

# *Porgy and Bess*

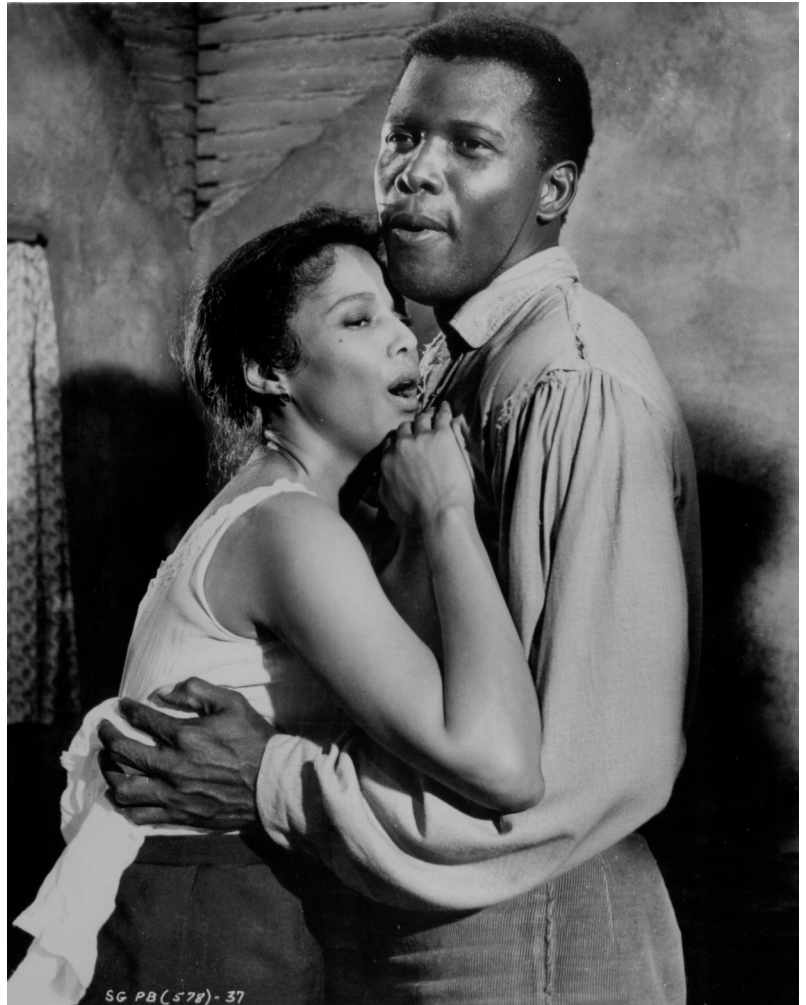
By Foster Hirsch

When producer Samuel Goldwyn, after lengthy and torturous negotiations with Ira Gershwin, won the rights to make a film of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," the 1935 folk opera set in Catfish Row, a black ghetto scarred by poverty and drugs, he may well have thought the hard part was over. As it turned out, his problems had only begun.

To fulfill his long-held goal of making a film that preserved the aura of the Broadway original Goldwyn hired the show's director, Rouben Mamoulian. But instead of following Goldwyn's plan – shooting the film on a giant set that replicated the original theatrical décor – Mamoulian had a different idea: he wanted to shoot on location in Charleston, where DuBose Heyward, a (white) native son and the author of the original 1925 novel, set the story. Equally stubborn and hot-headed, producer and director had many rows. Once he began casting, however, Goldwyn had to confront other challenges. To his dismay, he discovered that despite the scarcity of roles for black actors in 1950s Hollywood most black performers wanted no part of "Porgy and Bess." Many of those Goldwyn approached turned him down because they believed the material to be racially demeaning. Harry Belafonte, Goldwyn's first choice to play Porgy, a crippled beggar, refused him outright. As adamant as Belafonte, Sidney Poitier was signed only because Goldwyn engaged in tricky wheeling and dealing with Poitier's agent. Reportedly, Poitier to this day has not forgiven himself for appearing in the film.

