

Study Guide



The Genshwin's
Dorothy and Bess



The Company of the American Repertory Theater's production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. Photo by Michael Lutch.

THE SYNOPSIS

What's What On Catfish Row?

ACT I

On a quiet evening in Charleston's Catfish Row, Clara sings a lullaby ("Summertime") to her baby. In the courtyard, Clara's husband Jake tries his hand at calming the baby ("A Woman is a Sometime Thing") while the men gather for a game of dice ("Crap Game"). Amongst the players and bystanders are Porgy, a crippled beggar; Sporting Life, a shady drug dealer; Crown, an infamous drunk and bully; and Bess, Crown's woman who is shunned as a "hussy".

Porgy wins the game. When Crown flies into a rage, Robbins, another player, jumps to Porgy's defense. Crown and Robbins fight and Crown kills him with a cotton hook. With the police on their way, Crown flees but warns Bess that he will return for her. With no one else in Catfish Row willing to take her in, Bess takes shelter with Porgy.

The inhabitants of Catfish Row try to collect money to give Robbins a proper burial ("Gone, Gone, Gone"), as

the widow Serena laments his death ("My Man's Gone Now"). Porgy and Bess shock their neighbors by entering the funeral together. They encourage the others to donate money for the burial ("Leaving for the Promised Land").

One month later, the men set out fishing on Jake's boat, the Sea Gull ("It Takes a Long Pull"). Porgy, a changed man since Bess began living with him, sings about his life and his love ("I Got Plenty of Nothing"). Sporting Life arrives on the scene and Mariah threatens him with violence if he tries to sell drugs in Catfish Row ("I Hates Your Strutting Style"). Seeing how happy she has made Porgy, the community has come to accept Bess and Porgy decides to buy her a divorce from Crown. Bess is invited to the neighborhood picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island. Porgy, awaiting the delivery of a brace for his leg, stays behind ("Bess, You Is My Woman Now") and Bess joins the rest of Catfish Row as they leave for the island ("Oh, I Can't Sit Down").

ACT II

On Kittiwah Island, Sporting Life interrupts Serena's "sermon" with a satirical punch on religion ("It Ain't Necessarily So"). As everyone else boards the boat to return to Catfish Row, a half-starved Crown jumps from the bushes and seizes Bess. The boat leaves and Bess is trapped on the island with Crown, who has been hiding out there since murdering Robbins. Bess struggles against him, insisting that she is with Porgy now ("What You Want With Bess?"). Crown, refusing to accept that Bess has changed, attempts to take her by force and Bess, desperate, gives in to his embraces. The two leave, deeper into the wilds of Kittiwah.

The next day, the fishermen head out to sea, even though it is high storm season ("It Takes a Long Pull (Reprise)"). Bess stumbles back to Catfish Row, having walked twenty miles home from Kittiwah during low tide. She collapses, weakened and delirious with fever. Porgy remains steadfast at her side, and Serena prays for Bess's health ("Oh, Doctor Jesus"). As Bess recovers inside Porgy's house, vendors walk about Catfish Row selling strawberries, honey, and crabs ("Street Cries"). Bess awakens and apologizes to Porgy for being with Crown. Porgy vows to protect Bess if Crown ever comes back to her ("I Loves You Porgy"). The hurricane bell sounds, warning everyone that a storm is imminent.

With the hurricane raging, all of Catfish Row huddles inside ("Oh, The Lord Shake the Heaven"). Suddenly,

Crown barges in, mocking everyone's prayers with a bawdy song ("A Red Headed Woman"), demanding that Bess go with him. When Clara sees that Jake's boat has overturned in the ocean, she asks Bess to watch after her baby and runs into the raging storm to find her husband. Crown follows after Clara to rescue her.

Crown, Clara, and Jake are all lost in the hurricane. After the storm, the town is in mourning ("Clara, Don't You Be Downhearted"). Bess has adopted Clara and Jake's baby as her own and sings Clara's lullaby ("Summertime (Reprise)"). That night, Crown, who actually survived the hurricane, returns to look for Bess. Porgy attacks Crown and kills him. Later, the police arrive and demand that Porgy come down to the station and identify the body. Afraid of being arrested for the murder instead, Porgy is dragged off unwillingly. In Porgy's absence, Sporting Life tempts Bess with cocaine, or "happy dust", and she considers leaving for New York with him ("There's a Boat That's Leaving Soon").

After spending the night in prison, Porgy arrives back in Catfish Row. He is eager to see Bess but she is nowhere to be found. Porgy's neighbors reluctantly reveal to him that Bess has left for New York without him. Porgy, distraught, cries out for his love ("Where's My Bess?") while Maria and Serena encourage Porgy to forget about her. Undeterred, Porgy calls for his cane and leaves for New York to find Bess ("I'm on My Way").

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- **PRE-PERFORMANCE:** Before seeing the performance, pick three moments from this synopsis and create frozen tableaux to illustrate them. After seeing the performance, recreate each of these tableaux. How do the tableaux compare to what you saw on stage?
- Which parts of this plot make up the key elements of dramatic structure including the inciting moment, conflict, climax, & resolution?
- Can you identify any major themes in the story?

THE CHARACTERS

Who's Who On Catfish Row?

- **PORGY** – Disabled from birth, Porgy begs on the streets of Charleston for change and spends it gambling with the men of Catfish Row (usually winning). Thoughtful and liked by all, Porgy's neighbors are fiercely protective of him.

- **BESS** – The beautiful, hard-living Bess is known around the community at Crown's lover. Bess is addicted to drugs, drinks openly, and consciously separates herself from the rest of the women of Catfish Row. She is constantly on the run from her personal demons.



Audra McDonald & Norm Lewis in the American Repertory Theater's production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. Photo by Michael Lutch.

- **SPORTING LIFE** – A troublemaker who recently returned to Catfish Row after living in New York City, Sporting Life is the neighborhood's supplier of drugs (or, "happy dust"), alcohol, and other vices.

- **CROWN** – Bess's dangerous lover has a violent temper and an appetite for liquor and drugs. He works as a stevedore on the docks; is incredibly strong, and often spoiling for a fight

- **MARIAH** – As the matriarch figure of Catfish Row, Mariah cares for her neighbors like a family.

- **SERENA** – Deeply religious, and often judgmentally pious, Serena is the moral compass of the community.

- **ROBBINS** – Serena's loving husband likes to enjoy himself on a Friday night, gambling and drinking.

- **JAKE** – Jake is a fisherman and captain of the Sea Gull. He is willing to brave any danger to provide for his wife Clara and their newborn child.

- **CLARA** – Jake's young wife, prizes her husband and new baby above all else.

- **MINGO** – Mingo is the undertaker of Catfish Row who must balance his need to make a living with his sympathy for the families of the departed.

- **THE STRAWBERRY WOMAN, THE HONEY MAN, & THE CRAB MAN** – The cries from these street vendors fill the air as they try to sell their goods to the people of Catfish Row.
- **THE WOMEN AND MEN OF CATFISH ROW** – This lively community of workers from the streets, docks, sea, and fields of Charleston is close-knit and fiercely loyal to each other, especially in the face of external threats.
- **THE DETECTIVE AND POLICEMAN** – These men will use any tactic to make sure their case is closed, including violent interrogations and false imprisonment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- Describe the internal wants and motivations for Porgy, Bess, and the other major characters of Catfish Row. What actions do they take to accomplish these goals? What obstacles (both internal and external) must they overcome to accomplish these goals? Are they successful?
- How do Porgy and Bess individually develop over the course of the story?
- Without taking into account singing ability, how would you re-cast this show using celebrities from TV, film, and music? What qualities do your choices share with these characters?
- How does the community of Catfish Row remind you of your own community?

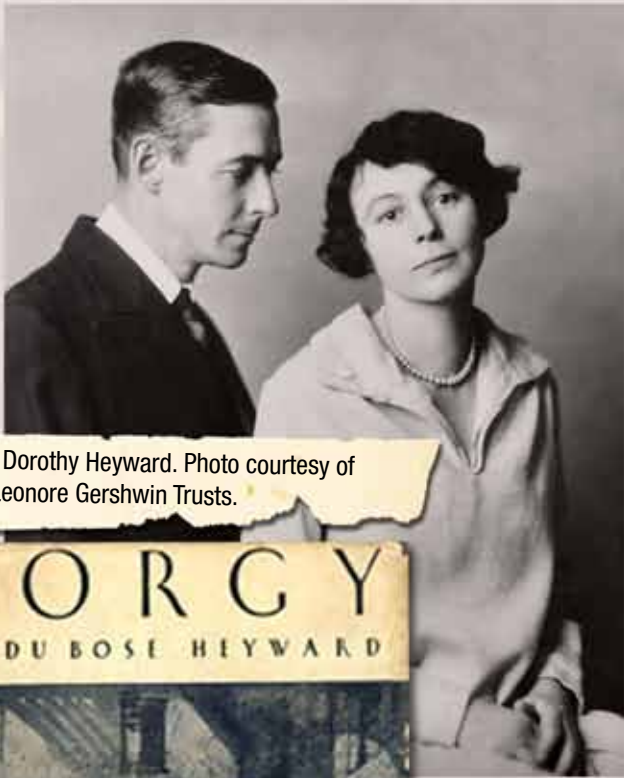


David Alan Grier and the Company of the American Repertory Theater's production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. Photo by Michael Lutch.

Dubose & Dorothy Heyward

And the Evolution of the Story

Like many contemporary plays and films, *Porgy and Bess* was originally a novel before it was adapted into a straight play, and then, into an opera, and THEN, into a musical. This is the story of Porgy and Bess's journey, including excerpts of the work from each incarnation. Each excerpt is from the same "scene" in the story... Bess's confrontation with Crown on Kittiwah Island. (Please note, the word "nigger" appears in some of these excerpts, which were written at a time when the word was used more regularly than it is now.)



DuBose & Dorothy Heyward. Photo courtesy of the Ira & Leonore Gershwin Trusts.

