

THE DEVELOPMENT AND TREATMENT OF THE NEGRO CHARACTER
AS PRESENTED IN AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

1927 - 1968

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF PH. D.

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STEPHEN ROBERT ALKIRE

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ABSTRACT

THE DEVELOPMENT AND TREATMENT OF THE NEGRO CHARACTER AS PRESENTED IN AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE 1927-1968

By

Stephen Robert Alkire

The purpose of the thesis is to discern various concepts of Negritude promulgated upon the American musical stage by chronicling the manners in which Negro characters have been presented to the public and by examining the dramatic situations in which they have been placed. The study also seeks to prove, although indirectly, that the modern musical theatre is a genre worthy of consideration and capable of withstanding the scrutiny of critical evaluation.

The subject is confined to plotted American musicals, produced commercially in New York City between 1927 and 1968, in which characters have been designated as Negroes. Plotless entertainments such as black-face minstrelsy, extravaganzas, and revues are not analyzed in detail; however, their influence in developing specialized racial images is discussed in a first chapter which provides the necessary background from 1769 through the 1920's. Succeeding chapters offer surveys of developmental trends in such productions.

The critical method of research is employed. Twenty-five musical plays are examined. Primary emphasis is placed upon textual analysis, aided by materials found on original cast recordings. Secondary sources provide details exploring production histories, musical and choreographic aspects, reviews by other critics, and the audience for which each work was intended. Social and historical tracts concerning

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the American Negro also are consulted in an effort to gain proper perspective. The study is designed as a chronology wherein evolutionary patterns are traced as they emerge; therefore, the thesis is structured according to trends as they develop by decade.

Of the musicals analyzed in depth, twenty were written by whites, two were products of interracial collaboration, and three were written by blacks. Contributions by black authors offered no greater insights into Negro character than comparable works by white authors. Moreover, excepting one of the collaborative efforts, Negro-written musicals shunned social themes in favor of folk humor and entertainment value. Thus, interracial issues were raised upon the musical stage almost entirely by whites.

The socially committed musical excoriated white racism by condemning or ridiculing its irrationality. In early works, the Negro was depicted as a resigned victim of society whose problems could be solved only by the benign intervention of enlightened whites. Later developments allowed for the emergence of the integration-oriented civil rights activist and, finally, the hostile black militant who openly expresses his hatred.

Musicals whose purpose solely was to entertain featured virtually all-black casts and an exotic milieu. Squalor and tawdriness originally were rendered picturesque in atmospheres of ecstatic depravity and enthusiastic corruption. Gradually, sensationalism bowed to greater humanization and diversification, but the all-black entertainment ultimately declined by virtue of its irrelevance.

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Perhaps the most revealing racial attribute may be found in the projection of Negro sexuality. Originally, the female was depicted as a whorish wench whose libidinous drives knew no bounds. Conversely, the male was denied his potency unless it was associated negatively with violence or crime. Gradually, those roles became more refined but were not challenged until the 1960's, a fact which supports psychiatric contentions about hidden racial lusts and fears buried deep within the white American psyche.

The import of the thesis is not to be found in speculations upon the degree of accuracy to which Negro character has been realized; rather, it is to be perceived in the development toward greater diversity and maturity of the black image as presented on the American musical stage largely by white authors to white audiences. Such is indicative of progressive patterns of social awareness within the nation.

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1927-1968

By
Stephen Robert Alkire

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three norms who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. For the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life.

Could such a metamorphosis have taken place as suddenly as it has appeared to? The answer is no; not because the New Negro is not here, but because the Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man. The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. . . . So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being--a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.¹

These words, written by Alain Locke and first published in 1925, unfortunately continue to ring with contemporaneity. Given the racial strife by which this country was torn during the 1960's, the image of a "new" Negro quite different from the one Locke had envisioned dramatically impressed itself upon the consciousness of this nation. Once again, the difficulty in comprehending him was compounded by our cherished and reassuring beliefs about the "old" Negro; thus, an astonished citizenry could wonder, somewhat naively, at the apparently

¹Alain Locke (ed.), The New Negro: An Interpretation (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925), p. 3.

incomprehensible causes of such spectacular manifestations of racial unrest, bitterness, and anger. The answers to many questions began to pour forth in an unprecedented number of publications² which addressed themselves to the social and cultural history of the American Negro. As these works began to fill some long-neglected gaps in our national education, it became inescapably and painfully clear that the so-called "Negro problem" was, in fact, a problem of white perception.³ Charles I. Glucksberg succinctly identified the difficulty as early as 1952. "There is, of course, no solution for the Negro problem until the Negro ceases to be a problem. And that will not happen until the whites in turn examine critically and objectively their concept of the Negro and the attitude they betray toward him."⁴

It is herein posited that certain firmly-held beliefs regarding the Negro have been supported, perpetuated, and perhaps even defined in entertainments patronized by white American audiences. The purpose of this study is to discern concepts of Negritude promulgated upon the stage by chronicling the manners in which Negro characters have been presented to the public and by examining the dramatic situations in which they have been placed. Because the stage Negro has been relegated so frequently to the role of musical entertainer, the examination will be confined to the delineation of his character in the American musical

²Mary R. Hardwick, "The Nature of the Negro Hero in Serious American Drama, 1910-1964" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University, 1968), p. 2.

³The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968) put it more bluntly in concluding that the Negro problem was a product of "white racism" (p. 203).

⁴Charles I. Glucksberg, "Bias, Fiction, and the Negro," Phylon, XIII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1952), p. 128.

theatre. It is suggested that such a study may provide insight into the current re-evaluation of racial attitudes in this society.

The study also seeks to prove, although by means of indirection, that the American musical theatre is not to be considered a kind of artistic bastard whose form is unworthy of critical analysis. For far too long it has been thought to be a genre separate from, and inferior to, the "straight" (comedy or drama) stage. Its history rarely has been taught, its librettos infrequently published, and its form, style, and content have been considered seriously by only a handful of theorists.⁵ Nevertheless, the mature musical production has been acknowledged to be "America's greatest contribution to worldwide theatrical entertainment,"⁶ for at its best it incorporates and integrates all of Aristotle's six dramatic elements. In his introduction to Lehman Engel's thoughtful consideration of The American Musical Theater, Brooks Atkinson has commented:

As an art form, the musical stage is entitled to serious consideration. The musical stage is pure theater. I have sometimes wondered whether it is not a more genuine and comprehensive form of theater than the spoken drama. In essence, theater is poetry, and the musical stage has the spontaneity of poetry. It is the most effective method for creating imaginative drama.

For the musical stage is phantasmagoria. Like poetry, it deals in myth. It incantates the theater. By the richness of its medium, which blends music, dance, verse, costume, scenery, and orchestra, the musical drama makes complete use of the theater. It is the one element of poetry left in a form of literature that was all poetry originally.⁷

⁵ Among them: Lehman Engel, David Ewen, Stanley Green, and Cecil Smith. For specific references, the reader is referred to the Bibliography.

⁶ Abe LaFite, Broadway's Greatest Musicals (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), p. xi.

⁷ In: Lehman Engel, The American Musical Theater, A Consideration (A CBS Legacy Collection Book; New York: The Macmillan Company 1967), pp. vi-vii.

The librettos with which this study is concerned will be considered, therefore, as literary efforts and will be subjected to textual analysis⁸ employing the six Aristotelian elements of drama as basic criteria. Inasmuch as (most) librettos do not contain musical scores, heavy reliance will be made upon original cast recordings;⁹ however, purely musical elements can be discussed only with regard to the nature and purpose of the composition as it relates to the subject of Negro character (native rhythms, blues, work songs, spirituals, gospels, etc.). Similarly, elements of spectacle (especially choreography) will necessarily be confined to stage directions given in the libretto and to information given in critical reviews or historical surveys.

The following limitations are imposed: The subject will be confined to plotted musicals by American authors, commercially produced in New York City—both on and off-Broadway—in which characters have been necessarily designated as Negroes. Because the study deals with the popular musical stage, American grand opera (Regina, Troubled Island, The Barrier) is excluded; however, a distinction is made with regard to works which borrow from or border on opera (Porgy and Bess, Carmen Jones, My Darlin' Aida) because of their acceptance as popular or Broadway opera. No effort has been made to establish a representative grouping of works for the musical theatre; rather, the study is intended as a chronology wherein evolutionary patterns are traced as they emerge. For this

⁸ Chapter II, devoted entirely to Show Boat, is designed to demonstrate the fact that the libretto of a musical play can and does supply material that is worthy of critical assessment.

⁹ Of the twenty-five musicals examined in-depth, only four have not been recorded (Memphis Bound, Carib Song, My Darlin' Aida, and Tambourines to Glory). Access has been gained to the remaining twenty-one recordings.

reason, a structure has been established according to trends, as they develop, by decade. Finally, because such musical genres devoid of plot as blackface minstrelsy, the all-black extravaganza, and the later musical revues are deemed essential, by virtue of their influence, to any discussion of the central topic, a first chapter has been created in order to supply the necessary background to the major areas of interest. Likewise, each chapter which comprises a complete decade begins with a survey of developmental trends in musicals which do not meet the criteria for in-depth analysis.

The time boundaries of 1927-1968 have been carefully selected. Show Boat (1927), considered to be a turning point in the history of the American musical theatre, marked the first serious treatment, in a plotted work, of interracial relationships and of the Negro as a character of substance. The terminal date, 1968, has been chosen to be as revolutionary in form and social content as was Show Boat in its day.

Aside from the many social and historical tracts concerning the American Negro, materials covering the Negro's participation in show business are available;¹⁰ however, with the exception of the excellent studies by Sterling Brown and Doris Abramson, most deal with him as a performer rather than a character. Moreover, analysis of the Negro character tends to be confined to the non-musical stage in both published and unpublished works. Similarly, studies of the American musical

¹⁰ Among them: Doris Abramson, Sterling Brown, Tom Fletcher, Edith J. R. Isaacs, Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, and Lofton Mitchell. For specific references, the reader is referred to the Bibliography.

stage tend toward histories, surveys and plot summaries; characterization is rarely discussed, and the contributions to the musical stage made by American Negroes are all but ignored. It is suggested, therefore, that this study explores an area that, as yet, has remained untapped.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND: THE DEVELOPMENT AND REFINEMENT OF AN IMAGE

Depiction of Negro character in professional musical entertainment began in this country as early as May 29, 1769, when "Lewis Hallam delighted an audience in New York with his imitation of a drunken darkey."¹ The character portrayed was Mungo, slave of a West Indian planter; the occasion was the first American performance, at the theatre in John Street, of The Padlock, an imported English comic opera by Isaac Bickerstaffe and Charles Dibdin.² Of Hallam's characterization, William Dunlap is quoted as having observed:

In The Padlock Mr Hallam was unrivalled to his death, giving Mungo with a truth derived from the study of the negro slave character, which Dibdin, the writer, could not have conceived.³

Representation of Negro characters in formally written, imported musical entertainments was, however, a comprehensible rarity on the 18th Century American stage. Nevertheless, the image of the Negro song-and-dance performer--a precursor of black-face minstrelsy which was to follow--became popular toward the turn of the century.

With few exceptions, . . . the first "Negroes" in professional American theatrical companies were whites imitating Negroes. By the early 19th Century, these made-up Negroes were part of most

¹ John Tasker Howard, Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour (3d ed. rev.; New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1953), p. 120.

² Laurence Hutton, "The Negro on the Stage," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, LXXIX (June, 1889), pp. 131-32.

³ Ibid., quoting Dunlap, p. 132.

circuses and were in increasing demand as single acts in theaters and as intermission entertainers at straight plays.⁴

The form of entertainment was that of a brief novelty act, consisting almost always of comic material in the form of song and/or dance.

"Often in circuses clowns would sing Negro-like songs from the backs of horses as they cantered around the sawdust rings."⁵ On the legitimate stage, musical black-face acts "were inserted between the acts of a play or between separate sections of the bill."⁶ References to such burnt-cork interludes may be found as early as December 30, 1799, when, following the second act of the tragedy, Oronooko,⁷ musician Gottlieb Graupner performed "'in character,' with the accompaniment of a banjo, a song called 'The Gay Negro Boy' . . . at the Federal Street Theatre, Boston."⁸

From an historical point of view, it is possible to label these amusing pre-minstrel performers as the progenitors of the long-enduring concept of the merry, musical "stage Negro."

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

⁴Nat Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," Show Business Illustrated, I (October 17, 1961), p. 64.

⁵Howard, p. 121.

⁶Richard Moody (ed.), Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909 (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966), p. 475.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Howard, p. 120.

Jerry. In Tom and Jerry a spot is found for gay singing and dancing, even in a Charleston slave market.⁹

That these musical black-face acts--whether at the circus or on the stage--were designed to be appreciated as lighthearted entertainment is eminently understandable; however, the representation of an entire race as being only amusing is a curiously one-sided concept. Speaking of the conventional stage Negro, Margaret Just Butcher has stated:

In the years between the Revolution and the Civil War, the predominant Negro character types were the comic buffoon and the happy, carefree slave flourishing under benevolent patronage. . . . For decade after decade, the Negro character was synonymous with "comic relief," diverting antics, crude dialect, and grotesque appearance--either physically or in terms of costume.¹¹

This image, to the virtual exclusion of all others, proceeded in a direct line from the early blacked-up performers of circus acts and stage interludes to "our first authentic American theatre form"¹¹--the minstrel show.

Thomas Dartmouth ("Daddy") Rice has been credited as being "unquestionably the most significant figure of these pre-minstrel days,"¹² and as the man who "gave the first entertainment in which a black-face performer was not only the main actor, but the entire act."¹⁴ It is generally accepted that Rice was the first to jump "Jim Crow," probably

⁹Loften Mitchell, Black Drama; The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1967), p. 26.

¹⁰Margaret Just Butcher (based on materials left by Alain Locke), The Negro in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 188.

¹¹Edith J. R. Isaacs, The Negro in the American Theatre (New York: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1947), p. 27.

¹²Moody, p. 476.

¹³Carl Wittke, Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1930), p. 20.

in Louisville sometime between 1828 and 1831.¹⁴ "Wherever it happened, the initial 'Jim Crow' performance launched Rice on a career that brought him enormous fame and made him one of the highest paid performers of his day."¹⁵ It also generated a great many imitators. Rice followed his "Jim Crow" success by introducing "Ethiopian Operas" to audiences in New York City. As early as January, 1833, he had performed Long Island Juba and Where's My Head at the Bowery Theatre, these works being the precursors of the later minstrel burlesques.¹⁶ "Perhaps Rice's influence kept the minstrel from revealing the genuine plantation Negro, but certainly Rice's influence established the pattern for the individual performers of the burnt-cork line."¹⁷

Given the popularity of Rice and his imitators, it was not long before the individual novelty act gave way to the formation of groups, and, by February, 1843, the audience at the Bowery Amphitheatre witnessed the first "full-evening's musical entertainment in black-face."¹⁸

In 1843 Daniel Emmet, composer of Dixie, brought his Virginia Minstrels to the New York stage. These were [four] white men with faces blackened. They wore gala costumes; they performed on the fiddle, banjo, bones and tambourine, telling jokes and ending with a general breakdown [a noisy, rapid, shuffling dance]. And the great era of the minstrels was officially launched.¹⁹

Other, larger troupes soon formed--most notably Christy's Minstrels, led by E. P. Christy who claimed the innovational staging of a

¹⁴Moody, p. 477.

¹⁵Howard, p. 125.

¹⁶Moody, pp. 477-78.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 478.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Mitchell, p. 27.

semicircular line-up, the placement of tambourine at one end and bones at the other, and the central position of the Interlocutor.²⁰ Christy also claimed to have instituted, by 1846, the traditional structure of the minstrel show performance; however, it is more likely that the "stereotyped format"²¹ evolved through repetition and innovations of various companies. The customary production framework, probably established "sometime in the late forties or early fifties,"²² is detailed as follows:

For the first half of the performance a group of at least seventeen men, elaborately costumed, their faces covered with burnt cork, sat in a half-circle. At the center was the interlocutor, the master of ceremonies, who played straight, fed the comedians and was usually the butt of their gay humor. On either side of him were a minimum of seven singers, dancers, monologuists, or other featured performers, and at the end of each line the "end men," Mr. Bones and Tambo, named for the instruments they played (bones used like castanets, and a tambourine) who were also the leading comics. The band that supplied the music was either in the pit or behind the circle of actors. The performance always began with the interlocutor's ritual of command: "Gentlemen, be seated," and was followed by ballads, comic songs, humorous dialogues, travestied stump speeches, topical jokes, soft-shoe or buck-and-wing dances, all in quick succession, and by a "walk-around" as the curtain came down. The second half was the "olio," less traditional in form and more like a later burlesque or vaudeville show with sketches, except that the players were--as in Shakespeare's theatre--all males, with the Negro "wenches" a much sought-for solo part for a character actor.²³

That the minstrel show was inspired by the music and dances of the Southern Negro slave is indisputable; however, it is essential to remember that "Ethiopian minstrelsy was white masquerade; Negro performers were not allowed to appear in it until after the Civil War;

²⁰ Moody, p. 479.

²¹ Ibid., p. 480.

²² Ibid.

²³ Isaacs, pp. 23 and 25.

it was composed by whites, acted and sung by whites in burnt cork for white audiences."²⁴ It is essential, as well, to remember that, as

Richard Moody points out:

Negro minstrelsy was above all an entertainment of and for the theatre, presentational in every respect. At times there may have been some attempt to draw upon the characteristics of the plantation Negro, but there was never any very genuine effort to represent his true, realistic character.²⁵

The result was "a caricature of Negro life, . . . which 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."²⁶ Specific attributes of the comic minstrel show stereotype have been very well enumerated by Carl Wittke:

. . . the stage Negro became quite a different person from the model on which he was formed. More specifically, the plantation type which got into minstrelsy apparently was calculated to give the impression that all Negroes were lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow. The stage Negro loved water-melons and ate them in a peculiar way. He turned out to be an expert wielder of the razor, a weapon which he always had ready for use on such special occasions as crap games, of which the stage Negro was passionately fond.

In minstrelsy, the Negro type had all these characteristics and many more. 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; and he loved chickens so well that he could not pass a chicken-coop without falling into temptation. In minstrelsy, moreover, the Negro's alleged love for the grand manner led him to use words so long that he not only did not understand their meaning, but twisted the syllables in the most ludicrous fashion in his futile efforts to pronounce them.²⁷

²⁴ Sterling Brown, "The Negro in the American Theatre," The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (2d ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 566.

²⁵ Moody, p. 483.

²⁶ James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 93.

²⁷ Wittke, quoted in Howard, pp. 121-22.

The image of the Negro, as created and perpetuated by white minstrels, springs from sound comic theory. Indeed, the idea of laughing at the ludicrous is as old as Aristotle:

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type--not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive.²⁸

The humor of the minstrel show, aside from the familiar gags, one-liners and puns, is to be found in the concept of an uneducated human being ineffectually attempting to "ape" his "superiors." The fact that such a spectacle was found to be immediately hilarious when performed in black-face and with Negro dialect implies a racist posture on the part not only of the minstrels, but of the audience as well.

The "comic Negro" is created for the delectation of a white audience, condescending and convinced that any departure from the Anglo-Saxon norm is amusing, and that any attempt to enter the special provinces of whites, such as wearing a dress suit, is doubly so.²⁹

Thus, the minstrel character's penchant for malapropisms becomes funny not only because of the device of misused words, but because an identifiably "inferior" being assumes a social role associated (in the mind of the nineteenth century audience) only with whites.

Richard Moody has suggested that the true comic spirit of Negro minstrelsy is to be found in the burlesques or afterpieces of the

²⁸ Aristotle, Aristotle's Poetics, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 59.

²⁹ Sterlin A. Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Journal of Negro Education, II (January, 1933), reprinted in Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America, ed. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 154.

second part.³⁰ These are cast in either of two basic forms: the monologue and the burlesque of well-known, popular plays. In the monologue, the minstrel character is seen in an exalted social position; he may be an educator presenting a highly technical lecture or a politician delivering an oration. The humor proceeds from the fact that he is verbally incapable of fulfilling his function:

But again, logically speaking--yes, speaking logically, I see one-half geographically and climatrically, or in other words, climatrically and geographically considered; yes one-half our glorious Union slipping away--yes slipping into a--so to speak, an--a adumbrous chaosity; yes, chaosity--and so on.³¹

Virtually the same comic approach is employed in the burlesques of plays wherein the audience is treated to the spectacle of minstrel figures pretending to imitate the dignity and refinement of renowned, often royal, characters. Again, the humor is based upon the audience's awareness of the ludicrous, distortions of diction, and gross exaggeration.

Romeo and Juliet became Roman Nose and Suet; Macbeth, Bad Breath, the Crane of Chowder. The dramatis personae were invariably the same as in the original; thus the comic incongruity of black face impersonations of well-known dramatic figures was established immediately.³²

The enormous popularity of the minstrel show is an American theatrical phenomenon. "During the fifties, ten New York theatres devoted themselves almost exclusively to minstrel performances. . . . Hundreds of companies were playing throughout the country in the fifties and sixties."³³ Given its widespread popular appeal, it is not surprising that the image of the Negro projected in black-face minstrelsy

³⁰Moody, p. 481.

³¹J. B. Murphy, "If I May So Speak, a Burlesque Stump Oration," in Moody, p. 489.

³²Moody, p. 481.

³³Ibid., p. 482.

"took firm hold upon the theatre and the public's imagination and helped to perpetuate an enduring and usually degrading image of the Negro group in this country."³⁴

After the Civil War, Negroes themselves took to the musical stage as professionals, and minstrelsy was the logical form of entertainment for them to pursue. --Or was it? It is interesting to note that Negro performers adopted all the conventions of minstrelsy, even to the practice of blackening their faces with burnt cork and painting in exaggeratedly thickened lips. Negro performers were endeavoring to imitate an imitation of themselves; the result was a caricature of a caricature--a denial of reality and an acknowledgement of travesty.

Laurence Hutton has suggested that the use of make-up may have been necessary in order to achieve a uniform darkness of color for the entire company;³⁵ however, the achieved effect seems to imply more than this. The use of blackface for veritable Negroes may have been simply the result of a stubborn stage convention. Nevertheless, the fact that the minstrel show Negro, whether performed by white or black, appeared and was accepted only in the conventionalized garb of a red-white-and-blue dress suit, burnt cork, and white-gloved hands is of fundamental socio-psychological import. In this vein, Ralph Ellison has commented as follows:

This mask, this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the

³⁴Theodore Eugene Gilliam, "The Negro Image in Representative American Dramas" (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Tulane University), 1967.

³⁵Hutton, p. 140.

performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the "thing" in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask.³⁶

Such an analysis of the function of blackface is not to be minimized. It is true that minstrelsy never pretended toward realism, and perhaps its departure from reality into the realm of comfortable caricature--of which the blackface mask was the most discernible sign--helps to explain its enormous popular appeal with white audiences. Certainly it is significant to note that the dehumanizing mask of comic stylization did not die with minstrelsy; rather, it remained as the visual mark of the comic, musical Negro designed as a subject for laughter but never as a subject for thought.

Long after the decline of minstrelsy, blackface remained a common adjunct to white and Negro comedy. The white show business tradition included Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor and continued as far as Amos 'n' Andy. Nor could Negroes themselves escape the cork until the late 1930s and early 1940s. The comics on even the all-Negro variety shows for Negro audiences that played the T.O.B.A. [Theater Owners and Bookers Association] circuit through the South and Midwest in the first decades of the century wore blackface.³⁸

Beginning in September, 1852, and running concurrently with the minstrel show, was another American theatrical phenomenon--the Tom-show.³⁸ The term, "Tom-show" refers to a stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. Five months after the publication of the novel, C. W. Taylor's stage version made its debut at the

³⁶ Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 49.

³⁷ Hentoff, p. 64.

³⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, historical information on Tom-shows has been extracted from the following excellent source: J. C. Furnas, Goodbye to Uncle Tom (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1956), pp. 259-284.

National Theatre on the Bowery in New York City. The adaptation was unsuccessful, lasting only two weeks--probably due to the fact that Taylor chose to eliminate the characters of Topsy, Eva and Legree. A second, and much more complete, acting version was assembled shortly thereafter by George L. Aiken for George C. Howard's company in Troy, New York. The production was soon brought to the same National Theatre in New York City where it ran for three hundred consecutive performances. A third version, authored by Henry J. Conway, appeared in Boston a short while later and was subsequently brought to New York by P. T. Barnum in order to rival the Aiken version. It ran for six weeks and was revived twice in the spring of 1855. Needless to say, in all three cases, the casts included no Negro performers.

Given the Southern setting, the inordinate popularity of minstrelsy, and the fact that Uncle Tom's Cabin was usually played without an afterpiece, it was inevitable that Tom-shows should become pervaded with musical entertainment in the minstrel style. Songs and dances were interpolated even in Taylor's original version of the play, which featured numbers billed as "Chorus, 'Nigga in de Cornfield;' Kentucky Breakdown Dance; . . . [and] Negro Chorus, 'We Darkies Hoe the Corn.'"³⁹

Here began the infiltration of Uncle Tom with impertinent tricks. The Victorian stage was all cluttered up with incidental songs and dances anyway, but in this case such numbers were soon acting like the camel in the tent.⁴⁰

The Howard-Aiken production included interpolated songs such as "Uncle Tom's Religion" and "Old Folks at Home," sung by Tom. Also featured

³⁹"A Critique of Uncle Tom's Cabin," Theatre and Drama in the Making, ed. John Gassner and Ralph G. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), Vol. II, p. 947.

⁴⁰Furnas, pp. 262-63.

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was an original number, "I'se So Wicked!," written by Howard for Topsy.⁴¹ Likewise, the Conway version featured "many song-and-dance numbers: Its slave-auction scene, for instance, included a 'Plantation Jig . . . Mr. Gray/Banjo Accompaniment . . . Mr. Brown,' obviously a straight minstrel turn."⁴² Spots also were found for considerable eccentric dancing on the part of Topsy who had quickly become a favorite with audiences.

The enormous popularity of Tom-shows led to the formation of many companies specializing in its production. Rival companies vied with one another for patronage, each promising greater and more astonishing elements of spectacle and more and more musical numbers.

In February, 1863, New York had four rival productions of Uncle Tom's Cabin competing at once, all stuck full of banjos, cake-walks and tin-pan-alley coon songs with no relation to either the action or the character singing. All insisted more and more on the minstrel-show picture of the Negro as simian buffoon, agile, tuneful, rhythmic, but all the funnier for being imperfectly human.⁴³

After the Civil War, and with minstrel entertainment having become an important aspect of Tom-shows, the Negro began to appear in productions. He did not, however, play Uncle Tom nor any of the other major characters until a very late date--minstrel star Sam Lucas having been the first Negro to fill the role of Tom.⁴⁴ Instead, the Negro performer was used to supply local color, to do minstrel turns, and to provide choral music, such as spirituals underscoring the death of Eva. As had been the custom prior to Emancipation, this left only made-up

⁴¹Ibid., p. 269.

⁴²Ibid., p. 271.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Tom Fletcher, 100 Years of the Negro in Show Business (New York: Burdge & Company, Ltd., 1954), p. 71.

white actors to portray the principal Negro characters. The function of the blackface mask, as applied to minstrelsy's image of the comic Negro has already been discussed,⁴⁵ and the contentions proposed are supported by an ominous practice adhered to in Tom-shows, wherein not all of the Negro characters were comic figures. The caricature of blackface was designed to prevent empathy or human concern; however, the melodramatic action of the Tom-show made it necessary that an audience should care, for example, about the plight of an Eliza. The problem was solved, predictably, by portraying such characters, visually and verbally, as closer to white than to black.

Tom-shows even accentuated Mrs. Stowe's notions of the superiority of "white blood" by playing Eliza, George Harris and Cassie--the slave characters of energy and enterprise--with white actors using little if any dark make-up and eschewing Negro dialect. Only Tom, Topsy and the chuckleheaded minor characters were played as identifiable Negroes.⁴⁶

Should one doubt that "identifiable Negroes" means costumed and made-up in the blackface minstrel tradition, one need only look to a photograph of Fay Bainter as Topsy in the 1933 Player's Club revival, in New York City, of Uncle Tom's Cabin.⁴⁷ Miss Bainter appears in gingham dress, pickaninny braids, white-gloved hands, and blackened face with huge white eyes and mouth. This, as late as 1933, is the essence of a much earlier image--"a grotesque expression of the mirth of nature."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Supra, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁶ Furnas, p. 283.

⁴⁷ Daniel Blum, A Pictorial History of the American Theatre (3d ed. rev.; New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1953), p. 211.

⁴⁸ Lorraine Hansberry, "Me Tink Me Hear Sounds in de Night," Theatre Arts, XLIV (October, 1960), p. 10.

To say that Tom-shows were popularly successful throughout the nation (discounting extensive European tours and even European adaptations) would be a gross understatement. J. Frank Davis has estimated that, "No play in the world, probably, has ever had half so many productions."⁴⁹

Right after the Civil War, and into the 70's, Uncle Tom's Cabin was a headliner of American drama. In the 80's it became the reliable stand-by of every company of "rep" barnstormers. It was still going strong out in the sticks in the 90's, and the Western tent show had it until close to 1910 and perhaps later than that. Thus, for more than fifty years it shrieked its improbabilities across the footlights.⁵⁰

Tom-show troupes brought their spangled, minstrelsy-laden productions across the country--not only to big cities but to small towns and remote areas--and everywhere they reinforced a stereotyped image of the Negro:

Far and wide, year after year, generation after generation, they tempted the isolated and the ignorant to come and see the Negro as Topsy the mischievous, simian imp; as Uncle Tom, the subservient victim "with his sureole of cotton-wool hair . . . bobbing and bowing . . . Yes, Massa; no Massa"; as the vaudeville "coon," that subhuman, juba-patting, bones-knocking, banjo-strumming caterer to the white man's need for patronizing amusement . . .⁵¹

Similarly, J. Frank Davis has summarized the nature and influence of the Tom-show:

It had done more, probably, than any other one thing to keep alive for years sectional misunderstandings and hatred that were ready to die, although it had never by deliberation done this; "Uncle Tom," the book, may have been ante-bellum propaganda, but "Uncle Tom," the after-the-war show was never consciously anything but entertainment.⁵²

⁴⁹ J. Frank Davis, "Tom Shows," Scribner's Magazine, LXXVI (April, 1925), p. 350.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 351.

⁵¹ Furnas, pp. 282-83.

⁵² Davis, p. 360.

Both minstrelsy and the Tom-show, conceived and executed purely as entertainments, eventually died of their own excesses. Their popularity, which produced many rival companies, also produced keen competition based largely upon magnitude in production.

"Bigger and better" was not compatible with minstrel entertainment. . . . The increased cost of stage settings, advertising, and salaries, when it seemed impossible to raise the admission price from the customary twenty-five cents, made the minstrel show a financially unprofitable enterprise.⁵³

The Tom-shows not only brought on more and more bloodhounds and animal acts, but even utilized the incoherent practice of staging with double companies, "in which two Topsys, two Marksies, two Evas and so forth alternated in the indicated roles on the same evening. From any conceivable point of view this was showmanship gone mad, theatrical suicide."⁵⁴ And the more entertaining both forms endeavored to become, the greater were the vulgarities of Negro characterization.

. . . Minstrelsy and Tom-shows, both of which had elements conducive to a more truthful image of the Negro, grew larger and more popular the more distorted the image they projected. The public obviously would accept the worst postulated in Negro character . . . and the producers and actors . . . would go to any extent to gain lucre and fame, in that order.⁵⁵

Minstrelsy and Tom-shows, nevertheless, did provide training grounds and outlets for the kinds of talent, both black and white, necessary to the development of the musical stage. Negro composers, such as James Bland ("Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny" and "In the Evening by the Moonlight"), began to write material for minstrel companies. The presence,

⁵³ Moody, p. 483.

⁵⁴ Furnas, p. 280.

⁵⁵ Gilliam, p. 32.

in Tom-show troupes, of Negro musicians, jubilee singers and ensembles "must have helped greatly to train a group of professional singers and dancers for at least off-and-on careers."⁵⁶ The minstrel show, aside from giving us the vaudeville monologue and many dance routines,⁵⁷ also provided--especially for Negro entertainers--"an essential training and theatrical experience which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source."⁵⁸

One white man whose early career was strongly influenced by minstrelsy was Edward Harrigan (1845-1911). During his early teens, Woods, Bryant's and Christy's Minstrels were popular attractions on the New York stage, and Harrigan, himself, made his stage debut during amateur night at the Bowery Theatre reciting a minstrel-inspired monologue of his own composition.⁵⁹ Later, in 1871, Harrigan joined the Manning Minstrels and, while on tour, met the man who was to become his stage partner--Tony Hart. They soon formed an act based upon dialect humor and began to play the vaudeville circuit.

On July 15, 1873, at the Academy of Music in Chicago, Ed Harrigan and Tony Hart appeared in a vaudeville sketch in which they sang "The Mulligan Guard," lyrics by Harrigan, music by David Braham. At that period there existed splinter organizations, aftermath of the Civil War, that enjoyed flaunting military uniforms. The Harrigan and Hart sketch and song reduced this practice to absurdity. Both Harrigan and Hart appeared in outlandish military costumes, and in their song they made a mockery of the pretenses that inspired men to keep on wearing uniforms.

From such an embryo came forth the series of New York burlesques, with Braham's music, that made Harrigan and Hart the

⁵⁶ Furnas, p. 276.

⁵⁷ Isaacs, p. 27.

⁵⁸ Johnson, p. 93.

⁵⁹ Moody, p. 537.

toast of the city for a decade or so. In these burlesques Harrigan and Hart presented a cross-section of life in New York, particularly in the lower strata of society, embracing such racial groups as the Irish, Germans, and Negroes. Their plays represented one of the first attempts of the American musical theater to identify itself with everyday life (however much that life was satirized); to provide locales, characters, manners, speech, and racial types indigenous to New York and familiar to all New Yorkers.⁶⁰

Essentially, the Harrigan plays were expanded vaudeville sketches featuring elementary plots complicated by misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and a fierce chauvinism on the part of characters of all nationalities and races. Harrigan kept his plays moving with an abundance of slapstick; a Mulligan Guard show was not complete without some sort of spectacular catastrophe--a building falling apart, or a ceiling caving in--which led to the ubiquitous Harrigan stage-direction, "general melee," which inevitably followed.

The Mulligan Guard farces were peopled with a stock company of characters. Principal among these was the Mulligan family, composed of Dan (played by Harrigan)--leader of the Mulligan Guard--his wife, Cordelia, and their son, Tommy. Also conspicuous were Gustavus Lochmuller, a German butcher, his Irish wife, Bridget, their two children, and various tradespeople of Jewish and Italian descent. Although Harrigan never allowed any love to be lost among the Irish, Germans, Jews and Italians, the major rivals of the Mulligan Guard were those characters who comprised the Negro organizations of the Skidmore Guard and the Secret Society of the Ancient Order of Full Moons. Prominent characters of both organizations--and great favorites throughout the

⁶⁰ David Ewen, Complete Book of the American Musical Theater (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958).

Mulligan Guard series--were Sim Primrose, a barber and captain of the Skidmore Guard, and Brother Palestine Puter, chaplain of the Skidmores.

All of Harrigan's characters, although they were drawn as stock types rather than complex individuals, were derived more from observation than from imagination:

Harrigan was a student of all this life which marked New York of the eighties; he did not cut himself aloof, but wandered along the streets where the lower life disported itself. He frequented political clubs, white and colored; a cakewalk drew him after the theatre. In a Bowery restaurant, they say, he found his colored chaplain of the Skidmore Guards waiting on the table; .
. .61

Harrigan, himself (and perhaps revealing the influence of his background in minstrelsy), has commented upon the factual basis for his characters:

Though I use types and never individuals, I try to be as realistic as possible. . . . If I have given undue prominence to the Irish, and Negro, it is because they form about the most salient features of Gotham humanity, and also because they are the two races who care the most for song and dance. There are at least three hundred organizations in New York like the Mulligan Guards, and probably fifty like the Full Moons.⁶²

The rivalry between the Mulligan Guard and the Skidmore Guard provided a great deal of the situational humor to be found in the Mulligan Guard series. Using the Mulligan Guard Ball⁶³ (première: January 13, 1879)⁶⁴ as an example, it is interesting to note the lack of racial malice toward the Negro on Harrigan's part. Dan Mulligan is

⁶¹ Montrose, J. Moses, The American Dramatist (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1925), p. 282.

⁶² Edward Harrigan, in Harper's Weekly (February 2, 1889), quoted in Moody, p. 547.

⁶³ Edward Harrigan, "The Mulligan Guard Ball," Dramas from The American Theatre, 1762-1909, ed. Richard Moody (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966), pp. 549-565.

⁶⁴ Moses, p. 283.

antagonistic toward the Skidmores, it is true. He does not want the "coons" at his ball, but then neither does he want Lochmuller (a German) to attend. He may speak of the "Nagurs," [sic] but he speaks contemptuously of the Dutch as well. Dan is a chauvinist, and his excessive zeal for all that is Irish, his contempt for all that is not, is ludicrous and, therefore, funny. When, in the final scene, Dan boasts that he has hired Sim Primrose to wait on his table, he is not belittling the Negro, as such. He is belittling the captain of the Skidmore Guard, a non-Irish organization and, by virtue of that fact, unworthy.

In large measure, Harrigan's Negro characters were presented according to the minstrelsy formula. Punning and plays-on-words were favorite Harrigan devices, and although he used them in repartee for characters of all races and nationalities, the outlandish malaprop--as in the minstrel turns and stump speeches--was reserved almost exclusively for the Negro. For example, in Scene five of The Mulligan Guard Ball, Mr. Garlic offers the Skidmores reduced rent if they will agree to hold their function in the upstairs ballroom. Sim Primrose cheerfully announces to his group, "I think members dat's a very boisterous proposition and I propose we go up stairs."⁶⁵ Moreover, Harrigan's "New York Darky" or "Dandy Coon"⁶⁶--obviously derived from the flashy dandy character (Zip Coon) of the minstrel show⁶⁷--is possessed of those characteristics associated with minstrelay's image of the comic Negro. He carries with him at all times a sharpened razor and is proficient in its

⁶⁵Harrigan, "Mulligan Guard Ball," in Moody, p. 561.

⁶⁶"The Variety Stage," Harper's Weekly, XLVI (April 12, 1902), p. 466.

⁶⁷Gilliam, p. 19.

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use; he attempts to imitate the actions of whites (in this case, the pomp and ceremony of the Mulligan Guard); and he has a childlike fondness for singing, dancing and having a "hot time." The Skidmore band is, not surprisingly, composed of bones, fiddle and banjo,⁶⁸ and the chorus of "Skidmore's Fancy Ball" reinforces the carefree, happy image:

Hallelulah, glory oh,
 Balance down de middle,
 I tell you what, um um it's hot
 Like gravy in a griddle
 Forward four, hold on de floor,
 Spread out through de hall,
 Every coon's as warm as June,
 At the Skidmore Fancy Ball.⁶⁹

Indeed, the singing and dancing of the Skidmores is so exuberant that the ceiling crashes in upon the Mulligan's ball.

Harrigan's delineation of the Negro, however, was not merely a facile re-creation of the comic image propounded in minstrelsy. Even if his characters were immediately recognizable types--and, therefore, not psychologically explored in depth--Harrigan was not content to show the Negro only as a perennially happy creature. For the first time on the musical stage, the Negro was seen--although still in a comic light--as an individual of sufficient dimensionality to allow for a variety of emotions, including anger and even possible violence.

In the July, 1886 issue of Harper's Magazine, William Dean Howells complained:

All the Irish aspects of life are treated affectionately by this artist, as we might expect from one of his name; but the colored aspects do not fare so well under his touch. Not all the Irish are good Irish, but all the colored people are bad colored people. They are of the gloomy, razor-bearing variety;

⁶⁸Harrigan, "Mulligan Guard Ball," in Moody, p. 562.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 559.

full of short-sighted lies and prompt dishonesties, amusing always, but truculent and tricky; and the sunny sweetness which we all know in negro character is not there.⁷⁰

Examination of the plays reveals that there is no character quite so "full of short sighted lies," "prompt dishonesties" and trickiness as Dan Mulligan, himself. Howells' objection, therefore, apparently was based upon a reluctance to recognize a conspicuous crack in the time-honored and comfortable stage image of the gay, carefree, never-defiant "darky." His suggestion that enmity and chicanery are believable attributes of the Caucasian, but not of the Negro, is astonishing. Clearly, the minstrelsy image of perpetual "sunny sweetness" would have been out of place in Harrigan's milieu of "the 'Bloody Sixth Ward,' a tenement area of alleys, shops, bars, barber shops, and primitive lodgings commonly known as 'the vilest place in town.'"⁷¹

Through the character of Sim Primrose, Harrigan ably demonstrates that the Negro is no less immune to an offensive racial slur than anyone else. In Scene 3 of The Mulligan Guard Ball, Sim is seen in his barber shop, shaving Gus Lochmuller. Dan Mulligan is present, discussing with Lochmuller the latest boxing news.

LOCHMULLER

Do you suppose a German would fight mit a nigger?

SIM

Say, look here--do you see dis razor--I'm Sim Primrose, Captain of de Skidmore Guard. Every man of them is N. G. a nice gemman. Now I want you to apologize or I'll draw dis across your jugular.

⁷⁰William Dean Howells, "Edward Harrigan's Comedies," Harper's Magazine (July, 1886), reprinted in Theatre and Drama in the Making, ed. John Gassner and Ralph G. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1964), Vol. II, pp. 953-54.

⁷¹Moody, p. 535.

DAN

A man has no right to insult a colored man to his face.⁷²

Predictably, during the confusion at the ball (Scene 5), Dan's "good manners" lapse:

DAN

What--Give an account of it--What are these nagurs doing here?

OMNES SKIDMORES

Niggers--Who ses that--(Attempt to rush)

SIM

Hold on gemmen--I'll give the word when to cut.⁷³

Sim Primrose is far removed from the bowing and scraping of an Uncle Tom. When angered, he speaks his mind, and, as Captain of the Skidmore Guard, he is prepared for violent confrontation should it be necessary.

Members, I ordered you to carry arms to-night at de Skidmore Fancy Ball, kase we was forced to give up Lyric Hall and take de Harp and Shamrock. Dar's no telling how many Irish will be in hambush dare. So, going in de hall, you can put your muskets in de hat rack, and every man have his razor sharpened. No one must interfere wid our pleasure.⁷⁴

The audience is free to enjoy this kind of speech because one may be assured, in a Harrigan play, that violence will be handled only in terms of exaggerated slapstick associated with the "Keystone Kops"--no one really is hurt.

The chauvinism which is characteristic of all ethnic groups in Harrigan's plays is not spared on the part of the Negro characters. Brother Palestine Puter is as fiercely contemptuous of all that is not

⁷²Harrigan, "Mulligan Guard Ball," in Moody, p. 556.

⁷³Ibid., p. 561.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 559.

Negroid as Dan Mulligan is contemptuous of all that is not Irish. The illogic of such scorn and derision is frequently carried to absurd lengths; Brother Puter belongs to a colored secret society, the purpose of which, he explains, is to prevent the Irish from riding on horse cars.⁷⁵ Further, he is outraged by the foreigners who have invaded "his" country. Upon catching sight of Dan Mulligan and Walsingham McSweeney strolling down the block, Brother Puter grumbles, "I don't see why de government can't quarantine such people as dese. Dey land too sudden; dar ain't enough fumigation."⁷⁶ Nor is his distaste reserved solely for the Irish: "I don't like to go up dat bottle alley in de daylight, so many Italians. I'll wait on de corner."⁷⁷ In the Harrigan plays, human imperfections--racism, bigotry, chauvinism--know no boundaries of nationality or race.

Edward Harrigan's portrait of the Negro was not necessarily a flattering one, but, William Dean Howells' criticism notwithstanding, it certainly was no less flattering nor affectionate than his portraits of the Irish, Italians and Jews. Harrigan allowed his characters--all of his characters--sufficient dimensionality to express human motivations, human emotions and human foibles. In the case of Negro characterization upon the American musical stage, Harrigan's work must be seen as a major breakthrough--a rupture in the minstrelsy-oriented image which allowed the grinning mask of blackface occasionally to frown.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 553.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 554.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Harrigan's Negro characters were acted by white men, most notably Johnny Wild and Billy Gray, in blackface. (For further reference, see Moody, p. 539 and "The Variety Stage," Harper's Weekly, XLVI [April 12, 1902], p. 466.)

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, a series of innovations in the traditional minstrel-show format provided a transitional bridge which led directly to the establishment of Negro musical comedy. It is of no little significance that those responsible for the initial departures from the minstrel pattern were Negroes--writers, composers, performers and producers who had perfected their skills within the tradition they now were seeking to change.⁷⁹

In 1891, Sam T. Jack's The Creole Show introduced female performers to minstrelsy in an attempt to "glorify the coloured girl."⁸⁰

The Creole Show gave great prominence to the girls and was smart and up-to-date in material and costumes. It had none of the features of plantation days; nevertheless, it was cast in the traditional minstrel pattern.⁸¹

The production opened in Boston, later played an entire season at the Chicago World's Fair (1893), and subsequently moved to New York City.

"In one form or another, The Creole Show was seen for a period of five years."⁸² In 1895, John W. Isham organized and produced The Octoroons in which the girls were featured not only as chorus members but some as principals. Although billed as "a Musical Farce," The Octoroons also conformed to the standard minstrel-show format--except that, in the middle part, "a number of specialties were strung on a very thin thread of a story."⁸³ Isham's next production, Oriental America (1896), dispensed with the burlesque afterpieces, comic specialties and cakewalk

⁷⁹Mitchell, pp. 40-41 and 45.

⁸⁰Johnson, p. 95.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Mitchell, p. 46.

⁸³Johnson, p. 96.

finale; rather, it ended with a medley of operatic selections--a distinct departure from minstrel practice and the comic image. The success of Oriental America was quickly followed in the same year with a production, written by Bob Cole, for concert star, Sissieretta Jones--better known as "Black Patti." Black Patti's Troubadours featured, as a first part, "a sketchy farce interspersed with songs and choruses and ending with a buck-dance contest."⁸⁴ An olio followed, and then came the lengthy finale--Black Patti, assisted by the chorus, in a series of operatic selections. The show played for a number of years, both in New York City and on tour.⁸⁵

It is clear that these all-Negro musical entertainments--from The Creole Show through Black Patti's Troubadours--brought many innovations on the road leading away from the conventionalized structure of minstrelsy toward a new destination. The introduction of attractively gowned female performers, in principal roles, pointed toward all kinds of possibilities in story, song and dance. The acceptance of serious, even operatic, music performed by black artists was also something new. And, of course, a great deal of the exuberant fun of minstrelsy remained--along with most of the comic character stereotypes. Nevertheless, a complete departure in form had not yet taken place. These transitional shows remained, in essence, potpourris of unrelated songs, dances and sketches--precursors of the more sophisticated all-Negro revue which was to flower upon the Broadway stage some two decades hence. The complete break with the minstrel-show form, and the emergence of a revolutionary new one, was, however, at hand.

⁸⁴Johnson, p. 101.

⁸⁵Mitchell, p. 46.

100

The year 1898 marked the appearance of the first fully-plotted Negro musical to be professionally presented in New York City. Written, directed and produced by Bob Cole--with an assist from his partner Billy Johnson, and featuring Sam Lucas and Jesse Shipp (who later was to write the books for the Williams and Walker shows)--A Trip to Coontown opened in April at the Third Avenue Theatre.⁸⁶ With regard to its historical significance in the American musical theatre,⁸⁷ James Weldon Johnson has observed:

A Trip to Coontown [was] the first Negro show to make a complete break from the minstrel pattern, the first that was not a mere potpourri, the first to be written with continuity and to have a cast of characters working out the story of a plot from beginning to end; and, therefore, the first Negro musical comedy.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

⁸⁷ In a personal letter (October 20, 1969), Lofton Mitchell states that Cole and Johnson, along with such other black men as Williams and Walker, Cook and Dunbar, and, later, Sissle and Blake, "actually created in a strict sense the American musical comedy pattern with book, music and lyrics." (See, also, Mitchell, Black Drama, pp. 40-41.) Certainly, A Trip to Coontown pre-dates George M. Cohan's first musical (The Governor's Son, 1901), and the Williams and Walker production, In Dahomey (1903) pre-dates the 1904 production of Cohan's Little Johnny Jones--a show which David Ewen cites as being the first authentic American musical comedy (The Story of America's Musical Theater [Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1961], p. 71). If, however, the Stearns' observation (infra, p. 33) is accurate, A Trip to Coontown and Cole's two subsequent Negro-oriented musicals post-date Victor Herbert's European-inspired operetta, Prince Ananias (1894). Cook and Dunbar's Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk (also 1898, infra, pp. 33-36) might have proved to be the first authentic American musical comedy had it not been for the last-minute elimination of Dunbar's libretto. It would appear that the distinction should have to be made between In Dahomey and Little Johnny Jones. It is, perhaps, significant that the Williams and Walker shows are rarely mentioned in works detailing the history of the American musical theatre but, rather, are left to the chroniclers of Negro participation in the American theatre. Suffice it to say that composers and writers, both black and white, were engaged in the process of developing the American musical comedy form at approximately the same time.

⁸⁸ Johnson, p. 102.

Beyond Johnson's observation (which is widely quoted in standard sources), very few details of the production remain; however, Marshall and Jean Stearns have commented that "bandleader Noble Sissle, who saw the show, states flatly that A Trip to Coontown was an operetta based on European models, and Cole's later productions--The Shoofly Regiment (1906) and The Red Moon (1908)--bear Sissle out.⁸⁹

The summer of 1898 marked the appearance of yet another Negro musical. Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk opened to instantaneous acclaim and ran throughout the entire summer season under the auspices of George W. Lederer at his Casino Theatre Roof Garden. Clorindy was conceived by composer Will Marion Cook as a musical entertainment which would tell the "story of how the cakewalk came about in the early Eighteen Eighties."⁹⁰ To this end, Cook persuaded poet Paul Laurence Dunbar to write the lyrics and a libretto which, for practical production purposes, was discarded prior to the opening.⁹¹ With most of Dunbar's dialogue and plot having been eliminated, Clorindy became essentially a spirited song-and-dance show, and its enormous popularity may be attributed to three factors: the performances of its twenty-six-member, all Negro cast led by comedian Ernest Hogan;⁹² the energy and quality of the

⁸⁹ Marshall and Jean Stearns, Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 119.

⁹⁰ Will Marion Cook, "Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk," Theatre Arts Anthology, A Record and a Prophecy, ed. Rosamond Gilder, Hermine Rich Isaacs, Robert M. MacGregor, and Edward Reed (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1950), p. 227.

⁹¹ Cook has explained that "a lot of dialogue on an uncovered roof garden after eleven p.m. would have been impossible." (Ibid., pp. 231-32.)

⁹² Hogan was a notable exception among Negro comedians in that he eschewed the use of blackface. (See Johnson, pp. 102-03.)

singing and dancing; and, most important, the novelty of Will Marion Cook's music.

Clorindy was the talk of New York. It was the first demonstration of the possibilities of syncopated Negro music. Cook was the first competent composer to take what was then known as rag-time and work it out in a musicianly way. His choruses and finales in Clorindy, complete novelties as they were, sung by a lusty chorus, were simply breath-taking. Broadway had something entirely new.⁹³

Although he had studied violin in Europe under Joachim, and composition at the National Conservatory of Music with Dvorak,⁹⁴ Cook's music for Clorindy was hardly in the Classical tradition of the Western world. It has been said of Will Marion Cook that he "believed that the Negro in music and on the stage ought to be a Negro, a genuine Negro; he declared that the Negro should eschew 'white' patterns, and not employ his efforts in doing what 'the white artist could always do as well, generally better.'"⁹⁵ Indeed, with regard to his score for Clorindy, Cook has told the following story:

. . . I was at John's piano trying to learn to play my most Negroid song, "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?" My mother, who was cooking my breakfast, came into the parlor, tears streaming from her eyes, and said:

"Oh, Will! Will! I've sent you all over the world to study and become a great musician, and you return such a nigger!" My mother was a graduate of Oberlin in the class of 1865 and thought that a Negro composer should write just like a white man.⁹⁶

If, in his score, Cook adhered to the Negro-inspired musical form of ragtime, Paul Laurence Dunbar adhered just as strongly, in his lyrics

⁹³ Johnson, p. 103.

⁹⁴ Cook, Theatre Arts Anthology, p. 231.

⁹⁵ James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), p. 173.

⁹⁶ Cook, Theatre Arts Anthology, p. 228.

and song titles, to the dialect poetry for which he had become famous. Titles such as "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?," "Hottes' Coon in Dixie," "Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back!," and the finale, "Darktown Is Out Tonight"⁹⁷ suggest the comic Negro image projected in "coon songs" which, at the time, were "the rage." James Weldon Johnson has explained that the content of "coon songs" was "concerned with jamborees of various sorts and the play of razors, with the gastronomical delights of chicken, pork chops and watermelon, and with the experiences of red-hot 'mamas' and their never too faithful 'papas.'"⁹⁸ Clearly, Cook and Dunbar appear to have utilized, for purposes of entertainment, that familiar image of the happy, singing-and-dancing, down-home "darky"--no longer a slave, but replete with most of minstrelsy's comic foibles and peculiarities. Clorindy was, however, revolutionary in form; even without its libretto, it introduced to the American musical theatre "the happy possibilities of syncopated music in sustained form,"⁹⁹ and its chorus, featuring strenuous dancing and singing at the same time, departed from the "model of the easy, leisurely movements of the English light opera chorus."¹⁰⁰ Such innovations were soon incorporated into musical comedy, both black and white. Of Clorindy's historical significance, especially with regard to musicals written and performed by Negroes, Will Marion Cook has stated:

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 228 and 230-32.

⁹⁸ Johnson, Along This Way, pp. 152-53.

⁹⁹ Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, A Pictorial History of the Negro in America (revised edition, New York: Crown Publishers, 1963), p. 252.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, Along This Way, p. 151.

Negroes were at last on Broadway, and there to stay. Gone was the uff-dah of the minstrel! Gone the Massa Linkum stuff! We were artists and we were going a long, long way. We had the world on a string tied to a runnin' red-gear'd wagon on a downhill pull. Nothing could stop us, and nothing did for a decade.¹⁰¹

The following summer (1899), another musical sketch, Jes Lak White Folks, composed by Cook--and for which he wrote his own libretto--was produced in New York City.¹⁰² Featuring Abbie Mitchell and comedian Irving Jones, the show failed--largely because "the book and lyrics were not so good [as those for Clorindy], nor was the cast; and, naturally, the music was not such a startling novelty."¹⁰³ Will Marion Cook continued his career with great success, however, as composer for the later Williams and Walker shows.

The team of Bert Williams and George Walker was established when they met in San Francisco during the early Eighteen-Nineties. Engaged by the managers of the San Francisco Mid-Winter Fair in 1893, the two found themselves in a company of American Negroes temporarily impersonating a delayed troupe of native primitive dancers from Africa--a midway attraction then popular at large fairs and expositions.¹⁰⁴ They quickly formed a blackface vaudeville act billed as "Williams and Walker, The Two Real Coons."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Cook, Theatre Arts Anthology, p. 233.

¹⁰² James Weldon Johnson is inconsistent here. In Black Manhattan (p. 103), he notes that Jes Lak White Folks was presented at the New York Winter Garden. In Along This Way (p. 174), he states that it played the New York Theatre Roof Garden.

¹⁰³ Johnson, Along This Way, p. 175.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Todd, "Negro-American Theatre Dance, 1840-1900," Dance Magazine, XXIV (November, 1950), pp. 33-34.

¹⁰⁵ Hentoff, Show Business Illustrated, I (October 17, 1961), p. 88.

Although the title smacks of minstrelsy, the emphasis was upon the "Real" and not the "Coons," for they were consciously rebelling against minstrel stereotypes.

"My partner, Mr. Williams, is the first man that I know of our race," wrote Walker, "to delineate a 'darky' in a perfectly natural way, and I think his success is due to this fact." The progress achieved by Williams and Walker--and it was very real--shows how low the minstrel stereotypes had sunk, for their delineation of the Negro in "a perfectly natural way" consisted--in part--of Walker playing the role of the strutting dandy and Williams the role of the shiftless, shuffling "darky" whose shoes pinch his feet. Today, both are considered stereotypes.¹⁰⁶

Thus, it was within the limitations of the familiar, comic stage Negro that Williams and Walker built and sustained their highly successful careers.

After some lean years traveling the country "in medicine shows and cheap vaudeville houses,"¹⁰⁷ the pair was brought to New York and introduced between the acts of The Gold Bug at George W. Lederer's Casino Theatre. The play was a failure, but the act was not. Given a trial in big-time vaudeville at Koster and Bial's, Williams and Walker remained for thirty-six prosperous weeks.¹⁰⁸ There followed the team's series of successful full-length musicals: The Sons of Ham (which toured for two years), The Policy Players, In Dahomey (1903), Abyssinia (1906) and Bandanna Land (1908).

The Williams and Walker shows were designed "to utilize the Negroes' gifts without resorting to minstrelsy,"¹⁰⁹ and they were put together by a team of collaborators which included Bert Williams, George Walker, Jesse Shipp, Alex Rogers and Will Marion Cook.

¹⁰⁶ Stearns, p. 121.

¹⁰⁷ Cook, Theatre Arts Anthology, p. 227.

¹⁰⁸ Bert Williams, "The Comic Side of Trouble," American Magazine, LXXXV (January, 1918), p. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 49.

Mr. Shipp . . . worked out the details of the construction of the plays, after the idea had been discussed and adopted by the above-named heads. Mr. Rogers was the lyricist and the author of the words to many of the most popular of the Williams and Walker songs; among them: "Why Adam Sinned," "I May Be Crazy, but I Ain't No Fool," "The Jonah Man," "Bon Bon Buddy, the Chocolate Drop," and "Nobody." He also contributed much of the droll humour and many of the ludicrous situations for which these plays were noted. Mr. Cook . . . was the composer-in-chief.¹¹⁰

Essentially, these shows were extravaganzas with elaborate scenery and costumes, large casts, much singing and dancing, and great spectacle.

The exotic setting for Abyssinia included live camels on the stage.¹¹¹

The songs, dances, various variety acts and spectacular elements were held together by formula plots designed to promote the talents and pre-determined specialty characterizations for which Williams and Walker had become famous. Throughout the series, Williams and Walker played Williams and Walker just as Abbott and Costello always played Abbott and Costello.

Bert Williams portrayed the "Jonah Man," a characterization which Edith J. R. Isaacs has described as "the mournful and melancholy, quaint and philosophical, but exceedingly funny fellow, with the discouraged shoulders, the shambling gait and stumbling dialect of the ignorant Southern Negro."¹¹² Whereas the basis for such a characterization obviously sprang from minstrelsy, it is to Bert Williams' credit that he refined the stereotype. He was "the first to break loose from the standard formula of colored acts--the chicken-stealing, crap-

¹¹⁰ Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 107.

¹¹¹ Fletcher, p. 235.

¹¹² Isaacs, p. 35.

shootin', gin-guzzlin', razor-totin', no-account."¹¹³ Even in black-face (and Williams blacked-up twelve shades darker than his natural color)¹¹⁴ and speaking "a dialect he never heard except from white performers,"¹¹⁵ Bert Williams shattered the grinning, dehumanized mask of minstrelsy characterization and elicited from his audience sympathy, as well as laughter, through the use of pathos. His "Jonah Man," an unfortunate human being for whom everything always seemed to go wrong, was more in the tradition of the classic clown--both comic and pathetic--than it was in the tradition of the happy, childlike minstrel stereotype. It was a characterization with universal appeal, about which Williams, himself, has commented:

Nearly all of my successful songs have been based on the idea that I am getting the worst of it. I am the "Jonah Man," the man who, even if it rained soup, would be found with a fork in his hand and no spoon in sight, the man whose fighting relatives come to visit him and whose head is always dented by the furniture they throw at each other. There are endless variations of this idea, fortunately; but if you sift them, you will find the principle of human nature at the bottom of them all.¹¹⁶

It has been said of Bert Williams that "he reformed and refined the art, so called, of the (white) black-face comedians, by teaching them to substitute drollery and repose for roughness."¹¹⁷ In so doing, "he

¹¹³ Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., Show Biz; from Vaude to Video (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), p. 37.

¹¹⁴ Langston Hughes, "The Negro and American Entertainment," The American Negro Reference Book, ed. John Davis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 829.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. (Williams was born in Antigua, West Indies, and was raised and educated in California. His mother was half-Negro; his father was Dutch. For further reference, see the article by Williams referred to in footnote #116, below.)

¹¹⁶ Williams, American Magazine, LXXXV (January, 1918), p. 33.

¹¹⁷ Isaacs, p. 42.

brought more poignancy and dimension to the 'stage Negro' than any performer before or since."¹¹⁸

Working in complementary contrast to Williams' "Jonah Man" was George Walker's characterization of "the overdressed Negro, the 'sharp cat,' looking for a quick deal, always knowing he could fast-talk anyone out of anything,"¹¹⁹ and "spending generously whatever he was able to borrow or filch from the Jonah Man's hard-earned money."¹²⁰ Nevertheless, the Jonah Man "was never as stupid as whites thought him to be."¹²¹ An example typical of the humorous interaction between these two characters may be found in the following dialogue, paraphrased by Lofton Mitchell, from Bandanna Land:

WALKER

I'll save you from getting up in the morning. Yeah. I'll do you a big favor. I'll go down to the white man's office and get the money and bring it to you. I'll be down at the white man's office about nine o'clock and I'll get you your share by 9:30. Where you gonna be at 9:30 A.M. tomorrow?

WILLIAMS

Right down there at the white man's office with you.¹²²

The Williams and Walker shows, especially Abyssinia and Bandanna Land, apparently were designed to provide something more than sheer entertainment. Played before white audiences, these musicals were imbued with a point-of-view, often a serious one, and they employed a good deal of sharp satire and social comment--all in the guise,

¹¹⁸ Hentoff, Show Business Illustrated, I (October 17, 1961), p. 88.

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 51.

¹²⁰ Isaacs, p. 35.

¹²¹ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 51

¹²² Ibid., pp. 51-52.

however, of lighthearted entertainment under the familiar, comfortable (to white audiences) mask of burnt-cork.

Bandanna Land satirized the "Negro-scare racket." In the show Williams and Walker decide on a quick way to make money. They buy up land in a well-to-do white section and move into a house. They proceed to give a number of parties, to raise hell, and the whites immediately agree to buy back the land at twice the amount the Negroes paid. It takes no genius to see the point the artists were making.¹²³

Nevertheless, Lofton Mitchell notes that ". . . many whites did not 'get the message,' either by design or through ignorance, or both."¹²⁴

Likewise, in the earlier production, Abyssinia (1906), Bert Williams "wandered around through the splendor of black Abyssinia, reflecting contrasts between two cultures."¹²⁵ With regard to this show, Lofton Mitchell has commented as follows:

Abyssinia was troublesome to the critics. They liked it, but they stated bluntly it was a little "too arty." It was too Caucasian, some critics said, too serious. In other words, they wanted a fast-moving "darker show."¹²⁶

Despite the satire, the social comments and some serious compositions by Will Marion Cook,¹²⁷ Williams and Walker did offer to their audience at least what appeared to be "a fast moving 'darker' show."

Even men like Williams and Walker were outwardly resigned to all sorts of discrimination. They would sing "coon," they would

¹²³ Ibid., p. 51

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹²⁷ In a personal letter (February 9, 1970), Lofton Mitchell remarks upon the serious character of Cook's opening number for Abyssinia, "Song of Reverence to the Setting Sun"--a work which he also has called (Black Drama, p. 50) "a Rimski-Korsakov type number."

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joke about "niggers," they accepted their success with wide-mouthed grins as the gift of the gods.¹²⁸

They went as far as they dared without alienating the sensibilities and expectations of a white box office. George Walker has been quoted as having declared, "'The white man won't let us be serious!'"¹²⁹ Speaking of the efforts of Bert Williams and George Walker, and those of their contemporaries, Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson,¹³⁰ Loften Mitchell has stated his opinion as follows:

. . . [they] stepped in to revolutionize theatrical concepts regarding the Negro. But they fought their revolution on the grounds of the oppressors. They used the same weapons--the blackface, the low comedy--and did the things whites would pay to see Negroes do. They used for their reasoning the belief that whites would not accept them any other way. These Negroes, then, were true to the first American Revolution. They engaged in a reform movement, not a revolution. They fought a defensive action, rather than an offensive one.¹³¹

Bandanna Land was the last of the Williams and Walker shows.

George Walker fell ill and could no longer perform; he died in 1911. In 1910, Bert Williams was engaged by Florenz Ziegfeld and subsequently appeared as a featured star in many editions of the Ziegfeld Follies--a first for a Negro performer.

The partnership of Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson¹³² was formed in 1901. They wrote their own songs and ultimately became headliners on the big-time vaudeville circuit--both in the United States

¹²⁸ Edward B. Marks as told to Abbott J. Liebling, They All Sang (New York: The Viking Press, 1935), p. 96.

¹²⁹ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 49.

¹³⁰ Infra, pp. 42-44.

¹³¹ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 84.

¹³² J. Rosamond Johnson is not to be confused with Billy Johnson, Cole's former partner and with whom he wrote A Trip to Coontown (supra pp. 32-33).

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and in London. The act was a stylish one, and "Cole and Johnson enhanced the dignity of the stage Negro . . . by doing their act in full-dress suits, an example soon followed by white monologists."¹³³ When not performing, Cole and Johnson were joined in their collaborative efforts by Rosamond's brother, James Weldon Johnson. Together, the trio wrote many musical numbers which were purchased and interpolated into white musicals, and their success soon led to an exclusive contract with producers Klaw and Erlanger for whom Cole and the Johnson brothers supplied entire scores--again for white musical productions.¹³⁴

In 1906, the team presented an all-Negro musical, The Shoofly Regiment, with music by J. Rosamond Johnson, book and lyrics by Bob Cole and James Weldon Johnson. The latter recalls that "it was to be in three scenes; time, the outbreak of the Spanish-American War; the first and third scenes in a Negro industrial school in the South, the second scene in the Philippine Islands."¹³⁵ With a cast of sixty, headed by Cole and Rosamond Johnson, The Shoofly Regiment proved to be too elaborate and expensive a production to tour profitably. Following a financially disastrous season of one-night stands, The Shoofly Regiment played a short engagement at the Bijou Theatre in New York City.¹³⁶ Another all-Negro musical, The Red Moon, written this time by Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson alone, was presented in 1908. Of both musical productions, James Weldon Johnson has stated:

¹³³Green and Laurie, Jr., p. 37.

¹³⁴Johnson, Along This Way, pp. 177-201.

¹³⁵Ibid., pp. 222-23.

¹³⁶Ibid., pp. 239-40.

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Each of these plays was a true operetta with a well-constructed book and a tuneful, well-written score.

. . . The Cole and Johnson combination lacked any such fun-makers as were Williams and Walker, but in some other respects they excelled their great rivals; their plays, on the whole, were better written, and they carried a younger, sprightlier, and prettier chorus which, though it could not sing so powerfully, could out-dance the heavier chorus of the other company by a wide margin.¹³⁷

With the exception of some of their published songs, little remains of the collaboration of Bob Cole and the Johnson brothers; however, their work must be seen as a pioneering effort consciously to break down certain aspects of the "stage Negro" image. Specifically, they rejected the style and content of the "coon song,"¹³⁸ so widely popularized by men such as Ernest Hogan and Will Marion Cook, and wrote instead of more universally human feelings.

They wrote songs sometimes romantic, sometimes whimsical, but they eschewed the squalor and the squabbles, the razors, wenches, and chickens of the first ragtime. The word "coon" they banished from their rhyming dictionary, despite its tempting affinity with moon. The coon song died, the coon shouter vanished from the scene during the years of their ascendancy. "We wanted to clean up the caricature," says Rosamond Johnson.¹³⁹

The caricature could be "cleaned up" only to a degree. All of the precedent-setting Negro musicals--from A Trip to Coontown and Clorindy through the Williams and Walker shows and the Cole-Johnson efforts--were designed and played for white audiences.¹⁴⁰ Whether or not the audience was prepared to accept a more sophisticated approach is a moot point; managers and producers--and, quite likely, Negro

¹³⁷ Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 109.

¹³⁸ Supra, p. 35.

¹³⁹ Marks, p. 96.

¹⁴⁰ Even in New York City, Negro patrons were barred from most theatres, often with the "flimsy excuse: 'house full--only broken seats left.'" (See: Green and Laurie, Jr., p. 96.)

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performers and writers--feared any kind of displeasure reflected in box office receipts. In general, they adhered to the long-established rules in which the Negro was presented as a happy, childlike being whose ever-sunny disposition was reflected in his penchant for exuberant song and dance.

One of the well-known taboos was that there should never be any romantic love-making in a Negro play. If anything approaching a love duet was introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued. The reason behind this taboo lay in the belief that a love scene between two Negroes could not strike a white audience except as ridiculous. The taboo existed in deference to the superiority stereotype that Negroes cannot be supposed to mate romantically, but do so in some sort of minstrel fashion or in some more primeval manner than white people. This taboo had been one of the most strictly observed. . . . Cole and Johnson had come nearest to breaking it in their Shoofly Regiment and Red Moon. Williams and Walker never seriously attempted to do so.¹⁴¹

Whereas the men who created these early Negro musicals succeeded in reforming and refining some of the more blatant and damaging stereotypes propounded in minstrelsy, the Negro character on the musical stage remained a creature designed solely for laughter and entertainment--an exotic whose burnt-cork precluded serious contemplation.

Other all-Negro musicals were organized during the first decade of this century, and they featured such performers as Ernest Hogan, Smart and Williams, and S. H. Dudley; however, "all these shows, though organized in New York, were road shows and of secondary merit."¹⁴²

Hogan's vehicles, Rufus Rastus (1905) and his last musical, The Oyster Man, are mentioned frequently. The latter production featured music by Joe Jordan and Will Vodrey and a book "written by two young fellows

¹⁴¹ Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 171.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 109.

named Miller and Lyles"¹⁴³--names which became very prominent during the 1920's spate of all-Negro revues. But as the first decade of the century drew to a conclusion, so did the activity of the Negro on the Broadway musical stage. Too many of the guiding talents became ill and soon passed away; among them: Bob Cole, Ernest Hogan and George Walker.¹⁴⁴ Also, the Negro musical comedy pattern had begun to grow stale to the taste of Broadway audiences, and, as Lofton Mitchell has observed, "this land of patterns and fads longed for 'something new.' . . . The Negro was evicted from the Broadway stage."¹⁴⁵ Negro activity in the musical theatre, however, by no means came to a halt; it was merely geographically shuffled. "There came an interval, and the efforts of the Negro in New York in the theatre were for a while transferred to Harlem"¹⁴⁶ The result was an incubation period, the training ground for a fresh assault on Broadway which was to take place during the 1920's.

If, with the exception of Bert Williams, the Negro performer was no longer in evidence on the Broadway musical stage, the Negro character--or, more accurately, caricature--as performed by white comedians in blackface, remained a popular favorite. He was seen not only as a specialty act in revues but also in musical comedies tailored to the talents of specialists in the genre. Most notable among these was Al Jolson who received his training and initial success with Lew

¹⁴³Fletcher, p. 140.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁴⁵Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 53.

¹⁴⁶Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 110.

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Dockstader's Minstrels.¹⁴⁷ By 1913, a blacked-up Jolson was cavorting with Fannie Brice and Gaby Deslys in The Honeymoon Express,¹⁴⁸ and by 1916, the Shuberts were starring him in Robinson Crusoe, Jr.

Robinson Crusoe, Jr., set a pattern for the Winter Garden extravaganzas starring Al Jolson which was followed for the next few years and which were completely dominated by his dynamic personality. They would have him fill various colorful roles (usually named Gus) in fantasies that carried him from the present to another age and to far-off exotic places. The plot would generally be diffuse and amorphous, always elastic enough to permit Jolson to seize the limelight and strut his wares.¹⁴⁹

As Gus, the chauffeur, Jolson found himself involved in his wealthy employer's dream as Robinson Crusoe's man Friday; together they wandered from one exotic scene to another, affording Jolson ample opportunity for songs, dances and clowning. Robinson Crusoe, Jr., was followed by Sinbad (1918) in which Jolson, as a Negro porter, found himself in Baghdad surrounded by characters out of The Arabian Nights. The series continued on into the 1920's with Bombo (1921), featuring Jolson as a colored deck hand on the historic voyage of Christopher Columbus.¹⁵⁰ The Jolson shows, of course, were designed as pure entertainment and were built strictly around Jolson's stage personality. Audiences came to see Al Jolson and not, really, his delineation of Negro character. The blackface was part of the "package," and the shows themselves are of no historic significance with regard to Negro characterization—except for the fact that they continued to equate burnt-cork with mirth.

¹⁴⁷Green and Laurie, Jr., p. 25.

¹⁴⁸Blum, pp. 93 and 95.

¹⁴⁹Ewen, Complete Book of the American Musical Theater, p. 270.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 270-74.

Meanwhile, Harlem became the center for musical shows written by and featuring veritable Negro talent. The hub of Harlem's theatrical activity was the Lafayette Theatre, managed so ably by Lester A. Walton who presented both musicals and "straight" plays. For the first time, Negro musicals were being written for primarily Negro audiences; however, the degree to which these may have differed, in character presentation, from the earlier Williams-Walker, Cole-Johnson shows is difficult to discern. It is, perhaps, significant that the Harlem musicals were not without their impact upon downtown audiences and Broadway producers.

J. Leubrie Hill's Darktown Follies opened [at the Lafayette Theatre] in 1913, and it became the theatre's first smash hit. Scores of whites journeyed to Harlem to see it. Florenz Ziegfeld was among those who witnessed Darktown Follies, and he bought the Finale for his own use in his Follies. Thus the stamp of white approval was placed upon the Lafayette. . . . When Fluornoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles' Darkydom appeared in 1915 the premiere was attended by many whites in coaches. This prompted one critic to note: "It looked like a Broadway opening." Sketches from Darkydom were also sold to Broadway producers.¹⁵¹

Aside from the stage musicals, Harlem also provided adequate training ground for many Negro singers and dancers in its night clubs and cabarets. The heyday of such fabulous institutions as The Cotton Club, Small's Paradise and Connie's Inn did not come until the enactment of Prohibition, but during the decade of 1910-1920 many smaller Harlem clubs afforded initial opportunities for later legitimate performers such as Ethel Waters. In establishments such as Baron Wilkins' Club, Connors' Club and Edmond's Cellar,¹⁵² the standard forms of

¹⁵¹ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 68.

¹⁵² Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, His Eye is on the Sparrow (New York: Bantam Books, 1951), p. 151.

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entertainment were tap dancing and blues-singing--both of which became synonymous with Negro entertainment. The blues, in particular, projected a new and more urban image of the Negro female, and more often than not the content had to do with a woman bemoaning an unfaithful lover and/or seeking solace in liquor or drugs. One of the most popular blues in Ethel Waters' repertoire, as performed at Edmond's Cellar, went--in part--as follows:

I feel my habit coming on,
 I haven't got a dime,
 Yet feel like I could lay down,
 Draw a pill a long, long time

 When a colored gal gets the blues
 She gets drunk and starts to fight.
 When a China gal gets the blues
 She just lays down and smokes all night.
 It makes you feel happy
 And makes you feel lighthearted, too . . .¹⁵³

During the interlude of the Negro's exile from the legitimate Broadway musical stage, there also remained the vaudeville houses which continued to book established Negro acts, and there were, as well, the burnt-cork touring shows on the T.O.B.A. circuit. All of these, including the Lafayette Theatre shows and the big-city cabarets, provided an outlet for Negro musical talent, but it was not until 1921 that a full-scale Negro musical found a popular Broadway audience in a downtown theatre.

The precedent-setting show was, of course, the legendary Shuffle Along, and, not surprisingly, it had its roots in the Harlem enterprises begun during the previous decade. The team of Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, whose Darkydom had been successful at the

¹⁵³Ibid., pp. 155-56.

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Lafayette Theatre in 1915, assembled a loosely constructed book¹⁵⁴ tentatively titled Mayor of Jimtown.¹⁵⁵ The plot concerned "an election race for the job of a small-town mayor, with complications arising from the social aspirations of the candidates' wives."¹⁵⁶ The team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake provided a score which produced two popular hits, "I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way" and included, among others, "Bandanna Days," "Honeysuckle Time," and "If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brownskin."¹⁵⁷ The cast, led by Miller and Lyles as the two would-be mayors, featured Gertrude Saunders, Lottie Gee, a chorus girl by the name of Josephine Baker, and--making her Broadway debut--Florence Mills.¹⁵⁸ Retitled Shuffle Along, the all-Negro musical comedy¹⁵⁹ moved from its origins in Harlem to the Sixty-third

¹⁵⁴The book was based, in part, upon an earlier effort by Miller and Lyles, The Mayor of Dixie, produced in 1907 by the Pekin Stock Company in Chicago. (Fletcher, pp. 201-03.)

¹⁵⁵Waters, His Eye is on the Sparrow, p. 169.

¹⁵⁶Stearns, p. 133.

¹⁵⁷Jack Burton, The Blue Book of Broadway Musicals (Watkins Glen, New York: Century House, 1952), p. 220.

¹⁵⁸Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, "Have Faith in Your Talent," Many Shades of Black, ed. Stanton L. Wormley and Lewis H. Fenderson (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969), p. 112.

¹⁵⁹Critics and historians of the musical stage tend to use loose terminology with regard to the all-Negro shows of the 1920's. Shuffle Along has been identified simply as a "musical" (Stearns, p. 139; Sissle and Blake, p. 111), as a "revue," because the story element is negligible (Laufe, p. 11; Isaacs, p. 63; Ewen, Complete Book . . ., p. 361), and as a "musical comedy," because of the existence of a plot--even if sketchy and serving only as a framework for extensive musical numbers (Burton, p. 220; Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 186). For purposes of clarity, the definition of "musical comedy" will be accepted as correct terminology for Shuffle Along and for all other loosely plotted musicals produced during the 1920's. A plotless production will be referred to as a "revue," and, in the following pages, an attempt will be made to distinguish between such forms insofar as secondary sources can be trusted to be accurate.

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Street Theatre where it opened on May 23, 1921, and remained for a total of 504 performances.¹⁶⁰

The enormous popular success of Shuffle Along may be attributed to certain innovations on the musical stage; however, its structure and its presentation of Negro character cannot be counted among them. As a musical comedy, "Shuffle Along was cast in the form of the best Williams and Walker . . . tradition;"¹⁶¹ it was built around the particular talents of Miller and Lyles, its starring team of blackface comedians, who specialized in portraying "two ignorant Negroes."¹⁶²

Their type of blackface comedy, much in the nature of "Amos 'n' Andy" who came along later, formed the nucleus of sketchy plots around which much music and dancing swirled, to electrify the New York audiences. Their dialogue brought into use words in the pseudo-Negro vernacular of comedy sketches, such as "re-gusted," etc.¹⁶³

Indeed, the image of the comic stage Negro—laughably ignorant, malaprop-prone, ludicrous in his pretensions toward the sophistications of public, political office—harks back to the heyday of minstrelsy. There appears, however, to be some disagreement among critics with regard to the nature of the image projected. Edith J. R. Isaacs has observed:

Shuffle Along asked only to be enjoyed. It was . . . acted and produced by Negroes, written by Negroes for Negro audiences. . . . It was Harlem, but with a folk angle. It did not bother to make concessions to white taste or to theatre clichés.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Abe Laufe, Broadway's Greatest Musicals (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), pp. 11-12.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 187.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁶³ Ed Kirkeby, Ain't Misbehavin': The Story of Fats Waller (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966), p. 71.

¹⁶⁴ Isaacs, pp. 63 and 66.

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Lena Horne disagrees, and some of the song titles in the Sissle and Blake score would appear to justify her contention:

It was all very down home, with a lot of talk about pickaninnies and watermelon and a song about the "dear old bandana days" and what-have-you. Noble [Sissle] would have been shocked to think he was perpetuating a racial stereotype. As far as he was concerned, this was Negro life that white people wanted to see.¹⁶⁵

Whether or not Shuffle Along pandered, consciously or unconsciously to the conditioned tastes of a white audience is not really to the point. Miller and Lyles wrote their show according to the established Negro musical comedy formula--which called for a pair of blackface comedians. And they wrote it for themselves, or, more precisely, for their act which was patterned according to traditional comic Negro characterization and had its roots in the first decade of the century. It is, therefore, comprehensible that Shuffle Along offered virtually nothing new in the realms of format or of Negro characterization.

What, then, may be said to have accounted for the immense popular appeal of Shuffle Along? Sissle and Blake have suggested that "many ingredients went into making Shuffle Along a success. It moved fast and it was fun. It had good music, a good story, and above all, it was clean."¹⁶⁶ Historians of the musical theatre¹⁶⁷ tend to agree, stressing especially the show's frenzied pace heightened by "whirlwind dancing."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Lena Horne and Richard Schicel, Lena (New York: The New American Library, 1965), p. 50.

¹⁶⁶ Sissle and Blake, in Many Shades of Black, ed. Wormley and Fenderson, p. 113.

¹⁶⁷ Notably: David Ewen, Miles Kreuger, Marshall and Jean Stearns, Abe Laufe, Edith J. R. Isaacs.

¹⁶⁸ Ewen, Complete Book of the American Theater, p. 361.

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The most impressive innovation of Shuffle Along was the dancing of the sixteen-girl chorus line. When not dancing on stage, they sang in the wings to keep things moving. "Besides being superb dancers," says Sissle, "those chorus girls were like cheerleaders." They started a new trend in Broadway musicals.¹⁶⁹

The frantic dancing which enlivened the pace of Shuffle Along could not have been the novelty that it was, however, without Sissle and Blake's innovational score. Just as Will Marion Cook's Clorindy had introduced ragtime to the musical stage, Shuffle Along--at the beginning of the decade to be known as "The Roaring Twenties"--brought to Broadway the exuberant abandon of Harlem jazz.

Those [the 1920's] were the days when people went to musicals to hear music. One style of music that stood apart from all the others found its soul not in Tin Pan Alley, but up above 125th Street in Harlem. . . . The show that set the style and took Broadway by storm was Shuffle Along, which . . . brought Harlem jazz downtown and lit up a fairly dull theatre season with its hot rhythms, frantic dancing, knockabout humor and a lovely score . . .¹⁷⁰

Shuffle Along was not only a huge popular success, but a financial one as well.¹⁷¹ As a result, the Negro once again became a fashionable entertainer on the musical stage.

After the fourteen-month run on Broadway, two Shuffle Along companies toured the country for two years. The tour proved conclusively that a show by Negroes, about Negroes, and with music based on Negro rhythms could be just as salable to the general theatregoing public as any other show. Until that time, producers had used the excuse that the public just wouldn't buy this type of show, especially the downstairs society clientele, and it was this attitude that had kept Negroes out of the legitimate theatre--until Shuffle Along.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹Stearns, p. 139.

¹⁷⁰Miles Kreuger, "Notes," Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1928 (Columbia Records, Hall of Fame Series, OL 6770, March 8, 1968), n. p.

¹⁷¹Stearns, p. 139.

¹⁷²Sissle and Blake, in Many Shades of Black, ed. Wormley and Fenderson, p. 113.

With the advent of Shuffle Along, all-Negro musical comedies and revues flourished on Broadway for the remainder of the decade. Nearly all such productions adopted the winning features of Shuffle Along, and there followed "a spate of torrid, jazzy, brisk shows"¹⁷³ which became, "along with jazz and the blues, what white audiences expected of Negroes."¹⁷⁴ In chronological order, the major all-Negro productions on the legitimate musical stage were as follows:¹⁷⁵ Irving C. Miller's musical comedies, Put and Take (1921) and Liza (1922)¹⁷⁶--the latter with a score by Maceo Pinkard; Runnin' Wild (1923), a musical comedy with book by Miller and Lyles, music by James P. Johnson, and lyrics by Cecil Mack; Irving C. Miller's Dinah (1924), produced uptown at the Lafayette Theatre; Chocolate Dandies (1924), score by Sissle and Blake, book by Noble Sissle and Lew Payton; Dixie to Broadway (1924), a revue produced by Lew Leslie and featuring Florence Mills; Lucky Sambo (1925), an ill-fated musical comedy with music by Freddie Johnson who also collaborated on the book and lyrics with Porter Grainger; Africana (1927),

¹⁷³Miles Kreuger, "The Road to Oklahoma!," Performing Arts: The [Los Angeles] Music Center Monthly, I, No. 1 (November, 1967), p. 56.

¹⁷⁴Doris E. Abramson, Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1925-1959 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 26.

¹⁷⁵Because discrepancies abound from historian to historian, the following chronology has been extracted largely from materials presented in two sources which appear to be most accurate (Johnson, Black Manhattan, pp. 189-216, and Burton, Blue Book of Broadway Musicals, pp. 194-95 and pp. 220-21). Data derived from sources other than these will be indicated in separate footnotes.

¹⁷⁶Miles Kreuger ("Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.) gives the opening date of Liza specifically as November 27, 1922; James Weldon Johnson (Black Manhattan, p. 189) is more vague, placing it in the spring, 1923.

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a revue, with music by Donald Heywood, lyrics by Louis Douglas, and featuring Ethel Waters;¹⁷⁷ a Miller and Lyles vehicle, Rang Tang (1927), a musical comedy with book by Kaj Gynt, music by Ford Dabney, and lyrics by Jo Trent; Lew Leslie's production of Blackbirds of 1928, with music by Jimmy McHugh and lyrics by Dorothy Fields (both white); Keep Shufflin' (1928), a musical comedy featuring Miller and Lyles, who wrote the book, and a score equally divided between the teams of James P. Johnson-Henry Creamer-Clarence Todd and Fats Waller-Andy Razaf, with an occasional contribution by Con Conrad;¹⁷⁸ Hot Chocolates (1929), a revue transported from a Harlem night-club to Broadway, and which included in its score the Fats Waller hit, "Ain't Misbehavin'";¹⁷⁹ and Messin' Around (1929), a revue with music by James P. Johnson and lyrics by Perry Bradford.

Most of the aforementioned productions were notable for their emphasis upon energetic dancing, and their influence upon the musical stage of the period, both black and white, is not to be minimized.

The rhythmic impact of jazz-dancing Negro performers in Shuffle Along jogged the Broadway musical stage out of its time-stepping rut, and the Harlem version of a knock-kneed, heel-kicking dance from South Carolina created a new dance craze in the mid-Twenties--the Charleston.¹⁸⁰

The Miller and Lyles show, Runnin' Wild (1923), claims the distinction of having introduced the Charleston, "a Negro dance creation which up

¹⁷⁷Waters, pp. 232-33.

¹⁷⁸Kirkeby, pp. 112-14.

¹⁷⁹Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 103.

¹⁸⁰William Iversen, "A Short History of Dancing," Playboy, X (May, 1963), p. 162.

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to that time had been known only to Negroes."¹⁸¹ James Weldon Johnson has described the manner in which the Charleston was first staged in that production:

When Miller and Lyles introduced the dance in their show, they did not depend wholly upon their extraordinarily good jazz band for the accompaniment; they went straight back to primitive Negro music and had the major part of the chorus supplement the band by beating out the time with hand-clapping and foot-patting. The effect was electrical. Such a demonstration of beating out complex rhythms had never before been seen on a stage in New York.¹⁸²

Once seen, the dance was greatly admired--largely because of its exuberant abandon. Critic, Gilbert Seldes, remarked that the all-Negro chorus appeared to be "excited by the dance to the point where they did not care whether they were graceful or not,"¹⁸³ and the result was a spectacle which was "gay and orgiastic and wild."¹⁸⁴ The shows which followed introduced novelty dances in a similar vein, hoping at least to create an audience-pleaser and, at best, "a copyrighted dance craze."¹⁸⁵ Irving C. Miller's Dinah ushered in the Black Bottom,¹⁸⁶ and Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1928 featured Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in "a hot specialty dance called 'Doin' the New Low Down.'"¹⁸⁷ These dances, performed by all-Negro companies to the accompaniment of hot Harlem jazz, not only

¹⁸¹ Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 189.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 190

¹⁸³ Gilbert Seldes, "Shake Your Feet," The New Republic, XLIV (November 4, 1925), p. 283.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Iverson, Playboy, X (May, 1963), p. 162.

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 190.

¹⁸⁷ Kreuger, "Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.

reinforced the popular assertion that all Negroes "have rhythm," but also brought into vogue a re-defined image of the Negro in general.

From the days of minstrelsy, two major comic Negro types had been prominent upon the musical stage: the Southern Negro--ignorant, lazy, mirthful, sometimes sassy, and, because of his intellectual inferiority, always demonstrating his so-called primitive origins--and the shrewd, sharp-dressing, fast-talking city slicker. In the musical comedies, and especially in the revues of the 1920's, the two types tended to merge into a third image--that of the Harlem Negro, a stereotype which Sterling A. Brown has dubbed "The Exotic Primitive":¹⁸⁸

In Harlem dives and cabarets [was] found what [was] believed to be the Negro, au naturel, . . . a Negro synchronized to a savage rhythm, living a life of ecstasy, superinduced by jazz (repetition of the tom-tom, awakening vestigial memories of Africa) and gin, that lifted him over antebellum slavery, and placed him in the comforting fastnesses of their "mother-land." A kinship exists between this stereotype and that of the contented slave; one is merely a "jazzed-up" version of the other, with cabarets supplanting cabins, and Harlemized "blues," instead of the spirituals and slave reels. Few were the observers who saw in the Negroes' abandon a release from the troubles of this world similar to that afforded in slavery by their singing. Many there were, however, who urged that the Harlem Negro's state was that of an inexhaustible joie de vivre.¹⁸⁹

Certainly the revues of the period, composed only of songs, dances and sketches and not having to bother with plot or extended characterization, projected just such an image of the Negro who, as has been seen, was taken to be "gay, orgiastic and wild."¹⁹⁰ As such, and given the limitations of the popular entertainment stage, the Negro continued to

¹⁸⁸ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," in Dark Symphony, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 164.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 164-65.

¹⁹⁰ Supra, p. 56.

be seen as a figure who was not allowed to evoke a serious empathic response; he remained "something to be watched rather than felt."¹⁹¹

Many of the performers and much of the material that went into the all-Negro revues on the legitimate musical stage came directly from floor shows produced in fashionable night clubs--most of them located in Harlem. Hot Chocolates (1929) had begun at Connie's Inn; Dixie to Broadway (1924) was an enlarged edition of the floor show in which Florence Mills had starred at the Plantation, a downtown club.¹⁹² Lew Leslie had been the first producer of the Cotton Club shows,¹⁹³ and his leading songwriters had been the team of Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh--a triumvirate which later was to create Blackbirds of 1928. The revues produced in Harlem cabarets, perhaps more than any other form of entertainment during the 1920's, contributed to the image of the Negro as an "exotic primitive."

Significantly, the plush night clubs which featured all-Negro floor shows invariably operated according to a double standard. They were owned and operated by whites "who based their business on giving their white brethren a thrilling peek at the 'exotic' world of the Negro, but refused to allow Negroes into their club as paying customers."¹⁹⁴ At the Cotton Club, the atmosphere--created for a pleasure-seeking, adult, white clientele--deliberately was highly charged with sexuality.¹⁹⁵ Great emphasis was placed upon a dancing chorus of scantily-

¹⁹¹Peter Noble, The Negro in Films (London: Skelton-Robinson, n.d.), p. 27.

¹⁹²Johnson, Black Manhattan, pp. 189 and 197.

¹⁹³Horne and Schickel, p. 46.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁹⁵Ibid. p. 44.

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clad "bronze beauties";¹⁹⁶ however, the fundamental erotic appeal of the club had to do with baser instincts than that of ogling a display of brown skin. Rather, its basis was to be found in a racial-sexual concept. Female performers, often lavishly gowned, were presented as being alluring and desirable, but underneath the chic veneer lay the excitement of unrestrained animal passions. Lena Horne has described Adelaide Hall's most popular number in one of the later editions of the Cotton Club shows:

Her first number was "Primitive Prima Donna" and she was dressed to the nines in gorgeous satins and laces. Then gradually, the sexiness, the wild quality began to emerge until, by the end, she was indeed, a primitive prima donna. She was great in the number, and it was just what the audiences seemed to like.¹⁹⁷

The fascination of a white audience for what it believed to be atavistic influences of the Negro's heritage was further exploited in a variety of ways. There were native-inspired production numbers, one of which featured Juano Hernandez (who later proved himself to be a serious actor of considerable merit) "doing a kind of fake voodoo incantation, with drums and dancing, that just thrilled the audiences silly—they figured it was a real taste of the jungle."¹⁹⁸ Further, the club made a practice of hiring specialty acts according to the exotic Negro image it had chosen to project. Lena Horne has commented:

The tradition in the club was for what I have since heard called "eccentric dancers," of whom Jigsaw Jackson and Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker were famous examples—at least among the cognoscenti.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., quoting a Cotton Club brochure, p. 47.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

Certainly the club favored the more spectacular, contortionistic, exhibitionistic sort of dancer. It fitted with the image they wanted to present and which led them to, at first, dub Duke [Ellington]'s band as "The Jungle Band."¹⁹⁹

In addition to the "selling" of the Negro as a primitively-oriented being, cabarets such as the Cotton Club also featured the traditional comedy teams, a blues singer, a spiritual-singing baritone, and a lively tap-and-jazz dancing chorus working to the hot rhythms of a prominent Negro band.²⁰⁰ Such acts were standard form in the Negro show business of the 1920's; however, the cabarets also "sold" a kind of luxurious glamour in their production numbers. Fond of elaborate scenery, lighting effects and costumes, these stagey spectacles promoted an image of elegant and exotic Negro femininity which was hardly related to the off-stage lives of the performers. Lena Horne wryly observes that she returned home every night from the on-stage fiction to "a typical, roach-infested tenement . . ."²⁰¹ To be sure, the stage illusion of any magnificent production number is designed solely to dazzle the eye and ear and has, as a result, absolutely no connection with off-stage reality. Nevertheless, even during the "Negro Renaissance" of the 1920's, such a display performed by Negroes before an all-white audience must have appeared to be somewhat bizarre. Speaking again from her personal experience at the Cotton Club, Lena Horne has commented as follows:

The big production numbers at the Cotton Club were probably no funnier than the big numbers in the Ziegfeld and George White

¹⁹⁹Ibid., p. 51.

²⁰⁰Ibid., p. 49.

²⁰¹Ibid., p. 48.

shows, or those huge, gaudy things that Busby Berkeley was doing in the movie musicals at that time. But ours were, perhaps, a little sillier than the rest, considering . . . the rich irony of doing these expensive, expansive numbers in the middle of Harlem. One that I remember as particularly ironic was a thing about sailing to Europe and the boys in the show carried out eight or ten deck chairs in which we reclined to sing the number. Considering who we were and where we were, it must have seemed pretty silly (and I'm sure a lot of people came there just to get a laugh out of our pretensions).²⁰²

If one accepts Miss Horne's final statement with regard to a condescending attitude on the part of (white) audiences toward Negroes in general, it becomes apparent that the stereotypic images of the Negro, propounded in minstrelsy, continued to flourish even in the lush cabarets throughout the 1920's. As has been indicated,²⁰³ whatever refinements had been made in characterization were largely "jazzed-up" versions of the prototypes. The results remained the same. The Negro was seen to be basically primitive and, therefore, inferior to members of white, Anglo-Saxon culture. The more he attempted to join that culture, the more audiences responded with laughter and derision.

Flattery of white audiences in all-Negro musical entertainments was prominent on the legitimate musical stage as well, and it appeared to become even more blatant, even more attuned to minstrelsy concepts, as the decade wore on and Negro musicals proliferated.

As these shows were designed more and more primarily for white audiences, most of the humor fell into predictable stereotypical gags about gambling, knife wielding, crooked politicians and spooky graveyards at night. In other words, they presented the Negro as white audiences of the period preferred to see him: ignorant, but full of hell.²⁰⁴

²⁰²Ibid., p. 50.

²⁰³Supra, p. 57.

²⁰⁴Kreuger, "Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.

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Examples may be found in the most successful all-Negro musical of the decade, Blackbirds of 1928, which totaled 518 performances at the Liberty Theatre on Forty-second Street.²⁰⁵ Blackbirds was strictly a revue, a "song and dance show, with blackface skits interspersed."²⁰⁶ It differed from most other Negro revues of the period in the simplicity of its staging, about which the review in Variety stated: "' As to production it is nearly nil, drapes constituting the principal stage dress. Blackbirds depends on its players and numbers.'"²⁰⁷ Tim Moore, who later appeared as Kingfish in the television version of Amos 'n' Andy, was the principal comedian. Brooks Atkinson has summarized Moore's performance and the basic character of Blackbirds' comedy sketches as follows:

Even in what is supposedly an authentic Negro entertainment the comedians appear in blackface. Tim Moore, whose wild talk and wild lunges supply most of the fun, puts on his make-up according to form, and his enormous mouth opens capaciously between streaks of light tan color. As a blustering uptown bully he puts a good deal of fun into a burlesque boxing match. With three other players, none of them slaves to card etiquette, he feels his way cautiously through a Harlem poker game. When he sees a dancing skeleton in a graveyard, the look of horror, gradually turning to terror, in his eyes makes for eloquent Negro comedy.²⁰⁸

Indeed, "Negro comedy" was the inescapable terminology, for the humorous sketches in Blackbirds were replete with the comic props found in minstrelsy. Witness the following moment from the "Famous Poker Scene," printed on an advertising flyer:

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Sterling A. Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama (Bronze Booklet Number 7, Washington, D. C.: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937), pp. 139-40.

²⁰⁷ Kreuger (quoting Variety), "Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Kreuger, "Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.

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DARKEY

(Producing a razor as another darkey makes attempt to touch chips) Brother, if you lay your hand on those chips, the next time you buy gloves just ask for one!²⁰⁹

The "Famous Graveyard Scene" offered the superstitious, easily frightened comic Negro:

FIRST DARKEY

Don't get scared. That's the voice of a dead man and you know a dead man can't hurt you.

SECOND DARKEY

Maybe not, but they kin make you hurt yourself!²¹⁰

Clearly, the most popular all-Negro musical of the 1920's had made no great strides with regard to fresh comic characterization.

Musically, Blackbirds of 1928 was a delight and is best remembered for its outstanding hit, "I Can't Give You Anything but Love." Nothing in the lyrics of the song suggests that it should be sung by a member of any particular race, and, indeed, it has been popularized without regard to such distinction. Nevertheless, in the mouth of a black performer and given the popular stage image of the time, the lyric, "I can't give you anything but love, baby; That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby . . ." ²¹¹ must have suggested, to a predominantly white audience, the concepts of poverty and passion. In a similar, if somewhat more erotic, vein was Adelaide Hall moaning a low-down, torchy, "I Must Have That Man." The score also included jazzy, dance-oriented numbers such as "Diga Diga Doo," "Stroll Along Your Way," and Bill Robinson's show-stopping tap dance, "Doin' the New Low Down." There

²⁰⁹ Advertising flyer, reproduced on album cover, Blackbirds, n. p.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1928 (Columbia Records, Hall of Fame Series, OL 6770), Side one, Band two.

were also two serious musical sequences, both inspired by the 1927 dramatic success, Porgy. One was a plaintive, "I've Got Porgy Now;" the other was a soul-stirring musical setting--seven years before Gershwin's --of the wake scene (I-ii), "staged similarly to the original, even to the shadows on the wall. But instead of Spirituals the blues--the 'St. Louis Blues'--were sung, and with an effect equally electrical and almost as moving."²¹² Entitled "I'm on My Way," the sequence was filled with pathos, and the Negro was seen as a being who could experience painful human emotions. Nevertheless, the characters depicted were ignorant and poverty-stricken Negroes, seen in a situation taken out of the dramatic context of the original and placed in the middle of a fast-paced revue. Moving though the scene may have been, under such circumstances it became a curious peak at an exotic culture foreign to that of a Broadway audience.

