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A big black lady stops the show: Black women, performances of excess and the power of saying no

ABSTRACT

As performer Capathia Jenkins sings in Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me, it has become almost de rigueur to have 'a big black lady stop the show' on Broadway. This article uses theories of affect and performance studies to examine the theoretical significance and performative effects of this common trope, arguing that these black female performances are both integral to, yet remain separate from, mainstream Broadway musical theatre. These songs are multifariously excessive, and their excessive nature places them at the fringes of the musical proper, thus in some sense reaffirming Broadway's existence as the 'Great White Way'. However, the intense popularity of these songs must also be acknowledged; indeed, they play a key role in the production of affect that is an essential part of Broadway musical theatre. And it is the affective power of these vocal performances, along with their ability to actually halt a show's progress, which points towards their queerly subversive potential.

KEYWORDS

musical theatre
black woman
gospel
affect
Capathia Jenkins
*Martin Short: Fame
Becomes Me*

Near the end of the musical *Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me* (2006), Capathia Jenkins steps out onstage for her one solo, 'Stop the Show'.¹ Until this point Jenkins, a black woman described by critic Ben Brantley (2006) as 'broad of

1. 'Stop the Show' was the title listed in the Broadway playbill.

For the subsequent cast recording, the title was changed to 'A Big Black Lady Stops the Show'. *Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me* has music and arrangements by Marc Shaiman, lyrics by Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman, and book by Martin Short and Daniel Goldfarb.

2. Keeping in mind that any one song will diverge somewhat from the 'classic' example that 'Stop the Show' puts forth (i.e., the song plays a key role in the story, or exists in a show with a racially diverse cast), other big black lady songs could include 'Twenty-Four Hours of Lovin' from *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1978), 'Black and White' from *Barnum* (1980), 'Mama Will Provide' from *Once On This Island* (1990), the reprise of 'Fools Fall in Love' from *Smokey Joe's Cafe* (1995), 'The Oldest Profession' from *The Life* (1997), 'I Do, I Do in the Sky' from *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002), and 'Push Da Button' from *The Color Purple* (2005). *Hairspray* (2002), another musical written by Shaiman and Wittman, has two: 'Big, Blonde, and Beautiful' and 'I Know Where I've Been'. Even as recently as 2011 there is *Lysistrata Jones*, in which the big black lady narrator remains outside the action for the duration of the musical, except for those few scenes in which she plays the show's only non-student character – a larger-than-life (and of course good-hearted) prostitute.

beam, with an even larger voice', has barely appeared onstage. But the reason for her absence becomes clear when she sings:

Now the show's wrappin' up
 You know what that means
 No matter the plot
 The sets or the scenes
 It's a Broadway tradition
 If your show needs some bling
 For someone like me
 To come out and sing [...]
 Yes, the audience will stand
 Nobody ever dares walk out
 When a big-boned mama
 Starts to wail and shout
 If your plot's running thin
 And your ticket sales are slow
 Let a big black lady stop the show.

(Shaiman and Wittman 2007)

Jenkins's absence for most of the show drives home the point; 'Stop the Show' names and critiques (as it performs) a common Broadway trope: the 'big black lady song'. In this device a black woman, heretofore uninvolved in the storyline, sings a rousing number that elicits a large audience response, thereby literally stopping the show for applause. As 'Stop the Show' would have it, these songs do not further plot or develop character. In fact, given that Jenkins sings the song *as herself*, 'Stop the Show' suggests that character is not even necessary. What *is* necessary is excess – the big black lady song (what Jenkins terms the 'obligatory gospel number' (Gans 2006), province of the 'black mama role' (Anon 2007)) is in many ways – physically, racially, even religiously – excessive. The excess of the number is heightened by the song's existence outside (in excess) of the main narrative, and this intensification produces an excessive affect that has various performative effects.

Certainly the humour in 'Stop the Show' comes from an apt description of a familiar Broadway scene.² As a work of satire, 'Stop the Show' allows *Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me* to 'have its red velvet cake and eat it too' (as Brantley suggests in his review for the *New York Times*): Jenkins' show-stopping performance of the song is as crowd-pleasingly excessive as any other big black lady song, even while the song itself critiques this problematic trope, what Brantley (2006) calls 'an over-exploited entertainment stereotype'. As with any good satire, just hearing 'Stop the Show' provides a sense of this trope to those unschooled in Broadway musical traditions. To do this, 'Stop the Show' suggests that all big black lady songs are more or less the same, and thus elides the complexity and variety of these musical theatre moments. In collapsing these songs, 'Stop the Show' points to the attitude of certain (white) composers and producers towards the (black) singers upon whom they depend. The message of 'Stop the Show' seems clear: rather than diversifying Broadway musical theatre, big black lady songs marginalize black women, assigning them a limited role on the Broadway stage. The excessive nature of these songs places them on the fringes of the Broadway musical, thereby reaffirming Broadway's existence as the Great *White Way*.

