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## The Oppression and Sexism of African-American Women: Then and Now: Substantial Contributions to the History of Musical Theatre

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THE OPPRESSION AND SEXISM OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN:  
THEN AND NOW  
SUBSTANTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY OF MUSICAL  
THEATRE

by

KELLI OWENS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for 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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Thesis Chair: Earl Weaver, MFA

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## ABSTRACT

A wise Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Freedom is never given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed (King 1).” For as long as men and women have shared the planet, sexism has been a universal issue in civilization. In a social justice context, American society has found ways to oppress people for centuries. The Oxford Dictionary defines sexism as a “prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex (“sexism”).” Voting rights in America were established in 1790, but it took years of petitioning at various women’s rights conventions before the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution stating "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" was passed in 1920 (“Nineteenth Amendment”). Traditionally, men were supposed to be the strong, decisive, driven, courageous, money-making breed, while women were expected to be the nurturing, affectionate, weak subordinates. Today, we find men and women working in careers previously linked with sexism; men as nurses and teachers, women as CEOs and factory workers. Statistics show that today there are an increasing number of women providing the financial support in their families.

As with sexism, people also have been oppressed by racism for centuries. According to The Oxford Dictionary, racism is defined as a “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior (“racism”).” It has been argued that African Americans have been one of the most oppressed groups in America. Even after they were emancipated in 1865, it was nearly one hundred years later that their rights were protected with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Before the act’s passing,

African Americans were denied equal education, employment, housing property, and a political voice.

My interest in this topic was peaked right around the same time I became interested in performing on the musical theatre stage. I got my start in local community theatres, and up until college, was the only African American cast in the productions. I started playing multiple ensemble roles per show, and throughout the years advanced myself to “supporting character” but never the lead. Admittedly, there were times when I wasn’t as talented as the women who snagged the leading roles, but many a time when I was just as talented or more qualified for the role, it went to another woman—most times of Caucasian descent. What did they have that I didn’t have? When I got accepted into The University of Central Florida as a BFA Musical Theatre student, I auditioned for the plays and musicals every semester, and each season I began to see the same patterns of who was cast for each show. Roles I thought I would get often went to White actors. I felt victimized in this modern-day example of racism.

But racism goes beyond black and White. Internal racism between the light-skinned and dark-skinned African American women I was competing with became a factor as well. There were many times when an audition notice called for an African American woman; however, an unsettling trend became very apparent to me; if the casting description was for a maid, or something of that nature, larger, dark-skinned women would get the majority of the callbacks, which would lead to them getting cast. On the flip side, if an audition notice called for an African American ingénue type, more of the slimmer, lighter-skinned women were called back and later cast. Has American society cast a racial stigma for African American beauty?

## **DEDICATION**

These events sparked my interest in researching what African American women in musical theatre history went through and what they faced. Each audition season, I've continually asked myself what role, if any, race plays in the process, and it has made me want to find out more about other African American women and their struggles.

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Darryl and Sherri Owens. Thank you for igniting the theatre spark in me from a very young age. If it weren't for your persistence, my teenage years would've been filled with a lot more angst.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER: 1 INTRODUCTION

In the early years, American Theatre emulated the lives of White, property-owning Christian men. During the fourth and fifth centuries B.C., in Athens, Greece, Athenian citizens held competitive dramatic festivals without censorship or political interference. Famous playwrights of the day, including Aristophanes, divided their comedies into seven sections, giving name to vaudeville, which featured variety in song, dance, and monologue. Exploration in theatre moved to Florence, Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as interest in secular plays rose, giving acceptance and popularity to the Renaissance, or rebirth of thought. Commedia 'dell Arte was formed and inspired by shows about conflicting families and city-states. These touring acting troupes featured stock characters and stock plots centered around mistaken identity. This type of performance art and European ideals influenced America, and persuaded them to create a canon of their own. While White Americans continued to finesse the different forms of staging and performing, African Americans were busy trying to forge a way for themselves.

African American performers were seen showcasing their original work from as early as 1821, though African American women played little to no involvement in the origins of African American theatre. The first African American theatre, The Grove Theatre, was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett and opened their first play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, in 1823 (Wilson 243). The company performed tragedies and comedies from a plethora of playwrights, White and Black. It was a rule in the American industry for White men to play Black characters. Later, minor roles for African American men became available. Acting roles for African American women were scarce. White playwrights would create plays with African American women in them, but because of the prejudiced time period, opted to cast

a White woman in Blackface. Many White women refused to be demoralized, therefore leaving White playwrights no choice but to cast a genuine, African American woman, as seen in Edwin Forrest's, *The Tailor in Distress* (Bordman 12). Because of the White's opposition to an all-Black performance venue, the theatre was forced to close its doors, just two years after they opened. As American theatre increased in popularity, political and social issues were inserted into the performances, one of the most controversial being racial slavery in the South. Whites would portray African Americans in a crude, stereotypical way, usually in Blackface attire.

Blackface can be spotted in Ancient Greek Theatre, the Renaissance, and even commedia dell' arte. Minstrelsy, "the impersonation of Negro life and manners by White men in Blackface," was first introduced to America in the nineteenth century (Kenrick 1). It was also the first form of musical and theatrical entertainment to be recognized by European audiences as distinctively "American" in nature. While the Virginia Minstrels of 1843 marked the idea for the first minstrel show, full of comic banter, sketches, and scenes, the Christy Minstrels established mature subject matter, starring Edwin Christy, the founder of the three-act minstrel show format (Kenrick 53). The structure of the minstrel shows inspired the development of vaudeville, burlesque, and revue-type musicals.

The first act featured variety (vaudeville), or olio acts, where the two men on the ends of the semi-circle began with an engagement of comic gags, and ended with a free and open "walk-around" company song, later known as the "cake-walk", a satirical representation of the White man's attitudes and manners, or today's production number exploding in company song and dance. The "interlocutor" sat in the center of the semi-circle. Typically the only performer not in Blackface, served as the "master of ceremonies (Kenrick 53)." Brudder Tambo, the

tambourine player, and Brudder Bones, the bones player, sat on opposite ends of the semi-circle, often interjecting comic banter throughout the show.

Act two, or fantasia, typically featured individual specialties in song and dance, comic skits, or circus talents. While African American women weren't present in this act, or the show as a whole, the highlight of act two was the absurd stump speech, when one of the end-men would mock pretentious speeches of White politicians. The third act featured burlesque, or satire, often in the form of improvised patter and action. These performances were usually a response to a recent event, either political or dealing with contemporary life. It started as a "sentimental, comic tale of plantation life," but later became more risqué. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* was turned into *Roman Nose and Suet*, while *Macbeth* became *Bad Breath*. Famous performers of the day were all men. Among them were P.T. Barnum, Edwin Booth, George M. Cohan, Al Jolsen, and African American Bert Williams (Blackface! 1). When there was a female role available for the sketch, White impersonators were given the opportunity because White woman often rejected the offers, and Black women, an oppressed group, were never asked. Famous female impersonators included George Christy as "Lucy Long", Patrick Francis Glassey as "The Only Leon," and Anthony J. Cannon as "Tony Hart (Blackface! 1)". Minstrel shows were sexually discriminatory in casting and in the sketches actors agreed to include in the performances. Minstrel shows remained all- male until 1890, when a female interlocutor was cast in *The Creole Show* (Kenrick 56). It wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that women, Black and White, were allowed to perform in the Minstrel shows. Famous African Americans who got their start in minstrelsy include Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Unfortunately, by the time they

were granted the performance opportunity, minstrelsy as an art form was starting to die out (Bordman 1).

