

# BLACK IMAGE IN CINEMA AND THEATRE IN AMERICA\*

By

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## I

### AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATRE 1890-1910\*\*

From their beginnings in 1890, the African-American theatrical and musical comedies typical of the period declared war on the minstrel image.<sup>1</sup> A face smeared black with burnt cork and lips brightly painted to exaggerate their size characterize the minstrel image, one which in turn portrayed Africans as happy-go-lucky "darkies" with a flare for dancing, singing and joking who longed for a return to the benevolent paternalism of plantation life.

This image was confronted first by *The Creole Show* in 1890 followed by *The Actaroons* in 1895, an actaroon being a "light-skinned" person with one eighth African blood. Both of these shows were musicals and both glorified the beauty of the African woman. James Weldon Johnson, a renowned African poet and activist of the era, applauds Bob Cole's 1898 production of *A Trip to Coontown* (1898) not only for its being "organized, produced and managed by Negroes," but also for the completeness of its break with minstrelsy. Its story had continuity and a gallery of African characters working out the story from beginning to end, this as opposed to the "mere potpourri" of the minstrel shows.<sup>2</sup> *Cakewalk America* (1898) also broke from minstrelsy in abandoning the traditional cakewalk (an African dance developed during slavery that, unbeknown to most whites, satirized European ballroom waltzes by comically exaggerating European dance movements) and ending instead with an operatic melody. Will Marion Cook burst on the Broadway scene in 1898 with *Clorindy -- The Origin of the Cakewalk*, followed by his *Jes Lak White Folks* in 1899. Cook later acted as composer for Williams and Walker, whom James Weldon Johnson concedes as the acknowledged premier comics of the period.

*George Walker as the sleek, smiling, prancing dandy, and Bert Williams as the slow-witted, good-*

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\* In memory of Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Bob Marley, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and dedicated to my Mother and Father.

\*\* "African-American" is used to distinguish U.S. cinematic and theatrical development from such other developments occurring elsewhere on the continent and throughout the Diaspora. To avoid verbosity, the term "American" is dropped hereafter. (Author's note.)

natured, shuffling danky. Together they achieved something beyond mere fun; they often achieved the truest comedy through the ability they had to keep the tears close up under the loudest laughter.<sup>3</sup>

The string of Williams and Walker hits began in 1896 with *The Goldbug*, and continued with *The Sons of Ham* (1900), *In Dahomey* (1903) -- which travelled to Europe and institutionalized the cakewalk in England and France -- *In Abyssinia* (1906), and *Bandana Land* (1907). *Bandana Land* was the last play in which the two appeared together, for soon thereafter, George Walker suffered a massive stroke and died in 1911. Williams then joined the Ziegfeld Follies, where he remained until he too died an early death in 1922.

But, for Johnson, the musical comedies of Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson excelled the works of Williams and Walker. *The Shoofly Regiment* (1906) and *The Red Moon* (1907) were better written and they carried a younger, sprightlier, and prettier chorus. Finally, Earnest Hoban, a veteran minstrel and a very funny, natural black-face comedian, who ranked higher than Bert Williams according to some, wrote *Rufus Rastus* and *The Oyster Man*.

From the period of 1910 to 1917, however, African Theatre in New York had come to a standstill, a "term of exile," according to Johnson.<sup>4</sup> Because it had traditionally played to predominantly white audiences, its fate was now in the hands of white backlash. Thus, as Lofton Mitchell points out, "Many critics declared: 'The Negro Musical comedy pattern is running thin'. And so, with the consolidation of power, the tide of reaction rolled over the nation. The Negro was evicted from the Broadway stage."<sup>5</sup> In addition, African-American Theatre had suffered by the untimely deaths of such monarchs as George Walker, Bob Cole and Earnest Hogan.

