

## BLACK THEATRE IN THE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY



**Bob Cole** and **William Johnson** conceived, wrote, produced and directed one of the first black musical comedies in 1898. The show was called *A TRIP TO COONTOWN*. With JR Johnson, Bob Cole created *THE SHOO-FLY REGIMENT* in 1906 and *THE RED MOON* in 1908, both of which were more successful. These shows helped to establish a trend of black performers moving away from the previous standard of minstrelsy and into sophisticated themes and lyrics. Bob Cole was a performer and composer who greatly influenced the development of the black musical. By 1897, most American audiences had had an opportunity to see African Americans perform on the stage during the previous thirty years. Hired by European American agents and managers, they were expected to reproduce many of the songs and skits that had been made famous in blackface minstrelsy in new theatrical genres, such as variety and vaudeville. Others were forming their own concert companies to do a variety of popular and high-art music, and writing and singing ersatz spirituals, “coon songs” (*i.e.*, black dialect numbers), and sentimental Victorian tear-jerkers. These had all become popular thanks to writers/performers such as Ernest Hogan, Sam Lucas, and Gussie Davis, among others.<sup>1</sup> It is within this context that Bob Cole and Billy Johnson’s *A TRIP TO COONTOWN* first appeared on the stage during the 1897–98 season. Although African Americans had written numerous short theatrical and musical works, none had written a full-length musical production. To add to its historical significance, *A TRIP TO COONTOWN* was performed, directed, and produced by African Americans, an astounding feat in an era where few independent theaters could even consider taking a chance on such a production. Unfortunately, the play—like so many other nineteenth-century African American documents and artifacts—was lost, and scholars could only make conjectures (based mainly on newspaper reviews) about what it looked and sounded like.



**Scott Joplin** was an African-American composer and pianist. Joplin achieved fame for his ragtime compositions, and was later dubbed “The King of Ragtime”. Joplin was born into a musical family of laborers in Northeast Texas, and developed his musical knowledge with the help of local teachers, most notably Julius Weiss. During his brief career, he wrote 44 original ragtime pieces, one ragtime ballet, and two operas. One of his first pieces, the “Maple Leaf Rag”, became ragtime’s first and most influential hit, and has been recognized as the archetypal rag. Ragtime is a musical genre that enjoyed its peak popularity between 1897 and 1918. Its main characteristic trait is its

syncopated, or "ragged," rhythm. It began as dance music in the red-light districts of African American communities in St. Louis and New Orleans years before being published as popular sheet music for piano.

The "Maple Leaf Rag" (copyright registered 18 September 1899) is an early ragtime musical composition for piano composed by Scott Joplin. It was one of Joplin's early works, and became the model for ragtime compositions by subsequent composers. It is one of the most famous of all ragtime pieces. As a result Joplin was called the "King of Ragtime". The piece gave Joplin a steady if unspectacular income for the rest of his life.

Despite ragtime's decline after Joplin's death in 1917, the "Maple Leaf Rag" continued to be recorded by many well-known artists. The Ragtime revival of the 1970s brought it back to mainstream public notice once again.

Joplin grew up in Texarkana (a city in Bowie County, Texas, United States, located in the Ark-La-Tex region), where he formed a vocal quartet, and taught mandolin and guitar. Joplin moved to Sedalia, Missouri, in 1894, and earned a living as a piano teacher, continuing to tour the South. In Sedalia, he taught future ragtime composers Arthur Marshall, Scott Hayden and Brun Campbell. Joplin began publishing music in 1895, and publication of his "Maple Leaf Rag" in 1899 brought him fame.

Joplin moved to St. Louis in 1901, where he continued to compose and publish music, and regularly performed in the St Louis community. The score to his first opera, *A Guest of Honor*, was confiscated in 1903 with his belongings, owing to his non-payment of bills, and is considered lost by biographer Edward A. Berlin and others. He continued to compose and publish music, and in 1907 moved to New York City, seeking to find a producer for a new opera. He attempted to go beyond the limitations of the musical form which made him famous, without much monetary success. His second opera, *TREEMONISHA*, was not received well at its partially staged performance in 1915.

