

Porgy and Bess, War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco

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Heading the list of works that you love all the more for their imperfections, the Gershwins' sole foray into fully integrated lyric theatre at its best intoxicates with its sheer verve, its unceasing melodic invention and its effrontery at charting African-American culture with almost Italianate gusto. Since its 1935 premiere, the Broadway, pop and jazz worlds have all imbibed from this well of inspiration, but not until the Houston Grand Opera's production in 1976 was the operatic grandeur of *Porgy* completely revealed.



After a two-decade hiatus, the work has returned to the San Francisco Opera in splendour, leaving no doubt that this is a masterpiece of American verismo. In Francesca Zambello's production, borrowed from the Washington National Opera, the denizens of Catfish Row represent a cohesive, functioning society, bound and buoyed by religious fervour. Its protagonists, a crippled beggar and a drug addict, transcend stereotypes with the raw conviction of their passions. Zambello has transposed the opera two decades into the 1950s, in a vain attempt at social relevance. Designer Peter J. Davison has transformed the original South Carolina setting into what looks like a crumbling prison cellblock, a stroke of symbolic preaching that hobbles characterisation rather than illuminating it.

Eric Owens and Lacquita Mitchell

Happily, we get a substantially integral version of an opera, which, in its entirety, can be too much of a great thing, and we are blessed with a fresh cast that transcends the problematic production with vocalism of rare intelligence and uncommon allure.

Bass Eric Owens' debut as Porgy is an act of possession, marked by velvety tone and disarming emotional candor. Laquita Mitchell's initial foray as Bess heralds a striking soprano who rises to moments of surpassing eloquence. In "My Man's Gone Now," Karen Slack introduces a definitive Serena. Angel Blue's "Summertime" soars sweetly to angelic heights.

Chauncey Packer offers an insinuating Sportin' Life. Lester Lynch's Crown captures the character's villainy, but not his charisma. John DeMain conducts with much vigour and thrust, allowing his singers a modicum of freedom in departing from written notes, if the spirit moves them. It does, often and memorably. ★★★★★☆