Three more all-Negro musicals²¹³ followed Blackbirds of 1928, but the Depression, which stifled a good deal of Broadway activity, was only around the corner. Moreover, "by the 1930's the public began to weary of the rather ritual all-Negro revue, partially because of social changes, and partially because the shows became virtually indistinguishable from each other."²¹⁴

In summarizing the all-Negro shows of the 1920's, Miles Kreuger has stated:

If this type of musical seems riddled with condescension from today's point of view, certainly no one in the 1920's ever

²¹² Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 213.

²¹³ Supra, p. 55.

²¹⁴ Kreuger, "Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.

thought so, or at least said so in print. These musicals were cheerfully patronized by white and black audiences alike for they provided some of the best entertainment of the era.²¹⁵

On the other hand, Negro writer Sterling A. Brown has objected to the content and tone of such productions:

These shows remain farce and cabaret, and the audience is too well summed up by a Negro critic who says: "As soon as a Negro puts his money down for a ticket he starts laughing." Escape from drudgery and insult by laughter is what the Negro theatre means to too many Negroes.²¹⁶

It must be remembered that, throughout this period, the American musical stage, both black and white, was rarely concerned with serious or thought-provoking material. The main attractions were usually chorus girls, comics, singing and dancing, and if there was a plot with which to be bothered it was most often both harmless and mindless. This was the popular entertainment stage, and it is unfair to fault any of the productions for not being something they never intended to be. The inescapable fact, however, is that the Negro performer in the musical theatre of the 1920's, by virtue of his public image, was forced to present himself only in those greatly limited, tradition-honored and essentially dehumanized roles that have been discussed. He was denied the greater latitudes of even the most simplistic varieties of characterization,²¹⁷ and was viewed more as a performer than as an actor.

²¹⁵Ibid.

²¹⁶Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama, p. 140.

²¹⁷As an example, many white musical comedies were based upon a sweet and spiritually pure romance; if the subject of love was ever broached in a Negro show, it was dealt with on a much earthier level--having to do with animal passions and sexual gratification. Furthermore, the setting of an all-Negro musical most often featured a milieu remote to white audiences--Africa, Harlem or the South. A Negro show taking place on a college campus or in the United States Navy would have been unthinkable.

The Negro had been the subject, if somewhat sporadically, of several serious works upon the dramatic stage, starting with Ridgeley Torrence's Three Plays for a Negro Theatre (1917) and continuing on into the 1920's with Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones and All God's Chillum Got Wings. It was breakthroughs such as these which created dissatisfaction, among the Negro intelligentsia, with the Negro's status of mimic and clown upon the musical stage. In 1926, Alain Locke was moved to write as follows:

The real mine of Negro dramatic art and talent is still in the sub-soil of the vaudeville stage, gleaming through its slag and dross in the unmistakably great dramatic gifts of a Bert Williams, a Florence Mills or a Bill Robinson. Give Bojangles Robinson or George Stamper, pantomimic dancers of genius, an artistic libretto, score and setting; give Josephine Baker, Eddie Rector, Abbie Mitchell or Ethel Waters a dignified medium, and they would be more than a sensation, they would be more than a sensation, they would be artistic revelations.²¹⁸

Certain men of the theatre agreed, among them Max Reinhardt, and saw great possibilities both in Negro talent and in the musical theatre form itself. The swiftness and vitality²¹⁹ of Shuffle Along and Runnin' Wild appealed to Reinhardt on his first visit to New York, and he found in these Negro musicals the seeds of a new dramatic form-- if only their techniques might be combined with something worth saying. Alain Locke reports Rheinhardt's enthusiastic reaction:

"It is intriguing, very intriguing," he told me, "these Negro shows that I have seen. But remember, not as achievements, not as things in themselves artistic, but in their possibilities,

²¹⁸ Alain Locke, "The Negro and the American Stage," Theatre Arts Anthology, ed. Rosamond Gilder, Hermine Rich Isaacs, Robert M. MacGregor, and Edward Reed (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1950), p. 83.

²¹⁹ Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama, p. 140.

[illegible]

their tremendous artistic possibilities. They are most modern, most American, most expressionistic. They are highly original in spite of obvious triteness, and artistic in spite of superficial crudeness. To me they reveal new possibilities of technique in drama, and if I should ever try to do anything American, I would build it on these things."²²⁰

It was not, however, for Max Reinhardt to do. In 1927 there appeared a precedent-setting musical of serious purpose. With an integrated cast, it presented the Negro, for the first time on the American musical stage, as a figure worthy of serious contemplation and as a character of dignity and substance. It was called Show Boat.

²²⁰ Locke, in Theatre Arts Anthology, p. 83.

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CHAPTER II

SHOW BOAT, AN ANALYSIS

Niggers all work on de Mississippi,
Niggers all work while de white folks play--
Loadin' up boats wid de bales of cotton,
Gittin' no rest till de Judgement Day.¹

On the evening of December 27, 1927, the curtain of New York's Ziegfeld Theatre rose to reveal a chorus of Negro stevedores singing as they toiled on the Natchez levee. This was the scene and these were the lyrics with which Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern had chosen to open their musical stage version of Edna Ferber's popular novel, Show Boat. It was at once a decision both audacious and suspicious, for in the very first moments of Show Boat, the authors had succeeded in breaking from the fixed traditions of 1920's musical comedy² and had established the basic tone for what was to become the first musical play.

David Ewen has described the differences in form as follows:

In a musical comedy the means was more important than the end, the parts more significant than the whole. The story, the characters, the situation were generally just the excuse for offering songs, dances, routines, and stars. . . .

Beginning with the 1920's a new concept of musical theater was arrived at in which the procedures of musical comedy were

¹Oscar Hammerstein 2nd (book and lyrics) and Jerome Kern (music), Show Boat (London: Chappell & Co. Ltd., 1934), p. 6.

²The standardized formula invariably called for a rousing opening chorus or "icebreaker" at the beginning of the first act. For further reference see: Elie Siegmeister, "Which Way the Musical?," Theatre Arts, XLI (April, 1957), pp. 74-75.

[illegible]

reversed. In this new approach, the producer started out with a good play in which the main interest lay in story, background, characters, and situations. Everything else had to be an inextricable part of the dramatic exposition. The new genre aspired to be an art form through the projection of dramatic truth, insight into and depth of characterization, while borrowing the resources of music and dance to project and intensify mood and feeling.

This new kind of production was the musical play.

The musical play can be said to emerge with Show Boat. . . .³

It is of little wonder that Edna Ferber was astounded by the suggestion that her novel be transformed into an entertainment for the musical stage.

Thinking in terms of Sally and Sunny she could hardly conceive of her novel as a showcase for chorus girls, tap dances, comedians, and the other paraphernalia with which musical comedy was then cluttered. Kern dismissed her fears by insisting he was thinking of a new kind of musical theater which would respect her own concern for plot structure, character, social problems, and local color.⁴

The finished product accomplished Jerome Kern's stated objectives and pointed toward greater maturity on the musical stage. "Here, in 1927, at the height of the age of jazz and nonsense, was the modern musical drama. It was the first time that songs and slapstick, the tricks of vaudeville and the trappings of the Follies, were used to tell a serious story."⁵ Certainly the content of Show Boat, romantic and melodramatic though it might seem by contemporary standards, was far removed from the average lighthearted musical entertainment of the 1920's. Instead of ringing down the final curtain on a marriage destined to endure happily ever after, Show Boat presented the "ever after" for not

³Ewen, The Story of America's Musical Theater, p. 159.

⁴David Ewen, Composers for the American Musical Theatre (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1968), p. 76.

⁵"Showstopper: Morgan's Bill," Show Business Illustrated, I, No. 3 (October 3, 1961), p. 54.

one, but two unhappy marriages, broached the very delicate subject of miscegenation, went far beyond the Ferber novel in depicting the harsh life of Southern Negroes, and unified its sprawling plot and myriad characters with a resigned philosophy of life. Beyond this, the Hammerstein libretto featured believable, individualized characters, well-integrated musical numbers, and natural-sounding dialogue. Of his revolutionary contributions to Show Boat, Oscar Hammerstein II has stated:

Show Boat led the way in doing away with certain conventions that operettas and musical plays demanded. Both the operetta and the musical play were written in a kind of code. The author knew, and the audience knew, that the actors weren't really speaking like human beings, even though their motivation as characters and symbols was sound. The dialogue was the hardest thing for the audience to take. In Show Boat, I think, the characters for the first time spoke more like human beings, like characters in a straight play. The content of the story was not the usual operetta or musical-comedy content. The misunderstanding did not take place at the end of the first act; at the end of the first act Ravenal and Magnolia got married. But there was the very significant trouble in the first act that dealt with Julie's leaving the showboat because of the problem of miscegenation, which was pretty unusual material for a musical play.⁶

Indeed, most historians of the musical theatre not only agree, but accord to Show Boat the distinction of being a major turning point on the musical stage--a show which "in its day was perhaps the only musical comedy to achieve a dramatic verisimilitude that seemed comparable to that of the speaking stage."⁷ Deems Taylor has commented upon the revolutionary qualities of Show Boat as follows:

⁶ Oscar Hammerstein II, "The Book Had Better Be Good," Theatre Arts, XLIV (November, 1960), p. 19. (In accordance with definitions herein employed, Hammerstein's use of the term, "musical play" should be understood to mean "musical comedy.")

⁷ Cecil Smith, Musical Comedy in America (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1950), p. 275.

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Compared with its predecessors, the book of *Show Boat* is not a musical comedy at all. At moments it has overtones of tragedy; at others it is not afraid to mention the forbidden subject of race prejudice. Its people are real people, and their emotions are real. It is a romance, but it is not a fairy tale.⁸

Given its initial production by Florenz Ziegfeld, that master showman with a "partiality toward elaborate visual display"⁹ spared no expense in the mounting of *Show Boat*. "The late nineteenth century American setting allowed for vivid, colorful costuming. The backgrounds of a show boat, an intimate auditorium within the boat, and the Chicago world's fair could give immense scope to a scenic designer's invention."¹⁰ Sets and costumes were created, respectively, by Joseph Urban and John Harkrider; Sammy Lee was responsible for the choreography,¹¹ and Oscar Hammerstein--assisted by Jerome Kern--provided the over-all direction.¹² In principal roles, the original company included the following: Edna May Oliver (Parthy Ann Hawks), Charles Winninger (Cap'n Andy), Helen Morgan (Julie), Howard Marsh (Ravenal), Norma Terris (Magnolia), and Jules Bledsoe (Joe).¹³ The magnificent Kern-Hammerstein

⁸ Deems Taylor, Some Enchanted Evenings: The Story of Rodgers and Hammerstein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 126.

⁹ David Ewen, The World of Jerome Kern (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1960), p. 92.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bernard Sobel, "Musical Comedy, Quo Vadis?," Theatre Arts, XII (August, 1928), p. 575.

¹² Ewen, The World of Jerome Kern, p. 93.

¹³ Taylor, Some Enchanted Evenings, p. 123.

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score--filled with memorable songs and, today, considered a classic of the musical theatre--contained the following musical program:¹⁴

"Cotton Blossom"; "Only Make Believe"; "Ol' Man River"; "Can't Help Lovin' That Man"; "Life Upon the Wicked Stage"; "Till Good Luck Comes My Way"; "I Might Fall Back on You"; "C'mon Folk"; "You Are Love"; "Why Do I Love You?"; "In Dahomey"; "Bill" (lyric by P. G. Wodehouse); "Goodbye, My Lady Love"; "Hey, Feller."¹⁵

Rich in spectacle, color and music, and peopled with believable characters in comprehensible situations, Show Boat "bewitched the eye, ear, and heart; and it never offended the mind."¹⁶ Greeted with great enthusiasm by critics and audiences alike, the original production ran for an astounding total of 572 performances. "It became such a substantial hit that, within a year after its opening, the producer made plans to assemble another company to run concurrently in New York. . . . These plans, however, never materialized."¹⁷ Undeniably, Show Boat "established itself not only as the major musical show of the 1920s but also

¹⁴There is disparity between the final two musical numbers listed in the original production and those included in the published script (copyright 1934). The latter substitutes "How'd You Like to Spoon With Me?," a song written in 1905 by Kern and E. Laska (see Liner Notes, Let Me Entertain You; Sandra Church [Columbia Records, CL 1461, n.d.]) and "Dance Away The Night," origin undetermined. Both Kern and Hammerstein had seen fit to tamper musically with the admittedly rambling second act on several occasions--most notably those of the 1946 Broadway revival (into which they inserted a new song, "Nobody Else But Me") and the 1936 film version for which two new songs were interpolated ("I Have the Room Above Her" and "Ah Still Suits Me"). For further reference, see: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1946, VII, No. 1 (Week of January 21, 1946), pp. 496-500, and Taylor, Some Enchanted Evenings, p. 125. In particular, much of the latter half of the second act allows for interpolations--several of the musical numbers being presented as show-within-the-show.

¹⁵Ewen, The World of Jerome Kern, p. 125.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁷Stanley Green, The World of Musical Comedy (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1960), pp. 76-77.

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as one of the finest musicals ever produced in the United States,"¹⁸ and its durability in numerous successful revivals attests to the fact that "even the time-worn sequences still have the power to move audiences."¹⁹ Lehman Engel has commented upon the production history of Show Boat as follows:

After a successful tour, it ran 181 performances in 1932, 418 in 1946, has had four more recent revivals in New York, was converted into a successful motion picture, and never in a single year goes unperformed somewhere in the United States.²⁰

For purposes of this study, however, it is the impact of Show Boat and its author's delineation of Negro character, in the year 1927, upon which attention will be focused.

Structurally, Show Boat suffers from the outrageous proportions of its episodic story which spans a period of thirty-seven years (1890-1927) and moves from Natchez, Mississippi, to Chicago and back again. The first act, which covers a period of only three weeks, is entirely satisfactory--what with its richness of milieu, romance, comedy and pathos. The second act,²¹ however, falls victim to the sprawling nature of the plot and is constructed at the expense of probability. Lehman Engel has stated that "the element of coincidence in the book is not

¹⁸Laufe, p. 23.

¹⁹Green, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 77.

²⁰Lehman Engel, The American Musical Theater, A Consideration (New York: A CBS Legacy Collection Book, Distributed by The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 170.

²¹Hammerstein's libretto departs considerably, especially in the second act, from the Ferber novel. In the novel, Cap'n Andy drowns in the Mississippi River, Julie reappears as secretary to the madam of Chicago's most notorious bordello, and Ravenal--once having disappeared--never reappears. See: Edna Ferber, Show Boat (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1954).

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only silly but sloppy, for the action could have been motivated without resorting to nonsense."²² Nevertheless, the second act is sufficiently filled with spectacle, music, sentiment and character crises so that one may overlook the structural absurdities of the book.

The plot of Show Boat follows the fortunes of its heroine, Magnolia Hawks, daughter of the genial Cap'n Andy (owner of the "Cotton Blossom" Show Boat) and his shrewish but likeable wife, Parthy Ann. When it is discovered that the Show Boat's leading actress, Julie LaVerne, is in fact a mulatto who has been passing for white, she and her leading-man husband (Steve) are charged by the local sheriff with the crime of miscegenation and forced to leave the Show Boat. Against the wishes of Parthy Ann, Cap'n Andy allows Magnolia to assume Julie's roles on the stage, and, as a replacement for Steve, he impulsively hires Gaylord Ravenal--an itinerant gambler whose charm is irresistible. Magnolia and Ravenal are immediately attracted to one another and, within a few short weeks, find themselves deeply in love. With the connivance of Cap'n Andy--and over the strong objections of Parthy Ann--the two are married.

Act II finds the couple in Chicago where Ravenal's gambler's luck has allowed them to live prosperously for several years during which a daughter, Kim, is born to them. By 1904, however, this luck has turned sour, and Magnolia finds herself in a shabby boarding house staring at a farewell note from Ravenal. In order to support herself and her child, Magnolia determines to resume her show business career and auditions as a singer at the Trocadero Music Hall. Unbeknown to her,

²²Engel, p. 44.

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the Trocadero's star attraction is none other than Julie--now deserted by Steve and, although still an able performer, a grieving alcoholic. Unseen by Magnolia, Julie witnesses the audition and silently vanishes, leaving a message for the management advising that Magnolia be hired in her place. Encouraged by Cap'n Andy (who has happened upon the Trocadero the very night of Magnolia's debut), Magnolia becomes an instantaneous success and launches a brilliant theatrical career. The scene changes to that of the Show Boat in the year 1927. Quite by chance, Cap'n Andy has encountered Ravenal and invited him to the Show Boat where he expects a visit from Magnolia and Kim--the latter having become a Broadway musical comedy star. Still very much in love with him, Magnolia welcomes Ravenal and a reconciliation appears imminent.

In addition to the main line of action and the "Julie" sub-plot which twice crosses it, are two comic sub-plots which deal with members of the Show Boat troupe and serve to contrast with the serious business of the main plot. There is the comic bickering between Cap'n Andy and Parthy Ann--a woman whose acidulous tongue might easily be more annoying than amusing were it not for the fact that the capering Captain continually outwits her. There is also the team of Ellie May Chipley and Frank Schultz (originally played by Eva Puck and Sammy White),²³ comedienne and general character man aboard the "Cotton Blossom." Their lighthearted romance--ardently pursued by Frank and coyly evaded by Ellie--finally culminates in marriage and a mediocre stage career for

²³ Robert Benchley, "Top and Bottom," The New Yorker (May 28, 1932), pp. 26, 28, reprinted under the collective title, "The Musical Theater," American Drama and Its Critics, ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 60.

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the two. Ellie's pretensions toward fame, however, are finally realized when the couple adopts a boy who becomes a child star in motion pictures.

On a more serious level is the presence of the Negro characters, three of whom (Julie, Joe and Queenie)²⁴ are assigned individual speaking roles while the rest appear as members of a large singing and dancing chorus, maintained separately from that of the white chorus. Apart from the mulatto, Julie, the Negro characters might easily be removed entirely without damaging the plot at all, for none of the rest are truly connected with it; however, a production of Show Boat lacking their presence would be unthinkable. Hammerstein employs his Negro characters not only for purposes of authenticity in period and setting but also to function thematically as personifications of the play's fatalistic philosophy.

The position of, and sympathetic attitude toward, the Southern Negro is made clear at the very opening of Show Boat--an opening calculated to express the plight of an oppressed race and the distinct separation of black from white. Piling up the heavy bales, the Negro stevedores sing of the "Cotton Blossom," referring to the (ironically white) product of the plant and the backbreaking work derived from it:

Cotton Blossom, Cotton Blossom,
Love to see you growin' free,
When dey pack you on de levee,
You're a heavy load to me!

²⁴Technically, credit is given in the Cast of Characters to a fourth speaking role. In Act II, Scene 2, Ethel is the Negro maid at Mrs. O'Brien's boarding house in Chicago. She sings briefly as she dusts and later delivers one line to Magnolia--along with Ravenal's farewell letter. The role is that of a supernumerary and quite likely is filled by a member of the Negro chorus.

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Cotton Blossom, Cotton Blossom,
 Love to see you growin' wild
 On de levee, you're too heavy
 Fo' dis po' black child!²⁵

There follows a brief spoken interlude during which a heated exchange transpires between Queenie, the Negro cook, and the villainous Pete who addresses Queenie simply as "Nigger."²⁶ Immediately thereafter, the white chorus--composed of the town's Mincing Misses and their dashing Beaux--enters to extol in song the virtues of the "Cotton Blossom." This time the reference has to do with the name of Cap'n Andy's Show Boat and is sung in pointed contrast to a reprise of the Negro lyrics above:

Cotton Blossom, Cotton Blossom,
 Captain Andy's Floating Show,
 Thrills and laughter
 Concert after
 Ev'rybody's sure to go!²⁷

Thus, within the span of only a few minutes, Hammerstein and Kern establish--in a musical setting--an unenviable portrait of the lot of the Southern Negro, separate and unequal not because of inherent inferiority or buffoonery, but because of skin pigmentation.

Given such a picture of the Negro's social position, it is not difficult to determine the basis for Julie's motives in attempting to pass for white. Hammerstein has drawn her, as did Miss Ferber, according to formula for the stereotype known as the "tragic mulatto."

The term tragic mulatto, as referred to in American fiction and drama, denotes a light-colored, mixed-blooded character. It is the common lot of this character to suffer unmercifully

²⁵ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 6.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

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due to difficulties arising from his bi-racial background, a situation which lends itself to pathos, exaggeration and melodrama.²⁸

Certainly such a description suits Julie, and if the character type was a familiar one in 1927, it is nevertheless significant to note that the Julie of Show Boat is not only the first tragic mulatto to appear on the American musical stage, but also the first to be involved in a case of miscegenation.

It has been suggested that Julie is one of the more interesting of Show Boat's characters, "but possibly only because she is so shadowy."²⁹ She is not seen at length, appearing only in Scenes i, ii and iv of Act I, then reappearing to sing "Bill" in Act II, Scene iii, after which she vanishes forever. Julie's story is never brought to a conclusion; rather, she passes on into the night, an "immortal lost creature"³⁰ whose nebulous existence will return to haunt us. When the fact of her color is discovered and revealed, Oscar Hammerstein offers the following stage direction:

ANDY and MAGNOLIA . . . find the situation quite beyond them-- probably each has a desire to run to the humiliated couple and join STEVE in protecting JULIE. Probably each is too afraid of JULIE's sensibilities. How can one tell how she will receive anything?³¹

It is precisely this question-mark about Julie's character which makes her so fascinating a figure. She is defined almost entirely by the

²⁸ Mary R. Hardwick, "The Nature of the Negro Hero in Serious American Drama, 1910-1964" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University, 1968), pp. 40-41.

²⁹ Engel, p. 39.

³⁰ "Showstopper: Morgan's Bill," Show Business Illustrated, I (October 3, 1961), p. 54.

³¹ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 35.

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"fate" of her blood--a definition which is entirely sufficient for Hammerstein's purposes, owing to the fact that a white audience inevitably will fill in the missing details with bathetic fantasies. Speaking of the tragic mulatto as a literary figure, J. C. Furnas has observed:

The device substitutes the melodramatic for the meaningful, the teary for the tragic. It aims to discredit racism by reductio ad absurdum, but actually it distracts the reader from issues that he might otherwise be cajoled into facing but would really rather skip. It lets him dwell on the minor problem "What would it be like to know you're a nigger even if you look white?" in order to avoid having his nose rubbed in "What is it like always to be treated like a nigger because you look like one?"³²

This premise holds true in Show Boat, in which Julie's lengthiest scene (I-iv) is devoted to the sensational revelation and her subsequent tearful departure from the Show Boat. The scene is sentimentalized by Steve's nobility, the loyalty of the Show Boat folks, and by Julie's resigned dignity. Prior to the arrival of the sheriff, Steve has slashed the tip of Julie's finger and--in a planned effort to avoid their arrests on the charge of miscegenation--sucked her blood. Once charged with the crime, he boldly makes his stand.

STEVE

Say! You wouldn't call a man a white man that's got negro blood in him, would you?

VALLON

No, I wouldn't. Not in Mississippi. One drop of nigger blood makes you a nigger in these parts-----

STEVE

Well, I got more than a drop of--nigger blood in me, and that's a fact.

VALLON

You ready to swear to that in a court of law?

³²Furnas, p. 331.

STEVE

I'll swear to it any place. I'll do more than that. Look at all these folks here. Every one of them can swear I got nigger blood in me this minute. That's how white I am.³³

The members of the Show Boat do not disappoint him, especially the old pilot, Windy:

WINDY

Now I'm tellin' you, me, Windy McLain (goes further down stage and points at STEVE) that that white man there's got nigger blood in him. I'll take my oath to that-----³⁴

Not all, however, are quite so charitable. The tight-lipped Parthy Ann turns her back upon Steve and Julie,³⁵ and twice gives vent to her vituperative tongue against the young woman for whom Magnolia has deep affection. Significantly, she does not speak the word which, now, must be in the audience's mind: "No daughter of mine's goin' to talk to that--that-----" and "I'm goin' straight into that room and pull her away from that lyin', deceivin'-----".³⁶ Also noteworthy is the reaction to the scene by the Negro observers who are astonished, as well, by the revelation of Julie's secret. As the sheriff leaves, they sing "Misery":

WOMEN

On my back in a hack
In a fohty dollar hack
No mo' gin, no mo' rum
Oh de misery's done come.

MEN

Upon my poor ol' back
Within a liv'ry hack
With no mo' rum
Oh! de misery's done come.³⁷

³³ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 34.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

³⁶ Ibid.

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Certainly there is compassion here for one whom the Negroes thought to be their social "superior"; there is also a tinge of horror derived from their first-hand knowledge of Julie's fate--accompanied, perhaps, by a look of derision directed toward a woman who has denied her racial ancestry and attempted to "pass" into a more comfortable world. The latter is suggested by Steve's outburst:

STEVE

(shouting at the COLOURED FOLK as they hum "Misery") You needn't all look at us like we were a couple of wild animals--We ain't goin' to hurt anybody-----C'm on Julie, We'll pack up our things-----³⁸

The most interesting aspect of the scene, however, is that of Julie's response. When first informed (secretively) that the sheriff is on his way, Julie becomes terrified and ultimately swoons in Steve's arms. By the time Vallon has arrived, she has regained her composure--reassured by the fact that Steve will stand by her--and delivers only a single line, affirming the sheriff's question about her mother's color.

VALLON

Julie Dozier--my information says, you were born in Mississippi --your pop was white, and your mammy black--that right?

JULIE

Yes--that's right.³⁹

Apart from this, Julie remains silent during the remainder of the confrontation, her emotions expressed only physically. She buries her head in Steve's shoulder,⁴⁰ and when it is time to pack her belongings, "her shoulders straighten bravely, but her eyes look down and meet no one's

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

gaze as she precedes STEVE to their tiny dressing room . . ."⁴¹ Julie's silence, her inability or unwillingness to speak or even to look at her Show Boat colleagues, confirms both the depth of her humiliation and the presence of that invisible line of racial separatism. Moreover, her passivity allows the audience to indulge itself in personal, yet invulnerable, fantasies revolving around that somewhat smug question: "What would it be like to know you're a nigger even if you look white?"⁴² Julie answers the question, as she prepares to leave, by acknowledging the fact that her divided heritage allows her to belong to neither race. Magnolia, who has been to Julie "like a little sister,"⁴³ tearfully runs to Cap'n Andy.

MAGNOLIA

Poppa!--half an hour ago, Julie was my dearest friend--And she hasn't changed a bit--to me-----

ANDY

(quietly). O' course not, Nola-----

MAGNOLIA

Then why are you sending her away? (Gets hold of JULIE'S arm.)

JULIE

He's not sending me away, Nola dear--Steve and I want to go.⁴⁴

Were it not to spare Magnolia's feelings, Julie more honestly might have said that she had no choice in the matter. From a purely practical standpoint, as the sheriff has indicated,⁴⁵ an integrated acting company

⁴¹Ibid., p. 36.

⁴²Supra, p. 79.

⁴³Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 14.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 35.

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would not be allowed to perform in the South. Of even greater importance is the fact that Julie's secret has been revealed to the members of the Show Boat troupe. Even if the whites were to continue their relationships with her as before, Julie herself would no longer feel equal to them. This fact is demonstrated in a moving piece of pantomime as Julie bids farewell to Magnolia.

JULIE

Good-bye, dear----- (MAGNOLIA runs to kiss her. JULIE turns her head away, but holds MAGNOLIA close to her.)⁴⁶

Clearly, Julie recognizes that she cannot fraternize with whites who know her secret, nor--given her appearance and her marriage to a white man--can she belong among Negroes. And so Julie, supported by Steve, goes on her way into another world of deception, always filled with the terror of subsequent exposure.

Speaking of the mulatto stereotype as a literary figure, Sterling A. Brown has observed that he is often presented as being "perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect with black sensuousness. . . . White blood means asceticism and Negro blood means unbridled lust . . ." ⁴⁷ Insofar as Julie is concerned, such is not a part of her character; however, the idea that black blood may be equated with sensuousness is very definitely a part of the character of Pete, the white man who vengefully reveals her heritage. As Ellie aptly describes Pete, he is "a sooty-faced river-rat" whose villainy is motivated "because he's been stuck on Julie here--and she wouldn't have anything to do

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁷ Brown, "Negro Character . . .," reprinted in Dark Symphony, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 162.

(stamps her foot) with him."⁴⁸ Obviously, Pete does not truly love Julie; if he did, his deliberate destruction of her would be quite unlikely. Rather, he is attracted to Julie while being fully aware both of her marital state and, more importantly, of her racial background. According to Pete's mentality, Julie--being what she is--not only can be had but can be bought. In the opening scene of Show Boat, Pete belligerently questions Queenie about where she obtained the fancy brooch she wears.⁴⁹ Queenie will tell him only that it was given to her, but it is obvious that Pete knows the identify of the donor. Moments later, he furiously approaches Julie with a deliberate racial slur:

PETE

That's a hell of a thing to do--givin' my presents to a nigger-----

JULIE

(nervously). Pete--if Steve ever knew about your sending me that brooch, I declare he'd just about beat you to death. . . .

PETE

Well, he better not try, and you better be pretty nice to me . . . or you'll be mighty sorry. . . .⁵⁰

A fist fight ensues between Steve and Pete, and a vindictive Pete storms off spouting threats: "Just wait--I'll get you two for this, and I know how I can do it . . . And when I start in, you'll be sorry you were ever born."⁵¹

Although Pete's psychology is never fully explored, it is clear that his actions are motivated by something beyond Ellie's rather simple

⁴⁸ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 12

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 13.

explanation of unrequited love.⁵² At the outset, Pete's behavior with Queenie ("Hey there, nigger! . . . Where'd you git it, nigger?")⁵³ immediately suggests a racist posture--a posture which, in Pete's case, allows a "sooty-faced river-rat"⁵⁴ to enjoy a sense of personal superiority. Pete's attitude toward Julie is tempered by the fact that she is not identifiably black; therefore, a relationship with her would not appear to be demeaning. Nevertheless, Pete is aware that Julie possesses Negro blood, and this knowledge not only allows him to be brash in his dealings with her but also, quite probably, to assume that an inherent sensuality in her character makes her "available." When he is rebuffed by Julie and publicly humiliated by Steve, Pete's racism emerges to soothe a bruised ego. In his mind, Julie becomes an "uppity nigger," and his actions in disclosing her secret are designed to prove her worthlessness and to shame the white man who has sunk so low as to marry a "nigger wench."⁵⁵ Hammerstein has barely taken the time to sketch in Pete's character, and it is true that in the brevity of his scenes Pete emerges as a two-dimensional--if functional--cardboard villain. Nevertheless, Hammerstein's intelligent appraisal of a hard-core racist (and not simply a rejected suitor) lends credibility to Pete's villainy and also remains in keeping with Hammerstein's sympathetic attitude toward an oppressed race.

Beyond the fate of her blood, Julie is characterized by one major trait: her unswerving devotion to, and dependence upon, those

⁵²Supra, p. 84.

⁵³Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 7.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 35.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 26.

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whom she loves. At first, one is made aware of Julie's fierce fondness for Magnolia. When Parthy Ann, apparently jealous of her daughter's close relationship with Julie, attempts to separate them, Julie bursts into tears and threatens to leave the Show Boat.⁵⁶ There follows a scene in which Magnolia confides in Julie, telling her of the fascinating young man (Ravenal) she has just met, whereupon Julie expounds upon the nature of love.

JULIE

I don't know as I like you to go fallin' in love with some man that nobody ever heard of. . . . Once a girl like you starts to love a man, she don't stop so easy-----

MAGNOLIA

Couldn't you stop loving Steve if he treated you mean?

JULIE

No, honey, no matter what he did-----

MAGNOLIA

Why do you love Steve?

JULIE

I don't know--he's such a bad actor on the stage. And he thinks he's so good--maybe that's why I love him----- You see, child ----- Love's a funny thing----- There's no sense to it--that's why you got to be so careful when it comes creeping up on you-----⁵⁷

Love has crept up on Julie in the person of Steve, and her inflexible fidelity to the man whom she loves is given expression in two songs: "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and "Bill."⁵⁸ The first, composed by Kern

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁵⁸ "Bill" was originally written by Kern (music) and P. G. Wodehouse (lyrics) in 1918 for Oh, Lady! Lady!! from whose score it was discarded. Kern and Hammerstein revived and revised it for use in Show Boat. See: Stanley Green, The Rodgers and Hammerstein Story (New York: The John Day Company, 1963), p. 58.

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as a Blues, is identified as a Negro song, and when it is recognized as such by Queenie, Julie is visibly unsettled.

QUEENIE

How come y'all know dat song?

(JULIE stops abruptly, a swift terror steals across her face, and quickly vanishes--succeeded by an expression of stolid caution.)

MAGNOLIA

Why? Do you know it Queenie?

QUEENIE

F'sho Ah does-----But ah didn't ever hear anybody but coloured folks sing dat song-----Sounds funny for Miss Julie to know it-----.

MAGNOLIA

Why, Julie sings it all the time.⁵⁹

Julie is persuaded to sing, and in doing so she expresses the idea that love is fated; once in its thrall, the lover is emotionally powerless to alter his affection--despite the circumstances:

Oh, listen, sister
I love my mister man.
And I can't tell yo' why-----
Dere ain't no reason
Why I should love dat man-----
It mus' be sumpin' dat de angels done plan!

Fish got to swim and birds got to fly,
I got to love one man 'til I die.
Can't help lovin' dat man of mine!

.....

When he goes away
Dat's a rainy day
But when he comes back dat day is fine!

(Carried away.)

De sun will shine!
He kin come home as late as kin be.
Home widout him ain't no home to me!
Can't help lovin' dat man of mine.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p.22.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

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The content of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man"--dealing as it does with an ever-faithful woman and her faithless mate--invades familiar territory. Many of the Blues popularized in Harlem clubs between 1910 and 1920 presented the same theme,⁶¹ although frequently on a level more earthy and "low-down." Whereas Hammerstein's lyrics for this song in the "Negro idiom" are characterized by a popular image of Negro life, the sentiment expressed remains on a universal plane. Indeed, "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" serves to unify the unhappy marriages found in the main plot and the sub-plot and is, in fact, sung by, and identified with, both Julie and Magnolia. If the song, itself, is identified with race, the truism of an adoring woman and a worthless man knows no color; Julie and Magnolia suffer parallel marital crises.

When Julie reappears in Act II, Scene iii, it is evident that the woman who "Can't Help Lovin'd Dat Man" has suffered for it. Seen in the rehearsal room of the Trocadero Musical Hall, Julie is described as follows:

. . . a WOMAN . . . sits dejectedly in a chair. . . . This is JULIE--a hollow-cheeked woman--looking older than she really is--with all the earmarks of one who is down and out--marks which she has desperately and pathetically tried to hide by overdressing, by making use of too many odds and ends of finery, and by a too anxious application of rouge and lipstick. She sits there, oblivious to all that is going on around her. From time to time she opens her handbag and takes out a flask--typical of the bottled goods of the time--and furtively takes a drink.⁶²

When asked to rehearse a new song, Julie complains: "Leave me alone, Max--I ain't feelin' so very good. Before you know it I'll be off on a tear an' to hell with your show."⁶³ The cause for Julie's descent

⁶¹Supra, pp. 48-49.

⁶²Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 74.

⁶³Ibid.

into alcoholism is explained rather brusquely by the Trocadero's manager:

MAX

Queer how a woman goes to pieces over a man! Why, she wos [sic] the best bet in Chicago till that big bum left her flat.⁶⁴

Such motivation is entirely consistent with Julie's character; however, the brevity of the explanation raises questions which, not surprisingly, are left unanswered. Was the "big bum" Steve? Apparently one is to assume so; however, his desertion of Julie would appear to be inconsistent with his heroic protection of her in Act I. Inasmuch as Hammerstein offers no clues as to the events of their life together, one must assume either the unlikely proposition that Steve was a worthless man from the very beginning or that something specific prompted his apparently irresponsible departure. Hammerstein remains silent. Either he prefers that his audience should not speculate upon inconsistencies which might label him a bad playwright, or--more likely --he once again employs a technique⁶⁵ whereby, because of Julie's definition as a tragic mulatto, the audience imaginatively may fill in the details. Probably the most logical conclusion regarding Steve's behavior would have to do with the idea that Julie's life of deception finally became too great an ordeal for Steve. In this manner, a white audience might indulge itself in pitying Julie while, at the same time, reserving too harsh a judgement for Steve. Such a concept suits the fate of the tragic mulatto character as it is most often presented, and is corroborated by the assertion that one of the "most common

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁵Supra, p. 79.

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thematic patterns surrounding the tragic mulatto [is] the idea of desertion on the part of the white relative. . . ."66 Similarly, of the female character who is light enough to pass for white, Sterling A. Brown has observed the following literary pattern: "The whole desire of her life is to find a white lover, and then go down, accompanied by slow music, to a tragic end."67 Such is the case with Julie; Hammerstein's delineation of her character remains in accord with stereotyped formula.

Julie's rendition of "Bill" is surely one of Show Boat's most moving moments. Dealing as it does with the contrast between romantically imagined illusions of love and the plain, simple realities of affection, the song complements the emotion expressed in "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and, in fact, reiterates the story of Julie's life. The opening verse deals with love's illusions:

I used to dream that I would discover
The perfect lover some day
I knew I'd recognize him if ever
He came round my way.

I always used to fancy then
He'd be one of the God-like kind of men
With a giant brain and a noble head
Like the heroes bold
In the books I read.68

The remainder of the song reveals the simple truth of experience; the beloved man, herein named Bill, is "not the type at all," but rather

⁶⁶Hardwick, p. 41.

⁶⁷Brown, "Negro Character . . .," reprinted in Dark Symphony, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 162.

⁶⁸Hammerstein 2nd, [Wodehouse], and Kern, Show Boat, pp. 74-75.

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is "an ordinary boy" whom the singer loves "because he's--I don't know/
Because he's just my Bill."⁶⁹

Julie, of course, no longer has her "Bill"; in her case, the imagined perfect lover turned out to be not only an ordinary boy but a faithless one as well. In the line, "And I can't explain why he should be / Just the one, one man in the world for me,"⁷⁰ it is clear that the broken woman sings with a despair drawn from personal experience. The effect of the scene, instead of being merely maudlin, is electrifying. Perhaps it is because one knows so little about Julie, perhaps because she is portrayed not psychologically but simply as a victim of fate,⁷¹ that Julie seems to become in this scene a monumental figure, "'a composite of all the ruined women of the world.'"⁷² The following statement very well summarizes the impact of Julie's rendition of "Bill":

It was the torch song crystalized into art; the torch singer become, in one stroke, a classic figure like the clown, the jester, the wandering minstrel. Precisely suited to each other, song and singer were at once specific symbols of an era and a timeless evocation of the essence of a woman lost in love.⁷³

If the singing of "Bill" has not moved the audience sufficiently, the sentimentality of Julie's final moments on-stage is calculated to leave not a dry eye in the audience. Julie reappears while

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 75.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹The fate of her blood and the fate of being disposed to love only one man despite adverse circumstances.

⁷²"Showstopper: Morgan's Bill," Show Business Illustrated, I (October 3, 1961), p. 54.

⁷³Ibid.

Magnolia's audition is in progress. Appropriately and ironically for both characters, Magnolia has chosen to sing a Negro song, "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man." Julie remains on-stage, unseen by Magnolia, just long enough to be affected by the lyrics which hold much personal significance for her. Characteristically, Julie remains silent, but her actions are eloquent:

(When MAGNOLIA begins to sing, JULIE enters quietly, passes behind piano--recognizes MAGNOLIA and takes a couple of quick steps up to her, but directly behind her. Stands there during song till next to last line, when she seems to arrive at a decision. She makes a shy, hesitant little gesture which is half-throwing a kiss. She disappears quickly and softly through stage centre.)⁷⁴

Whether Julie is motivated by the meaning derived from the lyrics of the song or by her fondness for Magnolia, Julie's decision is to leave the club so that Magnolia might replace her. Unaware of Julie's identity, the following is exchanged between Magnolia and Frank:

FRANK

Funny how you always git your chance, ain't it?

MAGNOLIA

How do you mean?

FRANK

You know--on the Show-Boat. That's how you got your first chance--remember--Julie?

MAGNOLIA

Yes, I remember . . . I often wonder what became of her. I loved Julie . . . (She stands looking out front smiling raptly.)⁷⁵

The audience, of course, knows very well what has become of Julie and probably what will become of her if, indeed, she does go off on an alcoholic binge as promised. Yet there remains a mysterious sense of

⁷⁴ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 78.

⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 78-79.

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uncertainty. Julie vanishes with her story unfinished, and we are left only to speculate upon, to imagine, its outcome.

Oscar Hammerstein has characterized Julie according to the formula of the tragic mulatto stereotype and has promoted to the fullest, in both of her major scenes, the sentimental and melodramatic aspects of that stereotype. Doomed by her blood, Julie is a pathetic creature whose function in life apparently is to suffer. Nevertheless, so much remains unspoken--thereby avoiding the mundane--that Julie's misfortunes seem to attain heroic, almost tragic, proportions. Despite its brevity, the role of Julie is surely one of the most memorable in the history of the American musical stage.

Seen in contrast to Julie is Queenie, cook for the Show Boat and an identifiably black female for whom the possibility of "passing" would be unthinkable. Apart from providing authenticity for the Southern milieu of the first Act, Queenie's primary function in Show Boat is to represent the social position into which Julie would be thrust if she were known to possess Negro blood.

Queenie is a realist. She knows her place, accepts it, and operates successfully within it. When addressing the white people for whom she works as, for example, "Miss Nola" or "Mars' Steve,"⁷⁶ Queenie acknowledges the fact that she is not their social equal; however she is never servile and, when the situation warrants, can be quite pert --as in the following exchange:

PETE

(shouting). Where'd you git it, nigger?

QUEENIE

(shouting back at him). Where'd I git it? It was given to me.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 21 and 7, respectively.

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PETE

Who give it to you?

QUEENIE

Ax me no questions 'n ah'll tell y'no lies! (Turns to STEVE).
That man asking me where I get my jewellery!⁷⁷

Seen in her own special domain of the kitchen pantry, Queenie is the boss. A hard-working woman who is prone to remark, "Lordy, my feet shure [sic] is killing me this morning," Queenie does not hesitate to object whenever a member of the Show Boat troupe attempts to disrupt her cookery. In Act I, Scene ii, Julie casually reaches for a biscuit, and Queenie immediately reproves her.⁷⁸ But the relationship between this black woman and the white members of the Show Boat company essentially is a congenial one. Unlike Julie, Queenie "belongs"--not only to her race but to the social position dictated by her color.

In employing Queenie to serve in contrast to Julie as a representative of the Negro race, Hammerstein has relied rather heavily upon specific character traits associated with the comic stage Negro--traits which, derived largely from minstrelsy, an audience would recognize immediately. Basically a cheerful person, Queenie's enthusiasm is unrestrained; she laughs a lot! When Magnolia announces that she is in love, the more experienced--and more realistic--Queenie reacts as follows:

QUEENIE

What's dat? You says you in love? (she laughs boisterously).
Why, you po' little gal--you got your first long skirt and you in love? (QUEENIE laughs even louder than before--which seemed impossible, and exits . . .)⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

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Queenie also makes several pointed references to the shiftless character of her man, Joe--references which are in keeping with the familiar stage image of the lazy, shuffling, irresponsible comic Negro.

QUEENIE

Joe! Dat lazy nigger don't help me--he's always too tired
--ef dat feller ever tried to cook, he's be puttin' popcorn
in pancakes so dat dey'd turn over by demselves.⁸⁰

In the same manner, the lyrics which Queenie sings to "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" are purposely written to project an image of the comic Southern Negro, whereas those sung by Julie⁸¹ are much more universal in content.

QUEENIE

Mah man is shif'less
An' good for nuthin' too-----
He's mah man jes' the same-----
He's never round here
 When dere is work to do-----

De chimbley's smokin
De roof is leakin' in-----
But he don't seem to care-----
He kin be happy
Wid jes' a sip of gin-----⁸²

In addition to the carefree, childlike, irresponsible characteristics herein attributed to Negro life, Queenie is utilized to imply that Negroes are forgetful and easily motivated by their baser instincts. When Cap'n Andy complains that the Negroes have not purchased tickets (in the segregated balcony section) for the evening performance, Queenie suggests the reason for their reticence:

QUEENIE

'Cause you don't talk to dem.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Supra, p. 87.

⁸² Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 23.

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ANDY

What you mean-----don't talk to 'em? I ballyhooed my lungs out this morning.

QUEENIE

Mah people don't remember dat long. Dis is how to get 'em.⁸³

In the sequence which follows ("C'mon, Folks"), it becomes clear that, in Queenie's opinion, Cap'n Andy does not know how to talk to her people. Whereas Andy's salesmanship depends upon promoting the glamorous aspects of his show and its stars,⁸⁴ Queenie's approach, which follows in part, is direct, personal and earthy.

QUEENIE

Come on folks we'se rarin' to go
Is you or ain't you seein' dis show?
Get het up, dere'll be no let up, here.
.
You'll be excited all night,
Grippin' yo' man an' holdin' him tight--⁸⁵
Two seats fo' twenty cents ain't so dear!

As a representative of the Negro race, Queenie is a familiar character. Hammerstein's portrayal of her, within the confines of the comic Negro stereotype, is acceptable because it is somewhat restrained, but it adds no new dimension to Negro characterization upon the American musical stage.

Queenie, however, is not the sole identifiable Negro character in Show Boat, and the rest are presented with greater originality. The Negro chorus of singers and dancers may be considered as a single mass character. Throughout Show Boat, both in the South and in Chicago,

⁸³Ibid., p. 45.

⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 10-13.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 46.

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members of the Negro chorus function exclusively as laborers (stevedores and their gals), as menials for whites (maids, waiters), or as entertainers for the amusement of white audiences. Of Oscar Hammerstein's delineation of the collective Negro in Show Boat, Stanley Green has observed:

For the first time, he had written a libretto and lyrics that would reveal something of the philosophy of Oscar Hammerstein. This was particularly true of the play's handling of the Negro characters. During the Twenties, with rare exceptions, Negroes were treated as comic characters on the musical stage. They were the buffoons, the butts of many tasteless jokes. Hammerstein showed his understanding of their plight right at the beginning of Show Boat.⁸⁶

Indeed, the opening chorus of "Cotton Blossom" demonstrates Hammerstein's awareness of a race which has been deliberately oppressed.⁸⁷ Throughout the first act, all of which takes place in the South of 1890, stage directions carefully and meaningfully insist upon the segregation of the Negro chorus from the white chorus. Never do the two mingle, and the point is made, several times, not only of segregated seating policies within the auditorium of the Show Boat,⁸⁸ but also of separate box offices for the purchase of tickets. Moreover, the Negro chorus of laborers and their gals is depicted as being friendly and "enthusiastic, but a trifle diffident"⁹⁰ whenever they come into direct contact with whites. While the collective Negro in the first act of Show Boat is

⁸⁶ Stanley Green, The Rodgers and Hammerstein Story (New York: The John Day Company, 1963), p. 59.

⁸⁷ Supra, pp. 76-77.

⁸⁸ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, pp. 45 and 47.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 41 and 46.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

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seen as a genial person who frequently sings and dances the Cakewalk,⁹¹ Hammerstein also presents the more serious of racial inequities.

Hammerstein's most interesting and purposeful use of the Negro chorus occurs in Act II, Scene i, at the Chicago World's Fair. As was typical at expositions of the period, one of the midway's major attractions is the Dahomey Village--an exhibit of "savage" Africans seen in their "native" state.⁹² When the Dahomey Villagers enter the fairgrounds, dancing and chanting in their native tongue, the white chorus, appearing as visitors to the Fair, becomes increasingly nervous.

WHITE CHORUS

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 be a spearful
So you'd better show me
The way from Dahomey.
(WHITE CROWD exits in fear.)⁹³

Surprisingly enough, the moment the white chorus has fled, the Dahomey Villagers break into perfectly respectable English, followed again by more native chanting which, at best, is only a travestied approximation of an African tongue. In the song's refrain, however, it becomes clear that Hammerstein intentionally has been unauthentic.

DAHOMEYS

In Dahomey--
Where the Africans play
In Dahomey;
Gimme Avenue A.
Back in old New York

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Supra, p. 36.

⁹³Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 67.

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Where yo' knife and fork
 Gently sink
 Into juicy little chops what's made of pork!
 We are wild folks
 When de ballyhoos bawl,
 But we're mild folks
 When we're back in de kraal,
 'Cause our home (our little home)
 Our home ain't in Dahomey at all,
 Oh, take me back to-day
 To Avenue A!⁹⁴

These natives are natives of New York City, and Hammerstein's ironic point in demonstrating the reality behind the illusion is obvious. The white chorus accepts without question the equation of blackness and primitive savagery. Those New York Negroes who perform as Dahomans, either because of necessity for employment or, perhaps, out of spite, have chosen to capitalize upon the white man's blindness. As Paul Laurence Dunbar would have it, they wear the mask which furthers the image:

Why should the world be over-wise,
 In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the Mask.⁹⁵

The mask conceals deeply felt resentment as well, resentment which is clear in the line, "We're glad to see those white folks go."⁹⁶ There is no doubt that Hammerstein's pseudo-savages deride a society which can so passionately persuade itself to believe in an illusion.

It is true, of course, that the statement intended by Hammerstein in the "In Dahomey" number is somewhat blurred by its own

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁹⁵ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," Lyrics of Lowly Life (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1897), p. 167.

⁹⁶ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 67.

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production values which feature some highly spirited dancing. The song, itself, has never been included in any of the six American recordings of the score, and, when mentioned in reviews, it is the spectacle of the dancing which occasions comment. In the 1946 revival, Howard Barnes called it one of the "Negro stomp numbers,"⁹⁷ and Miles Jefferson commented that the "physical contortions" of Pearl Primus and her troupe "seem a little primitive for 'Show Boat' . . ."⁹⁸ In a most astute review of the original production, Francis R. Bellamy complained: "It goes 'Follies' at times, of course. . . . You have a feeling that the plot has gone 'Winter Garden' on you, and that you are going to end up touring the World's Fair Dahomey Village with Florenz."⁹⁹ Whether the content of "In Dahomey" has been overlooked or whether it has been camouflaged by so much production spectacle, the presence of the number cannot be denied. Had Hammerstein desired only a gaudy conclusion for the first scene of his second act, quite obviously he had other material in such a setting from which to draw. "In Dahomey" is structurally purposeful with regard to both character and to thought, and in the comic irony which surrounds it a serious racial statement is made.

The most serious, and most memorable, statement in Show Boat is reserved, however, for the character of Joe. Although he speaks only a total of five lines, none of which are in the least noteworthy, Joe is

⁹⁷Howard Barnes, "Miraculous Make-Believe," Herald Tribune (New York), January 7, 1946, reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1946, VII, No. 1 (Week of January 21, 1946), p. 500.

⁹⁸Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1945-1946," Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 195.

⁹⁹Francis R. Bellamy, "Lights Down; A Review of the Stage," Outlook, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 7 (February 15, 1928), p. 265.

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perhaps Show Boat's most distinctive character, for it is he who sings the classic, "Ol' Man River." Lehman Engel has remarked that "the only original character in the show is the Negro, Joe, . . . and what makes him particularly interesting are the lyrics in this one song, which he reprises three times."¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in the singing of "Ol' Man River," wherein "the power and nobility of the music and lyric have given it an almost heroic folk quality,"¹⁰¹ Joe emerges as a character of magnitude equal to that of the mighty Mississippi about which he sings.

Queenie's remarks in Act I, Scene ii¹⁰² characterizing Joe as a shiftless, good-for-nothing, lazy nigger with a taste for gin are startling when viewed in contrast to the resigned dignity of the man who sings "Ol' Man River." Furthermore, Joe's on-stage behavior does not support Queenie's comments; although he is most often silent, the stage directions indicate that Joe is most frequently engaged in some kind of purposeful activity.¹⁰³ Perhaps the apparent discrepancy may be explained by the circumstances surrounding the genesis of the song, "Ol' Man River."

When [Hammerstein] and Kern first began to work on Show Boat, they found that they would have to write a song that would tie all the sprawling parts of the story together. They found their

¹⁰⁰Engel, p. 39.

¹⁰¹Green, The Rodgers and Hammerstein Story, p. 60.

¹⁰²Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, pp. 21 and 23.

¹⁰³Joe's initial entrance, just prior to the singing of "Ol' Man River," finds him carrying a heavy sack of flour and wearily mopping his brow (*ibid*, p. 18). Later, in Act I, Scene iv, in an important position of secondary focus, Joe polishes the rails around the boxes of the Show Boat's auditorium (*ibid*, p. 32). It is natural that he ceases his labors (*ibid*, pp. 34, 36, 38, and 39) in order to watch the scene of Julie's public disgrace, but it is made clear that Joe is both feeling and thinking very deeply throughout the scene (*ibid*, p. 40).

theme in the Mississippi River, which Edna Ferber had brought into every important turn in the novel. But what kind of river song should it be? Hammerstein thought and thought about this. Finally he decided that instead of giving it to one of the major characters, he would give the song to one of the Negro dock workers.¹⁰⁴

If assigning "Ol' Man River" to the character of Joe was something of an afterthought, it is probable that Hammerstein originally had envisaged Joe as a minor character, complementary to Queenie, in the familiar comic stage Negro tradition. Once in Joe's mouth, however, "Ol' Man River" would have precluded such characterization, for, as Deems Taylor has observed, it "became practically the theme song of the operetta."¹⁰⁵ It became necessary, therefore, that the singer of that theme song should function as something more than a buffoon. Hammerstein wisely chose to employ Joe as a "rugged and untutored philosopher"¹⁰⁶ who sees life, and accepts it, as it is. Joe is not to be viewed realistically; rather, he is a symbol, a Greek chorus, the spokesman for the thought content of Show Boat.

Given the lyrics of "Ol' Man River" as Joe's definition, Lehman Engel perceptively has observed that "he is made to see the world from a distance—perhaps Godlike—and therefore whole."¹⁰⁷ The opening lines of the song are crucial to such a comprehension, for in them it is made clear that Joe is singing about the Mississippi River not literally but metaphorically. The river is elemental; it is the life-stream, the universe—and it is indifferent.

¹⁰⁴Green, The Rodgers and Hammerstein Story, p. 59.

¹⁰⁵Taylor, p. 124.

¹⁰⁶Oscar Hammerstein, quoted in Ewen, The World of Jerome Kern, p. 89.

¹⁰⁷Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 18.

Dere's an ol' man called de Mississippi
 Dat's de ol' man dat I like to be
 What does he care if de world's got troubles?
 What does he care if the land ain't free?¹⁰⁸

In the refrain, Joe further explores the mystery of this cosmic river and then contrasts the eternal force of nature, seen in the indestructibility of the river, with the impermanence of mankind.

He don't plant taters
 He don't plant cotton,
 An' dem dat plants 'em
 Is soon forgotton,
 But Ol' Man River,
 He jes' keeps rollin' along.¹⁰⁹

A transition occurs wherein Joe introduces the human condition--specifically the miseries of the Southern Negro.

He states the sharp difference between Negroes and white people, and he states it not so much as a complaint but as a reality, as, say, the characters at the end of Chekhov's Cherry Orchard: what is, is. The problem is thrown into the laps of the audience. Perhaps they will do something about it.¹¹⁰

You an' me, we sweat an' strain
 Body all achin' an' racked wid pain,
 Tote dat barge!
 Lift dat bale!
 Git a little drunk
 An' you lands in jail . . .¹¹¹

Joe concludes the first chorus with an expression of the personal anguish he feels as the unfortunate child of an indifferent universe.

Ah gits weary
 An' sick of tryin'--
 Ah'm tired of livin'
 An' skeered of dyin',

¹⁰⁸ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Engel, p. 39.

¹¹¹ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 19.

But ol' man river
He jes' keeps rollin' along.¹¹²

Joe next introduces a second river image, one which is historically consistent with religiously-inspired song patterns of the American Negro. Lofton Mitchell tells us that "the river runs deep throughout black imagery; this river is the Jordan. Negroes constantly sang and spoke of that land beyond the river, the deep river they wanted to cross over into the campground."¹¹³ Hammerstein employs the benevolent Jordan, across which Joshua led the Children of Israel into the Promised Land,¹¹⁴ in contrast to the indifferent Mississippi. To Joe, the former implies salvation and the latter, earthly damnation.

JOE
Let me go away from the Mississippi
Let me go away from the white man boss
Show me dat stream called the river Jordan
Dat's de ol' stream dat I longs to cross.¹¹⁵

Joe's dream of salvation, however, remains only a dream, irreconcilable with the facts of his life. He envies the apparent freedom of the Mississippi, its lack of concern, its power. Joe would like to be in the river's position, but he is, in fact, only a "nigger."

Oscar Hammerstein has described "Ol' Man River" as "a song of resignation with a protest implied."¹¹⁶ If one accepts Joe's metaphor of the Mississippi River as the eternal, impenetrable life stream whose

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 29.

¹¹⁴ Josh. 3:1-17.

¹¹⁵ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 19.

¹¹⁶ Ewen, World of Jerome Kern, p. 89.

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various currents affect human destiny, Joe's view of life becomes clear. Man has no control over his own fortune; rather, a human being succeeds or fails according to fate, chance or luck--three words which appear with great regularity in Show Boat's dialogue and lyrics. The most practical method of coping with life, therefore, is to appraise and accept it as it is rather than as it ought to be. Whereas Joe may resent his fate, nevertheless he resigns himself to it, for, as Hammerstein suggests in a stage direction, Joe knows "there is nothing he can do to stop the march of events in this puzzling river world."¹¹⁷ He is ever the practical observer of occurrences wrought by a capricious universe, and as a result, he endures.

Joe's deterministic philosophy, coupled with his objective view of the world, may be considered to be Show Boat's unifying thematic principle. The conflict between romantic illusions and the realities of life is the subject of six of the songs written by Hammerstein and Kern for the production.¹¹⁸ Self-deception, the tendency to live in a world that is "Only Make Believe," is a complicating trait common to many of the major characters, and all of them suffer for it. Julie refuses to accept the fate of her blood and creates for herself a world of false appearances. Her deception is supported by Steve, a man upon whose strength Julie depends but who, ironically, is revealed to be not so dependable as he appeared to be. When Steve deserts Julie, much of her world of illusion collapses; however, she employs another crutch, in the form of alcohol, in order to avoid facing the reality of her situation. Similarly, Magnolia's romance with Ravenal is based upon "Make

¹¹⁷ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 40.

¹¹⁸ "Cotton Blossom"; "Only Make Believe"; "Life Upon the Wicked Stage"; "In Dahomey"; "Bill"; and "Dance Away the Night."

Believe,"¹¹⁹ as is their life style once married. Magnolia encounters a marital crisis similar to that of Julie, but Magnolia manages to accept the facts as they are and goes on to success and a happy reconciliation. Ellie, a second-rate comedienne who envisions herself not only as a star but as a great tragedienne, is ill-equipped for either role. She ultimately attains success through the practical means of adopting a talented child possessed of star quality. Cap'n Andy, himself in the business of creating (theatrical) illusion, promotes his troupe as an affectionate, congenial family--a generalization which, given petty jealousies and the Steve-Julie-Pete triangle, is far from the truth:

ANDY

Mr. Schultz is the villain in our play . . . but off the stage he's as meek as a lamb, and wouldn't hurt a fly--and he's stuck on Ellie. . . . That's the way they are, folks . . . just one big happy family! . . . and I'm their father. . . . and Parthy here is the mother--ha, ha! What about that, Parthy?

PARTHY

Y'make me sick!¹²⁰

Parthy has difficulty in reconciling her existence within the milieu of the Show Boat with her "good Christian bringing up . . . in Massachusetts"¹²¹--something which she vainly attempts to transplant aboard the Show Boat. In accepting the responsibilities of marriage and a family, Ravenal tries to be what he is not--and fails. Each of these characters encounters varying degrees of personal difficulty which is directly related to his reluctance to recognize and to accept the role designed

¹¹⁹ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, pp. 16-18.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 14.

[illegible]

for him by fate. Self-deception is the antagonist which complicates the lives of Show Boat's characters, and the transient insignificance of human fortune is displayed in contrast to Joe's symbol of the eternal and mighty river.

. . . "Old Man River" is ever in the background; flowing, flowing on, ceaselessly, silently, untouched by mere human tears and laughter, always there beneath the moon. . . . Just to hear the darkies singing beside the cotton bales and to see the Show Boat gleaming with a hundred lamps in the moonlight is to know the uselessness of striving. Everything is dwarfed by the majestic Mississippi; flowing in the 'nineties precisely as in the 'seventies.¹²²

The same is true of the collective Negro, represented by the black chorus. The stevedores bemoan their life of toil, but they do not --indeed, they cannot--reject the facts of their circumstance in favor of fantasy. It is true that those Northern Negroes who appear as Dahomans at the Chicago World's Fair (Act II, Scene 1) seem to be something they are not; however, the illusion which they promote springs not from their own needs but, rather, from the needs of whites. Ironically, the "Dahomans" capitalize upon the American white man's capacity for self-delusion. In this manner, Hammerstein accords his oppressed Negro characters in Show Boat both wisdom and dignity.

Writing in 1933, James Weldon Johnson called Show Boat "the greatest colored musical show ever staged."¹²³ Technically, of course, Show Boat should not be labeled a "colored musical" any more than it should be termed a "white musical"; however, the reason for Johnson's

¹²²Bellamy, Outlook, CXLVIII, No. 7, p. 265.

¹²³Johnson, Along This Way, p. 181.

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enthusiasm is obvious. In 1927, Show Boat was a revolutionary production, both in form and content. For the first time upon the American musical stage, serious racial statements were made. For the first time, the sensitive subject of miscegenation was introduced, and it was treated not sensationally but sympathetically. For the first time, the American Negro was presented as a human being worthy of sincere contemplation. It is true that, by contemporary standards, the characterizations seem somewhat sketchy. Queenie is essentially a comic stereotype; Julie is mysterious, and Joe is more symbol than man. Nevertheless, Hammerstein's treatment of these Negro characters suggests greater human understanding and greater realism than anything seen before upon the American musical stage. The total absence of minstrelsy-oriented caricature is noteworthy. Whereas Southern Negro dialect is faithfully employed, it is significant to note that the only character to be distinguished by the outlandish comic malaprop--"Oh Frank, don't be so mid-victrola"¹²⁴--is the pretentious Ellie, who happens to be white. The Negro characters in Show Boat are approached by Hammerstein with compassion, and although some good earthy humor is associated with Queenie, and there are lighthearted dance sequences performed by the Negro chorus,¹²⁵ the basic racial tone is somber. Prior to Show Boat, the Negro on the musical stage had been the source of merriment and laughter. Hammerstein departed from that practice, and in doing so led

¹²⁴ Hammerstein 2nd and Kern, Show Boat, p. 90.

¹²⁵ The most notable example is probably the "Cake-Walk" performed in celebration of Magnolia's coming nuptials (Act I, Scene viii).

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Stanley Green to remark: "At last a Negro on the musical stage was written about with dignity. At last an author's concern for his fellow man could be used logically within the framework of a Broadway musical."¹²⁶

In Show Boat, Hammerstein's statement about the social oppression of the American Negro is serious in its intent and is meant to be taken seriously by the audience. The period setting and the basically Southern locale, however, are sufficiently removed so that the gravity of that statement is made palatable, even poignant, to a white Broadway audience. In this fashion, no personal responsibility is implied; both the authors and the audience avoid, within themselves, an immediate ethical confrontation. They are absolved. The intent is rendered meaningful, yet it is not pertinent. Herein is established a precedent which remained in effect for thirty-five years. Following Show Boat, those musicals featuring Negro characters in which a serious racial comment was intended, invariably were set in a remote time and/or place. To recognize injustice--and to sympathize with it--was acceptable. To suggest that such was a contemporary phenomenon remained taboo.

¹²⁶Green, The Rodgers and Hammerstein Story, p. 60.

CHAPTER III

THE 1930'S: STALEMATE

In the American Theatre, the decade of the 1930's is most often characterized as one of social and political awareness and protest.

"The prevailing mood of the thirties," writes Harold Clurman, "was what used to be called 'left of center.' . . . A good many of the writers, artists and theatre folk in the thirties were inclined to radicalism."¹

The reasons for such a widespread movement among the nation's artists and intellectuals are not difficult to discern. "The Wall Street crash of 1929, the Great Depression of the early thirties with its attendant scar of widespread unemployment, the hopeful attempt to remedy this bitter condition which ensued are the effective causes for the abrupt and drastic change."² Summarizing the results of such conditions, as they were reflected in serious American drama of the decade, John Gassner has commented as follows:

The playwrights concerned themselves more and more with the social and political organization of the country and with the threat of fascism from abroad. They were interested less in private difficulties of the ego than in the difficulties that individuals faced together--unemployment, lack of means of subsistence, and racial prejudice. . . . They were troubled by the fact that the economic system had broken down. The stress frequently fell on the conflict between employers and the working class and on the

¹Famous American Plays of the 1930s, selected and introduced by Harold Clurman (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1959), p. 7.

²Ibid., p. 10.

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disappearance of the hard-pressed middle class, which lost its businesses, homes, and farms. Thus a literature of social protest, variously described as "leftist" or "proletarian," made its appearance.³

Negro characters appeared significantly in several works of such persuasion,⁴ and the more radical of these promoted innovational treatment of the Negro on the dramatic stage. Theodore Gilliam has observed that "liberal playwrights and some Communist playwrights were strongly instrumental in bringing about a re-evaluation of the Negro in Marxist terms, which tended towards a more humanly realized and realistic assessment of him in society."⁵ Speaking largely of the Communist-inspired propaganda plays produced by organizations such as The Theatre Union, Gilliam analyzes their contributions with regard to what he considers an important transformation of the Negro stage image:

This transformation consisted by and large of representing the Negro group as an exploited class, and delineating the Negro protagonist as a man of self determination set against the decadence and corruption of a bourgeois, capitalistic establishment which used prejudices and race hatred as its primary means of exploiting the Negro. Implicit in the new image encouraged by the Communists was the recognition of the Negro as human and very much a part of--not apart from--the life of America.⁶

While it is true that Negro characters also were featured during the 1930's in plays devoid of social or political content,⁷ these more

³ John Gassner (ed.), A Treasury of the Theatre (Third College Edition; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 781.

⁴ Most notably: The Theatre Union productions of Paul Peters and George Sklar's Stevedore (1934) and John Howard Lawson's Marching Song (1937); also, Paul Green's Roll Sweet Chariot (1934) and Hymn to the Rising Sun (1936).

⁵ Gilliam, p. 108.

⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

⁷ Most notably: Marc Connelly's The Green Pastures (1930), Hall Johnson's Run Little Chillun (1935) and DuBose and Dorothea Heyward's Mamba's Daughters (1939).

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entertaining productions continued to adhere to the well-established means of delineating Negro character--and most frequently the Southern or rural Negro. In 1935, George Sklar, co-author of Stevedore, charged that "the American theatre has never really given up its minstrel show conception of the Negro . . . [as] Sambo, the lazy good-for-nothing, crap-shooting, razor-toting, ghost-ridden, sex-hopped Negro."⁸ Similarly, as late as 1937, Sterling Brown complained:

Broadway for all its growing liberal attitudes, is still entranced with the exotic primitive, the comic stooge and the tragic mulatto. The anecdote of the manager who, having read a serious social drama about Negro life, insisted upon the insertion of "hot spots," of song and dance, is still too pertinent.⁹

Throughout the decade of the 1930's, it may be said that significant innovations in the depiction of the Negro character were made upon the non-musical stage by the more radical, socially committed playwrights.

Contrary to what one might suppose, the American musical theatre during the 1930's was not solely the haven for mindless, escapist entertainment. Of Thee I Sing¹⁰ (1931) bitingly satirized American politics and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Pins and Needles (1937), an incisively topical revue with music and lyrics by Harold Rome, was produced by the Labor Stage with members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Its mocking thrusts aimed at a variety of targets, ranging from picket lines to the ominous rise of overseas dictators, and it ran--in several editions--for a total of 1105 performances.¹¹

⁸George Sklar, quoted in Noble, pp. 23-24.

⁹Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama, p. 139.

¹⁰Book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind; lyrics and music by Ira and George Gershwin, respectively.

¹¹Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), p. 406.

Group	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4
Control	~95%	~90%	~95%	~90%
MCI	~85%	~80%	~85%	~60%
AD	~25%	~20%	~25%	~30%

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The Cradle Will Rock, Marc Blitzstein's abrasive musical essay on the subject of sociopolitical corruption and the virtuous rise of the militant masses via a union strike, was considered to be so controversial that its production was prohibited under the auspices of the Federal Theatre.¹² Yet, despite the fact that social commitment and radical views were very much in evidence upon the musical stage, innovations in Negro characterization were not at all comparable to those found in similar works upon the non-musical stage. With regard to the musicals of the decade, presentation of the Negro can best be described as a stalemate.

During the first years of the decade, the all-Negro revue, so popular during the 1920's, uttered its death rattle.¹³ Bill "Bojangles" Robinson starred in Brown Buddies (1930), a show criticized for being "produced like a Harlem night-club floor entertainment."¹⁴ Fast and Furious was a quick failure in 1931, about which Otis Chatfield-Taylor complained: "For about twenty minutes the darkies . . . are allowed to be themselves, but most of the time they are forced to sing second-rate Broadway-Hebraic songs with dismal consequences."¹⁵ Just what was meant by allowing the "darkies" to "be themselves" is lost to history, but given the example of the 1920's Negro revues, one might well guess at the ramifications of such a statement. In these same years, Lew Leslie

¹²Engel, pp. 146-47.

¹³Supra, p. 64.

¹⁴Gilbert Seldes, "Big, Little and Good Shows," The New Republic, LXIV, No. 831 (November 5, 1930), pp. 323-34.

¹⁵Otis Chatfield-Taylor, "The Latest Plays," Outlook and Independent, CLIX, No. 5 (September 30, 1931), p. 153.

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unsuccessfully attempted to re-create his triumphant Blackbirds of 1928 with a subsequent edition, Blackbirds of 1930, and with Rhapsody in Black (1931). Both productions starred Ethel Waters and both were short-lived,¹⁶ although the latter managed to tour profitably.¹⁷ It is significant to note that the producer, Lew Leslie, "felt he had made a contribution to the theater by presenting Negro talent in what he called a 'high-class' way,"¹⁸ and both revues included some material which was devoid of racial identification.¹⁹ One may be certain, however, that the well-established brand of "Negro comedy" associated with Flournoy Miller and Mantan Moreland, featured performers in Blackbirds of 1930,²⁰ was not wasted. For all practical purposes, these four shows, produced during the first two years of the decade, represent the last gasps of the all-Negro revue as a form of entertainment upon the legitimate musical stage.²¹

¹⁶Miles Kreuger, "Liner Notes," Ethel Waters; On Stage and Screen (1925-1940), Columbia Records, Hall of Fame Series, CL 2792, n. p.

¹⁷Waters, His Eye is on the Sparrow, pp. 265-66.

¹⁸Horne and Schickel, p. 77.

¹⁹Blackbirds of 1930 produced two popular songs, both written by the team of Andy Razaf and Eubie Blake: "Memories of You" and Ethel Waters' show-stopping parody of Rudy Vallee, "You're Lucky to Me." (Both are available on: Waters, Columbia Records, CL 2792, Side I, Bands 5 and 6.) For Rhapsody in Black, the team of Mann Holiner and Alberta Nichols provided four songs written especially for Miss Waters: "Washtub Rhapsody," "Dancehall Hostess," "What's Keeping My Prince Charming," and "You Can't Stop Me from Loving You." Of these, the last--with its catchy tune and witty, sophisticated lyrics--is entirely free of racial content. (It, too, is available on the Columbia recording, Side I, Band 7.)

²⁰Waters, His Eye is on the Sparrow, p. 263.

²¹Lew Leslie made a futile attempt to resuscitate the form with an edition of Blackbirds of 1939, featuring Lena Horne. It closed after eight nights on Broadway. (See: Horne and Schickel, pp. 74-78.) Other such productions may have been staged, but none were successfully received.

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Harlem night clubs, of course, had continued their all-Negro floor show revues which remained popular well into the 1930's, even if the depression "had severely inhibited the downtown crowd's search for pleasure."²² One of the Cotton Club's most celebrated shows was The Cotton Club Parade of 1933, for it was in that edition that Ethel Waters returned to the Harlem cabaret circuit and electrified audiences with her rendition of Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler's "Stormy Weather"²³ --yet another black woman's lament about her faithless man. Two years later, however, the 1935 Harlem riot "brought an end to the New Negro era; the Cotton Club, the most lavish of the uptown cabarets, closed its doors and moved to Broadway; and the black city settled down to the drab existence of WPA and relief living."²⁴ After its desperate move closer to the downtown audience, the Cotton Club forever closed its doors in 1937,²⁵ thereby bringing to a close the institution of the exotic all-Negro revue.

The revue format itself, however, continued to be a popular Broadway attraction throughout the 1930's--so long as it was not cast in the somewhat stylized, formalized mold of the all-Negro show. Apparently, audiences of the 1930's sought either to escape from the dreary days of the depression into a world of entertainment and glamor, or they wanted to hear a song with social significance. Whereas the

²²Horne and Schickel, p. 46.

²³Miss Waters' original recording, made in 1933, is available on: Waters, Columbia Records, CL 2792, Side I, Band 8.

²⁴Arthur P. Davis, "The Harlem of Langson Hughes' Poetry," Phylon, XIII, No. 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1952), p. 278.

²⁵Horne and Schickel, p. 46.

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Broadway revue did not necessarily preclude the appearance of Negro performers, integrated companies were the exception rather than the rule. Apart from Josephine Baker, who figured prominently in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1936, Ethel Waters was the only Negro entertainer of distinction to be featured in non-segregated revues during the 1930's.

Miss Waters' versatile stage personality allowed her to appear in a variety of guises. Irving Berlin provided her with four excellent songs in As Thousands Cheer (1933), a revue in which she shared the stage with Marilyn Miller, Clifton Webb and Helen Broderick²⁶ in what, at that time, was "the most prominent booking ever afforded a Negro woman in an otherwise white Broadway production."²⁷ Structured according to the format of a newspaper in which each sketch or song was introduced as a news item, As Thousands Cheer was both flexible and topical. Ethel Waters' initial number, "Heat Wave,"²⁸ accompanied by a torrid dance, was the weather report. Given a Caribbean setting, the sudden rise in temperature was explained as the result of the anatomical eroticism of a cancan dancer's gyrations--familiar territory considering the popular image of the Negro's animal passion and sexual abandon. "To Be or Not to Be" was part of the Drama Section, linked--perhaps coincidentally--to the success of The Green Pastures. "Harlem on My Mind" satirized "the ultra-chic darling of Parisian society, Josephine Baker, who drips with diamonds, attends all the best parties, but rather

²⁶Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 270.

²⁷Kreuger, "Liner Notes," Ethel Waters . . ., Columbia Records, CL 2792, n. p.

²⁸Waters, Columbia Records, CL 2792, Side II, Band 1.

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1. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1997; 277: 1033-1037.

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wistfully longs for the lost lusts of the old days . . ."²⁹ Here we have repeated that fascinating concept of the native of Harlem as a jazzed-up exotic primitive³⁰—an idea popularized during the 1920's in Carl Van Vechten's novel, Nigger Heaven.³¹ In "Harlem on My Mind," the elegant veneer of the character portrayed is belied by her announcement, "I've been too damned refined,"³² and her true nature is revealed in the following lyric:

I go to supper with a French marquis
Each evening after the show;
My lips begin to whisper "Mon Cheri,"
But my heart keeps singing "hi-de-ho."³³

But Ethel Waters' most powerful characterization in As Thousands Cheer was to be found in her performance of a song which Irving Berlin had written with the express purpose of injecting "a serious note into this musical."³⁴ Succeed, he did, for audiences were deeply moved by Miss Waters' dramatic rendition of "Supper Time." "In the sketch headlined 'Unknown Negro Lynched by Frenzied Mob,' Miss Waters appeared as a southern mother who is somberly preparing her dinner table and painfully planning how she can explain to her children that their father 'ain't comin' home no more.'"³⁵ Of this, Ethel Waters, herself, has commented:

²⁹Kreuger, "Liner Notes," Ethel Waters . . ., Columbia Records, CL 2792, n. p.

³⁰Supra, p. 57.

³¹Charles I. Glicksberg, "Bias, Fiction, and the Negro," Phylon, XIII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1952), p. 130.

³²Waters, Columbia Records, CL 2792, Side II, Band 2.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Waters, quoting Berlin, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 270.

³⁵Kreuger, "Liner Notes," Ethel Waters . . ., Columbia Records, CL 2792, n. p.

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"'Supper Time' was a dirge. . . . If one song can tell the whole tragic history of a race, 'Supper Time' was [sic.] that song. In singing it I was telling my comfortable, well-fed, well-dressed listeners about my people."³⁶ What Miss Waters describes as the "horror and the defeat"³⁷ expressed in "Supper Time" is evident in the following lyric wherein the character ponders the difficulty of confronting her children with the facts:

How'll I keep explainin'
When they ask me where he's gone?
How'll I keep from cryin'
When I bring their supper on?

How kin I remind 'em
To pray at their humble board?
How kin I be thankful
When they start to thank the Lord?³⁸

Here in a single song, given no context other than itself—indeed, it was followed by a "flippant bedroom dance"³⁶--are situation, characterization and genuine drama. Whether one considers it tragic or pathetic, "Supper Time" was "a type of song never heard before in a revue,"⁴⁰ and it required of its audience an emotional identification with a Negro character. This was no teary tragic mulatto about whom one safely might wonder, "What would it be like . . .?"⁴¹ Rather, "Supper Time" forthrightly presented a contemporary social issue with regard to racial

³⁶Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 271.

³⁷Ibid., p. 272.

³⁸Ethel Waters, Miss Ethel Waters, Performing In Person Highlights From Her Illustrious Career, Monmouth-Evergreen Records, MES/6812, Side I, Band 7.

³⁹Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 272.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Supra, p. 79.

brutality and its effect upon the human personality. Within the confines of the revue format, the talents of Irving Berlin and Ethel Waters had combined to create, at last, a situation wherein the Negro performer was more than an entertaining object solely to be watched.⁴² They had proved that Negro characterization, even within a revue, was capable of eliciting from an audience a serious empathic response.

"Supper Time" was a rarity, however, and Miss Waters was given no such number in her next Broadway revue, At Home Abroad (1935), in which she co-starred with Beatrice Lillie.⁴³ The team of Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz provided Miss Waters with material that was largely sophisticated and witty. In at least two of the songs, she appeared as a native of Harlem who had gone on to celebrated careers elsewhere. "Hottentot Potentate"⁴⁴ told of the Empress Jones whose worldly-wise Harlem background, plus a bit of "trickieration,"⁴⁵ enabled her to knock the Congo "on its ear."⁴⁶ The Congo is depicted as a jungle filled with savages, heathens and wild animals to which the "hot and potent, potent and hot, Hottentot potentate"⁴⁷ has brought her own brand of chic:

The jungle's not what one supposes now;
The heathens live upon a bed of roses now;
And Cartier rings they're wearin' in their noses now.⁴⁸

⁴²Supra, pp. 57-58.

⁴³The supporting cast included Eleanor Powell, Reginald Gardiner, and Eddie Foy, Jr. (Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, pp. 277-78.)

⁴⁴Waters, Columbia Records, CL 2792, Side II, Band 3.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

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The clever lyrics are based upon the humor of ludicrous contradiction which, in this case, depends upon an audience's preconceived notions of the Dark Continent. The character portrayed is, of course, a classic example of the exotic primitive⁴⁹ in its most sophisticated vein. Another song, "Thief in the Night,"⁵⁰ has to do with that ubiquitous woman abandoned by her unfaithful lover--herein a male Harlemite by the name of Slinky Johnson. In an exquisitely earthy monologue which interrupts the song, we are informed that the character singing is Mme. Roberta--a celebrated Parisian "courtesan"⁵¹ formerly known in her native Harlem as Ruby! The ribaldry of Mme. Roberta/Ruby's somewhat sleazy background is evident as, in her imagination, she excoriates her former lover (with double entendre fully intended): "And don't go braggin' around Harlem you had an affair with me. Affair with me, hell! You call that little thing an affair?"⁵² "Thief in the Night," not unlike other songs introduced on the stage by Negro performers--such as "I Can't Give You Anything but Love," "Memories of You," or "Stormy Weather"--might well be sung by performers of any race; however, with the monologue intact, it is racially identifiable as belonging to the exotic primitive--this time in its least sophisticated vein.

At Home Abroad ran on Broadway from September, 1935, through March, 1936.⁵³ Its closing marked the end of significant contributions

⁴⁹Supra, p. 57.

⁵⁰Waters, Columbia Records, CL 2792, Side II, Band 4.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 278.

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by Negro performers in integrated Broadway revues. Almost single-handedly, Ethel Waters had proved that a Negro could be accepted as a star of equal magnitude in otherwise all-white productions, and this was a very definite professional accomplishment. Nevertheless, with the exception of the song, "Supper Time," it cannot be said that these few revues of the 1930's contributed anything new in presenting the Negro to the theatre-going public. It is of more than passing interest to note the virtual absence of the Negro male performer in these revues⁵⁴ and the fact that, without him, the humor of the rural stage Negro stereotype was excluded. Still, despite glamorous costumes⁵⁵ and sophisticated lyrics, Ethel Waters consistently emerged in her various numbers as that red-hot, high-living, earthy native of Harlem. The Exotic Primitive maintained center stage.

During the 1930's, characterization of the Negro was prominent in yet another category of production best distinguished by the term, hybrid. To varying degrees and for various purposes, these works incorporated the use of music, song and, in some cases, dance; yet, because these elements were not truly integrated into the fabric of the whole,⁵⁶ they cannot be considered to be a part of the musical theatre.

⁵⁴Hamtree Harrington supported Miss Waters in "Harlem on My Mind" in As Thousands Cheer (Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 271).

⁵⁵Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 278.

⁵⁶Perhaps more than any other decade in the American theatre, the 1930's allowed for stylization and theatricalization wherewith the better to promote social or political causes. The existence of Brechtian-inspired techniques, agit-prop, and the Living Newspaper documentaries attest to such a fact. Frequently, music, song and dance were utilized to appeal to an audience's emotions or to illustrate a specific point. Most often, they were embroidered upon the fabric of the whole rather than being a part of the cloth. Admittedly, the dividing line between a fully theatricalized production and one belonging to the

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The following five productions,⁵⁷ therefore, will be accorded scant consideration but are mentioned because they do utilize certain elements of the musical theatre and because their characterization of Negroes may illuminate the darkness of a decade in which the Negro was rarely depicted in the plotted musical.

The Green Pastures (1930), Marc Connelly's "attempt to present certain aspects of a living religion in the terms of its believers,"⁵⁸ has been called "unique; it cannot be placed in any existing classification without some reservations."⁵⁹ It was both a folk drama and a religious pageant, ably supported in its original production by a background of spirituals provided by the Hall Johnson Choir.⁶⁰ Incidental

musical theatre can be a fine one (See: John Gassner, "Social Realism and Imaginative Theatre," Theatre Survey, 1962, reprinted in Gassner and Allen, II, p. 1006). Nevertheless, one would hardly call plays such as Oedipus Rex or The Royal Hunt of the Sun products of the musical stage; yet, both employ the elements suggested above. Those plays referred to as hybrids in the following discussion utilize these same elements to their own individual purposes and, likewise, they are not necessarily of the musical theatre--although some may be considered as borderline cases. (Doris Abramson treats Hall Johnson's Run, Little Chillun as a drama with incidental music, as does Theodore Gilliam; whereas, Mary Hardwick apparently dismisses it as a musical.) Moreover, instead of an original musical score, many of the hybrids incorporate the use of traditional music.

⁵⁷ The important all-Negro production of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's surrealist opera, Four Saints in Three Acts (1934), is excluded from this discussion because it has nothing whatever to do with Negro characterization. Thomson has explained that the opera was written about specific saints and was given a Spanish setting according to the whim of Gertrude Stein. It was not written with Negroes in mind, and an all-Negro company was assembled by Thomson because the quality of their voices appealed to him. (See: Virgil Thomson, "Liner Notes," Four Saints in Three Acts, RCA-Victor, LM-2756.)

⁵⁸ Marc Connelly, "Author's Note," The Green Pastures, in A Treasury of the Theatre, ed. Gassner, p. 897.

⁵⁹ Gassner (ed.), "Marc Connelly," A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 896.

⁶⁰ Kreuger, "Liner Notes," Blackbirds, n. p.

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music also was incorporated into many of the individual scenes. In The Green Pastures, Connelly employs to serious purpose the device of the minstrel show travesty⁶¹ wherein Negroes enact specific roles which, in the minds of whites, are not traditionally associated with members of the black race. Connelly's play presents the Old Testament as seen through the eyes of the uneducated, rural Negro of the deep South. The basic premise is valid, and its execution is not without considerable charm; nevertheless, despite the paternalistic humanity and simplicity of De Lawd, it is difficult to read lines such as, "Dat's all right. I'll jest r'ar back an' pass a miracle,"⁶² without thinking of the golden age of minstrelsy. Inevitably, John Gassner's question must be raised: "Is the play entirely free from a spirit of condescension toward primitive folk and their notions?"⁶³ The Negro characters in The Green Pastures are portrayed, lovingly to be sure, as being "just like children."⁶⁴ Although it enjoyed great success on Broadway, it is of little wonder that Negro critics find the play objectionable due to its identification of the Negro race solely with "poverty, ignorance, dialectical language, and the fantasy construct of a lovable children stereotype that removes Negroes from consideration as mature equals."⁶⁵

In contrast to the somewhat pastoral romance of The Green Pastures with its Heavenly fish fries, there followed a low-life portrait

⁶¹Supra, pp. 13-14.

⁶²Connelly, The Green Pastures, in A Treasury of the Theatre, ed. Gassner, p. 901.

⁶³Gassner (ed.), "Marc Connelly," A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 896.

⁶⁴Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 134.

⁶⁵Hardwick, p. 280.

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of the Northern big city Negro ghetto in a mixed bag of tricks entitled Singin' the Blues (1931). The melodramatic story, supplied by John McGowan, concerned the tribulations of a Negro man (played by Frank Wilson) "who killed a policeman and is harried all through the play."⁶⁶ An original score was provided by Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh whose musical numbers interrupted the action as a show-within-the-show. Conveniently, the heroine (portrayed by Isabell Washington) was depicted as a night club singer, thereby allowing for the inclusion of cabaret-style entertainment and vaudeville acts.⁶⁷ Fredi Washington was seen as "a seductive double crosser,"⁶⁸ and the humor of Mantan Moreland supplied comic relief. The rest of the cast--all-Negro except for two "of the most unbelievably dumb detectives to be seen on any stage,"⁶⁹ who were white--included Jack Carter and Dick Campbell.⁷⁰ Here, apparently, was Negro high life on the Chicago and Harlem circuit: singing, dancing and gaiety; gin-drinking and cabaret; violence and sex--in short, the exotic primitive stereotype.

In 1933, Hall Johnson's Run, Little Chillun, "a Negro folk drama with incidental music composed and arranged by the author,"⁷¹ opened on

⁶⁶ Chatfield-Taylor, Outlook and Independent, CLIX, No. 5 (September 30, 1931), p. 152.

⁶⁷ Ibid. (These included "Eubie Blake and His Orchestra, the Lindy Hoppers, the Four Flash Devils, Bruce Johnson's Washboard Sere-naders, Wen Talbot's Choir, three night club entertaining teams and a full-sized chorus . . .")

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 96.

⁷¹ Abramson, p. 49. (Miss Abramson also gives a detailed plot summary and analysis of the play, pp. 49-54.)

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Broadway for a four month run. Later in the decade, it was given several productions by units of the Federal Theatre and was prominently revived on Broadway in 1943. Like The Green Pastures, Run, Little Chillun is set in the South and deals with religion. Theodore Gilliam has summarized its plot and intent as follows:

The play concerns the struggle of the members of the Hope Baptist Church to offset the growing popularity of a new, primitive sect calling themselves the Pilgrims of the New Day. Caught in the midst of the conflict is Jim Jones, a Baptist, who is having an adulterous affair with Sulamai, a free and easy young girl, attracted to the new sect which engages in orgiastic sessions in the forest at night. The conflict, as represented in the competition of the churches and in Jim's hesitancy of decision between his wife, a staunch Baptist, and Sulamai, is implicitly a conflict between the spirit and the flesh. Jim eventually returns to his faith and the spirit, but not in an attitude of joy; so it is not really certain whether the spirit has achieved a permanent or temporary victory.⁷²

The musical elements intrude mainly at the conclusion of each of the play's two acts. Of the 1943 revival, Burton Rascoe wrote:

The climax of the first act is a corybantic dance in the ritual of the New Day Pilgrim. It is the essence of voodooism, abandoned, wild, voluptuous, sensuous and beautiful. . . . In contrast to this is the climax of the second act, which is one of religious ecstasy in the church meeting of the Baptist congregation. Here, too, is an incredible beauty, . . . and the singing in this scene by Hall Johnson's famous choir . . . is heavenly.⁷³

The production of Run, Little Chillun is significant in the history of the American theatre, for it was that rare commodity: a Broadway show, with serious intent, about Negroes and written by a Negro. How did characterization compare with that presented in the many

⁷²Gilliam, pp. 145-46.

⁷³Burton Rascoe, "Run Little Chillun Great Art," New York World-Telegram, August 14, 1943, reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 13 (Week of August 30, 1943), p. 296.

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Negro shows of white authorship? The critics are divided on this point. Sterling A. Brown and Kenneth Burke found that it added a new dimension to the image of the stage Negro and contrasted the author's viewpoint with that of The Green Pastures:

It inclined to the exotic and melodramatic, but unquestionably has the authenticity of the inside view. The church scenes especially were distinguished by moving realism, with superb musical effects. Kenneth Burke pointed out that The Green Pastures was "essentially a white man's play . . . exploiting the old conception of the Negro (naïve, good-natured, easily put upon)," whereas Run, Little Chillun emphasizes "an aspect of the Negro symbol with which our theatre-going public is not theatrically at home: the power side of the Negro."⁷⁴

Similarly, concentrating upon the exciting presentation of the primitive sect, Hallie Flanagan commented upon San Francisco's Federal Theatre production (1939): "The barbaric scenes of ritual in the jungle and a bolt of lightning in the church were more than voodoo: this was no white man's conception of another race; it was elemental Negro and its dark pulse beat in the blood of the beholder."⁷⁵ Miss Flanagan's remarks give one pause, for surely we have seen the "elemental Negro" before. Those atavistic impulses which spring so readily to the fore, the chanting and the jungle drums, the frenzy and the sudden release of animal passion--all of those ingredients which caused Miss Flanagan to enthuse about "unrest in the blood and dark stirrings in the forest"⁷⁶--all lay within the core of inspiration for the Cotton Club revues.⁷⁷ In a favorable analysis of Run, Little Chillun's Broadway revival,

⁷⁴ Sterling A. Brown, "Negro in the American Theatre," The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (2d ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 569.

⁷⁵ Hallie Flanagan, Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1940), p. 290.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Supra, p. 59.

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Louis Sobol described the climax of the first act precisely in those terms: "There are devilish goings-on, including a suspicion of voodoo and a lively orgiastic ritual that . . . is noisy and exciting and brought back memories of the torrid numbers that used to feature the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn night club revues."⁷⁸ Clearly, there is little in Run, Little Chillum that can be called progressive, and most critics agree that both plot and characterization are, at best, skimpy and awkwardly handled. As Theodore Gilliam concluded, the play "did not contribute any depth to the Negro image already prevalent in the American theatre."⁷⁹

Roll, Sweet Chariot (1934), Paul Green's experimental "symphonic play of the Negro people,"⁸⁰ alternated speech, song and chant⁸¹ in an effort toward theatricalized or "total" theatre. Described as a cross "between the folk-play and the play of protest,"⁸² the content of Roll, Sweet Chariot has been summarized by Edith J. R. Isaacs as follows:

It was about a heterogeneous group of Negroes that live in or hang around a boarding house in a run-down settlement that is invaded by a steam roller, and about the building of a new road that threatens the isolation of the wretched, inchoate community. It used every well-tried element of theatrical emotion--love and crime, jealousy and fear, the presence of poverty and the hope of wealth, pistols, the police, the chain gang. It blended them

⁷⁸ Louis Sobol, "Lew Cooper Offers the Hall Johnson Negro Musical First Seen in 1933," New York Journal-American, August 14, 1943, reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, p. 296.

⁷⁹ Gilliam, p. 143.

⁸⁰ Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Roll, Sweet Chariot," Theatre Arts Anthology, ed. Gilder et al., p. 628.

⁸¹ Brown, "Negro in the American Theatre," The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, ed. Hartnoll, p. 569.

⁸² Isaacs, The Negro in the American Theatre, p. 94.

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all through music and the poetry of words, action and fine acting, so that they became humanly exciting and dramatically satisfying and stimulating.⁸³

In this play, the rural Southern Negro was not presented according to the formula stereotype; he was not simply a happy child, nor was he depicted as being quaint. Sterling Brown has observed: "Green does not make this material something picturesque; his chain-gang scene is brutal and true; the general tone is depressing."⁸⁴ Roll, Sweet Chariot took a sober look at "the loose morality and violence of a southern shanty-town,"⁸⁵ and, with the accompaniment of Dolphe Martin's music,⁸⁶ presented its Negro characters with a solid measure of depth and dimension. Unfortunately, perhaps because of its stylization,⁸⁷ Roll, Sweet Chariot closed after only seven performances.

The last of these hybrids was entitled Don't You Want to be Free? (1938).⁸⁸ Written by Negro author Langston Hughes, the production was performed on weekends-only at the Harlem Suitcase Theatre where it ran for a total of 135 performances.⁸⁹ A Pastiche of spirituals, blues,

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 94-96.

⁸⁴ Brown, "Negro in the American Theatre," The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, ed. Hartnoll, p. 569.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Isaacs, The Negro in the American Theatre, p. 94.

⁸⁷ Ibid. (Miss Isaacs comments: "Most of the critics, white and Negro alike, saw only its strangeness and failed to see that it was, in many ways, theatrically prophetic.")

⁸⁸ The script is available in One Act Play Magazine (October, 1939). (Webster Smalley [ed.], Five Plays by Langston Hughes [Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1963], p. x.)

⁸⁹ Webster Smalley (ed.), Five Plays by Langston Hughes (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. ix-x.

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poetry and commentary, this presentational work took as its theme the substantial subject of the black experience in the United States.

A Young Man . . . walked across the hall with a suitcase on his shoulder. On this suitcase was the theatre group's name, lighted. The Young Man placed the suitcase at the edge of the stage and said, in effect, that his theatre was going to put on a play about being colored in America. And as the play unfolded, we saw the first slaves landing in America. We saw Negroes working in the fields. We saw Negro women being abused and then we saw the Young Man going north, singing: "Going down the road, Lord, 'way down the road. These Mississippi towns ain't a-fitting for a hopping toad!"

This particular song introduced what came to be known as the Blues Sequence of the play. The Young Man sat on the edge of the stage and declared he had the blues. Colored folks made up the blues, he said, and now everybody's singing them. He described the types of blues--the "left-Lonesome Blues" and others--and there were examples of these.⁹⁰

Don't You Want to be Free? endeavored to be both socially relevant and entertaining.⁹¹ The fact that it was produced in Harlem after the New Negro era had ended indicates that Hughes had not intended his work for the commercial consumption of a white audience. Don't You Want to be Free? employed authentic materials and spoke of the Negro to the Negro. In doing so, Hughes candidly broached many areas of sensitivity in this country's racial history. It was a serious effort to present, by way of montage and an abstracted central character, a representative picture of the various experiences, motivations, desires, and emotions of an entire people. Clearly, Don't You Want to be Free? was a progressive work--but it was not purely of the musical theatre.

Returning now to the musical stage, one finds that the last two years of the decade ushered in three large-scale, gaudy, plotted

⁹⁰ Mitchell, Black Drama, pp. 103-04.

⁹¹ Strikingly similar both in conception and execution was the recent off-Broadway production, by Voices, Inc., of The Believers (1968). The excellent original cast recording is available on RCA-Victor, LS0-1151.

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musicals: The Swing Mikado (1938), The Hot Mikado (1939) and Swingin' the Dream (1939). As the titles suggest, these works capitalized upon the immense popularity of swing music. This was, after all, what John S. Wilson has called "the Swing Era, a few short years in the late Thirties when for the first and only time, one area of jazz found such a mass audience that it became the most popular music in the country."⁹² Each of these productions was performed by a Negro company, yet none of them featured characters originally written as Negroes. Like The Green Pastures, all three musicals employed the device of the minstrel show travesty wherein Negroes were seen in traditionally non-Negro roles.⁹³ The Swing Mikado and The Hot Mikado were pure Gilbert and Sullivan; the story, lyrics, and music remained as written--except that, in the case of the music, the tempo and rhythm were altered.⁹⁴ Swingin' the Dream was less faithful to its original source--William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream--but likewise depended upon the craze for swing music and the novelty of Negro entertainers such as Louis Armstrong and Butterfly McQueen interpreting the roles of Bottom and Puck. Lorraine Hansberry has commented:

It is a matter of a partially innocent cultural heritage that, out of its own needs, was eager to believe in the colossal charm, among other things, of "childlike" peoples. From that notion, presumably, came the tendency to find non-Negro dramatic and musical materials rendered "quaint" when performed by "all-colored casts."⁹⁵

⁹² John S. Wilson, "When the Big Bands Were Swinging," Show Business Illustrated, I, No. 7 (November 28, 1961), pp. 57-58.

⁹³ Supra, pp. 13-14 and p. 123.

⁹⁴ See: Flanagan, pp. 144-48, and Laufe, p. 79.

⁹⁵ Hansberry, "Me Tink Me Hear Sounds in de Night," Theatre Arts, XLIV, No. 10 (October, 1960), pp. 69-70.

The two jazzed-up Mikados and the musical Dream relied, for their justification, upon precisely that concept. These non-Negro materials were rendered "appropriate" for their all-black casts largely in terms of production values, and all were derivative of the Negro image popularized in the 1920's by Shuffle Along and its ilk.⁹⁶ Staged at a furious pace and with great emphasis upon exuberant dancing, these garishly caparisoned musicals continued to promote the idea of the rhythmic Negro and insisted upon presenting him as a creature of carefree abandon: "gay, orgiastic and wild."⁹⁷

The Swing Mikado, originally staged by Harry Minturn for the Chicago unit of the Federal Theatre, ultimately moved to the New York City branch and subsequently was produced commercially on Broadway.

Of the lavish production, Hallie Flanagan has remarked:

Color, movement, and sound assaulted the senses: the background of ever-moving deep blue Pacific waves, the honey-colored moon, the exotic palms and gigantic blossoms, the rose-red sarongs and the warm brown bodies and the lovely full voices. The music of the opera instead of tinkling in clipped British accents rolled over the audience like a tropical sea, and the audience let go and floated. . . . The actors . . . got so worked up . . . that emotion plunged them into the Shag, the Big Apple, the Susie-Q.⁹⁸

Michael Todd's production of The Hot Mikado, which ran on Broadway in competition with the transplanted Chicago version and later became a major attraction of the New York World's Fair, went even further. With Bill (Bojangles) Robinson in the role of the Mikado, Todd dispensed with any pretense toward authenticity and opted for gaudy showmanship:

⁹⁶ Supra, pp. 49-58.

