



## Eric Owens shines in Glimmerglass's emotionally charged 'Lost in the Stars'

*But Weill and Anderson's theatrical adaptation of the compelling Alan Paton novel about South Africa in the 1940s gets 'lost in translation'*

By David Rubin

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*Lost in the Stars*, Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's adaptation of Alan Paton's powerful novel of South Africa in the 1940s (*Cry, The Beloved Country*) is an unusual work in the history of American musical theater. It is really a stage drama with music, containing only 60 minutes or so in a show of more than two hours' duration. Weill offers many musical styles to the audience — embracing blues, folk, Tin Pan Alley and occasionally opera. It was written for Broadway. It opened at New York's Music Box Theater in 1949 and managed a respectable run of 281 performances.

While it is not an opera, it is surely operatic in its demands on the lead character. That character is the black clergyman Stephen Kumalo, a man of such dignity, charity, and nobility that he is, for Weill and Paton, all that is good in the native South African people.

The character of Kumalo delivers many of the important songs in the piece. These include the famous title song in which he fears that his god has left him and his people to wander lost in the stars; his decision to travel to Johannesburg to find his lost son Absalom (*Thousands of Miles*); and his appeal to his god Tixo for guidance as he struggles to decide how to help Absalom — who has murdered a white man and faces hanging for it (*O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me*). It is hard to imagine *Lost in the Stars* succeeding without a towering Kumalo. In bass-baritone Eric Owens, Glimmerglass has one. While a bit young for the role and not quite world-weary enough (at least as Paton created Kumalo), Owens brings Kumalo to life. His rich, warm, magnificent voice is just right for the clergyman. He projects every word of his songs and considerable dialogue clearly. (Only the songs receive supertitles.)

Owens is also singing Amonasro in Glimmerglass's *Aida* this season, and he will be giving a solo recital of music made popular by Billy Eckstein on July 27. Given that he is also a superb Wagnerian (he sang Alberich in the Met's *Ring Cycle*), his range is impressive. Owens is a special artist, with a long career ahead of him. His Kumalo is not to be missed. The chorus is the second most important character in *Lost in the Stars*, sometimes commenting on the action as spectators and sometimes interacting with Kumalo as his parishioners. The chorus was particularly persuasive in singing about traveling to

Johannesburg (*Train to Johannesburg*) and reacting to news of the murder (*Murder in Parkwold*).

Sean Panikkar, with a lithe tenor voice like clear water, was a sympathetic Leader or Narrator. He begins the work with his description of Kumalo's little rural village and the surrounding countryside (*The Hills of Ixopo*). Panikkar was a constant welcome presence as he commented on the action.

The role of Absalom's pregnant girlfriend, Irina, was sung by mezzo Brandy Lynn Hawkins — a member of the Young Artists Program. Hawkins has a voice of warmth and strength. She portrayed Irina as older and wiser than the naïve girl in Paton's original. As the prostitute Linda, Chrystal Williams was entirely convincing in her song of double entendre, titled *Who'll Buy?* Amos Nomnabo was expert in the small role of John Kumalo, Stephen's sleazy brother. Both Williams and Nomnabo are also in the Young Artists program.

A special place in the pantheon of child singers/actors goes to little Caleb McLaughlin in the role of Alex, the nephew of Stephen Kumalo — who has come to live with him in the countryside. McLaughlin stopped the show late in the second act with *Big Mole*, ostensibly a child's song about a big black mole digging ever deeper into the earth. I took it as a song about the lost potential of South Africa's young black population, but also its resiliency. McLaughlin's pitch was close to perfect, his diction clear, and his manner beguiling. I laughed and cried at the same time. The audience loved him.

*Lost in the Stars* is a problematic work for many reasons. Paton's novel is almost as much about the journey of the white father James Jarvis as it is about Stephen Kumalo. But in *Lost*, the murdered son of James Jarvis — named Arthur — barely registers as a character, and James Jarvis is a stick figure of a South African white racist. How he eventually overcomes his racism to embrace the native cause and Stephen Kumalo — so moving and credible in *Cry, The Beloved Country* — is entirely lost in *Lost*.

Weill and Anderson didn't even give James Jarvis anything to sing. It is a speaking part, delivered in predictably nasty fashion by Wynn Harmon. Indeed, the only whites permitted to sing are in the chorus. As a result, Jarvis's embrace of Stephen Kumalo and his parishioners at the very end of the opera are neither sung nor credible. Indeed, it deflates what should have been a moving close to the piece. If ever a plot cried out for a duet between Kumalo and Jarvis, this is it. Weill and Anderson clearly had their reasons for keeping the whites from singing, but those reasons hurt the dramatic potential of *Lost in the Stars*.

Given the dramaturgical shortcomings of the piece, director Tazewell Thompson did a solid job. Set designer Michael Mitchell presented the audience with a spare wooden box divided into two playing levels separated by a low step. It was filled, as necessary, with tables, chairs, a lamp, and other props. Thompson expertly moved from scene to scene within this simple box, sometimes by dropping wooden slats to separate front from back.

He created some startling stage pictures. Especially noteworthy were the citizens of Johannesburg as they read their newspapers about the murder; and the pregnant Irina

surrounded by glowing white sheets — hanging on lines to dry in the breeze — as she sang of her affection for Absalom.

Anthony Salatino provided choreography to heighten the sense of place.

John DeMain conducted the small orchestra (no violins) expertly. He is also conducting *The Music Man* this summer, so he seems to have become the company's Broadway maestro. By bringing back *Lost in the Stars* and putting its famous title song into context, Glimmerglass has done a service. The audience reacted with great enthusiasm and emotion — not to mention some tears — at the curtain. Now, for the full story of the Kumalo-Jarvis relationship, read the book.