

Class 3: A Watershed Work

A. Show Boat and Race

1. Class title 1 (*Show Boat* posters)
2. Cover and frontispiece from Edna Ferber's novel (1926)

Just about any book on Broadway you read will talk about *Show Boat*, the 1927 musical by **Jerome Kern** (1885–1945) and **Oscar Hammerstein II** (1895–1960), as a landmark work. The reason generally cited is its attitude to narrative, the fact that almost every bit of music arises out of and develops to story and characters of the original book by **Edna Ferber** (1885–1968). I hope to explain this further in the second hour. But the one that interests me most at the moment is its treatment of race. Let me play you the beginning and ending of the 22-minute opening sequence in **Francesca Zambello's** 2014 production for the San Francisco Opera, and tell me what you think. The situation at the opening should be obvious enough. There is then a long section of exposition, which I'll omit, at the end of which **Magnolia**, the juvenile lead, meets a handsome gambler, **Gaylord Ravenal**, and is obviously attracted. She confides in **Joe**, the old river man (**Morris Robinson**), but he advises her to keep it all in perspective.

3. Kern: *Show Boat* (San Francisco Opera), opening
4. Kern: *Show Boat* (San Francisco Opera), "Ol' Man River"

Judging by these two numbers, this is a show as much about Black people as about White ones, isn't it? How would you say the Black ones are treated? The attitude at the beginning is somewhat realistic, I'd say. It admits the distinction between the two races: the one out there enjoying themselves, the other doing the hard work. But I don't think it is patronizing or exploitative. Only Kern's cleverness at the end in putting the two choruses together seems just a bit too cute. And Joe is given a good bit of dignity, isn't he? Even though the notion of the wise old Negro is rather a stereotype.

5. Will Marion Cook

Given how White a phenomenon Broadway seems to have been for most of the Twentieth Century, it surprised me to discover that several of the earliest Broadway musicals were all-Black affairs, written, composed, produced, and cast entirely by African Americans. This man, **Will Marion Cook** (1869–1944), was the composer of two of them—despite what you might guess from the photograph, he was African American on both sides, but a person of some class and education. After graduating from Oberlin, he studied for a while with **Antonin Dvorak** in New York, then attended the conservatory in Berlin for several years. His *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898) had words by **Paul Laurence Dunbar** (1872–1906), later associated with the Harlem Renaissance; it was produced by **Edward Rice** (the composer of last week's *Evangeline*). Almost nothing of it remains, at least on YouTube, but here is last part of the overture played by the composer himself on a piano-roll. The section starts with a fairly conventional lyrical tune, but it segues into a cakewalk—not quite ragtime, but definite Black rhythms.

6. Cook: *Clorindy*, piano roll (played by the composer)
7. “Darktown is out tonight,” sheet music

Just because *Clorindy* was an all-Black affair, does not mean that it was immune from stereotyping. Listen to one verse of this song, and especially the chorus, and tell me what you hear.

8. Cook: *Clorindy*, “Darktown is out tonight”
9. “Darktown is out tonight,” sheet music (repeat)

What did you think? I see that the words to this were apparently written by Will Marion Cook himself; I can’t imagine Dunbar penning anything as crude as “*Warm coons a-prancin’, Swell coons a-dancin’, Tough coons who’ll want to fight.*” If you look at the photo—which is actually from Will Marion Cook’s next show, *In Dahomey* (1903)—you’ll see that although the performers are African American, the men are still made-up in blackface. This is the tradition of the Minstrel Show, and the performers are still buying into it.

10. “On Emancipation Day,” sheet music

But Dunbar certainly wrote the words to this one, which comes from *In Dahomey*. Unlike *Clorindy*, which was a shorter piece played in a roof garden, *In Dahomey* was full-length and given in a real theater, so it surely wins the accolade for first full-length musical comedy written and performed by Blacks. I’ll play one verse, sung by **William Brown**. On the one hand, the text portrays a scene of real excitement, such as you might see, for example, in New Orleans at Mardi Gras—and the idea of whites wanting to behave like blacks is a good observation. On the other hand, the language seems quite demeaning.

11. Cook: *In Dahomey*, “On Emancipation Day”
12. *In Dahomey* at 54 Below

Dunbar and Cook’s songs were not all strut and show; they could also write intimate numbers such as “Brown Skin Baby Mine,” sung here by **Austin Rivers** in the Broadway club 54 Below.