*TREEMONISHA* ragtime (1910/1972) is an opera composed by the famed African-American composer Scott Joplin. Though it encompasses a wide range of musical styles other than ragtime, and Joplin did not refer to it as such, it is sometimes incorrectly referred to as a "ragtime opera". The music of

*Treemonisha* includes an overture and prelude, along with various recitatives, choruses, small ensemble pieces, a ballet, and a few arias.

The opera was not performed in its entirety until 1972, after the discovery of the piano score. This discovery was called a "semimiracle" by music historian Gilbert Chase, who said

*TREEMONISHA* "bestowed its creative vitality and moral message upon many thousands of delighted listeners and viewers" when it was recreated. The musical style of the opera is the popular romantic one of the early 20th century. It has been described as "charming and



piquant and ... deeply moving", with elements of black folk songs and dances, including a kind of pre-blues music, spirituals, and a call-and-response style scene involving a congregation and preacher.

The opera's theme is that education is the salvation of the Negro race, represented by the heroine and symbolic educator Treemonisha, who runs into trouble with a local band of magicians who kidnap her.

In 1916, suffering from tertiary syphilis and by consequence rapidly deteriorating health, Joplin descended into dementia. He was admitted to a mental institution in January 1917, and died there three months later at the age of 49.

Joplin's music was rediscovered and returned to popularity in the early 1970s with the release of a million-selling album of Joplin's rags recorded by Joshua Rifkin, followed by the Academy Award-winning movie "The Sting", which featured several of his compositions, such as "The Entertainer". The opera *Treemonisha* was finally produced in full to wide acclaim in 1972. In 1976, Joplin was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize.



In 1904, political operator and gambling boss Robert T. Motts opened the **Pekin Theater** in Chicago. Dubbed the "Temple of Music," the Pekin became one of the country's most prestigious African American cultural institutions, renowned for its all-black stock company and school for actors, an orchestra able to play ragtime and opera with equal brilliance, and a repertoire of original musical comedies. A missing chapter in African American theatrical history, Thomas Bauman

author of "The Pekin: The Rise and Fall of Chicago's First Black-Owned Theater" presents how Motts used his entrepreneurial acumen to create a successful black-owned enterprise.

Concentrating on institutional history, Bauman explores the Pekin's philosophy of hiring only African American staff, its embrace of multi-racial upper-class audiences, and its ready assumption of roles as diverse as community center, social club, and fundraising instrument.

The Pekin's prestige and profitability faltered after Motts' death in 1911 as his heirs lacked his savvy, and African American elites turned away from pure entertainment in favor of spiritual uplift. But, as Bauman shows, the theater had already opened the door to a new dynamic of both intra- and inter-racial theater-going and showed the ways a success, like the Pekin, had a positive economic and social impact on the surrounding community.





In 1915, black theatre pioneer **Anita Bush**- a frequent player in the shows of Bert Williams and George Walker, formed the Anita Bush All-Colored Dramatic Stock Company and performed shows that were considered "white" plays. Anita Bush was born on September 1, 1883, in Brooklyn, New York. Her first experience with theater was with her father who is described as a theatrical costumer whose clients included many New York actors and performers. She spent hours working alongside her father, gaining exposure to many white theater actors and actresses. Furthermore, while working with her father she also

had a sister whom she acted alongside in a play, called "*ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*" which inspired her to pursue a career in the theater realm.

While working with her father at the Bijou Theater, she saw the Williams and Walker company performing a piece on stage titled, "*IN DAHOMEY*". It was during this time that she asked her father for permission to audition for the group, in hopes to gain a career in acting. At the age of 17, she was cast with the company and it allowed her to tour the world and pave a way for her to form her own companies. With the Bijou Theater Company, she traveled to England with the musical and later performed in the Chorus of four other Williams and Walker shows.

After performing in her final play titled, "*MR. LODGE OF KOAL*" with the troop, she went on to form her own dance group. The dance group was called the "Anita Bush and her 8 Shimmy Babies". Unfortunately, at the break of her career she had to stop dancing due to a back injury, which then inspired her to pursue a full-time career in theater drama.

