



Transcendent

by B.A. Nilsson on August 8, 2012

Lost in the Stars

Music by Kurt Weill, libretto by Maxwell Anderson, directed by Tazewell Thompson,
Glimmerglass Festival, through Aug. 25

As the second act of *Lost in the Stars* gains momentum, Stephen Kumalo, an Anglican priest, faces a moral dilemma that threatens the foundation of his faith. "O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me!" he sings, and as rendered by bass-baritone Eric Owens, it's a nuanced, soul-stirring number.

Owens has a voice that can penetrate into the rearmost recesses of the Alice Busch Theater, and there are thrilling moments in the show when he pulls out all stops and his rich, warm thunder envelops you with stirring emotion. But the most compelling moments come when he drops to a husky pianissimo, whispering, as it seems, his plaint.



Glimmerglass Festival's LOST IN THE STARS

He's also an outstanding actor. The character of Kumalo begins the show with a sense of himself as a man of the world, but, as he journeys through Johannesburg in search of his son, his sparkling innocence gets hammered out of him. By the end of the first act, when he sings the title song, Kumalo still has a measure of hope. By the devastating end of act two, he will need to rebuild his sense of everything.

Lost in the Stars premiered on Broadway in 1949, and was composer Kurt Weill's final show and final collaboration with librettist Maxwell Anderson, with whom he'd written the successful *Knickerbocker Holiday* a decade earlier. Based on Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, it's the story of a racially divided society on the brink of apartheid as exemplified by the travails of two families.

Anderson's lyrics celebrate much of the book's poetry, and Weill fashioned a score that transcended the expectations of both Broadway and opera—something that wasn't foreign to the show going audience of the time, with works by Menotti and Blitzstein on Broadway at the time.

Michael Mitchell's boxlike set of corrugated roofing tin becomes each of a variety of locations with the addition of a few furniture pieces. When, toward the opening, it was transformed into a train through clever lighting (by Robert Wierzel), I was sucked into its magic. And when, at the first act's end, Owen sang the title song as the set vanished into a void of stars, I completely succumbed to what, in less-skilled hands, could have been a silly effect.

Tenor Sean Panikkar gave brilliant voice to the enigmatic role of the Speaker. When the superb chorus eventually erupts into the anthemic "Cry, the Beloved Country," the searing effect is aided by a pentatonic feel—and a chorus that splits and unifies, splits and unifies, with Panikkar, vocally leading the way, revealed as the voice of the country itself.

Kumalo's son has a pregnant girlfriend, Irina, and Irina has two terrific numbers—"Trouble Man" and the lovely "Stay Well," sung with poise and beauty by mezzo-soprano Brandy Lynn Hawkins.

Wynn Harmon, who performs a comedy role in Glimmerglass's concurrent *The Music Man*, is Kumalo's white antagonist, James Jarvis, and sneaks up on you with a compelling, climactic monologue, also showing skilled dialect work.

Nothing wins an audience roar as effectively as a talented kid, and young Caleb McLaughlin, as Alex, gets his big moment with the song "Big Black Mole," itself a fond reworking of the old "Drill, Ye Tarriers." He does an amazing job both singing and dancing.

Conductor John DeMain and the Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra are also among the stars of the show, an excellent ensemble giving life to an excellent score.

Todd Duncan starred in the original, and he'd been Gershwin's original Porgy as well. In an unfortunate parallel, there was little access to big opera for black singers when *Lost in the Stars* premiered. It soon changed, and we have in Owens a Met Opera star bringing a powerful presence to a piece that won't lose its relevance in my lifetime, I fear. But it's a star turn for Owens, a must-see, the highest point, I promise you, of your theatergoing year.