

I Was a Teenage Negro! Blackface as a Vehicle of White Liberalism in *Finian's Rainbow*

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Obviously we hope you will enjoy your evening with us, but before the curtain goes up we would like to forewarn you about what you will see. *Finian's Rainbow* is a joyous musical celebrating life, love, and the magic that lives in each of us, but it is also something more. Produced in 1947, it was one of the American theater's first attempts to challenge racism and bigotry. With the two-edged sword of ridicule and laughter it punctured the stereotypes that corrupted America. In doing so it created something of a stereotype itself. If it seems at times that our cast makes fun of racial or social groups, it is only that we wish to expose and deride the bigotry that still would gain a hearing in our hearts.

—program note from Edison Junior High School's (Sioux Falls, SD) 1974 production of *Finian's Rainbow*

I might as well confess right up front that this article's title is a bit of a tease. While I did play a sharecropper in Edison Junior High's 1974 production of *Finian's Rainbow*, I was as white onstage as I was (and am) off. In this case, however, color-coordination of actor and role was less a matter of race-appropriate casting than of directorial whim. Allow me to explain.

Finian was a big Broadway hit in 1947. Francis Ford Coppola's 1968 movie adaptation reminded the American public of its charming score, which features an impressive share of "standards": "Old Devil Moon," "Look to the Rainbow," and "How are Things in Glocca Morra?"¹ In light of the songs' enduring popularity and the movie's relative currency, it seems an unremarkable choice for my school's annual musical.

In other respects, however, *Finian* presented unusual challenges for our middle-American junior high school. For starters, there is the play's somewhat heavy-handed message; the plot of *Finian's Rainbow*—a good deal of it, anyway—can be accurately described as agitprop. Yip (Edgar Yipfel) Harburg, *Finian's* lyricist and principal author, set out to present a satirical critique of American attitudes toward race and wealth through the medium of musical comedy.

If our current political climate—in which public schools are under pressure to abandon sex education and the teaching of evolution in favor of abstinence-only and intelligent design—had prevailed in 1974, *Finian's* progressive politics alone might have been sufficient to convince Edison's drama department to choose something safer—like *The Sound of Music*, perhaps. But in 1974, the problem was less the play's political ideas than the means by which they were expressed.

The plot centers around a racial miracle. The play's principle villain, a racist U.S. Senator, goes from white to black, and back again—learning a lesson, in the process, about tolerance. Barring a real miracle, this means that there is really no way to do *Finian's Rainbow* without somebody blacking up. Inasmuch as the senator's metamorphosis presents an unequivocally "progressive" message, the use of blackface is (arguably) forgivable. Indeed, given its history as the visual basis of minstrelsy, the play's appropriation of this technique in the service of an anti-racist parable may even strike a cleverly subversive note.

But our production faced an additional challenge. The setting for the play is Rainbow Valley, Missitucky, a racially-mixed utopia, where black and white sharecroppers live, work, and sing, side by side. It was brought to life, in the 1947 production, by Broadway's first fully integrated cast (which included, incidentally, blues legend Sonny Terry). Without this "Rainbow" milieu, the senator's racism—and his subsequent conversion—make no sense. But in 1974, Edison's production of *Finian* had no African-American cast members, and no chance of getting any. The school had not a single black student, and Sioux Falls had only a handful of black residents. I am fairly sure that the only real, live African Americans I had seen to that point were the Harlem Globetrotters, whom I had begged my father to take me to see at the Sioux Falls Arena a couple of years earlier (I worshipped Curly Neal). I would venture to guess that most of my castmates' experience of racial diversity was similarly scant.²

The upshot of this demographic inconvenience was that the senator was not the only one wearing blackface in our production. In order to do the story jus-

tice, other characters and several members of the “sharecropper” chorus were obliged to maintain the racial masquerade from overture to curtain call. (As far as I know, it was mere chance that I was not selected for this honor. Perhaps our faculty director, the kindly Mr. Connor, was concerned about the effect grease-paint would have on my already problematic complexion.) As strange and ironic a solution as this may have been, it is difficult to see how we could have done *Finian* without it; the story requires the presence of a few “permanently” black faces to offset the senator’s temporary one.

So it was that my classmates, Jeff and Kelly, Liz and Mark—the white sons and daughters of a white community in one of the whitest parts of America—were transformed into the ersatz Negroes of Rainbow Valley. So it was that *Finian’s Rainbow*, that relic of post-Popular Front, racially progressive agit-prop, came to look, on our tiny stage, like nothing so much as an old-fashioned minstrel show.

Given the program note’s acknowledgment of the play’s problematic approach to “stereotypes,” and my own (admittedly faded) memories, I believe the adults who guided our production deserve credit for good intentions. But what stands out in retrospect as an almost absurdly ironic clash of message and method points up the more subtly problematic nature of Harburg’s use of racial masquerade, and more generally, the challenge of satirically attacking stereotypes without simultaneously indulging them.

Finian’s simplistically progressive fable of racial tolerance presents, upon closer inspection, a picture of progressive intentions and regressive assumptions that is far from black and white. At the root of the play’s problematic racial politics lies the question of audience: for whom is its message intended? As Susan Gubar notes in *Racechanges*, white appropriations of black identity, whether undertaken in a spirit of derision or (as in *Finian*) affirmative action, are premised on a notion of blackness which “operates as a generic commodity constructed by the white imagination for white people.”³ The utter absence of real African Americans from my junior high school’s stage and auditorium constitute a particularly striking example of this dynamic. Though the kids in the cast and the parents in the seats could not easily misread the play’s liberal moral, it was easy to feel enlightened, edified, even absolved, when the real world of racial competition and conflict was so far away. *Finian’s* fairy-tale moralizing went down easily, partly because the day-to-day reality in the neighborhoods, classrooms, and school buses of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, circa 1974, presented little to challenge such utopian daydreams.

Even the original Broadway production (despite its touted integrated cast), and the 1968 movie (despite Coppola’s half-hearted attempts to “update” the story’s racial themes to reflect two decades of progress and foment) look, in retrospect, less like cutting satire than self-satisfied preaching to the choir. Whatever boldness or passion moved Harburg and his collaborators seems secondary to the desire to deliver a “cheering word” (to quote the lyrics’ “Glocca

Morra bird”) to a white audience which imagined itself to be enlightened. A closer look at the play’s creative genesis and subsequent fate (especially its unusually long journey from stage to screen), only reinforces these impressions.

Black and White, and Green All Over

Blackface is the medium of *Finian’s* message: the senator’s spiritual and moral conversion depends upon a white actor putting on burnt cork (or its modern Max Factor/Ben Nye equivalent), and then washing it off again. In the Edison production this “special effect” was achieved by having the strapping 9th-grader who played the part fall headfirst into a pasteboard and papier-maché “well” where a crouching classmate waited to slap greasy, dark brown makeup on his face as quickly as possible, while the rest of the cast stalled with clever ad-libs like “Oh! The senator has fallen into the well!”

This is all rather embarrassing to recall. Just as a lot of us would probably like to forget our junior high years, most Americans would probably prefer to forget the role blackface played in the nation’s cultural past. Blackface minstrelsy was our first popular, mass-entertainment phenomenon, as much a part of American life in the nineteenth century as was Hollywood in the twentieth. The minstrel show peaked before the Civil War and had practically died out by 1900, but its legacy—and the use of blackface—continued long after. Common on the vaudeville stage and in films of the 1920s, burnt-cork “blackness” still popped up occasionally in films of the 1940s. Moreover, the underlying dynamic of racial masquerade and white appropriation of black culture and identity has continued to constitute a defining feature of our popular culture, from Al Jolson through Elvis Presley to Eminem.

From a contemporary perspective, it is difficult to see blackface as anything other than patently offensive. It was, after all, a three-dimensional racist caricature that facilitated a blatant and condescending act of cultural larceny, but it was never *merely* that. Recent scholarship suggests that blackface, though certainly a form of “racial insult,” also expresses a degree of “racial envy.”⁴⁴ Blackface was, among other things, a tool for the appropriation of (what was understood to be) black culture, as expressed in language, dance, and music. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then appropriation (complete with the highly visible burnt-cork “footnote” that indicates the source) must also be understood as including a note of tribute. In its contradictorily insulting and envious relationship to “real” blackness, the blackface masquerade constitutes, in Eric Lott’s phrase, an act of “Love and Theft.”