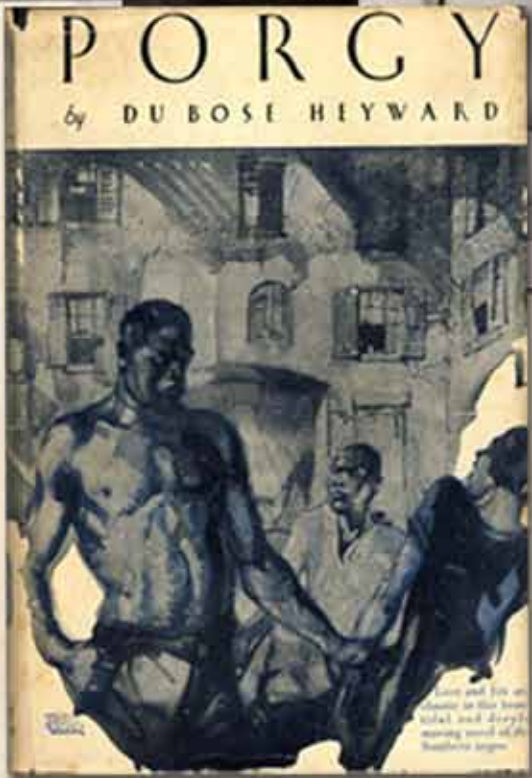
THE NOVEL

DuBose Heyward was born in 1885 in Charleston, SC. A descendent of Thomas Heyward, Jr., who signed the Declaration of Independence, DuBose was nevertheless born into modest economic circumstances. As a child and young man, he was frequently ill and, during his convalescence, he began to develop a passion for writing fiction and poetry. DuBose met his wife Dorothy at the famed MacDowell Colony for writers in 1922 and she returned with him to Charleston.

In 1924, DuBose made the decision to give up his day job as an insurance agent and pursue his love for writing. Having garnered only minor recognition for his poetry, DuBose turned his focus to fiction, and to the colorful local culture of his hometown. He had been raised surrounded by "Gullah," the language and traditions of former slaves who had been brought from West Africa (the word "Gullah"

may be a corruption of "Angola," the native land of many Charleston slaves). In this environment, Heyward set to work on a novel, *Porgy*, inspired in part by Samuel Smalls, a local beggar. Smalls had lost the use of his legs and traveled around the streets on Charleston in a goat-drawn wagon.

Catfish Row, the setting of Heyward's novel, was drawn from the real-life Cabbage Row, a block of decaying row houses inhabited by black workers. When *Porgy* was published in 1925, critics hurried to praise it as "the best novel of the season" (*The Chicago Daily News*) and "of beauty so rare and perfect it may be called a classic" (*The New Republic*).



The original dust jacket cover of the novel *Porgy*.

EXCERPT:

Almost immediately she was in another world. The sounds behind her became faint, and died. A rattler moved its thick body sluggishly out of her way. A flock of wood ibis sprang suddenly up, broke through the thick roof of palm leaves, and streamed away over the treetops toward the marsh with their legs at the trail.

She cut a wide fan-shaped leaf from the nearest palmetto. Behind her someone breathed – a deep interminable breath.

The woman's body stiffened slowly. Her eyes half closed and were suddenly dark and knowing. Some deep ebb or flow of blood touched her face, causing it to darken heavily, leaving the scar livid. Without turning, she said slowly:

"Crown!"

"Yas, yuh known berry well, dis Crown."

The deep sound shook her. She turned like one dazed, and looked him up and down. His body was naked to the waist, and the blue cotton pants that he had worn on the night of the killing had frayed away to his knees. He bent slightly forward. The great muscles of his torso flickered and ran like the flank of a horse. His small wicked eyes burned, and he moistened his heavy lips.

Earth had cared for him well. The marshes had provided eggs of wild fowl, and many young birds. The creek had given him fish, crabs and oysters in abundance, and the forest had fed him with its many berries, and succulent palmetto cabbage.

"I seen yuh land," he said, "an' I been waitin' fuh yuh. I mos' dead ob lonesome on dis damn island, wid not one Gawd's person to swap a word wid. Yuh gots any happy dus' wid yuh?"

"No," she said; then with an effort, "Crown, I gots somethin' tuh tell yuh. I done gib up dope; and beside dat, I sort of change my way."

His jaw shot forward, and the huge shoulder muscles bulged and set. His two great hands went around her throat and closed like the slow fusing of steel on steel. She stopped speaking. He drew her to him until his face touched hers. Under his hands her arteries pounded, sending fierce spurts of flame through her limbs, beating redly behind her eyeballs. His hands slackened. Her face changed, her lips opened, but she said nothing. Crown broke into low shaken laughter, and threw her from him.

"Now come wid me," he ordered.

Into the depths of the jungle they plunged; the woman walking in front with a trance-like fixity of gaze. They followed one of the narrow hard-packed trails that had been beaten by the wild hogs and goats that roamed the island.

On each side of them, the forest stood like a wall, its tough low trees and thickbodied palmettoes laced and bound together with wire-strong vines. Overhead the foliage met, making the trail a tunnel as inescapable as though it had been built of masonry.

The man walked with a swinging, effortless stride, but his breath sounded in long, audible inhalations, as though he labored physically.

When they had journeyed for half an hour they crossed a small cypress swamp. The cypress-knees jutted grotesquely from the yellow water, and trailing Spanish moss extended drab stalactites that brushed their faces as they threaded the low, muddy trail. Finally Bess emerged into a small clearing, in the centre of which stood a low hut with sides of plaited twigs and roof of palmetto leaves laid on top of each other in regular rows like shingles.

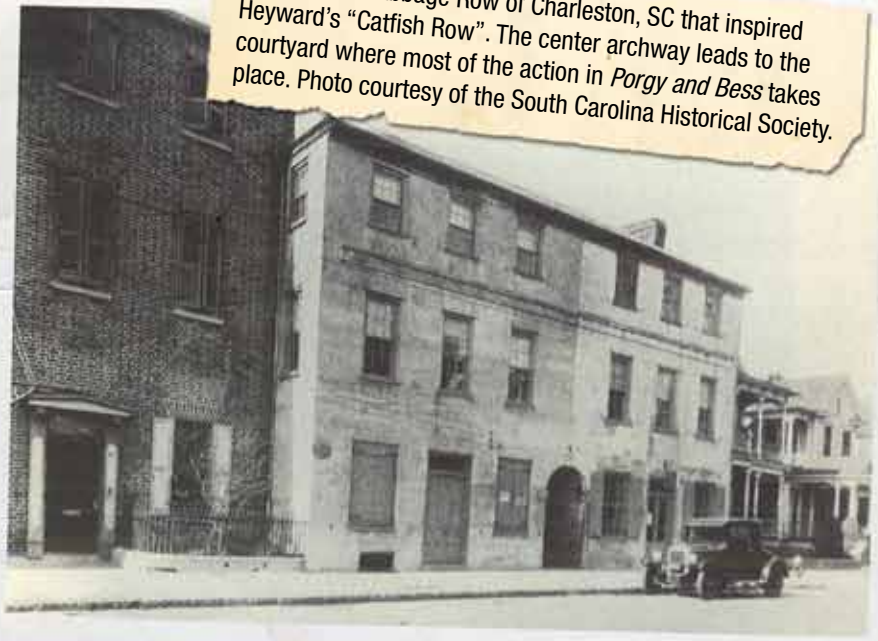
Crown was close behind her. At the low door of the hut she paused and turned toward him. He laughed suddenly and hotly at what he saw in her face.

"I know yuh ain't change," he said. "Wid yuh an' me it always goin' tuh be de same. See!"

He snatched her body toward him with such force that her breath was forced from her in a sharp gasp. Then she inhaled deeply, threw back her head, and sent a wild laugh out against the walls of the clearing.

Crown swung her about and threw her face forward into the hut.

The real life Cabbage Row of Charleston, SC that inspired Heyward's "Cattfish Row". The center archway leads to the courtyard where most of the action in *Porgy and Bess* takes place. Photo courtesy of the South Carolina Historical Society.



THE PLAY

In addition to the mountain of praise for the novel, many reviewers noted what Heyward's wife, Dorothy, had been telling him for months: with murder, love, and a catastrophic hurricane, *Porgy* was destined for the theatre.

Despite the encouragement from the press, Heyward was skeptical that *Porgy* would make a worthwhile adaptation for the stage. Film director and producer Cecil B. DeMille sought the rights to a film version of the novel, but the project was killed when the production company deemed it a hopeless endeavor that would never play in the South. During the next several months, Heyward turned down offers from three playwrights who were interesting in bringing *Porgy* to the stage. However, when a letter arrived from George Gershwin, expressing interest in turning the novel into an opera, Heyward was thrilled by the idea of the great American composer adapting his work. Upon seeing her husband's excitement, Dorothy Heyward was forced to come clean to her husband. Dorothy – herself a playwright – had been secretly at work on a stage version of *Porgy* for months. She sat DuBose down and read the play aloud to him. Her work stayed true to the action of the novel, and Dorothy had brilliantly captured her husband's narrative voice in the feeling of the play. Heyward was moved by his wife's work, yet deeply torn between the play and Gershwin's proposal for the opera. Heyward decided to remain loyal to his wife, and politely declined Gershwin's opera, telling him that they would be pursuing *Porgy* as a play. Gershwin quickly wrote back and told the Heywards that writing an opera would take him years, and with the strong dramatic structure of a play on which to base his music, *Porgy* could have life as both a play and opera. The Heywards were thrilled.

Dorothy continued to work with input from her husband. He helped her translate her dialogue into lines with a more "Gullah" quality. The Heywards also decided to omit a scene from the novel in which Bess, arrested during a cocaine binge, spends several days in prison for refusing to give up Sportin' Life as her dealer. It was Dorothy who made one of the most significant changes from novel to stage. Instead of having Bess depart for Savannah, leaving a heartbroken Porgy back in Charleston, Bess runs off to New York, and a determined Porgy follows after her in his goat-wagon. While Gershwin worked on his opera, *Porgy* the play premiered on Broadway on October 10, 1927, and ran for a successful 367 performances.

