

Choreographic Ghosts: Dance and the Revival of *Shuffle Along*

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As Marvin Carlson (2001) has noted, ghosts haunt the stage in almost any theatrical production. In the case of the 2016 revival of the smash-hit musical *Shuffle Along*, one ghost in particular stands out: that of the show's original choreographer. *Shuffle Along*, which featured an all-black creative team and cast, opened on Broadway in May 1921. It ran for 504 performances, generated multiple traveling companies, and sparked the careers of several acclaimed performers. While critics panned the plot about a mayoral race in a fictive southern town, the music and dance made crowds go wild ("Negroes Offer Lively Show" 1921; "'Shuffle Along': Lively Show," 1921). Indeed, stories about the influence of *Shuffle Along*'s dancing inspired acclaimed theater director George C. Wolfe to work on a revival. In an interview with TheatreMania in May 2016, he stated,

I discovered [the show] in increments. I found out Paul Robeson was a replacement in *Shuffle Along*, and then I learned about Florence Mills . . . and then at one point I was working on a Josephine Baker project, and then she was in *Shuffle Along*. And then the thing which sort of went, "Oh, there's something else. This isn't just a musical." That it was the first time a women's dancing chorus existed on Broadway. So I went, "Oh. This is a significant turn in the evolution of the American musical. Why isn't this discussed? (TheatreMania 2016)

Wolfe repeated this discovery tale about dance's importance at every press opportunity. In an interview with Jeffrey Brown of the PBS NewsHour, Wolfe opened the discussion with, "*Shuffle Along* was the first time there was a women's dancing, hoofing chorus. And I went, 'Why isn't this discussed?' And then I went, 'So THIS altered the American musical'" (Brown 2016). Wolfe's claims were exaggerated, as women's dancing choruses had existed on Broadway prior to 1921. Choreographer Ned Wayburn, for example, had popularized precision dancing in the 1910s and incorporated tap choreography (Stratynier 1996, 51–7). Nevertheless, for audiences accustomed to chorus lines who kicked squarely in time with the music, the syncopation and energy of dancing to jazz music, with its intricate and propulsive rhythms, proved a revelation (Stearns [1968] 1994, 132). As David Savran argues, "*Shuffle Along* made jazz and tap dancing obligatory on Broadway" (2009, 76). Wolfe's argument that history ignored *Shuffle Along* was also overstated, as scholars such as Jean and Marshall Stearns, Allen Woll (1989), David Krasner (2002), and Savran had written

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about the show's importance. Nevertheless, Wolfe was correct in asserting that the innovations of *Shuffle Along*'s dancing chorus had been largely ignored in the popular history of musical theater. The absence of *Shuffle Along* in the collective public memory of theatergoers is an example of what Brenda Dixon Gottschild calls the "invisibilization" of black contributions to the performing arts (1996, 6). For Wolfe, the discovery of *Shuffle Along*'s impact on Broadway dance proved the pivotal turning point toward his desire to resurrect the show.

Rather than do a straightforward revival, Wolfe transformed *Shuffle Along* into a backstage musical, rewriting the book entirely. *Shuffle Along, or, the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed* (shortened to *The Making Of* hereafter) was, as its unwieldy title suggested, about the making of *Shuffle Along* and what happened as a result. Early in the creative process, Wolfe brought in choreographer Savion Glover, with whom he had previously worked on the Broadway shows *Jelly's Last Jam* (1992) and *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk* (1996). Glover called *The Making Of* "edutainment" (Allen 2016), given that much of the script was given over to didactic lessons to the audience about the lives of four members of the original creative team: writers F. E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles and composers Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, played by Brian Stokes Mitchell, Billy Porter, Brandon Victor Dixon, and Joshua Henry, respectively. Adhering to the norm that a Broadway musical contain a heterosexual romance, the other main plot point concerned the rumored love affair between Blake and *Shuffle Along*'s ingénue, Lottie Gee, played by Broadway superstar Audra McDonald.

