

An Inconvenient Black History of British Musical Theatre 1900-1950

The history of British musical theatre is often told as a story of white performers, composers, lyricists, producers, and directors. But this is only part of the story. Black British musical theatre practitioners have a long and rich history that has been largely forgotten or marginalized.



An Inconvenient Black History of British Musical Theatre: 1900 - 1950 by Sean Mayes

★★★★☆ 4.5 out of 5

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This article will explore the contributions of Black British musical theatre practitioners from the early 20th century to the mid-century. We will look at the challenges they faced, the successes they achieved, and the impact they had on the development of British musical theatre.

The Early Years

The first recorded performance by a Black British musical theatre performer was in 1800, when the African dancer and singer Ira Aldridge performed in

London. Aldridge went on to have a successful career in the United States and Europe, but he was never fully accepted by the British establishment.

In the late 19th century, a number of Black British performers began to emerge on the musical theatre scene. These included the singers Adelaide Hall, Florence Mills, and Ethel Waters. These performers were often forced to perform in segregated venues, but they nevertheless achieved great success.

The Interwar Years

The interwar years saw the rise of Black British musical theatre performers such as Leslie Henson, Bert Williams, and Paul Robeson. These performers were able to break down some of the barriers that had prevented Black British performers from achieving success in the past. They performed in integrated venues and on Broadway, and they helped to change the way that Black people were perceived in British society.

In addition to performers, Black British composers, lyricists, and producers also began to emerge during the interwar years. These included the composers Will Marion Cook and Eubie Blake, and the lyricist Noble Sissle. These artists helped to create a new sound for musical theatre, and they inspired a generation of Black British performers.

The Post-War Years

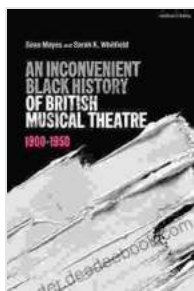
The post-war years saw a decline in the number of Black British musical theatre performers. This was due in part to the rise of rock and roll, which appealed to a younger audience. However, a number of Black British performers continued to achieve success, including the singers Lena Horne, Sammy Davis Jr., and Harry Belafonte.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Black British musical theatre performers emerged. These performers included the singers Elaine Paige, Cleo Laine, and Patti Boulaye. These performers helped to break down the remaining barriers that had prevented Black British performers from achieving success in the past. They performed in leading roles in major musicals, and they helped to change the face of British musical theatre.

The history of Black British musical theatre is a complex and fascinating one. It is a story of struggle, success, and triumph. The Black British musical theatre practitioners who have come before us have paved the way for the success of Black British performers today. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their contributions to British culture.

Further Reading

- Black British History: Musical Theatre
- Black British musical theatre artists celebrated in virtual exhibition
- Black British Theatre: Trailblazers
- Black History Month: Artists who broke down barriers on the UK stage
- Black British musical theatre can make us proud



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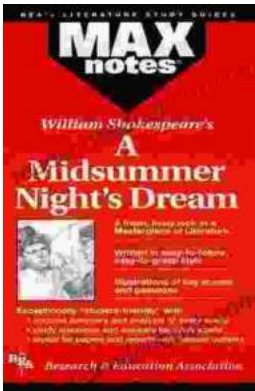
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