

**Monday, February 28, 2011. Presentation: *Porgy and Bess* "Take Another Look."**

MS. MUTI: On October 10, 1935, *Porgy and Bess*, George Gershwin's opera, made its Broadway debut. From the very beginning it was considered another American classic by the composer of *Rhapsody in Blue*. Even the critics couldn't quite figure out how to evaluate it. Was it an opera? Or was it simply an ambitious Broadway musical? "It crossed the barrier," says theater historian Robert Kimball. "It wasn't a musical work, per se, and it wasn't a drama. It elicited response from both music and drama critics. But the work has sort of always been outside categories."

Borrowing musical language from classical tradition, call-and-response from black churches he visited, and dashes of jazz, Gershwin's new music was completely original and very American. It was a commercial failure in its first run on Broadway, but despite that rocky start, *Porgy and Bess* went on to become one of the most performed works in theater history.

Unfazed, George Gershwin faced his critics head-on and with unwavering faith in his opera, wrote in The New York Times, "I'm not ashamed of writing songs at any time so long as they are good songs. In *Porgy and Bess*, I realized I was writing an opera for the theater. And without songs, it could neither be of the theater nor entertaining, from my viewpoint. But the songs are entirely within operatic tradition. Many of the most successful operas of the past have had songs. Nearly all of Verdi's operas contain what are known as song hits. *Carmen* is almost a collection of song hits."

This evening, William Schlitt, Bill, producer and director of The Company Company, will help us take another look at this classic work. Specializing in musical theater, The Company Company is a nonprofit organization dedicated to reimagining musical theater wherever people gather, and it has inspired the organization to produce and collaborate with many of low country's arts organizations, including churches, synagogues, the Village Playhouse, the Charleston Symphony, the Footlight Players.

Our soloists for this evening are Bill Schlitt, Daniel Washington, and D'Jaris Whipper-Lewis, with Ghadi Shayban on piano.

Please help me welcome The Company

**Company, *Porgy and Bess*.**

MR. SCHLITT: Good evening. George Gershwin and the city of Charleston are forever linked through his American folk opera *Porgy and Bess*. The work has been performed all over the world, including such hallowed opera houses as La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.

From the moment of its debut on Broadway at the Alvin Theatre in New York City on October 10, 1935, it also endured an enormous share of controversy. Tonight, in addition to enjoying selections from the work by three extraordinary artists and interpreters of Gershwin, I hope to examine its creation within the historical context of its day as well as briefly survey subsequent reaction to its myriad and often quite varied productions. From this perspective, I will offer an appreciation of *Porgy and Bess*' relevance today, particularly in the realms of race relations, the continued marginalization of minorities within society, the reception and criticism of new artistic works, and most importantly, the value of historical context in appraising socially relevant art forms.

Now, *Porgy and Bess* is a reflection of the experiences and mind of Charlestonian DuBose Heyward. He began as an insurance salesman on Broad Street and sometime poet and he was one of the city's true blue bloods. He could trace his ancestry all the way back to the Declaration of Independence, and one of his great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfathers, Thomas Heyward, who signed that important document. But his family and the city of his birth continued to endure hard times that followed the bitter defeat of the Civil War and later hurricanes and earthquakes in this city.

DuBose was not a good student. He daydreamed and I kind of marvel at the fact that later on in his life, he was considered in this country such a man of letters, and this man of letters dropped out of school at 14 to go to work.

Some of his jobs were alongside the African-American stevedores that worked the Charleston waterfront. He had a real sympathy for the plight of Charleston's black population. The African-Americans he worked with often came to him for advice, and as a poet, he developed a good ear for the Gullah speech that was spoken by Charlestonians who were descendants of slaves from West Africa. His mother, in fact, became something of a local authority on the Gullah language.