There are two glaring omissions in this backstage show: any exploration of the choreographic process and any mention of *Shuffle Along*'s original choreographer, Lawrence Deas. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Deas toured with the famed Ernest Hogan on the black vaudeville circuit before building his own theater in Asbury Park, New Jersey. He then joined the team of *Shuffle Along* not only as choreographer, but also as coproducer. The original 1921 playbill lists "Dances by Lawrence Deas" (*Shuffle Along* 1921), and a 1955 article in the *Chicago Defender* bemoaning the dearth of black shows on Broadway begins, "Back in the early 20's five guys, Sissle and Blake, Miller and Lyle [sic] and Lawrence Deas hit upon the idea for an all Sepia Broadway production under the label of 'Shuffle Along'" (Roy 1955). After *Shuffle Along*, Deas was engaged to produce *Shuffle Along No. 2* for the road. In the fall of 1922, he opened his own show in Chicago, *Plantation Days*, which also enjoyed tremendous success and spawned a wave of imitators. Deas went on to choreograph and produce several other shows, including an African dance drama at New York's Lewisohn Stadium in 1938 viewed by 12,000 people. He was an inaugural member of the Crescendo Club, an elite Harlem social organization whose other members included Eubie Blake, J. C. Johnson, and Jelly Roll Morton, and in 1948 cofounded Sun Tan Studios, a "Clearing House for New Talent" in Harlem to train black performers for Broadway. He died in New York in 1951 (White 1924; "Stadium to be Scene of a Dance Drama" 1938; "N.Y. Composers Organize" 1939; Brown 1948; New York Department of Health, n.d.).

The historical record clearly shows Deas's centrality to the theatrical world of the mid-twentieth century and to *Shuffle Along* in particular. In the 2016 revival, however, Deas was absent. He is not a character in the show. Neither Wolfe nor Glover mention him in interviews, nor does John Jeremiah Sullivan in his 9,816-word *New York Times Magazine* essay, "'Shuffle Along' and the Lost History of Black Performance in America" (2016). The playbill for *The Making Of* includes an insert of a "historical" program from 1921 that eliminates any mention of Deas or the act of choreography (*Shuffle Along, or ...* 2016). In order to create such a program, Wolfe and his team must have consulted *Shuffle Along* archives, where copies of the playbills containing Deas's name are in the files. Therefore Deas's absence was not simply an oversight, but rather a deliberate choice.

This decision exposes how the creative and performative labor of dance on Broadway still, in the twenty-first century, remains subordinate to other aspects of a musical in a way that reproduces

racist and sexist logics about performance. Simply put, dance foregrounds the body, which in the modern history of Euro-American thought has been considered to be separate from, and inferior to, the mind. Dance in commercial venues has engendered particular suspicion, as selling one's body for entertainment has historically been linked to sex work. Furthermore, prior to the advent of regular video recording, dance failed to conform to traditional archival standards of materiality. The presumed lack of tangible traces entrenches its marginalized status in relation to the book and score of a musical.¹

The people associated with dance also matter to this inequality. The “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” as bell hooks calls the power structure that has governed the United States since its inception as a nation (2004, 17), has historically associated both people of African descent and women with dance (and thus with intellectual inferiority) as part of justifications for oppression. Dancing women, particularly black dancing women, particularly black dancing women on a commercial stage, faced stereotypes about race, gender, and the body together. Audiences in the 1920s viewed black women dancers as representing “the supreme expression of black female eroticism” (Rose 1989, 28) and the physical embodiment of primitive stereotypes about black people as closer to nature and freer, especially sexually (Krasner 2001, 196). Of all the arts, dance has retained the strongest association with the term “primitivism” because the body is the form’s “medium of creativity” and thus seemingly “precede[s] all other forms of creative expression” (Henderson 2003, 112). This view has stubbornly persisted into the present (Copeland 1996, 8–9). Despite decades of discourse attempting to reframe primitivism, the term still connotes inferiority and a lack of sophistication and definitely did so during the *Shuffle Along* era. Thus many black male intellectuals of the 1920s denigrated dance as a pursuit that harmed rather than helped goals of racial equality. They championed music, literature, poetry, and visual art as the preferred artistic media that could contribute to a political cause. Scholars such as Daphne Brooks, Jayna Brown, and David Krasner have investigated how early twentieth-century black women performers countered these images, asserting their own power and agency as creative, intellectual beings (Brooks 2006; Brown 2008; Krasner 2001, 2002). Brown in particular has written about how the chorines in *Shuffle Along* navigated the “fear and blame [that] were mapped onto the bodies of black women dancers” (2008, 194).

On the surface, Wolfe did not devalue dance. He sang the praises of the chorines’ talents in interviews and hired one of the world’s most prominent choreographers to reimagine their world for *The Making Of*. His directorial choices, however, reveal the lingering effects of an intellectual tradition that links dance with harmful stereotypes. By neglecting to explore the process of choreography in *The Making Of* and by ghosting Deas, Wolfe missed the opportunity to demonstrate that dance is a creative, intellectual endeavor integral to the success of a musical—and to black historical memory. For centuries, white Americans claimed that black Americans had no history because the Middle Passage had supposedly destroyed any record of social, cultural, or political practices in Africa. In the mid-twentieth century, black ethnographer-choreographers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus countered this myth by asserting that people of African descent carried memories in their bodies, revealing historical legacies through storytelling, music, and most importantly, dance. In short, black dancing bodies form archives (Hardin 2016). Embodied memories contest the white supremacist, patriarchal structure that places greater value on written sources. In *Shuffle Along*, the dancing was *especially* important to its success, far more important than any story line. In refusing to grant the labor and value of dance equal status to the book and music, Wolfe reproduced cultural hierarchies that have engendered racial and gendered subordination.