The "Lawyer Frazier" scene in the Theatre Guild's 1927 production of the play. Photo courtesy of the Theater Collection, Museum of the City of New York.



EXCERPT:

BESS:

(In a low, breathless voice) Crown?

CROWN:

Yo' know berry well dis Crown.

(She turns and looks at him. He partly emerges from the thicket, naked to the waist, his cotton trousers frayed away to the knees.)

I seen yo' land, an' I been waitin' all day fo' you'. I mos' dead on dis damn island'!

BESS:

(Looks at him slowly) Yo' ain't look mos' dead. Yo' bigger'n eber.

CROWN:

Oh, plenty bird' egg, oyster, an' t'ing. But I mos' dead ob lone-some wid not a Gawd's person fo' swap a word wid. Lor' I'se glad yo' come!

BESS:

I can't stay, Crown, or de boat go widout me.

CROWN:

Got any happy dus' wid you?

BESS:

No.

CROWN:

Come on! Ain't yo' gots jus' a little?

BESS:

No, I ain't. I done give up dope.

(CROWN laughs loudly.)

CROWN:

It sho' do a lonesome man good to hab' he 'oman come an' swap a couple joke wid um.

BESS:

Dat's de Gawd's trut'. An' 'sides – I gots sompen fo' tell yo'.

CROWN:

Yo' bes' listen to whut I gots fo' tell yo'. I waitin' here til de cotton begin comin' in. Den libin'll be easy. Davy'll hide yo' an' me on de ribber boat fur as Savannah. Who yo' libin wid' now?

BESS:

I libin' wid de cripple Porgy.

CROWN:

(Laughing) Yo' gots de funny tas' in men. But dats yo' business. I ain't care who yo' takes up wid while I'm away. But 'membuh whut I tol' yo'! He's temporary! I guess it be jus' couple ob week' now 'fo I comes fo' yo'!

BESS:

(With an effort) Crown, I got sompen fo' tell yo'.

CROWN:

What dat?

BESS:

I – I sort ob change' my way'.

CROWN:

How yo' change?

BESS:

I – I libin' wid Porgy now – an' I libin' decent.

CROWN:

Yo' heah whut I tol' yo'? I say in couple week I comin' fo' you', an' yo' goin' tote fair 'less yo' wants to meet yo Gawd.

Yo' gits dat?

BESS:

Crown, I tells yo' I change'. I stayin wid Porgy fo' good.

(He seizes her by the arm and draws her savagely toward him. The steamboat whistles.)

Take yo' han' off me. I goin' miss dat boat!

CROWN:

Dere's anudder boat day atter tomorrouh.

BESS:

I tells yo' I means what I says. Porgy my man now...

CROWN:

Yo' is tellin' me yo' radder hab' dat crawlin' cripple dan Crown?

BESS:

(Taking a propitiatory tone) It like dis, Crown – I de only 'oman Porgy eber hab'. An' I thinkin' how it goin' be if all deses odder nigger' goes back to back to Catfish Row tonight, an' I ain't come home to um. He be like a little chil' dat los' its ma.

(CROWN, still holding her, throws back his head and laughs. BESS begins to feel frightened.)

Yo' can laugh, but I tells yo' I change'!

CROWN:

Yo' change' all right. Yo' ain't neber been so funny.

(The boat whistles. She tries to pull away. He stops laughing and holds her tighter with lowering look. Draws her nearer.)

BESS:

Lemme go, Crown! Yo' can get plenty odder women?

CROWN:

What I wants wid odder women? I gots a 'oman. An' dats yo'. See?

BESS:

(Trying flattery) Yo' known how it always been wid' yo', Crown – yo' ain't neber want for a 'oman. Look at dis chest, an' look at dese arm' yo' got! Dere's plenty better-lookin' gal dan me. Yo' know how it always been wid' yo'. Dese five year 'now I been yo' 'oman – yo' could kick me in de street, an' den, when yo' ready fo' me back, yo' could whistle for' me, an' dere I was again a-lickin' yo' han'. What yo' wants wid Bess? She gettin' ole now. (She sees that her flattery has failed and is terrified.) Dat boat goin' widout me! Lemme go! Crown, I'll come back fo' see yo'. I swear to Gawd I'll come on de Friday boat. Jus' lemme go now. I can't stop out here all night. I 'fraid! Dere's t'ings movin' in de t-icket – rattlesnake, an' such! Lemme go, I tells yo'! Take yo' han' off me!

CROWN:

(Holding her and looking steadily at her.) No man ever take my 'oman from me. It goin' to be good joke on Crown if he lose um to one wid no leg' an' no gizzard (Draws her closer.) So yo' is change, is yo'? (Grips her more tightly. Looks straight into her eyes.) Why yo' say now?

BESS:

(Summoning the last of her resolution.)

I stayin' wid Porgy fo' good.

(His jaw shoots forward, and his huge shoulder muscles bulge and set. Slowly his giant hands close round her throat. He brings his eyes still closer to hers. The boat whistles long and loud, but neither gives sign of hearing it. After a moment, CROWN laughs with satisfaction at what he sees in Bess's eyes. His hands leave her throat and clasp her savagely by the shoulders. BESS throws back her head with a wild hysterical laugh.)

CROWN:

I knows yo' ain't change'! Wid yo' an' me, it always goin' be de same. See?

(He swings her about and hurls her face forward through an opening in the thicket. Then, with a low laugh, he follows her. She regains her balance and goes on ahead of him. The band is still playing, but growing faint in the distance.)

CURTAIN



The 'Crap Game' scene in the Theatre Guild's 1927 production of the play. Photo courtesy of the Theater Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

EXCERPT:

(All sung except where noted.)

(Crown whistles from thicket. Bess stops, drops basket.)

BESS:

(Spoken) Crown!

CROWN:

(Emerging from thicket) You know very well dis Crown;
I seen you lan' an' I been waitin' all day for see you.
I mos' dead on this damn island.

BESS:

You ain' looks mos' dead, you bigger 'n ever.

CROWN:

Oh, I got plenty to eat, bird egg, oyster an' such.
But I mos' dead of the lonesome wid not one Gawd' person to
swap a word wid. Lord! I's glad you come.
(Takes her right arm, she pulls away.)

BESS:

I can't stay, Crown,
or de boat'll go without me.

CROWN:

(Spoken) Damn dat boat!
Got any happy dus' wid you?

BESS:

No, Crown, no mo' happy dus'.
I done give up dope, an' besides, Crown,
I got something for tell you.

CROWN:

You bes' lissen to what I gots to tell you.
I waitin' here till de cotton begin' comin' in.
Den libbin'll be easy.
Johnny'll hide you an' me on de ribber boat fur as Savannah.
Who you libbin' wid now?

BESS:

I livin' wid de cripple Porgy.

CROWN:

(Laughs)

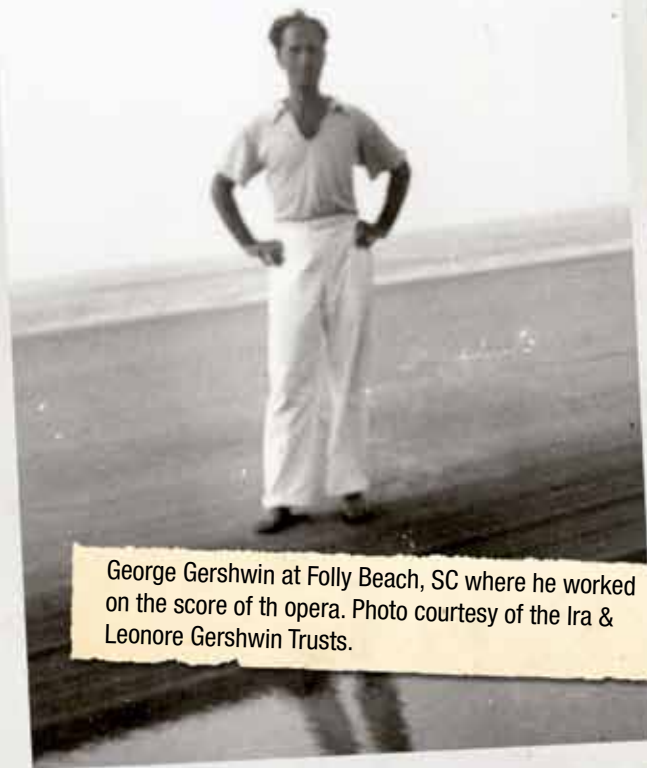
You sho' got funny tas' in men, but dat's yo' business, I ain't
care who you takes up wid while I's away. But membuh, what
I tol' you,
he's temporary.
I reckon it'll be just a couple ob weeks now 'fore I comes for
you.

BESS:

Crown, I got something to tell you.

CROWN:

What dat?



George Gershwin at Folly Beach, SC where he worked on the score of th opera. Photo courtesy of the Ira & Leonore Gershwin Trusts.

THE OPERA

In 1932, George wrote to DuBose Heyward again, reaffirming his desire to adapt *Porgy* into an opera. By this point, Heyward was prepared to collaborate with Gershwin; he agreed to license the operatic rights to the story. George spent the next year composing the score of *Porgy and Bess*.

In the meantime, Heyward began working on the libretto (the text of the opera) with George's brother, Ira Gershwin. Ira was a gifted lyricist and frequently collaborated with George. Ira, who was more experienced at writing song lyrics, assisted Heyward in adapting his prose to be sung. Heyward wrote the lyrics to two of *Porgy and Bess's* well-known songs, "Summertime" and "My Man's Gone Now." Ira (with Heyward's help) wrote most of the lyrics in the second act. The three men worked together quite well and would look back fondly on the collaboration.

