

Swingin' Shakespeare from Harlem to Broadway

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Abstract

Play On! was a great hit at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre in 1997, but a tepid non-hit on Broadway in the same year. The show is a derivative of *Twelfth Night*, re-set to the Harlem Renaissance, with music by Duke Ellington. Critics complained that the show was too fantastic, yet the history of Shakespeare in the Harlem Renaissance suggests that the show is, in fact, closer to the historical record than its creators probably realized. The essay examines the 1939 musical *Swingin' the Dream*, as well as briefly considers the trouble that women musicians had receiving recognition.

Play On! was a great hit at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre in 1997, but a tepid non-hit on Broadway in 1997, although it enjoyed regional success, and one regional production was included in the prestigious Public Broadcasting Service series "Great Performances" (2000; Ellington and West 1997).¹ The show is a derivative of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, re-setting the plot to the Harlem Renaissance and dropping Shakespeare's language, while adding the music of Duke Ellington.

The show's creators use twenty-one songs by Duke Ellington throughout the show, but in this plot summary I shall mention only a few. A young woman named Vi comes to New York from the country, arriving on "The 'A' Train" determined to make it as a songwriter by learning from the Duke, Harlem's finest song composer (track 1): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) TRACK 1: "The A Train" (Mel Tormé)

Her uncle Jester tells her she cannot succeed as a woman, so she cross-dresses to gain employment with the Duke, who is having a dry spell. All the Duke can think about is the beautiful nightclub singer, Lady Liv, so he laments, "I've Got It Bad and That Ain't Good" (track 2): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) TRACK 2: "I Got It Bad" (Carmen McRae)

The Duke sends Vi-man to woo Lady Liv, and — after managing to get past Liv's club manager, the Rev — Vi-man tries to persuade Liv to care. Liv falls for Vi-man, who has fallen for the Duke, while the respectable Rev yearns for Lady Liv. By himself, the Rev sings "Don't You Know I Care." Jester and his friends overhear him and tell him that he needs to loosen up because

"It Don't Mean a Thing, If It Ain't Got That Swing" (track 3): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)TRACK 3: "It Don't Mean a Thing" (Joe Carroll)

Dressed in a yellow zoot suit, Rev sings and dances up a storm with Lady Liv in "I'm Beginning to See the Light." When she rejects him, Rev is heart-broken and returns to his navy-blue manager's suit. Liv pursues Vi-man until the untimely entrance of the Duke. Duke renounces both Liv and Vi-man, Vi rejects Liv, and everyone is unhappy. The show ends with Vi's revealing her female identity to the Duke by asking him to help her complete "Prelude to a Kiss" (track 4): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)TRACK 4: "Prelude to a Kiss" (Carl Anderson and Cheryl Freeman)

Meanwhile Rev and Liv fall in love in a duet, "I Want Something to Live For." Everyone lives happily ever after (track 5): (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)TRACK 5: "Something to Live For" (Chris Connor)

The alterations that the musical *Play On!* makes to Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* are similar to those made by other Shakespearean musicals, since musicals generally streamline the plot, trimming "name" roles and expanding the number of supernumerary roles. Such methods provide more room in the production for musical numbers, allow the book to focus on the show's stars, and offer a good dramaturgical reason for a chorus to exist. But in *Play On!* these changes have other effects worthy of note. One major plot change, for example, is the elimination of Viola's twin brother Sebastian and his loving rescuer Antonio. Cutting those characters reduces the size of the company, but it also brings a consequent reduction of homoeroticism in the show's subtext. Another change is that Sir Toby and Feste are combined in the person of Jester, who is given a familial connection to the Viola figure rather than to Olivia/Lady Liv. That shift reduces the danger that Vi-man runs, since her secret is known early on by the benevolent Jester, but isolates Olivia more thoroughly than in Shakespeare's play. The sweet country girl has family on whom she can draw, while the sultry singer must stand alone. That plot change also affects what may be the most significant character change: the Rev, serving as the Malvolio figure, ends up in a romantic relationship with Lady Liv, rather than as the object of humiliation.