Finding Lawrence Deas

The role of dance in *The Making Of* is ironically parallel to the role of black history in American history: the central character and primary creative force that is nonetheless overlooked, sometimes given lip service but not fully fleshed out. Possible explanations of the absence reproduce the logic

that has perniciously marginalized black history. One could say that Wolfe was showing fidelity to his sources. There are multiple books written about Sissle and Blake and recordings of their songs. There are unpublished memoirs by Miller and Lyles. In fact, in contrast to Wolfe's claim that history forgot *Shuffle Along*, the show actually popped up quite often throughout the twentieth century—in a 1932–1933 revival, in a 1952 revival, in a 1973 book about Sissle and Blake, in a 1978 off-Broadway revue version of *Shuffle Along*, and in the 1978 musical *Eubie!* on Broadway, which ran for a respectable 439 performances. In contrast, little is publicly known about Lawrence Deas (Seibert 2016).

At the same time, that explanation—a lack of source material—undercuts Wolfe's entire thesis. The fact that white Americans are better represented in the archive, particularly the Broadway archive, is something he wanted to fight against. Wolfe believed that *Shuffle Along's* story had been unfairly lost to history, and his project was to recover its significance. The cast felt the burden, too. Sullivan wrote in the *New York Times*:

At a moment when the conversation about blacks and how they're represented in American entertainment is as fraught as it has been since "The Birth of a Nation," [these performers] had undertaken to put one of the sacred relics of black theater back in front of the public. There was an inescapable sense that they'd be letting down more than themselves if they failed. (Sullivan 2016)

To hammer the point home, the one white actor in the production sings "They Won't Remember You" to the black characters late in Act II, a thesis about the loss of black history that Wolfe challenged in the very act of mounting this production. To ignore Deas because of his relative absence in source materials thus replicated the very modes of history making that Wolfe critiqued.

Furthermore, as it turns out, Deas is not actually absent in source materials. Searching for Lawrence Deas from 1900 to 1940 turns up dozens of relevant citations in digitized historical newspapers. Deas was a well-known figure during his lifetime. Of anyone involved in the original *Shuffle Along* production, the differential between Deas's importance in the 1920s and his absence in historical annals is much greater than that of Noble, Sissle, Miller, or Lyles. A 1924 *Chicago Defender* profile called Deas "one of the best known managers in the theatrical business, regardless of color" (White 1924). Deas exists not only in the archive, but also in the historiography of *Shuffle Along*. Marshall and Jean Stearns's foundational *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, first published in 1968, discusses Deas. In August of 1922, after an unprecedented fourteen-month run on Broadway, *Shuffle Along* hit the road for Boston. The Stearns quote Eubie Blake as saying, "Before we left for Boston, they brought in a white dance director named Walter Brooks to give the show 'That Broadway touch.' He got two percent of the production, and Lawrence Deas who had done all the work, was paid off with a small amount of cash and dropped" ([1968] 1994, 137).

Aside from clearly establishing that Deas was central to the creation and success of *Shuffle Along* on Broadway, Blake's anecdote reveals the all-too-common way that black creators have been exploited and pushed aside in the history of American theatrical performance, particularly creators involved in the most marginalized aspect of a musical: choreography. Even with a clear record of success in New York, *Shuffle Along's* white producers lacked faith that an all-black show could translate for audiences in Boston. While Blake does not expand on why the music and book were deemed good enough but the dancing was not, the fact that in the 1920s Americans linked black dance with primitivism, hypersexuality, and spontaneity surely led to a desire to censor the movement. Despite the rave reviews for the dancing, the producers most likely believed that only a white choreographer could transform it in a manner acceptable for conservative Boston. Of course, Deas's uncredited work saturated into virtually every musical thereafter. The *Defender* profile asserted that "every white and Colored production, including Ziegfeld Follies, Fred Stone Co., Liz, How Come, etc. have patterned after Deas's style of staging numbers, as they never thought of girls

working and dancing with so much pep until they saw ‘Shuffle Along’” (White 1924). Ninety-six years later, Wolfe, who claimed to champion the recovery of lost black theater history, ironically repeated this ghosting by ignoring the black person “who had done all the work” to alter how dance looked and felt on Broadway.

