

## EXPLORING RACIST STEREOTYPES IN LITERATURE AND LIFE

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### Skills and strategies under development

#### Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
2. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
3. Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
4. Uses general skills and strategies to understand a variety of informational texts
5. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

#### Music

6. Understands the relationship between music and history and culture

#### Arts and Communication

7. Understands ways in which the human experience is transmitted and reflected in the arts and communication

#### United States History

8. Understands the extension, restriction and reorganization of political democracy after 1800
9. Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

#### Behavioral Studies

10. Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior

#### Life Skills: Working With Others

11. Contributes to the overall effort of a group
12. Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

### Overview

What are the roots and legacy of minstrelsy and the Scottsboro Trials? How can stereotypes be used not only to reinforce a bias, but also to satirize that very bias? In this lesson, students learn about the minstrel

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tradition, consider how it echoes through stereotypes of African-Americans today and explore the legacy of black stereotypes and the Scottsboro Trials in popular culture, history and literature.

### **Materials**

Computers with Internet access and projector; copies of the Langston Hughes poem «Minstrel Man»

### **Section 1: Introductory materials for home-reading and discussion**

#### ***1). Read the information:***

#### **Blackface Minstrelsy**

People who are unfamiliar with popular entertainment of the 19th century probably would not know what blackface minstrelsy is. Blackface minstrelsy, which derived its name from the white performers who blackened their faces with burnt cork, was a popular form of entertainment of the 19th century. In this form of entertainment, whites masquerading as blacks performed songs, dances, and dialect inspired by the blacks on Southern plantations. However, it wasn't until later that blacks themselves started participating in the minstrel shows. Blackface minstrelsy was known not only for its lively songs and dances, but also for its infamous use of outlandish stereotypes and offensive dialect. Examples of these exaggerated stereotypes include characters such as Jim Crow, who in the eyes of white people appeared as a naive, clumsy, devil-may-care southern plantation slave, who dressed in rags. Another example that represented the white people's idea of a typical black male was a character named Zip Coon or Dandy Jim, who portrayed the urban black as an absurd man who wore a blue coat with tails. However, not all people agreed with the misrepresentation of black people. According to information gathered from author Thomas Hampson's PBS World Wide Web site, called I Hear America Singing, Stephen Foster, who was made famous by early songs in minstrelsy, began to do away with any words that were really offensive or trashy in his dialect songs. He also refused to allow his sheet music to carry pictures that poked fun of blacks, and finally he created songs that depicted blacks with compassion and dignity.

Blackface minstrelsy should not only be remembered for its dialect, songs, or over-exaggerated stereotypes but also for its historical importance. According to author Robert C. Toll, in his book *Blacking Up*:

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The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America, blackface minstrelsy had its origins after the War of 1812, when America underwent many changes including increases in urban population growth and a «culture shock» that many Americans faced from not having their own distinct culture (3-5). Everything from literature, art, music, and theater was influenced by Europeans, and this led many Americans to search for something to distinguish themselves from their English brethren. Ironically, Toll credits an Englishman named Charles Matthews for helping Americans to fill this gap with his characterizations of blacks in his theatrical productions (26). Toll notes that Matthews, who was captivated by black music and dialect during his visit to the United States, began transcribing sermons, lore, songs, and speeches, collecting anything that was useful about blacks, and also studying the Negro dialect. Matthews also became one of the first, if not the first, white man to use Negro material in his acts. Matthews got the idea for the material after he observed the audience at the African Theater Company in New York City. During the black actor's performance of Hamlet's soliloquy, Matthews overheard the audience demanding the actor stop the soliloquy and instead sing «Possum up a Gum Tree». Matthews later studied and learned the song and used it in his «A Trip to America» act. According to Clayton W. Henderson, in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, when minstrel shows first began, their main purpose was just as an entr'acte in theaters or circuses (247). However, as their popularity grew, these minstrelsy shows started to become more independent from the circuses and theaters. New York City was the birthplace of the minstrel shows and also the place where these shows enjoyed the greatest popularity until the Civil War ended. New York contained numerous places for minstrel shows, including ten major minstrel houses that thrived during the 1850's, large theaters such as Bowery and Barnum's Museum, showboats that toured around New York, and newly built theaters known as «Ethiopian Opera Houses». The *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* states that the classic age of blackface minstrelsy lasted from 1840 until 1870; during this period, individual blackface performers began to join with other blackface performers to form duos, trios, and finally quartets. These troupes became so popular that they went to the White House, where they entertained such presidents as Polk, Fillmore, Tyler, and Pierce.