But can blackface be used to promote racial integration and conciliation? This certainly seems to have been the intent of *Finian’s* authors. Harburg, who conceived of the senator’s burnt-cork epiphany and brought it to the stage in collaboration with composer Burton Lane and book writer Fred Saidy, was a Tin Pan Alley veteran who penned the lyrics to “Brother Can You Spare a Dime” (music by Jay Gorney), “Over the Rainbow” (music by Harold Arlen) and many

other hit songs of stage and screen. He was also a left-liberal who evinced a keen interest in issues of social, economic, and racial justice in both his private and professional lives. Contemporary reviews suggest that in 1947, *Finian's* parable of racial tolerance came across as an effective bit of progressive satire.⁵ But viewed in retrospect, the *technique* through which the satirical point is made renders the play itself nearly as offensive as the attitudes its well-intentioned authors aimed to attack. For “liberal-minded” whites—not only Harburg and his coauthors, but critics and audience members who cheered the Broadway production in 1947, Francis Ford Coppola and other participants in the 1968 film version, and even those who took part in Edison Junior High’s 1974 production—the problematic dynamic of *Finian's* progressivism, if it does not exactly reiterate the “Love and Theft” logic of minstrelsy, can only somewhat more generously be called Righteousness and Condescension.

Michael Rogin, in his book *Blackface, White Noise*, argues that blackface performance has often served as a vehicle for white “ethnic” performers to assimilate into the fabled American “melting pot”—a metaphorical construct which, for all its equalitarian resonance, has usually stood for the assimilation of only *European* immigrants into a more thoroughly homogenized, “whiter” whiteness. Blackface performance, Rogin argues, served as a cultural rite of passage for certain of these immigrant groups. By temporarily taking on the color and culture of their adopted country’s most oppressed and unassimilable “other,” these “outsiders” took part in a quintessentially American masquerade, thus proving their own assimilability into undifferentiated American whiteness.

The ironic aspect of this cultural naturalization process is that, while it depends upon the use of “blackness,” it excludes actual black people. Blackface, for these white immigrants, was the key component of an initiation ritual; the first step on the road toward assimilation. But for African Americans—people born in America, and born with black faces—assimilation was impossible. Permanent blackness was a barrier to full citizenship and full personhood. Temporary blackness was a means of achieving a whiter whiteness: This was true for the Irish immigrants who dominated nineteenth-century minstrelsy, and for the Russian and East European Jews who had largely taken over blackface performance by the turn of the twentieth. “By painting himself black,” Rogin writes of Al Jolson’s eager-to-assimilate character in *The Jazz Singer*, “he washes himself white.”⁶ The transfiguration of the non-Anglo European from outsider to “American” depends upon the immutability of the black “other”; in the case of *The Jazz Singer*, Rogin argues, “The blackface that offers Jews mobility keeps the blacks fixed in place.”⁷ Blackface functions as a vehicle for the white immigrant’s journey of assimilation, but the journey little benefits the vehicle itself; one can take a taxi from Harlem to Broadway, or from the slums to the suburbs, but no matter where the passenger comes from and where he ends up, the cab remains a cab.

Rogin traces the process by which early twentieth century Jewish performers like Eddie Cantor and Jolson went from “ethnic” to all-American via

blackface, following a trail blazed by Irish-American minstrels in the nineteenth century. By the time of *Finian's* debut, however, divisions amongst various Euro-American ethnic groups had faded in its prominence as a pop-cultural theme. Though one strand of *Finian's* tangled plot does deal with immigration—Finian and his daughter have come from Ireland to seek their fortune in the Land of Opportunity—the character whom blackface here “Americanizes” is American to begin with. For the senator, blackface facilitates a journey of *ideological* Americanization. The temporary blackness that in 1927 served to transform the Jazz Singer from Jewish immigrant to assimilated American was employed twenty years later to transform *Finian's* bigoted senator from a bad, racist American to a good, “liberal” one.

The premise of this transformation is fundamentally progressive: true Americanism, the play argues, is incompatible with racism. Nonetheless, the benefits of temporary blackness in *Finian*, as in *The Jazz Singer*, redound mainly to whites: not only to the senator, whom it redeems, but also to the white audience, which by witnessing the character's plight from a safe remove is invited to learn the same lesson—or better yet, to congratulate themselves for knowing it already.

If the immigrant's Americanizing use of blackface leaves actual African Americans behind, this is not precisely the case in *Finian's Rainbow*. The senator's change of heart certainly seems like a good thing for the play's black characters as the curtain falls since it saves them from being evicted from their homes. But the power relationships—and, for all intents and purposes, the racial dynamic underpinning them—that allowed the initial injustices to exist have not changed. Though the senator's journey through temporary blackness leads him to understand and to help those whom he once despised (whereas the Jazz Singer's blackface sojourn is more purely exploitative, in that it helps only himself), such magnanimity is nonetheless still *his* to grant. The senator's tale is yet another white success story. Just as the Jazz Singer gets to be a Broadway star and marry his *shiksa* girlfriend, the senator gets to be a better person, and retain his office and position in the community, while whites in the audience get to go home whistling *tooralay* and feeling secure (if not smug) in their own “tolerance,” which has been tested, one suspects, by nothing more troubling than the plot's convolutions.

Yet the significance of the senator's life-altering color adjustment—and the white spectators' enjoyment of the same—is more than skin deep. Even as it explicitly criticizes the notion that a person's color has any bearing on the content of his character, *Finian's* story, music, and lyrics subtly reinforce the same sort of condescending, “positive” stereotypes that have haunted the well-intentioned works of white progressives from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Norman Mailer.⁸ However sympathetic—even flattering—its implications, a stereotype is a stereotype: a reductive and essentializing caricature.

Stage and Screen

From this point, my analysis of *Finian's Rainbow* draws upon two versions of the text: the published script of the original 1947 Broadway play and the 1968 MGM film. (Sadly, there is no extant complete record of the 1974 Edison Junior High production.) The film and the play are not interchangeable, of course; the adaptation of a work from one medium to another is bound to complicate attempts to contextualize and interpret its content and its reception. But in the case of *Finian's* racechanging plot, the unusually long gap of twenty-one years between stage and screen versions illuminates the salient points more than it obscures them.

That twenty-one-year delay is a story in itself. Consider, by way of contrast, the fate of the other 1947 Irish-accented Broadway hit, *Brigadoon*, which was in neighborhood cinemas by 1954.⁹ But then, given *Finian's* ideological baggage, it is not hard to imagine why Hollywood might have been more comfortable with *Brigadoon*. Racially progressive stories were a tough sell for studios wary of alienating Southern "sensibilities," and there was nothing subtle about *Finian's* assault on Jim Crow. The play's pseudo-socialist economic critique (see below) may also have raised some hackles. Perhaps these difficulties could have been overcome by the usual Hollywood bowdlerization process, but it was the appearance of Harburg's name on the blacklist, more than its problematic content, that kept *Finian* off the screen for the next two decades.

Like many victims of the Hollywood witch hunt, Harburg was not, and had never been, a member of the Communist Party. But he was certainly a man of the left, and his membership in such "suspicious" organizations as the Writers Congress, the Civil Rights Congress, and the Progressive Citizens of America helped make him a target of congressional red-baiting.¹⁰ The blacklist caught up with Harburg three years after *Finian's* stage triumph, when he was back in Hollywood, writing lyrics for a prospective musical adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn* for producer Arthur Freed. The project was abandoned when Harburg and screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart both ran afoul of HUAC.¹¹ Harburg fought a long, frustrating battle to clear his name, and a couple of proposals to film *Finian* in the 1950s did get to the discussion stage, but the blacklist always got in the way.¹²

Finally, in 1968, with the blacklist era a fading memory, MGM engaged novice director Francis Ford Coppola and a cast that included Fred Astaire (in what was to be his last dancing role) and British pop singer Petula Clark to bring *Finian* to the screen.¹³ The problem now was that *Finian*, far from being either an ageless fantasy (like *Brigadoon*) or a quaint period piece (like *The Music Man*) had been conceived as a topical, political satire, complete with references to contemporary policies and persons. Topicality does not always age well; even a meticulous historical recovery of the play's contemporary referents can only hint at their possible impact upon an audience of 1947. But the biggest obstacle the film faced was the enormous shift in U.S. race relations

between that year and 1968. When *Finian* premiered on Broadway, as Harburg later said, “There had been no such song as ‘We Shall Overcome.’ There was no Martin Luther King. . . .”¹⁴ While it would be more accurate to say that the song (a traditional spiritual of obscure origins) and King (who was then just eighteen) were merely awaiting their moment, the *Brown* decision, lunch counter sit-ins, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement were indeed, still years away.¹⁵

