

Classic Vision.

James Robinson
directs the Met's new
Porgy and Bess.



The Met's new *Porgy*,
designed by
Michael Yeargan

NORTH AMERICA

Porgy and Bess

New York City

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA opened its new season with a bang on September 23, as George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* made a galvanizing return to the company after a twenty-nine-year hiatus.

Porgy is the great American opera, its electric energy and drive clearly springing from the same soil that engendered the Broadway musical, its dramatic intensity of emotion and inspired musical craftsmanship placing it firmly in the exalted realm of lyric art. The sole previous Met production (1985–90) struck me as heavy, even ponderous, as if weighed down

by the need to justify the presence of a work that began life on Broadway in the American high temple of opera. Not so the dynamic, fluid production of director James Robinson: this show is altogether more spirited, as befits a work whose spark of musico-dramatic genius fully justifies itself.

The refreshing transparency and buoyance that marked the Met's new vision began in the pit, with David Robertson's colorful, propulsive reading of this dazzling score. Robertson and the matchless Met Orchestra swung easily with Gershwin's jazzy rhythms and surged forcefully in moments of devastating power, such as the literal hurricane that ravages Catfish Row and the internal storm conjured in Bess by her dark, sexually charged island encounter with Crown. Robertson captured with equal deftness the lighthearted, subtle pulse of

everyday life that throbs throughout the work.

The gracefully skeletal structures of Michael Yeargan's set provided an atmospheric framework that left room for the human forces to conjure each specific environment (the hurricane-battered coast, the untamed island) from their hearts. Like everything else about Robinson's direction, the subtly evocative projections integrated themselves into the stage picture with miraculous fluency, enhancing but never distracting from the live performance. A typically effective example was the way projected rain sheeting off the tin roof of Catfish Row blended with the simple gesture of unfolding umbrellas. Even the perfectly timed revolutions of the turntable seemed to spring directly from the musical impulse of the moment.

The special *Porgy and Bess* Chorus

© BETH BERGMAN

brought in by the Met for these performances created a living, breathing organism made up of diverse people but functioning with a Greek chorus-like unity of purpose, and the ensemble took its rightful place at the center of the story. The prevailing transparency notwithstanding, both choral and orchestral forces easily reached the requisite heart-pounding fever pitch in moments of sturm und drang.

Another key ingredient was Camille A. Brown's choreography for a small group of skillful dancers interspersed among the massive chorus, which punctuated and emphasized the mood of the moment and gave the impression of a community of individuals in collective synchronicity, the simpler gestures of the larger ensemble melding seamlessly with the frenetic impulses of the smaller troupe.

The large cast of principals was uniformly excellent. In the iconic title roles, both Eric Owens and Angel Blue

performance provided ample compensation, particularly in a vivid rendition of the perverse sermon, "It Ain't Necessarily So."

Golda Schultz offered a shimmering "Summertime," her pure soprano capturing the ineffable joy of motherhood. Serena's visionary prayer over Bess was another highlight in the gleaming, heart-piercing rendition of Latonia Moore, whose star-quality turn, including a devastating "My Man's Gone Now," stood out even in a constellation of brilliant performances. Alfred Walker's brutish, high-octane, aptly charismatic Crown dominated his scenes. Ryan Speedo Green deployed his resonant, attractive baritone as a likable Jake, and Denyce Graves drew both sympathy and laughter with Maria's no-nonsense pronouncements.

The moving, deeply human, eminently singable libretto by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin is one of

David Robertson led a colorful, propulsive reading of this dazzling score.

sang and acted with a low-key naturalism that allowed these eminently human characters to develop organically, both individually and together. Blue's ravishingly lush, warm singing drew us into the character's conflicted inner life without histrionics but with a vibrant personal and vocal radiance that beautifully represented this loving but needy and all-too-human woman. Owens's unsentimental portrayal played down the pathos of Porgy's handicap and let his rock-solid singing convey the earnest steadiness of Porgy's devotion, bringing this three-dimensional character to life more effectively than a more overtly theatrical approach.

Moving with a dancer's lithe grace and power, Frederick Ballantine—lean, mean, biting and intense in voice and physique—captured all the devilish charm and irresistible magnetism of Sportin' Life, making Bess's acquiescence as understandable as Maria's disgust. The role lies low for Ballantine, but his riveting overall

the glories of *Porgy*. Given the vast size and resonant acoustic of the auditorium, the performers put the words across with admirable clarity, though in moments of heftier orchestration, the seatback titles inevitably proved helpful.

The program notes quoted George Gershwin as saying he "hoped to have developed something in American music that would appeal to the many rather than the cultured few." Judging by the opening-night response, his hopes were realized. The audience reacted, for once, like a Broadway crowd, alert to every funny moment, sharing the characters' joys and sorrows, transported and transfixed by every shifting mood.

Though the cast was stellar, what shone brightest on opening night was the work itself, presented in a straightforward, period style that served to reinforce its timeless relevance. Kudos to Robinson for a vision of this towering American classic that is fully worthy of Gershwin. —Louise T. Guinther



Lisette Oropesa and Michael Fabiano in the Met's *Manon* revival

Manon

New York City

LAURENT PELLY'S BELLE ÉPOQUE

Manon returned to the Metropolitan Opera on September 24, with soprano Lisette Oropesa as Massenet's titular coquette and tenor Michael Fabiano as her idealistic lover, des Grieux. While there was much to admire, the evening felt undercooked, even though it managed to catch fire as it went on. In this case, the sum of the production's parts was greater than the whole. Oropesa made a captivating Manon, singing with lustrous, pearly sheen and tossing off flights of coloratura with teasing insouciance. She clearly delineated the character's progression physically, from the swinging arms of the convent-bound innocent to the lover lounging comfortably in her boyfriend's shirt to the weakened, broken-spirited convict. "Je suis encore tout étourdie" was fresh and winsome, and her repeated "Voyons, Manon" was freighted with the warring impulses of piety and pleasure. "Adieu, notre petite table," her most unadorned singing of the night, was suffused with genuine regret. Pelly emphasizes Manon's need for adoration at the top of Act II; a crowd of top-hatted men in tails stares rapturously at the love nest of Manon and des Grieux before silently gliding away. Is it that