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This past Sunday, Jan. 29, 2017 at UC attended a beautifully performed and Weill's grand musical, "Lost in the Stars" in 1950, Weill's musical tragedy as he came to Broadway when it opened in 1949 and a new production was performed as a part of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra curated by Jeffrey Kahane, Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. Kahane brought together two communities this season in Los Angeles and New York City, to explore the music of composers such as Kurt Weill to social justice themes linked to Martin Luther King and Rabbi Joachim Prinz. Maestro Kahane conducted "Lost in the Stars" expertly leading members of LACO and the over 70 performers on stage. Featured in the cast were talents of several young African-American rising opera stars with exceptional talent and voices. However, the star of the evening was Kurt Weill's glorious music set to the moving libretto of Andrew Maxwell. The musical is based on A.Patton's famous novel "Cry, the Beloved Country" which relates the story of the personal tragedies of two families in the late 1940's - one black the other white - trapped in South Africa's apartheid policies.

This fully staged production was directed by New York City Director, Anne Bogart and included actors from her New York City based SITI Company. Her staging was elegant and effective, cleverly using the talents of her large ensemble of local Los Angeles choral singers. Occasionally the staging lost dramatic impact mainly during the big solo moments, such as the famous song, "Trouble Man" or "Tikku" which seemed overly static without specific detail. Jeffrey Kahane conducted Weill's music with confident and brilliant timing. A few numbers however, such as the aria/song performed by soprano Lauren Michelle, "Trouble Man" could have had a bit more jazz flow. Especially moving was the gorgeous and nuanced singing and acting of the Los Robles Master Chorale and The Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers of Los Angeles.

The production used an excellent sound system. The balance between singers and instrumental was good and gently enhanced the power of their voices. However, the young opera soloists diction was not improved with miking, often times the text from choir and soloists was not clear. Soloists needed much more diction and using of Weill's Broadway style. The lack of sufficient word painting, diction, phrasing and vocal color made some of the solo numbers sound overly stiff. Despite these drawbacks, especially appealing was the performance of lyric soprano Lauren Michelle in the role of Irina, and the world-class voice of spinto tenor, Issachah Savage, in the role of Chorus Leader. Lauren Michelle is clearly a young soprano on the rise, and I look forward to her singing lyric soprano roles in opera. Her Broadway styling is not in evidence, and her performance of the Weill's well-

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rising young African-American bass-baritone, Justin Hopkins. He has good looks and a solid opera voice, along with sufficient acting skills to take on a role like this. Overall, he made a better impression as an actor than singer. His final spoken monologue in the Church scene in Act II was very impressive and moving. Much was required in this complex role and requires a mature singer who can move from the quintessential old Broadway romantic style, in vocal gems such as "Lost in the Stars" or "Grey House" to grand aria such as the powerful monologue, "Tiku." Justin Hopkins voice was not often really up to this task and his muddy diction an strictly operatic approach in each number, obscured the musical nuance needed for Weill's musical. In addition, he seemed too young to be really believable as the long-suffering, wise and mature father. Vocalist/soprano Meloney Collins brought spunk and strong belting to her role of Linda. The rest of the performers and actors were committed and lively in their roles, such as Kumalos' Brother, Larry Powell, and Kumalos' son, Stephen, played with simple power by actor Samuel Stricklen. The standout of actors, however, was Will Bond (co-founder of SITI Ensemble) in the role of the white Grandfather, James Jarvis, giving a fiery and incisive portrayal of this dogmatic, prejudiced and proud land-owner. The adorable, nine year old performer, Joel Baptiste Muepo, acted his role as Alex the nephew with believable sincerity and performed his delightful solo number in the 2nd act with confidence.

The minimalist set and lighting design by Brian H. Scott supported the story without distraction. Costumes by Nephelie Andonyadis, while lovely and all in shades of white and brown, somewhat in period of 1950's didn't provide clear differences between what the black and white populations wore, or between upper/lower classes. Choreography by David Roussève was subtle, clear accenting Weill's rhythmic music; while cleverly tailored to the strengths of the two choir ensembles, actors and vocalists, who were clearly not trained dancers. Especially delightful was Roussève's choreography for "Johannesburg Train" in Act 1, performed and sung with verve and passion by the ensemble, receiving the first big applause of the evening.

At the end of this exceptional evening, the audience arose in a heartfelt and appreciative standing ovation for this specially revived production of one of America's great musica dramas.

More details to follow.



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