To play Bess, Goldwyn's first choice was Dorothy Dandridge, who had won worldwide acclaim (and an Oscar nomination) as Carmen Jones in 1954. But the actress did not want to perform what she felt was a racial stereotype, a black woman defined by a free and easy sexuality. She signed on, with trepidation. Pearl Bailey, cast as Maria, the unofficial mayor of Catfish Row, said she would not appear if she saw even one bandanna on the set. As casting continued, local black groups held protests accusing Goldwyn of being a racist.

Early in the morning of the first day of shooting a mysterious fire (its cause remains unexplained) destroyed the set. Weary but unbowed Goldwyn announced that he would rebuild. "All that's left to go wrong on this picture is for me to go to jail," he quipped. While at great cost



*Porgy (Sidney Poitier) and Bess (Dorothy Dandridge) embrace.*  
Courtesy Library of Congress

the set was being re-constructed the exasperated producer fired Mamoulian and hired Otto Preminger, who had directed the well-received all-black "Carmen Jones." There was to be no relief for Goldwyn, however, since Preminger like Mamoulian wanted to shoot the film on location. Feeling he could not afford further negative publicity by firing another director Goldwyn made a concession: Preminger could shoot on location two segments that take place outside of Catfish Row, the opening and a picnic scene.

Once filming finally began, tension escalated. Preminger, famously irascible, engaged in daily shouting matches with the producer and remarkably, succeeded in banning the boss from the set. The actors were disgruntled. Poitier refused to speak DuBose Heyward's stylized, lyrical black dialect. Instead, he 'upgraded' to a grammatical, unaccented general American. All the other performers followed his example. Dorothy Dandridge, who had begun an affair with Preminger when he directed her in "Carmen Jones," was terrified of working with him now that their romance was over. Her fears were justified.

Preminger lit into her after each take, berating her in front of the entire company. The actress was on the verge of a complete breakdown until a coalition of actors led by Nichelle Nichols confronted Preminger with an ultimatum: either he would treat Dandridge with respect or they would walk off the film. Otto backed off enough to allow his star to complete filming.

If Dandridge was the director's target, Pearl Bailey was the court favorite on whom a dotting Preminger lavished praise. The other actors, however, despised her – they regarded Bailey, jealous of Dandridge and feeling she should have been playing Bess, as a two-faced troublemaker. Among the principal players only Sammy Davis, Jr., as the satanic tempter Sportin' Life, was happy to be there. Ironically, Davis was the one performer Goldwyn and Mr. and Mrs. Ira Gershwin had not wanted. The Gershwins had exacted a promise from Goldwyn that he would not hire the singer, whom they regarded as brassy and vulgar. Aware of the objections and as resolute as Goldwyn, Davis lobbied hard for the part which he correctly recognized as the role of a lifetime. He fought for his place and had a good time throughout filming; according to colleagues he even seemed to relish his battles with Preminger.

Goldwyn from the start knew the film of his beloved opera would be his swansong, the capstone to a distinguished career. To honor his departure the master showman opened "Porgy and Bess" in prestigious roadshow presentations in a handful of movie palaces. The policy: only two screenings daily, at 2 and 8, with all seats reserved at advanced prices. Again, Goldwyn was to be disappointed: the film received mixed reviews and despite first runs of marathon length did not turn a profit.

Even more bedeviled than its production, however, has been the film's afterlife. "Porgy and Bess" has been unavailable for decades. Entangled in complicated rights issues it has been both unseen and vilified: a 'forbidden' film. Reportedly acting on instructions from Ira Gershwin, said to have disliked the film, the Gershwin estate has only rarely granted permission for isolated screenings (the last five of which it has been my honor to host). Recently, the Goldwyn estate has also become obstructionist. It's as if the rights holders regard any exhibition as a potential public offense. Their attempts to 'silence' the film are ironic in light of the fact that over the years the estates have granted permission to many opera-house productions of lesser value and recently sanctioned a paltry revisionist Broadway version directed by Diane Paulus.

