

2019

Race and Representation: Creating a Puppet Production for the Smithsonian Institution

Brad Brewer

Follow this and additional works at: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/ballinst_catalogues



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Africana Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brewer, Brad, "Race and Representation: Creating a Puppet Production for the Smithsonian Institution" (2019). *Living Objects: African American Puppetry Essays*. 1.
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/ballinst_catalogues/1

Race and Representation: Creating a Puppet Production for the Smithsonian Institution

by Brad Brewer

Introduction

As a child growing up in America, I was exposed to all the entertainment and cultural representations of American culture: television, movies, books, school, you name it. When I was a kid, movies were a big part of my life. I mean, I loved all kinds of movies. Each week I had a different favorite actor or movie. I loved musicals, dramas, comedies, but above all biographies. I was fascinated watching James Cagney sing and dance the first time I saw *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. I was intrigued throughout *Edison, the Man*, starring Spencer Tracy. And I totally enjoyed *Young Tom Edison* with Mickey Rooney in the featured role.

But it was *Young Abe Lincoln* that really struck a nerve with me. Henry Fonda's portrayal of Mr. Lincoln was that of a witty, folksy and honest man years before he became the sixteenth president of the United States. Even as a boy, I knew that these movies took liberties with history. Just as I know stories about George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and Abe Lincoln walking five miles to return change to someone he overpaid were myths, I understood that these myths summarized their character. I often thought about how that approach to storytelling could be applied to African American historical figures, to capture the essence of famous individuals and present them in a folksy, witty and honorable portrayal.

But besides movies, it was the puppetry of Bil Baird, a master puppeteer, that really crept into my imagination and gave me new ways to think about telling our stories. Though Bil Baird was a white kid from Iowa and I was a Black kid from the Bronx, I could be inspired to new flights of imagination after seeing his shows. Indeed, Baird once wrote that puppetry constituted an international language, and indeed his work spoke directly to me even though all of his human puppets were Caucasian. This was because

they told stories, and the art of puppetry has always excelled in storytelling, regardless of language or cultural background. For example, Mr. Baird's production of *Peter and the Wolf*, a European folk tale with music by Tchaikovsky, was an impactful, effectively told story. His marionettes, who even demonstrated early NASA orbits around the earth, were understood by everyone regardless of their language.

So puppetry was a vehicle for me to explore my imagination and envision new ways to express ideas and emotions. And later, when I listened to the music of John Coltrane and Miles Davis, or read a poem by Langston Hughes, or saw a painting by Romare Bearden, the possibilities for creative expression seemed endless. Bearden's approach to form and color taught me not to allow myself to be limited to conventional images. Each work produced by him told a unique story, using what was an unconventional technique to the art world, one that was recognizable by the African American community. Like the work of Baird, the jazz music of Coltrane or Miles Davis is a classic example of an art form that communicates an international language. It invites you into its world and encourages you to imagine, to become part of its journey, to feel the joys and pains of life ... a perfect partner for puppetry ... and one that shaped my conceptual approach. With both jazz music and abstract art, I could immediately begin to imagine how those works could be interpreted in an animated form. I thought of how Hughes' short-story character, Simple, could be a humorous puppet, completely recognized by the African American community.

Through Baird and other notable puppeteers, I saw how they projected their history and culture through puppetry. I wanted to do that. From the beginning, my shows came from an African American perspective, from our community, from the experiences as told by our parents and grandparents, and what we witnessed ourselves, yet they still reflected the Bil Baird mantra that puppetry is an international language. We have found that the way we represent black culture through puppetry speaks to everyone. We experienced that first-hand with the Crowtations when we performed in Germany, Spain, Singapore, and Japan, not to mention Brooklyn, Indianapolis and San Antonio (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Brad Brewer with the Crowtations. Photo courtesy Brad Brewer.

Themes and Outlook of the Brewery Troupe on Race and Representation

The Brewery Puppet Troupe has always been inspired by black music as one of our vehicles for telling a story, beginning with our first production, *A Night at the Apollo Theater*. Although it was a musical revue of famous musicians, from jazz to Latin to soul, it presented a backstage story of the legendary theater through the recollections of the Master of Ceremonies and the house band's piano player, Sweet Chocolate Brown. And here the music was yet another vehicle for telling the story.

A Night at the Apollo Theater was also our first effort to present notable African Americans using themes that that we have continued to include up to now. In other productions like *The Jackson Five Meet Malcolm X*, *Harriet Tubman*, *Duke's Place*, and *Frederick Douglass in Harlem*, we told a story by looking for the essence of each historical character and presenting her/him in a folksy, yet honorable portrayal. For example, in *The Jackson Five Meet Malcolm X*, Malcolm was presented as a father figure to the young Michael and a mentor to the Jackson brothers, reminding them of their responsibilities as role models for young people. Our characterization of Harriet Tubman portrayed her as a focused leader who used her courage and compassion to guide runaway slaves to their freedom. These productions were not biographies as such, but rather a celebration of the person.