Having set out to combat the minstrel image, too many of the successful African-American pioneers made the tactical miscalculation of fighting "their revolution on the enemy's terms."<sup>6</sup> With the unfortunate attitude that "There is no place such as Broadway," Bert Williams echoed a notion held by many other pioneers.<sup>7</sup> This attitude was unfortunate because the terms of white acceptance exacted harsh compromises from the pioneers, such as the prohibition of romantic scenes between Africans on stage. Nor were Africans permitted to become "too arty," as critics charged in *In Abyssinia*, forcing Williams and Walker to refrain from its seriousness and return to dakyism in their next show, *Bandana Land*, a Broadway smash.<sup>8</sup> Though permitted to abandon some minstrel motifs, African Theatre responded to the demands of white audiences by maintaining the use of blackface make-up, the essence of minstrelsy. Indeed, the titles of the plays themselves point to a direct association with blackface, or at least a general perception of the African as comic "danky." Within these constraints,



the closest African playwrights could come to criticizing white America was in satires. Hence, *Bandana Land's* capitalizing upon the African "block-busting" myth (one which claimed that once Africans moved into a neighborhood property values would plummet and white residents would begin to move out). Here, a scheming Williams and Walker buy a house in an all-white neighborhood, throw a series of disruptive parties, and then move out only when paid double the amount for which they originally bought the house, thereby exposing the arrant housing discrimination typical of the period. Thus, African desire for Broadway acceptance locked Africans into a milieu of one "musical farce" after another, in which relevant expression was seriously and constantly curtailed, if not foreclosed altogether. Within this context, negative, comic stereotypes were, in fact, rational manifestations of the African position of weakness on the Broadway stage.

## II

### AFRICAN IMAGES IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CINEMA

Given the lack of information regarding the major African plays and films of the period, a reasonable means of comparing the images of the two mediums lies in the titles of the works themselves. Here, at least, one garners a hint as to what those images were:

<u>African Plays</u>	<u>African Films</u>
<i>The Creole Show</i> (1898)	<i>A Natural Born Gambler</i> (1910)
<i>The Octaroons</i> (1898)	<i>The Realization of a Negro's Ambition</i> (1916)
<i>Oriental America</i> (1898)	<i>Ambition</i> (1916)
<i>Clorindy -- The Origin of the Cakewalk</i> (1898)	<i>The Trooper of Company K</i> (1916)
<i>Jes Lak White Folks</i> (1899)	<i>The Law of Nature</i> (1917)
<i>The Sons of Ham</i> (1900)	<i>The Homesteader</i> (1918)
<i>In Dahomey</i> (1903)	<i>The Colored American Winning His Suit</i> (1919)
<i>In Abyssinia</i> (1906)	<i>In the Depths of Our Hearts</i> (1920)
<i>The Shoofly Regiment</i> (1906)	<i>Nobody's Children</i> (1920)
<i>Bandana Land</i> (1907)	<i>Within Our Gates</i> (1920)
<i>The Red Moon</i> (1907)	<i>As The World Rolls On</i> (1921)
<i>Rufus Rastus</i>	<i>The Burden of His Race</i> (1921)
<i>The Oyster Man</i>	<i>By Right of Birth</i> (1921)
<i>Exile from Broadway 1910-1917</i>	<i>A Giant of His Race</i> (1921)
<i>Three Plays For a Negro Theatre</i> (1917)	<i>The Call of His People</i> (1922)
<i>Emperor Jones</i> (1920)	<i>His Great Chance</i> (1923)
<i>Shuffle Along</i> (1921)	<i>Birthright</i> (1924)
<i>Runnin' Wild</i> (1923)	<i>Body and Soul</i> (1925)
<i>Chocolate Dandies</i> (1923)	<i>Free and Equal</i> (1926)
	<i>The Millionaire</i> (1927)
	<i>The Scar of Shame</i> (1927)

African Plays, cont'd.

*Salome* (1923)  
*Comedy of Errors* (1923)  
*Taboo* (1923)  
*All God's Chillun Got Wings*  
(1924)  
*Blackbirds* (1926)  
*Appearances* (1925)  
*Lulu Bell* (1926)  
*Black Boy* (1926)  
*In Abraham's Bosom* (1926)  
*Rang Tang* (1927)  
*Porgy* (1927)  
*The Green Pastures* (1930)

African Films, cont'd.

