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The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess

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By FRANK RIZZO

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After the brouhaha over statements from the creative team -- with a slap from Stephen Sondheim in a letter to the New York Times and subsequent back-and-forths in social media -- the show itself can now be judged on its own merits.

While entertaining, engaging and exceptionally well-acted, something is lost, too, in the scope of the score. The work's new passions -- while musical-theater "real" -- are now earth-bound, making it more "folk" than "opera."

Still, the handsome and in many ways appealing show, with its stars -- not the least of which is Audra McDonald giving another multi-layered and gorgeously sung perf -- and the familiarity of the Gershwin-Heyward score should prove to be a big box office draw. (The title "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess" -- diminishing the Heyward contributions -- is a marketing misnomer.)

In writer Suzan-Lori Parks, music director Diedre L. Murray and helmer Paulus' adaptation, dialogue replaces recitative in many moments; song lead-ins are tweaked; and specificity of staging clarifies character. But the basic archetypes remain -- just with more shading, not new colors. The big difference here is in the overall style of the show.

The production signals its intent in its first moments. Instead of a faux realistic setting of the shanties of Catfish Row, there's an abstract sweep of bleached-out wood planks (by designer Riccardo Hernandez) where all the action takes place.

And when at the show's start Nikki Renee Daniels as Clara steps out onstage to sing the exquisite

"Summertime" with an actual focus-stealing babe in her arms, the moment may be more "real," but it becomes less about the music.

That's the production's trade-off. It's a "Porgy and Bess" connected to the truth in the storytelling set in a Catfish Row community that is vivid and vital, with great actor-singers with musical experience rather than operatic chops (with a few exceptions, such as Philip Boykin's riveting Crown and, of course, McDonald).

What is gained is a greater sense of a community of characters who live hard-scrabble (but well-dressed, in costumes by ESosa) lives in the coastal enclave, from the leading players to each member of the ensemble. The accent is on the upbeat, most boldly demonstrated in a foot-stomping second-act curtain raiser choreographed by Ronald K. Brown.

McDonald gives a stunning perf as Bess, and demonstrates the balance between the character's two worlds -- as well as the show's. William David Bohn and Christopher Jahnke's sophisticated orchestrations for the 17-piece ensemble also deftly do that double duty.

Norm Lewis' perf as Porgy is clearly rooted in the musical stage, which brings a deeper warmth, intimacy and humanity to the role, but comes up short on grandeur until the work's final moments. David Alan Grier shows considerable vocal skills to match his familiar comedic talents for a smooth-as-silk portrayal of dope peddler Sportin' Life.

Despite some smart edits and additions, the one inauthentic note is Bess' disposal of the "magic dust" (cocaine) before leaving with Sportin' Life to New York at show's end. Without the addiction, her exit makes little sense, even with the ominous white authority figures lurking in the background.

At least the show's finale bows to the power of the original's call to hope, lifting the production's spirits -- if not to operatic heights, then at least to that of a happy musical high.

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