The Artistic Approaches to a Brewery Troupe Production

The artistic elements of our productions have also reflected our cultural experiences and outlook. For example, we approached skin color as an artistic element that touches on an often unspoken subject of race in puppetry. With few exceptions, for the most part, African American puppet characters have been painted with a singular, dark, burnt-umber hue. However, our characters have always represented the wide range of skin colors that are found in Black people in real life (a result of our history of mixed-race relationships during slavery). Happily, this varied representation of skin tones made for an interesting and colorful imagery that enhanced our productions. Ironically, this sensitivity to skin color, as well as facial structures and hair textures, also allowed us to explore and present a more diverse imagery of the Caucasian characters as well. Instead of falling into the trap of physical stereotypes, our sensitivity to how Black people have been represented without nuance in skin color prompted us to create a wide range of visual representations of “black” characters without overlooking the fact that puppets are by definition caricatures of real people (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Brad Brewer and some of his puppet creations. Photo courtesy Brad Brewer.

The scenery in most of our productions also represented what was familiar to us: that is, an urban setting, with tenements, garbage cans, and fire escapes. For example, our production of *Snow White* was titled *Snow White in Harlem*, and the dwarfs, rather than being miners who trekked out of a forest singing “Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho,” were transit workers who climbed up from the subway stairs, singing the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

Our music tends towards jazz, soul, and rhythm and blues. The music helps carry the message and reflects much of the universal language that Bil Baird mentioned. Comedic elements such as puppet pratfalls, sight gags, silly jokes, and puns have always kept our audiences entertained and engaged.

Race and Representation in the Lewis Latimer Production

The Brewery Puppet Troupe was commissioned by the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History to produce a show featuring an African American scientist. We were invited to produce this story because of our prominence as an African American puppet company

that had been showcased at the Puppeteers of America convention and had been recommended by their Board of Directors. Primarily, the Lemelson Center staffers were familiar with the Crowtations and anticipated a production that would be a humorous look at a black inventor prominently featuring the Crowtations. Based on our discussions, they assumed that the show would highlight the relationship between Lewis Latimer and Thomas Edison, particularly since they had a permanent exhibit on Edison at the Center. Also, they needed the show to appeal to a school-age audience. In the end, the show they got was not what they expected, but ultimately, it worked well and exceeded their expectations. Initially, the Lemelson Center staff members were vague as to what exactly they wanted us to do, and they asked us to choose a black inventor to depict. At first, I looked at some of the few black inventors that I was familiar with. Although their achievements were noteworthy, I did not see how I could turn their biographies into an entertaining puppet show. The Smithsonian staff suggested we do a show about Lewis Latimer, a nineteenth-century inventor instrumental in the creation of the electric light bulb, because they had an upcoming exhibit about him. At first unfamiliar with Latimer, although I had considered other black inventors, I settled on Latimer because his story incorporated so many different aspects of African American history, which I thought could be made even more engaging through puppetry.

Moreover, as I did additional research about him, I became even more intrigued with his life and accomplishments, such as the fact that he was a part of Thomas Edison's group of prominent engineers and scientists known as the Edison Pioneers. And I was further impressed with the fact that he had worked closely with Alexander Graham Bell. As much as I had seen movies about Thomas Edison, Latimer had never appeared in any of them. But Latimer had in fact achieved much success and distinction during his lifetime. He was a self-taught draftsman (in the era before computers), who improved Edison's light bulb, allowing it to burn for days instead of minutes. He designed and oversaw the implementation of the electrical grids of London, Montreal, and parts of New York City. But more than those things, I was fascinated about how this little-known inventor and his family had played an important role in American history.

From his parents' escape from slavery, to their association with Frederick Douglass, to how he assisted Alexander Graham Bell secure the patent for the telephone,

his story was very significant on many levels (see Figure 3). But it wasn't until the Smithsonian put me in contact with Lewis Latimer's granddaughter, Winifred Latimer, who shared details about his personal life and his devotion to his wife and family, that I saw an opportunity to show the human side of this great scientist.



Fig. 3. A scene from the Brewery Troupe's *Lewis Latimer* production. Photo courtesy Brad Brewer.

A New Brewery Troupe Production

Lewis Latimer's life was impacted by America's tragic struggle with slavery and racial inequality. We had never seriously tackled these subjects before, and his was a hard-hitting story that told of the desperate and challenging times faced by African Americans. Indeed, Latimer's life was impacted by historical events, such as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the Dred Scott Decision (the Supreme Court decision which held that black people had no citizenship rights), that were just as important to his story as his scientific achievements. Slavery and the struggle for freedom constituted the backstory of his life, and I was determined to tell it.

At the outset of planning the project, I had assumed I would present Lewis Latimer in the way we usually did in a Brewery Puppet Troupe production, but here the challenge was how to incorporate the history of slavery and racial discrimination, which I saw as central to the story, into an entertaining Smithsonian-sponsored puppet show. My commitment to present the complex story of his life started to come through in my early drafts of scripts, and the Lemelson Center staff began to push back against showing the tragic experiences he and his family had lived through.