Blackface minstrelsy helped to produce many successful troupes, talented performers, and some very popular songs. One of the most successful early performers of the minstrel show was Thomas D. Rice, who became very popular for the song «Jump Jim Crow», which he learned to dance from an old Negro while on tour in 1828. Rice also helped to develop

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the minstrel show by increasing the use of black dialect plantation songs , banjo and fiddle music, virtuoso dancing, and crude humor, and he helped to establish a better sense of organization. In his Web site, Thomas Hampson speaks of another very talented performer of blackface minstrelsy: Daniel Decatur Emmett, a talented fiddler, singer, banjoist, comedian, and author of plays and songs for the minstrel show. Emmett was also a member of a popular minstrel group called the Virginia Minstrels and the composer of the famous pro- Southern walk-around called «Dixie». White performers were not the only ones to achieve success from blackface minstrelsy; blacks benefited, as well. Two of the most famous blacks to emerge from minstrelsy were James Bland and William Henry Lane, or «Master Juba». Bland became the first successful African-American songwriter; «Carry Me Back To Old Virginny» is one of his most famous songs. William Henry Lane, or «Master Juba», was a very talented dancer who was praised by critics such as Charles Dickens for his unique, lively dances that combined a European dance with African tradition to form his own distinctive style.

Much of the music that was performed by the blackface performers contained melodies that had originated in Britain. Some examples of these melodies and their origins include such songs as «Jim Crow», which resembled an Irish folk tune and an English stage song; «My Long Tail Blue», which had a melody similar to a Scottish folk song; and «Gumbo Chaff», which had a melody identical to that of an English song called «Bow Wow Wow». One of the most popular blackface groups was the Virginia Minstrels, which took on its name to enhance the authenticity of the group. The quartet—which consisted of Emmett, Billy Whitlock, Dick Pelham, and Frank Bower—was a unique group of individuals who knew how to get the audience involved in their show, whether it was by whistling, stomping their feet, or shouting along. Clayton Henderson credits the Virginia Minstrels for setting down the foundation for other groups to follow by presenting a new style for the other troupes to adapt to their shows. In this new style the quartet would gather around in a semicircle with the man playing the tambourine sitting across from the man playing the bones, while another person in the group served as both a musician and also as a dancer. The Virginia Minstrels performed their first show in this new format at the Bowery Amphitheatre in New York on February 6, 1843.

### **A Brief History of Blackface**

The stock characters of blackface minstrelsy have played a significant role in disseminating racist images, attitudes and perceptions worldwide. Every immigrant group was stereotyped on the music hall stage during the

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19th Century, but the history of prejudice, hostility, and ignorance towards black people has insured a unique longevity to the stereotypes. White America's conceptions of Black entertainers were shaped by minstrelsy's mocking caricatures and for over one hundred years the belief that Blacks were racially and socially inferior was fostered by legions of both white and black performers in blackface.

### *Racist Black Stereotypes*

Originating in the White man's characterizations of plantation slaves and free blacks during the era of minstrel shows (1830-1890), the caricatures took such a firm hold on the American imagination that audiences expected any person with dark skin, no matter what their background, to conform to one or more of the stereotypes:



*Jim Crow*

The term Jim Crow originated in 1830 when a White minstrel show performer, Thomas «Daddy» Rice, blackened his face with charcoal paste or burnt cork and danced a jig while singing the lyrics to the song, «Jump Jim Crow».