*Absent* (1928)  
*The Midnight Ace* (1928)  
*Thirty Years Later* (1928)  
*Wages of Sin* (1928)  
*Black and Tan* (1929)  
*Daughter of the Congo* (1930)  
*Siren of the Tropics* (1927)  
*A Prince of His Race* (1926)  
*Fighting Deacon* (1925)  
*The Flaming Crisis* (1924)  
*Secret Sorrow* (1923)  
*Regeneration* (1923)  
*A Shot in the Night* (1927)

Clearly, the contrast of titles between the two art forms indicate a wider contextual latitude in the African films of the period. The variety of geography, subject matter, and character combined to construct a positive film image as opposed to the all too often negative theatrical one of the same period.

Geographically then, the cinematic images of the period were presented in locales ranging from a French country home in *Siren of the Tropics* (1927) to West African jungles in *Daughter of the Congo* (1930). Other locales include the Wild West in *The Trooper of Company K* (1916), the American Great Plains in *The Homesteader* (1918), and the modern metropolis in *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916). The cinema therefore provided the African with a geography spanning well beyond the common theatrical locales of Eastern city or rural countryside.

Similarly, the subject matter of the African cinema also spanned beyond the limits of the theatre to more conscientiously address the African experience. Thus, although melodramas were typical of the period, they operated within such relevant contexts as the upward mobility of the African petty bourgeoisie (*The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, 1916) and within the African petty bourgeoisie itself (*The Millionaire*, 1927).

Both of the above films also demonstrate film as a political mirror, quite in keeping with the Talented Tenth theory of W.E.B. Dubois. Of which Daniel J. Leab says, "Indeed *The Colored American Winning His Suit*, 1919, is something of an allegory," for it, "in many ways represented Dubois' views on how to improve the image and condition of the Black."\* Another film, *The Trooper of Company K* (1916) also illustrated film as contemporary social mirror. It was the second film of the Lincoln Picture Company, one whose star and president, Noble Johnson, would soon abandon in favor of a career at Universal Studios, where numerous spots as an extra were as close as he would come to the big time. *Trooper* is an actual

\* D. J. Leab. *Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston, 1975, p. 71.



reenactment of the Carrizal Incident at which U.S. African troopers and Mexican soldiers clashed during the Mexican War.

Oscar Micheaux, the premier filmmaker of the period, if not by virtue of his ability to sustain a consistent film output, often used semi-autobiography as subject matter. Thus, a flavor of the African filmmaking atmosphere itself was realized in *Deceit* (1921), in which he reenacted the controversy surrounding *Within Our Gates* (1920), his stirring document on lynching, racism, and sharecropping in the South. *The Homesteader* (1918), his first film, related Micheaux's earlier experience as a lone African homesteader amid the white-dominated Dakotas.

Several other subjects typified the period Western film genre was done: *The Crimson Skull*, 1921; *The Trooper of Company K*, 1919; *The \$10,000 Trail*, 1921). A *Modern Cain* (1921) was an African update of the ancient biblical tale, while the contemporary, racist sensationalism of an actual murder trial was portrayed in *The Gaunsalaus Mystery* (1921). Finally, African films made subjects of contemporary African heroes themselves, providing plot vehicle that served to emphasize the popularly perceived characteristics of those heroes. Hence, Jack Johnson as businessman and boxing trainer in *As The World Rolls On* (1921) and as a prize fighter in *For His Mother's Sake* (1922). Bill Pickett, a famous African cowboy and Steve Reynolds, the "one legged marvel," both appeared in *The Crimson Skull* (1921), filmed in the equally famous all-African frontier town of Boley, Oklahoma.

