

RACE & MUSICAL THEATRE: AN INTRODUCTION

“The history of the American musical is the history of white identity in the United States”

- Warren Hoffman, Author

(The Great White Way: Race & the Broadway Musical)

The beloved American musical's beginnings are easily traced to the racist, misogynistic and uniquely American theatre genre: the minstrel show. Widely popular, minstrel shows date back to the early 19th Century and famously showcased white male actors in blackface performing overtly racist songs, dances and themes to mock slaves and black Americans. Thomas D. Rice, the father of minstrelsy, created the caricature Jim Crow in 1832 which became a standard in minstrel shows. One of the most famous troupes: *The Christy Minstrels* had a ten-year run on Broadway featuring

songs by "the father of American music" Stephen Foster. After the Civil War, minstrel troupes with black performers, such as *Callendar's Consolidated Spectacular Colored Minstrels*, became popular. Black actors, in effect, were forced to participate in this offensive genre to make a living on stage. The use of demeaning stereotypes and blackface continued well into the 20th Century in Vaudeville, TV, film, and Broadway. When *Showboat*, the first racially integrated musical, debuted in 1927, the show proudly incorporated actors in blackface.

NOTEWORTHY DATES

1832

Thomas D. Rice, a white performer in blackface, created the signature character Jim Crow

1843

The first minstrel show was produced by *The Virginia Minstrels* - four white men

1866

The first Broadway musical *Black Crook*, opened, and was comprised of an all-white cast and crew

1902

The first black Broadway musical, *In Dahomey*, opened to mostly hostile crowds, and critics accused the show of inciting a race war

1927

The first integrated musical *Showboat* made its debut, with completely passive black characters and white actors in blackface.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Take Note

How does reading about the racist roots of Broadway make you feel? Why? How do you think this information makes POC feel?



Learning/Unlearning

How is racism intrinsically linked with the American musical?



Keep Digging

What questions do you have about Broadway's history now?



Irene Dunne in the 1936 film *Showboat*

“What we can deduce is that the American musical we know today came about in part through a series of interesting developments motivated by and rooted in America’s conflicted racial history.”

- Alyssa Taubin, Author
Howlround's: The American Musical in Black and White

Only the Beginning...

This infographic is intended solely as an introduction to the history of race and the American musical. We urge you to continue this research on your own, and as a starting point, recommend joyjackson.org/timeline and uprootedfilm.com