

ARZELL & COLE

IN DAHOMY!

THE RESSURECTION OF A NEGRO MUSICAL COMEDY

BOOK: JESSE A. SHIPP (1906) // BREON ARZELL & MONTY COLE (2024)
LYRICS: PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1906) // BREON ARZELL (2024)
MUSIC: WILL MARION COOK (1906) // DAHLAK BRATHWAITE (2024)

THE WHAT

This project is a resurrection of the first musical, performed on Broadway, written by and starring African Americans, 'In Dahomey'. It is a way to honor the legacy of what has been written and bring it into the present.



THE HOW & WHY

We first came across the original piece during a search for musicals completely written by and performed by African Americans; a list that was shockingly much shorter than expected. However, at the top of that list was 'In Dahomey', first written and appearing on Broadway in 1904, and not performed since its London production in 1906.

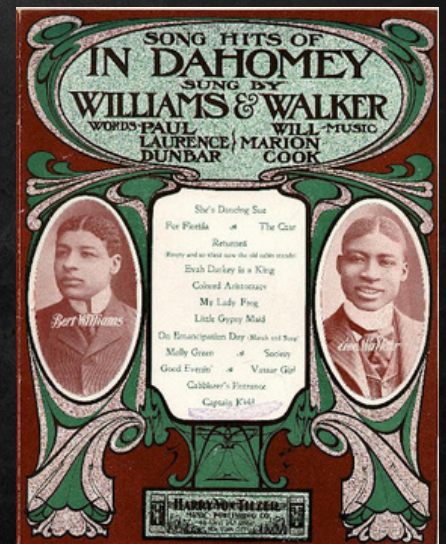
Upon reading the original text, even through its patchworked transcription, we immediately recognized the great potential of this project; not only as a piece of American and theatrical history, but a hilarious and artful piece of theater.

We began to think, could this show of vaudeville vignettes and solo songs work as a book musical? Could we preserve the essence, and much of the content, and also create something fresh and cohesive?

We began to re-order songs, remove songs, write new songs, enhance and write new scenes, edit lyrics, and even increase the female presence (which, originally, was only 3 of 17 principal and supporting roles).

Considering when the show was conceived and how it was performed, it provides an intriguing commentary on the history and state of society, and cleverly challenges its audience's perspective and ideals.

"Working on 'In Dahomey' has been like an archaeological dig. Breon and I have had to dust off and dig up old bones, 3-D print new bones, to see the artifact that's in front of us. What astounds me every time we come back to working on this powerful musical about home is how funny it is still. There are parts that consistently, to this day, still crack us up." -Monty Cole



THE SHOW

In Boston, we meet the members of a Colonization Society, their followers, and their nay-sayers, as they prepare to embark on a journey to Abomey, Dahomey, by way of Gatorville, Florida; in hopes of establishing a homeland of their dreams.

Along the way, we encounter two down-on-their-luck pals that are just trying to capture the key to success.

Victims of circumstance, they find themselves in the right place at the right time, as they are mistaken for detectives, and join the ranks. Full of antics, hijinks, plots and plot twists, curses, and dreams of what could be, this story will take you on a vaudevillian ride of calamity and opportunity.



THE DETAILS

-a Presentation in Three Acts-

Prologue, Act I- Boston

Act II & Act III- Gatorville, FL

Epilogue- Dahomey

22 songs

15+ cast

11 principals + a Quartet + 4 ensemble

*8 actors for a music workshop

*15 actors for a full reading
ragtime, jazz, gospel, americana,
spiritual, urban contemporary

THE MUSIC

Demo

featuring *experimental arrangements and composition by
Dahlak Brathwaite, Jermaine Hill, & Nicole Michelle Haskins



THE JOURNEY

*Independent Private Reading, Chicago - original text - Co-Creators: Breon Arzell & Monty Cole - 2017

*Workshop, Court Theatre (Chicago)- 1st draft, script work - Book: Breon Arzell & Monty Cole, Dir: Monty Cole, MD: Jermaine Hill - 2018

*Workshop, Oregon Shakespeare Festival - music, script & music - Book & Lyrics: Breon Arzell, Dir: Monty Cole, MD & Composer: Christie Chiles Twille, Dramaturg: Martine Kei Green - 2022