13. Cook: *In Dahomey*, “Brown Skin Baby Mine”
14. Blake and Sissle: *Shuffle Along*, sheet music

The all-Black show that really changed Broadway was *Shuffle Along* (1921) by Baltimore-born **Eubie Blake** (1887–1983) with words by his fellow vaudevillian **Noble Sissle** (1889–1975). I found a rather good documentary on YouTube; I don’t know its source, and I don’t know who the elderly gentleman is who introduces it. The man in the chair who does a lot of the talking is the director **George C. Wolfe**. It ends with Blake himself playing the hit number “I’m just wild about Harry,” which **Harry Truman** adopted for his election campaign a quarter-century later. The show is comparatively free from the minstrel-show influence I have been discussing, although you will hear two of the performers in the 2016 revival saying how it is still reflected in the titles. But the number I most want you to notice is the love duet “Love will find a way,” which seems to have been the first sentimental number written by and for Black musicians. Instead of the rather lackluster performance on the documentary, I cut once more to 54 Below, where it is sung by **Rachel Simone Webb** and **Phillip Attmore**, also of the 2016 revival.

15. *Shuffle Along* documentary

16. Audra McDonald and the *Shuffle Along* cast at the Tonys, 2016

Such a high-energy show needs more than a documentary to present it. So here is the four-minute sequence from the 2016 Tonys. This revival was interesting, in that it did not merely reproduce the show, but placed it in the context of a script in which Sissle and Blake are characters, showing how it ever made it to Broadway in the first place. The lead singer is **Audra McDonald**.

17. *Shuffle Along* at the 2016 Tonys

18. The original Broadway production of *Show Boat*, 1927

So back now to the original *Show Boat*. It too contained a number called “In Dahomey.” It is always cut in modern performances, so I can’t show a video, but I do have a version with the sheet music, and it is pretty exciting. As you will see, it calls for two choruses: one is black and sings in a made-up language; the other is white. Please hold off any value judgments for now, but listen and tell me what you think.

19. Kern: *Show Boat*, “In Dahomey”

20. Billy Van in blackface

Were you offended? Probably. But the idea of the piece is a quite subtle. The “Black Chorus” are white performers engaged to appear in blackface at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, where Act Two is set. The point of the number is that although they may behave like cartoon savages onstage, they are longing to get back to their normal lives on Avenue A. So instead of racial exploitation, it is a *critique* of the exploitation common in the theater of the time. But the distinction is too subtle to work, and the number was dropped from the two films and all revivals.

21. Paul Robeson and Jules Bledsoe

A further proof of the seriousness with which Kern and Hammerstein took the portrayal of Black characters in *Show Boat* is the fact that they wrote the role of Joe specifically for **Paul Robeson**. Robeson earned his LLD at Columbia while playing for the NFL. But instead of law, he went onto the stage (Othello and the title role in **Eugene O’Neill’s** *The Emperor Jones*) and concert platform, and was already becoming known as an activist for civil rights. But because of his stage commitments, Robeson was not available for the Broadway premiere, so the role went to another outstanding Black figure, **Jules Bledsoe**, at the time one of the few African American artists to make a career in opera. But Robeson sang Joe in the London production, and in the Broadway revival of 1932. Critic **Brooks Atkinson** described Robeson’s performance: “Mr. Robeson has a touch of genius. It is not merely his voice, which is one of the richest organs on the stage. It is his understanding that gives ‘Old Man River’ an epic lift. When he sings ... you realize that Jerome Kern’s spiritual has reached its final expression.” Fortunately, we have his performance in the 1936 film.