Heyward and the Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess* premiered at Boston's Colonial Theater on September 30th, 1935, to great critical acclaim. The story goes that George Gershwin, director Rouben Mamoulian and vocal director Alexander Smallens walked around Boston Common until three in the morning, arguing over cuts to the score. The opera was nearly four hours long – too long for Broadway audiences, according to some. Finally, Gershwin agreed to take out three songs. He delivered the cut pages from the script to Mamoulian in a gift-wrapped parcel two days before the Broadway premiere, as a birthday present. It came with a note: "Thank you for making me take out all that stuff in Boston."

BESS:
I...I livin' wid Porgy now,
an' I livin' decent.

CROWN:
You hear what I tol' you,
I say in a couple ob weeks I's comin' for you,
an' you is goin' tote fair, lessen you wants to meet yo' Gawd,
(spoken) you gets dat?

BESS:
Take yo' han's off me, I goin' miss dat boat.

CROWN:
You tellin' me dat you'd rather have dat cripple
dan Crown?

BESS:
It's like dis, Crown,
I's the only woman Porgy ever had
an' I's thinkin'
now, how it will be tonight
when all these other niggers go back to Catfish Row.
He'll be sittin' an' watchin' the big front gate,
accountin' 'em off
waitin' for Bess.
An' when the las' woman goes home to her man
an' I ain' there.
(CROWN laughs.)
Lemme go, Crown!
(spoken) You can get plenty other women.

CROWN:
What I wants wid other woman!
(spoken) I gots a woman an' dat's you, see!

BESS:
Oh, what you want wid Bess? She's getting' ole now;
Take a fine young gal for to satisfy Crown.
Look at this chest an' look at these arms you got.
You know how it always been with me,
these five years I been yo' woman,
You could kick me in the street, then when you wanted me back
You could whistle
an' there I was back again lickin' yo' han'.
There's plenty better lookin gal
than Bess

(BESS and CROWN sing together)

BESS: CROWN:
Can' you see, What's I wants wid
I'm with Porgy, other woman,
now an' forever, I gots a woman, yes,
I am his woman, An' dat is you, yes,
he would die without me, dat is you, yes,

BESS:, CROWN:
Oh, Crown, won't you let me go I need you now an' you're mine
to my man, jus' as long as I want you.
to my man, No cripple goin' take my
He is a cripple an' woman from me.
needs my love, You got a man tonight an'
all my love. that is Crown,
What you want wid Bess? yes Crown, yes Crown.
Oh, let me go to my man, You're my woman Bess,
I'm tellin' you now
I'm your man.

BESS:
What you want wid Bess?

(Boat whistles.)

BESS:
(spoken) Lemme go, hear dat boat, it's goin' without me!

CROWN:
(Pressing her very close, exerting his male attraction to the full.)
You ain' goin' nowhere.

BESS:
Take yo' hands off me, I say,
(weakening) yo' hands,
yo' hands,
yo' hands!

(CROWN kisses BESS. After a time, her arms close around him.)

CROWN:
I knows you ain' change,
Wid you and me it always be the same.
(He hurls her into edge of Palmetto thicket.)
(spoken) Git in dat (sung) thicket.

(She rises and backs into woods. He follows.)

CURTAIN

John Bubbles as "Sportin' Life" with the company in the Kittiwah Island scene of the opera's 1935 Broadway production. Photo courtesy of the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.





The Creative Team of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess* – Musical Adapter Diedre L. Murray, Director Diane Paulus, and Book Adapter Suzan-Lori Parks.

THE MUSICAL

A team of contemporary American theatre artists has gathered to adapt this classic once again, this time for the contemporary musical theatre stage. This version is intended to be less operatic and epic, and more focused and intimate. In adapting the libretto/book of *Porgy and Bess* for a new generation, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks sought to give an individual voice to the inhabitants of Catfish Row. In revising a classic like this, Parks drew upon a key concept of her writing style – what she calls “repetition and revision.” In Parks’s other plays (such as *Topdog/Underdog* and *In the Blood*), history is retold but altered in a way that reveals something new in the present context. The idea is similar to the way jazz musicians will replay the same riff and improvise off it, creating new textures, sounds and feelings from a single melody. Putting the libretto of *Porgy and Bess* in the hands of Suzan-Lori Parks is like handing its sheet music to Miles Davis – the ensuing “repetition and revision” maintains the essence of the original, but is enhanced by her signature style. It is a dialogue between the past and the present. In her words:

“Sometimes I’m restructuring a sequence of action, sometimes rewriting an entire scene, or excavating underwritten original moments, sometimes strengthening the plot line and individual character through-lines, sometimes, you know, ‘fleshing out’ and ‘unpacking’ emotional beats; sometimes I just had to add a few words to help something click. It’s not as if we are trying to put our thumbprints all over it; what we are doing is appreciating what is there, then trying to make what’s there into a viable show for today’s musical theatre stage.”

The original features phonetic spellings of the 1920s “Gullah” dialect in an attempt to “write how it sounds”. Parks adapted this into a more timeless Southern African-American manner of speaking and, for the most part, she used standard American English in her spelling. Instead of dictating the sounds of the dialect in writing, this allowed the pronunciation to be explored by the performers, in consultation with a dialect coach. (Spoken lines in italics, all other lines sung.)

EXCERPT:

(Spoken lines in italics, all other lines sung.)

UNDERScore: #31 “RECIT ON KITTIVAH”

BESS:

Crown!

CROWN:

You know very well it’s Crown.
I seen you land and I’ve been waiting all day to see you.
I’m almost dead on this damn island.

BESS:

You don’t look almost dead. You’re bigger than ever.

CROWN:

Oh, I got plenty to eat, bird egg, oyster and such.
But I’m almost dead of the lonesome without a single person
to swap a word with.
Lord! I’m glad you come.

BESS:

I can’t stay, Crown, or the boat’ll go without me.

CROWN:

Damn that boat! Got any Happy Dust with you?

BESS:

*No, Crown, no more Happy Dust. I done give up dope and
besides, Crown, I’ve got something to tell you.*

CROWN:

*You best listen to what I’ve got to tell you. I’m waiting here till
the cotton comes in. Then living would be easy. We’ll both
hide out on a riverboat as far as Savannah. Who you living
with now?*

BESS:

I’m living with Porgy.

CROWN:

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

You sure got funny taste in men, but that’s your business.
I ain’t care who you take up with while I’m away.
But remember what I told you. He’s temporary.
I reckon it’ll be just a couple of weeks now fore I come for
you.

BESS:

Crown, I got something to tell you.



The Company of the American Repertory Theater's production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. Photo by Michael Lutch.

CROWN:
What's that?

BESS:
I – I'm living with Porgy now, and I'm living decent.

CROWN:
You heard what I told you? I said in a couple of weeks I'm coming for you, and you are gonna tote fair, unless you want to meet your God! You get that?

(boat whistles)

BESS:
Take your hands off me. I'm gonna miss that boat.

CROWN:
You telling me that you'd rather have that cripple than Crown?

BESS:
It's like this, Crown. I'm the only woman Porgy ever had and I'm thinking now, how it will be tonight when all those others get back to catfish row. He'll be sitting a watching. He'll be watching and waiting for Bess. But I won't be there –

(CROWN laughs)

BESS:
*Lemme go, Crown!
You can get plenty of other women.*

CROWN:
*What I want with other women?
I got a woman and that's you, see!*

SONG: #32 "WHAT YOU WANT WITH BESS"

BESS:

What you want with Bess?

She getting old now;

Takes a fine young girl

for to satisfy Crown.

Look at this chest

and look at these arms you got.

You know how it's always been with me,

these five years I've been your woman,

you could kick me in the street,

and when you wanted me back,

you could whistle, and there I was

back again, licking your hand.

There's plenty better looking gals than Bess.

(CROWN and BESS sing at the same time)

BESS: CROWN:

Can't you see, What I want with other women?

I'm with Porgy, I've got a woman, yes –

now and forever.

I am his woman. and that is you, yes,

He would die without me. that is you, yes.

Oh, Crown, won't you let me go I need you now and you are mine,

to my man! just as long as I want you.

To my man! No cripple's gonna

take my woman from me.

He is a cripple and You got a man tonight and

needs my love, that is Crown,

all my love. that is Crown, yes, Crown.

What you want with Bess? You're my woman, Bess.

Oh let me go to my man. I'm telling you now I'm your man.

(pressing her very close)

BESS:

What you want with Bess?

(Boat whistles)

UNDERSCORE: #33 "LEMMIE GO"

BESS:

Lemmie go, that boat is going without me!

CROWN:

You ain't going nowhere!

BESS:

(weakening)

Take your hands off me, I say
your hands, your hands, your hands.

(CROWN kisses her passionately, she kisses him back.)

CROWN:

I know you ain't changed.

With you and me it's always the same.

(They embrace passionately. BESS takes off her dress and leads CROWN offstage.)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- Taking the adaptation of the novel into a straight play as inspiration, select a section of narrative prose (fictional or non-fictional, as long as a "story" is involved), and transform it into a dramatic scene. As you make your prose selection, think about how much action is contained within the passage (the amount of dialogue already written can be a good indicator). Think about how the narrative descriptions in the prose can be translated into action-able staging and design directions. Read aloud the prose selection and then present the scene fully staged.
- Read aloud the straight play excerpt above. Then, listen to a recording of the scene in the opera, following along with the excerpt. What are the ways in which the addition of music affects the scene? Be specific and list as many as you can. How do the "rules" of opera vs. straight theatre affect the underlying drama of the story?
- In the final excerpt, from the musical version, many more lines are spoken than in the opera libretto. How do you think the adapters decided which lines should be spoken and which should be sung?
- What are the pros and cons of letting the actors (with the director and dialect coach) determine how the "Gullah" dialect should be pronounced, instead of spelling out the words phonetically?



George and Ira Gershwin. Photo courtesy of the Ira & Leonore Gershwin Trusts.

George & Ira Gershwin

AND THE MUSIC OF THE GREAT AMERICAN "FOLK OPERA"

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn on September 26, 1898, the second of four children from a close-knit immigrant family. He began his musical career as a "song-plugger" for Tin Pan Alley, but was soon writing his own pieces. Gershwin's first published song, "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em," demonstrated innovative new techniques, but only earned him five dollars. Soon after, however, he met a young lyricist named Irving Ceaser. Together they composed a number of songs including "Swanee," which sold more than a million copies.

