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"BEFORE THE PARADE PASSES BY"

All-Black and All-Asian *Hello, Dolly!* as Celebration of Difference

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In 1967, faced with waning audiences at his blockbuster hit show *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), the infamously mercenary impresario David Merrick hired an all-Black cast starring Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway to bring the show back to life from 1967 to 1970. In 2013, an Asian-American theater company revived *Hello, Dolly!* at the Pershing Square Signature Center in New York with an all-Asian cast and Christine Toy Johnson in the title role. Was the all-Black *Hello, Dolly!* by any means socially progressive? Was the all-Asian *Hello, Dolly!* a gimmick? Was it a coincidence that both productions took place during the historical periods when the African-American and Asian-American communities, respectively, advocated for more inclusion in American theater? Did *Hello, Dolly!* comprise secret messages of activism? What new meanings did the minority casts provide the Broadway blockbuster? To answer all these questions, this chapter introduces a new perspective of reading the musical that celebrates minoritarian performance, examines the historical purposes and significance of both the all-Black and all-Asian *Hello, Dolly!*, and parses the messages of social advocacy embedded in minoritarian casting practices of the musical.

The story of *Hello, Dolly!* can be traced back to British playwright John Oxenford's one-act farce *A Day Well Spent* (1836). The play depicts a day in the life of an eminent hosier, Mr. Cotton, his foreman Bolt, and his apprentice, Mizzle. Bolt and Mizzle sneak off to the city when they should be looking after Cotton's shop, only to run into him. The story ends as three couples tie the knot: Cotton marries Mrs. Stitchley, an old lady who owns a dress shop; Bolt marries Miss Brown, Mrs. Stitchley's friend and helper; and Cotton's daughter Harriet marries the young gentleman Mr. Cutaway.[1] In six years the play was adapted as *Einen Jux Will Er Sich Machen* (*He'll Have Himself a Good Time*, 1842) by Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy. About a century later Thornton Wilder adapted it into *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938) featuring the title character Horace Vandergelder—a flop on Broadway; and later *The Matchmaker* (1954) with the focus shifted to the female lead Dolly Levi—a hit in Edinburgh and London, and then on Broadway, where it was produced by David Merrick.

Merrick was, in fact, so successful with the play that in 1961, he began putting together a cast and creative team to musicalize it. Michael Stewart, who wrote the book for what became *Hello, Dolly!*, strengthened Dolly Levi even further. Levi, a matchmaker for the wealthy Yonkers merchant Horace Vandergelder, plans to marry him herself. Vandergelder comes to New York to participate in the 14th Street parade and meet Dolly at Irene Molloy's hat shop, where he intends to propose to the proprietor. While he is away, his clerks, Cornelius and Barnaby, decide to seek adventure in New York City. Upon learning of their intentions, Dolly directs them to the

hat shop. When Vandergelder arrives, he is infuriated to find two men with Irene, and cancels his plan to marry her. Dolly promises to introduce Vandergelder to an heiress at the Harmonia Gardens restaurant that evening. There, she enters triumphantly, feted adoringly by old friends. A riot ensues, and everyone except Dolly is arrested. In the final scene back in Yonkers, Cornelius and Irene decide to marry and open a store across the street from Vandergelder's. Vandergelder proposes to Dolly and makes Cornelius his business partner.

A widow who is no longer young, Dolly does not fit the conventional gender stereotypes or expectations of a leading lady. Directors initially turned down the musical because they felt that the kind of celebration in the title song "Hello, Dolly!" did not make sense. When Merrick asked Harold Prince to direct the show, Prince passed on the project, and suggested Merrick get rid of the title song: "The 'Hello, Dolly!' number has nothing to do with Dolly Levi. She's a woman who has no money and scrounges around; she's never been to a place as fancy as the Harmonia Gardens, where the number happens.... The way the number is now, you're talking about a woman who has lived her life at '21.'"[2] Jerome Robbins also turned down an offer to direct because he couldn't understand what the title song was about or why Dolly belonged there.

