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Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952–1956

DAVID MONOD

Life in the cultural shallows tested the character of American art. Where the Depression had encouraged artists to engage in social and political criticism, the early cold war years constricted and confounded them. By conflating dissent and disloyalty, the triumphant conservatism of the cold war not only shifted the frame of cultural reference dramatically to the right, it narrowed it as well. This had a profound impact on America's cultural establishment. With conservatives now in possession of the moral absolutes, the more politically progressive artists felt pressed into the position of endorsing ambivalence and moderation. The result, for many, was a quiet retreat from principle; unwilling to blindly adopt the conservatives' standard of good and evil, and yet unable to risk their own, forward-thinking artists ended up chronicling rather than challenging their age. So much of fifties art became an exploration of the ordinary – domestic comedy, social commentary, “wistful melodrama,” sermons on rootlessness or delinquency or affluence – instead of a questioning of the larger truths. Tragedy, which, by challenging certitudes, required the moral commitment of liberal writers, became, in this context, anachronistic. “We are not producing real tragedy,” observed Leonard Bernstein in 1952, because “caution prevents it, all the fears prevent it; and we are left, at the moment, with an art that is rather whiling away the time until the world gets better or blows up.” Art had adopted the Technicolor blandness of the age.¹

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¹ B. Witham, “Appropriately Wistful: Blacklisting and the American Theatre,” *Exchange* (winter, 1978), 11–17; Leonard Bernstein to Irving Fine, 19 Sept. 1952, cited in H. Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: 1994), 229. J. Elsom makes the same point in *Cold War Theatre* (London: 1992), Ch.2.

For most social observers, anti-communism lay at the heart of this coarctation of culture. Mainstream fiction, Thomas Pynchon wrote, was “paralyzed by the political climate of the Cold War.” The editor of *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz, agreed; in his view, the world of the 1920s and 30s, “the modern world of which Faulkner, Hemingway and Dos Passos were the most penetrating observers ... froze to death in 1948.” What replaced it was a ‘limbo’ inhabited by “a generation not ‘lost’ but patient, acquiescent, careful rather than reckless, submissive rather than rebellious.”² As radical thought dissipated, the externalization of the moral debate, achieved through the transference of all alternative definitions of right and good to foreign and enemy powers, created a powerful domestic consensus. This cultural construction became so pervasive that, in the eyes of one historian, it contained dissent, and pressed together “a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogeneous and contradictory aims into a single collective will based on a shared interpretation of reality.” The resultant culture of containment was symbolized by the Hollywood “trials” and the House Committee’s persecution of some of America’s foremost authors and thinkers. These developments, and the Red Scare which fueled them, narrowed “the spectrum of reputable public opinion ... shriveling the framework within which realistic political choices were entertained” and resulted in “the suffocation of liberty and the debasement of culture itself.”³

Such, at least, is the accepted explanation of America’s cultural attenuation in the early cold war years. While many writers have refined the view, few have doubted that, in the late 1940s, arts and letters

² Thomas Pynchon, “Is it OK to be a Luddite?” *New York Times Review of Books* (28 Oct. 1984), 40; N. Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings: the Fifties and After in American Writing* (New York: 1964), 23.

³ R. J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: 1993), 2 and 25–26; W. Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston, 1991), 142; Stephen J. Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: 1991), 20. For the New York dramatists’ response to McCarthyism, A. Wertheim, “The McCarthy Era and the American Theatre,” *Theatre Journal*, 34:2 (May, 1982), 211–22 and R. G. Scharine, *From Class to Caste in American Drama: Political and Social Themes since the 1930s* (New York: 1991), 81–88. The classic study of containment, which first employed the term as a heuristic devise, is P. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Berkeley: 1980). For a recent work dealing with the post-war years: A. Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age* (Durham: 1995), esp. Chp. 3 (passim). W. T. Lhamon Jr.’s refreshing reinterpretation of fifties culture, *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Washington: 1990), is well worth the read. Though Lhamon stresses the cultural richness of the decade, his work confirms the depoliticization of fifties art.

surrendered their critical, political edge. Central to this interpretation, paradoxically enough, is the cold war's own iconography of treachery and rebirth. For critics of the cultural failures of the 1950s, the process of containment remains an act of betrayal. Andrew Ross speaks of the progressive thinkers' self-inflicted "lobotomy" and their subsequent "amnesia" about their own Depression-years radicalism, while others suggest that the rebirth of culture would come only when a younger generation absorbed the collectivist energy of the African American struggle and repudiated the narrow vision of postwar rights-based liberalism.⁴ Emphasis here is placed on the discontinuities in postwar political culture. The bomb, America's new internationalism, the maturation of the consumerist society, civil rights, all contributed to the destruction of the progressive tradition. In cultural terms, the postwar years saw the birth of abstract expressionism in the visual art, new realism in literature, serialism in classical music and Bebop in jazz; and here, again, each change is conceived in terms of rupture.

The centrality of the caesura to postwar cultural history has served to obscure much that still needs explanation. We know little, for example, about the process by which individual artists are thought to have betrayed their convictions. To what extent were Aaron Copland's serial works or Jackson Pollock's paint dribblings actual responses to the cold war's climate? What did artists think they were doing when they abandoned Depression-era populism? Did their objectives or social attitudes change alongside their styles? What motivated the adoption of new artistic, approaches or the abandonment of certain forms of social commentary? To answer these questions, we surely need to understand more about the process by which artistic expressions changed and the relationship of those shifts to the dominant social formation.

While not denying the overall triumph of cold war conservatism and, more particularly, of anti-communism, one does have to wonder, when one looks at the views of individual artists and intellectuals, whether the leagues separating 1950 from 1945 have been stretched in the telling. As Frances Pohl has shown in her study of Ben Shahn, shifts in style do not necessarily involve changes in values. The same could be said of the Everyman Opera Company's production of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, a work of truly radical potential which was mounted to enthusiastic reviews by liberal artists who placed the piece within the context of the struggle for social reform and civil rights. What is so striking about this

⁴ A. Ross, *No Respect* (New York: 1989), 43 and 62.

show is that, despite its obvious criticism of contemporary race relations and cold war ethics, it obtained State Department funding for several major international tours. In fact, *Porgy* became the most heavily governmentally subsidized artistic production of the 1950s. Ironically then, one of the great works of Depression-era art, as fundamentally “New Dealish” as the *Grapes of Wrath* or Walker Evans’ photography, was promoted by conservative policy makers and cold war liberals alike as one of America’s surest weapons in the struggle against communism.⁵

The *Porgy* revival, like Ben Shahn’s paintings and the theatrical successes of *Twelve Angry Men*, challenge the idea that the cold war opened a wide cultural fissure. That conservatism brutally damaged hundreds of lives and degraded some arts sectors is certain, but, in emphasizing the homogeneity of cold war culture, historians have rather too easily accepted the self-serving justifications of a compromised generation of liberal intellectuals. Alternatives to surrender did exist and, in the creative arts at least, progressive idealism did not disappear in the fifties to be reborn in the sixties. Still, as the *Porgy* example shows, the messages artists hoped to convey were not always expressed clearly or received unmediated. Though many of the artists participated in this *Porgy* revival – including the director – certainly believed that they were consistent in the message of their art, through the subtle emphasis they placed on certain themes and through the muting of others, they aligned themselves with the conservative mood of the public and the anti-communist orientation of the government.

Porgy’s meaning and significance was therefore thicker than traditional explanations of postwar culture allow. It manifested at one and the same time a continuation of the art of the Roosevelt era and a repudiation of that inheritance. Understanding this requires us to look beyond the 1948 divide, to set aside assumptions about cooption and betrayal, and to grapple with the fact that an art work contains multiple meanings that coexist in shifting relations of dominance and subordination. The radical intentions of the producers and director of *Porgy*, for example, did not need to be denounced or assimilated by the cold warriors; instead, they were obscured. As Frederic Jameson has suggested, dominant readings do not have to be established through a destruction of alternate interpretations, but, rather, they can assert themselves by way of a “blockage” of

⁵ F. K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947–1954* (Austin: 1989). Shahn’s work, which was initially refused funding, was ultimately also exhibited abroad in 1954 using State Department Funds.

other meanings so subtle and natural “as to pass unnoticed.”⁶ This process might be described not as elimination, or even as assimilation, but as masking. In some respects, this masking was inadvertent, but in others, it might have been the result of a disguise assumed by the artists or intellectuals themselves. Indeed, duplicity was basic to the whole culture of containment as a nation which honored its informers seemed resigned to its dissemblers.

Disguise – whether by way of style, veiled images or double-entendres – was a primary means by which progressive artists preserved their audience in the early years of the cold war. Unfortunately, the disguises artists adopted also dulled their impact on cold war America’s dominant culture. The artists who exemplified ideals of fashion or youth or beauty, for example, might have worn their progressivism as radical chic, but the costuming denuded the politics. And did the blacklisted artist who used a pseudonym not surrender his nonconformity along with his identity? What was problematic in people was even more so in the case of artistic productions. It was unrealistic to expect a moral message masked as something else to be understood for what it was, as the confusion over the meaning of movies like *Johnny Guitar* and *High Noon* so amply demonstrates. In the latter case, the celebration of the individual, made inevitable by the casting of Gary Cooper, undercut its challenge to both the right-wing desperados and the acquiescent, morally indecisive, community.⁷

Over the last decade, students of film have been active removers of these artistic disguises. But one of the precepts of their scholarship is that the artists they describe were intentionally subversive in their art. This was often true, but what of those artists who were unaware or, perhaps, selective in their understanding of the transformed meaning of their work? In these cases, we are not dealing with a “right” reading that can be revealed through a borax scrub, but with a multiplicity of coexistent meanings. In the *Porgy* case, I want to suggest that the white director’s unreflecting employment of sexual and racial stereotypes seemed to divert audiences and critics from the liberal message of the show. A further

⁶ F. Jameson, “Metacommentary,” *PMLA* 86:1 (Jan. 1971), 31–42; see also Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: 1981).

⁷ For *High Noon*: J. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Chicago: 1980), 117–22 and Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 146–49; J. Peterson offers a similar argument in her reassessment of one of the most controversial films of the period: “The Competing Tunes of *Johnny Guitar*: Liberalism, Sexuality, Masquerade,” *Cinema Journal* 35:3 (spring, 1996) 3–18.

mask, the celebration of the work as an American folk icon, made it even more acceptable and even less immediate as a moral critique. More controversially, this study of *Porgy* also suggests that this happened not because right-wing audiences chose to read liberal messages in conservative ways, but because the artists themselves unthinkingly masked their intentions and in so doing distorted their manifestation in performance.