In the same year as "Swanee," Gershwin collaborated with Arthur L. Jackson and Buddy De Sylva on his first complete Broadway musical, *La, La Lucille*. Over the course of the next four years, Gershwin wrote forty-five songs; among them were "Somebody Loves Me" and "Stairway to Paradise," as well as a twenty-five-minute opera, *Blue Monday*, a precursor to *Porgy and Bess*. Composed in five days, the piece contained many musical clichés, but it also offered hints of developments to come.

In 1924, George collaborated with his brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, on a musical comedy *Lady Be Good*. It included such standards as "Fascinating Rhythm" and "The Man I Love." It was the beginning of a partnership

that would continue for the rest of the composer's life. Together they wrote many more successful musicals including *Oh Kay!* and *Funny Face*, starring Fred Astaire and his sister Adele. While continuing to compose popular music for the stage, Gershwin began to lead a double life, trying to make his mark as a "serious" composer.

When he was 25 years old, his jazz-influenced "Rhapsody in Blue" premiered in New York's Aeolian Hall at the concert, "An Experiment in Music." The audience included John Phillips Sousa, Serge Rachmaninov, and Igor Stravinsky. Gershwin followed this success with his orchestral work "Piano Concerto in F, Rhapsody No. 2" and "An American in Paris". Serious music critics were often at a loss as to where to place Gershwin's classical music in the standard repertoire, but it always found favor with the general public.

In the early 1930s, Gershwin experimented with some new ideas in Broadway musicals. *Strike Up The Band*, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, and *Of Thee I Sing*, were innovative works dealing with social issues of the time. *Of Thee I Sing* was a major hit and the first comedy ever to win the Pulitzer Prize. It was also during this time that George composed the music for *Porgy and Bess*.

In 1937, after many successes on Broadway, the brothers decided to go to Hollywood. Again they teamed up with Fred Astaire on the musical films *Shall We Dance* and *A Damsel in Distress*. The films included such hits as "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me", which earned an Academy Award nomination.

After becoming ill while working on a film, he had plans to return to New York to work on writing serious music. He planned a string quartet, a ballet, and another opera, but these pieces were never written. On July 11, 1937, at the age of 38, he died of a malignant brain tumor.

Ira didn't write any new material for three years after the death of his brother. Once he returned to the music world, Ira spent fourteen years writing lyrics for a wide range of theater and film musicals before retiring. In 2007, the Library of Congress named its Prize for Popular Song after the Gershwin brothers. The award recognizes "the profound and positive effect of popular music on the world's culture." The first three winners of the prize were Paul Simon, Stevie Wonder, and Paul McCartney.

George Gershwin's score for *Porgy and Bess* is a true hybrid of many varied forms- jazz, classical, blues, gospel, and traditional musical theatre. Here's what musical arranger Diedre L. Murray had to say:

"There's such a wide range of influences and sounds in Porgy and Bess. It is classical music, but in many ways it looks like a jazz score. Gershwin used to go up to Harlem to hear jazz, and then he also spent time on the islands in South Carolina. There's music in there that foreshadows McCoy Tyner and Thelonious Monk. I also think there's a lot of Puccini and Bizet in there. And Wagnerian flourishes. And ragtime. I even hear R&B and rap! Hybrid is where we live now. The world is smaller. Everything is coming closer together."

Porgy and Bess was also way ahead of its time and had a tremendous influence on American popular music. The opening song "Summertime" has been covered thousands of times. When arranging the music for this production, Diedre L. Murray and Orchestrators William David Bohn and Christopher Jahnke, took some of the sounds that Gershwin helped influence and injected them back into the original. By emphasizing the musical legacy that was left by Gershwin's work, they are paying homage to the history of *Porgy and Bess*, while also illuminating the lasting effect that the opera has had on contemporary American music.



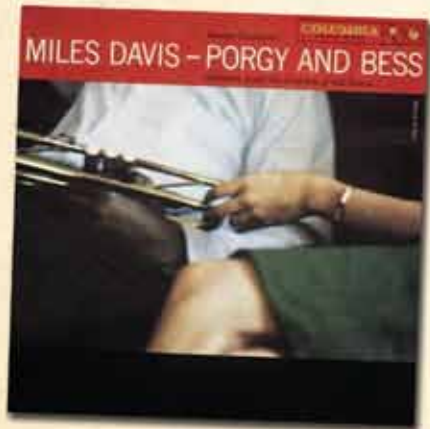
Members of the Original Cast- Decca

This 1940s highlights recording features original Broadway cast members Todd Duncan and Anne Brown.



Nashville Symphony Orchestra- Decca

This 2006 concert recording represents the version that originally appeared on Broadway in 1935.



Miles Davis and Gil Evans- Sony

This 1958 album was recorded in anticipation of the Hollywood film – in the late 1950s, “jazz versions” of film scores were in vogue. Davis’s incredible trumpet work on this album (along with his pioneering use of modal improvisation) cemented its place in history as one of the finest jazz collaborations of all time.

The Recordings

Here are some of the landmark recordings of *Porgy and Bess* from both the classical and jazz traditions.



Houston Grand Opera- RCA Red Seal

This 1976 production transferred to Broadway and was the only opera to ever win a Tony Award. It was revived at Radio City Music Hall in 1986. It is one of the fullest versions of the original opera, restoring what even Gershwin himself had previously cut.



The Film Soundtrack- Hallmark

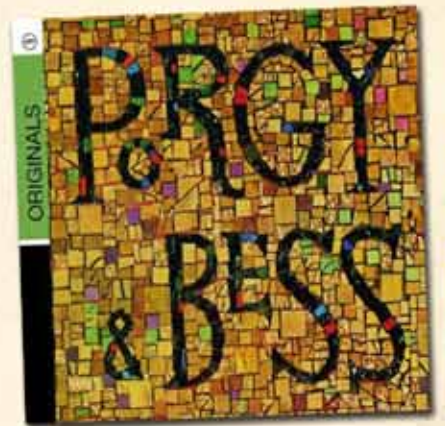
Although Sidney Portier and Dorothy Dandridge starred in the 1959 film, Robert McFerrin (father of Bobby) and Adele Addison sang the title roles for the film and this soundtrack. Clara, played on-screen by Diahann Carroll, was dubbed by Loulie Jean Norman, a white coloratura soprano. Sammy Davis, Jr., who played Sportin’ Life, sang in the film but could not appear on the soundtrack as he was already committed to record a *Porgy and Bess* album with another record company. Cab Calloway sang the role instead.



High Performance

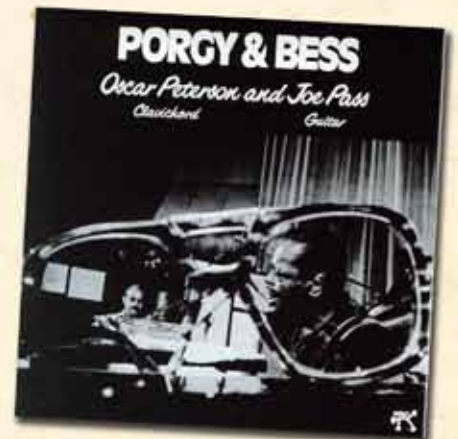
(Leontyne Price and William Warfield)- RCA

This 1963 highlights recording reunited the stars of the US State Department sponsored world tour of the 1950s.



Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong- Verve

This 1957 highlights recording marked the final pairing of these two iconic jazz vocalists, and some of the most popular versions of these songs.



Oscar Peterson and Joe Pass- Ojc

This 1976 recording takes a different approach to the score, featuring only a clavichord and an acoustic guitar.



There are innumerable popular recordings featuring individual songs from *Porgy and Bess*. From Janis Joplin to Fantasia Barrino, from Sam Cooke to Cher, the options are endless. This playlist is a good place to start and is available on iTunes (copy “<http://bit.ly/PBSongs>” into your browser).

- **“Summertime”**
 - Janis Joplin - *Janis Joplin's Greatest Hits*
 - Sam Cooke - *30 Greatest Hits- Sam Cooke*
 - The Zombies - *The Original Studio Recordings, Vol. 1*
- **“My Man’s Gone Now”**
 - Nina Simone - *The Very Best of Nina Simone*
 - Herbie Hancock - *Gershwin’s World*
 - Sarah Vaughn - *Ultimate Sarah Vaughn*
- **“I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin”**
 - Brian Wilson - *Brian Wilson Reimagines Gershwin*
 - Pearl Bailey - *Pearl Bailey Sings Porgy and Bess*
- **“Bess, You Is My Woman Now”**
 - Miles Davis & Gil Evans - *Porgy and Bess*
 - Ray Charles - *Porgy and Bess*
 - Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong - *Porgy and Bess*
- **“It Ain’t Necessarily So”**
 - Cher - *The Glory of Gershwin*
 - Jamie Cullum - *Pointless Nostalgic*
 - Aretha Franklin - *The Great American Songbook*
- **“I Loves You, Porgy”**
 - Billie Holiday - *Billie Holiday's Greatest Hits*
 - Diana Ross - *The Blue Album*
 - Joshua Bell - *At Home With Friends*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- What do you think the differences are between “classical”, or “serious”, music and “popular” music?
- *Porgy and Bess* is a blending of many different musical styles, including 19th century grand opera and “ragtime”. Which moments of the show felt more “classical” or more “jazzy”? How did the musical style affect the emotional aspect of those moments?
- Taking all of the varied “covers” of songs from *Porgy and Bess* as inspiration, find as many online examples as you can of any song being publicly performed in two contrasting styles. How do the different musical styles contribute to (or detract from) the words of the song?



The Company of the American Repertory Theater's production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. Photo by Michael Lutch.

