

Porgy and Bess

George Gershwin

Cape Town Opera

Royal Festival Hall

(2009)

Review by [Kevin Catchpole](#)



Production photo

Credit to the Royal Festival Hall without whose space London would not have enjoyed the unique sound of Cape Town Opera in their remarkable rendering of George Gershwin's all too seldom seen opera telling the story of the black man's lot in a strange land, *Porgy and Bess*.

Yet after thrilling to the wonderfully rich tenors and basses and the soaring sopranos of a quality found only in townships and gospel choirs, I began to wish I had been in Cardiff last week where an audience in the Wales Millennium Centre were brought to their feet by so much more of Christine Crouse's full stage production.

Crouse has translated the work from Gershwin's South Carolina to 1950s Soweto and the fight against apartheid.

At a stroke, any tendency to patronise is gone. This is no longer some relic of the minstrel era but a powerful tale of men and women struggling against the injustice of their time.

Even in the confined space of Festival Hall, the semi-staged performance has a beauty and a vigour that transcends its surroundings.

True the large orchestra, comprising mainly British players, threatened to form a musical screen in front of the singers, yet such is the projection of their powerful voices that one soon began to overlook this deficiency as the splendid South African sound, led by the Cape Town Opera Voice of the Nation Ensemble (chorus) leaps upwards and into the auditorium.

The brief *allegro con brio* led us straight to the pure soprano of Pretty Yende (Clara) scaling the octaves with the lazy "Summertime", not only the most beautiful song in the show but arguably amongst the great songs of opera itself.

Porgy, again sung by Xolela Sixaba, among the richest bass-baritones I have heard in the flesh, wears the role of Porgy as his own flesh. His crippled character moves around the limited stage area on a skateboard. But the power and beauty of his voice renders technicalities of staging secondary. And, yes, of course he has sung Joe in

Showboat.

Bess, for Tuesday's performance, was sung by the American soprano Kearstin Piper Brown, another powerful lyric-dramatic soprano. While the duets of Porgy and Bess have long been highlights of the musical stage, this performance of "Bess, you is my woman now" is one I shall remember for a long time.

The work is notable for a generous collection of cameo parts involving the folk of the waterfront, no less in this interpretation than in traditional productions.

Outstanding are Ntobeko Rwanqa (Crown), Arline Jaftha (Serena), Miranda Tini (Maria), Aubrey Lodewyk (Jake), Mthunzi Mbombela (Mingo), Mlamli Lalapantsi (Robbins) and Marvin Kernelle (Peter).

Tenor Victor Ryan Robertson is a memorable Sportin' Life. No surprise, therefore, that in addition to a variety of classical roles, he has made this character his own in Dallas, Los Angeles and Berlin.

Conductor David Charles Abell, maintains a firm hand on his, almost certainly unfamiliar, resources. A source of particular charm is the banjo of Daniel Thomas in such toe-tapping numbers as "I got plenty o' nuthin' " and "It ain't necessarily so".

There has not been anything quite like this heard in London for many a year. Oh to be in Edinburgh when the Cape Town sound is there!

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