*Zip Coon*

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First performed by George Dixon in 1834, Zip Coon made a mockery of free blacks. An arrogant, ostentatious figure, he dressed in high style and spoke in a series of malaprops and puns that undermined his attempts to appear dignified.

Jim Crow and Zip Coon eventually merged into a single stereotype called simply «coon».



*Mammy*

Mammy is a source of earthy wisdom who is fiercely independent and brooks no backtalk. Although her image has changed a little over the years, the stereotype lives on. Her face can still be found on pancake boxes today.



*Uncle Tom*

Toms are typically good, gentle, religious and sober. Images of Uncle Toms were another favorite of advertisers and «Uncle Ben» is still being used to sell rice.



*Buck*

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The Buck is a large Black man who is proud, sometimes menacing, and always interested in White women.



*Wench/Jezebel*

The temptress. During the minstrel era, wenches were typically a male in female garb. In film, wenches were usually female mulattos.



*Mulatto*

A mixed-blood male or female. In film, often portrayed as a tragic figure who either intentionally or unintentionally passes for White until they discover they have Negro blood or are discovered by another character to be Black.



*Pickaninny*

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Picaninnies have bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips and wide mouths into which they stuff huge slices of watermelon.

These stereotypes were staples during the minstrel era and carried over into vaudeville and film.

### **Blackface in Minstrel Shows**

Blackface makeup was either a layer of burnt cork on a layer of coca butter or black grease paint. In the early years exaggerated red lips were painted around their mouths, like those of today's circus clowns. In later years the lips were usually painted white or unpainted. Costumes were usually gaudy combinations of formal wear; swallowtail coats, striped trousers, large hats.

White audiences in the 19th Century wouldn't accept real black entertainers on stage unless they performed in blackface makeup. One of the first Blacks to perform in blackface for White audiences was the man who invented tap dancing, William Henry Lane, aka Master Juba. Lane's talent and skill were extraordinary and eventually he became famous enough that he was able to perform in his own skin.

In the late 1800s one of the most popular of the blackface entertainments was the adaptation of Uncle Tom's Cabin; an antislavery tale, it met with few objections even from anti-theater religious leaders. A mixture of minstrel show, circus, and zoo, with trained dogs, ponies, and even a crocodile, it remained the most popular play in America for over a century.

The American minstrel show was effectively dead by WW1, yet some old-timers continued to peddle blackface stereotypes. It's one of the interesting twists of history that in the early years of the twentieth century, the main purveyors of the old-fashioned blackface minstrel tradition were Black performers, who'd began in show business wearing the blackface mask and were reluctant to give it up.

But they also had little choice in the roles they were offered. Until well into the 1950s, Black male actors were limited to stereotypical roles: Coons, for example, Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland, and Willie Best; and Toms, the most famous were Bill «Bojangles» Robinson and Eddie «Rochester» Anderson. Likewise, the only film roles for Black women were maids and mammys and the most famous mammy was Hattie McDaniel.

### **Silent Movies**

Movies have always been a powerful medium for the propagation of racial stereotypes. Early silent movies such as «The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon» in 1904, «The Slave» in 1905, «The Sambo Series» 1909-1911 and «The Nigger» in 1915 offered the existing stereotypes through an exciting new medium.



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The premiere of «Birth of a Nation» in 1915 marked a change in emphasis from the pretentious and inept Jim Crow stereotypes to that of the Savage Negro. In D.W. Griffith's film, the Ku Klux Klan rescues the South, and Southern women in particular, from savage Blacks who have gained power over Whites with the help of Northern carpetbaggers. Griffith later admitted that his film was designed to, «create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men».

