

Jazz, Shakespeare, and Hybridity: A Script Excerpt from *Swingin' the Dream*

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Abstract

This essay examines the contemporary critical assumptions surrounding *Swingin' the Dream* — the short-lived 1939 swing production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* — in light of a recently discovered script excerpt (click on highlighted text) from the "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene. Whereas theater critics generally viewed the play as consisting of two irreconcilable elements, swing and Shakespeare, the excerpt draws attention to the ways in which the production attempted to combine these elements fruitfully. If this scene is at all indicative of the approach taken in the rest of the play, then the critical consensus appears to have been prejudiced by a reluctance to accept the manner in which *Swingin' the Dream* places swing and Shakespeare on an equal footing.

Somehow, I suspect that if Shakespeare were alive today, he might be a jazz fan himself. — Duke Ellington

Given its "prominent names" and "lively design," *Swingin' the Dream*, the 1939 swing version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adapted by Gilbert Seldes and Erik Charell to depict plantation life in 1890s New Orleans, should "have had a long and happy run" (Teague 2002, 229). Instead, it "was open on Broadway for about three minutes" (Eddie Condon, quoted in Carr, Fairweather, and Priestley 2002, 159).¹ In this essay, however, I would like to skirt the question of what went wrong, save for to say that the critical consensus at the time was that the production was not very well executed, probably because of inadequate preparation. Most soon forgot the show, though one of its songs, "Darn that Dream," has become a standard (track 1). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

I will give the critics the benefit of the doubt, although as a jazz fan, I confess I would love to hear Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman play in any context. What I would like to examine is a fundamental assumption that underlies critiques of the production: the notion that

swing and Shakespeare are irreconcilably opposed and that the production should, therefore, have given precedence to one or the other, but failed to do so. I will then examine these assumptions in light of a recently discovered script excerpt (click on highlighted text) from *Swingin' the Dream*.

"A Hybrid Shakespearean Shageroo"

Most reviewers of *Swingin' the Dream* focused on the production through the discursive lens of either swing or Shakespeare. One reviewer writes, for example, that "the show which was meant to be a mammoth orgy of swing missed its objective." He makes no mention of Shakespeare, but describes the "dreadful distance" that "separated the audience from dancers and music alike" and complains that the elements of the production did not "reach out to the spectator and make him take part, even vicariously, in the festivities" (Review, *Theatre Arts* 1940). For the reviewer, the production should have capitalized on the conception of jazz as an interactive art form, one in which the distance between performer and audience is minimized. This was, after all, dance music. As Ralph Ellison wrote much later in a nostalgic vein, contemporary musicians might "do better if they went back to playing for dances, went back to the communal situation in which there's a closer identification between their artistic goals and their prospective audience's desire to participate in the creation of the jazz spell" (Ellison 2001, 33).

A few reviewers complained that the play should have focused more on Shakespeare; one called it "more Cotton Club than bard," and a "hybrid Shakespearean shageroo"; but by far the consensus was that the production should have stuck to what its players knew best: swing (Review, *Variety* 1939a). This bias resulted in part because fewer of the kinds of reviewers who would have wanted more Shakespeare would have seen the play. In a survey of the most recent spate of Shakespearean productions, for example, the theater critic from *Time* acknowledged *Swingin' the Dream* only in a disparaging footnote: "*Swingin' the Dream*, a jitterbug version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, opened a week earlier; but no self-respecting Bard-hunter would stalk such mongrel prey" (Review, *Time* 1939c). The reviewer's dismissive comment, especially his use of the term "mongrel," betrays an anxiety about intermixing cultures, and suggests that the text itself has been miscegenated. "'At one moment you hear genuine pentameters in the style and sometimes the original wording of the bard,' said a reviewer, 'at another you hear anti-climactic lines like "go fly a kite" that are appropriate neither to Shakespeare nor to the New Orleans 1890 setting into which the story has been dumped'" (Bergreen 1997, 396).