Because few cultural products are more open to interpretation than a performance work, a word regarding methodology is appropriate. It is, simply put, far too easy for historians to misunderstand artistic intentions or even to discount them entirely. This study seeks to address the problem in two ways. First it takes seriously the work of art as a product of a particular historical moment and attempts to document what contemporaries – through the critical reviews – appear to have seen in the performed piece. In this regard, I have chosen to look both at the writings of domestic reviewers and at those of a large number of non-American critics writing in several different languages. By studying the response of viewers with varying degrees of exposure to America's cultural imagery – Poles, Czechs, Russians, Yugoslavs, Italians, Germans, Belgians and French – and by looking for commonalities in their readings of the text, I have tried to get through the critics to what the director and performers were presenting on stage. The idea is simple: if critics from different places, with different cultural backgrounds, saw more or less the same things in a work of art, then one can only conclude that those were the messages being overtly communicated in the performance. The problem is that the messages being conveyed were not in every case the director's avowed intent. Or, at least, the dominant messages received were not the ones the director (or actors) apparently hoped would be received. Crucial to explaining the disjuncture between artistic intent and spectator perception is the presentation of the work as live theatre, and to explore this I have relied on the original stage directions as well as on two films made of the production. The central argument offered here is that constructions of race, gender and art were forces of cultural solidarity that transcended political differences. By relying on artistic, racial and gender stereotypes that were part of his liberal inheritance, the director emphasized certain features that opened the work to conservative reinterpretation.⁸ The result was less a false reading as a distorted projection, a form of inadvertent self-containment.

⁸ A powerful statement of this theme can be found in George Lipsitz "The possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'white' problem in

Robert Breen, who directed and co-produced the 1952 *Porgy* revival, was a child of thirties theatre. Born in 1909 and educated in drama and psychology at the University of Minnesota, he began his professional career in the early Depression years with a traveling repertory company. In 1935 he registered with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and his company came under the wing of the Federal Theater Project (FTP). Unfortunately, the play they had been touring – Martin Flavin's *Amaco*, ran afoul of Chicago business interests and was closed down with WPA blessing. Despite bitterness over the closure of *Amaco*, Breen remained in Chicago, directing and acting in FTP productions and serving as an assistant to Thomas Wood Stevens, the Project's regional director.⁹ Relations between the city's Democratic machine and the federally supported arts community remained stormy, however, and by the time Breen joined the air force in 1942, he had developed a general hostility to state-controlled theatre. Linking government too closely to theatre production politicized it, he wrote, thereby “distorting it for propaganda use.” The entire federal Theater approach, “with [its] over-centralized government control” and “giant factory methods” was fundamentally “undemocratic.”¹⁰

Doubtless, what Breen disliked about the FTP was in part the multiple layers of control: he was one of those directors who insisted on obedience from his company and freedom for his own expression. Where he was clearly in his element was in the FTP's concern that contemporary theatre address issues of “injustice, poverty and despair” and bring audiences “face to face with the great economic problems of the day.”¹¹ The pre-war performance tradition in which Breen was trained, and out of which Federal Theater developed, sought to achieve an accurate representation of social existence on stage. It emphasized naturalism in dialogue, realism in direction and place-specificity in set design. In order to make their

American studies,” *American Quarterly* (Sept. 1995), 369–87, for a similar critique of fifties art, J. Panish, *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture* (Jackson: 1997).

⁹ H. Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theater* (New York: 1940), 135; Lawrence and Lee Theater Research Institute, Ohio State University (OSU), Robert Breen Collection (BC), F44A, Vienna and Berlin Programs, Biography of Robert Breen for Vienna and Berlin Programs.

¹⁰ R. Potterfield and R. Breen, “Towards a National Theater,” *Theater Arts* (Oct. 1945), 602.

¹¹ Hallie Ferguson cited in M. Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater in the Great Depression* (New York: 1974), 251.

creations more believable, realistic theatre artists rejected the epiphanic moments at the centre of so much classical drama and instead allowed their characters to learn small and non-transforming truths. In this drama, knowledge came to individuals only incrementally. Consequently, like the new realism that would emerge in the 1950s, social realist drama left audiences with a sense of incompleteness, but unlike cold war theatre, the promise of perfection remained. Though inter-war drama attacked accepted truths, it restored order for the audience by maintaining that truth still existed, often in the form of a reintegration of and accommodation to conflicting ethical claims.

In this way, social realist theatre was conceived as drama with a moral message. Seldom light and never frivolous, realism was a means by which the comfortable assumptions of audiences might be shaken and spectators brought to a deeper appreciation of the *social facts*. Among the most politically progressive authors, a preoccupation with the dark recesses of life sharpened this theatre's disruptive impact. Here the drama became a scalpel that might cut the blinkers of class or race from America's eyes. In the thirties, this type of theatre became more common and more popular, with class oppression being offered as the force obstructing the attainment of perfection and, in true agitprop theatre, with social completeness being achieved only through revolution.¹²

Soon after the war, Breen was hired as secretary of the American National Theater Academy (ANTA), a federally chartered charitable organization set up in 1935 to act as a central fundraising agency for independent theatrical productions. Under Breen's guidance, ANTA evolved into a privately funded equivalent of the British Arts Council, raising donations, vetting productions, dispensing grants and, in cooperation with the government, supporting foreign tours by American companies. In 1951, the Department of State established ANTA as its sole agent within the arts community for presentations in Germany. Though it paid most of the costs, and retained veto power over artistic decisions, it used ANTA, the only federally chartered cultural agency, as its intermediary: the Academy vetted proposals, selected shows for support,

¹² B. Murphy, *American Realism and American Drama, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: 1987), Chs. 2 and 4; J. Gassner, *Form and Idea in Modern Theater* (New York: 1956), pt. 1. On the theatre of commitment: G. Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theater of the Thirties* (Bloomington: 1964); S. Smiley, *The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression* (Columbia: 1972) and R. C. Reynolds *Stage Left: The Development of American Social Drama in the Thirties* (Troy: 1986). On social dramas of the fifties: N. Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York: 1982), Ch. 6.

approved budgets and made performance/appearance arrangements with foreign managers. With the creation of the President's Emergency Fund for international exchanges in 1954, ANTA's authority was then extended from Germany to the world.¹³

By the early 1950s, the Department of State was deeply interested in sponsoring foreign tours by black artists in order to counter Soviet charges of racial discrimination in the US. It was this which in 1950 first led Breen to recommend a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*, a show he believed had "the kind of body and guts the Germans will like." Gershwin's music was popular in Germany (in part because of army radio broadcasts) and the Department of State was convinced that "*Porgy and Bess* was the greatest possible propaganda tool that could be sent abroad."¹⁴ Unfortunately, negotiations with the Gershwin–Heyward estates over performance rights dragged on, and it was not until 1952 that Breen was able to finally bring the opera into production.

Money to prepare the show, which Breen directed, came from Blevins Davis, a millionaire with a passion for theatre, who had been a childhood friend of President Truman. Further support came from the Department of State, which paid travel for the eighty-person company to Vienna and flew them on military aircraft to Berlin and back to Washington. In addition, the company received \$15,000 a week, in advance, for the show's four-and-a-half-week run. All local theatre costs were borne by the Department and the 12 percent royalty to the Gershwin–Heyward estates was also guaranteed. Moreover, the Department paid DM7,000 for the construction of a second set of scenery in Berlin, which it then gave to the producers, and it set aside a further \$4,000 to cover unforeseen expenses. In addition, the Company was assured a 12 percent share of box-office

¹³ On the development of cultural exchange: F. Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas: US Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938–50* (Cambridge: 1981), Ch. 5. On Germany, R. Willett, *The Americanization of Germany* (London: 1989) and H. J. Kellermann, *Cultural Relations as an Instrument of US Foreign Policy* (Washington: 1978). On ANTA's role: OSU, BC, F106, Negotiations: Germany, "Report on United States Participation in the Berlin Festival." Breen later claimed to have "initiated" the idea of designating ANTA the State Department's intermediary; F261, Bookings–Heller, R. Breen to A. Heller, 16 Nov. 1954. For ANTA and President's Fund: John H. Taylor's "Ambassadors of the Arts: An Analysis of the Eisenhower Administration's Incorporation of 'Porgy and Bess' into its Cold War Foreign Policy" (Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University, 1994), esp. 55–61 is essential.

¹⁴ For Breen's assumptions regarding German taste: OSU, BC, F106, Negotiations: Germany, 1952, draft of letter, Breen to M. Stuart French, 11 Sept. 1951; on the negotiations for rights: H. Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess* (New York: 1990) 146–50; State Department opinions are communicated in OSU, BC, F44A, Vienna and Berlin, R. Schnitzer to M. French 30 June 1952.

receipts. The arrangement, Breen chortled, “provides security – [or] at least the avoidance of risks.”¹⁵

The Vienna and Berlin performances inaugurated a four-year relationship between the Department of State and the *Porgy and Bess* touring company, which adopted the ingeniously symbolic name, the Everyman Company, late in 1952. In addition to the sponsored tour in 1952, the Department of State, using the President’s Emergency Fund, supported an eleven-week Mediterranean and a sixteen-week Central and South American tour in 1955. All together, the government spent over \$800,000 on direct subsidies to *Porgy* over three years in addition to which it contributed an unspecified amount in USIA advertising and research and foreign mission time and entertainment. Though Breen’s two greatest projects – tours of the Soviet Union and China – did not receive governmental support, it was not because of any hostility to the show itself. Rather, the company’s shoddy management of its financial affairs, conflicts with ANTA management – from which Breen resigned in 1952 in order to produce and direct *Porgy* – and a feeling that the opera had already received too much money, led to a curtailment of funding. Nonetheless administrative, Congressional and State officials remained united in their enthusiasm for the show. As one State Department report declared in September 1955: “The effectiveness of [the Everyman Opera’s] performances to date can only be described as spectacular. It has been a great critical and popular success and it has admirably served the purposes of the President’s Fund in demonstrating the cultural achievements of the United States.”¹⁶

Which is, in some ways, a strange observation, because, for all his innovative efforts to create a post-New Deal state-subsidized theatre, Breen remained, as an artist, out of touch with current trends. Where

¹⁵ Breen assured the estate that because *Porgy* would be going under “the direct management of ANTA” which was using “special funds” from the State Department, there would be little financial risk. OSU, BC, F261, Bookings: Heller, R. Breen to A. Heller 23 Oct. 1951; F104, European Tour: Heller, R. Breen to H. Pollack, 4 June 1951; F44A, Berlin Festival, Final Agreement between *Porgy and Bess* Company and Department of State, 21 Aug. 1952.

