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A CRITIC AT LARGE

A MAN AND A WOMAN

“Porgy and Bess” reimagined.

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As audience members took their seats before a recent performance of the director Diane Paulus’s politically radical and dramaturgically original musical adaptation of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward and George and Ira Gershwin’s “American folk opera” “Porgy and Bess” (at the American Repertory Theatre, in Cambridge, through October 2nd; the show will open on Broadway on January 12th), the air was full of questions and expectations. Last year, the A.R.T., where Paulus is the artistic director, announced her plan to team up with the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks to revise parts of the controversial 1935 libretto, about a love affair between a crippled black man and a drug-addicted woman in Catfish Row, a fictional slum in South Carolina. (Paulus also hired the cellist and composer Diedre Murray to adapt the music for an eighteen-piece orchestra.) In an interview in the *Times* in August, Paulus said that she had enlisted Parks to help with the task of “excavating and shaping and modernizing the story and particularly Bess.” In a program note for the production, Parks explained her approach to the collaboration:

While the original opera triumphs on many levels, I feel the writing sometimes suffers from what I call “a shortcoming 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 one could see it as I see it: as a problem of dramaturgy.



McDonald and Lewis as the title characters in “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess.” Photograph by Francesco Carrozzini.

(On a break from rehearsal in August, Paulus told me that when she first spoke to the actress Audra McDonald about taking on the role of Bess—which she eventually accepted—McDonald’s primary concern was the character’s two-dimensionality.) With the support of the Gershwin and Heyward estates, Paulus and Parks began filling in holes and jettisoning material that they felt obscured the important character-building moments, developing a new script, which they titled “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess.”

But not everyone in the theatre world was feeling Parks and Paulus’s love. The composer Stephen Sondheim, writing in response to the *Times* article, first took issue with the new title—“I assume that’s in case anyone was worried it was the Rodgers and Hart ‘Porgy and Bess’ that was coming to town”—then went on to relate his distress at “the disdain that Diane Paulus, Audra McDonald, and Suzan-Lori Parks feel toward the opera itself.” He disagreed with the suggestion that the characters, as originally conceived, were less well rounded than they should be. In fact, Sondheim wrote, Porgy and Bess and the other major characters in the opera were “as vivid as any ever created for the musical theatre.” Paulus, he said, had failed “to recognize that Porgy, Bess . . . and the rest are archetypes and intended to be larger than life and that filling in ‘realistic’ details is likely to reduce them to line drawings.” Of course, in a way archetypes *are* line drawings—figures that capture the outlines of an idea. (During this exchange, McDonald tweeted, wittily and discreetly, “Here’s what I think . . . to quote the greatest musical theater composer of our time . . . ‘Art isn’t easy.’ ”)

Sondheim is of an age where he may worry about the notion of legacy; no writer wants to look in from the afterlife and see his hard work undone or misinterpreted. But Paulus and Parks’s approach ultimately has much less to do with the self-serving manipulation of a classic than it does with humanizing the depiction of race onstage. Sondheim is one of the chief architects of the contemporary American musical, and a genius with a fascinating interest in marginalization—I’m thinking of his too-little-seen shows “Assassins” (1990) and “Passion” (1994)—but the stories he tells involve white characters, and his professional world is a white one. (When, as a young writer, Sondheim was asked to pen the lyrics to “West Side Story,” he responded, “I’ve never even *known* a Puerto Rican!”) He made his name as an artist in a theatre where just about the only blacks on the mainstream stage were in revues or musical pageants, such as Truman Capote and Harold Arlen’s 1954 “House of Flowers,” set on a lush West Indian island populated by loving prostitutes, or Arlen’s 1957 “Jamaica,” in which Lena Horne played a simple Caribbean girl who yearned for the bright lights of Manhattan. “Porgy and Bess,” which takes place in an isolated black realm, a kind of tropical ghetto, had a clear influence on

shows like these, in which white composers and lyricists presented their ideas of blackness to one another.

