Race Melodrama and Minstrel Shows: Crash Course Theater #30

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=M3K9uKIMob0
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios logo)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today, we're continuing our discussion of 19th century American theater with a look at some upsetting parts of our theatrical past. In the 19th century, race and racism contributed to a unique and troubling performance culture which helped create and spread racist stereotypes that are still with us today, and just to be super clear, the stuff we're talking about in this episode is tough. The images are upsetting and much of the language is fraught, to put it lightly, so just an upfront content warning so you know what's coming up.

While some theatrical versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin contributed to the abolitionist cause, other melodramas used racial themes to titillate white audiences and even to support slavery's values. America's original theatrical form, the minstrel show, re-enforced ugly caricatures even as it made some African-American performers stars. We're also gonna look at the history of African-American theater, which is a tradition as old as America.

(Crash Course Theater intro plays)

Before we get into all the disturbing details about minstel shows, we should take a moment to note that there's a vital tradition of African-American theater actually made by African-Americans that's almost as old as America itself. In 1816, William Alexander Brown, a former ship steward turned theatrical impresario, opened the African Grove Theater in New York. The theater's resident company, the African Company, was all black. They played to mostly black audiences with a Shakespeare repertoire. Richard III and Othello were particularly popular. Brown also wrote original plays. "The Drama of King Shotaway" was performed at the Grove in 1823. This play about a revolt against British colonists on the island of St. Vincent was probably the first play by an African-American performed in the US.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Sadly, it has been lost. Unsurprisingly, the African Grove Theater faced hostility. On at least one occasion, rowdy white spectators hired by a rival theater caused trouble, yelling during performances and threatening to riot. Other times, neighbors objected to the "noise" at the theater, complaining that the conduct of the patrons was unacceptably boisterous. The theater was shuttered in 1823.

One young actor who got his start at The African Grove was Ira Aldridge. Faced with bigotry and a lack of available roles, he left New York as a young man, sailing for England and there, he became a widely celebrated performer of classical roles, playing Othello and the rebel slave Oronoko. Sometimes, he also acted in whiteface, playing Sherlock, Richard III, and King Lear. He toured Europe and was especially popular in Russia and Prussia.

The first published play we have by an African-American author is by William Wells Brown, a leading abolitionist thinker and lecturer. Brown was an escaped slave and his 1858 play, "The Escape", is partly autobiographical. In it, two slaves, Melinda and Glen, who have different masters, marry in secret. Each is horribly mistreated and together they plan a daring escape to Canada. But Wells Brown's characters are escaping from the American 19th century theater, too. The play shakes off 19th century theatrical tropes and racist stereotypes. Wells Brown transforms minstrel songs, which we'll discuss very soon, into hymns of freedom. The ideas behind "The Escape", that African-Americans are fully human, that they resent their masters, and also that the dominant genres of 19th century American theater were complicit in racist ideology were incindiary enough that "The Escape" was never performed in Brown's lifetime. He did read it himself at abolitionist rallies, though, which must have been amazing, giving an African-American voice and perspective to a theatrical moment featuring almost entirely white performers and playwrights.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Sadly, nuanced or thoughtful portrayals of African-Americans were far from the norm. African-Americans were largely subjects of caricature, comedy, and racism in American theater. The minstrel show was a widely popular and deeply racist 19th century genre created by white Americans. It allowed other white Americans to laugh at stereotyped portrayals of African Americans.

Initially, it was performed by white actors in blackface, a kind of theatrical makeup that used burnt cork, grease paint, and even shoe polish to darken the skin, and other makeup to exaggerate the eyes and lips. Later on, when African-Americans began to perform in minstrel shows, they had to use blackface, too, transforming themselves into the caricatures that white audiences demanded. The genre is usually credited to T.D. Rice, or "Daddy Rice", a New York actor who sang and danced in blackface in variety entertainments. He styled himself as an Ethiopian delineator, created a character named Jim Crow, and popularized the song 'Jub Jim Crow'. In the late 19th century racist laws enforcing segregation in the Southern United States became known as Jim Crow Laws after Daddy Rice's character.

Rice wasn't the first white man to use blackface in America. Blackface servant characters had appeared on US stages since the 18th century and let's not forget Othello, but Daddy Rice was the first to become famous for it, even taking his act to London. He later became even more famous for playing Uncle Tom in a pro-slavery version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which we'll discuss in a minute. For a while, there was a statue of him in blackface on Broadway. Performers such as Al Jolson performed on Broadway in blackface well into the 20th century.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Initally, performance's like Rice's were solo acts, but in the 1840s, minstelcy formalized and became a team effort. In the first act, the troupe would gather on stage in a semi-circle with a figure named Tambo who played the tambourine on one end, Bones who played the bone castinets on the other, and an interlocuter in the middle. They would tell jokes and sing songs, some of which were originals, some derived from folk songs. We still have some of these songs today, like "Oh, Susannah", though the lyrics have been adjusted. The second act, the 'Olio', was devoted to variety entertainment and usually included a nonsense speech delivered in dialect. The third act, or 'Afterpiece', was a burlesque of a popular play or scene depicting idealized plantation life. Performers began to specialize in certain character types such as the mammy, the buck, the zip coon, the jezebel, and the pickaninny.

