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STUDENT  
GUIDE

MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2010

# PORGY & BESS

/ FROM PAGE TO STAGE //

## Profiling Porgy

**Name:** *Porgy and Bess*

**Genre:** Opera

**Nationality:** American (a very rare thing – most operas are Italian in origin, and Americans tend to prefer traditional musicals to operatic productions). *Porgy and Bess* is sometimes called a *folk opera* due to its focus on an ethnic group and incorporation of their actual dialect and speech patterns. It also bears the distinction of being written almost strictly for African-American performers. The other actors who briefly appear in the production speak rather than sing.

**Language:** English (also rare – operas in languages other than English often have to be presented in the US with *supertitles*, or a rough translation of the character's words, projected on a screen above the stage).

**Librettist:** DuBose Hayward, author of a novel called *Porgy*. Hayward wrote the novel after reading a newspaper account of a disabled man killing a rival.

**Lyricist:** Ira Gershwin, brother of George. Both Gershwins were famous for being men who could write lovely songs but were also notorious for not being able to sing.

**Composer:** George Gershwin (the visionary who first suggested collaboration with DuBose Hayward and worked for nearly ten years to bring this about). The 700 pages of music that made up *Porgy and Bess* represented his most ambitious creation and his favorite composition. According to David Ewen, Gershwin's first biographer, he "never quite ceased to wonder at the miracle that he had been its composer. He never stopped loving each and every bar, never wavered in the conviction that he had produced a work of art." Sadly, *Porgy and Bess* was not terribly famous or financially successful in Gershwin's lifetime, and only attained the status he felt it deserved after his death.

**Setting:** Depression-era Catfish Row, a poverty stricken black tenement in Charleston, South Carolina. DuBose Hayward and the Gershwin brothers visited this area and spent time observing the local "Gullahs" in preparation for their writing.

**Themes:** Poverty, Jealousy, Natural Disaster, Drug Addiction, Tragic Love.



Reggie Whitehead in the role of Sportin' Life, Donita Volkwin in the role of Bess

## The story of *Porgy and Bess*

~ ACT ONE ~

### SCENE 1: Catfish Row.

It is evening and the community is relaxing. As couples dance and Clara sings a lullaby to her baby, the men shoot craps. Despite Serena's objections, her husband Robbins joins the game. Porgy arrives in his goat cart, and the group teases him about his crush on Bess. Crown and his woman, Bess, a flashy dresser, soon arrive. The game becomes rowdier as Crown becomes intoxicated on the liquor and "happy dust" supplied by Sportin' Life, the local drug dealer. Crown disputes Robbins' roll and they start fighting. Crown kills Robbins with his cotton hook, and then runs away. Everyone scatters to their homes before the police come. Bess quickly rejects an invitation to run away with Sportin' Life, and then changes her fate by going to hide in Porgy's room.

**Highlights:** Look for Clara's song "Summertime," one of the standouts of this opera.

### SCENE 2: Serena's Room.

Robbins' body lies on the bed while money is collected in a saucer to pay for his funeral. The Detective and a policeman arrest Peter as a material witness until Crown is caught. Serena laments her husband's death and Bess leads the group in a spiritual.

~ ACT TWO ~

### SCENE 1: Catfish Row, a month later.

The fishermen sing a rowing song as they repair nets. "Lawyer" Frazier, discovering that Bess has been with Porgy since Crown ran away, sells Porgy a "divorce" of Bess from Crown to make the new liaison "legal." Sportin' Life tries repeatedly to tempt Bess and she refuses him. Mr. Archdale, whose family used to own Peter's parents, comes to inquire about Peter. He promises to post Peter's bond. Sportin' Life again offers Bess some "happy dust"; this time Porgy intimidates him into leaving. Porgy and Bess declare their feelings for each other.