According to then-contemporary essentialist views, African Americans had an inherent understanding of jazz. The following description of jazz by Hugues Panassi from 1942 is just one of many that perpetuated racial dichotomies: "We know that there are good jazz musicians belonging

to the white race. But in general the Negroes prove more gifted, and while the Negro masses among themselves have an instinctive feeling for this music, white people approach it with resistance and assimilate it slowly" (quoted in Clark 2001, 19). Shakespearean acting, on the other hand, was considered to be inherently foreign to African Americans. Thomas Anderson, who acted in Orson Welles's famous 1936 "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, recalled how "people came to laugh at them because of the 'oddity' of their speech" (Gill 1988, 114). In reviews of early African American performers, it is common to read "the complaint that black Othellos could not enunciate Shakespeare's text correctly because of inherited, 'incurable flaws'" (Iyengar 2002, 106); in particular, their lips and mouths were thought to be inappropriately shaped for the articulation of Shakespearean verse. In contrast, Armstrong's nickname "Satchmo," from "Satchelmouth," draws proud attention to the size of his mouth as a metonymic representation of his musical prowess.

While it was perhaps utopian to imagine an equal exchange between swing and Shakespeare, this is exactly the sort of rhetoric that surrounded jazz during the swing era: "Jazz, to its proselytizers, was above all a democratic music, a product of 'the people,' accessible to all classes and cultural types, marked both by a spirit of collective cooperation and by spontaneous individuality" (Stowe 1994, 53). One of the ways in which this democratic spirit manifested itself in practical terms was through interracial bands such as the one Goodman brought to *Swingin' the Dream*, which included Lionel Hampton, Fletcher Henderson, and Charlie Christian, and, one could argue, helped legitimate the production's racially mixed cast (track 2). (A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)²

Combining jazz and Shakespeare was not unprecedented. In a version of *The Comedy of Errors* staged in 1923, a jazz band played during scene changes and during a few scenes. Its director "was responding to calls for a Negro drama that would utilize the resources of the race as expressed in the folk arts of song, dance, and pantomime" (Hill 1984, 99). While reviewers praised some of the acting, most called the production "faddish and absurd" (100). One notable exception, however, was W. E. B. Dubois, who suspected that New Yorkers would have lapped it up "if this new thing had come out of France with a European imprint" (100). The successful *The Boys from Syracuse* (based on *The Comedy of Errors* and staged the year before) was obviously part of the impetus for *Swingin' the Dream*, but its white cast and Rodgers and Hart score make it somewhat different.

Given the perception that the combination of Shakespearean acting and swing music was incongruous, the *proper* approach to such a combination would have been to capitalize on the ironic spectacle of the performance. As Teague writes: "Clearly the pleasure that the audience was intended to receive from *Swingin' the Dream* involved their recognition that African American

performers who were important on the variety stage were doing Shakespeare, the epitome of the legit stage from which they were largely excluded" (Teague 2002, 229). Is it possible, then, that part of the problem with the reception of the play was that it attempted to place swing and Shakespeare on equal footing? "Challenged about the adaptation," writes Gary Jay Williams, "Charell observed that, for most Americans, Shakespeare's play was in a foreign language," while "Seldes's interest in the project probably followed from his campaign to give the popular arts (jazz, musical comedy, vaudeville, comic strips) the kind of critical attention the high arts enjoyed" (Williams 1997, 187). Although Seldes "felt committed to cultural democracy" (Kammen 1996, 207), it would be difficult to imagine that those involved were oblivious to the irony in coupling swing and Shakespeare.

Most blatantly, *Swingin' the Dream* plays white and African American performance against one another by casting white actors as the members of Theseus's court and African Americans in the "outsider" roles of the mechanicals and fairies. Their position as outsiders coincides, of course, with the marginal social position of African Americans and African American performers; whether this casting choice was simply mirroring racist social conventions or subtly critiquing them, however, is unclear. Williams reminds us that "*Swingin' the Dream* was created by whites for a predominantly white Broadway audience" (Williams 1997, 187), and he goes on to describe the racial stereotypes inherent in the production and the racist rhetoric underlying many of the reviews. His point is well-taken, but as I will demonstrate shortly, a close reading of one scene shows that interpreting *Swingin' the Dream* only in terms of its racial dichotomies does not give us the whole picture.