Such changes make sense in terms of African American culture. The resistance to homosexuality, after all, has been called "the greatest taboo" among African Americans."² Thus, reducing such homoerotic elements as Antonio's declared passion for Sebastian for Antonio neatly trims the production budget for salaries while eliminating social discomfort. The image of the isolated Lady Liv may recall the "tragic mulatto" stereotype so often found in American drama about race, yet reclaims that stereotype: this character has agency and concludes the show with a

new love, a strong African American man, and a successful career. As for Malvolio/Rev, surely the idea that a hard-working black servant becomes a partner and wins his love is, in *this* cultural context, more bearable than that a black servant should be mocked, humiliated, imprisoned, and finally driven away.

Although the idea for the show came from Sheldon Epps and the joyful choreography from Duke Ellington's granddaughter, Mercedes Ellington, the writer of the book was Cheryl West, a noted African American playwright whose dramas *Jar the Floor* (1991) and *Before It Hits Home* (1989) have enjoyed success and won awards. These plays interrogate gender and sexuality within the African American community. In *Play On!* her concern clearly was to privilege African American culture both in her emphasis on the Harlem Renaissance and in her refusal to let a black man be humiliated.

But while the alterations make political sense, does the history that West fictionalizes seem at all likely? Does the show in any way resemble what went on in the Harlem Renaissance or in Duke Ellington's life? Since the production declared that the show was set in "the magical kingdom of Harlem," it is unsurprising that critics pointed to the fantasy feeling of the show in their reviews of the New York production. In the *Times* (Brantley 1997), Ben Brantley called *Play On!* a "romantic fable," asking "why not substitute a bygone Harlem, nostalgically remembered as a stylishly self-contained cradle for dazzling musical talent, for the fantastical dukedom of Illyria?" Brantley considered West's manipulation of the Lady Liv-Rev relationship clumsily handled, and complained that "This awkwardness wouldn't matter as much if the show could create, as it obviously means to, a fluid, fairy-tale sense of Harlem as a hip Brigadoon" (Brantley 1997). Some critics were skeptical about Vi's cross-dressing. *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll called the device "silly fun," and the show "a cartoon" (Kroll 1997, 74), while Mark Steyn, more irascible, dismissed Vi as a "budding lady Songwriter" and the show as "necrophilic" (Steyn 1997, 44). In *Variety*, Greg Evans complained, "'Play On!' maintains (loosely) the Bard's storyline and characters, but replaces complexity with sketch-comedy mechanics," adding that "A chance to visit the famed Harlem nightclub [Ellington's Cotton Club] remains, like most of 'Play On!,' a missed opportunity" (Evans 1997). Clearly the critics thought that the show's events were unlikely. I want to argue that considering what actually happened in Harlem, the events in *Play On!* are plausible. The "cartoon" or "fantasy" comments are directed, I think, at the plot device of a woman's cross-dressing to participate fully in the world of music and at the idea that the Harlem Renaissance has anything to do with William Shakespeare. Such skepticism, I shall argue, is not only unwarranted, but also condescending and ignorant.

Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s was not simply the source of the hot swing music from Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong that was fast replacing the sweet jazz played by such popular bands as Guy Lombardo and his Canadians. The Harlem Renaissance had been in full swing since 1919. African Americans came to New York from across the nation for its opportunities in education, business, and the arts. Many understood an interest in Shakespeare's works to be an indicator of their privileged status as members of the talented tenth. Thus Langston Hughes published a collection of poems, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, while the late Errol Hill has written of important African American Shakespearean productions in the Harlem Renaissance (Hill 1984). That Shakespearean interest was included in the world of swing, most notably in the interest and affection that Ellington and his collaborator Billy Strayhorn felt for Shakespeare. But Ellington was not the only swing musician to care about Shakespeare.

