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Burdine, Warren Buster, Jr., Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1991

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHARACTERS IN THE AMERICAN COMMERCIAL MUSICAL

by

WARREN B. BURDINE, JR.

VOLUME I

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1991

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

10 May 1991
Date

Glenn A. Loney
Chair of Examining Committee

5-10-91
Date

Executive Officer

Daniel Gerould

Prof. Marvin Seiger

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

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Abstract

THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHARACTERS IN THE AMERICAN COMMERCIAL MUSICAL

by

Warren B. Burdine, Jr.

Adviser: Doctor Glenn Loney

This dissertation examines the evolution of the images portrayed of African-Americans in the American commercial musical theatre. Eight distinct eras are scrutinized in regard to trends in the structure and content of the shows, and the characterizations of blacks in musicals featuring a predominantly black cast or a black-themed story line.

The myths and stereotypes concerning African-Americans which were enacted by black characters in these musicals will be examined to determine both their origins and any measure of truth they contain. Such elements as the plays and entertainments of England's Elizabethan era, the nineteenth century American minstrel show, and the "peculiar institution" of American slavery will be examined in terms of how they shaped the images and stereotypes portrayed by black performers on the American musical stage.

Select librettos of major Broadway and Off-Broadway musicals will be scrutinized in relation to the images that their respective authors presented of black characters. Special emphasis will be placed throughout the thesis on how the images changed over the decades--from the Williams & Walker Company operettas in the first decade of this century, to the most recent musicals. Attention will be paid to the symbiotic relationship between the images portrayed by black characters on the musical stage, and how these

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images accurately mirrored the perceptions that the larger American society had of blacks in the era being studied.

Not only will black-themed shows with predominantly black casts be examined, but "white" musicals which feature important black characters and issues concerning the relationship between the races will receive attention as well.

Sources consulted will include the librettos of select musicals, newspaper and magazine articles and reviews of the shows to be discussed, biographies and autobiographies of major artists, and reference books written about the musical theatre. The evolution of the images of black characters on the musical stage will, in some instances, be compared to that of his counterparts in fiction and nonmusical dramas.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the decades, the status of the black performer on the American popular musical stage is quite confusing. While given high praise for his singing and dancing abilities, the African-American has for the most part been relegated to appearing in musicals that traditionally have portrayed him as a stereotypical carefree, childlike being, prone to break out in a song and dance at any moment. Blacks of both sexes have been delineated within a set of simple traits in lieu of more broadly recognizable human characteristics.

This is not to say that the American popular musical theatre of the past was a wellspring of profound, intelligently-crafted vehicles in which other ethnic groups fared much better than the former slaves. From The Black Crook, a work which premiered on September 12, 1866, and is "generally looked upon as the birth of the American Musical Theatre,"[1] to today's offerings, the creators of popular musicals have more often than not chosen to cater to their audience's predilection for flashy costumes and scenery, well-choreographed production numbers, tuneful scores, and routine librettos, which often seemed to be merely afterthoughts to everything else in the show. Such elements as a cause-and-effect line of action and psychologically-motivated characters of any discernible complexity would be left to the writers of serious drama.

Although regarded in some theatre circles as vapid, frivolous, and too dependent upon entertainment-value as an end, the commercial musical is the subject of numerous books. One can find in any bookstore specializing in theatrical literature several "how-to" books on writing the Broadway (commercial) musical. A number of thick, expansive works which catalogue and chronicle the history of musical shows of the past 120 years are also available to anyone interested in the genre.[2] However, to find a published work on one of the most important and talented group of performers on the American musical stage--the African-American--is a different matter.

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Numerous books documenting the history of the black man in the theatre have been published. Confining themselves mostly to the "straight" or "serious" dramas, the authors of these books have by and large excluded black musical artists and their shows. In the few instances where the musicals are mentioned, it is merely in passing and as an adjunct to the non-musical dramas; seldom is any factual detail or critical analysis supplied for the musicals.

Perhaps the chroniclers of the "serious" dramas deemed the musical offerings as unworthy of analysis due to their ostensibly frivolous nature. Where the black non-musical dramas for the most part strived to make an intelligent comment on the human condition, their musical counterparts were seen as unabashedly commercial, non-substantive intellectually, and, at times--depending upon the particular show--promoting, subtly or overtly, images of black Americans which were created in the days of slavery to form the myth of the black man's inferiority. While the most respected of the straight dramas often consciously concentrated on neutralizing or eradicating those images which served as a psychological albatross to the African-American's self-esteem, the musical performers were sometimes judged to be agents in their own debasement.

If indeed these images are what have prevented historians of the black theatre movement and its literature from taking the musical sector of that theatre seriously, then the phenomenon of the American commercial musical theatre as the perpetrator of the negative images and stereotypes of the African-American is deserving of critical analysis if only to ferret out the reasons behind its being the major medium that has historically brought these distorted pictures of the black man to mainstream audiences. The reasons behind the continued popularity and success of the shows, and the part that the black performer has played in allowing himself to appear in presentations which he must have known to be self-deprecating must also he investigated.

In this study, the history of blacks on the musical stage will be divided into eight different eras. The evolution of the stereotypes and images presented of the African-American characters will be examined, and particular shows within each of

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these eras will be focused upon. The images and stereotypes will be shown as a theatrical mirror held up to reflect the American mainstream's attitudes and perceptions about blacks in the eras being discussed.

At times this study will examine the images portrayed by means of black characters in similar art forms such as fiction, non-musical drama, and film in order to establish a discernible pattern of character types. From the Blackamoors of Shakespeare and his Elizabethan counterparts, to the blacks in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and the imitative abolitionist--as well as proslavery--works, onward to contemporary stereotypes which are being employed in a more subtle and less insidious fashion, one can see the same character traits used time and again when dealing with black characters. Sterling A. Brown sums up the list of types, giving us this roster of the most-encountered (and sometimes overlapping) stereotypes in drama, fiction, and film:

1. The Contented Slave
2. The Wretched Freeman
3. The Comic Negro
4. The Brute Negro
5. The Tragic Mulatto
6. The Local Color Negro
7. The Exotic Primitive[3]

These designations will be referred to often in this study. Of these stereotypes, only "The Wretched Freeman" will not be a recurring character on the musical stage. Often the characters cited from specific works will be variations, extensions, or combinations of these various types; if so, they will be identified as such.

If this study is to analyze effectively the images of blacks in musicals in relation to these stereotypes, it must first determine who in American society deemed that the black man should be portrayed, not as a well-drawn human being with recognizable and admirable qualities, but rather as a facile composite of prescribed and unflattering traits--and why this was done. To understand the racist attitudes which serve as the basis of such stereotyping, the

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institution of slavery in the American South and its methods for undermining the psychological and intellectual growth of the African-American must be understood. Taking this one step farther, we must first note the differences between American slavery and the practices of that institution in other societies, and the bearing it had upon the psychological warfare perpetrated against the African-American.

The slavery experience is also pertinent to this study when one realizes that the American minstrel show--the nineteenth-century form of musical entertainment which established the recurring stereotypes and images of blacks on the musical stage--was essentially a caricature of Negro slave life on the plantations.

Another major consideration must be made in establishing criteria for this thesis. Although the United States prides itself on being a proverbial "melting pot" nation, the truth of the matter is that its language, laws, customs and mores are essentially British-based. Hence, any knowledge of black stage characters and how they were portrayed on the British stage before or concurrent with the American slavery experience will allow us to find precursors to attitudes towards blacks by the dominant culture and the subsequent images portrayed of the black man on the American stage.

Not to be ignored is a sharp parallel between the images depicted in the musicals and those of blacks (or, more precisely, Blackamoors) as presented in the earliest known usage of the African as a figure on the stage--in the court masques, civic pageants, and a few select dramas in England's Elizabethan era. The attitudes towards blacks as displayed by a segment of the British population before that nation's involvement in the slave trade are viewed in this study as a thought-provoking philosophical precursor to a system which saw the African as inferior and spared no amount of energy in perpetrating that myth.

Surprisingly, the Elizabethan stage provides us with a character who is both a forerunner to and the antithesis of some of the types of black characters to be encountered later. Aaron the Moor, in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, affords us a chillingly accurate preview of the words, actions, and attitudes which will be

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expressed by the more militant stage characters of the 1960s and '70s, while functioning as the English-speaking stage's first fully-drawn "Brute Negro" character.

An old proverb claims that behind every stereotype exists a grain of truth. Stereotypes are neither all bad or totally untrue. A universal image of peoples of African descent depicts their nature as being, in a word, musical. While it would be both foolish and incorrect to say that every individual of African heritage has a talent for singing, dancing, or playing a musical instrument, it is obvious that an inordinate amount of the world's most renowned entertainers and innovators in the popular music industry of this century have been black. The accomplishments of black Americans in the field of music are too numerous to be listed here.

While dealing with the effect that slavery had upon the subsequent theatrical presentations of blacks, this study will examine how the image of the black man as overly-musical in nature came to be, and will attempt to find whatever truth there is to that notion.

The goal of this study is to demonstrate how the African-American's general status in mainstream American society has, for the most part, been mirrored in the assignment of the roles for him to play on the commercial musical stage. This study will also examine the degree to which the African-American himself has aided in either the maintenance or the betterment of his image from era to era, and how the African-American's social and political advances in American society at large played a major role in the improvement of the images portrayed on the musical stage by him. The relationship between black self-autonomy in the producing of black musicals and the direction of the images of African-Americans in the commercial musical theatre will also be examined. The examination of these elements should add up to produce the main thesis of this dissertation--that as the image of the African-American in White America has changed, so have the images of black characters in the American musical.

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ENDNOTES TO INTRODUCTION

[1]Gerald Bordman, American Musical Theatre, A Chronicle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 18.

[2]Among these are three books by Stanley Green: Broadway Musicals: Show by Show (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Books, 1985); Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company,1976), and The World of Musical Comedy (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1960); David Ewen, The New Complete Book of the American Musical Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958); Abe Laufe, Broadway's Greatest Musicals (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), and Cecil Smith, Musical Comedy in America (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1950).

[3]Sterling A. Brown, "Negro Characters As Seen by White Authors," Journal of Negro Education, vol. 2 (April 1933), p. 179.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROLOGUE ON THE PLANTATION

In order to create and subsequently perpetuate the myth of a minority group's inferiority, members of both the majority and minority groups must be constantly exposed to that myth, in a number of ways, overt and covert. The dominant culture's negative attitude towards blacks first became apparent on the plantations of the Old South, and it became the major point of reference in the entertainments of the music hall stages of the Northeast.

Musical Scapegoats

As humor was one of the staples of the early American musical theatre, sources for that humor, often in the form of collective targets for ridicule, were constantly being sought. Any ethnic group which did not fall under the heading of the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant mainstream group was a prime suspect in the search for minorities to be lampooned on the musical stage. In her biography about the noted turn-of-the-century black comedian Bert Williams, Ann Charters states:

> Racial prejudice has left its bitter stain over many aspects of the Negro's history . . . but it is perhaps nowhere so vividly illustrated as in its role in the development of the American popular theatre. To some extent every immigrant group found its background ridiculed on the music hall stage, but for the Negro special conditions of prejudice, hostility, and ignorance insured a unique longevity to the stereotypical portrait. For over one hundred years the impression of the Negro as racially and socially inferior was fostered by legions of comedians in blackface. Originating in the white man's 'imitations' of Negroes in the nineteenth century minstrel shows, the caricature took such firm hold on the American imagination that audiences expected any man with dark skin, no matter what his background or inclinations, to be a 'real coon.'[1]

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It must be noted that after the most-caricatured European immigrant groups--the Italians, Germans, Jews, and Irish[2]--had become more assimilated into the mainstream of American society, the negative images of them on the musical stage became less insidious and eventually were phased out.

For the African-American it was another matter. Unlike the European immigrants, he was brought to America against his will. Unlike the European immigrants, his integration into the mainstream of American society was opposed by law in some parts of the country, and on a de facto basis in others.

The Black Man's First Role in America: As Slave

The myth of the black man's inferiority, while fostered on the music hall stage, was born as both an aid and adjunct to the slave trade. However, the marketing of African slaves by European merchants, which flourished between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, was by no means the first instance of that institution in the history of mankind.

"Slavery was practiced in most ancient societies. The ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome all had their slaves. Slavery was practiced by the ancient Hebrews, and the early Christian church did not attempt to end the practice."[3] The slaves of these ancient empires possessed a status which was markedly different from their black counterparts in the Americas of later centuries.

Slavery in the ancient societies was not based on race. More often than not, the enslaved people were basically prisoners of war whose fate was to become the servants of their conquerors. Slaves could obtain an education, were permitted to share in the culture of their masters, to own property, to marry, and, in many cases, were allowed to buy their own freedom.[4]

Since the slaves in the ancient societies had been conquered by neighboring armies, they were often of a similar, if not the same, racial make-up as their masters. This was also true in Africa,

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where black Africans enslaved black Africans. According to the preeminent African-American historian, John Hope Franklin:

> Slavery was an important feature of African social and economic life. The institution was widespread and was perhaps as old as African society itself. . . . Slaves were usually regarded as the property of the chief of the tribe or the head of the family. In law, slaves were chattel property, but in practice they often became trusted associates of their masters and enjoyed virtual freedom. Some, however, were sold and exported from the country.[5]

In both the African and Greco-Roman institutions of slavery, the major difference between the ruling and servant groupings was not of race, but of social class. Franklin describes what was perhaps the first instance of a widespread system of slavery based on race:

> When the Mohammedans invaded Africa, they contributed greatly to the development of the institution of Negro slavery by seizing Negro women for their harems and Negro men for military and menial service. By purchase as well as by conquest [my emphasis], the Moslems recruited Negro slaves and shipped them off to Persia, Arabia or some other land of Islam. . . . slaves who were converted to Islam were regarded as brothers. Although this did not release them from their duties as bondsmen, it did have the effect of elevating their standing and enhancing their dignity among their fellows.[6]

A few decades before the introduction of slavery into the New World colonies of Spain and Portugal, Africans were brought to Europe as bondsmen. The first black slaves in Europe were taken to Portugal in the middle of the fifteenth century and used primarily as house servants.[7]

The influx of blacks into the Iberian peninsula, while noticeable, by no means matched the numbers which would later be transported to the New World holdings. Chattel slavery never

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developed in Europe to the extent which it did in the Americas; there were simply too many people in the peasant class to do the same type of work in Europe which black Africans were doing in the New World. Furthermore, there existed in Europe at that time forms of servitude which were not far removed from slavery.

In the feudal societies of the early Middle Ages (c. 900 to 1050 A.D.) in Western Europe, the serfs were in essence slaves to the lords on whose lands they lived and worked.[8] This ever-so-slight variation on the institution of slavery has a direct descendant in the post-Civil War system of sharecropping which was developed in the American South.

Before the potential of black slaves was recognized as the solution to the need of a cheap labor force to work the vast holdings in the New World, whites emigrated from the British Isles to the present-day southern American states in search of work. Under the title of indentured servants, these poor whites would hire themselves out for an agreed-upon period of time, usually seven years, after which they would be released from the work agreement. In fact, "wherever [black] slavery ultimately developed [in the British colonies], indentured servitude had earlier been in use."[9]

This system of using white indentured servants proved unsuccessful. Many initially agreed to become servants as a ruse to obtain passage overseas; once in the colonies they would refrain from honoring the contract by either suing for their freedom or simply running away. Attempts to enslave the native Americans were futile. Taking note of the success that the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Dutch were having with African slaves in their Caribbean and South American colonies, the British realized that a system using blacks as slaves could be beneficial to them.

A certain aspect of the African slave trade must be noted here. Although mention of that slave trade conjures up images of Europeans conducting swift, sweeping raids on unsuspecting West African villages, the truth of the matter is far less dramatic. Some brigand bands did obtain their human merchandise by this method, but the most common way of obtaining the blacks was by "the purchasing of prisoners of tribal wars. In time, the Europeans

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became skilled in promoting enmity between the tribes, even to the point of aiding one of the warring parties by supplying them with firearms."[10]

Because of the unique set of circumstances in the trading of Africans, as opposed to those in other instances of slavery, a new and infinitely harsher set of rules had to be created. In the cases of one population enslaving the captives of war from a nearby city, tribe, state, or nation, there would often be no discernable genetic difference between the conquerors and the vanquished. There were, however, a number of salient differences between the European merchants and the African chattel.

These physical and cultural differences were to be manipulated by the whites to serve as the basis for their manufactured myths of the black man's innate inferiority. The portrayal of the African as inferior served a twofold purpose: it justified the European's enslavement of the black man, and placed in the minds of the enslaved that their servile condition was a natural consequence of their inferiority.

Perpetuating the Myth of Black Inferiority

It is only natural that an enslaved people feel they are inferior to their masters to a certain degree. The mere fact of their being in a servile position shows that the ruling class possesses an economic superiority which maintains the master/slave relationship. The various European nations which engaged in slavery all promoted the myth of their own superiority, but in degrees of intensity which were directly related to each country's past dealings with Africans and other dark peoples.

Because of the Iberian peninsula's geographic proximity to North Africa, Spain and Portugal had had close contact with the Muslims, Moors, and Blackamoors for centuries.[11] Unlike the British, the Iberian nations "had been invaded and subjected by people both darker and more highly civilized than themselves."[12] Thus, having in the past been on the opposite end of the conqueror/vanquished spectrum, the Spanish and Portuguese were not so quick to assign any immediate and automatic powers of

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superiority based on white skin alone. Furthermore, after centuries of having intermixed with the Moors and Blackamoors, many people of the Iberian peninsula were quite swarthy themselves.

The British, having had infinitely fewer dealings with peoples of darker hues, were less inclined to see them as humans who might have some qualities worthy of respect or admiration. Not only were the physical differences between whites and blacks overly stressed --to the exclusion of any similarities between the races being noted--but they were exaggerated, to better justify the master/slave system which was being developed.

The most obvious difference is one of pigmentation. "The most arresting characteristic of the newly discovered African was his color. . . . Englishmen actually described Negroes as black--[author's emphasis]--an exaggerated term which in itself suggests that the Negro's complexion had a powerful impact upon their perceptions."[13]

The Englishman's religious beliefs played a major part in his preconception that the African's dark skin branded him as innately inferior. In Black Face, Maligned Race, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy notes:

> Attitudes toward black people in the seventeenth century were formulated in an environment that had not distinguished between the traditional Christian view of black people as devils and the then not entirely familiar Africans.[14]

Compounding this sentiment was an adjunct fear and prejudice against Muslims of which the non-Muslim blacks bore the brunt:

> European attitudes toward Islam in the Middle Ages were characterized by ignorance and fear; ignorance of the origins and doctrines of this religion and fear of the military might of its adherents. . . . Adopting the traditional view that enemies of Christianity were demonically inspired, European Christians endowed Muslims . . . with the characteristics of the devil, and as we have seen, one of the devil's most important and common characteristics is his supposed blackness.[15]

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The Englishman's Christian beliefs led him to equate the African's near-black skin with the devil. Three other factors were cited to support the claim of white superiority: the coastal West African's lack of a formal, written language; his religion, which appeared pagan to the Englishman; and his sexual behavior, which the British judged to be licentious.

"To the relatively lettered English colonists, Negroes must have indeed seemed downright stupid."[16] Evidently the British either ignored or were truly ignorant of the fact that further inland in the kingdom of Askia Muhammad, a black West African Muslim, one could find the mercantile centers of Gao, Walata, Jenne, and Timbuktu, the latter of which was "one of the great centers of learning in the Muslim world,"[17] to which scholars from Asia, Africa, and Europe "came for consultation and study."[18] This West African intellectual center flourished into the sixteenth century, concurrent with the enslaving of blacks from a few hundred miles away who were thought to be savages with little or no capacity for formal, structured learning.

The British slavers used the religion of the non-Muslim West African and his sexual moral code--or seeming lack of one--to further brand the black man as inferior. According to Winthrop Jordan:

> Englishmen found the natives of Africa very different from themselves. Negroes looked different; their religion was un-Christian; their manner of living was anything but British; they seemed to be a particularly libidinous sort of people.[19]

Not only did the Englishman question the African's intellectual capacities, morals, and religious practices, but his status as a full-fledged member of the human race as well. One of the more common of the numerous racial epithets traditionally hurled at persons of African descent is that of "a black ape." Winthrop Jordan gives us an insight into the origin of that invective and its implications.

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> . . . the Negro's homeland was the habitat of the animal which in appearance most resembles man. . . . Accordingly it happened that Englishmen were introduced to the anthropoid apes and to Negroes at the same time and the same place. The startlingly human appearance and movements of the 'ape' . . . aroused some curious speculations.
>
> A few commentators went so far as to suggest that Negroes had sprung from generations of ape-kind or that apes were themselves the offspring of Negroes and some unknown African beast.[20]

The British slavers were molding the pattern for the stage caricature of the African-American. He was stupid, for the most part unable to grasp the intricacies of critical thought and structured education. Spiritually, he was given to strange religious practices; when forced to accept Christianity, he bastardized it by inserting aspects of his primitive, ancestor-worshipping religion from which he had never fully weaned himself, and had embraced his master's religion with an emotional fervor and depth of faith which must have surprized even the most devout white Christians.

The question of the degree of "human-ness" which blacks possessed was used as a justification for subjecting them to work-loads fit only for the proverbial beasts of burden.

The Myth of the "Musical" Negro

To understand the notion that peoples of African descent are "musical" in nature, one must take a look at one of the key features of African culture. Music was an important aspect of the African's religion; religion, however, was not just a mere aspect of the African's life. It was his life. "The African came from an intensely religious culture, a society where religion was a daily, minute-to-minute concern, and not something relegated to a specious, once-a-week reaffirmation."[21]

According to John S. Mbiti, the noted Kenyan-born scholar:

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> Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion. [22]

Whereas the Protestant hymns and liturgical chants of Catholic masses serve as adjuncts to the ceremony, singing and dancing are integral parts of the African religions. Along with the traditional drumming and playing of other musical instruments, they are the backbone of religious ceremonies and rituals.

> God is often worshipped through songs, and African peoples are very fond of singing. Many of the religious gatherings and ceremonies are accompanied by singing which not only helps to pass on religious knowledge from one person or group to another, but helps create and strengthen corporate feeling and solidarity. . . . Music, singing and dancing reach into the innermost parts of the African peoples, and many things come to the surface under musical inspiration which otherwise may not be readily revealed.[23]

The African's religion was as inseparable from his psychological makeup as his skeletal and muscular systems were to his physical being; his music, being the primary language of his religion, was as natural to him as breathing and speaking. To the European traders, however, the African's immersion in the aforementioned modes of musical expression seemed, like numerous other culturally-derived differences, quite strange and more than a bit childish. Coming from a society where spontaneous outbursts of musical expression were relatively uncommon; where music was set aside for certain occasions, the Europeans used this as yet another bit of evidence for a new stereotype.

What had traditionally been a means of self-expression and worship for the African would become a form of entertainment for his white captors. The concept of the Negro as a song-and-dance

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entertainer began before he touched American shores. Impressed by and appreciative of the black man's musical talent from what little they had seen in their limited contact with him. "Slave captains sometimes forced their black cargoes to dance and sing on shipboard on the way across the Atlantic from Africa."[24]

In his new status as human chattel, the African's music took on some new functions. "Singing to accompany one's labors was quite common in West Africa. . . . The African [-American] slave continued to chant his native songs, at work, even though the singing of them might be forbidden or completely out of context."[25] To ease the drudgery of his labors, the work songs or "field hollers" were used.[26]

Generation after generation of African-American slaves had only their songs and dances to amuse themselves with in the few hours of their own time which was allotted to them after their long, arduous workweek was completed. Ostensibly their own creations, the songs and dances were in reality the words, tunes, and movements which had been passed down from their ancestors.

To many European-Americans, the fact that the slaves would have the desire to sing and dance in their spare time--and, in certain cases, while performing their labors--only served to prove that, despite the rigors of their condition of servitude--they were <u>still</u> such a happy race of people. Hence, the stereotype of the happy, singing, dancing, and childlike slave was born and nurtured, though nothing could have been farther from the truth. Their sorrow, like Pagliacci's, was masked by what appeared to the unknowing as a facade of frivolity.

As they had been for the slavers on the vessels bringing the black chattel to the Americas, the musical talents of the slaves became a source of entertainment for the slavemaster class. As Carl Wittke observes:

> Often in ante-bellum days the master . . . summoned those of his slaves who were specially gifted as singers or dancers to perform for him . . . and on occasion he invited his guests and friends to the performance.[27]

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The image of the black man as a musical entertainer for whites was not fostered solely on the plantations. In some towns and cities, places were set aside for slaves to congregate and sing and dance. Invariably they attracted curious white spectators. The Sunday dances at Place Congo (Congo Square) in New Orleans became one of that city's major tourist attractions from the late 1820s to the advent of the Civil War.[28] The beauty of the singing and sheer athleticism of the dancing as performed by the blacks surely must have left a lasting impression on the white tourists. With little or no previous--and perhaps subsequent--contact with blacks, the major image that the Congo Square "shows" had left the tourists with was probably of the African-Americans as supremely talented in the area of music-making.

As we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the earliest vestiges of the black commercial musical theatre in America evolved out of the Sunday singing and dancing gatherings of the slaves--and free persons of color--at Congo Square.

In keeping with his own cultural dictates, to express himself in some musical mode was an almost involuntary response for the African, and then likewise for his African-American offspring. To his European conqueror, the black man's musicality took on an aura which was variously viewed as exotic, admirable, childish, and betokening the slave's alleged carefree nature. As often happens, an aspect of a minority group's cultural makeup is seen to be strange and subject to ridicule by the dominant group, and is thought to be indicative of all the members of that group and is then ultimately perceived as a stereotype.

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CHAPTER ONE ENDNOTES

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[3]Rayford W. Logan and Irving S. Cohen, The American Negro (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 17.

[4]Ibid.

[5]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom. A History of Negro Americans, 3d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 3.

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[7]Saunders Redding, They Came in Chains (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1950), p. 12.

[8]Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1982), p. 105.

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[10]Lerone Bennett, gen. ed., Ebony Pictorial History of Black America, vol. 1 (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1971), p. 44.

[11]Winthrop Jordan, White Over Black. American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 6.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid., p. 4.

[14]Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to

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Southerne (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), p. ix.

[15]Ibid., p. 10.

[16]Jordan, p. 10.

[17]August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (London: Constable and Company, 1972), p. 12.

[18]Franklin, p. 21.

[19]White Over Black, p. 4.

[20]Ibid., pp. 29-31.

[21]Leroi Jones, Blues People (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), p. 34.

[22]John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 2.

[23]Ibid., p. 87.

[24]Carl Wittke, Tambo and Bones, A History of the American Musical Stage (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1930), p. 6.

[25]Blues People, p. 19.

[26]Later, when the "field hollers" evolved into the blues,which changed to rhythm-and-blues to eventually become rock 'n'roll, that highly-charged emotional "feeling" that was put into the "hollers" would, in the early 1960s, be given a name, and labeled as "soul."

[27]Tambo and Bones, p. 6.

[28]Herbert Asbury, The French Quarter (New York: Albert A. Knopf, Inc., 1936), pp. 241-242.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE BRITISH LEGACY OF BLACK STAGE PORTRAYALS

The symbiotic relationship between the [Anglo-] American's attitudes toward the African [American] and the former group's set of perceived images toward the latter, emanated, like the language, legal system, and mores of the Americans, from their British forefathers. Many of the perceptions of the black man as dramatized on the American stage were merely holdovers from earlier British traditions.

The Earliest Vestiges of the Black Stage Character

In terms of language, structure, and content, the theatre of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries exerted a certain amount of influence on the American popular theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In lieu of establishing their own distinctly American theatrical tradition in the early 1800s, numerous American theatre managers instead produced plays by Shakespeare and his Elizabethan era counterparts, albeit in sometimes altered versions, primarily because of the wealth of choice acting roles in these works. Touring British theatrical stars would, in the years between the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars, inevitably perform the Shakespearean classics for their American audiences. Thus, it stands to reason, that the images and perceptions of blacks by the general British population as reflected on the stage of that era would have a measure of influence upon the theatrical presentations of their American offspring two and three centuries later.

In a reversal of the usual order of events, the African's representation as a stage character preceded his actual presence in the British Isles. This can only mean that upon his arrival, the African was as much a prefabricated notion in the minds of the English as he was an actual human being to them.

Since the days of the Roman Empire, black traders and seamen were a rare but not totally uncommon sight in the European

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mercantile centers on the Mediterranean Sea. This was not so, however, in the more isolated British Isles to the northwest. The first Africans in England were brought from Sierra Leone, West Africa, in 1554.[1] As already mentioned, before his physical arrival there, the black man was not unknown. "Englishmen had witnessed black characters on the stage long before they saw real black men."[2]

In Black Face, Maligned Race, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy documents the depiction of black characters on the British stage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Acknowledging that the term "Moor" (as the characters are described in the extant plays) was at that time an all-encompassing phrase describing anyone with dark skin or of the Islamic faith, Barthelemy has confined his study primarily to the characters who are unequivocally (and repeatedly) designated by the authors of the respective examined plays as black, or "blackamoor."

According to Barthelemy, the first black "characters" appeared on the English stage in early sixteenth-century court masques:

> Courtiers masquerading as Moors has a long history in England. The earliest documented instance occurred in 1510 at the court of Henry VIII. Between 1510 and 1605, there were at least six documented masques in which courtiers appeared as blacks.[3]

Played by actors in darkened skin, the stage Moors did little more than wear brightly-colored costumes and try to give off an aura of exoticism. "In these early masques the appeal of masquerading as Moors was in the Moor's exotic nature."[4] In this respect they were the forerunners of one of the major stereotypes that we will later encounter--that of the "Exotic Primitive."

"[Ben] Jonson's The Masque of Blackness (1605) is the earliest English court masque in which royal masquers appeared as Moors for which there is an existing text."[5] In reflecting the attitudes of his day which measured a person's godliness and general worthiness as a human being on the color of his skin, Jonson created three other

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extant masques which glorified whiteness and by extension associated dark skin with evil and inferiority.[6]

By 1596, the black population in London had grown to such a degree that Queen Elizabeth I was prompted to write a letter to the city's Lord Mayor, expressing her concern over what she considered to be a growing black underclass in the British capital.[7] At that same time, a black African named Lucy Negro had become one of the most famous courtesans in London.[8]

Blackamoors were also featured in a series of events quite similar to the court masques. In the larger cities of England, the Lord Mayor's Pageant was held on the 29th of each October to celebrate the inauguration of that city's new lord mayor. Barthelemy writes:

> Consisting of several splendid pageant wagons, troupes of marchers . . . and speeches organized . . . around a central theme, these pageants were not unlike other civic pageants and royal entries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[9]

As in the court masques, the blacks in these pageants had little more to do than appear to be exotic, strange, mysterious, and foreign:

> In many civic pageants, the emblematic role assigned to black characters is very simple. They more often than not seem to be exotic paraphernalia, used essentially to increase the air of extravagance surrounding a particular pageant car. Blacks also served as visible reminders of British success in trade and exploration, as do Indians.[10]

According to Edward Scobie, for several consecutive years during Shakespeare's popularity as a dramatist, the parade for the Lord Mayor's Pageant of London was led by an actual black man dressed as the "King of Moors," riding a lion, and followed by "other blacks bearing bars of gold."[11]

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The blackamoor representations of the court masques and civic pageants can be seen as the ancestors of the Exotic Primitive type. They were seldom more than costume-wearing, breathing stage properties. Like the "coon" characters of nineteenth-century American minstrel shows and Broadway entertainments of the first third of the twentieth century, they were in essence caricatures, as opposed to fully-drawn characters.

As for well-crafted, psychologically-motivated black stage creations, two examples stand out in the Elizabethan era. Not surprisingly, both are from the pen of the preeminent author of that --or any other--era.

The Moors of Venice and Rome

There is some controversy over whether or not William Shakespeare fashioned his two famous blackamoors--Othello, the title character of the play of the same name, and Aaron, the instigator of most of the bloody actions in Titus Andronicus--from an anti-black point of view. Any discussion on the possibility of racism coloring Othello's portrayal eventually becomes academic. On one hand, it can be argued that the Moor of Venice's character defects can be ascribed to his blackness and as emblematic of Shakespeare's desire to show black man in a negative light. Conversely, it can be countered that the character defects exhibited by the Moor are merely the requisite tragic flaws necessary for the hero's downfall. Moreover, Othello is intelligent, forceful, and a leader of men. Having earned the (perhaps begrudged) respect of his community, he is a far cry from the shuffling stereotypes of later centuries. While various characters during the course of the play may verbalize their racist preconceptions of the black general, Shakespeare has cleverly avoided imbuing the character with any of the traits of the stereotypical negro.

While there have been some articles published by black scholars either alluding to or making outright accusations of racist sentiments by Shakespeare in the portrayal of Othello, on the whole there has been no great protest from African-American academicians concerning the Moor of Venice.

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Perhaps one of the most articulate of the Shakespeare-as-racist arguments appears in The Drama of Nommo, by the noted-educator and author (The Great MacDaddy), Paul Carter Harrison. Harrison centered his thesis around his belief that Othello's desire to be fully accepted as a white man in a white society despite his black skin automatically renders him "impotent in his pursuit."[12]

Aaron, the "blood-letting Moor of Titus Andronicus,"[13] is another case entirely. In drawing him as the ruthless, remorseless, and sadistic villain of the piece, Shakespeare leaves himself open to accusations of showing these traits to be emblematic of black men in general. In a time and place which had an understandable dearth of black theatre characters, one wonders why Shakespeare would choose to portray one of the few in such a negative light. Numerous times during the course of the play, Aaron is alluded to as the embodiment of evil and called outright a "devil"; one must remember that the religious teachings of that time equated evil with blackness.

Even a casual reader of plays would probably find Aaron to be Titus Andronicus' most compelling character. "The most powerful single ingredient . . . is Aaron. Of all the characters he is the most fully developed and most interesting. He has life and energy; [is] an ingenuous contriver of mischief, a descendant of the Vice of the old morality play."[14] The forerunner of the "Brute Negro" of literature and drama, Aaron is the complete anti-thesis to the stupid, lazy, and docile "coon" types which will later litter both the musical and dramatic stages.

This wily Moor is the instigator of a series of misdeeds which include rape, mutilations, and murders. The capacity in which he serves to Rome's emperor Saturninus is never quite clearly explained. One cannot say for sure if Aaron is the emperor's slave, valet, bodyguard, or adviser. Aaron's role to the emperor's wife Tamora is much clearer--he is her lover. Thus, "cuckolding"[15] Saturninus by having an "unsanctioned"[16] affair with Tamora, Aaron plays the role of the sexual outlaw, which is part of the classic image of the Brute Negro.

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The mention of Shakespeare and his plays immediately conjures up images in the minds of a vast majority of the members of the African-American community of archaic, long-winded, vague dramas which are totally irrelevant to the experiences of the inhabitants of that community. However, if made accessible to general black audiences, it would not be too difficult to predict that Aaron would be elevated to the status of a folk hero of sorts by black Americans. "Aaron is categorically drawn as the Brute Nigger [sic]."[17] Anyone familiar with the leading characters of African-American literature, folklore, history, and mythology would immediately equate Aaron, on the sheer dint of his uncompromising defiance of the white power structure alone, with such anti-establishment "bad Niggers," real or invented, as Malcolm X, Bigger Thomas, John Henry, Nat Turner, and Stagger Lee (or Stackolee).

Aaron's potential popularity with black audiences is not lost on Paul Carter Harrison. "Blacks are easily charmed by a Shakespeare who envisions a black man with the inexorable boldness of Stackolee, the devious nature of Brer Rabbit, the guiltlessness of Bigger Thomas, and the incorrigible ruthlessness of The Great MacDaddy."[18]

Along with being drama and literature's first Brute Negro, Aaron can be viewed as the precursor of the outspoken militant, totally unapologetic for his blackness and taking great pride in it. It is learned in Act Four, Scene II, that Tamora has borne a child fathered by the Moor. The attempt of Tamora's two adolescent sons --the baby's half-brothers--to kill the brown new-born child brings about what is perhaps the Moor's most memorable moment in the play. This precipitates an outburst of righteous indignation, articulate verbal self-defense, and sheer ego strength which would not be seen again on the stage from a black character for more than three centuries.

By means of Shakespeare's pen, Aaron delivers a diatribe that predates the black pride/militant rhetoric of the 1960s by hundreds of years and is chillingly similar to it in its theme. The Nurse, bringing the just-born infant to his father, makes the mistake of denigrating the child because of its darkness:

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A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue!
Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad
Amongst the fair-fac'd breeders of our clime
The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal
And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point.[19]

For Aaron to be perceived time and again as evil for his skin's blackness is one thing; to be judged as automatically inferior is another. He deflects this racist remark with a sarcastic reply:

Zounds, ye whore! is black so base a hue?
Sweet blowse, you are a beauteous blossom sure.[20]

Sword drawn, preparing to defend the baby from his half-brothers who would kill him, Aaron's speech foreshadows the basic attitude of the "black is beautiful" liturgy of peoples of African descent of the twentieth century:

Coal black is better than another hue
In that it scorns to bear another hue;
For all the water in the ocean
Can never turn the swan's black legs to white
Although she lave them hourly in the flood.[21]

His status as dramatic literature's first Brute Negro, the antithesis to the "coon" stereotype and the stage's first black militant notwithstanding, Aaron's most relevant characteristic to this study lies in his usage as a symbol representing the image of blackness as evil and associated with the devil which permeated English thought at the time of the play (circa 1594).[22]

According to Barthelemy:

> It is no exaggeration to say that the overwhelming majority of black Moors who appeared on the popular English stage between 1589 and 1695 endorsed, represented, or were evil.[23]

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Both Harrison and Barthelemy envision Aaron as a black plague of sorts who is "loosed" upon both Elizabethan audiences and the play's fictional setting of Rome. The former writes of:

> . . . the climate of early Elizabethan closet lusts which thrived on accounts of rape, sodomy, and homicide for the blood-curdling shocks to their otherwise virtuous [Harrison's emphasis], courtly demeanor. And now they would have an Aaron cut loose [my emphasis] through their minds, the demonic repository of their repressed, blood-seeking barbarity.[24]

In describing Aaron's dramatic function, Barthelemy uses the same operative verb. "As he moves through the play, Aaron becomes the very symbol of the evil that is loosed [my emphasis] upon Rome."[25]

Ostensibly Shakespeare has painted Aaron in accordance with the prevailing racial attitudes of the time. "Aaron's 'abominable' color links him to the stage devils of old, an association not lost on Titus and his sons or on the audience."[26] The Romans of the play are constantly verbalizing their belief that black is evil. In Act Two, Scene III, Bassinius, the brother of the emperor Saturninus, spies his sister-in-law Tamora waiting in an isolated part of the forest for her black lover. Bassinius lets Tamora know that her cuckolding of her emperor husband is not the secret that she might believe it to be:

> Believe me, Queen, your swarth Cimmerian[27]
> Doth make your honour of his body's hue.[28]

Once it is established beyond all doubt by the other characters that Aaron is indeed the architect of all mischief, Titus and his sons hammer home the point of their view of Aaron as being the devil incarnate again and again. In Act Five, Scene I, upon Aaron's apprehension, Lucius, the son of Titus, says that Aaron "is the incarnate devil that robbed Andronicus of his good hand."[29]

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In Act Five, Scene II, the title character chides Tamora for not only having been the accomplice of the villainous Moor, but his lover as well:

> . . . had you but a Moor
> Could not all hell afford such a devil
> . . . . . .
> It were convenient you had such a devil.[30]

Had Aaron been crafted by a lesser playwright than Shakespeare, he might have been portrayed by the author as a stereotype which played upon the audience's perception of black as symbolic of evil. Astutely attuned to audience psychology as he was, surely Shakespeare must have had this preconception of his contemporaries in the back of his mind as he constructed the piece. Shakespeare offers a disclaimer of sorts by instilling a huge measure of self-knowledge and determination into the Moor's part, in relation to his being perceived as evil by the other persons in the play. While providing a most fiendish villain to an audience which would readily ascribe his evil as a character trait as exemplified by the color of his skin, Shakespeare uses that character to comment on the British people's penchant for blindly accepting pre-conceived notions without examining beneath the surface to get a closer look at the person and his motives. Aaron is not evil because he is black. Aaron is a black man who chooses to be evil. Notes Barthelemy:

> Aaron denies the power of his blackness to determine his nature; he insists that he chooses to be evil. Proud of his villainy, Aaron, after he has chopped off Titus' hand, gloats:
>
> Aaron
> Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace Aaron will have his soul black like his face.
>
> By emphasizing his volition in the election of evil over good, Aaron rejects determination; for him blackness <u>can</u>

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> [Barthelemy's emphasis] be a signifier of evil only when black men choose to be evil. . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Titus and his sons and their partisans undeniably see blackness as a symbol of evil . . . but . . . Aaron does not deny his role as an agent of evil; he does, however, insist unrelentingly that his was a free choice. . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> By demonstrating some humanity, Aaron undermines the univocal symbol of blackness, and the play says something about the nature of evil. . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Aaron's ability to recognize the role his blackness plays in the mind of others and to deny its power over himself helps loose somewhat the constrictions of type characterization [3]

True to his nature, Aaron has the last word, laughing at the fate which has been handed down to him. He scoffs at the chance for expressing his remorse when that opportunity is presented:

> Lucius
> Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds?
>
> Aaron
> Ay, that I had not done a thousand more
> Even now I curse the day . . .
> Wherein I did not some notorious ill:
> As kill a man, or else devise his death;
> Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it;
> . . . . . .
> Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things
> As willingly as one would kill a fly;
> And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
> But I cannot do ten thousand more.
>
> Lucius
> Bring down the devil, for he must not die
> So sweet a death as hanging presently.

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Aaron

If there were devils, would I were the devil,
To live and burn in everlasting fire,
So I might have your company in hell
But to torment you with my bitter tongue![32]

Like the Brute Negro characters who followed him, Aaron makes jest with the notion of his own demise. His previous speeches have foreshadowed twentieth century black militant rhetoric; the above speeches demonstrate the classic Brute's attitude toward his own mortality which is succinctly paraphrased by the legendary Bo Diddley (born Ellas McDaniel), one of the founding fathers of rock 'n' roll, in his 1958 hit recording of "Who Do You Love?":

I got a tombstone heart and a graveyard mind
I'm just twenty-two and I don't mind dyin'![33]

While he is the psychological antithesis to the shuffling minstrel "darky," Aaron shares with him the function of being a scapegoat. The "coon" caricature served as the brunt of the white audience's humor; as the lightning rod for the thunderbolts of the audience's repressed emotions that mingled fantasy with fear, Aaron is a convenient "bogeyman" and an all the more hissable villain because of his blackness.

In drawing Aaron, Shakespeare gave himself the best of two worlds. Aaron's demonic actions and the attitudes towards his blackness as emblematic of evil which are expressed by the Romans in the play pander to the prejudices of the Elizabethan audiences. Conversely, lest Aaron be perceived as a mono-faceted caricature of evil, Shakespeare has meticulously delineated the Moor's motives. We can construe Aaron as an evil individual who happens to be black, or as a black individual who happens to be evil--and luxuriates in it.

In spite of Aaron's undeniable potency in a venue which has historically portrayed the black male in less than flattering terms,

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Paul Carter Harrison nonetheless retains his misgivings on the character.

> Unquestionably, to have a nigguh [sic] like Aaron in the service of black liberation would be truly welcome; however, in the racist context of cosmic evil conceived by Shakespeare, Aaron becomes a hopeless stereotype of 'badness' whose enmity reinforces the cultural bias.[34]

Mark Harris takes the opposite view from Harrison in regard to Shakespeare's racial attitudes.

> It is impossible to accuse the immortal Bard of anti-color prejudice: he gave us the magnificent Othello; and if he made Aaron a villain he gave to him, along with an overwhelming lack of conscience, the power to assert, in moving language, his right to be black.[35]

We shall see Aaron reincarnated numerous times in subsequent chapters. Ironically, in light of Harrison's qualms about Aaron's depiction, the character from the musical theatre who perhaps most closely resembles Shakespeare's militant Moor is Harrison's best-known creation: the title character in The Great MacDaddy.

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CHAPTER TWO ENDNOTES

[1]Harry Lee Faggett, Blacks and Other Minorities in Shakespeare's England (Prairie View, Texas: Prairie View Press, 1971), p. 4.

[2]Barthelemy, Black Face, Maligned Race, p. x.

[3]Ibid., p. 19.

[4]Ibid., p. 20.

[5]Ibid.

[6]These are The Masque of Beauty (1608), The Masque of Queen (no date given) and The Gypsies Metamorphosed (no date given).

[7]James Walvin, The Black Presence (New York: Schocken Books 1972), p. 12.

[8]Edward Scobie, Black Britannia (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1972), p. 5.

[9]Barthelemy, p. 43.

[10]Ibid., p. 47.

[11]Scobie, p. 6.

[12]Paul Carter Harrison, The Drama of Nommo (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1972), p. 187.

[13]Ibid., p. 182.

[14]Gustav Cross, ed., "Introduction," The Pelican Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 19.

[15]Barthelemy, p. 93.

[16]Ibid.

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[17]The Drama of Nommo, p. 183.

[18]Ibid., p. 185.

[19]William Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Irving Riner and George Lyman Kittredge, eds. (Waltham, Massachusetts: Xerox College Publishing), p. 951. Henceforth, unless otherwise noted, any quotes from the Titus Andronicus text will be from this compilation.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., p. 927.

[23]Barthelemy, p. 72.

[24]The Drama of Nommo, p. 183.

[25]Barthelemy, p. 94.

[26]Ibid.

[27]According to Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, a Cimmerian is "any of a mythical people whose land was described by Homer as a region of perpetual mist and darkness." (p. 326).

[28]Titus Andronicus, p. 940.

[29]Ibid., p. 956.

[30]Ibid., p. 958.

[31]Barthelemy, pp. 95-97.

[32]Titus Andronicus, pp. 956-957.

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[33] Composed and performed by Bo Diddley (Ellas McDaniel) on Chess Records, Chicago, Illinois, originally recorded in 1958. A re-made version was used in the soundtrack of the 1987 hit motion picture La Bamba.

[34] The Drama of Nommo, p. 184.

[35] Mark Harris, "What Shakespeare Wrote About Negroes," Negro Digest, January 1950.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES: THE FIRST BLACK CHARACTERS ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

As did the Blackamoor representations in the British court masques and Lord Mayor's pageants, the roles of the first black stage characters in America mirrored, predictably enough, their servile condition in the society. Unlike their British counterparts--who were basically colorfully-costumed set-pieces--the early black characters were for the most part comic slaves.

The Birth of the "Stage Negro"

"One of the most distinctly native of the comedy types was the 'stage negro'."[1] The comic Negro servant can be seen as a darker-hued offshoot of the comic servant tradition in drama. Central in the comedies of ancient Greece and Rome, the comic servant was one of the most important stock characters in Comedia del Arte, which flourished in Europe between 1550 and 1750.[2]

In Elizabethan dramas, the comic servant is sometimes represented by the character of the fool or court jester. The black equivalent of this traditional buffoon is the "coon" or "darky" character, often given the generic name of Sambo. "Sambo was the descendant of a long line of fools who played an important role in Medieval Europe."[3] Whereas the Medieval fool performed before the royalty, his American Sambo counterpart played for the ruling class of the antebellum Southern plantation society.[4]

Like the comic servants who populated the works of the seventeenth century French dramatist Molière, and the comedies of manners of eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Europe, the basic function of the Negro servant was to amuse the audience. Here, however, the resemblance ended. While the joke with the other servants often centered around the fact that they were smarter than their masters, the stage Negro servant was depicted in a way which perpetrated the myth of his inferiority. "Whites laughed at them as

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clowns, not with [the author--Jack Schiffman's--emphasis in both cases] them as wits."[5]

The first black character to appear on the American stage was drawn in keeping with this attitude. According to the black playwright and historian Loften Mitchell:

> The Negro as subject matter was introduced to the American theatre in 1769. This was in The Padlock, a comedy that portrayed a Negro character with little authenticity. Lewis Hallam, who supposedly sought realism in the American drama, played this role.[6]

Minor Negro characters appeared in the anonymous play The Candidates.[7] The plot of John Leacock's The Fall of the British Tyranny (1776) revolved around a planned British-sponsored slave revolt in which the blacks would kill their American masters and be freed by King George III's forces.[8] There is no documented proof, however, that these two plays were ever staged.[9]

The mulatto character made its American debut in 1792 in The Yorker's Strategem, or Banana's Wedding, by J. Robinson. Set in the West Indies, the play is a two-act farce in which the lead character of Banana, played by the author, walks away from a pre-arranged marriage to Louisa Fingercash and "returns contentedly to his mulatto, Priscilla."[10]

In his book A History of the American Drama From the Beginning to the Civil War, Arthur Hobson Quinn states that in John Murdock's 1795 play, The Triumph of Love, or Happy Reconciliation, "Sambo, a negro, was well conceived and was the first native negro character on the American stage."[11] He reminds us that the Negro characters in the previously-acted The Padlock and The Yorker's Strategem were West Indians, and that The Candidates and The Fall of the British Tyranny "were probably not acted."[12]

Quinn then remarks on a subsequent, unproduced play written in 1798 by Murdock. He writes of The Politicians:

> The negro characters are . . . drawn with a skill in which Murdock surpassed anyone else for many a year, and he

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put into their mouths an amusing argument on the merits of France, England, and America.[13]

Much later in the text he gives an example of the "skill" with which Murdock depicted the black characters by citing some of their "amusing argument."

Pompey
My massa for France--so I--who you for, Sambo?

Sambo
I go we massa, too.

Pompey
He for France?

Sambo
No.

Pompey
For English?

Sambo
No.

Caesar
Who de debil he for den?

Sambo
He for he country![14]

Had this play been staged, perhaps some of the audience members, as did Doctor Quinn, would have found the conversation of the Negroes "amusing" and the "skill" of their depiction by Murdock admirable. Others may have judged from the speeches of the Negroes that their inability to pronounce even the most rudimentary, monosyllabic words placed them at the lowest end of the human intellectual spectrum, not too far removed from dumb animals.

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William Milus' 1798 backstage farce, All in a Bustle, or The New House, contains a Negro buffoon character. This comedy centers around the trials and tribulations of a stage manager of a new theatre.[15] Lampooning the insecurities, jealous natures, eccentricities, and inflated egos of actors and actresses, it features a scene in which "a black wench [sic] who, in the intervals of waiting on them, falls on the scenery and wipes it up with her head."[16]

A Negro servant, Harry, appears in A. B. Lindsley's 1807 play, Love and Friendship, or Yankee Notion.[17]

The first decades of the nineteenth century featured the earliest vestiges of the American theatre's image of the Negro as a song-and-dance specialist. According to Loften Mitchell:

> An art form is not always ahead of history, but a review of the drama during the early nineteenth century indicates that it was certainly assisting in undermining the Negro as a human being. As early as 1802 a new tradition was hardening in America. Songs in alleged Negro dialect were interspersed in A New Way to Win Hearts, The Battle of Lake Champlain (1815) and Tom and Jerry. In Tom and Jerry a spot is found for gay singing and dancing, even in a Charleston slave market.[18]

Edwin Forrest, "the first American performer to win lasting fame,"[19] honed his "American"[20] style of acting in part by playing a Negro character, Ruban, in Cincinnati in 1823.[21] The play was a farce entitled The Tailor in Distress, by a famous American theatre manager named Sol Smith; Forrest took the role as a favor to the financially-distressed Globe Theatre. None of the actresses in the company shared his willingness to apply the blackface, so he found "an old negro washerwoman"[22] and cast her. She proved to be quite popular with the audiences.[23]

By the 1820s the image of the black man--or at least the Negro stage caricature of the black man--was becoming more and more associated with "darky" song-and-dance routines. It was not uncommon to "interpolate Negro songs in theatre programs, whether

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tragedy or farce."[24] Charles Matthews, a British actor who specialized in Negro characterizations, reports of an 1822 visit to New York City's African Grove Theatre, when, during the course of the performance, the audience demanded that the actor playing Hamlet stop his soliloquy and instead sing the popular song "Possum up a Gum Tree."[25]

Although American minstrelsy did not solidify into a relatively concrete structural form until the early 1850s, the patterns for that genre were starting to become evident by the late 1820s. According to Robert C. Toll:

> By the late 1820s, blackfaced white American performers like George Nichols, Bob Farrell, George Washington Dixon, J. W. Sweeney, John N. Smith, and Thomas D. Rice toured the nation, performing alleged Negro songs and dances in circuses and between acts of plays. Like much of the rest of American culture, the melodies for many of these songs were of British origin.[26]

While a certain element of White America was using the theatre as one of the media to undermine the black man's humanity, an advance guard from Black America was making a sincere, if ultimately unappreciated attempt to obtain a measure of dignity and artistic expression in that same arena.

The African Grove--America's First Black Theatre

In 1821 New York City had a population of free blacks ranging between ten and fourteen thousand, mostly centered in what is today the southern sector of Greenwich Village. A relatively substantial black middle-class was developed due to the availability of well-paying jobs such as ship's steward, restaurant chefs, and other service-related labor. In two occupations--as janitors of business buildings and in the food catering industry--a number of blacks actually became wealthy.[27] Young black males could be educated at one of the two African Free Schools, which offered a curriculum similar to that of their white counterparts.[28] Not surprisingly, a

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segment of this middle-class African-American population and its burgeoning intelligentsia were attracted to forms of artistic expression such as the theatre.

The Park Theatre, one of the grandest in New York City in the early 1800s, was one of the few theatres to set aside a section for blacks. Fronting on City Hall Park, it was a huge stone building with three tiers which seated approximately 2,000 people.[29] A part of the gallery was set aside for blacks; co-habitors of that level were prostitutes and pickpockets.[30] The typical bill-of-fare at the Park "usually consisted of two pieces, a tragedy and a comedy, and sometimes even three, with a comic song or dance in between."[31]

The appreciation of the arts by his fellow blacks did not go unnoticed by James Brown. A steward on an ocean liner that sailed between New York and Liverpool, Brown retired from the sea in 1817, purchasing a house on the north side of Thomas Street.[32] Fashioning the back yard into a tea garden, he presented singing and instrumental entertainments that were well-received by the black populace.

James Hewlett quickly became the most popular of the tea garden performers. A fair-skinned young mulatto born on the island of Nassau in the Bahamas,[33] he supplemented his well-appreciated renditions of popular songs by adding "by degrees"[34] dramatic speeches that he had seen performed at the Park Theatre by celebrated British and American thespians.

After a time the recitals began attracting a growing number of curious whites, owing in part to the word-of-mouth communication of Hewlett's talents. Sensing that there was a sufficient following amongst blacks and whites to merit an expansion, Brown, Hewlett, and others formulated the plans for starting their own theatre group in 1820, and turned it into a reality in 1821. They called themselves The African Company, and their theatre edifice The African Grove Theatre.

Situated at the corner of Bleecker and Mercer Streets, the theatre was made "of wood, roughly built, and having capacity for an audience of 300 to 400."[35] The initial 1821 productions included Richard III, Othello, and Hamlet.

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Richard III is thought to be the flagship presentation of the African Company because the earliest extant "review" concerning that ensemble's work was published in the September 21, 1821, edition of The National Advocate, a New York City daily newspaper. The review reported that "a little dapper, woolly-headed waiter at the City Hotel personated the royal Plantagenet."[36] This was obviously not the stoutly-built, fair-skinned James Hewlett, who played most of the company's leading roles. The critic stated that some unconventional doubling of roles resulted from a paucity of actors; the scenic decoration was done with "some taste," and that some of the costumes were "made up from discarded merino curtains of the ballrooms [of the City Hotel]."[37] The reviewer, in summation, felt that "their conception of Shakespeare will be sufficient, and how delighted would the Bard of Avon have been to see his Richard performed by a fellow as black as the ace of spades."

While attending the Grove Theatre to ostensibly partake of the African Company's interpretations of Richard III and other classics, the patrons of that theatre subscribed to the long-standing tradition of going not only to see, but to be seen. The clientele at the Grove made it a point to look their best while attending the plays; members of both sexes were dressed in the height of fashion.[38]

As expected, the whites who supported the tea garden entertainments also patronized the African Theatre. Along with them came a rowdy, disruptive band of young white toughs, who responded to moments they did not like in the African Company's productions in the same impolite manner with which they were accustomed to expressing themselves at New York's "white" theatres.[39]

In Black Manhattan, the noted black historian, novelist, essayist, and songwriter James Weldon Johnson gives us an insight into ticket prices:

> The prices of admission charged by the African Company are interesting in that they seem pretty high for the times and the patrons; the boxes were seventy-five

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cents, the pit fifty cents, and the gallery thirty-seven and a half cents. [40]

Perhaps these relatively steep prices were designed to dissuade the disruptive element from frequenting the theatre. If that was the case, the ploy did not work. The jeering and hooting during performances continued, prompting the management to segregate all whites into the back of the theatre because they did not know "how to behave themselves at entertainments designed for ladies and gentlemen of colour."[41] The repeated interruptions by the white hoodlums was one of the major factors causing the African Theatre's demise.

The mildly favorable response to the company's inaugural performance of Richard III from The National Advocate notwithstanding, the African Company suffered from a generally hostile press. "Open references to the company's physical features, its elocution and its mannerisms fill the newspapers of that era."[42]

Frequent harassment from the police compounded an already bad situation. Fearful that incendiary tensions between the relatively well-off black patrons and the poor white rowdies would ignite into a race riot, the police halted numerous African Grove performances because of real or invented violations of the local fire codes within the theatre, sometimes dragging the actors off to jail. "Sometimes the actors were reciting their lines as they were being carried away. And, upon the actors' release from jail, they returned and offered another performance."[43]

Symbolically enough, the final production of the African Company consisted of the staging of the first play by a black author to be presented in America.[44] The Drama of King Shotaway, by the company's manager and co-founder, James Brown, opened on June 20, 1823. Starring Hewlett in the title role, the play was "founded on facts, taken from the insurrection of the Caravs on the island of St. Vincent. Written from experience by Mr. Brown."[45] In Ira Aldridge, The Negro Tragedian, Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock speculate:

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> This is the last we hear of the African Company, and it is in keeping with the general outlook of the group that it went out, not with a whimper, but with a bang--a Negro insurrection, with which Mr. Brown had some experience. Maybe this first Negro drama of revolt was the last straw for the authorities, who now felt more than ever impelled to close down the African Theatre for good.[46]

The company's leading player, James Hewlett, performed for the next two years in New York theatres, then sailed for England in 1825.[47] Meeting with limited success there, he returned to New York, where his last documented performance was a "farewell performance" at the Columbian Hall, with his wife accompanying him on the piano.[48]

Its distinction of being the first black theatre company in America notwithstanding, perhaps the African Theatre's most important contribution to world theatre was for serving as a training ground for the first world-renowned black actor: Ira Aldridge. Born July 24, 1807, in New York City, and a product of the African Free Schools, Aldridge apprenticed in his middle teens with the African Company. Like Hewlett, he left New York around 1825 to pursue a theatrical dream in Europe; unlike Hewlett he became a resounding success. A popular, critical, and artistic success throughout the British Isles and continental Europe, Aldridge mastered not only the roles of Shakespeare's blackamoors Aaron and Othello, but Macbeth, Lear, and Shylock, among others, as well.

While touring in the role of Shylock, Aldridge died in his hotel on August 7, 1867, in Lodz, Poland. He was buried two days later in the town's Evangelical Cemetery, "and to this day the grave of the African Roscius is cared for by the Society of Polish Artists of Film and Theatre."[49]

Two precursors to the attitudes which blacks would later face in the commercial theatre are at play in the saga of the African Theatre Company. Attempts at "serious" theatre by African-Americans were derided by the white press, and, with the exception of a relatively small group of black--and white--patrons, for the most part their efforts were neither appreciated nor desired by the

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general theatre-going populace. With but a few exceptions, Broadway has been inhospitable to the serious black drama. Such black dramatists with varying degrees of success on Broadway as Richard Wright, Louis Peterson, Lorraine Hansberry, Joseph A. Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Samm-Art Williams never came close to a triumphant return to the commercial arena; only August Wilson, with Fences and The Piano Lesson has had two successful Broadway plays.

Another aspect of the black man's representation on the stage related directly to the images presented of him in the theatre and White America's perception of and acceptance or rejection of that image. The grinning, shuffling, dialect-mumbling,dice-shooting, watermelon-stealing stage "darky" became a staple of the theatre; the prospect of the black insurrectionists in Brown's King Shotaway possibly instilling a measure of racial pride in the black patrons of the African Theatre Company induced a paranoia into the New York officials that, as Marshall and Stock have suggested, led to the ultimate shutting down of that theatre.

James Brown and James Hewlett were the engineers of America's first black presenters of structured drama in an official theatre venue. Just a few years later, and thirteen hundred miles to the southwest, the earliest vestiges of the black commercial musical theatre were being produced by a woman who most likely never attended a conventional theatre event in her long and fabled life.

The Voodoo "Shows" of the Widow Paris

The link between structured theatre as we know it and religious rituals has long been acknowledged. The theatre which began in ancient Greece evolved in 534 B. C. in the form of a contest to be presented for the authors of tragedies at the City Dionysia, a major religious festival.[50] After organized theatre virtually disappeared for several centuries,[51] it made a gradual return in the churches in Western Europe, first in the form of liturgical dramas, then by means of vernacular plays with religious themes.[52]

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The relationship between formal theatre and the religious rituals of pre-literate peoples exists in the similarities that are shared between the two practices. Both are story-telling mediums; they can be didactic; they employ music, dance, speech, masks, costumes, performers, audience participation, and usually take place on a stage or pre-arranged performance space.[53] Often the rituals serve as a surrogate of the theatre for the pre-literate peoples.

Such a surrogate for structured theatre can be seen as the basis for the first instance of a black commercial theatre of sorts in the United States. Whereas Brown and Hewlett consciously aspired to produce formal theatre in New York in the early 1820s, their counterpart, a free woman of color in New Orleans, capitalized on the ancient West African rituals of the Vodun religion by turning them into theatre-like spectacles which were as popular and controversial as anything that graced the boards of New Orleans' numerous "legitimate" theatres and opera houses. Some of the techniques that she employed and her awareness of audience psychology predate her successors by several decades.

Vodun, one of the oldest and most popular forms of West African religions, was brought to the New World by the slaves.[54] Like several other elements of the African's culture (i.e., his language and customs) which were banned by slavemasters for fear that they might prove to be unifying factors amongst the bondsmen, Vodun was outlawed. The religions of the respective colonial nations were thus forced upon the human chattel. The slaves of the French- and Spanish-speaking colonies in which Catholicism was practiced took immediately to this religion; the pantheon of Catholic saints, usage of artifacts and ritual, and the general structure closely mirrored the traditions of the outlawed Vodun.[55] Hence, the West African practices, cleverly disguised and adapted, flourished in the Catholic/Latin colonies of the New World, while in the Protestant/Anglican mainland American colonies the practice of Vodun languished, and, except in a relatively disorganized manner, fell out of practice.[56]

The earliest documented instance of Vodun--by now having been corrupted to and known as "voodoo" (voudou)--on what is now

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the continental United States appears in the form of a piece of legislation issued in 1782 by the governor of the then-Spanish colony of Louisiana. Governor Bernardo de Galvez banned the further importation of slaves from Martinique, "as they are too much given to voudouism and make the lives of the citizens unsafe."[57] Ten years later, when control of New Orleans and Louisiana had returned to the French, the Governor Baron de Carondelet extended this prohibition to the importation of blacks from Santo Domingo [Haiti], partly due to the same Voodoo-inspired paranoia, and partly "through fear that they might foment rebellion among the Louisiana slaves."[58]

The Haitian revolution was to provide a legitimate base for Carondelet's fears. In the only successful revolt among numerous slave rebellions in the Western Hemisphere, the blacks and mulattos had expelled the forces of Napoleon after a dozen years of hostilities between 1789 and 1801.

More than a little credit was given by the victorious patriots Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Toussaint L'Ouverture to the power of Vodun in their overthrow of the French. L'Ouverture, Haiti's first dictator, himself had been a voodoo doctor and "insisted that it had been the mystical powers of the voodoo priests that had given the black fighters the strength to drive their enemies to the sea."[59]

The continued intramural political struggles forced the flight of thousands of whites, mulattos, and blacks from the new sovereign state of Haiti. Louisiana and New Orleans having since been sold to the United States, the quarantine against persons of African descent was eased there, allowing over 5,000 Haitian blacks and mulattos to migrate to that French-speaking outpost of America between 1806 and 1810.[60]

With the influx of refugees from Haiti, voodoo mushroomed in New Orleans. The alarms which had been sounded decades before by Governors Galves and Carondelet rang again. A municipal law was passed in 1817 limiting the gathering of slaves to Sundays only, from noon to nightfall, at Congo Square, situated at North Ramparts and Orleans.[61]

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The Sunday gatherings featured the athletic dancing of the slaves and free persons of color. Soon the festivities became one of the city's foremost tourist attractions, as curious whites flocked to Congo Square to watch the blacks and their African-based dances, such as the Calinda and the Bamboula.[62] "The current Voodoo queen was always present . . . the most elaborately dressed woman, the haughtiest and most carefree."[63]

Early nineteenth-century New Orleans voodoo had a clear-cut hierarchy. Priestesses and priests were an absolute necessity; individuals could not directly address the gods; only an intermediary who had been tutored in the proper rites could make a successful appeal to the deities.[64] Not everyone could qualify for the priesthood. "Although slaves continued to form the great majority of the rank and file of voodoo worshippers, the priesthood was composed almost entirely of free persons of color, principally mulattos and quadroons."[65]

The voodoo culture was matriarchal.[66] "Women seem . . .to have made up at least eighty percent of the cultists, and it was always the female of the white race who entered the sect."[67] The male high priests and doctors, regardless of their power and popularity, always had to acquiesce to the Queen.

By far the most famous of the doctors was Jean Montanet, also known as Bayou John and Voodoo John, but best known as Doctor John.[68] The facts of his life read like fiction, and a century and a half after his colorful existence, the particulars of his life are shrouded by legend, lore, and myth. Among innumerable items of fact and hearsay, Doctor John is generally credited with introducing and gradually teaching his canon of secrets to the greatest of all the Voodoo Queens--Marie Laveau.[69]

Marie brought a sense of order and structure to New Orleans voodoo. Before her, a number of high priestesses had claimed to be the queen. A combination of her personality, presence, and the ability to convince the voodoo worshippers that her "power" was indeed stronger than that of the other pretenders to the title made her the choice as the city's top voodoo practitioner.

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To this day people of African descent in New Orleans speak of Marie Laveau with a mixture of awe, pride, and reverence. Her story is augmented with legend and hearsay. The recorded facts of her existence are as colorful as anything a novelist or dramatist could create. Her history is full of contradictions, many created by herself.

Tourists from all over the world made it a point to stop at Congo Square while in New Orleans to see her shows, yet all indications point to the possibility that she herself never ventured more than a few miles outside of New Orleans, and then only to conduct her ceremonies at the confluence of Bayou St. John and Lake Ponchartrain. It has been alternately speculated that she was totally illiterate, that she had been taught the rudimentary elements of reading and writing, and that she had had the full benefit of the Catholic school education afforded to free girls of color. She was the queen of a religion which many incorrectly connected with devil worship; she was a devout Catholic who attended Mass practically every day of her life.[70]

Marie was born in 1794, the illegitimate daughter of Charles Laveau and Marguerite Darcantel.[71] Her mother was believed to have been a mixture of French, African, and Choctaw Indian;[72] her father, by some accounts was white,[73] but by others, a free mulatto.[74] Her own publicist, Marie would manipulate the facts in her own interest, and was not above boasting that she was descended from the noblest blood of France, a claim that, considering what she accomplished, was by no means without credence.

On August 14, 1819, she was married in St. Louis Cathedral to Jacques Paris, a young, free quadroon who was one of the Santo Domingo immigrants.[75] Shortly thereafter he vanished from her life, dying in 1826.[76] Long before his death, however, "Marie was calling herself 'The Widow Paris,' after the fashion of the period."[77]

One speculates that Paris' departure might have been hastened by his young wife's growing involvement with voodoo. "It was at this time that Marie began to enter the homes of white people of the city as a hairdresser."[78] While fixing the hair of the wives of some of the city's most influential men, Marie gained some invaluable

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information and secrets that she could later use against them, if necessary. Concurrent with this, she was learning the rites and ceremonies of voodoo from her mentors Doctor John (of whom local gossip and hearsay had decreed as her "secret" maternal grandfather)[79] and Marie Saloppe, whom the Widow Paris succeeded as the consensus-acknowledged voodoo queen.

At about this time, Marie began living with Louis Christophe Duminy de Glapion, a free mulatto who, as a captain in a regiment of free men of color, had distinguished himself in the Battle of New Orleans.[80] Glapion's union with the Widow Paris lasted until his death in 1855, despite the fact that they were never legally married. Marie bore him fifteen children in rapid succession, of whom it is estimated that perhaps eight survived to adulthood. Most of the evidence points to the possibility that Glapion had absolutely nothing to do with his mate's voodoo activities.[81]

Marie was secretive about her relationship with Glapion, but that was about the only facet of her life that she kept obscured. By 1830 she was the acknowledged Queen of the Voodoos, leading the Sunday dances at Congo Square, and conducting nocturnal ceremonies--public and private, for the curious and the true believers.

Marie was by no means a charlatan milking a lunatic fringe of social misfits of their meager earnings. According to Robert Tallent:

> Marie, intelligent and shrewed and an excellent showman [sic], with a strong business sense . . . brought into her new profession a rather ruthless talent for doing things thoroughly. Voodoo, for the first time, except for the witch doctor practice of John Bayou [Doctor John], was to be put on a paying basis.
>
> Marie never lessened in any way the mysticism and sensuality of the fanatic Zombi worshippers . . . but she added new tricks, both borrowed and original, principally Roman Catholic statues of saints, prayers, incense and holy water.[82]

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Marie quickly disposed of her rivals, sometimes by threats of using her powers against them, sometimes by using her tall, robust frame to its advantage and simply beating them up and making them promise to either leave town or serve under her as "sub-queens."[83]

To say that Marie was one of the most powerful persons of her time in New Orleans is no exaggeration. "Her control over the Negroes became almost absolute,"[84] and a sizeable amount of whites were in true fear of her purported powers. Politicians and civic officials at times had to do her bidding, not necessarily because they feared her "magic," but because she "mixed black magic with blackmail. Her network of black spies, servant slaves to the city's most prominent families, kept her better informed than most journalists."[85]

Marie used every trick imaginable to augment her growing mythological status. Numerous times criminal charges were dropped against her clients by judges over whom she had garnered a measure of influence; she herself was brought up on charges several times; the few instances in which she had to appear in court never resulted in a conviction against her. No doubt rumors of divine intervention found their way behind these stories.

Another gimmick that Marie used to supplement the lore of her being magical was by appearing to be in two places at once. One of her daughters resembled her so much that the girl was renamed Marie Laveau II and often posed as her fabled mother. The junior Marie would be present at a highly-publicized event in one part of town while the real Marie would likewise be conducting some sort of public business in another, leading her followers, until the ruse was ultimately discovered, to believe that the Voodoo Queen was indeed bilocational.[86]

Her legend spread beyond the city limits of New Orleans. Congo Square on a Sunday afternoon had become an obligatory stop. "To go see Marie Laveau became one of the things a tourist in New Orleans must do, just as he was supposed to eat once in each of the famous restaurants and attend a performance at the French Opera House."[87]

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The highlight ceremony of the Voodoo worshippers was the St. John's Eve festival every June 23rd, conducted at the confluence of Lake Ponchartrain and Bayou St. John. To this day this event is a major occasion in New Orleans.

Marie was a master of what is known euphemistically today as the "crossover" technique--i.e., revamping the elements of a form of African-American art so that it would have a broader-based appeal with white audiences. She had tempered the ancient African practices with Catholicism; she had sanitized the blatant sexual movements of the popular Congo Square dances; now she was reshaping the St. John's Eve rites so that they would be acceptable to the paying whites who had traveled the dozen or so miles to the ceremony. A section of reserved seats, not unlike bleachers at contemporary sporting events, was erected for the convenience of the influential persons attending the ceremony.[88] According to Herbert Asbury, Marie

> . . . obviated the likelihood of police interference by inviting politicians, police officials, sporting men and newspaper reporters to attend the annual festivals on St John's Eve. During her reign these celebrations became almost as popular among sightseers as the weekly dances of the slaves in Congo Square; frequently the white spectators outnumbered the Voodoos.[89]

Perhaps the sole reason that this event was not as popular as the Sunday dances was because of both its once-a-year occurrence and its distance from the center of town.

For the right price, Marie and her cultists would stage their equivalent of what has traditionally been known in the "legitimate" theatre as a "command performance." At these private rites "the real magic of Voodoo was invoked, and the dancing carried to orgiastic extremes not possible before the easily shocked whites."[90]

These quasi-secret ceremonies were for the most part sponsored by the same element that served as the customers for the brunt of Marie's lucrative charms, potions, and gris-gris business--affluent young white women who had resorted to the Widow Paris'

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aid in attracting the affections of a would-be lover. Asbury describes the rites thusly:

> Most of the gatherings were for definite purposes and were paid for by the persons on whose behalf they were held. And secret and mysterious though they were supposed to be, Marie Laveau never lost her sense of the value of publicity and occasionally admitted a reporter.[91,92]

Whether the Widow Paris' acute sense of the theatrical was innate, learned as part of her indoctrination from her mentors Marie Saloppe and Doctor John, attained by observing standard theatrical fare in New Orleans theatres, or a combination of these possibilities, can never be fully proven. Surely the celebrated Marie Laveau could have gained admittance to some theatre events that otherwise barred persons of color, but there is no information, documented or hearsay, alluding to her having done so on a regular basis. What is known is that she was well aware of numerous basic elements for successful theatre: publicizing her events; seizing and maintaining her audience's attention; usage of the theatre artisan's most fundamental tools (costumes, music, dance, and the proper setting); and that she herself had that rare combination of appealing aspects that today is euphemistically known as "star quality"--by all accounts she was tall and stately, with a stunning beauty of both face and figure.

She obviously exhausted every gimmick in making herself a celebrity and proverbial "living legend." One almost wonders if Marie, in lieu of becoming a so-called "star" of the legitimate theatre, had used the stage of voodoo as her vehicle. Mel Leavitt opines that: "If her power was voodoo when she got into it, it was 'pure theatre' when she got through."[93]

Perhaps most important of all, Marie was cognizant of the images and perceptions that whites had of blacks, and how to turn those whites from Sunday afternoon Congo Square gawkers into paying customers. Like Williams & Walker, Miller & Lyles, Cole &

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Johnson, and other black creators who followed her, she was not above playing upon the whites' stereotyped notions of blacks as a means to an end.

A closer look at her ceremonies reveals that she applied techniques which would later be considered obligatory in the turn-of-the-century black musicals.

As the reviews of the black musicals of the first half of the twentieth century placed strong emphasis on the dancing, Marie's presentations were famous for the exotic and uninhibited gyrations of her cultists. Hence, by extension, the rhythms that were danced to were to play a major role in the shows of both the black musical creators and the Widow Paris. Like the ragtime, jazz, and boogie-woogie music that were staples of the black revues and operettas, the rhythms pounded out by Marie's musicians were presumedly African-based and decidedly non-European. Colorful, flashy, if less than tasteful, costumes were the order of the day in the black shows; in Marie's public rites the elaborate garbs of her voodooiennes were a given, along with the lack of costumes in the more private rites.[94]

The carefree, childlike Negro and the Exotic Primitive recurred as a type in the musicals; Marie's shows combined these elements. There was nothing profound or thought-provoking about the blacks who whirled about in various degrees of spiritual possession; they could readily be perceived by the whites as carefree and primitive; by white standards surely no self-possessed, intelligent human being could be party to spiritual possession. Similarly, in the later musicals, the dialect-speaking and malaprop-spouting Negroes could not be perceived as a people who collectively prized intellectual achievements.

A certain preoccupation with sex was evident in both the early musicals and in Marie's exhibitions. In the former there was an undercurrent of the black race's presumed predilection toward indiscriminate and rather spontaneous physical couplings; Marie's private rites allegedly sometimes climaxed into orgies.[95]

Like the creators of the later shows, Marie catered to and depended upon the more affluent white audiences. Before Williams &

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Walker, before Miller & Lyles, before Melvin Van Peebles, the Widow Paris was aware of white perceptions of blacks and manipulated those images to her advantage.

The black commercial musical has for the most part been given less than its due in critical accounts of the black man on the American stage. Similarly, Marie Laveau, undoubtedly the most powerful and prominent person of color in nineteenth century New Orleans, is mentioned nowhere in any of the "major" treatises on black history. She has been relegated to books specializing either in Voodoo or on offbeat New Orleans characters. For a woman who was a precursor of such cultural phenomena as woman's liberation, the black commercial musical, black pride,and black economic self-determination, one would think that history would have paid greater homage to her achievements.

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CHAPTER THREE ENDNOTES

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[13]Ibid, pp. 125-126.

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[30]Ibid., p. 28.

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[34]Ibid., p. 31.

[35]Black Manhattan, p. 78.

[36]Marshall and Stock, p. 33.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Mitchell, p. 24.

[40]Black Manhattan, p. 80.

[41]Mitchell, p. 25.

[42]Ibid., p. 24.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Although given full credit for having written King Shotaway, James Brown cannot be acknowledged as being the first black American playwright, because what little evidence there is concerning his place of birth points towards the West Indies.

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[76]Asbury, p. 266.

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[82]Ibid.

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[86]Ibid., p. 35.

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[87]Tallent, p. 103.

[88]Leavitt, p. 35.

[89]Asbury, p. 268.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Rather detailed descriptions of Marie Laveau's voodoo "shows" can be found on pages 269 and 270 of The French Quarter, and on pages 71 and 72 of Voodoo in New Orleans. The recent voodoo-themed motion pictures The Believers (1987), Angel Heart (1987), and The Serpent and the Rainbow (1988) feature scenes not unlike those described in the books.

[93]Leavitt, p. 35

[94]Tallent, p. 71.

[95]Ibid., p. 75.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE MINSTREL SHOW AND ITS ADJUNCTS--1828 to 1859

The American minstrel tradition of the middle decades of the nineteenth century proved to be the spawning ground for a number of important components of American popular entertainment and culture. Considered by many to be "the first genuinely American Musical Theatre, the first great indigenous entertainment,"[1] minstrelsy has had a monumental influence on the popular theatre in terms of its shaping the structure and content of the musical play, its serving as the nurturing ground for American folk music, its being the first instance of a cross-cultural exchange between black and white Americans, and its usage of the Negro as a theatrical scapegoat by displaying him in a degrading manner.

Whites in Blackface

Due to its popularity, American minstrelsy has been well-documented. Detailed historical accounts of that art-form can be found in, among other works, Robert C. Toll's Blacking Up and Carl Wittke's Tambo and Bones. Jack Haverly, one of minstrelsy's most prominent entrepreneurs, has provided a book containing the jokes, skits, and lyrics that were used in the shows, entitled Negro Minstrels: A Complete Guide. This Grotesque Essence, edited by Gary D. Engle, contains sixteen playlets from the minstrel stage.

Rather than reiterate the particulars of the structural, biographical, demographical, and production facts that these--and numerous other accounts of the genre--have given us, this study will deal with minstrelsy in terms of its direct pertinence as the ancestor of the black musical. Minstrelsy had an indelible influence on the black shows well into the 1930s, and in less obvious ways, on the works since then to the present. The structure and content of these later shows were fathered by minstrelsy, but the blackface tradition left its strongest stamp on the presentation of the images of the black race and how they were shaped by audience perceptions and expectations.

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By the 1820s, when the earliest vestiges of minstrelsy were emerging, the inferiority of the African race was a given in the minds of the American public. This was so not only to that segment of the white population which needed a scapegoat to feel superior to and not only to the black man himself, who saw his condition of servitude as a constant reminder of his inferiority, but also to many of the whites who sympathized with the black man's plight and struggled for the abolition of slavery. In Time on the Cross, Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engermen inform us:

> For with few exceptions, both those in the anti- and pro-slavery camps shared the conviction that blacks were, for racial reasons, generally inferior to whites both as laborers and as human beings.[2]

They give a brief hypothesis why the otherwise sympathetic whites might feel this way:

> Unfortunately abolitionists and other antislavery writers were not free of racism merely because they carried the banner for moral struggle. With their greater physical separation from blacks, these writers were often more gullible and more quick in their acceptances of certain racial stereotypes than slaveholders. . . . Moreover, coming from the upper classes, as many of these writers did, they shared with slaveholders certain conceptions regarding the behavior of all laboring folk.[3]

A set of political deeds by the so-called "Great Emancipator," Abraham Lincoln, that have been underplayed by the historians/mythmakers who have served as the curators of his image, epitomizes this attitude. A well-known scene in the Lincoln legend recounts the shock and sadness he experienced upon, as a young man making his initial journey to the Deep South, seeing human chattel being auctioned in New Orleans and other Mississippi delta riverports. If this is true, then so is the fact that despite whatever sympathy Lincoln felt for the black race, he also saw them

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as inferior to whites.[4] While president, when drawing up a list of acquiescences to slaveholders on a proposed bill for emancipation, Lincoln formulated plans to deport American blacks to Panama, Haiti, Liberia, and other unspecified Caribbean and African locales.[5]

Minstrelsy took what was a given--even to the most well-intentioned whites--and compounded this assumption of the African's inferiority by making it the central thought and subsequent source of humor in the art-form that would prove to be the most popular of the century. Aspects of the black race's culture and physical features were exaggerated and ridiculed. Exposure to these caricatures in the music halls of America served to instill racist tendencies, prejudices, and feelings of superiority in whites who, although they might have had an unconscious perception of the black man as the proverbial "other," perhaps would have not made strong value judgments on the black race and its ranking in the human species had they not been bombarded with the theatrical stimulus provided by the minstrelsy imagemakers.

Obviously the theory of scapegoating is at work here. Being on the lowest end of the American social spectrum, the subjected blacks were the most open to ridicule by anyone and everyone, including the group which ranked slightly above them--the poorest whites. Popular entertainment, by the inference of its very name, caters to the whims of its audience. As the popularity of the segments of theatrical entertainments of the 1820s and 1830s that featured "coon" songs and dances increased, so did the notion that perhaps whole evenings of this type of material could prove to be commercially viable.

With its blending of comic skits, humor, songs, and dances, the minstrel show greatly influenced the structure of the twentieth-century American musical comedy, perhaps more so than did the latter's other ancestors, the eighteenth century British ballad-opera, a trend started by John Gay's The Beggar's Opera in 1728;[6] the nineteenth-century British comic operetta, as popularized by Gilbert and Sullivan,[7] and the nineteenth century Viennese operetta.

Due to its musical nature, minstrelsy exposed a huge body of songs to a vast audience; many of these songs became standards. All

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of the songs of Stephen Foster were popular on the minstrel stage, even those not written specifically for that venue.[8] The minstrel shows were responsible for "the most considerable body of song sprung from the soil, which properly can be called American folkmusic."[9]

"Besides confirming the folk origins of American popular entertainment, minstrelsy's borrowing [my emphasis] of Afro-American culture is of great significance because it was the first indication of the powerful influence Afro-American culture would have on the performing arts in America."[10] This was the first instance of an on-going trend in which black music and dance have been "borrowed" by artisans of other cultures, with the white usurpers given undue credit as the innovators of the art-form, while the black originators are given minimal, if any acknowledgement. In practically every case, the borrowers secure wealth and fame at the expense of the true creators. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, and other groups of the mid-1960s "British Invasion" rock 'n' roll phenomenon "borrowed" extensively from Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Little Richard, James Ray, and others; such major twentieth century dance crazes as the Charleston, the Twist, and others were "borrowed" from inner-city blacks; Marvin Hamlisch escalated to fame by "borrowing" Scott Joplin's ragtime tunes for the 1973 motion picture, The Sting.

The Origins of the Minstrel Tradition

The evolution of minstrelsy followed a course similar to the courses of several river branches which began at different sources but later merged at a point of confluence. In this case,the songs and dances performed by the slaves on southern plantations provided a most influential branch.

In Voices of the Black Theatre, Loften Mitchell gives us an interesting twist on the origin of the minstrel tradition. It is generally acknowledged that the songs and dances were formulated by whites observing blacks on the plantations; Mitchell hypothesizes that the slaves had a much more active input into the development of the art-form:

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> Sometime during the eighteenth century black slaves on southern plantations created the minstrel form. This form--the forerunner of the American musical comedy pattern [my emphasis]--was designed by slaves to satirize slave masters. . . . What black slaves had conceived as a satirical form was taken from them and used against them! [Mitchell's emphasis][11]

The slave songs and dances, as Toll has told us, were borrowed by the stage performers of the 1820s and interpolated into their acts. Particularly popular was Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice's "Jump Jim Crow" routine. This act was conceived while Rice, as a member of Samuel Drake's company at the Louisville Theatre in 1828, "was cast for the part of a Kentucky cornfield negro" in The Rifle, a play by Solon Robinson, a local dramatist.[12] Not only was the dance well-received by the public, but the term "Jim Crow" has survived as a euphemism for segregation.

Although the blackface performers were gaining in popularity in the 1830s, they had yet to be the centerpiece of a whole evening of theatre. They "remained only a part, though a prominent one, of other entertainment forms."[13]

The first time an entire evening was devoted to the blackface entertainers occurred in New York City in February 1843.[14] The Virginia Minstrels, four white men in black makeup and appropriately ragged costumes, enacted a full-length piece displaying the "oddities, peculiarities, eccentricities, and comicalities of that Sable Genus of Humanity."[15]

Shortly thereafter minstrelsy was sweeping the nation. Just a year after its first full-length showing, this art-form received a command performance at the White House when the Ethiopian Serenaders appeared there in 1844.[16] It was most popular in the Northeastern cities, and especially so in the place of its birth, New York City.[17] Would-be traveling troupes were undercut by the fact that most of the potentially profitable "road" cities already had several resident troupes.[18] Minstrelsy was settling in as the most popular form of theatre in America, and would hold that position for decades.

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The Structure and the Image

Lest it be forgotten that the black race was deemed inferior, the minstrel shows broadcast this to its audiences. A list of character traits was assigned to the Negro by the white blackface entertainers; unfortunately, these caricatures were perpetuated by blacks themselves in the post-minstrel musicals written by African-American creative teams well into the 1920s and '30s.

Carl Wittke's recital of the stereotypes is as eloquent as any:

> The plantation type which got into minstrelsy apparently was calculated to give them impression that all Negroes were lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow. The stage Negro loved watermelon and ate them in a peculiar way. He turned out to be an excellent wielder of the razor, a weapon which he always had ready for use on such occasions as crap games, of which the stage Negro was passionately fond. . . . He always was distinguished by an unusually large mouth and a peculiar kind of broad grin; he dressed in gaudy colors and in a flashy style; he usually consumed more gin than he could properly hold; he loved chickens so well that he could not pass a chicken-coop without falling into temptation.[19]

Robert C. Toll offers insights into the process of selectivity which was used when concocting the images of blacks, and how those subsequent images had a profound effect on whites with little or no interaction with African-Americans:

> In the process of creating their stage images of Negroes, Northern white professional entertainers selectively adapted elements of Afro-American culture into caricatures and stereotypes of Negroes. These negative images of blacks did have some elements of black culture in them, however twisted and distorted the overall effect was. Thus, when white Americans later came into contact with Afro-Americans, whites who were disposed to confirm the caricatures could do it by focusing on the familiar elements, like superstition, love of music and

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> dance, and the "childish" belief in "silly" animal fables and by ignoring everything else about blacks.[20]

Structurally, the minstrel entertainments were likewise unique. When the blackface acts were merely part of other entertainments, their specialty routines were interpolated into the evening's bill; once they had attained a full-length status, the minstrels integrated their songs, dances, and "stump" speeches into a structured whole. After a decade of trial-and-error in attempting to establish a standard pattern of sorts, this basic format, as detailed in Jack Haverly's Negro Minstrels, became the norm by the mid-1850s:

> In the first part, a single row of "Negroes" . . . was seated in chairs. The humor consisted of exchanges between the "interlocutor," a "straight man," and Tambo and Bones, the "end men." The humor . . . was lowbrow and leaned heavily on puns, the most childish form of verbal amusement. It was not obscene . . .
>
> The second act, the "olio," was a variety entertainment made up of banjo players, clog dancers, perhaps a watermelon man . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The show concluded with an "after-piece," another variety entertainment. It frequently played upon the combination of simplicity and low cunning attributed to Negroes by the all-white audiences.[21]

Note the "all-white audiences." In truth, the latter decades of minstrelsy saw all-black troupes and integrated companies playing to houses which seated both blacks and whites, but normally in restricted sections. Rather than die out with the demise of the minstrel show, these black companies evolved into ensembles which would present their own musical comedies and operettas while performing on their own theatrical circuit.

Also to be noted is that if the single row of seated black-faced "Negroes" is removed, we have the earliest vestiges of burlesque,

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and its sanitized offspring, vaudeville.[22] The "lowbrow" humor that was used throughout the pieces, the specialty acts of the olio, and the playlets in the final portion are all staples of musical comedy revues of the succeeding decades. As will be discussed in the next chapter of this study, the Negro comedians of the first third of the twentieth century, blackface and all, would, save for the purported injection of a "plot" or "story line," stick basically to the minstrel format.

Fashion, Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Octoroon, and The Escape

After the runaway success of minstrelsy in the mid-1840s, it was only natural that certain elements of that genre would be borrowed by authors of other forms of theatre. While the familiar servants, contented slaves, and mulattos appeared in such lesser-known mid-century plays as J. G. Burnett's Blanche of Brandywine and Neighbor Jackwood by J. T. Trowbridge (1858),[23] the Negro figures in Fashion, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and The Octoroon have proven to be more memorable; in part owing to the historical stature of these three immensely popular works, and partly due to the colorful, if inaccurate depictions of the black characters. The portrayals of the African-Americans in these works owed a debt, if however slight, to the techniques used in minstrelsy.

Despite the fact that it was written by a black author, William Wells Brown, The Escape, Or Leap to Freedom borrows from minstrelsy, perhaps much more so than the white authors of the other three works mentioned. However, Brown's manipulation and subsequent turning around of the images predates both techniques and attitudes which will be used by black writing teams of the early part of the twentieth century.

Born in a well-to-do New York family, Anna Cora Mowatt attained instant success at age twenty-six when Fashion, her comedy of manners which satirized Manhattan's high society, became a popular play in 1845. Presenting a roster of pretentious characters striving to be who and what they are not, Mowatt sets the tone of the play in its opening speech by Zeke, "a colored servant."[24] In keeping with the practice of the times, Zeke's servant

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role is relatively small and strictly for comic relief, but Mowatt's use of him as the figure who opens the play suggests that his function as a stage personage, if not the role itself, takes on an added import. Though roughly only two years old, minstrelsy had such an impact on the American theatre scene that a playwright such as Mowatt, striving to create a popular opus, would not be above taking a page, so to speak, out of the minstrel shows, and inserting it at the top of her own work. Probably because of the public's curiosity toward and the acceptance of the buffoonish black character, Mowatt had taken the colored servant, normally relegated to a later position in the play, and placed him front and center at the opening curtain.

Zeke's function is twofold. Not only does he mirror the dialect-speaking, malaprop-spouting, flashily-dressed clown of minstrelsy, but his galling pretentiousness foreshadows the attitudes that the white characters of the play will later exhibit. The play opens with the traditional expository scene of eighteenth and nineteenth century drawing-room comedies, the euphemistic "feather-duster" scene is literally so in Fashion; the stage directions indicate that "Millinette [a French maidservant] is dusting furniture."[25] In the room with her, luxuriating in the minstrel show "darky" 's love for flashy clothing, is Zeke, "in a dashing livery, scarlet coat."[26]

> Zeke
>
> Dere's a coat to take de eyes ob all Broadway! Ah! Missy, it am de fixin's dot make de natural born [author's emphasis] gemman. A livery for ever! Dere's a pair of insuppressibles to 'stonish de colored population.
>
> Millinette
>
> (very politely)
>
> Oh, oui, Monsieur Zeke.
>
> (aside)
>
> I not comprend one word he say![27]

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What Zeke said, as was usually the case with the comic Negro servant, was not important, but how he said it.

An even more blatant borrowing of minstrel techniques occurred in the staged versions of the most controversial novel of its time. Uncle Tom's Cabin is a landmark in American literature and drama in its respective forms of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel which was published in 1852, and George L. Aiken's play, "the most successful and enduring"[28] of a plethora of unauthorized adaptations of Stowe's original.

Focusing upon the ills of slavery, Stowe's novel enlightened reading audiences both here and abroad about the evils of that institution. As there existed no copyright laws prohibiting the pirating of works at that time, Stowe's novel, like any other well-received opus, was quickly adapted. A New York actor named C. W. Taylor presented a stage version of the novel in the city in August 1852, but it was "withdrawn after only eleven performances."[29]

Undaunted by the failure of Taylor's version, George C. Howard, the manager of a stock company in Troy, New York, commissioned one of his actors, George L. Aiken, to adapt a version ofthe book for their company. The result was a run of "an unprecedented one-hundred performances at the Troy Museum Theatre,"[30] beginning in September 1852, followed by a run of over two-hundred performances in New York City starting roughly a year later.

The effects of Stowe's novel on the American popular theatre of its era reached beyond the myriad of adaptations by Aiken and others. Uncle Tom's Cabin--to be henceforth referred to in this study as Cabin--was bastardized into a variety of entertainment forms, ranging from "one-act miniature[s] with a handful of actors to five-hour six-act spectaculars with live animals--dogs, donkeys, horses, even alligators--two-hundred jubilee singers, and real cotton ginned on stage."[31]

Not surprisingly, due to its plantation setting and Negro characters, Cabin became a special target of the minstrel shows, whose creators prided themselves on their topical parodies of current events and popular items from fiction and the stage.[32] Shortly after the original's success, the lampooning of it in the

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playlets of the final segment of the minstrel entertainments became the rule.

Minstrelsy's borrowing from Cabin was reciprocated in the form of the portrayal of Topsy in the Aiken version. She is introduced in Act Two, Scene II, having just been purchased by St. Clare, the ill-fated slaveholder with whom the audience is supposed to empathize. Ophelia, St. Clare's cousin from Vermont, who is paying a visit to his New Orleans home, is immediately taken aback by whatever this two-legged creature is upon seeing it:

> Ophelia
>
> Good gracious! what a heathenish, shiftless looking object! St. Clare, what in the world have you brought that thing [my emphasis] here for?
>
> St. Clare
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I thought she was rather a specimen in the Jim Crow line. Here, Topsy, give us a song, and show us your dancing. (Topsy sings a verse and dances a breakdown)[33]

In using Topsy as the obligatory comic relief character, Aiken went immediately for the lowest common denominator--the singing, dancing, heathenish, shiftless-looking object and funny specimen from the Jim Crow line. To his credit it must be said that Aiken allows Topsy to make a transformation of sorts for the better, as Topsy herself puts it: "I tries to be good, too, and I's gettin' 'long 'mazin' fast. I's not so wicked as I used to be."[34]

Cabin shows for perhaps the first time in popular American drama a differentiation between darker Negroes and those with white blood, a demarcation which is signaled by the usage or non-usage of the stage Negro dialect. The intelligence of the mulatto characters George and Eliza is betokened by their proper use of the English idiom, in direct contrast to the butchering that the darker, less-progressive Negroes perpetrate upon the language of the land. In later years black authors would also use the verbal facility of their black characters to draw boundaries between the different

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types they were presenting. However, white authors, following the example set in Cabin, would merely use this facile technique as a reminder that the mulattos were, due to the advantage of having white blood, mentally superior to those blacks unfortunate enough to be full-blooded Africans.

To say that the purpose of the humor in minstrel shows towards the black race was to undermine his humanity and brand him as merely an animate object is an understatement. Note Ophelia's reference to Topsy as a "thing." The Octoroon, a melodrama by Dion Boucicault, which could have been possibly written to capitalize on the racial issues made controversial by Cabin, plays upon this sentiment in its very first scene. Boucicault, "a chameleon of a playwright,"[35] evidently found the related subjects of slavery and miscegenation the proper fodder for the melodrama audience's craving for topical points of reference. He crafted The Octoroon in 1859, basing it loosely on the novel The Quadroon, by Mayne Reid, which was published in 1856.[36]

Called "a man of talent rather than . . . of genius,"[37] the Irish-born Boucicault was no different from the other melodramatists who stocked their plays with a somewhat limited array of cardboard figures.[38] His Negro characters were predictably stereotypical in their actions. Moreover, in light of the"wholesale borrowing"[39] that authors of this genre were guilty of, his depictions of them at times can make them appear to be "darkies" on leave from a minstrel entertainment.

The first thing the audience in Fashion sees is the minstrel-like Zeke mouthing "darky" inanities; The Octoroon's opening image is that of a group of Negro plantation children acting out one of the more popular stereotypes--stealing--in this case, pilfering food from the breakfast table of the white folks.[40] Echoing in a less than subtle manner the theory of the African race's dubious membership in the human species, Old Pete, the head male house slave, shoos them away, saying:

> Guess they nebber was born--dem tings! [my emphasis] . . .
> Mas'r George; dem black tings never was born at all; dey

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> swarmed one mornin' on a sassafras tree in the swamp; I cotched 'em; dey ain't no 'count. Don't believe dey'll turn out niggers when dey've growed; dey'll come out sunthin' else.[41]

To some, the image of the black children generating spontaneously on a sassafras tree might seem harmless enough, but it must be remembered that the racist notion which intertwined the origins of the African and the ape had, at that time, no small amount of credence amongst that element which was convinced of the black man's innate inferiority.

Although he eschews Aiken's obvious borrowing from the minstrel shows (i.e., Topsy's song and breakdown dance), Boucicault links his plantation Negroes with their minstrel brethren quite economically and immediately. In the first eleven speeches he establishes that they are a pack of petty thieves, "black trash," "varmin," and have not experienced a typical mammal birth.[42] Although officially children, one can readily see that they will always be childlike and irresponsible, if Old Pete's assessment of them it to be believed.

The link between Zoe, the title character, and the minstrel tradition is not quite as overt. At the time of the play's initial run (late 1859/early 1860), the "alluring 'yaller gal' "[43] appeared in the blackface shows not so often as a role fleshed out by a performer, but as a desired object mentioned in "emotional love songs."[44] Traditionally viewed as an object of desire by men of both races--by the black man because she represents a surrogate white woman; by the white man because her mixed blood makes her a compromise between the physical beauty of the white woman and the supposed hypersexuality of the black, the "sweet, graceful yellow girls"[45] possessed an image which was not conducive to minstrel show comedy.

Zoe, however, is the object of the affection of George Payton, the young white protagonist, and she is also the target of the lusts of the play's villain, Jacob M'Closky. This miscegenation-tinged triangle underlines Zoe's chief function in this study: as the

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precursor to the almost-white Julie in the landmark 1927 musical Show Boat. In both works the minute infusion of African blood causes Zoe and Julie to experience legal, social, and emotional barriers in their quest for happiness with their white lovers. Both must ultimately and tragically bear the cross of their tainted ancestry; Julie, by sinking into alcoholism upon her white husband's desertion;[46] Zoe, by taking a lethal dose of poison, in the American version.[47] As Boucicault was wont to do, the ending in the London version was changed to a happy one, with Zoe and Payton leaving Louisiana and marrying.[48]

As with Julie in juxtaposition to the more Negroid blacks in Show Boat, Zoe's tragic mulatto theme is shown in opposition to the childlike, carefree primitive nature of the Negroes who populate Terrebonne Plantation. Adhering to the stereotype, the "true" Negroes notice nothing untoward about their condition, while Zoe, in a variation of the so-near-and-yet-so-far dilemma, is, because of her mixed heritage, intelligent enough to see the consequences of her near-whiteness. By planting in Zoe's mouth a speech of poetic self-deprecation, Boucicault, by implication rather than by invective, delivers lines as denigrating toward the black man as any others to be found in the canon of "classic" theatre.

Zoe explains to the naive George Payton that there is the obstacle of race separating them:

> That is the ineffaceable curse of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black--bright red as the rest may be, but that one drop that poisons all the flood; those seven bright red drops give me love like yours--hope like yours--ambition like yours--life hung with passions like dewdrops on the morning flowers; but the one black drop gives me despair, for I'm an unclean thing--forbidden by the laws--I'm an Octoroon![49]

In a seeming answer to the rhetorical question posed by Shakespeare's rogue blackamoor Aaron, "Is black so base a hue?" Zoe's retort is a resounding "Yes!"

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Under the cover of eloquent language, Zoe's speech subtly communicates the same thing that the minstrels hammered home with crude humor: it verbalizes the alleged inferiority of the African race. Two factors must be taken into consideration here. The minstrel shows created--or rather, uncovered--an atmosphere in which the black man and everything about him was ridiculed; that genre's popularity sanctioned similar sentiments which were aired in other forms of entertainment. Boucicault was an author whose goal was popularity, rather than art; he was able to interject his racist sentiments--consciously or not--into the play with impunity simply because the tenor of the times, as informed by the images in minstrelsy, allowed him that editorial leeway. "Chameleon" that he was, one can, on the other hand, easily conceive of Boucicault's characters, had he been born a century later, shouting "Black is beautiful" as loud as anyone.

While Boucicault's and Aiken's slavery-themed dramas had immediate and resounding success upon their presentations on the eve of the War Between the States, a work by an author with first-hand experience in the matter never reached the performance stage.[50] The West Indian theme of King Shotaway, and the assumed Caribbean birthplace of its author James Brown notwithstanding, William Wells Brown's The Escape, or Leap to Freedom, published in 1858, is considered to be "the oldest extant American play by a black author."[51] According to the author's claims, it was based on his experience as a slave who ran away to freedom.[52] Brown wrote it expressly to be read at Northern abolitionist functions, more often than not by himself.[53]

Brown, a true pioneer in the field of African-American letters, is believed to be "the first American Negro to publish a novel, the first to publish a drama, and the first to publish a travel book."[54] He was born a slave in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1815,[55] his father a white plantation owner, his mother a mulatto slave.[56] Raised in St. Louis, Brown escaped to Canada at age nineteen, then worked out of Buffalo, New York, as a steward on Lake Erie ships, all the while educating himself.[57]

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In 1849 the American Peace Society chose him to represent them in the Peace Congress in Paris.[58] Brown remained abroad for five years, spending most of his time lecturing on the evils of slavery throughout Europe. His five-year overseas hiatus can be viewed as a sentence of sorts; the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made his return a risk; he feared he could be legally apprehended and returned to slavery under this new law.[59] He returned to the United States in 1854, now a published author: his novel Clotel, or the President's Daughter had been printed in London in 1853.[60]

No doubt influenced by the stage popularity of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Brown chose the theatre as his next arena for communicating the tribulations of his fellow American blacks, readying The Escape for publication in 1858. He evidently harbored no delusions that the play would ever be staged. Perhaps he assumed that while audiences would flock to see slick, formulaic melodramas on the slavery issue by white professional craftsmen, anadmittedly crudely-constructed piece on the same subject by a black man who had lived it would ultimately prove to be commercially unviable amongst even the most patronizing whites. Hence, the work was relegated by its author to the status of a chamber-piece or closet-drama.

In a preface to the published version, Brown states:

> This play was written for my own amusement, and not with the remotest thought that it would ever be seen by the public eye. I read it privately, however, to a circle of my friends, and through them was invited to read it to a Literary society. Since then, the drama has been given [staged readings] in various parts of the country. . . . I ask no favor for it, and have little or no solicitude for its fate. The ignorance of the slave . . . is common wherever chattel slavery exists.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The play, no doubt, abounds in defects, but as I was born in slavery, and never had a day's schooling in my life, I owe the public no apology for errors.[61]

While catering to a theoretically sympathetic white audience, Brown nonetheless felt the need to resort to the depiction of the

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comic, Negro dialect-speaking slaves, one of "the devices that made his audience comfortable."[62] The prime buffoon in this case is the slave Cato, who, when we first meet him, is strutting about in a splendid coat which his master has cast off, masquerading as a doctor.[63]

Having taken a page out of minstrelsy, Brown next yanks a leaf from Uncle Tom's Cabin. With a situation and characters that mirror the mulatto slaves in Aiken's work, Brown introduces us to Glen and Melinda in Act One, Scene III. Like George and Eliza, Glen and Melinda are mulattos; like the former pair, the latter couple is married but live apart due to being owned by different masters; Brown's mulatto pair speak precise, if not overblown English, as do Aiken's couple, eschewing the standard misuse of the language as malpracticed by the darker slaves. Glen and Melinda possess the mulatto's requisite intelligence and desire to be free. As do George and Eliza, Brown's mixed-bloods come to the conclusion that the consummation of their freedom lies in their own willingness to chance an escape attempt.

In another move which might be construed as pandering to his white audience's expectations, Brown inserts four songs into the play, using his original lyrics, but sung to the tune of popular airs of the day. These songs, however, provide a twist. Borrowing from the black spirituals tradition of slavery days in which coded messages of escape and freedom were relayed under the guise of overtly Christian-oriented lyrics,[64] Brown's songs depart from the minstrel tradition in their themes of protests. Hannah, one of the slaves, sings an antislavery song to the tune of "Dandy Jim."[65] While resting for the night during the course of their escape, Glen sings an ode to Melinda of the "Star of the North."[66]

In a complete turnaround from the minstrel tradition, Cato, the former buffoon of the piece, lays aside his fool's mask and makes his escape. Cato gloats about his departure in a song:

> Dey work me all de day,
> Widout a bit of pay
> And thought, because they feed me well,
> I would not run away.

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> Masta gave me his ole coat, an' thought I'd happy be
> But I had my eye on de North Star, an' thought of liberty;
> Den Masta lock de door, an' den he went to sleep
> I dress myself in his bess clothes, an' jump into de street.[67]

Several dynamics are at work here. Whereas Cato starts out as the typical black buffoon, we learn that his fool's makeup is just part of his guise; he had been planning his escape all along. The audience could easily predict that the standard-issue mulattos Glen and Melinda would make a leap for freedom; when the happy plantation "darky" shows them a different face, the audience is surprized. This is a technique which will recur in the latter-day, ersatz minstrel entertainments of the turn of the century, whereas the buffoon character, while overtly playing the fool, is covertly stringing together an accumulation of seemingly minor misdeeds in an attempt to "get back" at the whites. This is the offshoot of a common defensive mechanism used on the plantations--the house slaves would feign clumsiness and break expensive household goods; the field hands would avoid work by pretending to be too stupid to follow the instructions of the foreman.[68]

Brown makes a pair of ever-so-subtle refutations to the myth of innate black inferiority. While commenting on the "ignorance" of the slaves in his preface to the play,[69] he implies that this ignorance lies in the fault of the institution of "chattel slavery," and not in any predetermined genetic shortcomings of the African race. His apologia in the final paragraph of the preface is a reminder that, unlearned though he is, he has the native intelligence to have mastered the English language to the point where he could author a play which is well-wrought from a linguistic, if not a structural point-of-view.

By means of his insider's perspective, Brown has provided us with an insight which has escaped the white writers of black characters. Aiken and Boucicault have divided the speakers and non-speakers of stage "darky" dialect between the full-blooded Negroes and the mulattos; the underlying message here is that the persons of

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mixed blood are more intelligent due to their infusion of European characteristics and thus possess the wherewithal to master a formal language, while the unmixed blacks are too stupid and lazy to grasp anything that complex. Brown, as do practically all black authors of note who succeed him, shows that the usage of non-standard English--not necessarily the so-called Negro dialect--is employed to denote intraracial class differences amongst blacks. Blacks who strive to emulate certain mores and mannerisms are traditionally depicted by black writers as speaking a more "proper" English; the stereotype notwithstanding, many mulattos, in addition to experiencing a physical proximity to the slavemaster class by working in the "big house" often shared branches of the same family tree with their owners; hence, they would be wont to emulate, whether consciously or not, the speech patterns of the whites.

