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| Darktown Follies (Lafayette Theatre, Harlem 1913) |
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| One of the earliest large-scale musical revues to be created and performed by an all-Black cast, *Darktown Follies* premiered in 1913 at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. *Darktown Follies* exhibited qualities common to minstrel shows of the period with its episodic musical numbers and large group finale. The plot however focused on a romantic storyline between two Black characters, which was rarely seen in minstrel performances. *Darktown Follies* introduced dances, like Ballin’ the Jack (which would eventually become a popular dance on Broadway) and the Texas Tommy (a predecessor of the Lindy Hop) to the New York stage. *Darktown Follies* helped launch a trend of White artists travelling to Harlem in search of new material for their own productions. The show foreshadowed the development Black musicals like *Shuffle Along* (1921) and was an important precursor to the artistic renaissance that would define Black modernism in Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s. |
| Summary  One of the earliest large-scale musical revues to be created and performed by an all-Black cast, *Darktown Follies* premiered in 1913 at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. *Darktown Follies* exhibited qualities common to minstrel shows of the period with its episodic musical numbers and large group finale. The plot however focused on a romantic storyline between two Black characters, which was rarely seen in minstrel performances. *Darktown Follies* introduced dances, like Ballin’ the Jack (which would eventually become a popular dance on Broadway) and the Texas Tommy (a predecessor of the Lindy Hop) to the New York stage. *Darktown Follies* helped launch a trend of White artists travelling to Harlem in search of new material for their own productions. The show foreshadowed the development Black musicals like *Shuffle Along* (1921) and was an important precursor to the artistic renaissance that would define Black modernism in Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s. Contributions to the field and to Modernism From 1910-1920, Black theatre moved to Harlem, developing away from Broadway’s traditions, and thus was not hindered by the expectations of White critics. Like its predecessor *Red Moon* (1908), *Darktown Follies* featured a love story about a Black couple, a plot line that had previously been avoided in Black theatre out of concern that White audiences would not accept it, as it did not fit with Black stereotypes. Created by J. Leubrie Hill, with the assistance of songwriter Alex Rogers and composer Will Vodery, *Darktown Follies* tells the story of Jim Jackson Lee, a spendthrift who falls for a scam that costs him his father-in-law’s plantation. To escape his creditors, Lee flees to Washington D.C., where he hopes to make his fortune and find a place in high society. Throughout his travels, he is chased by his wife (played by Hill in women’s attire), who eventually brings him back home.  The memorable and energetic dances of *Darktown Follies* made it the most successful Black musical of the teens. Perhaps most popular was Ballin’ the Jack—a group dance at the end of the first act where the entire company travels in a large counterclockwise circle with a shuffling step (this is likely a descendent of the plantation Ring Shout). Florenz Ziegfeld bought the choreography in order to incorporate it into his own Broadway Revue *Ziegfeld’s Follies.* (It should be noted however that no one from *Darktown Follies* was in Ziegfeld’s production, and J. Leubrie Hill was not acknowledged in the program). In addition, the dances found in *Darktown Follies* influenced the development of modern American social dance. *Darktown Follies* dancers Ethel Williams and her partner Johnny Peters taught famed professional ballroom dancer Irene Castle some of their steps which she then incorporated it into her own ragtime dance repertoire. The show also helped popularize dances like the Texas Tommy—an acrobatic partner dance that would eventually lose its basic three kicks three steps pattern and become the Lindy Hop.  *Darktown Follies* also helped established Harlem as an important cultural center for Black artists, paving the way for such musicals as *Shuffle Along* (1921), and other theatrical performances of the Harlem Renaissance, which helped articulate a sense of modern Black identity. |
| Further reading:  (Emery)  (Glass)  (Hill)  (Long)  (Malone)  (Stearns and Stearns) |