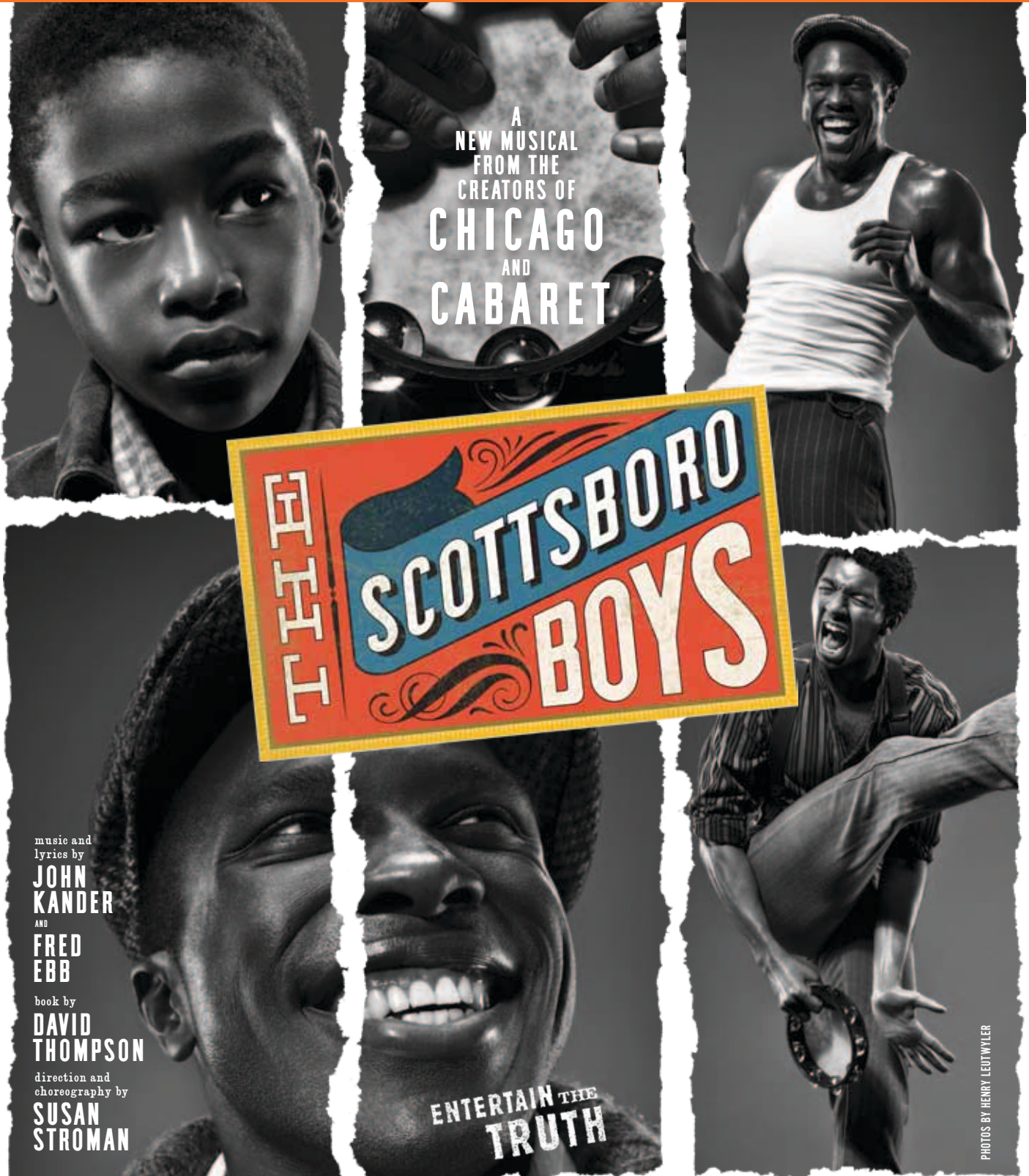


# STUDY GUIDE



A  
NEW MUSICAL  
FROM THE  
CREATORS OF  
**CHICAGO**  
AND  
**CABARET**

**THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS**

music and  
lyrics by  
**JOHN  
KANDER**  
AND  
**FRED  
EBB**  
book by  
**DAVID  
THOMPSON**  
direction and  
choreography by  
**SUSAN  
STROMAN**

**ENTERTAIN THE  
TRUTH**

PHOTOS BY HENRY LEUTWYLER

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 Probo Productions/Randy Donaldson Catherine Schreiber/  
 Michael Palitz/Patti Laskawy Vineyard Theatre presents  
**THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS**  
 Music and Lyrics by John Kander & Fred Ebb  
 Book by David Thompson  
 with Joshua Henry Colman Domingo Forrest McClendon  
 Sharon Washington Josh Breckenridge Derrick Cobey  
 E. Clayton Cornelious Jeremy Gumbs Rodney Hicks  
 Kendrick Jones James T. Lane JC Montgomery Clinton Roane  
 Cherene Snow Julius Thomas III Christian Dante White  
 and John Cullum  
 Scenic Design Beowulf Boritt Costume Design Toni-Leslie James  
 Lighting Design Ken Billington Sound Design Peter Hylenski  
 Orchestrations Larry Hochman Music Arrangements Glen Kelly  
 Music Coordinator John Monaco Conductor Paul Masse  
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 Direction and Choreography by Susan Stroman

The material in this study guide was originally produced by the Guthrie Theater for its run of *The Scottsboro Boys*.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### THE PLAY

- 3 Synopsis
- 4 Comments about the Play

### THE AUTHORS

- 5 The Authors
- 6 Comments on Kander and Ebb

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

- 8 The Scottsboro Case: Miscarriage of Justice
- 18 Minstrel Shows

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- 21 For Further Reading

This play guide will be periodically updated with additional information. Study Guide last updated October 4, 2010.

## THE PLAY

## SYNOPSIS

**T**he *Scottsboro Boys* dramatizes the story of the real life Scottsboro Boys, a group of nine black youths falsely accused and convicted of rape on a train passing through Scottsboro, Ala., in 1931. Set as a minstrel show by the legendary musical theater duo John Kander and Fred Ebb, this show continues their exploration of the moral quandaries of humanity. Here, however, it is not with a wink and a nod to corruption, as in *Chicago*, or with lascivious fascination of the decadent Weimar Berlin, as with *Cabaret*, but rather as a collective artistic catharsis for America's racial injustices. An example of one of the greatest miscarriages of American justice, *The Scottsboro Boys* offers to audiences on stage that which the real Scottsboro Boys never had in life – truth.

As the train slows to a stop in Scottsboro, the sheriff (played by Mr. Bones, a stock minstrel character) enters the train and accuses the nine Scottsboro Boys of instigating a fight with a group of white boys on the train. While searching the train, the sheriff's deputy (played by Mr. Tambo, another stock character) discovers Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, two "fallen" women, and threatens to take them to jail for prostitution. Rather than face jail time, the girls, led by Victoria, falsely accuse the nine black youths of rape. Almost instantly the sheriffs' attitudes toward the women change. They are no longer common whores but delicate flowers of the American South, victimized by animalistic black men. The Scottsboro Boys are hauled to jail, and the first show trial is swiftly concluded with nine guilty verdicts and nine death sentences.

As the boys wait in prison for their execution by electric chair, they are informed by the prison guards (Tambo and Bones) that they will be getting a new trial. By now they have developed some camaraderie, and the illiterate Haywood Patterson has learned to read and write. The boys have attracted a lot of attention, and they have a new northern lawyer, Samuel Leibowitz (portrayed as a self-righteous northerner to further highlight the tension between the North and South.) Though racism was rampant across the United States, and even the North was *de facto* segregated, the *de jure* segregation of the Jim Crow South was particularly offensive to many Northern liberals who made the Scottsboro Boys a cause célèbre. In addition to the northern liberals and the NAACP, the case attracted the attention of the communists, whose legal arm, the International Labor Defense, secured Leibowitz's services.

At the beginning of the new trial, Ruby Bates admits to the lawyers and the jury that she and Victoria lied about the rape. Despite this, the

Characters	
Interlocutor	Samuel Leibowitz
Mr. Bones	<i>the boys' Northern attorney</i>
Mr. Tambo	
<i>minstrel show stock characters</i>	The Lady
	Governor of Alabama
Ozie Powell	Attorney General
Olen Montgomery	Judge
Andy Wright	Clerk
Eugene Williams	Cook
Haywood Patterson	Preacher
Clarence Norris	Little George
Willie Roberson	Billy
Roy Wright	Electrified Charlie
Charles Weems	Electrified Isaac
<i>the Scottsboro Boys</i>	
Ruby Bates	
Victoria Price	
<i>women who accuse the boys of rape</i>	

jury once again convicts the boys. In the next scene, the boys are on a chain gang, and Haywood Patterson attempts to escape to see his dying mother; he is caught and thrown into solitary confinement.

The Scottsboro case drags on for nearly nine years and, with each passing year, each passing trial and each guilty verdict, the boys continue to languish in prison for a crime they did not commit. Through a deal struck with the prosecutors, Leibowitz is able to secure the freedom of four of the Scottsboro boys – Eugene Williams, Willie Roberson, Olen Montgomery and Roy Wright. "It's a raw deal," he tells the remaining boys, "but for the moment, it's the best we can do."

