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## African-American Men and a Journey Through Musical Theatre and Opera

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN AND A JOURNEY THROUGH  
MUSICAL THEATRE AND OPERA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
of the Honors in the Major program in Musical Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to outline the origins of African-American men in musical theatre, uncover their contributions to the art form, and explore how their legacy is continued today. I was inspired to do this research because through my undergraduate curriculum I have only narrowly studied African-American men in musical theatre and opera history. Upon realizing the lack of attention to this subject matter, not only in my curriculum but in historical resources, I was inspired to address the need for this research. The courses I have taken included Theatre History 1 and 2 and Musical Theatre History 1 and 2; recognition of African-Americans in the theatrical arts has been discussed at a minimal level. The majority of African-American studies in these classes focus on minstrelsy and its contribution to American musical theatre. Minstrelsy was an American form of entertainment consisting of variety acts, dancing, and music during the early 1900s. The shows were a mockery of African-Americans with white (Sometimes Black) men dressing themselves in clown-like costumes and black face paint to depict a caricature of blacks. Throughout my coursework I have found there is still a presence of Minstrelsy in the framework of American musical theatre today. Understanding how minstrelsy influenced musical theatre led me to research Bert Williams, a pioneer African-American performer both in minstrelsy and American theatre. Bert Williams broke racial barriers, allowing African-Americans to perform alongside whites and gain proper show billing. This not only influenced theatre, but the social temperature of the time as well, as the stereotype of African-Americans in society slowly began to be broken down, and whites having the opportunity to see African-Americans as normal people aided in the seeding and progression of the civil rights movement. To further study the works and life of Bert Williams, I learned and performed his iconic song, "Nobody." The song is

a commentary of how Williams is overlooked because he is an African-American man. It talks about how he is expected to be funny and make a mockery of himself at the expense of himself. In researching the historical context and gaining an understanding of the content within the song, I was able to better understand other roles I have played in various musicals. This gave me a different perspective to the subject matter of racism within a show. Furthermore, it allowed me to view the evolution of African-American roles in musical theatre, and how they originated in vaudeville shows. A subject of which I had never explored within my classes. Williams had a very successful and influential career and became the basis for my research. However, as I began my exploration, I realized there were a vast variety of men of color who either contributed as much, if not more, to the progression of African-American men in musical theatre and opera. Bert Williams, Todd Duncan, and Paul Robeson all forged careers in musical theatre and/or opera. These men aided in presenting African-American men in realistic settings and not as stereotyped caricatures. African-American men in musical theatre and opera are typically overlooked for their contribution to the art forms. However, Bert Williams, Todd Duncan, and Paul Robeson were trailblazers for African-American men in musical theatre and opera; utilizing their status and fame to make political change and fight for equal rights, both on and off stage. Their legacy is seen in the art form through the structure of musical theatre, the content of the musical comedy that led to the musical drama, and through the integration of the African-American performer in both musical theatre and opera. In continuation of their legacy, we see more roles in shows for African-American men and a growing interest in shows with African-Americans. The recent opening and revivals of shows like *Porgy and Bess*, *Motown: The Musical*, and *Kinky Boots* all

feature leading African-American men on stage. My duty as a young African-American practitioner of both musical theatre and opera is to continue their legacy through both my studies and performance. I am honored to be a part of their legacy, furthering their contributions, and bringing light to their stories through my research and analysis.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

African-Americans and their early beginnings in American entertainment truly developed through the Minstrel show. Minstrelsy began as a series of songs and dance interchanged between black and white workers alongside the piers and canals of New York City in the 1830s (Reiss 51.) This was soon transformed into musical street theater for the urban proletariat, which now featured solely white men masked in black face lampooning African-Americans through the use of comic bits, dance, and music. Though the shows were demeaning for the black community, it was a palatable way to expose the lower antebellum to black culture and blacks on stage. Over-exaggerated features, including large lips, which were over-emphasized through the use of red paint; big butts, which were typically pants stuffed with fabrics/pillows; and paint as dark as tar to portray skin complexion were all a part of the caricature that minstrelsy created of an African-American.

A typical Minstrel show would begin with the company coming onstage dancing and singing a well-known song, and ending in a semi-circle formation. After each member did their designated act/routine, there would be a walk around, also known as a cakewalk, where they would re-introduce themselves before the conclusion of the first act. When the audience returned, they would be met with a variety of routines, and the highlight of that would be the stump speech. The stump speech was when one of the actors, typically the end man, would deliver a long oration in a black dialect. During the oration the character would attempt to speak and act as a white person but would always fail miserably. From the mispronunciation of words and a risible posture, the character would amuse audiences, and further display the stigma that African-Americans were inapt to be a part of society. Another major component was the “fools mask,” which was the make-up



used to create the black face. The difference between the fools mask for the stump speech and the rest of the troupe was significant in that the stump speaker had the blackest make-up of them all.

