DRAMATIZING LYNCHING AND LABOR PROTEST: CASE STUDIES EXAMINING HOW THEATRE REFLECTED MINORITY UNREST IN THE 1920s AND 30s

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Theatre is widely unrecognized for the compelling influence it has held in society throughout history. In this thesis, I specifically examine the implications surrounding the social protest theatre of black and Jewish American minority communities in the first half of the twentieth century. I discuss how their historical circumstance, culture, and idiosyncratic natures caused them to choose agitated propaganda theatre as an avenue for protest. I delve into the similarities in circumstance, but their theatre case studies separate the two communities in the end. I present case studies of each community, beginning with anti-lynching plays of the 1920s that were written by black American playwrights both in response to white supremacist propaganda theatre and to assert a dignified representation of the black community. However, their plays and protest movement never developed a larger popular following. My next minority theatre case study is an examination of 1930s Jewish labor drama created in protest of popular anti-Semitic theatre and poor labor conditions. The Jewish community differs from the black community in their case because the racist propaganda was produced by a man who was Jewish. Another difference is that their protest theatre was on the commercial stage by this point because of a rise in a Jewish middle class and improvement of circumstance. Both the Jewish protest theatre and labor reform movements were more successful. My conclusion is a summation of black and Jewish American theatre of the era with a case study of collaboration between the communities in George Gershwin’s operetta about black Americans, *Porgy and Bess*. I conclude that these two communities eventually departed from circumstance and therefore had differing theatrical, political, and social experiences in America during the 1930s.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how two minority groups asserted themselves in American society during the first half of the twentieth century. They worked to overcome prejudice in both society and the arts. Black and Jewish Americans pursued the theatrical avenue because of their distinctive and particular circumstance and the nature of their communities. These proletariat groups both utilized the agitated propagandist drama with its appeal of modernity, radicalism, and its abstract style of idealism. At this time in America, both social reform and the theatrical institution were becoming more popularized and the two were beginning to merge on the American stage. Another shift at this time was occurring for both the black and Jewish American communities as they changed how they related to each other and the surrounding majority population. Though they shared a history of unfortunate societal circumstance, their differing theatrical styles represented the divergence in their American journeys.

My second chapter is an introduction to America’s Progressive Era. I start with the background of the Era, describing the time frame and the various significant changes such as urbanization and industrialization, and the modernizing politics, economics, and social constructs. After illustrating the disunity of a country torn apart by reconstruction, racial tensions, and new waves of immigration, I go into the history of black and Jewish relations in America, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. I discuss religious connections and then move into a dialogue of black and Jewish press from the nineteenth century that depicted a tenuous relationship. I conclude this background section by stating that the relationship was changing in the twentieth century due to a new liberal wave of Jewish immigrants and the changing face of black intellectuals. For context, I give a background of each community’s circumstance in
America to emphasize similarities as well as the groups beginning to move in different
directions. For the black community, I discuss the atrocious nature of lynchings and racial terror
in the period, warranting a resistance movement. In the Jewish community background, I discuss
troubles in immigration, and the emergence of socialism. Then I conclude the chapter and raise
the point of American theatre in the time period, which connects to my second chapter.

My third chapter is also an introduction, and it is solely based in the theatre background. I
start with the emergence of modern drama and I decipher the period style of American theatre as
popular melodrama. I give the background of melodrama in order to emphasize its over-
romanticized idealism and the fact that it could never be a radical form of propaganda. I discuss
the other popular forms of theatre in this time as negative theatrical portrayals of black and
Jewish characters. I delve into the minstrel shows that utilized blackface and created several
negative archetypes, including the example of Jim Crow. Then, I discuss the negative Jewish
archetypes and give the example of Shylock in the Merchant of Venice. These examples are
meant to emphasize how the misrepresentation of both groups was another reason for creating
their own drama. After the section on popular theatre, I give the history on the more subversive
theatre of agitated propaganda (agit-prop). I describe the history and the structure of agit-prop in
order to later be able to connect my case study plays to the genre.

My fourth chapter is an agit-prop theatre case study in black anti-lynching drama written
around the 1920s. I give a brief synopsis of the atmosphere of racism and lynchings for context
of the hostile atmosphere in this time. I give the synopsis of white supremacist Thomas Dixon’s
rise to fame with his infamous novel turned play, The Clansman. This, then, evolves into Birth of
a Nation and racial violence at this time is pervasive. I discuss one intellectual activist behind the
black theatre movement, W.E.B. DuBois, and his ideas for how black theatre should look and
function. Then, I discuss the character of lynching drama in its early form, according to the subject’s leading scholars. I examine the first popular model, Angelina Weld Grimke’s *Rachel*, which inspired others to perpetuate the genre. My main playwright of discussion is Georgia Douglas Johnson, and I explain her background, opinions on art as propaganda, and her evolution towards agit-prop plays. I discuss her anti-lynching plays entitled, *Sunday Morning in the South* and *Safe* which effectively radicalized and changed the genre of anti-lynching theatre. Though these plays are seen now as important contributions to the American theatre, anti-lynching plays written by black women were produced with limited funds and could not reach large audiences with public theatre venues. Like the people who wrote it, black drama was kept segregated from mainstream American culture in this time.

My fifth chapter is an agit-prop theatre case study in Jewish labor theatre of the 1930s. I briefly discuss the background of Jewish hardship and the violent pogroms that led to their tradition of protest. Next, I discuss Russian origins dealing with socialism and S. Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* and the popularity of the show on the American stage. I talk about the American immigration troubles briefly for context, and then delve into a brief history of passion plays. The popular American passion play that I dissect is *The Freiburg Passion Play*, written by Morris Gest, as an example of the anti-Semitic theatrical propaganda in this time. The significance of this case study that differs from chapter three is that the playwright propagating the racism was Jewish. This is another major signifier of the two communities beginning to diverge because Jewish Americans found assimilation easier than the black community and some fueled their careers and positions in society by propagandizing against their own community. Then, I examine the worker’s theatre with the background of the Group Theatre and Harold Clurman’s theatrical ideology that shaped a worker’s theatre. I end with my discussion of my main
playwright, Clifford Odets. I discuss his background with identity issues and theatre, and I examine his plays, *Awake and Sing* and *Waiting for Lefty*, which both challenge the audience to become aware of social and labor issues and act on this awareness in the name of social change. The end of this chapter briefly mentions the rise of the Jewish middle class and their hold on commercial American theatre in this time period because these factors lead to Jews portraying another minority group in my conclusion.

My conclusion is a case study where the black and Jewish theatrical worlds finally collide. It is a summation of the era with the “event” of *Porgy and Bess*. By 1935, George Gershwin was a successful, commercialized composer who had created shows that gained widespread popularity. He planned, entering into the 1930s, to write a Dybbuk musical because he was inspired by a few performances he had seen, and the play version had been popular for over a decade. However, when these plans fell through, he realized his dream was both theatrically and socially driven. Picking up the novel, *Porgy*, by DuBose Heyward, Gershwin saw a greater purpose in the image he wanted to create with his music. To portray a black community in a genuine and sympathetic light was something not many white playwrights would attempt at this time, especially in mainstream theatre. However, Gershwin knew the ethnic plight of being Jewish and he saw a dignified and honest people that accessed both the higher and lower rungs of society, just as with any race. He was also completely enchanted by their music, and he ended up staying in a community like the one dramatized in the operetta in order to fully capture the music and community in a genuine way. After discussing Gershwin’s process of becoming involved with a black community in order to write *Porgy and Bess*, I discuss broad black involvement and reviews of the first production and later revivals. There is a collaborative element with the making of the production which is singular, but the reviews were decidedly
mixed because the community was sensitive about their portrayal due to long instituted prejudice in society and on the stage. I then briefly discuss Lorraine Hansberry’s *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* because it is a counterpart to Gershwin, though it is not in the discussed era. Because black artists were yet to have their own popular theatre that chronicled their strife in this time, their journey for social change and social drama differed from the Jewish journey. Jews had gained a stronghold on mainstream American theatre, and had already had their folk dramas produced at a public level, such as *The Dybbuk* and *Waiting for Lefty*.

Black Americans were still trying to find their place in American society and on the stage which is why they would not write about their minority counterpart until decades later. The separate black and Jewish case studies show similarities in some aspects of theatre style and purposes of protest. However, the communities were never able to maintain a solid alliance, socially or theatrically, because their American experiences differed. Despite similarities in historical circumstance, religion, and folk traditions, the black and Jewish American communities differed in their timeline of Americanization. Where the Jewish community was successful in producing their protest theatre and in their labor reform in the 1930s, the black community went unrecognized for their anti-lynching theatrical and political movements in the 1920s. This affected the way in which their communities and theatrical presentations were viewed as different.
MOVING TOWARDS THE PROGRESSIVE ERA: AN INTRODUCTION TO BLACK AND JEWISH AMERICAN RELATIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCE

During America’s tumultuous Progressive Era, minority communities were suffering persecution and discriminatory treatment of a disturbing nature. Specifically, the black and Jewish communities had suffered this treatment in their existence for generations. Modernization and changes in international relations were shifting the country. The complicated black and Jewish American relationship was multi-faceted in the nineteenth century, and began to change course leading into the twentieth century. In addition to the general transformations in America during the era, the circumstances and dialogue between these two minority groups were also being altered at the start of the twentieth century. Despite sharing singular historical circumstances of prejudice, their relationship never solidified because the two groups were ultimately on different timelines of Americanization.

The Progressive Era is generally defined as the years from 1890 into the 1920s, as this was the time period of intense modernization in the United States.¹ This era is dichotomously characterized as being optimistic yet tumultuous.² It was a time of immense change and development for American politics, economy, culture, and influence. Many Americans had a positive mindset going into the twentieth century. By this time, many rural communities were urbanized with the Industrial Revolution, and this meant a significant shift in labor and a way of life.³ Societal “progression,” such as urbanization and industrialization, wreaked havoc by facilitating poor working conditions in industry and unfortunate living conditions at home.

³ Ibid, 137.
Though great development took place during this time period, it was at the expense of racial minorities and immigrants who were exploited for labor. Personal identity was also demoralized in factory assembly lines and the dense populations of urban life.4

Post-Civil War Reconstruction left the Union in a shambles as tensions flared between the economically devastated South and the industrializing North.5 National pressures were also peaking due to longstanding hostile race relations and increasingly negative attitudes towards the growing immigrant population. Reform was becoming a more popular idea among some groups with movements in the 1890s and first decade of the twentieth century, such as temperance and voting regulations. However, these progressives were mild in their reform mindsets and sought no revolutionary measures for change. Often contradictory in their moral outcries, many progressives snubbed minorities in their quest for rights such as labor reform and voting.6 Not only was America expanding within its own boundaries, but it was also gaining global influence, attaining territories overseas, and ultimately transforming into a major international power by World War I. Developments such as urbanization, technology, medicine, transportation, and imperialism were positive progressions that kept the general American population optimistic about the new century. However, the forward progressions often caused a destructive backlash. As industry advanced, labor and living conditions suffered. The economy also fluctuated wildly during this period.7 Many Americans during this era saw the various expansions as potential threats to America’s democratic institutions, such as the government’s growing imperialistic

7 Ibid, 134-135. Between 1893 and 1897 the United States economy suffered a major crash. Citizens were turning to the federal government for comfort, support, and relief but to no avail. As it was the country’s first real depression, the federal government was unprepared to handle such mass bank closures and unemployment rates. This crash caused many Americans to become skeptical of the Industrial Revolution and how it could effect the country on a long term scale. The disillusioned mindset also aided in turning some American groups towards social reform and discourse.
attitudes and actions. America was changing rapidly as it withstood economic instability in the 1890s and the First World War, and these changes made some traditionalist American groups cling ever more tenaciously to the racism and xenophobia of the country’s old order. However, there were minority communities that continuously pushed back.

Widespread stereotyping and scapegoating were common practice as they intended to “cope” with a new society and in order to preserve their old system of values and livelihood in a period of great change. There was also a major shift occurring in how different communities related to one another. Various minority groups were transforming with the era. Both social and artistic interaction intensified during the American Progressive Era as each group became less tolerant of their community’s circumstance. Specifically, the relationship between black and Jewish communities within the United States has often been a complicated one. Within the developing dialogue in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were both proponents and skeptics of a proposed black-Jewish alliance. Despite similar historical circumstance, black and Jewish Americans did not always share the same agenda.

One ideology that created a link between the two groups was the shared belief of being God’s Chosen People and having to endure Exodus before salvation. Intense spirituality and adherence to the Old Testament caused some sects of the black community to see parallels between the enslaved ancient Hebrews of Egypt and themselves, a modern people of bondage in America. Though legal bondage had ended by the twentieth century, emotional, social, economic, and political enslavement still bound black Americans. Their Exodus journey played out with the Middle Passage to America representing the Jewish trek to Egypt, with the white American Christians representing the cruel slave master Pharaohs. They believed their day of deliverance would come, as it did for the Jewish people. Many Black hymns and poems spoke of

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8 Ibid, 135.
Moses and being set free as the new slaves of the new Egypt. 9 Though it held revolutionary ideas, the black American Exodus fostered an overt form of resistance because it offered a prophecy of a day when they would be set free rather than encouraging a revolt against the system. After the pronouncement of Emancipation, there was a religious chant of liberation. Despite the initial song, feelings of liberation soon dissipated as different forms of racial oppression refused to release their grip on bound individuals for over a century. Ironically, there was no major Jewish involvement in abolition or civil rights during this time. Jonathan Kaufman, a writer on minority issues, wrote that the Jews “largely sat out the epic battles of reform” in the nineteenth century. He further explains that “the Jews who first came to America in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries were heirs to a conservative political tradition that tended to embrace the status quo and sought not to rock the boat.” 10

In general, black American writers often excluded Jews when discussing the gradual American acceptance of white immigrants. They saw even white Jews as living closer to the black experience instead of the white experience. In 1860, the organization of the New York Negroes for Equal Suffrage Rights made an appeal to white America, stating that “with the exception of the Jews, under the whole heavens there is not to be found a people pursued with a more relentless prejudice and persecution, than are the free colored people of the United States.” 11 Later in the 1880s, the New York Age newspaper published an article entitled “The Jew and the Negro,” which stated: “There is a similarity between the Jew and the Negro.”

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9 Religious Folk-Songs as Sung at the Hampton Institute, ed. R. Nathaniel Dett (Hampton, Va.: Hampton Institute Press, 1927); Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1913), 13-15. Paul Laurence Dunbar was considered a leading black poet by the turn of the twentieth century.


11 The Principia, I (October 20, 1860), 385-386.
despised almost as much as the other.”

It is clear that black Americans in the nineteenth century recognized Jews as the only comparable group in American society that had suffered similarly to them. However, this sentiment began to change as America entered the twentieth century. There was not a great deal of widely publicized Jewish press concerning the black community because at this time in America, the Jewish immigrant population was more conservative and did not want to stir up anti-Semitic responses.

The new century displayed even greater violence and persecution towards blacks than in the previous decades, and it appeared that the Jewish people they had praised as a minority model seemed indifferent to the black American plight with the lack of press response. This became clearer as lynch law increased to a common and brutal practice by the 1890s, as silence seemed to fall on the Jewish press. It seemed in 1899 that the alliance had brighter days ahead when a Rabbi Abram L. Isaacs published an article in the *Jewish Messenger* thanking blacks for their outspoken support during the Dreyfus Affair, while also publicly condemning disenfranchisement of the black community and the extralegal atrocity of lynching. “The best of our people, the most idealistic and humanity-loving were to be found in the anti-slavery ranks.” The Rabbi wrote his article to represent the larger Jewish American community in voicing public support of the black population. Gratitude for the Rabbi’s article was expressed in

14 The Dreyfus Affair has become an infamous anti-Semitic case in France in the late 1890s. It came about when charges were made against a Jewish captain, Alfred Dreyfus for allegedly sharing secret documents with the German government. During the Dreyfus Affair, black newspapers such as the *Washington Bee* and *Christian Recorder* published articles that expressed disgust over the prejudicial case and drew comparisons to the current terrorizing of black Americans through lynch law.
15 *Washington Bee*, August 18, 1899; *Christian Recorder*, September 8, 1899.
the black press, such as *The Colored American*.\(^\text{17}\) No action or further attention was given to lynching cases in the *Jewish Messenger*, and black Americans, again, felt abandoned by their minority counterpart. However, the *American Hebrew* and *American Israelite* regularly published lynching statistics accompanied by social commentary that described it as an embarrassment for America as the rest of the world looked on.\(^\text{18}\) Also, an American Yiddish magazine, *Tageblatt*, took the opportunity during the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the 1920s to suggest an atmosphere of comradery looking at both the Klan’s racist and anti-Semitic doctrines. “It carries on heated agitation not just against Jews, but against Catholics, Negroes, and liberals…This is a small piece of consolation that at least we are not alone in this misfortune.”\(^\text{19}\)

The black press was incensed when the American federal government spoke out against the pogroms in Russia that left hundreds of Jews dead by 1903, but ceased to even acknowledge the increasingly high lynching rate. “Surely the United States Government cannot be more sensitive over the wrongs inflicted on the Semitic people in Roumania [sic] than over the ignominious disgraces heaped upon the Afro-Americans, its citizens, by its white citizens.”\(^\text{20}\) Many black newspapers offered heated opinions of resentment towards the federal government such as this one published by a black Bishop, Henry M. Turner. The antagonism was aggravated further when Thomas Dixon, a known literary white supremacist of the period, criticized the black press for their comparison of violence against the Jewish community to that of the black community. He stated that the Jews had “achieved a noble civilization,” for which he then

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\(^\text{17}\) *The Colored American*, April 29, 1899.


\(^\text{19}\) *Tageblatt*, September 4, 1921, p. 4.

“claimed” the Jewish community as a part of the white race. After his article appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, there was no response from the Jewish press to rebut Dixon’s race opinion.

In contrast to the amount of black press that was disappointed in Jewish involvement in black affairs, there was also a great deal of black press praising Jewish philanthropic efforts. There were specific philanthropists such as Julius Rosenwald that provided social services to the black community, including education. Rosenwald was known to donate funds to both Jewish charities and black institutions. In 1910, the *Baltimore Afro-American* predicted that if the Jewish population were to gain control of the nation through economic and political means, then they would surely provide aid to the black cause. The article proposed this as a possibility because of evidenced Jewish assistance for the black community even when they themselves held a low societal status.

Jewish press response to the black community’s plight shifted in the first decades of the Progressive Era. The liberalized and secularized Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were arriving in the first decades of the twentieth century and offered sympathy in their press regarding the black American community. The American Yiddish press published articles recognizing the common singularities of the black and Jewish American experience. Jewish magazines, such as the *Yiddishe Tageblatt, Jewish Daily Forward*, and the *Jewish Messenger*, wrote on racial violence towards blacks in both statistical and emotional terms, offering data and social commentary on lynching incidents. A *Tageblatt* article attempted to appeal to the Jewish community with comparing the East St. Louis Race Riot: “Jews who have lived through all of

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21 *Saturday Evening Post*, August 19, 1903.  
these things in the Old World can well empathize with those who walked in the procession, can feel the oppression which the march protested.”25 A few years later the Forward took the sympathies a step further by stating that the Jewish community had an obligation to the black community because of their shared history of oppression: “That which the Negroes suffer in America, the Jews in many parts of Europe are now suffering in a more massive degree…We can understand them better and therefore we sound their appeal wide and quickly.”26

Despite their similar goals and limited public interactions, tension lay in place of a cohesive relationship between the black and Jewish American communities. The Jewish immigrants of the nineteenth century were more conservative, and it can be suggested that this conservatism led to more covert actions and statements to support the black American community because they did not want to create problems for themselves in gaining mainstream American acceptance.27 There was, however, a shift after 1915 that caused a more positive relationship to form between the two groups. Minority persecution in America hit a peak for both groups in 1915 with the lynching of the Jewish merchant, Leo M. Frank, and the premiere of D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, which glorified the lynching of black people in order to rectify southern pride.28 Seeing a mutual benefit in aiding black Americans, Jews became more outspoken about civil rights surrounding these troubling events. In condemning the maltreatment of black people, the Jewish elite that funded the campaign were simultaneously condemning persecution in general, including American anti-Semitism.

25 Yiddishe Tageblatt, July 30, 1917, p. 3. The East St. Louis Race Riot was sparked by both labor and racial tensions in May and July of 1917. By the end of the riots, a silent march was held in New York City with over 1,000 participants to protest the riots.
26 Jewish Daily Forward, January 5, 1920, p. 3.
27 Adams and Bracey, Strangers & Neighbors, 334-335.
It is evident that black and Jewish relations were complicated at best, and the press was ambivalent on both sides. However, it is also clear that Jewish and black mindsets were focused on advancing their own communities, and at times they attempted to rely on the other group for public support in this time period. The views of each other held by black and Jewish communities entered a transitory state as America did with the emergence of great societal change that came in the modernizing time period of the Progressive Era. A new wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in America in the new century, and this group was more liberal-minded than previous Jewish immigrants because of the rise of Russian socialism. As the Jewish American community was changing during this time period, the black American community was experiencing its greatest shift with recent emancipation and their emboldened fight to break into the equal opportunity market in America. Each of these communities was transforming with America, and in turn they were shifting their community’s ideas of each other. The American Progressive Era represented an intellectualized modernization and saw marginalized communities beginning to relate to each other differently and hold progressive ideas in asserting human dignity of themselves, as well as other minorities.