In early production meetings, difficult discussions led to a compromise which required that all the historical information I included was completely accurate, and to ensure that, staff historians were asked to read and comment on all the drafts of the script. The Brewery Troupe has staged many shows that featured prominent African American figures, but this was the first time that the scripts were fact-checked by professional historians. In deference to the restrictions of the Smithsonian staff, I could not expand the mythological aspects of the character, like the *Young Abe Lincoln* type of characterizations we had done in past shows, but we were still able to bring out the essence of Latimer's character as a man who worked hard, persevered, wrote poetry, and loved his wife and family.

To help ensure the entertainment value, I did include the typical elements of a Brewery Troupe production, including sight gags, a variety of puppet types, lots of evocative music, and striking visuals in the sets and costumes (see Figure 4). Indeed, I intended to and did incorporate lots of comedic aspects, for example the puppet character Bobby Bird, Latimer's pet bird, who talked in a folksy, funny voice and became a vehicle for telling the story in a way that would not go over the heads of the children who we knew would make up a good percentage of our audiences. (Bobby Bird, in a nod to Black culture, was named after one of the legendary James Brown's backup singers).

The Brewery Troupe's famous quartet of puppets, the Crowtations, played hapless scientists wearing white lab coats, who arrived in a beat-up truck at the beginning of the show, and whose disastrous experiments got the audience laughing from the outset. Young Junior, one of the Crows, took his failed experiments the hardest. But it was Otis,

LEWIS LATIMER PUPPET



PUPPETS AND DRAWINGS
BY BRAD BREWER 1998



PHOTO BY HUGH TALMAN

Fig. 4. Photo, sketch, and final puppet version of Lewis Latimer.
Images courtesy Brad Brewer.

the elder and wiser of the group, who used the story of Lewis Latimer to show how, through study and persistence, success can be achieved.

As in many of our productions, jazz played a key role in telling the story. Throughout the performance, a musician playing an upright bass provided a score that highlighted various episodes, some of which expressed the joy of freedom and the pain of slavery. A jazz version of the National Anthem accompanied a blood-stained American flag slowly unrolling down in front of Supreme Court Justice Taney as he read the

infamous Dred Scott decision. Using a bow, the bass produced a sound of anger and rebellion and a thirst for freedom.

As a period piece, we had the challenge of researching and then creating nineteenth-century offices, labs, homes and costumes. We built an endless variety of puppets to carry the message and emotions we wanted to convey. For example, we used soft sculpture, which allowed us to show the aging of the principal characters. The papier-mâché and celastic heads were painted to show a variety of skin tones, particularly Lewis Latimer's light-skinned father and dark-skinned mother. And I built two eight-foot-tall kite puppets of Latimer and Edison to illustrate their importance to the world of science and invention.

Conclusion

All in all, this project gave me the opportunity to both showcase a historical black achiever and explore some of the hard realities of the black experience in America, using a great soundtrack, dozens of puppets and the professional expertise of the Lemelson Center. Ironically, our project reflected the more traditional characteristics of European puppet theater, which often tackles dark subjects such as Communist oppression, political issues, social unrest, and the plight of the working class. This approach is in contrast to traditional American puppetry, which has tended to highlight make-believe worlds and happy-ending fairy tales free of controversy. Our production drew on both traditions, as a result of our unique place in American society.

In the end, we produced a full-scale puppet play that presented the life of an African American scientist who was conceived in slavery, but born in freedom, and who rose to work side by side with Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. While the Smithsonian staff looked at Lewis Latimer from one perspective, I looked at his story from the perspective of how it impacted me as a Black man. Indeed, the Dred Scott case led to the Civil War and was tied to the Civil Rights Movement into which I was born. The Smithsonian saw his value as an inventor, rather than how his life was more fundamental to Black American history, and American history more broadly. If I had been a white puppeteer, the relationship between Latimer and Thomas Edison would



Fig. 5. Brad Brewer (right) and colleague performing at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.
Photo courtesy Brad Brewer.

surely have been the crux of the story. However, for me the fact that his mother refused to have her child born into slavery, which led to his opportunity to become an inventor, was more important, more central to his story.

The black contribution to puppetry is consistent with our contribution to all American art forms. Sometimes that perspective is uncomfortable, may lack a feel-good aura, and might defy what people believe a puppet show is supposed to be. But I believe in this case we found a way to present some of the harsh realities of black history while incorporating the usual Brewery Troupe elements of visual impact, lively and evocative music, and silly wise-cracking characters to tell the story. Indeed, our production demonstrated how the universal language of puppetry, using an African American perspective, can tackle a serious subject like slavery with music and humor, and without minimizing its impact.

Nearly two years of working with the Lemelson Center allowed me to grow as a storyteller and take the Brewery Troupe to another level. It gave me an opportunity to use the art of puppetry to produce a show that highlighted African American values of freedom, family, education, hard work, persistence, and creativity. We are more than

proud to have told the story of people lifting themselves up in spite of great odds, to achieve excellence, and make real contributions to American progress.