But perhaps the most frequent subject involved the African "identity crisis." *Thirty Years Later* (1928) concerns the love of a man of mixed parentage, brought up to believe he is white, who is refused marriage by his African sweetheart because she mistakenly learns he is white. He is later told by his mother that he is African and the two finally marry. *The Depths of Our Hearts* (1920) concerns inter-racial racism, as a young "Blue Vein," as light-complexioned Africans were referred to in the '20s, forces his family to accept his darker complexioned girl. *The Homesteader* (1918) is still another variation of the "identity crisis" theme. This time, a young homesteader in the Dakotas is prevented by social custom from marrying the girl he and everyone else presumes to be white. Forced to marry a darker woman who, lacking the strength of her convictions, later goes insane, the young homesteader abandons her to return to the Dakotas and to the woman he had recently learned was African after all. Throughout the period, a love theme frequently ran throughout these melodramas as well as the adventures, westerns, dramas, and semi-documentaries of the time. Few comedies were produced.

The specific characters operating within the various geographies and subjects outlined above represented a variety and positiveness unheard of during the African theatrical experience

from 1890 to 1910, such as attorney, film producer, doctor, janitor, businessman, prize fighter, cowboys, novelist, ranch owner, chemist, mining engineer, millionaire, newspaper man, wash woman, federal agent, music student, army veteran, lieutenant, and minister.<sup>9</sup>

Using both titles and the genre of "musical farce" typifying African theatre from 1890 to 1910, the characters involved therein were locked into a mode so closely related to minstrelsy that it was difficult for them to breach the limits of Darkyism. Characters in the African Cinema, by comparison, not only represented greater variety, but also spoke of contemporary African aspirations. The generally positive nature of these characters, their ability to triumph over adversity, represented "an obligation to present Blacks as icons of virtue and honor...to show the better side of Negro life," and "to inspire the Negro to climb higher."<sup>10</sup>

But the characters of the African Cinema are not without detractors. The tendency of such films to focus on the African petty bourgeoisie as opposed to "direct" protests against racism is amplified by Henry T. Sampson:

*The themes of these early pictures tended to reflect the lifestyle and social customs of the Black bourgeoisie of the period. In an indirect sense, these early productions can be viewed as a protest against the demeaning stereotypes portrayed by the majors. Almost always, the central characters in pioneer Black-cast films were portrayed as well educated, with high moral values, and strongly motivated to achieve success.<sup>11</sup>*

Still another criticism is levied by Daniel Leab in speaking of Noble Johnson, the major star of the period.

*Johnson did not fit the usual image of a black, nor did any of the other light-complexioned performers who appeared in Lincoln productions. The casting of light-complexioned blacks was common practice among companies who advertised "all-colored casts" or "race performers". But for the advertising it would often be difficult for a viewer to know that many of the actors and actresses were black. To a remarkable degree the films of Lincoln and those of other companies are visual evidence of an attitude that many blacks themselves accepted. As a popular verse of the period went:*

*If you're light, you're all right;  
If you're brown, stick aroun';  
But if you're black, stand back.<sup>12</sup>*



Thus, the images of the African Theatre from 1890 to 1910 have been compared to African cinematic images from 1910 to 1930 (with 1910's *A Natural Born Gambler* serving as a starting point). Through this comparison, the images of African Cinema are seen as being generally positive, as compared to the generally negative theatrical images, and operating in dramatic milieus that not only addressed themselves to the contemporary issues facing the African community, but also offered a positive direction for that community to follow.

The reasons for this marked difference in image lie with the differing ideological, economic, political, and sociological circumstances within which each was produced.

African films, that is, films with African casts, resulted from three types of production companies: African, white and mixed. Although all such firms were outside Hollywood and therefore had an opportunity to advance pro-African films, the extent to which this actually happened lies outside this investigation. Here we are concerned only with films actually produced by Africans, in which ideological commitment to positive African images can be found, as manifested by such concerns as the Micheaux Film Corporation: "It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights."<sup>13</sup>

With white firms or white-owned firms there was too often "absolutely no interest in the image of the Negro beyond that which would sell tickets."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this ideological commitment to positive African images, African film images were also possible due to favorable economic factors. The first was the reality of available capital and its ability to foster African production companies in the first place. A second factor was the rapid growth of movie houses catering to African audiences in Northern and Southern cities with large African populations. By 1921, there were about three hundred such theatres.