# Opera 101

- *Opera* comes from the Italian word *opus* which means “work of art.”
- Instrumental music in an opera is not part of the background like it would be in a movie. Instead, it expresses feelings and thoughts without using words. Therefore, it is just as important as the characters or singing.
- The story of an opera is created by a *librettist*. He or she develops the plot and creates the characters’ words. The name librettist comes from the word *libretto*, which is Italian for “little book.”
- A *composer* takes the libretto and song lyrics and sets them to music.
- Operas are usually sung in the language in which they were originally written; most often this is Italian. The reason for not performing the opera in translation is that the musical values of certain syllables are not preserved when one changes languages.
- Many operas are based on *tragedies* – stories that have potential for a happy ending but fail to work out because of some flaw or twist of fate.
- Operas are structured much like plays with sets, suggestive lighting, and costumes. Like plays, they are divided into acts and scenes.
- Operas have a director (who works with issues like acting and placement onstage) and a conductor (who controls the live orchestra).
- Often, the pace of speaking words is much faster than the pace of singing those same words would be. If the music is speeded up to match the pace of speech it is called *recitative* or *patter-song*.
- Singer-actors must always be in a position onstage where they can see the conductor. Often, there is so much going on onstage that they cannot actually hear the orchestra. Therefore, the conductor must cue them when it is time for them to sing again.
- Operas have their own way of cheering performers at the end of a show or after a particularly good musical number. In celebration of the Italian roots of opera, it is appropriate to shout  
*Bravo* to appraise a male performer,  
*Brava* to praise a female performer, or  
*Bravi* to praise two or more performers.

– CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 –

The Catfish Row residents get dressed up and prepare to leave on a picnic. Bess plans to stay with her man, but Porgy convinces Bess to go along.

**Highlights:** Look for a change in Bess’ appearance and manners. Being Porgy’s woman has made her more humble and wholesome. Porgy is also much happier and more confident. In this act, Porgy sings his key song, “Plenty of Nuttin’” and he and Bess join in the love duet “Bess, You is my Woman Now.”

**SCENE 2:** Kittiwah Island.

During the picnic, Sportin’ Life makes fun of biblical literalism and is denounced by Serena. As everyone hurries to catch the boat going back to town, Crown emerges from the thicket and prevents Bess from returning.

**SCENE 3:** Jake and the fishermen are preparing to go fishing. Peter has been released from prison, and Bess, who has returned to Porgy, is suffering delirium. Serena prays for her, and tells Porgy that Bess will soon be well. Finally Bess, sounding recovered, calls for Porgy. She talks with Porgy, who tells her that he knows that

she has been with Crown, but that he loves her all the same. She says that although she told Crown she would go with him she really wants to stay with Porgy and is fearful of the effect of Crown’s presence on her. Porgy assures her that he will take care of Crown if he bothers Bess again. Clara watches the sea anxiously as a storm approaches, and the fearful sound of the hurricane bell is heard as the scene ends.

**SCENE 4:** People huddle in Serena’s room as a hurricane rages outside. Anxious groups, singing “Oh, Doctor Jesus.” Peter sings “I hear death knockin’ at de do” and almost immediately a real knock is heard on the door as the people rush to hold the door closed. It is Crown, who has come for Bess, and he throws Porgy down as he attempts to save her. Serena warns Crown that at any moment the storm might get him, but he scoffs at her warnings. Suddenly Clara thrusts her baby at Bess and runs out because she has seen Jake’s fishing boat floating upside down in the river. Bess urges the men to follow her but only Crown will brave the storm. He leaves, promising that he will return for Bess, and the act ends with the people again pleading for mercy again in “Oh, Doctor Jesus.”

## Composer: George Gershwin (1898-1937)

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1898, the second of four children from a close-knit immigrant family. He began his musical career as a song-plugger on Tin Pan Alley (what’s Tin Pan Alley, you ask? Tin Pan Alley is the name given to the collection of New York City-centered music publishers and songwriters who dominated the popular music of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century) but was soon writing his own pieces. Gershwin’s first published song, “When You Want ‘Em, You Can’t Get ‘Em,” earned him five dollars. Soon after, however, he met a young lyricist named Irving Caesar. Together they composed a number of songs including “Swanee,” which sold more than a million copies.

In the same year as “Swanee,” Gershwin collaborated on his first complete Broadway musical, *La, La, Lucille*.