We can, and should, examine *Swingin' the Dream* in terms of cultural domination and subordination; by doing so exclusively, however, we neglect an alternate way of entering into the play, one that examines it more in terms of hybridity than of opposition. According to Nicholas Evans, whose analysis applies contemporary theories of hybridity to jazz, the belief that "jazz draws on cultural practices and aesthetic traditions associated with different social groups and fruitfully combines them [. . .] has existed at least since 1938, when the early jazz critic Winthrop Sargeant published *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid*" (Evans 2000, 11-12). Borrowing from Evans's analysis of jazz as a hybrid art form, I suggest that *Swingin' the Dream* is a hybrid whose identity is dictated by neither swing nor Shakespeare. At least one reviewer, Robert Benchley, writing for *The New Yorker*, seems to have experienced *Swingin'* in such a way. He tells the reader that he went to the show "prepared to wince." Afterwards, Benchley says, he still loathed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (joining a tradition of *Dream* haters stretching back at least as far as Samuel Pepys) and swing, too, for that matter, but, he conceded, "somewhere in the combination" of swing and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "Erik Charell has produced a swell treat for the eye and ear. I don't understand it" (Benchley 1939). Benchley's somewhat tongue-in-cheek inability to understand why he would like the sum

of two parts he hates has to do, I suspect, with the fact that "the significance of a hybrid entity need not be circumscribed by the categories that define its parents" (Evans 2000, 31).

A Script Excerpt from *Swingin' the Dream*

It is difficult to examine *Swingin' the Dream* through the limited comments of reviewers and the partial memories of the cast and crew. Unfortunately, there is also no extant script or film of the production. The UCLA Music Library's Jimmy Van Heusen collection, however, contains a number of items related to the production. Van Heusen, the Tin Pan Alley composer who wrote the music for such classics as "Love and Marriage" and "Call Me Irresponsible," composed and arranged songs for *Swingin' the Dream*. The items in the collection are primarily copyright-related documents, though the collection also contains sheet music for a number of Van Heusen's compositions for *Swingin' the Dream*, and, most important, a photocopy of three typewritten pages constituting the "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene. Of course, any assertions based on this small fragment of the script will necessarily be partial and limited, since it is difficult to tell how far we can generalize the approach taken with this scene to that taken with the rest of the production. Furthermore, the "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene is constructed to emphasize its hybrid nature through a fruitful combination of swing and Shakespeare. It is quite possible that this was one of the better-received scenes, since it does not deal with what John Mason Brown dubbed "the tedious story of the lovers," whom yet another reviewer called "ghastly bores" (Brown 1939; Review, *Time* 1939b). At the very least, we can look at this scene as the moment in the play that most strikingly combines swing with Shakespeare.

Before explaining how the scene does so, I should point out quickly the nature of the excerpt. The pages reprinted here (click on highlighted text) are clearly pre-theatrical. The title at the top of the first page reads "OPERA," although there appears a hand-written title, "Swingin' dream," above and to the right of the title. The date at the upper right corner of each page is "11/2/39," twenty-seven days before *Swingin' the Dream* opened, suggesting that the show was, as many reviews indicate, put together rather hurriedly. The "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene, as presented in these pages, begins with Quince's prologue ("If we offend, it is against our will") and ends with Pyramus's death ("To die, die, die, die, die"). The text is probably not complete, since we do not witness Thisbe's discovery of Pyramus.

Another relevant document from the archives, dated October 7, 1939 (fifty-three days before the show opened), lists the repertoire for the production. This scene, the penultimate one (followed by a finale that consists of a "repetition of three numbers from show") is described as "Pyramus & Thisbe — medley from old Negro tunes." The manner in which the script is laid out clearly

indicates the medley format. Song titles are typed in capital letters on the right margin, presumably to indicate the tune to which their corresponding lines are to be sung. The choice of material — hardly "old Negro tunes," but "Darktown Strutters' Ball," "St. Louis Blues," "Hold Tight," "Jeepers Creepers," "Ain't Misbehavin'," and so on — is clearly not meant to reflect the setting of the play, but to present what were, for the most part, still contemporary popular songs, several of which had been recorded by Armstrong, Goodman, or both. Only a year before, in fact, Armstrong had sung "Jeepers Creepers" in the film *Going Places*, and recorded a version of "Ain't Misbehavin'," a song he re-recorded several times throughout his career.

