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Vicki Price
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Blacks on Broadway: A Trend on the Rise

by Vicki Price

(English 1102)

With the stress of the world today, nearly everyone desires an experience where they can forget about all of their troubles. There is a desire to be immersed in a world of fantasy and joy; Manhattan, New York City has been able to produce such a place. There’s a place where you can experience the excitement of a high-energy performance and you’re only requirement is to enjoy. Broadway has been providing this thrill for over 100 years. With hit after hit, the plays and musicals on Broadway range from serious dramas, to Dr. Suess’ whimsical stories. The productions on Broadway differ not only in their plot or use of special effects, but also in the production team and actors. The types of people involved in these shows have seen a huge transformation from the late 1800s when the stage was filled with predominately white performers. Blacks, on the other hand, were also itching to dip their feet in the Broadway scene early on. As African Americans have been starring and producing shows on Broadway, the success that they have seen continues to bring Broadway to an entirely new level. The new and soulful flavor of talent and voices that African Americans were bringing to the stage has been an extraordinary addition to the thrilling Broadway world. From the moment a black performer stepped foot on stage, Broadway has never been the same.

Decades before the recent hits such as Memphis and The Lion King, all-black casts of Broadway shows were bursting with energy, passion, comedy, and drama. In an industry run by predominantly white actors, directors, and producers, the earliest black actors found it difficult to claim their place on Broadway. Whether as an audience or cast member, it took time for blacks to feel at home on Broadway. Dating back to the late 19th century, there have been several all-black or mostly black productions that have challenged the norms of Broadway as a whole. A continuously growing process, all-black productions have become a must within every Broadway season. Not only did such shows create a new type of production, but by offering elements that traditional Broadway shows had a hard time capturing, all-black productions have attracted new audiences of all kinds. The essence of an all black play or musical is usually raw, bare, and uncensored; they desire to give the audience a sense of real life and in that manage to relate to each person in a different way. After over a century of writing, directing, and starring in musicals and plays, blacks have finally found a permanent spot on the Great White Way. With each play or musical providing a new glimpse into different areas of African American life, the involvement of blacks in musical theatre has driven the Broadway scene to places it had never been before.

Black actors emerged onto the live stage in the late 1800s when Vaudeville was on the rise. The traveling shows made it so that Americans could enter into a world defined by fantasy and beauty. When the famous Ziegfeld Follies were at their peak as the most successful of all Vaudeville show of all time, blacks were still trying to break onto the scene. With African American life being far from fantasy and beauty, blacks could only pull from personal experience. Their experiences made their performances guided by the minstrelsy that defined black performers at the time. These minstrel shows began with white actors in blackface, a form of black makeup used to create a black character. After the Civil War, even black actors wore blackface makeup while performing. The minstrel shows highlighted all black stereotypes, showcasing blacks as foolish, dimwitted, and musical. It was only logical that minstrelsy would guide early black performers as it was “America’s only professional outlet for black talent” (Kenrick 109). The minstrel stereotypes also made an
appearance in *A Trip to Coontown*, New York’s first first full-length comedy “written, directed, and performed exclusively by blacks” (Kenrick 109). While black performers were searching for chances to be seen, white audience members weren’t willing to accept them on the stage. Though the early stages of Broadway only held a place for whites, black performers were eager to create a successful black musical. This new element, or involvement of new stories and actors, in theatre in America underscored the “significance of an African American presence in musical theatre and its separation from the cultural mainstream” (Stempel 85). Blacks were hungry to get onto the Broadway stage, and ultimately “embodied the different sensibilities of ethnic subcultures that would contribute most substantially to the development of Broadway musicals in the next century” (Stempel 67).

