African American Portrayals in American Musical Theatre 1920’s-1930’s

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American History in Song
African American Portrayals in American Musical Theatre

- Broadway (mainstream) portrayals
- Effect of the Harlem Renaissance
- Progress made to advance the African American experience in musical theatre
Pre-1920’s American Musical Theatre

- Early 19th century: blackface usually in buffoonish minstrel roles
- Playbill: "shuffling, irresponsible, wide-grinning, loud-laughing Negroes" in a musical rendition of "dooky life on the old Plantation"
- 1890 census: 1,490 African American actors, mostly in minstrel shows, sometimes in blackface, several employed overseas or in Shakespearean works
Whites in Blackface and Ernest “All Coons Look Alike To Me” Hogan
1920’s-1930’s: Popular Shows by both White and African-American Artists

- Eubie Blake/Nobel Sissel’s: Shuffle Along (1921) and The Chocolate Dandies (1924)
- Roy Turk/Russell Robinson’s: Plantation Revue (1922)
- Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein II’s: Showboat (1927)
- Joe Jordan/Henry Creamer/Salem Whitney/Homer Tutt’s: Deep Harlem (1929)
- Thomas "Fats" Waller/Andy Razaf/Harry Brooks’s: Hot Chocolate (1929)
- Eubie Blake/Noble Sissle/Flournoy Miller’s: Shuffle Along of 1933 (1933)
- Donald Heywood’s: Africana - A Congo Operetta (1934)
- George Gershwin/Ira Gershwin/DuBose Heyward/Dorothy Heyward’s Porgy and Bess (1935)
Harlem Renaissance:
Bob Cole and Will Marion Cook

- Cole’s “A Trip to Coontown” continued longstanding stereotypes

- Cook encouraged African Americans to create a new voice in musical theatre; “The Southerners” and “The Origin of the Cakewalk”
Show Boat: First American Musical

- Jules Bledsoe (1927 Broadway)
- Paul Robeson (1928 West End, later Broadway and movie)
Show Boat: Robeson’s Elevation of Joe

- "Tote dat barge! / Lift dat bale! / Git a little drunk, / An' you lands in jail..."

- "Tote that barge and lift that bale! / You show a little grit and / You land in jail..."

- Moving stereotype from “drunken shiftless Nigger” to more outspoken, strong African American
Show Boat: Robeson’s Elevation of Joe

- “Ah gits weary / An' sick of tryin'; / Ah'm tired of livin' / An' skeered of dyin', / But Ol' Man River, / He jes' keeps rolling along!"

- "But I keeps laffin'/ Instead of cryin' / I must keep fightin'; / Until I'm dyin', / And Ol' Man River, / He'll just keep rollin' along!"

- Less resignation, more strength of character and willingness to overcome racial injustice
Porgy and Bess: Re-iteration of old stereotypes

- Porgy: beggar, gambler, physically disabled (emasculating stereotype), eventual murderer
- Bess: impoverished, “goes with” different men
- Sportin’ Life: drug dealer and bootlegger
- Crown: violent bully, gambler, pimp, eventual murderer
- Supporting characters fit stereotypes of Uncle Tom, Mammy, shiftless underemployed fools, children made orphans due to parental poor choices
Porgy and Bess: Historic pre-Broadway run at Boston’s Colonial Theatre
Porgy and Bess: Searching for Dramatic Interpretation of African American Reality

- Gershwins studied Gullah language of James Island and incorporated the slang and mannerisms into play’s dialog
- First musical to incorporate traditional African American folk music (jubilees, spirituals, work songs) with arias
- Gershwins employed classically trained African American actors, singers, and dancers and insisted on future productions maintaining this standard
Conclusions

- Given the **cultural and economic conditions** of the 1920’s-1930’s, African American performers had little choice but to partake in popular stereotypical portrayals in order to gain employment and recognition in mainstream American musical theatre.

- The Gershwins and others who were influential (and monied) helped **advance the employment** prospects for African Americans while performers such as Paul Robeson helped **advance the portrayals** of African Americans in musical theatre.

- The **growing divide** between mainstream musical theatre and that of the Harlem Renaissance (re: Bob Cole and Will Marion Cook) symbolizes the greater differences which we see today between Broadway and fringe, independent, off-Broadway musical theatre.