

## **Spreading the Sand: Understanding the Economic and Creative Impetus for the Black Vaudeville Industry**

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that the beginning of the twentieth century contained a perfect storm of influences and motivations to create the Black vaudeville industry. Artists combined the aesthetics of many genres and businessmen saw the opportunity to serve a population wanting more respectable and professional entertainment. The creation of Toby may not have been ideal for all involved but it was an important early step in the organization and institutionalization of African American performance. It provided an invaluable platform for talent to develop both as performers and as entrepreneurs. Attention to this moment in history reveals not only a reevaluation of aesthetics but also a burgeoning Black economic system based on the wants and needs of a population ready to move beyond subsistence-level livelihood into a larger political economy of leisure. At the heart, what was deemed “valuable” and the “stakes” of performance in Black vaudeville helped define an era. The professionalization of Black vaudeville signals a crucial shift in American history.

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The impetus for this research stems from questions sparked when I was researching and writing a book on the Whitman Sisters, a turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century Black vaudeville troupe owned and operated by four Black women. Fascinated by the raced, classed and gendered political and social negotiations, I dug into this unlikely success story. The company pushed buttons and broke barriers left and right: cross-dressing; passing for white; desegregating theaters. Most impressive, though, was Mae Whitman who managed the company and, I argued, relied on certain gendered advantages to succeed in this mostly white male business. They succeeded aesthetically, helping to foster some of the greatest talent in the entertainment industry. They also succeeded financially. They were the highest paid act on the Black theater circuit and could always attract the best acts and audiences. Academic inquires in performance studies tend to ignore or downplay economic influences on changing culture and aesthetic developments. It is unseemly, I suppose, to imagine that artists are motivated by factors other than art. Alternatively, we recognize that the performing arts are rarely lucrative ventures. However, as I was beginning to understand then and what has become increasingly clear to me as I research my current book project, though the financial milieu is not the whole story in performing arts histories, it is certainly an important determining factor. It is a mistake to ignore financial motivations when trying to understand cultural production. And for Black artists a generation away from the abject poverty of slavery, the economic opportunities afforded by a career in the performing arts was attractive. For these reasons I began thinking more deeply

about the intersections of art and economics at this critical moment in US history. Though this article is part of a larger research journey, I think it is important to think about Black vaudeville as a significant early African American business industry alongside other meditations on Black performance inception for this inaugural issue on African Diaspora performance. I title this article “Spreading the Sand” to invoke the moment when the soft shoe dancer spreads sand on the stage to begin the choreography. Ostensibly a preamble, more often than not these early moments contained many (and sometimes more) fascinating performative elements than the “main show.” Similarly, by digging into the early moments of Black vaudeville, I believe we can gain profound insight into the significance of Black performance.

My larger book project will be an economic history of The Theater Owners’ Booking Association. Also known as TOBA, Toby, Tough on Black Artists and Tough on Black Asses, this enterprise soon garnered a mixed reputation for both providing better opportunities for Black performers and for providing inadequate conditions and remuneration for them. Though The Whitman Sisters booked most of its own engagements, toward the later years of the company Toby developed and Mae decided to join this new venture. I’m curious about the motivations for starting this organization, the appeal of joining a performing arts circuit, and the particulars for the many negotiations necessary for Toby to exist at this moment in history. What is the whole story of Toby? How did this venture operate? Why the contradictory reputation? These are some of the guiding questions of this study and though we may never know the whole story, we can certainly gain insight into American enterprise and social principles.

### **Value and Stakes**

To work through these questions, this study engages terms like “value,” “exchange,” “currency,” “compensation,” and “ownership” among others. All of which are made vastly more complicated when considering the Black arts economy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How do we value the labor of these performing bodies in one of the few viable post-bellum industries outside of the agricultural or industrial workforces? What do we make of compensation in the form of cakes, hams or gold teeth? How did artists protect their investments in their routines, acts, tricks, steps, songs, style, etc. when copyright was not an option? What was at stake travelling to the South when performers balanced promised wages with the threat of lynching? How does gender complicate these questions as Black women built their careers? What were the consequences of white performers adopting Black artistry and profiting from it? And how did this all produce innovation and fuel the aesthetics that so powerfully influenced the performing arts in America.