In the early part of the 20th century, Anita Bush worked extensively as a dancer in musical theatre and vaudeville performing with the likes of Bert Williams and George Walker. While working with Maria C. Downs she put on vaudeville acts and plays. With a signed contract with Elmore, Bush went to Billie Burke, a Harlem-based white director/playwright to stage his play, "*THE GIRL AT THE FORT*", a light comedy with five characters. Bush then assembled the cast which included Carlotta Freeman, Dooley Wilson and Andrew Bishop. The play opened at the Lincoln Theatre in November 1915. For the next six weeks, Bush's company presented a different play every two weeks to much success. The Anita Bush Stock Company presented a one-act play titled "*THE GIRL AT THE FORT*".



The success of Maria C. Downs and Bush's team allowed them to generate more revenue and popularity. At this point, Maria C. Downs asked Bush to change the name of her company from the Anita Bush Stock Company to the Lincoln Players. However, when Maria C. Downs, the owner of the theatre, insisted that the name of her company be changed to the Lincoln

Players, Bush moved her company to the Lafayette Theater to open with a sketch entitled "*OVER THE FOOTLIGHTS*". This effort proved that blacks can perform serious drama and also introduced Broadway to the African-American community. The Lafayette Players proved that a black theatre company can sustain itself over a long period of time, lasting all the way until 1932 when the Great Depression brought the venture to an end. The Lafayette Players Stock Company was owned by Anita Bush in the early 1900s. In 1915, she presented the idea of launching a dramatic stock company to Eugene "Frenchy" Elmore, the assistant manager of the Lincoln Theatre, an established vaudeville house in the Harlem section of New York City. Although her company had not yet been established, she convinced Elmore that she could mount a production in just two weeks. In March 1916, the Lafayette Theatre purchased the rights to her company and changed the name to the Lafayette Players. Bush then organized four additional companies of the Lafayette Players which toured throughout the United States. At the Lafayette Theatre, the Anita Bush Stock Company would mount a new play on a weekly basis. Throughout the Lafayette Players lifetime with Bush, she reached a point where she could no longer afford the group and sold her right to her so-called co-manager Lester Walton. Even though she no longer managed the Players, she is credited with the responsibility of their reputation. As a faithful member she remained with them until 1920. During this year she left the company to pursue a career in motion pictures.

In 1921, she appeared in "*THE BULL-DOGGER*", the first of two Norman Film Company productions starring Bill Pickett. The following year she was featured in "*THE CRIMSON SKULL*".



**Charles Gilpin** was an actor born in Richmond, Virginia. He quit school when he was 12 years old and at age 18 began to travel with the Williams & Walker Vaudeville Company. Gilpin was one of the original members of the Pekin Stock Company in Chicago, founded by Robert Motts. In 1914 he appeared in the leading role in "*THE GIRL AT THE FORT*", with the Anita Bush Company. Charles Gilpin stayed on with the company when it moved to the Lafayette Theatre and helped to re-organize the company as the Lafayette Players, the first stock company in Harlem. There, he played a memorable role in white-face in the play "*OCTOROON*". He left the company over a salary dispute, moving on to play the role of Rev. William Curtis in the 1919 premiere of

"*ABRAHAM LINCOLN*".

As with most actors of color at the time, Charles Gilpin had few opportunities to demonstrate the true scope of his talents to a wide audience. He worked as an elevator operator in Macy's department store to earn his living. In 1920 he was solicited for the leading role in Eugene O'Neill's play "*THE EMPEROR JONES*" at the Provincetown Theatre in Greenwich Village. He offered a powerful



performance in what was to be the first dramatic production in an all-white theater to star an African-American actor. This play launched Gilpin's career. The New Republic ranked him with the greatest artists of the American stage for his performance. He was received at the White House and was awarded the NAACP Spingarn Medal for his notable performance in O'Neill's play. He was later replaced by Paul Robeson after a falling out with the playwright.



