

Infectious rhythms behind a dark tale of poverty and oppression

Porgy and Bess has always been a controversial work.

How, critics ask, could Jewish-European immigrants from New York – composer Gershwin and his lyricist brother Ira – and white American author DuBose Heyward, write convincingly about the experiences of a poverty-stricken black community in the south? In performance terms, the fact that Gershwin stipulated that *Porgy* always be performed with an all-black cast makes the work difficult to cast in this country and puts it out of reach of the budgets of many British opera companies.

One company that has made *Porgy and Bess* very much its own in recent years is Cape Town Opera. The youthful company, currently celebrating its 10th anniversary, is undertaking its first UK tour with a new production of the opera directed by its artistic manager Christine Crouse. Here the action is transplanted to apartheid-era South Africa, and Catfish Row in South Carolina becomes a derelict township house that has been taken over by squatters.

There are clear parallels between the original setting and South Africa at this time, according to Cape Town Opera's general manager Michael Williams. "There was a really vibrant scene that developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the townships," he says. "*Porgy and Bess* fits really well with that, with its elements of folk singing and street dance. There's also the black tradition of singing at funerals, expressing sorrow but at the same time finding something uplifting – something that the opera does so well."

But behind the infectious rhythms and memorable tunes, *Porgy* is a story of racism, poverty, oppression and violence. "You can't get away from the brutality," says Williams, "something else that links it to the experience of black South Africans during apartheid."

Certainly, the violently aggressive role of the policemen, one of a handful of white characters in the opera (all of them spoken), assumes a particularly chilling significance when delivered in the distinctive Afrikaans accent.

Porgy and Bess is a story of optimism in the face of adversity and struggle for survival. Something that could also be said of Cape Town Opera itself. The company was reborn out of the ashes of the Cape Arts Board at the end of apartheid when the new South African government withdrew subsidies from organisations that were particularly associated with white rule. Opera, seen as an elitist European import, was one of the first casualties and one by one all African opera companies went to the wall.

Yet in such tough conditions Cape Town Opera has not only managed to survive but also to thrive. The company was already more ethnically diverse than most, having created pioneering outreach projects such as scholarships to enable talented black singers to train at the university and join the company.

Most importantly, believes Williams, the company talked to its audience. “Other companies thought they could get by with secret slush funds,” he says, “but we asked our audience to support us. At the same time we listened to what they wanted from us.”

The result is that 15 years after the end of apartheid, Cape Town Opera is one of only two opera companies on the African continent (the other is in Cairo) and the only one to exist without any government subsidy.

Any kind of support, or even acknowledgement, from the authorities has been slow to develop, though a real turning point in putting Cape Town Opera in South Africa’s national consciousness came in 2004 when the company staged Beethoven’s Fidelio on Robben Island to mark the 10th anniversary of the end of apartheid.

An audience of 1000, with many more watching on giant screens erected on the mainland, saw a black Florestan and a white Leonora triumph over violence and repression being performed in a location of major symbolic significance for South Africa’s struggle for equality and justice.

Today 88% of the company may be black, but one problem Cape Town Opera is still having to address is that its audience is primarily white.

In what Williams describes as “geographical apartheid”, lack of safe night-time

transport to the townships means that family and friends of cast members often cannot see them perform.

To help counter this, the company has introduced taxi night at the opera. The company's cheapest ticket is usually 100 Rand, but on taxi night 60 Rand will buy a ticket that includes a lift to and from the theatre.

On another level, Cape Town Opera's problems are the same as opera companies the world over. While a recent production of *Madame Butterfly* had ticket sales of well over 90%, advance sales for contemporary opera *Dead Man Walking* have been nearer the 30% mark.

"Cape Town audiences just love their Puccini," says Williams. "The struggle is making them try something different."

Cape Town Opera's repertoire might be similar to opera companies elsewhere but claims that opera isn't a truly South African art form seem to fly in the face of the number of excellent singers the country has produced in recent years.

In the last couple of years

Scotland alone has seen plenty of evidence of the flowering of South African operatic talent. Soprano Sally Silver played the title role in Scottish Opera's recent production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, as did countertenor Clint van der Linde in the concert performance of Handel's *Rinaldo* at the Edinburgh Festival. Another soprano, Amanda Echalaz, who impressed in several leading roles with English Touring Opera at the Perth Festival has now gone on to bigger things. Then there is 24-year-old Pretty Yende, who plays the role of Clara – and sings *Summertime* – in Cape Town Opera's *Porgy and Bess*. With all the makings of an international star, she recently swept the board at a major competition in Vienna and is about to join the young artists programme at La Scala, Milan.

The irony of the fact that people in South Africa can criticise opera for being European while simultaneously going crazy over another such import is not lost on Williams. "I often think football is the greatest colonial tool of all time," he says wryly.

However, when the attention of the world is turned towards South Africa for the World Cup 2010, Cape Town Opera plans to take advantage. Just before the start of the competition the company will stage a new production of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, following which, during the first weeks of the competition, it is planning a staged tribute to Nelson Mandela built out of music from his lifetime.

The company's 2010 season, incidentally, ends with a rather familiar-sounding contemporary opera project – Williams admits that he got the idea for *Five:20* from Scottish Opera's very successful *Five:15* concept – although in Cape Town the operas will be five minutes longer. "It is a great way to bring South African stories created by South African writers and composers to the stage."

Occasional foreign touring remains an essential way for the company to balance the books. Given the breadth of Cape Town Opera's work, does Williams feel frustrated that the company is associated abroad with a couple of "black" operas, *Porgy and Showboat*?

"It's true we can't keep staging *Porgy*, especially at home," he agrees (there are no immediate plans to stage this production in South Africa), "but the company is not sick of *Porgy* yet – it really speaks to their experiences.

"Bringing Puccini and Verdi to Europe feels a little like carrying coals to Newcastle, *Porgy* is one opera we know we can make uniquely our own."

Porgy and Bess is at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre, Friday (7.30pm) and Saturday (2pm and 7.30pm). www.eft.co.uk