In *In the Break*, Fred Moten provides a vital lesson about value by taking on Marxist theory using the slave as the exception to the rule that commodities don’t speak. For Marx, a speaking commodity is impossible. By re-invoking Frederick Douglass’s Aunt Hester’s scream upon her beating he not only demonstrates the value of commodities who not only speak but who cry out, he also demonstrates the nuanced inextricably-linked relationship between these

“objects” (slaves) and resistance. A commodity’s essential value is supposedly linked to its mute/lifeless objecthood and usefulness. The slave defies this definition. And the resistive slave shatters it. It is no wonder, then, that in evaluating African American enterprise our understanding of labor-value, use-value, commodity and exchange value must be reconsidered. In particular, performance, so often called an “outlet,” is an important site for the renegotiation of these concepts. When Black performers first tried to make a living as professionals and when circuits like Toby tried to form systems of exchange, the players were operating under economic principals not readily acknowledged. Moten argues that Douglass sets the stage for a revaluation of the revaluation established by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Saussure. For Moten, this is an oral, phonic critique of valuation. Here we might push this to consider the corporeal critique, the physical body, the Black body, the Black performing body in discourses about human freedom and human essence. So that African American performance (especially at this nascent professional moment) is part and parcel of the political, social and economic freedom drive that is necessarily raced, classed and gendered in the United States.

Building on this, we may understand a Black dancer in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as not only trying out new steps to wow a crowd and get consistent bookings. We may also think of her as trying out owning her own body. Always already a commodity, the uses (and abuses) of the Black body shift significantly at this time and the stakes of performance were far more critical than the perhaps nominal wages earned.

In fact, if we think critically about what was at stake for a performer on Toby time, we are forced to take into consideration concepts other than income. In other words, what did artists produce, risk and challenge as they developed material? What did they bet on to please a crowd? What did it mean for performers to use “blue” humor? Did they risk the reputation of the entire race? Could a Black woman “afford” the challenge to her reputation by going on the stage?

Perhaps the most widely investigated “stake” is the intercultural exchange (sometimes outright theft) of creative material between white and Black performers. The earlier genre of minstrelsy is the most obvious site for such discourse as white minstrels alternatively stole Black culture and invented Black culture to the detriment of Black people and when Black performers took to the stage as minstrels, they were often obligated to step into those ill-fitting shoes.

### **Performance Economies and Racial Politics in Antebellum and Post-bellum America**

But if we take a step even further back we can see that the history of the economics of performance and racial politics in African American performance is as old as African Americans. We know of the practices of slave ship captains forcing slaves to dance to not only entertain the crew but also to fetch a better price at auction. Stopping in the Caribbean was not only a port in the triangle trade of goods but also an opportunity to strengthen the slaves before bringing them to the continent.

Plantation life is also a fruitful site for such investigations of the stakes of Black performance. Jean and Marshall Stearns recount an interview with Leigh Whipper, a former president of the Negro Actors Guild, who saw his old nurse on a trip back to South Carolina in 1901. She was past seventy and when he remarked about her good health she replied that she didn't need to work in the fields because she was a "strut gal." She and other good dancers would perform in exchange for special treatment. I quote their interview with Whipper at length to best present her own words (though mediated by several layers of reportage):

"Us slaves watched white folks' parties," she added, "where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we'd do it, too, *but we used to mock 'em, every step*. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better"[\[1\]](#)

This unnamed nurse then participated in dancing contests on different plantations winning bets for her owners. "I won a lot of times. Missy gave me a dress and my partner a suit."[\[2\]](#)

There are several important clues to the political economy of antebellum performance at play here. Not just the willing mocking of white people by their slaves but also the relationship being an open secret of sorts. Whether the owners thought they could dance better or not, possibilities were opened up in the space of mimicry. We must understand the exchange value of being mocked and entertained in conjunction with the wagers at stake for the owners betting on slaves. Too, it is important to recognize the nuance of winning lots of times but only being given a single dress and suit. These also likely served as their costumes making the investment from Missy even less of a magnanimous effort.

Jigging contests are another important example. Here the dancing did not mimic (or mock) "graceful" movements of cotillion. Rather, African and Irish traditions of step dancing combined on the plantation to create styles that were syncopated, rhythmic and emphasized the vertical plane over the horizontal. Again, masters wagered on these dance contests further developing the marketplace of Black performing bodies. There is an added level of spectacle and achievement in these dance contests. For example, a bowl of water might have been placed on the dancer's head and the winner was determined by who spilled the least as well as who was the best dancer.