### **Race Movies**

Northern Blacks responded to «Birth of a Nation» by producing their own movies. «Race movies» were all-black affairs that were made for Black audiences. But few of the small independent Black film companies survived the Depression plus the added costs associated with the change in technology from silent to sound, and eventually Hollywood stepped in and took control of Black filmmaking by providing the financing. Race movies then changed from organic Black entertainment to knock-offs of standard Hollywood fare; like westerns, crime dramas and musicals; but featuring an all-Black cast.

### **Racist Cartoons**

Between 1930 and 1950, animators at Warner Brothers, Walt Disney, MGM, Merrie Melodies, Looney Tunes, R.K.O., and many other independent studios, produced thousands of cartoons that perpetuated the same old racist black stereotypes. This period is now known as the golden age of animation, and until the mid 1960s, cartoons were screened before all feature films. Later, these same cartoons would cycle endlessly for decades on broadcast TV or cable syndication.

Eventually the worst of the racist cartoons were removed from television or heavily edited, but many are available on the internet if one knows where to look. To modern audiences, many of these cartoons are quite shocking and graphically illustrate how pervasive and institutionalized racism was in our culture just a short time ago.

### **The Civil Rights Movement**

When integration became Federal law in the 1950s it put small Black theaters out of business and that brought an end to the production of race movies. Blacks continued to play servant roles in mainstream movies but the only Blacks to appear in early television were those who performed racist caricatures. In 1951, Amos 'N' Andy ranked 13th in the Nielsen ratings and in 1952 it won an Emmy award. The NAACP responded by

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initiating a boycott of its sponsor, Blatz beer. By April 1953 Blatz withdrew its sponsorship and CBS announced «The network has bowed to the change in national thinking». Yet the series was in syndication more than 4 times as long as it was broadcast on the network. It remained in syndication for 13 years after it was withdrawn from the network schedule. As late as 1963, it still played on 50 US stations. The programs were finally locked in vaults as of 1966, but videotapes and DVDs continue to circulate among collectors.

NAACP protests also resulted in blackface scenes being cut from TV showings of such films as *Babes in Arms* and *Holiday Inn*. 15 years passed from Amos 'N' Andy until the introduction of another African-American situation comedy (*Julia* in 1968). The series failed to gain an audience and that may explain why during the 1970's, stereotypical «coons and mammies» were again featured in shows such as *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *What's Happening* and *Diff'rent Strokes*.

### **Blacksploitation Films**

The 1970s also saw a resurgence of movies tailored to Black audiences in a genre called «Blacksploitation» films. Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971) starred Melvin Van Peebles, who also wrote, produced and directed. In the film, his character is a black prostitute who is forced to go on the run after he saves a young Black Panther who was being beaten by two corrupt White cops. The film is often credited with the invention of the blaxploitation genre, because its success proved that there was a lucrative market for such films. The film cost only \$150,000 – most of it put up by Peebles – and grossed over \$15 million. *Superfly*, *Shaft*, *Blackula*, *Black Caesar*, *Hell up in Harlem*, *Black Gestapo*, *Foxy Brown*, and many others quickly followed.

Most Blacksploitation films were small, independent productions that dealt with crime and the effects of illegal drugs on the inner cities. The cause was usually portrayed as being a result of White racism and exploitation of poor Blacks. Most White cops and politicians were portrayed as corrupt, forcing Black antiheroes to take matters into their own hands. Heavy on graphic sex scenes, gratuitous nudity and violence, as well as stereotypes of pimps, whores, and black criminals, the films eventually generated a backlash led by Black leaders that put an end to blacksploitation films by 1980.

