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‘Shuffle Along’ and the Lost History of Black Performance in America

Minstrelsy. Blackface. Mugging. Out of this twisted past came one of the first successful all-black Broadway musicals. Now an ambitious revival is bringing it back.
By JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN MARCH 24, 2016

Ninety-five years ago in New York, a journalist named Lester Walton bought a ticket to see a much-buzzed-about new show, a “musical novelty” that had opened about a week before at the Sixty-Third Street Theater. Or the Sixty-Third Street Music Hall, as it was more properly called. A kind of multipurpose performance space, not very big, not very nice, “sandwiched in between garages,” Walton wrote, and “little known to the average Broadway theatergoer.” You could rent the place for the night. It had philosophical lectures, amateur violin recitals and religious meetings, and during the day it showed silent movies: “‘Pudd’n Head Wilson,’ with Theodore Roberts, tomorrow.” But on this evening — and for many months to come, as it turned out — the stage belonged to an all-black show called “Shuffle Along,” a comedy with lots of singing and dancing. A problem: The music hall had no orchestra pit, and this show needed an orchestra. It needed space for the band, which happened to include a 25-year-old musician known as Bill Still, later to become the famous composer William Grant Still, but in 1921 a mostly unheard-of young man from Arkansas, switching among the six or seven instruments he taught himself to play. The production was forced to rip out seats in the front three rows to make room. These were people used to improvising. Among themselves, they referred to the show as “Scuffle Along.”

Les Walton, the journalist in the audience that night, was also a theater man. In St. Louis, a city he left behind 15 years before — and where he got his start as America’s first black reporter for a local daily, writing about golf — he had somehow come to know and collaborate with the legendary Ernest Hogan, a.k.a. the Unbleached American, an early black minstrel and vaudeville comedian who (by some historians’ reckoning) was the first African-American performer to play before a white audience on Broadway. Walton and Hogan wrote songs together, and it was Hogan who first brought Walton to New York, as a kind of business manager. Hogan was not so much unbleached as the opposite of bleached. He was a black entertainer who painted his face — with burned cork or greasepaint (or in emergencies, lampblack, or in real emergencies, anything black mixed with oil) — to make it appear darker. Or at least to make it appear *different*. In one picture of Hogan, from the 1890s, he looks more like a sock puppet, wearing a clownish pointed cap.

The blacks-in-blackface tradition, which lasted more than a century in this country, strikes most people, on first hearing of its existence, as deeply bizarre, and it was. But it emerged from a single crude reality: African-American people were not allowed to perform onstage for much of the 19th century. They could not, that is, appear as themselves. The sight wasn’t tolerated by white audiences. There were anomalous instances, but as a rule, it didn’t happen. In front of the cabin, in the nursery, in a tavern, yes, white people might enjoy hearing them sing and seeing them dance, but the stage had power in it, and someone who appeared there couldn’t help partaking of that power, if only ever so slightly, momentarily. Part of it was the physical elevation. To be sitting below a black man or woman, looking up — that made many whites uncomfortable. But what those audiences would allow, would sit for — not easily at first, not without controversy and disdain, but gradually, and soon overwhelmingly — was the appearance of white men who had painted their faces to look black. That was an old custom of the stage, going back at least to “Othello.” They could live with that. And this created a space, a crack in the wall, through which blacks could enter, because blacks, too, could paint their faces. Blacks, too, could exist in this space that was neither--nor. They could hide their blackness behind a darker blackness, a false one, a safe one. They wouldn’t be claiming power. By mocking themselves, their own race, they were giving it up. Except, never completely. There lay the charge. It was allowed, for actual black people to perform this way, starting around the 1840s — in a very few cases at first, and then increasingly — and there developed the genre, as it were, of blacks-in-blackface. A strange story, but this is a strange country.

Ernest Hogan died not too long after bringing Les Walton east to New York, but Walton maintained his interest in the theater and songwriting and had managed a theater in Harlem, the Lafayette. A progressive theater — it was the first major venue in New York to desegregate its audiences, i.e., to let blacks come down from the balcony and sit in the orchestra seats — and

Walton worked hard to put serious black theater on the stage. At the same time, he had been making a name for himself as one of the first black arts critics in America, writing for *The New York Age*, a black newspaper. (His life would get only more interesting — over a decade later, Franklin D. Roosevelt named him an American minister to Liberia.) That evening, he went to see “*Shuffle Along*” on assignment. It was late May. That week, the Tulsa race riots had erupted more than a thousand miles away. A white mob torched one of the most prosperous black neighborhoods in America. Walton had already seen the show, with more or less the same cast. He had caught it in Philadelphia a month or so before, near the end of a long road tour meant to shake out the performers’ nerves and generally get the production battle-hardened for New York. And he loved it — he saw it several times in the end. Which is surprising, maybe, given his interest in serious black theater and in ennobling the black community (in 1913, he campaigned to have the “n” in the word “Negro” capitalized as a matter of journalistic style), because “*Shuffle*” wasn’t exactly forward-thinking on race. It broke boundaries, no doubt, but mainly through its success, and by having great pop tunes. Otherwise, it was a blacks-in-blackface production. Walton even mentions that there were “more than the usual number of comedians under cork in one show.”



Love Will Find a Way Audio: Masterworks Broadway/Sony Music Entertainment

The 1921 sheet-music cover for “*Love Will Find a Way*.” Listen to a version of the song from the 1952 revival here. Credit Music Division, The New York Public Library

There was, however, an area in which the show genuinely pushed things forward: romance. In “*Shuffle Along*,” two black people fell in love onstage, and Walton wanted to see how a white audience would handle this. He came to the music hall

expressly for that reason, he told us. The theater he had gone to in Philadelphia, the Dunbar, was a black place. Now, Walton wrote, he was “curious to learn if ‘Shuffle Along’ would find its way into the category of what is known, in the language of the performer, as a ‘white folks’ show.’” Could the production, in other words, manage to be both black enough to have “it” and at the same time white enough to make loads of money? Specifically, Walton wanted “to observe how the white people in the audience took to Roger Matthews, the tenor, and Lottie Gee, the prima donna, singing ‘Love Will Find a Way.’” What he expected to see was not rage or revolt but something more ambiguous, an occasional discomfort passing through the room, and perhaps at certain moments a holding-back too, on the part of the cast. “White audiences, for some reason,” Walton wrote, “do not want colored people to indulge in too much lovemaking. They will applaud if a colored man serenades his girl at the window, but if, while telling of his great love in song he becomes somewhat demonstrative and emulates a Romeo — then exceptions are taken.” Black sexuality was dangerous.

