

## FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

In “Minstrelsy and Brechtian Epic Theater: An Analysis of Satire,” James Robson investigates Kander and Ebb’s musical *The Scottsboro Boys* in order to formulate an appropriate critical response to an enigmatic and, some say, offensive musical by the men who created *Cabaret*. The play is set up as a minstrel show in the same way that *Cabaret* is set in a 1930s Berlin cabaret, but the problem for the audience is that the German cabaret tradition is grounded in social and political satire, while the American minstrel tradition is grounded in promoting racism and offensive stereotypes as “entertainment.” Are Kander and Ebb being disrespectful to the nine “Scottsboro boys,” who were wrongly convicted and imprisoned for raping two white women, by placing them in a minstrel show in a way that seems offensive, or at the very least insensitive, or are they employing a more complex dramatic strategy?

Robson’s answer is that Kander and Ebb have created an approach to satire based on “Brechtian epic theater.” This is a sophisticated argument well supported by reference to the primary text as well as to a range of critical sources, the core of which is that Brechtian theater is politically motivated and not intended to create identification between characters and audience. The effect is supposed to be alienating, confusing, off-putting, offensive, the point of which is to place the audience in the position of taking responsibility for their own response—which in this case means taking responsibility for racial injustice in America. This is an approach to musical theater that is bound to make many theater-goers uncomfortable, and that is the point, though it is certainly not the point of most American musicals.

Robson’s argument is valuable because it can help us to make sense of a work that stands in a theatrical tradition that we in America might not be familiar with, or know how to respond to. *The Scottsboro Boys* turns the traditional American musical on its head: we don’t walk out feeling good and humming the tunes; we walk out feeling bad and wondering what to do about the problem at the heart of the drama, and of the “entertainment.” Robson astutely investigates the tension Kander and Ebb have created between the American minstrel tradition and the Brechtian tradition of alienating or “epic” theater, the unbearable tension created by the duality of characters who are both minstrel-show caricatures and real-life men who were the victims of a Depression-era tragedy that, upon further reflection, turns out to be our ongoing national tragedy.

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WR 100: The Theater Now

## FROM THE WRITER

*The Scottsboro Boys* premiered on Broadway in 2010 for a run of only two months and received twelve Tony Award nominations, but failed to win any. How was this possible, I wondered? How could a show that lasted a mere 49 performances receive so many nominations? After attending the performance at the SpeakEasy Stage Company, our class had a discussion about the musical. Among the foremost things examined was the racial tension present in the show brought forth by the minstrel themes. From there, I read an abundance of theater reviews on the show and discovered it wasn't merely the fact that the musical wasn't "entertaining" that led the musical to close on Broadway, but that the structure of the play as a minstrel show and the use of blackface caused an abundance of discomfort and anger towards the musical and its writers.

I then realized I wanted to take the methods of Brecht, a German playwright, and apply them to this show to analyze the play as a Brechtian work. In doing so, I give light to the fact that *The Scottsboro Boys* is a piece of satire to comment on historical racism; Kander and Ebb's use of minstrelsy is designed so that the audience is challenged to formulate a critical response not only on the events of the Scottsboro Trials, but also on an entire time period in American history. This paper is a way for me to help myself and others by explaining how this entertaining, upbeat, and shocking show represents the oppression and dehumanization present at a dark time in America. Although the show applies the racist form of minstrelsy, Kander and Ebb scrutinize the medium of theater itself through the use of satire. While the show may not have been performed for long, the actors, book, and music combine to create an impactful piece of theater through Brechtian methods.

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JAMES ROBSON

## MINSTRELSY AND BRECHTIAN EPIC THEATER: AN ANALYSIS OF SATIRE

Kander and Ebb's musical *The Scottsboro Boys* addresses a historical event in which nine African American males are unjustly accused and convicted of raping two white women, a conviction based on racist fears that were present in the deep South. Throughout the show, Kander and Ebb use vaudeville music and the form of the minstrel tradition in a way that entertains, but also alienates the audience. The intended satirical application of minstrel theater as a means to comment on racism in America establishes a duality within *The Scottsboro Boys* between minstrel theater and the Brechtian characteristics of the play. While minstrel theater isn't inherently Brechtian, the means by which satire is used within the musical creates a dynamic that uses racism and the minstrel tradition to create Brechtian theater in *The Scottsboro Boys*. The structure of the musical as a minstrel show offers compelling connections between past and present racial tensions while simultaneously developing Brechtian characteristics and satirical commentary on minstrelsy.