⁹⁷ Supra, p. 56.

⁹⁸ Flanagan, p. 145.

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"I'll dress him in gold. Gold derby, gold suit, gold cane, incandescent gold shoes. I'll build a special bakelite floor for him to dance on, . . . a waterfall of soap bubbles on stage, forty feet high, and a volcano that really erupts."⁹⁹

This he did, and more! Time magazine reported:

It is gaudy, glittering, foot-wise and fast. Todd kisses Gilbert and Sullivan good-bye at about the eighth bar of the first song, then turns Titipu into a dance hall before late-comers are in their seats, makes Yum-Yum, Pitti-Sing and Peep-Bo carry on like three maids from reform school and finishes in an uproar when Katisha, no hatchet-faced termagant but an eye-rolling, hip-shaking, torch swinging red-hot mama, busts in.¹⁰⁰

In short, The Hot Mikado fairly reeked of the popular concepts of Negritude as they had been promulgated upon the musical stage. Likewise, the far less popular (thirteen performances) Swingin' the Dream,¹⁰¹ "which was meant to be a mammoth orgy of swing,"¹⁰² dressed itself in opulence:

On the stage Louis Armstrong blew his magic horn, Maxine Sullivan, a dusky, gentle Titania, crooned her strange rhythms, jitterbugs danced madly, fantastic creatures cavorted and sang, masses of brilliant costumes deployed against gay or fantastic settings, in the orchestra pit and on either side bands provided swing in every mood and mode. Yet never once did all these elements come together or reach out to the spectator and make him take part, even vicariously, in the festivities.¹⁰³

Instead of exploring Negro characterization, these three adaptations for black casts exploited a Negro image which already had seen better days in the 1920's. The Negro was exuberant and entertaining, an energetic

⁹⁹ Art Cohn (quoting Michael Todd), The Nine Lives of Michael Todd (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1958), p. 72.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Cohn, p. 77.

¹⁰¹ Book by Gilbert Seldes and Eric Charrell; music by Jimmy Van Heusen; lyrics by Eddie DeLange (Burton, p. 265).

¹⁰² Rosamond Gilder, "Tragedy and Tinsel; Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, XXIV, No. 2 (February, 1940), p. 93.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

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bundle of rhythm who was enjoyable to watch but neither was to be considered in depth nor to be taken seriously.

The works thus far examined in this chapter constitute--with one major exception--the entire output of Negro-oriented productions on the musical (or musical-affiliated) stage during the decade of the 1930's. As one can see, it was not a prosperous period for the black performer. If this is true, one may safely say that it was a period even less fruitful with regard to characterization of the Negro. Beyond the well-established stereotypes of the jazzy, earthy, exotic Harlem primitive and the quaintly childlike "darky," very few innovations are to be found. It is true that Irving Berlin's "Supertime" provided a fully-realized individual whom an audience was expected to take seriously,¹⁰⁴ but memorable as it was, "Supertime" was only one number in a full-scale (and otherwise all-white) revue. Moreover, looking back upon the productions discussed, one finds the following: all-Negro revues on the legitimate stage and in night clubs, integrated revues, hybrids, and non-Negro works performed by all-black casts. The absence of original plotted musicals is conspicuous. But the decade did produce one. Like Show Boat, its style was innovative, it stood alone, and it has since come to be considered an enduring classic of the American musical theatre.

Porgy and Bess

George Gershwin, composer of the Porgy and Bess score, has labeled the work a "folk-opera"--a term which has proved nettlesome to

¹⁰⁴Supra, pp. 117-19.

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analysts of the American musical theatre. The difficulty appears to proceed from the idea that opera is a form not fit for commercial consumption and that, by definition, it should not be popularly entertaining. "It has been pretty generally accepted for many years, by everyone remotely connected with Broadway, that opera inherently is something longhair, academic and repulsive to the cash customer."¹⁰⁵ George Gershwin, however, did not subscribe to such a philosophy. In an article written for the New York Times, Gershwin explained:

It is my idea that opera should be entertaining--that it should contain all the elements of entertainment. Therefore, when I chose Porgy and Bess, a tale of Charleston Negroes, for a subject, I made sure that it would enable me to write light as well as serious music and that it would enable me to include humor as well as tragedy--in fact, all the elements of entertainment for the eye as well as the ear . . .¹⁰⁶

Many critics continue to be troubled by what Gershwin has called the "light" music and argue that Porgy and Bess is essentially a collection of song hits which smack more of the brassy, Broadway musical theatre¹⁰⁷ than of the Metropolitan Opera House. Cecil Smith has summarized this position as follows:

If it is viewed--as perhaps it should be--as an upreach of the light lyric stage, both its integrity and the viability of its songs entitle it to a high position. Its qualities serve to emphasize the width of the gap separating opera from music of lighter genre. As an opera, Gershwin's last work is an interesting but inconclusive first try by a stranger to the *métier*.

¹⁰⁵ Elie Siegmeister, "Which Way the Musical?," Theatre Arts, XLI, No. 4 (April, 1957), p. 83.

¹⁰⁶ George Gershwin, quoted from an article in the New York Times in David Ewen, A Journey to Greatness: The Life and Music of George Gershwin (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1956), p. 271.

¹⁰⁷ David Ewen cites numbers such as "It Ain't Necessarily So," "A Red Headed Woman Makes a Choochoo Jump Its Track," and "There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York" as having sprung from Broadway musical comedy (Ewen, Composers for American Musical Theatre, p. 120).

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As a Broadway musical play, it is one of the important mileposts in the developing craft of light musical composition.¹⁰⁸

Those of opposite persuasion, however, would agree with Gershwin's contention that "songs are entirely within the operatic tradition."¹⁰⁹

In this vein, acknowledging Porgy and Bess truly as an opera, Goddard Lieberman has remarked:

The separate songs, beautiful or entertaining or persuasive as they may be, are but incomplete glimpses of a breathtaking panorama, a few fragments from a musical-dramatic work of a magnitude that has not yet, in my opinion, been correctly estimated or properly esteemed.¹¹⁰

One must consider the fact that Gershwin and his collaborators intended that both the style and the staging of their "folk opera" should remain consistent with the material from which it had sprung. The result lacked the formalities associated with European grand opera, substituting in their place the jazzier elements associated with the Broadway musical stage.

Starting with the rhythms, melodic turns and harmonies of familiar American musical speech—the blues, jazz and Negro folk songs—George Gershwin arrived at a high musical style that was at once rich, passionate and powerfully effective in the theatre. . . . Porgy and Bess was in fact a true opera—an opera of a new, jazzy, entertaining, sexy American type.¹¹¹

Porgy and Bess was derived from DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's successful folk drama, Porgy (1927), which in turn had been adapted

¹⁰⁸Smith, p. 285.

¹⁰⁹George Gershwin, quoted from an article in the New York Times, in Isaac Goldberg, supplemented by Edith Garson, George Gershwin: A Study in American Music (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1958), p. 329.

¹¹⁰Goddard Lieberman, "A Few Notes on this Recording of Porgy and Bess," Gershwin: Porgy and Bess, Odyssey Records, A Product of CBS, Stereo 32 36 0018. (Formerly released in monaural as [Columbia Records], OSL 162.)

¹¹¹Siegmeister, Theatre Arts, XLI (April, 1957), p. 83.

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from DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel of the same name.¹¹² The play's success, coupled with the possibilities afforded by its emphasis upon local color, prompted a request by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II for permission to develop Porgy into a musical with Al Jolson starring in the title role.¹¹³ DuBose Heyward, who had been contacted by George Gershwin even prior to the production of the stage version,¹¹⁴ preferred Gershwin's more ambitious proposal of making Porgy into an opera. Moreover, assigning the musical chores to Gershwin assured Heyward's personal control of the libretto, and "he had no illusions about the kind of musical comedy which might result if it was placed in the hands of Kern and Hammerstein with their preference for using white men in Negro roles."¹¹⁵

Much of Porgy and Bess was written by correspondence, with Gershwin bound to a radio contract in New York and Heyward writing in his native Charleston, South Carolina. "Their postal teamwork was arranged so that scenes and lyrics would be written first, and then mailed north to Gershwin to supply the appropriate music."¹¹⁶ The difficulties imposed by such an arrangement led to the participation of Ira Gershwin who joined the venture in order "to work with his brother

¹¹² A detailed discussion of the transformation from the somber starkness of the naturalistic novel to the colorful romanticism of the stage play is to be found in: Robert Payne, Gershwin (New York: Pyramid Books, 1960), pp. 125-30.

¹¹³ Payne, P. 131.

¹¹⁴ "Facts Concerning the Everyman Opera Production of Porgy and Bess," In the files of Everyman Opera, New York City (Mimeographed). Copy courtesy of Mr. Robert Breen.

¹¹⁵ Payne, p. 131.

¹¹⁶ Green, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 120.

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on Heyward's lyrics, serve as general editor, and also contribute several lyrics of his own."¹¹⁷ Of the original play, "almost half had to be cut away, while drastic revisions had to be made in the dialogue to make it acceptable for the operatic stage."¹¹⁸ Eleven months of work were consumed in the creation of Porgy and Bess, and George Gershwin devoted another nine months to the orchestrations.¹¹⁹

Produced on Broadway by the Theatre Guild, Porgy and Bess opened at the Alvin Theatre on the evening of October 10, 1935. Conducted by Alexander Smallens and with settings by Sergei Soudeikine, the production was directed by Rouben Mamoulian--the man who had staged the original Porgy. In principal roles, the original cast featured the following: Todd Duncan (Porgy), Anne Wiggins Brown (Bess), Warren Coleman (Crown), Ruby Elzy (Serena), Abbie Mitchell (Clara), Georgette Harvey (Maria), John W. Bubbles (Sporting Life), J. Rosamond Johnson (Frazier) and the Eva Jessye Choir.¹²⁰

Critical response to Porgy and Bess was sharply divided, ranging from the enthusiastic reception of a masterpiece to the flat dismissal of a dull and monotonous work.¹²¹ The production ran on Broadway for a disappointing total of 124 performances¹²² and closed a commercial

¹¹⁷Goldberg and Garson, p. 323.

¹¹⁸Ewen, A Journey to Greatness, p. 252.

¹¹⁹Green, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 121.

¹²⁰George and Ira Gershwin, and DuBose Heyward, Porgy and Bess (New York: Gershwin Publishing Corporation, n.d.) Cited hereafter as Porgy and Bess. (Further production credits and a complete list of the musical numbers are found on the preliminary pages preceding this vocal score.)

¹²¹Green, The World of Musical Comedy, pp. 121-23.

¹²²Walter Rigdon (ed.), The Biographical Encyclopaedia and Who's Who of the American Theatre (New York: James H. Heineman, Inc., 1966), p. 39.

failure. Many of the dissenting critics reversed their initial verdicts, however, when confronted with Cheryl Crawford's streamlined and well-received 1942 revival. But it was the phenomenal success of the Blevins Davis-Robert Breen production¹²³ which achieved for Porgy and Bess world-wide acclaim as a masterwork of the American musical theatre. Today it is considered a classic.

The story told in Porgy and Bess is basically very simple and follows the well-worn "boy meets girl" formula. Porgy, a lonely crippled beggar, offers Bess asylum when her brutish lover, Crown, is forced to flee after having killed a man in an argument over a crap game. Bess finds comfort in Porgy's warm compassion and becomes his "woman"; together they find happiness. Having relinquished her dependence upon liquor and drugs, despite the temptations offered by Sporting Life, a Harlemite pimp and dope peddler, Bess becomes a respectable member of the Catfish Row ghetto community. At Porgy's insistence, Bess accompanies her new-found friends to Kittiwah Island for a festive picnic where she encounters the fugitive Crown. Having succumbed to Crown's aggressive sexuality, a guilt-ridden Bess returns to Catfish Row and begs Porgy to protect her from Crown, who has insisted that she still belongs to him. Thus, when Crown arrives in search of Bess, Porgy kills him. Forced by the police to identify Crown's body, Porgy's superstitions impel him to refuse, and he is jailed. Upon his release, Porgy

¹²³This production by Everyman Opera, Inc., frequently under the auspices of the United States State Department and the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), toured the United States, Canada, Europe, Latin America, and the Soviet countries for a total of four years (1952-1956). For further details, in addition to the fact sheet in the files of Everyman Opera, the reader is referred to Ollie Stewart, "An American Opera Conquers Europe," Theatre Arts, XXXIX, No. 10 (October, 1955), pp. 30-32, 93-94.

[illegible]

discovers that Sporting Life has taken advantage of his absence and tempted Bess, with the blandishments of drugs and bright lights, to New York City. In his goat-cart, the cripple sets out on a thousand mile journey in pursuit of the woman he loves.

Porgy and Bess offers much more, however, than the above narrative implies, for the story of the lovers occupies little more than perhaps fifty per cent of the total work. The fact is that the opera's protagonist is really neither Porgy nor Bess but, rather, Catfish Row and all of its inhabitants. An Eastern European critic reported of the Davis-Breen production that the opera's "importance is more in the colorful depiction of the environment than in the creation of truly great and rich individualities,"¹²⁴ and David Ewen has stated:

Gershwin's opera is an epic of Negroes, mostly a picture of the lower depths of Negro life. The tragic love of Porgy and Bess is incidental to the humor and pathos, the emotional turbulence, the psychological and social maladjustments, the naivete and childlike terror, the violence and tenderness of the much-abused Negro in a Southern city.¹²⁵

In Porgy and Bess, Heyward and the Gershwins offer events and characters which comprise slices of a way of life rather than sub-plots. There is the summer night crap game in "a Charleston back alley that teems with raw and racy vitality,"¹²⁶ and which constitutes the "normal night

¹²⁴Bohumil Karosok, "The Successful Premiere of Negro Opera," Vecerni Praha (Prague, Czechoslovakia), February 14, 1956. Reproduced (in English translation) in "Porgy and Bess" Reviews: Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, in the files of Everyman Opera, New York City (Mimeographed). Copy courtesy of Mr. Robert Breen.

¹²⁵Ewen, A Journey to Greatness, p. 273.

¹²⁶Walter F. Kerr, "Porgy and Bess," Herald Tribune (New York), March 10, 1953. Reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1953, XIV, No. 7 (Week of March 16, 1953), p. 339.

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life"¹²⁷ of Catfish Row (Act I, Scene i). There is the saucer ritual over the corpse of the murdered Robbins, replete with community grief and religious fervor (Act I, Scene ii), and the awesome destruction wrought by a hurricane which touches the lives of many on Catfish Row (Act II, Scene iv). Indeed, the authors have placed great emphasis purely upon milieu--not only in the opening scene, wherein Catfish Row is revealed, but in the "Street Cries" of the Strawberry Woman, the Honey Man and the Crab Man (Act II, Scene iii), and in the rhythmic "Morning in Catfish Row" (Act III, Scene 3). What we have here is a microcosm in which the hermetically sealed characters are as tiles in a mosaic which spells local color. Despite the poverty, the flaming passions and violence, the sex, the liquor and the drugs, Catfish Row manages to be quaint and picturesque. Of the original stage version of Porgy, Sterling Brown observed that it was a "colorful romantic spectacle, . . . [and] only incidentally realistic."¹²⁸ The same is true, and on an even larger scale, of the opera. In the remote setting of Porgy and Bess,¹²⁹ the sordid gives way to the exotic, and dark passions are expressed in hot colors.¹³⁰ Drugs are glamorously wicked,

¹²⁷Porgy and Bess, p. 22.

¹²⁸Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama, p. 118.

¹²⁹The setting is Charleston, South Carolina, during the recent past--sufficiently removed to allow a Broadway audience to glimpse an "alien" culture. See the remarks on Show Boat's setting (Supra, p. 109).

¹³⁰"We are in a waterfront Negro slum. It is tattered and gaudy. The Negroes, who still have the African sun in their veins, wear terribly flashy clothes which to us seem vulgar. Naturally enough, this garishness suits the general scene to perfection, creates a truly artistic composition." (Ewa Ziegler, "The Black Manon," Nowa Kultura [Warsaw, Poland], February 5th, 1956. Reproduced [in English translation] in "Porgy and Bess Reviews: Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia," in the files of Everyman Opera, New York City [Mimeographed], copy courtesy of Mr. Robert Breen.)

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and the low-life characters disport themselves with jazzy abandon.

"There is prancing and dancing. Its argot is quaint. Its characters are colorful and broadly drawn. There are children in the show, a goat, and a marching band. It has almost everything capable of drawing money into the box office."¹³¹ In short, as Truman Capote has observed:

. . . Despite its accent on folkish fun, the situation of the American Negro as depicted in Porgy and Bess, an exploited race at the mercy of ruthless Southern whites, poverty-pinched and segregated in the ghetto of Catfish Row, could not be more agreeably imagined if the Ministry of Culture had assigned one of their own writers to the job.¹³²

Porgy and Bess has been described as "a work generally hailed by whites and disliked by many Negroes."¹³³ The reason for this has to do with what Theodore Gilliam has called "the largest cast of Negro stereotypes to appear in the American theatre,"¹³⁴ and has been further explained by Langston Hughes:

The character, Porgy, is a cripple, an almost emasculated man. His Bess is a whore. The denizens (as the critics term them) of Catfish Row are childlike ignorant blackamoors given to dice, razors, and singing at the drop of a hat. In other words, they are stereotypes in (to sensitive Negroes) the worst sense of the word. The long shadow of the blackface minstrel coarsens the charm of Porgy [and Bess] and darkens its grace notes.¹³⁵

Such objections are well taken, for there is a great deal of truth in them. On the surface, the Negro characters presented in Porgy and Bess

¹³¹Langston Hughes, "The Negro and American Entertainment," The American Negro Reference Book, ed. John Davis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 843.

¹³²Truman Capote, The Muses Are Heard (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 20.

¹³³Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 98.

¹³⁴Gilliam, p. 102. (Gilliam is speaking of the stage version of Porgy, but his opinion would apply, as well, to the opera.)

¹³⁵Hughes, in Davis (ed.), The American Negro Reference Book, p. 843.

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conform to the familiar stage Negro types which, as we have seen, do not constitute a flattering racial image. Porgy is the rural Negro: childlike, ignorant, superstitious, and poverty-stricken--yet perfectly content with "Plenty O' Nuttin'." Bess and Sporting Life are classic examples of the exotic primitive: amoral, hedonistic, seeking gratification in momentary pleasures. Crown, the vicious brute-primitive and sexual giant, is new to the musical stage, but the stereotype of the "bad nigger" has been well-established both in folklore and in fiction. Psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs have commented:

It seems that every community has had one or was afraid of having one. They were feared as much by blacks as by whites. . . . They are angry and hostile. They strike fear into everyone with their uncompromising rejection of restraint or inhibition. . . . The bad nigger is a defiant nigger, a reminder of what manhood could be.¹³⁶

The remainder of Catfish Row's inhabitants also run true to form. As a group, they are ignorant, clannish, superstitious, God-fearing, and unabashedly emotional; they are "either the most madly exuberant or desperately dejected people in the world."¹³⁷ The characters of Porgy and Bess reflect the simplistic approach toward racial attributes inherent in George Gershwin's stated intention to "utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race."¹³⁸ It is of little surprise, therefore, that many critics have found Porgy and Bess to be racially

¹³⁶ William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1968), pp. 54-55.

¹³⁷ John McClain, "Great Gershwin--And Lots of It," Journal American (New York), March 10, 1953. Reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1953, XIV, No. 7 (Week of March 16, 1953), p. 337.

¹³⁸ Gershwin, quoted by Garson from the New York Times, in Goldberg and Garson, p. 328.

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offensive. Nevertheless, granted the stereotypes, a closer examination reveals deeper human values and greater individualization of Negro character than that found in any previous work for the musical stage.

Of primary interest is the development of the title characters. When we first meet her, Bess is described by the women of Catfish Row as a "liquor-guzzlin' slut" who "ain't fit for Gawd fearin' ladies to 'sociate with."¹³⁹ Indeed, her brazen behavior and sharp-tongued taunts would appear to justify such an opinion. Porgy, however, is more charitable and displays keen insight when he remarks to the women: "Can't you keep yo' mouth off Bess? Between the Gawd fearin' ladies an' the Gawd damnin' men, that gal ain't got a chance."¹⁴⁰ Porgy would give Bess that chance, and eventually he does, but our initial impression of him is that of a man unhappily resigned to a life of loneliness.

PORGY

No, no, brudder, Porgy ain' sof' on no woman.

They pass by sinin',
 They pass by cryin', always lookin'.
 They look in my do' an' they keep on movin'--
 When Gawd make cripple, he mean him to be lonely,
 Night time, day time, he got to trabble dat lonesome road,¹⁴¹
 Night time, day time, he got to trabble dat lonesome road.

These, then, are the two principal characters as we see them in Act I, Scene 1: a slut who is confident that "some man always willin' to take care of Bess,"¹⁴² and a lonely cripple who, at the end of the scene, becomes that man.

¹³⁹Porgy and Bess, p. 49.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

¹⁴¹Ibid., pp. 50-52.

¹⁴²Ibid., p.97.

The transformation which occurs in both characters is fully realized in Act II, Scene 1, which takes place one month later. Early in the scene, Porgy exuberantly expresses his delight with life in song ("I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'"), while his neighbors comment upon the miraculous change in his personality.

CHORUS

Porgy change since dat woman come to live with he.

SERENA

How he change!

CHORUS

He ain' cross with chillen no more, an' ain' you hear how he and Bess all de time singin' in their room?

MARIA

I tells you dat cripple's happy now.¹⁴³

Later, sensing trouble in the ominously symbolic appearance of a buzzard circling overhead, Porgy beautifully summarizes the nature of his relationship with Bess, fully aware of the new dimension it has brought to his life ("Buzzard Song"):

PORGY

Buzzard keep on flyin' over, take along yo' shadow
Ain' nobody dead dis mornin', livin's jus' begun
Two is strong where one is feeble;
Man an' woman livin', workin',
Sharin' grief an' sharin' laughter,
An' love like August sun.

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Dere's two folks livin' in dis shelter--
Eatin', sleepin', singin', prayin'.
Ain' no such thing as loneliness.
An' Porgy's young again.
Buzzard, keep on flyin', Porgy's young again!¹⁴⁴

In this simple passage, there is enormous dignity. The relationship between Porgy and Bess is directly opposed to that between Crown and

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 200-202.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 237-43.

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Bess. Instead of abuse and degradation, there is mutual respect and trust. In the duet, "Bess, You Is My Woman," one discovers a new Bess --Porgy's Bess--and a concern on the part of each for the other's happiness above his own.

PORGY

Bess, you is my woman now, you is, you is!
 An' you mus' laugh an' sing an' dance for two
 instead of one.
 Want no wrinkle on yo' brow, nohow,
 Because de sorrow of de past is all done done.
 Oh Bess, my Bess! De real happiness is jes' begun.

BESS

Porgy, I's yo' woman now, I is, I is!
 An' I ain' never goin' nowhere 'less you shares
 de fun.
 Dere's no wrinkle on my brow, nohow,
 But I ain' goin'! You hear me sayin'
 If you ain' goin', wid you I'm stayin'.
 Porgy, I's yo' woman now! I's yours forever,
 Mornin' time an' ev'nin' time an' summer time an'
 winter time.¹⁴⁵

This is no minstrel show caricature; these are no stereotypes. Swept away--at least momentarily--are the crap game and razors, the violence and depravity of the first Act. The values expressed in the above duet are intensely human and, therefore universal. A love relationship between Negroes has been presented, for the first time on the musical stage, in a tasteful and completely humanized fashion. Gone is the carnality, and in its place remains something spiritually pure. If the almost sexless bond between Porgy and Bess appears to be overcompensation to provide contrast with the Crown-Bess relationship, still the lovers are capable of human fineness and deep devotion. The progress in such characterization is significant.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 252-55.

If Bess is capable of redemption and deep emotional attachment, she is also a weak-willed creature of her own appetites. Sexual pleasure is one of them. Her scene with Crown on Kittiwah Island (Act II, Scene ii) is intensely erotic. Upon discovering Crown, Bess's initial response--"You bigger'n ever"¹⁴⁶--indicates her instantaneous awareness of his physical presence. Thinking of Porgy and the pain he will experience should she fail to return with the others,¹⁴⁷ Bess begins to fight a losing battle--not only with Crown, but within herself. Appealing to Crown's masculine vanity, while at the same time revealing the physical attraction his body holds for her, Bess pleads with Crown:

Oh, ----What you want wid Bess? She's gettin' ole now;
 Take a fine young gal--for to satisfy Crown.
 Look at this chest--an' look at these arms you got.
 You know how it always been with me, these five years I
 been yo' woman.
 You could kick me in the street, then when you wanted
 me back,
 You could whistle an' there I was back again lickin'
 yo' han'.
 There's plenty better lookin' gal than Bess.¹⁴⁸

But Crown knows what he wants, and his approach is sure, basic and direct. Bess cannot resist his touch, and at the first physical contact her resolve waivers.

CROWN

(Pressing her very close, exerting his male attraction to the full.) You ain' goin' nowhere.

BESS

Take yo' hands off me, I say, (weakening) yo' hands, yo' hands, yo' hands! (Crown kisses Bess. Her arms close around him.)¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 304.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 311-12.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 313-15.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 319-21.

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Indeed, in the scene which follows (Act II, Scene iii), Bess acknowledges to Porgy that, despite her devotion to him, she is powerless to resist the erotic impulses which Crown stirs in her.

Someday, I know he's comin' back to call me;
He's goin' to handle me an' hol' me so.
It's goin' to be like dyin', Porgy, deep inside me.
But when he calls, I know I have to go.¹⁵⁰

Presumably, Bess's animalistic sensuality derives from atavistic savagery inherent in her blood--or so it would be interpreted by a white audience. "Black men and women . . . have always been regarded by white Americans as sexual objects, exotic people living close to instinct and primitivism."¹⁵¹ Fascination with the assumed trait of Negroid immorality and lack of sexual inhibitions is, as we have seen, fundamental to the exotic primitive stereotype and was the implied subject of many songs in revues of the 1920's and 1930's. The Crown-Bess seduction scene in Porgy and Bess, however, provided the first occasion in the musical theatre wherein Negro characters engaged in explicitly sexual stage action. The Davis-Breen revival left very little to the imagination and, quite rightly, emphasized the passionate arousal of Bess.

The scene, a favorite of the director's and one he'd kept heightening in rehearsal, begins with Crown attempting to rape Bess--he grips her to him, gropes her buttocks, her breasts; and ends with Bess raping him--she rips off his shirt, wraps her arms around him and writhes, sizzles like bacon in a skillet: blackout.¹⁵²

Such abandon is characteristic of Bess throughout the opera. Having experienced a sense of human dignity while living with Porgy, Bess wishes to continue living decently, but it is her tragedy that she

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 350-51.

¹⁵¹ Grier and Cobbs, p. 76.

¹⁵² Capote, The Muses are Heard, p. 175.

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succumbs so readily--and so completely--to temptation. Her return to drugs¹⁵³ and the subsequent flight to New York with Sporting Life are no less wanton than her behavior with Crown. She is weak rather than evil. These many facets to her character allow us to understand and to sympathize with a Bess who is more vibrantly alive than a facile stereotype.

Where Bess is weak, Porgy is strong. He possesses the strengths of gentleness, compassion and human insight. Porgy understands Bess's flaws, and while he does not take them lightly, he forgives them because he loves her. "Gawd give cripple to understan' many thing he ain' give strong men,"¹⁵⁴ Porgy explains to a repentant Bess, and he vows to protect her--but only if such is her wish.

You ain' got nuttin' to be afraid of; I ain' try to keep no woman what don't want to stay. If you wants to go to Crown, dat's for you to say.¹⁵⁵

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If you wants to stay wid Porgy, you goin' stay. You got a home now, Honey, an' you got love. So no mo' cryin', can't you understan'? You goin' to go about yo' business, singin' cause yo' got Porgy, you got a man.¹⁵⁶

Such behavior is in direct contrast to the casual amorality of Crown: "You sho' got funny tas' in men, but dat's yo' business. I ain' care who you takes up wid while I's away. But membuh what I tol' you, he's temporary."¹⁵⁷ Porgy's fidelity to the woman he loves leads him to

¹⁵³Porgy and Bess, Act III, Scene 2, pp. 495-504.

¹⁵⁴Porgy and Bess, p. 347.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 349. . .

¹⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 355-57.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 307-08.

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murder the interloper, Crown, and at the end of the opera the strength of his resolve remains undiminished. When confronted with the facts of her departure, Porgy's devotion to Bess remains pure and unshaken.

MARIA

Ain' we tell you all along, Porgy, dat woman ain' fit fo' you?

PORGY

I ain' axin' yo' opinion
Oh, Bess, oh where's my Bess?
Won't somebody tell me where?
I ain' care what she say,
I ain' care what she done.
Won't somebody tell me where's my Bess? Bess!
Oh Lawd, my Bess! I want her now.
Wid out her I can't go on.¹⁵⁸

And so, "transformed and exalted,"¹⁵⁹ Porgy sets out in his goat cart on an impossible journey. The character of Porgy would be purely stereotypical if one could laugh at the ridiculous spectacle of a foolish cripple, in an absurd vehicle, bound for a destination which is vaguely "way up North pas' de custom house."¹⁶⁰ But Porgy is far from laughable. As the goat cart rumbles over the cobbles and through the gates of Catfish Row, Porgy becomes a romantic hero of towering proportions. As Mary Hardwick perceptively observed with regard to the dramatic version:

Porgy has insurmountable problems; however, in the play, not only does the character confront them, he surmounts them. For the perennial romantic, his strength is of such dimension that there is hope that he will overcome the final hurdle and find Bess as he has overcome poverty, physical deformity and Crown.¹⁶¹

Although Porgy may be cloaked in the trappings of the conventional rural stage Negro, his character lacks the elements of the ludicrous and the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 537-40.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 554.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 551.

¹⁶¹ Hardwick, p. 278.

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grotesque¹⁶² associated with minstrelsy-inspired caricatures of the past. Because he is so intensely humanized--even idealized--one takes him seriously and cares about him.

The villains of the piece, Crown and Sporting Life, likewise appear to proceed from familiar stage Negro types to whom Heyward and the Gershwins have accorded a degree of individualized dimensionality. If Crown's abusive brutality, aggression and violence qualify him as the "bad nigger,"¹⁶³ nevertheless, he has the courage of his convictions and is not to be considered simply as a bully. His fearlessness is not a pretense. Theodore Gilliam has noted that Crown "possesses none of the submissiveness and superstitious fears attributed to his group, and is far from ready to lay down his life for the promised land."¹⁶⁴ During the hurricane (Act II, Scene iv), as the residents of Catfish Row engage in fervent prayer and the singing of spirituals, Crown contemptuously interrupts with a blasphemous and vulgar ditty ("A Red Headed Woman").¹⁶⁵ When the others object to his irreverence, warning that God might strike him dead, Crown remains sanguine. "Gawd want to kill me, He had plenty of chance 'tween here an' Kittiwah Island. Me and Him havin' it out all de way from Kittiwah; firs' Him on top, den me on top. There ain' nothin' He likes better den a scrap wid a man. Gawd an' me is frien'."¹⁶⁶ Crown fears neither man, the wrath of God,

¹⁶² Compare, for example, the palpable fear produced in Porgy by his superstition (Porgy and Bess, Act III, Scene ii) with the comic treatment of superstition in the "Famous Graveyard Scene" from Blackbirds of 1928 (supra, pp. 62-63).

¹⁶³ Supra, p. 142.

¹⁶⁴ Gilliam, p. 104.

¹⁶⁵ Porgy and Bess, pp. 420-28.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 410-12.

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nor the violence of nature. His defiance and sense of invulnerability are extensions of Crown's concept of masculinity. When Bess calls for a man to aid Clara, who has rushed out into the storm, Crown sneers:

Yeah, where is a man? Porgy, what you sittin' dere for? Ain' you hear yo' woman callin' for a man? Looks to me like dere ain' only one man 'roun' here! (Crown looks at Bess, turns toward door.) All right, I'm goin' out to get Clara, then I'm comin' back to get you. . . . All right Big Frien', we's on for another bout!¹⁶⁷

Crown is his own man, and despite his animal-level existence and brutish behavior, there is something heroic in his courage. From a contemporary perspective, as Gilliam suggests, the character of Crown "anticipates the rebellious, virile, self-determined Negro, who, but for a lack of education and a finer intelligence, would be classed a revolutionary."¹⁶⁸

Sporting Life is the antithesis of the big "black buck," Crown; small of stature, he is the cowardly pimp, a flashily-dressed, pseudo-sophisticated liver of the big-city high-life. His life style is, perhaps, best described by Maria:

I hates yo' struttin' style, Yes, sir,
An' yo' god damn silly smile,
An' yo' ten cent di'mon's an' yo' fi' cent butts.
Oh, I hates yo' guts.¹⁶⁹

Crafty where Crown is blunt, Sporting Life is the logical and highly stylized extension of the "city-slicker" popularized by George Walker during the first decade of this century.¹⁷⁰ Slinking about the stage, employing in his movements a characteristic dance step known as the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 431-434.

¹⁶⁸ Gilliam, p. 104.

¹⁶⁹ Porgy and Bess, pp. 210-11.

¹⁷⁰ Supra, p. 40.

Pimp's Walk ("shoulders hunched, fingers popping"),¹⁷¹ Sporting Life seems always to be lurking in the shadows waiting to make contact with Bess. He does not want her exclusively for himself, but rather would sell her into prostitution, as he indicates in one of his many attempted seductions: "I can't see for the life of me what you is hangin' roun' this place for; why, with yo' looks, Bess, an' yo' way with the boys, there's big money for you an' me in New York."¹⁷² When he is threatened by Porgy, Sporting Life remains coolly confident of the power his temptations hold for Bess.

SPORTING LIFE

All right, yo' men frien's come an' they go, but remember ole Sportin' Life an' de happy dus' here all along.

PORGY

Get out, you rat, you louse, you buzzard!¹⁷³

Indeed, Sporting Life is that trouble-bearing buzzard Porgy had feared.¹⁷⁴ It is he who instills in Porgy the fear of looking upon Crown's face,¹⁷⁵ and it is he who lies to Bess about the length of Porgy's jail sentence,¹⁷⁶ thereby inducing her flight with him to New York. Truly, Sporting Life is a thoroughly disreputable character--but he is so roguishly cunning, so cynically witty, that he fulfills George Gershwin's intention that "the character of Sportin' Life, instead of being a

¹⁷¹Stearns, pp. 151 and 357.

¹⁷²Porgy and Bess, pp. 244-46.

¹⁷³Ibid., pp. 250-51.

¹⁷⁴Supra, p. 144.

¹⁷⁵Porgy and Bess, pp. 488-89. (" . . . When the man that killed Crown go in that room an' look at him, Crown' wound begin to bleed.")

¹⁷⁶Porgy and Bess, pp. 494 and 540-47.

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sinister dope-peddler, is a humorous, dancing villain, who is likable and believable and at the same time evil."¹⁷⁷ Sporting Life's attitude toward religion, for example, is fully as irreverent as Crown's, yet it is expressed not with defiance but, rather, with malicious glee. "Oh, I takes dat gospel / Whenever it's pos'ble / But wid a grain of salt,"¹⁷⁸ sings Sporting Life to a group of religious Sons-and-Daughters--of-Repent-Ye-Saith-the-Lord picnickers, as he informs them that some of the Biblical stories "Ain't Necessarily So." And we laugh along with him. If the character of Sporting Life is a classic example of the exotic primitive stereotype, he is certainly one of the most fully realized and ingratiatingly stylized examples found to date.

Quite naturally, the lesser characters in Porgy and Bess are defined with fewer individualized details; nevertheless, three may be singled out for brief comment. Maria, proprietress of the cook shop, is the earthy matriarch of Catfish Row and can be compared, especially in terms of her bossiness, to the Queenie of Show Boat. Maria, however, is given greater human warmth--as may be seen in her friendly reversal of attitude toward Bess¹⁷⁹ and in her compassionate explanation to Porgy of the causes of Bess's departure for New York.¹⁸⁰ Serena, widow of the man murdered by Crown, is the self-appointed guardian of community morals and a bit of a religious fanatic. A disapproving and rather cold

¹⁷⁷ Gershwin, quoted by Garson from the New York Times, in Goldberg and Garson, p. 329.

¹⁷⁸ Porgy and Bess, p. 293.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 270-72.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 540-47.

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woman, Serena's bitterness toward the mistress of her husband's killer is comprehensible. She is allowed considerable dimensionality in her willingness to pray for Bess's recovery¹⁸¹ and is exceptionally moving as the hard-working woman examining the enormity of her grief in the lament, "My Man's Gone Now."¹⁸² Simon Frazier, the so-called lawyer who peddles illegal certificates of divorce to the Negroes, is a comic character straight out of the minstrel show travesty.¹⁸³ His pretensions toward the niceties of legal practice lead him to insist that Bess should "address the court as 'yo' honor',"¹⁸⁴ and his ineptitude is made evident as he pompously explains, "it take expert to divorce woman what ain't marry."¹⁸⁵ It is an amusing scene performed by one of the oldest stage Negro stereotypes.

There are further stereotypes in Porgy and Bess, and not least among them are the white characters "who in their brief appearance[s] as the hand[s] of authority and law, are made to seem cruel and foolish."¹⁸⁶ Their presence allows one some insight into the causes of the isolation of Catfish Row, and Gershwin cleverly employs a stylistic device whereby the two races immediately are set apart. He has explained: "I am trying to get a sensational dramatic effect. I hope to accomplish this by having the few whites in the production speak their lines while

¹⁸¹Ibid., pp. 333-37.

¹⁸²Ibid., pp. 154-61.

¹⁸³Supra, pp. 13-14.

¹⁸⁴Porgy and Bess, p. 221.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁸⁶Goldberg and Garson, p. 331.

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the Negroes, in answering, will sing."¹⁸⁷ Indeed, throughout the opera interracial lines of communication are virtually nonexistent. Of the five white characters, Archdale and the Coroner display friendliness, patience and tolerance, but are essentially paternalistic in their attitudes toward a people whom they obviously consider to be childlike. Archdale's concern for Peter is one of protective responsibility, for as Archdale explains, "his folks used to belong to my fam'ly."¹⁸⁸ The Coroner is patient and reassuring in his scene with Porgy (Act III, Scene ii), behaving in the manner of a doctor preparing to administer an injection to a child. Significantly, despite his past generosity to the beggar, the Coroner does not recognize Porgy without his cart.¹⁸⁹ To him, the goat is more readily identifiable than the individual. It is as much as saying, "niggers all look alike to me"--a familiar phrase. The remaining white characters are openly hostile and, frankly, despicable. The two policemen laugh derisively and sadistically as they drag the fear-stricken Porgy away from Catfish Row.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, the Detective employs the tactics of a storm trooper, and his methods of questioning always include threats of violence. In both his appearances,¹⁹¹ the detective demonstrates open contempt for black people who, so far as he is concerned, apparently are sub-human dolts.

¹⁸⁷ George Gershwin, quoted in Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart, *The Gershwin Years* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), p. 207.

¹⁸⁸ Porgy and Bess, p. 232.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 481-82.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 490-92.

¹⁹¹ Act I, Scene ii, and Act III, Scene ii.

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The residents of Catfish Row have cause to fear and mistrust the white man and his society. Upon his return from jail, Peter explains that the white power structure is incomprehensible to him: "De white folks put me in, and de white folks take me out, an' I ain' know yet what I done."¹⁹² Because of their fear of Caucasians, the Negroes of Catfish Row are clannish and secretive. They band together for protection and, in the presence of the white man, employ the defensive tactic of dissembling.¹⁹³ The entrance of Archdale (Act II, Scene 1) serves as a case in point:

ARCHDALE

(Goes to Clara): I'm looking for a man named Porgy; can you direct me to his room?

CLARA

(Raising her voice): Anybody here know a man name Porgy?
(General negative shaking of heads.)

ARCHDALE

Come. I'm a friend of his, Mister Archdale. I have good news for him.

SERENA

(Opens door, looks at Archdale, then addresses court): Go 'long and wake Porgy. Can't you tell folks when you see 'em?

CLARA

(Surprised): Oh you mean Porgy! I ain' understan' what name you say.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Porgy and Bess, pp. 329-30.

¹⁹³ Countless authorities on the American Negro have suggested that the art of dissembling developed, especially for the Southern Negro, as a matter of survival. Charles E. Silberman has stated that Negroes "became masters at turning obsequiousness and flattery into weapons of defense or offense. . . . Whites rarely know what Negroes are thinking, for the latter have learned to hide their true feelings behind a mask of submissiveness, or pleasure, or impassivity, or humility." (Crisis in Black and White [New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1964], p. 97.)

¹⁹⁴ Porgy and Bess, pp. 228-230.

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As a result of such deception, there is mutual mistrust. Because the Negroes are suspicious, they play the fool; because they play the fool, Caucasians continue to think of them as irresponsible children. The same point is made in Act III, Scene ii, as the women protect Serena from the Detective by providing her with a patently false alibi—to which the Detective disgustedly responds: "Oh hell! You might as well argue with a parrot, but you'll never break their story."¹⁹⁵ These are telling moments with regard to the psychology of race relations, and although there is humor in them, there is also a wealth of human understanding.

Isolated as they are from society-at-large, the community of Catfish Row turns for salvation to spiritual comforts. With the possible exception of Serena, who appears to live by the gospel, religious expression is seen most often as a community affair—a mass appeal or exorcism in times of great trouble or natural disaster. Porgy explains that the singing of spirituals—in praise of or appealing to the Lord—"make you forget yo' trouble an' lif' up dat burden of sorrow offen yo'."¹⁹⁶ Yet, the religious fervor of these people is seen to proceed from the same mentality which produces such keen belief in superstition. The somewhat sacrilegious invocation of divine aid during the opening crap game, the trouble-bearing buzzard, Porgy's fear of looking on Crown's face—all are allied to the concept of supernatural powers as tangible beings. During the hurricane, there is the following sequence:

PETER

(Trembling): Death is knockin' at de do'.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 480.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., pp. 382-83.

MARIA

Open de do' Mingo, an' show Peter there ain' nobody there.

MINGO

(In sudden fear): Open um up yo'self!

MARIA

All right, I'll show you.

(She takes a step, then there is a loud knock. Several people cry, "Hol' de door!"; "Gawd have mercy!"; "Oh Gawd, I's repent!" Several men throw themselves against the door which shakes violently.)

BESS

(Shouting): Dat ain' no use, if he's Death, he comin' in anyway.¹⁹⁷

These are the beliefs of a primitive people; however, in the isolation of a Catfish Row, one can hardly expect to find sophistication.

The subject of religion is central more to characterization than it is to thought content. The results of prayer in Porgy and Bess are inconclusive. Too many innocent people are killed in the wake of the hurricane--among them, Clara, Jake and many of the fishermen. Yet Crown, who has blasphemed and dared confrontation with his "Big Frien'" escapes harm. It is true that Crown is destroyed later, but this is not God's work; rather, it is Porgy who deliberately takes his life. Similarly, Sporting Life is irreverent, and it seems that he and his degenerative ways not only go unpunished, but result in personal success. Serena's prayers over the ailing Bess, however, appear to succeed. Her pronouncement that Bess will recover at five o'clock—and the fact that Bess does recover precisely on the stroke of the fifth chime¹⁹⁸ is not to be taken idly. Is it coincidence, or has Serena's prayer been

¹⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 399-405.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 333-37 and 342-43.

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answered? One can rely only upon Porgy's emotional, "Thank Gawd,"¹⁹⁹ but it is clear that he and Serena, in time of trouble, believe in divine intervention. And that belief, coupled with Porgy's appeal for spiritual assistance to find Bess,²⁰⁰ perhaps allows one to leave the theatre hopeful of Porgy's success in his final task.

Porgy and Bess has been faulted by Lorraine Hansberry as being a shallow portrait of life in the ghetto.

I believe that when the blinders are dropped, it will be discovered that while an excessively poignant Porgy was being instilled in generations of Americans, his truer-life counterpart was ravaged by longings that were, and are, in no way alien to those of the rest of mankind. . . . Each hour that flies teaches that Porgy is as much inclined to hymns of sedition as to lullabies and love songs.²⁰¹

Such charges would be valid had the authors of Porgy and Bess intended that the opera be as naturalistic as the novel from which it was derived. As we have seen, however, the opera romanticizes Catfish Row and its inhabitants.²⁰² Whereas the authors have been content to exploit for its entertainment value, rather than to explore for its social value, life in the ghetto--still it is difficult to fault the work for not being something it never intended to be. It is true that Porgy and Bess employs time-honored stereotypes and that, today, the dice, liquor and drugs, the licentiousness, violence, ignorance and poverty, may be considered to be racially offensive. But beneath the surface, in the love of Porgy for his Bess, there arises from the misery of Catfish Row

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 343.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 555-58.

²⁰¹ Hansberry, Theatre Arts, XLIV (October, 1960), p. 70.

²⁰² Supra, pp. 139-41.

the spirit of human fineness, compassion, devotion and heroism.

Despite the advances made in Show Boat, the major characters found in Porgy and Bess are more vibrantly alive and possessed of greater universal appeal than any we have yet seen upon the American musical stage. Perhaps it is a small victory; nevertheless, it is a decisive one.

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CHAPTER IV

THE 1940'S: AWAKENING OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The entrance of the United States into World War II undoubtedly was one of the most important historical events of the decade, and it was not without its impact upon race relations in this country. Indeed, the seeds of the Civil Rights movement were sown in the irony of a war which was "fought in the name of the Four Freedoms, but managed so as to preserve segregation."¹ The President's Commission on Civil Disorders, established by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967, reported the following facts:

During World War II, Negroes learned again that fighting for their country brought them no nearer to full citizenship. Rejected when they tried to enlist, they were accepted into the Army according to the proportion of the Negro population to that of the country as a whole--but only in separate units--and those mostly noncombat. The United States thus fought racism in Europe with a segregated fighting force. The Red Cross, with the government's approval, separated Negro and white blood in banks established for wounded servicemen--even though the blood banks were largely the work of a Negro physician, Charles Drew.²

Such inequities were not lost upon the Negro population of the United States. Racial riots erupted not only within the military (both at home and abroad),³ but also among the civilian population in America's larger cities--the Detroit and Harlem riots of 1943 being among the most

¹Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in Black and White (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1964), p. 60.

²Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 223. Cited hereafter as Kerner Commission Report.

³Silberman, pp. 63-64.

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destructive.⁴ White insensitivity to the causes of black frustrations was made clear when the Harlem riot "was denounced by the New York press as 'the most vicious riot in Harlem's history,' while what should have been excoriated, our system of legalized racism, went generally unmentioned."⁵ As the war and the decade progressed, however, the contradiction between the professed ideals of American democracy and the actualities of racial discrimination practiced within the society became painfully apparent to thoughtful Americans of all colors.

New organizations formed and went into motion as political allies of the Negro. Reflecting the political upsurge, plays came to Broadway; a new, a modern anti-slavery literature issued from the presses; a few liberal dailies gave emphasis to the position of the Negro.⁶

Thus, the participation of the United States in World War II led to an awakening of the national conscience and accelerated, in many quarters, a more liberal attitude toward race relations. Especially in the post-war years, demands for civil rights and equal opportunities were made by a Negro population whose effort in the war had produced feelings of resentment toward the white establishment rather than fear.⁷ Organizations such as the N.A.A.C.P. and C.O.R.E. made striking advancements, compelling the administration and the courts to take specific stands on the illegality of discriminatory practices.⁸ This socio-political

⁴Kerner Commission Report, p. 224.

⁵Earl Conrad, Jim Crow America (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), p. 18.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Silberman, pp. 64-65.

⁸Kerner Commission Report, pp. 223-25.

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movement of liberalized policies toward the American Negro is clearly reflected in the musical theatre of the 1940's.

Taken as a whole, one discovers that the decade produced what appears to be, at the very least, a trend toward token integration in the casting of musicals. Proceeding, perhaps, from the same idea that later led Lorraine Hansberry to complain, "it takes rather more of a trick to imagine a good many urban American scenes without Negroes than with them,"⁹ liberalized hiring practices found black singers and dancers performing in shows from which they surely would have been excluded prior to World War II. One of the more progressive practices was that of integrating the choruses of productions which dealt with non-racial themes. Among others, two outstandingly successful examples were On the Town (1944)¹⁰ and Annie Get Your Gun (1946).¹¹

Writing specifically of the 1940's, Edith Isaacs has observed: "It had come to be a part of the newer musical comedy formula to have at least one Negro feature--a dancing star, a chorus line, a singer, or sometimes all three."¹² Thus, in many plotted musicals featuring otherwise all-white casts, one finds the introduction of specialty numbers performed by Negroes. In most cases, these song-and-dance interludes had little or nothing to do with the show's content, and the black act generally remained off-stage for the remainder of the evening. "Mamie

⁹Hansberry, Theatre Arts, XLIV (October, 1960), p. 11.

¹⁰Isaacs, The Negro in the American Theatre, p. 122.

¹¹Quoting from the News-Chronicle (October 1, 1947), Peter Noble reports that the touring company of Annie Get Your Gun was banned in the Southern States for "'showing Negroes as being on an equality with whites, and allowing Negro and white dancers to dance together.'" (Noble, p. 11.)

¹²Isaacs, The Negro in the American Theatre, p. 122.

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is Mimi," a sophisticated tap routine executed by the team of Honi Coles and Cholly Atkins, was featured in the second act of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1949)¹³ and is a case in point. Moreover, as was true of "Mamie is Mimi," the music and lyrics provided for such specialty turns were usually devoid of racial identification--presumably so that subsequent productions might be cast according to available talent. Cole Porter's "Too Darn Hot," which opened the second act of Kiss Me Kate (1948), was sung and danced in the original production by a trio of Negro males.¹⁴ Inasmuch as the stage directions in the published script¹⁵ specifically indicate that Negroes are to be featured in the number, it is interesting to note that Porter's lyrics for "Too Darn Hot" are unquestionably the earthiest and most basic in the entire score.

I'd like to fool with my baby tonight,
Break ev'ry rule with my baby tonight
But pillow, you'll be my baby tonight
'Cause it's too darn hot.¹⁶

Nevertheless, even the most sensitive apologist would have difficulty in charging that the song's directly expressed sensuality is racially motivated. Indeed, in the MGM screen version of Kiss Me Kate, "Too Darn Hot"--with only slightly laundered lyrics--was entirely satisfying as performed by Ann Miller. Likewise, the rousing opening chorus--

¹³Stearns, p. 309. ("Mamie is Mimi," by Jule Styne and Leo Robin, may be heard on the original cast album: Columbia OL 4290; OS 2310.)

¹⁴Lorenzo Fuller, Fred Davis, and Eddie Sledge.

¹⁵Samuel and Bella Spewack, and Cole Porter, "Kiss Me Kate," Theatre Arts, XXXIX, No. 1 (January, 1955), pp. 47-48.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 48.

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"Another Op'nin', Another Show"--was led on the stage by Annabelle Hill in the role of the leading lady's Negro maid. In the lyrics, and in the few perfunctory lines allotted to her and to her male counterpart (Lorenzo Fuller in the role of valet to the leading man), there is nothing which might preclude a policy of racially open casting. In a similar vein, Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner's experimental and inventive Love Life (1948) included a minstrel show production number and a Negro quartet singing "a song about economics in the style of 'Dry Bones.'"¹⁷ In essence, the phrase "separate but equal" would apply to the Negro acts featured in the productions mentioned above, for in each case they were seen to stand apart from the general pattern of the show as a kind of extra added attraction.¹⁸ These examples tend to suggest that the practice of incorporating an independent Negro specialty number into plotted musicals was more a matter of fashion than it was a sincere attempt toward integration.

Progress of a more significant sort was to be found in three moderately successful musicals in which a more genuine brand of integration was motivated by good realistic practice. Early to Bed (1943),¹⁹

¹⁷John Chapman, "'Love Life' Is a Superior Musical, Being Smart and Handsome, Too," New York Daily News, October 3, 1943. Reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1948, IX, No. 19 (Week of October 18), p. 202. (No original cast recording is available; however, "Economics," performed in the more contemporary style inspired by The Supremes, is included in the following record album: Ben Bagley's Alan Jay Lerner Revisited. Crewe, CR 1337.)

¹⁸Such a technique clearly is an extension to the plotted musical of the policy which earlier enabled Bert Williams, Josephine Baker, and Ethel Waters to star in otherwise white revues. (Supra, pp. 42, 46 and 115-21.)

¹⁹Historical insight into the preparation of the production is afforded by Waller's biographer: Ed Kirkeby, Ain't Misbehavin': The Story of Fats Waller (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966), pp. 217-20.

[illegible]

with music by Thomas "Fats" Waller, book and lyrics by George Marion, Jr., ran on Broadway for 382 performances,²⁰ largely on the strength of its widely publicized raciness. Set in a luxurious West Indian brothel on the exotic island of Martinique, the plot revolved around the myriad complications which arise when the bordello is mistaken for a fashionable girls' finishing school.²¹ Featured prominently in the supporting cast, and contributing to the action rather than being isolated from it, were Negro performers Bob Howard and Jeni Le Gon. Howard was seen as major-domo to the star (Richard Kollmar as a bullfighter),²² and was assigned much comic material²³ as well as two hit songs: "When the Nylons Bloom Again" and "Hi-De-Ho-High."²⁴ Joined in both by his partner, Miss Le Gon, "Hi-De-Ho-High" also featured Negro dancers Harold Cromer and David Bethea as a caddy and a gardener respectively.²⁵ The extent to which racial characterization was motivated or even intended in Early to Bed unfortunately remains debatable.²⁶ Much the same may be said of

²⁰Burton, Blue Book of Broadway Musicals, p. 312. (Rigdon credits 380 performances, p. 15.)

²¹New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 12 (Week of July 5, 1943), pp. 314-16.

²²Burton Rascoe, "Early to Bed Opens at the Broadhurst Theater," New York World-Telegram (June 18, 1943), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 12, p. 316.

²³Herrick Brown, "'Early to Bed,'" New York Sun (June 18, 1943), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 12, p. 316.

²⁴Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 120, and Burton, Blue Book of Broadway Musicals, p. 301.

²⁵Burns Mantle, "'Early to Bed,' Rowdy and Fast Musical Has West Indies Color," New York Daily News (June 18, 1943), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 12, p. 315.

²⁶The libretto is unpublished and unavailable.

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Street Scene (1947),²⁷ an operatic version of Elmer Rice's 1929 drama of tenement life. Creighton Thompson appeared as a Negro janitor singing "I Got a Marble and a Star," and black performers also filled the roles of the janitor's wife and a child "who attends the neighborhood school."²⁸ Whether or not these parts were specifically designed with Negro actor-singers in mind, again, is debatable; however, it is clear that the Street Scene company was successfully and realistically integrated with black performers who became a natural part of the environment. Likewise, but more fully realized, Beggar's Holiday (1946) may be said to have been the most unself-consciously integrated, non-racial musical production of the decade. Produced by Perry Watkins (Negro) and John R. Sheppard, Jr. (white), this modernized adaptation of John Gay's The Beggar's Opera was also the product of black-white collaboration: Duke Ellington provided the music for a libretto by John Latouche. The result has been called "an object lesson in democracy,"²⁹ for the show "was cast without regard to colour; the male lead was white, the female was Negro; the rest of the cast interracial."³⁰ In the underworld setting of Beggar's Holiday, peopled with "thieves, gangsters, pimps and prostitutes,"³¹ the racial mixture was "taken for granted as a

²⁷ Kurt Weill (music), Elmer Rice (book), and Langston Hughes (lyrics), Street Scene (London: Chappell & Co. Ltd., n. d.). (The original cast recording of excerpts is available on Columbia, OL-4139.)

²⁸ Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1946-1947," Phylon, VIII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1947), p. 151.

²⁹ Smith, Musical Comedy in America, p. 333.

³⁰ Brown, in Oxford Companion to the Theatre, ed. Hartnoll, p. 571.

³¹ Jefferson, in Phylon, VIII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1947), pp. 147-48.

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natural concomitant of a city where a variety of races lives side by side."³² Beyond such sound realistic practice was the startling fact that the production not only mixed the races but combined them with ease and complete nonchalance. Thus, of this musical--with Alfred Drake in the role of MacHeath and Mildred Smith as Lucy Lockit--it could be said that "for the first time Broadway saw a white man make love to a Negro girl in simple, natural terms."³³ Early to Bed, Street Scene and Beggar's Holiday, all produced during the 1940's and all relatively free of specifically racial characterization, suggest a liberalization and relaxation of previously discriminatory casting practices on the musical stage. Happily, audiences seemed unopposed to such an innovation. Early to Bed was a commercial success;³⁴ Street Scene lasted 148 performances³⁵--a lengthy run for a serious work with operatic pretensions--and the potentially more controversial Beggar's Holiday closed with a total of 108 showings³⁶ after having received mixed reviews largely critical of its book.³⁷

The decade produced further divergent movements concerning the Negro as musical performer, the least successful of which not only reverted to the success formulas of the 1920's and 1930's, but also

³² Rosamond Gilder, "Rainbow Over Broadway; Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, XXXI, No. 3 (March, 1947), p. 16.

³³ Smith, Musical Comedy in America, p. 333.

³⁴ Supra, pp. 165-66.

³⁵ Rigdon, p. 46.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁷ New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1946, VII, No. 26 (Year ending December 31, 1946), pp. 204-07.

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resuscitated much of the original material and some of the performers. Harlem Cavalcade (1942), an all-Negro revue produced and staged by Ed Sullivan and Noble Sissle, was a nostalgic but ill-advised attempt to re-create the exuberant dancing and low blackface comedy so characteristic of past triumphs. The cast, brimful of names associated with the 1920's, included veterans Noble Sissle, Flournoy Miller and Tim Moore.³⁸ The production regurgitated two song hits from Shuffle Along,³⁹ and interspersed among too many tap-dance routines were the traditional comedy sketches beginning with "two frightened ebon gentlemen . . . alone in a graveyard at midnight."⁴⁰ Audiences no longer found such high jinks palatable, and Harlem Cavalcade closed after only forty-nine performances.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Flournoy Miller continued to cling tenaciously to the format he knew best. The result was a short-lived, Harlem-based musical comedy entitled Meet Miss Jones (1947), which Miles M. Jefferson faulted as follows:

Flournoy Miller of the historic Miller & Lyles team should be jailed on bread and water diet for the libretto which the program attributed to him. The music by James "Pete" Johnson was a series of elementary sounds recalling the simple melodies of "Shuffle Along" and "Runnin' Wild" days, but it lacked their nostalgic charm and originality.⁴²

³⁸ New York Theatre Critics' Revues, 1942, III, No. 11 (Week of May 4, 1942), p. 297.

³⁹ Richard Watts, Jr., "Revue from Harlem," New York Herald Tribune (May 2, 1942), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1942, III, p. 297.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Rigdon, p. 21.

⁴² Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1947-1948," Phylon IX, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1948), p. 106.

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Clearly, audiences of the 1940's no longer could accept the stage Negro so popular during the 1920's. Likewise, Broadway response was lukewarm to performances which had met with success during the previous decade. The indefatigable Ethel Waters trotted out strictly vintage material from past triumphs, both musical and dramatic,⁴³ in two Broadway vaudeville-style revues: Laugh Time (1943; integrated),⁴⁴ and Blue Holiday (1945; all-Negro).⁴⁵ Neither indulged in the 1920's-style foolery of Harlem Cavalcade or Meet Miss Jones; however, owing to a lack of originality, Laugh Time totaled a mild 126 performances, and Blue Holiday failed after only eight showings.⁴⁶ The rejection of these four derivative musicals indicates that audiences of the 1940's had tired not only of well-known material but also had grown weary of Negro performers projected in a standardized and familiar fashion.

The 1940's also ushered in a series of dance-oriented revues celebrating the exotic and pagan charms of the West Indian Negro. These tropical displays may be seen as the linear descendants of those troupes of "genuine" African natives found at turn-of-the-century expositions,⁴⁷

⁴³The former included songs closely associated with Miss Waters' career, most of them from revues in which she was featured during the 1930's (Supra, pp. 115-21) as well as a medley from Cabin in the Sky (1940). The latter refers to scenes from Mamba's Daughters included in Blue Holiday.

⁴⁴See: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 14 (Week of October 4, 1943), pp. 285-86.

⁴⁵See: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 9.

⁴⁶Rigdon, pp. 27 and 7, respectively.

⁴⁷Supra, pp. 36 and 98.

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of the jungle numbers for which the Cotton Club had such a penchant,⁴⁸ and of the voodoo rites featured in Run, Little Chillun.⁴⁹ The aboriginal revues of the 1940's differed from their predecessors, however, by emphasizing authenticity over pure showmanship. Katherine Dunham, a serious student of social anthropology⁵⁰ in addition to her professional career as a dancer-choreographer, brought her personally trained dance company to New York seasonally during the middle years of the decade. The Dunham productions, such as Tropical Revue (1943) and Bal-Negre (1946), were highly revered in dance circles for their ethnic accuracy but also were limited in their popular appeal and criticized for becoming "monotonous with each season's repeating."⁵¹ Also faulted for the repetitious sameness of its calypso rhythms⁵² was the more commercially oriented Caribbean Carnival (1947). Essentially a revue, the proceedings were climaxed by a voodoo ballet, conceived and executed by Pearl Primus and her dancers, which Brooks Atkinson described as being "infinitely superior to the tawdry orgies Broadway usually stages."⁵³ Universally damned by the critics as being insufferably dull, the production closed after eleven performances. Nevertheless, the Dunham

⁴⁸Supra, p. 59.

⁴⁹Supra, pp. 125-27.

⁵⁰Rigdon, p. 424.

⁵¹Jefferson, in Phylon, VIII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1947), p. 152.

⁵²New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1947, VIII, No. 21 (Week of December 8, 1947), pp. 246-47.

⁵³Brooks Atkinson, "Pearl Primus and Claude Merchant in a Calypso Musical Entitled 'Caribbean Carnival,'" reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1947, VIII, No. 21, p. 246.

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dance recitals and even the ill-advised Caribbean Carnival demonstrate a movement toward greater authenticity in presenting to the American public a picture of the non-American Negro. In this fashion, the popular image of the uncivilized and orgiastic pagan animal began to show signs of refinement. And it is no small matter that these revues were the precursors of more serious plotted musicals dealing with the non-American Negro (both West Indian and African) which were to come at the end of the decade and continue throughout the 1950's and '60's.⁵⁴

Finally, in the realm of American Grand Opera, Negro characters figured prominently in two works produced at the end of the decade. Troubled Island (première March 31, 1949), by composer William Grant Still and librettist Langston Hughes, was based upon the career of Jean Jacques Dessalines, revolutionary liberator of his people and Emperor of Haiti. It was a quick failure, about which Miles M. Jefferson wrote: "The opera proved disappointing to music and drama lovers alike who had anticipated inspiration rather than labor in the first major opus of its kind completely composed by Negroes to be presented in New York."⁵⁵ Regina⁵⁶ (première October 31, 1949), Marc Blitzstein's operatic version of Lillian Hellman's The Little Foxes, lasted fifty-six performances on

⁵⁴Reference is here made to the following: Lost in the Stars (1949), House of Flowers (1954), Jamaica (1957), Kwamina (1961), Ballad for Bimshire (1963), and The Zulu and the Zayda (1965).

⁵⁵Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway: 1948-1949," Phylon, X, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1949), p. 111.

⁵⁶The libretto is available in a brochure which accompanies the complete recording: Marc Blitzstein, Regina, Columbia Records, 03S 202 (stereo), 03L 260 (Monaural).

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Broadway and has been periodically revived by the New York City Opera Company.⁵⁷ For purposes of atmosphere and occasional ironic comment, Blitzstein employed a Negro jazz band and an offstage chorus of Negro field workers. Cal and Addie, servants in the Giddens' household, contribute modestly to the action. Cal is barely sketched in as a butler fond of spirituals and ragtime. Addie is essentially the faithful "Mammy" character of the contented slave school; yet, like a combination of Show Boat's Queenie and Joe, she is revealed to be an objective observer of the people and events which fill her life:

If you was like the night, and you could
 see the things there are,
 Then you'd be blue, like you ain't never
 been before, so far.⁵⁸

Although Addie is treated sympathetically and with some dimension, Blitzstein's operatic adaptation remains so faithfully to its source that one would be better advised to consult The Little Foxes for further reference.

Keeping in mind the preceding survey of the decade, one must acknowledge--especially in the post-war years--an attitude of growing enlightenment in policies and practices regarding the Negro performer on the American musical stage. The varying degrees of integration in productions devoid of racial content, coupled with attempts to present a more authentic cultural representation of the non-American Negro, and the rejection by audiences of minstrelsy-oriented blackface comedy, all suggest a movement toward greater social awareness within the realm of race relations on Broadway. Such a statement, however, can be derived

⁵⁷Engel, p. 142.

⁵⁸Blitzstein, Regina, Columbia O3S 202 (brochure), p. 11.

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only from inference, for the specific delineation of Negro characters in plotted musicals of the 1940's has not yet been mentioned. The decade produced eight works for the popular musical stage which necessarily contained Negro roles. They follow, in chronological order, along with their total number of performances on Broadway:⁵⁹

Cabin in the Sky (1940), 156 performances
Carmen Jones (1943), 502 performances
 **Bloomer Girl (1944), 657 performances
Memphis Bound (1945), 36 performances
Carib Song (1945), 36 performances
St. Louis Woman (1946), 113 performances
 **Finian's Rainbow (1947), 725 performances
 **Lost in the Stars (1949), 281 performances

Of these eight, only the three marked with asterisks featured thematic material devoted to the subject of race relations. It is significant, however, to note that the three musicals of serious social commitment were among the four most popular productions found on this list. In order best to determine the decade's varying attitudes toward characterization of the Negro, the study now will examine each of the musicals in chronological order.

Cabin in the Sky

The musical fantasy, Cabin in the Sky, began as "that unheard-of-thing—a completed libretto (dialogue, stage business, and all) ready for its musical setting."⁶⁰ Originally entitled Little Joe,⁶¹ it was

⁵⁹In each case, the length of the Broadway run has been derived from Rigdon; in chronological order, the references to pagination are as follows: pp. 8, 9, 7, 31, 9, 42, 16, and 29.

⁶⁰Vernon Duke, "Notes," Cabin in the Sky, Capitol Records, SW-2073. Cited hereafter as Duke, "Notes," Recording.

⁶¹Lynn Root, personal letter (November 6, 1969).

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the brainchild of playwright Lynn Root who subsequently was joined by composer Vernon Duke and lyricist John Latouche in giving the text its final shape and scope. Presented at the Martin Beck Theatre by Albert Lewis and Vinton Freedley, Cabin in the Sky opened on October 25, 1940, with choreography by George Balanchine, settings and costumes by Boris Aronson, and an all-Negro company headed by Ethel Waters (Petunia), Dooley Wilson (Little Joe), Katherine Dunham (Georgia Brown), Todd Duncan (The Lawd's General), and Rex Ingram (Lucifer, Jr.)⁶² The musical program, which has been called Vernon Duke's "one genuinely distinguished light score,"⁶³ contained the instantaneous and durable hit, "Taking a Chance on Love," while "Honey in the Honeycomb," "Love Turned the Light Out," and the poignant title song all proved to be popular and are fondly remembered.⁶⁴ Cabin in the Sky received enthusiastic response from the critics who were unanimous in praising Ethel Waters' performance;⁶⁵ George Jean Nathan voted it "the Best Musical Show of the 1940-41 theatrical year."⁶⁶ In 1943, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released a successful film version⁶⁷ starring Ethel Waters, Eddie

⁶²New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1940, I, No. 10 (Week of October 28, 1940), p. 243.

⁶³Smith, Musical Comedy in America, p. 332.

⁶⁴Kreuger, "Liner Notes," Ethel Waters . . . , Columbia Records, CL 2792.

⁶⁵New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1940, I, No. 10 (Week of October 28, 1940), pp. 242-44.

⁶⁶Vernon Duke, Passport to Paris (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), p. 400. (History of the production is discussed at length.)

⁶⁷Of the motion picture, Peter Noble has remarked, "'Cabin in the Sky' was excellent entertainment. . . . Nevertheless, like all exclusively Negro movies, it suffered from the same defects: complete unreality and relentless continuance of the stereotypes, such as the dice-throwing, razor-carrying, good-for-nothing, jazz-playing, gambling 'darkies.'" (Noble, p. 201.)

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(Rochester) Anderson, and Lena Horne.⁶⁸ Since then, Cabin in the Sky has been revived once in summer stock (1953)⁶⁹ and, more recently, in a prominent but ill-fated off-Broadway production (1964).⁷⁰

The libretto of Cabin in the Sky remains commercially unavailable;⁷¹ therefore, a detailed plot summary may prove helpful. The action takes place "somewhere in the South."⁷² Little Joe Jackson, an irresponsible but likeable rascal, dies of gunshot wounds inflicted by Domino Johnson, his rival for the affections of sexy Georgia Brown. Joe's ever-faithful wife, Petunia, fervently prays that the Lord will spare him while, unknown to her, the Lord's General and Lucifer, Jr.,⁷³

⁶⁸Various publicity releases from the studio, "Cabin in the Sky file," Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood, California.

⁶⁹Duke, "Notes," Recording.

⁷⁰According to Walter Rigdon (p. 8), the 1964 revival ran for only forty-seven performances. Author, Lynn Root, in a personal letter (November 24, 1969), states that "it was not a good production and I vehemently fought against it. In fact, it killed a potential London production." Nevertheless, the revival led to the Capitol recording (SW-2073). Although four songs from the original production have been excluded in favor of interpolations from other sources, the recording does preserve much of the original score which, heretofore, had been unavailable.

⁷¹This author is grateful to Mr. Lynn Root for the generous loan of the only manuscript remaining in his possession. Close examination of the text reveals that it is a preparatory draft for the 1964 revival; however, in a personal letter (November 6, 1969), Mr. Root writes: "This is not the original script, but it hews very closely to it." Other manuscripts of Cabin in the Sky are believed to be in the collection of the Library of the University of Wyoming at Laramie (to which Mr. Root donated much of his original material), and what appears to be the original version is believed to be in the Theatre and Drama Collection of the New York Public Library.

⁷²Lynn Root (book), John Latouche (lyrics), and Vernon Duke (music), Cabin in the Sky, Unpublished manuscript (typewritten), access granted courtesy of Mr. Lynn Root, Los Angeles, California, p. I-F-1. (Pagination throughout according to Act, Scene, page.) Cited hereafter as Cabin in the Sky.

⁷³Also referred to, throughout the script, as The Head Man.

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haggle over the possession of Little Joe's soul. In deference to Petunia, the Lord sends word that Joe is to be given a reprieve--a six month earthly trial period during which he is to prove himself worthy of a place in Heaven. There is, however, a stipulation; when Joe revives, he will remember nothing of his desperate situation. Moreover, Lucifer, Jr., and the Lord's General will be present in spirit, each attempting to lead Little Joe in morally opposite directions.

Aided by the influence of the Lord's General and reassured by Petunia's tender care and warm piety, Little Joe appears to be a changed person, and the devilish temptations offered him are thwarted at every turn. Thoroughly peeved, Lucifer, Jr., devises a devious scheme designed to provide the ultimate test of Little Joe's new-found moral fiber. He arranges for Joe to draw a winning lottery ticket in the Irish Sweepstakes. The plan nearly backfires when Little Joe assumes that his good fortune is the Lord's reward for his recently impeccable behavior, but when Petunia observes the mercenary Georgia Brown embracing Little Joe with joyous congratulations, she assumes the worst, banishes him from their home, and bitterly questions her own faith in God.

The now-wealthy Little Joe consoles himself by proceeding to live in high style, with Georgia Brown his constant companion. In desperation, Petunia determines to shock Little Joe back to his senses and transforms herself into an elegant, glamorously-gowned and very worldly creature. The gaudy Georgia Brown suffers by comparison, and it is now Petunia who is desired not only by Little Joe but by his former rival, Domino Johnson. During the altercation which ensues, Petunia steps in the path of the first of two bullets aimed at Little

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Joe, and both are killed. Confronted now by the Lord's General, Petunia's past conduct guarantees her a place in Heaven, but the books on hapless Little Joe do not balance. Just as he is in the clutches of Lucifer, Jr., word arrives that Georgia Brown has repented all her sins and has given to the church her worldly possessions--most of which had been supplied by Little Joe. With this to his credit, the almost-reformed rascal and his ever-faithful Petunia together enter the pearly gates.

Should the above synopsis lead one to the conclusion that Cabin in the Sky leans toward serious sermonizing or moralistic profundities, let that notion be dispelled at once. Lynn Root sets the tone in the opening scene wherein the balance between the serious and the comic is often masterful. Little Joe lies upon his deathbed. The mood of a mournful spiritual is quickly shattered by the following exchange between Georgia Brown and Dr. Jones:

GEORGIA

(Frowning)
Little Joe that bad?

DR. JONES

(Nodding)
Yeah, it's that bad. And you'll only make it worse if you come between Little Joe and Petunia at a time like this.

GEORGIA

(Flippantly)
I could go in there an' get him on his feet--
(She snaps her fingers)
--just like that.

DR. JONES

(Firmly)
You're better at gettin' them off their feet. Now get along, Georgia.⁷⁴

⁷⁴Cabin in the Sky, pp. I-F-2 and 3.

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The seriousness returns briefly as Petunia prays with moving urgency and then wearily sings a tender lullaby to her dying husband. Immediately thereafter, Lucifer, Jr., appears and, in Latouche's lyrics for "Little Poppa Satan," gleefully announces Little Joe's fate:

Don't be hesitatin'
 Little Poppa Satan
 Thinks your time is overdue.
 Imps are shovin'
 Fire in the oven,
 heatin' it up for you
 Wow! . . .⁷⁵

When Little Joe complains that he is too ill to comply, Lucifer, Jr., prods him with the information that "the asbestos chariot is a-waitin'!"⁷⁶ After this, all threats of any serious kind of hell-fire and brimstone are dispelled, and the authors lead us into a good-natured fantasy world, the only purpose of which is to entertain. If Cabin in the Sky succeeds in making light of potentially somber material, it also is infused with a simplicity that is at once both poignant and tender. In short, it is a well-balanced, warmly humorous work, the total quality of which has best been described by drama critic, Richard Lockridge:

[Cabin in the Sky] ventures into fantasy, prances out into Broadway, mingles virtually all possible moods into a slightly indescribable melange. It is frequently funny in a wide-eyed way, . . . brash and oddly gentle at practically one and the same time. . . . By and large it is imaginative and gay and at its best it has a special quality of its own.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. I-1-4b.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. I-1-5.

⁷⁷ Richard Lockridge, "'Cabin in the Sky,' With Ethel Waters, Is Offered at the Martin Beck," New York Sun (October 26, 1940), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1940, I, No. 10, p. 243.

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The basic premise from which Cabin in the Sky proceeds has been likened to that of The Green Pastures,⁷⁸ and it is true that both inescapably derive from the tradition of the minstrel show travesty. The significant difference between the two works may be found in the fact that, unlike its predecessor, Cabin in the Sky makes no attempt to present its material in a fashion which presumes to see through the eyes of the Negro. Its creators took admittedly standardized Negro characters as the subjects of their modern morality play, but they made no real effort, beyond that of dialect,⁷⁹ to cast their work according to the formula molds either of the joke book tradition⁸⁰ or of the jazzy tap-dance revues. In point of fact, they fought against it. Given the scenario, one can easily imagine the temptation of presenting torridly tapping choruses of angels and devils, but those responsible for the staging of Cabin in the Sky would have no such thing. Vernon Duke relates the following story:

Vinton Freedly and, especially, Martin Beck were alarmed by the sinuous, sex-laden writhing of the [Katherine] Dunham troupe

⁷⁸ Among others: Richard Lockridge, Burns Mantle, Brooks Atkinson, Rosamond Gilder, Stanley Green and Cecil Smith.

⁷⁹ In a personal letter (November 24, 1969), Lynn Root confirms the fact that the manuscript employed in this study differs significantly from the original only with regard to dialect. He writes: "In the original script, the dialogue was written in a much broader Southern accent, more in the idiom of how people expected Negroes to talk at that time. It wouldn't do today, and I mention it because I think it shows how far we've come in mutual understanding in that comparatively short time."

⁸⁰ In the manner either of the minstrel show or of those works in the style of the Williams and Walker musical comedies.

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and by [George] Balanchine's novel approach to the Negro dancing. Negroes were noted for their show-stopping hoofing and tapping. (Bill Robinson or Nicholas Bros. style); putting them through the motions of a highly stylized ballet seemed pretty iconoclastic to the producers. They begged George to let the Dunhamites do a little hoofing--no dice. Finally, Beck decided on a showdown, the purpose of which was to oust Balanchine and replace him with a tap-routine specialist.⁸¹

Balanchine emerged victorious, and "work was resumed with no tap or hoofing to mar our art."⁸² This reluctance to conform to the established traditions and expectations of the so-called "darky show" is reflected, as well, in the attitudes of the composer and lyricist.

Vernon Duke recalls: "On reading the script, my first impulse was to turn it down because, much as I admired the Negro people and their musical gifts, I didn't think myself sufficiently attuned to Negro folklore."⁸³ Having changed his mind, however, Duke and John Latouche journeyed to the South for inspiration. The result, in Duke's words, was that "John and I returned to New York with the decision of staying away from pedantic authenticity, writing our own kind of Negro songs instead."⁸⁴ Thus, the score for Cabin in the Sky was written in none of those styles which, rightly or wrongly, Broadway audiences had come to associate with black people. Instead, music and lyrics were inspired solely by character, situation, theme or mood already present in Lynn Root's finished book.⁸⁵ Moreover, Root, himself, refrained from

⁸¹Duke, Passport to Paris, p. 390.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Duke, "Notes," Recording.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Stanley Green (The World of Musical Comedy, p. 203) has commented: "Despite the fact that there were no blues or rhythm songs to convey the authentic emotions [*sic*] of American Negroes, the score was still authentic enough as purely theatre music to delineate characters skillfully and to set the proper mood."

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pursuing a deliberately racial orientation; in fact, the script contains virtually no overt references to race whatever.⁸⁶ The puns, gags and one-liners with which the text is liberally laced are derived largely from the heaven-hell theme or are topical in nature, thereby imbuing Cabin in the Sky with a witty sophistication rarely seen in previous musicals featuring Negroes. David Ewen has correctly stated: "The folk characters of the play were rarely permitted to degenerate into vaudeville humor, gawdy spectacle, or outright caricature. Every element in the production maintained dignity."⁸⁷ The text of Cabin in the Sky reveals a collaborative effort which resulted in a musical work so well unified in style, intent, and general tone as to be remarkable for its day.

If the production of Cabin in the Sky broke with certain long-standing traditions regarding the popular image of the Negro on the musical stage,⁸⁸ it must be acknowledged that the musical is peopled with the same comic stage-Negro types whom we have seen for years. The plot summary, alone, should serve as sufficient evidence that Little Joe is the childlike, shiftless, crap-shooting, unfaithful male; Petunia is the long-suffering, patient, hard-working wife--happy with "plenty of nothing," so long as her mate comes home at night; Georgia Brown fulfills the role of the tawdry, gaudy, hedonistic, temptress-trollop, and Domino

⁸⁶The only possible instance occurs when the Lord's General, suspicious of Lucifer, Jr., and his scheming ways, cannot bring himself to use the familiar phrase "nigger in the woodpile," and virtuously substitutes in its stead, "there's a colored gentleman in the lumberyard around here." (Cabin in the Sky, p. II-1-7.)

⁸⁷Ewen, Story of America's Musical Theater, p. 169.

⁸⁸As, in their own fashions, had Show Boat and Porgy and Bess.

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Johnson is the possessive, gun-toting, violent brute. Nevertheless, it is well within the authors' objectives that the characters should be no more than two-dimensional types. Cabin in the Sky is, after all, a morality play, and such works require immediately identifiable representatives of good and evil, right and wrong. It is taken for granted that an audience will respond accurately to the opposing moral positions which the Lord's General and Lucifer, Jr., represent, and Lynn Root has cleverly accomplished the same for his earthly characters by insisting upon the caricature of Negro stereotypes. From the moment she saunters onto the stage, "a voluptuous, good-looking Negress flashily dressed and full of sex appeal,"⁸⁹ an audience knows (because it has been well trained) that Georgia Brown spells trouble and will side with the forces of the devil. It knows, too, that Petunia personifies righteousness and that the childlike Little Joe has the best intentions and the weakest resolve. Thus, in this instance, the long-abused Negro stereotypes of the musical stage are employed for a practicable purpose and, seen within the context of fantasy, are rendered eminently acceptable.

Once the stereotypes have been established, characterization is maintained on a very simple level, proceeding in each case from the individual's moral orientation. For the three principal earthly characters, the distinction is not so much between good and evil as it is a matter of conflicting standards of value which lead to behavioral patterns. The difference between Petunia and her errant husband is revealed most clearly in Latouche's concise lyrics for the title song:

⁸⁹ Cabin in the Sky, p. I-F-1.

PETUNIA

There's a little cabin in the sky, Mister
 For me and for you
 I feel that it's true
 Somehow....
 Can't you see that cabin in the sky, Mister
 An acre or two
 Of heavenly blue
 To plough....

We will be oh so gay
 Eat fried chicken every day
 As the angels go sailing by....
 This is why my heart is flying high, Mister
 'Cause I know we'll have a cabin in the sky....

LITTLE JOE

There may be a cabin in the sky, Sister
 Yet I am a boy
 Who's headed for joy
 Below --
 There may be an acre way up high, Sister
 But I ain't got wings
 And I want the things I know....

I done heard preachers pray
 'Bout that chicken every day
 But I'll settle for gravy now

So until the day I learn to fly, Sister
 I'm just passing by that cabin in the sky....⁹⁰

Here, in a single song, is character delineation made crystal clear.

Petunia's religious convictions lead her to appreciate the simple things of life--shelter, the goodness of honest physical labor, food--and to expect a heavenly reward in precisely those basic terms. By way of contrast, the carefree Little Joe is revealed to be completely earth-bound, thinking only of the pleasures of the moment and eager to "settle for gravy now."⁹¹ Similarly, Georgia Brown's philosophy--which is merely an extension of Little Joe's--is neatly captured in Latouche's lyrics for "Love Me Tomorrow":

⁹⁰Cabin in the Sky, p. 1-2-7.

⁹¹Ibid.

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GEORGIA

I been taught, that this life is short
 Never wait until tomorrow....
 'S temptin' fate to procrastinate
 Better grab what you got ⁹²
 While the iron is hot....

The characters never really develop beyond these positions.

Little Joe's behavior is entirely consistent with his hedonism, and the extent to which he truly mends his ways is negligible. Early in the first scene, Lucifer, Jr., remarks to the Lord's General: "You better let us take this rascal or you're gonna have a bunch of crap-shootin' angels on your hands."⁹³ At the very end, just as Little Joe is about to enter the pearly gates, "a pair of dice clatters to the floor at his feet."⁹⁴ As Petunia has observed when praying for Little Joe's recovery, "he ain't wicked, Lord--he's just weak, that's all. He's got no power to resist the devil lest I watch him."⁹⁵ Thus, Little Joe's attempts to reform are mighty--especially when influenced by Petunia or the Lord's General--but his lapses are many. Despite his insistence that he has renounced gambling, Little Joe rationalizes the purchase of a lottery ticket because, as he puts it, "I got to cut down gradual."⁹⁶ His actions always are motivated by his intense interest in momentary pleasures and immediate rewards. Little Joe embraces religion not because of any spiritual value he finds therein but because

⁹²Ibid., p. II-1-25.

⁹³Ibid., p. I-1-11.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. II-2-21.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. I-1-4.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. I-4-3.

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he comes to the conclusion that "maybe there is somethin' in this prayin' business."⁹⁷ The same expectation is revealed in the following exchange with Georgia Brown:

GEORGIA

You got religion--sure enough?

LITTLE JOE

(Uncertainly)

I have it if you don't get too close to me!

GEORGIA

What kinda pay-off is there in it? Tell me that!

LITTLE JOE

(Vaguely)

I dunno yet. I ain't been at it long enough to find out.⁹⁸

It is entirely proper, therefore, that upon receipt of the winning lottery ticket Little Joe should exclaim, "this must be the payoff,"⁹⁹ for it is characteristic that he would look for spiritual rewards in the form of earthly gain. Moreover, once abandoned by Petunia, Little Joe's quick reversion to his old ways of high living and free spending with Georgia Brown reveals the personality of an earthbound hedonist. Even upon approaching the gates of heaven, his final act is the theft of a pair of dice, followed by a prompt lie with regard to his intentions for their use.¹⁰⁰ In this manner, the characterization of Little Joe is always consistent and, in accord with the authors' purposes, lacking in dimensionality. He retains all the familiar traits of the rural, comic Negro stereotype, but they are refined to the point where an audience

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. I-2-10.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. II-1-23.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. II-1-27.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. II-2-21.

laughs more at the predicaments in which the character finds himself than at the clichés.

Georgia Brown, less ingenuous and even more hedonistic than Little Joe, is equally two-dimensional. Described by Lucifer, Jr., as "the best gong-kicker I got,"¹⁰¹ Georgia represents vice in the form of temporal pleasure. A comic cousin of Bess--although not developed to the extent of her predecessor--she lives a life of exaggerated eroticism. An apparent threat to the religious community, which avoids her as if she were a leper,¹⁰² Georgia's appeal to male sexuality is evident in Little Joe's wistful remark: "You're awful hard to forget once a man gets to know you good."¹⁰³ More interested in a variety of conquests than in the respectability of a marriage license,¹⁰⁴ Georgia evaluates, in "a hot vampish number with plenty of swing,"¹⁰⁵ her natural attraction to the opposite sex:

What have I got that others ain't
That always seems to please?
Ain't my perfume nor my fancy paint
But when I charm
The men all swarm
Just like they was bees.¹⁰⁶

Georgia's life is devoted not only to sensual pleasures, but also to the pleasures of material possessions. Her taste runs toward dazzling

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. II-2-18.

¹⁰²Ibid. (stage directions), p. I-F-2.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. II-1-20.

¹⁰⁴The text contains many observations that Georgia is promiscuous, and Georgia, herself, states: "I ain't never tried to bust up your home, Little Joe. I just want to see yuh once in a while." (Cabin in the Sky, p. II-1-21.)

¹⁰⁵Cabin in the Sky (stage directions), p. II-2-4.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. II-2-4.

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jewelry and gaudy clothing--the better to attract attention to her charms--and she has no inhibitions about displaying herself or her finery. Georgia performs two sizzling dance numbers¹⁰⁷ for the purpose of arousing Little Joe, and in the nightclub scene she proudly lifts her skirt to display her new silk underwear. When reprimanded by Little Joe for her gaucherie, Georgia's response could not be more characteristic:

LITTLE JOE

Georgia' (She drops her skirt and looks up.) Remember--you're a lady now.

GEORGIA

(Loftily)

"Course I'm a lady. I was impressin' 'em with that fact."¹⁰⁸

Georgia Brown is, quite simply, a classic example of the pseudo-sophisticated, high-living, exotic primitive. Because it is intended that she should embody all the "wrong" values, she never develops beyond the symbolism of the stereotype. Her reported off-stage reversal is completely out of character and is employed, quite frankly, as a deus ex machina in order to resolve Little Joe's final predicament. Being immersed in a world of fantasy, however, one is amused to find the device in accord with the spirit of the show rather than being offended by it.

Petunia, too, is entirely consistent as a representative of the opposite moral persuasion and is delineated in simple terms with no great depth. Ethel Waters, who created the role, recognized its lack of complexity. Having been given the initial draft, entitled Little Joe, Miss Waters recalls:

¹⁰⁷"Little Joe's Vision" (Act II; Scene i) and "Honey in the Honeycomb" (Act II; Scene ii).

¹⁰⁸Cabin in the Sky, pp. II-2-3 and 4.

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I rejected the part because it seemed to me a man's play rather than a woman's. Petunia, in the original script, was no more than a punching bag for Little Joe. . . . After some of the changes I demanded had been made I accepted the role, largely because the music was so pretty. But right through the rehearsals and even after the play had opened, I kept adding my own lines and little bits of business to build up the character of Petunia.¹⁰⁹

For purposes of the morality theme, Petunia embodies all the "right" values. Characters of great virtue often run the risk of being less interesting than characters of lesser virtue--especially in a light-hearted work such as Cabin in the Sky wherein the "wrong" values are equated with temporal pleasure rather than outright evil. Happily, the authors avoid the sanctimonious, and Petunia emerges as a good-natured, sympathetic and warmly realized human being. Her religiosity is far from the fanaticism and fervor of the Serena of *Porgy and Bess*, being manifested, instead, as a deeply abiding faith in the goodness of the Lord. As Petunia prays, it is made clear that she feels close to Him and gathers reassurance from her conviction that God is a benevolent Protector. This is evident in Petunia's explanation to the parson, Brother Green:

I'm trustin' in Him. Sometimes it's awful hard. Sometimes I wonder why He lets the devil get into Little Joe's soul. But there's a reason. That's what I keep tellin' myself. There must be a reason. . . . I'm beginnin' to think maybe the Lord brought this about to save Little Joe. Maybe Little Joe's gonna be like his old self again when he gets recovered. Maybe the Lord is helpin' me out with my trouble right this minute.¹¹⁰

Given such faith and confidence, coupled with the fact that her prayers are answered by Little Joe's miraculous recovery, it is not uncharacteristic that Petunia should question her credence in divine wisdom when

¹⁰⁹Waters, His Eye Is on the Sparrow, p. 312.

¹¹⁰Cabin in the Sky, p. I-1-3.

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her happiness seems to be shattered for no apparent reason. Having banished Little Joe in a fit of temper the likes of which she has never before displayed,¹¹¹ the heartbroken woman cries out in anguish:

Oh Lord! What have I done to get punishment like this!
 . . . Why didn't Yuh let 'im die, Lord? Why did You give
 him back to me so he could hurt me like this?
 (Looking up tearfully)
 I tried my best to be a good wife. I believed in You, Lord.
 (She suddenly rages)
 Then You let that devilish woman come into my home and take
 Little Joe!
 (She screams angrily)
 You let me love that two-timin' tom cat--then You let 'im
 break my heart! Why! Why!¹¹²

While it is true that such an hysterical outburst constitutes, for the mild-mannered woman we have come to know, behavior of an extreme sort (serving the exigencies of the plot more than characterization), still it remains consistent with Petunia's system of values. Nor is her apparent transformation into a woman of the world particularly out of character. Rather, it is an act, a conscious performance for the benefit of Little Joe,¹¹³ designed to demonstrate the shallowness of a way of life devoted only to self-gratification. Throughout Cabin in the Sky Petunia remains devoted to the "right" values, and in the end--still faithful to her husband and thankful to the Lord¹¹⁴--she receives the ultimate reward.

¹¹¹ Little Joe asks, "You gone crazy?," and the Lord's General remarks, "Petunia--you ain't never acted like this before!" (Cabin in the Sky, p. II-1-28).

¹¹² Cabin in the Sky, pp. II-1-28 and 29.

¹¹³ Petunia frantically repels Domino Johnson's amorous advances (*ibid.*, pp. II-2-12 and 13), and, later, the Lord's General confirms her pretense: "We understand you just acted up to get Little Joe back again." (*ibid.*, p. II-2-14.)

¹¹⁴ Cabin in the Sky, pp. II-2-17 and 19.

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There is nothing stuffy about Petunia's goodness; she is given neither to sermonizing nor self-righteousness and can be remarkably tolerant of Little Joe's minor lapses. She allows him to keep his lottery ticket "just this once,"¹¹⁵ and although Petunia disapproves of gambling, she admits, with irony and great gaiety, the pleasure she has derived from "Taking a Chance on Love":

. . . I thought that cards were a frame-up
 I never would try
 But now I'm taking the game up
 And the ace of hearts is high--

 Wadin' in again
 I'm leadin' with my chin again --
 I'm startin' out to win again --
 Taking a chance on love. . . .¹¹⁶

Early in Act II, Petunia yearns for "just a little ol' house with a garden. Maybe a Virginia home--'way off by itself where nobody can find us."¹¹⁷ This leads to a song, "In My Old Virginia Home (on the River Nile)," followed by an elaborate Egyptian dream ballet. The song inspires Petunia toward the following spontaneous action: "Petunia momentarily forgets herself and starts an energetic dance, tossing her hips. Suddenly she stops, shamefaced, looking up for forgiveness."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. I-4-4.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. I-1-23. ("Taking a Chance on Love" was not intended as part of the original score. At the request of Ethel Waters, the song was added in order to give the character of Petunia greater variety. Originally entitled "Fooling Around With Love," it had been written by Vernon Duke and Ted Fetter for another project. Fetter and John Latouche collaborated in revising the lyrics better to suit character and situation for Cabin in the Sky. See: Duke, "Notes," Recording.)

¹¹⁷Cabin in the Sky, p. II-1-9.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. II-1-10.

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This, coupled with the fact that Petunia convincingly accomplishes her sophisticated-lady charade by launching into a torridly rhythmic performance of "Savannah,"¹¹⁹ suggests that she is capable of more than the homeliness to which she subscribes in the following speech: "I'm a real lady now. Don't do nobody's washin' but my own. Little Joe's workin' hard and payin' attention to nobody but me. (She sighs happily.) There's just nothing more in this wide world I could ask for."¹²⁰ This sentiment, so reminiscent of Porgy's contentment with nothing more than his gal, his Lord, and his song,¹²¹ clearly demonstrates that Petunia has chosen the latter, having discovered that the simple things of life bring to her the richest earthly rewards. In this manner, Petunia stands in direct contrast to Georgia Brown and to the baser instincts of the potentially redeemable Little Joe, representing a specific moral position without ever renouncing the humanized gaiety and warmth which make her so likable.

The chief representatives of temperance and hedonism are, of course, the Lord's General and Lucifer, Jr. Their fundamental positions are stated most succinctly in the lyrics of John Latouche. In "The Man Upstairs," the Lord's General advises Little Joe on the subject of propriety:

Pay heed to the Man upstairs
Pay no mind to the one below
Let your heart be wise
Turn your watchful eyes

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. II-2-11 and 12.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. II-1-7.

¹²¹ Porgy and Bess, pp. 197-206.

Up to Paradise...
 Work and pray
 Until your day is over.¹²²

Lucifer, Jr., on the other hand, has no use for a virtuous existence or "pie in the sky," opting instead for a carefree life of self-indulgence:

Do what you want to do
 It's your life
 And brother, it's up to you
 Say what you want to say
 Speak your piece and trouble will fly away

Go on and live
 Like a crazy elf
 Put your inhibitions upon the shelf.¹²³

It is important to note that, unlike the Biblical characters of The Green Pastures, both Lucifer, Jr., and the Lord's General are couriers of the ultimate supernatural powers; therefore, the issue of color need not be reconciled in terms of caricature nor rationalized as an author's conceit. In point of fact, with the exception of dialect, these characters are devoid of specific racial attributes. Moreover, Lynn Root's ingenious device neatly avoids potential accusations of irreverence, while it enables him to treat the cosmic forces humorously.

The legions of the Lord, dedicated to fighting "the good fight,"¹²⁴ appropriately are designated by military titles and military uniforms,¹²⁵ rather in the fashion of an exaggerated Salvation Army.

¹²²Cabin in the Sky, p. I-1-21.

¹²³Ibid., p. I-3-5.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. I-1-21.

¹²⁵The Lord's General appears in "the gaudiest uniform that has been worn since The Emperor Jones." (Sidney B. Whipple, "Ethel Waters Back in Musical Fantasy," New York World-Telegram, October 26, 1940, reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1940, I, No. 10 [Week of October 28, 1940], p. 243.)

Lucifer, Jr., and his henchmen are reminiscent of gangland-style organized crime. There is absolutely nothing awesome about these two and their followers. Lynn Root humanizes his incorporeal agents in purely comic terms. In conflict over the possession of Little Joe's soul, the Lord's General and Lucifer, Jr. (also known as the Head Man), haggle over territories, bicker about legal technicalities, hurl petty insults at one another, and behave in a manner which is childish rather than childlike. The following exchange is illustrative.

GENERAL

Who gave you orders to pick up this man?

HEAD MAN

Now, you all better keep outa this. We got our orders from the big boss himself.

GENERAL

Mmmm! Looks like old Lucifer been jumpin' the gun again.

HEAD MAN

(Stubbornly)

No, he ain't. We've had Little Joe on our list for a long time.

GENERAL

That don't cut no ice. You had lots of souls on your list that you didn't get.

HEAD MAN

I know that. But Little Joe, here, never done no repentin' till after he was dead -- and that don't count -- you know that. What you doin' down here anyhow? Tell me that.

GENERAL

I'll tell you. We received a powerful prayer from Petunia there. It was the most powerful piece of prayin' we've heard up there in a long time.

HEAD MAN

Oh - oh! I was afraid of that.

GENERAL

(Warningly)

Now if you coal-heavers don't lay off till we check up on Petunia's prayer, you're gonna have some explainin' to do.

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HEAD MAN

(Puzzled)
Well, this is a mess!¹²⁶

The devil's henchmen and the angel-soldiers follow the same childish, pattern and are ever-eager to settle disputes with their fists. One particularly amusing sequence (Act II; Scene 1) has to do with Christ's admonition to turn the other cheek--an action which the angels are unwilling to perform until the Lord's General bribes them with promises of promotion in rank.¹²⁷ The absence of veneration and the colloquial approach applied to the supernatural characters and religious themes account for much of the lighthearted humor found in Cabin in the Sky. There is, however, purely secular satire as well. Act I; Scene iii, which takes place in the Head Man's air-conditioned office in Hades, ridicules the brainstorming sessions so popular in corporate big business as Lucifer, Jr., and his idea-men devise Little Joe's downfall. Topical humor of a political nature is also included when the Head Man's failure results in dire punishment:

HEAD MAN

Oh-oh! Pappy mad?

MESSENGER

Is he mad? (He whistles emphatically) You know what he's gonna do? . . . He's gonna send you to Russia. He says there's a bunch of human bein's over there that can further your education. Grab him, imps.

HEAD MAN

Oh, no! Pappy can't do that to me! Those human hell-raisers scare the wits out of me!¹²⁸

¹²⁶Cabin in the Sky, pp. I-1-9 and 10.

¹²⁷Ibid., pp. II-1-2 through 5.

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. II-2-20. (Three of the members of the production team were of Russian descent: Vernon Duke, Boris Aronson, and George Balanchine. In a personal letter [November 24, 1969], Lynn Root confirms that, "Lucifer, Jr., being sent to Russia was in the original version, partly as an in-group joke. As you may know, Balanchine took the Russian ballet on a world tour, and 'forgot' to go back home.")

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Despite the fact that Lucifer, Jr., and the Lord's General represent the abstractions of "right" and "wrong," they are richly comic characters drawn in purely human terms.

It is to the credit of Lynn Root and his collaborators that Cabin in the Sky could present Negro characters--including the stereotypes of Little Joe, Georgia Brown, Domino Johnson and Petunia--in a humorous fashion without ever being guilty of condescension. While it is true that fantasy can tend to place clichés in a kind of never-never land so remote as to be inoffensive, Cabin in the Sky remains both entertaining and tasteful throughout. As a result, it constitutes an auspicious beginning for the Negro-oriented musicals of the 1940's. Not so much can be said, however, for its successor.