Choreographic Copyright

Deas’s absence from *The Making Of* also has the effect of recreating one of the longest-standing stereotypes in black performance: that black dancers are just natural dancers. This faulty logic has been applied in particular to black women, doubly denied status as skilled professionals for both their race and gender. One might assume that Glover would not fall prey to this way of thinking, as he has always emphasized his reverence for tap progenitors. In April 2016, while *The Making Of* was in previews, the Associated Press published a story on Glover titled, “Tap Dancing Icon Savion Glover Keeps ‘Tradition’ Alive,” in which the main point was how Glover uses tap dance to make sure that the stories and names of tap dance history “remain mentioned.” He requires students at his dance studio in Newark to learn months of tap history before they even get to tap themselves (Kennedy 2016).

Yet Glover stated of the original production, “It was a groundbreaking moment—they were creating these dances in the streets” (Paulson 2015). The statement assumes a faulty linear logic about social dance and theatrical dance. Instead of migrating unidirectionally from street to stage, forms circulate. The Cakewalk is a classic example, something that began as a social dance among enslaved persons in the American South, morphed into a theatrical dance performed in minstrelsy and vaudeville (by both black and white performers), heightened in prominence by black female choreographer Aida Overton Walker, repopularized as a social form in the early twentieth century when danced by African Americans, immigrants, and New York City’s white elite, and revived on the stage in Katherine Dunham’s suite of “Americana” dances in her 1940s Broadway revues. A similar pattern happened with tap dance, the form to which Glover is most likely alluding. Before people tapped in paved streets, they tapped on dirt floors in the American South and in bars in New York City, then on wooden stages in minstrelsy and vaudeville, and then in urban nightclubs. In the United States, these circuitous paths of transmission also crossed racial lines, weaving tangled webs of appropriation, borrowing, and imitation.² By the time tap and other black vernacular dances such as the Turkey Trot and Black Bottom appeared onstage in *Shuffle Along*, they came not directly or solely from the streets as Glover claimed, but from the performers’ experiences in previous theatrical performances. The show’s star Lottie Gee, for example, had performed Walker’s choreography for years in numerous shows. Josephine Baker had toured with the vaudevillian Dixie Steppers before joining the *Shuffle Along* cast. Deas had also appeared in several vaudeville productions. There were some chorines without previous stage experience, such as Fredi Washington. For the movements these dancers contributed from their informal training in vernacular dance, most likely Deas arranged them spatially to be front facing, rather than in circular forms typical of social dancing, and literally choreographed them, so that the performers would repeat (approximately) the same steps night after night to the same musical cues.

One could argue that the absence of the choreographer in *The Making Of* opens up space to acknowledge female dancers’ labor, which in this case provides some gender balance to the main story of a four-man creative team. However, none of the women dancers have individual names or stories. The women’s dance chorus (there is also a men’s dance chorus, called the “Dancin’ Boys”) exists as an amalgamated character in the show, a mass counterweight to the primary dynamic of feuding male creative couples. On a positive note, the emphasis on the group dynamic of the chorus dramaturgically reinforces the collective nature of the *Shuffle Along* enterprise and of making musicals in general. Furthermore, choreographers often get much of their material from the dancers themselves, and doubtless Deas did so. Anthea Kraut argues that black expressive forms in

particular are often collaborative creations, something “more closely resembling a gift economy than a capitalist, proprietary one” (2016, xvi). The women’s chorus most certainly had agency in how they chose to perform and perhaps even in what steps they performed.

At the same time, the most famous stories about Josephine Baker’s role as a chorine in the touring production of *Shuffle Along* emphasize how her crazy antics deviated from the set choreography (Stearns [1968] 1994, 134)—which reminds readers that there *was* set choreography. Steps alone do not necessarily thrill; how a choreographer stages those steps and creates dynamic interactions among cast members indubitably contributes to the visual impact. Kraut also points out that many black tappers “worked to protect dance steps they considered their property” (2016, xvi). There are limits to collective creation. As Kraut persuasively argues, questions of choreographic copyright are always racialized in the United States: “Who possesses the rights to which movement, of who is authorized to borrow from whom, and of who profits from the circulation of dance are all entangled in legacies of racial injustice” (5). In this case, the question is a messy tangle of racial and gendered dynamics. Does leaving out Deas from *The Making Of* rightfully allow the chorines to shine? After all, it was their bodies in motion that wowed audiences. Or does his absence wrongfully invisibilize the labor of black creativity, echoing how the original producers replaced him with Walter Brooks? Although the absence might seem to affect Deas the most, it actually affects the perceptions of black women as well: without acknowledgement of the rehearsal process, without showing the chorines learning and mastering choreography, does the women’s skill become seen merely as natural talent?

