



PORGY AND BESS

by George Gershwin, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin

Directed by Charles Newell

Music Direction by Doug Peck

Artistic Consultant Ron OJ Parson

May 12 - July 3, 2011

at Court Theatre

CHARACTERS

- Porgy – A disabled beggar
- Bess – an itinerant woman whom Porgy falls in love with
- Peter – the honeyman
- Sporting Life – a drug dealer
- Maria – keeper of the cookshop
- Mr. Archdale – a white lawyer
- Crown – a docksman
- Lily – Peter’s wife
- Robbins – a resident of Catfish Row
- Clara – Jake’s wife
- Jim – a cotton picker
- Serena – Robbins’s wife
- Mingo – a resident of Catfish Row
- Annie – a resident of Catfish Row
- Jake – a fisherman

STORY

The story of *Porgy and Bess* focuses on the fleeting romance between Bess, an itinerant woman, and Porgy, a crippled beggar, known for riding his goat cart through the streets of Charleston. At the beginning of the play, Bess belongs to Crown, a powerful, short-tempered stevedore, or docksman, prone to drinking. When in a drunken rage Crown murders Robbins over a game of dice, he flees, leaving Bess to fend for herself. Refused shelter by the other residents of Catfish Row, Bess is welcomed by Porgy into his hovel. The two begin an unlikely romance, and Porgy’s life begins to change for the better.

As Bess is accepted into Catfish Row, she is invited to a picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island with the rest of the community. Unable to follow, Porgy stays behind; left unprotected, Bess is caught off guard on the island by Crown, who forces her to submit to him. Upon her return to Catfish Row, Bess is overcome with a mysterious fever. Serena, widow of Robbins, prays to cure Bess, and promises that she’ll be better by five o’clock. At the stroke of five, Bess revives, and confesses to Porgy that she has been with Crown; she begs Porgy to protect her when Crown returns.

Suddenly the hurricane bell rings, and all of Catfish Row takes shelter in Serena’s room. A terrifying knock at the door interrupts the hymns and prayers of the chorus, and everyone assumes it is Death waiting outside the door. Instead, Crown enters, having fought the storm all the way from



Kittiwah Island, looking for Bess. All of a sudden, Clara spies the overturned fishing boat of her husband Jake outside the window. Fearing for his life, Clara hands her infant baby to Bess and throws herself out the door into the storm. Bess begs for one of the men to follow her; Crown volunteers, but only after taunting Porgy, who is unable to go.

The next day, the deaths of Jake and Clara are mourned by the residents of Catfish Row. The care of their baby has fallen to Bess, who sings him a lullaby. After night falls, Crown returns to seize Bess, but Porgy is waiting there to stop him. They fight, and Porgy kills Crown, against all odds.

The next day, the local detective arrives to inquire about the murders of Crown and Robbins, and the residents collaborate to protect Porgy. The police take Porgy in anyway, ordering him to identify Crown's body. Once he is gone, Sporting Life takes his opportunity to persuade Bess to come with him to New York, convincing her that Porgy will be imprisoned. He forces drugs on her and extols the virtues of the city. She refuses, but Sporting Life waits patiently for her to give in.

A week later, Porgy returns from prison, bearing gifts he bought with the craps money he earned in jail. He reveals a red dress purchased for Bess, but she is nowhere to be found. When he learns that Bess has left with Sporting Life to go to New York, he makes the decision to ride his goat cart all the way to New York to find her. The opera closes as Porgy begins his long journey to the city.