Carmen Jones

The longest running all-Negro musical production of the decade, Carmen Jones was the result of Oscar Hammerstein's determined effort to transform Bizet's opera, Carmen, into a contemporary and relevant work for the American musical theatre. To this end, Hammerstein retained the plot of Meilhac and Halévy's original libretto¹²⁹ but transplanted the characters and the action to a present-day (1943) American setting. Rosamond Gilder has summarized Hammerstein's essential alterations and their appropriateness as follows:

Seville becomes a town in the South, gypsies and Spaniards are transformed into American Negroes, the cigarette factory is a defense plant for the making of parachutes. The war fits neatly

¹²⁹The Meilhac and Halévy libretto was based upon a novel by Prosper Mérimée.

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into the new pattern by providing a soldier-guard for the factory and doughboys and officers from nearby camps to take the place of the ever-present garrison of a continental city. [Don] José [becomes] Joe in the current version, . . . while Escamillo, that brave fighter of angry bulls, becomes a heavyweight champion, Husky Miller, King of the Prize Ring. So the drama unfolds, with Cindy Lou singing Micaela's soprano reminders of home and mother, with the tavern of Lillas Pastia transformed into Billy Pastor's place, . . . [and] the smugglers metamorphosed into Husky Miller's satellites. . . . All this fits very well with the gaiety of the music and the diableries of the plot.¹³⁰

Because Hammerstein was intent upon creating a work which would be serious and meaningful rather than an entertaining travesty, he reversed the procedures employed in the "swing" adaptations of the late 1930's.¹³¹ Carmen Jones was not to be a kind of "Hot Carmen." The adaptation was accomplished in terms of setting, characterization and diction, while the musical values remained very much faithful to the original. In his introduction to the published script, Hammerstein described his methods as follows:

Bizet's score has not been reorchestrated, nor have the traditional tempi been altered. The arias are sung in their original order and in their proper places in the unfolding of the plot. Two melodies were cut. A few repeated passages have been cut. The recitative has been supplanted by dialogue. This last liberty is, indeed, no liberty at all, for the very first version, as produced at the Opéra Comique in Paris in 1875, used dialogue in these very spots. The recitatives were written in later, and not by Bizet, but by Guiraud.¹³²

The result was successful. "Most of the critics characterized Hammerstein's adaptation as brilliant. He was praised for avoiding jazz

¹³⁰ Rosamond Gilder, "That's Theatre; Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, XXVIII, No. 2 (February, 1944), pp. 69-70.

¹³¹ The Swing Mikado, The Hot Mikado, and Swingin' the Dream (Supra, pp. 130-33.)

¹³² Oscar Hammerstein II, Carmen Jones (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), pp. xvi-xvii. Cited hereafter as Carmen Jones.

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rhythms [and] for 'singing the music straight.'"¹³³ In this manner, Hammerstein had created a genre unique to the popular musical stage. He has written:

Carmen Jones is not even an opera. It is a musical play, based on an opera. Carmen Jones, however, does prove this much: that a surprisingly large number of the regular theatre-going public will enjoy operatic music if you let them in on the story. However unconventional may be my treatment of the original work, the score remains an operatic story. It is a tragedy. Yet it has appealed to the same public that nightly patronizes musical comedy.¹³⁴

After having been rejected by fourteen producers,¹³⁵ Carmen Jones was given a lavish production, financed by Billy Rose, and it opened at the Broadway Theater on December 2, 1943.¹³⁶ The cast was composed of unknown and untried talent culled from across the nation by Rose and John Hammond, Jr.¹³⁷ Settings and costumes were designed by Howard Bay and Raoul Pène duBois, respectively. Charles Friedman directed the libretto, while Hassard Short assumed responsibility for the lighting, color schemes,¹³⁸ and overall staging of the entire

¹³³Laufe, p. 48.

¹³⁴Carmen Jones (introduction), pp. xv-xvi.

¹³⁵Polly Rose Gottlieb, The Nine Lives of Billy Rose (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968), p. 168.

¹³⁶Taylor, Some Enchanted Evenings, p. 176.

¹³⁷Gottlieb, pp. 169-70. (Principal roles were filled by Muriel Smith, Luther Saxon, Carlotta Franzell and Glenn Bryant. Alternates for Carmen, Joe, and Cindy Lou were Muriel Rahn, Napoleon Reed and Elton J. Warren.)

¹³⁸Color and lighting were co-ordinated and designed so as to establish proper emotional tones. The production featured "each scene bathed in one color. Yellow, mauve, blue and red became the skeleton plan for Carmen Jones." (George Beiswanger, "Featuring Carmen Jones; the Team Behind the Show," Theatre Arts, XXVIII, No. 3 [March, 1944], p. 159.) See also: Laufe, pp. 47-48; Gottlieb, pp. 170-71.

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production. The result, "a vividly idiomatic theatrical piece, beautifully sung and acted, and stunningly produced,"¹³⁹ was received enthusiastically by critics¹⁴⁰ and theatregoers alike. "Carmen Jones had audiences in the hundreds of thousands, went on the road, became a motion picture, and helped . . . to reveal to a grudging public that black talent in America was a big reservoir."¹⁴¹

The plot of Carmen Jones depends upon yet another love triangle and contains only a few new twists to distinguish it from Porgy and Bess or Cabin in the Sky. Fiery Carmen Jones, worker in a Southern parachute factory during World War II, is attracted to Joe, a shy corporal devoted to his innocent hometown sweetheart, Cindy Lou. When she attacks a jealous factory girl, Carmen is arrested and placed in Joe's custody. Determined to make him her next conquest, Carmen employs her seductive wiles and persuades the overwhelmed Joe to release her, promising to meet him that night at Billy Pastor's Cafe. Joe's misconduct is discovered by his superior, Sergeant Brown, and he is promptly sent to the guardhouse.

Three weeks later, Joe is about to be released. Carmen waits for him at Billy Pastor's where she is seen by Husky Miller, a famous prize fighter on his way to Chicago with his manager, Rum, and the latter's sidekick, Dink. Immediately captivated by Carmen, Husky insists that she accompany them. Encouraged by her girl friends (Frankie and

¹³⁹ Green, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 247.

¹⁴⁰ New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1943, IV, No. 22 (Week of December 6, 1943), pp. 207-09.

¹⁴¹ Earl Conrad, Billy Rose: Manhattan Primitive (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1968), p. 159.

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Myrt) who also have been invited, Carmen is tempted but hesitates because of her infatuation with Joe. When he arrives, desperate to see her, Joe disappoints Carmen with the information that he cannot stay with her and must return to the base. Thoroughly vexed, Carmen mocks his lack of passion for her. Sergeant Brown, now a rival for Carmen's affections, joins in the verbal abuse until the furious Joe attacks and injures him. Joe fears military repercussions, and Carmen, seeing the opportunity to achieve both her objectives, convinces him to desert and flee with her to Chicago.

In Chicago, Joe must remain in hiding, and he suspects that a bored Carmen is "two-timing" him. He discovers her at a fashionable Negro country club where she has arranged a date with Husky Miller. Mad with jealousy, Joe attacks Husky but to no avail. In search of Joe, the ever-faithful Cindy Lou brings a message that his mother is dying and begs him to return with her to his home. Torn between duty and his passion for a woman he knows is tiring of him, Joe reluctantly departs with Cindy Lou but warns Carmen that he will return for her.

In Joe's absence, Carmen becomes Husky's mistress and accompanies him on the night of his big prize fight. Outside the stadium she catches sight of Joe, looking haggard and desperate. Although she has had premonitions of death, Carmen decides to brazen through with the inevitable confrontation. Joe tells her that his mother is dead and begs her to resume their relationship, but Carmen remains adamant. She no longer loves him. In cold fury, Joe stabs Carmen, then embraces her corpse and wishes for death so that, once again, he might be with his beloved.

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If all of this begins to sound familiar, it is because Hammerstein's translation to the Negro idiom conveniently employs the very stereotypes we have come to know in both Porgy and Bess and Cabin in the Sky. Hammerstein has explained his rationale as follows:

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 American life to an equivalent of the gypsies in 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.¹⁴²

Hammerstein's facile generalizations with regard to an entire race serve to clarify much of the racial characterization as it has been accomplished in Carmen Jones. Hammerstein's statement that the Negro "expresses his feelings simply, honestly, and graphically"¹⁴³ simply means, when paraphrased, that the Negro is uninhibited--a familiar concept. Thus, if one is to adapt to the contemporary American scene the tale of an amoral gypsy woman, what more logical counterpart could one select than that of "one of the oldest racist clichés: the Negro whore"?¹⁴⁴

Like Bess and Georgia Brown, Carmen Jones is a baggage who differs from her predecessors essentially in the degree to which her sexual inclinations border on the neurotic and the nymphomaniacal. Carmen must be admired; she must be desired; she must be worshipped. Any man who is not simply panting to experience her charms presents a

¹⁴² Carmen Jones (introduction), p. xviii.

¹⁴³ Supra, p. 201.

¹⁴⁴ Anthony Wolff, "The Passion of Diana Sands," Look, XXXII, No. 1 (January 9, 1968), p. 72.

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threatening challenge to Carmen's ego, and she must conquer his reticence. So it is with Joe, and Carmen reveals her character--as well as the entire plot--in "Dat's Love" (Habanera):

You go for me an' I'm taboo,
 But if yore hard to get I go for you,
 An' if I do, den you are through, boy,
 My baby, dat's de end of you.

 When your love-bird decides to fly
 Dere ain' no door dat you c'n close.
 She jus' pecks you a quick good-bye
 An' flicks de salt from her tail, an' goes!

If you listen den you'll get taught,
 An' here's your lesson for today:
 If I chase you den you'll get caught,
 But once I got you I go my way!¹⁴⁵

Beyond this, Hammerstein does not bother with details of psychological motivation. Carmen simply is what she is. Like the amoral gypsy after whom she was patterned, the astonishing behavior of a black Carmen Jones is immediately comprehensible to an audience trained to believe in the eccentricities of a people alien to the cultural mainstream.

Carmen's one major virtue, to which we are intended to respond in a positive fashion, is inherent in the lyrics of "Dat's Love." She is a thoroughly practical woman with no illusions about herself or her life style. Like the Crown of Porgy and Bess, Carmen may be destructive, but she possesses courage and is willing to assume the responsibility for her actions. As she puts it in her final aria, "I look at life straight in de eye!"¹⁴⁶ And indeed she does. When, while reading her own fortune, Carmen twice in a row cuts the nine of spades, her initial fear of death quickly transforms itself into defiance:

¹⁴⁵ Carmen Jones, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

It ain' no use to run away f'um dat ol' boy
 Ef he is chasin' you.
 It's bes' to stan' right up an' look him in de face
 When he is facin' you.
 Y'gotta be puhpared to go wid dat ol' boy,
 No matter what de time.
 So I won't fill my pretty eyes wid salty tears--
 Cuz I ain' got de time!
 I'm gonna run out ev'ry secon' I got lef'
 Before he t'rows me down.
 I'm gonna laugh an' sing an' use up all my bref
 Before he mows me down!
 While I kin fly aroun' I'll do my flyin' high!
 I'm gonna keep on livin'
 Up to de day I die.¹⁴⁷

In the final analysis, however, Carmen's hedonistic sensuality and her rebelliously defiant approach to life are far from admirable and not even very interesting. She is more a symbol of wantonness rather than a living representation of it. Certainly, she is far less humanized than Bess. Carmen's death, which in the Hammerstein version is "the result of the sudden violence of a desperate man rather than the inevitable, the foredoomed, the fate-laden climax of her love,"¹⁴⁸ carries nowhere near the impact of Bess's final degradation.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, Hammerstein's delineation of a woman so ruthless and egocentric as Carmen Jones leaves no room for comprehensible motivation nor for character qualities with which one might sympathize. She is not worth saving, and it is impossible to care about her when she is killed.

The character with whom one is supposed to sympathize is the shy and ingenuous Joe, a decent young man who loves his Maw and values a rather pristine relationship with Cindy Lou for that very reason.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁴⁸ Gilder, Theatre Arts, XXVIII (February, 1944), p. 71.

¹⁴⁹ Porgy and Bess, pp. 495-504.

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JOE

You talk jus' like my Maw,
 You even walk jus' like my Maw,
 An' I know why I'm stuck on you--
 It's 'cause I'm jus' like my Paw!¹⁵⁰

Determined to become an officer and a pilot,¹⁵¹ Joe is a man with integrity--a trait which Carmen finds difficult to understand:

CARMEN

All you gotta do is figger out some excuse to get away. Tell your captain your ol' grandmaw is dying.

.

JOE

I don' like to tell lies to de captain.

CARMEN

(Mimicking him scornfully) He don' like to tell lies to de captain! Boy, da's a lover, dat is! Got a chance to go to Chicago wid me--on my check! An' he cain' tell a lie!¹⁵²

Joe's guilelessness is evident at every turn of his relationship with Carmen. When she suggests that she will be "nice" to him if only he will release her from his custody, Joe earnestly implores:

Look here, is you tryin' to fool me?
 Swear to Gawd you wouldn' fool me!
 'Cause I'd free you,
 If I could see you.
 Say kin I see you!
 An' out on de town we'll go!¹⁵³

"Out on de town" to Joe, however, implies less than what Carmen would expect. He woos her as he would Cindy Lou. Given Carmen's libidinous

¹⁵⁰ Carmen Jones, p. 20.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 9 and 76. (Either Joe or Oscar Hammerstein is uncommonly ambitious. Of the 920,000 Negroes who served in World War II, only 850 attained the rank of officer. See: The Negro Handbook, Compiled by the editors of Ebony Magazine [Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1966], p. 296.)

¹⁵² Carmen Jones, pp. 75-76.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 34.

drive, his gift to her of a box of "marshmeller fudge"¹⁵⁴ is incredibly naive. When at last Joe does succumb to his passion for Carmen, his sentiments are touched more with sincerity than with fire:

I only saw you once.
 Once wouldn' do!
 I don' know anythin' about you.
 I don' know much about a shinin' star.
 Jus' know de worl' is dark widout you--
 Das' all I know.
 I only wan' you as you are.
 Das' how I love you.¹⁵⁵

But this is not really true, for in the final analysis Joe cannot accept Carmen as she is. What he really wants is a Carmen whom he can respect (Cindy Lou) and whose love will remain constant (his Maw). Thus, when Joe recognizes the totality of his self-degradation--the result of his love for the wrong kind of woman--it is a terrible moment: "Look what kind o' man I am, now! My Maw is dyin' an' I'm standin' here wond'rin' how I can leave dat woman--even for a little while."¹⁵⁶ In his final confrontation with Carmen, Joe continues to insist upon his idealized concept of her,¹⁵⁷ and he murders her because she will not conform to his standards: "You bitch! You gimme love--den you kill it right in front of my eyes! Y'ain' never goin' to do dat to no man again!"¹⁵⁸ In this fashion, Joe is portrayed as a decent, earnest young man who is destroyed by his irrational passion for the wrong kind of woman.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 134. (Joe is willing to believe even in a lie. He begs of Carmen: "Don' y't'ink dere's a chance? Only say dat y'do!")

¹⁵⁸ Carmen Jones, p. 137.

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It is important to note that Joe, as he is delineated by Hammerstein, is a singularly wooden character. Perhaps his lack of dynamics is the result of Hammerstein's fidelity to the original. Whatever the reason, given Joe's ingenuous sincerity and his "marsh-meller" fudge, it is difficult to imagine him in bed with Carmen. A character supposedly consumed with desire, Joe is virtually sexless. In an essay critical of the 1955 Hollywood film version, James Baldwin makes the following pertinent observation:

[Joe's] sexuality is really taken as given because [Carmen] wants him. It does not, otherwise, exist and he is not destroyed by his own sexual aggressiveness, which he is not allowed to have, but by the sexual aggressiveness of the girl. . . .¹⁵⁹

If one thinks back to the musicals which previously have been discussed, an extraordinary pattern begins to emerge. The Negro female is allowed to be considerably erotic, whereas the Negro male is denied his potency unless, as in the case of Crown, it is equated negatively with violence or crime. Otherwise, when sexuality is an issue, the male is made to seem either ineffectual or comic. The Queenie of Show Boat is earthy, while her mate, Joe, is merely weary. Bess, Georgia Brown, and Carmen Jones are all intensely libidinous, whereas, of their respective partners, Porgy is a cripple,¹⁶⁰ Little Joe is purely comic, and the Joe of Carmen Jones is frankly sterile. It is a pattern which, as we shall see, continues with astonishing regularity well into the 1960's.

¹⁵⁹ James Baldwin, "Carmen Jones: The Dark Is Light Enough," Notes of a Native Son (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), p. 43.

¹⁶⁰ Supra, pp. 141 and 145.

Rosamond Gilder has remarked that the opera, Carmen, "was the epitome of seduction, of passion, of danger and desire,"¹⁶¹ whereas "Mr Hammerstein presents the story of Carmen more as a small-town romance than as a study of elemental passions."¹⁶² This is true, and it points to a major flaw--with racial implications--inherent in the Hammerstein adaptation. Eroticism necessarily remains the motivating principle of Carmen Jones; it should be steeped in sexuality, featuring raw, flaming desire with the impact of the Crown-Bess scene on Kittiwah Island.¹⁶³ Curiously, Hammerstein can bring himself only to suggest licentiousness in the most sniggering fashion. Virtually the steamiest remark in the show has to do with a male fantasy about girls who "don' wear underpants!"¹⁶⁴ In a production which pretends to depend upon the sexual aggressiveness of its two principal characters, it is significant that the moment of greatest intimacy between them occurs when Joe examines with considerable embarrassment a "sprained" ankle which Carmen has feigned.¹⁶⁵ The kind of sensuality with which Hammerstein has filled Carmen Jones--as when Carmen begins "a slow, sinuous dance"¹⁶⁶ intended to set Joe immediately ablaze--is almost wholly caricature. James Baldwin has remarked:

¹⁶¹Gilder, Theatre Arts, XXVIII (February, 1944), p. 69.

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁶³Supra, pp. 146-47.

¹⁶⁴Carmen Jones, p. 121.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 30-31.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., p. 67.

It is a sterile and distressing eroticism . . . because it is occurring in a vacuum between two mannequins. . . . One is not watching either tenderness or love, and one is certainly not watching the complex and consuming passion which leads to life or death--one is watching a timorous and vulgar misrepresentation of these things.¹⁶⁷

Carmen Jones was nevertheless an enormous success on the stage.

While it is true that the shortcomings which have been discussed may have been minimized by the excitement of its spectacle and the richness of its music, one still must account for the wide public acceptance of a work which is infantile--if not downright dishonest--in the treatment of its major theme. The answer is to be found in Hammerstein's translation to the Negro idiom. Writing of the film version, but pertinent to the stage production as well, James Baldwin has stated:

It was helpful, first of all, that the script failed to require the services of any white people. This seals the action off, as it were, in a vacuum in which the spectacle of color is divested of its danger. The color itself then becomes a kind of vacuum which each spectator fills with his own fantasies.¹⁶⁸

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The only reason, finally, that the eroticism of Carmen Jones is more potent than, say, the eroticism of a Lana Turner vehicle is that Carmen Jones has Negro bodies before the camera and Negroes are associated in the public mind with sex.¹⁶⁹

If one accepts this line of reasoning--and it is difficult not to do so after re-reading Hammerstein's defense of employing the Negro idiom¹⁷⁰--one must conclude that Carmen Jones depends upon the stereotype of the Negro whore and all those Cotton Club fantasies about brown skin

¹⁶⁷ Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 42.

¹⁶⁸ Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 39 (Italics mine.)

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁷⁰ Supra, p. 201.

and animal passion. It is not what Hammerstein has written which reeks of sex; rather, it is the all-Negro atmosphere. Undoubtedly, it is this premise--perhaps unconscious on Hammerstein's part--which accounts for Lofton Mitchell's evaluation:

For all of its success and acclaim, Carmen Jones troubles me. Actually, it seems that in the adaptation, the Negro stereotype is sought. I feel this is more insidious than many other works that perpetuated the stereotype. The Green Pastures, Porgy, and Porgy and Bess seem to me to be works created by people who didn't know anything about Negroes. Carmen Jones seems to be a work that deliberately used the stereotype to assure a measure of success.¹⁷¹

The remaining characters conform to type and need not be described at length. Cindy Lou is sweet, folksy, and given to such barnyard banalities as:

I'm a chick dat likes one rooster.
Never mess aroun' wid two.
Dat is why I mus' refuse ter
Be more den jus' perlite to you!¹⁷²

She is the long-suffering, ever-faithful woman, abandoned by her man but willing to have him back if only he will recant:

How kin I love a man when I know he don' wan' me?
He ain' been good. He ain' been kind.
He gimme up for a ol' roadside woman--
But I cain' drive him from my mind!¹⁷³

Cindy Lou is a younger, more innocent version of Julie, Serena, Petunia, and the subjects of countless songs in earlier revues.

Husky Miller, the prize fighter endowed with enormous shoulders¹⁷⁴ and a fine physique, embodies all the properties of a virile

¹⁷¹Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 120.

¹⁷²Carmen Jones, p. 4.

¹⁷³Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 126.

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Negro male. He is not so dangerous as Crown or Domino Johnson, but Husky's profession--although socially acceptable--is a violent one, a fact which is emphasized in the final scene of Carmen Jones:

The action takes place in front of the stadium where Husky Miller is fighting. The wooden walls rise high and solid, curving forward, filling the background of the stage. After the crowd has gone in, Carmen and Joe are left alone outside, facing each other in their last deadly quarrel. From inside can be heard the roar of the mob as the prize-fighters battle. Carmen defies Joe. Just then there is a shout of triumph from the stadium. Carmen turns her head. Joe strikes. For a moment the wall above them becomes transparent. As though through Carmen's dying eyes, Husky Miller is seen on the platform in the ring--huge, muscular, towering over his prostrate antagonist.

"Stan' up an' fight, until you hear de bell

Stan' toe to toe

Trade blow fer blow. . . ."

The triumphant toreador music crashes out, engulfing the dying Carmen, the despairing Joe.¹⁷⁵

Once again, the sexually potent Negro male is depicted in bestial fashion.

Of Carmen's friends, Myrt has very little to do, but Frankie epitomizes all that is implicit in Hammerstein's contention about the Negro having "rhythm in his body, and music in his heart."¹⁷⁶ To this end, Bizet's "Gypsy Song" is transformed into a frenzied song and dance number, "Beat Out Dat Rhythm on a Drum." Frankie explains that it is not the music, but rather some mysterious primitive impulse within her, that inspires her to dance:

It's sumpin' thumpin' in de bass,
A bumpin' underneath de music.
Dat bum-bum-bumpin' under music
Is all I need
To start me off.
I don't need nuthin' else to start me off!
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¹⁷⁵Gilder, Theatre Arts, XXVIII (February, 1944), p. 72.

¹⁷⁶Carmen Jones (introduction), p. xviii.

I feel it beatin' in my bones,
 It feel like twen'y millyun tomtoms.
 I know dere's twen'y millyun tomtoms.
 Beatin' way down deep inside my bones!¹⁷⁷

Indeed, Hammerstein has led us back to the jungle.

Rum and Dink are purely comic characters, and they emerge full-blown and intact directly from the minstrel show. As Husky Miller's manager, Rum is ludicrous because of his pretensions toward the (false) power of his position and because of his bumbling efforts to appear urban, worldly and sophisticated. As in the minstrel show travesty,¹⁷⁸ Rum's attempts to live up to an exalted self-image are thwarted by his own inherent shortcomings. His malaprop-prone¹⁷⁹ sidekick, Dink, provides much of the joke-book style humor as he innocently exposes Rum's pretentiousness:

RUM

Tell you what, we'll take 'em to de club some Satiddy night!

DINK

(Impressively) He's talkin' 'bout de Meadow Lawn Country Club.

MYRT

Ain' dat de high-toned place where de Chicago swells go for de week-end?

DINK

(Flicking an ash from his cigarette) Yes, sir! Da's where we go!

FRANKIE

You a member?

DINK

N-no, but Rum is tryin' to be.

¹⁷⁷Carmen Jones, pp. 39-40.

¹⁷⁸Supra, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷⁹Example: "He come on de groun's an' attack Husky. It's a case o' salt an' battery." (Carmen Jones, p. 114.)

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RUM

(Conscious of the distinction) My name is up. It's very "sclusive, but I 'spec' to make it.

DINK

Hey, Rum--if dey don' exclood you, what kind o' people do dey exclood?¹⁸⁰

These are familiar characters as well as familiar gags, and Hammerstein's employment of them indicates a facile approach in his adaptation to the Negro idiom. One might wish that he had been more imaginative.

Thus far, all the characters in Carmen Jones have been lower class, uneducated, rural Negroes; however, in depicting the Meadow Lawn Country Club set--supposedly the cream of Negro society--Hammerstein goes to the opposite extreme. The intent is to create an "atmosphere of gentility . . . [in] sharp contrast to the strident exuberance of Billy Pastor's, many miles south."¹⁸¹ What Hammerstein achieves, however, is as studiously false as his representation of passion. The use of diction is perfect, but is also curiously formal and really rather British--as if Hammerstein intended to write a parody of sophistication:

HIGGINS

Did you enjoy your dinner, Mrs. Dill? So glad you could come.
And Mr. Gaines! I saw you sink that thirty-foot putt today.
Mrs. Vandunk! That hat is too, too--too really!¹⁸²

The studied mannerisms and the superficial values which Hammerstein's black bourgeoisie appear to emulate are as ludicrous as the comic pretensions of Rum and Dink.

Carmen Jones is given a contemporary wartime setting, but its action is effectively sealed off from contemporary issues such as the

¹⁸⁰ Carmen Jones, p. 45.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁸² Ibid.

war effort and racial discrimination.¹⁸³ One cannot fault Hammerstein, however, for not having made Carmen Jones into a musical document of social concern, for such was never his intention. Nevertheless, from a contemporary perspective, one can fault his insistence upon the stereotype, his exploitation of an all-Negro atmosphere in order to provide the necessary eroticism which Hammerstein, himself, failed to supply. Finally, one can fault a certain lack of imagination--if not of taste--in Hammerstein's adaptation. Successful as it proved to be, Carmen Jones is disappointing with regard to racial characterization on the musical stage. But less than a year after the opening of Carmen Jones, an even longer-running production provided the decade's first example of social awareness in thoroughly entertaining form.

Bloomer Girl

The opulent production of Bloomer Girl began as a play script by Dan and Lilith James which "was built around some episodes in the life of Dolly [Amelia Jenks] Bloomer, champion of women's suffrage and inventor of the garment named for her."¹⁸⁴ Intrigued with the idea of developing it into a musical, composer Harold Arlen persuaded, with some difficulty,¹⁸⁵ lyricist E. Y. Harburg to collaborate with him on the score. Sig Herzig and Fred Saidy were enlisted to write the book, and Bloomer Girl opened October 5, 1944 with Celeste Holm, David Brooks, Joan McCracken and Margaret Douglass in leading parts; Dooley Wilson,

¹⁸³Supra, pp. 161-62.

¹⁸⁴Edward Jablonski, Harold Arlen: Happy with the Blues (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), p. 124.

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

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Richard Huey and Hubert Dilworth were prominently featured in the three Negro roles. Harburg undertook the over-all staging; settings and costumes were designed by Lemuel Ayres and Miles White, respectively, and Agnes DeMille provided the choreography. Critical reception was largely favorable.¹⁸⁶ The score was much admired, as were the visual delights of the production which included a hoop-skirt fashion parade as well as a controversial, daringly somber "Civil War Ballet."¹⁸⁷ Nearly all the reviews mentioned weaknesses in the book, but Bloomer Girl's other charms captivated an eager public for a run of 657 performances.

In bald outline, the basic plot designed by Herzig and Saidy is, indeed, frivolous. Everything hinges upon a romance between Evalina Applegate, daughter of a wealthy Northern hoopskirt manufacturer, and Jefferson Lightfoot Calhoun, a dashing Southern aristocrat. The love affair is threatened by their differences in political philosophy. Jeff's family background, as represented by his stuffy brother Hamilton, is fiercely conservative and wholeheartedly embraces the system of slavery. Evalina, much to the consternation of her tyrannical father, sides with her Aunt Dolly Bloomer, a militant suffragette and abolitionist who is active in the underground railway.

In a more serious sub-plot, complications arise when Evalina and Dolly aid and harbor Pompey, a runaway slave who happens to belong

¹⁸⁶ New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1944, V, No. 18 (Week of October 30, 1944), pp. 118-121.

¹⁸⁷ Details concerning the creation and controversy of the ballet may be found in: Agnes DeMille, And Promenade Home (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), pp. 194-203. See also: Jablonski, Happy with the Blues, pp. 126-28.

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to Jeff. The women remain true to their beliefs, and the good-natured Jeff is brought around to Evalina's more liberal philosophy. He defies his brother, abandons his family traditions and, after the secessionists have fired upon Fort Sumter, joins the Union Army to fight for the cause of freedom.

The concept of freedom is essential to Bloomer Girl and serves as the unifying principle whereby all the threads of action are tied together. If the plot is good-naturedly trivial, Bloomer Girl is nevertheless thematically strong--largely due to the efforts of lyricist E. Y. Harburg.¹⁸⁸ His initial reluctance to join the project derived from an opinion that the Jameses' text lacked significance; therefore Harburg suggested that it be strengthened "by putting greater emphasis on the issues of women's rights and Negro rights."¹⁸⁹ In this fashion, according to Harburg, the major thesis of the musical became "'the indivisibility of human freedom.'"¹⁹⁰ The idea is most clearly stated by the character of Dolly Bloomer who responds to Jeff's acid remark,

¹⁸⁸ The output of Harburg's career suggests a man of keen insight and social awareness--a lyricist who functions as an analyst of his times. Never content to write in a mindlessly entertaining fashion, Harburg remarked on a recent television appearance: "The way a song writer's mind works, or any writer for that matter: he absorbs from the canvas of the history of his society what is going on about him--his headlines." (A Conversation with E. Y. Harburg, "The Great American Dream Machine, Public Broadcasting Service, February 17, 1971.)

¹⁸⁹ Green, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 207.

¹⁹⁰ E. Y. Harburg, quoted in Jablonski, Happy with the Blues, p. 126.

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"it seems to me that slave running is a mighty strange way to achieve women's rights,"¹⁹¹ as follows:

Freedom, Mr. Calhoun -- is without sex and without color! When you're fighting for freedom for women you fight the enemy of freedom everywhere! If our lines break in Savannah, we've suffered a defeat in Cicero Falls.¹⁹²

The intent and impact of such a statement in the year 1944 is as obvious as the parallel drawn between the period setting of Bloomer Girl and contemporary world events.¹⁹³ Both the Civil War and World War II were fought in the name of freedom, and racial intolerance was a major social issue of both periods.¹⁹⁴ Like the technique employed in Show Boat,¹⁹⁵ Harburg and his colleagues utilized a remote setting whereby to make palatable some pungent, racially-oriented social observations. Bloomer Girl, however, was essentially an entertainment. While it was thoughtful and, at times, thought-provoking, the ideas expressed never were emphasized to the point of becoming a crusade. Abe Laufer has summarized the method as follows:

¹⁹¹Sig Herzig and Fred Saily (book), E. Y. Harburg (lyrics), and Harold Arlen (music), Bloomer Girl, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), access granted courtesy of Tams-Witmark Music Library, Inc., New York, p. I-3-39. (Pagination throughout according to Act, Scene, page.) Cited hereafter as Bloomer Girl.

¹⁹²Ibid.

¹⁹³That the parallel was effective is evident in Agnes DeMille's recollection of Bloomer Girl's first public performance and the audience's emotional response to her "Civil War Ballet." "As the people filed out past me," she writes, "one woman, recognizing me, stood for a moment with her eyes covered and then quietly handed me her son's Navy wings." (DeMille, And Promenade Home, p. 202.)

¹⁹⁴Supra, pp. 161-62.

¹⁹⁵Supra, p. 109.

The authors handled the issue of women's rights with humor. The issue of civil rights, on the other hand, was presented in a straightforward manner, neither overplaying nor understressing . . . the slaves. The authors effectively presented the issue by making all the characters attractive. There were no melodramatic villains to pursue victims relentlessly or to be used as scapegoats by militant crusaders. As a result, the musical was neither rabid propaganda nor preaching.¹⁹⁶

Bloomer Girl requires the services of three Negro characters --Pompey, Alexander and Augustus--all runaway slaves being harbored by Dolly and Evalina. Of these, Alexander and Augustus function only thematically and largely in song; with a minor amount of editing, both easily could be eliminated.¹⁹⁷ Pompey, however, provides the major argument on behalf of Negro rights and human dignity. Perhaps because of the authors' desire to make him a thoroughly sympathetic figure, he is served less well by Herzig and Saidy's minimal characterization than by Harburg's distinguished and thoughtful lyrics.

Described as "a tall, young, intelligent-looking Negro,"¹⁹⁸ Pompey is immensely likeable. Unlike the oppressed Negroes in Show Boat or Porgy and Bess, Pompey is not submissive in the presence of whites. Although respectful and mannerly, he does not "bow down" or dissemble even when unexpectedly confronted by Jeff, the owner from whom he seeks to escape. The relationship between these two at first remains that of slave and master, but as the following dialogue indicates, Jeff's

¹⁹⁶Laufe, p. 79.

¹⁹⁷The song ("I Got a Song," *infra*, pp. 223-24) is important; however, it might easily be given to Pompey. The presence of Alexander and Augustus merely supplies weight to the Negro freedom theme. The characters are given very few lines, are not individualized, and have virtually nothing to do with the action.

¹⁹⁸Bloomer Girl, p. I-3-38.

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paternalism is made to seem so benevolent that Pompey bears no grudge and holds no personal resentment:

JEFF

Pompey, haven't I always fed you, clothed you, cared for you when you were ill --

POMPEY

(Grabs him) Yes -- But I had a special kind of sickness this time, Mr. Jefferson. It comes on after dark when you hear that train whistle a-whooin' through the cotton-woods.¹⁹⁹

In this manner, the concept of freedom becomes an abstract goal--a matter of principle, as it were, tied to a deeply felt belief in the universality of individual dignity. When Jeff demands to know what has prompted Pompey to run away, Pompey replies in E. Y. Harburg's simple but eloquent lyrics for "The Eagle and Me":

River it like to flow
Eagle it like to fly
Eagle it like to feel its wings against the sky
Possum it like to run
Ivy it like to climb
Bird in the tree and bumble bee want freedom
In Autumn or Summer time.

Ever since that day
When the world was an onion
"Twas natural for the spirit to soar and play
The way the Lord wanted it
Free as the sun is free
That's how it's gotta be
Whatever is right for bumble bee
And river and eagle is right for me
We gotta be free ²⁰⁰
The eagle and me.

The justice and universality of this statement immediately makes Pompey a sympathetic character defined almost wholly by the nature of his cause.

¹⁹⁹Bloomer Girl, p. I-3-40.

²⁰⁰Ibid., pp. I-3-41.

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The authors make certain that the audience will react in a positive fashion toward Pompey by endowing him with a thoroughly sunny disposition. Once it is made clear that Jeff will collaborate in the winning of his freedom, Pompey's enthusiasm is boundless and, indeed, childlike. In an amusingly touching scene, he asks Evalina's permission to quit his job--only for a moment--in order "to see how it feels."²⁰¹ Even more affecting is Pompey's loyalty to those who have earned his trust. When Jeff provides him with a means of escape to Canada, Pompey delays his departure at great personal risk because he had promised to appear in Dolly's production of Uncle Tom's Cabin.²⁰² Pompey's admirable qualities--his faithfulness, sincerity and lack of guile--all combine to make him a singularly attractive character.

Pompey's virtues make him worthy of our affection, yet there is something disturbingly false in this kind of character delineation. The absence of even a trace of bitterness or hostility on the part of the slave toward even the kindest master (whose acceptance of the system of bondage nevertheless exploits and oppresses that slave) is charitable to say the least. Pompey's trust--not only in the women who shield him but, incredibly, in the man who owns him²⁰³--is remarkable. It serves to divert one's attention from the real issue, which is racism, and permits one to dwell upon the more flattering and comfortable premise

²⁰¹Ibid., p. I-5-64.

²⁰²Ibid., p. II-2-17.

²⁰³When the sheriff and his rifle-toting deputies burst upon the scene in search of Pompey, Jeff tells them that "Pompey's a good slave. He'll come when I call." Despite the fact that he is aware of the potential consequences, Pompey obediently complies. (Bloomer Girl, pp. I-3-46 and 47.)

of tolerant white people, committed to just ideals, earning the undying gratitude of a lovable and very worthy black man. It is essential, therefore, to note that the depiction of Bloomer Girl's one major Negro character is heavily loaded. James Baldwin's disturbing question, asked in another context and twenty years after the production of Bloomer Girl, is eminently applicable. "Why is it necessary at this late date, one screams at the world, to prove that the Negro doesn't really hate you, he's forgiven and forgotten all of it. Maybe he has. That's not the problem. You haven't. And that is the problem."²⁰⁴

It cannot be said, however, that Bloomer Girl fails in presenting its plea for human dignity nor that its position on civil rights is invalid. If Pompey is not to be allowed to express resentment toward a system which has oppressed him, the issue of racism nevertheless is indicted by the behavior and attitudes of some of the white characters. It is historically clear that any system of human slavery has its basis in economics and that a society must find some means of justifying its practice of bondage. In the United States, the introduction of "slavery into a society of free men thus posed a real dilemma . . . [which] was resolved very neatly through an appeal to the Africans' alleged inferiority."²⁰⁵ Unlike apologies made by other societies, this unique rationale,²⁰⁶ which questioned the black man's humanity and "his rights

²⁰⁴James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," Playboy, XI, No. 1 (January, 1964), p. 241.

²⁰⁵Silberman, p. 88.

²⁰⁶"The fact is that Negro slavery in the United States and in the other British colonies was completely unlike slavery in any other part of the globe or any other period of history." (Ibid., p. 78; also: pp. 77-93.)

therefore as a human being,"²⁰⁷ created a concept of racism which continues to plague us even today:

The nation became involved in a bizarre system of reasoning about slaves. No longer were they simply unfortunate beings caught up in an economic system which exploited their labor. Now they were to be subhuman--quasi-humans who not only preferred slavery but felt it best for them. The American had to hide from himself and others his oppression of blacks. To be safe, the entire country had to share in the denial.²⁰⁸

Thus, in Bloomer Girl, one finds conflicting philosophies between the Abolitionists and the apologists for slavery. The former (Evalina, Dolly, and ultimately Jeff) insist upon the value and dignity of human life, whereas the latter (represented most conspicuously by Jeff's brother, Hamilton) argue that the slave is not a man but, rather, a "thing"--specifically, property. The following exchange, an argument over Jeff's attempt to save Pompey by giving him to Evalina, is illustrative:

HAMILTON

He wasn't yours to give!

JEFF

He's my body servant.

HAMILTON

He's family property! And there's enough of that damned abolitionist propaganda in Kentucky already without you encouraging it! . . . Why, our delegation had a protest meetin' last night!

JEFF

But Pompey is not their concern --

HAMILTON

Pompey is everybody's concern. When you gave him away, you struck a body blow at the whole conception of private property!²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son, p. 144.

²⁰⁸ Grier and Cobbs, p. 26.

²⁰⁹ Bloomer Girl, pp. 1-5-60 and 61.

In this manner, the slave is dehumanized and thought of only in terms of economics. The idea is reiterated when Evalina's father, Horatio, determines to betray Pompey to the authorities in order to secure a business transaction with Hamilton,²¹⁰ and is seen also in the nature of his objection to Dolly's activities:

HORATIO

Look here, Dolly -- I'm entertaining a whole delegation of Southern buyers here next week -- and this is no time for slaves to be running loose through Cicero Falls.²¹¹

Both Hamilton and Horatio profit from the system of slavery, and their refusal to acknowledge the Negro as a human being permits them to do so without staining their consciences. Although they are disagreeable characters, neither is truly dangerous, and both are bested at every turn by the feminists. In this fashion, a serious statement is rendered good-naturedly and without resorting to melodrama.

The authors of Bloomer Girl continue to expose the psychology of racism in an elaborate "Tom Show" production number. Topsy, portrayed by a white character in blackface, is typically chuckleheaded in a comic turn ("Never Was Born") which, nevertheless, pursues the theme of dehumanizing the Negro:

I never was born never was born
I just grewed like cabbage and corn
So if I die there's no need to mourn
'Cause I never was born.²¹²

Immediately following this, the "Tom Show" reaches a powerful musical climax in a simulated slave auction entitled "Man for Sale." With Pompey

²¹⁰Ibid., p. II-1-4.

²¹¹Ibid., p. I-3-43.

²¹²Ibid., p. II-3-26.

and Augustus enacting the roles of slaves, the auctioneer initiates the bidding as follows:

Man for sale
 Nice big man for sale
 Look at them hands look
 Look at them strong cotton pickin' hands
 Look at them rock-bustin' hands
 Log-rollin' steamboat-loadin' hands
 He good as forty mules . . .²¹³

Because we know that Pompey, himself,²¹⁴ is a man with a deeply felt dream,²¹⁵ Harburg's spare lyrics succeed in damning the racist rationalizations which make of a human being a commodity wherein individuality and simple dignity are denied.

The plea for self-respect and freedom of the human spirit with which Bloomer Girl concludes is also stated in the "Tom Show." A relevant parallel between the issues of the Civil War and those of World War II is drawn as Eliza, crossing the ice, sings about her child:

Oh Lord
 This baby must be strong
 So Lord
 Please give him faith and song
 But Lord
 If the going is cruel
 Then let him die like man
 Not live like mule. . . .²¹⁶

Similarly, the psychology of oppressed peoples is cleverly explored in Harburg's lyrics for "I Got a Song." When it appears that Pompey will be returned to serfdom in the South, Alexander attempts to cheer him

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ The character as opposed to the ironic role he plays in the "Tom Show."

²¹⁵ Supra, p. 218.

²¹⁶ Bloomer Girl, p. II-3-25.

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with songs on a variety of subjects: railroad, woman, sinner, bullfrog. In each case, the human (Negro) subject expresses effort and hope, followed by failure and disappointment. The following is illustrative:

Railroad need the tracks
 Little me lays the tracks
 Now then come the facts
 The big old train comes a-whistlin' by
 It puff in your face and spit in your eye
 Choo-choo goodbye
 That is a railroad song. . . .²¹⁷

If this is seen to be a syndrome wherein the individual expresses belief in his inherent ineffectuality, the reprise--sung when the runaway slaves are freed--is significant by virtue of contrast:

Freedom needs a sweet song
 Sweet song's gotta be
 Freedom gits a sweet song
 And back of that song is little old me
 Freedom needs a noise
 Little me starts the noise
 Now then comes the joys
 The dawn comes up like a cinnamon bun
 You sink your teeth in the rising sun
 Amen! Some fun!
 That is a freedom song
 That is a freedom song.²¹⁸

In both "I Got a Song" and "Liza Crossing the Ice," the motif clearly has to do with the negative effects of oppression upon man's spirit.

Bloomer Girl's stated theme of "the indivisibility of human freedom"²¹⁹ made a contemporary social comment. It reflected "the mood of a unified America in wartime,"²²⁰ while at the same moment it pointed out the paradox of racism in a nation committed to world-wide liberation.

²¹⁷Ibid., p. II-2-14.

²¹⁸Ibid., p. II-2-23.

²¹⁹Supra, p. 215.

²²⁰Jablonski, Happy with the Blues, p. 126.

It demonstrated, with considerable insight and frankness, the very roots of racial intolerance and condemned all forms of prejudice with sardonic wit. As a work which purported to be light entertainment for the musical stage, Bloomer Girl stands as a distinguished and thought-provoking musical play. It may be considered the beginning of a somewhat sporadic trend toward socially committed protest on behalf of the Negro.

Memphis Bound and Carib Song

The year 1945 ushered in two all-Negro musicals: Memphis Bound and Carib Song. Both were commercial failures, each running for a dismal total of thirty-six performances.²²¹ Neither script has been published,²²² and no original cast recordings have been released; therefore, information regarding these works has been derived solely from the various reviews which each production received.

Memphis Bound reverted to the swing music craze of the late 1930's which had produced such adaptations to the Negro idiom as The Swing Mikado, The Hot Mikado and Swingin' the Dream.²²³ Built around the considerable talents of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson,²²⁴ Memphis Bound was, in effect, a swing version of Gilbert and Sullivan's H. M. S. Pinafore. As in the case of its 1930's predecessors, Memphis Bound found its inspiration in the premise of the minstrel show travesty wherein traditionally non-Negro materials were rendered amusing when

²²¹Rigdon, pp. 9 and 31.

²²²To date, a search for these materials in manuscript form has proved fruitless.

²²³Supra, pp. 130-33.

²²⁴Significantly, Bill Robinson had starred in The Hot Mikado.

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performed in blackface.²²⁵ Unlike the jazzed-up Mikados, however, Memphis Bound presented its version of the Gilbert and Sullivan original as a play-within-a-play. Louis Kronenberger has summarized the proceedings as follows:

Originally conceived as a swing version of HMS Pinafore, it has wound up as a Negro musical show with a large slab of Pinafore in the center of it. In other words, the old show-within-a-show trick. This is achieved . . . by turning the cast into a showboat troupe whose boat has been grounded somewhere near Memphis and who, to raise the cash to set it afloat, put on a performance of Pinafore. They put it on with so much jive, swing, boogie-woogie, abandon and irreverence that half way through it the horrified lady impressario rings down the curtain.²²⁶

The book by Albert Barker and Sally Benson also included a comic romance in which Pilot Meriweather (Bill Robinson) finds it necessary to lock himself in jail in order to avoid the ardent pursuit of the showboat's owner (Edith Wilson). A sub-plot featured a romantic triangle in which a sporty Avon Long "ensnares the heart of Sheila Guys . . . when her better judgment tells her she should marry Billy Daniels, a steady man."²²⁷ Don Walker and Clay Warnick provided some original songs²²⁸ to supplement the book and adapted the Gilbert and Sullivan material to its new idiom. Wilella Waldorf reported: "Most of the music is still Sullivan's, though it is doubtful if Sir Arthur would recognize some of

²²⁵Supra, pp. 13-14 and 130.

²²⁶Louis Kronenberger, "'HMS Pinafore' Southern Style," New York PM (May 25, 1945), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 9 (Week of June 4, 1945), p. 209.

²²⁷Burton Rascoe, "'Memphis Bound' Fails to Arrive at Port," New York World-Telegram (May 25, 1945), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 9, p. 208. (Rascoe employs the names of performers.)

²²⁸Various critics mentioned the following: "Growing Pains," "Things Are Seldom What They Seem," and "The Gilbert and Sullivan Blues." (New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 9, pp. 207-210.)

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it in its current incarnation, while Gilbert's lyrics are sometimes kept intact, but more often adapted or entirely rewritten."²²⁹ In production, great emphasis was placed upon dancing, of which John Chapman remarked that it was characterized by "the quality that only Negroes can give it, of looking abandoned and almost sloppy but being very precise."²³⁰ In short, Memphis Bound was designed to be a fast-paced, colorful, brassy entertainment entirely in the tradition of the all-Negro song-and-dance shows of the 1920's and 1930's. The Negro was presented as a bundle of rhythm. Despite generally favorable reviews,²³¹ the quick demise of Memphis Bound indicates that the old formula no longer was palatable in the mid-forties.

The equally unsuccessful Carib Song, billed as a "serious musical play of the West Indies,"²³² was, in fact, an attempt to create greater popular appeal for the Katherine Dunham dance recitals²³³ by adding the framework of a plotted musical.²³⁴ Because Miss Dunham and

²²⁹Willella Waldorf, "'Memphis Bound' Swings Some of 'H.M.S. Pinafore'," New York Post (May 25, 1945), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 9, p. 210.

²³⁰John Chapman, "HMS Pinafore Bound for Memphis With Bill Robinson as the Skipper," New York Daily News (May 25, 1945), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 9, p. 207.

²³¹Of the eight "dailies," most critics faulted the book but enjoyed the show. Burton Rascoe held the only totally unfavorable opinion.

²³²Kappo Phelan, "The Stage & Screen," Commonweal, XLIII, No. 1 (October 19, 1945), p. 17.

²³³Supra, pp. 170-72.

²³⁴John Chapman, "'Carib Song' a Frequently Exciting, Creepy West Indian Jungle Show," New York Daily News (September 28, 1945), and Robert Garland, "'Carib Song' Opens at Adelphi Theatre," New York Journal-American (September 28, 1945), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 13 (Week of October 1, 1945), pp. 158 and 159.

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her troupe were noted for ethnic authenticity, the chore of writing the book and lyrics fell to William Archibald, a Caucasian native of Trinidad who "was said to have spent months of serious study in the Indies collecting source material."²³⁵ The slim plot which he provided, however, did not appear to reflect such expertise, and it dealt, rather unoriginally, with the complications created by yet another love triangle.

Burton Rascoe has summarized the action as follows:

The story tells of a lusty young wench (Miss Dunham) in a West Indian village who was taken to wife by a middle-aged, proper and placid husband (William Franklin) and of how she fell in love with an agile, carefree and poetically persuasive young fisherman [Avon Long] who begot a child upon her; and of how the villagers gossiped, giggled and shunned her; and of how her conscience tormented her until she renounced her lover only to be strangled by her desperately jealous and distracted husband.²³⁶

In other words, the plot had all the necessary ingredients for a tale of primitive passion and violence in the jungle.

With calypso-inspired music by Baldwin Bergerson, Carib Song saturated itself with the exotic strangeness of foreign folkways and emphasized the elements of spectacle wherewith to establish the necessary milieu. Kappo Phelan reported that:

. . . the formula would appear to depend largely on costume and color (always striking); upon the carrying on and off of a number of provocative props; and upon, of course, the dancing, which cumulatively frenetically rises to one ritual or another among the painted jungle.²³⁷

²³⁵ Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1945-1946,," Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 187.

²³⁶ Burton Rascoe, "A New Katherine Dunham Emerges in 'Carib Song,'" New York World-Telegram (September 28, 1945), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 13 (Week of October 1, 1945), p. 159.

²³⁷ Phelan, Commonweal, XLIII (October 19, 1945), p. 17.

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Despite the unavailability of the text, a fairly complete impression may be formed of the Negro image as it was presented in Carib Song.

Drama critic, Burton Rascoe, whose response was one of only two in favor of the production, wrote revealingly as follows:

The social ritualistic, religious and orgiastic dances which Miss Dunham has arranged for herself and [her troupe] are primitive, priapic and erotic, frankly depicting the incitements to lust, the taboos and restraints put upon it. But, for the most part, the dancing and pantomime was gay, colorful, joyous, depicting the untutored emotions of West Indian Negroes as they are expressed in their ancient African, jungle dances, modified by the Christian rites and religious practice which have been superimposed upon their voodoo superstitions.²³⁸

No matter how authentically such goings-on may have been conceived and executed, the above comments indicate that the Negro as depicted in Carib Song was not far removed from the pseudo-savage featured in the Cotton Club revues of the 1920's.²³⁹

It is significant that, upon the American musical stage, the non-American Negro consistently has been represented only in a primordial state. In its appeal to the belief that, without the civilizing influences of Western society the black man must necessarily remain a primitive, Carib Song appears to have continued that tradition.

St. Louis Woman

The 1946 all-Negro musical, St. Louis Woman, was eagerly anticipated because of the reputations of its four talented authors; Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer provided music and lyrics for a book by Arna

²³⁸ Rascoe, New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1945, VI, No. 13, p. 159.

²³⁹ Supra, p. 59.

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Bontemps and Countee Cullen.²⁴⁰ Bontemps and Cullen, both Negroes, were highly respected and well-established writers associated with the Negro Renaissance of the 1920's. This fact led to expectations that St. Louis Woman would be a work of genuine literary distinction²⁴¹ and a more authentic representation of Negro character and life than previously had been seen in Negro-oriented musicals by white authors. Unfortunately, it was not. The production received mixed reviews,²⁴² but the book was universally condemned. Miles Jefferson remarked: "As is pretty generally known by now, the Countee Cullen-Arna Bontemps book for the show is the greatest disappointment."²⁴³

It should be noted that St. Louis Woman was subject to an astonishing number of difficulties prior to its Broadway opening,²⁴⁴ and that the final product may have differed considerably from what Bontemps and Cullen originally had intended. Countee Cullen died prior

²⁴⁰St. Louis Woman was based upon Arna Bontemps' earlier novel, God Sends Sunday.

²⁴¹Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1945-1946," Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 193.

²⁴²The majority of critics found the score to be adequate but commonplace. It included "Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home," "I Had Myself a True Love," "Legalize My Name," and "Come Rain or Come Shine," as well as several less familiar but worthy pieces. The original cast recording (Capitol, DW 2742), long out of print, was reissued in 1967 and confirms the following statement: "Ironically, St. Louis Woman has, with time, become hailed as the Arlen-Mercer masterpiece. . . . Divorced from its book, St. Louis Woman has outlived its original receptions." (Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 150.)

²⁴³Jefferson, Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 193.

²⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 192-93. (The original director and choreographer were replaced, as was the leading lady who, later, was reinstated. The final credits were as follows: Rouben Mamoulian, director; Charles Walters, choreographer; Lemuel Ayres, settings and costumes. In principal roles: Harold Nicholas, Ruby Hill, Rex Ingram, June Hawkins, and Pearl Bailey.)

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to the rehearsal period, and it is a matter of record that, during rehearsals and tryouts, "it was probably impossible to keep track of the number of times the book was rewritten."²⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is the "official" version, as performed on Broadway,²⁴⁶ with which this study is concerned. Louis Kronenberger perceptively summarized the show's major flaws as follows:

. . . The subtitle . . . accurately describes St. Louis Woman as a "musical play." It is not a musical comedy; it has very little dancing, no chorus lines, no regulation production numbers. The burden of the evening rests on the story, as told in words and music; and the story cannot stand up under it. For the story is obvious and commonplace, with a certain folk-operatic flavor, but without the proper operatic swell and excitement. It is an all-Negro period piece, in spots a "blues" piece, . . . and it is made tedious from being spun out to excessive length, and made trivial from being glazed with musical-comedy icing. A real musical play would have made fewer compromises. And though the book of St. Louis Woman is the work of two very reputable Negro writers, one questions whether the kind of glib characterizations it falls back on, the kind of stock humor and melodrama, is in the Negro's best interest.²⁴⁷

St. Louis Woman, set in the sporting, honky-tonk district of that city in the year 1898, tells the story of Little Augie Rivers, a

²⁴⁵Vernon Rice, "'St. Louis Woman' Arrives--Fast-Paced and Never Dull," New York Post (April 1, 1946), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1946, VII, No. 7 (Week of April 8, 1946), p. 417.

²⁴⁶The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University has in its collection an "almost final version" as well as "various drafts with ms. corrections by the authors." (Personal letter from Miss Joan Hofmann, Library Assistant, December 5, 1969.) Leah Salisbury, Inc., Play Broker and Writers' Representative, New York City, is the exclusive agent for the property and kindly made available to this writer the manuscript which is believed to be "the most up-to-date version in existence." (Personal letter from Lois Berman of Leah Salisbury, Inc., February 16, 1970.)

Following the date of this writing, the text of St. Louis Woman was published. See: Bibliography, Published Librettos.

²⁴⁷Louis Kronenberger, "'Woman' Is a Sometime Thing," New York PM (April 1, 1946), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1946, VII, No. 7 (Week of April 8, 1946), p. 417.

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horse-race jockey born with a caul and therefore supposedly blessed with phenomenal luck. Augie's free spending and boastful ways cause Della Green, a beauty of easy virtue, to leave her brutish lover, Biglow Brown, for the more affluent and high-spirited little jockey. Meanwhile, Biglow's former mistress and benefactress, Lila, waits with desperate anticipation for Biglow to return to her.

Augie and Della are blissfully happy together until the enraged Biglow appears and vents his frustration by beating Della. When Augie discovers the deed, the two men quarrel and, in a highly complicated series of events, Biglow is shot--not by Augie, but by the spurned and vengeful Lila. In the confusion, however, Biglow believes that it is Augie who has delivered the mortal wound and, with his dying breath, places a curse on Augie's renowned luck. Augie is charged with murder but ultimately is released from prison when Lila, brought to a peak of religious frenzy at Biglow's funeral, confesses her guilt.

Augie's luck nevertheless changes for the worse, and Della becomes convinced that she is the cause of his misfortune. Reluctantly, she determines to leave Little Augie, telling him that she is in pursuit of the high life which he no longer can provide. They part without bitterness and go their separate ways, each remaining constant to the memory of the other. Six months later, Augie returns to St. Louis for a major race. Once again he is famous and prosperous, but he has learned during the interim that belief in luck and curses is mere superstition. Della, however, must have proof--which necessitates Augie's victory in the race and provides, along with a huge production number, the inevitable happy ending. There is, in addition to the main line of action, a comic sub-plot which concerns the on-again-off-again romance

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between Barney, a second-rate jockey, and Butterfly, a barmaid in Biglow Brown's saloon.

As Miles Jefferson has observed, St. Louis Woman is "a more or less popular copy of 'Porgy and Bess' with a happy ending tacked on. Plot crumbs from the 'Carmen Jones' table are gathered up, too."²⁴⁸ One may as well add Cabin in the Sky to make the list complete. The triangular love affairs and loose morals, the violence and passion, the tawdry atmosphere and gaudy costumes, the stock characters from the limited Negro repertoire--all begin to take on a sameness so as to make them virtually interchangeable from production to production. Lena Horne, favorably impressed with the Arlen-Mercer score, agreed to appear in the role of Della--until she read the script. Miss Horne states the reasons for her quick withdrawal, at great expense to her film career, as follows:

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 very melodramatic and old-fashioned. I knew the book had been written by Negroes, but I still resented its pidgin English and the stereotypes they had written. In fact the play seemed just another of those tired rehashes with Porgy and Bess overtones. . . . 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.²⁴⁹

A reading of the libretto confirms Miss Horne's objections.

Following what is essentially a prologue, the milieu of St. Louis Woman--which differs from that of, say, Porgy and Bess only in the degree of its tawdriness--is established in the following stage directions:

²⁴⁸ Jefferson, Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 194.

²⁴⁹ Horne and Schickel, p. 143.

SCENE: Biglow's Bar, a St. Louis honky-tonk restaurant of the late '90's. . . . [There are] small tables at which are seated a few fancy women from St. Louis' darktown, . . . pretentiously dressed in the finery of the period; they are heavily jeweled. The "Macks" as in all primitive society [italics mine], are even more brilliantly attired than the women. They wear gay embroidered shirts and on their fingers, beneath knuckle-length shirts [sic], flash diamonds and polished nails.²⁵⁰

The authenticity of such a setting is not necessarily in question; rather, it is the repetition of "the conventional bar on the other side of the railroad tracks . . . where varied assortments of minstrel pimps, gamblers and tipplers congregate,"²⁵¹ which may be decried. It is the kind of establishment to which *Sporting Life* surely must have spirited Bess; it is the logical extension of John Henry's Roadhouse (Cabin in the Sky) and Billy Pastor's Café (Carmen Jones). In short, the milieu established for St. Louis Woman is the supreme example of the exotic-primitive syndrome. And into this atmosphere parade the leading characters: Augie and Della, Biglow and Lila--all eminently recognizable.

Augie and Della are the exotic-primitives of the piece--both hedonistic, fond of momentary pleasures and material possessions. Augie states his value in characteristically boastful fashion: "I might be little, but I'm loud. I got greenbacks on me worser'n a dog got fleas. I got money in my shoes, money in my hat, money in the lining of my clothes, and money hanging round my neck. And I don't mind spending it neither."²⁵² The same lines might have been spoken by *Sporting Life*,

²⁵⁰ Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen (book), Johnny Mercer (lyrics), and Harold Arlen (music), St. Louis Woman, from the novel, God Sends Sunday, by Arna Bontemps, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), access granted courtesy of Leah Salisbury, Inc., New York, p. I-2-3. (Pagination throughout according to Act, Scene, page.) Cited hereafter as St. Louis Woman.

²⁵¹ Jefferson, Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 193.

²⁵² St. Louis Woman, p. I-2-13.

Little Joe, Rum or Dink. Similarly, in the tradition of Bess, Georgia Brown and Carmen Jones, Della is immediately established as "the prettiest gal in town," but as Lila bitterly observes, "that don't keep her from being the biggest hussy."²⁵³ In song, Della quickly confirms that her life style is indeed one of restless pleasure-seeking:

Free and easy - that's my style
 Howdy do me, watch me smile
 Fare thee well me, afterwhile
 Cause I gotta roam
 And any place I hang my hat is home.²⁵⁴

As the relationship between these two gaudy characters progresses, one is asked to believe that Augie brings out in Della a long repressed sense of domesticity. Having set up housekeeping (without benefit of marriage), Della exclaims: "I ain't never been so happy in all my born days! I got a home and a man. I guess even a woman like me wants that."²⁵⁵ The two soon are singing of their devotion to one another and of the miraculous transformation of a casual affair into a lasting attachment.

. . . I guess when you met me
 It was just one of those things
 But don't ever bet me
 Cause I'm gonna be true if you let me.

You're gonna love me like nobody's loved me
 Come rain or come shine
 Happy together, unhappy together
 And won't it be fine
 Days may be cloudy or sunny
 We're in or we're out of the money
 But I'm with you Augie (Della)
 I'm with you rain or shine.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Ibid., p. I-2-5.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. I-2-8

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. II-1-2.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. II-1-3.

It is made clear, however, that Augie and Della are enjoying sunny weather and that their hedonistic values have remained unchanged. The following dialogue immediately precedes the singing of "Come Rain or Come Shine":

DELLA

How about some sweeten' water?

AUGIE

That's the ticket, baby. Must have our sweeten' water.

DELLA

Ain't this the life, Lil Augie?

AUGIE

Oh, gal, I'se havin' a ball.²⁵⁷

Unfortunately, such an exchange diminishes the credibility of the emotions expressed in "Come Rain or Come Shine," and makes both characters appear shallow.

It is impossible, moreover, to take seriously the minstrelsy-oriented buffoonery of Augie's style of love-making. Upon seeing Della in a lovely white negligee, he exclaims: "Pretty gal, I loves you like a hoss loves corn, like a fly do molasses. I love you worser'n a hog loves to waller."²⁵⁸ Even in a folk setting, such endearments are difficult to accept. Like so many other sympathetic Negro male characters, Little Augie is not allowed to possess any real sexuality.²⁵⁹ Given a relationship which we are to assume has an erotic basis, Augie still is rendered comic, childlike, and therefore ineffectual as a lover. Any credence in the romantic entanglements found in St. Louis Woman depends

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. II-1-2. (Sweeten' water, it is explained [p. I-2-6], is gin sweetened with rock candy.)

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. II-1-1.

²⁵⁹ Supra, p. 206.

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upon the attractive and supposedly libidinous Negro female, upon an atmosphere of moral license and an audience's fascination with dark skin. To this purpose, Augie and Della are delineated according to formula; they are more caricature than flesh and blood.

In the last act of St. Louis Woman, the authors attempt to humanize the two leading characters by demonstrating the true affection each has for the other. Here, the comic props are dropped and some genuine feeling is allowed to emerge, although the result is more mawkish than it is moving. Augie and Della have remained together through more rain than shine, and Della seems sincere in saying, "Lil Augie and me can sing the sad tunes same way we do the sweet ones."²⁶⁰ Her decision to leave Augie for his own good, however, is poorly motivated,²⁶¹ and the situation is made trivial as a result. In the predictable and sentimental scene which follows, Della lies to Augie about her reason for leaving him and castigates him for being unable to keep her in the style to which she is accustomed. It is true that each is thinking of the other's happiness, but it is also apparent that neither understands the other very well. Nevertheless, Augie and Della achieve an aura of humility and dignity in the following dialogue:

AUGIE

Who gonna look after you, Della?

²⁶⁰St. Louis Woman, p. III-1-2.

²⁶¹It is a quick decision, based upon superstition and the urging of Leah (Augie's hypocritical and disapproving older sister) and Badfoot (Augie's best friend). Neither has Della's interests in mind, and the rationale, as Badfoot puts it, is that, "all you do is touch a man and his luck goes from him--first Biglow and now Lil Augie. . . . If you love him, you got to get out of his way." (St. Louis Woman, p. III-1-3.)

DELLA

(Turning away)

Rags. He's got money. You ain't gonna think hard of me, Lil Augie?

AUGIE

No, gal. All my thoughts of you goin' to be sweet as corn and roses.

DELLA

You is good, Lil Augie.²⁶²

It is, however, really too late for this kind of character revelation to be convincing. Despite Della's virtuous behavior after having left Augie, it is difficult to eradicate the stereotypes, reinforced by so many years of characterization, with which St. Louis Woman begins and upon which it insists throughout most of the production. Unlike Porgy and Bess, Augie and Della do not really grow or change in a meaningful manner. In the final analysis, Howard Barnes was correct in reporting: "The truth is that it is hard to give a hoot about Little Augie and Della Green."²⁶³

The remaining characters of interest also conform to well-established formula and need not be discussed at length. Lila is the ubiquitous faithful woman, waiting in vain--this time with some bitterness--for her faithless lover to return to her. Introduced as "a good-looking brown girl who sips her drink in a mood of black dejection,"²⁶⁴ Lila's entire character is revealed in Johnny Mercer's simple but distinguished lyrics for the song, "I Had Myself a True Love":

²⁶² St. Louis Woman, p. III-1-6.

²⁶³ Howard Barnes, "Without Diamond Rings," New York Herald Tribune (April 1, 1946), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1946, VII, No. 7 (Week of April 8, 1946), p. 416.

²⁶⁴ St. Louis Woman, p. I-2-3.

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In the evenin'
 In the doorway
 While I stand there and wait for his comin'
 With the house swept
 And the clothes hung
 And the pot on the stove there a-hummin'
 Where is he while I watch the risin' moon
 With that gal in this damn ol' saloon

 There may be a lot of things I miss
 A lot of things I don't know
 But I do know this
 Now I ain't got no love
 And once upon a time I had a true love.²⁶⁵

Ever-faithful and consumed with love, Lila pursues Biglow and pleads with him,²⁶⁶ but when it is made clear to her that the situation is hopeless, Lila takes action. Unlike many other characters of this type, she is not content simply to suffer through yet another torch song. Defiantly, triumphantly, Lila expresses her motive for shooting her erstwhile lover:

Sleep peaceful, mister used-to-be
 I'll see yuh to th' door
 Too long you got th' best o' me
 But you'll never in dis world
 Git th' best of me any more

 I ain'tuh gonna fret my head
 I ain'tuh gonna cry
 I'm gonna dress myself in red
 Gonna walk around da town wid my head in the
 Good Lord's sky. . . .²⁶⁷

At this point, Lila achieves a grim dignity which, unfortunately is flawed by her improbably hysterical confession in the funeral scene. Because this is virtually the extent of her role, it can be said that the character of Lila is enriched and dimensionalized almost exclusively

²⁶⁵Ibid., p. I-2-23.

²⁶⁶Ibid., pp. I-2-21, II-1-15 and 16.

²⁶⁷Ibid., p. II-2-19.

by the two Arlen-Mercer songs provided for her. The songs are memorable--perhaps two of the best in a distinguished score--but Lila remains a facile stereotype.

Biglow Brown, the antagonist of St. Louis Woman, is the epitome of the "bad nigger."²⁶⁸ A huge brute of a man given to possessiveness and abrupt outbursts of violent temper, Biglow is only slightly more civilized than the Crown of Porgy and Bess and follows in the tradition of Domino Johnson (Cabin in the Sky) and Husky Miller (Carmen Jones). Inasmuch as Biglow's primary character trait is revealed to be a propensity for beating his women ("Any woman messes wid me gotta take the lumps"),²⁶⁹ it is difficult to justify Lila and Della's attraction to him except in terms of sexuality. Like his predecessors, Biglow is allowed his virility only as a negative trait. His stature and physical presence may be admirable masculine attributes in which Biglow takes pride, but they are manifested only in brutal and sadistic behavior. Thus, Biglow may deride Augie as a potential rival by sneering to Della: "Ain't he a mighty little excuse for a loving man?"²⁷⁰ But when the little jockey succeeds in taking Della from the bigger man, it is not only Biglow's ego that is wounded; the very essence of his masculinity is threatened. Witness Biglow's desperation in the following dialogue:

BIGLOW

I done had to whip three men since the cotton flower ball. Now when I passes down Targee Street, don't none of them say, "There go Biglow Brown what lost his woman to a puny Lil jockey." No they don't say it but they looks it. . . . You got to come back to me, Della. Wasn't I always good to you?

²⁶⁸ Supra, p. 142.

²⁶⁹ St. Louis Woman, p. I-2-7.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. I-2-15.

DELLA

You was good enough, Biglow, for you kind. But you was too free with your fists. Lil Augie ain't like that. He likes to see me pretty and satin smooth. He don't like to see no bruises on my arms, nor my eyes swelled up.

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BIGLOW

Every man has the right to beat his own woman. . . . When I leave here, Targee Street going to have something else to grin about. They going to talk about how Biglow Brown had to do Lil Augie's manly duties for him, and beat up his woman.²⁷¹

The above represents psychologically sound characterization,²⁷² and while it is true that the sadistic personality respects no racial boundaries, it is significant to note a repetitive pattern in delineating the sexually aggressive Negro male according to compulsive and deviant behavior. Biglow Brown, moreover, exists simply as a functional character,²⁷³ and his motivations are not explored sufficiently beyond the actions which lead to his untimely death. Again, the authors have chosen to employ the stereotype without bringing it to life.

The comic sub-plot for St. Louis Woman introduces Barney and Butterfly. The former is a carbon-copy of Augie and serves largely as a foil to the more interesting Butterfly.²⁷⁴ As an earthy barmaid with pretensions toward a propriety she obviously does not possess, Butterfly is hilarious in a scene in which her mask of pristine virtue is exposed as fraud:

²⁷¹Ibid., pp. II-1-13 through 15.

²⁷²Walter J. Coville, Timothy W. Costello and Fabian L. Rouke, Abnormal Psychology (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1960), pp. 135-36.

²⁷³Without Biglow's dying curse, there would be no complication upon which to build the rest of the plot.

²⁷⁴As performed by Pearl Bailey in her legitimate stage debut, the role of Butterfly received unanimous praise from the critics. She delivered two infallible Arlen-Mercer songs with consummate skill (available on the recording).

BARNEY

(Yawning sleepily as HE opens the door)
Come on in, honey.

BUTTERFLY

(Drawing back suddenly)
And lose my galhood? Well, I should say not. . . . Young gals don't visit gentlemens in they rooms. It ain't proper. Close that door before the neighbors see you standing there front of me in your night clothes. They might -- they might think things.

BARNEY

Everybody thinks things - all the time. You can't stop 'em. . . . If it ain't proper for gals to come in gentlemen's rooms, how about gentlemens coming in gals' rooms?

BUTTERFLY

(Sweetly)
Aw, Barney, that's diff'rent.²⁷⁵

One might charge that such vaudeville-style comedy harks back to the humor of the minstrel show and its concept of an "inferior" creature vainly attempting to conform to the standards of "polite" society.²⁷⁶ The characterization, however, is really too slight and the situation too good-natured to concern oneself seriously with such matters. Moreover, Butterfly's anxiety over public opinion concerning her casual relationship with Barney merely serves as an introduction to one of Arlen and Mercer's best numbers, "Legalize My Name." Mercer's saucy and sophisticated lyrics, which follow in part, are so witty as to make the role of Butterfly memorable:

Will I kiss you - ain't the issue,
You've been sayin' ever since we met
That you - want a sample of the way I pet,
You've had all the samples that you're gonna get
Legalize my name.

²⁷⁵ St. Louis Woman, p. I-3-25.

²⁷⁶ Supra, pp. 13-14.

'Fore we ever can dwell
 Out of one valise
 You must learn how to spell
 Justice of the peace.
 (SPOKEN--and I spell that peace with an E A)

 If you prize me
 Notarize me
 Give me an old piece of parchment that I can frame
 You got to.... 277
 Legalize my name.

Another song, "It's a Woman's Prerogative (to Change Her Mind)," is equally amusing. Butterfly and Barney, albeit familiar characters whose sexual morality might be questioned, function only as comic relief, but they succeed, at the same time, in supplying some of St. Louis Woman's most satisfying entertainment.

St. Louis Woman conjures up several other characters--all purely functional and lacking in distinction. Ragsdale, the victim of his unrequited love for Della, is a wealthy and quite polished Negro gentleman--perhaps the first on the musical stage--but sadly undeveloped as a character. Badfoot, a race track stableman and Augie's long time friend, introduces the proceedings in a presentational opening ("Lil Augie Is a Natural Man"), and appears sporadically throughout. Only Leah, Augie's older sister, approaches what one might call characterization. Unfortunately, hers is an uneven and, finally, irritating portrait of a meddlesome hypocrite. At first, Leah's self-righteousness is treated warmly and comically, but quickly her behavior becomes cynical and cruel. Aside from making one defensive in Della's behalf, Leah is an extraneous character who does not even belong in St. Louis Woman.

²⁷⁷ St. Louis Woman, pp. 1-3-27 and 28.

If, at this point, St. Louis Woman appears to be a production designed according to the success formulae of previous works, that impression is confirmed by two scenes which are obvious reversions not only to the 1920's but even to a portion of the minstrel show format. The latter is evident in the sensationallly danced Cakewalk finale to the first act--a production number which is in accord with the 1898 setting, but poorly integrated into the show's action. The former is apparent in the funeral sequence (Act II; Scene iii), about which Miles Jefferson complained: "In bad taste is a scene it is hard to believe Cullen and Bontemps wrote as presented . . . [including] the usual frenzied spirituals a-la-Porgy with all the frantic shenanigans now associated with their rendition by Negro choral groups."²⁷⁸ The scene begins promisingly enough with the following stage directions:

This is unlike any funeral you have ever seen, for no funeral clothes are worn by anyone; the WOMEN wear their usual loud dresses and the MEN wear their equally loud suits, with here and there a woman adding the fantastic touch of a long black veil.²⁷⁹

A good deal of grotesque humor about the undertaking profession follows, and it is climaxed by Butterfly's entrance with a funeral bouquet and card which reads, "To Biglow! Best wishes wherever you are, love and kisses, from Butterfly."²⁸⁰ Perhaps the scene's most imaginative comic thrust occurs when the Preacher refuses to deliver a prepared eulogy in praise of the deceased and, instead, condemns Biglow's soul to hell. But the bizarre suddenly gives way to the solemn singing of emotion-

²⁷⁸ Jefferson, Phylon, VII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1946), p. 193.

²⁷⁹ St. Louis Woman, p. II-3-20.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p. II-3-22.

drenched spirituals, presumably to motivate Lila's confession and, not incidentally, to provide a moving finale for the second act. Director, Rouben Mamoulian staged the sequence very much in accord with his celebrated hurricane and wake scenes for Porgy and Porgy and Bess.²⁸¹ The abrupt shift in mood proved troublesome to critics and audiences alike,²⁸² but of even greater significance was the fact that Mamoulian's concept of ensemble religious hysteria proved offensive to the cast. Pearl Bailey has recalled the rehearsal period difficulty as follows:

The cast was in an uproar. The mumblings had grown as loud as thunder. It had to do with the funeral scene. In that scene June Hawkins [Lila] . . . was to fall on her knees and raise her hands to heaven. That, in turn, was to make everyone else sad enough to do the same. Well, sir, that gesture only served to make the cast angry. They felt it was too Negroid.²⁸³

It is evident, of course, that the cast of an all-Negro play would hardly object to something as being "too Negroid" unless the real objection had to do with something which was too patent a cliché. What had been an effective piece of stage business for Mamoulian in 1927 and 1935 seemed dated by the mid-forties, and St. Louis Woman suffered for it.

As pure entertainment, St. Louis Woman was occasionally electrifying but frequently flawed and predictable. With regard to its

²⁸¹Supra, pp. 64 and 157-58.

²⁸²Edward Jablonski has commented: "The first act's high jinks were all but neutralized by the last scene of the second act, set in a funeral parlor. Though the third act provided the traditional happy conclusion, the pervasive gloom infected the entire evening; it was as if an unrelenting duality of purpose prevented the musical from being all of a piece." (Happy With the Blues, p. 149.)

²⁸³Pearl Bailey, The Raw Pearl (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), p. 66. (Miss Bailey indicates that Mamoulian successfully calmed the cast and suggests that the scene progressed according to plan.)

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presentation of Negro life and character, the best that can be said is that the production continued to promote the old superstitions, flashy and exotic types who go about their business of loving and killing with supreme intensity. That the book was provided by two Negro writers of genuine talent made the result all the more disappointing. One had hoped for greater enlightenment and fresher invention, neither of which were forthcoming in St. Louis Woman. Happily, imagination, satire, and a brand new cast of characters were to be found on the musical stage in the following year.

Finian's Rainbow

In 1947, E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, both veterans of the thought-provoking Bloomer Girl,²⁸⁴ joined forces with composer Burton Lane to create a musical which, while lighthearted and entertaining, would contain broad and pungent satire on a wide variety of contemporary social and political issues. In order to make much of their material palatable, the authors chose a recognizable but remotely mythical setting in the state of Missitucky, U. S. A. With tongue firmly in cheek, they proceeded to conjure up wildly improbable characters and situations involving leprechauns, pots of gold, and a good deal of magical whimsy. As E. Y. Harburg has explained, the escapist nature of such material served a valuable purpose:

"Through fantasy, I feel that a musical can say things with greater effectiveness about life. It's great for pricking balloons, for exploding shibboleths. Of course I want to send

²⁸⁴ Supra, pp. 213-25.

people out of the theater with a glow of having a good time, but I also think the purpose of a musical is to make people think."²⁸⁵

The result, entitled Finian's Rainbow,²⁸⁶ was warmly received²⁸⁷ and has been called "a marriage of fantasy and satire, of old Irish legends and modern American social and political problems,"²⁸⁸ as well as "a musical with a social conscience, with message in its madness."²⁸⁹

The Finian of the title is one Finian McLonergan who, having stolen a pot of gold from the leprechauns in his native Ireland, arrives with his daughter, Sharon, at Rainbow Valley in the state of Missitucky. Finian's scheme is to bury the gold in the fertile soil near Fort Knox which, he reasons, surely will make it grow. To this end, he purchases a tiny plot of ground from Woody Mahoney, leader of the valley sharecroppers and would-be political activist who is determined to save Rainbow Valley from the greedy clutches of Senator Billboard Rawkins. Finian is pursued by Og, an irate leprechaun seeking repossession of the magical crock of gold--which, it develops, obligingly grants wishes

²⁸⁵E. Y. Harburg, quoted in Ewen, Story of America's Musical Theater, p. 202.

²⁸⁶Production credits were as follows: Scenery and lighting, Jo Mielziner; Costumes, Eleanor Goldsmith; Choreography, Michael Kidd; Direction, Bretaigne Windust. Although the cast was integrated, principal roles were filled by Caucasians: Ella Logan, Albert Sharpe, David Wayne and Donald Richards.

²⁸⁷Critical response was enthusiastic. Although faulted by some for an overabundance of "cuteness" and for occasional lapses of taste in its brand of humor, none of the reviews could be called negative. (See: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1947, VIII, No. 1 [Week of February 3, 1947], pp. 486-90.) The public patronized Finian's Rainbow for a lengthy Broadway run of 725 performances (Rigdon, p. 16).

²⁸⁸Ewen, Story of America's Musical Theater, p. 202.

²⁸⁹Louis Kronenberger, "A Nice Musical Blend Fantasy and Satire," New York PM (January 13, 1947), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1947, VIII, No. 1 (Week of February 3, 1947), p. 487.

upon demand. From this framework emerge myriad complications, counter-plots and sub-plots²⁹⁰ which include two romances, a get-rich-quick scheme on the part of the sharecroppers, a witchcraft trial, episodes of political chicanery, a burlesque attacking the free enterprise system and--of importance to this study--the sudden transformation of the bigoted Senator Rawkins into a black man.

Having dealt previously with the economics and psychology of racism in Bloomer Girl,²⁹¹ Harburg and Saidy attack the notion of white supremacy with great relish and much sardonic humor in Finian's Rainbow. Their target is the aforementioned Senator Billboard Rawkins, a blustery Southern politician whose favorite motto is: "Forward to yesterday!"²⁹² Rawkins is introduced in the third scene of Act I, where it is immediately made clear that the Senator's image of black people conforms to the minstrel show stereotype. In order to ridicule such prejudice, the authors confront him with two educated, intelligent and dignified Negro characters--thus far a rarity upon the musical stage. Two governmental geologists are announced, and their entrance reveals one to be white, the other black. Rawkins' behavior could not be more revealing:

²⁹⁰ A detailed summary of the convolutions of the plot is deemed extraneous to the purposes of this study. The reader is referred to the published text which, at this writing, is readily available.

²⁹¹ Supra, pp. 220-24.

²⁹² E. Y. Harburg (book and lyrics), Fred Saidy (book) and Burton Lane (music), Finian's Rainbow (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1968), p. 43. Cited hereafter as Finian's Rainbow. (This is a paperback edition, published to coincide with the Warner Brothers' film version. It differs from the original publication [New York: Random House, 1947], only in the updating of a few topical references and the deletion of less than two pages of left-wing union propaganda spouted by Woody.)

RAWKINS

(Looking them over)

I thought you said there was two of them.

NEGRO GEOLOGIST

(Quietly)

There are two of us, Senator. Here are my credentials.

(Hands papers to RAWKINS, who pushes them away.)

RAWKINS

Credentials? You? You're in the wrong state, fella. . . . I don't need nobody to tell me what's on my land, least of all--

(He looks hesitatingly at the Negro)--his kind.

NEGRO GEOLOGIST

You're giving me too much credit, Senator. All I do is read the finding on this meter. It detected gold on your property this afternoon.

.

RAWKINS

Fetch some mint juleps for our guests. It ain't every day we're honored with the presence of two distinguished scientists from Washington.²⁹³

Even more significant is the fact that the Senator insists that his servants behave in a manner consistent with his cherished beliefs.

Howard, a black college student seeking summer employment, is instructed by Buzz (Rawkin's assistant) in the proper serving techniques:

BUZZ

That's no way to serve a mint julep. It's too fast. Get some shuffle into it. You've seen movies like Gone with the Wind, haven't you? Here, like this. (He takes the tray and gives a quick course in Southern julep-serving, based on the minstrel tradition of Dixie shuffle and exaggerated accent) Youah julep, (Turning back to HOWARD) See?

HOWARD

(In dignified straight English)

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.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Finian's Rainbow, pp. 44-45.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

The scene is climaxed as the servant outwits the master. Suffering an attack brought on by high blood pressure, the gasping, choking Senator desperately calls for a Bromo-Seltzer. The scene proceeds as follows:

HOWARD'S VOICE

Comin', Massa, just as fas' as I kin. (And HOWARD appears with a foaming glass of Bromo-Seltzer on his tray. It sizzles and smokes violently as--having won his diploma in julep serving--he slowly shuffles toward the SENATOR.)

BUZZ

Great work, Howard, you finally got it, fine manners. Take it easy, take it easy.

RAWKINS

Hurry it up, man, for God's sake, please!

HOWARD

Comin', suh, Massa Rawkins, suh. Ah hopes you enjoys it.

RAWKINS

Give it to me! Give me my Bromo! (He is on his knees, his collar off, his ego down, pleading and crawling toward HOWARD.)

HOWARD

(The Bromo evaporated)
Yassah, Massa Rawkins. (On HOWARD, the picture of a man on a treadmill, making forward steps, but never advancing, the lights fade out fast.)²⁹⁵

This, of course, is more lampoon than satire, and it hardly need be pointed out that the characters--especially Sentator Rawkins--are drawn so broadly as to belong to the realm of caricature. Blatant as the social criticism in the scene may be, Harburg and Saidy nevertheless make a valid point about the very nature of stereotypes and effectively condemn the practice of viewing an entire race with limited scope.

Perhaps the pithiest racial statement in Finian's Rainbow emerges from the fantastic notion of turning Senator Rawkins black and thereby exposing him to the kind of prejudice which he, himself, has

²⁹⁵Ibid., pp. 46-47.

perpetrated. This is accomplished when Sharon, angered by the Senator's threat to evict the valley's Negro population, delivers an impassioned speech: "There's nothing wrong with being black. . . . But there's something wrong with the world that he and his kind have made. . . . I wish he could know what the world is like. I wish to God he were black."²⁹⁶ Quite unwittingly, Sharon has spouted her tirade while standing directly above the buried crock of gold, and the wish is granted immediately. Rawkins' initial degradation occurs swiftly as the Sheriff strolls past and, not recognizing the Senator, commands: "Here, Sambo--sing for the white folks."²⁹⁷ Later, in a pointed conversation with the whimsical Og, Rawkins bemoans the situation which has made him the victim of his own discriminatory policies:

RAWKINS

Can't you see I'm black?

OG

Yes, and I think it's very becoming.

RAWKINS

But I'm a white man, dammit, a white man! At least I was a few weeks ago.

OG

. . . Don't you find an occasional change of color interesting?
. . . I think it's just ridiculous making such a fuss about a person's color.

RAWKINS

You moron! Don't you realize what it means to be black? . . . You can't get into a restaurant. You can't get on a bus. You can't buy yourself a cold beer on a hot day. (With disgust) You can't even go into a church and pray. . . . The law says you can't.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

OG

The law? Mmm ... that's a silly law. Is it a legal law?

RAWKINS

Of course it's legal. I wrote it myself.²⁹⁸

Quite clearly, Og is the authors' spokesman, and his ingenuous responses to the Senator's anguished complaints serve to make Rawkins appear all the more absurd. Moreover, it is Og who determines that the Senator should be given a personality more in keeping with his recently acquired exterior, and he sets about accomplishing the feat with a bit of the leprechaun's magic. "All we have to do," advises Og, "is broaden out that narrow mind a little--reduce some of that bigotry--and your pomposity won't show at all."²⁹⁹ Indeed, Rawkins becomes a new man. He joins forces with the Passion Pilgrim Gospels, a trio of itinerant singers who explain to him the limited means of employment open to Negroes in the South: "You either tote that barge, lift that bale, shine that shoe--or sing. We sing."³⁰⁰ Together they enthusiastically perform a vaudeville turn entitled, "The Begat."³⁰¹

The Senator's education is complete when, at last, he refuses to be reconverted into a white man. "It ain't progressive."³⁰² he thunders, demonstrating a newly found enlightenment as he argues with his former political cronies:

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 95-96.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 97-98.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 101.

³⁰¹ The content of "The Begat," although amusing and notable for Harburg's nimble rhymes, has nothing whatever to do with the rest of the show.

³⁰² Finian's Rainbow, p. 110.

RAWKINS

I ain't turnin' white or any other color to keep a pack of crooks like you in office!

SHERIFF

Calm yourself, Billboard. You're in no position to have opinions right now.

RAWKINS

Oh, no? Who the hell's in a better position? Boy, can I see both sides of this question!

BUZZ

. . . Mr. Rawkins, as a Negro you've got no rights in this state.
. . . Not even the right to stay black. So you've gotta turn white.

RAWKINS

I can stay black if I want to! I got congressional immunity!³⁰³

Ultimately, Senator Rawkins is restored to his original color, but it is made clear that his experience has taught him tolerance and respect for brotherhood. He vows to seek re-election on a platform of non-discrimination and benefits for all the people. "Poor fellow," remarks the Sheriff with intentional irony, "got his color back, but never recovered his senses."³⁰⁴

It is, perhaps, curious to note that a musical play with so strong a commitment to racial issues as Finian's Rainbow should concentrate almost exclusively upon the white man. Finian's Rainbow is intended to be a thoroughly integrated production, yet there are no Negro roles with which an audience truly can identify. There is Howard, the college student, who with gleeful malice dissembles before the Senator. There is also the Negro geologist. Both are bit parts, and

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

the function of each is to point out all that is ludicrous in Rawkins' character.

The community of Rainbow Valley is interracial and functions largely as a chorus. Aside from stage directions or specific references in the dialogue,³⁰⁵ the authors make it impossible to determine which of the incidental characters belongs to what race. All speak the same, slightly rural, brand of English, and there is no attempt at dialect --other than the Irish. Moreover, all the valley residents share the same hopes and dreams of economic gain and an easier life.³⁰⁶ This kind of non-racial delineation of character--obviously intentional--represents a departure from previous Negro-oriented musicals in which, at the very least, peculiarities of speech and conduct had been taken for granted. Reviewing the Broadway production, Miles M. Jefferson wrote:

There are no star roles for the Negroes in the cast, and if one were inclined to be churlish he might say there should have been, but so completely a part of the show are the Negro performers, who compose more than one-third of the company, that it demonstrates an object lesson in race goodwill. The mixed dancing chorus performs terpsichorean tricks in the friendliest race diffusion.³⁰⁷

This is precisely the point upon which the authors insist. It is the interracial congeniality of the Rainbow Valley sharecroppers--the ideally integrated community,--rather than specific character delineation which is stressed. In this manner, the Negro is maintained simply as an ordinary human being with no startling attributes, thereby

³⁰⁵As when a child asks: "Is Henry the wrong color?" (*ibid*, p. 72).

³⁰⁶Three chorus numbers carry the theme: "Necessity," "That Great Come-and-Get-It-Day," and "When the Idle Poor Become the Idle Rich."

³⁰⁷Jefferson, *Phylon*, VII, No. 2 (1947), p. 150.

allowing the focus of attention to be aimed directly at Senator Rawkins and "the inanity of racial intolerance."³⁰⁸

Inasmuch as this study has dealt with the racial theme to the exclusion of other elements in Finian's Rainbow, it should be noted that the fantasy, whimsy, and romance which comprise the bulk of the show tend to temper the seeming blatancy of the racial message. Stanley Green has written that "the feeling of a message may have been apparent throughout, but Finian's Rainbow was never allowed to become a sermon. It was light, it was imaginative, and it had its own brand of simple-minded logic."³⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the liberalist philosophy³¹⁰ so evident in the libretto has been criticized as follows: "Its book is . . . littered with Thirties-Forties left-wing messages; . . . the point is a combination of racial reform and redistribution of wealth. . . ."³¹¹ This is true, but it does not necessarily follow that racial issues, among others in the production, should not be explored from the liberal position. It is also true, however, that situations and characterization are heavily slanted toward the authors' purpose so that the message cannot be misconstrued. In an essentially favorable review of the 1960 revival, Richard Watts, Jr., remarked:

³⁰⁸Green, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 213.

³⁰⁹Ibid.

³¹⁰E. Y. Harburg has confirmed the fact that his political and social views, which have influenced much of his work, were inspired by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. (Great American Dream Machine, Public Broadcasting Service, telecast February 17, 1971.)

³¹¹Martin Gottfried, A Theater Divided: The Postwar American Stage (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), p. 187.

If the return to the school of social significance seems rather wistfully old-fashioned, it is certainly not because its point about racial intolerance has lost its timeliness. It is due to the primitive cartoon terms in which it is set down; to the elementary way in which it appears to have been tossed into the proceedings.³¹²

This, too, is valid criticism, and similar objections were held in response to the original production in 1947. Nevertheless, from one source concerned specifically with theatrical presentation of the Negro, came the following remarks:

For the first time in this reviewer's memory race intolerance in the Deep South has been subjected to light, but peppery spoofing in a musical show, and this has been accomplished in the best of taste and with great style. Some critics accused the show of undue vulgarity in spots and of a tormenting cuteness. Race issues were suspected of having been dragged in by the ears. This spectator cannot agree. Nothing in the show is too coy for comfort and race peculiarities in the South are only exposed to the lightest kind of raillery, quite reticent, in view of their real fantastic nature.³¹³

Whatever the methods employed, the one incontestable fact about Finian's Rainbow is that its authors made their point. Perhaps it was felt that only the broadest brand of satire, within the framework of fantasy, would render the serious social criticism palatable. Certainly, the exaggerated absurdity of Senator Rawkins' dilemma effectively served the authors' goal of ridiculing the notion of white supremacy. Foreshadowed by much of the thought content found in Bloomer Girl, Finian's Rainbow stands as a landmark of social protest among Negro-oriented musicals upon the American stage. It was followed, in the last year of the decade, by a far more sober treatment of the very same theme.

³¹² Richard Watts, Jr., "Two on the Aisle," New York Post (April 28, 1960), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1960, XXI, No. 12 (Week of May 2, 1960), p. 279.

³¹³ Jefferson, Phylon, VII, No. 2 (1947), pp. 149-50.

Lost in the Stars

In 1949, Cry, the Beloved Country, Alan Paton's widely acclaimed novel of racial animosities in South Africa, was adapted to the musical stage with book and lyrics by Maxwell Anderson and music by Kurt Weill.³¹⁴ Entitled Lost in the Stars, it was billed as a "musical tragedy,"³¹⁵ but might more aptly have been described as a sentimental musical play with a message. Miles M. Jefferson accurately summarized the production's cumulative effect as follows: "Seeing Lost in the Stars was like going to church and having reaffirmed the truth of the ultimate goodness of man."³¹⁶ The ambitious musical was received by the critics with mixed emotions. Many were deeply moved by the development of the racial and spiritual themes; others found it to be contrived, inaccurate, and shallow. John Chapman called it "a magnificently pictorial and emotion-stirring theatre piece."³¹⁷ Kappo Phelan dubbed it an "abortion."³¹⁸ Quite probably, the most exact evaluation lay somewhere

³¹⁴ Further production credits were as follows: Direction, Rouben Mamoulian; settings, George Jenkins; costumes, Anna Hill Johnstone. In principal roles: Todd Duncan (Stephen Kumalo), Leslie Banks (James Jarvis), Julian Mayfield (Absalom), and Inez Matthews (Irina).

³¹⁵ Harold Clurman, "Theatre: Two Hits," New Republic, CXXI No. 21 (November 21, 1949), p. 19.

³¹⁶ Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1949-1950," Phylon, XI, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1950), p. 106.

³¹⁷ John Chapman, "Anderson, Weill, Mamoulian Make 'Lost in the Stars' a Work of Art," New York Daily News (October 31, 1949), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1949, X, No. 23 (Week of November 7, 1949), p. 243.

³¹⁸ Kappo Phelan, "The Stage & Screen: 'Lost in the Stars'," The Commonweal, LI, No. 6 (November 25, 1949), p. 212.

between the two extremes. Lost in the Stars was a work of considerable integrity which sought to explore social problems from a humanistic point of view, but which also led to facile solutions drenched in an abundance of emotion. From the middle position of mixed response, Miles Jefferson objectively reported:

Despite occasional brazen assaults on the tear ducts . . . the Anderson-Weill musical play was a touching if not completely faithful and triumphant adaptation to the stage of a distinguished novel. Let us label it a popular success of considerably more merit than the average Broadway product.³¹⁹

Lost in the Stars tells a fairly simple story. Stephen Kumalo, a gentle and compassionate Negro minister of the Christian faith, leaves his humble dwelling in the South African village of Ndotsheni and journeys to Johannesburg in search of his son, Absalom. Stephen discovers that Absalom has become disillusioned in his efforts to earn sufficient funds to further his education. Having been imprisoned for theft, Absalom is now on parole and living in the slums of Johannesburg with Irina, his pregnant common-law wife. Desperate to improve their circumstances, Absalom is persuaded to participate in the burglary of Arthur Jarvis, a wealthy white man who, ironically, is a crusador for Negro equality. When the robbery is foiled, the terrified Absalom shoots and kills Arthur Jarvis.

In prison, Absalom confesses his guilt to the incredulous Stephen whose simple but deeply abiding faith in a benevolent God is shaken to its very foundations. In anguish, Stephen approaches James Jarvis, father of the victim and a staunch supporter of South African

³¹⁹ Jefferson, Phylon, XI, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1950), pp. 106-07.

apartheid. Stephen begs Jarvis for forgiveness and pleads for his son's life, but Jarvis seeks retribution and will not be moved to intercede. At the trial, Absalom's accomplices lie and are acquitted; Absalom tells the truth and is sentenced to be hanged. Upon their mutual request, Stephen unites Absalom and Irina in a marriage ceremony performed in prison. Grief-stricken, Stephen returns to Ndotsheni accompanied by Irina and Alex--the unwanted child of Stephen's wayward sister.

At Stephen's home, young Alex befriends Edward, son of the murdered man and grandchild of the elder Jarvis--much to the latter's distaste. Jarvis is moved, however, by Stephen's announcement, to the local congregation, of a decision to abandon his pastorate because he questions the validity of his faith. As the hour of the distant execution approaches, Jarvis appears at Stephen's house. In their mutual desolation, racial boundaries disappear, and the two men find comfort in friendship as well as new faith and a reason for living.

Lost in the Stars is presentational in style and demands performance upon an open stage with only fragmented scenery.³²⁰ The authors shun illusory methods and employ, in their place, the convention of a chorus, the purpose of which is suggested in the opening stage directions: "From the orchestra pit a broad flight of steps leads up to the stage. A group of SINGERS sits on these steps, so placed that they are not in the way of the action but can comment on it or ascend to take

³²⁰In his introduction to Famous American Plays of the 1940's (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1960, pp. 20-21), Henry Hewes remarks that: "The Broadway production was not ideal. It suffered from a pictorial staging. . . . Lost in the Stars is a musical that will not really come into its own until it is produced on the open stage, which is the stage of the future."

part in it at any time."³²¹ In addition to setting the proper emotional tone in various scenes, the function of the chorus is largely didactic. The device enables Anderson and Weill to state their messages economically and directly, and it allows them to explore social problems and their causes from a much broader perspective than that of a purely representational style.³²² Lost in the Stars is concerned more with mankind as a whole than it is with the misfortune of Stephen Kumalo and his family. Philosophic questions concerning purpose and meaning in human life give scope and dimension to the musical, as well as a universality of appeal, which removes it intellectually from the confines of its South African setting.³²³ Accordingly, neither Weill nor Anderson make any pretense toward authenticity in music or words. In an

³²¹Maxwell Anderson, Lost in the Stars, in Famous American Plays of the 1940s, selected and introduced by Henry Hewes (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), p. 291. Cited hereafter as Lost in the Stars.

³²²The reader will note stylistic similarities to the techniques of epic theatre. Kurt Weill was, perhaps, Bertolt Brecht's most celebrated musical collaborator during the early Berlin period of their respective careers. Together, they turned out such works as The Three-penny Opera and The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny. In Brecht: The Man and His Work (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books; Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961, p. 34), Martin Esslin has stated that "Brecht's theory of the function of opera and of the 'epic theatre' in general owes a great deal to Weill's ideas." Lost in the Stars, however, differs from the epic style--most notably in its insistence upon eliciting an emotional response from the audience.

³²³It should be noted, however, that Lost in the Stars adheres to the pattern established in Show Boat (*supra*, pp. 108-09), wherein musicals featuring serious racial statements invariably have been given a setting remote in time and/or place. In this case, the locale allows an American audience to contemplate the cruelties of racism abroad without being affronted with the consideration of subtler forms of racism at home.

interview published in the New York Times, Kurt Weill explained their motives as follows:

But, you see, I wasn't trying to reproduce the native music of Africa any more than Maxwell Anderson was trying to provide with words a local-color picture of life there. I'm attempting to get to the heart of the public, and my public wouldn't feel anything if I gave them African tunes.³²⁴

In Lost in the Stars, theatrical illusion is abandoned in an effort to achieve larger values. Its authors' concern with human problems rather than jungle drums resulted in a musical play which, for the first time, presented the non-American Negro as having emerged from the bush.