### **An Enduring Legacy**

In *Bamboozled* (2000), Spike Lee addresses the legacy of blackface minstrelsy, and raises the question of who is wearing the blackface now. Many of the Black characters in television comedies today are derived from

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the same racist stereotypes of blacks that have existed since the days of minstrel shows. The FOX Television sitcom, *South Central* (1994) was, in the words of Brotherhood Crusade President Danny Blackwell, «the Amos ‘n’ Andy of 1994». The Parent ‘Hood (1995-2000), a program aimed at family viewers, relied on working class coon and mammy caricatures for a good portion of its humor. 180 years after «Daddy» Rice donned blackface makeup and sang *Jump Jim Crow* for white audiences, Black families in television comedies remain negative, stereotypical portrayals that White television producers and distributors believe the majority of the American public imagines Black families to be.

Tyler Perry, currently the most prolific Black producer, director, actor, writer, and one-man multimedia conglomerate has populated many of his stories with classic stereotypes. His latest blend of low comedy, *Madea Goes to Jail*, is centered around a modern-day mammy character. The recurring character of Mabel «Madea» Simmons appears in much of Perry’s work and is played in drag by Perry himself. Perry first introduced Madea in his 1999 play *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* and the character has appeared in many of his subsequent works. Perry has said he based Madea on an aunt who lives in Georgia, as well as on his mother and several other women he knew from his childhood.

In 2009, director Spike Lee criticized Perry’s work, saying, «Each artist should be allowed to pursue their artistic endeavors but I still think there is a lot of stuff out today that is ‘coonery’ and buffoonery...As African Americans, we’re not one monolithic group so there is room for all of that, but at the same time, for me, the imaging is troubling and it harkens back to Amos ‘n’ Andy». Perry has bristled at the criticism but he also has gone on to much more serious work, producing with Oprah Winfrey the critically acclaimed, *Push: Based on the Novel by Sapphire*, an uncompromising look at one Black girl’s journey from sexual, physical and mental abuse, and teen pregnancy to adulthood and independence.

### **Rap Music**

Negative stereotypes of Blacks are a staple of Black music videos that glorify gangsterism. In Rap music and videos, the minstrel-show plantation has been born again as the «hood». While the setting has changed from an idyllic plantation to the mean streets of urban America, the process is the same: a black culture is being marketed for white profit, with black performers portraying racist stereotypes. Performers claim that they represent authentic black America, while critics decry the glorification of ugly caricatures and its effects on Black youth.

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### 2). *Discuss the questions:*

1. How did blackface minstrelsy begin?
2. Why did it spread in the 1830s?
3. What was a blackface minstrel show?
4. Who went to the shows?
5. How were the minstrel shows racist?
6. Was blackface minstrelsy only about caricaturing blacks?
7. How did class frictions relate to blackface minstrelsy?
8. How did class issues relate to the race issues?
9. Although blackface minstrelsy was racist, did it have any benefit for African Americans?
10. What's the connection between blackface minstrelsy and rock and roll?
11. What legacy did blackface minstrelsy create for American culture today?
12. Should we change Foster's songs to remove their racist aspects, or not perform them?

### Section 2: In-class Activities

#### 1. Warm-Up

- 1). Distribute or project the Langston Hughes poem «Minstrel Man». Ask students to read it silently and respond to it orally or in written.

#### **Langston Hughes - Minstrel Man**

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter  
And my throat  
Is deep with song,  
You do not think  
I suffer after  
I have held my pain  
So long?

Because my mouth  
Is wide with laughter,  
You do not hear  
My inner cry?  
Because my feet  
Are gay with dancing,  
You do not know  
I die?

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2). Then play the video from the Favorite Poem Project (<http://www.favoritepoem.org/videos.html>) in which a student named Pov Chin reads and responds to «Minstrel Man».

3). Discuss the following questions:

– What central idea from the poem does this California student respond to?

– Who is the minstrel man?

– In invoking him, to what tradition is Hughes referring? What is your understanding of this figure, based on the Hughes poem?

– In what way do you wear masks every day?

4). Show images or film clips, like the blackface montage or one of these two slightly less extreme film clips (<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/minstrel/movie/mimovhp.html>) .

Ask:

– In what way do these images offend modern sensibilities?

– Why do they make us uncomfortable?