In 1915, a pair of Oberlin graduates opened a settlement house in an area of Cleveland called **The Roaring Third**, located at the corner of East 38th and Central Avenue. With foresight and vision, Russell Jelliffe and Rowena Woodham set out to establish a common ground where people of different races, religions, social and economic backgrounds could come together to seek and share common ventures.

The settlement house idea was conceived out of the principles upon which our nation was founded: that the individual is not wholly determined by his environment but has the capacity to transcend it. Each person can, by his response to his environment, change the way it affects him. Everyone can discover his own, independent significance and make his personal, distinct contribution to life. The Jelliffe's soon discovered that the arts provided the perfect common ground. The early twenties saw a large number of African-Americans move into the area from the South. Resisting some pressure to exclude their new neighbors, the Jelliffe's insisted that all races were welcome.

The **Playhouse Settlement** quickly became a magnet for some of the best African-American artists of the day. Dancers, printmakers, actors, writers all found a place where they could practice their crafts. The Jelliffe's held high standards of excellence in the arts, not for the sake of excellence, but because they knew that pursuing excellence makes the greatest demands on the individual to fulfill the promise of his potential. The Playhouse Settlement was renamed **Karamu**, a Swahili word meaning "Place of enjoyment in the Center of the Community", in 1941.

**THEATRE OWNERS BOOKING ASSOCIATION**  
CHATTANOOGA OFFICE: 1212-1213 VOLUNTEER BUILDING  
 SAM E. REEVIN, MANAGER

**BOOKINGS**

Date Dec. 12th, 192 7

To Mr. Ben Stein,

Douglas Theatre Macon City Ga. State

Kindness December 19th, 20th & 21st 192 7

Name of Act	Salary	Commission	Address for Tickets
<u>Boley de Legge</u>	<u>\$ 50%</u>	<u>\$ 5%</u>	<u>Pekin Theatre, Savannah, Ga.</u>
<u>" SANDANNA GIRLS "</u>			
<u>20 people -</u>			
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 60%</b>	<b>\$ 5%</b>	

Remarks:

In the late 19th & early 20th centuries, most black performers made their living by working in vaudeville rather on the 'legitimate' stage. Circuits such as Keith-Albee or Columbia would book some black vaudeville acts, but it was the Negro circuit that such acts relied upon most. The Negro circuit extended from New York to Texas and Chicago to Birmingham. Bookings along the Negro circuit were managed by the **Theatre Owners Booking Association**, or TOBA (generally pronounced TO-bee).

TOBA was founded by managers that had been associated with the Dudley circuit, which was a

circuit founded by the former vaudeville performer Sherman H Dudley. In founding the Dudley circuit, Dudley was attempting to establish a string of black owned theaters across the United States. In 1911, Dudley was managing the Colored Actors' Union and established S.H. Dudley Enterprises, which he used to buy theaters around Washington D.C. and Virginia. Within five years, the Dudley circuit extended into the south and midwest.



TOBA was established in the 1920s, and grew to include nearly a hundred theaters. However, the most prestigious theaters in Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New York booked acts independently rather than through TOBA- which was considered less prestigious since it paid less and had inadequate touring arrangements. That is how TOBA came to instead stand for Tough On Black Artists (or Tough On Black Asses) by the likes of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel "Sweet

Mama Stringbean" Waters, Pigmeat Markham, Butterbeans and Susie, Nipsey Russell, the Nicholas Brothers, Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington, Florence Mills, Cab Calloway, a young William Basie (he who would later be dubbed "Count"), a four-year-old Sammy Davis, Jr. and Josephine Baker (before she found her niche in Paris).

After 1929, like many other theatrical advances and enterprises, TOBA faded away in the Great Depression.



**Butterbeans and Susie**, stars of black vaudeville from the 1920s through the '50s, had originated the husband/wife comedy routine that later got translated into the likes of George Burns and Gracie Allen. Jodie Edwards and Susie Hawthorne were both teenage chorus dancers in a TOBA vaudeville show when a publicity agent offered them \$50 each to get married on stage at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia in 1917. It started out as a joke, but they stayed together for life. Jodie recalled

having launched his performing career as a child, on a neighborhood street corner: 'Get out there, dance barefooted, pass the hat'. By the time he was nine or ten, Jodie was tagging along with a local string band, serenading the rich white folks of Marietta. For her part, Susie is known to have appeared in southern vaudeville as early as 1911, when she was billed as a 'coon shouter' at the Budweiser Theater in Macon, GA.

