
Music to My Ears

Young Old "Porgy" New Young Pianist

by Irving Kolodin

THE decades that have brought honors to *Porgy's* creators have also brought peril to those who challenged the standards of their now famous progenitors. Such eminent elders as Anne Brown and Todd Duncan, Leontyne Price and William Warfield, all brought something uniquely personal to their impersonations, which cast real, if invisible, shadows over the opening performances of the company that has been playing at New York's Uris Theatre.

But those chosen for the first-night ordeal in this revival not only fleshed out the shadows that hung over them but established approaches of their own to the roles they performed. The principal women were Clamma Dale (tall, young, beautiful, in face and voice, sinuous in movement), who can very well progress from Bess to an operatic career, as Price did; and her alternate Esther Hinds, who has, prophetically, already measured up to her prototype by performing the role of Cleopatra that Samuel Barber created, operatically, for Price when the Lincoln Center Metropolitan Opera House opened a decade ago. Not yet so fully in command of her abilities as Dale, Hinds delivers her own kind of vibrantly youthful Bess, and very

well sung it is, too, in a bright well-formed sound of great promise.

The men brought less prior identity to their parts but abundant reasons for justifying their choice. Donnie Ray Albert is not only the right age and physical size for a credible Porgy but the possessor of a booming baritone that makes the ears quiver with his singing of "I've Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" and the "Buzzard Song," as well as his duets with Bess and all the in-between action. Abraham Lind-Oquendo, somewhat less magnetic in personality and projection, radiates a human warmth that is much in the inner being of Porgy.

In other roles, Andrew Smith is a Crown burly enough to recall the original, Warren Coleman, with a musical background that already includes performances of Scarpia and several principal roles in Verdi operas. Add Wilma Shakesnider, who sings a poignant "My Man's Gone Now" in the role of Serena, and Carol Brice, who has left behind the frustrations of being a greatly talented black mezzo in the days before integration (when the Met and other opera companies were looking the other way) to become a brilliantly artistic embodiment of the mature Maria, and there is very little this production lacks by comparison with its

antecedents. That little might be charged against the Sportin' Life of Larry Marshall. He has a good enough light tenor voice and a flexible body, but he hasn't yet gotten below the surface of this verminous character.

Like its predecessor with Price and Warfield, the revival's production scheme, devised by Jack O'Brien on behalf of the sponsoring Houston Grand Opera, permits the original three-act sequence to be played in two. This is achieved by means of a reversible unit in the Catfish Row setting. Mounted on rollers, it can be swiveled swiftly in view of the audience to provide the interior for Robbins's wake or the hurricane episode later on. Thus, everything up to and including the scene on Kittiwah Island is played in a single, continuous sequence.

A more subtle consequence is to gain time in which to include sundry bits and pieces of Gershwin's score often omitted ("Jazzbo Brown Blues," "Oh, Doctor Jesus," "O Hev'nly Father," and "Oh, Dere's Somebody Knockin' at de Do'") without stretching the evening to inordinate lengths. Also, sequence is preserved by presenting the "Buzzard Song" in its proper place, prior to the intermission, rather than deferring it to near the end, as in the famous Blevins-Breen production of the Fifties. Jack DeMain's conducting lacked a little of the leadership that the late Alexander Smallens so long provided, but it maintained a gratefully light hand on Gershwin's scoring. The sizable pit of the Uris Theatre permitted an orchestra of forty-six, which, by Broadway standards, is practically symphonic.

Do all these values contribute to making *Porgy and Bess* more "operatic"? Only superficially. In this production all the

Abraham Lind-Oquendo as Porgy, below, bids farewell to his neighbors on Catfish Row. Donnie Ray Albert as Porgy and Clamma Dale as Bess, right, share duet.

Photographs: Martha Swope



conversational elements are sung (rather than spoken) more or less as Gershwin wrote them. "More or less" means that latitude exists in his free form of recitative for individual options. To some the results would necessarily be "operatic."

But there is little "operatic" in the conventional sense, in the blend of elements or in Gershwin's treatment of them, that has enabled *Porgy* to endure into its fifth decade. Basic to that flowering is the unending gush of melody that delights neophytes and connoisseurs alike. Whatever Gershwin's mind told him about motives and counterpoints in the orchestra, his instinct told him to keep them out of the way of the important happenings on the stage. The semi-improvised, loose-jointed, but always apposite mixture of pop songs, blues, and Broadway, with ensemble elements borrowed from gospels, spirituals, and the synagogue, has solidified, grown together, strengthened with the passage of time. Does that make it a folk opera? Not in this opinion. Or, even less, a glorified musical. But it does make it *Porgy and Bess*.

THREE years ago, Yefim Bronfman, born in Tashkent, USSR, as recently as 1958, migrated to Israel under conditions that compelled his parents to leave behind everything but the barest necessities. Two years ago, after a visit to Israel, I described the strong impression the young pianist had made at an informal hearing. The projection then was that he would probably turn up in a couple of years at the Curtis Institute, in Philadelphia, or the Juilliard, in New York, for advance training that would prepare him for a bright career.