Still, the late 1940s was a time of rising expectations for proponents of integration and civil rights. World War II brought about sweeping changes in U.S. society, with profound implications for African Americans. On the homefront, the wartime production boom brought a second wave of black migration from the rural South to the urban North. In addition to this increase in economic opportunity, activism organized around the proto-Civil Rights “Double V” movement (*V*ictory over fascism abroad, and racism at home), and the relatively progressive race policies of the Truman years were at least chipping away at segregation, laying some of the groundwork for the movement to come. And bigger changes were in the air—just a year after *Finian*’s debut, President Truman issued an executive order that would lead to the eventual desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces. That the war just fought had been a struggle against a racist state presented a particularly compelling argument for change—one that did not escape the *Saturday Review*’s John Mason Brown, who used his review of *Finian* to make exactly this point: “To mobilize our strength to fight overseas the theory of the Master Race, and to accept that same theory at home without mobilizing our consciences, is worse than a paradox.”¹⁶

Still, though there were signs of progress, it would be pollyannaish to say that “things were looking up” for African Americans in 1947. Jim Crow was alive and well, and at times it seemed that every advance was met with violent backlash—after the war there was another spate of lynchings in the United States, with black veterans among the victims. But at least in the realm of popular culture, there was some cause for optimism. The Office of War Information had been pushing Hollywood toward more positive portrayals of African Americans.¹⁷ *Body and Soul* was released in 1947, and a mini-wave of “message” films would follow: 1949 saw the release of *Pinky* and *Home of the Brave*, and on Broadway, a musical that took on racism in a more soberly melodramatic fashion, *South Pacific*.¹⁸ For all their faults, such well-intentioned works at least directed attention to racial discrimination.

The original production of *Finian*, then, was not entirely exceptional in dealing with such issues, though its satirical approach set it apart. African American reviewer Miles Jefferson enthused about *Finian*’s integrated cast (an “object lesson in race goodwill”) and its humorous approach. “Intolerance in the Deep South has been subjected to light, but peppery, spoofing in a musical show, and this has been accomplished in the best of taste and with great style. . . .”¹⁹

By the time *Finian* made it to the screen in 1968, times had changed. African American political activism had reached both an apotheosis and a crisis point in that turbulent year. The non-violent tactics of the early Civil Rights movement had given way to urban race riots and the more militant philosophies of Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers. Eldridge Cleaver published his “Black Power” jeremiad, *Soul on Ice*.²⁰ And just months before the film *Finian* debuted, Martin Luther King was assassinated.

In contrast to the generally positive reviews the Broadway production had received, most of the film’s reviews characterize *Finian*’s gently satirical take on racism as embarrassingly dated and naive. “My, how progressive it all seemed some twenty years ago!” wrote Arthur Knight. “My, how quaint it all appears today! How well-meaning! How simpleminded!”²¹ *Time*’s reviewer took a snider tone: “The American Negro has endured Little Rock and Selma; he will survive Mississippi.”²² *Newsweek* warned those with fond memories of the Broadway production that seeing the film might “shatter some cherished illusions” about *Finian*’s supposed progressiveness. “The terrible truth is that ‘Finian’s’ folklore was always fake, its sentiments always bogus, its social consciousness always a clumsy embarrassment, and we always knew it.”²³

Kindlier critics suggested that the story was calculatedly left intact, preserved, in effect, as a museum piece. “So much has happened along racial lines in the past 20 years that modernizing the old ‘Finian’s Rainbow’ would have meant rewriting it completely—and then it wouldn’t have been ‘Finian’s Rainbow’ at all,” said one.²⁴ Indeed, the film script (credited to Harburg and Saidy), does hew fairly close to the original play, albeit with a few, subtle concessions to 1968 realities.

But what is most remarkable in comparing the reception of the 1947 play and the 1968 film is how *little* the critics’ racial sensitivities seem to have evolved. None of the film’s reviews specifically note any of several blatantly stereotypical details that I believe would strike most contemporary viewers as almost painfully obvious—a reminder, no doubt, that even the relatively recent past is “another country.”

The Melting Pot at the End of the Rainbow

The plot of *Finian’s Rainbow* is so convoluted as to defy synopsis. John Lardner complained that “it would take a pack of beagles to follow [the authors] through the ins and outs of their four- or five-fold harangue.”²⁵ Harburg later recalled that *Finian*’s scenario derived from several separate strands of thought. One was his profound distaste for the white supremacist rhetoric of Mississippi Senators Theodore Bilbo and John Rankin.²⁶ Harburg first conceived the race-changing gimmick with these two archetypal racists in mind. “The only way I could assuage my outrage against their bigotry was to have one of them turn black and live under his own [Jim Crow] laws and see how he felt

about it," he said. But Harburg was stymied as to how he might use this idea in a musical comedy. "It was a little grim," he decided, "so I put it in my notebook for future reference and forgot about it. . . . Two years later I was reading James Stephen's *The Crock of Gold*, a beautiful book with all the lovely Irish names and the leprechaun. . . ."27 Somewhere along the way, these two stories came to an unlikely intersection in Harburg's mind; add to this stew his social-democratic take on property, consumerism, and the gold standard, and you have *Finian's Rainbow*.

As the play opens, Finian McLonergan and daughter Sharon arrive in Rainbow Valley, Missitucky, a fictional Southern backwater. The McLonergans are Irish immigrants, who have come from "Glocca Morra" with only the clothes on their backs and a few pieces of luggage, including a beat-up satchel. Unbeknownst to Sharon, this forlorn-looking piece of luggage holds a treasure as Finian, an inveterate rainbow-chaser (and "shore-an'-begorra," Blarney-basted Irish caricature) has at last found the golden crock of legend, stolen it from the leprechauns, and absconded with it across the Atlantic. In his own version of the "streets-paved-with-gold" immigrant cliché, Finian has wisely concluded that it helps to bring some gold of one's own. He regards the "borrowed" crock as literal "seed money," which he plans to "plant" in American soil—as near Fort Knox as possible—in the belief that this fertile ground will make his fortune grow like clover. This, he explains to his skeptical daughter, is the "McLonergan Theory of Economics":

The peculiar nature of the soil in and about Fort Knox brings an additional quality to gold, hitherto unsuspected by either Karl Marx or the gold itself. This causes the gold to radiate a powerful influence throughout America . . . and produces a bumper crop of millionaires.²⁸

There are no millionaires in Rainbow Valley, but it is an idyllic place, a pastoral village, where black and white sharecroppers "with no blight of Faulkner or Caldwell upon them" live in racial *and* economic harmony.²⁹ It is, in fact, a collective farm, which the sharecroppers own in common (Harburg's blacklisting aside, one can imagine why Hollywood might have had a problem with this particular idea in the HUAC era). If that unobtrusive nod toward utopian socialism wasn't enough, the community is led by one Woody Mahoney, identified in the script as a "union organizer."³⁰ The character is clearly named for Woody Guthrie—the stage directions indicate that he carries a guitar and "speaks in a 'Talking Union Blues' rhythm"—a figure with whom Harburg apparently felt a degree of political, if not musical, affinity.³¹

As the McLonergans arrive on the scene, agents of Senator Billboard Rawkins (a name meant to evoke both Bilbo and Rankin) are trying to seize the sharecroppers' land, ostensibly for back taxes (though in fact this legalism is an

excuse for the senator to grab Rainbow Valley for himself). But Finian and Sharon intervene, chipping in their last \$65 (not counting the gold) to pay off the balance of the debt. The grateful Rainbow Valley residents want to reward the newcomers, but Finian requests only “a parcel of land as big as me bag,” which will allow him to plant his gold and put the “McLoneran theory of economics” into action.³²

But Finian soon learns, to his chagrin, that he has been pursued all the way from Ireland by a leprechaun named Og, who vainly demands Finian return his pot of gold. For Og, the gold is not merely a source of wealth or security, but identity—deprived of its magic, he will gradually turn “mortal.” Indeed, he is already growing taller by the minute!