On its surface 'Stop the Show' satirizes, and thus criticizes, the trope of always using black female singers for one specific purpose. But if we simply

allow the song to speak for itself, it will only tell part of the story. While I offer here a deeper analysis and further critique of the big black lady song, I also wish to problematize the song 'Stop the Show' itself. Because while this song's satirical critique is certainly valid, the trope of the big black lady song is far more complex than 'Stop the Show' lets on. If 'Stop the Show' does not deny this complexity, it also obscures as much as it illuminates. Having named and acknowledged a stereotype, 'Stop the Show' arguably professes to have dealt sufficiently with the issue, so that it can then traffic in the very stereotype it claims to critique.

But before going any further, we should clarify the key attributes of big black lady songs as they are described by 'Stop the Show'. First is the big black lady herself: Jenkins sings about the need for 'someone like me/To come out and sing'. This 'someone like me' (meaning someone who is a 'big-boned mama') must be black, although since Jenkins sings that we might also 'go get Ben Vereen', a big black lady song apparently does not *require* a 'mama'. For example, the 2000 musical *The Full Monty* features the first act showstopper 'Big Black Man'.³ Yet for the most part, these show-stopping numbers are sung by big black *ladies*.

Jenkins tells us to 'break out the organ/Go and grab your tambourine'. Later on, she allows that the song might be R&B, 'gospel or some blues'. The songs are 'black' not only because they are sung by black folks, but because they are written in a style associated with black music. In other words, a big black lady song must 'sound' black. If we risk essentializing black vocal performance by thinking of a black *sound*, this nevertheless points us to the musicological theorization of a black musical aesthetic (see for instance Williams-Jones 1975; Ricks 1977; Oliver et al. 1980; Ramsey 2003; Griffin 2004). One element is the grain of the voice, what Barthes (1977: 182) describes as 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue'. Maya Angelou (1976: 20) writes of the 'textured grain that colors the Black voice'. Ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander (1963: 23) echoes this characterization, arguing that a black singer's voice is beautiful not because it sounds smooth or sweet, but because it is 'foggy, hoarse, rough, or sandy'. Big black lady songs are exemplified by an intensification of these aspects of a singer's voice and by vocal techniques often used in gospel and blues singing. These techniques include 'moans, grunts, wails, shouts, gliding pitches, and song speech', as opposed to the 'clear enunciation of words, clean, clear phrasing, and [...] few glides or slides to and from pitches' found in European or 'western' (i.e. white) music (Williams-Jones 1975: 377). This juxtaposition to whiteness is a key aspect of the big black lady song. Jenkins sings 'white folks step aside', suggesting that until (and after) the big black lady song, pretty much everyone onstage is white. Thus the big black lady's blackness – both visibly, in her contrast to the other people onstage, and audibly, in contrast to the other types of music heard throughout the evening – appears as racial excess (i.e. pronounced racial difference), making it all too obvious that this is a non-white moment in an otherwise white show.

But rather than typifying the big black lady song as black music, it is more precise to describe it as the white *idea* of what black music is. When I spoke with Jenkins about what precisely characterizes a big black lady song, she suggested thinking of:

the time where the black girl comes out and then there's a choir all of a sudden that appears. Like, really? ... [It's] what white musical theatre or

3. The 'big' in 'Big Black Man' refers not to the singer's body (as it does in most big black lady songs), but to the perceived 'bigness' of black male genitalia. Although to *The Full Monty's* credit, it is Ethan (a white character) who has the shockingly large penis rather than 'Horse' (the self-described 'big black man'). So 'Big Black Man' might be read as a subtle commentary on this stereotype, rather than as a song that naively embraces it.