GULLAH CULTURE

Compiled by Resident Dramaturg Drew Dir and Production Dramaturg Martine Kei Green

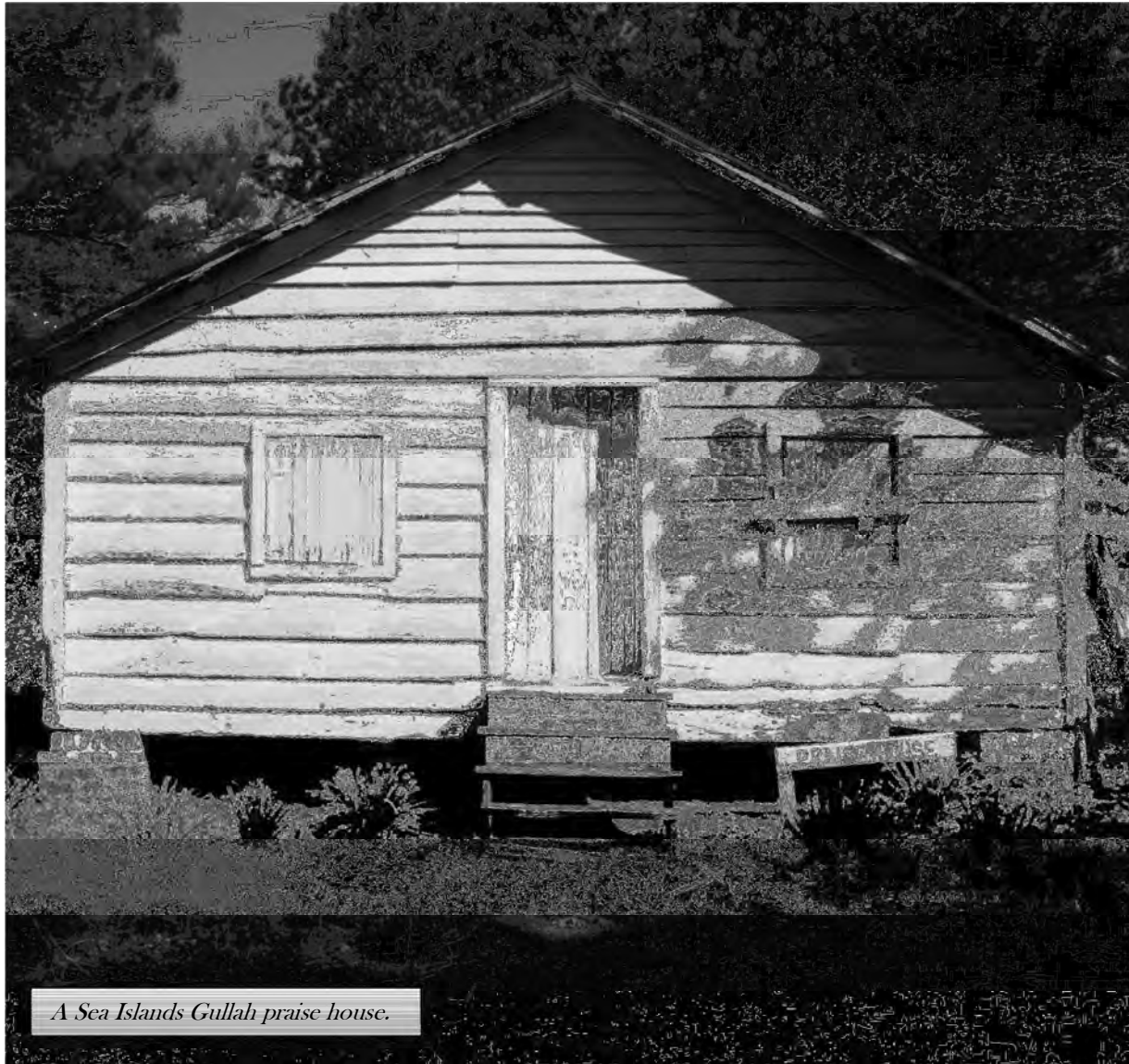
The characters of *Porgy and Bess* are based on the Gullah residents of Charleston observed by DuBose Heyward in the 1920s. The Gullah (or Geechee) have resided on the coasts and sea-islands of Georgia and South Carolina since the eighteenth century. Originally from the tribes and ethnic groups of Sierra Leone and West Africa, they were enslaved and forced to immigrate to America to work on the rice plantations of the South Carolina “Low Country.” They are unique among other black communities in North America because their African culture—including language, customs, music, religion, food, and art—have been preserved to an astonishing degree. Twentieth-century research has uncovered these distant ties to Africa; when Gullah men and women travel to West Africa today, they often find striking similarities between the culture of the South Carolina sea islands and the culture of West African tribes, even though these two groups have been disconnected for hundreds of years.