¹⁶ On the Department’s support for the production, Taylor, “Ambassadors of the Arts,” 100. To Taylor’s figures should be added the 1952 subsidy. An example of an additional contribution is Ambassador Strong’s personal underwriting of the engagement in Oslo; EL, White House Office, National Security Council Staff: Operations Coordination Board Central File (OCB), Box 16, 007.3 (8) R. Breen to E. Allan Lightner, 31 May 1956. For evidence of continuing governmental enthusiasm for the show: idem, Box 15, 007.2 (6), Staff Study, “Proposed tour of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union and the European satellite countries,” 20 Sept. 1955.

playwrights like Miller and Williams and directors like Kazan and Quintero were experimenting with flashback, broken time lines, and the projection of a character's interiority on stage – all devices which manipulated the artificiality of the theatre in order to express the contingent quality of all we think we “know” – Breen still believed that good drama should create the sensation of observing lived reality.¹⁷ Breen called it “neo-realism.” In keeping with this, and unlike most forward-looking directors of his time, Breen's aesthetic remained visual not verbal. He was one of those Virgil Thomson labeled “eye people”: an artist, “liberal in politics and presumably tolerant in art”, who felt that, where words could only represent facts, sights could intensify them. In conversation, as in his theatre, he sought “to give to the simplest thing immediate and physical expression.” Breen, according to *Porgy* cast members, “did not engage in a whole lot of talk,” but instead used his body to communicate his ideas. “He was the kind of director that they invented sneakers for, “remembered his first Porgy, William Warfield, “he was always on the move, leaping from the orchestra seats in the house up to the stage to show us what he wanted.” It was, noted a prescient interviewer, “as though words were not enough for him.”¹⁸

This kinetic approach manifested itself in the production which critics hailed as “balletic” and “highly choreographed.”¹⁹ As a Leningrad critic observed: “[t]he Everyman Opera company could just as well be called the Everyman Ballet.” In conventional opera, agreed a Polish reviewer, “[w]e have come to accept statics on the part of players, or at least poor quality acting; movement on the stage is restricted, gestures are superficial ... With the ‘Everyman Opera,’ the opposite is the case: the stage is alive, it glitters and sparkles with colour and movement.” In the first moments of the show, for example, while Clara sang “Summertime” to her baby, “children are playing. One woman prepares a scanty supper

¹⁷ John Gassner called these dramatists “theatricalists,” *Directions in Modern Theater and Drama* (New York: 1966), 138; see also, T. P. Adler, “Tennessee William's ‘Personal Lyricism’: Towards an Androgynous Form,” in W. W. Demastes, ed., *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition* (Tuscaloosa, 1996), 172–86 and B. Murphy, “Arthur Miller: Revising Realism,” in the same volume, 189–202.

¹⁸ D. Trilling, “An interview with Virgil Thomson,” in V. Thomson, ed., *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (New York: 1981), 553; for cast comments as well as the idea of “neo-realism,” OSU, BC, F27, Public Relations: Italy, Copy: “Interview with Robert Breen,” *La Fiera Letteraria* (translation), 8 May 1955; W. Warfield with A. Miller, *My Music & My Life* (Champaign: 1991), 131.

¹⁹ By contrast, directors like Quintero encouraged actors to improvise their stage action and insisted “I have never blocked a play in the usual sense,” J. Quintero, *If You Don't Dance They Beat You* (Boston: 1974), 226.

for her husband. Another is knitting a jumper. A tiny boy, helping his family, carries a sack of coal he has gathered somewhere. Between a husband and wife there occurs one of the small quarrels over two or three cents which she is missing from her wages. Two girls are learning new steps from a new dance. Men who have returned from their work are playing dice.” Tom Donnelly of the *Washington Daily News* was one of the few who found all this activity intrusive. “The current production is an excessively busy one,” he wrote, “with the actors hopping and leaping and prancing about so as to all but smother the Gershwin songs. A stage full of energy and high spirits is a fine and welcome thing, but, please, let’s not garnish every line of dialogue and every note of song with accompanying pantomime.”²⁰

Donnelly may have been correct: anyone attracted to Gershwin’s music would likely be disappointed by the *Everyman* production. Breen considered *Porgy* a theatrical, not an operatic work and, apart from the well-known songs, he did not think the music very good. But the enormous energy which filled the stage – the ceaseless to-ing and fro-ing of characters, the constant presence of background noise as actors whistled and hooted, “ad libbed” and gesticulated – had a purpose. It was primarily designed to increase the emotional intensity of the drama *as seen*. Truth, Breen felt, could only be experienced by overcoming the obstacle of the theatre itself. By raising the emotional pitch of a scene, Breen believed he could make the drama more immediate, increase audience involvement and, in so doing, bridge the gap between active stage and passive seat. In keeping with this, he kept scenes short and fast moving and he allowed no breaks or crescendos after familiar numbers to prevent the applause he knew would shatter the illusion of reality. In his staging he therefore worked at “holding back the applause, not playing for it, holding it back, where it might come three or four times, and holding it, and finally then letting it out.”²¹ The reviewers apparently understood

²⁰ EL, OCB, Box 15, 007.3 (6), U. Kovalyev, “Porgy and Bess,” *Smena*, 29 Dec. 1955 (translation); E. Ziegler, “The Black Manon,” *Nova Kultura*, 5 Feb. 1956; Morschikhin, “American Opera in Leningrad,” *Leningrad Pravda*, 5 Jan. 1956 (translation); OSU, BC, F109, Reviews: US Tour, 1954, T. Donnelly, “Porgy and Bess,” *Washington Daily News*, 22 Dec. 1953.

²¹ In his notes to actors, he continually emphasized “vigor,” “spirit,” “punch.” “Your entrances,” he told one performer, “need more pile-driving – [a] juggernaut impetus.” Not surprisingly, Breen was prone to rate appearance over ability. Al Hoosman, who he hired to understudy Crown, was a tone deaf retired boxer with little acting experience. He had, however, startling size and physical energy. Remarkably, Breen even conceived Hamlet to be a menacing, virile figure; no “dull as dishwater” indecision for him, only “real dynamics.” In addition to himself, he thought John

Breen's intentions and acclaimed them. Where conventional opera "erects a wall between the actors and the public," a *Nova Kultura* reviewer declared, "the contrary is true of *Porgy and Bess* and it is this which dazzles us immediately, grips us by the hand, almost lifts us bodily from our seats and hurls us onstage."

For white critics, both American and European, who knew little about black life in the South, it all seemed terribly authentic. "The stream of life that is Catfish Row has never vibrated with so much flesh and blood, so much humor and pathos, so much violence and tragedy," wrote the *Philadelphia Enquirer*. The production, noted the *Carriere Lombardi*, "is more than an imitation, it is truth itself, expressed in a crude, empirical unpolished art." Where opera "belongs to Art, *Porgy and Bess* instead is the direct reproduction of drama taken by the lens of a merciless camera, without a filter, without attenuation, lived with all the weight and brutal violence and the bitterness of the state of the souls of those who compose the action." It is "like a newspaper story faithfully and brutally told," commented another, we see "the warmth of the negro race, their customs; their primitive gestures, their cries and their sighs, their elementary joys and tenderness, their subterfuge and slyness." To the *Chicago Times* reviewer: "It vividly captures a mood, a spirit and a sympathy for people who have and do exist in the manner depicted." It has a "national authenticity despite its particular setting," announced the *Chicago American*, and the sets exhibit the "necessary softening of reality and yet a physical fidelity to any shantytown." Another critic was so bewitched he seemed unsure of what was real and what was theatre, and he praised the production for giving "throbbing reality to the swarming life of Catfish Row." "This *Porgy*" declared the *Minneapolis Star*, "[is] truly a representation of a community living its life, mourning its dead, loving and working and laughing."²²

What makes the fulsome praise so extraordinary is that the critics

Garfield and Marlon Brando the two actors best suited to realizing his vision. "I may be immodest," he wrote, "but no one can turn out a more exciting production of Hamlet than yours truly." OSU, BC, F5: Russian Tour, R. Breen to H. and S. Jaffe, 16 Nov. 1955; the quote regarding applause is from OSU, BC, interview with Wilva Breen, 22 Oct. 1988.

²² EL, OCB, Box 15, 007:3 (6), E. Ziegler, "The Black Manon," *Nova Kultura*, 5 Feb. 1956 (translation). OSU, BC, F109, Review Book, 1954. *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 2 Dec. 1952; F109 (2), Review Book 1955. *Carriere Lombardi* (translation), 23 Feb. 1955; *Il Mattino*, 16 Feb. 1955; F109, Review Book 1954. *The Denver Post*, 2 June 1954; *Chicago Sun Times*, 3 Mar. 1954; *Chicago American*, 3 Mar. 1954; *The Los Angeles Times*, 14 July 1954; *The Minneapolis Star*, 25 Mar. 1954.

ignored the fact that Breen's approach ran counter to the dominant artistic current. Liberal aesthetic theory in the 1950s denigrated the eye in favour of the word. Where realists of the inter-war period avoided obscurity and used language in a concrete way "as the painters were using pigments," those of the postwar period increasingly considered words as signs "whose intentions are fugitive."²³ Postwar "writerly texts," to use Barthe's term, denied the reader a stable position from which they could "understand" a work. Words were used to communicate insecurity and uncertainty: they did not establish meanings, but only allowed readers to infer their sense. As Lionel Trilling argued, forward-thinking artists had to unearth postwar "realities" by exposing the ambiguities that underlay the certitudes of their age. Moral absolutes, whether of the left or the right, were no longer convincing and he presented ambivalence, doubt, ambiguity and relative knowledge as the ultimate "truths" which modern artists needed to present. The "moral realism" he advocated lay "in the perception of the dangers of the moral life itself ... in inviting [the audience member] to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it."²⁴

The ambiguities of speech so prevalent in the new cold war period, allowed progressive artists to mount a secret challenge to the moral absolutism of cold war ideology. Even though most liberal artists accepted the principle of containment as a political necessity, they were reluctant to adopt it as an ethical position. Through decentered prose, artists questioned the existence of objective reality and in so doing implicitly challenged the cold war's moral justification even as they accepted the necessity of its existence.

This was why ambivalence was so terribly important to postwar liberal artists. It was not, however, important to Robert Breen. There was no room in his production for the nuance of postwar modernism. To Breen, *Porgy* was a simple tale of goodness, evil and temptation. "It is," he wrote, "a story of life and love among the hard-working, deeply religious and yet carefree Negroes of Catfish Row." The hero, Porgy, "is a crippled beggar who loves but dares not approach Bess, a woman of the streets, belonging to Crown, a huge, ill-tempered stevedore, with a taste for liquor and

²³ For words as pigment quote see M. Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: 1989), 243; "fugitive" words are described in Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War*, 80.