Haywood Patterson refuses to lie to the governor of Alabama for his release and as a result is kept in prison. In real life, Patterson escaped to Detroit, but ended up back in prison after killing someone in a barroom brawl. He died of cancer in 1952, two years after he published *Scottsboro Boy*, a true to life memoir of the Scottsboro case. "I wrote it all down in a book," Haywood tells us at the end of the play. "I told the truth."

## COMMENTS ABOUT THE PLAY

“**T**he *Scottsboro Boys*” is a staggeringly inventive piece of musical theater.

Its intentions are serious, its execution pretty much pitch perfect, and its entertainment value – featuring what is the final score by John Kander and Fred Ebb – of the highest order.

Yet the show ... could not have found a more somber, real-life subject to musicalize: the story of nine young black men accused of raping two white women in Alabama in the early 1930s.

And their tale of justice repeatedly delayed and denied is framed in the most provocative manner possible: It’s told as a minstrel show, that 19th and early 20th century form of entertainment which often featured performers in blackface trading in the most blatant of stereotypes.

You could call “The *Scottsboro Boys*” a concept musical, much like such Kander and Ebb classics as “*Cabaret*,” set in the tawdry world of a ’30s Berlin nightclub, or “*Chicago*,” whose musical numbers are performed in the style of 1920s vaudeville. ...

What makes “The *Scottsboro Boys*” so intriguing is the dichotomy between its supremely melodic score and the tragic if sometimes convoluted tale the musical is telling.

Kander and Ebb know how to make a song work in the theater – propelling the plot or revealing character – that immediately engages an audience.

Kander’s melodies are effortless, pouring out in a variety of styles from cakewalk to folk ballad to comic ditty. Ebb died in 2004, but here his clear, precise and often quite funny lyrics have been finished by Kander, and the transitions are seamless.

Michael Kuchwara, “The *Scottsboro Boys*’ examines racial injustice,” *Associated Press*, March 10, 2010

“**T**he *Scottsboro Boys*” is a masterwork, both daring and highly entertaining, and director/choreographer Susan Stroman (“*The Producers*”) has given it the best production possible. ... The book (by David Thompson), score and staging are so organically linked, you can’t imagine one without the others.

The stroke of genius – and the word feels right here – was to stage the piece like a traditional minstrel show with an all-black cast, save for ... the Interlocutor, who serves as emcee and is one of the genre’s stock characters framing the events. ...

Using only some chairs to suggest a train, a jail and a courtroom, Stroman follows minstrel conventions to tell the story. Juxtaposing deep emotions and often exaggerated gestures, she creates a mood that feels straight out of Brecht and Weill.

Paradoxically, this makes the piece feel incredibly modern. It’s certainly more provocative than most self-consciously “edgy” rock musicals, as the creative team and its fearless, irreproachable ensemble constantly push the audience to the brink of discomfort – while dishing out one catchy number after another.

There’s nothing Kander and Ebb won’t dare to do as they explore pet issues such as justice as spectacle and the corruption of the American dream. Here, they apply their signature musical style to some stupefying scenes in which razzle-dazzle rubs elbows with tragedy.

Elizabeth Vincentelli, “Ugly prejudice, dazzling drama,” *New York Post*, March 11, 2010

**T**he music effectively apes early 20th-century American song and dance styles: cakewalk, jazz, ragtime. Kander, Ebb and Thompson avoid the earnestness of other musicals about Southern racial violence (*Parade*, for example) in favour of an approach combining acidity with sweetness. The evening’s framework – a reverse minstrel show, in which two jiving clowns ... and an Interlocutor ... host the story – bolsters the comedy. ...

In *Chicago*, Kander and Ebb also used a vaudeville-celebrity approach to a story about egregious interwar American injustice. And in *Cabaret*, the duo used showbiz routines to mock the horrors of a nation’s persecution of social groups. *The Scottsboro Boys* may not be the equal of those two shows, but it has two or three numbers as dazzling as any in town. In fact, if there’s anything around right now that’s more startling than “*Electric Chair*,” in which prisoners tap-dance the horrors of capital punishment, I don’t know of it.

Brendan Lemon, “Legal History: the musical,” *Financial Times*, March 11, 2010

**T**he *Scottsboro Boys* is an astounding production. In the guise of a minstrel show, it tells the tragic story of nine black teens falsely charged with raping two white women in Alabama in 1931. Tantamount to a legal lynching, the outcome, in the Jim Crow South, was inevitable.

That miscarriage of justice is recounted ... in a smart, provocative way. The music and lyrics are by John Kander and Fred Ebb, book by David Thompson; all have employed the minstrel convention to great effect – revealing prejudice against the defendants as well as their famed lawyer Samuel S. Leibowitz, who argued in both Alabama and the Supreme Court to reverse the guilty verdicts. ...

The show employs Southern patter, heartfelt exchanges and caricature to underscore the cruelty and insanity the defendants endure. The score adroitly mines jazz, blues and gospel music, which perfectly encapsulates the Depression-era atmosphere. ...

Susan Stroman, who directed *The Producers* with panache, has used her considerable skills to illustrate more with less. The set is almost Brechtian bare, save for a few chairs that double as a prison cell. She gets the pacing just right and moving performances from her cast. *Scottsboro Boys* will leave you shattered; it’s the definition of inspired theater.

Fern Siegel, “Stage Door: The *Scottsboro Boys*, The *Addams Family*,” *Huffington Post*, April 14, 2010



CREDIT: CAROL ROSEGG. THE VINEYARD THEATRE PRODUCTION OF *THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS*

## THE AUTHORS

### JOHN KANDER AND FRED EBB MUSIC AND LYRICS

**F**or nearly five decades, composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb have been one of Broadway’s greatest and longest-running songwriting teams in Broadway musical history.

The legendary collaboration resulted in some of the most beloved and enduring musicals in theater history including *Cabaret*, *Chicago* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

John Kander began his career in 1956 as the pianist for *The Amazing Adele* during its pre-Broadway run and for *An Evening with Beatrice Lillie* in Florida. Soon he was preparing dance arrangements for the musicals *Gypsy* and *Irma la Douce*. With *A Family Affair* in 1962 he made his Broadway debut as a composer. The show flopped, but it introduced his talents to the show’s young producer, Harold Prince. That same year Kander met Fred Ebb.

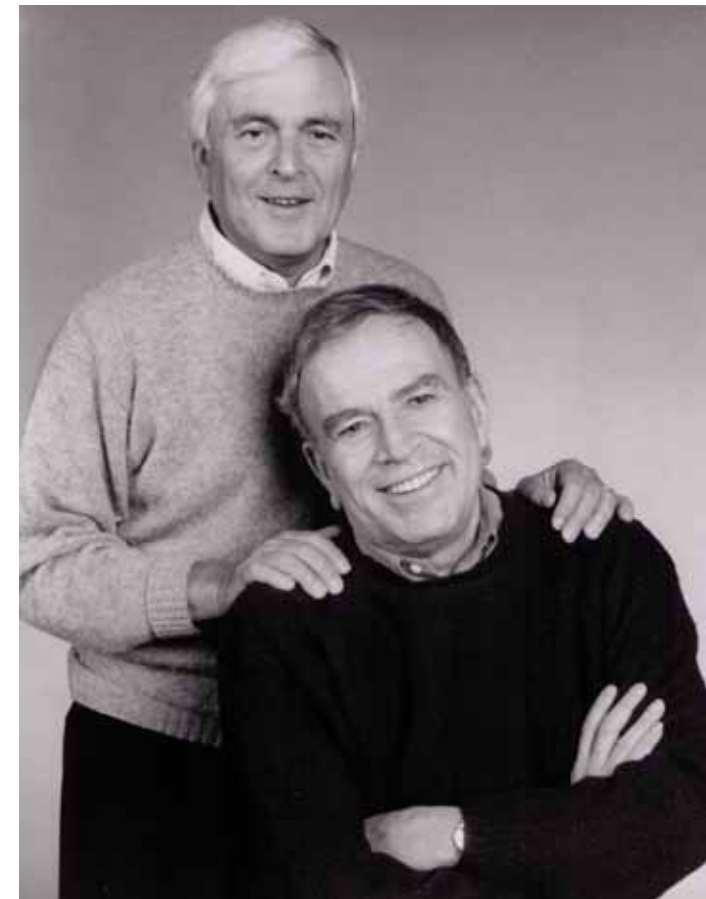
Ebb had been writing material for nightclub acts, revues, and for the satirical television show *That Was the Week That Was*. By the time he met Kander, he too had experienced the agony of a musical flop: *Morning Sun*, for which he wrote the lyrics, had closed after eight performances.

It was their next collaboration with Prince in 1966, on a musical that dealt with the evils and seductive nature of fascism in pre-war Berlin, that catapulted Kander and Ebb to the Musical Theater Hall of Fame. A major critical and box office success, *Cabaret* had a Broadway run of 1,166 performances and captured the Tony Award as the season’s best musical. The original cast recording won a Grammy Award and the 1972 film adaptation won eight Academy Awards.

Kander and Ebb’s writing for films have been no less notable. In 1975 they wrote five new songs for Streisand’s *Funny Girl* sequel, *Funny Lady*, including “How Lucky Can You Get,” and “Let’s Hear It for Me.” One year later they wrote the title song for the film musical *New York, New York*, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro. The song eventually became one of the biggest hits of their career.

Throughout their long, fruitful career together, Kander and Ebb never had an argument or a falling out. “When we’re at our best, we sound like one person,” said Kander. They worked together to the very end writing the music for *The Scottsboro Boys* before the death of Fred Ebb in 2004.