However, this is not true in all cases. Brown, eschewing a racial dividing in the speech patterns, has Sampey, "a white slave,"[70] talk in a Negro dialect as thick as that of the dark blacks. We learn later that the near-white Sampey is the octoroon son of Dr. Gaines, the owner of the plantation where some of the play's action is set. Unlike the mulattos depicted by white authors, Sampey is not automatically aggressive, intelligent, assertive, and desirous of freedom. Surely in numerous real-life cases the physical proximity and blood ties to the whites whiff of freedom, but, as Brown demonstrates in an understated and credible manner by means of the character Sampey, these advantages are not always realized or acted upon by the mixed-blood in question. Brown accomplishes something that the turn-of-the-century black musical creators emulate--the blatant use of stereotypical characters (Cato, the buffoon, and Glen and Melinda) on one level to satisfy the expectations of the white audiences, while counterpointing these images by inserting characters who play against the stereotype (Cato, the runaway slave, and Sampey, the mulatto with none of the standard stage mulatto's obligatory characteristics). The latter technique is done in so subtle a manner that it is tantamount to a wink that says to the black audience members: "You know that we have to give these white folks some of what they want to see."

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Whether or not Williams & Walker, Cole & Johnson, et. al., had access to a copy of The Escape, one thing is certain--they, like Brown, and unlike the white authors of minstrel shows and their surrogates, knew that there were two sides to the mask that the African-American performer was forced to wear.

On Other Shores

Until the advent of genuine blacks performing in minstrel shows in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the African-American theatre artist had virtually no outlet for his skills, and, due to the frivolous nature of minstrelsy, the serious black performer still had little opportunity to exhibit his craft after Negroes had invaded the blackface entertainments.

On foreign shores, however, it was another matter. Numerous persons of African descent were given the opportunity to ply their artistic vocations in European countries, an opportunity that they would never have been given in the United States.

Perhaps the most ironic example is the New York-born Ira Aldridge. As mentioned earlier in this study, he sailed to England in 1825, slowly and steadily fulfilling his ambition to become an actor of the classics. At a time when his race was being collectively slandered by burnt cork-wearing minstrels in America, Aldridge would paint all visible parts of his body white[71] in order to portray a broad spectrum of "white" characters such as Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Shylock, Richard III, William Tell--and even Frankenstein[72] on the stages of Europe.

In an era in which American black writers could hope for no more than the publication of their slave memoirs by a publisher with abolitionist sentiments that would result in minuscule sales to the proverbial already converted, the name of Alexandre Dumas would ring at the top of French drama and literature for two successive generations.

Alexandre Dumas pere was born in Villers-Cotterets, France, in 1802, the legitimate son of General Thomas Alexandre Dumas, a Haitian-born mulatto, and Marie-Louise-Elizabeth Labouret, a white woman.[73] Dumas obviously inherited quite a bit of his legendary

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aggressiveness from his soldier father, who had entered the French army as a private and had worked his way rapidly up to General, serving under Napoleon in the emperor's Egyptian campaign and becoming a favorite of the French commander-in-chief.[74]

After slogging through a six-year trial-and-error apprenticeship in the craft of playwrighting, Dumas had his first success in 1828 with Henri III et sa cour, followed by a series of rapid success for the next four years in the theatre.[75] When he and the dramatic stage grew tired of one another, he switched to the novel, where he had even greater and longer-lasting success.

Those novels were best-sellers in the United States, a country Dumas yearned to visit.[76] He was ultimately dissuaded from this by his friends and publishers, who had calculated, probably correctly, that the popular reaction that Americans had given his works might reverse itself upon seeing that the creator of these picaresque romances was indeed a black man.

Black historian A. J. Rogers' designation of Alexandre Dumas fils as "the foremost French dramatist of the nineteenth century"[77] could be either an exaggeration or an overrating, but Dumas' vast popularity is indisputable. A devote of Eugene Scribe's "well-made play" style of drama,[77] his La Dame aux Camelias created a sensation on its premiere in 1852, after having been banned for three years "because of its realism."[79]

Camille (as the play is known in English) has been called "one of the two most popular plays in America in the nineteenth century"[80]--the other being Uncle Tom's Cabin.

There has been an ongoing debate amongst the chroniclers of French popular fiction at to which of the two Dumas had the most illustrious career; one thing is certain: had they been born in America they would have attained nowhere near the fame--if any at all.

A black American dramatist did achieve a successful career in the nineteenth century--but not in his native land. Juan Victor Sejour Marcou et Ferrant, called by theatre historian James V. Hatch "the only black American playwright who led a successful nonracial artistic life"[81] was born in New Orleans in 1817, the legitimate son

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of a French Creole mulatto father and quadroon mother.[82] His parents, adhering to a practice followed by well-off free persons of color, provided him with the best education available to him in New Orleans, then sent him overseas to Paris for further schooling at the age of nineteen. Eight years later his first play, Diergarias, was performed by the Comedie Francais.[83]

Over the next twenty-five years, twenty-one of his plays were staged in Paris.[84] He specialized in full-length romantic-historical dramas which showed the influence of his two literary idols, Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare.[85] It is ironic that one of the plays for which he is best remembered, The Brown Overcoat (1858), is a short one-act comedy that is a total departure from his representative style. Called by Hatch "a typical artificial comedy in what was by 1858 the degenerated tradition of Moliere and Beaumarchais,"[86] The Brown Overcoat was presented Off-Broadway in 1972 in a translation by Townsend Brewster.

Proud of his African heritage, Victor Sejour was a member of a society of French men of color, which was responsible for his first published work, an 1837 short story entitled Le Mulatre in their publication Revue Des Colonies.[87] Afterward the issue of race was avoided entirely in his works, with the exception of a five-act drama, L'Esclave, which he wrote but never had staged or published, and Le Martyre du Coeur, an opus heavily inspired by Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, complete with an Aaron-like villain in the form of a Jamaican-born Negro named Placide.[88]

Unlike Ira Aldridge, Sejour did make a return to his native land, to see his ailing mother. Shortly thereafter, he brought his parents to France to live out their remaining years with him.[89]

Victor Sejour was not the only New Orleans Creole mulatto expatriate to make an impression on the Paris artistic scene. Louis Gottschalk, likewise born in Louisiana and sent to France for further education, had produced on the Paris stage basically the same sort of ritual drama that Marie Laveau was using in her Congo Square and Bayou St. John "shows." Born in 1829, Gottschalk, at age eighteen, saw the Paris presentation of a dance-drama that he had composed,

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La Bamboula, "based on the sights and sounds of New Orleans' Congo Square."[90]

According to the popular myth, the Negro, with but a few exceptions, lacked the intellectual capacity to master the intricacies of a formal written and spoken language. Perhaps the greatest refutation of this myth was personified by Aleksandr Pushkin. At the time when blacks were caricatured as clowns who massacred a language, Pushkin was literally formulating his native Russia's language.

Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837) was the great-grandson of Abraham Hannibal, a black African-born military genius who ascended from the position of Peter the Great's personal manservant to become the commander-in-chief of that Tzar's armies.[91] Though technically only one-eighth black (which would have made him legally white in some American states), Pushkin's facial features, skin coloring, and hair texture bespoke undeniably of his African heritage, of which he was proud.[92]

Antony Woods, in the introduction to a volume of plays byPushkin which Woods has translated, lauds Pushkin as the architect of the Russian language:

> To the Russians, Pushkin is a miracle. His was the hand that transformed a lumbering carthorse of a language into a literary Pegasus. He was the final shaper of a language that has remained intact from his day to this, and that the modern schoolboy, taxi-driver, writer and engineer takes as his own. He fit the syntax and natural rhythms of Russian to metre as music to the barline.
>
> Pushkin laid the foundations of what the world knows as Russian literature, in numerous genres; narrative poems, tragic and comic; lyrics and other short poems; dramatic verse, fairy tales in verse, a novel in verse; prose taleslong and short; a number of pregnant fragments [sic]; letters, criticisms and historical writings. His achievement was a literary parallel to Peter the Great's: he too led Russia into Europe.[93]

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Before Pushkin, Russian was more a compromise of numerous local dialects than it was a language, used chiefly by the serfs and disdained by the educated and the elite, who instead spoke and wrote in French.[94]

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, authentic American blacks were infiltrating the minstrel stage and gaining valuable experience in the theatre from performance, technical, creative, and management standpoints. Lacking the freedom of expression that his overseas counterparts possessed, the African-American performer had the huge task before him of somehow gradually changing the self-denigrating roles he was forced to play. Plagued by institutional racism, a lack of capital, and the absence of a concerted, centralized philosophy of attack, the black performer was ill-equipped to bring about any radical changes, but a series of small, subtle victories was not beyond his grasp.

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CHAPTER FOUR ENDNOTES

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[9]Carl Wittke, Tambo and Bones, p. 3.

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[21]Jack Haverly, Negro Minstrels (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Literature House, reprinted 1969), pp. v-vi.

[22]Don B. Wilmeth, Variety Entertainments and Outdoor Amusements (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 118.

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[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Daniel C. Gerould, ed., American Melodrama (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983, p. 15.

[29]John Gassner, ed., Best Plays of the Early American Theatre, p. xxxiii.

[30]Gerould, p. 15.

[31]Ibid., p. 14.

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[33]George L. Aiken, Uncle Tom's Cabin, in American Melodrama, ed. by Daniel C. Gerould, p. 90. Henceforth, all references to this play will come under the title Cabin; the page number will refer to the numbering in the Gerould text.

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[36]Robert Hogan, Dion Boucicault (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. 73.

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[38]Michael Booth, English Melodrama (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), p. 15.

[39]Gerould, p. 10.

[40]Dion Boucicault, The Octoroon, in Best Plays of the Early American Theatre, ed. by John Gassner, p. 186. Henceforth,all references to this play will be under the title The Octoroon; the page number will refer to the numbering in this text.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Toll, p. 76.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, II, Show Boat, typescript copy at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, New York City. A note on this copy says that: "According to a knowledgeable reader, this [typescript] is very close to the opening night 1927 version." The reference to Julie's alcoholism occurs on p. 2-3-17.

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[47]The Octoroon, p. 215.

[48]Hogan, pp. 74-5.

[49]The Octoroon, p. 197.

[50]Oscar G. Brockett, A History of the Theatre, p. 519.

[51]Ibid.

[52]James V. Hatch, ed., Black Theatre, U.S.A. (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 34.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Harry A. Ploski and Ernest Kaiser, compilers and editors, Afro-U.S.A. (New York: Bellwether Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), p. 668. Henceforth, this work will be referred to as Afro-U.S.A.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Afro-American Encyclopedia (North Miami, Florida: Educational Book Publishers, Inc., 197?), p. 442.

[57]Afro-U.S.A., p. 668.

[58]Afro-American Encyclopedia, vol. 12, p. 442.

[59]Rayford W. Logan and Michael R.Winston, eds., Dictionary of American Negro Biography (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 72. Henceforth, this work will be cited as Negro Biography in this thesis.

[60]Afro-U.S.A., p. 668.

[61]Black Theatre, U.S.A., p. 36.

[62]Ibid., p. 34.

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[63]William Wells Brown, The Escape, or Leap to Freedom, in Black Theatre, U.S.A., p. 38. Henceforth this play will be referred to as The Escape, and all page numbers will refer to the numbering in this text.

[64]Hildred Roach, Black American Music (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 28-9.

[65]The Escape, p. 47.

[66]Ibid., p. 54.

[67]Ibid., p. 55.

[68]Gilbert Osofsky, ed., Puttin' On Ole Massa (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 9.

[69]Supra, pp. 96-7.

[70]The Escape, p. 36.

[71]Herbert Marshall, Further Research on Ira Aldridge, the Negro Tragedian (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 41.

[72]Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

[73]A. Craig Bell, Alexandre Dumas (London: Cassell & Company Limited, 1950), p. 5.

[74]Ibid., p. 8.

[75]F. W. J. Hemmings, Alexandre Dumas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), pp. 74-8.

[76]J. A. Rogers, World's Great Men of Color, vol. 2 (New York: F. Hubner & Company, Inc., 1947), p. 383.

[77]Ibid., p. 384.

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[78]Stephen S. Stanton, ed., Camille and Other Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. vii.

[79]Brockett, p. 491.

[80]Stanton, p. xxv.

[81]Black Theatre, U.S.A., p. 25.

[82]Negro Biography, p. 552.

[83]Ibid.

[84]Black Theatre, U.S.A., p. 25.

[85]Negro Biography, p. 551.

[86]Black Theatre, U.S.A., p. 25.

[87]Negro Biography, p. 552.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Harry A. Ploski and James Williams, editors and compilers, The Negro Almanac (4th ed.) (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), p. 1136.

[91]Rogers, p. 36.

[92]In keeping with the racist myth regarding the closeness on the evolutionary chain between the African and the ape, Dumas pere and fils and Pushkin all experienced comments centering around the speculation that their African ancestors were apes. Each of these men deflected such insults in his own inimitable fashion.

[93]Antony Wood, translator, Alexander Pushkin, The Little Tragedies (London: Angel Books, 1982), p. 9. Though he gives high praise to Pushkin and his accomplishments, Wood never mentions Pushkin's African heritage.

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[94]Rogers, p. 79.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE EARLIEST BLACK MUSICALS

In a form of entertainment which featured white performers masquerading as blacks, it was inevitable that the black man would take the stage and play himself--or, rather, a caricature of himself. The situation is innately paradoxical; on one hand, the black minstrel would be party to his own debasement by playing within the narrow range of denigrating roles he was allowed; on the other hand, if the black race was indeed to be the hapless brunt of that particularly vicious brand of music hall humor, then what could be wrong with playing the fool and receiving the pay, rather than have whites reaping all the benefits? As Academy Award-winner Hattie McDaniel was wont to say: "I'd rather play a maid for seven hundred dollars a week, than be one in real life for seven dollars a week."[1]

As discussed in the previous chapter, there was no marked demand for the talents of "serious" black artists in America by whites--or, for that matter, by blacks, either. Any African-American who desired a career on the stage had the choice of either complying with the images that whites had of him, or abandoning his theatrical aspirations altogether. Human nature being what it is, one can imagine that numerous blacks took to the minstrel stage, fully aware that they would be playing self-degrading roles, but seeing this as a means to an end: the day when the serious black artist could portray a wider spectrum of the African-American experience realistically and honestly.

The black minstrels consciously strove to make the best of the one venue for their talents. James Weldon Johnson comments in Black Manhattan that:

> Minstrelsy was on the whole, a caricature of Negro life, and it fixed a tradition which has not yet been entirely broken. It fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being. Nevertheless, these companies did provide

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> stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of coloured men. They provided an essential training and experience which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source.[2]

Additionally, being, as they traditionally called themselves, the "genuine article," the black minstrels brought an undeniable truth and originality to their audiences, and a canon of authentic songs and dances that the white "Ethiopian delineators" simply did not have access to--until they "borrowed" them from the black troupes. Henry T. Sampson notes in Blacks in Blackface:

> . . . these black singers, composers and dancers brought an original vitality never before seen on the American stage. They brought a great deal that was new in dancing, including the buck and wing, the stop-time, and the Virginia Essence, which constituted many of the fundamental steps in American jazz dancing.[3]

A few anonymous and short-lived black minstrel troupes appeared in the Northeast in the mid-1850s: a Philadelphia-based group in 1855, a troupe that toured Massachusetts and New York in 1857, and another which operated throughout Ohio that same year.[4] Other anonymous black companies performed in San Francisco, New York City, and several major midwestern cities during the Civil War years.[5]

The first successful black minstrel company was The Original Georgia Minstrels, organized in the spring of 1865 in Macon, Georgia, by a black man named Charles B. Hicks.[6] Expending his personal finances on costumes and musical instruments, Hick's original cast consisted of "ex-slaves who were giving extemporaneous performances in the barber shops and other places of amusement in and around the city."[7] Henry T. Sampson opines in The Ghost Walks that "Charles B. Hicks deserves the credit of being the man who first introduced Blacks into the mainstream of American show business."[8]

The Georgia Minstrels' initial tour of the Northeast in the 1865-66 season met with resounding success, drawing "large,

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unprecedented audiences"[9] of curious whites who judged them to be excellent performers. Predictably, this precipitated a slew of black troupes, some of whom claimed falsely to The Original Georgia Minstrels themselves.[10]

White entrepreneurs moved swiftly to capitalize on this new phenomenon. Sam Hague, a white minstrel dancer from England, hired ten black performers and took them to his homeland, calling them Sam Hague's Slave Troupe, and opening on July 9, 1866, at the Theatre Royal in Liverpool.[11] Highly successful throughout the British Isles, they opened in their permanent home at the St. James Theatre in Liverpool on October 31, 1870.[12] By that time they had become an integrated troupe, with just four blacks, one of them being, curiously enough, Charles Hicks, the originator of the first successful black company.[13]

Until the formation of Sam Hague's Slave Troupe, "Negroes had evidently owned and run all the black Minstrel troupes of the 1860s."[14] However, in the 1870s, whites bought out the most successful black companies and "Negroes had to struggle to regain ownership of any companies at all."[15] The experience of the Original Georgia Minstrels, which underwent a series of white owners and name changes over the next thirty years, was the rule, rather than the exception, for the black troupes.

The white theatregoers, accustomed to seeing the white delineators uniformly made up in blackface, were often confused upon encountering the "genuine article" who eschewed the burnt cork; many whites, seeing real blacks for the first time, were amazed by the wide spectrum of pigmentation amongst the Negro performers. In some instances the non-usage of the blackface was to assure white audiences that the black players were truly just that.[16] In the later years of black minstrelsy, the usage of burnt cork increased, but it "was definitely not a requirement,"[17] rather, "a matter of individual preference."[18] The most frequent users of blackface in the black troupes were the endmen, the comedians, and the lightest-skinned blacks.

Knowing that it would be impossible to ameliorate radically the stage image of the African-American in a short time, the black

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minstrels attempted to upgrade that image by subtle degrees. While the format remained the same, a slight change came about in the content of the entertainments. The blacks still performed the requisite plantation material; however, instead of waxing nostalgic about their masters and mistresses as did their white minstrel counterparts, the Negro players sang of their friends and relatives and the happy times of their youth.[19]

Taking note of the success and popularity of The Fisk Jubilee Singers, a non-minstrel black group, the Negro companies began inserting spirituals into their format in the 1870s. "With the introduction of Afro-American religious music, black culture revitalized minstrelsy. But unlike the early years, Negroes now interpreted it."[20] Thus, by replacing the plantation odes, the black artist undoubtedly felt that he was playing a much lesser hand in his own debasement when performing songs of a spiritual nature. White audiences, however, saw the spirituals not as an antidote, but as an adjunct to the negative portrayals of blacks which the minstrel stage fostered. Robert C. Toll judges that:

> . . . the way the black minstrels presented it, the religious music did not seriously challenge minstrelsy's plantation mythology. . . . it . . . allowed whites to maintain their negative caricatures of blacks by focusing on and exaggerating the alien aspects of Afro-American religion. Descriptions of gaudily dressed, uninhibited blacks singing, shouting, laughing and dancing in church confirmed minstrelsy's stereotypes of Negroes.[21]

What the black performer had added with the intention of being a more respectable aspect of his culture turned out to be merely another point for ridicule by the white patrons.

The spirituals on the minstrel stage did, however, serve the same function in the music hall that they had when sung in the churches and the fields: as coded protest messages ostensibly understood by blacks only. This technique of covert communication was slyly injected into some non-spiritual songs which seemed

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harmless enough to the whites, but the blacks in the audience understood the underlying and sometimes bitter comments.

The insertion of a more diverse format of entertainment played a major role in black minstrelsy's gradual easing away from the plantation amusements. By the 1880s the minstrel shows, black and white, had to compete with vaudeville--an offshoot of minstrelsy--for the attention of the public. Black specialists with skills in such arts as ventriloquism, magic, acrobatics, juggling, contortionism, and wire-walking were now in demand.[22] The portrayal of the stereotypical characters and their actions still abounded, but by the 1880s, the focus was beginning to shift away from the traditional plantation "darky" show.

Attempts at Serious Black Art

Concurrent with the black minstrelsy trend, several African-American artists strived to operate outside of the confines of that degrading art-form. Between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century, such performers as The Hyers Sisters, Scott Joplin, Theodore Drury (and his Grand Opera), and The Fisk Jubilee Singers would make valiant, if not totally successful, efforts to break from the minstrel format and produces works which contained a measure of dignity for black performers and audiences.

"The first black women to gain success on the American stage were the Hyers Sisters,"[23] Anna Madah and Emma Louise, who were born in 1853 and 1855, respectively, in Sacramento, California.[24] Trained from early childhood as classical singers, they made their concert debut in their home city's Metropolitan Theatre on April 27, 1867, before an audience of 800.[25] Encouraged by a series of artistic and critical successes in their immediate area, the Hyers Sisters embarked on a tour of the United States in 1871. Numerous favorable reviews were written about them as they made their way eastward; several critics expressed amazement that such young colored girls could have attained such a talent in a basically European art-form.[26]

In early 1875, the Hyers organized a small concert company which performed primarily in New England; a year later that

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operation expanded into The Hyers Sisters Negro Operatic and Dramatic Company, with the intention of producing plays and musical dramas of a serious nature that would be "based on black history."[27] Their first presentation, in 1876, was a musical drama entitled Out of Bondage, which had been written especially for them.[28] Subsequently, Urlina, the African Princess and The Underground Railroad, possibly the first produced play written by a black female dramatist, Pauline E. Hopkins, were added to the repertoire.[29]

However well-intended, these attempts at bringing serious black drama to the public were not enough to sustain the Hyers. They continued performing their classical concerts into the late 1870s, now assisted by Wallace King and John Luca of the famed singing Luca family.

The situation of the Hyers Sisters in the late 1870s epitomizes the dilemma faced by all black artists in the theatre. In spite of having attained a measure of respect from the theatre-going public for their serious work in concerts and in their musical drama productions, they were, at times, out of economic necessity, forced to join minstrel companies in order to supplement their incomes.[30] They did not have to stoop to play the stereotypical "darky" roles; they sang "respectable" songs in as "refined" a manner as the managers thought the audiences would accept, but the mere fact that these established, prideful artists would have to be a part of an art-form which clashed with their basic principles is commentary enough on the lack of acceptance of serious black art and artists by the general public. Still, while doing whatever they could to distance themselves from the degrading aspects of the shows they were so reluctantly part of, the Hyers were not totally immune to the sideshow atmosphere that was inherent to minstrelsy. While appearing with Callendar's Consolidated Colored Minstrels at the San Francisco Opera House in August 1883, Emma Hyers and the troupe's band leader were married on stage before a standing-room only audience.[31]

The Negro Operatic and Dramatic Company disbanded temporarily in 1883, regrouping three years later to revive Out of

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Bondage. A program for the performance of February 2, 1890, at the Los Angeles Theatre describes it as:

> Written by the Rev. Joseph Bradford, of Boston. A comedy of interest, sparkling with old time jubilee music and portrayals of Negro characteristics, presented by the greatest and most refined company of colored comedians and singers.
>
> .....
>
> A unique Comedy, picturing the Darky as he existed in Ante-Bellum Days, showing his humorous characteristics without burlesque [my emphasis]. Introducing Musical Novelties and the Old-Time Southern Camp-Meeting and Jubilee Melodies.[32]

Though their purpose was to present serious black theatre, the terminology used in the program shows that the Hyers were consciously operating within the narrow frame of reference that white audiences had of blacks.

In 1891 two new plays were added to the repertoire, The Blackville Twins and The Colored Aristocracy. The last known performances of the Hyers occurred in 1897.[33]

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were another non-minstrel black entertainment entity of the era. They were founded in 1867 at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, by a music professor named George L. White, who, like all of the faculty members during that institution's earliest years, was white.[34] For the first four years of their existence, they confined themselves to performances in their immediate area. In 1871 they inaugurated a concert tour with the intention of raising funds to alleviate the university's dire financial situation.

At first audiences were surprized--and, at times, disappointed--to learn that the repertoire of the Fisk University Singers consisted of black folksongs, Negro spirituals, and traditional European songs, instead of the minstrel format that the audience had expected to see. The first few months of the tour were for the most part unsuccessful. The reputation of the Fisk Singers

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as being "refined" began to precede them; somehow this word-of-mouth helped the audiences to accept the Fisk Singers for what they were, and the patrons came to appreciate them.[35] Attempting to compromise the perhaps begrudged acceptances by the audiences, George White added the word "Jubilee" to the group's title in December 1871, an obvious concession to white expectations.[36]

On May 15, 1873, the Fisk Jubilee Singers embarked on the black American performer's obligatory final step toward acceptance in the Anglo-American entertainment continuum--a European tour.

They proved to be an unqualified success; after seven years they "had earned more than $150,000 for their institution, an enormous sum for that time."[37]

Despite their attempts to be "refined," the Fisk Singers were still viewed by some as an adjunct to minstrelsy; often the songs which were best received by the public were the folk-songs and spirituals that most closely resembled the standard plantation odes of the blackface shows.[38] Their reputation was not enhanced by the fact that numerous groups had sprung up with the word "Jubilee" in their titles. Some of the imitators, mostly from other all-black institutions, attempted to emulate the Fisk Singers' serious and dignified manner; others, simply basic minstrel groups, pirated the name in the same fashion that they stole material from other troupes.[39]

In a way, the Fisk Singers were victims of their own success. After the first successful European tour, more than half of the members decided to remain overseas.[40] Fisk University was forced to relinquish sponsorship of the group after a second successful tour in 1878, partly because once again the ranks were diluted by several members remaining in Europe, partly because of the natural difficulties in holding any touring entity together for any considerable length of time, and because of the inevitable attrition caused by graduation.

While it would be inaccurate to designate Scott Joplin as "the father of ragtime," it can be said that he is arguably that music genre's best-noted and remembered proponent. Born November 24, 1869, in Texarkana, Texas, Joplin was not only one of "ragged-time"

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music's most prolific composers, but he also struggled to incorporate that oft-maligned musical form into a legitimate theatrical mode.

Ragtime, a musical genre which was basically a "mixture of conventional European-based march or dance rhythms" and syncopated African-based melodic lines,[41] was, like so many aspects of African-American culture, not taken seriously by the mainstream artistic elite. Hence, Joplin's quest had a two-fold set of obstacles to clear: to incorporate a style of music that was not taken seriously into a serious mode of theatre involving a race for whom the terms "serious" and "theatre" were immediately contradictory.

An industrious young man, Joplin worked while in his twenties as a piano-player in saloons, "barrelhouses," and brothels throughout the southernmost Midwestern states, a part of his life which has been well-documented and somewhat romanticized. Given less emphasis is the fact that he strove to promote numerous cultural entities; he organized bands and choral groups which gave concerts in Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri.[42]

Undaunted by numerous rejections of his music, Joplin's faith was rewarded in September 1899, when his composition, "The Maple Leaf Rag," became a huge success after its publication by John Starke in Joplin's adopted hometown of Sedalia, Missouri. Over one million copies of sheet music for the song were reportedly sold, earning Joplin the title of "The King of Ragtime." The success of "The Maple Leaf Rag" brought Joplin a measure of financial security, giving him a strong base of operations for his related professions of composing and teaching. Encouraged by his newfound success, he wrote a ballet entitled The Ragtime Dance, which was given a few performances in Sedalia in late 1899, and published by Starke in 1902.[43]

Expanding into the field of opera, Joplin composed and produced his own work, The Guest of Honor Rag, with his ensemble of performers, The Scott Joplin Drama Company, for at least one showing in St. Louis in 1903.[44]

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Joplin began his most famous theatrical work, Treemonisha, in 1905, completing it two years later, then moving to New York to begin the process of trying to get it staged. The atmosphere in the New York theatre world was hardly conducive for a serious classical work which amalgamated European rhythms and ragtime syncopations; it must be noted that at this same time certain New York critics were aghast at what they considered to be the effrontery of black musical comedy teams such as Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson to veer away from the typical "coon" fare of the era and attempt to be "white," as these critics were wont to put it.

By 1910 even the Williams & Walker-style shows were receding in popularity, thus diminishing by extension the chances for Treemonisha to be produced. Never one to give up, though, Joplin financed the publication of a 230-page manuscript of his opera from his own funds in 1911; despite the enthusiastic review given to it by American Musician, Joplin could still find no backers. In 1913 a production which would feature forty singers and an orchestra of twenty-five was announced, but that proposed Lafayette Theatre venture never reached fruition.[45] As a last resort, Joplin financed, produced, and directed a concert version of Treemonisha, sans scenery and costumes, with a small cast of singers and just himself on the piano providing the music, before an invited audience of prospective backers in a small Harlem hall.[46] Vera Brodsky Lawrence gives this account of the backer's audition:

> . . . with Joplin at the piano substituting for the orchestra, the effort, although painstakingly prepared, was received with bored indifference by an uncomprehending audience. Joplin was crushed.[47]

Perhaps Joplin was crushed, but only momentarily. Contrary to the romanticized version of his story in which the dual misfortunes of his inability to have Treemonisha staged and his suffering from the final stages of the syphilis which would soon end his life compounding to make his final years a living purgatory, Joplin's

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indomitable spirit held up as he continued composing and selling his works to publishers. Joplin's predicament in his last years symbolized the plight of all serious black artists in America at the time: publishers were more than willing to buy his ragtime pieces, but not one of them, including John Starke, his most loyal supporter, would have anything to do with Treemonisha.[48]

Joplin succumbed to syphilis on April 1, 1917, in New York. In 1972, Treemonisha was given a world premiere in Atlanta, Georgia. The opera made its Broadway debut in 1975, in a production which had originated at the Houston Grand Opera House. This presentation, which was supposed to be a three-week engagement at the Uris Theatre, opened October 21, 1975, but, due to popular demand, was extended by five weeks and moved to the Palace Theatre. Treemonisha's Broadway run totaled 64 performances.

One of the factors which contributed to the opera finally being staged on Broadway was a wide-scale re-interest in Joplin and his works, stemming from the use of his compositions in the 1973 Academy Award-winning motion picture, The Sting.

Theodore Drury (1867-1943) was another African-American musical artist who attempted to extend black participation on the music hall stage beyond the confines of minstrelsy and its adjuncts. Born in Kentucky, he was fluent in French and German, and "was considered by some as the first highly-trained male singer of the Negro race."[49] In 1889 he formed the Theodore Drury Opera Company, "the first successful black opera company in America,"[50] which gave concerts of operatic selections in several major Northeastern cities.

Drury was well aware of the general lack of demand for a black opera company; the only attempt at such an entity on record was the Colored Opera Company of Washington, D.C., which lasted just a few months in 1872 and 1873, and "whose repertory consisted of only one operetta."[51]

While directing and starring in his company's semi-professional productions of the 1890s, Drury, not unlike the Hyers Sisters, had to supplement the income from his ensemble's concerts by giving solo concerts of his own. Although the audience for a black operatic company at the turn of the century was predictably limited,

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Drury's ensemble did as well as could be expected under the circumstances. From 1900 through 1910, his company had a series of annual presentations of fully-staged operas which were well-received in New York, Boston, Providence,and Philadelphia.[52] Included in the repertoire were such classics as Carmen, Faust, Aida, Cavaleria Rusticana, and I Pagliacci.[53]

Drury's company performed "sporadically into the 1930s,"[54] just a few years before his death in 1943 in Philadelphia.

Breaking the Minstrel Mold

The first steps in the black theatrical performer's escape from the artistic confines of minstrelsy came as the result of an experiment by Sam T. Jack.

Jack, a prominent white New York theatre owner and manager who specialized in burlesque, decided that, as a gimmick, he would send an all-black burlesque revue out on the road. The format would be identical to that of the white burlesque shows; the sole difference was the race of the performers.

Eschewing the plantation scenes, retaining the common elements shared between burlesque and minstrelsy, Jack planned to "glorify the coloured girl."[55]

Jack hired Sam Lucas, the famed black minstrel comedian, to write the show. It was called The Creole Show, and, among other innovations, according to Henry T. Sampson:

> . . . was the first [black show] to feature a beautiful female chorus and consisted of a minstrel first part, which was different from the traditional minstrel shows in that the girl was the center of the line, and it had a female interlocutor, with men on the ends. The show had an olio which preceded the finale.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . The Creole Show opened in Boston in 1891 and later played Sam Jack's Opera House. . . . It later created a sensation in New York City at the old Standard Theatre in Greeley Square. The show played for five successful seasons.[56]

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Although Sampson writes of the "minstrel first part," [emphasis mine] he offers a disclaimer of sorts by saying that: " . . . the delineation of Negro pastimes on the plantation was not its objective. It was a combination of low comedy, vaudeville, and beautiful women."[57]

In an atmosphere where any successful format was borrowed immediately by rival producers, it was inevitable that The Creole Show's formula would serve as the basis for a similar entity. John W. Isham, while serving as an advance agent for The Creole Show, gained enough show business expertise and made a sufficient number of contacts to the point where he could inaugurate his own theatrical venture.[58]

Isham branched out on his own in 1895, calling his company John W. Isham's Octoroons. He has the distinction of being the first black entrepreneur to break from the traditional minstrel format. Possessing a minimum of visible Negroid traits, Isham often passed for white in order to ensure more advantageous bookings for his company.[59]

Henry T. Sampson's report on the format of Isham's Octoroons show reveals an even more profound break from the minstrel format than the show it copied:

> The first part consisted of an opening chorus and a medley of songs done by the various principals, generally assisted by the girls of the chorus. The middle part was a burlesque sketch in which a number of specialties were strung on a very thin thread of a story. The show ended with a cakewalk jubilee, a military drill, and a "chorus march" finale. The scenes of the show were laid in New York City.[60]

Isham was obviously taking steps to upgrade the level of the entertainment in his show; intermingled with the specialty numbers were selections from both grand opera and contemporary operas.[61] His Octoroons show proved to be so popular that within two years of

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its inception two additional road companies had become necessary.[62]

In 1897 Isham put out a more grandiose show, entitled Oriental America, which upon its debut at Palmer's Theatre, became the first all-black show to play on Broadway, and "the first to entirely break away from the slapstick and burlesque of the minstrel show,"[63] featuring a finale which consisted of a medley of opera selections.

One should not deduce that Jack and Isham made a diversion from the standard minstrel format in their shows because of any altruistic sentiments toward the African-American race and its theatrical image as portrayed on the music hall stages. It must be remembered that in 1890, when Jack and Sam Lucas first drew up plans for The Creole Show, the basic formula had been in use by white groups for more than thirty-five years, and by black delineators for a quarter of a century. Even if the public had not been clamoring for an alteration in the entertainments, after such a long time with basically one format, it would surely be receptive to some sort of change--providing that the revamped structure was as entertaining as the older one. The more astute entertainment entrepreneurs anticipate shifts in the audience's tastes; the most astute ones do what they think is feasible and necessary to precipitate those changes. Jack merely interjected his black performers into a burlesque format, which was actually an offspring of minstrelsy itself. This technique can be seen as a forerunner to the ploy of later theatrical producers who would take a "white" story and adapt it into a black setting with black characters.

The obligatory images remained in these shows, chiefly because white audiences expected to see a certain amount of crap-shooting, thievery of chickens and watermelons, and an occasional razor fight. However, these images were retained more to appease audience expectations than to promote the myth of black inferiority.

Although the spectacle of scantily-clad beautiful women was a major part of the attraction, one cannot blame this element of the shows of Jack and Isham on any adherence to the stereotype of blacks being oversexed. This particular aspect of the shows is an adjunct of burlesque. However, one must look at the titles of the

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shows--Creoles and Octoroons--the former a misnomer given to people of mixed blood in Louisiana,[64] and the latter meaning an individual who is seven-eighths white and only one-eighth black. As these shows had the expressed purpose of "glorifying the coloured girl," it must be noted that the only women of color who were being glorified were the octoroons and other women of mixed blood but very little color. These shows slyly implied that almost-white black women were, if not superior to, then surely more sexually desirable than their darker sisters.

Like the black minstrel shows which preceded them, the productions of Jack and Isham proved to be an invaluable training ground for black talent, primarily in the fields of acting and writing. Many of the featured performers of the turn-of-the-century musical comedy companies of Cole & Johnson and Williams & Walker were alumnae of The Creole Show and Octoroons. Bob Cole and Billy Johnson received their first big theatrical breakthrough as writers for The Creole Show.[65]

While Jack and Isham departed from the minstrel format by placing blacks in a burlesque structure, a show headlined by Sissieretta Jones was making a similar effort in vaudeville, a more sanitized version of burlesque. Jones, dubbed "Black Patti" after the famed opera singer Adeline Patti, was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, in 1869, and received training as an opera singer. Her reaction to the dearth of opportunities for a black female concert singer was the same as that of the Hyers Sisters: she formed her own company.

Well aware of the public's preference for black women with a predominance of Caucasian features, the decidedly Negroid-looking singer went with her husband, Dick Jones, to London in 1890 for the purpose of becoming more beautiful. She chose the "arsenic treatment, which was supposed to lighten her skin and straighten her hair."[66] It must be noted that in a similar vein such famed African-American entertainers as Lena Horne (in the 1940s), Diana Ross, and Michael Jackson (both in the 1970s) had their noses and lips surgically altered to make them appear less Negroid, theoretically to increase their appeal to white audiences.

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Under the management of white proprietors Voelckel and Nolan, Black Patti's Troubadours began performing in 1895, and made their New York debut on September 26, 1896, before a packed house.[67] Featured prominently in the cast as both an actor and writer of some of the sketches was Bob Cole. The "gimmick" of the show came at its conclusion, in which Jones would sing operatic selections, "supported by the leading soloists of the company."[68]

Black Patti and her company toured successfully until 1920. In the show's quarter century of existence, the vaudeville format survived virtually unchanged. The typical structure is detailed in Sampson's The Ghost Walks.[69] The first act consisted of a "musical skit" of perhaps an hour in length--for the majority of the company's duration it was In Jolly Coon-ey Island, originally written by Bob Cole, but updated periodically by Ernest Hogan and other writers. The second act featured selections from "The Troubadour Sextette" then a brief musical sketch, whose main purpose was to serve as a juxtapositional lead-in for Black Patti, who would sing one operatic number as a "coming attractions" of sorts for her more extended appearance in the next and final act. A cakewalk was next, with the act concluding with the co-featured special guest attraction performing his or her specialty routine.

The last act, entitled The Operatic Kaleidoscope, was centered around Black Patti, who, according to the show's program,was "the greatest singer of her race," and "a chorus of well-trained voices" performing selections from grand and comic operas.

With perhaps no intention of attempting to do so, the shows of Black Patti brought black entertainment even farther from the minstrel format than the productions of Isham and Jack. Her show was, in essence, a three-hour showcase of her classical singing talents; the evening was structured so that her operatic selections would be anticipated and appreciated. Note the structure of a typical show: the opening hour-long musical skit is merely the obligatory concession to white audiences--it gives them the theatrical dose of the "coons" they have come to expect. "Darky" tomfoolery dispensed with, the program next moves on to more serious fare. Since one cannot segue effectively from a neo-minstrel section to

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operatic renditions by the "refined" and self-proclaimed "greatest singer of her race," the designated vocal groups would sing selections in Act Two, chiefly to serve as a bridge between the comical first act and the final portion, which featured operatic selections by not only the headliner, but by other classically-trained black vocalists as well.

In the mid-1890s, with the shows of Jack, Isham, and Black Patti making a visible break from the traditional format, one might get the impression that progress was being made. Unfortunately, a new phenomenon was emerging which would lower the African-American's image even more--if that was indeed possible.

"Coon" Songs--A Major Step Backward

Black Americans had been lampooned by means of songs for practically all of the nineteenth century. Before the white minstrels centered complete evenings of entertainment around jingles which denigrated blacks, anti-Negro humor had been sung on the music hall stages in not-so-isolated interpolations into popular shows.

Until 1896, those songs deprecating African-Americans had always been linked to the music hall stage, an expected part of the show. In the latter part of 1896, however, an event took place that brought this type of music into the saloons, parlors, and living rooms of America--any place which had access to a piano and the necessary sheet music.

The "coon" song had been loosed upon America.

Though the anti-Negro ditties had been a music hall staple for almost a century, it was only upon the publication and subsequent overwhelming nation-wide popularity of Ernest Hogan's "All Coons Look Alike to Me," in August 1896, that this genre of song received a name and definition.

"Roughly defined, a so-called coon song was a combination of black-oriented lyrics, in most cases in dialect, and a ragtime music style created [sic] by Scott Joplin."[70] Although this type of song--without the relatively new ragtime musical mode, of course--had been around longer than Ernest Hogan had been alive, he is the person

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whom chroniclers of black music have generally credited with starting the trend in the mid-1890s.

Born in 1865, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, Hogan began his theatrical career as a small child, playing a "pickaninny" in a touring production of Uncle Tom's Cabin.[71] Had he never gained notoriety for writing such a song that compounded the negative images associated with blacks, his other achievements, such as being the star of several minstrel troupes, the head comic and one of the writers for Black Patti's Troubadours, and the leading player in such landmark turn-of-the-century black musicals as Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk, would surely have put him into the annals of the history of black music and theatre.

Hogan pleaded innocent to any conscious, self-hating act of songwriting; he had no way of knowing that what he had intended as a harmless jingle would cause a national sensation and make the African-American more of a collective joke than he already was.

Shortly after the publication of "All Coons Look Alike to Me" in September 1896, songwriters, black and white, were turning out similar offerings to keep up with the great demand.[72] "Coon" songs became an obligatory feature of burlesque and vaudeville entertainments, and "the profits of music publishing houses soared overnight. Some of the leading daily newspapers even included 'coon' songs sheet music as a supplement to the Sunday edition."[73] In less than two years this form of music was popular in Europe and Australia and being published in England.[74]

Any person familiar with the black consciousness movement of the 1960s might immediately assume that a large segment of the black community would have taken umbrage at the "coon" songs and would have made some sort of political statement, however token, against this additional affront to the collective dignity of African-Americans. Undoubtedly numerous individuals, particularly those amongst the best educated and those who possessed a strong sense of pride in their African ancestry, were aghast at this new trivialization of their racial heritage, but on a national level there was no organized outcry against this form of music. Henry T.

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Sampson, in The Ghost Walks, gives as good a reason as any as to how the tenor of the times precluded such a collective rebuttal:

> Although 'coon' songs spread black music throughout the country and abroad, they also did much to propagate the negative stereotypes then associated with the Negro race. The words 'coon, ' 'darky,' and 'nigger' quickly came into vogue, their use 'legitimized' by both white and black song writers. In the first decade following the rise to popularity of 'coon' songs there was no widespread protest against them in the black community. One reason for this apparent lack of protest may have been that many Blacks living in this time were former slaves, and these terms were frequently used on the plantation by Blacks and Whites. The relatively high illiteracy rate among Blacks may be the reason that most of them didn't realize the harm racial slurs could do to future generations.[75]

Sampson makes a valid point when he discusses how the terms "coon," "darky," and "nigger" were frequently used by blacks themselves. The African-American, with his potent oral tradition that places strong emphasis on the spoken word, has historically, as a racial defensive mechanism, found a way to take a lot of the intended psychological venom from these would-be epithets by using them freely--and, of times in an endearing manner--amongst his own people. In a foreword to his now-classic autobiography, Nigger, the famed comedian Dick Gregory tells his mother that "whenever you hear that word, you know they're advertising my book."[76,77]

Whatever the reasons for the lack of protests by blacks to the "coon" song rage, the fact remains that the black race was reduced to a lower level in the view of other ethnic groups. As a large number of popular songs throughout the history of music to the present day have been, the title of "All Coons Look Alike to Me" stemmed from a popular phrase or sentiment of the day. In this case it is self-explanatory; due to the "Invisible Man" syndrome, many whites do not recognize individual physical or psychological characteristics of blacks with whom they are not personally

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acquainted. The same holds true for other races: a similar saying, once popular with blacks and whites, decreed that all Chinese look alike. Many blacks will state in total seriousness that all whites look alike to them.

The fact that Hogan's song augmented the negative stereotypes of blacks was compounded by the fact that its author was himself black, thus, for numerous whites, adding a bit of authenticity to the statement.

Both the lyrics and the music have been credited to Hogan, though the latter was lifted by Hogan from a now anonymous ragtime piano-player whose rendition of the tune was popular in the late 1880s, in the Chicago brothel where the pianist performed.[78]

A look at the offending lyrics is in order:

Thar's another coon barber from Virginia
In society he's the leader of the day,
And now ma honey gal is gwine to quit me
Yes, she's gone and drove this coon away.
She'd no excuse to turn me loose,
I've been abused, I'm all confused,
'Cause these words she did say:

(chorus)
All coons look alike to me.
I've got another beau, you see,
And he's just as good to me as you, nig!
Ever tried to be.
He spends his money free,
I know we can't agree,
So I don't like you no how,
All coons look alike to me.[79]

It must be remembered that this song was written in 1896; surely in the forty-odd years of black minstrelsy and half-century of white blackface entertainments a much more perjorative song against blacks than this must have been put forward to the public. In a society whose most popular art-form consisted of the ridicule of blacks, there is nothing inordinately heinous towards African-

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Americans in the song, surely nothing that had not been expressed in countless other skits, songs, and "Ethiopian operas."

Let us compare Hogan's lyrics to those of "Happy Colored Children From the South," published twenty-four years earlier (1872) in the Minstrel Song Book:

> Keep your eyes on the children from the south
> We're as merry as the little birds a singing in the trees
> Our hair's so tight that we cannot shut our mouth,
> We're always just as happy as can be.
>
> (chorus)
> Dancing, singing, jumping all day,
> Music makes us foolish as the children in the hay;
> Singing, shouting to pass the time away,
> We're the happy colored children from the South.
> When us darkies give a fancy ball,
> They watch us niggers as we promenade the hall
> For singing, dancing, we can beat them all--
> Were the happy little children from the South.[80]

Hogan's song, by means of its titular phrase, expresses only one of the stereotypes of blacks; the lyrics from "Happy Colored Children From the South" contain an anthology of minstrel images. One might be more inclined to judge the latter song, due to its broader inclusion of stereotypes, as more offensive than the former, which is essentially a one-joke song.

Perhaps the popularity of the new "coon" songs was a reaction by whites to the fact that, by 1896, the traditional minstrel format was being phased out, replaced by the afore-mentioned entertainments of Jack, Isham, and Black Patti. The plantation songs and images, though no longer the most popular item on the music hall stage, were still such a huge part of the white American's consciousness that he retained a need for them in order to feel superior to his black scapegoat, thus glorifying this new musical mode in lieu of the now relatively passe plantation tomfoolery which had by this time been consigned to the lesser

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halls, as portrayed by lesser talents, as viewed by smaller and less discriminating audiences.[81]

One can sympathize with Hogan, who later expressed deep regret for having written the song, saying that he had no idea of the impact it would have.[82] White Americans needed something to further the practice of scapegoating the Negro, and "coon" songs were it; history needed someone to blame for the loosing of that form of music onto the public, and Hogan was the man.

It is impossible to prove that any collective anti-black sentiments were intensified by the proliferation of "coon" songs, but, as did the minstrel shows when they erupted into a national sensation in the mid-1840s, the "coon" songs uncovered a latent hostility and feelings of superiority towards blacks by whites that was demonstrated by the embracing of an art-form with such dubious humanistic qualities.

With or without Hogan and his unfortunate lyrical faux pas, the African-American was considered by both private citizens and the print media as more of a joke than a human being. In the years before and after the turn of the century, the ironically-titled New York City daily newspaper, The American, featured every Sunday in its cartoon section "The Coon Alphabet With Pictures From Dixie." Pictured were the stereotypical plantation "darkies": grotesquely ugly with oversized lips, simian features, and malformed limbs. The comic strip's format consisted of nursery rhyme-type couplets in Negro dialect, depicting these neo-minstrel clowns in typical "coon" activities.

The example in The American's "Colored Supplement" cartoon section of the July 3, 1898, issue is representative of the series. Pictured is an old "darky" asleep on a mule when a little "pickaninny" comes along, lights a set of firecrackers, causing the mule to buck, throwing the old man. To better illustrate the "Coon Alphabet," a caption reads:

"I" is fo' Isham
Who was havin sweet sleep

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'Til a package of squibs
Knocked him plum off his feet.

These weekly anti-black cartoons were supplemented by other caricatured attacks on the black race. Just two pages before the afore-mentioned drawings, a cartoon, with a heading: "What Manila will look like when our glorious institutions are introduced," depicts American mercantile institutions of the era in a somewhat incongruous Manila setting, with the citizens of that Philippine Islands capital drawn as black-skinned, thick-lipped minstrel-type "darkies." Remembering Manila's Pacific Basin location, the author of this drawing also inserted a few Chinese coolie caricatures.

The lampooning of blacks by the print media was not limited to the comic pages of this era. Feature stories on not necessarily newsworthy events involving blacks read like minstrel show afterpiece scenarios. In a development that was perhaps ironic--or, perhaps planned--such an account appears on the same page as the review of Clorindy in the July 12, 1898, edition of The New York Times. The story, entitled "The Luscious Watermelon," recounts the arrest of "Steve," a "homeless negro" who "has a bad reputation among the police as a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow who lounges about Pier 24 . . . along with other negroes, watching for opportunities to get hold of watermelons.

" The reported events are designed to resemble the patter of minstrel skits. Charged with theft and mayhem, Steve responds: "I didn't take no watermillions, yo' Honah. They fall and brak themselves. An' I done stole no mayhem neither, Jedge. Dat feller Cohen don't sell no mayhem an' dere was none on the dock."

Another similar account of stereotype-laden metropolitan news occurs in the same paper's February 4, 1908, edition. In "Chickens Upset Darktown" an incident was reported thusly:

> A series of squawks and cackles which a strong wind carried down Ninety-ninth Street yesterday afternoon were heard by dozens of colored residents of the upper east side. Six crap games came to a sudden halt. Two participants in a razor fight sank their enmity in the

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> common cause and in five seconds Ninety-ninth Street was filled with negroes and negresses, not to count dozens of pickaninnies, each armed with a basket or bag.

The article goes on to describe how a truck carrying crates of chickens had smashed against a light pole, scattering twenty boxes full of market-bound birds all over the street, precipitating the daylight chicken-stealing orgy.

Note how the article reads as a caption to a freeze-framed photograph of a minstrel show in progress. The dice games, the razor fight, the pilfering of chickens, the speed and alacrity with which these Negroes responded to the cackle of the chickens gives the impression that it was an innate racial reflex action for them to swoop down on the uncaged and unclaimed birds.

Let it be noted that this writer happened upon these minstrel-tinged accounts while researching reviews of shows. Surely a concerted search for stories of this ilk would have resulted in the findings of numerous others, due to the usage of the print media--in some instances, at least--as yet another venue for denigrating the African-American.

As it was at the onset of minstrelsy, the inferiority of the black race was a given to many white Americans. In a U. S. Government-sponsored Dictionary of Races or Peoples which was published in 1911, the official statement on the Negro race--in this instance, encompassing all peoples of African heritage, not just the American Negro--was that it was "the lowest division of mankind from an evolutionary standpoint."[83]

Despite the fact that the Negro occupied the lowest rung on America's social and economic ladder, numerous energetic young black musical creators were striving to put on their own shows with a measure of autonomy and integrity.

A Trip to Coontown

The first two black musical comedies not written in the minstrel, burlesque, or vaudeville formats appeared within thirteen weeks of each other in New York in 1898. The first, A Trip to

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Coontown--to be henceforth referred to as Coontown--was written by Robert "Bob" Cole and William C. "Billy" Johnson, and made its debut on April 4, 1898, at the Third Avenue Theatre. Other than its status as the first show "entirely written, performed, and produced by blacks,"[84] the play itself appears to be rather unremarkable; "it appeared at an otherwise obscure, out-of-the-way theatre, and it appeared only briefly."[85]

One look at the play's title gives an indication that Cole and Johnson were making an obvious concession to white audiences and their expectations. From this title alone one would expect an anthology of the usual images to be presented. As is the case with all but a few of the early black shows, no libretto for Coontown exists; one can only venture to guess the play's content based on plot summaries. The show was centered on the antics of a confidence artist named Jim Flimflammer (played by Billy Johnson) who tries to swindle an old man out of his pension, but is in turn outwitted by the intended victim.[86]

Although practically ignored by most of the daily papers of the era, the New York Times, which reviewed it twelve days after its opening, gave Coontown an enthusiastic report. The critic praised the comic talents of co-author Cole, "who plays Wayside Willie, the tramp, and in a white make-up which makes it impossible to guess his particular tint."[87] Obviously Cole and Johnson had a penchant for using topical, ironic humor: another high point for the critic was a parody of Ernest Hogan's "All Coons Look Alike to Me"; the reviewer thought that "it was worth the price of admission to hear the blackest Negro in the Company sing 'All Chinks Look Alike to Me.' "

As mentioned before, the show created no noticeable stir on the New York theatre scene--despite a fine review from the Times--but found an audience elsewhere. The show was sharpened for its New York debut by a three-month tour of the Canadian provinces; after its brief Manhattan run, it embarked on a road tour which lasted for four successful seasons.

Cole would soon be severing his working relationship with Billy Johnson, taking on John Rosamond Johnson (no relation to Billy) as a collaborator. This new team of Cole & Johnson would rank

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second only to Williams & Walker as the most influential innovators of the new wave of black comic operettas which proliferated between 1898 and 1910.

Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk

The more successful of the two earliest all-black musicals written in operetta form was Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk, a collaboration between a pair of young, talented black men: Will Marion Cook, a twenty-nine-year-old, classically-trained violinist, pianist, and composer; and twenty-six-year-old Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the preeminent black poet of his time. Unlike Cole and Johnson with Coontown, Clorindy had what turned out to be the advantage of being managed and financed by whites, a situation which resulted in much better coverage from the New York press, due to the show's producer, E. E. Rice, having a fine rapport with the show business editors of the city's daily newspapers.

Clorindy was based on an original idea by Will Marion Cook, who was born January 27, 1869, in Washington, D. C., to a well-to-do black family. Having studied at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio, with Josef Joachim in Berlin, Germany, and at the National Conservatory of Music in Manhattan,[88] Cook was perhaps as well-trained in classical music as was possible for a black student at that time.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Cook took the time to chronicle the particulars behind the production of one of his works, in this case in an article bearing the same name as the title of his historic creation.[89]

Cook first conceived the idea of capitalizing on the popularity of a new dance craze, the Cakewalk, whose chief proponents were a precocious pair of black comedians who were barely out of their teens, Egbert Austin "Bert" Williams and George Nash Walker. Cook sketched out a series of representative ragtime tunes and immediately contacted the comic duo. Williams & Walker expressed admiration for both the music and Cook's potential as a composer whose style was compatible with their own, but, because of a long-term contractual agreement with their managers, were unable to

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appear in any production of the proposed operetta anytime in the near future.[90]

Fueled by an unfaltering belief in the ultimate success of the project, Cook next contacted Paul Lawrence Dunbar about supplying a libretto and lyrics for the work. Dunbar was the most celebrated black author in America at that time; his fame was sealed when his 86-page collection of verse, Majors and Minors, published in 1895, was given an ecstatic review by William Dean Howells in Harper's Weekly in the June 27, 1896, issue.[91] Howells was one of those select few critics from whom a glowing review usually led to an increase in sales; such was the case with Dunbar, who, until Howells' review, was experiencing only modest sales of Majors and Minors.[92]

According to Cook, all the songs were written in an eight-hour session one night between 8 P.M. and 4 A.M. at Cook's brother John's house near Howard University, where their father was the dean of the law school, in the nation's capital. Cook mentions, perhaps wryly, that when the evening started he and Dunbar had nothing but twenty-four bottles of beer, a quart of whiskey, John Cook's porterhouse steak, which they ate raw, and no piano--he and Dunbar had to beat out the rhythms on the kitchen table with a spoon.[93]

In spite of Cook's thorough classical training, and Dunbar's proven ability to write poems and lyrics in "standard" English, they chose to write the libretto and lyrics in the to-be-expected Negro dialect. Dunbar was well aware that white audiences did not appreciate blacks appearing to be intelligent by means of the use of "proper" English; his standard English poems had, for the most part, been dismissed by white critics, while his dialect works were praised.[94] Surely Cook had learned by the age of twenty-nine that his classical music would not find a home on the music hall stage, but that a style of music most closely associated with Negroes--"ragged time"--would be accepted.

The dilemma of the black artist of that era is best summed up by the reaction of Cook's mother upon overhearing some of the songs at a rehearsal in her house. As she heard the "Negro" songs played in ragtime in the incongruous setting of her upper-middle-class home,

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she shrieked: "Oh, Will! Will! I've sent you all over the world to study and become a great musician, and you return such a nigger!"[95]

After completing the writing of the show, Cook went to New York to find a producer. He had no luck, soon running out of money for room and board, and was forced to be smuggled onto a train by a porter friend of his in order to return home.[96]

A friend of his brother referred him to E. E. Rice, the owner of the Casino Theatre. As was a popular summertime custom in that era, hour-long "afterpieces" were performed on rooftops which had been converted into theatres. Above Rice's Casino Theatre was the Roof Garden Theatre; Cook proposed that Clorindy be presented there as an afterpiece. Rice found it to his liking and agreed to do the show. In lieu of Williams & Walker, Ernest Hogan would headline the show; because of the standard hour-length running time for the late-night afterpieces, Dunbar's libretto had to be eliminated, making the show, in essence, a ragtime opera.[97]

On opening night, July 5, 1898, Clorindy was beset by what proved to be a most fortunate accident. Sporadic rain delayed the opening by forty-five minutes and kept the original crowd to about fifty in number. However, the late start turned out to be perfect timing. The show at the Casino Theatre below was turning out as Clorindy's opening number was being performed. The exiting crowd, seduced by "those heavenly Negro voices," scrambled upstairs for seats to this entertainment.[98] Word soon spread of the show's excellent singing and dancing, and Clorindy was a hit.

Will Marion Cook ended his chronicle of the making of Clorindy with these words:

> Negroes were at last on Broadway, and there to stay. Gone was the uff-day of the minstrel! Gone was the Massa Lincoln stuff![99]

Obviously Cook saw his work as a radical departure from the "Massa Lincoln stuff" of the minstrels. Perhaps that was his intention. However, as his and Dunbar's choice of ragtime music and the lyrics in Negro dialect implies, Cook knowingly made the

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necessary concessions to white audience expectations. Song titles from the show such as "Hottes' Coons" and "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?" could just as easily have come from a minstrel songbook. Furthermore, to read the New York Times review, one might get the impression that Clorindy was an old-fashioned minstrel piece, replete with most of the images:

> Darky songs and dances seem to be more popular than ever before. In Mr. Rice's programme, this week Ernest Hogan introduces "the Origin of the Cakewalk," which is full of them, while Alice Atherton appears with her chorus of coons. Edwin Frank is a make-believe darky when he picks his banjo, and there are other reminders of negro minstrelsy in the bill, which also introduces the dancing of Al Dorita, the mimicry and juggling of Lafayette, and the other favorite 'turns'.[100]

Remember, this is one critic's observation. As is the case with all of the early black shows, one must take the reviews of the white critics with the proverbial grain of salt. In some instances surely the most subtle departures from minstrelsy were either missed or ignored by the reviewers whose ideas of blacks and their musicals had been informed by works that seriously undermined the humanity of African-Americans; conversely, any remnants of the blackface entertainments which appeared in the shows would be overplayed by those reviewers who desired that black musicals retain all of the "coon" and "darky" imagery.

Williams & Walker

No two names are more closely associated with the proliferation of black musical comedies at the turn of the century than those of Williams and Walker.

Egbert Austin Williams and George Nash Walker were the first black show-business idols in America. Working within the narrow confines that they were allowed, these two men combined great performance talents, a sharp business acumen, sex appeal, and a flair for self-promotion that made them the most popular black

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entertainers--amongst black and white followers--and, along with Booker T. Washington, the most famous black men in America of their time.

One finds contradictory information on the early, pre-show-business years of Bert Williams' life; perhaps this vagueness was promoted by Williams himself, a private man who was prone to giving conflicting facts about himself to reporters and even his friends. It is known that he was West Indian by birth; in Nobody, a biography about Williams by Ann Charters, his date and place of birth are listed as November 12, 1874, on the island of Antigua.[101] Black entertainment historian Donald Bogle cites Williams' time and place of birth as 1873 on the island of Nassau in the Bahamas.[102] It is commonly agreed amongst chroniclers of Williams that he was born sometime between 1873 and 1875 in the Bahamas.

The facts behind Williams' early years in America are also cloudy. It is generally known that as a boy he moved to New York with his parents, a brother, and a set of grandparents. Finding the weather there disagreeable, the clan moved to Riverside, California, whose climate they found to be more similar to that of the West Indian island from which they had recently emigrated.

Williams finished high school in Riverside, then enrolled at Leland Stanford University to study engineering. According to Ann Charters, Williams completed one financially-strapped year there, and, rather than return home to Southern California that summer to work to raise the next year's tuition, he teamed up with three Stanford classmates to tour in a wagon through small California coastal towns as troubadours.[103] Their act consisted of skits, clowning, and banjo-strummed songs dealing with college humor parodies. Perhaps the people in these unsophisticated towns saw the repertoire of the Stanford boys as somewhat elitist; the act did not go over well; the receipts taken in when the hat was passed were generally small; the troupe disbanded, with Williams' colleagues presumably going off to raise their tuition money in a more conventional manner.

With virtually no money for his sophomore year, and smitten by the lure of show-business, Williams never returned to Stanford.

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Instead, he journeyed back to the Bay Area and threw himself into "the rambunctious theatre world of San Francisco."[104] His pride dictating that it was undignified to "blacken up," the teen-ager passed up numerous minstrel show opportunities, preferring to begin his career "on the lowest rung of the theatrical ladder,"[105] performing in saloons and restaurants as a singer of sentimental ballads.

Williams found that jobs on this level were few, far-between, and low-paying. Pride being a commodity which does not translate into a material asset, Williams put his aside and auditioned for the Mastadon Minstrels in 1893.

What would follow would be the most important meeting of his life. Also at the audition was a sprightly teenager from Lawrence, Kansas, who had worked his way to the West Coast by appearing in a series of circuses, minstrel shows, and medicine shows.[106] An immediate bond was formed between Williams and George Walker, the son of a policeman, and a life-long performer on the stage who had participated in amateur minstrel productions in his hometown for as long as he could remember.[107]

Both young men recognized the other as his show-business complement. They made plans to become a vaudeville team, polishing a routine that they had practiced on the off-hours from their touring with the Mastadon Minstrels and the stint at Halahan and Homan's Midway Theatre in San Francisco that followed.

Their next major engagement had a profound effect on their later operettas. As part of the Midwinter Festival which was held annually in Golden Gate Park, an "exhibition" of "real life" inhabitants of the West African nation of Dahomey was to be a feature of the 1894 festivities. The proprietors did plan to use genuine Africans, but upon learning that the Dahomeans would be arriving late, the management was forced to hire local blacks to stand in for them. Walker and Williams were amongst the locals given work; this must have constituted a major makeup problem for the olive-skinned, straight-haired Williams.

The real Dahomeans arrived and replaced their stand-ins; after numerous conversations with the authentic Africans, Walker was

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particularly impressed with their attitudes and outlooks on life which had not been tainted by having lived in the midst of American-style racism. This respect for the African and his culture would serve as a major plot determinant in the two shows that made Williams & Walker famous on both sides of the Atlantic: In Dahomey (1902) and Abyssinia (1906).

Perhaps compelled by a belief that their introduction at the Mastadon Minstrels audition was no chance meeting, but an appointment dictated by Fate, the duo continued honing their act, taking work wherever they could find it, doing brief stints on the vaudeville stage, in anonymous minstrel shows, and with circuses in the Bay Area. As with all classic comic pairings, Williams and Walker were perfect foils for each other, having the right combination of similarities and differences.

Physically both were very attractive: Williams, an Afro-Spanish-Dutch quadroon with Latinate-Negroid features; Walker, dark-brownskinned, with a "cute," pixie-like face highlighted by what would become a famous, dazzling smile that, as the legend goes, many women of all races found irresistible. Walker was of medium height and build, perfectly co-ordinated and graceful; Williams was six-feet-four, powerfully-built, and moved with a rather attractive Lincolnesque awkwardness which was exaggerated in his stage routines for greater comic effect.

Both had innate comedic talents; at the beginning of their association, Williams, because of his more conventional "pretty-boy" good looks, played the "dandified" straight man, the Brighella to the more Puck-ish Walker's Harlequin. The roles were reversed when they discovered that Williams' superior comic timing, coupled with Walker's real-life propensities as an immaculately-dressed seducer of women produced an offbeat combination which had greater comic effect than the original idea.

Until this new development, Williams had avoided using blackface makeup whenever he could; now that he was to specialize in the "darky" caricature, he had to disguise his Mediterranean features with burnt cork and paint, and cover his straight hair with a kinky wig.

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Walker was an excellent dancer; Williams, nowhere near as graceful, actually made his awkwardness a stock-in-trade; he cleverly overexaggerated his stiffness to the point where it became graceful in itself. Their eccentric dancing styles complemented each other while performing the Cakewalk, a dance which they helped to make into a national sensation.

Although famed for their songwriting and singing, neither one possessed a great singer's voice; they relied more on the energy and enthusiasm of their delivery while selling a song. After hearing the results of their efforts at the Victor Company recording studio, Walker, dismayed that the records did not capture the "personality" of the Williams & Walker team, decided that the session of October 11, 1901, would mark his first and final foray into the world of recording.[108]

Their personalities were complementary. Williams was by nature reserved and somewhat of a loner; this aspect of his psychological makeup was probably compounded by the fact that his early West Indian upbringing had not properly prepared him for the virulent anti-black sentiments of many white Americans, and what he construed as a resultant complacency on the part of black Americans.[109] Walker, by contrast, was outgoing, determined and stubborn when he felt he was correct; these qualities proved to be invaluable when he had to negotiate forcefully with white theatre proprietors on behalf of the team and their subsequent production company. Furthermore, Walker's duties while working the medicine shows, which consisted of drawing and entertaining a crowd as a lead-in to the spiels of the "quack doctors" peddling their panaceas, were the perfect training methods for the self-promoting stunts for which he and Williams would become famous.

Away from the stage, Williams lived quietly with his wife,the former Lottie Thompson, a very lightskinned woman several years his senior whom he had met when the Williams & Walker Company was recasting The Senegambian Carnival in Chicago in 1898. In contrast to the Williamses' quiet married life, Walker's offstage "life was a further exercise in showmanship and unadulterated celebration of his stardom."[110] His June 22, 1899, marriage to the

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then-nineteen-year-old showgirl Aida Overton "did little to change his private life."[111] Walker's wedding was a big social event which was covered by all of New York's daily papers; Williams, in a rather matter-of-fact manner, mentioned to the cast of The Sons of Ham before a rehearsal in September 1900, that he and Lottie had been wed in a civil ceremony earlier that day.[112]

At the onset the duo was billed as "Walker & Williams," but the billing was erroneously reversed on a poster advertising their presence in a San Francisco show. A coin was flipped to determine if the billing would remain "Williams & Walker" as per the mis-printed posters; Williams won the toss.[113]

Upon hearing of a call for Negro performers in Chicago for Isham's Octoroons in 1896, the comic team decided to give it a try. Due to a lack of funds, they were forced to work their way East. Their best opportunity proved to be with a traveling medicine show which was headed to Texas from the Bay Area by means of the deserts of California, Arizona, and New Mexico. Walker saw this job as a backward step; he had worked his way West in such a manner.

Upon reaching Chicago in August 1896, the pair was given a one-week trial engagement with the Octoroons. Much to their surprize and chagrin, their brand of comedy did not catch on with the Chicago audiences, and they were dropped at the end of the week.

Not letting this set them back, they looked immediately to find a way to capitalize on a new trend which was sweeping the nation--the "coon" song. After Hogan's tune became popular in the fall of 1896, songwriters and performers, black and white alike, were turning them out rapidly. Demonstrating for the first time the penchant for self-promotion for which they would become famous, the team billed themselves with what they hoped would be the attention-garnering soubriquet of "The Two Real Coons."

The gimmick worked; they were soon hired to do their specialty act in the Broadway musical, The Gold Bug, a Victor Herbert presentation which opened September 21, 1896, at the Casino Theatre, and closed a scant five days later. Their routine was interpolated into the show; their characters did not appear in the libretto; and, although they were not mentioned in the program, the

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comic duo received glowing reviews in a show which was otherwise roundly dismissed by the New York critics.[114]

The team was now in demand. Among other things, the pair appointed themselves as the unofficial ambassadors of the Cakewalk. Like so many aspects of "black" show-business of the time, the Cakewalk had its origins on the plantations of the ante-bellum South. The plantation owners, for the amusement of their guests, would, on holidays, set up a cake in a room of the "big house" and have the slaves dance around it in a pseudo-sophisticated manner which was a parody of white dances such as the minuet and the quadrille. The couple judged to have done the best "cake walk" would, of course, "take the cake" as the declared winner.

By the 1890s the dance was a national phenomenon; Cakewalk contests became de rigueur at dances and social events; local competitions were fiercely contested; national championships were held annually in Madison Square Garden.

The lure of the dance, like all of the steps which have achieved widespread popularity, lay in its simplicity. The movements were not unlike those of The Stroll, a dance popularized in 1957 by its self-crowned "King of the Stroll," the late rhythm-and-blues legend Chuck Willis. Like the later dance crazes of The Twist, The Stroll, and The Madison, The Cakewalk was a dance for people who were not really dancers. Everyone fancied himself as doing it well.

Cakewalks were interpolated into all sorts of entertainments --minstrel shows, vaudeville and burlesque offerings, and musical comedies. As reported earlier, the Will Marion Cook/Paul Lawrence Dunbar opus Clorindy devoted itself to giving a "history" of the dance. Walker and Williams surely must have had plenty of competitors disputing their claim to be the world's leading Cakewalkers. As Marie Laveau defended her "title" of the Voodoo Queen against occasional pretenders, as a boxing champion must defend his crown against challengers, Williams & Walker became adept at outstepping all aspirants to their "title."

On the morning of Sunday, January 16, 1898, the young comedians augmented their burgeoning reputation with their cleverest publicity stunt to date. Calling upon the Vanderbilt mansion at Fifth

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Avenue and Fifty-Second Street, they requested an audience with William K. Vanderbilt, a scion of that fabled and fabulously wealthy family. Young Vanderbilt, who fancied himself as quite a Cakewalker, had won several competitions and was not particularly modest about it. The comedians, "dressed just a point or two above the height of fashion,"[115] petitioned for a brief meeting with Vanderbilt. As expected, their request was denied; in preparation for this they had drafted a letter which, in very formal and well-stated terms, invited Vanderbilt to a contest to "decide which of us shall deserve the title of champion cake-walker of the world."[116]

A wager of fifty dollars was offered, its modesty owing to the benevolence of Williams, who told his partner that: "It's a shame to take the money, so make the stakes small, George."[117]

Vanderbilt never took up the challenge, but, as the comedians had hoped, this charming little vignette found its way into most of the city's daily papers.

In 1897 the pair formed their own company and presented The Senegambian Carnival, an all-black vaudeville-style show. This venture proved to be unsuccessful, one of the few losses on the Williams & Walker ledger. One must remember that they had been in New York for only one year; that, coupled with their youth--they were in their early twenties--and the minimal amount of contacts they could have made in the nepotistic theatre world could perhaps signify that the shortcomings of the show were not so much reflective of the talent on stage, but a lack of business expertise due to inexperience.

They knew that, as Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali was wont to say, they would have to find someone "with the right complexion to make the right connection to provide the protection." In 1898, after returning from a successful vaudeville engagement at London's Empire Hall, they secured the managerial services of Hurtig and Seamon, a pair of white theatre entrepreneurs who owned a theatre named after themselves in Harlem.[118]

Under the management of Hurtig and Seamon, they scored their first success in a Williams & Walker-headlined show. The Policy Players, a "vaudeville farce,"[119] opened in New York in October

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1899, but did most of its business on the road. When the show played in Walker's hometown of Lawrence, Kansas, a holiday was declared in his honor.[120]

Their next success was another vaudeville-type farce. The Sons of Ham opened in 1900, and ran for the next two seasons, right up until the debut of the opus which would make them internationally famous, In Dahomey.

As in some of the Williams & Walker Company shows, one depends in part upon newspaper reviews in an attempt to sort out some idea of a plot. An extended review of The Sons of Ham in the New York Telegram of September 1, 1901, gives clues to the vaudeville-style nature of the work; specialty acts, skits, comic choruses, and eccentric dancing and singing are mentioned. The reviewer does mention what appears to be an attempt by Williams to upgrade the images of blacks which are presented in the show. "Some of his lines are capital and a departure from the regulation coon comedy." The critic seems to be a bit perturbed by the pigmentation of the girls in the chorus. "The chorus is lighter in tint than ever before . . . and several are almost white. A few of them are not bad looking, but there are some there who are worse than straight blacks."

This pre-occupation that the white critics have with the various complexions of the performers--especially the females--will repeat itself time and time again.

In a sense, the Williams & Walker team could be viewed as two different show-business entities: The Williams & Walker whose vaudeville farces The Policy Players and The Sons of Ham were such big hits on the black circuit in the Northeastern and North Central states, and the Williams & Walker whose specialty act was extremely popular with audiences on the "white" vaudeville circuit. Color-lines notwithstanding, Williams' reputation as a comedian was so great that in 1900 he was pronounced in The Theatre magazine as "vastly funnier than any white comedian now on the American stage."[121]

By 1901 the pair was so popular that one Williams & Walker team was literally not enough for the theatregoing public. The duo

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must have been sincerely flattered when learning that the comic team of [Dan] Avery & [Charles] Hart was becoming a popular item on the vaudeville stage by impersonating Williams & Walker and doing the more popular acts from the shows of "The Two Real Coons." The imitators obviously impressed the originals; in later years Williams & Walker would hire Avery & Hart to stand in for them whenever a second company of their current hit show was being mounted. Dan Avery and Charles Hart even bore a marked facial and physical resemblance to the original pair.

In Dahomey was initially designed as a musical comedy to play the usual stops on the black theatrical circuit. With music by Will Marion Cook, lyrics by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and a book by Jesse Shipp, In Dahomey was different from the previous Williams & Walker Company offerings inasmuch as it had a recognizable plot, and that the songs and dances in the show, for the most part, complemented the plot. Walker was cast in what would become his customary quick-witted, fast-talking, worldly-wise fashion-plate of a confidence artist; Williams, as he would in their latter efforts, served as Walker's oafish foil. The plot revolved around the scheme of Rareback Pinkerton (Walker) and Shylock Homestead (Williams) to masquerade as detectives in order to bilk a group of moneyed black Americans into a confidence game centering on a return-to-Africa colonizing ruse. At the play's end, the two fake detectives and the wealthy Florida Negroes do wind up in Dahomey, as the honored guests of that state.

The show was premiered on September 8, 1902, in Stamford, Connecticut. In a review in the black weekly newspaper, The Indianapolis Freeman, Sylvester Russell, arguably the preeminent black critic of this era, and one who was not averse to airing his opinions on the racial content of the black shows, expressed qualms about both the artistic merits and the images presented in In Dahomey. Already having found faults with librettist Shipp's overall structure and some lines of dialogue, Russell stated:

> There is not a literary merit to be found in a band of American Negroes taking a trip to Dahomey merely to

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> bluff the people around them after they get there. We must remember that we belong to an oppressed race ourselves and Jesse Shipp must scratch his head and write the third act over again.[122]

Regardless of Russell's numerous problems with the show, it created such a sensation on the circuit that Hurtig and Seamon decided to chance a Broadway opening, which they scheduled for February 18, 1903. This management team had initially planned to allocate for the show's Broadway budget the usual parsimonious sum traditionally consigned to all-black ventures, but George Walker, using the show's extremely popular road reception, and the Williams & Walker team's status as show-business icons as leverage, demanded and received the "then unheard of sum of $15,000"[123] to finance the Broadway production.

The Manhattan opening of In Dahomey was heavily-promoted and eagerly-anticipated. It was to be the first full-length all-black musical to appear in that venue. The proceedings were enhanced by controversies surrounding the show's huge budget, and the prospect of violence breaking out in the theatre that would house the mixed, though segregated audience.

Also at stake was the reputation of Williams & Walker as artists. Although established on the black theatre circuit and in white vaudeville houses, they were not fully "accepted" by the so-called legitimate Broadway establishment. The question as to whether they could appeal to the most discriminating and ostensibly knowledgeable audience was to be answered.

The feared opening-night outbreaks of racial violence never materialized.

Not surprisingly, the newspaper accounts of the day focus as much on the events surrounding the production as on the theatrical event itself. The review in the New York Times began by recounting the fears of a "race war" that "established Broadway managers" had had upon hearing that the Williams & Walkers Company's latest venture would appear in that venue. The critic,however, was quick to note that "all went merrily last night."[124]

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The Times reviewer was not overly impressed with the artistic merits of the show. "The play is already familiar in its main outline to the theatregoing public," and "the whole was well up to the not very exalted average in this kind of show,"[125] opined the Times' writer. However, he did concede that the show was a hit with those in the packed New York Theatre, which he described as a "chuckling, gurgling and roaring multitude." As for the performers themselves, he judged that "Williams, in particular, had electric connections with the risiblities of the audience."

As the white critics of the era were wont to do, the Times reporter gave undue emphasis to the pigmentations of the members of the African-American cast:

> The actors were dark, medium and light. Some of them were so light that they might have passed for white, except that the flare of a nostril, the weight of an eyelid, or the delicate fullness of a lip betrayed them, to minute inspection. One of the chorus girls had blond hair that was clearly not peroxide.[126]

To stem the flow of questions concerning the racial seating arrangements at the New York Theatre, Klaw & Erlanger, the managers of that house, had placed a notice in the major papers of the city and on handbills in the theatre district that designated that "one section of the dress circle, two sections of the balcony and the entire gallery" would be reserved "to colored people."[127]

The question of Williams & Walker's acceptance by the more sophisticated Broadway audience was laid to rest by the thunderous applause which erupted numerous times during the show. The reviewer from the Daily News paid special attention to this:

> On the great stage of the New York Theatre . . . they amused a Broadway audience, reaped Broadway tribute of applause and dollars, and will henceforth wear the hallmark of real [my emphasis] Broadway stars. For them the 'negro problem' is answered happily, the color line is

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> obliterated. Let our matinee idols look to their laurels.[128]

One must note how the reviewer stressed the theme of acceptance by whites as a "hallmark" for the black performer, suggesting that his art is not valid until he had experienced the "tribute of applause and dollars" of the white establishment. In this sense Williams & Walker had achieved the status of what is known euphemistically today as "cross-over" stars; they had initially established themselves with their black audience, and had gained the perhaps begrudged respect of the white mainstream. With In Dahomey the team proved once and for all that their appeal cut across racial, cultural, and class divisions.

The Daily News critic made several comments which reflect racial attitudes of the day. In a statement which vaguely alludes to the makeup of the black segment of the audience, the News reviewer stated:

> It is 'all coon'. There is no white trash on the stage, and there was a good deal of the other thing [my emphasis] in the audience, the management having kindly reserved the third tier, boxes and all, for the racial brethren of the performers.[129]

One cannot be sure that "the other thing" was a code phrase for black people in general, or if it was supposed to mean "the other thing" in relation to his comment on "white trash"--the rowdy, "black trash" equivalent.

That blacks were a people to be viewed in the light of a narrow set of preconceived notions is exemplified by the critic's final comment. "They will crowd the New York Theatre if they remain here till watermelon time."[130]

In conferring the euphemistic "cross-over" status to a minute number of minority artists, the mainstream audience has designated those select few as "special," as exceptions to the rule that states that they share the characteristics prescribed to members of

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a culturally, socially, and intellectually backward ethnic group. The critic from the New York Sun disassociated, in no uncertain terms, Williams' and Walker's intellectual capacities from the quasi-simian norm of their black brethren:

> In Dahomey is the product of two talented men of African descent, men those cranial structures have not yet begun to close.[131]

Surely he was referring to one of the many accepted "scientific" theories of the time which explained the black race's alleged inferiority in terms of some sort of peculiar cranial development.

An observation by the reviewer from the New York World pointed out an ironic dilemma faced by members of the black New York society hierarchy who attended the play:

> It was, and then again, it wasn't, a great night for the high-toned colored circles on Broadway last evening . . . The colored elite came in carriages, but was waved to the gallery.[132]

Despite lifetimes devoted to achievement and making themselves living antitheses to the poor, lazy, shiftless "coon" caricature, the well-to-do blacks were still accorded third-class status on the opening night of the musical by the most popular artists of their race. Surely some of these "colored elite" who were relegated to the worst seats were personal friends of the show's stars and featured players; the seating arrangements must have caused the more sensitive members of the cast to view their opening-night triumph as tainted.

Williams and Walker, who dedicated their careers to the improvement of the African-American's stage image, must be praised for their efforts in In Dahomey. The libretto contains no blatantly self-deprecating humor that is insulting to blacks. The only echoes of minstrelsy occur in the opening scene, and even then as a play-within-a-play. In a vignette undoubtedly inspired by

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Walker's days as a shill in medicine shows, Tambo, Bones, and a Banjoist put on a brief minstrel sketch in order to attract a crowd for a "fakir," Dr. Straight, a medicine man. This excusable moment of pandering to white expectations dispensed with, the subsequent humor is at once topical and full of Molière-like social commentaries on black mores and attitudes of the time.

As an undercurrent to the two main subplots--the back-to-Africa movement, and the attempt by Pinkerton and Homestead to find and sell back a miniature silver casket to the rich, eccentric, and almost-senile ex-slave, Moses Lightfoot, most of the humor of In Dahomey lampoons Negroes who strive to ape the mores and manners of whites. Dr. Straight's two products, "the most wonderful discovery [sic] of modern times," are Straightaline, a tonic which "straightens nappy or knotty hair," and Oblicutucus, a skin lightener which is guaranteed to give the user a "peach-like complexion that can't be duplicated--not even by peaches."[133]

Librettist Jesse Shipp also comments on the theory that blacks, if given any degree of power, would be just as abusive of that power as those who have abused them. Moses Lightfoot, in discussing his plans to help "Dahome" modernize itself once he and his fellow black Americans arrive there, tells "The Barbers Society of Philosophical Research" of Gatorville, Florida, what measures he would take. A member, Stamp, defers:

> . . . suppose the natives don't take kindly to the new order of things and refuse to be electric lighted, salooned and otherwise fixed up with the blessings of civilizations--suppose they look upon you as intruders and . . . make war on you?
>
> Moses
>
> (slowly)
> If it comes to that, we'll arrange with them gentlemen like Uncle Sam did with the Indians.
>
> Stamp
>
> How is that?

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Moses

> Kick the stuffin' out of dem and put them on a reservation.[134]

Lightfoot, the type of Negro who is a blustery, self-appointed authority figure around blacks, but obsequious when around whites, is an especial target for the play's humor. His riches derive from his inheritance from his beloved former master, John Goodman; Lightfoot's continuing devotion to the long-departed Goodman is lampooned throughout the play.

Topical humor abounds; well-known brand names of the era are frequently dropped. Perhaps the play's funniest scene is the one in which the pseudo-detective Pinkerton (Walker), is recalling the latest escapades of the most popular fictional detectives of the era, Nick Carter and Old Sleuth:

> Nick Carter is the only man living that's been shot through the heart 41 times, and Old Sleuth's been knocked in the head with his arms tied behind him and a gag in his mouth and throwed in every sewer in the country.[135]

Pinkerton/Walker proceeds to give a long-winded but gripping account of how Carter and Old Sleuth perform the rather implausible task of saving a train full of sleeping passengers by repairing a broken bridge which is dangling over a chasm one thousand feet deep.

Such drawn-out speeches, glibly and articulately rendered by Walker, became part of his stock-in-trade. Though these speeches more often than not veered from the story-line, they were, due to their colorful imagery, not only highly entertaining, but served as an antithesis to the stereotype of the "darky" who is so stupid that he can express himself only in a monosyllabic, English-mangling Negro dialect. This Negro dialect, emblematic of the Negro's supposed inferiority, is markedly absent in the Williams & Walker operettas. The blacks in their shows speak standard English, more befitting of their middle-class stations in life. In the case of Walker, his characters' occasional forays into the use of slang and improper English

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were offset by an occasional "big word," but, for, the most part, the dialogue in the Williams & Walker shows complied with the request of a voice in the crowd in In Dahomey's opening scene who warned Dr. Straight that he had "better bring your language down to the limitations of a universal understanding."[136]

In addition to eschewing the standard "darky" caricatures and chastising certain blacks for their silly penchant for imitating whites, In Dahomey ventured to make as strong a statement as possible, given the times, on black pride. In the show's finale, a song entitled "Evah Dahkey Is A King," the Williams & Walker Company sings an ode to past glories of the African race. The song ends with an admonition of sorts:

> White folks what's got dahkey servants
> Try an' get dem every thing
> You must nevah speak insulting
> You may be talking to a king.[137]

In Dahomey completed a respectable run of 53 performances on Broadway in early April, moving down to Philadelphia prior to a scheduled six-week engagement at London's Shaftesbury Theatre. The show was a resounding success in Britain; the Londoners not only jammed the theatre to see Williams & Walker, but many prominent socialites hired the pair to give private lessons in the Cakewalk and perform bits of their vaudeville act.

Perhaps the high point of their London experience was a command performance at Buckingham Palace on June 23, 1903. The occasion was the ninth birthday of Prince Eddie of Wales, the grandson of England's King Edward. A stage was erected on the lawn of the palace for the presentation of a full production of In Dahomey.[138]

The King's endorsement proved to be the best possible advertisement for the show. Before, the play had been drawing near-capacity audiences; after, In Dahomey, starring "The Royal Comedians," as George Walker had dubbed himself and his partner, became the most-prized ticket in London. The planned six-week

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engagement stretched into what would eventually become a ten-month stay. A tour of the British provinces followed, then Walker and Williams returned to the United States to create a new version of the show to play on the black theatrical circuit. Some of the original cast members remained in Europe to tour in the show, with the Williams & Walker imitators, Avery & Hart, assuming the lead roles.

The revised In Dahomey made a ten-month tour before the pair decided that it had run its course. In August 1905, near the end of the run, Williams and Walker won a lawsuit against their managers, Hurtig and Seamon, freeing them from their contract. They then returned to the vaudeville circuit, all the while preparing their next musical comedy, Abyssinia.

As he had done with the financial backers of In Dahomey, George Walker argued vehemently for a huge budget for Abyssinia in lieu of the paltry allocations that all-black shows had to settle for. Once again Walker's demands were satisfied; Abyssinia received the then-astronomical budget of $30,000,[139] ensuring that the costumes and set design would be far more lavish than any seen previously in a black show. The huge budget for the show was used mainly for the Abyssinia set design. A real waterfall was erected on stage; real donkeys were used to complement the real-appearing property lions and camels.[140]

The theme of African heritage, which played such a prominent part in In Dahomey, is even more pronounced in Abyssinia. Rastus Johnson (Walker), of Wilson County, Kansas, has, on a lark, played the Louisiana lottery and hit for $15,000. He elects to spend this new fortune on a European vacation, taking his best friend, Jasmine Jenkins (Williams) and a group of friends and relatives with him. While in Paris, which was to be the last stop on the tour, Rastus learns that oil was discovered on his land in Wilson County, enabling him to extend the itinerary into Africa, where he tells one of the natives that he "received the coin the day before we left Paris, hence the fresh supply of Mazuma."[141]

Much of the show's humor derives from the fact that Rastus' nickname, Ras, means "Prince" in the Abyssinian language, causing

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the Africans to think that this loquacious tourist is royalty. Compounding this mistake, the Ethiopians take Jasmine's nickname, Jas, for their word meaning "General." This leads to the usual Williams & Walker series of misadventures, culminating in their being accused of stealing a priceless vase. The play ends with Johnson and Jenkins receiving an acquittal from the King of Kings Melenik when they are presented before him in a tribunal.

One of the major themes in the play is a philosophy that has been historically popular with apologists for the African-American race: that the African is not inherently inferior; rather, his psychological indoctrination during American slavery has lead the American Negro into some behavioral patterns that are suggestive of a self-hating, inferior breed. The Africans of Abyssinia are articulate and dignified, drawn in sharp contrast to the rather loutish American black visitors. However, the priggishness of the American Negroes is not so much a comment on black Americans as it is a sly parody of the stereotype of Americans abroad, a breed that would, in later times, be euphemistically known as "The Ugly American."

As in its predecessor, Abyssinia offers several characters who are antitheses to the stereotypical stupid "darky." Prince Bolassa, the nephew of King Tegulet, has been educated in the finest schools of Europe. In a move that is surely the authors' ploy to discount the theory of black intellectual inferiority, another colorful, drawn-out speech is given to the George Walker character; this time he gives a most intelligent, scientific, and accurate discourse on his new hobby, astronomy. Though obviously veering from the plot, the librettists' (Alex Rogers and Jesse Shipp) intentions are clear: a black man can be well-versed on current scientific topics and speak about them knowingly and sans malapropisms.

When Abyssinia opened at the Majestic Theatre on February 20, 1906, Williams & Walker had long since established themselves as internationally-famous performers. Despite their popularity and accomplishments, Alan Dale, the theatre critic for the virulently anti-Negro New York American daily newspaper, was aghast at what he perceived to be the comic pair's attempt to break out of the mold to which black performers were consigned. Dale wrote:

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> It was not until the amiably colored Mr. Bert A. Williams deliberately wrenched himself away from the grandiosely operatic melodrama called Abyssinia . . . and condescended to sing to us in his deliciously 'darky' way that the ice was broken. . . . Abyssinia was a 'coon show' in name only . . . in reality it was a most serious near-grand opera, for which we were totally unprepared. We had sat and listened to the colored company trying to be more legitimate than a whiter [sic] troupe would have dared to be.[142]

Note how Dale sarcastically labeled the play as "grandiosely operatic" and has sardonically reported that Williams had "condescended" to revert to "darky" behavior in the midst of what was otherwise an attempt to be white by the "colored company" in "a most serious near-grand opera."

Reviews of this nature exemplify what white audiences were expecting for black shows and underscores the black performer's dilemma of trying to appease the theoretically more lucrative white audiences, without presenting an endless parade of stock caricatures.

Walker and Williams had frequently made known their desire to create "serious" works which used elements from classical theatre forms to tell the black man's story; perhaps Abyssinia represented their most obvious attempt to incorporate near-operatic music into what was ostensibly another neo-minstrel operetta. Several other critics, as did Dale, commented negatively on the serious aspects of the show, perhaps inhibiting the Williams & Walker Company's creative team from any similar tries at reproducing classics-oriented elements in their subsequent shows. Perhaps the eschewing of the usual "darkyisms" in favor of more serious fare in Abyssinia dampened the enthusiasm of the Broadway theatregoers. The play lasted for a disappointing 33-performance run, then made the mandatory tour of the black theatre circuit. Predictably, Abyssinia did not prove to have the drawing power of Williams & Walker's biggest hit, In Dahomey; surprisingly, Abyssinia was not as

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popular on the road as their 1900-1901 vaudeville farce, The Policy Players.

Though still the most popular black entertainers, by 1907,when Abyssinia's tour ended, the pair now had plenty of competition for the black theatrical market. [Bob] Cole & [John Rosamond] Johnson, a musical comedy team second only to Williams & Walker in popularity had, like the "Royal Comedians," a built-in claque of loyal followers. "The Smart Set Company," founded in late 1902 by the black comedians Ernest Hogan and Billy McClain, became a staple on the black circuit, with a show whose format was not unlike that of the vaudeville-style "Black Patti's Troubadours." Three years later Hogan would bolt from "The Smart Set Company" and form another, calling the new one "Ernest Hogan's Rufus Rastus Company." Although the two Hogan-created companies never enjoyed a Broadway production as did the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson teams, they fared quite well on the black circuit.

After Abyssinia's disappointing Broadway run and road tour,the Williams & Walker Company rebounded strongly with their next effort, Bandanna Land. Opening February 3, 1908, the plot centered around a group of Negroes, headed by Moses Blackstone, played by the show's co-librettist and co-lyricist, Alex Rogers,who have bought a tract of land, selling half to a railroad company, and the other half to a company which intends to build an amusement part for Negroes. Blackstone's group then plots to blackmail the railroad company into buying the half set aside for the black amusement park; of course the railroad faction is to pay an exorbitant price for the privilege of not having to put up with the noise which would result from the activities in the park, and the subsequent drop in the railroad's business due to its proximity to the raucous "darkies." Before the Blackstone group can perpetrate the swindle, the Williams and Walker characters arrive, swindle the would-be swindlers, and, in their roundabout way, resolve the proceedings.[143]

From what little can be gleaned of a plot outline, one can see two dynamics at work in the story-line. With Blackstone's appeal to the railroad company that a Negro amusement park would, in essence, make them neighbors to a group of classic "darky" types

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going through the canon of "coon" activities, he is playing upon their worst fears and restoring the images of minstrelsy. Conversely, the creators of Bandanna Land have, for the first time in a major black show, portrayed blacks in opposition to whites, albeit in the comic context of a planned swindle/blackmail farce. For a black character to even think he could out-smart his white stage counterpart was surely radical at the time, though, it must be pointed out again, the show's comic context was used as a device for the proverbial sugar-coating of the pill.

Bandanna Land played for eleven weeks on Broadway, then a record for black shows.[144] Breaking their usual habit of going straight from Broadway to the road, Williams & Walker's next engagement was in the form of a forty-minute vaudeville act at New York's Colonial Theatre.[145] It was probably during this engagement that the first visible symptoms of the disease that would prove fatal for George Walker became evident. A review in Variety noted that "he talks so low he can not be heard more than five or six rows back."[146]

Perhaps Walker's illness was the cause of the delayed tour of Bandanna Land. The show finally took the road in November 1908, but less than three months into the tour, Walker was forced to leave. G. Henri Tapley, the secretary for the comic duo, cited in a press release that exhaustion and overworked nerves were the causes of Walker's absence.[147] Shortly thereafter Walker announced that he was taking an extended leave from the stage.

Walker, with his legendary ability to seduce young Broadway chorus girls, black and white alike, had been afflicted by that era's chief occupational hazard for womanizers--syphilis. For the remaining two years of his life he divided his time between resting at home and convalescing in sanatoriums. His devoted partner Williams set aside a portion of his, Williams', earnings, which Williams considered to be their earnings, for Walker's medical expenses. Ironically, during the remainder of Bandanna Land's tour, and in Williams' next venture sans Walker, the George Walker role was played by Walker's wife, Aida Overton Walker, who herself

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would die in five years, presumably of the same disease which took her young husband.

Williams' first--and only--black musical comedy venture without Walker was Mr. Lode of Koal, which opened November 1, 1909, at the Majestic Theatre. The plot concerned Mr. Lode (Williams) who falls asleep one afternoon and dreams that he has been shipwrecked on an island peopled by black natives. Leaderless since the island's real king (Big Smoak) had been kidnapped recently, the natives decide to make Mr. Lode their new king. The comedy centers on the efforts of Mr. Lode, the reluctant ruler, to abdicate his throne. The play ends with the real king returning, and Mr. Lode "losing" himself in the audience.[148]

Mr. Lode of Koal lasted only five weeks on Broadway. Perhaps the theatregoing public, in their knowledge of Walker's absence, naturally and reasonably perceived they would be receiving only half of the previous entertainment value. This is not to denigrate Williams' talents, but to underline how well they functioned as a team. Subsequently, the obligatory tour was relatively poorly-received also. Perhaps Williams, if only subconsciously, was letting the absence of his partner affect his work. Unlike the numerous show-business pairings whose onstage rapport is contrasted by offstage animosity, Walker and Williams were the best of friends away from the theatre; perhaps Walker was the best and only true friend of the reserved and aloof Williams. In Nobody, Ann Charters speculates that Walker's illness and impending death acerbated what had been an already noticeable fondness for alcohol on the part of Williams, and that his characteristic aloofness became even more pronounced.[149] In a similar vein, Nathan I. Huggins notes that: "Williams could find no partner to take Walker's place, and it seems he lost a sense of his own purpose in the years following Walker's death."[150]

Six month's after Mr. Lode of Koal's closing on Broadway, Williams was back on the New York stage, this time as the first major black performer featured in an otherwise white musical. Florenz Ziegfield's Follies of 1910 opened on June 20, 1910;

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Williams, as his contract decreed, did his specialty act alone onstage.

Williams was involved with Ziegfield's Follies from 1910 to 1920. Appearing strictly as a solo performer in his first season with the show, he subsequently played in scenes with some of the foremost white comedians of the time: Leon Errol, Eddie Cantor,Will Rogers, and W. C. Fields, who called Bert Williams "the funniest--and saddest--man I've ever met." The typical Williams vignette featured him as a servant, waiter, or porter who outwits the white comic without even appearing to try to do so.

Williams demanded and received clauses in his Ziegfield show contracts which explicitly stated that at no time was he to share the stage with a white female performer, or was he ever to appear in the South.[151]

Williams' chronic melancholy and overindulgence in alcohol--although he never came to the theatre drunk--had become more apparent in his decade with the Ziegfield shows. Surely he missed working with his friends and colleagues from his black musical comedy days. His salary with Ziegfield made him the highest-paid black entertainer of his time by far, earning more than the President of the United States,[152] but Williams undoubtedly missed the autonomy he had enjoyed as the co-head of the Williams & Walker Company. Despite the wealth and the mainstream acceptance it provided for him, Williams must have considered, in an artistic sense, at least, his years with the Ziegfield shows as a major step backward.

George Walker died on January 6, 1911, in a sanatorium in Central Islip, New York. He was thirty-six years old. His funeral arrangements were made by his partner Bert Williams, who accompanied the body to Lawrence, Kansas, for burial.

Walker's wife Aida died three years later in New York City at the age of thirty-four. The cause of her death is unavailable; one can rationally assume, given her age at the time of death, and her husband of nearly twelve years' fatal affliction, that she too was a victim of syphilis.

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While touring in Under the Bamboo Tree, a play that had been written for him, Williams collapsed onstage during a performance in Detroit on February 25, 1922. Immediately returned home to New York, he seemed to be making a recovery; thus, when he died in his sleep at 11:30 P.M. on Saturday, March 4, 1922, the members of his household were surprized. Egbert Austin Williams was forty-seven years old at the time of his death.

Williams, as did several of his black musical comedy colleagues, made no secret of the fact that his work represented a conscious effort to ameliorate the stage image of the American Negro. In a 1909 interview with reporter Veronica Adams,Williams stated his basic artistic goals:

> The primary object of the stage . . . is to sheer [sic] people up, to put a little sunshine into their lives. . . . But linked with this object is the secondary consideration of nailing down a plank of virtue. I am hoping and working for the day when negroes on the stage will take themselves [my emphasis] and be taken more seriously, when the colored performer can be something more than a minstrel man, a song and dance artist, or a slapstick gent. . . . Companies of purposeful players will not only uplift the black man, but they will, through the presentation of proper plays, aid toward a more perfect understanding between the races.[153]

In the same article Williams predicted that the day would come when black playwrights would be produced. One must remember that this was 1909; the only black writers being produced were those who wrote for musicals; at that point no "serious" black dramatist's work had reached the commercial stage.

A newspaper article which appeared a year after Williams' death reported that he and the famed theatre impresario David Belasco had had numerous discussions concerning possible productions featuring Williams as an actor in serious plays, in which Williams would "renew on the stage some day the flattering native triumphs of Ira Aldridge."[154]

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Williams was well aware of his status in the advance guard of the wave of Negro musical comedies that flourished in the first decade of the twentieth century; conversely, he realized that his efforts to be the precursor for a more serious brand of black drama would never reach fruition. To say that he died at the young age of 47 of the proverbial "broken heart" over this failure is not necessarily an indulgence in trite, amateur psychoanalyzing. Though generally recognized as the funniest man in America, and well paid for being so, Williams theorized that he was a high-priced, highly-publicized representation of America's favorite Negro caricature, the comic "coon." Ann Charters summarizes Williams' dilemma:

> It is undeniable that Bert Williams was a frustrated genius, a man caught in a degrading mask which he humanized but from which the public wouldn't allow him to escape.[155]

Lacking the perspective of time, perhaps Williams himself did not realize the progress he and his shows had made. Sandra L. Richards theorizes that Williams and Walker:

> . . . effected cracks in the public mask of the black man, even while operating within the confines of that mask. Yes, they played the dandy and the lazy coon types established in minstrel days, but they portrayed a lot more, which had the effect of enlarging the horizons of acceptable black characterizations. An examination of the plots of their musicals indicated the shrewd way in which they both fed the public image and denied it at the same time. . . . In all their comedies are presented black folks somewhat urbanized and middle-class; some . . . even have fortunes to which they are heir. Gone are the days of the happy life on the plantation with dear ole Massa; instead these Negroes strut, wear modish clothes and impressive jewelry. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> In addition to presenting refined Negroes, the team also began breaking down the barrier against the portrayal of a love interest among blacks.[156]

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Since Walker and Williams were the products of middle-class families, the shows of the Williams & Walker Company reflected the value systems which had been instilled in the two comedians. Let it be noted that a vast number of the creators of the black operettas of that era such as Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, John Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson, Jesse Shipp, and Alex Rogers, were brought up by well-educated black middle-class parents. It would be only natural that such offspring of the black middle-class would strive to phase out the image of the lazy, stupid, shiftless "coon" caricature--after all, they, and most of the Negroes that they had grown up around, were antitheses to that stereotype.

Black historian Nathan I. Huggins gives his opinion on how Williams & Walker manipulated the stereotypes they were given to work with and how adept they were in doing so:

> [Williams and Walker], probably the most talented of black theatrical performers at the turn of the century, tried to push beyond the limits of the minstrel character. They tried to use the stereotype as an instrumental satire. Or, when they billed themselves as 'Two Real Coons,' they were not portraying themselves or any other Negroes they knew. Rather, they were intending to give style and comic dignity to a fiction that white men had created and fostered and with which black men [on and off stage] conspired, being one of the few public selves they were permitted.[157]

In the two African-themed musicals the pair made sly comments upon racial matters by contrasting the rather loud-mouthed, abrasive American Negroes to the proud and dignified black Africans. This, as Nathan Huggins calls it, "Afro-mania" on the part of Walker was inspired by his contact with the real Africans he and Williams had worked with at San Francisco's Midwinter Fair of 1894. "Walker saw the addition of African themes to be a real freedom for the black performer."[158]

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The black African, like his American counterpart, was the object of a set of preconceived notions by white--and black--Americans. In their portrayals of the African blacks, Walker and Williams used basically the same technique in the shrewd manipulation of images as they did with their stereotypes of American Negroes. According to Huggins:

> The characters were still African stereotypes . . . and to a large extent they were white determined, yet Negroes could, through them, deal with a black royalty, a black power, a black elegance, and black beauty . . .[159]

That Williams and Walker would stress such themes as royalty, power, elegance, and beauty is appropriate. Walker and Williams were, in a sense, themselves "royalty." They were the foremost entertainers of their race of their time; black Americans have historically held their most popular figures from the entertainment and athletic fields in a higher esteem than their political and educational leaders. The autonomous manner in which the Williams & Walker Company managed its business matters represented one of the earliest vestiges of black economic power. As extremely cultured, erudite, articulate, and immaculately-dressed men in their offstage lives, Walker and Williams personified black elegance. Their personal attractiveness, that of their wives, and the members of their company was a contradiction to the caricature of the Negro as simian-featured and without beauty.

Williams and Walker were not without their critics amongst the black middle-class and intelligentsia, some of whom found the stock roster of shysters, dandies, oafish dupes, and neo-plantation Negroes as an embarrassment to the race. Sylvester Russell, in his critiques in the Indianapolis Freeman, though a staunch Williams & Walker supporter, was quick to point out images in their shows which offended him. The comedians, ever sensitive to their portrayals of the African-American, surely heeded some of Russell's prescriptive criticism when re-working their shows. Other criticisms of the duo were not as ambivalent. Citing how they had billed

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themselves as "Two Real Coons" in 1896 to capitalize on the new "coon song" rage of that era, an editorial article in the January 2, 1909, issue of the Indianapolis Freeman, entitled "Coon Songs Must Go," states "Williams & Walker are a great deal to blame for being the originators and establishing the name 'coon' upon our race."[160]

Like it or not, the prominence and popularity of Walker and Williams had elevated them to the position of role models. This status was not lost upon Albert Ross, who was affiliated with both the Grand Theatre of Kansas City, Missouri, and Western University in nearby Quindro, Kansas. In a letter to the comedians which appeared in the December 12, 1907, issue of Variety, Ross begins by reminding them how revered they are by black Americans, and the effect their shows have upon them, especially the young. "Your name is magic to our people." Ross expresses the sentiment that he hopes Williams and Walker are striving consciously to present the race in the best possible light, declaring that anything other than that would result in them "succeeding and prospering personally and financially at the expense and injury of your own race and people."

Ross next calls into question the limited array of stock character types which people the Williams & Walker shows:

> Is it not possible that while at the same time you hold the old plantation Negro and the ludicrous darky and the scheming 'grafter' up to entertain people, that you could otherwise have a prominent character representative of Locke, the Negro student at Oxford, England, having won an American Rhodes scholarship by reason of his superior ability, mentally, morally, and physically?

Ross continues by naming real-life outstanding young black scholars, intellectuals, and "great football or baseball stars at Harvard," suggesting that Williams and Walker "make such characters heroes."

For the remainder of the letter Ross re-iterates that Walker and Williams should realize their function as role models for blacks. "Your tremendous influence, your great personality, can throw a

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great weight for or against the Negro race. The 'good time' Negro is the curse of the day."

The tone of Ross' letter throughout was respectful, and, at times, even reverential; he questioned the comedians' choice of character types objectively and without rancor. Williams and Walker's reply, published in the same issue of Variety, mirrored the tone of Ross' missive. Their carefully-worded response gives us a deep insight into the philosophy used not only by them, but by their fellow black musical creators in attempting to ameliorate the image of the black race while working within the narrow confines they were allotted.

Walker and Williams begin by pointing out the historically vapid range of roles the minstrel and neo-minstrel performers were allowed, and how, since whites made up the bulk of the paying audience, the Negro performers had to conform to white images "with all manner of absurd antics which might please the non-sympathetic, biased and prejudiced white man." The comic icons hint that the mere act of black men presenting their own works autonomously, regardless of the images portrayed in those works, was revolutionary in itself:

> . . . we, Williams and Walker, proudly boast of the fact that all of our shows were written, staged and produced by Negroes, and which required some thought and very careful deliberation before attempting to present them before the public.
>
> Our task was no easy one, but rather difficult, because the colored theatre 'goer,' taken collectively, only wants to see when he attends a Negro show such characters as reminds him of 'white folks,' while on the other hand the white patrons only want to see him portray the antebellum 'darkey'; but our aim is to average and simply use characters most familiar today . . .

As to Ross' suggestion that they use over-achieving students from the Ivy League schools and the Rhodes Scholars as characters in their shows, they reply:

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> . . . we must draw from the masses and not from a few; such characters as you mention are worthy examples, but in a public sense they are obscure and surely away from the type, and consequently would prove uninteresting.
>
> We hope that such characters will combine to develop, affording an opportunity to draw them for stage studies; but, at the present time, Oxford, Yale, Harvard, and Cambridge graduates of color are not sufficient in numbers to depend upon for public examples.