In order to rectify the injustices of the Progressive Era, reform-minded people were seeking social justice through different movements; yet cultural and biological racism ran rampant, especially through the new South. As southerners attempted to cure themselves of Reconstruction in the late 1880s, they sought desperately to retain social control and preserve the oppressive position over the black American citizen. Arguments made by pseudo-scientists of the age, such as eugenicists, used their “findings” to justify racial restrictions and discrimination, stating that it was for the safety and well-being of all races. A leading eugenicist in his time, Lothrop Stoddard, encouraged this racial barrier in *The Rising Tide of Color against White*.

29 Ibid, 177-178.
Worse than the general discrimination, outright violence was a terrorizing element of social control that was inflicted on black communities across the country by the turn of the century. By the 1870s, radical white groups utilized the established extralegal practice of lynching to instill fear and establish a state of subservient caution in the black community. Through violence and fear mongering, groups such as the KKK and Knights of the White Camelia (KWC) were effective for a time in maintaining black compliance. This violent affront to the black American community represented a larger affront to black identity. Black Americans seemed trapped in a never-ending state of pariah as they sought to end their longstanding exile.

At this same time, America was also facing another major transitory event: immigration. As the large wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe began to pour into American neighborhoods, the character of American society began to shift. According to Wilson, the figure of immigrants arriving in America during the second half of the nineteenth century numbered in the millions. The attitude towards immigrants was little better than the attitude towards blacks, who were considered foreigners simply because of their overt ethnic differences, even if they were born in America. There were also eugenicists that focused on immigrants in their racial sciences. Madison Grant wrote *The Passing of the Great Race* in 1916, which argued Nordic superiority and the dangers of immigration because of potential breeding with these “inferior” races. In his book, he specifically warns against the dangers of Jews entering the population as their “dwarf stature, peculiar mentality, and ruthless concentration on self-interest [were] being engrafted upon the stock of the nation.” This book captured the general American attitude of the

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32 Ibid, 288-289.
time, as many American citizens put pressure on the federal government to pass restrictive immigration laws. Set up as a barrier to legal citizenship, intelligence tests were administered under extreme bias considering most immigrants did not understand English, nor knew detailed American cultural trivia.  

For thousands of years, Jews faced persecution wherever they sought to call home, but by the late nineteenth century, Jews of Eastern Europe were facing daily violence during the Russian pogrom campaigns. This ongoing attempt of annihilation prompted the Jews to seek a new home that beamed with promises of freedom and opportunity. However, upon arriving in America, these promises started to resemble fictionalized idealism. Though their new home lacked the violence of the Russian pogroms, Jews still were not warmly welcomed into the country and constant prejudice separated them as “other” and barred them from general American consumerist opportunities. They did not suffer outright violence and legal prejudice equal to the Jim Crow laws, but Jewish immigrants were subject to anti-Semitic pamphlet propaganda, housing restrictions, and job discrimination. These immigrant groups sought refuge from disturbing social positions, ranging from limited livelihood to systematic genocide.

After arriving in the United States, many Jews were thrust into the unforgiving jobs of industry where they earned little, but risked much, every day in dangerous working arenas such as factories. Stigmatized Jews had a difficult time attempting to find work that provided efficient means to support a decent life for a family, and because of this, they were crammed into
the cheap tenement housing of New York City that so many immigrants of the day were subjected to. The construction of these buildings, such as 97 Orchard Street, was not regulated, and they were characterized by cramped quarters, no heating in the winter or air conditioning for the summer, and a generally unsanitary and unsafe structure. Basic amenities were lacking at best, but Jews still pursued improvement of their situation, as well as that of the immigrants that would surely arrive after them. Many Jewish families turned to assimilation in this time period in order to improve their circumstance. Various actions of assimilation, such as name changes, made it easier for Jewish immigrants to mask their foreignness and earn greater opportunity in jobs and housing. In these actions to Americanize, the Jewish community’s circumstance was already becoming strained from that of the black community, who still struggled against overt violence and segregation.

The decades of the 1920s and 30s were in the midst of a turbulent atmosphere while simultaneously promising a brighter tomorrow in the United States. The hegemonic population was threatened by a growing group of non-traditionalists that began demanding change in the country that they helped to build. Nearing the end of the Progressive Era, America experienced growth that was unfathomable in the nineteenth century, but even the First World War was rivaled by America’s internal war. Prosperity and expansion abroad could not effectively shadow the inconsolably discontent and often terrorized minority populations at home. American arts, and especially theatre, were in a transitory state as well at this time. The popular style in American theatre at the start of the Progressive Era was stagnant and offered up offensive

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39 Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 100-101. 97 Orchard Street is one of the more well known and preserved tenement buildings from the time period of heightened immigration. It was built in 1863 and is now a museum that offers a glimpse into the slums in which impoverished immigrants were forced to live after arriving in America.

stereotypes as entertainment to the large American public. Revolution of the marginalized and persecuted seemed fast-approaching and the theatre served its utilitarian purpose to prepare both the oppressed and their oppressors for the inevitability of equality both on the theatrical and social stages of America.
CHAPTER 3

A THEATRICAL INTRODUCTION: THEATRE FROM TRADITIONALISM TO PROTEST
BEFORE AND DURING THE AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE ERA

Agitated propaganda theatre is a form of protest theatre based in the belief that if a group
of oppressed people is truly discontent in their circumstance, they will become inclined to speak
up and demand action by either authoritative change or by revolt of the oppressed against the
oppressive authority. At the beginning of the twentieth century, America was changing
dramatically in politics, economy, social structure, and the arts. American theatre was becoming a
more popular form of expression in this time period and it often displayed the outright racism of
American traditionalists towards minority groups as tensions peaked. Resentful of their current
treatment and representation, black and Jewish American communities asserted their agency in
using agitated propaganda theatre in order to attain respect and dignity while also readying its
audiences for what they regarded as inevitable revolution of the oppressed. These two groups
chose to express themselves using theatre based on their historical and current circumstances, the
nature of their cultures and communities, and in rejection of the past theatrical
misrepresentations. Not only did they utilize theatre to assert the humanity of their own
communities, but the complicated relationship of black and Jewish Americans became even
more entwined as each became involved in dramatizing and reviewing the other group’s theatre
in growing recognition of the fellow outsider of American society.41

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41 Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 3. Diner refers to the mutual societal status of both groups as
outsiders when discussing the growing involvement of Jewish Americans in the black American plight following the
Leo Frank case.
Prior to the twentieth century, theatre was more regulated and often concerned with upholding traditions and societal norms to maintain a like-minded society to deter revolt. However, when, in history, minority communities are faced with prejudice and sometimes possible annihilation, a backlash is imminent. It is the characteristic of the black and Jewish American communities in the first half of the twentieth century that chose the theatrical route of revolt in order to dually promote awareness of their marginalized situation and prompt an outraged response that would hopefully lead to reform. Each of these communities found a common voice through American proletariat theatre though they would eventually deviate from each other.

Robert Brustein, a theatrical producer, critic, and educator, states in *Theatre of Revolt* that “the theme of revolt is sufficiently general and inclusive to merit this unusual emphasis: it is the current which runs through the majority of modern plays.” Most theatre scholars agree upon the simple characteristic in his study that “modern” theatre refers to the style of social drama created by playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekov and elements of this style appeared in drama thereafter. Their plays in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stressed their social ideas of self-liberation and fulfillment to people around the world that hemorrhaged identity within the economic shuffle and social hardships of the day. The modern play was the foundation and inspiration for a more radicalized type of theatre that became a voice for America’s minority communities in the first half of the twentieth century as they struggled for both national solidarity and ethnic individualism. Preceding a revolutionary theatre style, America was entrenched in the romanticized style of melodrama that offered more popular propaganda than radical. It was in this same time period that American theatre propagated

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stereotypes of minority groups, especially black and Jewish Americans, in order to maintain longstanding classicism. These minority groups needed to radicalize the genre of social drama to become a major influence on American theatre and their own destiny and image in American society.

At the start of the Progressive Era there was a definitive American theatre style known as melodrama. Melodrama is characterized by sentimental themes and it is centered around a conflict with some evil force. It also encouraged innovation in stage design by asserting theatre as a spectacle.44 Daniel C. Gerould described melodrama as being “crude, violent, dynamic in action, psychologically and morally simplistic, reliant on machinery and technological know-how for its powerful effect.”45 Most theatre historians believe this genre developed in France in the eighteenth century; however some assert that it dates back to the antiquity of Greek theatre.46 Despite the dispute over its origin, the fact that melodrama reached America around the time of the Declaration of Independence is generally accepted.47 At a time when colonists were still obsessed with hyper-English culture, they took theatrical cues from England as well. Theatre historian Garff B. Wilson expressed his disappointment in American culture because in gaining their autonomy from England they refused to become autonomous in a cultural sense. He goes as far as to say that the “blight that perverted American dramaturgy was the love of melodrama” during the nineteenth century.48 Choosing to adopt English melodrama as the new all-American drama stunted its individual theatrical growth and solidified it as just another loyal appendage of its mother country.

48 Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama, 65.
The melodrama genre acted as a buffer in French society by catering to all classes, but when it reached England it became a lower class phenomenon. The French supporters of this type of theatre claimed that it imbued respect for authority by instructing the moral standard and upholding the ideals of the establishment.\textsuperscript{49} However, the lower classes in the newly industrialized England saw the idealism that melodrama presented as a tool they could utilize to embody their own agendas of social and political reform. Urbanization created greater class tensions in London, and these tensions led the disgruntled lower rung to resent their position and radicalize their dramatic agenda.\textsuperscript{50} The main reason that melodrama did not work when used in a radical fashion was the fact that it was so widely popularized that content mainstream audiences outweighed the radial few.\textsuperscript{51} This mainstream faction of melodrama was the style adopted by American colonists in the late eighteenth century, and though it radicalized the elite colonists to declare autonomy, there was still a large oppressed population left voiceless within the colonies.

Because the large numbers of immigrants arriving in America were not necessarily fluent in English, theatrical shows such as variety and minstrel shows thrived due to the minimal use of language.\textsuperscript{52} Many of the immigrant groups became patrons of melodramatic theatre as well. The theatrical style relied on spectacle which also aided in the language barrier and the melodramas sung praises of the American Dream which excited the immigrant audiences about their opportunities in their new home. However, they also were bringing in their own style of theatre,

\textsuperscript{52} Wilson, \textit{Three Hundred Years of American Drama}, 113.
and both social and worker’s drama had by this time become a prominent fixture in European theatre.\textsuperscript{53}

Before the movement began for an established black theatre in the early twentieth century, white people performed in blackface and portrayed blacks as negative caricatures. Even blacks would perform in these shows, and they would have to “black up” as well in order to placate white audiences.\textsuperscript{54} These minstrel shows, which portrayed blacks as comical fools starting in the 1830s, were an incredibly popular entertaining style of American theatre especially during the 1880s and 1890s, though it remained on a smaller scale into the 1950s.\textsuperscript{55} White audiences only approved of the exposure of black characters onstage that they were prepared to believe, which were only in the realm of stereotypes. In Leslie Sanders’ \textit{The Development of Black Theater in America}, she explains that white audiences were dramatically attracted to the “Negro” character-type because in their primitiveness they were seen as either innocents in need of paternalism or exotics that needed to be tamed and broken. She also states that the problem of the “white cultural ground” and the need for “Black stage reality” in the period of early Black theatre.\textsuperscript{56} One of the most notable blackface characters is Jim Crow, who started as a variety show act before becoming the title of the infamous code of legalized racism in the South. Thomas Dartmouth Rice was the white actor to premiere this character in the 1830s, first as a one-man act, and then as commercially successful one-act plays. The character of Jim Crow lived gluttonously, perpetuating black stereotypes of being constantly in pursuit of excess amounts of sex, lying, drinking, and fighting.\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] McConachie, \textit{Theatre Histories}, 319.
\item[55] Ibid, 320.
\item[56] Leslie Catherine Sanders. \textit{The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) 2.
\item[57] McConachie, \textit{Theatre Histories}, 320.
\end{footnotes}
One early archetype created to misrepresent the black population was the white-generated myth of the “superstitious black witch.” In both the postbellum and antebellum South, many whites misconstrued the meaning of the slave folktales as they also did not understand the slave culture. It was sometimes described as a “horrible debasement of some of the highest and noblest doctrines of Christianity,” because many whites believed that the slave religion was based in witchcraft and Satanism. This was still a very popular ideal in the late nineteenth century. These publications created an image of the “voodoo” superstitious blacks in order to further antagonize the general population toward the black community. From the racist comedic stylings of the minstrel shows to the portrayal of blacks on the stage as criminals that must be lynched for the good of the nation, it was clear that blacks needed to undo almost a century’s worth of misrepresentation on the American stage and in society.

The long struggle for identity and freedom left black slaves desiring autonomy in any aspect of their lives. For this reason, they clung to their culture as a small form of resistance and a large measure of unapologetic racial pride. One surviving cultural aspect that has warranted immense scholarship is that of slave folklore and oration. Section 31 of the Alabama 1833 Slave Codes dictates that “Any person…who shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall, upon conviction…be fined.” Sections 32 and 33 offer harsher punishments for free black people or slaves teaching other slaves how to read or write. The imposed law discouraged educating enslaved black people, and therefore orating of folklore was a more common practice of resistance in expressing the community’s stories, culture, and belief.

systems. Lawrence W. Levine described the folktales as being centered on human and social morality and human relationships.\textsuperscript{61} I.E. Edwards recalls this emphasis in describing her grandmother’s stories that were developed in her time of slavery and she states that, “From that she would tell us, regardless of what you might have, don’t ever forget to be kind, because we all have to live on the same level.”\textsuperscript{62} The essential characteristics of this presentational narrative is inherently similar to the theatre art form both in creating stories out of cultural beliefs and upholding the value of performance.

Especially in the years following the Post-Reconstruction Era of the 1890s, newly liberated African Americans experienced extreme prejudice, social and political injustices, and violence on a daily basis. Despite their constant struggle in this perilous society, black Americans were not without agency. Missionary schools established in the South intended to educate the Freedmen and a major point of study in these schools was classic literature, oration and theatre. They extensively studied the Bible, ancient Greek and Roman literature, and Shakespeare. William Easton, in his preface to his play \textit{Dessalines}, refers to these classically educated black intellectuals as a “new emancipation literati.”\textsuperscript{63} He saw a powerful medium in theatre, and saw it as a viable tool for the black community because the new literati were being taught and trained in classical theatre. Easton also states in his preface that until this time in the

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\item William Edgar Easton, “Preface,” in \textit{Dessalines, A Dramatic Tale: A Single Chapter from Haiti’s History} (J.W. Burson Publishers, 1893), vi. This play includes an oration from Frederick Douglass delivered on the occasion of the dedication of the Haitian pavilion at the World's Fair in 1893. This four-act play was performed at the Freiberg’s Opera House in Chicago instead of the fairgrounds of the exposition. It is of a romantic melodrama style and was written about the first emperor of Haiti, Jean Jacques Dessalines, who helped to overthrow slavery and declare Haiti a free republic.
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late nineteenth century, “the art of drama writing has been neglected” in the black community.  

He saw theatre for the reforming propaganda that it could be:

> We pause to consider the potent influence the drama wields in the reformation or vitiation of public opinion. In ancient Rome, the drama was made the reformer of private vices and public morals. On the mimic stage were portrayed the direful results of the abuse of power…the stage in those days, as it is today, was a mirror for despots to view their own iniquity.  

Easton stresses in his preface that it is the obligation of black people to keep the posterity of their “distinguished dead” so that it is not left to other races to bastardize black history. This was tied to their “double consciousness” and amongst black intellectuals, such as Du Bois, that this unfortunate black self-perception could be eradicated by black artists putting their own story and real characters onstage.

Similar to the black community, the Jewish population also endured false and criminalizing dramatizations in popular theatre, such as passion plays, which were as anti-Semitic as minstrel shows were racist and often incited mob violence against the Jews. Before having a hand in actively creating their own theatrical genre, Jewish people were depicted in the theatre as unsavory caricatures onstage. It was an especially popular dramatic tool to include Jewish people in mystery and morality plays in medieval Europe. Both morality and mystery plays were very straightforward in determining right from wrong and righteous from wicked. There was no room for moral interpretation. Therefore, by having the Jew as a ubiquitous

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64 Ibid, vi-vii.
65 Ibid, v.
66 Edna Nahshon, Ed., *Jewish people and Theater in an Intercultural Context*, vol. 46 in Brill’s Series in Jewish Studies (BRILL, 2012), 62. Passion plays are the more modern version of mystery plays. Their origins lie in Medieval Europe, and they are now known to have been highly sensationalized reenactments of the crucifixion of Christ. The modern revivals of these plays inspired blood libels against Jewish communities in the late nineteenth century. Jewish people are depicted in these plays as materialists and unmerciful murderers of the Son of God.
character in Christian plays, the “otherness” and evilness of the Jew, the saintly aura of the pious Christian characters shown evermore brightly.

Plays such as Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* illustrated Jewish people as characters of degradation and buffoonery. As in the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jewish character, Shylock, was made to wear a red fright wig to display his clownish and unsympathetic behavior. It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that an actor refused to wear the wig because he saw the humanity and tragic nature of his character, and he also believed this was Shakespeare’s original intent and it had been bastardized. Elizabethan audiences continued to overlook Shylock’s attempt at discrediting his otherness with his “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech because they could not see his unsavory actions as natural human blunders of retaliation and greed, but rather as the “typical” Jew who only craves a life of malevolence and vagrancy that will surely degrade and undermine the gentile world in his path.

One myth regarding Jews that led to a character archetype was that of greed. Since the Middle Ages, Jewish people were seen as “obsessed with acquisition” and enacting unscrupulous money lending practices. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is one of the more infamous texts that fictionalized Jewish greed and usury. This forged text was made public in 1905, following the jarring Russian Revolution and it offered up the Jews as the sacrificial scapegoat to be blamed and punished for the Revolution. “Surely there is no need to seek further proof that our...
rule is predestined by God? Surely we shall not fail with such wealth to prove that all that evil which for so many centuries we have had to commit has served at the end of ends the cause of true well-being - the bringing of everything into order? Though it be even by the exercise of some violence, yet all the same it will be established."  

Another archetype referred to as the Wandering Jew stems from legends dating back to the crucifixion of Christ. Because of the unsubstantiated legends adopted by Christianity stating that the Jewish people were responsible for condemning Christ, the Jews themselves are condemned to wander the earth without purpose or home. Hermann Sinsheimer, a Jewish theatre critic, describes this phenomenon as the “transformation of the Jewish conception of the holy wanderer with Messianic features into a Jewish figure burdened with the curse of the Christian Messiah” and says it is a “characteristic fact of medieval mythology.” Each of these sordid archetypes was used to further polarize Jewish people by publicly invalidating Jewish religion, moral character, culture, and general right to live among the general population. The living restrictions were especially hard on Jews because of their traditional emphasis on community.

Their sense of community was based in the Hassidic text. Hasidism for Jews dictates that the individual and the community are interconnected and that saving one’s neighbor is redeeming the world on a broader scale. In his doctoral dissertation on Hasidism and Jewish folktales, Alan Pearlmutter states that this belief is based on the fact that “Differences between men are removed yet each individual is unique in God’s eyes and has a special importance in the world.”

*Znamya* newspaper which was edited by P. A. Krushevan who was a well known leader of Russian pogroms that left many Russian Jewish communities obliterated.

72 “Protocol XXII,” *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1905). At least five of the protocols (2, 4, 20, 21, and 22) are specifically dedicated to discussing materialism as being a driving force behind the religion, even replacing God.


74 Alan Pearlmutter, “Leonard Bernstein's Dybbuk: An Analysis Including Historical, Religious
because this could potentially relax immigration policy for the next generation of both Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants trying to improve their circumstance.\textsuperscript{75} The especially poor labor conditions they found themselves in were the catalysts to unionizing and revolt that persisted in the 1920s and 30s. The hatred of the current system and the political philosophy of socialism that immigrated with the Jews caused the emergence of socialist groups such as the Workmen’s Circle intent on improving the position of the worker and spreading a new economic ideology for complete redistribution of wealth.\textsuperscript{76} This ideology also sprang out of the secularization that came from the Jewish Enlightenment.

Partly intended to rectify the damage inflicted on the Jewish community by the anti-Semitic propaganda, the age of Jewish Enlightenment was at its peak by the turn of the twentieth century and it stressed cultural and artistic expression. This was another encouraging factor of using theatre to propagandize humanizing the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{77} The Jewish poet, Judah Leib Gordon wrote of the Enlightenment: “Awake my people! How long will you sleep? Night has taken flight, the sun shines bright. Awake, lift up your eyes and look about. Become aware of time and place.”\textsuperscript{78} Though a movement had begun in the Jewish Enlightenment, the struggle to end the persecuting treatment by the alienating majority would persist for various Jewish communities especially around Eastern Europe. After being characterized as fools and criminals for centuries all over the world, Jews felt anxious as America entered the twentieth

\textsuperscript{75} MacDonald, “Jewish Involvement,” 297-298.
\textsuperscript{76} Burt, \textit{The Progressive Era}, 189-191. Socialism developed as an ideology in Europe out of the works of Karl Marx that stressed violent revolution to end capitalism and private profit. The socialist factions in the United States accepted the ideals but took a more lax approach stressing evolutionary rather than revolutionary means of reform. The first major socialist party in the United States was the Socialist Labor Party, founded in 1877, and it later joined with the smaller Social Democratic Party in 1901 to become the combined Socialist Party of America (SPA). Despite their efforts, no socialist party would hold a strong grip on United States politics.
century to re-dignify their people and garner respect in their new American community in order to finally receive the equal treatment and opportunity they had been promised.