Politically, the period was characterized by such issues as reform, Jim Crow laws and lynching. It was dominated by such figures as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Moziah Garvey. This era of political outspokenness and activism was facilitated substantially by an African press willing to communicate the thinking of the times as well as cast its own opinion on that thinking. With regard to the African cinema, the African press "vigorously urged Blacks to support these films and were, in general, enthusiastic over the rapid growth of the industry."<sup>15</sup> As quick to criticize as to hail, the African press often chided African films, particularly Micheaux's later works, which focused a bit too much on the negative images of crap tables, numbers rackets, and fast night life.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the sociological factor fostering the existence of positive African images in the African cinema resulted from the African audience itself, which generally accepted these films. Here, the role of the African audience in the presentation of African images must be addressed. Understanding film not just as a means of social influence, but also as a social reflection presupposes recognizing it as a two-way system of communication. Thus, the African audience is also responsible, in some degree, for the images presented. Any criticism, therefore, levied against African film's preoccupation with melodramas and dramas of the mulatto, African petty bourgeoisie must take this partial responsibility into account as an indicator of the ideology of a sector of the African community large enough to support a national film industry. In addition, African tastes demanded African versions and thematic treatment of white story lines by virtue of their tastes having been vulgarized by white culture. Specifically, theatres catering to African audiences frequently showed white Hollywood films as well, such that African films suffered by comparison. The white Hollywood product also furthered the historical indoctrination of African people to white cultural norms. These norms were policed by censors, both African and non-African, who attempted to subdue those issues and images potentially able to mobilize Africans against white society. Hence, the Chicago Board of Movie Censors attempted a ban of *Within Our Gates* (1910) because a scene in the film depicting a Southern lynching might have incited a race riot similar to the recent Chicago Riot of 1916<sup>17</sup> [1919] in which

*Negroes were snatched from street cars and beaten; gangs of hoodlums roamed the Negro neighborhood, shooting at random. Instead of the occasional bombings of two years before, this was a pogrom. But the Negroes fought back.*<sup>18</sup>

In sum then, the existence of a positive image of the African personality in African films from 1910 to 1930 is directly related to a number of existing circumstances. These included: an ideological commitment from African producers, economic factors permitting production and limited distribution, a political atmosphere of outspokenness, the support of the African press and the sociological reality of an African audience receptive to these images.

### III

#### CIRCUMSTANCES OF AFRICAN THEATRICAL IMAGE: 1890 - 1930

Although African images in the theatre had improved in the years 1917 to 1930, the presence of the dancing, singing, joking African still persisted. Because the several musical comedies



that dotted the period had played before white audiences, the assumption that whites laughed at Africans, not with them, is not only a legitimate one, but also one that points to the continuation of the comic "darker" of the 1890-1910 period. White attitudes toward Africans cannot have changed much in seven years, not if that seven year "exile" from Broadway was prompted by white racism.

Just as ideological, economic, political, and sociological factors played a major role in African film images, they were also important in the presentation of African theatrical ones. But because those factors were so different from those of the African cinema, the resulting African image was also different. Specifically, the musical comedy images were too often related to the negativism of the minstrel period. African images in "serious" drama were also subject to negativism.

The key to the African theatrical images of both periods was the sociological factor of the white audience, for to it is related the ideology of the participants in this medium, that is, producers, writers, lyricists, actors, and so on, who in order to be economically successful, had to cater to that audience. Thus, although white audiences could, by 1917, accept such "major" and "serious" plays as *Three Plays For A Negro Theatre* (1917), *Emperor Jones* (1920), *All God's Chillun' Got Wings* (1924), *Taboo* (1923), and *Porgy* (1927) -- all by white authors -- they also insisted on the musical comedy: *Shuffle Along* (1921), *Runnin' Wild* (1923), *Chocolate Dandies* (1923), *Africana* (1927), *Rang Tang* (1927), and *Hot Chocolates* (1929). Even if some of these works were not big hits, the fact that they were performed at all represented a knowledge by their producers of white receptivity to the genre of the musical comedy.