There are two main types of Negro impersonation: the southern plantation hand (poor, crude, but happy-go-lucky, also known as Jim Crow) and the “White dandy.” The romantic and sentimental plantation content helped the slavery topic to be less awkward and more of a popular and dominant force in American culture, but nonetheless, stereotypes remained. Despite the crude or silly lyrics, minstrel fans came to hear the songs, contributing to the most popular folk songs of America. Stephen Foster was the most famous American composer to introduce original songs in minstrel shows. He also provided a personalization of African Americans and life as a working slave.

African American women fell victim to oppression as they developed aspirations of becoming a star. They had trouble finding fame in White America. Some chose to compete with European-American performers by imitating them and proved their worth and performance ability for a chance to be on stage. Others decided not to imitate the European-American ways and broke the mold by creating new performance styles and even their own shows. While it was a hard road for African American men to find performance work, it was even harder for the African American women. The casting decisions of these women weren’t based on talent but on the color of their skin. If you were considered to be an attractive, lighter-skinned African American woman with European features, you might have a chance in getting cast in the ensemble of a show. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, their luck changed, and many were offered ingénue roles that in the past would have gone to European American women with blonde hair and blue eyes. Women have been considered underdogs for centuries, but dark-skinned, African

American women were and still are the ultimate underdog. They were rarely cast until the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century. When they were offered a role, it was a role that an African American woman would stereotypically play in the household (i.e., a housemaid or a nanny). The dark-skinned women were typically considered to be brassier with more attitude. This sparked an internal racial battle between the light-skinned and dark-skinned women. Dark-skinned women were fed up with not getting the roles they really wanted to play, and had the talent to play, so they forged their own opportunities by creating their own nightclub acts, then moving to star in their own revues and cabarets. In time, they became some of the biggest stars in Europe, America, Broadway and on the silver screen!

Throughout the decades, casting has greatly improved for African American women; however, the same skin color rules still seem to apply today, even in Broadway musicals featuring African American performers. The Tony Award-winning musical *Ragtime* is the perfect example. The ingénue was played by actress Audra McDonald, a light-skinned African American woman with narrow features, while her best friend in the show was played by a gospel singing, dark-skinned woman, actress Vanessa Townsell-Crisp. Sarah, the ingénue character is typically cast with a woman who has a background in classical or opera music, while Sarah's friend is usually played by a woman with a heavy, church-like belt and timbre. While the script doesn't clearly denote a specific skin tone necessary to portray each character, both roles have repeatedly been cast that way, seen professionally and educationally. It appears that America isn't fully comfortable with a female, dark-skinned love interest. Though there have been special circumstances seen on the Broadway stage, it is extremely rare. It's been a constant struggle for Americans to say goodbye to stereotypes on and off the stage. While not as extreme, the

character, Sarah's Friend, goes back to the traditional "mammy," comforting roles that African American women were only offered. Sarah, often cast as a lighter-skinned African American, seems to be a bargaining chip for White Americans; though many spend money to hear the stories of African American life on stage, the lighter the actors' skin color, the more comfortable White audience members are with the storyline.

There have been standout women who overcame oppression, made their sassiness work for them, created their own opportunities, and became more successful than anyone ever would have imagined. They went from being banished in early musical theatre to being in control of their success, becoming popular because of their actual talent and eventually running the roost of the producers and making more money than the male headliners of their time. Black Patti, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker are representative of the Early Musical Theatre generation. In contemporary Musical Theatre, Nell Carter, Heather Headley and Patina Miller have personified the definition of success.

My goal is to shed light and knowledge on these remarkable women whose contributions to musical theatre have inspired and paved the way for many women.

## CHAPTER: 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Black Patti

Sissieretta Jones, better known as “Black Patti,” was born Matilda Joyner on January 5, 1869 in Portsmouth, Virginia. She was the daughter of Reverend Jeremiah and soprano singer Henrietta Joyner. Jones began singing as a young child in her local Baptist church. At the age of fifteen, she began studying at the Providence Academy of Music, where she later continued her training at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Her professional debut was made at the age of nineteen, in New York City of 1888, at Wallack’s Theatre, “a place where no other colored singer had been privileged to shine (Tanner 1).” Together, her husband and manager, David Richard Jones, discussed many extravagant ways to make her a more marketable opera singer, and the best idea was to physically alter her body, so she may have a chance against the White opera singers she was just as good as, if not better than. In 1890, the couple traveled to London to begin arsenic treatment, in hopes of lightening her “very dark skin” and straightening her hair, but it didn’t work (Tanner 1).

Jones received worldwide recognition after touring the West Indies and South America, and was even rumored to have been signed to sing the dark roles in the operas *Aida* and *L’Africaine* at the Metropolitan Opera House. Due to racial prejudice of the time, the news proved false, but her early successes helped pave the way for other African American opera singers to follow. In September of 1892, Jones was granted the opportunity to sing for President Benjamin Harrison at the White House and later for Presidents Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, and William McKinley.



Jones was managed by the American Lecture and Musical Agency, owned by Major James B.N. Pond, who handled many celebrities, including Mark Twain. For a one-week engagement at the Pittsburgh Exposition, Major Pond demanded and received \$2,000 for Black Patti to sing, the highest ever paid to a Black artist of her time. Unlike her White contemporaries, Jones wasn't able to become an opera performer on the American stage, and when asked about her encounters with racism, she was completely honest. On February 13, 1892, Jones became the first Black artist to perform a solo concert at Carnegie Hall. Though she wasn't welcomed on stage as an opera performer, her voice became popular and was in high demand. She then was offered the opportunity to sing for President Benjamin Harrison at the White House, and later for Presidents Grover Cleveland Theodore Roosevelt, and William McKinley. Soon after, Black Patti embarked on a year-long United States and European tour. While on tour, the "Star System" was in full development, while the popularity in operatic companies greatly increased. On stage, Jones had a unique presence, was attractive and extremely professional, but it all came down to her skin color. Because she knew her operatic career was limited, and she wouldn't have an advantage in the star system as an African American female, Jones turned to theatre.