Kander and Ebb have received one Grammy nomination, four Tony Awards, two Academy Award nominations, four Emmy nominations (of which two awards were won), three Golden Globe nominations, one Laurence Olivier Theatre Award, a Joseph Jefferson Award, were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, recognized with Kennedy Center Honors, and granted honorary doctorate degrees from Niagara University.



John Kander and Fred Ebb  
Music and Lyrics

### DAVID THOMPSON BOOK

**D**avid Thompson has collaborated on works with Kander and Ebb for almost 15 years, including the book for *Steel Pier* and script adaptations for the current revival of *Chicago* on Broadway and Off-Broadway productions of *And the World Goes 'Round* and *Flora, the Red Menace*, for which he wrote a new book. He also wrote the book for *Thou Shalt Not*, based on Emile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, collaborating with Harry Connick Jr., who wrote the music and lyrics.

He adapted Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* for the McCarter Theatre, where it is now in its 20th year of annual performance. Mr. Thompson’s work extends to the small screen as well. He has written for “*Sondheim – A Celebration at Carnegie Hall*,” the PBS specials “*Razzle Dazzle*,” “*Bernstein on Broadway*,” “*Jerry Herman and the Pops*,” “*The Music of Richard Rogers*” and Great Performances’ “*My Favorite Broadway*.”

His work has received numerous awards and nominations, including a Tony Award nomination for Best Book for *Steel Pier*,

# COMMENTS ON KANDER AND EBB

## KANDER AND EBB ON KANDER AND EBB

And though Mr. Kander said he wouldn't recognize a Kander and Ebb tune if it slapped him in the face, many other people would, especially the adamant anthems that Mr. Kander calls "screamers": "All That Jazz," "Cabaret," "New York, New York." Driven by irresistible vamps, these songs just barely suppress, beneath an apparent message of grit and survival, the magma of despair and disaster.

Constant to their themes and to each other, Kander and Ebb were among the most successful songwriting partners in musical theater, and among the longest lasting. Most of the great composers and lyricists either hooked up serially (Rodgers with Hart then Hammerstein) or were, like Cole Porter, professionally celibate. But from "Flora, the Red Menace" in 1965 through "Steel Pier" in 1997, and for a few years on either side, Kander and Ebb, who seldom socialized with each other, wrote almost nothing with anyone else. (Mr. Ebb even declined an offer to work with Rodgers, post-Hammerstein, on "Rex.") In all, 11 Kander and Ebb musicals appeared on Broadway; when Mr. Ebb died, at 76, another four were waiting in the wings. ...

"My feeling was that I was the untalented member of this duo," [John Kander] said over lunch after a rehearsal in Los Angeles. "I felt inadequate. Fred could improvise in rhyme and meter like a Shakespearean actor from the original Globe. I've never heard of a lyricist who could work that way. I can't. And a lot of what I think people mean when they say they recognize a Kander and Ebb song, came from him. The anger, that's Fred's – an energizing anger, very near the surface, that brought out something in me I would not otherwise have found."

Pressed further, Mr. Kander admitted that he too had contributed something unique: "a lyricism or a more reflective tone" that didn't come naturally to Mr. Ebb. "For Fred the perfect score would be one with no ballads," he said. "He thought I was too sentimental. But then our pleasures were always so different. Those differences kept us apart socially: neither of us was equipped to understand the other's needs the way a best friend would. But creatively it worked for us. We were afraid of totally different things."

Jesse Green, "Kander Without Ebb? Start Spreading the News," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2006

**KANDER:** I think if you start to think about how you do something, you freeze. If we're working on a scene in a rehearsal and suddenly the director says, "We need some music to get from this point to this point," if I think about it, I can't do it. If I just go to the piano and put my hands down, immediately my fingers will invent. It had nothing to do with my brain. It just happens, but I have to let myself do it. When I watch you working, I don't think of it as an intellectual exercise. I think of it as an oral or verbal process. You get the rhyme scheme worked out, and there is suddenly a quatrain that didn't exist before. It's not because you sit down and think and take notes and examine it. Sometimes that may be true, but most of the time it comes out in this effortless way like what I feel when I put my fingers on the piano.

**EBB:** I think the reason for that effortlessness is confidence. I feel confident when I've written something that you will properly set it musically and that I will like the song when you're finished. We know how to please each other musically and the collaboration work on the basis of that kind of mutual support, which we agree neither of us would necessarily have if we were to sit in a room and try to write with someone else.

**KANDER:** I think when we're at our best, we sound like one person.

John Kander and Fred Ebb, *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz Collaboration, and All That Jazz* by John Kander and Fred Ebb with Greg Lawrence. New York: Faber & Faber, 2004

Every once in a while, if you're a really lucky composer, you'll write an "of course" song, meaning that it sounds like OF COURSE it was written and it's probably been around forever. "Love and Love Alone" from *The Visit* and "A Quiet Thing" from *Flora The Red Menace* fulfilled our intentions as completely as possible and still make me very content when I hear them. Hearing our songs can be strange. After we finish writing a show, after a song has been performed exactly as we intended and it's kind of "out there," it seems as if somebody else wrote it. When I hear the vamp to "New York, New York," I no longer relate it to myself. It's a piece that I know but is no longer a part of me. Regarding the way we write, I'm very much for simplicity – not much for padding. There is such a thing as fake music, which is hard to define but doesn't interest me. You know what's horrible? When you write something that's not very good and people love it. That's really confusing!

- John Kander

**I'm always uncomfortable [picking a favorite song] because I'm afraid it'll sound like bragging. However, I happen to like "Love and Love Alone" from *The Visit*. If you ask me, and you have, I think it's the very best melody John's ever written. My lyric? Ehh! But his work is quite wonderful on that song. I like "Marry Me" from *The Rink* because it's so simple and it accomplishes what it starts out to say.**

- Fred Ebb

Both quoted in "In All Kander (and Ebb)" by Jim Caruso, theatermania.com, February 6, 2004. [http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm?int\\_news\\_id=4340](http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm?int_news_id=4340)

## OTHERS ON KANDER AND EBB

There is something incredibly optimistic and youthful about their work. They are not cynical fellows. They have verve and innocence and energy, and I think of these as common to great American theater composing.

Harold Prince, foreword to *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz Collaboration, and All That Jazz* by John Kander and Fred Ebb with Greg Lawrence. New York: Faber & Faber, 2004

I first knew about John Kander and Fred Ebb in 1965. I heard a friend of mine named Carmen Zapata singing a song called "If I Were In Your Shoes, I'd Dance." I loved it and said, "My God, who wrote that song?" With Kander and Ebb, I heard my feelings stated exactly as I felt them, in the kind of language that I thought was so marvelously straight-ahead and in the moment. In that song ... these two songwriters caught envy and regret and a lost chance, and yet without self-pity, because the feelings were stated in such a positive way and with such passion.

Liza Minelli, introduction to *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz Collaboration, and All That Jazz* by John Kander and Fred Ebb with Greg Lawrence. New York: Faber & Faber, 2004

I got to do Sally in *Cabaret* with Billy Crystal quite a few years ago and I was thrilled that they put "Maybe This Time" into the production. It tells you so much about the character – which is, of course, what a theater song needs to do. "Maybe This Time" tells the audience about Sally's past, about what she thinks of herself, and about her yearning for a second chance. The humanity of the character shines through with such a sense of hope. That makes it even more touching; Sally realizes that she doesn't have to "hang back with the apes," as Tennessee Williams said. The music is very torchy but I don't feel it's a sad song. "All the odds are in my favor, something's bound to begin." If that's not optimistic, I don't know what is!

Donna McKechnie, quoted in "In All Kander (and Ebb)" by Jim Caruso, theatermania.com, February 6, 2004. [http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm?int\\_news\\_id=4340](http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm?int_news_id=4340)

With a presence on Broadway for nearly 40 years and through a dozen different musicals, Mr. Kander and Mr. Ebb had one of the longest-running collaborations in the history of the American musical theater. From their Broadway debut in 1965, with "Flora, the Red Menace," starring a teenage Liza Minnelli, to the current long-running revival of "Chicago," Mr. Kander and Mr. Ebb were known for their sometimes saucy, sometimes sincere subject matter, their often pointed political undertones, and more than anything their uncanny ability to fuse sharp lyrics and catchy melodies into hummable, quotable musical theater.

Much of the team's comic sensibility came from Mr. Ebb, whose hand-dog expression and deadpan personal manner belied an effusive passion for a well-turned phrase.

Jesse McKinley, "Fred Ebb, Lyricist Behind 'Cabaret' and Other Hits, Dies," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2004

## COMPLETE WORKS OF KANDER AND EBB

### MUSICALS

- *Flora, the Red Menace* (1965)
- *Cabaret* (1966)
- *Go Fly a Kite* (1966), an industrial musical for General Electric
- *The Happy Time* (1968)
- *Zorba* (1968)
- *70, Girls, 70* (1971)
- *Chicago* (1975)
- *2 by 5* (1976)
- *The Act* (1978)
- *Woman of the Year* (1981)
- *The Rink* (1984)
- *And The World Goes 'Round* (1991)
- *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1992)
- *Steel Pier* (1997)
- *Fosse* (1999)
- *Over And Over* a.k.a. *All About Us* (a.k.a. *The Skin of Our Teeth*) (1999)
- *The Visit* (2001)
- *Liza's Back* (2002)
- *Curtains* (2006)
- *The Scottsboro Boys* (2010)

### FILMS

- *Cabaret* (1972)
- *Funny Lady* (1975)
- *New York, New York* (1977)
- *Chicago* (2002)

# THE SCOTTSBORO CASE: MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE

## ORIGIN OF THE STORY

At 10:20 a.m., Wednesday, March 25, 1931, somewhat behind schedule, a Southern Railroad freight train left Chattanooga, Tennessee, bound for Memphis. ... Among the illicit passengers were Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, who were returning to Huntsville, Alabama, after failing to find work in Chattanooga's textile mills. Price was 21 years old and Bates 17. Each was white. Four friends who living in Chattanooga scrambled onto the train: 18-year-old Haywood Patterson; brothers Andy (age 19) and Roy (13) Wright; and Eugene Williams (13). They did not know the five other young men from Georgia who were on board, nor were those five acquainted with each other. Charlie Weems, the oldest, was 20. Clarence Norris was 18; Olen Montgomery 17; Willie Roberson 15; and Ozie Powell 15. The nine youths – soon to be known as the Scottsboro Boys – were all black.