ELEMENTS OF THE PRODUCTION:

Dance

Choreographer Ronald K. Brown has developed a specific movement vocabulary for The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. "Our job is to discover and excavate who these characters are," he said. "When we are looking at grief within the piece, we look at dances that have grief in them. When we look at how the characters celebrate, we ask: where would the remnants of celebration be in their bodies? They draw from Africa, but also from their new world, here in the USA. These characters are not brand new. They were not created from the atmosphere. They're rooted in something."

This movement is inspired by dance from native South Carolina coastal culture (or Gullah). These social dances have origins dating back hundreds of years, and their modern incarnations can still be seen today.

• RING SHOUT

The ring shout is a dance element found in church services of the Sea Islands in the Carolinas and Georgia, the center of Gullah culture. Worshippers form a circle outside, sometimes surrounding the church building, and stomp, clap, and sing a hymn of praise.

• CAKEWALK

The cakewalk began as a tradition during the time of slavery in the United States, when white slave-owners would gather slaves to dance for them as a form of entertainment. The best dancer or dance couple would receive a cake as a prize. However, slaves subverted this act by purposely mocking whites' formal ballroom dances, a fact that went unnoticed by the slave owners. The cakewalk was not exclusively practiced in Gullah culture, but throughout the American South. Even after slavery ended, the cakewalk remained a fixture in social gatherings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- **PRE-PERFORMANCE:** Break out into small groups. Based on these descriptions (or further written research), develop and perform your own versions of the ring shout and cakewalk. Afterwards, use YouTube or other online/video resources to watch others perform these dances. How do your versions compare to theirs?
- When do elements of the ring shout and cakewalk appear in The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*? How do these dances contribute to those moments in terms of theme and plot?

The Company of the American Repertory Theater's production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*. Photo by Michael Lutch.





The set model featuring the exterior courtyard of Catfish Row at the top of the show.

ELEMENTS OF THE PRODUCTION:

Design - Scenery

From Scenic Designer Riccardo Hernandez:

It was a very thrilling moment when Diane called and asked me to design the space for The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*, and to hear her initial comments on our approach to this amazing classic. It was also captivating to hear Suzan-Lori Parks' thoughts on what Catfish Row should be in our first meeting and to re-imagine this place; a daunting task to say the least when you consider that Catfish Row now exists in our collective consciousness as an icon of the

American Theater. First and foremost, we all felt that Catfish Row is a place of gathering, a place of community, a kind of mythical Garden of Eden. We felt strongly the need to strip away that which was not essential in order to expose the humanity and emotions of these people. That which was illustrative was abandoned in order to find something more abstract and universal. The materials used in this space had to be real and not “scenic”, just like the characters are human, flesh and bones, and filled with raw emotions and not caricatures. A real space, made with sweat and tears, timeless in its humanity; both intimate and mythic, a space that contracts and expands, that breathes like its people. It was a real gift to start this journey at the American Repertory Theater, a place dear to me and where I’ve grown as an artist over the years.



The set model featuring the interior of Serena's house during Robbins' funeral.

Porgy + Bess



ESosa
2011

Bess I

Structured
PRINCESS LINE
Dress w/ slit
w/ leg-button
detail
3 separate straps
at shoulder
SELF BELT
Fitted thru top of
knee into a
Flounce
Back is longer
Zipper
Back



Porgy + Bess



ESosa
2011

Crown I

Blue shirt
Red Neck
Scarf
Tan Pants
Boots
2 Leather
Belts
Leather
Braid

ESosa's original costume design sketches for Bess and Crown

ELEMENTS OF THE PRODUCTION:

Design - Costumes

From Costume Designer ESosa:

For The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*, set in Charleston, South Carolina, during the 1930s, it was very important to be true to the fabrics and techniques used by its inhabitants. My design process starts with research. I will spend the first two or three weeks finding images of the particular time the show set. Working closely with our director, Diane Paulus, most of our early conversations and meetings were centered on period photos, research books and the individual roles the actors will be playing.

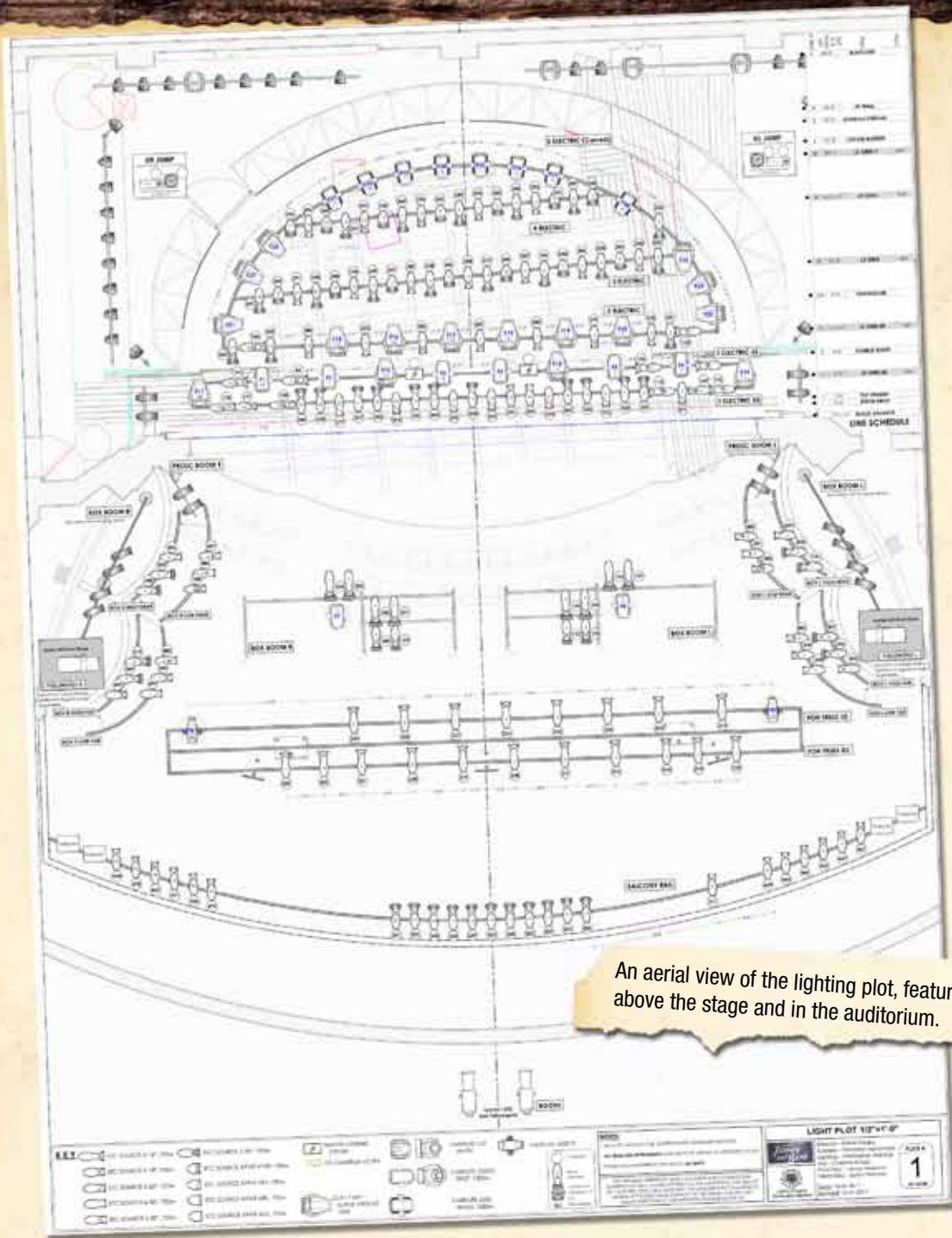
Once I feel comfortable with the style and look of the time period, I start to design. I do all my sketches by hand, while a great deal is done during brain storming meetings with Diane. For this production, I designed perhaps 150 different designs for characters ranging from Bess to Sporting Life. As I finalize the designs, my team sources fabrics and trims to be used. Once I assign fabrics to the sketches I present my concepts to the director. Careful attention must be placed on the sets and lights, which will affect the final look of the production.

To bring a sketch to life takes many costume shops, tailors, wig makes, milliners, and cobblers. My design assistants are responsible for making sure I have as many options as needed to insure the accuracy of the period, yet ensuring the actors comfort, always taking into account these costumes will be worn 8 times a week. Special attention is placed on the internal construction to assure the look will be consistent for every performance, as a lot of garments are laundered daily.

When all is done correctly, the costumes will enhance an actor's performance, while transporting the audience to a new experience.



ESosa's original costume design sketches for Clara and an Ensemble member.