Because the black characters of Lost in the Stars are entirely victims of circumstance, and because, as William Hawkins has suggested, "the white characters are so thinly drawn that they are barely symbols,"³²⁵ emphasis is placed upon the negative effects of apartheid. It is the motivating principle which touches, and even defines, each of the major characters. As in the case of Bloomer Girl,³²⁶ Lost in the Stars makes it clear that an official policy of racism may have an economic basis. The South African black serves as an inexpensive source of labor--especially in the gold mines upon which much of the Union's financial foundation rests. The frustration and bitterness which arise from the inequity of such a system are enunciated by Stephen's brother, John: "They pile up mountains of gold, and they pay our sons three

³²⁴Quoted in George Gene Nathan, "The Theatre," The American Mercury, LXX, No. 314 (February, 1950), p. 171.

³²⁵William Hawkins, "'Lost in Stars' Has Zulu Theme," New York World-Telegram (October 31, 1949), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1949, X, No. 23 (Week of November 7, 1949), pp. 242-43.

³²⁶Supra, pp. 220-22.

shillings a day, and out of this wage take a heavy tax. Is that fair?"³²⁷ Johannesburg, a city literally built by that gold and the site of principal mines, embodies all that is associated with apartheid. It is the place to which blacks are drawn out of necessity and from which there is no escape. The chorus sings the message:

White man go to Johannesburg--
He come back, he come back.
Black man go to Johannesburg--
Never come back, never come back!³²⁸

In Johannesburg, as one of Absalom's accomplices puts it, "justice is when the black man digs and the white man carries the brief case! Justice is when the black woman cooks and the white woman has breakfast in bed!"³²⁹ The despair of the black man's lot, separate and unequal in Johannesburg, is movingly described by Absalom in his remarks to Irina:

Shanty Town. Crawling with boarders and bugs and children. You'd have your baby, and I'd keep on at the factory, and you'd have another baby, and we'd live in the same shack and pay our taxes and our rent and pretty soon we're sleeping four in a room. Ten in a room. Filth. Nothing. And that's our life forever. That's what we get. Isn't it?³³⁰

The city, built upon and sustained by the system of apartheid, is presented as a symbol of corruption, a cesspool of degradation for the blacks whom it systematically dehumanizes. Thus, it is postulated that the behavior of the black population is the direct result not only of deplorable living conditions but of an insidious social cancer

³²⁷ Lost in the Stars, p. 305.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 298.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 317.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 319.

manifested in the streets of Johannesburg. Echoing the sentiments of the slain Arthur Jarvis, probation officer Mark Eland suggests: "They see no way out of their poverty or their fear and they grow desperate."³³¹ Fear is the key word, and it is derived from the strict policies of white repression. As James Jarvis explains:

There are two races in South Africa. One is capable of mastery and self-control--the other is not. One is born to govern, the other to be governed. One is capable of culture and the arts of civilization--the other is not. . . . There is only a handful of whites in South Africa to control the great tide of blacks--and the blacks have no control of their own! . . . Those who will not keep order must be kept in order!³³²

From the transparency of the foregoing, it should be clear that there exists an element of fear on the part of the oppressor as well as the oppressed. The resulting, and seemingly irreconcilable, racial tensions are expressed in an emotion-charged choral passage which follows the murder:

WHITE CHORUS

Yes, we fear them.
For they are many and we are few!

NEGRO CHORUS

Who can be content
When he dares not raise his voice?
.
For fear of the mines,
And the prison,
And the cell from which there is no return?
Yes, we fear them,
Though we are many and they are few!

WHITE CHORUS

Who can lie peacefully abed
When the dark without window is troubled
By those who hate you for what you are and
what you do?

³³¹Ibid., p. 329.

³³²Ibid., pp. 346-47.

NEGRO CHORUS

You think you know what it is to fear or to hate?
 What is there you have not taken from us except
 hate and fear?
 Yes, we fear them, though we are many and they
 are few!³³³

This passage expresses the complexity of the social climate produced in Johannesburg by the system of apartheid. In a society in which each race distrusts, fears and hates the other to the point of chaos, it is comprehensible and revealing that Absalom should cry out to Irina, "Oh, God damn this world!"³³⁴ It is within the context of such a world that the largely uncomplicated characters are defined.

The major black characters are sympathetically presented as the victims of their circumstances. Absalom is depicted as an earnest and willing young man, discouraged by the fruitlessness of his work in the mines and disillusioned by his inability to rise to his full potential.³³⁵ His lapse into thievery is blamed by Stephen upon the moral corruption of the city of Johannesburg.³³⁶ Absalom's reluctance to carry a gun--much less to use it--during the robbery is quickly established³³⁷ and he is persuaded to do so only when his friends insist upon it, reminding him of his desperate circumstances and suggesting that he can become "a man--not somebody's dumb ox!"³³⁸ Immediately.

³³³Ibid., pp. 331-32.

³³⁴Ibid., p. 320.

³³⁵Supra, p. 262.

³³⁶Lost in the Stars, p. 334.

³³⁷Ibid., pp. 317-18.

³³⁸Ibid., p. 321.

following the murder, Absalom repents the rashness of his deed and returns to the righteous ways of his father's teachings with a solemn vow: "I shall not lie any more, all the rest of my days, nor do anything more that is evil."³³⁹ Fully aware that he might save his life by perjuring himself before the court, Absalom remains true to his word. "He did not mean to kill," pleads Stephen, "and he tells truth. Is there not a core of good in him who tells truth?"³⁴⁰ Clearly, we are to sympathize with this position, although Anderson does present the other side of the dilemma with Jarvis' rather pertinent observation that Absalom will not die "for his truthtelling."³⁴¹ Absalom is further ennobled by his insistence upon marrying Irina in order to legitimize their unborn child. Finally, when the verdict is read, the chorus bursts into a lament which moves from the personal fate of Absalom to "the tragic fate of the land and its people,"³⁴² in what has been called one of the most stirring and eloquent passages to come out of the popular Broadway theatre:³⁴³

Cry, the beloved country,
Cry, the beloved land,
the wasted childhood,
the wasted youth,
the wasted man!
Cry, the broken tribes, and the broken hills,
and the right and wrong forsaken,

³³⁹Ibid., p. 354.

³⁴⁰Ibid., p. 345.

³⁴¹Ibid.

³⁴²Howard Taubman, "Good Opera Need Not be Grand Opera," New York Times, Magazine Section (December 11, 1949), p. 15.

³⁴³Ewen, The Story of America's Musical Theater, p. 235.

the greed that destroys us,
 the birds that cry no more!
 Cry, the beloved country,
 Cry, the lost tribe, the lost son.³⁴⁴

Absalom is not a well developed character. Particularization is avoided so that he may serve as being representative of the masses of South African blacks. Given the cruelties of apartheid, Absalom's fate is the inevitable fate of an entire race. The authors minimize individual responsibility and place the blame upon society.

Irina, Absalom's common-law wife, is at first glance the familiar long-suffering and faithful woman, waiting in anguish for her man to return to her. She differs from such predecessors as Petunia (Cabin in the Sky), Cindy Lou (Carmen Jones), and Lila (St. Louis Woman) in that her man has not deserted her for another woman. Nevertheless, Irina waits in vain while Absalom engages in robbery and, again, when he is imprisoned. She voices her woes in two torch songs: "Trouble Man" and "Stay Well."³⁴⁵ Moreover, Irina invades familiar territory as a woman of apparently easy virtue, given to a variety of casual liaisons. When probation officer Eland discovers that Irina does not know Absalom's whereabouts, he remarks to Stephen: "They're like water. They live together, they get a child, they engage to marry, and the next day both have forgotten."³⁴⁶ Upon questioning Irina, Stephen learns that Absalom is, indeed, the third man with whom she has lived, but her seemingly

³⁴⁴Lost in the Stars, pp. 356-57.

³⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 324-25 and 349-50, respectively. (Both songs are available on the original cast recording: Decca, DL 79120.)

³⁴⁶Lost in the Stars, p. 322.

promiscuous behavior is explained and excused with the implication that social conditions are the cause of such conduct:

STEPHEN

But you lived somewhere--before you met Absalom.

IRINA

I lived in Sophiatown.

STEPHEN

Alone?

IRINA

(Picking nervously at the back of a chair) Nobody lives alone in Sophiatown.³⁴⁷

Quite clearly the authors are suggesting that the virtual imprisonment of a people in slum conditions may, out of necessity or convenience, have an effect upon behavior patterns. Like Absalom, Irina is a victim of circumstances which allow her a destiny of limited scope. She is, however, dignified and humanized by her sincere devotion to Absalom. While he is in prison, Irina determines that she will remain faithful even if Absalom should never return to her. Stephen asks: "And when the desire is on you?" Irina replies with utter simplicity: "I desire only him."³⁴⁸ Thus, Irina is made into a character of high moral standards, and in requiring the audience to reverse its initial opinion of her, the authors succeed in making her an admirable and sympathetic character.

The protagonist of Lost in the Stars is the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, an intelligent, guileless and soft-spoken man whose charitable ways render him nothing short of saintly. Well aware of the rules

³⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 322-23.

³⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 349.

imposed by the system of apartheid, Stephen is respectfully meek in the presence of whites but never abandons his human dignity.³⁴⁹ As a follower of the teachings of Christ, Stephen believes in forgiveness and the love of one's fellow man, but his faith is shaken by events beyond his control--events so apparently senseless to him that they could not possibly be in the scheme of a benevolent God or a comprehensible universe. In the title song, which follows in part, Stephen expresses his anguished doubts:

Now a man don't mind if the stars grow dim
And the clouds blow over and darken him,
So long as the Lord God's watching over them,
Keeping track how it all goes on.

But I've been walking through the night and the day
Till my eyes get weary and my head turns grey,
And sometimes it seems maybe God's gone away,
Forgetting the promise that we heard him say--
And we're lost out here in the stars . . .³⁵⁰

When Absalom chooses the morally correct path, but nevertheless is condemned to death, Stephen's dilemma reaches the proportions of a crisis, and he resigns from his pastorate, explaining that he has lost his faith. In conversation with James Jarvis, the disillusioned preacher exclaims: "Do you know what I would preach here? . . . That if there is a God He is hidden and has not spoken to men! That we are all lost here, black and white, rich and poor, the fools and the wise! Lost and hopeless and condemned on this rock that goes 'round the sun without meaning!"³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Stephen, his wife, Absalom, and even young Alex address all the white characters as "sir" throughout the play.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 337.

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 368.

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The character of Stephen Kumalo brings the audience into an encounter not just with the cruelties of racism, but with the concept of man's inhumanity to man and the even larger question of the purpose of human life. Stephen Kumalo's love for his family, so beautifully expressed in the song, "Thousands of Miles,"³⁵² is extended to the ideal love of one's fellow man. Lost in the Stars raises the question: Why does man so complicate things? Love, peace, harmony and simplicity should reign in place of hate, stress, friction and greed. Lost in the Stars makes this happen at the final curtain with a little more felicity than might be considered practicable. James Jarvis, who has upheld the policy of racial separation throughout the production, suddenly comprehends the parallel between his and Stephen's bereavement. He concludes that "even out of the horror of this crime some things have come that are gain and not loss."³⁵³ The gain belongs largely to Jarvis, for he has come to enlightenment and will now accept Stephen as an equal. The following dialogue is illustrative:

JARVIS

I haven't come here lightly. I shall take your hand whenever I like, before whom I like. I shall come and worship in your church if I wish to worship. May I sit here with you?

.

STEPHEN

And [Absalom] is forgiven, and I am forgiven?

JARVIS

Let us forgive each other. . . . Let us be neighbors. Let us be friends.

STEPHEN

. . . You are welcome in this house. I have a friend.³⁵⁴

³⁵²Ibid., p. 296.

³⁵³Lost in the Stars, p. 369.

³⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 368-69.

The play concludes with the chorus' affirmation that "people, through a personal approach, will solve whatever racial problems exist."³⁵⁵

Each lives alone in a world of dark,
Crossing the skies in a lonely arc,
Save when love leaps out like a leaping spark
Over thousands, thousands of miles!³⁵⁶

The final scene of Lost in the Stars is difficult to assess, and its reassuring tone tends to color the entire work. Both Stephen and Jarvis abandon the hatred which might easily threaten to consume them. Such is consistent with the established character of Stephen. Jarvis' reversal is more difficult to accept but, in view of the very condescension of his "I-shall-do-as-I-please" attitude, it is not implausible. Still, Stephen's grateful acceptance of Jarvis' friendship has offended some critics. Kappo Phelan, who loathed the original production, remarked that "the role of Stephen Kumalo . . . is composed as a pickaninny. . . ."³⁵⁷ Lofton Mitchell concurs, stating that the play attacked the white standard, but "failed to realize there is also a 'black standard.'"³⁵⁸ The real problem with the denouement of Lost in the Stars has to do with its authors' desire to prove that the ideal can come true--that the entire racial problem of a divided nation can be solved with a friendly handshake.³⁵⁹ As a piece of social criticism, the musical's many valid moments appear to be invalidated by the facile,

³⁵⁵Green, quoting Weill, The World of Musical Comedy, p. 235.

³⁵⁶Lost in the Stars, p. 369.

³⁵⁷Phelan, The Commonweal, LI, (November 25, 1949), p. 212.

³⁵⁸Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 140.

³⁵⁹Nathan, The American Mercury, LXX (February, 1950), p. 170.

if heartwarming, conclusion. With his usual precision, Harold Clurman observed:

I am more than dubious about its "philosophy": it tells us that since man is lost in the stars and nothing else is sure, people ought to help one another. I hardly believe that such thinking will activate anyone socially, though it may serve as a softener.³⁶⁰

This is accurate criticism; however, one should not be tempted to emphasize the weaknesses of Lost in the Stars to the point of obscuring its positive values when viewed in the chronological context upon which this study insists. Its sympathetic--if not unbiased--presentation of the oppressed black man results in the most dignified, humanized, image to date. Its comprehension of societal and environmental influences upon character and behavior bring to the work a sophistication uncommon to the musical stage. The indictment of racial generalizations causes one to pause--as in the white probation officer's remarks: "There are good and bad among them. . . . We can know them only by their actions. . . . Let us not blame the whole race."³⁶¹ If such ideas seem archaic by today's standards, they had not been enunciated so seriously, directly, or forcefully in any work written for the American musical stage prior to 1949. The production was a thought-provoking landmark of its time.

It is fitting that Lost in the Stars should provide the finale for the 1940's, for the decade was one which suggests in many ways a liberalized awakening of social conscience on behalf of the Negro. The post-war years saw the Negro more and more in evidence as an integrated performer on the musical stage, while a goodly percentage of the plotted musicals dealt with him as a featured character for purposes of both

³⁶⁰ Clurman, New Republic, CXXI (November 21, 1949), p. 19.

³⁶¹ Lost in the Stars, p. 329.

pure entertainment and thoughtful social consideration. While the latter category may have been beset with flaws, nevertheless it advanced and humanized the image.

CHAPTER V

THE 1950'S: EMPHASIS UPON ENTERTAINMENT

With regard to racial relations in the United States, the decade of the 1950's must be regarded as a crucial period, the events of which presaged the seething crises of the 1960's. Of fundamental importance was the drastic change in the nation's geographical racial imbalance:

Between 1940 and 1960, the Negro population living outside the eleven states of the Old Confederacy increased two and a quarter times, from under four million people in 1940 to over nine million in 1960--roughly half the total Negro population in the United States. Most of this increase was concentrated in the central cities of the twelve largest United States metropolitan areas.¹

Such a massive redistribution of the Negro population necessarily had political repercussions:

The growing size of the Northern Negro vote made civil rights a major issue in national elections and, ultimately, in 1957, led to the establishment of the federal Civil Rights Commission, which had the power to investigate discriminatory conditions throughout the country and to recommend corrective measures to the President. Northern and Western states outlawed discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations, while the NAACP, in successive court victories, won judgments against racially restrictive covenants in housing, segregation in interstate transportation, and discrimination in publicly-owned recreational facilities. The NAACP helped register voters, and in 1954, Brown v. Board of Education became the triumphant climax to the NAACP's campaign against educational segregation in the public schools of the South.²

¹Silberman, p. 7.

²Kerner Commission Report, p. 225.

Other organizations, such as C.O.R.E., were equally active and succeeded in producing progressive legislation. But the most significant movement, and one which "captured the imagination of the nation and of the Negro community in particular,"³ was led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. His successful employment of non-violent direct action techniques--beginning with the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955-56--dramatically demonstrated that

the older techniques of legal and legislative action had had limited success. Impressive as the advances in the 15 years after World War II were, in spite of state laws and Supreme Court decisions, something was still clearly wrong. Negroes were disfranchised in most of the South. . . . Supreme Court decisions desegregating transportation facilities were still being largely ignored in the South. Discrimination in employment and housing continued, not only in the South but also in Northern states with model civil rights laws. The Negro unemployment rate steadily moved upward after 1954. . . . King and others were demonstrating that non-violent direct action could succeed in the South. New laws and court decisions and increasing support of white public opinion gave American Negroes a new confidence in the future.

. . . Ironically, it was the successes in the legislatures and the courts that, more perhaps than any other single factor, led to intensified Negro expectations and resulting dissatisfaction with the limitations of legal and legislative programs. Increasing Negro impatience accounted for the rising tempo of non-violent direct action in the late 1950's, culminating in the student sit-ins of 1960 and the inauguration of what is popularly known as the "Civil Rights Revolution" or the "Negro Revolt."⁴

Given this acceleration of the civil rights movement during the 1950's, the thrust of which was summarized by Martin Luther King as an endeavor to bring racial injustice "out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with,"⁵ and considering the amount of social protest on behalf of

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., pp. 226-27.

⁵Martin Luther King, quoted in Silberman, p. 357.

the Negro in musical theatre of the 1940's, one logically would assume that musicals of the 1950's might deal relevantly with racial themes. Surprisingly, they did not. During this decade, presentation of the Negro on the musical stage was by and large frothy and escapist in nature.

Musical entertainments of the 1950's continued the trend, established during the 1940's toward policies of integrated casting in works devoid of racial content.⁶ The musical revue, in its final decade of popularity,⁷ frequently managed to feature at least one black performer. Pearl Bailey appeared in Bless You All (1950) and Babe Hines was favorably received in the short-lived Almost Crazy (1955). Harry Belafonte's talents were prominently showcased in two revues: John Murray Anderson's Almanac (1953) and 3 for Tonight (1955). Leonard Sillman's highly successful New Faces of 1952 introduced Eartha Kitt, while the 1956 edition featured Tiger Hanyes. Several plotted musicals also included black performers in racially neutral roles. Out of This World (1950)--a Cole Porter musical loosely based upon Jean Giraudoux's mythological comedy, Amphitryon 38--symbolically employed the services of Janet Collins, a Negro dancer who, "as Night, seductively permeated all of the corners of the stage with her spineless cavortings."⁸ Sandhog (1954), was a serious but labored off-Broadway treatment of the hardships endured by workers engaged in the gigantic construction projects which have made

⁶Supra, pp. 163-68.

⁷Engel, pp. 70-71.

⁸Miles Jefferson, "Empty Season on Broadway, 1950-1951," Phylon, XII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1951), p. 130.

this country an economic giant.⁹ Rodester Timmons portrayed one of the laborers digging and building New York's Hudson River Tunnel during the 1830's. "His part," wrote Miles Jefferson, "was a minor one, but he and a couple of Negro children contributed happily to the whole."¹⁰ In Ankles Aweigh (1955), an old-fashioned and undistinguished musical comedy about a Hollywood starlet's troubled honeymoon and sailors on shore leave, Thelma Carpenter appeared briefly "as a bordello madame,"¹¹ and sang one song.¹² Eartha Kitt starred in the 1957 production of Shinbone Alley, an imaginative musical adaptation of the Don Marquis archy and mehitabel stories. Inasmuch as Miss Kitt took the part of mehitabel--literally an alley cat--opposite Eddie Bracken's archy, the cockroach, any attempt to view or discuss the production in terms of racial characterization would prove meaningless--especially when mehitabel had been rendered so superbly by Carol Channing on an earlier recording¹³ from which the Broadway version was derived. With regard to Shinbone Alley, Theatre Arts Magazine remarked:

Just how actors are to go about impersonating such animal characters is something that conceivably might tax any human being. It didn't faze Eartha Kitt, however. She was just Eartha, and there were, after all, quite a few virtues in such

⁹Harold Clurman, "Theater," Nation, CLXXIX, No. 24 (December 11, 1954), p. 518.

¹⁰Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1954-1955: More Spice Than Substance," Phylon, XVI, No. 3 (Third Quarter, 1955), pp. 309-10.

¹¹Ibid., p. 308.

¹²Miss Carpenter does not perform on the original cast recording (Decca, DL 9025).

¹³archy & mehitabel, Columbia Records, OL 4963.

an arrangement, especially when she was stepping through a musical number. . . .¹⁴

Finally, The Body Beautiful (1958)¹⁵ featured Lonnie Sattin and Barbara McNair in secondary leads as Harry and Marge, a boxer and his wife. Nowhere in the script was race mentioned or inferred; the roles might have been taken by any actor or actress. Taken as a whole, casting policies in the revues and plotted musicals outlined above appear to run the gamut from the seeming tokenism of Ankles Aweigh, with its black bawdy-house keeper, to the more enlightened and nonchalant integration found in The Body Beautiful.

In the same category of racially neutral characterization was Mr. Wonderful (1956), which has been singled out for more careful consideration because its history infers a good deal about Broadway attitudes toward racial relevance in musicals during the 1950's. The production starred Sammy Davis, Jr., with Olga James as his love interest, and featured a thoroughly integrated chorus. Davis felt very strongly that his show should make a strong racial statement, and a plot was devised about a young Negro performer (Charley Welch) who, because of his encounters with prejudice in the United States, becomes an expatriate and achieves stardom in Paris. The major conflict then had to do with whether or not Charley should return to the States in an effort to seek acceptance in his homeland.¹⁶ The racial theme, however, was

¹⁴"Shinbone Alley," Theatre Arts, XLI, No. 6 (June, 1957), p. 16.

¹⁵Joseph Stein and Will Glickman (book), Jerry Bock (music), and Sheldon Harnick (lyrics), The Body Beautiful (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1957).

¹⁶Sammy Davis, Jr., and Jane and Burt Boyar, Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr. (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), pp. 291-92 and 303.

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denounced by the critics during Mr. Wonderful's tryout in Philadelphia, and the unnerved producers insisted upon a complete rewrite. Sammy Davis has recreated the atmosphere of the decisive meeting as follows:

Somebody in the back of the room ventured, "Maybe they're right. Maybe it's something that doesn't belong in the theater." The one voice triggered the others: "It's dangerous." . . . "Like they say, let Western Union deliver the messages." . . . "Yeah, the racial thing should be softened." . . . "It's touchy." . . .

I stood up in the middle of the cross-fire. "May I say something? If we take the racial theme and just sweep it under the carpet, then what'll we have left?"

"An entertaining show. That's all we need. . . . Our first concern is to sell tickets. And apparently we won't do it with the racial angle as is. You know we all feel as you do, that it's worth saying, but it's too hot."

"But if we're the first ones to come out with a hard-hitting story like this--isn't that good?"

"Sammy, maybe the reason it's never been done before is that nobody wants it."¹⁷

One thing was clear; the producers did not want it as it was. Mr. Wonderful was changed, and so was its protagonist and his conflict. The Paris setting was dropped, and Charley Welch became a nightclub performer who was afraid to approach the "big time" simply because "he's afraid."¹⁸ Sammy Davis, Jr., put it succinctly: "Instead of a story about a sophisticated, sensitive guy who doesn't want to live with prejudice, Charley Welch has become a shnook who doesn't have the guts to try for success."¹⁹ Although Mr. Davis and his fellow performers were well liked by the press, Mr. Wonderful received disastrous reviews in New York City, but it managed to run for a respectable total of 383 performances on the strength of Davis' efforts and personality.²⁰ The

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 302.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 303.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 306.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 311-12. Also: Rigdon, p. 34.

text, as performed on Broadway and as it stands,²¹ contains no reference whatever toward race and could be handled, in fact, by virtually any versatile night club entertainer. As it was presented, Mr. Wonderful depended upon the drawing power and talent of its star performer. In this case, he happened to be black, but he need not have been. Nevertheless, during the 1950's, the significance of Mr. Wonderful may well have been seen in its failures rather than its achievements.

Black performers were also seen as ostensibly Negro characters in several plotted musicals of minor distinction. In most cases, the parts were either miniscule or were created as specialty turns to inject some liveliness into otherwise lagging proceedings. Pearl Bailey appeared as an extraneous delight in Arms and the Girl (1950), about which Theatre Arts Magazine reported: "Pearl Bailey as a runaway slave runs away with the show three times. Only one number, a song about her birthplace, has anything to do with the matters at hand."²² Similarly, Mae Barnes was featured in By the Beautiful Sea (1954) as Ruby Monk, the housekeeper of a Coney Island boarding house owned by Shirley Booth.²³ Miles Jefferson observed that, "Miss Barnes . . . does not have anything very exciting to do in By the Beautiful Sea except to

²¹Joseph Stein and Will Glickman (book), Jerry Bock, Larry Holofcener, and George Weiss (music and lyrics), Mr. Wonderful, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), access granted courtesy of Music Theatre International, New York City, Controller of Rights.

²²"Arms and the Girl," Theatre Arts, XXXIV, No. 4 (April, 1950), p. 17.

²³Descriptive catalogue, Music Theatre International (New York City), 1968.

belt two songs over the footlights in a way to bring down the house."²⁴ In 1951, Maurice Ellis and Alonzo Bosan appeared very briefly as a hired hand and his father²⁵ in Seventeen, a musical adaptation of Booth Tarkington's novel. Finally, Livin' the Life (1957), an off-Broadway musical based upon Mark Twain's Mississippi River stories, recounted the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Lee Charles was cast in the role of the runaway slave, Jim. The production was condemned for its lack of dimensionality and an undistinguished score;²⁶ it closed after only twenty-five performances.²⁷ In these musicals, the Negro was seen briefly, often as being extraneous to the main line of action, and always in predictably traditional and subservient roles: the runaway slave, the handyman, and the domestic.

During the decade, two musical comedies with predominantly Negro casts failed because of their insistence upon old-fashioned formulae. Flournoy Miller, Noble Sissle, and Eubie Blake decided to resuscitate their precedent-setting Shuffle Along.²⁸ They retained the title, two of the original hit songs ("I'm Just Wild About Harry" and "Love Will Find a Way"), and the general format involving two male comedians and much dancing. Paul Gerard Smith assisted Miller in transforming the plot and altering the setting to Italy and New York at the end of World War II.

²⁴Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1953-1954: A Baffling Season," Phylon, XV, No. 3 (Third Quarter, 1954), p. 257.

²⁵Theodore Kraus, "Credits and Critics," Theatre Arts, XXXV, No. 9 (September, 1951), p. 7.

²⁶"Livin' the Life," Theatre Arts, XLI, No. 7 (July, 1957), p. 18.

²⁷Rigdon, p. 28.

²⁸Supra, pp. 49-53.

Sissle and Blake provided new musical numbers, but the over-all result was, as Walter Kerr observed, "a minor vaudeville masquerading as a full-fledged musical comedy."²⁹ The years between 1921 and 1952 had changed the public's taste sufficiently that the new Shuffle Along, for all its revisions, was found to be offensive. The authors had failed to change the one element which clearly needed alteration. Miles Jefferson echoed the unanimous critical response when he wrote:

The Shuffle Along brand of humor has long since been happily buried--the humor of two shambling comedians murdering the English language and indulging in "Negroisms" [is] painfully embarrassing in a much more enlightened 1952. Mr. Flournoy Miller and Mr. Hamtree Harrington were as old as their comedy and should be punished as severely as they punished their audiences for posing, even slapstickly, as Privates Cyphus Brown and Longitude Lane.³⁰

Representing an investment of "over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars,"³¹ the 1952 edition of Shuffle Along closed after four performances. Also unsuccessful was an off-Broadway venture, by Lorenzo Fuller and Carley Mills, entitled The World's My Oyster (1956). Butterfly McQueen was featured, and Fuller cast himself in the role of the romantic lead. Virtually all that remains of The World's My Oyster is the following description: "The book was one of those long ago moth-eaten South Sea Island fancies developed somewhat as if its writers had been

²⁹Walter F. Kerr, "Shuffle Along," New York Herald Tribune (May 9, 1952), reprinted in New York Theatre Critic's Reviews, 1952, XIII, No. 12 (Week of May 12, 1952), p. 287.

³⁰Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1951-1952--Another Transparent Season," Phylon, XIII, No. 3 (Third Quarter, 1952), p. 202.

³¹Ibid., p. 203.

stunned by Finian's Rainbow."³² The musical ran for a total of forty performances.³³

Finally, two serious productions during the 1950's deserve mention--although their categories place them beyond the scope of this study. The Barrier (1950), by Langston Hughes and composer Jan Meyerowitz, was an opera based upon Hughes' earlier play, Mulatto, and short story, "Father and Son."³⁴ Received coldly by the critics, The Barrier was a quick failure; however, its thoughtful probing into the psychological effects of racism, on both the black and the white, marked it as a musical rarity during the largely frivolous 1950's. Miles Jefferson commented:

The consensus of the critical fraternity was that the opera lacked genuine emotional intensity, that the music and the libretto were not married, that there was a woeful lack of inspiration. It was refused on the grounds that it was an old-fashioned blood-and-thunder exhibit--sound and fury signifying nothing. . . . It closed after four performances--a great pity, for despite minor flaws it generated authentic feeling in its indictment against race intolerance.³⁵

³²Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1955-1956: Pits and Peaks in an Active Season," Phylon, XVII, No. 3 (Third Quarter, 1956), p. 237.

³³Rigdon, p. 54.

³⁴The libretto of The Barrier remains unpublished; however, the reader is referred to the text of Mulatto in: Webster Smalley (ed.), Five Plays by Langston Hughes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 1-35. In an excellent analysis of all three works, which includes several quotations from the manuscript of The Barrier, Arthur P. Davis states: "Although there are minor differences among the three--differences occasioned largely by the nature of the form used--it is surprising how closely each follows the other. . . . The opera libretto is artistically the most finished version of the story. Much of the violence and sensationalism of the original play is toned down in the poetry of the libretto." ("The Tragic Mulatto Theme in Six Works of Langston Hughes," Phylon, XVI, No. 2 [Second Quarter, 1955], p. 199.)

³⁵Jefferson, Phylon, XII, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1951), pp. 131-32.

Later in the decade, Eartha Kitt starred in an unusual play by Negro artist and writer Charles Sebree and his white collaborator, Greer Johnson. Entitled Mrs. Patterson (1954), it was given a period (1920) folk setting and dealt with "the ambitions, daydreams, and frustrations of a fifteen-year-old Southern Negro girl"³⁶ effectively played by Miss Kitt.³⁷ Six songs by James Shelton were introduced to enhance the several symbolic, fantasy-daydream sequences;³⁸ however, Mrs. Patterson must be considered a hybrid--a play to which music was appended but not truly integrated. Critical reaction was mixed--most of it uneasy with regard to the play's uncertainty of style--and the show closed after 101 performances.³⁹

The 1950's produced only five major plotted musicals dealing specifically with characterization of the Negro. They follow, in chronological order, along with the total number of performances on Broadway:⁴⁰

My Darlin' Aida (1952), 87 performances
House of Flowers (1954), 165 performances
Simply Heavenly (1957), 62 performances
Jamaica (1957), 555 performances
Saratoga (1959), 80 performances

Of these, only Jamaica was commercially successful. From the foregoing discussion, it may be said that the 1950's was not a particularly

³⁶Butcher, p. 204.

³⁷Sketchy material tracing the production's history may be found in: Eartha Kitt, Thursday's Child (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1956), pp. 244-49.

³⁸"Mrs. Patterson," Theatre Arts, XXXIX, No. 2 (February, 1955), p. 15.

³⁹Rigdon, p. 34.

⁴⁰In each case, the performance record has been derived from Rigdon.

lucrative decade for the Negro performer on the musical stage. Neither was it lucrative with regard to advances in Negro characterization, although there were some refinements.

My Darlin' Aida

In 1952, after five years of artistic labor,⁴¹ Charles Friedman's My Darlin' Aida was given a sumptuous production at the Winter Garden Theatre. Friedman, who nine years earlier had directed the libretto of Oscar Hammerstein's Carmen Jones, was much enamored of that show's achievements, and My Darlin' Aida was his attempt to recapture its success by employing Hammerstein's methods. In an effort to render grand opera popularly appealing, Friedman chose Giuseppe Verdi's Aida, retained much of the music in its original form, transplanted the action from the banks of the Nile to the levees of the Mississippi, and developed a book and lyrics which closely approximated the structure and characters of the original. Friedman has explained his motives as follows:

I chose Aida because it had rich music, crowd and ballet scenes and a strong story. There my advantages ended. Its setting was ancient Egypt, a time and place with which nobody in the Broadway audience that I expected to play to would have the slightest emotional contact. . . . Where to put it then? Ideally, America, for I intended that my audience should become completely caught up in the story--as the music always intended. . . . But where in America? It was imperative that the character Aida remain a slave, unusually close to her mistress, for the structure of the story and all of Verdi's imaginings and embellishments to stay in place. I went back from 1947 till I found my period in the Civil War. I had not set out to write a play about the South. It was simply the setting in which the sweep and passion of this opera could be best

⁴¹Charles Friedman, "Toward American Opera," Theatre Arts, XXXVII, No. 6 (June, 1953), p. 34.

understood by the modern Broadway audience. Those who missed the point, that this and no other was my departure, made much too much of the cuteness of Memphis, Egypt-Memphis, Tennessee. The coincidence was sheer accident.⁴²

Directed by Mr. Friedman, My Darlin' Aida opened on October 27, 1952, with a cast headed by Elaine Malbin, Howard Jarratt, Dorothy Sarnoff, and William Dillard; the opulent settings and costumes were the work of Lemuel Ayres, and Hanya Holm provided the choreography.⁴³ Critical reception was mixed, but heavily weighted toward the unfavorable. The vocal talents of the female leads were greatly admired, and the spectacularly lavish mounting of the production left virtually all viewers breathless. But the melodramatics of the Friedman libretto, coupled with the banality of lyrics so reminiscent of flowery verses found on sentimental greeting cards,⁴⁴ led most critics to denounce My Darlin' Aida as a contrived, if gorgeous, spectacle. Walter Kerr observed:

The situations are Americanized easily enough. It is in the uncomfortably plain and platitudinous lyrics--and worse yet, in the melodramatic dialogue--that Mr. Friedman fails to do justice to Verdi or to his own commendable ambitions. . . . His lyrical form is not even clearly defined. . . . The result of this verbal flatness is that Verdi's musical line is rarely matched and the melodramatic plotting which we are usually ready to forgive in an opera becomes garishly accented.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1952, XIII, No. 21 (Week of November 3, 1952), p. 218.

⁴⁴ Quotations of lyrics in the pages ahead attest to this fact.

⁴⁵ Walter F. Kerr, "My Darlin' Aida," New York Herald Tribune (October 28, 1952), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1952, XIII, No. 21, p. 219.

Brooks Atkinson was even more outspoken:

Charles Friedman's new libretto is American, with a strong dash of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" seasoning. . . . Sooner or later theatre people will have to abandon this notion that everything exotic can be happily translated in terms of the American South. . . . Mr. Friedman's new plot involves a slave insurrection and a good deal of literary bravura that seems obsolete today, especially since his mind is full of clichés.⁴⁶

Finally, Miles Jefferson came directly to the racial point:

A lavish production reported to have cost over three hundred and fifty thousand dollars could not conceal the fact that the combination of Italian melody and an essentially "Uncle Tom" libretto was like bedecking Topsy in a silk party dress and expecting her to be toasted at a ball given by "the white folks." The gesture was democratic, but fantastically incredible.⁴⁷

The collection of well-worn Southern period stereotypes (both black and white) which paraded through My Darlin' Aida debilitated the only musical production of the decade which earnestly endeavored to present a racial-social theme.

The plot is worth recounting in some detail. After six years of military schooling in the North, Southern aristocrat Raymond Demarest returns to the plantation of General Farrow where he had been raised. It is taken for granted that Raymond will marry Jessica Farrow, the General's beautiful but willful daughter. Raymond, however, is strongly attracted to the gentle Aida, a mulatto slave who had been brought up on the Farrow plantation and who now serves as Jessica's personal servant and confidante. Aida and Raymond engage in furtive meetings, but Aida

⁴⁶ Brooks Atkinson, "'My Darlin' Aida' Transports Verdi's Opera to the South of Civil War Times," New York Times (October 28, 1952), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1952, XIII, No. 21, p. 218.

⁴⁷ Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1952-1953: Still Cloudy; Fair Weather Ahead," Phylon, XIV, No. 3 (Third Quarter, 1953), p. 269.

recognizes the hopelessness of their situation when Tennessee secedes from the Union and Raymond proudly marches off in Confederate uniform. Bitterly, Aida expresses the irresolvable conflict of divided heritage--the dilemma of her passion for a white man who is obliged to fight for the subjugation of blacks. In so doing, she affirms her commitment to the darker race but cannot suppress her love for Raymond. Prompted by jealousy over Aida's favored position in the Farrow household, Lolly--a demented slave girl--lewdly reveals to Jessica the nature of the Raymond-Aida relationship. Jessica tests Aida and, when the truth is exposed, determines that Raymond will be hers and that she will humiliate Aida by retaining her as their slave following the marriage.

The Confederate troops return in triumph after the victory of Bull Run, but the festivities are interrupted when a vigilante group appears with Adam Brown--General Farrow's runaway slave and Aida's stepfather--whom they have captured. Adam is militant and in danger of being lynched, but he is saved when Raymond agrees to marry Jessica. According to previous agreement, Adam becomes Raymond's property and is released into his custody. Having been educated in the North during his hegira, Adam has become part of a Union Army plot to cripple the Confederacy, and he reveals to Aida his plans for an armed revolution against the Southern whites. Premature discovery of the scheme necessitates the assistance of a military strategist, and Adam prevails upon Aida to persuade Raymond to fulfill that role. Shocked by the prospect of having to ask her beloved to turn against his racial heritage, Aida refuses, whereupon Adam accuses her of faithlessness. Arguing that her white blood is the cause of such treachery, he rejects her, and the distraught girl chooses allegiance to her blackness. Confronting Raymond,

Aida proudly insists that she will be secretive no longer and convinces him that they must flee to the North where, theoretically, they will be free to love one another openly. Adam appears and discloses his scheme to the horrified Raymond. Unseen, Jessica has eavesdropped upon much of the conversation, and she alerts the household to the proposed Negro uprising. Aida, Adam, and Raymond flee, with the segregationists in pursuit.

Warned of the events which have taken place, the field slaves determine to protect themselves, as well as Adam and Aida, by dissembling. When the slave quarters are searched, violence erupts; Adam is killed, Aida wounded, and Raymond is arrested. As the vigilantes amass, Jessica attempts to blackmail Raymond into marriage by advising him, quite sincerely, that she has the political influence to save his life. Raymond, however, will not be moved and insists upon following his own convictions which now include belief in equality and brotherly love. He invites his capture by the vigilantes who brutally whip and torture him as Jessica pleads for clemency. Raymond's unconscious body is hurled into the Negro church where Aida lies dying. Both revive sufficiently to recite for one another the marriage vows and to sing their good-byes. Raymond and Aida die as the plantation Negroes conclude: "They died so we could go free. . . . Why ain't we free?"⁴⁸

In this passionate tale of miscegenation, a subject absent from the musical stage for a full twenty-five years,⁴⁹ the character of Aida

⁴⁸ Charles Friedman, My Darlin' Aida, in Theatre Arts, XXXVII, No. 6 (June, 1953), p. 61. Cited hereafter as My Darlin' Aida.

⁴⁹ The reference is to Show Boat (1927). Of significance is the fact that, unlike Julie, Aida's black heritage is to be visible. Nevertheless, "Mr. Friedman insisted upon casting a white girl in the part of

conforms to the classical pattern of the tragic mulatto stereotype--the "victim of a divided inheritance and therefore miserable."⁵⁰ Her family background is made clear early in the proceedings:

LOLLY

Her true pa was white folks.

FISHER

Adam marry Aida's ma when the babe was born an' the white man near killed the woman.⁵¹

Aida's social position in the Farrow household and her relationship to both Raymond and Jessica also are clarified in the opening scene:

RAY

Aida and Jessie were raised together. The General dotes on her. Miss Jessie depends on her. Why, they're like sisters.

SOURBY

. . . He [Raymond] was raised with them. He is their brother, you might say.⁵²

Ostensibly, such expository details lend credibility to the miscegenation theme. Aida is considered a slave because she possesses Negro blood, but she has been raised as a "house nigger" in genteel fashion, and her half-white ancestry serves as something of a cushion to absorb any shock with regard to her relationship with Raymond. Nevertheless, it is made clear that, within the Farrow household, no one but (possibly) Raymond considers Aida an equal.⁵³ She is relegated to the subservient

Aida, . . . and you were never convinced that she was anything but white, even with a slightly darkened skin." (Jefferson, Phylon, XIV, No. 3, 1955, p. 269.)

⁵⁰ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," in Dark Symphony, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 162. (Also: Supra, pp. 77-78, 82, 89-90.)

⁵¹ My Darlin' Aida, p. 38.

⁵² Ibid., p. 37.

⁵³ Jessica refers to Aida as her "house darky" (ibid., p. 39).

position of a slave on the plantation. Such is her identity given the social structure, and such is her means of identification.

Aida is, however, half white, and this fact theoretically produces a conflict within her. Her love for a white man is at odds with another racial identification which not only has been imposed upon her, but which supposedly courses through her veins. When Raymond marches off toward the battle of Bull Run, Aida initially expresses contempt through the eyes of a black, considering Adam Brown to be her father:

Off to war against my father,
Against the folk whose blood runs in mine--
Letting his heart fill with hatred,
Foolish hatred--
Even a fool sees which way this war is headed.
.

I promise to God that I'll never be sighing.
I won't even cry when I know he is dying!⁵⁴

Later in the same aria, Aida's true longings, and the cause of her bitterness, are enunciated:

A girl whose folks are the color of night
Can never hope to covet a man that's white.
It's sin, it's Satan, to dream I belong.
To dream of wedding chimes is wrong, all wrong.⁵⁵

Aida's ambivalence--the product of her bi-racial background, which allows her to belong exclusively to neither race--brings on a misery which can be erased only by death:

Up streets I moan
"I'm all alone!"
Left all alone
So all alone
I die.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 53.

It is the classic pattern in which the major function of the tragic mulatto is simply to suffer.

It has been pointed out that one of the three most common themes concerning the tragic mulatto has to do with the fear of "violent rejection by members of both races."⁵⁷ Certainly, Raymond's affiliation with the Confederate Army, not to mention his forced membership in a Klan-like organization, are interpreted by Aida as rejections of her black ancestry. Likewise, but from the opposite persuasion, Aida suffers rejection by her stepfather, Adam Brown. Employing reverse logic⁵⁸ in his attitude toward the mulatto, Adam castigates Aida:

Get out of our house! Your ma don' want you! I don' want you!
 You're false like that other
 Your cold-blooded father
 Who ravage your mother
 You're spawn of a brute!⁵⁹

Continuing, Adam angrily reminds Aida of the race to which society, if not her own instinct, insists she belongs:

So proud with your white blood!
 One spot of our blood, a drop of black
 on the lily white page, an' you're tore
 from the Book o' Life, trompled,
 The same slave as I is!⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Hardwick, p. 41.

⁵⁸ From the white point of view, one of the theses upon which the stereotype is based is that "even inheriting the worst from whites is sufficient for achieving among Negroes." (Brown, in *Dark Symphony*, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 160.) The beliefs which Adam expresses are equally racist. They proceed from the same brand of logic but are turned to black advantage.

⁵⁹ *My Darlin' Aida*, p. 54.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

The rejection is too much for the unhappy Aida who finds that she must belong somewhere. Spurned by white society and unable to find a place between the races, Aida consciously chooses to acknowledge her blackness. Apologetically, she cries to Adam:

Take in your daughter
I'm home for good and true
We're tied in darkness
We're tied in darkness, me, ma and you.⁶¹

Nevertheless, moments later, Aida seems to have forgotten her momentary allegiance as she seductively coos to Raymond that he should come away with her, above the Mason-Dixon line, "away where they don't talk about color, just ask a man does he pray."⁶² It comes almost as a relief when, at the final curtain, Aida and her lover sink into oblivion, thereby resolving all their difficulties with the most basic possible solution. In My Darlin' Aida, characterization of the tragic mulatto is accomplished with mathematical precision and very little imagination.

Of considerably greater interest is the character of Adam Brown. As an escaped slave brought into confrontation with his former master, Adam may profitably be compared with the Pompey of Bloomer Girl.⁶³ When asked why he had run away, Pompey replied with an explanation to the effect that he sought freedom. Adam, described as "a man who will fight,"⁶⁴ expresses the same motive, but he responds to the question with a tirade:

⁶¹Ibid., p. 55.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Supra, pp. 217-20.

⁶⁴My Darlin' Aida, p. 49.

Don't preach me!
 Was I the slave?
 Was you the master?
 That's the gallin' fact!

I been tore, I been beat, I been hongry?
 It's fo' more than to eat that I'm hongry.
 Livin' river inside o' me
 Wanna move free
 Gotta live free
 Or why ever live?⁶⁵

Here is an angry man who openly vents his resentment and hostility toward white society, making no attempt to conceal the depth of his bitterness. He is the first such Negro character on the musical stage.

Adam is a man not only of words but of deeds. As the leader of an insurrection strongly reminiscent of Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, Adam is not averse to the use of violence. In a significant scene, he reveals to Aida his plot and the justifications for it.

ADAM

Ain' nothin' to be scared, chile. That's the way the beast have--a time to be low, and a time to spring and kill. The master, he make us the beast. We got guns! . . . An' a time to use them!

AIDA

Who gave you the guns?

ADAM

The brother to the North. He comin' this way, talkin' for us with guns. We echoes with guns, guns to the back of white folks that won't set the black man free! . . . They learn me in the North. Then they study me in ways to deliver my people. When the sun ups to spill his blood in the valley we ups with him.

I been told how the northern sky
 will brighten
 How fire! an' brimstone! will level
 all this down.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Once proud bones will be sown aroun'
 to whiten
 Free men! black men! will reap this
 teary groun'.⁶⁶

Despite Friedman's sophomoric imagery, Adam's hatred and revolutionary zeal are impressively stated. Significantly, Adam is not the villain of the piece; rather, it is the system of white supremacy which is condemned. Friedman clearly intends that his audience should respond sympathetically--if not toward Adam's horrifying methods, then at least toward the circumstances which have brought him to the state of bestiality. Adam Brown is the first Negro male on the American musical stage whose violence is not negatively equated with the stereotype of the brutish "bad nigger." He will not be the last.

Of the remaining Negro characters--all servants or field slaves--no effort is made toward individualization.⁶⁷ Collectively, they represent an oppressed and dissatisfied people whose apparent humility in serving the white master is a self-protective mask. Early in the opening scene, Friedman reveals the animosities which lie beneath the seemingly placid surface. While a particularly elegant party is in progress at the Big House, the slaves privately deride the guests whom they have had to serve, commenting that "now I know what the devil looks like."⁶⁸ Similarly, late in the second act, the slaves expose the fact

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

⁶⁷ Lolly, the simple-minded slave-girl who betrays Aida so that she, too, might ride in Miss Jessie's carriage, is accorded minimal characterization. Beyond her functional role in the manipulation of the plot, however, Lolly is a dim-witted servant employed for occasional comic relief in a manner which suggests that Friedman had been heavily influenced by the character of Prissy in the film, Gone With the Wind.

⁶⁸ My Darlin' Aida, p. 37.

that they are not so benignly loyal to the Farrows as their presentation of Miss Jessie's wedding gift⁶⁹ might suggest. The supreme loyalty is to one another; of necessity, they are secretive and clannish:

MORNIN' STAR

We gotta do for Adam an' Aida!

.

PORK

That's right. First--we don' rouse the Quarter. Then we blind who come lookin', blind them with feathers. We gonna be the fool darky, up havin' a sing or something. . . . Get a move on--move them feet. Girl, if you was ever crazy, be crazy tonight!⁷⁰

There follows a sequence of elaborate dissembling⁷¹ which Friedman carries farther than necessary--making his Negroes appear half-witted rather than cunningly evasive.⁷² Nevertheless, the point is made with regard to black animosity and the tactics necessary for survival within the system of slavery.

It is the painful indignity inflicted by the policy of racial bondage which My Darlin' Aida decries. The thought is expressed as the black women sing to their children:

When you grow up to be
About as big as me,
Or even bigger,
You'll know when you ain't free
You don't figger
In none of de fun.⁷³

The big message, however, is reserved for Raymond who delivers it as he dismisses the willful Jessica:

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 52.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 56-57.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 57.

⁷²Compare with Porgy and Bess, supra, pp. 156-58.

⁷³My Darlin' Aida, p. 48.

I want it said there was one who stood against you. . . . I will say, I am guilty, I knew the slave and I were alike and I did not shout it enough. Try to understand, Jessie. I want to plant my small love and see it seed and multiply after its kind. There has got to be love. There is a terrible famine of love.⁷⁴

Thus, in the final scene--as Raymond and Aida, members of the two races, lie dying but joined in spirit--the message of love and brotherhood is brought to a climax:

(. . . The blushing world beyond the walls is invading the church. There are visitors come to the funeral feast, the NEGRO PEOPLE.)

AIDA

You hear something?

NEGROES

Birds are flying in the sky.

RAY

I hear. Your people! They remember us.

NEGROES

An' fish are swimmin' in the sea.

AIDA

Sweet people. Kind as my ma.

NEGROES

Free!

RAY

Patience, you humbled people
Your time of pride is coming
No, I won't see it.⁷⁵

And so the antiphonal chant is continued by the Negroes until the final curtain: "Lord, why ain' we free? . . . Free, why ain' we free? . . . When will it be? . . . When will it be? . . . Why ain't we free?"⁷⁶

Charles Friedman closes his opera-turned-musical-play with an urgent

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 58-59 (italics mine).

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 61.

⁷⁶Ibid.

plea which is valid both in its historical setting and in the social climate of 1952. My Darlin' Aida nevertheless remains a throwback to the patterns of awakening conscience during the 1940's when, indeed, its idea was germinating. Sincere as Friedman's endeavor may have been, it was both a commercial and an artistic failure. It brought to the musical theatre one prophetic character: Adam Brown, the angry but sympathetically presented revolutionary. For this, Friedman may take credit. The rest of My Darlin' Aida was dross.

House of Flowers

As it was presented on Broadway, the 1954 production of Truman Capote and Harold Arlen's House of Flowers is nearly impossible to evaluate. The original cast recording⁷⁷ is a helpful tool, but the script⁷⁸ --first published in 1968--has been entirely rewritten and bears as little resemblance to the Broadway version as the latter did to the Capote short story upon which it was based.⁷⁹ In the published text, Capote has eliminated nearly half of the songs written for the original, decreased the importance of what had become the starring role, and, in a brand new second act,⁸⁰ introduced the character of a grandmother who

⁷⁷House of Flowers, Columbia, OL 4969; OS 2320.

⁷⁸Truman Capote (book and lyrics) and Harold Arlen (music and lyrics), House of Flowers (New York: Random House, 1968). Hereafter cited as House of Flowers script.

⁷⁹Truman Capote, "House of Flowers," Breakfast at Tiffany's; A Short Novel and Three Stories (New York: The New American Library, 1958), pp. 86-101.

⁸⁰Gloria Steinem, "An Interview with Truman Capote," McCall's, XCV, No. 2 (November, 1967), p. 149.

had appeared in the short story but not in the Broadway musical. To make matters even more confusing, the revised text was unsuccessfully staged off-Broadway at the Theatre De Lys in January, 1968; however, the cast album of this altered version⁸¹ indicates that it departed considerably from the published script.⁸² This study is principally concerned with House of Flowers as it was presented to audiences between December 30, 1954, and May 22, 1955; therefore, although the published text undoubtedly conforms to the musical which Capote originally had envisioned, it must be considered an untrustworthy representative of the musical which actually emerged. In this case, greater reliance must be placed upon the original cast album and upon secondary sources.

Tracing the evolution of the Broadway production proves helpful.⁸³ Capote's short story, inspired by a sojourn in Haiti during the winter of 1948, employed that island as its locale. The action has been summarized as follows:

Capote's original concentrated upon the love story of a young, relatively innocent prostitute who married an equally young and innocent country boy. The early action takes place in the city, and the later action in the country, where [the boy's] grandmother attempts to break up the marriage with spells. She is defeated by the girl who, one day, puts all the conjure objects (lizards, toads, etc.,) into the old woman's soup. After the grandmother enjoys the soup the girl informs her of its ingredients, whereupon the old woman conveniently dies. After an interlude, in which two of the girl's prostitute

⁸¹House of Flowers, United Artists, UAS 5180.

⁸²It contains four musical numbers not included in the script--three of which were not heard in the original Broadway production: "Somethin' Cold to Drink," "Woman Never Understan'," and "Madame Tango's Particular Tango."

⁸³Details of the Arlen-Capote collaboration are explored in the following source: John S. Wilson, "Building a House of Flowers," Theatre Arts, XXXIX, No. 1 (January, 1955), pp. 30-31 and 91.

friends appear to try to get her to return to town, the story closes with a happy fade-out.⁸⁴

The story's main line of action subsequently was abandoned. Edward Jablonski has outlined the pertinent details as follows:

Very early in the show's production [Capote's] original story was greatly changed. The role of one of the madams, small in the story, was expanded to suit the talents of star Pearl Bailey. Eventually the entire second act was thrown out and a new one substituted, and the character of a grandmother, important in the short story, completely disappeared.

.
The musical turned its attention to the rivalry between two madams; . . . the boy-girl story became subsidiary.

.
Since the book was no longer really his, Capote could not relate himself to the problem. And that problem lay in the book, which wavered between the boy-girl story and the rivalry between the madams. For "commercial" Broadway purposes it behooved the management and director Peter Brook to lean toward the latter emphasis, thereby missing completely the point of the original story.⁸⁵

When the last of numerous alterations had been accomplished, House of Flowers opened on Broadway with the following plot:

The setting is the West Indies during Mardi Gras week. The House of Flowers is a bordello run by Mme Fleur (Pearl Bailey), its name derived not only from that of the proprietress but also from the fact that each of its girls was named after a flower. This house is run in competition with another one headed by Mme Tango (Juanita Hall), as a result of which it comes upon hard times. During an epidemic of mumps brought on by visiting sailors, the House of Flowers is forced to close. In an effort to retrieve her lost fortune Mme Fleur is ready to turn over her young and innocent protégé, Otilie (Diahann Carroll) to a wealthy white ship merchant. But Otilie is in love with Royal, a barefoot boy from the hills (Rawn Spearman). To get him out of the way, Mme Fleur contrives to get him abducted aboard a ship, from which he manages to escape. At first he is believed to be the victim of sharks. But just as Otilie is about to give herself up to the wealthy merchant,

⁸⁴ Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 187.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 187-88.

Royal appears, becomes the town hero, and is reunited with the girl he loves.⁸⁶

Critical response was mixed and occasionally ran to extremes;⁸⁷ however, the majority applauded Oliver Messel's sumptuous settings and costumes. The leading performers were admired, and the Arlen-Capote score "was voted the Drama Critics' Award and has come to be considered one of the finest of the decade."⁸⁸ Most of the critics reacted negatively toward the book, finding it to be both humorless and tasteless. John McClain's assessment was as follows:

The onus seems to fall upon Mr. Capote, whose book is neither ingenious nor very funny and is often plain vulgar. . . . 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.⁸⁹

A reading of the various critical opinions leaves the distinct impression that the plot of House of Flowers was allowed to drift into happy oblivion while the sensual aspects of island life were emphasized for purposes of color and excitement. Walter Kerr wrote:

After an impudent first scene, comedy is given the cold shoulder. . . . With the disappearance of the initial comic vein, there is a gap to be filled either by sentiment or by exotic local color. Both are tried, both are tepid. The love story is at best fragmentary; the dances and the island mumbo-jumbo become alarmingly conventional. Fingers are snapped, hands

⁸⁶ Ewen, Complete Book of the American Musical Theater, pp. 13-14.

⁸⁷ Compare the opinions of Robert Coleman and Brooks Atkinson in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1954, XV, No. 21 (Year Ending December 31, 1954), pp. 189 and 192.

⁸⁸ Edward Jablonski, "Harold Arlen--Broadway's Tone Poet," The Theatre, I, No. 12 (December, 1959), p. 47.

⁸⁹ John McClain, "Capote Play Big, Beautiful," New York Journal American (December 31, 1954), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1954, XV, No. 21, p. 191.

clapped, shoulders swiveled and tom-toms pounded with furious energy.⁹⁰

In a similar vein, Brooks Atkinson described the eroticism promoted in the production numbers: "Tall and short Negroes, adults and youngsters, torrid maidens in flashy costumes and bare-chested bucks break out into a number of wild, grotesque, animalistic dances."⁹¹ If such descriptions are accurate, the Broadway production of House of Flowers may be said to have painted a familiar portrait of the primitive, uninhibited island native.

Materials found on the original cast album, as well as those lyrics which remain in the published version, corroborate such a contention. The sultry atmosphere of the tropical island is captured in the casual eroticism of one of the most popular numbers in the score, "Two Ladies in de Shade of de Banana Tree." Begun with voluptuous languor by three of Madame Fleur's "flowers," it gradually increases in tempo to the point of frenzy. The lyrics follow, in part:

With lips pout-in' to please,
An' eyes rol-lin' to tease.
De most pop-u-lar plan
De-signed to cap-ture man,
Two ladies in de shade of de ba-na-na tree.
What a fro-lick-in' spec-ta-cle dey can be,
In de ice cold shade of de ba-na-na tree.
De nights dey always fair.
No-body nev-er wear
A stitch too much

⁹⁰Walter F. Kerr, "Theater: 'House of Flowers'," New York Herald Tribune (December 31, 1954), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1954, XV, No. 21, p. 190.

⁹¹Brooks Atkinson, "Alvin Theatre Offers 'House of Flowers'," New York Times (December 31, 1954), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1954, XV, No. 21, p. 192.

From here to here,
Or ev-en there to there.⁹²

This--followed by a madly exuberant dance and coupled with such other diversions as a lively "Mardi-Gras" production number and "a cock-fight dramatized by the spectators' backs"⁹³--promotes an exotic and sexually-oriented milieu, characterized by its carefree lack of restraint and the childlike gratification of momentary pleasures. In substance, House of Flowers depends upon that concept of "paradise" promised in so many travel brochures, heightened by the romantic notion of half-civilized inhabitants and their unconventional behavior.

Madame Fleur, proprietress of the House of Flowers, is depicted as being earthy and ribald, a woman who is curiously coarse and worldly sophisticated at the same time. In her opening number ("One Man Ain't Quite Enough"), she reminisces about her girlish fantasy of settling down with a man she loves--but then goes on to explain with supreme candor:

And soon my real desires couldn't be
concealed.
So I had to yield and play the field.
My attitude became more hum'rous,
More I dealt in numbers num'rous.
Oh, I sure was a good girl at bein' bad.
Unless my loves were plural I'd go
stark ravin' mad.⁹⁴

Once again the Negro female is characterized by an intense eroticism, and if Madame Fleur is more the poised courtesan than the promiscuous

⁹²House of Flowers script, pp. 13-14, and Columbia recording, OS 2320, Side 1, Band 7.

⁹³Richard Watts, Jr., "Musical Tour of a Caribbean Isle," New York Post (December 31, 1954), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics; Reviews, 1954, XV, No. 21, p. 190.

⁹⁴House of Flowers, Columbia recording, OS 2320, Side 1, Band 3.

wench, she nevertheless remains a hedonistic sister to Bess, Carmen Jones, and their ilk.

Madame Fleur is entirely mercenary, and in her efforts to maintain the House of Flowers as the foremost brothel on the island she is shrewd and ruthless. Her behavior as a bawd in negotiating an "arrangement" between Otilie and the wealthy Monsieur Jamison is selfishly motivated, as is her scheme to kidnap Royal. Much of the humor in the characterization of Madame Fleur is to be found in the discrepancy between her actual craftiness and the transparent mask of selflessness which she wears from time to time. When one of her plots goes awry, she pacifies her "flowers" in a mock lament:

I was never ever meanin' to be mean
 Always wanted to behave like a hen with her chicks,
 Tried not to fuss or cuss.
 I was only tryin' to make a home for all of us.⁹⁵

Having gained their sympathies and devotion, Madame Fleur concludes with the order: "Go to work!"⁹⁶

A glimmer of genuine affection is allowed to emerge as Madame Fleur bids good-by to Otilie:

It's not easy,
 It's never been easy,
 To let anyone see
 The sentimental side of me.
 Hard as I try,
 I can't help but show
 It's my heart you're takin'
 When you go.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid., Side 2, Band 4.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ House of Flowers script, p. 58. (In Capote's revised text, the song is given to Otilie; on Broadway it belonged to Madame Fleur and may be heard on the Columbia recording, Side 2, Band 7.)

Happy because of Ottilie's happiness, Madame Fleur releases her with the inner strength of the ultimate realist:

I won't be grievin',
Now that you're leavin',
It's travelin' time
And you must move on.
Found someone you can lean upon--
And if I could arrange it
Oh, would I care to change it...
Not me.⁹⁸

Madame Fleur's essential ruthlessness is somewhat offset by the sentiments expressed in the above song, but it is her slyness, her ribaldry, and the preposterous basic premise of two brothel keepers locked in bitter rivalry, which make Madame Fleur an amiable female rascal.

Ottilie is seen in direct contrast to Madame Fleur. A mountain girl, Ottilie remains unspoiled by her sojourn at the Maison des Fleurs, and the finery in which Madame Fleur has garbed her has diminished neither her simplicity nor her lack of guile. Although fond of the shiny gold bracelets with which Monsieur Jamison has gifted her, Ottilie attaches to them no material importance.⁹⁹ Indeed, as it is expressed in the song, "I'm Gonna Leave Off Wearin' My Shoes," she is unimpressed with the sophisticated life which Monsieur Jamison offers; her values are far more basic:

Gonna leave off wearin' my shoes,
Feel my bare feet on the ground,
Steal away when spring comes around.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

⁹⁹ In a dialogue sequence which introduces "A Sleepin' Bee" on the Columbia recording (Side 1, Band 4), Ottilie's friends make much of her naïveté in having given away the bracelet.

Gonna leave off cuttin' my hair,
 Let my hair get drenched in the rain,
 When I come home he won't complain.¹⁰⁰

Thus it is that Otilie, a simple child of nature, falls in love immediately with the barefoot Royal who sings to her of the idyllic delights in which they both find pleasure:

My house is made of flowers,
 The warm winds carpet the floor,
 Whenever there's spring showers
 I open a rainbow door.

The frog--the toad--the turtle
 Make my home their home,
 My curtains are crepe myrtle,
 And the fireflies fly 'neath my dome.

I've never had money
 And I'll never need none,
 The moon is my lamp
 And my clock is the sun. . . .¹⁰¹

Her nostalgia for the rich rewards of simple values have been awakened, Otilie rejects the glitter and gaiety of Madame Fleur's bawdy-house, declines Monsieur Jamison's promise of luxurious living, and, in the remarkably beautiful "I Never Has Seen Snow,"¹⁰² expresses her devotion to the boy from the hills and his unaffected way of life. In so doing, Otilie joins the ranks of such admirable folk characters as Porgy, Petunia (Cabin in the Sky) and Cindy Lou (Carmen Jones) who find contentment with "plenty o' nuttin'."

¹⁰⁰House of Flowers script, p. 56, and Columbia recording, Side 2, Band 3.

¹⁰¹House of Flowers script, p. 48, and Columbia recording, Side 1, Band 6.

¹⁰²Ibid., script, pp. 70-71, and recording, Side 2, Band 5.

The best known and most durable song to emerge from Arlen's magical score¹⁰³ is "A Sleepin' Bee"; it belongs to Ottilie and develops yet another facet of her personality. Like Porgy, Ottilie's childlike naïveté is accompanied by firmly held superstitious beliefs. Given the West Indian setting, this persistently stereotypical Negro trait is manifested in terms of voodoo. Confused by her lack of any special feeling toward Monsieur Jamison, Ottilie consults the houngan--a voodoo witch doctor--asking by what means she might know if she is in love. Her friends, Tulip, Gladiola, and Pansy--employees of Maison des Fleurs who pride themselves upon their ludicrous pretensions toward sophistication--deride voodoo as being "low class."¹⁰⁴ They advise Ottilie to pluck a hair from the man's head and place it in a glass of wine; if it turns into a flower, it is a sign of true love!¹⁰⁵ But Ottilie does not hold with such archaic rites. She agrees with the methods of the houngan and trusts a bee:

OTILIE

All a lady has to do is catch a bee an' hold him in your hand.
An' if it don't sting you, if it don't fly away, then you'll
know you've found a love, sweet golden as a crown!¹⁰⁶

When a bee lies sleepin'
In the palm of your hand,
You're bewitched and deep in
Love's long looked-after land.
.

¹⁰³Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 192.

¹⁰⁴House of Flowers script, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵House of Flowers, Columbia recording, Side 1, Band 4.
(Essentially the same speech is delivered by the houngan in the script, p. 6.)

¹⁰⁶House of Flowers, Columbia recording, Side 1, Band 4.

A sleepin' bee done told me,
 I'll walk with my feet off the ground--
 When my one true love I has found.¹⁰⁷

The voodoo theme is pursued further and made an important part of House of Flowers, not only in several production numbers but also in arriving at the dénouement. When it appears that Royal has been lost at sea while escaping from his abductors, Otilie invokes the powers of the voodoo gods,¹⁰⁸ and Royal is miraculously saved from the sharks by a giant sea turtle upon whose back he sails to shore.¹⁰⁹ In this fashion, "on an island where voodoo and French culture have settled down in amiable unity,"¹¹⁰ the exotic and childlike island native is portrayed as a curious and amusing pagan, far from the mainstream of Western civilization.

House of Flowers was blessed with many virtues, not the least of which were the visual beauties of its physical production and the lush Arlen-Capote score. Nevertheless, with regard to character delineation, one cannot minimize the inescapable fact that the Negro female was presented almost exclusively as the whore. If the milieu of the Maison des Fleurs was depicted as being less tawdry¹¹¹ than the back alleys of Catfish Row or Billy Pastor's seamy roadhouse, still the eroticism and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., and House of Flowers script, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript: Romanoff and Capote," Saturday Review, XXXVIII (January 15, 1955), p. 31.

¹⁰⁹ "Turtle Song," House of Flowers, Columbia recording, Side 2, Band 6.

¹¹⁰ "Liner Notes," House of Flowers, Columbia recording.

¹¹¹ Ibid. ("The West Indies are fragrant islands, where luxuriant scenery, soft winds and exotic rhythms temper the harsher realities, and such Establishments as the House of Flowers offer neither the stuffy splendor nor squalid poverty of similar places in other lands.")

casual sexuality of the black woman was its strong suit. The remaining characters, such as Ottilie¹¹² and Royal, were portrayed more according to the familiar image of the primitive native living in harmony with nature, happy and carefree, the rhythm of voodoo drums coursing through his veins. In late 1954, House of Flowers offered well-established stereotypes as inhabitants of an idyllic Caribbean island. Nearly three years later a musical featuring a parallel setting, with music again by Harold Arlen, and one which was beset by strikingly similar problems in its production history, projected a very different image of the West Indian Negro.

Jamaica

Like House of Flowers, the 1957 production of Jamaica suffered from the extensive revision of its book in order to suit the talents and personality of a star for whom it had not been written. Authors E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy originally had concocted a whimsical folk tale in which the harried pace of urban life in the United States was to be contrasted with the human and natural values of relaxed island life. Harburg's well-known penchant for witty and often devastating social satire was to be largely in evidence, and because of this Harold Arlen agreed to supply the music for Harburg's lyrics.¹¹³ The musical,

¹¹² Capote stretches one's credibility by insisting, as Pearl Bailey put it, that Ottilie "was supposed to be the only virgin that I had in the place." (Bailey, The Raw Pearl, p. 70.)

¹¹³ Edward Jablonski, "The Unsung Songsmith of 'Jamaica'," Theatre Arts, XLI, No. 10 (October, 1957), pp. 74 and 88. (Arlen "had just completed House of Flowers, also with a Caribbean setting. The idea didn't seem too appealing. What made the difference was the chance to work again with E. Y. 'Yip' Harburg and Fred Saidy, with whom he had collaborated in 1944 on the hit musical Bloomer Girl.")

tentatively titled Pigeon Island, was written for Harry Belafonte who at that time was the leading purveyor of the calypso song, which has become a national craze.¹¹⁴ David Merrick announced plans for production, but Belafonte--ill with a serious throat condition--lost enthusiasm and withdrew from the starring role in early 1957.¹¹⁵ Left without the box office lure of a name star, a search was begun for a performer with great audience appeal. Finding no potential male contenders available,¹¹⁶ the musical--now titled Jamaica--was offered to Lena Horne who accepted the role of Savannah with some misgivings. The script, which the authors performed for her, remained as it had been written for Belafonte, and Miss Horne's observations were as follows:

I sat with tears in my eyes thinking, "What a lovely show and what a great part the leading man has, and who am I going to be?"

The story was about a wonderful fisherman on one of those lovely islands, who had the only brains in the place. He believed that nature and innocence and goodness were more to be desired than all the facilities of civilization, including especially, the bomb. The only lack of brains he displayed was loving a stupid broad who has somewhere gotten hold of a TV set and believes that the only place where things are really happening is New York--and besides she hates fish! I thought they must have called in the wrong person. . . . It was the man's part that had all the earthy qualities they wanted revealed in me, and which I wanted to project. As things stood that afternoon, the part played so brilliantly in the

¹¹⁴Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 199.

¹¹⁵Ibid., pp. 200-201. See also: Jablonski, The Theatre, I, No. 12 (December, 1959), p. 47.

¹¹⁶Sidney Poitier was approached but had prior commitments (Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 201). The dearth of appropriate Negro leading men with box office appeal is made glaringly apparent when one notes that the role of Koli, opposite Miss Horne, was filled by Ricardo Montalban. One might also consider the significance of the following statement: "No reference was made to the fact that Jamaica used an integrated cast, nor did audiences even consider the story as one dealing with miscegenation, for the plot simply developed a typical island romance." (Laufe, p. 229.)

show by Josephine Premice--that of Savanna's [sic] hip, wise-cracking friend--was superior to that of Savanna [sic]. . . . I allowed myself to believe them when they said, "Don't worry, we'll change Savanna [sic] so the part will be great," forced myself not to think that in the context of this script that was something like putting a straight seam down the front of a bias-cut dress.¹¹⁷

Changes in characterization, however, were minimal and, according to Miss Horne, "The new part that was going to fit me never did quite arrive."¹¹⁸ Instead, the emphasis was shifted from Koli, the fisherman, to the character of Savannah, but this alteration of focus toward Lena Horne was accomplished largely in musical terms. "Songs that had been planned for others were given to her, and by the time Jamaica opened Miss Horne was literally singing half the show. This was, of course, fine for Arlen and Harburg, song writers, but not so good for Harburg and Saidy, librettists."¹¹⁹

In restructuring the musical as "a stunning vehicle for its star,"¹²⁰ the plot diminished until it became "nothing more than a strung-out lovers' quarrel."¹²¹ Indeed, especially in the first act, the dialogue sequences are so brief that, for the most part, they serve only as bridges between musical numbers. With the decline of the plot, much of the social criticism disappeared, and what remained was to be found mostly in Harburg's witty lyrics. Moreover, production values

¹¹⁷ Horne and Schickel, pp. 194-95.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

¹¹⁹ Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 205.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 209.

¹²¹ Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript: Horne Swoggled," Saturday Review, XL (November 16, 1957), p. 48.

rather than fresh characterization were designed to emphasize above all else the exciting personality of the star.

With Miss Horne as an important asset to Jamaica, [David] Merrick naturally tended to slant the entire production in her direction, as did director Robert Lewis. . . . Staging was planned so that Miss Horne could stand and sing as she had done so successfully at the Waldorf.¹²²

The result was far more elaborate than the whimsical, socially conscious musical which Harburg and Saidy originally had envisioned, thereby tending to overshadow much of the pungent commentary which remained. Unhappy with the outcome of the Broadway production, E. Y. Harburg has stated, in a personal letter:

We had great difficulty in the mounting of this show due to the opposition of both the director and our star to much of the salient social satire. The authors were also decidedly against the musical comedy gloss, the gaudy costumes and the Broadway tinsel and tinkle of most of the presentation. This goes also for many of the inane and raucous orchestrations. What we wrote as a travesty was in most cases produced almost literally. However, they could not entirely obliterate the social spark and comment.¹²³

Nevertheless, critical response was surprisingly enthusiastic. The reviews in all seven of New York City's daily newspapers¹²⁴ unanimously

¹²² Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 205.

¹²³ E. Y. Harburg, personal letter, November 19, 1969. (In a postscript, Mr. Harburg added the following information which is of interest: "A few years after the Broadway run, the show was presented at the Karamu Theatre in Cleveland. I was called in as consultant by Benno Frank, its director. It was produced with the simple dignity of a folk play. What was supposed to be a six week run, turned into a twenty-six week run with public demand for repeat performance a few years later.")

¹²⁴ All were reprinted in: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1957, XVIII, No. 20 (Week of November 4, 1957), pp. 196-99. (The production opened October 31, 1957.)

applauded Lena Horne's magnetic stage presence;¹²⁵ the Arlen-Harburg score was generally admired, and all the critics agreed that Jamaica's major flaw was to be found in the absence of a plot. Harburg and Saidy were forgiven, however, for the musical was highly entertaining even without much of a story and, as Henry Hewes perceptively observed, it was "held together more by an attitude than by a plot."¹²⁶

Only a brief summary of the action is necessary. The specific locale is not the island of Jamaica itself but, rather, Pigeon Island--off the main coast and differentiated from it by the fact that its principal industry is not tourism but fishing. Savannah, a seamstress, and Koli, captain of the fishing fleet, have been in love for three years, but Savannah will not agree to marriage unless Koli promises to move with her to exciting New York City. Koli finally capitulates and wedding plans are announced; however, his resolve weakens and--instead of a wedding ring and two tickets to New York--Koli purchases a new fishing boat. Furious, Savannah calls off the wedding. Meanwhile, Joe Nashua, a slick entrepreneur, has arrived from New York City intent upon exploiting the island's shark-infested pearl beds. Promising riches, he successfully appropriates Koli's fishermen who, for a salary of ten dollars per week, are only too eager to risk their lives as pearl divers. In an effort to shame Koli, Savannah applies for a diving job, and Joe is immediately captivated by her. She tells him of her desire to go to New York and, in a fantasy sequence, imagines herself with Joe as the toast of

¹²⁵ This writer saw the Broadway production in August, 1958, and can corroborate the fact that Miss Horne was positively stunning.

¹²⁶ Hewes, Saturday Review, XL (November 16, 1957), p. 48.

Manhattan in an elegant supper club. The unhappy Koli once again agrees to Savannah's terms but, upon learning of Joe's attentions to her, he becomes angry and the engagement is broken. Savannah cynically decides to accept Joe's proposal and to return with him to New York. As they prepare to leave, a hurricane strikes the island and Savannah's little brother, Quico, is lost at sea. Joe is revealed to be cowardly and selfish; Koli sets out in search of the boy, rescues him, and returns a hero. Savannah tells Joe that her dream of New York has lost its meaning and that she will marry Koli. A final misunderstanding is reconciled when Koli obtains for Savannah a black pearl which is the subject of an island legend introduced by Savannah's Grandma Obeah. Content to remain on Pigeon Island, Savannah and Koli are happily united. A subplot chronicles the comic pursuit of the seductive Ginger by Cicero, an islander with pretensions toward political fame.

The motivating principle of Jamaica is to be found not in the trite manipulations of its triangular love affair, nor in the complications of its hackneyed plot, but rather in the idea which provides the core of the show. "The thesis of the Harburg-Saidy book was much the same as Thoreau's in Walden: 'Simplify, simplify, simplify.'"¹²⁷ The characters are not presented in depth but emerge, instead, as representatives of conflicting ideologies. Of supreme importance is the fact that the stereotype of the primitive, pagan, island native is consciously avoided. In reviewing the Broadway opening, critic Frank Aston missed the point completely when he wrote: "The audience spends a couple of hours watching the natives . . . and listening to the humor of what is

¹²⁷Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 210.

supposed to be their childlike concept of government, mushroom clouds, fine clothes, fidelity, infidelity, love and John Foster Dulles."¹²⁸

But, quite clearly, Harburg, Saidy, and Arlen were concerned with something of greater social significance and wit than presenting yet another rehash of picturesque local color and minstrelsy-oriented humor. Edward Jablonski's assessment is far more perceptive and provides an accurate rebuttal to Aston's hasty impression:

Though the characters in Jamaica supposedly lived on the isolated Pigeon Island they were a singularly sophisticated and well informed group. . . . For all their simplicity the inhabitants of Pigeon Island proved to be intelligently satirical and wise.¹²⁹

Koli, for example--unlike the Royal of House of Flowers--is far from the simple barefoot boy whose character is rooted in the joys of nature purely for their own sake. Koli is not ingenuous, and his judgment in favor of island life is based upon sound reasoning and a comparison of values, whereby he concludes that the pressures of urban civilization leave much to be desired:

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 a 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.¹³⁰

¹²⁸Frank Aston, "Lena Horne Tops Musical," New York World-Telegram and The Sun (November 1, 1957), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1957, XVIII, No. 20, p. 199. (*Italics mine.*)

¹²⁹Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 210.

¹³⁰E. Y. Harburg (book and lyrics), Fred Saidy (book), and Harold Arlen (music), Jamaica, unpublished manuscript (typewritten,

Koli's preference for the unaffected, relaxed life style is nearly always expressed in terms humorously derisive of all that he finds ludicrously pretentious and artificial in a so-called civilized society. When Joe Nashua accuses Koli of being backward and living the primitive existence of the apes, Koli points out: "Maybe the monkey stage a step forward."¹³¹ In Harburg's lyrics for "Monkey in the Mango Tree," he argues that the monkey is offended by the theory of evolution and considers himself superior to the human race:

Would a monkey ever...
 Analyze his psyche, amortise his soul
 Tranquilize his frontal lobes with alcohol
 Televise his follies and the life he lives
 Eulogize his gargles and his laxatives

 Simonize his teeth, lanolize his hands
 Harmonize his chromosomes with monkey glands
 Mechanize the Greeks, modernize the Turks
 And then with one little atom.....poof!
 Atomize the works

Hey man, do you call it fair play
 Hey man, is it cricket to say
 That the monkey and his uncles
 And his cousins and his aunts
 Are the parents of such foolishment and decadence
 Don't identify yourself with me
 Said the monkey in the mango tree!¹³²

In this fashion, the familiar cliché of the happy, carefree, primitive islander is cleverly reversed; Koli is made to appear wiser and far more rational than his "civilized" urban counterparts.

mimeographed), n. d., Access granted courtesy of E. Y. Harburg and Tams-Witmark Music Library, Inc., New York City, p. I-5-32. (Pagination throughout according to Act, Scene, page.) Cited hereafter as Jamaica.

¹³¹Ibid., p. I-7-44.

¹³²Ibid., pp. I-7-45 and 46. (The song is delightfully performed by Ricardo Montalban on the original cast recording: Jamaica, RCA Victor, LOC 1036; LSO 1103.)

Savannah's philosophy is seen in direct contrast to Koli's. In an effort, presumably, to provide the character with more sympathetic motivation than that of the original draft's "stupid broad" to which Miss Horne has referred,¹³³ the authors have suggested that Savannah's desire to go to New York is not necessarily selfishly motivated. A note to directors which accompanies the script offers the following explanation:

Savannah's character -- She is not a mercenary, bitchy operator -- but an island girl with spirit and imagination 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 this backward island.¹³⁴

Savannah reveals this motivation in conversation with Grandma Obeah:

Grandma, when I look at Koli, I see him big. I want him to see what I see. I want de world to see what I see. . . . Some of our island people do big things in de big world outside. But they got to have a chance. And that chance never come on dis little island. Dat why I want to put a little fire under Koli.¹³⁵

Thus, the authors refuse to conform to the usual island stereotype and present, instead, an ambitious and determined young woman. Savannah's dream of going to New York is, therefore, not to be compared with the longings for bright lights and lusty high life so characteristic of Bess, Carmen Jones, Della Green (St. Louis Woman), and their ilk.

Savannah is, nevertheless, quite obviously fascinated by the conveniences of a mechanized society, and she enthusiastically endorses labor-saving devices in Arlen and Harburg's satiric "Push the Button":

¹³³ Supra, p. 309.

¹³⁴ Jamaica, p. N (precedes the text).

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. I-4-27 and 28.

Push de button
 Up de elevator
 Push de button
 Out de orange juice
 Push de button from refrigerator
 Come banana shortcake and frozen goose

 What an isle
 What an isle
 Where de automat
 Feed every child
 Where de brave and de free
 Live and love electronically . . .¹³⁶

This is the lure of New York which dazzles Savannah; however, the authors present it not as a childlike concept of modern living but, rather, as a devastating view of the fully automated society. This is virtually the extent of Savannah's character. It is not until after the events of the hurricane that she arrives at the realization that material possessions have no intrinsic value for her and that she can be happy on any island--so long as she is with Koli.¹³⁷

Interest is maintained in the starring role of Savannah largely through a succession of musical numbers--many of which have little to do with the matters at hand but, nevertheless, present refreshing points of view. In Harburg's sly lyrics for "Pretty to Walk With," a wise and ultra-feminine Savannah offers advice on how to capture the heart of a man, insisting that a lady must be:

Lovely to play with
 Not go astray with
 That is the simple plot
 How a lady gets git
 And how the mighty man gets got
 Un poco sweet, poco hot
 That's how you got to be to hit the spot

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. I-2-14.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. II-1-6.

Lovely to make up with
 And to wake up with
After the nuptial knot
 That's how a man gets git
 That's how a gal gets got¹³⁸

The song has style; it allows Savannah to approach the subject of sexuality with both sophistication and propriety, thereby endowing her with considerable feminine charm without resorting to the familiar concept of the earthy, erotic Negro female. Late in the second act, Savannah reflects upon the transitoriness of fame and observes with witty candor that the great names of history have been appropriated for commercial exploitation:

Napoleon's a pastry
 Dubarry is a lipstick
 Pompadour's a hair-do
 Good Queen Mary just floats along
 From pier to pier
 Venus De Milo is a pink brassiere¹³⁹

The advice implied in Harburg's mocking lyrics--that worldly achievement of position, money, or power is not necessarily worthy of the importance so often attached to it--is entirely consistent with the authors' message of simplifying one's life. But the song ("Napoleon") need not be delivered by Savannah; it might easily be given either to Koli, whose character is more in harmony with the sentiments expressed, or to Ginger, who in this particular scene is more directly involved in the action than Savannah.¹⁴⁰ In this case, the idea precedes the character; much the same may be said for the remaining roles.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. I-2-11. (Italics in the original.)

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. II-3-22.

¹⁴⁰ Act II, Scene 3, truly belongs to Ginger and Cicero. Having temporarily assumed the Governorship, Cicero has become too impressed with his statesman-like importance to be bothered with Ginger's affections. Savannah enters and deflates his ego with the song.

As the third figure in the traditional love triangle, Joe Nashua assumes the role of the villain, but he is disagreeable not because he comes between Koli and Savannah but because his greed represents the "wrong" values. Although he is the logical extension of the "city slicker," care is taken not to portray him in the fashion of a Sportin' Life. Joe is delineated as a successful, if somewhat cunning, businessman. He is self assured, polished, and might even be likable were it not for his blatant opportunism. Joe worships money, for money is to be equated with power. "Everything is for sale,"¹⁴¹ he remarks. Indeed, whatever Joe desires--be it Savannah or the islanders' labor--he will attempt to purchase it. His influence upon the inhabitants of Pigeon Island is devastating; soon they are haggling among themselves over ownership of pearls.¹⁴² Joe's destructive selfishness is presented most clearly in a scene obviously designed to promote the authors' liberal social views. Following the hurricane, the island's food supply is cut off. When Koli enters with a fresh catch of fish, Joe eyes it greedily:

JOE

I'll buy it from you! The whole catch! . . . I'll pay you anything you want! Name your price! . . . I'll pay you in pearls! There's a dozen here. O.K., fisherboy, hand over!

KOLI

If I sells you me catch, what do the rest do? They got a right to eat--even though they pearl-divers.

JOE

What do you care about them. They didn't give a damn about you when a better chance came along! . . . This is a simple business proposition. The one who's got the pearls gets the fish.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹Jamaica, p. II-1-5.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. I-9-52.

¹⁴³Ibid., p. II-2-13.

The islanders solve the problem by relieving Joe of the pearls and begin preparations for a community fish-fry. When Joe complains that "that's robbery," Grandma Obeah tartly observes: "No, that's nationalization!"¹⁴⁴ It is, perhaps, significant that Joe ultimately leaves the island without the girl but, once again, in possession of the pearls. The character of Joe Nashua is really nothing more than the representative of an idea which the authors wish to attack. It is, however, of more than passing interest that the authors chose to substitute the caricature of a capitalist in place of the long-standing caricature of the exotic-primitive Negro city slicker.

The comic romance between Ginger and Cicero is essentially a rewrite of the Barney-Butterfly subplot in *St. Louis Woman*¹⁴⁵ and is of little consequence. Nevertheless, both characters contribute to the thought content of Jamaica. As a result of the hurricane, Pigeon Island temporarily loses all communication with the outside world, and the islanders conclude that a nuclear holocaust may have destroyed everything on the globe save their tiny island. Ginger delivers a blistering and hilarious musical editorial entitled "Leave the Atom Alone," which follows in part:

If you want Mississippi
 To stay where it is
 If you want to see wall street and General Motors
 Continue in biz
 If you want Uncle Sam to keep holding
 What's yours and what's his
 If you're fond of kith and kin
 In their skin and bone
 Don't fool around with hydrogin [sic]
 Leave the atom alone

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. II-2-14.

¹⁴⁵Supra, pp. 232-33.

.
 Don't mess around you dopes
 Lay off the isotopes
 Don't you fuss with the nucleus
 Don't go too far with the nuclear
 Don't get gay with the cosmic ray
 You'll burn your fingers, lose your hair
 Leave big smog in the atmosphere
 You're most exasperated
 When radioactivated
 And cannot be located on telephone. . .¹⁴⁶

In a less political vein, Ginger leads the islanders in a paean celebrating the benefits of the "Yankee Dollar,"¹⁴⁷ while Cicero concocts an elaborate scheme designed to encourage an influx of greenback-laden tourists to the remote Pigeon Island:

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 your festival costumes at all times. Item number two--no more handmade souvenirs. From now on we is importing genuine authentic mementoes from Hackensack, New Jersey, stamped "Made in Jamaica." Item number three--sing whenever possible. If a tourist ask you a question--answer in Calypso.¹⁴⁸

This little sequence, so reminiscent of the mint julep scene in Harburg and Saidy's earlier Finian's Rainbow,¹⁴⁹ adroitly attacks the very nature of stereotypes and explodes the notion of the quaint, childlike island Negro. The character of Grandma Obeah is also employed to this thematic purpose. She is the local myth-maker, manufacturer of island

¹⁴⁶ Jamaica, pp. II-1-3 through 5.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. I-6-37A through 39.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. I-6-36.

¹⁴⁹ Supra, pp. 249-50.

legends, and fortune-telling reader of the clouds.¹⁵⁰ Before one can take her superstitious hocus-pocus too seriously, however, young Quico asks Grandma to reveal her techniques, whereupon Grandma makes a startling revelation:

GRANDMA

I don't know nothin' about magic. . . . There's no such thing.

QUICO

Then you fooling all the folks?

GRANDMA

I is not fooling the folks. I only trying to help them see with their eyes what they feel in their hearts. Sometimes they won't listen to an old woman, so I call on the clouds to make it official.¹⁵¹

By avoiding exotic voodoo incantations and insisting upon a comic reversal of the more commonly held stereotypes, Harburg and Saidy have endowed Grandma Obeah and the rest of the islanders with wit, wisdom and simple dignity.

None of Jamaica's characters are more than barely sketched in, but it is the ideas they espouse which are of fundamental importance. John Chapman reported that "there is more social significance than sexual significance in 'Jamaica'--and this is doing a musical plot the hard way."¹⁵² Perhaps this is true, but Jamaica's broad and mocking swipes at the complexities and occasional insanities of contemporary civilization are always entertainingly and good-naturedly stated. Furthermore,

¹⁵⁰The song, "Savannah's Wedding Day" is largely devoted to Grandma Obeah's magical prowess. (Jamaica, pp. I-2-7 through 9.)

¹⁵¹Jamaica, pp. I-4-25 and 26.

¹⁵²John Chapman, "'Jamaica' Has Horne, Needs Plot," New York Daily News (November 1, 1957), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1957, XVIII, No. 20 (Week of November 4, 1957), p. 196.

the above comment causes one to wonder whether Chapman, without consciously realizing it, may have missed the earthy and erotic qualities usually associated with Negro musicals. It is true that these elements are conspicuously absent in Jamaica, and what sensuality remains is more often chic than bawdy. The question of whether the inhabitants of Pigeon Island are more truly representative of the non-American island Negro than are the inmates of Truman Capote's House of Flowers is probably unanswerable if not irrelevant. The significance of Jamaica, with regard to the Negro image, is that Harburg, Saidy, and Arlen eschewed the frantic jungle drums and the quaint local color potential of their tropical setting and insisted upon ridiculing the usual stereotypes which tend to emerge from such an exotic milieu. Henry Hewes accurately summarized the result as follows:

The performers avoid a literal attempt to be exotic Jamaicans and slip into something closer to themselves. Thus, they come across as sophisticated New Yorkers making fun of metropolitan foibles from the temporary asylum of a Caribbean isle. This Jamaica is not Montego Bay and palm trees. It is the relaxing point in all of us.¹⁵³

Jamaica is not to be considered a great work of art. Admittedly it had its flaws--many of which undoubtedly were compounded by its troubled journey from the original script to the stage of the Imperial Theatre. Nevertheless, it possessed a bright and refreshing point of view and succeeded in shattering the childlike image of the primitive, barefoot island native.

¹⁵³ Hewes, Saturday Review, XL (November 16, 1957), p. 48.

Simply Heavenly

Earlier in 1957 the celebrated Negro author, Langston Hughes, transferred from the printed page to the musical stage his "most memorable comic creation":¹⁵⁴ Jesse B. Semple, affectionately known as Simple. The character "was conceived in 1943 and appeared originally in a series of columns written by Langston Hughes for the Chicago Defender, a Negro weekly."¹⁵⁵ In these dialogues, Simple emerged as "an uneducated Harlem man-about-town who speaks a delightful brand of English and who, from his stool at Paddy's Bar, comments both wisely and hilariously on many things, but principally on women and race."¹⁵⁶ The Simple stories became immensely popular, especially among urban blacks, and beginning in 1950 they were assembled in book form--ultimately filling four volumes.¹⁵⁷

When he first appeared in print, Simple caused considerable controversy among both the black and the white intelligentsia. Lofton Mitchell has remarked:

A lot of well-intentioned whites saw Simple as a stereotype. They said he was always drinking beer, hanging around bars and talking improper English. He had a broken marriage, a troubled love-life, and he was a disgrace to Negroes. They were ready to hand Mr. Hughes his head.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Webster Smalley (ed.), Five Plays by Langston Hughes (Bloomington and London: University of Indiana Press, 1968), p. xiv.

¹⁵⁵ Arthur P. Davis, "Jesse B. Semple: Negro American," Phylon, XV, No. 1 (First Quarter, 1954), p. 21.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Abraham Chapman (ed.), Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature (New York and Toronto: The New American Library, 1968), p. 97.

¹⁵⁸ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 145.

Hughes's defense was to be found in the very name with which he had christened his hero: Jesse B. Semple. This drawled admonition was intended as serious advice to those Negroes who would reject their racial heritage.

Hughes has criticized the efforts of middle-class Negroes to disassociate themselves from lower-class Negroes, from stereotyped characterizations, and from their history and their culture. His protagonist, Simple, is a lower-class Harlemite who takes pride in his race, and displays the characteristics popularly ascribed to the Southern Negro. Like other American folk heroes, he uses common sense and shrewdness to compensate for his lack of formal education. Most of his attitudes are revealed in conversations with the narrator, a more formally educated person whose moderate, rational attitudes make him an excellent foil for Simple. Through the conversations of these two, Hughes develops the ridicule which he believes to be the most effective weapon against sham, hypocrisy, bigotry, and injustice.¹⁵⁹

From the recesses of Simple's untutored mind, there tumbles forth a wealth of eccentric opinion on matters racial, political, social, and even religious--all accented with "the voice of folk humor and folk wisdom."¹⁶⁰ It has been stated that "Simple generally exemplifies the directness and single-mindedness of the untrained Negro,"¹⁶¹ and it is widely acknowledged that the characterization is accurate and realistic.¹⁶² Nevertheless, the fact that Hughes sought to portray a lower-class uneducated Negro, whom he revealed in a dialogue form vaguely

¹⁵⁹ Darwin T. Turner and Jean M. Bright (eds.), Images of the Negro in America (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1965), p. 77.

¹⁶⁰ Davis, Phylon, XV, No. 1 (First Quarter, 1954), p. 21.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁶² In a foreword to the Simple stories (see: Chapman [ed.], Black Voices, p. 97), Langston Hughes contended that "it is impossible to live in Harlem and not know at least a hundred Simples." Black literary critics tend to agree, and it has been noted that fans of Simple find him so believable that he is often regarded not as a fictional character but as a real person to whom some have sent gifts. (Mitchell, Black Dream, p. 145.)

reminiscent of the minstrelsy exchanges between Mr. Bones and the Interlocutor, quite naturally prompted some charges of stereotyping. A fine distinction must be drawn here. Although Simple bears many of the surface features of the comic, rural Negro stereotype, Hughes has refrained from employing the exaggeration so characteristic of that image.

Theodore Gilliam accurately pointed out that Simple's humor is "a genuine humor, not a concocted one as was true of the minstrel shows and their derivatives."¹⁶³ Moreover, unlike the pure stereotype, Simple is not possessed of a perpetually sunny disposition; pain and resentment are evident beneath the amusing surface of his indignant outbursts which nearly always are underscored by a fierce racial consciousness. Significantly, Simple is made credible--and, therefore, more human than the facile caricature--by virtue of his very ordinariness. Arthur P. Davis has summarized the very careful delineation of character as follows:

Hughes has taken pains not to make Simple sensational in any respect. He is not a numbers baron or a cabaret artist or a reefer-smoker or like Bigger Thomas a victim of slum living. He is not a mouthpiece of corny racial humor; nor is he funny because of far-fetched and highly contrived farcical situations; and most important of all he is not a bleeding heart personification of racial injustice. Simple, like the overwhelming majority of Harlemites, is just a plain, garden variety of untrained but honest and hard-working peasant from the South who has found a new and freer home in the North.¹⁶⁴

In transferring his literary creation to the musical stage, Hughes retained Paddy's Bar as the central setting,¹⁶⁵ transformed the

¹⁶³Gilliam, p. 234.

¹⁶⁴Davis, Phylon, XV, No. 1 (First Quarter, 1954), p. 22.

¹⁶⁵The setting is a simultaneously split stage, representing Simple's room on one side, Joyce's room on the other, and Paddy's Bar prominently in the center. The action moves from one to the next, but the largest percentage of the entertainment takes place in the bar.

narrator into a struggling young writer named Boyd, and breathed life into an assortment of characters whom Simple had described and discussed in the stories. Again, Hughes maintained his emphasis upon the ordinary. Unlike the gaudy and rowdy saloons pictured in Cabin in the Sky, Carmen Jones, or St. Louis Woman, Paddy's Bar is a neighborhood institution; its patrons represent a cross-section of conventional Harlem society. Although Hughes has invented a very slender romantic plot in order to hold together the various elements of the musical, his principal focus remains upon the Harlem milieu as it is reflected in the various habitués of Paddy's Bar. In many cases, these characters have nothing whatever to do with the main line of action. As a result, Simply Heavenly is structurally very weak, amounting to nothing so much as a series of favorite speeches and episodes patched together from the stories. When accepted purely on its own terms, however, the show can be entertaining, for, as Webster Smalley has observed, "the values of this play are not built on dramatic clash and suspense, rather, they are inherent in Hughes' intimate and warmly affectionate picture of the unique inhabitants of this city within a city."¹⁶⁶

David Martin's musical score, for which Langston Hughes provided the lyrics,¹⁶⁷ complements the emphasis upon atmosphere. There are no so-called production numbers and no formal choreography; both would be out of place. Instead, the uncomplicated musical numbers rise out of

¹⁶⁶ Smalley (ed.), p. xiv.

¹⁶⁷ Both music and lyrics are pleasant and serviceable, but they tend toward monotonous repetition and are generally undistinguished. The reader is referred to the original cast album: Simply Heavenly, Columbia, OL 5240. The published texts do not contain all the songs heard in the Broadway production.

either character or mood and "cannot be considered as aims in themselves."¹⁶⁸ Because of this, there has been some difficulty in classifying Simply Heavenly. In production, it was billed as "a musical folk comedy."¹⁶⁹ The text has been published twice, offering the alternate subtitles: "a comedy with music,"¹⁷⁰ and simply, "a comedy."¹⁷¹ This study would agree with the description, "a comedy with music," for the impression persists that the songs have been appended to the script rather than inextricably integrated with it. For the most part, they are extraneous to the action and often are awkwardly introduced, thereby producing the unhappy result of halting the proceedings rather than advancing them. This is especially true of "Broken Strings," "Did You Ever Hear the Blues," and "Look for the Morning Star,"¹⁷² all of which are introduced in the setting of Paddy's Bar. Hughes employs the crude device of a guitarist or piano player who ambles in and is asked by the patrons to play. Inasmuch as the play's action is, at best, inconsequential, such musical interruptions add to the atmosphere and prove to be pleasant diversions. Simply Heavenly belongs to the musical theatre,

¹⁶⁸Paul V. Beckley, "'Simply Heavenly' in Move to Broadway's Playhouse," New York Herald Tribune (August 21, 1957), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1957, XVIII, No. 14 (Week of August 26, 1957), p. 265.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁷⁰Langston Hughes (book and lyrics) and David Martin (music), Simply Heavenly (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1959), p. 1. Cited hereafter as Simply Heavenly.

¹⁷¹Smalley (ed.), p. 113. (The text of Simply Heavenly also is included in this collection.)

¹⁷²Simply Heavenly, Columbia, OL 5240, Side 1, Bands 3 and 5; Side 2, Band 1, respectively.

but by no stretch of the imagination should it be considered a model of construction.

Simply Heavenly was generally well-liked, but it had a troubled existence.¹⁷³ The all-Negro production originally opened off-Broadway at the 85th Street Playhouse on May 21, 1957. Although it was a success, the show was forced to close when the theatre was found to be in violation of the Fire Department's safety code. Simply Heavenly next re-opened on Broadway at the Playhouse Theatre, August 20, 1957, and received favorable notices.¹⁷⁴ Critical response acknowledged the frailty of the book, but most reviewers were charmed by the show's casual lack of pretense and amiable lightheartedness. The cast was also lauded, with Melvin Stewart (Simple) and Claudia McNeil (Mamie) receiving a large share of the accolades. Financially, however, Simply Heavenly could not survive the higher production costs on Broadway, and so it moved, on November 8, 1957, into the small Renata Theatre in Greenwich Village where it played to full houses. Successful as it was, the production ran afoul of a legal technicality, and Actor's Equity ordered it to close. Simply Heavenly was given subsequent productions in Hollywood and London, and it was seen on the "Play of the Week" television series.