James R. Acker, *Scottsboro and Its Legacy: The Cases that Challenged American Legal and Social Justice*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008

The Grand Jury of Jackson County charge that before the finding of this indictment Haywood Patterson, Eugene Williams, Charlie Weems, Roy Wright, alias Ray Wright, Ozie Powell, Willie Roberson, Andy Wright, Olen Montgomery, and Clarence Norris, alias Clarence Morris, whose names to the grand jury are otherwise unknown than as stated forcibly ravished Victoria Price, a woman, against the peace and dignity of the State of Alabama.

Grand Jury of Jackson County, Indictment, March 31, 1931

The controversy of the Scottsboro Boys case was to last over a decade and produce accusations, unfairness, and countless trials and retrials, more than any other case in American history. Once again, America was divided on the issue of racial injustice. Although this case made strides in that it allowed southern blacks to serve on court-appointed juries, it consumed the lives of the nine young black men who were accused of a crime they did not commit.

Lita Sorenson, *The Scottsboro Boys Trial: A Primary Source Account*, New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2004

That is how the  
Scottsboro case began ...  
with a white foot on my  
black hand.

- Haywood Patterson, *Scottsboro Boy*, New York: Doubleday, 1950

Now you can take your B and O  
And you can take your Santa Fe  
And you can take your Old Rock  
Island Line  
And throw them all away!  
And if the Pennsylvania calls  
Just say you want your money back  
And if the New York Central's on the  
phone  
Tell 'em they're way off the track  
Commencing in Chattanooga  
On the Southern Railroad Line.

"Commencing in Chattanooga" from  
*The Scottsboro Boys*

NINE NEGRO MEN RAPE TWO WHITE  
GIRLS, THREW WHITE BOYS FROM  
FREIGHT TRAIN AND HELD WHITE  
GIRLS PRISONER UNTIL CAPTURED  
BY POSSE

ALL NEGROES POSITIVELY  
IDENTIFIED BY GIRLS AND ONE  
WHITE BOY WHO WAS HELD  
PRISONER WITH PISTOLS AND  
KNIVES WHILE NINE BLACK FIENDS  
COMMITTED REVOLTING CRIME.

Headlines from *Jackson County Sentinel*,  
March 25, 1931

## HOLLACE RANSALL'S REPORT TO THE ACLU

**Editor's note:** In 1931, the American Civil Liberties Union sent a young teacher and social activist, Hollace Ransdall, to the South to report on the Scottsboro case. The report is an illuminating portrait of the complex issues of race and regionalism that affected the fate of the Scottsboro Boys. Excerpts from this report are included here. If you wish to access the whole report, please visit: [http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scottsboro/sb\\_hrrep.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scottsboro/sb_hrrep.html)

### ON THE SETTING OF THE TRIAL

Scottsboro, the county seat of Jackson County in northern Alabama, is a charming southern village with some 2,000 inhabitants situated in the midst of pleasant rolling hills. Neat, well-tended farms lie all around, the deep red of their soil making a striking contrast with the rich green of the hills. The cottages of the town stand back on soft lawns, shaded with handsome trees. A feeling of peace and leisure is in the air. The people on the streets have easy kind faces and greet strangers as well as each other cordially. In the Courthouse Square in the center of town, the village celebrities, such as the mayor, the sheriff, the lawyers, lounge and chat democratically with the town eccentrics and plain citizens.

### SOUTHERN ATTITUDES ON RACE

They said that all Negroes were brutes and had to be held down by stern repressive measures or the number of rapes on white women would be larger than it is. Their point seemed to be that it was only by ruthless oppression of the Negro that any white woman was able to escape raping at Negro hands. Starting with this notion, it followed that they could not conceive that two white girls found riding with a crowd of Negroes could possibly have escaped raping. A Negro will always, in their opinion, rape a white woman if he gets the chance. These nine Negroes were riding alone with two white girls on a freight car. Therefore, there was no question that they raped them, or wanted to rape them, or were present while the other Negroes raped them – all of which amounts to very much the same thing in southern eyes – and calls for the immediate death of the Negroes regardless of these shades of difference. As one southerner in Scottsboro put it, "We white people just couldn't afford to let these Niggers get off because of the effect it would have on other Niggers."

### ON THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AFFECTING VICTORIA PRICE AND RUBY BATES

The distinction between wife and "whore," as the alternative is commonly known in Huntsville, is not strictly drawn. A mill woman is quite likely to be both if she gets the chance as living is too precarious and money too scarce to miss any kind of chance to get it. Promiscuity means little where economic oppression is great

Hollace Ransdall, "Report on the Scottsboro, Ala. case to the American Civil Liberties Union, May 27, 1931"

Why, just lots of  
these women  
are nothing but  
prostitutes. They  
just about have to  
be, I reckon, for  
nobody could live  
on the wages they  
make, and that's  
the only other way  
of making money  
open to them.

Social worker to Hollace Ransdall, 1931

## THE SCOTTSBORO BOYS



**OLEN MONTGOMERY** was riding alone toward the back of the train when the alleged crime occurred, and though he was tried and convicted of rape, by 1937 everyone involved in the case agreed that he had nothing to do with anything, including the fight with the white boys that set the whole tragic event in motion. He was released in 1937 as part of a deal struck by Samuel Leibowitz.

Montgomery was a frequent letter writer and often wrote to friends and supporters seeking money to buy musical instruments, or to pay

for prostitutes in prison. On his release, he travelled the country with Roy Wright speaking in defense of the remaining Scottsboro Boys. He eventually resettled in his native Georgia.



**CLARENCE NORRIS**, the last of the Scottsboro Boys (also the name as his 1979 autobiography), died in New York City in 1989. The son of Georgia sharecroppers, he only had a second grade education. From age 7 he worked in the cotton fields and in a Goodyear rubber plant prior to hitchhiking on the Southern Railroad, which led to his arrest for raping Ruby Bates and Victoria Price.

Norris was allegedly involved in the fight with a group of white boys on the train; he was so frightened for his life after a beating in jail that he testified at the first Scottsboro trial that every other one of the Boys had perpetrated the rape, but that he alone was innocent.

His second conviction was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in the landmark case *Norris v Alabama*, which found that the systematic exclusion of black people from Alabama juries was unconstitutional.

Convicted of rape for a third time in 1937, Norris received the death sentence, which was commuted to life imprisonment by the governor of Alabama. He was first paroled in 1944 and moved to New York City. This was a violation of the terms of his parole and he was convinced to return to Alabama, where he was once again imprisoned, to be paroled again in 1946. He once again left Alabama, which technically made him a fugitive from justice.

In 1976, with the help of the NAACP, he was pardoned by Alabama Gov. George Wallace.

**HAYWOOD PATTERSON** was in many ways the center of the Scottsboro trials. From the time he was falsely accused of rape in 1931 until his escape in 1947, he was tried and convicted four times and spent 16 years in Alabama prisons.

Patterson was a Georgia native, but grew up in Chattanooga, where his father worked as a steelworker. He left school after third grade to work as a delivery boy and began riding the rails at age 14, traveling through Ohio and Florida in search of work.

Patterson entered jail as an illiterate but learned to read and write within eight months. Over the years he held a number of jobs in the various prisons he was held in, including responsibility for removing the bodies of executed inmates from Kilby prison; his cell was immediately adjacent to the electrocution chamber. In 1941 he was stabbed 20 times by another inmate who had been paid by a prison guard to kill him. He survived and managed his first prison break in 1943.

After five days of freedom, he was apprehended and faced even worse treatment than before. In 1947, while working on the chain gang, he managed to escape and eventually made it to his sister's home in Detroit. He lived underground for three years but at the urging of legendary leftist journalist I.F. Stone he published his memoir, *Scottsboro Boy*, in 1950. He was subsequently arrested by the FBI. Alabama sought his extradition but Michigan Gov. Mennen Williams refused after a national letter-writing campaign convinced him that Patterson would be subject to cruel and inhumane treatment if sent back to Alabama.

In New York, Leibowitz had planned to place the boys in vocational schools, but offers from vaudeville proved too tempting. Thomas S. Harten, a minister, offered to manage the four released young men and presented them at Harlem's famous Apollo Theater. Harten's management style did not translate into good wages for the four, though. Leaving their manager, Montgomery and Roy Wright agreed to a national tour ... to raise money for their five incarcerated friends.

PBS, "Scottsboro: An American Tragedy,"  
*American Experience*

I am not guilty and I don't think justice has been done me in my case.