In 1924, George collaborated with his brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, on a musical comedy, *Lady, Be Good*. It included such standards as “Fascinating Rhythm” and “The Man I Love.” It was the beginning of a partnership that would continue for the rest of the composer’s life. Together they wrote many more successful musicals including *Oh Kay!* and *Funny Face*, starring Fred Astaire and his sister, Adele. While continuing to compose popular music for the stage, Gershwin began to make his mark as a serious composer. This is not a surprise as George began to study piano as a child and

worked with teachers who were prominent classical musicians of the time. When he was 25 years old, his jazz-influenced *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered in New York’s Aeolian Hall. Gershwin followed this success with his orchestral works *Piano Concerto in F*, *Second Rhapsody*, and *An American in Paris*.

Gershwin also experimented with some new ideas in Broadway musicals. *Strike Up The Band*, *Of Thee I Sing* (the first musical comedy ever to win a Pulitzer Prize) and *Let ‘Em Eat Cake* were innovative works dealing with social issues of the time. Finally, in 1935 he presented a folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Now recognized as one of the major works of American opera, it included such memorable songs as “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” “I Loves You, Porgy,” and “Summertime.”

In 1936, after many successes on Broadway, brothers George and Ira decided to return to Hollywood. Again they teamed up with Fred

Astaire, who was now paired with Ginger Rogers. They made the musical film, *Shall We Dance*, which included such hits as “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” and “They Can’t Take That Away From Me.” Soon after came *A Damsel in Distress*, in which Astaire appeared with Joan Fontaine. Gershwin had plans to return to New York to work on writing serious music. He planned a string quartet, a ballet and another opera, but these pieces were never written. After becoming ill while working on the *Goldwyn Follies*, George Gershwin died of a brain tumor at the age of 38. Today he remains one of America’s most beloved popular musicians and composers. ■



## ~ ACT THREE ~

**SCENE 1:** Catfish Row, the next night.

The storm has ended, but people wonder what has become of Clara, Jake and the others. Bess sings to Clara's baby at the window of Porgy's room. Crown tries to sneak into Porgy's room, but Porgy stabs then strangles him.

**Highlights:** Bess's reprise of "Summertime" is a famous part of this act. Obviously, Crown's murder is as well.

**SCENE 2:** Catfish Row, the following afternoon.

The Detective and the Coroner try to find out who killed Crown, but everyone pleads ignorance. They question Porgy, then force him to go identify Crown's body. Afraid that his guilt will be revealed, Porgy resists. After they leave, Sportin' Life gives Bess some "happy dust" and tries to get her to go to New York with him. She refuses, but he leaves more "happy dust" on the doorstep and bides his time.

**SCENE 3:** Catfish Row, one week later.

Porgy is released from jail, where he was sent for contempt of court when he refused to identify Crown. Having won at craps while in jail, he brings presents for everyone. When he is told that Bess has gone to New York with Sportin' Life, he vows to go there to find her. Porgy asks that his goat-cart be brought to him. As he starts out of Catfish Row to find Bess wherever she may be and bring her back, he and the chorus sing the finale, "Oh Lawd, I'm On My Way."

**Highlights:** Porgy's "Oh, Bess, Where's My Bess?" is known as one of the most heartbreaking moments in this tragic opera. ■



## Novelist, Playwright, Librettist: DuBose Heyward (1885-1940)



Dorothy and DuBose Heyward in 1927

Porgy and Bess first began as the novel, *Porgy*, written by DuBose Heyward in 1925. A descendant of Thomas Heyward, Jr., who was a signer of the United States Declaration of Independence as a representative of South Carolina, DuBose became a Charleston insurance and real-estate salesman with a long-standing and serious interest in literature. He became financially independent and abandoned his business to devote full time to writing.

Heyward and his wife Dorothy spent many years in Charleston observing the lifestyle of the African Americans of that area. He also participated in an amateur Southern traditional singing society open to anyone whose family had lived on a plantation, whether as owner or slave. In Charleston Heyward found a majority of the inspiration for his book, including what would become the setting (Catfish Row) and the main character (a disabled man named Porgy). Literary critics cast Heyward as an authority on Southern literature. During his time in Charleston, DuBose taught at the Porter Military Academy.

The non-musical play, *Porgy*, adapted by DuBose and Dorothy opened on Broadway in 1927, eight years before the opera *Porgy and Bess*. It was a considerable success—more so at the time than the Gershwin opera. It was the

play that was used as the opera's libretto. The novel differs greatly from the play, especially in the ending. The plotline of the opera follows the play almost exactly. Large sections of dialogue from the play were set to music for the recitatives in the opera.