Walton was among the first critics of “Shuffle Along,” our first eyes on its original production. His response to the show was positive — “Speaking as a colored American,” he wrote, “I think ‘Shuffle Along’ should continue to shuffle along at the Sixty-Third Street Theater for a Long Time.” And when he went back in October, he celebrated that the show was now “in its sixth month” at the music hall, assuring readers that the fact would be “pregnant with historical significance” for anyone “conversant with the ups and downs of colored theatricals” and all “the abortive, yet well-intended efforts of the past.” But Walton’s response was complicated too, or shadowed by something. Facets of the show must have made him uneasy, just as the black-on-black romance had made some of the whites in the crowd uneasy. “Shuffle” seemed at times to have one foot stuck in the mire of a murkier racial past, even as it strode boldly forward with the other.



Dancers in “Shuffle Along” performing “Bandanna Days.” Josephine Baker is sixth from the right. Credit Eubie Blake Photograph Collection/Maryland Historical Society

Savion Glover slouches a little. It’s not the slouch of an old man, not stiff — or the diffident slouch of a young one, for that matter — it’s somehow part of his movement, closer maybe to how boxers crouch, but relaxed. It suggests a body that’s resting slightly because it’s about to burst into motion, which he kept doing throughout the morning (this was late last summer).

If the slouch was noticeable, it could have reflected the fact that Glover, the genius child at 42, had been spending hundreds of hours bent forward and pacing around like this, staring down at other people’s feet. For the last few months, he’d worked pretty much exclusively as a choreographer and would stay in that role for months to come as he conceived and staged a wildly ambitious revival of “Shuffle Along,” one of the most significant musicals of the 20th century. He would not appear onstage for this show. Except maybe, it was rumored, for a sort of cameo. There was one dance he liked so much he wasn’t sure he’d be able to stay away from it entirely.

We were in a rehearsal space at the New 42nd Street Studios in Manhattan. A long open room with extremely high ceilings (productions have to be able to wheel in huge Broadway props sometimes). Giant windows at the front looked out onto 42nd Street, but no one looked out of them. It was dark and gray and pounding rain that day, as hard as I had ever seen it rain in New York. The noise of it made a strange effect when the dancers were actually dancing, because the sound of all their tap shoes was also loud, body-shaking, so the two different thunders, theirs and the storm’s, were mixing and fading, creating illusions, and when the tap would stop abruptly, the rain outside for a second seemed like an echo or a rumbling of it.

This happened most often when Glover would spot a mistake or something in his own choreography that he didn’t like and clap his hands to make everything quiet. In front of him in three rows, 15 or so of the most gifted young singer-dancers in the country would come to an abrupt stop. Their eyes watching him were hard to look away from. Awe was there, but equally something that couldn’t afford to be awed, that was having to pay too close attention and was too professional to indulge it, and the two registers chased each other across their faces. To sit five or six feet away made a person want to reel back decades of career choices and become the world’s most passionate talentless tap dancer. Glover would slide forward into the crowd of dancers toward the person or group of people whose steps he wanted to change. Big loose dreads, tight V-neck T-shirt, tap shoes, sweats. He would stop and flash out some blazing routine. “Like *that*, like *that*,” talking while he danced.

“Not da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-DA. It’s da-da-da-DA-da-da-da-DA-da-da.” The changes often seemed less rhythmical than mathematical. At tap’s higher levels, a dancer can hit an ungodly number of beats per second, so the variations of pattern that are potential in just two or three seconds’ span can quickly jump beyond a normal person’s ability to follow. “We have seven, so you’re actually coming in on the two.” The dancers picked up Glover’s minuscule tinkering within two to four tries. Some could do it right off. In particular, one young woman, a 22-year-old from Texas named Karissa Royster, had clearly been recognized by the group as having a Rain Woman knack for memorizing Glover’s choreography. She would watch it, do it, then sort of drift around the room repeating it. Everybody’s hands floated at their sides.

On his side on the floor with his elbow cocked and his palm supporting his head lay George C. Wolfe, whose idea this production was. Wolfe is a big old deal in the theatrical world — winner of two Tonys, for directing “Angels in America: Millennium Approaches” as well as “Bring in ’da Noise, Bring in ’da Funk,” which revolved around Savion Glover’s talents, telling the saga of African-American history by tracing the evolution of tap. It was an implausible-sounding idea that succeeded wildly. The show kicked off a renaissance of interest in a form that Glover himself describes as “almost lost,” birthing a generation of what he called, with no modesty but no inaccuracy either, “Noise/Funk babies.” The show had paid a deep and very explicit homage to the black American cultural past and to Glover’s own teachers in the tap field, both the mentors he’d known in life, like Gregory Hines, and the ancestors, the inventors and innovators, people like Bill (Bojangles) Robinson or Ulysses (Slow Kid) Thompson, a spellbinding dancer who performed in the original “Shuffle.” He got his nickname from his ability to perform wild dance moves in completely credible-looking slow motion, which audiences had just become familiar with through the movies.

Also here, in the corner opposite where I sat, stood Daryl Waters, who worked on the music for both “Jelly’s Last Jam” and “Noise/Funk.” And starring in this show — although she wasn’t there that day, except as an energy — was Audra McDonald, the powerhouse actress-singer and Winner of Six Tony Awards, a phrase that has begun to trail her name like a title. Billy Porter and Brian Stokes Mitchell were here — both Tony winners as well. It was a supergroup of black Broadway and

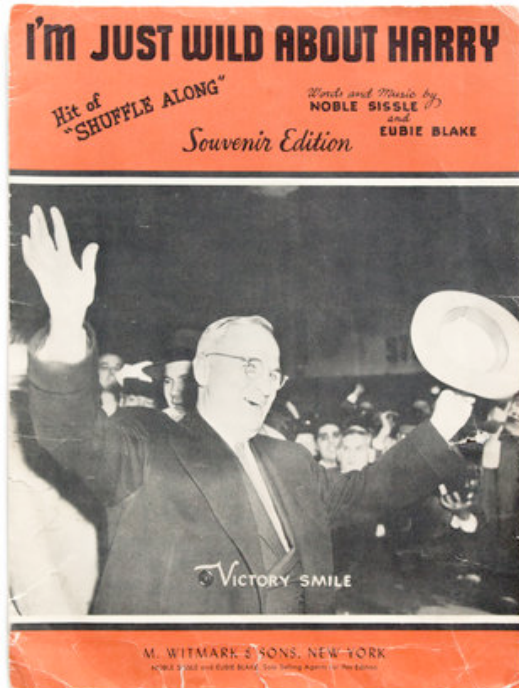
designed to be such. At a moment when the conversation about blacks and how they're represented in American entertainment is as fraught as it has been since "The Birth of a Nation," this bunch had undertaken to put one of the sacred relics of black theater back in front of the public. There was an inescapable sense that they'd be letting down more than themselves if they failed. An unfair pressure to put on anybody. Also an exciting one, for the people involved. I kept thinking of one of those movies where they're trying to lift something out of the desert, some buried archaeological monument, and everyone's wondering if the ropes will hold. Maybe it will fall and shatter. "Shuffle Along" is often called the first successful all-black musical. It wasn't that — there was a prehistory, 20 or so years earlier — but in between the two pulses had come the Great Migration and the Great War. The list of names alone, of those whose careers "Shuffle" hatched in the original show and later productions, is enough to establish its influence on American theater and song as they played out over the rest of the 20th century: Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Nat King Cole, Florence Mills (one of the greatest who ever lived, said those who heard her sing). Langston Hughes said more than once that "Shuffle Along" was the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. In order to deal with the crush of patrons, the city had to alter the traffic pattern around the theater, turning a stretch of 63rd into a one-way street. It was a supernova. An argument could be made (has been made, by the scholar David S. Thompson in his unpublished "Shuffle Along in Theatrical Context") that the reason chorus girls, or the stereotypical chorus girls in your mind, dance jazz is "Shuffle Along." As Wolfe told me, "It introduced syncopation into the American musical," meaning syncopation but also meaning blackness. Not blackface but black faces. Well, blackface too.



