A Review of *T.O.B.A. Time: Black Vaudeville and the Theater Owners' Booking Association in Jazz-Age America*

By Michelle R. Scott

University of Illinois Press, 2023. xvi + 264 pages.

$110.00 (cloth), $28.00 (paper), $19.95 (eBook)

The Theater Owners' Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) was a semi-national theater circuit that provided a crucial platform for Black performers and served working-class Black audiences across the Midwest and Southeast from 1920 to 1931. The history of T.O.B.A. is one of apparent contradictions: How could an institution notorious for being "Tough on Black Asses"—marked by harsh working conditions, racial discrimination, segregation, and pay inequities—also empower Black artists and communities? How might we understand the power dynamics at play within T.O.B.A.'s management structure, which was a joint venture between Jewish and Black entrepreneurs, as they navigated a fraught landscape shaped by the brutal politics of Jim Crow? Were Black performers confined to racialized caricatures for (White) profit as they performed in the long shadow of blackface minstrelsy? Or did they, in their own way, subvert expectations and harness audiences' familiarity with racialized and gendered character types to their advantage? Was T.O.B.A. ultimately exploitative, empowering, or both?

The answer to these questions, of course, is not a simple "yes" or "no," but rather "both/and." In *T.O.B.A. Time: Black Vaudeville and the Theater Owners' Booking Association in Jazz-Age America,* Michelle R. Scott expertly navigates the paradoxes, revealing simultaneously the remarkable achievements and deep tensions at the heart of T.O.B.A. Scott argues that T.O.B.A. was a "contradictory organization that *both* empowered and hindered African American men and women… onstage and off" (p. 4, italics original). While the circuit was shaped by the systemic inequities and limitations of the time, Scott demonstrates that it also facilitated Black entrepreneurial and artistic success by way of interracial and interethnic coalition building.

Scott begins with a pre-history of T.O.B.A. as it developed out of Black participation in minstrel comedy, variety theater, and vaudeville at the end of the nineteenth century. She examines the biographies of the "race" men and women who emerged from this landscape of popular entertainment with a vision to establish a Black-controlled theater circuit. This cohort includes T.O.B.A. founder Sherman H. Dudley along with the theater managers Charles H. Turpin, John T. Gibson, and the Griffin Sisters (Emma and Mabel). Scott then turns to the Jewish

immigrants (including Martin Klein, Sam Reevin, and Milton Starr) who partnered with these Black theater entrepreneurs to form T.O.B.A.'s interracial board. Attending to the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and region, Scott "challenge[s] the narrative that T.O.B.A. Time was solely the product of white management and black labor" (p. 10).

As the circuit evolved, it was shaped by the cultural currents of the New Negro Movement and debates around racial uplift, Black economic self-sufficiency, and civil rights. At the same time, T.O.B.A. was a business that prioritized profit above all else. One of the book's key strengths is its exploration of business strategies, which Scott evaluates by using archival sources such as T.O.B.A.'s incorporation charter, annual tax reports, stockholder meeting summaries, and artist contracts, as well as writing in the press. For example, she notes that T.O.B.A. franchised many of its theaters in urban centers in the South, where loyal patronage had already been established by tent shows, minstrel troupes, and circuses. Theater managers there ensured full houses by booking veteran performers who reliably drew crowds. To keep the lineup fresh, they brought in new talent on a rotating basis. Blues singers, comedy and dance duos, novelty acts, and ensemble-led tab shows (likely short for "tabloid," an abbreviated version of a musical) were among the most popular acts on the circuit.

Gender played a significant role in the dynamics of the Black vaudeville circuit. While women were absent from T.O.B.A.'s leadership board, many of the circuit's most popular acts were women— specifically, the "blues queens." Scott interprets T.O.B.A.'s strategic placement of its press advertisements next to those for female blues artists as a calculated move that linked the blues queens to the circuit, thereby boosting its profitability by association. In this way, Scott makes the case that "African American female talent funded the rise of T.O.B.A.'s success" (p. 78).

Additionally, Scott highlights the case of Emma Griffin, a vocal critic of the Colored Consolidated Vaudeville Exchange (one of T.O.B.A.'s predecessors). Griffin viewed the interracial management of the organization as a threat to Black autonomy and economic success, but her objections were dismissed as "irrational" by prominent critics in the Black press (p. 50). Public discourse also shaped perceptions of performers, who found themselves at the center of press debates about the morality of stage life. In these discussions, Black women artists—particularly chorus girls—were burdened with assumptions of "wickedness" and moral impurity, both onstage and off. Scott's inventive reading of individual performer contracts reveals how demands for cleanliness and respectability were disproportionately imposed on women, while such stipulations were notably absent from male performers' contracts (p. 109). She offers a valuable counterpoint to the male-dominated discourse in the industry by drawing on the *Defender*'s running theater advice column written by Vivienne Gordon Russell throughout the book. In response to the criticism of T.O.B.A.'s chorus girls, for instance, Russell defended their work ethic and called for them to be given fair opportunities to excel.

Despite these challenges, women on “Toby Time” could find financial success, develop their talents, and form community, even as they faced threats of racial violence, unstable employment, and inadequate lodging and transportation conditions. By the late 1920s, however, various forces had arisen that foreshadowed the decline of vaudeville. T.O.B.A. was rocked by several public scandals and disagreements within its leadership, jeopardizing its already tenuous reputation as a source of “respectable” entertainment. Meanwhile, sound films or “talkies” were posed to outperform live theater acts, and White vaudeville circuits began poaching Black talent and audiences by offering cheaper, though segregated, seats. This undermined the “resistance method of separate institution building” that had inspired T.O.B.A.’s creation in the first place (p. 154). The onset of the Great Depression exacerbated these issues, hitting working-class Black audiences especially hard and transforming a theater ticket into an unaffordable luxury. By the 1929–30 season, larger acts were increasingly replaced by smaller ensembles and film screenings in a bid to draw paying audiences to T.O.B.A. theaters. Scott argues that it was ultimately “the menace of segregation during one of the worst economic disasters of the twentieth century” that caused T.O.B.A.’s collapse in 1931 (p. 161).

T.O.B.A. Time is an excellently researched work that makes a significant contribution to Black theater history and popular culture studies. For those new to the history of vaudeville, it serves as an accessible and engaging introduction, while readers more familiar with the topic will appreciate the parallels and points of divergence from White or mainstream circuits. The book’s emphasis on Black business history offers a critical perspective that has been overlooked in similar studies of performance culture. Scott’s use of a wide range of archival sources is invaluable, and readers will find the chapter notes particularly enriching. This book offers a timely and nuanced understanding of T.O.B.A.'s foundational role in the history of Black theater and entrepreneurship in the early twentieth century.

Elea Proctor
Assistant Professor,
African American and African Studies
The Ohio State University

Elea Proctor’s scholarship addresses the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in U.S. popular music and culture, paying specific attention to Black women’s musical performances in the wake of slavery. Dr. Proctor earned her B.A. in Music from Florida State University and her M.A. and Ph.D. in Musicology from Stanford University. Her book project currently in development examines how Black women shaped the tradition of blackface minstrelsy in the nineteenth century from its antebellum origins to its evolution into other musical-theatrical forms like vaudeville, burlesque, the revue, and musical theater.
