

Porgy & Bess

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ing adversity. Most of the people in Catfish Row are good, hard-working, fun-loving people, especially as portrayed in Thompson's production.

The second problem is musical. Is it "opera" or is it "musical theater." The answer since the Houston Opera Company first staged it in this full-opera style back in the 1980s is that it will be opera. Certainly that was George Gershwin's intention and preserves the full musical text.

But, in the end, it's the songs that everyone remembers. Gershwin's exquisite ear for song

and the clever, precise lyrics of his brother, Ira, with some help from "Porgy" novelist DuBose Heyward and his wife, Dorothy, "Summertime." "It Ain't Necessarily So." "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'." "Bess, You Is My Woman," and "There's a Train a-Leavin'" are masterpieces of the American "popular" music repertoire.

And whether it was poor acoustics or the demands of operatic range, the singers in the opening night production often could not be understood without referring to the subtitles, except for the one pop singer in the

group - Penob Bryson.

Except for a couple memory lapses, Bryson made a stylish Sporting Life, the drug pusher with attitude. And Bryson's narrower range and pop phrasing made it easier to understand him.

This is not to diminish some wonderful performances. Gordon Hawkins is a heart-rucking Porgy, a man with great courage, religious belief and inner strength that his twisted body mocks. Hawkins brings warmth and sensitivity to his reading of Porgy, especially in the first song (aria) about how a cripple is condemned to loneliness. Marquita Lister is a fiery, beautiful, sensual

Bess. She brilliantly conveys Bess' tension between her desires for excitement and her need for love. Musically their famous duet is haunting. Unfortunately, Lister's soaring, musically beautiful voice fails to deliver the lyrics.

Male singers in the bass range also could not be fully understood.

The musical showstopper on opening night was Angela Simpson's Serena, who just wails with all the power of spiritual singing on "My Man's Gone Now" to a rousing approval. She is also a fine actress in her portrayal of the upright church lady.

Other fine performances were

Karla Burns sassy Maria, the matriarch and moral scold of the community who delivers Sporting Life fair warning; Jeffrey Lavar's strong, yet vulnerable, interpretation of the muscular, primitive Crown; and Roberta Gumbel's sweet Clara, who opens the show with a stunning "Summertime."

Gershwin's music is a tribute to the black music tradition, transposed through the white European tradition. Spirituals, blues, voodoo cries and jazz rhythms all come into play here. At times the orchestra under John Dainin overpowers the singing, but the choral work during a wake and a hurricane were

superb. Taking a cue from the Southern black church experience, Gershwin captures the rich emotional and musical quality of the music.

Thompson's staging is generally good, but "It Ain't Necessarily So" needs fewer people milling around and more life in response to Bryson's lively taunts. There was more fun to be had in this number. The staging here had the stiffness often associated with opera group scenes.

In performances June 4, 6, 7, 10, 12 and matinee 14, Angela Brown sings Serena, Alvy Powell sings Porgy, Timothy Robert Blevins sings Crown and Marilyn Moore-Brown sings Bess.

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Woods

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ston has created a colorful set inspired by pop-up books.

The books are eight feet tall, and some revolve and open up in three dimensions.

"They had to be designed to move for set changes, and to fit under the arches, which are nine-and-a-half feet tall," said DeMay. "We painted leaves to enclose the whole scene, and there's a panorama of trees pointed in very colorful, vivid colors to bring out the scariness of the woods."

DeMay earned her master of arts degree from Western Michigan University, and studied oil painting at the Volkshochschule Wiesbaden and exhibited her work with other international artists in Frankfurt and other cities as well as in a solo show at the American Women's Club in Oberursel.

She is a designer/producer of multi-image shows for business meetings and presentations.

"This is a pretty elaborate set," she said. "It's very colorful. It's a fantasy, and one of my best pieces so far."

Smith said the show has a "constantly moving, whirling quality. You don't know where people will come out next. The costumes and sets are very bright, and we have some very cool special effects. We're doing some neat things with different sounds coming out of different places."

Music plays an important role, and it's a challenge to music director Margie Brooks of Bloomfield Hills accepted.

"It's a difficult score," she said. "The music advances the plot. There are more than 400 pages to the score. The musicians are playing almost all the time. Sondheim's music is very sophisticated, it uses unusual chords and rhythms and changes from key to key. It's very challenging, but very interesting to the ear."

For this show, Brooks assembled an orchestra which includes

piano, synthesizer, trumpet, French horn, flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, bass and percussion.

"The singers are really up to the challenge," she said. "They have to sing the music very well. It's just been a marvel to me."

This is not an easy show for choreographers either because there's not a lot of typical dancing. Roberta Campion of Southfield has been working with Smith to figure out how actors should move on stage.

"It's a character driven show, singing tells the story, it's vital, but there is some dialogue," said

Campion. There's some Renaissance dancing, minuets, hopping and skipping patterns.

"Cinderella can't make up her mind, she moves in circular patterns. The Big Bad Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood dance the tango."

"Into the Woods" is an ensemble show, and the crew and cast have been working together since March to bring it together. "I can't believe our good fortune," said Smith. "Everyone has thrown themselves into it. I feel very comfortable before opening night, and everyone is having a great time. It's truly an ensemble show."

Truman

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Williams through his first major "straight" role in "Dead Poets Society" in 1989.

"The first time I saw him," Weir remembers of Carrey, "I thought he was like a silent movie star. If he had been around in the '20s, he would have been one of the biggies."

Carrey has been notorious for not getting along with directors. When he didn't like the way the "Ace Ventura" sequel was progressing, he removed the director and brought in a friend. His arguments with Ben Stiller on "The Cable Guy" may have contributed to the movie turning into such a turkey.

When Carrey made his trademark demands, Weir generally stood firm. "Sometimes he'd say, 'Give me another take,' far more takes than I thought necessary, and I'd say, 'Jim, we've got it.' I knew in the beginning he was a man used to working on his own.

He wasn't used to trusting a director so completely."

And veteran Weir deserves respect. For a decade in the mid-'70s through the mid-'80s, he and a talented group of Australian filmmakers were sending amazing movies statewide on an almost monthly basis. Weir's contributions included such art house classics as "Picnic at Hanging Rock," "Gallipoli," and "The Last Wave."

The "Australian New Wave," as it came to be called, was comprised of Fred Schepisi, Gillian Armstrong, Bruce Beresford, and George Miller, among others. Though some still reside in Australia, all now work almost exclusively in Hollywood.

Of all of his contemporaries, however, Weir is the one who has most retained his soul. He only picks the projects he really believes in, and if "The Mosquito Coast" isn't quite a good as "Witness," you watch both movies knowing he has instilled them with the same intensity.

His last film, "Fearless," about the psychological aftermath of an airline disaster, was just one in a series of critically acclaimed movies that have sometimes found receptive audiences.

The ante gets upped a bit with "The Truman Show." With a \$60-\$85 million budget and the most high-profile comedian in movies today, Weir is forced to worry about things like opening weekend grosses. "Almost any figure we got on that first weekend will probably be bigger than I've ever had before," he says.

At one point in the production, Weir was ready to cast himself as Christof, the godlike creator of "The Truman Show" and a father figure for the naive Truman (Ed Harris eventually got the part). When his creation wants to leave the nest, Christof becomes like any protective parent. "It's a frightening world out there," he seems to say, "so the minute you leave, you're on your own."

And what about the notion that the whole world is tuned into vicariously experiencing the life of someone who, at the core, isn't all that interesting to begin with? According to Weir, "It says something about our lives that there's not a whole lot of living going on."

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