“A Better Person, Not a Worse ’un.”

The pot of gold is the magical maguffin that ties the various plots together. It is the foundation of Finian’s utopian dreams and the instrument of both Og’s and Senator Rawkins’s ultimate humanization/Americanization.

The senator’s lust for the Rainbow Valley land leads him to concoct a made-to-order Jim Crow statute to usurp the black sharecroppers’ collective claim—a stark satirical example of how institutionalized racism could be exploited in the service of individual greed. When Rawkins shows up to enforce the foreclosure, an indignant Sharon wishes aloud that the senator could see what it is like to be black “in the world he and his kind have made.”³³ It so happens that as she speaks these words she is standing, unwittingly, on the spot where Finian has buried the golden crock. Through the power of this talisman, her wish immediately comes true, to the astonishment of all. The suddenly black senator takes it on the lam, pursued by his erstwhile henchmen.

The character of Billboard Rawkins is himself a stereotype: he wears a white suit, *à la* Colonel Sanders, and lives in a crumbling plantation manse, in denial of the Confederacy’s Civil War defeat. The specific reference to Bilbo and Rankin seems likely to have been lost on most of the 1968 movie audience, though in 1947 it was obvious enough. *Newsweek’s* review of the play slyly noted that “there is no program note to protest that any resemblance between senators fictional or alive is strictly coincidental.”³⁴

The authors, however, did not intend subtlety. “Billboard,” after all, is more than just a pun on Bilbo. A billboard is a sign: a big, *obvious* sign that cannot be ignored. And so it is with the Rawkins character in the play: the play’s didactic message is boldly painted upon his very face—he goes from white to black and back only to learn that what matters is not the color of one’s skin but the content of one’s character.

Or does he? As it happens, Rawkins’ outward color change is only the *first phase* of his conversion. As the second act begins, Rawkins—still black and still on the run—meets the gradually “humanizing” Og in the forest.

OG

What were you hiding from?

RAWKINS

My wife, my people, my friends. You think I want 'em to see me this way? . . . Can't you see I'm black?

OG

Yes, and I think it's very becoming.

RAWKINS

But I'm a white man, dammit, a white man! . . .

OG

Well *that's* a coincidence. I was *green* a few weeks ago. Don't you find an occasional change of color interesting?³⁵

Rawkins's supernaturally reconfigured P.O.V. has heightened his awareness, but it has not awakened his empathy:

RAWKINS

You moron! Don't you realize what it means to be black? . . . you can't get into a restaurant. You can't get on a street car. You can't buy yourself a cold beer on a hot day. . . .

OG

Who says you can't?

RAWKINS

The law says you can't.

OG

The law? Mmm . . . that's a silly law. Is it a legal law?

RAWKINS

Of course it's legal. I wrote it myself.³⁶

(In Harburg's first draft, Rawkins' "Black Like Me" experience is a much grimmer business. Among other indignities, Rawkins is nearly lynched for having had sexual relations with a white woman: his wife!)³⁷

Sharon's wish that Rawkins could "see what it's like to be black" seems to be based on the premise that even a bigot could see the light if made to walk (or in this case, *run*) a mile in his victim's skin. Yet this is not what happens to

Rawkins at all. When he meets Og, he is angry *not* at the injustices to which his new complexion exposes him, but at the “witch” who stole his whiteness. This is because, in spite of his change of hue he is still white (and still a bigot) on the “inside.”

“It’s *all* that witch’s fault,” Og frets when he hears Rawkins’ unrepentant grouching. “She gave you a new *outside*, when she should have give you a new *inside*. Very incompetent.”³⁸ The senator’s conversion requires further supernatural intervention. Og casts a spell:

Rise, ye vapors, and unwind
 This tangled medieval mind . . .
 Balm of briar and sandalwood
 Season him with brotherhood.
 Magic vapors, make this person
 A better person—not a worse ’un.³⁹

That Rawkins’ color change *by itself* fails to open his mind would seem to undercut the basis of Sharon’s wish for him (and Harburg’s wish for the real Bilbo and Rankin) to “see what it’s like.” At this point in the story, he *has* seen what it’s like, but the experience has failed to bring about the change of heart implicit in that wish.

What happens to Rawkins after Og completes his incantation and scampers off upsets the simple logic of the parable, and exposes the condescending, “positive” racism that taints *Finian*’s good intentions. Stunned by the leprechaun’s spell, Rawkins lies still, apparently unconscious. But soon he awakens, and rises to his feet singing “Oh Dem Golden Slippers!” In the film, Keenan Wynn as Rawkins wakes with a groan: “Ohhh . . .,” which he repeats with gradually dawning consciousness and pleasure, as if “finding his voice.” Finally a contented smile plays across his face and the groan stretches into the first line of the lyric. He clammers to his feet and strolls out of the woods in an unaccustomed loose-limbed gait, singing all the way. The implications are clear: the first spell made Rawkins a black man, but it took a second spell to turn him into a “Negro,” replete with the stereotypically “positive” gift of innate musical ability. (Amazingly, none of the 1968 reviews I found raised any objections to this particular sequence.)

If “race”—as the contemporary consensus of biological and social science indicates—is a purely social construction, rather than a reflection of an individual’s biologically determined essence, then the simple *experience* of being a black man in a racist society should be sufficient for Rawkins to “see what it’s like.”⁴⁰ Granted, he has not been black for very long, and the vast majority of his still-remembered life experience has been as a white man. But Og’s spell does not, for instance, take the senator on a trip through time, showing him a greater range of the indignities he might be expected to endure, or the opportu-

nities he might have been denied, as a black man. Unlike Ebenezer Scrooge, Rawkins is not shown the error of his ways and convinced to repent as a result of these insights. Being turned black has *not* turned out to be, as Sharon had presumably hoped, an educational experience. Moreover, when Rawkins wakes from the *second* spell, he does not take on the chastened air of someone who was just learned a tough lesson. In fact, he *sings* for the first time in the play. Mere experience has left his soul untouched, but a magical change in his *essential self* has turned Rawkins into a *true* “Negro”—with a rhythmic lilt in his step and a soulful song in his heart.

Passion Pilgrims

Among the stereotypically “positive” traits routinely ascribed to African Americans by white liberals of the racial-romanticist bent are innate musical ability, a sincere and unstudied spirituality (“soul”), and a freer and less guilt-ridden sexuality. What happens to the “Negrofied” Rawkins next touches on all three of these stereotypical themes, almost simultaneously.

Rawkins’ rendition of “Golden Slippers” catches the collective ear of the “Passion Pilgrim Gospellers,” a gospel group that happen to be passing through the woods on their way to sing at the wedding of Sharon and Woody. It is a fortuitous meeting as the Pilgrims, due to an unforeseen defection, have found themselves one baritone short of a quartet. In fact, Rawkins’ musical arrival on the scene strikes the Gospellers as nothing short of divine intervention. “Brother,” they greet him, “you’re the voice in the wilderness.”⁴¹

The gospel quartet is a “two-fer” in terms of positive stereotyping, covering both musicality and spirituality. But what about sexuality? This is a bit trickier; the play’s white audience would likely have had no objection to being told that blacks were musical and spiritual—indeed, these qualities were fundamental to the “logic” of minstrelsy, and were largely taken for granted by garden-variety bigots and racial-romanticist white liberals alike. But African American sexuality—*male* sexuality, especially—taps into the “miscegenation” anxiety so deeply embedded in the history of American racism. The slanderous myth of the animalistic, rapacious black man was trotted out as an excuse for KKK terror and countless lynchings; it was the overt theme of *The Birth of a Nation* and remained available for exploitation at a subtextual level seventy years later, as demonstrated by the apparent effectiveness of George H. W. Bush’s infamous Willie Horton ad.⁴² But for liberal whites, sensitive to the destruction this stereotype had wrought, black sexuality was the lust that dare not speak its name (and is undoubtedly one reason Harburg cut the dialogue about Rawkins’s wife and lynching).

Nonetheless, the racial-romantic view also holds that there is something essentially exceptional about black sexuality. The “positive” stereotypical spin insists that blacks’ sexuality is “freer,” less repressed than that of whites, not so

much “animalistic” as more “natural.” Harburg’s allusions to these problematic assumptions demonstrate a certain finesse; all suggestions of “free” black sexuality—the most potentially disturbing of the “positive” essential traits—are confined within boundaries defined by those more acceptable traits, spirituality and musicality (a.k.a. soul and rhythm).