"Hello, Dolly!" is indeed isolated from the story of the musical, but the isolation is itself a metaphor of how Dolly as a character doesn't belong. She doesn't conform to contemporary age or gender stereotypes; she doesn't belong to the social class of the heiress or Vandergelder. She is so good at managing other people's lives that she comes off as both outsider and patronizing manipulator: when everyone else is arrested for instigating a riot, she avoids trouble as if she were on a different planet. It would seem that as a poor widow, she doesn't belong to Harmonia Gardens, either, but has used wit and charm to work her way up there. As she famously, triumphantly descends the elegant staircase in her sumptuous gown, the restaurant staff gleefully marks her appearance. In his book *World of Musical Comedy*, Stanley Green posits, "No matter how tightly constructed a musical may be, there is always room enough for at least one number…that is inserted solely as an applause-catching specialty with scant relationship to the plot."[3] To the directors who turned down the show, "Hello, Dolly!" is precisely such a song of irrelevance. However, the fact that the song has been perceived as an irrelevant number runs parallel to the racial and sexual minoritarians' exclusion in society and lived experience which many regard as peripheral and insignificant. The song is a poignant reminder that minoritarians can and should take center stage and celebrate their difference. "Hello Dolly," especially when performed by a minoritarian actor, asserts Dolly's great significance and dismisses the commonly held perception that she is no more than a trivial afterthought inserted to fill the room.

From "Before the Parade Passes By" and "Hello, Dolly!" to Minority Casting

Celebrating difference and otherness is, in fact, the central message of *Hello, Dolly!* The song "Before the Parade Passes By" both serves as a metaphor for the musical and neatly summarizes Dolly as a character. It is also the key to perceiving minority casting of the musical as a broader celebration of difference. The song takes on new meaning, after all, when sung by a person of color.

"Before the Parade Passes By" comes late in act one, when Dolly reflects on her life after the death of her beloved husband Ephraim. She bemoans a dry, colorless existence without him, which resembles a dead oak leaf. She decides with this number to finally "rejoin the human race," and thus sings of declaration, motivation, celebration, and empowerment. Dolly gives herself a second chance to be alive again—to race with "the parade." As a metaphor, this "parade" could mean life itself; it could also mean the majority, or the normative. Instead of merely being "in" the parade, Dolly wants to be "out in front" with her "head up high" waving "an old baton": to embrace herself and to live her life in such a way that the parade has to catch up with her rather than

the other way around. Earlier in act one, Horace reveals that he plans to march in the 14th Street parade with the only people he can trust: 700 men. By moving to the front of such a parade, Dolly honors her own difference and otherness as a woman perceived as past her prime. "Before the Parade Passes By" thus becomes a thrilling celebration by and of the outsider.

When a person of color sings it, the song becomes more than mere celebration. It turns, as well, into a declaration of racial pride and a motivational march advocating step-by-step empowerment. The rhythm evokes snare drums in a marching band, forming a rhythmic pattern that is bracing and powerful. The melodic line, too, builds in pitch, representing a gradual elevation toward victory. The number ends on a higher note than it begins on, symbolizing the process of elevation as empowerment through the course of the song.

If "Before the Parade Passes By" is a declaration song advocating racial difference and pride, then the title song, "Hello, Dolly!," is an "outcome song" depicting the victorious result of the outsider's endeavor. Similar to "Before the Parade Passes By," "Hello, Dolly!" is a song built on elevation. The melodic line steadily rises in shape, and the phrases follow arcs of elevation. Just like "Before the Parade Passes By," the song ends higher than it began, again symbolically elevating the character as it progresses. As an outcome song that serves as the production's eleven o'clock number, "Hello, Dolly!" would not be nearly as effective without the formidable declaration of "Before the Parade Passes By" at the end of act one.

