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Porgy and Bess

A Triumphant New Production
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Storm Over

Cattfish Row

The Metropolitan Opera kicks off the season with a triumphant revival of *Porgy and Bess*

By: David Barbour
Photos: Ken Howard/Met Opera

The Metropolitan Opera, now under the musical directorship of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, enjoyed a major success with its season opener, a stunning new staging of what is, arguably, the greatest American opera, *Porgy and Bess*. In *The New York Times*, Anthony Tommasini raised the questions that have dogged the piece since its 1935 premiere: “Is the opera a sensitive portrait of a struggling black community in 1920s South Carolina? Or does it perpetuate uncomfortable stereotypes?” But, he added, “All these questions are valid. But they were pushed aside for me in the moment when hearing [composer George] Gershwin’s masterpiece on Monday, especially in a performance so authoritative and gripping.”

Among those earning acclaim were Eric Owens and Angel Blue in the title roles; Ryan Speedo Green as the doomed fisherman Jake; Latonia Moore as Serena, shining in the aria “My Man’s Gone Now,” and Denyce Graves as Maria, the community’s moral authority.

This is only the second production of *Porgy and Bess* in the Met’s history, following its 1985 company premiere. Coming a few years after *The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess*, an intimately scaled and heavily abridged version (with reduced orchestrations) for Broadway, audiences are thrilling to the original, gloriously sung in a production that makes only a few minor cuts.

The production, directed by James Robinson—first seen last season at English National Opera and Dutch National Opera—is straightforward, conceptually, making

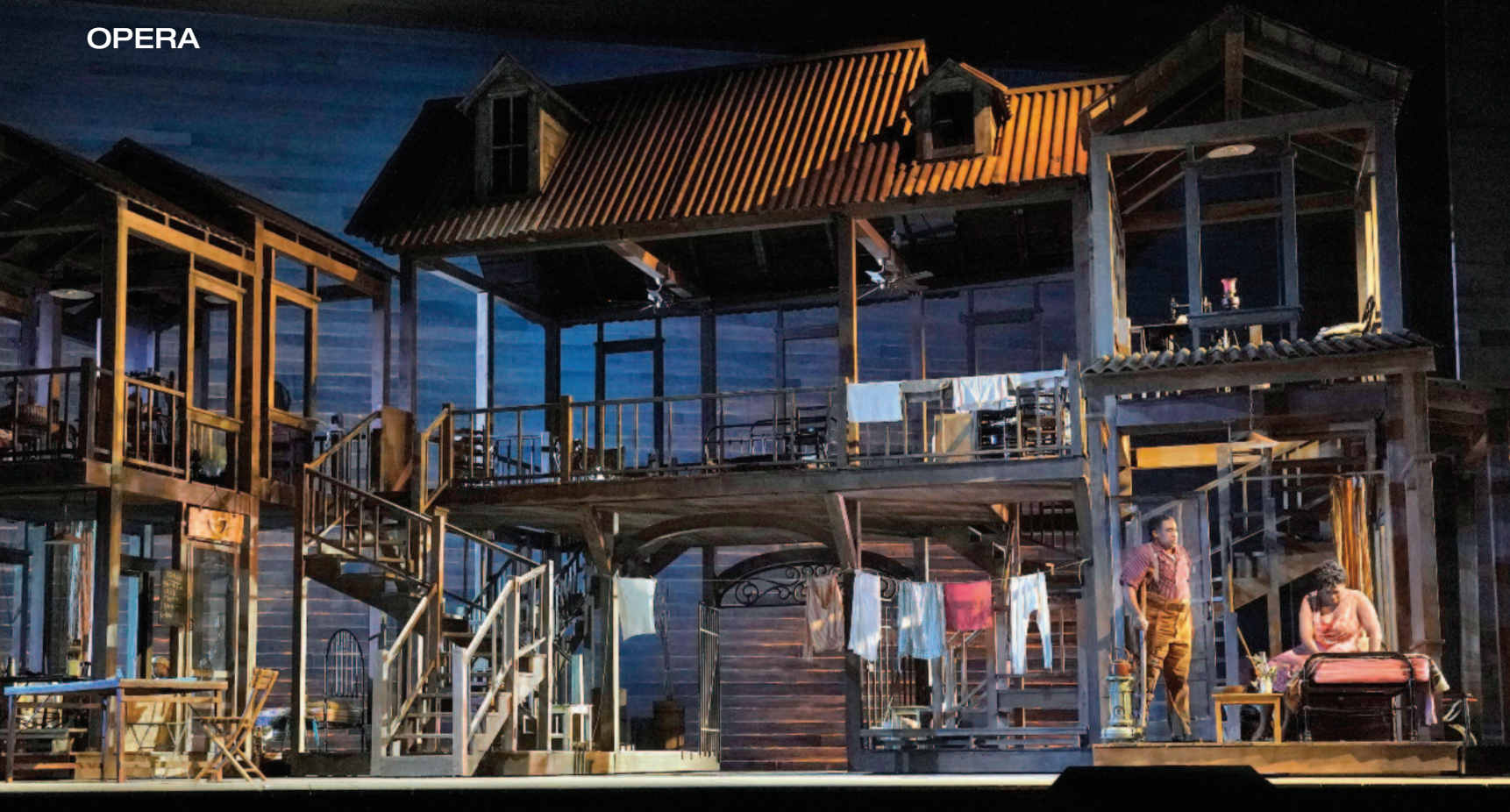
use of the Met’s stage machinery; it also makes good use of new gear in the company’s lighting rig and features video technology, the latter of which is used discreetly but highly effectively. Perhaps more than in other productions, Robinson’s staging highlights the entire community of Catfish Row, an enclosed series of tenements in Charleston, South Carolina. Few operas feature so many meaty principal roles and, in this production, they swirl around the title characters—the disabled beggar Porgy, and Bess, the troubled, addicted woman he loves so desperately—creating a sense of life at its most tumultuous.