As America continued to propagandize negative public images that kept minorities more alienated, a new genre of theatre was developing at the end of the nineteenth century, and it fostered an arena for a stronger proletariat voice and an overtly propagandist message that challenged the old order. Theatre and philosophy scholar, George H. Szanto asserts that there are two different types of propaganda within western drama. The first style is what he refers to as integration propagandist theatre which characterized early theatrical form. It establishes a relationship between the theatrical presentation and the audience that is intended to uphold institutionalized ideology of societal norms and to create the “comforting” feeling that the current societal norms are the correct way to live.79 Ancient Greek drama was produced in this style of propaganda by civic leaders in order to maintain religious hegemony. The integration propaganda thrived most exponentially in Medieval Europe when pro-Christian propaganda was at its peak. The propaganda took the form of mystery and morality plays which enforce a message of rigidity in moral decorum.80

The second style of agitation propaganda (agit-prop) also includes elements of the morality plays, but the moral ideals are revolutionary and meant to unnerve its contemporary audiences. This style of propaganda also derives from what Brustein termed “theatre of revolt,” created by modern dramatists of the late nineteenth century. He argues that the theatre of revolt was created in the style of the day, Romanticism, but he clarifies that it is radical Romanticism as

80 McConachie, Theatre Histories, 77-78. Also referred to saint’s plays, morality plays were developing around the fourteenth century. The plays were performed publicly and were based in allegory dramatizing an “everyman” with his choice between ultimate good or ultimate evil. This everyman that appears in each morality play is meant to represent mankind as a whole and his one choice represents the belief that God gave man free will to choose between good and evil, and that these are mutually exclusive events. If the everyman chooses evil in one of these plays he is dramatized as being eternally punished through damnation and Hell fire. This rigid message was meant to maintain social order through religious pressure and promises of unthinkable punishment.
opposed to the passive idealism of the earlier style. He states that before the emergence of the modern social dramatist, theatre was in “communion” style which meant upholding traditional values and presenting them onstage to a large hegemonic and accepting audience. The more modern theatre of the revolt projected new and progressive ideals to a smaller and sometimes involuntary audience.

Because these dramas are not based solely in realism, but rather in idealistic rebellion, they are usually more abstract in content. Their practical utility is limited because the artists are not necessarily politically driven, but rather they are driven by idealistic individualism. Agitation propaganda is based both in morality plays and German Expressionism because these two styles effectively facilitate a strong message of the discontent in the search for morality and the abstract, allegorical style needed for staging this style of theatre.

German Expressionist theatre was developed by middle-class Germans at the turn of the twentieth century as Germany was entering its own transitory state of revolution. David Kuhns, a prolific historian of German Expressionistic theatre, asserts that in the midst of a coming revolution, Germany experienced an extremely heightened artistic atmosphere, especially in theatre. The corresponding atmosphere of revolution and the arts was undeniable. The expressionistic elements cause agitation propaganda to diverge from the theatre of revolt created by Brustein’s selected modern dramatists. These social dramatists, such as Ibsen and Chekov, based their plays mainly in realism despite containing more abstract content than straight traditional theatre. Expressionism took the abstract element a step further by shifting the style of western theatre towards the avant-garde. Kuhns poses the question of why anti-realist artists of

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81 Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, 8
82 Ibid, 4.
84 Ibid, 21.
Europe, especially Germany, chose expressionism for the desired “social regeneration.” His answer lies in the ideology of these artists because they “assumed that a revolution in aesthetic form amounted to a full-scale cultural revolution.”

Szanto supports Brustein’s assertion that though agitated propaganda is meant to stir a fervent revolutionary ideal in the minds of a dominating society, the true propagandist does not expect direct action. Its metaphysical purpose lies more in creating awareness and a passion for action within a generally passive society. In describing the timelines of the different eras of agitated propagandist theatre, Szanto assesses that it is dramatized in either prerevolutionary or revolutionary timeframes. This is a tactical move constructed by the propagandist. Considering that integration propaganda is intended as a preventative measure to keep change from occurring, agitation propaganda can be seen as a mode of preparation in readying its audiences’ minds so that they are made aware of present circumstance and are encouraged to voluntarily act as the inevitable revolution draws near.

Though popular melodrama shone the brightest in American theatrical culture, large groups of immigrants brought with them their native culture, ideology and theatre. This included the new and developing genre of agitation theatre that was sparked by the social unrest and the static cultural condition of Eastern Europe, and it became an influence on the modernizing American stage. Utilizing this style of drama combined with the already developing resistance drama in America, persecuted minority communities sought a voice that would accurately represent them while simultaneously protesting the unjust treatment of their community by the majority population. Drama was becoming an increasingly relevant American cultural institution.

86 Szanto, Theater and Propaganda, 9.
87 Ibid, 23.
towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the minority groups of the country recognized this popular medium for expression. Two American communities in particular turned to protest drama as their medium for this duel purpose, and this actively reflected their idiosyncratic identities. In examining Black and Jewish Americans, each community’s culture, traditions, history and societal status determined their decision to create their form of agitation propaganda with the intention of positively impacting their circumstance. Each group had their particular xenophobic plays to respond to, and there were key artists and intellectuals within each of these communities that both encouraged and regulated the artistic responses and acted as the emboldened crafters of resistance and cultural freedom.

CHAPTER 4

THE DEMAGOGUE AND THE BIRTH OF A DRAMATIC RESISTANCE:
ANTI-LYNCHING DRAMA AS A REACTION TO

THOMAS DIXON’S THE CLANSMAN

To Broadway, the Negro is still not an actor, he is a vaudeville turn...Broadway endured patronizingly...for limited periods and with the clearly expressed proviso, that the author engage in the climax to kill the black hero, or destroy him or rend his soul from his body. Then the white audience could depart secure in the knowledge that all Negro aspiration and effort, by the very constitution of the universe, must ever end in annihilation and defeat, frustration and death.90

W. E. B. Du Bois, 1931

As lynchings became a more brutal and pervasive spectacle by the twentieth century, the black American community was not without agency or expression of discontent in the current order. Due to the increasingly grotesque character of lynchings, the continuous denial of equal and respectful treatment, and the propagating of degrading misrepresentation by theatrical white supremacists, sects of the black arts community in America decided to turn to a radicalized form of performance protest. Their inclination towards agitated propagandist theatre stemmed from their history of oppression, their tradition of folklore and oral story telling, and the structure of their community built around a religion that valued spiritual performance. Thomas Dixon wrote his rebel-rousing play The Clansman at the turn of the twentieth century, and this spurred the black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois to create an intellectual model for the agitated propagandist theatre he wanted black artists to create denouncing both the glorifying dramatization and general practice of lynching. Angelina Weld-Grimké was the first dramatic model for this anti-lynching drama, and Georgia Douglas Johnson was instrumental in radicalizing and bringing...

more awareness to the genre. Their theatre protest movement, just as their social protest movement, was characteristically grass-roots because it was not produced in public venues and did not garner public funding or support in this time period. Through these plays the dramatists implored the government for necessary change, but also prepared the black community for the probability of needing to create a grass-roots revolution.

The longstanding tradition of lowbrow portrayal of blacks in white art created a backlash from black scholars and artists looking towards art for the benefit of their own racial advancement. The reality of the terror and violence inflicted on the black community was even more sinister and dire. Between 1890 and 1940, lynching was used as a form of race control, especially in the South. It was fueled by the threat that white supremacists perceived from a growing black middle class, the changing character of race relations due to urbanization, and the warped myths of gender politics. These tensions were presented as popular, or integration, propaganda to mass audiences that were already indoctrinated to uphold the racist ideals of the nineteenth century. The Civil Rights Movement was still decades away, but the black community refused to remain marginalized for much longer.

In his article, “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice,” historian Donald Mathews compares the rituals of lynching in the American South to that of religious ceremonies and human sacrifice. He details the psychology behind white society’s myth of the “black beast rapist.” This mythology solidified white justification in the sacrificing of black men to protect the purity of white women. The reality showed that the violence came from the white

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supremacists, who were left bitter over their Lost Cause.93 By contrast, during this turbulent time, new art forms sprang up, and American theatre was on the rise. White supremacists, such as the playwright Thomas Dixon, used the medium of art to further their racial propaganda of caricatures and stereotypes through integration propaganda, as the presented ideals were popular at this time. Their “artistic” efforts depicted not only an inferior race but also a dangerous one that needed to be controlled through any means necessary.

The scholars and artists of the black communities that were concentrated in the Northeast and Washington D.C responded in an overtly theatrical manner.94 There was an obvious need for some form of social protest, but it had to be chosen carefully so as to be effective and lasting. Demonized by integrationist drama, blacks mobilized to dramatically agitate. Exhausted from the intolerance of American society, the black artist community was ready to have more control over popular American culture that held no respect for their place in society.95 Black art, and specifically theatre, quickly became the answer for black scholars concerned over how they would protest Dixon’s *The Clansman*. This play not only sparked a significant debate about how blacks should be portrayed in art, but it also pushed W. E. B. Du Bois to call for the creation of a black theatre in the name of resistance and autonomy.96 Aside from being a sociologist and historian, Du Bois was a bold African American activist for civil rights who constantly

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93 Wesley Moody, *Demon of the Lost Cause: Sherman and Civil War History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 108-109. The Lost Cause is the post-Civil War intellectual and literary mythology that asserts the South as victorious over North, despite its loss in the physical battles. The Lost Causers believed the North won the war because of circumstance with their larger population and advanced industrialization. They argued that Confederate soldiers were superior fighters, their wives strong and pure, and their slaves better treated than northern factory workers.
95 Ibid, 10.
96 Kerry W. Buckley, “Du Bois: A Concise History,” In *Special Collections and University Archives*, (Amherst, MA: University of Amherst, 2013) [http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/dubois/?page_id=861] (Accessed March 28, 2013). William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was a prominent black activist, scholar, sociologist, and artist in the first half of the twentieth century. His mission was to secure an equal position for blacks in American minds and society, and his efforts were presented in his teaching, magazines, articles, plays, and in co-founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
demanded that his fellow African Americans loosen white grip on America and find their place in society.

With a framework and incentives set up by Du Bois through the NAACP Drama Committee, which Du Bois created in Washington D.C. in 1915 in order to support black theatre, prolific black playwrights emerged from this era (though under-appreciated in their time), such as Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld-Grimké. Du Bois advertised writing contests in *Opportunity* Magazine, edited by Charles S. Johnson, and these contests offered to publish plays of artistic merit as well as production opportunities through the Drama Committee that would also present a positive image of the black community. These women in particular wrote anti-lynching plays that were significant to the search for a fully autonomous black American theatre and a new genre in an almost non-existent uniquely American theatre in the early twentieth century. These plays represented Johnson and Grimké’s respective opinions on the art question as they went into battle to solidify their right to expression, culture, and safety with the stage as their battleground. Though their art can be viewed as political protest, the true meaning goes beyond that simplistic form. This early black arts movement would birth not only resistance to white supremacist art but also racial pride and awareness that were intrinsically significant to the black art community’s expression of agency and humanity.

Though the 1880s saw a flourishing style of romanticism and exploration in white southern literature, it would take a turn towards extremism and find a hate-filled voice while spreading white supremacist propaganda. The leading author in this new reactive genre was Thomas Dixon, Jr. He embodied southern redemption and its justification for violent racial

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control through his writings. In 1901, Dixon witnessed a stage production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the popular play derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel. An early black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, praised Stowe’s novel for attempting to publicize the plight of the black community with his sonnet that read,

She told the story and the whole world wept,
At wrongs and cruelties it had not known
But for this fearless woman’s voice alone,
She spoke to consciences that had long slept…\(^99\)

The novel was adapted for the stage by George Aiken and produced by George C. Howard, and it first premiered only a few years after the novel was published.\(^100\) Early reviews of the play, premiering in 1852, varied dramatically. The editor of the *New York Atlas* wrote a lengthy review denoting surprise after witnessing the audience reaction to the production. “We were astonished that a part so cleverly conceived and executed should not obtain some testimonial of approbation, when, on looking around, we discovered that the whole audience was in tears! It was composed of those, who if they ‘came to laugh, remained to pray.’”\(^101\) While other reviews denounced the play as abolitionist propaganda intending to throw the union into a chasm, this reviewer praised its portrayal of a sympathetic black character. However, enraged by its interpretation of the South and race relations, Dixon wept at its misrepresentation.\(^102\) He had a mission to “correct” this perception through his own story of the South, and to tell the world what it meant to be a white man in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century. He claimed that he never had a goal of creating well-conceived literature, a claim that no critic argued against. Dixon stated, “My sole purpose in writing was to reach and influence with my

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\(^100\) McConachie, *Theatre Histories*, 321.
\(^101\) Unsigned Editor, “A Visit to the National Theatre,” *New York Atlas* (October 1953).
argument the minds of millions. I had a message and wrote it as vividly and simply as I knew how.\textsuperscript{103}

After seeing the 1901 production \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, Dixon started work on the novel entitled \textit{The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden - 1865-1900}, and wrote the \textit{Reconstruction Trilogy} published in 1902. Dixon used his book to justify the establishment of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which he believed instituted white southern law through lynching. He claimed the “invisible Empire of White Robed Anglo-Saxon Knights was simply the old answer of organized manhood to organized crime. Its purpose was to bring order out of chaos, protect the weak and defenseless…and re-establish the civilization.”\textsuperscript{104} Dixon’s novel also received scathing reviews from critics like Sutton E. Griggs and Du Bois.\textsuperscript{105} Du Bois claimed Dixon’s audience was made up of desperate southerners that feared the “uppity Negro” and those who sought out any piece of fiction that would validate them in their fear and violent cause.\textsuperscript{106} He perceived Dixon as stoking the flame that was already growing in the hearts of white southerners, gaining more intensity each year since the fall of the Confederacy. In turn, Dixon always regarded Du Bois as an agitator in the black community and a “Race imbecile!”\textsuperscript{107} His second novel in the \textit{Trilogy} was not a sequel but a reworking of the first novel as he attempted to improve on his art form.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{103} Anthony Slide, \textit{American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 27.
\textsuperscript{108} Slide, \textit{American Racist}, 37.
Dixon’s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, the rewrite of *The Leopard’s Spots*, was published in 1905. It became Dixon’s vehicle to true notoriety as the hero and new voice of the South. At the turn of the century, there was a stasis of literature in the South, and no southern voice sprung forth that would truly capture southern life and circumstance.109 Dixon quickly became the spokesman to embody the Lost Cause and make it his own. In each of his books, black criminals and rapists were not the only villains. He wrote his disdain for white villains in the form of northern carpetbaggers and southerners that he viewed as traitors to their own homeland. The climax is reached in all of his works with the pivotal scene of a black man raping or attempting to rape a white woman, and the Klan is called to defend the violated woman’s honor and restore racial balance by lynching the black perpetrator. Dixon used the same basic themes, plot structure, and even similar stock characters with different names in this second novel, which led many critics to label him as a self-plagiarizing novelist who continually wrote the same story throughout his career.

Dixon wrote on this subject not just to legitimize the KKK, but to answer what he called the “Negro question.” He believed Booker T. Washington was a more adequate leader for the black community in America than Du Bois because he saw Washington’s attitude as less hostile.110 Dixon believed that African Americans could not coexist with white society, and therefore they must be excommunicated either by lynching or sending them to Africa. Dixon thought that it was out of a paternalistic concern for blacks and not a racial hatred that made him call for their full return to Africa.111 As Dixon tried to solve the problem of racial destiny, he

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111 Ibid, 2.
turned to an art medium other than books to expound his ideology and own opinions concerning African American destiny.112

Enthralled by the power of the theatrical stage, Dixon studied drama at Johns Hopkins University at the turn of the century.113 He saw the potential impact his novels could have if they were able to reach mass audiences through live performances that could tour the South. Before Dixon’s first play adaptation, the first and only truly American play to be produced in the South aside from vaudeville shows, was the stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that marked a shift in American melodrama.114 This was Dixon’s chance to react through the stage as well with a southern stage script to counter *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that was written and produced by northerners. To adapt *The Clansman* for the stage, Dixon submitted his script to a theatrical agent, Crosby Gaige, and the play was produced by George H. Brennan who established the Southern Amusement Company for this specific production. Dixon wrote a four-act play in three months, and he selected only whites for the cast of almost thirty, with black characters portrayed onstage in blackface.115

The play’s fundamental difference from the book was that it contained no actual rape scene. In the book, the character of Gus, the former black Union soldier, raped Marion, a young white girl who was the childhood love of Ben Cameron, the hero of the novel. In the play adaptation the female ingénue character of Flora assumed the role of victim and hurled herself off the cliff to avoid Gus’s advances. This was seen as a more desirable outcome than being raped by a black man, which resonated with the racist readers of the book. They believed it was

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113 Ayers, *Southern Crossing*, 224.
115 Slide, *American Racist*, 53. Blackface is a theatrical term referring to white actors wearing burnt cork on their faces with the racist intent to play an African American onstage, and it was a popular form of theatre in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Applying the burnt cork to one’s face was termed, “blacking up.”
better for a white woman to sacrifice herself and choose death over being “violated” by a black man.\textsuperscript{116} Dixon himself stated that if women, who represent the “mother of civilization,” are degraded, then “life is degraded” on the broader scale.\textsuperscript{117} In the play, however, Gus had no dialogue to suggest that he even had the intention of raping her. Dixon’s climax remained as the Klan was called in Act III, entitled “The Hunt for the Animal.” The Klan saddled up in preparation for their moment of glory and heroism in the lynching of the innocent Gus.\textsuperscript{118}

The play premiered in Norfolk, Virginia, in September 1905 and was on a southern tour that proved profitable until it reached the tumultuous Atlanta stage.\textsuperscript{119} One review from the Chattanooga Times even cautioned that the play was “a riot breeder,” and this would prove prophetic as the South reached a pivotal racist point in September 1906. The 1905 staging of The Clansman in Atlanta served as a precursor for what was to come the following year as police had to break up a developing riot between black and white audience members. Whites cheered for the KKK and demanded the lynching of Gus upon his onstage capture while blacks threw out boos and hisses of protest.\textsuperscript{120} After the infamous Atlanta Race Riot in September 1906, officials in Atlanta canceled the scheduled restaging of The Clansman for late October to avoid inciting any further violence.\textsuperscript{121} Though it was not well written or well reviewed, Dixon’s play started a movement that not only paved the way for future white supremacist propaganda but also began a countercultural resistance from the black community.

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\item[119] Slide, American Racist, 22. The 1906 Atlanta riot led to The Clansman being barred from opening the following month because of community fear of another riot. In turn, this cancellation slowed the momentum of the play’s tour in the South.
\item[121] Ibid, 143.
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Dixon responded to the negative reviews of his play with a reaction of satisfaction. He saw in each review emphasis on the raging emotions of the audience rather than on the content of his play. To Dixon, that kind of review spoke to a truth that he always believed, which was, “drama is by far the most powerful of all forms of art.”\(^{122}\) Though Dixon’s dramatized story of race was controversial at best with the critics, southern audiences loved it, and this southern message was even able to captivate northern audiences. After the commercial success of *The Clansman*, Dixon prepared for the next step in furthering viewership of his play through the medium of film.

In film, Dixon saw a chance for expanded budgets and venues for filming that would give his story the resources he believed it deserved. Just as Dixon saw *The Clansman* as his vehicle to fame and influence, D.W. Griffith took center stage in transforming it into the film that he knew would have more far-reaching effects than the play. Before his claim to fame with the film version of *The Clansman*, Griffith had gained transitory fame through various short films he had directed between 1908 and 1914 that had little to no viewership.\(^{123}\) What he did with Dixon’s play revolutionized the American film industry with its move away from plotless films with only the purpose of entertainment. He created the modern movie narrative using *The Clansman* as his vehicle.\(^{124}\)

Anthony Slide argues that although Dixon’s play was able to rouse the South into riotous screams, the film adaptation made those screams sound like whispers. Entitled *The Birth of a Nation*, the film jolted the nation into factions passionately praising the film, while others

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\(^{123}\) Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 6-7. Before *Birth of a Nation*, Griffith directed over 450 short films that had very limited release because his production company had little money. Several movies from his portfolio include *The Heart of an Outlaw*, *The Suicide Club*, and *The Smile of a Child*.

\(^{124}\) Ibid, 8.
vehemently condemned it.\textsuperscript{125} Dixon and Griffith met censorship troubles even before the first public showing of the film. Dixon referred to this attempt to suppress his film as “sectional conspiracy,” and both he and Griffith pushed for its imminent release.\textsuperscript{126} The film was very similar to the play in its storyline and themes. It not only spawned a revival of the KKK, but it also garnered many different responses from the leading black scholars of the day as they attempted to move away from the idea of “art for art’s sake” and instead try to answer the race question through their own art for protest.\textsuperscript{127}

Neither Dixon nor Griffith predicted the assertive responses from the nation’s oppressed that was directed at racist propaganda in general in the time period. In his book \textit{Harlem Renaissance} Nathan Irvin Huggins describes the era as a “channeling of energy from political and social criticism into poetry, fiction, music, and art.”\textsuperscript{128} The Harlem Renaissance, birthed from the coalescing of the late-nineteenth-century radical feminist movement, saw the formation of racial advancement groups for blacks, such as the NAACP, and the Great Migration of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{129} The Harlem Renaissance sparked a surge of racial pride for the black community and the need to express the black experience in America, which was vastly different from that of whites at the time.\textsuperscript{130} The artistic movement ignited black female dramatists, such as Grimké and Johnson, who made great strides in creating a fully realized, and later recognized, black theatre.\textsuperscript{131}

For black artists and scholars, the Harlem Renaissance brought a flourishing of culture and art, but it also struck up intellectual discussions that lasted throughout the Renaissance and

\textsuperscript{125} Slide, \textit{American Racist}, 82.
\textsuperscript{126} Dixon, \textit{Southern Horizons}, 424.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{130} Brundage, \textit{Beyond Blackface}, 8.
\textsuperscript{131} Young, \textit{African American Women Playwrights}, 23.
caused the black community to question the relationship between art and propaganda as they hoped for progress in American society. In *When Harlem was in Vogue*, David Levering Lewis argues that the leading scholars of the black community recognized the power in utilizing art and words for their message as the white “lost causers” had done.\(^{132}\) Indeed, the driving force for blacks to begin utilizing art was to create a more accepting society with this art wherein they could coexist as equals in society and culture. Blacks hoped to gain equality through their art and writings, and it was apparent that this art must be cautiously created in order to be effective.\(^{133}\)

A far-reaching goal across the black artistic community was the desire to win respectability through a form of “high art.” If achieved, there would be a break from traditional images of blacks in low art, such as minstrelsy.\(^{134}\) One of the first official replies from an African American concerning Thomas Dixon’s work came from *As to the Leopard's Spots: an Open Letter to Thomas Dixon, Jr.*, published in 1905 with Kelly Miller’s thoughts on Dixon’s unsubstantiated race ideology. Miller berated Dixon throughout his twenty-one page letter, stating that there was no substance to any of his racial arguments, and after he refuted Dixon’s racial proposals, he attacked him for what he set loose on American audiences. He accused Dixon of “stir[ring] the slumbering fires of race wrath into an uncontrollable flame…,”\(^{135}\) and referred to him as an inciter of lawlessness. Miller asserted that by writing his hateful books and plays, Dixon should claim responsibility for the racial violence that would surely follow in the wake of his works.