As has been stated, the plot is but the merest trifle. Simple is in love with sweet and refined Joyce Lane, but before they can marry he must arrange for a divorce from his first wife from whom he is

¹⁷³For details of the production history, see: Hughes and Meltzer, Black Magic, pp. 290-92. (It is inferred that some of the difficulties may have been caused by racial prejudice.)

¹⁷⁴Five out of the seven dailies gave affirmative responses. The few reviews published in periodicals also received the production warmly but, characteristically, without enormous enthusiasm.

separated. Unwilling to finance a divorce for a woman he no longer loves, Simple is persuaded to pay one-third of the cost. The problem rests in raising the necessary amount of money, for despite the best of intentions Simple is easily led astray by temptation. Injuries sustained in an automobile accident while joy riding with Zarita, a flashy party girl, send Simple to the hospital which bankrupts him. When he complains about his difficulties, Boyd (his neighbor) reminds Simple that his financial problems are really the result of self-indulgence and urges him toward a sense of personal responsibility. Inspired by Boyd's counsel, Simple succeeds in raising the money for his share of the divorce--only to discover that he has been temporarily laid off from work. With his finances at an ebb, Simple adopts a hermit-like existence but is encouraged by Joyce's faith in him. To cheer him, Zarita brings Simple's friends to his room and a wild party ensues. Joyce arrives unexpectedly, discovers Simple in Zarita's arms, leaps to the wrong conclusion, and walks out of his life. Boyd is moved to intercede on Simple's behalf, and there is a happy reconciliation. Simple, however, has come to recognize the folly of his errant ways and insists that they remain apart until he can fully meet the obligations expected of a mature and responsible adult. On Christmas Eve, Simple presents Joyce with the document of his divorce, the lease on an apartment, and a ring, whereupon they set a date for their wedding.

In outline, Simply Heavenly is strongly reminiscent of Cabin in the Sky, for the central figure of Simple is remarkably like the irresponsible Little Joe and the moral conflict is essentially the same. Simple, however, is updated and dimensionalized by his awareness of race and its attendant social pressures. He is able to excuse his own

shortcomings with the rationalization that all his difficulties somehow spring from the misfortune of being black. "You know," grumbles Simple, "no matter what a man does, sick or well, something is always liable to happen--especially if he's colored."¹⁷⁵ Admittedly, Simple's life has not been one of luxury, but as he describes the hardships and the near-poverty he has endured, a pattern of behavior emerges which is truly interracial:

All my life, if it ain't raining, it's blowing. If it ain't sleeting, it's snowing. Man, you try to be good, and what happens? You just don't be good. You try to live right. What happens? You look back and find out you didn't live right. Even when you're working, and you try to save money, what happens? Can't do it. Your shoes is wore out. Or the dentist has got you. You try to save again. What happens? You drunk it up. Try to save another time. Some relative gets sick and needs it. What happens to money, Boyd? What happens?¹⁷⁶

Coming late in the play, as this speech does, it is significant that Simple should preface it with the following remarks: "I tell you, something's always happening to a colored man! Stormy weather! Boyd, I been caught in some kind of riffle ever since I been black."¹⁷⁷ The remainder of the speech makes it clear that, despite economic realities, something more than race is the cause of Simple's woes. But it is not until Joyce displays the extent of her faith and devotion that Simple ceases making excuses and views the situation as it is:

All my life I been looking for a door that will be just mine--and the one I love. Joyce, I been looking for your door. But sometimes you let the wrong me in, not the me I want to be. . . .

¹⁷⁵ Simply Heavenly, p. 23.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

The problem to solve is me, Joyce--and can't no one solve that problem but me.¹⁷⁸

Simple's journey toward self-discovery contains Langston Hughes's message, which is this: it is as foolish to employ race as an excuse for one's personal flaws as it is to employ skin color as the basis for hatred and prejudice. It is a human thesis and a universal one. Henry Hewes summarized it as follows: "If there is any message it is just that there are certain times in life when one must stop drifting and get back on course."¹⁷⁹

What makes Simple a memorable character, however, is to be found less in such gentle sermonizing and more in the rich humor of his twisted logic which, when so positively stated, has an odd ring of reason about it. Simple speaks a patois which combines Harlem slang with the curiosities of the Southern rural idiom. In conversation with Joyce, Simple delivers an incredible lesson in linguistics:

JOYCE

Were you ever at the Grand Canyon?

SIMPLE

I were. Facts, I was also at Niagara Falls, after I were at Grand Canyon.

JOYCE

I do not wish to criticize your grammar, Mr. Semple, but as long as you have been around New York, I wonder why you continue to say, I were, and at other times, I was?

SIMPLE

Because sometimes I were, and sometimes I was, baby. I was at Niagara Falls and I were at the Grand Canyon--since that were in the far distant past when I were a coachboy on the Santa Fe. I was more recently at Niagara Falls.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷⁹ Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript: Home Cooking," Saturday Review, XL (September 7, 1957), p. 24.

JOYCE

I see. But you never were "I were"! There is no "I were". . . .

SIMPLE

Joyce, baby, don't be so touchous about it. Do you want me to talk like Edward R. Murrow?¹⁸⁰

The humor of Simple's defense is obvious, but such dialogue also serves to promote a subtle racial observation. Quite clearly, Simple does not wish to sound like Edward R. Murrow, and he has consciously elected not to imitate the more refined speech patterns which he associates with white culture. Such use of diction is not only realistic but psychologically sound as well. In discussing maladaptive speech patterns in black Americans, psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs concluded:

In our view, speech patterns, or accents, announce to the world an essential quality of the speaker's identity. He is telling all who will listen who he is, and stating that this aspect of his identity forms an essential element of his character structure.¹⁸¹

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In contemporary Negro life the patois of old is ubiquitous. . . . It remains essentially the language a black man uses with his fellows and continues to represent past years of bondage. In this sense it is despised and rejected by many Negroes.¹⁸²

Thus, Simple may complain about the difficulty of being black, but above all else he is, in the popular parlance, always a "brother."

In a similar fashion, Hughes employs the fantastic resources of Simple's fertile imagination to ridicule the very concept of racial prejudice, and he does so by proposing a situation so unlikely as to appear ludicrously bizarre. In conversation with Hopkins, the bartender, Simple

¹⁸⁰ Simply Heavenly, pp. 35-36.

¹⁸¹ Grier and Cobbs, p. 100.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 104. (For a detailed explanation, see pp. 96-108.)

envisions himself in a third World War as the commander of an all white Southern regiment:

In the last war, they had white officers in charge of Negroes. So why shouldn't I be in charge of whites? Huh? General Simple! . . . I can see myself now, in World War III, leading white Mississippi troops into action. Hop, I would do like all the other generals do, and stand way back on a hill somewhere and look through my spy-glasses and say, "Charge on! Mens, charge on!" Next day, when I caught up to 'em, I would pin medals on their chest for bravery, . . . me--the first black American general to pin medals on white soldiers from Mississippi. Then, Hop--man, oh, man--then when the war be's over, . . . I would say, "Mens, at ease. Gentlemen of the Old South, relax. Put down your fighting arms and lend me your ears--because I am one of you, too, borned and bred in Dixie. . . . And I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, and forget how you failed to obey my orders in the old days and right faced-ted when I said, 'Left,' because you thought I was colored. Well, I is colored. I'll forget that. You are me--and I am you--and we are one."¹⁸³

Even in 1957, the very idea of a black general commanding an all white Southern regiment must have seemed so implausible as to cause one to confront the equally incredible truth of the racial situation. As Simple proudly marches his imaginary troops out of Paddy's Bar, the remark of one of the patrons cuts deep into the heart of the matter: "You know something--that boy is sick!"¹⁸⁴ In this fashion, Simple's quirks are humorously utilized to a thoughtful purpose, but the effect is laughter and ridicule rather than venom. As Miles Jefferson has observed, Langston Hughes "often shoots sharp arrows at exposed targets across the line, but his arrows are dipped in kindly oils, seldom in stinging acids."¹⁸⁵ Such is the case with the character of Jesse B. Semple.

¹⁸³ Simply Heavenly, pp. 72-73.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

¹⁸⁵ Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1956-1957," Phylon, XVIII, No. 3 (Third Quarter, 1957), p. 292.

As Simple's neighbor and confidant, Boyd is the voice of reason and, therefore, Simple's opposite. In his character notes, Langston Hughes describes him as follows:

Boyd has probably been half-way through college before his army service in Europe. Serious-minded, pleasant-looking, trying to be a writer, perhaps taking English courses at New York University on the last of his G. I. money. Almost every Harlem bar has such a fellow among its regular customers, who acts sometimes as a kind of arbiter when "intellectual" discussions come up.¹⁸⁶

Boyd is well-liked and respected by the clientele of Paddy's Bar--largely because, despite his education, he has not developed a pretense toward erudition. Miss Mamie puts it succinctly: "One thing I like about Boyd here, even if he is a writer, he ain't always trying to impress folks."¹⁸⁷ Boyd's unassuming manner, and the fact that he has not abandoned his Harlem roots in favor of greater cultural refinements, is considered laudable. Moreover, like Hughes himself, Boyd finds his literary inspiration in the people of Harlem, and it is the passing scene which he quietly observes and records. Boyd rarely speaks unless spoken to, but when he does become verbal he is to be considered the author's spokesman. His primary function is to advise Simple. Although Hughes's metaphors are painfully forced, the counsel which Boyd offers comprises the play's major message.

BOYD

You're not the first man in the world to have problems. You've got to learn how to swim, Jess, in this great big ocean called the world.

SIMPLE

This great big old white ocean--and me a colored swimmer.

¹⁸⁶ Simply Heavenly, p. 4.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

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. And even if you are colored, you've got to swim beyond color, and get to that island that is you--the human you, the man you. You've got to face your obligations, and stand up on that island of you, and be a man.¹⁸⁸

In this fashion, Boyd is presented as a rational young man who is sensitive to the human condition. As a poor would-be novelist, Boyd belongs to the lower class Harlem milieu which Hughes has chosen to depict, but given his intelligence, it is significant that he plays a somewhat reticent role in Simply Heavenly. Darwin T. Turner has observed: "Hughes has not ridiculed the educated Negro; at the same time, however, he has not pedestaled Boyd as the individual carrying the hopes of the race. . . . Boyd attracts not as a leader but as a respected individual."¹⁸⁹ Seen as one aspect of the larger composite which is Hughes's Harlem, the character of Boyd contributes a realistic dimensionality to a milieu which too often has been presented in a sensationalized and one-sided fashion.

Similarly, Joyce is sympathetically delineated as a young lady of considerable refinement. Conspicuously, she is the only character who does not frequent Paddy's Bar, and Hughes has described her as follows:

Joyce is a quiet girl more inclined toward club work than bars, toward "culture" rather than good-timing. But she is not snobbish or cold. She is tall, brownskin, given to longish ear-rings,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁸⁹ Darwin T. Turner, "The Negro Dramatist's Image of the Universe, 1920-1960," CLA Journal, V (December, 1961), p. 110. (Also reprinted in: Turner and Bright, pp. 91-99, and Chapman [ed.], pp. 677-90.)

beads, scarfs, and dangling things, very feminine, and cries easily. Her charm is her sincerity.¹⁹⁰

Like Boyd, Joyce attempts to bring out the best in Simple, and in the end--given her faith in him, her respect for him--she succeeds. Ironically, it is her propriety which both attracts and frustrates Simple.

"Morals is your middle name,"¹⁹¹ remarks Simple, and that very fact provides him with a challenge:

SIMPLE

Baby, what's the matter? Don't you trust me yet?

JOYCE

I don't mind you being close to me. But when you get close to a bed, too-----

SIMPLE

Then you don't trust yourself.

JOYCE

Have you ever known me to-----

SIMPLE

That's the trouble.

JOYCE

That goes with marriage, not courtship.¹⁹²

Despite Simple's playful suggestiveness, it is evident that he admires Joyce's dignity and her sense of values. He would prefer to rise to her level, as he suggests in the following:

Listen, Joyce, you know when I first met you on that boatripe, I said to myself, "That girl's too good for me. I can't make no headway with that kind of woman." Yes, I did! To tell the truth, Joyce, you gave me a kinder hard road to go--you know, with your morals. . . .¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Simply Heavenly, p. 4.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 48.

Moreover, Joyce projects sincere respect for Simple. "She never laughs at nothing about me, never does, which is why I loves that girl,"¹⁹⁴ remarks Simple, and it is her faith in him which encourages Simple to become the mature and responsible man who is worthy of her. By the play's end, Simple has arranged to provide for Joyce the kind of future she earlier had envisioned:

JOYCE

Oh, Jess, we'll have our own little place, our own little house,
and at night we'll both be there after jobs are done. Oh, Jess,
baby, you don't know how much---

I want somebody to come home to
When I come home at night
I want somebody to depend on
I know will do right.¹⁹⁵

In short, Joyce is a sweet, average, normal young lady with no startling or sensational attributes. She is the standard ingénue, but the characterization is made noteworthy when one considers how few standard Negro ingénues have appeared on the musical stage. Without calling attention to it, Hughes has demonstrated that Harlem possesses its share of Joyces as well as its more familiar flashy types.

Good realistic practice required that Hughes should include Joyce's opposite in the person of Zarita, a lively party girl who "wears her morals like a loose garment."¹⁹⁶ In his character notes, Hughes insists that "she is not a prostitute. Brassy-voiced, good-hearted, good-looking, playing the field for fun and drinks, she lives a come-day-go-day existence, generous in accepting or giving love, money, or

¹⁹⁴Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., p. 17.

drinks."¹⁹⁷ As a hard-playing, hard-drinking hedonist, Zarita's philosophy is summarized in song, as follows:

ZARITA

Ball, ball, let's ball awhile!
 Ball, ball, honey chile!
 Sing! Shout! Beat it out!
 Dance! Prance! Take a chance!
 Grab the blues and get them told--
 When you're happy in your soul.
 Start the music playing,
 Let the good times roll.¹⁹⁸

It is a standard characterization which Hughes attempts to dimensionalize by suggesting that Zarita seeks a life of varied pleasures and temporary liaisons in order to numb the awareness of her loneliness. In a moment of rare candor, she remarks to one of the bar regulars: "I wish someone would feel about me the way Simple feels about Joyce, and she about him, even if they do have their ups and downs."¹⁹⁹ Later, having been rebuffed by Simple, Zarita abruptly cries out her desperation to Hopkins, the bartender: "I'm lonesome, Hop! I'm lonesome! I'm lonesome!"²⁰⁰ It is perhaps unfortunate that, no matter how accurate such a character portrait may be, Zarita seems to be a pale and unimaginative copy of her more sensational and better motivated counterparts, such as Bess and Carmen Jones.

Among the remaining patrons of Paddy's Bar, only Miss Mamie is of more than passing interest. "A hard working domestic" who uses "biting words to protect a soft heart and a need for love too often

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

betrayed,"²⁰¹ Mamie prides herself on her self-sufficiency. Ardently pursued by Melon, a cocky little fruit vendor "who likes to fancy himself as a man of irresistible charm despite his shabby appearance,"²⁰² Mamie sidesteps his advances with supreme aloofness and states her credo of independence in the musical score's best character song, which follows in part:

I been making my way through thick and thin
 'Spite of devilish men in this world.
 There ain't no man can get me down
 Not even Harry Belafonte,
 'Cause I'm a good old girl
 (Mamie rises and addresses the entire bar.)
 I make five or ten dollars, sometimes more a day.
 You men what ain't working know that that ain't hay.
 Don't let no strange man get his hands on you--
 There's no telling, baby, what a strange cat will do.²⁰³

As it is written, however, the "romance" between Mamie and Melon becomes repetitious and quickly tiresome, requiring excellent performances to maintain interest in the characters.²⁰⁴ But Mamie, herself, becomes memorable by virtue of a single speech which summarizes Langston Hughes's intense displeasure with the Negro who abandons his heritage. Webster Smalley has remarked:

Hughes creates his characters from life. He does not create character to fit a preconception, so he is not frightened if some of his creations do things and like things that Negroes are reputed to do and like. . . . He accepts, loves, and enjoys every aspect of his heritage and has the wisdom to recognize its richness. He does not write for those Negroes who have turned their backs on the spirituals and blues, nor for the people,

²⁰¹Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰²Hewes, Saturday Review, XL (September 7, 1957), p. 24.

²⁰³Simply Heavenly, pp. 68-69.

²⁰⁴Claudia McNeil's robust portrayal of Mamie won unanimous acclaim from the critics.

Negro and white, who would bowdlerize Huckleberry Finn. He writes of what he sees, in his own way.²⁰⁵

Thus, when a pretentious Negro criticizes Mamie's professed fondness for watermelon and accuses her of being a stereotype, she puts him properly in his place with a blistering and uproarious outburst.

I like watermelon and chitterlings both, and I don't care who knows it. . . . Why, it's getting so colored folks can't do nothing no more without some other Negro calling you a stereotype. Stereotype, hah! 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. You got to wear beige or chartreuse. 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! (Mamie glares around as if daring somebody to dispute her. Nobody does.) 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. Stereotype!²⁰⁶

Mamie's speech on the subject of stereotypes is to be considered definitive within the context of Simply Heavenly, and one would be well advised not to question the accuracy with which Hughes has drawn his characters. When the bartender asks Boyd's opinion as to whether he would consider the regular customers to be stereotypes, one can hear Hughes's voice in the reply: "In the book I'm writing they're just folks."²⁰⁷ And so they are, yet in most cases they are barely sketched in. We learn, for example, hardly anything at all about Bodiddly and his wife, Arcie, save for the fact that he is a dock worker, she has a taste for sherry, and they are the parents of seventeen children. Webster Smalley has correctly pointed out that, "to ask for analysis of motivation or for character study in depth in . . . Simply Heavenly is

²⁰⁵Smalley (ed.), p. xiii.

²⁰⁶Simply Heavenly, p. 16.

²⁰⁷Ibid., p. 22.

to miss the point . . . [which has to do with] the warm understanding Hughes has of the people of Harlem."²⁰⁸ It is really a collective portrait with which Hughes is concerned, and he has succeeded in reproducing the very human qualities of a group of ordinary--even mundane--lower-class Harlemites. Henry Hewes remarked that Simply Heavenly "reveals Harlem society as a widely differentiated group of human beings with the same desires and idiosyncracies as anyone else, but with a somewhat superior capacity to be practical about their situation and to joke at their own expense."²⁰⁹ This is an accurate assessment, and it calls to mind a goal stated by Langston Hughes in one of his oft-quoted poems, "Notes on Commercial Theatre":

. . . You put me in Macbeth,
In Carmen Jones, and Anna Lucasta,
And all kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me--
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me--
Black and beautiful--
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be me myself!
Yes, it'll be me.²¹⁰

Simply Heavenly accomplishes this goal, and it does so gently and pleasantly, with the implicit reminder that there is no such thing as the typical Negro, nor even the typical Harlemite. Nevertheless, Simply Heavenly cannot seriously be considered an important work for the musical theatre. It was designed purely as good-natured entertainment, and

²⁰⁸ Smalley (ed.), p. xiii.

²⁰⁹ Hewes, Saturday Review, XL (September 7, 1957), p. 24.

²¹⁰ Quoted by Langston Hughes in "Writers: Black and White," Black Voices, ed. Chapman, p. 620.

that is all that it provides. In an otherwise favorable account, Phylon's critic, Miles Jefferson, admitted to being disturbed by the musical's lack of significance:

Now that Mr. Hughes has had quite a few good-humored laughs at his race we hope he will settle down to something better organized and with a more substantial point of view. He knows his Harlem and a soundly and soberly observed drama of the more serious pursuits of his brothers is awaited.²¹¹

But nothing of the sort, from any source, was to be forthcoming in the remaining years of the entertainment-prone 1950's.

Saratoga

The last musical of the decade to deal with Negro character was Saratoga, based upon Edna Ferber's 1941 novel, Saratoga Trunk, adapted to the musical stage by Morton DaCosta, with music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Johnny Mercer, and a cast headed by Carol Lawrence and Howard Keel. This much-anticipated production opened at the Winter Garden Theatre on December 7, 1959, and ran for a sad total of eighty performances. Given an opulent production by Robert Fryer, with gorgeous settings and costumes by Cecil Beaton, and under the direction of Mr. DaCosta, Saratoga was unmercifully received by the critics who adored the work of Mr. Beaton and the two principals but loathed DaCosta's book.²¹² In his adaptation, DaCosta had remained absolutely faithful to the Ferber novel, and so far as the critics were concerned²¹³ this

²¹¹ Jefferson, Phylon, XVIII (Third Quarter, 1957), p. 293.

²¹² New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1959, XX, No. 24 (Week of December 14, 1959), pp. 195-98.

²¹³ The libretto exists in its third, and presumably final, draft --although extensive musical revisions were made during the tryout. (See: Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, pp. 212-17.) The script is literate and extremely readable, although it tends to become overly

proved to be the show's undoing. DaCosta succeeded in transferring to the musical stage all of the ponderous plot with its myriad complications, multiple locales, and a huge cast of characters. The result, apparently, was overpowering--especially inasmuch as the two romantic leads were unsympathetic anti-heroes--and the critics chose to malign the beautifully caparisoned musical because it did not fulfill their expectations of a relaxed evening's entertainment. "We are never given time to get near the people we must care about,"²¹⁴ objected Walter Kerr, and the unanimously negative opinion was expressed by Richard Watts, Jr., as follows: "The libretto for 'Saratoga' not only goes too far in being hackneyed and routine but is also remarkably tedious and complicated and persistently gets in the way of everything and everybody."²¹⁵ The Arlen-Mercer musical score²¹⁶ received mixed reactions, but on the whole its charm and unity with DaCosta's book was vastly underrated.²¹⁷ Saratoga closed "with an estimated loss of \$390,000."²¹⁸

talky at times. Nevertheless, it possesses greater substance than that colossal hit, Hello Dolly.

²¹⁴Walter Kerr, "First Night Report: 'Saratoga'," New York Herald Tribune (December 8, 1959), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1959, XX, No. 24 (Week of December 14, 1959), p. 196.

²¹⁵Richard Watts, Jr., "A Handsome Musical Play Suffers from Book Trouble," New York Post (December 8, 1959), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1959, XX, No. 24 (Week of December 14, 1959), p. 196.

²¹⁶Harold Arlen became ill during the tryout; therefore, Johnny Mercer wrote both music and lyrics for the following: "Why Fight This?," "Gettin' a Man," and "The Men Who Run the Country." (Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 217.)

²¹⁷A hearing of the original cast recording (RCA Victor, LSO-1051) provides an untapped reservoir of some very fine material which has yet to be popularly discovered.

²¹⁸Jablonski, Happy With the Blues, p. 218.

In order to comprehend the authors' treatment of Negro character, a detailed plot summary is unnecessary. For purposes of orientation, suffice it to say that Saratoga is a period piece, set in the 1880's, and it follows the fortunes of a young and spirited adventuress, Clio Dulaine. The illegitimate offspring of a wealthy New Orleans aristocrat, she returns from exile in Paris determined to brazen her way to wealth and respectability. Posing as an affluent widowed countess, Clio joins forces with Clint Maroon, an equally ruthless Montana cowboy intent upon getting his fair share in what he considers to be a "dog-eat-dog"²¹⁹ world. Having succeeded in embarrassing the staid, but acknowledged, family of her late father, Clio moves on with Clint and her retinue to the greener financial fields of Saratoga Springs, a high-society spa in New York State. There she pursues a calculated romance with the scion of a multi-millionaire family while Clint engineers a daring escapade which thwarts the underhanded schemes of the nation's railroad barons. In the end, love conquers connivance, but Clio attains her goals of riches and respectability as the wife of a lavishly rewarded Clint.

The only major black character to emerge from this tale is Angelique Pluton, better known as Kakaracou or simply Kakou. She is described as follows: "A dignified Negress of mixed blood. Her skin is neither black nor coffee-colored but the shade of a ripe fig--almost purplish dusted with gray. . . . Her face is impassive, but the eyes are sharp and expressive."²²⁰ As Clio's personal servant, Kakou represents

²¹⁹This is the subject and title of a particularly cynical song.

²²⁰Morton DaCosta (book), Johnny Mercer (lyrics), and Harold Arlen (music), Saratoga, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), third draft, 1959, access granted courtesy of Mr. Morton

the familiar "Mammy" figure who, in caring for her charges, usually demonstrates forbearance, strength, loyalty, and wisdom.²²¹ (The Mammy in Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind is a classic and memorable example.) Whereas Kakou possesses most of the essential attributes associated with this character type, her behavior is made distinctive as a result of the cultural impact of having spent twenty years in exile in Paris. A native of New Orleans, Kakou's position originally was that of nurse to the infant, Clio. Following the accidental shooting of Clio's father, for which his mistress--Clio's mother--was blamed, the family (composed of Clio, her mother, her Aunt Belle Piquery, and their servants--Kakou and a dwarf coachman named Cupide) sought refuge in Paris. There they remained in self-imposed exile until the death of Clio's mother. The more relaxed racial climate of Paris,²²² coupled with the family scandal and a reduced income, quite obviously led to a more intimate relationship between servants and employers than might have been the case even in cosmopolitan New Orleans during the 1880's.²²³ Such influence is evident in the character of Kakou.

In Edna Ferber's novel, with a mixture of amusement and resentment, Clint Maroon is made to remark: "They sure ruined you in Paris, nigger."²²⁴ When we first meet Kakou in Saratoga, the intent of that

DaCosta, New York City, p. P-1. (Pagination throughout according to Act, Scene, page.) Cited hereafter as Saratoga.

²²¹James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Note of a Native Son (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), p. 21.

²²²See James Welton Johnson's impressions of a visit to Paris in 1905 in: Along This Way, p. 209.

²²³See: Furnas, footnote, p. 167.

²²⁴Edna Ferber, Saratoga Trunk (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), p. 89.

observation immediately is made clear; she is no "nigger"! Rather, she is more the proud and commanding duenna than the faithful family retainer. Having witnessed the unhappy conclusions of many romances in which Clio's mother and her Aunt Belle had indulged themselves, Kakou remains intensely protective of Clio. In conversation with Belle, she speaks her mind: "I seen the difference between the love and the passion. Love burn slow and warm for the lifetime. Passion flare quick--and die just as soon. . . . I don't want nobody leave that child with a big heap of dead ashes--like Nicolas Dulaine left her poor Mama."²²⁵ It is clear that Kakou is interested in Clio's well-being, and she insists upon propriety at all times. Managing the mature, headstrong, and willful Clio, however, is no simple task--especially inasmuch as Clio, posing as a countess, now considers Kakou to be her maid rather than her governess. Nevertheless, it is the intimacy of their relationship which is significant. In a scene which takes place in a church, just following Clio's initial encounter with Clint Maroon, Kakou outspokenly gives vent to her strong disapproval of Clio's flirtatiousness:

KAKOU

(in a harsh whisper)

Keep your thoughts on your prayers, Mademoiselle. You will need them. . . . Madame la Comtesse looked very chic talking to that wild west. That vacher!. . . I know that kind. He is probably wanted in the Montana courts this minute.

CLIO

(sharply)

Your prayers!

KAKOU

(swaying a bit and mumbling--but making herself heard)
Forgive her Vanity and her Arrogance, O Lord! She still a child wid little intelligence.²²⁶

²²⁵ Saratoga, p. I-6-57.

²²⁶ Saratoga, p. I-4-34.

Whereas, in the past, Negro servant characters have demonstrated their true feelings toward master or employer only in solitude or in the company of their peers,²²⁷ Kakou's affrontery adds new dimension in delineating such types.

Kakou is possessed of a sharp tongue and does not hesitate to employ personal vilification to indicate her displeasure. In one of New Orleans' most fashionable French restaurants, Clio announces that she wishes to order everything on the menu. Still furious with Clio for her unseemly behavior with Clint, Kakou takes the opportunity to rebuke them both, as she hisses: "Yes, burst your corsets. With a figure like a cow you'll get a fine husband! Or maybe you've already picked that Montana vacher for a bridegroom. He's used to bulging sides. . . . Look at him mumbling over the menu. He can't read a word of it."²²⁸ When her remarks become too outrageous, Clio must remind Kakou of her position: "You're not my nurse any more. You must learn that. You are my maid. Do as I say or I'll send you away to starve."²²⁹ But Kakou is persuaded to follow instructions only when the situation threatens to become public; to cause a scene would be unthinkable, and so she complies. Such frank exchanges between servant and mistress are conducted only in private or in whispered conversation. For the eyes of the world, Kakou is a model of quiet dignity; she plays her role well--although she stops short of employing a servile manner. When, in a more formal social situation, she finds it necessary to hurl an insult in the

²²⁷ Supra, pp. 294-95.

²²⁸ Saratoga, p. I-5-39.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. I-5-45.

face of someone with whom she does not share such an intimate relationship, Kakou does so en francais, thereby providing an adversary with the ultimate humiliation. She utilizes this technique, with great relish but unfortunate results, in conversation with Clint:

KAKOU

Vacher! Rustique! Ordure! Je t'd'teste!

CLINT

My, my! I don't parlay Frangsay very good myself but I sure admire to hear other people go it. I kind of caught the drift, though on account of that "detest." I guess that means the same in any language.²³⁰

DaCosta's portrayal of Kakou, which hews very closely to the characterization in the Ferber novel, provides the musical stage with one of its first truly forthright Negro servant characters. Her relationship with Clio is well motivated and vastly interesting. Inasmuch as she has Clio's best interest at heart (as is typical of the standard "Mammy"), she cannot be considered hostile or insolent; rather, she is open, direct, and frank. Unlike the usual "Mammy," however, Kakou is her own woman--a character of dignity and great pride, far too sophisticated to dissemble or to wear a mask of humility and servitude.

Adding even greater dimension to Kakou's characterization is the fact that her gruffness is largely a facade. Beneath the dour exterior there beats a heart filled with warmth and compassion. Although she and Cupide--Clio's dwarf coachman--bicker incessantly, their affection for one another is obvious. When, late in the second act, it is discovered that Cupide has joined Clint's gang in the vicious railroad fight, Kakou's concern for the little man's safety is deeply felt. In a voice of doom, she moans, "He is not all right. They are not. Cupide--I hear

²³⁰Ibid., p. I-6-55.

him cry out to me in the night."²³¹ The rapport between these two characters may very well result from the fact that both experience a similar social ostracism because each departs from the so-called norm--Kakou in terms of race; Cupide by virtue of his freakish height. Enunciating an extremely practical philosophy, Kakou addresses herself to the subject in song as she offers the adventurous Cupide²³² the benefit of her very wise counsel:

Goose never be a peacock
 Don't I know!
 Crow try to be a jaybird
 He still crow
 Bust his cackle in two
 Still can't sing
 Got no feathers of blue
 On his wing
 A hawk try to be a eagle
 Down he fall
 So don't walk around all beggesty-like
 Or squinchify up too small
 'Cause maybe you is the very best you of all

Be proud of who you is
 And what you do
 No matter where you is
 Act dat way too
 And everyone you see
 Be proud of you . . .²³³

These simple but eloquent words reveal a woman who views the world realistically but succeeds in guarding her self-esteem--a woman who refuses to humble herself or bow to social conventions which might threaten to demean her own sense of personal worth. In this fashion, Kakou emerges

²³¹Ibid., p. II-6-132.

²³²In DaCosta's manuscript, the song, "Goose Never Be a Peacock," was placed in the first scene of Act I, at which time Kakou directed its message to Clio--yet another social outcast. During Saratoga's tryout, the song was moved into the second act, but the music, lyrics, and intent remained the same.

²³³Saratoga, p. I-1-24.

as a character of considerably dignity and stature, and she may be said to foreshadow the trend toward "black pride" which blossoms upon the musical stage during the 1960's.

Whereas Kakou is content to be the figurative goose, Clio would be the peacock--a role for which she possesses undeniable potential. It is not, however, with her ambitions that this study is concerned, for her behavior is motivated largely by the stigma of her illegitimacy and by the years of scrimping in exile. What is of interest is that Clio is an octoroon, a fact of which Kakou frequently reminds her.²³⁴ But Clio chooses to ignore the issue. When she mentions her Creole heritage, there is the following snarling exchange:

KAKOU

(sniffing sourly)
Who's Creole here?

CLIO

(almost in a shout)
I am! Show me anyone who has more right to be called Creole than my father had. The most aristocratic blood of France and Spain ran through his veins. And as his blood runs through my veins I am Creole, too.

KAKOU

Your great Grandmere Bonnevie - the actress - came to New Orleans from the West Indies with the troupe of Monsieur Tabary. You forget ---

CLIO

Ancient history! I am sick of it. I chose [sic] to remember more recent history. . . . I shall be what it suits me to be.²³⁵

Such a revelation would not have been treated so casually in the past.

Indeed, in such previous works as Show Boat and My Darlin' Aida, the

²³⁴This, too, may help to explain Kakou's somewhat brazen familiarity with her mistress, but Kakou's insistence upon continuing to act in the capacity of Clio's governess provides stronger and more probable motivation.

²³⁵Saratoga, pp. I-1-16 and 17.

little drop of "midnight" led to sensational tales of miscegenation and disastrous consequences for their female mulatto characters. In Saratoga, Clio's blood is not considered to be tainted, and her racial background is swept lightly into the background where it remains until late in the second act.

At Saratoga Springs, Clio is advised by Mrs. Bellop, the social directress, that her imminent engagement to the wealthy Bart Van Steed may not take place because of the danger that Clio's ancestry may be exposed:

BELLOP

. . . Perhaps you can persuade Mrs. Van Steed to stop spreading the rumor that Mrs. de Chanfret is not a Countess at all -- that she's not even Mrs. de Chanfret; that she's an adventuress with a heavy touch of the tarbrush. . . . I'm afraid that unless you come now, accept Mr. Van Steed's proposal and let me announce your engagement, you will be asked to leave as an impostor or--

CLIO

--Or as a Negress, relegated to the servants' quarters?

BELLOP

It's extremely possible, my dear.²³⁶

Infuriated by the shallowness and pettiness of the high society which she had been so eager to enter, Clio refuses to submit to Mrs. Bellop's terms. Her solution is seen in a grand and contemptuous gesture of defiance as she makes a shocking entrance at the fashionable costume ball:

(CLIO is dressed like a TOPSY in a short ragged garment, over-size shoes flapping on her nimble feet, her hair in corkscrews knotted with gay-colored rags, gold hoop earrings dangling, her teeth gleaming white in her blackened face. On HER arm is a big woven basket. SHE grins and prances.)

²³⁶Ibid., p. II-6-134.

CLIO

Praw-leens! Praw-leens! Fo' sweeten dem sour faces! Praw-leens!

(SHE throws pralines from the basket at the GUESTS. BELLOP rushes to HER.)

BELLOP

You're crazy! They'll never forgive you for this. This will ruin you!

CLIO

Honey, I'se BEEN ruined!

BART

Mrs. de Chanfret! Please! Please, don't!

CLIO

Go 'long, honey chile. You quality folks, you don't want no truck wid a no-count wench lak me. You jes' shut yo' mouf wid one dese chah praw-leens. M--mmh!

(SHE actually pops one into BART's open mouth and deftly does the same to BELLOP. BELLOP dashes the candy to the floor and stomps out, followed by BART.)

Hey, Mistah Band Man! How 'bout a bit of "Petticoat High"?!

(The ORCHESTRA complies. CLIO hands her basket to KAKOU, picks up her ragged skirt to show still more disreputable pants, breaks into the SHUFFLE of the Negro dance SHE learned at the Waterfront Market in New Orleans.)²³⁷

Clio remains in this costume through her quick reconciliation with Clint whose only reference to her bizarre appearance is that she has changed.²³⁸ He seems not to notice even when some of Clio's make-up rubs off on him; the final stage direction reads: "CLIO embraces CLINT and, as THE CURTAIN FALLS, CLINT, too, is in partial blackface."²³⁹ Thus, the fractional Negro heritage which spelled disaster for such characters as Julie and Aida is turned into a personal triumph for Clio. Her performance at the costume ball is designed as a positive reflection

²³⁷ Ibid., p. II-7-137.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. II-7-138.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. II-7-139.

on the spirited Clio and as a negative reflection on the stuffy hypocrites of fashionable society. Moreover, there is no hint whatever of any kind of miscegenation theme in the happy conclusion. Clio's mixed blood is to be accepted with complete nonchalance--a premise which certainly would have required greater delicacy of treatment even in the more socially conscious 1940's.

Saratoga's remaining Negro characters function as supernumeraries. The attendants and waiters at Saratoga Springs are black, and they remain quietly in the background performing menial chores. In the earlier scenes, however, Negro characters are introduced as an integral part of the color and gaiety of the New Orleans milieu. They comprise a collection of domestics, laborers, street vendors, and children who, in musical terms, create the very atmosphere of Clio's New Orleans. Some of their work songs, staged as a kind of processional, follow, in part:

PICKANINNY

You want de best - you want de good work?
I does the walls - I does de woodwork!
Call fuh....Shorty!

CHARWOMEN

What we does is sweepin' up
Any house we's keepin' up....watch it shine!

CHIMNEY SWEEP

Chimneys is my specialty
And I does my specialty.....mighty fine!²⁴⁰

All of this is a prelude to the refurbishing of Clio's house on Rampart Street, during which a pleasant, but unfortunately predictable, "Negro-inspired" musical sequence takes place. The fiery Clio observes that the work is proceeding sluggishly and, in order to speed her lazy help,

²⁴⁰Ibid., pp. I-1-13 and 14.

she adopts a Negro patois and appeals to their supposed rhythmic and musical instincts:

CLIO

Heah come who is payin' you
 But I sho' ain't payin' you - til you's done
 Sooner you stop frittin' time
 Sooner we has quittin' time
 Den has fun!

.

One step - two step
 We make new step
 I step - you step soon

After we cleans up everything
 We gonna cut dat pigeon - wing
 Oooooo-la-la
 We chantez-le-bas
 And dance - under de moon!

.

(ALL sing the SONG as they work in a frenzy. CLIO dances a shuffle with SHORTY and MAUDEY. At the end of the number the room is miraculously in order and everyone drops in his tracks with fatigue.)²⁴¹

This number successfully establishes the scene, advances the action somewhat, and provides for a rousing song and dance to set the first act in motion. As a collective characterization of Negroes, however, with its implications of laziness followed by childlike glee and much rhythmic stomping, the "One Step, Two Step" sequence must be said to belong to past traditions; it might easily have been a product of the 1920's. The same is true of the ebullient "Petticoat High," an elaborate cakewalk production number, with a Negro chorus led by Clio and accompanied by the ragtime rhythms of the "Razzy Dazzy Spasm Band."²⁴² Finally, the "Street Cries"²⁴³ which introduce the Waterfront Market scene invite

²⁴¹Ibid., pp. I-1-15 and 16.

²⁴²Ibid., pp. I-3-29 and 30.

²⁴³Ibid., p. I-3-28.

inevitable comparison with Gershwin's similar atmospheric interludes in Porgy and Bess.²⁴⁴

One should not take too seriously Saratoga's lapses into dated characterization of the Negro in the aforementioned musical numbers, for they--like the entire production itself--exist principally for their entertainment value. Saratoga does not pretend to be a thought-provoking work; it expounds no urgent social message, and asks only to be viewed, heard, and enjoyed as a colorful, romantic adventure story. If the authors chose to promote a period image of the collective Negro, at least they had the taste to do so within the framework of a period piece. By way of contrast, the fully individualized characters--Kakou and Clio--are presented with dignity, and each possesses a healthy measure of self-esteem. For the most part, Saratoga tends to minimize a conscious awareness of race, concentrating instead upon purely human problems and values. As such, it may be considered progressive. Conversely, given this nation's troubled racial climate by late 1959, one might wish to view the musical as an entertainment wearing blinders.

In point of fact, during the decade of the 1950's the American musical theatre did not address itself to timely racial issues. Of the five plotted musicals analyzed in this chapter, only Simply Heavenly was given a contemporary American setting. Although Langston Hughes provided some telling comments on racial injustices, the all-Negro Harlem setting worked as a vacuum which precluded a meaningful confrontation between black and white. The remaining musicals retreated from relevance either into the past (My Darlin' Aida and Saratoga) or into such

²⁴⁴Supra, p. 140.

remote settings as the exotic West Indian islands (House of Flowers and Jamaica). Of these, only My Darlin' Aida, with its plea for human tolerance, possessed what might be called a racial-social conscience, but its better intentions were smothered by an insistence upon tired stereotypes and impoverished clichés. It is true that Jamaica featured a timely setting whereby to project some wonderfully sophisticated topical humor, but its major thrust was directed toward satirizing politics and urban civilization; it concentrated not at all upon serious racial questions. The decade's emphasis, therefore, was upon entertainment, and some cheerful amusement was forthcoming. What should not be overlooked is the fact that, amid the diversions, refinements in Negro characterization were taking place. Even in cases which, on the surface appear to be blatant stereotypes, an attitude of substantially greater respect is evident. Jesse Semple emerges as a kind of black Will Rogers, while Koli is a barefoot but very wise philosopher. The Negro female, as in the persons of Savanna and Ottilie, is portrayed less consistently as a sensual animal. And in the Adam of My Darlin' Aida and the Kakou of Saratoga, two distinctive and prophetic types emerge: the angry revolutionary and the black character of considerable self-esteem. These will be seen with increasing frequency during the 1960's.

CHAPTER VI

THE 1960'S: MOVEMENT TOWARD MILITANCY

Now is the moment, now is the moment,
Come on, we've put it off long enough.
Now! No more waitin', no hesitatin',
Now! Now! Come on, let's get some of that stuff.
It's there for you and me,
For every he and she;
Just want to do what's right:
Constitutionally!
I went and took a look
In my old History book;
It's there in black and white
For all to see.
Now! Now! Now, now, now, now,
Now! Now! Now, now, now, now.
The message of this song's not subtle;
No discussion, no rebuttal.
We want more than just a promise;
Say good-bye to Uncle Thomas!
Call me naive.
Still, I believe
We're created free and equal
Now! Now! Now! Now! Now! Now! . . .¹

These lyrics, written especially for Lena Horne and fitted to the melody of the Israeli Hora, "Hava Nageela," effectively summarize the spirit of urgency which both characterized and created the seething racial crises of the 1960's. During this decade, the fight for civil rights moved out of the nation's courts and into the cities' streets. As the movement accelerated, its direction turned toward open and often furious protest.

¹[Betty] Comden, [Adolph] Green, and [Jule] Styne, "Now!," Here's Lena Now!, 20th Century Fox Records, TFS-4115, Side 1, Band 6.

Involved in this was a gradual shift in both tactics and goals: from legal to direct action, from middle and upper class to mass action, from attempts to guarantee the Negro's constitutional rights to efforts to secure economic policies giving him equality of opportunity, from appeals to the sense of fair play of white Americans to demands based upon power in the black ghetto.²

In short, legal and legislative action appeared promising on paper but proved to be of little practical value. The hollowness of token victories had been exposed. Progress of a tangible sort was desperately needed, and frustration decreed that the means of attainment was to be found not in the asking but, rather, in the taking. It has been argued that

the Negroes' impatience, bitterness, and anger . . . are likely to increase the closer they come to full equality. This is not a quirk of Negro character but a characteristic of all disadvantaged groups: the closer they are to their goals, the harder it is to understand or justify the disparities that remain. Indeed, it is a commonplace of history that revolutions (and the Negro protest movement resembles a revolution in many ways) stem from hope, not despair; from progress, not stalemate. And the nearer to triumph the revolutionaries get, the tougher they usually become.³

As a group, significantly, it was the nation's black youth who, having perceived the situation, first dared to act. Lena Horne meaningfully has remarked:

A new generation was taking over. And they were not interested in being symbols. . . . They were not interested in appeasing the white man, in cajoling favors from him. They were demanding their rights and not getting them yet. They knew my generation had been sold a bill of goods--and I was just learning it.⁴

²Kerner Commission Report, p. 227.

³Silberman, p. 357.

⁴Horne and Schickel, p. 203.

The black activism of the 1960's was to spawn a series of civil disorders so savage, viscious and violent as to make it "appear that domestic turmoil had become part of the American scene."⁵

The crucial tactical turning point in the struggle for civil rights occurred in the South at the very beginning of the decade. On February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, four black college students requested service at a segregated lunch counter; when refused, they remained seated until closing time. It was that simple. But this tentative and rather quiet gesture signaled the beginning of a revolution.

Nothing much really happened at Greensboro that day. But the sit-in of McNeil Joseph--which was entirely his own spontaneous idea--caught on like wildfire all over the South with Negro students who were fed up with the slow progress of their leaders. In less than two weeks the student sit-ins had spread to fifteen other cities; at the end of the month they had reached 33, and on and on.⁶

In practical terms, the results of the student sit-ins of 1960 were negligible, but in psychological terms, their impact cannot be minimized.

In dozens of communities of the Upper South, the Atlantic coastal states, and Texas, student demonstrations secured the desegregation of lunch counters in drug and variety stores. Arrests were numbered in the thousands, and brutality was evident in scores of communities. In the Deep South the campaign ended in failure, even in instances where hundreds had been arrested. . . . But the youth had captured the imagination of the Negro community and to a remarkable extent of the whole nation.⁷

⁵Kerner Commission Report, p. 38.

⁶William Brink and Louis Harris, The Negro Revolution in America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), p. 42.

⁷Kerner Commission Report, p. 227.

The stage effectively had been set for a series of dramatic racial confrontations, the violently repressive character of which was destined to shock this nation and the world.

The sit-ins of 1960 were followed by the often bloody Freedom Rides of 1961, when the Negroes (and white supporters) rode directly into brutal violence. As variations on a theme, there were wade-ins at beaches and swim-ins at pools, kneel-ins at churches and lie-ins at construction projects. By early 1963 the pace of the Negro revolution was quickening rapidly. And then there occurred an event that made all earlier developments seem merely a prologue: the riots of Birmingham, Alabama.⁸

Much has been written about what happened in Birmingham, and none of it is pleasant. "Police used dogs, firehoses and cattle prods against marchers, many of whom were children. White racists shot at Negroes and bombed Negro residences. Negroes retaliated by burning white-owned businesses in Negro areas."⁹ Birmingham, however, was not an isolated incident.

In a three-month period of the summer of 1963, the U.S. Justice Department counted 1,412 separate demonstrations. The newspaper pictures showing the limp bodies of Negroes being carried to police patrol wagons became a great tapestry of the times. Over the land echoed the Negro hymn "We Shall Overcome."¹⁰

The lesson to be learned from these events was not that Negroes were dissatisfied, nor even that dissatisfaction had given way to anger; rather, the significance is to be found in the intransigence of the white position and the depth of white hostility. Writing in 1964, Charles E. Silberman observed:

For all the talk of the dangers of Negro protest erupting into violence, the most serious outbreaks of violence in 1963 came from whites determined to block the Negro advance with any

⁸Brink and Harris, p. 44.

⁹Kerner Commission Report, p. 35.

¹⁰Brink and Harris, p. 46.

means: the murder of four Negro children in the bombing of a Birmingham church, the assassination of Medgar Evers, the murder of William Moore. Nor has the violence been limited to the South. There is an ugly streak of violence in the American character that erupts when racial change occurs; we can expect this ugliness to come to the surface more and more.¹¹

Silberman's analysis of the situation could not have been more prophetic. In the North as well as the South, as the Negro protest gained momentum, the urgent cry rang out for "Freedom Now!"¹² But it soon became clear that such a demand was falling upon deaf ears.

For a brief period following the demonstrations in Birmingham in the spring of 1963--a very brief period--it appeared that the American conscience had been touched; a wave of sympathy for the Negro and of revulsion over white brutality seemed to course through the nation. But then the counterreaction set in, revealing a degree of anti-Negro prejudice and hatred that surprised even the most sophisticated observers.¹³

It was the enormity of white resistance--or, in the words of the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, "white racism"¹⁴--which encouraged the movement toward militancy on the part of many Negroes during the 1960's. Conscious of the futility of direct action techniques, many of the angrier and younger leaders abandoned what they considered to be the moderate and overly cautious philosophy of Martin Luther King, and the civil rights movement broke into separate camps.

By the middle of the decade, many militant Negro members of SNCC and CORE began to turn away from American society and the "middle-class way of life." Cynical about the liberals and the leaders of organized labor, they regarded compromise, even as

¹¹Silberman, pp. 357-58.

¹²Kerner Commission Report, p. 229.

¹³Silberman, p. 8.

¹⁴Kerner Commission Report, p. 203.

a temporary tactical device, as anathema. They talked more of "revolutionary" changes in the social structure, of retaliatory violence, and increasingly rejected white assistance. They insisted that Negro power alone could compel the white "ruling class" to make concessions.¹⁵

Out of this mood, and inspired by "the swift emergence into power of the independent African nations,"¹⁶ came defensive and defiant assertions of self-respect: black consciousness, black pride, black nationalism, and the rhetoric of black power. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad's separatist Muslim movement, which preaches that the white man is a devil doomed to destruction, suddenly sprang to national prominence, and the inflammatory words of its foremost ideological spokesman, Malcolm X,¹⁷ created converts and alarmed countless whites. Other extremist and separatist groups such as the Black Panther Party emerged, their cries of "burn, baby, burn" and "get whitey" standing in sharp contrast to the more palliative "We Shall Overcome."

It is generally agreed¹⁸ that the most militant factions do not enjoy the support of this nation's Negro majority; however, it would be foolhardy to dismiss the private satisfaction of a moderate black upon seeing "whitey" cringe when confronted with the rhetoric of an angry black militant. The long, hot, riot-torn summers which

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 232.

¹⁶ Nat Hentoff, "Through the Racial Looking Glass," Playboy, IX, No. 7 (July, 1962), p. 70.

¹⁷ Malcolm X later found himself in disfavor with Elijah Muhammad, a situation which encouraged considerable alteration of his racial philosophy. See: Malcolm X [Little], with the assistance of Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965).

¹⁸ Gary T. Marx, Protest and Prejudice: A Study of Belief in the Black Community (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 4 and 25-28. Also: Kerner Commission Report, p. 236.

commenced in earnest with Watts in 1965 and continued with increasing regularity in the urban ghettos through the climactic summer of 1967¹⁹ were indicative of the frustration, hostility, and rage seething within this nation's black communities. Dick Gregory summarized the attitude as follows:

A few years ago, the nonviolent philosophy told the Negro to stop running; confront the man who is chasing you, and turn the other cheek. When the Negro stops running, his fear is gone. He has turned the other cheek and been hit twice. Now that Negro is mad. And there is a big difference between a scared Negro and a mad Negro.²⁰

By the end of the decade, both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., were long in their graves, and the war in Vietnam had replaced the racial dilemma as the target of urgent protest. Nevertheless, the latter cannot be considered as having been solved; so long as inequities exist, anger will remain. In 1968, psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs warned:

No matter what repressive measures are invoked against the blacks, they will never swallow their rage and go back to blind hopelessness.

If existing oppressions and humiliating disenfranchisements are to be lifted, they will have to be lifted most speedily, or catastrophe will follow.

For there are no more psychological tricks blacks can play upon themselves to make it possible to exist in dreadful circumstances. No more lies can they tell themselves. No more dreams to fix on. No more opiates to dull the pain. No more patience. No more thought. No more reason. Only a welling tide risen out of all those terrible years of grief, now a tidal wave of fury and rage, and all black, black as night.²¹

The accuracy of such a prophecy is yet to be proved; however, one thing is certain: during the 1960's America was forced to acknowledge the

¹⁹Kerner Commission Report, pp. 37-108.

²⁰Dick Gregory, The Shadow That Scares Me, ed. James R. McGraw (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), p. 124.

²¹Grier and Cobbs, p. 179. ,

extent of its black citizen's hostility and discontent. And in large measure, the musical theatre reflected the complex temper of the times.

In a wide variety of musical productions, casting policies ran the gamut from genuine integration to a curious brand of apartheid. The inclusion of one or more black performers in singing and dancing choruses of otherwise all-white shows became common practice.²² Occasionally, Negroes filled minor speaking and/or singing roles which, although not necessarily racially defined, smacked of tradition. Royce Wallace, for example, appeared in Funny Girl as Emma, Fanny Brice's maid.²³ With its Coney Island setting, I Had a Ball²⁴ featured a widely interracial supporting cast in which Rosetta LeNoire was prominent as "Ma Maloney, the proprietor of a Hot Corn stand"²⁵ and leader of a good-natured minority clique known as The Alley Gang. Jack Lawrence and Stan Freeman, who wrote the music and lyrics, gave to Miss LeNoire and her group a sassy song entitled "Neighborhood" which cleverly commented upon the subject of ethnic chauvinism the world over. It follows, in part:

²²Photographs in this writer's collection of souvenir theatrical programs show Negro chorus members in, among others, the following musicals: Here's Love, Funny Girl, What Makes Sammy Run?, Skyscraper, Cabaret, On a Clear Day You Can See Forever, A Joyful Noise, and George M!.

²³"Funny Girl," Playbill, II, No. 6 (June, 1965), p. 19.

²⁴A 1964 failure which starred Buddy Hackett, Richard Kiley, and Karen Morrow. Interestingly, its director, Lloyd Richards, is black. Jerome Chodorov, author of the book, states that "there is no script extant" of I Had a Ball. (Personal letter, November 3, 1969.) The original cast recording, which no longer is in release, remains. (Infra, p. 366, n. 26.)

²⁵John McClain, "Buddy Hackett and That's All," New York Journal American (December 16, 1964), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1964, XXV, No. 29 (Week of December 21, 1964), p. 108.

Irish infiltrated Boston, Massachusetts,
 Breeds of Swedes in St. Paul.
 Now if we let in one more alien,
 Where can a native-born Episcopalian
 Girl like me go at all?
 Honey!
 It happens other places;
 Take, for instance, Princess Grace's
 Royal debut--on that balcony she stood.
 Folks in Monaco said, "Silly,
 Why'd he pick a Mick from Philly?"
 Oh-oh! There goes the neighborhood!

 They cook those smelly dishes,
 Speak English horribly.
 Their names are awful funny, honey,
 They sure don't look like me.
 Get out. Go home. Scoot!
 They're in. We're trapped. Shoot!
 Get the family on the run.
 Ooops! My brother just married one.

I went to Africa to find a free Republic;
 Then no more would I roam.
 I told the natives there, "I want to settle
 down and live in Ghana."
 The natives said, "Yankee Go Home."²⁶

In an otherwise mindless, if diverting, piece of work, here was pungent social satire. Beyond this, however, the extent of racial characterization in I Had a Ball remains difficult to assess.

The talented Thelma Oliver was featured prominently in two musicals which were devoid of racial themes. Off-Broadway, she functioned in a narrative capacity as one of three Storytellers in Cindy (1964), a contemporary version of "Cinderella" set in a Jewish delicatessen.²⁷ On Broadway, Miss Oliver was well-received in the role of Helene, a dance-hall hostess and sidekick of the title character in Sweet Charity (1966).²⁸ In both musicals, Miss Oliver's parts might

²⁶I Had a Ball, Mercury Records, OCS 6210, Side 2, Band 2.

²⁷Rick Ward, "Album Notes," Cindy, ABC-Paramount Records, ABCS-OC-2.

²⁸"Gwen Verdon as Sweet Charity," Stage Magazine; The Program for the Palace Theatre, I, No. 11 (December, 1966), pp. 11, 13, 15, and 19.

have been played by virtually any capable actress-singer, thereby indicating a tangible and positive integrated casting policy on the part of the producers.

Although the logic was similar, it is difficult to say the same for David Merrick's successful shift from an all-white company to an all-black company during the run of his immensely successful Hello, Dolly! It should be understood that no gimmicks reminiscent of The Hot Mikado were involved. The book, music, and lyrics remained unaltered; the only change was to be found in casting. Replacements are common during lengthy runs; indeed, Ginger Rogers already had replaced Carol Channing in the starring role on Broadway. But in the new Pearl Bailey-Cab Calloway version, race became something of an issue. No eyebrows had been raised when Dolly opened with an all-white cast, but given the racial sensitivities of 1967, an all-black cast was considered suspect. Ebony Magazine reported:

When it was first announced that David Merrick was planning an all-Negro version of Hello, Dolly!, many people questioned his motives. Most were the so-called white liberals who felt this would be a relapse to the all-Negro shows of an earlier, less-enlightened era. Cynics contended it was just a gimmick to attract people who had already seen the show, and the Women's National Democratic Club voted down a proposal to engage the show for a benefit because the cast was "segregated." Criticism died down quickly, however, as soon as the new production was unveiled. Merrick's initiative was hailed as a "brilliant stroke of showmanship."²⁹

Despite enthusiastic reviews and solid support at the box-office, it became clear that this Dolly was to be considered "special" and quite different from the original. Such an attitude is evident in Henry Hewes's astonishing assertion that "somehow the patently artificial book

²⁹Ragni Lantz, "Hello, Dolly," Ebony, XXIII, No. 3 (January, 1968), p. 89.

seems more real when peopled by Negroes."³⁰ Just why this should be so, Hewes was at a loss to explain--although he did offer several equally astonishing theories.³¹ To David Merrick's credit, the production remained unaltered in any significant fashion--except, perhaps, in the public mind. Whereas no attempt was made to fashion a "hot" Dolly, the result reinforced the premise of "separate, but equal." Jack Good was less generous; he called it "apartheid."³²

A spate of all-black musical entertainments based upon the history and culture of the American Negro also proliferated during the decade. These were experimental in nature, and most were the work of Langston Hughes who returned to the form of his earlier Don't You Want to be Free? (1938)³³ in order to create an idiom which he called the "gospel song-play."³⁴ These works were unified by a theme rather than a plot, and the theme was explored through "dialogue, narrative, pantomime, gospel song, folk spirituals, and dance."³⁵ Hughes began with a Christmas cantata, Ballad of the Brown King (1960), which he expanded into his most celebrated piece of this genre, Black Nativity (1961).³⁶

³⁰Henry Hewes, "The Theater; The Considerate Lovers," Saturday Review, L, No. 48 (December 2, 1967), p. 24.

³¹The response of Mr. Hewes was not atypical.

³²Jack Good, "'Catch My Soul'--Listening to Sounds of 60s," Los Angeles Times, Calendar (Sunday, March 24, 1968), p. 26.

³³Supra, pp. 128-29.

³⁴James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross (ed.), Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 198.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid. (The production achieved international recognition the following summer at the Festival of Two Worlds, Spoleto, Italy, and during a highly acclaimed European tour. Off-Broadway, it ran fifty-seven performances [Rigdon, p. 7].)

Produced off-Broadway at the 41st Street Theatre, the proceedings have been described as follows:

There are two sets of gospel singers in the company--Marion Williams and the Stars of Faith, a female quartet, and Professor Alex Bradford with a group of four men and a woman--plus a soloist named Princess Stewart, three dancers, and a narrator named Howard Sanders. The first act, called "The Child is Born," tells the Nativity story. The dancers portray Mary, Joseph, and a shepherd; Mr. Sanders reads relevant portions of the Bible and some verses and prose by Mr. Hughes; and the choirs sing several traditional carols, along with many gospel songs. . . . The second act, called "The Word is Spread," is a camp meeting at which Professor Bradford (who actually is a minister) leads the proceedings as the preacher. The proceedings are entirely gospel songs; there is no narration except for a few introductory words, and there is no formal dancing.³⁷

It has been said that Black Nativity "taps a treasury of specifically Negro materials and puts them in the hands of an all-Negro cast, giving a fresh and wholesome new approach to the Bible's best-loved story."³⁸

Other gospel song-plays by Hughes, all of which remained essentially concerts unified by a central theme, were: Gospel Glow (1962), Jerico-Jim Crow (1964), and The Prodigal Son (1965).³⁹ Two other productions employed the same techniques: Trumpets of the Lord (1963) and The Believers (1968). The former has been described as follows:

"Trumpets" is Vinnette Carroll's musical adaptation of "God's Trombones," by the late Negro poet James Weldon Johnson, whose contribution to the evening is a set of poems in the form of sermons. These are delivered by three actors . . . and serve as leads into spirituals and gospel and freedom songs, sung by a choir of three men and three women. . . . There is no obvious dramatic construction, but the elements of drama--humor, pathos, variety of mood, tension, and even character--are all there.⁴⁰

³⁷Edith Oliver, "The Theatre: Off Broadway," New Yorker, XXXVII, No. 45 (December 23, 1961), p. 57.

³⁸Gary Kramer, "Album Notes," Black Nativity, Vee Jay Records, SR 5022.

³⁹Emanuel and Gross (ed.), pp. 198-99.

⁴⁰Edith Oliver, "Off Broadway: Perfect Pitch," New Yorker, XXXIX (January 4, 1964), p. 60.

The Believers, subtitled "The Black Experience in Song,"⁴¹ proved to be the decade's most ambitious and comprehensive example of the staged musical montage. Assembled and performed by Voices, Inc., the first act traced the saga of the black past--beginning in Africa, depicting conditions aboard the slave ships, continuing with the work songs and spirituals of the Southern slave, and concluding with the shouting gospels of post-Emancipation Christian worship. The second act turned to the contemporary scene and explored various aspects of life in the Northern ghetto, touching upon such subjects as the drug culture, police oppression, and the anger of black power.⁴² The Believers differed from the aforementioned gospel song-plays in the timeliness of its outspoken message⁴³ and in its broader musical range. Whereas the score included traditional work songs, field hollers, gospel songs and spirituals, much of the musical material--especially in the second act--consisted of original compositions written for The Believers.⁴⁴ The strength of all these works was to be found in theme, mood, and their musical values. Nevertheless, none of these pasticci developed plot or character sufficiently sustained so as to be considered a part of the commercial American musical theatre.

The decade produced three further experimental productions which deserve mention but, for reasons peculiar to each case, do not merit

⁴¹The Believers, RCA Victor Records, LSO-1151.

⁴²Ibid., Side 2.

⁴³The finale is an extremely powerful paean to individual dignity, freedom, and the positive assertion of one's will.

⁴⁴Edith Oliver, "The Theatre: Off Broadway," New Yorker, XLIV, No. 13 (May 18, 1968), p. 75.

detailed examination. They are: The Bible Salesman (1960), The Roar of the Greasepaint--The Smell of the Crowd (1965), and June Bug Graduates Tonight (1967). Considered in chronological order, even these three isolated works suggest the decade's swift movement toward relevance, however unpleasant, in exploring the racial climate.

The Bible Salesman was Jay Thompson's almost literal one-act adaptation of a prize-winning short story by Alma Stone.⁴⁵ Although designed so that nearly every line was to be sung, Thompson himself agrees that The Bible Salesman⁴⁶ remains an unclassifiable curiosity:

Salesman is not an opera or a musical comedy; it is not a musical setting of the short story or of a one-act play based on the story; and it is certainly not a play with music. If you want to call the form "washtub" or "Tuesday afternoon," those terms make about as much sense as any. Salesman is really, I hope, a musical work for the theatre.⁴⁷

That final definition is significant and should not be twisted, for The Bible Salesman cannot seriously be considered a work for the musical theatre. "My main objective," Thompson has stated, "was to write a work that would be sung, and yet would proceed at the tempo of a straight play."⁴⁸ A glance at the libretto⁴⁹ confirms the fact that The Bible

⁴⁵ Alma Stone, "The Bible Salesman," The Yale Review, XLVII, No. 3 (March, 1958), pp. 393-404.

⁴⁶ The Bible Salesman was commissioned by Bill Penn for production by the Chapel Players of the Broadway Congregational Church, New York City, where it opened on February 21, 1960. It was performed for ten subsequent Sunday afternoons. One year later, it was seen as the first of two musical works by Jay Thompson, produced off-Broadway under the collective title, Double Entry. It ran fifty-six performances (Rigdon, p. 14).

⁴⁷ Jay Thompson, "A Headnote on the Form of 'Double Entry,'" Theatre Arts, XLV, No. 7 (July, 1961), p. 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jay Thompson, "Double Entry," Theatre Arts, XLV, No. 7 (July, 1961), pp. 34-39.

Salesman reads fluently and naturally without benefit of music.⁵⁰ Given a rural setting in east Texas, the story concentrates upon the warm relationship between a wise but impoverished grandmother and her evangelistic grandson whose calling it is to sell Bibles and make the world a better place. These are the Negro characters and, despite a surfeit of folksiness, they are simple, sincere, and intensely human. The play's only disagreeable character is the white man in the Bible office, a hypocrite who is more intent upon selling the Christian ethic than living according to its principles. Little of consequence transpires, save for a moving recitation of the grandmother's past hardships. And the message seems to be that faith has to do with deeds rather than words, with life rather than the hereafter. Considered upon its own merits, this is an unpretentious, if insignificant, little theatre piece. Nothing of social significance is intended--nor is it attempted. Perhaps it is for this reason that critic Whitney Balliett concluded: "The Bible Salesman is a 'Porgy and Bess' view of Negro life--that is, it is one step up from 'Uncle Tom.'"⁵¹ In this case, such a statement is unduly harsh and not completely accurate; however, it is quite probable that by 1960 the genre of the Negro folk-tale struck many observers as being irrelevant and downright condescending.

Although it was first presented in this country, The Roar of the Greasepaint--The Smell of the Crowd⁵² remains essentially a British

⁵⁰The musical score is not commercially available.

⁵¹Whitney Balliett, "The Theatre: Off Broadway," New Yorker XXXVII (March 11, 1961), p. 116.

⁵²Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley (book, music and lyrics), The Roar of the Greasepaint--The Smell of the Crowd, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), access granted courtesy of Tams-Witmark Music Library, Inc., New York City.

Its authors, Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse, are Englishmen, and in this abstract "parable of the changes in the British class structure,"⁵³ they have relied heavily upon the broad comic style of the English music-hall. For this reason, this unconventional production will not be analyzed in detail; however, its social commentary with regard to the Negro is worthy of mention. The Roar of the Greasepaint is a didactic work which "expresses optimism that the traditional exploitation of the masses is coming to an end because the masses are discovering that capitalist rules are not sacred."⁵⁴ All of the characters are to be understood as symbols. The setting is a gigantic game board upon which the two principals--Sir, representing the Establishment, and Cocky, representing the underdog--are pitted against one another. Cocky always loses because Sir gives the orders and changes the rules of the game to his own advantage--a situation which Cocky blindly accepts. Toward the middle of the second act a character known as The Negro appears, thus providing Cocky with his very own object of scorn. Having encountered someone theoretically more disadvantaged than he, Cocky quickly adopts Sir's lofty superiority and overbearing manner. The Negro, however, is familiar with trickery and exploitation; he refuses to be oppressed by Cocky. Instead, he explains to Cocky the nature of Sir's deviousness and concludes with an impassioned song of emancipation: "Feeling Good."⁵⁵

⁵³Richard Watts, Jr., "Two on the Aisle: The Class Structure With Music," New York Post (May 17, 1965), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1965, XXVI, No. 8 (Week of May 17, 1965), p. 325.

⁵⁴Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript: Newley World A-Coming," Saturday Review, XLVIII, No. 23 (June 5, 1965), p. 38.

⁵⁵The Roar of the Greasepaint--The Smell of the Crowd, RCA Victor, LSO-1109, Side II, Band 6.

Inspired, Cocky asserts himself, defies Sir, wins the game, and proposes new rules which are advantageous to the little man. In this fashion, the symbolic character of The Negro becomes a crucial figure who provides the musical with its major turning point. The social criticism in support of the Negro could not be more blatantly stated. Nevertheless, Cocky's initial response toward The Negro as an inferior, The Negro's canny comprehension of exploitative tactics, and his insistence upon independence suggest the decade's movement toward racial awareness upon the musical stage.

Archie Shepp's June Bug Graduates Tonight took the final step by moving directly and angrily into the arena of protest wherein the question was posed: "'Can America prevent June Bug from murdering her?'"⁵⁶ Billed as a jazz allegory, its author (who is a black jazz musician) composed a "series of songs, at once cool and tuneful,"⁵⁷ which bolstered a play that "swung back and forth from anger to mockery to maliciousness to hokum."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, June Bug Graduates Tonight apparently was not considered to be a part of the musical theatre; critics persistently referred to it as a play, and Doris Abramson has remarked that it "seems to have been given a production that would call to mind Brechtian cabaret."⁵⁹ Like The Roar of the Greasepaint, June Bug Graduates Tonight eschewed a realistic style--save, perhaps, for

⁵⁶ Archie Shepp, quoted in Howard Smith, "Young Man with a Pen," New York Times (February 19, 1967), p. 2:3, cited in Abramson, p. 283.

⁵⁷ Robert Pasolli, "Off-Broadway," The Nation, CCIV, No. 13 (March 27, 1967), p. 412.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Abramson, p. 282.

the use of "gutter language"⁶⁰--and employed allegorical characters in symbolic situations. The proceedings⁶¹ have been described as follows:

Junebug is a young Negro, about to graduate from high school as valedictorian of his class, who is profoundly troubled to decide what he should say in his address. The terms of his confusion devolve from his mother, who welcomes his advancement as a gift from the white world (tokenism); from his father, who angrily rejects all accommodation (black supremacy); and from his sister, who cynically cooperates with whites for her own ends (opportunism). Junebug gropes toward his own position in a few long scenes with his girl friend, a white Southern girlie named America, and with his new pal, a dissolute old man named Uncle Sam. The boy's attitude toward them alternates between acceptance and rejection until the final scene, the graduation exercises, where Junebug chooses positive feelings over negative ideas and embraces America. For this Uncle Sam, presiding as the school principal, mercilessly shoots him down, and down comes America with him. In an epilogue, which I understand was created by the company during rehearsal, Junebug and Sam exhort each other "to call to [America] in a loud voice."⁶²

Produced off-off-Broadway,⁶³ this piece of activist theatre which indicted what it considered to be a racist American power structure lasted for only a limited run of February 20 to March 3, 1967.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, June Bug Graduates Tonight dealt provocatively with urgent and relevant racial questions. Critic Dan Sullivan summarized June Bug's perplexing variety of options as follows:

If I play the white liberal game (integration, moderation, hot lunches in the schools), am I copping out on the black race?

⁶⁰Pasolli, Nation, CCIV, No. 13 (March 27, 1967), p. 411.

⁶¹At present, the script is unavailable, however, its potential publication is being negotiated.

⁶²Pasolli, Nation, CCIV, No. 13 (March 27, 1967), p. 412.

⁶³June Bug Graduates Tonight was presented in the sanctuary of the Church of the Holy Apostles under the sponsorship of the Chelsea Theatre Center, New York City. (Ibid., pp. 411-12.)

⁶⁴Abramson, p. 282.

If I play the Black Muslim game (separation, action, blood--if need be--in the streets), am I copping out on the human race? Do I defend myself with my fists, or with my words? Or, do I forget about defense and start attacking?⁶⁵

Such questions are troubling; Shepp meant them to be. His jazz allegory has been called "an inflammatory play . . . which put one on the spot; that was its value. It did so with verve, color and spirit; that was its worth."⁶⁶ As such, June Bug Graduates Tonight accurately reflects the spirit with which full-scale musical plays began to present racial themes as the decade groped its way toward maturity.

Between 1961 and 1968, ten musicals featuring Negro characters were presented in New York City.⁶⁷ They follow, in chronological order, along with their total number of performances:⁶⁸

| |
|---|
| <u>Kwamina</u> (1961), 32 performances |
| <u>Fly Blackbird</u> (1962), 127 performances |
| <u>No Strings</u> (1962), 580 performances |

⁶⁵ Dan Sullivan, New York Times (February 21, 1967), quoted in Abramson, p. 282.

⁶⁶ Pasolli, Nation, CCIV, No. 13 (March 27, 1967), p. 412.

⁶⁷ Other original works were produced during the decade but are not included here. Kicks & Co., with book, lyrics and music by Oscar Brown, Jr., was slated for Broadway in 1961 but closed after four performances in its Chicago tryout. Jack Good's Catch My Soul, a rhythm-blues-rock version of Shakespeare's Othello, with music by Ray Pohlman, was produced at the Los Angeles Music Center in March, 1968, and is on view in London at the time of this writing (1971). Two imports were presented on Broadway in 1961 and 1966, but they are excluded from discussion because of their foreign (South Africa) origin. They were: King Kong (a plotted musical) and Wait a Minim (a revue). Finally, the 1968 Broadway production of Maggie Flynn, which concerned itself with the 1863 race-oriented draft riots in New York City, is omitted from consideration because it was presented after the terminal date set for this study. The libretto, authored by Hugo Peretti, Luigi Creatore, and George David Weiss, is readily available from Samuel French, Inc.

⁶⁸ The performance totals have been derived from two sources. The first five: Rigdon, pp. 26, 17, 35, 6, and 47. The last five: Files of the Theatre Collection of the Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library (personal letter, June 9, 1971).

Ballad for Bimshire (1963), 72 performances
Tambourines to Glory (1963), 24 performances
Fade Out--Fade In (1964), 271 performances
Golden Boy (1964), 569 performances
The Zulu and the Zayda (1965), 179 performances
Hallelujah, Baby! (1967), 293 performances
Hair (1968), 1305 performances as of June 9, 1971; still
 running at the time of this writing.

These works demonstrate an awesome range of subject matter--from African nationalism to the making of Hollywood movies, from the conventional romance to the "hippie" life-style. Considered as a group, however, startling patterns which differ from the practices of past decades can be seen to emerge. Of the fifteen musicals thus far examined in detail, ten featured southern settings; among those listed above, only Hallelujah, Baby! had some scenes set in the American South. Whereas the majority of earlier works had been either period pieces or fantasies, nine of these ten musicals produced during the 1960's were firmly rooted in the present.⁶⁹ It should come as little surprise, therefore, to learn that eight of the ten contained thematic material pertinent to racial relations and firmly in support of the Negro. Unfortunately, this is not to say that all succeeded in realizing the potential of their socially significant aims. In many cases, the bravest of themes was worked out in distressingly familiar fashion.

Kwamina

Inspired early in the Kennedy administration by the surge of political interest in emerging African nations,⁷⁰ Kwamina undoubtedly

⁶⁹Fade Out--Fade In takes place in the 1930's. Although Hallelujah, Baby! spans a period of more than sixty years, it ends in the present, and its point of view is obviously contemporary.

⁷⁰Geoffrey Holder, "The Awful Afro Trend," Show, II, No. 3 (March, 1962), pp. 94-95. (Holder states that Adlai Stevenson suggested such a setting and theme to one of Kwamina's authors.)

was one of the decade's most ambitious productions. A promotional release described it as follows:

Few musicals . . . have ever attempted quite so momentous a theme as has Kwamina which, within the framework of the commercial Broadway stage, has miraculously conveyed the whole exciting struggle of the birth of African nationalism. "Here is an entire continent," composer-lyricist Richard Adler has said, "that is trying to bridge a thousand-year effort into five or ten. Here are the seeds of true drama, with real conflicts and contrasts. Where else could you find thriving cities with trolley cars, stucco buildings and supermarkets, while only a few miles away native tribes may still be practicing human sacrifice?"⁷¹

In this spirit of enthusiasm, a script was developed by Robert Alan Aurthur for which Richard Adler provided both music and lyrics. The redoubtable Agnes de Mille created the choreography, Robert Lewis directed, and the musical was given a lavish production by Alfred de Liagre, Jr.; Sally Ann Howes, Terry Carter, and Brock Peters filled the leading roles. Kwamina was a much heralded and eagerly anticipated event, for word had spread that this was to be a bold venture of high purpose and an authentic representation of modern Africa. On opening night, October 23, 1961, it became painfully clear that the authors had not succeeded. The critics applauded the positive intentions which had produced Kwamina but were forced to acknowledge the banality of the material. Robert Alan Aurthur's book was found to be culpable, and Walter Kerr summarized the critical consensus when he reported that "the show in general is a thing of enormous good will and as much bad writing."⁷² The public concurred, and the production closed after only thirty-two performances.

⁷¹"Album Notes," Kwamina, Capitol Records, SW 1645.

⁷²Walter Kerr, "First Night Report: "Kwamina," New York Herald Tribune (October 24, 1961), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII, No. 19 (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 206.

The text of Kwamina has not been published. According to its composer, its producer, and its author, the manuscript is no longer extant.⁷³ The original cast recording, however, was released by Capitol Records,⁷⁴ and it contains sufficient material to allow for a reconstruction of the musical's essential features. In addition to the recorded score, the album's liner notes provide a detailed synopsis. The background against which the action unfolds is as follows: "A country in West Africa, soon to win independence from British rule, is torn between its ancient superstitions and its yearning for freedom and democracy."⁷⁵ Returning to this milieu after years of intensive medical study in London is Kwamina Mwalla, son of the ailing tribal chieftan, Nana Mwalla. By virtue of his education, Kwamina represents the thrust of the future both scientifically and politically, and he finds his intellectual counterpart in the person of Eve Jordan, the white daughter of missionaries who for several years has functioned as medical doctor to the tribe--much to the disgust of Obitsebi, the local fetish man. Eve and Kwamina meet when the latter arrives to assume his duties at the segregated clinic where Eve works. He is barred by Blair, the pompous British Commissioner who secretly loves Eve, from utilizing anything other than the entrance marked "Natives." Eve apologizes for Blair's discriminatory behavior, but Kwamina's resentment causes them to quarrel.

⁷³Personal letters: Richard Adler (October 26, 1969); Alfred de Liagre, Jr. (October 31, 1969); Robert Alan Aurthur (November 17, 1969).

⁷⁴The recording is no longer in print.

⁷⁵Robert Alan Aurthur, "Story Synopsis," Kwamina, Capitol Records, SW 1645.

Nevertheless, the seeds of love are sown and, despite Blair's courting, Eve and Kwamina soon are in one another's arms. Tribal custom, however, conspires against their love, and both recognize the fact that their interracial romance will meet with opposition not only from Blair but also from Obitsebi, Nana Mwalla, and the unsophisticated villagers. Unwilling to love secretly, the two sadly agree to part.

Backward tribal ways provide an exciting subplot filled with romance and horror. The lovers here are the attractive Naii and her suitor, Ako. Their romance is complicated by the fact that Naii has been betrothed to Kwamina from birth. In love with Eve, Kwamina offers no objection to their marriage; however, Obitsebi and Nana Mwalla stubbornly cling to tradition and insist that Naii must wed Kwamina. The distraught girl and her lover attempt to flee, and when they are apprehended Obitsebi decrees that they must be put to death. As Kwamina bitterly protests such action, Nana Mwalla suddenly suffers a seizure and dies. Triumphant, Obitsebi cites an ancient tribal custom which requires human sacrifice following the death of a chieftan. Although Kwamina attempts to protect his people from the wrath of Obitsebi, the men of the tribe perform a ritualistic fetish dance, whereupon word arrives that Ako and Naii have been killed. On Independence Day, Kwamina assumes the political leadership of his country, and there is the optimistic assertion that the old customs will give way to more progressive and enlightened policies.

Among other things, Kwamina was a tale of miscegenation which differed from its two predecessors in one significant detail. Whereas Show Boat (1927) and My Darlin' Aida (1952) had seemed daring in presenting love affairs between white men and mulatto women, Kwamina took the

far bolder step of suggesting a relationship between a black man and a white woman. In this, there was not even the palliation of mixed blood to "excuse such a bond." Even more explosive was the authors' insistence upon an interracial romance involving a black male. Despite its distant African setting, Kwamina clearly was intended for an American audience, and that audience had yet to witness such a situation upon the musical stage. The sensitivity surrounding a liaison of this kind obviously is derived from two well-established schools of racist thought. The first would hold that a white man does the Negro race a favor by impregnating a black woman with sperm containing the genetic characteristics of a "superior" race--whereas the reverse is considered to be an unthinkable form of pollution.⁷⁶ The second has to do with what James Baldwin has called the white American male's "sexual paranoia,"⁷⁷ wherein the black man is thought to be "a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others."⁷⁸ Such a concept is well supported by psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs who state: "The black man occupies a very special sexual role in American society. He is seen as the ultimate in virility and masculine vigor."⁷⁹ In other words, he is a threat not only to the purity of white womanhood but to the white male's concept of his own

⁷⁶ Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Dark Symphony, ed. Emanuel and Gross, p. 160.

⁷⁷ James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), p. 151.

⁷⁸ James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," Nobody Knows My Name, p. 172.

⁷⁹ Grier and Cobbs, p. 73. (See also, pp. 159-60.)

maculinity.⁸⁰ It has been established that the character of the Negro male, as depicted upon the musical stage, consistently has been denied his sexual potency unless it has been associated with violence and crime."⁸¹ That this has been so even when the character of the female partner has been black only serves to illustrate the potentially dangerous territory which Kwamina sought to invade.

The question now arises as to how the authors handled their premise, and the answer is to be found largely in the characterization of Kwamina Mwalla. Pains are taken to dispel any popular notion of the African tribesman. Indeed, following ten years of medical study in London,⁸² Kwamina has absorbed Western manners and mores to the extent that he is less attuned than the white lady doctor to native ways. In a revealing bit of irony, Eve sarcastically derides Kwamina as follows:

I suppose you don't look as though you've just stepped out of a garden party in Mayfair. A lot you have in common with all of this.

Look at you! In your tailored clothes.
 From the looks of them they must have cost a packet.
 You are so—so Edwardian;
 Quite the dandy in your tacky little jacket.
 I really do admire
 Your Burberry attire.
 At least it makes you look a proper gent.
 From your trousers to your tie.
 No one could ever deny
 You're as English as the Duke of Kent. . . .⁸³

⁸⁰The American South's long history of sexually-motivated lynchings and castrations is well-documented. Should one doubt the validity of the theory that sexual jealousy remains at the very core of racism, John Hersey's vivid reconstruction of The Algiers Motel Incident (New York: Bantam Books, 1968) should prove illuminating.

⁸¹Supra, p. 206.

⁸²Susan M. Black, "Play Reviews," Theatre Arts, XLVI, No. 1 (January, 1962), p. 13.

⁸³Kwamina, Capitol Records, SW 1645, Side I, Band 5.

In this fashion, the cultural gap is immediately bridged. Add to this the fact that the refined and educated Kwamina is not only a qualified physician but also a prince who is destined to become the political leader of his nation, and one discovers an eminently eligible bachelor. Inasmuch as the only white male character in the cast is a thoroughly unpleasant "Kiplingesque British administrator who thinks all natives are called 'boy,'" ⁸⁴ it is not difficult to comprehend Eve's attraction toward Kwamina. ⁸⁵ The considerable virtues with which he has been invested represent a positive thrust in the delineation of Negro character upon the musical stage; however, Kwamina has been idealized to the extent that his fine qualities become a kind of apologetic justification for the interracial romance. It is as if Robert Alan Aurthur believed that audiences would be less horrified by the liaison if his black prince was a model of perfection who had mastered the niceties of Western ways. ⁸⁶ This leads to a portrayal of character which, although not infeasible, certainly is heavily weighted and highly romanticized.

Having proceeded this far, the authors lacked the courage of their convictions and became even more reserved in working out the details of the love affair. It has been said that "Kwamina decided to brave a White-Negro Romance and then got scared." ⁸⁷ As critic John

⁸⁴"News and Reviews; 'Kwamina,'" Show Business Illustrated, I, No. 8 (January 2, 1962), p. 17.

⁸⁵In Aurthur's synopsis, it is not made clear precisely what attributes Kwamina finds attractive in Eve. Perhaps her Caucasian lineage was considered to be sufficient.

⁸⁶Psychiatrists Grier and Cobbs contend that such an attitude is characteristic of (white) American culture: "People will really care less if the man is not a readily recognizable black. And even that will matter less if he is rich enough or powerful enough." (Black Rage, p. 159.)

⁸⁷Black, Theatre Arts, XLVI (January, 1962), p. 14.

McClain observed: "It seems to me that whenever the love story actually came to life the stage would darken, a great tribal hut would revolve into view, the stage would fill with shining black bodies and those booming drums would begin another of their primeval beats."⁸⁸ Indeed, from the moment romance threatens to blossom, the authors seek to reassure their audience that it is doomed from the start. The would-be lovers, therefore, are very much aware of the difficulties they face in challenging the prejudices of both races, and they acknowledge the fact that any relationship between them must impose keen restrictions. When Eve suggests that Kwamina drive her to the clinic, there is the following significant exchange, most of which is sung:

KWAMINA

I'm afraid I'd be caught out of bounds after curfew. I'd like to. I'd like to under different circumstances. But luxuries like that we're not permitted. No, they're for others. The lovely little things they do or say, the ordinary things they do each day--we're not permitted. No, they're for others.

Ordinary people can come and go;
Ordinary people can come and go.

EVE

Come and go, never stopped
By the rest of the ordinary people.
Lucky people:
Ordinary people have it all.
.

BOTH

Ordinary people can touch a star;
Ordinary people can touch a star.
Touch a star, choose a friend;
Might as well try the one as try the other.
That's the trouble:
Ordinary people have it all.

⁸⁸ John McClain, "A Rhythmic, Titanic But Dreary Musical," New York Journal American (October 24, 1961), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII, No. 19 (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 208.

Why can't we touch a star,
 Come and go and touch a star,
 Just as ordinary people do?
 Why can't we be
 Ordinary people, too?⁸⁹

The answer to the song's final question is that the authors will not permit them to be "ordinary people." Adler's lyrics present a strong plea for human tolerance, but Kwamina never really challenges intolerance; it merely bemoans it. Thus, the tepid lovers choose reason over passion and terminate their romance with anguished sentimentality.

EVE

Why can't we just be free to do as we wish?

KWAMINA

It can't be easy. Not the way things are.

EVE

If we could have met somewhere else or--or even five years from now.

Another time, another place;
 Somewhere behind the moon
 Way out in outer space.
 Another world would have to do;
 Another world where there is room
 For me and you.
 And we might find it
 If we could be
 On top of Everest
 Or miles beneath the sea.
 And you could hold me
 Forever in your embrace,
 Another time, another place.
 And I could love you
 As much as you would allow,
 But this is here
 And this is now.⁹⁰

In a production which had promised to be progressive and bold, these lyrics demonstrate that the authors were hesitant to proceed beyond the status quo. Perhaps it was felt that the characters were being only

⁸⁹Kwamina, Capitol Records, SW 1645, Side II, Band 3.

⁹⁰Ibid., Side II, Band 7.

practical by responding to an "impossible" situation in a realistic manner; however, the conclusion that one timidly should bear injustice while awaiting the dawn of a distant but rosy future is insipid, and it evades the central issue. As John McClain put it: "I did not think the story by Robert Alan Aurthur really came to grips with the problem, or the romance, for that matter."⁹¹

The details of the romance have not yet been described, yet they reveal the greatest amount of reticence in dealing with Kwamina's theoretically explosive premise. As lovers, Eve and Kwamina are revealed to be as antiseptic as the medical clinic in which they work. Geoffrey Holder⁹² has given the following account of the crucial scene:

The African Student Prince met up with the white lady (M.D.) with the penicillin. They had sung a duet from opposite sides of the stage in the segregated, separate-but-equal bush hospital. Finally, the moment neared for the touch. Prince Kwamina encounters White Lady Doctor Eve at stage center. She is not feeling well. He invites her into the native dispensary, where, with great medical daring, he makes so bold as to take her pulse. Just as the fine brown thumb touches the dainty white wrist, the music turns foreboding. From stage right stalks the British Governor General of the Colony. Without rhyme or reason, he lunges to the door of the dispensary, like the cuckold in a burlesque sketch looking under the bed. There are gasps all around. The characters thrash around like blind Oedipus Rexes.

"I was only taking her pulse," shouts the freedom-loving Student Prince.

Blackout. Musical crescendo. The stage is suddenly full of natives. All Africa is in turmoil.⁹³

Undoubtedly this scene was meant to be critical of irrational attitudes condemning interracial fraternization; however, Aurthur's overly

⁹¹McClain, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 208.

⁹²Mr. Holder is a black dancer-choreographer. It should be noted that he was offended by the production. His account, although sarcastic, is accurate.

⁹³Holder, Show, II (March, 1962), p. 95.

self-conscious approach to the miscegenation theme produced an effect which was less than positive. Indeed, it seems as if those responsible for Kwamina were somewhat shocked by their own idea. Had the lovers been allowed to display even one moment of natural passion, the romance might have called less attention to itself than it did in its squeamish and contrived misrepresentation of human desire. Throughout the musical Eve and Kwamina behave as if disinfectant were coursing through their veins. Susan M. Black reported that "the White M.D. and the Black M.D. embrace but never kiss; they talk about love, but shy away from the subject of marriage. On stage or off, too much tact is worse than none at all."⁹⁴ The result, of course, was that Kwamina Mwalla joined the musical theatre's seemingly endless parade of emasculated black heroes. Significantly, however, audiences in 1961 tended to yawn when confronted with such a timorous presentation of interracial attraction. As one critic put it, the black man and the white woman "embrace warmly a couple of times and nobody in the theatre seemed in any way impressed."⁹⁵ Thus, in its overly hesitant way, Kwamina may be said to have marked the end of sensitivity surrounding the theme of miscegenation on the musical stage. The decade produced four more works in which the subject of interracial love, and sex, was handled with complete frankness.

The love affair was not Kwamina's only topic, nor was it really Aurthur and Adler's major theme. Howard Taubman identified the authors' primary intention as follows: "They have attempted to dramatize in

⁹⁴Black, Theatre Arts, XLVI (January, 1962), p. 14.

⁹⁵Bill Slocum, "'Kwamina' Almost Makes It," New York Mirror (October 24, 1961), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII, No. 19 (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 208.

story and song the collision between past and present in a West African village. Their principal conflict is between the fetishism of tribal ways and the enlightenment of science and freedom."⁹⁶ That last sentence warrants close scrutiny, for both the author and the composer-lyricist have insisted upon the absolute superiority of democracy and the forces of modern progress in comparison with the absolute inferiority and foolishness of tribal custom. Their argument is not without validity;⁹⁷ however, it is presented in such overly-simplified terms as to provide some fascinatingly familiar concepts with regard to Negro characterization.

The villain of the piece is Obitsebi, the witch doctor. Although he is not intentionally evil, his reluctance to relinquish his position of power and the tenacity with which he clings to centuries of tradition create chaos. Obitsebi's deterministic philosophy is clearly enunciated in song as follows:

A man can have no choice.
He cannot choose his path.
And if he does, then he must know
That he will feel the wrath
Of the spirits on the mountain
And the gods in the sky,
From the bones of our ancestors
Who can name the day we die. . . .⁹⁸

⁹⁶Howard Taubman, "Theatre: Musical About Africa Opens," New York Times (October 24, 1961), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII, No. 19 (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 207.

⁹⁷At the very beginning of Kwamina it is made clear that modern medical science is to be considered more reliable than the healing power of voodoo charms, and one would be hard-pressed to disagree. Likewise, the idea is accepted that human sacrifice is not a practice characteristic of an enlightened society.

⁹⁸Kwamina, Capitol Records, SW 1645, Side II, Band 4.

Such beliefs obviously are opposed to the concept of individual freedom --as represented by the plight of Kwamina and Eve--and, on a broader scale, are opposed to the policy of national freedom as the country wins its independence from British rule. Thus, Obitsebi, who feeds upon the superstitions he promotes among his tribesmen, assumes the position of the major antagonist. Interestingly, it is the innocent lovers, Ako and Naii, who are punished most severely, apparently the victims of a fetishistic ritual led by Obitsebi. In this manner, the barbarism of tribal ways is condemned, and the witch doctor emerges as a stubborn and misguided being whose refusal to abandon primitive beliefs results in unwarranted violence. In the absence of a complete libretto, it is perhaps unfair to suggest that the character of a fetish man, with his sorcery and charms, was a less than imaginative means of establishing the conflict central to Kwamina's thesis. It safely can be said, however, that such a familiar and facile device excused the authors from delving into the complexities of an alien culture--complexities which might have helped to explain and justify its departures from Western behavior and religious beliefs.

Collectively, the African natives portrayed in Kwamina fared just as poorly. Early in the first act, Kwamina expresses contempt for the white man's generalities concerning black Africans:

They all think we're like children:
Attracted to bright colors,
Who dance more than walk
And sing more than talk.⁹⁹

Committed, as Susan M. Black observed, to disprove that prevailing image, the production then proceeded to show "African after African

⁹⁹Ibid., Side I, Band 4.

continually dancing, singing and acting childish."¹⁰⁰ Another critic remarked that, with the exception of the principals, nobody "ever seems to just walk. They all undulate about the stage."¹⁰¹ For the ensemble dances, Agnes de Mille's choreography was described as being based "not on ethnology but on excitement of movement and communication of atmosphere."¹⁰² Miss de Mille, herself, has indicated that she knew nothing about Africa and designed her dances instinctively--according to what she "felt" was correct.¹⁰³ Although her work generally was admired, one review called it "festoons of orchestrated epilepsy, passed off as authentic African dance."¹⁰⁴ Material contained in the original cast recording sheds even greater insight. Richard Adler provided six group numbers for the natives, only two of which dealt directly with tribal life and customs.¹⁰⁵ Designed to provide comic relief, these were: "Seven Sheep, Four Red Shirts, and a Bottle of Gin" and "One Wife." Significantly, both examined tribal sexual mores. An extremely casual attitude toward adultery is expressed in the former, while the native women sing the praises of polygamy in the latter:

¹⁰⁰Black, Theatre Arts, XLVI (January, 1962), p. 14.

¹⁰¹Slocum, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 208.

¹⁰²Taubman, in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 207.

¹⁰³Gilbert Millstein, "Theatre Arts Gallery: Agnes de Mille," Theatre Arts, XLV, No. 10 (October, 1961), pp. 14-15.

¹⁰⁴"News and Reviews: 'Kwamina,'" Show Business Illustrated, I, No. 8 (January 2, 1962), p. 17.

¹⁰⁵The other four included one atmospheric work song and three songs of celebration. Excluded from the recording were Adler's compositions for three major ballets: "Mammy Traders," "Naii's Nuptial Dance," and "Fetish."

One wife, one wife:
 Very sad if you are only one wife.
 Only one to clean the hut,
 One to cut the coconut,
 And only one to share the sleeping mat at night.
 Very bad, very bad. Very sad!
 Anyone who wants it must be mad.
 Anyone who wants to be just one wife is mad. . . .¹⁰⁶

The emphasis placed upon the sexual aspects of village life, all presented in gently comic terms, produces a familiar collective portrait in which the natives are rendered as being exotically different--quaint, irrepressible, and childlike.

For a production which had promised so much, Kwamina delivered little in the way of Negro characterization that was new. For all the authors' good intentions, a nagging spirit of paternalism persists in the means of character delineation. Still, even though Aurthur and Adler did not succeed, their portrait of a people "facing ancient problems which cannot be solved just by uttering the word 'freedom,'" and their idea of a nation wherein "age-old customs and superstitions cannot be erased by proclamation,"¹⁰⁷ provided thoughtful and thought-provoking material. In spirit, if not in execution, Kwamina may be said to have been a fitting beginning for Negro-oriented musicals of the 1960's.

Fly Blackbird

If Kwamina was a lavish production whose socially significant aims were marred by its solemn tone and overly cautious approach, then

¹⁰⁶ Kwamina, Capitol Records, SW 1645, Side II, Band 6.

¹⁰⁷ John Chapman, "'Kwamina' Brave Opera-Ballet," New York Daily News (October 24, 1961), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1961, XXII, No. 19 (Week of October 30, 1961), p. 206.

Fly Blackbird may be considered its direct opposite. Produced with simplicity off-Broadway in 1962, Fly Blackbird took a very timely and extremely witty look at the student-oriented, nonviolent racial demonstrations with which the decade had begun.¹⁰⁸ Should this seem a somewhat unlikely subject for a sprightly musical romp, it will be noted that the show was mounted prior to the Birmingham riots and the backlash of white opinion.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the authors had the wisdom to place the action in a northern city, for it has been pointed out that in 1962 "it would hardly be possible to stage a lark about integration against a Dixie backgrop."¹¹⁰ The result was an impudent and often devastating satire on the nature of American race relations. The product of an interracial collaboration by C. Jackson and James Hatch,¹¹¹ Fly Blackbird "was intended to appeal to black audiences particularly";¹¹² nevertheless, its great good humor, the mockery in its message, the vitality of a young and exuberant cast, and the bounce of its musical numbers all combined to receive enthusiastic acclaim from the critics.¹¹³ Staged by Jerome Eskow, and with an

¹⁰⁸Supra, pp. 360-61.

¹⁰⁹Supra, pp. 361-62.

¹¹⁰Robert Hatch, "Theatre," Nation, CLXXXIV (March 3, 1962), p. 201.

¹¹¹Mr. Jackson is a Negro; Mr. Hatch is Caucasian. At the time, both were members of the U.C.L.A. faculty.

¹¹²William R. Reardon, The Black Teacher and the Drama, Report on an Institute in Repertory Theatre operated under a grant from the U.S. Office of Education for potential teachers of disadvantaged youth in cooperation with the Department of Dramatic Art at the University of California, Santa Barbara (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1968).

¹¹³Because of its off-Broadway status, Fly Blackbird was not widely reviewed.

integrated company featuring Avon Long, Robert Guillaume, Mary Louise, Michael Kermoyan, and Helen Blount, Fly Blackbird found a comfortable home at the Mayfair Theatre in mid-Manhattan. By off-Broadway standards its modest run may be considered respectable, and there is little doubt that the musical enjoyed the enthusiastic support of white and black patrons alike, for its message applied to both.

Fly Blackbird is deliberately loosely structured, its simple plot being a mere framework within which to score satiric points. The first act opens with what appears to be an ancient rite but is, in fact, the elaborate ceremony of a black fraternal order. Sweet William Piper, a retired entertainer who had gained fame and fortune in stereotyped motion picture roles, is being installed as the Master Caribou of his lodge. He expresses his gratitude and remarks, in song, that "Everything Comes to Those Who Wait." It is Piper's firm conviction that responsible behavior and perpetual patience ultimately bring deserved rewards, and he points with pride to the example of his daughter, Josie, whom he has managed to enroll at prestigious Sarah Lawrence College where she is head of her class. When Josie arrives to congratulate her father, she is introduced to Carl Eldridge, a college student majoring in Political Science. He succeeds in offending Josie by mocking her father's belief in gradual change and insisting that the time for social reform has arrived--even if it needs a little push.

The following day, Carl and an interracial group of his fellow students hold an informal rally in the park where Officer Jonsen, a kindly black policeman, warns that their enthusiasm could lead to a charge of disturbing the peace. Nevertheless, they proceed with plans

to organize into a political action protest group. They are interrupted by Sidney Crocker, a middle-aged white bigot, who strides on-stage from the audience and editorializes to the effect that he is "Sick of the Whole Damn Problem." Piper arrives and it is revealed that he and Crocker not only are friends of long standing, but that the two agree about the racial situation. After they have left, Josie appears and apologizes to Carl for her curt behavior the previous day. The students proceed to educate the refined Josie with regard to the practical aspects of racial discrimination; however, their mockery becomes too exuberant, and all are arrested. In an effort to frustrate the process of being booked, each student gives "Blackbird" as his surname, and the group is locked up for the night.

