

Cast performs 'Porgy and Bess' as it should be

BY SUSAN H. TAUBER
STAFF WRITER

Generations of music lovers aren't familiar with the story, haunting melodies and lyrics of *Porgy and Bess*, George Gershwin's musical that premiered in 1935.

That can be remedied soon. All music lovers — whether they love hip-hop, rap or rock — have an opportunity to see the treasured folk-opera that grasps the variety of musical idioms popular then and now — from jazz to gospel to classical — now that *Porgy and Bess* is in Detroit through Sunday, March 30.

Samuel Stevenson said theater patrons will have a rare opportunity to experience *Porgy and Bess* sung as it should be.

"Gershwin wrote *Porgy and Bess* for classically trained, African-American voices," Stevenson said. "At the time the musical opened, African-Americans were overlooked for the roles because people didn't think they could sing anything but jazz or gospel."

But this cast proves "them" wrong.

The average age of the cast is 40-ish, according to Stevenson, who is one of two professional singers who perform the lead role of Porgy. "Some in our cast are in their 30s, but none are in their 20s," he added.

Stevenson is among the older group. He's been involved in *Porgy and Bess* since the 1970s, when he became a member of the chorus in his hometown of Charlotte, NC. He's since moved up the ranks in terms of the star-quality of his roles.

He's performed on the tour on and off since 1995. He joined the international tour in Hawaii that year. In 1997, he was part of a five-country tour, which proved to him that the music of *Porgy and Bess* transcends language barriers around the world.

"It's amazing to me how well people in different countries are familiar with George Gershwin's music," Stevenson said.

Porgy and Bess is based on a novel by DuBois Heyward. The story is set in Charleston, in South Carolina's famed Catfish Row, where a crippled man, Porgy, witnesses a murder during a dice game and later gives shelter to the murderer's woman, Bess. The story revolves around Porgy's love for the beautiful Bess and life in Catfish Row.

Gershwin's transformation of the novel into a musical stage production resulted in such



Brian Gibson as Porgy and Rose Saxon as Bess star in the musical now playing at the Fisher Theatre.

famous songs as *Summertime*, *A Woman Is a Sometime Thing*, *I Got Pains 'Nuttin'*, *Bess*, *My Man*, *My Man* and *It Ain't Necessarily So*.

Stevenson talked about how difficult it is to play the crippled Porgy, who spends his time on stage on his knees. He moves around the stage on a goat cart.

"That's one reason why there are two men sharing the lead role of Porgy," Stevenson said. "The other performer is Brian Gibson."

"I've tried many different methods of padding my knees over the years," Stevenson admitted. "I've used soccer and baseball knee guards, regular knee pads, Egyptian cotton, duct tape wrapped around regular pants. None of these are really sufficient. It's just not natural to be on my knees. There are so many performances on these road tours. There are too many for one singer to handle."

There also are two stars for the role of Bess. They are Elizabeth Graham and Jerri Cates.

"The roles are tough on our voices, too hard to perform night after night," Stevenson said. "When Stevenson has an opportunity to go home to Charlotte, he resumes his role as vocal teacher and student. He's a graduate from the University of Cincinnati and Manhattan School of Music."

"I didn't start out to be a classical singer. I did summer stock, musical theater, rhythm and blues bands and sang in church,"

AT A GLANCE

What: *Porgy & Bess*

When: Continues through Sunday, March 30, Curtain 8 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, and 7:30 p.m. Sunday.

Where: The Fisher Theater, 3011 W. Grand Boulevard, Detroit.

For directions go to www.nederlanderdetroit.com

Tickets: \$30-\$65, available at all Ticketmaster outlets.

To charge tickets by phone, call (248) 645-6666. For more information call, (313) 872-1000.

he said. A mentor led him to expand his voice to open and he's never left the classical field.

"I have 12 students. I believe it is my obligation to pass on to my students what I've learned and what I know," Stevenson said.

He also continues to study voice with his teacher, Frances Shuster.

And what does Stevenson hope to do while he's with the show in Detroit?

"I want to visit Hittsville. I'm a real Motown fan," Stevenson added.

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Authors set stage for 'A Hot and Sultry Night For Crime'

A HOT AND SULTRY NIGHT FOR CRIME, EDITED BY JEFFERY DEEVER (BERKLEY PRIME CRIME), \$23.95.

Old man winter might still be hanging around our neck of the woods, but this anthology of crime fiction may make you sweat, nevertheless — and in more ways than one.

In his introduction to these 20 short stories, editor Jeffery Deever (*The Bone Collector*) writes, "There might be some crime stories in which perpetrators are driven to murder by snowflakes, but I sure can't think of any. ... And so we asked a number of Mystery Writers of America authors to come up with some original stories whose theme is hot and sultry crime. ... The genres ... are as varied as stifling rain forests differ from sizzling deserts."

He's certainly correct on that point. In the lead-off story, *Ninety-eight Point Six*, Deever himself introduces us to a lone motorist named Sloan, navigating a humid Michigan byway in the dead of summer. As the story unfolds, we learn there's been a power outage at an area prison (too many air conditioners turned way too high), enabling one of the most dangerous inmates to escape. As you might expect, Sloan encounters

him in a way you may not anticipate. Deever is a marvel at bringing readers into this steamy milieu. One of his key players, for instance, gets up to answer the door and leaves behind "an over-stuffed Naugahyde armchair that still glistened with the sweat that'd leached from his skin."

Michigan's own Loren D. Estleman takes a typically satisfying turn here with a succinct story titled, *Lady on Ice*.

"Outside, it was eighty-nine degrees at 10 p.m., with percentage of humidity to match, and I was experiencing the early stages of frostbite," the tale begins.

Turns out, Estleman's famous fictional PI, Amos Walker, is flirting with frostbite because he's investigating a case involving a figure skater and a second-rate Detroit hockey player.

Snooping around in their world, of course, involves some time spent in ice arenas, which can be pretty frosty places when you're seated rink-side and not properly attired for the occasion.

Though John Lutz's *El Palacio* is set in a tiny oven of a town in Mexico, it also comes up with a Motor City connection, when one fast-talking type named Martin tells another that he "used to play minor league ball for the Detroit Tigers."

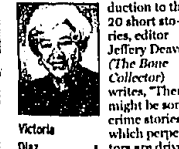
movies). The people are sweaty here, the drinks are sweaty, even the pesos are sweaty. The insects they are a-buzzin' in the heat, as are the overworked electrical transformers in this remote spot at the edge of the jungle. If you're in the right career field, it could be a pitiful night for offing somebody with the weapon at hand — a machete.

G. Mike Hayden's *War Crimes* is perhaps the most thought-provoking story in this collection. Played out mainly within the confines of a sweltering Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in the Philippines, this layered tale examines the essence of guilt, and how a sense of guilt imposed on the very young might become a twisting — "primary foundation," lasting forever.

In Tim Myers' "The Stay-at-Home-Thief," you'll meet a loving father with a rather unusual way of bringing home the bacon. And Angela Zeman, in a little thriller titled *Green Heat*, takes us to a kind of West Virginia "twilight zone," where Chicago slicker Tyree Garcia, meets up with some rather strange citizens who aren't nearly as dumb as they think they are.

For an intriguing change of pace, Suzanne C. Johnson's *Body in the Pond* illustrates how feverish passions run deep on muggy summer nights in "ole Virginia."

Victoria Diaz is a Florida resident and writer about books, movies, theater and travel for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.



Victoria Diaz

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Cinema 101
Cinema 102
Cinema 103
Cinema 104
Cinema 105
Cinema 106
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Cinema 123
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