Bert Williams and George Walker were two of the early black performers who paved the way for blacks on Broadway. Gracing Vaudeville shows with their knack for comedy, these two black actors achieved more success than they had set out for. The two performers wowed their audience with dance numbers, comic dialogues and skits, and humorous songs. Over time, Williams and Walker became the “most celebrated black comedians in Vaudeville” (Stempel 87). Audiences were amazed at their skills to create laughter in every situation. The two performed together for over a decade until Walker’s death. His death led to the steam train that showed that blacks as performers on the live stage had come to a halt. Still, Williams’ success was undeniable, he became a part of Ziegfeld’s *Follies* in 1910, even amidst an angry white cast threatening to walk. Ultimately, Ziegfeld fought back saying that “he could do the show without any of them, but not without Williams” (Kenrick 124). A frustrated Williams later expressed that he was “never able to discover that there was anything disgraceful in being a colored man, but found it inconvenient—in America” (Stempel 88). While he received hurtful comments from his cast members, Williams, with the support of Ziegfeld, went on to be a success in *Follies* time after time. Regardless of the negativity that Williams and Walker received as a result of their success, the two began a movement that “attracted African American audiences in large numbers-some perhaps to let off steam through laughter” (Stempel 235). Though Williams and Walker began to break the barrier for black performers, there was still a long journey ahead for those who were hungry for more.

When the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance entered New York City around 1919, with it came new black writers, artists, and performers. Some that emerged from this new movement were the famous Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Billie Holliday. Breaking into the 1920s, theatre was an instant escape for those feeling the burden that engulfed their lives; black musicals set out with a similar goal. The emergence of jazz music was able to bring black musicals back to life. Instead of attempting to conform to the musicals of the Harlem Renaissance that showcased the idea of the New Negro, (one who could challenge racism through intellect and producing art and literature) these new musicals focused on “old-Negro life,” or the simple and stereotypical life they knew (Stempel 235). The first and most successful of these was *Shuffle Along* in 1921. “It’s unexpected popular success established the black musical as a Broadway phenomenon of the 1920s” (Stempel 235). After over a decade, *Shuffle Along* revived musicals written, directed, and performed by all blacks. The show centered around the fictional Jimtown, where two friends, Sam and Steve are both running for mayor. When one wins, the other finds several areas to disagree and the two battle it out in a twenty minute comedic fight scene. The musical couldn’t have come at a more perfect time; it was exactly what African Americans needed to feel that there was still a chance for them. According to the celebrated black writer Langston Hughes, *Shuffle Along* “gave just the proper push--a pre-Charleston kick--to that Negro vogue of the 20s that spread to books, African sculpture, music, and dancing” (Stempel 235). Designed for a primarily black audience, the creators were not expecting *Shuffle Along* to reach those of different races and backgrounds. Creators soon realized that “the show succeeded not only with black audiences but white audiences as well.” They noticed that it became impossible for the white audiences to “resist a jollity that the company itself appeared to experience down to the very marrow” (Stempel 235). It
was because of *Shuffle Along* that black musicals became an acceptable and anticipated form of entertainment in American culture. Everyone began to take notice; audiences ranging from blacks, whites, jews, and immigrants came out to see this new outbreak of talent. *Shuffle Along* changed the Broadway scene so dramatically, that Ziegfeld’s Gilda Gray sang the song “It’s Getting Dark on Broadway” and everyone knew that Gilda “was not referring to the absence of street lights” (Stempel 237).

As Broadway became more accepting of black plays and musicals, writers began to expand on new ideas to new shows that were creating a buzz on the streets. There was no longer a question as to whether an all black cast would be successful on Broadway. Gershwin’s 1935 *Porgy and Bess* further proved this as it was seen to be “destined for immediate popularity” the night after it opened (Gershwin’s Opera Makes A Hit). This popular show follows Porgy, a black beggar who lives in Charleston and his attempts to rescue Bess from the controlling Crown. Combining traditional opera with a dramatic plot and powerful dialogue made *Porgy and Bess* something that everyone could talk about. Years later, in the late 50s, writer Lorraine Hansberry tested her skills on Broadway with the monumental *A Raisin in the Sun*. *A Raisin in the Sun* focuses on a black family's experiences living on the Southside of Chicago. The Youngers, the family within the play, struggle with fulfilling their individual dreams and also doing what is right for the family as a whole. This groundbreaking play was continual proof that blacks could write, direct, and act on Broadway. It also furthered the idea that their shows pushed boundaries and gave Broadway a new edge. Even amongst a time of racial discrimination, audience member’s recall watching Hansberry’s work and stating that “during the first 15 minutes the audience gets colorblind and they no longer see Negroes on the stage” (Zolotow). Once the play was nominated for four Tony awards that year, including the highest honor of the season, best play, audiences began to realize that African Americans had conquered Broadway.