Scenery and video

Most of *Porgy and Bess* unfolds inside Catfish Row, which Michael Yeargan, who designed the scenery for the Met production, notes, “is based on a real place, called Cabbage Row.” According to Wikipedia, Cabbage Row is a set of buildings, built before the Revolutionary War, and probably designed as counting houses—which may account for their rather institutional look; the block went downhill after an earthquake in 1886, gradually becoming residences for the poor. According to the Cabbage Row website—it is now a tourist attraction—“At one time, Cabbage Row was home to up to ten families at a time and was mostly inhabited by African-American families of freed slaves. This is also where the name, Cabbage Row, was born. African Americans living in these row houses would sell cabbage right from their windowsills. The build-



Holder’s lighting often works to carve out the company from Yeargan’s multilevel set design.



Above and below: The cyc, portals, and show curtain (not pictured) are painted to look as if constructed from wood planks. Yeargan notes that they “take light really well.”

ing continued to house a tenement into the early 1900s.”

Cabbage Row and its denizens would have been well-known to Charleston native DuBose Heyward, who used them as the setting for his best-selling novel *Porgy*, published in 1925, and the play of the same name, written in collaboration with his wife, Dorothy, and staged on Broadway in 1927. Heyward subsequently wrote the libret-

to for *Porgy and Bess*, collaborating with Ira Gershwin on the lyrics; his is the opera’s foundational vision.

Yeargan says he studied photos of the original 1935 production, staged by Rouben Mamoulian and featuring scenery by Sergei Soudeikine, a Russian artist who also worked with the Ballet Russes and Metropolitan Opera. (*Porgy and Bess* was originally presented on Broadway, at the Alvin Theatre—now the Neil Simon—where it ran for 142 performances.) Soudeikine’s vision of Catfish Row consisted of a forced-perspective array of brick buildings, creating an enclosed, slightly claustrophobic atmosphere. “That set has always been a favorite,” Yeargan says. “That ground plan worked so well.”