Parks and Paulus come from another world entirely. Parks has spent most of her career exploring the tropes and representations of African-American life. Paulus is no novice, either, when it comes to depicting race onstage. In 2007, she adapted and directed a theatrical version of James Baldwin's 1962 novel, "Another Country." Last year, she directed a revival of Paul Simon and Derek Walcott's "The Capeman," a 1998 musical about the life of Salvador Agrón, a Latino gang member in New York during the fifties. Sometimes Paulus's concern for the issues feels jarring, as was the case in her recent successful revival of "Hair," but that stridency is absent from the intelligent, intuitive, and architecturally sound production "The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess," in which she and Parks have rescued a work that was mired in condescension and a bizarre and unreal sexuality. (Truman Capote criticized the show's tendency to gild that particular lily in "The Muses Are Heard," his hilarious 1956 report, for this magazine, on a "Porgy and Bess" tour in Russia.)

In 2002, Stephen Sondheim contributed a piece to an anthology titled "Invisible Giants: Fifty Americans Who Shaped the Nation but Missed the History Books." The person he wrote about? DuBose Heyward. Heyward, Sondheim pointed out, "has gone largely unrecognized as the author of the finest set of lyrics in the history of the American musical theatre. . . . There are two reasons for this. . . . First, he was primarily a poet and novelist, and his only song lyrics were those that he wrote for 'Porgy.' Second, some of them were written in collaboration with Ira Gershwin, a full-time lyricist, whose reputation in the musical theatre was already firmly established. But most of the lyrics in 'Porgy'—and all of the distinguished ones—were composed by Heyward. His work is sung, but he is unsung."

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1885, Heyward belonged to the city's relatively impoverished aristocracy. (An ancestor was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.) His father, Edwin, a mill laborer and failed plantation owner, died when Heyward and his younger sister were toddlers, and his mother, Janie, hardworking and practical, took in boarders to support her children. Another source of income was the stories about Charleston's history that she sold to local newspapers. Eventually, Janie published two books that were inspired by the Gullahs of South Carolina, a community of blacks with strong ties to their African past: "Songs of the Charleston Darkey," in 1912, and "Brown Jackets," eleven years later. The books are her interpretation of Gullah folktales—material that her son would later mine. (The scholar James M. Hutchisson notes that Heyward's first language may have been Gullah.)

At twenty, Heyward, who had been weakened by a bout of polio at eighteen, got a job as a

customs worker among black stevedores on the Charleston waterfront and was awed by their strength. Robin Thompson, in his 2010 book “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess: A 75th Anniversary Celebration,” says that the stevedores “took on a mythic quality” in Heyward’s imagination: “DuBose didn’t know what to make of their seemingly carefree and lively behavior. . . . They were ‘alien and exotic.’ ” Heyward himself wrote, “I saw the primitive Negro as the inheritor of a source of delight that I would have given much to possess.” After leaving this world of physical possibility to start a successful insurance and real-estate company with a family friend, in 1908, Heyward began to write. By 1922, he had co-founded the Poetry Society of South Carolina, one of the first regional poetry circles in America, with the poet Hervey Allen, and published, with Allen, a successful volume of verse, “Carolina Chansons.” The same year, he was invited to MacDowell, the arts colony in New Hampshire, where he met an ambitious young writer from Ohio named Dorothy Hartzell Kuhns; she pushed him to dedicate himself entirely to his art. The couple married in 1923, and Heyward began work on his first novel, “Porgy,” soon afterward.

The story was inspired by a short item that Heyward had noticed in the *Charleston News & Courier*:

Samuel Smalls, who is a cripple and is familiar to King Street, with his goat and cart, was held for the June term of court of sessions on an aggravated assault charge. It is alleged that on Saturday night he attempted to shoot Maggie Barnes. . . . His shots went wide of the mark.

The book is a mere hundred and fifty-eight pages, but it feels longer; Heyward’s future facility as a lyricist is not evident in his fiction, in which he spends a lot of time trying to prove that he’s a “real” writer by overwriting. Catfish Row, where Porgy and Bess live, is described this way:

Within the high-ceilinged rooms, with their battered colonial mantels and broken decorations of Adam designs in plaster, governors had come and gone, and ambassadors of kings had schemed and danced. Now before the gaping entrance lay only a narrow, cobbled street, and beyond, a tumbled wharf used by negro fishermen. Only the bay remained unchanged. Beyond the litter of the wharf, it stretched to the horizon, taking its mood from the changing skies; always different—invariably the same.