There is at least one spoken section in the excerpt. When Pyramus delivers the line, "What dole is here, / Eyes do you see," "SPOKEN" is indicated in the left margin. It is unclear whether or not this spoken section lasts until the end of the scene. Further songs are listed, but there is also a song, "Harvest Moon," listed for this spoken section. It is safe to assume that previous sections were sung; otherwise, the stage direction would not have been required to indicate the spoken section.

The only other direction noted in the left margin of the script occurs during Pyramus's earlier lines, "Thanks, Wall. May Jove / Shield thee for this," where we read that "LOUIS plays trumpet" (track 3). (This is, tellingly, the only reference to an actor by name in the excerpt.) (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Since Armstrong was cast as Bottom, who "plays" Pyramus, he must have interspersed his playing with his lines. In nearly every photograph that I have seen of Armstrong in the production, even when he is embracing Maxine Sullivan (Titania), he appears with trumpet in hand, though he apparently did not play it enough for most audience members. Brooks Atkinson writes, "Although Louis Armstrong carries his golden horn whenever he appears, he hardly has a chance to warm it up until the show is well over" (Atkinson 1939), and Leonard Feather, though he was relatively complimentary about the play, noted that Armstrong played "only occasional snatches of trumpet" (quoted in Bergreen 1997, 396).

The clearest way in which the script emphasizes the combination of swing and Shakespeare is in its overall form. The layout of the script, with the adapted and truncated, but recognizably Shakespearean lines appearing on the left, and the corresponding song titles that provide the melody for each section on the right, can be viewed as a representation of swing and Shakespeare coming into contact. The structure is reminiscent of the form of some of Langston Hughes's earlier poems, such as "The Black Clown" and "The Big-Timer," in which "THE MOOD" is written on the left margin, separate from "THE POEM" on the right; Hughes uses this structure extensively for poems such as "Cultural Exchange" (from *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*), in which we read a detailed description of the musical accompaniment for the poem on the right column of the page:

The
rhythmically
rough
scraping
of a guira
continues
monotonously
until a lonely
flute call,
high and
far away,
merges
into piano
variations
on German
lieder
gradually
changing
into
old-time
traditional
12-bar
blues
up strong
between verses
until
African
drums
throb
against
blues

fading
as the

music
ends.
TACIT
(Hughes 2001, 89-90)

The similarity in layout between Hughes's poem and the excerpt from *Swingin' the Dream* encourages us to read both works in relation to their *mise-en-scène*, in the sense in which Patrice Pavis uses the term, as "the confrontation of all signifying systems, in particular the utterance of the dramatic text in performance" (Pavis 1992, 25). In the space between these two elements are the many dialogic possibilities for a meeting between swing and Shakespeare, text and performance, and performers and audience(s). The complexity of these interactions does not allow for simplistic oppositions. It is there that we might find the something that is not quite swing, not quite Shakespeare, "something yet undefined" (Evans 2000, 32).

We might expect *Swingin' the Dream*'s version of "Pyramus and Thisbe" to emphasize the irony inherent in the "homespun" actors' performance, but instead it alters the Shakespearean text to legitimate both the performance and the combination of swing and Shakespeare, starting immediately with the prologue. Thus, what we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

If we offend, it is with our good will.
That you should think, we come not to offend,
But with good will. To show our simple skill,
[. . .]
The actors are at hand: and, by their show,
You shall know all, that you are like to know. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
5.1.108-17)³

becomes

If we offend, it is against our will
We only want to show our skill
You see the actors are at hand
And by their acting and their show
All of you shall know, all that you are like to know.

