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Black Musicals in the Golden Age of American Theatre

by Olivia Schultz

(History 1140)

African American performers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a unique experience both socially and musically. On the one hand, audiences were becoming increasingly more comfortable with seeing African American actors on stage. On the other, patrons were still not ready to see them play significant roles, that is, until 1920. Bert Williams, for example, played a pitiable character in vaudeville for many years, repeatedly singing the hit he made famous, “Nobody.”<sup>1</sup> He reveals his perceived insignificance when he asks himself such questions as “Who soothes my pain?” This unknown and uncared-for identity of African-Americans was an extremely prevalent concept on the American stage throughout history. Despite the sorrowful circumstances Williams constantly sings about, however, he eventually became successful in several full-length Broadway musicals. This dichotomous situation was similar to the experiences of many African American musical theatre performers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is demonstrated aptly through three well-known musicals: *Shuffle Along*, *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess*. It is evident through the characters, critiques, and musical styles that the 1920’s and 30’s was a time of both continuity and progressivism for blacks on the American stage.

African American performers first had to endure the era of minstrelsy, before entering into the Golden Age of American theatre. Minstrelsy was a growing popular form of entertainment in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, which featured white people in blackface playing a variety of instruments. Through this musical comedy routine, African Americans were interpreted as buffoons.<sup>2</sup> Following the Civil War, however, their portrayal was altered. White Southerners were bitter towards slaves, and minstrelsy became a product of the harsh stereotypes that white plantation owners had for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, this was the first truly American contribution to the history of stage entertainment.

Despite cruel stereotyping in the South, the 1890’s was a decade that featured several black musicals that began to shy away from the minstrel show structure. For example, minstrelsy was performed almost strictly by white men. The *Creole Show* introduced a female chorus.<sup>3</sup> The depiction of African Americans also began to change with the *Creole Show* because it accentuated the music and dancing aspect of entertainment, rather than jokes and skits.<sup>4</sup> With time, this became more of the norm for black entertainment, and led to the development of *Shuffle Along*.

Written and produced by two African-American teams on vaudeville, *Shuffle Along* became a major instrument in promoting the Harlem Renaissance in New York with its premier in 1921.<sup>5</sup> The show was indeed a success, but not instant, as the cast and crew encountered several mental and physical obstacles on the way. For example, prior to *Shuffle Along*, creators Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles claimed they found it easier to pretend they were white people dressed in blackface at the outset their careers as comedians.<sup>6</sup>

Obtaining funds was always the first step towards getting a show produced, and after achieving the initial amount to get a practice stage, the show remained financially tight for the duration of the tour. In addition, few hotels accepted black customers, thus the cast had to find private homes to stay in. *Shuffle Along* was not exactly welcomed in every city, either. In New York, producer John Cort struggled to get access to a theatre. After two weeks, the once vacant venue was packed. The show also had trouble getting a stage in Chicago and Milwaukee.<sup>7</sup> After several one-night stands outside of New York city, the show finally landed a place on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. This off-

Broadway setting was mostly a result of post-war discrimination.<sup>8</sup> Even so, the premiere on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street helped producer James Blake overcome the psychological strains of being a black person in American show business. After hearing the positive reaction from a white audience, he stated, “It made me feel like, well, at last, I’m a human being.” After the 504-show-run of *Shuffle Along*, Miller, Lyles and the once unknown cast were not only considered human, but also were destined for stardom.<sup>9</sup>

Before *Shuffle Along*, love songs performed by blacks had to be comedic in style in order to gain acceptance from whites.<sup>10</sup> It was also the first musical in which a black man and woman displayed their affection alone on stage. Not only did it achieve status for a style of song, but *Shuffle Along* also essentially “legitimized the black musical” in many ways.<sup>11</sup> For example, despite its off-Broadway setting, producers were able to charge as much as a Broadway ticket would cost. Financial patronage, however, came second to the show’s support from critics and audiences.

The score of *Shuffle Along* was one of the most praised during the entire decade. Part of this success can be attributed to the new jazz rhythms that were being developed by blacks in New Orleans, Chicago and New York. This was a new development and presented a contrast against other shows which were inclined to imitate European styles.<sup>12</sup> Thus, not only did *Shuffle Along* motivate producers to make black musicals, but it also became the standard to which proceeding black and white musicals hoped to achieve.<sup>13</sup> This show was truly of high caliber especially in comparison to other black musicals that fell short during the decade, such as *Strut Miss Lizzie* (1922), *Lucky Sambo* (1925), and *Deep River* (1926).<sup>14</sup>

In addition to music, the appearance of the show revealed both society’s acceptance and ridicule of the new black musical. Some critics evidently enjoyed the simplicity of the show in its feeble settings and leftover costumes. Yet a critic from the *New York Times* labeled the settings as “extremely crude” and only good enough for “fair to middling entertainment.”<sup>15</sup> This mixture of reviews is reflective of society’s perception of the black musical in general and its adoption into the canon of American theatre.

