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‘Castor and Patience’ Review: Land and Legacy at the Opera

Gregory Spears and Tracy K. Smith’s new, luxuriously cast opera, which premiered in Cincinnati, depicts cousins at odds over family property in 2008’s American South and the complex history of their black ancestors.



Reginald Smith Jr. and Talise Trevigne

PHOTO: PHILIP GROSHONG

By Heidi Waleson

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What makes a narrative operatic, demanding to be sung rather than spoken? In the haunting final aria of “Castor and Patience,” given its world premiere by the Cincinnati Opera at the School for Contemporary and Performing Arts on Thursday, all the other characters fade away as Patience (soprano Talise Trevigne) sings: “What happened hasn’t left us. What happened is. We’ve got to tend to it. That’s what the ancestors tell us.” Here, music and the text deftly encapsulate the message of the opera, a richly layered tale about a black American extended family and its fraught relationship with land, history and obligation. But up until that moment, composer Gregory Spears (who wrote the justly praised “Fellow Travelers”) and first-time

librettist Tracy K. Smith (a two-term U.S. poet laureate) only intermittently reached that standard. Much of “Castor and Patience” felt more like a play with accompaniment: “Death of a Salesman” with tunes. And without the death.

The complexities of Ms. Smith’s original story reveal themselves gradually over nearly 2 1/2 hours of music. Castor, who lives in Buffalo, N.Y., brings his wife and two teenage children to visit his cousin Patience at her island home in an unspecified Southern state. It is 2008; he is in grave financial difficulties and hopes to persuade Patience to sell some of their jointly owned land to bail him out. But Patience views the land as more than an economic entity: It connects her to her ancestors, the formerly enslaved people who bought it and the descendants who managed to hang onto it against all odds. For her, selling land to rich developers means cultural erasure, and she sees Castor’s alienation from those familial and spiritual roots as the true cause of his suffering.

And Castor’s suffering is intense, conveyed in several explosive arias by the imposing baritone Reginald Smith Jr. He is about to lose his Buffalo house, which was purchased by his father, who left the island when Castor was a child. He feels weighed down by guilt; emasculated by his failure to provide for his family; under existential threat from white people; and shadowed by an overwhelming sense of impending doom.



Raven McMillon and Reginald Smith Jr.
PHOTO: PHILIP GROSHONG

But the juxtaposition of this titanic pair—the shamanistic Patience and the disintegrating Castor—is embedded in a complicated web of other characters, all with their own issues, and expressed in a libretto that is mostly prose, with lines like, “Last week she turned up with a great big case of tissue boxes.” In one scene, Patience’s adult son West (baritone Benjamin Taylor) and Castor’s children Ruthie (soprano Raven McMillon) and Judah (tenor Frederick Ballentine) have an awkward conversation about feral cows and racial profiling. It’s interesting, and gives information about the characters and their situation, but you still wonder, why are these people singing?

The 36-member orchestra, led by Kazem Abdullah, supplies a subdued, minimalist underpinning, a gentle, tonal river that flows along under the voices with occasional outbursts of brass and percussion. When Ms. Smith turns to poetry, Mr. Spears writes vibrant, soaring arias that make us snap to attention. But in between, the pace often sags as the libretto, rather than the music, is tasked with building up the complete picture, incorporating many details that ultimately seem peripheral, and tending to tell rather than show. The ending is ambiguous, though since Patience gets the last word, we are urged toward the idea that if Castor's family dropped the idea of selling the land, gave up their northern existence and remained on the island, everyone would be healed.

The opera was luxuriously cast. In addition to the charismatic leads, Jennifer Johnson Cano brought urgency to Celeste, Castor's white wife; Mr. Ballentine was a wonderfully bristling Judah, struggling on the edge of adulthood; Ms. McMillon was affecting as his younger sister. Mr. Taylor, though hampered by the need to sing in a mask due to Covid-19 protocols, effectively made West the translator between the two worlds; as his sister, Wilhelmina, Victoria Okafor had two standout arias, both poignant explorations of how loss can be a blessing.

The five excellent ensemble members, each playing multiple roles, helped supply context from the past. In a scene depicting the family's 19th-century, newly landowning forebears, tenor Victor Ryan Robertson had an arresting cameo about how freedom "gave work a different hue." And in an 11th-hour revelation scene, set in 1966, Amber Monroe and Phillip Bullock, as Castor's parents, Clarissa and Cato, explicated the very personal reason for their move to the North. Ghostly wisps of a hymn, "I'm not ready to go home, Lord," kept all that history alive in the present-day scenes.

Director Kevin Newbury set out the conflicts clearly; set designer Vita Tzykun used scrims and S. Katy Tucker's projections to evoke the trees and marshes of the island, as well as a few furniture pieces for the interiors and the ferry dock and rail that symbolized the island's remoteness. **Thomas C. Hase's lighting helped create a sense of the past that is always present**, while Jessica Jahn's costumes captured the multiple historical periods as well as the characters' personalities. Patience's brightly colored, flower-patterned dresses made her stand out as the voice of the land—and, finally, perhaps, the winner of the argument.

Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal and is the author of "Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America" (Metropolitan).