

Through Porgy's Eyes

In his home studio on Upshur Street, in a fashionable part of Washington, D.C. bordering Rock Creek Park, Todd Duncan displayed his collection of treasures. Above the battered Mason and Hamlin piano hung two Florence Vandamm portraits of the young bass-baritone in 1935, while opposite it a cast photograph signed by the Gershwin brothers, DuBose Heyward and the production team graced the wall. The cracked leather pads he wore strapped to his knees in more than 1,700 performances of *Porgy and Bess* and two personal letters from George Gershwin were casually stashed in a cabinet drawer. His dog-eared piano/vocal score of the opera was carefully annotated with cues, staging and pages of cuts made after the Boston premiere, when the opera consumed more than four hours. Todd Duncan's memories of the opera are as rich as his voice, and they begin on a wintry Sunday afternoon in 1934 when he met George Gershwin at the composer's apartment on East 72nd Street.

Having auditioned hundreds of potential cast members for *Porgy* (the opera's title matched that of Heyward's novel and play until it was changed for marketing reasons in August 1935), Gershwin was still searching for the perfect male lead. Paul Robeson had been rejected and no one seemed to possess the combination of timbre, range and acting abilities that Gershwin knew were critical to the role. Both Olin Downes, music critic for *The New York Times*, and Abbie Mitchell, already cast as *Porgy's* Clara, had heard Duncan sing Alfio in an all-black production of *Cavalleria rusticana* at the Mecca Temple on 55th Street. Their recommendations prompted Gershwin to phone Duncan in Washington, D.C. where he taught voice and music education at Howard University.

"I had heard about the new Gershwin opera *Porgy* but had no interest in it at all. But when I received a phone call from George Gershwin, well, it was pretty difficult to say no. So up to New York I went on the train one day. I started with an old aria, "Lungi dal caro bene." Well, number one, he didn't understand because he thought I was going to sing "Shortin' Bread" or "Ol' Man River" or some Negro spiritual—something "niggery," you know."

There was also a problem with the accompaniment. "I had a big stack of music; I didn't know what he'd want to hear. And when I asked him to play he says, 'Well, where is your accompanist?' I didn't know that I was supposed to pay five bucks and bring a pianist. And I said, 'Well, can't you play?' 'Well,' he said, 'I play a little bit.' And I said, 'If you can't, I'll play for myself.' Oh, he loved to tell that story! He used to tell it at all the parties and he would say, 'I fell in love with that man then.'"

According to legend, Gershwin asked Duncan to be his Porgy on the second repetition of the aria and Duncan responded, "I have to hear your music first." Gershwin smiled and spoke, "Well, we can arrange that. Could you come back next week?" "I thought a bit and then said that I could return if he would pay for the train fare for my wife, Gladys, and me. When he asked how much I would need, I managed a quick calculation. Knowing that the train fare was \$18 round trip and that if I asked for \$25 we could also

go out for sandwiches, I asked for \$30 so I could have a \$5 bill to stick in my pocket! And that was the beginning of an exciting time in our lives.”

A letter to DuBose Heyward two weeks later reveals that Gershwin had not yet decided on Duncan’s role: “Here is an exciting piece of news. I heard about a man singer who teaches music in Washington and arranged for him to come and sing for me on Sunday several weeks ago. In my opinion he is the closest thing to a colored Lawrence Tibbett [a popular baritone with the Metropolitan Opera, Tibbett was hired for the authorized Victor cast recording of *Porgy and Bess* with soprano Helen Jepson] I have ever heard. He is about six feet tall and very well proportioned with a rich booming voice. He would make a superb Crown and, I think, just as good a Porgy. He is coming to sing for me again during Christmas week. I shall ask the Guild [The Theatre Guild produced the play in 1927 and contracted for the opera in October 1933] to take an option on his services.”

Duncan remembers the Christmas visit to Gershwin’s New York apartment vividly. “We were sitting everywhere—on chairs, couches, and on pillows on the floor when he started out with the opening of the opera and I said to myself, ‘Oh, my God. Gee, this junk!’ And then he segued into “Summertime.” Well, Ira with his rotten voice starts ‘Summertime, and the living is easy.’ And George looked up to me and smiled. Then George sang, ‘Fish are jumpin’ with Ira finishing the verse, ‘And the cotton is high.’ Then George, in a voice even worse than Ira’s, ‘Oh, your daddy’s...’ But when he got to the second verse I could have wept. I said to myself, ‘Well, this is so beautiful. Where did this man get this from?’ Then he went into the next part where Porgy’s theme enters. It was like the royal gates opened. And I thought, ‘This is so graphic.’ He had me hooked from then on.”

Duncan was complimentary of the music in a letter to Gershwin soon afterwards. Gershwin responded on January 24, 1935: “I received your letter and was glad to learn how you felt about my music for *Porgy*. I appreciate your nice remarks. As anxious as you seem to be to get hold of the music just so anxious am I to hear you sing it. I am leaving for Florida this weekend where I begin the task of orchestrating the opera.”

Gershwin spent eleven months composing the music for *Porgy*, from February 1934 to January 1935, and wrote the final seventy-eight pages of the opera for Duncan’s voice specifically. “I loved singing the role of Porgy and after Gershwin had heard me sing, he tailored the part for my voice. Some of the music had already been written but once he knew my sound, everything just seemed to fit so well.” The process of orchestration took nine more months, with the final score available only several weeks before the Boston try-out run at the Colonial Theatre on September 30.

