

HOLLYWOOD PROGRESSIVE



Encores Big River

Encores! Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn - February 8-12 at City Center

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Sing, the Beloved Country

BY ED RAMPELL

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Justin Hophins (Stephen Kumalo) and Zuri Adele (Grace Kumalo) (Photos: Reed Hutchinson)

Revival of Weill and Anderson's Apartheid-era South Africa Musical *Lost in the Stars* Rocks Royce Hall

It was a rare treat to experience the revival of *Lost in the Stars*, composer Kurt Weill and playwright Maxwell Anderson's 1949 Broadway musical adaptation of Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The large cast of 30-plus performers stunningly brought the South Africa-set anti-apartheid story vividly alive for a nearly sold out audience at UCLA's capacious Royce Hall.

Weill, the German cantor's son who fled the Nazis in 1933, collaborated with playwright Bertolt Brecht on the 1928 sensation *The Opera*. *Stars* was Weill's last completed work for the stage before his untimely death in 1950, and it contains the trademark edgy politics and bawdiness of *Threepenny* and his other Brecht opera, 1930's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.



Issachah Savage (Leader) with Chorus

(When he died at age only age 50, Weill and Anderson had been co-working on a musical version of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* – what a loss to posterity that his life and composing was cut short by a heart attack. In his eulogy Anderson said: “I wish, of course, that he had been lucky enough to have had a little more time for his work. I could wish the times in which he lived had been less troubled. But these things were as they were – and Kurt managed to make thousands of beautiful things during the short and troubled time he had...”)

In terms of its political message, *Stars* exposes the injustices caused by South Africa's separate and unequal segregation of the races. Whereas a white majority populated the South and other states where outright American apartheid existed, in South Africa Blacks and other nonwhites formed an overwhelming majority. Hence, their oppression was arguably even more absolute and brutal than that of African Americans, in order for a minority to tyrannically enforce its rule over a majority that greatly outnumbered Caucasians.

Although Brecht could be a moralist, his agitprop plays emphasized the need for militant resistance to repression. *Stars* stresses the role of morality and compassion in resolving South Africa's racial imbroglio. (Good luck with that one – activists have to appeal to people's sense of economic self interest, as well as their sense of ethics, in order to radicalize most members of the working class.)

[PLOT SPOILER ALERT!] The plot of Paton's novel and of this musical based on it reminded me of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*. As I recall, the impoverished Bigger Thomas kills (albeit unintentionally) Mary, the free-spirited pro-Communist daughter of his employers. Similarly, Absalom (Broadway, Off-Broadway, screen actor Samuel Stricklen) – the son of Stephen Kumalo (bass-baritone Justin Hopkins), a Black man of the cloth – likewise accidentally shoots anti-racist Arthur Jarvis (veteran theater thesp Stephen Duff Weber) during a botched break-in. (What's the deal with Black criminals killing lefty whites in fiction? Progressive lives matter, too, don'tchaknow!) In any case, Kumalo must contend with Arthur's father, the racist James Jarvis (actor Will Bond, a founding member of SITI company), as the two fathers deal with the loss of their sons in a troubled land.



Angelo Johnson (Johannes/chorister) [has back to camera], Melanie Collins (Linda) and Daniel J. Ozan (chorister)

Standouts in the abundant cast included soprano Meloney Collins as Linda, who sizzled in a risqué rendition of a song that uses fruits and vegetables as enticing sexual double entendres. Collins stole the almost three hour two-acter, exhibiting a sensuous panache similar to *Threepenny's* hooker Jenny (who Weill's kinky wife Lotte Lenya played).



The Jarvis family: Will Bond (James Jarvis), Stephen Duff Webber (Arthur Jarvis) and Jonah Verdon

Heldentenor Issachah Savage was the chorus leader, joined by Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers, Los Robles Master Chorale and members of SITI Company. Jeffrey Kahane conducted the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, rather gloriously playing live in Royce Hall's pit. Soprano Lauren Michelle's Irina was fetchingly sympathetic as Absalom's impregnated, desperate girlfriend and nine-year-old, Joel Baptiste Muepo was another favorite.

The staging was at times Brechtian, in the sense that it used Brecht's "alienation effect" to emotionally distance the viewers from the drama so they could assess the saga with logic and reason. Perhaps due to budgetary constraints this production of *Stars* was mostly performed on a bare stage with sparse if any sets, although Brian H. Scott's lighting often set the mood. *Stars* was directed by Anne Bogart, co-artistic director of New York City's theatre ensemble SITI Company, with choreography by David Roussève, Professor of Choreography in World Arts and Cultures/Dance Department and Interim Dean for the School of the Arts and Architecture at UCLA.



Justin Hopkins (Stephen Kumalo) and Lauren Michelle (Irina)

Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, in partnership with Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA, admirably presented *Lost in the Stars* for two nights only, Jan. 28 and Jan. 29 at UCLA's Royce Hall. Let's hope we don't have to wait another 67 years for this musical to be performed live and on stage in L.A. Unfortunately, as the Black Lives Matter movement shows, *Stars'* theme of racial in justice and inequality remains all too relevant. Alas!



It's interesting to note that the epitaph on Weill's tombstone in New York comes from the song "A Bird of Passage" in *Stars*, lyrics by Anderson:

"This is the life of men on earth:
Out of darkness we come at birth
Into a lamplit room, and then –
Go forward into dark again."

Ed Rampell

L.A.-based critic and film historian Ed Rampell is the presenter and programmer of "10 Films That Shook the World", a cinematic centennial celebration of the Russian Revolution, premiering 7:00

p.m., Feb. 24 at the Los Angeles Workers Center, 1251 S. St. Andrews Place, L.A., CA 90019.

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POSTED ON FEBRUARY 4, 2017



About Ed Rampell

Film historian and reviewer Ed Rampell's interview with legendary Greek director Costa-Gavras is in the September issue of The Progressive Magazine. Rampell is the co-author of The Hawaii Movie and Television Book, to be released by Honolulu's

Mutual Publishing in October 2013.

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Lifting the Weight of a Farmer's Lament

Paul Haeder: The house is sky burled with wheat penetrating winds,

light with stove lids open, wolves in the night
standing down stars, a glacial weight on their
world.

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