African-American exclusive minstrel troupes began to form in the later 1850s, creating a new realm of Minstrelsy, which re-invigorated audiences. The Minstrel shows soon began to undertake a new genre of theatre, known as vaudeville; a mixture of specialty acts typically through burlesque comedy, dance, or music. Categorized as black vaudeville, the shows were wildly-popular. However, to the dismay of the performers, the troupes had a hard time surviving due to the constant racial turmoil with which they were met. When performing in theaters, blacks were not allowed to act as guests. Whether they were in the audience, on stage, or back stage, they were required to remain in their character's mask and costume whenever they were in the theater. Furthermore, when traveling, it was unlikely for them to have somewhere to sleep because they were restricted from staying in the white hotels. They would resort to sleeping outside or in the stage coach, in the hidden compartments built underneath. However, it was likely for the stage coach to be vandalized in the night resulting in fateful situations. Many troupes would continue to tour in spite of the virulent threats and abuse from the Whites. They endured the suffering because of the opportunity to make enough money to pay for their freedom (Nowatzki). Though wages were low, it was higher than many occupations available to black men.

In 1920, Milton Starr, started the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA), a circuit of theaters stretching from the east coast to Kansas City (UMKC.) The association was used for the booking of blues shouters, dancers, comedians, and specialty acts (black vaudeville). Carl Phillips in *Dancing in the Dark* discusses how "TOBA provided valuable experience and exposure

for innumerable black entertainers and musicians who might not have had an opportunity to break into show business otherwise. Some of the more established black performers like Bert Williams, Ben Harney, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Noble Sissle, and Eubie Blake also appeared in white vaudeville houses, where the salaries were more substantial. Almost all the black entertainers, however, remained with the TOBA even though the facilities, wages, and working conditions inspired the well-circulated employee definition of TOBA: 'Tough on Black Asses!' (Phillips)"Though tough, TOBA awarded many African-American performers with valuable opportunities to perform in theaters across the country. Those performers who were happy with TOBA referred to the circuit tours as "Toby Time."

As time passed, another re-facing of Minstrelsy surfaced in the form of musical comedy. Opening in 1890, *The Creole Show* toured the country and had many successes. The structure, content, and overall plot of the musical was the same as minstrelsy; however, the inclusion of female performers brought a new dimension to the show. *The Creole Show* would spawn other musical comedies such as *The Octoroons* (1895) and *Black Patti's Troubadours* (1896); both of which were spin-offs of Minstrelsy. In 1898, *A Trip to Coontown* was written, the first full-length musical to be written, produced, directed, and performed entirely by Blacks. The show continued to incorporate variety act interludes from minstrelsy for the benefit of maintaining audience excitement throughout the show. In addition, *A Trip to Coontown* had great success as a tour with two runs in New York City (Musicals101.)

## CHAPTER TWO: BERT WILLIAMS

### Early Beginnings

As a young boy, Bert Williams had his first exposure to theatre working as a tour guide in a Medicine show. Medicine shows were touring troupes of pseudo doctors who traveled across the country to sell medicines and elixirs through outlandish performances. They would make claims of being able to heal life-threatening ailments, provide a better quality-of-life, and of having the capability to heal wounds through esoteric powers. These traveling conmen disguised as experienced health experts were an expansive orchestration of individuals that created fantastical productions providing entertainment for both blacks and whites. A carnivalesque atmosphere, high tents, music, and elixir booths for hoax doctors to sell their miracle drugs were all part of the show. The shows were widely popular across the country and was one of the first true forms of entertainment for America in the 1850s (Forbes 6). It was extremely uncommon during that time period to see the miraculous and spectacular performances the Medicine shows would bring. As exciting as they were, once patrons would begin to unearth the truth and realize they had been swindled, the shows would decamp and head to a new city.

The medicine shows were intended for Whites, but Blacks would sometimes receive the opportunity to purchase elixirs from the medicine men as well. Though Williams' employment was incongruous, his complexion was fair enough where he was passable to White audiences. More than likely, Williams was uncomfortable being a part of such a show at the young age of eight; however, he found a place for himself in that world and felt a part of it. As Williams came of age, he began to pick up on the enthralling theatrics of the Medicine show performers. All the years of observing the overzealous antics of the medicine men attributed to Bert's development

of his own methods for engaging an audience. One day Frederick Williams, Bert Williams' father, watched Bert give one of his tours at the Medicine show. As Frederick watched, he noticed his son's overt capability to give a speech and capture an audience with an ease of someone with years of experience. Though Frederick had hoped for Bert to attend college and forge a career in an academic profession, he rethought his efforts of pushing Bert in any other direction than his innate ability to perform (Forbes 10).

Always active, the young Williams would let his imagination take flight and transpire into his performances. In school, his teachers did not know what to do with him, because he was rowdy in class and always doing something funny (Forbes 14). Unlike the other kids, Williams would study stage performance and joke books instead of his assigned class readings. Williams stated in an interview about school that "once when I was in sixth grade I got tired having lessons, so I got out my almanac from my desk and buried my head in it. I was also reading every joke I could find, and I remember on this particular day I had read some good ones. The class was reciting on Geography, and pretty soon I was called on.

'Bert, may you recite.' The teacher said; well, I had the least idea what to say, but I got up and told the class a joke I just read. (Forbes 10)" Williams would have been seen as being a cut-up in school, but since he received good marks, it wasn't as much of an issue with his family.