Despite whatever qualms some members of the black community may have had about Williams & Walker and their material, the comedians were supported by the most prominent African-American leader of the turn-of-the-century era, Booker T. Washington. In the March 25, 1922, issue of The Literary Digest, Washington decrees that:

> Bert Williams is a tremendous asset to the negro race. The fact of his success aids the negro many times more than he could have helped the race by merely contenting himself to write about racial difficulties.[161]

Although the comedies of Williams & Walker could not be described as meticulously-plotted by later book musical standards, they were one of the earliest American musical comedy creative teams to emulate the operettas of Gilbert & Sullivan in their integration of songs and story-lines. Certain aspects of their style and the structure of their musical plays did not go unnoticed by future comic legends; Nathan Huggins points out that In Dahomey and Abyssinia, with their plots centered around the comic premise of two Americans abroad who careen from one uncomfortable situation to another because of their ignorance of the local customs and peoples "anticipates the 'road' films of Bing Crosby and Bob Hope."[162]

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Unlike Walker, who was so disappointed over the results from his first and only recording session, Williams recorded his songs with relative frequency for that era.

Williams and Walker have been the subject of musicals by two black playwrights. Star of the Morning, subtitled Scenes From the Life of Bert Williams, was written in 1965, with a book by Loften Mitchell, and music and lyrics by Louis Mitchell and Romare Bearden. The play, using both original songs by Louis Mitchell and Bearden, in addition to Williams & Walker standards, centered on Williams' dilemma of experiencing a stifling lack of artistic freedom in spite of being American's most famed black performer. The play, though published, and produced in 1966 at the Karamu Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, never received the major commercial production that the authors had obviously intended for it to have.[163]

In late 1973 an announcement for a planned film based on the life and times of Williams & Walker was made in Variety.[164] It was to be based on Mitchell's play, and was to star Ben Vereen. The film was never made.

On January 5, 1986, a "musical biography" entitled Williams & Walker opened at the Henry Street Settlement on New York's Lower East Side. A ninety-minute, intermissionless show, written by Vincent Smith and directed by Shauneille Perry, it ran for 21 performances at Henry Street, then reopened at the American Place Theatre for 77 showings.

Cole & Johnson

The black musical comedy creative team second only to Williams & Walker in popularity at the turn of the century was that of Cole & Johnson. Actually, "Cole & Johnson" is a bit of a misnomer; there was one "Cole" (Robert), but there were three "Johnsons"--William C. ("Billy"), and the brothers John Rosamond and James Weldon.

Bob Cole was born in Athens, Georgia, in 1868, "the son of devout parents whose father was prominent in politics in the South during Reconstruction."[165] Moving to New York in the early 1890s, he first gained show-business fame by writing skits and most of the

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songs for Black Patti's Troubadours in 1896. Cole broke with this show in 1897, after becoming involved in a countersuit over the rights to the show's music with the promoters Voelckl and Nolan. The judge handling the case ruled in favor of Cole, but the victory was only a moral one; Cole retained the rights to the songs he had written for the show, but received negligible monetary compensation.[166]

Determined to be autonomous, Cole then set out to write and produce his own show, with the assistance of the then thirty-nine-year-old vaudeville and minstrel show veteran Billy Johnson. That show was A Trip to Coontown, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

That 1898 opus proved to be Billy Johnson's major claim to theatrical history fame. For the next three years he would work intermittently with Cole in vaudeville; at that time he was sharing Cole's song and skit-writing talents with the Johnson brothers, John Rosamond and James Williams [Weldon], a pair of Jacksonville, Florida, schoolteachers. Cole had no exclusive written contract with Billy Johnson; the former began working with the songwriting Johnson brothers in 1900; for perhaps a year Cole overlapped between the single Johnson and the sibling Johnsons before breaking completely from Billy in 1901.

After his separation from Cole, Billy Johnson returned to vaudeville as a solo performer, where he was considered as only a second-line talent, and eventually faded into obscurity.

The Jacksonville Johnsons, as did Cole, came from a middle-class background; their father was a very well-paid head-waiter at an exclusive resort hotel, and their mother was a schoolteacher. The boys inherited their histrionic talents from both parents; their father was fond of making extemporaneous quotes from Shakespeare;[167] their mother was a talented singer and superb mimic.

By 1900, the twenty-nine-year-old James and the twenty-seven-year-old John had secure jobs in the Jacksonville public schools system. That same year they wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing" for the Lincoln's Birthday Celebration of 1900.[168] That song

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would later be adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) as the "Negro National Anthem."

Dividing their time between their Florida school jobs and trying to break into the entertainment field, the Johnsons traveled back and forth between Jacksonville and Manhattan. They began working exclusively with Cole in 1901; the trio, billed alternately as "Johnson, Cole, and Johnson," and "Cole and the Johnson Brothers," soon became the first black songwriting team to be signed to a contract by a major Tin Pan Alley publishing concern; in this case it was Joseph W. Stern and Company.[169]

Their songs proved to be quite lucrative; when the Johnsons told their parents of how much money they were making from royalties, they did not believe them. Soon Cole and the Johnson brothers were the second-best paid black performers in show-business. Though never acquiring the popularity on the musical comedy stage and in vaudeville of their friendly rivals Williams & Walker, Cole and the Johnsons did surpass "The Royal Comedians" in of songwriting. Soon after they signed with Joseph Stern, their songs were placed in several Broadway shows, with major contributions in The Sleeping Beauty and the Beast (1901), The Little Duchess (1901), Sally in Our Alley (1902), Nancy Brown (1903), and In Newport (1904).

Cole and the Johnson Brothers became simply Cole & Johnson in 1906 when James left the trio to begin his appointment as United States consul in Venezuela. In the next year Cole & Johnson's operetta The Shoo-Fly Regiment had a two-week run on Broadway, beginning August 6, 1907. The plot centered on the male students of the Lincolnsville Institute, who, upon hearing of a call for soldiers to fight in the Spanish-American War, sign up and somehow manage to have their girlfriends accompany them to Cuba. "Much to their own surprize, the young soldiers win a battle and return home as heroes."[170]

Like Williams & Walker, Cole & Johnson were dedicated to showing a more positive image of blacks on the musical stage. Judging by the review in the New York Sun, they did succeed in

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purging the show of several of the minstrel-like images. The reviewer began by stating that the play "is such a radical departure that scarcely a feature remains of the old time negro show."[171]

> The writer next gave concrete examples as to how Cole and Johnson sidestepped the usual "coon" images: . . . Old Uncle Joe is relegated and in his place is the learned professor; the cotton pickers are troops burning with patriotism and the colored girls are all schoolteachers. No more banjoes, pickaninnies, old mammies or other relics of plantation slavery days.[172]

Ameliorated images of the black man notwithstanding, the Sun critic--and several members of the audience, white and black, if the critic is to be believed--obviously waxed nostalgic for the more minstrel-informed elements.

> A number in the last act, "Who Do You Love?" a song and dance that reminded one of the genuine plantation stage article, was apparently favorably received. It struck the black crowded upper part of the house as happily as the thin white lines in the orchestra. New York seems to like best its negro shows straight and of the old time variety.[173]

Perhaps a paucity of "the old time variety" explains why The Shoo-Fly Regiment had a mere two-week Broadway stay.

In yet another example of white reviewers' fascination with the range of pigmentation amongst black performers, Ray Stannard Baker, a white critic writing a review of the play in the black independent weekly The Indianapolis Freeman, devoted almost half of his review to pondering the question of how much Negro blood makes one an African or a "white American with the drop of black blood."[174] He also noted that the show was written by "two clever mulattoes."[175]

The next Cole & Johnson venture was The Red Moon, which had its Broadway debut on May 3, 1909. In a curt review, the New York Times critic, in the May 4, 1909, edition, dismissed it, saying that it had "a flimsy and uninteresting story." The review in the New York

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World praised the music, but judged that the "dialogue and alleged humor are bad," causing the show to "drag woefully at times."[176] The World critic, however; noted that the black audience members enjoyed the show; the reviewer from the New York Tribune made a similar observation; both suggested that the whites in the audience were not of the same opinion.[177]

The plot outline, involving Minnehaha, a half-black, half-Native American woman who is manipulated by two confidence artists, Slim Brown and Plunk Green, played by Cole and Johnson, reads more like the typical Williams & Walker scenario. Not surprizingly, the book which was scorned by white critics, was praised in the black press. Perhaps the absence of "coon" images angered the white reviewers, many of whom, as did the white audience-members, had an idea as to what a black show should be. However sophomoric the libretto indeed may have been, the point remains that The Red Moon, like The Shoo-Fly Regiment that preceded it, had been consciously divested by its creators of the minstrel images.

The Red Moon not only attempted to upgrade the stage image of the black man, but the red man as well; as a result of the portrayals of the Native Americans in the play, Cole and Johnson were made honorary subchiefs of the Iroquois nation.[178]

Unfortunately, the story of the Cole & Johnson team also paralleled that of Williams & Walker in ways other than their great popularity and talents as actors, vaudeville performers, and songwriters. Like Walker, Bob Cole succumbed as a result of his affliction with paresis. Cole, suffering from the final stages of syphilis, was forced to take what proved to be a permanent leave of absence from the theatre after having a nervous breakdown during a vaudeville performance with Rosamond Johnson at Keith's Fifth Avenue Theatre in Manhattan in October 1910.[179] Exactly seven months to the day after Walker's death, Cole, on an outing in upstate New York with his mother and his wife, drowned; this was widely considered to be an act of suicide on Cole's part, as he was known to be an excellent swimmer.[180] He was forty-three at the time.

From what little can be determined about the content of the plays from the sole extant sources--the plot outlines as reported in

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newspaper reviews--one can see that Cole & Johnson made a conscious purging of all minstrel images. Like Williams & Walker, Cole & Johnson strove to create well-crafted works modeled after the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta structure. In reference to the Cole & Johnson team, James Weldon Johnson, speaking of The Shoo-Fly Regiment and The Red Moon, says of their work:

> Each of these plays was a true operetta with a well-constructed book and tuneful, well-written score. On these two points no Negro musical play has equalled The Red Moon. The Cole and Johnson combination lacked any such fun-makers as were Williams and Walker, but in some respects they excelled their great rivals; their plays, on the whole, were better written.[181]

One must take into account that James Weldon Johnson would have a certain bias toward Cole & Johnson; he was, after all, the brother of the latter, and a former songwriting partner of the pair.

The romantic interest, obligatory in white musical comedies, was taboo in black shows until used by Cole & Johnson in their two Broadway works. Even Williams and Walker, whose wives were the featured performers in their company, avoided any detailed development of a love interest in their operettas.

Bob Cole died at age forty-three, but the Johnson brothers lived long, prosperous, and productive lives. Shortly after Cole's death, Rosamond Johnson took over the position of the director of Oscar Hammerstein's Grand Opera House in Harlem. From 1925 to 1940 he collected, arranged, and published five books of Negro spirituals. As an actor he played featured roles in the original Broadway productions of Porgy and Bess (1935) and Cabin in the Sky (1940), for which he also did the vocal arrangements. He died of cardiac arrest in his sleep at his New York City home on November 11, 1954.

James Weldon Johnson--born as James William, but changing his middle name to Weldon in 1913[182]--published anonymously the now-classic novel The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man in 1912, when it had "mixed reviews which limited sales."[183] Upon its re-

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issuance in 1927 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, its popularity increased dramatically. Black Manhattan (1930), a book by James Weldon Johnson which chronicles the history of blacks in New York City, and pays especial attention to the Harlem Renaissance, and his autobiography, Along This Way (1933), have proven to be invaluable historical documents from the black point of view; the latter work is one of the relatively few references for the turn-of-the-century black musicals and for information on the African Grove Theatre and its company.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Concurrent with the efforts of the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson companies to better the stage image of the black American in the first decade of the twentieth century, the first national black political movements were taking place organizing. Founded in 1905, the Niagara Movement, headed by William Edward Burghardt Dubois, dedicated itself to battling racial injustice. Holding only two annual conferences, the Niagara Movement was forced to disband for myriad reasons, the main one being a paucity of funding from moneyed blacks and whites alike.

In 1909, however, an offshoot of the Niagara Movement was formed, calling itself the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.). More politically moderate than its radical predecessor, the N.A.A.C.P. succeeded where the Niagara Movement had failed--they were able to elicit funding from liberal whites who had shied away from the Niagara Movement's much more militant approach.

The leaders of the infant N.A.A.C.P. were aware of the power of the medium of the live theatre in shaping the images that people would come to have of Negroes. In 1916 a Drama Group was established within this organization to sponsor plays concerning the black man. Their intention was to operate community theatres in black neighborhoods. Their initial production in 1916 was Angelina Ward Grimke's Rachel, "a melodramatic exposition of the traumatic effects of racial persecution . . . on a respectable middle-class

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Washington, D .C., family."[184] This production proved to be quite controversial.[185]

Dubois viewed the theatre as instrumental in dealing with the ills of racism. Organizing the Krigwa Little Theatre Movement in 1926, his plan, like that of the N.A.A.C.P.'s Drama Group, called for "little theatres" to be founded in black communities. His vision was based on four basic principles: that the plays would be "about us," "by us," "for us," and "near us," i.e., "the theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people."[186]

Though by no means overwhelmingly successful, these two factions paved the way for a wave of more "serious" black drama which would proliferate in conjunction with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

The Demise of Black Musicals Created by Blacks

With the exception of Sherman H. Dudley's His Honor, the Barber, which had a brief two-week run on Broadway in May 1911, there was a void of almost eleven-and-one-half years for black shows on Broadway: between Bert Williams' Mr. Lode of Koal and Shuffle Along, which premiered on May 23, 1921. The demise of the commercial black musical can be directly traced to the death of several of its greatest creative forces to a disease, which, like the A.I.D.S. plague of today, decimated the ranks of the artistic community. George Walker, Bob Cole, Ernest Hogan, and Scott Joplin, to name just a few of the better-known talents, succumbed to the then-incurable affliction of syphilis. Not only were Walker, Hogan, and Cole exceptional performers, but they possessed shrewd business acumen. Hence, their deaths had two-fold results: not only was their talent lost, but also their ability, as simple as it may sound, to get things done. Bert Williams, for all his legendary talent, lacked the interest in the business of show-business, which he left to Walker. In The Ghost Walks, Henry T. Sampson writes:

> Undoubtedly the popularity and rapid development of black-produced musical comedies would have continued

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> if not for the untimely deaths of Ernest Hogan . . . George Walker and Bob Cole . . .[187]

Sampson also cites Bert Williams' defection to the Ziegfield Follies as another major factor in the demise of the black operettas.[188]

One should not get the impression that the long lapse between black shows on Broadway signaled the abrupt and total end of the black musical. Musical comedies by "talented and energetic producer/performers such as S. H. Dudley, Salem Tutt Whitney, J. Leubrie Hill and others"[189] continued to be popular on the black theatre circuit of the major Northeastern and North Central cities, and the S. H. Dudley Circuit, which, by 1916, "consisted of over 28 theatres covering the South, East, and Midwest."[190]

Dudley, born shortly after the Civil War in Dallas, Texas, served the usual apprenticeship in vaudeville and minstrel shows, first showing his organizational skills by forming the Dudley Georgia Minstrels in 1897 with the financial backing of "wealthy people of Galveston, Texas."[191] Buying up several theatres in the Washington, D.C., area and using them as a base of operations beginning in the early 1910s, Dudley operated his circuit, which housed vaudeville entertainments, recitals, and musical comedies, until 1929, when the Great Depression forced him to sell his theatres to whites.

While the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson operettas were being developed in New York, a residential musical theatre troupe was making itself known in Chicago. The Pekin Theatre, owned and founded by Robert Motts, boasted a talented ensemble of performers, musicians, and playwrights, collectively known as the Pekin Stock Company.

The company presented the typical fare of the day: vaudeville entertainments and operettas which showed the obvious influence of the Williams & Walker comedies. Motts had a company of creators whose talents approached those of the famed New York black companies, including such future legends as Charles Gilpin, comedian Dooley Wilson, the talented composer Joe Jordan, and the Shuffle Along librettists and stars, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles.

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Mott also had one asset that the fabled black New York companies did not possess: a theatre, an elegant one that Henry Sampson describes thusly:

> Located at 27th and State Streets, then the center of the black business district in Chicago . . . the Pekin with its talented stock company quickly became the "Mecca" of black entertainment. Almost all of the black stars of the period played the Pekin and it became a major black tourist attraction. It was a place to see and at which to be seen.
>
> The Pekin . . . had a seating capacity of about 1000 and was artistically designed and adorned with gold and red embellishments in the interior.[192]

Motts' success with the Pekin Theatre served as an inspiration to other black entrepreneurs; within just a few years most American cities with a sizeable black population had theatres which were owned and operated by blacks.

After Motts' death in 1911, the Pekin Stock Company struggled to continue his legacy, finally closing in 1916, after ten years in operation. In addition to being a source of pride and inspiration to blacks, Motts' ensemble was the training ground for the aforementioned artists and numerous lesser-knowns; Shuffle Along, which in 1921 would break the decade-long drought of black musicals on Broadway, originated in part at the Pekin in the form of Miller & Lyles' libretto for The Mayor of Dixie, with music by Joe Jordan.[193]

The black musical comedy was by no means dead; it was being kept alive by lesser-celebrated talents in relatively obscure black theatres.

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CHAPTER FIVE ENDNOTES

[1]Langston Hughes, Black Magic (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 211.

[2]Ibid., p. 93.

[3]Henry T. Sampson, Blacks in Blackface (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), p. 1.

[4]Robert Toll, Blacking Up, p. 198.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Henry T. Sampson, The Ghost Walks (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1988), p. 4.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., p. 5.

[9]Toll, p. 199.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]The Ghost Walks, p. 5.

[13]Ibid., p. 9.

[14]Toll, p. 199.

[15]Ibid.

[16]The Ghost Walks, p. 4.

[17]Ibid., p. 283.

[18]Ibid.

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[19]Toll, p. 243.

[20]Ibid., p. 238.

[21]Ibid., p. 243.

[22]The Ghost Walks, p. 39.

[23]Blacks in Blackface, p. 4.

[24]Eileen Southern, Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 192.

[25]The Ghost Walks, p. 6.

[26]Ibid., see the reviews on pp. 10-17.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Southern, p. 192.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Toll, p. 210.

[31]Ibid.

[32]The Ghost Walks, p. 44.

[33]Ibid., p. 135.

[34]Southern, p. 132.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., p. 133.

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[38]Toll, p. 236.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Southern, p. 133.

[41]Peter Gammond, Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 22.

[42]Southern, p. 221.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Negro Biography, p. 370.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., p. 371.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid., p. 370.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., p. 192.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Southern, p. 115.

[54]Negro Biography, p. 192.

[55]Black Manhattan, p. 95.

[56]Blacks in Blackface, p. 6.

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[57]The Ghost Walks, p. 71.

[58]Black Manhattan, p. 96.

[59]Blacks in Blackface, p. 61.

[60]Ibid., p. 8.

[61]Ibid., p. 62.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid., p. 8.

[64]Many persons of African descent in Louisiana, in an attempt to identify as fully as possible with the whites, erroneously call[ed] themselves "Creoles," a term which actually describes a person of French and/or Spanish descent born in the New World. In the Producer's Note in the program for Deep River, a short-lived 1926 Broadway musical drama, it is stipulated that: "The Creoles were of mixed Spanish and French descent, a carefully preserved and sometimes regenerated aristocracy, brought bodily with all the cultural and racial characteristics, into the new Latin world organized at the mouth of the Mississippi. They were never possessed of the Negro strain, as is the general misconception."

[65]Blacks in Blackface, p. 7.

[66]Ann Charters, Nobody, p. 44.

[67]Southern, p. 218.

[68]The Ghost Walks, p. 90.

[69]See pp. 146-7.

[70]Ibid., p. 101.

[71]Southern, p. 195.

[72]The Ghost Walks, p. 101.

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[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

[75]p. 103.

[76]Dick Gregory, Nigger (New York: Evergreen Press, Inc.,1966), p. i.

[77]It must also be noted how the term "nigger," traditionally frowned upon by network television censors, eased its way past the censors at N.B.C. in the early 1970s to the point where it was used with relative frequency on the hit show Sanford and Son. Because of the lack of hostility, and the non-deprecatory inflection with which the black characters on the show hurled that term at each other, most black Americans would be prone to mentally remark at the accuracy with which it evoked African-American speech patterns and attitudes; only the most racially-oversensitive would have been offended by the usage of this cleverly-defused would-be invective.

[78]Nathan I. Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 276.

[79]Charters, pp. 49-50.

[80]The Ghost Walks, p. 18.

[81]Engle, This Grotesque Essence, p. xx.

[82]Negro Biography, p. 317.

[83]Dictionary of Races or Peoples (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1911), 61st Congress, 3rd Session, Senate Document Number 662--Reports of the Senate Immigration Commission.

[84]Bordman, American Musical Theatre, p. 158.

[85]Ibid.

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[86]Ibid.

[87]April 16, 1898.

[88]Southern, p. 81.

[89]Will Marion Cook, "Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk," International Library of Negro Life and History: Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre, Lindsay Patterson, ed. (New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 51-55.

[90]Ibid., p. 51.

[91]Negro Biography, p. 200.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Cook, p. 51.

[94] Negro Biography, p. 200.

[95]Cook, pp. 51-2.

[96]Ibid., p. 52.

[97]Ibid., p. 54.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Ibid., p. 55.

[100]July 12, 1898.

[101]p. 15.

[102]Negro Biography, p. 653.

[103]Charters, p. 17.

[104]Ibid.

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[105]Ibid.

[106]Huggins, p. 279.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Charters, p. 101.

[109]Ibid., p. 59.

[110]Negro Biography, p. 625.

[111]Ibid.

[112]Charters, p. 60.

[113]Ibid., p. 25.

[114]Bordman, p. 146.

[115]Black Manhattan, p. 105.

[116]Ibid.

[117]Ibid.

[118]Southern, p. 387.

[119]Charters, p. 53.

[120]Ibid., p. 54.

[121]Bordman, p. 191.

[122]The Ghost Walks, p. 242.

[123]Negro Biography, p. 625.

[124]February 19, 1903.

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[125]Ibid.

[126]Ibid.

[127]Ibid., February 22, 1903.

[128]February 19, 1903.

[129]Ibid.

[130]Ibid.

[131]February 19, 1903.

[132]February 19, 1903.

[133]In Dahomey typescript copy, in the Music Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., p. 2.

[134]Ibid., p. 4.

[135]Ibid., p. II-7.

[136]Ibid., p. 1.

[137]Ibid., p. III-4.

[138]Black Manhattan, p. 106.

[139]Negro Biography, p. 625.

[140]Ibid.

[141]Abyssinia typescript copy, in the Music Division of the Library of Congress. The pages in the libretto were not numbered.

[142]February 22, 1906.

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[143]Bordman, p. 240. The Library of Congress did not have a typescript of Bandanna Land; after a concerted search for the libretto of this operetta, I was unable to locate a copy.

[144]Ibid.

[145]The Ghost Walks, p. 429.

[146]Ibid.

[147]Ibid., p. 455.

[148]Bordman, p. 253.

[149]p. 96.

[150]Huggins, p. 283.

[151]Charters, p. 115.

[152]Michael Feingold, "The Clown Quoted Aristotle," Village Voice, January 14, 1971, p. 71.

[153]Newspaper clipping from the Bert Williams file, at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, New York City, in the Billy Rose Collection. The article is from a Chicago paper of January 17, 1909, but the name of the paper can not be determined.

[154]Lawrence Reamer, "Bert Williams, Negro Comedian," New York Herald, May 13, 1923.

[155]Charters, p. 76.

[156]"Bert Williams: The Man and The Mask," Mime, Mask and Marionette, Spring 1978 issue.

[157]Huggins, p. 258.

[158]Ibid., p. 272.

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[159]Ibid.

[160]The Ghost Walks, p. 447.

[161]Charters, p. 147.

[162]Huggins, p. 281.

[163]Star of the Morning is published in Black Drama Anthology, edited by Woodie King and Ron Milner (New York: New American Library, 1971).

[164]November 28, 1973.

[165]Negro Biography, p. 121.

[166]Black Manhattan, pp. 101-2.

[167]James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), p. 17.

[168]Ibid., p. 37.

[169]Negro Biography, p. 121.

[170]Bordman, p. 232.

[171]August 7, 1907.

[172]Ibid.

[173]Ibid.

[174]The Ghost Walks, p. 407.

[175]Ibid.

[176]May 4, 1909.

[177]May 4, 1909, for both papers.

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[178]Negro Biography, p. 359.

[179]The Ghost Walks, p. 532.

[180]Negro Biography p. 121.

[181]Black Manhattan, p. 109.

[182]Negro Biography, p. 354.

[183]Ibid.

[184]Leslie Catherine Sanders, The Development of Black Theatre in America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 23.

[185]Ibid.

[186]Ibid., p. 21.

[187]p. 357.

[188]Ibid.

[189]Ibid.

[190]Blacks in Blackface, p. 49.

[191]Ibid., p. 41.

[192]The Ghost Walks, p. 280.

[193]Southern, p. 283.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE 1920s and '30s: SHUFFLE ALONG AND THE NEO-MINSTREL ENTERTAINMENTS

The black musical, missing from Broadway for a decade, made a triumphant return, in May 1921, with the production of Shuffle Along. This landmark show paved the way for nearly forty all-Negro musicals that would be produced on Broadway in the next sixteen years.

Because the artistic expression of the black man was then informed by the attitudes of the mainstream audience, the shows which followed Shuffle Along [to be called Shuffle] can be placed into four clear-cut categories. The first grouping consists of the shows which relegated themselves to the lowest common denominator, artistically speaking. A second set of shows which followed in Shuffle's wake made some attempt at aesthetic innovation and toward upgrading the images of African-Americans. A third grouping of shows straddled the line between the first two categories: the works of Donald Heywood, which attempted to communicate "dignified" story-lines by means of the traditionally-accepted modes of neo-minstrel musical comedy expression. A fourth category involves the subsequent shows of the two creative teams responsible for Shuffle--Sissle & Blake and Miller & Lyles.

The high-budget, white-crafted, quasi-operatic "black" shows of the 1920s and '30s, which had greater pretensions toward art, as opposed to being mere entertainment vehicles, will be examined in the next chapter.

Although the all-Negro musical would have surely made its return to Broadway whether or not there had been a Shuffle, the fact remains that the show's immense popularity uncovered--or better yet--re-discovered a substantial audience for Negro musicals.

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Shuffle Along

There was a gap of exactly ten years and fifteen days between the openings of His Honor, the Barber in 1911, and the next black musical comedy on Broadway, the legendary Shuffle Along. This is by no means to suggest that the black musical languished in a moribund state for that decade. As cited earlier, that format remained popular on the black theatrical circuit, despite a lack of attention from the mainstream media. At the same time, the black musical retained its popularity in New York City in productions at the Lincoln and Lafayette Theatres, both in Harlem, where whites still outnumbered blacks. The black musical had not lost favor with the theatregoing public; it was merely being ignored by white patrons and the press.

White producers and investors had come to the conclusion that black shows were no longer profitable, rendering it virtually impossible for a Negro company to raise the funds necessary for presenting its work in a mainstream theatre. Hence, black musical comedy creators were forced to operate in the afore-mentioned arenas, or to participate on the "white" vaudeville circuit--which usually limited black talent to one act per show.

The return of the black musical to Broadway was the result of a series of chance meetings between two vaudeville teams. Four young men, a cast of unknown and unpaid performers, and their collective determination and ability to operate on virtually no budget proved to be the elements which made up Shuffle's now famous success story.

The first of the chance meetings resulted in the formation of the songwriting team of Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. James Hubert "Eubie" Blake was born February 7, 1883, in Baltimore, the son of former slaves and the only one of their eleven children to survive to adulthood.[1] He began his show-business career at the age of fifteen by playing the piano in bars and brothels in his hometown, soon graduating to performing in more respectable venues, such as the better supper clubs and resort hotels in the area.[2] As did many of the talented black musicians of his era, Blake also performed in vaudeville whenever he could find work.

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Blake met Noble Sissle on May 15, 1915, when both were playing with Joe Porter's Serenaders, a pickup band which had been formed to be part of the summer entertainment at Baltimore's River View Park;[3] Blake was the pianist and Sissle was a singer. Blake was a composer in search of a lyricist; Sissle was a lyricist in need of a talented composer, and the two immediately joined forces.

Noble Sissle was born in Indianapolis on July 10, 1889, the son of well-to-do parents; his father was an educator and a minister; his mother was also an educator. Before meeting Blake, he had co-authored several tunes with various partners that had been published, but had not yet attained any marked prominence in the song-writing field.

That changed shortly after his partnership with Blake began. Their first collaboration resulted in the song "It's All Your Fault" which was made into a hit by Sophie Tucker.

The next five years saw Blake and Sissle leading the nomadic life of vaudeville performers, selling an occasional song, but, by and large, having most of their songs being rejected by music publishers and singers alike. Their partnership was suspended for a year during World War I when Sissle enlisted in the Army. He co-organized the 369th U. S. Infantry Jazz Band with the famed black composer and bandleader, James Reese Europe. The band provided entertainment for the American troupes in Europe, and, after the Armistice, toured the United States, where they were a source of great pride for African-Americans.[4]

After Europe was murdered by a member of the band in Boston in 1919, Sissle re-joined Blake. Shortly thereafter, while appearing in a benefit performance for the N.A.A.C.P. at the newly-opened Paul Lawrence Dunbar Theatre in Philadelphia in February 1920, they met the vaudeville and playwriting team of Miller & Lyles. Each duo admired the other's style, and promised to keep each other in mind if they had any ideas on a project in which their talents could be pooled.[5]

Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles met in 1903 while they were students at Fisk University. Miller, who was born in Nashville on April 4, 1887, was just sixteen when he met Lyles, a native of

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Jackson, Mississippi and four years Miller's senior. Two years later they joined Robert Motts' Pekin Theatre Stock Company and wrote the libretto for the first musical produced there, The Man From Bam, with music by Joe Jordan.[6] In 1907, they wrote Oyster Man for Ernest Hogan, who starred in it until his death in 1909.[7]

From 1910 to 1920, Miller & Lyles toured on the B. F. Keith vaudeville circuit, all the while trying to find producers for the several Williams & Walker-type operetta librettos which they had written. While playing an engagement in New York, Miller &Lyles happened upon Sissle & Blake on a Manhattan street, just a few months after their initial meeting in Philadelphia. Once again they discussed the possibility of collaborating, offering potential story-lines, the most concrete of which was Miller's plan for producing a very low-budget Broadway show centered on the antics of several small-town politicians who were running for office; the show would be called The Mayor of Jimtown.[8] An earlier version of the show had been presented by the Pekin Theatre Stock Company under the title of The Mayor of Dixie, with music by Joe Jordan. The two teams made a verbal agreement right there on the sidewalk to pursue the project.

The first step was to gather a large cast of young, talented, hungry, and unknown performers and convince them that, although no one would be paid anytime soon, they had a show which, if everyone remained faithful to its potential, would be the springboard to show-business fame and fortune that they were all seeking. In its first few weeks of rehearsal the show had literally no budget; what little money that was put into it came from the weekly vaudeville salaries of the four creators.

The sets were minimal; the costumes were cast-offs from other shows. Sissle & Blake had written only three new songs for the show, culling chiefly from the catalogue of songs they had written and had rejected by Tin Pan Alley publishers over the past six years. Ironically, of the three songs written for the show, two of them, "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way" became standards, and the third, "Bandana Days," proved to be one of the show's more popular tunes.

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After a short rehearsal period, a two-week trial run was scheduled at the Howard Theatre in the nation's capital. When the company assembled at Pennsylvania Station for the trip to Washington, D.C., it was discovered that there was not enough money for train fare for everyone. Industrious players that they were, some members of the troupe reverted briefly to their street-performer days, turning the busy terminal into an impromptu theatre just long enough to raise the necessary funds.[9]

The audiences at the Howard Theatre loved the show; the company moved on to another fortnight of popularity at the Dunbar Theatre in Philadelphia. Because they were catering to black working-class audiences, the ticket prices were kept low; after the two engagements it was learned that the tickets were too underpriced; the extremely low cost had not effectively neutralized the show's overhead, and the ensemble was forced to play a series of one-night stands in New Jersey and Pennsylvania in the hopes of having some sort of budget for the Broadway opening. Evidently the ploy worked to some degree--the four creators "brought the company intact into New York--but on a shoe-string."[10]

The Broadway opening of Shuffle Along was perhaps as inauspicious as that of any of the myriad of shows which went on to establish their places in the history of the theatre. The meager budget precluded any extensive advertising; the production was housed in the 63rd Street Theatre, shabby by Broadway standards, and was actually "a dilapidated lecture hall, without a proper stage or orchestra pit."[11]

Shortly before its Manhattan debut, the show did manage to find four additional backers: Harry Cort, who owned the 63rd Street Theatre, John Scholl, Al Mayer, and "the show's surprise 'angel,' the mysterious Gasthoffer."[12] They contributed just enough money to the company for it to barely stay solvent long enough to open on May 23, 1921. In a classic example of the way the white media either downplayed or ignored the contributions and efforts of blacks in matters in which intelligence and business acumen are at work, Burns Mantle, in his review of the show, gave full credit to "John Cort's son Harry," for organizing the"new colored musical comedy

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company,"[13] making no mention of the months of preparation and sacrifice which Blake, Lyles, Miller, and Sissle had to endure before the four white contributors made their last-minute appearance.

The New York City press, perhaps prejudging the show to be on the order of an undisciplined, underbudgeted, latter-day minstrel offering, gave the production, for the most part, short shrift. Those papers which did deign to send a reviewer to the opening dispatched their second- or third-line critics;[14] the remainder of the reviewers did not come until they were lured by the enthusiastic word-of-mouth from those who had seen the show in its first week. These word-of-mouth rave reviews provided the show with the publicity and advertising that its paltry budget had been unable to buy.

The critics, as they would with the myriad of black musicals which would follow in Shuffle's wake in the next sixteen years, by and large praised the music, singing, and dancing, but dismissed the show's book. The critic from the Morning Telegram, one of the few reviewers from a major daily paper who were present on opening night, summed up the consensus on the libretto by writing that "the least said of the book . . . the better."[15] He added that "a certain lack of staging that may be traced to amateurish directing" served to muddle the proceedings.

The plot borrowed from the typical Williams & Walker libretto. Steve Jenkins (Miller) and Sam Peck (Lyles) are, in addition to being uneasy partners in a grocery store, rival candidates for the office of mayor in Jimtown, a small, all-Negro Southern town. This provided an excuse for a rehash of their better vaudeville routines--including a comic boxing match between the rotund, five-foot-tall Lyles, and Miller, a lanky six-footer--and the insertion of several specialty routines which had nothing to do with the show's alleged plot. As in several of the "book" musicals which would imitate Shuffle, the libretto was merely an afterthought which made a weak attempt to string the usually more professionally-crafted songs together.

Reading the libretto, one finds that the songs and the book are integrated ineptly.[16] Only a few of the love songs are set up with dialogue, and then by only a few self-conscious seeming lines. In

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comparison to the speeches in the Williams & Walker librettos, the dialogue of Miller & Lyles seems stilted; the ability to accurately reproduce African-American speech patterns, the hallmark of so many black authors, was not high on the list of the talents of Miller & Lyles. The degrading Negro dialect, noticeably absent from the Williams & Walker comedies, is present in Shuffle, but, curiously, spoken only by the Miller and Lyles characters, who, as they did in all of their shows, had chosen to blacken up.

Furthermore, the libretto is uneven. Theoretically, a well-wrought book will feature a balance between the dialogue and the songs; musical numbers are presented at rather predictable, even mathematical, intervals. Shuffle Along contains pages upon pages of dialogue, a lot of which has nothing remotely to do with the plot; these digressions are obviously the insertion of old Miller &Lyles vaudeville routines which had proven to be popular in the past. Correspondingly, as if to make up for the fact that there had been no songs for an inordinate amount of time (for a musical comedy), the Sissle & Blake tunes are presented in clusters of sometimes three and four consecutive songs, with no visible connection between the numbers. A typical example of a lead-in for a song occurs on pages 60 and 61 of the libretto: a singing group, the Four Harmony Kings, enters the office of Mayor Steve Jenkins to ask for an entertainment permit, then begin to sing a series of selections as proof of their talent.

The plot culminates when the detective Jack Penrose, who has been hired by both Peck and Jenkins to spy on the other, informs Mrs. Peck that "Harry Walton shall be at the mayor's office tomorrow morning."[17] It in never made clear at to why the newly-elected Jenkins will be deposed as mayor, if at all. However, the audience is not supposed to ponder this oversight for long; shortly thereafter follows the grand finale of three new tunes, and a medley of those presented earlier in the show.

Shuffle's nominal director was Walter Brooks, a veteran, white Broadway director, but, according to Blake, the man who really staged the show was Larry Deas, who played Detective Jack Penrose in the initial production.[18] Songwriters Sissle and Blake also played

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minor roles; the arranging and conducting of the music was handled by Will Vodery, who had performed the same duties with the Williams & Walker Company.

Owing largely to an enthusiastic word-of-mouth, and partly to the critics' reviews which ranged from mixed to guardedly enthusiastic, Shuffle soon became one of the most popular shows on Broadway. Within a week the traffic had become so thick on 63rd Street that the city was forced to make it a one-way thoroughfare.[19] By popular demand from New York's smart social set, midnight performances on Wednesdays were added; this became the showing which they had to see, and at which to be seen.[20]

Shuffle played 504 performances on Broadway, by far a record for black shows, then it went on a national tour, appearing in the better "white" theatres on the road circuit. It eventually grossed close to $8 million, making its four creators, who, along with the four last-minute white benefactors, owned half the show, quite wealthy. At one time four different road companies were in operation; after the show had, for all intents and purposes, run its course as a full-length musical, it was re-presented on the vaudeville circuit in the form of an 80-minute "tab" show called Shuffle Along, Junior.[21]

Shuffle is a landmark in the history of the black musical theatre not because of any aesthetic, stylistic, or artistic innovations, but because its success paved the way for the reintroduction of the black musical to Broadway, because it helped to popularize jazz, because it spawned the show-business careers of a whole generation of talented black performers, some of whom would attain international acclaim, and, although given little or no credit for having done so, played a huge part in ushering in the Harlem Renaissance, when the reverse has erroneously been thought to be true.

Shuffle disproved all the theories of white Broadway producers who, for a decade, had the misconception that black shows were no longer profitable. The show's success made feasible the production of dozens of shows within the next sixteen years, each of which owed a huge debt to Shuffle Along. This reopened the doors of

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the commercial theatre to black performers and writers, giving them much-needed employment, even if it was in shows which, as we shall see soon, represented little, and in some cases, no advancement artistically from the minstrel entertainments of a half century before. In a positive vein, Shuffle reintroduced the black performer to Broadway; in a negative sense, it established a standard of mediocrity that the patrons of the black shows, easily pacified by energetic dancing, catchy tunes, and sophomoric humor by blackfaced comics, seldom demanded an improvement upon.

Jazz, a mode of music which, like ragtime, its stylistic sibling, was initially labeled as a disreputable art-form due to its conception, birth, and developmental years in late-nineteenth-century New Orleans brothels, houses of assignation, gambling dens, and other gathering places for the denizens of that libertine metropolis' underworld. The word "jazz" itself possessed a strong sexual connotation; in turn-of-the-century New Orleans slang "to jazz" meant to perform coitus.[22] As the Broadway shows of the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson companies helped to make "ragged time" music accessible to and acceptable by mainstream audiences, Shuffle's popularity helped to eradicate the negative stigma attached to jazz, and ultimately spread that mode of music throughout the United States and Europe by means of the show's touring companies.

Shuffle launched the careers of numerous soon-to-be Broadway stars, and three theatrical legends; Florence Mills, who would become the most popular black female performer in America until her untimely death from a burst appendix six years later; fifteen-year-old Josephine Baker, who would become an international star after moving to Paris; and, a member of the show's men's chorus, a Columbia University law student and former Rutgers College football All-American, Paul Robeson.

The monumental success of Shuffle helped to usher in, if only indirectly, the Harlem Renaissance. The show brought the talents of the black stage performer and writer back into the public's eye; between Shuffle's debut in 1921, and 1926, the year which in generally recognized as the one in which the Harlem Renaissance

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reached its full bloom,[23] eleven black musicals had appeared on Broadway. The re-interest by whites in the Negro on the commercial stage as shown by the rebirth of the black musical can be seen as a precursor to the fascination of downtown whites to the art, poetry, photography, novels, and music of uptown African-Americans. The whites who flocked to see Shuffle, Runnin' Wild (1923), Chocolate Dandies (1924), and lesser-celebrated black offerings whetted their appetites for black entertainment and culture on the Broadway stage before satiating themselves on the poetry and fiction of Hughes, McKay, Hurston, Cullen, and others. The taste for black jazz which white patrons indulged in Harlem's famous nightclubs and cabarets was nurtured in part by the Sissle & Blake tunes of Shuffle and Chocolate Dandies.

The four creators of the show obviously strove to make Shuffle a Broadway success. Although they presented the show in two-week trial runs at the black Howard and Dunbar theatres, the creators had no further plans for the play to be done in Negro houses once it became a commercial hit; their targeted audience was white Broadway. Show-business veterans that they were, they surely had a notion of what white audiences would find appealing in a black show--despite the fact that there had been no truly successful all-Negro show on Broadway since the Williams & Walker Company scored with Bandanna Land in 1909.

That whites would patronize a show with energetic and expert singing and dancing to the rhythms of a tuneful score was a given. Sissle and Blake, with their twenty-two celebrated songs, provided this. Less important, though having some bearing on the show's ultimate acceptance, would be the libretto.

The book by Miller and Lyles is thin, intellectually shallow, and serves chiefly to allow them to re-cycle their vaudeville routines, and--at times--to connect the songs vaguely. The combination of strong songs and inane plot permitted the insertion of certain specialty acts, making the show, in effect, a collage of popular songs, vaudeville-like skits and specialty numbers; in short, a musical revue with but a wisp of a book.

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Well aware of the decade-long dearth of black Broadway musicals, the creators obviously infused the show with the elements which had historically pleased white audiences. One needs only to look at a list of the characters, and the show's title, to know that the writers would be making no attempt to "uplift the race" with this vehicle.

Note the verb "shuffle" in the title. The authors knew that the last image of African-Americans that white Americans wanted to encounter was that of proud, self-determined, black people, whose physical movements would exhibit those qualities. The antithesis of this would be the weak, simpering, shuffling latter-day minstrel "coon." Whites would not go into a theatre to see a show with the word "shuffle" in the title and feel threatened; in truth, the opposite effect was the desired one. The name alone told the audience of the play's heavily neo-minstrel spirit and structure.

Once seated and glancing at the program, the theatregoer in search of the familiar "darkies" would immediately be consoled by seeing such minstrel-informed character's names as Uncle Tom, Uncle Ned, Old Black Joe, The Porter, and Rufus--which ranks with Sambo and Rastus as the most popular "coon" first names.[24]

In recapturing the white Broadway audience for the all-Negro musical, Shuffle re-established the concept that the only elements necessary for success were a tuneful score and well-executed dancing. Armed with this knowledge, the majority of the creators of Shuffle's subsequent imitators elected to provide their audiences with that popularly-proven lowest common denominator for black shows. For the most part, there was little innovation beyond the the songs and dances.

The 1920s/30s Neo-Minstrel Entertainments

A wave of black song-and-dance shows followed Shuffle Along, focusing, like the original, on the musical aspects. This was done at the expense of scripting more substantive librettos, deleting the hackneyed comedy routines, or attempting to present more positive stage images of African-Americans. There were, to be sure, a few shows which strove for more than just the established lowest com-

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mon denominator for all-Negro musicals, and they will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Those Shuffle Along imitators which provided their audiences with only the most basic formulaic elements of a black show have been designated in this thesis, as 1920s/'30s Neo-Minstrel entertainments.

These latter-day minstrel offerings featured little or nothing in the form of a story. The revues, by definition, had no plot, merely being a pastiche of songs, dances, comedy skits, and specialty acts. The "book" shows of the Neo-Minstrel tradition had librettos which were weak, trite, and obvious afterthoughts to the play's musical aspects.

The critical reviews of the shows that have been categorized as 1920s/'30s Neo-Minstrel entertainments are practically interchangeable, with the reviewers frequently citing the merits of the score and the dancing, while chiding a weak book [if any] and amateurish production values, obviously owing to a paltry budget. Given the luxury of mediocrity, the producers of these shows sought merely to entertain whites by playing upon the time-honored myth of the Negro as a natural-born song-and-dance performer; hence, the Neo-Minstrel shows were literally just that--slightly updated minstrel shows fifty years after the fact. It is not surprizing that several critics in this era referred repeatedly to the performers as "Harlem Minstrels." Regardless of the most positive aspect of this trend--that black performers and writers were working again--there existed a grave imbalance between the number of shows which fall into the category of Neo-Minstrel entertainments, and the few black shows which represented an attempt at something other than an updated "darky" collage.

Once again, it must be stated that the all-Negro musicals were no more or less frivolous and basically mindless than the white Broadway shows of the period. The main difference was that the European-Americans had numerous "serious" theatrical forms in which to express themselves; at that time the Negro producer and/or performer, though he was now becoming the subject of some "serious" plays and novels, still considered the Broadway musical as

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the arena in which he could attract the largest number of mainstream patrons.

The 1920s and '30s saw nearly forty black musicals staged on Broadway. Had it not been for Shuffle Along's success, perhaps half of those shows would have been consigned to the black theatrical touring circuit and/or Harlem's Lafayette or Lincoln theatres. The first of the shows to follow Shuffle was Put and Take, which opened exactly three months after the legendary show's debut. The book was by Flournoy Miller's brother, Irvin C. Miller; the songs were by Perry Bradford, Tim Brymm, and Spencer Williams, who, three decades later, would gain fame as Andy of early television's Amos 'n' Andy.

The reviewer's comment that "there is a flavor of minstrelsy through it, though it contains no out-and-out minstrelsy,"[25] leads one to deduce that the show's format, which contained numerous specialty numbers,[26] obviously stuck to a minstrel/vaudeville structure, minus the denigrating images of blacks. The New York Times, Evening Post, and Globe praised the show for its energy, singing, and dancing, the three areas in which black shows were required to be proficient. Put and Take had but a brief run in the late summer of 1921.

Strut Miss Lizzie and Plantation Revue opened in June and July, respectively, in 1922. Both shows, being unabashed Shuffle Along imitators, added nothing new to the musical theatre in terms of stylistic innovation. One aspect of Plantation Revue, however, is noteworthy. It was the first of the all-Negro musicals to be produced and written by whites, a practice which would become widespread after the success that Lew Leslie, Plantation Revue's producer, would have six years later with Blackbirds of 1928. Plantation Revue could also boast of having Florence Mills in a starring role. Strut Miss Lizzie lasted four weeks; Plantation Revue played for 44 performances.

Next came Liza, with Irvin C. Miller writing the book, and most of the songs composed by Maceo Pinkard. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this show were the comments it evoked from the critics. Writing what would be repeated by other reviewers over

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the next fifteen years, the New York Times critic opined: "It seems too bad that these negro revues have to be so unbelievingly crude and rough hewn."[27] Another writer, expressing the popularly-held view that Negroes were a quasi-exotic people who existed in the realm of some mystical, racially-idiosyncratic sense of time, wrote:

> There is some unconscious rhythm to which the whole performance keeps time. This is the beat, the beat of the jungle the pulse of darkest Africa--whatever you want to call it.[28]

In his review of Liza, Alexander Woollcott made a statement which could be construed as a vague allusion to the contributions of Williams & Walker, whose variations on the Gilbert & Sullivan-style British operettas have not been given their due in the evolution of the structure of the American musical comedy. Perhaps he is referring to the minstrel show's effect on the musical comedy format; perhaps he is giving minstrelsy and Williams & Walker roundabout credit for some sort of symbiotic relationship between the American musical and the black performer when he says:

> You catch yourself reproaching the colored brethren for imitating the patterns of the musical comedies of the Great White Way, but stop with an uneasy doubt as to who started it first.[29]

Taking place in Shuffle Along's fictional setting of Jimtown, Miller's plot centers around the typical roster of confidence artists and the intended victims who bilk the would-be bilkers. Liza enjoyed a respectable twenty-week run on Broadway.

Dixie to Broadway, which opened October 29, 1924, was, like Plantation Revue, a Lew Leslie production that starred Florence Mills, and, for the most part, was written by whites. The show gained a bit of notoriety for the accurate impressions by the black cast members of numerous white performers of the day. As did Liza, Dixie to Broadway inspired some interesting comments from the critics which went beyond the normal, "good singing, good dancing,

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weak book" quotes. The Times reviewer made an observation that is valid not only for Dixie to Broadway, but for practically all the black shows of the era. He noted that: "It is a tradition that in these shows the chorus girls must be light of hue and the comedians particularly black."[30] One must also keep in mind that as late as 1942, the comedians in black musicals were still "blacking up"; for those comics for whom nature did not provide the pigmentation that American theatregoers associated with the buffoon, the burnt cork was still the order of the day.

Heywood Broun also commented on the coloring of Dixie to Broadway's cast:

> All the members of the company are, according to the American [my emphasis] definition, Negroes, although there are only a few dark skins among the men and none at all among the women.[31]

One needs only to examine the production photographs of the shows of this era to verify this. Unlike the mainstream musicals, the all-Negro shows, owing to the avoidance of the love interest element, eschewed the handsome, romantic leading man in favor of the more traditional blackened-face buffoons. The black female, conversely, was allowed to be seen as a sexual object, but not as the black musical's counterpart to the romantic leading lady of white musicals; rather, as a sometimes scantily-clad chorus girl or "showgirl" who did little more than smile and dance. This hiring only of mulattos as chorus girls was in keeping with the tradition which began on the plantations which dictated that the whiter the Negro woman, the greater the appeal she ostensibly had for white and black men alike. The Caucasian-looking mulatto girls were surely hired in part because of their appeal to white male theatregoers; of course, there was no corresponding tradition of hiring handsome, sexy black male performers whose purpose would be to attract white female patrons.

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Heywood Broun also made a bizarre statement which expressed his fear that perhaps the Negro was not an inferior species, after all:

> There is the passionate fidelity to the eternal verities of tempo not in the inheritance of Nordics. When I see a Negro child two or three years old come out and dance a little better than anybody at the New Amsterdam or the Winter Garden [theatres] grow fearful that there must be certain reservations in the theory of white supremacy.[32]

In present day America there still exists a de facto sentiment in some circles concerning the innate inferiority of peoples of African descent; Broun's comment serves as a reminder that in 1924 this prospect was still a given, which can only highlight the grave handicap that blacks were under as not only people, but as performers as well.

Lucky Sambo (1925) complied with the blacks-as-inferior theory. It, as the title suggests, is obviously a "coon" show, taking place "in front of Aunt Jemima's Cabin,"[33] opening with the chorus falling into "violent convulsions of the Charleston."[34] The show was a catalogue of stereotypes, centered around the meanderings of the comedian Joe Byrd, whose Rufus Johnson character was a collage of Bert Williams depictions.[35] The title role was played by Tim Moore, who later starred as The Kingfish on television's Amos 'n' Andy.

Bottomland, opening June 27, 1927, was the brainchild of Clarence Williams, "a colored pianist who broadcasts."[36] Williams wrote the show's book, lyrics, and music, along with producing, directing, and starring in it. This work represents yet another example of a black writer culling from the most denigrating of stereotypes to appease white patrons. Standard "coon" names such as Rastus, Shiftless Sam, and Mammy Chloe are tacked onto the usual caricatures; the play's title, Bottomland, is a euphemism for "The Bottoms," or "The Black Bottom," names traditionally used to refer to the Negro slum sector of a town. By means of the play's

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title, Williams was assuring his audience that this all-Negro show would be peopled by the usual shiftless, slum-dwelling "darkies."

Bottomland received mostly negative reviews from the critics, who were obviously tiring of ineptly-crafted black shows which strove to do little more than pander to white audiences' high opinion of the Negro as a song-and-dance performer and low opinion of him as a human being. It closed after three weeks.

The two previous shows of Lew Leslie, Plantation Revue and Dixie to Broadway, which featured black talent on the stage, but white creators behind the scenes, had met with no marked success, lasting 33 and 77 performances, respectively. Leslie's firm belief that a well-wrought, slickly-produced Broadway show by whites, but with an all-Negro cast, could surpass even the vaunted Shuffle Along was realized with the popularity of his Blackbirds of 1928. Leslie directed the show; the songs were supplied by the team of Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, who were novices on Broadway in name, but not in talent.

Blackbirds of 1928 opened May 9, 1928, to generally good reviews and excellent business. The score, the first of several highly popular and successful McHugh-Fields Broadway collaborations, produced such standards as "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," and "Diga, Diga, Do," a song later popularized by Lena Horne in the 1943 motion picture Stormy Weather. The cast was exceptional, featuring such artists as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Aida Ward, Adelaide Hall, Tim Moore, "Mantan" Moreland, and the Cecil Mack Blackbird Choir.

The combination of the excellent music, the huge (in comparison to other black shows of the era) budget, which allowed Leslie to hire the supremely-talented cast, and the excellent production values, which the typical, parsimoniously-budgeted black shows could not match, resulted in Blackbirds of 1928 enjoying a run which ended at 518 performances, breaking Shuffle Along's record. However, despite the show's vaunted score and sterling packaging, its contents mirrored those of the less glossily-wrapped all-Negro revues.

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Songs such as "The Call of the South," "Shuffle Your Feet, "and "The Aunt Jemima Stroll," serve as reminders of the Negro's servile plantation role. Sketches with such titles as "Bear Cat Jones' Last Fight" and "Three Bad Men From Harlem," which takes place in "a gin mill somewhere in Harlem,"[37] perpetrate the image of Negroes as slum dwellers preoccupied with such non-cerebral pursuits as drinking, womanizing, and gambling.

Not all the critics were dazzled by the show's veneer. Alexander Woollcott judged it to be "just a third-rate Broadway musical, tinted brown."[38] Obviously viewing McHugh and Fields as dilettantes, he wrote that "the whole show teems with Congo memories and the plantation melodies of Tin Pan Alley." Percy Hammond dubbed it "an average Harlem opera,"[39] while Gilbert Gabriel, likewise not letting the show's style blind him to its substance, noted that "another Negro revue . . . is just another Negro revue,"[40] calling it "a Harlem Local rather than a Broadway Express."

The critics of 1929's Messin' Around were universal in their citing of the show's commonplace nature in relation to other black musicals. One aspect of the show found its way into practically every review. Featured was a rather unique variation on the Miller-Lyles boxing scene from Shuffle Along which was by now a stock segment of the all-Negro shows; this time, however, the stage fisticuffs were in the form of "a four-round prize fight between two husky female boxers, who, the program assures us, are the only licensed women prizefighters in America."[41] The pretty, shapely distaff pugilists, Emma Maitland and Aurelia Wheedlin, also "fought" in Change Your Luck and Fast and Furious.

The title, Messin' Around, can be construed as a wink-of-the-eye of sorts, letting the audience know that they can read that as "[Coon]"-in' Around.

Pansy, opening just two weeks after Messin' Around, was greeted by reviews in which the critics used adjectives in the superlative degree--the superlative degree of bad, that is. Quotes such as "the colored folks were at their worst last night,"[42] . . . "a shiftless music show . . . by a troupe of unskilled Harlem amateurs,"[43] "the worst show of all time,"[44] and "bad beyond

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belief"[45] were the order of the day. The critics agreed that the show's sole redeeming feature was the appearance of the legendary "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith, who, in a move perhaps calculated to keep her followers in the theatre past the intermission, did not make her entrance until well into the second act.

Hot Chocolates, a revue which had been a successful cabaret show at Connie's Inn in Harlem, was revised for the move downtown to Broadway. More professionally-packaged and slickly-produced than the typical Neo-Minstrel shows, most of Hot Chocolates' music was by Thomas "Fats" Waller, and a majority of the lyrics were written by Andy Razaf, who was born Andreamenontania Paul Razafinkeriefo in Madagascar, and who claimed to be "an authentic tribal prince."[46]

As with Blackbirds of 1928, several of the songs in Hot Chocolates would become standards; some of the Waller-Razaf compositions would reappear on Broadway a half century later in the 1978 revue Ain't Misbehavin', which was the name of Hot Chocolates' most popular tune. In the 1929 show, "Ain't Misbehavin' " was essayed by two energetic show business novices who would become international legends: Cabell "Cab" Calloway, who, in a duet with Margaret Sims, introduced the song on Broadway, and Louis Armstrong, whose trumpet solos developed into one of the show's highlights, and who, as a vocalist, recorded a cover of the song in his unique, gravelly voice.

Hot Chocolates ran for a formidable six months past its June 20, 1929, debut, a stay all the more impressive when one remembers that the last two months of the show coincided with the start of the nation's worst Depression ever. As far as the perpetration of stage images of African-Americans went, the show took a neutral stand; it obviously fulfilled the white audience's expectations for a black musical comedy revue without resorting to the roster of "Rufus," "Rastus," "Sambo," "Jemima," and a myriad of Aunt and Uncle caricatures which the pandering black shows were guilty of using.

Even the name Hot Chocolates is neutral. The "Chocolates" part, of course, serves notice that this is a black show; the "Hot" part is ostensibly a code word for the intensity with which the

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singing, dancing, and music are to be performed, but in a covert sense it alludes to the Negro's alleged hypersexual nature. Missing, though, is any overt suggestion of typical "coon" activities in the title.

Hot Chocolates made no attempt to change the public's perception of black shows, but, in its avoidance of the regressive Neo-Minstrel elements of many of the shows of the era, this neutral stand can almost be viewed as a relative step forward.

The list of 1920s/'30s Neo-Minsrel entertainments is made complete by several disposable, generally short-lived shows which, had there been no rash of blacks musicals in response to the popularity of Shuffle Along, probably would have never been created, let alone produced. Continuing the tradition of pandering to white audience's notions of blacks as both entertainers and humans, the names of the shows usually suggested a latter-day minstrel influence.

How Come? (1923) and Yeah, Man (1932) used Negro idiomatic expressions for titles; My Magnolia (1926) hints of Southern plantations; the word "Hot" in the title--Hot Chocolates, Hot Rhythm (1930), and Hot Mikado (1939)--usually denoted the fact that the show was an all-Negro song-and-dance festival. Fast and Furious (1931) got its name from two of the adjectives which black shows strived to be described as. The Blackbirds and Blackberries series were called so for obvious reasons.

Perhaps the most odious of the quasi-minstrel titles was that of Change Your Luck, which ran for the first two weeks of July 1930. The name comes from the expression "to change my luck," a racist euphemism [still] used by many white males--more often than not Southern. Experiencing a run of bad luck, a man would attempt, as the expression goes, to change his luck for the better by having sexual intercourse with a black woman. Perhaps whoever was responsible for this title had concocted some private joke that white people could "change their luck"--which, due to the Great Depression, was apt to be terrible--by watching a black show. That notwithstanding, in giving the show this name, the creators were, in a sense, condoning the tradition of the white male taking sexual

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advantage over the black woman, and the inherent put-down of black males which that situation implies.

In attempting to categorize the shows of this era, the line which separates the 1920s/ '30s Neo-Minstrel entertainments from those which strove for more is often blurry. Some shows, such as Hot Chocolates, Put and Take, and Liza presumably avoided the use of self-deprecating images of blacks, but made no discernable attempt, as did Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson, to upgrade the black man's stage personifications. Similarly, some of the shows mentioned in the next section did not strive to ameliorate the African-American's theatrical persona on any obvious level, but the mere fact that the plots, however vapid or borrowed from other genres, represented a stretch that the Neo-Minstrel shows, with their updated "coon" show formats, were unwilling to try.

Deep Harlem, Brown Buddies, and Others

A few all-black musicals of the 1920s and '30s made an effort to pass beyond the boundaries of the latter-day minstrel shows. Though none of these more substantive shows possessed a book with a truly well-crafted plot, the story-lines represented more than the mindless meanderings of the stereotypical clowns of the Neo-Minstrel shows. Though primitive when compared to the new breed of quasi-operatic "serious" musicals by white creators which featured blacks (Deep River, Show Boat, and Porgy and Bess), the shows discussed in this segment made, whether consciously or not, an attempt to duplicate the spirit of the operettas of the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson companies. Amidst the mandatory frivolousness of a black show geared toward a white audience, the creators' more serious intentions managed to make themselves visible.

Deep Harlem, which opened January 7, 1929, was the creation of three of the most illustrious talents in the history of black entertainment. The concept and libretto were furnished by Salem Tutt Whitney and J. Homer Tutt, who were full brothers despite the difference in their surnames.[47] Salem Tutt Whitney, born in the 1870s, in Logansport, Indiana, was a veteran of several minstrel

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troupes in the 1890s, and appeared with several black musical comedy companies during the Williams & Walker era. In 1907 he became the stage manager, producer, and leading comedian for Black Patti's Troubadours;[48] from there he branched out into managing his own companies. Between 1912 and 1920, Whitney and his younger brother J. Homer Tutt, also born in the 1870s in Indiana, "produced over 13 new and original musical comedies."[49]

The music was by Joe Jordan, another long-time black musical creator, who had been the resident composer at Robert Motts' Pekin Stock Company in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Deep Harlem's story is told in the form of a sermon by Salem Whitney, appearing as an "old-fashioned Southern Negro preacher,"[50] who is addressing his congregation on the glory of the African-American. The story takes his ancestors from ancient Abyssinia, through an African deserts a jungle, then onto a slave ship destined for the slave markets of the Old South. The scene then shifts to the present, first to Savannah, then to the streets and cabarets of Harlem, ending in a splendid apartment at Seventh Avenue and 139th Street.

The show consisted of a mixture of the prerequisite Neo-Minstrel songs, dances, and skits, with references to "the ancient glories of black Africans."[51] This format is not unlike that used by Williams & Walker in Abyssinia and In Dahomey. The ambivalence of the authors' style of presentation was mirrored by the ambivalence of the critics. Arthur Ruhl, of the New York Tribune, stated:

> There was an ingratiating lack of meaningless noise in Deep Harlem . . . and a similarly interesting attempt to use genuine Negro themes.[52]

Ruhl asserted that, for the most part, the show's production values displayed an "amateurish air," which he nonetheless found to be attractive. He ended his review by sympathetically noting that the authors were muted by "the exigencies of the medium he [sic] was working in."

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Alison Smith, in the New York World of January 9, 1929, wrote that the authors had:

> . . . attempted to combine all the sprightliness of musical comedy action with a complete and solemn outline of African history.
>
> With all due admiration for this ambitious undertaking, the combination still seems a shade too heavy at the top.

Smith paraphrased the attitude of so many white theatregoers when he stated:

> Most of the time you are hoping wistfully that they will shove all the "mighty kings of Ethiopia" and the tumult of the slave markets and the plantation jubilees off the stage to make room for one good tap dance or crap game.[53]

Hazel Hazlitt found the proceedings to be "altogether too refined," calling it "a sermon and lecture with dancing attached."[54] Noting that "most of the music sounded like Deep River," Hazlitt also wrote that "it ended as a combination of The Emperor Jones and Shuffle Along, somehow lacking the merits of either."

The most encouraging review was written by Wilella Waldorf,in the New York Evening Post of January 8, 1929. Beginning her critique by calling it "an earnest, naive, often entertaining show," she later noted how the white man makes the black entertainer operate "within a stencil which he himself [the white man] has made for them," adding that the Negro has been relegated to the role of the "court jester . . . [which is] little related to his natural character." Waldorf called the show amateurish, but praised its "attempt to make something out of what wide-awake Negro minds have been thinking of as possibilities for a genuine black drama." She closed her review by lauding the show for "lacking in that meaningless and ear-splitting noise which Broadway audiences have come to think necessary in black musical comedy."

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Despite--or, perhaps, because of--its good intentions, Deep Harlem's stay on Broadway lasted only five days.

Brown Buddies, which opened October 7, 1930, starred Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and listed Joe Jordan as its chief composer. Six other musicians contributed to the score, one of them being John Rosamond Johnson. The plot of Brown Buddies is essentially an update of Cole & Johnson's Shoo-Fly Regiment, although no mention of this is made in the program, nor is there any credit along this line given to Johnson, a contributor to the imitation, and the co-creator of the original.

The troops in Shoo-Fly Regiment consisted of a group of students at a Southern industrial school who enlisted en masse and were sent to the Philippines, with their girlfriends following them. In Brown Buddies, the soldiers are from an East St. Louis neighborhood who go to France to fight in what would later be known as World War I, as their "girlfriends bring up the rear in uniforms,"[55] having attained passage overseas as entertainers in a Y.M.C.A.-sponsored company.

Though offering nothing new aesthetically, the show must be cited for its steering away from the quasi-"coon" elements of most of the contemporary black shows. The listing of songs and characters--normally a tell-tale sign of how much a show pandered to white's perceptions of blacks--shows an absence of "darky" names and images. One can tell that it is indeed a show by and about blacks, but not necessarily one which uses self-deprecation to cater to whites.

Brown Buddies lasted 111 performances on Broadway, a commendable run for that time.

Lew Leslie's Rhapsody in Black, which opened May 4, 1931, featured some of the most important names on Broadway. Among those who contributed songs were such notables as John Rosamond Johnson, Cecil Mack, George Gershwin, Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, Alberta Nichols, and the self-nominated "Father of the Blues," W. C. Handy. The onstage performers included such legends as Ethel Waters and the dancer Earl "Snakehips" Tucker.

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Critic Arthur Pollock noted that the show was neither a musical comedy nor a revue, but rather a "program of songs and orchestral numbers,"[56] stating that "its aim is to make the negro show a work of art." Pollock reviewed the show twice--on April 28, 1931, when it was in a pre-Broadway showing at the Majestic Theatre in Brooklyn, and five days later on May 3, the day before its Manhattan debut at the Harris Theatre. His initial critique was positive; he felt that it was "a very fine show," but, oddly enough, in the follow-up review, he added a number of picayune misgivings which he had not expressed in the first report. He complained that Leslie had made the mistake of allowing the show to be too refined, remarking that Leslie "has made his Negroes academic."[57]

Richard Lockridge, the critic for the New York Sun, labeled the play "not a revue . . . [but] a sing-song of spirituals and negro chanties."[58] Lockridge deduced that Leslie's intention was to:

> . . . sweep away all the conventions of the Harlem shows . . . and prove the Negro capable of offering sophisticated and versatile entertainment.

Lockridge admitted that Leslie succeeded in part, but that "much of the lusty, carefree and exciting color of the past Negro musical shows has vanished."

With the impressive roster of songwriters who contributed to the show, it is not surprising that several of the tunes went on to become standards, including such numbers as "Until the Real Thing Comes Along" and "St. James Infirmary."

The budget and consequent production values for Rhapsody in Black were as austere as the roster of talent was impressive. Lew Leslie, having suffered a huge loss just six months earlier on Blackbirds of 1930, a seven-week failure, produced Rhapsody in Black on a parsimonious budget, which allowed no chorus, scenery, or comedy numbers. Perhaps the combination of the dearth of eye-pleasing visual elements, the absence of the standard low-brow "darky" comedy routines, and the show's basic non-frivolous nature

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was responsible for the play's demise after just ten weeks, making it Leslie's second failure within a nine-month period.

Hummin' Sam was a show which could have easily been placed in the Neo-Minstrel grouping, but for one reason: its source material was not in keeping with that of the other Neo-Minstrel entertainments. Hummin' Sam was based on a popular, old-fashioned, late-nineteenth-century melodrama, Charles Dazey's In Old Kentucky. The 1920s/'30s Neo-Minstrel shows were strictly genrecentric, never venturing outside of the minstrel/vaudeville or pseudo-Williams & Walker formats. In casting for the title role of a diminutive jockey, the producers opted for Gertrude "Baby" Cox, a "cute little colored girl,"[59] to portray the male character.

Hummin' Sam is important in this study inasmuch as it foreshadowed a trend which would become popular in the musical theatre in the next six to twelve years--the taking of an established white play, novel, or story, and adapting it to an African-American setting.

The novelty of adapting an 1890s melodrama to a black situation and casting a "cute little colored girl" as the male lead was not enough to catch the public's attention. Hummin' Sam opened and closed on April 8, 1933.

As many a theatre artisan has learned, enthusiasm and good intentions are no guarantees for success. One such energetic young artist created several shows which strove for more than the typical "mindless, ear-splitting noise," but was ultimately unable to bring together the right combination of elements for Broadway fame and success.

The Shows of Donald Heywood

A special mention must be made of Donald Heywood, a young black composer of the post-Shuffle Along era. His relative obscurity stems from the fact that all of the shows with which he was involved were box-office failures; his concepts and intentions for his shows were obviously superior to his execution of them. Regardless of his inability to create a critical or popular success, Heywood

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symbolizes certain important facets of the black musical theatre of his era.

Heywood was born in 1901 in Trinidad; his father was a physician and his mother a schoolteacher. A child prodigy in music, he had mastered several instruments before he reached his teens. Heywood was well-educated, having attended the best private schools of Trinidad and England. Though a lover of music, he was well aware of the economic caprices of show-business and decided to follow in his father's footsteps in the field of medicine. He graduated from Fisk University's pre-med program in 1923, then enrolled in the Northwestern University School of Medicine. After a few weeks at Northwestern, Heywood succumbed to the lure of show-business and moved to New York, where he promptly found work composing for the producing team of J. Homer Tutt and Salem Tutt Whitney.[60]

Heywood's first Broadway effort, Africana, opened July 11, 1927, two weeks after another black show, Clarence Williams' Bottomland, and the day before Miller & Lyles' Rang Tang. The critic from the Times wrote that Africana was "a bit more pretentious than some of its recent predecessors, but . . . it retains a pure racial quality."[61] Evidently, despite its attempt toward some sophistication, Africana did rely on some of the most familiar elements of the Neo-Minstrel shows. The Times critic noted that it featured "the usual romantic songs about the hypothetical delights of a Dixie paradise [and] the customary minstrel interludes." Borrowing a page from the book of Williams & Walker, the first-act finale was a grand cakewalk, spotlighting the self-proclaimed world champion of that dance, Pickaninny Smith.

Both Richard Watts, Jr., of the Herald-Tribune, and Alison Smith, of the World, devoted three-quarters of their reviews in praise of newcomer Ethel Waters. Smith spent the final fourth of his critique, after noting that both Shuffle Along and Africana had made their debuts in the "remote little playhouse, hedged by garages,"[62] that was the Sixty-Third Street Theatre, by comparing Heywood's work unfavorably with the trendsetting opus, calling Heywood's music "dimly imitative" of the tunes of the Sissle & Blake

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show. The Post critic concurred with Smith on Heywood's paucity of memorable songs, saying that the show was as "bare of good tunes as a billiard ball is of whiskers."[63]

The critics were unanimous in their lavish praise for Ethel Waters, citing her expert delivery of Heywood's risque, double-entendre-laden lyrics. Africana lasted for 77 performances, not bad when considering its competition from two other shows at a time when the black musical was undergoing a brief slow spell.

Heywood's next Broadway appearance came five years later, as the composer for Blackberries of 1932. Its title alone suggested an attempt at copying Lew Leslie's Blackbirds revue. If the similarity in the titles was intended to fool the patrons of Leslie's shows, it did not; Blackberries managed only 24 showings.

Heywood's next Broadway musical was titled, curiously, Africana. The similarity between the two shows ended with the identical name. The 1927 Africana was another obvious copy of Shuffle Along, while the 1934 show was a mixture of serious opera, less serious operetta, and standard Broadway musical comedy.

Opening November 26, 1934, it was one of only two black musicals on Broadway that year--the other being the Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thomson curiosity, Four Saints in Three Acts. Africana was written, directed, and produced by Heywood, who had gone to Africa to study African music forms so that his compositions for the show would be as authentic as possible.

Africana is the story of an African prince named Soyanga, who, after graduating from Oxford, has returned to the realm of his father, King Yafoula. Soyanga's British education causes him great internal conflicts as he wrestles with the plans for modernizing his homeland; his plight is compounded by his love for a missionary's daughter, a union which would be taboo because she is a mulatto.

Heywood, like several black authors before him, undertook the schizoid task of writing a more serious black musical by creating a substantive story-line and point of view while also bowing to the commercial dictates which demanded the mandatory images and modes of presentation. As had the other creators to date, Heywood failed to come up with the right combination.[64] The critics were

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unanimously harsh, all attacking Heywood's weird mixture of theatrical forms. One reviewer called it "a pseudo Broadway, pseudo Harlem and pseudo Congo operetta."[65]

Heywood's hackneyed story-line and his attempt to create a conflict by means of a romance between a black man and a half black woman suggest, along with a list of interesting-sounding ideas for plays which flopped nonetheless, that he was a man of infinite ambition and finite talent. Arthur Ruhl's critique of Africana attests to this possibility:

> [Africana] has been described in a pre-performance gossip as a more or less serious work based on the author's visit to Africa, and making use of genuine African dances and rhythms. There was comparatively little in the piece itself to support any such rumors. It was, as a matter of fact, simply a rather ambitious Harlem musical show . . . overlaid with third-class Harlem comedy, while most of the songs were quite in the manner of Tin Pan Alley.[66]

In lieu of less exciting fare in the play itself, the high point of the evening for most of the critics occurred during the show's overture. Heywood, who was conducting the orchestra, was suddenly attacked by "a six-foot negro." The less-than-half-capacity audience applauded the proceedings, thinking it was all part of the show. The man was pulled off of Heywood and led away to be booked. He identified himself as Almany Dauda Camaro, originally from French West Africa and currently a Harlem schoolteacher, and said that he and Heywood had served in the French Foreign Legion together, where they had planned the story for Africana and even written some of the songs. Upon buying a ticket, reading the program and realizing that he was to get no credit for his share of the show, Camaro became enraged and rushed the orchestra pit, beating up Heywood.[67]

More than one critic wryly wondered why Camaro would claim to be the co-author of such a bad show, when totally disavowing it

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would have been wiser. The 1934 edition of Africana could do no better than three performances.

By the mid-1930s the all-Negro musical was in such dire straits that it would be over two years before another all-black show would arrive on Broadway after Heywood's 1934 Africana fiasco.[68] Oddly enough, the next all-Negro musical would be yet another Donald Heywood effort, this time entitled Black Rhythm. With names such as Africana (twice), Blackberries, and Black Rhythm, it is obvious that Heywood did not expend much energy in the creating of titles for his works.

Black Rhythm opened December 19, 1936. Its plot, such as it was, involved a producer who was auditioning acts for a new all-black show. The players simply entered and performed their acts. Just as the fight with Camaro was the most noteworthy moment of Africana for most of the critics, many thought that the high point of Black Rhythm occurred when "a disgruntled audience member set off a stink bomb in row J of the orchestra."[69]

By now the Broadway patrons had finally tired of paying to see basically the same black show over and over again. Black Rhythm lasted for six performances, or twice as long as Heywood's most recent failure.

Heywood's bad luck in Broadway musicals extended to his attempts at straight plays--or, to be more precise, plays-with-music. His first Broadway play, Ol' Man Satan, "a play in thirty-seven scenes, with incidental music," was a folk drama about the rise and fall of Satan, which lasted for 24 performances in late 1932. His second play, How Come, Lawd?, a melodrama/folk drama about Southern blacks who had organized themselves into a labor union, folded after its second showing in the autumn of 1937.

That was the last that was heard of Heywood as a theatre artist. Outside of his time and place of birth and some information about his education, little is known about Heywood before he entered the commercial theatre; nothing is known about him after his departure. He is not mentioned in even the most thorough of biographical dictionaries of writers and composers of African descent.

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Donald Heywood is an interesting figure in this study because he represents opposing sides in the dichotomy of the black musical theatre of his era. On one hand, he, like his fellow West Indian Bert Williams, was born in a land where the systemic denigration of blacks and the Negro' s subsequent self-hatred were not nearly as pronounced as they were in the United States. Like Williams, his reaction to the scapegoating of the Negro on the musical stage was to try and infuse a certain seriousness into the mandatory frivolousness of the all-black shows. He actually went Williams one better by writing "serious" non-musical plays, although it must be remembered that no black author of a serious straight play had received a commercial production during Bert Williams' lifetime.

Conversely, Heywood, in spite of his good intentions, and the advantage of being well-educated, was guilty of the same crime perpetrated by the 1920s-'30s Neo-Minstrel shows: a lack of originality and a tendency to be imitative. The 1927 Africana and Blackberries of 1932 were merely formulaic revues; the "plots" for the 1934 Africana and Black Rhythm exhibited a minimum of originality; his play Ol' Man Satan is an obvious copy of Hall Johnson's Run, Little Chillun[70] and Marc Connelly's The Green Pastures; How Come, Lawd has a story-line which reads like a cross between Paul Peters' and George Sklar's Stevedore and Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty.

Perhaps this penchant to borrow plots and ideas from others represented a lack of creativity on Heywood's part. If only his ability to produce good works had matched his ability to get produced, the black musical theatre would have been much better off for it.

The Subsequent Shows of Sissle & Blake and Miller & Lyles

Several of the later shows of the two Shuffle Along creative teams could have easily been placed in the Neo-Minstrel entertainment grouping. However, as a result of their landmark success from that show, the four men developed both a built-in following from the theatregoing public and a measure of esteem from some members of the theatre establishment, which dictated that the

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shows of the Shuffle innovators would be given more than the skeletal production trappings which so many of the all-Negro shows of the period received.

Their success with the original show proved to be the proverbial blessing and curse. The blessing, of course, lay in the afore-mentioned advantages. The curse stemmed from the fact that everything which they subsequently created would be compared to Shuffle--and the comparison would inevitably be unfavorable.

The most logical thing for the Sissle & Blake and Miller & Lyles teams to do was to capitalize on the momentum created by Shuffle and prepare a follow-up as soon as feasible. Ideas were offered by both sides, but a chasm was growing between the two teams. Sissle & Blake had become the more popular of the duos; after all, their music, and not the vaudeville-like series of sketches that Miller & Lyles had passed off as a libretto, had been the show's chief drawing-point. The songwriters garnered more publicity and inter-views; because their tunes had become hits, their royalties from the music publishers were astronomical, even in a comparison to the formidable wages earned by Miller & Lyles for writing the show's book and playing the lead roles.[71]

In 1923, after the show's long run on Broadway and the national tour had ended, the two teams, unable to agree on a new effort, went their separate ways. Both parties began putting together shows which, not surprisingly, resembled Shuffle; the main difference in both cases was that the bare-bones production look would be eliminated in favor of more elaborate settings and costumes.

The tradition of black songwriting teams composing for white shows which began with Cook & Dunbar and Cole & The Johnson Brothers was continued in early 1923 when Sissle & Blake were signed to try and salvage the floundering show Elsie. By the time they were hired, this show was too far gone even for them; Elsie folded after a brief run.

Miller & Lyles scored with Runnin' Wild, which opened at the Colonial Theatre on October 29, 1923. Miller & Lyles once again supplied the book and reprised their Steve Jenkins and Sam Peck

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roles. The music and lyrics were by James Johnson and Cecil Mack. It should be noted that, unlike so many all-Negro musicals of the era, the play did not open during the hot and generally unprofitable summer months.

The Times review of October 30, 1923, raved about the play, calling it superior to the rash of Shuffle imitators which were the current trend and commented that there was nothing new in the proceedings, but that it was funnier and more inventive than the other pretenders. The critic from the Sun and Globe called it--as if this were not already known--a direct descendant of Shuffle and mentioned the usage of one of the most basic Negro stereotype--the "darky" as deathly afraid of ghosts in the obligatory graveyard scene. The show's title itself conjures up visions of the stage "coon" doing what he did best: runnin' wild.

Miller & Lyles, having re-established the formula for success for the so-called librettos for black shows--revamping the minstrel show images and marrying them to the Williams & Walker plots featuring Negro charlatans and dupes--once again parlayed their penchant for pandering to white audience expectations into a hit. Runnin' Wild, which ran for 167 performances, proved to be the most successful of the earlier Shuffle Along imitators, and introduced an ancient Ashanti tribal dance to the mainstream under its new name: the Charleston.

Corresponding to the Miller & Lyles offering was Sissle & Blake's Chocolate Dandies [to be called Dandies]. From its inception it was designed to be the most elaborate all-black show ever. It was to have lavish costumes and a set worthy of the highest-budgeted white shows. A cast of 125 was provided for. The salaries paid to the performers were double that of the wages for Shuffle. A huge treadmill was installed to be used for an onstage race between two thoroughbreds. Part of the grandiose plans for this show was a lengthy pre-Broadway road tour in which the structural and technical problems could be ironed out.

This tour began on March 10, 1924, in Rochester, New York,under the show's original title, In Bamville. By the time it made its Broadway debut on September 1, 1924, much was at stake.

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As the monumental success of the Williams & Walker Company's In Dahomey had been parlayed into a huge budget for their next work, Abyssinia, Shuffle Along's songwriters had skirted the unwritten theatrical law which decreed the smallest of budgets to black shows. The funding for Dandies represented the largest amount of money to date to be put into an all-Negro musical. As with Abyssinia, added pressure was placed on the second work to succeed, owing chiefly to the gigantic budget, which inevitably angered some whites. The critics and audience would be much more demanding; every aspect of the show would receive much closer scrutiny.

Noble Sissle, in addition to providing the lyrics for Blake's music, co-authored the book with Lew Payton. The standard flimsy plot revolves around Moses Washington (played by Payton), who dreams that his racehorse, Dumb Luck, has won him a small fortune. He awakens, disappointed that all the things he had fantasized about doing with the money were just that--part of a dream. Undaunted, he wagers all of his money against the horse of Dan Jenkins, his rival in both horseracing and for the hand of his beloved, Angeline Brown.

Since the practice of de-emphasizing the libretto had long been established in the all-Negro shows, Dandies' focus on the set, costumes, and Sissle & Blake's score surely precluded anything resembling progress in the presentation of characterizations and images in the play. Dandies' true purpose lay in the given that Negroes could sing and dance, and embellishing that with the most elaborate dances possible and wearing the flashiest costumes imaginable. Of course, every effort was made to outdo Shuffle's score, which, according to Blake, was accomplished; he considered the songs for Dandies as his best work.[72]

In general, the critics praised the show in terms of the narrow set of reference points with which they traditionally and myopically viewed black shows, but many expressed indignation over the fact that an all-Negro musical would dare to rival the white shows in production values. Some critics suggested that it was better than its predecessor, including the critic from the Herald-Tribune, who said it "was far and away ahead of Shuffle Along in

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every respect."[73] The reviewer from the Sun, while praising its dancing, made a sly comment on how all-Negro shows engaged in self-caricature by chiding the cast on its "New York negro's interpretation of Southern negro dialect," and informing them "that negroes do not talk that way."[74]

Though basically well-received both popularly and critically, the show's enormous overhead played a huge part in the relative brevity of its run, "a disappointing 96 performances."[75]

A major difference in the basic philosophies of Sissle & Blake brought about their break-up in late 1925. They were in Europe for a vaudeville tour; Blake, although enjoying the adulation, missed the companionship of his black musical theatre and vaudeville cohorts, and desired to cut the engagement short and return to the United States. Sissle, however, being "something of an elitist,"[76] was finding the attention from the European artists and intellectuals--whom he admired in return--to be too addictive to let go of anytime soon. Blake returned home; Sissle remained overseas; their working relationship, for the moment, was over.

Next for Miller & Lyles on Broadway was Rang Tang, which was, in essence, just another Neo-Minstrel entertainment. It opened July 12, 1927, almost simultaneously with two other all-Negro shows--Bottomland and Africana. The fact that these three shows were opening so close to one another, and potentially cancelling each other out at the box-office, was significant, inasmuch as the preceding years of 1925 and 1926 had seen the productions of just one relatively short-lived show in each of those years--Lucky Sambo and My Magnolia. The prospects for the black musical were bad enough without the limited pool of prospective patrons having to choose between three plays.

One advantage which Rang Tang had over the competition was the fact that its stars were the famed Miller & Lyles. They also produced the play; Miller directed; the music was by Floyd Dabney and the lyrics by Jo Trent; Kaj Gant wrote the book.

The plot stemmed from yet another theft of a Williams &Walker story-line, only this time the pilferage was more blatant than the others; George Walker's "Afro-mania" theme was lifted in

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this case. Once again the play opens in the mythical Jimtown; once again Miller and Lyles, this time playing barbers, are fugitives from the wrath of Jimtown's citizens, to whom, not surprizingly, the barbers are in heavy debt. True to their stage "darky" heritage, they steal an airplane and somehow manage to fly it all the way to Africa--this just six weeks after Charles Lindbergh's initial transatlantic solo flight--where, upon reaching the coast of West Africa, the plane disintegrates around them. They are met on the beach by a hostile Zulu tribe, and from there the play is Abyssinia revisited, revolving around the cultural clash between the American Negroes and black Africans.

The characters played by Miller & Lyles meander from the West Coast of Africa to "The Bamboo Forest," through a desert, then create some chaos in a native village, and, having lucked upon a lode of diamonds, wind up the proceedings as a pair of nouveau riche swells in the middle of a Harlem cabaret show. Amidst it all, they managed to work in their patented "Fisticuffs" bit, which surely even their staunchest fans must have found to be tiring by then.

A majority of the critics mentioned that this was a high-budget show. The reviews can best be described as mixed to poor. Percy Hammond, of the Herald-Tribune, subtitled his critique "The Colored Folks in Another Child-Like Imitation of Dull, White Extravaganza."[77] The Times reviewer, in calling it "a blackamoor folderol bearing the enigmatic title of Rang Tang,"[78] stated that "it is quite slavish in its imitation of the Times Square girl-and-tune hippodromes . . ."

One need only to look at the description of the scenes, song-titles, and character names[79] to confirm whatever suspicions one might have about the play drawing on every stereotyped notion of Africa and Africans. It was becoming more evident that the musicals featuring Jimtown's two resident ne'er-do-wells were created to pander to white tastes and dollars. Unlike Williams & Walker, whom Miller & Lyles had chosen to emulate, the Shuffle Along co-creators never bothered to provide any clever and subtle counter-balance to the minstrel-informed caricatures.

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Rang Tang outlasted its two early-summer rivals, owing in great part to its superior production values.

Shortly after Rang Tang's closing, Miller & Lyles wasted no time in giving the public yet another dose of Jimtown's Jenkins and Peck. Opening February 27, 1928, this episode was entitled Keep Shufflin', with Miller & Lyles writing the book; the lyrics were by Henry Creamer and Andy Razaf, and the music by Jimmy Johnson and Thomas "Fats" Waller.

The plot of Keep Shufflin' had Jenkins and Peck forming a socialist-type group called the Equal Got League which was to pool the resources of Jimtown's residents so that the municipal wealth would be redistributed equally. Jenkins and Peck blow up the bank and hand out the money to themselves and a few close friends, making a farce of their original plan.

On the whole, the reviews for Keep Shufflin' and its "Harlem Minstrels"[80] were interchangeable with those of the other Neo-Minstrel entertainments of that era. Most of the critics mentioned co-composer "Fats" Waller, whose gestures and expressions while conducting the musicians from the orchestra pit caught their attention more than once.

Keep Shufflin' represented Miller & Lyles' third attempt, sans Sissle & Blake, to capitalize on the original hit; the play on the verb "shuffle" in the title of their 1928 work was the most blatant instance of reusing the name of the 1921 show. Keep Shufflin' ran for a respectable 104 performances, not a bad total "considering the stiff competition . . . and the show's distance from the heart of the theatre district."[81]

Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1930 brought about a reunion of sorts for some of Shuffle Along's initial crew. Leslie, a white producer whose numerous productions of black revues in the 1920s and '30s had many people thinking that he himself was black, went against his normal policy of hiring white writers for a "black" show, and assigned the bookwriting chores to Flournoy Miller, the music to Eubie Blake, and opted for Andy Razaf to do the lyrics.

With his Plantation Revue (1922), Dixie to Broadway (1924), and Blackbirds of 1928, Leslie began a trend which has a strong

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carryover to today's "black" Broadway musicals: the usage of white artists in the writing, directing, choreographing, and other backstage areas of the show. Leslie's fondness for the Negro as a performer was offset by a paradoxical attitude toward the black man's ability to write shows for and about himself. Leslie was not shy about making comments on his belief that the white man understood the Negro better than the Negro understood himself and that the Negro was a natural-born performer due to his childlike psyche which disdained such things as worrying about making money and other adult responsibilities.[82]

According to Leslie, the Negro's underdeveloped brain provided him with the uninhibited nature which was necessary to be a good performer, but this inferior intellect was also responsible for the lack of skills one must have to write about oneself. To Leslie's way of thinking, the white writers, due to their innate mental superiority, could do some brief anthropological viewings of Negro life, culture, and mores, and write a much better and authentic work on the African-American than could the black race's most skilled and literate authors.

Despite its claim that it was "glorifying the American Negro," Blackbirds of 1930 was basically the same old Neo-Minstrel show with the same old comments in the reviews. However, the critics were unanimous in their view that Miller's parodies of Green Pastures, The Last Mile, and All Quiet on the Western Front ranked with some of his cleverest works.

The show's huge overhead, due to the elaborate sets and costumes and the steep salaries of its many stars, was perhaps the primary reason for Blackbirds of 1930 having to close after just seven weeks. The show also marked the beginning and end of Leslie's experiment with black writers; henceforth, he would revert to his policy of hiring only white backstage talent.

Miller & Lyles were reunited in Sugar Hill, which opened on Christmas Day of 1931. Jenkins and Peck had left Jimtown, and had become detectives in the middle-class enclave of Harlem known as Sugar Hill. Written and produced by Miller, Sugar Hill represented Miller & Lyles' sole attempt at anything vaguely serious or subtly

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making a social comment. The play's plot was based on a real-life incident which could have been culled from today's headlines--the murder of an innocent bystander during a shoot-out between warring vice lords. In this case the victim was a baby girl.

Sugar Hill mixed the stock elements of musical comedy and cliches borrowed from gangster movie melodramas. Detectives Jenkins and Peck scour "the 'cafe au lait' [aristocracy] of Harlem society"[83] for witnesses who will testify against the gangster king Gyp Penrose, as played by Henry ("Broadway") Jones. Stealing a climax from many gangster movies of that era, they set up Penrose by convincing his scorned mistress to turn him in.

Although Sugar Hill was somewhat of a diversion from the typical Miller & Lyles fare in that it was based on a serious incident, and that it dealt not with Jimtown's dupers and dupes, but with upper-class Harlemites, the show was riddled with the usual non-sense. The critics tore the show apart, generally citing the confusion caused by the mixture of melodrama, minstrelsy, and seriousness, and the resultant jarring shifts in the play's tone. Also disconcerting to the reviewers was the show's single set, the facade of a Harlem brownstone. Most of the critics mentioned that Sugar Hill tried hard to emulate Elmer Rice's Street Scene and suffered badly in the comparison.

Surely a musical which was inspired by the accidental shooting of a baby girl on a Harlem street would have strived to avoid anything which would be construed as lampooning that unfortunate situation. That would be tantamount to producing a show whose main idea resulted from its writers studying, let us say, the 1989 Central Park jogger's rape case, or the 1986 Eleanor Bumpers shooting incident, and, during the course of the play, casting aside the seriousness of the original subject matter and resorting to musical comedy cliches in an attempt to entertain.

What the critics judged to be a curious and rather tasteless mixture of incongruous genres led to Sugar Hill's dissolving after just eleven performances.

Shuffle Along of 1933 was to have marked the first reunion of the original show's four creators. Aubrey Lyles died on July 28,

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1932, of tuberculosis, while the work was in its planning stage. The three survivors concocted a show in which Miller reprised his Steve Jenkins role with yet another get-rich-quick ruse, this time by selling stock in a product called U-Eat-Em Molasses. Mantan Moreland played the Sam Peck character.

The critics viewed the show with the same tunnel vision and dearth of reference points with which they saw all black musicals. The play, which opened one day after Christmas 1932, proved to be a victim of the Great Depression, and the greater discrimination in taste that the Broadway patrons were exercising as a result. The black shows were now notorious for their sameness and lack of originality in the subject matter; many theatregoers were electing to avoid shows which were nothing more than clones of the trend-setting Shuffle Along. The 1933 edition barely lasted into the second week of that year, closing after only seventeen showings.

The inability of the Shuffle Along creators to duplicate their success with the late-1932 offering sent a strong message to those who had been piecing together Negro song-and-dance festivals, supplementing them with minstrelsy-informed humor and specialty acts, and expecting that nondiscriminating audiences in search of Broadway's version of exotic primitivism would patronize the show. Lean times loomed ahead for the all-Negro musical.

It would be four years before any of the surviving three would be part of a major black Broadway musical. The Federal Theatre Project of the Work's Progress Administration (W.P.A.), which had initially avoided producing musicals because several of the chief officials deemed them to be too frivolous, finally acquiesced to popular tastes and formed a Variety Theatre unit in 1936. This unit produced several short, vaudeville-like entertainments; when it was felt that a full-length work was in order, the talents of Eubie Blake were summoned. The show was called Swing It, and it opened, like so many black shows of the era, in mid-summer--July 22, 1937.

Blake collaborated on the music with Milton Reddie, who doubled as the show's co-lyricist with the sole librettist, Cecil Mack. The plot was that of a backstage musical in which a troupe of black entertainers on a Mississippi River showboat try to get their

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vessel to that Mecca of Black America--Harlem. As any student of geography would quickly realize, this presented a problem; there is no connecting river between the Mississippi and the Hudson. That notwithstanding, the troubadours sang, danced, and played their way northward toward Manhattan.

Because the venture was federally-funded and operated on an austere budget, the ticket prices at the Adelphi Theatre were incredibly low, with the most expensive seats going for a mere fifty-five cents. However, not even the cheap tickets and the names of such accomplished Broadway veterans as Blake and Cecil Mack could attract the theatre public, which had become terminally disenchanted with the Neo-Minstrel shows of the past sixteen years. The critics excoriated this "potpourri of minstrelsy"[84] unanimously, chiding it for its mediocrity and for being content to merely travel once more in the same old overtrod terrain.

Considering its cheap ticket prices--which should have been a great lure for the public--and the show's low overhead, one would think that Swing It would have lasted much longer than the nine weeks it managed. In effect, its demise signaled the death knell for the 1920s-'30s Neo-Minstrel entertainments. No black musicals were produced in 1938; the three major black shows of 1939 were the advance guard of a new trend which was developing: the adapting of "white" classics into a Negro setting. Lew Leslie's final revue, Blackbirds of 1939, proved to be an instant anachronism, and was disposed of after nine showings.

In a retrospective look at Eubie Blake's work, it must be noted that in none of the shows for which he composed was there any attempt to show the African-American as anything more than just the Jazz Era's edition of minstrelsy's singing, dancing "darky." All of his shows featured the mindless entertainment expected of all-Negro musicals; at no time did he attempt to take a page out of the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson books by offering the mandatory "coon" activities on one level, while slyly interjecting more positive aspects of the African-American experience on another.

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One can only speculate if Blake's willingness to acquiesce in commercial imperatives, by supplying his tunes to the Neo-Minstrel shows, was a factor in his parting from Sissle. Perhaps Sissle's upper-middle-class upbringing allowed him to see these updated "coon" offerings in a different light than the one in which Blake viewed them; having grown up in a well-educated milieu, Sissle surely was aware of the origins of the images of blacks portrayed in the shows, while Blake, who grew up in a poor and relatively uneducated household, might not have had the advantage of more learned insights into the usage of the caricatures.

While Blake continued composing for various Neo-Minstrel shows, Sissle, realizing the artistic restraints in the theatre which had been placed upon him as a black creator, took his considerable talents to other venues, not allowing himself to be viewed strictly as the co-creator of updated "coon" shows.

Sissle founded and conducted several bands and orchestras in the late 1920s and early 1930s, then returned to national prominence with Noble Sissle's Society Orchestra, which proved to be one of the most popular and respected bands of the "Big Band Era" (c. 1935-1950).[85] Reflecting his upbringing, Sissle's Society Orchestra enjoyed the reputation as one of the more sophisticated and refined of the black bands of the Swing Era. Among its more famous alumnae was Lena Horne, who, after being initiated into show business as a dancer at the Cotton Club in Harlem, first gained celebrity as the lead female vocalist for the Society Orchestra in 1935, at age eighteen.

Charting the 1920s-'30s Black Musical Trend by Years

Between 1921 and 1937, thirty-eight black musicals were given what can be considered Broadway productions. Cases can be made for a half-dozen or so other shows whose productions took place in theatres not universally deemed to be Broadway play-houses. Correspondingly, at least forty black musicals were staged elsewhere in Manhattan--at theatres and cabarets in Harlem and more southerly parts of New York City--which can be compared to contemporary Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway productions.

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Surely a majority of these shows were mounted with the intention of an eventual Broadway opening.[86]

Shortly after Shuffle Along established itself as a hit in 1921, a second black show soon followed, Put and Take. The world of the theatre being as small as it was--and still is--it is not surprizing to learn that Irvin C. Miller, the author and producer of the latter show, was the brother of Flournoy Miller, a co-star and co-creator of the former.

Three black shows reached Broadway in 1922, including Lew Leslie's first all-Negro extravaganza, The Plantation Revue, but only Liza could be considered a success amongst that year's trio.

Two black musicals were mounted in 1923: the short-lived How Come? and the most successful of the all-Negro shows between Shuffle Along and Blackbirds of 1928, the Miller & Lyles comedy, Runnin' Wild.

Two more black shows were staged on Broadway in 1924, but the relative failure of Sissle & Blake's Chocolate Dandies seemed to be an ominous sign for the all-black musicals. Already a discernable sameness was handicapping the shows; perhaps the mainstream theatregoing public had already had its fill of the Neo-Minstrel entertainments.

This possibility was enhanced by a dearth of black musicals in the next two years, and the lack of response given to the sole all-Negro entry of both 1925 and 1926. The latter year did, however, feature a short-lived but nonetheless important production in the history of the African-American on the commercial musical stage: Deep River, an integrated late-1926 failure which featured black performers in roles of some importance. Deep River was a stylistic precursor to Show Boat, a landmark musical which came out slightly more than a year later.

Three all-black shows were staged in 1927, which, due to poor timing, all opened within days of each other. The Miller & Lyles farce Rang Tang proved to be the most popular of the three.

In 1928 only two black shows were presented, another Miller & Lyles comedy called Keep Shufflin' and the monumental Blackbirds of 1928. Blackbirds, produced, written, and staged by whites, signaled

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the beginning of a trend which continues to this day: black talent on the stage, white talent behind the scenes.

Surprisingly, in the first three years of the Great Depression, 1929 to 1931, the number of black musicals increased--in this case, to four in each of those years. The to-be-expected low-budget look and skeletal production values of the Negro musicals had now become an economic advantage; lavish costumes and scenic designs, which were mandatory in the white shows, were now a great strain on the budget of the mainstream musicals; no such demand was made for the black shows. Furthermore, the typical white Broadway show had an extended out-of-town tryout run in such places as Boston, Washington, D. C., and other Northeastern cities; practically all of the black Broadway shows had been optioned by their white producers after a successful run in a Harlem theatre or cabaret.

On the negative side, of the twenty all-black musicals produced on Broadway between 1929 and 1937, only the "Fats" Waller-Andy Razaf opus Hot Chocolates (228 performances) and Brown Buddies (111 showings), headlined by Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, could be labeled as hits, and only the former show was considered an unqualified success.

By 1933 both the quality and quantity of the black musical was in a critical state. Nothing vaguely resembling a success with the public or the reviewers appeared until 1939, when the competing Mikados opened in almost literally the same time and place. The Mikados, however, were from a totally different genre.

The Neo-Minstrel musical was, by the eve of World War II,for the most part dead. It would be resurrected and re-set in more modest guises in various Caribbean isles in the next two decades, but, as far as dealing with native-born blacks in indigenous settings, it had overstayed its welcome.

A Final Perspective on the Neo-Minstrel Entertainments

The majority of the all-Negro musicals of the 1920s and '30s, while lacking the scapegoating images of the African-American that the nineteenth-century minstrel shows perpetrated, nevertheless contrived to cast the black race in a most negative light. The

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attitude toward blacks remained the same; the execution was, for the most part, more subtle.

As it had been true for minstrelsy, the characteristics of the black musicals of that era accurately mirrored the black man's place in White America. In these shows the Negro was portrayed as a singing, dancing puppet of little or no substance, all flash and no form, all gloss and no content. The songs and dances were strictly for the entertainment of whites; nothing resembling intelligence was expected to be found in what passed for a libretto in the all-Negro shows. This was reflective of White America's conviction of the Negro's innate mental inferiority; the mindless entertainments went along with the old adage that "the Negro's brains are all in his feet."

The majority of the shows of this era were performed on the most parsimonious of budgets. With the exception of the shows which were specifically mentioned in this study as having unusually high budgets for an all-black show of the time, the simplicity and spareness of production values of the respective shows were mentioned by most of the reviewers. The bare-bones nature of these productions coincides with the image of the Negro's condition as naturally being one of poverty; he is sentimentally portrayed as happily poor, content to "make do" with the leftovers of society.[87] The fact that Shuffle Along originated in a makeshift theatre, with the performers wearing cast-off, patched-up costumes from a failed white show is perhaps the perfect metaphor to connect the black man's place in society in general and the commercial theatre of that time.

Shows which made some attempt to overstep the prescribed boundaries for black shows were castigated by the press, and, in practically every case, received a chilly audience response and short run as a result. Whether it was in the form of a high-budgeted, elaborately-costumed and well-designed production which white critics deemed as too good for Negroes, or by means of its content, which eschewed the traditional "coon"-isms and tried to portray African-Americans in a more substantive light, any work which did not conform to the accepted notion of blacks dancing around in

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sparsely-produced, amateurish spectacles propped up by a myriad of self-denigrating images, was fair game for the wrath of the Broadway critics. This was paralleled by America's treatment of individual blacks who, because they dared venture beyond the educational, occupational, or societal borders imposed by de facto segregation, were verbally and, in many instances, physically chastised, lest they forget their "place."

Ernest Hogan's "All Coons Look Alike to Me" lyrics could have been updated to a song entitled "All All-Negro Musicals Look Alike to Me." In the eyes of racist whites, every black man, from the sharecropper scratching out a meager existence on a farm in the Deep South, to the physician in a Northern metropolis, was basically the same organism, sharing the same educational, cultural, and social background with twelve million other African-Americans. Not given credit for having any individual traits, one black man was interchangeable with the next. Similarly, the newspaper reviews for the black shows of the 1920s and '30s echoed one another, adhering to the same trite comments on the singing, the dancing, the irritatingly facile libretto, and the sparsely-produced, amateurish presentation by the "Harlem Minstrels" or "Ethiopian entertainers" or the "Blackamoor troupers" or some other nonsense.

It must be noted that, in preserving the established formula for black shows, Negro entertainers made themselves party to the attitude which alleged that all Negroes--and, by extension, all-Negro shows--were unfailingly predictable due to their insistence upon conforming to a narrow set of characteristics.

In terms of living accommodations, the black American has been historically confined, like the Native American, to plots of real estate set aside for him. In the case of the Native American, he was to live on government-controlled reservations; the Negro was similarly relegated to his own section of town that has, through the ages, been euphemistically and variously known as "Coontown," "Jimtown," "Bucktown," "The Bottoms," "Little Africa," and less colorful soubriquets such as "the ghetto" and the current "inner city." The housing is generally substandard, and in some cases, dilapidated;

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the black reservation is usually situated so that it might be easily avoided by whites.

Similarly, most of the black shows of the 1920s and '30s were housed in the commercial theatre's version of the ghetto. With few exceptions, they were consigned to the least desirable in terms of personal comfort for its patrons and technical functionality for the performers. The all-Negro shows appeared mainly in the theatres which were physically on the outskirts of the theatre district. A majority of the black musicals opened at the most inopportune time: during the hot summer months when many of the theatres were dark and rental rates were the lowest because few white shows would subject their performers and patrons to three hours in a sweltering theatre.[88]

The all-Negro Shuffle Along imitators were, by the late 1930s, being phased out, replaced by a trend featuring black musicals based on white sources. Within the next dozen years more shows--"black" and "white" alike--would have integrated casts. Ironically, the gradual improvement of the stage image of the African-American would begin to unfold in shows which were not of his creation, and, in shows which could not be considered as "black" musicals. Surely William Shakespeare, George Bizet,and Gilbert & Sullivan, writing some of their classics, could never have imagined that one day the work at hand might be essayed by an all-black cast.

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CHAPTER SIX ENDNOTES

[1]Interview of Eubie Blake by Robert Kimball in the New York Post, February 7, 1978.

[2]Eileen Southern, Dictionary of Afro-American and African-Musicians, p. 36.

[3]Robert Kimball and William Bolcom, Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), p. 15.

[4]David Ewen, American Songwriters (New York: The H. W.Wilson Company, 1987), p. 49.

[5]Al Rose, Eubie Blake (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), p. 70.

[6]Southern, p. 272.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Rose, p. 71.

[9]Ibid., p. 76.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Kimball and Bolcom, p. 88.

[12]Ibid., p. 123.

[13]New York Evening Mail, May 26, 1921.

[14]Kimball and Bolcom, p. 94.

[15]May 24, 1921.

[16]A copy of the libretto can be found in typescript at theLibrary of Congress in Washington, D.C., in the Music Division.

[17]Shuffle Along typescript libretto, p. 65.

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[18]Rose, p. 79.

[19]Ibid., p. 82.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., p. 82.

[22]The word "jazz" is believed to have its origins from the word "jazzem" from a West African dialect, meaning to have sexual intercourse. The vulgar term "jizzum," meaning male sperm, also originates from this word.

[23]Nathan I. Huggins, The Harlem Renaissance, p. 118.

[24]This list of Shuffle Along characters comes from the program of the production at the Selwyn Theatre in Boston, of the week of August 21, 1922.

[25]New York Times, August 24, 1921.

[26]Ibid.

[27]November 28, 1922.

[28]New York Globe, November 28, 1922.

[29]New York Herald, November 28, 1922.

[30]November 30, 1924.

[31]New York World, November 30, 1924.

[32]Ibid.

[33]New York World, June 8, 1925.

[34]Ibid.

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Herald-Tribune, June 28, 1927.

[37]Blacks in Blackface, p. 151.

[38]World, May 10, 1928.

[39]Herald-Tribune, May 10, 1928.

[40]New York Sun, May 10, 1928.

[41]William King, Evening Post, April 28, 1929.

[42]Percy Hammond, Herald-Tribune, May 15, 1929.

[43]Brooks Atkinson, Times, May 15, 1929.

[44]Richard Lockridge, Sun, May 15, 1929.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Rose, p. 101.

[47]Blacks in Blackface, p. 100.

[48]The Ghost Walks, p. 279.

[49]Blacks in Blackface, p. 20.

[50]Arthur Ruhl, Tribune, January 8, 1929.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Alison Smith, World, January 9, 1929.

[54]Sun, January 8, 1929.

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[55]Brooks Atkinson, Times, October 8, 1930.

[56]Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 28, 1931.

[57]Ibid., May 3, 1931.

[58]May 5, 1931.

[59]Arthur Pollock, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 10, 1933.

[60]From an untitled collection of typed pages, written by William W. Sanders, in the clippings file on Donald Heywood in the Billy Rose Collection on the third floor of the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, New York City.

[61]July 12, 1927.

[62]July 12, 1927.

[63]July 12, 1927.

[64]With the exception, of course, of the extremely popular Williams & Walker Company hits In Dahomey and Bandanna Land.

[65]Stephen Rathburn, Sun, November 27, 1934.

[66]Herald-Tribune, November 27, 1934.

[67]George Russ, World-Telegram, November 27, 1934.

[68]Porgy and Bess, which opened in October 1935, does not apply here, because it contained four white characters.

[69]Robert Coleman, Daily Mirror, December 21, 1936.

[70]Although Ol' Man Satan made its debut five months before Run, Little Chillun, the Hall Johnson work had been in development for a considerable period of time, and had been presented in churches and smaller theatres in backer's audition-type presentations for two or three years prior to its early 1933 Broadway premiere.

