

African Americans in "The World of Tomorrow": 1939

By David J. Cope

In retrospect, 1939 appears to be a most unlikely year for any city to create a major world's fair. The Great Depression still gripped much of the United States, and the advent of another war threatened in Europe. Yet, New York City pursued its dream of holding the largest international exhibition up to that time. Initially conceived as a method for pumping an estimated one billion tourist dollars into the local economy, the Board of Directors eventually took on a broader perspective: the fair would present, largely through corporate sponsorship, a somewhat utopian view of the future made possible by the advancements and initiatives of the present. The fair's slogan, "Building the World of Tomorrow," explained what the board had in mind.

In perhaps its most fortunate decision, the Board of Directors selected Grover Whalen as the fair's president. Well-established as New York City's unofficial greeter, Whalen's vast connections in the business and political worlds proved invaluable. Whalen understood how to promote a product; and, what a product he had.

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Whalen requested that President Franklin D. Roosevelt invite the nations of the world to participate, and an amazing record number of 60 countries and international organizations responded positively. Likewise, a remarkable 33 states accepted New York Governor Herbert E. Lehman's invitation. With all this bright promise, however, the fair's futuristic vision manifested a bleak replay of the past for most African Americans. The age-old problems of securing meaningful representation in managerial positions and acquiring non-servile jobs cropped up again.

Prospects appeared promising in the early planning stages. On January 24, 1937, Whalen attended the annual meeting of the New York Urban League with the "promise that Negroes would not be discriminated against in any way by the management." This proclamation elicited loud cheers from the delegates. He continued, "Whenever we, who are running the fair, find that there are outstanding contributions made by your race, I assure you that they will be recognized". I know that you people do not care to be set apart from the rest of the world, and I again promise you that the managers of the fair will give you your just representation." Regrettably, Whalen's exciting assurances never achieved reality for the vast majority of African Americans in the New York City region.

However, within the nine months between December 1937 and August 1938, expectations ran high in the hopes that Whalen's assurances of non-discrimination and racial recognition would be carried through. On December 8, he announced that the fair's board of design had selected Augusta Savage to sculpt a group to be placed in the court of the Community Arts Building (eventually known as American Art Today). Reiterating the fair's policy of equal participation, he concluded his comments with, "It seemed important to recognize the really worthwhile and distinctive gifts to our American culture of the different races that have constituted our population.... One obvious way is the choice of subjects for the decorative sculpture ... and the selection of artists to execute them.

Four months later, on April 4, the board of design announced their appointment of another African American, Walter L. Roberts, a 24-year-old honor graduate of Carnegie Institute of Technology, who received the position of draftsman. The *New York Times* heralded this as the "second Negro artist to be engaged for important professional work by the fair corporation."

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While the press exulted in these three well-placed appointments, others protested almost immediately over the fair's discriminatory hiring practices. Mrs. M. S. Fickert, assistant director of promotion, and Miss Katherine B. Gray, an office manager, testified before a citywide investigation committee on January 20, 1939, that African Americans held a variety of capacities and adamantly denied any discrimination against an unnamed and un-hired, qualified stenographic candidate. Two months later, with the fair's hiring policy still very much in question, the NAACP issued this statement: "In an exposition which purports to indicate the trend toward the world of tomorrow, this association believes that among the first considerations should have been a recognition of the unfairness of discrimination between peoples and the justice of opportunity for all on the basis of merit."

In April, the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment called for a mass demonstration on the fair's opening day at the end of the month. Forke Thurnborg, a member of the Swedish commission of the Fair and executive secretary of the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League, congratulated the organization on its courage in "fighting for their rights in a democracy." While the protest occurred, it failed to reach the estimated 10,000 people called for by the committee.

Louise Johnson, presiding at the Harlem Community Cultural Conference on May 6, painted the bleakest picture of the entire on-going labor crisis. She stated, "The Fair portrays the social and economic accomplishments of man up to the present and attempts to look into the future as well. In view of the blind attitude on the part of the World's Fair, the future seems to hold the gloomiest prospects. The Negro is only given a menial part in the great Fair which is supposed to typify the truly democratic world of tomorrow."

Whalen, under increasing pressure, replied, "You will find capable, efficient, and highly intelligent Negroes in most every department of the World's Fair." In response to further inquiries, he stated that, "The fair is organized and built without regard to race, color, or creed," and that New York City residents made up 90 percent of the 7,000 employees. To further appease his detractors, Whalen announced within weeks that "Space [actually 500 square feet] was allotted in the Science and Education Building to the National Negro Achievement Commission" for exhibits promoting the progress of African Americans.

While the fair's management never satisfactorily resolved the discriminatory labor issue, it now faced two unforeseen crises: (1) the financial failure of the fair's Hall of Music and (2) Germany's September 1st invasion of Poland. The solution to both problems lay, at least in part, with the intervention of prominent African Americans.