²⁴ L. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (Harmondsworth: 1970), 17–34 and 221–23; T. Siebens, *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Scepticism* (New York: 1983), Ch. 2.

happy-dust (cocaine).” After Crown murders a man named Robbins and flees the Row, Bess is abandoned, ostracized by the Row’s inhabitants, until “the gentle Porgy can finally prove his love by taking Bess to his little shack and sheltering her.” Together they find “happiness and security” until her fugitive lover returns during a picnic of Kittiwah Island and Bess “succumbs to the brutish, virile Crown who carries her off into the woods.” Bess eventually returns to Porgy’s hovel, as does Crown, and in the ensuing struggle Porgy kills him. But the lovers’ “joyous relief” is short-lived. The police, not knowing him to be Crown’s killer, take Porgy away to identify the body and Sportin’ Life, a drug dealer, “who has long wanted Bess, persuades her that Porgy will be imprisoned or even executed ... and forcing cocaine on her, entices her [away], with the promise of fine clothes, a beautiful house and the high life of New York.” When Porgy returns a week later and “learns of her faithlessness, his love is too strong to accept it, and he sets out on the long road to New York, in his goat-drawn cart, in search of her.” It was, wrote Breen, a “simple, universal story” peopled by archetypes. There was the strong, loving Porgy; the malevolent, sexually potent Crown; the sleazy, “snake-like” Sportin’ Life and the “fickle” Bess who flipped from whore to Magdalene and back again with each changing scene.²⁵

What all this shows is the Breen’s artistry had been freeze-dried in the 1930s. Indeed, Breen’s postwar success lay, paradoxically enough, in his transference of a theatrical approach that had been dominant in the inter-war years to an operatic art that remained girded to the performed traditions of the pre-World War I period. Where the great operatic actors had performed with their voices, Breen’s characters used their bodies. The emphasis on visual elements, the effort to expose a “chunk of life intensely real,” the focus on the poor and oppressed, all these tie his *Porgy* to inter-war American social realism. The artistic presentation – the desire to capture reality – was, as it had been for Depression-era dramatists, at one and the same time a revelation of a moral and an aesthetic position. Truth, which pre-war art defined largely in terms of the exposure of heretofore-occluded social “realities,” was not only to be captured on stage, its perception was also the central point of the drama itself. At the core of Breen’s *Porgy* was a defence of the intelligibility of both reality and truth. For Breen, goodness, as manifested in Porgy’s love, was omniscient – it probed beyond appearances and recognized the virtue in Bess that others could not see – and it was also utterly forgiving; it could triumph over

²⁵ OSU, BC, F116, Public Relations: Press Releases, “Porgy and Bess: The passionate Tale of a Girl and Three Men.”

evil and make powerful the otherwise handicapped. Most importantly, goodness could be known and lived, even if temptations and prejudices might lead individuals away from its side and blind them to its presence. While the traces of these themes could certainly be found in the Heyward/Gershwin *Porgy*, Breen brought them into the foreground by cutting, pasting and fairly significantly revising the libretto. Because the whole opera had not been performed since 1935, critics believed that this *Porgy* was “Gershwin’s original” but it was in reality very much Breen’s.

Evil in the Breen production was clearly represented in two forms: Crown, the malevolent force of nature and Sportin’ Life, the embodiment of social corruption. Crown was all brutish strength and uncontained sexuality; in Breen’s stage direction he “growls,” “grunts,” “brawls,” “lurches” and “laughs boisterously.” He terrorized the community – in one scene even kicking a female character about the stage – and he taunted nature and God. Where the Gershwin Crown truly loves Bess and is softened, even in the Kittiwah rape scene, by the swelling romanticism of his declaration of love and loneliness ([r147] – music cut from the *Everyman* production), Breen made him a great, rutting beast. Where Gershwin imagined Crown a classical hero, at once inspiring for and antithetical to the community, a figure whose hubris brings down the wrath of God and who is made to die in a shameful way, Breen portrayed him as a simple brute. Where Heyward/Gershwin have him stabbed in the back by Porgy as he crawls blindly and ignominiously through the darkness, Breen staged a heroic struggle in which the evil Crown confronted Porgy, pulled a knife and was killed in a fair fight. Where the Heyward/Gershwin libretto emphasizes throughout the community’s admiration of Crown, Breen invented lines like “Porgy’s a better man dan you!” and “Why don’t you get out of here you dirty hound!” to make clear his Row’s rejection of the monster.²⁶

Sportin’ Life was characterized with equal moral clarity. As in the Heyward/Gershwin libretto, Sportin’ Life embodied immorality: he was irreligious, anarchic and decadent. In the original, he is always accompanied by Gershwin’s idea of hot jazz and his scat singing rises as a “savage outburst.” The original character represents a white man’s perception of the Harlem jazz scene of the twenties: alluring, addictive but ultimately corrosive. For Breen this complexity was unnecessary. His Sportin’ Life was a citified Satan and his weapons were drugs, liquor, sex and crime. Under his influence, the Kittiwah church picnic

²⁶ These and subsequent citations from the score are from Breen’s libretto with stage directions, in OSU, BC, F106, Production Book, Apr. 1956.

degenerated not, as in the Gershwin score, into a jazz dance, but into a sexual orgy. Sportin' Life represented not cynicism or an absence of moral grounding so much as simple evil. The director described Sportin' Life as "Svengali-like" and in this scene he concentrated his attentions on a character Breen invented – a young churchgoer and prude – and "manipulated" her into a "sensuous dance" her ecstatic "gyrations" ending only when the force of community order – the huckster Maria – pulled her from the dancing crowd with the single line: "Tell me – when did you start working for the devil." The line is also in the Heyward/Gershwin libretto, but there it is given to another character, is directed at a male, is part of a longer monologue and is issued in response to a mockery of the Bible. Though one doubts if Cab Calloway, Breen's first Sportin' Life, was ever able to realize his director's intentions – being too much a likeable rogue to play a demon – the character was clearly imagined as embodying unadulterated vice.

Though evil was crisply delineated in the show, Breen was not adopting the clean-cut moral code of cold war conservatism. If he defied the main current of liberal aesthetics in rejecting verbal, visual and moral ambiguity, he even more clearly opposed the right-wing ethos of his day. In his presentation of the nature of the good, in his depiction of authority and his presentation of community, Breen made manifest his liberalism. In this production, the only whites to appear on stage were brutal policemen who terrorized the Row with their arbitrary justice and crude force. This is, to an extent, also the case with Heyward/Gershwin, but the authors softened their image of whites with the characters of Archdale – the benevolent planter who continued to protect his family's freed slaves – and that of the gently philanthropic coroner. Breen eliminated Archdale from the script and made the coroner's kindness a ruse with which to trick Porgy into coming away to identify Crown's body. The Detective who investigates the two deaths was also made even more sadistic in this revival than he was in the original. He desecrated the body of the dead Robbins, pushed and kicked innocent people, dragged a sobbing old man across the stage and waved his gun about freely.

And if the contemporary resonance was not loud enough, or if it was still too easy for Northerners to dismiss the race relations displayed as merely a Southern problem, in both scenes involving whites, Breen's police tried to force the people of the Row to name names. The drama in these scenes revolved around Porgy, who in the first steadfastly refused to cooperate by naming Crown as Robbins' murderer, and in the second maintained his silence despite his terror of being discovered as Crown's

killer. Even though they feared the police, everyone living in the Row also refused to cooperate, leaving the authorities “bewitched and fooled like people from another planet.” Only one character, old Peter, informed, and he was portrayed as pathetic and weak. Kazan might have turned the informer into a hero in *On the Waterfront*, and in *The Crucible* Miller might have introduced ambiguity into the act of naming names, but Breen accepted no such compromise with postwar conservatism. In his morality play, snitching was quite simply wrong, even when it meant identifying a murderer.²⁷

Similarly, in his treatment of community, Breen broke with both conservative conventions and the equivocations of the cold war liberals. He depicted the community of Catfish Row as attracted to both good and evil in a childlike way and he presented its members at different moments as nasty and kind, spiritual and worldly. The lines delineating these values were, however, never blurred, for Breen’s characters, unlike Heyward/Gershwin’s, recognized good and evil as moral absolutes. If the community failed to project ambivalence, it also differed from the conservative cold warriors’ ideal in its capacity to judge falsely and in its recognition of the need to honor the thoughtful individual’s moral choices. One of the most overwrought political charges of the age – that one might err by being *soft* on communism – was a coded expression of the conservatives’ horror of appeasement and reconciliation. Breen defied this standard of intolerance: his Porgy represented the ethical individual who inspired the community to forgive the pariah. He defied those who denounced Bess as unworthy and forgave her “infidelity” not once, but three times. As Breen pointedly explained in an article for the Leningrad periodical *Neva*, Porgy embodied “undying love” and in so doing “affirms our belief in the essential goodness which is in everyone, no matter what outward appearances may seem.” *Porgy and Bess*, Breen avowed in a candid moment, “is a *morality* play.”²⁸

Interestingly, Breen’s desire to express both the existence of objective truth and the ability of individual love to dispel collective hate, grew over

²⁷ OSU, BC, F109, Russia/Europe: Review Book, 1955–56, *Muenchener Merkur*, 3–4 Dec. 1955. Ironically, while no American reviewer commented on the play’s and anti-McCarthyite overtones, the Russians were more disturbed and dismissed the scenes as “melodrama” resting on “an abundance of the customary details regarding criminal investigation. EL, OCB, Box 15, 007.3 (6) V. Bogdanoff-Berezowski, “Porgy and Bess” *Evening Leningrad* (translation), 29 Dec. 1955.

²⁸ OSU, BC, F27, Public Relations: Russia (8), Article by Robert Breen for *Neva*, 4 Jan. 1956; Breen called it a “morality play” in OSC, BC, F22, Censorship, R. Breen to D. X. Marks, 17 July 1954, emphasis in original.

the life of the production. The last scene of the opera, where Porgy goes off in his goat cart to New York in pursuit of Bess, is crucial in this regard. Here the director must decide whether *Porgy* represents the aspiration of the individual and the defiance of the common stock or the embodiment of a socially sanctioned and absolute good. It all depends on how Porgy leaves the stage. If the staging of his departure indicates his quest to be hopeless and his love misguided, Porgy becomes at once noble and alone – the yearning cripple in pursuit of a false ideal. If, on the other hand, the performance presents his pursuit of Bess as right, sensible and socially sanctioned, he becomes a paragon of collective good. Interestingly, this was the one scene which Breen completely reworked over the life of the production. In its 1952 Vienna incarnation, Porgy remained for much of this crucial last scene on the left side of the stage. The cast stood in an arc behind him and centre stage was left empty. As Porgy exited, he moved around the semi-circle, saying goodbye to each of the characters and receiving their sad hugs and handshakes. As he left, the crowd parted and two women moved centre stage to cry on each others' shoulders. In the Russian production, four years later, Porgy occupied centre stage through most of the scene and the cast encircled him. As he prepared to leave, the inhabitants of the Row moved in on him, rather than his sadly circling, and they escorted him from the stage waving and smiling their good wishes. Instead of two women, a small boy now moved centre stage as the crowd ushered Porgy away, and began to cry and rock slowly back and forth. Interestingly, this solitary somber note did not affect the scene's up-beat tone.²⁹

In other words, over the course of the production, Breen sharpened the moral message of the show's conclusion. The uncomfortable ending of 1952 placed a shadow over the argument, even if, by having the community accept Porgy's moral choice with reservations, the hero was made self-reliant instead of wrong. By 1956, however, Breen had securely harmonized the individual and collective ideal of the good. Truth knowable to the forgiving man was also accepted by the group. The hard-

²⁹ OSU, BC, USIA videotape of Vienna and Soviet-made videotape of Moscow performances. One wonders if the rocking child – which may have been borrowed from the rocking idiot at the close of *Boris Godunov* – might not have been included as a familiar symbol for the Russian audience. Certainly Breen knew *Boris* and told an interviewer that it was his dream to direct it! See OSU, BC, F27, Public Relations: Italy, "Revolution in Lyric Theatre – An Interview with Robert Breen," *La Fiera Letteraria* (translation), 8 May 1955. In any case, in moving grief from the women to the child, Breen had shifted the focus from experience to innocence. The positive tone of the ending is noted in EL, OCB, Box 15, 007.3 (6), U. Kovalyev, "Porgy and Bess," *Smema*, 29 Dec. 1955.

lines of the first year of the show, where moral right stood against a background of community uncertainty, had been softened and the message of forgiveness, hope and love had spread from the one to the many.

