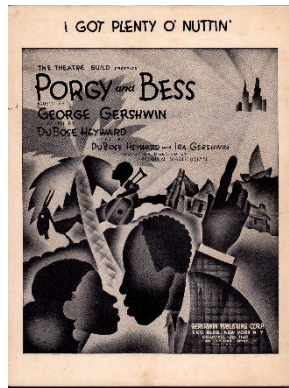


PORGY AND BESS



The Mason-Dixon line defines the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland and West Virginia, as well as Delaware to the East. It is regarded as the informal dividing line between the Southern slave states and the Northern free states. Washington DC is definitely in the South.

Porgy and Bess, with music by George Gershwin and lyrics by Ira Gershwin, was scheduled to be performed at the National Theatre in Washington opening on March 16, 1936, and closing March 21, 1936. The theater had a segregation rule, like most places in the south, that no blacks were allowed in the audience.

This posed a problem, as the entire cast of *Porgy and Bess* was black. The segregation rule meant that family members and friends of the cast could not see the show. When George Gershwin heard about this, he put his foot down. He told the management of the theater that the show would not go on unless they allowed blacks to be in the audience. The management backed down and blacks were allowed in. Here's how David Ewen reported it:¹

During the run in the nation's capital, *Porgy and Bess* helped to shape social history. For the first time in a century, racial barriers were dropped at the National Theater for performances of the opera, and Negroes were given their right as American citizens to attend performances without the indignity of segregation.

According to Wikipedia:²

After the Broadway run, a tour started on January 27, 1936, in Philadelphia and traveled to Pittsburgh and Chicago before ending in Washington, DC, on March 21, 1936. During the Washington run, the cast—as led by Todd Duncan—protested segregation at the National Theatre. Eventually management gave in to the demands, resulting in the first integrated audience for a performance of any show at that venue.

[Undoubtedly, as soon as the show left town, the theater became segregated once again.]

¹ Ewen, David, *George Gershwin, his journey to greatness*, Prentice-Hall, NJ 1970, p. 235.

² Wikipedia, *Porgy and Bess* (retrieved August 20, 2024).