

Radio Transcript:

Lost in the Stars Glimmerglass Music Festival

There are unquestionably theater experiences that during your lifetime are remembered with affection for their impact *after* you've encountered them...either seeing a fine production of the show, or -- if in the case of a musical --hearing the music for the first time. Such a theater experience could be *Lost in the Stars*...music by Kurt Weill...book and lyrics by Maxwell Anderson...based upon Alan Paton's, *Cry the Beloved Country*...Paton's wrenching story of apartheid in South Africa...with the book's impassioned plea not just for tolerance and equality, but its plea for sharing personal grief.

This brilliant musical -- that borders on being an opera -- is rarely produced, but is having an exemplary staging at Glimmerglass Musical Festival...a co-production with the Cape Town Opera..

The story centers about Stephen Kumalo, the spiritual leader of a small, devoted congregation in a poor village that -- as throughout South Africa -- suffers from the economic and social consequences of apartheid. That divide is vividly foretold in the opening song by a narrator and chorus: "Cry the beloved country! Cry the lost son, the lost tribe. The great red hills stand desolate, and the earth has torn away like flesh."

We then meet Stephen Kumalo and his wife, Grace. He has received a letter telling him his sister in Johannesburg has left the path of virtue. Moreover, it has been over a year since they have heard from their son, Absalom -- who also is in Johannesburg. Kumalo must go to seek them out.

At the train station we encounter the divide between white and black as the chorus sings: "White man go to Johannesburg...*he* come back...*he* come back. Black man go to Johannesburg...*never* come back...*never* come back."

Throughout this drama, the story unfolds through scenes that come across as refreshingly creative -- and effective. These include a murder event as reflected by the white citizens flashing and shaking newspapers as they sing *It is Fear*.

That effectiveness is momentarily lost with the inclusion of two songs attributed to Kurt Weill that were not in the original score, but added here by the director Tazwell Thompson. One is a nonsequiter, the other an excuse for a jazzy song and dance number.

But these are set aside as the music and haunting lyrics by Weill and Anderson, return with the simple staging of the song *Trouble Man*, sung by Brandy Lynn Hawkins in the role of Irina, a young woman carrying Absalom's unborn child.

There are several outstanding voices -- including tenor Sean Panikkar as The Leader, whose delivery carries easily and firmly over the voices of orchestra and 20-plus chorus.

But, from the very first phrase sung by Eric Owens -- in the role of Stephen Kumalo -- we know whose show this is. Owens is so perfectly cast that it is impossible to imagine this production without him in the lead. He brings us -- almost effortlessly -- into his heart, his hopes and his pain. His bass-baritone tone is glorious, sonorous, and, never fails to carry meaning.

In sum, *Lost in the Stars* is the gripping story of shared tragedy -- brilliantly told in song and narrative. It is also a theater experience you should not miss.

Lost in the Stars plays now in repertory -- with only seven more performances -- ending August 25th at Glimmerglass Music Festival, Cooperstown, New York.

This is Herbert Wolff for WAMC