However, given Robinson’s emphasis on Catfish Row as a teeming community, Yeargan chose to strip away the buildings’ walls, creating a transparent framework that functions rather like a scaffold. “In a way, my design is an homage to [Soudeikine’s set],” he says. “But, by skeletonizing it, I gave it a lighter quality; it lets you see the lives of the families inside. In the Mamoulian production, you could get rid of everyone by closing the windows. In our production, you have to take them offstage.” Still, the company is more often than not present, a choice that is textually appropriate, the designer says. “Everybody in Catfish Row knows what everyone else is doing,” he notes. “And all the characters are fascinating.” Certainly,





Above and below: Yeargan's design strips away the walls of Catfish Row. "It lets you see the lives of the families inside," he says.





The Kittiwah Island set is based on Folly Island, a real-life location, off the coast of Charleston. Halls' projections fill out the stage picture with images of poles used to tie up boats.

the exposed set allows for a variety of lively, crowded stage pictures, as the photos on these pages reveal.

The Catfish Row set breaks into three pieces that can be reconfigured itself as needed. Also, because the opera is structured as a series of relatively brief scenes, Yeargan makes extensive use of the Met's turntable, giving the audience multiple views of the structure from different angles; for scenes set on the docks, it does a half-revolve, turning its back to the audience. "I seem to be in a turntable frame of mind," he says with amusement, citing his work on the recent Broadway revival of *My Fair Lady* (now on tour) and a new *Rigoletto* at Berlin State Opera. He adds that he worried about overusing the turntable, editing back the use of it during rehearsals.

Adding to the makeshift atmosphere, the show curtain,

and portals are painted to look as if constructed from wood planks. "It's all done with paint and just a little bit of texture to give it more dimension," Yeargan says, "and it takes light really well." This was especially helpful in London, because, he says, "We had to use just black house masking in London, as the ENO wasn't big enough for the wood surround designed for the Met and Amsterdam. We were able to use the translucent painted drop that backs the set in London, which gave us the background for strong silhouettes." Indeed, one of the production's challenges involved fitting it inside three very different opera houses. "ENO is the smallest," Yeargan says, "and there's so much decoration going on in the proscenium that it affects how things look onstage. The Dutch National Opera is a modern theatre; it's as big as the Met



but it doesn't have a clearly defined proscenium; we were able to use the designed wood surround there, which helped to give a frame. At the Met, for the first time we finally saw it as it was designed to be seen; that felt really good—but it took a really long time to dot the 'i'."

Nevertheless, the final dress at the Met provided a moment of high tension: "One of the most beautiful scene changes features light on the downstage scrim. For some reason, the change seemed to be taking a long time. All of a sudden, the scrim caught on the turntable and ripped from top to bottom! We had to stop the show. Fortunately, there two scrim in the show—one that hides the upstage unit during the hurricane sequence, so we could make a switch."

An entirely new set is introduced when the action shifts to Kittiwah Island for a festive picnic that turns into a

moment of reckoning when Bess is reunited with her abusive ex-lover, Crown. In his research, Yeargan says that he discovered the existence of a dance hall on Folly Island, a real-life location off the Charleston coast. Using this for inspiration, he came up with a raised boardwalk with tall streetlamps and a suggestion of the dance hall, featuring louvered windows, located upstage left.

The production's scenery was built by Dutch National Opera. "They did an amazing job with it," Yeargan says. "It was constructed as a metal frame with wood cladding on it. When the pieces arrived at ENO, it was like the biggest jigsaw puzzle you've ever seen. There were thousands of pieces. We barely got it done in time. But once it was done, it was easy to take apart and put back together."

He adds, "You've never seen a scene shop like it. It's in the newer part of Amsterdam, in a building made of red corrugated tin; it is spotlessly clean, like a hospital. Every piece of wood is bar-coded" for inventory purposes.