Less than a month after the Hall of Music's premier performance, Whalen announced that it would close following the Schubert Choir of Brantford, Ontario's concert. The auditorium itself drew rave reviews. With a seating capacity of 2,375, a 60-foot wide and 56-foot deep stage equipped to handle 45 scene changes, and an orchestra pit that accommodated 100 musicians, *Newsweek* noted that "it was considered the last word in comfort and acoustics." Unfortunately, the Hall sat in direct proximity to Billy Rose's popular Aquacade, and Depression-era audiences could ill afford the additional \$2.50 ticket price for the Hall's performances. Olin Downes, the fair's director of music, resigned, and the fair cancelled \$51,000.00 in future performance contracts. The \$350,000.00 Hall briefly stood vacant until Whalen announced producer Michael Todd's intention to move his Broadway hit "The Hot Mikado" to the fair.

In the spring of 1939, Broadway witnessed two updated versions of Gilbert and Sullivan's classic, the second of these being "The Swing Mikado." "The Hot Mikado" drew universal rave reviews and capacity audiences. In his annual awards column, critic George Jean Nathan presented it as the "best all-around musical show," named Nat Karson "the season's best costumer," and hailed two performers, Rosa Brown as "best blues singer" and, to no one's surprise, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson as "best hooper." In fact, Robinson **was** the show. *Theatre Arts Monthly* put it simply, "The king of the evening is of course Bill Robinson.... He is allowed as many reprises of the chorus as he and the audience want--for he does not sing, or even swing, with his voice but with his feet. Never has shoe leather beaten out such a variety of intricate patterns."

Todd announced that he set the ticket price range from 40 cents to \$1.65 (they eventually ran from 40 cents for general admission to 75 cents and 99 cents for reserved seats) and added 14 performers to the cast to fulfill the terms of the fair contract. Broadway director Hassard Short restaged the show down to an hour's performance, with the scenery built on platforms to facilitate the many rapid changes. Also, Robinson acquired two more topical songs.

Todd now began a month-long disagreement with The Council of Actors Equity Association. On June 1, the council announced that "The Hot Mikado" would run under the general World's Fair Equity conditions: a six-day, 44-hour week, with time and a half for overtime, and a \$50.00 minimum wage for the principal players and a \$45.00 wage for chorus members. Twelve days later, Todd appealed for a month-long trial period of a seven-day week stating, "The Fair itself is operated on a seven-day week basis, and union rulings should be made to conform with the Fair's routine." The Council rejected the idea. On the 16th, a majority of the cast sent a petition requesting a seven-day week and a pay scale of \$40.00 for the principals and \$35.00 for the chorus. A day later, the council met at a special Saturday meeting and relented to the seven-day week.

On June 22, "The Hot Mikado" opened at the Hall of Music. The *New York Times* raved, "What Mr. Rose has done for the liquid entertainment, Michael Todd is doing for the festivities on dry land.... 'The Hot Mikado' was a good show on Broadway, it is better in the concentrated version." Once again, Bill Robinson walked away with ebullient reviews, "As for Bill Robinson, he is one of the great men of the patchwork community.... Bill's eyes are as magnetic as his feet, and his pants (Nat Karson's costume design--gold trousers, gold shoes, a feathered gold derby, and a broad-shouldered, tight-fitting white jacket) are a dream of better times."

Business boomed. On July 4, Todd announced a new schedule of three daily performances at 5:00, 8:30, and 10:30. Nine days later, Todd once again approached Actors Equity for economic relief, claiming that he faced an \$8,900 deficit and, later in the month, added that the 222-person payroll caused him "not [have] made a nickel back" on his investment. Playing power politics, Robinson and more than 50 percent of the cast joined Equity's rival union, The American Federation of Actors. On July 25, Equity acquiesced a second time. Todd then added a 2:30 show on Sundays. On August 1, at the 5:00 show, "The Hot Mikado" gave its 200th performance (including the Broadway run).

However, Bill Robinson's contribution to the success of the '39 fair didn't just entail his work on the stage. Throughout the early summer, the overall attendance figures remained far below Whalen's expectations. In an attempt to improve the image of the fair not as a "high brow" but as an entertaining experience, the fair's promoters assemble the exhibition's stars for a one-shot performance in the Court of Peace. Robinson headlined the program. To the delight of the assembled thousands, Robinson sang a parody on the fair that recalled the site's previous use as a garbage dump and Whalen's widespread use of flowers to give the grounds a respectable appearance.

On August 28, the fair acknowledged its debt to Robinson by celebrating "Bojangles Day." In his gold derby, Robinson toured the fairgrounds and had his feet and hands cast in wet cement. The Fair employees presented him with a scroll of appreciation for his efforts in the ticket-selling campaign. To top off the day, Robinson returned to the amusement area and raced backwards against four college athletes normally employed by the fair as chair-pushers. An accomplished athlete at racing backwards, Robinson won the 100-meter race.

Bill Robinson continued his goodwill work for the fair in September. To entice evening attendance, fair officials converted the Hall of Special Events into the Mardi Gras and offered free nightly dancing to two leading bands. To draw attention to the opening, Robinson, in a green suit and an African crown of feathers and horns, tap danced in front of the New York City Hall. Reporters discovered, however, that his backup group, supposedly made up of "Victoria Falls natives," actually came from Algeria.