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[71]Kimball and Bolcom, p. 55.

[72]Ibid., p. 164.

[73]September 2, 1924.

[74]September 2, 1924.

[75]Gerald Bordman, American Musical Theatre, p. 391.

[76]Kimball and Bolcom, p. 194.

[77]July 13, 1927.

[78]July 13, 1927.

[79]These can be found in Blacks in Blackface, on pages 284 to 286.

[80]Alexander Woollcott, World, February 28, 1928.

[81]Bordman, p. 437.

[82]Allen Woll, Black Musical Theatre (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 99, p. 110.

[83]Times, December 26, 1931.

[84]Ibid., July 23, 1937.

[85]Leo Walker, The Big Band Almanac (Pasadena, California: Ward Ritchie Press, 1978), p. iii.

[86]This approximate figure was gleaned from a search of "Show Synopses" in Henry T. Sampson's Blacks in Blackface, pp. 136 to 327. Not all of the shows had the theatre in which they were performed listed; this writer deduced that they were staged in Manhattan because they were created by and/or performed by popular, established artists who were generally associated with Broadway and Harlem cabaret shows.

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[87]This alleged attitude was best dramatized in Porgy's song "I Got Plenty O' Nuthin' " in Porgy and Bess.

[88]Allen Woll, Dictionary of the Black Theatre (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 159.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE 1920s and '30s: THE NATIVE OPERAS AND CLASSICS REVISITED

Before the African-American could be accepted as a serious character on the musical stage, he would first have to establish himself in dramas in which he was portrayed as more than just a comedic song-and-dance performer.

The First Serious Plays About Blacks in the Commercial Theatre

Although serious non-musical plays had been performed in black colleges and by community theatre groups since the earliest years of the twentieth century, it was not until April 5, 1917, that the New York commercial theatre saw the presentation of straight plays about blacks, when white dramatist Ridgely Torrence's Three Plays for a Negro Theatre premiered at the Garden Theatre on Broadway. The three plays did not make up a thematic trilogy; instead, they were three self-contained entities, representing three distinct theatre genres. The curtain-raiser, The Rider of Dreams, was a comedy; Granny Maumee was a folk tragedy about "a blind old negress"; the final play, Simon the Cyrenian, was based on the biblical tale about Simon, a black man who was one of Jesus' cross-bearers. The critics found Torrence's writing to be sincere, but faulted Harlem's Hapgood Players for their amateurish acting. Some reviewers went so far as to suggest that Torrence would have been better served by a cast of experienced white actors wearing the blackface.

Almost perfectly complementing the concurrent rash of black musicals of the 1920s and '30s in a numerical sense, approximately forty black non-musical dramas were staged in Manhattan's commercial theatres in those decades. Unlike the musicals, which primarily adhered to the Neo-Minstrel and pseudo-Williams & Walker operetta formulas, the straight plays about blacks covered a fairly wide range of theatrical genres. They were written by an eclectic group of authors, the majority of whom were white. Eugene O'Neill,

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considered by many theatre critics and historians to be the preeminent American dramatist of this century, was responsible for two of the most controversial works of the nonmusical trend: the much-imitated Emperor Jones (1921) and All God's Chillun Got Wings (1926), which centered around the heretofore taboo dramatizing of a marriage between a black man and a white woman.

Other celebrated authors contributed heavily to this trend. The prolific Paul Green won the 1927 Pulitzer Prize for drama with his black-themed In Abraham 's Bosom; he also wrote Roll Sweet Chariot (1934), "a symphonic play of the Negro in four scenes," and co-authored the 1941 adaptation of Richard Wright's novel, Native Son, with Wright.

Another distinguished author, who, like Green, at times appeared to be a self-appointed white spokesman for the African-American, was Dubose Heyward, the creator of Porgy (1927), Brass Ankle (1931), and Mamba's Daughters (1939); Porgy and Mamba's Daughters were adaptations of novels which Heyward had co-authored with his wife, Dorothy.

Along with these three famous dramatists there also were many now-obscure white playwrights who chose the Negro as subject-matter for their plays for reasons known only to themselves. Surely some wrote about the African-American for altruistic reasons; they sympathized with the plight of blacks and recognized the inherent drama in the African-American's everyday struggles. Others saw blacks as a somewhat other-worldly people who existed in an exotic world. These writers chose to depict black life in sensationalistic plays which recalled several of the traditional stereotypes of the Negro. These authors dramatized the black man's plight not in the concerned and carefully-wrought manner of a Ridgely Torrence or Eugene O'Neill, but with a tabloid-like, yellow-journalistic approach. The Negro, with his supposed propensity toward violent behavior in his slum environments, and natural bent toward religious over-zealousness, be it within the parameters of Christianity, voodoo, or a strange concoction of the two, had, in the eyes of many novice white authors searching for that elusive

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breakthrough hit play, both an individual nature and collective mode of existence which was rife with dramatic possibilities.

Willis Richardson has the distinction of being the first black playwright to have a drama mounted on Broadway. In 1923 the Ethiopian Art Players of Chicago presented his one-act play, The Chip Woman's Fortune, as the curtain-raiser of a double-bill in which the featured piece was Oscar Wilde's Salome. The first black author to have a full-length drama staged on Broadway was Garland Anderson, a San Francisco bellhop, whose Appearances was produced in 1925. Other black playwrights who were produced in the commercial theatre during the 1920s and '30s were Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Hall Johnson, Hughes Allison, William Dubois, and the ubiquitous Donald Heywood.

Lew Leslie's opinion, discussed in the previous chapter, that white writers were better for black shows, was, with all of its inherent racism, a philosophy which was widely-embraced at that time. This attitude is epitomized in a comment in a review of black dramatist D. Frank Marcus' Make Me Know It in 1929:

> It seems that only white men can write good plays about the Negro--or, at least, a white man must act as a collaborator.[1]

In comparison to the narrow course adhered to by the all-Negro musicals of the 1920s and '30s, the plays in those same decades were written in an eclectic range of genres. The old-fashioned melodrama was recalled in such works as Goat Alley (1921), Kongo (1926), and Brass Ankle. The courtroom melodrama, a staple of twentieth century theatre--and films--was represented by Legal Murder and They Shall Not Die, both 1934 plays about the infamous trial of the Scottsboro Nine, and The Trial of Doctor Beck, a 1937 play written by Hughes Allison, a black physician, and produced by the Negro Theatre Unit of the Works Progress Administration Federal Theatre Project.

The racial protest melodrama, which was the offspring of the nineteenth-century slave narrative, was presented on Broadway in

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the form of Appearances, Stevedore, and the long-running Langston Hughes play, Mulatto (1935).

Music, so long associated with the Negro on the stage, played a major role in such folk dramas as Roseanne (1923), Hall Johnson's Run, Little Chillun (1933), and the legendary Green Pastures. Music was also an integral part of a quartet of sprawling, episodic, huge-cast plays which gave every appearance of wanting to be full-fledged musicals instead of the stereotype-laden melodramas which they actually were: Harlem, a 1929 opus co-written by Wallace Thurman, a "Harlem negro novelist,"[2] and white dramatist W. J. Rapp; Make Me Know It, which appeared later in that year, by D. Frank Marcus, chronicled the political intrigue and underworld activities of an un-named black community with a close resemblance to Harlem; Brown Sugar, a 1937 work by Mrs. Bernie Angus, which focused on Harlem's underclass; and, perhaps the most grandiosely-produced of all the black dramas of this era, the David Belasco extravaganza, Lula Belle, a 1926 play by two white authors, Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur.

Folk dramas, which depicted the supposed simple, innocent, child-like nature of the Negro, were the staple of this era. With the exception of the more lurid melodramas such as the four quasi-musicals discussed in the previous paragraph, some elements of folk drama appeared in practically all of the black plays. The more noteworthy undiluted folk dramas are two Dubose Heyward entries, Porgy and Mamba's Daughters, Ridgely Torrence's trio of plays which began the trend, and Richardson's The Chip Woman's Fortune.

The folk drama was used as a basis for numerous plays dealing with what was perceived to be as the Negro's hyper-religious nature. His deep devotion to Christianity was examined in the aforementioned Roseanne, Run, Little Chillun, Green Pastures, Roll, Sweet Chariot, and George Bryant's The Second Comin' (1931). An adjunct of that religiosity, the Negro's presumed bent toward voodoo, formed the basis of several plays after voodoo's introduction into mainstream drama in O'Neill's The Emperor Jones. Given much importance in the serious 1926 musical Deep River, voodoo was at the center of Taboo (1922), Savage Rhythm (1931), Zombie (1932),

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Louisiana (1933), and the most famous voodoo-themed work of all, the 1936 adaptation of Shakespeare's Macbeth, which was produced by the W. P. A. and reset in Haiti.

Also mounted by the W. P. A. Federal Theatre and set in Haiti was William Dubois' historical pageant, simply titled Haiti, presented in 1938 at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. Haiti dealt with the overthrow of the French during the Haitian Revolution, and its aftermath.

Although ostensibly more serious-minded and less prone to cull from the catalogue of facile and degrading images than were the Neo-Minstrel and pseudo-Williams & Walker musicals, even the best-intended of the black-themed dramas featured a set of recognisable stereotypes. The Negro's devout faith, and its attendant gospel singing, spiritual possession, and long-winded but imagery-laden sermons appeared in at least a dozen plays. Voodoo, if not the focal point of the play, was at least mentioned in over half of the dramas involving blacks.

The American Negro's alleged bent toward promoting intramural racism by means of a color caste system was a popular recurring theme in the dramas. This racism-within-the-race factor, in tandem with its adjunct Tragic Mulatto theme, was prominent in such works as Mulatto, Brass Ankle, Granny Maumee, and The Trial of Doctor Beck, among others.

The chronic poverty and illiteracy of those Negroes who have historically made up the permanent underclass was sentimentalized, and, in some cases, romanticized, in the folk dramas about blacks; these same aspects were sensationalized by the authors with a more melodramatic bent.

Violent deaths were frequent occurrences in these plays.[3] The depiction of the black protagonist as a Christ-like martyr was a popular cliché of the time; many a black hero met a swift and sudden demise at the hands of a lynch mob for daring to go against the status quo; often the primary offense was having a relationship with a white woman.[4]

Spontaneous murders and other crimes of passion were popular devices of the authors of this period, used to show the debilitating

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effect on the psyche that the lower-class Negroes experienced due to living in the most depraved of conditions.

Even though the range of the theatrical styles in which the black characters were presented was rather wide, the only class of Negro which received much attention on the stage were the poor, uneducated, living-from-day-to-day blacks. Though the more sensitive authors stroved to show this type of Negro as a human being, and make some sort of prescriptive comment on his condition, the dramatists' insistence upon focusing on the poor and the ignorant, while ignoring the hard-working, educated middle-class, only served to perpetuate the image of the Negro as intellectually and morally inferior.

Hence, the authors of these plays, particularly the white writers, were guilty of a certain duality of thought, however unintentional, in their failure to use more progressive blacks as characters. Those serious authors, though striving to avoid the minstrel images, have, in so many of their dramas, called upon those supposed aspects of the Negro's personality on which the minstrel caricatures were based: his poverty, lack of education, hyper-religiosity, and inability or unwillingness to better his condition.

Their bent toward depicting simple, superstitious, and economically-deprived Negroes notwithstanding, the authors of the more serious non-musical dramas of the era must be praised for not scapegoating the Negro. Although some of the less flattering aspects of African-American life were dramatized, the black man was not lampooned as he had been in the minstrel shows and was still being done in the concurrent Neo-Minstrel entertainments. One must also keep in mind that a measure of truth lay behind many of the stereotypes; several of the authors of the straight plays dealt with the realities which informed those stereotypes; the Neo-Minstrel musical comedy creators merely exploited them for comic effect.

The trend toward serious black-themed drama, which began with the 1917 production of Torrence's three plays, signaled the first time that the African-American performer could hope to be

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cast in the commercial theatre as something other than a Neo-Minstrel or vaudeville buffoon, or something more substantive than a small part as a comic servant in a play. The commercial theatre, getting a glimpse of the black performer in serious, non-musical roles, was, by slow degrees, coming to accept more serious portrayals of black characters on the musical stage.

Deep River and Show Boat

The mainstream theatregoing public of this era had already proven that it was unwilling to accept serious images of blacks on the musical stage in the form of substantive black story-lines being played out in shows with all-black casts. Any portrayals of serious black characters and the presentation of black creative art on the musical stage would have to be undertaken by subtle degrees. Ironically, the non-buffoonish black character first appeared on the mainstream musical stage in a pair of serious, near-operatic "white" shows: Deep River and Show Boat.

Both shows have striking similarities. Both have nine-teenth-century Deep South settings; Deep River takes place in 1835 in New Orleans; the first half of Show Boat occurs on a Mississippi riverboat in the latter part of that century. Both have miscegenation at the core of their plots; in both cases the female in question is a near-white Negro woman, a theatrical descendant of Zoe in Boucicault's The Octoroon. Most important to this study, both musicals feature several black characters who are peripheral, but nonetheless important to the plot. Though some of the recognizable stereotypes appear in the plays, the blacks are not drawn as min-strel clowns.

Deep River, which was billed by its producers as "a native opera," opened at Broadway's Imperial Theatre on October 4, 1926. Frank Harling composed the music; the libretto was by Lawrence Stallings; the show's director was Arthur Hopkins. The authors obviously did a lot of research on New Orleans of the 1830s; this fact is duly noted in the program.

Although the show's tone, its mode of musical presentation,and its subject-matter were unique for Broadway at that time, its

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story-line was not. The plot entailed the eternal love triangle; in this case it involved Broussard, a forty-year-old Creole gentleman and the most-desired bachelor in New Orleans; Mugette, a quadroon beauty who is attending her first quadroon ball, and Hazzard, a young, handsome, rough-hewn but nouveau-riche Kentuckian who is regarded as a loutish outsider by the ethnocentric Creole society.

In using the setting of the quadroon ball as a dramatic focal point, the authors of Deep River must be commended for refraining from ridiculing or being overly judgmental on this rather obscure aspect of Afro-[Franco]-American culture. Quadroon girls, in their late teens, would attend elegant parties, at which they would meet Creole gentlemen. If a mutual attraction was apparent, a financial arrangement would be made between the girl's mother and the Creole gentleman, who, more often than not, was already married and had a family of his own. The girl would be set up in a house along Ramparts Streets; an allowance was given to the girl; any children which resulted from the union were provided for; many of the sons from these liaisons would be educated in Paris.[5] In more contemporary terms, this tradition, which was peculiar to New Orleans, but had similar guises elsewhere, can be seen as a combination of higher-level prostitution and the welfare system. Harling and Stallings presented this situation as it was, without pontificating on its moral overtones, or using it as a point of ridicule for those involved.

As can be predicted about a play centering on the conflict between the stereotypical hot-blooded Latin gallant and a rough-and-tumble backwoods intruder, a fatal duel serves as the climax. Hazzard, the one whom Mugette really loves, slays Broussard. In a scene reminiscent of the final moments of The Octoroon, Hazzard and Mugette voice their undying love for each other and their regret that, because of their racial differences, they cannot live happily thereafter as lawfully wedded man and wife. They part; he, back to Kentucky, she, presumably back to searching for another white sponsor at the next quadroon ball.

The reviews, for the most part, were from fair to good. The critics were unanimous on several key points. They felt that

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Harling's music, though advertised as "operatic" was actually a jazz score, but excellent nonetheless. The reviewers concurred that the fine score was done a grave disservice by Stallings' over-long and rambling libretto, and by Hopkins' languid, sometimes unfocused directing. Many of the writers dubbed the work an operetta, despite the show's producers having billed it as an opera.

Most of the critics implied that the forty-minute second act, a re-enactment of a voodoo ritual, complete with singing, dancing, drumming, and chanting--but no dialogue--was too good for its own good; its vibrancy served to accentuate the too-leisurely pace of the first act, and the offbeat theatricality of the second act made the predictable culminating duel of the convention third and final act anticlimactic. The second act was also by far the most popular with the opening night audiences; in all of the reviews mention was made of the enthusiastic call for the show's creators at the end of that act.

Brooks Atkinson called the piece a "colorful, if too pretentious native opera,"[6] saying of the plot that it was "a charming picture, formal and neat, but little more than an incident in its dramatic value." Atkinson faulted Hopkins' direction by observing that "it progresses more like an animated panorama than a drama."

Burns Mantle concurred with this. He wrote:

> Being of an excessive casualness in story development, and a leisurely pace in movement, it is a stiffish dose for restless play followers.[7]

Mantle noted of the integrated cast that "the mixing of white and black actors is deftly done and without offense."

The play opens by using the traditional "feather-duster" method of imparting information. In this case, it is from a few Negroes that we learn about the upcoming quadroon ball, Broussard's search for a new concubine because his latest one has cuckolded him, and Mugette's coming out in her initial ball.[8] There is nothing offensive about the black characters in either their words or deeds; since their race was not indicated by the script itself, this writer

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could not ascertain that they were black until he looked at a cast list.

In portraying the interracial romance, the authors--as did Boucicault in The Octoroon, and Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern in Show Boat--elected to use the pairing which would be the least offensive to white theatregoers: the white male and the almost-white black female. This match is made more acceptable by the fact such a female role is almost always played by a white actress in slightly dark make-up.[9] However, by portraying the black female as almost white, the old stereotype about the lighter the black woman, the more desirable she was, comes into play. The creators of Deep River also relied on the belief that the black character whom the audience would be most sympathetic towards would be an attractive, intelligent female who had the misfortune of having African heritage, even if in such a slight amount that the "tom-tom blood" was barely discernable in her features.

Given the play's 1835 New Orleans setting, and the fact that a woman of color was in the middle of a love triangle, voodoo was a natural element in this patently American opera. It must be noted that, although this was not a "black" show centered around a Negro-oriented story-line, the favorite act with both the critics and the audience was the second. The playgoers were most enthralled and entertained by the spectacle of the exotic primitive Negroes practicing their other-wordly "devil worship," as the creators so incorrectly called it.[10] Even in the context of a serious, "native opera," the patrons were most comfortable while watching the stage Negro do what the stage Negro does best: chanting, singing, and dancing to primal, racially-idiosyncratic rhythms.

Deep River lasted just four weeks. Perhaps the playgoing public found its score to be too opera-like for its tastes; the patrons of the opera may have judged its story-line as too Broadway-oriented; obviously the desired but ever-elusive middle ground was never reached. Furthermore, in an atmosphere in which commercialized fluff was the order of the day, in which even the most serious of dramas usually provided their audiences with a comic relief scene, the relatively humorless Deep River, with its

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tragic ending, must have been a somewhat depressing evening for many theatregoers. The show's failure perhaps lay not so much in its own shortcomings, but due to the fact that as a serious, mature work, it offered more than the Broadway patrons could appreciate at that time.

Surely the creators of Show Boat, which would premiere fifteen months later, were keeping a close watch on Deep River, and learning from the earlier show's mistakes. Though similar in theme and tone, Show Boat was imbued with several commercial imperatives Deep River avoided either by choice or negligence.

Show Boat, with book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, and music by Jerome Kern, is considered a landmark work in the American musical theatre due to several of its facets. Because the creators of Deep River insisted their show was an opera, Show Boat gets deserved credit for being the first major American musical drama. At the time of its premiere, in late 1927, the integration of the book and songs in most musicals was, in a word, weak; often the two elements seemed to be at odds; the afore-mentioned inept linking of the two as shown in the case of Shuffle Along was typical of the majority of Broadway shows. Show Boat's songs and production numbers truly sprang from the book.

Show Boat avoided the silly, mindless plot which was standard for a Broadway show, and dealt with more serious, adult themes, such as gambling addiction, desertion, and miscegenation. Moreover, the characters had real depth, and in some cases, undergo a development, which heretofore was practically unheard of on the commercial musical stage. Most pertinent to this study, Show Boat, as had its precursor, Deep River, chose not to portray its Negro characters in a ridiculous light.

Show Boat was based on Edna Ferber's best-selling novel. Upon reading the book shortly after its August 1926 publication, Jerome Kern approached Ferber about obtaining the "dramatico-musical" rights to the piece. The novelist initially felt that a musicalization of her book was preposterous, but after a series of meetings with Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, Ferber relented, signing a contract with the songwriting team on November 17, 1926.[11] Although Kern

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and Hammerstein had not as of yet secured a written agreement with a producer to mount the work, it was a foregone conclusion that the proposed show would be produced by Florenz Ziegfield. Because of a stipulation in the contract with Ferber, Hammerstein and Kern had a mere forty-four days--until January 1, 1927--to finish the adaptation. Miraculously, they crafted an acceptable first draft which satisfied the stipulation.[12]

Before he had even completed the score, Kern made several trips uptown to Paul Robeson's Harlem apartment to play some songs from the show for Robeson. Robeson was eager to play the featured role of the black roustabout Joe, but after a series of postponements which pushed the show's opening back to the last week of 1927, Robeson was forced to withdraw due to prior engagements.[13] Robeson soon got his wish to play Joe, however, when, just eighteen weeks after the triumphant New York opening, he essayed the role in the British mounting of Show Boat which made its debut on May 3, 1928, at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane.[14]

Show Boat opened on Broadway on December 27, 1927. The story begins "about 1890"[15] on a Mississippi River show boat, the "Cotton Blossom." The plot focuses on two sets of lovers: Steve and Julie, the resident male and female leads on the show boat, and Magnolia Hawks, the daughter of the couple who own and operate the floating theatre, and Gaylord Ravenal, "of the Tennessee Ravenals," a handsome rake with a shadowy past and a penchant for gambling. Steve and Julie are forced to quit the show when it is learned that Julie is of mixed blood; Magnolia, despite the wishes of her prim and prissy mother, Parthenia, assumes Julie's roles; the reluctant Ravenal is drafted as the leading man simply because he has the prototypical leading man's good looks.

Act Two sifts to Chicago during the 1893 World's Fair. Ravenal, having hit a streak of bad luck, deserts Magnolia and their baby daughter, Kim. In need of a job, Magnolia goes to the Trocadero, where a singer is needed to replace the incumbent, who is unreliable due to a drinking problem. The soon-to-be-fired singer is Julie, who, ironically, had taught Magnolia the "coon songs" which Magnolia

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sang as an audition piece in order to get the job from which Julie was to be released.

The play receives the standard Broadway musical's "happy ending." The final scene is set in the "present day"--1927. Ravenal, making a brief return to the "Cotton Blossom," guided more by morbid curiosity than any nostalgic urge, is reunited with Magnolia and their daughter, Kim, who is now a celebrated Broadway performer.

Show Boat proved to be one of the most highly critically-acclaimed and popular shows of its era. The reviewers duly noted its innovations, filling their critiques with superlatives. The original production ran for 572 performances; it is performed by many opera companies throughout the United States and the world; four motion pictures have been made from it.

One reason for Show Boat's success was Hammerstein's ability to combine its serious story-line with tried-and-true commercial imperatives. Comic relief scenes, so glaringly absent in Deep River, were placed strategically in the Show Boat libretto. The ever-popular big song-and-dance production number featuring the Negro performers, used only in the elongated second-act voodoo rite in Deep River, is used in several instances in Show Boat. The love triangle in Deep River incites a minimum of interest from the audience, due to its cardboard characterizations, which only serve to emphasize the plot's basic triteness; Hammerstein provides not only more fully-rounded stage personages, but two sets of lovers, in case the audience does not find one of the pairs compelling.

Although the show's creators abstained from scapegoating their black characters, some preconceptions of the African-American which were so deeply ingrained into the mainstream consciousness found their way onto the stage. Blacks were still confined to menial labor; twenty-five years after the Emancipation they still address white males as "Mars'," a dialect-shortened form of "Master."

Two of the most overworked stereotypes are employed in Show Boat: the overweight, handkerchief-headed cook, played in the original production by an actress who called herself "Aunt

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Jemima,"[16] and the "tragic mulatto," as embodied by Julie, yet another offshoot of the original, Boucicault's Zoe.

While basically drawing upon stereotypes, librettist Hammerstein did manage to provide his black characters with a certain dignity. In the show's major leit-motif, the song "Ol' Man River," the "Cotton Blossom"'s man-of-all-work, Joe, while singing about that all-knowing stream that just keeps rolling along, is in part describing himself, the eyes and ears of the showboat. The cook, Queenie, exercises the carte blanche enjoyed by only the chief house servant to "sass back" to the white folks; early in the play, when the villainous Pete calls her "nigger," she responds, with impunity, in an equally disrespectful manner which would probably have gotten a black male lynched.[17]

Julie, though another "tragic mulatto," whose love for a white man is undermined by a scant amount of African blood, is not, unlike her fictional ancestors, reduced to spouting a series of self-pitying, self-degrading platitudes because of her situation; rather, her condition is dramatized--though much too briefly, and in subordination to Magnolia's plight--in the second act, by means of showing her descent into alcoholism. Hammerstein, perhaps consciously avoiding another negative stereotype of blacks, refrained from incorporating Julie's descent into prostitution which took place in Ferber's novel.

Regardless of Hammerstein and Kern's goal of fashioning a serious musical play, they were aware of the commercial dictates which had to be adhered to. Concerning the Negroes in the cast, one of the dictates was obvious: what would a show featuring black performers, which was set in the Deep South of 1890, be like without some good, old-fashioned, plantation-style numbers? The creators of the show complied by writing in two "shuffle" numbers for the blacks to perform in Act One.

Hammerstein dramatizes how the Negro is used as the exotic "Other" and how black performers had to grudgingly accept those degrading roles. In the first scene of the second act, at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, a "Dahomey Village," eerily reminiscent of the true-life one which employed the adolescent George Walker and Bert

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Williams, has been set up, employing performers from New York who must act like "Savage Dahomeys." From the inside of cages they make teeth-baring, gorilla-like gestures to the whites on the outside, prompting fear in the Fair-goers:

Whites

Don't let us stay here
For though they may play here
They're acting vicious ---
They might get malicious;
And though I'm not fearful
I'll not get a spearfull
So you'd better show me
The way from Dahomey.
(CROWD exits in fear)

Dahomeys

We're glad to see them go;
We're glad to see those white folks go;
We've had enough
Of all this stuff---
We wish we 'd never come here
To join a Dahomey show!

We are wild folks
When de ballyhoos bawl
But we're mild folks
When we're back in de kraal,
'Cause our home
Just ain't Dahomey at all,
Oh, take me back today
To Avenue A.[18]

Show Boat, like Deep River, was the work of sensitive white creators who had some sympathy toward and understanding of the black man as both a human and a performer; the success of the former, as we can discern with the hindsight of historical perspective, helped plant in the minds of theatregoers the germ of an idea that the black musical performer and the minstrel-like "coon" were not necessarily the same.

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Green Pastures, Four Saints in Three Acts, and The Voodoo Macbeth

Three shows, none of which was a musical comedy in the accepted definition of the term, proved to be indirect, but ultimately important agents in moving the black musical performer farther away from the latter-day minstrel images and toward more substantive portrayals of African-Americans on the musical stage.

Marc Connelly's Green Pastures [to be called Pastures], which was "suggested by Roark Bradford's Southern sketches, Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun,"[19] represented both an advancement and a backward step in the evolution of the black musical. Though technically not a musical, but a play-with-music, its episodic structure, cast of nearly one-hundred performers, reliance on traditional minstrel images, and the usage of twenty-four popular Negro spirituals give it so close a resemblance to the standard Broadway musical that all that is missing are the well-choreographed, Harlem cabaret-style production numbers.

Much has been written on whether Pastures was a well-intended folk-play which praised the virtues of the depth and simplicity of the American Negro's faith in Christianity, or was just another condescending look at the black race which focused yet again on the uneducated, superstitious, dialect-speaking element without offering any countering, more positive images of African-Americans. On one hand, Connelly's intentions appear to have some merits; in adapting several stories from the Old Testament into a black setting, by making the biblical characters Negroes, and depicting God as an African-American, Connelly was opening himself up to a possible backlash from those who might deem the portrayal of personages from the annals of Judeo-Christian mythology as Negroes--and illiterate Louisiana Negroes at that--surely was an act of blasphemy. The concept of a black man playing the role of God, during the Depression era, when the inferiority of the black race was a given, was radical. That the other Old Testament figures, who have been traditionally painted and portrayed as having Nordic features--despite having lived in a part of the world inhabited by swart-skinned, curly-haired people--would be played by Negroes

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showed a huge stretch of the imagination on Connelly's part.

Conversely, in choosing which segment of the black race to use in his play, Connelly opted for the minstrel-like, lower-class Negroes. Once again the educated and hard-working members of the black middle-class were ignored in favor of Negroes toward whom white audiences could feel a vast superiority.

The same elements that attracted theatregoers to the Neo-Minstrel entertainments proved to be magnetic for Pastures. Twenty-four traditional Negro spirituals were used, serving as mood music or functioning like the choral odes of Greek tragedy, linking the scenes. Despite his oft-proclaimed intentions not to lampoon the African-American race, Connelly could not resist frequent borrowings from the handbook of minstrel "coon" images. In describing the black angels in Heaven, he wrote "they look and act like a company of happy Negroes at a fish fry."[20] Upon God's descent into Louisiana, He discovers the stock roster of stereotypes doing what "coon" caricatures are infamous for: engaging in dice-shooting, razor-fighting, and general debauchery.[21]

Connelly wasn't above using highly perjorative terms in his play. One character actually calls God "Liver Lips";[22] Pharaoh calls Aaron and Moses "baboons";[23] in his description of a Brute Negro named Flatfoot, the author wrote that he was "a tall, black [my emphasis], wicked-looking buck";[24] Connelly used the adjective "black" in this sense as bad and ugly, in keeping with the contention that a black person's desirability and worth as a human was in inverse proportion to his African characteristics.

The critics, perhaps because they were so pleased to see the standard Neo-Minstrel "darkies" in such an unconventional venue, were lavish in their praise for the play. Many actually defended Connelly by making the highly-debateable claim that the author never stooped to being patronizing or condescending to his black characters. Richard Watts, Jr., called it "one of the loftiest achievements of the American theatre."[25] Brooks Atkinson concurred, saying "the beauty of the writing, the humility of the performance, put the theatre to its highest use."[26] Arthur Pollock, perhaps unaware that he was expressing his pleasure at seeing the

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stage Negroes in their proverbial "place," wrote "it is the gentlest of all plays about the Negro and his ignorance and superstition."[27]

Dubose Heyward, himself a white dramatist who used the ignorant and superstitious element of the black race as subject-matter for his own folk plays, made a pair of highly dubious statements about the show in an article in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle of March 9, 1930. Concerning a show which can be justifiably viewed as a revamped, disguised version of minstrelsy, he wrote "[Pastures] marks another step in the evolution of the Negro play." About the speech patterns of the black characters, which was the basic stage Negro dialect, Heyward made the absurd statement that "the dialect has been almost eliminated."

There were some isolated protests from members of the black intelligentsia over the depiction of blacks in Pastures, but, similar to the lack of a concerted backlash against the explosion of "coon" songs one-third of a century before, no organized opposition to the show and its images was mounted. Surely the black performers were not up in arms about it; the show provided jobs for hundreds of black actors and singers during the harsh early days of the Depression.

Furthermore, it must be said for the black performers of the era, that they could take roles with questionable images, and play them with such a dignity that many of the intended denigrating aspects were rendered sterile. One only has to look at the film versions of Broadway shows such as Pastures and Cabin in the Sky, which ostensibly lampooned some facets of African-American life, and marvel at how the performers refused to fall into the trap of playing the underlying negative aspects, thus, never allowing themselves to become self-depricating.

Perhaps the best thing that can be said about Pastures is that it was the first play in a wave of black shows which would be based on something other than the cliché sources for black theatrical works. This offbeat adaptation paved the way for equally-atypical sources for Negro-themed story-lines, such as the plays of William Shakespeare, the operettas of Gilbert & Sullivan, and other European-derived operas, one of which was Four Saints in Three

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Acts, with its libretto by the eccentric American expatriate, Gertrude Stein, and music by another American-born artist who had emigrated to Paris, Virgil Thomson.

Though intentionally vague in its meaning, and harboring no illusions about becoming a runaway commercial success, Four Saints in Three Acts [to be called Saints] took the black musical one step further from the usual, plantation, Jimtown or Harlem settings. Its language was unconventional, in keeping with the idiosyncratic, non-sequitur style favored by its librettist, Stein. Opening February 20, 1934, for a limited, four-week engagement, Saints was by no means the biggest commercial hit of the season, but was one of the most talked-about shows. John Anderson called it a "brainscrambling show . . . with an all-Negro cast [and] all nonsensical dialogue";[28] he also noted "its reputation as a freak [sic] made its premiere last night a notable event on Broadway."

Saints is ostensibly about Saint Theresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola, and their disciples. True to Stein's usual style, the libretto was formless. The story was confusing to practically everyone; the show's director, John Houseman, admitted that after having read the libretto and hearing the score several times, he still needed the authors to tell him what the show was about.[29] However, the confusion caused by Stein's libretto was offset by Thomson's music, which the critics unanimously proclaimed to be outstanding.

The fact that Four Saints in Three Acts--which, incidentally, had four acts--performed by an all-black cast, was initially assumed to be an outgrowth of Stein's absurdist nature, perhaps a combination gimmick, private joke, or a nebulous commentary of sorts. As it had been for Connelly in Pastures there was always the possibility of controversy because of the casting of African-Americans to portray certain "white" religious personages. However, the idea for having the Spanish saints and their followers played by blacks came from the composer, Thomson, who cited the quality of their voices, their clarity of speech, and their graceful, dignified way of moving as the reasons behind his unusual choice.

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After the opera completed its scheduled four weeks at the 44th Street Theatre, it moved to the Empire State Theatre for another fortnight.

Although it established no standards or begat any aesthetic trends in the black musical, Saints was the second link in a lengthening chain of musicals and music-oriented dramas which originated from non-black sources.

Like Green Pastures, the Voodoo Macbeth--as the Orson Welles/Federal Theatre production was generally referred to--was not technically a musical, but its episodic scope, huge cast,and the heavy reliance upon the voodoo-informed singing, chanting, drumming, and dancing to convey the story makes its labelling as a musical, a play-with-music, a musical drama, or whatever, a moot point. For the purpose of this survey, it will be considered a musical drama; without the afore-mentioned musical-oriented features, the show would have come off as merely a cast of black actors mouthing Shakespeare, instead of the unique, exciting transposition of the Bard's play to an Afro-Caribbean milieu that it was.

Produced in 1936 by the Harlem unit of the Federal Theatre project, Voodoo Macbeth once again showed the theatregoing public that African-Americans, in a music-oriented mode, could stretch beyond the restrictions of the Neo-Minstrel and pseudo-Williams & Walker entertainments.

In planning his all-black edition of one of the most popular and frequently-produced plays by the English-speaking world's pre-eminent dramatist, Orson Welles, just twenty years old and making his directoral debut, decided against the declamatory, often unnatural-sounding attempts at recreating Elizabethan speech of which so many productions have been guilty. However, he did not allow his actors to play down to their audience by adapting a decidedly non-classical speech or dialect; instead, he met Shakespeare on a middle ground, striving to maintain the poetry of the language without the stentorian delivery.

Macbeth opened at Harlem's Lafayette Theatre April 14, 1936, a night on which a mob of 10,000 gathered in an attempt to get tickets.[31] The show was an immense source of pride for New York

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City blacks; during its 64-performance run in Harlem; not one ticket went unsold in the 1,233-seat Lafayette Theatre.[32] After its uptown triumph, Macbeth moved downtown to Broadway for eleven scheduled performances at the Adelphi Theatre, prior to its engagement in, of all places, Dallas, Texas, as part of that state's centennial celebration.[33] By the time Voodoo Macbeth had completed its national tour of W. P. A. theatres in Dallas, Chicago, Detroit, and several other major cities, over 100,000 had seen its road version.[34] Once, in Indianapolis, when Maurice Ellis, the actor playing Macbeth, became too ill to perform, Welles, wearing blackface, essayed the role.

Set on a Caribbean island, not unlike Haiti, Welles' Macbeth was a black dictator, not unlike the Haitian revolutionary general/dictator Henri Christophe. One might argue that Welles' grafting of the voodoo theme onto Shakespeare's text played upon one of the basic stereotypes about Negroes; this was indeed the fear of many blacks when the nature of Welles' project was learned; the cast members assured the community that Negroes were not being lampooned in Macbeth. It must be said that voodoo, although a presumably obscure facet of the overall African-American experience, but a most important aspect of the daily lives of those who do believe in it, provided the necessary cultural departure to remove Macbeth from its original medieval Scottish setting and place it within a New World, black context.

In dealing with the text, Welles did not adapt Shakespeare's language; he, like most apt directors of Shakespeare's work, merely eliminated the obscure topical references. The only "tampering" with the text was the transforming of the speeches of the three witches into authentic voodoo chanting and singing, with the accompanying drumming and ritual dancing.[35]

Welles' Macbeth would be a test of the black actors' ability to perform in a serious manner, within a framework that could be construed by some as slightly stereotyped. If the black performer could acquit himself well in Shakespeare, then there was surely more to him than the mask of the minstrel clown would indicate. This fact was not lost upon Burns Mantle, who wrote:

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> To be playing Shakespeare within an iron shot of Broadway is something of an achievement for these Harlem actors. In their wildest dreams they never hoped to rise to any thing like that. Musical comedy and high-yaller [sic] revues were the best they expected.[36]

The critics were unanimous in their assessment that Voodoo Macbeth was not Shakespeare, per se, but an interesting derivation, or, as Burns Mantle termed it, "an amazing novelty."[37] The consensus was that its cast of over one-hundred actors, dancers, singers, and musicians did not capture the pure Shakespearean rhythms, but created their own unique variation. Many compared it to The Emperor Jones; most felt that it was a singular, worthwhile experiment by Harlem's black performers.

Still, in a vein similar to the one in which some critics took exception to the black musical creators' attempts at anything different, several critics made remarks about the Voodoo Macbeth which ranged from the racially insensitive to downright racist. Brooks Atkinson labelled it "the darktown version,"[38] hinting it was an illegitimate offspring of Shakespeare by calling it "a voodoo show suggested by the Macbeth legend."

John Mason Brown of the Evening Post and the critic from Variety cast aspersions on the black cast's collective intelligence by stating that the actors did not understand the play's language. Brown's venom could not be confined to just one negative, sarcastic critique; he followed his initial review of April 15, 1936, with one just as sardonic three days later.[39] Arthur Pollock compared the Harlem actors to "apt children" playing at Shakespeare, and concluded his review by saying the show "ought to prove as popular as a Harlem night club act."[40]

Even more so than Green Pastures and Four Saints in Three Acts, the Voodoo Macbeth was instrumental in the trend toward black musicals being based on sources other than those thought of in connection with African-Americans, and the resultant breaking away from the minstrel mold. Pastures, though indirectly based on an

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improbable source--the Bible's Old Testament, by the way of Bradford's Ol' Man Adam and His Chilluns--was, nonetheless, in part a minstrel entertainment in a newer, somewhat more dignified disguise. Saints was undermined as a potential serious black musical by Stein 's idiosyncratic, nonsense language, which was simply too esoteric for most tastes. Any claim that Porgy and Bess might have as the first serious black musical drama is weakened by its creators' insistence upon dredging up the catalogue of minstrelsy-informed images.

Welles' Voodoo Macbeth, with its infusion of a strong Afro-Caribbean musical format which did not compromise Shakespeare's text, can stake a legitimate claim as the first serious all-black musical drama--albeit one adapted from a white source, and one which does not adhere strictly to the basic Broadway musical formula. This production paved the way for more conventional black musicals which were based on such Europeans sources as Gilbert & Sullivan, George Bizet, and Shakespeare, again.

Porgy and Bess

The first work written specifically for the commercial musical theatre "about Negroes among themselves, in serious situations, not about Negroes entertaining whites,"[41] was Porgy and Bess, a 1935 collaboration between Dubose Heyward, and the songwriting Gershwin brothers, composer/arranger George and lyricist Ira.

Written as "an American folk opera," the source for Porgy and Bess was Heyward's best-selling 1926 novel, Porgy, about a group of poor blacks living on Charleston's Catfish Row. George Gershwin, having read the novel and being impressed by it, contacted Heyward about the possibility of turning it into an opera. Heyward expressed an interest in Gershwin's plan, but told the composer that the novel had been optioned to the Theatre Guild; Heyward and his wife Dorothy had been commissioned to adapt Porgy into a folk drama, to be presented for the Guild's 1927-1928 season. Furthermore, Al Jolson had been discussing a plan with the Guild officials about the adaptation of Porgy into an operetta of a tone much lighter than that of the novel, with Jolson playing the title role in blackface.[42] The

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folk drama version of Porgy was a hit, opening October 10, 1927, and running for 367 performances. Fortunately for Gershwin, the proposed Jolson blackface operetta never materialized.

Before Porgy and Bess, George Gershwin (born Jacob Gershvin) was one of the most successful composers in the world, from both a critical and financial standpoint. Having gained fame for composing the music for George White's Scandals from 1920 to 1924, Gershwin attained international acclaim in 1924 with his jazz concert, Rhapsody In Blue, which, in effect, sanctioned jazz, a musical mode created chiefly by black piano players in New Orleans brothels, as an art-form which could be performed not just as the backdrop for Negro dances, but in long, intricate concert passages reminiscent of the European classical music greats. Rhapsody in Blue brought jazz into the concert halls and brought Gershwin over one quarter of a million dollars.[43]

Once certain that Jolson's planned operetta would never be made, Gershwin and Heyward again discussed the prospects of Porgy as a native opera. In late 1933, they signed a contract with the Theatre Guild, which had the rights to the musical adaptation; Gershwin began composing the score in February 1934; a few months after that he moved to Charleston to absorb the local color and let it find its way into his musical idioms; by early 1935 he had finished the composition of the score, and then spent the next several months orchestrating it.[44] Though labelling his work-in-progress a "native opera," Gershwin was gearing it toward the Broadway theatregoers, rather than "just the wealthy few,"[45] the elitists who patronized the opera.

Due to Gershwin's stature as an artist, and the relative popularity of both the novel and dramatic versions of Porgy, the opera was one of the most highly-anticipated events of the season. The major New York City dailies sent two critics to the October 10, 1935, opening night: both their drama and music reviewers.

Heyward wrote the libretto and co-authored the lyrics with Ira Gershwin. The director was the same artist who had been at the helm of the drama Porgy, Rouben Mamoulian, an Armenian who had been born in the Caucasus and trained at the Moscow Art Theatre.[46]

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The role of Porgy was played by Todd Duncan, who was taking a leave of absence as the head of Howard University's music department.[47] Anne Brown portrayed Bess; featured in the cast was John Rosamond Johnson, doing a comic turn as the shyster Attorney Frazier. Paul Robeson, who at that time was living and working out of London, wanted badly to play the role of Porgy, but was unable because of numerous engagements in Europe. Due to the vocal demands placed upon the singers, the show was double-cast.

The reviews were for the most part positive, raves from Burns Mantle of the Daily News and Arthur Pollock of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, who wrote that the opera was "the sort of thing that Pulitzer Prizes are not good enough for."[48] Even the least enthusiastic reviews had plenty of positive comments. The music of Gershwin, as expected, was highly praised; the predictable comments on the singing and sense of rhythm of the black cast members were made; the production values, the staging, and the acting were unanimously praised. Porgy and Bess, an anxiously-awaited show which had garnered a positive response from the critics, seemed destined for a long run.

Porgy and Bess, at the time of its 1935 premiere, arguably represented the ultimate achievement in black musicals in terms of the separate crafting of the music, libretto, and lyrics, and their integration into a whole. The outstanding production values and a superb cast of performers more than did justice to the well-wrought piece. However, one area in which the creators of the opera cannot be cited for making any innovations was in the images portrayed of Charleston's blacks. For a show which prided itself on having given the theatregoing public something different and beyond what had been done before, it chose to provide the audience with the same illiterate stage Negroes languishing in abject poverty, and making no effort to better their lot.

All the offensive stereotypes are present; the excellence of the writing may have added even more force to the stereotypes in the eyes of some viewers. To see these images presented in the obvious cardboard characterizations of the Neo-Minstrel shows was

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one thing; to see them in the context of an otherwise well-crafted, serious work was another.

Heyward's libretto is an anthology of the stereotypes. The first vivid image occurs shortly after the curtain. Sportin' Life, "the cokey from Harlem,"[49] commences a series of movements, described thusly:

> Sportin' Life and a half dozen couples [are] dancing in a slow, almost hypnotic rhythm. Sportin' Life is sounding off a rhythmic chant, and the dancers join in lazily.[50]

The image conveyed is that of the lazy Negroes on the almost-deserted Catfish Row moving to the voodoo-like chant of the local vice lord, the pimp and cocaine-dealing Sportin' Life. In an understated manner, the Negro's supposed propensity for being spiritually possessed--even in the rather mild instance suggested by the stage directions--and his penchant for following any charismatic charlatan are dramatized.

The afore-mentioned image was so subtle, and so poetically rendered, that a lot of the racial insult is lost. However, subtlety is cast aside as Catfish Row comes to life; the remainder of its inhabitants enter, opening a Pandora's Box of negative images. The ubiquitous dice game breaks out. The denizens of the Row are obviously the standard dirt-poor, carefree, lower-class Negroes. Regardless of the depth and humanity that some of them will show later in the play, at first glance the four principal characters appear to be drawn in a denigrating light. Porgy is a crippled beggar, on his knees on his goat-drawn cart.[51] Before her first appearance, Bess is described by another woman as "that liquor guzzlin' slut."[52] Crown is the classic "Brute Negro," the first black villain on the commercial musical stage, a descendant of Shakespeare's blackamoor Aaron, and similarly seductive in his potency. Sportin' Life, as mentioned before, is the purveyor of "happy dust"--cocaine --and in town to vend his drugs and recruit some of the more comely females for prostitution in New York.

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Despite the good intentions and high pretensions of its creators, librettist Heyward was not above stooping to use one of the most trite images associated with the stage Negro for his opening incident: Crown, in a drunken rage over a turn in a dice game, stabs a fellow named Robbins to death.[53] Heyward did bring a bit of innovation to the moment--the instrument of death was not the usual straight razor, but rather, a cotton hook.

Next follows a scene in which the overzealous manner with which the stage Negro expresses his devotion to Christianity is depicted. The author makes a rather macabre commentary on that zeal: the all-encompassing fervor with which blacks honor their God is counterpointed by the abject poverty their deity has consigned them to; it is as if He is mocking their devotion to Him by making them the butt of one cruelest of jokes: He doles out, in terms of earthly material goods, the least to these unlearned Negroes, the people who, with their blind and unwavering faith, love Him the most.

The Christian's God is not the only symbol of white power before whom they cower. A room full of Negroes become meek and mute when a white detective, flanked by two patrolmen, enter, in search of Crown. In lieu of Crown, the whites drag off a fellow named Peter as human collateral, to be held until they apprehend Crown himself. No one utters a word of protest.[54]

One shared aspect of the folk dramas, musicals, novels, and stories written by white authors about blacks is that the poverty in which these Negroes invariably live is both romanticized and sentimentalized. Lacking neither the desire, intelligence, nor self-discipline to better their condition, the Negroes of folk fiction and drama are complacent about, and in some cases, happy with their poverty. This emphasis on the part of the white writers on their black characters' poverty stems from the racist notion that being poor, ignorant, and socially and politically impotent is the black man's natural lot. The African-American, who in the eyes of the racist is a no-thing, should have or want nothing. This attitude is exemplified in Porgy's song "I Got Plenty 0' Nuttin'." He has nothing, wants nothing; to languish in Nature is good enough for him. Aside

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from furthering the notion that the Negro is non-deserving or desirous of material goods, it reaffirms the thought of the black man as being closer to Nature, or, by implication, closer to an animal state. The song serves as a catalogue for the stereotype of the childish, carefree hedonist who has no concept of the future and therefore no need to prepare for it. Porgy's simple desire for the most basic and free commodities in life are summed up in the song's final line: "Got my gal, got my Lawd, got my song!"[55]

The Negro's religiosity is once again subject to ridicule as the denizens of Catfish Row pray for the sick and delirious Bess.[56] As written, the unrestrained emotion the Negroes let loose to their God who has obviously neglected them, burlesques the intense but sincere devotion traditionally shown by many black Christians; this overstated prayer scene was a staple of the minstrel and Neo-Minstrel shows, and often was featured in the folk dramas of the 1920s and '30s.

The overzealous religious stage Negro is by definition a superstitious stage Negro. The same set of Negroes, now petitioning God for salvation from the oncharging hurricane, hear a knock on the door and assume it is Death, black hood, scythe, scepter, and all, paying them that last visit. Several men prop themselves against the door to keep Death out; however, Crown will not be denied entrance and refuge from the storm. The Brute Negro of literature and drama, and the real-life persons from which he was drawn, have traditionally been the source of fascination, fear, and a convoluted reverence from blacks and whites alike, particularly in the segregated South. To the Negroes he was a source of embarrassment for his uncouth, undisciplined manner; he inspired fear in his fellow blacks, inasmuch as his deeds could trigger a backlash from whites which would put the black community at risk; he was a bully, who, if crossed, would not hesitate to react violently, regardless of whether the transgressor was white or black. He served as a source of perverse pride for the black community: the whites, knowing of his violent nature, were less prone to subject him to the niggling little abuses with which they harassed the other blacks. The Brute Negro was a constant reminder to the whites that there was at least

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one person in the black community who would not turn the other cheek. To whites he was a "boogeyman"; he was irrational, placing absolutely no value on his own life, and even less on the lives of others. Often his fate was dealt to him by a lynch mob, but, never going passively, he often took several of his white antagonists' lives in exchange for his one.

That Crown has no fear of the local authorities is not enough; he claims to have no fear of the ultimate authority. Crown scoffs at the superstitious Negroes, verbalizing what the librettist has been slyly hinting all along with his opposing images of super-religious but super-poor Negroes: "Gawd's laughin' at you."[57] He chastises them for having a master/slave relationship with the Deity, declaring himself as not a subordinate, but an equal to the Lord. "Gawd an' me is frien'!"[58]

No cardboard cutout of evil, the complex Crown, looking to put in a good word for himself with the Almighty, dashes into the storm to do what all the others huddled in the shack were afraid to try: to rescue Clara, who is stranded in the hurricane. Before crashing into the winds with the Brute Negro's requisite reckless abandon, Crown shouts: "All right, Big Frien', we're on for another bout!"[59]

Show Boat marked perhaps the first instance in the American commercial musical theatre where the characters underwent any discernable growth or transformation; Porgy and Bess, though stooping to the usage of the traditional stereotypes, represents the first time black characters on the musical stage undergo any metamorphoses, or are drawn with any depth. Porgy, who has gone through most of his life lonely and loveless, is transformed by his relationship with Bess. Bess, after having fallen incongruously in love with the indigent, crippled Porgy, becomes a caring person she begins to have interactions with the members of the community who had previously regarded her as a wanton woman; a mutual respect grows between her and them.

Crown, ever aware of the effect his presence has on others, always striving to gain control of whatever situation he is in, knowing of the awe he inspires in blacks and whites, is no villain drawn with melodramatic shallowness. Like Shakespeare's Aaron, he

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revels in his evil, yet is able to call upon a perversely seductive charm when it suits his purpose. Sportin' Life's motives and his method for obtaining them are made clear throughout. Envisioning himself as the master of a stable of Harlem whores, with Bess as the head of his harem, he uses a combination of patience, "sweet talk," and, ultimately, drugs, as a means to spirit Bess away to New York. He makes a low-keyed assault upon her resistance; when he finally wins her over, it is believable; the author has crafted the deconstruction of her will by showing that Sportin' Life's pursuit of her has been as persistent as it was patiently gradual.

The Brute Negro of drama and fiction invariably dies by the violence that is major part of his life; usually it is at the hands of a white lynch mob, but the dictates of this drama have necessitated that Porgy be the one who kills Crown. The burly roustabout, still a fugitive from justice, dares a return to Catfish Row to reclaim his Bess from Porgy; the two men grapple; Porgy, rather incredibly, given Crown's strength, and experience in and lust for combat, kills the athletic, larger man, having taken Crown's own knife from him.[60]

While Porgy is in jail, Sportin' Life seizes the opportunity to make a final assault on Bess' will. Her fickleness already having been established, the pimp tries to lure her with cocaine. At first she spurns him, but soon it becomes evident she has by now exhausted her personal reserve of virtue; two sniffs of "happy dust" later, the once-reformed Bess prepares to return to a life of degradation; she will be on that boat leaving for New York. The opera's final image, though touching, is not the most flattering for either the black male or female: Porgy, setting out in his goat-drawn cart on the virtually impossible thousand-mile journey to New York, in search of a woman who deserted him for a cocaine-supplying pimp.

Given its glowing reviews, Gershwin's superb score, the excellent performances, and a certain charm the characters were able to convey in spite of the stereotyped images and situations, Porgy and Bess was a surprizing failure. Perhaps an operatic show about blacks with a downbeat ending was just too depressing for the Broadway audience, which was trying to persevere through the Great

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Depression. Perhaps, despite the inclusion of the minstrel-based images, albeit from a new, more "refined" point of view, the mainstream theatregoers were still not ready to make an unqualified hit out of any show in which the onstage Negroes were there to do more than just entertain whites. Perhaps the combination of non-comedic Negroes and an opera score sounded too pretentious to some potential patrons. Perhaps for a combination of these reasons, Porgy and Bess managed only a disappointing 124 showings on Broadway; the subsequent tour failed to recoup the Theatre Guild's $50,000 investment.[61,62]

Porgy and Bess would be the last major work for George Gershwin, who would die on July 11, 1937, from an inoperable brain tumor which had been discovered only two days earlier.

The Mikados: Swing and Hot

The developing trend of adapting European classics into all-black musicals was continued with the dueling Mikados of 1939. The first of the black Mikados emanated from the Negro unit of Chicago's Federal Theatre Project. The success of the Voodoo Macbeth sent the Federal Theatre's directors on a search for other "white" plays which could be adapted into black stories. During the course of interviewing numerous black actors, Harry Minturn, the artistic director of Chicago's Federal Theatre group, learned that many of them had appeared in various productions of Gilbert & Sullivan's The Mikado.[63] After weighing the possibilities of an all-black Mikado, Minturn doubted his Negro performers could play the Japanese roles in the British operetta as it was written, so he changed the locale to a South Sea Island. As Orson Welles had done in his production of Macbeth, Minturn decided against "Negro-izing" the dialogue or lyrics; he stayed with the basic text, although he made the necessary cuts and updated some of the lyrics. The arranger/composer Gentry Warden was hired to re-arrange five of the songs into a jazz or "swing" idiom; hence, the adaptation was renamed The Swing Mikado. Opening September 25, 1938, at Chicago's Great Northern Theatre, it ran for twenty-two weeks, where it was seen by over a quarter of a million people, breaking all

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attendance records for that house.[64] The sale of Gilbert & Sullivan records enjoyed a resultant surge in the Chicago area. The newspaper reviews, for the most part, were positive; the major complaint of the critics was that the show had not been made "Negro" enough, and that not enough "swing" had been added to the score.[65] As could be expected, Broadway producers clamored for the rights to move the show to New York, with young Michael Todd as perhaps the most ardent suitor. Rather than sell the show to an independent producing entity, the Federal Theatre decided to retain the rights to the Chicago production and transfer intact to Broadway. Since so many of their presentations had operated on a deficit, the Federal Theatre had no plans of relinquishing such a huge money-maker. Upon hearing of the transfer to Broadway, Todd, among others, became enraged, charging that the government, under the auspices of the Federal Theatre, was entering into an unfair competition with private enterprise. Todd's assertion was echoed by a large number of Broadway impresarios.

Not to be outdone, Todd began laying the groundwork for his all-black version of The Mikado, striving to prepare it quickly enough so that his opening night would not be too far behind Minturn's production's Broadway debut.

Todd, who had had a fascination With The Mikado ever since he saw it as a child in his native Minneapolis, produced the earliest vestige of The Hot Mikado as an all-white "tab" show on the vaudeville circuit in the late 1930s.[66] Hence, he was aimed with a full-fledged concept with which to compete with Minturn's production. Despite his later start, Todd did have certain advantages. Having seen several performances of the popular but flawed Chicago Mikado, he had a good idea of the pitfalls to be avoided in his adaptation, and he knew which innovations were needed. As a private producer with access to a huge pool of backers, Todd's budget would be much bigger. The Chicago Mikado was using the original cast of the Illinois production, whose talents ranged from the competent professionals down to the semi-professionals and novices; Todd had the best of the roster of black Broadway musical artists from whom to pick.

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Todd was well aware that many observers had judged The Swing Mikado, despite its title, to be short on "swing"; every number in Todd's version, which he called The Hot Mikado, was re-arranged into an uptempo jazz idiom by Charles L. Cooke. Ten copyists were immediately put on the payroll so that Cooke's adaptation could be notated on lead sheets as soon as possible. Todd and his aides scoured the cabarets of Manhattan for the best and least affected-sounding jazz players they could find; Todd was not satisfied until "he had rounded up the greatest aggregation of cats [sic] this side of Duke Ellington. Each musician was a solid virtuoso."[67]

Ironically, Todd's hiring of the copyists proved to be a waste of money. None of the accomplished musicians whom he had employed could read a note of music--they all played strictly by ear.[68] This instinctive playing by the orchestra added to the spontaneous-sounding effect Todd was seeking in the music. Several of the numbers which dragged, even when jazzed up, or did not blend in well with the show's Negro flavor, were eliminated. With his huge budget, Todd was able to provide his version with a much more stunning array of costumes and designs. Unlike Welles' Voodoo Macbeth and Minturn's Mikado, Todd was not above having a huge part of the lyrics and dialogue re-written "to fit the white producer's version of black jargon."[69]

Playing the title role was Bill Robinson, clad in a luminous, all-gold ensemble. Robinson, who choreographed his own dances, would often break character and give the audience his tip on the policy number of the day.[70]

The Swing Mikado opened March 1, 1939, at the New York Theatre; Todd's Hot Mikado made its debut slightly more than three weeks later on March 23, at the Broadhurst Theatre. Brooks Atkinson began his review of the Minturn edition by praising it and commenting on how its opening night had been a celebrity-laden event. However, the typical Brooks Atkinson racially-insensitive remarks found their way into his essay. "Leave it to the Negro minstrels to liven things up,"[71] he wrote, later describing the performers as "stomping out the rhythms with animal frenzy." Overall, he gave the show a favorable review, equating it with a

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minstrelized rendition of Gilbert & Sullivan, an opinion which was contradicted by Richard Watts, Jr.'s, comment that the performers had retained a "fidelity to the classical method of production."[72]

Richard Lockridge, who concurred with the Chicago critics, who had felt Minturn's Mikado was lacking in the "swing" department, opined that the cast had stuck too closely to the original concept of Gilbert & Sullivan. He wrote: "The odd thing about all this is that it does not make an odder Mikado."[73] He added "the acting has a marked tendency to congeal into dignity." Lockridge's sentiments were echoed by John Mason Brown. Brown's comments, such as "whenever The Swing Mikado is swung, it is grand good fun,"[74] and "for no good reason the book (though cut) is more or less traditionally played" could lead one to believe Brown wanted to see a more "colored" show by the black cast, whom he judged as incapable of doing justice to Gilbert's satire. Let it be noted how Brown wanted to see a minstrel-like show; Atkinson thought he had seen one; and, Watts expressed appreciation over the fact that he had not seen one.

As with the Chicago critics, the consensus complaint of the New York reviewers was that the show lacked its advertised "swing." Perhaps Arthur Pollock best summed up a common sentiment concerning the new wave of black music-oriented works derived from white classics:

> A freer use of the Negro vernacular would give it a greater raciness . . . instead the . . . colored players have been have directed to stick to the dictionary. They find it a chore.[75]

The reviews for Todd's show were, in a large sense, uniform; the critics, for the most part, gave The Hot Mikado reviews which were positive without being unqualified raves, although Burns Mantle called it one of the best of "all the colored shows of our time."[76] The critics agreed on several points, judging that because of The Hot Mikado's glossier production values and more accomplished cast, Todd's edition was more enjoyable than Minturn's. They

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also felt Todd's show enjoyed another huge advantage in that its jazzier score and more Negroid dialogue and lyrics made its story more accessible to general audiences.

The Federal Theatre sold its version to a commercial producer in April, when it moved to the 44th Street Theatre, across the street from the Broadhurst, which housed Todd's production. The Swing Mikado lasted 86 performances on Broadway; the Hot rendition managed three more than that, but enjoyed a much longer after-Broadway life when Todd moved it to the 1939 World's Fair at Flushing Meadows Park in Queens, New York, for three months, from whence it went on a national tour.

Swingin' the Dream

In an attempt to emulate the relative success of the Mikados, Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream was adapted to a more modern setting and given a jazz score. Opening a few months after the Mikados, on November 29, 1939, its jazz version, Swingin' the Dream, featured a collection of some of the finest talent in the entertainment world, black and white. Prominent in the cast were Louis Armstrong, Butterfly McQueen, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Bill Bailey (the older brother of Pearl Bailey), Maxine Sullivan, Juano Hernandez, and the Dandridge Sisters, featuring Dorothy Dandridge, who, in the 1950s, would become Hollywood's first black female sex symbol. Jimmy Van Heusen's score was played by Benny Goodman and his Sextet; Agnes de Mille choreographed the show. The costumes and set designs were gawdy and elaborate; the latter were based on Walt Disney cartoons. The production's overall lavishness rivaled that of Michael Todd's The Hot Mikado.

Swingin' the Dream, re-set in Louisiana of 1890, possessed the rarity of rarities for that time--an integrated cast. The critics did not appear to be bothered by this; their complaints focused on what they perceived as an imbalance in the libretto: at times the book remained too faithful to Shakespeare's original text, at others it burlesqued the Elizabethan language by requiring the cast to speak it with overbroad Southern accents. Most of the critics remarked on how the usage of performers who alternated between the Broadway

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and nightclub stages had proven too great a temptation for the adapters; so many specialty routines had been interpolated into Shakespeare's story-line that, as the reviewer from Variety noted, one had difficulty remembering if a Shakespearean adaptation or a Cotton Club floorshow was in progress.[77]

The show, which began with such high expectations amongst the theatre public, lasted but 13 performances. Perhaps the show's failure resulted from its attempt to impose the popular image of the Negro as song-and-dance entertainer onto Shakespeare's text, rather than follow, Orson Welles' lead from the Voodoo Macbeth and let the Elizabethan text represent a stretch for the black talent, and not a diversion, or an excuse to do nightclub turns in an offbeat venue.

While this new trend of adapting European classics into black musicals was commendable, inasmuch as they removed the black performers from the plantations and their Jimtown and Harlem stage adjuncts, a certain caveat came attached. The adapters, in changing the original setting and characters into a black context, called upon the most closely-related aspects of the culture of the people in the original work and that of the Negroes in the re-created version. The "exotic" features of Japanese culture were seen as parallel to the "other"-ness associated with peoples of African descent. Both the Japanese of Gilbert and the "South Sea Island" Negroes of Minturn and Todd showed a penchant for pomp, circumstance, and brilliantly colorful costumes which were decidedly not prominent features of the more staid Anglo-American culture. Welles' Voodoo Macbeth, well-intentioned as it was meant to be, found an accessible cultural link in the medieval Scottish superstition concerning ghosts and witches, and the matching Afro-Caribbean phenomenon of voodoo. Who better to people an adaptation of stories from The Bible's Old Testament than the most devoutly religious Christians of all: unlearned Deep South Negroes who had blindly accepted the religion of their slavemasters?

In a strong sense these adaptations--with the exception of Green Pastures--marked a vast step forward inasmuch as they placed the stage Negro in geographical settings different from the accustomed places; on the other hand, some aspects of the Negro's

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supposed exoticism or "other"-ness were heavily played upon, to serve as the most subtle of umbilical cords to the minstrel tradition and its attitudes which still informed the black musical, even in its changing guise.

The major dilemma for the adapters was as to how much of the Negro idiom should be imposed upon the text, the lyrics, and the music; how closely should the re-created version stick to the author's original intentions; in short, how "colored" did they dare make the show, how "classical" and "refined" should they allow it to remain? On one level, the producers would want to infuse a sufficient amount of the elements which were to be expected in an all-Negro show to ensure its popularity; on a perhaps higher level, the creators of these shows, in disdaining the tired old Neo-Minstrel and pseudo-Williams & Walker formulas, wanted to add a measure of innovation to the black musical, but had to be very careful as to how "different" they could make their shows.

The trend toward adapting European classics into black musicals would continue in the next decade, aiding greatly in the gradual deletion of the public's perception of the African-American musical performer as strictly a black-faced purveyor of "coon"-isms.

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CHAPTER SEVEN ENDNOTES

[1]The critic was identified only as "G. H."; the review, appeared in the November 5, 1929, edition of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

[2]New York Times, February 21, 1929.

[3]There was--and is--a standing anecdote amongst black male actors who have been cast in a prominent role in either a play, film, or television episode, upon receiving the final script, he should check to see on which page his character dies.

[4]In the plays, films, and novels which came during and after this trend, the death-to-the-outspoken-black-protagonist theme became so prominent as to degenerate into a clichéd, macabre metaphor; one cannot help but wonder if many of these authors actually condoned the lethal punishment that they had subjected their characters to in their fictional creations.

[5]Herbert Asbury, The French Quarter, p. 131.

[6]New York Times, October 5, 1926.

[7]Daily News, October 5, 1926.

[8]Deep River typescript libretto (minus the song lyrics--dialogue only), in the Billy Rose Collection, Third Floor, Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, New York City. The passage cited in this note was on pp. 1-3.

[9]The classic quadroon roles of Zoe in The Octoroon and Julie in Show Boat are seldom played by lightskinned black actresses. When Lena Horne played the role of Julie in the "Show Boat" segment of the film biography Till the Clouds Roll By, about Jerome Kern, which was made in 1946, it was almost assumed she would be cast in that part in the next major film or stage rendition of Show Boat. After a lot of controversy, Ava Gardner was given the role of Julie over Horne in the 1951 M. G. M. remake of Show Boat. The lightskinned black actress, Lonette McKee, played Julie in the Houston Grand Opera production of Show Boat which played 73 performances at the Uris Theatre on Broadway in the spring of 1983; her being cast in this

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part caused an outcry from some theatre purists. The lightskinned black British song-stylist Cleo Laine starred as Julie in the Harold Fielding production of this work at London's Adelphi Theatre. There was no major controversy over the choice of Laine for this role; the 910-performance run, which commenced on July 29, 1971, is the longest ever for any production of Show Boat.

[10]The reference to "devil worship" was made by the authors in a note in the show's program. This is a popular misconception about voodoo, when the truth of the matter is that the canon of voodoo deities have counterparts among the pantheon of Catholic saints.

[11]Miles Kreuger, Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 18.

[12]Ibid., p. 19.

[13]Ibid., p. 20.

[14]Ibid., p. 74.

[15]The typescript copy of the Show Boat libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library. See note no. 46 of Chapter Four for further explanation of this typescript. This libretto will be referred to as Show Boat. The "about 1890" quote appears on p. 1-1-1.

[16]This performer's real name was Tess Gardella, and, though heavyset, she was not grossly obese, as in the stereotype. Gardella was lightskinned, as opposed to the clichéd darkskinned "mammy"/cook/chief house servant.

[17]Show Boat, p. 1-1-2.

[18]Ibid., pp. 2-1-8 and 2-1-9.

[19]Marc Connelly, Green Pastures (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1930), p. 4.

[20]Ibid., p. 9.

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[21]Ibid., pp. 49-60.

[22]Ibid., p. 56.

[23]Ibid., p. 126.

[24]Ibid., p. 75.

[25]Herald-Tribune, March 5, 1930.

[26]Times, February 27, 1930.

[27]Brooklyn Daily Eagle, February 27, 1930.

[28]Evening Journal, February 21, 1934.

[29]John Houseman, Run-through (New York: Curtis Books, 1972), p. 102.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Jane Dehart Mathews, The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939 (New York: Octagon Books, 1980), p. 75.

[32]Houseman.

[33]Burns Mantle, Daily News, July 10, 1936.

[34]Hallie Flanagan, Arena (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1940), p. 74.

[35]Typescript prompter's copy, on microfilm in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library.

[36]Daily News, July 10, 1936.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Times April 15, 1936.

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[39]The Variety review was in the April 22, 1936, issue.

[40]Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 15, 1936.

[41]B. H. Higgins, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, October 11, 1935.

[42]H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, vol. 4 (London: MacMillan Press Limited, 1986), p. 201.

[43]Ibid., p. 201.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Lawrence Gillman, Herald-Tribune, October 11, 1935.

[46]Gilbert Gabriel, American, October 11, 1935.

[47]Burns Mantle, Daily News, October 11, 1935.

[48]October 11, 1935.

[49]Variety, October 16, 1935.

[50]Dubose Heyward, George Gershwin, and Ira Gershwin, Porgy and Bess, in the anthology, Ten Great Musicals of the American Theatre, ed. by Stanley Richards (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1973), p. 77. All references to the libretto will be from this anthology under the title of Porgy and Bess.

[51]It is to be hoped that Heyward did not intend this to represent a metaphor for the black male, in general.

[52]Porgy and Bess, p. 80.

[53]Ibid., p. 83.

[54]Ibid., p. 86.

[55]Ibid., p. 90.

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[56]Ibid., p. 99.

[57]Ibid., p. 104.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., p. 105.

[60]Ibid., p. 107.

[61]Hitchcock and Sadie, p. 201.

[62]Porgy and Bess' artistic reputation has been enhanced by its frequent revivals at the New York City Opera. Despite protests from the N.A.A.C.P., it was made into a motion picture in 1959, using the top black actors of the time: Sidney Poitier as Porgy, Dorothy Dandridge as Bess, Sammy Davis, Jr., as Sportin' Life, and Brock Peters as Crown.

[63]Stephen M. Vallillo, "The Battle of the Black Mikados, "Black American Literature Forum, Winter 1982, vol. 16, no. 4, Joe Weixlmann, ed., p. 153.

[64]Flanagan, p. 74.

[65]Vallillo, p. 154.

[66]Michael Todd, Jr., and Susan McCarthy Todd, A Valuable Property: The Life Story of Michael Todd (New York: Arbor House, 1983), p. 36.

[67]Art Cohn, The Nine Lives of Michael Todd (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 89.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Vallillo, p. 156.

[70]Ibid.

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[71]Times, March 2, 1939.

[72]Herald-Tribune, March 2, 1939.

[73]Sun, March 2, 1939.

[74]Post, March 2, 1939.

[75]Brooklyn Daily Eagle, March 2, 1939.

[76]Daily News, March 24, 1939.

[77]December 6, 1939.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE 1940s: MORE CLASSICS AND FEWER "COONS"

Having been historically one of the most accurate mirrors reflecting America's overall attitude towards its black citizens, the musical theatre remained an effective barometer with which to measure the advancements the African-American made in the 1940s. In terms of concrete social, economic, and political gains, this decade proved to be one of the most satisfying to date for black Americans.

Having the proverbial "friend in the White House" in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the African-American was able to benefit from his various "New Deal" agencies, which were designed to rescue America and its economy from the debilitating effects of the Great Depression. Arguably the greatest presidential champion of civil rights ever, Roosevelt had a huge number of black advisors keeping him abreast of the events concerning African-Americans.[1]

Racial barriers were steadily being dismantled throughout the 1940s. Advances in the breaking down of segregation in housing, public accommodations, and educational and job opportunities were gradually being made. With the signings of black baseball players Jack Roosevelt Robinson and Roy Campanella to contracts with the Brooklyn Dodgers in late 1945, American--and Latin American--Negroes were allowed to play in "organized" [white] baseball for the first time in the twentieth century.[2] With the advent of World War II, the African-American played a more important role in the nation's armed forces than ever before. Better educated than their predecessors, the new crop of black recruits sent a vastly higher number of fighting men through Officer's Candidate School than in any previous war. Before World War II, blacks in the Army, Navy, and Army Air Corps had been confined chiefly to menial custodial duties; now, they were given more combat and technical responsibilities. The previous all-white bastion of machismo, the Marine Corps, was integrated in 1942.

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With the resultant expansion of the American economy in the aftermath of the war, millions of blue-collar jobs became available in the industrial cities of the North, causing an acceleration of the migration of blacks from the segregated South. While racism and de facto segregation still existed in the theoretically less-restrictive Northern cities, those African-Americans who did go north had access to better-paying jobs, better schools, and, for the most part, more personal freedoms than their counterparts who elected to stay in the South.

The 1940s was a decade in which the American Negro made significant gains in the areas of literature and the arts. Delivering on the promise he had shown with his 1939 prize-winning collection of stories, Uncle Tom's Children, black author Richard Wright created a sensation in the literary world with his gripping novel Native Son. Released in March 1940, it soon attained the number-one position on the best-seller list, the first time a black writer had reached so lofty a perch.[3] A stage adaptation of the novel was a critical and popular success a year later, furthering the demand for more substantive black art in the theatre. Native Son and subsequent works by Wright proved to be an effective forum for voicing the plight of the African-American to the world. With the possible exception of James Baldwin, no black author has come close to being such a world-wide literary spokesman for the African-American as Wright was.

Black Americans made considerable gains in the non-musical theatre in the 1940s. The American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.) was founded in Harlem in 1940 by the actor Frederick O'Neill and the playwright/director Abram Hill. Operating at first out of the basement of the public library on West 135th Street, their successes included Abram Hill's Striver's Row (1940), Theodore Browne's musical drama about the John Henry legend, Natural Man (1941), Hill's Walk Hard, a 1944 boxing melodrama, and their greatest success, Anna Lucasta.[4] Written by the Polish-American dramatist Philip Yordan, Anna Lucasta was originally intended for a Polish-American cast. Unable to find any producers willing to take on this project, Yordan's agent suggested he submit it to O'Neill and Hill at

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the A.N.T. Pleased with that they read, they produced the play, changing the small-town Pennsylvania Polish-American family into African-Americans.[5]

Opening in Harlem in 1944, the play proved to be so popular that it was moved to Broadway, where it enjoyed a two-year run. Anna Lucasta turned out to be both the best and worst thing to happen to the A.N.T. Several of its outstanding young talents--Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Hilda Simms, Earl Hyman, Frederick O'Neill, and others--were seduced by better-paying jobs in the theatre and in films.

The stage image of the black male as strictly a clowning buffoon was dealt another blow by the monumental success of the 1943 Broadway production of Othello, starring Paul Robeson. Running for a then-record 296 performances, it was the most popular Shakespearean presentation on Broadway to date.[6]

America's changing attitude towards its black citizens was mirrored by a noticeable improvement in the images of Negroes in the commercial musical theatre. Some shows in the early part of the decade insisted upon dredging up the Neo-Minstrel clichés; the shows of the middle years of the 1940s exhibited an obvious attempt at ameliorating the offensive images, while at the same time infusing the elements of the Negro shows which had historically proven to be audience-pleasing; the last show of the decade, Lost in the Stars, was perhaps as far removed from the typical Negro show of the previous two decades as its authors dared to make it.

Cabin in the Sky

The first commercially-successful all-black musical of the 1940s was Cabin in the Sky, dubbed by its producers as a "musical fantasy." Opening October 25, 1940, at the Martin Beck Theatre, the show's book was by Lynn Root, the music by Vernon Duke, and the lyrics by John Latouche. The production was staged by the Russian-born director and choreographer, George Balanchine.

The cast list of Cabin in the Sky [to be called Cabin] reads like a Who's Who of black Broadway performers. Ethel Waters and Dooley

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Wilson had the lead roles of Petunia and Little Joe; featured players included Todd Duncan, the original Porgy in Gershwin's opera, playing "The Lawd's" general of the angels; Rex Ingram, a gigantic actor who, after having played "De Lawd" in the film version of Green Pastures, was making a complete role reversal, literally, by portraying Lucifer, Junior, in Cabin; Katherine Dunham played the vamp Georgia Brown, with her dance troupe as a featured part of the show. John Rosamond Johnson, late of the Cole & Johnson Company, had a small role and did a majority of the vocal arrangements.

The simple plot entails the battle for the possession of Little Joe's soul which is being waged between the forces of "The Lawd" and the minions of Lucifer. As the play opens, Little Joe is dead, having been slain, not surprisingly, by a razor-wielding gambler who had taken exception to Joe's usage of loaded dice during a game. Joe is about to be snatched away by Lucifer's henchmen, but, because of the fervent praying by Little Joe's wife, Petunia, "The Lawd" makes a special ruling and allows Joe to be returned to the land of the living. Joe is to be given exactly six more months of life, in which he must prove he is worthy of entrance to Heaven. However, there is one small stipulation: Joe will have no memory of the fact he was dead and had been given a second chance.

Joe makes an honest effort to straighten himself up; he has found steady, if not well-paying employment; he has forsaken his wanton ways and remained faithful to his doting wife. One day, however, his part-time paramour from his libertine days, Georgia Brown, pays him a visit while Petunia has briefly stepped out of the house; Joe is fighting off Georgia's advances when Petunia returns, sees them in what she mistakenly judges to be an embrace, and casts Joe out of her house and her life.

Shortly thereafter, Petunia makes a surprize appearance at John Henry's tavern, where she knows Joe will be with Georgia. Petunia, in an effort to make Joe jealous, acts totally out of character, taking on the dress and mannerisms of a flirtatious vamp. Little Joe tries to act nonplussed about it; suddenly Domino Johnson, who had nearly fatally slashed Joe six months earlier, enters the bar, having just been paroled for the attack. Just as he and Joe are

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to have a return bout, a hurricane hits, destroying the tavern, and killing not only Joe, but Petunia as well.

Her recent backsliding notwithstanding, Petunia is an automatic choice to be allowed entrance to Heaven. Joe's ledger is tallied up, and he just misses making the Heavenly roster. The decision is reversed at the last minute when it is learned that, in a burst of guilt over Joe's death, Georgia Brown has ended her wicked ways and taken on a life of devoutness.

The reviews were generally positive, with an unqualified rave from Brooks Atkinson, who felt that the show "ranks with the best work on the American musical stage."[7] Arthur Pollock had especial praise for the director, Balanchine, stating "Negro actors have seldom had so knowing a guide in the white man's theatre."[8] Vernon Duke's music was lauded; the customary enthusiastic comments about the singing and dancing of the all-black cast were made. However, several reviewers had problems with Root's libretto, feeling it was wordy, taking up too much time between the musical numbers, thus making the show "bookbound." In practically every review, a mention was made of Cabin's obvious similarities to Green Pastures.

Ralph Warner, in his column for The Daily Worker, the American Communist Party's New York newspaper, expressed serious reservations about Root's book, but his qualms had nothing to do with any perceived imbalance between the dialogue and the song-and-dance routines. As a representative of the American Communist Party, which at that time was the self-designated champion for blacks and other ethnic groups who did not receive their fare share in the American capitalistic scheme, Warner was not afraid to address an issue that his fellow critics had ignored about this and a myriad of black musicals: the persistence of the white producers and creators of these "black" shows in portraying only the most unflattering aspects of black American life.

Warner began his critique in the October 26, 1940, edition of The Daily Worker by giving the talented performers their due praise, then attacked Broadway's systemic exploitation and denigration of African-Americans: As is almost always the case in a Broadway

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musical show of this kind, all of this talent is poured into a show which is shameful in its maltreatment of the Negro. As had most of the reviewers, Warner compared Cabin to Green Pastures, writing:

> There is the same burlesque [my emphasis] of the simple faith of the Negroes depicted, the same clowning. Absent, however, is the dignity of Green Pastures, the nod in the direction of a man's right to a personal religion. Little Joe and Petunia are cardboard figures, cut to fit the white man's assumed ideas. But even more serious is the constant repetition throughout . . . of much of the outmoded "mammy," "stepinfetchit" school of comedy. The Negroes of [Cabin] are unrecognizable because they never lapse from the author's view of them as comic figures into real human beings. They never feel, think, or act.

The librettist, Root, had obviously not based his stage Negroes' speech patterns on those of real-life blacks; rather, he had merely employed the clichéd "darky" dialect of drama and literature as his main point of reference. This was not lost upon Warner, who wrote "the entire cast speaks in plantation dialogue, replete with grammatical errors."

An examination of Root's libretto could very well give the reader the impression Root had had absolutely no interaction with real-life African-Americans prior to writing the book. Unlike Dubose Heyward, who, despite his heavy reliance on the major stereotypes in Porgy and Bess, demonstrates his intimate knowledge of real-life blacks in the depth with which that show's four major characters are drawn, Root's "characters" are strictly off the shelf. The dialogue and caricatures of blacks have been harvested from the canon of racist-inspired drama and fiction which has dealt with the black race strictly in terms of the view of Negroes as sub-human, inferior, and exhibiting a minute range of behavioral patterns. As usual, there are no moneyed or intelligent blacks in the show; the "darkies" of Cabin restrict themselves to the predictable activities: carousing, gambling, and demonstrating an unrequited love to the God who, to paraphrase Porgy and Bess' Crown, finds their devotion to be

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a joke. However, Root has perhaps gone his predecessors one better: his adherence to the lowest common denominator extends to his usage of what he perceived to be the most common "colored" surnames: Jackson (Joe and Petunia). Brown (Georgia), Johnson (Domino), Jones ("Dr."), Green ("Brother"), and Washington (Delilah).

Ethel Waters, having been approached by the producers to play the female lead, read the script and initially refused to be a part of the show, feeling it was too much of a "man's play."[9] She also objected, in the show's original draft, that the character of Petunia "was no more than a punching bag for Joe,"[10] and balked at the way in which the Negro's religiosity was handled. After demanding certain changes, which the producers granted, Waters accepted the role. One wonders how much the view of the black man's faith was changed in what came to be the working script; the African-American's supposed hyper-religious nature is portrayed in all of its overzealousness. Furthermore, Waters, in her autobio-graphy, only mentions the qualms she had with Petunia, the character she was to play; nowhere does she raise any objections to the myriad of negative stereotypes which abound in the show's book. Root's description of the whorish Georgia Brown, on the very first page of the libretto,[11] gives an insight into his basic attitude towards the blacks he has written about. "She is a voluptuous good looking negress flashily dressed and full of sex appeal for any dark boy [my emphasis]."[12] In addition to introducing us to the stereo-typical loose-living black female, he has undermined the manhood of black males in general by collectively referring to him as a "boy."

The image of the African-American male, as portrayed in the "character" of Little Joe, takes a further battering in Root's book. Joe is the standard jobless, illiterate, irresponsible, crap-shooting caricature, whose interests never extend beyond gambling, drinking, and womanizing. Although he does, after his return to life, make an effort to cast aside his evil ways, he is still in a subordinate position in his household to his devout wife, Petunia, who is the real breadwinner of the family. This view of the black male as being subordinate to his female counterpart was underlined by the casting

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in the original production; Ethel Waters was much taller and heavier than the diminutive Dooley Wilson.

Petunia is infinitely morally stronger than Joe; it is her fervent praying that initially gives him a second chance. Her quick thinking wipes out his gambling debts; during his period of convalescence, she treats him like a child:

> Little Joe
> You treats me like a little ol' baby, Petunia.
>
> Petunia
> You is mah baby, honey--an' Ah has got to take care of you.[13]

After Joe's seeming dalliance with Georgia Brown causes his wife's attitude towards him to change from one of cloying devotion to contempt, Petunia twice calls Joe "black" in the perjorative sense of the word with which African-Americans use at times to denigrate others of their race; not in the contemporary sense of the term, which is interchangeable with "African-American," or to use as a blanket term for all persons of African descent, but she uses it in a manner which is meant to be grossly insulting. Petunia refers to Joe as "dat black rascal,"[14] calling him "da dumbest hunk of black trash dat ever lived."[15]

Root's stereotype-laden libretto was neutralized by the show's songs, and the acting of the cast, who, under the direction of the foreign-born Balanchine, refused to let the proceedings degenerate into yet another latter-day minstrel affair.[16] It is not an outrageous speculation to think that Balanchine, <u>not</u> having grown up in the United States and not having been influenced by a life-long barrage of anti-black preconceptions, empathetically steered his performers <u>away</u> from playing the numerous "coon"-isms of the book as they were written. As stated before, the black performers, who had become so accustomed to having to play roles written about blacks by whites, who obviously had little or no idea as to how <u>real</u> African-Americans talked and behaved, had developed a talent for

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taking the "darky" dialect as written, and delivering it in a manner which was true to the speech patterns of blacks who, though uneducated, were not necessarily unintelligent.

With Lynn Root's minstrel-like libretto having been effectively neutralized by practically every other aspect of the production, Cabin enjoyed a relatively successful twenty-week run on Broadway, and was made shortly thereafter into a popular motion picture.

Carmen Jones

Continuing the tradition started in the 1930s by the all-black versions of Macbeth and the competing Mikados, Carmen, an opera by the French composer George Bizet, became the first European classic to be adapted to an African-American setting in the 1940s. Carmen Jones, its black version, was the brainchild of Oscar Hammerstein II, who had, with his well-crafted character development and integration of story-line, songs, and dance numbers, raised the American musical to new levels of excellence and intelligence in such works as Show Boat, Oklahoma! (1943), South Pacific (1949), and The King and I (1951). The libretto and lyrics for Carmen Jones were written on speculation by Hammerstein, representing the first and perhaps only time in his long and prolific career he had created a work which was not under contract with a producer. After its completion, Hammerstein let the adaptation sit for a year, intending to produce it himself. When that did not work out, he took it to the Broadway impresario Billy Rose, who was immediately enthusiastic about it and readily decided to produce it.[17] Hammerstein and Rose opted to retain Bizet's score, and the order in which the songs were presented, but, taking a hint from Michael Todd's Hot Mikado, they decided to have the music slightly re-arranged into a more contemporary jazz idiom, choosing Robert Russell Bennett for the task. Having had a life-long fascination with Prosper Mèrimèe's story--upon which the Bizet opera was based--of the lusty gypsies of Spanish Seville, Hammerstein explained his decision to use Negroes in his "Americanization" of Carmen:

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> I want to establish that my choice of Negroes as the principal figures in the story was not motivated by any desire to pull an eccentric theatrical stunt. It is a logical result of my decision to write a modern American version of Carmen. The nearest thing in our modern American life to an equivalent of the gypsies of Spain is the Negro. Like the gypsy, he expresses his feelings simply, honestly, and graphically. Also as with the gypsy there is rhythm in his body, and music in his heart. The score of Carmen is a Frenchman's version of the Spanish music. Do not forget, however, that Spanish music was deeply influenced by the Moors from Africa.[18]

Hammerstein found Spanish gypsies and American Negroes to be linked by the similar traits of being carefree, childlike, unrestrained, irresponsible, and moving to a beat and rhythm which is racially idiosyncratic, in short, the definitive "exotic other."

Rewriting the libretto and lyrics into what he perceived to be Negro speech idioms, Hammerstein remained faithful to the original story. The heroine of the Bizet/Mèrimèe piece, Carmen, a beautiful, lusty, free-spirited worker in a tobacco factory in Seville, becomes Carmen Jones, a beautiful, lusty, free-spirited mulatto woman working in a parachute factory--which had been converted from a tobacco factory--in the deep South during World War II. Sought after by many of the men, Carmen yearns for a rather naive country boy named Joe who is a corporal at a nearby army base; her attraction to him is inversely proportional to how much he ignores her; he is trying, despite Carmen's adamant pursuit of him, and her ample charms, to remain faithful to his hometown sweetheart, Cindy Lou. The matter becomes more complicated when the heavyweight boxer Husky Miller--based on the champion bullfighter Escamillo in the original, but clearly patterned after Black America's then most popular hero, Joe Louis--decides he must have Carmen. After much conniving and manipulating on the part of several persons involved, Carmen runs off to Chicago with Husky and his entourage, sneaking Joe--whom she has talked into going absent without leave from the army--aboard with her on the train.

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Now that Joe loves Carmen, he no longer fascinates her; she had established at the beginning of the play that she had no interest in anyone who had an interest in her. Joe, having become more distraught after having lived the past two weeks in an alley, and desperate over his impending court martial if caught by the army officials, stabs Carmen to death in a jealous rage outside Comiskey Park at the precise moment Husky Miller has vanquished Pancho, his Brazilian opponent, inside the stadium.

Casting for Carmen Jones was not uneventful. Although the musical arranger Bennett was "jazzing" up Bizet's score, it would still require a cast of trained opera singers to perform it; since Broadway opportunities for black opera singers had been limited to a pair of relatively short-lived shows of almost a decade hence--Four Saints in Three Acts and Porgy and Bess--talented opera-trained African-American performers were at a premium. In addition to conducting the traditional auditions in the major cities, "John Hammond, Jr., jazzophile,"[19] and scion of the Vanderbilt family, scoured the music and drama departments of numerous black colleges, and searched in the handful of black community theatres which existed. Hammond, who played a prominent role in introducing such celebrated blues divas as Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin to mainstream audiences, was largely responsible for the casting of many of the major and minor parts.

Carmen was portrayed by Muriel Smith, who, at the time of her casting, worked as a clerk in a camera store in Philadelphia. Luther Saxon, also from Philadelphia, where he worked as a checker in a navy yard, played Joe. Glenn Bryant, taking a leave of absence from his job as a New York City police officer, was cast as Husky Miller.[20]

The opera, directed by Hassard Scott, opened at the Broadway Theatre on December 2, 1943. The response of the critics was practically a unanimous rave; superlatives were used freely; all aspects of the show were enthusiastically lauded; the reviews were by far the best to date for a black show. Noticeably absent from the critiques was the trite, shallow emphasis on the energetic singing and dancing of the all-black cast, at the expense of other facets of

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the production. Even that minority of critics, such as Brooks Atkinson and Arthur Pollock, among others, who tended to be unfair, sarcastic, and judgmental towards black shows, refrained from their usual racially-insensitive remarks.

Upon early examination, one might get the impression that Carmen Jones would be just another theatrical excursion into the stereotypical demi-monde of Jimtown/Catfish Row-type Negroes who are overdeveloped sexually but underdeveloped intellectually. Once again the speech patterns of uneducated blacks are inaccurately reproduced by a white writer so that the result is the standard stage Negro dialect jibberish; evidently not even Hammerstein, arguably the most apt of musical theatre librettists of his time, could differentiate the minstrel-informed patter from the real-life mode of speaking of the people involved. As was often the case, the black female characters in the play did not represent paragons of virtue; before her initial entrance Carmen has been described as "dat hip-swingin' fluzy";[21] soon after she enters, Carmen shows how she revels in her reputation as a slut:

> Sally
> How we goin' to help de war effort if we don't git to work on time? You cain't help de sojers by stayin' home in your bed!
>
> Carmen
> (flicking a speck from her bodice)
> Dat's what you [author's emphasis] think![22]

The Negroes whom we meet in the early part of Carmen Jones --the girls who work in the parachute factory, and the young male soldiers--though they are the dialect-speaking, presumably not very well-educated blacks who typically populate the all-Negro musicals, differ from their predecessors in that they are not mired in abject poverty. The female parachute-makers are surely drawing a decent wage, and the government is taking good care of its fighting men. Hammerstein succeeds in giving his audience a balance amongst the images of his black characters, a balance which is absent from the

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librettos of his fellow white musical bookwriters for Negro shows. In a situation which abounds with young, attractive, and unattached persons of both sexes, a certain undercurrent of sexual tension charges the atmosphere, but lest anyone think Hammerstein is making trite usage of the Oversexed Negroes stereotype, he neutralizes this in the form of the character of Cindy Lou, Joe's virtuous and virginal hometown sweetheart, and with Joe himself, who, for a while, at least, exercises restraint in the face of Carmen's attempts to seduce him.

For the first time since the presentations by the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson companies are black Americans of financial means portrayed in a major musical work. The Joe Louis-like Husky Miller is, like his real-life model, handsome, charismatic, and an icon amongst black people; Hammerstein offers his audience a brief glimpse of well-to-do blacks, albeit in the rather implausible setting of a country club in--incredibly--the Southside of Chicago. Hammerstein has gone against the musical theatre notion of the time that the stage Negroes must live in shacks and go through a day-to-day and hand-to-mouth existence.

For the first time in a major musical written by whites about American blacks, two distinct social classes are seen; previously, all the Negro characters within a play belonged to the same socio-economic class--poor--and spoke the same Negro dialect. The country club blacks of Carmen Jones disdain the usual dialect in favor of more "proper" speech patterns.

Hammerstein continued his practice of showing depth and a discernable growth in his major characters, in this case, Carmen and Joe. Although not as well-developed as the two principals, the lesser characters are by no means cardboard figures; their motives are always clearly defined. Though presumably uneducated, Hammerstein's characters are by no means stupid; several plot turns are predicated on the ability of certain persons to cleverly outwit others. A cause-to-effect continuum exists throughout; Carmen, in a rather intricate scheme, manages to go to Chicago at the expense of Husky, not only bringing along a claque of girl friends, but Joe as well.

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Though Carmen's character does not really grow--she remains basically the same selfish, manipulative vamp throughout--she is more psychologically complex than any heroine portrayed to date in a black musical. Despite her narcissistic facade, it is clear to see she suffers from low self-esteem, as shown by her love/hate relationship with men; it is love on her part when she is the pursuer, and hate when the situation turns and she is the one being pursued. She sings about it:

> You go for me an' I'm taboo
> But if you're hard to get I go for you
> .....
> If I love you dat's de end for you![23]

Obviously a person who enjoys sexual contact, Carmen gives indications her sexual preferences extend beyond the basics. Having soundly thrashed Sally, her frequent tormentor, in a scratch-and-claw hair-pulling fest, Carmen is arrested and to be sent off to jail--in the custody of Joe, the object of her desire. When Joe's sergeant orders him to tie up Carmen, she exudes an almost child-like glee, insisting that the ropes bind her tightly.[24] Quick-witted and conniving, she is an active participant in determining her own fate.

Joe does not so much grow as a character; rather, he deteriorates. A role reversal between Joe and Carmen takes place throughout the course of the drama; at the beginning she pursues him, all the while warning him that once she has conquered him she will be through with him; after his unsuccessful attempt to fend off her advances, Joe becomes at first infatuated with her, then obsessed, going from a model soldier to an unkempt deserter living in an alley, while Carmen is being kept by the rich and famous Husky.

Perhaps the most positive feature of the classics-based black musicals was that, in adapting stories about people whose interactions were not strictly limited to one locale and amongst fellow slum-bound blacks, a different milieu could be explored. If the lower-class, lustful Spanish gypsies of Mèrimèe's novel are to

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be translated into lower-class, lustful Southern Negroes, then the high-living sporting crowd and the smart, moneyed element with whom they interact in Mèrimèe's original work must likewise have their African-American counterparts. The Voodoo Macbeth, the competing Mikados, and Carmen Jones brought, by the nature of their sources, a certain balance, if at times by extension only, that was lacking in the narrow creative range within which the Neo-Minstrel shows were written. Furthermore, the use of operatic and light classical music in these shows, so far removed from the latter-day "coon" songs of the Shuffle Along imitators, aided greatly in distancing--in the minds of the audience members, anyway--the blacks of the revamped classic shows from their "Coontown" and "Jimtown" stage brethren; in effect, this spawned a weird sort of black musical character hybrid: when he spoke, his voice reeked of the ghetto, but when he sang, his voice soared in the music of great European composers, or those who were influenced by them.

With its complexity of characters and its balance of black images that was heretofore unseen in a black musical written by whites, Carmen Jones "ran a surprising 503 performances,"[25] on Broadway and had a successful road tour. In 1954 it was produced as a motion-picture by Otto Preminger; for her portrayal of the title role, Dorothy Dandridge became the first black actress to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress.

St. Louis Woman

The 1946 production of St. Louis Woman marked the first time in nearly nine years, since the Federal Theatre-sponsored 1937 production of Swing It, that black writers were used for a black Broadway musical.[26] Based on a 1931 novel by the black author Arna Bontemps, God Sends Sunday, the producers of St.Louis Woman [to be called Woman] employed Bontemps and the black Jamaican-born poet Countee Cullen to write the libretto, with the veteran Broadway songwriting team of Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer hired to do the music and lyrics, respectively.

Despite the use of black adapters for a show based on a black novel, the question of negative portrayals of blacks was raised

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before even the first rehearsal. Lena Horne, the producers' first choice to play the female lead, Della Green, was given a copy of the Arlen-Mercer score, which she immediately fell in love with.[27] Shortly thereafter, she was given the libretto to read, and she was aghast at what she perceived to be yet another burlesque of black life:

> The role I was to play was a flashy whore who was in love with a jockey, There were all sorts of the usual cliché characters in it and I thought it was very melodramatic and old-fashioned. I knew the book had been written by Negroes, but I still resented its pidgin English and the stereotypes. . . . In fact, the play seemed just another of those tired rehashes with Porgy and Bess overtones.
>
> I was pretty bored with the cliché representations of Negro life. . . . It just seemed to me, at that time, that it was a drag to do another show about Negroes that created the same old atmosphere.
>
> I didn't deny that a lot of Negroes had to live in that atmosphere. I had lived in it myself not so long ago. But I saw nothing romantic about it, the way audiences apparently did. I knew there were other sides of Negro life you could write about.[28]

In the above passage from her autobiography, Lena, Horne communicates the frustration felt not only by herself, but by so many black theatre artists of the era. She mentions that "people representing the Negro organizations" were advising her not to do the part, believing that the refusal of black performers to keep portraying the same old stereotyped characters would hasten the death of those stage caricatures.[29] With a long-term contract with the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio in Hollywood, and in constant demand on the nightclub circuit, Horne enjoyed the freedom to pick and choose jobs which most black performers did not have, thus forcing them to take roles which they might have felt were degrading.

Reading the novel on which the show was based, God Sends Sunday,[30] one finds it difficult to imagine the book was written by a

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black man, let alone an African-American author as highly esteemed as Bontemps. The protagonist, Little Augie, is a runt of a man whose sole talent lies in his equestrian ability, which enables him to become a jockey of the first rank. He is characterized by the full roster of the hard-living, irresponsible "coon" images; he is so imbued with self-hatred that, though darkskinned himself, he will have nothing to do with a Negro woman lest she is of the lightest possible hue.[31]

Bontemps describes the violence-prone, criminal element which plays such a major role in this book in romantic, almost loving terms. There is nothing resembling a strong family unit in the novel; black men lust solely after the lightest Negro whores; black women will cohabit with a black male only if no white man is available.[32] Bontemps seems to have a personal vendetta against darkskinned black women. Numerous times in the novel, Little Augie makes disparaging comparisons between dark women and their lighter counterparts. The 198-page novel ends with Augie a wasted old man who has done nothing with his life except squander it on the standard "darky" activities. Like the white authors who have given squalid portrayals of black life, Bontemps offers no neutralizing images in his book, nor does he offer any commentary on the self-destructive mode of living of his characters other than merely presenting them as they are.

The journey from the conception of the novel as a Broadway musical to Woman's opening night was by no means smooth. The original director, Lemuel Ayers, was fired during the rehearsal period; Rouben Mamoulian, who would, before the decade was out, have a reputation as Broadway's designated white director of black shows, was brought in to assume the directoral duties. Co-librettist Countee Cullen died shortly before opening night. Ruby Hill, a theatre novice who had been cast as Della Green, the role Lena Horne had rejected, was fired, only to be rehired in time for opening night.

Undoubtedly the biggest backstage turmoil came as the result of the all-black cast staging minor mutinies over what they considered to be grossly negative misinterpretations of the mores and modes of living of the black characters, especially as dramatized in

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the lax morals of the female leads Della and Butterfly. Perhaps heartened by Lena Horne's public denunciation of the images presented in the show, the cast demanded and received numerous changes in the libretto, and in the director's interpretation of some of the scenes, primarily the funeral scene in Act Two.[33]

Opening March 31, 1946, at the Martin Beck Theatre, Woman had an exceptional cast headed by the diminutive dancing Nicholas Brothers, Harold and Fayard, as Little Augie, the male lead and star-crossed jockey, and Barney, Augie's prime horse-racing rival, respectively. Pearl Bailey established herself as a full-fledged star with her comic, earthy portrayal of Butterfly. Rex Ingram, black Broadway's resident heavy, and Juanita Hall, who would later gain everlasting Broadway fame as "Bloody Mary" in South Pacific, played smaller but important roles.

The reviews of the show ran the gamut from enthusiastic raves to sarcastically negatives with the bulk of the critics citing the virtues of the performers and the well-wrought Arlen-Mercer songs uniting to overcome the show's being overlong and book-heavy. Pearl Bailey drew unanimous praise for her rendition of Mercer's double-entendre-filled lyrics to "Legalize My Name" and "A Woman's Prerogative." While the acting and singing abilities of the Nicholas Brothers were called into question, the critics had to agree that their dancing was expert. More than one reviewer complained, the dueling dance duets of the Nicholas Brothers and the Act One cake-walk finale notwithstanding, that the show was severely lacking in big production numbers.

Obviously the complaints of the cast were instrumental in the reshaping of the negative, stereotype-filled novel into a Broadway libretto with tolerably acceptable images of blacks. Della, a mulatto prostitute with whom Augie has a fleeting affair in the novel, is transformed into a singer at Biglow Brown's nightclub. While her character is established early in the musical as a money-grubbing woman with no sense of loyalty to a man, she is no longer an out-and-out whore. Biglow Brown, Della's pimp in the original, becomes her boss who has romantic designs on her.

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Leah, Augie's sister, who was portrayed in the novel as a woman with "a yardful of mulatto children" by several anonymous white men, becomes, in Woman, a comically self-righteous and self-contradictory churchwoman. The dialogue in the original work, which resembles that of a white writer who has had little or no contact with real blacks, is transformed in the libretto into the more accurate interpretation generally characteristic of talented black authors.

The low-life pimps and whores of the novel are softened into the festive sporting crowd in the musical. All of the Negroes of Woman are people of means, even if their wealth was the result of their skill and luck at various gaming activities. However, the authors make a comment on this capricious way of earning a living when Leah responds to a suggestion that one of her sons might follow in his uncle Augie's jockey footsteps: "No thank you, sir. I got plans for my children. They goin' to school. They gonna learn, they gonna be somebody."[34] This is surely one of the earliest instances in a commercial musical where any priority of blacks uplifting themselves through education was ever addressed.

Leah serves as a sounding-board on other issues with which blacks in the audience might be uncomfortable. She insists Augie and Della cease living together without benefit of clergy and become legally wed. This sentiment favoring matrimony over the stereotypical "living in sin" is echoed by Butterfly in Pearl Bailey's show-stopping rendition of "Legalize My Name."

The characters of Della and Augie undergo a change, something that was rare in black musicals of the time. Della, opportunistic and eager to be kept by whomever had the means to do so in the show's beginning, is, by its end, faithful to and truly in love with Augie. Augie, pompous and boastful at the start, is, in the end, humbled by learning even he is not immune to fate's fickleness; this new-found maturity is compounded by his realization that Della loves him for himself, and not his equestrian talents.

Missing, for the first time in a black musical since the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson shows, is the "de, dem, dose"-type Negro dialect. With their insider's advantages, Bontemps and

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Cullen reproduced the speech patterns of blacks who, though untutored in the "proper" usage of English grammar, nevertheless communicate in their own poetic and clever version of the language. Augie's initial attempt to persuade Della to be his girl is a classic example of how American blacks have traditionally fashioned English into their own adjunct tongue, which is often described incorrectly as "substandard," despite the rich imagery it conveys:

Augie

You're pretty as a race hoss. Honey, a race hoss is about the prettiest thing God ever made. Skin smooth like satin, proud head tossing, and dancing feet. Ain't nothin' prettier ceptin' you.

Della

If you ride as fast as you talk, them other riders can't have much of a chance with you.

Augie

All they has a chance at is to see my dust.

Della

I think that's what you're trying to do to me, Lil Augie.

Augie

What's that?

Della

Trying to throw dust in my eyes.

Augie

That's the truth, gal, only it ain't just common dirty dust. Know what kind it is?

Della

No. What kind is it?

Augie

Lucky dust, the only kind I has anything to do with. I'd like to throw so much of that in your eyes till you don't see nobody but me.

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Della

Lil Augie, I'm half-blind now.

Augie

When I look at you, pretty gal, I think about sunshine in the clover fields, and dew drops sparkling in the morning.[35]

In a spoken aside in the midst of "Legalize My Name," Pearl Bailey invokes the George Walker specialty routine of firing off a series of multisyllabic "big words":

> Let's change this temporary expedient into a permanent state of affairs. Kindly affix your signature at the bottom of that document.[36]

As did the librettists of the Williams & Walker Company operettas, Cullen and Bontemps surely inserted this brief outburst of overwrought language as a sly refutation to the theory that black brains could only deal with the most rudimentary aspects of English.

Although the creators of Woman must be commended for their improvements in the images of blacks on the musical stage, it must be remembered that these changes came to be only after the cast members demanded them. Cleaned-up images notwithstanding, the same stock, carefree, living-for-the-moment characters are represented. The desire for more stable relationships, job situations, and better education are mentioned several times by some of the characters, but the standard capricious, fun-loving traits are dramatized. The fact that the stock roster of stage Negro types was used in a libretto written by two esteemed black authors was not lost on the critic Louis Kronenberger.[37]

Although several critics predicted Woman would enjoy a long and profitable run, it proved to be a major disappointment, closing after a relatively brief stay of 113 performances.

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Two Interpretations of the John Henry Legend

Arguably the best-known African-American folkloric hero on the eve of World War II was that mythic "steel-drivin' man," John Henry. An imposing physical specimen, with a prodigious appetite for work, play, food, sex, and life in general, John Henry embodied all that was to be suppressed in a black male by America's systemic racism; in short, he was black masculinity unchained. The subject of countless songs and several obscure dramas, the John Henry character was given life twice upon the New York stage within a span of sixteen months in the early 1940s: in 1940, in a Broadway production of white dramatist Roark Bradford's folk musical, simply titled John Henry, and, in a Harlem presentation, black author Theodore Browne's musical drama, Natural Man.

The two works were completely opposite in terms of their authors' attitudes toward the subject-matter, their content, and each play's direction in the ever-changing development of the theatre in general, and the African-American theatre in particular. Bradford's piece can be regarded as an attempt to prolong the pulse-beat of the Neo-Minstrel musical before its inevitable demise; Browne's opus is a precursor of the militant Off-Broadway musicals written for, by and about blacks which were popular in the 1960s and '70s.

John Henry, which opened January 10, 1940, at the Forty-Fourth Street Theatre, had a libretto and lyrics by Roark Bradford, best known for the collection of stories, Ol' Man Adam and His Chillun, upon which Green Pastures was based. The music was composed by Jacques Wolfe. There was no listed director credited for the show; several directors were called in during the rehearsal period to give coherence to the piece.[38] The title role was played by the then most obvious choice to portray a black American mythic hero, Paul Robeson. Josh White, a popular blues/folk singer, essayed the part of Blind Lemon, a one-man chorus who comments on the action throughout.

If Bradford had intended to bring a larger-than-life folklore figure to the stage, one would never know that from the script.[39] Rather than recreate the clever, heroic, self-assured and

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indominatible black giant of the legend, Bradford's protagonist does little more than boast about his size and strength, and put in an appearance in all the clichéd settings of the Neo-Minstrel entertainments. Bradford gives an immediate clue to his attitude toward his protagonist: the initial image of John Henry is one of him having just been born, but already the size of a full-grown man, with a cotton hook in his right hand and eager to go to work rolling bales of cotton. "He is dressed in swaddling clothes . . . and under his long baby dress, he wears the apparel of a roustabout."[40] With this image, the stereotype of the eternally childish Negro is fostered. The six-foot-five-inch newborn "baby" next sings a song about all the food he plans to eat,[41] another ode to the Negro's supposed infatuation with the most basic pleasures of life, but little else.