#### Williams and Walker

Williams first met George Walker in San Francisco while playing Dahomeyans in an exhibit of the California Midwinter International Exposition (Answers.com.) Williams was working for Selig's Mastodons, an integrated minstrel troupe, consisting of five whites, four blacks, and one Mexican (Peterson 136). Williams noticed that Walker was a talented dancer and asked

for his assistance to fix some dance moves in Williams' show. From then on, Williams and Walker developed a collaborative friendship which would soon lead to Walker's addition to the troupe after an unexpected opening became available. They used the troupe as a platform to cultivate their craft, sharpening and improving their skills before breaking away to form their own act, soon to be regarded as the most well-known African-American minstrel duo, "The Two Real Coons."

Walker's and Williams' arrival in New York City was less than favorable. They were met with a destitute and frenetic city, brimming with immigrants who were escaping religious persecution and poverty within their own countries. The Great White Way, now referred to as Broadway, was nothing more than a strip of run down building and shops. Even so, there was a clear fervor underneath the rubble for growth and expansion into the theatrical fanfare we know today. The inception of this new beginning of the Great White Way can be attributed to Charles Frohman. Going against the better judgment of his colleagues, Frohman built a theater in an area far from the Union Square Theater district, which is where all the city's prominent theaters were located. It was seen as foolish for someone to invest in a theatre anywhere outside the already-established district. However, Frohman followed his instincts, soon proving to have great success in his new location, and so, others began to follow. Such as Oscar Hammerstein, whose theater would be one of the crowning jewels of Broadway. Hammerstein's theater, the Olympia, was to take up an entire block on 44th and 45th Streets to be a combined three theaters, Turkish baths, cafes, and restaurants (Forbes 40).

Walker and Williams ventured through the city looking for opportunities to perform and quickly realized they would now have to audition, which is something they were unaccustomed

to. They attended their first audition for a show entitled *The Gold Bug* by Victor Herbert. The duo auditioned but had no luck in being cast in the production. The production staff described their audition as nothing but a display of mediocre talent that was not ready to be a part of a show of that caliber (Forbes 41). Walker and Williams continued to audition for different productions and ironically were called back for *The Gold Bug* after an unsuccessful opening. George Lederer, the producer, asked them to be part of the show in hopes they could save the production somehow. Lederer figured the damage was already done so what more could they do. Walker and Williams taught the orchestra their music, a ragtime, which was a mixture of uncanny melodic shifts and rhythmic syncopation. This new music was completely intriguing and unfamiliar to the orchestra for they had never been exposed to anything like it. Walker and Williams continued to prepare their act with their show stopping number, “Oh! I Don’t Know, You’re Not So Warm!”, and to Lederer’s surprise the song did just that—it stopped the show. Lederer was amazed and beguiled by the way Walker and Williams took command of the stage. They brought the show great success. However, the show needed more than just the duo’s enchanting performances, so it closed after one week’s worth of performances. Even though *The Gold Bug* did not have great success, it provided a catapult for Walker’s and Williams’ career as “The Two Real Coons.”

The growing irreverence towards the African-American community was to be feared. With the passing of “Separate but Equal” through Plessy V. Ferguson and Frederick Hoffman’s novel, *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, a hysteria was created within the white community over the capabilities and intentions of Blacks. Hoffman’s novel discussed a

Negro uprising and revolution against Whites, this resulted in the creation of pandemonium, increasing racial injustices towards Blacks, and spawned the Jim Crow era. Ironically, the mania created an ever-growing market for “Coon music”, a style that was categorized by the mixture of Negro spirituals and Ragtime. Williams and Walker were at the forefront of Coon music and would sell their music through Tin Pan Alley. Unlike other Coon music composers, Williams and Walker would put their faces on the cover of the sheet music, and alongside that would be them in their mask and costume -- a requirement for all Coon music that passed through Tin Pan Alley.

After great success with the selling of their music, new performance opportunities continued to award themselves to the duo. As they ventured, they began to experiment with negating the mask through the use of ethnic jokes and playing against the foolish persona of their typical characters, and a new character emerged. This new show had great success. Although the mask remained, there was some realism beneath the comedy to which the audience could connect. The characters became more than just an outlandish mockery of Blacks; they became a telescope into both the joys and troubles of being Black in America. As their success continued, so did their approbation from the public and esteem within their artistry. This availed them the opportunity to do more shows with all-Black casts. These shows would bring both White and Black audiences, which was great for the duo’s exposure and careers. However, Williams and Walker noticed a pull from both sides for the type of show Whites and Blacks wanted to see. The expectation of what a black person should act like onstage was different for both sides. James Johnson says in his 1928 article, *The Dilemma of the Negro Author* that,

“But the Afro-American author faces a special problem which the plain author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer picks up his pen or sits down to his typewriter, he is immediately called to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience (Johnson 1).”

The nagging issue of representation was the root of the conflict, with the blossoming of the ideology, the “New Negro.” Blacks wanted to break away from their slave roots, attain an education, and refinement; this was the goal of the New Negro, and negating that through minstrelsy did not appeal to Black audiences. Williams and Walker adjusted their show and gained more success than ever because of it. They continued to reach out to the black community and reassure them of their efforts to re-present Blacks in a favorable light. They became representatives and the standard to which other Black comedy acts were to be compared to for years to come (Forbes 109).