It's important to note that there was little authorial intent toward social activism in the creation of *Hello, Dolly!* Composer and lyricist Jerry Herman specifically told interviewers that he did not think too deeply beyond his goal to entertain. But a minority cast—especially the all-Asian cast—clearly brings a message of social advocacy into the musical: difference, such casting says, is to be included and celebrated. If the all-Black *Hello, Dolly!*, with its oft-criticized mercenary casting choices, was socially progressive in any way, it was in its increased Black employment rate on Broadway, its boost at the box office of audiences of color, and its establishment of Pearl Bailey as a beloved leading lady on Broadway. The all-Asian *Hello, Dolly!*, despite its rather short run, delivered a compelling statement that actors of Asian descent, too, very much belong in the Broadway world.

The All-Black *Hello, Dolly!*

In 1963, the musical, then called *Dolly: A Damned Exasperating Woman*, had unsuccessful tryouts in Detroit. After intensive rewriting and a change of the show's title, *Hello, Dolly!* was a hit in its subsequent Washington DC run. It was such a hot ticket by the time it arrived on Broadway on January 16, 1964 that after initial top prices of $8.80 for weekday and $9.40 for weekend performances, tickets soon rose to $9.60 for all evenings.[4] The infectiously cheerful musical seemed to help lift audiences out of the depression brought about by the assassination of President Kennedy months before. The musical garnered publicity during the presidential campaign in 1964, both when Channing sang "Hello, Lyndon!" at the National Democratic Convention and when Merrick threatened to sue anyone who attempted to change it to "Hello, Barry (Goldwater)!"[5] Also in 1964, Louis Armstrong released his album titled *Hello, Dolly!*, in which he interpreted the song "Hello, Dolly!" The album became an instant sensation, and sold three million copies.[6]

The musical's ten Tony Awards included Best Musical, Best Original Score, Best Director and Choreographer, Best Producer, and Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role for the original Dolly, Carol Channing. By January 1965, the rights to the show had been sold to a dozen different countries. It was equally successful on the road. In 1965 and '66, the show was performed before American troops in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. When women's rights were in the air in the sixties, the title role Dolly Levi, a capable middle-aged widow who handles love, romance, and marriages by manipulating other people's lives, spoke to the civil rights movement. Stacy Wolf writes, "The musical does not sexualize [Dolly]; rather, [her] forceful personality reverses

the age-old masculine-active/feminine-passive binary."[7] Unlike many conventional female roles in the past, Dolly is clearly the master of her own future.

In the summer of 1967, while race riots rampaged in American cities including Buffalo, Minneapolis, and Detroit, David Merrick saw a new opportunity: why not replace his all-white cast of *Hello, Dolly!* with an all-Black one? The gimmick, which was possibly the only way to boost the box office, would allow him to cash in on the civil rights movement. At the time, Channing had been with the road production for almost two years, and Ginger Rogers, who first took over the lead in the Broadway production, had been succeeded by Martha Raye and Betty Grable, respectively. Despite the fact that all these women had offered excellent, distinctly individualized interpretations of Dolly, the hit musical was beginning to fade on Broadway. Merrick, it was often argued, would do anything to ensure a long run. Long before the all-Black *Hello Dolly!*, theater critic Robert Brustein had accused Merrick of too regularly applying "the shameless hucksterism of a modern Barnum," in his relentless pursuit of money.[8]

At the same time, however, Black underemployment on Broadway in the late 1960s was a grave problem. Despite the 1952 endeavor of Actors' Equity to integrate the theatrical world, integration on-stage was rare, and a majority of backstage workers, too, were white. Of the 664 production employees on Broadway in the 1967–1968 season, only 14 (2%) were Black.[9] Black performers were expected to constantly prove their worthiness; even when they did, they were most often given menial roles like servants or doormen. And for his difficult reputation, Merrick had a demonstrated interest in working with Black theater artists. In 1955, he hired Black stagehands by threatening the union with "publicizing their delaying tactics."[10] Having successfully worked with Black casts in musicals like *Jamaica* (1957), Merrick was convinced a Black cast could sell as well as a white one. *Hello, Dolly!* was not the only show for which he used an all-Black cast; he did it again in 1990 with his revival of *Oh, Kay!*[11]