Haywood Patterson to Judge W.W. Callahan, 1936

In December 1950 Patterson was involved in a barroom brawl that resulted in the death of the other man. Arrested again and convicted of manslaughter, Patterson died of cancer in prison in 1952.



**OZIE POWELL** was 15 when first charged with raping the two white women on the train in Scottsboro. It was under Powell's name, in *Powell v Alabama*, that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the 1931 trials had violated the boys' constitutional right to adequate counsel.

In 1936, after testifying at Haywood Patterson's fourth trial, Powell stabbed a sheriff's deputy while being transported back to jail. The sheriff shot him in the head point blank; both the deputy and Powell survived. On the operating table, Powell told his mother, "I done

give up... everybody in Alabama is down on me and is mad at me."

After the shooting, doctors estimated Powell's IQ to be about 64 – extremely low functioning intellect. The rape charges were dropped against Powell, but he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for assaulting the deputy. On his release in 1946, he moved back to his home state of Georgia.

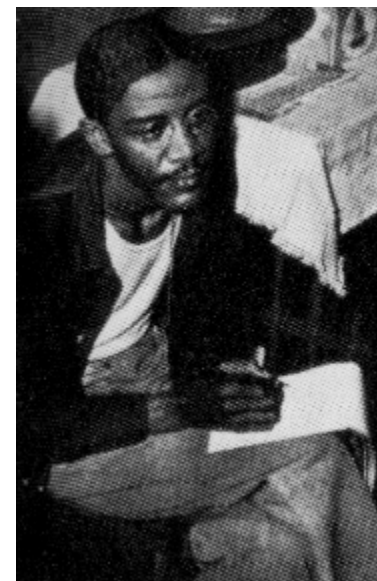


ALABAMA STATE ARCHIVES/  
MONTGOMERY ARCHIVES

**WILLIE ROBERSON** was 15 when he was arrested for raping Ruby Bates on the railroad. He was also an active syphilitic, which would have made sex extremely uncomfortable due to the sores on his genitals. He was also unable to walk without the aid of a cane, which undermined the prosecution's accusation that he leapt from the railcar to escape apprehension. He did not receive any medical treatment for this painful and progressively degenerative disease until 1933.

He had worked as a busboy in Georgia and went to Chattanooga to look for work. Finding none, he hopped the train headed to Memphis. Throughout the ordeal, Roberson stood by his story – that he had neither participated in nor seen

any alleged rape – and was one of the four released in Leibowitz's deal with prosecutors in 1937. He settled in New York City where he worked a number of odd jobs before dying of a severe asthma attack.



**CHARLES WEEMS** was convicted of rape in 1931 and again in 1937. He was paroled in 1943. Weems was the oldest of the Scottsboro Boys and had a difficult life prior to his conviction and in prison. He was one of seven siblings, born in Chattanooga, Tenn., and raised outside of Atlanta, Ga.; only two survived beyond childhood. His mother died when he was four years old, and Weems only had a fifth grade education.

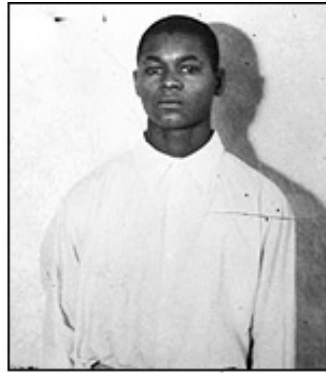
In 1934 he was found reading Communist literature in his prison cell and he was beaten and tear-gassed, causing permanent eye injuries. In 1938 he was stabbed by a prison guard for seemingly no reason.

On his parole in 1943, he returned to Atlanta and took a job in a laundry.

Ozie Powell, one of the nine Negro defendants in the Scottsboro case, was shot in the head and critically wounded this afternoon in an apparent attempt to escape, after Judge W.W. Callahan had sentenced Haywood Patterson to seventy-five years' imprisonment and adjourned the rest of the trials indefinitely.

Powell was shot while handcuffed to two other prisoners, Roy Wright and Clarence Norris, in an automobile driven by Sheriff J. Street Sadlin of Morgan County, who was taking them back to the Jefferson County jail in Birmingham. The shooting occurred after Powell allegedly slashed the neck of Edgar Blalock, a deputy sheriff, with a knife which was smuggled to him during his stay in the local jail. The attempted escape was staged on the downgrade of Lacon Mountain, about twelve miles this side of Cullman, about 2 P.M., less than an hour after the nine Negroes left Decatur in three automobiles escorted by two carloads of State highway patrolmen. According to Highway Patrolman J.T. Bryant, both the Negroes with Powell joined in the attempt to escape.

F. Raymond Daniell, "Scottsboro Negro shot trying to break as he stabs guard," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1936



ALABAMA STATE ARCHIVES/  
MONTGOMERY ARCHIVES

**EUGENE WILLIAMS** was only 13 at the time of his arrest in 1931, and had worked as a dishwasher in Chattanooga prior to hitchhiking along the Southern Railroad. After his conviction, the Alabama Supreme Court struck down his conviction due to his youth. He remained in jail until 1937 when he was released as part of the deal struck by Leibowitz with the prosecution. He eventually settled in St. Louis, where he had relatives, and briefly pursued a vaudeville career.



**ANDY WRIGHT**, 19 at the time of his arrest, was Roy Wright's older brother. With Haywood Patterson, his brother and Eugene Williams, Wright boarded the train in Chattanooga and ended up accused of rape with the other boys. Wright had a sixth grade education and drove a truck after leaving school.

After the Scottsboro trials, in which Wright was convicted multiple times of rape, he was paroled in 1944, but left Alabama in 1946 in violation of his parole, which led to his re-imprisonment. He spent the next several years in an out of Alabama prisons until he was freed in 1950. He was the last of the Scottsboro Boys to be freed from Alabama prisons.

He moved to New York State upon his release.



MORGAN COUNTY ARCHIVES

**ROY WRIGHT**, age 13 when arrested, was the youngest of the Scottsboro Boys. He was arrested with his older brother Andy, traveling with Haywood Patterson and Eugene Williams en route to Memphis from Chattanooga on the Southern Railroad. His first trial ended in a mistrial when 11 jurors voted to sentence him to life imprisonment, due to his youth, while one held out for the death penalty. At the first trial he testified that he saw the other defendants rape Bates and Price. This testimony was coerced from law enforcement, which beat him until he agreed to testify.

Wright was freed in 1937 along with the others in the Leibowitz deal. After touring the country in support of the other Scottsboro Boys, he served in the army, married and

then joined the merchant marine. In a fit of jealous rage in 1959, he shot his wife and then killed himself.

Sources: The University of Missouri – Kansas City Law School and PBS' "American Experience: Scottsboro, An American Tragedy"

You have brought  
sunshine into my  
gloomy heart at the  
needy times. You  
have been a God  
fairy to me of which  
makes you my  
Earthly Sunshine.

Letter from Andy Wright to Mrs. Hester G.  
Huntington of Montgomery, Alabama, March  
15, 1942

## VICTORIA PRICE AND RUBY BATES

**Editor's Note:** Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, the two accusers in the Scottsboro cases, both came from the mill town of Huntsville, Ala., and both were quite poor. Victoria Price especially was well-known as a "fallen woman" – according to Hollace Ransdall's report for the ACLU, a deputy sheriff in Huntsville claimed that she supplemented her low income from the mills with prostitution. When she accused the Scottsboro Boys of rape, she had already been married three times.

Ruby Bates was the quieter of the two girls, always allowing Price to take the lead in their claims against the boys. Initially, she also claimed that they had been raped on the train. Later, however, Bates reneged on her initial testimony, and in Haywood Patterson's 1933 trial she was a surprise witness for the defense, testifying that there was never any rape, and that physical evidence suggesting sexual intercourse was from the night before, when they had both had sex with their boyfriends.

After testifying for the defense, Bates left Alabama, married Elmer Schut, and took the name Lucille. Ruby Bates died in 1976, one week before Clarence Norris received his official pardon from the governor of Alabama.

### BIOGRAPHY AND NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS

The details of the crime coming from the lips of the two girls, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, are too revolting to be printed and they are being treated by local physicians for injuries sustained when attacked and assaulted by these negroes.

Scottsboro *Progressive Age*, March 26, 1931

Both girls are daughters of Huntsville widows. Both are in poor financial circumstances and had caught a "free" ride to Chattanooga the day before hoping to obtain employment of some nature in the larger city.

Huntsville *Daily Times*, March 26, 1931

**[H]**e [prosecutor Melvin C. Hutson] warned the jurors that when they had rendered their verdict and gone home they would have to face their neighbors. His voice rose to a crescendo as he choked back a sob evoked by his own eloquence in lauding the martyrdom of Victoria Price.

"She fights for the rights of the womanhood of Alabama," he shouted.

F. Raymond Daniell, "Scottsboro case goes to the jury," *New York Times*, January 23, 1936

**T**he sympathetic portrayal of Price and Bates in Huntsville newspapers contrasted starkly with how they were portrayed in the *Daily Worker*. As the trial loomed, the Communist Party publication slammed the "fake charge" lodged against "the nine young Negro workers," of raping "two white girls bumming a ride on a freight train." The article emphasized that a "prominent county official admitted to [an] investigator that the two girls supposed to have been attacked are notorious prostitutes."

