

## Stellar *Lost in the Stars* at Glimmerglass Festival



The seldom-seen opera musical *Lost in the Stars* found prominence Friday night, enrapturing a full house at Glimmerglass Festival in New York, moving some of the actors themselves to tears, and stirring the audience to its feet for curtain call.

The mainstage opera-theater production is based on the novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton, and is a co-production with Cape Town Opera where it first played with performers who themselves experienced apartheid, according to Director Tazewell Thompson. The new Glimmerglass production also featured exciting young performers brought over from South Africa for the season including tenor Makudpanyane Senoana and baritone Amos Nomnabo.

The show's themes of intolerance, heartbreak, and redemption sparked a too-familiar resonance with social ills not only occurring in South Africa but also in America today, more than sixty years after the show was written (1949). *Lost in the Stars* was conceived by composer Kurt Weill as a way to deepen the American musical theater experience and make it more significant for all involved. In the hands of the Glimmerglass Festival, in concert with Cape Town Opera, Weill's vision for what the modern musical could be was realized to near perfection by the Central New York company.

In brief, the story revolves around a black minister, Stephen Kumalo, who must travel to Johannesburg to bring back his son Absalom, who has been accused of murdering a white man. Though the son did fall in with a bad crowd in the South African city, he is repentant, confesses to

the murder, and is sentenced to hang. Had he lied along with the other black men indicted for the crime, the son might have saved himself and spared his father gut-wrenching agony and his disillusion with a god he served his whole life, who had surely abandoned him in his time of need.

As must happen with sparkling productions (but so rarely does), all elements worked in tandem to produce an impactful whole: direction and staging, design and technical aspects, stage performance, and music. And it was all perfectly suited to that house and stage.

From the opening notes of this musical, Paton's lush prose and distinctive narrative voice is preserved in Maxwell Anderson's book and lyrics and conveyed through a character created expressly for the musical called the Leader, played to perfection by tenor Sean Panikkar whose spinto voice soared to the rafters, gathering and spurring on the players and characters and audience with the power and distinction of a shofar.

As Stephen Kumalo, a minister of a country congregation, Metropolitan Opera star Eric Owens delivered a moving, layered performance. It was a pleasure seeing Owens in this more intimate setting and in a rarely-seen work. His rich bass-baritone, his appearance, and even his stage sensibilities were ideally suited to the role. Either Owens or his character or both were overcome in the final moments after his only son has been hanged, and the actor was visibly sobbing at curtain call. And though this reviewer can't know what it feels like to be a singularly talented African-American artist in a field dominated by white, Western culture, one can sympathize with the fact that Owens and his character might be engulfed by his emotions by the end of the show.

Other standout performances included Brandy Lynn Hawkins as the faithful Irina, Amos Nomnabo as the streetwise brother John Kumalo, and Makudupanyane Senaoana as the son Absalom Kumalo, who retrieves his virtue and character before he's hanged. A special nod must go to Chrystal E. Williams, who almost stole the show as Linda in her delightful number "Who'll Buy" as a woman of questionable repute, which showcased not only her vocal and dancing ability, but her extraordinary talent for selling a number. I say *almost* because show-stealing honors must be shared with a virtuosic child performer Caleb McLaughlin as Alex, who was winsome and winning in his lone second-act solo.

Technically, the show was wondrous in its ability to advance the themes and ramp up the racial tension. I still marvel at one scene set, designed to allow whites to stand upright while forcing the oppressed blacks to squat and crouch to sing in counterpoint beside them on stage.

Musically, *Lost in the Stars* is a bit of an odd duck because it was conceived as one kind of piece and then morphed into a Broadway opera featuring an occasional sweeping aria as it developed. It wasn't a "big play" for the orchestra, but it certainly was a varied play, and the musicians were up to the challenge, led by the gifted conductor John DeMain. As the show evolved, controlling motifs were cut and added—even for the Glimmerglass production of 2012. DeMain further shaped the piece to include a reprise of the title song in the second act and recommending cuts to the dialogue throughout.

All of which means that in the hands of a different company, operagoers might not see the same production as the one being offered at Glimmerglass this summer. And that would be a great shame, since it is the single strongest show of a solid 2012 festival season.

*Submitted by **Gale Martin**, [operatoonity.com](http://operatoonity.com) on 6th August 2012*