– In what way have they permeated modern perceptions of blacks?

– How do images of blacks in the media, movies and music reflect or resist this tradition?

– In what way do these and other stereotypes of blacks – even in portrayals of President Obama – reinforce racist attitudes?

– How might they also challenge and stimulate critical thinking about those very attitudes?

5). Now switch gears and ask students what they know about the Scottsboro Trials ([http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scottsboro/SB\\_acct.html](http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scottsboro/SB_acct.html)). Share this brief history, from a review of the play about which they will read next:

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The Scottsboro case, which transfixed and divided Americans in the early 1930s, began when nine black youths were arrested in 1931 on a freight train passing through Alabama and charged with rape by two white women also on board. White Alabamans were up in arms, lynch mobs were formed, and the young men – who were mostly teenagers – were convicted in speedy trials with their race serving as the chief evidence against them. Most were quickly sentenced to death. Appeals led to retrials, convictions and more appeals for several years before the defendants were eventually paroled or escaped.

### 2. Reading and discussion

In «Hard Steps to Walk a Fine Line in ‘Scottsboro,’ « Patricia Cohen discusses the play «The Scottsboro Boys», which uses «the minstrel-show tradition, so clearly offensive to modern sensibilities, to drive home the horror of one of American history’s most shameful episodes of racial injustice».

#### **Hard Steps to Walk a Fine Line in ‘Scottsboro’**

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/theater/09scottsboro.html>

By PATRICIA COHEN

Published: November 8, 2010

In the new Broadway musical «The Scottsboro Boys», a black actor plays the part of Samuel Leibowitz, a white Jewish lawyer from New York who defends nine African-American youths wrongly imprisoned for raping two white women in the Alabama town Scottsboro in 1931.

That would be tricky enough if the script played it straight. It doesn’t.

The actor, Forrest McClendon, is playing an actor playing the lawyer. Specifically, he portrays a comic fixture of old-time minstrel shows, here called Mister Tambo, who delivers lines and lyrics in a broadly caricatured style.

The idea is to use the minstrel-show tradition, so clearly offensive to modern sensibilities, to drive home the horror of one of American history’s most shameful episodes of racial injustice. And Mr. McClendon doesn’t mind saying this was one very fraught assignment.

«It was absolutely a very, very fine line to walk», he explained, as he sat with some of his fellow cast members in the lower lobby of the Lyceum Theater before a recent performance.

The challenge was a result of a bold decision by the musical’s white creators, John Kander and Fred Ebb (who died in 2004) – the celebrated authors of «Cabaret» and «Chicago», blockbuster hits also with a subversive strain – to use provocative, buffoonish and theatrically extreme language to dramatize a disturbing chapter in American history.

For the African-American actors, however, it means inhabiting roles that in their original incarnations – when minstrel shows constituted the most popular form of live entertainment in 19th-century America – were meant to debase blacks and sentimentalize slavery.

At the same time, the cast must bring the audience members along for the ride, making them comfortable enough to laugh at cartoonish portrayals of blustering white sheriffs, prancing Southern belles and shuffling former slaves while connecting to the anguish of lives ruined by bigotry.

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Mr. McClendon said he started by treating Leibowitz as realistically as possible. «I literally prepared an astrological chart for him to really just do everything that I could to channel his real spirit», he said with a laugh. Then, selecting details garnered from a filmed interview with Leibowitz's son, Mr. McClendon took the character to a ridiculous extreme.

«His own son talked about how quick he was with a one-liner, how he had this baritone voice he would use to just chilling effect», Mr. McClendon said. «I used certain aspects of his speaking voice with a little bit of Cagney and a little bit of Jolson».

When trying out different characterizations, he said he was encouraged when Mr. Kander told him: «You cannot go too far. Just go. «

Mr. McClendon, like J. C. Montgomery, his understudy, had played the minstrel before as part of different theatrical productions about the American songwriter Stephen Foster. Mr. McClendon also appeared in blackface as the master of ceremonies during a production of «The Threepenny Opera». In his eyes a subversive thread ran through the minstrel tradition.