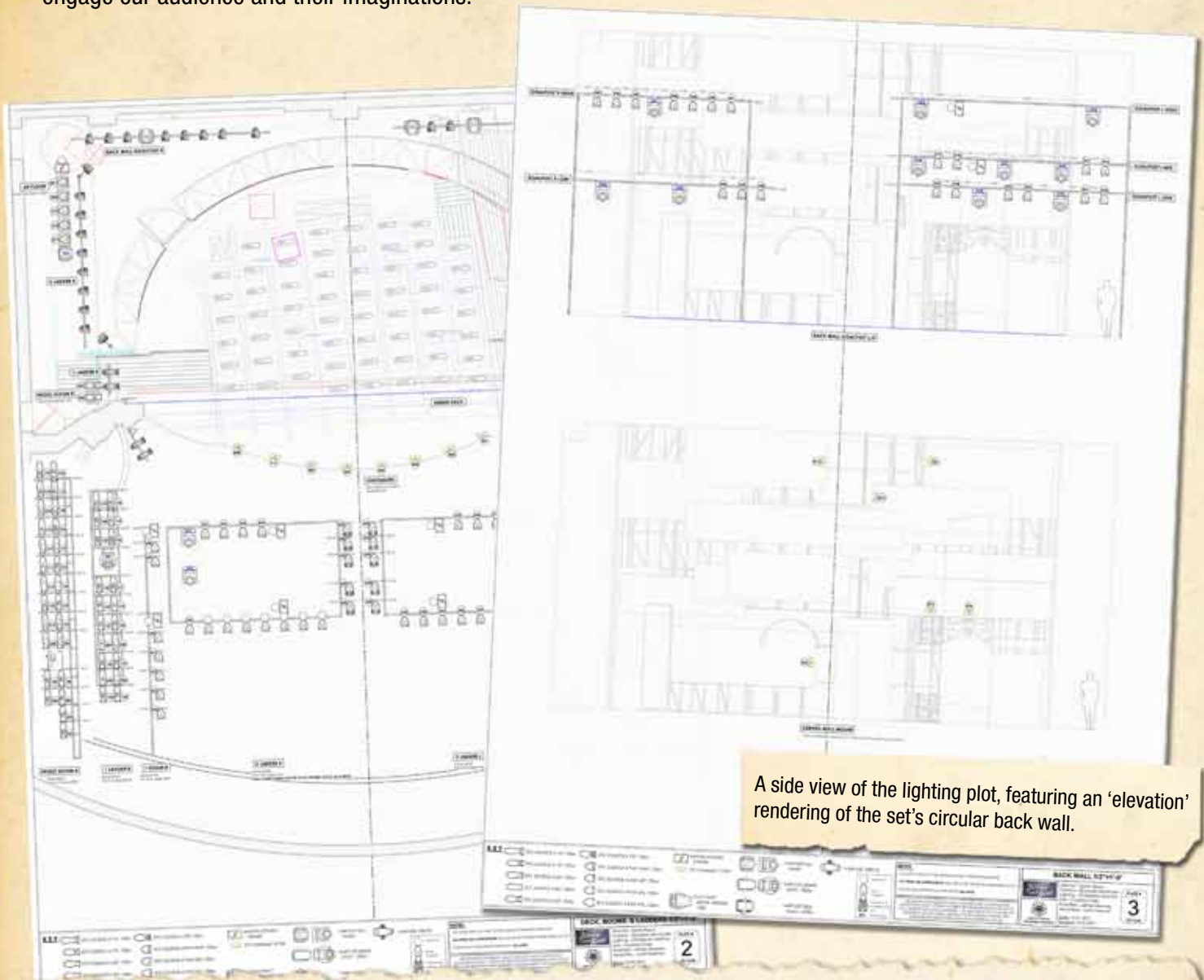
An aerial view of the lighting plot, featuring instruments above the stage and in the auditorium.

ELEMENTS OF THE PRODUCTION:
Design - Lighting

From Lighting Designer Christopher Akerlind:

The challenges of creating the lighting for this production of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess* have been fascinating and many. The essential visual simplicity of the production, forgoing a literal Catfish Row setting in exchange for a more minimalist, and poetic space, asks that the lighting provide most of the atmosphere, sense of place, rhythm, and tone. I applaud the instinct to strip away literal setting as I believe it has enhanced the human aspect and therefore the intensity of our storytelling. That said, the lighting must describe the heat of this environment, the scale and circumstances of the characters lives, and the geographic distance between Catfish Row and Kittiwah Island, all in sync with the style and taste of staging, musical production, setting, costumes and sound environment.

An interesting question of this process has been how to make use of state of the art lighting technology to create pictures that feel as gritty and natural as the other elements of the story. The work I have made thus far relies on simpler solutions, large gestures of light that reveal the performers, text, and music in simpler pictures, images that engage our audience and their imaginations.



A side view of the lighting plot, featuring an 'elevation' rendering of the set's circular back wall.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- While the primary structure of the set remains the same throughout the show, the scenic design does make subtle adjustments to let the audience know where a scene is taking place (e.g., indoors/outdoors). How many of these adjustments can you recall? Be specific.
- Why would a director/designer choose a more abstract/poetic scenic design instead of a more realistic representation?
- Think of a moment in the production when you really noticed a particular costume or a particular lighting effect. Using colored drawing utensils, create a rendering of this moment. Your rendering should incorporate as much detail as possible but you do not need to worry about accurately representing the production's actual design...use your impression of the moment and your imagination to fill in the blanks in your memory.

A HISTORY OF

Groundbreaking Productions

Porgy and Bess first stretched its legs seventy-six years ago at an “out of town tryout” in Boston, with the largest all-black cast seen on an American stage. After its premiere at the Colonial Theatre on September 30, 1935, George Gershwin received a fifteen-minute ovation. Tickets for the week-long engagement were impossible to obtain.

After this trial run, *Porgy and Bess* moved to the “Great White Way” – Broadway. The official premiere came on October 10, 1935, at the Alvin Theatre in New York (now known as the Neil Simon Theatre). Rouben Mamoulian, who would later go on to direct the films *Blood and Sand* and *The Mask of Zorro*, directed the production. Opera singers Todd Duncan and Anne Brown performed the title roles, and comedian John W. Bubbles took on the role of Sportin’ Life. As he could not read music, Bubbles compensated by learning the complex rhythm through tap dancing.

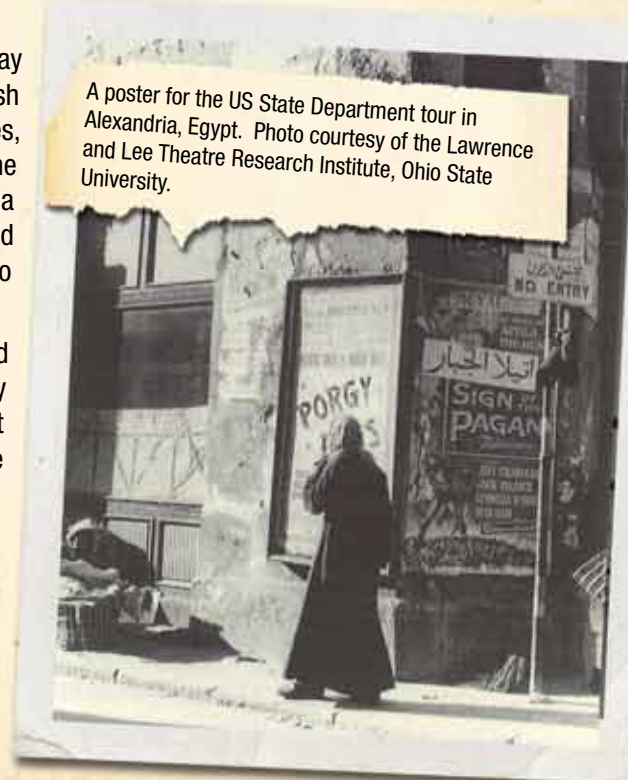
Despite reviews from Boston that hailed *Porgy and Bess* as having reached “the ultimate in theatrical production,” the New York critics sat on the fence, neither universally approving nor dismissing. The mixed reception forced them to close after a disappointing 124 performances. The Gershwins, DuBose & Dorothy Heyward, and their backers lost their financial investments.

When the national tour took off in 1936, *Porgy and Bess* ignited social change. After stops in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, the opera was scheduled to finish at Washington D.C.’s National Theatre. Todd Duncan, a longtime resident of Washington, knew that the Theatre had long refused entry to non-white patrons. Anne Brown recalled, “As expected we were told that the National Theatre would be a segregated house. Todd and I refused to perform and we were threatened by the Theatre Guild who said we had to sing or there would be reprisals. We cared less. We were adamant.” Upon learning this, the manager of the National Theatre, S.E. Cochran, approached Duncan/Brown with a compromise: Wednesday and Saturday matinees could be opened to black audiences. Duncan and Brown said no. Cochran returned with a second offer: black patrons could sit in the second balcony at any performance. Duncan and Brown said no. Unless every seat be made available to any patron, regardless of the color of their skin, Todd Duncan and Anne Brown would not be satisfied. Finally, Cochran relented. Whites and blacks sat side-by-side for the first time in the theatre’s history.

Despite the success of the tour, directors, scared by the disappointing box office receipts of the Broadway premiere, hesitated to restage *Porgy and Bess*. Finally, producer and director Cheryl Crawford opened a streamlined Broadway revival of the opera in 1942. She cut minor characters, turned the recitatives into spoken dialogue, and reduced the orchestra to half its size. The result was a musical theatre version, and ticket sales reflected the audience’s approval. The production ran for 286 performances (at the time, a record for a Broadway revival), left on an eighteen-month tour across the country, and returned to New York for a two-week, sold-out run.

As affection for *Porgy and Bess* boomed in America, the opera made its way across the Atlantic. On March 23, 1943, at the height of World War II, the Danish Royal Opera premiered the work in Copenhagen. Despite its enthusiastic audiences, the Nazis tried to close the production. The theatre refused, and for twenty-one sold-out performances, policed surrounded the building. The show became a symbol of resistance to the Nazi occupation of Denmark; radio stations would play “It Ain’t Necessarily So” after Nazi broadcasts. When the Nazis threatened to bomb the theatre, managers ended the run.

After the war, *Porgy and Bess* found its way back to Europe and beyond with financing from the U.S. State Department. The show played in seventy cities in twenty-nine countries around the world. Under the guidance of Robert Breen and Blevins Davis, several songs cut from previous productions were restored. The production boasted an all-star cast with Leontyne Price as Bess and William Warfield as Porgy. Vaudeville legend Cab Calloway took on Sportin’ Life, a part written with him in mind, and a young Maya Angelou stepped in as a featured dancer. In December, 1955, *Porgy and Bess* navigated a jungle of Cold War hostility to travel to the Soviet Union. Audiences in Moscow adored the production, the first show performed by Americans since the Bolshevik Revolution. Famed writer Truman Capote rode along with the company on this leg of the tour and chronicled it in *The New Yorker* article “The Muses are Heard”.





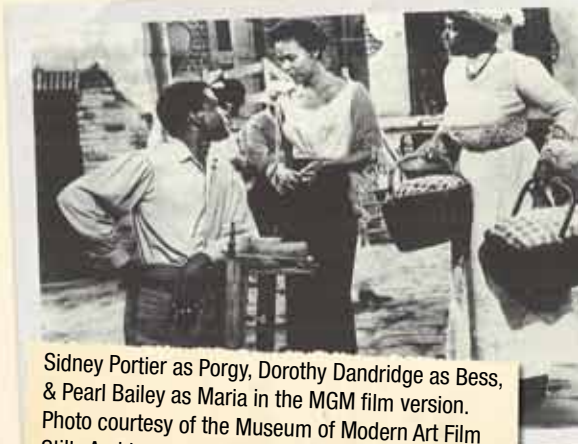
Ira Gershwin & cast members of the US State Department tour in Moscow. Photo courtesy of the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.