In 1939, a musical comedy version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, entitled *Swingin' the Dream*, re-set the action to Louisiana around 1900, with white performers playing Theseus's court (Theseus becomes governor of Louisiana) and African American performers playing the mechanicals (New Orleans firemen) and fairies (Charell and Seldes 1939). The production of *Swingin' the Dream* employed an impressive group of musical artists: Louis Armstrong, the Bud Freeman band, and the Benny Goodman sextet, with Don Voorhees conducting.³ Unfortunately, no script for the show survives, although thanks to Alan Corrigan's research, readers of this journal have the opportunity, for the first time, to see what part of the script looked like.

But music was not all the show offered. Agnes de Mille choreographed the production for such notable dancers as the Rhythmettes and Bill Bailey. Louis Armstrong played Bottom, Bill Bailey played Cupid, the Dandridge sisters were attendant fairies, Juan Hernandez played Oberon, Moms Mabley played Quince, Dorothy McGuire played Helena, Butterfly McQueen played Puck, Maxine Sullivan played Titania. These are important performers, either in the African American theatrical tradition (Moms Mabley never really broke through with a white audience, for example, but was enormously influential in African American clubs, performing until the 1970s), or in the broadest popular spectrum (Louis Armstrong and Butterfly McQueen are obvious examples).

The show was preceded by talk about how important it would be. Donald Bogle notes that "During rehearsals, word spread among jazz aficionados and fans that *Swingin' the Dream* was a progressive production that made excellent use of its often underemployed Negro talents" (Bogle 1997, 72). Special effects were plentiful:

The huge Center Theatre's stage was exploited for various trick and interesting effects, with sets and costumes modeled after Walt Disney's cartoons. Titania made an entrance in

a World's Fair "World of Tomorrow" electric wheelchair, a Murphy bed emerged from a tree in the forest; microphones (to help audibility in the cavernous playhouse) sprang up in the shape of caterpillars and snails; and there was a noteworthy scene of plantation life on the lawn of the governor's . . . mansion, with a cast of jitter-bugging celebrants. (Leiter 1989, 502)

Lionel Hampton wrote with excitement about the upcoming show and his high hopes for it (Hampton 1939a). He also commented that "It's in 'Swingin' the Dream' that the sextette really puts over to you how much wider a scope and opportunity for each man for better playing we now have" (Hampton 1939b). The leader of the show's other swing band, Bud Freeman, talks about the show's promise:

We were at Nick [Condon]'s for about six or seven weeks when we got an offer to do a Broadway show called "Swingin' the Dream." The show was produced by Eric Charell, who had tremendous success in Europe with a show called "White Horse Inn." He came to America with enormous financial backing to create a revue mixing *Midsummer Night's Dream* with black vaudeville. He had just about the finest talent you could get. Just about everyone in the show became world-renowned. He had Louis Armstrong, Nicodemus, Troy Brown, Oscar Polk, Butterfly McQueen, Bill Bailey, Dorothy Maguire, and Maxine Sullivan. If Charell had known the greatness of the black people he could have had a revue that would still be running. There was some excellent music in the show. Jimmy Van Heusen wrote a number of pieces for it, and one of them, "Darn That Dream," has become a classic (Freeman 1989, 49-50)(track 6):

(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)TRACK 6: "Darn that Dream" (Karen Ziemba)

If prominent names and promising talk were all that a play needed to succeed, *Swingin' the Dream* would have had a long and happy run. It failed. The production closed in less than two weeks. The *Afro-American* reported that the total loss was over \$80,000 (Newspaper Column, 1939); Bogle says the total loss was over \$100,000.

Historian Lewis Erenberg has demonstrated that swing was an agent of remarkable social change in America, especially in precipitating racial integration. There was popular recognition that the best music and the best dancing in America was African American, leading to white customers visiting Harlem's clubs (most notably Ellington's Cotton Club) and to the success of New York's first integrated club, Cafe Society. But if addressing racial inequity was part of the

swing movement, and Erenberg makes a compelling case that it was, gender inequity was ignored. In *Play On!* Viola/Vi-man's fictional case mirrors what actually occurred to women who tried to succeed as musicians.