Ironically then, Breen's presentation of *Porgy* as signifier for the sovereignty of collective forgiveness became sharper as the cold war lengthened. Quite possibly, his increased optimism had something to do with the end of overt McCarthyism, the opening of cultural contacts with the East bloc and the hope that rose between the death of Stalin and the Hungarian revolution. It might also have been a reflection of rising confidence regarding the possibility of civil rights reform in the wake of the *Brown* decision. Still, Breen's notion of the transcendent value of forgiveness went far beyond the cautious official optimism embodied by "the spirit of Geneva." In going beyond mere coexistence, in proclaiming the value of friendship, love and understanding and in bringing that message to Moscow, Breen may have been more receptive to the hopeful mood of the American people in 1955 than were the policy-makers.³⁰

The nostalgia that appears to have survived among many Americans for an age when peace did not mean surrender and left did not mean aggression, would suggest a notable continuity in political culture. This conclusion is also supported by the staggering popularity of the *Porgy* revival (it played to rave reviews and sold-out theatres everywhere but in London and New York where it remained in production too long), revealing, as it does, the continued public and critical acceptance of the artistic expression of inter-war progressivism. This was, after all, an old fashioned realist production, plainly sympathetic to the poor, which exposed the brutality of America's caste system and denounced informing, which defended an ethical code above the law and portrayed physical strength as less potent than love and understanding. Moreover, this was a show which a white director claimed to have made in the interests of advancing the struggle for civil rights and racial equality.

According to Breen, the opera was "of and for Negroes," and though written and composed by whites, captured "the poetry" and "the message hidden in the misery" of the black experience. Gershwin, he wrote, had studied the music of the Gullahs and had lived among the African Americans of Charleston, "before the process of integration with

³⁰ "President's News Conference, 21 March 1956," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1956* (Washington: 1958), 330; For press opinion, R. H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (Middletown: 1989), 348–61.

the white world would bring the loss of something ethnic and pure.” To the cast, Breen maintained the position that the opera was an African American cultural product and felt their enthusiasm hinged on “the respect and dignity ... [it] accorded them and their people.” He worked hard to promote the image that he was a student of African American culture and not an accomplice in its counterfeit. One Italian interviewer, for example, who “interrupted” him reading a book on black religion, was told, as Breen “reluctantly” set the book aside: “the contribution of African art is one of the most extraordinary phenomena [sic] of American civilization.” To the interviewer it consequently was no surprise that the cast should perform *Porgy* “with all the conviction of an act of faith.”³¹

Clearly, Breen, like so many other postwar artists, was drawing on the resources of African American culture. Like Elvis, the Beats and the white beboppers, he was therefore helping to forge postwar America’s mongrel culture. In Breen’s case, however, the task was made more difficult by his realization that for two decades *Porgy* had been attacked in the black press as a cultural appropriation and caricature, and he was anxious that no charge of racism should “be brought to the attention of our cast members and disaffect them.” As a result, he carefully instructed his all-white crew about how they should behave towards blacks, loaning them books on African American history, refusing to perform in segregated houses (*Porgy* was the work which de-segregated Washington’s National Theater) and, in Dallas, threatening to cancel the show if a local technician who had made racist remarks was not removed from the theatre. In short, the producers wanted to do “all that was possible to create general goodwill ... and maintain [the] friendliest of relations” with the artists and their communities.³²

In defiance, then, of postwar liberalism’s doubts, ambiguities and anxieties Breen’s production of *Porgy* presented the good as intelligible and liveable. It was designed to celebrate the culture and talent of an oppressed racial minority. It preached love and openness in communist states. On top of it all, it was produced by one individual with strong connections to the Democratic Party and directed by another who had pushed agitprop theatre in the 1930s. One might conclude from all this

³¹ On Gershwin’s empathies and research: OSU, BC, F27: Public Relations, Russia (8), Article by Robert Breen for *Neva*, 4 Jan. 1956; F27, Public Relations, Italy, “Revolution in the Theatre: An Interview with Robert Breen,” *La Fiera Letteraria* (translation), 8 May 1955.

³² OSU, BC, Interview with Wilva Breen, 22 Oct. 1988: F5 Pt.1: Robert Breen, 1952 (2), Wilva Breen to Bill Doll, 14 Feb. 1953.

and from the sell-out crowds and enthusiastic reviews that accompanied the show in most of the cities where it was performed, that the moral iconography of New Deal liberalism remained more potent in the postwar period, at least to the theatre-going public, in cities small and large, north and west, than has generally been observed.

Still, tempting though it is, we should not oversimplify the issue. *Porgy* may have been a traditional, left-liberal show by contemporary standards, but how many in the audience perceived it as such? And, even if they did hear the social commentary, how effectively did the other voices drown this one out? Certainly, officials in the Department of State and on the Operations Control Board, which dispensed the funds for the opera's international tours, were aware of *Porgy's* politics, but they were also able to interpret its progressivism in ways which justified their own conservative positions. The official assessments made at the time of the Soviet tour, for example, noted that "the opera presents an undignified picture of the American colored population as being downtrodden and uneducated" and that it could be seen "as an illustration of American racial prejudice." In spite of this, *Porgy* was approved for support because by subsidizing it "we would demonstrate that the United States is assessing realistically the true importance of Soviet propaganda as far as our ethnical [sic] problems are concerned ... and claims an appreciation of art above politics."³³

Art above politics. The expression bears scrutiny because in its lies, in some measure, the secret to *Porgy's* critical success and governmental patronage. It is a deeply misleading phrase in that it implies a distinction – which I am suggesting in Breen's case, did not exist – between ethics and aesthetics. Nonetheless, the statement is of importance because it allows us to better appreciate how the opera was seen and its message assimilated. Above all else, it reveals one of the ways in which *Porgy's* liberal-reformist meaning was effectively contained and the public oriented to its repackaging as an expression of an official ideology. Through its reclassification as "art," *Porgy* was surrounded by layers of ideological buffers that absorbed its impact and dulled its message. "Art," in this dominant construction, became entertainment removed from its historical location rather than a distillation of reality. In the Everyman *Porgy*, the dissident intentions remained visible, but their force as criticisms of American culture and politics was muffled. In a way, the opera's progressivism was masked even before it was realized and

³³ EL, OCB, Box 15, 007.2 (6), Staff Study: "Proposed Tour of *Porgy* and *Bess* in the Soviet Union and the European satellite countries," 20 Sept. 1955.

returned to the work as an expression of a conservative ideational construction.

The submersion of *Porgy*'s liberalism was not, however, imposed upon it. Director, artists and public were neither isolated from each other nor mutually antagonistic. Breen may have been a liberal in a conservative age, but he was no alien. Indeed, what facilitated *Porgy*'s masking was a fundamental agreement over certain basic cultural principles and assumptions. *Porgy* may not have been *read* as Breen had intended, but the dominant *reading* nonetheless rooted itself in what he had placed on stage. And so, while the masks failed to eliminate the liberal message – several foreign critics remarked on it – they did provide room for those seeing the production to accept it on modified terms. To put it another way, liberal reformism and its antithesis were contained in the same artistic expression. Consequently, the success of *Porgy*'s masking derived from an implicit layering of opposites: the opera was a timeless “folk classic,” resonating with contemporary political criticism, and it was a show about racism, packaged as an illustration of progress in civil rights, that presented hoary racial and gender stereotypes as real images of African American life. In effect, Breen and the public worked together to place *Porgy*'s progressivism behind a reactionary imagery and in so doing to ensure the opera's triumph as a monument to containment art.

Gershwin hoped he had composed an enduring masterpiece when the curtain went up in Boston's Colonial Theatre in September 1935. His ambition was to produce an “authentic American opera,” “a combination of the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Meistersinger*.” Critics and public alike, however, were uncomfortable with the notion that this “halfway opera” by a composer of “Broadway entertainments,” should be considered the equal of the European masterworks. The critics therefore back-handed their praise of the score, acknowledging the loveliness of much of the music even as they disputed its status as an opera. Ten days after the work's opening in New York, Gershwin apparently gave way and began calling *Porgy* a “new form,” a “folk opera,” which he defined as a work that presents “folk music ... in operatic form” and “combines opera and theatre” in a fashion that he now conceded “has never before appeared.”³⁴

The idea that *Porgy* was a “folk opera” stuck, even though the term had generally been applied, slightly condescendingly, to pastoral comedies like

³⁴ On Gershwin's ambition: Alpert, *Porgy and Bess*, 89. For critical reaction: A. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: 1989), Ch. 10; For Gershwin's “retreat”: *New York Times*, 20 Oct. 1935.