He did turn up in New York recently, not in any training capacity but as soloist in the Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 3 with the Israel Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein's direction, in Carnegie Hall. A less appropriate introduction could hardly be imagined. The Rachmaninoff No. 3 is generally considered the personal property of Vladimir Horowitz, a territory not to be invaded by a young performer unless he has the unique attributes of Vladimir Ashkenazy or the youthful Van Cliburn. Such qualifications of fervor, muscular power, and intellectual energy are not yet in Bronfman's possession. He is a natural pianist with a dominant way at the keyboard and a large capacity for growth. Too much, too soon, in the wrong surroundings, are the only possible comments on this ill-conceived debut. ●

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Dance

An Actor Finds Nijinsky

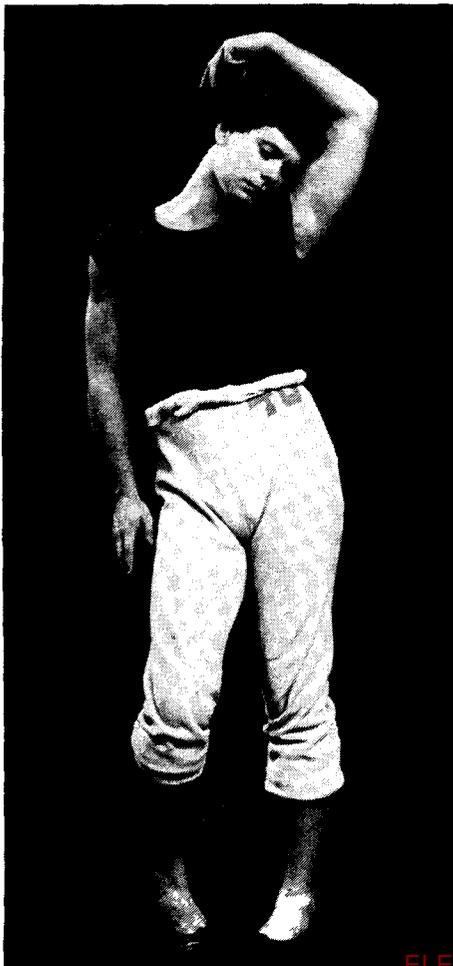
by Walter Terry

THE Fates and his own tormented mind permitted him less than a decade to establish himself as one of the great artists of all time. I am speaking, of course, of Waslaw Nijinsky, who made his debut with the Russian Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg in 1907, electrified Paris in 1909 with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, conquered the art world by 1916, and, in 1917, ascended toward insanity—"I have to stop in the clear air. I cannot come down now."

The dancer with the legendary leap—"St. Petersburg and the world stood still and waited for Nijinsky to oblige the law of gravity"—has been the subject of endless books, essays, articles, poems, analyses, including the celebrated and controversial biography written in 1934 by

Lang—"The portrayal is uncanny."

Martha Swope



his wife, Romola. In addition there's Arnold Haskell and Walter Nouvel's *Diaghileff: His Artistic and Private Life* (1935), which discusses his relationship with the great impresario from a nonuxorial point of view; and Nijinsky's own diaries, written in his private world of madness. There have been theater pieces about him, most notably Maurice Béjart's massive spectacle *Nijinsky, Clown of God*, but nothing I have seen has touched me more deeply than a new play by England's Richard Crane, *Clownmaker*.

The play, first presented in 1975 at the Edinburgh Festival to high critical praise, was given its American premiere as the final production of the summer season at Lucille Lortel's White Barn Theater, in Westport, Conn., the site of history-making premieres, debuts, and theatrical experimentations.

The play itself, in two acts and twenty-five scenes—some are short soliloquies, others barely more than tableaux—is an intensely dramatic yet tenderly poetic exploration and exposition of the dancer who was protégé, lover, and puppet (very like his own celebrated role of *Petrouchka*) of Diaghilev; of Romola's campaign to conquer Nijinsky; and of the resulting tragedy that saw genius, suddenly unprotected, seeking the haven of madness.

In Lortel's production, Jerome Dempsey, a splendid actor, was tremendously effective as the urbane, brilliant, domineering, and briefly vulnerable Diaghilev, but the sensation—and it was just that—of the occasion was the performance of Stephen Lang as Nijinsky. Lang, who has studied mime but not dancing, did not dance the part. He acted the role of Nijinsky, and that was his special strength. Of course, he acted with his body, as well as with his rich speaking voice, but all fine actors do that.

When he was cast as Nijinsky, twenty-four-year-old Lang knew only that "he was a dancer who went crazy" and that Diaghilev was "an impresario for a Ballet Russe." The role was a complete theatrical departure for a college (Swarthmore)

boy who is athletically inclined and had made his stage debut, as a child, in a school play *Jack Frost's Christmas*, in which "I played an icicle!" and, as an adult, specialized in "solid lords in Shakespeare or tough guys in modern plays."

BUT how to portray someone who lived only when dancing—when one cannot dance? Lang, by his own account, saturated himself in literature about, and photographs of, Nijinsky. "The stills gave me clues to mime I should use. Because I myself can identify with jerky, angry, almost spastic movements of wildness, I used Nijinsky's roles in *Petrouchka* and *Til Eulenspiegel* as my metaphors. I was also influenced by the clown characterization in the movie *La Strada*." Lang and the other actors also were astutely guided by Isaiah Sheffer, the director, and by Igor Youskevitch, a great dancer himself.

Lang, as I say, moved, but he did not dance. He suggested in a remarkable way, however, the emotional roots of dance as he seemed to caress the earth with a hand and reach heavenward as he called out, "I can fly to the sun, touch it if I want."

The portrayal that emerges from Lang is uncanny. The viewer familiar with

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Nijinsky—"Ascent toward insanity."

