By Alexander Taylor

Based on the 1926 Edna Ferber novel of the same name, *Show Boat* (1937) is an American musical composed by Jerome Kern (1885-1945) with book and lyrics written by Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960). It is regarded as a pioneering development in musical theater; deviating from the contemporary trend of loosely connecting collections of popular songs with an inconsequential plot, Kern’s music in *Show Boat* artfully illustrates a complex story, its characters, and their relationships. The musical relates the successes and hardships of a group of characters who live, work, and perform aboard the *Cotton Blossom*, a showboat, in 1887.

Interpreting *Show Boat* as a theatrical performance about theatrical performance leads to some interesting self-commentary. After the overture, the action begins with the African-American chorus of stevedores and “gals” singing to the tune of “Ol’ Man River.” In this fast-tempo working song the laborers lament that they “work while the white folks play.” The verb “play” here has a dual meaning: while the white characters in *Show Boat* are certainly exempt from physical labor, most of them are also actors who play roles in the theatrical productions staged by the *Cotton Blossom*. In a definitive filmed performance (*PBS Great Performances*, 1989), the characters’ displays of acting on the showboat stage is humorously overdone, and the glamor inherent in 1920s show business is portrayed as similarly pretentious. As a groundbreaking musical for its artistic integration of plot and music, it is not surprising to discover undertones of commentary in *Show Boat* that reflect the challenge of creating a work with both entertainment value and meaningful depth in such an environment. References are also made to the issue of segregation and the difficulty of attracting diverse audiences, both of which are exemplified in “Queenie’s Ballyhoo.” Perpetuated by a lack of cultural understanding and acceptance, these issues were undoubtedly faced by many theaters and opera houses throughout the nation in the early twentieth century.

Thematic material concerning whimsical theatrics and racial tensions is further illustrated by the racial separation of the cast and its portrayal in music and relationships. As the frequent underscoring of the melody in “Make Believe” suggests, many of the relationships in the musical are haunted by unrealistic idealism. The relationship of Magnolia and Gaylord proves particularly naïve; founded in immaturity during the fanciful song “Make Believe,” the relationship cannot stand the weight of Gaylord’s gambling addiction. This collapse is paralleled in the music, as many second-act songs, including the reprisals of “Make Believe” and “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” illustrate a sharp reversal of the playfully optimistic mood with which they were first performed. These and similar dramatic events (in essence, the action of the plot) generally occur only to the white characters; African-American characters, oppositely, seem to act as a kind of indifferent Greek chorus that delivers commentary separately from the drama of the musical. In both “I Still Suit Me” and their section of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” Queenie and Joe cathartically sing about their relationship; by airing grievances and being honest about their love, they portray a partnership that is realistic, heartwarming, and constant throughout the entire forty years of the plot. Their relationship serves as a foil to highlight the nonviable nature of the dramatic idealism inherent in the white characters’ lives. The beautifully powerful reiterations of “Ol’ Man River”
similarly articulate constancy in that time “jus’ keeps rollin’ along.” These reminders help to fit the events of the musical into a broader perspective that includes an awareness of persistent, pervasive suffering due to societal racism; Joe and his song help *Show Boat* transcend theatrical traditions of both content and performance practice.