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Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's "Lost in the Stars" at Royce Hall

By Jane Rosenberg

When a politically powerful work of art performed by world-class artists takes the stage before an audience hungering for substance and truth, the results are electric. Without doubt, UCLA's Royce Hall was an important place to be on Sunday evening. Those in attendance were treated to an emotional rollercoaster of profound implications. Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's *Lost in the Stars*, based on Alan Patton's great anti-apartheid novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, speaks to issues of racism in South Africa but travels across time and space, landing, like a gift, to audiences in LA now. One can only hope it travels further, perhaps as far as Trump Tower.

Produced for the Broadway stage in 1949, the show can be accurately described as a singspiel, combining non-singing actors and operatic singers. It ran for over 300 performances but never toured the country, cancelled in protest when it was learned that the black cast would be banned from staying at the same hotels as the white cast. Weill was a man who lived by his principals and we are the beneficiaries of his vision.

That vision is evident in all his works, as are his prodigious musical gifts. The cast and orchestra did justice to Weill, from the exquisite rendering of his score by LACO under the baton of Jeffrey Kahane, whose dream it was to present this piece, to the principal singers whose devotion to and



PHOTO CREDIT *Lost in the Stars* by Reed Hutchinson
 (L-R) Angelo Johnson (Johannes / chorister) [has back to camera], Melanie Collins (Linda) and Daniel J. Ozan (chorister)

interpretation of the material was of the highest quality. Add to that the marvelous chorus and the consummate actors whose gravitas and stage presence grounded the piece, and you have a gripping evening of drama and song.

Lost in the Stars incorporates gospel, African American spirituals, blues, and Broadway show tunes to tell the tale of a black minister, Stephen Kumalo, who leaves his South African village for Johannesburg in search of his son, Absalom. He discovers his boy in prison, accused of killing a white man – an act foolishly executed out of social and financial distress. Absalom refuses to plead non-guilty to the charge, acknowledging that the accidental murder happened as a result of a botched robbery attempt. While his accomplices go free by lying, Absalom insists on telling

the truth. We see all too clearly the desperation of the black man in a country where white rule is harshly imposed and opportunities are non-existent.

Performed on an empty stage with only chairs and curtains as props, the principals and chorus were awash in pale clothing and white backdrops. It was more than enough to convey the setting. Choreography was cleverly handled from the sensual gyrations of Linda in the saloon to the mass movement of the chorus at the train station.

Starring in a 2016 Washington National Opera production of *Lost in the Stars*, Lauren Michelle, who played Irina, reprised the role in Los Angeles. As the heartbroken and pregnant lover of the condemned Absalom, she poignantly portrayed the all too common victim of an indifferent society, making us feel the depth of her sorrow in the songs 'Trouble Man' and the gorgeous 'Stay Well.'

Stephen Kumalo, performed by bass-baritone Justin Hopkins, is the dramatic anchor of the tragedy, and it is mainly through his eyes that we view the unjust world of apartheid. A compelling performance, Hopkins sang majestically, capturing the pain and pathos of a loving father, concerned husband, and religious leader of his community. With tenderness, he sang the evocative number 'Lost in the Stars' then delivered an anguished climax in 'O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me!'

Issachah Savage as the Chorus Leader was beautifully cast. His voice resonated with clarity and power, leading, among many songs, the chorus in 'Last Train to Johannesburg' with the chilling refrain, 'White man goes to Johannesburg, he comes back; black man goes to Johannesburg, never comes back.'

The chorus, composed of singers from the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers and the Los Robles Master Chorale, was exhilarating from first to last; and the principal actors were moving and spirited in their portrayals, particularly Will Bond as James Jarvis and Samuel Stricklen as Absalom.

Weill, Anderson, and their original director, Rouben Mamoulian, understood the mechanics of drama and didn't neglect to insert some lighter notes in the tragedy. Delivering the cleverly sexy tune, 'Who'll Buy?' Meloney Collins as Linda lit up the audience with her full voiced, sensual number. And, having the time of his life, nine-year-old Joel Baptiste Muepo conquered the stage with 'Big Mole,' a respite from the heartbreak.

Unfortunately, *Lost in the Stars* had only two performances. If you can find a production, run to see it. If you can't, buy the CD, and if you have the interest, beg Jeffrey Kahane and director Anne Bogart to take it on the road: the time is ripe.

Principal Singers:

Linda – Meloney Collins
Stephen Kumalo – Justin Hopkins
Irina – Lauren Michelle
Chorus Leader – Issachah Savage
Alex – Joel Baptiste Muepo

Actors:

Zuri Adele, Will Bond, Larry Powell, Samuel Sticklen,
Stephen Duff Webber

Ensembles:

Artists and Soloists of Siti Company, Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers, Los Robles Master Chorale, and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra

Production:

Conductor – Jeffrey Kahane
Director – Anne Bogart
Costume Design – Nephelie Andonyadis
Lighting and Scenic Design – Brian H Scott
Choreography – David Roussève

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Jane Rosenberg is the author and illustrator of [SING ME A STORY: The Metropolitan Opera's Book of Opera Stories for Children \(http://thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/sing-me-a-story\)](http://thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/sing-me-a-story). Jane is also the author and illustrator of [DANCE ME A STORY: Twelve Tales of the Classic Ballets \(http://thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/dance-me-a-story\)](http://thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/dance-me-a-story)

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