To further support Kraut’s point that black creators *did* care about copyright, the newspaper records on Deas reveal an interesting fact: the other members of the *Shuffle Along* team sued him for stealing material for his Chicago show, *Plantation Days* (“‘Shuffle Along’ Sues ‘Plantation Days’” 1922). In February 1923, the Keystone Detective Agency secured an injunction from a New York federal judge to block the *Plantation Days* cast and crew from sailing to London for an engagement because of this accusation of intellectual theft. The *Amsterdam News* reported,

In using the Keystone National Detective Agency, the only one of color in the world, the “Shuffle Along” company showed the same confidence displayed by some of the leading firms in the West who at all times use the operatives of this well-known agency... In taking these drastic steps for their own protection the “Shuffle Along” company are fully within their rights. (“Sleuth Acting for ‘Shuffle Along’” 1923)

While the first article names Deas as the defendant, this one instead names two white men as the *Plantation Days*’ producers. The author defended the show’s black cast members as simply doing their jobs. The newspaper wrote, “We understand that the colored people in the show had no choice, as they are under contract to white men behind the company” (“Sleuth Acting for ‘Shuffle Along’” 1923). The newspaper framed the dispute as a black show, *Shuffle Along*, protecting its intellectual property against white producers of an imitation show—even though *Shuffle Along*’s majority stakeholders were actually white and Deas, the creator of *Plantation Days*, black.

In July 1923, Sissle and Blake opened their own show called *Plantation Days* in Atlantic City, begging the question of who was stealing or borrowing ideas from whom (“Original ‘Shuffle Along’ Co. Closes in Atlantic City” 1923). Up the turnpike in New York City, Deas busied himself casting a second version of his *Plantation Days* to open in Chicago. This time, the newspaper named Deas as a “producer” of both *Shuffle Along* and *Plantation Days* (“Plantation Days’ Producer Assembling Talent for New Show” 1923). So, who owned the dance numbers of *Shuffle Along*? Did they belong at least in part to Deas, who not only choreographed, but also helped produce *Shuffle Along*? Or did they belong to the majority-stakeholder producers? What does it mean to “produce” a show? At the very least, the multiple legal battles reveal that creative team members

cared about ownership of their intellectual property. Deas was centrally involved in these disputes and cannot simply be overlooked.

Dance and Choreography in *The Making Of*

The Making Of did not ignore dance, but did not treat it as intellectual property with equal status to music or the book. The first lines spoken in the show, by the character F. E. Miller, reaffirm Wolfe's thesis that the dancing bodies of *Shuffle Along* ensured its success and lasting influence:

In 1921, “the-little-show-that-could” opened in New York City... The name of the show, “Shuffle Along.” It ran for 504 performances and among its many innovations, featured a line of chorines who didn't just promenade like so [stage notes read: “F. E. does a mindless traipse across the stage”] No-no! They stomped, shimm[i]ed and hoofed like never before! (Wolfe 2016, 2)³

Dance's influence comes up again in Act II. In the song “Struttin' Medley,” a choline excitedly proclaims that *Shuffle Along* has just celebrated its 100th performance on Broadway. Sissle sings in response, “Everybody's struttin' now/Everybody's learn' how/To do a syncopated jazz time walk/You'd better imitate it, it's the whole town talk” (Wolfe 2016, 75).

How, then, to represent the power and energy of this dancing? Instead of acknowledging the choreographer as integral to the process, or even that there *was* a process, dance emerges fully formed in *The Making Of*. In this backstage musical about putting together a show that featured dance, there are no numbers in which dancers learn steps (either from a choreographer or from each other), figure out spatial arrangements, or rehearse. No choreographer muses on how a particular number would work in the show or explain the origins of certain steps. While perhaps the show was too top-heavy and male-dominated to warrant another major male creative team character, there is not even a single mention of a choreographer. While audiences in 2016 were almost assuredly aware that Glover choreographed *The Making Of*, given all the publicity, the dramaturgical effect is to convey that in 1921, these women were just all naturally great dancers who brought their steps to the show from, in Glover's words, the streets.