22. Kern: *Show Boat*, “Ol’ Man River” (Paul Robeson in the 1936 movie)

23. Class title 2 (An Integrated Musical?)

B. Show Boat and its Story

24. Section title B (*Show Boat* and its Story)

I ended the first hour with a slide that asked whether *Show Boat* was an integrated show? I meant this in two senses: **racial integration**, as I addressed in the first hour, and **narrative integration**, which I shall consider now. The answer to both questions, I think, is “yes,” but with caveats. Yes, the show includes Black characters in both leading and chorus roles. But **Francesca Zambello’s** production in San Francisco probably takes this further than would have been possible in 1927. Although it is generally clear (mainly from the costumes) whether a given section is intended as a “Black” or a “White” number, the people in the chorus are pretty much integrated throughout. As far as **narrative integration** is concerned, the first act pretty much follows the book, covering a span of days in more or less a single locale, with most (but not all) of the musical numbers clearly advancing the plot. Act Two, on the other hand, covers a span of 34 years, shuffling between the Mississippi, Chicago, and New York, and virtually all the numbers are insertions that could easily be replaced by something else, or even left out. For the rest of this hour, with the minimum of talking from me, I am going to play selections from Act One that develop the pretty but conventional romance between the two leading characters, and also the utterly unconventional racial subplot that is such an original feature of this show. After this, if time, I’ll play the one scene from Act Two that I think deserves to be set against the best of Act One, and also one totally gratuitous inserted song that nonetheless makes for a rousing finale.

25. Julie, Magnolia, and Ravenal

For the rest of this hour, with the minimum of further explanation, I am going to play selections from Act One that develop the pretty but conventional romance between the two leading characters, **Magnolia (Heidi Stober)** and **Gaylord Ravenal (Michael Todd Simpson)** and also the utterly unconventional racial subplot concerning the other leading lady, **Julie (Patricia Racette)**. After this, if time, I’ll play the one scene from Act Two that I think deserves to be set against the best of Act One, and also one totally gratuitous inserted song that nonetheless makes for a rousing finale. Let’s start with a snatch of the Magnolia’s first meeting with Ravenal, which is one of the episodes in the brilliant 12 minutes of exposition that comes between the opening and “Ol’ Man River.”

26. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act I scene 1, “Make Believe”

I’ll play the Scene 2 in its entirety. It introduces the song “Can’t help lovin’ dat man,” whose jazzy syncopation suggest it is a song for colored people, as the cook **Queenie (Angela Renée Simpson)** says. It is the first indication—in music, not words—that Julie is of mixed blood, though she is passing as white.

27. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act I scene 2, “Can’t help lovin’ dat man”

I am cutting Scene 3, which is a solo for Ravenal in a saloon. Scene 4 is on the stage of the *Cotton Blossom*. I’ll play the opening, cut the 4½-minute rehearsal that follows, and pick it up at the end, when Julie’s story reaches a climax.

28. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act I scene 4, first part

29. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act I scene 4, ending

Scene 5 contains two catchy numbers, “Life upon the wicked stage” and “Queenie’s Ballyhoo.” Frankly, either could be cut without loss. But I’ll play the second, as a further example of my thesis about the racial integration of the show, at least in this production.

30. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act I scene 5, Queenie’s Ballyhoo

In Scene 6, we are back in the theater watching an hilariously overacted melodrama. But there is no music, so I’ll pass on to the very end of Scene 7, when Ravenal persuades Magnolia to marry him and come to Chicago. This leads straight to Scene 8, the act-finale, with all the expected production values of a Broadway musical.

31. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act I scenes 7 & 8, “You are Love” and Finale I

32. Chicago World’s Fair

Act Two takes us to **Chicago**, but the long scenes of the first act give way to shorter ones that jump around in place and time. The plot now shifts to what would become another staple of the Broadway musical: *the problems of showbiz life*. And it is not happy. Julie and her husband Steve have also come North, where she is performing in a night club, the **Trocadero**. She becomes an alcoholic and, in exasperation, Steve leaves her. Meanwhile, Ravenal and Magnolia have had a daughter, but he takes to gambling again and leaves her. So both women have been abandoned. The one scene that I want to play, the only one that holds its own against Act One, is the one occasion when their paths cross again, although Magnolia never knows it. Julie is coming to the end of the road at the Trocadero, when Magnolia comes in to audition. Hearing her sing her own song, “Can’t help lovin’ dat man,” Julie quietly slips away into the night. I find it very moving, not least because so much of it is handled in music.

33. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act II scene 3, Magnolia’s audition

34. Climax of “Hey Fella!”

But let’s end on an upbeat note, with Queenie’s song and production number from the final scene, “Hey Fella!” It is the perfect example of a **superfluous song** that is dragged in only on a pretext. Apparently it was only written to cover a scene-change, and was indeed cut in most subsequent revivals when no longer needed. It is not even Queenie’s song. Magnolia has become a big star, and Queenie sings one of *her* numbers, that she has heard and memorized. But it is a wonderful example of what is known as an “**eleven o’clock number**,” a rousing piece just before the show winds up.

35. Kern: *Show Boat*, Act II scene 11, “Hey Fella!”

36. Class title 3 (A Serious Show)