\(^{133}\) Brundage, *Beyond Blackface*, 17.
\(^{134}\) Ibid, 13-14.
\(^{135}\) Kelly Miller, *As to the Leopard's Spots: An Open Letter to Thomas Dixon, Jr.* (Boston: Harvard University, September 1905), 18.
Miller insisted the burden lay with Dixon’s appeal to people’s reason and passions in an already turbulent atmosphere. Miller’s response came before much of Dixon’s commercial success in the theatre and before the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, but he represented the larger population of blacks who were outraged by the blatant stereotyping and the trivializing dramatization of the symbolic lynching of all black men in a public venue such as the theatre. There was an immediate backlash to *The Birth of a Nation* as well, and black artists who viewed the film in New York and Washington D.C. went head first into their artistic propagandist replies to the film, while other leaders of the black community pondered the question of black art and its potential impact on their longstanding societal circumstance.

In the latter group, the prominent voices leading the debate were angry and more aggressive. They spoke out of a fear for their community’s safety in the violent stir caused by Dixon and Griffith. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attempted to shut down screenings of the film, but was unsuccessful. However, once President Wilson watched the film and commended it for its authenticity, the film protesters found it hard to garner support against its showing. The concerned members of the black community also wanted to counter it with their own film propaganda, but did not have the funds for production. Booker T. Washington, a well-known educator and leader for the African American community who reached the peak of his influence around the turn of the century, was noted as a non-participant in the mass African American protest of the film. On the other end of the reactionary spectrum, Du Bois published an article in *The Crisis* in May 1915 that called for the entire second half of the movie to be removed from its screenings because of its offense.

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139 Young, *African American Women Playwrights*, 93.  
and affront to the black community. He provides a chronology from the months of February through April in 1915 of the NAACP’s battle to bring legal action against Griffith and his film, but the timeline and the battle both ended with no positive outcome, ruling in favor of Griffith.

Du Bois was characterized by Lewis as “the senior intellectual militant of his people” during the Harlem Renaissance. Du Bois led the majority of the art debates, provoking answers from other black scholars and artists of the day through speeches at NAACP conferences and articles in *The Crisis*. Lewis states that the Renaissance was located in the mind rather than just the physical city of Harlem. He listed black colleges from around the country involved in the artistic surge, and authors from the South that had as great an impact as those writers in Harlem. In the dawning of the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans finally reached a new level of emancipation through culture and individual art. But how must it be utilized?

Du Bois put forth a very important question in 1926 in an article entitled, “Criteria of Negro Art” which asked if the new generation of African Americans had a duty to respond to white supremacist propaganda with their art that resisted white racial ideals. He asserted that art was central to fighting for civil rights because it was not basic citizenship as Americans that blacks wanted. With the emphasis he put on art, Du Bois believed that it was as important to express one’s experiences and circumstances to the rest of the nation as it was to hold equal rights as a citizen under the law. “I am but a disciple of art…I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right…but here and now and in the

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142 Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 84.
143 Ibid, 58.
world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.” He did not believe, however, that all black arts should be used as a representation of the race or community. It is in this section of the article that Du Bois displays his preferences toward the more affluent classes of blacks to represent the race in propagandist art. He impressed upon particular black artists that they had an obligation to the black community as they were blessed with the “accidents of education and opportunity.”

It was also very important, Du Bois believed, to portray African Americans in an artistically favorable light, and bar the criminal archetypes of racist propaganda like *The Clansman*. That same year, Du Bois proposed the question to young black and white artists in his symposium, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” published in *The Crisis* in 1926 along with the responses from each artist. Du Bois laid out his opinion before the start of the questionnaire and it further solidified his philosophy that it was more important to show a high-class black individual in art than to have complete artistic license. Therefore black theatre practitioners had to stay within the strict bounds of Du Bois’s structure in order to receive funding from the NAACP Drama Committee.

Through this criterion, Du Bois attempted to regulate black theatre and create a social protest tool, molded by his propaganda philosophy. In 1931, black theatre had by this time gained momentum, and Du Bois felt it necessary to increase specificity in his regulatory demands of the genre. In chapter two of his *Playthings of the Night*, he itemizes “10 things that must not be said or done on the American stage when it comes to the subject of the Negro.”

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145 Ibid.
147 Ibid, 219.
Among his new rules, he condemned defeatism in the Negro character and stressed caution in subjects like interracial marriage and portraying colored women as anything but subservient mammy types. Du Bois also encouraged “positive” representations of the race as an educated bourgeoisie. Some black artists tried to fit their work under his rubric in order to incur aid from the resources of the NAACP Drama Committee, while others found it hard to change their opinions, considering that art, especially in the name of minority protest, traditionally glorifies individualism. Du Bois was confronted with dissenting artistic purists in the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Alain Locke, who believed politics took away from art for art’s sake. Locke even became one of the leaders of the folk-theatre movement that encouraged drama to emphasize folk ideals, culture, and art. For the most part, black artists asserted their power of public influence and refused to accept the injustices of American society.

The next step for African American artists in their debate over artistic propaganda was actualizing their opinions by creating work that actively expressed their views to the nation. The Harlem Renaissance, combined with a need for reaction to the disturbing nature of lynchings and the white supremacist propagandists, created an empowered platform where black playwrights readied their voices for theatrical expression. In his essay on the role of drama in political propaganda, “Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement,” Du Bois challenged the black community to determine what it wanted in terms of black theatre. He foresaw a surge of black theatre coming out of the Harlem Renaissance, and in the true style of Du Bois, required stiff criteria in creating this new nationalistic black theatre.

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149 Ibid.


movement. His four stipulations were that the new black theatre must be written “about us…by us…for us…and near us,” and this was his declaration that to have a dignified black theatre and break down the double-consciousness of blacks in theatre, it would need to have a black audience and all black participants onstage and off. In the aftermath of *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation*, a select group of black female dramatists no longer sought to appease white audiences but instead attempted to teach them with their drama. Just as white women were beginning to mobilize for women’s rights in the late nineteenth century, black women were also mobilizing, but their fight was two-fold. Not only were they fighting for the same liberties as white women activists, but they also had the challenge of the racial problem to take on. Each of the black female dramatists to emerge held their own opinions on art as propaganda, and they even answered Du Bois’s questions through either directly written replies or through their presented work.

These anti-lynching drama playwrights not only had to capture the true African American experience on the stage, but they also had the challenge of undoing all of the misrepresentation by whites of the “Negro character” from the long tradition of minstrel shows. According to Judith L. Stephens, an expert theatrical historian focused on this drama and its playwrights, there is a criterion that standardizes the style, motifs, and structure of the plays. These elements that can are present in the anti-lynching plays of this era represent the black artistic decision to

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152 Brundage, *Beyond Blackface*, 2. The idea of African Americans possessing a double-consciousness derives from Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, which he wrote in 1903. He used this term to describe the “two-ness” that African Americans feel in their struggle to reconcile their identities between an African past and an American present.


154 Angela D. Sims, *Ethical Complications of Lynching: Ida B. Wells’s Interrogation of American Terror* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 70. One of the most prominent women who individually attacked extralegal mob violence was Ida B. Wells. In 1892, Wells published her anti-lynching pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, which analyzed lynchings and exposed them for what they were: racial terrorism. Wells was also the first to interpret the significant role that white women played in inciting lynchings with a good deal of false accusations of rape allegedly perpetrated by black men.
dramatize their plight. The first of the stipulations is that the central place of action set in the black home, displaying the significance and centrality of the black family within the black community, and that the black family truly represents the black community as a whole because of their close ties.\textsuperscript{155} Dating all the way back to the slave trade, communities cultivated a semi-familial support system that encouraged black survival under the harsh institution of slavery.\textsuperscript{156} In order to create an atmosphere that fostered dignity, support, and race optimism, community was a lasting epicenter for blacks to hold onto their own identities while also encouraging their black neighbors to keep focus on working towards an improved future for blacks in the overall American community.

Koritha Mitchell, author of \textit{Living with Lynching}, explained this theme further by saying that “placing the black family center stage, the play dramatizes the extent to which mobs mutilated black households, not just black bodies.”\textsuperscript{157} The prevailing motif used in the plays was the use of other artistic and cultural mediums besides drama, and these would show up in the form of songs, prayer, and poetry. This motif is an undeniably significant element in black culture, and therefore it defined their drama. Black storytelling, especially during slavery, relied on folklore and oral stories because of laws restricting slave education. This was a traditional means of expression within the black community, and theatre was an extension of such means.\textsuperscript{158}

The existence of prayer and hymns in the plays represent the deep-rooted spirituality of blacks with the church acting as a center for faith and hope that circumstance could improve.

Before Emancipation, freed slaves started small institutions such as schools and churches to

\textsuperscript{158} Levine, \textit{Black Culture}, 84.
assert societal autonomy and spiritual solidarity.\textsuperscript{159} Especially in the South, churches functioned as a center for the black community’s social gatherings, spiritual affirmation, political rallies, and it also regulated and enforced a moral order under which the black community must operate.\textsuperscript{160} The third dramatic device that Stephens identified as a constant was the role that black female characters played in delivering dialogue that detailed the lynching in the play. This was a very important tool because lynchings were not actually shown onstage in these early plays, and its events had to be communicated through a vessel of sorts. This stipulation meant a lynching never occurred during the dramatic action of the play. It was always an event of the past, and the past was recounted by the maternal figure in the play. The black maternal figure played a significant role in the black community that represented a desire to protect one’s family from the injustices of society.\textsuperscript{161} Also, motherhood was seen as a value that could possibly bridge the gap between races and could potentially make black women more relatable to white women through this aspect.

The first black woman to pen an anti-lynching drama that was semi-professionally produced onstage was Angelina Weld Grimké.\textsuperscript{162} She lived in Washington D. C. at the time of her play premiere, and this city became known as a hub for black scholars and artists. It was in Washington D.C. that Georgia Douglas Johnson held weekly salons in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and these parties encouraged open discussions about black art. The impressive guest lists included W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and even Angelina Weld Grimké.

\begin{footnotes}
\item Foner, \textit{A Short History of Reconstruction}, 59.
\item Ibid, 65.
\item Perkins and Stephens, \textit{Strange Fruit}, 10.
\item Mitchell, \textit{Living with Lynching}, 10.
\end{footnotes}
Grimké. These salons also demonstrated the enduring black sense of community and collective uplift.

Grimké wrote her first draft of *Rachel* in 1914, and she had numerous ties with the NAACP Washington D. C. branch. It is clear to see the connection between her knowledge of her family history and the style and characters that made up her drama. Her desire to capture a propagandist style in her art traces back to her father’s famous abolitionist aunts, Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld. This personal history also established Grimké’s fixation on women as her central characters that carry the dramatic action of the play. Grimké’s mother left when she was still very young and this accounts for another facet of this fixation. Her paternal grandmother is thought to be the archetype for her strong maternal characters. Grimké was privy to her grandmother’s position as a cruel slave master’s mistress. Though offering partial privileges, it was most likely a union based on violation. Grimké recognized the importance of exposing white rapists and black victims, which was the accurate reversal of the white supremacist art. She instilled initial meaning in her characters with their names. She used some names that had been used in Dixon’s *Clansman* in order to give these characters more honest and noble representations than Dixon. Upholding the tradition of faith, in Grimké’s final draft, she changed the name of her leading protagonist from “Janet” to the Biblical name of “Rachel.”

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163 Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 127.
164 Perkins and Stephens, *Strange Fruit*, 24. Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld were avid abolitionists and women’s rights activists namely in the first half of the nineteenth century. They published pamphlets and articles throughout their activist careers, and they moved from South Carolina to Philadelphia in 1819 in order to further their activism.
Rachel premiered in 1916 at the Myrtilla Miner Teacher’s College in Washington D.C.¹⁶⁸ Unlike Dixon’s play, which was able to tour major American theatre houses due to public funding and support, the black playwrights of this time had to self-subsidize their productions, which were usually housed in churches and homes. The play was produced by the Washington D.C. branch of the NAACP, of which her father, Archibald Henry Grimké, was head of the branch’s new anti-lynching campaign. Grimké wanted to make a statement that would instill pride in her father. “I am anxious to mail all this stuff to you, if only to prove to you that I really did try to do something.”¹⁶⁹ After reading his daughter’s play, Archibald knew that it would be a necessarily aggressive addition to the campaign.¹⁷⁰ The play was performed at the Neighborhood Playhouse the following year with a one-weekend run. Both venues were more accessible than the expensive production houses both in staging plays and in accessibility of minority communities that did not necessarily have a great deal of money to attend the theatre.¹⁷¹ Cheap performance spaces offered opportunity for the proletariat audiences for whom the art itself was speaking. Grimké even self-subsidized the publication of Rachel in 1919 with Cornhill publishing Company, though no profit was ever recorded.¹⁷² The program for the play advertized, “This is the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million of colored citizens in this free Republic.”¹⁷³

Whites were not frequent participants of black theatre audiences at this time, but these venues that were exclusively for black theatre offered an atmosphere for the black bourgeoisie

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 119.
¹⁷⁰ Young, African American Women Playwrights, 92.
¹⁷¹ Bernstein, “Never Born,” 68.
¹⁷² Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry, 121.
that was non-threatening, free of racial tensions, and it catered to the desires and tastes of the black community. One of Grimké’s friends, famed black sculptor, Meta Warrick Fuller, called the play “beautiful” but stated that “…while it [the white audience] was sympathetic, I do not believe it arose to the high tension of the plot in every instance.” On the whole, the white critics that did attend responded favorably to her play’s message. One white reviewer from the New York Courier declared that “there is a terrible tragic note throughout the three acts of this little play, which compels one to think, and if possible to lend aid to try and remove the prejudice against the colored race.” On the other hand, some reviewers thought her portrayal of the black community was not uplifting. One reviewer called it “morbid and overstrained,” while another suggested she “cover the splendid century of growth made by the colored race since its emancipation.” It was clear that white reviewers still had their ideas of how black characters and circumstance should be portrayed, negating the honesty of the tragic situation that represented many black families in the period. The black middle class was also particular about what should be represented in the plays written and produced by African Americans in these theatrical spaces and some did not appreciate Grimké’s art. In response to criticisms of Grimké’s breakout anti-lynching play, Rachel, she wrote an article addressing her critics. She intended her play to affect whites more than blacks because blacks were already aware of the injustices against them. She was now forcing whites to meet it head-on by choosing them as her target audience. Still, some in the black community condemned her for dramatizing and glorifying the main black character, Rachel, who committed race suicide in the play by swearing never to bear black children.

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174 Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry, 120.
175 Buffalo, New York, Courier, October 3, 1920.
177 Brundage, Beyond Blackface, 27.
Grimké used her article in the Competitor as a platform to state her true purpose in writing the play and her stance on art as propaganda. “Since it has been understood that ‘Rachel’ preaches race suicide, I would emphasize that that was not my intention. To the contrary, the appeal is not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites.” She was in the same school of thought as Du Bois, who thought that blacks should indeed use art for propaganda, but she dissented from his argument for a nationalistic black theatre in that she was seeking a white audience. Rachel is a racial commentary and a drama in protest of the barbaric treatment of blacks from white society, and it sparked the debate among black scholars about overt protest art. Locke and Montgomery Gregory were two known dissenters within the NAACP Drama Committee that rejected Grimké’s overt propaganda, and they founded the Howard Players theatre company in order to produce folk-centric art that was strictly for artistic purposes. Grimké asserted in her article that white women were “about the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend,” and this is why she attempted to appeal specifically to white women as her audience by creating a transcending connection between black and white women: motherhood.

The biggest piece of contention about the play for the black community was the concept of race suicide. In the script, the impelling agent, Rachel, had held a deep desire to be a mother since she was very young. However, after hearing the story from her mother about her father and brother being lynched by a white mob, she decides that God “has been mocking at her by implanting in her breast this desire for motherhood, and she swears…never to bring a child here

178 Angelina Weld Grimké, “Rachel: The Play of the Month; the Reason and Synopsis by the Author,” Competitor (January 1920): 51.  
179 Perkins and Stephens, Strange Fruit, 23.  
180 Grimké, “Rachel: The Play of the Month,” 52.  
to have its life blighted and ruined.”\textsuperscript{182} The significance of a young black woman refusing to reproduce was seen by some as race suicide because it halted the genetic line of an already oppressed society. Grimké asserts, however, that her purpose in dramatizing Rachel’s stand was to show the struggle of the black mother, who was on constant guard for her children’s welfare, and from Grimké’s view there was no greater assurance that a child would be protected than if it was never brought into the hateful and violent world. In telling her fiancé that she can neither marry him nor bring children into the world, Rachel delivers a devastating monologue about her decision not to bear children.

\begin{quote}
God is laughing.—We’re his puppets.—He pulls the wires,—and we’re so funny to Him.—I’m laughing too—because I can hear—my little children—weeping. They come to me generally while I’m asleep,—but I can hear them now.—They’ve begged me—do you understand?—begged me—not to bring them here;—and I’ve promised them—not to.—I’ve promised. I can’t stand the sound of their crying.—I have to laugh—Oh! John! Laugh!—laugh too! I can’t drown their weeping.\textsuperscript{183}
\end{quote}

In Koritha Mitchell’s other study of anti-lynching dramas, she looks at the generational devastation that comes with the legacy of lynching. In \textit{Rachel}, “lynching disrupts two generations of marriage and destroys countless generations of children.”\textsuperscript{184} Grimké made the same stand in her own life, declining to bear children who would only know a life of prejudice at best. In \textit{Strange Fruit}, Judith Stephens affirms the historical significance of the 1916 premiere of Grimké’s \textit{Rachel}, in that it was the first straight, or non-musical, play written by an African American that was produced in a public theatrical venue.\textsuperscript{185} The significance that the innovator of this new American theatre genre was a woman is certainly not easily ignored either. The play also served as a tool for the NAACP to combat the screenings of \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, which

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{182} Grimké, “\textit{Rachel}: The Play of the Month,” 52.
\textsuperscript{183} Grimké, \textit{Rachel}, 48.
\textsuperscript{185} Perkins and Stephens, \textit{Strange Fruit}, 24.
\end{flushright}
the organization had failed to halt. They were unable to fund a movie countering the deplorable portrayal of African Americans, and the production of *Rachel* became their staged rebuttal.\(^\text{186}\)

Seen as an overt political piece, Grimké’s play even spurred the creation of the Howard Players, a theatre group formed specifically to produce apolitical theatre in response.

The intellectual debate that grew more fervent in the 1920s can be seen clearly in its early form in the reviews of and reactions to Grimké’s drama. Through *Rachel*, Grimké set the standardized frame for anti-lynching plays to be written thereafter with the portrayal of persecuted upstanding blacks. Her refusal to shy away from the dark realities of black hardships was played out in this period. Though certainly revolutionary in her time, Grimké’s work added to the repertoire of agitated propagandist theatre more than agitated because it contained the abstract content but a realistic style. The level of agitation in anti-lynching drama increased as the decade of the 1920s progressed forward and tensions were denied relief.

In the years following the premiere of *Rachel*, a few more female anti-lynching playwrights emerged, such as Mary Powell Burrill and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, wife of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Though these women were significant in propelling this new genre forward, it was not until 1925 that an anti-lynching dramatist would push the boundaries and take the genre to a more extreme level. Georgia Douglas Johnson pushed past her image as a recognized poet and moved boldly into the revolutionary genre of anti-lynching plays. Though she was not the first playwright of anti-lynching drama and did not have her plays produced in her lifetime, Johnson’s work proved to be the most radical in content, and her radicalization of the genre earned her the title of most prolific of these playwrights.

In response to the Du Bois symposium in *The Crisis*, Johnson agreed with Du Bois in saying that black art should be produced by the elite class of blacks, and that these artists should

\(^{186}\) Young, *African American Women Playwrights*, 94.
“paint, write, let the submerged man and the world see those who have proven stronger than the iron grip of circumstance.” She, like Du Bois, wanted the artist to depict the more positive images of the racial community, such as religious and honest families, and not the archetypes of criminals and fools that were exploited through white racist propaganda. To her, the successful production of art as propaganda was the way to effectively advance the race. Always thought of as an important artistic facilitator during the Harlem Renaissance, she started a tradition of hosting her “Saturday Salons” in 1926 that were attended by the biggest names in art and scholarship, such as Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. Not only did she devote herself to her artistic endeavors and furthering the art of others, but she was also thought of as a great humanitarian, taking in not only stray animals but also convicts upon release from prison. She became enamored with social protest drama from earlier histories of theatre, and with the encouragement of friends, Johnson wanted to take Grimké’s efforts a step further.