Some of the shows were grotesque and profane, others were sanitized. Some shows even tried to unite blacks and white working class audiences as mutual victims of oppression, but as the Civil War approached, most shows encouraged white animosity and presented happy visions of plantation life. Minstrel shows promoted a racist image of African Americans as childish, dim, and lazy. This continued even as African Americans began to perform them and were expected to conform to the expectations of white audiences. But these African American minstrel shows also introduced new songs and characters and eventually led to African American musical plays.

Though minstrel shows waned in popularity in the late 19th century

and early 20th, the minstrel tradition continued in literature, on Broadway, in silent film, in not-so-silent film, on the radio, in cartoons, and even on early television shows.

Melodrama was big everywhere, but only America decided to link melodrama and the minstrel show, and this gets us Uncle Tom's Cabin, stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel with frank discussions about the horrors and complexities of slavery, and which depicts slaves shockingly at the time as people with relationships and emotions.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Also, yes, adaptations. Plural. The novel, serialized in 1852, set off such a craze that everyone with a pen and some actors tried to stage. Some versions were staged before the serial had even finished. Harriet Beecher Stowe didn't approve any of those versions, by the way, because she was a Puritan and what do Puritans hate? Theater. But later, she went to see the standard version, George Aikens, and she seemed to like it, especially Topsy.

Some of these adaptations, like Aikens', were faithful takes on the novel, (?~8:47) up with stagecraft to make Eliza's river escape to New France, sorry, Canada, Canada, more exciting. Others were just an excuse for white actors to put on blackface and dance around, undermining the novel's humanism. Some of the versions were explicitly pro-slavery, and titles were changed to stuff like "Happy Uncle Tom" or "Uncle Dad's Cabin." These versions came to be called Tom shows, intercutting scenes from the book with circus and spectacle, because everyone knows that what Uncle Tom's Cabin really needed was a dog act. Also in one case, a crocodile act. Tom shows, even the more abolitionist ones, relied heavily on minstrelcy and stereotyped characters and, to be fair, so does the novel. In their heyday, there were literally hundreds of Tom shows, crisscrossing the country, and also, just to be clear, African American roles in plays like Uncle Tom's Cabin, even versions without a silly name, were played by white actors throughout the 19th century and even sometimes into the 20th.

We're gonna look at one more melodrama today: (?~9:54)'s 1859 play, "The Octoroon". This play tried to have it every which way when it comes to slavery, and The Octaroon was second in popularity only to Unlce Tom's Cabin.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Take it away, Thought Bubble.

George Payton has inherited a plantation, but it has to be sold. The evil and Irish Jacob McCloskey wants to buy it. Meanwhile, George is attracted to Zoe, his uncle's daughter who his uncle had with one of his slaves, but Zoe refuses to marry George, admitting she's an Octaroon, a woman who is 1/8 black. That would make their marriage illegal. The villainous McCloskey is also attracted to Zoe. She rejects him because McCloskey is the worst. So he's like, I'm totally going to buy you. There's also a whole subplot involving a murder and a letter and a camera and a Native American character but we only have 300 words in this here Thought Bubble.

So there's a slave auction, and George is shocked to find Zoe up on the platform. Turns out, his uncle forgot to free her. McCloskey outbids everyone and buys Zoe, which is upsetting. Before McCloskey can take her away, he's arrested for murder, but he escapes and blows up a steamboat, but then he's killed by Wahnotee, the Native American character. But that news comes too late for Zoe, who has already taken poison. She dies as George kneels beside her.

Now, maybe you're thinking, wow, how about that steamboat, but also, isn't melodrama supposed to end happily? You're not alone. Audiences loved the steamboat, but not the ending. They wanted Zoe and George to go somewhere they could make their love legal. Was the unhappy ending a way to emphasize the cruelty of slavery or a way to reassure an audience who might have been made queasy by an interracial marriage? It's unclear. Thank you, Thought Bubble.

When the play came to London, English audiences also really wanted the ending changed. For a while, (?~11:49) refused, writing, "Had this girl been saved and the drama brought to a happy end, the horrors of her position, irremediable from the very nature of the institution of slavery, would subside into the condition of a temporary annoyance."

===== (12:00) to (13:39) =====

This doesn't mean that (?~12:06) was anti-slavery. He had previously written that "The Octaroon" would instead include sketches of slave life, truthful, I know, and I hope gentle and kind. This was supposed to be in contrast to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" which he thought had treated slavery too harshly. Eventually, he caved and gave the play a happily ever after conclusion where Zoe doesn't die.

American theater, like American society, still hasn't shaken off the legacy of minstrelcy. The portrayal of racist stereotypes or kowtowing to the expectations of intolerant audiences. The entertainment industry, in many respects, has come a long way, but still has very, very far to go and many powerful recent works of theater and film have shown just how much we carry the legacy we've discussed with us today.

We'll see you next time when we're off to France for naturalism. Until then, curtain.

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