Florence Mills in various costumes. Credit White Studio/Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library

The original “Shuffle” run lasted something like 500 nights, a record, they said, and it toured in different forms for years. There were spinoffs. It was announced that the pioneering blues singer Mamie Smith would appear in a show called “Struttin’ Along.” Nineteen hundred twenty-one: the year of “Shuffle Along” and the year Mamie’s “Crazy Blues” became the first true black pop success. Before that, prehistory. After that, everything.

The most famous song from “Shuffle,” “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” is one everybody can still hum. We may not know why we know it, how we heard it (from an old musical? a frog in a cartoon?), but it percolates somehow. Harry S. Truman used it as the theme song for his presidential campaign in 1948. A song written by African-Americans used as a presidential campaign theme — it would take until Barack Obama’s candidacy for that to happen again. (Bob Dole used “Soul Man,” but that shouldn’t be allowed to count somehow.) It’s questionable whether Truman even knew who wrote it. By 1948, the song’s origins had been scrubbed.



I'm Just Wild About Harry Audio: Masterworks Broadway/Sony Music Entertainment

A souvenir edition of the sheet music for "I'm Just Wild About Harry"; Harry S. Truman used the song in his successful 1948 bid for the presidency. Listen to a version of the song from the 1952 revival here. Credit The archives of Robert Kimball

Although “I’m Just Wild About Harry” was originally a love song, the Harry character in “Shuffle Along” is also running for office. He wants to be “Mayor of Jimtown.” But even to write those two sentences, I’ve had to make it sound as though the show had more of a story than it did. The plot of the first “Shuffle Along” was mainly to allow an excuse for the singing and dancing. That was one of the first things Wolfe mentioned when I asked about “creative challenges” he encountered in dealing with the source text. It was the day after the rehearsal, and we were at the Music Box Theater on 45th Street, where the new production will be staged. Irving Berlin made that theater famous. The interior was beautifully baroque-looking and on the intimate side size-wise. Music-boxy. Wolfe stood on the stage and admired the empty seats. Lots of them, and very empty. “Look at those boxes,” he gasped. The boxes were elegant.

Creative challenges?

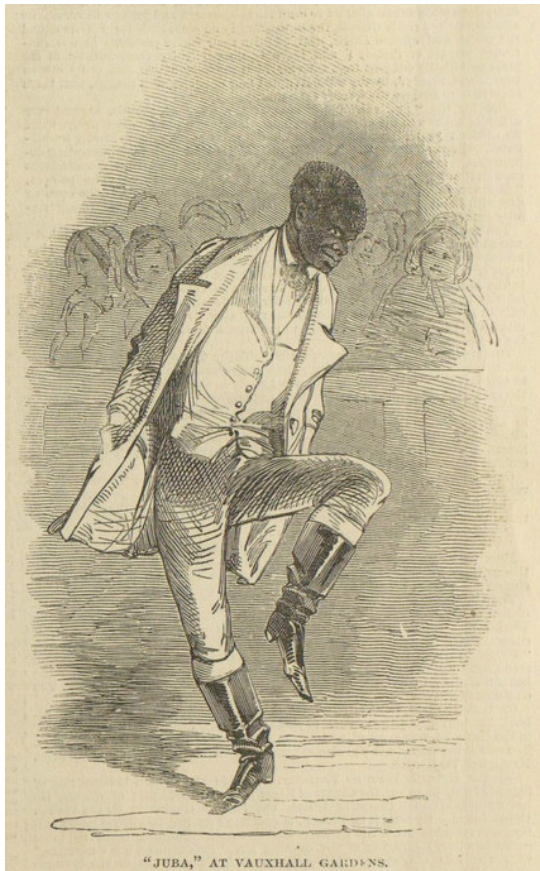
“The book,” he said, meaning the script, the nonmusical part of the show. “Terrible book, bad book. Everybody knows it’s terrible.” Because it was racist? “Because it was *bad*.” (And, it seems to me, because it was racist, or racially offensive; a typical line: “You ain’t got no business being no mayor and you knows you ain’t, what you talking about being mayors.”) What was a black director doing even messing with that in 2015?

Wolfe said he cared less about the Major Historical Significance of the 1921 show and more about an attitude that he saw as

having been present at the beginning of the “Shuffle” story, when the team that put the production together was touring the country, or first getting ready to stage the show in Manhattan. There was a “purity” to that scene, he said, using the last word I ever thought I’d hear about the origins of “Shuffle Along.” In what sense did he mean? “In the sense that they didn’t have time to have a full awareness of what they were doing.” Full awareness, as in, the politics of it? “Yes,” he said. “They weren’t savvy that way. They were too busy *being creative*.” He’d said “savvy” but had also meant “self-conscious.” “They lived,” he said, “inside that pure love of *wanting to do the thing you do*, the part of me that gets into show business.” But weren’t they also having to deal with all sorts of racism, even inside the world of the theater, especially inside it sometimes? “Yes,” he said, “but they were trying to figure out how to make America work for them. It was, How do I keep pushing against this *thing* in order to be what I need to be?” He asked it with a real urgency that made his chin quiver. It was clearly not an abstract question for a gay black man from Frankfort, Ky., who had conquered Broadway. Nor an arbitrary one in the context of Wolfe’s career. In approaching “Angels in America” 23 years ago, he first keyed into the notion of “performance of self” that runs through the play. It was, he said, “something I understand from having been raised a Negro.”

The tradition of blacks-in-blackface was sparked, according to one account, by the circus impresario P.T. Barnum one day in the early 1840s. He had a white kid in one of his shows, a boy by the name of Diamond, who specialized in what was called Juba or Juber dancing. Also “patting Juba.” That meant African dancing, plantation dancing. Expressive, complex, physically taxing. In Juba, you drum on your body, slapping your chest and knees and the soles of your feet. Certain familiar Celtic elements had been mixed into it over the decades and centuries, most obviously the percussive effect of hard-soled shoes on a wooden floor, which could work as a drum during the dance (think clogging). It was with Juba as inspiration that blacks and Irish-Americans created what we call tap. Or rather, that’s the kind of simplistic explanation that an actual dance scholar would quibble with every word of, but it’s trueish.