Hugh the Drover and the *Bartered Bride*, rather than to gritty urban tragedies. But *folk* in this American parlance meant primitive, not pre-industrial, and as such it carried with it the bitter aftertaste of racism. Breen, however, used the expression to great advantage, as he did a phrase of his own coinage: “folk classic.” Anyone disturbed by the substance of the show – by its criticism of white justice or its depiction of the superiority of love over strength and of charity over insularity – could rest assured that *Porgy* was really a “folk classic” and therefore distanced from contemporary concerns. As Peter Gay has written of late Victorian art, the “more draped [a work is] in elevated associations, the less likely it is to shock its viewers.” The Company’s front office clearly understood this and used *Porgy*’s canonical associations to reassure audiences potentially sensitive to its political message. In Vienna (a city divided like Berlin and deep within the Soviet occupation zone), the advertising explained that despite appearances, Heyward and Gershwin were “not writing either a social message or a comedy-caricature of the Negro,” instead, the opera “is in a poetic vein.” Contrary to appearances there was, in actuality, nothing place-specific about this opera: it dealt only incidentally with black Americans. *Porgy*, Breen announced, is “concerned with basic emotion related to love, birth and death ... [and] could take place in any port city of the world.” Indeed, the director informed the Russians a few years later, the opera “is not in any sense documentary, and does not reflect life in the United States today any more than *Aida*, *Madama Butterfly*, or *Boris Godunov* have a real bearing on present day Egypt, Japan, or the Soviet Union.” When necessary, then, the “neo-realism” of the production, as well as its contemporary subtext, could be veiled by the curtain of great art.³⁵

This was, interestingly enough, a view shared by those African American critics who supported the show. The opera was even more uncomfortable for blacks than it was for whites, but for very different reasons. Where whites might find the nobility of the blacks, the liberalism within the production and the talents of the cast disquieting, African Americans had reason to be disturbed by the show’s insistent depiction of black poverty, criminality, vice and ignorance. But just as the notion of the folk opera might distance whites from the work and allow them to bracket its politically threatening implications, so too could black reviewers use the image to distance themselves from the production and

³⁵ P. Gay, *The Education of the Senses* (New York: 1984), 391; OSU, BC, F44A, Vienna and Berlin, “For October 26 Broadcast over Red-White-Red Network”; F27, Public Relations: Russia (8), Article by Robert Breen for *Neva*, 4 Jan. 1956.

make it more palatable. The *Chicago Defender's* theatre critic made this explicit when he noted that “from novel to play, from play to folk musical ... Porgy has gradually assumed the proportions of a legendary character.” Indeed, the crippled beggar had “over the years” taken on the “grandeur” befitting the hero of “the most famous musical work that our native writers have yet created.” The opera, agreed the *The Washington Afro-American*, was “an outstanding and distinctive piece of Americana.” And again, “for more years than your correspondent cares to admit *Porgy and Bess* has been a favorite with theatre goers the nation over.” Everything in these comments laid stress on the very elements Breen sought, for different reasons, to encourage: the lineage of the production, the classic status of the work, the grandeur of its characters. In this case, of course, black critics were emphasizing the age and status of the opera in order to mute criticism of it as unreflective of the realities of African American life, but the mask was the same.³⁶

To be sure, what made the notion of the “folk classic” so enticing was the way it might disguise many less acceptable aspects of the plot and score. And this was not just true of the production’s racial or aesthetic politics. When Breen’s European agent, Anatole Heller, entered negotiations with Ministry of Culture officials for a Soviet tour, he was asked by the rather prudish Russians whether the show contained anything “immoral.” “Well,” wrote Heller, “Bess’s behaviour and the ‘happy dust’ [cocaine] gave me a little shiver, but I was innocently smiling and denied any immorality.” It contained, he avowed “typically American music of a high level.” Happily, the opera’s status as a “classic” served both to reassure those who were hesitant to see it and to discredit those whom it subsequently offended. When, for example, the manager of the Auditorium in Los Angeles tried to pressure Breen into restaging some of the more sexually explicit scenes in the production, the director shot back: “[a]s you know, nearly every great classic deals with the basic passions; extracting these fundamental elements from any one of them is to kill them.”³⁷

We are moving here through the layerings of masks, for just as the notion of a “folk classic” could distance audiences from aspects of the show that might prick them disagreeably, so too could it dignify what

³⁶ *Chicago Defender*, 28 June 1952 and 27 Feb. 1954; *Washington Afro-American*, 9 Aug. 1952; *Chicago Defender*, 7 June 1952; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 Feb. 1954.

³⁷ OSU, BC, F5 Pt.1: “Europe 1954–55, A. Heller to R. Breen, 1 May 1953; Breen quoted in A. Woods, “‘Those Hot Hands’: Porgy and Bess: Los Angeles 1954: Containing Disruptive Black Sexuality on Stage,” paper read to the American Society for Theater Research Conference, 1992.

would otherwise prove scandalous. And this was important, because sex appears to have been the production's leading attraction; critic after critic commented on it, the company's advertising emphasized it and Breen repeatedly insisted on it. Robert Dustin, the company's manager, for example, remarked that in preparing a market for their arrival they circulated "sexy pictures." The photos carried captions like: "the villainous Crown, played by Paul Harris, tantalizes the sensuous Bess played by Gloria Day"; "the voluptuous Bess displays her wares to the enjoyment of the infamous 'Sporting Life'; and 'Come up Here' cries the monstrous Crown played by John McCurry to Bess played by Irene Williams as he carries her off seductively." When the manager in LA objected to "the harlot Bess ... as sexy and vivid," Breen remarked to the press: "vivid and Sexy? If Miss Williams' portrayal was NOT just that, we'd get another actress. After all, this is a story of bare primitive emotions."³⁸

Sex, sinuously connected to the idea of the savage, seems also to have defined the production in the minds of company members. Years later what the white wardrobe primarily remembered was "[t]he sensuousness of [it all] – it was a sensuous group of people, also the sensuous music and it was a sensuous production." Even the actors responded favourably to Breen's design: "[t]he music was so sensuous," recalled Martha Flowers, one of the actors performing Bess, "what can match the sensuality and the rhythm, the underlying rhythm of the Kittiwah scene between Bess and Crown? What can match that?"³⁹

The Kittiwah picnic, where Sportin' Life excites orgiastic behavior and where Bess is raped by Crown, actually became the dramatic apex of the production. In Breen's staging, the scene started with men and women coiled together on the ground; one actress raised a naked leg and twined it around a man, a couple emerged from behind a bush, the male "adjusting" his pants, while others danced "sensuously." After Sportin' Life twisted one girl into her own "sensuous dance," Crown emerged and "catching Bess by the arm" prevented her from leaving the island with the others. He then "seize[d]" her basket and "tosse[d] it [away]," "grabbing" her arm and "pulling her to him." Then, though Bess "resist[ed] his advances," he raped her: he "r[an] his hands over her breasts, onto her belly, over her thighs," "pull[ed] her back" when her

³⁸ OSU, BC, Box 22/2, clipping file: LA controversy, *Valley Times*, 15 July 1954; *The Mirror*, 14 July 1954; *Los Angeles Herald and Express*, 14 July 1954.

³⁹ OSU, BC, Interview with Alice Webb and Marilyn Putnam, 14 Dec. 1987; Interview with Martha Flowers, 17 June 1988.

“tugging ... for release” momentarily freed her; “unfasten[ed] [the] sash from [her] dress” and “w[ou]nd” it “around her neck.” Then, as he slid behind her, forshadowing their intercourse, Bess suddenly consented in her assault, “mov[ing] her hips back against him sensuously,” then, turning, “slid[ing] her hand across his chest” and finally, “aroused ... claw[ing] at his hair – his chest – [and] mov[ing] sensuously as she rip[ped] the shirt off him.” Finally, Crown “order[ed] her into [a] thicket and she g[ot] down into the thicket and he [went] to her unbuttoning his pants” as the curtain dropped.⁴⁰

American and foreign critics and, one presumes from the enthusiastic applause, most audience members, were thrilled by this pornographic display. It was, admittedly, nothing new in night club entertainment – black women nude and scantily clothed had been performing in jungle settings since at least the 1920s – but it was a novelty in the concert hall and an operatic revolution. And, perhaps for that reason, sex came to dominate representations of the show. In describing the performance, drama and music critics alike charged their words with their own sexual excitement: the opera “throbbed,” “vibrated” and “pulsated”; it was “lusty,” “sensuous,” and “raw”; it was, announced the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, “a flash story of sex and murder, pulsating with the vigour of the late George Gershwin’s mightiest music, and staged with a realism that sometimes reaches a savage intensity.”⁴¹

The African American press was equally enthusiastic. Leontyne Price, the first Bess, was “talented and quite sexy ... Likewise she is terrific as a Lyricist”; and more: she had “the shapeliness required for the part ... the sight of her ankles and the unmatched voice she displays are but two of her possessions.” Bess, declared the *Baltimore Afro-American* unfavourably, was little more than “a wiggling gall,” even if it had to be admitted that “seldom did one observe such whistling material in a characterized play.” The Kittiwah scene, noted another, would not have been out of place in the movie *Duel in the Sun*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Needless to say, none of these stage directions are in the original libretto. As the boat leaves the island, stranding Bess, Gershwin sends rippling waves through the orchestra to signify its departure. Breen used these waves to signify Crown’s hands caressing Bess. Similarly, in the original score Bess resists his advances to the end, surrendering at (r165) when all is clearly hopeless. In the Breen production she yielded at (r157), making her subsequent protests into little more than sexual play.

⁴¹ OSU, BC, N/A: Feb.–Apr. 1955, Reviews, *La Lanterne*, 18–19 June 1955; F109: US Cities 1954, Review Book, *The Denver Post*, 2 June 1954; *Los Angeles Times*, 14 July 1954; *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, 26 Jan. 1954.

⁴² *Chicago Defender*, 28 June 1952 and 6 March 1954; *The Afro-American* (Baltimore), 11 Apr. 1953; *Richmond Afro-American*, 17 May 1952.

The generally ecstatic reactions should not really surprise us. It was the age of *Playboy* and *Peyton Place*, of Marilyn Monroe and “mammary madness” and Americans liked to believe that sexual mores were changing and that their attitudes had become fresh and sophisticated. A primary manifestation of that liberation lay in their acceptance of, and pleasure in, the exposure of the female body to view, whether in bikinis, tight sweaters or off-the-shoulder dresses. *Porgy* provided that exposure – Bess’ dress in the first Act was tight around the bottom and breasts, left the arms and shoulders bare, was slit high up the front and, during the opening scene crap game, was raised slowly along her thigh so that money could be removed from a garter – but it went much further. That a female “no” meant “yes” was of course a commonplace in melodrama and romance; where Breen exploded the form was in his graphic display of the sexual attraction. No soft focus here, no dewy eyes and quivering mouth; this was sex with hips crushing and hands tearing. And yet, despite its sexually explicit content, those seeing the show maintained that “[t]his production of *Porgy and Bess* [presents] a completely American folk opera, widely recognized as a great work of art.”⁴³ In other words, the production presented pornographic titillation in the guise of high-brow culture. And this was a heady mix.

But if Breen’s *Porgy* punctured the girdle of middle-class propriety, it did so without really challenging dominant gender stereotypes. Even though the women in the production were portrayed as having aggressive sexual appetites – something critics of Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* had found quite disturbing in 1953 – few appear to have thought this surprising. The reason is simple: where Kinsey was discussing white women – the daughters, wives and mothers of suburbia – Breen was portraying prostitutes and poor blacks. Though Breen’s Bess might have longed, as he explained it, “for a respectable existence, to be addressed as ‘sister’ by the village women, and to be taken into their circle,” she remained, nonetheless, “a beautiful whore.”⁴⁴ Unwilling to accept that the sex women sold was not really enjoyed by them, men had traditionally configured the prostitute as a sheath of lust. Bess therefore embodied a popular conception – “Brown sugar” – and it was Porgy’s love, not her own wanton sexuality, that was intended to jar the audience. Bess’ intrinsically libidinous nature was what made Porgy’s love so absolute.

Similarly, the dripping sexuality of the Kittiwah scene, which affected

⁴³ EL, OCB, Box 15, 007.2 (6), Department of State Staff Study: “Proposed Tour of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union,” 20 Sept. 1955.