Before breaking into their big number, the quartet sets up this strategy with the tale of their missing member. Note the biblical syntax:

FIRST GOSPELEER

(Chanting like a revival-meetin’ preacher) Well, you see, brother, we suffered a casualty last night, after our triumphant performance at the First Baptist Church. There was our Number Four man, Russ, suddenly taken with temptation. And in his desperation he cried out, “Get thee behind me, Satan”—and Satan got—and Satan pushed—and he pushed him right into the arms of a bouncin’ Babylonian Jezebel from Biloxi, Mississippi. Oh, the soul was strong, but the flesh was weak.⁴³

The Gospels recruit the reformed Rawkins as a replacement (“You mean I can make a livin’ singin’ with you?” he asks. “There’s only a handful of ways,” one of the quartet replies, invoking a familiar lyric from that other “race musical,” *Showboat*: “You either tote that barge, lift that bale, shine that shoe—or sing. We sing.”) As in the story of the AWOL baritone, the lyrics of the Gospels’ number, “The Begat” cleverly reconcile the sacred with the profane (or at least risqué):

The Lord made Adam, the Lord made Eve
 He made them both a little bit naive . . .
 Then she looked at him
 And he looked at her
 And they knew immejitly
 What the world was fer!⁴⁴

The song continues through a world-wide inventory of peoples, emphasizing their common desire to “begat”: “The Greeks begat, the Swedes begat / Why even Britishers in tweeds begat.” As the list continues, however, one group remains conspicuous by its absence: African Americans. (Unless they are the object of the oblique reference in this Harburg couplet: “The white begat, the red begat / The folks who shoulda stood in bed begat.”⁴⁵) The Gospels are *celebrators* of sex, but not participants: in their account of the erstwhile baritone Russ (who is, perhaps significantly, never seen by the audience, a device which allows *Finian* to keep black sexuality safely offstage/offscreen), and in the lyrics of “The Begat,” and in the fact that they perform at weddings (when

they stumble upon Rawkins, they are en route to the nuptials of Sharon and Woody, the two white romantic leads). In spite of the carnal wink safely embedded in the “gospel” lyrics (to say nothing of the implicit double meaning embedded in the name “Passion Pilgrims”) the Gospeleers themselves seem fated to a celibacy that has less to do with their religious vocation than their race.

“The Begat” employs what is sometimes referred to as a “laundry list” lyric. Perhaps that metaphorical description could be extended in this instance to include the warning “keep colors separate.” The black quartet serves as a vehicle for white romance, white reproduction, and, in Rawkins’s case, white redemption. Ironically, Sharon and Woody’s “white wedding” is a melting pot moment, through which the immigrant Sharon is Americanized (and presumably, naturalized). As in *The Jazz Singer*, blackface and cross-cultural marriage are the catalysts of Americanization, but only for the white and “near-white” European immigrant.

Cornelius and Mike

If sex is the common denominator of “The Begat,” another of *Finian’s* songs celebrates another, more peculiarly American leveler: easy credit. “When the Idle Poor Become the Idle Rich” is a tongue-in-cheek celebration of what might be called melting-pot consumerism. But despite the message that all money is green, this song’s vision of financial “passing” is not quite colorblind.

The occasion for the song is the surprising discovery that the “McLonergeran Theory of Economics” has borne fruit: government geologists have confirmed that Finian’s planted crock has begun to yield a bountiful crop of gold. With undreamed-of wealth growing beneath their very feet, the residents of Rainbow Valley open a charge account with the “Shears and Robust” mail-order house and go on a shopping spree. “They can now afford to stop wanting things they can buy and to start buying things they don’t want,” say Harburg and Saily’s stage directions. “So it is understandable that they appear in mink shorts, leopard-skin pajamas, and gold-brocaded hunting habits.”⁴⁶

But the lyrics focus on what might be called, with some irony, the positive/progressive side of conspicuous consumption:

No one will see
The Irish or the Slav in you
For when you’re on Park Avenue
Cornelius and Mike
Look alike.
When poor Tweedledum is rich Tweedledee
This discrimination will no longer be.⁴⁷

“The Idle Poor” lyric does not include an extensive *list* of ethnic groups like “The Begat,” but given a number of references of this sort it is still notable that,

unlike the Irish and the Slavs, African Americans—who make up a substantial portion of the chorus singing these lyrics—do not rate a specific mention. *That* discrimination apparently will continue, since the markers of race cannot be disguised with a pair of mink shorts, especially when one considers how neatly the sight of African Americans so costumed fits another minstrel-vintage stereotype.

Consumer democracy does allow Rainbow Valley's marginalized whites—including new immigrants Finian and Sharon—to “pass” as middle-class Americans. In the words of the song, “With just a few annuities / We'll hide these incongruities / With cloaks from Abercrombie Fitch.”⁴⁸ The *white* “idle poor,” regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or (thanks to their new line of credit) class of origin, can blend in by dressing like their “superiors.” But the visual logic that insists “clothes make the man” is closely analogous to the key rationale of racial essentialism: *color* makes the man. Clothes, for the “idle poor” serve the same function as blackface for *The Jazz Singer*'s protagonist: the key to “Americanization,” in both cases, is disguise. But the disguise is only effective to the extent that the difference it seeks to cover can be successfully subsumed into what society has defined as the visible spectrum of whiteness. The true test of this is not what one looks like before donning this disguise, but what one looks like after it is removed. When the *Jazz Singer* removes his burnt cork, his journey to whiteness is complete; and when that “cloak from Abercrombie Fitch” is shed, Cornelius and Mike will still “look alike.” Real “blackness,” on the other hand, cannot be removed like makeup, nor covered with a pair of mink shorts, as the song's lyrical omissions tacitly acknowledge.

A Musical Interlude

The music of *Finian's Rainbow*—or rather, the story behind the music—is a striking illustration of the phenomenon of “love and theft.” The history of American popular music is largely defined by that complex racial dynamic, as Rogin demonstrates in his examination of the rhetoric surrounding Tin Pan Alley “jazz” of the 1920s. Many of the songwriters spawned in this milieu, who would become the founding fathers of Broadway, were immigrant or first generation American Jews. For these marginally marginalized counterparts of *The Jazz Singer*'s fictional Jakie Rabinovitz, the road to success (in early twentieth-century America, the highest form of assimilation) was paved with “jazz”—a generic designation which, as Rogin shows, was at that time more often used to refer to songs like Irving Berlin's “Alexander's Ragtime Band” than the music of Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller.

Black music, W. E. B. Du Bois once claimed, was the “only real American music”—a notion that the rhetoric surrounding minstrelsy had actually helped promote.⁴⁹ But as in that earlier entertainment era, African American culture was relegated to the status of raw material, which could be refined and per-

fectured only by white interlocutors. Rogin quotes several contemporary sources that place the Jewish tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley in the role of alchemists converting “primitive” Negro music into “jazz”: “Originating with the Negroes,” wrote one critic, “jazz . . . has become a Jewish *interpretation* of the Negro.”⁵⁰ Jazz was not a black invention, Isaac Goldberg wrote in 1927, but the product of “musical miscegenation” between African American “folk” tradition and Jewish American songsmiths like Berlin and George Gershwin.⁵¹

Tin Pan Alley begat the Broadway musical, and the paradigm of “musical miscegenation” continued to provide the lens through which its practitioners saw their work, as Harburg’s own attitudes toward “black music” illustrate. In seeking a musical collaborator for *Finian*, he first sought out Harold Arlen, with whom he had worked on *The Wizard of Oz*.⁵² But Arlen, uncomfortable with *Finian*’s didactic satire, declined (“I called it education,” Harburg recalled, “[Arlen] called it propaganda”).⁵³ Plan B was to enlist Burton Lane for the “Irish material, the ballads, and the more mainstream Broadway production numbers,” but to call in Earl Robinson to compose the “black” songs. Robinson was another erstwhile collaborator, with whom Harburg had written the racial-equality anthem “Free and Equal Blues” in 1944.⁵⁴ Harburg felt that Robinson, who, like Arlen and Lane was white, had a special feeling for “Negro” music. This same affinity was what had initially led him to try to enlist Arlen, whose “hallmark,” Harburg claimed, was “his synthesis of Negro rhythms and Hebraic melodies.”⁵⁵ Like Arlen, though, Robinson demurred, and Harburg apparently allowed himself to be convinced that Burton Lane was versatile enough to handle both “Irish” and “black” musical styles.