#### Solo Career

As Williams’ career took a new path, he and Walker went their separate ways. Williams started a solo venture by creating a new public persona for himself. Williams no longer wanted to be presented as a comedian or jokester but as a historian, actor, and activist. His interviews were no longer led by funny stories and enthralling antics to gain attention, but they were subtle and contained commentaries of his thoughts and ideologies. Williams wanted to show the clear and simple differences between himself and his character on stage (B’Way Video). He knew he



was a prime representative of the Black actor and wanted to ensure it was not something to be made fun of. In an interview, Williams was described as solemn and very serious. The interviewer stated that the seriousness that Williams used when discussing his craft was that of a serious public issue, presenting himself polar opposite of the vapid character he played on stage. Williams wanted to provide a voice to the Black community, making a point that Blacks were just as intelligent as any other race.

Williams became a top headliner in the big Vaudeville houses. This did not come easy though; camaraderie amongst Williams and his company was non-existent. White performers did not like that Williams had top billing, and through constant efforts they forced the producers to drop Williams down to regular billing. In spite of this action, Williams took audiences by storm with his iconic song “Nobody”. “Nobody” was a song that gave light into the life of Williams; it juxtaposed the comedy and reality of his journey as a Black man (B’Way Video).

“Nobody” from Ziegfeld Follies (1910).

“When life seems full of clouds an' rain  
and I am filled with naught but pain,  
who soothes my thumpin' bumpin' brain ?  
Nobody . . .

When winter comes with snow an' sleet,  
and me with hunger and cold feet,  
who says " Ah, here's two bits, go an' eat!"  
Nobody . . .

I ain't never done nothin' to nobody,  
I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time!  
And until I get somethin' from somebody, sometime,  
I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time!

When I try hard an' scheme an' plan,  
to look as good as I can,  
who says "Ah, look at that handsome man!"  
Nobody . . .

When all day long things go amiss,  
and I go home to find some bliss,  
who hands to me a glowin' kiss?  
Nobody . . .

I ain't never done nothin' to nobody,  
I ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time!  
And until I get somethin' from somebody, sometime,  
I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time!

Nobody, no time!"

Williams took the sad and haunting lyrics of “Nobody” and juxtaposed them with a rag-time tune and comedic bits to leave the audience baffled at whether to laugh, cry, or both. The song was a glimpse into the struggles Williams faced as an African-American performer on a White stage and living in a world tailored to the White race. Williams performed and later recorded his title song and sold upwards of 100,000 copies. “Nobody” became the theme song for Williams and an anthem for the struggle that African-Americans faced in society.

As Williams continued to perform in the Vaudeville houses around New York, he was offered a role in another show, the lead in *Mr. Lode of Koal*. Though the show was not remarkably successful, it contained an all-Black cast and was an opportunity for Williams to show his true artistic ability. However, stuck behind the mask, his actions were overshadowed for some critics who continued to categorize him into stereotypical Black acting. Other critics saw his work as the emergence of a new era of Negro acting, breaking away from the slap-stick buffoonery of the past (Forbes 189). Williams wanted his work to speak to the truths that lied behind the mask and not be construed as just another stereotype. His work was a call to action for injustices against Blacks, and that is just what it did.

Williams’ success peaked when a producer by the name of Florenz Ziegfeld caught sight of him during one of Williams’ performances. Ziegfeld knew it was a huge risk, but he still offered Williams a contract in the Ziegfeld Follies with top billing. Williams’ solo career was now at a new height that he had never been before. He thrilled audiences performing alongside stars such as Fanny Brice. Williams had made it, idolized by both the Black and White communities, and respected for the artist he was. Williams continued to perform for the Follies and speak out

for the Black community using the stage as an engine for change. His activism is still revered today; accredited for contributing to the change of the depiction of the Black actor in musical theater through the black face.

## CHAPTER 3: TODD DUNCAN

### Early Beginnings

In 1903, Todd Duncan was born in Danville, Kentucky sharing a birth date with President Lincoln. At a young age, Duncan had a talent for singing. His mother was a music teacher and would give Duncan music lessons. When he was older, he began taking lessons from a voice teacher by the name of Sara Lee, then he switched to Robert LaShelle. He would graduate from Butler University in 1925 with his Bachelor's degree in Music, followed by a Master's Degree from Columbia Teaching University in 1930. Duncan eventually attained a position as the Director of Public Schools Music Department through Howard University. Duncan trained many notable singers, none of which went on to pursue careers in music (Evans 46).

