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Tense, powerful 'Central Park Five' a must-see at Detroit Opera: Review



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

- Detroit Opera's "The Central Park Five" tells the story of five minority youths wrongfully imprisoned for a crime in 1980s New York City.
- The opera highlights the injustices faced by the boys and the role of Donald Trump in fueling public outrage.
- Strong performances, particularly from the lead actors and Todd Strange as Trump, elevate the production.
- Innovative staging and a powerful jazz score by Anthony Davis enhance the storytelling.
- Remaining performances are scheduled for May 16 and 18 at the Detroit Opera House.

“Justice delayed is justice denied,” the old saying goes. When five African American and Latino boys are dragged through hell in late 1980s New York City, falsely accused and wrongfully imprisoned for a gruesome crime, will they ever be able to find peace? Will they ever be whole again?

These are the questions clanging at the core of Detroit Opera’s gripping production of “[The Central Park Five](#),” [Anthony Davis’](#) [sweaty jazz opera that opened on Friday, May 10](#). Director Nataki Garrett takes a challenging amount of characters and material and weaves a soulful elegy of youth and innocence with an all-too-familiar villain beating the drum for capital punishment.

“Don’t get got,” a well-known warning from Black and brown parents to their children for generations, is sternly advised at one point in Richard Wesley’s libretto, but that’s exactly what happens during what starts as garden-variety troublemaking

one spring 1989 night in Central Park. When a white, female jogger is beaten, raped and left for dead, the wrong culprits get nabbed and destinies are forever altered.

With law enforcement abusing the system to coerce false confessions, New York real estate mogul Donald Trump rises to the top of the angry voices calling for the boys' heads. Over and over, the vicious, preening Trump takes the stage, flailing and sputtering, screaming into a golden telephone, gobbling McDonald's fries and fanning the flames that rapidly engulf the boys.

When they are all convicted and sent to prison for the crime they did not commit, it feels like there is no fairness in the world. Trump moves on with his life, his image and influence bolstered by the episode, and we all learn a little something about America.

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The five protagonists – Freddie Ballentine as Kevin Richardson, Chaz'men Williams-Ali as Raymond Santana, Nathan Granner as Korey Wise, Markel Reed as Yusef Salaam, and Justin Hopkins as Antron McCray – are exceptionally well cast. In particular, Williams-Ali is quite affecting, and Granner gives a soaring, chill-inducing performance.

High praise is deserved for mezzo Kendra F. Beasley, who stepped into the role of Salaam's mother as a last-minute substitute and delivered a jaw-dropping turn that drew cheers from the audience.

Catherine Martin's impressive vocal clarity is a highlight as she skillfully navigates the tricky role of the assistant district attorney. As the hateful, bloodthirsty Trump, Todd Strange is both eerily menacing and flat-out hilarious. Chomping exactly as much scenery as one might imagine the role requires, his surreal presence yields some of the show's strongest moments.

On Friday night, this extended even to the curtain call, when Strange, Martin and Daniel Belcher (who portrays The Masque and the judge) took the stage together and were met with deafeningly loud boos echoing throughout the opera house – a sure sign of a job well done.

The subject matter and the portrayal of real people and events make this a very acting-heavy opera, and Garrett polishes her performers to shine brightly. Their gritty work provides moments that transcend the genre to become not just good opera, but great art.

Rasean Davonté Johnson's projection work comes through big-time as a major hero for this production, making viewers feel literally drowned in the headlines of the day. The show's brilliantly staged centerpiece, the marathon interrogation session, is played out with a live camera onstage in constant motion, capturing the performers' faces in extreme close-up and displaying them above the stage. It's a bold, cool choice that creates a visceral, you-are-here intensity.

Conductor Anthony Parnther works wonders with the Detroit Opera Orchestra and Davis' muscular, jazz-heavy score. Richly layered and bearing shades of Oliver Nelson, the music is a bit of a revelation, leaps and bounds more complicated than Davis' earlier Malcolm X opera, recently explored in Detroit. The score begins with blistering chords that sound like shattering glass. With that, Parnther takes off and never looks back; it's hard to imagine this show without him at the baton.

Even if you're familiar with the story of these five young men, there's a new perspective and catharsis to be found in this epic retelling of "The Central Park Five." And if you've never seen an opera, perhaps this should be your first.

"The Central Park Five" will be performed twice more: Friday, May 16, at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, May 18, at 2:30 p.m., at the Detroit Opera House, 1526 Broadway St. Tickets start at \$30 and can be purchased at detroitopera.org. Detroit Opera has also introduced new \$25 rush tickets for city of Detroit residents, available by calling the box office at 313-237-7464 or visiting detroitopera.org/discounts.

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