4. After early tryouts in the US during 2006-7, *Sister Act* opened in London's West End in 2009, transferring to Broadway in 2011.
5. The abbreviation in this song's title is perhaps meant to signify its 'blackness', as compared to 'Too Good To Be Bad', the 'white' version that immediately precedes it. One account of the song's genesis is that when *The Goodbye Girl* was not working, Carol Woods (playing not a maid, but a landlady) was given a second act song in which she tells the main character's daughter to do her homework. The song comes out of nowhere and has no relevance to the main plot; its sole purpose was to showcase Woods's talent and to entertain (and energize) the audience (Post by footlight9 2010, archived by author).
6. According to Broadway lore, this reportedly happened almost nightly in *Purlie*, at the end of Melba Moore's performance of 'I Got Love' (Posts by enoch10 and jeffef 2010, archived by author).
7. Indeed, audience reports after the experience inevitably fall back on a softer measurement of such markers, as in an observation like 'everyone stood immediately and they just didn't stop screaming!'
8. Frank Rich (1998: 992) named Holliday's performance one of his top twenty performances in his life as a theatre critic for the *New York Times*.

white America thinks is quintessentially black. So it's gospel, it's church, it's south. So it's *that* thing where she doesn't even have to sing. The very sight of her, with a choir and robes ... You know what I mean? It's *that* thing.

(Jenkins 2010)

For Jenkins, the big black lady song is '*that* thing', a thing that, if somewhat elusive, is nonetheless extremely visible. As Farah Jasmine Griffin puts it, the singing black woman is 'as much about the spectacle as the sound' (2004: 102–03). And it can be *just* the visible – in saying 'it's *that* thing where she doesn't even have to sing', Jenkins suggests that the big black lady song can be experienced without being heard. As the recent musical version of *Sister Act* (2009) shows,⁴ one need only give a black woman church robes and a back-up choir, and before she even starts to sing, the audience will get the message. That the big black lady song exists *even in the absence of the song itself* points to an excess that is fundamental to the song's performative effects.

'No matter the plot/The sets or the scenes', as Jenkins sings, suggests that a big black lady song is often randomly shoehorned into the action to provide a jolt of energy at a much-needed point in the evening. The character is likely superfluous – perhaps, as Jenkins sings, 'a goddamn maid or tacky ho'. One example is *The Goodbye Girl* (1993), whose song '2 Good 2 B Bad' purportedly inspired 'Stop the Show'.⁵ And this non-diegetic nature is even more obvious in the condensed version of the big black lady song – the featured solo, which exists purely to energize a large ensemble number, and is thus even less connected to plot. Examples of songs with these solos include 'Seasons of Love' in *Rent* (1996) and 'Brotherhood of Man' in the 1995 revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. As in a full-length big black lady song, the character singing this type of solo is superfluous (in *How To Succeed*, Lillias White played the anonymously named secretary Miss Jones) or non-existent (Gwen Stewart played various smaller roles in *Rent*, but was best known for her role as 'soloist #1'). Because these solos contain all the hallmarks of the black vocal aesthetic, including riffs, wails and sliding from a low pitch to a high one, they can be viewed as a variation of the big black lady song.

But whether singing a featured solo or full song, every big black lady character serves a larger purpose than 'the plot' – if her song works the way it is meant to, it quite literally 'stops the show'. Her song is so exciting, so thrilling, so powerful, that it causes the audience to applaud longer and more intensely than at any other point in the show. In certain instances, they even give a standing ovation for the singer in the middle of the musical itself.⁶ The show literally stops cold, and does not progress further until the excitement has died down. One might attempt to quantitatively assess how well a show has been 'stopped', by measuring (for instance) the length of the applause, the decibel level of the audience response, or the number of people who stand up at the end of the number.⁷ But a reliance on these data inevitably falls short, because the phenomenon of stopping a show occurs on the level of affect. The show-stopping number produces a palpable affective change in the audience: if you are in the audience when a show has been 'stopped', you can *feel* it.

For fans of musical theatre, big black lady songs can be intensely pleasurable, and a high point not only of the evening, but of one's entire theatre-going experience.⁸ I suggest that we take this pleasure seriously; these songs clearly do *something* that provides enjoyment, something that may not happen through other devices of musical theatre. And this enjoyment, this intense thrill, is not

limited to those in the audience. When asked about the experience of receiving applause at the end of 'Stop the Show', Jenkins responded by saying: 'It's awesome. There are some nights where I've literally had people leap to their feet, and I'm just shaking. I'm shaking, I'm looking at Marty [Martin Short], he's looking at me (laughs). It's an amazing, amazing feeling' (Gans 2006).⁹

Jenkins's description of 'shaking' illustrates that big black lady songs are not just superficially enjoyable, but in fact produce a visceral bodily experience for the singer. And given that many in the audience might leap to their feet, scream until they are hoarse, or else clap so hard their hands hurt, this song is also felt bodily by the audience. If we want to fully understand the big black lady song, we need to consider the excessive affect that Jenkins describes. But we must be clear about *how* the big black lady song is excessive, and what precisely it exceeds.

