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THEATER

Look at the Old Girl Now, Fellas!

In 1967, Pearl Bailey appeared in an all-Black *Hello, Dolly!* It was a sensation, smashing preconceptions, showcasing civil rights, and announcing a new era on Broadway



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On an afternoon in June 1966, the Broadway star Pearl Bailey ran into the theatrical producer David Merrick at a videotaping of the popular game show *What's My Line?*

Bailey needed a boost. She had made her Broadway debut in the 1946 Harold Arlen–Johnny Mercer musical, *St. Louis Woman*, which had brought her fame and a Donaldson Award for best newcomer, but a number of flops had followed, including the 1954 Harold Arlen–Truman Capote musical, *House of Flowers*, which closed after only 165 performances.

Hollywood didn't know what to do with her, even though she had practically walked away with the 1954 film version of *Carmen Jones*. And although she worked hard as a touring nightclub singer and had released some 20 albums, she was now nearing 50 and had not been seen on Broadway in more than a decade.

Merrick, too, had a need—to keep his huge hit *Hello, Dolly!* alive on Broadway while it was touring the United States. True, *Hello, Dolly!* was still playing eight times a week at the St. James Theatre, in New York—at the time, starring Ginger Rogers—and a second national tour with Merrick's original Dolly, Carol Channing, was making its way around the country.



David Merrick outside the St. James Theatre in New York, 1970.

However, the role was seen as a career extender for actors of a certain age (by the time the Broadway production closed at the end of 1970, the leading role had been played by actors including Ethel Merman, Eve Arden, Phyllis Diller, Martha Raye, Betty Grable, and Dorothy Lamour), and there was another common denominator in the casting—*Hello, Dolly!* was 100 percent white.

And so, on that fated afternoon in the last months of a quiz show that had been running since 1950 but had already been canceled by CBS, Merrick met Bailey in what is now Studio 54 and told her, “I have something in mind for you.” He wanted Bailey to take the leading role in *Hello, Dolly!*

A contract was quickly signed and kept secret for nearly a year—astounding when one considers the gossip columnists of the era—while casting details were being worked out. Bailey suggested Cab Calloway to play opposite her as Horace Vandergelder, and Merrick agreed, realizing the show should be populated completely by Black artists.

Bailey and Carol Channing joined forces for a one-night-only television concert on March 16, 1969.

Bailey was performing her nightclub act in Pittsburgh when she broke the news about her contract to play Dolly. A review of her act said, “A single misgiving right now: Pittsburgh may never see Pearl Bailey again. *Hello, Dolly!* when she takes charge, could quite possibly run forever.”

Indeed, what Pearlie Mae did for *Hello, Dolly!* and the history of racial representation on the Great White Way is one of the celebratory triumphs of the era, because it invited everyone to the party.

The Great Black Way

Two years before Merrick met Bailey, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. It prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, and outlawed segregation, including in theaters. One year later, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. All of this must have been in Merrick's mind when he offered Bailey the role and told her his plan. But like all matters relating to the civil-rights movement, controversy quickly erupted.

Some Black actors were adamant that the cast be integrated, thinking an all-Black company would reflect a "separate but equal" mentality. Actors' Equity was also against an all-Black company, with its Black president, Frederick O'Neal, calling it "a favor in reverse," and stated that "casting should be done according to ability."



Cab Calloway and Bailey in *Hello, Dolly!*

Merrick held meetings with civil-rights advocates, but, wrote *The Philadelphia Tribune*, "it seems that some people—black and white—think the all-Negro show is a throwback to the Cotton Club-type shows of the thirties and has set the civil rights movement back 30 years."

Cynics argued it was just a stunt to attract people who had already seen the show, and the Women's National Democratic Club voted down a proposal to engage the show for

a benefit because the cast was “segregated.” The arguments raged back and forth.

Jack Crowder, who played Cornelius in the all-new cast, lauded David Merrick for doing *Hello, Dolly!* “in living color.” He went on, “Why is there so much discussion any time Negroes work?... Every character is valid as a slice of black society in early New York.... Isn’t it unrealistic for people to be asked to believe that all Negroes do nothing but crusade and protest?” While the show’s musical director, Saul Schechtman, stated that there were “many who had never had the chance to be on a big stage. They were getting their chance.” Indeed, Morgan Freeman made his Broadway debut in this *Hello, Dolly!* and was happy to have a steady job for 11 months playing Rudolf, headwaiter at the Harmonia Gardens.



Jack Crowder and Emily Yancy in *Hello, Dolly!*

Standing firm between the warring sides was Bailey, who, as the writer and Broadway aficionado John McWhorter has said, “was a diva, not a race crusader.” “Integration,” she told *Life* magazine, “is one of the most distasteful words in the language. Wherever I am, *that’s* integration—because there’s love there,” before adding tartly, “If anyone was worried about integration, why didn’t they worry about it at the time of the first *Dolly?*” She was not to be denied a starring role.

Merrick’s ultimate response to all the controversy was a simple one. “I looked for the right cast for *Dolly* for four years, and finally I’ve found it!”

“She was a diva, not a race crusader.”

But the show couldn't escape politics. When the company opened for its out-of-town tryout in Washington, D.C., the *Frederick News* reported: "The fact is that the premiere of *Hello Dolly* at the National Theatre ... is the first musical to treat the Negro as a middle-class person instead of a Negro in a ghetto."