The Gullah community was formed shortly after the first European colonists arrived in South Carolina in 1670. The early settlements struggled to create a successful colony until about 1700, when they discovered that the humid swamps of the Low Country were perfect for growing rice, then imported from Asia. As the cultivation of rice became more successful for the colonists, they began importing more slaves from the West African region because those slaves were skilled in growing rice in a climate similar to South Carolina's. Unlike the other Northern colonies that typically showed no preference for the origins of their slaves, South Carolina had a vested interest in importing Africans from specific rice-growing regions, especially the tribes around Sierra Leone, which included the Mende, Vai, Kissi, and others. This was one of the factors that inadvertently encouraged a culturally homogenous community, despite their masters' best attempts to discourage the retention of African culture. Another factor

that accidentally preserved their African culture may have been malaria and yellow fever, diseases brought by Africans that thrived in the Low Country and forced plantation owners to build their homes far from the slave houses, discouraging cultural exchange.

The Gullah speak a creole language, meaning a language that has been created from two or more other languages. In the case of the Gullah, the primary “target language” was English, while the African “substrate languages” influenced the pronunciation, grammar, and some vocabulary of the English language. This has led many observers to view the Gullah language as “pidgin,” broken or inferior English, but Gullah is a full, robust language with its own systems, structures, and rules. Some Gullah words that are identical to Sierra Leonean languages are *defu* (“rice flour” in Vai) and *kome* (“to gather” in Mende). The Gullah language is also very close to Sierra Leone Krio, a hybrid language of many different groups that can be understood throughout Sierra Leone (the Gullah and Krio words for “boy” and “girl,” *bohboh* and *titi*, are the same). Gullah, while still spoken and understood in certain communities of South Carolina and Georgia, is rapidly disappearing. Much of what we know of the Gullah language and its origins was recorded in the 1930s and 40s by Dr. Lorenzo Turner, an African American linguist.





A Sea Islands Gullah praise house.

The worldview of the African slaves saw no distinction between the “holy” and the “secular”; spirituality pervaded all aspects of human life. Communal experience was more important than that of the individual, though every individual was seen to have a role in the life of the community. Immediate earthly punishment and retribution were held over a final judgment for sins and transgression. The spiritual world consisted of an “unseen (but not remote)” afterlife of former individuals. The Gullah adapted Christianity to this African worldview. Instead of converting to the Christian God (as scholar Paul Radin observes), they converted the Christian God to Gullah.

The Gullah valued human life over the afterlife, and they also valued freedom, which, during slavery, they believed would come to them or to future generations. The Gullah often sang of the “Tree of Life,” a tree of liberty that embodied the worldly attainment of freedom. In the time of slavery, the Gullah were not known for slave insurrections, leading some observers to see them as “resigned” to their fate. On the contrary, the Gullah likely viewed slave rebellions as impractical and individual acts of violent insurrection as selfish. Instead, they focused on the cultivation of an enduring community. Though they suffered under their masters, who they viewed as their enemies, they saw no need to practice vengeance upon being emancipated. As one scholar describes it, the Gullah were consummate humanists who valued the collective good over the personal.

On Gullah Customs and Traditions

Taken from the writings of Joseph A. Opala

The Gullah believe in witchcraft, which they call wudu, wanga, joso, or juju. They say that witches can cast a spell by putting powerful herbs or roots under a person's pillow or at a place where he usually walks. There are special individuals called "Root Doctor" or "Doctor Buzzard" who can provide protection against witchcraft or withdraw the effects of a curse. The Gullah also believe in dangerous spirits capable of enslaving a person by controlling his will. They sometimes paper the walls of their houses with newsprint or put a folded bit of newspaper inside a shoe, believing that the spirit must first read each and every word before taking action. This custom is clearly derived from the common West African practice of wearing a protective amulet, called sebeh or grigri, containing written passages from the Koran.