Bob Cole was hired to write and stage an all-Black show for Jones, and, in 1896, "Black Patti's Troubadours," which featured comedy sketches and 30 chorus girls, opened at Proctor's 58<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre in New York. As the main attraction of the traveling show, Jones' contributions came in the form of "Operatic Kaleidoscopes," which contained famous operatic scenes from shows such as *La Boheme*, *Rigoletto*, and *Carmen* (Mercier 276). Black Patti's Troubadours traveled across the United States and performed for both White and Black

audiences. Jones' troupe is credited for being the first successful Black road show to tour the East and South. They embarked on a 45-week season from July to May. In 1900, The Troubadours began adding slight plot to the comedy sketches, in an early attempt to create a "unified musical comedy with a beginning, middle, and end (Tanner 3)." After marrying, and traveling for fifteen years in a private railroad car for her troupe, Jones retired from the stage to care for her sick mother. Soon after her mother's death, Jones began taking care of homeless children until she was left penniless. Forced to sell her houses, jewelry, and silver, she was able to keep three of the seventeen medals she earned in her lifetime. During her worldwide tour, Jones was well-received, and many adoring fans and political officials from the different countries she visited thanked her with medals of appreciation, sometimes made of solid gold. Sissieretta Jones died a broke woman on June 24, 1933 of cancer in Providence, Rhode Island.

In her lifetime, Sissieretta Jones had opportunities that many African American women of her time weren't privileged to have. She sang in some of the world's most prestigious concert halls and public venues, including Carnegie Hall, Covent Garden, Madison Square Garden, and even the White House. She forged a way for African American female stage performers for the future. If it wasn't for her steadfast determination, greats like Audra McDonald and Marian Anderson wouldn't have the careers they have now. While her dream to become an operatic stage performer didn't work out due to racial guidelines, Jones forged her own way by creating "Black Patti's Troubadours." Her traveling show created a way for all-Black shows and revues to come, including *The Wiz* and the musical revue, *Ain't Misbehavin.'*

## Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith was born on April 15, 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Part of a large family of nine, her father, William, was a Baptist preacher who died soon after Bessie was born. Her mom and two of her brothers died before Bessie was a teen. Her older sister, Viola, took over as head of the household, while Bessie and her younger brother, Andrew, worked the street corners for money. Bessie sang for tips while Andrew accompanied her on the guitar. Living in Chattanooga's "Negro quarter," singing became Smith's means of escape (Barlow 1074). She got her big break at the age of eighteen when her older brother, Clarence, arranged for Bessie to audition for Moses Stoke's traveling minstrel troupe. Hired as a dancer, she traveled on the road with the troupe that same year. She and one of the troupe's most famous members, Ma Rainey, "Mother of the Blues," struck a lifelong friendship. Supposedly, Ma Rainey discovered Smith singing in 1912 while passing through Chattanooga. On tour, Ma Rainey became Smith's mentor, while she informed Smith on the dos and don'ts of the music industry. It was reported that Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith became lesbian lovers. During this time, lesbianism was still a taboo, more so in the African American community. They strove to keep their relationship private, but in later years, Smith's affairs with women became public.

In 1913, Smith relocated to Atlanta, where she became a performer at Charles Bailey's 81 Theatre. After her success working in the Theatre Owners Booking Association circuit, she sang in numerous venues, performing in cabarets and dance halls in many rural areas. Next, Smith traveled with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, a troupe that Ma Rainey worked with many times. After traveling and performing with other minstrel troupes, Smith returned to her base theatre at 81 Decatur Street (Smith 1042). By 1918, she was a well-known headliner throughout the United

States, and in 1920, she began producing her own shows for the 81 Theatre, then traveled with them. In her show, *Liberty Belles*, Smith took a risk, and cast her chorus line with dark, voluptuous women. While some theatre owners disapproved of the non-traditional casting, she stuck with her choice, and made it known that if they weren't welcomed, Smith wouldn't work for them either. In the following years, Smith moved to Philadelphia, where she performed at many popular theatres and nightclubs. Her first attempts to break into the record industry failed when many companies labeled her voice too "rough (Barlow 1074)." In 1923, however, Smith was approached by Columbia Records head, Frank Walker, who took the credit of discovering her six years prior in Selma, Alabama, while she was singing in a rundown nightclub.. In her early recordings, Smith's voice was described as "powerful and poignant (Barlow 1074)." She was known to use her voice as an instrument. "Her moans, groans, slurs, swoops, scoops, slides, and stretches were as carefully employed as each stroke on a master's canvas (Smith 1043)." Her first record sold about 780,000 copies in six months, giving her stage career a boost. She later became the centerpiece of Columbia's race record labels.

Smith was one of the first Black performers to stage shows for White audiences, and was also the first Black woman to be broadcast live in concert on local radio stations in Atlanta and Memphis. She was known to collaborate with many "greats" of the time, including Charlie Green and Joe Smith and Louis Armstrong. Smith avoided recording commercialized material from vaudeville or Tin Pan Alley and concentrated on evoking "deeply felt responses from her audiences (Barlow 1076)." Many of her songs dealt with the hardships of African-Americans, such as "poverty, bootlegging, prisons and injustice, drinking and gambling, unemployment and hard times (Barlow 1076)." Some even expressed her own feelings and experiences as an

African American woman. Smith was very open with her sexuality, in her songs and in her actual love life. She had numerous lovers, both male and female. Smith was also a binge drinker, which often brought out the rage and violence in her. Unfortunately, she became notorious for her outrageous behavior.

Smith starred in her only movie, *St. Louis Blues*, in 1929, filmed in Astoria, Long Island. An extremely racist and sexist film, Smith was cast as a prostitute whose pimp preferred a lighter-skinned woman. During the time of the Depression, Smith's record sales declined, and her contract with Columbia was terminated in 1931. With the exception of a 1933 special recording arranged and paid for by John Hammond, her recording career was over. Smith died on September 26, 1937, in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Undisputedly dubbed the "Empress of Blues," Bessie Smith symbolized "African-Americans' resurgent militancy and racial pride. Though she never received official recognition in her lifetime, Smith made important contributions to the African-American performing arts scene. She was known for making blues music mainstream in popular American music, and successfully blended African and Western modes of music, which had a permanent effect on the future of American music. Bessie Smith helped forge the groundwork for making what we categorize as "musical theatre" music mainstream. She also helped African American women in the performance scene find the courage to stick with what they love, without allowing others to steer you away from your dreams. Many performers, including Pearl Bailey and Hattie McDaniel had mainstream albums they used to express themselves, when it was hard to do so on the stage.