The circumstances surrounding one of Harburg’s previous collaborations with Arlen provide a telling glimpse of how white denizens of Tin Pan Alley thought of “Negro” music. In 1940 Harburg was offered the opportunity to contribute lyrics to the all-black Broadway show, *Cabin in the Sky*, but turned it down on aesthetic grounds, because Vernon Duke (another stalwart of the Great “White” Way) was slated to do the music. It wasn’t that Harburg didn’t admire Duke’s talent; the two had in fact collaborated before, most notably on the hit song “April in Paris.” The problem, Harburg would later explain, was that Duke’s songs tended toward the “smart, charming, [and] sophisticated”—qualities Harburg considered inappropriate for *Cabin*’s black milieu.⁵⁶

Three years later, Harburg got a second chance to contribute to *Cabin in the Sky*, as MGM was preparing a film adaptation of the story. The score was to be substantially revamped, which provided an opportunity for Harburg to collaborate once more with Arlen, whose command of the “Negro” musical idiom more closely conformed to Harburg’s preconceptions. The team contributed eight songs to the film version of *Cabin*, including the title number and “Happiness is a Thing Called Joe.” Yet it is emblematic of the bizarre twists and turns of cultural appropriation that the film’s producers felt they had to hire Arlen and Harburg to write “black” music for a film whose cast included another Duke—

Ellington—whose current reputation as a composer far exceeds that of Vernon Duke, Arlen, and all of Harburg’s other white collaborators, and whose music was both urbane and (indisputably, it would seem) “authentically” black.⁵⁷

“Making forward steps, but never advancing”

Not counting the temporarily black Senator Rawkins and the itinerant Gospels (who appear only briefly and are unnamed, except for absent Russ, the prodigal baritone), there are only two black characters with substantial roles in *Finian’s Rainbow*. The first is Henry, a little boy. His is by far the most developed children’s role, which may have been a calculatedly “progressive” gesture on the part of Harburg and Saidy. In spite of this, however, Henry’s character is defined strictly within the bounds of “positive” essentialism.

Henry’s principal function is to serve as interpreter for Woody’s mute sister Susan. Until another pot-of-gold-enabled miracle towards the end of Act II restores her voice, Susan can communicate only through dance; as Henry puts it, “She don’t do talk-talk. She does foot-talk.”⁵⁸ Henry is the only one who can interpret Susan’s steps. One might think Susan’s brother would be most likely to understand her, but as a white man, Woody apparently lacks the black child’s superior musical and rhythmic intuition. Henry’s ability to read Susan’s “foot-talk”—like Rawkins’s sudden ability to sing—is not the result of intellect or training, but is a “natural” gift. And as with the other essentialized “black” traits that figure in *Finian’s* plot, Henry’s gift serves as a vehicle for white needs. In this case, a black boy’s mouth is literally made to speak the words of a white woman.

The other important African American character is Howard. In the play he appears in only one scene, though by all accounts it was a show-stopper. Howard, introduced in the stage directions at the beginning of Act I, Scene 3 as “a young, intelligent-looking Negro,” has just arrived at the decaying plantation home of Senator Rawkins to apply for the position of butler. He explains to the senator’s aide, Buzz Collins, that he is working his way through school:

BUZZ

. . . Do you want a job here as butler or don’t you?

HOWARD

Yes, sir, I do. I’ve got another year to go at Tuskegee.

BUZZ

Tuskegee? What’s that?

HOWARD

A college.

BUZZ

Oh-oh. Don't mention the word college to Mr. Rawkins. It upsets him.⁵⁹

Howard is the very model of the New Negro: intelligent, educated, and dignified (though he is a student at Tuskegee, his name is likely a reference to Howard University, another famous black school). Buzz asks Howard to "audition" for the job by asking him to serve a mint julep. Howard complies, but Buzz is dissatisfied with his performance: "Mm-mm. Rawkins won't like it. That's no way to serve a mint julep. It's too *fast*. Get some *shuffle* into it. You've seen movies like *Gone With the Wind*, haven't you?"⁶⁰ Buzz proceeds to show Howard the "proper" way to serve a julep, complete with Stepin Fetchit gait and Uncle Tom accent: "Youah julep, suh, Mr. Rawkins, suh, all frosted and minty—yawk, yawk!" In spite of this helpful demonstration, Howard still fails to act "black" enough to suit Buzz (as the stage directions put it, "[Howard] has evidently been walking upright too long to change his habits").⁶¹

The punchline comes at the end of the scene when a near-apoplectic Rawkins (who has just been informed that gold has been detected beneath the Rainbow Valley land he covets but has yet to claim), gasping for breath, calls for a bromo-seltzer. *Now* Howard gets the hang of shuffling, taking his sweet time to deliver the senator's medication:

RAWKINS

Hurry it up, man, for God's sake, please!

HOWARD

Comin', suh, Massa Rawkins, suh. Ah hopes you enjoys it.

The scene ends with Rawkins "on his knees . . . pleading and crawling toward Howard," who stubbornly enacts "the picture of a man on a treadmill, making forward steps, but never advancing."⁶²

In its direct refutation of negative stereotypes, and its overt critique of "Gone With the Wind"-style representations of African Americans, this scene is arguably *Finian's* satirical highpoint. In 1947, *The Saturday Review* praised it for revealing how African Americans are forced to "bow to white prejudice" by performing minstrelsy's version of blackness.⁶³ Howard turns the demeaning stereotype into an instrument of comeuppance for the white bigot, in what could justly be described as an act of "signifying." And yet, for all the scene's progressive "agit-," Howard is only a "prop." His character exists *only* as a means of introducing Rawkins. He serves to reveal the bigot's character, and then disappears from the play before having a chance to display any character of his own.

In the film, Howard's role is much larger. He is promoted from a junior to a graduate student (when he explains that he is "working on my Master's," a

perplexed Buzz asks, “Working on your master’s what?”), a scientist (whose botanical research focuses on an effort to cross-pollinate tobacco with mint, in order to grow pre-mentholated tobacco), and Woody’s best friend. When the movie’s Howard applies for the butler’s job, it is ostensibly to earn money for lab equipment, but the scene itself is basically unchanged. Many of the reviews which otherwise disparaged *Finian’s* naivité and dated racial critique nonetheless singled out the julep scene for praise. *Newsweek* called it “the best moment in the film,” and *Saturday Review* agreed that it was “the comedic highlight.”⁶⁴ Yet the scene’s humor is double-edged. Though Howard’s calculated cooptation of “movie Negro” behavior and Rawkins’ comeuppance may be designed to please liberal sensibilities, the scene nonetheless entails the reenactment of a demeaning stereotype. Whatever the satirical intent, some of the humor undoubtedly arises from Howard doing the Stepin Fetchit bit so *well*. The routine’s success arguably depends upon a degree of nostalgic *fondness* for such antics persisting in spite of—or alongside—its overt sarcasm.

Still, though the movie Howard’s status remains below that of the white leads, he is much more than the one-scene “prop” of the Broadway version. Al Freeman Jr.’s performance also adds a defiant edge to the nice-guy role, giving Howard a sense of agency at which the written dialogue only hints. He is also shown to exercise a certain degree of leadership within the community, in a manner meant to evoke the contemporary Civil Rights movement. With no lyrical changes, he turns the opening number, “This Time of the Year” (in which the sharecroppers defy Rawkins’s first attempt to foreclose on their land) into a sit-down strike with a gesture and the inaudible but clearly mouthed command to his fellow Rainbow Valley communards to “sit down.” With this subtle addition, the film manages to convey Howard’s status in the community and his brave defiance in the face of injustice.⁶⁵

Even so, it is emblematic of Howard’s continuing second-class status that the movie update fails to give him a last name! (All the white characters with more than a few lines of dialogue are granted surnames.) The 1968 Howard is still not quite a full-fledged character. He exists mainly as a sidekick for Woody, and as a living testament to the hero’s racial enlightenment: we know Woody’s a good guy, because he has a black friend. Aside from his brief forays into activism and butling, Howard apparently has no life outside of his lab, and Woody’s effusive praise of his intelligence (Howard is the “best research botanist in the country,” he tells Sharon, a second “Luther Burbank”) reeks of liberal condescension. The film’s insistence on Howard’s superior intelligence comes across as a self-conscious “counter-stereotype,” designed to offset traditional racist assumptions about the intellectual capacity of African Americans.