The profoundly fraught marketplace of minstrelsy has been more deeply analyzed. Though another analysis of minstrelsy would be too difficult to summarize in this short article, it is important to note this political economy as an important influence of Black vaudeville. The perverse system of demand/desire created by white minstrels that Black minstrels were forced to adopt cast a long shadow over early Black vaudeville efforts. As professional minstrelsy died out in the 1910s[\[1\]](#) other forms of entertainment maintained some of the tropes of America's first original performing art. These conventions of comedic business, dance styles and format seeped

their way into other genres like variety, farce, burlesque, revue, operetta and most importantly for this study, vaudeville. As such, these conventions carried with them the political economy and social stakes of performance from minstrelsy. Indeed, I doubt American performance will ever be rid of the influence of minstrelsy. As minstrelsy declined, it afforded Black performers the opportunity to broaden their repertoire beyond the rigid typical and stereotypical lines of business. Though minstrelsy lost favor due to increased resistance to and protest of the familiar portrayals as well as lack of innovation, other forms were primed to take the vestiges that remained appealing and push them in new directions. It is not a coincidence that the syncopated rhythms and virtuosic “trick” dancing of minstrelsy, two elements far removed from Victorian conventions, were particularly influential.

Minstrelsy was not the only performative genre to influence vaudeville and Black vaudeville in terms of artistry and structure. Medicine shows and gillies were proving grounds for the burgeoning Black aesthetic and professional styles of dancing. Medicine shows were entertainments designed to draw a crowd so that a huckster could hawk elixirs of dubious efficacy. Gillies were small circuses that travelled by specially outfitted trucks called gillies. Talented performers might have served as apprentices and then worked their way up from the cruder and more makeshift medicine show to the relatively more established and professional gilly. In the gilly, the Jig Top was the tent occupied by the Negro entertainers and the dancer/comedian was the feature. This might be the start of a profitable dancing career for a performer who made it to this level.<sup>[2]</sup> In the mid-teens, a dancer/comedian working in a gilly might earn fifteen dollars a week. Three dollars of it went for company meals. If the performer was light-skinned enough to double as a barker (the person who draws audiences into the tent) he could earn five dollars more.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Jig Top not only provided a more professional setting, it also allowed performers to practice owning their own bodies. I use “owning” deliberately. Always already a commodity, the Black performing body became less of a good with a means to an end and more of an end in itself. In other words, as Black performers gained more (though not all) of the means and ends of production, their use value shifted in terms of race and class. Of course, the owners of gillies were still white and those producers saw the most profit. However, Black performers recognized what sold and developed acts to draw in crowds and increase their own value qua performer/entrepreneur rather than qua someone else’s property. As such, they fulfilled a social need in America satisfying a want for African Americans to move from objects to subjects. Performers on the Jig Top were able to create characters, show psychological depth and nuance and build plots to a climax and resolution. These performers could alter and deviate from formulaic plots and devices. Speaking of this type of performer, Jean and Marshall Stearns claim that,

In the course of many improvised performances he could, in fact, choreograph his role. It was still comedy, but the potential was much greater, and he would gain applause and recognition for

any step he might invent. Best of all, a Negro dancer in a gilly worked in front of a consistently large audience and could establish a reputation in the business.<sup>[4]</sup>

In choreographing roles onstage, these Black performers also choreographed roles offstage.<sup>[3]</sup> Being rewarded for innovation and building a career in a gilly was a vital step at the inception of Black vaudeville. Though perhaps a strange way to think of it, the entertainment industry owes much to the freed Negro. The energy of this new freedom, the possibility to become a self-made man or woman (the American dream at heart), the ingenuity of making the most of one of the few industries allowed African Americans at this time meant a surge in American creativity. And the entrepreneurial spirit that led to an original dance step, joke or song was part and parcel of the entrepreneurial spirit that fueled the burgeoning Black entertainment industry. From all of these theatrical settings came a blurring of genres and a *mélange* of styles that would lead to Black vaudeville, help define Black aesthetics and profoundly influence American aesthetics.<sup>[4]</sup> These models served as a foundation for the performing economy after emancipation when more Black performers became the direct beneficiaries of their labor (in goods or cash).

## **Vaudeville**

Vaudeville was based on a simple idea: stage shows with something for everyone in a series of different acts. If you don't like one, wait a second or go out in the lobby and something else will come on stage in a minute. There were no continuous plots that connected the acts and they usually had nothing to do with each other. We can trace the development of a plot that links the songs, comedy routines, skits and dancing to the development of musical theater. But for vaudeville, the emphasis was on developing one's own act for a few minutes in the limelight and it didn't matter what anyone else was doing.

In New York City at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, for example, the project of appealing to a wide variety of audience members was not easy considering the demographic diversity. Each show had to have: rough fun for the working classes, glamour for the middle-class women, old country sentiment for the immigrants. They also had daredevils, comics, tearjerkers and crooners.