But it was early in the 1920s that he began to devote more time to writing and less to his insurance business. Newly married to Dorothy, an as-yet-to-be-produced playwright from the north, he had set his sights on writing a novel. One day on his daily walk to work to the insurance office, up Church Street, he passed a local tenement on Church Street that was then known as Cabbage Row, because the street-level grocers sold their vegetables on the sidewalk in front of their shops. If you have time before you leave Charleston, you go south of Broad Street and walk a couple of blocks south and you can see it today. They have renamed it Catfish Row there. But the second and third floors were homes to a large number of African-Americans living in poverty. It was often a place the local police had to visit on Saturday nights.

Now, one morning he decided to stop by his sister's house for breakfast, also on Church Street, when one particular item in the police blotter of the *Charleston News & Courier* caught his eye. It read, "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 at number 4 Romney Street. His shots went wide of the mark. Smalls was up on a similar charge some months ago and was given a suspended sentence. Smalls had attempted to escape in his wagon with his goat and was run down and captured by the police patrol."

Well, it wasn't long after this that he shared with his new bride an idea for a novel that he originally called *Porgo*. Porgo was the name of a very precious African doll that Heyward's mother's nanny, a former slave, had kept as a reminder of her ancestry. From these humble beginnings, DuBose Heyward's best-selling novel *Porgy* hit the bookstores in September 1925. It was universally hailed as a new note of sympathy and understanding in its lyrical and fictional treatment of the Gullah-speaking blacks of Charleston. This was, for most of white America, a foreign world.

It's also important to know that black critics of the time had praise for Heyward's accuracy in depicting these African-Americans downtrodden lives. In the new novel and later in the opera, the real-life tenement of Cabbage Row was now moved to the waterfront and renamed Catfish Row.

It is in this setting on a summer evening that we begin our presentation of selections from *Porgy and Bess*.

### **(Overture.)**

#### **(“Summertime.”)**

Summertime, and the livin' is easy.  
Fish are jumpin', and the cotton is high.  
Yo' daddy's rich, and yo' mama's good-looking.  
So hush, little baby, don't you cry.  
One of these mornin's, you're gonna rise up singin'.  
You're gonna spread your wings and you'll take to the sky.  
But till that mornin', ain't nothin' can harm you.  
With daddy and mommy standin' by.

**(“A Woman Is A Sometime Thing.”)**

Lissen to yo' daddy warn you.  
'Fore you start a-travelling.  
A woman may born ya, love ya and mourn ya.  
But a woman is a sometime thing.  
Yes, a woman is a sometime thing.  
Yo' mammy is the first to name ya.  
Then she'll tie you to her apron strings.  
Then she'll shame you and she'll blame you,  
Till yo' woman comes to claim you,  
Cause a woman is a sometime thing.  
Yes, a woman is a sometime thing.  
Don't you never let a woman grieve ya.  
Jus' cause she got yo' weddin' ring.  
She'll love you and deceive you,  
Take yo' clothes and leave you,  
Oh, cause a woman is a sometime thing.  
Yes, a woman is a sometime thing.  
Yes, a woman is a sometime thing.  
Yes, a woman is a sometime thing.

**(“My Man's Gone Now.”)**

My man's gone now.  
Ain't no use a-listenin' for his tired footsteps  
Climbing up the stairs.  
Old man sorrow's come to keep me company  
Whisperin' beside me when I say my prayers.  
Ain't that I mind workin'.  
Work 'n me is travelers journeyin' together  
To the promised land.  
But old man sorrow mountin' all the way with me  
Tell me that I'm old now  
Since I lose my man.  
Since I lose my man.  
Old man sorrow's sittin' by the fireside.  
Lyin' all night long by me in the bed,  
Telling me the same thing,  
Mornin', noon, and evenin',  
That I'm all alone now, since my man is dead.  
Oh, since my man is dead.