Little can be discerned in the way of a plot by the end of Act One; a conflict of sorts is broached in the second act when John Henry's nemesis, called "A Nigger Named Sam" in the text, but "A Man Named Sam" in the play's program, briefly steals John's girl, a prostitute named Julie Ann. When she begs John to take her back, he vacillates, then casts her out, despite his better judgment.

Finally, by the third and final act, and with extremely little foreshadowing, Bradford decides to focus on the main event in the John Henry legend: the contest between Man and the steam-powered Machine. However, instead of dramatizing the more familiar battle between John Henry and the steam-driven rock-smashing drill, Bradford opts for a competition between John and the machine to see which of the two can roll the most two-ton bales of cotton. Bradford further diminishes his character by having John Henry's death brought on, not by overtaxing his physical resources and having a heart attack after the contest, but by being crushed by an errant bale.[42] John Henry is the victim not of his hubris, but of a mere accident. If Bradford had intended to attach some sort of ironic symbolism to Black America's most potent fictional hero being crushed by one of the major symbols of slavery--cotton--he failed to set up that particular image in an effective manner.

The show's flaws were obvious, and the reviewers cited in unison the major weaknesses. The book was judged to be weak and

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unfocused, fragmentary, never fully developing its scenes. According to the consensus, Bradford had diminished the John Henry legend, rather than create a larger-than-life presentation of the original; most of the critics felt the show's chief shortcoming was the author's concentration on the protagonist's on-again, off-again love affair with the whore, Julie Ann.

Brooks Atkinson wrote that the songs were best suited for a concert, and that the play was "hardly more than a series of miscellaneous pictures . . . a desultory narrative, underwritten, and put together in perfunctory fashion."[43] Richard Lockridge summed up a common complaint of his colleagues when he said the mythic hero had been reduced to just "a big and baffled man who is unlucky in love,"[44] and that the play was too small and static for its epic theme. Only Robert Coleman of the Daily Mirror gave it a rave review. John Henry had just five showings on Broadway.

Theodore Browne's version of the John Henry legend, Natural Man, was presented by the American Negro Theatre at the 135th Street Public Library Theatre, opening May 7, 1941. Originally produced as a W.P.A. Federal Theatre project in Browne's native Seattle,[45] Natural Man, with its structure and attitude make it a prototype for the black Off-Broadway musicals of more than a quarter of a century later, seems to have been decidedly ahead of its time.

The music was arranged and conducted by Miss R. Verada Pearson; the play was directed by Benjamin Zemach, who received his training at the Habimah Hebrew-Language Theatre in Moscow, and had recently migrated to New York from Tel Aviv.[46] Unlike Bradford's piece, which tacks on the all-important Man vs. Machine theme as a mere afterthought, Browne makes this contest the focal point of his play, as it is in the legend. The play is divided into eight episodes; the audience learns right away of the contest and its importance in the initial scene. The stakes are raised when John Henry's white boss, Captain Tommy, informs the protagonist that if he should lose the contest, John must go back to the prison chain-gang from which Captain Tommy has "leased" him. If John is indeed forced to return to the chain-gang, it will mean certain death for

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him at the hands of the sadistic guards. Borrowing from the flash-back technique used by Eugene O'Neill in The Emperor Jones, episodes three through seven detail the events leading up to John Henry's being imprisoned, to his being, in a sense, "bought" by Captain Tommy, and, of course, culminating in the contest itself.

In the first scene, the audience meets John; he is a robust, virile man, loved and admired by his co-workers for his charm and physical prowess, and adored by his devoted girlfriend, Polly Ann. Browne portrays him as at once supremely self-confident, without being conceited, and boyishly self-effacing.

Browne cannot resist having some fun with the obvious sexual imagery of that "steel-drivin' man" who prides himself on his ability to swing a potent hammer and drill prodigiously through even the most seemingly unpenetrable rocks. On the day before the big contest, John is inside the tunnel, warming up for the morrow, taking some last-minute conditioning swings. The pounding noise from the tunnel causes his girlfriend to come running.

> Polly Ann
> You ain't afraid you'll forget how to swing that hammer?
> (rhapsodic)
> Lord, when I come out the house, the earth rocked under my feet.
>
> John Henry
> That was justly hammer falling down!
>
> Polly Ann
> And when I get here to the tunnel, feel like the whole tunnel caving in![47]

At the risk of appearing to draw further attention to the supposed hypersexuality of Negroes, Browne has taken the inherent sexual imagery of hammers, tunnels, and earth-shaking drilling and produces some amusing banter filled with sexual innuendo that is so cleverly wrought that the double-entendres could be missed by those who might otherwise be offended by them.

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In the second episode it is learned that Captain Tommy, the white boss at the excavation site, had made a practice of buying off the sentences of black chain gang convicts, and having them work for him for practically nonexistent wages. In essence, he is a slave-owner a generation after the Emancipation.

The third episode takes place on more familiar Negro musical terrain--a pimp and whore-infested gin mill on Memphis' Beale Street. In the first of five flashback scenes, John is negotiating with a prostitute, and drinking himself into a stupor. The pimps, or "Sweetmen" as they are called, sing a jump-blues ode to themselves and their ability to induce women to bring them money the whores have filched from men who are "a fool to work."[48] Next come the "Streetwalkers" who proclaim that the main lure of the unofficial red-light district consists of:

> Love for sale on Beale Street
> Man can pick and choose
> Woman take way all your money,
> Drink up all your booze,
> --all your rot-gut booze.[49]

Rather than romanticize these denizens of the lower depths, Browne surveys them with a cautionary eye. Next, John Henry, who is by now gloriously drunk, has stolen goods planted on him by a pickpocket who is fleeing from the police. Wrongly accused, he is led away to the ring of derisive laughter from the patrons of the dive. The whores offer him a refrain of their blues lament:

> If you're looking for the real thing,
> Beale Street ain't the place for you.[50]

The next setting is the jail, where the black prisoners are being taunted by unseen white "jailbirds" on the other side of the segregated prison. One white prisoner asks: "Tell us, Sambo, how it feels to be like you?"[51] John Henry retorts:

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Like a giant in a straight jacket!

. . . . . .

Like a natural man mongst a heap of muscle-bound sissies!

. . . . . .

Like a great king without a throne to sit on!

[White] Jailbirds

Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! King without a throne! Ha! Ha! Ha!

John Henry

You damned right, a king! Every inch, White Folks, every inch! That's me. King without a throne, but king right on. You may be sitting on the throne, but that won't make you king cause you sit there. Nossir! I built that throne. I built that stone palace you live in. Yes, even down [sic] built the roads so you could travel from place to place. And I ain't askin you-all to thank me for what I do. I ain't askin you to be my friend. Ain't wishing to eat at the same table with you. Ain't wanting you to put yourself out of the way for me at all, understand? All I ask is that you let me be [author's emphasis]. You can have the swell palace and the golden throne, but don't mess with my crown![52]

John's reward for this outburst is to be sentenced to hard labor breaking rocks in a quarry. An argument with a white guard erupts into a fight in which John kills the guard. Fleeing, he seeks refuge with a small band of Negro worshippers at a camp meeting. Rather than follow the teachings of Christ and take the stranger in, the preacher turns John away, citing possible retribution by the whites.[53] John chides the preacher for his hypocrisy; for perhaps the first time on the black musical stage, the black Christian church and its relevance is called into question.

It must be noted that although John Henry becomes ultimately a victim of American racism, it is he himself who is responsible for thrusting himself into the chain of events which lead up to his killing the guard. Had he never allowed himself to get drunk in the predator-filled Memphis dive, he never would have been arrested for being in possession of the stolen goods. Browne's message--and one

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that will be used by later black playwrights and librettists--is that in many instances the self-destructive acts of blacks result in them being party to their own oppression.

John does beat the steam drill, but expends so much energy doing so that he kills himself in the process. Emerging from the cave to greet the amazed spectators, John is unbowed by the prospect of his impending death; rather than have his character die the slow, gasping death so popular in melodramas, Browne allows his protagonist to acknowledge that he does not have much time to live, then "hammer across his shoulders, symbolically sets out for parts unknown."[54] Browne's John Henry was too heroic to die before his audience's eyes.

The critical response to Natural Man was positive. The mere fact that the major daily newspapers sent their first-line critics to the opening four miles uptown from the center of New York theatre speaks volumes of the seriousness with which the theatre establishment took the production--it must be remembered that by the early 1930s the second- and third-line reviewers were usually being dispatched to review the black shows. Practically every review noted that the production, though grandiose in intention, was hindered by the small space the American Negro Theatre had to work with in the basement of the library. The script itself was judged by most to be crudely crafted at times, but always interesting and powerful. John Mason Brown of the Post, John Anderson of the Journal-American, and George Freedley of the Morning-Telegraph all thought that Browne's version of the John Henry legend was vastly superior to Bradford's.[55] Noticeably missing in the reviews was the sardonic and sometimes mocking tone that the white critics normally used in their judgments of the Neo-Minstrel offerings; evidently they had respect for a black author who had respect for his material and his audience.

Bradford's John Henry seems to be a theme-less, unfocused series of vignettes, while Browne's piece is connected by three clear-cut themes upon which he expands. The first is the not-so-original topic of Man versus The Machine, or Man's worth being diminished by the fact he can easily be replaced by a machine--

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hence, the title, Natural Man. Through the character of Captain Tommy, who literally buys black convicts from Deep South prison chain-gangs, Browne dramatizes the fact that, though technically free, a huge segment of the black race is still existing in a state of de facto slavery. Browne also repeatedly pushes home the point that America was built upon the free or cheap labor of the African-American.

The fact that Bradford was able to secure the resources for a --though short-lived--Broadway production, while Browne's play went underproduced almost one hundred blocks from the theatrical center of New York, underlines the dilemma the African-American creators of black musicals faced then and face now. Though he had written what the critics conceded to be a poorly-wrought show, Bradford still had access to that nepotist network from which even the most talented black creators were automatically excluded; regardless of the merits of his play, Bradford could somehow find a way to have it mounted on Broadway. Conversely, a critically-acclaimed musical drama such as Natural Man, though judged to be superior to Bradford's work, was, due to its militant stance, and the fact of its author being an outsider to the theatre establishment, was forced to play in a theatre much too small for the play's scope and far away from the cluster of mainstream houses. Furthermore, Natural Man was a far cry from the Neo-Minstrel updated "coon" shows that so many black creators had panderingly written for white audiences since the days of the blackface entertainments.

In terms of its tone and structure, Natural Man can be seen as the prototype of such later Off-Broadway musicals as Joseph A. Walker's The Believers (1968), Paul Carter Harrison's Tabernacle (1965) and The Great MacDaddy (1974), and Melvin Van Peebles' pivotal opus Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death, a controversial 1971 Broadway show. Natural Man was, like the musicals that would follow it, uncompromisingly militant, not bothering to conceal or tone down its anger. It was by, for, and about blacks, but this is not to say that whites were not welcome at the box-office; they simply were not pandered to.

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Though a musical drama, Browne's piece, like the musicals of the 1960s-'70s black awareness era, eschewed the typical musical comedy structure, which, due to its mechanical juxtaposition of intimate scenes and "big" scenes, solos or duets and production numbers, slow ballads and uptempo songs, often came across as being contrived, and, at times, predictable. The author's message is the most important aspect of the show, not his cleverness in calling upon tried-and-true techniques to make his message palatable. Long-winded, "message" speeches, taboo in most musicals, abound in Natural Man; Browne refrains from turning the most dramatic speeches and passages of dialogue into songs, as is the standard ploy in musicals; he allows his points to be hammered home via the harsh reality of the angry spoken word, instead of being sweetened and possibly obscured by changing them to lyrics and setting them to music.[56] The afore-mentioned black-written black musicals of the 1960s and '70s also avoided the traditional musical comedy structure in favor of story-telling techniques more amenable to the African and African-American oral traditions, with their emphasis on the spoken word.[57]

Though Browne's play was deemed by many critics superior to Bradford's, one cannot realistically believe that, if Natural Man had indeed been produced on Broadway, it would have fared any better than John Henry's five performances. Though it had a well-received run in Harlem, and was regarded highly enough by the mainstream media that the first-line reviewers were sent to cover its opening, no producer opted to move the play downtown to Broadway. By 1941, mainstream audiences had become less receptive to Sambo and his inane antics, but were still not yet ready for his proud and non-shuffling counterpart.

Harlem Cavalcade, Blue Holiday, and Memphis Bound

By the early 1940s, the vaudeville format had become a relic in the eyes of Broadway audiences and producers. Thus, the success of a pair of shows mounted in early 1942 and written in the old variety show format, Keep 'Em Laughing and Priorities, surely caught numerous members of the Broadway community unaware. As could

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be expected, several shows went into preparation to capitalize on what was thought to be the return of vaudeville; as could be expected, an all-Negro show was put together in that most tried but trite genre of the black musical, the music/comedy revue.

Produced by Ed Sullivan, and staged by Sullivan and Noble Sissle, Harlem Cavalcade premiered May 1, 1942, at the Ritz Theatre. Featured in the cast were Sissle, Tim Moore, Flournoy Miller, and Una Mae Carlisle, who sang many of her own compositions. Presented twice on weekdays, and thrice on Saturday and Sundays, Harlem Cavalcade gave the instant appearance of being an anachronism, using the same old structure of the Neo-Minstrel entertainments which Broadway audiences had stopped patronizing almost a decade before: songs, dances, and skits featuring black-faced comedians doing the Negroes-afraid-of-ghosts routine which dated back to the white minstrels.[58]

The creators of Harlem Cavalcade dredged up all the clichés while putting the show together; the critics dusted off their old lines and attitudes when writing their reviews. While giving it a mixed-to-positive appraisal, the Times critic said it was "out of the spirit of the minstrel shows, and out of the spirit of Amos and Andy."[59] In giving the show a mixed-to-negative critique, Richard Watts, Jr., in calling it "routine" and "common-place," wrote "the comedy is not worthy of a tradition which stems from the mighty Bert Williams."[60]

The common complaints which littered the reviews of the more ineptly-crafted Shuffle Along imitators re-appeared in the critiques for Harlem Cavalcade. What was thought to be a comeback for vaudeville-type variety shows was only a mirage. The two shows whose surprize success precipitated this short-lived trend proved to be the only ones with any measure of success. Harlem Cavalcade lasted but 49 performances.

In gathering some of the most talented black singers, dancers, and comedians, the producers of Blue Holiday obviously felt they could circumvent the unwritten law that Negro variety shows were passe on Broadway. Featuring Ethel Waters, Katherine Dunham and her dancers, the blues/folk singer Josh White, dancer Josephine

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Premice, comedian Timmie Rogers, and the Hall Johnson Choir, who opened the show by singing "The Star Spangled Banner," Blue Holiday opened May 21, 1945. Its premiere date had been postponed for a week because a new director, Jed Harris, had to be called in to revamp the show.[61]

The show's chief attraction was Ethel Waters, who sang the songs which she had made famous, and performed two scenes from Mamba's Daughters, which most of the critics thought to be out of place in a variety show.

Blue Holiday's producers consciously veered away from the trite Neo-Minstrel format. The few reviewers who liked the show cited this as being the most favorable aspect of the show; the majority of the critics who were harsh toward the play damned the show for the same reason.

George Freedley deemed it "a negro vaudeville show with vaguely left-wing tendencies, but with all the faults to which such shows are heir."[62] Barton Rascoe of the World-Telegram began his review with "Vaudeville raised its feeble hand last night and sank right back into a coma."[63] Eleanor Monroe of Woman's Wear Daily gave it a rare positive review, mentioning how the predictable types of entertainment had been included, but were complemented by "more serious contributions."[64] Arthur Pollock's critique gives us a fair idea of the show's production values:

> Blue Holiday is not an old-fashioned extravaganza. It does not go in for show--no elaborate settings or wild and whirling dances, no big revue numbers, no exhibitionism. The accent is on talent.[65]

Several comments in Louis Kronenberger's appraisal in P. M. summed up succinctly the consensus opinion of his peers. In addition to judging that the show was hamstrung by "maladroit programming," he opined:

> Calling itself a variety show, it is badly lacking in variety; and almost equally lacking in the verve and pace traditionally associated with vaudeville. It too often

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> seems heavy and monotonous. More of it is on the serious side than is good for it, because the serious numbers do not display enough originality or art. And the best performers are perhaps at their happiest in night clubs rather than Broadway.[66]

Try as they might, the producers of Blue Holiday were unable to skirt the natural limitations of a grossly-overworked genre, the all-Negro variety show. The failure of Blue Holiday signaled the end of that format, although a close relative of that structure would assert itself three decades later on Broadway in the form of such musical anthologies/revues as Eubie, Sophisticated Ladies, and Ain't Misbehavin', and in "concept" song revues as Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope and Your Arms Too Short to Box With God.

Six years after the Broadway black Mikados, another Gilbert & Sullivan show was re-set into an African-American milieu. Originally intended as a straight adaptation of H. M. S. Pinafore, the librettists Albert Barker and Sally Benson later chose to write the musical, now entitled Memphis Bound, in a show-within-a-show format. The plot concerned a black troupe on a Mississippi River showboat which must perform H. M. S. Pinafore in order to raise enough money "to get the boat off the mud flats,"[67] in which it is mired. Thus, the show mixed scenes written by Barker and Benson with those from Gilbert & Sullivan's original text.

The reviews of the show, which opened May 24, 1945, at the Broadway Theatre, ranged from mixed to guardedly positive, with only Barton Rascoe of the World-Telegram giving it a totally negative critique, which was counterweighted by Robert Garland's rave review in the Journal-American. The most recurring comment centered on the opinion that the show was at its best when the Negro troupe was performing Gilbert & Sullivan's operetta in the play-within-the-play; the critics felt the show sagged when the original material was introduced. Most made mention of the fact that opening night was the sixty-seventh birthday of its star, the legendary Bill Robinson; many added that he looked decades younger.

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A majority of the critics predicted Memphis Bound would, despite its structural imbalances, enjoy a long run on Broadway.

The creators of Memphis Bound were unable to find the cultural link between the showboat Negroes and Gilbert & Sullivan. Memphis Bound, as would St. Louis Woman a year later, disappointed the many critics who forecast a long run for the show. Memphis Bound lasted a surprisingly brief 36 performances.

The Black Musical Goes Caribbean

By the mid-1930s it had become obvious Broadway audiences were no longer fascinated by the American urban ghetto settings of black musicals. The theatregoers had had their fill of the Jimtown, Harlem, and Catfish Row Negroes. For those in search of a new set of exotic, romantic Negroes, the Caribbean provided a convenient change of locale.

The producers of the 1940s remembered well the success of the music-laden Voodoo Macbeth, which had been set in a country that was presumably Haiti. Furthermore, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, whose avocations as students of anthropology supplemented and complemented their careers as dancers/choreographers/performing artists, had given dance recitals featuring Caribbean and African dances which had proven to be popular and critical successes among the patrons of dance in New York.

Katherine Dunham, born in Chicago in 1909, effectively combined her love of dance and anthropology in a long and distinguished career. To further her research for her Master of Arts degree in Anthropology at the University of Chicago, Dunham was awarded a Rosenwald study grant, which she used by living in various Caribbean countries for a year in 1935 and 1936. She focused her study on Caribbean dances and their African origins.[68]

In 1938, Dunham organized her own dance company, which she called "The Third World Company." Though the ideal black dancer in the eyes of whites at that time was a lightskinned female, Dunham's troupe consisted of Americans, West Indians, and Hispanics of African descent, regardless of sex or pigmentation. For Dunham to

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employ so many dancers who did not fit the fair-skinned ideal was thought to be a radical move by blacks and whites.[69]

Dunham gained her initial Broadway success in 1940 by playing Georgia Brown in Cabin in the Sky and providing the show's choreography, which featured her troupe, now called The Katherine Dunham Dancers. Almost three years later she and her dancers headlined the dance recital, A Tropical Revue, which was presented by Sol Hurok at the Martin Beck Theatre, opening September 19, 1943. The show, which presented an assortment of black dance forms from the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America, ran for two months on Broadway, which was highly successful for a dance concert in that venue. A Tropical Revue had a profitable tour, and, as was the custom at that time, finished its popular Broadway run and road tour with a brief return to Broadway.[70]

Four months after their appearance in the short-lived Blue Holiday, Katherine Dunham and her dancers returned in the first Broadway book musical set in the Caribbean. Billed by its producers as "a musical folk play of the West Indies," Carib Song premiered at the Adelphi Theatre on September 27, 1945, with the book and lyrics by William Archibald, music by Baldwin Bergerson,direction by Mary Hunter, and choreography by Dunham.

The novelty of the show being the first Caribbean-set Broadway musical notwithstanding, it is obvious that not much innovative thought went into creating the story line. The plot is one of the oldest from the shelf of clichés: a love triangle involving "a lusty young wench,"[71] simply called "The Woman" (played by Dunham), her husband, called "The Husband," and her lover, "The Fisherman." Generic names were the order in this piece; all of the characters are designated by an occupational or social title; even the play's locale is nameless: "a small West Indian village."

If the generic names of the people and places in Carib Song were intended to suggest some sort of universality, their bland designations only served to underline the story's triteness, which was the major complaint of the critics. As had been a common objection amongst the critics of Dunham's choreography, it was

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noted in many reviews that the Caribbean dances and the rhythms to which the performers gyrated eventually became monotonous. Several critics opined that Dunham was much more adept at dancing and choreographing than she was at acting and singing. However, these same critics, while chiding the monotony of the dances, reverted to the usual comments on the special gift they felt blacks had for singing and dancing.

Carib Song, which could have represented an advancement for the black musical by delving into a different aspect of black culture, resorted instead to the lowest common denominator. The setting had changed, but the same old images were being presented. The Negro's Exotic Primitive mystique was played out in full force in the person of the morally-lax character of the female lead, and in the obligatory libidinous voodoo dances, described thusly by Barton Rascoe:

> The social ritualistic, religious and orgiastic dances which Miss Dunham has arranged . . . are primitive, priapic and erotic, frankly depicting the incitements to lust.[72]

As with their American counterparts, the Negroes of Carib Song are drawn from the poverty-bound, pidgin-English-speaking lower-class. Substantiveness in the libretto was obviously not a consideration; as in the myriad of pseudo-Williams & Walker book musicals of the 1920s and '30s, the creators of Carib Song, according to the majority of the critics, gave the patrons of black shows yet another weak, inane plot. The creators' decision to stay with the lowest common denominator aesthetically, and the fact that the show was presented at the Adelphi Theatre, which was somewhat unpopular with Broadway audiences due to its off-the-beaten-track location, were two of the chief factors in the show's short, four-and-a-half week run.

Returning to a format which had proved successful to her, Dunham and her dancers were back on Broadway thirteen months later in the dance revue, Bal Negre. An offspring of A Tropical

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Revue, Bal Negre failed to repeat its parent's success, playing for just a few weeks to small houses.[73]

The Caribbean-set book musical next appeared in late 1947, featuring Pearl Primus and her dance troupe. Primus, born in 1911 in Trinidad, had, like Dunham, an extensive formal education in sociology and anthropology, and, like Dunham, had applied her learning in a practical manner in her art.

Billed by the producer as "the first calypso musical ever presented" Caribbean Carnival made its debut December 5, 1947, at the International Theatre. Written by Samuel L. Manning and Adolph Thenstead, the show was directed by Manning and Colonel John Hirschman. Featured performers were Pearl Primus, who also provided the choreography, Josephine Premice, and the Trinidadian calypso star, Cecil Anderson, who was called "The Duke of Iron."

First titled Calypso, then Bongo in its pre-Broadway trial run,[74] Caribbean Carnival was originally intended to be a musical revue which would introduce Trinidadian calypso music to American mainstream audiences. A wisp of a libretto was draped around the musical numbers shortly before the Broadway opening.[75] As with so many so-called black "book" musicals, the plot was the aspect of the show which received the least amount of consideration from its creators. An idea of Caribbean Carnival's trace of a story-line can be gained from the comments of William Hawkins of the World-Telegram:

> The revue is threaded on a vague idea of a photographer trying to worm her way into a voodoo meeting in Trinidad. The first half of the show is a series of specialties leading up to the ceremony which is the second act.[76]

As yet another Negro show whose aim was to dazzle its audience with an array of brilliant parts which its creators never bothered to fully integrate into an aesthetically-pleasing whole, Caribbean Carnival left itself open to a flood of vicious negative reviews. A majority of the critics concurred that the music had

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soon become repetitious, and, of course, the afterthought of a book was chided. Several were of the opinion that the show might have been successful in the form of an hour-length nightclub revue/dance recital of calypso songs and West Indian dances.

While giving audiences an eclectic overview of black dance formats from around the world, Dunham, and those who presented her dance revues, A Tropical Revue and Bal Negre, were not above playing heavily upon the Negro's Exotic Primitive mystique. However authentic they may indeed have been, the dances, which featured scantily-clad, lithe-limbed dark bodies writhing about played upon every preconception of people of African descent as being oversexed, uninhibited, and prone to spiritual possession. The book musicals Carib Song and Caribbean Carnival, though being able to make the claim of having been the first Caribbean-set and calypso musicals, respectively, served merely to provide a less-used setting for the standard poor, uneducated, licentious stage Negroes for whom life is just one endless party. Instead of giving alternative views and stories of New World blacks, these shows were the basic Harlem/Jimtown/Catfish Row musicals set hundreds of miles to the south--in countries which were never named--and with a lilting West Indian vocal inflection replacing the thick-tongued American Negro stage dialect.

Bloomer Girl and Finian's Rainbow

As Show Boat had done almost twenty years earlier, two long-running mid-1940s "white" musicals eschewed the tradition of scapegoating its Negro characters. As Oscar Hammerstein had done in the earlier work, the creators of Bloomer Girl and Finian's Rainbow used irony and satire, respectively, in formulating black characters who possessed an unusual amount of dignity and self-awareness in comparison with the standard stage Negro depictions.

Bloomer Girl, which opened October 5, 1944, was at once as how which adhered to many of the formulaic dictates of the time, yet ventured into the possibly controversial subjects of woman's rights and civil rights for blacks. In the more traditional subplot, Evelina Applegate, heiress of a Cicero Falls, New York,

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manufacturing family, is torn between accepting a would-be suitor who has been brought to her in an "arranged" marriage, or following her heart--if not her head--and marrying the dashing Jefferson Lightfoot Calhoun, a slave-holding Kentuckian. Less conventional is the character of Dolly Bloomer, Evelina's maternal aunt, who, as a feminist and abolitionist, is quite the controversial figure in this small Northern town on the eve of the Civil War.

Dolly is visited one day at the office of The Lily, her feminist/abolitionist newspaper, by Pompey, an escaped slave, who is described as "a tall, young, intelligent-looking NEGRO."[77] A dignified, well-spoken young man, he had read contraband copies of Dolly's paper which had been smuggled onto the Kentucky plantation on which he labored. Having come North with his master, Evelina's suitor, Jeff Calhoun, Pompey seizes the opportunity to escape. Unfortunately, Pompey is not very difficult to trace in such a small town; when finding his runaway, young Calhoun is shocked that his well-cared for slave Pompey would desire to be free. Pompey sings "The Eagle and Me,"[78] an ode to man's natural inclination to be free.

Pompey is placed in a jail cell for safekeeping, sharing the pen with two other runaways from Calhoun's party, Augustus and Alexander, the latter of whom sings "I Got a Song,"[79] an ironic ode to the Negro's status as a second-class citizen.

Fortunately for the three black men, Evelina and her aunt Dolly have convinced Calhoun to set the jailed trio free. Calhoun offers them train tickets to Canada, which Pompey declines, electing instead to stay in Cicero Falls and play the title role in a Dolly Bloomer-sponsored production of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Alexander and Augustus, however, opt for leaving the country, reprising the earlier "I Got a Song," only this time with lyrics about being free.

The use of irony becomes perhaps a bit heavy-handed when Pompey, while portraying Uncle Tom in the play-within-the-play, is singing a song on an auction block entitled "Man For Sale," when Hamilton Calhoun, Jeff's older brother, rushes in with the local sheriff, and grabs Pompey, shouting: "I demand my property! That man is mine!"[80] The heavy-handed irony is compounded when,

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shortly after this, it is learned that Fort Sumter has been fired upon, precipitating the War Between the States.

As can be expected in the all-ends-well formula for Broadway shows, the elder Calhoun's mistake is discovered, and Pompey is once again free.

Pompey, Alexander, and Augustus are a far cry from the typical happy slaves who just love pleasing their masters. Well-spoken, they eschew the "darky" dialect. Librettists Sig Herzig and Fred Saidy's black characters never "coon it up"; lyricist E. Y. Harburg provides them with the most profound words to date in a commercial musical on what it is to be black and oppressed, electing for uncompromising bluntness, rather than the coy sarcasm of Oscar Hammerstein II in the "In Dahomey" number in Show Boat.

Lyricist Harburg and co-librettist Saidy were two of the major creative forces behind the decade's other "white" show with a strong civil rights undercurrent. Harburg served as the lyricist for Finian's Rainbow, and co-authored the book with Saidy. The show, which opened January 10, 1947, had a fantasy plot, revolving around Finian McLonergan, an Irishman who has fled his homeland after "borrowing" a pot of gold from Og, the somewhat oversized leprechan who is pursuing Finian in hopes of recovering the gold, and Senator Billboard Rawkins of the mythical Southern state of Missitucky, who claims to own the land on which Finian will plant the pot of pilfered gold, thinking it will thus generate even more gold.

Rawkins plans to claim the property from numerous sharecroppers, black and white alike, who are unable to pay the tax on the land. Senator Rawkins is biased not only against blacks, but poor whites as well.

The first instance of racial satire in the play occurs in the third scene. Buzz Collins, the "stooge for Senator Rawkins,"[81] is interviewing a young black man who is applying for a job as Rawkins' butler:

> (The NEGRO, HOWARD, offers the tray as though serving drinks)
>
> Buzz

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Mm-mm. Rawkins won't like it.
(To Howard)
That's no way to serve a mint julep. It's too fast. Get some shuffle into it. [Emphasis both times is the authors']
(He takes tray)
You've seen movies like "Gone With the Wind," haven't you. Here, like this.
(Shuffling and with an exaggerated Southern accent, moves to D.C.)
Youah julep, suh, Mr, Rawkins, suh, all frosted and minty yawk, yawk! See?

Howard
(In dignified straight English which will surprize some people)
But why do I have to shuffle, Mr. Collins?

Buzz
Why? Well, it's a mark of breed, here in the South. Makes for kindly feelings between master and servant.[82]

We learn Howard has just another year to go before graduating from Tuskegee Institute. Buzz assures the young black man that upon finishing his studies he has a butler's job for life within the Rawkins household.[83] Suddenly Rawkins bursts in, upset over some matter, screaming for a bromo seltzer to settle his churning stomach. Now Howard elects to shuffle, carrying in the medicine at a snail's pace which such cinematic "coons" as Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, and Nicodemus would have been proud of. Howard is going so slowly that Rawkins is forced to crawl to his servant. By the time the two finally meet, the bromo has evaporated.[84]

The satire on plantation stereotypes continues in the final moments of the first act. Finian's daughter, Sharon, aghast over Rawkins' treatment of the black sharecroppers, forgets momentarily that the pot of gold which her father has "borrowed" from the leprechans has magical powers, and says: "I wish to God he [Rawkins] were black so---". A sudden fuselage of thunder and lightning strike, and Rawkins indeed becomes black. The first person whom he encounters in this new incarnation is the sheriff, who is showing a

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group of tourists around, all the while extolling the virtues of the South. Spotting Rawkins, and not recognizing him as the Senator, the sheriff hands him a guitar, saying to him: "Here, Sambo--sing for the white folks."[85]

Despairing over his new condition, Rawkins tries to hide out, but is discovered by the leprechan Og:

> Og
> . . . I think it's just ridiculous to make such a fuss about a person's color!
>
> Rawkins
> You moron, don't you realize what it means to be black?
>
> Og
> But you're still a human being.
>
> Rawkins
> But you can't get into a restaurant! You can't get on a street car! You can't buy yourself a cold beer on a hot day![86]

Og uses his magical powers to change Rawkins' mind and soul to that of a black man's to match his skin coloring. With the memory of his ever having been white deleted, Rawkins immediately joins three black gospel singers whom he encounters on the road. They are in need of a fourth voice to form a quartet, and Rawkins complies.

Sharon confesses that it was because of her that Rawkins had been changed into a black man. His constituents find him and demand he return to being white, so he can be re-elected, thus ensuring they will keep their jobs. The Senator's chief lackey, Buzz, informs him that:

> . . . Mr. Rawkins, as a Negro, you've got no rights in this state, not even the right to stay black. So you gotta turn white.[87]

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The satirical point having been driven home effectively, Senator Rawkins is returned to his former white self.

Bloomer Girl and Finian's Rainbow were the first major American musicals which stated in no uncertain terms that the black man was a human being, with rights all others were bound to respect. Other shows might have implied this by simply portraying the black characters as people who just happened to be black (i.e., the shows of the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson companies, and others which likewise eschewed the stereotypical "darkies"), but the two mid-1940s shows boldly stated that opinion. However, Bloomer Girl and Finian's Rainbow had the luxury of incorporating these liberal sentiments into their subplots, as mere adjuncts to the more commercially viable aspects of the show. A plea for understanding between the races could act as a diversion, as a commercial for equality to be inserted into an otherwise conventional Broadway entertainment, but, as of the late-1940s, it was still believed that an evening of musical theatre centering on the theme of equal rights for blacks within a white society would have a hard time finding an audience. The Broadway theatregoers did not want to be preached to, no matter how subtle or attractive the package. Yet, the decision-makers of the Playwrights' Company felt that the time was right for an evening of musical theatre which dealt with the black man's struggle for equality and human rights as the central theme, and not as a plot diversion--albeit in the context of a work which,though geographically far-removed from American racism, was, at the least, a metaphor for segregation in the United States.

Lost in the Stars

The last black musical of the 1940s was the Playwrights' Company's presentation of Lost in the Stars, which opened at the Music Box Theatre on October 30, 1949. Based on the novel Cry The Beloved Country by Alan Paton, a white writer from the Union of South Africa, Lost in the Stars [to be called Stars] takes a look at that nation's system of racial segregation. The show was directed

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by Rouben Mamoulian, who, by this time, was obviously the first Broadway director one sought when mounting a black musical.

The integrated cast of 48 actors and singers was lead by Todd Duncan of Porgy and Bess fame. The music was composed by the German-born Kurt Weill, who is best known for his collaborations with the German leftist dramatist/poet Bertolt Brecht. The libretto and lyrics were furnished by Maxwell Anderson, who challenged Eugene O'Neill as America's preeminent playwright of the first half of the twentieth century.

The protagonist of Stars is Stephen Kumalo, a black South African Christian minister, who has become distressed because he and his wife, Grace, have not heard from their son, Absalom, who has been living in Johannesburg. Stephen journeys to Johannesburg, only to learn from his brother, John Kumalo, that Absalom is living with a pregnant girl whom he has yet to marry, is keeping company with a bunch of ruffians, and has forsaken his plan to work and save enough money for a college education.

John's negative predictions about Absalom's future soon come to pass. Absalom, desperately needing money so that he can leave the city and try his luck in the gold fields, arranges with his cousin Matthew (John Kumalo's son) and Johannes Pafuri, to burglarize the house of Arthur Jarvis, a young white liberal, and "the greatest friend of the negro in Africa."[88] Jarvis surprizes them in the middle of the crime; panicking, Absalom shoots and kills Jarvis. The three intruders are soon captured and scheduled for trial.

After meeting Absalom's pregnant girlfriend, Irina, Stephen pays a visit to James Jarvis, the father of the deceased, a man who is as intolerant of blacks as his son was attracted to them and their plight. Reverend Kumalo is seeking whatever type of clemency the senior Jarvis might be able to afford him, but is rebuffed by Jarvis. So that the symbolism of the murder is not lost upon the audience, the elder Jarvis spells it out quite clearly: "And the irony of it all--that an advocate of negro equality should have been killed by a negro."[89]

At the trial, Absalom readily admits his guilt and is sentenced to hang; Matthew and Johannes lie about their role in the

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crime and are acquitted. Shortly before Absalom's execution, Stephen conducts a wedding ceremony for his son and Irina. A few minutes before young Kumalo's hanging, James Jarvis visits Reverend Kumalo, and they pledge to nurture the unlikely friendship which has sprouted from their mutual tragedy.

Stars, the most unconventional black commercial musical to date (Gertrude Stein's nonsense exercise in esoterica, Four Saints in Three Acts notwithstanding), elicited a wide range of critical response from the reviewers. Rowland Field, of the Newark Evening News was perhaps the most ecstatic about the show, calling it "an extraordinary luminous folk opera of South Africa,"[90] judging the chorus to be "a superfine Negro ensemble of mixed voices," and opining that it was the best black musical theatre since Porgy and Bess. John Chapman of the Daily News, George Currie of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and Ward Morehouse of the Sun all wrote positive critiques, with the review of the latter being particularly enthusiastic.

The critics from the Post and the World-Telegram gave the show mixed reviews; Robert Coleman of the Daily Mirror thought it lacked the distinction one would expect from the joint efforts of such great craftsmen as Weill, Anderson, and Mamoulian; Robert Garland of the Journal-American felt Stars' creators had complicated the novel's artful simplicity.

Regardless of the show's perceived merits or shortcomings, it is only fitting that in a decade in which the stage image of the African-American had undergone a marked improvement, the final black-themed, predominately-Negro cast show of the 1940s would be the musical play which cast blacks in the best light to date, in terms of positive images. The two serious operatic works, Porgy and Bess and Carmen Jones, while avoiding the Negro-as-solely-the-purveyor-of-mindless-entertainment syndrome, nevertheless were peopled by lower-caste, dialect-spouting Southern Negroes whose speech and actions, at times, recalled the plantation folderol. The blacks of Stars speak a precise, lyrical English (courtesy of librettist Anderson, the majority of whose earlier plays were written in blank verse); for the first time ever in a black musical, the concept of the necessity for a strong family unit is examined: Stephen

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Kumalo and his wife are a loving, hard-working couple and deeply concerned about their wayward son. Unlike its presentation in Porgy and Bess, the black man's religiosity is not lampooned by Anderson, but, rather, is treated with dignity and respect.

The thieving and loose-living nature of Absalom and his cronies are seen as an aberration in Stars; in numerous other black shows this unstructured mode of living has been viewed as romantic and part of the Negro's basic makeup. For the first time ever the subject of segregation is attacked directly on the commercial musical stage--albeit in a foreign locale; during the course of the play, factions from both sides undertake sincere efforts against apartheid.

That the noble, Christ-like black male protagonist of the [white-authored] folk melodramas of the 1920s and '30s would be lynched was a given; Stars features for the first time on the Broadway musical stage the killing of a white man by a black. In veering away from stereotypes, Anderson refrained from painting Absalom Kumalo as the standard Brute Negro; in fact, Absalom is immediately repentant for his crime.

Some people might quibble and say that the mention of the past histories of promiscuity of Absalom's girlfriend, Irina, and Gertrude Kumalo, the unseen sister to John and Stephen, and the nightclub vignette in Act One, Scene VI, are gratuitous impositions of lower-caste "darky" behavior, but these somewhat tawdry inclusions are more than effectively balanced by the libretto's portrayal of blacks as both human and humane.

Not only did the content of the musical go against Broadway's traditional treatment of blacks, but the show made numerous structural changes from the standard format. Unlike all other black shows to date, Stars has no big, splashy production numbers tacked on. The typical song-and-dance chorus is replaced by a chorus of community dwellers who comment on and narrate as in ancient Greek tragedies. At times the show seems more like a play-with-music than a full-fledged musical drama; the exposition of the narrative depends more upon spoken dialogue and less upon song than the typical musical; long, passionate speeches, which would invariably

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be changed to song lyrics in other musicals, are retained here; ostensibly, to have sung them would have sweetened and diminished the desired harsh impact of the words. Unlike most musicals written for the commercial stage, where practically all of the featured performers should be able to sing, only the actors playing Stephen Kumalo and Irina must be apt singers; most of the songs are in the form of Stephen's solos and the choral commentaries.

Stars, at the relatively late date of 1949, deemed it possible for the black man to be seen as the social equal of the white man, and an occupant of the same rung on the ladder of human development. For the commercial musical theatre, which had long fostered the belief that the Negro race was, despite its supposed genetic deficiencies, the planet's premiere song-and-dance people, the idea that the black man was indeed human was a long time in arriving. James Jarvis, though thoroughly grief-stricken over the murder of his son, says as much to Stephen Kumalo when he visits the black minister moments before Absalom is to die:

> . . . your grief and mine are the same . . . your tragedy [is] mine--and mine [is] yours. And I [am] more to blame than you.
>
> Stephen
>
> There's no blame.
>
> Jarvis
>
> Yes, there is. Because I have believed and said that your race was a lesser breed than mine. And it's not true.[91]

Jarvis also promises that:

> I shall take your hand wherever I like, before whom I like. I shall come and worship in your church if I wish to worship.[92]

During its eight-month run, Stars had to overcome several obstacles. Its eschewing of the predictable and the formulaic

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baffled and surely put off many would-be patrons. The cast--and the theatre-world at large--suffered a stunning loss when Kurt Weill died suddenly on April 3, 1950, as the show was beginning its sixth month. As a "serious" musical, it refrained from the gratuitous comic-relief scenes and production numbers which were interjected into other shows which had similar pretensions to being serious art. Although the show had run longer than many theatre experts had predicted, its stay of well over 200 performances was nonetheless viewed as a commercial failure, as the show lost money.

As Stars closed out the decade, it had become apparent that there was no longer any infallible formula for success when putting together a black show. The mindless entertainments, featuring decently-crafted songs and dance routines grafted onto a vague, pseudo-Williams & Walker-type libretto no longer worked, as witnessed by the failure of Caribbean Carnival. The Negro-as-Exotic-Primitive motif no longer guaranteed success, as seen in the relatively early demise of St. Louis Woman. The all-Negro variety show came and went quickly in both of its 1940s incarnations, Blue Holiday and Harlem Cavalcade. Despite its good intentions and the fact that it dared to be truly innovative--as far as black shows went, anyway--Lost in the Stars had only a limited appeal.

The Dearth of Black Writers for Black Shows in the 1940s

The overall situation had improved somewhat for the black performer in the 1940s. Although the number of black shows in this decade had decreased from the total of the previous two decades, the range of possible roles was widening for the African-American musical theatre artist. No longer was he confined to the grinning, shuffling "darky" portrayals of the Neo-Minstrel shows, nor to the would-be grifters and their molls of the pseudo-Williams & Walker book shows; his domain had stretched from Jimtown and Catfish Row to foreign shores. If playing a slave, he could now be an intelligent, freedom-seeking bondsman, instead of a happy "coon" singing about his love for his plantation, his master, and his condition of servitude. To our current sensibilities, these improvements, such as they were, may seem trivial, but, considering the stagnant, even

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regressive atmosphere (after the gains made by the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson companies at the turn of the century) of the black musical theatre before the 1940s, they do represent progress. True, as the decade ended, the black performer still had but a limited array of possibilities, but his lot was better than it had been previously.

However, this was not so for the black talent behind the scenes. Of all the black-themed musicals of the 1940s, only one show--the book for St. Louis Woman, by Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps--was written by blacks. Continuing a tradition begun by Will Marion Cook and Bob Cole and the Johnson Brothers in the first years of the twentieth century of blacks writing for white shows, Thomas "Fats" Waller (Early to Bed, 1943), Duke Ellington (Beggar's Holiday, 1946), and Langston Hughes (the lyrics for the 1947 operatic adaptation of Elmer Rice's Street Scene) contributed only to major white shows.

If these black composers and lyricists could be hired to create for white shows, then one wonders why they were not also asked to write black shows. One has to speculate that there must have been at least one capable black director in the 1940s; no producer in the commercial theatre, except Ed Sullivan, who hired Noble Sissle to co-direct Harlem Cavalcade, dared engage a black director for a show.

For Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, the 1940s were more noteworthy for those of his shows which were not produced on Broadway. Of the several scores which Ellington wrote for black Broadway musicals, perhaps Jump For Joy was the best candidate for success on the New York stage. Jump For Joy [to be called Jump], with most of the music composed by Ellington, opened in June 1941, at the Mayan Theatre in Hollywood, California. Running for three months there, it proved to be a popular success. Ellington describes the show in his autobiography, Music is My Mistress:

> In 1941 a team of scholarly Hollywood writers decided to attempt to correct the race situation in the U.S.A. through a form of theatrical propaganda. This culminated

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> in meetings at which the decision to do [Jump], a show that would take Uncle Tom out of the theatre, eliminate the stereotyped image that had been exploited by Hollywood and Broadway, and say things that would make the audience think.[93]

The show, dubbed a "Sun-Tanned Revu-sical," received its financial backing by "top-bracket film people."[94] The few numbers in the score which were not composed by Ellington were written by Hal Borne; most of the lyrics were by Paul Webster. A majority of the sketches were by Sid Kuller and Hal Fimbert, but ten other writers contributed to the songs and sketches, among them Langston Hughes and Mickey Rooney. The director was Nick Castle.

Prominent in the cast were Marie Bryant, Evelyn Burwell, Paul White, Dorothy Dandridge, and Herb Jeffries. Jeffries, a matinee idol from the explosion of independently-produced black films of the 1930s and early 1940s, and a popular nightclub singer and recording artist, became, in essence, the first black romantic leading man in a commercial musical, albeit in a non-Broadway commercial musical. "Big" Joe Turner, whose later self-designated title as "The Boss of the Blues and the Grandfather of Rock 'n' Roll," was as accurate as it was immodest[95] joined the cast shortly after the show's opening, providing a boost at the box-office, as his legion of followers flocked to see their blues-shouting favorite perform in a different venue.[96]

According to Ellington, Jump was the first "legitimate show to be created and produced on the West Coast."[97] More sophisticated than the 1929 Salem Whitney and Homer Tutt failure, Deep Harlem, which had similar intentions, Jump was the precursor for black musicals of a satirical nature, such as Jamaica (1956) and Fly Blackbird (1962). Ellington provides us with just one of the reasons why the show did not go on to Broadway:

> The show was done on a highly intellectual level--no crying, no moaning, but entertaining, and with social demands as a potent spice. Anyone who attended those backstage meetings for twelve weeks got a full college

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> education in social significance. The show was a smash during its three-month run, but along came World War II to scoop up most of our young show stoppers.[98]

World War II notwithstanding, one can only speculate how Broadway would have received the show. To date--1941--no positive, "propaganda"-oriented show which eschewed the standard poor and illiterate stage Negroes had been mounted on Broadway. Jump's production values and roster of distinguished creative artists who had contributed ensured it would not have been the typical bare-bones, crudely-crafted black show of which there had been many examples in the twenty years since Shuffle Along. Whatever their reasons, those who had backed the Los Angeles production decided against recasting the show and presenting it before the perhaps more-demanding Broadway audiences.

Another show which was written as, but never received a full-fledged Broadway production, was Ellington's Black, Beige and Brown. Planned as "a tome parallel to the history of the American Negro,"[99] the "Black" segment delved into the African and early American past; "Brown" recognized the contributions "made by the Negro to his country in blood,"[100] and "beige" referred to "the common view of the people of Harlem, and the little Harlems around the U. S. A."[101]

The show was done in a 57-minute concert version at Carnegie Hall in 1943, followed by a six-month engagement at the Hurricane Club at 49th Street and Broadway, and a four-week stay at the Capitol Theatre, with Lena Horne co-starring.

Despite the show's popularity in its abridged version, Ellington found no takers in his attempt for a full mounting on Broadway. Perhaps he made a mistake in letting it run for so long in the shortened edition; producers could justify their not taking on the project because it had possibly already exhausted its potential audience.

Ellington's inability to secure a full-fledged Broadway production for his black musicals underscores the dilemma African-American authors and composers faced in the 1940s when trying to

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sell their works to the commercial theatre: if a household name like Duke Ellington was not attractive enough to white producers, then the lesser-known and unknown artists had no chance at all. The 1940s marked the first decade since the 1880s in which no Broadway shows had been produced by blacks; by now the cost of mounting a production had become so high as to be prohibitive for anyone, save for the moneyed elite.

Of all the black musicals of the 1940s, only Carmen Jones can be labeled an unqualified success. That it was the brainchild of such a master craftsman as Oscar Hammerstein II, aided by George Bizet, and was bolstered by the energetic publicizing of its producer, Billy Rose, almost made its success a given. It was easier said than done when others tried to duplicate Carmen Jones' formula for success: an intelligently-crafted libretto with as much psychological depth to its characters as was now necessary on the Broadway stage, and the requisite good music, and singers and dancers to bring the songs to life.

The day had long since passed when all that was needed to garner the white dollar was a stage full of singing, dancing, grinning, happy "darky" types. A new formula for guaranteed success was needed by producers; this formula would not be making itself apparent anytime soon.

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CHAPTER EIGHT ENDNOTES

[1]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, p. 533.

[2]Before Robinson, there had been incidents of lightskinned ballplayers of African descent from both the United States and Latin America who had "passed" for white and played "organized" baseball.

[3]Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973), p. 180.

[4]James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds., Black Theatre U.S.A., p. 437.

[5]Howard Barnes, Herald-Tribune, August 31, 1944.

[6]Black Theatre U.S.A., p. 392.

7New York Times, October 26, 1940.

[8]Brooklyn Daily Eagle, October 26, 1940.

[9]Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, His Eye Is on the Sparrow (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1951), p. 255.

[10]Ibid

. [11]Tpescript copy in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library, New York City. All further references to this libretto will be simply called Cabin in the Sky.

[12]Cabin in the Sky, p. 1-1-1.

[13]Ibid., p. 1-2-36.

[14]Ibid., p. 2-2-36.

[15]Ibid., p. 2-2-35.

[16]Allen Woll, Dictionary of the Black Theatre, p. 38.

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[17]David Ewen, New Complete Book of the American Musical Theatre (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 75.

[18]Oscar Hammerstein II, Carmen Jones (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. xviii.

[19]Variety, December 8, 1943.

[20]John Chapman, Daily News, December 3, 1943.

[21]Oscar Hammerstein II, Carmen Jones typescript libretto inthe Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library. The typescript will be subsequently referred to as Carmen Jones. The line quoted appeared on page 1-1-6.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., p. 1-1-8.

[24]Ibid., p. 1-1-14.

[25]Gerald Bordman, American Musical Theatre, p. 540.

[26]By this I mean in the role of the major librettist, lyricist, or composer for the show. This does not count the contributors to the skits or songs of Harlem Cavalcade.

[27]Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, Lena (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), p.187.

[28]Ibid., pp. 187-188.

[29]Ibid., p. 188.

[30]Arna Bontemps, God Sends Sunday (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931).

[31]Ibid., pp. 21-26.

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[32]Although the preference of the black female characters in the novel for white males is a recurring theme, the black male/white female issue is never broached by Bontemps.

[33]Pearl Bailey, The Raw Pearl (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), pp. 59-60

[34]Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen, St. Louis Woman, in Black Theatre, ed. by Lindsay Patterson (New York: The New American Library, 1971), p. 33.

[35]Ibid., p. 15

[36]Ibid., p. 25.

[37]P. M., April 1, 1946.

[38]Burns Mantle, Daily News, January 11, 1940.

[39]Roark Bradford, John Henry (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939).

[40]Ibid., p. 6.

[41]Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[42]Ibid., p. 89.

[43]New York Times, January 11, 1940.

[44]New York Sun, January 11, 1940.

[45]Brook Atkinson, Times, May 8, 1941.

[46]George Freedley, Morning Telegraph, May 9, 1941.

[47]Theodore Browne, Natural Man, in Black Theatre U.S.A., p. 364. All subsequent references to the play will be from thetext in this anthology.

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[48]Ibid., p. 371

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid., p. 372.

[51]Ibid., p. 373.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., p. 378.

[54]Ibid., p. 381.

[55]The reviews of Brown and Anderson appeared on May 8, 1941; Freedley's appeared one day later.

[56]For instance, the speech quoted on p. 373 surely would have been, by the dictates of the commercial musical comedy/drama structure, made into a grand, heart-rending, near-operatic "show-stopping" song.

[57]Paul Carter Harrison, The Drama of Nommo, p. xiv.

[58]New York Times, May 4, 1942.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Herald-Tribune, May 2, 1942.

[61]Edgar Price, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, May 22, 1945.

[62]Morning Telegraph, May 22, 1945.

[63]May 22, 1945.

[64]May 22, 1945

[65]Brooklyn Daily Eagle, May 22, 1946.

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[66]May 22, 1945.

[67]George Freedley, Morning Telegraph, May 22, 1945.

[68]James Haskins, Katherine Dunham (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghehan, Inc., 1982), p. 52.

[69]Ibid., p. 73.

[70]Bordman, p. 538.

[71]Barton Rascoe, World-Telegram, September 8, 1945.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Bordman, p. 554.

[74]Variety, December 10, 1947.

[75]Ibid.

[76]December 6, 1947.

[77]Sig Herzig and Fred Saidy, Bloomer Girl, p. 1-3-39. Typescript of the libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library, for the Performing Arts. All subsequent references to the play will be from this typescript.

[78]Ibid., pp. 1-3-41 and 42.

[79]Ibid., pp. 2-1-5 through 17.

[80]Ibid., p. 2-3-39.

[81]E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, Finian's Rainbow, p. 1-1-3. Typescript of the libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library.

[82]Ibid., pp. 1-3-30 and 1-3-31.

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[83]Ibid., p. 1-3-30.

[84]Ibid., p. 1-3-35.

[85]Ibid., p. 1-6-58.

[86]Ibid., p. 2-2-12.

[87]Ibid., p. 2-3-23.

[88]Maxwell Anderson, Lost in the Stars, p. 1-7-45. Typescript of the libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library.

[89]Ibid., p. 1-8-48.

[90]As with all of the newspaper reviews to be quoted in the following paragraphs, this critique appeared in the October 31,1949, edition of said newspaper.

[91]Lost in the Stars, p. 2-6-38.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Edward Kennedy Ellington, Music Is My Mistress (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), p. 175.

[94]Ibid.

[95]In interviews with the "founding fathers" of rock 'n' roll--Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Fats Domino, et. al.--the same five names are always mentioned as being heavy influences on this 1950s art form: Louis Jordan, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Hank Williams, Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter)--and "Big" Joe Turner.

[96]Music is My Mistress, p. 176.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid.

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[99]Ibid., p. 181.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Ibid., p. 182.

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A

THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHARACTERS IN THE AMERICAN COMMERCIAL MUSICAL

by

WARREN B. BURDINE, JR.

VOLUME II

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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CHAPTER NINE

THE 1950s: ONLY THOSE WITH BUILT-IN FOLLOWINGS NEED APPLY

The 1950s was by no means an exemplary decade for the black musical; only six--or eight, depending on how one categorizes--new black musical shows were mounted between 1950 and 1959. According to Gerald Bordman, the musical theatre in general was marked at this time by alternating seasons of feast or famine, with the better-crafted, more slickly-produced shows lasting for long runs, while the obviously less aptly-wrought works usually met with a swift and sudden demise.[1]

The Broadway audience became more discriminating; the rising cost of theatre tickets made many people find cheaper forms of entertainment, such as the movies or television. Prospective patrons simply would not spend their money in the theatre, when they could find something more entertaining for a lower price elsewhere.

Of the six--or eight--new Negro musicals of the decade, only four managed over one hundred performances, and just one could be labeled an unqualified hit. Two lasted less than a week. There was obviously no formula for success for a black show at this time.

Producers and writers could no longer resort to the traditional stereotypes. Gone were the days of using the Negro as a stage buffoon. The collective black consciousness was growing to the point where African-Americans would simply not stand for such denigration. Black pressure groups, primarily the N.A.A.C.P., readily took exception to images of blacks in films, on television, and on the stage which they deemed as defaming.

Due to increased integration in schools, at the workplace, and in public accommodations, more white Americans were coming into contact, even if just casual, with blacks. The more sensitive and sensible whites saw that the African-American's culture was different, but that each black person was not necessarily possessed of the roster of stereotypical traits. As whites interacted more with

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blacks--once again, even if in the most casual sense--the Negro, in the eyes of whites, was beginning to lose that exotic, "other"-ness; the more dealings whites had with blacks, the more they were prone to see each other as human beings.

The advancements the African-American had made in the area of civil rights in the 1940s continued in the 1950s. In an historic decision, the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in the nation's public schools in a verdict made on May 17, 1954.

The American Negro, historically characterized as passive and unwilling and unable to act in a concerted manner in his own behalf, refuted that myth with a series of nonviolent confrontations in the mid- and late-1950s, many of which were led by the Atlanta-born Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., a graduate of Boston University's School of Divinity. A devotee of Mahatma Gandhi's principal of nonviolent resistance, King's fame and mode of confrontation spread throughout the South, and he was instrumental in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (S.C.L.C.) in 1957. Until the so-called militants of the mid-l960s adopted a more physically-confrontational stance, King's brand of nonviolent resistance was the rule for most of the civil rights leaders.

The 1950s marked the era in which the Nation of Islam, a group of African-Americans who practiced Islam as taught by their Georgia-born leader Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Poole),[2] thrust itself upon the American consciousness. Founded in 1931 in Detroit,[3] the sect--dubbed by the media as the "Black Muslims"--grew steadily in number and power in the 1950s, embracing numerous former drug addicts, ex-convicts, and those who were simply disillusioned with Christianity.[4] Much of the publicity which they received was generated around the sect's dynamic and controversial minister Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little).

The nationalistic, non-integrationist philosophy of the Nation of Islam, which was based on an intense sense of black pride, would become the basis for the ideologies of the more militant African-American factions of the 1960s. This stressing of black self-awareness would have a monumental influence on the content and

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attitude of numerous black musicals in the late-1960s and early-1970s.

Though the 1950s was not one of the better decades for the black "straight" play, gains were made which would pay off in later years. The decade did not portend well for black serious drama when an all-Negro production of Jack Kirkland's Tobacco Road, presented on Broadway by the Negro Drama Group, lasted for just seven performances in March 1950. Touchstone, a play by William Stuckey, a white Kentucky newspaperman, and one of the few works up to that time which attempted to take a serious and empathetic look at the Negro middle-class, likewise closed after seven performances on Broadway, in February 1953. Black playwright Louis Peterson's semi-autobiographical Take a Giant Step, centering around a youth growing up in a middle-class neighborhood in a small Connecticut town, fared somewhat better, lasting for 76 showings on Broadway in the autumn of 1953.

The black Off-Broadway drama came of age in the 1950s. Three plays by African-American authors were presented during this decade--all at the Greenwich Mews Theatre--which would set the tone for numerous black Off-Broadway dramas--and musicals--in the subsequent decades. In Splendid Error, a 1954 effort by William Branch, told of the relationship between the white abolitionist John Brown and the first major African-American political "agitator," Frederick Douglass. Trouble in Mind, a 1955 opus by Alice Childress, proved to be one of the first commercially-successful plays by a black female dramatists. It dealt with the stereotypical roles and the renditions of them imposed upon black performers by insensitive white producers, writers, and directors. Loften Mitchell's A Land Beyond the River (1957) was about a famous and powerful Negro preacher.

Though any play presented Off-Broadway would have to have, of course, some commercial appeal, the reduced pressure from not having to ultimately create the proverbial "smash hit" generally allowed dramatists, black and white, much more artistic freedom and a resultant refreshing honesty in the creation of their works. The authors were less prone to impose obviously gratuitously

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commercial imperatives onto their plays and musicals. Simply stated, many worthwhile works, which would have been doomed to short-lived runs on Broadway, found an audience Off-Broadway; the three plays presented at the Greenwich Mews in the mid-l950s ultimately helped to clear the path for the windfall of black plays--and especially the militant musicals--of the 1960s which would have had virtually no chance for success on Broadway.

In Search of a Formula for the 1950s

The scapegoating of the Negro, which had proliferated during the Minstrel era, and, in a more subtle manner during the Neo-Minstrel entertainments, had become passe; the trend of "Negro-izing" the classics, though it produced several interesting shows, could boast of only one hit--Carmen Jones; the variety show, though popular on the new medium of television, was for all intents and purposes dead in the live theatre; thus, no easily accessible formula for the black musical was making itself obvious.

All of the producers of the black musicals of the 1950s reverted to a formula which had traditionally often worked: the building of a show around an established star who had a dependable claque of followers. That star, or stars, could just as well be a writer or composer. Each of the black shows of the decade had at least one "name" person either on the creative end, or as the performer around whom the show was crafted and marketed.

One of the black shows of the 1950s can be categorized as an opera (The Barrier, 1950); five--Shuffle Along of 1952, House of Flowers (1954), Mr. Wonderful (1956), and two 1957 entries, Simply Heavenly and Jamaica--were book musicals. Ethel Waters' one-woman show, At Home With Ethel Waters (1953), and Mrs. Patterson, a 1954 play in which six songs were added to be sung by its star, Eartha Kitt, are not considered by some critics and historians to be in the musical category.

The Barrier and Shuffle Along of 1952

The first two black musicals of the 1950s were similar in that both depended upon the drawing power of their respective authors,

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Langston Hughes and the Sissle & Blake songwriting team, to bring in prospective patrons. Furthermore, they were linked by the fact that each would manage just four performances on Broadway.

The Barrier, an opera with a libretto by Langston Hughes and music by Jan Meyerwitz, opened November 2, 1950, at the Broadhurst Theatre. Staged by Doris Humphrey, the cast included Lawrence Tilbett of the Metropolitan Opera as the white plantation owner, Colonel Norwood, and Muriel Rahn, who had alternated the title role of Carmen Jones with Muriel Smith in the original 1943 production, as Norwood's long-time black concubine/housemaid and the mother of his four mulatto children. The central role of Robert, their militant youngest child, was essayed by Milton Clary, "a pretty likeable white farm boy from Oklahoma."[5] As in the 1935 presentation of Mulatto, the Hughes play upon which The Barrier had been based, all of Norwood's half-caste children were played by white performers.[6]

James Langston Hughes, born February 2, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, ranks with Richard Wright and James Baldwin amongst the preeminent African-American literary giants of the middle decades of the twentieth century. Though never attaining the monetary rewards, critical acclaim, and status as an international literary spokesman for American blacks which Wright and Baldwin enjoyed, Hughes was vastly more popular with the black proletariat, for whom he tailored his writings.

One of the main reasons why Hughes did not garner the higher status achieved by Wright and Baldwin was due to a widely-perceived lack of intellectual depth to much of his work in general, and to his dramatic characters in particular.[7] Surely one of the shortcomings of The Barrier, and, by extension, Mulatto, is a lack of depth in his characters, who never become more than the standard cardboard melodrama depictions.

The story behind Mulatto, a surprise Broadway hit, would, in and of itself, make an interesting play. In short, Hughes' theatrical agent, John Rumsey, placed Mulatto with the producer Martin Jones. Hughes, who had been away from Manhattan for the better part of three years, signed an agreement through the mails that the play

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could be rewritten by a Broadway dramatist--for one quarter of the royalties and billed credit as a co-author--to make the work more amenable to Broadway audiences. The rewriting of the play--by its producer/director Jones--consisted of simply sensationalizing it by adding more sex and violence. When Hughes did make a surprize visit to New York four weeks prior to the opening night, he was aghast at the changes which had been made in the doctoring of his text.[8] However, in his "Broadway-izing" of the script, Jones obviously knew what he was doing. Despite a maelstrom of scathingly hostile reviews, the play found an audience, lasting for 373 showings, by far the record at that time for a black-authored drama on Broadway.

In 1949 Hughes teamed with Jan Meyerwitz on the operatic version of his maligned but nonetheless popular Mulatto. The musicalized edition was first presented by the Theatre Associates of Columbia University, a group which staged ten-day workshop productions of works-in-progress by contemporary American composers.[9] Opening January 18, 1950, at the Brander Matthews Theatre on Columbia's campus, the limited engagement met with popular acclaim by those who saw it in its workshop run. Several producers expressed an interest in the show, and many of them voiced the desire that the opera not be too closely linked to the critically-lambasted play Mulatto; hence, Hughes and Meyerwitz decided to change the opera's name to The Barrier.[10]

The producers who did show an interest in the work did so with several reservations. The opera retained many of the structural flaws which had prompted the generally negative reviews of the play upon which it had been based. Miscegenation and patricide were hardly tried-and-true formulaic winners on the opera stage. When a producer was found, bad luck followed the out-of-town tryout.

The Baltimore engagement was cancelled when the N.A.A.C.P. protested vehemently to the fact that the show was slated to play in a theatre which segregated the races. The run in the nation's capital was cut short due to the small audiences which had been the result of hostile reviews of the show in the daily papers.[11] Returning to New York, the owners of the Mansfield Theatre, where The Barrier

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was to be presented, reneged on the use of the house, forcing the show to tour "the 'subway circuit' in Brooklyn and the Bronx,"[12] until another Broadway theatre could be secured.

The opera's plot is faithful to its source. Taking place in the 1930s in Georgia, it is the story of Colonel Thomas Norwood; Cora, a black housemaid with whom he had had a thirty-year conjugal relationship, and their youngest son, Robert. Although Norwood had never in any overt way recognized his relationship with Cora or his children by her, he had made a concession of sorts by having his four mulatto offspring educated in Northern schools. This is enough to satisfy the three older children, but the eighteen-year-old Robert, who has had a severe hatred for his father stemming from an incident in which Colonel Norwood violently chastised his seven-year-old bastard son for calling him "father" in public, demands some sort of official recognition. On vacation from the Washington, D.C., school which he attends, Robert brashly insults a white female store clerk, then further antagonizes his father with a series of verbal taunts, which culminates in Robert's entering his father's house through the front door and depositing himself in Norwood's throne-like favorite chair. The Colonel draws his gun and orders Robert to leave; Robert complies, exiting by the front door, daring his father to shoot him. Norwood stifles the impulse to do so, as the first act ends.[13]

The hostilities resume in Act Two; Robert strangles his father to death, then flees.[14] The rest becomes predictable: a mob is formed; Robert, trying to confuse them, returns to the scene of the crime; rather than give the mob the pleasure of lynching him, Robert takes his own life with an offstage gunshot.[15]

The reviewers decried the work's bent toward predictable melodrama, its one-note characters, and its underwritten scenes. A commonly-expressed opinion was that the respective tones of the libretto and score were of times at odds. Most of the critics commented on how the interpolation of a dream-ballet sequence, which takes place in Cora's mind concerning her and Norwood as adolescents, was poorly placed between Robert's killing of Norwood and the subsequent chase and suicide scenes, thus destroying the show's

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dramatic momentum. Many critics noted that, except for the dream-ballet scene, there was no dancing and no comic relief, facts which, coupled with the heavy subject-matter and violent ending, seriously undermined the show's entertainment potential.

Robert Coleman wrote that the opera "tells a familiar story with varying effect, a story which has found many forms in its mutations."[16] He added that it was "too sketchy and confused in mood" and was "much too short a work to provide a full and, rewarding evening in the theatre." William Hawkins, in citing the "one-dimensional roles," echoed the consensus of his peers when he complained of "a thin musical treatment of a thin story, "and judged that the subject-matter was "treated here in hackneyed fashion with no particular comment by author or composer."[17]

In keeping with what proved to be a career-long problem with Hughes' dramatic characters,[18] the people in The Barrier must be labeled as shallow, never rounded out beyond their melodrama-like flatness. All of the whites are die-hard racists; all the black characters, with the exception of Robert, are stupid, docile, and content with their inferior status; in short, they are latter-day contented slave types. In one scene midway through the first act, Cora and her son William, aghast over Robert's behavior and fearing for his life, do a "help me, lawd" routine which reeks of minstrelsy;[19] in the second act, Sam, the house servant, in reaction to the white mob's pursuit of Robert, gives a response which is more appropriate in the nineteenth-century "Ethiopian opera" segments of the white minstrel shows than in a purportedly serious opera by one of America's most respected black authors.[20]

Norwood is the standard stodgy, racist plantation-owner of countless melodramas, even down to the the dubious designation of "colonel." He never bends in his refusal to acknowledge his mulatto bastard children, other than grudgingly paying for their education. In his dealings with Cora, we never see any of the qualities which have obviously endeared him to her over their thirty-year covert relationship. Not only does he refuse to acknowledge her children, but her, as his lover, as well. The most immediate assumption is that he had enjoyed--or still enjoys--her solely as a form of sexual

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release. No indication is given why she would put up with such indifference; the reader or viewer can only speculate that perhaps her self-hatred as a black woman is so intense that she can be satisfied with bad treatment from this rich and relatively powerful white man, in lieu of no treatment at all, and that she enjoys a certain status amongst the local blacks for being Norwood's mistress. Once again, these are merely assumptions and speculations, but they are necessitated by Hughes' failure to properly flesh out his characters by adequately detailing their motivations. Whatever mutual affection which must exist between them is never dramatized by Hughes, not even in a depiction of Norwood in his most unguarded moments.

The relationship of Norwood and Cora has not gone unnoticed by those in the community. In discussing them, the Undertaker says:

> Norwood didn't have a gang o' yellow gals . . . like . . . some o' these big bugs. Just one bitch far's I know--living with him damn near like a wife.[21]

Had Hughes given us a scene demonstrating whatever it was between the two that had precluded Norwood from having "a gang o' yellow gals," the author would have provided a dimensionality to both characters which they were sorely lacking.

Although Hughes does give his audience a specific reason for Robert's consuming hatred of his father--the beating--the hatred itself is never demonstrated in anything but general terms; Robert has no characteristic other than his unrelenting anger; he lives only to express his contempt for his father and all whites. The audience sees the madness, but not the method. As the protagonist of the piece, and therefore the character with whom the audience is to empathize, Robert is drawn with absolutely no charm. Lacking is the wickedly perverse seductiveness of Shakespeare's Aaron or Dubose Heyward's Crown and Sportin' Life.

As the critics agreed, the story never went beneath the surface. A representative of the white Southern planter class exercises his sexual carte blanche with a black "wench" of his

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plantation; of the inevitable brood of offspring, one will inevitably rebel against his neither-nor status; a violent confrontation will ensue; the Christ-like black male protagonist will, of course, die in the end. No new twists were provided in The Barrier; no new insights were offered in this yet another story of a situation which, however tritely it had been rendered in literature and drama, had been true in so many real-life occurrences throughout the South.

The Barrier stayed for only four showings on Broadway, but fared much better on its national tour, and abroad.[22]

Shuffle Along of 1952 represented yet another attempt by most of the original's creative team to duplicate the 1921 show's landmark success. Opening May 8, 1952, at the Broadway Theatre, Sissle & Blake once again provided the songs. Paul Gerard Smith and Flournoy Miller were responsible for the book. The 1952 edition was not an updated adaptation of the 1921 opus, but featured a totally new book, story-line, and set of characters, although the show reprised some of the more popular tunes from the original.

The first act is set in Italy near the end of World War II, with a platoon of black G.I.s and their Women's Army Corps girlfriends at the plot's center. The second act moves to a "ladies' garment salon in New York City,"[23] where both units have returned after having been mustered out of the service.

Not unlike The Barrier, Shuffle Along of 1952 encountered a barrage of bad luck during its rehearsal period. Any black musical in the early 1950s would have had a hard time raising the necessary capital; the preconception on the part of many potential "angels" that the 1952 Shuffle Along would be yet another dinosaur by the Blake/Sissle/Miller team in a vain try at recapturing the magic of the original only served to make the fundraising that much more difficult. What little scenery they had was destroyed by fire; shortly before opening night, many of the principal performers were hampered by flu and cold viruses.[24]

The critiques of the show read like those of the ineptly-crafted black shows of the 1920s and '30s. It was almost unanimously agreed that the book was horrid, that there were no "stars" or standout performers in the show, and that it lacked any

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overall distinction. In the more racially-enlightened early 1950s, many of the reviewers could not resist punning on the word "shuffle" as it applied to a show that was put together by writers who obviously had not received the message that Negroes could now get around by means other than shuffling. Walter Kerr summarized the opinions of several of his colleagues when he called the show "a minor vaudeville masquerading as a full-fledged musical comedy."[25] The critic from the Times, a paper which did not bother to send its first-string reviewer, pointed out that the show's authors were unaware "dialect comedy of the type heard last night" had long since lost its appeal.[26]

In an attempt to recapture the elements which had made the original so popular, the creators of Shuffle Along of 1952 were unable to discern the fine line between giving their audience a nostalgic look at a quaint but once-successful formula, and simply trying to coax life back into a theatrical corpse. As noted by many of the critics, the word "shuffle" has a racially retrogressive ring to it; though extremely popular itself, the original show had the dubious distinction of being the progenitor of the Neo-Minstrel entertainments which were, in the early 1950s, being looked upon as an embarrassment by some African-Americans. Regardless of its new content, the 1952 Shuffle Along surely suffered, in the minds of many potential customers, a guilt-by-association with the vapid colored carnivals which had followed in the wake of the 1921 original.

The 1952 edition lasted just four performances, and would represent the final attempt for the surviving Shuffle Along creators to duplicate their 1921 success, although the music of Sissle & Blake would later be revived on Broadway in such anthology revue shows as Eubie, Bubbling Brown Sugar, and Black Broadway.

House of Flowers

Long gone were the days when a black musical with a novice team of creators and/or a cast of relatively unknown performers could have any hope for a Broadway production. All of the black musicals of the 1950s depended upon the drawing power of either a

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writer (or a team of writers) with a built-in following, or a cast with several members who were acknowledged stars. House of Flowers, a late-1954 entry, had both advantages: writers Truman Capote (book and lyrics) and Harold Arlen (music and lyrics), and such popular Broadway performers as Pearl Bailey and Juanita Hall, "Bloody Mary" of South Pacific fame. Also featured were Diahann Carroll, Josephine Premice, Alvin Ailey, Geoffrey Holder, Carmen De Lavallade, and Frederick O'Neill.

Opening December 30, 1954, at the Alvin Theatre, House of Flowers [to be called Flowers] was choreographed by Herbert Ross, with its highly-acclaimed scenic and costume design by Oliver Messel. The program credits Peter Brook as the show's director, despite the fact he and its original choreographer, George Balanchine, had defected during the show's out-of-town tryout period.[27]

The play is set on a West Indian Island, which, as in the Voodoo Macbeth, is not unlike Haiti, but is never identified as such in the text. The main locale is that of two adjacent whorehouses, one run by Madame Fleur (Pearl Bailey), in which all of the girls are named after flowers. The rival brothel is headed by Madame Tango (Juanita Hall), where "the girls teach dance for an ostensible living."[28] The play's major conflict centers around a beautiful, nubile girl who goes by the name of Violet while working at Madame Fleur's, but is Ottilie to the rest of the world. Madame Fleur has lightened Violet's workload in order to "sell" the teenage beauty to Monsieur Jamison, a rich white planter. This plan goes awry when Ottilie/Violet meets Royal, a handsome young island native, and runs off with him to his home in the mountains.

The show was based on Capote's short story of the same name, which earned him the O. Henry Award as one of the best pieces of short fiction of 1950.[29] Capote had made an extended stay in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1948. To stave off boredom, he would while away his evenings sitting on the porches of a string of bordellos in the city's red-light district, drinking and absorbing gossip from the women who worked in the houses.[30] These twilight talk-sessions with the Haitian whores evolved into the award-winning story, from

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which Capote next adapted into a play, but, working upon instincts which told him this particular saga demanded more than straight drama, next began to insert "tentative song lyrics wherever it seemed logical."[31] His next step was to take this incipient libretto to the producer Arnold Saint Subber, who then contacted Harold Arlen about doing the score.

With Arlen's wavy hair, broad nose, full lips, and his association with the all-black musical St. Louis Woman, Capote immediately assumed the composer was a fair-skinned Negro.[32] Arlen, born Hyman Arluck on February 15, 1905, in Buffalo, was instantly drawn to the project. Shortly after the collaboration began in early 1954, Arlen was hospitalized with an ulcer, but was so engrossed in the creating of the show that Capote would visit him in the hospital, and the two of them would work on the lyrics and music, with Arlen beating out the rhythms on a tray, using knives, spoons, and forks, all the while trying not to disturb the other patients.[33]

Pearl Bailey was signed to play the pivotal role of Madame Fleur. In a move which showed a reverence of star-power over believability in casting, the producers approached the then-37-year-old Lena Horne about playing the adolescent Ottilie/Violet. Horne turned them down, but expressed a desire to play the role which had been given to Bailey.[34] It is interesting to note Horne had no qualms about playing a madame in Flowers, yet adamantly refused to essay the role of the loose-living, gold-digging Della Green in St. Louis Woman.

During its rehearsal period, the show became infamous for the backstage bickering going on amongst the monumental egos and temperaments involved. Even by Broadway standards, the arguments and petty jealousies amongst the writers, performers, and behind-the-scenes personnel had reached epic proportions. Capote was so distressed by the countless changes in the libretto, which he felt had taken the story far from his original conception, that he was constantly threatening to defect, as had Brooks and Balanchine. He would later comment that the show had degenerated into "an extended vaudeville act for Miss Pearl Bailey."[35]

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All of this confusion resulted in, if one goes by the consensus of the critics, what can be, in a phrase, best described as a schizoid production. The most recurring comment was that Capote's book was weak, uninteresting, and, for a musical comedy, devoid of humor. However, these faults were more than offset by Arlen's music, which the critics almost unanimously judged to be superb, and by Oliver Messel's exotic and colorful costumes and lighting design. Bailey, the then-19-year-old Diahann Carroll, who was playing Ottilie/Violet, Rawn Spearman as Royal, Frederick O'Neill as The Houngan, and several others drew raves for their acting. Many reviewers complained that the Caribbean voodoo dances in the show had by now become cliché, having been made so by their overuse in the Caribbean-themed shows of the 1940s. A majority of the critics recommended the show, despite what they perceived as Capote's inept book.

Richard Watts, Jr., wrote that Flowers was, in general, "a beautiful and likeable show," while citing his chief reservation by stating ". . . Capote's book . . . seems to have withered during the process of production." Despite this, he called the show "a colorful, exotic and generally enlivening entertainment,"[36] and predicted Flowers would be a big hit.

Brooks Atkinson of the Times was the only major critic who expressed displeasure with Arlen's music. In perhaps the most negative critique of the show, Atkinson suggested Capote was hardly the person to be writing about whores and bordellos, stating Capote "lacks the flair of the real troubadour of sin."[37]

Perhaps the quote which best summarized the consensus belonged to John McClain:

> The whole thing is an unhappy juxtaposition--there is so much that is pleasant to the eye and ear, played against so much that is squalid.[38]

Arlen's tuneful score and Messel's appealing designs did not obscure the fact that the performers were once again stuck with many of the classic images which had hounded Negro actors

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throughout their history on the American stage. John Chapman spoke volumes when he wrote: "Capote [has] conceived . . . [Flowers] out of a dirty little mind."[39] The colorful costumes, exotic West Indian setting, and cleverly horticultural names of some of the characters do not hide the fact that once again the stereotype of the Negro as oversexed, and particularly the black female as naturally whorish, inform the base of the story. Not only do the inhabitants of this nameless island make no negative value judgments upon the proverbial world's oldest profession, but laboring in one of the brothels is considered by them to be a prestigious vocation.[40] Although it is never explicitly stated, one can easily get the impression that white patrons are preferred over black pleasure seekers; one of the major plot concerns is that Madame Fleur is "saving" Violet/Ottilie to be "sold" to a rich white planter. This smacks of slavery, and the attendant image of blacks existing solely for the usage and [sexual] pleasure of whites.

The show's Caribbean setting made the voodoo ritual dance scenes de rigueur, but, as already noted, the critics had grown tired of this exotic but now passe adjunct to the islands-set Negro musicals.

The glossy production and Arlen's highly-acclaimed score notwithstanding, Flowers' attitude toward the Negro mirrored the classic conception of him as licentious, non-cerebral, and ultimately existing to serve whites. This star-studded, slickly-packaged vehicle managed just 154 performances.

Mr. Wonderful

When the news was learned in the waning weeks of 1955 that Broadway musical was being built around the many talents of Sammy Davis, Jr., surely the safest bet amongst show-business insiders was--given the commercial musical theatre's traditional lack of innovation when dealing with the American Negro--it would most likely be nothing more than Davis' popular--and lucrative--nightclub act played out upon a Broadway stage.

Sammy Davis, Jr., born November 29, 1925, in New York City, the son of vaudevillans Sammy Davis and Elvira "Baby" Sanchez, had

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been a professional entertainer since his toddler days. One of the first African-American child-stars, he worked with his father, and his "uncle" Will Mastin, in a trio named for the latter performer. As Davis, Jr., grew older and his popularity increased, the name of the group had to be changed to "The Will Mastin Trio, Featuring Sammy Davis, Jr." By the age of thirty, Davis had established himself as arguably the greatest all-around entertainer in the world. He was adept at playing numerous musical instruments; he was universally regarded as a superb singer, dancer, impressionist, and "quick-draw" artist--his dazzling ability to handle a "six-gun" was unmatched by any of Hollywood's celluloid gunslingers. The only area of show-business where he had yet to establish his prodigious talent was in the field of acting, and this was due, as was the case for so many black artists, to the lack of suitable roles.

The Broadway composer Jule Styne had plans to change that for Davis. Meeting with Davis after a performance of the entertainer's Las Vegas nightclub act, Styne broached the possibility of Davis starring in a Broadway musical. Though he did not have any concrete plot outline to give Davis, the entertainer agreed with the basic idea of starring on Broadway, provided that however the show was ultimately crafted, it would have to "say something racially," and be an integrated show with a mixed chorus.[41]

In the next discussion on the matter, Styne told Davis that in the proposed show Davis would portray a character as far removed from his real-life image as a nightclub performer as possible. Davis informed him that, partly due to contract stipulations, and partly because of simple familial loyalty, roles for his father, Davis, Sr., and his "uncle" Will Mastin, would have to be written in if Davis were to appear on Broadway. Styne had no problem with this. However, once the business details were gone over, Will Mastin balked at the fact that the Trio would be sacrificing almost $10,000 a week from their act to appear on Broadway.[42] There is a decided note of irony here--not many performers in the history of black entertainment would have had the luxury of turning down a Broadway show because it represented a huge drop in their normal weekly wage.

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As possible story-lines were discussed, Davis was adamant that the show have a strong racial message; the producers and creative team felt that the commercial musical stage was not the most appropriate venue for making those types of statements.[43]

In chronicling the genesis of the show, which was to be named Mr. Wonderful, in his autobiography, Yes I Can, noticeably missing from Davis is an explanation as to how the proposed show, which was to "say something racially" and have a character as far removed from Davis' nightclub entertainer persona as possible, had been made, as could have been predicted, into what could be construed as an excuse to reproduce the Will Mastin Trio's act on Broadway. Perhaps this was Styne's intention all along. This possibility was not lost upon Davis himself, who, when complaining about some of the show's structural problems during the rehearsal period, observed that the second act of the play consisted primarily of a recreation of the Trio's $25,000-a-week Las Vegas revue--for which he was doing for a mere $6,000 a week on Broadway.[44]

Mr. Wonderful opened March 22, 1956, at the Broadway Theatre. Its book was by Joseph Stein and Will Glickman; the music and lyrics were crafted by Jerry Bock, Larry Holofcener and George Davis Weiss; the director was Jack Donahue. Olga James, as the Davis character's love interest; Jack Carter, and Chita Rivera, as a stereotypical hot-blooded and hot-tempered Latin showgirl, were featured in the cast, along with Davis' father and uncle.

The plot concerns Charlie Welch (Davis), a rock 'n' roll singer [sic] who appears to be stuck in an endless web of playing nondescript Northern New Jersey "juke joints"--and not reluctantly so--and his white friend Fred (Jack Carter), who has infinitely more faith in Charlie's talent and potential than Charlie has in himself. Fred and his wife, Lil, who make up an affable but third-line song-and-dance team, decide to do something about Charlie's squandering of his talent. Withdrawing $3,000, the bulk of their savings, they make plans to "supply a whole unit built around Charlie."[45] Once again Charlie expresses his reluctance at making a try for the "Big Time." After much cajoling, Fred convinces Foster, a high-powered Manhattan talent agent, to make the trek to the North Jersey

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roadhouse where the Charlie Welch Trio will be appearing. Foster does so, and is so impressed with the act that he attempts to sign them up to play the Palm Club in Miami Beach.

Charlie, thinking that playing the Palm Club would be akin to swimming in water above his head, tells Foster and Fred to "forget it," because the Palm Club is "too big," and that he is "not ready."[46] The ever-patient Fred has been pushed beyond the limit of his tolerance, telling Charlie:

> You're right, you're not ready. You'll never be ready. You got it in the feet and in the voice, but not in the belly! I sold myself on a big nothing![47]

Not only does Fred part with Charlie, but he and his wife leave New York and the world of show-business entirely, moving to Miami, where they open up a gift shop on the Miami Arcade. Relocated with and now working for them is Charlie's now ex-girlfriend, Ethel. The three of them are paid a surprize visit by Charlie, who informs them he had reconsidered Foster's offer and will be playing at the Palm Club for three weeks. Once again Fred questions Charlie's desire, but Lil encourages Charlie to make the most of the opportunity. This scene ends with the four of them dancing a polka, to the tune of "Too Busy."[48]

Despite the usual contrived stumbling blocks, the engagement at the Palm Club finally gets under way. The libretto ends with the introduction of the "Charlie Welch Trio," and from there Davis, his father, and his uncle do what they do best.

If one is to use the consensus in the reviews as the sole reference point, it could be ascertained that Mr. Wonderful's virtues and shortcomings were quite obvious. Once again, according to the over-all view of the critics, the creative tandem for a black musical lacked either the inclination or the talent to fashion a libretto which was remotely well-written. The critics almost unanimously praised Davis, Carter, Rivera, and several of the other featured cast members who managed to give excellent performances despite working with inferior material. Many critics did see the show as

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ultimately an excuse to present the Mastin Trio's Las Vegas act in New York. The recurring image presented in the critiques was that the show's positive and negative aspects had managed to cancel each other out, or, as in the words of Whitney Bolton, "It was a draw."[49] Similarly, Rowland Field called it "a painfully crude mediocrity,"[50] while William Hawkins noted that the superb rendition of the night-club act only underlined how ordinary the rest of the show had been.[51]

Also mentioned in most of the newspaper accounts was the roster of celebrities whom Davis had impeccably impersonated: Billy Eckstine, Nat "King" Cole, Tony Bennett, Cary Grant, Harry Belafonte, Bing Crosby, Jerry Lewis, Joe Louis, and Jimmy Stewart, among others. The reviews of the show were either unabashedly negative, mixed, or mixed-leaning-toward-the-negative, with only John Chapman of the Daily News offering a positive appraisal.

Davis had wanted, in his own words, for the show to "say something racially"; in its final form, perhaps the total opposite had become the reality. The play's most prominent image is that of the proverbial "Great White Father," Fred, saving the underachieving Charlie from his own complacency. Fred sacrifices his own career and bank account on Charlie, who, for a while, does not care. As Ralph Warner had pointed out in his review of Cabin in the Sky in the Daily Worker,[52] the caricatured stage Negro can not instigate a direct action, but can only react; although he is no overt "coon" caricature, this is especially true of Charlie; throughout the play others must make decisions for him; he initiates nothing. His girlfriend, Ethel--who seems to exist in the play for the sole reason that the musical comedy formula dictates the nominal protagonist must have a love interest--proposes to him; he can only vacillate in return.[53]

Charlie possesses the same carefree, noncommittal attitude toward life which had been expressed by stage Negro characters since the minstrel days. After Fred explodes over Charlie's complacency and walks out in disgust, Charlie brings the first act to a close with his variation on the theme expressed by Porgy in the song "I Got Plenty O' Nuthin' ":

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The world doesn't owe me a lot.
Cause I'm happy with what I got.[54]

The image of Fred as "The Great White Father" shouldering the "White Man's Burden" re-emerges in the second scene of Act Two. Not only have he and his wife moved to Miami to open their own business, but Charlie's ex-girlfriend has moved with them, to work for them. Obviously she had no life of her own in New York worth staying for; like the faithful retainers of plantation stories, she has moved with her white folks to serve them, even though she was not legally bound to do so. One can argue that her presence in Florida is necessary if she is to reunite with Charlie before his Palm club engagement, but the librettists could have contrived a better device to get her there than by recalling the image of the servant who just can not be parted from his master[s].

Nothing is known about Charlie other than the fact he is an underachieving performer. We know he has a father, an uncle, and a girlfriend, but he merely exchanges lines of dialogue with them intermittently; never are any of his relationships with the black characters, not even his girlfriend, dramatized in any depth.

Charlie's father and his uncle, the other members of the Charlie Welch Trio, make only token appearances a few times in the first act; all we know about Ethel is that she loves Charlie, loses Charlie, goes to Miami with Fred and Lil, and gets Charlie back. As with Charlie, all we know about her history is what she has just said or done on the stage.

The most aggressive, and therefore, most compelling character, by far, is Fred. The story is really seen from his point of view: that of a lifelong marginal performer who will live vicariously through the triumphs of a truly talented entertainer, whom he, Fred, will be ultimately responsible for

Mr. Wonderful can be seen as a benign updating of the contented slave theme; the apathetic--read that--lazy--Negro does not realize his full potential until he is practically ordered to do so by a white authority figure. That Charlie's "authority figure" is a fellow struggling entertainer, and one whose designs, as the text would

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lead us to believe, are not mercenary, but altruistic, only serves to lessen Charlie's stature. However, if these thoughts had been going through the minds of anyone watching Mr. Wonderful, chances are that these images would have been forgotten once the Charlie Welch/Will Mastin Trio launched into its famous routine.

The musical missed a chance to "say something racially" when it failed to make a comment on the fact that Charlie would be appearing at a club in Miami. In 1956, the only blacks in the house would have been either on the stage, on the bandstand, or in the kitchen. Charlie makes no protest about playing before what would have been a segregated audience. The issue of race is never addressed in the show; no mention is ever made that the black characters are indeed black.

His appearances as a child in a handful of independently-made black movies notwithstanding, Mr. Wonderful marked Davis' debut in a major role in a mainstream vehicle. He would later be maligned by more militant blacks for some of the images he depicted in his film roles, such as Sportin' Life in Otto Preminger's controversial 1959 cinematic version of Porgy and Bess, and for the sundry "Rat Pack" movies, in which he was often the butt of the jokes of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Peter Lawford, et. al., always bringing up the rear and making himself party to the so-called "shadow syndrome."[55] In his highly-acclaimed history of blacks in the cinema, Toms, Coons, Bucks, Mammies, and Mulattos, author Donald Bogle even went so far as to single out Davis as the definitive celluloid "coon."[56,57]

As the producers had hoped, Davis and the Will Mastin Trio proved to be a huge draw on Broadway. The show ran for 383 performances, but the high salaries commanded by Davis and his life-long partners, and the show's high overhead, resulted in Mr. Wonderful actually losing money, despite its relatively long and popular run.[58]

Simply Heavenly

Although Langston Hughes had had dozens of his plays staged in black community theatres across America--some of the theatres which he himself had founded or co-founded--his 1957 musical

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Simply Heavenly represented only the fourth time a work he had authored or co-authored had appeared on Broadway.

Simply Heavenly [to be called to as Heavenly] with music by David Martin, was first presented Off-Broadway at the 85th Street Playhouse on May 21, 1957. There it played for 44 performances to capacity crowds until it was closed because of license trouble and alleged violations of the city's fire code.[59] The show re-opened on Broadway August 20, 1957, at the Playhouse Theatre. The director was Joshua Shelley, with Melvin Stuart essaying the lead role of Jesse B. Semple; Marilyn Berry played Joyce, his girlfriend; Stanley Greene portrayed Boyd, a surrogate for Hughes, and Claudia McNeil crafted the role of Mamie, for which she won universal rave reviews.

The play centers on Jesse B, Semple, known to all as "Simple," Hughes' black Everyman character who had for years expressed his colorful, offbeat, and humorous opinions on being black in America in a column Hughes wrote for the weekly black paper, The Chicago Defender. The play's plot adhered to Hughes' novel, Simple Takes a Wife, from which it was adapted.

The story-line is a variation on perhaps the most simplistic scenario in all of drama: Boy meets Girl, Boy loses Girl, Boy gets Girl. Actually, Simple knew Joyce for a long time at the play's beginning, but he loses her, not once, but twice, with the vampish Zarita inadvertently coming between Joyce and Jesse both times.

Jesse's road to a wedding with Joyce is blocked by the fact he is in the process of divorcing his estranged wife, who live in Baltimore. His soon-to-be-ex-wife demands Simple pay one-third of the divorce fee--$133.34--a sum which Jesse simply does not have at the moment. One night Jesse foolishly agrees to go bar-hopping with the party-happy Zarita. Out of a carload of revelers he is the only one to sustain an injury when their car is involved in a wreck. His girl Joyce is sympathetic to him because of his injuries, but is angered over the fact he received them while carousing with the likes of Zarita.

Simple "sweet-talks" his way back into Joyce's good graces, only to have her walk out on him again when, one night when he is laid up in bed with a severe cold, Zarita and her traveling party crew

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pay a surprize visit to his room. While he is reluctantly dancing with Zarita, Joyce appears, and suspects the worst. However, true to the musical comedy formula, Jesse and Joyce resolve their differences, and set the wedding day.

A recurring comment in the reviews of the play was that it was not really a play at all, but a series of amusing vignettes which were interesting in and of themselves, but were lacking as a unified whole. The adjective "sketchy" appeared in many of the critiques. The plot was generally thought to be thin, predictable, and noncompelling, but many reviewers tempered this observation by remarking that the lack of a story-line was offset by the play's likeable and recognizable characters. Several reviewers noted how Hughes' love for Harlem and its people was obvious in his writing, and conjectured that the energy in the writing, and the fun the characters were evidently having onstage mirrored the fun with which Hughes had written the play.

Jim O'Connor noted that the show had worked fine in the lower-stakes Off-Broadway arena, but was not up to the higher downtown standards.[60] William Peper concurred with this, writing that the show "seemed rather frail in the harsh glare of Broadway."[61] A majority of the critics compared Claudia McNeil to Pearl Bailey. Brooks Atkinson opined that Hughes was too close to his material, had had too much fun in the writing of it, and should have been more analytical and objective, summing up his review with the comment that the show "seemed like something that had been improvised out of high spirits for the sake of a good time."[62]

Like most African-American writers of note in the last half century, Hughes had decried the myriad of stereotypical portrayals of black characters in drama and fiction, yet he was accused throughout his career of fostering many of those caricatures by means of what many critics perceived to be woefully shallow characterizations of his major figures.[63] Hughes purportedly had a deep love for his fellow black Americans, unlike the expatriates Richard Wright and James Baldwin, who often did not bother to hide their disdain for American Negroes and their feeling that the African-American was in part responsible for the continuance of his

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third- and fourth-class citizenship. Hughes, the self-appointed literary spokesman for the black American proletariat, took great care to write in the terms which he felt his audience could understand. Many critics thought he was too careful not to write over his readers' heads, thus resulting in a basic lack of depth or insight to his work, especially when compared to the hard-driving prose and psychological astuteness featured in the works of Baldwin and Wright. Perhaps Hughes was inadvertently insulting the collective intelligence of his readers. Note the choice of the name of his character, Semple, or "Simple."

Hughes chose to write for and about the same group of people who had been the subject of so many plays and musicals about black Americans: the uneducated lower class, for whom life is a string of day-to-day struggles.

In terms of creating strong, positive theatrical images for the people Hughes supposedly loved so, he failed to practice what he preached. On commenting on the flood of black musicals which followed on the heels of Shuffle Along in the 1920s, Hughes once remarked on the "awfully bad colored shows. . . being put on Broadway every week or so,"[64] yet he had been excoriated by critics, black and white, for romanticizing the poverty-bound, razor-fighting Negroes who were at once an embarrassment to the black race, but the segment of American Negroes whom writers had deemed to be the most interesting subjects of their works. One black critic, William M. Kelley of the New York Amsterdam News, went so far as to call Hughes a "Sewer Dweller"[65] in a review of Hughes' paean to the African-American lower depths, Fine Clothes for the Jew, a book of poems published in 1927, which garnered horrendous reviews due to its portrayal of poor blacks, as basically stupid, self-destructive, and interested solely in animal pleasures.

Though a world traveler, Hughes made it a point to live amongst his people, unlike those black artists who had fled to Europe in search of more personal and artistic freedom. As Brooks Atkinson had suggested, this could have resulted in a lack of objectivity on the part of Hughes when writing about his people. Unlike Wright and Baldwin, who, before their physical divorcement from

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America, had maintained a certain psychological distance from blacks, stemming in part from their basic solitary natures, Hughes may have been too close to his subjects in both a physical and psychological sense. Thus, for whatever his reasons, Hughes chose to portray characters who might be regarded by some as stereotypical. Hughes was aware of the stereotypes and whatever truth which might be behind them, but was unable to, as Richard Wright had done with the definitive Brute Negro, Native Son's Bigger Thomas, create out of that stereotype and flesh out a complete and memorable character. To whites, Hughes' figures may appear to be caricatures; to blacks, they are easily recognizable as people whom they see every day in the black community. However, Hughes was wont to let the identification factor suffice and seldom delved beneath the surface.

If Hughes did not set out to create any full-fledged, unforgetable characters in Heavenly, he did make a conscious effort to veer from the standard negative images. In his description of Zarita, the traditional vamp, he wrote:

> [She] is a lively bar-stool girl wearing life like a loose garment, but she is not [Hughes' emphasis] a prostitute.[66]

Hughes does try to give this finger-popping mischief-maker a degree of depth beyond the usual for her type. In Act Two, Scene IV, set in Paddy's Bar, Jesse is jobless and at the bottom of his luck. In a burst of sisterly compassion, Zarita doffs her normal brassy persona long enough to offer to loan Jesse money and cook for him, which the proud Simple refuses, then leaves the bar. As a blues piano plays mournfully in the background, Zarita "cries [out] in desperation" that she is "lonesome,"[67] repeating this several times. That about does it for characterization for Zarita; like Simple's sweetheart, Joyce, we know that she works, but Hughes never gives us any indication of what she--or Joyce--does for a living.

As a counterpoint to the hedonistic Zarita, Hughes portrays Joyce as the conventional prim and proper Miss. She lives in a rooming house in which the landlady has strict rules concerning

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gentleman callers; she is adamant about not engaging in premarital sex on the two occasions in the play when Jesse capriciously brings up the subject, fully expecting to be rebuffed, which he, of course, is. As for Jesse, he appears to be equally chaste; there is never any indication he is having sex outside of his wait-for-the-wedding relationship with Joyce, not even with Zarita, whom Joyce thinks he is having some sort of affair with.

Although the patrons of Paddy's bar seldom have any appreciable sum of cash on hand, everyone has a job--the regulars include a stevedore, a housemaid, a writer, street musician, fruit vendor, and, of course, the bartender. No one begs, steals, or does anything illicit; they all work for their money, even if they have to stretch that money a long way between paydays.

For those who would accuse Hughes of creating yet another directionless and irresponsible protagonist in a black work, he has allowed Simple to undergo a certain self-realization. For those who would condemn Hughes for offering yet another gaggle of Negroes whose raison d' etre is merely to have a good time, he cites the morally and intellectually vapid mode of living as something Jesse must put behind himself. By means of the character Boyd, a writer who serves as Hughes' own surrogate in the play, Simple learns he--and other Negroes--can not keep blaming whites for the collective woes of the black race, and that each black person must look within him-self to find part of the solution to the racial problem:

> Boyd
> . . . You're not the first man in the world to have problems. You've got to learn to swim . . . in this great big ocean called the world.
>
> Simple
> This great big old white ocean--and me a colored swimmer.
>
> Boyd
> Aw, stop feeling sorry for yourself just because you're colored. You can't use race as an excuse forever. All men have problems. . . . You've got to face your obligations,

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and stand up on that island of you [Hughes' emphasis], and be a man.

Simple

. . . Seems like to me obligations is just a big old rock standing in a man's way.

Boyd

Then you've got to break that rock, fellow. Or, maybe I should say rocks.

Simple

I know what you mean--like the beer rock, huh, Boyd?[68]

Simple and Boyd agree the former must also break the "likker," "bar," "night owl," and "chick-chasing" rocks.[69]

It is one thing, however, for Hughes' surrogate character to tell Simple he must break these counterproductive stones, but it is another that Hughes, as the reviewers noted, obviously took a certain amount of pleasure in recreating Harlem's "bar-stool" element and their hedonistic ways.

Sensitive to the career-long accusations of peopling his work with stereotypes, Hughes answered these attacks in Act One, Scene III. When the talk amongst some of the bar regulars centers around watermelons, a diminutive black man, carrying "an armload of high-brow papers and magazines,"[70] and obviously an Anglophile, as his attire and pseudo-British accent suggest, chides them as being "Stereotypes! . . . Disgraceful stereotypes!"[71] Mamie responds:

> Why, it's getting so colored folks can't do nothing no more without some other Negro calling you a stereotype. . . . If you like a little gin, you're a stereotype. You got to drink scotch. If you wear a red dress, you're a stereotype . . . Lord have mercy, honey, do-don't like no blackeyed peas and rice! Then you're a down-home Negro for true--which I is--and proud of it! . . . I didn't come here to Harlem to get away from my people. I come here because there's more of 'em, I loves my race. I loves my people.[72]

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The black theatre historian, Darwin T. Turner, in dealing with the issue of Hughes' resorting to stage stereotypes, cites this very passage, concluding:

> Nevertheless, it is true that Hughes generally created stereotypes. Even in [Heavenly], Hughes clung to gross, time-honored models.[73]

In making this defence against those who have accused him of reissuing stock characters, Hughes ironically resorts to incorporating yet another stereotypical character, whom in the text he does not bother to give a name, merely designating the black would-be Briton as "Character." The character "Character" is a caricature of the snobbish, educated Negro middle-class who have adopted many of the mores and social conventions of the white upper-class whom they ape, but do so without the political or economic power of the whites; in short, these bourgeois Negroes are affecting a millionaire's mode of living on a middle-class income. "Character" comes from basically nowhere and returns to the same place without Hughes giving us any insights as to why he would venture into a bar full of the type of Negroes whom he obviously loathes, and decry them as "stereotypes." As he has done in not one this, but in practically all his plays, Hughes has presented a recognizable, easily identifiable type of person from the black community, yet, other than playing upon the recognition factor elicited by the Negroes in the audience, he has given these "types" no discernable depth or function.

Surely unintentionally, Hughes has presented a pair of stereotypes with the two most important female roles in the play. Despite Hughes' disclaimer in the description of Zarita's character, she never develops beyond being "a standard musical comedy siren."[74] The prim and proper Joyce is a variation of the "church-girl" type which permeates black and white theatre; she is also a close relative of the conventional "school-marm" figure from Western movies. We

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never learn where either of them works; we see Joyce only in reaction to Simple's litany of misdeeds; and, with the exception of the brief scene in which Zarita confides her overwhelming loneliness to the world at large, she is a toned-down version of the traditional Exotic primitive, constantly on the prowl for a party or a man willing to spend a goodly part of his wages on her.

Hughes, in a curiously roundabout way, attempts to comment on the perceived lack of structure within the black family. A married couple, the stevedore Bodiddly and his wife Arnie, have a huge flock of children, and Hughes tries to squeeze some humor out of some arguments about which child is doing what chore, which children have clearance to be out in the streets on what nights, and, of those remaining at home, whose duty it is to watch whom. Yet, in trying to show this bit of order and cohesiveness within a black family, Hughes failed to realize he is, by extension, adhering to the myth of the irresponsible black parents--it is obvious Bodiddly and Arnie should be at home supervising their clan, rather than lounging in a place where they feel much more comfortable--Paddy's Bar.

Though Hughes' characters are all gainfully employed, he still fails to steer them away from the conventional image of the poor stage Negroes. They seldom have any appreciable amount of spending money; even the well-educated Boyd is barely getting by on the small royalties from the short stories he sells and from the last of his G.I. Bill money. Not destitute nor wallowing in abject poverty, Hughes' characters, who literally live from paycheck to paycheck, nonetheless uphold the tradition of Negro characters on the commercial stage as being of the lower economic class. Once again the more progressive black middle-class, for whom Hughes had a deep-seated resentment, have been bypassed for the assumedly more colorful branch of the Negro race.

By means of the exchange between Boyd and Simple concerning the retrogressive "rocks" which must be smashed if the Negro is to better himself, Hughes suggests possible solutions to the African-American's plight. However, he contradicts himself by choosing the usual finger-popping, good-timing Negro characters as the subject matter for his play. In the course of chastising their

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less-than-progressive mode of living, he is also marveling at the carefree ease with which they slide through life, unencumbered by the weight of any profound thoughts or actions.

Hughes, as a major black writer who professed a strong love for his people, surely must have known it was both his duty and within his power to attempt, in some way, to ameliorate the black man's image on the musical stage. Furthermore, although he had been talking specifically about the spate of 1920s black musicals when he referred to the insipid, alike-appearing shows he disdained, he undoubtedly must have felt the same about the shows since that time, which were similarly sophomoric and unoriginal. In the crafting of Heavenly and his other theatre works, one would have expected Hughes to have taken especial care not to be guilty of the same shortcomings of the shows which had effronted him. According to Jim O'Connor, in his review of Heavenly, Hughes did not take the opportunity to correct what he--Hughes--and so many others had felt were the traditional negative aspects of black musicals. O'Connor wrote:

> Some evening I hope to see a play about Negroes, written and acted by Negroes, that presents them in a better light than heretofore. I would like to see a play, for a change, about a fine, decent Negro family of moderate means or even wealthy. A play in which the actors and actresses are not always poor, comic characters.[75]

Jesse B. Semple, as a black, prototypical Everyman, is a fairly well-drawn character; Hughes defines him sufficiently in terms of his philosophies, actions, and emotions; we are given several bits of information about Simple's past; we know basically what he wants out of life. He will make a conscious attempt to correct several of those shortcomings which inhibit his growth as a human being, as his "rock-busting" dialogue with Boyd indicated.

However, the protagonist is the only character whom Hughes develops to any degree. To those familiar with the Harlemites who people Heavenly, Hughes' other characters are recognizable; to those

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not familiar, the denizens of Paddy's Bar may appear to be stereotypes. Hughes has accurately reproduced their speech patterns and surface attitudes; what he has failed to do, as did the legion of white librettists for black shows, is give any real insights into the characters so they might seem to be more than just stage figures mouthing a playwright's words.

It is obvious Hughes and his collaborators were undecided as to whether the show would be a play-with-music, or a musical.[76] Technically, Heavenly fits much better into the former category; for a full-fledged musical it has a dearth of songs; there are only nine of them, not counting reprises, in the play. At times there is such a long interval between songs that some of the spectators might have forgotten they were indeed watching a musical.[77]

Hughes also violated the cardinal rule of the commercial musical which dictates the most dramatic moments of the show should be sung;[78] at least two speeches by Simple begged to be transformed into song lyrics: a long, deeply-felt monologue about how his beloved Aunt Lucy sacrificed so much of her time and emotional energy in raising him,[79] and his explanation of what he would do as the first black army officer to command an all-white squadron of Mississippeans,[80] which most of the critics cited as the play's comic high point.

The Broadway establishment, which, by 1957, had long held the attitude that black librettists simply could not write for the commercial theatre, might have been convinced otherwise had an African-American bookwriter presented a work of unusual wit, intelligence, character depth, an obvious mastery of the craft of libretto writing, and perhaps a fresh outlook and insight into Negro characters other than the traditionally poor and uneducated stage creations. Langston Hughes, who, until the emergence of Richard Wright, was the preeminent black American writer,[81] merely presented Broadway with an insider's point of view, but with little else in the way of the above-mentioned criteria.