There is the excessive body of the singer: she is often large, especially in comparison to the other bodies onstage. She also looks and sounds black, a blackness that appears as racial excess in contrast to everything else onstage. Although it is more accurate to say that her blackness makes visible another kind of racial excess, one often unmarked in discussions about Broadway musical theatre, where race is generally mentioned only when a person of colour is onstage.¹⁰ I suggest that the big black lady's excessive presence shows up the real racial excess at work in many Broadway musicals: an excess of whiteness. Jenkins describes this as being 'the only':

I've often been 'the only' – the only black person, not just in the room, but onstage, backstage, in the house. I mean, the only black person in the *building*. It's an interesting thing when you look around yourself and you don't see yourself.

(2010)

Jenkins stands out to a white audience because of her seeming racial excess. But the excessive whiteness that surrounds Jenkins threatens her with disappearance. The fact that she ultimately does *not* disappear is testament not only to her power as a performer (power that, as we will see, derives partly from the black performance traditions from which she draws), but to her ability to successfully negotiate the difficult terrain in which she performs.

This excess is not limited to the 'visible' excess of skin colour – there is also Jenkins's excessive vocal performance. But her song is 'excessive' not just because her voice sounds black. In comparison to the performances throughout the rest of the evening, which hew closer to the written score, her singing blows the score wide open, exceeding (in the tradition of gospel music, as we will see) the very limits of the written page. And since a big black lady song is often placed outside the main narrative, the song *itself*, by exceeding the storyline, works to intensify the excess at work in this number.

I suggest that these multiple excesses produce and amplify the intense emotion that is essential to the performative effects of the big black lady song. The song's excess differentiates it from the show as a whole: the song exists outside of, and in opposition to, the rest of the piece, even as it is constituted by and through the musical. In the same way, the black female vocal performance stands outside of, and in opposition to, the written music (i.e. the artistic work produced by the show's composers).

The big black lady song's multifarious excesses allow it to produce what Sianne Ngai (2005) terms animatedness. Ngai theorizes animatedness as an

9. I asked Jenkins if this was the case in any big black lady song, even in those that were extremely problematic and she agreed that even then it is 'loads and loads of fun. You're having a blast especially if you are the moment and you're honest' (Jenkins 2010).
10. A musical with an all-white cast is often described as a 'white musical', compared to something like *The Color Purple*, which is often described as a 'black musical'.

11. For similar versions of this story see Anon (2007) and Gans (2006).

affect epitomized by excessiveness, a 'kind of exaggerated emotional expressiveness' that is a marker of the racialized subject (2005: 94). Ngai argues for a crucial ambivalence in animatedness, suggesting that this affect 'manages to fuse signs of the body's subjection to power with signs of its ostensive freedom' (2005: 100). If Ngai does not go so far as to commit to a definite subversive potential on behalf of the animated body, she allows that animatedness has the 'capacity to generate unanticipated social meanings and effects' (2005: 101, 125).

Ngai's concept of animatedness as a fusion of a subjection to power and an ostensive freedom resonates with big black lady songs, which are performed by women who, while likely aware of the stereotyping at work in these songs written by white men, nevertheless choose to perform them. Viewing big black lady songs as a performance of animatedness thus suggests the possibility for additional meaning, meaning that might become apparent if we ask: 'Why might Jenkins and her sisters actively choose to sing a big black lady song?' If this idea of 'unanticipated social meaning' might be overly optimistic, and if I risk minimizing the various subordinations to white male power that are at work here, I do so in the belief that emphasizing the performative power of the black female subject is equally important.

In interviews Jenkins talks about how, right before Shaiman contacted her, she had been complaining to her agent about the constant request for her to audition for the black mama roles – the characters who sing the obligatory gospel number; she did not want to do any more of these auditions. In our interview Jenkins repeated this story, saying she had told her agent:

I'm so tired of going in for these parts ... basically it's just the big black, you know, gospel, gospel-y kind of song that happens in the show, but that's *all* she does. That's so *not* interesting to me, right? I just feel like I want to do other things. I can sing different styles. And just because I look a certain way I don't want to just always get up and do the thing that people expect.