Although neither James Weldon Johnson nor Lofton Mitchell make plot synopses or content analyses of the musical comedies they cite, the titles themselves, and the fact that they were Broadway successes make an expectation of image negativism difficult to dismiss.

The most successful "serious" dramas of the period were written by whites, subjecting the African experience too often to clumsiness of treatment, to erroneousness of assumption, and to arrant racism. As Mitchell points out in Ridgley Torrence's "landmark" play *Three Plays For A Negro Theatre*:

*White Torrence's play may have assisted in paving the way for the Negro to reenter the downtown theatre, he also assisted in fathering a long line of neostereotype characters that ranged from the Emperor Jones to Abraham to Porgy to those of the present. Apparently, Torrence struck a norm that appealed to white theatre-goers.*<sup>19</sup>

These "neostereotype" images were encouraged by the white critics, who spoke for the Broadway audience. Hence, such images as a Negro fish fry in Heaven, were encouraged by awarding *The Green Pastures* (1930) a Pulitzer Prize. Further, these spokesmen insisted on the African remaining locked in the established roles Broadway had cut out for him. Thus, the Ethiopian Art Players' version of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and *The Comedy of Errors*, were sharply criticized by white critics, illustrating a "paradox which makes it quite seemly for a white person to represent a Negro on the stage, but a violation of some inner code for a Negro to represent a white person."<sup>20</sup> Whites applauded *In Abraham's Bosom*, the era's only "successful" drama written by an African with a Pulitzer Prize in 1926. But Mitchell points out:

*It seems to have little relationship to the plight of the American Negro at that point in the nation's history. He presented to us a man named Abraham who attempted to "elevate" his people through education. In the midst of all this, Abraham has trouble with black people and white people and, of course, ends up killing a white man.*<sup>21</sup>

Thus, by catering to Broadway, African images from 1890-1910 and 1917-1930 were forced into the stereotyped dancing, singing and joking Africans of the musical comedies and the "neostereotypes" of the serious dramas. Both African and white producers were ideologically forced then, to abdicate a line of communication with the African community in order to establish one with the white community in whose terms they measured their success.

Finally, the sociological factor of the white audience operated with political context that was expressly anti-African for this was the heyday of Jim Crow law, public lynchings and Klu Klux Klan terrorism. But the sociological factor of the white audience was not the only determinant of Broadway success. The economic prospects for any play were in large part determined by the Theatrical Trust Syndicate, a major theatrical business organization that rapidly grew to dominate all bookings, hirings and firings. Organized in 1896, the "Trust" controlled Broadway for at least sixteen years. Under such control, one "sound business judgement" after another steered Broadway into a conservative posture in which theatrical adventurism was severely discouraged.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it was only after this sixteen-year monopoly that the comic darky gave way to the neostereotypes of the "serious" African dramas beginning with 1917's *Three Plays For A Negro Theatre*.

Finally, the socio-ideological factor of the white audience operated within a political context that was expressly anti-African, for this was the heyday of discriminatory Jim Crow laws, public lynchings and Klu Klux Klan terrorism.

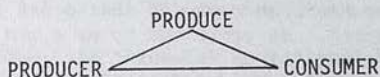


The difference between the factors of ideology, sociology, politics, and economics between African Theatre and African Cinema account for the differences in the images presented in the two modes.

#### IV

#### GATEWAY TO HARLEM

Perhaps the simplest way to comprehend the differences between the images of African Theatre and those of African Cinema is in terms of the production triangle of film semiologist James Monaco:



Upon this production triangle we may hang the African Cinema and the African Theatre. In African Cinema, because both the producer and consumer were African, enhanced by an ideological commitment to positive imagery by the consumer, the product necessarily reflects this interaction. It results from a direct dialogue between producer and consumer, both possessing, also, particular economic, political, and social characteristics that foster the positive, progressive quality of that dialogue.

