

PORGY AND BESS

Music by George Gershwin

Libretto by Du Bose Heyward

Lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin

First Performed on October 10, 1935 in New York

Characters

Jasbo Brown (pianist)

Clara (soprano)

Mingo (tenor)

Jake (baritone)

Sportin' Life (tenor)

Robbins (tenor)

Serena (soprano)

Jim (baritone)

Peter (tenor)

Lily (mezzo-soprano)

Maria (contralto)

Scipio (child actor)

Porgy (baritone)

Crown (baritone)

Bess (soprano)

Detective (actor)

Undertaker (baritone)

Annie (mezzo-soprano)

Frazier (baritone)

Strawberry Woman (mezzo-soprano)

Crab Man (tenor)

Nelson (tenor)

Coroner (actor)

JASBO BROWN

Jasbo Brown, the kind of jazz musician who inspired Gershwin's work is at his piano.

Act 1

Scene 1 – Catfish Row, a summer evening

Clara sings a lullaby while a group of men begin a crap game. Porgy, a crippled beggar, comes through the gate in his goat cart and joins the game. A drunken Crown arrives with Bess and argues with Robbins; a fight ensues, and he kills Robbins. Crown escapes, leaving Bess to fend for herself. Sportin' Life tries to get her to go with him, but she refuses. Bess knocks on doors seeking shelter. All but Porgy's remain closed to her, and she enters his room.

Scene 2 – Serena's Room, the following night

Neighbors come to comfort Serena and to place money in the saucer for Robbins' burial. A detective takes Peter away as a witness to the murder. The undertaker agrees to bury Robbins for what money there is in the saucer, Serena promising to come up later with the balance.

Scene 3 – Catfish Row, a month later, in the morning

Jake prepares to take his fishing boat out. Lawyer Frazier manages to sell Porgy a divorce for Bess even though it turns out that she has not been married to Crown. As a buzzard flies ominously over, Porgy fears losing his newly-won happiness and he chases away Sportin' Life

who attempts to win over Bess with “happy dust.” All in Catfish Row have donned their best and brightest finery for a picnic. Bess wants to stay back with Porgy, but Porgy persuades her to go along and have a good time.

Scene 4 – Kittiwah Island, that evening

Everyone dances and sings into the night; Serena summons everyone to the departing boat. Bess, the last to go, is suddenly confronted by Crown who emerges from hiding. Crown wants Bess, and she is once again unable to resist.

Act 2

Scene 1 – Catfish Row, a week later, just before dawn

Bess has been sick and delirious since returning to Catfish Row. Bess confesses to a forgiving Porgy that although she wants to stay in Catfish Row, she fears she’ll not be strong enough to resist when Crown comes for her. The wind begins to blow; a hurricane bell clangs; people take cover.

Scene 2 – Serena’s Room, dawn of the next day

The storm is still raging. Neighbors have gathered together to keep each other company and to pray when Crown appears. When Clara rushes out to find Jake, whose boat has broken up, Crown plunges into the storm after her.

Scene 3 – Catfish Row, the next night

The storm is over, and the residents of the Row are mourning the loss of Clara and Jake. Crown appears and makes his way toward Porgy’s room. Porgy wrestles him to the ground and kills Crown.

Scene 4 – Catfish Row, the next afternoon

The detective and the coroner tell Porgy that he must identify Crown’s body, and the police drag Porgy out. Sportin’ Life tells Bess that Porgy will undoubtedly be put in jail and hints that it could be for a year or two. With the help of “happy dust,” Sportin’ Life paints a glamorous picture of life in New York. Bess leaves with Sportin’ Life.

Scene 5 – Catfish Row, a week later

It’s a lovely morning. Porgy returns to Catfish Row and has brought presents for Bess and his friends. People surround him, sad, silent, and embarrassed. Porgy learns that Bess is not there; she is alive but she has gone to New York. Porgy calls for his goat and his cart and leaves Catfish Row in search of his woman.