(2010)

So when Shaiman sent her 'Stop the Show', a song he wrote with her in mind, Jenkins fell in love with it immediately because it spoke to exactly what she had been complaining about.¹¹

Perhaps it is somewhat ironic that Jenkins, tired of being asked to perform the same 'gospel-y kind of song', nevertheless fell in love with 'Stop the Show', a song that is as much an exemplar of this trope as it is a critique of it. Certainly, calling out 'Stop the Show' for being a big black lady song misses the point of satire. But 'Stop the Show' *selectively* characterizes big black lady songs, highlighting certain elements while deemphasizing and obscuring others. By positioning the writers and producers of the musical as the 'owners' of the show, and the black female singer as the passive agent hired to do their bidding, 'Stop the Show' reifies the imbalance of power between the black female and white male subject positions. The song goes: 'It's a Broadway tradition/If *your* show needs some bling/For someone like me/To come out and sing' and later 'If *your* plot's running thin/And *your* ticket sales are slow/Let a big black lady stop the show' (emphasis added). Jenkins, singing to a group of Broadway composers and producers, gives them advice on how to create more successful shows, shows which belong solely to *them* (the white writers and producers).

Because Jenkins is singing to a Broadway audience, the word 'your' implies that the show in question also belongs to the audience members. But as 'Stop

the Show' constructs it, the musical does *not* belong to Capathia Jenkins; the word 'your', if intentionally vague, clearly separates her from everyone else. 'If *your* show needs some bling [it is time for] someone like *me* to come out and sing' (my emphasis): these lyrics place Jenkins outside of a group of people (writers, producers, audience, even other people onstage) who all, in various ways, can stake a claim to the show. By structuring big black lady songs as the 'property' of white men (the authors and producers of the show), and in a broader sense as the property of a largely white audience, 'Stop the Show' constructs a one-sided picture of these songs and singers.

The song also addresses financial profit: a big black lady can help 'if your show needs some bling' and 'if your ticket sales are slow'. Adding a big black lady song means 'there won't be one seat left/You'll be strictly SRO [standing room only]'. 'Stop the Show' even suggests that adding a black maid to *My Fair Lady* (1956) would mean the show might still be running today. In short, big black lady songs make a musical more popular with Broadway audiences. And popular shows make money: as the song tells us, the 'old fart white gay Jews [...] love their divas', but they also love 'the way their profits grow'. So ultimately, 'Stop the Show' reminds us that one of the most important functions of the big black lady song is to increase profits.

While 'Stop the Show' is not wrong in its description of the financial reality of Broadway musicals, or in its portrayal of most Broadway musical writers as white men, the song fails to mention what the financial picture looks like from the big black lady's perspective:

Sometimes you're like, look I gotta pay the rent. *I'm* going to be the big black lady. You know what I mean? Because I gotta pay my rent. That is just the practical day to day of what an actor goes through. So now I gotta pack my bags and go on the road and be the big black lady for a couple months.

(Jenkins 2010)

Jenkins reminds us that many black female musical theatre performers might sing a big black lady song not because they *want to*, or because they are ignorant of the problematic stereotypes that are at work, but because they simply 'gotta pay the rent'. But all this is absent from 'Stop the Show'. Since we have no information about why this woman decided to walk onstage in the first place, 'Stop the Show' produces an image of a black female performer who is always already the big black lady.

But rather than throw out 'Stop the Show' altogether, I suggest we read further into it. If 'Stop the Show' is a song written by two 'old fart white gay Jews', it is also a song sung by Capathia Jenkins, a woman who values, and even celebrates, this musical moment. If we argue that 'Stop the Show' merely reaffirms and reinscribes a stereotypically-based trope, we ignore the emotional, psychic and intellectual investment that Jenkins has in this song, thereby risking the very paternalism we might think we are critiquing.

'Put me center stage' Jenkins sings – to all of the white men in the room. One reading of this lyric is that these men must put her someplace, or rather, they must put her in *her* place (wherever the big black lady and her song fit best – likely somewhere in the second act). By doing this, the show can increase its popularity, success and profit. And it is true that white men both write the songs and profit financially from them. But the black women who sing these songs also do something important – something that goes beyond

12. The use of gospel music on Broadway, and thus the popularity of the big black lady number, is rooted in the gospel musicals of the 1960s and 1970s, many of which were written and directed by black men and women for black audiences. For more on gospel musicals, see Woll (1989) and Burdine (1999).
13. For more information on black gospel music, see, for instance, Jackson (2004) and Darden (2004).

simply singing a song onstage for the benefit and pleasure of others. By constructing the big black lady as a passive object that can be used by white composers, producers and audience members for their own benefit, 'Stop the Show' ignores the important performance of black female subjectivity.