### Josephine Baker

Josephine Freda MacDonald was born in St. Louis, Missouri to Eddie Carson and Carrie MacDonald on June 3, 1906. Abandoned by her biological father, and living with an abusive stepfather, Baker developed a mistrust of men and the thought that she must rely on only herself (Johns 43). In school, she was a rebel and chose domestic work over getting an education. Before the age of fourteen, Baker was married and divorced, lost a child, and supported herself by waiting tables. Soon after, she joined a street band, where she developed her dancing skills and comedic timing. At the age of fifteen, she got her big break when she was cast as a chorus girl in Noble Sissle's and Eubie Blake's African American revue-style musical, *Shuffle Along*. She was the darkest of the chorus girls, and throughout the show's duration, the other girls called her degrading names, like "monkey (Haney 35)." She didn't let that get her down. The dance director put her at the end of the chorus line, traditionally the comedy spot, but Baker milked it for all it was worth. Usually the chorus girl comically fakes her ability to dance, but during the encore, she surprises the audience with her actual talent. Baker did that, plus more. During the encore act, she performed her dance routine, but added more complex moves to it. As a result, her cast remained hostile toward her until the show's end. Baker became the primary reason theatre-goers, specifically of Caucasian descent, went to see the show, as they viewed her as "exotic (Haney 36)." Baker later became the highest paid chorus girl in Vaudeville, due to her high demand and rising popularity in *Shuffle Along*. In the following years, she was awarded the opportunity to tour with one of her predecessors, Bessie Smith, and continued her collaboration with Sissle and Blake in their Broadway return for *Chocolate Dandies* in 1924. In her free time, Baker was often seen dancing the Charleston and Black Bottom at the Old

Plantation Club in New York. As a Black cabaret dancer, of “sepia-tone,” Baker was expected to make customers happy, by discretely flaunting her sexuality while singing and dancing (Haney 36). Baker was sexualized in her job, but it came with a hefty paycheck.

In 1925, Baker moved to Paris, where she became an international sensation due to her acclaimed portrayal of the “quintessential exotic Black woman” in the American production *La Revue Negre* (Asante 75). While in Paris, she performed as an exotic dancer, and in 1927 appeared in two silent films, *La Revue des Revues* and *La Sirene des Tropiques*. Her first talkie was in 1934 for the film *ZouZou*, where she was a featured singer and dancer. That same year, she starred in the hugely successful comic opera, *The Creole*, an Offenbach remake. In 1935, Baker made her second talkie, *Princesse Tam Tam*, shot in North Africa, which told the story of an African Princess. Shortly after filming, she traveled to New York to appear in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1936 and 1938.

While she achieved fame abroad, Baker didn’t receive the same adoration in America, so Baker became a French citizen in 1937 to escape racial discrimination and prejudice. She was opposed to performing in front of segregated or discriminatory audiences, which occurred more when she traveled to the United States. Unlike her predecessor, Bessie Smith, Baker “refused to suffer the habitual and pervasive abuse meted out to Black female entertainers in America (Asante 76-77).” She admitted that whenever she returned to America, the producers would make her sing “mammy songs,” and she often was confronted by racists calling her derogatory names.

Baker was known to have introduced the Charleston and Black Bottom dances to the Europeans. Black dance forms didn’t get the same respect or acceptance as other art disciplines.

As an African American woman, her performance in the chorus line helped transform dance and fashion internationally. The new and improved chorus line featured Black women “dancing close together to a swinging rhythm (Asante 76).” On her performance as a chorus girl, Langston Hughes stated: “there was something about her rhythm, her warmth, her smile, and her impudent grace that made her stand out (Asante 76).”

Josephine Baker has a true “rags to riches” story. She came from a poor town in St. Louis, Missouri to later celebrate with European royalty, including Princess Grace of Monaco and Queen Elizabeth of England. In Paris, fashion, clothing, perfumes, and hairstyles were being promoted under Baker’s name. Many famous designers were known to create elaborate costumes and headdresses for her performances. One of her most famous costumes was the banana costume, which became a part of French folklore. In a single performance, she was known to make seven costume changes. Her ability to sing in six languages, along with her contributions in dance and fashion, made her a force to be reckoned with. She was known for her comedic abilities as well as her sensual dance moves, often involving her baring her breasts.

Nicknamed the “Black Venus” of France from European fans who considered her a sexualized being, Baker performed for Allied soldiers in North Africa during World War II (Asante 77). She was also a Red Cross volunteer, where she served as an ambulance driver. For her work in Germany’s underground intelligence program, Baker was later awarded the Legion of Honor and Rosette of Resistance decorations. Baker was an animal lover and had a heart for children. In the 1950’s, she embarked on her “experiment in humanity,” in which she adopted “children of different races and nationalities to make a point about humanity and racism (Asante 77).”



In 1956, Baker officially retired from show business to make the children her full-time priority. Her hiatus didn't last long, however. In order to keep up her lavish lifestyle, Baker was forced to return to show business in 1959, where she appeared in *Paris, Mes Amours*, a revue loosely based on her life. One of her life's desires was to see her "people happier in this country (Asante 78)." In 1963, she flew into the United States for the March on Washington and performed for many civil rights benefits. Josephine Baker died on April 12, 1975 in Paris shortly after a performance and dinner party in her honor. Baker is the only American-born citizen to receive a twenty-one gun salute honor at her funeral.

Josephine Baker is considered to be the first and greatest Black dancer in history. She used dance as a freedom of artistic expression. Baker contributed to the merging of Black and White audiences, and a mutual understanding between the two races. Though she started out as a chorus girl, Josephine Baker forged her way to become a highly-acclaimed singer-dancer. Future performers, like Adelaide Hall, Heather Headley, and Patina Miller, who started out as a chorus girl or understudy, wouldn't have their own successes without Baker.

### Nell Carter

One of nine children born to Horace and Edna Mae Hardy, Nell Ruth Hardy was born in Birmingham, Alabama on September 13, 1948. Her childhood was trouble stricken. At the young age of two, her father died from the electrocution of a live power line. As a means of escape, she began listening to star performers Dinah Washington and Elvis Presley at a very young age, sparking an early interest in music. Her family was "anti-show business," so she began singing in the church choir and for youth groups at a very young age, like many of her

predecessors, and she was also featured on a local gospel radio show. Carter states, “At five years old, I knew I was different from everyone else. I just knew I wanted to be on stage as an actress. I never thought of myself as being a singer. Though I cared for them both (qtd. in New York Amsterdam News, Vol. 88, Issue 28).” She was inspired by actor Marian Anderson, because as an African American woman, Anderson was doing what she loved to do, while White people paid to watch her perform. Hattie McDaniel also was a role model for Carter. Carter was quoted on her thoughts about McDaniels’ fame:

“It really baffles me how our people don't do anything to praise or mention her. When you say, 'Who was the first Black to win an Oscar?' you say 'Sidney Poitier.' That is not true. She was. People get upset because she played a maid, but I understand that. She played what was out there. But she was put down by the bourgeoisie, and that is happening all over again. The bourgeoisie complain there are no jobs. But some Blacks out there won't play maids because they find it demeaning. But if they give it to a white actor they feel it was racism. Make up your mind (qtd. in New York Amsterdam News, Vol. 88, Issue 28).”