Johnson was born in 1877 in Atlanta, Georgia, known to be a center for racial contention. She earned a higher education degree from Atlanta University Normal College, in music studies at Oberlin Conservatory, and at the Cleveland College of Music. Johnson became a prominent member of the black arts society when she and her husband moved to Washington D.C. in 1910. Little detail is known about Johnson’s early life because she kept a lot private to protect her mother, whom she described as “unusually shy.” Johnson was also known to be quite shy, and she was very solitary in childhood and while attending universities. Another thing that is

189 Perkins and Stephens, Strange Fruit, 101.
190 Ibid, 100.
known about Johnson is her mixed race that led many to describe her as nearly white. This fact explained Johnson’s constant theme of miscegenation that she utilized in each of her plays. Johnson was not always considered an artist driven to right racial injustice. She was even accused of being too neutral, providing no racial commentary in her book, *The Heart of a Woman*, published in 1918.

As her desire increased to create more racially conscious work with her career advancing, Johnson wrote *A Sunday Morning in the South* in 1925, the first of six plays that she dubbed anti-lynching plays. She eventually wrote another version of the same play, and it shook the foundation of anti-lynching drama in its uninhibited confrontation of racial violence and the reasons behind it. Johnson was the first of the lynching playwrights to tackle the idea of the alleged black male rapist and white female victim providing the reason for lynchings. She exposed it dramatically as myth in her plays. Another aspect of Johnson’s drama that was recognized as decisively setting her apart from her playwrighting peers was the fact that she dramatized the lynching as it took place during the play, as opposed to characters divulging past lynching events. Though these lynchings were set offstage and out of the audience’s view, it was still considered too taboo and possibly riot-provoking. These dramatic factors that appear in all of Johnson’s anti-lynching plays directly contributed to the plays not reaching the stage of production or publication in her lifetime.

Johnson was encouraged throughout her career by Du Bois, who believed she had a political zeal to advance the black community because of her avid support of black artists

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194 “Harold Jackman to Georgia Douglas Johnson, 1918,” Box 19, Folder 20, Countee Cullen/Harold Jackman Memorial Collection (Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia).
through hosting her weekly salons. They became close friends, writing each other often. These letters, mainly dated between 1925 and 1931, illustrate the close relationship as well as the work related guidance Johnson received from her mentor. In March, 1931, he writes her concerning both her being rejected by a publisher and her poor health, “My dear Georgia…it is of course discouraging to be turned down by a publisher…Just keep the manuscript on the go until you get it accepted. Moreover, without any hesitation go on to a nice hospital and get yourself fixed up.”196 His demonstrated general concern for her well being and his belief that “she is liable at any time to turn out some little thing of unusual value and beauty” spoke volumes about the potential he saw in her.197

Johnson submitted four of her six plays to the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in the mid-1930s, but administrators were critical of them, stating that it would incite more racial violence and that it was deplorable that Johnson would state that black-on-white rape was only a propagandist myth.198 Reader Jean Lamar warned that “It would appeal to many audiences composed of men and women who have feverish ideas about the lynching ‘Down South.’ Its rather unhealthful matter would interest and delight many loose thinking, race baiting persons both black and white.”199 Lamar regarded her plays as “incomplete” and attacked Johnson for

198 Winona Fletcher, “From Genteel Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson,” Theatre Annual, 30 (1985), 41.. The Federal Theatre Project, part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) founded in 1935, was created by the federal government of the United States in 1935 as a part of Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts to create jobs. This project employed many theatre professionals that lost their jobs in the Great Depression, and it assisted in producing plays written and directed by blacks. The FTP was shutdown in 1939 due to the fear of communism.
plotlines that could offend both black and white races.\textsuperscript{200} The only plays produced in her lifetime were her non-lynching plays because her lynching plays were considered too controversial for theatre groups.\textsuperscript{201} These less riotous plays were staged after Johnson won awards from the 1926 and 1927 Opportunity play contests for her plays Blue Blood, produced by Du Bois’s Krigwa Players, and Plumes, by the Harlem Experimental Theatre.\textsuperscript{202}

Johnson’s plays followed the criterion for agitation propaganda because of her more abstract style and obviously overt and radical ideals being presented. In A Sunday Morning in the South, as in all of her anti-lynching plays, prayer and spirituals were constant alternative mediums used in her dramatic art. At the end of Sunday Morning, before the lynching occurred, the central maternal figure of the black home, Sue, turns in prayer to beg God to spare her grandson, who has been accused of raping a white woman whom he denies ever seeing.\textsuperscript{203} Johnson scripts the prayer song in her familiar poetic format: “I must tell Jesus, I cannot bear my burdens alone. In my distress he surely will help me. I cannot bear my burdens alone. I must tell Jesus, I cannot bear my burdens alone. Jesus my Lord he surely will help me. Jesus will help me, Jesus alone.”\textsuperscript{204} This hymn, as designated by the stage directions, is meant to come from Sue while simultaneously emulating from a church service offstage. The unseen churchgoers continue to sing their spirituals even after the dramatic action concluded on the stage. This represents the perseverance of the black community to continue their everyday lives, directed by faith, with the hopes that tomorrow will bring a brighter day.

\textsuperscript{200}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{202}Perkins and Stephens, Strange Fruit, 100.
\textsuperscript{204}Johnson, Sunday Morning in the South, 394.
Her next play, the 1929 adaptation of *Safe* caused even more uproar with the theatre critics. This play also has the dramatic element of a lynching offstage during the action onstage, but it also includes the portrayal of the “race suicide” that critics condemned Grimké for suggesting in *Rachel*. In *Safe*, the character Liza is pregnant with her first child. Before she goes into labor, Liza tells her mother, “What’s little nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hopes mine will be a girl. I don’t want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked ‘round. No, I don’t want to ever have no boy chile!”\(^{205}\) In this monologue, Liza captured the plight of the black mother, who fears that her sons are sentenced from birth to endure the atrocity of lynching. Black women lived in constant fear that the day would come where they would be forced to watch their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons be tortured and killed because lynching was so prevalent.

The crux of the play occurs when Liza goes into labor just as a young black boy is captured from the prison by a lynch mob, and Liza cries out, “did you hear that poor boy crying for his mother? He’s jest a boy.”\(^{206}\) In her agony over the condemned little boy, Liza is devastated to find out that she has given birth to a son. The birth takes place offstage, and the doctor comes back onstage to recount the events that took place in the back room to the rest of the family. He tells them that upon learning her child’s gender, Liza strangled her infant son to death, claiming he was safe now.\(^{207}\) She thought herself his protector that gave him a peaceful end so that he would not have to endure the horrific racial violence to which he was destined. Now, she would not have to endure it either. This is an important play because the extreme dramatic action of scripted infanticide showed the depth of desperation with which black mothers lived, especially in 1893, when the play is set.

\(^{206}\) Ibid, 381.
\(^{207}\) Ibid, 384.
Johnson’s early anti-lynching plays were originally rejected for production or publication by the NAACP in 1937 as being too racially defeating. The FTP reader, Walter White, wrote Johnson back, stating his reason as the plays “all end in defeat and gave one the feeling that the situation was hopeless despite all the courage which was used by the Negro characters.”

Despite this development, Johnson stayed true to her obligation to preserve honesty and truth and the knowledge that, in life, circumstance is most often far from ideal. The organization commissioned Johnson to write new ones in 1938 depicting the struggle to get the anti-lynching bill passed in Congress. Johnson wrote two plays, *And Yet They Paused* and *A Bill to be Passed*, with each carrying extra pages of songs to be included in the staging. Each of these plays employed plot elements of lynching occurring offstage with one of the characters relaying the details to the unknowing characters onstage and to the audience. *And Yet They Paused* dramatized the frustrating delays that kept the anti-lynching legislation from being passed by Congress, while *A Bill to be Passed* depicted the fictionalized portrayal of the bill being triumphantly passed in Congress and ending with the unknown verdict as it reached the Senate. This legislation only passed in Johnson’s drama and never truly passed despite the aggressive campaign efforts of the NAACP. President Roosevelt bypassed this effort because he feared that his campaign to pass the New Deal legislation would flounder without the southern vote, and the anti-lynching bill would surely threaten the support of that constituency.

The significance in the lack of public American support for the black anti-lynching plays was mirrored in the lack of support for anti-lynching legislation, which was what the genre was

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209 Stephens, *And Yet They Paused.*, 521.
protesting. Black Americans were, in this time, denied access to the American theatrical and political stage. Though these plays would not reach production, they were kept in the NAACP records, which were made available to the public.213 The growing fascination with Johnson by theatre and history scholars lies in the irony of her being described as the most prolific anti-lynching playwright of her race while never having a single one of the plays produced in her lifetime. The lack of popularity in producing Johnson’s righteous message speaks to the era that also glorified the racist and violent propaganda of Dixon’s play. However, her role as facilitator and agitator to the African American artistic community earns her an equally significant place in the establishment of black theatre, and art in general, during the tumultuous Progressive Era in America. The African American experience is far removed from that of white Americans. For so long their differences were used against them by white supremacists, such as Dixon, who strove to keep blacks in their present circumstance as second-class citizens. After enduring centuries of slavery and years of violent persecution, blacks refused to be excluded from what America had to offer. As African Americans embarked on the excursion to represent their own culture and American experience, they sought to utilize the same tools that had been used for years by whites to perpetuate the theory that blacks were the inferior race. Just as art was the medium for white supremacist propaganda, it was wielded by African Americans to ignite the Harlem Renaissance. What was used to sustain the heavily hegemonic society now boldly challenged it.

Though Du Bois was instrumental in setting the stage for the black dramatic movement, the singular women who defied the adversity of both sexism and racism, were truly the creators and masters of the new American genre. Fatigued by other avenues that constantly proved unsuccessful, playwrights such as Grimke and Johnson viewed art as the necessary tool for their cause. Their plays did not incur the widespread or extended production runs that Dixon achieved

in the mainly white-controlled mainstream theatre in America. Though these productions were not seen by the mass American population, their message relied on truth and the reality of the violence and oppression that blacks had continuously suffered. The playwrights and their supporters saw the country on what many Americans attempted to deny: the edge of revolution. Their sense of community, tradition of faith and folklore, and unfortunate circumstance set the stage for early black drama. This new genre of black theatre created by these black women proved to be a notable precursor of the emerging black arts movement. Not only did these pioneering women aid in crafting the developing genre of social protest for American theatre, but black Americans were also attempting to represent their story and history in public view as they journeyed toward what they could finally call a safe haven within their own theatre, culture, and country. Though the black artistic community would not gain a stronghold in mainstream American theatre until the late 1950s, they still struggled in this era in deterring violent and segregated injustices, putting an end to paternalistic black theatre created by white outsiders of the community, and focusing on their community’s troubles in producing their own theatre.
CHAPTER 5

JEWISH ACTIVIST THEATRE OF THE 1930S: LABORING FOR
SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH DRAMA

Escaping the violent pogroms of Russia, Jewish immigrants arrived to America in droves at the start of the twentieth century, but they found little improvement in their circumstance. Though they were no longer being systematically killed, the Jewish people faced adversity in America in the face of extremely poor labor and living conditions, prejudice and denial of equal opportunity, and stereotypical misrepresentations from anti-Semitic propagandist theatre that dehumanized and degraded the Jewish community. Various Jewish American artists decidedly expressed their revolutionary mindset through agitated propaganda theatre because of their oppressed history, their violent present, and their socialist ideology and tradition of theatrical and artistic expression that accompanied them from Russia to America. S. Ansky’s Russian socialist play, *The Dybbuk*, not only became a model for Yiddish folk drama, but it also gained popularity on the American stage, which was a significant step for Jewish artists and producers gaining a stronghold in commercialized American theatre.

Jewish community leaders assumed an obligation of active response after being villainized in anti-Semitic passion plays, such as Morris Gest’s Broadway production of the *Freiburg Passion Play* in 1929 and suffering the atrocities of poverty and prejudice. Harold Clurman established a theatre ideal based in socialist values and theatre style as he drew inspiration from Ansky’s *The Dybbuk*. Inspired by Ansky’s play and Clurman’s radial idealism, the unacclaimed Jewish actor, Clifford Odets, became a voice for the Jewish labor movement with his agitated propagandist plays with hopes of raising enough awareness that would stress to audiences the plight of the marginalized worker and the need for reform. Jewish artists were able
to gain control over the propagation of content in American Theatre following the rise of successful Jewish producers stemming from the growing Jewish middle class.

“Never was there a movement for the liberation of man, for social justice, for the advancement of the working class…and never did a cry of pain or agony go up, a cry of hunger or injury, that the Jewish people did not respond to.”214 Howard Fast penned this phrase in “Jewish People and the Cry for Justice,” one of his many writings as the “author of immigrants.” He constantly asserts in each of his works on Jewish people and revolution that Jewish activism and community consciousness began with their existence and was only fueled in their efforts through each persecuting century.215 Jewish people have often been the targets of scapegoating by the majority population throughout their history, and they were negatively stereotyped as a greedy lower wrung of society. For the Jewish people, drama combined utilizing the Jewish tradition of written folklore with attempting also to discredit public misrepresentations by depicting truthful representations of themselves. In the early twentieth century, the Haskalah Enlightenment secularized, intellectualized, and liberalized the Jewish American population. The Enlightenment, the ideal of folk-centric expression, and the model of Jewish socialist theatre from Russia created an atmosphere for Jewish drama in this period.216

Jewish people were not worried only about being portrayed in a disagreeable fashion; their fear was entrenched in a more sinister outcome. The turn of the twentieth century bore witness to an increase in violent pogroms acted out by non-Jewish local populations against the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe (namely Russia and Ukraine) due to rising tensions and anti-Semitic propaganda, such as the Protocols. Passion plays were also popular at the start of the twentieth century, and Jewish people feared these portrayals would incite violence against

215 Ibid.
216 Schiff, From Stereotype to Metaphor, 116.
their communities as it had so many times in the past.217 Outspoken Rabbis protested and were successful in halting a few of the Passion plays in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.218 In protesting the plays, they were really protesting anti-Semitic propaganda and the subsequent violence they feared would follow. Beyond outright protest, Yiddish theatre began accumulating playwrights that wanted to propel this socialist movement forward through their dramatic action and dialogue onstage.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the peak of popularity for melodrama and light comedy in American theatre, but select Jewish artists sought a more favorable image and radical message. They used theatre as their vehicle to reach mainstream American audiences through agitation propagandist drama, which they brought with them from Eastern Europe.219 This ideology helped shape modern Yiddish theatre for popular playwrights, including S. Ansky, penning the now classic Yiddish play, The Dybbuk, at the start of the twentieth century. Though Ansky wrote his play in Eastern Europe, the production, as well as its impact on modern theatre, made its way to the American stage not long after the European premiere. The legacy of The Dybbuk exists in a broader context than its commercial acclaim as it aided in solidifying and popularizing the modern Jewish theatre as well as the movement for propagandist drama.220 S. Ansky used a sense of traditionalism to create works of literature and theatre that became iconic images of modern Jewish theatre and culture, and he remained a popular face of socialist values. As an ethnographer, the stories that Ansky unearthed from ancient folklore were filled with old legends and Jewish mysticism, and he was able to stylize it

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217 Nahshon, Jewish people and Theater, 62.
218 Ibid, 63, 68. Salmi Morse’s The Passion was removed from the stage in San Francisco in 1879 because of its controversy, and the lead actor was even arrested.
219 Nahshon, Yiddish Proletarian Theatre, 15.
in order to merge with the modern ideals of socialism. Ansky was a perfect example of the dual mission of modern Yiddish Drama, as he created his work with the purpose of both preserving old Jewish folklore and spreading the new ideal of socialism. His play was not only a major step forward for the popularization of modern Yiddish drama in Europe, but it was also a foundation for the Jewish labor theatre movement on the rise in America in the 1920s and 1930s.

Later described as the father of modern Jewish culture and theatre, Shloyme-Zanvl ben Aaron Hacohen Rappoport, or S. Ansky, was born in 1863 in the Russian town of Vitebsk. In this traditional, Yiddish-speaking village, Shloyme was expected to devote his life to religious study. The rigid traditionalism of his poor Russian village left him suffocated and yearning for a world outside of the Jewish faith, which drew him to the early ideas of the secularizing Haskalah and socialist movements.221 The Haskalah promoted intellectualism and liberalism, which inspired many Jews to pursue paths in literature and drama in greater numbers.222 Due in part to his impoverished background, Shloyme was always greatly affected by the struggles of the working class, and spent most of his young adulthood trying to spread socialist propaganda throughout the poorer communities with his membership and allegiance to the Russian Populist Party. Shloyme-Zanvl was given the name Semyon Akimovich, his name in Russian, by the members of the communities that he spent his time educating. Decades after undergoing his first name transformation, Semyon Akimovich started writing under the name of S. A. An-Ski (Ansky) in the 1880s when he was writing propagandist pieces for various Populist journals.223 In and out of St. Petersburg during the length of his career, Ansky’s avid devotion to socialism created a common theme in his notable works.

222 Schiff, From Metaphor to Stereotype, 116.
Ansky gained initial notoriety for his writings when he wrote his poem, “Di schvue” (The Oath), which acted as the sacred hymn of the Jewish Labor Bund.224 He stated his commitment to labor efforts in writing on his twenty-fifth literary anniversary: “My striving was to work on behalf of the oppressed, the laboring masses, and it seemed to me then—and that was my error—that I would not find them among Jews.”225 Despite his constant search for an exit from his religion and heritage, Ansky found a renewed sense of admiration for what Judaism had to offer modern literature through old Hassidic legends and the Yiddish language. He also returned to Jewish communities out of disgust from the atrocities like the pogroms threatening Jewish livelihood. His goal was to help these communities build relief programs to minimize these attacks and massacres.226 Ansky found his way back to St. Petersburg at this time in order to be at the epicenter of Jewish culture and folkways. While working as an ethnographer for the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society, Ansky traveled to old Jewish towns around St. Petersburg on archival expeditions. It was during this time that his appreciation for Jewish folklore inspired Ansky to write his Yiddish play, The Dybbuk. However, he still sought to insert the modern agenda to which he was so dedicated.

The concept of a dybbuk is based in religion, but it mainly derives from ideas of Jewish mysticism. “In Jewish folklore and popular belief an evil spirit which enters into a living person, cleaves to his soul, causes mental illness, talks through his mouth, and represents a separate and

224 Fruma Mohrer and Marek Web, Eds., Guide to the YIVO Archives (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1998), 43. The Jewish Labor Bund developed in Russian Jewish communities in an effort to combine social revolution campaigns for both Russian Jews and Russian workers, and existed within the Russian Empire from around the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of WWI. It was noted as being made up of Jewish socialists that had distanced themselves from the religion and traditionalism of their heritage. They denounced Zionism and promoted Yiddish as the universal Jewish language at a time when Hebrew was being revived.


226 JHOM, “S. An-sky (1863-1920).”
alien personality is called a *dibbuk.*” Although Talmudic scripture references unclean spirits, it does not use the specific term, “dibbuk,” to refer to them. The term gained popularity in the eighteenth century when stories of dibbukim occurrences became more frequent, and it seemed to be mostly concentrated in Russian Jewish communities. Though the first recorded exorcism occurred in the sixteenth century, the bulk of documented events were in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was a historically rich subject to explore through Jewish literature, art, and drama.

*The Dybbuk, Or Between Two Worlds* follows the plotline of love, death, and possession. Hanan, a Talmudic scholar, comes from a poor family, which complicates his love for Leah, the daughter of a very wealthy man. Upon learning that her father, Sender, has betrothed Leah to another man of wealth, Hanan is so devastated that he dies suddenly after seeking solace with the darker side of his religion. On Leah’s wedding day, she visits the town graveyard to invite the spirits of a random bride and bridegroom couple to her wedding. When she arrives at the graveyard and stands in front of Hanan’s grave, she is overtaken by Hanan’s dybbuk. She returns to the wedding hall and the Hassidic men realize that she is not herself, especially when Hanan speaks through her. After the men attempt to exorcise Leah in a religious ceremony, Hanan appears in front of Leah and asks her to follow him. She follows, and so in death they are finally united as one.

Ansky wrote *Der Dibbuk, or The Dybbuk* in Russia in 1914, though it was not produced until 1920 in Poland. Knowing Ansky’s background and creed, it is impossible to ignore the

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228 Ibid.

socialist overtones of the play. He attacks the elite for their hypocrisy and oppression of the lower classes. In his play, Ansky stressed the ultimate injustice as being the superiority of the elite class that stood in the way of this couple’s true love in order to exclusively breed within their own class. It is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s better-known *Romeo and Juliet* in which the tragic fall of star-crossed lovers is depicted. In *The Dybbuk*, Hanan’s spirit pushes past death in order to pursue the one he loves. The story later created a backlash, however, with feminist groups that accused Ansky of masking a story of rape as a love story. They saw Leah as a victim whose body was violated by Hanan, and this act was romanticized by saying that her assailant did it in the name of love. Despite this negative reaction from some later groups, nothing could stop the momentum and the ultimate popularity that the play received in its time.

Ansky held an unyielding belief in the power of spirituality:

> From the Old Testament to the present, the central idea of all Jewish creativity is: physical force is not the force that wins. The physically stronger is defeated because he is spiritually weaker. The Jewish hero does not struggle for power or women or wealth, and his weapons are spiritual rather than physical. The sole motif of the Jewish folk tale is spiritual struggle.