Gullah burial customs begin with a drum beat to inform people that someone in town has died. Mirrors are turned to the wall so the corpse cannot be reflected. The funeral party takes the body to the cemetery, but waits at the gate to ask permission of the ancestors to enter. Participants dance around the grave, singing and praying, then smash bottles and dishes over the site to "break the chain" so that no one else in the same family will soon die. Then, the funeral group returns to town and cooks a large meal, leaving a portion on the veranda for the departed soul. In slavery days some Gullahs called this cooking ceremony saraka, a term derived from Arabic and familiar to most West Africans.

The Gullah possess a rich collection of animal fables with such stock characters as Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Brer Bear, and Brer Snake. The plots of these stories always involve competition among the animals, which have distinctly human personalities; and the situations and predicaments are virtually identical to those in stories told in Africa. The main character in the Gullah tales is Brer Rabbit, a clever figure who often outwits his bigger and stronger animal opponents, but whose dishonest tactics sometimes lead him into serious trouble. Brer Rabbit is analogous to the "trickster" found in animal stories throughout Africa and represented in Mende, Temne, and Limba tales as the spider and, in Krio stories, as "Koni Rabbit." The Gullah story-telling tradition is the only part of Gullah culture widely known in the United States. The writer Joel Chandler Harris popularized Gullah stories a hundred years ago in his books on the tales of "Uncle Remus."

Gullah arts and crafts are also distinctly African in spirit. During slavery times and the decades of isolation that followed, the Gullah made a wide assortment of artifacts, some indistinguishable from West African crafts. In museums in South Carolina and Georgia one can see wooden mortars and pestles, rice "farmers," clay pots, calabash containers, baskets, palm leaf brooms, drums, and hand-woven cotton blankets dyed with indigo. In modern times Gullah men have continued their wood carving tradition, making elaborate grave monuments, human figures, and walking sticks. Gullah women sew quilts organized in strips like African country cloth, and still make their finely crafted baskets.

Finally, the Gullah diet is still based heavily on rice, reflecting the Rice Coast origins of many of their ancestors. Two traditional dishes are "rice and greens" and "rice and okra," similar to Sierra Leone's plasas and rice and okra soup. The Gullah (and other South Carolinians) also make "red rice" which, when served with a "gumbo" containing okra, fish, tomatoes, and hot peppers, greatly resembles West African jollof rice. In fact, one South Carolina writer, who has visited West Africa, refers to jollof rice as a "typical South Carolina meal." In remote rural areas the Gullahs have also traditionally made a boiled corn paste served in leaves, similar to Sierra Leonean agidi, and a heavy porridge of wheat flour which they call fufu.

THE GENESIS OF *PORGY AND BESS*

1925

DuBose Heyward, a white insurance salesman from Charleston, SC and a descendent of Southern aristocracy, writes and publishes *Porgy*. The novel is inspired by a notice in the newspaper describing a beggar, Samuel Smalls, who was arrested for attempting to shoot a woman. Heyward, who had witnessed Smalls begging on Charleston's King Street with his goat and cart, wondered what passion could have driven a pitiable character like Smalls to such violence. The newspaper article sparked Heyward's imagination and became the impetus for the novel *Porgy*.

1933

George Gershwin takes a train from New York's Penn Station to Charleston, South Carolina, where his friend and collaborator DuBose Heyward sets him up in a cottage on Folly Island.

1935

Fall - Gershwin's first version of the opera, which runs 4 hours long, is performed in a private concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City

September 30 - The world-premiere performance of the work takes place at the Colonial Theatre in Boston

October 10 - *Porgy and Bess* opens on Broadway and runs for 124 performances

1926

George Gershwin (1898 -1937), an American composer and pianist, reads DuBose Heyward's novel, *Porgy*, and writes to the author suggesting they collaborate on a folk opera based on the novel.

1933 -

1934

Gershwin and Heyward collaborate on a folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin writes music in the morning and works on the libretto with Heyward in the afternoon, occasionally taking up painting with his artist companion Henry Botkin. The two also make frequent trips to Charleston and the nearby islands, visiting black churches and schools.