At the police station, we are introduced to Matron Jonsen, a middle-aged white woman who bears the unconscious racial prejudices of her southern upbringing. In conversation with black Officer Jonsen, it is discovered not only that these two were born in the same small town but that they have a great-grandfather in common. This bit of information leads each toward frantic speculation. A contemplative Matron Jonsen drifts off into a fantasy of black-white relations which comprises the bulk of the second act. Her dream encompasses both past and present and is cast in the form of a medicine show. Sidney Crocker reappears as the huckster of a love elixer designed to cure the racial ills of the world. One sip and the Negro conforms to the old minstrelsy image of himself: obsequious and grinning. An effort to transform the angry Carl into Uncle Tom backfires, however, and Crocker's docile black supporters turn militantly against him. Because his time has come, Crocker is symbolically buried alive; Piper, his faithful servant, is

entombed beside him. The fantasy fades into the following morning, whereupon the students are released. A transformed Josie exultantly tells her father that she will join Carl and the students in their fledgling protest movement. When Piper attempts to dissuade her, Josie calls him a fool, and he is left alone to examine the very course of his life. Led by Carl and Josie, the now fully organized students begin their march, calling upon the audience to "Wake Up" and respond to the need for social reform.

The characters who people this thesis musical are not dimensionalized; rather, each represents a specific position either for or against racial integration. Inasmuch as biographical details would tend only to cloud the central issue, the authors have not bothered to invent any beyond the most superficial. Consequently, the characters emerge full-blown as immediately recognizable types. The students constitute a mass protagonist whose ideals are presumed to be right. Save for Josie, who vacillates somewhat colorlessly, the remaining characters are, by virtue of wealth or authoritative position, middle-aged members of the so-called "Establishment." They are shown to be wrong and, to varying degrees, act as the musical's antagonists. Thus, the racial point is made not in terms of black against white, but in terms of right against wrong--the former being equated with innovation, the latter with tradition. It is a clash of values which Fly Blackbird records, and its virtue is that it manages to be meaningful by employing scathing satire rather than preachment.

The students represent an educated and singularly well-informed group which is comprised largely of blacks, but with a sprinkling of whites and one Japanese-American. When they first burst upon the stage

in the second scene of Act I, it is clear that these students are united by their concern for, and insistence upon, immediate social change.

Led by Carl, their goal is stated in song with absolute directness:

CARL

If there's a job, I want a chance to earn a decent living. . . .
If there's a school, I want the best education I can get. . . .
If there's a house for rent, don't tell me "sorry but we don't
rent to colored." . . . It makes me mad! . . .

We've waited two hundred years or more
But the time is drawing near
When we will stand up and say--
Today is the day!

GROUP

The time is here!
Now! Not another hour
Now! Not another day
Now! Not a minute longer but now!¹¹⁴

This is the zeal of youthful idealism, and it is consistent with the spirit of the early civil rights demonstrations during the first years of the decade.¹¹⁵ Inasmuch as the students' complaint is born of generations of racial injustice, the demand for immediate reform would appear to be an impossibility--especially in view of the limited resources at their disposal. As Josie dryly observes: "Now, seriously. What were you doing out there in the park? The signs, that whole bit? Did you really think anybody would pay attention?"¹¹⁶ The answer is in

¹¹⁴C. B. Jackson and James Hatch, Fly Blackbird, in The Black Teacher and the Dramatic Arts: A Dialogue, Bibliography, and Anthology, ed. William R. Reardon and Thomas D. Pawley (Westport, Connecticut: Negro University Press, 1970), pp. 148-50. Cited hereafter as Fly Blackbird.

This writer gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Department of Dramatic Art, University of California at Santa Barbara, which, for purposes of research, generously made available a copy of the unpublished typescript of Fly Blackbird prior to the publication of the above volume.

¹¹⁵Supra, pp. 359-62.

¹¹⁶Fly Blackbird, p. 191.

the affirmative, for, as Carl passionately points out, theirs is a people's movement which will not be quelled: "All of us nobodies are beginning to think we're somebody. All of us nobodies all over the world beginning to push out our chests a little bit and sayin', 'Hey! Look at me!' For the first time in our lives, startin' to talk above a whisper."¹¹⁷ Thus, coupled with the sense of urgency, there is a powerful and very definite element of hope. It is with this spirit of assurance--of faith that together they can surmount the most forbidding obstacles--that the imprisoned young people conclude the first act. Led by Carl and Palmer in a spiritual-tinged chorale entitled "Rivers to the South," the students sing their poetic and urgent vision of what must come. Rich in imagery and metaphor, the lyrics follow in part:

PALMER

Little drops of rain fall from the branches,
form a pool at the bottom of a tree.

CARL

The pool flows into the babbling brook,
The brook flows into the stream.

GROUP

Then the stream plunges down the side
of the mountain into the river,
filling the river.

PALMER

I have seen the mighty rivers of the South
filled to the brim by a driving rain.¹¹⁸

Quite obviously, "Rivers to the South" is a stirring call to activism, but it is not a call to arms. Fly Blackbird's students may be said to

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 192.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 194.

be the musical theatre's first contemporary black activists;¹¹⁹ however, the "revolution" which they envision is intended to be persuasive but peaceful.

Although frustration and dissatisfaction are evident, it is significant to note the absence of outright hostility or hatred on the part of the students. Save for the fantasy sequence which will be considered separately,¹²⁰ the students tend to avoid direct confrontation with their antagonists.¹²¹ Instead, redress is to be found in ridicule and a brand of humor that is self-directed but ultimately ricochets to find its appropriate target. For example Big Betty, a flippant and high-spirited coed whose idea of action is far from political, refers to "C.P. Time" which, when translated, means Colored People's Time--"just a little bit behind everybody else."¹²² Similarly, when it is revealed that Tag possesses an intelligence quotient above 172, there is the following exchange:

TAG

And Officer, that's white man's IQ, measured by his language, his culture, and his words...

OFFICER JONSEN

Then your Negro IQ must be over 200.¹²³

¹¹⁹ See the character analysis of Adam Brown, supra, pp. 292-94.

¹²⁰ Infra, pp. 409-15.

¹²¹ Piper is tolerated, but his beliefs and his film career are mocked in his absence. Crocker is frankly ignored during his first act tirade, and the technique of dissembling is employed for the benefit of Matron Jonsen and a white policeman.

¹²² Fly Blackbird, p. 153.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 152.

"The Housing Cha-Cha" provides more of the same. The subject of this musical number is housing discrimination, and in the following spoken lines the students envision, with caustic wit, their reception as new residents in a wealthy white community:

(Gail [a white student] assumes sunbather's pose, starts lathering up with suntan oil.)

BETTY

(To Gail) Hello!

GAIL

Oh, how d'you do.

TAG

Mind if we share your sunshine?

GAIL

Not at all. (Noting their complexion) Oh, how marvelous. Sea and Ski?

BETTY AND TAG

Heredity! (Gail screams.)¹²⁴

Fly Blackbird is liberally sprinkled with this sort of humor which the students employ as an in-group mockery of those who would discriminate against Negroes. Because we know the students to be so well-informed, their self-directed ethnic jokes serve to comment ironically upon the prejudiced mentality which clings so desperately to a belief in inferior stereotypes. It is a humor which proceeds directly from the frustration of Carl's cry, "Hey! Look at me!,"¹²⁵ and it requires us to cease generalizing about racial characteristics. Undoubtedly it is for this reason that much of the remaining humor derives from a complete reversal of standard procedures, thereby rendering Fly Blackbird, as one critic

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 171.

¹²⁵Supra, p. 397.

thoughtfully observed, "an inverse minstrel show performed by stereotyped whites before enlightened Negroes."¹²⁶

The most blatant white stereotype is, not surprisingly, the villain of the piece: Sidney Crocker, a businessman in his mid-fifties.¹²⁷ Master of the non sequitur and a hypocrite par excellence, Crocker represents a threat by virtue of the shocking state of his mind. Having observed the students' protest rally, he quickly interrupts it and addresses the audience directly:

CROCKER

What are they complaining about? (Indicating frozen figures of Students) We're living in the richest country in the world. We've never had it so good. You know, that's the whole damned trouble with people. They're never satisfied. No matter how much they have, they always want more.

Let's look at the facts. I'm a businessman and I like to see things down in black and white. Now the average income in the United States is about five thousand dollars a year. The average for the Negro is two to three thousand. I realize that's below what you and I make, but remember...it's considerably above the average for the hemisphere. . . .

I'm sick of the whole damn problem.
The whole damn thing has gotten out of hand.
I can't bear another syllable on the subject.
I've had about as much...as I can stand.

It's driving me insane
Driving me mad
I simply can't believe the situation is that bad!

What the heck
Do they expect?
They're still a whole lot better off than many on
this earth.

.

Now, don't get me wrong.
I don't have a prejudiced bone in my body.
That's a fact in which I've always taken pride.

¹²⁶ John Simon, "Play Reviews," Theatre Arts, XLVI, No. 5 (May, 1962), p. 62.

¹²⁷ Fly Blackbird, p. 138.

I don't care if you're short, tall, fat, or lean,
 black, brown, red, or green...
 Just as long as you're...white inside! . . .¹²⁸

In this monologue and song, all of Crocker's personality is revealed. His very sense of self is measured in terms of money and material possessions; therefore, he is reluctant to witness the rise of others to his level of success. For this reason, the students' demand for equal rights is repugnant to Crocker, for it threatens his sense of security. The Negro, then, must be kept in his "proper" place. In order to live with himself, Crocker justifies his opposition with rationalizations and invidious comparisons. Despite his strongly professed racial tolerance, the depth of his prejudice is made obvious not only in the remark about being white inside, but by his constant reference to Negroes as "they." It is Crocker's belief that white is superior, and any challenge to the status quo is to be met with resistance. Significantly, however, he will associate with a Negro--so long as that Negro is eminently respectable, behaves himself, and caters to Crocker's lofty opinion of himself. Such is his relationship with the conservative William Piper who cautiously reinforces Crocker's cherished beliefs. Piper's unassuming ways and his own aversion to the activism of the protest movement lead Crocker to an observation that is heavily tinged with unconscious irony: "You know, Bill, if there were more people like you, there wouldn't be any Negro problem."¹²⁹ If such were the case, one might more accurately say that the Negro problem would not be made evident to the affluent Crocker, and his conscience would not be troubled

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. 157-59.

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 160.

with facts that are not to his liking. As a smug representative of the ostrich school of reality, Sidney Crocker is revealed to be a collection of irrational prejudices realized in terms of caricature. The transparency of his attitude renders him ludicrously comic and a wonderful target for derision as "the man you love to hate."¹³⁰

As a white man who prefers order to justice, Sidney Crocker is condemned; however, he is not meant to represent all whites, nor is he made to assume the burden of guilt alone. Sweet William Piper also receives his share of well-deserved criticism. Obviously, Piper represents his race collectively no more than Crocker does his. Both are types, broadly drawn, but Piper profits from a slightly more dimensionalized presentation which serves to make his behavior understandable, even though it is to be denounced. Nevertheless, he, like Crocker, must be seen as an antagonistic social force which obstructs the students' goals of immediate recognition and reform.

Ironically, William Piper and the students share the common objectives of integration, acceptance, and equality of opportunity. They differ sharply, however, about the means whereby to accomplish those ends. Whereas the students would march in protest of racial discrimination, Piper would achieve integration by means of ingratiation:

PIPER AND GROUP

There's a right way and there's a wrong
in everything you do.
You can catch more flies with honey...

¹³⁰Robert Hatch, "Album Notes," Fly Blackbird, Mercury Records, OCM 2206.

PIPER

Than by shootin' off your mouth
 at the wrong times and places,
 wavin' those signs in people's faces. . . .¹³¹

Such a tactic has proved successful for Piper, but his victory essentially is a hollow one. It is true that he has attained fame and fortune, but he has done so at the expense of compromising himself by appearing in a long list of Hollywood films in such comic roles as the bumbling African servant, the lazy railroad porter, and the tap dancing janitor.¹³² Piper's resulting affluence has enabled him to provide for his daughter many opportunities designed to assure her entree into the social mainstream. In this fashion, Piper projects upon Josie his own frustrated ambitions, but his self-delusion is made apparent when, at the end, Josie recognizes the fact that the refinements of a Sarah Lawrence education will not magically solve the fundamental problem of racism.

Unfortunately, Piper fails to differentiate between acceptability and acceptance, and he places far too great an emphasis upon the tokenism of white society. Being the first man of his race to be extended an honorary membership in a white fraternal order, Piper's pronouncement to his black lodge brothers that "we have finally arrived"¹³³ is at once foolish and pathetic. Not even a considerable bank balance can achieve for Piper the equality which he seeks. When Crocker offers to drive him to a casually mentioned destination, there is the following delightful and penetrating conversation:

¹³¹Fly Blackbird, p. 164.

¹³²The students perform incisive satires of Piper's films which they have seen on television (Fly Blackbird, pp. 165-67).

¹³³Fly Blackbird, p. 145.

PIPER

Is that your Cadillac parked over there?

CROCKER

(Modestly) Yeah, the black one.

PIPER

A beautiful car. 1968, isn't it? . . . Well, that's my Cadillac parked beside yours.

CROCKER

The white one?...Side by side. Well, we'll both drive. Separate but equal!

PIPER

But mine's a '69. (Crocker does a take.)¹³⁴

Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier has stated:

One of the chief frustrations of the middle-class Negro is that he cannot escape identification with the Negro race and consequently is subject to the contempt of whites. Despite his "wealth" in which he has placed so much faith as a solvent of racial discrimination, he is still subject to daily insults and is excluded from participation in white American society.¹³⁵

As a man who has sought to purchase an acceptance which is forthcoming only upon the most superficial levels, Sweet William Piper would appear to be a classic example of Frazier's black bourgeois.

Although the epithet is never employed, it is indisputable that, in the popular parlance, William Piper is an "Uncle Tom." Quoting a Negro source, J. C. Furnas contends that, in its contemporary usage, the term "Uncle Tom" connotes "'a weakling or a coward, a traitor, a wily manipulator, one who engineers a race sell-out or one who for any reason failed to "speak up" for his race at an important point.'"¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Ibid., pp. 160-61. (The automobiles' year models have been updated for publication.)

¹³⁵ E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 184-85.

¹³⁶ Furnas, p. 9.

In the opinion of the students, Piper's career in motion pictures amounts to a betrayal of his race, for he is accused of having participated in films which perpetuated a derogatory image of the Negro.¹³⁷ Beyond this, there is the argument against Piper's complacency and his collusion with the likes of Crocker in opposing the students' right to protest. "I know these kids can be annoying," Piper remarks, "but take my word for it, it's just a passing phase that everybody'll have forgotten in a few months."¹³⁸ From the point of view of the students, such apathy is deplorable, and Piper's philosophy anent the virtues of waiting is regarded as being not only unrealistic but detrimental to the cause of the Negro people.

Despite the criticism leveled at him, the authors succeed in making Piper something of a sympathetic character. It is stressed that he belongs to an older generation for which the very thought of open dissent would have proved dangerous, indeed. Piper's advice to the students demonstrates that he is fully aware of the obsequious role that he has chosen to play as a means of attainment in a discriminatory society. When Josie calls him a fool, Piper suffers a private moment in which he justifies his lifelong behavior but also concedes, at last, that the new generation is entitled to its own brand of struggle. His musical soliloquy, entitled "Who's the Fool?," follows in part:

PIPER

They're doing things so differently.
Who's the fool...them or me?

¹³⁷There are no speeches to this effect; however, the students' mockery of Piper's films effectively makes the point (Fly Blackbird, pp. 165-67).

¹³⁸Fly Blackbird, p. 159.

They think they've got the world by the tail.
 Think they're gonna change things overnight.
 Well, that's all right with me.
 I've done things differently myself.

 Yes. I've shuffled.
 I had to.
 Shuffled high, shuffled low.
 Shuffled fast, shuffled slow.
 But I shuffled my daughter
 right through one of the finest schools in the country
 so she'll never have to shuffle for anybody...
 white or black.

 Look at 'em!
 Proud, handsome,
 with that "bow to no man" kinda walk.
 Go on! Sing your song of sixpence.
 I've sung mine.
 Everybody has to pay the Piper...some way.

 They're doing things so differently.
 Who's the fool...them or me?¹³⁹

There is poignancy here as well as compassion for a man who has found it necessary to humble himself in order to achieve sufficient social status to become polite society's token Negro. There is also practicality in Piper's recognition that the "blackbirds" will necessarily sing their "song of sixpence" in terms of pain and sacrifice as they encounter the inevitable resistance to their goal. Nevertheless, because Piper, himself, has resisted the urgency of the youthful protest movement so as not to have his own comfortable world upset, the authors provide an answer to his question, "Who's the Fool?" The finale, which immediately follows his song, is an appeal to all the Pipers of the world, as well as all the Crockers, to:

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 227-28.

Wake up!
 The dawn is coming.
 Rise up!
 Sleep no more.
 Stand up!
 Meet the morning.
 There's a new day waiting at your door.¹⁴⁰

If, at this point, Fly Blackbird's message and social criticism begin to seem a trifle labored, one hastens to stress that this musical is nearly always fast-paced and genuinely funny. Contributing richly to the humor is a highly improbable and delightfully silly sub-plot which lampoons the heretofore somber subject of a racially divided heritage. Gone are the tragic mulattoes of Show Boat and My Darlin' Aida; in their places stand a black police officer and a white police matron--both from Natchitoches, Louisiana, of approximately the same age, and both named Jonsen! Officer Jonsen is only barely sketched in as an average human being, happy to have escaped the racial climate of the South. The focus here is upon the broadly caricatured matron whose "tolerance" of the Negro is belied by her efforts to "understand" him. She devours such literary efforts as Little Black Sambo and Uncle Remus in the Briar Patch,¹⁴¹ but her major accomplishment is to be found in an acquired appreciation of the melodies of Stephen Foster. The latter occasions a typically giddy encounter between the officer and the matron:

MATRON

That was Stephen Foster. (Jonsen grimaces.) Y'all oughtn't to be ashamed of yoah heritage. . . . You should be proud of yoah past.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 229-30.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 183.

JONSEN

What's Stephen Foster got to do with my past?

MATRON

It's all here in this book--The Nigrah and You. . . . It says Stephen Foster was one of the best friends the Nigrah ever had. Why, he wrote hundreds of beautiful songs glorifyin' the people of yoah race. Oh, I can just see him...sittin' in the big house on the plantation, his loyal and beloved slaves clustered around his feet...listenin' to the songs he wrote for them...and for you...

JONSEN

Sorry...but I don't like Stephen Foster.

MATRON

If you don't like Stephen Foster, you must be a bitter man.¹⁴²

Given Matron Jonsen's fondness for shallow generalities and her condescending attitude toward the Negro, the discovery that she and Officer Jonsen are related predictably sends her into a state of shock. Even though the great-grandfather whom they have in common bore the distinctive Danish name, Helgar Aksel Jonsen, one look at Officer Jonsen's complexion is sufficient to convince the matron that he must have been black. Conversely, Officer Jonsen is equally certain that he must have been white. When it is learned that, according to Louisiana statutes, a single drop of Negro blood establishes one as being legally a Negro, the matron faints. In a happy comic reversal designed to point out the inanity of negative attitudes toward persons of mixed descent, a horrified Officer Jonsen concludes, by virtue of the same logic, that he is white. "How am I going to tell my wife?,"¹⁴³ he wails. In song, the officer and the matron bemoan their ill fortune with considerable exaggeration:

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 200.

JONSEN

There's nothing more worth living for
when you find you're neither nor.

MATRON

I can see the surprise
In everybody's eyes
when they discover that I'm Nature's little
compromise!

MATRON AND JONSEN

We're all alone
in the Twilight Zone!¹⁴⁴

Their dilemma produces a series of broadly satirical gags,¹⁴⁵ but it is resolved simply enough with Officer Jonsen's advice to the matron:

"It's going to be all right. I talked it over with my wife, and she says since I've been passing as a Negro all these years I might as well just go on doing that...and I guess you oughta do the same."¹⁴⁶ The absurdity of this little sub-plot thus effectively lays to rest the flagrant melodramatics of the tragic mulatto theme, for the subject of a racially divided heritage does not appear on the musical stage for the remainder of the decade.

Matron Jonsen's assumption that her blood may be tinged with that notorious little drop of "midnight" leads her to a greater awareness of the Negro as a human being and of the effect upon him of (white) racist behavior. Her newly acquired insight prompts the second act's bizarre fantasy sequence in which the matron is radicalized in support of the students' cause. It is in this segment of Fly Blackbird that

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁴⁵For example, the following conversation: "MATRON: There's nothing in the world so beautiful as colored people singing. JONSEN: You oughta know." (Fly Blackbird, p. 197).

¹⁴⁶Fly Blackbird, p. 224.

the authors' message is most forcefully stated, for the matron's vision at last brings the opposing forces into direct confrontation. The principal characters are those whom we already have met, but their attitudes are carried to the logical extremes. There is no mincing of words here; Sidney Crocker's hearty hypocrisy turns evil, and the activist students--represented by Carl and Palmer--become openly hostile. The humor remains rich, but it is not intended that the laughter it elicits should be carefree or even good-natured. Under the surface there is resentment, and the desired responses are recognition and agreement. Given the greater latitude afforded by fantasy and presentational style, the authors present a scathing indictment of American race relations.

In the matron's dream, Sidney Crocker, "dressed in a white top hat and tails,"¹⁴⁷ becomes Doctor Crocker, the purveyor of a Love Elixir which he claims "can cure the ills of an agonized soul, a tempest-tossed mind, an...aching heart."¹⁴⁸ His enthusiastic assistant is William Piper, costumed as a circus barker. Both are supported by the Crocker Boys and Girls--formerly students but now dressed in colorful turn-of-the-century garb. They comprise a cheerful chorus which eagerly attests to the efficacy of the Love Elixir. The racial conflict is initiated when, in the middle of Dr. Crocker's spiel, a contemporarily clad Palmer addresses him from the audience. There is the following significant exchange:

¹⁴⁷Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 204.

CROCKER

...Ah, my colored friend. Come a little closer please. (Palmer hesitates.) Do you have trouble with your white neighbors?

PALMER

Yeah, Mister...the trouble is...I don't have any!

CROCKER

What's your name, boy?

PALMER

Boy.

CROCKER

All right, Boy, if you'll come up here...

PALMER

Hey..wait a minute. That's MISTER Boy!

CROCKER

Mister Boy. . . . Come, Mister Boy. Come now, there's nothing to be afraid of...why, some of my best friends are colored people.

PALMER

All my best friends are colored people.

CROCKER

The Elixir can change that!¹⁴⁹

When Palmer is induced to consume the Love Elixir, his aggressive manner vanishes, and he is transformed into a grinning minstrelsy type in bright overalls. At this point, as Palmer happily shines Dr. Crocker's shoes, the hateful purpose of the Love Elixir becomes evident, and Crocker celebrates its effectiveness in song:

CROCKER

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.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 204-05.

He's got to be pacified!
 He's got to be dominated!
 He's got to be willin' to do what I tell him to
 'cause this is the order that God created.

 Now I realize that the colored man
 hasn't always been treated right.
 But I can guarantee Equality...
 If we separate black from white!¹⁵⁰

When, at the conclusion of the song, Crocker announces to the audience that he has shown "what love can do,"¹⁵¹ the bewildered matron remarks: "Love? That's got nothing to do with love!"¹⁵² The remainder of the fantasy concerns itself with the militant black response to that assertion. It, too, has nothing to do with love.

In cold fury, Carl bursts from the audience and leaps onto the stage where he quickly gains the matron's support in defiance of Crocker. Agreeing that "violence is no solution,"¹⁵³ Carl and the matron--who now prefers to be known as Matron Blackbird--seat themselves at stage center. This action gives rise to Fly Blackbird's most succinct endorsement of nonviolent direct action techniques as employed in the struggle for civil rights:

CROCKER

Will you get that cotton-pickin' bench out of the way so we can go on with the show! (Carl and Matron ignore him.) Boy, if you just want to sit...

CARL

(Correcting him) Sit...in!

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 207-09.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 211. (Inasmuch as the Crocker Boys have just physically restrained Carl with a considerable show of force, the phrase becomes bromidic when uttered by Crocker.)

CROCKER

Why don't you do as everyone else does and sit in the audience.

MATRON

I've spent my whole life sitting out in the audience. Sitting out there is like...(Gropes for the word.)

CARL

Sitting still. (Matron nods happily.) But sitting-in is like moving!¹⁵⁴

Here is a very clear call for activism in support of the Negro, and it is directed to the audience. With this understood, the tempo accelerates--as does Carl's hostility. Having promised to sing an old plantation song for Crocker, Carl reverses the "Old Black Joe" stereotype and, in "Old White Tom," delivers a blistering attack upon the notion of white supremacy:

CARL

Old White Tom he went along through life...
 Thinkin' he was better than the black man,
 Thinkin' he was better than the red man,
 Better than the yellow man.
 Hot damn!
 This is the song of Old White Tom,
 who didn't realize his time had come.

 Now the old folks say that when Tom was born
 the devil stood by his side...
 and the very first words he was heard to say
 were: "The Devil's gonna be my guide!"
 Little Tommy let out a yell
 "Devil take my soul, because I'm ready to roll.
 I'm gonna give these black folks hell!"

CARL

(Tenderly)

The stars had never shone for Tom.
 The sun had never shined.
 One day lightning struck
 and gosh darn the luck...
 it turned Tom...color blind!

¹⁵⁴Fly Blackbird, pp. 211-13.

CROCKER BOYS AND GIRLS
 (Sadly)
 Nearly drove him outta his...
 (Breaking into a broad smile)
 ...mind!¹⁵⁵

The humor here is genuinely sardonic, and in an earlier decade the lyrics would have been considered positively inflammatory. Even in 1962 the song may have been considered daring, for it provided the first occasion upon the musical stage in which audiences were expected to react positively, and without reservation, to the suggestion that the white racist could be equated with the devil.¹⁵⁶ Such an assertion is somewhat tempered by being presented within the realm of fantasy, yet it is meant to be taken seriously. In this manner, the dream sequence moves inexorably toward its inevitable climax. If "Old White Tom" does not know that his time has come, Carl and the students will inform him--and that includes "Uncle Tom" Piper as well. Moved to anger by Crocker's attempted humiliation of Carl,¹⁵⁷ the Crocker Boys and Girls reassume their original identities with cries of protest: "No more auction block for me!"; "No more! No more!"; "We shall overcome some day!"¹⁵⁸ Reprising the chorus of "Old White Tom," the students, led by Carl, conduct the symbolic burials of Crocker and Piper. The ludicrous comes into play as the gravestones are set into place, each "designed like the

¹⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 214-16. (A hearing of this song, and of "Mister Boy," is deemed necessary; the reader is referred to the original cast recording, Mercury Records, OCM 2206.)

¹⁵⁶Supra, p. 363.

¹⁵⁷The Love Elixir briefly transforms Carl into a shuffling and pathetic representation of Uncle Tom (Fly Blackbird, pp. 220-22).

¹⁵⁸Fly Blackbird, pp. 221-22.

front end of a new Cadillac"¹⁵⁹--black and white, respectively.¹⁶⁰

This is a stunning moment and a very strong statement, but it is not to be considered an expression of black racism. No hatred is directed toward the collective white man; rather, this is the burial of outmoded ideas and attitudes. The meaning, the social protest, is both forceful and unmistakable.

Considering the subject of the Negro student movement, James Baldwin wrote in 1961 as follows:

This movement, I believe, will prove to be the last attempt made by American Negroes to achieve acceptance in the republic, to force the country to honor its own ideals. The movement does not have as its goal the consumption of over-cooked hamburgers and tasteless coffee at various sleazy lunch counters. . . . The goal of the student movement is nothing less than the liberation of the entire country from its most crippling attitudes and habits.¹⁶¹

Fly Blackbird may be said to have been a timely and accurate translation of Baldwin's evaluation, rendered in the language of America's musical theatre. Its positive portrayal of a group of proud, courageous, and defiant black young people marks Fly Blackbird as an impressively innovative work which stands as one of the decade's most important racially oriented musicals.

No Strings

Far more successful at the box office than the pithy Fly Blackbird was a musical with a more conventional social conscience entitled

¹⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 222-23.

¹⁶⁰Supra, p. 404.

¹⁶¹James Baldwin, "East River, Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem," Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), p. 69.

No Strings. Written as a showcase for the talents of Diahann Carroll, the production boasted music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers,¹⁶² a book by Samuel Taylor, and direction and choreography by Joe Layton. Experimental both in its staging and its employment of a small mobile orchestra composed exclusively of wind and percussion instruments,¹⁶³ No Strings opened at the 54th Street Theatre on March 15, 1962, with Miss Carroll and Richard Kiley in leading roles. Critical response was largely favorable.¹⁶⁴ Miss Carroll's performance and Rodgers' score were amply praised; however, there was an almost unanimous dislike of Samuel Taylor's book which was thought to be humorless and rather dull. Nevertheless, No Strings earned considerable favor with a public eager to identify with its comfortable liberalism, and it enjoyed the second-longest run of the ten musicals considered in this chapter.

Samuel Taylor's boy-meets-girl plot is embarrassingly unimaginative. Set in Paris and a variety of elegant French coastal resorts, the story concerns a love affair between two expatriate Americans: Barbara Woodruff, a New York-born fashion model who has found fame and fortune in the world of Parisian haute couture, and David Jordan, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist given to aimless drifting about the Continent. Complications arise when it is discovered that David's creative energies are being sapped by the pleasures of his existence as a parasitic member of the jet set. Barbara abandons her lucrative

¹⁶²This was composer Rodgers' initial outing as his own lyricist.

¹⁶³Ewen, Composers for the American Musical Theatre, pp. 182-83.

¹⁶⁴New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1962, XXIII, No. 7 (Week of March 19, 1962), pp. 328-31.

career and secludes herself with David, far from hedonistic temptation, in an effort to encourage his authorship. Ultimately they quarrel and separate, whereupon it becomes clear to Barbara that David's artistic salvation depends upon returning to the inspiration of his native rock-bound seacoast of Maine. This he agrees to do; however, a reconciliation is thwarted when it is recognized that David and Barbara's best interests are in conflict because she belongs in Paris. And so the lovers sadly part.

Such a familiar little tale would be far too inconsequential to sustain a full evening's entertainment were it not for the unique factor that Barbara Woodruff happens to be an American Negro. Suddenly No Strings theoretically becomes fraught with meaning as yet another exploration of the miscegenation theme. It differs, however, from such predecessors as Show Boat, My Darlin' Aida, and Kwamina in one important respect: any reference to the interracial aspect of the love affair is studiously avoided. In the published text, an Author's Note explains:

The part of Barbara Woodruff in No Strings is designed to be played by an American colored girl in her early twenties. It is proposed that she also be beautiful, have style, and wear clothes well; be intelligent, witty, warmly human, and wise. The play itself never refers to her color.¹⁶⁵

The effect of such an approach, obviously designed to appear enlightened, was considered to be startling and quite progressive. David Ewen has commented:

What made the treatment of this relationship so unusual was the natural way in which this involvement of two people, of different colored skins, is treated. There is no suggestion that there is

¹⁶⁵ Samuel Taylor (book) and Richard Rodgers (music and lyrics), No Strings (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 1. Cited hereafter as No Strings.

anything unusual for a white man and a Negro girl to be in love; there is no intrusion of any interracial problems. The two main characters are developed as they should be--as two attractive human beings interested in one another.¹⁶⁶

The main point of No Strings, therefore, is that no point is made of the racial angle which has been quite deliberately introduced. And yet, ironically, the final complication and the entire social message of this musical depend upon the audience's awareness of race. All that the authors refrain from discussing is implied, and the result--as Harold Clurman has perceptively put it--is "socially fraudulent, but healthy in terms of our stage."¹⁶⁷

"In America," James Baldwin has written, "the color of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down."¹⁶⁸ Taking for granted the well-documented fact that "color-blindness" tends to prevail in the major cities of Europe, Rodgers and Taylor purposefully employ the Parisian setting of No Strings in order to make some telling points, by way of contrast, about racial prejudice in the United States. Barbara Woodruff's passion for Paris depends upon more than her status as its "highest-paid model."¹⁶⁹ Although she somewhat fondly recalls her childhood in the tenements of Harlem, which is euphemistically identified as being located "east of the Hudson" and "up north of Central Park,"¹⁷⁰ it is obvious that Barbara harbors little sentiment for the life she has abandoned. "I didn't leave much,"¹⁷¹ she remarks.

¹⁶⁶Ewen, Composers for the American Musical Theatre, p. 182.

¹⁶⁷Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, CLXXXIV (April 14, 1962), p. 338.

¹⁶⁸James Baldwin, "Introduction," Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1963), p. 11.

¹⁶⁹No Strings, p. 60.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁷¹Ibid., p. 27.

"As soon as I'd breathed the air of Paris, I knew I was home."¹⁷² Home, in this case, is to be construed as that place where the specter of race does not obscure her identity. Thus, there is the following significant conversation between Barbara and her wealthy French benefactor:

LOUIS

There are some Americans that Europe destroys.

BARBARA

Not this American.

LOUIS

And then there are some Americans who have to come to Europe to be born.

BARBARA

You're so right; that's me.¹⁷³

Given these indirect but obvious references to racial attitudes in the United States, it is not surprising that Barbara should be suspicious and mistrustful of Americans whom she encounters in Europe. Upon being introduced to David, she greets him with defensive hauteur and derides, with mocking sarcasm, his talent as a novelist. "What have you got against Americans?,"¹⁷⁴ he asks. Later, after Barbara has apologized, David pursues the subject, questioning whether she always is so rude when first meeting her fellow countrymen. Barbara's response could not be more explicit: "I think so; it's not meant to be rudeness. It's a kind of wariness, a kind of fending off, I guess."¹⁷⁵ It is precisely because Barbara fears encountering the scorn from which she has fled

¹⁷²Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁷³Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., p. 25.

that her relationship with David ultimately is dissolved. When David proposes marriage, both suddenly consider--for the first time--the serious objections to interracial marriage which surely would be raised in rural America. Their final discussion, although banal, is highly revealing:

BARBARA
David, I'm afraid.

DAVID
No, don't be.

BARBARA
(Turning on him, appealing) But this is my home! My safe and beautiful world! Can I leave it for yours?

DAVID
Yes.

.
BARBARA
You'll have to tell me what to pack. I don't think I have the clothes for a rugged, coast-of-Maine woman. . . . But I would like to take all my beautiful Paris dresses! May I? . . . I can wear them to the Saturday-night dances! (A moment) Don't they have Saturday-night dances?

DAVID
(Quietly) Yes, quite often.

BARBARA
(With a small smile of irony) But we won't go.

DAVID
(Almost roughly) Of course we'll go!

BARBARA
Once. To show we're not cowards. . . .

DAVID
Look, Barbara, it's not going to be easy, we both know that--

BARBARA
(Brightly) Of course we know it! We're neither one of us fools. It won't be like Paris!

DAVID
(Grimly) No. No one's going to ask you to dinner at Maxim's. You'll be alone a lot of the time. I'll be working.

BARBARA

Oh, I'll read, and I'll sew. I might even join the ladies' sewing circle. (And then) No. (She smiles) Well, anyway, I can go for long walks through the woods and along the shore.

DAVID

(Turns away, tormented) Ah, what a damned foolish thing it is . . . that your warm, lovely world should be so bad for me, and the world I'm going back to so impossible for you.¹⁷⁶

Thus, without ever mentioning color, but by capitalizing upon an audience's awareness of it, Taylor and Rodgers succeed in making a strong statement denouncing racial intolerance in American society, for that is where they place the blame.

Despite the considerably enlightened attitude toward the Negro which No Strings projects, there remains something disturbingly false about the characterization of Barbara Woodruff. Diahann Carroll, who was instrumental in guiding the authors' creation of the heroine, has been quoted with regard to her objectives as follows:

I wanted to do a play that dealt with the Negro people or a Negro person in the everyday situations of ups and downs or health and sickness, without making the play "special" because of a Negro player. I thought that the Negro-ness of a character is special enough without having to write a whole play to point up constantly in everything that's said, in every role, that there is a problem or specialness about this person. . . . What I wanted most was the message to be given in an intelligent manner, rather than with a hammer, as it's been done so many times. I felt it was time for people to enter the theater, watch a Negro performer for two-and-a-half hours as an actor and leave saying, "I'll be doggoned. You know that girl stood there and was just like anyone else." Ordinarily when Negro actors walk on the stage they're Negro. Every third line they're Negro, the plot is because they're Negro, what happens to them is because they're Negro. I just felt it was now time to present the Negro character primarily as a human being.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 117-18.

¹⁷⁷ Richard Warren Lewis, "Rodgers & Carroll," Show Business Illustrated, II, No. 4 (April, 1962), pp. 46 and 48.

These are laudable sentiments, and in some measure, as we have seen, No Strings accomplishes the goals herein set forth. But as for the character of Barbara Woodruff being "just like anyone else," one surmises that the "average," "everyday," expatriate American girl might find the odds to be formidable against her becoming a glamorous model, the toast of Paris, who sports a (show) wardrobe reputed to have cost fifteen thousand dollars.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, Barbara Woodruff--whether Negro or not--is simply too good to be true. She is a veritable paragon of middle-class virtue and charm. Her relationship with her middle-aged French patron is pristinely platonic. "But we're not in love," she protests, "and when you're not in love you don't fall into being a mistress that easily."¹⁷⁹ Because this aspect of the plot is never sufficiently developed, one might well assume that it is included so as to preclude, because of Barbara's healthy sexual liaison with David, any possible charge of characterization according to the time-worn Negro-whore stereotype. This it accomplishes, but with a heavy hand. Furthermore, the zeal with which Barbara attempts to reform her errant novelist is compatible with Doris Day's spunky screen personality, and the lyrics which state "I just want money,/ A nice position,/ And loads of lovely love"¹⁸⁰ are designed to warm the heart of every red-blooded American. This girl cannot be black! In the words of Fly Blackbird's Sidney Crocker, she is "white inside!"¹⁸¹ This is not to suggest that

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁷⁹No Strings, p. 36.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁸¹Supra, p. 401.

the qualities attributed to Barbara Woodruff should be considered alien to the American Negro. Rather, it is suggested that her personality has been carefully designed to appeal to a predominantly white Broadway audience. The problem here is similar to that of Robert Alan Aurthur's delineation of Kwamina Mwalla.¹⁸² In an effort to make Barbara Woodruff worthy of the shiftless and not particularly attractive David Jordan, she must be idealized to the point of apology.

The conclusion of No Strings is equally disappointing and unfortunately predictable. While Allan Lewis found the unhappy ending to be a positive exploration of "mature romance and social realism"¹⁸³ in the usually flossy arena of the musical theatre, there is also the uncomfortable suspicion that the authors "managed to promote interracial romance while avoiding intermarriage."¹⁸⁴ More often than not, such has been the case in musical studies of the miscegenation theme,¹⁸⁵ and one cringes with recognition at the possible veracity of John Simon's acerbic opinion that legitimation of such a bond might "offend the Southern buyers in the audience."¹⁸⁶ In any event, a definite pattern may be seen to emerge with No Strings, and it is one that does not change throughout the decade.

¹⁸²Supra, pp. 382-83.

¹⁸³Allan Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 223.

¹⁸⁴Gottfried, p. 179.

¹⁸⁵The single exception is Show Boat, but Julie and Steve's marriage failed apparently because of pressures occasioned by the interracial liaison.

¹⁸⁶Simon, "Play Reviews," Theatre Arts, XLVI (May, 1962), p. 57.

If Fly Blackbird produced perceptive and meaningful satire with seeming effortlessness, it may be said that No Strings labored furiously to appear liberally casual and enlightened in its attitude toward the Negro. Nevertheless, the production was progressive in that it presented the Negro female in a positive light and as a distinctive human being who, if not quite so average, encountered problems which were largely individual rather than racial. As such, it may be considered a successful, if somewhat flawed, work of good intention.

Ballad for Bimshire

Two unsuccessful musicals, both written by Negroes and featuring virtually all-black casts, appeared late in 1963. Curiously, and contrary to the decade's dominant thematic pattern,¹⁸⁷ neither concerned itself with race relations or social relevance. The first of these, Ballad for Bimshire, was written purely as "a family entertainment,"¹⁸⁸ and it combined color and excitement with an attractive score, an interesting milieu, and a conventional romance.

Irving Burgie--popularly known as Lord Burgess--came to national attention when his songs,¹⁸⁹ introduced by Harry Belafonte, prompted the calypso craze of the mid-fifties. Ballad for Bimshire was Burgie's pet project, and he had worked intermittently on the book, music and lyrics. Finally, in 1962, he approached Loftin Mitchell with the suggestion that

¹⁸⁷Supra, p. 377.

¹⁸⁸Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 193.

¹⁸⁹Among the best known: "Day-O," "Jamaica Farewell," "I Do Adore Her," and "Island in the Sun."

they collaborate on the book, and Mitchell reluctantly agreed.¹⁹⁰ It was a difficult collaboration, necessitating "one rewrite after another."¹⁹¹ The problem apparently was that of tailoring a book to suit the musical materials that Burgie already had prepared, for Lofton Mitchell has commented:

Ballad for Bimshire remains, for me, a show with book trouble. The fault lies in both the conception and execution, and it appears to be a work that was written as an excuse for some good songs. What the play really needs is meticulous imagination, organization and structure. It should have been written first, then had the music added. Therefore, it had to be played at a fast clip with numerous belly laughs so the audience wouldn't have time to think about the story.¹⁹²

The critics concurred,¹⁹³ finding the book to be weak but inoffensive; the humor of the comic characters was thought to be congenial, however, and Burgie's score--considerably aided by Talley Beatty's choreography for the production numbers--was applauded.

Ballad for Bimshire opened at the Mayfair Theatre (off-Broadway) on October 15, 1963, entirely under the domination of black talent and management. Lofton Mitchell has written, with justifiable pride, that "it was a throwback to the days when Negroes wrote, produced, directed and managed their own shows."¹⁹⁴ Its cast, too, was black--save for the

¹⁹⁰ Mitchell, Black Drama, pp. 192-93. (Much of the production history is detailed by Mitchell, pp. 191-97.)

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁹³ See, for example: Theophilus Lewis, "Theatre," America, CIX (November 16, 1963), p. 643, and, Alan Pryce-Jones, "New York Openings," Theatre Arts, XLVIII, No. 1 (January, 1964), p. 67.

¹⁹⁴ Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 197. (The reference here is principally to the following teams: Cook and Dunbar, Cole and Johnson, Williams and Walker and their associates, Miller and Lyles, and Sissle and Blake. Their contributions have been discussed in Chapter I.)

late inclusion of one white character (Arthur Roundville, portrayed by Joe Callaway),¹⁹⁵ and one white chorus member (Hilary Kelley).¹⁹⁶ In featured roles, the company included: Ossie Davis, Frederick O'Neal, Christine Spencer, Jimmy Randolph, Sylvia Moon, Clebert Fort, Miriam Burton, and Alyce Webb. Ed Cambridge directed. The production was supported largely by black audiences,¹⁹⁷ and numerous theatre parties, raising funds for civil rights groups and civic organizations, assured good houses.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, its run was brief; Ballad for Bimshire closed in financial distress after only seventy-two performances.

Set in the West Indies, the central focus of the plot is upon the maturation of young Daphne Byfield, a seventeen-year-old Barbadian girl who has been raised by her uncle, "Captain" Neddle Boyce, and his wife, Iris. While Dennis Thornton, her shy and scholarly suitor, pursues lengthy academic studies in New York, Daphne learns the skills of domestic science at the Housecraft School for Girls. But she is not content simply to prepare for an uncertain career as Dennis' wife;

¹⁹⁵There are some minor discrepancies between the manuscript of Ballad for Bimshire and the final version as it was presented on the stage. The manuscript, which was loaned by Mr. Irving Burgie, refers to an off-stage character named Arthur Roundville; in performance, the character appeared and was featured in a lively production number ("Chicken's a Popular Bird"). The original cast recording (Ballad for Bimshire, London Records, AM 48002/AMS 78002) contains sufficient narration, along with the songs, to confirm the fact that the manuscript employed in this study represents an essentially accurate blueprint of the final production.

¹⁹⁶Loften Mitchell, personal letter, March 15, 1970. (Robert Dolphin, whom Mitchell mentions in Black Drama, p. 197, served as Joe Callaway's understudy.)

¹⁹⁷Loften Mitchell estimates that "eighty-five percent of its audiences came from the Negro community." (Black Drama, p. 196.)

¹⁹⁸Mitchell, Black Drama, pp. 196-97.

Daphne has bigger and more immediate plans. Restless with the ambition to make something of herself, and filled with romantic longings, she intends to find employment as a domestic servant in the United States--land of golden opportunity and Horatio Alger success stories. Complications arise with the arrival from New York City of a dashing and worldly-wise businessman, Johnny Williams. He is enchanted with Daphne's dewy innocence, and she is overcome by his sophistication and charm. Johnny offers to exercise his influence in seeing to it that Daphne is selected as one of two Housecraft School graduates to be offered positions in the United States; however, he is noncommittal when the subject of marriage is broached. Perceiving the fact that Johnny is interested only in a temporary romantic diversion, "Captain" Neddie persuades him of the injustice he may commit; therefore, for Daphne's benefit, Johnny decides to leave the island. His sudden departure shocks Daphne into a more realistic view of life and love, and she evolves a "Master Plan" in which she envisions her future roles as wife, mother, and grandmother--roles which no longer seem so prosaic to her. Determined to capture Dennis' heart, she goes off to her new job in the United States, vowing that one day soon she and Dennis will return to the island home which is so much a part of them.

A serio-comic subplot of almost equal force has to do with the island's economy. A severe drought has retarded the growth of the chief crop, sugar cane. Dependent upon the seasonal harvest for their income, the field workers find themselves in debt. Because Millie, proprietress of a local rum shop, has extended credit in sizable amounts, she also finds herself in financial distress when her taxes come due. Sir Radio, the stiffly pretentious tax collector, remains unsympathetic, however,

and Millie resorts to a variety of schemes--including an attempted seduction of influential Johnny Williams--in order to defer payment. Howie and Spence, indigent field workers and patrons of Millie's bar, hit upon a more drastic solution to the problem: they set the fields afire in order to force cutting of the premature cane. "Captain" Neddie's desperate efforts to extinguish the blaze nearly cost him his life, and it is Daphne who heroically rushes to his aid and saves him. The fire is quenched by rain which presumably is brought by the ritual incantation of a mysterious and prophetic African woman (the Vendor). The crops are saved, and the end of the drought solves the islanders' economic difficulties. Justice triumphs, too, as Howie and Spence are given only token punishment for their deed, while the pompous Sir Radio is severely reprimanded for his insensitivity to Her Majesty's subjects.

Ballad for Bimshire is a lightweight, even inconsequential, piece of entertainment, but what strength it does possess is to be found in its authors' eschewal of the purely exotic in rendering the island setting. Milieu, to be sure, is an essential part of this musical whose principal point has to do with the islanders' love for the land, but it has not been romanticized into a kind of travel agent's dream come true. While Capote and Arlen's¹⁹⁹ ladies loll languorously in the shade of a Haitian banana tree, Burgie and Mitchell are busy exploring the universal hopes, dreams, successes and failures of hard-working common people going about the business of ordinary day-to-day existence upon the island of Barbados. The familiar images of the carefree barefoot native or the exuberant primitive pagan would be as much out of place in the society

¹⁹⁹ The reference is to House of Flowers (*supra*, pp. 297-308.)

herein depicted as they would be among the laboring classes in a city such as Detroit. Barbados, however, is not Detroit, and its distinctive atmosphere is realized successfully in Ballad for Bimshire largely because the authors do not promote it as being alien or quaint. Rather, it is the meeting and mingling of specific cross-cultural influences indigenous to the British West Indies which supplies the appealing background and makes the behavior of a wide variety of characters seem both human and natural. This well-informed approach to the island culture is most immediately apparent in Irving Burgie's varied score, which contains not only the characteristic rhythms of the inevitable calypso, but also compositions which reflect the social impact of the ruling British ("Hail Britannia" and "Welcome Song"), as well as ethnic background of those inhabitants of African origin ("Street Cries" and "Chant").²⁰⁰ The cultural complexity of the milieu is thereby established, and it is carried out in the delineation of character. The result is a more authentic and representative picture of life in the British West Indies than has been the case in previous musicals featuring similar settings.

The characters, lacking in complexity, are all eminently recognizable types; however, they do not necessarily conform to the racial stereotypes that we have come to know. Instead, they may be thought of as stock characters--the innocent but spirited ingénue, the sophisticated and romantic leading man, the nagging wife, the "barfly," and the seductive temptress--all of whom may be found in countless musical

²⁰⁰There are, in addition, several musical numbers best described as standard Broadway fare; these develop the romance between Daphne and Johnny, and they may be said to be universal expressions of love and longing.

comedies and straight plays. Furthermore, the characters are universalized; their goals, dreams, desires, and foibles are limited only to the human race and therefore acknowledge no bounds of color. In certain cases--most notably with regard to the comics of the subplot--there is a tendency toward facile characterizations which seem ominously familiar; however, as was the case with Simply Heavenly,²⁰¹ Ballad for Bimshire provides a sufficient range of character types so as to preclude categorization according to so-called racial traits. As a result, none require more than cursory analysis.

As the protagonist, Daphne Byfield is properly ingenuous and quite charming. Envisioned as a kind of "every girl," it is Daphne's psychological growth from adolescence to womanhood that is of interest. In her opening song, she confides to the Vendor:

Lately I've been feeling so strange
Sort of giddy, melancholy, disarranged
Sometimes I'm feeling old and flat
At other times I'm acting like a brat.²⁰²

The Vendor's diagnosis, that Daphne's problem is "a story of the birds and bees" because she is "coming of age,"²⁰³ is confirmed in the second scene as Daphne expresses her vague romantic yearnings ("Deep in My Heart"):

Yes, I know how I feel and why can't I
Someday meet that certain guy 'cause

²⁰¹Supra, pp. 324-43.

²⁰²Irving Burgie (book, music, and lyrics) and Lofton Mitchell (book), Ballad for Bimshire, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), access granted courtesy of Mr. Irving Burgie, Hollis, New York, p. 3. (Pagination determined by this writer.) Cited hereafter as Ballad for Bimshire.

²⁰³Ibid., p. 4.

Deep in my heart, there's brewing a storm
 That somehow I can't conceal
 Let that someone come by with arms that are warm
 And who understands how I feel.

 Let him love me as I love him
 Let his feeling be strong, not just a whim,
 And though we be hand in hand or oceans apart
 I'll love him, yes, love him with all my heart. ²⁰⁴

The sentiments expressed in these lyrics may be found in countless musicals, and they establish Daphne as a standard musical comedy ingénue. When one considers how rarely this has been the case in portraying the black female upon the American musical stage, the character of Daphne acquires a significance which transcends the essential banality of the material.

As might be expected, Daphne's romance with Johnny Williams is developed in predictably starry-eyed fashion and provides the occasion for two very conventional, but attractive, love songs ("My Love Will Come By" and "Yesterday Was Such a Lovely Day").²⁰⁵ Late in the second act, however, Daphne delivers a major musical piece which affords her considerable distinction and causes the character to grow in stature. Having been abandoned by Johnny, the heartbroken girl crosses the line from adolescence to maturity as she conceives a "Master Plan" in which she suddenly comprehends the totality of her existence and her place in the cycle of life:

The morning after the night before
 You begin to question what life is for ----
 What is the meaning, where does it end?
 Where's the beginning, what's love, what's a friend?

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁰⁵ Ballad for Bimshire, London Records, AM 48002/AMS 78002, Side II, Bands 1 and 4.

Gone are the rainbows with pots of gold ----
 Gone the sweet nothings that you've been told
 And there you stand, woman, naked in the world
 Transformed as by magic, no longer a girl.

But I've given up on the species, man
 Except to fit into my master plan.

For now, as a woman, I see
 Someone dangling on my knee
 With little pink petticoats and bows in her hair
 To sprinkle with powder, and hold to my bosom, there
 To watch her sleep, and then, alas
 I'll pray to God that she might pass
 The night without incident.²⁰⁶

Daphne continues at length, describing the birth of a son and her years of motherhood until her children, themselves, attain maturity. At this point, envisioning her own grown daughter, Daphne understands the meaning of self-fulfillment as her projected life-cycle completes itself:

And soon she will marry a fine young man
 It's all a part of my master plan
 And her honeymoon will last for two years or three
 And she'll have a little girl that looks just like me.

And then, a few years later - - I'll die
 So peacefully
 So happily - -
 That I'll hardly ever be missed.²⁰⁷

In its entirety, this song bears a striking resemblance to Billy Bigelow's famous "Soliloquy" in Rodgers and Hammerstein's Carousel, and it is employed much to the same purpose. Daphne, at last, comes fully alive--expressing, in this single number, a wide range of emotion and character revelation. Although her thoughts are not particularly profound, they are universally comprehensible and intensely human. In this

²⁰⁶ Ballad for Bimshire, p. 72.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

fashion, questions of race are completely irrelevant to the characterization. Daphne emerges simply as she is: a sweet and unspoiled young girl who grows to womanhood.

As Daphne's romantic interest, Johnny Williams might easily have become the villain of the piece--a latter-day Sporting Life of the well-worn city-slicker variety. Instead, Burgie and Mitchell present him as a successful and likable young businessman, well-versed in the ways of the world, amenable to any opportune situation or invitation, both a hedonist and a romantic. When not actively pursuing the business interests of his associate (Arthur Roundville), Johnny's principal aim, as "Captain" Neddie sagely observes, is "looking for fun."²⁰⁸ His idea of amusement invariably includes feminine companionship, and it is evident that he is highly successful with the ladies. Both Millie and Daphne immediately are attracted to Johnny, but it is the more experienced of these women who accurately appraises his character. With considerable interest, even admiration, Millie throatily asks: "How many girls you got, John? How many, huh? In how many places?"²⁰⁹ It is inferred that Johnny's fleeting relationship with Millie develops a sexual basis, for they are two of a kind; both are opportunists, and each takes--with enjoyment--what the other freely offers.²¹⁰ Their behavior is not condemned, nor is either character considered to be wicked or immoral. In fact, Johnny's treatment of Daphne reveals him

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

²¹⁰ In this case, Millie offers her charms to an attractive man whose influence helps to save her bar from falling into the clutches of the tax collector.

to be not only ethically responsible but also something of a romantic. He is intrigued by Daphne's purity, her lack of guile, and his feeling for her is clearly distinguished from the absence of genuine sentiment characteristic of his more temporary liaisons:

JOHNNY

Well, I've had many flings before
And the chances are there will still be more
But my heart's sitting way up there on the shelf
As I look, I hardly resemble myself.²¹¹

As opposed to the Millies of his experience, Daphne is regarded as someone special, and Johnny behaves accordingly. Although he initiates the romance, he refuses to consummate it when he realizes that Daphne's expectations are incompatible with his own life style. It is with considerable regret, therefore, that Johnny wistfully expresses in song his responsible final decision:

Swayed by the crush of her gentle lips
Her sweet lovely innocent mind
Warmed by the touch of her fingertips
But for her sake, I'll leave it behind.²¹²

In this manner, the authors carefully avoid portraying Johnny Williams as a smooth-talking Don Juan; they reveal, instead, an amiable, easy-going young man with a healthy interest in the opposite sex. Johnny wears his masculinity casually, but what is of the utmost importance with regard to characterization of the black male is that he is allowed his sexuality without being depicted as a brute, a villain, or a clown.

"Captain" Neddle Boyce, a former seaman and Daphne's doting uncle, is a man of little formal education, but he possesses great common sense

²¹¹Ballad for Bimshire, p. 41.

²¹²Ibid., p. 67.

and an abundance of compassion. Moreover, his years at sea have offered "Captain" Neddie a wide range of experience and an intimate knowledge of the world and its various peoples. Because of this, he escapes the more common image of the isolated island native and, without benefit of idealized or superior virtues, is allowed to emerge simply as an unassuming man of stable character and practical judgment. A diligent worker, Neddie is respected by the field laborers of whom he is the foreman,²¹³ and his advice is highly valued. It is not surprising, therefore, that "Captain" Neddie functions, from time to time, as the authors' spokesman in advancing the thematic principle of the islanders' love for the land. The following conversation with Daphne is illustrative:

DAPHNE

Captain Neddie, you love that cane as much as you love -- people. You act like you own it.

NEDDIE

I don't own it, but it's part of the island. Our onely [sic] crop. And this is my land. Your land. If this cane ain't good, everybody suffers.

DAPHNE

I just don't understand --

NEDDIE

You will someday. I had to sail the seas, child, and hear the land calling me, calling me before I understood -- 214

These are warm sentiments, and they are characteristic of a gentle and immensely likable character who is endowed with a considerable fund of mother wit.

Iris Boyce, "Captain" Neddie's nagging wife, is a familiar comic character. Although not quite a shrew, Iris is a master of the

²¹³Ibid., p. 12.

²¹⁴Ibid., p. 10.

degrading remark, and her scolding tongue is seldom silent. Daphne is the subject of the nearly constant bickering in the Boyce household, but it is Neddie who ultimately bears the brunt of his wife's displeasure:

NEDDIE

Why don't you stop picking on that child? She got good plans. Got a nice young fellow in Dennis. . . .

IRIS

She going to have to get some sense before she get a man.

NEDDIE

She's only a child. Seventeen.

IRIS

Is that so? Let me remind you, your own mother ain't but seventeen years older than yourself. You forget you is a love child.

NEDDIE

Damn that nonsense! These young folks got to look higher than us older folks.

IRIS

What you mean, US older folks? And you the one that don't look high. . . . Just 'cause you stopped off in a couple of ports, you think you know everything.²¹⁵

The banter between these two is not really malicious, and their bickering is played strictly for laughs which culminate with the exasperated "Captain's" characteristic admonition, "Aw, woman, put the damn dinner on the table."²¹⁶ Such a comic device serves to humanize both Iris and Neddie, for the humor of their relationship is confined neither to any specific culture nor to any single race. They are universally recognized types which would strike an immediate response of recognition in audiences throughout the world.

Of Ballad for Bimshire it may be said that the characters of the main plot primarily are concerned with domestic issues and, for the most

²¹⁵Ibid., pp. 11-12.

²¹⁶Ibid., p. 13.

part, represent the culture of the British West Indies only through the suggestion of dialect (Daphne, Neddie and Iris),²¹⁷ and by virtue of their very normalcy. The more colorful aspects of island life are explored in the subplot, but here again the authors avoid the well-worn image of the carefree barefoot native, happy in his tropical paradise and content with "plenty of nothing." The economic plight of the field workers belies that pleasant notion. These laborers toil for their pay and clearly are distressed with the threat of "plenty of nothing." This is revealed in a lively work song, rich in the tradition of calypso.

NEDDIE

To cut this cane you got to show up able
 'Fore day noon in the mornin'
 Can't stay up all night raising cain
 'Fore day noon in the mornin'

CHORUS

Look out yonder, the sun done set
 But a new day soon a-bornin'
 Gotta work the cane in a bitter sweat
 To sweet my tea in the mornin'. . .²¹⁸

Despite the depressed pay scale and the rigorous nature of their work, the field hands display considerable self-esteem and an inborn love for the land--as expressed in the title song:

FIELD WORKER

Long time my father told me
 This is your lan'
 Often the land would scold me
 And laugh at my plan.

²¹⁷"In the West Indies, Irish and Scotch brogues joined the Cockney dialect and mingled with the African tongue. A decided lilt was given to the speech of the West Indian Negro. This speech pattern, which is more British than the Southern Negro's, rose and fell with remarkable inflections." (Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 29.) The patois, varying in degree with regard to appropriate characters, is suggested throughout the script.

²¹⁸Ballad for Bimshire, p. 7.

But I coming along, got plenty to do,
 Times been hard, but I seeing it through
 Gon' hold onto my claim -
 Cause when the day is won
 In this sea and sun
 They gon' think well on my name.²¹⁹

In this manner, the authors succeed in establishing a definite sense of the island milieu and a feeling for its common people. Local color thus is achieved without resorting to quaintness or the behavior of "child-like" natives.

Inasmuch as the subplot emphasizes the financial distress of the working classes, while the wealthy Arthur Roundville is said to own "pretty near half of this island,"²²⁰ it is interesting to note that Burgie and Mitchell avoid developing a social protest theme concerning the economic exploitation of the black population.²²¹ Instead, the subject is treated lightly and is pursued through the actions of three comic characters--Millie, Howie and Spence--who share a single common objective: hastening the approach of payday. Their schemes provide the substance, such as it is, of the subplot; however, delineation of character is facile, unimaginative, and surprisingly old-fashioned. Millie, the seductive hedonist, already has been discussed.²²² Although less tawdry than such predecessors as Carmen Jones or Georgia Brown, she is a familiar figure. Howie and Spence--likable but shiftless, and

²¹⁹Ibid., Prologue, p. 2.

²²⁰Ibid., p. 24.

²²¹Elsewhere, Lofton Mitchell has been less reticent to point out the exploitation and oppression of the West Indian Negro (Black Drama, p. 29).

²²²Supra, p. 433.

overly fond of the rum and ginger served in Millie's bar--function as a comedy team which might well have been at home in the Williams and Walker shows or the later musical revues of the 1920's. As these three conspire to set the cane fields ablaze, the humor is strictly low comedy, liberally sprinkled with vaudeville-style gags:

HOWIE

Girl, I got this thing figured out. Tomorrow night Spence and me gone take torches and - - -

MILLIE

No. You gone make a big mess, Howie.

HOWIE

Don't worry, Millie. You know I don't do that much, but what I do do, I does.

MILLIE

Well, does well, then!²²³

Likewise, when the inebriated pair of clowns actually accomplish the deed, Spence strikes a night watchman with their half-finished bottle of rum. Thoroughly disgusted, Howie remarks: "Why you - - blasted fool. All these sticks out here and you couldn't hit him with nothin' but the rum?"²²⁴ This brand of fun is painfully dated and is a direct descendant of the burnt cork school of comedy; however, its inclusion in Ballad for Bimshire undoubtedly was intentional. As Lofton Mitchell has pointed out,²²⁵ those who were associated with it considered the production, which was created and mounted entirely by black talent, to be symbolically related to the successful pioneering efforts of their legendary predecessors. The antics of Howie and Spence, therefore, may

²²³ Ballad for Bimshire, p. 61.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

²²⁵ Supra, p. 425.

be considered a tribute not only to the comic styles, but also to the theatrical accomplishments, of such teams as Williams and Walker or Miller and Lyles.²²⁶ Nevertheless, both the comedy and the characters (Howie, Spence, and Millie) strike one as being inappropriate in a 1963 musical which does not otherwise attempt to recreate the historical triumphs of the Negro artist in the American musical theatre.

Far more delightful than the low comedy of the clowns is the imaginative rendering of the tax collector, Sir Radio, who is so named because, it is explained, he is "always tuned in."²²⁷ A native Barbadian Negro, Sir Radio has been inspired to the point of reverence by the cultural impact of the ruling British, and he embraces their formalities and traditions with a vengeance. Sir Radio's affected behavior makes him the object of a good deal of ridicule, but he staunchly defends what he considers to be the superior customs of a truly civilized people.

HOWIE

(Mockingly) Have you been to the Mother Country, Sir Radio?

SIR RADIO

I don't have to go to no damn Mother Country. The British are here and they tell me what to do. Their examples is all about you, but you all too blind to see. . . . Man, there is a truly dedicated and disciplined people. The trouble with you all is you gets too much fun out of life. These people seldom crack a smile and hardly ever laugh above a low chuckle. . . . If I had my way, I'd make every man on this island wear a winged collar and tie all day long every day. Then, we may be agitated towards some progress.

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²²⁶Loften Mitchell's admiration of these black teams, and the stress he places upon the importance of their contributions to the American musical theatre, are well documented throughout Black Drama--as well as in personal letters to this writer (October 20, 1969 and February 9, 1970). His play, Star of the Morning, produced in Cleveland, Ohio, tells the story of the Williams and Walker company.

²²⁷Ballad for Bimshire, p. 27.

What a splendid regimen these people have built
 If the day is awful hot, and you are tempted to wilt
 At four o'clock they test you with a ceremony
 You herd around together with a steaming cup of tea.

Hail Britannia, you keeper of the flame
 May they never never, ever ever desecrate thy name. ²²⁸

Admittedly, Sir Radio is a single-joke character, but the humor is bright and pointed. While we are laughing at Sir Radio's pretentiousness, we also are laughing at British colonialists who insist upon transplanting the customs of home into an alien culture and climate. Sir Radio is ludicrous, therefore, not because--as in the days of minstrelsy--he is presumed to be a black man ineffectually attempting to emulate the sophistication of white "superiors"; he is, in fact, quite proficiently "British." Rather, the humor proceeds from Sir Radio's vain adoption of superficial mannerisms which quite obviously are impractical for life in the tropics. As such, his comic flaw, instead of being based upon race, is seen to be purely a human foible. Sir Radio would be as much at home upon Molière's stage as he is on Burgie and Mitchell's Windward Island.

If Sir Radio represents the influence of the political mother country, then the character of the Vendor represents the influence of the ethnic mother country, insofar as it is common to the great majority of the island's inhabitants. She is a mysterious woman whose prophetic powers and magical charms are thought to be the result of an African heritage which has not grown dormant. When the islanders dismiss her predictions as being mere superstition, the Vendor forcefully lectures them as follows:

²²⁸Ibid., pp. 29-31.

You laugh at me, but my ancestors are from that far away land called Nigeria, a descendent of the daughters of Benin. (All listen intently.) They teach me the secret of makin' rain. (All laugh in disbelief. She looks stern.) Don't laugh; in five days the rain shall come.²²⁹

Significantly, toward the end of the second act she is proved correct, and the no longer skeptical islanders join her in an African chant, followed by a ritualistic "Dance of Fulfillment."²³⁰ What is offered here as being representative of African tradition is something larger than simple superstition or exotic voodoo rites in the jungle. There is a sense of the mystical, of the inexplicable workings of nature, or as "Captain" Neddie puts it: "When I shipped to Nigeria a few years back, they paid fees to the rainmakers. This is a scientific age. We better not question one way or the other."²³¹ Although the Vendor functions as a deus ex machina, her more important role is symbolic, for she and Sir Radio serve as opposing cultural influences which help to explain the fact that the orientation of the Barbadian people is neither African nor British, but a combination of the two.

Ballad for Bimshire never claimed to offer anything more than pure entertainment, and a reading of the script, a hearing of the recording, suggest that it must have provided a pleasantly diverting evening in the theatre. Lofton Mitchell has called it "a 'fun-show' that seemed to please but went out for a series of misfortunes, possibly never to be seen again."²³² Its principal flaws are to be found in its meandering

²²⁹Ibid., p. 8.

²³⁰Ibid., pp. 77-78.

²³¹Ibid., p. 79.

²³²Mitchell, personal letter, February 9, 1970.

book, the absence of a cogent point of view, and a case of unfortunate timing. Ballad for Bimshire might well have been received with greater enthusiasm during the entertainment-prone 1950's, but by 1963 the civil rights movement, with its attendant turmoil, made this unassuming little folk musical appear to be completely beside the point. In its own quiet fashion, however, Ballad for Bimshire did make a point that seems to have been overlooked. It presented the non-American Negro in completely human terms and laid to rest the stereotypes associated with "exotic" island settings. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that this might not have been accomplished in a more significant production; nevertheless, this minor and unsuccessful work achieved that goal, and its importance lies therein.

Tambourines to Glory

Closely following the opening of Ballad for Bimshire was the Broadway première, on November 3, 1963, of yet another Negro-authored musical entitled Tambourines to Glory. It, too, suffered from a lack of social significance during a year in which audiences seemed to expect blackness to be equated solely with the strife reflected in newspaper headlines. It has been stated that "the public expected a play dealing with the more urgent civil rights problems at that time and seemed disappointed with this melodrama about storefront churches in Harlem."²³³ Undoubtedly, one of the primary causes of its lack of newsworthy contemporaneity may be attributed to the fact that the germination of

²³³Raoul Abdul, "The Negro Playwright on Broadway," Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre: A Critical Approach, ed. and comp. Lindsay Patterson (New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1967), p. 62.

Tambourines to Glory occurred as early as 1949,²³⁴ when author Langston Hughes commissioned composer Jobe Huntley to provide a gospel idiom for four of his poems. The resulting songs were not recorded, but Hughes subsequently used them as the inspiration for a play about his beloved Harlem. "Gospel singing is a feature of the storefront church," he has said, "and it was with this idea that 'Tambourines' began."²³⁵ Producers demonstrated little enthusiasm, however, and the play was not staged. Several years later, Hughes returned to his project and adapted the play as a novel which was published in 1958.²³⁶ At the request of the Theatre Guild, Hughes readapted the novel for the stage and once again called upon Jobe Huntley--this time to provide a complete musical score for the play. In addition to the original four gospel songs written so many years before, thirteen new compositions were created. During the summer of 1960, Tambourines to Glory was given a trial production in Westport, after which it stagnated under option to the Theatre Guild. Finally, with the support of different backers, it was brought to Broadway in 1963, boasting an impressive cast headed by Hilda Simms, Rosetta LeNoire, Louis Gossett, Clara Ward, her singers, Micki Grant, and Robert Guillaume. The production closed after a run of twenty-four performances and lost 120,000 dollars.²³⁷

²³⁴ Copyright dates of four songs in the score are given as either 1949 or 1950. See also the following entry.

²³⁵ Langston Hughes, quoted in Lewis Nichols, "Poems to Play: Langston Hughes Describes the Genesis of his 'Tambourines to Glory,'" New York Times, October 27, 1963, Section 2, p. 3.

²³⁶ Emanuel and Gross, Dark Symphony, p. 199.

²³⁷ Hughes and Meltzer, Black Magic, p. 226.

Critical response to this gospel-oriented musical²³⁸ was intriguingly uniform. In virtually every review, Hughes's book was faulted--the most common complaints holding that it was stylistically confused, repetitious, and a much too shallow treatment of a narrative which obviously bore promise. Conversely, the performers and the musical values were lavishly praised, often in terms of a long-held--and, one would have thought, outmoded--racial bias. "It seems impossible for a Negro to sing badly,"²³⁹ enthused John Chapman, while allowing that Louis Armstrong might be considered an exception. John McClain elaborated upon that theory with a variety of cherished generalizations: "The American Negro can sing and move better than anybody, and he has an original and exuberant sense of humor about himself and the world at large which has nothing to do with Civil Rights. In this climate he is as endearing as it is possible for any human being to be."²⁴⁰ That these critical reactions seem astonishingly old-fashioned and condescending may be attributed to the fact that Tambourines to Glory seems to reflect the temper of an earlier time when the Negro had not yet become a so-called "problem." Because of Hughes's broad and lighthearted

²³⁸ Although the musical score is enriched by the addition of eight traditional pieces or hymns, Tambourines to Glory is to be considered an original work for the musical theatre. It is therefore distinguished from the structural pasticcio of Hughes's gospel song-plays (supra, pp. 368-70.)

²³⁹ John Chapman, "'Tambourines to Glory' Magnificent in Song," New York Daily News, November 4, 1963, reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1963, XXIV, No. 17 (Week of November 18, 1963), p. 208.

²⁴⁰ John McClain, "Hallelujah, It's Great!," New York Journal American, November 4, 1963, reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1963, No. 17 (Week of November 18, 1963), p. 209.

approach to character, it is possible to find in this all-black musical²⁴¹ a reassurance that "darktown" is peopled with endearing and childlike folks whose irrepressible pursuit of the high life represents their primary goal. To do so is to ignore the subtleties of Hughes's text which, unfortunately, lay buried beneath an exterior so gaudy as to invite misinterpretation. It is true that some of the complexities of life in Harlem are suggested; however, insofar as characterization of the Negro is concerned, the surface of this work resembles a journey into the musical theatre's past.

Tambourines to Glory is a modern morality play in which "good co-operates with evil to the glory of God."²⁴² Hughes tells the story of two poverty-pinched Harlemites--Essie Belle Johnson and Laura Wright Reed--who, in order to make ends meet, hit upon the idea of starting a church and living off the contributions of those even less fortunate than themselves. They begin by preaching and singing on a Harlem street corner, and as their following increases, they move successively into a storefront operation and finally into an abandoned theatre which they convert into a magnificently gaudy Tambourine Temple. Guiding their success, and taking a share of the profits, is Big-Eyed Buddy Lomax, a Mephistophelean hustler with underworld connections. Laura promptly

²⁴¹Because the production featured an all-black cast, there was some nervous speculation regarding "reverse" segregation--a situation which may help to explain the inclusion of two white performers in the cast of Ballad for Bimshire (*supra*, pp. 425-426). Some backers feared the picketing of Tambourines to Glory by whites. In a burst of hilarious irony, Langston Hughes conceded that a white actor might take the role of a chauffeur. The company remained black. (Nichols, New York Times, October 27, 1963, Section 2, p. 3.)

²⁴²Abramson, p. 280.

succumbs to Buddy's aggressive sexuality, and she embraces with equal enthusiasm the increased profits which derive from such nefarious schemes as the sale of "holy water" drawn from the tap and the pronouncement of "lucky" scriptural references which are understood by the congregation to be tips on the numbers game. Disapproving such deception in a house of worship, the devout and sincere Essie devotes herself to prayer and the saving of souls; however, as the church prospers, so do the charlatans. Laura and Buddy indulge their seemingly limitless capacities for sex, ten-dollar scotch, expensive automobiles, and lavish wardrobes. It is not long before the faithless Buddy begins to squire other women about town, and the jealous Laura angrily confronts him, alone, in the Robing Room of the Temple. When Buddy abuses her, both verbally and physically, Laura stabs him with a switchblade knife that belongs to Essie. Discovery of the body and the knife results in Essie's arrest. In prison, the innocent Essie reflects upon recent events, concludes that her own inaction has been one of the causes of corruption in her church, and vows to serve God and her fellow man with renewed strength. Having prayed for guidance, Laura publicly confesses her guilt, and because she slew Buddy in self-defense, the charge is reduced to manslaughter. Released on bail, a repentant Laura appears at the Tambourine Temple where Essie urges the congregation to welcome her back into the fold. There is also a minor romantic subplot concerning Essie's daughter, Marietta, and C. J. Moore, a college student and follower of the faith. Their wedding ceremony, performed by Essie, prompts a rousing musical finale.

In an Author's Note which accompanies the published script, Langston Hughes has explained his intent and approach as follows:

Tambourines to Glory is, in play form, a dramatization of a very old problem--that of good versus evil, God slightly plagued by the Devil, but with God--as He always intends--winning in the end.

Tambourines to Glory is a fable, a folk ballad in stage form, told in broad and very simple terms--if you will, a comic strip, a cartoon--about problems which can only convincingly be reduced to a comic strip if presented very cleanly, clearly, sharply, precisely, and with humor.²⁴³

This is an accurate appraisal of the play's style--at least up to that point in the second act when it begins to turn sharply toward the melodramatic. What is of greater interest, however, is the fact that Hughes's description of Tambourines to Glory may be applied even more effectively to the 1940 production of Cabin in the Sky.²⁴⁴ Webster Smalley has called Tambourines to Glory "a Faust-like tale, told with the simplicity of a medieval morality play."²⁴⁵ Precisely the same may be said of Cabin in the Sky. Moreover, the striking similarities of these two musicals extend beyond the superficiality of having in common a religious theme that is treated lightly. In both cases, the authors have utilized characters that are broadly drawn, reduced to the simplicity of a cartoon, and immediately recognizable as representatives of good or evil, vice or virtue. Lynn Root purposefully employed the most familiar comic Negro stereotypes in his 1940 fantasy; twenty-three years later, Langston Hughes rather surprisingly trotted them all out again. His principal characters find their direct parallels in Cabin in the Sky.

²⁴³Langston Hughes, Tambourines to Glory, in Five Plays by Langston Hughes, ed. Webster Smalley (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 184. Cited hereafter as Tambourines to Glory.

²⁴⁴Supra, pp. 174-96.

²⁴⁵Smalley (ed.), p. xvi.

Langston Hughes has suggested that "the role of Essie is that of the good old earth, solid, always there come sun or rain, laughter or tears, the eternal mother image."²⁴⁶ Devout, sincere, infinitely patient because of her faith in the Lord, Essie is for all practical purposes the Petunia of Cabin in the Sky. Conversely, Laura, the supreme hedonist and enthusiastic sinner, is a combination of Little Joe and Georgia Brown. The contrasting personalities of Essie and Laura are most effectively revealed in the following dialogue.

LAURA

You just naturally got goodness in you. Me, I have to wrestle with temptation. You just take whatever comes.

ESSIE

I wrestle with temptation, too, Laura, in my heart. But somehow or other, I always did want to try to be good. Once I thought being good was doing nothing, like you said, I guess, so I done nothing for half my life. Now I'm trying to do something--and be good, too. It's harder. . . . I found a verse in the Bible I been studying over and over, says: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" . . .

LAURA

What verse is that? Where is it?

ESSIE

Job 11:7.

LAURA

What a number! 11-7--wow! Rolled up in luck. That's gonna be one of my texts, too.

ESSIE

Laura, you thinking about numbers, and I'm thinking about God, finding out what is God in terms of what we is--us--on this earth. I'm just discovering there's so many ways to do good and be good I ain't found yet.

.

LAURA

It's good to me when its just all mine, Essie--like love--like Buddy. I don't want to share Buddy with nobody.

²⁴⁶Tambourines to Glory, p. 184.

ESSIE

You talking about flesh-kind of love, not spirit.

LAURA

The spirit can't do a woman like me no good in bed.

ESSIE

Laura!

LAURA

Eat, drink, and love, that's what I live for!²⁴⁷

Like Petunia and Little Joe/Georgia Brown, Essie and Laura never really progress beyond these positions. One is strong, the other is weak; one represents virtue, the other represents vice. As was true of Cabin in the Sky, vice is the more entertaining of the two, and Hughes places the greater emphasis upon Laura's transgressions. His approach, like Lynn Root's, is always affectionate and amusing; the toreador pants which the fun-loving Laura wears beneath her churchly robes²⁴⁸ are not far afield from the pair of dice concealed in Little Joe's heavenly attire.²⁴⁹ But Hughes offers little more than repetitious, if entertaining, examples of his leading character's moral persuasions. At the conclusion, Essie's goodness emerges triumphant, and Laura's ill-prepared scene of repentance tells us only what we already know:

LAURA

Mine was a sumptuous kind of sin
 Wrapped in diamonds and fur,
 Scattering money to the wind
 Like frankincense and myrrh.
 Mine was a giddy kind of sin,
 Laughing without care
 While others in this world I knew
 Found no happiness anywhere.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 213-14.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 206.

²⁴⁹ Supra, p. 185.

Mine was a lustful kind of sin
 Close, close in lustful arms.
 Mine was a hungry kind of sin,
 Hungry for a body's charms. . . .²⁵⁰

Because characterization is maintained at a level somewhere between abstraction and caricature, Essie and Laura follow in the tradition of two of the most familiar stage Negro stereotypes: the patient mammy and the promiscuous exotic primitive.

Completing the trio of principal roles is Big-Eyed Buddy Lomax who, in a presentational prologue laced with topical humor, informs the audience of his identity:

BUDDY

You think I'm who you see, don't you? Well, I'm not. I'm the Devil. . . . The Devil comes in various guises--and disguises. I'm disguised now. I am not the me you see here--tall, handsome, brownskin. I am not always dark--sometimes I'm white. Sometimes yellow, sometimes Khrushchev.²⁵¹

In Tambourines to Glory, Hughes's Devil takes the form of a jive-talking Harlem hustler who places his faith in the "unholy trinity"; "love, loot, and likker."²⁵² It is with these that he tempts Laura, just as the devilish Lucifer, Jr., tempted Little Joe in Cabin in the Sky.

As Buddy explains:

I play with people. Let me tell you one of my secrets. The way to get any good man--I mean he-man--on the Devil's side is to put your hand in his pocket with something in it--money. The root of all evil!...The way to get a woman is to put your arm around her waist with your hand empty--and let your sense of touch do the rest.²⁵³

²⁵⁰Tambourines to Glory, p. 255.

²⁵¹Ibid., p. 188.

²⁵²Ibid., p. 236.

²⁵³Ibid., p. 228.

Buddy practices this technique in his relationship with Laura, capitalizing upon her own erotic nature with the sheer force of his potent masculinity. In the time-honored tradition, however, the sexually effective Negro male is presented negatively. Not only is Buddy thought to be evil incarnate; his prowess in the bedroom is characterized as being crude, raw, and animalistic. "Tom cat! Billy goat! You big brown bar stud!"²⁵⁴ These are Laura's passionate endearments, and they suit a man who equates the act of love with an act of violence. "Beat a woman till she cries, then kiss her till she laughs--is my recipe,"²⁵⁵ boasts a Buddy who, in this respect may be compared to such brutish lovers as Crown (Porgy and Bess) and Biglow Brown (St. Louis Woman). In all other respects, however, Buddy remains a comic villain, following in the footsteps of Lucifer, Jr., and the earlier Sporting Life (Porgy and Bess).²⁵⁶ Like these two "devils," Buddy is an ingratiating rogue who stirs up trouble with such obvious relish and forthrightness that one cannot help being amused by his antics. "Be a devil right out--like me," Buddy advises. "Then folks will think you are dashing, daring, dangerous, darling, cute--especially the women. . . . Another tip on being a devil, friends--don't take yourself seriously. Smile! You can't help being a devil, so don't worry about it."²⁵⁷ Such good-natured irreverence--and, especially, his attitude toward the church as a

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 243.

²⁵⁶ Supra, pp. 252-53.

²⁵⁷ Tambourines to Glory, p. 228.

profitable racket²⁵⁸--provokes a good deal of laughter, for we have been assured at the outset that Buddy's deviltry ultimately will be quashed.²⁵⁹ Engaging though Hughes's Harlem hell-raiser may be, this is shallow characterization which, in the final analysis, must be labeled derivative.

The remaining characters are barely sketched in and deserve only scant attention. Essie's daughter, Marietta, is a standard ingénue: sweet, wholesome, possessed of high principles, and desirous of serving her fellow man. Her intended, C. J. Moore, is a fine, upstanding young man who will be a credit to his community.²⁶⁰ Among the congregation of the Tambourine Temple, only two noteworthy characters emerge: Birdie Lee and Chicken-Crow-For-Day. They are two redeemed sinners who, as Birdie Lee puts it, came from "underneath the gutter."²⁶¹ Believing themselves to have been saved, these two embrace the church with enthusiastic fervor, never missing an opportunity to testify before the congregation. All of these are warm and sympathetic figures, and one wishes that Hughes might have seen fit to enrich the texture of his tale by allowing them greater substance.

If dimensionality of characterization is not the strong suit of Tambourines to Glory, and if the conflict between good and evil is as old as time, then one must consider other aspects of the total work in

²⁵⁸Ibid., p. 210. (Further references abound throughout the text.)

²⁵⁹Ibid., p. 189. (BUDDY: "I never win--but I have a hell of a good time trying.")

²⁶⁰Marietta and C.J. are, in effect, younger versions of Joyce and Boyd in Hughes's earlier musical, Simply Heavenly.

²⁶¹Tambourines to Glory, p. 223.

order to determine its intended meaning. Musically, of course, the production is extremely rich, and Hughes emphasizes the idea that "when the curtain falls, the final effect must be that of having heard a song --a melodic, likable, dramatic song."²⁶² The gospel idiom--which is "rarely calm, never sanctimonious, always direct"²⁶³--predominates and serves to enliven the proceedings while remaining consistent with the religious subject matter. Moreover, assuming the authenticity of the Huntley-Hughes score in performance,²⁶⁴ the rousing, joyous, and emotion-drenched gospel music infuses the play with a distinct racial identity. "Gospel singing is the last refuge of Negro folk music,"²⁶⁵ it has been said, and Tambourines to Glory simply overflows with this lively example of black culture. It is, to be sure, one of the virtues of this musical which, as a result, stands apart from many other works whose scores have been laden with tin-pan-alley-inspired approximations of Negro music.

When one is not otherwise occupied with the exigencies of the plot or keeping time to the soul-stirring rhythm of the music, one profitably may pause and reflect upon the subtle but revealing insights Hughes offers into various aspects of urban Negro life. The supposition that two untutored women, with no credentials beyond the magnetic force of their own personalities, should so blithely presume to "start" a church on a street corner and actually develop a following of sizable

²⁶²Ibid., p. 184.

²⁶³"Let the Church Roll On," Show Business Illustrated, II, No. 1 (January 23, 1962), p. 45.

²⁶⁴No original cast recording was released.

²⁶⁵Hughes and Meltzer, Black Magic, p. 166.

proportion might seem farfetched, but the phenomenon of the storefront church is more common within the milieu of a Harlem than is, say, the national emergence of an evangelist such as Aimee Semple McPherson.

As James Baldwin has commented:

There are probably more churches in Harlem than in any other ghetto in this city and they are going full blast every night and some of them are filled with praying people every day. This, supposedly, exemplifies the Negro's essential simplicity and good-will; but it is actually a fairly desperate emotional business.

These churches range from the august and publicized Abyssinian Baptist Church on West 138th Street to resolutely unclassifiable lofts, basements, store-fronts, and even private dwellings. Nightly, Holyroller ministers, spiritualists, self-appointed prophets and Messiahs gather their flocks together for worship and for strength through joy.²⁶⁶

The promise of salvation undoubtedly appeals strongly to those in desperate circumstances, for it offers hope to the hopeless. The deprived, the liquor-ridden, the superstitious and ignorant, the squalid victims of society--these are the people whom Essie would save and Laura would exploit.

LAURA

We'll save them lower down than us.

ESSIE

Who could that be?

LAURA

The ones that do what you can't do--drink without getting sick. Gamble away their rent. Cheat the Welfare Department--more'n I do. Lay with each other without getting disgusted--no matter how many unwanted kids they produce. Blow gauge, support the dope trade. Them's the ones we'll set out to convert.²⁶⁷

These, too, are the people who will follow a self-proclaimed prophet unquestioningly and who, therefore, become susceptible to the duplicity

²⁶⁶Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," Notes of a Native Son, p. 54.

²⁶⁷Tambourines to Glory, p. 192.

of a charlatan. The concept of religion as a profitable "racket" virtually requires this stratum of society; thus, it is not surprising that examples of chicanery in the independent ghetto church have been well documented. Malcolm X has written of "the hustling preacher-pimps to be found in every black ghetto, the ones with some little storefront churches of mostly hardworking, older women, who kept their 'pretty boy' young preacher dressed in 'sharp' clothes."²⁶⁸ Drawing upon his own youthful experiences. James Baldwin offers even further insight:

Being in the pulpit was like being in the theatre; I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion was worked. I knew the other ministers and knew the quality of their lives. And I don't mean to suggest by this the "Elmer Gantry" sort of hypocrisy concerning sensuality; it was a deeper, deadlier, and more subtle hypocrisy than that. . . . I knew how to work on a congregation until the last dime was surrendered--it was not very hard to do--and I knew where the money for "the lord's work" went. . . . I was in a very lucrative business. . . . I don't refer merely to the glaring fact that the minister eventually acquires houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their dimes and quarters and dollars into the plate. I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door.²⁶⁹

Obviously, this is not intended to suggest that all independent churches in an area such as Harlem are fraudulent. "Most of them" according to Langston Hughes, "are run by men of good will, pious, trying to help the community and area, but there's an occasional bad seed that mars the record."²⁷⁰ It is suggested, however, that the phenomenon of the

²⁶⁸ X [Little], with Haley, p. 214.

²⁶⁹ James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), pp. 55-58.

²⁷⁰ Hughes, quoted in Nichols, New York Times, October 27, 1963. Section 2, p. 3.

store-front church, whether legitimate or not, is the direct result of a community situation in which ignorance, superstition, deprivation, and despair are widespread. It is with this segment of Harlem society that Hughes directly concerns himself in Tambourines to Glory.

From a spiritual, or at least a moralistic, point of view, Essie and Laura's Tambourine Temple combines the forces of both right and wrong. If Laura bilks the "customers," Essie's warm devotion encourages those parishoners, such as Birdie Lee and Chicken-Crow-For-Day, who would better themselves. It is significant that Essie views her church as an instrument of social redemption as well as spiritual redemption:

ESSIE

Oh, but there's so much our church can do in Harlem--make a playground for the neighborhood kids, establish an employment office, set up a day nursery for children of mothers what works. . . . I wants to make our church a good church, Laura. The needs is so big up here in Harlem, we have to do all we can, me and you--and you're God's handmaiden, even if you don't always act like a holy maiden do.²⁷¹

For all these noble sentiments, however, there is the counter-influence of the iniquitous Big-Eyed Buddy Lomax with his schemes to defraud fellow Harlemites. Given the attributes of the three principal characters, the Tambourine Temple may be said to embody three very human qualities: goodness (Essie), weakness (Laura), and evil (Buddy). As such, the church itself represents a microcosm of the larger reality that is Harlem--a community in which these human forces coexist and interact, producing results that often are inspiring but just as frequently may be dire. It is in Hughes's somewhat abstract composite of Harlem that the meaning of Tambourines to Glory is to be found.

²⁷¹Tambourines to Glory, pp. 207-08.

Corruption in Harlem is shown to involve the white man, but his influence is thought to be peripheral. When racketeer Buddy mentions the power of "the fixer--the man behind the men behind the men,"²⁷² Laura asks if he is colored. Buddy's response is both cynical and practical: "You know he can't be colored."²⁷³ Similarly, for the Tambourine Temple, Laura commissions a mural depicting the Garden of Eden. It features a black Adam and Eve (who bear striking resemblances to Joe Louis and Sarah Vaughan), but the devil is unmistakably white.²⁷⁴ This, however, is Laura's idea; the gentle Essie speaks for Langston Hughes:

LAURA

That artist sure painted us a pretty Garden of Eden. . . .

ESSIE

Who told him to make the Devil white?

LAURA

Me--also to put a real diamond in the snake's head.

ESSIE

That snake should have been named Buddy.²⁷⁵

Quite clearly, Hughes labels the black hustler as Harlem's true degenerate, for, without his collusion, organized crime would find greater difficulty in peddling its deadly wares to the black community. Only once during the course of the play is such an idea promoted, but the substance of the dialogue is quite direct:

²⁷² Ibid., p. 203.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 205.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 206-07.

C. J.

I guess it's not enough you're doing, turning the Temple into a gambling den! Chasing all the young girls in the church! And don't think I don't know you've got a bunch of runners writing numbers for you in the block. Guys like you are no good for Harlem.

BUDDY

You talk like I'm not Harlem.

C. J.

You are not Harlem. Harlem is a dream--the dream black folks dream way down in the deep South. And then they come here and sometimes find it's a nightmare, because men like you trick and betray them. You're related to the devil, Buddy, that's what. . . . Harlem is full of good people, and people trying to be good, trying to get somewhere. Some are already there, up in the world--in the City Council, in Albany and in Washington. We've got wonderful doctors now, and lawyers and writers like Ralph Ellison, and composers like Margaret Bonds, and ministers like Rev. Dempsey, and young people--like Marietta and me, even. I'm going to amount to something, Buddy, in spite of all.

BUDDY

All meaning me, huh? You bore me, kid. . . . 276

The point is that Harlem is neither C. J.'s dream nor Buddy's corruption; it is both, and the difficulty lies in what happens to those caught between the two extremes. Harlem, like the Tambourine Temple, is a complex community in which good struggles against temptation and evil. The strong may emerge victorious, and the weak may descend to degradation, for, as in the church, the inhabitant of this community may benefit from all that is good about it if he does not permit himself to be ruined by all that is wrong. The problem is multi-faceted, but it remains internal and, apparently, can be solved only within the confines of the community itself. This view of Harlem is revealing and Hughes's conclusion is meaningful. Unfortunately, both remain buried beneath the gloss and brightness of a script which might have

been less superficial and a musical score which, although apparently authentic, might have contributed more insightfully to situation and character. Beneath the surface, Tambourines to Glory has much to recommend it; on the surface, one wonders what the critical reception might have been had it been written by a white man.

Fade Out--Fade In

Following 1963's two unsuccessful and virtually all-black musicals, there appeared in May, 1964, a bright, brisk, good-natured musical romp entitled Fade Out--Fade In. This, with virtually an all-white cast, was an exuberant show with plentiful laughs, fast pacing, lavish production numbers, a bright score, and a blissfully mindless plot. As sheer entertainment, and especially because of the popularity of its leading lady, the production found favor with the critics²⁷⁷ and the public alike, and it ran for a respectable, although not overwhelming, total of 271 performances.²⁷⁸

With book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Jule Styne, and direction by the old master, George Abbott, Fade Out--Fade In was tailored to the talents and personality of comedienne Carol Burnett. As Hope Springfield, a stage-struck girl who is pleasant but plain and rather gawky, Miss Burnett successfully clowned her way through a mistaken-identity plot which capitalized upon the

²⁷⁷Of the reviews in New York City's six leading daily newspapers, only one turned in a negative verdict. See: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1964, XXV, No. 16 (Week of June 8, 1964), pp. 248-51.

²⁷⁸Files of the Theatre Collection of the Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library (personal letter, June 9, 1971).

incongruity of attempting to transform this wholesome and ungainly creature into a Hollywood sex goddess. With Jack Cassidy, Lou Jacobi, Tina Louise, and Dick Patterson in supporting roles, the production broadly satirized the eccentricities and excesses of the motion picture industry during its palmy days of the 1930's.

Among the Hollywood characters whom Hope Springfield encounters in her unlikely rise to screen stardom is a black actor by the name of Lou Williams (portrayed by Tiger Haynes). His primary function is to play Bill "Bojangles" Robinson opposite Miss Burnett's devastating impersonation of Shirley Temple in a second-act song and dance entitled "You Mustn't Be Discouraged."²⁷⁹ Down on their luck, Hope and Lou have found temporary employment as walking advertisements for a children's dancing school. They are costumed as grotesque caricatures of the movie stars each is meant to represent: Hope wears "a full head of bobbing blond curls, a bow or two, a starched short dress over many petticoats, white socks, and flat Mary Jane shoes";²⁸⁰ Lou is "dressed in a bilious-looking green suit, a green derby, pink shirt and tie, yellow gloves and spats."²⁸¹ After bemoaning their declining film careers and making quick references to one another as "Shirley" and "Bojangles," they launch into a delicious parody of Shirley Temple's brand of hearty optimism:

²⁷⁹The hilarity of Miss Burnett's impression cannot adequately be described on paper; it must be seen and heard. She and Mr. Haynes have performed the routine on national television; however, for those unfamiliar with it, the original cast recording is recommended: Fade Out--Fade In, ABC-Paramount Records, Inc., ABCS-OC-3, Side II, Band 4.

²⁸⁰Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Fade Out--Fade In (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 91. Cited hereafter as Fade Out--Fade In.

²⁸¹Ibid., p. 92.

When you think you've hit the bottom
 And you're feeling really low,
 You mustn't be discouraged--
 There's always one step further down you can go!
 When you're lying in the gutter,
 Feeling just a bit unsure,
 Just wait until tomorrow--
 You may be lying flat face-down in a sewer! . . . ²⁸²

This number has absolutely nothing whatever to do with the remainder of the production and obviously was included to exploit Carol Burnett's comedic gifts. The character of Lou Williams (as "Bojangles") remains subordinate, in this sequence, to the star's mimicry, but his participation does serve to recall the kind of good-natured, faithful servant roles that Bill Robinson was obliged to play during his career in motion pictures. ²⁸³

More to the point than this show-stopping specialty turn ²⁸⁴ is a brief but incisive sequence (Act I, Scene v) in which the authors satirize Hollywood's attitude in presenting the image of the Negro. On the studio set, under the direction of Custer Corkley, Lou Williams and leading man Byron Prong prepare to rehearse a scene. Both wear robes over their costumes, and they begin by reading from the script "in casual monotones--for lines, not expression." ²⁸⁵ The action proceeds as follows:

²⁸² Ibid., p. 93.

²⁸³ A concise evaluation of Robinson's screen career may be found in: Peter Noble, "The Coming of the Sound Film," Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre: A Critical Approach, ed. and comp. Lindsay Patterson (New York: Publishers Company, Inc., 1967), p. 255. (This material has been extracted from Noble's book, The Negro in Films.)

²⁸⁴ The critics concurred that "You Mustn't Be Discouraged" prompted the greatest amount of laughter and received the most applause of any number in the show.

²⁸⁵ Fade Out--Fade In, p. 42.

LOU

"Mr. Bercovici--"

BYRON

"Yes, what is it, Lightning?"

LOU

"There's a lady outside...kind of wants to see you."

BYRON

"I told you I didn't want to see anybody."

LOU

"I told her that, but then I noticed she had a machine gun with her."

BYRON

"A machine gun?"

CORKLEY

That's enough. Lou, I don't have to tell you what you're supposed to do in this scene...

LOU

The usual, Mr. Corkley?

CORKLEY

The usual. . . . Rehearsal! Quiet, everyone!...Okay, Byron.
Enter Lou!

(BYRON goes into action with the punching bag. LOU has taken off his robe and put script down. He is revealed in tattered shirt, overalls with suspenders and large floppy shoes. He shuffles toward BYRON, slouching, mouth hanging, eyes bugging out--Willie Best, Stepin Fetchit style)

LOU

(Deep South, mumbling)

"~~MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM~~sah Buhkoveechee..."

BYRON

(Stops punching)

"Yes, what is it, Lightning?"

LOU

"Dey's a lady out sahde...kahnda wonts to see ya..."

BYRON

"I told you I didn't want to see anybody..."

LOU

"Ah tol huh dat...but den Ah notice she had a machine gun wid huh..."

BYRON

"A machine gun?"

LOU

"She's carryin' a vah-o-lin case...and dat kin oney mean one thing...(He holds up two fingers, then only one) ...dere's a machine gun insahde! Ah could feel de wings sproutin' outa mah back riah den an' dere...Ah ain't ready fo' no green pasture just yit, boss..."

(He exits shuffling and mumbling, receives an "okay" sign from CORKLEY as he finishes, then straightens up, puts on his robe, and sits at one side.)²⁸⁶

The scene is hardly inventive. Consciously or unconsciously, Comden and Green simply have paraphrased Harburg and Saidy's more imaginative mint julep sequence in Finian's Rainbow.²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, given the truly fantastic nature of any Stepin Fetchit characterization, the humor of Comden and Green's scene cannot be said to be exaggerated. Their intended racial statement is valid, therefore, insofar as it successfully ridicules the well-documented practice within the American motion picture industry of having regularly presented Negro characters in a demeaning fashion. Writing upon this subject in the late 1940's, Peter Noble stated:

The bulk of Hollywood's output in the past thirty years has . . . pointed out, in varying degrees of subtlety, those racial characteristics which supposedly indicate Negro inferiority and refer continually to his historic position of abject subservience to the white man. From "The Birth Of A Nation" to "Gone With The Wind" it has been the same sorry tale of discrimination.