One locus for this black female subjectivity is in a politics of refusal, or in Jenkins' words, 'the power of no'. Jenkins spoke about the lived experience of being involved in creating new works of musical theatre, in which a show is developed over the course of several readings and workshops, and performers might not always know what a role entails when they agree to do it. If Jenkins finds herself playing the big black lady:

When the piece comes around again, I can say no, I don't want to move forward with it. I can give you what you need in the moment, but I'll know in my soul this is not going to work for me. I'm going to move on. (2010)

And refusal – saying no – is not only invoked when a performer must decide whether or not to continue in a big black lady role. The performer can continue to 'say no' even after she is onstage. In fact, as I would like to discuss, the performative power of the big black lady is *rooted* in a politics of refusal.

But in order to better understand this, we must first return to Jenkins's description of the big black lady song as the obligatory *gospel* number. Langston Hughes, author of several 'gospel musicals', once overheard Mahalia Jackson's pianist ask her why she did not sing a song the way she had previously.¹² Her response: 'Because I don't want to, that's why' (Hughes 1963: 13). Jackson points to the freedom a gospel singer has to change the music based on whatever she might feel in the moment. Yet she also points to the ability of the gospel singer to say no, an ability drawn from a tradition in which the soloist, not the composer, is the one in control. In gospel music, the lead singer uses the composed song as a basic outline, and then riffs off that with audible breaths, melismatic embellishments, gliding pitches, 'worrying the line', back-phrasing and word repetition. Indeed, the songwriter *expects* that the written notes and words will be only one part of the actual performed song.

Early gospel music was also one of the few areas where black women could command respect and praise, especially during a period prior to the civil rights and women's liberation movements.¹³ Although women could not formally preach, they could sing; the church thus became an important place where women could learn musical skills, 'testify to their religious convictions, sustain fellowship, and pursue missionary work' (Jackson 2004: 4). So from its very beginnings, gospel music was a form of black music that featured a vocal soloist, often female, whose own innovations were as important as the work of the composer.

Intense emotion is another hallmark of gospel music. Indeed, prioritizing emotion was the main condition of possibility for gospel music's initial development. In contrast to the mainline Methodist and Baptist black churches, which valued emotional restraint, the Pentecostal and Sanctified churches believed in 'exuberant worship'; free expression of emotion was considered to be the expression of the Spirit. In a sense, gospel music arose out of a desire, or even a need, to embrace and express intense emotion. Olly Wilson argues that the excessive emotion inherent in gospel music has important ramifications:

Within the gospel and blues traditions, people familiar with these art forms know that the expected goal is a point in the performance when the

expressive power of the performer is so overwhelming that it demands a spontaneous response from the audience. That moment of collective catharsis is extremely important in reinforcing a sense of cultural solidarity [...] Within the black performance tradition, there is a communion of participants, not isolation between performer and audience.

(1992: 337)

This 'communion of participants' is a crucial breaking down of the boundaries between performer and audience, often manifested by an audible audience response at key moments in the song. This response involves more than just continuous applause and loud cheers: some in the audience might speak back to the performer (sing it, sister!) as she finishes holding an especially long note, or as her voice climbs one note higher than it seemed possible to go. As Wilson has it, the power of the performer overwhelms the audience, working through a mechanism of contagion in which the affective power radiates outward from the performer.¹⁴ This powerful emotion infects audience members, producing within them not only the immediate response to the number, but a desire for more. But this desire, evidenced by the audience's vocal responses and the applause that threatens to continue forever, is inevitably thwarted: after the song ends, there is no more.

Of course, there is often a significant difference between legitimate gospel music and the 'gospel-y' music of many big black lady songs. Those in the audience may not know or even care about these differences, since as Jenkins reminds us, the big black lady song is written to reflect what white audiences *perceive* black music to be. But at the very least, the singer herself can tell the difference. Jenkins told me about her experiences with certain composers, in which they would say to her 'I want this to be gospel', and then would ask her to riff on her own, telling her: 'in this part, just do what you do'. The problem is not that Jenkins is asked to improvise; as we have seen, improvisation is a quality of legitimate gospel music.¹⁵ Jenkins explained that the difference is located in a composer's lack of understanding about the gospel style:

What a legitimate gospel composer is doing is [...] giving you the chords and the chord structure to set you up so that you are in a place where you can really sit and relax and riff and you know where it's going. We know how to feel it emotionally, we know to connect it all – that composer gives you that place from which to jump off. Somebody who hasn't done their homework gives you sort of a pseudo version of that but still wants the same outcome [...] So now I am not invested. I can't get invested because I'm just trying to give you what I think it is you want, but you're not helping me. You're tying my hands and asking me to just give you riffs, or give you these random twists and turns, but they don't mean anything. I'm singing, but why? Why am I singing that? I'm one of those singers who – I'm always an actor first. I'm always with the lyric. If I can't connect to that, and now I'm in this space where I'm just riffing, I don't know what that is.