During the decade, the black musical was still considered a genre of its own by critics. An article regarding the premier of *Shuffle Along* on May 23, 1921 was entitled, “Shuffle Along Premiere: Negro Production opens at 63<sup>rd</sup> Street Music Hall.”<sup>16</sup> By calling the show a “negro production,” this reviewer segregates the stages. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the “distinction” this musical has of being “written, composed, and played entirely by negroes.”<sup>17</sup> Accentuating the black authorship of the musical reveals that society was not used to seeing such an occurrence taking place on the stage. The author also suggests that the melodies found in the musical are “inherent in the negro,”<sup>18</sup> thus making the stage a black-and-white affair. This statement also implies that African Americans were intrinsically different from the rest of society’s biological makeup. Yet it seems as though it is this distinction that caused a positive social uproar among African Americans in New York.

In addition to giving strength to the black musical on stage, *Shuffle Along* also caused a stir off stage as well. For example, Shuffle Inn was opened as a new club in Harlem which eventually became the famous Connie’s Inn a few years later.<sup>19</sup> Harlem was at the heart of this hit musical, and the success of *Shuffle Along* conveyed the message that there was much talent and excitement occurring there. This cultural stirring led to the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> Langston Hughes, a key player in the development of this movement, recognized *Shuffle Along* as giving “the proper push... to the vogue that spread to books, African sculpture, music and dancing.”<sup>21</sup> The social affects of *Shuffle Along* were an incredible testimony to the influence of the American stage on cultural society.

Similarly, *Shuffle Along* demonstrated the return in strength of black shows that started in 1921.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, the growing popularity of the black musical had an inverse relationship with the amount of seating restrictions during the 1920’s.<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates the social changes that resulted

from the increase of black musicals. Also during the decade, black male performers no longer needed to disguise themselves in black face, and black women began to play more leading roles.<sup>24</sup> It was the start of integration that created the foundation for *Show Boat*.

Born just six years after *Shuffle Along* in 1927, *Show Boat* was brought to life by Kern and Hammerstein shortly after the release of the novel. *Show Boat* was considered a turning point in American musicals, partially as a result of the African-American characters in the story. It was evidently the first fully integrated musical to reach Broadway.<sup>25</sup> This show was largely appraised for its interesting characters and the accommodation of both black and white in leading and secondary roles.<sup>26</sup> The tumultuous lives of the white leading characters in the musical stand as a direct contrast to the enduring attitude of the black characters who can always be relied on.<sup>27</sup>

Joe and Queenie are the leading black characters in the story, who are always working steadily, rarely exhibiting casing outbursts of emotion. Mulatto Julie, however, leads a very dramatic life as the result of her marriage with a white man. Some interpreted Julie's alcohol-related death as a racial offense. Yet Hammerstein insisted that Julie's experience was meant to magnify the cruelty of society, not her own racial status.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, African American character Queenie, was originally played by a white actress who was known as the "Aunt Jemima" of the stage. Furthermore, some critics saw *Show Boat's* black characters as less authentic, especially compared to the all-black cast of *Porgy and Bess*.<sup>29</sup> Overall, the creators of *Show Boat* wanted the musical to be about Americans, not race conflict, although the race of the characters contributed significantly to the development of the plot.

Despite Hammerstein's intention to stay away from race issues, race was addressed by critics of the time, and many years after its original showing. It was evident to Andrew Lamb at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that *Show Boat* dealt seriously with the issue of race, instead of simply portraying blacks in silly, outrageous roles.<sup>30</sup> Robin Breon, however, took notice of the scenes that would propagate racial stereotypes such as the opening scene that portrays blacks working in the fields of Mississippi.<sup>31</sup> Even beyond its original premiere in 1927, *Show Boat* was altered on several occasions, especially in the 1936 and 1954 film versions, to fit the norm for what was considered racially appropriate for the time.<sup>32</sup>

No matter what audiences thought of the musical's racial commentary, *Show Boat* is still known as a classic in the cannon of musical theatre.<sup>33</sup> Another aspect of *Show Boat's* original successful run of 575 performances beginning in 1927, and its lasting legacy in stage entertainment were the American-ness of the musical. The characters travel from Natchez to Chicago, up and down the magnificent Mississippi River. In fact, the tune "Old Man River," made famous by African American bass singer Paul Robeson, is the main theme of the show which describes not only the turmoil of black labor life in America, but overtly refers to a very specific and well known geographical landmark of the country. Thus, the musical portrayed a much broader aspect of American society which went far beyond the view of New York.<sup>34</sup>