Carter’s extracurricular activities acted as a positive distraction for the misfortune occurring in her personal life. At the age of sixteen, Nell was raped at gunpoint, and it wasn’t long before she discovered she was pregnant. After giving birth to her daughter, Tracey, her aunt raised the baby as her own. At only nineteen, Carter decided to pursue her dreams and left Alabama for New York City.

Under her new surname, Carter, an old family name, she began singing in local coffee shops to pay the bills. Originally, she wanted to be an opera singer, but listening to big-names

Barbra Streisand, Doris Day, The Andrews Sisters, and Cleo Laine convinced her to switch to musical theatre. Her singing voice has been described as a “piercing, sassy, naughty-girl wail that recalls Dinah Washington, but several notches higher in pitch and volume. Not as familiar but equally potent is a lower register that suggests a blues shouter wise in the ways of dramatic Broadway belting (qtd. in *New York Times*, Vol. 144 Issue 50142).” While studying at Bill Russell’s School of Drama, she landed her first Broadway gig at 23 years old. *Soon*, a rock opera co-starring Richard Gere, Peter Allen and Barry Bostwick, opened on January 12, 1971, but unfortunately the show closed after only three performances. Other musical roles include *Dude Be Kind to People Week* and *Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope*. In 1974, Carter became the Music Director for Westbeth Playwright’s Feminist Collective’s production of *What Time of Night It Is*. That same year she auditioned for *Miss Moffatt*, a musical based on superstar Bette Davis’ movie *The Corn is Green*, despite the fact they were looking for a redhead. To make a point that race doesn’t constitute talent, Carter bought a red wig and auditioned. Needless to say, she got the part, changed the wig to black, and was featured alongside Davis. The show turned out to be a flop and never made it to Broadway.

Carter traveled to London for further theatrical training when her big break finally came with *Ain’t Misbehavin*, a Fats Waller musical revue, in 1978. The star-studded cast also featured Armelia McQueen, Charlayne Woodard, André De Shields and Ken Page. Her four-year performance of many show-stoppers earned her a Tony Award for Outstanding Actress in a Musical, as well as the 1982 Outstanding Individual Achievement Emmy Award for the televised performance. It was later revived in 1988 with the original cast. Carter was cast as diva Effie White in the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls* in 1978, but she declined the offer in order to take a

television role in the ABC soap opera, *Ryan's Hope*. While *Dreamgirls* opened in December 1981 with Jennifer Holiday as Effie White, Carter was busy trying to make a career on the television screen. In a remark she made about how she entered the industry, Carter states she didn't come into the business as a Black person. "I came into the business strictly because I wanted to work. I don't need anyone to tell me I'm Black. I know I'm Black, so to come in with that extra chip on my shoulder would be a downfall. Just about any job I've gotten that meant anything to me did not say 'Black woman' (qtd. in New York Amsterdam News, Vol. 88, Issue 28)."

In 1979, Carter was granted the opportunity to be a featured performer in the 1979 movie adaption of *Hair*, directed by Miloš Forman. Her vocals are sprinkled throughout the movie soundtrack, one of the most popular songs being her version of "White Boys," a comic song on an African American woman's obsession with men of Caucasian descent. She had a recurring role on *The Misadventures of Sheriff Lobo*, and her portrayal of Sargent Hildy Jones earned her nominations from The Golden Globes and Emmy Award Ceremonies. Months later, Carter landed a featured role on the sitcom *Gimme a Break!* which lasted from 1981 until the final season in 1987. Audiences loved her portrayal of the no-nonsense housekeeper for the White family, and she received two more Emmy nominations for her work on the comedy (legacy.com). Many facets of her talents were showcased, from her warm and loving persona, to her sassy and funny side. She even got to showcase her vocal talent, which was featured in the theme song, as well as various episodes.

After the series' demise, Carters' personal life took a turn for the worse. Shortly after marrying George Krynicki, Carter, a newly-converted Jew, attempted to end her life, for which

her good friend, Liza Minnelli, helped her get admitted into a drug rehabilitation center in 1985. After conquering her cocaine addiction, Carter and her husband decided to adopt two sons, Daniel and Joshua. She was faced with another trivial hardship when the couple tried to adopt twice more, but in both cases the plans fell through. While they tried to conceive, Carter suffered from three miscarriages over a short period of time. Two years later, Carter was on the television scene again with an NBC pilot for *Morton's By the Bay*, which had a one-time only airing. She performed "The Star Spangled Banner" for the 1989 World Series in San Francisco, California. Just when her life seemed to be picking back up, she received word that her brother and best friend, Bernard, died of AIDS complications. After taking a personal leave from the celebrity scene, Carter was cast the following year in a starring role for the CBS comedy *You Take the Kids*, which featured a bourgeois African American family, often referred to as the "Black *Roseanne*." Due to poor ratings, the series ended after a month of airing.

In the early 1990's, Carter appeared in a slew of low-budget films, television specials, and game shows, including *Match Game '90* and *To Tell the Truth*. In 1992, however, Carter underwent surgery to repair two untreated brain aneurisms, and she also received news that she had Type 2 Diabetes. That same year, she and her husband got divorced because of her returning expensive drug and alcohol habit, but Carter wasn't single for long, for she married her new husband, Roger Larocque, almost instantaneously. Unfortunately, the newlyweds ended their marriage after only a year of wedded bliss. Carter had a hard time with her grandmother's passing, which put a strain on her relationship with her husband. From 1993 to 1995, she co-starred in American television sitcom *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper*, which featured a largely

African American cast. Carter played principal “P.J.” Moore for seasons two and three of the comedy. After her stint on the series, Carter declared bankruptcy.

In 1997, Carter returned to Broadway for the musical revival of *Annie*, in which she was contracted to play the evil, alcoholic orphanage owner, Miss Hannigan. When asked how she felt about playing a character that originally was played by an Irish, White woman, Carter replied: “I am a woman. First of all I am a human being. I am God's child. If you find me anyone who is totally Black or totally White, I'd like to meet them. Most people don't know there's a mixture (qtd. in New York Amsterdam News, Vol. 88, Issue 28).” Controversy began when Carter got word that the commercial promotions featured a Caucasian actress, Marcia Lewis, as Miss Hannigan. After a confrontation with the commercial producers, they claimed the advertisements were made during a previous production, and it would be most cost effective not to reshoot. Many reporters read into slightly offended Carter’s interviews and spun the idea that racism was potentially involved. While the advertisement does name Carter as the female supporting actress, she admittedly states that not being in the commercial was “insulting” to her as a Black woman. In an interview with the New York Post, Carter reasons, “maybe they don’t want audiences to know Nell Carter is Black (playbill.com).” Coincidentally, a Caucasian Sally Struthers replaced Carter in the role shortly after the publicity dispute.