A major testament to the lasting impact of *The Dybbuk* lies in the almost innumerable adaptations done around the world, spanning countries and languages. It first premiered in Warsaw, Poland on December 9, 1920, which was unfortunately one month after S. Ansky died of pneumonia at age 56. The opening took place in Warsaw at the Elysium Theater and was produced by the Vilna Troupe, a new theatre company that was devoted to Yiddish drama. David Herman directed the play on the Elysium stage with a very traditional style, which created an

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atmosphere of fantastic realism onstage that was steeped in ritual and tradition. The intense spiritual experience that struck audiences in Poland inspired nearly four hundred performances of the play in its first year, and it contributed to the notoriety of the newly formed Vilna Troupe.

Following its success of over a year in Yiddish theatres, it made its debut on the Hebrew stage. Ansky originally wrote the play in Yiddish, but felt it would reach a broader audience if he translated it to Russian. Before Ansky died, he showed his play to the renowned director of the Moscow Art Theater, Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski was able to convince Ansky that he needed to translate The Dybbuk back to Yiddish in order to have it performed by genuine Jewish theatres. In 1919, Stanislavski’s student, Evgeny Vakhtangov, was given the charge of directing the play at the Moscow Art Theater, a year before it premiered at the Elysium Theater.

Though work on production began in 1919, three years passed before The Dybbuk opened at the Moscow Art Theater, making it the third venue. In January of 1922, the play opened at one of the MAT’s independent studios, the Habima Theatre. One reviewer of the Habima production was enthralled: “This performance by the Habima is the most complete work of art…Such completeness, such unity in essence and form, is the living principle in every work of art, the supreme soul of it, first and last. Ansky’s praised work once again earned not only popularity for itself, but it also gained recognition for a theater in its infancy, leading the Habima to become known as one of Moscow’s greatest artistic theatres. It continued to run The Dybbuk for over forty years, and is still seen today as an iconic image of this theatre.

One year after its premier, The Dybbuk was produced at the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York City, and the play made its debut in English in 1925 at another theatre in New York City.

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234 Ibid, 5. The Habima eventually split from the MAT to become Israel’s National Theater.

called the Neighborhood Playhouse. The play was funded and produced by a Yiddish art club in New York, known as the Schnorers. These “scroungers” were interested in furthering Jewish culture in America, and they aided new Yiddish Theatre coming to America in gaining publicity and popularity. They were successful even in increasing the attendance of non-Jewish patrons in the Yiddish playhouses. The Schnorers were responsible for translating and staging The Dybbuk in New York. The significance of cultural clubs, such as the Schnorers, is that they represented the growing Jewish middle class of the 1920s that had the means to fund Jewish produced theatre in public venues. This made Jewish theatre more accessible to American audiences, and Jews were able to display their culture onstage, even if it was limited at first. One reviewer of the New York production expressed his adoration, stating, “By means of atmosphere and ritual, the play externalizes the passionate and tortured mysticism of the medieval Jew…These people have a spiritual greatness.” Because of its commercial success on the American stage, The Dybbuk earned consideration as a far-reaching play that gained international success. Harold Clurman, a major theatrical intellectual of the American Jewish labor theatre, said of the Neighborhood Playhouse Production that the play was one of the most memorable productions in his extensive theatre career. He wrote, “The play was viewed as a kind of phantasmagoria of a past civilization, a world beautiful in its depth of feeling but condemned for its practical organization.” Clurman was entranced, inspired.

Jewish journalists referred to The Dybbuk as the awaited answer to the long history of plays degrading the Jewish people. They felt that the play imbued dignity and humanity into

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236 Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre*, 208-209. These culture clubs were pivotal in producing a professional Yiddish stage in America, and many of the members held socialist ideals.
237 Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 5-6.
the popular theatrical Jewish archetype. Arnold Zweig, who studied the history of the Vilna Troupe, referred to *The Dybbuk* premiere as the turning point for the troupe and theatre. He argued that this production captured the idea that “Jews in the theatre are to give joy, and not be the butt of jokes.”

Though it was popular on the Yiddish theatre circuit in New York, the underlying socialist message raised tensions between the Jewish community and the surrounding non-Jewish neighborhoods that feared these ideas entering America. A critic of the growing Yiddish theatre spoke up in the early 1930s stating that “Corrosive, vitriolic, animated by the spirit of a separate minority, the intellectual theatre has now given itself over to the drama of acid intelligence.” Though he recognized in his article that this theatre was popular in Eastern Europe, he still condemned American theatre companies that supported Yiddish or Jewish plays instead of “American plays.”

The significance of *The Dybbuk*’s long-lasting run and image lies in its ability to prevail in spite of longstanding Soviet oppression. Russian government action, such as the May Laws of 1882, restricted Jews with where they could live, where they could conduct business, and it threatened their right to general safety. Though pogroms left many Jews dead throughout the 1880s, Tsar Alexander III launched an investigation into Jewish economics, believing they were at fault for sparking the murderous rampages. *The Dybbuk* represented the steadfast nature of the Jewish people. The play also aided in growing the American Yiddish worker’s theatres because it brought guaranteed revenue to the companies. If the theatre produced an unsuccessful play one weekend, they would stage *The Dybbuk* the next weekend for a promised return of funds needed to perpetuate the cause. The new breed of zealous Jewish playwrights arising out

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244 Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre*, 103.
of the 1920s and 30s brought Ansky’s idealistic socialist message to a more overt and radical level. This group was ready to defend the rights of the proletariat, and now had the means to do it because it was also in the 1920s that the Jewish middle class was on the rise. This meant funding and support of their community’s idiosyncratic expression, and Jewish artists were now gaining a major foothold in commercial American theatre.

The message of Ansky’s *Dybbuk* also inspired a transformation of an actualized theatre of agitated propagandist style. Aspects of Ansky’s socialist theme and the developing style of agit-prop theatre made their way to America by the 1920s because it was traveling with the thousands of Jewish immigrants at this time. The Yiddish theatre companies adopted the new theatrical genre of agit-prop, which was ironic because it derived in part from the medieval mystery and morality plays that had ridiculed the Jewish character for centuries. Agit-prop was akin to these genres because of its stark differentiation between good and evil. However, it was used by the worker’s theatres during the labor movement of the 1930s to mark the authority of the state as the evil entity and the workers as the “everyman” who was capable of saving mankind from damnation.²⁴⁵ This style continued to develop along with Jewish American theatre. However, the other popular theatrical style in America at this time was the Passion play, and it sparked outrage against both content and creator. A growing trend in the twentieth century saw Passion plays being written by Jewish playwrights that denied their heritage. This trend stemmed from the other growing trend of assimilation that many Jewish immigrants dealt with when cornered by a pressuring majority.

Before the turn of the twentieth century, more than three and a half million Jewish people settled in America, with a great majority residing in the northeast corner of the country.²⁴⁶ In

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fact, by 1915, Jewish people made up an incredible 40% of the population in New York City, with common settlement centers on the Lower East Side.\textsuperscript{247} Hasia Diner discusses the main reasons for this mass migration in her \textit{Hungering for America}. Diner argues that most immigrated in order to escape their poor economic conditions, Russian violence, and the sheer hunger they were suffering in the Old Country.\textsuperscript{248} America projected a perceived image of plenty, and Jewish people sought a portion of this prosperity. After several thousand years of persecution, Jewish people did not reach the shores of America with expectations of welcoming arms.\textsuperscript{249} However, the combined forces of poor treatment in Europe and the newfound Haskalah intelligentsia spurred immigration and a hope that circumstances could improve. The Jewish immigrants in the first decades of the twentieth century were more liberal than the previous groups of Jewish immigrants, steeped in the socialism and artistic expression of the Jewish Enlightenment. The majority of Russian Jewish artists left the country starting in the 1880s, and the majority of those that left came to America, effectively making it the largest and most influential center for Yiddish drama in the world by the 1920s.\textsuperscript{250}

These Jewish immigrants were immediately faced with the dilemma that pitted the preservation of traditionalism against the cultural genocide of assimilation. Pamphlets and settlement houses became prevalent fixtures in New York as a means to train immigrants how to become “American.”\textsuperscript{251} One popular pamphlet was Alexander Harkavy’s instruction manual, \textit{Harkavy’s American Letter Writer}, which was an English-Yiddish guide meant to inform Jews

\textsuperscript{247} Nahshon, \textit{Yiddish Proletarian Theatre}, 1.
\textsuperscript{248} Hasia R. Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish foodways in the Age of Migration} (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 176.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid, 179.
\textsuperscript{251} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America}, 177.
on how to write formal letters in an American style.\textsuperscript{252} There was an immense pressure on all immigrant groups to acculturate because, despite America’s claims of pluralism, they still highly valued hegemony and feared the foreign. One \textit{Boston Traveller} reporter stated in 1892 that at the increasing rate of immigration, Americans could expect and be fearful that by 1910 the “government will be in the hands of and controlled by the alien-born citizens.”\textsuperscript{253}

Compounding the aggravation of pressure from outside the community, there was a struggle within the Jewish American communities. This played out onstage in Jewish and Yiddish theatre, specifically found in New York City where these communities were concentrated. There were no Yiddish schools or cultural centers and this fact made creating a Yiddish theatre more desirable for some Jewish immigrants because it was a medium that was saturated in Jewish culture and it meant preserving a piece of their traditions, language, and proverbial lessons. Prior to this harmonious theatre movement, as with any group, there was the presence of inner-struggle among the Jewish American artists who were confronted with the dilemma of traditionalism versus assimilation. The question of identity was hard to reconcile for many immigrant groups as they struggled to find their place in American society. In order to keep Jewish intellectualism and religion alive, their theatre needed to be popularized and commercialized for American audiences. However, on the other side of that spectrum, the pressure was too great, and creating popular theatre in order to garner acceptance was more important to some Jewish artists. These artists poured their efforts into the popular anti-Semitic Passion play genre.

The Passion play was a European theatrical phenomenon and was steeped in Catholicism. The genre lost public support around the Protestant Reformation, but a revival came in the


\textsuperscript{253} “The Immigration Rate,” \textit{Boston Traveller} (19 December, 1892).
nineteenth century with the rediscovery of one of the most popular Passion plays, the
Oberammergau Passionspiele.254 This play was staged in the small Bavarian village of
Oberammergau every ten years since 1634, but it gained international attention in 1860 due to
audience members from different parts of Europe. There was a great deal of press starting to
surround the production that hailed it as a European attraction. This production was also
reigniting anti-Semitic sentiments. In 1870, it was clear that these sentiments had reached an
international level when an American audience member expressed his disgust during the
Crucifixion scene, declaring:

With strange emotions you gazed upon wild beasts, when they tore his mantle into
shreds, and cast lots of his vesture; and the Jewish race appeared hateful in your eyes, as
you watched them gathering round the cross, looking at the man they had crucified, and
railing at him, and taunting him with his powerless and his pain. Then, for the first
time, you seemed to understand the significance of those ungovernable explosions that in
the history of the middle ages one reads of, when sudden outbursts of hatred against the
Hebrew race have taken place, and have been followed by cruelties and barbarities
unexampled in history. Just such a feeling seemed excited in this Ammergau audience by
this representation.255

The fiendish portrayal of the Jewish people in the Passion plays propagated anti-
Semitism by encouraging disapproval of the race and “necessary” violence. Because of the
widespread popularity of Passion plays, such as the Oberammergau, American theatre troupes
started planning national tours. Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf dedicated many lectures and sermons to
halting the production of these plays. Krauskopf’s 1899 sermon entitled, “The Passion Play at
Polna,” discussed the travesty of the Leopold Hilsner trial. He declared that both the accusation
and the subsequent trial were “simply a play—a passion play, in which the Hebrew plays a

254 Nahshon, Jews and Theater, 62-63. The medieval Passion play survived in small European villages,
such as Oberammergau, located southwest of Munich. They thrived because of a revived sense of religiosity and
spirituality for a population lost within their industrializing and urbanizing society. The Oberammergau
Passionspiele was one of the most well known Passion play productions of the nineteenth century in Europe, and it
attracted American audiences to its spectacle as a popular European attraction.
255 “The Passion-Play in the Highlands of Bavaria,” Appleton’s Journal of Literature, Science and Art, (III:
59) 14 May 1870: 548.
leading part, a tragic part, as he has in every passion play that has ever been brought upon the
world’s stage.”256 He also started a lecture tour in 1901 in an appeal to stop the Oberammergau
Passion Play from being produced in the country. The Rabbi stated that he knew nothing that
“could more deeply root the prejudice against the Jews than the Passion Play.”257 Unfortunately
his warnings went unheeded and blood libels became more frequent in the following decades.
There were incidents in both New York City and Pennsylvania in 1913 and in Massachusetts and
Illinois in 1919. In 1928 the Massena incident occurred in New York, which is considered one of
the most notable blood libels in America in the twentieth century.258 One year later, Morris Gest
spurred anti-Semitic sentiments further with his Freiburg Passion Play. The purpose of his
propaganda, however, was much more complicated.

The trend of the self-hating Jew played out in one of the more popular Passion plays
produced in America in the first half of the twentieth century. Morris Gest’s Freiberg Passion
Play premiered on Broadway in May of 1929. The backlash from various Jewish American
organizations highlighted the unavoidable fact that Gest’s propagating of anti-Semitism was
considered even more deplorable because Gest was in fact Jewish. It is a very telling piece of
social commentary that the negative image of Jews was being perpetuated in America, at times
most prominently, by other Jews. Because there was greater possibility of Jews passing as
Anglo-American, the temptation drove some to not only refuse their heritage, but also to degrade

Czech Jew, was accused of murdering two Christian women as a part of Passover ritual.
257 “Rabbi Krauskopf Says it is Unfair to the Jews,” Sun, 8 April 1901: 7.
258 Abraham C. Duker, “Twentieth Century Blood Libels in the United States,” A Casebook in Anti-Semitic
became popular in the middle Ages in Europe, and they revolved around false accusation of ritualistic murder,
namely the Christian belief that Jews used gentile blood in their recipe for matzah (Passover bread). The incident in
Massena involved a young girl getting lost in the woods and the search party raising questions about the date being a
Jewish holiday that would invoke a ritual murder of the young girl. Reports state that Jews in the community had
their homes and businesses illegally searched by officers and the atmosphere created fear in the community of anti-
Semitic violence.
it in their attempt to gain entry to American mainstream culture and society. The desire for opportunity and societal freedom created pressure on Jewish producers, such as Gest. He sought to improve his circumstance through perpetuating this integration propaganda of the majority population, rather than the agitation propaganda of the minority population.

Gest (1881-1945) was born Moishe Gershnovitch into a small traditionalist Jewish family in the city of Vilnius, Lithuania. By age 12, Gest was anxious to travel to America, and upon arriving he quickly decided he could rely on himself rather than American relatives. He made his way around Boston, finding odd jobs mostly at Yiddish theatre companies, such as ushering. In 1901, Gest moved to New York in the hopes of finding a greater theatrical opportunity. Gest had always been open about his Jewish heritage and was even eager to stage Yiddish plays from the Moscow Yiddish Theater. However, after seeing Max Reinhardt’s successful mystery play, The Miracle, in 1924, Gest was entranced by the major spectacle aspects of large budget productions. The production was comparable in content to the Oberammergau, which had incensed audiences with anti-Semitic sentiments in its heyday. By the late 1920s, Jewish producers were fully established in American theatre, and Gest saw and admired the prominent Jewish producer, Reinhardt, and his religiously exploitative piece that earned mass funding and widespread attention. Gest was interested in creating shows that would entice audiences through gaudy visuals and popular themes, and he saw the religious pageant as the vehicle. He was always profiled as a master of spectacle. “Soon after he was launched as a producer, he

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259 Nahshon, Jews and Theater, 82.
261 Nahshon, Jews and Theater, 83.
began to show symptoms of a species of artistic elephantiasis…Vast spectacles, groggy in size, in color and movement…have had a cheerful fascination for him.”262

In 1928, Gest discovered the Freiburg Passion Play which was being performed by the Fassnacht brothers who also wrote the play. Adolf and Georg Fassnacht played the title roles of Christ and Judas, respectively, and were performing in small venues in New York at the time of Gest’s discovery.263 The brothers claimed the play preceded even the Oberammergau in production history, a claim that made the Freiburg Play the longest surviving Passion play.264 They made a deal with Gest, who announced in March of 1929 that he would produce the play.265 The play itself depicted the Jewish characters as merciless fiends condemning Christ to unspeakable violent torture. The Roman people were the protagonists that attempted to stop the atrocious crucifixion and save Christ. In Gest’s production, the character of Jesus was given Nordic features of blond hair and pale skin, while the character of Judas was depicted as a man of Eastern European Jewish decent. The production was wrought with misrepresentation, particularly in the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion. It illustrated the “utterly unhistoric presentation of the Jews as seeking his death and the equally unhistoric presentation of the Romans seeking to save his life.”266

Known as a press monger, Gest crafted stories in order to create more public interest in his pageant. One of his advertisements cited the Freiburg Play as Leonardo da Vinci’s inspiration for “The Last Supper,” and he even made one of the last scenes of his production depict this iconic dinner setting.267 Staying true to his dream of lavish spectacle, Gest staged his

264 Nahshon, Jews and Theater, 92.
267 Nahshon, Jews and Theater, 86, 88.
extravaganza in the massive Hippodrome Theatre in New York City that offered seating to over 6,000. This surpassed Reinhardt’s production of The Miracle at the Century Theatre which offered half of the capacity. Gest even adorned the lobby with stained glass and stone façade before stating to the press, “I did it all! Designers? What do designers know that I don’t know about Jerusalem?” His gloating fully displayed his false sense of success, which was defined by production aesthetic. The aesthetic, for Gest, outweighed his loyalty to the Jewish community and ties to his own heritage.

Those who were not outraged by the blatant anti-Semitism were offended by the garish spectacle of the production. Even the general public was outraged at Gest’s production. Famed theatre critic, Brooks Atkinson, remarked on the blasphemous nature of the show that displayed more focus on ornate and kitschy displays, such as glowing chalices, rather than the expected simplicity and purity of a true medieval religious pageant. “When the ignobility of artifice is measured against an unassuming dignity of a sacred theme, the effect is rather absurd.” Traditional Oberammergau patrons had always insisted on minimalistic productions in order to offer full immersion in the religious pilgrimage of witnessing the pageants. Critic Burns Mantle expressed the same sentiment, feeling that the purity of the religious service had been tainted by urbanization and the modernity of the commercial stage.

For the Jewish community, the indignation ran deeper with anti-Semitism being propagated on the American stage and produced by a Jewish man, no less. One of the more notable articles to react from the Jewish press was American Hebrew’s article, “A Perilous Undertaking.” Included in this article are quotations from letters written by Louis Marshall, then president of the American Jewish Committee, that were addressed to Gest. Marshall was a

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270 Mantle, “Passion Play is on View,” G1.
leading public figure in the battle to halt the production of the *Freiburg Passion Play*.271 Marshall wrote, “The Jewish people, as you should know, have suffered for centuries from the reaction occasioned by plays of this character and by the story on which they are based.” He questioned and protested Gest’s identity by stating, “Why should you, a Jew, contribute to the dissemination of your own people?” He ended the letter: “There are some subjects that are not for the stage, and nobody should know better than you that, whether this play is regarded as blasphemous or mischievous, it should never have been brought into an American environment. There are limitations even to what is called art.”272 The importance of Marshall’s statement about art speaks to his knowledge that art is influence, with the potential to alter circumstance for better and for worse. He was aware of the anti-Semitic potency that was produced by Passion plays, such as Gest’s, throughout history and was astounded that a member of the Jewish community would willingly propagandize such a hostile atmosphere for his own people. After a period of silence, Gest finally reacted to this letter, stating, “I have refrained from answering you so far because I prefer to have the opening night audience and the critics of the leading newspapers who represent the fair-minded public of New York pass judgment upon the religious pageant. Personally I do not find it offensive.”273 In his statement, Gest upholds the popular public mind by relying on the “leading newspapers” for a reaction rather than acknowledging the offended minority’s point of view.

In one review, entitled “On Seeing the Passion Play Produced by Jews,” Jewish theatre critic Isaac Landman condemned Gest for his actions against his Jewish community. He stated in his review, “That two American Jews should unite their talents to recreate and retell to American

272 Louis Marshall, “Letter.” General Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 8, The American Jewish Committee Collection (Blaustein Library Archives, New York City, New York).
273 Ibid, 922.
audiences this story, more vividly than it has ever been done before, is a humiliating circumstance which they alone are responsible and a grievous wound in American Jewish life for which there is no balm and no healing.” In May of 1930, one year after the premiere, Rabbi Stephen Wise offered his opinion of the “cruelly unjust” genre, stating that “Only when Christians cease teaching that the Jews killed Jesus, and teach instead that Jesus and his disciples were all Jews, will true goodwill be obtained among Gentile and Jew.” The desire for economic and social opportunity that commercialization offered was enough for Gest to disrupt his priorities of ethnicity and heritage. Despite the passionate Jewish backlash and campaign against the play’s overt anti-Semitism, top reviewers such as Atkinson and Mantle deterred success of the Freiburg production with their lackluster reviews. In the end, Gest filed for bankruptcy and the playwrights’ historical origin claims were debunked. However, the significance of his production lived past its short run because of the offense it caused to Jewish artists that were trying to create a theatrical genre to represent the community’s dignity and depth of humanity.