This extensive representation of America in turn widened the gap for African Americans to star as important characters in stage productions, which is exemplified by the reoccurring theme of "Old Man River," known for being sung by a black performer and for propelling the plot of *Show Boat*. The day after the show's original premiere in December of 1927, Atkinson claimed the biggest hit throughout the entire musical "Old Man River," continually sung by an African American actor. He also added that the negro chorus made this tune, "remarkably effective."<sup>35</sup> In his January 1928 review, he paid special attention to the mixed race character of Julie who sings, "Can't Help Lovin' that Man of Mine." Atkinson proclaimed the song, "in all its interpolations, is pure negro in its folklore mysticism."<sup>36</sup> It is evident that the roots of African American song were very apparent to critics and contributed to the show's originality.

Another critic whose review in 1928 featured "Edith Day, Paul Robeson and other Americans," highlighted the African American actors in the show.<sup>37</sup> He relayed that they received an

enthusiastic reception from the audience, which he attributed to Robeson's rendition of "Old Man River."<sup>38</sup> African-American actors and singers were definitely receiving an increasing amount of attention from the media as a result of *Show Boat*, which still differentiated from white actors, yet positive at large. The heart of the Golden Age of American Musicals, took place during the 1930's, and with it came the revolutionary stage production, *Porgy and Bess*.

Largely influenced by *Show Boat*, the 1935 premiere of *Porgy and Bess* portrayed yet another geographical aspect of American life. This production was based on Dubose and Dorothy Heyward's novel *Porgy*, demonstrating the life of African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. The South lended itself to a more ethnocentric portrayal of African Americans based on their true ancestry, in contrast to the Harlem setting where blacks were usually depicted.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the novel itself is known to be "one of the strongest statements ever made about the black race in this country."<sup>40</sup> Racial "games" are played all throughout the story by both white and black characters. For example, the Charleston whites are constantly suspecting, threatening, and ultimately demeaning the Gullah Negroes. The blacks are accused of faking "Uncle Tom" reactions whenever white Southerners enter their domain.<sup>41</sup> Even so, *Porgy and Bess* is still considered a step forward in the societal progress of American musicals because its cast was predominately black, as an expansion upon the small, yet influential roles the black characters had in musicals such as *Show Boat* and other shows of the 1920's. *Porgy and Bess* was the original musical to present the black population in America "as a fact rather than a fancy."<sup>42</sup> These portrayals were reflected accurately in Gershwin's original stage version.

*Porgy and Bess*, which featured a predominately black cast, was created by popular white writer, George Gershwin. All the creative behind-the-scenes work was done by white Americans, while all the on-stage talent was black.<sup>43</sup> Gershwin was apparently interested in black music prior to World War I. He also spent some time in Harlem, and experienced first-hand the Harlem Renaissance that swept the 1920's.<sup>44</sup> As a result of his background, it has been said that Gershwin understood the unique qualities of black music, and thus he was fully qualified to write music for the African American cast.<sup>45</sup>

The truly African American inspiration of this musical was a major part of *Porgy and Bess*' unique contribution to the stage. Black jazz was a rudimentary aspect of *Porgy and Bess*.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the music was largely a combination of Hebraic and Oriental chants, pseudo-Negro jazz, religious, and minstrel show elements. This mixture of musical contributions became a widely accepted expression of African American music by the audiences of *Porgy and Bess*, thus widening America's impression of black music.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, this musical expanded upon its African-American roots by utilizing work songs, spirituals, and early blues rhythms which were first used by *Shuffle Along*.<sup>48</sup>

Some time after its original premiere in 1935, critics had varying views of *Porgy and Bess*, stemming from its exposé of black culture. For example, *Porgy and Bess* was observed as a show that "limited" African American culture as a result of its white creators.<sup>49</sup> Some even considered *Porgy and Bess* to be a black musical only because of the color of the faces on stage, having nothing to do with its African American roots or plot. Yet *Porgy and Bess* is agreed upon by many to be America's favorite musical opera.<sup>50</sup> The show also, "depicted black characters and dramatic situations in a way totally foreign to the Broadway musical" at the time.<sup>51</sup> In modern times, *Porgy and Bess* has been continually reproduced on Broadway thanks to the audience's respect for "black culture, the sass, and the sentiment of the new black musical" which had its origins in 1935.<sup>52</sup>

Reviews of the original version in 1935 expressed opinions of Gershwin's opera which had focus on both the black culture and the music itself. A subtitle of one of these reviews states, the "Almost All-Negro Cast Proves an Event."<sup>53</sup> This review categorized the race of the actors, yet also acknowledged the "enthusiasm of the audience" in its regard.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, these reviews featured many compliments on both the singing, and the "rich"<sup>55</sup> comedy, regardless of the skin color of the

people on stage.