With the African Theatre, however, although there is a dialogue between producer and consumer, the consumer is not African and therefore does not expect, nor is the producer compelled (she is, in fact, discouraged) to supply a commitment to positiveness. The resulting image neither reflects positivism nor progressivism, nor relevance. Instead, it functions as a vulgar perception of the African experience by whites.

Unfortunately, because so many scholars have and do perceive white acceptance as the barometer of African success, African theatrical development is said to have stuttered once Africans were thrown off Broadway in 1910, to have resumed with the so-called "breakthrough" of Torrence's *Three Plays For A Negro Theatre* in 1917. But what James Weldon Johnson refers to as African Theatre's seven-year "exile" was, in fact, a liberation. It was the beginning of an African Theatre for African people. As Johnson himself admits:

*The Negro performer in New York, who had always been playing to white or predominantly white audiences, found himself in an entirely different psychological atmosphere. He found himself freed from a great many restraints and taboos that had cramped him for forty years.*<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the melodrama and drama of the Harlem Theatre made "great appeal" to the Harlem audiences. The Lincoln and Lafayette Theatres were primarily responsible for this flourish of theatre:

*To most of the people that crowded the Lafayette and the Lincoln the thrill received from these pieces was an entirely new experience, and it was all the closer and more moving because it was expressed in terms of their own race.*<sup>24</sup>

Musicals and comedies, even those in the minstrel tradition were supported by the community as long as the audiences were "strictly Negro."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this is better explained by Sterling Brown:

*But Negro writers feel justly that these stereotypes have received far more attention than the total picture warrants, and that, being stereotypes, they are superficial, resulting from memory more than from observation and understanding.*<sup>26</sup>

Freed of the demands of the white stage, African musical comedies were, perhaps free to be more relevant as well as just funny.

Thus, the development of a theatre in Harlem which spoke directly to its African inhabitants mirrors the African Cinema in its ability to establish a dialogue with the African community and the relevant, positive images that resulted. More importantly, Harlem Theatre, 1910-1917 (and beyond), acts to illustrate the effects of circumstance upon the images of the African Theatre. Had African Theatre from 1890-1910 and from 1917-1930 abandoned its preoccupation with Broadway, and the limits that preoccupation forced on its images, the African theatrical development of the period may well have equalled or excelled that of the African Cinemas.

The results of this investigation then illustrate aspects in political, economic, ideological, and sociological factors that precipitated sharp differences in the resulting images of each expressive mode. Where those factors were similar, as with African Cinema and Harlem Theatre (1910-1917), the relevance of African Theatre to African-Americans approaches or exceeds that of the African Cinema.

Impression-wise, if anything is to be taken from this investigation, it is the need for Africans on the Continent and throughout the Diaspora to abandon a definition of success that exists in terms of white acceptance. The clarion call for Africans to leave Babylon (Western teachings and thought-patterns)



has been recorded in the Bible:

*Fear not, for I am with you, I will bring your seed from the East, and gather you from the West; I will say to the North, give up; and to the South, keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth.*

(The Book of Isaiah: 43:5-6)

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lofton Mitchell, *Black Drama*, Leswing Press, San Francisco, 1967, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, Arno Press, 1975, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., 1977, pp. 83-134.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro In American Film 1900-1942*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Sampson, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel J. Leah, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1975, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Sampson, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Leah, p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Sampson, p. 5.

- 16 Leah, p. 49.
- 17 Sampson, p. 45.
- 18 St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis, Vol. 1*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1970, p. 66.
- 19 Mitchell, p. 85.
- 20 Johnson, P. 191.
- 21 Mitchell, p. 85.
- 22 Ibid., p. 55.
- 23 Johnson, p. 171.
- 24 Ibid., p. 172.
- 25 Ibid., p. 173.
- 26 Sterling Brown, "The Negro Character As Seen By White Authors," in the *Journal of Negro Education*, No. II, April 1933, pp. 179-203.

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