MR. SCHLITT: It's important to note that in the painful and often horrific prejudice and discrimination experienced by African-Americans early in the 20th century, the migration of so many from rural areas to the industrialized north helped birth a black artistic and cultural renaissance in the middle and late '20s. It found its first manifestation in Harlem, and this is where the young George Gershwin, as a little boy from Brooklyn, first became entranced by the jazz that would later infuse his music. It was this same idiom that catapulted the 25-year-old to celebrity in 1924, with his "*Rhapsody in Blue*," a full year and a half before Heyward's *Porgy* was published. Gershwin's career exploded with Carnegie Hall performances and new Broadway musicals with his brother Ira and other artists.

The gregarious Gershwin found himself quite comfortable among the talented, the rich, and the famous.

Handsome and athletic, he was a magnet for beautiful women. He loved life and by all accounts exulted in the music that he created.

In the summer of 1926, he found himself back in New York after several weeks in London rehearsing yet another of his musicals. He became quite busy in New York in rehearsals and in composing the score to his latest new musical, *Oh, Kay!* Unable to sleep after the stimulation of a rehearsal one night, he came home and he picked up Heyward's *Porgy*. This new bestseller so entranced him that he read it straight through until 4:00 in the morning.

Now, George Gershwin was deeply impressed by the book's poetry, its dramatic possibilities and musical sensitivity. He immediately penned a letter to Heyward suggesting they collaborate on an opera based upon the novel. But it would take more than nine years before that collaboration reached fruition, and in the meantime, Heyward's novel became a very successful play by his wife, Dorothy, who had for a time secretly worked on the dramatic adaptation without her husband's knowledge.

Indeed, several events over these years threatened to derail the project. One was a concern by the Heywards that the play would somehow negate any future work on the opera. Another was Hollywood's interest in the property. Al Jolson, great star of the new talkies, sought rights for the play to develop into a film and later a Broadway musical that he wanted Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern to produce and write. For both projects he wanted to cast himself as Porgy and use other white actors to play the roles in black face.

DuBose was adamantly opposed to such portrayal. He and Dorothy had insisted upon using only African-American actors in mounting their very successful Broadway play, which incidentally launched many careers and actually opened new doors for black actors on Broadway. But it was now the Depression, and even the Heywards were suddenly financially strapped. It was a real dilemma for DuBose and is reflected in the correspondence between him and Gershwin in 1932 and 1933.

Well, the Jolson film and musical never materialized, but Gershwin cleared his desk in the summer of 1933 to start work on the project. He, his older brother, Ira, and DuBose would work by mail, telephone, and in person from New York and, happily for this city, Charleston. It was clearly the intention of the trio to faithfully embody in the production, just as had been done in the novel and the play, a true, faithful, and dignified view of the people who inhabited Catfish Row. Particular attention was paid to Gullah speech, and Gershwin himself quite famously attended church and other places where black music could be heard on his visits to Charleston. They said he often made quite sizeable donations in the collection plate. So much attention was paid to the details of authenticity that a somewhat desperate call was made to the Charleston County Public Library a few days before the opening asking for the exact pitches of the bells to St. Michael's Church that would sound in the opera.

**(“Oh, I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'.”)**

Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin',  
And nuttin's plenty for me.  
I got no car, got no mule, I got no misery.  
The folks with plenty o' plenty, they got a lock on the door,  
Afraid somebody's gonna rob 'em while they're out a'makin' more.  
What for?  
I got no lock on the door, that's no way to be.  
They can steal the rug from the floor, that's okay with me,  
'Cause the things that I prize, like the stars in the skies, are all free.  
Say, I got plenty o' nuttin', and nuttin's plenty for me.  
I got my gal, got my song, got heaven the whole day long.  
No use complaining.  
Got my gal. Got my Lord, got my song.

I got plenty o' nuttin', and nuttin's plenty for me.  
I got the sun, got the moon, I got the deep blue sea.  
But folks with plenty o' plenty gotta pray all the day.  
Seems with plenty, you sure got to worry how to keep that devil away.  
Now, I ain't frettin' about hell until the time arrives.  
Never worry long as I'm well, never one to strive to be good, to be bad.  
What the hell, I am glad I'm alive!  
Oh, I got plenty o' nuttin', and nuttin's plenty for me.  
I got my gal, got my song, got heaven the whole day long.  
No use complaining.  
Got my gal, got my Lord, got my song.

