

A race-themed work not performed in L.A. for 67 years is back for a Black Lives Matter era



Zuri Adele rehearses with other SITI Company actors for "Lost in the Stars," to be performed with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in partnership with the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By **Catherine Womack**

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When Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's hit 1949 Broadway production of "Lost in the Stars" went on a nationwide tour, black audience members in many Southern cities were required to watch the musical from segregated balconies — a reality that must have felt particularly cruel given the work's story line.

Set in apartheid-era South Africa, "Lost in the Stars" is based on Alan Paton's novel "Cry, the Beloved Country." Weill and Anderson chose the book as the subject of their operatic Broadway play specifically because its African story line so directly addressed the realities of a still-segregated America.

In Los Angeles, one of the more progressive stops on that 1950 tour, audience members were racially integrated. That performance — produced by the long-defunct Los Angeles Civic Light Opera at the historic Philharmonic Auditorium at 5th and Olive streets — is believed to be the last time L.A. audiences could see a professional production of "Lost in the Stars," until now.

On Jan. 28 and 29, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, in partnership with the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA and the New York-based SITI Company, will bring “Lost in the Stars” to life in L.A. for the first time in 67 years.

The performances will take place at UCLA’s Royce Hall and will mark the first time the chamber orchestra has produced a fully staged musical theater work. The production will also serve as the climactic conclusion to the orchestra’s three-week “Lift Every Voice” series.

L.A. is not alone in neglecting Weill’s final composition for stage. Unlike Weill favorites like “The Threepenny Opera,” “Lost in the Stars” has rarely been produced. Worldwide, fewer than a dozen revivals have been staged during the last seven decades.

The orchestra’s music director, Jeffrey Kahane, said there were good reasons why the work has been largely shelved. For starters, it is a complex piece to cast and produce. A sort of hybrid play-musical-opera, it features equally demanding speaking and singing roles, and it traditionally requires a racially split cast (half black and half white).

“I don’t really know what it is,” SITI director Anne Bogart joked. “It demands operatic singing, but it also demands acting in the way a Bertolt Brecht play would, and it demands great choral singing, too. I don’t really know whether it’s an opera or a musical or a piece of political activism. It’s really a hybrid. That’s just one of the things that makes it extraordinary.”

L.A. Chamber Orchestra and Kahane are casting the operatic roles and handling the musical details, while Bogart and actors from her company are managing the theatrical elements.

Another reason why the work may have been passed on for so long: It is somewhat stylistically antiquated.

“It’s a Broadway show from the 1940s,” Kahane said, “and so there are certain aspects of it that I suppose one could take exception to because of the sort of old-fashioned nature of it. Some people might think it is a little overly simplistic or sentimental.”

But the bones of the work — its story, subject and songs — stand the test of time, he said.

“It was an act of tremendous courage in 1949 for these two men, against all odds, to put on a Broadway play about apartheid,” Kahane said. “It is still a work of incredible power. The score has some unbelievably beautiful music, including the title song, which really is one of the greatest songs ever composed for Broadway.”

Bogart said she “flipped out” when Kahane introduced her to the piece. She found the music extraordinary, the story heartbreaking and the issues it addresses incredibly pertinent.

“It is so much about Black Lives Matter,” Bogart said. “I couldn’t imagine working on a more relevant piece. And the idea of doing it with a number of different communities — my SITI Company actors, Jeffrey Kahane and

LACO, the really great African American opera singers and the community choirs — I couldn't think of a better way to spend January in 2017.”

The 2016-17 season marks Jeffrey Kahane's last as LACO's music director and this production, along with the rest of the “Lift Every Voice” series, is a passion project years in the making for the conductor-performer. At the heart of Kahane's musical send-off is a devotion to collaboration and community.

Kahane said his orchestra owes a huge debt of gratitude to CAP UCLA executive and artistic director Kristy Edmunds, who connected him with Bogart and SITI and supported the project from Day 1.

“This really is an amazing three-way partnership,” Kahane said. “And we have an unbelievable cast. Having the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in the pit is also going to lend it something extra special.”

Bogart is equally as excited by the collaborative elements of this production and is hopeful that the sense of community fostered on stage will be infectious.

“It's a piece that is made by many different communities,” she said, “and I hope that in the audience there will be people from many different backgrounds and interests. My hope is that this will bring us all together.”



“Lost in the Stars”

Where: Royce Hall at UCLA, 340 Royce Drive, Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. Jan. 28, 7 p.m. Jan. 29

Tickets: Start at \$25

Information: (213) 622-7001, www.laco.org

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