Unlike Woody—ostensibly his “partner”—Howard is not allowed a love interest, nor the faintest hint of sexuality. By the end of the story, even the semi-human Og has found love, with Woody’s sister Susan. Apparently, in the supposed racial utopia of Rainbow Valley, even a leprechaun has a better chance

for romance than an African American. In the final analysis, though Howard may not have to step 'n' fetch anything, he still lives to serve—albeit in the laboratory rather than the plantation house.

Back From Black

The denouement of *Finian's Rainbow* begins when Woody and Sharon's wedding is interrupted by Buzz and the Sheriff, who have come to arrest Sharon on charges of witchcraft and "Demotin' a member of the white race . . . to a member of the Negro race."⁶⁶ When they discover that Rawkins is standing right in front of them—as a black member of the Passion Pilgrims Quartet—they command Sharon to restore the senator to his original color. Rawkins, whose Og-aided spiritual conversion has improved not only his singing voice but also his integrity, protests: "I ain't turnin' white or any other color to keep a pack of crooks like you in office!"⁶⁷ But Buzz informs him that "as a Negro you've got no rights in this state. . . . Not even the right to stay black."⁶⁸ Finian, seeing that his daughter is in real trouble, promises the authorities that Rawkins will be white again by dawn, and runs off to dig up the magical crock of gold to wish things right again.

But Finian is unable to find the crock, which has been stolen and hidden away somewhere by Woody's childlike mute sister, Susan (whose motive is not greed, but that the crock is a bright shiny object). At the eleventh hour, with the sun coming up and Sharon's life hanging in the balance, Og locates the crock accidentally, when his desperate wish that Susan could *tell* him where she has hidden the damn thing restores her voice (the wish came true! He must have been standing right over it!). Now, however, Og faces a dilemma: it's three wishes to a crock, and two have been used. He can use the last wish to restore his fast-fading leprechaun immortality, or save Sharon by returning the senator to his former color. In the best musical comedy tradition, love is the deciding factor: a timely kiss from Susan convinces Og that being human might not be so bad after all. "Rawkins, you blackguard," he exclaims, "I wish you white!"⁶⁹

Og's transformation into full humanity is now complete. So, as it turns out, is Rawkins's; the senator's blackness has been not a destination, but a journey. At the end of this odyssey, he has become a better (white) man. The mobility he enacts is not trans-ethnic, from immigrant to "American," like the journey of assimilation undertaken by the Jackie Rabinovitz/Jack Robin in *The Jazz Singer* (or by Susan, in marrying Woody), but moral, political, and ideological. Rawkins was an American to begin with, but only in the technical sense: though native-born, his heart does not hold the true American devotion to equality. This is a job for alchemy; the senator is transformed by his experience from dross to gold, from un-American to True American, not in the melting pot of assimilation, but within the crucible of a forced—and particularly intimate—integration.

What links Rawkins' journey to that traced by Rogin for *The Jazz Singer* is the blackface vehicle that makes it possible. Blackness, though more "positively" essentialized in *Finian* than in the blackface masquerades Rogin explores, still serves the redemptive and assimilationist needs of a *white* character. And in following this Passion Pilgrim's progress, laughing at his ignorance and then cheering his conversion (and even in tapping their toes to Lane's appropriated "black" music), the white audience might also feel redeemed—and excused. The lessons of *Finian* seem contradictory, though within a certain, narrowly constructed white-liberal perspective they can be complementary: color doesn't matter, but black people really are "different"—albeit in a "good" way.

"Hopeless, but not Serious"—Gravitas *Rainbow*

Its last wish spent, the crock of gold turns to dross, and Finian's dreams of wealth are shattered. But this allows the old man to fulfill his prescribed role in the melting pot saga. As the immigrant father of a newly assimilated daughter, he must disappear, just as *The Jazz Singer's* Old World patriarch has to die by the end of that film. Finian doesn't die, of course (this *is* a musical comedy), but merely sets off in search of another rainbow. He bids farewell with the words, "I'll see you all some day in Glocca Morra"—a place which Sharon now reveals to Woody exists "only in Father's head."⁷⁰ It is hard to imagine a more definitive break with the "old country" than denying it existed in the first place. Not even *The Jazz Singer's* Jackie Rabinowitz was able to so thoroughly efface his immigrant origins.

In the end, Harburg said, "That's all man has left: the rainbow."⁷¹ The rainbow was one of the lyricist's favorite symbols; it is beautiful, ethereal, and always out of reach, a symbol of hope and of existential longing. Yet there is no bleakness in this coda: "Things are hopeless," as Finian says near the end, "but they're not serious!"⁷² Harburg was conscious of painting a utopian picture with *Finian's* fantasy world, but he also wished to attest to the tangibility, and *reachability*, of another rainbow: the spectrum of American and human diversity.

It is easy to criticize *Finian's*—and Harburg's—blind spots, but it is hard not to admire its intentions. I retain a fondness for this play, which is not entirely due to nostalgia for the seventh grade. I doubt whether any of my fellow sharecroppers who were picked to wear the greasepaint underwent Rawkins-like epiphanies, but most of us took the play's message to heart. Our teachers saw to that—like Harburg, they had only the best of intentions, for which they deserve credit. But equality cannot be built on a foundation of essentialized racial differences, nor can it be simply bequeathed by the sympathetic members of a privileged caste onto those they have magnanimously decided no longer deserve their oppression. And this, in the end, is *Finian's* failing: the racial utopia at the end of Harburg's rainbow is tarnished by condescension, and the ambiguities of representing race.

Notes

1. References to *Finian's Rainbow* cite either the original musical play, book by E(dgar) Y(ipsel) Harburg and Fred Saidy, lyrics by Harburg, music by Burton Lane, 1947; or the motion picture, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, 1968, as indicated in the text. Quoted dialogue is taken from Harburg and Saidy's published script *Finian's Rainbow* (New York: Random House, 1947). For an overview of Broadway musicals, with an emphasis on shows that incorporate an element of conscious social commentary, see John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003).

2. In 2000, South Dakota had 4,685 African Americans out of a total population of 754,844. In 1970 the figures were 1,627 African Americans out of a total of 665,507. U. S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts table data for 2000: DP-1. Profile of General Demographic Characteristics. Available from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsTable?_lang=en&_vt_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_DP1&_geo_id=04000US46. 1970 data available from: <http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0056/tab56.xls>.

3. Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xv.

4. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 18.

5. See John Mason Brown, "A Leprechaun to the Rescue," *Saturday Review*, 15 February, 1948, 29; "A Little Irish Magic," *Newsweek*, 20 January 1947, 84; Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway," *Phylon* 8:2 (1947), 149, Quoted in Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 268; Brooks Atkinson, "The New Play," *The New York Times*, 11 January 1947, 23.

6. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the American Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 102.

7. *Ibid.*, 112. Jeffrey Melnick complicates Rogin's picture of Jewish/African-American relations through an examination of the phenomenon of the "Jewish white Negroism" of Jewish hipsters such as George Gershwin, Artie Shaw, and Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, for whom identification with Black culture was not so much an assimilationist mask as a connection based on a shared experience of "otherness." Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 134-140. Andrea Most argues that in *The Jazz Singer* blackface functions not so much to "Americanize" Jackie Rabinovitz/Jack Robin, but to teach him a lesson about the immutability of "racial" identity. Even under burnt cork, he feels the irresistible gravitational pull of tradition. Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 32-39. Michael Alexander argues that Rogin exaggerates the desire of American Jews—including blackface performers—to join the "melting pot" and leave their Jewish identity behind. Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 172.

8. For an examination of nineteenth-century "racial romanticism," see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

9. *Brigadoon*, directed by Vincente Minelli, MGM, 1954.

10. "Harburg, E(dgar) Y(ipsel)," *1980 Current Biography*, 142.