I don’t know how a wharf tumbles, but that was the least of my problems while reading. Heyward is more interested in showing off his vocabulary than in inhabiting his characters, and the only vibrancy in the story is generated by the portrait of Bess’s addiction to drugs and to her bullying stevedore lover, Crown, who she knows is no good. But even she can’t redeem Heyward’s tedious attempts to represent black speech. When one character praises Bess, for

instance, he is greeted with these words of reproach from another character: “Yuh po’, ole, wall-eyed, sof’-headed gran’daddy! Ain’t yuh ’shame’ tuh set dey befo’ me, an’ talk sweet-mout’ ’bout dat murderin’ Crown’s Bess? Ef I wuz yo’ age, an’ er man, I’d sabe my sof’ wo’d fer de Gawd-farin’ ladies.” I had to read the passage five times before I understood it.

Still, “Porgy” became a best-seller when it was published, in 1925. A reviewer for the *Times* called the book “a sympathetic and convincing interpretation of Negro life by a member of an ‘outside’ race.” The columnist Heywood Broun remarked on Heyward’s apparent attraction to a “Negro life” that was more “colorful and spirited and vital than that of the white community.” Even some black writers, such as Nella Larsen, commended Heyward on his efforts. (Perhaps they felt that “Porgy” was the best they could hope for.) Eager to bring the story to an even larger audience, Dorothy Heyward adapted the novel for the stage. The play, produced in 1927, was a Broadway hit, and Heyward became the go-to guy for “authentic” black voices. In 1933, he wrote the film version of “The Emperor Jones,” Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 play about a black murderer who becomes a tyrant on a tropical island. In 1939, he and Dorothy adapted his second novel, “Mamba’s Daughters,” for the Broadway stage. That play, which starred Ethel Waters as Hagar, a poor, ill-educated black woman who sacrifices everything for her daughter, was also a success.

One of “Porgy” ’s most ardent fans was George Gershwin. He read the book when it came out, and knew that he wanted to attach himself to the story. In 1924, the composer had produced a twenty-minute stage opera, “à la African-American,” called “Blue Monday” (later renamed “135th Street”), which presaged “Porgy and Bess” in a number of ways—down to the inclusion of a gambling argument that precipitates an act of violence and a melancholy female character who has a hard time understanding, let alone accepting, love. Despite its technical innovations—Gershwin was among the first American composers to fuse classical music and black popular music into what has been called “symphonic jazz”—“Blue Monday” flopped. Eight years after reading “Porgy,” Gershwin began work on what he excitedly called his “folk opera,” telling the press that he wanted to write the piece, in part, because of the superiority of “nigger voices.”

“Porgy and Bess,” a show about black people, created entirely by white people, has never been a favorite of black audiences. In traditional stagings, Porgy and Bess come together amid their community’s will to destruction; there is no uplift, just sweat, blood, carnality, and resignation. The song “I Loves You, Porgy,” even when delivered by such masters as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, feels more like a passive acceptance of degradation than like a confession of love. Harold Schonberg, a *Times* music critic, wrote of a 1976 production of the opera in Houston, “The libretto invents a never-never land with crap-shooting, watermelon-

toting black stereotypes who in moments of stress fall on their knees and start shouting spirituals.” When the opera premiered, in 1935, one of its most trenchant critics, the Southern composer Virgil Thomson, noted, “Folklore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935.” Nor is it true of the American Negro in 2011.

Diane Paulus’s great achievement is to cut through Heyward’s muddy folklore and to present us with us something more profound. Her Porgy (the beautiful Norm Lewis) and Bess are not archetypal “black lovers”; they are a man and a woman, human beings who are not defined by their race. It was their humanity—their desire to be seen and their fear of being stripped bare by another—that left me breathless when Lewis and McDonald sang the duet “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” while trembling and glancing sideways at each other. By ridding the script of its sociological and anthropological strain, Paulus allows us to see the people and, perforce, to hear the music.

