

Lost in the Stars at Glimmerglass

AUGUST 3, 2012 BY [SUSAN GALBRAITH](#)

Lost in the Stars, directed by the very talented Tazewell Thompson, was, by contrast to the *Aida* production in its design and performance style, restrained and quietly stunning but no less disturbing. It made a perfect pairing in the Glimmerglass season tackling social issues of critical importance through different styles and periods of music-theatre.



Eric Owens as Stephen Kumalo (Photo: William M. Brown/The Glimmerglass Festival)

Never having seen this work, *Lost in the Stars* hit me with the force of everything that a work of theatre should have. Perhaps I should have been more prepared for its emotional impact knowing it was based on Alan Paton's memorable and courageous work, "Cry, the Beloved Country." My father had known Paton when he was working in South Africa and always had admired him and the tireless work he had done to help bring his country out of its oppressive apartheid policies.

Designer Michael Mitchell avoids the pitfall of turning the set into a National Geographic special, although by my father's account, South Africa is the most beautiful country in the world and has often been called a major character in Paton's book. Instead, the stage starts out as a floor-to-ceiling stockade of corrugated beams, lit so effectively by lighting designer Robert Wierzel that it changes from a crushing animal pen to a symbolic landscape that evokes the beauty of South Africa's hills. As the show continues, segments of the walls lift and separate like storage doors to create rectangular frames of various sizes. They are used effectively to emphasize the inequity of the two races grouped separately on stage as the White and Black Chorus. In one scene, a frame is tall enough so the White Chorus can stand, but the Blacks, corralled in a separate frame, have to crawl under the "gates" to sit on the ground. In the court scene, the Black Chorus is contained far upstage, only able to look on dumbly while the White Chorus weighs in heavily, seated centrally in the proceedings. Late in the play, in a painfully intimate scene, two men of different races come together, both broken by the loss of their sons. We watch the scene as if we are standing outside the White man Jarvis' house peeping in through the window. It is with a certain amount of Peeping Tom shame that we bear witness to their conversation and discover that both men are oppressed by a system that destroyed the dignity of Whites as well as Blacks.

Composer Kurt Weill knew something about oppression for he had come to America after escaping Nazi Germany and sought to find, in the freedom of New York and the stage, opportunities to give voice to new music-theatre forms. When he came together with friend and neighbor, playwright Maxwell Anderson, he found a writer with similar sensibilities to explore a tale of morality, injustice, and ultimately spiritual healing under South Africa's period of apartheid.



Wynn Harmon as James Jarvis (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

Together they created a performance piece – pointedly neither an opera nor a conventional Broadway musical — a play suffused with song and poetic musicality. The creators made the decision to limit the white characters to spoken dialogue; they gave only the Blacks a voice to soar musically. Weill experimented also with mixing-up musical styles within the work to create rich and sometimes intentionally jarring textures: jazz, popular song, strongly driven percussion passages in an interpretation (albeit with considerable liberal license) to conjure an African sound, extremely modern non-melodic passages, liturgically-inspired music, and complex operatic numbers.

Most of the music in this little-produced work is worthy; some of it is outstanding. In “Thousands of Miles,” Owens communicates the heartbreak of a father who can’t reach the son who has left his family’s rural community to eke out a better life in the complex and dangerous world of Johannesburg. In the song, the father faces the truth of the physical and emotional distance between them.

The two big numbers in the show are “Lost in the Stars” and “Cry the Beloved Country.” The first comes at the end of Act I and gives voice to the emotional crux of the piece: how does one keep faith when God seems to have forgotten you, your race, and culture. It is a simple yet effective tune and, sung by Eric Owens and the committed chorus, a deeply moving one. Likewise, the anthem “Cry, the Beloved Country” is brought in twice, moved in this production to serve as a stirring finale about the pain a land feels being ravaged by greed and injustice.

Artist in residence Eric Owens leads the company as Stephen Kumalo, the minister who struggles with both the loss of his son and his faith. Owens brings all his musical intelligence and prodigious emotional depth to the role. As he takes us on Kumalo’s heartbreaking journey of a man shattered in his faith, who stands by, helpless to rescue his son from a life gone terribly wrong and a mistake that ultimately convicts the young man to be hanged. The dignity he brings to the role is only surpassed by the shattering power in his voice.

Sean Panikkar makes a startlingly strong impression as Leader. In a white jumpsuit, he stands heroically proportioned, dominating the stage. With clean, weighted gestures and a strikingly beautiful tenor voice, Panikkar serves the production as leader of the Chorus and a kind of ever-present Stage Manager, ushering people on and off stage and, with a wave of his hand, shifting the stage pictures to tell the story. He becomes the voice of South Africa itself as he sings with such eloquence the descriptive poetry of Alan Paton as set by Kurt Weill.



The ensemble of The Glimmerglass Festival's production of Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's *Lost in the Stars*. (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

Thompson has achieved a beautiful ensemble in so many ways, despite the challenges that singers, coming from primarily opera backgrounds, face tackling long spoken dramatic scenes. Thompson has done his homework intellectually to ground this piece, but more, he has seemingly created an incubator that is a rehearsal process at its best where artists can find the safety to go inside to the emotional heart of a work such as this.

Wynn Harmon in the non-singing role of James Jarvis has the greatest distance to go emotionally as a white man trapped by his color and upbringing to hold others as something other than his brothers on earth, but when his more enlightened son is murdered and he allows himself to hear the pain of a Black (Kumalo) who has also lost his son, he opens his heart. His performance, like Owens's, sends seismic quakes out into the audience, and neither performer backs off from the emotional honesty required of them.

Some performers can cut loose best in the singing. Chrystal E. Williams pulls off the raunchy Broadway-style number "Who'll Buy" with such gutsiness infused with grace that she's downright honey-luscious as she basks in the radiance of her own sexuality and vocal heat. As a result, Williams new-mints this kind of song and uplifts its sentiments, reminding us that a government can oppress a people for a time with inhumane policies but never extinguish that people's spirit.

Brandy Lynn Hawkins as Irina, the pregnant girlfriend of Stephen Kumalo's son, has two beautiful legit arias, "Trouble Man" and the second act number "Stay Well," where the woman sings of hope against the hopelessness. South Africa performer Makudupanyane Senoana plays the hapless son Absalom, and I regret that Weill chose not to set some songs to highlight key moments in this character's life. He deserves them. Although he is a young performer, he gave his all to the scenes where he both chooses the harder moral road and the terror he carries forward after his sentencing.

Anderson's and Weill's collaboration balanced some brilliant moments. Just when the tension in the play feels as if it might suffocate in its relentless tragic arc, they inserted a little relief with a song sung by little Caleb McLaughlin, who plays the young nephew of Kumalo. Pound for pound, this performer delivers like a stick of dynamite. He sings "Big Mole," a charming ditty, as he runs and plays exuberantly. But the song also serves as a chilling reminder of how children can internalize aspects of a horrendous system (in this case, the way grown men are kept for months in pens and then lowered miles underground to serve as "big moles" in mining for treasure which will never benefit them) until dark truths become part of playful lore.