### Musical Career

In 1930, Duncan was asked to appear as Alfio in a single performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, presented by an all-Black cast at New York's Mecca Temple, and he accepted. In the audience was music critic Olin Downes, who informed musical composer George Gershwin of Duncan's talents. Gershwin, a prominent American composer, was working on a new American opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Duncan, being a purist for truly classical music, was not interested in being a part of Gershwin's musical, behavior that would be seen as pretentious and presumptuous today. Duncan saw performing in a musical as beneath him; he would rather perform the works of classical composers such as Schubert, Schumann, or Brahms, opposed to contemporaries like George Gershwin (Evans 46). After constant avoidance, Duncan finally went to his audition appointment and performed an Italian aria, even though he was aware the musical was an American operetta. Without regard to his choice in music and before Duncan could even finish his song,

Gershwin responded, “You’re my Porgy!” Duncan, still unsure of whether or not he wanted to be a part of the production, demanded to hear the show first before officially accepting the offer. George and Ira Gershwin played the operetta for Duncan and before they could finish playing “Summertime,” they noticed Duncan’s eyes tearing up. Duncan stopped them mid-song and accepted the role; he knew this was going to be a momentous role for him and his career.

### Porgy and Bess

*Porgy and Bess*, opening in 1935, with music by George Gershwin, libretto by DuBose Heyward, and lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, was based on the novel and play, *Porgy*, by DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward.

The show is set in Catfish Row, based on Cabbage Row. Cabbage Row is a preserved structure from the revolutionary war that was used as a home for many African-Americans. Cabbage Row earned its name because people would sell cabbage from the tenement-style windows to bystanders on the streets of Charleston, South Carolina. The opera followed the life of Porgy, a cripple, and how his love transpired through his efforts to save Bess, a woman with a misunderstood past, from her abusive lover, Crown, and a drug dealer, Sportin’ Life.

George Gershwin’s vision was that of a production with an all-classically-trained Black vocalists. When Gershwin approached producers, they instantly repressed this concept and insisted on doing the production with White men guised in black face to play the characters. Gershwin would not allow it, and so *Porgy and Bess* was halted. After some time passed, Gershwin was informed of the possibility of someone else trying to obtain rights to adapt *Porgy* into an opera. Gershwin immediately returned back to writing *Porgy and Bess* and put the show back in motion. This time he was approved to have an all-Black cast, and that is just what he intended to

have. Gershwin's opera was revolutionary not only because of the use of Black actors but because of the music he was composing. Gershwin's integration of American folk music into the symphonic orchestra, whilst still capturing the effervescence of Negro spirituals, was a remarkable feat. The mixture of old and new was something beguiling to listeners and inspiration to admirers. The presence of the spiritual-like music gave the audience exposure to the African-American community. This juxtaposition brought light to the subculture of New York, and the people Gershwin loved; he hated to see them shunned away because of their skin color.

Though historic and notable, *Porgy and Bess* did not have much success in its early production stages. The opera was submitted to be produced at the Metropolitan Opera and was denied. Gershwin resorted to Broadway, where he received approval, and then developed the production for the Broadway stage. It wasn't until years later that the Metropolitan Opera deemed the work an "Opera" and produced it in their venue.

#### Career after Porgy

After the closing of *Porgy and Bess*, Duncan continued to work in musical theater playing the role of Lawd's General in *Cabin in the Sky*. Duncan's continued musical success led him to a 50-city concert tour, where he would appear as a guest on radio-shows and perform as the lead soloist for the New York Philharmonic. In 1945, Duncan received a historic invitation to sing the roles of Canio in *I Pagliacci* and Escamillo in *Carmen* for New York City Opera. For the first time in history, a Black American opera singer was asked to portray Italian and Spanish characters alongside a White cast. In addition, in 1946, Duncan became the first Black concert-artist invited to sing in Australia and New Zealand. Duncan's rich baritone timbre delighted both Black and White audiences. His notoriety onstage began to gain public popularity as a trailblazer

for African-American opera singers. Audiences and colleagues would ask him questions like; “How does being in a White role make you feel?” When interviewed, Duncan’s comment was, ““We were all wearing greasepaint.” He felt that they all came from the same cloth as singers; and that it was the music that deserved the attention, not race (Evans 43). He wanted to be remembered for the works that he created and who he was, he aspired to leave this legacy behind. When offered a major recording contract with RCA records, Duncan was overjoyed and thrilled to accept the offer. Duncan felt a fulfillment in his realization that being a recording artist would preserve his contributions to the art form, leaving something behind for those to come. However, this deal took a downfall after the Board of Directors pulled his contract, stating, "This has nothing to do with your musical artistry. But we already have one Negro concert artist on record-- Marian Anderson. America isn't ready for another Negro." Duncan was crushed (Evans 46).

Duncan retired from the stage in 1965 and went back to teaching. With many of his students continuing his legacy performing in concert halls and the Metropolitan opera. Though it appeared that Duncan was defeated by the loss of his record deal, he was truly happy to be able to inspire others through teaching. He was satisfied with his performance career and with knowing that he is credited for opening doors for Black opera singers (**cite**). As a trailblazer, Duncan created opportunities for generations to come and taught his pupils the essence of hard work and determination. His teachings, rooted in moralistic values, urged his students to work hard, and the rewards of that hard work will follow. Duncan stated, “The greatest lesson to learn is honesty, integrity and deep commitment. Understand that if you want to be an artist, every hour in the day, every day in the week must be a testament to your inner desire (Evans 46).”