Before vaudeville, concert saloons painted in gaudy bright red, green and yellow décor, smelling of liquor, pipes and cigars provided entertainment to lower class men. Along with the sounds of clinking glasses and an out-of-tune piano playing an Irish jig, one might experience performers on a small platform vying for attention. Concert saloons were on the margins of polite society and the theater world was very divided in terms of class, race, gender, nationality and ethnicity

Vaudeville entrepreneurs tried to reverse this fragmentation and create a kind of theater that would appeal to everyone under one roof. After the Astor Place Riots of 1849 it was much harder to get diverse audiences. Serious drama and opera developed for the rich; cheap bowery theaters developed for the poor; and foreign language theaters developed for the immigrants.

Lower classes went to the bowery for melodrama, minstrelsy, variety, music and comedy where they could talk to their friends, eat, chew and spit tobacco, talk back to the performers, throw tomatoes at performers, hire a prostitute, drink and perhaps enjoy the singers, dancers, musicians, acrobats and comedians.

The Victorian moral reformers had a field day condemning the activities of the bowery. They thought this predominantly male establishment went against family values. “Respectable” people were not to be found in the Bowery theatres and concert saloons. Though they got a few laws passed requiring liquor licenses with the proceeds going to charity, they were basically ignored. But Vaudeville businessmen saw the economic potentials of what the reformers were preaching. So they decided to target middleclass women and families but to do so they would have to change the content or at least the reputation of the shows. They had to divorce themselves from the low class smutty concert saloons and the bowery image. The first thing they did was change the name of popular entertainment to Vaudeville. The structure was the same as variety shows—series of acts but they changed the name to a French term, *Voix de Ville*, or Voice of the City. It sounded sophisticated. Next they got rid of most of the smoke, booze and sleazy people from the playing area. Finally they advertised. Promoting these venues as museums and lecture halls. B. T. Barnum devised his “museum” to be a venue to study scientific wonders of nature when he was basically putting on “freak shows” exploiting people because of some kind of unique or odd feature.

One of the paradigm shifts that took place in society at the turn of the century in terms of culture was the division of entertainment into highbrow and lowbrow. Laurence Levine argues that this division that may appear to us today as somehow natural was actually a social construction that served to distinguish the classes. Levine uses the example of Shakespeare’s plays which are often associated with high art. However, if we trace the history of Shakespeare’s plays in the U.S. we see the popularity of Shakespeare in “lower” art forms like minstrelsy and vaudeville. This was a concerted effort of class stratification through performance. By comparison, the economic social negotiations of Black vaudeville are less well known but upon close examination we can see similar strategies used to create a respectable entertainment forum for audiences of Black vaudeville. The economic realities created a very complex interaction between race and class at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although most Black performers were barred from white minstrelsy, some notable performers were able to make the transition. These performers include Bert Williams, George Walker, Ada Overton Walker, Buck and Bubbles, Ulysses “Slow Kid” Thompson and Florence Mills. Even though these performers were considered successes they were often not allowed to walk through the front door of theaters in which they were headlining, denied hotel accommodations and forced to ride in substandard train compartments (when permitted at all).

For the most part, Black vaudeville developed to fill the void for both Black performers and audiences and this movement posed significant aesthetic and economic challenges. In Black

vaudeville, the cult of respectability that developed in mainstream society also affected the types of acts that were performed. "Class Acts" were popular and the Cakewalk (popularized by Ada Overton and George Walker) signified sophistication. The economic dealings between owners, managers, agents, performers and audience members was a complex set of negotiations that reveals much about conditions for African Americans at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While the Harlem Renaissance was burgeoning in major Northern cities, another story of Black cultural production was unfolding in other parts of the country. In the early 1920s, many Black performers joined the Black vaudeville traveling circuit TOBA, which alternately stood for Theater Owners' Booking Association, Tough on Black Actors, and Tough on Black Asses. According to Langston Hughes, the circuit was thus nicknamed because it paid very little money except to headliners. Those with top billing got work 52 weeks a year at good salaries. Hughes identified some of the most famous headliners as The Whitman Sisters, singer Bessie Smith, Butterbeans and Susie, comedian S. H. Dudley and his mule, and comedian Tom Fletcher. This circuit was also referred to as The Chitlin Circuit and Toby. Theater historians generally recognize the advent of talkies and the worsening Depression of the 1930s as bringing the end of American vaudeville. An examination of Black American vaudeville reveals a complicated scenario, however. These performers made alternate choices in order to adapt and the factors that allowed Toby to prosper and the actual conditions of its eventual demise deserve deeper consideration.[\[5\]](#)

### **Sherman H. Dudley: The Man and His Mule**

Sherman H. Dudley (1880-1940[\[6\]](#)), known for his quick-witted understated humor, was one of the leading Black dancer/comedians of the early twentieth century. Though remarkably accomplished, he remains a neglected figure in history. His relative obscurity is due in part to the fact that he often operated outside of the Manhattan epicenter of Black art. However, not only was he a well-loved performer, he was also instrumental as a manager and promoter. Dudley was perhaps the most important (at least the most visible at the time) player in the establishment of Toby.