Following the dichotomous premieres of The Dybbuk and the Freiburg Passion Play in America, the 1930s was a major time of transformation for Jewish American theatre. It was at this time that Jewish Americans began seriously asserting their roles in the fight for social justice in labor through mobilizing and through their protest theatre. For the most part, the artists managed to produce work that was respectful and referential to Jewish traditionalism, as Ansky had, in their attempt to capture the foreign Jewish world onstage. Though some Jewish artists went in the Americanized direction of commercialization, others, such as the Yiddish socialist

artists, were emboldened to embrace their heritage and display it on the stage. This was in the
same time period in the mid-1930s of arguably the most aggressive threat to Jewish existence of
the twentieth century happening in Europe, and Jewish people were still able to find ways to
express themselves. Even the Third Reich was unable to halt the endeavor of creative
resistance.\textsuperscript{277} It was in the time frame of the Holocaust that Jewish Americans felt a similar sense
of empowerment, and this expressional empowerment worked to solidify a Jewish stronghold on
mainstream American theatre after decades of being immigrant outsiders. Despite the areas
where acculturation did occur with aspects such as name changes and Jewish produced Passion
plays, many Jewish artists upheld the tradition of resistance. In the 1930s, New York theatre
companies interested in the modern social theatre movement, such as the Group Theatre,
provided venues and funds to support playwrights using drama to speak out against the labor and
class atrocities in America. The Jewish people were well-acquainted with labor concerns and
poverty by this time.

For the Jewish people who laid the foundation for proletariat theatre in America, social
justice was a longstanding cause of tradition in Jewish communities because of their strong
messianic beliefs of living a righteous life and aiding the less fortunate. The laboring classes
needed a voice that deeply understood their current struggle. Edna Nahshon, Professor of
Yiddish at the Jewish Theological Seminary, argues that Eastern European Jewish migrants had a

\textsuperscript{277} A.E. Steinweiss, \textit{Art, Ideology and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music,
Theatre and the Visual Arts} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 7-10, 32-38. During the
Holocaust, Jewish artists were forced to choose either to immigrate or to follow the Jewish Culture League
(Jüdischer Kulturbund). The league developed in 1933 and provided a venue for not only the emotional and spiritual
outlet of the artist, but it also granted an economic reprieve for those artists that lost their jobs. Jewish people were
barred from the mainstream German entertainment industry in the late 1930s. Jewish art was heavily censored by the
Nazi regime. Eventually, Jewish people were able to create theatre under the regime as long as it was produced
outside of mainstream culture. There were two types of theatre produced by Jewish people during the Holocaust:
commanded art and self-initiated expression. The commanded art was produced in both the ghettos and camps, and
it was commissioned by Nazi officials within Joseph Goebbels’ Ministry of Propaganda and Cultural Enlightenment.
The self-initiated theatre occurred in the ghettos more subversively because they denied Reich regulations.
different take on the Great Depression than the general American population because of their traditionally impoverished backgrounds. Her *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre* delves into the long suffering of Jewish people in Europe through Diaspora, pogroms, and anti-Semitic laws that kept Jewish people poor and hungry for centuries. In order to understand the Jewish societal ideologies that they held while making a home in the United States, it is necessary to examine their Russian origins. The economic turmoil of the Great Depression in America was further compounded by widespread labor unrest and fears of communist and socialist insurrection, and Jewish reaction at this time had already been shaped by Russian policy a few decades earlier. A second wave of Jewish immigration between 1904 and 1914 that brought a deeply secularized and urbanized group of Jewish immigrants from Russia that were affected by the Jewish Enlightenment and socialism. Before

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280 Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, 5.
leaving Russia, most individuals from this group were considered radical socialists and were participants in the Bund Jewish Labor Movement in Russia.\textsuperscript{282}

Though modern Yiddish drama began in America in the late nineteenth century, it gained real traction with the socialist movement in the transitioning years of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{283} The two movements went hand in hand as each tried to preserve culture, history, and values. Both socialist ideology and drama traveled from Russia in the early 1900s, and these movements were idealized for the masses that lived in poverty and squalor in the slum tenements of New York City.\textsuperscript{284} The Jewish American communist and socialist groups formed clubs in this time period, such as the socialist Workmen’s Circle, and attempted to gain widespread support through propaganda.\textsuperscript{285} The party’s labor unions gained a major increase in membership and therefore more strength and support as they successfully tested the bounds of challenging tyrannical business practices through striking. The nation then found itself in a new line of overt confrontation with hostile labor relations, such as the New York Taxi Strike in 1934.\textsuperscript{286} During this period of growth, fraternal organizations were on the rise in the Jewish enclaves of New York City, and the Workmen’s Circle sprang into existence as the premier producer of Jewish and Yiddish culture in this area.\textsuperscript{287}

In order to appeal to a broader audience, leaders of the Workmen’s Circle searched for Yiddish artists and intelligentsia to join the league because they believed these members would create a sympathetic public image for the club with their work. Bertram Wolf, the chairman of

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\item \textsuperscript{282} Nahshon, \textit{Yiddish Proletarian Theatre}, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{283} Berkowitz and Henry, \textit{Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage}, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{284} Liebman, \textit{Jewish people and the Left}, 212-13. Before the wave of socialist immigrants arrived, America already had an existing Socialist Party (S.P.), established in 1901. The S.P. was American in nature and consisted of the older generations of the Americanized Jewish people.
\item \textsuperscript{285} Nahshon, \textit{Yiddish Proletarian Theatre}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{286} Ibid. The New York Taxi Strike in 1934 is still known as one of the largest and most recognized union strikes, especially within the taxi industry.
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the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the New York Committee of the Worker’s Party in 1926, expressed his view on the significance of making art a major aspect of the Party’s cause by stating that their objective was to “awaken all humankind to culture; to prepare for the artists and singers of the future the largest most profoundly cultured public the world has ever known.”

This organization needed to present a new style of theatre and they were inspired in part by Ansky’s Dybbuk from Russia, the birthplace of both the genre model and the political ideology. While Jewish producers, such as Gest, were commercializing their theatre with integrated propagandist messages on major Broadway stages, more humble theatre groups staged the more subversive and agitated messages, though they were still produced in public venues with large audiences.

Socialist theatre groups were on the rise in America as conditions worsened with the Depression and unethical labor laws, and membership was heavily male. Despite the growth in fraternity and majority of the prolific Jewish playwrights being male, there were major female figures within the worker’s theatre movement that were vital to its development and image. As a student of prominent drama programs at both Harvard University and Vassar College in the 1920s, Hallie Flanagan understood the significance of funding theatre programs. She toured Europe on a scholarship and gained a growing interest in experimental theatre, and she earned national recognition for her theatrical adaptation of Can You Hear the Voices? in 1931. Flanagan was a prominent intellectual voice in developing the American Proletariat theatre.

Her notoriety earned her a nomination from Harry Hopkins to head the new Works Progress Administration’s Federal Theatre Project in 1935. She had a preference towards

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experimental theatre, namely German Expressionistic theatre. Flanagan was introduced to German Expressionism on her study abroad in Europe, and it made her inclined towards theatre that questioned the moral intent of authority and encouraged investigation of moral social justice. Though she wasn’t Jewish, her leadership in the Federal Theatre Project opened the door to many Jewish people earning high ranking positions in American theatre. In an article written by Flanagan for *Theatre Arts Monthly* magazine in 1931, she states that the “theatre being born in America today is the theatre of workers.” APTLY TITLED *A Theatre is Born*, Flanagan’s article illustrates the stipulations that should be upheld by this new theatre movement. She quotes a propagandist workers’ theatre pamphlet:

> If you are a worker in a shop, a factory, or a mine, where struggle for existence makes one day as dark as the next; If you are oppressed by capitalism and want to cry out in protest—organize a dramatic group… Start dramatic groups in unions in fraternal organizations, in social clubs, in company unions… Let dramatic groups dot the land from coast to coast. Do not expect profit in money. These theatres exist to awaken the workers.

Flanagan used this pamphlet excerpt to interpret the meaning of the workers’ theatre, stating that its virtue was that it can be produced anywhere. Her analysis placed a great emphasis put on the message of a play. Because the message was all-important, producers easily avoided costly spectacles made up of complex sets and ornate costuming. Without these aesthetic distractions, audiences were more focused on the characters’ dialogue, which acted as a dialogue between the actors and the audience as much as between multiple actors onstage. Flanagan discussed attending workers’ theatre conferences that stressed a Soviet model for the proletariat theatre. However, cautioning talk around the conferences warned these theatre groups about

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Flanagan was a theatre scholar during the late Progressive era, and she played a pivotal role in solidifying modern American theatre. In 1935, Flanagan was appointed as Director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). 

290 Ibid.


292 Ibid, 909.
openly adhering to this style because doing so could ignite the reignite paranoia in American fears of communist infiltration.293

A demonstrating skit was performed at one of these conferences in which workers marched and chanted up and down the aisles. One worker dissented and spoke to the audience about art being man’s search for divine beauty, and his costuming and dialect made him representative of the capitalist consumer. The rest of the workers denied his view, shouting that art was “a weapon in man’s struggle for justice.”294 The audience of conference attendees cheered the radical labor artists. Flanagan makes the point that, though the workers are mocked by the bourgeois stage, they must still learn from it and adapt aspects that work for this type of theatre. This was the only way to popularize their own protest theatre because they needed not only a righteous message but also a genuinely good production that would attract large audiences. In terms of dramatic criticism, Flanagan asserted that workers’ theatre was reviewed in a very specific way that differed from critiques of bourgeois productions because its merit was measured not by entertainment value but by its effectiveness in dramatizing utilitarianism.295 This ideology was actualized in the Group Theatre.

The main company that emerged in this movement to lead Jewish labor theatre to its glorious height in the 1920s and 30s was the Group Theatre. Though several Yiddish theatres started appearing in the 1880s, they were underdeveloped in style, production, and dramatic education. Theatre gained a new financier in the 1930s with the Federal Theatre Project (FTP).296

293 Ibid, 909-910.
294 Ibid, 910.
296 Lorraine Brown and John O’Connor, *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978), 2. The Federal Theatre Project, part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) founded in 1935, was created by the federal government of the United States in 1935 as a part of Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts to create jobs. This project employed many theatre professionals that lost their jobs in the Great Depression, and it assisted in producing plays written and directed by blacks. The FTP was shutdown in 1939 due to the fear of communism.
A part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), it only lasted until 1939, but its theatrical influence facilitated imitators that had a profound and lasting effect on American theatre.

Working together through common cause and ideology, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford established the Group Theatre in 1931. Harold Clurman, who was mesmerized by The Dybbuk production, held the similar purpose of Ansky’s to social obligation in creating a passionate atmosphere that would inspire change and breathe life anew into the lost souls of 1930s America. At this time, all three worked for the Theatre Guild in New York City with Clurman as the script-reader, Strasberg as an actor and director, and Crawford as casting director. Clurman was determined to produce an impacting agitated-propagandist theatre:

Is the situation hopeless? It is only hopeless if we allow ourselves to settle into a lethargy of indifference, stupid optimism or routine. Present theatre circumstances demand that the theatre’s adherents abandon their playboy giddiness…and build up within themselves a new consciousness of their craft, its possibilities, its requirements, its perils. Simply to wait for a beneficent social-mindedness to descend on men in power so that they may bestow upon us a subsidized “national theatre” is still another fuzzy dream.

Clurman was a realist that recognized that his agitated propaganda theatre would not be produced in major theatre houses, such as the Hippodrome, but he was more focused on the ideology and message than large crowds. He intended to evoke necessary changes from a population already on the verge of revolution, and he started a dialogue with like-minded dramatic artists and actors about starting this new company. Now that he had a growing pulpit, Clurman was in need of a star playwright that could write the voice of the people. By 1931, Clurman had his Group Theatre established and many contributing participants, but he was still searching for the playwright to share a belief in the cause as earnest as his own. Perhaps the most celebrated playwright of the 1930s, Clifford Odets translated his high regard for human dignity

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299 Ibid, 3.
to the stage in his famous plays that challenged a generation to critically view the place and time in which they lived and to take more action to shape their circumstance. Born to immigrant parents, Clifford Odets experienced a childhood very familiar with the hardships of being a part of both a working class and a minority group in the United States. By the time Odets was born in Philadelphia in 1906, his father, Lou, had long been working to assimilate in order to give his family a chance at a comfortable life. This process started with Odets’s father changing the original family name of Goredetsky to Odets, and the elder Odets was known to harbor anger and resentment against those in the family that still clung to the Jewish culture.  

Odets suffered from identity issues, but they differed from Gest’s in that he wanted to embrace his Jewish heritage. He had qualms from a young age, and throughout his life, about his father’s complete break from their religion and heritage, and he saw his father’s corporate job as another cowardly act of assimilation in order to placate the American gentile majority. Because he saw his father’s abandonment of personal identity, Odets spent his entire life searching for his own identity as he earnestly preached the desperate need to accept the realities of life. He even sought a more idealistic paternal figure, and found one in Dr. Morris Vladimir Leof in his early adulthood. Dr. Leof spoke of the righteousness of Jewish traditions that value intellectualism and humanitarian activism. Odets admired the honesty and tenacious grip Leof held on his identity, especially because beforehand he had only been witness to his father’s falsehoods. Inspired by his new paternal mentor, Odets sought to capture these values, but he still wasn’t certain about what medium he would use. What he did know that was that no matter the genre of drama being presented onstage, it is all propaganda. He stated in an article for *Current*

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302 Ibid, 122.
Controversy that “every artist is a partisan,” including Shakespeare, realizing that his purpose would will be based in drama.303

When Odets was six, Lou moved his family to New York, and it was while attending his new school that Odets found his love for acting. He pursued acting throughout the 1920s, and it was this artistic avenue in which he was introduced to Clurman’s Group Theatre. Odets accepted minor roles in various plays in the Group from its founding in 1931 until 1934, and it was at this time that his dabbling in playwrighting was starting to earn him more recognition than his rigorous attempts to express himself on the stage.304 In terms of finding where he felt he belonged and what he was meant to do with his work, the Group was an invaluable turning point. “I who cried from my inverted wilderness for strong roots with which to fasten to the swarming sustaining earth have found them at last in The Group. I am passionate about this thing!”305 Odets penned this entry in the Group Theatre daybook, which was open to all members for entries, in his first summer with the company. He felt secure in the Group as his identity was unearthed by his newfound purpose of writing meaningful theatre with hopes of stimulating change.

After winning an unofficial award in a play contest featured by New Theatre magazine in 1934, Odets took Waiting for Lefty to the stage in January 1935. It was produced by the Group Theatre, which also produced three other plays of his that year including Paradise Lost, Awake and Sing!, and Till the Day I Die. When Odets wrote these plays, he was for a brief time a member of the Communist Party. He joined about a year before becoming heavily involved in the Group, and though he was not an official member for very long, he continued to sympathize

303 Clifford Odets, “All Drama is Propaganda,” Current Controversy (February 1936): 13, 37.
304 Ibid, 5.
305 Clifford Odets, Group Theatre Daybook, 8/9/1931, 114.
with their cause and to incorporate his own form of extreme leftist messages in his work. He staged the second act of *Awake and Sing!* in the summer of 1933 as his first project to be produced by the Group.

“When I started to write *Awake and Sing!* I didn’t have a mission in life; I wasn’t going to change society. When I came to rewriting it I was going to change the world—or help it.” As he grew with his work, Odets found his purpose both in the Group and on the American stage. This sense of purpose imbued him with an obligation to inspire people with his scripts to inevitably improve what he saw wrong within the world. In an interview of Odets, conducted by Arthur Wagner in the Lincoln Center Theatre Review in 1961, Odets chastised Hollywood writers for referring to themselves as “creative.” He holds to a definitive meaning of creativity by stating that a truly creative writer can only write characters that come from his own emotional repertoire, and this is how he can effectively relate to an audience. No matter the message the playwright wishes to convey, Odets asserts that a fully developed character is the only way to truly affect the audience. To attain this deeply developed character, the playwright must understand him through and through.

As Odets found his home in the Group, the members of the Group found a hero in Odets. Alfred Kazin wrote in 1935, “Odets pulled us out of self-pity…How I admired Odets! It was all one, as I had always known. Art and truth and hope could yet come together—if a real writer was their meeting place.” Many members of the group shared Kazin’s sentiments in celebrating Odets and the surge of moral energy he brought to the Group. Early reviewers of his plays

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308 Ibid, 11.
confessed to their astonishment that this novice playwright had such strong technical ability and an equally strong ideological purpose. Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times stated in his commending review of Awake and Sing! that the play itself was “full of substance and vitality” and that the script proved that the Group had a “genuine writer” to launch them onto the mass theatre circuit in New York. Neither Odets nor Clurman foresaw the success of Odets’s plays. This was especially true in the case of Waiting for Lefty, which is still thought of today as not only the strongest of Odets’s works, but also the shining light of the modern agit-prop genre. It is unique in all aspects ranging from structure to message.

Waiting for Lefty was not the first agit-prop play dealing with labor in the time of the Depression, but it was the most successful in serving as a leader to standardize how the genre should function. Despite the major success of Lefty, Paradise Lost remained the author’s favorite, which he confessed while also admitting that it was considered both a popular and critical failure. Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times assessed in his review that Lefty was “one of the best working-class dramas that [has] been written” and “one of the most dynamic dramas of the year.” Another reviewer of the same production, John Anderson, praised the play’s proletarian message and even told a story in his review in which a female audience member stood up and shouted in fervent support of the message and then fainted.

The focus of Lefty is a union strike at a cab company in Philadelphia, and it is meant to represent the infamous New York Taxi Strike that had just occurred by this time. At the end of the play, the workers cry “STRIKE,” and the chanting characters are meant to include the

311 Demastes, Clifford Odets, 67.
audience in this plea for change. 315 Audience involvement was an incredibly significant tool used in this play because it forced members of the audience to shed their roles of bystander and finally accept the role of active participant to uninhibitedly vocalize demand for the change they wanted to see in their country. The play was also distinguished in the genre due to its message, which didn’t call for action as much as it aroused the spiritual commitment to take social action, as classic agitated propaganda dictates. Odets believed that the Americans of the 1930s were left disenchanted and lifeless from the Depression, and this hindered the fervor necessary if change were ever to occur in the country. 316 Therefore, he attempted to use his play in order to yield a passionate spirit that would lead inspired people to take collective action, and this would in turn lead to more widespread change.

Odets struggled all of his life with questions of identity, truth, and morality. Fueled by his constant resentment towards his father, Odets sought truth in his work and encouraged others to seek it in their communities. This truth, he believed, could improve many lives, especially of the people so often slighted. In the first drafted manuscript of *Paradise Lost*, his personally treasured masterpiece, which was modified before publication, Odets’s closing statement of the “Act 3 Finale” reads:

I must make a confession! The dream is over. From our past history and bitterness can come a clean future—if the present is accepted for what it is. The past was based on ignorance, on misconceptions of life, on foolish optimism and belief in the goodness of people and government. Now that we know how bad things really are we can work from a true base of experience and understanding truthfully what can happen to honorable people. 317

317 “*Paradise Lost* First Draft, 1935,” Box 14, Folder 2, Billy Rose Collection: Clifford Odets Papers (New York Public Library, Lincoln Center, New York)
Odets attacked critics for their harsh reviews of *Paradise Lost* by stating that his play represented an entire struggling class, rather than simply focusing on the individual.\(^{318}\) He saw delusion and deception as America’s downfall in the past, which fostered oppression and hardship. However, he states the key to America’s salvation is to see the reality of life and embrace it for its honesty. According to Odets’s declaration, echoed in his *Paradise Lost* character, Leo, the American people must break from the ideal of the “American Dream” in order to be capable of embracing the realities that face them in life and in America. “The dream kills and maims. Not seeing reality cripples the finest man.”\(^{319}\)

Odets did not only explain the problem in this speech, but he also constructively offered a clear solution that demanded decisive action from his audience. “If the past was a dream, the present reality is brilliant and hard. We see with clear eyes what must be done. We must work!”\(^{320}\) This statement illustrates Odets’s true disdain for living in fallacy, as well as his sincere belief in the cause of the workers. He trusted that the workers could be the ones to alter the faces of both reality and the American Dream, making each more attainable. Because of this strong belief, he was determined to write his plays with the purposes of raising awareness and inspiring a fight for change. Though Jewish people had been gaining more control on the mainstream American theatre circuit before his time, Odets was the Jewish playwright who fully captured the Jewish American identity crisis with each of his works, protesting for a religious and cultural dignity, as well as a class dignity. Odets differed from Gest’s identity issues in that Odets embraced the obligation to the honesty and morality that Gest’s work negated.

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\(^{320}\) Ibid.
The history of tradition displayed steadfast strength that followed the Jewish people as they moved around the world looking for a home, and yet each new “home” held a new set of challenges that tested Jewish endurance throughout the centuries. Reconciling tradition with the need to assimilate was a struggle that molded Jewish empathetic zeal, and subsequently the new genre of American theatre that successfully captured their sentiments. Those who sacrificed their connection with their history, such as Gest, moved more quickly to mainstream theatre than the playwrights like Odets using Jewish subversive themes. The labor genre itself eventually progressed from producing bold agit-prop pieces to commercialized theatre meant for entertainment purposes. Though this reconciliation moderated the forthright proletarian voices, these voices did not go completely unheard in the decade of the 1930s. The labor union victories offered new economic and societal opportunity to the growing Jewish middle class, and they were involved in shaping the future of American theatre. Jewish American playwrights were able to present their social drama, as well as their plight, early on with The Dybbuk. Along with the early theatrical success and improving financial circumstance, Jews were also facing less overt anti-Semitism in America by the 1930s and several Jewish artists began exploring the idea of dramatizing other minority groups for the American stage. The plight of a person being persecuted based on ethnicity rather than a judge of character was recognizable when some Jewish artists saw it in other minority communities, whether in Europe or America. It was a transcending element that created a sense of solidarity both in their activism and art for some within the Jewish artistic community.

