

The Colored Museum

A Modern-day Minstrel

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"All this time I been thinking we gave up our drums. But naw, we still got 'em. I know I've got mine. They're here in my speech, my walk, my hair, my God, my style, my smile, and my eyes. And everything I need to get over in this world, is inside here, connecting me to everybody and everything that's ever been."

-Topsy, *The Colored Museum*

On April 3, 2002, the opening of *The Colored Museum* took place at the Clarence Brown Lab Theatre. It is a play written by George C. Wolfe meant to break down the stereotypes that characterize black America. Wolfe attempts to delve deep into the psyche of African-American society, especially in regard to theatre arts. However, the play seems to take on a satirical form of theatre, a distant relative of the minstrel. This is a form of theatre in which so-called natural characteristics of black people are completely distorted, especially through the use of blackface. Wolfe appears to use this theatrical form in order to strike a nerve with African-Americans. This is done in hopes of helping African-Americans see the negative stereotypes that have been embraced within the African-American community.

Wolfe's use of a somewhat minstrel-like form gives much insight to the origins of the stereotypes that have

been perpetuated within the African-American community. Although minstrels may appear to have been a doorway for black people in the theatre, the origin of the minstrel and it's effects may have caused greater damage to the development of African-Americans in theatre.

"Before our stages were filled with minstrel shows...there was a Negro theatre playing the classics in New York City"(Isaacs, 19) around 1821. It was a theatre company by the name of The African Company. It consisted of black actors who performed Shakespearean pieces and other classic works. Apparently, the number of participants was sufficient in size because of an "active Negro colony in New York"(Isaacs, 19). In addition, "the audience, though not over-large, was enthusiastic. Unfortunately, white hoodlums filled the empty seats and raised such a rumpus that before long the theatre was closed"(Isaacs, 19).

Therefore, due to the social ramifications of seeing black people in a more positive light on stage, minstrels became very popular entertainment for perpetuating stereotypes of black people. It was a method which seemed "a transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that, in inventing and ridiculing the slow-witted but irrepressible 'plantation darky' and the foppish 'northern

dandy Negro,' conveniently rationalized racist oppression"(Bean, Hatch and McNamara, 3). Since the dominant form of racial oppression before the Civil War was slavery, much of the content of minstrels originated from plantations of the South.

As was custom on many plantations, slaves would entertain themselves in their quarters with music and dances that were brought over from their homelands. Many plantation owners would encourage their slaves to entertain the family, as well as guests, with their unique form of singing and dancing. Around the early 1800s, closer to the 1840s, some "plantation owners offered their amusing Negro singers and dancers as entertainment to Northern visitors who carried word of the novelty home"(Isaacs, 23). Thus, "the first minstrels who played on the professional stage in New York were always white men with their faces covered with burnt cork"(Isaacs, 23) in an effort to mimic what was seen on the plantations.

However, the idea that white performers were mimicking the performances of plantation slaves is ironic. The minstrels were more so a distortion of black people. The burnt cork on the faces of these white men was an exaggeration of the true skin color of black people. In addition, the use of over enlarged lips also gave a false

impression of the anatomy of black people. Another form of encouraging myths about the character of black people was to change material that was used by the slaves on the plantations. "In the nostalgic plantation songs Black minstrels wrote, they expressed longing for the happy days of their childhood and for departed family and friends"(Simond, XXV). However, songs written by white performers consisted of lyrics "that stressed blacks' love for their masters and mistresses"(Simond, XXV) which black slaves rarely expressed in their songs.

It was not until after the Civil War that African-American performers were allowed on the professional stage. Unfortunately, the only vignettes in which they were allowed to perform were the minstrels. They were forced to embrace "the entire minstrel convention, even to the use of burnt cork and the thickened lips"(Isaacs, 25). In addition, "blacks still performed white-written songs as part of their shows"(Simond,XXV). As well, "because heavily caricatured images of Blacks as happy on the plantation"(Simond, XXV) were enforced, they became the central themes of the minstrels.

In the decades following the end of the Civil War in 1865, "Black minstrels traveled to every section of the United States as well as to England, Europe, Australia, New

Zealand, and the Orient"(Simond, XXIII). Although the minstrels opened many doors for the African-American performers in these groups, they contributed worldwide to the persistent "white stereotypes of Negroes by consistently contrasting the happy, contented 'darker' to the unruly, inept Northern Negro"(Simond, XXIV) in an attempt to undermine the disbandment of slavery in the South. They were characterized as subordinates in order to justify enforcing more restrictions on black people.

So, with the writing in *The Colored Museum*, Wolfe tries emulate the distorted images the have been traced back from the days of the minstrel. For instance, in the scene *Git On Board*, Wolfe makes a slight reference to idea of black people only having their rhythm to contribute to American society with dances such a the Watusi and the Funky Chicken, which can be traced to the type of dances used in minstrels. It appears that the same idea exists in today's society regarding the pop culture trends originated by African-Americans. In addition, with the scene *The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play*, Wolfe exaggerates the consistent myth in American society that black families are dysfunctional, in which the man is shiftless and lazy, depending on the "Mammy" for support. This was an idea all too present in minstrels, which seems to persist with some

of the type of plays embraced by the black community. Perhaps the most interesting scene is *Lala's Opening*. Wolfe effectively gives insight to the damage that the stereotypes of minstrels have caused on the African-American psyche. In the scene, the main character must come to grips with facing her true self regardless of the fact that white American, as well as black American, society had rejected her dark skin and thick lips. This is one of the main problems that minstrel stereotypes have perpetuated within the African-American community, a distorted image of self. This can be seen through the type of hair care products meant to straighten natural hair, the ways that skin color determines social status, and the ways in which people try to alter or down-play natural features, such as the thickness of one's lips.

Although George C. Wolfe's play is more satirical and biting, perhaps good aspects can be seen through the way the African-American community has excelled through the tribulations of deep-rooted stereotypes. "It was partially through opposition to that distortion of black cultural forms that authentic African-American arts evolved and flourished as perhaps the most influential cultural expression of the twentieth century" (Bean, Hatch and McNamara, X). Such strength and persistence has aided "the

emergence of innovative artists such as Charlie Parker, Alvin Ailey, and Richard Pryor" (Bean, Hatch and McNamara, X). What occurred in the past has even help to pave the way for George C. Wolfe. Perhaps one day the African-American community will come to a point where the past is appreciated, but not completely embraced.

" 'Cause I'm not what I was ten years ago or ten minutes ago. I'm all of that and then some. And whereas I can't live inside yesterday's pain, I can't live without it."

-Topsy, The Colored Museum

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