In contrast, there are three numbers in *The Making Of* about the composing of songs. These are important moments of a backstage musical during which audiences see how the sausage gets made. To continue the metaphor, there is no dance sausage but a surfeit of song sausage. In Act One, Gee takes Blake's song “I'm Just Wild about Harry” and turns it from a ballad into a syncopated jazz number, with a young male tap dancer giving her inspiration. The audience witnesses the act of transformation in musical styles. In Act Two, Gee coaches the new cast member, Florence Mills, in how to sing “I'm Cravin' That Kind of Love.” Gee tells Mills to start off the song with less vigor, and then says, “Sing it, gently so, let it start to grow.” As Mills gets the hang of it, Gee says, “Let it flow, start to grow, nice and slow, now you go.” Gee coaches, “Upstage! Upstage! So that you've got somewhere to go. And take that tacky hat off!” Observing from the side, Miller comments, “She's turned it into a song of longing. Smart” (Wolfe 2016, 79–81). The scene shows the audience that the coaching of the song is not only about making the musical qualities better, but also about improving the song's message and therefore its utility for the show. Finally, in Act II, Blake surprises Gee with a new song he's working on, “You're Lucky to Me.” Gee starts to sing, hesitantly. She stumbles as she sight-reads the materials for the first time. Blake interrupts to describe when various instruments come in. Gee gains confidence once she figures out the basic rhythms and melodic line of the song, and the two improvise together to improve the number (Wolfe 2016, 81). Audiences learn how collaboration works to create musical numbers—but not dance numbers.

If Glover and Wolfe imagined *Shuffle Along*'s dance numbers as the collective creation of a talented female chorus (even if the collaboration process is not represented onstage), *The Making Of*'s dance numbers were decidedly not collaborative creations. Instead, rehearsal footage shows Glover in the front of the studio, dancers arranged in lines behind him. He demonstrates a step; the cast repeats it. If they struggle, they ask the dance captain for help. Even in the workshop phase of the process, the dancers learned Glover's steps rather than contributing their own (Moore 2016). Theater critics emphasize Glover's singular genius, with the superlative titles of "the greatest tap virtuoso of our time, perhaps of all time" (Acocella 2014) and "world's greatest tap dancer" (Kennedy 2016). The reverence for a solo artistic genius in dance is a gendered phenomenon, historically applying to men—the male choreographer as godlike puppet master, and women dancers as his objects to mold.⁴

There is no denying that Glover is indeed an incredible talent. The choreography was by almost all accounts successful in conveying the central purpose of the show: recovering the overlooked African-American creative influences on Broadway. In an echo of the original production's reviews, reviews from 2016 disparaged the book and praised the dancing. Ben Brantley wrote in the *New York Times*, "The clunky, shoehorned-in exposition doesn't overwhelm the sweeping grace of 'Shuffle Along' whenever it sings or dances" (2016). Marilyn Stasio, writing for *Variety*, called it a "dance-drunk show," and wrote, "an incoherent book seems a small price to pay for the joy of watching Audra McDonald cut loose" (2016).

In the opening dance number, Glover set up kinesthetic support for Wolfe's thesis about *Shuffle Along*'s influence, achieving an important dramaturgical goal. When Miller proclaims that the *Shuffle Along*'s chorines "stomped, shimm[i]ed and hoofed like never before," the women break out into a fast-paced rhythm tap sequence that also includes the Charleston and pirouettes. They eventually form a line and do precision kicks, legs at 90 degrees, which invokes earlier musical theater dancing. Then the dancers, both men and women, form a semicircle, open to the audience, and individuals take turns improvising in the center. The movement vocabulary blends 1920s jazz dance (including tap), encompassing steps like Falling Off a Log and the Susie Q, with more contemporary movements. One young man executes a series of barrel leaps; another does hip-hop inspired footwork on the floor. A third lowers himself into the splits and returns to standing without the use of his hands, relying on adductor and groin muscles. This step pays homage to The Nicholas Brothers, a virtuosic, acrobatic, tap-dancing duo who made the no-hands split famous in their film and stage performances of the 1930s and 1940s.⁵

From the beginning of *The Making Of*, then, we have a temporal mix of movement, dancing that draws upon decades of black performance history. Theater scholar Phoebe Rumsey sees this choreographic strategy as essential for reminding audiences of the important impact of African-American dance forms on Broadway both past and present (2019, 138). The temporal promiscuity, however, common in Broadway revival choreography, also includes a curious disregard for historical context that other aspects of revivals adhere to more faithfully (Das 2017, 170–171). In *The Making Of*, the opening dance number offers a parallel contradiction: it affirms the talent of the cast, while also rendering their dancing as a natural outgrowth of their joy, rather than as something instilled by training.