James R. Acker, *Scottsboro and Its Legacy: The Cases that Challenged American Legal and Social Justice*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008

Even the dumbest cop on the [New York City] force would have spotted those two as tramps and liars. You know damn well they lied that day at the Paint Rock station and the Price girl has been lying ever since. Now you want me to plead three or four of the boys guilty of something they never did. The State of Alabama finally realizes that it has made a horrible mistake. You want me to pull your chestnuts out of the fire. You want a chance to save face. Tom, you ought to know me better than that.

Samuel Leibowitz to prosecutor Thomas Knight, on a proposed compromise, December 1936

**Editor's Note:** This is the text of a letter obtained by the International Labor Defense in which Ruby Bates, writing to a boyfriend, claims that the Scottsboro Boys are innocent. The letter is rambling and full of grammatical inaccuracies, but in it she nonetheless admits that she lied under pressure from police.

**Dearest Earl, I want to make a statement to you Mary Sanders is a goddam lie about those Negroes jazzing me those policemen made me tell a lie that is my statement because I want to clear myself that is all too if you want to believe me OK. If not that is okay. You will be sorry some day if you had too stay in jail with eight Negroes you would tell a lie ... those Negroes did not touch me or those white boys I hope you will believe me the law don't ... i was drunk at the time and did not know what i was doing I know it was wrong too let those Negroes die on account of me ... i wish those Negroes are not Burnt on account of me it is those white boys fault that is my statement ... I hope you tell the law hope you will answer. [Signed] Ruby Bates**

Ruby Bates to her boyfriend, January 1933

Victoria Price, however, never changed her story and testified consistently for the prosecution until 1937, when the last of the trials concluded. She faded from public view, and when Dan T. Carter published his book *Scottsboro: Tragedy of the American South* in 1969, he wrote that he thought both Bates and Price to be dead.

Neither were dead, and Price resurfaced when she filed a defamation lawsuit against NBC for their television movie, *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys* – the case was dismissed. Price, who had married twice since the Second World War and lived in Tennessee under the name Katherine Queen Victory Street, died in 1982.



## THE LEGAL FIGHT: THE NAACP, THE COMMUNIST PARTY, LANGSTON HUGHES AND THE SCOTTSBORO TRIALS

**A**nother factor injected at Scottsboro which Alabamians resent is communism. They believe that the efforts of certain radical organizations to make the condemned Negroes appear as martyrs in a class struggle are vicious and assuredly misplaced.

"Alabama resents outside agitation," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1931

**The righteous people of the South have been gradually waking up to the idea that they can save their face by taking justice out of the rude hands of the mob and putting it in the delicate hands of lawyers, and judges and a few representatives of the better people in a jury.**

Lincoln Steffens, "To lynch by law is as bad as to lynch by obscene hands of a lustful mob," *Contempo*, December 1, 1931

**W**hile sitting all alone in prison I thought I'll express [to] you a few lines to let you here [sic] from us boys. We are all well and hoping to be free soon and also hoping you all will remain in fighting for us boys.

Mr. Engdahl I am ask you a question ... Have you all got Mr. Darrow fighting for us boys. The reasons why I ask you ... I heard that Mr. Clance Darrow [sic] was going to [be] fighting for us boys, and I would like to know if possible becost [sic] I am innocent, as innocent as the tiny mite of life just beginning to stir beneath my heart. Honest, Mr. Engdahl, I haven't did [sic] anything to be imprisonment like this. And all of the boys send their best regards to you all and best wishes. So I would appreciate an interview at your earliest convenience.

Letter from Haywood Patterson to J. Louis Engdahl, National Secretary of the International Labor Defense, December 10, 1931

**C**larance Darrow and Arthur Garfield Hays of New York were here today preparing to take the defense of the eight Negroes convicted and sentenced to death at Scottsboro on a charge of attacking two white girls on March 25.

Mr. Darrow said that he and Mr. Hays had been retained by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. They will spend a day or two in Birmingham consulting local lawyers connected with the trial and then will return to New York.

"Darrow in Alabama to aid eight Negroes," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1931

**S**tirred to a frenzy by the eloquence of Samuel S. Leibowitz, who promised he would not give up his legal battle in defense of the nine Negroes in the Scottsboro case even if he had to "sell his house and home," a congregation of more than 4,000 persons hailed the lawyer as "our leader" and "a new Moses" yesterday afternoon at a meeting in the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, 129th street and Seventh Avenue. ... "I promise you citizens of Harlem," he said, "that I will fight with every drop of blood in my body and with the help of God that those Scottsboro boys shall be free."

"Leibowitz in Harlem stirs 4000 by plea: Promises to fight with 'Every drop of blood' in Scottsboro Case," *The New York Times*, April 14, 1933

**The Communists are more of an issue than are the FACTS of the case.**

Judge A.E. Hawkins, 1931

**P**recisely because the Scottsboro Case is an expression of the horrible national oppression of the Negro masses, any real fight ... must necessarily take the character of a struggle against the whole brutal system of landlord robbery and imperialist national oppression of the Negro people.

From the Communist Party newspaper, *Daily Worker*, January 31, 1933

**T**he International Labor Defense, through William L. Patterson, its national secretary, assailed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People yesterday for its statement of Monday to the effect that the injection of communism into the trial affected the verdict in the Patterson case.

"The directors of the N.A.A.C.P. have seen fit to gloat over the death verdict against Heywood Patterson," said the defense secretary. "They take the occasion of this verdict to bring forward a ridiculous claim that had they been in the case the verdict would have been different.

"They say that 'racial prejudice closed the eyes of the jurors' and at the same time that the injection of communism into the case brought about the death verdict."

"Plan national aid at negroes' trial," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1933

**I was amazed to find at many Negro schools and colleges a year after the arrest and conviction of the Scottsboro boys, that a great many teachers and students knew nothing of it, or if they did the official attitude would be, "Why bring that up?" I asked at Tuskegee, only a few hours from Scottsboro, who from there had been to the trial. Not a soul had been so far as I could discover. And with demonstrations in every capital in the civilized world for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys, so far as I knew not one Alabama Negro school until now held even a protest meeting.**

Langston Hughes, "Cowards in the Colleges," *The Crisis* 41, 1934





**T**he NAACP's initial efforts in behalf of the boys were nullified by the intervention of the Communists. The latter, seeking to exploit the matter for their own ideological purposes, misrepresented the NAACP ... and persuaded the boys to abandon the NAACP-provided counsel, which included Clarence Darrow and Arthur Garfield Hays.

Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP*, New York, 1962, cited in Hugh T. Murray, Jr., "The NAACP Versus the Communist Party: The Scottsboro Rape Cases, 1931 – 1932," *Phylon* 28, 3 (1967)

**If the 9 Scottsboro Boys die the South ought to be ashamed of itself - but the 12 million Negroes in America ought to be more ashamed than the South. ... The 9 boys in Kilbee [sic] prison are Americans. 12 million Negroes are Americans too. (And many of them far too light to be called Negroes except by liars.) The judge and jury at Scottsboro, and the governor of Alabama, are Americans.**

Langston Hughes, "Southern Gentlemen, White Prostitutes, Mill Owners, and Negroes," first published in *Contempo* on December 1, 1931

**T**he Communist Party may or may not be villainous, but there is no evidence of its villainy in the Scottsboro cases. On the contrary, it saved the lives of nine young boys and opened new avenues of protest to Negroes.

Hugh T. Murray, Jr., "The NAACP Versus the Communist Party: The Scottsboro Rape Cases, 1931 – 1932," *Phylon* 28, 1967

### EXCERPTS FROM THE SUPREME COURT DECISIONS IN POWELL V ALABAMA AND NORRIS V ALABAMA

**I**n the light of the facts outlined in the forepart of this opinion – the ignorance and illiteracy of the defendants, their youth, the circumstances of public hostility, the imprisonment and the close surveillance of the defendants by the military forces, the fact that their friends and families were all in other states and communication with them necessarily difficult, and above all that they stood in deadly peril of their lives – we think the failure of the trial court to give them reasonable time and opportunity to secure counsel was a clear denial of due process.

Justice George Sutherland, delivering the majority opinion of the Court in *Powell v Alabama* on November 7, 1932

**D**efendant adduced evidence to support the charge of unconstitutional discrimination in the actual administration of the statute in Jackson County. The testimony, as the state court said, tended to show that "in a long number of years no negro had been called for jury service in that county." It appeared that no negro had served on any grand or petit jury in that county within the memory of witnesses who had lived there all their lives. Testimony to that effect was given by men whose ages ran from fifty to seventy-six years. Their testimony was uncontradicted. It was supported by the testimony of officials. The clerk of the jury commission and the clerk of the circuit court had never known of a negro serving on a grand jury in Jackson County. The court reporter, who had not missed a session in that county in twenty-four years, and two jury commissioners testified to the same effect. One of the latter, who was a member of the commission which made up the jury roll for the grand jury which found the indictment, testified that he had "never known of a single instance where any negro sat on any grand or petit jury in the entire history of that county." ... That testimony in itself made out a *prima facie* case of the denial of the equal protection which the Constitution guarantees.

Chief Justice Charles Hughes, delivering the majority opinion of the Court in *Norris v Alabama* on April 1, 1935

For a map with detailed information on the Scottsboro chronology, please visit [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/maps/map\\_text.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/maps/map_text.html).

**Editor's Note:** Langston Hughes (1902-67), a poet, playwright, essayist and novelist, is perhaps one of the best known African American writers of the 20th century. He is closely associated with the "Harlem Renaissance," a period of great flourishing of African American arts and letters in the 1920s and 1930s, though he later described this period of time as merely being "in vogue."