Based on the concept of white supremacy and the belief in black inferiority, minstrelsy is distinguished by the presence of exaggerated stereotypes of African Americans. Black performers during the Jim Crow era combined blackface with the newly popular genre of vaudeville and brought a black political agenda to their stage performances, a premise very prevalent in *The Scottsboro Boys*. However, the traits of minstrelsy in the play used in a satirical sense by Kander and Ebb also contribute to Brechtian elements of the show. The epic theater of Brecht appeals not to the spectator's feelings but encourages the audience to adopt a more critical attitude; Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright, believed that an audience should not become emotionally involved in a play and that theater should be capable of provoking social change. Brecht's plays may be typified by blurred lines of characterization and an objective style of acting so that observers and actors become detached. ("Epic Theatre of Brecht"). The duality of the presence of both minstrel and Brechtian elements within *The Scottsboro Boys* ultimately leaves the audience to think critically on this satirical commentary on the racist attitude in the South at the time of the Scottsboro trials and the minstrel tradition.

In Brechtian Epic theatre, characterization is especially important in establishing an emotional disconnection between the audience and the actors on the stage, a device effectively used by the creative team of *The Scottsboro Boys*. Ayşe Yönkül states that within Brechtian theatre, "disabling the emotions and enabling the critical thinking are mostly achieved by the characterization" (61). Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo, two African American figures also prevalent in minstrelsy in the nineteenth century, present characterizations of the Deputy and Sheriff. Mr. Bones exclaims in an exaggerated fashion: "All you colored boys, unload! You're talking to a white man. Sherriff white man, to you!" (Kander et al.12). Sympathy that could be felt for the Scottsboro boys is upended as the characterization provides a comic element to what is otherwise a serious moment when the boys are getting arrested. In a review of the 2010 Broadway production, Belinda Chiu

contends that the two roles of Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo are “both essential to the minstrel theme that prevented the play from making any advances in emotional progress” because the minstrelsy structure requires there be little emotional attachment to the characters in the play. The many characters Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo perform within the play adhere both to the minstrel tradition and also contribute to an essential aspect of Brechtian theater: a lack of connection between the audience and characters present. While the structure and face of minstrelsy is upheld through their characters, the white caricatures that they represent at times provide racist tension that is unsettling.

Characters in *The Scottsboro Boys* follow both the qualities of the minstrel show and Brechtian epic theater. In her definition of the Brechtian epic, Yönkul comments that “among the technique of [Brechtian] thought, there is surreal casting, naming the characters in relation to their social roles and professions, and letting one actor play several roles on the stage” (61). The names of the roles played by Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo are written solely as their social roles: “Public Defender,” “Deputy,” and “Sheriff.” Many of the characters exist only as caricatures, conforming to the theatricality of a minstrel show where a core group of actors play multiple roles, which is a typical Brechtian device. Maryanne Boelcskevny, Director of Undergraduate African American Studies at Boston University, claims that the minstrel show “offers up a rich mixture [of characterizations] including female impersonations,” which is evident through the inclusion of drag present in *The Scottsboro Boys*. In the play, Charlie and Ozie, two of the accused boys, appear in drag to portray Ruby Bates and Victoria Price. *The Scottsboro Boys* includes representations that blur the lines of identity between the characters rather than the usual distinctive individual, which is often used in Brechtian theater to prevent the formation of empathy for characters in the play. Due to the various caricatures each actor is responsible for playing, the musical adheres to the definition of minstrel theater, as the several roles and generic names further develop Brechtian features.

Perhaps one of the most important Brechtian aspects of the play is the way in which the creators use the characterizations and racist conventions of minstrelsy at the conclusion of the show to question and provoke the audience instead of providing resolution. In the final song, “The Scottsboro Boys,” the actors come out in blackface makeup, and when the Interlocutor calls for the minstrels to commence the closing dance, the Cakewalk, the minstrels refuse, wipe their faces, and leave the stage. The stage directions read, “There is no anger or animosity” in the act, but simply, “just a feeling of pride and resolution,” not leaving a sense of closure by the end of the show, but a questioning, critical sense of racism and freedom (Kander et al. 94). Characteristic of Brechtian epic theater, the style, as Yönkul claims, “does not serve for certain ideologies because it does not give direct messages; it lays bare the facts and figures from several aspects and wants its reader or the audience to think critically on the data and to render a verdict themselves” (76). The ending of the show conforms to these traits because there is no sense of closure, and the audience is left to think critically about racism and the fairness of the Scottsboro trials.

Instead of eliciting emotion through the individual characters, Kander and Ebb’s emphasis on the structure of the show and its satirical portrayal of minstrelsy is another important aspect of the play’s duality. In Megan Stahl’s article “Too Big for Broadway: The limits of historical and theatrical empathy in *Parade* and *The Scottsboro Boys*,” she contends that the multivalent qualities of the minstrel show “allow the actors to seamlessly transition among the various characters they embody throughout the story, but in doing so they limit the opportunities for theatrical empathy” (71). In this way, *The Scottsboro Boys* aligns itself with aspects and goals of Brechtian epic theater to limit audience connection as the form and message of the show are developed through the multiple

characters each actor performs; Kander and Ebb use these exaggerated stereotypes to highlight the satirical elements of the show and alienate the audience. Here, this Brechtian device allows the audience to more clearly understand and experience the racist conventions of minstrel theatre.