321 Schiff, From Stereotype to Metaphor, 153.
CHAPTER 6

DRAMATIC CONNECTION: HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN AND JEWISH AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IDENTIFIED WITH THEATRE AND EACH OTHER

As the country moved further into the twentieth century, there was change on both the domestic and international stage. The mainstream population was affected by a growing proletariat voice that refused to stay silent a decade longer, and the minority groups were still struggling to find their place amidst mainstream American society. Paralleled by the failed anti-lynching legislation, black anti-lynching theatre was unable to gain recognition in the 1920s. The Jewish community, through changing circumstance, produced popular labor theatre in the 1930s and achieved goals in labor reform in the same time period. Both communities were not deterred from their path to demanding equality of life and the recognition of human dignity. These communities were both able to survive the tribulations of the era by relating to their minority counterparts. In this sense, writing about other groups was a way to reflect on how America treated all outsiders, and it offered perspective into each community’s circumstance.

But ultimately their circumstances would diverge. The daily struggles that blacks still endured overshadowed the now milder existence of anti-Semitism. By the 1930s, Jewish Americans were more financially and socially comfortable in America.322 As Jewish producers and playwrights became more commercially successful in the American theatre, eyes from the different communities were situated on them to see how they would portray blacks in their popularized, mainstream theatre. In particular, George Gershwin is notable because, as the most prolific composer of his time, he turned down a Jewish theatrical project in order to write his now famous Porgy and Bess operetta, and he sought to collaborate with the black community in order to retain sensitivity, sympathy, and honesty in his portrayals. This did not always mean,

322 Diner, In the Almost Promised Land, 5.
however, that the black community responded favorably to the operetta, though it created a dialogue. Since black artists were still seeking in this time to represent themselves in theatre, there was sensitivity and wariness to being depicted onstage by an outsider of the black community. The black representative voice was still missing in American theatre and society.

In 1935, George Gershwin, known by this time as the quintessential American composer, was premiering his new operetta portraying the lives of an African-American community in the slums of Charleston. Though *Porgy and Bess* was not an immediate commercial success, it was recognized in later decades as one of the great American operas of the twentieth century. Before his spark of true inspiration for the *Porgy* operetta, Gershwin was actually intent on writing a musical version of *The Dybbuk*. He saw his setting as New York, and described his artistic purpose to a friend: “I’d like to write an opera of the melting pot, of New York City itself, with its blend of native and immigrant strains…This would allow for many kinds of music, black and white, Eastern and Western, and would call for a style that should achieve out of this diversity, an artistic unity. Here is a challenge to a librettist, and to my own muse.”

However, in 1926, George Gershwin picked up the novel of *Porgy*, written by DuBose Heyward, a white native of South Carolina. Gershwin was deeply inspired by the narrative, but he was not ready to move forward with plans just yet, though he wrote Heyward expressing his interest.

*Porgy* was based on a newspaper article Heyward came across describing a wounded black man who was charged with committing murder while caught up in the throws of passion. He was inspired by both the newspaper article and his mother’s career as a local

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323 “George Gershwin to Isaac Goldberg, 1925,” Box 63, Folder 76, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Music Division (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.)
324 “George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, 1926,” Box 64, Folder 22, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Music Division (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.)
folklorist, specializing in indigenous black American culture centered on the coast of Southern Carolina. 326 Heyward’s story was set in Catfish Row, an old tenement off the coast of Charleston that is occupied by a black community. The themes of the story chronicle one summer at the start of the twentieth century where the community experiences elements of physical and substance abuse, passion, and murder. Porgy is a handicapped peddler who lives in the tenement. Though he has trouble getting around, he still defends his lover, Bess, who is a victim of both physical and drug abuse and has escaped to Catfish Row. Porgy murders her abusive boyfriend, believing there was no other option because of the apathy the Charleston police had towards the black community. 327

Heyward wrote the novel in 1925, and it earned immediate critical acclaim, even from the black community, because of its progressive sympathetic portrayal of the black community. 328 However, his true intentions were somewhat convoluted. This was the same time period in which Du Bois was writing his many articles asking how the black community should be portrayed in art. Du Bois referred to Heyward in his article, “Criteria for Negro Art,” asserting that Heyward “writes beautifully of the Charleston underworld. But why does he do this? Because he cannot do a similar thing for the white people of Charleston, or they would drum him out of town. The only chance he had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people.” He raises these questions in order to assert his idea that white artists, such as Heyward, “cry for freedom in dealing with Negroes because they have so little freedom in dealing with whites.” 329 He was also expressing resentment towards the trend of white Americans as the popular producers of black characters in art. Du Bois insists that, despite good intentions from white

327 DuBose Heyward, Porgy (Garden City New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1925).
328 Ibid.
artists writing about the black community, their field is limited because white audiences are only open to stories of the infallible white society and a counterpart of the depraved black society. Heyward responded to Du Bois in “The Negro in Art” questionnaire, stating that he is “convinced that [the black artist] alone will produce the ultimate and authentic record of his own people” when referring to black artists creating their own literature.\(^\text{330}\) Heyward’s response was ironic in that a white novelist who writes on black struggles also expressed his opinion that black Americans should be their own historians and artists. His seemingly respectful ideas gave way to the fact that he was paternalistic in his portrayals. Heyward’s depictions were better than offensive archetypes from the past, but they were still entrenched in romanticized images of a more primitive group. Heyward played into this romantic racism in other writings, such as an article entitled, “The Negro in the Low-Country.” In this essay, he describes “the Negro” as having “faith in his simple destiny.”\(^\text{331}\) Despite these perpetuations, it is still clear in the novel that Heyward’s intention was to present Porgy as a tragic hero that was righteous in his murderous crime because of the lack of racial justice in Charleston.

The novel was first adapted as a straight play\(^\text{332}\) under the same title as the novel in 1927, produced by New York’s established company, the Theatre Guild. The playscript was co-written by Heyward and his wife, Dorothy. \textit{Porgy} was a major success with not only a major run on Broadway, but also a national tour and London performances in the following years. The historical significance of this successful production was that the play has been regarded as the first prestigious theatrical opportunity offered to such a large group of black actors. The cast was

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comprised of sixty-six black actors, with a third of that number garnering principal roles. James Weldon Johnson, a famous black author at the time, witnessed a performance and commented on this significance, stating that, “In Porgy, the Negro performer removed all doubts as to his ability to do acting that requires thoughtful interpretation and intelligent skill. Here was more than the achievement of one or two individuals who might be set down as exceptions. Here was a large company giving a first-rate, even performance, with eight or ten reaching a high mark.” After Gershwin saw the play, he described it as “the most outstanding play that I know, about the colored people.” Heyward insisted that Gershwin start on the project immediately and immerse himself in the black community that is the focus in Porgy.

In 1929, Gershwin signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera to write a Dybbuk opera. When the news of this contract broke, the press hoped this would be “the great American opera.” Gershwin described his mesmerizing experience with the play stating, “It was the mysticism in it that fascinated me,” and he also reveled in the folk overtones of the play. However, the project was shelved because of adaptation rights disputes. Gershwin was still interested in doing a folk opera, and he began fiddling with compositions that resembled Khassidic dance music. Up to this point, Gershwin had earned success with his jazz numbers, and as he played the traditionalist music of Eastern European Jews he “became increasingly conscious of the similarity between the folk song of the Negro and of the Polish pietists,” according to his friend, Isaac Goldberg. Goldberg also recalled that “George saw blacks and

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333 Ibid.
334 James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Atheneum, 1930), 212.
335 “George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, March 1932,” Box 64, Folder 22, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Music Division (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.)
337 “Gershwin Plays His Rhapsody,” New York Sun (7 May 1930).
Jews as being the same in relation to the rest of society.” Gershwin recognized a connection between the black and Jewish music, as well as historical struggle. This shift in his idea of the American folk musical made Gershwin also shift his project focus back to Heyward’s novel. Gershwin was entranced by the lyrical prose of the novel, a style inspired by Heyward’s background as a poet. The Dybbuk was already a popular show, and Porgy was a more unconventional project that could popularize sympathetic images of the marginalized black community. Instead of choosing another project that would reflect on the Jewish folklore and struggle, Gershwin sought to put the focus of American audiences on the black community, which he saw as an unrecognized cornerstone of American culture. He was already envisioning it as the “Great American Folk Musical.”

In 1932, when Gershwin expressed his desire to write the Porgy operetta, Heyward insisted that Gershwin travel to his home on Folly Island, a barrier island off the shore of South Carolina. Heyward wanted Gershwin to visit this island in order for him to live the research in the black enclave that inspired Heyward’s Catfish Row in the novel. Gershwin wrote Heyward in agreement, “I would like to see the town and hear some spirituals.” Upon arriving in Charleston in December of 1933, Gershwin was shuffled around the city by Heyward, who took him to various black church services, but Heyward also had Gershwin take note of local black street vendors because he wanted him to understand the social aspect of the music. Heyward was a part of the Charleston’s Society for the Preservation of Spirituals, and he insisted that Gershwin still did not have a full experience of Charleston life and music after his short trips. To placate Heyward and gain a genuine outlook on the community, Gershwin planned an extended stay at

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339 Pollack, George Gershwin, 572-573.
340 George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, November 1933,” Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Music Division (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.)
Folly Island for five weeks in the summer of 1934. He even had an upright piano moved to his rented beachside cottage.\textsuperscript{341} Gershwin and Heyward wanted to experiment with their work, and so they tested it at regularly-held artistic gatherings of the local black community. The various black singers described Gershwin as “simple” and “unpretentious.”\textsuperscript{342} This persona was a reflection of Gershwin as the humble pupil instilled with humility and a deep desire to learn from his teachers. A notable moment occurred when at one of these meetings, “George started ‘shouting’ with them, and eventually to their huge delight stole the show from their champion ‘shouter.’” Heyward recalled this night as marking the venture as “more like a homecoming than an exploration” for Gershwin, who seemed to fit right in. He was even commended by an elderly black man who told him, “By God, you can sure beat out them rhythms, boy. I’m over seventy years old and I ain’t never seen no po’ little white man take off and fly like you. You could be my own son.”\textsuperscript{343} A mutual respect existed between Gershwin and his teachers who impressed upon him the necessity of honesty in his depictions of the music, which represented the community as a whole. His full immersion in the black culture and community at Folly Island led Gershwin to believe that this would not be another one of his purely jazz operas because it would also be very folk-centric. It was also a reminder of the recognition of a group with which he somehow identified.

As for a venue to house the operetta, the Metropolitan Opera once again wanted to book Gershwin for their 1934-35 season with his new operetta after the failed attempt with \textit{The Dybbuk}. Gershwin, however, thought it would be in the best interest of his piece that \textit{Porgy and Bess} be produced at a smaller venue in order to ensure the use of an all-black cast. He was

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\footnotetext{341}{Pollack, \textit{George Gershwin}, 577-578.}
\footnotetext{342}{“John Bennett to Susan Bennett, July 1934,” Box 3, Folder 40, John Bennett Collection (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina).}
\footnotetext{343}{John Andrew Johnson and Robert Wyatt, eds., \textit{The George Gershwin Reader} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 235-236.}
\end{footnotes}
concerned that the Met would not be as accommodating to such a request, and Gershwin was
determined to capture the authenticity he had experienced first-hand in Charleston.\footnote{Pollack, \textit{George Gershwin}, 574.} He even
turned down the star power of Al Jolson, who wanted to play the title role of Porgy in blackface,
because Gershwin thought Jolson would play the role comically and he wanted a more serious
interpretation.\footnote{Ibid. Al Jolson was a prolific blackface entertainer, especially in the 1920s, and he starred in \textit{The Jazz Singer} (1927), which was somewhat of a biopic created specifically for the star.} They eventually chose the Theatre Guild, which produced the first stage
adaptation of \textit{Porgy} in 1927. While Gershwin composed the music, Heyward and Gershwin’s
brother, Ira, wrote the libretto. Gershwin and Heyward had initial struggles over the style of the
opera. While Heyward wanted what would be considered more of a musical with mostly speech
with interludes of musical numbers, Gershwin wanted fully sung recitative. He wanted to use this
style in order to highlight what he thought of as a rhythmic culture of the black community,
while playing up the “unemotional” characteristics of the minor white characters by having them
speak their lines.\footnote{“George Gershwin to Dubose Heyward, 7 November 1933,” Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira
Gershwin Collection, Music Division (Library of Congress, Washington D.C.)}

Members of the cast were entranced by Gershwin’s talent and personality. Todd Duncan
was cast as the title role of Porgy, and he travelled with Gershwin to Charleston in order to gain
authenticity in his dialect. Duncan said the trip brought him and Gershwin closer and that
Gershwin stayed with Duncan in the home of a black resident rather than in a segregated hotel.
He stated that Gershwin “didn’t have any of that prejudice in him.”\footnote{Pollack, \textit{George Gershwin}, 597.}

Duncan respected
Gershwin for his desire to present accurate and sympathetic black characters in order to properly
honor those who sang beside him when he arrived in Charleston. Eva Jessye, the black choral
director, recognized the authenticity of Gershwin’s music, saying that Gershwin “had written in
things that sounded just right, like our people.” She believed that both the music and the representation captured “our inheritance, our own lives.” Anne Brown, who played Bess, remarked that “Gershwin’s opera was concerned with humanity.” These and other cast members held similar sentiments that Gershwin intended to share his honest experience of a black community with American audiences, both white and black.

*Porgy and Bess* premiered in October of 1935 to mixed reviews, and the reviews displayed an obvious racial divide in opinion. Considered the top drama critic of his time, Brooks Atkinson reviewed the operetta in the *New York Times*. Though he refers in offensive terms to some of the songs as “lazy darky solos” and “made-to-order spirituals,” Atkinson does conclude his review in celebration of Gershwin’s successful operatic adaptation, claiming that the “fear and pain go deeper in *Porgy and Bess*” than what had been displayed in the straight play version of *Porgy*. Gershwin’s personal friend, Isaac Goldberg, wrote another commending review of the operetta in *Stage Magazine*. Goldberg observed the highly collaborative piece, pointing out that “A Russian and Armenian had, respectively, prepared the scenery and production; two Nordics, man and wife, had provided the novel and the play upon which the libretto was based; two Jews, brothers, had joined talents for lyrics and music,” and the “cast of Negro singers and actors had interpreted this collaborative inspiration. It was an American symbol.” Despite his recognition of the significance of the multi-community art, the reviewer was, at times, praising the show at the expense of black dignity. Goldberg describes black people as having “honest simplicity,” though his slight paternalistic tone was considered a

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more docile characterization of the black community as he did not try to raise points about dangers of the “black criminal.” He did commend the play as a liberation of sorts that connected the two minority groups in a statement about the creator’s social reasons for producing *Porgy and Bess*: “Perhaps, under the jazz rhythms and the general unconventionality of musical process lies the common history of an oppressed minority.”\(^352\) Despite the overall positive feedback from reviewers, *Porgy and Bess* was a financial disappointment. Also disappointed were most black audiences, reviewers, and eventually previous cast members.

The atmosphere in America was changing rapidly, and each decade of the early twentieth century drew the American population closer to an unyielding assertion of countercultural revolution. Black audiences were not at this time going to idly accept Gershwin’s work simply because its portrayals were milder misrepresentations of the black community. It still contained stereotypes and primitive undertones that the black audiences found intolerable. Some black American intellectuals approved the novel and stage adaptation, including James Weldon Johnson and Sterling Brown referring to DuBose as an “honest artist.”\(^353\) Black attendance was major during the New York premiere as interest grew in the operetta with questions of how the message and themes would be depicted. During the national tour, the amount of black press interest grew as well, especially after the performance in Washington D.C. The cast of *Porgy and Bess* refused to perform at the segregated National Theatre until integrated seating was allowed. After winning their case, the cast proceeded with the show.\(^354\) This event stressed the significance of an all black cast performing what they believed to be an authentic show of racial plight that should not be undermined by the enforcement of a segregated audience.

\(^352\) Ibid.
The two notable black critics that denounced the operetta were Hall Johnson and Duke Ellington. Ellington proclaimed that “the times are here to debunk Gershwin’s lampblack Negroisms.” Both reviewers raved about the performances from the actors but criticized the production itself as inauthentic and falsified folklore. The negative press from black critics only increased with the later revivals in the 1940s and 1950s. Dean Gordon Hancock wrote an article in the Defender condemning the play as detrimental to the process of integration on the American stage because there were so few white characters, though he admits that the creator had good intentions. He did not want to see the production tour the United States, as it was scheduled to, because he thought the image was harmful to the integration cause.

Despite the mostly negative feedback from the black press, there were still people involved in the productions that regarded it as an innovative opportunity to challenge the racial divide, which was reminiscent of what the original cast believed. Maya Angelou recounted her feelings in her memoir about playing Ruby in a 1955 production at La Scala: “This was something unique: Famous white American performers had appeared at La Scala, but never blacks. The moment the curtain opened, the singers pulled the elegant first-night audience into the harshness of black southern life…time and again the audience came to their feet, yelling and applauding.” Though the production was mixed in its racist and progressive elements, the people that worked closely with Gershwin, both white and black, saw his honest intentions. He felt he had an obligation to the black community as he worked tirelessly to authentically represent the music and culture, maintain an entirely black cast, and cultivate a new perception.

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356 Dean Gordon Hancock, “Dangerous Propaganda Says This Critic of Planned Tour,” Chicago Defender (17 April 1954), 10.
of the black community based in the reality of their humanity and dignity. Gershwin held a purpose of ousting the racism of government authority as the true villain in his story, as he believed the ones in power should be held accountable for such poor race relations in America at the time.  

Despite its initial financial failure on Broadway, the operetta became a popular American classic with constant revivals and films productions, especially after the 1970s. Its content depicted a sad setting for a black community, a circumstance imposed on them by an unjust power. The music and lyrics written by the Gershwins and Heyward set a backdrop meant to garner sympathy for the black community rather than the more negative caricatures often depicted in the contemporary theatre, but more importantly they gave the characters depth, humanity. Though it can be considered paternalistic and romanticized racism in hindsight, it was for its time a step forward in improving the image of the black American community on an American mainstream theatrical stage. On a greater level it represented the merging of minority theatre because of the collaboration involved in the creation of this truly American classic.

As for black American playwrights writing about the Jewish plight, there were no prominent plays in this particular era. There was a delay over some decades because black Americans struggled to produce their own story on a popular, or even public, American stage. Anti-Semitism was still a problem in America, but black Americans were faced with more overt and harsher obstacles of outright violence, segregation, and general exclusion from mainstream American society and art. In gaining a stronghold in commercial American theatre early on, it was more accessible for Jewish Americans to produce the plays and messages they desired. Gershwin and Heyward recognized the lack of a strong black American voice on the American

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stage and used their commercially successful positions to attempt to popularize this voice in an authentic manner through collaboration. Because black American theatre in this time was produced more subversively in churches and homes, the first popularized play on Jewish struggles written by a black American playwright was not seen until the Civil Rights Era.

Considered the first commercially successful black American playwright, Hansberry rose to theatrical fame in 1959 with *A Raisin in the Sun*, depicting the social and economic struggles of an urban black family.³⁵⁹ Like Gershwin, after winning commercial acclaim on Broadway, Hansberry decided to highlight Jewish struggles in her next play. Her unique perspective was drawn not only from her history in a marginalized group, but also from her marriage to Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish music publisher. She believed in looking forward instead of dwelling on the troublesome past. This ideal plays out in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1965). Her play presented Jewish hardship as well as depicted a positive archetype with her Jewish protagonist meant to represent moral righteousness steeped in optimism, acceptance, and forgiveness.³⁶⁰ He fantasized about a better future for human kind. “*Man! The human race!* Yesterday he made a wheel…so today we’re all demanding to know why he hasn’t made universal beauty and wisdom and truth too!...All he needs is a little more time…”³⁶¹ She understood that revolution was a process and it would take time to effectively ready a closed-minded population for true and meaningful change. Her deep understanding of this patience is rooted in the long struggle black Americans had and continued to endure. Hansberry’s message captured the glowing artistic ideal of the concerned and creative individualist that fights for equality and humanity on all fronts.

³⁵⁹ Philip U. Effiong. *In Search of a Model for African-American Drama: A Study of Selected Plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 31, 34. She was inspired by the social drama of the late nineteenth century that had inspired the revolutionary playwrights before her, and she also worked with DuBois in the early 1950s.
³⁶⁰ Schiff, *From Stereotype to Metaphor*, 159-160.
History has proven that, when faced with adversity, the affected groups will speak out and demand change through one medium or another. The period of intense social and racial unrest in the first half of the twentieth century was no different, and during this period theatre was becoming an increasingly popular American institution. The evolution of the black and Jewish American communities were occurring on different timelines both socially and theatrically, but they still came full circle in the end, as their goals were always the same in gaining acceptance. With help from their predecessors and intellectual mentors, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Clifford Odets both sought to embrace the individualistic nature of their respective communities and highlight the culture and history that set them apart from the majority population. They utilized variations of agitated propaganda theatre in order to assert their own group’s humanity and to be recognized and respected, negating the negative and popular propaganda that had come before them. In representing another group of American outsiders, Gershwin, and later Hansberry, took this notion a step further by creating theatre that propagated that equality, justice, and dignity must be awarded to all human beings. These later artists were only able to dramatize the other community after they were commercially successful in dramatizing their own community. They were also starting a social dialogue between the communities that encouraged collaboration, even if it was, at times, regarded with ambivalence. Embedded in the diverse black and Jewish American communities were intellectuals and romantics, idealists and strategists, and artists and militants. Breaking down the long-instituted racist propaganda and violence against these minority communities was a struggle that spanned centuries and generations, but the revolutionary idealistic artists had a righteous cause, a steadfast voice, and an open stage.
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