PHOTO CREDIT: NICKOLAS MURAY (1892 – 1965)/ GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE

**H**ughes was a well-known leftist thinker and artist in his time. He spoke early and often about the Scottsboro trials, and though he initially supported the involvement of the International Labor Defense (ILD), the legal arm of the Communist Party of the United States, he later condemned the involvement of the Communists for compromising the stellar legal defense team of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

(NAACP), which withdrew from the case in 1932.

Hughes wrote the poem "Christ in Alabama" in response to the Scottsboro trials in 1931. Initially published in the "little magazine" *Contempo* at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, the poem captures the complex realities of the segregated South and the anger and resentment the initial verdict wrought. By invoking Christian imagery in a Southern racist context, Hughes makes it abundantly clear that the Scottsboro Boys are being sacrificed on the "cross of the South" to perpetuate racial injustice. The poem notably offers no subsequent tale of Christ-like redemption.

Christ is a Nigger,  
Beaten and black –  
O, bare your back.

Mary is His Mother  
Mammy of the South,  
Silence your Mouth.

God's His Father –  
White Master above  
Grant us your love.

Most holy bastard  
Of the bleeding mouth:  
Nigger Christ  
On the cross of the South.

Langston Hughes, "Christ in Alabama," first published in *Contempo* on December 1, 1931

**Editor's Note: Samuel Leibowitz** was born in 1893 to Romanian-Jewish parents and grew up in New York City. A graduate of Cornell University Law School, he chose to practice criminal law at a time when most of the brilliant legal minds of his generation were opting for civil affairs and corporate law.



MORGAN COUNTY ARCHIVES

**T**he International Labor Defense (ILD) obtained Leibowitz's representation *pro bono*. "Your organization and I are not in agreement in our political and economic views," he wrote to the ILD when they sought his counsel, but he decided to take the case to "defend the basic rights of man."

By 1937, Leibowitz had secured the release of four of the boys; four were convicted of rape and Ozie Powell pleaded guilty to

assaulting a sheriff's deputy. On his return to New York City, he became a judge. He died in 1978.

**S**amuel S. Leibowitz, the New York criminal lawyer defending the Negroes, whose original conviction and sentence of death were reversed by the United States Supreme Court in a decision which received little publicity in Alabama, expects the cross-examination of the State's star witness to consume the better part of a full court session.

That he intends to delve deeply into her past was indicated during his examination of prospective jurors, when asked if they would take into consideration in weighing the credibility of a witness the kind of life that witness had led, even if it happened to be a woman.

Attorney General Knight also expects Mr. Leibowitz to use all his skill as a cross-examiner in questioning Mrs. Price.

The lawyer's questioning of talesmen on Friday also brought to light the significant but hitherto scarcely known fact that Ruby Bates formerly lived here. One of the veniremen, in responding to the New York lawyer's questions said he had known the Bates girl when she lived here nine years ago.

"Make a note of that," Mr. Leibowitz said to one of his assistants with an expression of surprise.

"Observers leave Scottsboro trial," *New York Times*, April 3, 1933

**If you ever saw those creatures, those bigots whose mouths are slits in their faces, whose eyes popped out at you like frogs, whose chins dripped tobacco juice, bewhiskered and filthy, you would not ask how they could do it.**

Samuel Leibowitz, commenting on the jury verdict in *Alabama v Patterson*, 1933

# MINSTREL SHOWS

## A MINSTREL SHOW: THE WHOS AND THE WHATS

When a minstrel troop arrived in a town, they announced themselves by holding a **parade** through the town. The players paraded with their instruments in hand, dressed in “colorful coats and trousers, big brass buttons and striking hats” (Wittke, 145) with the rest of the company following behind. They marched in twos or fours to the theater, drawing out the process in whatever way possible so that it would sometimes last for hours. Once at the theater, the band would give a short concert that would summarize their show, comparable to a trailer for today’s movies. This mini-performance was repeated before each subsequent show if the troupe performed multiple shows in a town. For extra spectacle, fireworks were even sometimes used to draw in a larger crowd. This tradition evolved from the circus, where a circus troupe would call out to passersby, flaunting their costumes and revealing some animals on the way to their post. The parade became an established element of the minstrel show, and heightened the anticipation for audiences who had seen posters put up days before hand.

The show itself was split into two main parts. Christy Minstrels, one of the most popular minstrel groups both before and after the Civil War, first popularized the introduction of these parts and characterized versions of the interlocutor and endmen, and groups followed this form if they hoped to be successful in the travelling minstrel business. During the **first part**, chairs were arranged in a semicircular configuration on the stage. As the curtain rose, the minstrels came into view dressed in blackface and exaggerated “old plantation” clothes. Bright patterns and silks were mixed together to look gaudy and haphazard. Blackface was a type of stage makeup created by burning cork, grinding it into a fine dust, and adding water to make a paste. This was applied to the face in conjunction with lipstick drawn on to make the lips look much larger. All orchestra members and performers, save the interlocutor, wore this kind of makeup and clothes that instantly set the tone for the audience when the curtain arose. If only the orchestra was seated onstage at the start of the show, the other performers entered from backstage or the wings during a song and “a more or less elaborate drill back and forth across the stage, in which the endmen usually entered last” (Wittke, 137). The performers faked confusion and chaos until they reached their respective seats just as the song ended.

At this point, the **interlocutor** commanded the attention of the stage, introducing and narrating acts. He fueled and fed the endmen lines for jokes at his own expense. In essence, the interlocutor had to know the show forwards and backwards; each cue, joke and act depended on him and his ability to command his troupe. This caused him to develop into a specific character: a tall, large man attired in a dress suit from the time, unlike the other players. If suits were unavailable, interlocutors were attired noticeably contrasting to the **endmen**:

“The first requirement for a successful interlocutor was a big, booming voice, for the success of the endmen’s ‘gags’ depended largely on the former’s ability to make himself heard by the audience,

and on his success in stringing out his questions and comments until the most stupid person among the listeners could not fail to grasp the point of the joke when it cracked at last from the big lips of the end man. The interlocutor was at once the announcer for the show and the feeder to the comedians.” (Wittke, 139.)

Of course, the lowest-common-denominator comedy wouldn’t be possible without the endmen’s clownish demeanor contrasting with the interlocutor’s upright nature. These two men, who sat on the end of the semicircle, originally played the Tambourine and Bones for the orchestra, hence the nicknames Tambo and Bones. This musical importance declined as their comedy excelled:

“The endmen furnished the comedy of the show, and according to all accounts, from the beginning of minstrelsy to its decline as a form of the professional theatricals, they were universally successful in keeping their audiences in an uproar, by their grimacing while the balladists were performing, by their own comic songs sung to the accompaniment of various clever or grotesque dance steps, which sometimes became indescribably eccentric gyrations, and by their rapid-fire jokes.” (Wittke, 41)

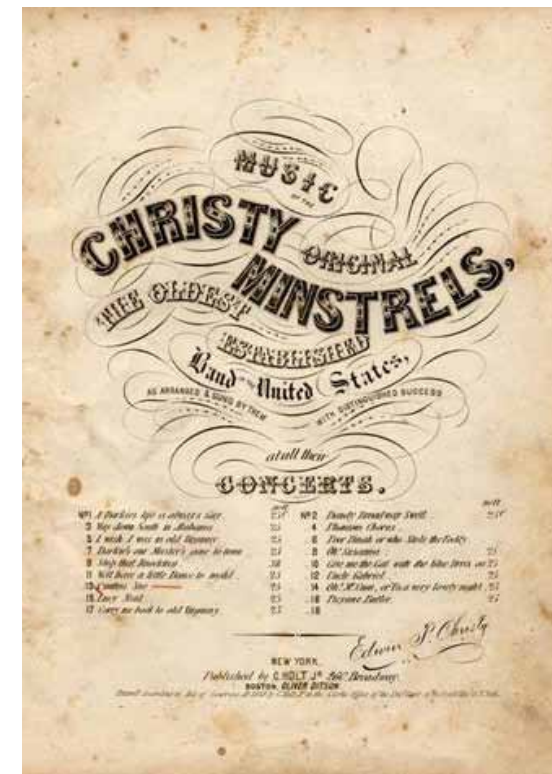
In many ways, their instruments became separate from the orchestra because they were generally only used to accent punch lines in jokes. One magazine writer commented, “The crowd likes nothing better than to see a half-wit get the better of a pompous intellectual” (Wittke, 139). The audience relishing in the antics of the endmen more than any other aspect of the minstrel show caused the gradual increase of involvement and number of endmen in the show.

Though they cackled and distracted during other acts, the endmen formed their own characters and sang their own songs during the first part. They conjured strong, fake Southern accents to sing about the “joys of slavery” and the “good old South.” Because most of the men in minstrel shows before the Civil War were urban white Northerners, their characters were based on impressions and generalized stereotypes, which were in turn stereotypes ingrained into American culture. One such character that became emblematic of racism in America is Jumpin’ Jim Crow, an immensely popular character in minstrel shows.

After this lively first part, the **second part**, or **olio** began. Some think that this part is what eventually broke off into vaudeville because the structure was so similar. The interlocutor would introduce each act, which had its own separate costumes and sets. While some were still done in blackface, this practice lessened in later years. Stars of the stage would appear for an act, while company members generally performed scenes with ballads or comic songs. Generally the storylines focused on unrequited love and the “Old South,” glorifying plantation life far beyond reality. Once again, the African American characters were grossly exaggerated and generalized into stereotypes. As fads changed in the U.S., troupes began incorporating more operettas and burlesque into the shows to keep up, though the popularity of these forms eventually decreased the audiences for minstrel shows after the turn of the 20th century.