Although the musical exemplifies typical characteristics of minstrelsy, it challenges the form and moves past traditional boundaries of the genre as racist elements depict a reversal of the structure that further highlights the play's Brechtian characteristics. In one instance, the Scottsboro Boys are portrayed as minstrels and mock white supremacy, while traditionally whites used blackface as a caricature of African Americans. Kristin Wolski observes that

Kander and Ebb use minstrelsy to tell the story of the historic Scottsboro Boys trials with actors portraying the Scottsboro Boys as minstrels; at the same time, they employ a number of devices to subvert minstrelsy stereotypes and thereby comment on racism.

The devices Wolski mentions relate directly to the minstrel structure of the show through the usage of blackface by the Scottsboro boys and the racist lyrics that Tambo and Bones sing. In "The Minstrel March/Hey, Hey, Hey, Hey," Tambo and Bones exclaim: "Wheel about, turnabout, and do just so. Every time dey wheel about, dey jump Jim Crow!" (Kander et al. 6) The direct mentioning of Jim Crow with its racist connotations in such a pointed confrontation with the audience unsettles in a way that alienates and disturbs. Similar to the conventions of Brechtian epic theater, Kander and Ebb use this spin on a typical theatrical style to highlight not only the racist conventions of minstrelsy, but also the historical perspective of racism present in the trials.

*The Scottsboro Boys* not only comments on racism towards African Americans in the South, but also offers a broader depiction of discrimination and prejudice occurring in America at the dawn of the Great Depression. When the character of Samuel Leibowitz is introduced, the Scottsboro Boys' attorney from New York is presented as a savior but is also depicted as a racist. In the song "That's Not the Way We Do Things," Leibowitz expresses his astonishment at the segregation present in the courthouse, but then goes on to sing "Just ask my maid Magnolia [...] Just ask my cook Jemima [...] Just ask our colored Laundress and I'm sure they'll agree [...] the folks up north all want to see you go free" (Kander et al. 59). Although Leibowitz states that he is for equality, he describes the conditions in which African Americans in the North are still subjected to jobs in which they are slaves, although they are "free." Meghan Stahl contends that "Leibowitz's song broadens the show's sociopolitical focus further to include the misguided assumption that racial prejudice has been eradicated in the northern states" (76). Kander and Ebb further comment through the exaggerated characterizations in the minstrel show to critique racial and ethnic prejudice, and leave the audience to think critically on minstrelsy. Through this mechanism, the satire of the play showcases the historical racism during the trials and simultaneously develops Brechtian elements that force a critical outlook on the show instead of only enjoyment.

The use of minstrelsy is inherently Brechtian, as blackface, for some critics, is extremely uncomfortable. The critical response following the opening of the show at the Lyceum Theatre mainly focuses on the ironic and satirical elements juxtaposed with the seriousness of the subject matter. Michael Feingold's review in *The Village Voice* proposes an analysis that criticizes the use of minstrelsy in such an upbeat manner and questions the permissibility of staging a blackface minstrel troupe. Feingold asserts that the "minstrel-style heartiness defuses the historical agony. You can sometimes please people by shocking them, but trying to please them and offend them at the same

time achieves neither.” Given the grim reality of the Scottsboro trials, Feingold contends that satirical portrayal of characters based on historical events is inappropriate. Feingold, and critics with a similar point of view, maintain the use of a minstrel narrative, a theatrical device used for the perpetuation of racial stereotypes, lacks empathy and respect for the gravity of the subject matter.

Meghan Stahl examines the effect of the show in an empathic sense, but does *The Scottsboro Boys* truly “present a form of entertainment now considered detestable” (78)? Boelcskevsky claims that there is “little space now for theater as *Verfremdung* [distancing or alienation]. Audiences tend to want to be entertained and maybe educated, not alienated or assaulted.” However, Kander and Ebb’s comment on social injustices in a manner that goes beyond the limits of conventional musical theatre is extremely effective in *The Scottsboro Boys*. Although current audiences may want to be entertained more than alienated or challenged, Brechtian theater, through the provocation of social change, is a necessity in modern American society in which these problems still exist. The Brechtian elements are used to comment on past historical failures as the minstrelsy structure is used to comment on the racism present during the trials, but both strategies point outward to the audience and the present historical moment.

In their satiric representation of the trials, racism, and the minstrel tradition, Kander and Ebb create Brechtian theater in *The Scottsboro Boys*. The racist conventions of minstrel theater establish a Brechtian dynamic throughout the play as the musical entertains but also promote social change through heightened historical consciousness. The play thrusts a satirical representation of racism during the trials and the racist conventions of minstrel theater upon the audience, a convention widely observed in Brechtian works. These inescapable and troubling historical realities impede the audience’s imagination; spectators are limited in their ability to derive their own meaning from the show as it is predetermined by history. Through the Brechtian portrayal of the story, however, the show is impactful, and while this strategy may not be viewed as socially acceptable by some, it is a necessary commentary on the racism present throughout American history, and toward which the audience is challenged to formulate its own response.

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