Heavenly could muster only 62 performances on Broadway, from whence the production moved to Los Angeles, and then to an

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engagement in London in 1958. The following year it appeared as a special on the W.N.E.T. public television network.[82]

Jamaica

On October 31, 1957, the black musical once again returned to the Caribbean. Jamaica, written by E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, composed by Harold Arlen, and starring Lena Horne, would prove to be the most critically-acclaimed and commercially-successful of all the black shows set in the tropical islands. This long-running show was far removed from the paltry-budgeted, inane book musical to which black talent had been mostly relegated; like Lost in the Stars, it displayed a strong social consciousness, but did so in what most observers would judge to be a much more entertaining manner than the Weill/Anderson vehicle.

Produced by David Merrick, directed by Robert Lewis, choreographed by Jack Cole, Jamaica also featured Ricardo Montalban and Ossie Davis in key roles. Primarily due to the drawing power of Lena Horne, the show had an advance sale of nearly $2,000,000,[83] by far the highest figure of its kind in the history of black shows up to that point.

1947's Caribbean Carnival had intended to spread calypso into the mainstream of American music; despite that show's quick demise, calypso music did make somewhat of an inroad into American music in the late 1940s and early 1950s; numerous popular songs had a noticeable calypso inflection. Perhaps the most famous pre-Harry Belafonte calypso-tinted recording was "Honey Love," a landmark 1954 hit by the New York-based rhythm-and-blues group, The Drifters. "Honey Love" topped the rhythm-and-blues charts for the better part of the summer of 1954.[84,85] Other notable calypso-flavored hits before the Belafonte explosion were a pair of 1956 entries, "Rock and Cry," by the legendary Clyde McPhatter,[86] and "Jean and Dinah," the first United States hit by "The Mighty Sparrow" (Slinger Francisco), a Trinidadian singer/composer who is widely regarded as the greatest Calypsoan of all.[87]

Calypso was catapulted into the forefront of the American music scene by the overwhelming popularity of the album by Harry

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Belafonte, simply titled: "Harry Belafonte: Calypso." Born in 1927 in New York City, but raised mostly in Jamaica, Belafonte returned to New York while in his teens to pursue an acting career. He ranked, after his friend and fellow West Indian Sidney Poitier, as the most frequently-employed young black leading man, but even so, jobs for black actors were few and far between. Belafonte supplemented his acting roles with his cabaret act consisting of West Indian folk songs. Perhaps despite his plans, his popularity as a singer was starting to outdistance his stature as an actor; this was probably borne out in the success of his album. Released in late 1956, it yielded five hit singles, including "The Banana Boat Song (Day-O)," which reached the top five on the popular charts,[88] and became his signature song.

Moving in to capitalize on calypso's new-found popularity in general, and Belafonte's in particular, veteran Broadway librettists E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy began developing the outlines for a show to be called Pigeon Island, which would be built around Belafonte.[89] They first contacted Harold Arlen, who was initially hesitant about tackling another West Indies-set musical; Arlen felt that after his work on House of Flowers three years before "he had mined all possible musical material from the Caribbean."[90] Upon hearing that Arlen might be writing the music for the show, Belafonte's interest in the project increased, for he had admired Arlen's music ever since he had been a boy.[91]

Perhaps influenced by the disastrous reviews of Caribbean Carnival almost a decade before, Arlen expressed the opinion that since calypso songs, by their very nature, did not have a strong melodic base, they would, in a theatrical mode, come off as boring and repetitious.[92] However, despite his qualms, Arlen was convinced by the two librettists and the producer, David Merrick, to take on the project.

Belafonte came down with throat trouble, which required surgery and several months of rest. Rather than wait for Belafonte, and preferring to capitalize on the calypso trend while it was still popular, Merrick searched for another "name" black actor, of whom Sidney Poitier was the most logical choice.[93] Poitier was

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contacted, but could not do the role because of other commitments. Had Poitier accepted, an interesting problem might have developed--he cannot sing well, or well enough to carry a Broadway musical.

Since Belafonte and Poitier represented the alpha and the omega of black male actors with any appreciable marquee value at the time, Merrick turned his search for a "name" performer to the distaff side. Here he had more luck; Lena Horne was available and willing. Naturally, the emphasis was shifted from the role of the male to the female lead. More so than for Belafonte, the revamped show, now entitled Jamaica, was constructed around Horne--she sang more than literally half the songs in the show--ten out of nineteen.

On the surface, the plot seems simple enough. Koli (Ricardo Montalban) and Savannah (Horne) are in love, but Savannah disdains the languid island life and yearns to move to New York, while Koli is content with Pigeon Island. Their engagement is broken by Savannah when she learns he has spent their wedding money on a glass-bottom boat, an act which further ensures he will not be leaving the island anytime soon.

Joe Nashua, a moneyed black New Yorker, visits the island, and, smitten by Savannah, assures her he can provide her with passage to New York, and lets her know she will not have to support herself there as a milliner, as she had planned to do. However, before she can leave the island, a hurricane hits; her little brother, Quico, is lost; Nashua, under this circumstance, is revealed to be a coward. As Koli dashes off gallantly to Quico's rescue, Savannah dismisses Nashua because of his selfish reaction. Realizing how much Koli loves her, despite his refusal to go along with her desire to move to New York, Savannah and he make up, and wedding plans are re-set.

In direct contrast to Simply Heavenly, with its paucity of songs, Jamaica was quite tuneful; there are nineteen songs, not counting reprises, and 52 musical cues; there is never more than five minutes or so of dialogue which is not interrupted for a song.[94]

The majority of the critics, once they got past what they felt was yet another weak book for a black musical, were generally enthusiastic; as had been the consensus opinion about House of

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Flowers, the alleged poor book was more than offset by Arlen's music--which the reviewers concurred was excellent--and the acting, sets, costumes and lighting.[95] Most of the critics mentioned that the show had been slickly packaged by a team of savvy show business veterans who were well aware of what Broadway audiences wanted.

The choice of the show's creators to give Jamaica some substance, in addition to the mandatory entertaining elements, did not go unnoticed by some members of the press. John Chapman remarked "there is more social significance than sexual in Jamaica--and this is doing a musical plot the hard way."[96]

Generally lauded by the reviewers, the only truly sour note sounded on Jamaica was by Walter Kerr. He speculated that the show was merely an excuse for an "original cast album," and labeled it as "the concert at the Imperial."[97] However, when Kerr made statements which fly in the face of the obvious, such as his opinion that Harburg's lyrics had "little social significance," one wonders if Kerr's hostile review was motivated by some sort of personal rancor.

If anything, the lyrics of Jamaica contained more "social significance" than in any black musical to date, with the possible exception of Lost in the Stars. Whereas the Weill/Anderson opus was the first black musical drama to deal with the racial issue, and Finian's Rainbow was the first Broadway musical to satirize racial stereotypes--albeit as an adjunct to the show's comic/fantasy plot --Jamaica was the first black musical to use satire and comic social commentary throughout, and as one of the bases for the plot. However, that commentary is not of a racial nature: Capitalism, Overreaching Consumerism, and the collective neuroses which they breed in the people of a so-called "civilized" society who are caught up in the proverbial "rat race" receive the brunt of the play's satire.

The issue is never one of a concrete, black-against-white nature; rather, the American way of life, with its hyperactive pursuit of the mythical "good life" is contrasted to the simpler, less-frenetic pace of the natives of Pigeon Island, who go through life leisurely, but not lethargically. Other related topics for Harburg

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and Saidy's satire are the would-be exploitation of the tourists from the "have" nations by the natives of the "have-not" countries for whom the tourist trade is the chief industry; America's automated, soul-less push-button society; and even the then American preoccupation with the imminent threat of atomic warfare. The satire is made without any overt racial statement, but, considering that the neuroses of a white male-dominated society are mocked by the inhabitants of a predominately-black tropical island, one does not have to look very deeply to get a covert message.

Cicero, played by Ossie Davis, sings a song about how there is always a bigger fish which will eat a smaller fish, and in turn be eaten by an even bigger fish, ad infinitum.[98] On the surface this song appears harmless enough, but, taken in the context of it coming from a man living in a land where practically everyone is just a few generations removed from slavery, and currently--not to mention historically--dependant upon the tourist trade, the underlying message is not too hard to grasp.

Jamaica also satirizes the perceived American penchant for striving for materialistic gains at the expense of one's mental health. This is best exemplified by Koli's speech:

> I know them boys from Wall Street and Madison Avenue. I see them landing at Kingston Airport. Each of them carry forty pounds of luggage . . . about ten of it pills. Where they get in that mongoose race? Day after day they shoot horizontal through the subways and perpendicular up the elevators . . . only rest they get is when they get caught in traffic jam. When the blood pressure about to rise higher than the stock market, they finally take a week off. And what do they do? They fly down to Jamaica and throw their shoes off.
>
> (shows bare right foot)
>
> My shoes off, and I already here.[99]

A commentary about the exploitation of the "have" nations against the traditionally underdeveloped countries is made by means of the character of Joe Nashua, the wealthy Harlemite who is visiting the island with more than the usual tourist's interests.

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When a golddigging lass named Ginger, who has noticed the obvious, that Nashua has plenty of money, offers to take him on a private tour of the island, he remarks: "I might as well look it over . . . before I take it over."[100]

Later Nashua begins enlisting the services of native swimmers by offering them ten American dollars in advance to go pearl diving in the shark-infested waters of Devil's Cove. Koli protests this, due to its dangerous nature, but the natives, to many of whom the ten American dollars represents a windfall of money, are ready to go, nonetheless. Included amongst the willing islanders is Savannah, partly to pique Koli's jealousy and partly to further Nashua's interest in her as "she flings off her wrap-around dress, revealing herself in a breath-taking BIKINI--beauty in bronze."[101] The creators and producers of the show, well aware of the public's perception of Horne as one of the world's most attractive women, did not miss the opportunity to exploit her shapely frame--and did so in a manner which did not seem too obviously gratuitous.

Though the means was perilous, the end was that the findings of the pearl divers did bolster Pigeon Island's economy.[102] Many of the natives of the island were beginning to view Nashua as a saviour of sorts until his fall from grace due to his cowardly actions during the storm as Act One came to a close. By making the character Joe Nashua, who represents the vulgarities of Materialism, a black man, the authors have cleverly sidestepped any overt black-white antagonism.

Since before the days of minstrelsy, right through the Neo-Minstrel entertainments of the 1920s and '30s, the American Negro has had little choice other than to play the fool on the American stage. This enforced role-playing is parodied in Jamaica by the way the natives must conduct themselves for the tourists: the closer they conform to the notions about them that the visitors have, the better it is for business all around. In perhaps the show's most biting and wittiest bit of satire, Cicero enters, interrupting an impromptu dance number which his fellow islanders are performing, and bellows:

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> All right, all right! At ease. men. Knock it off. Save your voices for the tourists.[103]

Cicero informs them that Pigeon Island is momentarily bankrupt, but he offers a possible solution:

> We've got to create for the tourists the kind of quaint, native atmosphere they've come to expect from a tropical island. Hollywood does it. Television does it. No reason why native Jamaicans cannot do it. Now, here's the blueprint for Operation Greenback. Item number one--clothes. You got to look authentic. That mean--wear festival costumes at all times. Item number two--no more home-made souvenirs. From now on we is importing genuine authentic momentoes from Hackensack, New Jersey, stamped "Made in Jamaica." Item number three--sing whenever possible. If a tourist ask you a question--answer in Calypso.[104]

To test the islanders, Cicero, and his sometime girlfriend, Ginger, pretend to be a rich American couple. Cicero asks a man:

> Chippie, could you direct me to the nearest banana boat?
>
> Islander
>
> Dey no more banana boats, sir. Dey all belong to Harry Belafonte.
>
> Cicero
>
> (flicks his gloves across the man's cheeks like challenging someone to a duel)
>
> I said--answer in Calypso.[105]

The islanders respond with a brief parody of the "Day-O" vocal hook in "The Banana Boat Song."[106]

Other satirical high points in the show were the song "End It All," which suggests that those who commit suicide are taking the easy way out; the song "Napoleon," which pinpoints its general comments on commercialism by parodying popular print, radio, and

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television commercials of the day; "Push de Button," a tune about how America has become a push-button society; "Leave de Atom Alone," a song which speculates on what would happen if the rest of the world blew itself up in an atomic war, and only Jamaica remained; and, "Monkey in de Mango," a song which suggests that monkeys and apes might be insulted to learn about Darwin's theory which links them to Man.

The inhabitants of Pigeon Island may be poor by American standards, but their poverty stems from the limitations of their island's economy, and not because of any laziness on their part. In the plays and musicals set in Harlem, Catfish Row, and similar locales, the lower-class Negroes are romanticized, yet there is an inherent implication that their poverty is the result of their determination to act out the entire canon of "coon" activities in lieu of undertaking any form of self-betterment. The islanders are aggressive in the face of possible work; Cicero takes the pains to drill them on the proper way to go after the tourist dollar whenever it becomes available, and the natives are willing to risk sharks when Nashua puts out a call for pearl divers.

The authors carefully avoided using stereotypical characters. Though exceptionally physically attractive, Savannah is more than just another Exotic Primitive talking set-piece. She has a concrete plan and a clear-cut course of action to take in pursuit of it. A self-employed boatman, Koli is industrious, and despite the afore-mentioned limits of the local economy, will always find a way to live comfortably.

In their portrayal of Savannah, the authors take great pains to avoid painting her as a standard, cynical gold-digger. They explain:

> Savannah's character--she is not a mercenary, bitchy operator--but an island girl with spirit and real affection for Koli. To her the New York trip means an opportunity for her man to realize the potential that others of her race, like Belafonte and Poitier--could never achieve on the backward island.[107]

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Though all of the characters in the play, with the exception of Joe Nashua, are black Jamaicans, there is nothing definitively "Negro" about them--the play could be adapted, without changing many lines, just the ones which refer specifically to Jamaica, to any resort nation which depends primarily on the tourist trade. It could have been set just as easily in the Hawaii, Rio de Janeiro, San Juan, or Acapulco of 1957.

Unlike the Negroes of most of the previous musicals, the natives of Pigeon Island are well aware of what is going on around them both in a local and world-wide sense. The eclectic subject-matter of their satirical songs shows they are knowledgeable about current events, and how to relate those events to themselves.

For the first time in a black-themed musical, the usage of social satire served as a thread tying the proceedings together, even though the comic commentary was not used as a black-versus-white statement. Jamaican Negroes could be used as mouthpieces for the authors' comic viewpoints on America's obsessive-compulsive mercantile society, but as of 1957 there had still been no full-length musical, comedic or with more serious overtones, which had the precarious yet symbiotic relationship between the races at the center of its plot, and was set in the United States.

Of the six full-fledged black musicals of the 1950s--discounting the three-week run of the 1952 solo show At Home With Ethel Waters, and the 1954, 101-performance run of the play-with-music, Mrs. Patterson--Jamaica was by far the biggest--and only unqualified--hit, and the only black show to make a profit, running for 555 performances on Broadway.

The 1950s was an especially unkind decade for the black musical. The trend toward more substantive and intelligently-crafted librettos, which was begun by Oscar Hammerstein II in 1927 with Show Boat, and which continued with his collaborations with the composer Richard Rodgers with Oklahoma! (1943), South Pacific (1949), The King and I (1951), and other shows, resulted in a certain upgrading in general of the Broadway musical. A lot of the stigma of that genre as merely the vehicle for silly, fluff entertainment was being removed. However, if the critical reviews for the six black

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book shows of the 1950s are to be believed, the librettists for the black musicals were oblivious to the fact that a well-conceived book which featured a smooth integration of dialogue, songs and dances could now play a major role in ensuring that the show would be a hit.

In his two shows, Langston Hughes failed to correct the same types of technical mistakes he had been making throughout his career as a dramatist; the librettists of Shuffle Along of 1952 could not discern the fine line between what was nostalgic and what was simply outdated humor; Truman Capote, in House of Flowers, was perhaps writing about a culture and its people of which he had only a surface understanding; while Sammy Davis, Jr., wanted Mr. Wonderful to "say something racially," the bookwriters ultimately elected to take the safe way out, and, as a result, crafted what was perceived by the critics as bland, inoffensive, and just plain trite. Only Jamaica provided its audience with something which was remotely fresh or clever; only Jamaica proved to be a bona fide success.

Opening in late 1957, and running until early 1959, Jamaica would be the last black musical presented in the 1950s. However, the monumental success in 1959 of Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, a straight play, would alter the course of the black drama in the commercial theatre, and, by extension, have a noticeable effect on the direction the black musical would take in the 1960s.

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CHAPTER NINE ENDNOTES

[1]Gerald Bordman, American Musical Theatre, p. 583.

[2]Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America (New York: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 16.

[3]Malcolm X and Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 206.

[4]The Black Muslims in America, p. 26.

[5]Brooks Atkinson, Times, November 3, 1950.

[6]Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 312. Henceforth, this work will be cited as Rampersad, Hughes, vol. 1.

[7]Rampersad, Hughes, vol 1. The judgment on the part of numerous critics that much of Hughes' writing was shallow is an issue which Rampersad deals with throughout this definitive biography on Hughes.

[8]Ibid., pp. 311-2.

[9]Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 176. Henceforth, this work will be cited as Rampersad, Hughes, vol. 2.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., pp. 183-4.

[12]Ibid., p. 185.

[13]Langston Hughes, The Barrier, p. 1-26. Typescript libretto in the Music Division of the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts.

[14]Ibid., p. 2-6.

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[15]Ibid., p. 2-23.

[16]Daily Mirror, November 3, 1950.

[17]World-Telegram and the Sun, November 3, 1950.

[18]I will give this issue closer scrutiny in the Simply Heavenly segment of this chapter.

[19]The Barrier, p. 1-18.

[20]Ibid., p. 2-14.

[21]Ibid., p. 2-13.

[22]Faith Berry, Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1983), p. 315.

[23]John McClain, Journal-American, May 9, 1952.

[24]Walter Kerr, Herald-Tribune, May 9, 1952.

[25]Ibid.

[26]May 9, 1952.

[27]John Malcolm Brinnin, Truman Capote: Dear Heart, Old Buddy (New York: Delacorte Press, 1986), p. 106.

[28]William Hawkins, World-Telegram, December 31, 1954.

[29]Edward Jablonski, Harold Arlen: Happy with the Blues (New York: Da Capo Press, 1985), p. 183. Henceforth, this work will be cited as Happy with the Blues.

[30]Ibid., p.182.

[31]Ibid.

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[32]Ibid. Arlen bore a marked facial resemblance to two famed lightskinned African-American celebrities--The Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the popular musician, Cabell "Cab" Calloway, hence perhaps leading Capote to believe Arlen was indeed a Negro.

[33]Ibid., p. 25.

[34]Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, Lena, p. 258.

[35]Brinnin, p. 106.

[36]New York Post, December 31, 1954.

[37]December 31, 1954.

[38]Journal-American, December 31, 1954.

[39]Daily News, December 31, 1954.

[40]Truman Capote and Harold Arlen, House of Flowers (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 5. No libretto for the 1954 production could be located; the typescript, unpublished version which was thought to be at the Lincoln Center Library has been either lost or stolen. I was unable to compare the changes between the original production and the 1968 Off-Broadway revival, but I will cite the published text for that latter show in relation to minor details which the two shows most likely shared.

[41]Sammy Davis, Jr., and Jane and Bart Boyar, Yes I Can (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. 298.

[42]Ibid., p. 303.

[43]Ibid., p. 309.

[45]Joseph Stein and Will Glickman, Mr. Wonderful, p. 1-5-40. Typescript libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts.

[46]Ibid., p. 1-6-53.

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[47]Ibid., p. 1-6-54.

[48]Ibid., p. 2-2-17.

[49]Morning Telegraph, March 24, 1956.

[50]Newark Evening News, March 23, 1956.

[51]World-Telegram, March 23, 1956.

[52]Supra, p. 366.

[53]Mr. Wonderful, p. 1-4-38.

[54]Ibid., p. 1-6-54.

[55]The "shadow syndrome" involves not only the more obvious practice of having a minority character in a subordinate servant's, or even a "sidekick" role--to wit, the Lone Ranger and Tonto--but also, in a more subtle manner, in character relationships which are ostensibly equal--to wit, Rico Tubbs and Sonny Crockett of television's Miami Vice--the white character usually enters a room before the minority person, speaks his first line in a scene before the non-white character speaks his, and, more often than not, has a more favorable camera angle in the medium shots.

[56]Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Bucks, Mammies and Mulattos (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1973), p. 214.

[57]Regardless of the degree to which one feels Davis was indeed guilty of these perceived compromises, one cannot help but speculate that these presumed acquiescences began with Mr. Wonderful. Davis initially demanded that the show "say something racially," yet never abandoned the project when it became apparent it was becoming another weak-booked story with a "contented slave" undercurrent.

Davis' dilemma once again underscores the complex array of compromises which must be made by a black artist who knows that the quickest and surest way to wealth is through the mainstream audience. Perhaps the final irony of Davis' situation is that had he not played what so many have construed to be "Uncle Tom" roles, he

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would not have been in the position to contribute the millions of dollars which he had done to numerous charities, the United Negro College Fund included. Surely some of those individuals who were so quick to judge Davis in a negative fashion have obtained college degrees at black institutions which were bolstered financially by Davis' contributions.

[58]Bordman, p. 599.

[59]Robert Coleman, Daily Mirror, August 21, 1957.

[60]Journal-American, August 21, 1957.

[61]World-Telegram and the Sun, August 21, 1957.

[62]Times, August 21, 1957.

[63]Rampersad, Hughes, vol. 1, p. 326.

[64]Ibid., p. 172.

[65]Ibid., p. 140.

[66]Langston Hughes, Simply Heavenly, in Five Plays by Langston Hughes, ed. by Webster Smalley (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 115. The play will be henceforth referred to as Simply Heavenly and the pages cited will be from this anthology.

[67]Ibid., p. 165.

[68]Ibid., p. 147.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Ibid., p. 123.

[71]Ibid., p. 125.

[72]Ibid., pp. 125-6.

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[73]Darwin T. Turner, "Langston Hughes As Playwright," Langston Hughes: Black Genius, ed. by Thurman B. O'Daniel (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 92.

[74]William Peper, August 21, 1957.

[75]Journal-American, August 21, 1957.

[76]In the published text in Five Plays by Langston Hughes, Simply Heavenly is called merely "A Comedy." (p. 115.)

[77]"Simply Heavenly," the title song, and the first tune in the show, appears at the end of Act One, Scene Two; the next song, "Did You Ever Hear the Blues" does not come until three, scenes later, or between approximately 25 to 35 minutes of the play's running time.

[78]Aaron Frankel, Writing the Broadway Musical (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977). See pp. 43-48 for the ideal relationship between dialogue and song lyrics in furthering the narrative.

[79]Simply Heavenly, p. 134.

[80]Ibid., pp. 177-8.

[81]After the publication and overwhelming critical and popular success of Wright's novel Native Son in 1940, Wright was generally considered the most prominent black American author until his death on November 28, 1960, although James Baldwin had a legitimate claim to that unofficial title during the 1950s.

[82]Faith Berry, p. 316.

[83]Robert Coleman, Daily Mirror, November 1, 1957.

[84]Billboard, issues July 10, 1954, through September 25, 1954. "Honey Love" held the number-one position in either the records-sold or most-played-on-jukeboxes categories during this period.

[85]Co-written by the group's lead singer, Clyde McPhatter, and Jerry Wexler, an executive at Atlantic Records, for whom the

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Drifters recorded, "Honey Love" was an energetic melding of calypso rhythms and traditional rhythm-and-blues vocal harmonies. In addition to being based on West African musical patterns, calypso and rhythm-and-blues shared the propensity for suggestive lyrics which were naughty, but not filthy.

[86]McPhatter (1932-1972) was the prototypical rhythm-and-blues singer in that art-form's halcyon years, 1953-1963. Numerous other r&b stars have cited McPhatter as their major influence, including William "Smokey" Robinson and Jackie Wilson, McPhatter's successor as lead singer of the Dominoes, and arguably the finest r&b/soul singer ever.

[87]Due to the more eclectic approach that many radio stations of that era took in regard to their playlists, "Jean and Dinah," a witty song about the removal of U.S. troops from Trinidad and how it would affect the local prostitutes, received fairly wide airplay. Given contemporary radio's playlists, which are set rigidly along ethnic and age-oriented lines, such a fine record would be played today almost exclusively on the handful of U.S. stations which cater to a Caribbean-American audience.

[88]Joel Whitburn, The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits (New York: Billboard Publications, 1985), p. 37.

[89] Happy with the Blues, p. 199.

[90]Ibid., p. 200.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Ibid.

[93]This represented a reversal from the normal situation--Belafonte often took roles which Poitier had refused.

[94]E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, Jamaica, typescript libretto in the Billy Rose Collection, Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts.

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[95]This writer disagrees vehemently with the consensus comments by the reviewers on the show's libretto. Though the boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl-back aspect of the plot was predictable, this writer saw the libretto--and the songs with which it was quite aptly connected--as most intelligently-crafted and thought-provoking--especially in the comparisons with most of the librettos which I have scrutinized for this dissertation. Perhaps the reviewers were so conditioned to seeing and writing about the typically-weak book for the black shows that they wrote negative comments about Jamaica's libretto strictly as a reflex action of sorts--with-out even bothering to notice the book's wit. Or, perhaps they simply did not understand it.

[96]Daily News, November 1, 1957.

[97]Herald-Tribune, November 1, 1957.

[98]Jamaica, p. 1-4-288.

[99]Ibid., p. 1-5-32.

[100]Ibid., p. 1-6-40.

[101]Ibid., p. 1-7-48.

[102]Ibid., p. 1-9-52.

[103]Ibid., p. 1-6-37.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid.

[106]Ibid.

[107]Ibid., "Notes to Directors From Authors."

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CHAPTER TEN

1961 - 1971: THE LAST RITES FOR SAMBO

The African-American, like the proverbial 97-pound weakling, did not obtain respect from his would-be oppressors until he finally took the necessary measures to demand that respect. The Civil Rights Movement, which began in the 1960s, not only accelerated in intensity in the 1960s, but took many divergent courses as well.

Within the first five weeks of the new decade, a novel form of nonviolent resistance--the "sit-in"--was used, and proved later to be quite effective. On February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four black college students seated themselves at the lunch counter of a downtown Woolworth store and refused to leave when they were denied service.[1] Soon this method of peaceful confrontation became popular throughout the South, and played a major role in the desegregation of many a facility which had previously denied service to blacks.

Many of these sit-ins were organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.), a group which was founded at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, in April 1960.[2] S.N.C.C. would, in the course of just a few years, institute a drastic change in its policies, taking on a more militant stance which would make a paradox of its name.

The Presidential election of 1960 turned out to be a closely-contested race between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate, was victorious in one of the closest races on record for the nation's top office. The black vote, which was overwhelmingly in favor of the young senator from Massachusetts, played a deciding role in the narrow margin of victory for Kennedy, who was judged to be the more pro-Civil Rights candidate. Like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Kennedy repaid the loyalty of his black voters by appointing a significant number of African-Americans to key governmental positions.

In early 1961 an ordinance was passed by the Interstate Commerce Committee which outlawed segregated seating on both

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interstate trains and buses, and likewise made "Jim Crow" waiting rooms illegal. To test the compliance of the bus companies and their stations, seven blacks and six whites boarded a Greyhound bus in Washington, D.C., on May 4, 1961, with New Orleans as their destination.[3] They became known as the "Freedom Riders"; soon other integrated teams of travelers were making similar journeys throughout the South. These "freedom rides" were organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.), another faction in a growing legion of black pressure organizations.

The early 1960s saw the desegregation of many universities in the South, and the eventual integration of all of the major state universities. Surprisingly, many of these schools were integrated with a minimum of incidents, although the National Guard had to be brought in to protect the first black students at the Universities of Alabama and Mississippi.

"Freedom marches," in which hordes of civil-rights advocates would march from one locale to another--often dozens of miles--were a popular method of nonviolent confrontation in the early 1960s. Many of these marches were led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself. The most famous of the freedom marches was the "March on Washington" of August 28, 1963, in which Dr. King made what was to become his most famous speech, the "I Have A Dream" oration, to a quarter-million followers and before cameras and journalists from all over the world.

The next year brought about a piece of landmark legislation for American blacks. "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the most far-reaching and comprehensive law in support of racial equality ever enacted by Congress,"[4] is the opinion expressed by the distinguished chronicler of African-American history, John Hope Franklin.

The ideologies of the civil rights organizations and the harsh reality of what was happening on the streets of the nation's teeming black ghettoes were frequently at odds. Racial rioting broke out in the summer of 1964 in Harlem and also 360 miles upstate in Rochester, New York, with both communities suffering the loss of several lives; millions of dollars worth of property was damaged. In both cities the hostilities began with alleged instances of police

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brutality. The next summer would see the outbreak of similar disturbances in the Watts section of Los Angeles, the Hough section of Cleveland, Ohio, and in Newark, New Jersey.

The riots gave evidence that many African-Americans, primarily in the large cities of the North and on the West Coast, had shunned the "turn-the-other-cheek" philosophy of King and his disciples, and favored a more physically-confrontational approach. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, under its new leader, the young, Trinidad-born Stokely Carmichael, began to take a less nonviolent attitude in 1965, often rushing to the rescue of blacks in the Deep South who were the targets of white supremacist organizations.

In 1966 a conference was held in Newark by the more radical black leaders. It was dubbed the "Black Power Conference" by the media, and White America had a new "boogeyman" to contend with--The Militant: gun-toting, military-garbed, bearded, and sporting a sprouting "Afro" hairdo; an urban guerilla whose most-frequently uttered phrases were "Kill whitey!" and "Burn, baby, burn!" This image was enhanced by the emergence of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, in October 1966. The Black Panthers were devotees of the principles of S.N.C.C.[5]

Taking a cue from the Nation of Islam and Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s, the so-called black militants promoted an intense campaign of self-awareness amongst American blacks, which emphasized a knowledge of and appreciation for their African heritage. A collective feeling of black pride spread throughout the African-American communities; many black Americans divorced themselves from Christianity, viewing it as a religion foistered upon the African in America to make him a better slave; some became members of the Nation of Islam; many aligned themselves with other Islamic cults; some renounced organized religion altogether. Numerous blacks dropped their American names, which they considered now as "slave names," for African names; many stopped eating what was known as "soul food"; some persons avoiding certain items, such as pork, for reasons of health, while others refused to partake of otherwise wholesome

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food items simply because they perceived them to be the fare of slaves.

In the mid-1960s, the young and charismatic heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali--born Cassius Marcellus, Clay, Jr., in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1942--established himself as a symbol for black pride. Ali was the perfect antithesis for the simian-featured, slow-witted "coon" caricature that many foreigners, because of their exposure to this stereotype in Hollywood films, wrongfully used as the major reference point in relation to American Negroes; handsome and charming, Clay/Ali rattled off witty and grammatically-perfect sentences and poems with the same velocity of his lightning combinations of punches.

Many African-Americans were beginning to look upon the non-violent techniques of Dr. King and his followers as both foolish and dangerous. His claque of Southern preachers was labelled in some circles as "Uncle Toms"; their views were becoming increasingly construed as old-fashioned by the less-patient younger blacks.

African-Americans were also disdaining the use of the word "Negro"; the "Negro" was being seen in the 1960s as a mutant strain of the African race which had been stripped of its identity and dignity.[7] The term "black," which had been used at times as an intraracial epithet to denigrate another African-American of darker skin, became the more acceptable designation.[8]

A major outgrowth of the new black awareness was a greater appreciation by African-Americans for the fine and performing arts. The number of community theatres in black neighborhoods across America increased dramatically in the 1960s; the number of black plays and musicals produced Off-Broadway rose to record levels. The heightened self-pride in black Americans was reflected in the content and attitudes of the black shows of the decade; because the black audience was not only growing, but cutting across class-lines within the black community, plays were being written not only for, by, and about black people, but in an interesting diversity of genres and formats, as well.

This surge in the production of black plays in the early 1960s was helped by the new trend started by industrious black social

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organizations and church groups: the theatre party. In these parties the sponsoring group would obtain tickets to theatre events for a large gathering of people, at a reduced bulk rate. Many African-Americans were introduced to the theatre by means of these theatre parties; a significant audience was developing because of them; these parties would become a staple in the African-American theatre. This symbiotic relationship between the burgeoning black theatre and its theatre-party audience allowed many shows to continue to run which would have suffered an early demise had it not been for this organized support.

Experimental by its [then] definition, the Off-Broadway theatre became the main venue for the new plays and musicals which spoke of the African-Americans new self-awareness. Moreover, many of the creators of these black shows were actually black. Producers, writers, and directors now had to be conscious of omitting any overtly denigrating images of blacks. The stereotypes which were formerly included to amuse white audiences were now being avoided so as not to offend the increasing black theatre audience. As he had been during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the Negro was the euphemistic "in" group of the decade,[9] only this time he was being viewed more as a human being and not as an exotic adjunct to Mankind.

Both the black nonmusical and musical theatres benefitted from the success of A Raisin in the Sun, whose Broadway run, though it began in March 1959, lasted until early 1961. A long and profitable national tour followed. The play's long run uncovered a vast audience of blacks who would respond to well-crafted and professionally-mounted shows for and about blacks, if not by blacks. Several producers, seeing a possible trend developing, began seeking plays with black themes.

On May 4, 1961, shortly after A Raisin in the Sun closed on Broadway, The Blacks, subtitled A Clown Show by its French author Jean Genet, began a run of 1,408 performances at the St. Mark's Playhouse in Greenwich Village. The cast contained some of the most illustrious actors, writers, and directors the black theatre has produced.[10] Many of the performers in The Blacks would later form

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the nucleus of the Negro Ensemble Company (N.E.C.) which, ironically, was originally housed in the same St. Mark's Playhouse.

The producers who forecast a trend towards the black theatre increasing in popularity in the 1960s were correct; the 1963-1964 season alone saw ten black plays or musicals mounted on Broadway or Off-Broadway. This surge in black plays of the early 1960s was augmented by the theatre parties.

The black theatre movement of the 1960s culminated in 1967 with the inauguration of the N.E.C. Capitalizing on the popularity of the 504-performance run of the double-bill of one-act plays by Douglass Turner Ward, Happy Ending and Day of Absence, Ward, the producer/actor Robert Hooks, and Gerald Krone formed the N.E.C. with the aid of a grant of $434,000 from the Ford Foundation.[11] Although receiving nowhere near the financial support which had been bestowed upon the N.E.C., other black theatre companies, such as Robert Macbeth's New Lafayette Theatre, in Harlem, and Detroit-born Woodie King's New Federal Theatre, on the Lower East Side, opened their doors shortly thereafter.

These new plays demonstrated a wide variety of structural formats, and, for the first time in the history of the black theatre, offered a fairly eclectic view of life in black communities. Structures varied from the meticulously-wrought "well-made"[12] format of Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun to Genet's sometimes vague and confusing The Blacks; from Ossie Davis' broad-humored Purlie Victorious (1961), thought by many to be paralyzingly funny, with its satirization of practically every Southern stereotype, to Leroi Jones' (later Amiri Baraka) allegorical Dutchman; from Douglass Turner Ward's reverse minstrel show, Day of Absence, to the achingly realistic slice-of-life plays set in the simmering ghettoes, which became the staple of the New Lafayette Theatre.

The black musicals of the 1960s, in stark contrast to the carbon-copy nature of the Neo-Minstrel shows, also reflected the diversity of black life which was shown in the straight plays. Between 1961 and 1971, black musicals would feature a wide variety of themes; gospel musicals and historical pageants represented the majority of the shows written by, for, and about

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black people. Several musicals with themes of integration and/or interracial romance were produced on Broadway, with mixed results. The new stereotype of the 1960s--the dilettantish, vainglorious black militant--was satirized in a show, Buck White, which was built around a performer who was arguably the planet's most popular and recognizable person. Nursery rhymes, of all things, formed the bases of two black musicals, Sambo and Inner City; the adaptation of writings by minority New York City schoolchildren resulted in The Me Nobody Knows. Finally, a heretofore taboo point-of-view was presented on the Broadway stage: a realistic look at the mean streets of the ghetto, from the eyes of an angry young black man, Melvin Van Peebles' Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death, in which, in a figurative sense, the metaphorical final stake was driven through the hearts of Rufus, Rastus, and Sambo.

The Integrationist and Interracial Romance Shows

The shows featuring the newly-expressed pride in the black man's history and those cultural idiosyncrasies which made the African-American a distinct ethnic entity were, for the most part, produced on the more experimental Off-Broadway stage. Broadway, more conservative in choosing its black-themed vehicles, invariably decided on shows which catered to the less reactionary views of the bulk of its predominantly white audience, than to the changing self-image of the growing, but nonetheless, much smaller claque of black theatregoers. The black-themed shows on Broadway of the era studied in this chapter reflected that particular aspect of the civil rights movement with which white audiences would feel most comfortable: the presumed desire by blacks to integrate themselves in the American mainstream. In five of the six shows built around this theme, the subject of interracial romance was used, not so much to titillate audiences by playing upon a once-taboo subject,[13] but to employ the theme as a metaphor--and in most cases, in a cautionary sense--concerning the mixing of the races. In outlining the obstacles the mixed couples would have to face in the course of their relationships, the covert message was about the sometimes

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painful transitions the African-American would have to make if he were to attempt to become one with mainstream America.

Four years after the debut of Jamaica, the last black musical to appear on Broadway, Kwamina, opened on October 23, 1961, at the Fifty-fourth Street Theatre, becoming the first of the interracial romance musicals. In this case, the black-white union symbolized the relationship between the emerging nations of Africa, and the European colonial powers which had recently returned the black African's freedom and land. With a book by Robert Alan Arthur, songs by Richard Adler, and choreography by the legendary Agnes de Mille, Kwamina is set in modern Ghana. It is the love story of two doctors in a small village; Eve, played by Sally Ann Howes, who, although white, was born and raised in Africa, the daughter of a Missionary,[14] and Kwamina, also known as Peter, played by Terry Carter, who has recently returned to his village after ten years of schooling in London, to work with Eve as a physician at the local clinic. Another bit of conflict is added; Kwamina is also a prince, the heir apparent of his father, the tribe's chief, who is dying. Kwamina's romance with the white Eve and his partial repudiation of the more primitive tribal customs form the base of his antagonism with the tribe's powerful voodoo priest, played by Brock Peters.

For the most part, the reviews were mixed; there were no raves, nor were there any scathingly negative attacks on the play; practically all the reviewers seemed to have been consciously taking the middle-ground, not wanting to praise a show which contained many obvious flaws, but also not eager to excoriate a work which had, in the consensus, such good intentions and noble ideas, if not sufficient talent on the part of the authors to dramatize them effectively. Given the subject matter--the newly-emerging African states yearning to negate all the negative myths concerning Africa and its people--many critics expressed disappointment with the show's execution.

Several reviewers complained that the romance between Eve and Kwamina was underdeveloped, that after the issue had been raised, the show's authors chose to avoid, rather than build upon it. Perhaps Walter Kerr best summed up the thoughts of his colleagues

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when he wrote "the show in general is a thing of enormous good will and as much bad writing."[15]

Historically, the theme of interracial romance has always been less acceptable to white audiences when the male character is black and the female white. Often the black male is "punished" for his trespassing on the white man's most prized territory--his woman. Shakespeare set the standard with his handling of his two blackamoor invaders, Othello and Aaron, one noble, the other a self-confirmed rogue, but both sexual outlaws who had to pay for their perceived sins of miscegenation. As noted earlier, the 1920s and '30s black-themed folk/melodrama plays often climaxed with a Christ-like black male protagonist being lynched for an illicit affair with a white woman.

However, such melodramatic punishment could not be meted out overtly to black characters in the ostensibly more racially-sensitive 1960s. Furthermore, there were marked differences in this story set in West Africa. Kwamina is no third-class "other" of a citizen; he is in his homeland, where he is both royalty and well-educated. His romance with Eve poses no threat to a powerful white male majority, simply because there is no such thing in his native land.

Kwamina is no unlearned sharecropper or failed, would-be lawyer16 who "dares" have a relationship with a white woman; his high status sanctions, to a degree, his relationship with the white woman, as did Othello's status as a military genius, and the handsome, worldly, world-famous, and practically perfect character of Dr. John Prentice, as portrayed by Sidney Poitier in the 1967 film Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. Like them, Kwamina has distinguished himself and shown he is "deserving" of a relationship with a white woman.

Walter Kerr complained that while the librettist of Kwamina consciously strove to eliminate anything which could be construed as an adherence to any of the classic stereotypes, the bookwriter went too far in the opposite direction, concocting a stiff and stodgy adjunct to the minstrel-informed Negro stage dialect he was trying to avoid. Kerr labeled it "an overripe idiom that used to be reserved

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for bad Biblical plays,"[17] which he deemed as insulting as the caricatured Negro speech the bookwriter was trying not to reproduce.

The ending was purposely vague:

> At the end . . . the lady doctor decides to remain in the native village.
>
> But although she says she will stay with the colored man she loves, neither of them mentions marriage, and while they clinch again, they still do not kiss. It's a patently discreet fadeout. It may be, in consequence, that in so circumspectly avoiding alienation, the authors have failed to satisfy anyone.[18]

Kwamina, as would the subsequent musicals No Strings and Hallelujah, Baby!, chose to leave the question whether the lovers would ultimately unite open. Kwamina managed just 32 performances.

Fly Blackbird, an Off-Broadway critical and popular success, delved into the issue of integration, and the tactics used by a young, racially-mixed group of college students who were dedicated to fighting segregation. The musical opened February 5, 1962, at the Mayfair Theatre, "a comfortable Off-Broadway playhouse located in the heart of the Broadway theatrical district."[19] The authors were "a pair of gifted U.C.L.A. teachers,"[20] C. Bernard Jackson and James V. Hatch. Although both contributed to the book, music, and lyrics, Jackson was mainly responsible for the songs, with the book mostly by Hatch.[21] Fittingly in a musical about integration, one of the authors, Hatch, was white; the other, Jackson, was black.

The show was directed by Jerome Eskow and produced by Helen Jacobson. Broadway veteran Avon Long starred as "Sweet" William Piper, a now-rich Negro entertainer who had achieved fame by playing a succession of movie and television roles not unlike those associated with Stepinfetchit and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson. Mary Louise was featured as Piper's Swarthmore-educated daughter Josie, who has forsaken her privileged-class ways and joined a group of youthful civil rights fighters, led by Carl, who was played by Robert Guillaume.

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While instructors at U.C.L.A.--Jackson in the Music department, Hatch in the Theatre--the two young men discussed the possibility of crafting a musical which would take a look at the burgeoning civil rights movement in which college-age people were playing a major role. In addition to this current-events topic, they wanted somehow to interject a parody of the minstrel form into the proceedings.[22] The show started out in 1960 with two performances before invited audiences in a small theatre on the U.C.L.A. campus, then moved to the aptly-named Shoebox Theatre, playing weekends.[23] Most of the performers were either U.C.L.A. students, or members of Jackson's chorus, which was based in Echo Park. The original Fly Blackbird was a one-act show which ran only an hour; the music was provided solely by Jackson at the piano.[24]

The show garnered good reviews from the Los Angeles press; as its popularity increased, so did its running-time; the authors extended it into a two-act play of two hours.[25] By 1961, the authors had rented the 800-seat Metro Theatre, a converted movie-house; the show ran four months there, playing on weekends.

Helen Jacobson saw the show, liked it, and decided to produce it Off-Broadway in New York. The original libretto did not suit her, so she had the authors rewrite it and add new songs. Co-author Hatch wryly noted that Jacobson could not specifically pinpoint why she did not like a certain scene, and what she wanted to replace it; she merely left the authors to their own devices to re-work the scenes which she had ordered to be extracted. Dr. Hatch felt that although the new songs represented a vast improvement on those from the original show, "the book was worse, hokier."[26]

Critics from the Village Voice, New York Times, Variety, and the Newark Evening News gave the show rave reviews; practically all of the other critics were enthusiastic; the closest to a negative review was by Herbert Kupferberg of the Herald-Tribune, who nonetheless had reserved praise for it. Many critics judged the book to be weak, but most of them tempered that opinion by adding the libretto was by no means a detriment to the show. It was generally felt that the play was highly entertaining and the cast was talented, engaging, and attractive. The critics concurred that the authors got

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their satirical points across well; that although it was a "message" musical, the writers never allowed it to become stiff or "preachy." The songs were especially praised for their catchy tunes and clever lyrics.

The reviewer from Variety opined:

> . . . the characters are sketchy and the plot slim. The show is really more of a topical revue than a musical play, but the people involved are so talented that it turns out enjoyably.[27]

Guy Savino, of the Newark Evening News, began his review by stating:

> For all we know, Fly Blackbird, which exploded on the stage of the Mayfair Theatre last night like a thermonuclear device, may be the musical sequel to Uncle Tom's Cabin.[28]

Frances Herridge noted "some of the witty lyrics . . . get across some points of their own that are sharper than any serious talk."[29]

The plot deals with the differing philosophies of two generations of African-Americans on the issue of civil rights. The older, more settled generation, as represented by "Sweet" William Piper, takes a slower, come-what-may approach, while the less-patient, activist younger element is headed by Carl, a headstrong college student whose purported major is political science, but whose chief concern seems to be civil disobedience. Their opposition is exemplified by the show's first two songs, Piper's "All Good Things Come to Those Who Wait,"[30] which cites the virtues of endurance, and the answering "Now," by Carl and his "Blackbirds family" of activists, which demands equality at this moment.[31]

A white pseudo-liberal character, Sidney Crocker, represents those who pretend to champion the black man's cause, while doing everything in their power to keep the Negro subservient. While informing Piper that the Negro entertainer is to be made an honorary

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member of Crocker's lodge, Crocker tells Piper "if there were more people like you, there wouldn't be any Negro problem."[32]

To sharpen the bite of their commentary on both the Pipers and the fake liberals like Crocker, the authors have juxtaposed the main plot about the differing philosophies with a subplot that parodies the minstrel shows and other adjunct forms of entertainment. They do this by means of a medicine-show sequence, which takes place in Carl's dreams. However, before the authors make the [somewhat awkward] transition from the "real" scenes to the dream sequence, they take a satirical look at the typical roles of Piper and those of his ilk: the comic servants and the African chieftains in the Tarzan-like jungle movies.[33] Hatch and Jackson do not ignore the fact that Hollywood has reduced other ethnic groups to mere stereotypes also; "The Gong Song" takes to task the caricature of Orientals in the Charlie Chan series of "B"-movies and similar folderol.[34]

The show's satire is perhaps most biting in "The Doctor Crocker Medicine Show" segment of Carl's dream sequence. Sidney Crocker is transformed into a mountebank "doctor" who is peddling "Dr. Crocker's Love Elixir" which he purports to be "the most, exciting innovation of the Century."[35] One sip of it will turn any black man into a simpering, minstrel-like "coon." Crocker calls for volunteers to sample his medicine; a young black man, who calls himself "MISTER Boy," reluctantly agrees to test it.[36] Mister Boy is immediately changed into a "Sambo"-like caricature, which pleases Crocker to no end, prompting Crocker to sing:

> When I go walking with Mister Boy
> I wear a smile on my face
> Because there's nothing better
> In the whole wide world
> Than a colored man in his place!
> .....
> They got a whole lotta trouble in Africa
> They got trouble in Tennessee,
> Because the colored man is gettin' outta hand,
> My friends, you better listen to me.
> He's got to be pacified!
> He's got to be dominated!

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He's gotta be willin' to do what I tell him to
'Cause this is the order that God created.[37]

Still in his dream, Carl auditions for a Hollywood contract, singing a bitter song about a classic Southern racist, "Old White Tom."[38] To Carl's surprise, Crocker is pleased by this venomous ode to "rednecks" such as himself; he offers Carl a contract which pays "a thousand dollars a week . . . plus carfare."[39]

Carl, momentarily entranced by the prospect of Hollywood riches, forgets his commitment to the civil rights struggle, and complies with Crocker's offer. Dressing Carl up and pushing him out to perform, Crocker introduces him as "the best loved Negro entertainer in the world . . . UNCLE TOM!"[40]

Snapping back to his senses, Carl feigns going along with Crocker by singing a bit from a "coon" song, from which he segues into a refrain of "Old White Tom" as the men in his activist group surround Crocker, seize him, and carry him around the stage in a mock funeral procession as Crocker screams his protest. Crocker's gravestone is produced, which is "designed like the front end of a new Cadillac--black."[41] Crocker is then placed before the gravestone and covered with a white sheet. Piper enters, protesting Dr. Crocker's burial; the group then produces his headstone--the front end of a white Cadillac. Piper is "gently forced down in front of the gravestone, then covered with a black sheet."[42]

The dream sequence ends, and the play segues back [once again rather awkwardly] to the main plot. As the show ends, Piper realizes that perhaps his views have now become outdated, but he nonetheless rationalizes on why and how the times he lived in demanded that he had acted as he had done. He sings:

They're doing things so differently
Who's the fool . . . them or me?
Yes, I've shuffled
I had to.
Shuffled high, shuffled low.
Shuffled fast, shuffled slow.
But I shuffled my daughter

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Right through one of the finest
Schools in the country
So she'll never have to shuffle for anybody . . .
White or black.[43]

Piper resolves his differences with his daughter and her civil rights activist colleagues. The show ends with an ultra-optimistic song entitled, "Wake Up," which calls for racial harmony.

Though Finian's Rainbow contained snatches of satire on the racial issue, and social satire served as the base for Jamaica, Fly Blackbird was the first commercial musical in which the American black-white issue is addressed throughout. As the critics duly reported, the play's satirical message was enhanced by the cleverness of the lyrics to the songs. Unlike so many of the weak-booked black musicals, whose librettos were merely afterthoughts to link the songs, the shortcomings of Fly Blackbird's book can be largely ignored; any technical flaws in the transitions are more than compensated by what follows in the scenes themselves, with the witty dialogue which serves as lead-ins to the equally piquant lyrics.

Co-author Hatch, while expressing disappointment with the Off-Broadway presentation, thought it would have great exceeded its 124-performance run had it played in a theatre in Greenwich Village, a haven for interracial couples and persons with a liberal, pro-integrationist bent, rather than at its actual house, the Mayfair Theatre, on 46th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues.[44]

In one sense, Fly Blackbird served as a prototype for subsequent black Off-Broadway and Broadway shows; within the next few years, the satire of minstrel-inspired characters and situations, and the parody of the Southern stereotypes would be overdone to the point of cliché in such shows as Day of Absence (1965), Leroi Jones' Great Goodness of Life (1966), Hallelujah, Baby! (1967), Hair (1967), and Purlie (1970), to name just a few.

No Strings was the story of a romance between Barbara Woodruff, a Harlem-born Paris fashion model, and David Jordan, a

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writer who, just eight years earlier, had written a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, but has since come down with a serious case of writer's block. No Strings premiered March 15, 1962, in the same house, the Fifty-fourth Street Theatre, in which Kwamina had its brief run. The music and lyrics were provided by the legendary composer Richard Rodgers; after having had long associations with two of the most accomplished lyricists of the theatre, Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein II, Rodgers would be writing the words to his own tunes for the first time in his career. The show's book was by Samuel Taylor; Joe Layton directed and choreographed; Rodgers and Taylor co-produced the play. The lead roles of Barbara Woodruff and David Jordan were played by Diahann Carroll and Richard Kiley, respectively.

Barbara, by her own admission, is "the highest paid model in Paris,"[45] while Jordan, though now unable to write serious novels because of his mental block, is nonetheless not exactly suffering through life. He is a social butterfly, traipsing around the continent pursuit of parties, good times, and car races. However, the fact he has been squandering his considerable writing gifts is not lost on Louis Pourtal, a middle-aged Frenchman with whom Barbara is having a sort of affair. He warns Barbara that David has descended into the limbo of being a "Europe-bum," and that David "writes cheap Italian films [and] sometimes he acts in them."[46]

Despite their better judgment, David and Barbara fall in love. She tries desperately to help cure him of his writer's block, which proves to be an impossible task as long as David is in Europe. The two of them agree that he must return to his hometown, Bear Island, Maine, if he is to write seriously again. The question of race, which had been assiduously avoided throughout the play, is now implied strongly as they discuss whether or not Barbara should join him back in the United States. As in Kwamina, the romance is left somewhat unresolved.

The reviews for the show were decidedly mixed. Almost all the critics mentioned that this was Rodgers' debut as a lyricist, and judged he had acquitted himself well in that role, that his lyrics were evocative of those of his two former partners, without being

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imitative. The reviewers also concurred that Rodgers, as always, had composed a great score. It was generally thought that Taylor's book was no match for Rodgers' score. Some reviewers were of the opinion that, although the two lead roles were well sung and acted, there was no visible spark between Carroll and Kiley. As they had done with Kwamina, numerous critics felt the interracial love angle was underdeveloped.

That indeed may have been the case. Nowhere in the text is it mentioned that Barbara is a Negro, although it is heavily implied in a few places. Much is left curiously unsaid throughout. Were it not for the veiled references to the fact Barbara had lived "Uptown . . . way uptown" and had attended the [then and now] predominantly black and Hispanic George Washington High School,[47] and in the dialogue near the end of the play in which the two lovers discuss the difficulty of her returning to Maine with him, the part could have been played by a white actress. However, her character is described thusly:

> The part of Barbara Woodruff . . . is designed to be played by an American colored girl in her early twenties. It is proposed that she also be beautiful, and have style, and wear clothes well; be intelligent, witty, warmly human, and wise. The play itself never refers to her color. [Emphasis mine][48]

Though purposely left unsaid, Barbara has fled the United States, like so many of her fellow black American artists and entertainers, to find a certain freedom of expression that her race has precluded her from having in her native land. She admits to being wary of any Americans she might meet in Europe;[49] what is implied but never verbalized is she fears those Americans might have imported some stateside racism with them. Similarly, she confides to Louis Pourtal she "had come to Europe to be born."[50] She never mentions that American racism would have most likely aborted any modeling career to which she could have aspired in be United States.

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In the typical white male/black female relationship of drama and literature, the black woman's social status is usually lower than that of her white lover's; whether the white male truly loves her or is merely using her for his sexual pleasure sometimes becomes a moot point with the female; the black woman in question often feels the mere fact she is having a relationship, however illicit, with a white man, elevates her, if not in the view of her peers, in her own eyes, at least. This is not the case for Barbara. Her attraction to him is not one of a member of a subordinated class hoping to better her condition by aligning with someone from what she feels is a superior race; she has her own money and prestige and does not need any that he might be able to give her.

However, in a similar vein, Barbara contradicts herself. She celebrates her independence with a song shortly after meeting David,[51] yet has some sort of nebulous relationship with Louis Pourtal. It is never fully disclosed as to what the true nature of the acquaintanceship consists of: are Louis and Barbara mentor and pupil? Do they have a platonic relationship? Is he "keeping" her, and, if so, is there any sex involved? If the latter is the case, then her song declaring the joy of being her own person is negated, reducing her to a high-level prostitute, and recalls the quadroon balls of New Orleans and adjunct instances where white males would pay for the upkeep of a Negro woman "on the side."

The earlier dialogue concerning the fact Barbara was from "way uptown" notwithstanding, the closest the libretto ever comes to mentioning Barbara is a Negro is near the play's end, when the two lovers have decided David must return to Maine in order to overcome his writer's block. He tells her she must go back with him--as his wife. She replies:

David, I'm afraid.

David

No, don't be.

Barbara

But this is my home! My safe and beautiful world! Can

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I leave it for yours?[52]

Her "home" is safe and beautiful because it is free of American-style racism, which, of course, is prevalent in his home. As they continue to debate the issue, both still avoid the mention of race.

David
Look, Barbara, it's not going to be easy, we both know that---

Barbara
Of course we know! . . . It won't be like Paris!

David
No. No one 's going to ask you to dinner . . . you'll be alone a lot of the time.[53]

The play ends on a vague note; they vow to pretend they have never met, all the while hoping they can and will be reunited in the future.

By never having the characters deal directly with the fact theirs was an interracial romance, the creators of No Strings presumedly thought that audiences, white and black, would be less prone to be offended. However, if that was indeed the case--that the obviously black Barbara was having an affair with the obviously white David--then why would the producers bother to broach the topic in the first place? Several critics asked this question, wondering why Barbara had to be played by a black actress. In No Strings the conflict was ostensibly about the difficulties encountered in an interracial romance, yet the creators lacked the strength of conviction to dramatize that aspect fully; their handling of the situation was not unlike a man who, having jumped from a tall building, changes his mind in mid-flight, but is unable to put on the brakes and return to the place from which he has launched himself. Regardless of this unconscionable avoidance of the issue the authors themselves had raised, No Strings nonetheless found an audience, running for 580 performances on Broadway.

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As Mr. Wonderful had been eight years earlier, 1964's Golden Boy was created to exploit the talents of Sammy Davis, Jr. The musical version was based on Clifford Odets' classic 1937 play of the same name, which had enjoyed a run of 250 performances during its initial presentation on Broadway. Odets had been in the process of adapting his play into the musical's libretto when he died on August 14, 1963. The producers convinced Odets' good friend, also a highly-esteemed dramatist, William Gibson, to complete the book for the proposed musical, but not after some initial reluctance on Gibson's part.

Lee Adams wrote the lyrics, and Charles Strouse composed the music for the show, which opened October 10, 1964, after several weeks of previews. Arthur Penn directed; Donald McKayle choreographed. Sammy Davis, Jr., played the role of Joe Wellington, the "golden boy" of the title; featured in the cast were Paula Wayne as Lorna Moon, the white girl whom Joe loves; Roy Glenn as Mr. Wellington, Joe's father who opposes his son's boxing career; Louis Gossett and Jeanette Dubois as Joe's siblings; Johnny Brown, who provided comic relief as Joe's brother-in-law, and the popular jazz vocalist, Billy Daniels, who made a highly-praised appearance as Satin, a Harlem gangster/fight-promoter whose methods eerily foreshadow those of the current boxing impresario, Don King. Lola Falana and Jaime Rogers were featured dancers, the latter in the climactic ballet-like elimination bout with Joe Wellington.

In the original work, Joe Bonaparte was a young, sensitive, would-be violinist. From a poor Italian-American family, and talented with his fists, Joe, despite his great reluctance and loathing for the sport, became a professional boxer, realizing that the fight game represented the quickest escape from poverty for those of his ethnic group.[54] In the 1964 adaptation, Joe Bonaparte has become Joe Wellington--which surely brought a smile to many a student of military history--a sensitive black youth from Harlem. As in the earlier work, Joe is a reluctant warrior.

The musical opens with a single spotlight on the Puerto Rican challenger, Lopez (Jaime Rogers), who is in the gym, shadowboxing as "a rhythm, set up by his sniffs [sic] is picked up quietly by

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percussion in the orchestra."[55] The lights rise on several other lean young spartans going through their training rituals.

Soon the audience is introduced to Joe, and it is quickly learned he is involved in three major conflicts: with his father, who learns of Joe's profession only after Joe has had six bouts; he is in love with Lorna Moon, who is the mistress of Joe's manager, Tom; and Joe is in conflict with himself, for being adept at a profession he detests.

Joe tries to make a compromise with himself by disdaining a brutal, slugging style of fighting in favor of a more clever and scientific approach to victory, but this only serves, despite his lengthening undefeated record, to alienate those ticket buyers who frequent boxing matches to see spectacular knockouts.

Joe loves Lorna; her feelings for him also evolve into love, although she can not bear to leave Tom, who is married. Despite Joe's pleading, Lorna stays with Tom, whom she admits she does not love, partly due to a perverse need for security, and partly because she is not ready for a full-fledged relationship with a black man.

As the play progresses, Joe, primarily because of his inability to win Lorna over completely, becomes less sensitive and more arrogant, cynical, and materialistic. He loses contact with his family and his friends from 127th Street. The change in his personality is reflected in the transformation of his boxing style; he has become a ferocious slugger bent on administering savage knockouts to his opponents.

Having battled his way up the ranks, Joe readies himself for an elimination bout for the lightweight title against the other top challenger, Lopez. Stunned by Lopez early in the bout, and on the verge of being knocked out, Joe manages a spectacular rally, punching Lopez unconscious. His dressing-room celebration slams to an abrupt halt when it is learned Lopez has died from Joe's punches; Joe's grief is compounded when Lorna tells him she does not love him, never did, and had married the newly-divorced Tom earlier in the day. As he had been wont to do as of late in stressful times, Joe jumps into his new sports car and drives it with abandon on the thruway leading out of New York; this time, in what may or may not

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have been a conscious act of suicide, Joe crashes the car while racing it up the highway at well over 100 miles per hour.

The reviews, for the most part, tended to be guardedly positive. The critics singled out the song "Don't Forget 127th Street" as one of the show's high points; the performances of Davis, Wayne, Rogers, and, especially, Billy Daniels, were lauded.

If Davis, as some of his harshest critics have maintained, did play numerous characters of questionable racial awareness, then they cannot include his portrayal of Joe Wellington on that dubious roster. Wellington, in contrast to the reigning stereotype of a fighter, is articulate, intelligent, and socially aware. For one of the few times in a black commercial musical, the protagonist's family--with the exception of his mother, who is deceased--is intact. The other members of his family, though they may be morally opposed to his being a prizefighter, are nonetheless supportive of his efforts.

Joe is not one to suffer racial insults passively, be they blatant, implied, or even inadvertent. Shortly after Joe's entrance, he, not bothering to hide his indignation, reminds his co-manager Roxy Gottlieb that "you bought a piece of my contract, not of me" and asks Roxy to stop referring to him in the third person, as if he--Joe --were not even present.[56]

Joe is attracted to Lorna not because she is white, but despite that fact. He struggles unsuccessfully, out of a sense of black race consciousness, to sublimate his growing attraction for her. Lorna, under the guise of discussing some contract business, makes a call on Joe in his family's Harlem apartment. They go to a nearby park to further the conversation when "three white punks"[57] happen upon them--in the middle of Harlem, no less--and voice their displeasure at seeing Lorna with Joe. The white boys jump Joe, but he is immediately rescued by "three Negro punks,"[58] who chase the white youths away. When Lorna reaches to touch injured eye, he instinctively pulls himself back.

Lorna
Three at one time and girls scare you?

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Joe

(low)
White girls.[59]

Satin, as played by Billy Daniels, was that rarity of rarities of the time in a black musical--a Negro villain. Surely modeled in part after the real-life, notorious Harlem vice king, the Charleston-born Claude "Bumpy" Johnson, Satin bears an uncanny resemblance to Don King, who, a decade later, would become infamous as an exploiter of fighters. Satin wants to buy into Joe's contract, but Joe, knowing of Satin's sullied reputation as a man who "has his hands in everything from whores to horse [heroin],"[60] is reluctant to ally himself with the vicelord. As Don King is wont to do in persuading a black fighter to leave his white manager and sign with him, Satin plays upon the racial angle: "Joe. Soul brother. I'm a black man, dig me."[61] Though wary of him, Joe signs with Satin, and, as he had been promised, is soon fighting nationally-televised main events at the Mecca of boxing, Madison Square Garden.

One of the more interesting racial statements in the play is made in conjunction with the character of Lorna Moon. In the white male/black female pairings in fiction and drama, as mentioned before, the white male is usually a man of means; thus, the Negro female can rationalize that the union represents a betterment of sorts for her [perceived] social status. Conversely, in the black male/white female liaisons in fiction and plays, the white female is often portrayed as a neurotic, proverbial "poor white trash" type of person who cohabits with black men due to her inability to attract a white man of any degree of worth. In short, the black females who have love affairs with white males in these situations are usually attractive, intelligent, sensitive, and "too good" for the less-progressive black males who are obviously not up to their standards, while the qualities of the white females are just the opposite; no white men will have them, so they condescend to having relationships with Negro males. Lorna's character was not delineated as quite so unattractive, but she is portrayed as being

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morally lax and lacking in self-esteem. She acknowledges the fact that her best days are behind her as she sings:

> Golden boy, you think you need me so,
> Little boy, too naive to know,
> Weary girls like me have nothing left,
> So how could we give something to
> Golden boys like you?[62]

Despite her fickleness in refusing to part with Tom, Joe's pursuit of Lorna continues. In his dressing room before his pivotal bout with Lopez--hardly the time or place to be giving a fighter bad news--Lorna tells Joe what he has perhaps subconsciously known all along: "I haven't--the guts to--make a life with you."[63] This bit of information, augmented by the news that Tom had divorced his wife and married Lorna earlier that day, pumps extra adrenalin into the punches which prove to be fatal for Lopez.

Harlem has traditionally been pictured in drama and fiction as an exotic outpost of Manhattan which its denizens, the maids, porters, and servants to the downtown elite, magically transform into a romantic netherworld of nonstop parties; it is depicted as a place which moves to some mystical, ethnically-idiosyncratic beat to which only persons of African descent can mark time; it is portrayed as a sector of the city which, once the sun goes down, or the workweek ends, takes on the aspect of a tropical carnival ensconced in the concrete canyons of Manhattan. Using this typical depiction in plays and fiction as the sole reference point, one would never come in contact with one of the less colorful but more pervasive realities of Harlem--that it is a cauldron for a variety of social ills. That these urban maladies affect a huge number of black people has been glossed over by those authors who have historically romanticized Harlem, promoting the attitude that "yes, things are bad here, but the natives are always having so much fun"; that they have obviously discovered the necessary collective ego-defense mechanisms to combat the psychological stress. For the first time on the Broadway stage, the myth of Harlem as the haven for poor-but-happy Negroes

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is debunked in Golden Boy. Midway through the first act, Joe, his reputation as a boxer growing, decides to make a visit to his old neighborhood. Foreseeing the desertion of yet an-other Harlemite who has distinguished himself in the outside world, Joe's brother-in-law, and his childhood friends sing a sardonic ode to Harlem entitled "Don't Forget 127th Street." Their vision of the neighborhood is hardly the idealized one which theatre audiences had become accustomed to:

> Don't forget the cultural life on this here street--
> Richer than the outside world suspects!
> Hark! the cheerful patter of all the junkies' feet--
> And the soothing tones of Malcolm X!

Parodying an Ivy League glee club, they spell out Harlem:

> H is for the heroin they sell here--
> A is for the alleys where kids play--
> R is for the rats that run pell-mell here--
> L is for the landlords far away--
> E is for the endless clean-up projects--
> M is for the mouldy roofs above--
> Put them all together, they spell Harlem--
> The place that white folks--
> Think [my emphasis] we love![65]

Without resorting to an angry diatribe, or to something that more closely resembles a sociology lecture than a lyric, this song neatly and succinctly de-mythifies the Harlem seen from the romanticized, sentimentalized view of the cultural tourist.

Golden Boy, based on a critically-acclaimed drama, and with a libretto fashioned from that play by two accomplished dramatists, was exceptionally realistic--especially when compared to the other black musicals up to that time--and highly entertaining. The characters, their situations, and their emotions were as real as any up to that point in the black musical theatre; the lyrics and music were highly praised. According to the majority of the critics, the scenes and songs were well-juxtaposed around slickly-produced

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ensemble numbers and performed by a talented and attractive cast. The show featured that rare combination: an intelligently-crafted and well-integrated union of book, songs, and dances, to go along with the major "givens" of black musicals: an energetic cast of accomplished singers and dancers.

Golden Boy took a realistic, if somewhat cynical, look at one would-be interracial romance; one constantly got the feeling the machinations of this "almost" love affair was not, as in Kwamina, a metaphor to represent an allegorical pairing between two contrasting cultures, but simply the dramatization of the ill-fated attempt of two persons whose incongruent personalities and the compounding factor of racism precluded their getting together.

Those patrons who went to the show mainly to see Sammy Davis, Jr., received their money's worth; he appeared in practically every scene; he had four solo numbers, was involved in three duets, appeared in three production numbers, and, was, of course, in the climactic fight-ballet with Jaime Rogers. Golden Boy was a huge hit, running for 568 performances.

Hallelujah, Baby! [to be called Baby!] was the next in the trend of interracial romance musicals. Opening April 26, 1967, at the Martin Beck Theatre, its book was by Arthur Laurents, whose librettos for West Side Story (1956) and Gypsy (1959) had earned him significant critical praise. The lyrics were by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, the music by Jule Styne. Bert Shevelove directed and Kevin Carlisle choreographed.

The plot centered around a black entertainer, Georgina, played by Leslie Uggams, and the two men in her life: her black boyfriend, Clem, portrayed by Robert Hooks, and a young white man, Harvey, played by Allen Case, who, for the first half of the play, admires her from afar, but finally lets his attraction to her be known. The play begins shortly after the turn of the century, with Georgina explaining:

> Most people worry about the passing of time but not me. This show covers 60 years but I stay 25. . . . We start at

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> the turn of the century, go through the Twenties, Thirties, right on up to tonight.[66]

During each of the play's six scenes, Georgina, as an entertainer, takes on the predictable show-business jobs available to blacks. At the turn of the century she plays Topsy in a makeshift adaptation of Uncle Tom's Cabin. In the 1920s she is a Josephine Baker-type chanteuse in a Harlem cabaret where blacks can perform, cook, and wait on tables, but are not welcome as customers. She appears in a 1930s W.P.A. Federal Theatre production not unlike the Voodoo Macbeth, as one of the three witches. The 1940s finds Georgina as a World War II U.S.O entertainer; by the 1950s, she is a Lena Horne-type recording artist and nightclub star, who, in her rise in popularity has, to a large degree, abandoned her fellow African-Americans. In the play's final scene--the 1960s--she has made reparations with her people and rediscovered her cultural roots.

The reviewers' responses to the show were so varied as to make a critical consensus difficult. Walter Kerr, in disputing the play's relevancy, chided what he considered to be its "old-fashioned platitudinizing," adding:

> The musical . . . [which was] put together with the best intentions in the world is a course in Civics One when almost everyone in the world has already got to Civics Six.[67]

In perhaps the most scathing review, Martin Gottfried wrote that the premise "sounds like some television producer's silly idea for a silly program," and "the subject matter itself was hopelessly mistaken for the basis of a musical."[68] Gottfried was appalled by what he considered to be a vapid collective effort "despite the proven professionalism of nearly everyone involved" and criticized the show for its lack of truly black music.

However, John Chapman's review contrasted sharply with those of Gottfried and Kerr. He praised all aspects of the show, closing

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his critique with: "It has been a long time since I have seen as finely, as carefully wrought a musical."[69]

The tenor of the times dictated that the interracial romance angle in Baby! would have to be more vague than it was in Kwamina and No Strings--both of which, according to the critics, handled the issue vaguely enough, and Golden Boy, in which Joe Wellington and Lorna Moon harbored inclinations which were never consummated. By 1967, a vast number of blacks had embraced a more militant and separatist political stance than the generally-held view of the early half of the decide; many African-Americans construed the concept of an interracial romance as the rejection of the black race by the Negro person involved; the prospect of Georgina leaving her black boyfriend, Clem, for the white ne'er-do-well, Harvey, would have been taken as a racial insult by numerous persons of African descent. The possibility of Georgina doing that is broached; however, just as soon as the author of the book, Laurents, touches upon the subject, he appears to shy away from it. The most poignant "love" scene between Georgina and Harvey occurs in the 1930s segment, shortly after Georgina and Clem have a major argument over his having joined the Communist Party. He leaves; she tells him never to come back. Harvey, who until now had been admiring her from a distance, comes over to comfort her, and, doing so, kisses her impulsively. She is taken aback.

Georgina
You wouldn't have done that if I was white.

Harvey
If you were white, I would have done it sooner
(surprised)
I would've.

Georgina
Well, don't do it again, Harvey.

Harvey
I'm surprised I did it at all![70]

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They both express regret that it did take place and vow to never let it happen again.

One of the virtues of Baby! is that its characters do undergo a visible transformation throughout. In the first scene, Georgina is the typical naive show-business aspirant whose psyche is still unsullied by years of rejection, unemployment, and underemployment; in the Harlem cabaret scene she is a bit more polished, but still not sufficiently adept at fending off the racially-informed advances of an admiring Frenchman who persists in calling her an "an-ee-mal";[71] by the 1930s, she has become politically conscious to the point that, while performing in the parody of the Voodoo Macbeth, she and the two other "witches" sing their own ad-libbed agit-prop lyrics "like Calypso Andrews Sisters,"[72] much to the dismay of the director, who immediately fires them. In the 1940s scene, Georgina quits her job as a U.S.O. entertainer, rather than perform before segregated houses. Though success has caused her to forget her ethnic roots temporarily in the 1950s, the redeems herself in the subsequent decade by becoming a champion for civil rights.

Clem also shows substantial growth as the play progresses. In the first scene his occupation is that of a Pullman porter;[73] in the 1920s he has become a waiter in the posh nightclub in which Georgina performs; he does not become politically aware until the 1930s, when he changes into a staunch supporter of Communism; in the next decade he is transformed into a martinet of an army drill instructor, molding Black America's finest into fighting men. The discipline of the army and the political acuteness nurtured in his Communist days pay great dividends in the 1950s--by then Clem has become a prominent civil rights leader.

In the final two scenes, Georgina turns down a pair of seemingly half-hearted marriage proposals from Harvey; however, in the brief dialogue involving these proposals, little is made of race. Not only is the question of race played down, but the inherent dramatic possibilities in developing the love triangle go unrealized. Then again, one could not have separated the fact that the triangle involved two men, one white, the other black, vying for the hand of a

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black woman. Had the white character been triumphant, a heavily-symbolic message would have been sent out, a message which would not have gone unnoticed by blacks, and to say that some sort of repercussions would have been most likely instigated by some of the black pressure groups would not be too outrageous a conjecture. This was avoided, however, by Georgina's tentative decision to marry Clem as the play is winding to its end. Her indecisiveness has nothing to do with racial matters; she merely does not completely trust herself to make such a strong commitment as marriage, nor to Clem, a man whom she loves, but with whom she is not always emotionally and psychologically in synch.

Like No Strings, Baby!, in trying to offend no one, also failed to appease anyone on the sensitive issues which it touched upon but never fully developed. Like the earlier show, it proved to be fairly popular, but did not enjoy the runaway success of the former, lasting slightly more than half of No Strings' 580 performances.

The last Broadway musical built around the issue of interracial romance was Her First Roman. Based on George Bernard Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra, its book, lyrics, and music were written by Edwin Drake; Caesar was played by Richard Kiley and Cleopatra by Leslie Uggams, both veterans of the Broadway interracial romance arena. The show opened October 20, 1968, at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, was directed by Derek Goldby, and featured Claudia McNeill in the nonsinging role of Ftatateeta.

The reviews for the show were horrendous, ranging from negative to scathingly hostile. Of the major critics, only John Chapman of the Daily News refrained from unloading a barrage of sarcastic remarks; he praised the performances and the visual aspects of the show, but curiously evaded an overall assessment of the play.[74]

Chapman's colleagues were not so kind. Clive Barnes judged that since the libretto was taken almost verbatim from Shaw's play, the show's main faults stemmed from the music and lyrics.[75] He also felt the play was hampered by Drake's inability to make the necessary changes in style and tone from Shaw's drama to one which would be amenable to Broadway musical comedy audiences. Martin

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Gottfried complained that the show looked like a parody, and that he wished it had been a parody. He opined that the author, Drake, "is not yet up to Broadway hackwork"; he also disparaged the acting of Uggams and Kiley and added that Claudia McNeill "played Ftatateeta out of some jungle serial."[76]

It is debatable whether the historic Cleopatra was what would be considered in contemporary America as "black"; she has been portrayed by such white actresses as Claudette Colbert, Vivien Leigh, and Elizabeth Taylor; however, anyone who has ever visited Egypt knows the majority of that country's people would be mistaken for lightskinned American blacks or Hispanic mulattos in the United States. Perhaps the producers of Her First Roman were hoping the novelty of a black Cleopatra, in conjunction with the trend toward musicals with an interracial romance theme, would prove to be a box-office success. If so, they were ill-advised; the critically-lambasted musical adaptation of Shaw's classic managed just a two-week stay on Broadway.

The Gospel According to Langston Hughes

It is only fitting that Langston Hughes, who, by the early 1960s, had been an eminent author for over a third of a century, would be instrumental in the upsurge in black theatre. Although none of his three shows which would be produced professionally in New York in this era would enjoy a long, profitable run, two of them, Black Nativity and Jerico-Jim Crow, would serve as the prototype for two kinds of musical theatre which would prove later to be popular--the gospel musical and the black history pageant.

Though Hughes' personal attitude on religion wavered between agnosticism and atheism,[77] he, like any shrewd artist who sublimates his own views and tells his [targeted] audience what they want to hear, infused his 1960s works with gospel music. Taking note of the fact that many of the theatre parties for A Raisin in the Sun had been organized by church groups, and knowing that well-sung gospel has traditionally gotten a response from even the most cynical, nonreligious persons, Hughes built three consecutive theatre-pieces around that musical form in his later years.

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The first, Black Nativity, opened December 11, 1961, for a limited Christmas-season run at the 41st Street Theatre. Hughes' sliver of a book connected the two-dozen traditional songs. The first act, as the title implies, was about the birth of Jesus Christ, who, in this text, is black. The second act was "a twentieth century revival meeting"[78] and surely an excuse for Hughes to insert even more irresistibly rhythmic gospel tunes.

The show was directed by Vinnette Carroll and choreographed by Louis Johnson, two artists who would distinguish themselves over the coming decades. The cast was composed of the blind soloist, Princess Stewart, Marion Williams and the Stars of Faith, and Professor Alex Bradford and his Singers.

With the exception of Martin Gottfried of Women's Wear Daily,[79] who gave his usual sardonic--but unfailingly honest--review, the critics were delighted with the show, giving Hughes by far his best reviews to date from the white media. As would be the case with so many gospel musicals in the future, many of the critics questioned whether the show could be categorized as a play; Walter Kerr best summed up the opinion of many of his colleagues by stating it was not really a theatre-piece, but was in part a chorale and in part a concert.[80] Most of the critics praised the energy and exuberance of the cast. Jim O'Connor wrote:

> Gospel songs usually sound repetitious, but Miss Williams' quartet and Prof. Bradford's foursome worked in comedy and strutting steps that were amusing.[81]

Perhaps Whitney Bolton's quote best echoed the consensus:

> That there is more song than play is regrettable, but makes it none the less enjoyable. One feels at all times a surge and exaltation. The important thing here is not the event but the evocation.[82]

Those words could ring true for practically every gospel musical which has been presented since.

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Black Nativity, whose structure was informed by the use of traditional gospel songs linked to form a narrative of sorts, was the progenitor of such shows as Your Arms Too Short to Box With God (1976), Off-Off-Broadway's Mama, I Want to Sing (1983), and Truly Blessed (1990), to name but a few. In the latter shows, original songs would supplement the traditional tunes; the "book," though ostensibly written to provide a measure of cohesiveness, was generally an afterthought; the main purpose of the gospel musicals would be, as Bolton duly noted, to evoke the emotions of the viewers, not to titillate their intellect with any profound insights into the matter at hand, or foster any innovative narrative techniques for the musical theatre.

Though originally scheduled to run only until the week after Christmas, Black Nativity was extended until well into January, accumulating 57 performances.

Hughes returned with the more traditionally-structured musical drama, Tambourines to Glory [to be called Tambourines] in 1963. Like Simply Heavenly, it was based on a Hughes novel of the same name. Opening November 3, 1963, at the Little Theatre, the libretto was provided by Hughes; the songs consisted of a dozen traditional numbers, along with several original tunes with lyrics by Hughes and music by Jobe Hundley, the self-proclaimed "Broadway's first gospel composer."[83] Nick Psacharapolous was the director; the choral arrangements were by the gospel star, Clara Ward. The cast consisted of Louis Gossett as "Big-Eyed" Buddy Lomax, Rosetta Lenoir as the righteous Essie Mae Reed, Hilda Simms (of Anna Lucasta fame) as the beautiful charlatan, Laura Wright, and Micki Grant and Robert Guillaume as the young lovers, Marietta Reed and C. J. Moore.

The story is that of countless morality plays. Two middle-aged Harlem women, the staid Essie Mae Reed, a paragon of rectitude, and her friend and neighbor, Laura Wright, who looks and acts much younger than her years, decide to form their own church. Essie's intentions are honorable; Laura prefers being a minister to doing more secular and tedious work. Essie would rather conduct her church without the dilettantish Laura, but she needs Laura's

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charismatic style and physical attractiveness to supplement her own bland substantiveness. The combination of Laura's style and Essie's sub-stance soon results in them being one of the better "shows" on Harlem's "jackleg" street-corner preaching circuit. They then build their bank account to the point where they can rent their own church, which is--appropriately--a converted theatre.

A serpentine hustler type, "Big-Eyed" Buddy Lomax, appears and immediately appraises Laura as his next lover and provider. With Buddy's help in orchestrating the side schemes to boost the church's income--like selling "holy water," drawn from the kitchen-sink tap, for two dollars a bottle--the church rakes in a small fortune. Most of Laura's portion is spent on Buddy, but, true to his playboy nature, he soon tires of her, casting his sights on Gloria, a younger and fresher member of the congregation, and then on Marietta, Essie Mae's innocent, sixteen-year-old daughter who has just arrived from the South.

Predictably, Laura is the last to learn of Buddy's infidelity. When she confronts him about his spending her money on Gloria, an argument ensues; she stabs him with Essie's knife. She flees; moments later, when the body is discovered, it is determined the knife belongs to Essie; thus, Essie is arrested. However, Laura quickly confesses to the crime. Because it was deemed Laura was defending herself, she is given a relatively light sentence, and she becomes "the darling of the D.A.'s office"[84] because Buddy's death has put an end to a long investigation into a network of racketeering in Harlem for which Buddy was partly responsible.

The critics' comments read like a rehash of those from Hughes' 1950s musicals. They complained mostly of what they perceived to be a weak book with numerous underwritten, incomplete scenes. Many thought the story got in the way of the singing and that the show lacked unity in its point of view and tone, that it shifted from being a comedy to a melodrama to a morality play. The critics did, however, praise the play for being well-cast with a roster of talented and attractive performers. John Chapman wrote of the company that:

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> They sing magnificently--for they are mostly Negroes. It seems impossible for a Negro to sing badly, if you leave out one or two like Louis Armstrong. [sic][85]

Hughes, as he was wont to do, once again presented his story in the most simplistic, least thought-provoking terms, not giving his audience credit for being able to deal with a work of any discernable intellectual depth about black people. In the preface to the published text of the play he wrote that Tambourines:

> . . . is a fable, a folk ballad in stage form, told in broad and very simple terms--if you will, a comic strip, a cartoon . . . on the surface, a simple play about simple people.[86]

This aspect of the play was not lost upon Howard Taubman, who noted: "Its characterization is as casual as a comic strip."[87] Hughes further insulted his audience's ability to grasp the obvious when, in the prologue, he has Buddy Lomax tell the audience he is the Devil, rather than dramatize that fact throughout the play by means of the character's actions.

At first glance it appears Hughes was once more romanticizing the indigent and licentious element of the African-American race. The play opens with Essie, a decent but poor and somewhat resourceless woman, having been evicted from her apartment due to months of nonpayment of the rent, her possessions piled on the sidewalk. Laura appears, and immediately one sees she is a variation of Zarita from Simply Heavenly. She is drunk after a night of carousing, and is about to bed down with an escort until she changes her mind after speculating that perhaps the better part of his bankroll has already been spent. Laura and the man argue; she tells him: "Don't come back til payday"; when he does not leave quickly enough, she pulls "a pearl-handled switch-blade" knife, which, of course, hastens his exit. Laura then brags to Essie about her wanton sex life and how she cheats the welfare system.[88] It seems Hughes

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was trying to set some sort of record for the most negative images that could be crammed into one page of a text.

Hughes does make some improvements on his previous librettos, however, in Tambourines. He effectively dramatizes not only the motives behind Laura's--and Essie's--using religion for their own economic ends, but spells out in brief how these opportunities do fulfill a basic need in giving something to believe in for those who cannot believe in themselves. The steps the women take and the methods they use are shown in a logical and satisfying sequence--there are no gaping holes in the story-line or a set of unanswered questions of the sort which undermined Hughes' two 1950s musicals.

Moreover, Hughes offers numerous positive images to offset his anthology of negative characteristics of a black woman with which he opened the play in his depiction of Laura. The bitchy, scheming, and sluttish Laura is counterpointed by his portrayal of Essie as a truly righteous person who feels guilt over Laura's "show-business" approach to the ministry. Essie's daughter, Marietta, and Marietta's boyfriend, C. J., are wholesome youngsters who, although momentarily overcome by a flush of lust, hold their impulses in check and decide to wait until they are married before going to bed.

Sensitive to the years of accusations by critics that his works presented negative characterizations of the poor and unlearned element of the Negro race, Hughes offered an obvious disclaimer to these charges in Tambourines. He assured his audience that Harlem's population included not only the vice-ridden, but the virtuous as well. Hughes moralizes on the ghetto hustler element by means of the character C. J., who addresses Buddy:

> Harlem is a dream--the dream black folks dream way down in the deep south. And then they come here and sometimes its a nightmare, because men like you trick and betray them. You're related to the devil, Buddy, that's what.
>
> Buddy
> Ha-ha! How did you guess? Smart one, heh?

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C. J.
Harlem is full of good people, and people trying to be good, trying to get somewhere.[89]

C.J. then names various politicians and artists and "young people--like Marietta and me, even"[90] as examples.

Tambourines, as a morality play, is a marked improvement in Hughes' dealing with Harlem's historical image as an exotic outpost for "good-timing" and street-hustler types. In Simply Heavenly, he detailed the "rocks" his protagonist Simple would have to shatter if he were to grow as a person, yet all the while inadvertently romanticizing those "rocks" by means of his depiction of the sheer fun his characters were having with them. However, his intention in Tambourines was to show how the Buddies of Harlem are a negative influence on the community's well-being. At no time does he glorify Buddy's actions or methods; Hughes is consistent throughout in portraying Buddy as diabolical, albeit in an overly-simplified, self-admitted "cartoon"-ish fashion.

Despite Hughes' improved intentions and an arguably more adept command of musical-writing techniques, Tambourines never found an audience, closing after just 24 performances.

Jerico-Jim Crow [to be called to Crow] was the last musical show by Hughes to be mounted professionally in his lifetime. Produced by the Greenwich Players, in coordination with C.O.R.E., the N.A.A.C.P., and S.N.C.C., it was presented, symbolically, at the Sanctuary of the Village Presbyterian Church and Brotherhood Synagogue. Crow opened January 12, 1964--just seven weeks after the closing of Tambourines--and played on Saturday and Sunday evenings only.

Crow was co-directed by Alvin Ailey and William Hairston. Its format was similar to Black Nativity's--it consisted of vignettes from black history which were linked by 24 traditional songs, and two songs written by Hughes himself; Hughes also altered the lyrics of several songs in the public domain to suit his purposes.[91]

The male character ("The Boy") was played by Gilbert Price; his name was a conglomeration of those of such black historical figures

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as Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and others.[92] The major female role ("The Girl") was played by Hilda Harris; her name was a combination of famed black female freedom fighters such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Phillis Wheatley.[93]

A typical example of the show's structure is as follows: one of the characters delivers a brief speech about slave rebellions, then the old Negro spiritual "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jerico" is sung.[94] To add a bit of conflict to these abbreviated ersatz history lectures, a "Jim Crow" character appears throughout in classic racist guises--as a Ku Klux Klansman, a young backwoods tough, a "redneck" police officer, and a jailer. Despite all of Jim Crow's transgressions, The Boy writes Jim a letter in which he pardons Jim for all his past misdeeds, ending with "I know in the end you will become my brother, and we'll walk hand in hand someday."[95] The girl writes a similar letter to "Freedom." That ending seems hopelessly naive in today's racially-antagonistic society; even by the standards of its era it appears to have been rather pat, and once again points up Hughes' penchant for platitudes.

That fact was not lost upon Norman Nadel. He wrote:

> [Crow] faces two problems. One--which isn't anybody's fault--is the fact that the very people whom it should reach will stay away. Those who attend are already inclined toward integration or they wouldn't be there. So it isn't likely to markedly alter anyone's point of view. The other problem is its own deficiencies as a dramatic presentation.[96]

Gene Palatsky concurred with Nadel's latter judgment. "The thread of sorrowful vignettes barely holds the . . . program together in a theatrical sense," he wrote, adding that the play "tells us nothing that we don't already know about slavery."[97]

However, Palatsky and Nadel were the only critics who disliked the show. The remainder of the reviewers rated it from good to excellent, with Whitney Bolton giving it an unqualified rave,

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stating Gilbert Price possessed "the best Negro voice . . . since the early, much younger [Paul] Robeson."[98]

It should be noted that in the two shows which eschewed the traditional musical theatre devices of climactic plot and reasonably well-defined characters in the libretto, Hughes got his best reviews. Since Black Nativity and Crow were advertised as "song" plays, and not as typical "book" musicals, perhaps the critics readjusted their standards accordingly, and were not bothered by the stock allegorical figures and the "books" which merely functioned as verbal chains connecting the songs. Hughes' lifelong inability to delve beneath the surface was not as noticeable--or irritating to the critics--in Black Nativity and Crow as it was in Simply Heavenly, Tambourines, and The Barrier.

Having similar structural format and intentions to Duke Ellington's 1940s historical pageants, Jump For Joy and Black, Beige and Brown, it is ironic that Hughes' Crow, a much simpler and more modest piece, would reach the New York professional stage as a theatrical piece, while Ellington's more elaborate--and presumedly more slickly-crafted--shows never received a New York presentation.[99] Crow was the precursor to much later black history musical pageants as The Believers (1968) and Ododo (1970). Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death (1971), Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy (1972), and The Great MacDaddy (1974), with their episodic structure and use of dramatized musical vignettes from black life, history, and folklore, owe a certain debt to Crow.

However, the fine reviews for the show were not much of a help; Crow's Off-Broadway run lasted for only 31 showings.

Another of the early gospel musicals was Trumpets of the Lord, Vinnette Carroll's adaptation of James Weldon Johnson's 1937 opus, God's Trombones, which consisted of seven dramatized sermonettes to be delivered in the traditional black Southern Baptist revival-meeting style. Trumpets of the Lord [to be called Trumpets] opened December 22, 1963, at the Astor Place Theatre. Donald McKayle was the director; the sermonettes were delivered by Cicely Tyson, Al Freeman, Jr., and Lex Monson. The preachers' speeches were augmented by the traditional gospel tunes which the

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adapter, Carroll, had imposed upon the text. Theresa Merritt led the chorus and served as a soloist on several numbers.

The critics loved the show. It was becoming obvious that a well-sung evening of theatre centered around gospel music would have a hard time not pleasing the critics; the reviewers seemed to have altered their standards of judgment when dealing with a show advertised as a gospel musical; they did not expect to see much "drama," but they did expect to see uninhibited Negroes offering unrestrained gratitude in song to their Lord, and as long as the Negroes on stage did expertly what Negroes are supposed to do best --sing--then the critics, readjusted standards and all, would be satisfied.

In adapting the show, Carroll turned Johnson's ostensibly innocuous biblical sermons into a metaphor for the racial situation in the United States. As the Negro spirituals had traditionally featured a covert message to blacks that was meant to go undetected by whites, Carroll infused the show's songs and sermons with "messages" which were not too difficult to decipher. Playing upon the long-held notion that The Bible is self-contradictory in many instances and that its verses have been manipulated to both condone and condemn slavery and racial subjugation, Carroll called upon several passages from that book which related to the Negro's plight in America. The critic from the Village Voice took note of this, writing "This all-Negro company is using the gospel service to make a pitch for integration."[100] Martin Gottfried of Women's Wear Daily judged:

> . . . in the guise of an impeccably staged revival meeting it roars a savage warning to America's whites--'As ye sow, so shall ye reap.' If your skin is white it will crawl and if it is black it will bristle in agreement.[101]

Trumpets enjoyed a run of 160 performances. It was revived in April 1969, at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway. As is often the case when a modestly-produced Off-Broadway show moves to the higher-stakes Broadway arena, the critics were not as lenient

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with Trumpets' unpretentious, though highly-theatrical presentation of sermons and songs. The Broadway revival succumbed after one week.

Other Broadway and Off-Broadway Musicals

Several of the productions of the 1960s showed the influence of the form which introduced the black character to the musical stage--the minstrel show--either by recalling its structural format, or by parodying it, or both. Gentlemen, Be Seated, which opened October 10, 1963, for just three scheduled performances, as a trial presentation for possible inclusion as part of the New York City Opera's repertory, was a retelling of the events leading up to the Civil War in the form of a minstrel show. The libretto, by Jerome Moross and Edward Eager, was based upon actual persons and events. Eager supplied the lyrics and Moross composed the score. The cast included Dick Shawn as Mister Interlocutor, Avon Long as Mister Tambo, and Charles ("Cholly") Atkins, who is perhaps best known for choreographing the stage routines of the Motown Records singing groups, as Mister Bones.

The show was performed by a huge integrated cast, which sung 28 numbers. As for the unconventional melding of historical events and the traditional minstrel show format, Harold C. Schonberg's comment best summarizes the consensus of his peers.[102] As did most of the critics, he praised the strong minstrel show beginning, adding:

> . . . after the strong opening, most of the minstrel elements are dropped and what [the show] turns out to be is nothing more or less than a slick musical comedy.[103]

Despite all the time and energy the authors put into writing and researching the project, Gentlemen, Be Seated was not chosen as part of the New York City Opera's repertory, never returning after its three-performance appearance.

Ballad for Bimshire made a rather auspicious debut on October 15, 1963, at Off-Broadway's Mayfair Theatre. It was the flagship

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production for an integrated company known as the New Group, which had been established to promote meaningful black theatre and to "display the richness of Negro."[104] The creative staff consisted of such renowned artists as Ossie Davis, who co-produced the show and played a featured role; the playwright and black theatre historian, Loften Mitchell, who co-wrote the libretto with Irving Burgie, who was better known as "Lord Burgess," the popular Trinidadian calypso songwriter. Burgie wrote the songs; Ed Cambridge directed; Talley Beatty created the choreography.

Set in modern Trinidad--nicknamed "Bimshire" by the locals--the plot concerns a vacationing Harlem playboy type who falls in love with an island beauty. The critics excoriated the show. The almost unanimous decision on the libretto was that it was trite, weakly-crafted, and many of the reviewers expressed an inability to discern anything resembling a plot-line. Several mentioned that the appearance of Ossie Davis prevented the show from being a totally amateurish affair, with Martin Gottfried calling it "Amateur Night at the Apollo."[105]

The reviewers were also disappointed by the presentation of what they construed to be as stereotypical characters. In repeating the program note's information that the New Group's intention was "to display the richness of Negro culture," George Oppenheimer cited what he perceived to be an inept, stereotype-laden book and wrote: "Not for a moment do the characters display "the richness of Negro culture.' "[106] The artistic chasm between the New Group's theory and its practice was also noticed by Martin Gottfried, who stated:

> The play presents the Negro in exactly the stereotype that is to be avoided--sloppy, crude, silly, shiftless. His humor is portrayed as vulgar, his interests simple.[107]

Gottfried ended his review by opining that the play "does the Negro's cause no good."

Even in the hands of the most well-intentioned black writers, the colorful, recognizable characters with whom the masses of black audience members can identify will nonetheless give the

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appearance of being stereotypical if ineptly drawn. As was the case in some of Langston Hughes' works, the authors of Ballad For Bimshire did not assign their characters a set of individualistic attitudes, emotions, and personality quirks which can create uniqueness in the characters and lift them above the stereotypical. Ballad For Bimshire, though its box-office was bolstered by numerous theatre parties by black church and social organizations, could muster only 74 performances before closing; the New Group quickly faded into oblivion.

Cabin in the Sky was revived at the Greenwich Mews Theatre on January 21, 1964. Rosetta Lenoir played Petunia; Georgia Brown was played by the recording artist Ketty Lester, and the role of Little Joe was performed by Tony Middleton, the former lead singer of the street-corner harmony quintet, The Willows, one of the most influential and popular groups from the nascent days of rock 'n' roll.[108] Most of the critics felt the show was dated, but many noted that the book--which, as was pointed out in Chapter Eight, reeks of minstrelsy when read--was directed by Brian Shaw so that it had the appearance of being a folk operetta, rather than the Neo-Minstrel musical which Lynn Root's libretto suggests. The reviewers praised the performances, especially those of Lenoir, Lester, and Middleton. Some critics wondered why the show was being done in 1964; Martin Gottfried felt Cabin in the Sky was offensive when it was first done in 1940, and was even more so in 1964, in light of the current civil rights struggle,[109] as the African-American race was striving to put such unflattering images behind itself. Cabin's Off-Broadway revival lasted just six weeks.

Opening February 18, 1965, at the Gramercy Arts Theatre, Worlds of Oscar Brown was a "solo evening of songs, impressions and improvisations created and performed by Oscar Brown, Jr."[110] The composer and creator of somewhat offbeat songs and stories, the Chicago-based Brown's rather formidable Greenwich Village cult-following made up a major part of the audience in the show's 55-performance run.

Brown would return to the Off-Broadway scene almost five years later with Joy, a show he also created and directed, but this

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time he shared the stage with his wife, Jean Pace, and the singer Siruca, "an Albino Brazilian."[111] Most of the reviewers felt that Joy was a nightclub act masquerading as a musical; perhaps Clive Barnes of the Times best summed it up for his colleagues when he wrote "Joy is not a show for people who want a show, Joy is for people who want an experience."[112] He tempered his comments on the show by adding it was "a hell of a good cabaret." Joy proved to be a success, running for 208 performances after its January 27, 1970, debut at the New Theatre.

The Zulu and the Zayda [to be called Zayda], a play by Howard da Silva and Felix Leon, with a dozen folk songs by Harold Rome, opened at the Cort Theatre on November 10, 1965, its premiere delayed by one night due to the great electrical blackout which occurred on the East Coast. Based on a story by Dan Jacobson, the play was set in Johannesburg, South Africa, and told of the relationship between the sprightly Zayda, played by Menasha Skulnik, and Paulus, played by Louis Gossett, the "Zulu" of the title who, in the beginning, was the Zayda's personal servant, but, by the end, had become his best friend and more of a son to him than his own son, Harry. Of course, in South African's system of apartheid, this off-beat, ersatz father/son relationship between the tiny Jewish grandfather ["Zayda" means "grandfather" in Yiddish] and his black manservant flew in the face of accepted custom. Harry, who had hired Paulus initially, becomes jealous of the African's place in his father's heart and fires Paulus. The Zulu's absence triggers a series of psychosomatic illnesses in the Zayda, which are cured when Paulus is rehired. One critic called it "a sort of interracial Mutt and Jeff situation,"[113] while another wrote "it is the oldest boy-girl story in the business: [the Zayda] meets [the Zulu], [the Zayda] loses him and then gets him back."[114]

Though it was, like Lost in the Stars, set in Johannesburg, Zayda takes a much more lighthearted look at apartheid and its absurdities. Not only does the obvious mutual affection between the physically and racially disparate duo raise eyebrows on the streets, but a park attendant takes Paulus' pass for sitting with the Zayda on a "whites only" bench.[115] The Zayda follows Pauluson the Zulu's day off to a party at the house of Paulus' friends in a black

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"location"; the Africans are stunned to see the old white man, and are at first reluctant to allow him entrance, and for good reason: after the Zayda joins the party, the police intervene, arresting everyone present as the first act ends.[116]

The critical response was mixed. Adjectives such as "warm," "sentimental," and "compassionate" appeared in many of the reviews. Many of the critics thought that the play was charming but predictable. Most of them raved over Menasha Skulnik's performance. Several remarked that the show contained too many Yiddish "inside" jokes; Norman Nadel complained "it is pointed too much at one audience--a Jewish audience."[117] Martin Gottfried felt it was "a combination of Hadassah-N.A.A.C.P. luncheon speeches and in-the-lobby skits at a third-class Catskill resort."[118]

Rather than attempt to attack apartheid with metaphorical characters and situations and resounding rhetoric, the authors used the technique of merely presenting the aspects of that society as they existed and letting the conditions comment upon themselves. Regardless, one gets the impression that Zayda was not an anti-apartheid play per se, but the story of an unlikely friendship which was further complicated by the segregation within the South African society. Although unabashedly maudlin, the Zayda was never patronizing to Paulus in the negative sense of the word; Paulus' character was that of an honest, hard-working, intelligent, and quick-learning young man; the fact that the best job such a forthright young black man can get is as a caretaker to a white man is just one of several subtle comments the authors make on the inequities of apartheid.

The play, which featured both Yiddish folk tunes and traditional Zulu songs, lasted for a respectable run of 179 showings.

A Hand Is on the Gate opened at Broadway's Longacre Theatre for a limited run of 24 performances on September 21, 1966. Originally produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre in Central Park earlier that summer, it was an evening of blues and gospel singing, and dramatic readings from the fiction and poems of famous Negro writers. Roscoe Lee Browne arranged and directed the presentation which featured Leon Bibb, Gloria Foster,

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Moses Gunn, Ellen Holly, James Earl Jones, Josephine Premice, and Cicely Tyson. Selections were sung and read from the works of such great African-American authors and composers as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, W. C. Handy, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and the blues legend, Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter). Leon Bibb and Josephine Premice did the bulk of the solo singing, though they were joined in several songs by the multi-talented cast members. Almost antithetical to the standard Broadway entertainment, A Hand Is on the Gate offered an evening of well-packaged theatre which was educational, entertaining, and tastefully rendered by eight of the finest African-American theatre artists of the era.

Les Ballets Africains, which opened November 16, 1966, was "a collection of folk dances, songs and legends, with native instrumental music, from the Republic of Guinea."[119] Exposing Broadway audiences to West African culture, the show was "originally produced in Guinea and [was] on a 19-year [sic] world tour."[120] Performed in French, Les Ballets Africains was produced and directed by David H. McIlwaith and ran for 38 performances at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre before continuing on its lengthy world tour.

Like Cabin in the Sky, House of Flowers received an Off-Broadway revival, opening January 28. 1968, at the Theatre de Lys. Joseph Hardy directed; Talley Beatty choreographed; the cast included Josephine Premice as Madame Fleur, Novella Nelson as Madame Tango, Robert Jackson as Royal, Yolande Bavan as Ottilie, Hope Clark as Tulip and Thelma Oliver as Pansy. Five new songs were added; Capote's libretto was revised to show more of the relationship between the young couple, Royal and Ottilie, and Royal's grandmother, a second-rate voodoo woman, in their abode in the mountains.

The reviews for the 1968 revival mirrored those of the 1954 original. The critics loved the songs but hated the book. A major complaint from the reviewers was that the small stage at the Theatre de Lys undermined the presentation of a musical which had been written to be played on a huge Broadway stage. Surprisingly,

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in this late-1960s era of black militancy, there was no organized protest against the whores and other Exotic Primitive types who peopled this play. The 1968 edition could manage just 57 showings.

The new trend of presenting black history and culture as a theatrical collage which served as the structure for such 1960s shows as Jerico-Jim Crow, A Hand Is on the Gate and Les Ballets Africains spawned the most grandiose and popular musical black history pageant to date, The Believers. Opening May 9, 1968, at Off-Broadway's Garrick Theatre, its book was by Josephine Jackson and Joseph A. Walker. The lyrics and music were by Jackson, Walker, and several other contributors. Barbara Ann Teer, the founder and current artistic director of the National Black Theatre, was the director. An African-American theatre troupe known as Voices, Incorporated comprised the cast.

The Believers was a musical chronicle of the African-American experience, beginning in the pre-slavery days in Africa, journeying through the black American's centuries in bondage, and ending in the present day. "The show touches all bases,"[121] dramatizing the rape of Africa by European slave traders, blacks working the plantations of the Old South, the black church, the black migration from the South to the North, and the dreams of a rewarding life in the Harlems of the North which disintegrated upon the harsh reality of the hostile streets. The first act ends with the arrival of the Great Depression; the second act "deals with life among the children of the urban streets as they turn from innocents and marijuana-smoking to furious militants."[122]

From a brief look at the synopsis of The Believers, one could get the impression that the show was black nationalistic and militant, but in the eyes of many of the critics, it had more of the appearance of an old-fashioned folk epic than an angry theatrical statement at the height of the African-American's "militant" era. While citing what was perceived as a similarity amongst the songs and the didactic triteness of the lyrics, the reporter from Variety wrote that the show "more often [than not] fails to fulfill its potential," but, being ever aware of audience likes and dislikes,

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ended the review by predicting the show "might find a big audience."[123]

The critic from the Village Voice wrote that despite the show's ostensible nationalistic stance, "it seems exceedingly tame, almost Uncle Tomming in some of its attitudes," adding "there is an embarrassing resemblance to those folk-epics so popular in the 1940s."[124] Leo Mishkin also noted the play's similarity to folk opera.[125] Dan Sullivan of the New York Times noted how the authors used black stereotypes in the show, but added that they did so purposely, employing them gratuitously, as "tourist stuff."[126] Alan Bunce, of the Christian Science Monitor, commented on scenes which might have seemed stereotypical to the whites in the audience, but evoked "roars of recognition" from the black patrons in the house.[127]

The Believers, the critics' less-than-positive response notwithstanding, enjoyed a run of 310 performances, by far the longest to date of an Off-Broadway musical written by and about blacks. It is obvious the creators of The Believers located that nearly-impossible-to-find middle ground for black musicals--and plays--which attracts both black and white audiences without overtly catering to one while insulting the other. The show was "black" enough in its attitude and presentational style of dramatizing African-American history for the blacks in the audience, without alienating white patrons.

In addition, The Believers was instrumental in ushering in a musical format which would be used in such important and controversial black-written black musicals as Joseph A. Walker's own Ododo (1970), Melvin Van Peebles' pivotal Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death (1971), and Paul Carter Harrison's The Great MacDaddy (1974). Highly didactic in some parts, these shows, almost by necessity, eschewed the standard musical comedy and drama techniques and clichés of the expository unfolding of a chain of cause-and-effect events, replete with the protagonist, his antagonist, and the obligatory love interest. Instead, a style more akin to West African storytelling techniques is used, which, by European-American musical theatre standards, appears to be

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ramblingly episodic and not necessarily culminating in the Western theatre's definition of a "climax."[128]

Joseph A. Walker, Jr., the co-author of The Believers, would write two popular and controversial works for the Negro Ensemble Company: Ododo, and the multi-award-winning drama, The River Niger.

In the waning weeks of the 1960s, America could rest assured that the so-called black militants were not going to burn the country down, as they had promised in the mid-Sixties. America, as it has been historically wont to do with all new groups or subgroups, immediately created a new stereotype of the black revolutionaries--with more than a little help from the militants themselves. At first the most prevalent image of the black militant was merely an updated version of the Brute Negro, but as the decade came to a close, the caricature of the black revolutionary had softened to that of a posturing dilettante. On December 2, 1969, Buck White, a mild satire of this "paper tiger" federally-funded, so-called black militant arrived on Broadway. Based on white dramatist Joseph Tuotti's Off-Broadway comedy from the previous year, Big Time Buck White, the book, music, and lyrics were written by Oscar Brown, Jr., who also co-directed with his wife, Jean Pace. However, Buck White was produced primarily to serve as a starring vehicle for the deposed world heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali.

The first act of Buck White takes place in a local hall where five members of a "militant" organization known as B.A.D.--for Bad Allelujah Days--await the arrival of their leader, Buck White. The five men, while discussing ways to raise money for the organization, taunt each other and some audience plants. Each of these "leaders of a poverty group, living fairly highly on government money,"[129] performs what amounts to a vaudeville-like "schtick" before Buck's arrival.[130] Buck makes his grand entrance shortly before the end of Act One, chiding his cohorts on their clowning ways, and bringing a bit of order to the proceedings.

The second act was a showcase for Ali, as his character made speeches and sang songs about what the African-American would have to do to better his lot.

