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OPERA

Street Scenes: Opera on a Brooklyn Sidewalk

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Brooklyn, N.Y.

St. John's Place, a quiet street two blocks from Eastern Parkway on the edge of this borough's Crown Heights neighborhood, is home to tenements, a rarely used synagogue, a parking garage, and the Five Myles Gallery, a converted one-story industrial building that in the summer becomes a gathering place for young neighborhood artists, including painters, poets and a group of teenage hip-hop dancers. On an August Saturday



afternoon, a few dozen chairs, a sound system, a keyboard and the makings for a barbecue were set up on the sidewalk outside the gallery in preparation for the eighth annual St. John's Place on Stage, a minifestival of local talent coordinated by performance artist Hanne Tierney, owner of the gallery. This year's anchor event was something a little different: a staged reading of two scenes from a new opera, "**The Summer King**," by Daniel Sonenberg, produced by American Opera Projects.

Mr. Sonenberg's opera is about Josh Gibson, the famous catcher and home-run hitter of the Negro Baseball Leagues who was known as the "Black Babe Ruth." Gibson, who played for the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, died in 1947 at the age of 35, just a few months before Jackie Robinson broke the color bar in major-league baseball by joining the Brooklyn Dodgers. The story of "The Summer King" is both a celebration and a tragedy -- celebrating a player who could hit a fair ball out of Yankee Stadium, but also reflecting the pervasive racism of the period, the separateness of its black baseball culture, and Gibson's own precipitous decline and early death.

The opera certainly has relevance to this African-American neighborhood: The barber shop of Act 1, Scene 1 could be the one right around the corner from Five Myles on Franklin Avenue -- albeit in 1957, since the operatic barbers lament the fact that the Dodgers are about to leave Brooklyn. And, Ms. Tierney notes, "all the kids around here know about Josh Gibson." American Opera Projects, which is developing the opera, felt that the baseball theme and the African-American hero could make the opera a good vehicle for outreach into communities that don't usually come to the opera house. AOP held a raffle of baseball merchandise at the performance to collect names and contact information from the audience. A second performance was given in Fort Greene Park on Aug. 30, before a screening of the baseball film "Bang the Drum Slowly"; a third, also in Fort Greene Park, is scheduled for Saturday at 2:30 p.m. as part of FortGreeneFest.

On St. John's Place, a pair of local DJs in do-rags worked on the opera's sound check as several dozen spectators assembled for the 20-minute performance despite the fierce afternoon heat. Ms. Tierney thought

that some of the neighborhood people might have been intimidated by the prospect of an opera and stayed away, but it was nonetheless a racially mixed group, including a singer and a poet who would also be performing in the festival, their families and those of the hip-hop dancers, a few teenage boys, some young couples with small children, some friends of the composer. The occasional passing car slowed down to investigate.

Mr. Sonenberg hears Gibson's story in the musical language of grand opera. In Act 1, Scene 1, the Elder Barber (sung by tenor Lynn Randolph), who remembers Gibson in his heyday, has a challenging vocal line, including a high C; he, his wife (soprano Lori-Kaye Miller) and the Younger Barber, a Jackie Robinson fan (baritone Kenneth Overton), sing a lyrically nostalgic trio. The scene's accompaniment is jazzy, and a popular song, "Did You See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball?" comes over the radio for a moment, but this is no pop opera. Scene 2, flashing back for a pantomime re-enactment of a big Gibson homer in 1930, is dominated by the white baseball Announcer, sung by tenor Robert Hoyt, who adds to the excitement by singing high B's. So does his language, common in the 1930s but provocative today: "They say these darky clubs add enough comedy to the game to give you your money's worth." The audience was attentive and appreciative.

The composer, a professor at the University of Southern Maine, has been working on the opera, his first, since 2003 and has completed about 40 minutes of the projected two-hour score. American Opera Projects, the Brooklyn-based organization dedicated to developing new operas through workshops, readings, and other activities, has been a critical partner for him. For example, after a staged reading of several scenes in 2004, Mr. Sonenberg says, "I ended up cutting out all my favorite bits of music. I saw it staged, and realized that there were places where the singing would finish and there were three bars of music with nothing for the singers to do." He has also learned through the workshop process that his predilection for writing in the extremes of vocal ranges needs to be "paced" a bit. Working slowly and making changes has been good. "So many new operas get commissioned and produced so quickly, and they have the kinds of problems that I have had the opportunity to get rid of," he says.

American Opera Projects has several works in different development stages, including one based on Vikram Seth's verse novel "Golden Gate," and another on Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." In the past decade, it has also started doing full-fledged productions, including the recent Holocaust-themed "Darkling," which was mounted Off-Broadway in 2006, and several pieces that have been presented at the Lincoln Center Festival.

Charles Jarden, AOP's executive director, thinks that it could serve as the "development company" for new work in bigger producing opera companies. Money is always the issue: Grants are needed to pay for workshops, and opera companies need subsidies to mount new works. Still, he says, "It's a great time to run an opera company like ours. We could fit into lots of holes -- the opera world has been reinventing itself in the last couple of years. They can't do just 'La Bohèmes' any more."

The fate of "The Summer King" remains to be seen. Several more scenes are due to be completed in the next few months, and Mr. Sonenberg is hoping that he will have a complete score by next summer. AOP may put more scenes on its workshop schedule next year. In the meantime, some new audience members got a tantalizing taste of something different -- and AOP has their names, for whenever "The Summer King" is ready to go.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.

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