When Anita O'Day wanted to be recognized as a musician instead of simply the vocalist, she asked if she could wear a jacket like the men in the band. "She wanted audiences to 'listen to me, not look at me. I want to be treated like another musician,' not a trinket 'to decorate the bandstands.' Soon, however, rumors circulated 'that I preferred ladies to men!'" so O'Day went back to glamour gowns. "Girl" vocalists were not recognized as musicians, nor were women instrumentalists welcomed (Erenberg 1998, 200).

Indeed, to get jobs as a pianist, Dorothy Tipton began passing as a man in the 1930s, and did so successfully until after her death in 1989, when the coroner informed her startled third wife and three (adopted) sons that Billy Tipton was in fact a woman. Diane Middlebrook's recent biography of Tipton, *Suits Me* (1998), makes it clear that women were not easily admitted into the world of swing, although Tipton's case is complicated by personal desires. In *Play On!* when Vi turns herself into Vi-man, the show is not simply imitating Shakespeare: it's imitating life.

With its evocation of the Harlem Renaissance, *Play On!* suggests a nostalgic fantasy to most reviewers, not a reconstruction of history. I've tried to suggest that the show is, in fact, closer to the historical record than its creators probably realized. But in this version of history, Duke Ellington and William Shakespeare are recognized as equals, and swing is a triumphant force in America's culture. And that finally is the fantasy, more's the pity.

Notes

1. The show ran from March 20 to May 11, 1997. Three Tony nominations — Tonya Pinkins for Best Actress in a Musical, Andre DeShields for Best Featured Actor in a Musical, and Luther Henderson for Best Orchestrations — suggest that the show did have some strengths.
2. I take the epithet from Delroy Constantine-Simms and his anthology, *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities* (2001), with contributions from bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, and Rolling Stone's Toure.
3. Accounts of the show's music are confusing. Jimmy Van Heusen composed some of the music, Goodman did much of the arranging, and Eddie De Lange wrote the lyrics. One finds the occasional claim that Jimmy Van Heusen created all the music, basing his compositions on Mendelssohn's music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but I cannot find support for that. According to Ross Firestone (1993, 274), Van Heusen wrote only half a dozen songs, one of which, "Darn that Dream," has become a standard. Bordman's *Chronicle* credits Van Heusen

and Goodman with "Spring Song," Alec Wilder and Van Heusen with "Love's a Riddle," and lists "Peace Brother," "There's Gotta Be a Wedding," "Moonland," "Comedy Dance," "Dream Dance," and "Darn That Dream" as being by Van Heusen.

Online Resources

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Play On! 1: Cheryl Freeman as Vy in The Old Globe's world-premiere production of *Play On!*, directed by Associate Artistic Director Sheldon Epps, in the Old Globe Theatre September 14 – October 26, 1996. Photo by Ken Howard.

Play On! 2: (left to right) Yvette Cason as Miss Mary, Lawrence Hamilton as Rev, Larry Marshall as Sweets and André De Shields as Jester in The Old Globe's world-premiere production of *Play On!*, directed by Associate Artistic Director Sheldon Epps, in the Old Globe Theatre September 14 – October 26, 1996. Photo by Ken Howard.

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Play On! 3: Nikki Crawford in the Pasadena Playhouse's production of *Play On!*, directed by Sheldon Epps, July 9 - August 22, 1999. Photo by Craig Schwartz Photography, copyright 1999.

Play On! 4: Natalie Venetia Belcon and Raun Ruffin and the cast of the Pasadena Playhouse's production of *Play On!*, directed by Sheldon Epps, July 9 - August 22, 1999. Photo by Craig Schwartz Photography, copyright 1999.

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