

The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*

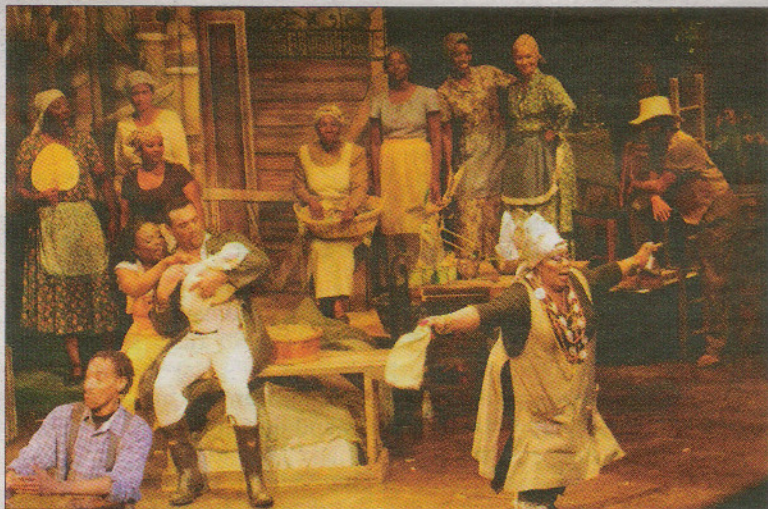
Samuel Spurr
Review

The hot and humid summertime of Charleston, South Carolina provides a backdrop to the vitality, beauty and soul of the Gershwin brothers' *Porgy and Bess*.

Based on DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy*, Charleston's Catfish Row in the 1920s hosts the love affair between cripple Porgy and "colourful" Bess. Premiering in Boston in 1935, Gershwin's work lost its initial \$70,000 investment; however, it has since been regarded as America's musical masterpiece.

Porgy and Bess fuses the rhythm, soul and faith of Catfish Row residents with operatic traditions. To the uninitiated, this mix of musical, opera, gospel and jazz styles, interspersed with Creole dialogue, can bewilder. Visiting Charleston repeatedly from December 1933, George Gershwin made authentic attempts to recreate Creole Gullah culture. Still evident in South Carolina today, Gullah culture is reproduced with dynamic style, albeit hastily, in the performance's two and a half hours.

Opening with the classic *Summertime*, this production by Living Arts Inc of New York brings together some of America's



A scene from the Gershwin's brothers' *Porgy and Bess*.

greatest performers. *A Woman is a Sometime Thing*, performed by Marvin Lowe in the role of Jake, sets the scene of a sultry summer's evening - men playing craps, drinking, gambling and the murder of Robbins by Crown. Stephen Finch's role as Crown, Bess's initial love interest, is suitably strong and vigorous.

Baritone Cedric Cannon (Porgy), having played the role extensively around the globe with Living Arts International and the New York Harlem Opera, puts in a strong performance.

La-Rose Saxon (Bess), herself

a native of South Carolina, has also played her role profusely and matches Cannon's vigour.

Meanwhile, the Jive-talking, Zoot suit-wearing playboy "Sportin' Life", is energetically played by Ronn K. Smith. His jazz number *It Ain't Necessarily So* is a natural crowd pleaser.

Outstanding individual performances ensure that this production of *Porgy and Bess* is one for true Gershwin fans. Playing at Sydney's Lyric Theatre, Star City until July 26 and touring throughout Australia and New Zealand until early September.