(2010)

As an actor, Jenkins places significant importance on the lyric and the meaning of the song. Certainly the more complex rhyming schemes of Broadway musical theatre, compared to a gospel composition for a religious service, might mark another difference between true gospel and big black lady songs.

14. This excessive energy also points to the big black lady song's roots in earlier forms of musical performance such as 'the mammy song' of blackface minstrelsy. In writing about the films of Al Jolson, Jane Feuer (1993: 1) argues that 'the "hard-sell" vaudeville personality, the emotional excess (all derived from the blackface "mammy-song" tradition), contributed to an uninterrupted flow of energy from performer to audience'.

15. I do not mean to imply that rampant improvisation occurs eight times a week, from one performance to the next; the improvisation I refer to occurs primarily in the *development* of a song in rehearsal. Indeed, Jenkins was careful to point out that 'it is a challenge to stay consistent on Broadway [...] not to come out every night and wing it [...] Once you set that bar, that's what you're shooting for [...] and sometimes that extra riff [...] is below the bar' (2010).

16. I signal here the work of Raymond Williams (1977: 132), specifically his theorization of structures of feeling, which he describes as 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought'. I see the world of musical theatre, and more specifically Broadway musical theatre, as one such structure of feeling.
17. My use of the term 'affective labour' here differs slightly from how the term is traditionally articulated (see for instance Hardt 1999).

However, Jenkins reminds us that the lyric – the Word – is crucial to both. The more essential difference occurs on the level of affect – in this case, we have a *literal* structure of feeling.¹⁶ Jenkins faults certain composers for not providing her with a (chord) structure through which she might find a reason to feel.

However, if big black lady songs may not be *true* gospel music, they still *function* as gospel music. They are positioned as such by the composer, performed as such by the lady herself, and experienced as such by the audience. If Jenkins implies that the singer might feel disconnected from the material, her performance nevertheless has a visible affective power. In fact, we have even more reason to locate this power in the body and voice of the big black lady, rather than in the work of the composer, precisely *because* it is the big black lady who provides the emotional experience for the audience. The composer of legitimate gospel music deserves some credit for whatever affective power occurs in the performance of a song. In contrast, in musical theatre it is the big black lady who carries the song, and her affective labour makes up for the work the composer is unable to perform.¹⁷

Previously I suggested that the phrase 'white folks step aside' speaks to the fact that everyone else onstage is white. The implication: that the black woman has been standing behind the white folks, who then step aside and allow her to come forward. That is to say, this black woman has been there the whole time but has been obscured by the (less interesting) excess of whiteness. Rather than viewing this woman as one who faithfully and reliably waits around for her promised turn in the spotlight, who waits because she must, I suggest that we view her instead as one who waits because she wants to. Here is what Jenkins says right before her song:

Jenkins: Hey! Hey old man. It's time for you to shut up!

Irving: Who the hell are you?

Jenkins: Honey don't you know what time it is? Check your watch, take your bow, and get the hell out.

Jenkins bursts onstage, interrupting the scene, and takes charge of the action. If her audience did not know the time before she comes out, they certainly do now. It is Jenkins's time, meaning, it is the time of the big black lady. Everyone else must check their watches because they will probably need to adjust them; they are now on a different time, one that Jenkins controls. She refuses to submit to their time, and instead, they must adjust to hers. After all, she has better things to do than entertain an audience for two and a half hours. Her audience only gets a few minutes of her time. And *if* she shows up, it is because she feels like it, not because anyone requests it.

And nowhere is her power more visible than in her final act of stopping the show. By singing a big black lady song, by infecting her captive audience with excessive emotion, Jenkins quite literally *stops* the show. She hijacks the musical, stopping it dead in its tracks. She disrupts the straight white time of the Broadway musical; not only does she force everyone else to adjust to her time, but she also erases any chance that they might refuse to follow her.

What is more, through her performance Jenkins produces within her audience a *desire* for this cessation. Not only do they not mind that she disrupts the Broadway musical, but they actively *want* her to. In fact, they want her to continue stopping the show over and over again. They beg for more, so much so that the show cannot continue. But this does not matter: the audience

only cares about her, not the show. And because she is in control, she can, and does, refuse to satisfy their desire for more. Even though they beg her to continue, she says no.

Near the end of 'Stop the Show' Jenkins sings the words 'And then I'll tell you all'. This is intentionally similar, in both lyrics and tune, to the phrase 'And I am telling you' from the *Dreamgirls* (1981) song 'And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going', a song likely recognizable to even the most casual musical theatre fan. Jenkins (2010) said this familiarity was indeed why Shaiman referenced this song, even though, given its crucial function in both the character development of Effie and the overall plot of *Dreamgirls*, 'And I Am Telling You' is not *really* a big black lady song.