11. Meyerson, and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 271.

12. When Burton Lane tried to sell Paramount head Y. Frank Freeman on filming *Finian*, Freeman rejected the idea on the grounds that Harburg was a "communist" [sic]. In 1955 an animated version set to feature the voices of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Frank Sinatra fell through when director John Hubley's name was added to the blacklist. Harburg's services as a lyricist were apparently considered for *Hans Christian Andersen* and the Judy Garland version of *A Star is Born*, but both offers, according to Harburg, were withdrawn due to political pressure on Hollywood. Harburg kept busy, with two stage musicals (*Flahooley* and *Jamaica*), but he didn't work in film again until 1962, when he contributed lyrics to the animated feature *Gay Purr-ee*. See Myerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, Chapter 9: "Flahooley, Jamaica and the Blacklist."

13. Francis Ford Coppola, *Finian's Rainbow*, Warner Brothers, 1968, DVD.

14. Quoted in Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 223.

15. Histories of the Civil Rights movement include Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking, 1987), and Taylor Branch's trilogy, *America in the King Years: Parting the Waters: 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); *Pillar of Fire: 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); and *At Canaan's Edge: 1965-68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

16. John Mason Brown, "A Leprechaun to the Rescue," *Saturday Review*, 15 February 1948, 29.

17. For a detailed account of earlier, organized efforts to improve Hollywood's depictions of African Americans, see Bruce M. Tyler, *From Harlem to Hollywood: The Struggle for Racial and Cultural Democracy, 1920-1943* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992).

18. *Pinky*, directed by Elia Kazan, 20th Century Fox, 1949. *Home of the Brave*, directed by Mark Robson, Republic, 1949. *Showboat*, music by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II and P. G. Wodehouse, book by Hammerstein, based on the novel by Edna Ferber, 1927.

19. Quoted in Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 268.

20. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967).

21. Arthur Knight, "The Times They Are A-Changing," *Saturday Review*, 5 October 1968, 47.

22. "Instant Old Age," *Time*, 25 October 1968, 100.

23. Joseph Morgenstern, "Paradise Lost," *Newsweek*, 21 October 1968, 100.

24. Phillip T. Hartung, "The Backward Look," *Commonweal*, 1 November 1968, 160.

25. John Lardner, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker*, 18 January 1969, 48.

26. Theodore Bilbo (1877-1947) served two terms as Governor of Mississippi, before representing the state in the U. S. Senate from 1935 to 1947. John Rankin (1882-1960) represented Mississippi in the House of Representatives from 1921 to 1953. Both Bilbo and Rankin were notoriously outspoken white supremacists.

27. Quoted in Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 222.

28. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, I:i 17.

29. Brown, "A Leprechaun," 28.

30. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, I:iii 40.

31. *Ibid.*, I:i 22. This is one of several satirical comments that appear only in the stage directions. *Finian's* script contains a whole layer of discourse invisible to the playgoer.

32. *Ibid.*, I:i 26.

33. *Ibid.*, I:v 83.

34. "A Little Irish Magic," *Newsweek*, 20 January 1947, 84.

35. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, II:ii 110.

36. *Ibid.*, II:ii 111.

37. Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 225.

38. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, II:ii 113.

39. *Ibid.*, II:ii 113-114. In the film the final lines of this incantation are punctuated by Og dunking Rawkins face in the churning waters of a pond—a baptism, of sorts.

40. See Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems* 41 (Feb. 1994), 152-176.

41. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, II:ii 114. The film underscores the element of fate by having the Passion Pilgrims stop to fix a flat tire at the precise time and place where Rawkins steps out of the woods.

42. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith, Epoch Producing Company, 1915. Griffith's film played on white fears of "miscegenation." Willie Horton was a convicted murderer, who, while on a weekend pass from the Massachusetts penitentiary, committed assault, rape, and armed robbery. Horton was African-American. Michael Dukakis, then governor of Massachusetts, was the 1988 Democratic nominee for president. The release of Horton and more to the point, his photo, were featured in a television ad, implying that the furlough program typified Dukakis's approach to crime. Though the ad was paid by an organization called the "National Security PAC," the campaign of George H. W. Bush, the Republican nominee, was suspected of involvement, or at least tacit approval, of what critics considered an example of race-baiting. National Security PAC, "Willie Horton," produced by Larry McCarthy, 1988. The ad is available on *The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials, 1952-2004*, a website maintained by the American Museum of the Moving Image. http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?nav_subaction=overview&campaign_id=174.

43. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, II:ii 115.

44. *Ibid.*, II:ii 117.

45. *Ibid.*, II:ii 118. "The Begat" resembles nothing so much as a "Gospel" version of Cole Porter's "Let's Do It." ("Birds do it, bees do it. . .")

46. *Ibid.*, II:i 96.

47. *Ibid.*, II:i 97-98.

48. *Ibid.*, II:i 98.

49. Quoted in Lott, *Love and Theft*, 16-17.

50. John Tasker Howard, quoted in Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 98, emphasis added.

51. Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 99. For an overview of Jewish contributions to American popular music, and their African-American subtext, see Kenneth Aaron Kanter, *The Jews on*

Tin Pan Alley: The Jewish Contribution to American Popular Music, 1830-1940 (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1982).

52. *The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming, MGM, 1939. Harold Arlen (1905-1986) was one of the most successful tunesmiths of his era. In addition to his music for *The Wizard of Oz*, he also collaborated with Harburg on such songs as "Lydia the Tattooed Lady" and "It's Only a Paper Moon" (with co-lyricist Billy Rose), and with other lyricists on such songs as "Stormy Weather," "Blues in the Night," and "Down With Love."

53. Quoted in Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 219.

54. *Ibid.*, 226, 214.

55. In an eerie echo of Isaac Goldberg and the other 1920s critics quoted by Rogin, Harburg further proclaimed that "Gershwin and Arlen created a new sound in American theater music by combining black and Jewish elements" (Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 176). The tangled pedigree of American music is more complex than a simple one-way dynamic of black invention and white appropriation. As Bean, et al. point out, the "black" music of minstrelsy was "actually a blend of Irish folksongs accented by African-influenced Southern plantations culture." Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xiii.

56. Myerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 176.

57. Myerson and Harburg write that "Arlen's early life could have served with only slight alteration as a model for the story of *The Jazz Singer*." Like Jackie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin in the Jolson film, Arlen's father was a cantor. "More remarkably, by Arlen's own account, his father's chanting anticipated the new sounds of jazz. Arlen recalled playing some of the earliest Louis Armstrong recordings and marveling how Armstrong's riffs could so closely resemble Cantor Arluck's interpolations" (*Who Put the Rainbow*, 65-66). Even Ethel Waters once referred to Arlen as "the Negro-est white man" she had ever known (*Ibid.*, 176).

58. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, I:i 7.

59. *Ibid.*, I:iii 45.

60. *Ibid.*, I:iii 44.

61. *Ibid.*, I:iii 45.

62. *Ibid.*, I:iii 52.

63. Brown, "A Leprechaun," 30.

64. Morgenstern, "Paradise Lost," 100.

65. Howard attempts to repeat this action when the authorities, looking for the culprit in Rawkins' "demotion" to the black race, arrive to break up Woody and Sharon's wedding. This time, however, he is carried off by deputies as soon as he sits. As the crowd is dispersed, there is a brief shot of cops manhandling the Gospels and even hitting one of them with a nightstick. This visually echoes the battles between cops and protesters that were a common feature of television news footage in 1968. In another startling visual during "This Time of the Year," the rebellious sharecroppers swarm all over the sheriff's car. Harburg's biographers report that he was politically sympathetic towards the 1960s youth culture (though he disliked the music) and the anti-war movement. However, that so many of the film *Finian's* contemporary touches are visual suggests the possibility that they were the contribution of the young director, Francis Ford Coppola. The many close-ups of flowers, which struck some reviewers as padding (the film had "more bouquets than a mafia funeral," groused *Time*) may have been another attempt to tie *Finian's* civil rights message to 1968 "flower power" protest culture. When a deputy aims his rifle at Sharon during the interrupted-wedding scene, she parries the thrust with her bridal bouquet, an image that calls to mind the famous 1960s photograph of a "flower child" placing a daisy into the barrel of a National Guardsman's gun. See Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, Chapter 10: "The Sixties and the Sunset Years," and "Instant Old Age," *Time*, 25 October 1968, 100.

66. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, II:iii 121.

67. *Ibid.*, II:iii 125.

68. *Ibid.*, II:iii 126.

69. *Ibid.*, II:iv 136.

70. *Ibid.*, II:iii 142-143.

71. Quoted in Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow*, 223.

72. Harburg and Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, II:iii 141.