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In general, the critics disliked the show, but were enthralled by Ali's performance. Many expressed surprize over the fact that Ali did indeed possess a measure of singing and acting talent; however, any student of human nature could have surmised his outrageous antics while promoting his fights were pure theatre.[131] Most of the critics also felt that what they perceived as the sloppy and amateurish nature of the show was offset by Ali's presence and dignity. Many hinted that Ali's name had been exploited; Martin Gottfried compared Ali's venture on Broadway with the way prizefighters had been used on the vaudeville stage. Gottfried even went so far as to suggest that "Clay" had been reduced to a sideshow-like freak and compared his situation to that of Jack Johnson, the first black man to hold the heavyweight championship, who had been similarly stripped of his title and had descended to playing in a circus version of Uncle Tom's Cabin.[132] Gottfried was surely overstating the case; as a living symbol of black pride, Ali simply had too much ego to appear in any vehicle in which he would be denigrating himself, and, by extension, the African-American race.

In calling the musical a "garish, expensive, vaudeville-oriented show," Walter Kerr of the Times also mentioned the possible exploitation of "the champion of the dispossessed, the sincere and urgent Cassius Clay,"[133] but does not use the term "exploited" in a perjorative sense.

The fact that the so-called black militants could be the subject of a satire on the commercial musical stage suggests that Mainstream America no longer saw them as a threat. It is to be noted that the original play, Big Time Buck White which satirized the militants as pseudo-"boogeymen" was written by a white dramatist. That such racially-conscious black American celebrities as Muhammad Ali and Oscar Brown, Jr., would be part of the parody is a statement in itself. Buck White may have been created to exploit Ali's name and popularity, but he would not have been the first star from another field whose fame was used to attract crowds in the theatre or cinema houses. Furthermore, denied a license to box in the United States, and unable to leave the country

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for overseas bouts due to his pending draft trials, he had every right to work in whatever venue that he could.

Buck White gained instant credibility amongst black theatre-goers due to the casting of the unofficial prince of Black America, Muhammad Ali, in the title role. It was automatically assumed he would not be involved in any vehicle which denigrated blacks in any way. However, the hoped-for support from Ali's legion of boxing fans never materialized; Buck White could manage just seven performances on Broadway.

Sambo, subtitled "A nigguh opera with Motown sounds as told by the Supremes to Doris Day" [sic][134] opened at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre on December 21, 1969. Ron Stewart played the lead role, wrote the lyrics, and co-composed the music with Neal Tate. Camille Yarbrough and Hattie Winston were featured in the integrated cast.

Sambo, the protagonist, is a young "expressionistic black Everyman."[135] In his personal odyssey for knowledge of self he meets an array of allegorical antagonists who bear names which have been corrupted from those of fairy-tale personages, such as Little Boy Blue-White Liberal and Jack Horney. To attain his symbolic manhood, Sambo must traverse various jungles infested with a mixed-race chorus of tigers:

> The action consists of Sambo's resistance to such current social paths as drugs, Afro-Nationalism, religion, sex, astrology, war, education and finally, show biz, in favor of his own uncorrupted individuality and an insistence on making his own decisions.[136]

The response of the critics was, for the most part, unflattering. Most admitted they were confused by the show and unable to make much sense of it. Perhaps Martin Gottfried's comment spoke best for his colleagues.

> It is more of a concert than a stage work and is only occasionally interesting. You have no idea what is going on, because the lyrics don't really tell the story.[137]

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The critic from Variety gave the opera one of the few reviews which had anything remotely positive to say about it. In calling it "a pop opera about Negro individuality and independence" the critic judged it to be "perhaps the most sophisticated theatrical use of contemporary music since Hair."[138]

The black critic and dramatist, Larry Neal, who was hired by the New York Times to offer a second opinion on the black plays covered by the paper's first-string white critic, lambasted Sambo. In citing the show's subtitle, Neal complained that the music was closer to classic opera than to Motown. He added: "The ghost of Hair rides through this place, spewing 'hip' clichés of the Sixties." He ended his critique with: "We are being fed stale Papp, diluted black sound, frail choreography."[139] Leo Mishkin echoed the attitude of many of his colleagues when he wrote that the show

> . . . in the end emerges as a trick, a gimmick, a stunt to illustrate the already familiar theme that Black is Beautiful.[140]

By the end of the 1960s the reverse minstrel shows, historical pageants, and gospel shows had been done and redone to the point of cliché. Surely the creators of Sambo, in an effort to bring to the black musical theatre a fresh point of attack, saw the format of a black opera using familiar nursery rhymes and fairy-tale characters as quite unique. After all, one of the most insidiously anti-black images has been spread throughout the years by means of the seemingly innocuous tale about Little Black Sambo, who wants to do nothing more in life than devour monumental stacks of pancakes. Nursery rhymes are really diluted myths which have been reduced to the most simplistic terms. Obviously, the creators of Sambo had a unique approach to their dramatization of the racial issues of the day. However, they were unable to translate their unconventional ideas into something which could be universally understood and appreciated. Sambo lasted just 37 performances.

Billy Noname, with a book by the black playwright, William Wellington Mackey, songs by Johnny Brandon, direction by Lucia

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Victor, and choreography by Talley Beatty, opened Off-Broadway at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre on March 2, 1970. Like Jerico-Jim Crow, The Believers, and Sambo, Billy Noname was an allegorical, episodic excursion through the author's interpretation of "the black experience"; in this case the journey transpires "from when Joe Louis [became the] heavyweight champion, beyond the slaying of Martin Luther King and the lost hope for immediate integration."[141]

The critics, perhaps by now having grown tired of the story-line in which the black male protagonist embarks on an allegorical quest for manhood and self-knowledge, were unkind to yet another episodic black musical with vague echoes of The Odyssey, Candide, and Peer Gynt. The general opinion of the book was that it was trite, overlong, sprawling, and provided no new insights, that it merely re-hashed what black playwrights and librettists had been saying for the past few years. Johnny Brandon's melodies were judged by most to be fair, but the critics generally felt that his lyrics were muddled and hackneyed. The only universally positive notes sounded by the critics were on the performances of Donnie Burks in the title role, and that of Alan Weeks.

Daphne Kraft, in one of the show's few positive reviews, called it "an entertaining history lesson."[142] Clive Barnes, in judging it to be "uneven" and "a strange piece of work," complained that the book was "far too simplistic."[143] Martin Gottfried, who may have been as knowledgeable and insightful as the highly-esteemed Barnes, but nowhere near as diplomatic or tactful, did not cloak his loathing for Billy Noname, saying "it camps itself," and that it called upon all the "clichés of black-musicals-for-white-people." In citing the music, which he labeled as "sterile white," he charged: "There is nothing black about Billy Noname except for its company."[144]

If, as Gottfried suggested, Billy Noname was indeed a black show written for white audiences--keep in mind that the director and the composer/lyricist were white--then the show was surely an anomaly for this era, in which black shows were being written--in the Off-Broadway arena, at least--for black audiences. Perhaps the reverting to the black-show-for-white-audiences method was the

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show's gimmick or "hook." Regardless, Billy Noname could manage just 48 performances.

The plantation images and stereotypes, which had been lampooned by black playwrights and librettists to the point of cliche by the end of the 1960s, were initially parodied by a black dramatist on the commercial stage in Ossie Davis' comedy Purlie Victorious, a play which opened September 28, 1961, and ran for 261 performances on Broadway. The musical adaptation, entitled Purlie, made its debut March 15, 1970, at the Broadway Theatre. Davis co-authored the libretto with Peter Udell and Gary Geld; Udell supplied the lyrics and Geld composed the music. Philip Rose produced and directed the show.

Adhering closely to its source, Purlie is about Purlie Victorious, a self-described "new-fangled preacher-man," who returns to his home county in southern Georgia to issue a challenge to Ol' Cap'n Kotchipee, a white relic of the plantation days, to see who would "dominize this valley," Purlie or Ol' Cap'n. The ensuing comedic power struggle between the two, replete with all the plantation stereotypes, is a symbolic clash between the old, segregated South of the past, and the more racially-tolerant and integrated days of the future. As his surname foretells, Purlie ends up victorious, with his triumph being sealed by Ol' Cap'n's fatal heart attack.

For the most part, the critics praised the performances of Cleavon Little in the title role, Melba Moore as Lutiebelle Gussie Mae Jenkins, Sherman Hemsley as Purlie's "Uncle Tom"-ish brother, Gitlow, and the remainder of the cast. The songs were judged to be only fair. The majority of the reviews were favorable, with the all-important Times critic, Clive Barnes, giving it a rave:

> This is by far the most successful and richest of all black musicals, chiefly I think for the depth of the characterizations and the salty wit of the dialogue.[145]

The ever difficult-to-please Martin Gottfried took the opposite view from Barnes'. He began his review:

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> And we're still going to have to wait for the big black musical--the one that catapults all the muscle and anger and music and spirit and mood of modern black men into the theatre--and one written and composed and directed by black men [and not Porgy and Bess]--the one that finally gets it all out, and out of everybody's system.
>
> For now, it's going to be a long time sitting through the tries.[146]

Gottfried felt Purlie was nothing more than Davis' 1961 play with songs added to, rather than incorporated effectively into the text.

Despite the fact that by 1970 the technique of black authors inverting the negative stereotypes of blacks and re-incorporating them for their own ends, which was begun by Davis, had lost some of its freshness and sting, the humor in Purlie rang true. In staying close to Purlie Victorious, arguably one of the funniest plays in recent theatre history, the creators were wise; in using Davis to co-adapt his own play into the libretto, the producer ensured that Purlie would not be written from the point of view of a tourist's observations. This was authentic African-American humor, which was--and still is--rare on the commercial stage. Popular with black audiences, Purlie enjoyed a run of 688 performances on Broadway, which was followed by a profitable national tour. Due to its modest scenic requirements and relatively small cast, Purlie has been a staple in community theatres and university productions.

Although its structural format was but a slight variation on that of the standard musical revue, the subject matter of The Me Nobody Knows made it a rather innovative piece of theatre. The musical was based on a book of writings compiled from the poems, essays, and statements of New York City schoolchildren between the ages of seven and eighteen, most of them black and Hispanic. This book, bearing the same name of its musical adaptation, was conceived and edited by Stephen M. Joseph, who taught school in the Bronx. The musical version had no plot or story-line, but consisted of brief, spoken soliloquies and the poems and statements which had been converted into songs by the lyricist, Will Holt, and the

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composer, Gary William Friedman. The libretto was written by Stephen M. Joseph; the adaptation was conceived by Herb Schapiro. The ensemble cast of eight black youngsters and four whites included such future stars as Irene Cara and the late Northern J. Calloway, along with Hattie Winston and the recording artist Beverly Ann Bremers. The material covered in the show dealt with growing up economically disadvantaged in New York.

Most of the critics found the show to be honest, appealing, and charming; even the normally acrimonious John Simon of New York magazine gave it a positive review. The consensus of the critics was perhaps best summed up by Richard Watts of the Post:

> The 12 performers in it are so attractive and appealing, their depiction of the sad, brave lives of the young underprivileged in New York's ghetto is so filled with dauntless courage and even humor, and the entire show is so winning that I don't believe anyone would resist falling in love with it.[147]

The Me Nobody Knows originally opened at the Orpheum Theatre Off-Broadway on May 18, 1970, where it ran for 208 performances. Its popularity dictated a move to Broadway, where it opened at the Helen Hayes Theatre on December 18, 1970, and enjoyed a stay of 586 showings.

The Negro Ensemble Company Musicals

Due to the selection of plays which were produced in their initial season--1967-1968--the Negro Ensemble Company (N.E.C.) received quite a bit of criticism from some segments of the black artistic community. Not one of the four plays presented was by a living African-American dramatist; two were by the white authors Peter Weiss and Ray Lawler, one was by the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, and Daddy Goodness, the N.E.C.'s final offering in their maiden season, was by the late expatriate novelist Richard Wright, which Wright had in turn based on an obscure satire entitled Papa Bon Dieu, by the young French humorist Louis Sapin.[148]

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In its second season, the N.E.C. reversed this situation; with the exception of a one-act play by the black Trinidadian poet/playwright Derek Walcott, all of the plays presented by the N.E.C. were by living African-American authors. December 17, 1968, marked the debut of the first musical produced by this company: God is A (Guess What?), "a first play by Ray McIver, an Atlanta school teacher."[149] Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, who would become the unofficial composer-in-residence at the N.E.C., wrote the music; Michael Schultz directed.

The 90-minute, intermissionless show was a "combination minstrel show, morality play, nightclub revue and sermonette."[150] Like co-founder Douglass Turner Ward's Day of Absence, it reversed the minstrel show pattern, making the end men on the minstrel line a pair of whiteface-wearing, "slow-moving, no-'count Peckerwoods."[151] The story centers around the black Reverend Jim Johnson, a "noble Uncle Tom Type,"[152] who is about to be lynched by the end men, simply because they are in the mood to do so. The Reverend is saved, in an almost literally deus ex machina ploy, by God, who arrives with an eleventh-hour Eleventh Commandment: "Thou shalt not lynch Negroes."[153] By the time God appeared in this musical satire few people in the audience were surprized to learn He was indeed black.

Most of the reviews were guardedly positive; there were no ecstatic raves or excoriatingly negative appraisals of the play; most of the critics veered just slightly to the positive side of the middle ground. Most judged it to be a well-intended, witty satire whose attempts at humor connected more than they missed. Perkinson's music was lauded; as always, the critics heaped praise on the company's acting. God is A (Guess What?) ran for its scheduled 32 performances at the N.E.C.'s St. Mark's Playhouse.

The N.E.C.'s next musical production was presented a few months later, with the Trinidadian-born playwright/scholar Errol Hill's Man Better Man opening July 2, 1969, for a scheduled run of three weeks. Once again Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson provided the music; Douglass Turner Ward was the director.

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Set in Trinidad at the turn of the century, Man Better Man is the love story of Petite Belle Lily, played by Hattie Winston, and Tim Briscoe, played by David Downing. Tim wants to impress Lily by becoming a champion in the art of stick-fighting, a sport which was both popular and manhood-defining in Trinidad at that time. Tim goes to the local obeah man--voodoo doctor--for the magical potions needed to augment his combative skills. It becomes evident that the obeah man is a fake when Tim is soundly trounced by the local defending champion, but all ends well when Lily declares her love for Tim despite his inability to become a stick-fighting titleholder.

Many critics observed that, unlike other musicals set in the West Indies, the author knew of whence he wrote; Hill's authenticity was viewed as one of the show's most attractive features. However, the reviewers complained that the characters, though immediately recognizable by the West Indians in the audience, were nonetheless nothing more than stock figures. Many critics also felt that Perkinson's calypso score, as calypso scores are wont to do, in the opinion of many, became repetitious.

Richard Shepard of the Times gave it a rave review. Perhaps alluding to the fact that a majority of the black-written black musicals of the 1960s had eschewed the standard musical comedy format, he noted that the show was constructed "in the modern musical style, with the music tied to the book closely and appropriately." He added: "It has its own flavor, tangy and terse, brightly mounted in words, performance, costumes and setting." He also praised the author's "authentic folktale flavor . . . it is quaint, yet not condescending; ingenuous, yet not silly."[154]

Daphne Kraft of the Newark Evening News, in calling it "a good-natured fable" which was "a somewhat more authentically built House of Flowers" said that Man Better Man "isn't going to set the history of the musical on fire," but praised the performers and the total production.[155]

However, some critics broached the ever-sensitive subject of stereotyped characters in a black musical. Walter Kerr of the Times complained:

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> . . . the narrative doesn't hesitate for a second to employ ancient Negro stereotypes that in any other hand would be howled down as bigoted.[156]

Kerr refers to a scene which played upon the traditional Negroes-as-afraid-of-ghosts scene as a case in point.

Clayton Riley, who divided the New York Times' guest black reviewer's duties with Larry Neal, felt that, in a time when black pride and cultural awareness were at an apex, Man Better Man was politically and socially irrelevant. He questioned why the N.E.C. had

> found the time and energy to spend on a piece of work that speaks of no significant issue of the day and has, further, little to recommend it in terms of basic, albeit inconsequential entertainment value.[157]

Riley ended his very negative review by chiding the N.E.C. for what he considered as its "safety-first, inoffensive stance." Martin Gottfried ended his similarly hostile review in Women's Wear Daily with the curious remark that: "The money would have been better spent taking the company up to Harlem."[158]

Akokawe, which means "initiation" in Yoruba,[159] was the next musical presented by the N.E.C. It was done in conjunction with the six-member Mbari-Mbayo Players, which consisted of performers from Nigeria, Tanzania, the Union of South Africa--and three native New Yorkers[160]--and five members of the N.E.C.'s acting troupe. Opening June 4, 1970, Akokawe was a dramatized presentation of traditional and modern African writings. Conceived and directed by the Nigerian poet/director Afolabi Ajayi, the show featured traditional African songs and vignettes from African mythology and folklore.

"Warm," "unpretentious," and "educational" were adjectives which found their way into many reviews. Several members of the New York press likened the show more to an evening of culture than a theatrical presentation; Martin Gottfried compared it to several cultural events he had attended at the 92nd Street Young Men's

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Hebrew Association.[161] Gottfried also felt that the N.E.C. actors in the play appeared to be somewhat self-conscious when performing the African material.

Four months after Akokawe's 44-performance run had terminated, the N.E.C. would present the most controversial work to date in its brief history, Joseph A. Walker's musical black history pageant, Ododo. The word Ododo, like "Akokawe," was from the Yoruba language, meaning "truth." Opening November 24, 1970, it was written and directed by Walker; its music was composed and directed by Walker's wife, Dorothy Dinroe.

Unlike most shows done at the N.E.C., Ododo had its start elsewhere. It was first presented at Harlem's Afro-American Center,[162] then at the Henry Street Settlement, both times with Walker's group of young performers known as the "Demi-Gods."

Ododo covered basically the same territory as did Walker's The Believers, tracing the history of the African-American from slavery to the present. However, this time the tone was much harsher. Not only was the requisite outrage against whites for perpetrating the horrors of slavery upon blacks expressed, but Walker also targeted for his approbation the militant dilettantes, "overnight revolutionaries"[163] and black intellectuals whose stance had shifted from "Uncle-Tommish" to the proverbial "blacker than thou."[164] As had a number of shows produced previously by the N.E.C., such as Day of Absence and God is A (Guess What?), the structure of Ododo at times recalled "a minstrel show in reverse."[165]

The critics were almost unanimously taken aback that the N.E.C., which normally avoided the angry, "get whitey"-type plays which white audiences invariably found to be more amusing than threatening, would produce such a harshly militant play. Clive Barnes of the Times began his critique by contrasting the N.E.C.'s high regard by white reviewers and audiences to the preference of proletariat blacks for Robert Macbeth's New Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. He cited how the N.E.C.'s fourth season was dedicated to "Themes of the Black Struggle," and how this cosmetic change in attitude on the company's part represented an attempt to upgrade its relatively poor standing in the black community. Barnes wrote:

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> Reading the prospectus for the coming season, there can be little doubt . . . that if the [N.E.C.] was at some time situated in some cabin in the sky, it has now vacated it. It seems that it is going to be henceforward separatist, militant, and black.[166]

About the show itself, Barnes, ever a paragon of diplomacy, judged that:

> It was a very good show, but it was also militant, propagandistic and full of rhetoric. As a white man, I felt as appropriate to its private rituals as a Jew might have felt at a Nuremburg Rally, or even a Nazi at an unusually lively bar mitzvah.[167]

As for Walker's writing, Barnes opined that it was:

> . . . propaganda, but even then it is beautifully-written propaganda. And when he writes from the heart rather than the mind he conveys emotions that strike deeper than rhetoric.[168]

Barnes ended his review by admitting that if he had been black, he would have identified with the play, but added: "I did not enjoy Ododo because it is a purely racist show."

Dick Brukenfeld of the Village Voice disagreed wholeheartedly with Barnes. Describing himself as "white, Jewish, witty" and "perceptive," Brukenfeld called Ododo "a, warm, virile, life-affirming show." He refuted Barnes' charge that it was "racist" and wondered if he and Barnes had seen the same play. He felt Walker had shown objectivity in his "restrained version of black history" and had omitted the worst atrocities which had been perpetrated on African-Americans. Brukenfeld summarized his review of Ododo by writing:

> What Walker emphasizes is the growth of black consciousness, the story of a people becoming more in touch with themselves, more conscious of their identity

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> and dilemma. If this is racism, I'm afraid we need more of it.
>
> With a gorgeous sense of theatre, Walker blends myth and history, hope and self-criticism, harangue and humor into an incandescent mix of dance, drama and song.[169]

The ever-astute but venom-penned Martin Gottfried began his critique by writing that the N.E.C. had taken a step backward with its presentation of Ododo. He stated:

> It is amateur, it is trite, it is sloppy and, finally, it is Bo Jangle militance (going through the militant steps like an old-time tap dancer).[170]

Gottfried ended his grossly negative review by charging that Walker had stolen many of his vignettes from Leroi Jones' Slave Ship, Porgy and Bess, and "old South Sea Islands movies."

John Beaufort of the Christian Science Monitor compared Walker's polemic portrayals of "congenital genocidal" whites and "gallant, courageous . . . and noble" blacks to the facile characterizations associated with "old-fashioned melodrama."[171] He warned "sympathetically inclined whites who climb the long stairs of the St. Mark's Playhouse" that they would have to serve as "scapegoats" to the predominantly black audiences whose members could become somewhat agitated over the onstage proceedings.

Edward Sothern Hipp noted "the second half reaches a frenzied agit-prop form of theatre," but he tempered that remark by saying the play was "a vivid cavalcade of the Negro's march from the dawn of time, that it has one of the better scores on or off Broadway."[172] He also stated the ironic fact that such an "angry" and "ugly" play had been funded by major white corporations and influential private investors.

Operating under the expressed goal of presenting its audiences a wide spectrum of the experiences of peoples of African descent, the N.E.C. had done exactly that in its choice of the four musicals which it had produced between 1968 and 1970; each member of this

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quartet was different from the others in terms of theme, format, and point of view. The black musical, once the main venue for white producers to use while promoting the worst stereotypes of black people was, by 1970, being employed by the N.E.C. and independent producers on the Off-Broadway scene, to give black audiences works that bespoke of their proud heritage. Oddly enough, in the midst of all the outrage expressed by white critics over Ododo--or in the praise of it by Dick Brukenfeld and Leo Mishkin[173]--it was never noted that Ododo was, in a sense, an antidote to the decades of denigrating caricatures of the black race which had been portrayed on the musical stage. Ododo, a theatrical study in black history which was the recipient of some of the most acerbic adjectives that the white critics could use in family newspapers, would prove to be the penultimate show in a wave of black musicals which would bring the genre full cycle.

Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death

As were the characters in dozens of ghetto-set Broadway musicals, the denizens of the unnamed American inner city neighborhood in Melvin Van Peebles' Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death to be called Aint--Van Peebles eliminated the apostrophe] were a collection of pimps, whores, alcoholics, drug addicts, and unlearned poor black people. However, this is where the resemblance between Aint and such shows as Porgy and Bess, St. Louis Woman, and Sugar Hill ends.

Aint opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on October 21,1971. Van Peebles wrote the book, music, and lyrics; the director was Gilbert Moses. According to the author, the title came from an old African-American adage which decreed that "a slave ain't supposed to die a natural death."[174]

A bit of controversy has been raised over the show's original conception. It is agreed that the songs were from two late-1960s albums, Brer Soul and Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death, both written and performed by Van Peebles, but the basic form of the version of Aint which was produced on Broadway "came from all places, a student production of the material at Sacramento, Calif.,

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[sic] State College in March, 1971"[175] under the direction of Paul Carter Harrison, then a professor at that institution. Harrison felt that, regardless of the fact the songs were of Van Peebles' composition, he, Harrison, had organized the structure and story-line which had resulted in the Broadway production. The two men, despite being friends and mutual admirers, sued each other; years later they would reached an agreement.[176]

Melvin Van Peebles was born Melvin Peebles--he would add the "Van" in the embryonic days of his filmmaking career--in Chicago in 1932. He graduated from Ohio Wesleyan College in 1953 with a Bachelor of Arts in English, then, shortly after his commencement, enlisted for a three-year hitch in the Air Force. After his stint in the military he moved to San Francisco, where he became active in film production and worked at such civil service jobs as postal clerk and cable-car operator to support his wife and two infant children. Temporarily discouraged by the dearth of opportunities for blacks in the American filmmaking industry, he and his family moved to Holland in 1959, where he studied astronomy for a year at the University of Amsterdam. He relocated to Paris in 1960, minus his wife and children, where he survived as a street entertainer and gigolo, all the while trying to get into the French filmmakers' union. Finding a loophole which stated a published author could film his own book and thus gain admittance to the union, he wrote five novels, one of which was the widely-acclaimed Story of a Three-Day Pass.[177] As the director of the film version of this novel in 1966 he became "the first American Negro director of a film of feature length,"[178] even though it was made in France and financed by the French government.[179] Ironically, he and his film represented France at, of all places, the San Francisco Film Festival, in 1967.

In 1968, Van Peebles became the first black man to direct a feature film for a major Hollywood studio when he made Watermelon Man, which starred Godfrey Cambridge and Estelle Parsons, for Columbia Pictures. His next film, shot in 1970, changed the course of the history of blacks in Hollywood. Sweet Sweetback's Baaadasss Song [sic], a cultural phenomenon which could itself be the topic of a

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dissertation, was made on a paltry budget and had no proven box-office attractions amongst the cast, yet, despite subject matter that many blacks felt was objectionable, grossed over $20 million[180] and was given the credit--or blame--for starting the so-called "blaxploitation" film trend of the early and mid-1970s.

After having created enough outrage and having made sufficient money with his maverick project in Hollywood, Van Peebles next set his sights on Broadway. Sweetback had obviously been made with a certain shock and controversy factor built in; thus, it came as no big surprize when Aint revealed itself to be the most unconventional black musical to date on Broadway. Disdaining the standard narrative form for the commercial musical--there was no dialogue in Aint--the story was conveyed by means of 19 monologues which the actors chanted, spoke or shouted to the score, which consisted of jazz, rock 'n' roll, rhythm-and-blues, and blues tunes. Martin Gottfried wrote that the music was more of "a series of riffs rather than songs" and that Van Peebles had purposely avoided "cheering up" his audience by means of well-structured and well-sung melodies.[181]

Aint was strictly an ensemble piece; it featured no name "stars"; none of the monologue/songs were " 'production numbers' in the commonly accepted Broadway sense."[182]

Van Peebles goal was to debunk the historical Broadway musical's concept of Harlem and take an authentic look at the black characters who had been seen in countless shows in stereotypical renditions. In his show, the same types of characters who had tap danced their way across the pages of theatre history would literally turn on the audience in the very venue which had aided in the denigration of the black race. Van Peebles' black characters would be closely akin to the dice-shooting, razor-fighting, loose-living, gin-swilling stage Negroes of yesteryear, but would be drawn from the point of view of a young black man who knew their anger and frustrations first-hand. These ghetto denizens would not be stopping their "coon" activities at regular intervals to belt out a song or ease into a soft-shoe routine, a point which the reviewers and spectators readily picked up on.

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Douglas Watt, in calling it "a plotless musical portrait of the seamier side of today's black environment," felt it was reminiscent of Elmer Rice's Street Scene.[183] Time magazine's T. E. Kalem called it "a jumbled-up, quasi-Brechtian Harlem re-do of Elmer Rice's Street Scene."[184] Jack Kroll, the drama critic for Newsweek, wrote: "The overall effect of the show is that of a Threepenny Opera of the contemporary urban black."[185] However, these three critics--and other reviewers who made similar comments--missed the point when the tried to define Aint in terms of European and European-American standards and authors.

Richard Watts of the Post had a somewhat better grasp on the fact that Van Peebles had set out to demythify Broadway's conception of Harlem and its colorful inhabitants. He showed a bit more insight than the critics quoted in the previous paragraph when he wrote: "What [Van Peebles] is trying to do is show [that] the abominable slum conditions inevitably bring out the worst in people."[186] However, like many of his colleagues, he displayed a basic shortsightedness when it came to urban-dwelling African-Americans. He wrote:

> Yet in the early scenes the denizens of the black ghetto appear to be having a reasonably good time, although the men do have troubles with their recalcitrant women. Only a sadistic pimp who beats his girl seems to have a satisfactory sexual relationship.[187]

In citing the "reasonably good time" the characters were having, Watts seems to have thought that the people who lived in such neighborhoods would, in direct contrast to the childlike, carefree "coons" of Broadway musicals past, spend all 24 hours of every day of their existence with a "woe-is-me" attitude. He failed to recognize the fact that, as a defensive mechanism, people living in even the worst of conditions can find some sort of mental middle ground.

In a guardedly positive review, Clive Barnes of the Times showed he was aware of what Van Peebles was doing in his inversion of the Neo-Minstrel entertainments. Barnes wrote: "The

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idea is to offer a musical mosaic of the other side of Broadway's tracks" and that "Mr. Van Peebles' ghetto has no sweetness and no light. It is a tough place to spend an evening, even on a tourist jaunt." He admonished his readers that "Whites can only treat [Aint] as a journey to a foreign country, and on those terms I think it has the power to shock and excite."[188]

Van Peebles' unorthodox look at black life called for an equally unorthodox format. Without songs or dialogue, the show's episodic structure seemed to meander from one chanted/spoken/shouted monologue to the next, with no ostensible links. A continuity, however, was maintained by the set itself, and the recognizable characters who peopled "the block." The vignettes were the theatrical equivalent to the technique of jazz players "riffing"--in which one musician improvises a solo, and his band members back him up, likewise improvising, but not overshadowing the musician who is being featured at the moment. Van Peebles employed the episodic, seemingly rambling structure, which was popular in the Off-Broadway musical black history pageants, for the first time on the black Broadway stage in Aint.

Many of the dissenting critics of the show found this technique to be muddled, confusing, artless, and formless. Peter J. Rosenwald thought that it was "more a series of sketches than an integrated drama work."[189] Conversely, Martin Gottfried, who gave Aint a rave review, and obviously recognized it as the anti-Broadway musical that the author had intended it to be, called it "a tremendously innovative kind of musical, possessed of a style dictated by its content."[190]

In writing the show for and presenting it on Broadway, yet doing so in a manner which flew in the face of all the conventions of that venue, the question arose which audience Van Peebles was targeting. It must be remembered that blacks had made up an overwhelming portion of the audience that had made his film Sweetback the success which it was. Purlie, whose long Broadway run was ending at roughly the same time of Aint's debut, had perhaps more blacks in the audience than any other Broadway show since the days of the Williams & Walker Company operettas, once again dispelling

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the notion that blacks cannot and will not patronize Broadway. The audiences at Aint were likewise heavily black; both Richard Watts and Douglas Watt noted in their reviews that the show's climactic "I Put a Curse on You" monologue was defused by the fact that, though the character, played by Minnie Gentry, was invoking evil spirits against the whites in the house, there were many more African-Americans than the intended objects of the curse in the audience.

Henry Hewes, the reviewer for the Saturday Review, suggested that the play was strictly for black audiences, writing:

> It could move to Harlem's New Lafayette Theatre, where it probably could play many more months to black audiences and white theatregoers interested enough to make the journey uptown. Or it could move to the Negro Ensemble Company, where it would be supported by audiences that are mixed fairly evenly between blacks and nonblacks. Or the enterprising Joe Papp might find room for it at one of his four theatres.[191]

Although this could be construed as a thinly-veiled racist remark, Hewes did have a wisp of a point. Aint's structure and attitude were ostensibly more compatible with the more experimental Off-Broadway scene. Shows of a similarly angry and offbeat nature, such as The Blacks, Dutchman, Day of Absence, and The Believers had flourished there. However, in inverting the standard ghetto-set Broadway musical, Van Peebles had obviously adopted the stance of "beating whitey at his own game," and to do that, his inversion of the Broadway musical had to be presented on Broadway.

With the sudden upsurge in black theatre in the 1960s, it had become sadly obvious that some white critics were ill-equipped to judge some plays by blacks; a lot was inevitably lost by some white reviewers in the cultural translations; many of these writers, whether they were conscious of the fact or not, harbored racist views which precluded any honest assessment of the play at hand. As previously noted in this chapter, the New York Times had two black critics on staff to augment the reviews of Clive Barnes, the paper's first-string critic, and of Walter Kerr, who wrote critiques

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in the Sunday edition. As had been the case with the equally controversial Ododo, the critics for Aint tended to either love it or hate it; few, if any, of the reviewers took anything which resembled a neutral stance. More so than in most of the other shows, the knowledge of black culture on the part of the individual reviewers had a measure of effect on that critic's response. For instance, what many critics saw as a confused, rambling story-line, was construed by Martin Gottfried to be a cleverly-employed outgrowth of the African-American's rich oral tradition of storytelling. Richard Watts confessed: "I didn't like [Aint], but it may provide evidence for the contention that white critics are not properly equipped to review certain black dramas."[192] Similarly, Clive Barnes noted that Aint was one of the plays to which a white reviewer could not do justice.[193]

Van Peebles describes the stage setting thusly:

> The stage doesn't have curtains and the set hulks there, a multi-leveled composite of all the urban black reservations. It is scarred and comic, dangerous and tender, with things blending and shifting back and forth in an instant the way they do in reality; there's a car carcass and there are light bulbs, lampposts, signs, dark rooms, stoops, steps, corners, concrete crotches, whiskey bars and prison bars. It's the place black folks mean when they talk about the Block.[194]

In lieu of an overture, Van Peebles began his play with the orchestra playing "The Star Spangled Banner." He decreed: "The song is played straight, not jazzed up or solemned down, and the house lights stay up full so folks can make their statement and be seen and dig other people making theirs."[195]

Van Peebles parades his characters by means of having them grab streamers from an overhead maypole, then circle the stage, streamers still in hand, not unlike the animals and performers in a circus marching before their audience. Van Peebles' variations on all of the familiar ghetto types are present and accounted for--a blue-collar worker named Sunshine, the pimp and two of his women,

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Lilly and Big Titties; the junkie, the Tomboy, the flamboyant transvestite known as Funky Girl, a Drunk, a Blindman, the Postal Clerk, the Dyke, a basic unemployed but harmless ghetto youth named Junebug, and the Old Crazy Scavenger Lady, to name the more noticeable ones.

As these ghetto types circle the maypole, there is a certain intangible edge to them; the more perceptive audience members get the feeling that if any violence does break out on the stage, it will not be of the caricatured Porgy and Bess variety, but a reasonable replica of the brand which takes place in the real-life inner cities. Indeed, in the number "You Gotta Be Holding Out Five Dollars on Me," the Pimp, after accusing Big Titties of shortchanging him for that amount, gives her a beating, replete with not only the requisite stage punches, slaps, and kicks, but, as would a real-life pimp in a similar situation, tears her purse to shreds, then further humiliates her by snatching off her huge pink afro wig and yanking off parts of her clothes. However, Van Peebles adds touches to this scene which go beyond what most white librettists with a tourist's insights could have written: a white policeman ventures by to investigate the disturbance, but the Pimp, who is obviously paying the officer protection money, gives him the "okay" sign and recommences to beating Big Titties. The Postal Clerk, thinking that the beating has gone on long enough, waves a five-dollar bill in front of the Pimp's face, then drops it on the ground next to the prostrate whore. The Pimp, knowing that he is being "fronted"--that is, being shown up--by the Clerk, reverses the "front" by picking up the money, but, instead of putting it in his pocket, places it in the Blindman's cup. The Clerk immediately snatches his money back.

An author unfamiliar with the true-life counterparts to these characters would have ended the scene after a few perfunctory kicks from the Pimp; Van Peebles, by means of his demonstration of the five-dollar bill's journey, gave a brief insight into both the Pimp and the Postal Clerk.[196] Subtle moments like this abound throughout the text; little by little Van Peebles adds textures to his characters. Though by design, due to the nature of the play, he never actually develops any of his characters into full-fledged human beings, Van

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Peebles' stage personages are much better defined by their thoughts and actions than the "coons" of the Neo-Minstrel and similar enterainments.

Not only did Van Peebles treat his audience to gritty realism, but he imbued Aint with several bits of symbolism which, though at times were heavy-handed, were nonetheless effective. After the afore-mentioned beating, the Pimp, like any self-respecting ghetto pimp, makes his woman reaffirm her loyalty and subservience to him before the very audience which saw her absorb the pummeling. After reaching into her drawers and finally surrendering the disputed money, Big Titties crosses to a device that is basically a rickshaw, but has been remade by the set designer into a "Pimpmobile-cum-chronium-plated Chariot . . . and with one girl pulling and one pushing, Sweet Daddio rides off like a King."[197] The imagery of the two "stallions"--black slang at the time, meaning a tall, well-built woman--conveying the Pimp's vehicle as if they were dray horses, was at once simple and complex.

The reviewers who complained that there was no continuity in Aint were simply wrong. Two characters assert themselves--wordlessly--throughout. One is "The Man," a symbol of the white power which imposes itself on "urban black reservations." Near the beginning of the play, The Man, played by a black actor in a white mask, is the recipient of a daily roll of protection money from the Pimp; he reappears intermittently, gazing down from his perch as the ghetto dwellers go about their existences. The other pivotal character is the Old Crazy Scavenger Woman, who, during the course of the play, wanders about the stage, collecting garbage and rags, mumbling to herself, and oblivious to all activity around her.

Van Peebles describes The Man as "that immense grinning white head and huge white-gloved creature,"[198] an Angel of Death who has, unbeknownst to the ghetto dwellers whom he peers down upon, condemned the whole community to a collective spiritual death. Van Peebles describes how The Man has mounted

> the perch to view the spectators and make sure everything adheres to plan. . . . His victims have been

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> programmed well . . . each one probably thinks he is an individual, that he's doing his own thing, as he dances to the jerks of the Man's strings, turning his rage, desperation, shame, hate, and blues inward on himself and on his brother.[199]

The Man gets to demonstrate his power shortly thereafter. The Postal Clerk, after an argument with a white Merchant, returns with his rifle, and things appear to be getting ugly on the Block; the inhabitants are primed for an impromptu insurrection, but The Man "has an antidote for a half-ass nigger resurrection [sic]."[200] He simply grabs handfuls of money and drops them, letting the bills waft down to the would-be rioters, and "the black folks forget their destiny once again and start scrambling. They fight for the crumbs."[201] However, The Man is inexplicably absent when a brief looting spree does break out shortly thereafter.[202]

In de-romanticizing his characters, Van Peebles allowed their self-destructive and counterproductive activities to speak for themselves. However, he could not refrain from making a comment on the contemporary ghetto's variation on the "coon" character--the heroin addict, who is both a scourge to his community and a living example of black inferiority to those who believe in such a thing. As the Junkie goes into a "nod" while high on heroin, Van Peebles describes him as "the hip new city cousin of that old Uncle Tom . . . head scratching and shuffling."[203]

As would any clever writer who is going for shock effect, Van Peebles saved his most grotesque imagery for the latter part of the play. Three streetwalkers are patrolling the Block when two police officers, one black, the other white, swoop down on them. The two veterans, Big Titties and Lilly, escape, but Tomboy, who has recently been "turned out" by the Pimp, is caught. What had been an abandoned hulk of a car becomes a police car, and the two officers climb in with their handcuffed prey; the White Cop, Dave, is in the driver's seat, and the Black Cop is in the back with Tomboy.

It is the birthday of Salamaggi, one of the officers at the local precinct house, and Tomboy's inability to escape has made her the

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centerpiece for a surprize celebration in "Solly's" honor. The Black Cop revels in his power over the prostitute; drawing "his jeweled revolver," he slowly caresses her face with it, and then "he strokes her lips with his gun."[204] When she finally realizes she is to be gang-raped at the station house, she tries to escape again, but is beaten by the Black Cop, who then "continues [in] his friendly neighborhood priest's voice,"[205] to assure her she will have put herself in good standing at the precinct house by her participation in the orgy. Shortly after promising her that Salamaggi will have her first, the Black Cop reneges, forcing Tomboy to fellate him, while "Dave the White Cop is driving steadily . . . he catches the action through his mirror . . . he shivers a little."[206] The imagery of the rape is compounded by the fact that the Black Cop is, in a sense, pimping the black whore for several of his white superiors at the station house.

After he is finished, "the Colored Cop" [207] exchanges places with Dave, who "lays her across the back seat,"[208] as "the black guy feels proud at what he sees in the rearview mirror . . . white dick after black dick."[209] Even though "treating" the white officers with a black whore, the Black Cop feels he has done a revolutionary deed by having her first.

The wanton murder of Junebug, the archetypical school dropout and unemployable ghetto youth, sets the play's climax in motion. The two officers "call him over on G.P.,"[210] but instead of complying, Junebug breaks and runs. He is hit in the back by a gunshot, but keeps sprinting nonetheless, chanting his song:

> Come on feet cruise for me
> Trouble aint no place to be
> Come on feet do your thing.[211]

This is an obvious parody of the line uttered in countless plays and movies by the "coon" character who has just seen a ghost or is being chased by more corporeal entities: "Feets don't fails me now!"

Van Peebles uses the murder of Junebug and his slow death as a metaphor for the decaying American ghettoes. Though the wounded

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Junebug's flight is slowing because his life is ebbing away, he is under the delusion he is gaining ground on his pursuers:

> he thinks he is living, he thinks he has won, he hasnt figured out yet he's a goner, he thinks he has outrun the universe.[212]

Perhaps Van Peebles is equating Junebug's ignorance of the fact he is dying to the refusal of those in the crumbling inner cities to take whatever measures that are within their power to slowdown or even halt the demise of their communities.

The Block, which has been simmering for the latter third of the play, erupts into mayhem as its habitues react to the murder of Junebug. The Postal Clerk "snipers" one of the officers from a balcony, precipitating "a niggerquake,"[213] then:

> The Man steps in. Suddenly blinding lights flash on, cutting everything short . . .
>
> The light is harsh and horrifying, and the Block can be seen as a prison. High above the Block, the Man himself operates the main searchlight, he sweeps it back and forth across the camp grounds. The folks stagger around blinded and cowering. The Man reaches into his bag and tosses out the puppet strings.[214]

The erstwhile rioters grab a string, and the maypole-like device re-appears. "There's a whole transformation. Once someone has a string, he becomes calm and obedient."[215] As he had done earlier, The Man has squelched a riot and pacified the denizens of the Block with a minimum of effort . . . or so it seems. The Crazy Old Scavenger Woman, who had been collecting garbage throughout the play "pushes through the line of niggerots,"[216] gazes at Junebug's corpse, then glares at the "zombies in mid-cringe,"[217] then, her anger slowly building, begins her tirade against the whites in the audience, "her voice [coming] from somewhere most people have never been,"[218] chanting:

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Put a curse on you
May all your children end up junkies too
Yo mammy trick by the pound to buy that ounce
Yo young daughters give rich old dudes head in
limousines too
Put a curse on you
Put a curse on you
.....
Gonna fix it so your menfolk
Can't see no beauty in yo womenfolk too
So yo menfolks be boys to the man
And to yo womenfolk too
Im putting a curse on you
Im putting a curse on you[219]

She continues the curse, wishing upon the whites all the social ills that are commonplace in poor black communities. Somehow, her words have roused the inhabitants of the Block from their lethargic state, "The Block--Playground--Prison fades away and the line of ex-puppets advance on the world."[220] The play ends with the Block's dwellers joining the Crazy Old Lady in chanting her curse.

Though Van Peebles chides white racism for perpetrating its misdeeds upon the black race, he also chastises those African-Americans who are willing participants in their own debasement. It may have been this ambivalence on Van Peebles' part of assigning the blame for the conditions in the nation's ghettoes that led Richard Watts perhaps to overstate the case by remarking: "Possibly Mr. Van Peebles simply hates everybody. He certainly isn't sentimental about his characters."[221]

Some critics, such as Richard Watts, Jr., and Douglas Watt, dismissed Aint as the unstructured ramblings of an angry man, while Martin Gottfried judged it to be a landmark work in the history of black musicals. Having in past critiques wondered if the black musical would ever rise above the mediocre, catering-to-whites standard that had long since been in existence, Gottfried's search for an authentic black musical ended with Aint:

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> Melvin Van Peebles has finally done what was lying there, waiting to be done. He has taken the style, the music, the color, the accent, the very spirit of urban black ghetto existence. . . . And he has done it without creating some kind of freak show--the minstrel show with real black faces that is mainly what Broadway black theatre has been.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . The black theatre of our crude past was produced by white people, showing off the blackbirds, the black Mikado's, the Porgy's and Besses. The black theatre of today is little better, now created by black people but still essentially exhibitions of black bodies, black 'soul.' [Aint] is no defensive celebration, no new-style nigger show. Van Peebles has avoided every possible attractive presentation of black street culture. He has merely shown the truth.[222]

Perhaps black critic Clayton Riley wrote the most eloquent statement concerning the reaction of many white reviewers to both Van Peebles' attitude and mode of expression in Aint:

> What I think confounded the many reviewers was that Van Peebles has written a show in which the players, all of them Black, expressed themselves in deeply moved and moving terms to other Black people. Some White critics seem to have the continuing and rather paranoid impression that any expression of love that does not mention Whites specifically is in fact an expression of hatred toward them.[223]

Despite its anti-Broadway Establishment attitude and unconventional structure, Aint lasted for 325 performances on Broadway--far longer than many of the critics who gave it unfavorable reviews had predicted

1961 -1971: A Summary

Joseph A. Walker's Ododo and Van Peebles' Aint were the penultimate and final shows which, by 1971, 116 years after the first

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Negro minstrel troupes, had brought the black musical theatre full cycle. By 1971, the "Sambo," caricature from the earliest days of the African-American on the American stage, was, for all intents and purposes, dead. No producer in the commercial theatre would dare present any plays with characters or situations which could be construed as deprecatory to blacks. Even the exclusion of black characters could create a controversy and instigate a boycott--Subways Are For Sleeping, a late-1961 entry, was picketed by those who felt the show was an insult to blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities because all the subway riders in the play were white.

By this time honest black sentiments could be expressed in the shows; the characters could have a measure of depth and exist to do more than just entertain whites; musicals by, about, and for blacks, which dramatized black history, black culture--and, perhaps most importantly--black self-love and awareness--became commonplace on the Off-Broadway scene in the 1960s and early '70s. Formerly, "black" shows had been created to cater to white audiences; blacks were welcome at these shows, but could be subjected to insult by some of the imagery onstage; now, black musicals were targeted for black audiences, with whites welcome, but with the possibility they might feel insulted or threatened by the subject matter.

The biggest advance brought on by the upsurge in black musicals was arguably in the area of backstage talent. The 1940s and '50s featured a drought of blacks as directors, choreographers, com-posers, librettists, and musical directors; many blacks who served in these capacities between 1961 and 1971 such as the director/librettist Vinnette Carroll, choreographers Louis Johnson, Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty and Alvin Ailey, musical directors Neal Tate and Danny Holgate, and the composer/arranger Professor Alex Bradford honed their talents in Off-Broadway vehicles in the 1960s to prepare them for the long-running Broadway hits they would help create in the next decade.

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CHAPTER TEN ENDNOTES

[1]John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, p. 623.

[2]Kenneth B. Clark, "The Civil Rights Movement," The Negro Almanac, ed. by Talcott Person and Kenneth B. Clark (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 615.

[3]Augustus Law and Virgil A Clift, eds., The Encyclopedia of Black America (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), p. 262.

[4]Franklin, p. 635.

[5]James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), p. 523.

[6]Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America, p. 52.

[7]Ibid., p. 50.

[8]Beginning in the late 1980s, the term "African-American," which this writer feels is the most accurate phrase, is gaining popularity. As of this writing it appears to be surpassing the term "black" in its frequency of usage in the electronic and print media; much of this increased usage is a result of the efforts of the Reverend Jesse Jackson to make "African-American" the universal designation for Americans of black African descent.

[9]A popular joke concerning the current "in" minority group of the moment stated that in the 1950s, the Jewish "guy" got the girl, in the '60s the black "guy" got the girl, and in the feminist '70s, the girl got the girl.

[10]Among them were James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, Ethel Ayler, Helen Martin, Maya Angelou, Roscoe Lee Brown, Douglass Turner Ward, and Charles Gordone.

[11]John J. O'Connor, The Wall Street Journal, January 4, 1968.

[12]See: Camille and Other Plays, ed. by Stephen S. Stanton (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1957). An extended history on the

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phenomenon of the "well-made play" and an examination of that genre's structural requirements is detailed in the editor's "Introduction," from pp. vii to xix.

[13]Actually, the theme of interracial love was not so seriously taboo as long as the black male was punished for his partin the illicit union, or, if the black character involved was female, that it was made clear to the audience that the relationship would not be permanent.

[14]Richard Watts, Post, October 24, 1961.

[15]Herald-Tribune, October 24, 1961.

[16]To wit, the character of Jim Harris in Eugene O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings.

[17]Herald-Tribune, October 24, 1961.

[18]Variety, October 25, 1961.

[19]Jim O'Connor, Journal-American, February 2, 1962.

[20]Guy Savino, Newark Evening News, February 6, 1962.

[21]Personal interview with Dr. James V. Hatch, April 22, 1990.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27] February 21, 1962.

[28]February 6, 1962.

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[29] Post, February 6, 1962

[30] James V. Hatch and C. Bernard Jackson, Fly Blackbird, in The Black Teacher and the Dramatic Arts, ed. by William Reardon and Thomas Pauley (Westport, Connecticut: Negro University Press, 1970), pp. 142-145. Henceforth, all references and quotations from the play will be from this text. The text for the original Los Angeles production can be found in Black Theatre, U.S.A., but nothing from that text will be cited in this segment.

[31] Fly Blackbird, pp. 146-148.

[32] Ibid., p. 160.

[33] Ibid., p. 165.

[34] Ibid., pp. 186-188.

[35] Ibid., p. 202.

[36] Ibid., p. 207.

[37] Ibid., pp. 207-208.

[38] Ibid., pp. 214-216.

[39] Ibid., p. 217.

[40] Ibid., p. 221.

[41] Ibid., p. 222.

[42] Ibid., p. 223.

[43] Ibid., p. 227.

[44] Personal interview with Dr. James V. Hatch.

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[45]Samuel Taylor and Richard Rodgers, No Strings, p. 1-58. Prompter's typescript in the Billy Rose Collection, Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts, Restricted Material #2060.

[46]Ibid., p. 1-35.

[47]Ibid., p. 1-29.

[48]Ibid., "Author's Note."

[49]Ibid., p. 1-23.

[50]Ibid., p. 1-38.

[51]Ibid., p. 1-29.

[52]Ibid., p. 2-41.

[53]Ibid., p. 2-43.

[54]The theme of the sensitive soul who is forced into the vicious pugilistic world, which originated in Odets' 1937 Golden Boy, has, over the years, become so overworked to the point it is now a cliché in drama and cinema.

[55]Clifford Odets and William Gibson, Golden Boy (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p. 27.

[56]Ibid., p. 30.

[57]Ibid., p. 48.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Ibid., p. 70.

[61]Ibid., p. 72.

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[62]Ibid., pp. 85-86.

[63]Ibid., p. 113.

[64]Ibid., p. 55.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Arthur Laurents, Hallelujah, Baby!, p. 1-1. Typescript libretto in the Billy Rose Collection, Lincoln Center Library.

[67]Times, April 27, 1967.

[68]Women's Wear Daily, April 27, 1967.

[69]Daily News, April 27, 1967.

[70]Hallelujah, Baby!, p. 1-63.

[71]Ibid., p. 1-29.

[72]Ibid., p. 1-48.

[73]Let it be noted that the job of pullman porter at that time was one of the best available to black men. Not only were the tips substantial, but Pullman porters were the backbone of an underground economy, transporting goods between America's black communities, dealing in merchandise, legal and illegal. Many blacks who held advanced degrees worked as Pullman porters, partly because of their inability to find work in their areas of expertise due to racism, and partly because working on the railroads often proved to be more lucrative.

[74]October 21, 1968.

[75]Times, October 21, 1968.

[76]Women's Wear Daily, October 21, 1968.

[77]See Rampersad's two-volume biography of Hughes.

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[78]Walter Kerr, Herald-Tribune, December 12, 1961.

[79]December 12, 1961.

[80]Herald-Tribune, December 12, 1961.

[81]Journal-American, December 13, 1961.

[82]Morning Telegraph, December 25, 1961.

[83]John Chapman, Daily News, November 4, 1963.

[84]Langston Hughes, Tambourines to Glory, in Five Plays by Langston Hughes, p. 254. All subsequent references to the play will be from this text.

[85]Daily News, November 4, 1963.

[86]Tambourines to Glory, p. 184.

[87]Times, November 4, 1963.

[88]Tambourines to Glory, p. 191.

[89]Ibid., p. 233.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Jack Thompson, Journal-American, January 13, 1964.

[92]Langston Hughes, Jerico-Jim Crow, p. 1. Typescript libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library.

[93]Ibid., p. 2.

[94]Ibid., p. 7.

[95]Ibid., p. 28.

[96]World-Telegram & The Sun, January 13, 1964.

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[97]Newark Evening News, January 13, 1964.

[98]Morning Telegraph, January 13, 1964.

[99]Although, as previously mentioned in Chapter Eight, Black Beige and Brown was presented in a 57-minute concert version at various mid-Manhattan locales.

[100]January 2, 1964.

[101]Women's Wear Daily, December 23, 1963.

[102]Since the show was designated by its producers as an opera, the music critics of the New York daily newspapers covered it.

[103]Times, October, 11, 1963.

[104]George Oppenheimer, Newsday, October 16, 1963.

[105]Women's Wear Daily, October 16, 1963.

[106]Oppenheimer, October 16, 1963.

[107]Women's Wear Daily, October 16, 1963.

[108]The Willows' "Church Bells May Ring" an infectious and--for its time--technically superb million-selling record from the summer of 1956, is one of the earliest recordings which serves as a musical link on the evolutionary chain between rhythm-and-blues, and its offspring, rock 'n' roll.

[109]Women's Wear Daily, January 21, 1964.

[110]Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., ed., The Best Plays of 1964-1965 (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1965), p. 355.

[111]Richard Watts, Jr., Post, January 28, 1965.

[112]January 28, 1970.

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[113]Richard P. Cooke, Wall Street Journal, November 11, 1965.

[114]John McClain, Journal-American, November 11, 1965.

[115]Howard da Silva and Felix Leon, The Zulu and the Zayda, p. 1-28. Typescript libretto in the Billy Rose Collection at the Lincoln Center Library.

[116]Ibid., p. 1-47.

[117]World-Telegram & The Sun, November 11, 1965.

[118]Women's Wear Daily, November 11, 1965.

[119]Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., ed., The Best Plays of 1966-1967 (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1967), p. 369.

[120]Ibid.

[121]Jerry Talmer, Post, May 10, 1968.

[122]Ibid.

[123]May 29, 1968.

[124]May 29, 1968.

[125]Morning-Telegragh, May 11, 1968.

[126]May 10, 1968.

[127]May 20, 1968.

[128]See Paul Carter Harrison's The Drama of Nommo, and Kuntu Drama (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1974), also by Harrison.

[129]Edwin Newman, television review, WNBC-TV (Channel 4, New York), December 2, 1969.

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[130]Ibid.

[131]Ali, as a singer, had released his rendition of the Ben E. King classic "Stand By Me" in early 1964, concurrent with his taking of the world heavyweight boxing championship from Sonny Liston. The record sold fairly well, and, in this writer's opinion, Clay/Ali did a very professional job singing on the record.

[132]Women's Wear Daily, December 3, 1969.

[133]December 7, 1969.

[134]Larry Neal, "A Black View of Sambo," New York Times, January 11, 1970.

[135]Variety, December 31, 1969.

[136]Ibid.

[137]Women's Wear Daily, December 22, 1969.

[138]December 31, 1969.

[139]Larry Neal, "A Black View of Sambo."

[140]Morning-Telegraph, December 22, 1969.

[141]Clive Barnes, Times, March 3, 1970,

[142]Newark Evening News, March 3, 1970.

[143]Times, March 3, 1970.

[144]Women's Wear Daily, March 3, 1970.

[145]March 16, 1970.

[146]Women's Wear Daily, March 16, 1970.

[147]May 19, 1970.

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[148]Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, p. 444.

[149]James Davis, Daily News, December 18, 1968.

[150]Dan Sullivan, Times, December 18, 1968.

[151]Julius Novick, Village Voice, December 26, 1968.

[152]Jerry Talmer, Post, December 18, 1968.

[153]Daphne Kraft, Newark Evening News, December 18, 1968.

[154]July 3, 1969.

[155]July 3, 1969.

[156]July 13, 1969.

[157]July 13, 1969.

[158]July 3, 1969.

[159]Leo Mishkin, Morning-Telegraph, June 8, 1970.

[160]Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., ed., The Best Plays of 1969-1970 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970), p. 353.

[161]Women's Wear Daily, June 5, 1970.

[162]Edward Sothern Hipp, Newark Evening News, November 25, 1970.

[163]Ibid.

[164]Clive Barnes, Times, November 25, 1970.

[165]Marilyn Stasio, Cue, December 5, 1970.

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[166]November 25, 1970.

[167]Ibid.

[168]Ibid.

[169]December 3, 1970.

[170]Women's Wear Daily, November 27, 1970.

[171]December 7, 1970.

[172]Hipp, November 25, 1970.

[173]Morning-Telegraph, November 25, 1970.

[174]Lester Abelman, Daily News, September 24, 1971.

[175]Richard Hammler, Daily News, May 21, 1972.

[176]I learned this after asking Professor Harrison about this issue during the course of a casual conversation with Professor Harrison before a presentation of his play, The Death of Boogie Woogie, in November 1979, at the Richard Allen Center in New York City. I did not press him for any further details, nor did he offer any.

[177]All the biographical data in this paragraph up to this point is from an article by Richard Klein in People, February 2, 1982.

[178]Renata Adler, Times, July 9, 1968. Adler, in making this statement, was obviously unaware of the plethora of films made in the 1920s, '30s and '40s by Oscar Micheaux and other black independent filmmakers.

[179]Brad Darrach, Life, August 13, 1971.

[180]Robert Wahls, Daily News, November 28, 1971.

[181]Women's Wear Daily, October 22, 1971.

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[182]Peter J. Rosenwald, Wall Street Journal, October 22, 1971.

[183]Daily News, October 22, 1971.

[184]November 1, 1971.

[185]November 1, 1971.

[186]October 22, 1971.

[187]Ibid.

[188]October 22, 1971.

[189]Wall Street Journal, October 22, 1971.

[190]Women's Wear Daily, October 22, 1971.

[191]November 13, 1971.

[192]October 22, 1971.

[193]October 22, 1971.

[194]Melvin Van Peebles, Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 3-4.

[195]Ibid., p. 3.

[196]Ibid., p. 33-40

[197]Ibid., p. 40.

[198]Ibid., p.100.

[199]Ibid., p. 101.

[200]Ibid., p. 107.

[201]Ibid., p. 108.

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[202]Ibid., pp. 127-128.

[203]Ibid., p. 141.

[204]Ibid., p. 132.

[205]Ibid., p. 135.

[206]Ibid., p. 138.

[207]Ibid., p. 139.

[208]Ibid.

[209]Ibid., pp. 140-141.

[210]Ibid., p. 142.

[211]Ibid., p. 143.

[212]Ibid., pp. 146-147.

[213]Ibid., p. 150.

[214]Ibid., pp. 150-151.

[215]Ibid., p. 151.

[216]Ibid.

[217]Ibid., p. 152.

[218]Ibid.

[219]Ibid., p. 152-154.

[220]Ibid., p. 156.

[221]October 22, 1971.

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[222]Women's Wear Daily, October 22, 1971.

[223]Times, November 7, 1971.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

1971 - 1979: THE RETURN OF THE NEO-MINSTREL ENTERTAINMENTS?

The early 1970s appeared to be promising years for the continued improvement of the commercial black musical. African-American racial pride was at a high point; the first few years of the 1970s saw important productions by such black creative talent as Melvin Van Peebles, Micki Grant, Vinnette Carroll, and Paul Carter Harrison. Having in recent years accomplished the task of exposing its audience to authentic black history and culture, the next logical step for the black musical theatre was to tap into the rich vein of stories, folktales, and historical events from the African-American experience and shape them into well-crafted musical shows.

At this time, it was impossible to find a formula which would ensure success in the commercial musical arena. A myriad of traditionally-structured musicals had appeared and suffered swift demises, while such shows as Hair (1968), Your Own Thing (1968), The Me Nobody Knows (1970), Jesus Christ Superstar (1971), and Grease (1972) featured either an unconventional structure or delved into offbeat or controversial subject matter--by Broadway standards--yet enjoyed long runs despite their refusal to adhere to the commercial theatre's formulas. This embracing of the offbeat and unconventional augured well for the further creation of black-wrought shows.

Although the Broadway musical was, in general, experiencing a downward cycle in the early 1970s, the momentum from the popularity of black shows in the late-l960s enabled the creators of black musicals to look to the future with optimism.

The Broadway Book Shows

With the premiere of Dont Play Us Cheap [to be called Dont] on May 16, 1972, Melvin Van Peebles became the first--and as of this writing, the only--black author to have two musicals running simultaneously on Broadway. As he had done in Aint, Van Peebles eschewed the use of the apostrophe in the first word of the title;

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however, there the resemblance between the 1971 show and Dont ended. The former show was angry and unconventional; the latter conformed much closer to the traditional Broadway formula; it was simple, lighthearted, and inoffensive.

As he had done in Aint, Van Peebles served as the librettist, lyricist, composer, and producer for Dont, and added the task of directing it as well. In a reversal of the normal procedure, Van Peebles produced and filmed the motion-picture version of Dont before it was staged on Broadway, transporting both the Broadway cast and set to Santa Fe, New Mexico.[1]

Featured in the cast were Esther Rolle, Avon Long, Rhetta Hughes, and Mabel King. The story concerns a pair of playful imps from Hell who have ventured to the Harlem of the 1940s to disrupt a rent party. One of the imps appears in the form of a cockroach; the other materializes in the guise of a rat. Their mission is doomed when one of them falls in love with a pretty reveler at the party.

Most of the critics were surprized--and pleased--to see the lighthearted side of Van Peebles. Many felt he had spread himself too thinly by trying to undertake too many duties. Several complained that the book was loose-jointed and the songs were not effectively integrated with the libretto. Many were of the opinion that Van Peebles' directing was weak and uncertain.

In calling it a "20th-century Harlem morality play" Clive Barnes of the Times said that Dont had "the joyous air of a Saturday night block party." He pointed out that the show was all in fun and that it made no mention whatsoever of whites. However, once again the issue of negative stereotypes was raised. Barnes wrote:

> A lot of black people looking at his picture of black Saturday night Harlem society will see--with a recoil of horror--black stereotypes. Mr. Van Peebles sees, I suspect, only theatricalized humanity.[2]

Barnes, however, lets his readers know that Van Peebles was not reverting to old minstrel-informed formulas, as he ended his review by stating: "This is a black [my emphasis] musical."

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Brendan Gill of the New Yorker was not as kind, calling the play "a 1972 minstrel show."[3] John Simon was also acrimonious, dedicating the first third of his excoriating review to a personal attack on Van Peebles, whom he called "a black man of virtually no talent whatever (unless self-promotion be counted as one)."[4]

In his characterizations, Van Peebles was using the familiar, while, unlike Aint, refraining from making a serious comment on his characters and the situation he had put them in. The Broadway theatregoers appreciated the serious Van Peebles more than they did the frivolous one; at 164 performances, Dont's run was roughly half of the 325 showings registered by Aint.

Raisin, a musical based on Lorraine Hansberry's landmark play A Raisin in the Sun, opened October 18, 1973, at the 46th Street Theatre. The libretto was by Robert Nemiroff, the former husband of Lorraine Hansberry--who had died of cancer at age 35 in 1965--and Charlotte Zulthery. Robert Brittan wrote the lyrics; Judd Woldin supplied the music. Nemiroff produced the show; Donald McKayle was the director and choreographer. The cast included Joe Morton as Walter Lee Younger; Ernestine Jackson as his wife, Ruth; Debbie Allen as Walter Lee's younger sister, Beneatha; and, Virginia Capers as the grand matriarch of the family, Lena Younger. Ralph Carter and Ted Ross were also featured.

The book was faithful to its source, so it came as no surprize that most of the critics commented on how unusually well-developed the characters were for a musical. The libretto also was praised by the reviewers, which was a rarity for the black musical. The critiques were for the most part positive; all aspects of the show were praised, with the exception of the songs, which, in the consensus of the critics, were merely serviceable.

Raisin enjoyed a run of 847 performances, despite word-of-mouth indictments from many black theatregoers that the music for the show was strictly "white."[5] However, due to its solid characterizations and well-wrought libretto, Raisin must be given credit for the further improvement of the black book musical.

Dr. Jazz opened at the Winter Garden Theatre March 19, 1975. Buster Davis, who had worked on more than 25 Broadway musicals as

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a musical director or vocal arranger, was given credit for the book, and composed several original songs to go along with the traditional jazz tunes which were used in the score.[6] "The show [took] its title from an old King Oliver number with which it open[ed] and close[d]."[7] Donald McKayle was given credit in the program for directing and choreographing the show, although a note appeared on the program saying that the "entire production [was] supervised by John Berry."[8] The original librettist was Paul Carter Harrison, who was followed by Joseph Stein, and then Davis, the credited bookwriter.

The show, which starred Lola Falana, had personnel and financial troubles throughout its tryout period. It was about to close prior to its scheduled Broadway opening and, as George Oppenheimer reported, "only opened after a last-minute reprieve from a misguided backer."[9]

The play begins in Storyville, the notorious New Orleans "red-light" district, in 1917. Edna Mae Sheridan, played by Lola Falana, "arrives at her aunt's New Orleans bordello and meets 'Doctor Jazz'--a young white man who loves jazz but cannot play it on his big trumpet."[10] Doctor Jazz, played by Bobby Van, functions as "the advance man for the music itself,"[11] serving as the go-between for the black music and the white audience it needs if it is to be profitable. Doctor Jazz makes Edna Mae a star, and falls in love with her, but she marries her black piano-playing lover, Jonathan Jackson, played by Jack Landron.

The reviews were horrible. Most critics thought Davis' original songs paled in comparison with the jazz standards; the book was judged to be inept; many of the reviewers felt that McKayle's fine choreographing of the musical numbers was nullified by his poor staging of the book. Perhaps Marilyn Stasio best summed it up for her colleagues when she wrote: "Buster Davis tells his musical odyssey in a book that is mostly embarrassing and with a score that is mostly white."[12] Not finding the sociological overtones in the libretto that he was seeking, Emory Lewis complained:

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> This production takes a tourist's view of jazz. It completely glosses over the fierce racial hatreds of New Orleans in the days of Storyville.[13]

In calling it "a hackneyed backstage story of a girl who rises to stardom at the price of her happiness," Martin Gottfried wondered how the show would have fared if the producers had stayed with the initial script by Paul Carter Harrison, "who has a special flair for musical theatre."[14]

Dr. Jazz was yet another case in which a white writer was under the impression that he knew enough about African-Americans and their music to write a successful show about them and it. Davis' long list of credits as a musical director and vocal arranger suggests he is indeed knowledgeable in the field of music, but knowledge is one thing, and the ability to translate that knowledge into an evening of satisfying theatre is another. Davis was never heard from again on Broadway as a writer; Dr. Jazz closed after just five performances.

Treemonisha, the opera which Scott Joplin had tried to get produced in his later years, finally reached Broadway on October 21, 1975, opening at the Palace Theatre. First staged at Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1972, Treemonisha received its first professional production by the Houston Grand Opera in the spring of 1975. This presentation featured a dozen singers, a score of dancers, and a chorus of 26, and cost $150,000 to produce.[15]

The Broadway production was directed by Frank Corsaro, with Louis Johnson choreographing. The title role was played by Carmen Balthrop, who was called "a short-haired Joan of Arkansas" by Donal Henahan, the music critic for the Times.[16]

The story is set in post-Civil War Arkansas. A black female infant is found beneath a tree, and is thus named Treemonisha. The influential members of her community see to it that she is educated, so that she might return to that community and provide it with much-needed leadership. She does so, getting her schooling and returning to lead her people, despite the resistance of the local "conjure man."

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For the most part, the unusally-carefully-worded reviews were "kind" to the point of being patronizing. Only Martin Gottfried of the Post gave it a negative review,[17] with the other critics praising the show's charming simplicity and rustic, folk-like tone. Most gave Treemonisha its due credit for being one of the earliest native operas.

Because of the advancements which had been made in the crafting of librettos and the natural evolution of the American music idiom in the 70 years which had passed between Joplin's writing of the opera and its premiere, Treemonisha could only be judged as an historical work, and so it was looked upon by a majority of the critics and theatregoers. The show, originally scheduled for a four-week run at the Palace, was extended for two more weeks and moved to the Uris Theatre.

By the middle of the decade, which had started out with such promise for the black book musical, one could detect a certain regression. Symbolically enough, the first black book show after the pivotal Aint was a milder, less abrasive show by the same author. The next show, Raisin, though based on what many critics have judged to be the most perfectly-structured play in the canon of African-American theatre, was adapted for the musical stage by whites, with minimal creative input from African-American artists. Dr. Jazz was the imposing of a white writer's point of view upon a black situation and the co-opting of traditional jazz tunes. As well-intended as the producers of Treemonisha may have been, the show was a museum piece by a composer whom the Broadway musical establishment had shunned three generations ago. By mid-decade it appeared Broadway was beginning to revert to the policy of whites being involved in almost all of the creative tasks in black musicals.

Accompanying this regression, an old phenomenon was being recycled--the adapting of white stories into black musicals or casting formerly white shows with black performers. The 1930s and '40s were returning to Broadway.

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White Shows/Black Cast, Revisited

The Broadway musical, which had even in the best of economic times been a financial risk for investors, became even more so in the early 1970s. Production costs were rising steadily; the number of major daily newspapers in New York City had dwindled to three, giving the critics from the Times, the Daily News, and the Post--nicknamed "The Three Wise Men"--more influence over the theatre-going public by means of their critical responses in making a show a success or causing it to close. As a result, Broadway producers reverted to a much more conservative method of operation, many of them avoiding musical works of an experimental nature and adhering to the tried-and-true book musical formats and song-and-dance revues. The producers of black musicals on Broadway became especially conservative, reviving the technique of adapting white stories into black musicals, a practice which had been popular in the 1930s and '40s.

The first of the 1970s white story/black cast shows, The Wiz, was by far the most successful. Opening January 5, 1975, at the Majestic Theatre, its book was by William Brown, and its music and lyrics were by Charlie Smalls. Gilbert Moses was the show's original director, but was relieved of that position during the rehearsal period and replaced by Geoffrey Holder, who had been designing the costumes. The choreographer was George Faison; Ken Harper produced the show; with the exception of the librettist, Brown, all of the above-mentioned artists were black.

The Wiz was a loose adaptation of Frank Baum's classic, The Wizard of Oz. The character of Dorothy, played by the then fifteen-year-old Stephanie Mills, remained that of a naive farm girl from Kansas, but most of the other characters were changed into personages with whom the targeted black urban audience could readily identify. Baum's familiar Tin Man, Lion, Scarecrow, et. al., were now spouting "hip" black jargon full of references recognizable by black audiences.

In some ways Brown's libretto was as impressive as any which had been written by a white bookwriter for a black show. The dialogue in The Wiz had a decidedly African-American inflection, and

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Brown refrained from recreating unauthentic stage Negro dialect. The dialogue in The Wiz came fairly close to echoing contemporary black American speech patterns; however, not all of its authenticity can be attributed to Brown; much of it was ad-libbed or improvised by the cast during the rehearsal period.[18]

Brown managed to insert social relevancy into the book, without compromising its entertainment value. Several scenes could be viewed by black audiences as metaphors for the time in which they were living; perhaps the best example can be found in the scene in which a cluster of dancers representing poppy flowers surround Dorothy, the Lion, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow on their search for the Emerald City. Addeperle had warned Dorothy about the poppies in the field, telling her they would "put you to sleep for a hundred years."[19] Dorothy, remembering Addeperle's admonition, tells her cohorts: "We gotta get out of here."[20]

Scarecrow

Hold your nose!

Tin Man

Don't sniff the stuff![21]

All of them are able to escape from the field, with the exception of the Lion. "A Poppy blows dust in his face, and he is hooked."[22] The Lion then proceeds to bend over in the heroin addict's knee-dipping, shoulder-hunching "nod," replete with the addict's requisite scratching, sniffling, and slurring of words. He is then arrested by "The Mice Squad."[23] This vignette had special significance to urban black audiences, serving as a metaphor for those whose neighborhoods had been crippled by the heroin plague which had been infesting numerous African-American communities since the 1960s.

The title character serves, to a degree, as a parody of the myriad of fake messiahs, such as Father Divine and Daddy Grace, who have imposed themselves on black American communities throughout the twentieth century. Fittingly, the Wiz, played by Andre

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DeShields, sings his exit song, "Y'all Got It," shortly after delivering a brief, black Southern Baptist-style sermon.[24]

Unlike most black-themed musicals, the music in The Wiz was indisputably "black." It echoed the black popular music of the day as performed by such entertainers as The Stylistics, Roberta Flack, Al Green, The Jackson Five, and countless other "soul" artists. Songs like "Y'all Got It" and "Ease on Down the Road" came as close to authentic rhythm-and-blues as the commercial theatre could tolerate. Michael Feingold wrote: "It's the first time I have seen black music put to valid theatrical use on Broadway."[25] The show's score, by Charlie Smalls, a graduate of the Juilliard School of Music, who had a background in classical music, won the 1975 Antoinette Perry "Tony" Award for the Best Score in a Broadway Musical, and the 1976 Grammy Award for the Best Original Cast Album.

A certain theatre mythology has been generated over the years concerning the monumental popularity of The Wiz amongst black theatregoers, who supported the show in spite of less-than-glowing reviews from the afore-mentioned "Three Wise Men." Simply stated, the myth about The Wiz's so-called "resurrection" said that the show, after receiving excoriating reviews from the white media, was rescued by an avalanche of commercials in the black electronic and print media, and by word-of-mouth amongst black playgoers. The latter half of the statement is true; as for the alleged horrendous reviews, an examination of the critiques of the two writers from the Times, Clive Barnes and Walter Kerr, and the critic from the Post, Martin Gottfried, will show that their reviews were mixed. The most damaging assessment in one of the three major daily newspapers came from Rex Reed in the Sunday Daily News of January 19, 1975. Reed's attack was venomous, but he compromised his credibility by making the preposterous claim that the show condoned the use of hard drugs.

The reaction of the reviewers from the three major dailies was surely disappointing to all associated with The Wiz, but nowhere near as bad as the legend has it. Regardless, a notice was posted saying that the show would be closing after its second week; this prompted the blitz in the black newspapers and on the radio

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stations. Let it be noted that although the response from the three major dailies was, at best, tepid, the lesser critics, for the most part, gave The Wiz fine reviews.

The Amsterdam News, which has, generally speaking, given unilateral support throughout the years to most black-wrought plays and musicals attempting to succeed in the mainstream arena, ran a special editorial in response to "the establishment critics" and "their inability to objectively and accurately assess the innovative work" of The Wiz. The editorial then praised the show, ending with:

> This play is one which should be supported by the Black community since its demise may come as a result of the inability of the 'mainstream play killers' [quotes in original] to respond to a white story satirized by Blacks, produced by Blacks, sung by Blacks and seen predominantly by Blacks on opening night.[26]

The February 15, 1975, issue of the same newspaper mentioned the series of "champagne supper" after-the-show theatre parties hosted by "Sonny Bostic, the international party giver," and how the "modest charge of $25" at the parties hosted by Bostic had been--and as of that writing, were continuing to be--of great assistance "to the floundering musical." It also mentioned that a part of the contributions from the champagne suppers would be handed over to the United Negro College Fund.

The publicity blitz and theatre parties, coupled with word-of-mouth advertising worked; within weeks the show was not only no longer "floundering," but meeting its huge overhead. The Wiz proved to be a prime example of the power of black Broadway patrons. Of course, much of the credit for the success of the show must be given to the producers and creators. They took a story with proven universal appeal and adapted it to a black milieu, with a decidedly African-American inflection and attitudes, but without compromising those aspects of the show which appealed to all ethnic groups, elements which had made the story so popular. Whites could still relate to the show despite its obvious slant

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toward a black audience; surely many whites, like blacks, were attracted by its relative authenticity; this was one of the few times in a Broadway musical that black "culture" as seen on stage was not totally counterfeit.

The Wiz was the most popular musical to that time among black audiences. Geared toward a black audience, yet taking care not to make it so "black" that white theatregoers would find it too ethnocentric, The Wiz was a fast-moving, slickly-packaged, well-scored vehicle which served as a model for the new wave of black shows which were modeled on white sources. It would enjoy a run of 1,672 performances, would have several national companies on the road simultaneously, one of which would return to Broadway in 1986 for 13 showings.

A black version of Hello, Dolly! had its second Broadway incarnation beginning November 6, 1975, for a six-week engagement at the Minskoff Theatre. With Pearl Bailey once again essaying the title role, and co-starring Billy Daniels, this edition differed from its 1967 model inasmuch as the earlier show had been all-black, while the latter offering was integrated. This fact pleased Martin Gottfried, who, in calling it "admirably interracial," stated that the addition of white performers had precluded it from being "the segregated, modern day minstrel show that Pearl Bailey's original Hello, Dolly! was."[27]

This presentation was a farewell engagement for Bailey, who had announced she would curtail her performing thereafter, and would subsequently limit herself to charity appearances in schools, hospitals, and similar institutions. Her altruistic intentions notwithstanding, the press was not kind to Bailey's last Broadway engagement. The critics complained about what they perceived as the show's poor production values, the lackluster performances from the principals, and the unimaginative directing by Lucia Victor.

While hoping to follow in the wake of The Wiz, the producers of Hello, Dolly! surely assumed that Bailey's legion of supporters would turn out in droves to see her in her announced farewell engagement. However, the envisioned huge crowds never materialized. The presentation played the scheduled six weeks, but

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the hoped-for extension did not happen. Perhaps the show fell victim in part to the normal drop-off in business which the theatre undergoes each year around the Christmas holidays.

Guys and Dolls was the next show originally written for a white cast to receive an all-black production. Based on stories and characters by Damon Runyon, Guys and Dolls, with a book by Jo Sperling and Abe Burrows, and songs by Frank Loesser, was the tale of a group of Times Square hustlers and gamblers. The original production, which opened November 24, 1950, ran for 1,200 performances, and was the basis for a popular 1954 motion-picture version which starred Marlon Brando, Jean Simmons, and Frank Sinatra.

The all-black edition opened July 21, 1976, at the Broadway Theatre, under the direction of Billy Wilson, who also choreographed. In the leading roles were James Randolph as Sky Masterson, Ernestine Jackson as Sarah Brown, Robert Guillaume as Nathan Detroit, and Norma Donaldson as Adelaide.

Since the merits of the already highly-lauded book and score were not at issue on the 1976 revival, most of the critics dealt with the fact that the play, which had been written with a discernibly Jewish-American flavor, was now being performed by an African-American cast. Before viewing this revival, the critics were waiting to see if the all-black company would play the libretto and songs straight, or if they would impose their own African-American inflections and physical movements onto the proceedings.

For a majority of the reviewers, the melding of black performers into a script and score which had been written a quarter of a century ago, and with a Jewish consciousness, simply did not work. Perhaps Howard Kissel's comment best sums up the collective opinion of his colleagues: "For the most part the production seems [to be] an uneasy compromise."[28] Many critics went to the show wondering of a "hip" contemporary black consciousness and flavor would be imposed upon the text, including Ernest Leogrande of the Daily News, who admitted that, to him, the idea of an all-black Guys and Dolls "immediately create[d] a picture . . . of a disco-ized evening subtitled Cats and Chicks."[29] Leogrande also mentioned that a suggestion of "Shaft" or "Superfly" was dropped into the arrangement of the

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music, adding: " 'Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat' turns into a real gospel number, a hallelujah chorus."[30]

Martin Gottfried of the Post noted that "the songs, the jokes and the dialogue that create the show's very nature are Jewish through and through" and that the black cast's interpretation of them were totally incongruous.[31] John S. Cooper wrote: "There is a faintly distasteful 'Amos 'n' Andy' flavor to the performance."[32] Wary of what type of unlikely coupling might follow in the new white show/black cast trend, Cooper ended his review by writing:

> But one hesitates being too praiseful of these fine performers for fear the next thing you know they'll all be consigned to something like an all-black My Fair Lady.[33]

Cooper's quote is indicative of the fact that the critics were noting, with a bit of dismay, the cessation of the development of the black musical which had begun in the 1960s, and that creativity and honest black self-expression in the musical theatre were once again giving way to sterile and imitative commercial imperatives. The all-black Guys and Dolls managed 239 performances.

Labeled by Douglas Watt as "the latest of Broadway's musical hand-me-downs, another all-black version of a formerly all-white show,"[34] Timbuktu!, a recreation of Kismet, opened March 1, 1978, at the Mark Hellinger Theatre. Kismet, which opened December 8, 1953, for a run of 583 showings, was reset by its librettist, Luther Davis, to 1361 in the West African center of learning and industry, Timbuktu. The show's score was given an African folk music inflection.

Starring Eartha Kitt, Ira Hawkins, Melba Moore, and Gilbert Price, Timbuktu! was directed and choreographed by Geoffrey Holder, who also designed the costumes.

The critics, who were by now tired of the lack of creativity in the musical theatre in general, and in black shows in particular, lambasted Timbuktu! Even the performances of the actors were excoriated, which was a rarity for black musicals. Many critics felt Holder had created a dazzling array of sets and costumes to

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overcompensate for a lack of substance in other areas of the production. Several reviewers thought it had been a bad idea to make Kismet into an all-black show in the first place, including Douglas Watt, who called it a "soggy rehash" of a show which was "itself a humdrum musical."[35] Howard Kissel's assessment aptly echoed the sentiments of his fellow reviewers:

> The current production has reduced both book and score to rubble, in conception as well as execution. Everything about the production is disastrous.[36]

Timbuktu! became of the few shows in fairly recent theatre history which did not succumb immediately to horrendous reviews. Taking into consideration the negative reaction from the critics and the show's monumental overhead which had been brought about by the high salaries of its stars and the elaborate sets and costumes, Timbuktu!'s run of 221 performances was rather remarkable and served as proof that there remained an audience for black musicals which would patronize a show regardless of that show's artistic merits.[37]

The July, 31, 1979, premiere of But Never Jam Today represented the culmination of a decade-long quest for Vinnette Carroll to stage her adaptation of Lewis J. Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. She had begun developing the show in 1968, as a workshop production for her Urban Arts Corps.[38] But Never Jam Today [to be called Jam] was a remake of Alice, an ill-fated vehicle which had been produced the previous year by Mike Nichols, with a book by Vinnette Carroll and songs by Micki Grant, and had closed in Philadelphia in June 1978, prior to its scheduled Broadway opening.

Jam's libretto was by Vinnette Carroll and Bob Larimer; the lyrics were by Larimer; the music was composed by Larimer and Bert Keyes, an arranger and composer who had been responsible for several rhythm-and-blues classics of the two previous decades.

The show's structure can best be described with this quote from Mel Gussow of the Times:

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> Vinnette Carroll's homespun black musical version of [the two afore-mentioned stories] . . . is very freely adapted from Lewis Carroll. The show uses many of his characters, extracts large sections from the text, but is a rabbit's hole away from the spirit and humor of the original. The show is more in the nature of a takeoff than a tribute.[39]

Gussow also noted: "The music is an eclectic mixture of blues, ballads, calypso, and rock, with even a few bars of boogie-woogie."[40]

The consensus of the critics was that the book, music, lyrics, and choreography were mediocre. Most praised the performances of Marilyn Winbush as Alice and Lynne Thigpen as Persona Non Grata. Several critics raised the question of the relevancy of the Lewis Carroll stories being adapted into a black musical by one of the theatre's most talented artists.

Some reviewers once again decried the reinstituted policy of black shows being made from white original works. In opining that "the long travail" of the show "was hardly worth all the effort," Douglas Watt added:

> I hope it marks the end to the chapter of jivey black musical versions of white classics, whether for children or not, and that the black musical theatre turn its attention to subjects worthy of its great resources.[41]

Jam lasted but one week at the Longacre Theatre. The normally inventive Vinnette Carroll had uncharacteristically bowed to the current commercial imperatives and was unable to find an audience for the work.

The last black musical of the 1970s which was based on a white classic was Comin' Uptown, a show derived from Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Opening December 20, 1979, at the Winter Garden Theatre, the book was by Philip Rose and Peter Udell; the lyrics were by Udell; Garry Sherman composed the music. The

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cast included Gregory Hines as Scrooge, Kevin Babb as Tiny Tim, and Larry Marshall, Esther Marro, Tiger Haynes and Loretta Devine in featured roles. Dickens' story was reset in modern times, with Scrooge portrayed as a Harlem "slumlord."

The consensus of the critics was that the book was fair, but the songs were substandard for Broadway. Most of the reviewers compared it unfavorably to The Wiz. Many critics questioned why so much money had been spent on a season-oriented production; they felt the producers should have known that business would fall off after Christmas. The critics, for the most part, praised the performances of the cast, especially that of Gregory Hines. The show played into mid-January, totaling 45 performances.

Although not a musical based on a white classic, A Broadway Musical is included in this section because, while its intentions were to satirize the trend of untalented "hack" writers ineptly crafting "black" musicals simply because black shows were popular at the moment, it fell victim to the very same pitfalls which it had intended to parody, thus becoming a bizarre and inadvertent case of hackwork imitating hackwork.

Opening December 21, 1978, at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, this Broadway musical about the making of a Broadway musical had a book by William Brown, who had success with The Wiz, music by Charles Strouse and lyrics by Lee Adams. Gower Champion was listed as the director, but, according to Mel Gussow of the Times, Champion was merely "called in for repairs."[42] Featured in the cast were Jackee Harry, Larry Marshall, and Loretta Devine.

In a move which was becoming more common due to steadily rising production costs, A Broadway Musical eschewed the standard out-of-town tryout tour, choosing instead to hold its pre-Broadway run at the Theatre of the Riverside Church, which was uptown, adjacent to the campus of Columbia University.

The show's structure, plot, and intentions were thus described by Mel Gussow:

> The musical-within-a-musical is about a white producer who, upon reading a serious play called The Final Point,

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> which is about the exploitation of black athletes on the collegiate level, options the play, and converts it into an upbeat musical entitled Sneakers.[43]

The critics were not fond of the show. They deemed Brown's book to be poorly-written, although they felt the songs by Adams and Strouse were passable. Many of the reviewers noted that the cast members appeared to be self-conscious about performing in what they obviously knew was a bad show. Clive Barnes of the Post made a trio of comments which effectively echoed the opinions of his fellow critics. In citing the play's "doppleganger sub-plot," the making of the musical Sneakers, Barnes noted: "We are being shown --very effectively--the anatomy of a Broadway failure." He also noted that the show was "in essence a parody of a parody," and ended his review by expressing a sentiment which was felt by the majority of his colleagues: "It was a sorry evening of theatre."[44]

The creators of the show based their story-line on the premise that at certain intervals in the history of the theatre, black shows have been popular to the point where virtually any non-talented creative team with financial backing could use the formula for success at that moment, target the show towards an undiscriminating audience, and, in spite of the show's ineptness, gain a measure of popular success. Ironically, the creators of A Broadway Musical were guilty of the same crimes upon which they were commenting. The show opened and closed the same night.

Generally speaking, Broadway was suffering from a severe lack of inventiveness in its musical division. Revivals of past hits and the willingness of producers to favor musical collages of song hits from past eras rather than original book musicals was undermining the Broadway musical theatre's own development. However, for black musicals, there was an added element to the revived trend of basing black shows on white classics: the statement was being made, by extension, that the African-American had neither the stories to tell, nor the resources to tell them with in the Broadway musical format. Of course this was untrue, but the inability, for the

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most part, of black artists to raise the capital to produce their own shows made that appear to be the case.

In addition to the renewal of the basic lack of control over the material presented about him on the commercial musical stage, the aura of the African-American's so-called "other-ness" was beginning to reassert itself by means of the black cast/white classic syndrome. This was pointed out by Martin Gottfried in his review of the all-black edition of Guys and Dolls:

> It's becoming wearisome to keep pointing out the offensiveness of all-black versions of white shows. There is a basic racism to them: the blackness of the actor is being used as a theatrical motif. It is a condescending exotica attitude that was supposed to have passed with minstrel shows and Carmen Jones.[45]

By the end of the decade, it was obvious that the black book musical, and especially, the black book musical which was actually created by blacks, was becoming an endangered species on Broadway. Off-Broadway, which had historically been a bastion of creativity, as opposed to the trend-following and imitative nature of Broadway, was the logical locale for the black book musical to thrive.

The Black Musical Off-Broadway, 1972 - 1979

As did such late-1960s/early-'70s musicals as The Believers, Ododo, and Aint Supposed to Die a Natural Death, both Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy and The Great MacDaddy eschewed the standard commercial musical structure, using instead techniques from traditional African-American storytelling; Paul Carter Harrison was a major contributor to both shows, as the director of the former and the author of the latter.

Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy [to be called Tragedy] opened October 25, 1972, at the 1,200-seat Music Hall of the Brooklyn Academy of Music for a scheduled three-week engagement. Aishah Rahman wrote the libretto; Archie Shepp, Stanley Crowell, and Cal Massey composed the show's original music; several of the songs made famous by the "Lady Day" of the title--the jazz icon Billy

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Holiday--were also used in the play. The cast included Cecelia Norfleet as Billie Holiday, with Rosetta Lenoir, Frank Adu, Maxwell Glanville, Madge Sinclair, and Roger Robinson in featured roles.

No attempt was made on Norfleet's part to impersonate Holiday and her unique vocal style; Clive Barnes noted: "Indeed, the only imitation of Lady Day . . . is ironically given by a man in drag [Roger Robinson]."[46] Due to the play's structure, which was "told episodically in a number of loosely connected scenes,"[47] many of the performers portrayed several different characters; the white roles were played by black actors in whiteface. The songs made famous by Holiday were not sung by Norfleet, but by other characters. A 15-piece-jazz band played onstage; the play's central motif was that of "an Amateur Night at the Apollo."[48]

As had been the case with Aint, each reviewer's critique was informed by how much he or she could relate to the nontraditional narrative techniques employed in Rahman's play. Clive Barnes of the Times, in calling Tragedy "unpolished, even unhewn," wrote:

> . . . the director . . . as well as the author, is happy with the kind of episodic black theatre style that we were introduced to in . . . [Aint]. It is a musical theatre that takes its rhythms from a different drummer from white musical theatre.[49]

The reviewer from Variety also made note of--and expressed an admiration for--the new musical style which was being developed by the African-American creators of black musicals, calling the show:

> . . . a superb piece of musical theatre that has little or nothing to do with what has come to be regarded [as the] standard legit [sic] musical formula.[50]

The Variety critic added that it was "a powerful drama with music that explores new musical territory with integrity."[51]

Martin Gottfried, who for years had expressed in his reviews a desire to see black musical theatre which was less imitative of the

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mainstream musical and which called upon more genuine African-American cultural reference points, was pleased with Tragedy, calling it "original, theatrical, exciting and intelligent . . . a sight to see . . . and . . . a powerhouse theatrical experience."[52] Marilyn Stasio's review for Cue was not so enthusiastic. She deemed it as "pretentious" and "an infuriating rip-off on the career of Billie Holiday," adding that "in Ms. Rahman's simplistic view, Lady Day is a stereotype of all exploited black women."[53]

The major critics seemed to be split evenly into three groups: those who loved the show (Gottfried, Edith Oliver of the New Yorker,[54] and the critic from Variety); those who hated it (Stasio, Arthur Sainer of the Village Voice,[55] and Douglas Watt of the Daily News[56]); and those who gave it a mixed review (Barnes, John Simon of New York,[57] and Jerry Talmer of the Post[58]).[59]

Paul Carter Harrison, who directed Tragedy, was also the author of the next Off-Broadway black musical, The Great MacDaddy. Opening February 2, 1974, at the Negro Ensemble Company's St. Mark's Playhouse, The Great MacDaddy [to be called MacDaddy] was described by its author as:

> . . . a ritualized African/American event inspired by the African story-telling techniques advanced by Amos Tutuola in his world famous novel, The Palm Wine Drinkard.[60]

The music was written by Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson; Douglass Turner Ward directed. The huge ensemble cast was headed by David Downing in the title role, Hattie Winston as his love interest, Leionah, and Al Freeman, Jr., as Skag, MacDaddy's nemesis throughout the play.

MacDaddy had perhaps the most unconventional structure to date in a commercial black musical. As had been the case in Tragedy, MacDaddy was presented in a succession of scene-like "beats"; the play began with a prologue entitled the "Primal Rhythm,"[61] and ended with its final scene being labeled as the "Terminal Rhythm."[62]

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The play's premise is simple enough. MacDaddy opens at the wake of The Big MacDaddy, a black, Prohibition Era Los Angeles bootlegger, whose main product, a palm wine concoction, maintains a certain peace and harmony in the community in which the elder MacDaddy was so highly revered. The Big MacDaddy has willed his illegal operation to his son, who, rather arrogantly, insists upon being called "The Great MacDaddy." As the new MacDaddy is telling everyone at the wake how he plans to extend his palm wine business into a nationwide operation, in bursts Wine, "the keeper of the illegal still and the possessor of the precious Palm Wine formula that has produced MacDaddy's greatness."[63] "The Man" has beaten up Wine, left him for dead, and run off with the list of ingredients for the palm wine. Having learned that MacDaddy no longer has access to the wine which is such an important element in the community's harmony, the mourners, who had just minutes before been trying to curry MacDaddy's favor, now desert him, with one of them telling him: "If you ain't got wine . . . you ain't got shit."[64] To make matters worse, Wine has suddenly disappeared. MacDaddy now must embark on a cross-country journey in search of the formula for the wine, and for the character Wine himself.

In a reversal of the historical African-American migratory pattern, MacDaddy makes his way eastward and southward, encountering characters from African-American folklore such as Shine, The Signifying Monkey, and Stagger Lee. The character Wine appears in several guises, unrecognized by MacDaddy. Along the way, MacDaddy meets Scag, symbolic for heroin, who is to be his antagonist. In a concession to the musical theatre's dictate that calls for the leading male character to have a love interest, a young lady named Leionah attaches herself, almost literally, to MacDaddy. At first he is reluctant to allow her to be his traveling companion; later in the play he sings of his love for her:

> A man ain't worth a quarter
> Without some other man's daughter
> I'm glad you're by my side![65]

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After encountering resistance in his search for Wine in such locales as a Las Vegas nightclub, an Arizona dog-racing track, a "redneck" cowboy saloon in Texas, and a Louisiana swamp teeming with members of a cult which worships something akin to voodoo, MacDaddy finally finds Wine--and the formula for the palm wine--on an island off the coast of South Carolina.

The show had but a handful of what can generally be regarded as full-fledged songs. The title character has just two brief singing numbers. Music is used more to set the play's moods and rhythms than it is to be the background for a collection of singable and catchy tunes.

MacDaddy, which relied heavily upon references to black American folklore, was found to be confusing by many critics. However, Harrison's references were also obscure to many African-Americans who were not as well-versed in black American culture as was the author. Harrison, as well as being a respected dramatist, is also one of the most knowledgeable black theatre scholars. Partly responsible for the conception of Aint, Harrison, in the 1970s, totally forsook standard musical plot formulas, creating his own concept of how the black American experience should be told on the musical stage. His innovative methods were lauded by Clive Barnes of the Times:

> What we are witnessing is the birth of the black musical, with storytelling techniques and dramatic rhythms as distinct from the white musical as jazz is distinct from the Viennese waltz. So don't go . . . looking for a black Oklahoma! . . . go expecting something quite different in thematic form and histrionic tempo. Go expecting a nonlinear ritual, a modern pageant with special and different jumps of meaning.[66]

Barnes also wrote that the show was

> . . . about race-consciousness, black sensibility of nationhood, Africa, America, voodoo, old-time religion, a nation stilled by narcotics, the coming of a savior, and

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> the virtues of simplicity. If all this sounds heavy--let me add that the musical is very funny, scabrous, entertaining and full of just that vitality that comes from having something vital to say.[67]

Many critics found the story-line to be nebulous, but they attributed this to their own unfamiliarity with Harrison's African storytelling techniques, rather than to his aptness, or lack thereof, at conveying a lucid plot line. Those critics who enjoyed MacDaddy cited the unique imposition of the characters from African and African-American folklore into a commercial black musical; those reviewers who did not like it were perhaps most troubled by its non-linear structure and Afrocentric nature. Douglas Watt of the Daily News expressed his disdain for both MacDaddy and Tragedy for precisely these reasons.

Martin Gottfried, in calling it "a stunning work," raved about all aspects of the production.[69] Clayton Riley of the Times wrote:

> [Harrison] has written the most important black theatre work since Melvin van Peebles brought [Aint] to Broadway.[70]

Several critics, such as Clive Barnes and Martin Gottfried, were of the opinion that the unique divergence from the standard musical format which typified Harrison's work would create a major change in the direction of the black musical. However, this was not to be the case.

MacDaddy proved to be the most popular musical produced by the N.E.C., and, in light of that fact, ironically, the last. Its run was extended twice; its 1974 presentation totalled 72 performances. A 1977 revival ran for 56 showings. Saddled by constant financial woes, the N.E.C. has never, as of this writing, produced another musical.

The Prodigal Sister, a collaboration among three of the most talented African-American female artists of the era, initially opened Off-Off-Broadway at the New Federal Theatre on Manhattan's

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Lower East Side. Dramatist J. E. Franklin wrote the libretto; Micki Grant composed the music; Shauneille Perry directed; Grant and Franklin authored the lyrics.

The Prodigal Sister made its debut July 10, 1974, at the New Federal Theatre's home in the Henry Street Settlement. Operating in a neighborhood inhabited chiefly by African-American, Hispanic and Asian-American families, the producer of the New Federal Theatre (N.F.T.), Woodie King, has never been shy about choosing plays with which his neighborhood audience can most easily identify. This was not lost on Mel Gussow of the Times, who wrote that plays done at the N.F.T. were invariably "exercises in audience identification: cheer the hero, hiss the villain, recognize the stereotype."[71] The Prodigal Sister fit neatly into this mold, offering its patrons facilely recognizable characters and situations.

Presented without intermission, the play, like MacDaddy, was structured into eight scene-like "beats." It was essentially the retelling of the Biblical tale of the Prodigal Son; however, this time the central figure was a young black female from a small southern town who went to a nearby metropolis, lived a hard life, becomes pregnant, and returned home, wiser and better for the experience.

Having played to capacity houses during its Off-Off-Broadway showcase run, the musical was transferred to Off-Broadway, re-opening November 25, 1974, at the Theatre de Lys. Its structure and point of view were described thus by Marilyn Stasio of Cue:

> Written in doggerel, the comedy is broad to the point of stylization--in the tradition of burlesque comedy, but with a little vintage television comedy and children's slapstick thrown in for good measure. The characters are cartoons, and most of the fun comes from the audience's instant identification of them as stereotypes. . . . Even the simplistic plot--a contemporary retelling of the prodigal son parable--contributes to the effect of a modern cultural ritual built on old traditions.[72]

In her review--of the Off-Off-Broadway presentation--Stasio, in praising its "unusual and exciting form," also commented upon the

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show's "extraordinary impact on and rapport with the audience at Woodie King's vital community theatre."[73]

While Stasio perceived the characterizations as something which black audiences could--and did--readily recognize, Brendan Gill of the New Yorker took an opposing view. In his critique of the show after its Off-Broadway debut he called it

> a coarsely-drawn caricature of middle-class black life, and not, as one would have expected from black artists of proved merit, a joyous embodiment of it. The stereotypes being glibly enacted onstage are those that white musical-comedy writers wouldn't have hesitated to invent back in the nineteen-thirties . . . and these stereotypes are matched in their vulgarity by the plot.[74]

One can only suppose that perhaps Gill overstated his point; had the plot and characterizations been as insulting as his review would lead one to believe, the audiences would have surely voiced their displeasure.

The critics agreed that the characters were indeed of a cartoonish nature; some thought that this was a virtue in the light-hearted, family-oriented show; others saw it as not simplistic, but merely simple-minded. Most of the reviewers felt that Grant's songs in The Prodigal Sister were not as good as the tunes she composed for Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope. It was not lost upon some critics that the audience response at the Henry Street Settlement--where no admission had been charged--had been much better than in the higher-priced Off-Broadway venue

The Prodigal Sister lasted 40 performances at the Theatre de Lys. It would be one of the last of the black-written black musicals which were inspired by the late-1960s black-pride movement to be given a commercial production. Similar shows were mounted in the mid and late-1970s at the N.F.T. and other Off-Off-Broadway nonprofit theatres, but rising production costs and a return to a more conservative stance on the part of producers and artistic directors precluded practically all of them from moving up to Off-Broadway or Broadway.

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On The Lock-In, with its book, music, and lyrics by David Langston Smyrl, opened at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre on April 27, 1977. The show had a cast of eleven in its minimum-security prison setting: nine black inmates, one Hispanic, and one "redneck" type. Smyrl played Houndog, a sort of interlocutor who served as the show's narrator. The show was intermissionless and had a ninety-minute running time; it was conceived and directed by Robert Macbeth, late of the defunct New Lafayette Theatre.

The show's structure was aptly described by Mel Gussow as "a collage of scenes, soliloquies and songs that is intended to give a complete picture of a certain kind of prison life."[75] The reviews were unanimously negative, with the same complaints being raised by practically every critic.

The book was generally judged to be rambling and unfocused, giving no real insight into prison life. Many critics thought that the characters were interesting upon first sight, but were never developed to any degree. Several felt there was no integration of the book and songs, and that no dramatic tension was ever established.

Benignly inoffensive in its portrayal of an almost all-black wing of a minimum-security prison, On the Lock-In managed 62 performances.

One Mo' Time [to be called Time] was a show which paid homage to the black vaudeville performers of the pre-Depression era. Written, directed, and conceived by Vernel Bagneris, Time opened October 23, 1979, at the Village Gate. Before making its Off-Broadway debut, Time had played for almost two years in New Orleans, the hometown of Bagneris, and the four other cast members: Topsy Chapman, Sylvia "Kuumba" Williams, Thais Clark, and John Stell. After its New Orleans run, the show made a successful tour of several Midwestern cities, and then, with the aid of financial backing from European investors, moved to New York.[76]

Set in 1926 at New Orleans' Lyric Theatre, Time was about a black vaudeville troupe, consisting of one man and three women, which toured the segregated South and endured a seemingly endless chain of indignities, both major and minor. A backstage musical, the

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show featured classic comedy skits and songs and dances of that era; the music was provided by the New Orleans Blues Serenaders jazz ensemble.

Time had two settings: the onstage area from which the actors performed their show to the patrons of the Lyric Theatre, and the cramped backstage area, where the Village Gate audiences received an insight into the life which the actors led on the vaudeville circuit: the bailing out of jailed co-performers, the absconding by some unknown person with the company's cash, and the professional rivalries and petty jealousies which inevitably sprang up between the cast members.[77]

Time received by far the best reviews of any of the black Off-Broadway musicals of the decade. Most critics gave it glowing praise despite what they perceived as a weak libretto by Bagneris, although they felt that, as a compiler of the material from the era in which the show was set, Bagneris' selection of the music and the comedy skits was impeccable. Several critics expressed distaste about for a scene which Bagneris, a lightskinned, straight-haired African-American, played in blackface. Some reviewers felt Bagneris could have eliminated the backstage subplot and simply presented a recreation of a vaudeville revue, in keeping with the trend of anthology revue musicals which was then popular on Broadway. The critics' consensus qualms with the book were perhaps best summarized by John Corry of the Times, who wrote that Time was:

> . . . really two shows, one which works fitfully, and one which doesn't work at all. . . . although much of the music that goes with this is fun, the spoken words are not. Sometimes, in fact, they are embarrassing.[78]

If the book by Bagneris did not match the high standards of his other contributions to Time, he must be commended for not merely presenting yet another anthology revue which portrayed the black performer as a smiling, singing, and dancing entertainer, but nothing else. Bagneris attempted to show the black vaudeville troupers as

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human beings by dramatizing their sundry personal tribulations, however petty they may have seemed. In doing so, the author's goal was to underscore the harsh conditions under which the black performers were forced to work. Such shows as Eubie!, Bubbling Brown Sugar, and Ain't Misbehavin' merely exploited the music of their respective eras, but gave no real insights into the performers and creators of that music, and what they had to do to persevere in a racist society.

Those numerous critics who predicted a long run for Time proved to be correct; it ran for 1,372 performances at the Village Gate. Bagneris declined several offers to move the show to Broadway, feeling it worked best in the more intimate, 240-seat cabaret house. At one point Time had seven national companies working in the United States. It was also popular in Europe; it ran for nearly two years on London's West End, and had two road companies performing simultaneously throughout Europe. Further Mo', a sequel to Time, which opened in April 1990, at the Village Gate, was short-lived despite garnering fine reviews; it was surely a victim of the harsh economic times.

Only five black musicals were produced Off-Broadway between 1972 and 1979. Only two of them, MacDaddy and Time, can be labeled as critical successes; only the latter can be termed a popular success by the commercial theatre's definition of success. Of the five, only the last show, Time, was independently produced. The others were presented at institutional theatres; despite Time's long and presumedly prosperous runs in New Orleans and the Midwest, it was only after a long search, and a payment of a $1,500 finders' fee to a New York agency, that Bagneris was able to secure the backing for his Manhattan production.[79]

The soaring costs of producing musicals on the Off-Broadway scene discouraged both independent producers and the artistic directors of institutional theatres. Coupled with the fact that a majority of the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway institutional theatres were geared more to the "serious" drama, the Off-Broadway black musical was in a precarious position: two or three straight plays could be mounted for the same cost of staging one musical.

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The hope that the black Off-Broadway musicals of the 1970s would maintain and even expand upon the creativity which had been the hallmark of the late-1960s went largely unfulfilled.

Black Broadway Musical Revues, 1971 - 1979

The four black-themed Broadway musical revues, Inner City, Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope, Your Arms Too Short To Box With God, and the import from South African, Ipi-Tombi, ostensibly strove to give their audiences more, politically speaking, than the standard Broadway revue whose sole purpose was to present an entertaining array of songs and dances. Not to be confused with such anthology revue shows as Bubbling Brown Sugar and Ain't Misbehavin', which dominated the latter half of the 1970s on the Broadway scene, these shows, with the exception of Ipi-Tombi, were end products of the late-1960s "protest"-oriented black musicals.

Inner City, subtitled A Street Cantata, was conceived and directed by Tom O'Horgan, who, as of the show's opening night, December 19, 1971, had three important and long-running shows being performed on Broadway: Lenny, Hair, and Jesus Christ, Superstar. Based on Eve Merriam's book, The Inner City Mother Goose, a grown-up version of the Mother Goose nursery rhymes which focused upon survival in contemporary New York, the show's lyrics were by Merriam and its music was by Helen Miller. Included in the cast were the talented veterans Linda Hopkins and Larry Marshall.

Douglas Watt, in calling the show "a catalogue of urban ills as they affect the downtrodden, mainly the blacks,"[80] questioned why, since the play was black-oriented, there were whites in the cast. Similarly, Martin Gottfried wondered why white performers had been included in the show, yet no Hispanic roles had been created.[81]

The consensus of the critics can best be described as mixed; many compared the show to Aint or judged it to be a more adult-oriented The Me Nobody Knows. Inner City managed only 97 performances.

Micki Grant's revue Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope [to be called Cope] was perhaps the most perfect melding of the "message" musicals spawned in the late 1960s and the conventional Broadway

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song-and-dance revue structure. As were several important black-created musicals of the 1960s and '70s, Cope was initially developed at Vinnette Carroll's Urban Arts Corps. Cope was first presented there as a workshop production, then performed in Washington, D.C., Detroit, and Philadelphia, in preparation for its Broadway run. Directed by Carroll, choreographed by George Faison, the cast included the show's lyricist/composer Grant, Hope Clark, Alex Bradford, and Bobby Hill.