His early career consisted of performing with medicine shows and minstrel shows, singing and giving stump speeches. He was the proprietor for the traveling tent show, Jolly Ethiopians. Most notably, he appeared with Richards and Pringle's Georgia Minstrels, Rusco and Holland Minstrels, McCabe and Young's Operatic Minstrels, P. T. Wright's Nashville Students, Sam Corker, Will Marion Cook's *Clorindy* company and with Billy Kersands in *King Rastus*. At the age of 17 he created his own company, a short-lived minstrel troupe (Dudley's Georgia Minstrels, 1897-1898) based in Galveston, TX. In 1904 he joined the Smart Set Company, starred in its shows and soon took over the productions.

There were several companies using the name *Smart Set* between 1902 and 1924. *Dudley's Smart Set Company* produced seasonal musical comedies for mainly white audiences including *The*



*Black Politician*, *Dr. Beans from Boston*, and *His Honor the Barber* featuring Dudley as principal comedian. These very successful shows were notable for having large casts during a time when other touring companies were scaling back. They also helped to establish the Black musical comedy formula of combining the variety show style with a more structured plot that usually consisted of hare-brained schemes, gambling, preposterous protagonists and horse races. Dudley was perhaps most well known for his mule act in *His Honor the Barber* in which he engaged in witty repartee with the animal. Patrick the donkey, dressed in blue overalls, was so well trained that he appeared to listen to Dudley attentively, understand everything he said, and answer his questions. This production was notable as well because Black audience members were not relegated to the balcony ("nigger heaven") but rather enjoyed the performance in segregated seating areas throughout the house, marking a significant shift in the system.

One review called The Smart Set Company "one of the most refined and enjoyable creations witnessed here in many years."<sup>[5]</sup> In a 1906 performance at the Bijou, Dudley obliged the wishes of the audience with seven encores and a speech. However, Dudley's shows received mixed reviews. The most problematic criticism from both white and Black reviewers stated that the show had performers who looked "too" white (some due to makeup) for the Black production and a style that imitated white productions. These comments expose some of the complex racial negotiations that existed at the time. Performers had to take into account the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, the obligation to create positive images, intraracial colorism and the implications for Black aesthetics.

Dudley was also a major entrepreneurial force in the Black entertainment industry and was instrumental in creating unions and touring agencies for Black performers. He was frustrated with the power and control wielded over Black performers by white-controlled theatrical syndicates that forced Black entertainers to book first-class shows in second-class venues and accept substandard pay. Dudley organized a vaudeville touring agency, Dudley's Theatrical Circuit, which was in operation from 1891-1916<sup>[7]</sup> and is considered the first Black-controlled theater circuit and booking agency. Based in Washington, DC the organization began with seven theaters: Circle in Philadelphia, PA; Blue Mouse in Washington, DC; Dixie in Richmond, VA; Globe in Norfolk, VA; Boston in Roanoke, VA and Ruby in Louisville, KY. In 1912 Dudley moved to Washington, DC to focus on management. He went into semiretirement from performing, and started leasing and buying theaters. He began with seven theaters in DC and elsewhere and by 1914 he had nineteen theaters in the South, East and Midwest under the organization's auspices. Two of the theaters bore Dudley's name, the Dudley Theater in Washington and the Dudley Theater in Newport News, VA. In 1916, Dudley's Circuit and two other organizations merged into the Southern Consolidated Circuit (SCC). The Theater Owner's Booking Association (TOBA) accused the SCC of mismanagement of its bookings and fierce battles ensued. Eventually, the companies came to an agreement and in 1921 TOBA absorbed SCC. These endeavors resulted in a touring circuit that was complete and independent of the white circuits. Playing Toby-time meant playing the big-time of Black vaudeville as the

resources available through Toby and the standards expected were far higher than going it alone. However, performers with Toby often complained of mistreatment by the organization, low pay and Southern racism. They had to enter and exit through service doors, sometimes dressing like servants so as not to seem too polished. Nonetheless, Toby guaranteed work, helped increase exposure for Black talent and provided a forum that had not previously existed in the South. The shows were about 45 minutes long and ran about three times a night. They generally included about 35 singers, dancers, actors, comedians, and musicians.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **Toby**

As traveling companies (roadshows) became more predominant than resident companies in Black entertainment after the Civil War, organizational complexities also increased. As a result, booking agencies were needed for group agreements and to orchestrate travel, accommodations, salaries, etc. Thomas Riis explains, "Circuits of theaters with a single owner emerged and prospered."<sup>[6]</sup> White theater circuits existed in the late nineteenth century; however it was not until the early 1910s that a major Black vaudeville industry emerged catering almost exclusively to an African American clientele.