The novel *Porgy* became a bestseller. Heyward continued to explore writing with another novel set in Catfish Row, *Mamba's Daughters* (1929), which he and Dorothy again adapted as a play. His novella *Star Spangled Virgin* was about the breakdown of the small farming economy of an island in the Virgin Islands.

He also wrote the screenplay for the adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1933). His work included a collection of poems, *Jasbo Brown* and selected poems published in 1931 and a children's book, *The Country Bunny* and *The Little Gold Shoes* published in 1939. ■

## VOICE TYPE VOCABULARY

### MALE VOICE TYPES:

A somewhat rare male voice is the **high tenor**. A high tenor can hit notes that most men can not. His voice is more flexible and able to imitate a female's. High tenors or often included in groups for artistic effect. In a comic opera, a man might deliberately sing in a super-high voice called a falsetto to get a laugh out of the audience.

**Tenors** are traditionally known as being the highest male voice type. In many forms of musical theater, tenors take the leading male role. Tenors have been the source of much interest and media attention in recent years – ever heard of "The Three Tenors"?

A **baritone** is the mid-range male voice type. Baritones have a complex role. They blend into the mix of other voices and instrument tones. In musical plays, the baritone can be either the villain or a prankster.

The lowest male voice type is the **bass**. The bass voice produces a throaty rumble. Think of a pounding, drum – like sound. While basses sometimes play comic roles in musical theater, they are more often seen as wise old men.

### FEMALE VOICE TYPES

The **coloratura soprano** is the highest range of the female voice. Think of the highest note Mariah Carey can hit and keep on thinking. This girl can hit such high notes that she can shatter glass.

A **soprano** is a high female voice. The heroine of the opera is usually a soprano. As you might imagine, she is usually in love with the main man, who tends to be a tenor. Some sopranos have a reputation for wanting things just so, so they are known as **prima donnas**.

If a female **mezzo-soprano** plays the part of a young boy (say Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* or Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel*), her part is referred to as a "**pants role**."

Makes sense, ya' know? Cause right then that girl is sure the one wearing the pants in that family!

An **alto** is a female performer with a lower voice. If an alto's voice is super-low, she becomes a **contralto** and her voice is very much like the tenor's. Contraltos often get the parts of wise old women and witches. Yes, it's stereotypical, but that's how it goes...

# LYRICIST: IRA GERSHWIN (1896-1983)

While his younger brother, George began composing and working in Tin Pan Alley from the age of sixteen, Ira worked at a number of jobs including as a cashier in his father's Turkish baths. It was not until 1921 that Ira became involved in the music business. Alex Aarons signed Ira to write the music for his next show, *Two Little Girls in Blue* (written under the pseudonym "Arthur Francis"). Gershwin's lyrics were well received and allowed him to successfully enter the theatre world with just one show.



It was not until 1924 that Ira and George Gershwin teamed up to write the music for their first Broadway hit *Lady, Be Good!* Once the brothers joined together, their combined talents became one of the most influential forces in the history of American Musical Theatre.

Together, they wrote the music for more than two dozen scores for Broadway and Hollywood. Following his brother's death, Ira waited nearly three years before writing again.

After this interlude, he teamed up with such accomplished composers as Jerome Kern, Kurt Weill, and Harold Arlen. Over the next fourteen years, Ira Gershwin continued to write the lyrics for films and Broadway.