## CHAPTER 4: PAUL ROBESON

### Early life

Paul Robeson was born on April 9th, 1898 in Princeton, New Jersey to his mother, Maria Bustill, and his father, William Robeson. William was a pastor and activist who preached to his congregation the importance of having pride in their race. However, he urged them to remain silent about their views in hopes of avoiding any unwanted threats or turmoil from the outside community; especially seeing that the church that William pastored was run by White people. William instilled the moral principles and teachings of the church in Paul at an early age. Though loving, William was said to be very distant from his children. Coming from a slave background, William was haunted by memories of the virulent abuse he received while working on the Robeson Plantation. Subsequently, William taught his children how to combat racial prejudices and protect themselves from the injustices of the world.

With four boys and one girl, Paul being the youngest, William found it hard to support a family after the loss of his wife. Paul was six years old when his mother died a horrific death. According to Ben and Marian, Paul's siblings:

“[Maria Louisa] decided first to take up the carpet, but the stove was in the way; she and Ben conferred about it, and decided she would lift the stove while he pulled away the carpet underneath. The stove had a sliding front door which opened as she raised the front legs, and a hot coal fell out. It set fire to her dress, but neither of them saw it until the blaze had caught on well, and she felt it burn her feet and legs. She tried to beat it out with her hands which

were terribly burned. Ben tried frantically to help her, but her full skirts were a dreadful hindrance. When he realized the task was beyond him, he rushed out of the house terrified, screaming for help. A neighbor who was passing came to his mother's aid, put out the flames, tore off her hot clothing, sent Ben for a doctor, and did what he could to ease her pain. The doctor found that her skirts had partially smothered the flames close to her body and that her feet, legs and hands were horribly burned; part of her hair was burned off, and she had even swallowed some of the flame. He used quarts and quarts of linseed oil to try to alleviate her suffering, but she lay in dreadful agony. "This is the way I am to go," she said courageously, "and because God intended it I am content (Robeson 7)."

This was an extremely traumatic event for Paul and his family. Paul blocked out this part of his childhood at an early age, and did not recall any more about his mother than what had been told to him. After his mother's death, Paul and his family had to relocate because of financial hardships, and they moved to the attic of a store in Westfield, New Jersey. William found a parsonage at a local church where he could work, and Paul started school again. The family started to find closure and move on with their lives.

#### School Days

In Somerville, New Jersey, Robeson took an active role in the church, where he began to realize that he had a knack for music and singing. Paul's father urged him to explore those talents, and told him that he was as good as any White man (PBS Video). Robeson would sing in the church, and it was while Robeson was in school that he explored his acting capabilities. Robeson performed in his school productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*. In addition, he sang

in the high school chorus and excelled in football. In addition to Robeson's extracurricular activities, he was a star student, at the top of his class in scholastic achievements. Robeson was the quintessential all-around student. When it came time to start applying for colleges, he had his heart set on some of the top schools in the country, one of which had a scholarship offering a full-ride to the student with the top score. Robeson attempted this test along with many of his classmates in hopes of winning a full-ride. He placed highest on the test and won a full scholarship to Rutgers.

Robeson's first day at Rutgers was less than favorable, he was punched in the face, and was the only Black in his school (PBS Video). Robeson was broken down by the amount of turmoil he met and instantly wanted to withdraw from Rutgers. However, his father would not let him quit, he said if you quit, then there would be no other Blacks who ever could attend the school. Robeson's father knew that Paul was making history for all Blacks and that it was something not to be understated or thrown away. William died when Robeson was 20, leaving Robeson with no parents. Through the support of his siblings, Robeson pushed through his struggles and persevered in school.

Trying to find joy within Rutgers, Robeson went to try-out for the football team. The Varsity coach approached Robeson and asked him, 'Are you sure you want to do this, and Robeson replied, I'd like to give it a shot (Robeson 8).' His first two days of try-outs were brutal. Robeson recalled in his biography, *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey*, that while

“...holding his own in a tough scrimmage, he was subjected to a sneak attack. He had made a clean, hard tackle and momentarily lay face down with his arms outstretched to catch his breath. Just then, passing by on his way back to the huddle, a varsity halfback named Frank Kelly deliberately stomped on the fingers of his right hand. The bones didn't break, but the pain was excruciating. Enraged even more by the insult than by his pain, he leaped to his feet. But he did not attack Kelly. Instead, he harnessed the immense energy of his anger and coiled his body in preparation for the next play. In his mind, he focused on avenging an insult, not just to himself but to the entire Black race.

The next play was run directly at him, with Kelly carrying the ball. Paul uncoiled, hurling aside the blockers, and drove his shoulder into the onrushing Kelly with a thump heard across the practice field. Then, in a single coordinated motion, he planted his feet widely, wrapped his arms tightly around Kelly, and with an explosive effort heaved Kelly over his head. He was in full control of his rage, but only he knew that; his murderous body language and facial expression frightened all the onlookers, who feared he might kill Kelly.

Coach Sanford screamed the first thing that came into his mind: ‘Robeson! You're on the varsity!’ Paul silently dropped the terrified halfback to the ground and stalked off the field, holding his injured fingers.