Incorporated into this show, usually in the second part, was a **cakewalk**. This tradition began on old plantations where the masters and mistresses would have their slaves dress in their clothes and performed in a circular song and dance. Oftentimes the winner of this dance contest was given a cake from the mistress. While it served as entertainment for the slave owners, the cakewalk became a symbol of black pride for the slaves. Instead of performing their traditional African dances seriously for the slave owners, the slaves participated ironically, performing but protecting their traditions by mimicking and exaggerating traditionally white dances (Seymour Stark, *Men in Blackface*, 2000: 144). In the minstrel show, it stayed a walk-around, sometimes combined with the ending **hoedown**, where the minstrels stood once again in a semicircle and each member took a turn singing, dancing and clapping along in the center. The hoedown was generally the finale in the pre-Civil War touring days of minstrelsy. With the cakewalk included after the Civil War in place of the hoedown, the members moved in a circle and performed a showy competitive dance, sometimes dressed in the “old South” costumes reminiscent of the cakewalk’s beginnings and sometimes attired in costumes previously seen in the show that night. Regardless of the costumes, troupes included at least some traditional African dances. This gave an opportunity to employ African Americans, and it grew in popularity after the Civil War when minstrel companies hired former slaves to perform in blackface rather than white Northerners. Many of the dances became more exaggerated as their popularity grew. Regardless, audiences saw the cakewalk as providing an enthusiastic, energy driven finale for the show. The combination of these elements and characters provided a well-known structure that audiences recognized and positively responded to during the development and height of minstrelsy.

For more information about minstrel shows, please refer to *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*, by Carl Wittke, from which the above quotations are taken.



## SEGMENTS OF POPULAR MINSTREL SONGS

Editor’s Note: “I’m Going Home to Dixie” was written and popularized by Daniel D. Emmett, a member of the Virginia Minstrels. The song would have been performed by a minstrel in blackface during a performance. Its lyrics may seem innocuous, but when the lyrics are put in context the reader can imagine the false and stereotypical imagery this song promotes. This nostalgia for the Southern easy life hardly reflects the life African Americans lived at the time this was written and sung. It promotes a picture of the harmless Southern plantation life as imagined by a man from Central Ohio, but it is a far cry from reality.

### “I’m Going Home to Dixie”

by Daniel Decatur Emmett, 1861

There is a land where cotton grows,  
A land where milk and honey flows,  
I’m going home to Dixie; Yes; I am going home.

Chorus  
I’ve got no time to tarry, I’ve got no time to stay,  
’Tis a rocky road to travel, to Dixie far away.  
I’ve got no time to tarry, I’ve got no time to stay,  
’Tis a rocky road to travel, to Dixie far away.  
I will climb up the highest hill,  
And sing your praise with right good will.  
I’m going home to Dixie; Yes; I am going home.

Chorus  
I’ve wander’d far, both to and fro’  
But Dixie’s heaven here below.  
I’m going home to Dixie; Yes; I am going home.  
Chorus

### “Jim Crow”

by Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, around 1829

Come, listen all you gals and boys,  
Ise just from Tuckyhoe;  
I’m goin, to sing a little song,  
My name’s Jim Crow.

Chorus  
Weel about and turn about and do jis so,  
Eb’ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.  
I went down to the river,  
I didn’t mean to stay;  
But dere I see so many gals,  
I couldn’t get away.

Chorus  
And arter I been dere awhile,  
I tought I push my boat;  
But I tumbled in de river,  
And I find myself afloat.  
Chorus

## VIEWS ON MINSTRELSY

In minstrelsy, the Negro type ... always was distinguished by an unusually large mouth and a peculiar kind of broad grin; he dressed in gaudy colors and in a flashy style; he usually consumed more gin than he couple properly hold; and he loved chickens so well that he could not pass a chicken-coop without falling into temptation. In minstrelsy, moreover, the Negro's alleged love for the grand manner led him to use words so long that he not only did not understand their meaning, but twisted the syllables in the most ludicrous fashion in his futile effort to pronounce them. This, in the main, was the Negro joke-book tradition and more especially of the minstrel tradition, and undoubtedly he was a somewhat different individual from the one to be found in real life in the Southern states. But it was this type of darky that the white minstrels strove to imitate or, better states perhaps, created and perpetuated.

Carl Wittke. *Tambo and Bones: A history of the American Minstrel Stage*. Westport, Conn.: Duke University Press, 1930

**It was no accident that the incredible popularity of minstrelsy coincided with public concern about slavery and the proper position of Negroes in America. Precisely because people could always laugh off the performance, because viewers did not have to take the show seriously, minstrelsy served as a “safe” vehicle through which its primarily Northern, urban audiences could work out their feelings about even the most sensitive and volatile issues.**

Robert C. Toll. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974

Minstrelsy not only conveyed explicit pro-slavery and anti-Abolitionist propaganda; it was, in and of itself, a defense of slavery because its main content stemmed from the myth of the benign plantation. ...

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Underlying the sociological congruency between city and frontier was a psychological similarity between traveling to the city and traveling west. ... In minstrelsy's complex matrix of social content, the journey became the central theme. It stood in contrast to the celebration of urban opportunity and permissiveness as a lament for what had been left behind and lost. This theme, I believe, entered minstrelsy in its beginnings, not in any sense as a reflection of journeys made by black slaves, but as a projection by the white performers of their own experience. ... The notion of a symbolic journey suggests minstrelsy's powerful impact upon white viewers. At the same time it helps to place in perspective one of the most puzzling aspects of minstrel repertory: the endless evocation of the old South.

Alexander Saxton in *Inside the Minstrel Makes: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. Edited by Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996

## MINSTRELSY'S DAMAGING AND LASTING EFFECTS IN FILM

**Editors Note:** In the excerpt below, John Stausbaugh discusses how blackface images and African American actors segued into early Hollywood, restricted to certain roles and characterizations drawn from minstrelsy. Sometimes blackface was used, and sometimes it was not, but the impulses behind it from minstrelsy greatly impacted African Americans in early film.

Blackface made an effortless leap from the stage to the movie screen virtually the moment the moving picture was invented. No medium is more American than movies. So it should be no surprise that American movies have often been obsessed with matters of race and images of Blackness. ... For almost a century, since the cameras were almost always in the hands of White people, those images were almost always of Blacks, and others, as White people saw them. ... Donald Bogle, one of the most influential and dyspeptic of Black film historians, sees Black film caricatures falling into five archetypes. ... Toms and mammies are obvious – they're the kindly older Negro house servants, Uncle Tom, Uncle Remus, Uncle Mose, Uncle Ben, Aunt Chloe, Aunt Jemima. We may call them uncles and aunts, but they're really the nation's grandparents, the granddads and grandmas we all wish we had but only wealthy folds could afford to buy. Coons are the shuffling black clowns like Stepin Fetchit. Mulattoes and mulattas are the light-skinned, Caucasian-looking hunks and hotties. ... The buck is the big, dangerous, sexual male. ...

At the same times all those white vaudevillians were preserving minstrelsy on film in the 1930s and 1940s, many Black performers from the vaudeville and minstrel stages were making their way to Hollywood. The now Jewish-run studios were hungry for Black talent – there were far more Black aces on the big screen than blackface ones. Part of the impetus was the introduction of sound in 1927. With their “natural” singing and dancing talents, Blacks were thought to be uniquely suited to the new technology.

Before World War II, the roles Blacks were offered in Hollywood were almost all restricted to Bogle's stereotypes. Black actors played maids, cooks and manservants; kindly old Toms and Jemimas; sleepy, shuffling coons; pickaninnies, golliwogs, and Topsies. Often they danced and sang; just as often they donned leopard-print loincloths and carried spears through fake jungles; and one in a great while they got to play a romantic lead, or even God. Filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles sums up his view of the era succinctly. Before the war, he has declared, “if you were a Black actor in Hollywood, that meant you tossed a spear, cooked somebody for dinner, or took a bullet. Or you brought a drink, or carried a plate.”

John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture*, New York: Penguin Group, 2006

## FOR FURTHER READING

## BOOKS

**On Kander and Ebb**

Kander, John, and Fred Ebb with Greg Lawrence. *Colored Lights: Forty Years of Words and Music, Show Biz, Collaboration, and All That Jazz*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2004

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Wittke, Carl. *Tambo and Bones: A history of the American Minstrel Stage*. Westport, Conn.: Duke University Press, 1930

## RELATED WEBSITES

**On Kander and Ebb**

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts: Explore the Arts. John Kander biography. [http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/artists/?entity\\_id=3938&source\\_type=A](http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/artists/?entity_id=3938&source_type=A)

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts: Explore the Arts. Fred Ebb biography. [http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/artists/?entity\\_id=3725&source\\_type=A](http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/artists/?entity_id=3725&source_type=A)

The Telegraph. Obituary for Fred Ebb. September 14, 2004. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1471651/Fred-Ebb.html>

“Broadway: The American Musical” on PBS.org. John Kander and Fred Ebb biography. 2004. [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/kander\\_j.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/kander_j.html)

**On the Scottsboro Boys**

“American Experience: Scottsboro, An American Tragedy” on PBS.org. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/>

University of Missouri – Kansas City, Law School: Famous American Trials. “The Scottsboro Boys” 1931-1937. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrial/scottsboro/scottsb.htm>