

Review Race, justice, power: Finding new relevance in Kurt Weill's 'Lost in the Stars'



Anne Bogart's SITI Company in Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars," co-produced by Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA. (Reed Hutchinson / UCLA)



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The arts and entertainment communities — anticipating government cutbacks, harmed by a presidential travel ban, alarmed by an atmosphere of divisiveness and invigorated by mass protests — have already declared war on a new Washington. And if music theater, a potent vehicle for any opposition party, appears uncannily ready for a new era of protest art, it has had a lot of practice.

Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra had a good cry for a beloved country Sunday night at Royce Hall, where it performed the second of only two performances of Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars," staged by Anne Bogart and co-produced by the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA.

Premiered on Broadway in 1950 and based on South African novelist Alan Paton's anti-apartheid bestseller, "Cry, the Beloved Country," "Lost in the Stars" is the theatrical collaboration between an émigré composer who had fled Nazi Germany and American playwright Maxwell Anderson. It was hailed as ushering in a new chapter in American opera, one that shared roots in Mozart's politically astute *Singspiel*, Weimar Republic agitprop musical theater and the Broadway musical.

"Lost in the Stars" fit the mood of its time, and though rarely revived, it fits the mood of our own. The motivation for this ambitious production, LACO's first staging in the orchestra's nearly half-century history, was as the culmination of music director Jeffrey Kahane's "Lift Every Voice" project.

The January series of concerts and talks looked at ways the American émigrés and activists Weill, Rabbi Joachim Prinz and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. resisted injustice. Before the performance, Kahane set the stage by quoting Prinz, who also fled Nazi Germany and who joined King on the 1963 March on Washington: "America must not become a nation of onlookers."

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"Lost in the Stars" chronicles backwater black Anglican cleric Stephen Kumalo, who goes to Johannesburg to find his son, Absalom, and discovers the full of extent of zealous racial discrimination affecting every aspect of South African society. Driven by poverty and lack of opportunity, Absalom unintentionally kills a white man in a robbery that goes wrong. Rather than cynically fight the system, Absalom confesses and is hanged. Right and wrong become gray areas, and both the saintly Stephen and his white adversary, James Jarvis, father of the murdered man, confront their prejudices and beliefs, finding understanding in inconsolable sorrow.

The stage was set, but there was no set at Royce. Bogart emptied it, leaving its back brick wall to become backdrop for her SITI Company, which formed a large ensemble of actors and dancers and chorus. The costumes (by Nephelie Andonyadis) featured pale whites and yellows. The backdrop was lighted (by Brian H Scott) in stronger colors suggesting a church, a bustling city, a vile courtroom.

Writer Anderson was no Brecht. His book relies heavily on the eloquence of Paton's prose. The song lyrics have a heavy hand beating on a resounding chest. Some songs, including "Lost in the Stars" (originally written for something else), are, in Broadway fashion, more for mood than character. If a director is less careful than Bogart was, the ending can turn maudlin.

But in this, Weill's last work before he died of a heart attack at 50 in 1950, there was an overpowering musical conviction to which the staging was mainly attuned. David Roussève's stunning choreography was about propulsion, as though warning how injustice thrives when events are allowed to control the will of the people.

"Lost in the Stars" can seem a lot of things. Weill's score has its popular elements and its operatic ones. But the tragedy and political motivation require the additional weight of the oratorio, with mighty choral numbers and an oracular solo tenor/narrator.

Even so, most of the characters are spoken, and members of SITI quickly changed roles as though the community itself were an ever-changing sea. Evil and good come to seem not so much the character of individuals but forces that can overtake individuals.

Above it all stands Stephen Kumalo. The slender Justin Hopkins was seemingly too young for a cleric whose authority comes from the wisdom of age. But it is hardly a disadvantage to hear a beautifully focused bass baritone equally effective in pop, opera and spoken. A commanding presence onstage, Hopkins put the crisis of faith at an age where it, in fact, matters most.

Every character in “Lost in the Stars” wants empowerment. The empowerer is the chorus leader, here the imposing *heldentenor* Issachah Savage. Soprano Lauren Michelle’s Irina, Absalom’s pregnant girlfriend, overcame her early hesitance. Meloney Collins strut her stuff to full effect in a novelty number full of sexual innuendo. Stephen’s nephew Alex was assigned a 9-year-old, Joel Baptiste Muepo. He is a fourth-grader with show business in his blood.

The original Broadway show did not, in the end, usher in a new era of American opera. It brought the earlier one that gave us “Porgy and Bess,” Virgil Thomson’s “Four Saints in Three Acts” and Marc Blitzstein’s “Cradle Will Rock” to an end. Broadway had other ideas, and so did American opera composers.

Still, if “Lost in the Stars” came to be seen as a relic, it no longer seems so. The sheer musical strength of Kahane’s unerring dramatic pace, enhanced by an ideally tart orchestra (Weill removes the violins) went a long way in finding what has been lost in “Lost in the Stars.”

Now, will anyone step up to pick up a project that offers an example of how to illuminate issues that sting like today’s headlines, and for which so much went into for only two performances?

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