By contrast, Joshua Henry, who stars as one of the boys, Haywood Patterson, was initially shocked by it.

«Just hearing it was a minstrel show kind of repelled me immediately», Mr. Henry said. After reading the script, however, he understood that the creative team, which included the Tony-winning director Susan Stroman and the librettist David Thompson, were using it to underscore the era's racism: «The boys at the end take control of the story and the way that it's told».

Patterson is the moral center of the show, refusing to admit falsely to a crime even to obtain his freedom, and his part is the most naturalistic. There is one scene during the first of a series of trials, though, when Patterson adopts the shucking, submissive stance expected by the white judge and prosecutors in an attempt to persuade them that he is telling the truth.

«I hated it», Mr. Henry said, recalling the early rehearsals. «It made my skin crawl». But he found it true to the way Patterson described his own experiences in a 1950 book. «If he needed something, a roll of toilet paper, he would have to raise his voice up a little bit and say, 'Yessir boss, yessir boss,' and put on a big smile», Mr. Henry said.

«That was a very foreign feeling to give over to 100 percent», he added. «It is probably one of the hardest sections of the show, even now».

The youngest cast member, Jeremy Gumbs, 12, was probably more puzzled than disturbed by the minstrel form. He admits that even after reading the script and score a couple of times, «I still didn't understand it». Now, he said, he sees it as a useful device for weaving horrifying historical details into the story line. His character, Eugene Williams, just shy of his

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13th birthday when he was arrested, was forced to sleep near the electric chair. His nightmares are brought to life onstage in a tap-dance number titled «Electric Chair» that mixes the comic and the grotesque.

Colman Domingo, who plays Mr. Bones, the sheriff and an assortment of other roles, had no experience with minstrelsy, but said all he needed to hear was that Mr. Kander, Mr. Ebb and Ms. Stroman were involved. «I'm so drawn to unconventional and daring storytelling», said Mr.

Like the other cast members, Mr. Domingo did research and watched clips from minstrel shows, from which he occasionally borrowed.

Both the creators and actors worked hard at finding the right tone for each character. For the sadistic sheriff, he said, Ms. Stroman told him to experiment first with playing the character completely realistically («that threw the show off balance») to an over-the-top spoof («that would have colored it too brightly»).

Later, Mr. Domingo, as the prosecuting lawyer, sings a song based on an actual statement made by the Attorney General to the jury: «Is justice in this case going to be bought and sold in Alabama with Jew money from New York?»

«The biggest question I had was how 'Jew money' would land in New York», Mr. Domingo said.

He remembers that when the musical first ran Off Broadway at the Vineyard Theater, a woman booed him; there have been walkouts on Broadway since the show's opening. Last week a writer in The Amsterdam News said she was «offended» and «unamused» by the show. «Off-color songs were being sung and offensive lines said as actors acted like buffoons», she wrote. And this past Saturday a small group of protesters, most of whom had not seen the musical, picketed the Lyceum.

Theatergoers do receive an insert in their Playbills that recounts the history of the Scottsboro incident and describes the minstrel tradition. Still, Mr. Domingo said he understood how some people might initially be thrown off balance in the first minutes of the show. He remembers Mr. Kander telling him how his «Cabaret» team ended up cutting a derogatory reference to Jews in the song «If You Could See Her Through My Eyes» after out-of-town audiences reacted negatively in 1966. (The full lyrics were restored in the 1972 movie and subsequent revivals.)

Audience members at «The Scottsboro Boys» are sometimes unsure how to respond to the buffoonery, Mr. Domingo said. From his perch onstage, he said, the show goes over best when there is a more even mix of black and white audience members.

«It becomes easier», he said, «for people to understand they can actually laugh».



