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## Opera production is 'a dream come true'

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Rodger Mullen

By Rodger Mullen

Staff writer

The Thursday night debut of Cape Fear Regional Theatre's latest production had a decidedly unique feel.

For one thing, the stage wasn't the theater's. The preview performance of "Porgy & Bess" was presented at the Crown Theatre.

For another, this was an opera, far different fare than the musicals that are the regional theater's norm. And an opera with a nearly all-black cast. Culminating a project that artistic director Bo Thorp called the most ambitious in the theater's 46-year history, Cape Fear Regional Theatre opened its limited run of the Gershwin folk opera to a near-capacity crowd.

Featuring some stunning singing and staging and a stellar performance by members of the Fayetteville Symphony Orchestra, the production can only be considered a success.

Based on a novel by DuBose Heyward with music by George Gershwin, "Porgy & Bess" is set in the 1930s in a fictitious slum near Charleston, S.C., called Catfish Row.

The opera's most famous song is also its first. Clara (Jacquetta D. Wilson) sings a mournful, yet hopeful "Summertime" as she cradles her baby.

We see the poor but vibrant Catfish Row come alive. A game of craps is organized, a bottle is passed around.

We meet the people who call this place home. Bess (Vanessa Stewart) is a finely-dressed woman on the arm of a lowlife named Crown (John Fulton). Sportin' Life (Larry Hylton) is a strutting drug dealer dispensing "happy dust" (cocaine). And Porgy (Thomas R. Beard Jr.) is a kind-hearted cripple who gets around on a cart or on his knees.

The summer evening is shattered suddenly by an act of violence. Crown flees police and Bess takes up Porgy's offer of shelter.

An unlikely and convenient love blooms between Bess and the crippled Porgy, a love expressed in the duet “Bess, You Is My Woman Now.” But Bess' past, in the form of her association with Crown and Sportin' Life, reemerges to shatter the idyll.

“Porgy & Bess” is directed by Linda James Johnson and Lemuel Wade, who have collaborated on European productions of the opera. The directors, along with vocal director Kevin Badanes, did an outstanding job of melding the cast of professional and amateur actors.

Similarly, conductor and musical director David Michael Wolff coaxes a terrific performance of the difficult score by the Fayetteville Symphony Orchestra.

Beard, a Cape Fear High School graduate and opera singer now based in Baltimore, displayed a powerful baritone on songs such as “They Pass by Singing.” Beard's performance was all the more remarkable in that he sings everything while on his knees or pushing himself on a cart.

Stewart was Beard's equal as a woman trying to live a straight life but feeling the pull of her disreputable past. Hylton was snake-like and Fulton brought an air of danger to their roles as Catfish Row's evil element.

In fact, there was not a weak voice or performance among the entire 45-member company. Perhaps the only complaint was that the sound system at the Crown didn't seem capable of fully capturing all the voices.

Strong staging enhanced the production. Act one opened to the nightlife of Catfish Row; the curtain on the second act rose to show the lush, thick vegetation of Kittiwah Island. (The words to all the songs were helpfully flashed on a screen above the stage.)

In fact, everyone associated with this production of “Porgy & Bess,” from the technical staff to the ensemble players, seemed to raise his game.

In her opening remarks Thursday night, Thorp called the opera a “dream come true” for the theater. That sounds about right.

Staff writer Rodger Mullen can be reached at  
mullenr@fayobserver.com  
or 486-3561.

Staff photos by Cindy Burnham