Yet 'And I Am Telling You' epitomizes the politics of refusal at work in the genre of big black lady songs, and shows how audience desire is perhaps most evident when it is forestalled. The song ends act one, but as staged by Michael Bennett, the audience does not have the opportunity to applaud Jennifer Holliday's legendary performance as Effie White while she is onstage. In the final moments of the song, the platform on which Effie stands glides upstage, and in her place appears the new (if not improved) Effie-less girl group. This new trio ends act one; the audience's ovation for Holliday's performance is ultimately given to three women who, at least in this moment, are not doing much of anything other than repeating the lyrics ('love me') that Effie was just singing.¹⁸ Bennett's staging thus performs the very substitution that the audience has just witnessed in the scene leading up to 'And I Am Telling You', the substitution of Effie White's superior talent for a performer who is prettier and doesn't stick out. After Holliday's bravura performance, Bennett reaffirms control over the proceedings; in this instance, Holliday does not get the chance to stop the show because Bennett does not let her.¹⁹

Granted, Holliday gets another opportunity to stop the show in the second act with 'I Am Changing'. More importantly, if the big black lady song is evidenced by the audience's desire for the show to be stopped, then Holliday's performance at the end of act one is effective after all. Holliday sings that she is 'not going', but in fact, she *does* go. And this leaving makes visible just how powerful her presence really is. Through her performance, Holliday produces a desire in her audience that overshadows, and in fact overtakes, the rest of the musical *Dreamgirls*. Many who are familiar with Holliday's performance, perhaps through radio play or from hearing it referenced on *American Idol*, may not know anything about the musical from which it came.²⁰ Ultimately, the musical as a whole becomes less important than a single number. So perhaps it would be more precise to argue that 'And I Am Telling You' is in fact the *ultimate* big black lady song, one that, by emphasizing its refusal, exploits its performative potential. If Bennett's staging prevents the fulfilment of our desire, and refuses us the chance to join in with, and celebrate, Holliday's talent, then it is also the case that Holliday's legendary talent ensures that we will continue returning for more.

And return we do. Holliday is one in a long line of black female performers known for their 'big' musical theatre performances, a list which includes Ann Duquesnay, Carol Woods, Mary Bond Davis, B. J. Crosby, Lillias White, Delores Hall, Kecia Lewis-Evans, Tonya Pinkins, Gwen Stewart, Terri White, Liz Mikel, and of course Capathia Jenkins. The sheer diversity of the performances by these incredible women means that any attempt to encapsulate them under a heading like 'big black lady song' will forever be incomplete.

18. This song, as performed with Bennett's staging by the original cast on the 1982 Tony Awards, can be seen on YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kC_u_q-iND accessed 29 September 2011.
19. Frank Rich (1998: 123) called this move by Bennett a 'masterstroke', one that matched Holliday's brilliant performance. Rich also wrote that the curtain didn't fall because the audience would probably cheer Jennifer Holliday until dawn!
20. Given its allowance for vocal pyrotechnics, 'And I Am Telling You' is popular with *American Idol* contestants and producers, and has been sung on the show consistently since *Idol*'s first season in 2002. In the early years, some singers would describe it (in on-camera interview) as a song 'by Jennifer Holliday', following the pop music practice of identifying a song by its singer rather than its composer. Of course, this is anathema to musical theatre fans, but the professional *Idol* judges would do the same thing, erasing any connection of the powerhouse song to the Broadway stage. The 2006 film version of *Dreamgirls* brought the musical to a wider audience, so listeners may now associate the song with the music (albeit the film version). However it is just as likely that this song will continue to be described, at least in the *Idol* world, as one 'by Jennifer Hudson', the woman who won an Academy Award for playing Effie in the film and who became famous through *American Idol*.

And this is perhaps the most profound excess of all, and the reason why 'Stop the Show' (and this article) *must* inevitably remain a partial account: the big black lady song will forever exceed all efforts to define or characterize it.

And as much as audiences might want to hear some of these same performances over and over, even after the show has closed, Jenkins reminds us that there must always be a limit, and that the big black lady can *always* say no:

I remember after closing *Martin Short* every benefit wanted me to come and sing that song, you know maybe change a few words here and there to make it more appropriate or whatever, and I was like 'OK. Enough of *that*'. You know what I mean? It makes you think.

(2010)

Yes, Capathia, it absolutely does.

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