Most accounts date and place the inception of the Theater Owners' Booking Association around 1909 in Tennessee with 31 theaters. At its peak in the 1920s Toby had over 100 theaters booking jazz, blues, comedians, dancers, and other acts for Black audiences. Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Fats Waller, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, a young William Basie (before he became a Count) and four-year-old Sammy Davis, Jr. along with many other big names, all performed on the T.O.B.A circuit.

Dudley worked with several white and Black theater owners in the South and together with producers Martin Klein, E. L. Cummings, Milton Starr, and about 15 investors, was instrumental in strengthening Toby.<sup>[9]</sup> In the 1920s, Toby theaters were in most areas of the South, Southwest, and Midwest, with a few in the North. In 1921, Toby was well represented in Galveston, Jacksonville, Cleveland, Kansas City, St. Louis, Nashville, Chattanooga, Memphis, New Orleans, Durham, and Baltimore, among other major cities. It reached as far west as Oklahoma. Eventually, Toby was complete and independent of the white circuits. In many newspaper ads, the organization was labeled "owned and controlled by Managers and Theater Owners Only," and claimed to book in "every desirable theater in the South and Middle West"<sup>[7]</sup> of the United States. Toby's original mission was to correct the deplorable conditions then prevalent in the world of Black theatre.

A few Toby shows had semi-permanent resident companies. The Grand on Chicago's Southside had a musical stock company, headed for a time by the comedian Billy King, and in Atlanta, Dudley had a company in which the young comedian Nipsy Russell honed his craft. It is also important to mention that Toby was instrumental in popularizing blues and jazz. Indeed, without Toby, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and other blues greats would have had few theaters in

which to perform. Toby allowed them to gain reputations that would lead them to go on to make records. Thus, we may never have heard recordings of these remarkable singers without Toby.

The vast majority of performers on Toby were part of touring shows. A company on Toby traveled second-class trains to each city or small Southern town. Costumes and sets were minimal, and the house band provided musical accompaniment. The most popular acts were center-stage singing and lowbrow "blue" comedy routines, although blue material was censored in some towns. Twenty-five cents bought a spectator admission to the show and a raffle ticket for a door prize—perhaps a gold tooth. A press release flyer stated, "An occasional ham or turkey would never cause as much 'checking the number on your ticket' as a gold tooth."<sup>[8]</sup> Clarence Muse described a typical Toby show as tabloid editions of musical comedies. Three shows were performed nightly, each about 45 minutes, and the company for these revues had approximately 35 people.

TOBA was always looking for new talent and almost anyone could get an audition. Staying with TOBA was another story and there were many who were fired without notice for not measuring up. Pete Nugent stated, "You found out if you could dance on T.O.B.A. and if you couldn't you were fired on the spot."<sup>[9]</sup> Innovation was rapid on Toby directly impacting the development of Black aesthetics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ernest "Baby" Seals talking to the Stearns about his touring company on Toby stated, "I made up some material, we'd see things on the road, other guys had ideas—we'd try anything."<sup>[10]</sup>

TOBA quickly earned the nickname Tough on Black Asses because of conditions on the circuit. Performers complained of mistreatment by the organization, low pay, poor theater and housing conditions, haphazard scheduling, cramped and makeshift dressing areas, poor lighting and staging, cheating managers and Southern racism. Despite its mission though probably predictably, Toby paid less and had worse touring arrangements than white vaudeville.

Though some Black performers at this time thought of white vaudeville (epitomized by the Keith circuit) as the pinnacle of success in the industry and Black vaudeville a disgraced alternative, others like the Whitman Sisters chose to stay in Black vaudeville where they could headline and be a part of a larger Black community of performers and patrons. Some of the best dancers apprenticed on Toby—including Bill Robinson, Jack Wiggins (with blues-singer Ma Rainey), Eddie Rector, and The Berry Brothers among many others.

The possibility of severe racist treatment by townspeople and even lynchings kept many performers away from Toby, as they preferred to deal with Northern racism. Southern "hospitality" especially troubled the many midlevel performers who stayed with Toby, as sometimes travel and housing arrangements could not be made, forcing these performers to stay in train stations where they could easily be attacked by angry mobs. According to Sampson, performers often dressed in plain clothes, appearing as field hands or domestics so as not to draw attention to themselves as performers.