*Vanguard Arts Fund recipient, Olney Theatre - music & composition - Lyrics: Breon Arzell, Dir: Monty Cole, & Composer: Dahlak Brathwaite - 2024/25

WHAT'S NEXT

- To further develop the music and create orchestration for new songs
- Refine the book, and make edits based on the new music created
- Have any new music transcribed, and update the libretto
- Play through all songs and establish styles and sound
- Hear the new draft of the script with the updated music
- Establish a relationship with potential producers/producing theater

WHO'S WHO



BOOK & LYRICS

co-creator



BREON ARZELL

Detroit native, Breon Arzell is a dedicated teaching artist, actor and choreographer with a BA in Theater Performance & Black World Studies from Miami University (Ohio). With Chicago, IL as his artistic home, he serves as mentor to several universities, studios and theaters. As a teaching artist he has created many original works and adaptations for performance and educational purposes. He is also certified in teaching English as a second language through theater and drama based activity. A collaborator, deviser, actor, choreographer, director, and writer, Chicago credits include working with Second City, Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, Theater Unspeakable, DePaul University, Northwestern University, & more. Regionally, he has worked with The Kennedy Center, MUNY, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Woolly Mammoth, Indiana Repertory, Goodspeed Musicals, & McCarter Theatre. He is the recipient of 7 Jeff Awards (Chicago), 2 Black Theater Alliance Awards (Chicago), and a Helen Hayes Award (DMV), and recognized as one of Time Out Magazine's Players of Chicago. His artistic efforts have taken him across the United States, Italy, and Germany, and to England and Singapore.



BOOK

co-creator



MONTY COLE

Monty Cole is a writer-director for theater and film based in Chicago, IL and Los Angeles, CA. As a theatre director, Cole's productions have been acclaimed for their emotional clarity, stunning visuals and innovative rethinking. He has directed for Steppenwolf, Center Theatre Group, The Goodman Theatre, The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Victory Gardens Theater, the Center for New Performance, Cape Cod Theatre Project, Alley Theatre and others. His re-interpretations of classics from Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* to his recent production of *Fences* by August Wilson have received awards and critical praise. As a new play director, he's directed staged readings, workshops and world premieres across the country.

Also an accomplished writer, Cole was a member with of the Playwrights Unit at the Goodman Theatre in 2020. His stirring essays can be read in *Howlround*, *American Theatre Magazine* and *Rescripted*, where he is a resident writer. As a professor, Cole has taught for the California Institute of the Arts and the theatre department at University of Illinois, Chicago.

Monty has a BA in Theatre Studies from Emerson College and an MFA Directing degree from the California Institute of the Arts.

COMPOSER



**DAHLAK
BRATHWAITE**

Playwright, composer, performer, director, and filmmaker. His work has been presented at The Smithsonian, The Wallis, Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, REDCAT, MCA Chicago, Ars Nova, The Public Theater, The Apollo, SXSW, and on HBO's Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry. Dahlak's trilogy of works - *Spirituals* (solo play), *Try/Step/Trip* (musical), *Adapting History* (documentary film) - take a personal look into the criminal justice system and the relationship between Black American music and Black American subjugation. Development of the work has been supported by CalArts, A.C.T., Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and Montalvo Arts Center. Dahlak is a Princess Grace Award winner. He has received awards and support from NEFA, the Doris Duke Foundation, Creative Capital, MAP Fund, California Arts Council, and has taught workshops internationally as a two-time fellow of the U.S. State Department. He was a member of The Public Theater's 2023 Devised Theater Working Group cohort. His musical adaptation of Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down* premiered at Olney Theater Center, broke box-office records, and was hailed by the Washington Post as "bracing and moving and funny and even fun...". Dahlak is a graduate of NYU's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program, where he was awarded the Dean's Full-Tuition Fellowship, and served as the Assistant Director for the national tour of the Tony-winning revival of *Oklahoma*. He has been a visiting professor at UC Davis and is currently part-time faculty at Berklee College of Music.



MATERIALS

script sample

Original Source Content

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