With its sweeping success on the international stage, *Porgy and Bess* became a hot commodity in Hollywood. In 1959, renowned producer Samuel Goldwyn offered Sidney Poitier the role of Porgy. Offended by the portrayal of African-Americans in the script, Poitier turned it down. Goldwyn, however, exerted pressure on Poitier who ultimately accepted the role. With Poitier on board, Dorothy Dandridge agreed to play Bess, and Sammy Davis, Jr. lobbied hard to play Sportin' Life. Diahann Carroll and Pearl Bailey took the roles of Clara and Maria. (Adele Addison and Robert McFerrin, father to Bobby, provided the singing voices for Porgy and Bess but neither received screen credit). Despite the stellar cast, the film ran into trouble. Early in production, a suspicious fire destroyed the set. Director Rouben Mamoulian was fired as a result of artistic disagreements between him and Goldwyn. The popular Hollywood musicals of the day – such as *Singing in the Rain*, *Brigadoon*, and *Kismet* – favored a more happy-go-lucky tone. Mamoulian, by contrast, wanted the film of *Porgy and*

Bess to reflect an authentic, historical Charleston. Goldwyn ultimately replaced him with director Otto Preminger. After the tumultuous filming process, critics lambasted the film's set as overly lavish and the action as monotonous. When Goldwyn's fifteen-year lease on the film rights expired, the Gershwin and Heyward estates blocked the movie from further distribution.

In 1976, the Houston Grand Opera assembled the first production of *Porgy and Bess* to use the score from before Gershwin made his first round of cuts after the opening in Boston. However, because union laws mandated overtime for a show that surpassed three hours, directors John DeMain and Jack O'Brien had to make edits. Snipping away reprises and short lines, they finished with a production that ran two

hours and fifty-eight minutes. The show, the only opera to receive a Tony Award, was hailed in the *New York Daily News* as “the most musical, moving, and profoundly beautiful production playing in New York.”



Sidney Poitier as Porgy, Dorothy Dandridge as Bess, & Pearl Bailey as Maria in the MGM film version. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

After the success of the Houston Grand Opera's production, classical music world finally began to take *Porgy and Bess* seriously as a great American opera. In 1985, on the fiftieth anniversary of its premiere, The Metropolitan Opera produced the work for the first time. One year later, Trevor Nunn directed an uncut version of the opera at the Glyndbourne Festival in England featuring the London Philharmonic Orchestra. The production was scenically expanded and filmed for television in 1993.

Since then, *Porgy and Bess* has been featured by almost every major opera company and, as a concert, symphony orchestra in the world.

Many operatic productions have taken experimental approaches to the story, including setting it in Apartheid South Africa, and South Central Los Angeles, and hurricane Katrina-ravaged New Orleans. Its current incarnation on Broadway has taken a more faithful approach to the original intent of the story, yet has adapted it for the conventions of contemporary musical theatre.



Todd Duncan and Anne Brown (*Porgy and Bess* in the opera's 1935 world premiere) along with Simon Estes and Grace Bumbry, who played the roles in the 1985 production at The Metropolitan Opera. Photo by Winnie Klotz, courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc., Lincoln Center, New York, NY 10023.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- Most of the company members on the international tour of *Porgy and Bess* in the 1950s had never traveled outside of the United States before. Pretend you are a member of this troupe. Write a personal journal entry describing what they might have experienced on one stop of the tour (for this exercise, pick any major international city as your stop). Perform basic research on the geographic and socio-political conditions of the location at that period to get a general idea of what they might have seen and heard and the attitudes they might have encountered. Combine these factual details with fictional stories about their stay.

Perspectives on Porgy

From segregating the National Theatre to being the first American cultural export to the Soviet Union, to catapulting the careers of the first major African American classical musicians, *Porgy and Bess* carries major historical significance with regards to race. However, as times and attitudes about race have changed, so have perceptions of the work.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s raised our awareness of how African Americans were presented culturally. When taking a look back at *Porgy and Bess* (which was written decades earlier), many recognized it as a story of an African-American community, with music drawing heavily on African-American traditions, written by people who are not of that culture. It took tremendous reach and thought for the Gershwins and Heywards to write about Catfish Row, especially during a time when black writers, composers, and lyricists had a much more difficult time telling their own stories in mainstream settings like Broadway.

Some artists, like jazz greats like Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong & Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone, decided to embrace and take ownership of the music, returning it to its Harlem roots with recordings that remain extremely popular. Many artists and intellectuals, however, rejected the opera as an inauthentic, even racist, portrayal of their culture.

In adapting *Porgy and Bess* for the musical stage in 2011, the creative team, comprised entirely of people of color, has had the opportunity to move away from the archetypes common in opera librettos, which can easily be perceived as stereotypes. They have focused on telling the story in a more intimate and personal way – by giving a fully developed voice to the characters on Catfish Row.

Here's what some famous musicians, writers, scholars, and critics have said about *Porgy and Bess*, throughout its 76-year history:



Suzan-Lori Parks – playwright and Co-Adapter of the current Broadway revival

“Porgy and Bess was written by white authors attempting to replicate an ‘authentic’ black voice and, while the original opera triumphs on so many levels, I feel the writing sometimes suffers from what I call ‘a shortcoming of understanding.’ There are times in all of our lives when, regardless of who we are, we experience shortcomings of understanding. In DuBose and Dorothy Heyward and the Gershwins’ original, there’s a lot of love and a lot of effort made to understand the people of Catfish Row. In turn, I’ve got love and respect for their work, but in some ways I feel it falls short in the creation of fully realized characters. Now, one could see their depiction of African American culture as racist, or they could see it as I see it: as a problem of dramaturgy.” (2011)



W.E.B. Du Bois – scholar and civil rights activist

“White artists themselves suffer from this narrowing of their field. They cry for freedom in dealing with Negroes because they have so little freedom in dealing with whites. DuBose Heywood [sic: Heyward] writes Porgy and writes beautifully of the black Charleston underworld. But why does he do this? Because he cannot do a similar thing for the white people of Charleston, or they would drum him out of town. The only chance he had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people.” (1926)



Henry Louis Gates, Jr. – Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research at Harvard University

“The story was a relic of an ugly past – not the real past of African Americans, but rather the Hollywood-imagined past of black folks. The coke fiends, the pimps, the broken black man at the center of the film – no thank you. ...I don’t share those views anymore, and now I see a character like Sportin’ Life, who used to make my skin crawl, as being in a long line of tricksters – a figure whose performance of duplicity, whose “shuckin’ and jivin’”, is very much part of the African-American literary tradition, and even part of a history of resistance.” (2011)

Sidney Poitier – Porgy in the MGM film version

“In my judgment, Porgy and Bess was not material complimentary to black people; and for the most part, black people responded negatively to that American opera, although they stood ready to acknowledge and applaud the genius in the music. I decided that the role was not for me and quite possibly injurious to Negroes... [However,] I am confident that Mr. Goldwyn, with his characteristic good taste and integrity, will present the property in a sensitive manner.” (1959)

William Warfield – Porgy in the US State Department’s 1952 European tour

“There was now another feeling in the community about being black – I’m a black man and proud. And with that attitude came a lot of negation and turning your back on things. ... Those of us in Porgy and Bess saw ourselves as playing only roles, and in no way did we play them as ordinary black stereotypes. It was art, and we were artists.” (1998)

Grace Bumbry – Bess in The Metropolitan Opera premiere

“I resented the role at first, possibly because I really didn’t know the score, and I think because of the racial aspect. I thought it beneath me, I felt I had worked far too hard, that we had come too far to have to regress to 1935. My way of dealing with it was to see that it was really a piece of Americana, of American history. Whether we like it or not, whether I sang it or not, it was still going to be there.” (1985)

Audra McDonald – Bess in the current Broadway revival

“I was very interested in delving into the idea of these characters. Needless to say, Porgy and Bess has had its share of controversy from the very beginning. And a lot of people feel that an iconic work can’t be touched. And yet there are also people out there who like to re-investigate works. It’s an iconic piece for a reason — it’s a masterpiece, it’s glorious. But for me, and I know other people out there too feel that a lot of these characters, some people call them archetypes, some people call them stereotypes. Some people look at it in a positive way and other people look at it in a negative way.” (2011)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS / ACTIVITIES:

- Do you feel that this production of *Porgy and Bess* is an accurate portrayal of African Americans? Why or why not?
- What is the difference between an archetype and a stereotype?
- Is it ever possible for a writer or artist to accurately portray a community which s/he is not a member of? Under what circumstances would it be?

CATFISH ROW and Beyond

To learn more about *Porgy and Bess* and the world that surrounds it, check out the following:

- *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward
- *The Life and Times of Porgy & Bess: The Story of an American Classic* by Hollis Alpert
- *The Gershwins' Porgy & Bess: The 75th Anniversary Celebration* by Robin Thompson
- *The Gershwins* by Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon
- "The Muses Are Heard" from *Portraits and Observations: The Essays of Truman Capote* by Truman Capote
- *Charleston! Charleston!: A History of the Southern City* by Walter J. Fraser, Jr.
- *Mamba's Daughters* by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward
- *The America Play* by Suzan-Lori Parks
- *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* by David S. Reynolds
- *The African-American Century* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
- *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- *Porgy & Bess* - Glyndebourne Opera, Trevor Nunn & Sir Simon Rattle, 1993 (VIDEO- EMI Classics)
- *Porgy & Me* - A Film by Susanna Boehm (VIDEO- Boomtown Media Intl)



George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, & DuBose Heyward, following the opera's Boston premiere. Photo courtesy of the Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.

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