So, Barnum had this Irish kid, John Diamond, doing Juba dancing in his shows. And Diamond would dance in blackface. Patting Juba was seen as a black thing, even if there were Irish and Scottish tinges, so Diamond performed it that way. But one day, around 1841, Barnum found out that Diamond had (supposedly) been dishonest in some financial dealing. Diamond, knowing that Barnum’s wrath was coming, ran off. And now Barnum was without his Juba dancer. Not just any Juba dancer, but the second-best in the world.



A newspaper’s depiction of Juba performing at Vauxhall Gardens in London in 1848. Credit Illustrated London News

Yes — there was one better. A boy even younger than Diamond. They called him Juba, that’s how good he was. Outside the circus tent, in a tavern or a theater, he and Diamond would compete against each other in challenge matches. They had teams of supporters. People gambled. It seems Juba hardly ever lost. “He defies all competition on ‘the light fantastic,’ ” they wrote in Boston. One of the first times the word “tap,” as a technical term of dance, showed its head was in an advertisement for a match, where we are told a judge will be present to “count the taps.”

The only problem with young Juba, from P.T. Barnum’s point of view, was that he was black. The spectators wouldn’t accept it, or the laws and civic codes wouldn’t permit it, or Barnum himself just couldn’t deal with it. But here is where his cynical genius comes in. He decides to *paint Juba black*. Same burned cork, same curly black wig. He looked just like Diamond. But people went even more nuts for Juba. He was better.

We don’t know the real name of Juba, the first great American tap dancer, and may never. The encyclopedias say William Henry Lane, but the lone source for that is a white theatrical agent turned journalist turned amateur historian named Thomas Allston Brown, who was not the type to use footnotes, and who anyway did not enter the entertainment world until years after the supposed Lane was dead. Brown’s other two sentences on Lane are anti-factual. They include the

statement that the dancer “married too late” to a white woman, which is a strange thing to say about a man who by most accounts was dead before he reached 30. They also include the claim that in 1852, Lane’s skeleton was placed on display at a music hall in Sheffield, England, but in truth he was still dancing in London in 1852, before he vanished as thoroughly as it is possible to vanish. There is slight reason to suspect that his real name may have been Redmond, though whether that was a first or last name, we cannot say. In any case, the question is academic. He was known as Juba. Prince Juba, Master Juba, Little Juba and Juba the King of All Dancers.

The encyclopedias say he was born in Providence, R.I., around 1825, but an English journalist who interviewed him for The Manchester Times in 1848 — the only journalist who ever spoke to him and wrote about him, as far as can be determined — stated clearly that he was born in New York in 1830, a date that corresponds better with later reports of his age. The Providence theory may have sprung up because the band of minstrel musicians with whom he had toured earlier in his career, the Georgia Champions, formed in that city. When Juba’s great success in England was noted in a Providence paper in 1848, the article made no mention of his having been from there, only that he “formerly gave exhibitions of his skill in this city, at the ninepenny entertainments.” But he had done that in every city on the East Coast.

Juba came up performing in the interracial underworld “halls” in the Five Points neighborhood of Lower Manhattan. That’s probably where Barnum discovered him. He played banjo and tambourine too, but those who saw him said he was the greatest dancer they’d ever witnessed, like Charles Dickens, who in his “American Notes” remembered having watched Juba dance in New York City. Dickens had written under the pen name Boz, so when Juba went to London in 1848, under the sponsorship of a white blackface minstrel named Gilbert Ward Pelham (the leader at that time of the Ethiopian Serenaders, with whom Juba also toured), the young dancer was billed as Boz’s Juba. The coverage he received from the English press from 1848 to 1852 is almost exhausting to follow, it grew to be so extensive, mostly ecstatic in its praise.

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An advertisement for a show in London featuring Juba in 1848. Credit The British Library Board

All we know about him is that he was a brilliant dancer — an artist, not just an athlete — and that he was the first black entertainer to perform before large crowds of whites in a context that transcended the informal. He was onstage. The explosiveness of his new “tap” style allowed him to cross over. “Not to be irreverent about it,” said the early minstrel S.S. Sanford in 1874, but “he was the ‘John the Baptist,’ preceding by a few years the Jubilee Singers of Tennessee, who are now before the public with the full chorus of songs.”

In the only semi-naturalistic image we have of Juba performing, his face is coal black. In the one (cartoonish) picture of the Ethiopian Serenaders that includes him, he is indistinguishable from the others, from the white men. They are all painted the same. Only a caption tells us which is him. He’s holding a tambourine and looks about to jump up and start dancing.

When the rehearsal was over, I spent an hour with Glover in a little side room off the rehearsal space. He was on his lunch break. His meal, which he devoured, was from a Caribbean place. Energy food — goat meat, mac and cheese, yams. He had at least four more hours of pacing and dancing to do after this. He was going to burn it all into nothing.



A cakewalk in 1903. Credit American Mutoscope & Biograph Company/Library of Congress

He had a laptop out and was showing me clips he had watched for inspiration after being asked to choreograph the show: the Nicholas Brothers skipping across tabletops in “Stormy Weather” (the sequence that Fred Astaire is said to have called the greatest dance number ever filmed, a superlative that, when you watch the scene, seems like an obvious thing to say). Then some eerie old footage of a “cakewalk,” from an early black vaudeville performance, one of the few that were ever filmed. The women in the clip wore high-collared Victorian dresses, the men black tailcoats. The cakewalk was a dance, created by slaves in imitation (some accounts say in mockery) of the white minuet. In one common iteration, the dancers would form two lines, one of men, one of women, then the couple at the end would link arms and promenade down between the rows of clapping hands. Each couple was expected to do something distinctive. Some would dance; others would simply present themselves. It was not unlike voguing. Nor “Soul Train.” Also, while we’re defining things: vaudeville. That’s the world of “variety” shows, mixed shows made up of several brief acts, that dominated the American entertainment world during roughly the half-century that spanned the 19th and 20th centuries, from, say, 1880 to 1930. The format grew out of minstrel shows and medicine shows. A white vaudeville lineup would often feature one black act, called, counterintuitively, a “white act.” Lester Walton had the same dynamic in mind when he wondered if “Shuffle Along” could make it as a “white folks’ show.”