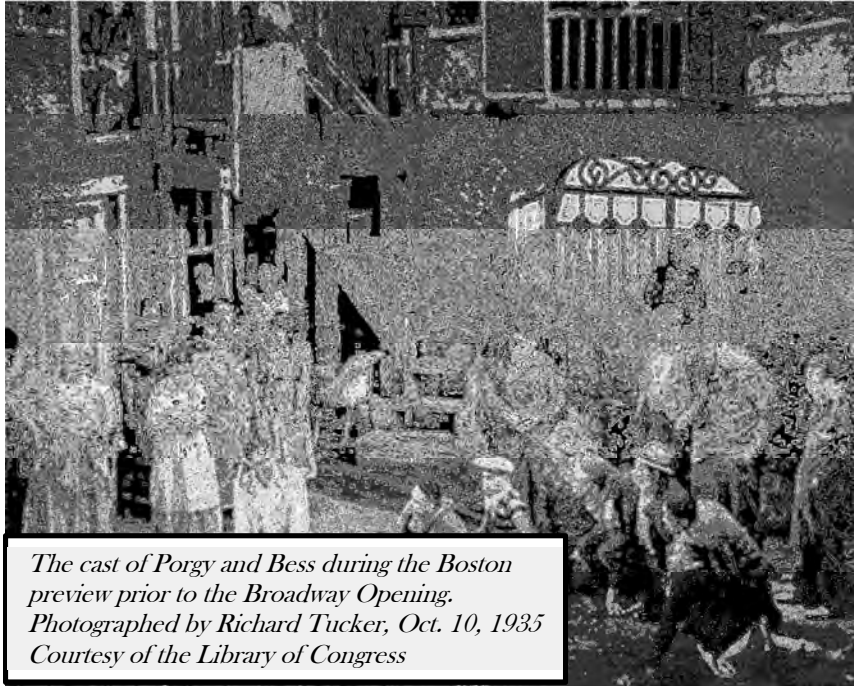
On one sojourn up to North Carolina, Gershwin pauses just outside a church to listen to the music of voices inside. According to Heyward's recollection, there are "perhaps a dozen voices raised in loud rhythmic prayer." Gershwin is fascinated with the sound; where Heyward hears it as an expression of "primitive intensity," Gershwin identifies it as a uniquely American form of counterpoint, a relationship between two or more musical voices that are independent yet harmonious with each other.

CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING *PORGY AND BESS*

Compiled by Resident Dramaturg Drew Dir and Production Dramaturg Martine Kei Green

The reception of *Porgy and Bess* as an American cultural symbol has changed over time, and since the original publication of Heyward's novel *Porgy* in 1925, the work has proven to be a litmus test for race relations in America in whichever decade it is presented.

Heyward's bestselling novel *Porgy* was praised by white critics in 1925 for Heyward's sensitive, rounded depiction of his characters; the fact that Heyward was a white southerner underlined the novelty of his achievement. Columnist Heywood Broun wrote that he was "fully prepared for another of those condescending books about fine old black mammies and the like." Instead, "a literary advance in the South must be acknowledged when the writers of that land come to realize, as Heyward does, the incredibly rich material in Negro life which has so far been neglected." The response by Charleston's black residents is largely unrecorded. A review in the city's black newspaper praised Heyward's sensitivity to his subjects, but criticized his choice to depict the poorest, least sophisticated sector of Charleston's black community. Outside of Charleston, black poet Countee Cullen called *Porgy* "the best novel by a white man about Negroes." Sterling Brown and W.E.B. DuBois both praised Heyward's talent, but recognized the novel as a white achievement, praiseworthy but separate from the project of cultivating black literature and a black readership—Brown himself was concerned throughout his career about the fact that literature written by black authors was consumed mostly by whites.



The cast of *Porgy and Bess* during the Boston preview prior to the Broadway Opening.
Photographed by Richard Tucker, Oct. 10, 1935
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

celebrity and the piece's controversial status as an opera, a designation that the opera world refused to acknowledge for decades. There were, however, two important criticisms of the opera which came from Duke Ellington and choirmaster Hall Johnson, who both claimed that the music of the piece was impressive but "inauthentic."

