

Eubie! @ The Black Rep

Music by Eubie Blake

Lyrics by Noble Sissle, Andy Razaf, Johnny Brandon, F. E. Miller, and Jim Europe

Conceived by Julianne Boyd

Ran May 3 - 21, 2023 @ The Edison Theatre

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On this blog, we have seen two musical revues of completely differing quality, one that was quite good and another that was total garbage. The Black Rep's production of *Eubie!* is definitely in the first camp; in fact, I would say it's the best revue I've seen for this blog, not just because of its subject but also for the sheer talent that explodes inside the Edison Theatre.

Eubie! is a celebration of the music of Eubie Blake, a composer who I never really got into, which is a crying shame on my part. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, in collaboration with lyricist Noble Sissle, Blake wrote the songs for *Shuffle Along*, the first Broadway musical to be created entirely by Black Americans. Compared to the shows running on Broadway at that time, *Shuffle Along* was sharp, edgy, and way ahead of its time. One of the show's songs, "I'm Just Wild About Harry," became a jazz standard, launching Blake's career into the stratosphere. Blake would become one of the great pioneers of jazz, ragtime, gospel, and blues music, developing a trademark style that was at turns incredibly energetic and crisp in its simplicity. I would also argue that Blake's music has a very timeless quality; many of his songs sound as if they could be written today, regardless of how rooted they are in that classic jazz style. You could put quite a few Eubie Blake songs in a musical set today and they would not feel out of place.

Watching *Eubie!* was an enlightening experience for me on that level, augmented by the Black Rep's amazing cast and crew giving their renditions of these musical gems. Director Ron Himes stages the evening as a reflection of the performance styles and sensibilities of Black actors working in the 1920s vaudeville/musical theatre circuit, a directorial vision that suits the songs beautifully. The cast consists of 10 performers playing multiple roles, and all of them are uniformly excellent: Coda Boyce, DeAnté Bryant, Robert Crenshaw, Serdalyer Darden, Evann De-Bose, Samantha Madison, Venezia Manuel, Carvas Pickens, Tamara PiLar, and J'Kobe Wallace. Crenshaw also serves as the production's tap choreographer, showcasing some of the most energetic and athletic tap dancing I've ever seen. Crenshaw's abilities are well-matched by fellow choreographers Heather Beal and Vivian Watt, whose work runs the gamut from jazz, to gospel, to tumbling, to slapstick – and all of it is impressively performed by the cast.

Even with the intensity of the dancing, the voices of the cast soar thanks to musical director Joe Dreyer, who leads a lively five-piece jazz band with himself on piano, Chris Tomlin on the tuba, Bernard Long on the drums, Anthony Wiggins on the trumpet, and Harvey Lockhart on the saxophone. As far as visuals go, the standout is Marc W. Vital II's vibrant costumes that outfit the actors in both the dazzling, decadent fashion of 1920s New York City and the down-to-earth,

humanist fashion of the American South. The scenic design by Tim Jones mostly consists of a few platforms on a marbled stage floor and an Art Nouveau-inspired backdrop in a smart evocation of the 1920s vaudeville aesthetic. Contributing to the visual splendor are Jasmine Williams's lights and Justin Schmitz's sound.

Eubie! is an invigorating, heartwarming revue celebrating the uncompromising energy, joy, edginess, and bold experimentation of being a Black musical theatre artist in 1920s America. I'm a sucker for shows like this not because I have a personal kinship with these stories but because of the kinship the people on stage have with them. At the Black Rep, you can see crystal-clear that everyone involved was having the time of their lives both onstage and back, and it's wonderful. The Black Rep's *Eubie!* is definitely a show that will shuffle your blues away.