Soon after in the show, the "Trenton Bound" number brilliantly instructs the audience in what *The Making Of* is all about: a historical lesson on black creativity in the Americas. Embodied histories proved to be powerful historical and creative forces. In the show, the cast members of *Shuffle Along* are stuck at a train station with no money and no tickets to their next stop, Trenton. In a minor way, their position echoes the historical position of enslaved Africans, stripped of their material goods and previous family networks by the slave trade. One of the characters suggests that they give up. Instead, Miller begins to sing with no instrumental accompaniment. He calls out, "Swing along, children," in a sonorous bass voice that invokes black spirituals. The emotional affect

of the song bursts forth from his body into a clap and a stomp. Embodiment happens as a result of the emotion he is carrying in his voice, the emotion of determination to pull something out of seemingly nothing. Miller starts beating out a rhythm on his suitcase. Someone calls out in encouragement; he asks them to repeat their call. Soon the entire cast is creating a syncopated rhythm with feet and suitcases. The will to dance breaks through the dire circumstances and creates continuity, a reminder of the potency of dance in ensuring black historical memory in the diaspora.

The dance numbers in *The Making Of* also communicate the exhaustion of this constant need to break through, sending an important message about the continued struggles of African-American performers on Broadway today to gain recognition. In “The Pennsylvania Graveyard Shuffle,” a dance about a series of one-night engagements across the Keystone State, the women’s chorus forms a straight line across the stage, embodying a train. Their tapping speeds up to keep up with the drums, whose acceleration emphasizes the grind of traveling on the road. The line re-forms on the diagonal, white and colored lights flash, and the dancers bend over like they are running. They stay loose and try to keep up with the frantic pace. Several critics commented positively on the “Graveyard Shuffle,” with one saying it “might be the most astounding dance number on Broadway just now” (Suskin 2016).

Finally, dance conveys the threat of disappearance due to white appropriation of black forms. In “They Won’t Remember You,” the last song of the show, clumps of dancers disappear and reappear behind screens. Their most prominent feature is their white-handed gloves. The rest of their bodies, and especially their faces, fade into darkness. The black satin tuxedos neutralize gender, implying that appropriation happened to both black men and women alike, and also signal timelessness, a reminder that white theft of black culture has happened not just in the past, but also in the present. Brooks Ashmanskas, who plays all of the white characters in *The Making Of*, sings as Carl Van Vechten, famed white “Negrophile” of the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten begins, “When your show first opened/Folks called it ‘spankin’ new’/But no one will remember *Shuffle Along*/N’ they won’t remember you.” Notes on the typescript read, “TAP Bursts Behind Scrim” (Wolfe 2016, 121). Indeed, the first tap group appears directly behind a screen upstage of Van Vechten and dances for four counts. They then disappear. With no time to register the movement, let alone appreciate it, this flash gives the audience the sense of history disappearing but still ghosting the stage. As the song continues, clumps of dancers appear and disappear stage left, stage right, and eventually center stage again. Van Vechten sings, “They’ll remember syncopation/So true, so true/They’ll remember those stompin’ feet/N’ that uptown lowdown beat/That downhome jive n’ red hot heat/But they won’t remember you” (Wolfe 2016, 121). Ironically, though Wolfe includes the song as a critique of remembering movement and music but not the names of the people who innovated the forms, he himself never names Deas. A dance break ensues, in which the stage right and left groups merge with the center, and they begin performing 1920s jazz tap movements—the Bees’ Knees and other Charleston steps. As Van Vechten starts to narrate what shows came after *Shuffle Along*, the chorus shouts out “begat” for each production as they run in place. The passage of time courses through their bodies. Finally, they appear in a clump behind a gospel singer and begin stepping in place. The singer vocalizes no words, just a stark melody as counterpoint to Van Vechten singing “They won’t remember you.” The pulsating dancers’ bodies act like a heart-beat, an insistence on the continuance of life and the persistence of memory, even if faded and undifferentiated.

All That Came After

This show about ghosts was itself quickly ghosted from Broadway. *The Making Of* closed after only one hundred performances, a source of deep shock, disappointment, anger, and even betrayal for the cast members. On the surface, the musical’s framing of dance seems to have little relevance to the chain of events. The immediate catalyst for the closing was McDonald’s surprise announcement

that she was pregnant and would thus be taking a six-month maternity leave. Producer Scott Rudin pulled the plug almost immediately thereafter, citing low ticket sales for the dates in which she was projected to step down. He even sued the show's insurer, Lloyd's of London, to recoup the initial \$12.5 million investment. He argued that the closing resulted from an "accident," which was covered by the policy. Lloyd's disagreed that McDonald's pregnancy was an "accident," arguing that the signing of the insurance contract occurred after McDonald knew she was pregnant (Paulson 2016a, 2016b). While this ugly and gendered legal battle over a woman's body is still ongoing as of 2019, other factors contributed to the show's demise.