Glover asked if I’d seen the recently identified Bert Williams footage, from 1913. Williams — there was a name to conjure while discussing the history of blacks-in-blackface shows. It was easy to articulate his relationship to the tradition: He was the pinnacle of it. Williams made art from behind the blackface mask. At the same time, he was haunted and wounded by

having to wear it. W. C. Fields claimed to sense “a deep undercurrent of pathos” in Williams. His masterpiece was the song “Nobody,” a nihilistic ditty one of his characters sang to himself when the penny-tossers walked away, a sort of song--monologue, as weird and dark, you might sense, when Williams introduced it in 1906 as it sounds today. There could have been no Sam Beckett without Bert Williams. His record of the song sold more than a hundred thousand copies, making him the first black recording artist ever to do so.

When life seems full of clouds an' rain,
And I am filled with naught but pain,
Who soothes my thumpin', bumpin' brain?
Nobody.

Nobody Audio: Library of Congress

The film reels were retrieved from the MoMA archives in 2004. George Wolfe had taken the cast on a field trip to view them. They represent the oldest surviving fragments of a black feature film, part of a very early and almost completely forgotten African-American filmmaking scene that sprang up before World War I but left no physical traces, mainly because of the extreme fragility (and inflammability) of the old film stock. This footage was more than rare — it was a peek through a keyhole many had assumed was forever blocked. It showed another cakewalk, this time from an outdoor celebration, a “field day.” Williams himself makes up half of one couple. His beautiful partner for the walk laughs delightedly at him. His shoes flap, he walks oafishly on his heels. His smile is inwardly pleased, sublime.



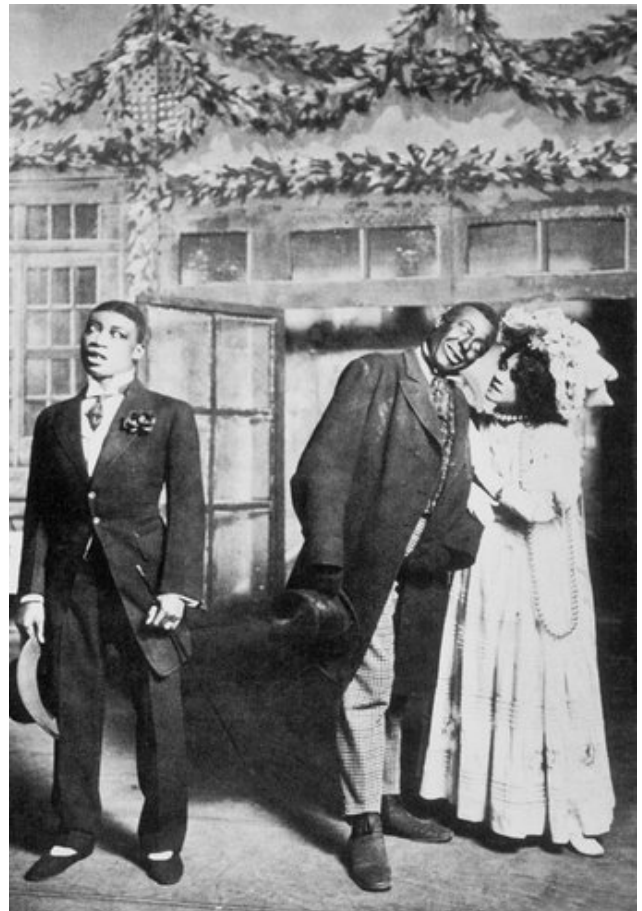
Bert Williams having blackface applied in a production still from an uncompleted 1913 film that was identified in the [MoMA archives in 2014](#). Credit Museum of Modern Art. Audio: Library of Congress.

Williams was Bahamian-born, a strikingly handsome man when he wasn't in cork. He grew up in Florida and California. In San Francisco, in his late teens, he fell into the medicine-show world. Around 1893, he joined a troupe called the Mastodon Minstrels, and it was while performing with them that he came to know a fellow cast member named George Walker, a young man from Kansas who was to become his closest friend and creative partner for nearly 15 years. Williams and Walker — the black theatrical world at the start of the 20th century is unimaginable without them, and so is “Shuffle Along.” When Williams and Walker started out in the 1890s, they were billed as “two real coons” who did “buck dancing.” But as the decade progressed, their ideas found some range, and they started producing musical comedies. In 1900, they did “Sons of Ham,” a sort of variety-farce, full of “oddities hard to describe.” It boasted a “carload of special scenery and electrical effects,” as well as “a chorus of handsome colored girls, 30 in number.” Besides that, it featured “a company of picked talent,” among whom was one Aida Overton. Walker fell in love with her and married her, and she became Aida Overton Walker, the greatest black actress in America before the First World War. Her “Salome” dance took over New York for about a year, around 1912. In the new “Shuffle Along,” Wolfe has Audra McDonald’s character, Lottie Gee, reminisce at one point over having shared the stage with Aida Overton Walker and a piece of singing advice she received from this mythic woman.

Some of the Williams and Walker shows were enormously popular. In fact, most of the claims that are made for “Shuffle Along” — that it was the first black Broadway show, or the first successful one — are really true of earlier Williams and Walker productions. Their 1907-9 show “Bandanna Land” played for capacity houses on tour and at the Majestic Theater at Columbus Circle, a much more legitimate “Broadway” house than the Sixty-Third Street Music Hall could ever aspire to be, and those audiences included, according to a much younger Lester Walton, “hundreds of white theatergoers.”



Left: Bert Williams and George Walker. Their 1903 production of “In Dahomey” was the first full-length black musical to open on a main Broadway stage. Credit Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library



Right: George Walker, Bert Williams and Aida Overton Walker in “Bandanna Land” in 1908. Credit Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library Photo



Aida Overton Walker, George Walker’s wife, whose “Salome” dance was a hit in 1912. Credit Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Williams and Walker were so successful that they changed the profile of black entertainment in America, vastly for the better, but also in ways that pushed up against boundaries. A forgotten incident from their “Policy Players” tour of 1899-1900 makes clear how real the tensions were. The show was booked to run at the Grand Opera House in Washington, but according to a newspaper report, the manager of the house had objected to Williams and Walker’s having an “orchestra leader who was a colored man.” The musicians, it was felt, wouldn’t like to see “a black director.”

The New York Morning Telegraph of Nov. 18, 1899, ran a startling headline, “WILLIAMS AND WALKER, SENEGAMBIAN COMEDIANS, CAUSE TROUBLE,” on top of its report: Not so long ago they were content to fill a place upon the vaudeville stage at rapidly increasing compensation. But since then they have been advanced to a position at the head of their own company, and they are now beginning to tell managers of theaters how they want things conducted during their various engagements. . . . [One] kick that arose was upon the question whether colored people should be admitted to all parts of the house, or should be restricted to the balcony and gallery. The manager of

the theater took a positive stand this time, and said he would close his doors rather than violate the rule against letting Negroes occupy the orchestra chairs. When Williams and Walker found they were really “up against it” they receded from their position, and consented to go on. . . .

The report concludes menacingly: “These young men are likely to wake up with a start some morning.”