⁴⁴ OSU, BC, F109 (2), Review Book 3, *Schwaebische Post*, 8 Mar. 1956.

almost all the female characters in the opera, further substantialized a stereotype. In this scene, the curtain rose to reveal dense underbrush, hanging vines, a huge tree with a suggestively gaping hole and a thick canopy of leaves that blocked out the light. A large drum stood on stage. If female sexuality was activated here, if passions boiled in even the most upright of women, that was only because Kittiwah was the primitive jungle and these people were returning to their savage roots.

As Alan Woods has shown, Breen's *Porgy* revealed a fundamentally racist sexism. Not only was the stage imagery drawn from the imagery associated with the primitive, but the white spectator's acceptance of the vivid sexuality on stage hinged on the fact that it was blacks who were on display. Just as black nudity was never censored when it was photographed on the savanna or in the rain forest and used to decorate the pages of *National Geographic*, so too was black female sexuality acceptable because the women themselves lay outside white definitions of proper womanhood. Colour made the erotic exotic but also objective, because it allowed it to be discussed and depicted as frankly as animal sexuality. Of course, this "objectivity" also concealed a white fantasy. The African stud was both a threat to white womanhood and a subject of secret male envy, while the black siren was at once the savage beast and the Hottentot Venus: a fetish of white desire. This unspoken dream of "white negritude" was the essence of *Porgy's* allure, just as the immiscibility of the black object's colour and the white subject's lust was what allowed that attraction to be repressed and decentered.⁴⁵ As with the politics of the production, *Porgy's* sensuality was at the same time exposed and contained, distanced and masked for and by the audience.

Breen's attitude to race relations was similarly multilayered. On the one hand, he worked hard to make his African American cast feel that this was their work and that it was serving to advance the equality of American blacks. But he was at the same time unable to bridge the divide of race and understand the sensibilities of his co-workers. His injunction during an early rehearsal of the Kittiwah scene that the troupe should throw themselves into "the jungle rhythm" was resisted by the actors. Similarly, he often liked to play the ethnographer and watch cast members in their "daily movements," even going so far as to tape one of their card games in order to get authentic "black speech" and "actions" he might

⁴⁵ M. Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: 1990). The repressed sexual fantasies of whites could, when challenged, result in horrific ritual violence as T. Harris demonstrates in *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: 1984), Ch. 1

incorporate into the show. Granted, his blurring of the lines between stage image and lived life was part of his realist aesthetic, but there was more to it than that. Though he repeatedly told the crew that *Porgy* was no more a mirror of black realities than *Aida* was Egyptian or *Madama Butterfly* Japanese, he clearly believed he was distilling the essence of his cast's blackness.⁴⁶ Like Heyward and the Gershwins before him, he assumed there was a "basic rhythm of the Negro folk" that might be detected even in the most urbane of African Americans. This objectification of the actors' race was most painfully revealed in his effort to put Lawrence Tibbett on stage as Porgy for ten performances in New York, despite the Gershwins' prohibition on whites performing the black roles. Tibbett had been the most extraordinary American baritone of the 1930s, a well-known radio personality and, among other roles, the creator – in blackface – of Gruenberg's *Emperor Jones*. He had also recorded a set of vocally brilliant if somewhat tastelessly "coloured" *Porgy* excerpts for Victor in 1936. By the mid-1940s, however, his voice was in tatters and his career at its sad and inebriated end. The idea of corking him up and putting him on stage for a series of performances in the Ziegfeld Theatre was, even for Breen, remarkably insensitive and artistically indefensible. It might, however, have been an effective publicity stunt – Breen himself called it "exploitational" – had the cast not refused to perform with him.⁴⁷

Naturally, the overwhelmingly white audience, and the critics who saw the show, were not privy to these backstage intrigues. But the reviewers, at least, engaged actively in the production's racial masking and derived apparent satisfaction from the powerful mix of denigration and approbation they saw revealed before them. For both European and American whites the opera was a deeply self-affirming experience, confirming their social distance from blacks while at the same time assuaging their guilt. They knew from the pre-performance publicity, and from the playbills they received, that the "majority of the company has college degrees and many speak and sing in different languages"; they

⁴⁶ Reaction to "Jungle rhythm" comment is recorded in OSU, BC, Interview with Ella Gerber, 12 Nov. 1987; OSU, BC, F26: Blevins Davis Correspondence 1953–55, R. Breen to B. Davis, 23 June 1953; F44A: card game is referred to by Lilian Hayman in Alpert, *Porgy and Bess*, 167; for comparisons to other operas see, Vienna and Berlin, "For October 26 broadcast of tape recording of *Porgy and Bess* over Red-White-Red Network."

⁴⁷ Interview with Ella Gerber, 12 Nov. 1987. An equally tasteless plan was to have the journalist Art Buchwald accompany the show on its tour of Yugoslavia and write his *Herald Tribune* reports "in jive"; F5 Pt.1: Europe 1954–55, R. Tobias to R. Breen, 19 Nov. 1954.

could tell from the singing and acting that some were also enormous talents. And yet, here they were, confirming the hoariest of stereotypes: here was the siren, the buck, the pimp, there the mammy, the primitive and, above it all, the black Christ. Robert Breen, one reviewer exclaimed, has captured “the mentality of a primitive human community.” Or, as the Baltimore *Afro-American* stormed, the opera “is delighting the bigots on Broadway and putting the colored race to shame.” The fact that white critics in North America and Europe objectified the characters in the same ways reveals both the pervasiveness of these stereotypes and their prominence in the opera production. Though the more talented actors undoubtedly worked to make their roles their own, and in so doing explode the caricatures through their individualization, the critics – if they can be taken as a measure of white audience perceptions – continued to see what they expected to see.⁴⁸

Bess, not surprisingly, provoked the greatest descriptive excess: she was “alternately a woman of sweetness and compassion or a creature of animalistic appetites”; she was “hot, feline, supple and yet weak and helpless.” In her character the “heart of the Negro comes alive: their passion, longing, and melancholy, their basic superstition and their overarching optimism.” Porgy, in the meantime, was “the warm breath of human solidarity”; “lively yet touching, simple and unspoiled.” Crown, for his part, was simply an “enormous gorilla, [a] human beast with a roaring laugh,” while Sportin’ Life embodied “the Devil ... half menace and half bufoon.” The opera, enthused one critic, putting a happy spin on the images he saw revealed, “represents the last link in a series of works in which the myth of the “noble savage” and the natural goodness of man have acted as a powerful leaven.”⁴⁹

The widespread condemnation of *Porgy* within the black newspaper community was a direct consequence of these racist stereotypes. What most troubled the editor of the *Washington Afro-American* was that spectators would leave the theatre thinking that “colored people are crapshooters who believe that human life is cheap.” Others were even more

⁴⁸ OSU, BC, F27: Public Relations, Russia (8), Article by Robert Breen for *Neva*, 4 Jan. 1956; F109 (2), Review Book 3, *Swaebische Post*, 8 Mar. 1956; *Afro-American*, cited in Taylor, “Ambassadors of the Arts,” 94. Maya Angelou, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (New York: 1976), 250, suggests that the actors did “live” their roles, experiencing the injustice and oppression on stage as a condensation of the brutality and discrimination they confronted on the street.

⁴⁹ F109: Russia/Europe Review Book, 1955–56, *Berliner Telegraf*, 11 Dec. 1955; F109 (2): Italy Review Book, *Milano* (translation), 23 Feb. 1955; *Musical America*, 15 Apr. 1953; N/A: Munich, *Muenchener Abendzeitung*, 2 Dec. 1955; F109: USA Tour, 1953, Reviews, *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 3 Dec. 1953.

hostile: the characters in the opera, stormed a *Pittsburgh Courier* reviewer, are “depraved ... murderers, illiterates, sycophants, prostitutes, dope addicts and degenerates ... Herein the basest emotions, the vilest of human frailties and the most damnable of earthly sins are dramatized and set to music. Moreover, bowing, grinning, leering colored riff-raff are projected as they cower and cringe before mean and vicious Caucasian police ... *Porgy and Bess* has some great colored singers. They are far from mediocre but their roles are disgraceful and demoralizing.” As another complained, why is it “that all operas dealing with the brother must either be in the gut-bucket style or some frantic jungle stuff with voodoo and tribal dances.” The show, wrote yet another “holds colored people up to ridicule.”⁵⁰ These critics were, of course, as bemused by *Porgy*’s masking as were so many white reviews. Unwilling, because of preconceptions, or unable, because of the staging, to move beyond the stereotypes, they attacked the opera for the very reasons so many whites found it agreeable.

Not all African American critics, however, remained unmoved by what Breen was trying to do, even though they had enormous difficulties overcoming the opera’s stage images. The result proved deeply troubling to commentators like Kay Pitman of the *Washington Afro-American* and his views are sufficiently complex that they warrant close scrutiny. After first masking and distancing the opera by classifying it as “one of the few authentic operas ever written in this country” and praising it as “one of the best known theatre pieces of this era,” Pitman then stripped away the mask he had just applied by decrying the work for having “gained acceptance as a classic everywhere except among the people it most closely touches.” It was the setting and the characters, he observed, that gave greatest offence: the people “are meant to look like poor, backward, down home folks. They are purposely given little hope of ever rising above their environment.” And yet, after seeing Breen’s production, he was led to ask: “is there a more heroic character in modern literature than Porgy[?]. He may look like a bum, but how does he feel about it and what does he attempt to do about it.” The two images pulled at Pitman’s conscience: “is it nobility of spirit or corn whiskey that keeps him going?” And what of Bess; was she really such a “regrettable characterization?” Admittedly they are character types, but are they not at the same time “humans caught up in their environment?” Pitman even found something “all too real in [Sportin’ Life’s] roguish cynicism.” Ultimately the critic failed to resolve his confusion and moved on to

⁵⁰ *Washington Afro-American*, 11 Apr. 1953; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 26 July 1952; *Afro-American* (Baltimore), 9 Aug. 1952.

review the food at Ruby Foo's Den, a new Washington restaurant, but his struggle with the masks is noteworthy. He was, he admitted, a "sensitive" reader of the opera's messages and he was clearly groping to remove the production's layered complexities. His failure to reach a point of resolution reveals both the weight of his own cultural baggage and the *mélange* of messages he was receiving from the stage.⁵¹

Most of those reviewing the production did not work as hard as Pitman to understand it. In their writings, the stereotypes appear to have functioned to distort the opera's meaning in extraordinary ways. Through them, an opera which seemed, on one level, to offer a condemnation of the Southern caste system and a paean to humanity in the face of oppression, was not only refashioned into a confirmation of prevailing racial and sexual stereotypes, but also served to justify a culture of containment. Bess, the whore, might embody social vice and community disorder, primitive sexuality and female irrationality, but, when transformed into "Porgy's woman," she signified peace, domesticity and virtue. During the scenes where Bess was "tamed" by Porgy, she abandoned her low cut, high slit, hip-moulded dress and wore demure calico print and an apron. Breen's staging of the lovers' duet is particularly revealing: Bess remained behind Porgy and in positions that made her shorter than him (he remained, as a cripple, on his knees throughout the opera) through most of the song, holding him by the shoulders as he looked down on her from a kneeling position, then moving over to a chair and cradling him as they intertwined their "Summertimes" and "Wintertimes." As the stage darkened around them and the song ended, Bess stood and pressed the kneeling Porgy to her breast, enfolding him in her arms, the consummate wife and mother. This domestic interlude was also, symbolically, the only moment of calm in the opera. It was Bess' abandonment of domesticity that brought on Crown's death, Porgy's arrest and her own fall into dope and prostitution. The fruit of female sexuality was chaos – a common enough message in early cold war literature and drama. But read this way, as a fable of domestic containment, Porgy's pursuit of Bess becomes less the triumph of the one over the group, or of forgiveness over fear, than a restoration of the tranquillity of the hearth. As the *Smema* reviewer slyly noted: "the spectator leaves the theatre with the full assurance that Porgy will find his wife and that happiness will once again be established in his miserable hut."⁵²

The same ironic juxtapositioning, the same potential subordination of

⁵¹ *Washington Afro-American*, 12 Dec. 1953.