As the show begins, we are presented with what looks like a cross-section of a weathered house. This is not the crowded Catfish Row of previous stagings, all of which have attempted to replicate the ornately described world of the novel:

Catfish Row, in which Porgy lived, was not a row at all, but a great brick structure that lifted its three stories about the three sides of a court. The fourth side was partly closed by a high wall, surmounted by jagged edges of broken glass set firmly in old lime plaster, and pierced in its center by a wide entrance-way. Over the entrance there still remained a massive grill of Italian wrought iron, and a battered capital of marble surmounted each of the lofty gate-posts. . . . The south wall, which was always in shadow, was lichened from pavement to rotting gutter; and opposite, the northern face, unbroken except by rows of small-paned windows, showed every color through its flaking stucco, and, in summer, a steady blaze of scarlet from rows of geraniums that bloomed in old vegetable tins upon every window-sill.

(I am most familiar with Otto Preminger’s bodice-ripping, omen-soaked 1959 film version, starring Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge, which James Baldwin called “grandiose, foolish, and heavy with the stale perfume of self-congratulation.”) Paulus’s scenic designer, Riccardo Hernandez, takes only one element of Heyward’s vision—“the jagged fourth wall”—and uses it as the lone wall on the raked stage, the perfect backdrop for Paulus’s scaled-down effects. A woman, Clara (Nikki Renée Daniels), enters, holding a baby. We hear the sweet, mournful strains of “Summertime,” and, as Clara sings, we realize that the baby isn’t a prop; it’s real. The child, like the song, is more than just a symbol of the “oppressed” black life that Clara longs to escape. Daniels uses the song as a kind of natural conversation with the audience. Drawing us in, she turns us, for a few moments, into fellow-inhabitants of Catfish Row. The meditative calm she conjures up is the same mood evoked by Miles Davis and Gil Evans’s 1958 recording of “Porgy and Bess.” This is not canned showbiz.

In Parks and Paulus's current script (parts of which may be revised before the New York transfer), Bess is still torn between the melodious and menacing Crown (Phillip Boykin) and Porgy, but that division now has more to do with her struggle to claim her own soul. You get the sense that, until she meets Porgy, Crown—or the life she lives with Crown—is all she has ever known. She's "bad" because that is her role in Crown's world. Porgy makes her want to be herself. But how to do that? For starters, Parks and Paulus treat Bess's drug habit not as a physical addiction but as a psychological one: she sniffs "happy dust" in order to shut out the sorrow of the world. After Porgy takes Bess in, she's given a hit by her dealer, Sporting Life (a solid David Alan Grier, who knows how to play a pusher: he doesn't smile or insist; he waits for the addicts to come to him), but she dumps it into a pail of water. She's free.

When, in the second part of the show, Bess joins a row of Catfish ladies in a dance, we see not a reformed Bess suddenly dancing but a Bess who is learning to dance in a new way, and learning to like it. And when Bess leaves Catfish Row, in this staging, it's not because drugs or Sporting Life has got the better of her; it's to protect her community from the havoc that her presence causes. This version of black female self-sacrifice is a far cry from the one in which Bess disappears because of her own weakness. It has a larger, more political meaning: if Catfish Row is to survive, Bess can no longer be the crack in the neighborhood's wall. She must leave in order to save what's worth preserving: Clara's child, the community's future.

McDonald exhibits her strengths in the role without trying to be "noble"; her Bess is beautiful and hard, uncomprehending and yielding. And she confers another kind of strength on Lewis's Porgy. Instead of smiling vapidly and being pulled around in a cart by his goat as he sings the happy-go-lucky jive "I Got Plenty of Nothing," this Porgy fights to break out of the limited world of his damaged body and into a world of love. In her first encounters with Porgy, Bess clearly recognizes, and tries to hide from, the need in his eyes. In that stirring familiar gesture of avoidance, we see what this "Porgy and Bess" has to offer us: a quiet and true lullaby of feeling. ♦

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