Williams often remarked that although he was proud of having made people laugh for many years, he wanted to show that he could make them cry. But his and Walker’s ambitions for their material grew during that first decade of the century. When their “In Dahomey” debuted in 1903, they advised audiences to read a book about Ethiopia before going to see it, so they’d understand what was happening. Critics began to complain that they were no longer black enough. No longer blackface enough. In trying to be intellectual, the comedians had left behind what made them fun.

This reaction elicited from Walker a remarkable, slashing reply. He told The Toledo Bee (this is in Camille Forbes’s excellent “Introducing Bert Williams”): “There is no reason why we should be forced to do these old-time nigger acts. It’s all rot, this slap-stick-bandanna handkerchief-bladder in the face act, with which Negro acting is associated. It ought to die out, and we are trying hard to kill it.” Walker said that 110 years ago.



The cast of “In Dahomey” in 1904. Credit The archives of Robert Kimball

It’s only with that “slap-stick--bandanna handkerchief--bladder” ringing in our ears that we can understand what Williams and Walker were up to with “Bandanna Land.” One of its songs became a hit, the unbelievably cloying “Bon Bon Buddy (The Chocolate Drop)” (Mamie Smith covered it when she was still a struggling vaudevillian; on YouTube you can hear a white singer named Billy Murray doing it a year after it came out, in 1908). By singing about the old mammy days, when don’t you know, nobody minded a bit being called “chocolate drop.”

Williams and Walker were laughing back at the white audiences who were laughing at them — with an irony that said out the side of its mouth, *Are they actually buying this?* — and at the same time they were laughing with the black audiences who came to see and hear them. And at the same time they weren’t laughing at all. It was a delicate balance, but they maintained it for a decade.

A white critic wrote about “Shuffle Along” around the same time Lester Walton did — the reviews were just days apart. The man’s name was James Whittaker. He lived in New York and was working as a music critic for The Daily News and then The Daily Mirror — where he would work until the end of his life, dying only after the paper folded in the early 1960s, and where he was remembered by former colleagues as having been “a large man with a crown of white hair, favoring vests and double-breasted suits.” I can’t help pausing to watch him turn the corner onto 63rd Street and walk toward the theater. Pictures suggest he favored black, dark ties. He had fought in the war as an artillery man, and before that spent most of his teens in Europe, in Leipzig and Paris, studying with tutors. He was once considered a gifted child pianist. None of the strangers passing on the street would have guessed he was romantically lucky (he had a dour and unfortunate face that involved a triple-threat combination of double chin, cleft chin and underbite) — but he was married to one of the most beautiful women in America, the actress Ina Claire. People whispered that she married him so he would chirp like a cricket about her in the papers, praising her performances. But she insisted that it had been for love. They are together, she and Jimmy. They take their seats. Afterward, Whittaker would have seen her home and gone to the office. He wants to file the review that night so it can run in the morning editions:

Negro humor is better in print or in the synthetic face of Frank Tinney than coming from the mouths of the originators. Fifty Negroes have banded together into a musical comedy company which is playing to white audiences in the Sixty-Third Street theater. “Shuffle Along,” as it is named, makes brave attempts to entertain the white folks in the intervals between its gorgeous songs. It subscribes to the musical comedy formula that, when you are not singing a song, you must be acting a joke.

But racial genius grips the cast and you when the songs begin. At a grand piano in the orchestra pit sits Mr. Eubie Blake, composer of all the music. He is surrounded by fifteen helpful harmonists. Miss Lottie Gee or Roger Matthews comes down to the footlights and sets a metronomic foot to beating a rhythm. It travels down the expectant spine of Mr. Blake and into his and his helpful fifteen’s fingers. In two semi-quavers you are quivering to the same magic that has set all these spontaneous musicians to reeling melodiously. You may resist Beethoven and Jerome Kern, but you surrender completely to this. It is

perhaps fortunate that there are dead intervals between the songs of "Shuffle Along." Because some of the music is as insidious and heady as absinthe.



Josephine Baker, noticed for her dancing, found her way into the chorus line of "Shuffle Along." She performed in the show's traveling production before going on to fame in Paris, dancing what was called a Danse Sauvage while wearing a skirt of bananas. Credit Lucien Walery, via Wikimedia Commons Photo



A scene from "Shuffle Along Jr.", a shortened revue by Eubie Blake. Credit The archives of Robert Kimball Photo



Florence Mills, Roger Matthews and Lottie Gee in “Shuffle Along.” Credit The archives of Robert Kimball

Whittaker’s opinions, at least that night, were dubious, racist and smug. But he was paying some kind of attention. And in one fundamental respect, he agreed with George Wolfe about the show: that the book, the comedy, didn’t work. But Wolfe’s problem, in trying to resurrect “Shuffle,” wasn’t as simple as what Whittaker prescribed. He couldn’t just throw away the talking and leave the song-and-dance bits. He’d end up with a vaudeville show. No, the very innovation that Williams and Walker had introduced — the reason their productions were so important to Broadway and black theater and the creation of “Shuffle Along” — was that their shows had a new kind of coherence. It would seem very loose to us, but it was different from vaudeville, closer to drama. Their musical comedies were musical, but they were also comedies, meaning they were plays. This isn’t reading backward onto their work a kind of artistic ambition it didn’t possess, but rather echoing what the new generation of black critics were saying at the time, when “Shuffle” came out. This is what Lester Walton was saying in 1921 and what he was trying to make happen at the Lafayette Theater.



Joshua Henry as Noble Sissle and Brandon Victor Dixon as Eubie Blake in the new revival of “Shuffle Along.” Credit Lyle Ashton Harris for The New York Times

Wolfe’s solution has been to build a kind of historical box around the set pieces. This new show would be unlike any of the previous revivals (1932 and 1952), most of which were failures, some of which never even made it to the stage. It wouldn’t be a revival. Wolfe had in mind instead a transformation. He wanted to do not “Shuffle Along” but the *making of* “Shuffle Along” (official title: “Shuffle Along, or the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed”). He would

tell the story of the original creators and cast and how they pulled it off — complete with a character (played by Brooks Ashmanskas) who gives voice to various white outsiders, people who commented on the original show, among them H.L. Mencken and Carl Van Vechten. Interesting approach, you say, sounds great. But to make it work, you couldn't stint on the dancing and the songs. Those were what made the show go: syncopation, fire, artistry. They couldn't be saved with historical buttressing, or even historical reimagining. They had to happen in the here and now, and they had to be authentic and good, or else — bomb. Meanwhile, no matter what you did, some seams were liable to show. You couldn't bring the show into the future and preserve it at the same time and do each perfectly at every minute. But that, I suppose, is when it becomes good to know Savion Glover.