Cinema audiences regard the coloured man as a clown, a buffoon, an idiot and a superstitious fool; and their feeling of contempt for him is a result of the manner in which he is invariably portrayed on the screen. The ordinary filmgoer has his whole outlook formulated by the film; politically, socially, intellectually he forms his opinions unconsciously through direct and indirect film propaganda. And in this instance the screen,

²⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

²⁸⁷ Supra, pp. 249-50.

an extremely powerful instrument for moulding opinion, has continually utilised its power to nurture among audiences this feeling of contempt, good-natured or otherwise, for those who happen to possess skins of a different shade. In forcing coloured actors and actresses to depict ignorant servants, lazy janitors, superstitious toilet-attendants, nit-wit maids, valets, shoe-shine boys, faithful retainers, tramps and no-accounts, and Uncle Tom rôles of every description, the film producers are merely carrying out a policy which seems to them to be a natural one--the debasement of the Negro, in the public mind, to that of an inferior. None of these film-characters is allowed to demonstrate a lively intelligence; all are merely cinematic puppets, empty-headed, grinning dolts with conversation consisting of those so-called "quaint" inanities with which all film-goers are by now familiar.²⁸⁸

That Comden and Green should include the Lou Williams scene and ask an audience to laugh at it requires recognition, on the part of that audience, not only of the Stepin Fetchit brand of racial screen comedy, but also of the underlying fraudulence of period film makers and its willing acceptance by the patrons of whom Noble speaks. In short, Fade Out--Fade In calls for derisive laughter at those who would employ and enjoy the comic black stereotype rather than laughter at the stereotype itself. Despite its brevity, the Lou Williams scene is socially relevant insofar as it exposes the pernicious aspects of stereotyping while also suggesting the positive development, on the part of the entertainment media and audiences alike, of a more humanized and diversified image of the Negro. It is a small statement in a much larger spoof of the eccentricities of the Hollywood film industry;²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Noble, The Negro in Films, pp. 7-8.

²⁸⁹ One might well complain that Comden, Green, and Styne ridicule the stereotyped presentation of the Negro in Hollywood films while conveniently ignoring the similar culpability of the musical stage from which they speak. In a later work entitled Hallelujah, Baby! (1967, in collaboration with Arthur Laurents), they focus upon race relations in the United States over a period of sixty years. Featured prominently is the Negro performer as he has been seen in various modes of live entertainment.

nevertheless, Fade Out-Fade In stands firmly in support of the Negro and insists that he be viewed as an equal member of society.

Golden Boy

In Fade Out--Fade In, the issue of race was only peripheral; later in 1964, a musical version of Clifford Odets' 1937 drama, Golden Boy, made that issue its central concern. The idea for the new Golden Boy was born in the imagination of its youthful producer, Hillard Elkins, who approached a somewhat skeptical Odets with the suggestion that the play be musicalized and made relevant to the contemporary scene.

In the play and the subsequent film version [explained Elkins], the principal character, a struggling young violinist who becomes a prize fighter, was an Italian. It seemed to me that with a slight alteration to fit the realities of the '60s--make the protagonist a Negro--"Golden Boy," set to music, would pack a punch. . . . When translated in terms of an American Negro of today, it would have the same kind of statement and point as the original play.²⁹⁰

John Gassner has stated that the thesis promoted in the 1937 drama was that "out materialistic society diverted men from humanly satisfying modes of self-realization."²⁹¹ The thesis which Elkins sought to promote in his musical version may be phrased, with equal aptness, as follows: our racist society diverts men from humanly satisfying modes of self-realization.

The basic concept was valid, but the process of working it out in concrete form was lengthy and fraught with difficulties which

²⁹⁰Hilliard Elkins, "Last Days of Clifford Odets," Sammy Davis in the New Musical Golden Boy [souvenir program], (New York: Globus Bros. Concessions, 1964), unpag. Hereafter cited as Elkins, program.

²⁹¹Gassner (ed.), A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 950. (Italics mine.)

ultimately affected the final product. At first, everything about the project appeared promising: Sammy Davis had agreed to star; Charles Strouse and Lee Adams were commissioned to provide the music and lyrics; Clifford Odets was to adapt the book from his own play. The writing began in March, 1962,²⁹² but it soon became apparent that Odets was not fully attuned to the stylistic requirements of the musical theatre, nor was his sense of the newly introduced racial element very clear. At the time of his death (August 15, 1963), Odets had completed a manuscript, but it has been reported that this draft was far from a workable version.

It was obvious that, at the least, much work remained to be done. The driving line of the original play was of course there. . . . But music in the theatre creates a profoundly altered time-world in the audience, material which in straight drama requires ten minutes of preparation can in a musical context be attacked instantly, and the text was that of straight drama, as yet undistilled to the concentrate which music compels. And Clifford [Odets], still working on the page, had not been privileged to witness the physical fact onstage of a Negro boy talking to a white girl; Joe Bonaparte had been changed in name only, and to Wellington at that.²⁹³

During the months following Odets' death, the script was thoroughly revised in what has been described as "a scissors-and-paste job put together by a committee of non-writers."²⁹⁴ When the lengthy tryout tour began, it became evident that the production was in very serious

²⁹²Elkins, program.

²⁹³William Gibson, "Preface" A Memento," in: Clifford Odets and William Gibson (book), Lee Adams (lyrics), and Charles Strouse (music), Golden Boy (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), p. 13. Mr. Gibson's "Preface: A Memento" hereafter cited as: Gibson, "Preface." References to the text of the musical play hereafter cited as Golden Boy.

²⁹⁴Gibson (acknowledging the remarks of Hillard Elkins), "Preface," p. 15.

trouble. Approximately six weeks prior to the projected Broadway opening, Hillard Elkins enlisted the aid of playwright William Gibson, a close personal friend and disciple of the late Clifford Odets.

Summoned to Boston, Gibson was appalled by what he saw on the stage and has written of his response as follows:

I was not prepared to find the book gutted of content, no writer present at all, the audience yawning, the director in the third week of a holiday at home in merrie England, and, with its Broadway unveiling a month and a half off, the star in an impotent wrath that the production was saying nothing of what he knew it must say--if only for verisimilitude--on the most divisive issue of our time in this country.²⁹⁵

For inspiration, Gibson returned to Odets' original drama and, in an effort to reintroduce the racial theme in an accurate and meaningful manner, worked in close consultation with Sammy Davis.²⁹⁶ The then-current director disagreed with Gibson's new concepts and was summarily superseded by Arthur Penn. There then began the feverish undertaking of mounting a completely new production while the old one still was in performance. The book was entirely rewritten, scenery was altered, Strouse and Adams composed new songs for which new choreography was devised.²⁹⁷ These efforts bore fruit. When Golden Boy opened on Broadway,²⁹⁸ the critical verdict was largely favorable,²⁹⁹ and

²⁹⁵Gibson, "Preface," p. 15.

²⁹⁶Ibid., p. 17.

²⁹⁷Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹⁸In principal roles, the cast included: Sammy Davis, Paula Wayne, Kenneth Tobey, Billy Daniels, and Johnny Brown.

²⁹⁹Five of New York's six daily newspaper critics approved the production. See: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1964, XXV, No. 23 (Week of November 9, 1964), pp. 185-88.

audiences filled the theatre for many months.³⁰⁰ Nevertheless, despite flashes of genuine brilliance--particularly in the exceptional choreography by Donald McKayle--Golden Boy remained an uneven production, a fact readily conceded by co-author William Gibson:

It was never possible for us to bring in a truly organic show --the components we had to blend, music, book, casting, lyrics, dance, sets, were so disparate the union was not unlike a shotgun wedding, and the daily revisions to meet musical changes cost us much of Clifford's dialogue--and the reviews we garnered reflected its inner incompatibilities; but however misbegotten it was alive, and its successful delivery after such labors displeased none of us.³⁰¹

The musical version closely follows the outline of Odets' original drama. In it, the Golden Boy of the title is Joe Wellington, a young black who is determined to escape from the poverty and dreariness of the Harlem slum in which he has been raised. To this end, and much against the wishes of his father, Joe employs a talent developed of necessity in the streets and enters the prize ring. A clever and skillful boxer, Joe nevertheless lacks the flamboyant style that his second-rate (white) manager, Tom Moody, knows is necessary to attract enthusiastic crowds and build him into a champion. Motivated by the promise of big money, Joe becomes impatient with his lackluster career under Moody's guidance, but he is persuaded by Lorna Moon, Moody's emotionally scarred but beautiful blonde mistress, to undertake a road tour. Although Lorna intends to marry Moody as soon as he can afford to divorce his estranged wife, Joe makes it clear that he will fight

³⁰⁰"Forty weeks after its premiere, in the middle of a very hot summer, it was still selling standing room only. Never during its run did box office receipts fall under \$11,000 a day. One week its intake was \$94,000." (Hughes and Meltzer, Black Magic, p. 262.)

³⁰¹Gibson, "Preface," pp. 20-21.

for her--both in the ring and out. While Lorna remains aloof but attracted, the spirit of success appears in the person of Eddie Satin, a powerful black racketeer who offers Joe the material rewards he has been seeking. Becoming increasingly famous, Joe abandons his Harlem roots and is welcomed into the superficial society of Eddie Satin and his high-living cronies downtown. Fearing that Eddie will gain control of Joe's contract, Moody asks Lorna to intercede on his behalf. When Joe expresses his love for her, Lorna quickly succumbs to the temptation she has been resisting and agrees to leave Moody for Joe. After a passionate interlude, however, Lorna discovers that she hasn't the courage to honor her commitment; at the last moment, she betrays Joe and marries Moody. Stunned by her rejection, which he correctly interprets as having a racial basis, Joe enters the prize ring where his rage mounts along with the roar of the crowd until, unintentionally, he delivers to his opponent a fatal blow. Dazed, and aware of the personal defeat underlying his professional success, Joe drives off wildly in a shiny sports car and is killed when it crashes.

Gone from the original drama is the protagonist's conflict between art and worldly success. The musical retains the success theme, but it is made a part of a larger conflict which, simply stated, has to do with the racial division in American society. It is, for Joe Wellington, a conflict between being invisible (to borrow a metaphor from Ralph Ellison)³⁰² and being a distinct entity, a conflict between being a "nigger" and being a man. As he vacillates between two worlds--one black, one white--that society has set apart, Joe

³⁰² See: Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: New American Library [A Signet Book], 1952).

undergoes an identity crisis that can be resolved only by the acceptance and acknowledgement of whites. Charles E. Silberman contends that such is psychologically typical of the black experience:

Every Negro must grapple with the universal "who am I?" in a way no white man can ever know. For always the Negro must come up against the knowledge of the white world's distaste for him, and so always there remains a lingering doubt. . . . The Negro begins to wonder if he really exists at all. Mistreatment and overt prejudice hurt, to be sure; the social ostracism that seems to deny the Negroes' existence hurts far more. The problem of "facelessness," as James Baldwin puts it, is the main preoccupation of Negro literature, each writer using his own metaphor to describe it.³⁰³

This concept is stated with clarity in Joe's restless "Night Song," the lyrics of which follow in part:

Where do you turn
When you burn with this feeling of rage?
Who do you fight
When you want to break out
But your skin is your cage?
Uptown--
Just another joe,
Downtown--
Where you gonna go?...

Always looking
For a place to be,
Where's that bright tomorrow
For a guy like me?
God damn!
Life is going by!
And I stand and wonder
Who the hell am I?³⁰⁴

Thus, throughout the course of Golden Boy, Joe's every action proceeds from a compulsion to belong, to become a part of that larger world which lies beyond the depressed confines of Harlem. To succeed within the mainstream of society is to reinforce Joe's sense of self.

³⁰³Silberman, p. 109.

³⁰⁴Golden Boy, pp. 36-37.

Familiar with the meaning of deprivation, Joe Wellington equates success with the most visible manifestations of social acceptance: fortune and fame. In conversation with Lorna, he reveals himself as follows:

My poppa's a junkman and thinks that's fine, my brother works for CORE and gets his head kicked in--and my whole life seems like one long night I've been standing in alleys looking across the park at these buildings, the lights of this city, my God, it's like diamonds in the air, why can't I pick some too? Who lives there, angels? white angels in robes?³⁰⁵

Lorna's response is direct: "Angels don't live there, just the rich and famous, and it's better than heaven, you can fight your way in."³⁰⁶ Fighting his way in, both literally and figuratively, becomes Joe's primary concern, and he pursues riches with a vengeance. It is not surprising, therefore, that Eddie Satin, a fellow black man, should exert such powerful influence in his advice to Joe:

This is the life!
They've kept you in a box,
Break down the walls,
Come out and play!

See all the lights,
They're spelling Wellington!
How sweet the song
When you belong.³⁰⁷

To this, Joe replies musically with a veritable catalogue of all that he wants:

JOE
Can I have a car
With a built-in bar?

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

GROUP
And a color TV
And a Playboy key!

JOE
And a hundred shares
Of AT&T?

EDDIE
Yes, you can!
Yes, you can! . . . 308

To be sure, a desire for luxuries and creature comforts is comprehensible--especially in an individual who, heretofore, has been denied them; however, Joe's preoccupation with material possessions is obsessive and leads to a conclusion which confirms his desperate need to belong beyond the confines of his socially imposed perimeter. In his perceptive analysis of the rise of a black American middle class, E. Franklin Frazier states that "the single factor that has dominated the mental outlook of the black bourgeoisie has been its obsession with the struggle for status,"³⁰⁹ and that "the attraction of the delusion of wealth is enhanced by the belief that wealth will gain [Negroes] acceptance in American life."³¹⁰ Such is the case with Joe Wellington, and the situation is evaluated with clarity in a conversation between Lorna Moon and Joe's brother, Frank:

FRANK
I'll tell you something about my brother, Miss Moon, he's nobody's brother. . . . He thinks if he's famous he'll be everybody's. Is that what you think? (He appraises her.) It's why Joe wants all the riches of this world.

LORNA
Who doesn't, is that wrong?

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 74. (The song continues at length.)

³⁰⁹ Frazier, p. 194.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 189.

FRANK

It's hard. Because it's your world. . . . Miss Moon, here's the truth--if Joe can't make your world, and can't live in ours, he's a man falling in space.³¹¹

As Golden Boy proceeds, we watch Joe fall until, with the final rejection, he realizes that his attempt to buy acceptance has failed:

EDDIE

You're not that kid in the dirty sneakers two years ago, you wear the best now, eat the best, sleep the best. . . . I gave you everything you asked for--

JOE

You gave me shit!

EDDIE

(Breathing)

You asked for it. Joe baby, everything you got you asked for, if you don't like what you asked for you don't like you. Now don't get fancy on me, nigger. . . .³¹²

Thus, even in the eyes of a fellow black man, for all his fancy clothes and fast cars, Joe Wellington remains a "nigger" who might have heeded the warning in his father's question: "What do he want, be a big shot with white folks where he don't belong?"³¹³

The attraction that Lorna holds for Joe, and the amorous relationship which ultimately develops between them, likewise may be interpreted as a manifestation of Joe's need to affirm his sense of self. On the subject of miscegenation, psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price Cobbs have considered the psychology of the black male as follows:

When a black man and a white woman unite, one can assume that unnumbered racially connected issues will arise. For the

³¹¹Golden Boy, pp. 80-81.

³¹²Ibid., pp. 115-16.

³¹³Ibid., p. 60.

black man, the white woman represents the socially identified female ideal and thus an intensely exciting object for his sexual possession. She has been identified as precisely the individual to whom access is barred by every social institution. . . . He feels a sense of power at having acquired this highly valuable woman and a sense of power that she finds him desirable and indeed that she finds him more desirable than a white lover.

.
He sees himself as having vanquished the white man in the field of love and of having rendered him impotent and castrated, for the white woman, in fantasy at least, has embraced a white lover and then chosen a black one. While in every other area of life the black man may feel emasculated and humiliated by the white man, here he can reverse the roles and, because of the central importance of the sexual function in human affairs, may feel that the scales are almost balanced.³¹⁴

Although such motivation is not explored in depth, it is strongly implied in Joe's competitive attitude toward Tom Moody--especially as it is expressed in his behavior with Lorna. Joe is well aware of the fact that Moody, who privately refers to him as "ole black Joe"³¹⁵ and "that jig,"³¹⁶ will use Joe in order to make a profit but never will acknowledge him as an equal. Joe's defense is to disparage Moody before Lorna, and the method he invariably employs contains outright references to Lorna's sexual relationship with "that red-headed hater."³¹⁷ "He's a born loser if I ever saw one," sneers Joe. "That's what interests you in him, huh?"³¹⁸ Even in song, Joe's competitive spirit produces sly, racially-oriented, sexual innuendo:

JOE
And of course
In certain cases

³¹⁴Grier and Cobbs, pp. 76-77.

³¹⁵Golden Boy, p. 41.

³¹⁶Ibid., p. 68.

³¹⁷Ibid., p. 79.

³¹⁸Ibid., p. 46.

A dark horse
 May win some races.
 Stick around, lady, and see!
 Tell Moody that when you're--in his arms tonight.

LORNA

You're a fresh kid.

JOE

You're just used to stale ones.³¹⁹

Finally, Joe comes directly to the point: "What's it like in bed with him? (LORNA shakes her bowed head.) Zero. Lorna, why, why, why, why, why?"³²⁰ In this fashion, Joe's battle is waged in the sexual arena as well as the sports arena, and when at last Lorna accepts him as her lover, the stigma of race suddenly is obliterated. "Lorna," he cries ecstatically, "what color, what color am I? No--color!"³²¹ At this moment, Joe can think of himself as a man; unfortunately, it is a short-lived victory. When Lorna subsequently rejects him and returns to Moody, Joe's illusion of belonging collapses. Once again race becomes a barrier, and its importance in the area of sexual relations is effectively stated as Moody, having been informed by Joe that "Lorna loves me,"³²² lashes out with incredulous fury: "You crazy--black--bastard."³²³ And so the door of social acceptance slams again in Joe's face, thereby illustrating author William Gibson's thesis that "with the act of love

³¹⁹Ibid., p. 51.

³²⁰Ibid., p. 113.

³²¹Ibid., p. 99.

³²²Ibid., p. 106.

³²³Ibid.

acceptable the racial problem qua racial problem would vanish; if sex was taboo, so was sitting together at a lunch counter."³²⁴

Unlike the decade's earlier Kwamina, Golden Boy presents its potentially explosive love affair between a black man and a white woman in an absolutely forthright manner. The authors make no effort to idealize Joe Wellington, nor do they attempt to "whiten him up" with claims of a superior education or good breeding.³²⁵ Joe never apologizes for his color, and he requires only that he be accorded recognition as a human being. The sardonic and pointed humor of "Colorful," a song delivered for Lorna's benefit, is significant; the lyrics follow, in part:

I've tried all sorts of shades,
Put them all to the test.
But I look at myself,
And black--suits me best!

Black is chic,
Always correct for the house or yard.
Black is neat,
Goes with everything, and doesn't try too hard.
Black is basic, you'll agree.
As the Duchess of Windsor would say,
"Black is me!"

Well, I've been yellow at times, I'm sorry to say,
Yes, I've been afraid to fight.
Sure, I've been scared as can be,
But take it from me,
I never quite turned white!³²⁶

When, in his relationship with Lorna, Joe expresses his passion for her, he becomes one of the musical theatre's very few black male characters

³²⁴Gibson, "Preface," p. 19.

³²⁵Supra, pp. 383-84.

³²⁶Golden Boy, p. 95.

whose masculinity is not comprised either by violence or by comedy. His lyrics of love are explicit and emphasize his physical desire for Lorna while also reminding her, reassuringly, of the social contempt that their union is certain to engender:

After all the nights of wanting you,
Lying there, loving you, hating you,
Tonight I'm touching you, tasting you!
World, you're gonna see,
We'll make out somehow.
Here's my girl and me, 327
They can't hurt us now.

There is, likewise, no hesitancy whatever in the physical staging of the scene. Lorna is an eager partner, and the lovers come together ardently:

LORNA

Joe, take me somewhere, take me somewhere--Oh my God, I'll fall all apart if you--don't hold me--

(JOE comes to take her face in his hands, and kisses her on the mouth, gently; the warmth of mouth to mouth steals over their bodies, their arms slowly enveloping each in the other's, until they are one figure, totally joined. The lights dim out on them.)³²⁸

On the musical stage, it is the first scene of its kind to achieve unself-conscious fulfillment,³²⁹ and its uncompromising honesty apparently made the love scene acceptable to audiences. Significantly, not a single critic chose even to mention it.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

³²⁹ It is true that the interracial love affair in No Strings was treated quite naturally, but it involved a black woman (who was highly idealized) and a white man. The opposite combination, as in Golden Boy, tends to be viewed with greater sensitivity. A 1971 national opinion poll conducted by Louis Harris and Associates revealed that "six times as many people said a black man with a white girl" disturbed them more than the reverse. See: Joan Downs, "Black/White Dating," Life, LXX, No. 20 (May 28, 1971), p. 67.

Although Joe Wellington is allowed to have his Lorna, he is not permitted to keep her. As usual, intermarriage is avoided. In the musical Golden Boy, unlike the original drama, Lorna's rejection of Joe is final. There is no eleventh hour reconciliation, and Joe drives off to his death alone--thereby precluding any possible interpretation that the lovers should be punished for an "unnatural" act. The pity Lorna feels for the dependent Moody remains the same as in the original, but in this version the disavowal of her love for Joe acquires greater significance and seems better motivated than before. The key to Lorna's character may be found in a brief but characteristically honest remark: "All I want is peace and quiet, Joe. At twenty you want to discover America and at thirty your feet hurt. I just want to sleep my days out like a tired cat."³³⁰ By virtue of her weariness, her instability, Lorna would appear to be an unlikely candidate for partnership in a mixed marriage. Early in the first act, while strolling through a Harlem playground, Joe and Lorna are accosted by three white youths who taunt them: "Whatta, y'like coons, lady?"; "Hands offa the lady, nigger!"³³¹ A confrontation ensues, but Lorna seems unfazed by this virulent expression of hostility until later, when she enunciates her true misgivings: "What are you offering, Joe?--a walk hand in hand down the street with half the world biting at me every step?"³³² As she seriously begins to consider a liaison with Joe, Lorna's doubts

³³⁰Golden Boy, p. 69.

³³¹Ibid., p. 48.

³³²Ibid., p. 79.

about the relationship begin to center more and more upon her own ability to cope with society's disapproval. In the title song, she sings:

Weary girls like me
Have nothing left,
So how could we
Give something to
Golden boys like you?

Is it all too late,
Or could I find
The strength somewhere
To see it through
With a boy
Like you?³³³

The answer, of course, is that Lorna cannot summon the necessary strength, and with a deadened spirit she rationalizes her decision to remain with Moody, placing the ultimate blame upon a racially intolerant society. "I can't--change anything," she whispers brokenly; "I'm tired, old, don't want any new--worlds, can't take another--step, I'm so--scared--I can't change, no--."³³⁴ And so she betrays Joe. "I haven't--the guts to--make a life--with you,"³³⁵ Lorna explains, and with these words she ruins him.

Despite the seemingly pivotal prize fight in which Joe kills his opponent, it is Lorna's rejection--and all it implies--which destroys him. If her love meant acceptance and reinforcement of Joe's sense of self, then her disavowal of that love could serve only to remind him that his identity, in the white world, inevitably is defined by his color. At the end, it is his color, rather than the barbaric act

³³³ Ibid., pp. 85-86.

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

committed in the arena, from which Joe flees. "I gotta--get out, I gotta--run, move--get in my car, speed--I gotta get out of my--skin --."336 Significantly, his final words are reserved for the woman who, by now, has come to represent the destructive forces of white rejection. "Oh Lorna," he cries in despair, "why couldn't you love me right?"337 It is a plea directed to every Caucasian in the audience.

Joe's tragedy is that he cannot escape the stigma of race which not only prevents him from belonging but, in a larger sense, prevents him from being. His death in an automobile crash may be construed as a symbolic extension of society's denial of Joe's very existence. In this fashion, Golden Boy effectively displays the damaging effect upon the human personality of irrational prejudice and constant rejection. Its lesson is well stated in the final scene when the news of Joe's death is received by those closest to him:

[PAPA] WELLINGTON

My Joe--killed. (He shakes his head, unbelieving.) What waste--

LORNA

Yes. What waste.

FRANK

Come, Pa. We'll bring Joe home--

WELLINGTON

(When he can.)

Yeah--where he belongs--

LORNA

Oh my God, he belonged anywhere--anywhere a human being could --walk--.338

336 Ibid., p. 123.

337 Ibid.

338 Ibid., pp. 124-25.

Golden Boy is, in effect, Joe Wellington's play. The remaining black characters are only barely sketched in and may be dispensed with in brief, for each is designed to clarify some aspect of Joe's personality. Eddie Satin, the powerful racketeer who is involved "in everything from whores to horse,"³³⁹ represents the kind of material success that Joe initially would achieve. Eddie has escaped from the ghetto and indulges his taste for elegance in a downtown penthouse, but he moves in the social mainstream at the expense of his own race. His nefarious dealings are conducted in Harlem, and he profits from the needs of lower class blacks who despise him.³⁴⁰ In some respects, Eddie Satin is the logical extension of Sporting Life, but he is a far more sophisticated and dangerous predator. Eddie's opposite may be found in the person of Joe's brother, Frank. A civil rights activist, Frank's goal is not personal gain; rather, he fights for the larger cause of his race. Like Joe, Frank battles for equality, but when it is observed that he has received "a busted head" for his efforts, Frank replies: "I get what Joe doesn't."³⁴¹ It is implied, therefore, that Frank's course of action in support of his people provides him with the sense of identity that Joe so desperately lacks. Providing contrast to the two aggressive brothers is their father, Papa Wellington, a patient, peaceful man who disapproves any kind of fight. He faults Frank for meddling in affairs that are not his (the civil rights struggle in the South),³⁴² and

³³⁹ Ibid., p. 70.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁴² Ibid., p. 33.

objects to Joe's boxing career on the grounds that he wants him to live a respectable life and "not be just another colored fighter."³⁴³

Representative of an older generation, Papa Wellington has learned his place and will remain in it. "You're looking at yesterday, I see tomorrow,"³⁴⁴ Joe tells his father, and it is a valid observation. But Papa Wellington is not an "Uncle Tom"; he is suspicious of whites collectively and simply prefers to live and work peacefully in the company of his own people. These three subordinate characters--Eddie Satin, Frank, and Papa Wellington--are very thinly drawn, but each serves the effective purpose of demonstrating various possible modes of coping with the reality of being a black urban American.

Beyond the personal problems of its protagonist, Golden Boy contains two excellent musical production numbers which speak intelligently of the dissatisfaction and anger engendered by the ghetto experience. The first of these is a deceptively cheerful and sassy tribute to the "joys" of living in Harlem. As Joe is about to embark on a road tour, his friends implore him not to forget his roots. Without respect to the various characters who sing specific lines, Lee Adams' double-edged lyrics follow in part:

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!

.
 Don't forget our glorious P.S. Forty-two,
 With the ninety kids in every class,
 Radiators full of ice all winter through--
 Man, oh, man, you really freeze your a--

³⁴³Ibid., p. 35.

³⁴⁴Ibid., p. 61.

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--
 Oh, yeah--
 The place that white folks--
 Think we love!³⁴⁵

The intent of this show-stopping³⁴⁶ song and dance routine was not lost in performance. In his review of Golden Boy, Howard Taubman commented:

Few of the grim sociological tracts have described with more burning zeal all the things that are wrong in Harlem, and no one, you may be sure, can fail to pay attention to this number. . . . It has been said that revolution could be buried in a song with no one the wiser; the coming change chants its urgency from every beat of this number, and it's not meant to be a secret.³⁴⁷

Equally as intense, and even more powerful, is a song entitled "No More." Immediately following Lorna's betrayal of him, Joe wanders the streets of Harlem, somberly attempting to overcome his grief:

Well, you had your chance.
 No more.
 Now I'll play the fool
 No more.
 How I needed love!
 But you closed the door.
 Oh, you'll laugh at me
 No more.³⁴⁸

He is joined by a chorus of Harlemites who also take up the song; however, as the stage directions indicate, while Joe sings a private

³⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 55-57.

³⁴⁶ Laufe, p. 381.

³⁴⁷ Howard Taubman, "Theater: Sammy Davis in a Musical 'Golden Boy,'" New York Times (October 21, 1964), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1964, XXV, No. 23 (Week of November 9, 1964), p. 185.

³⁴⁸ Golden Boy, p. 108.

lament, the chorus is singing a public resolve.³⁴⁹ If he is thinking of Lorna, the chorus is considering a history of oppression by whites:

How I bled for you!
No more.
Shed my skin for you.
No more.
Oh, I worshipped you,
That you can't ignore.
But I ain't your slave
No more.

Well, you had your way!
No more!
Well, it ain't your day
No more!
Well, I'm standin' up,
I ain't on the floor.
I ain't bowin' down
No more!³⁵⁰

The mood is defiant, even militant, and it is climaxed by Joe's heart-breaking but potentially prophetic lyric, "I just wanted love, / Why'd it turn to war?"³⁵¹ What is raised here in song is the voice of the black masses, and it is a voice which the authors of Golden Boy insist must be heeded. In Black Rage, psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs have stated: "We believe that the black masses will rise with a simple and eloquent demand to which new leaders must give tongue. They will say to America simply: 'GET OFF OUR BACKS!'"³⁵² One could not hope to find a more lucid summation of the total meaning of the musical Golden Boy.

³⁴⁹Ibid., p. 109.

³⁵⁰Ibid.

³⁵¹Ibid.

³⁵²Grier and Cobbs, p. 170.

For all its considerable virtues, Golden Boy remains an imperfect musical play.³⁵³ Author William Gibson has allowed too much of Odets' boxing milieu to intrude upon the central issue which now has become the psychologically destructive effects of racism. As a result, the apparently climactic second act prize fight unfortunately is incidental to the main line of action. As Henry Hewes has observed, "if this Joe is to end tragically, it should seem the direct result of rejection by the white man's world rather than the consequence of a ring accident."³⁵⁴ In point of fact, Joe's fate is the result of rejection, but Hewes is correct in identifying the fact that the prize fight tends to overshadow the earlier climax, and the result is confusing. Nevertheless, despite its structural flaws, Golden Boy must be viewed as one of the American musical theatre's most effective Negro-oriented accomplishments. Joe Wellington undoubtedly is one of the best conceived and most fully psychologically penetrated black characters ever to cross the musical stage. His motives are comprehensible, his frustrations are nearly unbearable to behold; in short, he is human and very vividly realized. The miscegenation theme is intelligently and tastefully handled, and if the lovers do not succeed in remaining together, the implication is that they might have done so were it not for the weakness of the white partner. Finally, in its acknowledgement of the deleterious effects upon black people of irrational white racism, Golden Boy presents

³⁵³ The major imperfections, not detailed here, are accurately assessed in Laufe, Broadway's Greatest Musicals, pp. 380-82.

³⁵⁴ Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript: The Gym and the Jungle," Saturday Review, XLVII, No. 45 (November 7, 1964), p. 29.

not so much a plea for human tolerance as it does a demand for human recognition. As such, it is in tune with the outcry of racial disaffection so characteristic of the 1960's.

The Zulu and the Zayda

A lighter, if somewhat peculiar, treatment of interracial relations appeared on Broadway in November, 1965. Based upon a short story by Dan Jacobson and billed as "a play with music,"³⁵⁵ The Zulu and the Zayda featured a book by Howard Da Silva and Felix Leon, with music and lyrics by Harold Rome. Not precisely what one might categorize a full-scale musical,³⁵⁶ the production nevertheless belonged to the tradition of the American musical theatre, and its structure might best be compared with Simply Heavenly.³⁵⁷ Critic Howard Taubman accurately assessed the stylistic confusion as follows:

The adaptation [of the short story] is broad in characterization and simple in its emotions; the approach is familiar and viable in musical comedy.

When "The Zulu and the Zayda" makes itself completely at home in the world of the musical theater, it has engaging interludes. At such moments even its sentimentality . . . can be tolerated.

But as a play "The Zulu and the Zayda," despite its good-will, cannot be taken seriously. It makes its point about the kinship of a white old man and young Zulu with an unashamed resort to all the trite devices of comedy and emotion. In its alleged dramatic sections it is corn unlimited.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵"The Zulu and the Zayda," Playbill, II, No. 12 (December, 1965), p. 19.

³⁵⁶Harold Rome's eleven songs reinforce character, mood, and occasionally thought, but they have nothing to do with the action of the play. Any, or all, could be removed without doing irreparable harm.

³⁵⁷Supra, pp. 327-28.

³⁵⁸Howard Taubman, "Theater: Premiere of 'The Zulu and the Zayda,'" New York Times (November 11, 1965), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1965, XXVI, No. 13 (Week of November 15, 1965), p. 279.

Further complicating the proceedings was the fact that The Zulu and the Zayda was quite specifically aimed at a Jewish audience. Much of the comedy was based upon an overabundant use of the Yiddish language, thereby seriously limiting the show's mass appeal.³⁵⁹ Despite these flaws, The Zulu and the Zayda provided an often hilarious and sometimes quite touching evening in the theatre. Its weaknesses were bolstered by the outstanding performances of Menasha Skulnik and Louis Gossett, who were widely praised. As a result, the reviews were mixed--with the book receiving the bulk of negative criticism. The production enjoyed a modest run of 179 performances.

The plot is very simple. In Yiddish, Zayda means grandfather, and this particular Zayda is an irrepressible old gentleman who has come from London to live with his son, Harry Grossman, and family in Johannesburg, South Africa. Not content to remain idle, Zayda has a talent for slipping out of the house unnoticed to go adventuring about the city where, invariably, he either runs afoul of South African law or succeeds in getting himself thoroughly lost. To remedy the situation, the Grossmans hire Paulus (the Zulu), brother of their houseboy, Johannes, to serve as Zayda-sitter. The fact that Paulus speaks only his native tongue while Zayda has a predilection for Yiddish does not prevent these two from becoming fast friends, and soon they are chattering away in a combination of Zulu, Yiddish, and English. Problems arise when, on their excursions into town, Zayda and Paulus cheerily ignore the harsh separatist code of South African apartheid. They create hostility when they are seen walking hand in hand. They are detained for sitting

³⁵⁹ Most of the critics were aware of the difficulty posed to the non-Yiddish speaking playgoer.

together on a park bench. Finally, because Zayda insists upon accompanying Paulus on the latter's day off, they are arrested--along with the friends whom Paulus has gone to visit--for having illegally entered a black location forbidden to whites. Thoroughly annoyed, and more than a little jealous of the close bond between Zulu and Zayda, Harry Grossman dismisses his father's beloved companion, whereupon Zayda suffers a heart attack. In the hospital, Zayda is inconsolable (even chicken soup has no beneficial effect), and Harry is persuaded to reunite the unlikely pair. At the final curtain, with renewed spirit, Zayda joyously affirms his love of life and eagerly plans future escapades with his devoted Zulu.

It has been said that The Zulu and the Zayda is "about the foibles and follies of apartheid in South Africa where life in Johannesburg, it seems, is not unlike Jackson, Mississippi."³⁶⁰ Given the distant setting, it is not difficult to detest the governmental oppression of the native population and the threatening tactics employed against anyone who dares to disobey the laws of the land. Moreover, the Nazi-like police enforcement of official policy--with its emphasis upon restricted locations (a polite phrase for ghettos), separate buses, identification passes, and travel permits--not only is designed to offend anyone's sense of independence, but specifically is calculated to elicit a fierce negative response from a predominantly Jewish audience familiar with the meaning of persecution. The dehumanizing effect of apartheid is well stated as Johannes lectures his brother, fresh from the kraal, on the rules of conduct necessary for survival in the city:

³⁶⁰ Hughes and Meltzer, Black Magic, p. 233.

JOHANNES

You fool! Fool! I think you smart, but you fool! I teach you, but you not learn. I tell you rules, but you not learn. . . . You remember what I say to you about looking? . . . Always look to see what European think. You not look in Baas Grossman's face? You not see his eyes? Danger! . . . And laughing. You always laughing. I never tell you rule about laughing?

PAULUS

I laugh when thing funny, no?

JOHANNES

No! You laugh when safe! When you in your room, or alone with other Zulu, or AFTER Baas Grossman laugh, THEN you laugh.

PAULUS

Hard rule. Must always wear different face.

JOHANNES

Right! Always! That way live!³⁶¹

Significantly, however, it is not only Johannes and his fellow blacks who must wear the mask of subservience. The law is rigid, and any attempt to bend it, on the part of the European population, is quickly repressed. Thus, Harry Grossman conforms to regulations with which he does not necessarily agree simply because it is convenient to do so. When, because of his father's activities, Harry must deal with officialdom, he allows himself to be bullied and suddenly becomes the very picture of abject humility, wearing the same kind of mask that Johannes describes.³⁶² It is this atmosphere of tension that provides the troubled background against which The Zulu and the Zayda is played.

The great charm of this little comedy is derived from the manner in which its two principal characters blithely ignore the harsh dictates of the society in which they live. Neither is a crusader. Zayda and

³⁶¹Howard Da Silva, Felix Leon (book), and Harold Rome (music and lyrics), The Zulu and the Zayda (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1966), pp. 26-27. Cited hereafter as Zulu and Zayda.

³⁶²Ibid., pp. 38-41.

his Zulu friend never battle the system; rather, they refuse to acknowledge it. Thoroughly involved with one another and the joys of each day's new discovery, the forces that would keep them separate and unequal--or, at the very least, insist upon a servant-master relationship--seem to them so nonsensical as to be unworthy of their attention. Rules clearly were not made for this pair. When Paulus acknowledges the law by stating that he has erred in taking Zayda to the restricted location, Zayda's reply is both typical and wise: "Not your mistake. Not my mistake...their mistake...location...a mishugas [an idiocy]." ³⁶³ Similarly, toward the final curtain, Paulus reduces the code of apartheid to its essential irrationality. Waiting outside the hospital to greet the ailing Zayda, he is again reprimanded by his fearful brother for having stepped over a hedge onto the forbidden hospital grounds:

JOHANNES

Not allow to stand there.

PAULUS

You say in hospital not allowed. But there? . . . Only one step away.

JOHANNES

One big step. Here safe. There trouble.

PAULUS

In kraal, I understand...crocodile in river...trouble. But here, grass...flower...(Steps over hedge) here grass...flower...(Johannes pulls him back) why safe here, trouble there?

JOHANNES

Is law.

PAULUS

Meshugah! [Crazy!] ³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

And so it is crazy for these two highly practical dreamers who refuse to be bound by what to them is ridiculous. Innocently, they will go their independent way. Their solution to the problem is personal rather than social.

Early in the first act, Johannes remarks that "it not make much difference if Paulus not speak English. Zayda not speak English either. They have a lot in common."³⁶⁵ The line is intended to provoke laughter, for on the surface they would appear to be opposites. One speaks Yiddish (mingled with English), the other speaks Zulu; one is old, the other young; one is white, the other black. Despite these artificial barriers, Zayda and Paulus do, in fact, have much in common. Both possess agile minds, and each has an intimate knowledge of the effects of persecution--Paulus as a black man living under the restrictions of South African apartheid, and Zayda as a Jew whose early years were spent in Czarist Russia.³⁶⁶ The individual experiences are not dissimilar, and perhaps it is this that allows each to respect the other's essential humanity and to ignore the barriers that society would impose. The intensity of the relationship is clearly revealed when Zayda accompanies Paulus to the restricted area in which the Zulu's friends live.

PETER

You are stupid...this is a location...the only whites allowed here are the police...(A little pause.)

ZAYDA

A mistake...I go...Paulus, you stay...

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 38-39. (Although the word "pogrom" is never uttered, it is indicated rather bitterly that the village of Zayda's birth no longer exists--a fact which implies a great deal.)

PAULUS

Wait, Zayda!...Peter, Zayda like brother...

PETER

Akafani nomfowenue. (William laughs.)

ZAYDA

For why you laugh?

WILLIAM

He say you not look like brother...

PAULUS

Not important he look.³⁶⁷

Indeed, outward appearances and the pettiness of society's rules can have no bearing upon two such free spirits who share in common all that is simply human.

Incarcerated in a Johannesburg prison cell, Paulus and his black friends open the second act with a song which summarizes the theme of

The Zulu and the Zayda:

Some things a man must have
As much as meat and bread.
Some things a man must have
So he can lift his head.

Some things a man must keep
So that his soul may live!
Some things beyond a price
He is not free to give.
To walk in freedom,
Brother to all men he sees
Upon his feet!
Not on his knees!

Some things a man must cherish,
Fight for while he can.
Some things a man must have,
Or how is he a man?
Or why is he a man? . . .³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Zulu and Zayda, p. 31.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

It is simple enough to attribute these sentiments to an oppressed South African native population, and they are meant to be representative of the desperate striving of that group. But the intent of the song is universal, and it supplies the play's unifying principle. If the code of apartheid deprives the Zulu of his freedom and dignity, then the Grossmans, however unintentionally, deprive Zayda of the same. Operating upon the theory that he is treating his father to a comfortable and well-deserved retirement, Harry actually confines Zayda to the house, denies him the opportunity of occupying himself as he pleases, and treats him like a child. The expectation that Zayda, because of his age, should entertain himself harmlessly and meaninglessly by dropping out of life and onto the shuffleboard court is entirely inconsistent with Zayda's concept of himself. His freedom and dignity are impeded, and the restrictions imposed upon him--for his own good, of course--are not so very different from those imposed by the South African government upon its black population. Paulus perceives the situation with clarity, and when Harry asks him to return to the family's employ, the Zulu answers in the form of an allegory:

PAULUS

So when he come to farm, King Shaka see many isikhukhukazi...you know isikhukhukazi? . . . Chicken, . . . in big cage, eating... and in middle he see intaka...eagle...big wings...King Shaka angry, say, "What eagle do here?" Farmer smile, say, "WAS eagle, I teach be chicken." Shaka pick up eagle...big...say, "You eagle...belong sky...go! Fly! "...Eagle look down, see chickens eat, jump down, eat...farmer laugh...King Shaka very angry...he kill farmer, then he take eagle up to mountain...high...sunrise...he make eagle look in sun...hold head...and he say, "Eagle...no chicken...remember! You are eagle!...Sky home, not earth...go! Stretch wings! Fly!"...Eagle look in sun...shake wings...screech...then jump and fly up...up into sky.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 55.

The parable is climaxed when, beginning to enumerate the conditions upon which he will return, Paulus demands only that which will benefit the interests of his devoted friend: "Zayda, he old, but you no more treat like old. Zayda eagle."³⁷⁰ Thus, the message proceeds from Paulus' native wisdom. No individual, no society, has the right to stifle the human spirit; to do so is to make a man less than he is--and that, because it is unnatural, may lead to danger. As King Shaka slew the farmer in Paulus' parable, so the masses may one day stand and confront the oppressors. Such a thought is suggested when Paulus' black friends raise their determined voices to sing of the changes which inevitably must occur:

You can't stop the breeze from blowing,
The sun from burning.
You can't stop the days from going,
Tides from turning!

You can't stop a dream in the hearts of men
from growing,
In the hearts of men all over the world
From growing, growing, growing, growing,
growing!³⁷¹

In this fashion, The Zulu and the Zayda presents not so much a plea for human tolerance as it does an indictment of human intolerance. Although its warning is not particularly forceful, it remains, nevertheless, a warning.

Something rather curious may be seen to emerge amid all the messages about brotherhood and equality. Even the most cursory glance at the structure of the plot is sufficient to confirm the fact that The Zulu and the Zayda is based upon the old formula of boy-meets-girl.

³⁷⁰Ibid., p. 56.

³⁷¹Ibid., p. 33.

In this case, Zayda meets Zulu; Zayda loses Zulu; Zayda gets Zulu back again. The difference between this and countless other plots of its kind is simply that the romance--and it is perfectly possible to consider the relationship as such--is carried on between two men. The only factor--and it is a decisive one--which does not enter into the emotional bond between the Zulu and the Zayda is that of sex. What one finds here, to stretch the point only slightly, is a sanitized miscegenation theme. Heretofore, when the American musical theatre has considered the subject of interracial romance,³⁷² the outcome invariably has been unhappy. Society is blamed, but the lovers either part nobly or are separated rather violently. The Zulu and the Zayda offers something startlingly new: a happy interracial ending. Society, in the form of apartheid, is faulted, but the Zulu and the Zayda overcome all barriers and clasp hands--if not, significantly, bodies. A heart warming glow envelops the theatre as racial prohibitions crumble in a very safe conclusion. Intense friendship, which this work effectively establishes, apparently is acceptable, but the musical theatre has yet to sanction anything beyond that.

As a light little comedy with a conscience, The Zulu and the Zayda offers congenial entertainment. As a piece of social criticism, it is far from penetrating. The entire play depends upon an awareness of racial discord in South Africa, but the problems which arise from that background are solved with a wave of the hand. Reuniting Zayda and Paulus provides a reassuring conclusion which does little more than to suggest that we all should love one another. It is a nice idea--but,

³⁷²The reader is reminded of the following musicals: Show Boat, My Darlin' Aida, Kwamina, No Strings, and Golden Boy.

one that belongs in the realm of fantasy. Moreover, perhaps because of the delightful naïveté of the two principal characters, there is a somewhat disturbingly paternalistic implication in all of this that, if the white world would only beckon, the black world eagerly would rush into its embrace, happy to forget the inequities of the past. Such an idea also belongs in the realm of fantasy. Because of this, The Zulu and the Zayda must be viewed as a well-intentioned and often engaging work which, unfortunately, tends to cloud the issues it raises with humor and sentimentality. In its approach to the Negro, it offers nothing new or meaningful, but it does succeed in making an audience want to like him.

Hallelujah, Baby!

No more perceptive than The Zulu and the Zayda, and even further riddled with clichés, was the 1967 production of Hallelujah, Baby! The work of seasoned and well-respected professionals, this full-scale musical featured a book by Arthur Laurents, music by Jule Styne, and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green. Leading roles were filled by Leslie Uggams, Robert Hooks, and Allen Case, with Lillian Hayman offering strong support; Burt Shevelove directed. Opening night, April 26, 1967, served to confirm the fact that a great deal of talent had been squandered on a show which failed to carry out the promise of its ambitious premise.³⁷³

³⁷³The critical consensus was divided but weighted toward the negative. Individual performances were applauded, and the score was thought to be adequate, but the majority of reviews faulted the book's simplistic and superficial treatment of black-white relations. See: New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1967, XXVIII, No. 10 (Week of May 1, 1967), pp. 312-15. (Reviews in weekly periodicals were even more harshly critical.)

Hallelujah, Baby! attempts to trace the trends, attitudes, and social changes in American race relations from the turn of the century to the mid-1960's. In order to gain the proper historical perspective, the authors have employed an interesting device: while the simple story is spread out decade by decade, the characters do not age. The intended effect is somewhat akin to that of time-lapse photography, for it enables the audience to perceive quickly and with clarity the authors' vision of the American Negro's long march toward equality.

The episodic and repetitious plot begins at the turn of the century. Georgina, an ambitious twenty-five year old Negro, is impatient to move beyond the dull life of domestic servitude which her mother (Momma), a former slave, insists is the limit of her possibilities. Georgina is in love with Clem, a likable fellow whose job as a Pullman porter unfortunately does not promise to expand her horizon. Opportunity beckons when Harvey, a white theatrical producer, offers Georgina the role of a maid in a local Civil War drama. Reasoning that playing a maid is better than being one, Georgina accepts, but public outrage over the issue of an integrated acting company causes Harvey reluctantly to dismiss her. Not content to return to domestic work, Georgina determines to succeed in show business. She packs her bag and moves out of the wrong time and place into the chorus line of a 1920's night spot strongly reminiscent of the Cotton Club. Here, Clem is a waiter and Harvey the master of ceremonies. When visiting European patrons insist that Georgina should mingle with the club's white clientele, a brawl ensues. Georgina and Clem are fired, and Harvey, in a fit of liberal pique, resigns on their behalf. Georgina and Momma return to the kitchen but discover, to their chagrin, that black servants

are expendable when the stock market crashes. During the Depression, Georgina finds herself in a voodoo-oriented version of Macbeth, a "socially significant" effort of the Federal Theatre Project. The production, charged with subversion, quickly is canceled by order of the government. Reduced to standing in bread lines, Clem is attracted by Communist rhetoric--especially its espousal of the equality of the masses. His decision to join the Communist Party prompts a bitter quarrel with Georgina, and Clem leaves her. Undeniably attracted to Georgina, Harvey remains by her side, but neither is ready to make a full personal commitment. Frustrated, Georgina determines that she will overcome all obstacles and succeed in life on the merits of her talent. She acknowledges, however, that because of her race she must develop abilities that are superior to any competition she may encounter.

The second act brings with it World War II, and Georgina is an entertainer with an integrated U.S.O. troupe. Clem, disillusioned with the Communist Party, now is a sergeant and Harvey a second lieutenant in charge of entertainment. When it is announced that the base theatre is segregated and the show must be performed for racially separate audiences, Georgina reluctantly allows Clem and Harvey to persuade her to quit the troupe on principle. Now Georgina is more determined than ever to succeed, but Clem cautions that a battle for acceptance by way of individual acclaim essentially is selfish. Victory will be solitary and, therefore, meaningless. Heedless of such advice, Georgina moves on into the 1950's and becomes a star; Harvey is the successful manager of a plush nightclub, and Clem is a prominent civil rights activist. Harvey asks Georgina to marry him, but she evades the proposal, indicating her affection for the still distant Clem. The two men

acknowledge their competition for Georgina but remain friends. When, on the way to an elegant society party in Georgina's honor, a wealthy white woman mistakes Momma for a maid, Georgina suddenly realizes that her success has accomplished very little, and she mobilizes her energy to fight the larger battle alongside Clem and his new masses of black people. It is in such a struggle that Georgina hopes to find her long lost identity. The 1960's arrive, and Harvey still hovers about Georgina and Momma, pulling legal strings to arrange a lease for them as the first black tenants in a posh, and formerly all-white, apartment building. Thoroughly hostile, Clem arrives and announces that black people have finished being thankful for the help of white people (Charlie). No matter how good the intention, blacks will be patronized --as he sees it--no longer. Protectively, and somewhat tentatively, Georgina agrees. Harvey leaves in the company of a white girl (Mary) who has loved him all along. Because Clem at last has asserted himself as a man rather than as a "boy," he and Georgina can be married with Momma's blessing. Georgina realizes that attitudes on the part of both blacks and whites still must change. Together, she and Clem will work toward establishing a world in which racial hostility has no place; hopefully, the audience will do the same.

In a brief but perceptive critique of Hallelujah, Baby!, Henry Hewes has complained that "its abstract episodes suggest a story they don't really tell, and personifications of attitudes substitute for memorable characters."³⁷⁴ This is an accurate analysis. The disjointed

³⁷⁴Henry Hewes, "The Theater," Saturday Review, L, No. 19 (May 13, 1967), p. 66.

plot seems to be of two minds. First, there is the interracial love triangle with Harvey and Clem competing for Georgina's affections. But there is no contest; it is made clear at the outset that Georgina belongs with Clem. Furthermore, the trace of a miscegenation theme does not really progress beyond an embarrassed kiss shared between Georgina and Harvey during the 1930's, and the following remarks which Clem directs to Harvey during the 1950's: "Why don't you get yourself a blonde? Or a redhead? Leave me one place where I don't have to fight you!"³⁷⁵ In the absence of any dramatic values concerning romance, one may turn to a second possibility: the story of Georgina's rise to stardom in the entertainment world. In this, there are opportunities for a great deal of singing and dancing, but one's interest in Georgina's career soon palls. The manner in which she is made to move from decade to decade and show to show becomes tedious, and when Georgina finally does win acclaim, there is little sense of exhilaration because the authors fail to supply the details of her professional struggle. What remains, then, is simply a series of repetitious episodes designed to illustrate the misfortune of being black in a racially discriminatory society, and when the final curtain falls one is left with only vague impressions of that experience. Contributing to the sense of vagueness, as Henry Hewes has pointed out,³⁷⁶ is the fact that none of the principal characters is developed as an individual about

³⁷⁵ Arthur Laurents (book), Jule Styne (music), Betty Comden and Adolph Green (lyrics), Hallelujah, Baby!, unpublished manuscript (typewritten, mimeographed), access granted courtesy of Music Theatre International, New York City, p. II-2-23. (Pagination throughout according to Act, Scene, page.) Cited hereafter as Hallelujah, Baby!

³⁷⁶ Supra, p. 500.

whom we come to care; rather, each represents one or more well-established images of Negro character. As a result, Hallelujah, Baby! has been called "a compendium of colored clichés"³⁷⁷ in which the authors trot out "one stereotype of the musical stage after another."³⁷⁸

Most blatant of the stereotypes, perhaps because she does not change with the times,³⁷⁹ is Momma—who might better have been dubbed "Mammy." Truly an Aunt Jemima type, Momma knows nothing but working in the kitchens of white folks, and she makes certain, by means of dissembling, that they receive all that she believes is expected of her. Momma's point of view is best expressed when, during the 1920's, she admonishes Georgina and Clem for failing to play the properly subservient role which, she insists, has been assigned them: "A little bobbin'n dippin' never hurt no one," she lectures. "You two gonna lose these jobs if you done forget how to show gratitude. An' I mean to show it like they likes us to show it!"³⁸⁰ At this point, Momma, Georgina, and Clem launch into a song which effectively mocks the mask that they wear for the benefit of white people. The lyrics follow, in part:

ALL
Jes' keep shufflin' along
Smile, smile
Jes' keep hummin' a song
Smile, smile

³⁷⁷"Theater," Playboy, XIV, No. 8 (August, 1967), p. 24.

³⁷⁸Norman Nadel, "Amen to 'Hallelujah,'" World Journal Tribune (April 27, 1967), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1967 XXVIII, No. 10 (Week of May 1, 1967), p. 312.

³⁷⁹In the final scene there is an indication that Momma is capable of change, but the reference is more to her attitude toward Clem than to her behavior in the presence of white people.

³⁸⁰Hallelujah, Baby!, p. I-2-36.

GEORGINA

Flash yo' teeth, show yo' gums

CLEM

They look nice against black

ALL

Roll your eyes back
And go "yak, yak, yak, yak"
Just keep bobbin' yo' head
Smile, smile

GEORGINA

And when yo' laid out and dead

ALL

Smile, smile
Keep alive that proud tradition,
Yo're descended from
Yo're the great great grandchild of a thirty-second
Cousin of dear old Uncle Tom.³⁸¹

This is Momma's way. She is a practical woman who, for purposes of survival, has found it convenient to employ the image of the Negro as it was propounded in blackface minstrelsy. As Georgina explains, "Momma was born a slave. She just scared of white folk like she scared to want. But my private opinion is: you never start wantin', you never start gettin'."³⁸² Momma stands in sharp contrast, therefore, to the more ambitious Georgina and Clem, and her inability to change serves as a constant reminder of the progress being made by the younger characters. Beyond this, however, Momma inescapably is nothing more than a tired cliché.

Decidedly more interesting than Momma, although no less predictable, is the character of Clem. It is intended that Clem should be considered a single individual in whom the changing temper of the times

³⁸¹Ibid., pp. I-2-36 and 37.

³⁸²Ibid., p. I-1-3.

is reflected as he runs the gamut of social postures from docile Pullman porter to hostile militant. Unfortunately, there is too little time to examine any of his attitudes in depth, and the authors settle for a series of the barest surface character sketches. In the early scenes, as an uneducated Negro living in the South, Clem has a fondness for the old props--cards and dice--and a thorough understanding of the personal threat posed by a small-town white sheriff who happens to belong to the Ku Klux Klan.³⁸³ Resigned to his status as a "boy," Clem is content with his position as a servant, even though Georgina disapproves. "Pullman porter's a good job," he tells her, "but you don't think it's good enough, do you?"³⁸⁴ Indeed, she does not, but despite Georgina's constant encouragement for Clem to better himself, it is not until the 1930's that he perceives a questionable opportunity to improve his station by affiliating himself with the Communist Party. In conversation with a skeptical Georgina, the not-too-bright Clem explains his rationale:

CLEM

Don't you understand you're lucky, girl? You got a trade. You can get a job singing. . . . But what kinda job can't I get? Porter, waiter, shoe shine boy. I don't know nothin', baby. I can't do nothin'. Who's gonna learn me? Who's gonna teach me?

GEORGINA

The comrades.

CLEM

Yeah. . . . They're my friends. They're the first people that treat me like a man. They call me "Comrade," not "boy."

GEORGINA

Wait 'til they know ya.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ Ibid., pp. I-1-7 through 9. (Song: "The Slice.")

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. I-1-10.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. I-3-56.

As an organization, the Communist party disappoints Clem, but in the 1940's he makes it clear that his commitment to group action on behalf of the Negro has not wavered.

GEORGINA

How are the Comrades?

CLEM

Well, when they begin tellin' me my problems was their problems, I suspected I was crazy to join. But when they told me mine had to wait 'til they solved theirs, I knew I was crazy. So I quit.

GEORGINA

So I was right.

CLEM

Yeah--for the wrong reason! And the minute I'm out of this Army, I'm joinin' somethin' else!³⁸⁶

This he does, and in the 1950's we are told that Clem has become a civil rights activist in support of integration. In his scene with Harvey,³⁸⁷ there is evidence that Clem no longer thinks of himself as a social inferior, and he can approach the liberal Harvey as an equal and as a friend. Suddenly, however, Hallelujah, Baby! lurches rather awkwardly into the 1960's. Without apparent motivation, Clem has become the antithesis of the cringing Pullman porter and now is fiercely antagonistic to all white people. In the final scene, his hostility is openly expressed:

CLEM

We are done taking help from Charlie.

GEORGINA

It isn't Charlie, it's Harvey! . . . There's no difference, Clem?

³⁸⁶ Ibid., p. II-1-3.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. II-2-22 through 24.

CLEM

No. None.

HARVEY

We're all Charlie.

CLEM

We are done saying thank you!

HARVEY

O.K.; right, be done! Why kick me in the face?

CLEM

Isn't it my turn?

.

HARVEY

I'm trying to help any way I can!

CLEM

We don't want your help!

HARVEY

Then how the hell are you going to get what you do want?

CLEM

By taking it!³⁸⁸

In this fashion, Clem moves beyond the activism in support of civil rights and integration common to such earlier works as Fly Blackbird and Golden Boy. His final position, apparently that of black power and racial separatism, is new to the musical stage,³⁸⁹ and it is unfortunate that the authors chose not to explore it in greater detail.

Because of Clem's varied attitudes toward him, mention should be made of Harvey's character. As the perennially helpful white liberal who obviously is meant to represent the so-called non-restrictive policy of "white show business through the decades,"³⁹⁰ Harvey, for all his

³⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. II-3-35 through 37.

³⁸⁹ The character of Adam Brown in My Darlin' Aida (supra, pp. 292-94, may be said to be a precursor of such a position.

³⁹⁰ James Harvey, "The Stage," Commonweal, LXXXVI, No. 12 (June 9, 1967), p. 345.

good intentions, is absolutely ineffectual. Every action he takes is based upon principle and, deeply as he may feel, has no essential meaning. During the 1920's, Harvey quits his job on behalf of Georgina and Clem, and there is the following incisive dialogue:

HARVEY

I couldn't let them fire Clem and you and do nothing. It was a matter of principle. Understand?

GEORGINA

No. . . . The way I see it: You kept your principle and lost your job. . . . So what good did it do?

HARVEY

Not much I guess...(Almost angrily)...Except that it made me feel good. I had my say!³⁹¹

The remainder of Harvey's actions are just as impractical--as when, during the 1940's, he insists upon walking twenty miles rather than moving away from his Negro friends to the front of a segregated bus. No matter how sincere Harvey may be, his individual concern is shown to be meaningless when seen in the larger perspective of the cause for which Georgina and Clem are fighting. Harvey's acceptance of blacks remains only a token which does not represent their acceptance by society at large, and his gestures of helpfulness only serve to remind Georgina and Clem that their position is, in fact, inferior to his.

As a young Negro who has chosen a career in show business, Georgina is afforded the opportunity of being seen in a variety of stage roles which are intended to recall specific images of the Negro female as they have been projected over the years in live entertainment. Such a device enables the authors to trace public acceptance of certain

³⁹¹Hallelujah, Baby!, pp. I-2-32 and 33.

racial types while, at the same time, suggesting a disparity between the personality of the performer and the nature of the performance. Thus, at the turn of the century, Georgina appears in a play-within-the-play as a bumbling, banjo-playing Topsy.³⁹² In the 1920's she is a Congo Cutie, scantily-clad and tap dancing madly in the chorus line of a nightclub revue.³⁹³ During the 1930's, she finds employment as a primitive pagan involved in some sort of island voodoo ritual.³⁹⁴ It is not until the 1950's that Georgina can stand upon a stage without benefit of a collection of exotic trappings whereby to justify her presence there. The point is well taken, for the bulk of this study can attest to the accuracy of the Negro stage images that the authors have chosen to satirize. It is perhaps significant, however, that one of the musical theatre's best known stereotypes--that of the Negro whore--is conspicuous by reason of its absence.

Beyond the various theatrical roles she is assigned, the characterization of Georgina is straightforward and very simple. She is a talented and appealing girl whose ambition it is to make a better life for herself. Like the Joe Wellington of Golden Boy, Georgina believes that possessions and public acclaim will guarantee her not only a more comfortable existence, but social acceptance as well. Unlike Joe Wellington, Georgina never becomes desperate in her search for fulfillment. A perennial optimist, she responds to incidents of racial discrimination with cheerful enthusiasm: "I'm not mad, I'm

³⁹²Ibid., pp. I-1-13 through 15.

³⁹²Ibid., pp. I-2-22, 30 and 31.

³⁹⁴Ibid., pp. I-3-40 and 41.

excited! 'Cause I know my time has got to be coming!"³⁹⁵ When at last Georgina's time does arrive and she achieves the status of a celebrity, Clem points out the fact that her victory has little to do with reality. "Come on, baby, you don't know what's going on," he lectures. "Get out of your little room and connect!"³⁹⁶ The truth finally penetrates, but as Georgina joins forces with the civil rights activists of the 1950's, her attitude still is one of sunny determination rather than outrage:

I'll get out of my little room
 I'll get out of my tight and tiny little room
 I'll get out in the open air
 Meet the gang and meet myself out there
 Start connecting with the world out there
 Now's the time--now's the time!

I'll go walking on down the road
 Join the talking and squawking, walking down the road,
 Want to be in that happy place
 Where the faces look like one big face,
 That's the place I want to see my face
 Now's the time -- now's the time

No more singing for myself
 No more going it myself and all alone
 Got to sing for everyone's supper
 Not just my own!³⁹⁷

Georgina's bright optimism is a commendable trait which makes her a most agreeable character, but in the final scene it tends to cloy. Confronted with Clem's hostility toward all whites, Georgina speaks in the voice of moderation, noting (along with Harvey) the progress that has been made:

³⁹⁵ Ibid., p. II-1-13.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., p. II-2-28.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. II-2-31 and 32.

All you can see is this moment! What about when he was Mr. Harvey? Or plain Harvey. All you know is this moment and Charlie Harvey! Well, this is just one little moment in a whole lot of time. We've all changed before and we're all gonna change again.³⁹⁸

Referring to the collective white man, Clem sneers: "Even them?"³⁹⁹ Georgina coolly responds, "They'll change,"⁴⁰⁰ whereupon she delivers a palliation which reduces Clem's anger to a nonentity: "I told you I was lucky, and I am--because I always get what I want. (To CLEM) I want you--(To the audience)--And I want you."⁴⁰¹ This is all very pleasant, for Georgina (as played by Leslie Uggams) is meant to be as congenial as possible. The conclusion of Hallelujah, Baby!, therefore, is fraudulent, and critic James Harvey has described the final moments, which depend upon the character of Georgina, as follows:

So Miss Uggams quite naturally in the end opts for Mr. Hooks' [Clem's] militancy. But in case we might think this means she won't like us any more, she steps forward to reassure us. Even though she is going away now--a little huffily, it's true--she'll be back soon. All this seeming anger about whites is just another phase really, painful and necessary perhaps, but as friendly essentially as all the others have been. Following this, the dancers come out . . . and do a big rock-'n-roll number . . . that certainly looks apocalyptic but is meant to be cheering. Then they all line up, link arms and advance in a march-step toward the footlights--chanting "Now! Now!" as they come. For a moment it seems rather threatening. But there in the center of them all is Miss Uggams again--and we see that she is--yes, sort of smiling at us. In fact they are all sort of smiling at us--and the curtain comes down.

The only proper response to all this, it seems to me, would be a riot in the theater (the Martin Beck).⁴⁰²

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. II-3-36.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. II-3-38.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p. II-3-39.

⁴⁰² Harvey, Commonweal, LXXXVI, No. 12 (June 9, 1967), p. 345.

Georgina is a sugary character with whom we are meant positively to identify, but her vehicle thrusts us "into a present which bears only accidental resemblance to life outside the Martin Beck theater."⁴⁰³

In its pretension toward social significance, Hallelujah, Baby! is a work that belongs to the 1940's. Granting the necessity of eliminating or altering the final scenes in order to suit the social realities of the earlier decade, Hallelujah, Baby!, like Bloomer Girl and Finian's Rainbow, undoubtedly would have been considered a prece-
dential musical in its support of the Negro. Its message also would have been effective and acceptable during the 1950's. But by 1967, this congratulatory chronicle of black social progress seemed tired. Its racial jokes ("all white men look alike to me")⁴⁰⁴ were limp, and its perceptions were passé. The long, hot summers of the middle-sixties⁴⁰⁵ had taken their psychological toll; as a result, Hallelujah, Baby! appeared to be pathetically outdated--a fact which Walter Kerr has considered in detail:

"Anyone who has managed to get through the past few years is well aware of how fast history can move. Sometimes, though, we don't notice it moving--until we sit down before an image of ourselves (a poster, a piece of architecture, a play) that has always been accepted as standard and just isn't any more. We blink and realize that a skin has been shed.

It happened, I think, with Hallelujah, Baby! The Negro gains that that show contented itself with describing no longer seemed real gains at all, certainly nothing worth singing and dancing about. There we were up on stage, in the comfortable

⁴⁰³Lowell D. Streiker, "Drama," The Christian Century, LXXXIV, No. 35 (August 30, 1967), p. 1106.

⁴⁰⁴Hallelujah, Baby!, p. I-3-49.

⁴⁰⁵Supra, pp. 363-64.

liberal postures we'd grown so used to--patting Negroes on the head as we tried to get them up front on the buses. And instantly we knew that paternalism was dead, had been killed inside us while we were scarcely looking. With so much more at stake in the air that we couldn't help breathing, our posture had changed before our eyes had.⁴⁰⁶

This realization, reflected in the general critical consensus that the show was cliché-ridden, pointed to something of far greater social significance than anything Hallelujah, Baby!, itself, had to offer. The old stage Negro images no longer were tolerable--at least not when one was asked to take them seriously or even semi-seriously. Georgina's patient optimism and willing forgiveness seemed unrealistic to the citizens of a nation that had been rudely shaken by a series of urban ghetto riots. Public preoccupation with the outright manifestation of anger and anti-white sentiment on the part of (some) American blacks made even Clem's last-minute hostility appear not very convincing. A new image of the Negro--outspoken and defiant--was about to appear on the musical stage in a controversial but immensely successful production which brings this study to a close.

Hair

Legend has it that Hair was put together from random jottings on miscellaneous scraps of paper.⁴⁰⁷ Its authors--and ultimately its co-stars--were two actors, Jerome Ragni and James Rado, whose professional paths had crossed off-Broadway. When sufficient material had been assembled, composer Galt MacDermot was commissioned to set the

⁴⁰⁶Walter Kerr, Thirty Plays Hath November; Pain and Pleasure in the Contemporary Theater (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), pp. 195-96.

⁴⁰⁷Nat Shapiro, "Notes," Hair, RCA-Victor, LSO 1150; LOC 1150.

Ragni-Rado lyrics to music. A loosely structured, anti-war, anti-establishment book provided a semblance of continuity. At this stage of its development, the show has been described as follows:

The plot concerned a bunch of hippies, one of whom, Claude, had been sent his draft notice, and the characters ambled around with him as he more or less said good-bye to his hippie existence. At the end, symbolically, he cuts off his hair and goes off to war. If this summary seems confusing and vague, it is only because Hair's plot echoed those adjectives. The book scenes, as much as anything else, served simply to launch musical numbers that indicated the hippies' youthful dissatisfaction with much of the world around them, particularly Vietnam.⁴⁰⁸

Subtitled "An American Tribal Love-Rock Musical," Hair was produced by Joseph Papp as the inaugural venture of his off-Broadway Public Theater. Under the direction of Gerald Freedman, it opened October 7, 1967,⁴⁰⁹ to enthusiastic reviews. When, after a successful eight weeks, Hair was forced to make way for an incoming production, the company was moved to Cheetah, a Broadway discothèque, where it remained briefly until the building was torn down. Meanwhile, entrepreneur Michael Butler had acquired the rights from Papp and was busily laying the groundwork which eventually would bring a transformed version of Hair to the Broadway stage. Butler engaged the services of avant-garde director Tom O'Horgan--darling of off-off-Broadway's experimental scene--who completely restaged the production as a frenetic, seemingly spontaneous, presentational happening which frequently spilled over the stage and out into the audience.⁴¹⁰ Instead of attempting to rewrite

⁴⁰⁸William Goldman, The Season: A Candid Look at Broadway (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), p. 381.

⁴⁰⁹William Glover, "The Signs Were Right For 'Hair,'" News Press (Santa Barbara, California), July 25, 1970, p. C-16.

⁴¹⁰Walter Kerr, "'Hair': Not in Fear, But in Delight," New York Times (May 19, 1968), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1968, XXIX, No. 13 (Week of May 27, 1968), p. 280.

or strengthen the weak book, the unorthodox decision was made virtually to abandon it. The basic idea was retained, along with the principal characters and their attitudes, and a great many more songs were added, as was a widely publicized nude scene. The Broadway production of Hair opened at the Biltmore theatre on April 29, 1968, to a wide variety of critical opinion--most of it favorable.⁴¹¹ The rest is history, for Hair has become one of the American musical theatre's most outstanding successes. Writing in the summer of 1970, William Glover released the following statistics: "Broadway SRO and eight concurrent North American productions, 19 overseas incarnations and a record 603 phonograph singles and cast albums. Estimated annual gross income: 18 million dollars."⁴¹²

Many qualified observers of the American musical stage declared Hair to be a revolutionary work, a harbinger of things to come, a precedent-setting musical as important, historically, as Show Boat, Pal Joey, and Oklahoma. Cecil Smith, for example, has commented:

"Hair" . . . may be one of the most important developments in the modern American theater. This "tribal love-rock musical" is of the New Theater and for the New Theater, and it has taken the astonishing step of moving the New Theater out of the periphery into the center of the theatrical marketplace.⁴¹³

Accordingly, director Tom O'Horgan has set forth his objectives as follows:

⁴¹¹New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1968, XXIX, No. 12 (Week of May 6, 1968), pp. 288-90. (It should be noted, also, that the East Village Other dismissed Hair as being fraudulent. See: Goldman, p. 386.)

⁴¹²Glover, News Press (Santa Barbara, California), July 25, 1970, p. C-16.

⁴¹³Cecil Smith, "New Plays Open Wedge in Theater Establishment," Los Angeles Times, Calendar (September 29, 1968), p. 24.

I took this assignment because I feel "Hair" is an assault on a theatrical dead area: Broadway. It's almost an effort to give Broadway mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. . . . Musicals today have evolved to this fine, precision-honed formula--something like the way you make a Buick--where they have little music, little singing, shiny, formula dancing, and no life, no immediacy. They go in for stories in fantasy settings, distant from us in time and/or place, and we find the problems of the characters charming--because they have nothing to do with us at all. To understate: "Hair" is not like that.⁴¹⁴

Hair broke with tradition and, ironically, in doing so it undermined the advances in form and style credited to Show Boat.⁴¹⁵ The creators of Hair did not begin with a well-structured play; they began with an idea which was not necessarily best expressed in story form.⁴¹⁶ Their characters, although perhaps convincing enough, were not explored psychologically in detail; rather, each (as part of a mass protagonist known as The Tribe) was defined as a collection of social attitudes in which much depended upon the projection of the performer's personality. And insofar as realistic-sounding dialogue was concerned, the bits and pieces of Hair that were not sung depended upon stichomythic exchanges, nonsense syllables, in-group "pop" jargon, and chanted four-letter words ranging from "love" to less polite variations on that theme. But Hair did not revert to the old pre-Show Boat musical comedy format, nor was

⁴¹⁴Quoted in: "Hair" (souvenir book), a Natoma/KSFI Production, n.d.

⁴¹⁵For comparative purposes, the reader is referred to the remarks by David Ewen and Oscar Hammerstein II, supra, pp. 68-70.

⁴¹⁶Hair does possess its own peculiar structure which may be divided into five discernible, if largely musical, movements: (1) an introduction to the principal members of The Tribe; (2) character conflicts: Claude's draft notice and Berger's expulsion from High School; (3) a protest demonstration; (4) Claude's marijuana-induced hallucination; and (5) the urgently optimistic, concluding plea for a better and saner world.

it possible to classify as a revue. Instead, it was an exuberant excursion into a way of life.

A "musical with a theme, not with a story,"⁴¹⁷ Hair dictated and followed its own rules, employing the techniques "of what has come to be called the New Theater of this country--the [amplified] rock beat, the projections and light patterns, a sort of freewheeling, improvisational style (precisely rehearsed)."⁴¹⁸ Although it resembled nothing so much as a rock concert in costume, Dan Sullivan was correct when he stated: "Hair' is undoubtedly more a celebration than a story, yet there is the graph of an action there, a feeling of accompanying some people from one thing to another."⁴¹⁹ In short, it was a new and innovational work for the musical theatre. "It's a good bet," predicted Sullivan, "that the better musicals of the 1970s will use music more as the motor of the show--as 'Hair' does--and less as singing telegrams."⁴²⁰ What real impact Hair may have upon form--or formlessness--in the musical theatre can be left only to scholars of the future. At present, the opinion is divided. When asked if Hair might signal the start of something new, an astute Broadway businessman responded: "You see those lines they had this morning? You better believe Hair's gonna change things. . . . There will now be a spate of shitty rock musicals."⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ Clive Barnes, "Theater: 'Hair'--It's Fresh and Frank," New York Times (April 30, 1968), reprinted in New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1968, XXIX, No. 12 (Week of May 6, 1968), p. 289.

⁴¹⁸ Smith, Los Angeles Times, Calendar (September 29, 1968), p. 24.

⁴¹⁹ Dan Sullivan, "On Musicals: They Never Forget Where Theater Was At," Los Angeles Times, Calendar (April 19, 1970), p. 22.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Goldman, p. 387.

The Tribe, and the central idea, is envisioned as follows:

The Kids should be approached, directorially, as a "tribe." Marshall McLuhan describes today's world as a "global village." And Today's youth is involved in group-tribal activity. So HAIR should be a group-tribal activity. An extension of what's happening. A coming-together for a common reason: a search for a way of life that makes sense to the young, that allows the growth of their new vision, however defined or undefined that may be; to find an alternative to the unacceptable standards, goals, and morals of the older generation, the establishment. (No matter that their task may never be accomplished, or that it may.) It's what's happening now. The tribes are forming, establishing their own way of life, their own morality, ideology, their own mode of dress, behavior; and the use of drugs, by the way, has a distinct parallel in ancient cultures, in tribal spiritual tradition, both East and West.

The Kids are a tribe. At the same time, for the purposes of HAIR, they know they are on a stage in a theater, performing for an audience, demonstrating their way of life, in a sense telling a story, in order to persuade those who watch of their intentions, to perhaps gain greater understanding, support, and tolerance, and thus perhaps expand their horizons of active participation toward a better, saner, peace-full, love-full world. They are trying to turn on the audience.⁴²²

Counting among its brotherhood a collection of whites, blacks, homosexuals, pot-heads, war resisters, nature lovers, astrology buffs, and "freaks" of many another denomination, the Tribe is composed of barefoot, beaded, long-haired young people, alienated from the mainstream of society. They are aware of being considered social pariahs by the so-called establishment; they encounter hostility and discrimination because of the length of their hair, their mode of dress, and their free moral code. Regardless of race, therefore, these dropouts may be considered to be society's new "niggers." Such an idea is clearly expressed in the second act as part of a drug-induced hallucination.

⁴²²Gerome Ragni, James Rado (book and lyrics), and Galt MacDermot (music), Hair; The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical (New York: Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1969), pp. viii-ix. (The published text is not representative of the Broadway production; it appears to be a combination of the off-Broadway book with the lyrics to all the songs written for both productions.)

Following a brutally surrealistic war pantomime in which all members of the cast succeed in killing one another, the Tribe rises--from the dead, as it were--and sings a vivid lament about the human carnage that is occasioned even in a computerized war:

Ripped open by metal explosion
 Caught in barbed wire
 Fireball
 Bullet shock
 Bayonet electricity
 Shrapnelled
 Throbbing meat
 Electronic data processing
 Black uniforms
 Bare feet
 Carbines
 Mail-order rifles
 Shoot the muscles
 256 Vietcong captured
 256 Vietcong captured⁴²³

Suddenly, there is a change in tempo and attitude as the music takes on the joyous flavor of an old-fashioned hoedown:

Prisoners in Niggertown
 It's a dirty little war
 Three five zero zero
 Take weapons up and begin to kill
 Watch the long long armies drifting home⁴²⁴

This particular sequence may be open to interpretation;⁴²⁵ however, it is suggested that, to the Tribe, "Niggertown" is meant to represent

⁴²³Gerome Ragni, James Rado (book and lyrics), and Galt MacDermot (music), Hair, unpublished manuscript (typewritten), access granted in Hollywood, California, courtesy of the authors, pp. II-16 and 17. (Pagination throughout according to Act and page.) Cited hereafter as Hair, manuscript. (Unlike the published text, this unpublished manuscript represents an authentic blueprint of the Broadway version.)

⁴²⁴Ibid., p. II-17.

⁴²⁵The reference to "three five zero zero," for example, seems obscure. When asked about it, Isabelle Blau--personal assistant to Ragni and Rado--told this writer that it had no specific meaning and was selected at random in order to fill in the necessary musical notes. The remaining lyrics would appear to suggest that armed revolution at home might bring American troops back from Southeast Asia posthaste.

that atmosphere of social and political repression wherein youthful dissent goes unheeded.

Beyond the symbolic generality of the Tribe as "nigger," Hair offers some pungent commentary on the subject of black-white relations. The approach, as with all other subjects it touches upon, is fast and fragmentary--a remark here and a song there, then a sneak attack upon another vulnerable issue. There is no such thing as sustained black characterization;⁴²⁶ rather, the members of the well-integrated tribe present certain attitudes toward various aspects of the problem--ranging from their support of the world-wide brotherhood of man to the reality of black power and hostility. Always there is a tongue planted firmly in cheek, and the observations are frank, funny, and often outrageous.

In the opening moments of Hair,⁴²⁷ we meet the principal characters. Among them is Hud, a glowering black militant who insists, ironically, that he is the "Imperial Wizard of the KKK."⁴²⁸ Hud introduces himself to the audience in a manner that can be described only as leaving no doubt whatever about his race:

I'm a
Colored spade a Nigra a black nigger
A jungle bunny jigaboo a coon a pickaninny Mau Mau
Uncle Tom Aunt Jemima Little Black Sambo
Cotton picker swamp guiny [sic] junk man shoe shine boy

⁴²⁶With few exceptions--notably Claude and Hud--the members of the Tribe are racially unidentifiable. The cast would call for at least six blacks (three of each sex), but members of any race might fill given roles. For example, in both the Broadway and Los Angeles (Hollywood) productions, black performers took leading roles that originally had been played by whites. But beyond the principal characters--of whatever color--some black performers are needed in order to make the racial points.

⁴²⁷Supra, p. 515, n. 416.

⁴²⁸Hair, manuscript, p. I-8.

Elevator operator table cleaner at Horn & Hardarts
 Slave voodoo zombie Ubangi-lipped
 Flat-nosed tap dancer
 Resident of Harlem and
 President of the United States of Love
 President of the United States of Love
 Shit

BERGER

And if you ask him to dinner, feed him:

HUD

Watermelon, hominy grits
 And shortnin' bread
 Alligator ribs, ham chitlins, collard greens
 Pig tails
 And if you all
 Don't watch out the boogie man will git you
 Boooooooooooooo! Boooooooooooooo!⁴²⁹

Here is every memorable racial epithet, from "nigger" to "spade," every stereotype from "shoe shine boy" to sexual superman ("President of the United States of Love"). They are not delivered fondly. Hud uses such terms because they have been used, but employed collectively they tend, at first, to shock and then to lose their meaning. Hud assaults us with the old words and emerges as a force with which we must reckon.

In the second act, the subject of miscegenation arises in terms so sexually frank as to be positively stunning. We are confronted with two female trios, each of which sings the praises of male lovers of the opposite race. In the first instance, a trio of white girls extols the supposedly superior phallic virtues of "Black Boys":

TRIO

Black boys are delicious
 Chocolate flavored love
 Licorice lips like candy
 Keep my cocoa handy
 I have such a sweet tooth when it comes to love

⁴²⁹Ibid., pp. I-6 and 7.

Black boys are nutritious
 Black boys fill me up
 Black boys are so damn yummy
 They satisfy my tummy
 I have such a sweet tooth
 When it comes to love
 Black Black Black Black
 Black Black Black Black
 Black boys⁴³⁰

The reverse in sexual attraction occurs as:

(THREE NEGRO GIRLS appear, in exaggerated blond wigs, and dressed very brightly, à la Supremes)

.....

SUPREMES

White boys are so pretty
 White boys are so sweet
 White boys drive me crazy
 Drive me indiscreet

White boys are so sexy
 Legs so long and lean
 Love those sprayed-on trousers
 Love the love machine

White boys are so lovely
 Beautiful as girls
 Love to run my fingers
 And toes through all their curls
 White White White White
 White White White White
 White boys

BOTH TRIOS

Black boys
 White boys
 Black boys
 White boys
 Mixed media.⁴³¹

A lusty tribute to the joys of the flesh in which each race acknowledges its sexual fantasies about the other, Hair's "Black Boys-White Boys" number effectively thrusts to the core of all miscegenation themes. In so doing, it mocks such agonized treatments of interracial romance

⁴³⁰Ibid., p. II-6.

⁴³¹Ibid., p. II-7.

as Show Boat, My Darlin' Aida, Kwamina, No Strings, and Golden Boy --rendering them, in the attitude of the Tribe, virtually obsolete. "Black, White, Yellow, Red / Copulate in a king-size bed,"⁴³² chant the young people, reminding us that real racial equality would necessarily include the area of sexual relations.

While firmly in support of brotherhood, Hair also acknowledges a mood of deep resentment and hostility toward whites on the part of many American black people. This is expressed forcefully, although in a bizarre manner, during the drug-induced hallucination which comprises the bulk of the second act. A Civil War charade begins to unfold, including such personages as U. S. Grant, John W. Booth, Clark Gable, Scarlet O'Hara, and Abraham Lincoln. Significantly, Lincoln is played by a female Negro sporting a white beard. Suddenly, this group is attacked by three African witch doctors, among whom is the militant, Hud. The dialogue and lyrics that follow are delivered by the black members of the Tribe:

LINCOLN

Look, niggers!

(AFRICANS kill the [white] PEOPLE on stage. Remove masks.)

HUD

I cut yo' up. I hate you and your white mothers.

RON AND DONNIE

Tell it like it is, Le Roi.

HUD

I hope you all die and rot.

[Abraham] LINCOLN [a black female]

Hey, I'm one of you, baby.

.....

⁴³²Ibid., p. I-10.

TRIO (HUD, RON, DONNIE)

Yes, I'm finished on y'all farm lands
With yo' boll weevils and all
And pluckin' y'all's chickens
Fryin' mother's oats in grease
I'm free now
Thanks to yo' Massa Lincoln
Emancipator of the slave

Yeah Yeah Yeah

Emanci-mother-fuckin'-pator of the slave

LINCOLN

[To a Motown beat, as white girl shines shoes]
Four score...I said, four score and seven years ago, our fore-
fathers...don't get nervous, I said all our forefathers, brought
upon this continent a new nation...(to TRIO) Sock it to 'em baby,
you're sounding better all the time...conceived in liberty...and
dedicated to the one I love...I mean dedicated to the proposition,
that all men...I mean you too honey...that all men are created
...(SHE looks down at shoe shine GIRL)...You know, they're not
making shoe shine boys like they used to...that all men are
created equal.

TRIO

Happy birthday, Abie baby
Happy birthday to you
Yeah

Happy birthday, Abie baby
Happy birthday to you
Bang

LINCOLN

Bang? Bang?? Shit...I'm not dying for no white man.⁴³³

The irreverence expressed toward Abraham Lincoln and the emancipation
of the slaves is far deadlier than the pronouncement, in Hallelujah,
Baby!, that "we are done saying thank you."⁴³⁴ The "Abie Baby" sequence
in Hair goes a step further in its implication that there is nothing
for which to be thankful at all. The slaves may have been freed, but
American blacks still encounter discrimination. And, so far as Hud is

⁴³³ Ibid., pp. II-13 and 14.

⁴³⁴ Supra, pp. 505-06.

concerned, young black males remain the slaves of a racist government. "The draft," Hud is convinced, "is white people sending black people to make war on yellow people to defend the land they stole from the red people."⁴³⁵ Although presented in terms of an elaborate "put-on," black anger is openly expressed in Hair--often in words that rarely have "graced" the musical stage, but that leave no doubt whatever as to the characters' attitudes. This production brings to fruition a new image of the Negro in the American musical theatre. If the hostile black militant is, in reality, yet another type and not sufficiently explored, at least he has been allowed to emerge as a social entity.

Of the ten plotted musicals featuring Negro characters that were produced in New York City between 1961 and 1968, all but two may be said to have been, in some measure, works of social protest on behalf of the civil rights movement and racial equality. Surprisingly, those two musicals which did not opt for socially significant themes were Ballad for Bimshire and Tambourines to Glory--both the products of black authorship. With the exception of the relatively unimportant Fade Out-Fade In, the remaining seven productions concerned themselves directly with interracial relationships, both on the group level (Fly Blackbird, Hair, and, in a sense, Hallelujah, Baby!) and on the far more explicit personal level (Kwamina, No Strings, Golden Boy, and The Zulu and the Zayda). As the decade progressed, the once sensitive subject of miscegenation was treated with increasing candor until Hair exploded upon the stage and made it seem to be no issue at all. Likewise, black characters--both female and male--were allowed to

⁴³⁵Hair, manuscript, p. II-4.

possess a healthy sexual appetite without being presented as whores or brutish animals. During the 1960's, the Negro on the musical stage remained, for the most part, a social problem, but in most cases--and especially that of Golden Boy--an effort was made to approach him as a distinct individual. The roles he filled, too, were more diversified than ever before: college student, fashion model, prize fighter, civil rights activist, glamorous entertainer, hippy. As Negro characters became more individualized, it is not surprising that the element of anger should have surfaced toward the end of the decade. The militant black, of course, is no more the key to Negro characterization than the shuffling darkey of blackface minstrelsy, but his appearance may be taken as an indication, symptomatic of the decade, that the approach to Negro character was becoming more perceptive all the time.

CONCLUSION

Niggers all work on de Mississippi,
Niggers all work while de white folks play--
Loadin' up boats wid de bales of cotton
Gittin' no rest till de Judgement Day.
--Show Boat, 1927.

.

Bang? Bang?? Shit...I'm not dying for no white man.
--Hair, 1968.

In her perceptive study of The Negro in American Culture,
Margaret Just Butcher has set forth the following argument:

The traditional stereotypes of the Negro, though in many instances contrary to fact, nevertheless reveal, more subtly than statutes and historical incidents, the inner complexes of the white mind in its attitudes and policies toward the Negro. A stubborn stereotype may block understanding and adjustment for decades because the way two groups of people think and feel about each other is often more influential and determinative than what the two groups actually are. Finally, changes of social attitudes are at least as important as changes of social condition, and such changes, reflected in literature and art, are often the best barometers at hand to signal shifts or impending shifts in the character and quality of race relations.¹

This study would agree with that position, for it is herein submitted that the delineation of Negro character as it has developed in the American musical theatre reflects a veritable evolution of white America's attitudes toward, and beliefs about, black people. Of the twenty-five musical productions examined in detail, twenty were written by whites; of the remaining five, only three were the products of exclusively black

¹Butcher, p. 4.

authorship.² Moreover, the commercial Broadway and off-Broadway theatre almost always has played to a predominantly white audience. The import of this study, therefore, is not to be found in speculations upon the degree of accuracy to which Negro character has been realized; rather, it is to be perceived in the various images of blacks as they have been presented (mostly) by whites to largely white audiences. It is further suggested that the development toward greater diversity and maturity of those images is indicative of progressive patterns of social awareness on the part of whites toward blacks within this nation. Nevertheless, the representation of black characters upon the musical stage has not, as yet, gone beyond that of a people set apart from the cultural mainstream--a group considered to be "they" rather than "we."

Serious contemplation of the Negro as a character of substance may be said to have originated with the 1927 production of Show Boat. In presenting the tragic mulatto, Julie, and the resigned laborer, Joe, as human beings with whom one could empathize, Show Boat shattered the dehumanized mask of blackface comedy that had been propounded in minstrelsy, Tom Shows, the all-black extravaganzas of the 1900's, and the revues of the 1920's. It also offered an intelligent plea for human tolerance and a condemnation of the negative effects of racial prejudice, but it did so given the palliation of a remote time and place. Show Boat thus became the first in a long line of social protest musicals committed to examining the plight of the oppressed Negro, but it

² St. Louis Woman and Fly Blackbird were the results of black-white collaborative efforts; Simply Heavenly, Ballad for Bimshire, and Tambourines to Glory were the products of black writers.

was not until the 1962 production of Fly Blackbird that any of these dared to suggest the contemporaneity of their subject matter.

Significantly, all of the musicals which contained social commentary on behalf of the Negro³ followed Show Boat's lead. In every case, white racism was excoriated as being irrational, and it was either condemned or ridiculed. Moreover, the Negro characters who peopled these works invariably were shown to be intelligent, possessing either native wisdom or a considerable degree of intellectual sophistication. In certain instances--chiefly Kwamina and No Strings--the central black character was idealized to the point of apology, but always, whether idealized or not, the Negro characters with whom an audience was meant to identify were made eminently appealing and worthy of respect. Given the theme common to these productions, such consistency of positive character delineation should come as no surprise.

Considered from an historical perspective, the musicals of serious social commitment demonstrate a distinct and somewhat abrupt change in the image of the Negro as regards race relations. In the early works--beginning with Show Boat and continuing through the 1940's into the 1950's--the Negro was depicted as an oppressed victim of society whose problems could be solved only by the benign intervention of well-meaning, enlightened white people. If only whites would learn to love him, the Negro would forgive and forget all past injustices and gratefully rush into a fast embrace. Although the white flattery and essential

³ These would include the following: Show Boat, Bloomer Girl, Finian's Rainbow, Lost in the Stars, My Darlin' Aida, Kwamina, Fly Blackbird, No Strings, Fade Out--Fade In, Golden Boy, The Zulu and the Zayda, Hallelujah, Baby!, and Hair.

paternalism inherent in that image surfaced occasionally during the 1960's,⁴ a new image began to emerge--one that reflected the vocal demands of the civil rights movement and the riot-splashed headlines of the decade. The 1962 production of Fly Blackbird left no doubt that many Negroes no longer were content to remain docile while waiting for acceptance. Frustration had given way to activism which, in succeeding musicals, was to take a variety of directions--some personal, others social.⁵ Implicit in the new image, however, was still the desire for integration--something which carried with it the reassurance that forgiveness would be granted upon the admission of white guilt. Toward the end of the 1960's, moderation was to be consumed by black militancy and the suggestion that the Negro not only was unwilling to forgive and forget, but that his outrage had turned into rage, thereby producing a reverse racism as virulent as its predecessor. Blind hatred of whites, as evinced by such characters as Clem (Hallelujah, Baby!) and Hud (Hair), was presented as being irrational but better motivated, and therefore more understandable, than the white racism which produced it. The appearance of the hostile black militant upon the musical stage should not be construed to represent the position of all Negroes any more than his docile predecessors should have been thought to typify the race, but his presence stands as a warning which allows for a more diversified and realistic consideration of racial relations which, hopefully, will be forthcoming in future works of social persuasion.

⁴It was apparent in: Kwamina, The Zulu and the Zayda, and, to an extent, Hallelujah, Baby!.

⁵For example, Barbara Woodruff (No Strings) and Joe Wellington (Golden Boy) fight personal racial battles which are no less activist than the social crusades of Joe's brother, Frank, or Georgina and Clem in the second act of Hallelujah, Baby!.

The Negro, as a character with whom one was intended to empathize, was also featured in a wide variety of plotted musicals, the primary purpose of which was to entertain.⁶ Significantly, from the 1930's through the late 1960's, these occasionally serious but more often amusing productions featured--with one exception⁷--virtually all-black casts. This very fact tended to create a milieu in which predominantly white audiences could indulge their fantasies in speculation about the essence of black people. Importantly, it was the purely entertaining Negro musical which originally borrowed most heavily from the traditions of dehumanized blackface comedy and the libidinous excesses of the hot-dancing, hedonistic, exotic primitive propounded in the stage and nightclub revues of the 1920's and early 1930's.

Beginning with the now-classic and very important production of Porgy and Bess (1935), a formula was established in which economic and moral squalor was equated with an all-black milieu and, somehow, rendered picturesque. Throughout the 1940's, the formula insisted upon a love triangle which always required one participant to be an intensely erotic Negro female. In addition to passion which soared like a skyrocket, there were the pleasures of the high life: flashy clothes, drinking, and occasional drugs. Rape and murder, cards and dice, the city-slicker, the violent brute, and the long-suffering betrayed woman all were represented in this atmosphere of ecstatic depravity and

⁶ These would include the following: Porgy and Bess, Cabin in the Sky, Carmen Jones, Memphis Bound, Carib Song, St. Louis Woman, House of Flowers, Simply Heavenly, Jamaica, Saratoga, Ballad for Bimshire, and Tambourines to Glory.

⁷ The reference is to Saratoga, in which the Negro characters are of secondary importance.

enthusiastic corruption. Surely, no people could have been happier in their moral abandon, nor more capable of lifting temporarily depressed spirits, than these stage Negroes. And if such works as Porgy and Bess or Cabin in the Sky also examined spiritual devotion, heroism, and human fineness, still it was the more fascinating impression of tawdriness that remained vividly in the mind and served to characterize the race.

During the 1950's, the image grew more refined. The rural settings and jazzy roadhouses of the 1940's first gave way to the equally exotic trappings of the tropics (House of Flowers); the love-triangle plots were retained, but the sensational aspects of the all-black milieu slowly began to be tempered. In Jamaica, for example, the city slicker was a well-dressed businessman rather than a pimp, and the barefoot natives were well-informed and worldly-wise rather than living on the edge of pagan primitivism. Similarly, the milieu of Langston Hughes's Harlem was more folksy than gaudy in Simply Heavenly, and if his characters were little more than cardboard cut-outs, at least they represented a cross-section of human types. By the end of the 1950's, the image of the Negro as an intriguing exotic had all but crumbled.

Virtually all-black entertainments declined in popularity on the musical stage of the 1960's--most probably because the social issue of interracial relations had become such a burningly topical subject. Neither Ballad for Bimshire nor Tambourines to Glory stirred much public enthusiasm. Both were structurally flawed, but either might have enjoyed greater popularity--and even have been thought to have possessed more significance--during a decade less characterized by direct racial confrontation. For the nonce, the all-black musical as pure entertainment had become irrelevant. Significantly, however, the stereotypes by

which it originally had been defined had matured and then been dismissed.

Attitudes toward the Negro as a sexual being have been advanced in both the musicals of social commitment and of pure entertainment. In the former, the subject of miscegenation understandably became a favored theme--proceeding cautiously, at first, from liaisons between white men and mulatto women to the later, more potentially explosive, relationships between black men and white women.⁸ In the latter category, from Porgy and Bess (1935) through House of Flowers (1954), intense eroticism was promoted as being indigenous to the all-black milieu; and if the supercharged sexuality of that atmosphere was tempered in ensuing productions, the enthusiastic hedonist remained in such characters as Jess Semple and Zarita (Simply Heavenly), Joe Nashua (Jamaica), Johnny Williams and Millie (Ballad for Bimshire), Laura Wright Reed and Buddy Lomax (Tambourines to Glory). What is of fundamental importance, from an historical perspective, is not so much the obvious fascination with the Negro as an erotic creature; rather, it is the specific sexual roles assigned to the Negro female and the Negro male. The sexually active Negro female originally was depicted as a promiscuous, whorish wench whose libidinous drives knew no bounds. Although a negative image of depravity, such characterization was not without its excitement and allure.⁹ Conversely, the Negro male was denied his potency unless it

⁸The miscegenation theme may be found in the following: Show Boat, My Darlin' Aida, Kwamina, No Strings, Golden Boy, Hallelujah, Baby!, and Hair.

⁹The major representatives of this type would include: Bess, Georgia Brown (Cabin in the Sky), Carmen Jones, Della Green (St. Louis Woman), and some of the residents of the House of Flowers.

was associated negatively with violence or crime;¹⁰ otherwise, he was either emasculated or rendered ineffectual by virtue of clownish behavior. These roles were refined somewhat during the 1950's, but it was not until the 1962 production of No Strings that the Negro female was allowed to possess a healthy sexuality without being regarded as something of a promiscuously primitive wench. Likewise, the 1964 production of Golden Boy granted to the Negro male the full benefits of his masculinity in a thoroughly human and positive fashion. But the tenacity of the original images, in which animalistic behavior was equated with Negro passion, tends not only to suggest a denigration of the Negro but also to reveal hidden fears and lusts buried deep within the white American psyche. Such a contention undoubtedly would be supported by psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs, who have stated:

Black men and women . . . have always been regarded by white Americans as sexual objects, exotic people living close to instinct and primitivism. The fascination black people have for white people in the sexual area can hardly be exaggerated, and this factor alone makes a major contribution to the charged quality of racial relationships in this country.¹¹

Certainly, the representation of Negro sexuality upon the musical stage can be said to have revealed more about the erotic fantasies of white people than it ever did about the reality of the black experience.

Considering the study as a whole, one immediately is struck by the minimal contributions of black writers and composers. Taking into account the American musical theatre's considerable debt to black

¹⁰The major representatives of the brute primitive would include: Crown (Porgy and Bess), Domino Johnson (Cabin in the Sky), Husky Miller (Carmen Jones), and Biglow Brown (St. Louis Woman).

¹¹Grier and Cobbs, p. 76.

creativity in the areas of composition, authorship, choreography, direction, production, and management in the flurries of (black) activity at the turn of the century and during the 1900's and 1920's, it is astonishing that--in the years 1927-1968--only five Negro-oriented musicals should have been written partially or entirely by blacks.¹² Even more astounding is the fact that, of those five, only one--Fly Blackbird, and a black-white collaboration at that--contained an element of social protest on behalf of the Negro. The remaining works, products of the 1940's, 1950's, and 1960's, and penned by such highly respected black authors as Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Lofton Mitchell--all contented themselves with folk humor and an emphasis upon entertainment. Furthermore, none of them were particularly successful, nor did they offer insights into Negro character that could be said to have been more enlightened than comparable works by white authors. For whatever reasons, the fact remains that--with the single exception of Fly Blackbird--the social battle for racial equality was waged upon the musical stage entirely by whites.

From 1927 to 1968, the delineation of Negro character in plotted American musicals has been largely the result of white imagination and/or observation. From an historical perspective, there are too many peculiarities of racist thought to be overlooked; however, one can learn a great deal from them--mostly about the astonishing and simplistic variety of white America's beliefs about the Negro. But if perceptions of the Negro as promoted upon the musical stage often were demeaning and condescending, if often the character was robbed of his essential

¹²Supra, p. 527, n. 2.

humanity and presented as a uniquely exotic "thing," still the shifting and developing attitudes toward the Negro--especially as evident in the new awarenesses of the musicals of the 1960's--must be considered to be positive recordings on the barometer of American race relations.

If we--and I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of others--do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare of our country and change the history of the world.

--James Baldwin

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