Playing in the North was safer than playing in the South due to the decreased (though not erased) threat of attack or lynching. There was the belief that most would rather play in the North. However, it is important to account for the diversity of experiences for African Americans at this time. "Getting out of the South" was certainly appealing for those who experienced the full force of Southern racism. And a disdain/fear of traveling south might have been more the case for Black performers who were born in the North. But the familiarity of Southern communities and the all-Negro theaters that were more readily available in the South was also attractive. So, too, was the familial nature of companies even if the pay was low. This congenial atmosphere no doubt played an important role in the cost/benefit analysis made by performers. As pianist Sammy Price said, "Well, you didn't get no money, and you didn't want any. You joined the show, and in one week's time you friendly with everybody, and you're like one big happy family...it could be tough but there were good times too." [11] Guitarist Lonnie Johnson stated, "On T.O.B.A. you *work*—you do five, six shows a day, you got little money but everybody was happy...I went as far as T.O.B.A. could carry you, from Philadelphia [sic] to New Orleans." [12]

Dudley made a concerted effort to remedy the problems of Toby, especially in his column in the *Chicago Defender*. He tried to resolve the differences between the box office and backstage and to alleviate the fears of Black performers. For example, at one point he suggested that Toby elect a commissioner to arbitrate disputes about salaries, contracts, and problems of low-quality acts. Previously, performers were paid a percentage of the receipts after each engagement. If the house was small, performers could be left with no pay at all. Dudley argued that fixed salaries were better for performers than percentages and schedules should provide acts with consecutive working dates so that "railroad jumps" would be more manageable and salaries more stable. In 1925, in order to improve theater practices and to bolster business for Toby, Dudley wrote:

Wake up Mr. Actor, and get in right, and Mr. Manager, you who think you can book your house and keep it open playing a company on percentage, your time is limited, so why not let an agent book for you and keep your house open? Of course you can get attractions now and then but the jumps will kill the actor and sooner or later they will not play for you at all. [13]

By 1926 conditions on Toby had improved. Performers had better living conditions and schedules that permitted them to stay in one area for several weeks instead of constantly "jumping" from one city to another. According to a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, this allowed them the chance to feel more at home on the road, participate in social activities, and do essential shopping. [14]

Toby had other positive attributes. Although Toby was difficult for small-time performers in terms of compensation and workload, most Toby dancers agreed that the good times they had with other performers made their tenure valuable. Also, headliners received traveling expenses, were guaranteed continuous runs, and were almost always treated well. Although it was generally easier and more profitable for headliners to tour Toby than organize

individual bookings they still had to look out for shifty theater owners who would try to take advantage of them.

The serious decline in revenues and activity for many American forms of popular entertainment that began in 1926 intensified after the stock market crash in 1929.<sup>[10]</sup> The Black entertainment forms of musical theater and vaudeville, however, were not as severely damaged as white entertainment forms in the initial impact of the national economic crisis. Despite the difficult times during the 1930s, Black musicals in the early part of the Depression did not take the expected decline. In fact, more Black musicals and revues appeared in the early 1930s than at any time since the early 1920s. Allen Woll claims several factors protected the Black musical from suffering as much as other businesses during the Depression:

First, these shows were comparatively inexpensive to produce. As Black musicals became more and more similar to nightclub presentations in the late 1920s, several expenses were pruned. Out-of-town tryouts were rarely needed, as local clubs from Manhattan to Brooklyn served the purpose. Additionally, the shows did not use much scenery or many costume changes because they concentrated on musical elements.<sup>[15]</sup>

Also, Black actors were given lower wages and were often cast only as "atmosphere" (a status change from "chorus" that permitted wage reductions). After the 1932 season, however, Black musicals also started to decline. Along with economic factors, the downturn was due in part to producers who misgauged their audience and relied on formulaic performances that soon tired audiences and critics. Similarly, Toby managed to outlast white vaudeville. As with Black musicals, the troubles of the Depression did not hit Black vaudeville until 1932. Ten years earlier, *Billboard* stated that Black vaudeville was flourishing in the United States with more than 360 Black theaters employing approximately 600 acts. Of these 360 Black theaters, 80 of them were affiliated with Toby. In 1929, there were still 80 Toby theaters, but by 1932 most of them were showing only films. Toby eventually declined and slowly died out during the Depression. Some acts went on to play in white shows, while others worked the independent Negro theaters that remained, theaters such as The Lincoln and the Alhambra in Harlem and later the Apollo. A few roadshows survived for a little while. The very popular *Silas Green from New Orleans*, stayed in the South, the producers made their own bookings and the company traveled by car. Though the Toby era was over, it left its influences on Black performance to come.