It never hurts to know Scott Rudin, either. Unless it actually hurts because he has just thrown a cellphone at the back of your head. Rudin is the notoriously temperamental producer of major movies who has never let go of his love for the New York theater, or his investment in it. You would be silly to pretend as if he weren't part of the reason that this show has the very best, the laughably best, of everything: Ann Roth, the queen of costume designers (“Midnight Cowboy” and “The Book of Mormon”), is sitting here trying to work out how you design a jazzy, feminine-heeled shoe that can be tapped in as hard as Glover needs without coming apart; Jules Fisher is working on the lights (he lit “Hair”); Santo Loquasto is on scenic design (three Tonys). And yet, that Rudin's machinations helped to make it possible, to assemble all that talent and power in the service of resurrecting a crucial piece of African-American history, reminded me of an uncomfortable fact, namely that Rudin was caught two years ago in the Sony email hack making racist jokes. Or borderline racist. I believe the official terminology landed on by the news media was “racially insensitive.” Rudin and the co-chairwoman of Sony at the time, Amy Pascal, were trading messages, and they somehow got onto the question of President Obama's taste in movies, throwing out such recommendations as “Twelve Years a Slave” and “Ride Along,” the buddy-cop movie that stars Ice Cube and Kevin Hart. It was the kind of joke that if you saw it on “Saturday Night Live,” you might have laughed. Movie night at the Obamas', curated by Mitch McConnell. For two rich white people to be typing it back and forth, no doubt from the backs of chauffeured cars, was ignorant and tasteless at best. Rudin and Pascal issued public apologies. She lost her job, but only Rudin can fire Rudin. Was his backing of the new “Shuffle” in part an attempt at karmic balancing, or more crassly, damage-control? You could point to “A Raisin in the Sun,” which he produced in 2014. In a way, the question itself is racist, given that the new show was an idea cooked up by Wolfe. He was going to find someone to back the production, especially given the other people he could recruit. Still, Rudin was at the helm, part of another old story and history — Jewish producer, black talent, a zone of cultural interface that has exerted tremendous force in American culture and made beautiful things happen and always been messy and uneven.



A rehearsal of “Shuffle Along” this month. Credit Henry Leutwyler for The New York Times

Whatever lay behind the scenes, the fact is the production would be responsible for a truly magical bit of casting: Audra McDonald in the role of the singer and original “Shuffle Along” star Lottie Gee. The dance that Glover had said he might have to sub in for one night, after the show goes live — what he actually said was, “I might have to tie the one doing it to a chair and go out there and do it myself” — is a duet between a male dancer and McDonald. I watched her rehearse the piece at the beginning of this year. It was the first time I’d been in a room with an actual diva. There was a space-heater quality to her presence in the studio. She was sort of dreamily sashaying around one hip at a time, chewing her cheek, looking up, into her head. When the scene started, she was captivating to see do her thing. I tried to break down what was technically different about it, what it was in her performance — even now, early in rehearsals, in a room — that made you think of the word “elevated,” that she was *elevating* everything. It was the cock of her head, the intensity of her gaze. But not really. Those were just effects.

Not long before the show was to debut, I had a chance to speak with McDonald about her character, Lottie Gee, a woman who fascinated us both, it emerged, because she was so unknown despite having once been humongously famous. I was interested for reasons having to do with private musical-historical preoccupations, while McDonald was interested because she’d been entrusted with embodying Gee onstage in front of tens of thousands of people, but we had a frustration in common. Gee is one of those figures — one of the countless, when you’re talking about this world of early black music and dance — whose biographies begin with phrases like “Details remain obscure.” With digging, she can be recovered somewhat. More than most. She was a star. I sent McDonald everything I was able to find. It was still spotty, but when there’s nothing, every little item in a small-town newspaper is a mountain.



A rehearsal of "Shuffle Along" this month. Billy Porter (seated left) plays Aubrey Lyles, and Brian Stokes Mitchell (seated right) plays Flournoy Miller. Adrienne Warren (foreground) plays Florence Mills. Credit Henry Leutwyler for The New York Times

Lottie Gee liked to tell people that she was from Kentucky — and it’s true, she grew up in a house in Newport, Ky. — but Newport is a satellite town to Cincinnati, and that’s what she was in reality, a Cincinnati girl (like Mamie Smith, who grew up an all-but-literal stone’s throw across the Ohio River from Gee and would probably have known her as a girl). Around 1905, she got her start singing with a jubilee choir, one of the dozens of choral troupes that formed in the wake of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ global success. From there she went into musical theater: Cole and Johnson (they were another of the important teams, like Williams and Walker). She was a chorus girl, a “dancing pick” (a “pickaninny,” in blackface). But she had something, a “presence of mind” onstage, that got her noticed by Aida Overton Walker. The great one took Gee on as an understudy and protégée, and her career took off. But what McDonald zoomed in on, in the documents about Gee, was how much the woman had already been through and sacrificed before “Shuffle Along.”

“I think about the fact that she was 35 when she got the lead,” McDonald said, “and had already clawed her way through vaudeville. I realized: She was 35 when she made her debut. An ingenue at 35. Talking about being in the chorus all those years, wanting to get to the front. And the fact that she was always so impeccably dressed. There is a pain, and the sense that she’s going to miss an opportunity, and that she’s trying to desperately stake her rightful claim on what is hers.” McDonald stopped short of reading Gee as a character to pity. Gee had an extraordinary career. She worked with Sidney Bechet and Doc Cheatham and was a mentor to Josephine Baker. She lived into her 80s, remaining much loved and respected in the arts community of Los Angeles, where she died in 1973. She was, somehow — impossibly, criminally — never recorded. Neither was her “Shuffle” co-star Florence Mills, who was according to most witnesses one of the great stage singers of her age. Gee’s obituary mentions that “she popularized such melodies as ‘Love Will Find the Way’ and ‘I’m Just Wild About Harry’ in the Miller-Lyles, Sissle-Blake production ‘Shuffle Along.’ ”



George C. Wolfe directing Audra McDonald and other cast members at rehearsal. Credit Henry Leutwyler for The New York Times

McDonald singled out one facet of Gee's personality — her "diva" qualities, like frequently canceling shows for illnesses real and imagined, for instance — as having been the thing that "frightened" her when taking the role. She didn't relate to that, she said, and worried that as a result she'd be superficial or performative in her representation of how a diva behaved. It was when she understood that the diva, as a type, operates principally out of fear, that Gee's behavior opened up to her somewhat. For an actress who has gone public, as McDonald did a couple of years ago, about her own past struggles with depression and a youthful suicide attempt, there's no way it didn't feel personal to read about Gee's own episodes of mental instability. Gee once had a huge nervous breakdown on a ship on the way to China. She spent at least a year recovering in a sanitarium in California. She also seems to have suffered from what today would have been considered severe phobia. An unusual article that appeared in The Boston Herald in 1922 describes her behavior on opening night, the first night of the epic run of "Shuffle" in New York. Gee is quoted:

I used to be an awful superstitious little fool. The least little thing I did made me quake, because somebody or other had once told me something dreadful would happen to me as a result of it. If I sneezed on a rainy day I'd never see a sunny one. Well, my life was simply a bundle of "ifs" and nerves. So one day I decided I'd had about enough of that kind of thing. It was getting too great a hold on me and I simply had to overcome it.

