

"Lost in the Stars" @ Glimmerglass, 7/22/12

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By Joseph Dalton

COOPERSTOWN – "Lost in the Stars" fulfilled expectations and made it complete. This is the strongest season at Glimmerglass in my eleven years of reviewing the company.

Strictly speaking the 1949 Kurt Weill-Maxwell Anderson piece might be called a musical, because of its Broadway genesis and copious amount of spoken dialogue. But of the four Glimmerglass presentations this season, it is the most timely and deeply felt. Through the immediacy of the songs and the quality of the performances, especially that of bass-baritone Eric Owens, labels and genres are transcended. The primacy of art and humanity rise to the fore.

Yet the subject of the show is actually the barriers caused by labels, specifically the animosity between races. Based on Alan Paton's novel "Cry, the Beloved Country," it's a wrenching story set in the apartheid of South Africa. The production is a collaboration with Cape Town Opera and directed by Tazewell Thompson.

Just as in daily life, theater and opera goers have been learning, perhaps sometimes struggling, to become color blind. For example, Glimmerglass' current production of "The Music Man" is set in a 1940s small town, populated by a happily integrated, if completely imaginative multi-racial citizenship.

For "Lost in the Stars," the divide of blacks and whites is clear and necessary. It makes for a poignant but fragile moment when the principals achieve reconciliation. A fascinating touch is that a terrific young tenor of Sri Lankan heritage, Sean Panikkar, was cast in the pivotal role of a narrator.

Composer Kurt Weill was, of course, a German Jewish refugee and channeled some of his personal experience into the overall concept. His music, though, is tuneful and mildly jazzy in a post "Porgy and Bess" kind of way. Among the highlights was "Who'll Buy," sung with lively suggestion by mezzo Chrystal E. Williams, and "O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me," which Owens made into a powerful aria.

A single unit set by Michael Mitchell consists of burnished walls resembling corrugated steel. Robert Wierzel's brilliant play of light and shadow keep it interesting.

Two songs cut from the show's Broadway debut have been restored, "Little Tin God" and "Gold." Each was an interesting and engaging nugget.

John DeMain returned from "The Music Man" to again conduct and the Glimmerglass Orchestra remains in unusually good form, despite the season's diverse demands.