If it will ever be possible to view the 1959 film again, what is there to see? It is, first of all, an ultimate example of the long-gone roadshow film: a stately pageant shot by master cinematographer Leon Shamroy, a painter with light, and directed by Preminger with unshakable command. In the film, as Heyward and the Gershwins intended, the denizens of Catfish Row are ennobled, raised to mythic stature, by their sense of community and by the soaring score, arguably the greatest ever written for the American lyric stage.

Composing for the curved, panoramic Todd-AO screen on which the film was originally presented Preminger works primarily with long shots and long takes. There is not a single closeup. And there is a minimum of intercutting – certainly no dramatic point is ever underlined by editing. The smoothly tracking camera functions as a discreet and objective observer. Group shots emphasize the cohesiveness of the community. Preminger's restrained approach, the cinematic grammar of another era that avoids the relentless closeups and staccato editing that have become clichés of contemporary film making, counts on the intelligence and the commitment of the viewer. In his favored long shots Preminger provides a vast visual field to navigate – there is a lot of information to absorb in the depth and on the sides of the image.

Despite their grievances the actors match the majestic framework that Preminger provides. Poitier imbues Porgy with his own inner strength. Preminger, himself a life-long member of the NAACP, supported his actor's dignified, pulled-in approach, and refused, for example, to have any scenes in which Porgy is shown begging. Dandridge's Bess, created under equally uncomfortable circumstances, is also compelling. The actress's innate elegance elevates Bess, while her uncertainty – Dandridge was to take her life barely six years after the film's release – illuminates the character's tragic split, torn as she is between her desire for her brutish seducer Crown, on the one hand, and her gratitude for Porgy's rescuing her, on the other. Dandridge rises to the demands of Preminger's austere staging when, for example, in an unedited two-shot of Bess and Sportin' Life (who tempts her in song to leave Porgy to go with him to New York) she vividly enacts the character's gradual submission. Without any help from the medium – no cutting, no closeups, no camera movement – Dandridge depicts her character's torment and her struggle. (At the time of the film's release the fact that the actors' voices were dubbed – Robert McFerrin for Poitier, Adele Addison for Dandridge – was criticized, yet the dubbing is expert).

Sammy Davis' vaudevillian Sportin' Life is exactly what George Gershwin had in mind: the performer, like the character, adds a dash of Broadway showmanship to the musically challenging folk opera. Pearl Bailey's Maria (a role expanded, at Preminger's request, by screenwriter N. Richard Nash) is a droll overseer, determined to rid the ghetto of city lice like Sportin' Life and to protect the community from white intruders. Brock Peters' Crown is a force of nature, the embodiment of phallic power.

Is this overlooked film a definitive version of "Porgy and Bess"? No, considering the era and the circumstances in which it was made, it is not. But it is unlikely that any iteration of this immense and still-controversial work – is it Broadway musical theater or is it opera? Is it an unconsciously racist depiction of black life conceived by outsiders? – will ever receive universal approval. Will the film offend some viewers, white as well as black? Perhaps, and certainly no one can legislate how an audience should respond. But interested audiences should be given the chance to see it and to decide for themselves.

That the 1959 film has been struck from the canon, in effect censored, is a form of cultural sabotage. "Porgy and Bess" is one of the most misunderstood, unfairly treated works in the history of Hollywood film making, and its inclusion in the National Registry is an important event. The Goldwyn-Preminger production is a vibrant example of studio craftsmanship near the end of the studio era and a cinematic landmark of a kind never to be seen again.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Foster Hirsch is the author of numerous film and theater related books. A native of California, Hirsch received his B.A. from Stanford University, and holds M.F.A, M.A. and Ph. D. degrees from Columbia University. Hirsch joined the English Department of Brooklyn College in 1967, and in 1973 was among the first faculty of the school's new Film Department. He has also been associated with the Pine Bluff Film Festival since its inception in 1994.*