And I soon had the opportunity. The night we opened at the Sixty-Third Street Music Hall, New York, I did something that even the least superstitious of persons has a sneaking little belief in — I broke a mirror. Now the act is almost irreparable, but they do say that if you quickly pick up the pieces of the broken glass and look in them three times over your left shoulder, the spell is somewhat broken and no ill luck can happen. Which is what I started frantically to do. But just in time I caught myself. No, I said, I will not do it. That moment was one of the biggest in my life. I simply let the mirror lie there. "What I'm realizing about her," McDonald said, "is that I don't have to go searching as far out, to find the roots of her character, as I thought I would. It made me weep, I so identified with her."

"Shuffle Along" was such a mammoth success — and became a minor industry so quickly after opening — that it seems as though it must have lasted forever, but the original gang of creators who put it together split up less than two years after it opened on Broadway. This was the falling out between Sissle and Blake (the writers of the songs) and Miller and Lyles (the writers of the book). It came down to money: The songs were making a lot of it, through recordings and sheet music. The book wasn't making much of anything. Miller and Lyles thought everything should be split down the middle; Sissle and Blake disagreed. Some of the cast went one way, some the other, some wandered off. By the end (the last "true" "Shuffle" performance happened on June 23 in Atlantic City), relations were so strained between the two sides that some people walked offstage during "Auld Lang Syne."



Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake in an ad for their musical "In Bamville," which was renamed "The Chocolate Dandies" before opening in New York in 1924. They wrote the music for "Shuffle Along." Credit The archives of Robert Kimball Photo



The vaudeville comedy duo Flourney Miller and Aubrey Lyles, who wrote the book for “Shuffle Along” and appeared in blackface in 1921. Credit Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library Photo

The four creators of “Shuffle Along” in a publicity still in 1921. Credit The archives of Robert Kimball



By 1930, Gee had gone back to vaudeville. She was in Baltimore with a show called “Harlem Vanities.” An anonymous (tragically anonymous) reporter with the local Afro-American caught up with her and did the best article ever written about her, one of just a couple that bring you close. She was in her mid-40s at that point. To read the article after having despaired for months of ever knowing anything about her was like having her spirit show up at a séance.

Although she can still hear the plaudits of Broadway and the music halls of Europe ringing in her ears, a memory that many a performer would love to cherish, pretty diminutive Lottie Gee, star of many musical successes, puckers her lips and pouts because she has never tasted any real happiness. “You’ll think me dreadfully old-fashioned and trite when I say that home and children are the only things in the world that can bring a woman supreme happiness,” declared Miss Gee between puffs on a scented cigarette, “but that is true, and the older a woman gets the more she realizes it.” ... “Married?” she asked in answer to my question. ... “If you won’t insist upon knowing his name, I’ll confess that I was married once — to a musician, but we parted before ‘Shuffle Along,’ long before anybody ever heard of me. All my later successes have been empty affairs. But why worry about that?” She flickered the ashes from her cigarette with an air of nonchalance. ...

“How do I like Baltimore?” she repeated, the smile disappearing suddenly from her face. “Oh, Baltimore is all right, I guess, only I hate to play here because it always brings back unpleasant memories. It was here many years ago that we parted. No, I

don't care for Baltimore.”

When I spoke with McDonald about that article, I said something that gave away an assumption I'd made, namely that Gee is talking about her first husband at the end of this interview, when she says, “we parted.” She was married — three times, in fact, before she died — but this would have been her first husband, a musician named Wilson (Peaches) Kyer. But McDonald stopped me. “I think she's talking about Eubie there,” she said. Meaning Eubie Blake, the songwriter for “Shuffle Along” — the real love of her life, people said. You think so? I asked. “Yes,” she said, “Eubie was from Baltimore.” That was true. Kyer, on the other hand — the man to whom she was still quite married when she and Blake started getting together — was from Philadelphia.

Thirty-four years later, a reporter tracked down Eubie Blake and asked him about Lottie Gee. It was 1964 in The Pittsburgh Courier. “ ‘Lottie?’ Blake responded. ‘Well, Lottie hasn't been doing so good. Her health seems to have gone bad on her. Of course, she's 78 now, you know.’ ” The answer suggests that he kept in touch or at least kept tabs on her. As for the fact that he knew her age to the year (she was born in 1886), it speaks for itself.

“I will always believe,” she told that interviewer in Baltimore back in 1930, “that if Miller and Lyles and Sissle and Blake had stuck together, the colored stage would have been entirely different.”

As for the pioneers Bert Williams and George Walker, their story would end with all the pathos Williams had hoped for. Sadly, horribly, it was toward the end of the “Bandanna Land” tour — and in the very midst of performing “Bon Bon Buddy” — that Walker had his first stroke. He had not been well for some time. Syphilis: It struck a number in the theatrical generation that came before “Shuffle Along.” They were all working very hard and having an enormous amount of fun, and there was no such thing as penicillin when you caught the dreaded “bad blood.” There was an arsenic-based remedy, which could be effective, but it was arsenic-based. As he sang the song, Walker began to sing “in a thick-lipped manner” and forgot the lyrics. Soon after that, his career was over, and soon after that his life.

Williams went on after Walker's death to a whole third phase in his career, starring in the Ziegfeld Follies. There, too, he broke racial barriers. His would-be co-stars threatened to quit; they didn't want to appear on the same bill with a black man. The director told them, “I can replace every one of you, except the man you want me to fire.” The power Williams evidently had — of making people laugh whether they wanted to or not — afforded a kind of protection. In those last years he grew more famous than ever but was mostly doing shtick. In the end he, too, suffered an onstage collapse. He was in a show called “Under the Bamboo Tree.” He went down in Detroit. The audience mistook his fall for a gag and was laughing as they carried him off.

I was tempted to read his death, at least as it related to “Shuffle Along,” as a tragedy. He had fought to open doors: Others would enjoy walking through them. But this turned out rather beautifully not to have been the case. In 1947 (more than 25 years after the show debuted), the composer Noble Sissle remembered in a guest column for The New York Age that it had been only “the great heritage left by Bert Williams and George Walker” that “had made it possible for F.E. Miller, Aubrey Lyles, Eubie Blake and myself to birth ‘Shuffle Along.’ Few people know, but Bert Williams playing in Ziegfeld Follies and [being] the only Negro playing Broadway at that time was literally a father to the four of us during the birth of ‘Shuffle Along’ and gave us every blessing and advice at his masterly command. None came more often than he to see our show or laughed more heartily or applauded it more vociferously.”