Inevitably, *The Making Of* suffered the fate of comparison to what may become the most popular musical of all time—*Hamilton*, which opened nine months earlier in August 2015, during the same official Broadway season. The two shows shared the same metahistorical question: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" (Kail 2015). Who is remembered, and who is forgotten, in the selective telling of history? *The Making Of* answered it with didactic history lessons in the foreground. *Hamilton*, instead, told history by *making* history. With its novel casting and use of hip hop, *Hamilton* led audiences to view the past through a seemingly fresh lens. While scholarship on *Hamilton* has already turned from praise to critique, with scholars finding a lack of innovation in its approach to gender, narrative structure, and historiography, few deny that the show has made a major impact (Kunze 2018; Romano and Potter 2018).

More importantly, there was an ironic repetition of the forgetting of history. As Joseph Roach argues, performance is an act of surrogation that requires forgetting as much as remembering (1996, 2–3). The original *Shuffle Along* was praised for its singing and dancing but pilloried for its book. Wolfe's revival faced the same fate. Rather than reanimate the dancing spirit of the original, Wolfe made *The Making Of* about the book. His new narrative commanded that the audience care about these characters because they really lived and made a difference to Broadway history, but the population who cares about musical theater history is quite small, and such a premise quickly turns into a navel-gazing exercise. While racism played an important part—there was an even smaller audience that valued black musical theater history—there is also a reason that there are no backstage musicals about the making of a Rodgers and Hammerstein show. Even with all of the fame, canonicity, and white privilege of *Oklahoma!* (1943), audiences' appetite for stories about Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II pales in comparison to their desire to hear "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'." Even critics who wanted to like the show admitted that its "insider" plot narrowed its appeal (Young 2016).

Would including Lawrence Deas and numbers about the making of dance have saved *The Making Of*? Maybe not, as such inclusions would not have fundamentally altered the limitations of Wolfe's backstage musical structure. But there was a missed opportunity *to make the show about dance*, given that the original show succeeded, in large part, *because of the dance*. As reviewer Kristin Moriah remarked, audiences were "denied an immersive experience of the original musical sensation and an understanding of what past audiences may have found compelling" (2017, 184). Dance critic Brian Seibert argued that the critical consensus that "dancing carries the day" in *The Making Of* was "praise [a]s a kind of condescension—not to black artists, but to dance on Broadway and what it can be." The choreography, Seibert (2016) explained, had no "understory," no emotional journey of its own that told the audience about memory, pain, loss, and joy in ways that the weak exposition could not. Instead, Wolfe relied on highly traditional musical conventions, prioritizing his new book and the singers. Glover's excellent choreography supported the show's intellectual thesis, but failed to communicate the process of choreographic creation and dancing labor that gave the show its affective core, its reason for success. Ultimately, dance remained ghostly.

In interviews about *Shuffle Along*, Wolfe asks rhetorically, "How could something so culturally significant end up a footnote that was a footnote to a footnote?" (Haskins and Riedel 2016). *The Making Of* argues that black artists such as Sissle, Blake, Miller, and Lyles were unfairly forgotten

as white artists George Gershwin and Florenz Ziegfeld, who borrowed and/or stole from *Shuffle Along*, rose to mythic status. What Wolfe overlooks is how the devaluation of dance reinforces the racialized and gendered divide between remembering and forgetting. It is no accident that a show most famous for its choreography and its dancing black women faded from popular memory. It is telling that figures as knowledgeable about theater and dance history as Wolfe and Glover reinforced notions of dance as a natural, spontaneous expression rather than as a concerted, collaborative effort of a choreographer and performers that requires just as much intellectual labor as writing music or a script. Dance, by being associated with primitivism, hypersexuality, naturalism, and anti-intellectualism, exacerbates those stereotypes as applied to people of African descent, women in particular. In order to truly upend the cultural hierarchies that dominate Broadway, producers and directors must begin to challenge assumptions about how dance operates. In the meantime, figures such as Lawrence Deas will remain ghosts.

Notes

1. For more on dance's subordinate status within musical theater, see Das and Donovan 2019.
2. Space does not permit an extensive synopsis of tap dance history here. See Hill 2010.
3. In my two viewings of *The Making Of*, one live and one on film, I noted how Miller's movements mocked the stiff, static Ziegfeld chorines.
4. For an analysis of how this trope has historically dominated the world of ballet, see Daly 1987.
5. Smith 2012, 2. All dance descriptions of *The Making Of* come from my viewing of a live preview performance on April 16, 2016, at the Music Box Theatre in New York City and from viewing a recording of the May 7, 2016, performance, archived at the TOFT (Theatre on Film and Tape) Archive, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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