Opening April 19, 1972, at the intimate Playhouse Theatre, Cope featured a collage of songs by Grant which commented upon the most pressing and relevant topics of black American life at the time. Clive Barnes described it as "almost the black equivalent of a flamenco show and it seems to be a mixture of block party and revival meeting,"[82] adding: "This is a militant show, but not at all bitter." T. E. Kalem observed:

> Some of the songs and dances . . . comment very seriously on the social injustices still visited on the heirs of slavery, but the inner jubilation that ignites the show is a love offering to the Creator and creation.[83]

For the most part, the critical response was positive. Many cited Grant's witty lyrics and catchy tunes, and praised the attractive and energetic cast. Several lauded Grant for her ability to relate her social commentary to her audience by means of entertaining songs which never resorted to anger or bitterness. Edith Oliver, who called Cope "perfect," inadvertently paraphrased many of her fellow critics when she wrote that "the title alone sounds too cranky for a show as humane and lively an this one."[84]

The success of Cope was the result of a grasp of audience psychology on the part of Grant and Carroll. Black patrons could relate to the issues which were being dealt with in the songs, but unlike the more militant black history pageants, such as Ododo, Cope was not so angry that it alienated whites. Unlike many composers who have used an eclectic range of musical genres within the same show for the sole purpose of being eclectic, Grant was adept in all

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of the sub-genres of African-American music in which she composed songs for Cope: jazz, the blues, rhythm-and-blues, gospel, calypso, and rock 'n' roll.

Unlike the standard Broadway revue, which is usually packaged as an entertainment vehicle in which any vaguely substantive material is tacked on as an afterthought, Cope celebrated the African-American experience and articulated some of its frustrations. It effectively managed to straddle the thin line between being both entertaining and "relevant," and lasted for 1,065 performances, by far the longest-running of Vinnette Carroll's many Broadway shows.

Over four years later, Carroll once again brought her unique combination of socially-relevant theatre and Broadway revue. Opening December 22, 1976, at the Lyceum Theatre, Your Arms Too Short To Box With God [shortened to Arms for this study] was conceived from The Bible's "Book of Matthew" and directed by Carroll. The show's music and lyrics were primarily the work of Alex Bradford, with additional songs by Micki Grant. Talley Beatty was the choreographer.

Developed at the Urban Arts Corps, Arms was first presented in a Renaissance chapel at the 1975 Spoleto Festival in Spoleto, Italy.[85] Intermissionless, with a 90-minute running time, Arms differed from the majority of gospel musicals inasmuch as its 27 songs were original compositions, and not borrowed from the canon of traditional gospel tunes and Negro spirituals. Described by Clive Barnes as "the Christ story from Palm Sunday, through the Passion in the Garden, the Betrayal, the Trial, to the Crucifixion and the Resurrection,"[86] the show was unique in that it portrayed Jesus--performed by Stanley Perryman--a mute; he danced throughout the play, but never spoke or sang. A tribute to great gospel singers of the past--and Louis Armstrong--was performed by the cast as an epilogue of sorts after the Christ story had been presented.

With the exception of Martin Gottfried, who, in his mixed review, complained that the show was a concert, but not an evening of theatre,[87] the critics raved about Arms. Clive Barnes wrote: "There is plenty of reverence in the piece, but also an abundance of

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cheerful folk humor," and commented that although some of the elements in Arms were similar to those in Jesus Christ, Superstar, the effect was totally different, and that while the Rice/Lloyd-Webber work "was all trash and glitter, Miss Carroll has given her work something of the emblematic simplicity of a medieval morality play."[88]

Unlike the majority of black gospel musicals of the past thirty years, whose purpose was to do little more than evoke the emotions of their targeted audiences with a succession of familiar gospel tunes from the public domain, Carroll was striving for more in Arms. Avoiding the traditional spirituals which many of the audience members had surely heard countless times in church services, Carroll, with the use of original songs by Grant and Bradford, brought a touch of creativity, a commodity which has historically been in short supply in black gospel musicals, to Arms. The use of black performers to portray the various Biblical characters was in and of itself a black-pride statement; Jesus, et. al., are usually depicted as persons with Nordic coloring, despite the fact they lived in a part of the world where the majority of the people were and are swarthy-skinned and curly-haired.

The fusion of Christian faith and African-American pride was also evident in the show's costume design. As Martin Gottfried noted, the performers began the evening wearing standard church choir robes, but "change[d] into costumes, designed by William Schroder, that cross a Biblical look with dashikis."[89] It was no mean feat for Carroll to even attempt to make a compromise between a belief in Christianity and black pride. One of the major tenets of the black militant rhetoric of the late 1960s was that Christianity, as "the slavemaster's religion," was totally incompatible with African-American self-respect.

Besides promoting the unlikely matching of devout faith in Christianity and black pride, Arms was unusual in another sense. At the time of its debut, late 1976, the black Broadway musical, with its plethora of black books based on white classics, and the emergence of the anthology revue, was taking on a 1920s/'30s aspect, featuring shows which were purely entertainment, without

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being thought-provoking. This regression did not go unnoticed by Jack Kroll of Newsweek in his review of Arms. He began his critique by mentioning "the much-ballyhooed black presence on Broadway," but added that presence

> seems to be largely an all-singing, all-dancing, all-jiving presence. One black theatre person who's tried to outflank this situation is director Vinnette Carroll. . . .
> . . . . . .
> Her basic challenge to the theatre establishment seems to be: "So, you want blacks to sing and dance? Okay, but here's our [Kroll's emphasis] singing and dancing, and not just white theatre colored black."[90]

In essence, Carroll, in Arms redefined a religion--which had been foisted upon the African-American--into her Afrocentric terms. Arms proved to be, next to Cope, the second-most successful show under Carroll's direction, running for 429 performances in its initial Broadway presentation, enjoying a 70-week national tour, then returning to Broadway after that road engagement for 149 more showings. A September 1982 revival which starred the rhythm-and-blues singers Patti LaBelle and Al Green ran for 70 performances.

In the opinion of many observers, Ipi-Tombi, an import from South Africa, was an updated and disguised variation of the "coon" shows of the past. Conceived, devised, produced and directed by Bertha Egnos, Ipi-Tombi, with a cast of 25, premiered at the Harkness Theatre on January 12, 1977. The revue consisted of an evening of black South African songs, dances, and musicalized vignettes of folktales

The opening night performance was picketed by the Socialist Workers Party and the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, among others.[91] The demonstration occurred because, according to Clive Barnes, the show was

> a black South African musical, conceived and produced by whites, which the demonstrators felt offered an unrealistic picture of the black in South Africa and could

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> consequently be regarded as propaganda for the present South African Government and apartheid.[92]

Barnes also opined: "Curiously, the controversy regarding the presentation is more interesting than the play itself." He added that, as of the show's New York opening night, Ipi-Tombi had been running in London for several months, and had proven to be "one of the biggest hits ever in Johannesburg,"[93] having enjoyed a three-year stay in that city.

Several critics hinted that the show recalled the mindless Negro entertainments of the past. Douglas Watt called it "a rather naive mixture of Zulu folkways . . . and simple-minded show business."[94] He wrote that the title meant "Where are the girls," and mentioned the show featured bare-breasted dancing girls and a wedding ceremony in which "a practically naked girl was dunked and then laved, instead of dried."

Martin Gottfried of the Post did not let the play's "coon"-show aspects go unnoticed. He wrote:

> The show is offensive by implication. It portrays black South Africans as superstitious primitives who are having a lovely time singing and dancing. Set against the bloody, genocidal, monstrously regressive truth of South Africa, this is outrageous.[95]

Howard Kissel stated that the picketers protested the portrayal of South African blacks as "happy natives," but that before the opening night performance, the civil rights leader Bayard Rustin came onstage and made "an eloquent statement" refuting the picketers' charges.[96] Jonathan Kwitny of the Wall Street Journal wrote that the cast members themselves did not see anything self-degrading about the show; several performers cited how three songs which had been banned in the Johannesburg production because of their political content had been reinstated for the New York presentation, and that the cast collectively felt "the show speaks

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out in its own way against the oppression of a white minority South African government."[97]

If Ipi-Tombi was a show which indeed denigrated blacks, a parallel can be made to the situation of the black South African performers in the show and the African-American players in the minstrel shows and minstrelsy's various offshoots: in lieu of more substantive roles, the black performer has [had] to play the fool, all the while hoping this would be the means to a more positive end.

Finally, if Ipi-Tombi was a transplanted "coon" show in disguise, it only served to underscore the fact that, by 1977, the black performer's image had once again regressed to that of, as Jack Kroll phrased it, "an all-singing, all-dancing, all-jiving presence." The most popular form of the black musical in the 1970s, the anthology revues which featured the works of a black composer or songwriting team from Broadway's past, would further promote this resurrected image.

The Anthology Revues

By the early 1970s, Broadway producers, in general, were showing an unwillingness--or fear--to entrust original ideas to unproven creative teams; hence, rather than pour money into unknown quantities, the producers stayed with the familiar. In the 1970s the revivals of past hits abounded, and an adjunct genre, the musical revue compiled around popular songs of bygone eras and/or the anthologizing of songs from the collections of famed song-writers of yesteryear gained prominence on Broadway.

Also popular at this time were one-person shows featuring a solo performance by a celebrity with sufficient box-office appeal to merit a Broadway engagement. Josephine Baker, reprising much of the material from her small-scale 1964 revue, played in a show entitled An Evening With Josephine Baker, which began its week-long stay at the Palace Theatre on New Year's Eve 1973. A few months later, Sammy, a presentation which showcased the talents of Sammy Davis, Jr., had a two-week engagement at the Uris Theatre, beginning April 23, 1974.

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The first famous black artist to be celebrated in an anthology revue show was the great blues singer, Bessie Smith. Me and Bessie Smith was conceived and written by Will Holt and Linda Hopkins, with Hopkins performing in what was basically a one-woman show--she was assisted onstage by two dancers, Gerri Dean and Lester Wilson.

Opening October 22, 1975, at the Ambassador Theatre, Me and Bessie Smith [to be called Bessie] featured 23 songs from Smith's repertoire which were performed by Hopkins, with Hopkins providing information about the famed blues singer's life between songs. At the beginning and end of each performance Hopkins reminded the audience that she was not trying to portray or impersonate Smith, but that she, Hopkins, was merely a gospel singer performing some of Smith's songs.

The critics were unanimous in their praise for the show, with such adjectives as "slick," "compact," "swift," and "smooth" re-appearing in many critiques. Unlike many one-person shows or song revues, Bessie was decidedly dramatic, according to Clive Barnes. He wrote that it was

> very cleverly staged . . . for this is not just a one-woman show or even a glossy cabaret act. A considerable effort has been made to give it the shape and substance of a theatrical evening.[98]

Barnes noted how no mention was made of the inglorious end to Smith's life. The Tennessee-born, 43-year-old Smith was injured in an automobile accident on September 26, 1937, just outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi; refused aid at two white hospitals, she died from her injuries before she could be transported to a black hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.[99] Perhaps this important bit of information was omitted from the show lest it have the appearance of making a "militant" statement; by 1975, Broadway had reverted to being ultra-conservative on matters involving racial antagonism.[100]

Though purportedly a book musical with a libretto by the dramatist and black theatre historian Loften Mitchell, Bubbling

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Brown Sugar [henceforth to be called Sugar] was essentially a song-and-dance revue which paid tribute to the black musicals and Harlem nightclub shows of the 1920s and '30s. Songs by such composers and lyricists as Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Andy Razaf, "Fats" Waller, Cab Calloway, Earl "Fatha" Hines, and Bert Williams were performed by the integrated cast of 17. A handful of original songs by various composers were interspersed amongst the standard tunes in the show.

Based on a concept by Rosetta Lenoir, the artistic director of the AMAS Repertory Company, where the show began Off-Off-Broadway, Sugar opened on Broadway on March 2, 1976, at the ANTA Theatre. Robert Cooper was the director and Billy Wilson created the choreography. Heading the cast were Avon Long, Josephine Premice, Joseph Attles, and Vivian Reed.

The plot, such as it was, concerned a pair of young black Harlemites who were discussing the old days of Harlem show business with three veterans--Premice, Attles, and Long--who had lived through them. The five of them were magically transported to the era about which they had been talking.

The critics raved about the show and forgave Mitchell's sophomoric excuse for a libretto. The consensus was that the show's original songs were only fair, but the reviewers lauded the cast's rendition of the standard tunes. Several reviewers wryly noted that the practice of inserting a black dancer into an otherwise all-white show was reversed in Sugar, which featured a white dancer, Barry Preston, whose eccentric dance number proved to be a highlight of the show,

Douglas Watt's comments were reflective of the prevailing sentiments of his fellow critics. He called it

> a song-and-dance recital, fitted out with a running thread of a story that's easy to ignore [which] handily takes first place among all those song-medley shows we've been treated to in recent seasons.[101]

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Watt also noted that the songs, in their original contexts "were . . . designed as much for the white trade . . . as the black trade," and observed that "this festive revue, though it should appeal to audiences of all kinds, is necessarily directed mainly at whites."[102] This is true to a certain degree of all the shows produced at Lenoir's AMAS Repertory; only shows with an integrated cast have received a staging there.

As Bessie's creators chose not to deal with the circumstances surrounding Smith's perhaps preventable death, the creators of Sugar, presumably to avoid being labeled as an "angry" black show, failed to mention the harsh and stifling conditions under which the black artists of that era were forced to labor. However, the time for making statements of a political bent on the Broadway stage had passed, and Sugar provided its audience with entertainment, and plenty of it. The show ran for 766 performances and represented the only real commercial success in Loften Mitchell's long career as a dramatist. The Broadway run was followed by tours of the United States and Europe.

Ain't Misbehavin', a revue of songs composed by or associated with Thomas "Fats" Waller, opened May 9, 1978, at the John Golden Theatre. Based on an idea by Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby, Jr., the show was directed by Maltby, with the musical numbers staged by Arthur Faria. Luther Henderson served as the show's pianist, music supervisor, arranger, and conductor of the onstage, six-piece band. The cast was composed of Nell Carter, Andre De Shields, Ken Page, Armelia McQueen, and Charlaine Woodard. The show had been originally presented Off-Off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club. Maltby also provided his own original lyrics to Waller's instrumental tunes.

The show, which featured 30 song numbers, won the 1978 Tony Award for "Best Musical"; Nell Carter garnered that year's prize for "Best Featured Actress in a Musical," and Maltby was cited as being the "Best Director of a Musical."

Though there was no libretto or even a discernable story-line, a thread which tied the piece together was the fact that each of the

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numbers was presented by the cast as a playlet in miniature, or as Howard Kissel noted, "each song is sung and staged with a clear idea --sometimes a dramatic one."[103] It was obvious that the intent was to reproduce the fun and verve with which Waller himself, who died in 1943 at the age of 39, was famous for in the presentation of his music, be it in a Broadway show or in a nightclub revue.

Ain't Misbehavin' received as fine a set of reviews as any show in the history of the black musical. Practically each critique was an enthusiastic rave; the reviewers praised all aspects of the production. Exceedingly popular, the original presentation ran for 1,604 performances on Broadway; with its small cast, six-member band and comparatively low overhead, several road companies proved to be profitable. A late 1988 revival at the Ambassador Theatre, however, could manage just 176 showings; unfavorable comparisons by the critics to the original production and harsh economic times were perhaps the two main reasons for the revival's relatively short run.

Eubie Blake, who had had several of his tunes performed in Sugar, was the subject of the decade's final musical anthology featuring a noted black songwriter or genre. Eubie!, which made its debut on September 21, 1978, at the Ambassador Theatre, consisted of 24 songs with music by Blake, and lyrics by Noble Sissle, Andy Razaf, James Reese Europe, and others; most of the songs in Eubie! were from Shuffle Along. Eubie! was conceived and directed by Julianne Boyd, with musical staging by Billy Wilson and tap choreography by Henry Le Tang. The 12-member cast was headed by the Hines brothers, Gregory and Maurice, and Alaina Reed.

Most critics compared Eubie! unfavorably to Ain't Misbehavin', yet nonetheless gave the show an enthusiastic assessment. Perhaps the most interesting comments were made by T. E. Kalem of Time.

> Ironically, where a Shuffle Along, a Blackbirds of 1930 or a Chocolate Dandies . . . were intended for all-white audiences, the current production courts black theatregoers. As a measure of heightened self-esteem and possible amused self-parody, blacks are now willing to admit that they can be superb singers and dancers--

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> something that was regarded as a condescending racial stereotype in the '60s.[104]

Kalem also opined:

> Yet as a musical revue without a narrative line or cohesive theme, Eubie! ranks as a mini-clone of Ain't Misbehavin'. That is not too difficult to understand, since Fats Waller's musical imagination was richer than Blake's in wit, satire and sophistication.[105]

That latter statement by Kalem echoed the sentiments of many of his fellow critics. Eubie! ran for 439 performances.

1971-1979: A Final Comment

The first half of the 1970s appeared to be a continuance of the aesthetic and political gains made in the black musical which had begun in the 1960s; several relatively young black creators such as Melvin Van Peebles, Micki Grant, Paul Carter Harrison, and Charlie Smalls had achieved a measure of success. African-American backstage talent was becoming more commonplace; many critics had made note of Harrison's innovations in black musical theatre storytelling and predicted his techniques would gain in popularity and drastically redefine the black musical for the better. However, as the cost of mounting a musical rose steadily throughout the decade, producers became more conservative, thus stifling much of the innovation which had been the hallmark of the shows of the late 1960s and early '70s. The Negro Ensemble Company, which had produced several musicals whose structures, styles, and content provided an alternative to the ordinary mainstream format, could no longer, due to a chronic shortage of funds, present musical shows. A nationwide recession in the latter years of the decade had a desultory effect on several levels: because of a dearth of disposable income, many people avoided spending their entertainment dollar in the theatre, choosing instead less expensive modes of amusement; the more innovative not-for-profit theatres, which have historically depended upon the grant-giving agencies for their funding, saw the

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donations dwindle due to the recession. This killed, in effect, the more experimental black musicals done in Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway institutional theatres; due to the economics of the theatre, an independently-produced Off-Broadway musical, with but few exceptions, stood a small chance of returning a profit to its investors.

On the Broadway scene, the precarious financial situation forced a majority of producers to adhere to the historically successful formats. The 1970s was the decade of the revival; for black shows a not-so-new twist was added; the resurrection of formerly all-white shows, but with black casts. Furthermore, by the latter half of the decade the producers felt that the time was right to take a nostalgic look at past black Broadway shows--or, at least, the music from them. As exhibited in the four successful anthology revues, a new formula for producing a hit show had become evident: take a composer or genre from the past, preferably from the 1920s/'30s Neo-Minstrel era, compile a score from his or its repertoire which best lends itself to slick production numbers, eccentric dance routines, and the requisite solos, duets, and ballads; obtain the best singers, dancers, musicians, and designers available; make the show as entertaining as possible without resorting to any "cooning," not even in a self-parodistic mode; and, perhaps most important--do not include anything which smacks of "anger" or "relevance."

This formula worked for the four shows detailed in the previous segment, and would work for similar offerings in the early years of the succeeding decade. Though of a historical nature, none of the anthology shows dared, as did Off-Broadway's One Mo' Time, to give any hint of the sometimes horrendous conditions under which the original performers were forced to labor.

The latter half of the 1970s marked the beginning of the re-disappearance of the black writer and composer from the musical scene. Blacks still worked backstage as choreographers and musical supervisors, but, with the exception of the Vinnette Carroll shows--which began Off-Off-Broadway--the African-American librettist,

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lyricist, and composer seemed to be once again unwelcome on Broadway as the 1980s arrived.

While the plotless, strictly-for-entertainment anthology revues flourished, a musical with something substantive to say about the history of blacks in the musical theatre, The Last Minstrel Show, by the white author John Taylor Ford, closed in April 1978, in Philadelphia, prior to its scheduled Broadway debut. Daddy Goodness, a musical which was based on the play of the same name by Richard Wright, also closed in its pre-Broadway tryout. A gospel musical financed by Motown Records, and starring Clifton Davis, Ted Ross, and the popular song-stylist, Freda Payne, Daddy Goodness had the advantage of being based on perhaps one of the funniest plays in the black theatre. However, the early demise of book shows of some substance such as Daddy Goodness and The Last Minstrel Show is a comment in and of itself concerning the atmosphere of the black musical theatre of the time, in which the plotless song-and-dance revues, and black re-issues of white classics were the norm.

By the end of the 1970s, the black musical theatre was in basically the same position it was at the end of the 1930s: in lieu of a tradition of black writers creating black stories for the musical stage, white authors were putting together vapid entertainments; the "other"-ness of the African-American was exploited in shows originally written for white performers; due to a lack of capital, few black producing entities could mount their own shows; hence, the image of the black American as portrayed on the musical stage was at the mercy of white producers; finally, more often than not, the so-called "black" shows of the era were being packaged to appeal more to whites than to blacks.

For all its regressions, the black musical had not reverted to the point where the "Sambo" caricature could make a return; conversely, black pride and autonomy in the commercial musical theatre appeared to have taken a leave of absence as the 1970s ended.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN ENDNOTES

[1]A.H. Weiler, Times, May 28, 1972.

[2]Times, May 17, 1972.

[3]May 27, 1972.

[4]New York, June 5, 1972.

[5]Having seen the show, I must agree with this assessment; my first impression of Raisin was that its music lacked any noticeable influences from African-American sources.

[6]Clive Barnes, Times, March 20, 1975.

[7]Douglas Watt, Daily News, March 20, 1975.

[8]Martin Gottfried, Post, March 20, 1975.

[9]Newsday, April 13, 1975.

[10]Gottfried, March 20, 1975.

[11]Marilyn Stasio, Cue, March 31, 1975.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Jersey Record, March 20, 1975.

[14]March 20, 1975.

[15]Raymond Ericson, Times, July 2, 1975.

[16]October 22, 1975.

[17]October 22, 1975.

[18]From a conversation with Wayman Thompson, a member of the cast of that show.

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[19]William Brown and Charlie Smalls, The Wiz, in the anthology Great Rock Musicals, ed. by Stanley Richards (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), p. 18.

[20]Ibid., p. 34.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., pp. 59-60.

[25]Village Voice, January 13, 1975.

[26]January 11, 1975.

[27]Post, November 7, 1975.

[28]Women's Wear Daily, July 23, 1976.

[29]July 22, 1976.

[30]Ibid.

[31]July 22, 1976.

[32]Wall Street Journal, July 27, 1976.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Daily News, March 2, 1978.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Women's Wear Daily, March 2, 1978.

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[37]I agree with those critics who complained that little creativity went into anything beyond the set and costumes. I felt the show was an insult to its audience's intelligence; the director had absolutely no control over his actors; I felt, at one point, I was observing six different actors performing in six different and distinct performances styles, i.e., "straight," melodrama, "camp," etc.

[38]Ron Cohen, Women's Wear Daily, August 2, 1979.

[39]August 1, 1979.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Daily News, August 1, 1979.

[42]December 22, 1978.

[43]Ibid.

[44]December 22, 1978.

[45]Post, July 22, 1976.

[46]Times, October 26, 1972.

[47]Variety, November 29, 1972.

[48]Ibid.

[49]October 26, 1972.

[50]November 29, 1972.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Women's Wear Daily, October 27, !972.

[53]November 4, 1972.

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[54]November 4, 1972.

[55]November 2, 1972.

[56]October 27, 1972.

[57]November 13, 1972.

[58]October 26, 1972.

[59]Whether the critics would admit it or not, surely their reviews were influenced by their impressions of the new, nontraditional approach to musical theatre as practiced by Harrison and other black artists of the era, and by how much--if at all--they were pleased or repulsed by the interpretation of both the Billie Holiday legend and the offbeat rendering of her songs.

[60]Paul Carter Harrison, The Great Macdaddy, in Kuntu Drama, ed. by Paul Carter Harrison (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1974), p. 259.

[61]Ibid., p. 261.

[62]Ibid., p. 343.

[63]Ibid., p.264.

[64]Ibid., p. 268.

[65]Ibid., p. 339.

[66]February 13, 1974.

[67]Ibid.

[68]February 13, 1974.

[69]Women's Wear Daily, February 14, 1974.

[70]March 3, 1974.

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[71]July 16, 1974.

[72]July 22, 1974.

[73]Ibid.

[74]December 9, 1974.

[75]Times, April 28, 1977.

[76]Jim O'Quinn, Villager, November 15, 1979.

[77]Marilyn Stasio, Post, October 23, 1979.

[78]October 24, 1979.

[79]From a conversation with Vernel Bagneris, November 1979.

[80]Daily News, December 20, 1971.

[81]Women's Wear Daily, December 21, 1971.

[82]Times, April 20, 1972.

[83]Time, May 8, 1972.

[84]New Yorker, April 29, 1972.

[85]Clive Barnes, Times, December 23, 1976.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Post, December 23, 1976.

[88]December 23, 1976.

[89]December 23, 1976.

[90]January 10, 1977.

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[91]Clive Barnes, Times, January 13, 1977.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Daily News, January 13, 1977.

[95]January 13, 1977.

[96]Women's Wear Daily, January 13, 1977.

[97]January 26, 1977.

[98]Times, October 23, 1975.

[99]Sheldon Harris, Blues Who's Who (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1979), p. 464.

[100]This incident has been dramatized by Edward Albee in his short play, The Death of Bessie Smith.

[101]Daily News, March 3, 1976.

[102]Ibid.

[103]Women's Wear Daily, May 10, 1978.

[104]October 2, 1978.

[105]Ibid.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE 1980s: THE BLACK MUSICAL STRUGGLES FOR SURVIVAL

As the 1970s waned, the American musical was experiencing a downward cycle. The proposed economic policies of the new president of the nation, former film actor Ronald Reagan, offered hope to millions of Americans, but Reagan's budgetary cutbacks--nicknamed "Reaganomics"--had a severely adverse effect on the arts and artists. Due to a decrease in funding from the government and other grant-giving agencies, the American theatre, in both its musical and nonmusical divisions, faced dire times.

The 1980s: More Anthology Revues

Yet another revue, Black Broadway, opened May 4, 1980, at the Town Hall Theatre for a three-week engagement. The veteran-laden cast included Nell Carter, Honi Coles, Mercedes Ellington, Gregory Hines, Adelaide Hall, John W. Bubbles--who was appearing in Black Broadway, despite being partially paralyzed, and Bobby Short, among others. There was no director, but Short, as the co-producer and master of ceremonies, was responsible for much of the staging. After the show's intermission, Short, so that he would be able to keep his long-standing engagement as a lounge singer at the Hotel Carlisle, turned the master of ceremonies duties over to Gregory Hines.

Originally presented in June 1979, at the Newport Jazz Festival, the show was expanded for Broadway by adding more dancing. Two-and-a-half hours in length, the "sentimental valentine to the black performers and songwriters of 1900-1946"[1] focused mainly on the music from the Cotton Club revues and Broadway shows of the 1920s and '30s. The critics were kind to Black Broadway, the majority giving it positive, if not enthusiastic reviews. The most oft-repeated complaint was about its length. Richard M. Sudhalter, of the Post, and Howard Kissel, of Women's Wear Daily, mentioned how well the show functioned as a theatre history lesson.

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Jack Kroll wrote of the stereotypes which abounded in the era covered in the show, adding: "For better or worse, many . . . are prominently displayed in Black Broadway." He noted that "the urbane cabaret star Bobby Short" sang sanitized versions of "coon songs."[2] Stanley Crouch, the black critic from the Village Voice, felt that Short's rendering of the "coon" songs put them in their proper historical perspective, in order "to let us see clearly the convention of minstrelsy with which black performers were faced."[3]

Well-intended though Black Broadway may have been, surely it must have induced a sense of deja vu in many of its audience members--several of the songs which were revamped in the show had already been redone in Bubbling Brown Sugar and Eubie!

Of the numerous musical shows which "Duke" Ellington had written for Broadway productions, only 1947's short-lived, integrated-cast Beggar's Holiday reached Broadway. Sophisticated Ladies [to be called Ladies], a collage from his seemingly infinite canon of compositions, contained many of the songs which he had written for Broadway in the shows mentioned in Chapter Eight of this thesis. Based on a concept by Donald McKayle, Ladies opened March 1, 1981, at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. It was directed by Michael Smuin, with Smuin and McKayle providing the musical staging and choreography. Henry Le Tang created the show's tap choreography and served as one co-choreographer with Smuin and McKayle.

Ladies' five main performers were Gregory Hines, Judith Jamison, Phyllis Hyman, P. J. Benjamin, and Terri Klausner, with Hinton Battle, Gregg Burge, and Mercedes Ellington, the granddaughter of the composer, in featured roles.

The show, which cost one million dollars to produce, and was two years in the making, fared badly in tryouts in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Wilmington, Delaware. Prospects for it surviving long enough to reach Broadway were dim, but Ladies "was reconstructed, eliminating the book [by black dramatist Samm-Art Williams] and putting the emphasis entirely on the Ellington music."[4] Ladies consisted of 36 Ellington songs; Ellington's son, Mercer, led the 20-piece onstage band.

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In general, the reviews were positive, although some critics complained that the bookless song revue was unfocused. The cast, and, of course, Ellington's music, received raves. Some critics wryly noted the inclusion of the "token whites," Klausner and Benjamin. Clive Barnes called it:

> . . . one of the most lavish musical non-musicals that Broadway has ever seen. In fairness, it is simply a handsomely tarted-up band-show.[5]

Several others also tempered otherwise positive critiques by remarking that they felt Ladies was "essentially another cabaret show."[6] Howard Kissel devoted a good deal of his review to commenting on the sameness of the recent black musicals:

> A few years ago, it seemed as if black musicals might bring a new spirit, a new imagination to Broadway. Now they have become so standardized only one part of the formula remains a question--which do you do first: hire Gregory Hines, or choose the subject.[7]

Kissel ended his review by citing the dichotomy which was at work in the anthology shows. He chided the general lack of creativity involved in merely compiling and juxtaposing songs from a bygone era, yet gave the anthology shows their due for being valid entertainment vehicles, saying that Ladies was "so full of pleasures only churls will not love it madly."[8]

Ladies proved to be a popular show, totalling 767 performances. Its success five years after Ellington's death underscores the somewhat necrophiliac affair that Broadway audiences were having at that time with black composers.

Opening May 5, 1981, Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music cast the spotlight on the legendary performer and the songs with which she was most closely associated. Under the direction of Arthur Faria, and with the aid of five supporting performers, Horne interjected biographical bits about herself and anecdotes concerning her career. The show, which made its debut a month before Horne's

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64th birthday, garnered unanimous rave reviews and played for 333 performances at the Nederlander Theatre before setting out on a lucrative national tour.

Not nearly as popular with either the critics or the theatre-going public was Blues in the Night, which opened June 2, 1982, at the Rialto Theatre, an out-of-the-way house. Conceived and directed by Sheldon Epps, the cast was comprised of Leslie Uggams, Debbie Shapiro, Jean Dushon, and Charles Coleman. It had been originally produced Off-Broadway in March 1980, totalling 51 performances for that run.

The show consisted of 25 more-or-less well-known blues numbers; there was no dialogue, and a minimum of dancing. It was set in 1938 in a cheap Chicago hotel where the three female performers--identified as Woman One, Woman Two, and Woman Three--have separate, shabby rooms. The three women did not interact with each other at any time, not even when singing the same song together.[9]

Several critics began their reviews by adding to the growing list of complaints decrying yet another anthology revue. Many were displeased about the vagueness of the characters and wanted not only a more profound sense of delineation about them but "a sense of progression or emotional build through the evening."[10] Several reviewers, including Douglas Watt, of the Daily News, thought that, since the subject was the blues, "Shapiro, the only white member of the trio,"[11] was totally out of her element. Most of the reviewers complained about what they perceived as a static staging of the musical by the director. The recurring negative comparison to other anthology revues which the critics had made were best summed up by Frank Rich, who called Blues in the Night:

> . . . a bland evening that mainly serves to remind us how much imagination went into the seemingly similar, far more fiery predecessors [Ain't Misbehavin' and One Mo' Time].[12]

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The 1982 presentation lasted 53 performances; a September 1988 revival at the Off-Broadway Minetta Lane Theatre netted another 45 showings.

Uptown . . . It's Hot! [henceforth called Uptown] was perhaps undermined by the desire on its creators' part to present too many different genres of twentieth-century African-American music in a standard-length Broadway entertainment. Opening January 28, 1986, at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, it was directed, choreographed, and conceived by Maurice Hines, who also starred in the show, the only "name" performer in the piece.

The first half covered the often-trod ground of the standards from the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, reusing many of the songs which had been already reissued in previous anthology revues. The second half was a swift montage of segments of songs from gospel, early black rock 'n' roll, the 1960s "girl-group" and Motown sounds, 1970s disco, and 1980s rap.

Uptown garnered mostly tepidly negative reviews. Most thought that the first act merely rehashed already overworked material, and that the second act, which Frank Rich called "the theatrical equivalent of a telephone-booth-stuffing contest,"[13] was undone by its intended eclecticism. In saying that Uptown was "a lavish nitery attraction, rather than a skillfully conceived Broadway show" and that it impressed one "as a synthetic and parodistic exploitation of great showbiz trendsetters,"[14] the critic from Variety inadvertently summed up the consensus of his colleagues.

Frank Rich, of the Times, also made several comments which evoked the sentiments of his fellow reviewers. He suggested: "If you stay only until intermission, you may leave [the show] with some pleasant feelings about [it]."[15] He added that the latter half "can only be described as a demented amalgam of Leader of the Pack, Dreamgirls, and Night of the Living Dead."

Any follower of African-American popular music of the past four decades would have noted how Hines' choice of songs and artists to parody was limited to those with "crossover" appeal; only those known by white audiences were dealt with; such familiar rock 'n' rollers as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, the Supremes, and Tina

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Turner were the objects of the show's tributes/satires, while talented black artists, who were obscure to whites, yet very popular in black neighborhoods, such as the Spaniels, the Eldorados, the Intruders, and Mittie Collier, to name just a few, were totally ignored, thus opening Hines to accusations of slanting his show to white audiences. This possibility was not lost upon Frank Rich, who wrote that the show:

> . . . displayed some of the tourist mentality of Francis Ford Coppola's [film] Cotton Club (in which Mr. Hines appeared), severs whatever roots it had in the soul of black music, and embraces wholeheartedly the expediencies of Las Vegas.[16]

In choosing only that black music to which white audiences could best relate, and offering abridged versions of the songs at that, Hines seriously underestimated his potential black audience's reverence for the music, and trivialized that music. The first anthology revue in nearly four years, since the short-lived Blues in the Night, Uptown, which started out as an Atlantic City casino show, could be perceived as having a dilettantish aspect: black rock 'n' roll had been one of the few genres left relatively untouched in the anthology shows, but, as if to safeguard its box-office appeal, Hines culled many of the by-now overdone songs from the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, and imposed them onto the first act. At once slickly-packaged and naively-conceived, Uptown--whose very title left Hines open for all sorts of sarcastic puns by reviewers--could muster only 45 performances.

Black and Blue, the last of the anthology revues of the 1980s, was the creation of Claudio Segoria and Hector Orezzoli, whom Frank Rich described as "a madcap pair of Argentine set and costume designers."[17] Conceived and directed by Segoria and Orezzoli--who also designed the lights and costumes--the $5,000,000 show had been developed in Paris, the city where the Argentine artists worked.

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The show, which opened January 26, 1989, at the Minskoff Theatre, was choreographed by Charles "Cholly" Atkins, Henry LeTang, Frankie Manning, and Fayard Nicholas. The huge cast was headed by Linda Hopkins, Carrie Smith, and Ruth "Little Miss Rhythm" Brown, the 1950s rhythm-and-blues great. Black and Blue featured blues, jazz, and show tunes from the first half of the twentieth century.

Only Joel Siegel, the television critic; Linda Winer of Newsday, and the highly-influential Frank Rich of the Times refrained from giving the show enthusiastic reviews. The three lead performers were given unanimous raves, as was the show's dancing. Several reviewers felt that the rather incongruous Argentinian/European tone of the show proved to be an inadvertent bonus, with Howard Kissel noting how it had "very much a European appreciation of things Americans often take for granted."[18] Clive Barnes wrote that it was "the Apollo transformed by a massive input of French chic: as a result it is. . . . a great deal more Josephine Baker than Bessie Smith."[19]

Several critics wondered why such simple art forms as jazz and the blues had to be staged so lavishly. Rich complained that the directors "don't seem to understand that the power of blues and jazz often rests in their unadorned simplicity."[20] Rich also expressed an opinion that the show would have been better served had the directoral reins been handed over to Henry Le Tang.

One minor complaint recurred throughout the reviews: many felt that although the performers had effectively captured the earthy, sensual nature of the blues, some of them were having too much fun with an art form which is essentially the communication of inner pain.

Black and Blue, the last of the anthology revues of the 1980s, was also the most popular; as of this writing, it is still playing to huge audiences.

Often maligned as a last-resort technique for staging shows when there exists a supposed absence of capable composers, librettists, and lyricists with fresh ideas, or the lack of means to develop more substantive--read that: intelligently-crafted book

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musicals--shows, the anthology revue was undermined by the fact that, though it was often colorful and entertaining, more often than not there was no real "drama" involved or developed. Many were, as the critics were so apt to point out, merely cabaret acts staged in a Broadway theatre. By the 1980s, these shows were repeating themselves; many of the songs, such as "Take the 'A' Train," "It Don't Mean a Thing," "I Got It Bad, and That Ain't Good," and "God Bless the Child Who's Got His Own," each appeared in at least four shows between Bubbling Brown Sugar and Black and Blue.

Despite having languished the latter half of the 1970s in a moribund state, the original book musical did not die in the 1980s, a decade in which an attempt was made to bring back thought-provoking libretto shows to the commercial stage.

The Black Book Musical Makes a Return

By 1980, the popularity of reggae, a Jamaican-based music, had reached the point where Broadway producers finally dared to make it the basis for a show. A combination of African rhythms, traditional Jamaican melodies, and the Fats Domino-derived New Orleans "Big Beat" sound of the mid-1950s, reggae music also came equipped with a lore of its own, centered around the mysterious Rastafarian cult of Jamaica. With its built-in mythology, and the music itself, the better of which examples featured catchy, dance-able tunes and cleverly-wrought, socially-conscious lyrics, the subject of reggae appeared to have commercial possibilities on Broadway.

The musical which brought the reggae sound to Broadway was five years in the making. With its numerous script and cast changes, and its plethora of librettists and songwriters, the finished product, entitled, appropriately enough, Reggae, gave truth to the axiom which states that too many cooks spoil the broth. Three different authors are given credit for the show's book, including Melvin Van Peebles; seven different songwriters are listed; Glenda Dickerson is listed as the show's director, but Gui Adrisano is credited with "additional direction."

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Heading the cast were Sheryl Lee Ralph, Phillip Michael Thomas, Calvin Lockhart, Obba Babatunde, and Sam Harkness. Finally opening, after several postponed premiere dates, on March 27, 1980, at the Biltmore Theatre, Reggae was the story of Faith (Ralph), a Jamaican-born pop singer who has achieved success in the United States and has returned to her native island to re-acquaint herself with her "roots." Perhaps against her better judgment, she recommences her romance with Esau (Thomas), her childhood sweetheart who is now a major marijuana farmer. The local Rastafarians fear she has come back to steal their music, but she convinces them that this is not the case, and in the end, the antagonistic factions unite and perform a benefit concert.

The reviews of Reggae were eerily reminiscent of those of 1947's Caribbean Carnival. The adjectives "muddled," "cluttered," "confusing," and "predictable" appeared in practically every critique. Most of the reviewers complained about what they judged to be a silly, noncompelling plot; several expressed the opinion that it would have fared better as a concert, including Thulani Davis, who wrote:

> The producers of Reggae might have done well to stage it at Roseland . . . and let the audience dance; the best thing about the show is the music.[21]

The critic from Variety made a similar suggestion, feeling that if the book was discarded and "the brief concert scene at the end of the show" was expanded, then Reggae "might attract enough customers for Broadway survival."[22]

Given reggae music's popularity at the moment, perhaps even a mediocre but lucid book might have saved the show. However, with its overabundance of writers, the focus of Reggae became so diffused that the enthusiastically-received songs were unable to keep it going; for perhaps the first time in the history of the black musical, a poorly-crafted book prevented a well-scored show from attaining success; Reggae was removed after 21 showings.

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It's So Nice To Be Civilized [shortened to Nice] marked Micki Grant's sole attempt to achieve a Broadway success sans Vinnette Carroll, her longtime collaborator. In addition to her usual role as composer/lyricist, Grant also wrote the libretto; the director was Frank Corsaro. The cast featured Mabel King, Vivian Reed, Deborah Burrell, and Obba Babatunde. Opening June 3, 1980, at the Martin Beck Theatre, Nice was a look at a rather placid predominately-black neighborhood. The show's skeletal story-line was attacked by the press, many of whom felt that there was no plot. The songs of Grant, one of the most respected songwriters in the theatre in the 1970s, were judged to be mediocre. Perhaps Douglas Watt best spoke for his colleagues when he wrote, "Much to my regret, I must condemn the show."[23] Nice lasted but a week.

The story of Jack Roosevelt Robinson and his quest to become the first identifiably black major league baseball player[24] is fairly well-known, and not just by sports fans. The First, a musicalized version of that saga, made its debut at the Martin Beck Theatre on November 17, 1981. The book was by Martin Charnin and Joel Siegel, the theatre critic for WABC-TV in New York. Charnin wrote the lyrics and directed; the music was by Bob Brush. David Alan Grier, a recent graduate of the Yale School of Drama, made his Broadway debut as Jackie Robinson; Lonnette McKee played his wife, Rachel. David Huddleston appeared as Branch Rickey, and Red Barber, the celebrated play-by-play announcer for the Brooklyn Dodgers, did several voice-overs in the show.

The First focused on Robinson's signing with the Dodgers in late 1945, and his first year in the major leagues, 1947. Little mention was made of his first year in "organized ball"--1946, with the Montreal Royals of the Triple-A International League. Surprisingly, the librettists missed a chance for added dramatic tension by downplaying the fact that, had Robinson failed in Branch Rickey's "noble experiment," the major leagues would have abandoned their search for the "right" first black ballplayer for several years.

The First was one of those shows which received good reviews from everyone but the critics who mattered the most in terms of influencing the theatregoing public--the afore-mentioned "Three

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Wise Men"--Frank Rich, Douglas Watt, and Clive Barnes. Barnes' Post critique was mixed, but leaning toward the negative; Watt's assessment in the Daily News was benignly negative; Rich's review in the Times was diplomatic but nonetheless negative.[25]

Plays, musicals, and films with sports and sports stars as their subjects have traditionally fared poorly at the box-office. Despite its good intentions, the story of Jackie Robinson's ordeal never found an audience, closing after just 37 showings.

A subject-matter which is full of dramatic possibilities, the early days of black rock 'n' roll music, had been, as of 1981--with the exception of the novel The Day The Music Died, by Joseph C. Smith--largely unexplored by writers. Opening December 20, 1981, at the Imperial Theatre, Dreamgirls became the first commercial musical to take a look at the world of rhythm-and-blues/rock 'n' roll music.

The show was the brainchild of Michael Bennett, who had, for the two years prior to its Broadway engagement, meticulously honed and restructured it in an extended workshop in a building which he owned at the corner of 18th Street and Broadway. Along with conceiving the show, Bennett also served as its director and choreographer, with Michael Peters assisting him in the latter role. The book and lyrics were by Tom Eyen; the music was by Henry Krieger; Theoni V. Aldredge designed the costumes. The huge cast included Sheryl Lee Ralph as Deena Jones, a Diana Ross-like singer; Loretta Devine, Jennifer Holiday, and Deborah Burrell appeared as her groupmates, the Dreams; Ben Harney played Curtis Taylor, Jr.; Cleavant Derricks was featured as the James Brown-like soul shouter, James Thunder Early; Derricks also doubled as the show's vocal arranger.

The show had, not counting reprises, 31 musical numbers; in lieu of dialogue, much of the exposition was provided by recitative. The plot concerned the rise of the Dreamettes--later the Dreams--beginning at the height of the early-1960s "girl-group" craze, and ending ten years later. The Dreams were not unlike the real-life Supremes, and recorded for a company which was not unlike Motown Records, which, in the play, was headed by Curtis Taylor, Jr., who

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was not unlike the founder and erstwhile head of Motown, Berry Gordy, Jr.

The story focuses on how Taylor, in seeking a "crossover" sound and look, which would have greater appeal to white audiences, had shifted the duties of lead vocalist for the Dreams from Effie White, an overweight, raw rhythm-and-blues shouter, to the more svelte and smooth-voiced Deena. The show's primary "message" was that "crossing over" extracts a Faustian price: in a figurative sense, the artists, the producers, and the music itself lose that "soul" which was the basis for their popularity in the first place.

Dreamgirls was one of those rare shows in which none of the critics took the middle ground; those who loved it and those who hated it did so wholeheartedly, giving it either the highest praise or the worst damnation. In his positive appraisal, Frank Rich of the Times provided his readers with several insightful comments. He noted the various paradoxes of the play:

> Dreamgirls is full of plot, and yet it has virtually no spoken scenes. It takes place in roughly 20 locations, from Harlem to Hollywood, but it has not one realistic set. It is a show that seems to dance from beginning to end, yet in fact has next to no dance numbers.[26]

In light of the play's emphasis on the phenomenon of black artists "selling out" to the mainstream, Rich noted that the two characters who maintained their integrity as African-Americans, and, by extension, as black artists, Effie and James Thunder Early, "suffer a more redemptive form of anguish." He extended this thought by remarking:

> As the Dreams blunt the raw anger of their music to meet the homogenizing demands of the marketplace, we see the high toll of guilt and self-hatred that is inflicted on those who sell their artistic souls to the highest bidder.[27]

Douglas Watt of the Daily News took the opposite view from Rich. He felt the show was "all style and no substance" and was "as

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flashy as a shopgirl's dream and just as empty." In commenting on the huge budget for costumes, he said that Dreamgirls "often resembles an outrageous fashion show set to music," and that Bennett's staging of the show reminded him of "a series of rehearsal periods for some slick TV commercial."[28]

Stanley Crouch, a black critic for the Village Voice, felt there was a lack of authenticity in the show which was a result of a paucity of black talent on the creative end. He complained:

> Slickness and emptiness, counterfeit Motown music [my emphasis] and terribly predictable dance routines constantly ruin brilliant visual ideas.[29]

Crouch decried the dearth of black backstage talent connected with Dreamgirls by writing:

> Had Bennett buttressed his own considerable gifts with more than the improvised characters provided by his performers, the substance of Dreamgirls could have gone over the top. But in order to do that, he would have had to hire first-class black choreographers, songwriters, and arrangers.[30]

Crouch also felt the musical really ended with Jennifer Holiday's rendition of "And I'm Telling You I'm Not Going" near the end of the first act.

Of all the reviewers, perhaps Sylviane Gold of the Soho Weekly News best understood both the music of the era covered in the play and how that music reflected the times in which it flourished. Speaking of the Supremes, the group from which Bennett's fictional Dreams were drawn, Gold said the fabled Motown trio:

> . . . represented the merging of the dark, fevered world of our r&b imaginations with the chaste, conventional world of our day-to-day existence.[31]

Gold also named several female groups of that era who were actually stronger singers and more dynamic stage performers than Berry

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Gordy's Supremes, but, that the Supremes, with their finishing-school image and toned-down and cleaned-up sound, represented "dreams."

As did many critics, Gold questioned the authenticity of the music used in the show, calling it "a masterpiece of imitation, even parody." Gold also presented her readers with an excellent insight into the main paradox dealt with in the show:

> The racial messages . . . just about defy analysis. This is, after all, a musical--by whites--about blacks whom get the white man's number and beat him at his own game. And the heroic characters are the ones who don't pander to the dominant culture--the ones who stick with their own thing . . . But, paradoxically, the characters who do [Gold's emphasis] pander succeed in changing [Gold's emphasis] the dominant culture, in shaping it to their own dreams.[32]

Several critics took the creators of Dreamgirls to task over the music, which they felt was much closer to that of the standard Broadway musical than of 1960s Motown music. At the height of Motown's popularity, the mid to late-1960s, numerous non-Motown records were released which tried to capture the "Motown sound";[33] surely many of the critics--and a vast number of the play's patrons --were expecting the composer, Krieger, to have written a score which was at least derivative of that sound. One critic complained that the score was much more redolent of white musical comedy than of rhythm-and-blues and added that "this is to be expected: the audience for this show, as for other 'black' musicals . . . is mostly white."[34] Clive Barnes concurred with that, writing: "The music . . . is chiefly a white man's watered-down version of Motown, reminiscent of the real thing but only faintly."[35]

Michael Feingold of the Village Voice defended what he felt was the creative team's choice not to write songs which were evocative of the great 1960s Motown classics:

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> Dreamgirls doesn't pretend to be a piece of Black art: the black characters are simply people fitting themselves into the mainstream of American life; their lives and music interest the white creators of the work, not as exotic "hot" items, but precisely because society has already made the crossover to them. Black music, in varying degrees of dilution, is [Feingold's emphasis] popular music. Eyen and Krieger aren't pretending to make black music, they're writing about the phenomenon of its popularity.[36]

The circumstances behind the creation of Dreamgirls epitomize the paradox of the black musical: white creative teams, due to more immediate access to those who invest in Broadway shows and the necessary contacts simply to get things done in such a nepotistic industry, have told "black" stories from their white point of view, while, due to a lack of funding, black creative and producing entities have been unable to tell their own stories on the commercial stage. However, a monumental irony was at work in the production of Dreamgirls. Bennett's story was an unflattering fictional account of the rise of Motown Records and Berry Gordy, Jr. Unlike the black would-have-been producers who lacked the finances to back their ambitious projects, Gordy had the money to celebrate the saga of his company's rise. With its abundance of writers, performers, and capital to back such a project, it had long been assumed that Motown would produce a musical--or even a series of musicals--on Broadway. However, rather than doing the obvious and the feasible, Motown either procrastinated or simply cancelled the several projects which they had announced they were preparing for Broadway in the 1970s.[37]

While Motown was either ignoring--or failing to see--the potentials of the lucrative Broadway stage, Broadway was not ignoring them; Dreamgirls can be seen, in its fictional context, by means of its unsympathetic portrayal of the character of Curtis Taylor, Jr., as a personal affront to Berry Gordy, Jr.

The refusal of Motown Records--at one time the most prosperous black enterprise in America--to venture into the arena of

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Broadway productions exemplifies what has been and is still the biggest obstacle to black-produced black shows in the commercial theatre: the nonparticipation of those African-Americans who have the necessary capital, yet refrain from investing it into black plays, musicals, and films.

The two-year workshop development phase did not go for naught; the songs, dances, and story-line were honed, if not to perfection, then at least to Broadway slickness; the team of show-business veterans used their knowledge of audience psychology and how to package an entertaining and quick-moving vehicle to turn out an opus which, from the consensus of the critics, was visually and aurally interesting throughout. Dreamgirls lasted for 1,522 performances in its initial Broadway run, by far the longest run by a black musical in the 1980s. The show toured successfully; one of the road companies returned to Broadway on April 28, 1987, for 168 more showings.

Melvin Van Peebles' Waltz of the Stork [referred to as Waltz] was roundly dismissed by the critics as a "vanity" production. Opening January 5, 1982, at "the 299-seat Broadway-localed Century Theatre,"[38] Waltz was written, directed, and produced by Van Peebles. Though it was "essentially a one-man show,"[39] Van Peebles was joined in the cast by his son, Mario, and a young woman named C. J. Critt. The music was provided by "a sullen-faced saxophonist named Bob Carten."[40]

The plot concerned the autobiographical character named Edward Aloysius Younger, who, like Van Peebles, grew up in Chicago, served a stint in the military, expatriated to Europe, and then entered the world of show business. The play ended with Younger returning home to marry his sweetheart from his teen years. The austerely-budgeted Waltz managed 160 performances.

The Tap Dance Kid [to be called Kid] began its long run on December 21, 1983, at the Broadhurst Theatre. The book was by Charles Blackwell; the lyrics by Robert Lorick, and the music by Henry Krieger of Dreamgirls fame. The director was Vivian Matalon, who had been fired, and then rehired, during the show's extended preview period, which it had in lieu of an out-of-town tryout.

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Based on Nobody's Family Is Going To Change, a children's novel by Louise Fitzhugh, the cast of Kid included Alfonso Ribeiro in the title role, Hattie Winston and Samuel E. Wright as his parents, Hinton Battle as his tap-dancing uncle, Alan Weeks as the ghost of his grandfather, a legendary "hoofer" from the vaudeville circuit, and Barbara Montgomery in the nonsinging role of the family's West Indian maid.

The story is about Willie, the ten-year-old son of a black lawyer who has settled his family in the upper-middle-class enclave of Roosevelt Island. Willie aspires to be, as many of his predecessors were, a tap dancer, but his upwardly-mobile parents oppose this dream; they associate tap dancing with "cooning." The fact that his mother was once part of a dancing team, along with her father and brother, adds to the tension created by Willie's goal. In a line that was quoted by many reviewers, Willie's father tells him: "We didn't get off the plantation until we stopped dancing and started doing."

Most of the critics felt that, as a variation on The Jazz Singer story, the plot was too predictable. Most complained about the songs, saying that Lorick's lyrics were bland and Krieger's music was uninspiring. The reviewers did praise the performances of the principle players. The so-called "Three Wise Men"--Douglas Watt, Clive Barnes, and Frank Rich--were all benignly negative in their critiques, but the less-influential reviewers gave the show more favorable responses.

Kid is noteworthy because it marked the first time that a black American family of means was the subject of a Broadway musical. Having, up until the 1960s black-consciousness era, drawn its characters and situations mainly from the lower strata of black life, the creators of mainstream musicals either totally ignored affluent blacks or subjected them to ridicule by parodying their supposed aping of the mores and mannerisms of wealthy whites; Kid took its audience into a black upper-middle-class household and did not hold the upscale African-Americans up to ridicule. This fact did not go unnoticed by Frank Rich:

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> Certainly the author of the show's book . . . deserves credit for dramatizing a milieu new to the musical theatre--the black upper-middle-class--and doing so with integrity.[41]

Kid, despite a tepid reception from the press, managed 699 performances on Broadway.

Honky Tonk Nights offered a look into a black vaudeville troupe of the early decades of this century, with its book and lyrics by Ralph Allen and David Campbell, and music by Michael Valenti, Honky Tonk Nights [called Nights in this thesis] opened August 7, 1986, at the Biltmore Theatre. Ernest O. Flatt directed and choreographed; the cast included Joe Morton, Ira Hawkins, Teresa Burrell, Yolanda Graves, Danny Strayhorn, and Reginald Veljohnson.

The first act of Nights was set in 1912 and focused on a black vaudeville troupe which operated out of a variety of Hell's Kitchen houses; the second act took place ten years later, with the same company now being based in Harlem.

The skits and jokes presented were those which had been used by black vaudeville performers; as he had done for his hit Broadway musical, Sugar Babies, Allen, also a prominent educator, had thoroughly researched the era in which the show was set. But, regardless of the authenticity of much of the material, many reviewers complained that the jokes were dated, and that the characters and their situations were not compelling enough to sustain interest or empathy. Most mentioned that the play's serious ending, in which the Bert Williams-like character named Barney Walker has been hired to perform with the Ziegfield Follies and is reluctantly donning the blackface makeup, was not adequately prepared for. Several reviewers expressed disappointment over the fact that Dr. Allen had been unable to duplicate the elements in Sugar Babies which had made that show such an entertaining and popular success. Mel Gussow of the Times echoed the opinions of several of his colleagues when he noted:

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> Because the co-author and co-lyricist is Ralph Allen and the subject . . . is black vaudeville, one has every reason to anticipate that [Nights] might be a black equivalent of Sugar Babies. . . . Such may be the intention, but it is not the result.[42]

Perhaps part of the negative response to Nights was a matter of the critics not writing about the show which they had seen, but about the one they had wanted to see. Whatever the case, Nights lasted but five performances.

Sarafina!, a musical which was by and about a group of black South African political dissidents, seemed to be an unlikely candidate for Broadway popularity. It made its American debut Off-Broadway at the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre, where it ran for 81 performances; the demand for tickets dictated a move to Broadway. It was transferred to the Cort Theatre, where it had its Broadway premiere on January 28, 1988.

The show was conceived, written, and directed by Mbongeni Ngema, a black South African dramatist. The music was composed and arranged by Ngema and Hugh Masekela, who had, after leaving his native South Africa as a young man, gained worldwide fame asa trumpeter, composer, and recording artist, becoming, along with his former wife, Miriam Makeba, the two most famous black expatriates from that nation.

Ngema and Masekela first met after a performance by the trumpeter at the club S. O. B.'s in Manhattan. They expressed a mutual admiration for each other's work, and made tentative plans for a collaboration. A year later they began working on what was to become Sarafina! at Masekela's London home.[43] The show was first staged at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. The actors in Sarafina!, practically all of whom were in their late teens or early twenties, were not professionals, but had been trained for the show by Ngema after being cast by him following a nationwide search.[44]

The play's plot is relatively simple. Set at "Morris Isaacson High School, the site of student protests during the Soweto uprising of 1976 . . . the premise has to do with the students' efforts to

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create a play out of their tragic history."[45] The title character is a charismatic schoolgirl around whom the rest of her classmates rally for their play/demonstration; Sarafina represents a surrogate for all black political prisoners and dissidents in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

With the exception of the critic from Variety, and the characteristically acrimonious John Simon of New York, the reviewers reacted positively to the show. Masekela's music was praised; most of the critics lauded the energetic and earnest, if unpolished, young cast. Many reviewers complained that the book was patchy and didactic in spots, and that the show was overlong and a bit repetitious in its libretto, songs, and dances. The consensus of the reviewers was expressed well by Frank Rich when he wrote:

> . . . the character of the music and the young faces . . . exert a pull that keeps rescuing the evening from its failures at conventional theatrical tasks.[46]

Like many a popular and well-conceived show, Sarafina! functioned on several levels. Though its message was steeped in political protest, its creators never lost sight of the fact that the show, after all, had to be entertaining. Most critics felt Sarafina! managed this aptly. Sylviane Gold of the Wall Street Journal made an interesting note on this aspect of the show. "It's both an impassioned protest and musical romp, a cry from the heart and a call to the dance floor."[47]

Sarafina! recalled two genres of the late-1960s commercial theatre: the black "protest" musicals, in terms of its strong political statement, and the rock musicals, with the spirit and energy generated by its youthful cast. The show's year-and-a-half run on Broadway made a mockery of the prediction by the critic from Variety, whose assessment of Sarafina! after its Off-Broadway opening was that it would probably do "adequate-to-brisk business for a while [at the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre]."[48]

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With such shows as The First, Dreamgirls, The Tap Dance Kid, Honky Tonk Nights, and Sarafina!, the black book musical marked a return to shows which strove to do more than merely entertain. However, the 1980s was not a hallmark decade for African-American musical creators. The only successful black-wrought book musical was Sarafina!, the creation of two black South Africans; the only book musical on Broadway of black American authorship was the spare and so-called "vanity production" of Melvin Van Peebles, Waltz. Nevertheless, the success of Sarafina! at the end of the decade proved there was still room on Broadway for an entertaining "message" musical.

White Show/Black Cast: 1980s

Bob Fosse's Big Deal was the only musical based on a white story but performed by a mostly-black cast on Broadway in the 1980s. Opening April 10, 1986, at the Broadway Theatre, and based on the 1958 motion picture, Big Deal on Madonna Street, Big Deal was written, directed, and choreographed by Fosse. The cast included Loretta Devine, Wayne Cilento, Cleavant Derricks, Larry Marshall, Desiree Coleman, and Alan Weeks. The show cost $5,000,000 to mount; Fosse had bought the rights to the film in 1968; Big Deal had an advance ticket sale of $1.5 million.[49]

The play was reset to Chicago's South Side at the height of the Great Depression. The songs--or, as was often the case, fragments of songs--used were popular tunes from the 1920s and '30s. Like the film upon which it was based, Big Deal was a spoof of low-budget gangster movies, "and dealt with the bungled efforts of a handful of stumble bums to pull off a grand theft."[50] According to Douglas Watt, "the entire evening [was] choreographed."[51]

The reviews were horrendous. Only the dancing received any positive comments from the press. Frank Rich, who remarked that "the crude, lame jokes . . . are as patronizing as Amos 'n' Andy" cited the perils of adapting a white story to a black situation, using Fosse's direction of Loretta Devine as an example. He noted that Devine had been "asked to mug . . . and shriek some lines and lyrics in a manner perilously reminiscent of Butterfly McQueen."[52]

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Edwin Wilson, of the Wall Street Journal, felt Big Deal was emblematic of the contemporary musicals, which he judged lacked "any semblance of substance or heart." He also noted that the Broadway theatre had recently "gone from book musicals, to the concept musical . . . to those created by a choreographer-director."[53]

The fact that Big Deal was the only white story/black cast show of the decade, while eight black book musicals--not counting the three gospel book musical shows--were mounted on Broadway, suggests the former trend, which was popular in the 1930s and '40s, and again in the latter half of the 1970s, had perhaps run its course.

White Shows With A Heavy Black Influence

As any sociologist could have predicted, one important aspect of popular culture in the 1980s would be a nostalgia for the 1960s; the proverbial "thirtysomething" or "baby boom" generation was now well into their thirties, with fond memories of the decade of their teen years, and the disposable income with which to indulge that nostalgia. Five "white" shows of the 1980s had an important--or several--pivotal black character[s]; three of these shows were centered around the "girl-group" sound of the first half of the 1960s, while music from that era played a prominent part in a fourth.

Off-Broadway's Little Shop of Horrors featured a parody/tribute to the female harmony groups of the early 1960s in the form of three bewigged black teenage girls called Crystal, Chiffon, and Ronnette--which just happened to be the names of three of the most popular girl groups of the era. The trio functioned as an ersatz Greek chorus, commenting on the action to tunes derivative of the music of that pre-Beatles era. Rejecting numerous offers to move uptown to Broadway, Little Shop of Horrors, which was based on Roger Corman's 1960 classic cult-film of the same name, totaled 2,209 performances after its July 27,1982, debut at the Orpheum Theatre.

Rock 'n' Roll: The First 5,000 Years marked the Broadway songwriting debut of such legends from the nascent days of rock 'n' roll as Frankie Lymon, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Larry Williams, and the father of rock 'n' roll himself, Chuck Berry. Not only were

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their songs performed, but their eccentric performance styles, along with numerous other early rockers, were parodied in production numbers. The show lasted but one week after its October 24, 1982, opening night.

1985's Leader of the Pack, which took its title from a 1965 chart-topping recording by the Shangri-Las, was basically a revue of the myriad of 1960s girl-group hits which were written by the then husband-and-wife team of Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich. Greenwich appeared in the show, as did Darlene Love, who sang lead on many of the Greenwich-Barry compositions of the era. The show's appeal proved to be limited to those who were aficionadoes of the girl-group sound, and lasted only 120 performances.

Big River was the only one of the five black-influenced shows which did not have 1960s black music at its core, although, ironically, its composer/lyricist, Roger Miller, had a string of hit records with a country-pop inflection during the same time period. Big River was a retelling of the Huckleberry Finn saga, with Ron Richardson winning the 1985 Tony Award for "Best Featured Performer in a Musical" in the pivotal role of Jim, the runaway slave with whom Huckleberry made his Mississippi River odyssey. Big River won the Tony Award for "Best Musical" of the 1984-85 season, and played 1,005 performances on Broadway.

Beehive was another tribute/parody show of the girl groups of the 1960s, deriving its title from the upswept bouffant hairstyles popular at the time. With its six female performers--three black girls and three whites--reprising and parodying the songs made famous by the Shirelles, Supremes, et.al., Beehive totalled 600 performances at the Village Gate, and, like Little Shop of Horrors, spurned numerous offers to move the show to Broadway.

Off-Broadway Black Musicals of the 1980s

Jazzbo Brown, a show which never officially opened, and,thus, was never reviewed, was the first Off-Broadway black-themed musical of the decade. Its book, lyrics, and music were by Stephen H. Lemberg; Louis Johnson served as the director and choreographer.

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Andre De Shields essayed the title role, with Chris Calloway playing his love interest.

Jazzbo Brown was a ragtime/gospel remake of The Jazz Singer; the protagonist, Billy Brown, yearns to be a Broadway star, while his father, a minister, has been molding him into a career as a gospel singer. The play opened as a showcase on June 24, 1980, at the City Lights Theatre, and had a scheduled Off-Broadway premiere for August 7, 1980, at the same theatre. The opening was, for reasons undisclosed, postponed; the show closed August 24, 1980, after 44 performances.[54,55]

Shades of Harlem was another in a seemingly endless line of black musical retrospectives. Opening August 21, 1984, at the Village Gate under the direction of Mical Whitaker, Shades of Harlem was created by Jeree Palmer. It covered basically the same territory as such shows as Sophisticated Ladies, Ain't Misbehavin', Bubbling Brown Sugar, and Eubie!, only on a much smaller scale with a much more parsimonious budget. Several original songs, written by the cast members and derivative of the 1920s and '30s hits which were featured in the show, were performed, but, according to the critics, paled against the standards.

Shades of Harlem, which can be viewed as an Off-Broadway anthology revue of the numerous Broadway anthology revues, somehow found an audience which did not mind hearing the familiar tunes of Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, and others in yet another venue, managing 258 performances.

The word "Harlem," much-used in many black musical titles because of its suggestion of uptown primitivism, had an extra "a" inserted in Andre De Shields' Haarlem Nocturne; perhaps the extra letter had the dual purpose of not making the show another generically-titled "Harlem" show and to pay a tribute to the Dutch city from which the black Manhattan community's name was derived. De Shields conceived the show, and, along with Murray Horwitz, wrote and directed it as well. It was basically a one-man show highlighting the talents of De Shields, who was assisted by four young women whom he called his "Black-Up Singers."

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Haarlem Nocturne opened November 18, 1984, at the Latin Quarter, a nightclub/theatre which straddles the demarcation between Off-Broadway and Broadway. The show was an expensive ticket--$35, plus a two-drink minimum.

The music was a collage of "rock, blues, gospel, cool jazz, '60s hits, and original songs written by Mr. De Shields."[56] In lieu of an overture, the pianist, Mark Shaiman, played "a series of theme songs from old television series, inviting the audience to sing along."[57]

Ron Cohen of Women's Wear Daily was able to discern a wisp of a story line:

> There's no book, but the sequence of songs and costume changes seems to suggest De Shields venturing from a backwoods home to become a Little Richard-style entertainer and then a suave crooner.[58]

The show elicited mostly mixed-to-positive reviews. There were no enthusiastic raves, and, with the exception of John Simon's excoriating review in New York, no writer expressed any extreme disdain for the show. Most of the reviewers made note of the fact--and not in a complaining manner--that the show had obviously been compiled to showcase the talents of De Shields, with the critic from Variety calling it "a vehicle to catapult [De Shields] to the front line of show biz,"[59] while Mel Gussow remarked that De Shields "delivers a performance that defines narcissism."[60]

The public, perhaps put off by the high price for what was basically a one-man show by a performer who had yet to establish himself as one of the theatre's elite artists, failed to respond to the musical, which closed after just 49 showings.

Williams and Walker, by Vincent D. Smith, made its debut February 5, 1986, at Woodie King's New Federal Theatre; its popularity at this Off-Off-Broadway house dictated a move to Off-Broadway, where it reopened at the American Place Theatre on March 9, 1986. The cast was comprised of Ben Harney as Bert Williams and Vondie Curtis-Hall as George Walker; Shauneille Perry directed. Thirteen songs from the turn-of-the-century era in which the

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Williams & Walker Company flourished were used; most of the tunes were from either the Williams & Walker or Cole & Johnson Company operettas; a pair of Scott Joplin ragtime numbers were included. The music was played by Neal Tate on piano and Joe Marshall on percussion. The Off-Broadway presentation was a co-production of the American Place and New Federal Theatres, and was staged as part of the former entity's "Jubilee" black theatre festival.

The play takes place in the dressing room of Bert Williams on the day of his debut with the Ziegfield Follies in 1910. As he is wiping off the blackface from his initial performance with that company, he is visited by his longtime best friend and partner, George Walker. They reminisce on their illustrious career together, reprising the song-and-dance routines, monologues, and specialty acts for which they were famous.

Most of the critics, including the all-important reviewers from the three major New York daily newspapers, gave the show positive assessments. Douglas Watt felt the intermissionless, 90-minute show was too short and dramatically incomplete, and thought it should have been rewritten to give a better insight into Williams and Walker and their times;[61] several other critics also felt it should have been expanded. All the reviewers raved about the performances of Harney and Curtis-Hall. Williams and Walker ran for 71 performances.

Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill [to be called Lady Day] was another small, Off-Broadway musical about a black artist of monumental talent. Written by Lanie Robertson and directed by Andre Ernotte, Lady Day opened as an Off-Off-Broadway showcase on June 4, 1986, at the Vineyard Theatre, reopening Off-Broadway at the Westside Arts Theatre on September 3, 1986. The "Lady Day" of the title--Billie Holiday--was played by Lonnette McKee; the cast was rounded out by the three musicians who functioned both as the show's onstage band and as actors in the play.

Lady Day takes place at a performance by Holiday in March 1959, at a neighborhood bar in South Philadelphia, four months before her death at age 44 from a heroin overdose; like many black Off-Broadway musicals of the 1970s and '80s, it was performed

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without an intermission. The play was, in a sense, a series of confessional monologues in which Holiday interrupted herself by singing the thirteen standards which were used in the show; Lady Day was similar in structure to Williams and Walker, with its use of flashbacks, anecdotes, and signature songs. The setting--a nondescript "corner" neighborhood bar in a working-class black section of Philadelphia was itself a subtle comment about the depths to which the once world-celebrated song-stylist had plunged due to her drinking and narcotics habits.

Most of the reviews were guardedly positive; there were no unabashed raves nor vehemently hostile critiques. Many reviewers noted that McKee, because she was extraordinarily striking of face and figure, simply looked too good to be portraying a 44-year-old-former beauty who had been ravaged by decades of drug and alcohol abuse. Several made note of the fact that, although playing one legendary jazz singer, McKee bore an uncanny resemblance to another, Lena Horne. Many reviewers expressed relief that McKee did not try impersonate Holiday and Holiday's unique vocal style. Six months into the run, McKee was replaced by S. Epatha Merkerson, who also received excellent reviews for her interpretation of the Holiday character. Lady Day had 281 performances in its Off-Broadway run.

Staggerlee, a Vernel Bagneris/Allen Toussaint collaboration, recalled--with its roster of stock characters from the black underclass--some aspects of the 1920s/'30s Neo-Minstrel entertainments. It opened March 18, 1987, at the Second Avenue Theatre; its book was by Bagneris, who also directed; Toussaint, the legendary New Orleans rhythm-and-blues composer/producer/arranger/pianist, wrote most of the songs; Bagneris provided some additional lyrics; a half-dozen traditional songs supplemented the original score. Bagneris also played the title character early in the show's preview run, but replaced himself with the actor/singer Adam Wade, who had enjoyed a brief but brilliant career as a Johnny Mathis-like recording star in the early 1960s, and had gained fame as the first black American host of a network television game show, Musical Chairs, in the 1970s. Also featured in the cast were Carol Sutton, Reginald Veljohnson, Juanita Brooks, and Ruth Brown.

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Staggerlee is Bagneris' variation on the story of the legendary hard-hearted street hustler and all-around "bad nigger" type. The Stagger Lee myth--he is alternately known as Stackolee, Stagolee, and Stacker Lee--has numerous variations, but appears to have originated in the Deep South shortly after the Civil War. Similar to the John Henry mythic character in his lusty and spirited manner of living, Stagger Lee differs from the railroad superman in that, while John Henry is hardworking and honest, Stagger Lee is ruthless and revels in his penchant, as the term goes in Louisiana, the probable birthplace of his myth, for "creating disturbance." In Bagneris' version the Stagger Lee character has been laundered into a rather benign, mid-level, Sportin' Life-type New Orleans hustler. He is wrongfully accused of a murder at Mardi Gras time, and the plot details his stay-close-to-home "flight" to avoid apprehension.

In dealing with the denizens of the underside of New Orleans life, Bagneris took great care not to allow his characters to sink to the inarticulate, dirt-poor caricatures of past black musicals. Indeed, the whores, pimps, madams, and other low-life types who inhabit Staggerlee could hardly be labeled as offensive by their actions; had they not been designated as lower-caste types, the viewer may not have guessed as much. The major complaint with the critics was that Bagneris had laundered his characters--and the Stagger Lee myth in general--too much. The critic from Variety wrote the show "could use some cayenne in the characters."[62] John Simon felt the play had "been sanitized and destereotyped by the authors."[63] As had been his libretto for One Mo' Time, Bagneris' book was judged as weak by most critics.

The show was advertised as "the authentic New Orleans rhythm-and-blues musical," and it was. Had its producers chosen to call it the first authentic rhythm-and-blues musical to grace the New York commercial stage, that would have also been a correct claim. That Toussaint's music and lyrics drew raves came as no surprize; he had been responsible for scores of Top Ten hit recordings, and had composed, arranged, and produced several records which had reached the number-one position on the popular music charts. However, the show's title tune was not of Toussaint's

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authorship; the 1958 chart-topping opus about the fatal dice game between Stagger Lee and Billy Isley, recorded and written by another New Orleans-born singer/songwriter, Lloyd Price, was used.

In the opinion of many critics--and of this writer--though the characters and situations may have brought to mind those from the Neo-Minstrel and similar shows, the authors never dramatized the worst aspects inherent in the stereotypes suggested. However, despite the obvious attempts not to play upon the most offensive elements of they types from whom they have drawn, Greg Tate, a black critic for the Village Voice, nevertheless took the authors to task for their portrayals of blacks. He began his critique:

> This late in the game (the race consciousness game, that is) no thinking person can sit through a black musical like Staggerlee and not wonder why they're being subjected to yet another round of rousing Negro song, sass and dance set in the 1950s saloon-and-whorehouse scene. The whole shebang played out so long ago, anyone intent on reviving it should at least invent a dramatic variation on the theme. Or find something weightier than turning our archetypical "bad nigger" into a pimp with a heart of gold.
>
> But why trifle over black macho verities--anybody who reads Newsweek knows the Staggerlee myth shit wasn't nothing but a cover-up for your basic low-life black man.[64]

Tate ended his attack on the show by wondering "how, in 1987, could some black folk mount a show so retro as to be nothing but some darktown strutters ball action?"

It is ironic that, while several white critics had complained that Bagneris and Toussaint had "destereotyped" the characters, a black critic, Tate, had expressed the opposite opinion.

Staggerlee fell far short of matching the popularity of One Mo' Time. It lasted but 118 performances at the Second Avenue Theatre; perhaps its relatively short run precluded an original cast album being recorded, despite an abundance of highly-praised tunes by

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Toussaint. Staggerlee did manage to fare better in London's West End.

Reversing the situation of the 1970s, all but one of the black Off-Broadway musicals of the 1980s was independently produced; only Williams and Walker originated at an institutional, not-for-profit theatre. Perhaps the runaway success of One Mo' Time, which made its New York debut in the waning weeks of the 1970s, gave independent producers confidence that black musicals could still turn a profit Off-Broadway. Ironically, of all the black Off-Broadway musicals of the 1980s, only Staggerlee had anything more than the small-cast, simple-sets-and-costumes, austerely-budgeted look which became the rule for the shows of that decade; Haarlem Nocturne and Lady Day were basically one-character shows; Williams and Walker had but two performers; Jazzbo Brown and Shades of Harlem had only slightly more actors involved.

The decade's first black Off-Broadway musical, the short-lived Jazzbo Brown, was an example of yet another white author attempting to impose black actors upon a white story; the final show, Staggerlee, was a black-wrought musical which took a look at a colorful slice of black mythology. The first three black Off-Broadway musicals were merely continuations of late-1970s trends; the last three shows dealt with authentically black issues; the first half of the 1980s on the black Off-Broadway musical stage gave the theatre more imitation; the latter half saw more substance in its shows.

The Gospel Musical in the 1980s

Mama, I Want to Sing [to be called Mama] developed from its troubled and rather obscure beginnings into perhaps the most interesting cult phenomenon in the history of the black theatre. Sub-titled A Story in Concert, Mama was first presented by the AMAS Repertory Company as an Equity-approved showcase production, making its debut December 3, 1980. Vy Higgensen, a prominent black female radio personality, wrote the book and lyrics; her husband, Ken Wydro, was credited with providing additional lyrics and "additional story consultation"; the music was by Richard

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Tee, and Duane L. Jones was the director. The play was to be, due to popular demand, extended past its initial 12-performance run, but Rosetta Lenoir, the artistic director of AMAS, was forced to close Mama after its thirteenth showing because the musical director, Frederic Gripper, had walked out with the music, taking the written orchestrations and dance arrangements.[65]

Gripper's walkout--which was done with the blessing of the cast--was in conjunction with a dispute between the actors and the show's creators, Higgensen and Wydro, over the latter couple's proposed recasting for a planned move of Mama to Broadway. Chapman Roberts, a spokesperson for AMAS, informed the New York Times that the actors had become disgruntled with Wydro and Higgensen, and that:

> to maintain its integrity, the highly qualified and professional cast, each of whom earned $12 a week, had to bring their own costumes, create their own characters and improvise lines.[66]

Undaunted by the dissension which aborted Mama's first run, Wydro and Higgensen, with $30,000 of their own money, mounted a second presentation of the show, beginning March 25, 1983, purportedly for three weekends. Ironically, the show was restaged at the Hecksher Theatre, a 667-seat auditorium in the East Harlem Cultural Center, the same building in which AMAS had its 112-seat theatre.

The 1983 production was written, produced, and directed by Higgensen and Wydro; Grenoldo [Frazier] served as the musical director, arranger, and composed the new version's original music. This production was not an Equity-approved presentation; this fact has caused some members of the mainstream theatre community to look askance upon the show and its proud claim of being "the longest-running black Off-Broadway musical in history." Regardless, the cast was headed by Desiree Coleman, then sixteen years old and the winner of the 1982 Miss Teenage Universe pageant; Doris Troy, Higgensen's sister, and the writer/performer of the 1963

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classic recording, "Just One Look," and Higgensen herself, as a radio personality who narrated the action.

If, as the actors in the 1980 production claimed, it is true Higgensen and Wydro left the creation of the characters and much of the dialogue to the performers themselves, then the couple did not squander much creativity in making a story-line, either. The skeletal plot, as did the plot of Jazzbo Brown and The Tap Dance Kid, represents yet another co-opting of The Jazz Singer story; Doris, the talented daughter of a minister, wants to sing secular music--in this case rock 'n' roll--instead of gospel. Against her family's wishes she becomes a recording artist whose career culminated in the Top-Ten hit record, "Just One Look." The producers made no secret that this was indeed the story of Doris Troy.

Mama's music came from three sources: the original compositions by Grenoldo; the traditional gospel tunes which have been the staple of gospel musicals; and, some rock 'n' roll songs of the 1950s and '60s.

Structurally, Mama was guilty of many of the sins which had caused many critics and theatre jurists to look with a measure of disdain upon the gospel musical. The book has no pretensions to originality; many of the songs have no ostensible relation to what comes before or after them. The "plot" seems to be merely dialogue to be spoken as a vague thread to link the songs; the main purpose of the songs appears to have been to arouse the emotions of the audience members.

Although Wydro and Higgensen knew little about structuring a fresh, innovative and insightful musical, they made up for this by knowing how both the audience and the critics would react. They geared the show for the former; they excluded the latter by never declaring an official, press-invited opening night. The producers must have felt, and rightly so, that negative reviews from the mainstream critics might kill the show before the advertising and word-of-mouth campaign in the black community could take effect.

Whenever a show's producers refuse to declare an official opening night, the New York critics have traditionally made a gentlemen's agreement and designated their own night for reviewing

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that show. For whatever the reasons, no such thing was done in the case of Mama. However, Stephen Holden, the "pop/jazz" critic for the Times did a report--not a review--on Mama, stating what probably would have been the consensus of the drama critics: "Theatrically [Mama] is primitive even by Off-Off-Broadway standards."[67]

As history has borne out, the creators of Mama aimed the show not at the traditional audience for black theatre, but toward church-related groups and social organizations; a majority of the targeted audience would have had no qualms about Mama's shortcomings in terms of structure and innovation; surely many patrons of it had seen few, if any theatrical productions. The show's main attraction, simply put, was its rousing gospel music. Mama had not been put together to please the purists, but to entertain the relatively uninitiated in terms of theatrical exposure.

Advertising heavily in the black media, and using an extensive word-of-mouth campaign, primarily in black churches, Mama became a "must-see" on the agenda of numerous black clubs and organizations. Busloads of people arrived from all over the Eastern Seaboard to the community center building on Fifth Avenue, and East 104th Street which housed the Hecksher Theatre. Numerous theatre parties were held at the show. It was only after the show became a runaway success that the producers began advertising in the main-stream media. According to Glenn Loney, "Mama is a textbook case of effective theatre management."[68]

After three years Mama was nearly evicted from the Hecksher Theatre. The community center in which the theatre was housed could be used only for non-profit ventures; the City of New York decided that, as a profit-making, private-enterprise entity, the production company for Mama was ineligible to use the city-owned building. After a nasty series of suits and countersuits between the municipal agents and the show's producers, it was decided that Higgensen and Wydro could rent the theatre at $96,000 a year, with a 15 percent increase in the rent after each year.[69]

Higgensen spurned many offers to move the show to Broadway; she felt the neighborhood in which the theatre was located, and the

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theatre itself, lent a certain ambience to the show. She pointed out how the play, which employed 150 persons, pumped much business into the predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood surrounding the Hecksher Theatre.[70]

The producers began sending out national companies in 1985; a production was staged in Japan in 1988. A sequel, Mama, I Want to Sing, Part II, was spawned in 1988; Wydro and Higgensen ventured into producing other shows, among them the critically-acclaimed August Wilson play, Joe Turner's Come and Gone.

The cult phenomenon which germinated due to the popularity of Mama may have inadvertently touched off another aspect of the black theatre of the 1980s. As mentioned before, the severe cut-backs in funding due to "Reaganomics" seriously undermined the financial situations of the institutional theatres; not only was the quantity of the works produced adversely affected, but some might argue that the quality also suffered. Many black Off-Off-Broadway institutional theatres either curtailed their production activities or simply became defunct. As a result, the formidable black theatre audience which had been developed in the 1960s and '70s began to atrophy; put simply, many of those black theatre patrons who had gotten into the habit of regularly attending plays had fallen out of the habit. Only a production which, for a variety of reasons, had become an "event," in which the mere being there was as important or perhaps more so than the play itself and its artistic merits, could persevere in this new theatre environment.

Mama became such an event. For those who had arrived on the caravan of buses, the whole procedure was not unlike a ritual: preparing for the trip; the trip itself; the entry into Manhattan--a first for many of the Mama audience members; and, finally, enjoying the gospel music of the show itself. This method of creating an "event" has not been lost on producers of recent black shows; rather than attempt to build a following during the course of an Off-Broadway or Off-Off-Broadway run, the people behind such shows as Momma Don't (1990) and the two Shelley Garrett plays, Beauty Shop and Barber Shop (both circa late-1980s) have chosen to hire non-union actors and book the shows into the cavernous Beacon Theatre at 74th Street

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and Broadway in Manhattan for a few performances, and, after a deluge of advertisement in the black media, hope to sell out the 1,200-seat auditorium for that short time.

Since the producers of these "event" shows opt for style over substance, a knowledgeable theatre audience is not being developed. A perfect case in point is the short-lived 1988 Broadway run of Joe Turner's Come and Gone; the producers, Wydro and Higgensen, initially attempted to market the play to the legion of followers of Mama--many of whom had seen the gospel show numerous times--by contacting the persons and groups on Mama's extended mailing list. However, the same audience which had made Mama a cult phenomenon failed to respond to the highly-praised Wilson play; it was sadly obvious that, for the most part, those same patrons who had flocked to see the simplistic, emotion-evoking gospel show did not find Wilson's deep and thought-provoking work attractive; in a sense, the trite and familiar had triumphed over the original and "different" opus.

As of its fifth anniversary showing on March 25, 1988, the producers of Mama had claimed it had played 1,608 performances; as of this writing it is still being presented once a week at the Hecksher. However, its claim of being the longest-running musical in the history of black theatre comes with a certain caveat. Though its producers persist in calling it an "Off-Broadway" show, being a non-union production, it does not subscribe, in terms of the salaries for the performers, musicians, and technicians, to the Actor's Equity pay scales or other regulations governing Off-Broadway productions. Had the show been done in 1983 under the standard Off-Broadway contracts and with an official opening night subject to the critics' analyses, the question remains whether it could have run long enough to build the following which it eventually gathered; surely the employment of amateur performers at less than union wager was responsible in part for the show's early financial survival.

Because of its more positive attributes, however, the phenomenon of Mama represents the best of the black theatre: it became an industry unto itself, employing scores of people, bringing much business into the community in which the theatre was located,

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and bringing joy and entertainment to its legion of supporters. Conversely, some other of its aspects are indicative of the worst elements of the black musical theatre: by playing upon the familiar and making no attempt to create anything innovative or profound, the authors of Mama merely appealed to the lowest common denominator--the love of gospel music--of their targeted audience. Regardless, their choice of style over substance paid off royally for Higgensen and Wydro; though essentially just a gospel concert--featuring the same music their patrons could hear in church for free, or a token contribution to the collection plate--which, as Stephen Holden pointed out, was "theatrically primitive," the fact remains that literally millions have seen and enjoyed Mama.

Amen Corner, a musical adaptation of James Baldwin's short-lived 1965 play, The Amen Corner, opened at the Nederlander Theatre November 10, 1983. Due to its setting in a Harlem Pentecostal church, the choice of the show's creators to use gospel as the major form of music was logical. The libretto, which was faithful to the original work, was by Philip Rose and Peter Udell; the lyrics were by Udell; the music was composed by Garry Sherman. Rose directed; Al Perryman created the choreography. The cast was headed by Rhetta Hughes as Margaret Alexander, Ruth Brown as Odessa, Chuck Cooper as Brother Boxer, and Roger Robinson as Luke.

The story centers on Margaret Alexander, the pastor of a Harlem storefront "holiness" church. Her congregation is being torn asunder by dissension; her teenaged son, David, has lost his faith in Christianity; and, perhaps worst of all, Margaret's long-absent jazz musician husband, Luke, has returned home, dying of tuberculosis.

The critics hated the show. A major complaint was that the songs were weak and did not integrate well with the book. Many critics shared Christopher Sharp's opinion of the score as being "imitation gospel music."[71] Several reviewers felt Baldwin's play, which tended to be talky and static, was an unlikely candidate to be opened up into a Broadway musical; like its source, the musical had two settings: Margaret's "cramped and inconvenient apartment,"[72] and her tiny church. Many expressed the opinion that the small, austere settings inhibited movement and choreography, and gave the

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play a claustrophobic feeling. Frank Rich's sentiment that "the staging is the most sedentary I've seen in a Broadway musical,"[73] was shared by many reviewers. Rich also complained that too much of the exposition was given in the dialogue, which he felt was not "spirited" enough.

Amen Corner represented the efforts of a white creative team to capitalize on a popular commodity--the gospel musical--by adapting Baldwin's play. However, unlike the creators of Mama, which had established itself as a hit shortly before Amen Corner made its debut, the creators of the latter show obviously did not know how to blend the music into the context of their show, and, if the critics are to be believed, were unable to write the rousing gospel numbers which must excite the patrons of that subgenre. Amen Corner lasted but 29 performances.

Don't Get God Started [to be called Started] made its Broadway debut October 29, 1987, at the Longacre Theatre. Based on a concept by Ron Milner and Barry Hankerson, Started was written and directed by Milner, with music and lyrics by Marvin Winans, who, as the lead singer of the gospel group, The Winans, had won a 1985 Grammy Award. Included in the cast were Vanessa Bell Armstrong as the Female Lead Vocalist, Be Be Winans as the Male Lead Vocalist, and Giancarlo Esposito, Chip Fields, Conni Marie Brazelton, and Ernie Banks. Also featured was a 16-voice gospel choir.

Milner's libretto was built around five dramatic vignettes depicting a series of black middle-class men and women "bedeviled by cocaine addiction, sexual obsession and other problems."[74] Religion was the antidote to these social ills; the vignettes were punctuated by Winans' gospel tunes as rendered by either the Lead Female Vocalist or the Lead Male Vocalist performing a solo number, or with the two of them singing a duet.

Once again the critics disparaged the book of a gospel musical; Milner's libretto was thought to be trite and annoying by most of the reviewers. Stephen Holden complained that "these little dramas have the depth of children's Sunday school pageants and the dramatic subtlety of burlesque show sketches";[75] Clive Barnes wrote that the

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vignettes were "as naive and simplistic as the comic episodes in a medieval morality play."[76]

Most critics noted that the predominately-black opening-night audience loved the show; the reviewer from Variety opined that started was "a black show aimed at black audiences,"[77] while Holden felt the show was "designed to appeal only to the converted."[78] Some reviewers complained that the songs with which the sketches culminated were not sung by the performers in those sketches, but by the featured vocalists.

Surely Milner, by dramatizing a variety of social ills which were plaguing the black community, was striving to give his gospel musical the substance and "relevancy" which has often been in short supply in that genre. One of the more conscientious black dramatists of the past quarter century, Milner writes plays which are invariably optimistic, but he has been accused throughout his career by critics of resorting to trite moralizing and oversimplifying the solutions to the problems dealt with in his works. Started failed to connect with its targeted audience--the black middle-class, church-going element which had made Mama such a huge hit--and, predictably, stirred little interest amongst mainstream theatregoers. It closed after 86 performances.

Like Vinnette Carroll's Your Arms Too Short To Box With God, the creators of Gospel at Colonus [to be called Colonus] attempted to go beyond the standard gospel musical's ploy of merely titillating its audience's emotions with a succession of high-spirited gospel numbers, while offering little in the way of innovation or substance. The authors of Colonus, Lee Breuer and Bob Telson, were the co-founders of the highly-regarded experimental troupe, Mabou Mines, an off-beat theatre company which has won numerous awards for their Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway presentations.

Colonus was an attempt to meld two rather disparate elements--African-American Christianity, as communicated through gospel music, and Classic Greek tragedy--into a theatrically satisfying event. Breuer provided its book, lyrics, and direction; Telson wrote the music. The Breuer/Telson opus was based on Robert Fitzgerald's adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, and

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incorporated passages from Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Antigone which they had gleaned from adaptations by Fitzgerald and Dudley Fitts. Colonus had been originally produced at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 1983; it made its Broadway premiere March 24, 1988, at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. Morgan Freeman played the pivotal role of the Messenger; Antigone was portrayed by Isabell Monk; Robert Earl Jones, the father of the legendary James Earl Jones, essayed the role of Creon; the part of Oedipus was sung by Clarence Fountain, who was backed up by The Five Blind Boys of Alabama. Although Fountain--who was really blind--was cast as Oedipus, Morgan Freeman, as the narrator, was, according to Frank Rich of the Times, "the true dramatic voice of Oedipus."[79] The cast was composed of over 60 actors and singers.

Colonus was the retelling of the Sophocles tragedy in the combination of a black Baptist sermon, medieval morality play, and a passion play, with gospel music as the main mode of communication. Many reviewers praised Telson and Breuer for their attempt to fuse the seemingly incompatible black church and Greek tragedy, but they also felt the Mabou Mines co-founders had fallen short of their goal. The performance of Freeman and the singing of the choir were given the highest compliments. Many critics felt the show had worked much better at the more intimate Brooklyn Academy of Music, and that much of Colonus' spirit and energy had been diffused by the cavernous Lunt-Fontanne Theatre. Mel Gussow of the Times wrote: "Though most of the actors and singers are identical [Colonus] has lost--or at least temporarily misplaced--some of its initial excitement."[80] However, in decrying what he considered the basic "redundancy" from the "surfeit" of gospel musicals of the past two decades, Gussow praised Colonus for being, in his opinion, "the first gospel show with a truly innovative idea at its core."

In stating that the show was "one of those worthy endeavors that one wants to cheer for its daring,"[81] Michael Summers of Backstage expressed the feeling of many of his colleagues. However, Clive Barnes admitted to a reservation about the gospel musical in general, which was shared by many of his fellow critics

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and theatre jurists, when he wrote: "Like all of its genre [Colonus] is theatre without being theatrical."[82]

Frank Rich of the Times expressed displeasure that, in his opinion, Colonus was yet another example of the black musical being informed and structured by Eurocentric artistic dictates. He wrote:

> Instead of liberating its singers [Colonus] seems to hem them in--gratuitously requiring that Afro-American artists worship at the shrine of Western culture before they can let loose with their own equally valid art.[83]

Despite the fresh approach taken toward the gospel musical by Telson and Breuer, perhaps the critics were correct in their view that the two elements which the authors were trying to combine were simply not conducive to a merger to form a clear, cohesive evening of Broadway entertainment. Although it was a popular topic of conversation in theatrical circles during its run, it lasted only 61 performances.

Beginning with the three Langston Hughes gospel musicals of the early 1960s, a recurring complaint from the mainstream critics has been that these shows are not really musical dramas, but merely gospel concerts with but a vague thread of a story-line to justify their being performed in a theatre. The implication here is that the creators of these shows did not bother to provide their targeted [black] audience with anything being remotely dramatically sophisticated. With exceptions such as Your Arms Too Short To Box With God and Colonus this has indeed been the case.

Yet, however simple, simplistic, or even simple-minded one might call the dramaturgical aspects of, for instance, the popular Mama, it must be said that such shows do not need any complex theatrical innovations as far as the targeted audience is concerned. On one hand, the gospel musical has become a staple in the black theatre because it provides its audience with unadulterated entertainment; however, it must be stated that the raw emotions which the creators seek to evoke, and the general dearth of profundity in the typical gospel show plays right into a pair of the

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oldest and most insidious stereotypes of the African-American: that he has little or no control over his emotions, and that he lacks the capacity for deep and intelligent thought.

Because of their penchant for playing upon the familiar, being derivative at the expense of being theatrically innovative, and seeking the lowest common denominator of being purely entertaining, the typical gospel musical shares some of the worst aspects of the Neo-Minstrel entertainments which littered the Broadway scene between 1921 and 1937.

A Final Look at the 1980s

Not surprisingly, some aspects of the first half of the 1980s in the commercial musical scene resembled those of the latter half of the previous decade--the anthology revue was popular until 1984, and made a comeback near the end of the decade in the form of Black and Blue. However, in addition to these anthologized entertainments, the black musical theatre of the 1980s offered its audience a return to substantive, thought-provoking shows as well. Though nowhere as politically-oriented as the shows of the 1960s, such musicals as The First, The Tap Dance Kid, Dreamgirls, Sarafina!, and others did attempt to make some social commentary.

The skyrocketing ticket prices precluded all but the most affluent from attending the theatre on a regular basis; numerous shows floundered, while such musicals as Cats, Les Miserables, Phantom of the Opera, and others flourished partly because of their artistic merits, and partly because they had become, similar to Mama, "events" of a "must-see" nature on the part of the now somewhat fickle and dilettantish audience for Broadway.

The mainstream producers of the 1980s continued demonstrating, for the most part, their distrust of American composers, lyricists, and librettists. Several musicals which became hits on Broadway in the 1980s were produced in New York only after they had enjoyed long runs in London and other European cities. While American musical creators were struggling to have their works staged, the British composer Andrew Lloyd-Webber's works seemed to be ubiquitous on Broadway.

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Similarly, no new African-American librettist, composer, lyricist, or director established himself in the 1980s. Proven talents such as Melvin Van Peebles, Micki Grant, and Vinnette Carroll were unable to continue the artistic momentum which they had established in the previous decade. Not one musical drama written by a black American creative team became an unqualified critical and commercial success in the 1980s, unless one wants to include Vernel Bagneris' One Mo' Time, which opened in the waning weeks of the 1970s, but became a hit in the early-'80s.

Once again, as the decade came to a close, the black-wrought black musical appeared to be an endangered species. The obvious remedy for this situation would be for African-Americans with the requisite disposable income to back the works of aspiring black musical creators, but that is an idea which is much easier to theorize about than to put into practice.

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CHAPTER TWELVE ENDNOTES

[1]Don Nelson, Daily News, May 5, 1980.

[2]Newsweek, May 26, 1980.

[3]May 19, 1980.

[4]John S. Wilson, Times, April 3, 1981.

[5]Post, March 3, 1981.

[6]Variety, March 4, 1981.

[7]Women's Wear Daily, March 2, 1981.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Frank Rich, Times, June 3, 1982.

[10]Ibid.

[11]June 3, 1982.

[12]June 3, 1982.

[13]Times, January 29, 1986.

[14]January 29, 1986.

[15]January 29, 1986.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Times, January 27, 1989.

[18]Daily News, January 27, 1989.

[19]Post, January 27, 1989.

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[20]January 27, 1989.

[21]Village Voice, March 14, 1980.

[22]April 2, 1980.

[23]Daily News, June 4, 1980.

[24]See the second notation to the "Chapter Eight Endnotes" of this study.

[25]All of these reviews appeared in the November 18, 1981, editions of their respective papers.

[26]December 21, 1981.

[27]Ibid.

[28]December 21, 1981.

[29]December 30, 1981.

[30]Ibid.

[31]January 12, 1982.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Of the myriad of songs of the era which tried to "pass" as Motown-produced records, the ones which sounded closest to actual Motown recordings were a pair of 1969 entries, "I Only Get This Feeling," by "Big" Dee Irwin, and "Your Love Was Strange," by the Dramatics, an opus which wounds like something the Temptations might have recorded at a Voodoo rite. Jackie Wilson had a pair of 1967 hits, "Higher and Higher," and "Whispers (Getting Louder)," which, although released on the Brunswick label, came by their "Motown" sound rightfully--it is common knowledge in the world of soul music that the musicians on these records were "moonlighting" Motown session players.

[34]"Longplay Shorts," Variety, January 6, 1982.

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[35]Post, December 21, 1981.

[36]December 30, 1981.

[37]The afore-mentioned Daddy Goodness closed prior to its scheduled Broadway opening in 1979, perhaps making the Motown people overly-cautious about returning to the Broadway arena. A mid-1970s adaptation of John Oliver Killens' novel, The Cotillion, was abandoned; Killens, who was to do the libretto, and famed former Miracles lead-singer William "Smokey" Robinson, who was to write the songs, had irreconcilable artistic differences.

[38]Variety, January 29, 1982.

[39]Douglas Watt, Daily News, January 6, 1982.

[40]Frank Rich, Times, January 6, 1982.

[41]Times, December 22, 1983.

[42]August 8, 1986.

[43]Diana Maychick, Post, October 24, 1987.

[44]Frank Rich, Times, October 26, 1987.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

[47]November 9, 1987.

[48]November 11, 1987.

[49]Jack Kroll, Newsweek, April 21, 1986.

[50]Douglas Watt, Daily News, April 11, 1986.

[51]Ibid.

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[52]Times, April 11, 1986.

[53]April 22, 1986.

[54]John Wills, Theatre World, 1980-1981 Season (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1982), p. 41.

[55]Jazzbo Brown was the example of yet another white writer, Lemberg, who, in search of a hit, elected to play upon the perceived "exotic" qualities of African-Americans to retell a white story with a black cast. The show's rapid demise suggests that the author might have fared better had he written a musical about an ethnic group with which he was more familiar.

[56]Christian Science Monitor, November 27, 1984.

[57]Mel Gussow, Times, November 19, 1984.

[58]November 20, 1984.

[59]November 21, 1984.

[60]Times, November 19, 1984.

[61]Daily News, March 10, 1986.

[62]April 1, 1987.

[63]New York, March 30, 1987.

[64]April 7, 1987.

[65]C. Gerald Frazier, Times, December 22, 1980.

[66]Ibid.

[67]April 13, 1984.

[68]Stages, March 1985.

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[69]Ali Stanton, Amsterdam News, September 27, 1986.

[70]Samuel G. Freedman, Times, September 19, 1986.

[71]Women's Wear Daily, November 11, 1983.

[72]John Beaufort, Christian Science Monitor, November 25, 1983.

[73]Times, November 11, 1983.

[74]Stephen Holden, Times, October 31, 1987.

[75]Ibid.

[76]Post, October 30, 1987.

[77]November 4, 1987.

[78]October 31, 1987.

[79]March 25, 1988.

[80]April 3, 1988.

[81]April 8, 1988.

[82]Post, March 25, 1988.

[83]March 25, 1988.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CONCLUSION

Throughout the African-American's experience in America, the manner in which he was portrayed in mainstream musicals and his actual status as a citizen have run a parallel course. Although in both instances substantial gains have been made, both on an individual and collective basis, the black man's current status in both the musical theatre and American society in general are far from ideal.

The story of the African-American on the English-speaking stage began in England in the 1500s, in the form of white performers donning blackface and colorful costumes in civic pageants to represent blackamoors, serving as the "Exotic Others" who had fallen to the British conquerors. Several extant British plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries feature a blackamoor figure, usually a villain who revels in his evil, the forerunner of the "Brute Negro" stereotype. Shakespeare's Aaron of Titus Andronicus is the prototype of this character.

Reflecting his status as a slave, the first Negro characters to appear in the early American plays--from roughly the Revolutionary to the Civil Wars--were servants, usually in a comic vein. Played mostly by white actors in blackface, and usually for comic relief, these Negro servants were descendants of the tradition of comic servants which dates back to the ancient Greek and Roman theatres, and has been a feature of most genres of Western theatre since. However, there was one major difference: the Negro servant--often as not named "Sambo"--unlike his European counterpart, was not smarter than his master. The European servants were to be laughed with; Sambo, Rufus, and Rastus were to be laughed at.

Popular during the first four decades of the nineteenth century was the interpolation of Negro songs and dances in evenings of theatre. Perhaps the most popular of the performers who did Negro song-and-dance routines was Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice. Numerous performers imitated his famed "Jump Jim Crow" routine--which he in turn had fashioned by imitating a black stable hand.

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These Negro song-and-dance routines--which invariably denigrated persons of African descent--had become so popular that by 1843, an entire evening of theatre was devoted to them. The minstrel show had been loosed upon the world.

Within two years minstrelsy became extremely popular in the Northeastern and North Central regions of the United States, and also gained a foothold in England and Australia. The minstrel show, more so than the early American plays with comic Negro servants, offered the definitive set of traits for the "coon" caricatures, which were prevalent on the American stage in various guises well into the 1940s. Credited with being a forerunner of the American musical comedy format, the minstrel show also was responsible for creating a grossly negative image of the American Negro. Though at the height of minstrelsy's popularity the supposed inferiority of peoples of African descent was a given, the minstrel show, whose basis was a virulently anti-Negro humor, formulated a national obsession with the black man as a sub-human buffoon.

In 1855 the black man took the stage to play the minstrel version of himself; by the early 1870s the black minstrel troupes were more popular than the white delineators, forcing the whites to alter the format of their shows. The result was the evolution from white minstrelsy into burlesque, and then vaudeville. The humor of the black minstrels, though by necessity self-degrading, was not as anti-Negro as the white minstrel shows. As had the shows of their white counterparts, the black minstrels' shows evolved into variety entertainments. In the 1890s the shows of Sam T. Jack, John W. Isham, and Sissieretta "Black Patti" Jones showed the conscious efforts on the part of their creators to move away from the standard minstrel format.

The years 1898 to 1911 were a halcyon period for the black musical. In April 1898, Cole & Johnson's A Trip to Coontown earned the distinction of being the first black musical comedy with a plot to be staged in New York. Three months later Cook & Dunbar's Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk became the first hit Broadway musical written and performed by blacks. For the next thirteen years numerous ragtime operettas written, performed, and

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produced by blacks appeared on Broadway, and flourished on the black theatre circuit across America. The Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson Companies led the way, while several other companies, though they never had a Broadway success, were well known in black communities.

During this trend, the Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson Companies produced shows which had taken especial care to better the stage image of the American Negro. However, this trend came to a halt in the early 1910s because of the deaths of many of the important figures in the black theatre. George Walker, "Bob" Cole, and Ernest Hogan, among others, were still young men and in the prime of their careers when they died from syphilis.

Between 1911 and 1921 no black musicals played Broadway. This ten-year absence was ended in May 1921, with the surprise success of Shuffle Along. The all-Negro musical was back on Broadway in full force--within the next sixteen years more than three dozen black musicals were mounted in that venue. Concurrent with this trend, and as an outgrowth of the Harlem Renaissance, a series of "serious" plays about the Negro--most of which were folk dramas by white authors--became popular. The Negro was in vogue.

In addition to being featured in the black musicals, which were mostly mindless copies of the Shuffle Along format or the operettas of the Cole & Johnson and Williams & Walker Companies, the Negro was the subject of more serious fare on the Broadway musical stage. The nonbuffoonish black character appeared in such 1920s and '30s shows as Deep River, Show Boat, and Porgy and Bess, all of which were white-authored, and all of which had pretensions toward opera. Let it be noted that in the three distinct trends in the 1920s and '30s, a more serious approach toward the Negro character was undertaken by the white authors of the "native operas" and folk dramas; for the most part, the black creators of the Neo-Minstrel musicals of that era played upon the classic negative images. In a sense, the Neo-Minstrel shows, in relation to the black-wrought turn-of-the-century operettas, represented a step backward.

The improved status which the American Negro attained in the 1940s within the greater society was mirrored in the further

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upgrading of the black character on the mainstream musical stage. A noticeable progression was made from the first hit black musical of the decade, Cabin in the Sky, whose libretto has heavy Neo-Minstrel overtones, but was played with dignity by its cast, to Oscar Hammerstein II's well-wrought Carmen Jones, to St. Louis Woman, which presents a much better set of images of Negroes than did its source, Arna Bontemps' novel, God Sends Sunday, to Lost in the Stars, which advocated understanding between the races. The equality of blacks was also a major topic in a pair of "white" musicals, Bloomer Girl and Finian's Rainbow.

The 1950s was a poor decade for black musicals. Only six were staged, and only Jamaica proved to be an artistic and commercial success.

The African-American asserted himself, in a political sense, in the 1960s as he had never done before. The Civil Rights movement, championed by Martin Luther King, Jr., evolved into the black pride movement, with more militant figures, such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Muhammad Ali, in the forefront. Blacks demanded and received much legislation on local and statewide levels. This new self-respect by blacks was mirrored on the musical stage; in the first half of the decade, when the black man was advocating integration, musicals with integrationist themes were prominent; in the latter half of the 1960s, when the black race showed more pride and interest in its history and culture, black musicals for, by, and about black people focused on the African-American's saga in the New World--and from the black American's point of view. Almost all of these shows were produced Off-Broadway.

As the black pride movement phased out in the 1970s, so did the trend of black-wrought musicals from the black perspective. Meanwhile, on Broadway, a popular trend from the 1930s and '40s -- adapting white stories into black musicals--once again became common. Along with this, the revue format was revived, but with a new slant--the revues were anthology shows featuring the music of a composer or a genre from the musical theatre's past. With the redoing of white shows with black casts, and the popularity of the

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anthology revues, the book musical seemed to be an endangered species for black Broadway.

The black book musical returned to Broadway and Off-Broadway in the 1980s in the form of several well-wrought, intelligently-conceived shows. The Off-Broadway shows tended to have small casts and but a few musicians, while the Broadway shows, despite the severe economic times, were often done in the traditional grand Broadway scope. One Mo' Time, which opened in the waning weeks of the 1970s, proved to be the biggest black Off-Broadway musical hit of the 1980s; Dreamgirls, The Tap Dance Kid, Sarafina! and Black and Blue kept the tradition of success alive on Broadway.

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