An article in *Christian Century* paid special attention to the potential impact on audiences: "The audience, already more integrated than most Broadway crowds, will become, under the spell of this black company, a unit ... partners in a great experience and in the larger society. [I] suggest that [the Congress of Racial Equality] organize theatre parties for blacks who struggle with inferiority feelings and whites who swagger with superiority."

Yet for all the racial opinions around the performance, none could deny the powerhouse that was Pearl Bailey onstage. If you are old enough to have experienced her *Dolly*, there was simply nothing like it. As Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* would write, "[Pearl Bailey] took the whole musical in her hands and swung it around her neck as easily as if it were a feather boa."

While performing in Washington, Bailey—never one to hold back—wrote to President Johnson to give him her views on the problems of the world. "A few days later," according to *Ebony*, "the President and the First Lady not only showed up at the National Theater for the second half of a Saturday matinee, but even joined the cast onstage for curtain calls, after thanking each member personally."

The all-Black cast of *Hello, Dolly!* takes a bow on

October 31, 1967.

The president was reported to be “pounding his hands and beaming” and told Bailey after the performance, “You must be so satisfied to bring so much happiness and laughter to so many and I just wish it were possible for everyone everywhere in the world, at the end of a long, hard week, to have had the treat we’ve had this afternoon.”

It was clear the show was not only a groundbreaking social production but a hell of a good time, too.

Carol Channing sat in the front row at the new *Hello, Dolly!*'s opening night in New York, on November 12, 1967. Not a note had been altered from her original performance, not a line, not a costume, nor a dance step. Had Merrick done that, this production might have felt like an adaptation, something like 1939's *The Hot Mikado*, in which an all-Black cast had appeared in a jazz-inflected version of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. Instead, this was the same production that had been seen the day before, except that everyone in the company was new and Black. It was this infusion of Black talent that made *Hello, Dolly!* brand-new.

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The New York Times ominously prefaced its review by saying that the idea of a “nonintegrated Negro show” offended Barnes, the reviewer. “It sounded ... all too patronizing for words.” But there was no denying Pearl Bailey and the cast's power. “Believe me, from the first to the last I was overwhelmed,” Barnes wrote. “Maybe Black Power is what some of the other musicals need.”

Even the baseball legend and civil-rights leader Jackie Robinson was adamant that the show's all-Black cast was not a step backward. He wrote an effusive article for the *New York Amsterdam News*, declaring, “Dolly’ is a long leap forward.... What a marvellous thing it would be if ‘Hello Dolly’ could play the streets, not only in the ghettos, but in

all kinds of neighborhoods in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, South Carolina—and yes, even in Jackson, Mississippi. Or maybe, especially there.”

Most importantly, the show was a smash. Bailey would go on to win a Special Tony Award and appear with Carol Channing in a television special that had the two of them lovingly sing the title song together in matching red sequined dresses. And lest the controversy over its casting be the end of the story, Pearl Bailey returned to the role of Dolly in 1975 in a fully integrated production of the show.

Curtain Call

The story of the Broadway musical is a story of Black and white creators and performers collaborating on a uniquely American art form. The Blackness of Broadway has much to do with the embrace of its music—ragtime, the blues, and jazz—into what is heard today as merely “American” music.

Music is invisible and also colorless. Progressive Jewish writers embedded stories within their white shows to awaken and educate, such as the Kern-Hammerstein *Show Boat*, in 1927, with its shocking miscegenation scene, and the Moss Hart–Irving Berlin revue *As Thousands Cheer*, in 1933, which was an *S.N.L.*-like series of comedy sketches that made fun of rich, white people.



Bailey waves farewell.

There are hundreds of stories of bravery and inter-racial collaboration that gave us the American musical while also changing attitudes during the progress of civil rights in our country. Black songwriters such as Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle could write “white” songs in their all-Black *Shuffle Along*, from 1921, and white writers like Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh could write “Black” songs for their all-Black musical, *Blackbirds of 1928*. Langston Hughes could write words for white characters in Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene* just as Oscar Hammerstein II could write “Ol’ Man River” and Ira Gershwin could write “It Ain’t Necessarily So.”

There were differences across the country. *As Thousands Cheer* would ultimately play to more than a million people, but on its national tour Ethel Waters initially was not permitted to bow with her white colleagues, and ads in local papers assured the public that there would be no scenes in which white performers would share the stage with “Negroes” in front of Southern audiences.

Sometimes Broadway over-estimated its own audience. When Alfred Drake kissed Jet MacDonald on the mouth in the Duke Ellington–John La Touche 1946 musical, *Beggar’s Holiday*, it so enraged white people in New York City that there was picketing outside the Broadway Theatre and the show closed after 111 performances. However, an inter-racial kiss between Sammy Davis Jr. and Paula Wayne in 1964’s *Golden Boy* didn’t seem to ruffle anyone’s feathers. The show ran 568 performances on Broadway and then went on to London.

The point is that collaboration and activism formed the essential spine of America’s commercial musical theater. To have any impact, a show had to please (i.e., sell tickets to meet its costs), while its writers and its onstage cast worked to shift understanding and acceptance. The all-Black *Hello, Dolly!* is part of that complex and unique story, a story that links the recently ended Black History Month to the current Women’s History Month, celebrating both aspects of the Broadway musical and our precious American experiment.

John Mauceri is currently writing, along with John H. McWhorter, Broadway Black & White: Assimilation and Activism in the Broadway Musical, with musicologist Michael Gildin as research consultant. It is to be published by

W. W. Norton

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