Arthur Knight observes that "the general trend of African American responses to *Porgy and Bess* [had] moved from favor to disfavor" as the century wore on. The original cast advocated strongly for Gershwin's opera. When the national tour played at Washington's segregated National Theatre, the cast of *Porgy and Bess* refused to perform until black audience members were allowed to be seated. In the 1940s, the Washington, DC public school system banned Gershwin's "I've Got Plenty of Nothin,'" as reported in a *Chicago Defender* article whose headline read "Offensive 'Darky' Songs At

Last Get Long-Awaited Boot Out of [Washington, D.C.] Schools.” When a State Department-sponsored tour of *Porgy and Bess* performed abroad behind the Iron Curtain, many black Americans objected to the kind of representation of African-American life that would be presented to Europeans. In a *Defender* article, Dean Gordon Hancock wrote that *Porgy and Bess*, despite its good intentions and admirable music, “does not contribute ultimately for better race relations.” Hancock’s article demonstrates how the political situation in the US had changed how *Porgy and Bess* was received by black Americans:

“The mind of the nation is being currently geared to the problems growing out of the Negro’s fight for full integration. The Supreme Court decision is being awaited as with bated breath... The mind of the new Negro is on Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C., not Catfish Alley, Charleston, S.C.”

The lion’s share of the criticism against *Porgy and Bess* originates from the late 1950s, when MGM turned *Porgy and Bess* into a major Hollywood picture. The film would introduce a much wider national audience to *Porgy and Bess* than the novel or Broadway opera had reached; it would also premiere at a particular historical moment when a civil rights movement was just beginning to consolidate. Playwright Lorraine Hansberry, appearing on a Chicago talk show with Otto Preminger, the film’s director, articulated the most widely disseminated critique of *Porgy and Bess*. Hansberry insisted that the characters in *Porgy and Bess* were stereotypes which “constitute bad art” and result from an artist who “hasn’t tried hard enough to understand his characters.” Furthermore, the opera/film was rife with exoticism:

“Over a period of time, [we] have apparently decided that within American life [there is] one great repository where we’re going to focus and imagine sensuality and exaggerated sexuality, all very removed and earthy things—and this great image is the American Negro.”

When Preminger asked Hansberry if she thought the production ill-intentioned, Hansberry replied:

“We cannot afford the luxuries of mistakes of other peoples. So it isn’t a matter of being hostile to you, but on the other hand it’s also a matter of never ceasing to try to get you to understand that your mistakes can be painful, even those which come from excellent intentions. We’ve had great wounds from great intentions.”

Era Bell Thompson, in an *Ebony* article titled “Why Negroes Don’t Like *Porgy and Bess*,” wrote:

“We do not want to see six-foot Sidney Poitier on his knees crying for a slit-skirted wench who did him wrong. We do not want the wench to be beautiful Dorothy Dandridge who sniffs “happy dust” and drinks liquor from a bottle at the rim of an alley crap game.... We do not like to hear our intelligent (*Porgy* has the highest percent of college degrees ever recorded by a movie) stars speak in dialect, [to] see them reduced to the level of Catfish Row when they have already risen to the heights of La Scala. We do not want to see them crawl even in make-believe dust after they have walked with their heads in the clouds.”

Both Hansberry, who hadn’t seen the film or the opera, and Thompson objected to the depiction of poor Southern black life, giving little attention to the matter of the accuracy of Heyward’s verisimilitude. All the same, their reactions to the piece demonstrate what *Porgy and Bess* had come to symbolize by the midcentury. Harold Cruse called *Porgy and Bess* “the most contradictory cultural symbol ever created in the Western World.” James Baldwin wrote sympathetically but decisively on the place of *Porgy and Bess* in black culture: “I like *Porgy and Bess*.... Just the same, it is a white man’s vision of Negro life. This means that when it should be most concrete and searching it veers off into the melodramatic and the exotic. It seems to me that the author knew more about Bess than he understood and more about Porgy than he could face—than any of us, so far, can face ...