**(“Bess, You Is My Woman Now.”)**

Bess, you is my woman now.  
You is. You is.  
An' you mus' laugh an' sing an' dance for two instead of one.  
Want no wrinkle on yo' brow nohow  
Because the sorrow of the past is all done done.  
Oh Bess, my Bess!  
The real happiness is just begun.  
Porgy, you're my man, I is, I is.  
And I ain't never goin' nowhere 'less you shares the fun.  
There's no wrinkle on my brow nohow,  
But I ain't going nowhere, I'm sayin' if you ain't going, with you I'm stayin'.  
Porgy, I'm your woman now. I'm yours,  
Your woman, mornin' time, evenin' time, an' summertime an' wintertime.  
Mornin' time and evenin' time, an' summertime and wintertime.  
Bess, you got your man.  
Bess, you is my woman now and forever.  
This life is just begun, Bess, we two is one now and forever.  
Oh Bess, you're mine.  
You got your Porgy.  
You have your Porgy.  
I knows you mean it.  
I seen it in your eyes, Bess.  
Mornin' time, evenin' time, an' summertime an' wintertime.  
Mornin' time and evenin' time an' summertime an' wintertime.  
And Bess, Bess, promise me.  
I'm telling you, I make this vow.  
Oh, my Bessie, I'm telling you, now we is one.

MR. SCHLITT: The Broadway opening at the Alvin Theatre on October 10, 1935, was a triumph and the resultant reviews were mostly quite favorable, although a notion has persisted to this day that it opened to bad press. Even then, it was realized as the high point in finding serious expression for the African-American experience in a singularly important and new Native American opera. It closed after 124 performances at the Alvin, itself a new achievement for opera in a single season. But economics forced the show to close. And sadly, George Gershwin died of a brain tumor several months later, in July 1937. DuBose Heyward followed him in death in the summer of 1940.

What followed was a succession of sometimes quite varied productions of the opera. It's interesting to note that George Gershwin readily agreed to cut almost a fourth of the music he'd originally written before it opened at the Alvin. Much license was later taken in many of these productions, all with the approval of Ira and other

Gershwin heirs along with Dorothy Heyward. Music was rearranged, recitative was removed, offensive lyrics and language were rewritten by Ira and particularly in recent times, productions have been mounted that restore all of Gershwin's original music.

But from a larger perspective, these subsequent manifestations can be viewed as a kind of mirror of social change in America. After World War II, thanks to a sympathetic Harry Truman who integrated America's military, *Porgy* became an important cultural ambassador for our nation. It literally conquered the world as no other opera ever has. In our time, when public funding of the arts has become so circumspect, I find it valuable to note that *Porgy and Bess* received substantial public support from Congress during the Eisenhower administration. It launched hundreds of careers for African-American singers and artists like William Warfield, Leontyne Price, Maya Angelou, and even one of my professors in graduate school at the University of Oklahoma, Carol Brice. It's even resuscitated flagging careers for some performers like Cab Calloway. It is now regarded as this country's greatest contribution to opera.

**(“What You Want Wid Bess?”)**

I got the woman and that's you. See?  
What you want with Bess?  
She gettin' 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' hand.  
There's plenty better lookin' gal than Bess.  
What I wants wid other woman.  
I gots a woman, yes.  
An' dat is you, yes, dat is you, yes.  
I need you now an' you're mine jus' as long as I want you.  
No cripple goin' take my woman from me.  
You got a man tonight an' that is Crown.  
Yes, Crown, yes, Crown.  
You're my woman, Bess, I'm tellin' you.  
Now I'm your man.  
What you want with Bess?  
Take yo' hands off me, I say, yo' hands, yo' hands, yo' hands.  
I know you ain't change. Wid you an' me it always be the same.  
I'm telling you now, I'm your man.  
What you want with me?