The beginning of the twentieth century contained a perfect storm of influences and motivations to create the Black vaudeville industry. Artists combined the aesthetics of many genres and businessmen saw the opportunity to serve a population wanting more respectable and professional entertainment. The creation of Toby may not have been ideal for all involved but it was an important early step in the organization and institutionalization of African American performance. It provided an invaluable platform for talent to develop both as performers and as entrepreneurs. Attention to this moment in history reveals not only a reevaluation of aesthetics but also a burgeoning Black economic system based on the wants and needs of a population ready to

move beyond subsistence-level livelihood into a larger political economy of leisure. At the heart, what was deemed “valuable” and the “stakes” of performance in Black vaudeville helped define an era. The professionalization of Black vaudeville signals a crucial shift in American history.

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[1] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 22.

[2] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 22.

[3] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 66.

[4] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 68.

[5] "Bijou—‘The Smart Set’", Pittsburgh ?, Feb. 20, 1906. (The name of the newspaper was illegible. The review can be found in the Sherman Dudley clippings archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.)

[6] Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 18.

[7] "T. O. B. A. DOINGS," *The Chicago Defender*, Apr 9, 1921, 6.

[8] The Roots Of "One Mo' Time". Solters & Roskin, INC. Public Relations Materials.

[9] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 79.

[10] Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 79.

[11] Oliver, *Conversations with the Blues*, 128-9.

[12] Oliver, *Conversations with the Blues*, 135.

[13] Dudley, *Chicago Defender*, 6.

[14] *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8.

[15] Woll, *Black Musical Theater*, 136.

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[1] Of course smaller and amateur productions continued until the civil rights era and the vestiges of these styles and stereotypes still remain with us.

[2] One dancer/comedian, Sherman H. Dudley, would go on to play a crucial role in the establishment of Toby and the professionalization of the Black entertainment industry.

[3] Jazz and the blues also developed in similar ways in these settings.

[4] Carnivals, tent shows and roadshows also greatly influenced the establishment of Black vaudeville. Carnivals usually played in a town for one week perhaps at a state fair and were like gillies but with animal acts, rides, sideshows, games of chance, shake dancers, weight lifters and sometimes a circus, a small minstrel "colored" show and/or a ragtime or jazz band. These performers traveled by railroad instead of wagon, which was a step up. Negro dancers found a somewhat lucrative position cakewalking in white circuses until the teens when the cakewalk lost popularity. Tent shows provided entertainment for folks in the rural South and urban audiences in the North and the South had roadshows that performed "Tom" shows (variations on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or "Plant" shows (Plantation-themed shows). "Tab" shows were tabloid versions of vaudeville shows that sometimes had a Friday night dance contest in which anyone

could enter. Winning the prize in such a contest could garner one sufficient attention to start a career.

[5] Though outside of the scope of this essay, in my larger study of this subject I unpack the complexities of race and capitalism, the tensions between the North and the South, and the artistry created in this rare cross-racial entrepreneurial venture. In this first comprehensive study of Toby, I provide a more detailed interrogation of the inner workings of the enterprise, all of the major players and a theoretical analysis of implications of this circuit on Black performance theory and theater history.

[6] Proper dates for Dudley are uncertain given the dates of some of his accomplishments. For example, he was apparently 11 when he started Dudley's Theatrical Circuit.

[7] Again, these dates are uncertain given his supposed birthdate.

[8] In addition, in 1921, Dudley helped found the Colored Actor's Union (CAU), the first African American theatrical union created to protect members from exploitation. In its first year, the organization had 800 individual members, 500 vaudeville acts and 27 stock companies under its rubric. The impetus behind this endeavor was the fact that Actors' Equity had only two Black members and there was no large organization that unionized Black performers. The goals of the organization were 1) To give guidance to Black performers; 2) To see that acts were sufficiently varied; 3) To guarantee timely contacts that could not be easily broken by managers and performers; 4) To classify and improve the quality of acts; 5) To help provide acts with new materials, new writers, and new songs and; 6) To protect female performers against the unwanted sexual advances of unscrupulous managers. In 1926 the organization produced the Colored Actor's Union Theatrical Guide, a handbook containing a history of Black theater, biographies of major players, a list of resources for performers and stories about the national status of African Americans. In 1937, the Negro Actors Guild of America replaced the CAU.

[9] Some sources erroneously claim that the theaters were all white-owned.

[10] For a discussion of the rise and decline of mainstream American touring companies and legitimate theater, see Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces 1870-1967* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1968).

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