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### Questions for discussion and reading comprehension:

- How is the decision by the show’s white creators to use minstrelsy to dramatize the Scottsboro Trials «bold»?
- What dilemma does this play pose for black actors? How did various cast members react?
- What is the idea behind using the minstrel show tradition to present the story of the Scottsboro Trials?
- Besides presenting audiences with racist stereotypes of blacks, what other line gave one actor pause? Why?
- How have audiences reacted to the show? Given the history you now know, why might some people still find minstrel imagery offensive?

### Section 3: Out-of –class Activities

Tell students that they will be breaking into small groups to explore the legacy of black stereotypes and the Scottsboro Trials in popular culture, history or literature, depending on the focus of your course. Natural and direct connections for American history include:

- the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement, and in English, titles like:
  - «The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn»,
  - «To Kill a Mockingbird»,
  - «Black Boy» and
  - «I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings».

### Possible topics for exploration include:

- the Scottsboro Trials themselves,
- Jim Crow laws
- racist stereotypes like the minstrel, blackface, mammy, Uncle Tom, pickaninny and jezebel,
- modern vestiges of these events and cultural artifacts.

Assign or allow groups to choose topics.

Students begin their research by using classroom, library and Internet resources to delve into the history of their topic, endeavoring to discover its origins and to trace its influence throughout history and, indeed, in the present day.

Then, students turn their attention to the historical moment or literature being studied in class and consider how this piece reflects, reinforces or resists racism by pulling and analyzing quotations that touch on history or stereotypes.

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To present their research, students will **create multimedia «glogs»**, which are essentially e-posters enabled with 2.0 functionality so that creators can include words, images, music, videos and hyperlinks to create a «living» document. (Note that though this site <http://edu.glogster.com/> is free for educators and private for students, it does require registration.) Examples: the glogs on racism and prejudice in «Tom Sawyer» (<http://spy4rev.edu.glogster.com/racism-and-prejudice/>) and «The Grapes of Wrath» (<http://felicia22.edu.glogster.com/grapesofwrath-2/>).

Tell students to include three things they learned about their topic and three ways it influences popular culture, history or what they are reading in class. They should also try to incorporate images and multimedia along with text. Use these instructions to get started (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/25030064/Glogster-Instructions-Revised>):

*A Glog is like a poster, only better. Glogs allow you to create an online poster using photographs, images, graphics, video files and sound files. Glogs allow you to add hyperlinks to other websites. When you use a Glog, you are referred to as a «glogger».*

*The benefits of the Glogster Edu version are:*

- *Students can't see content from the regular Glogster site when they are making Glogs in the EDU zone.*
- *You can embed your work in wiki pages.*
- *All Glogs made by students on the teacher page are PRIVATE.*
- *You can easily set up accounts for your students... just register for the EDU zone, fill in the number of student accounts or add accounts from your dashboard.*
- *Each teacher and all his students are connected, and students can leave comments on other student Glogs.*
- *You can see Glogs of your students on their profiles.*

Share student glogs in class or post to a classroom Wiki or Web site, and hold a class discussion on what students discovered and what questions still remain.

### Section 3. Going Further

Having explored the minstrel tradition and studied the history of the Scottsboro Trials, remind students that «Scottsboro Boys» audiences «receive an insert in their Playbills that recounts the history of the Scottsboro incident and describes the minstrel tradition».

Students use what they have learned to write a one-page statement educating potential audience members about the Scottsboro Trials and the

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minstrel tradition that might serve this purpose. Students should not only be sure that their audience understands the history and legacy of minstrelsy, but also understands the purpose to which it's been put in this play.

Alternatively, students might draft a similar statement describing the minstrelsy tradition and the trials and how they echo through the historical moment or literary work being studied in class. Share these in class or post on a classroom Wiki alongside the student glogs.

*(By Amanda Christy Brown and Holly Epstein Ojalvo,  
From The New York Times Learning Network, November 11, 2010)*