**Walker, Aida Overton** **(b. 14 February, 1880, New York, New York; d. 11 October, 1914, New York, New York)**

**Summary**

Aida Overton Walker (born Ada Wilmore Overton) was one of the first female African-American stars of vaudeville, and perhaps the first to be recognized as a choreographer. From the 1890s until her death in 1914, she danced, sang, and choreographed for several successful musical revues, many in conjunction with her husband George Walker and his partner Bert Williams. Most notably, she played a major role in the successes of *In Dahomey* (1902), *Abyssinia* (1906) and *Bandanna Land* (1907), shows that brought black musical theatre out of the minstrel tradition. Walker introduced her version of the cakewalk, an African-American social dance, to New York’s elite. Walker’s cakewalk paved the way for other black vernacular dances to become central to the modern, urban experience and blurred boundaries between high and low culture. Near the end of her career, Walker staged her own rendition of *Salome*, one of the most well-known modern dance pieces of the first decade of the twentieth century. By taking on *Salome*, Walker staked her claim to belong to a modern theatrical tradition and challenged existing depictions of black female sexuality onstage.

**Training, Contribution to Modernism, and Legacy**

Ada Overton enjoyed music and dance as a child, though it is unknown if she received formal training. As a teenager she joined the cast of Black Patti’s Troubadours, a black variety show in the minstrel tradition. In 1898 she met and married George Walker, who along with Bert Williams, ran the Senegambian Carnival vaudeville troupe. Their musical comedies abandoned the more egregious tropes of minstrelsy, instead showcasing the artistry of ragtime music and dance. Ada Walker was crucial in their success, for she served as the group’s choreographer and female lead. Their biggest hit was *In Dahomey* (1902), which played for weeks on Broadway and then toured to London.

Walker’s modernized cakewalk choreography for *In Dahomey* particularly impressed the British royal family. Both London and New York socialites requested that Walker teach them her cakewalk. Historically, the cakewalk as danced by African-American slaves satirized the pretensions of Southern slave owners, who imagined themselves as aristocratic Europeans. Black dancers would arch their backs and strut, performing exaggerated prances and high kicks. In Walker’s version, the satirical aspect dropped out in favour of showcasing the cakewalk’s elegance and grace. She eliminated movements that could be seen as vulgar or sexually suggestive. Her transformations of the cakewalk prefigured the changes that Vernon and Irene Castle would make to the Turkey Trot, Charleston, and other black social dances in order to make them acceptable to middle and upper-class white Americans. Walker’s modernized cakewalk brought her fame, and in the 1906 musical *Abyssinia*, she added her maiden name “Overton” to program billings to indicate her stature as an independent star. She also changed her first name to Aida, most likely alluding to the Ethiopian princess in Verdi’s eponymous opera.

In the musical comedy *Bandanna Land* (1907), Walker performed a Salome number, capitalizing on the Salome craze in vaudeville of that period. Unlike white women who danced Salome, however, Walker wore a conservative costume and emphasized the dramatic story rather than lascivious body movement. Her performance offered a new representation of black women onstage, who were normally cast in primitive or exotic roles. The dignified and serious portrayal also signalled her desire to join the ranks of emerging modern dance soloists such as Isadora Duncan.

After her husband’s death in 1909, Walker performed his role in *Bandana Land*, one of the earliest examples of male impersonation in black musical theatre. She left the troupe when *Bandanna Land* closed, but continued to perform elsewhere. Most notably, in 1912 she reprised *Salome* for Richard Hammerstein’s Victoria Theater, whose publicity agents declared that it was the first time a black woman would perform a “classic” dance on stage. She continued to perform in vaudeville shows until her death in 1914. With her creative, choreographic abilities, Walker was central to the transition in black musical theatre from minstrelsy to vaudeville. Her version of the cakewalk brought black vernacular dance into the mainstream, and her *Salome* dance displayed the same interests as the work of white women identified as modern dance’s early pioneers.

**Joanna Dee Das**

**Select List of Stage Appearances**

*The Policy Players* (1899)

*Sons of Ham* (1900)

*The Cannibal King* (1901)

*In Dahomey* (1902)

*Abyssinia* (1906)

*Bandanna Land* (1907)

*The Red Moon* (1909)

*His Honor the Barber* (1910)

“Salome” at the Victoria Theater (1912)

**References and Further Reading**

Brooks, D. A. (2006) *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Brown, J. (2008) *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Krasner, D. (1996) ‘Rewriting the Body: Aida Overton Walker and the Social Formation of Cakewalking’, *Theatre Survey* 37: 66-92.

———. (2001) ‘Black *Salome*: Exoticism, Dance, and Racial Myths,’ in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. H.J. Elam Jr. and D. Krasner, New York: Oxford University Press, 192-211.

Newman, R. (1993) ‘“The Brightest Star”: Aida Overton Walker in the Age of Ragtime and Cakewalk’, *Prospects: A Journal of American Cultural Studies* 18: 464-81.

Paratextual Links

Aida Overton Walker, 1907

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/dl_crosscollex/photoneg/oneITEM.asp?pid=39002037579472&iid=3757947&srchtype>=

Aida Overton Walker in *Bandanna Land*, 1908

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

[http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/dl\_crosscollex/photoneg/oneITEM.asp?pid=39002037579480&iid=3757948&srchtype](Aida%20Overton%20Walker%20in%20Bandanna%20Land,%201908:%20http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/dl_crosscollex/photoneg/oneITEM.asp?pid=39002037579480&iid=3757948&srchtype)=

Sheet music for the musical revue *Porto Rico*, featuring Aida Overton Walker on the cover (1910)

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/dl_crosscollex/SetsSearchExecXC.asp?srchtype=ITEM>

Aida Overton Walker in “An impromptu coon dance” from *In Dahomey*

New York Public Library Digital Gallery, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Division, Productions, *In Dahomey* Clippings File:

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/9e772929-b102-50c9-e040-e00a18064dbd>