As presented in *Swingin' the Dream*, the lines are less equivocal and the ludicrous punctuation is gone, thereby removing the primary source of humor and suggesting that the players are sincere

in telling the audience, "We only want to show our skill." The apologetic tone calls to mind the aforementioned experiences of early African American Shakespearean actors. One might even detect a note of defiance in the last line, "All of you shall know, all that you are like to know." Instead of asking the audience to embrace the mechanicals for their bumbling ineptitude, the scene asks us to accept the performance at face value. If the scene pokes fun, it does not seem to direct its jibing either towards Shakespeare or towards the mechanicals (as does *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), but towards a hierarchical conception of art. For example, the stage direction for Thisbe's "'Tide life" line reads, "Ala [sic] burlesque on opera." Thisbe's line — "'Tide life, 'Tide death, 'Tide death, 'Tide life, / I come, I come I come I come I come without delay, without delay" — is ridiculously exaggerated, far more extravagant than its Shakespearean source. Where Shakespeare's farcical comedy targets Ovid, *Swingin' the Dream* targets high culture in general. Where Shakespeare's scene is a statement regarding what he hoped not to have done in his play, here the scene becomes a positive statement of the play's goals.

"Pyramus and Thisbe" is probably the scene in which the African American performers were best able to show their skill. Immediately preceding this scene, according to Van Heusen's list of songs, came a "Jam Session" that featured Mendelssohn's and Wagner's famous wedding marches. One can assume that the musicians swung these pieces. We see this kind of playfulness recorded in Al Hirschfeld's illustration for the program cover of *Swingin' the Dream*, in which Armstrong and Goodman blow away on their trumpet and clarinet, while the Bard jitterbugs above them in a cloud, perhaps the cloud of smoke he is kicking up, and snaps the fingers of his left hand. The illustration reminds the audience that, as the title of the play implies, Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are being "swung." Armstrong, not surprisingly, typifies such a playful approach. Leonard Feather writes: "Louis enjoyed himself thoroughly. ('Man,' he said to me during intermission, 'if Old Shakespeare could see me now!')" (Feather 1974, 20). Almost a decade later, Armstrong recalled his fellow actor Butterfly McQueen in *Swingin' the Dream* (what he calls in the letter "a Shakespearean play"): "'And every night I'd wait for her to come on stage and do her act. And it would just knock me completely out. Yea, she's a great little actress'" (quoted in Berrett 1999, 132).

One of the complaints leveled at *Swingin' the Dream* was that the production was too reverent towards Shakespeare. Already, we have seen that the "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene foregrounds its hybridity in order to legitimate the mechanicals' performance. If by reverence the reviewers meant that the play adhered too closely to the Shakespearean text, this assessment is also contradicted by "Pyramus and Thisbe." While the scene does not "throw Shakespeare out of the window" (Atkinson 1939), it is substantially different from the one we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If the

changes made to this scene are at all similar to those made in other scenes, the implication is that Shakespeare's presence is so insistent that, paradoxically, for the majority of reviewers the play would have to wipe Shakespeare out entirely for swing to be able to engage with him. While occasionally there appear unaltered lines, as when Thisbe laments, "O Wall, full often hast thou heard my moans," over a hundred complete lines of the Shakespearean text are cut or altered, and just over two hundred words are added (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.188).

Many of the minor changes to Shakespeare's poetry made in the script help to fit the verse lines better to their corresponding music. For example, an exchange between Pyramus and Thisbe, sung to the tune of "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," is identical to Shakespeare's lines, except for the addition of the word "baby" from the song's chorus: "O kiss me thru the hole of this vile wall, Baby" and "I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all, Baby." Many of the alternating rhymes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* become rhyming couplets in *Swingin' the Dream*, occasionally with some grasping lines ("This grisly beast, denominated Lion, / Scared Thisbe first, beneath the sign Orion"). Repetition is often employed for rhythmic purposes. There are subtle moments, as when Quince asks, "Perchance you wonder, you wonder at this show," and more emphatic cases, as when Pyramus repeats the trumpet-like, "Quail crush conclude and quell / Quail crush conclude and quell / Quail crush conclude and quell," a line that is difficult to repeat without swinging.