**(“Strawberry Woman.”)**

Oh, they're so fresh and fine.  
And they is just off the vine.  
Strawberries, strawberries, strawberries.  
Oh, they're so fresh and fine.  
And they is just off the vine.  
Strawberries, strawberries, strawberries.

**("I Love You, Porgy.")**

Now the time. Oh, God. Now the time.

Oh, Porgy, Porgy.

Thank God.

I be lonesome here by myself. It's hot in there. Won't you let me stay here with you?

Oh, Bess, Bess.

I been sick, ain't I?

You have been very sick, but now I got you back, Bess.

How long I been sick?

Over a week now. You come back from Kittiwah with eye like fireball, an' Maria get you into bed an' you ain't know me. What's the matter, Bess?

I guess I ain't know nuttin' with the fever, or I ain't come back at all.

That's all right, honey. Don't you worry, honey. I knows you been with Crown.

How you know?

God give cripple to understand many things He ain't give strong men.

You ain't want me to go away?

No. No. I ain't want you to go. How things stand between you and Crown?

He's comin' for me when the cotton come to town.

You going?

I tell him yes.

You ain't got nothing to be afraid of. I ain't try to keep no woman what don't want to stay. If you wants to go to Crown, that's for you to say.

I loves you, Porgy, but I ain't worthy. You is too decent to understand. For when I see him, he hypnotize me, when he take hold of me with his hot hand. Someday I know he's coming back to call me. He's gonna handle me and hold me so. It's going to be like dying, Porgy, deep inside me, but when he comes, I know I'll have to go.

If there was no Crown, Bess, if there was only just you and Porgy, what then?

I loves you, Porgy. Don't let him take me, don't let him handle me and drive me mad. If you can keep me, I wants to stay here with you forever and I be glad.

There, there, Bess, you don't need to be afraid no more. You picked up happiness and laid your worries down. You going to live easy, you going to live high, you going to outshine every woman in this town. And remember, when Crown come, that's my business, Bess.

I loves you Porgy. Don't let him take me, don't let him handle me with his hot hand. If you can keep me, I wants to stay here wid you forever. I got my man.

So no more crying. Can't you understand? You going to go about your business singing, 'cause you got Porgy, you got a man.

MR. SCHLITT: In conclusion, I would like to suggest that *Porgy and Bess* deserves new consideration today. It has always stirred controversy in the arena of race relations, even as all evidence shows that Heyward and the Gershwin brothers were clearly intent upon ennobling the characters who lived on Catfish Row. As a reflection of the marginalization of minorities in our day, it is another piece in a long line of artistic endeavors that seeks to humanize those among us who have been relegated to the ghettos of society. An examination of the critical reception originally given to *Porgy and Bess* can help us understand the dilemma that reviewers sometimes face when confronted with new art. Many of the original critics simply didn't understand what Gershwin and his collaborators were trying to do.

Finally, I suggest that we must embrace historical context whenever we appraise any art form, and especially those that possess social relevancy. As can be seen in the opera's 75-year history, in doing less we jeopardize understanding and perpetuate a sort of prejudice that can cloud the artistic experience and limit the power of art to transform us and our world. So let us embrace the hope inherent in our final selection tonight, as philosopher

Porgy leads the company in a rousing spiritual to conclude Gershwin's American classic, *Porgy and Bess*.

**(“Oh, Lawd, I'm on my way.”)**

Oh, Lawd, I'm on my way.

I'm on my way to a heav'nly lan'.

I'll ride that long, long road,

If you are there to guide my han'.

Oh, Lawd, I'm on my way?

I'm on my way to a heav'nly lan'.

Oh, Lawd, it's a long, long way,

But you'll be there to take my han'.

MS. MUTI: Thank you very much. What a wonderful way to end our evening and time together.

Just a quick reminder, when coffee and dessert are served, we will hear from Dr. Helen Wright, our guest from England.