

REVIEW: Powerful and evocative, Cincinnati Opera's 'Castor and Patience' is a sweeping epic



Castor (Reginald Smith Jr.) and Patience (Talise Trevigne) in a scene from Cincinnati Opera's world premiere of "Castor and Patience" at the School for Creative and Performing Arts on Thursday.

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Midway through “Castor and Patience,” a new opera presented by Cincinnati Opera, Patience’s son, West, explained to his city cousins the meaning of freedom. After emancipation, it was a myth that Black people were given 40 acres and a mule, he explained. A few obtained land, only to have it seized or be swindled out of it. But on this island in the South, their ancestors were able to put their money together and buy land.

“I’ll tell you, freedom was one thing. But true freedom, now that was having your very own plot of land,” he sang.

“Castor and Patience” is an American epic set in the coastal islands of the South. It spans time from the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 to the financial crisis of 2008. The opera examines questions about family, the sense of place and about home. In the end, the freedom to have one’s own property, and the dignity and pride that accompany that freedom, are at the heart of this story.

On Thursday, Cincinnati Opera presented the world premiere of “Castor and Patience,” a debut twice postponed since its intended premiere for the company’s 100th anniversary in 2020. The opera is by Gregory Spears, composer of Cincinnati Opera’s “Fellow Travelers” in 2016 – now enjoying its 11th production – and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy K. Smith, a former U.S. poet laureate, writing her first opera libretto. The opera was being taped for a future recording.

The hallmarks of the opening night performance were its evocative, poetic libretto, gorgeous orchestral score and powerhouse cast of singing actors. It was effortlessly staged by Kevin Newbury, who also staged “Fellow Travelers.” The work unfolded over two acts lasting three hours (including intermission). If there was one caveat, it was that it still needs some distilling. Its general wordiness detracted from the elegance, sweep and atmosphere that lingered long after it ended.

Told through the lens of two cousins and their families, the opera illuminates a shameful, and not widely known history of racism following emancipation and Reconstruction in the American South. It was a time when Blacks, who were formerly enslaved, struggled to own and retain their own land, homes and small farms. The events of that time continue to resonate today.

The intimate setting of Corbett Theater at the School for Creative and Performing Arts was ideal to tell these stories. The characters of Castor and Patience were inspired by numerous interviews that the creators conducted with people throughout the South. In the opera, Patience is determined to fight land developers and save her family’s legacy. Castor, whose parents moved to Buffalo during the Great Migration, desperately needs the money that could come from the sale of his share, or even an acre.

Reginald Smith Jr. was a force of nature in the role of Castor, a man at his wit’s end. He arrived on a ferry with his family, at first nostalgic to be back at his birthplace. But he became increasingly desperate about his financial situation, under water and “over my head.” His anger seethed just beneath the surface in forceful duos with his cousin Patience and with his wife, Celeste. But it was his emotional breakdown in Act 2 that was a tour-de-force, as he hallucinated and railed against the unseen forces that had taken his car, his mortgage, his dignity and ultimately, his faith in himself.

As Patience, Talise Trevigne unleashed a ravishing voice while also conveying the tenacity to keep the family land, no matter what. In one climactic scene, Castor revealed to her that he was “strapped” by the mortgage crisis. She firmly replied that his ancestors were also in chains, but they survived. It was a complex and enthralling moment.

Trevigne’s finest moment as Patience was her final aria, “Think you know this man?” The power of her phrasing was mesmerizing, and it was set against a haunting orchestral backdrop of undulating major and minor harmonies. Smith’s poetic text spoke of time as the everlasting sea, and brought the opera back full circle to “Watchman, Watchman, can you please tell me the hour of the night?”

As Celeste, Jennifer Johnson Cano gave believable depth to the character of Castor’s wife, concerned but not overbearing. She sang with richness of expression in her impassioned plea to Patience for help.

Smith’s words were evocative, searching and sometimes funny. The characters emerged as deeply human. The creators also provided big moments for smaller roles. Benjamin Taylor was excellent as West, Patience’s son. Victoria Okafor sang convincingly as her daughter, Wilhelmina. As Judah, Frederick Ballentine gave a complete portrayal of the troubled 18-year-old son of Castor and Celeste, arguing that he wanted to go work on a barge instead of college in order to help out the family. Raven McMillon performed convincingly as their daughter Ruthie.

The creators used flashback techniques to illustrate that the present and the future are intrinsically linked to the past. The opera opened with a prologue that took place during a “Watch Night” service, as formerly enslaved and free African Americans awaited the Emancipation Proclamation. There was also the echo of the past in a spiritual-like chorus, “I’m not ready to go home, Lord,” which returned softly several times, each time a bit differently.

Scenes unfolded cinematically, with cast members helping to change the set. It was also multilayered. Sometimes, the past and present occurred at the same time, and Newbury was adept at staging these moments. In one vignette, Castor watched his parents leaving their island home in the '60s, when he was a boy. Castor and his family board the ferry to go back to Buffalo – simultaneously with his parents Clarissa and Cato, from another time period.

The ensemble, which also performed in flashbacks as Castor's parents and as people in the Watch Night service, deserve special recognition. They were Amber Monroe, Zoie Reams, [Phillip Bullock](#), Victor Ryan Robertson and Earl Hazell.

Spears' music helped to convey the feeling of nostalgia that pervades this work, while it also propelled the action. The music was grounded in minimalism and its rhythms, colors and moods were continually changing. The composer inserted dissonances and subtle chord clusters in tense moments of the score, and he also summoned antique, Baroque-sounding music and even a waltz.

He set the singers' lengthy conversations in long phrases of *arioso*, and the arias and ensembles were gently lyrical, all over an ever-changing palette in the 35-piece orchestra. One of the score's most beautiful moments was his sumptuous prelude to Act 2, which was symphonic in scope.

In the pit, rising conductor Kazem Abdullah led the members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with a sure hand, and illuminated atmospheric details in the winds and harp effectively. He swept up the orchestra in the storm music, with offstage timpani providing thunder. The orchestra responded well to his direction, and included wonderful playing by horns and trombones.

The inventive scenic design (Vita Tzykun) evoked the homes that are built on stilts in the wetlands of the coastal islands. The upper portion served as a building facade with windows, and also was effective for projections of trees and the seaside (S. Katy Tucker). The lighting (Thomas C. Hase) was also impactful.

In the end, Patience has saved a plot of land for Castor. But as he sails away on the ferry, we don't know whether he has decided to sell it.

Performances continue July 23, 24, 28 and 30 at SCPA's Corbett Theater, 108 W. Central Parkway in Over-the-Rhine. Tickets: 513-241-2742, cincinnatiopera.org.