Rehearsals began in August although Duncan took a leave of absence from Howard University early in the summer, moving with Gladys to an apartment near the Alvin Theatre [named for producers Alex Aarons and Vinton Freedley (‘Al’ + ‘vin’), the name was changed to The Neil Simon Theater in 1975] on West 52nd Street. He immediately began rehearsing with Anne Brown, a twenty-year-old Juilliard School student, who had been cast as Bess. “There were many wonderful things about those months in New York. Perhaps the best was working with such a first-rate cast. Anne Brown has remained my

friend these past fifty-plus years [although Duncan died in 1998 at the age of ninety-five, Brown will celebrate her ninety-sixth birthday in August 2008]. She lives in Norway but comes to visit her sister each year and always stops by for a meal and talking...She kept singing and can still do it today, just like I can.”

The other principal roles were filled with superlative performers. Ruby Elzy, a Juilliard graduate who added a powerful dimension to her characterization of Serena, had been recommended to Gershwin by Heyward, who had seen her in the film version of *Emperor Jones*. Warren Jones (Crown) was a graduate of The New England Conservatory and Abby Mitchell (Clara) was a veteran of the operatic stage. Eva Jessye’s chorus of forty singers rounded out the assemblage of gifted and mostly northern African-American concert artists that Gershwin had hired for his folk opera. [Gershwin had declined a contract with Otto Kahn and the Metropolitan Opera when they failed to agree to an all-black cast.] “It was a wonderful cast, highly educated, highly trained. We never had the trouble casts do these days, you know, moral troubles, morale troubles. You know the last song, “There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York” when they were sniffing that happy dust? Well, we didn’t know what it was! After the show we’d say, ‘What’s he talking about?’”

John Bubbles, Gershwin’s choice for Sportin’ Life, certainly knew since he often shared marijuana with female members of the chorus backstage. A successful vaudeville performer, he had paired with Ford L. Buck as “Buck and Bubbles,” with Buck on the piano and Bubbles tap dancing, and together they broke the racial barrier at Radio City Music Hall in the early 1930s. Bubbles was the only headliner in the *Porgy and Bess* cast and Gershwin was often forced to defend his choice. “He was a bit of a scoundrel, but a nice scoundrel; certainly a talented one. But he simply couldn’t learn his part and it was holding us all back. He didn’t read music at all; he had to learn everything by rote. Smallens [conductor] got so frustrated with him coming in wrong that he complained to Gershwin to replace him. Well, George Gershwin was not about to do that. Bubbles was an important entertainer, a big draw. So Gershwin taught him how to dance his part; taught him everything—every note, all the rhythms, all the cues—with his feet. And when he learned to dance it, he never made a mistake after that.”

One of Duncan’s chief concerns was the enormity of his role: with the exception of the Kittiwah picnic scene and his jailing in Act II, Porgy is virtually on stage for the entire opera; he sings in one-third of the musical numbers and has many lines of recitative. His vocal training, beginning with lessons from his mother and later at Butler University and Columbia University, had prepared him physically, emotionally and artistically for the marathon part. “I had only one problem with Gershwin’s folk opera: singing the entire show on my knees. I had to train, yes. I had to learn by just keeping on the floor all the time and practicing. That was when I became very interested in posture. Because, you know, crawling around is taxing. I would take two steps with my knees and then two more and I was out of breath. And I couldn’t sing! I even sang on my back and that used to bring the house down; boy, it sure did! I sang “I Got Plenty of Nuttin’” on my back lying down, and then I would rise up and they just wouldn’t let me stop. I used my knees

all the time, never the little cart like they do now. And now I have terrible problems with my knees; I've always wondered if that was the cause."

As the creator of the role, Duncan is critical of his imitators. "It seems that the Porgy's that I've heard really don't know who Porgy is. They've not gone into the depth of who the character is; they don't know the man himself. And when they sing "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" they think it's a buffoon song or a blackface "step-and-fetch-it" song. It's not that at all. It is very deep philosophy and I got it from the composer himself. It is making fun of very wealthy white people. I got this from George Gershwin's own mouth when he said to me, 'Todd, you're not singing what we're after. This is a bitter song and you have to sing it with tongue-in-cheek; you have to sing it smiling all the time. Because what you're doing is making fun of us. You're making fun of people who make money and to whom power and position are very important.' So when the song ends, 'I got my Lord, I got de sun, I got de moon, I got de waters,' well then you have just told the audience what really is important to you, to the composer, to the lyricist and to Porgy. And also to me, Todd Duncan, an artist and a Negro man. It became my credo: I got love, and I got God and I got my song."

"With the thrill of *Porgy and Bess* in my blood and a strong feeling about singing recitals as well as opera, I set off on my career. I had a contract with Columbia Management for many years, until I retired, made Hollywood films [*Syncopation* and *Unchained*], premiered two other big shows [*Cabin in the Sky* and Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*], played award-winning roles in *Show Boat* and Cole Porter's *The Sun Never Sets* and sang all over the world—two-thousand concerts in twenty-five years and on five continents. I sang at the White House for three different presidents: Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Johnson. Now, had I not met George Gershwin, things would have been different for me. In what ways I'll never know. He was the type of musician that you loved to be with. He was a genius, that man was. A real genius."