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THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS



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THE SCOTTSBORO NINE AND THE SHAPING INFLUENCE OF BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY

When the nine Black teenagers who became known around the world as the “Scottsboro Boys” were hauled off a freight train in Paint Rock, Alabama on March 25, 1931 and falsely accused and ultimately tried and convicted of raping two white women, their fates had been shaped by a century of blackface minstrelsy. The minstrel show, which traces its origins to the 1830s, was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States for much of the nineteenth century. Some credit Thomas D. Rice (also sometimes referred to as Daddy Rice) with popularizing the entertainment form (though he was not the first white actor to perform in blackface). One version of the story goes that, while on a visit to the Ohio/Kentucky region, Rice, who spent several years as a somewhat unremarkable itinerant actor, witnessed a disabled enslaved Black man dancing and singing and created a stage act that caricatured him and lampooned Black social and cultural life more broadly. To perform his “Jim Crow” character, Rice donned blackface makeup and tattered clothes, contorted his body, and ultimately launched into what became the trickster figure’s signature song, “Jump Jim Crow.” The act was a hit with audiences and generated demand for additional entertainment in this style.

As its popularity grew, the minstrel show settled into a somewhat formulaic structure. Performances would typically begin with a “walkaround.” The minstrel troupe would then arrange itself into a semi-circle, with the performers on each end playing the tambourine or clapping “bones.” These end men were a standard part of most minstrel shows, as was the Interlocutor, a character who usually wore formal attire and whiteface and functioned as a master of ceremonies of sorts. Often unfolding in two or three parts and featuring a variety of specialty acts, dances, impersonations, burlesques, and playlets, a crucial aim of the performances was to bolster prevailing beliefs about white supremacy. The minstrel show was instrumental in perpetuating and proliferating stereotypical ideas about Black people’s intellectual inferiority, animality, laziness, and lasciviousness, among other things. These ideas were offered up as rationales for why Black people were unworthy of full citizenship and, indeed, should be subjected to various forms of oppression and subjugation, including enslavement, racial segregation, and racist violence. That the laws aimed at disenfranchising and terrorizing Black people that emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War and endured through the 1960s drew their name from the Jim Crow character is illustrative of the outsized place that minstrelsy maintained in the American imaginary.

It is perhaps not all that surprising, then, that when composer John Kander, lyricist Fred Ebb, playwright David Thompson, and director-choreographer Susan Stroman began researching the trials of the Scottsboro Nine in the early 2000s, after determining that they wanted to make a musical about the saga, they encountered various contemporaneous reports comparing the courtroom proceedings to a minstrel show. Thompson reflected on this in a 2016 interview with Boston’s WBUR radio station: “We did a lot of research on the source material, and, at that time, it was one of the first real media circuses in the country. And we found an article written by a reporter who called it out and compared it to a minstrel show. And we thought: this is an interesting way to tell the story because what you are doing here is taking an extraordinarily racist art form and using it to tell an extraordinarily racist chapter in American history.” While the minstrel show and blackface performance are now generally regarded as harmful and offensive entertainment forms and practices, their entanglements with the history of the American theater and, indeed, the history of American race relations are undeniable. The Scottsboro Boys derives its potency, in part, from the ways it invites audiences to reckon with the layered and complex histories it stages and to contemplate how we might yet still imagine and create a more just world.

-Isaiah Matthew Wooden, PhD, Dramaturg



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P.O. Box 426470 • San Francisco, CA 94142 • 415.255.8207 • www.42ndstreetmoon.org