

OPERA

Porgy & Bess

Living Arts & Andrew McKinnon,
Festival Theatre,
July 12.

★★★

The players: Richard Hobson, Jerris Cates, Teresa Hamm-Smith, Heather Hill, Ronn K. Smith, Stephen Finch, Marvin Lowe, Jarrett Ali Boyd, Stephanie Beadle.

Behind the scenes: Director Will Roberson, choreographer Keila Cordova, lighting Kathryn M. Scarpino, costume design Candace Donnelly and Susan Williams-Finch.

Standout: Stephen Finch.

→ **In short:** The living is long, but it sure ain't easy!

Porgy's got plenty for me

WATCHING *Porgy And Bess* is like going to Gershwin gospel church.

George and Ira Gershwin wrote an immortal opera that would ensure work for African American performers for decades to come.

Based on the DuBose Heyward novel set in Charleston's fabled Catfish Row, this polished international production pays due tribute to the traditions of the piece, but it is a long night out at the theatre.

From the opening phrases of *Summertime* the show weaves a spell over the audience, as we see the cycle of life, elation, desperation and death, played out in the unforgiving, but still vibrant, atmosphere of the down-to-

earth South. James Fouchard's set design, Kathryn M. Scarpino's evocative lighting and Candace Donnelly and Susan Williams-Finch's costumes give the evening a touch of class.

Even though it was a preview and the understudies and alternates were on in some of the main roles, the show didn't miss a beat in delivering this passionate, earthy look at lives lived close to the storm.

Conductor Stefan Kozinski has the orchestra in fine fettle, bringing out the many nuances of the Gershwins' multi-layered musical score.

Richard Hobson made powerful, gritty Porgy a crippled man given an unexpected chance for happiness and, therefore, more to lose.

His rendition of *I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'* is uplifting and *Bess, You Is My Woman Now* is a statement straight from the heart.

Jerris Cates makes a most generous and tragic reformed prostitute, Bess, leading the way with *Leavin' for de Promis' Land* and tearing out the audience's heart with *What You Want Wid Bess?*

There are also tremendous performances by Marvin Lowe as fearless fisherman Jake, trying to give his new family a future, and Teresa Hamm-Smith as the earthy Serena.

Ronn K. Smith assures us all that everything in the Bible *Ain't Necessarily So* as the dope-dealing devils advocate Sportin' Life, and Stephanie

Beadle keeps his wolfish charms at bay with a meat cleaver as the wonderful windbag Maria.

The ensemble works beautifully in the big production numbers, such as *Oh, I Can't Sit Down*, and the epic hurricane scene.

But the show is stolen by Stephen Finch as Bess's pimp partner, Crown. His strength, physicality and devil-may-care charisma amped up the dramatic content of the production.

Overall the pace needs to pick up, but it is a great opportunity to see a classic like this, presented as it should be. For Gershwin fans, it has plenty to recommend it.

MATT BYRNE