He recalled this incident as a symbol of the savagery of America's popular culture. At the time, he experienced a liberating revelation. It was as if he had used the energy of his rage to convince a group of hostile White men that he might kill at least one of them in self-defense

if they attacked him. For the first time in his life, he had cast off his father's cautionary strictures about never angering White people (Robeson 23)."

Robeson earned 14 varsity letters while playing for Rutgers, their star player and still only Black player on the team. Besides playing football, Robeson would sing in the glee club, although he was not allowed to accompany them at any of the concerts. A focused man, Robeson had a limited social life in school due to race, but he did make friends outside of Rutgers, other African-Americans like himself. After graduating Rutgers, amongst the top of his class, Robeson moved to Harlem and was greeted like a hero into the Harlem community (PBS Video).

#### Robeson on the Move

Robeson stood out in Harlem, to his surprise, his academic and historic achievements in school had reached the Harlem community and his arrival was instantly noted. Robeson attended Columbia Law School, where he would receive his law degree, and graduated with a job waiting for him at a White law firm. To his displeasure, he met extant racism within his law firm, and noticed a clear lack of respect as an associate from both his colleagues and within the court room. Robeson's own secretary refused to take orders from him, regarding that, "she does not take orders from a Nigger (PBS Video)." Paul left behind his hopes of being a lawyer, as he did not want to work in a field that he did not believe he could ever rise to the top of.

#### Show Boat

Robeson took part in the Harlem Renaissance, appearing in the lead role of Jim in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. His acting success in this show attributed to his accession to fame where he would soon land the role of a lifetime, as Joe in the London production of *Show Boat*. Robeson would play the role again for the show's Broadway debut in 1927.

*Show Boat* was a landmark musical, not only for Robeson, but for musical theatre, with music by Jerome Kern, book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. *Show Boat* was the first time a musical had integrated both the libretto and score into one single plot line. Up until then, the songs had no connection with the story line and vice-versa. The songs had been intertwined into the plot, and thus a solid through-line was created. Furthermore, *Showboat* was beneficial for the African-American community as it allowed audiences to view the hardships Blacks faced from an unjust cycle of oppression; igniting a call-to-action.

*Show Boat*, set in the mid-1800s follows the life of the young, beautiful, and impressionable Magnolia Hawks, daughter of Cap'n Andy Hawks, captain of the show boat, Cotton Blossom. Magnolia meets a gambler, Gaylord Ravenal, on the show boat, and it is love at first-sight, they marry. In time, Gaylord's gambling would destroy their relationship and result in their separation. A secondary plot involves Magnolia's mulatto friend, Julie, and her devotion to her man, Steve Baker, following their afflictive love due to the forbiddance of miscegenation. Audiences are taken through the arduous battle of the two lovers, and the uphill battle they face in their relationship fraught with danger and reverie. Throughout the story, there are musical motifs of the song "Ol' Man River," sung by Joe, the boat's stevedore. The song highlighted the constant and never-ending struggle the men working along the Mississippi river faced, creating a metaphor between the troubled waters of the Mississippi and the African-American men who worked alongside the riverbanks.

#### Ol' Man River

"Ol' Man River" became an iconic song for Robeson. Written with him in mind, Robeson's rich baritone and strong timbre gave life to the lyrics and strength to the melody. The

haunting beauty and intrigue of the song lied in the juxtaposition of saddening lyrics to a buoyant melody. Murray Horwitz, director of the American Film Institute Silver Theater and Cultural Center states in an NPR interview that,

"The pulse is like the pulse of the river itself...the song's lyrics 'I'm tired of living and scared of dying/ But ol' man river, he just keeps rolling along' are an expression both of hope and despair, As in the best of musical theater works, what's happening in the music tells you something different than what's happening in the lyric, because even though the lyric is somewhat despairing, the music is absolutely exultant in the end (Horwitz)."

Making his mark on the song, Robeson would take liberties with the song and change the lyrics, reinventing the song's meaning (PBS video). Robeson felt the song made the Black man appear weak, and it was his goal to make him strong. As years passed, he would continue to make lyric changes, each time making them more powerful and hopeful for the future of the African-American man.

Below is the original version of the first verse of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's, "Ol' Man River"

"Niggers all work on de Mississippi  
Niggers all work while de white folks play  
Pullin' dose boats from de dawn to sunset  
Gittin' no rest till de judgement day

Don't look up an' don't look down  
You don' dar'st make de white boss frown  
Bend your knees an' bow your head  
An' pull dat rope until you're dead”

Below is an example of one of the revisions made to the original lyrics to give power to the character he played, Joe, and the Black man.

“Here we all work 'long the Mississippi  
Here we all work, while the white boys play  
Gettin' no rest from the dawn till the sunset  
Gettin' no rest till the judgment day  
You don't look up, you don't look down  
You don't dare make the rich boss frown  
Bend your knees and bow your head  
And tote that barge until you're dead (Metrolyrics)”

Notice the change from “Niggers all work” to “Here we all work.” This lyric change humanized Robeson's character and gave him a sense of intelligibility that was lacking in the original lyric. Furthermore, the change from “Don't look up” to “You don't look up” added strength to the character of Joe, rather than being demanded not to look up, he advised not to do these things. Once again humanizing the character, where he is now talked “to” instead of “at.” Along with the changes Robeson made to the song, the production team also found issues within the lyrics of



“Ol Man River.” In the 1936 film adaption, “Niggers” was changed to “Darkies’,” and changed again for the 1946 revival to “Color’d folks.” Most reproductions in circulation now use the 1946 adaption of the piece. These lyric changes are equal testaments to the rise of African-Americans in social class, their stake in society, and the growing sentiment towards the culture and their undeserved retribution.