Race does, however, play an important role in the show, as exemplified by Atkinson's review. He accentuated the "exotic richness of negro music and color of Charleston," which he stated was "admirably conveyed" through the story of the Catfish Row tragedy.<sup>56</sup> He went on to praise the plot as a "suitable theme" for an American folk opera. Thus, Atkinson distinguishes the predominately black cast as fully capable of producing a unique and interesting show. In addition, another critic addressed the narrative of a group of Negroes living in a white civilization as a "natural subject for theatre showmanship."<sup>57</sup> This suggests that the stories and realistic situations of Southern blacks, who were once merely mocked through minstrelsy, became more ingrained in the repertoire of American theatre via *Porgy and Bess*.

An interesting dichotomy can be observed from the critics who viewed the original showing of *Porgy and Bess* through their exploration of the music. The spirituals sung throughout the musical, which remain an important aspect of its African-American roots, were characterized by one critic as "effective," yet not actually "Negro in origin."<sup>58</sup> Thus, it seems as though Gershwin's manipulation of a musical style originating in black culture, proves to be different from its genuine form. Whether this white effect on African American music was viewed as positive or negative is difficult to determine.

The growing popularity of both integrated and black musicals continued in the later years of the stage's Golden Age. There were nine musicals written by and starring black performers from 1921-1924 on Broadway. In 1946 alone, there were twenty eight shows with black performers.<sup>59</sup> It is evident that this era proved African American performers were people, and people that could perform at a level that not only brought in financial revenue, but contributed to a social change throughout the country through music and dancing. The symbolic, lonely character Bert Williams played at the turn of the century was no longer a "Nobody," yet a few years later, he still exhibited the pains of discrimination in America. Williams proclaims in *American Magazine*, "I have never been able to discover that there was anything disgraceful in being a colored man. But I have often found it inconvenient- in America."<sup>60</sup> This statement reveals the paradox of the roles of African Americans on the American stage, in that most of their struggle was simply gaining acceptance from the people they performed for. The Golden Age of American theatre was not exactly a fortunate experience for all African Americans, yet there were definite instances where they were able to shine in the lights of the stage, which was often reflected in the eyes of the people watching.

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#### Notes

- 1 Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), 181.
- 2 *Dictionary of American History* 3rd ed., s.v. "Theatre in the Early United States."
- 3 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 156.
- 4 Andrew Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 5 James Haskins, *Black Music in America: A History Through its People* (Chicago: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987).
- 6 Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 156.
- 9 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 188.

- 10 Ethan Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976).
- 11 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 191.
- 12 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 158.
- 13 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 191.
- 14 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 162.
- 15 “May 23, 1921” In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 1 (New York Times Co, 1971), 133.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 162.
- 20 James Haskins, *Black Music in America: A History Through It’s People*, 235.
- 21 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 211.
- 22 Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, 149.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 232.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, 161.
- 30 Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre*, 164.
- 31 Robin Breon, “Show Boat: The Revival, the Racism” *JSTOR* 39, no.2 (1995): 89.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, 161
- 35 Brooks Atkinson, “December 29, 1927” In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 2 (New York Times Co, 1971), 220.
- 36 Brooks Atkinson, “January 8, 1928” In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 2 (New York Times Co, 1971), 221.
- 37 “May 4, 1928” In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 2 (New York Times Co, 1971), 222.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, 164.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 268.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Mordden, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*, 164.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Cecil Smith and Glenn Litlon, *Musical Comedy in America* (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1950), 113.
- 48 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 181.
- 49 David Horn, “Catfish Row to Granby Street: Contrasting Meaning in Porgy and Bess” *Cambridge University Press* 13, no.2 (1994): 168.
- 50 Cecil Smith and Glenn Litlon, *Musical Comedy in America*, 115.
- 51 Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre*, 181.
- 52 Cecil Smith and Glenn Litlon, *Musical Comedy in America*, 115.

- 53 "Gershwin's Opera Makes Boston Hit" In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 2 (New York Times Co, 1971), 227.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 "Porgy and Bess, Native opera, Opens at the Alvin; Gershwin Work Based on DuBose Heyward's Play" In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 2 (New York Times Co, 1971), 225.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 "October 11, 1935" In *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, vol. 2 (New York Times Co, 1971), 227.
- 59 Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, 289.
- 60 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 181.

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