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Loves You, Porgy

By Richard Zoglin

Thank God for theater purists. A new revival of Porgy and Bess might have become just another overpriced Broadway ticket if it hadn't been for Stephen Sondheim. After the show's creators talked to the New York Times about trying to fix the opera's dramatic flaws and "flesh out" its characters, Sondheim shot off an angry letter to the editor. Presuming to improve the great George Gershwin--DuBose Heyward folk opera? A mix of arrogance and "willful ignorance," Sondheim snarled.

The upshot: the new Porgy and Bess (now at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., with a Broadway opening set for January) has become a controversial, don't-miss theater event. Could Sondheim secretly be working for the show's publicists?

Porgy and Bess has never had an easy creative life. Gershwin cut it by 45 minutes just before the Broadway opening in 1935; later revivals shortened it more, restored the original cuts, changed the operatic recitative to spoken dialogue and fought off complaints about stereotypical treatments of its characters--black denizens of a poor fishing community called Catfish Row.


This latest Porgy, from director Diane Paulus (the revival of Hair) and playwright Suzan-Lori Parks (Topdog/Underdog) makes revisions that are respectful, not radical. The story of a doomed love affair between a crippled beggar (Norm Lewis) and the "loose woman" he takes in (Audra McDonald, in the role of her career) has been trimmed to just over two hours and unfolds not on naturalistic sets but in front of an abstract, driftwood-like backdrop. But the opera is all there in spirit. Starting with Nikki Renée Daniels' exquisite opening rendition of "Summertime," the Paulus-Parks Porgy is a streamlined, intimate, musically ravishing show.

It's also accessible--a Porgy for purists and for the rest of us too. The revamp shrugs off the sometimes stilted conventions of opera for the more colloquial style of musical theater: instead of coming out of the blue, songs like "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" now have dialogue to set them up. Admittedly, some of these additions (new lines about Porgy learning to walk again, for example) are dubious. But cheers to the revampers for avoiding the most egregious sin of musical revivals these days: sneaking in songs from other

shows to sweeten the playlist. This Porgy is faithful to what counts most--Gershwin's lush, bluesy, irreplaceable score. That makes it a revival not to hound but to hail.

Porgy and Bess

plays through Oct. 2 at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass.

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