What has always been missing from George Gershwin's opera is what the situation of *Porgy and Bess* says about the white world. It is because of this omission that Americans are so proud of the opera. It assuages their guilt about Negroes and it attacks none of their fantasies. Since Catfish Row is clearly such a charming place to live, there is no need for them to trouble their consciences about the fact that the people who live there are still not allowed to move anywhere else. Neither need they probe within their own lives to discover what the Negroes of Catfish Row really mean to them."

ABOUT GEORGE GERSHWIN

George Gershwin was born in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants (George's father changed the family's name from Gershowitz). It was a tough neighborhood, and George was known as a tough kid; where his brother Ira was a voracious reader from an early age, George was a vicious roller skater, the champion of Seventh Street, and pegged by his neighbors as the most likely Gershwin child to end up in jail someday. According to Gershwin himself, he was first inspired to play music when he overheard the sound of Dvorak's *Humoresque* emanating from a window of P.S. 25 (a different version of the story recalls it as Rubinstein's *Melody in F*). Shortly thereafter, the Gershwin family came into possession of an upright piano, and George almost immediately sat down to begin picking out tunes, to the amazement of his family. He showed an interest in jazz music—he would hang around Harlem night club spots, learning to imitate some of the greatest black pianists of the day—but his first music instructors instilled in him a solid classical foundation in Chopin and Debussy. From an early age, Gershwin had in mind his trajectory for a career in music—he would begin by making his name writing Tin Pan Alley-style songs (so named for New York's music publishing district, full of the tinny sound of upright pianos plucking away at popular sheet music), then move to composing for Broadway theatre, before finally rising to the legitimacy of opera. As it turns out, the prediction was accurate. Gershwin first made his name with "Swanee" 1919, which sold millions of copies and was famously sung by Al Jolson. He then composed for the annual Broadway revue *George White's Scandals*, which included an experimental light opera in 1922 called *Blue Monday*, a Harlem story performed in blackface which, though an all-around failure, nevertheless presaged *Porgy and Bess*. In 1924, he achieved international fame and the recognition of major European composers with his orchestral piece *Rhapsody in Blue*, an innovative collision of jazz and classical. As Gershwin continued to write for Broadway and the symphony, in the back of his mind was his plan to compose an opera that would be the first great American opera.

ABOUT DuBOSE HEYWARD

As a native of Charleston, DuBose Heyward was fascinated by the city's poor African-American residents, stevedores, and field hands, an interest that he inherited from his mother, Jane Screven Heyward, an amateur historian of Gullah culture. Heyward's father died young in a factory accident, so Jane was forced to raise young DuBose herself. As she struggled to support a family on her own, she saw in the Gullah community an inner strength and spirituality that she felt she lacked. Jane began by recording stories and songs of the Gullah; soon she was performing these at clubs and meetings as a dialect recitalist and publishing articles in local history journals. Jane shared her passion for the Gullah with her son DuBose. As a young man, DuBose Heyward had his own opportunity to witness Gullah life working jobs as a cotton checker on the docks of the stevedores, as a supervisor of black field hands on his aunt's plantation, and as an insurance collector of burial money in the black slums. DuBose was a sickly child; at eighteen, he was diagnosed with polio, and this ailment left him weak for the rest of his life. He poured into the character of Porgy these feelings of physical inadequacy, envy for able-bodied men (like Crown), and the desire to transcend his disablement.

DISCUSSION AND FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Over the years, critics have cited the fact that George Gershwin was white as evidence that *Porgy and Bess* is not an authentic depiction of African-American life on the fictional Catfish Row. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What part do you think “authenticity” plays in art? Is it necessary? Why or why not?
- Gershwin’s assertion that *Porgy and Bess* is an opera has been contested over the years. What constitutes an opera? In your opinion, is *Porgy and Bess* an opera? Why or why not?
- Discuss the residents of Catfish Row. How does spirituality feature in their daily lives? How do they maintain their culture in a modernized world?
- Have you had any experiences with call-and-response discussion? If so, what was it like? How did it affect the crowd’s mood and your own emotions?
- What musical forms do you hear represented in the *Porgy and Bess* score? How do they each affect the story?