



Alvy Powell as Porgy and Marquita Lister as Bess

IT'S "SUMMERTIME" TIME

The controversial but perennial favorite Porgy and Bess returns to the Portland stage

by Christopher Kamera.

Prejudice, intolerance, unacceptable romantic pairings and negative stereotypes are major themes that gay and lesbian opera fans will identify with during the Portland stay of *Porgy and Bess*. The Gershwin brothers' immortal work continues at the Portland Civic Auditorium with performances through July 29.

This staging, co-produced by 10 major U.S. opera companies including Portland Opera, is the

Opera

first to be directed by an African American—and it may be the first to be directed by a woman.

Hope Clarke, a former dancer and Broadway actress with impressive choreography and opera direction in her résumé, serves the George and Ira Gershwin classic well. *Porgy and Bess* blends folk opera, Broadway musical comedy and grand opera into a distinctive package. A limited, mixed success in its 1935 debut, *Porgy and Bess* has been called in recent years the greatest opera ever written in this country, even though some critics feel that the opera is a derogatory depiction of black life written by whites. While critics

will be debating those claims for decades—if not centuries—to come, there is no doubt that *Porgy and Bess* is the most popular U.S. opera ever written. A much heralded 1976 Houston Grand Opera revival returned the work to the top of popularity, this 1995 mounting will clearly keep it there.

Clarke's stage direction keeps Gershwin's original concepts stage center, while adding a bit of Broadway pizzazz in some of the ensemble numbers. While the new production may go a bit overboard in being politically correct, to reverse dated stereotypes, Clarke's work helps bring *Porgy and Bess* vividly to life. No matter how many snappy songs are sung by secondary characters, no matter how lively the citizens of Catfish Row become on Saturday night, no matter how many folk legends influenced the original concept, the

heart and soul of *Porgy and Bess* is the unlikely love between the "cripple," Porgy, and the "fallen woman," Bess. And Clarke—and the Houston team—keep the focus on the title characters.

All four of the major characters are double cast, and Portland audiences are likely to see any mix of the eight leads. Earlier this year, more than 35,000 cheering Seattle Opera fans welcomed the Houston production of *Porgy and Bess* to 11 sold-out performances at the Opera House. Specific performance comments are based on the performances in the Emerald City.

On opening night Alvy Powell was an impressive Porgy and Roberta Laws, a successful Bess. Both sang beautifully, and their "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" was a highlight of the show. It's one of the most moving love duets in all of opera, and Laws and Powell were simply magnificent.

Stacey Robinson was an unforgettable Crown—all muscle and energy. His powerful stage presence made Bess' sexual turmoil thoroughly believable.

Robinson's singing, however, was clearly amplified—one of the controversial aspects of the co-production. Angela R. Simpson gave a show-stopping "My Man's Gone Now" that brought the audience to a roar of applause.

Kimberly Jones opened the production with a properly underplayed "Summertime," the best-known song of the score. Larry Marshall's Sportin' Life was a crowd-pleaser, even though his big numbers, "It Ain't Necessarily So" and "There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York," were difficult to understand. Keith Crawford scored with an amusing scene about a lawyer who charges more to "divorce" unmarried couples than married ones.

Ticket details are available from Portland Opera at 241-1802. It's interesting to note that when *Porgy and Bess* sold out in Seattle this spring, Portland Opera ran ads in both major Seattle daily papers advertising its summer performance dates in the City of Roses. The company noted "good response" from the Seattle ads—demonstrating once again the importance of the arts on the I-5 corridor.



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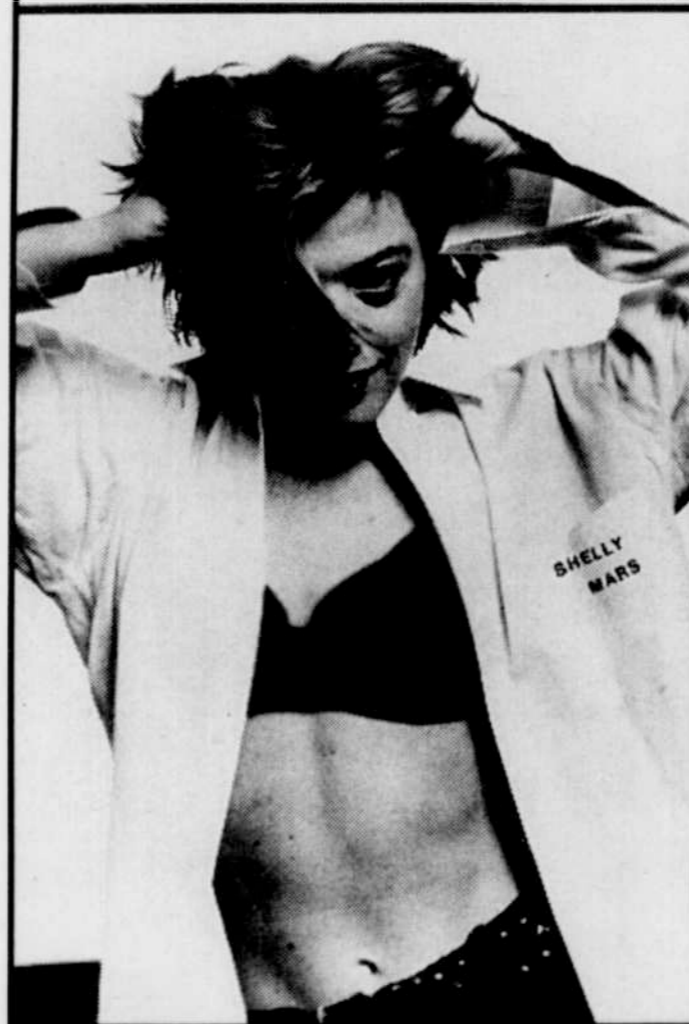
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