



SONGS OF THE SOUTH: (left to right) Audra McDonald & Norm Lewis in the revival of *Porgy and Bess*. Photo: Michael J. Lutch



Theater Review

Despite good performances, this pared-down *Porgy & Bess* revival's 'Got Plenty of Nothing'

THE GERSHWINS' PORGY AND BESS

By George Gershwin, Dubose, Dorothy Heyward & Ira Gershwin

Adapted by Suzan-Lori Parks & Diedre L. Murray

Directed by Diane Paulus

Open run

Richard Rodgers Theatre

226 West 46th Street, (212-239-6200)

www.porgyandbessonbroadway.com

By David NouNou

You know you are headed into choppy waters when the curtain goes up on a production of *Porgy and Bess* and you feel you are inside an industrial warehouse or the side of a garage. This is an accurate description of the set designed by Riccardo Hernandez to represent Catfish Row in late 1930s Charleston, South Carolina. I have never started a review by describing the set, but when one is as dreadful, non-representational, and so jarring to the sight as this one, it is as good a place as any to start.

Sometimes the books of revivals, especially old musicals, require tinkering and updating to make them more palatable for contemporary audiences, as long as the sacred scores stay intact. In many musical revivals, re-orchestrating scores can also be an improvement; in this case, the tinkering is just a tweaking that shortened the length of the show. No harm done here. However, this production neither soars nor thrills.

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Set in the tight-knit community of poverty-stricken Catfish Row, Porgy, (Norm Lewis), the cripple, is in love with Bess (Audra McDonald), the prostitute who has been with Crown (Phillip Boykin) for five years. After Crown commits a murder and flees, Bess turns to Porgy to be taken care of. She is the only woman he has ever known. Life does not always work ideally, for in this little Eden there lurks a serpent, Sporting Life (David Alan Grier), the drug dealer who at every turn is there to lure Bess into temptation and take her to New York to be his woman. Mother Earth of this community is Mariah (NaTasha Yvette Williams).

On the plus side, everyone mentioned has a beautiful singing voice. Unfortunately, not all play their roles convincingly. Ms. McDonald, as a soprano, is magnificent. However, the usually superb Ms. McDonald disappoints, for she is far too regal and elegant to be believable as the troubled prostitute Bess. Norm Lewis lacks the charisma to be a robust Porgy, and just comes across as bland, thus lacking the power to keep Bess. Her leaving him should be tragic; in this case, it is not so difficult to see why she can easily be lured away. As Sporting Life, David Alan Grier is the most enjoyable. His "It Ain't Necessarily So" is a showstopper. Although he lacks the menace the role requires, he makes it work with charm. As Crown, Mr. Boykin is in excellent voice, and is also disturbingly malevolent. Ms. Williams' Mariah is sheer pleasure.

With magnificent songs like "Summertime," "I Got Plenty Of Nothing," "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," "I Loves You, Porgy," "I Got Plenty of Nothing," to name a few, there is no doubt that the original *Porgy and Bess* has become an American operatic masterpiece. The score excites, thrills, and at times, is literally breathtaking.

Alas, in this production the cast is scaled down, the set is atrocious, there is no charm to represent Catfish Row, and some of the cast members just are not convincing. At best, this tepid revival is uneven, and at worst, statically long.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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