Yeargan notes that the projection designer Luke Halls was brought into the production to help fill out the onstage visuals and provide imagery to help with the scenic transitions. "I was asked to create a dynamic for the hurricane scene," Halls says, "and also to set the scene, using the black-and-white photo for historical context, and to provide vignettes in transitions." The photo is of Cabbage Row and it came out of Yeargan's research. "We started with it, recreating in 3D to make a link with the skeletal set," Halls adds. This involved camera-mapping the photo, extracting a 3D image from it, and reworking it digitally. When the opera begins, the image is seen on the downstage scrim; as lighting bleeds through, the full set is revealed behind it. It makes for a highly theatrical moment as the galvanic overture slips into the moody, compelling melody of "Summertime," the opening aria.

Halls also provided an animated sequence of rain falling on Catfish Row as the set rotates, and of the hurricane that is a key part of the plot. This, too, is an animation and it casts a frightening pall across the stage. In addition, the Kittiwah Island set features images of poles used to tie up boats. "It was all about creating images that have depth and atmosphere," the designer says, noting that he strove to make sure that his work merged seamlessly with other design elements: "There are moments when Don [Holder, the lighting designer] has backlit the set, which is spinning, and my images fills in the details; it creates a nice dynamic." The projections are delivered using two disguise gx media servers and two 21K Panasonic projectors.

Lighting

Holder's lighting provides Yeargan's set dimensionally, highlighting many details and carving it out onstage, in addition to pulling various principals out of the crowd, directing the viewer's attention like a motion picture camera, and creating numerous time-of-day looks. "Being able

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to shoot many angles of sunlight, moonlight, and emotional light through that structure was a huge plus,” he says. At the same time, he notes, “It was very challenging to have all that scenery on multiple levels, with so many people as part of each composition and a set that is constantly rotating.” Noting the Met’s fast-paced production schedule, he adds, “It can be quite tricky to physically keep up, moving the channels around and sculpting the space, when the need to keep moving forward is paramount. You’re asked to move unbelievably quickly at the Met. Fortunately, Michael’s design takes light beautifully.”

Speaking in creative terms, Holder says, “The overall point of view of this *Porgy and Bess* was gritty, truthful, a

naturalistic approach to the material that doesn’t sugar-coat or romanticize it in any way. These people really struggle. For me, this prompted the idea of tracking the piece fairly specifically in terms of time of day. It helps the audience navigate it from a storytelling perspective.”

Therefore, he adds, “I went toward a more monochromatic palette, resisting the impulse to colorize the space and keeping any saturated or non-muted choices out of it. The lighting is restricted to tints of white, except for the golden light of the setting sun.” One exception is the big burst of yellow light that ends the scene in which Porgy kills Crown. It is, he says, “more of a musical and emotional response to the moment. Having done this production



The Met’s new repertory rig, with its complement of gear from, among others, Elation Professional, was purchased from 4Wall Entertainment. The lighting purchase was a massive retrofit project that the Met undertook after a several year, multi-brand evaluation.

twice before, I felt it needed to be addressed. There were plenty of times when I felt the impulse to add a button at the end of a scene, but I resisted it, because I wasn't lighting a Broadway musical."

The demands of the production required some modifications to the rep lighting plot. "The big addition to the hang addressed the need to carve out the space as it revolved," Holder says. "The repertory situation isn't necessarily sympathetic to having lighting ladders and traditional side lighting, so I added positions that allowed me to add all that incredible side lighting that cuts through all the structures, creating those massively long diagonal shadows across the turntable. One moment where it all pays off is in the first act, after the funeral of Robbins [Serena's husband]. The set is revealed behind the scrim, rotating, and you see light cutting through scenery; the effect is like a black-and-white silent film. The interplay of light and shadow is really thrilling to me."