While trying to make the 1939 version of the fair profitable, the directors faced a more pressing problem in September. Hitler's invasion of Poland cast doubt on the eventuality of the planned second year. Following extensive negotiations with all major exhibitors, the fair did reopen in 1940 but in a dramatically different version. The "World of Tomorrow" theme was replaced with "For Peace and Freedom." While many foreign nations cut back on their pavilion's exhibits or adjusted them to the reality of war, Russia withdrew totally, and its massive structure disappeared over the winter. In its place, the fair built "The American Common" as a showcase for the nation's various ethnic groups. While the United States, in the midst of a presidential election, remained neutral and isolationist, the fair's promoters reacted to the upsurge in patriotism by presenting weeklong tributes to America's "Melting Pot."

The fair planned to recognize African Americans in "Negro Week," July 23-28. This institutionalized nationalism brought a very divided response from the African-American community. Many saw it as a test of patriotism, while some referred to it as a sham and a sellout. However, as other ethnic groups soon discovered, the national exposure drew the distant communities together in a very troubled time. The musical program highlighted numerous African-American composers and entertainers. The opening concert featured the noted composer and arranger J. Rosamund Johnson and singer Juanita Hall. The following evening, Todd Duncan and Ann Brown presented excerpts from George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." The New York Civic Orchestra performed a program of William Grant Still's extended compositions on Thursday. Friday's "Songs of a Generation" showcased Maxine Sullivan, The Savoy Lindy Hoppers, the Three Prophets, and The Calypso Kid's Troubadours performing works by Eubie Blake, Cecil Mack, and W. C. Handy. The concluding program featured Edward Matthews and the Juanita Hall Choir performing "Ballad For Americans."

For many Americans, the New York World's Fair displayed an exciting future of streamlined buildings, transcontinental highways, and endless commercial products (television, nylon, etc) meant for a more comfortable lifestyle. However, for most African Americans, the fair provided limited prospects of success. Once again relegating blacks to nominal job opportunities and providing no major exhibition space for African-American accomplishments, the fair seemed to present a future much like the present and unbelievably not much different from the past. Still, the

emergence of major African-American entertainers as a means of establishing economic, cultural, and patriotic stability gave hope to thousands of young, prospective artists.

Resources

For lesson plans using this essay, follow the links, below:

- **"Why The Colored American Is Not In The World's Columbian Exposition"**
- **"Stereotypes At the World Fairs"**
- **Exhibiting at a World's Fair Lesson Plan**

For other resources, see the following:

- "Achievements of Negro to Be Seen at Fair." *New York Times*. June 4, 1939.
- "Allow Chorus Pay Cuts." *New York Times*. July 26, 1939.
- "Baldwin is Summoned." *New York Times*. January 2, 1939.
- "Billy Rose's Mermaids Rout Music Culture at N.Y. Fair." *Newsweek*. June 5, 1939.
- "Bojangles Robinson and 'The Hot Mikado' Take a Trip to the World's Fair." *New York Times*. June 23, 1939.
- "Box Office Business Better." *New York Times*. June 19, 1939.
- "Business Has Been Good." *New York Times*. July 4, 1939.
- "Celebrates 'Bojangles Day.'" *New York Times*. August 29, 1939.
- "Equity to Weigh 'Hot Mikado' Petition." *New York Times*. June 17, 1939.
- "Fair Parade Approved." *New York Times*. April 5, 1939.
- "Fair's 'Hot Mikado' Likely to End Soon." *New York Times*. July 25, 1939.
- "Harlem Conference Sees Discrimination." *New York Times*. May 7, 1939.
- "The Hot Mikado." *Theatre Arts Monthly*. May, 1939.
- "'Hot Mikado' 4 Times Sunday." *New York Times*. July 29, 1939.
- "'Hot Mikado' Terms for Fair Rejected." *New York Times*. June 14, 1939.
- "'Hot Mikado' to Move to the World's Fair." *New York Times*. May 30, 1939.
- "Japan's good - Will Broadcast to Fair." *New York Times*. April 3, 1939.
- "Jitterbugs Invade Peace of City Hall." *New York Times*. September 23, 1939.
- "Music for Negro Week." *New York Times*. July 21, 1940.
- Nathan, George Jean. "The Season's Awards." *Newsweek*. May 15, 1939.
- "Negro Women See Fair." *New York Times*. August 1, 1939.
- "Negroes Protest to Fair." *New York Times*. March 16, 1939.
- "Poor Business and Pay Demands..." *New York Times*. July 14, 1939
- "6-Day Week at Fair for 'Hot Mikado.'" *New York Times*. June 2, 1939.
- "Today at the World's Fair." *New York Times*. July 23, 1940.
- "200th Show for 'Hot Mikado.'" *New York Times*. August 1, 1939.
- "Whalen Replies to Council Queries." *New York Times*. May 17, 1939.
- Wood, Dr. Andrew. "African Americans and the Prewar Fairs."
<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/149/149syllabus12rydell.html>
- "World's Fair Bans Bias Against Negro." *New York Times*. January 25, 1937.

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