While the steam driving blacks ‘involvement in Broadway shows had picked up, opportunities for black actors had once again become scarce. The industry was a constant roller coaster ride for blacks and while some shows tasted success, that success was short lived for blacks looking for work. Broadway thrived with the inclusion of all or mostly black casts of shows, but it was made clear that such shows needed even more to remain popular among both black and white audiences.

Just when there was speculation that black plays and musicals were taking an extended intermission, they sprang up in full force. With the near disappearance of black plays and musicals, playwrights, actors, and directors were all looking for their chance to revive the black scene on Broadway. Shows such as *Ain’t Misbehavin* and *The Wiz* in the 1970s brought back the exciting elements that Broadway had been missing. Being a “new kind of fantasy,” *The Wiz* followed Dorothy, the lion, the tinman, and the scarecrow down the yellowbrick road. This show took the characters out of the comfort of Kansas and set them in the big city, complete with junkyards and disco clubs. *The Wiz* demonstrated an entirely new elegance and, style into the musical theatre world and with it’s several Tony wins, it challenged other Broadway shows to do the same (Black Musical Shows Vitality and Style). *Ain’t Misbehavin* was a musical revue that served as a tribute to all black musicians during the Harlem Renaissance. It showed homage to the time of great creativity, ethnic pride and And not only did *Ain’t Misbehavin* experience great success on Broadway, it added to New York’s jazz scene by “developing the audience for the current revival of jazz entertainment in clubs” (Jazz Swings Back Into the Cabaret Scene). Both seventies musicals re-opened the can of black Broadway shows that audiences kept coming back for.

The opening of other groundbreaking shows such as August Wilson’s *Fences* in 1987 and *Dreamgirls* in 1981 were other productions with an all-black cast with similar elements that made Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* so memorable for all audiences. Upon winning the Pulitzer Prize for best play, Wilson reflects that “for the first time a general audience has been touched by blacks” (Freedman). Once again, an all-black cast left a lasting mark for those who experienced it. While other Broadway productions leave their audiences with a lasting impression of joy, laughter, fun, or
sadness, audiences knew that every time an all-black cast put on a show, they needed to hang on to their seats. Audiences began to realize that upon seeing an all-black production, they would get a true sense of life; not just African American life, but life as a whole, struggles and all. It was that element that kept bringing audiences back to see all-black shows from the 80s on. It became evident that these shows weren’t solely attracting black audiences, but that there was in fact “a broad range of people seeing them” (Gerard). Whereas the amount of black theatergoers to others was 1 to 10 in 1980, such shows began to drastically alter that number. Fences grossed “$11 million in it’s first year, a record for a nonmusical,” further proving that all-black shows were a crucial element to the success of the Broadway industry (Gerard).

Black producers were also smart about the types of audiences they wanted in their seats and what it would take to get them there. In cases such as Fences, producers lowered ticket prices for certain matinees, keeping in mind the target audience members, or African Americans with a lower income. Production teams created outreach offices to be able to reach not just blacks and white, but “Pentecostals, Hispanics, Jews, and students” (Gerard). They would even reach out to churches in black communities and put articles in the black weeklies in hopes to gain a wider range of viewers. Even after all of the extra effort to create a larger audience, production teams learned the value of word-of-mouth; people were talking about the black shows and it was that alone that made everyone want to experience them.

Dating back to the 1990s until today, we have seen more all-black productions in such a short period of time than ever before. These new plays and musicals were able to relate to and were enthrall audiences of all kinds. Truly innovative shows such as Disney’s The Lion King and Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk introduced larger than life puppets, and a show centered around dance to the Broadway scene. The Lion King, which opened in 1997 and is still running today, recreates a Disney classic with breathtaking sets, props, and an extremely talented mostly-black cast. Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk utilized famous black tapper Savion Glover to show the history of blacks from the days of slavery until present day.