In 2001, Carter made an appearance on the pilot episode of the new sitcom, *Reba*, starring country star Reba McEntire. Her guest role led to two more walk-ons in the show’s premiere season. The following year, she made two appearances on the hit television show *Ally McBeal*. Shortly after, with only \$200 to her name, she declared bankruptcy a second time. Returning to theatre in 2003, Carter began rehearsals for, *Raisin*, a musical adaptation of A

*Raisin in the Sun*, while concurrently filming for the romantic comedy *Swing*. Her farewell film appearance was in the movie *Back to Midnight*, which was released two years after her death.

Nell Carter died of a heart attack brought on by complications of diabetes on January 23, 2003, at the age of 54. She was the lesbian partner of Ann Kaser, and loving mother to her daughter and two sons. Though her relationship with Kaser was kept private until her death, Carter and Kaser began dating in the mid-1990's, though the public viewed their affiliation as friendly and/or business related. The couple, along with Carter's two sons, shared the Beverly Hills home. Carter was known for her sassy, steadfast attitude. A self-proclaimed "short, fat, Black woman", Carter was a "firecracker," who always seemed to light up a room, making her a highly-loved, critically-acclaimed star not only on the Broadway stage but on film and television screens as well (legacy.com). Though she wasn't dealt the best cards in life, be it health-related, family, or personal, an opinionated, larger-than-life Carter did her best to conquer her many dilemmas. In her Playbill bio for the 1988 Broadway Revival of *Ain't Misbehavin*, she posted: "This space is usually used to tell you what I've done. Instead, I will tell you what I'm going to do: the best that I possibly can (playbill.com)." She did exactly that. Carter lent personal and professional support to her community as shown by her memberships in the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, Screen Actors Guild, Actors' Equity Association, and her lifetime membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Nell Carter helped pave a way for other African American women in musical theatre history who would go on to play roles traditionally portrayed by White actors. Heather Headley and Audra McDonald are two examples. Sassy, full of life characters like Jennifer Hudson and Patina Miller wouldn't be where they are now in the musical world, without Nell Carter's gusto.

### Heather Headley

On October 5, 1974, Heather Headley was born in Trinidad to Hannah and Eric Headley, a pastor. She began competing in performing arts contests at the age of two, and by the age of four, Headley started singing with the choir and playing the piano. She had a love for various musical styles, whether it was native Trinidadian music like calypso, soca, and reggae or even American rhythm and blues. In 1989, she and her family made the move to the United States to support her father's new job as pastor for McKee Street Church of God in Anderson, Indiana.

The move was a big culture shock for the entire family. However, Heather was greatly affected. While her brother was able to dismiss his Caribbean accent in a week, Heather took a much longer time. The Trinidadian school system proved to be more advanced than the one in the states, which caused Headley to frequently skip class, leaving her friendless and alone. She did remain quite ambitious, however.

While attending Northrop High School, Headley was a member of the show choir, Charisma. Unaware of the American singing voice, Headley grew up imitating many greats, including Whitney Houston, Toni Braxton, Mariah Carey, Anita Baker, and Jennifer Holiday. Her high school career also granted Headley the opportunity to portray Fanny Brice in the musical, *Funny Girl*. Originally played by Barbra Streisand, the Jule Styne musical is based on the life and career of a Jewish comedian and film star, Fanny Brice. This character isn't typically played racially ambiguously, which made this a huge success and breakthrough for Headley, despite its high school credit.

After high school graduation, Headley was accepted into Northwestern University, where she studied Communications and Musical Theatre until the last day of her Junior year,



where she was forced to make a difficult decision: stay in school or drop out and pursue her aspirations for becoming a musical theatre performer. Heather never imagined music would bring her money and success, which is why she chose to study communications as a secondary job. However, after careful consideration, Headley chose the latter, and joined the tryout cast of the soon-to-be legendary musical, *Ragtime*, as a chorus member and understudy to the lead role, Sarah Brown (later played by Tony Award winner Audra McDonald). The Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty musical was a landmark in the making. *Ragtime* continues and strengthens the issue-driven musical; dealing with sensitive issues, such as racism, it unmask America, portraying the best and worst of our humanity.

Heather Headley's *Ragtime* stint was cut short because she was hired to originate the role of Nala in Tim Rice's and Elton John's musical adaptation of *The Lion King*. Completely unaware of the extent of her success, Headley believed playing a lion was reminiscent of the carnivals held back in her home country of Trinidad, so she kept her large role under wraps (askmen.com). According to Headley, she had no idea she'd be destined for Broadway. "And what I believe God is saying to me is this: You might not see it right now, but I'm going to put you on and it's called Broadway" (qtd. in Jet, Vol. 110 Issue 1, p54). Nonetheless, her performance was well-received, and the show won the 1998 Tony Award for Best Musical. Headley's performance in the now-classic landmark musical has contributed to one of Broadway's longest running musicals. She crafted and perfected her role from 1997 to 2000 for the still-playing musical.

In the midst of *The Lion King*'s third year, Elton John personally asked Headley to audition for the title role of Tim Rice's and Elton John's newest musical, *Aida*. Based

on Giuseppe Verdi's Italian opera by the same name, the musical centers around the forbidden love between a Nubian princess and an Egyptian soldier. The \$20 million production played in Atlanta before moving to Broadway in 2000. While critics gave the show mixed reviews, Headley's portrayal was so acclaimed, she won the 2000 Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical. Shortly after, Headley appeared in the Broadway Concert adaption of Jule Styne's *Do Re Mi*, also starring Brian Stokes Mitchell, who is an African American male. The original Broadway cast of 1960 featured an all-White ensemble, but the two leads being African American for the contemporary adaption didn't alter the storyline at all. The 20th Anniversary Benefit Concert for the Actor's Fund of *Dreamgirls* was a success, starring several strong and hugely-successful African American women, including Audra McDonald and Lillas White. Headley portrayed Lorrell Robinson, originated on Broadway by Loretta Devine. While Headley got this opportunity to perform with some "greats" in the theatre world that many people, especially women of color, aren't privileged to receive, she is completely aware of the significance of her presence in theater. "I was a Black girl playing a lead role on Broadway," she acknowledges proudly. "I knew what was on my shoulders. We don't get many opportunities like that (qtd. in *Essence*, Vol. 32, Issue 9)."

As a performer, Headley has had the honor of singing at prestigious events, including The Kennedy Center Awards, We are One: The Obama Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial, as well popular talk shows *Good Morning America*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, *The Today Show*, *The View*, and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. In November 2012, she starred as Rachel Marron in the musical adaption of the 1992 movie, *The Bodyguard*, in the West End Theatre.

With growing success, Headley was discovered by RCA records. Shortly after singing for the company, her first solo album, *This is Who I Am*, was certified gold, winning her the 2003 Lady of Soul Rhythm and Blues/Soul Album of the Year, as well as the trophy for Best New Artist. Her second album, *In My Mind*, was released by BMG North America Chairman/CEO Clive Davis. Headley won her first Grammy Award with a single released from her first Gospel album, *Audience of One*, in 2010. Her fourth studio album was released in 2012 under *Only One in the World*. She also received many accolades from prestigious award ceremonies including the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actress in a Musical (*Aida*), the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical (*Aida*), the Soul Train Lady of Soul Award for Rhythm and Blues/Soul Album of the year and Best New Artist, and the Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Rhythm and Blues/Gospel Album.