When Merrick first approached Pearl Bailey to portray Dolly, she was reluctant to say yes; she was well aware that Merrick was most likely attempting to capitalize on the civil rights era. Already a well-established performer, Bailey had won a Donaldson Award for her Broadway debut in *St. Louis Woman* (1946), received top billing in *House of Flowers* (1954), and appeared in the film versions of *St. Louis Blues* (1958) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959). Despite her misgivings, she finally took the role because "she was thrilled at the idea that she would be performing in a theater where, as a child, she would not have been allowed to come through the front door."[12]

Bailey brought her own style to the character Dolly (Figure 19.1), imbuing the character with warm, witty, wise asides and interpolations, and ad libs, as well as plenty of curtain-call chitchat.[13] Critics and audiences responded with equal warmth and enthusiasm. Richard P. Cooke for the *Wall Street Journal* called Bailey "a production all of her own. [She] has more show business talents than almost anyone I can think of, perhaps chief among them her ability to take an audience under her wing…Seldom has stage enthusiasm seemed more genuine."[14] Richard Watts Jr. of *The New York Post* observed, "I have rarely been among so many unaffectedly enthusiastic spectators. In fact, at the end of the performances, it appeared that they were determined to climb onto the stage en masse and embrace the splendid Miss Bailey."[15] Barely two weeks into Bailey's run, Walter Kerr humorously claimed in *The New York Times*, "Eventually people are going to stop going back to see *Hello, Dolly!* They'll just settle down and live there."[16] One of the most enthusiastic reviews came from Clive Barnes, also for *The New York Times*:

> Miss Bailey had no trouble at all in stopping the show—her problem was getting it started again. On her entrance the audience wouldn't even let her begin. After about a minute's applause, she cleared her throat …, murmured, "I've a few more words to say in this show…" She had, and a few more to sing. … By the second act the audience was not merely eating out of Miss Bailey's hand, it had started to chew at her fingernails. …[T]he audience would have elected her Governor if she'd only named the state.[17]

Figure 19.1 Pearl Bailey descending the stairs with a powerful gesture as Dolly Gallagher Levi in *Hello, Dolly!* Photo Courtesy of New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Just like that, a musical that seemed about to close again became the hottest ticket in town. The all-Black *Hello, Dolly!* ran for two years, until December 20, 1969. Pearl Bailey became the diva that kept the musical going for the longest stretch during its original run. A musical that cost $400,000 to produce eventually made an astounding $27 million on Broadway and $60 million worldwide by 1970.[18]

The all-Black cast proved controversial from the start. While content that the production supplied so many Broadway jobs for such a long time, Frederick O'Neal, the first African-American president of Actors' Equity, argued that *Hello, Dolly!* violated Equity policy by casting according to color rather than ability. Nevertheless, O'Neal stopped short of lodging a formal complaint against Merrick.[19]

Through the 1960s, and especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., one could taste racial tension in the air. Many Black theater makers, such as Douglas Turner Ward, disapproved of the all-Black *Dolly*.[20] The most astute criticism revolved around the exploitative nature of the casting choices, and the notion that Black performers were hired to make profits and set longevity records on Broadway, while ultimately benefiting the white producer and overwhelmingly white audiences. A week before the opening of the all-Black *Dolly!*, an article in the *Philadelphia Tribune* pointed out that some people believed "the all-Negro show is a throwback to the Cotton Club–type shows of the thirties and has set the civil rights movement back 30 years."[21] Theater historian Allen Woll argues that the all-Black *Dolly!* "harked back to the black Mikados of 1939."[22]

These criticisms aside, there are positive social outcomes to Merrick's experiment. Its success challenged critics, producers, and historians to rethink minority casting. The *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes was quite upfront about how the production changed his mind: "[F]rankly my sensitive white liberal conscience was offended at the idea of a nonintegrated Negro show. It sounded too much like 'Blackbirds of 1967,' and all too patronizing for words. But believe me, from the first to the last I was overwhelmed. Maybe Black Power is what some of the other musicals need."[23]

The All-Asian *Hello, Dolly!*

Whereas the all-Black *Hello, Dolly!* was initiated by a powerful white producer with no small interest in profits, the all-Asian *Hello, Dolly!* was initiated by Asian-American theater artists as an