Jodie and Susie met in 1915, as teenaged members of the singing and dancing chorus of Tolliver's Smart Set, a tented minstrel variety show that was billed like a circus. Their relationship began as a publicity stunt, when they were married on stage with the show, but they did not immediately team up on stage. In 1927, Butterbeans and Susie appeared in Jimmy Cooper's "Black and White Revue" at the mainstream Columbia Theater in New York and went

on to play some of the biggest spots that black acts could play in the South. During the 1930s, with vaudeville in decline, Butter and Sue diversified, taking up residence in hotel lounges and supper clubs. They also found a new generation of fans in the "modern" race theaters of the 1940s and 50s, including the Apollo Theater in Harlem.



**Ethel Waters** was an American blues, jazz and gospel vocalist and actress. She frequently performed jazz, big band, and pop music, on the Broadway stage and in concerts, although she began her career in the 1920s singing blues.

Waters toured on the black vaudeville circuit known as the TOBA circuit, where she was billed as "Sweet Mama Stringbean".

Despite her early success, she fell on hard times and joined a carnival, traveling in freight cars along the carnival circuit, eventually reaching Chicago, and soon headed south to Atlanta. There, she worked in the same

club with Bessie Smith, who demanded that Waters not compete in singing blues opposite her. Waters conceded and sang ballads and popular songs. Perhaps today best known for her blues voice, Waters then was to sing, dance, play and star in musicals, plays and movies, and later in TV. Around 1919, Waters moved to Harlemand there became a celebrity performer in the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s.

Ethel Waters first recorded for Columbia Records in 1925, achieving a hit with "Dinah", which was voted a Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1998. (From her start at Columbia, the label split her records initially with the more bluesey songs issued on their 14000-D race series and her versions of popular songs on their regular popular series.) Soon after, she started working with Pearl Wright, and together they toured in the South. In 1924, Waters played at the Plantation Club on Broadway. She also toured with the Black Swan Dance Masters. With Earl Dancer, she joined what was called the "white time" Keith Vaudeville Circuit, a vaudeville circuit performing for white audiences and combined with screenings of silent movies. They received rave reviews in Chicago and earned the unheard-of salary of US\$1,250 in 1928.



In September 1926, Waters recorded "I'm Coming Virginia", composed by Donald Heywood with lyrics by Will Marion Cook. She is often wrongly attributed as the author. The following year, Waters first sang it in a production of "Africana" at Broadway's Daly's Sixty-Third Street Theatre. In 1929, Waters and Pearl Wright arranged the unreleased Harry Akst song "Am I Blue?", which then was used in the movie "On with the Show" and became a hit and her signature song.



Her stage appearances include: *HELLO 1919!* (1919); *JUMP STEADY* (1922); *PLANTATION REVUE* (1925); *BLACK BOTTOM* (1926); *MISS CALICO* (1926-1927); *PARIS BOUND* (1927); *AFRICANA* (1927); *THE ETHEL WATERS BROADWAY REVUE* (1928); Lew Leslie's *BLACKBIRDS* (1930); *RHAPSODY IN BLACK* (1931); *BROADWAY TO HARLEM* (1932); *AS THOUSANDS CHEER* (1933-1934); *AT HOME ABROAD* (1935-1936); *MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS* (1939-1940); *CABIN IN THE SKY* (1940-1941); *LAUGH TIME* (1943); *BLUE HOLIDAY* (1945); *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* (1950-1951); *AT HOME WITH ETHEL WATERS* (1953) and *THE VOICE OF STRANGERS* (1956). Waters was the second African-American actress to be nominated for an Academy Award and she also won a Joseph Jefferson Award as Best Guest Artist in a Locally Produced Play in 1970 for her performance in *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* at the Ivanhoe Theatre in Chicago.