The most conspicuous alteration of the scene as rendered in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, is the elimination altogether of Theseus's court. Some of the poetic changes to lines therefore do double duty, altering lines that would make little sense without the court, such as Moonshine's, "This lantern should be the moon that you see, / And I the man in the moon seem to be." Unlike Shakespeare's lines, "This lanthorn doth the horn'd moon present; / Myself the man i' th' moon do seem to be" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.244-45), this speech makes no reference to horns, since there is no need to provide an opening for Demetrius to make his obligatory cuckolding joke. The elimination of the court's derisive gaze and wry comments, like the alterations to the prologue, suggests that we are not to take the mechanicals' production here as lightly as we do in "standard" productions.

Although the court is not present in the scene, there is a "Stage Audience" that plays a minor role, acting as a chorus. Thisbe and the Stage Audience have a brief call and response. When Thisbe, before Lion frightens her off with his roar, asks, "This is cupid's statue - - - - but where is my love?" the chorus replies, "Down by the old mill stream, / He has gone to dream." When she asks again, "Do not deceive me - - - - Where is my love?" they reply twice that "he'll be comin' round the mountain when he comes." When Thisbe asks a third time, "Do not grieve me - - - - Where is my love?" they respond with a refrain to the tune of "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans." This section of the scene

accentuates "repetition and difference," of which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes: "It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular form of Signifyin(g), jazz — and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime" (Gates 1988, 64). Having a chorus, rather than the mocking court members, interact with the mechanicals also further legitimates the mechanicals' performance. There is, however, a layer of irony in that, although the white, aristocratic stage audience is not present, the "mechanicals" are still performing for the apparently less responsive, and predominantly white, Center Theatre audience.

Despite the potential that one might see in this script excerpt, it is entirely possible that *Swingin' the Dream* was a travesty not only in the sense of being a burlesque, but also in the sense of simply being bad. I am, if it has not been clear in this essay, a fan of both Shakespeare and swing, and, therefore, may give *Swingin' the Dream* more than its due. I do not oppose the idea that the play did not work, but what I do oppose is the assertion, whether implicit or explicit, that the production *could* not have worked. While it might be going too far to say, as Kammen does of Seldes, that the "several productions designed for African-American performers on which he lavished energy were simply too far ahead of public opinion to achieve commercial success" (Kammen 1996, 98), *Swingin' the Dream*, it seems, was at least too optimistic about the democratizing potential of jazz.

Notes

1. I delivered an early version of this paper at the University of Western Ontario's "Modernist Shakespeare and After" graduate conference in April, 2004 and am grateful to M. J. Kidnie and others who offered feedback at that time. I owe thanks to Fran Teague for introducing me to *Swingin' the Dream* and for her kind assistance in my research. I also would like to thank Timothy Edwards at the UCLA Music Library Special Collections, Marian and Timothy Seldes for their generous permission to reproduce the script excerpt, and the editors for their invaluable comments.
2. In Van Heusen's song list, "Flying Home" is listed beneath "Jitterburg Dance" and "Exit of the Fairies."
3. All references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al.

Online Resources

Louis Armstrong House & Archives [cited 12 March, 2005]. <http://www.satchmo.net>
 Script excerpt from *Swingin' the Dream*. Jimmy Van Heusen Collection [cited 25 May, 2005].
 UCLA Music Library. Available online (in PDF format) through *Borrowers and Lenders*:

The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation at http://atropos.english.uga.edu/borrowers/files/issue1/Pyramus_and_Thisbe.pdf

Swingin' the Dream [cited 12 March, 2005]. Internet Broadway Database. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=13212>

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The image of Louis Armstrong as Bottom in "Pyramus and Thisbe" from the Louis Armstrong House & Archives at Queens College/CUNY is used by permission.

The script of the "Pyramus and Thisbe" scene in *Swingin' the Dream* from the Jimmy Van Heusen Collection at UCLA is reproduced by permission of Marian and Timothy Seldes.

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