#### Musical Career

Robeson teamed with Lawrence Brown, a notable African-American pianist and composer, on a mission to redefine plantation songs by adapting them into classic folk songs. Robeson was a popular artist in the 1920s and 1930s, and he was the third most popular singer on the radio at the time (NPR). Robeson’s and Brown’s works spawned into an entire program of nothing but slave music in concert. Robeson extracted songs that most demonstrated the history, struggle, and dignity of African-Americans. Robeson felt the songs were a service to his heritage and aided in the progression of the African-American community. In addition, his utilization of the black dialect was tremendous for the progression of this genre of music. Though it had been done before, Robeson’s execution of the dialect made it palatable to the undisciplined ear. Interestingly, he would also incorporate British and Irish folk songs into his concerts, stating, “All men are brothers because of their music (PBS Video).”

#### Legacy

Robeson’s legacy is one to be revered. His use of his musical talents to inspire social change and give voice to the words that are usually unspoken was admirable, especially amidst a time of racial injustices. Robeson was an inspiration for many performers, even the legendary Harry Belafonte. Robeson gave Belafonte the advice to “get the world to sing your song and they

would want to know who you are (Portraits of the Artist Video).” Robeson’s music was an engine for his goal of inspiring social change, utilizing his talents to break down barriers and open doors for those wishing to follow in his footsteps. Robeson believed that if Black individuals would demonstrate themselves in a variety of fields, they could demonstrate that Blacks could do anything Whites could. Robeson also believed the arts was the way to freedom, as much as it was; it also was his own salvation.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**

My research has led me to the findings that African-American men did make significant contributions to the fields of musical theatre and opera. Bert Williams, Todd Duncan, and Paul Robeson all carved out the path for African-American men not only to have the opportunity to perform onstage but to perform alongside Whites. Whether accidental or fully aware, they planted the seeds and cultivated a new face for Broadway, one that included African-American men. The talents, achievements, and activism of these great men are to be revered and honored within the American theatre textbooks and course curriculums. Though the roads they paved were for African-Americans, my research shows that their works influenced the White community just as much as the African-American community. They unearthed new forms of acting, dancing, music, and storytelling that all contributed to the formation of the American form of musical entertainment we have today.

The stories of these great men have inspired me to continue to do my research and create a public performance outlining their scope in history. The show will discuss the origination of Black acting in Minstrelsy and display popularized pieces from Williams' early and late career. The story will then segue into notable songs attributed to Duncan and Robeson, including the popularized Negro-spirituals arranged by Robeson. Intertwined between the music will be interludes of monologues that would preface the pieces giving history and paying homage to the legacy of these men.

I am proud to say I am too a part of that legacy. A legacy of African-American men on a mission to redefine the American musical and make it into a melting pot of cultures and talents

that it should be. In application of their teachings and stories I have begun to take notice of my personal journey within the career of musical theatre and opera, developing my own goals and aspirations. I aspire to have the same tenacity, fervor, and passion that these men possessed towards reaching their goals and helping others. I want to continue to push the envelope for non-traditional casting and play roles typically performed by White men. Roles such as, the Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera*, Sweeney in *Sweeney Todd*, and Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*. Playing these roles mean a lot to me, because they are able to break down the racial barriers in casting and recreate what it means to be an African-American male performer. Even though African-Americans playing these roles is nothing new, with the first Black Phantom appearing in a Los Angeles production of *Phantom of the Opera* played by Robert Guillaume in 1991 ([robertguillaume.com](http://robertguillaume.com)). In addition, the Broadway Star Norm Lewis will wear the Phantom's mask this year in an upcoming production of *The Phantom of the Opera*, becoming the first Black Phantom on Broadway. An iconic feat for both musical theatre and the African-American community, because it redefines the definition of a leading man. I want to take this a step further where it is no longer taboo to cast an African-American as the leading man in a show, but merely a part of the norm.

The advances African-Americans have made in such a small amount of time are astounding for the African-American theatre community. However, it is just as apparent that there is still a long way to go. It is now the next generation's duty to continue where Bert Williams, Todd Duncan, Paul Robeson, and all of the other pioneers for African-American men in musical theatre left off. We are just as capable to play the White roles and earn our place in the history books. I make it my life's mission to carry the torch on to future generations and continue to pave

the way for African-American men in nontraditional casting. I am pleased to say that I am well on my way where I will be playing Judd (a typically cast White role) in the musical *Oklahoma* this summer for Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre. African-American male actors must continue to go against the grain and not fall into the stereotypes that casting directors want to place them in. We must take charge of our own careers, serve our community, and preserve the legacy of those great men before us.

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