He adds, "I also used the side positions to create an abstract space for the second-act fight between Porgy and Crown. And I added gear upstage, at left and right, to cut through the scenery on a diagonal axis as it moves, allowing me to create long, extended shadows, getting a sense of sunlight and taking advantage of the set's depth."

Interestingly, Holder notes, "The rig at the Met is now almost all LED. Very little of what I used was either incandescent or tungsten." He notes that the overhead rig is dominated by gear from Elation Professional; the Met recently purchased 70 of the company's Artiste Monet units. The product is billed as providing up to 45,000 lumens from a 950W, 6,500K LED engine; it also features the company's new SpectraColor system, about which John Froelich, resident lighting designer at the Met, says, "The ability to mix to super saturated colors without having to revert to the use of color chips is really advantageous. For example, I can shift from a realistic lighting state in one cue and then fade to really saturated theatrical state to emphasize a musical moment, mood, or event onstage with the same lighting equipment. This is quite helpful in our repertory environment as we have more wide-ranging access to dramatic shifts without having to hang additional lighting equipment."

The challenge of working with LED gear, at least in this case, Holder says, was, "How do you create a murky, gritty environment that feels filled with various types of natural light, using solid-state lighting sources?"

The solution, he says, "is about color correction, being really specific and detailed about the color coming from each source. LED fixtures are, natively, quite cold; saturated mixed color tends to be quite electric and vibrant, which isn't at all what the world of *Porgy and Bess* is about. I spent a lot of time picking the right tints of white and color-correcting for the right tint of sunlight, moonlight, or the look of a torch or candle." He also made use of a large component of ETC Source Fours, outfitted with scrollers, to

warm up certain onstage looks. (Other Elation gear in the Met includes Chorus Line ST LED battens, also used in overhead positions.)

Holder notes that he was aided in this endeavor by the opera house staff: "The Met lighting department does a lot of preliminary work in creating color palettes, unlike other venues, where the lighting designer has to come in and get them accomplished. My process with the Met was to select from a series of premixed color palettes, which felt appropriate to the production." He notes of the Artiste Monets, "It works almost like hybrid fixtures; you can use it as a hard or soft source, using the internal frost selector; basically, any fixture can do what you need it to do."

In his final addition to the rep plot, the designer says, "The Met has many non-rep side lighting positions in the well where the house curtain goes. We fitted this out with [Vari-Lite] VL3500Q Profiles, three per side; they did a lot of heavy lifting as the set moved into different positions."

Also, Holder says, "There are a lot of Martin [by Harman] MAC Viper DX wash fixtures placed in non-rep positions, which I used liberally. These include a flying tormentor pipe in each wing that runs upstage to downstage instead of vertically; they create much of the natural light—sunlight, moonlight—that reveals the revolving set in three dimensions. The upstage cyc is lit primarily from behind; it's a translucent muslin drop treated with dyes and opaque paint; like the scrim and portals, it is painted like a big clapboard house. It takes backlight effectively; using very large tungsten cyc lights upstage of the drop was effective and, during the hurricane, I push strobe lighting through the drop, using five or six Martin Atomics."

Regarding the challenges of designing for three opera houses, he says, "I made the mistake of trying to translate the ENO design to the Dutch National Opera, which added time and complexity to the process. It would have been simpler for me to do what I did at the Met, which was keep the cue placements intact but basically relight the opera. Each house has a different space, positions, and gear; it was not really possible to translate or take advantage of much of what we had done before. We took advantage of the summer tech session at the Met to reconstruct it all. We only had a Monday through Thursday, but we relied on a production video from ENO for reference."

Altogether, he describes the process at the Met as "like an oncoming train. We had two [ETC] Eos consoles and two programmers, one who manipulated the active fixtures and puts things in place, and another who cleaned up things in terms of the show file, making certain it runs smoothly. It all happens simultaneously. The lighting department is superb; they've organized it in a way that makes it possible to do something that you're proud of."

All three designers have plenty to be proud of with this production. *Porgy and Bess* returns to the Met's repertory during the month of January. 🎭