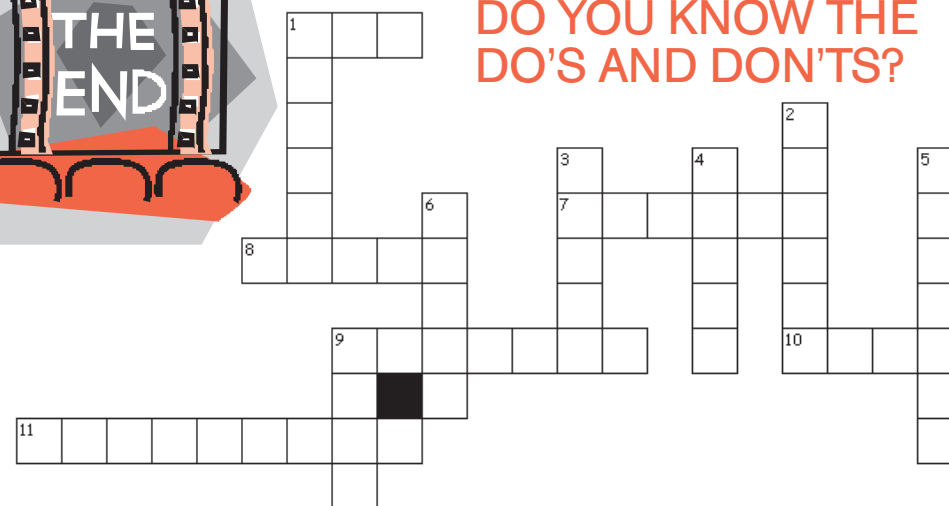
His critically acclaimed book *Lyrics on Several Occasions* of 1959, an amalgam of autobiography and annotated anthology, is an important source for studying the art of the lyricist in the golden age of American popular song.

**Circle your answer:** Maybe there should be an instructional television show called "What Not to Do," but until then, remember this: Theater behavior falls somewhere in between that expected for a church and a movie theater. If you wouldn't do it in one of the above, don't do it here. Apply that rule to the principle tips listed below. Five are DO's and five are DON'Ts. Determine which are which, label them in the boxes provided, and you will always be red carpet ready.



## THEATER ETIQUETTE

DO	DON'T	
		1. Sit in your assigned seat for the entire performance. Seating is assigned in theaters for a number of reasons; staying your seat is keeps things organized, prevents disruptions, and stops you from accidentally taking the place reserved for someone else.
		2. Turn your cell phone off. Everyone else in the theater came to hear the performers and the music – not your ringtone.
		3. Shout rude things at the performers. Treat them as you would want to be treated if you were onstage.
		4. Eat or drink in the theater unless refreshments are sold there. This is disrespectful to the performers and the other patrons. Would you want to sit next to someone making noise with their gum and wrappers and potato chip bags?
		5. Clap at the end of an act, a scene, after a wonderful moment called a "show-stopper", or at the end of a production. If you are unsure, clap when others do.
		6. Disturb those around you (even if you are bored).
		7. Arrive on time. This will keep you from missing anything or from causing others to do so.
		8. Sing along at an opera or musical...after all, everyone else came to hear the performers.
		9. Forget to enjoy yourself and learn new things. That's why you came.
		10. Remain in your seat until intermission. Even bathroom breaks should be avoided until this time.



### Good Theater Behavior: DO YOU KNOW THE DO'S AND DON'TS?

- ACROSS**
- Clap at the end of a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Good theater behavior falls between that expected for a \_\_\_\_\_ and for a movie theater.
  - Always remember to \_\_\_\_\_ new things.
  - Clap after an especially amazing part in the play called a "show-\_\_\_\_\_."
  - The only time you should leave your \_\_\_\_\_ is during intermission.
  - Your \_\_\_\_\_ should always be turned off.
- DOWN**
- \_\_\_\_\_ on time.
  - If you are unsure of when to clap, clap when \_\_\_\_\_ do.
  - Clap at the end of a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Never eat or \_\_\_\_\_ unless refreshments are sold in the theater.
  - Pay attention during the production. Even if you are not interested, sit \_\_\_\_\_ to avoid disturbing others.
  - Always remember to \_\_\_\_\_ yourself.
  - Do not \_\_\_\_\_ along at an opera or musical.

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### PORGY & BESS

#### STUDENT PERFORMANCE

MONDAY  
MARCH 8  
10:30 AM

#### EVENING PERFORMANCE

SUNDAY  
MARCH 7  
7:30 PM

AT THE HEYMANN  
PERFORMING  
ARTS CENTER

- ANSWERS TO "Good Theater Behavior"**
- Across**
- act
  - church
  - learn
  - stopper
  - seat
  - cellphone
- Down**
- arrive
  - others
  - scene
  - drink
  - quietly
  - enjoy
  - sing
- ANSWERS TO "DO'S & DON'TS"**
- Do
  - Do
  - Don't
  - Don't
  - Do
  - Don't
  - Do
  - Do
  - Do
  - Do

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