⁵² EL, OCB, Box 15, 007.3 (6), U. Kovalyev, "Porgy and Bess," *Smema*, 29 Dec. 1955.

the dissident message to the metanarrative of cold war culture, can be seen in the masking of the race question. The characters in the Breen production had a childlike innocence and a primitive passion which could only have confirmed the unreadiness of African Americans for equality. As a prominent, and ostensibly liberal, Department of State official confessed to Wilva Breen, in her eyes the special attributes of the “Negro race” which the opera revealed were the “sublime faith of their souls and the trust and love they feel for their neighbour ... Perhaps in another generation when they have attained that full equality they so richly deserve, a sophistication may develop that will brush away some of their shining qualities – but as of now the attributes of their nature are very marked in the case of the *Porgy* company.”⁵³

Robert Breen shared with such progressive directors as Nicholas Ray and Fred Zinnemann a desire to critique contemporary injustices, but, like them, he became entangled in his own masquerade. The images he offered on stage, the core of generosity as well as the layerings of prejudice, characterized the whole production. In explaining to an interviewer what made the job of directing a black cast so rewarding, Breen observed significantly, “they believe more. When they have faith in the director, they become the character they represent.” There was a sad meaning, then, to the Breens’ de-personalization of the cast. With the exception of the big stars – Price, Warfield and Calloway – the Breens in private correspondence almost never referred to the actors by name. Rather, they were “one of the two Bess’s “our Crown,” or “one of our Porgy’s.” Arguably, Breen’s inability in correspondence to describe his actors as people may have governed his whole approach to the opera. After all, the highly choreographed, overdirected stage attracted attention to the absent presence of the white director. Was this a reflection of Breen’s inner belief that his black cast needed controlling, that they could not be allowed to steal the limelight? Certainly, as Warfield discovered, Breen could be vindictive towards those who failed to provide him with unflinching devotion.⁵⁴ Though a liberal on civil rights issues, Breen suffered the myopia of so many of his New Deal compatriots. Equal and yet not equal, alluring and yet dangerously foreign: the progressive attitude to African Americans was troublingly complex and yet

⁵³ OSU, BC, F134, ANTA–State Correspondence, May 1955, M. French to W. Breen, n. d., rec’d 25 Oct. 1955.

⁵⁴ OSU, BC, F27; Public Relations, Italy, “Revolution in the Lyric Theatre – Interview with Robert Breen,” *La Fiera Letteraria* (translation), 8 May 1955. Warfield, *My Music & My Life*, 142–45.

maddeningly simple. In this, as in so much else, Breen's thinking had made little progress since the 1930s and this made it not unacceptable to conservative policy makers and white critics in the 1950s.

Unwittingly, the majority of the cast played its part in the company's racial masking. Overwhelmingly young, talented and grateful for the opportunities the production provided, cast members by and large accommodated themselves to their director's demands. For many, touring *Porgy* became the "high-point" in their careers and even those, like Warfield or Price, who went on to greater successes, could look back on the show and realize how remarkable was their early "lionization." In theatres and auditoriums across the United States and around the world, these actors were cheered and feted. It was an overwhelming experience. As Maya Angelou reflected, "even my imagination had never dared include me in Europe ... I was the too tall, unpretty colored girl who had been born to unhappy parents and raised in the dirt roads of Arkansas and [thanks to *Porgy*] I was [in Europe] for the only time in my life." And when, at a show's end, the cast members experienced the largely white audience "on its feet, yelling and applauding" their bows were as much to "compliment each other" as to acknowledge the audience. As Angelou explained, this was "the greatest array of Negro talent [we] had ever seen."⁵⁵

The *Porgy* experience was a demonstration, in cruel times, of the artistry and grace of African American actors, but the mask of achievement actually helped to further obscure the opera's message of repression. Department of State officials, believing, on one level, that the opera depicted social reality, initially fretted over sending such a production and company abroad. "There are some risks involved," the administrators worried, "such as the exploitation of the theme of *Porgy and Bess* as an illustration of American 'racial prejudice,' [as well as] the possible [communist] indoctrination of troupe members." But the cast swiftly put these fears to rest. Invariably, foreign post officials enthused over the performer professionalism and patriotism. As one report to the Department of State emphasized, the company "conducted themselves in an exemplary fashion – no drunkenness [sic] – and ... when they were questioned on segregation they would proceed to relate all the strides that had been made." The Department of State was well pleased: "the cast itself, when off the stage, deports itself in such a manner as to belie Communist propaganda of racial discrimination and [the] maltreatment of

⁵⁵ Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin'*, 251 and 127.

negroes.”⁵⁶ Remarkably, the dignity and talent of the cast was not only being used to uphold white prejudices regarding black simplicity, they were also serving to prove that the racism underlying the stereotypes was itself nothing more than communist propaganda.

Through these racial stereotypes, an opera which seemed, on one level, so critical of the caste system, was refashioned by white critics and Department of State officials into a confirmation of the “strides” that were being made by an apartheid culture. Simultaneously, a production which challenged US cold war politics and morality was made over into a tool in the struggle against communism. A show that liberated blacks conveyed the message within its own staging that they were not yet ready for freedom. And an opera which defended reality and moral certitude in defiance of doubt, fear and ambivalence, offered a justification for dominant images. The stereotypes became real because the show was realistic. In this way, as the writings of both American and foreign critics demonstrate, *Porgy*’s racism and sexism served to mask its message of tolerance, respect and the power of forgiveness. Breen was no cold warrior – he regarded state power, whether American or Soviet, with suspicion, believed in the basic goodness of ordinary people, was convinced individuals counted and felt that love would overcome hate by force of example. He truly considered himself “progressive” in his approach to race relations, in his willingness and ability to work with communists, in his aesthetic vision. But Breen’s liberalism was bounded by racial and gender assumptions that drew him into and not away from cold war culture. Ultimately, his work became a more powerful affirmation of racism and sexism and of American power abroad because it presented itself as a forward-looking challenge to these very forces.

That *Porgy* was masked by elements within itself suggests something significant about New Deal liberalism and its place in Eisenhower’s America. The survival of a mainstream moralistic, symbolic, communi-

⁵⁶ For perception of risks, EL, OCB, 007.1 (4), Box 15, “discussion of Soviet Invitation to the Porgy and Bess Troupe,” 31 Mar. 1955. Post reports: EL, White House Office, Administrative Series, Box 37, USIA (2), Riddleberger to Secretary of State, 17 Dec. 1954. EL, OCB, 007.2 (6), Box 15, Department of State Staff Study: “Proposed Tour of Porgy and Bess in the Soviet Union,” 20 Sept. 1955, appendix: from despatch to Department of State from USIS Barcelona, Feb. 1955. EL, White House Central Files, General File, 137-A-2(2), On cast department: R. Breen to Rabb, 6 June 1956. EL, OCB, 007.2 (6), Box 15, Department of State Staff Study: “Proposed Tour of Porgy and Bess in the Soviet Union,” 20 Sept. 1955. According to Blevins Davis, Porgy “has been a direct answer to the communists and destroys their charge that the Negroes [are] enslaved.” OSU, BC, F5 Pt.1: Porgy and Bess, 1952–53, B. Davis to W. Breen, 6 Feb. 1953.

tarian liberal aesthetic during the worst of the McCarthy years might be heartening, but we should not ignore the noxious aspects of that vision. The moral absolutes with which Breen dealt, the triumph of love and forgiveness, the survival of the ethical community of free individuals cowed only by brute violence, are all uplifting messages. And they were present and observable in the opera. But that message was overwhelmed, masked and largely neutralized – removed from daily concerns – by the director's reliance on familiar stereotypes and by the promotion of the show as a folk classic. Rather than provoking self-criticism, the opera encouraged distancing. The immediacy that Breen placed on stage – the excitement and recreation of the life depicted – did not lead white critics or government officials to analyze racism in their own lives or fight against the injustices of sexual exploitation. As one interpreter has recently observed of Breen's type of social realism, its "comforting closure ... ironically, reinforces the pastness of the action, its safe distance from the spectator, and so its illusion." For all Breen's progressive idealism, this became an opera, a musico-drama, a piece of folk memory rather than a living statement.⁵⁷

The Everyman Company's *Porgy* asks us to reassess our understanding of cold war culture. The fact that an old fashioned piece of moral theatre could receive the highest state sanction and be praised as "our latest weapon in the Cold War," suggests that historians may have exaggerated the postwar break with the aesthetics of the New Deal. Social and cultural criticism could be staged to ecstatic reviews and packed houses, and even the high priests of liberal ambivalence could accept the show on its own terms as new, exciting and real. The "consensus" that *Porgy* flood-lit was of a different kind. It was a consensus regarding images of race, sex and high art and it was the centrality of these that made Breen's *Porgy* appear contemporary even as it rendered it unthreatening. Because the dissident voices in the production were not received unmediated by the audience's prejudices or the white director's preconceptions, the stereotypes acted as filters which isolated the social problems revealed in the opera both from the reality of what they depicted and from the audiences that filled the concert halls. Even the cast's struggle to demonstrate the depth of black talent in America was turned, as Martha Flowers sadly reflected, into support for the belief that "we were now included in society."

There was nothing monolithic or unidimensional about this process; on the contrary, the forces of New Deal liberalism, realism, racism,

⁵⁷ A. Fleche, *Mimetic Disillusion: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Dramatic Realism* (Tuscaloosa: 1997), 43.

patriarchy, moral certitude and politicized art competed for control of the stage. And while, in this instance, the crude stereotypes and simplifications obscured the production's political and moral dissent, that should not be taken as criticism of *Porgy and Bess*. That the show provided room for liberal oppositions and black aspirations in a era unfriendly to both was itself astounding. The promise, then, endures that the humanity and beauty encrypted in the opera might be used to fight social injustices even as the repressive images displayed in Breen's production may have unwittingly served to perpetuate them.