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Opera review: Porgy and Bess, Festival Theatre

Porgy and Bess ****, Festival Theatre

THE capacity audience were cheering to the rafters on Friday night as the stars of Cape Town Opera's sparkling, vibrant production of Porgy and Bess returned for curtain call after curtain call.

This was a production which had everything going for it thanks to a large company of stunning singers who took the Gershwins' memorable music and made it their own – but who were also great all-round performers.

The big hits of this "American Folk Opera" – Summertime, I Got Plenty of Nuttin', It Ain't Necessarily So and the rest – were given their full due. More importantly, they were used with gutsy vigour to tell the story of cripple Porgy who takes up with Bess, the abandoned girl of a violent killer, Crown.

This production moved the original from 1920s Louisiana to a 1970s South African township, which made perfect sense given the desperate plight of black South Africans during the Apartheid regime's most vicious and arrogant period.

The violent society which surrounds the main characters, the gambling, drinking and drug-taking, was given a sharper relevance by the move, while the finale, where Porgy sets off to the promised land of New York, was backed by the company raising their fists in black power salutes.

Such relevance would be nothing, however, without the succession of thrilling performances from the soloists and chorus. Pretty Yende as Clara, who sings the lullaby Summertime as the opera opens, had a fine, resonant voice, well capable of tackling a much bigger role.

Xolela Sixaba wasn't content to bring a vast, warm voice to the role of Porgy, he also created a humane, warm character, which is crucial if you are to believe that fun-loving Bess could ever fall in love with him.

Equally, Lisa Daltirus gave her Bess enough depth to make her desire for escape from a life of drugs and violence seem realistic. The tonality of her voice changed too, from her flirtatious performance early on, to her later sober taking-up with Porgy.

In the smaller roles Miranda Tini was particularly full of life as shabeen-owner Maria. Victor Ryan Robertson brought a devilish cynicism, if the only slightly underpowered voice, to drug dealer Sportin' Life.

Behind them, a 36-strong chorus performed their socks off without ever letting the stage feel crowded, or that they were just there to provide backing vocals.

While it was a relief not to have the distraction of surtitles, the production's one failing was in the clarity of the sung dialogue.

Sharper enunciation would have helped make more sense of the narrative, which sometimes had to be guessed at.

Where it mattered, however, the production delivered with such swagger and verve that those who were there will be whistling the tunes

for weeks to come.

Run ended



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