Over the past few years, Headley has established a standard for African American female performers. She has shown versatility from singing musical theatre to American rhythm and blues and even gospel and classical. As one of classical singer Andrea Bocelli's favorite singing partners, Headley has toured internationally with him. As a performer, Headley wants people to "define me as an artist who sings beautiful, thoughtful songs. I want people to crave my music whether it falls into the R&B, neo-soul, pop, gospel, or even Broadway category...looking into an audience and seeing people laugh or cry or sing along...it just makes me want to sing more (qtd. in *Ebony* 61 no7 26)." Though still in the prime of her career, Headley has helped steer the performance future for African American women in the right direction. In her career so far, she has had the opportunity to portray characters originally written for African American women.

Unlike her predecessors, a lot of the shows written today include characters of various ethnicities, therefore widening the casting scope for African American women.

### Patina Miller

Patina Renae Miller was born on November 6, 1984. Born and raised in a single parent home in Pageland, South Carolina, Miller was immersed in gospel music and choir singing at a very young age. She attended performing arts summer camps as a preteen. Doing everything in her power not to be a single teen mother, like her own mother, Miller has always pushed herself to follow her dreams. Her mother encouraged the arts as a way to introduce confidence. She attended an elite performing arts boarding school that her mother founded, followed by a full-ride scholarship to Carnegie Mellon University, in which she graduated with a Musical Theatre degree in 2006. Miller remains thankful for her time at the University, stating, “It was there that I studied and really realized that I could make my dream a reality ([www.cmu.edu](http://www.cmu.edu)).”

In her junior year of college, Miller sent in an audition tape for the movie adaption of *Dreamgirls*. After about a month of forgetting, Miller was called into her Dean’s office, and she was notified that she had been asked to travel to California for an in-person audition. She was one of the three finalists for the role of Effie White. Ultimately, the role went to Academy-Award winner Jennifer Hudson, another dark-skinned African American woman. Unlike her predecessors, Miller’s big break came fresh out of college, when she landed a 30-episode stint on the daytime soap opera *All My Children*. She played the role of Pam Henderson, the new reality show producer in Pine Valley, who promised great ratings and additional fame to one of the show’s regulars, Erica Kane. Miller began to get noticed by the musical theatre community in

the Summer of 2008, when she was given the opportunity to work with director Diane Paulus and The Public Theatre on a production of *Hair* staged in the middle of New York City's Central Park. Months later, she was featured in the Manhattan Theatre Club's production of John Patrick Shanley's *Romantic Poetry*.

Though she was offered the opportunity to move with *Hair* to Broadway for the 2009 Revival, Miller chose to take the understudy gig she was offered for the lead role of Delores Van Cartier in the musical adaptation of *Sister Act* for six months during its first run in Pasadena, California, while the casting team began an international year-long search for the perfect West-End Delores. After the casting search garnered no results, Miller's "Cinderella story" began when she was removed from the chorus and cast as the female lead. Miller claimed to know she would eventually lead the show. She wanted to "know what it was like to take on that responsibility (qtd. in WWD, Vol. 205, Issue 84)." Whoopi Goldberg, who portrayed Delores in the 1992 movie, was a producer for the musical. She advised Miller to make the part her own and to bring her own experience to the role. The West End production opened June 2, 2009. The show as a whole received mixed reviews, though most critics were in awe of Miller's performance, including David Benedict of *Variety* magazine who thought her "powerhouse vocals, pitched somewhere between Gloria Gaynor and Whitney Houston, and her thrillingly fast vibrato act as the show's engine." Whatsonstage.com dubbed Miller "Best Actress in a Musical," and she portrayed the role until its closing in 2010 in London. The following year, Miller participated in City Center Encores! semi-staged production of Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*. The musical reveals the trials and tribulations that occurred in a South African Village in 1949. Miller portrayed the role of provocative-singing Linda. Shortly after, she was asked to

reprise the role of Deloris Van Cartier for the Great White Way, making *Sister Act* her Broadway debut as a leading lady. While she was nominated for a Tony Award, Sutton Foster ultimately took the win for her 2011 performance in *Anything Goes*. Miller did, however, win a Theatre World Award, and was nominated for many more prestigious accolades. Miller stayed with the Broadway Company of *Sister Act* until March 2012, when she was replaced by child star Raven-Symoné.

As director Diane Paulus' first pick, rising star Miller was asked to audition for the role of the "mischievous, mysterious" Leading Player for the American Repertory Theatre production of *Pippin* in December 2012. After a challenging audition process with over 30 candidates, men and women of all ethnicities, Miller won the role. Admittedly, Miller was aware of the big shoes she had to fill, since the part was originally played by African American song-and-dance man Ben Vereen, which earned him a Tony Award for Best Actor in 1973. In an interview with USA Today, Miller noted that she felt nervous about not only living up to others' expectations, but also being a woman playing a role that has always been played by a man. A source from Backstage Magazine states that "Vereen may have created the character, but Miller's reinvention makes the character feel brand-new... her inviting eyes speak a language all her own, and when she starts singing, the result is, as the opening number says, magic (Vol. 54, issue 21)." After the great success at the American Repertory Theatre, the show moved to Broadway in 2013. Despite being afraid of heights, Miller put her fear aside to dangle approximately 20 feet above the stage from a trapeze, along with other impressive acts, including toying with pyrotechnics, levitating a king, performing a soft shoe dance, hula hooping, and using hypnotics to guide a troupe of "acting acrobats" through the story of *Pippin* and self-discovery. In reference to facing her fears,

Miller stated: "Sometimes in this business, you'll be asked to do things that you're not completely sure of or not in your comfort zone, but you just do it (qtd. in *Back Stage*, vol. 54, issue 21)."

Miller's portrayal of *The Leading Player* in the avant-garde circus-inspired revival earned her a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical.

At the age of 29, Patina Miller's career doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon. So far in her career, she has been in two Broadway shows, in which she played the leading lady for both, received two Tony Award Nominations, in which she won her first with *Pippin*, and she got engaged to her long-time boyfriend, David Mars, on her opening night of *Pippin*. Miller has an incredible work ethic and constantly strives to be better at what she does (*Back Stage*, vol. 54, issue 21). Miller has collaborated with many songwriters on their albums, such as Scott Alan's *What I Wanna Be When I Grow Up*, and Michael Kooman's and Christopher Dimond's *Out of Our Heads*, which features the growingly popular song "Random Black Girl," a story song about how contemporary musicals utilize the "token Black girl," which portrays African American women in a brassy, big-voiced way. She's also participated in many Broadway musical workshop productions, including *American Idiot* and *The Book of Mormon*. Her singing voice has been described as "sprightly...with great pitch, a mellow tone, and theatrical savvy (washingtonpost.com)." Diane Paulus, who has had the opportunity to work with Miller twice (*Hair* and *Pippin*), has described her as determined and virtuous. "She has such an appetite for working hard and conquering any challenge that is put in front of her," Paulus says. "She's always game. She's always willing to try new things (*Back stage*, volume 54, issue 21)."