Reaching into the new millennium, revivals and original plays and musicals, of all-black productions have seen an enormous amount of success on Broadway, that success displayed through ticket sales and reviews. Out of these Broadway shows, we began to see repeats of the ones that were greatly received years before. The new millennium brought revivals of A Raisin in the Sun, Fences, and Cat On a Hot Tin Roof, a play originally done by a white cast but recreated with an all-star African American cast in 2008. Black producers began to bring in famous Hollywood stars to bring not only fans of film, but of different types of music as well. Sean P. Diddy Combs made his Broadway debut in the 2004 revival of A Raisin in the Sun in the hopes that the addition of a hip hop mogul would cause audiences to come in floods. Though A Raisin in the Sun may have received mixed reviews, Tony Award winners Audra McDonald and Phylicia Rashad attracted audiences of all types and carried the show through until it’s closing. Celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey couldn’t resist the pull of African American involvement in Broadway shows. In 2005 she brought The Color Purple to life on the Broadway stage, inspired by the film she starred in back in 1985. Broadway veteran Debbie Allen tried her hand at directing with the all-black revival of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof in 2008. The production of this American classic was sure to be a hit with it’s all-star cast. Big names such as Terrance Howard, Phylicia Rashad, Anika Noni Rose, and James Earl Jones immediately stirred up excitement about the retelling of the story of Big Daddy, Brick, and Maggie. Critics suggested that “Rose’s (cat) cries out for more lightning,” revealing that her performance was one unlike any other (Brantley). While the cast was all black, Allen didn’t want that to be the focus, her idea was to remove the idea of blacks playing white characters and “just discover the lives of the people” (Simonson). Running for just under four months, Allen’s production aided in revealing old characters in a new way, regardless of the color of their skin. These revivals of classic American
stories revealed that Broadway shows could be reinvented with black stars and attract an entirely new crowd.

In the past two or three years, Broadway shows have removed any doubt that an all black cast could be a hit. These shows have placed an exclamation mark on the phrase “all, or mostly-black cast.” The more recent successes such as the new musicals Passing Strange and Memphis have been an exciting addition to not only black theatre, but Broadway in it’s entirety. While Passing Strange and Memphis are both very different, both involve rock and roll as a main driving force to their plots. Passing Strange let audiences enter into a young African American’s journey to self-discovery. While Passing Strange may have had a short run on Broadway, those involved with the show were pleased that they were able to “shake things up a bit” while they could (“Passing Strange Sets 7/20 Closing Date”). The Broadway industry couldn’t be more thankful and proud of Memphis as it won the 2010 Tony Award for Best Musical. The show, not cast 100% with black actors, centers around the struggles of a young black woman trying to break her way onto the music scene. With it’s tagline being “The Birth of Rock n’ Roll,” Memphis demonstrated that such stories could be told not only by involving icons such as Elvis, but through unknown black performers of the same time (Healy). As attendance to Broadway shows had been on the decline in 2009-2010, producers have been particularly going after African Americans to boost attendance. Memphis proved that it’s “success at building a black audience is anything but business as usual for Broadway” (Healy). Though the trend of previous all-black productions was to involve big names in revivals of well known shows, Memphis exhibits that unknown stars and an unknown story is definitely the way to go. The undeniable success of Memphis “gave black audiences something to talk about” and an experience that they wouldn’t get if they had gone to see Mary Poppins per say (Healy).

Black plays and musicals have come miles from where they began in the late 1800s. From small minstrelsy vaudeville shows to million dollar, Tony winning productions, blacks have worked hard to get their voices heard on the stage, literally. Each play or musical has given new light into different areas of African American life. The involvement of blacks in theatre has driven the Broadway scene to great new heights. The progression of black plays and musicals in no where near over; opening a few months ago, The Mountaintop is a non-traditional play about Martin Luther King Jr. starring Samuel L. Jackson and Angela Bassett. Playwrights set out to make The Mountaintop non-traditional in the sense that it isn’t the same story we have all heard about MLK; it is a story being told from the inside out. Audiences have been reigning in from all over to experience the events leading up to the night MLK was assassinated. The excitement, life, pain, and happiness that black plays and musicals have helped Broadway audiences to encounter has had an enormous role in the success of Broadway over the years. Audiences of all kinds have fallen in love with such productions, making them some of their all time favorites. Broadway producers recognize that with such success comes great responsibility and are constantly improving and coming up with new ideas for all black productions. Today, a decade later than the small shows that started it all, every lover of Broadway is holding on to the edges of their seats, ready and anxious to see what new magic can be created through an incredible all black production.

Works Cited