The newly-engaged star remains excited and motivated about her future projects. "I like really working hard and challenging myself as an actor, and surrounding myself with good

people. You can only hope you get the opportunity to do another show (Back stage, volume 54, issue 21).” In September 2013, it was confirmed that Miller will play the role of Commander Paylor in the third installment of the *Hunger Games* movie franchise, *Mockingjay*. She also remains hopeful for the future in African American Musical Theatre, stating:

“There aren't a lot of roles out there yet on Broadway for women of color. Do I think there could be more? Yeah, but I think we've definitely made strides. On Broadway, I'm hoping that it will continue to change. I'm hoping that there can just be characters — it doesn't have to necessarily be Black or White. I hope that we continue to knock down the color barrier of roles you can play or not play (qtd. in WWD, Vol. 205, Issue 84).”



## CHAPTER: 3 CONCLUSION

Through exploratory research on the history of African American women's struggles in musical theatre history compared from the early generations to now, my findings have led me to the discovery that times are indeed improving, and African American women are starting to get the same chances at a leading role as White women have had since the existence of American theatre.

At the start of her career, Madame M. Sissieretta Jones endured racial turmoil at the hands of her own husband and manager, but she managed to forge through the oppression by creating her own opportunities and becoming an African American woman of firsts. Black Patti, as theatre scholars like to call her, constructed a new way for African Americans to create and perform their own performance pieces, without having to answer to White oppressors. She forged a way for African American female stage performers like Audra McDonald and Marian Anderson. Jones made her aspirations for becoming an operatic singer come true by forming her own minstrel troupe, which created the beginnings of all-Black musicals and Broadway-revues of the future.

Growing up in the slums of Chattanooga, Tennessee, "Empress of Blues" Bessie Smith started singing on the streets for tips and then moved to traveling with an all-Black minstrel troupe. Like Black Patti, Smith was oppressed by her own managers, for they constantly told her that her voice was too rough, and White critics were opposed to the Negro lyrics she incorporated in her songs, but Smith didn't let that discourage her. Instead, she continued writing about the trials and tribulations of African American life, which sold her almost a million record copies. Smith's legacy gives us heart-felt songs that give us an insight to what it was like

to be a poor African American woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Baker forged a way to make “musical theatre” music mainstream. The African American performers to follow walked in her footsteps and created great mainstream music for audiences worldwide.

Like Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker endured many hardships early in her life, but she used theatre as an outlet. Baker transformed the look and stereotype of the African American chorus girl. While she was racially victimized in America, Baker found fame and acceptance in Europe, where she will forever be remembered as the “quintessential exotic Black woman (Asante 75).” As the greatest Black dancer of the time, Baker transformed the look and personality of the African American chorus girl. Because of her comedic flair and artistic expression, chorus girls of the future would break that shell and become leading ladies.

Nell Carter has repeatedly been referred to as a sassy, African American woman. Each of the roles she portrayed, whether on screen or on stage, had a brassy quality to them. For every job she auditioned for, Carter made an effort to leave race at the door. She strove to earn the role fairly, despite the color of her skin. Though her personal life was full of challenges, much like her predecessors Bessie Smith and Josephine Baker, Carter will ultimately be remembered for the sassy, “big-lady roles” she portrayed, most significantly shown in the critically-acclaimed musical, *Ain't Misbehavin*.

Heather Headley has had the opportunity to originate two of the biggest and legendary roles for African American women: the role of Nala in *The Lion King* and Aida in *Aida*. Like her predecessor Nell Carter, there also have been times when Headley broke racial barriers, portraying roles that weren't typically dubbed “racially ambiguous” (Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*).

Headley is the epitome of a hard-working, successful Black female who is setting a standard for contemporary women entering the stage business.

Growing up in a single-parent home, Patina Miller knew she wanted to be successful and make a name for herself right from the start. She was blessed to have had opportunities granted to her directly after college graduation, though she did have to work for them. Her Broadway success as leads in the musicals *Sister Act* and *Pippin* has led her to become an African American female performer on the rise. Though Miller's legacy is still in the making, she has high hopes for the future of African American women in theatre. Like she's already achieved, Miller strives for genuine, non-traditional casting where directors don't look at the color of her skin to be considered for a role; a goal that many of her predecessors had but couldn't fulfill as much due to the time period.

As a musical theatre performer, I, too, have felt victimized, being an African American woman in a White American society. From my early start in the show business to my college career, there have been many instances when I would audition for a role, alongside an equally-talented White woman, and I would lose the opportunity. Internal racism inside the oppressed group of African American women also has been present in my college career, where light-skinned and dark-skinned women competed for the ingénue role. Admittedly, casting has gotten better in the professional world, but the educational world needs to catch up with the times. In the Spring of 2014, I was fortunate to have been cast non-traditionally in the musical, *The Music Man*. I portrayed the character Zaneeta Shinn, the mayor's eldest daughter. My family was all-Black, and we were the only African American performers in the show. As an actor, the other characters didn't treat us differently because of our skin color, but it was very apparent to the

audience that the Shinn family was the only Black family in town. Historically, the musical takes place in early 1900's Iowa. While it was great to be cast in a role that is typically cast with an all-White family, the director chose to take a different spin and cast an all-Black family. The educational system could go even further and completely color-blind cast the show, including having a Black daughter with interracial parents. Taking another step in the right direction, the educational theatre program should ignore what casting is being done in New York and cast according to talent, regardless of skin color, height/weight and vocal classifications.

I'm eager to see how I will be classified when I enter the professional theatre world after graduation. As a slimmer-set, lighter-skinned individual, theatre directors might assume I have a lighter-sounding soprano voice, with a background in classical music based on racial stereotypes. What casting directors aren't aware of is that my voice is just as bawdy with the piercing belt s many of the women I chose to study. While each of the women endured personal hardships, they all found a way to forge through and become some of the most successful African American women of their time. Some even chose to create their own opportunities when critics and other people in the field wouldn't provide them with any. When I start to feel victimized or oppressed in a performance setting, I will always find opportunities to forge my way to acquire the career of my dreams. Also, I won't automatically jump to the "race card." When casting decisions don't go as planned, I will completely assess my audition process, along with my competitors', deciphering what could have gone wrong on my part or what I could've done better to have a casting edge. In the future, I hope to be as successful as my predecessors. They are all an inspiration to me, and I admire how humble the women were about their success.

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