

History and Characters: Lindsay Bolton, Psychology

In order to comprehend the complexities of the characters in R. H. Burnside's Vaudeville-esque spectacle *Good Times* and the slightly more plot-driven *Tip Top*, it is important to understand the life of the creator himself. Born in Scotland to parents fully immersed in the theatrical world, R.H. Burnside began his stage career as a young child, participating in productions as an actor while traveling with his mother ("The Final Curtain", 51). According to the New York Public Library, which provides a comprehensive overview of Burnside and his works, after his twelfth birthday, Burnside was taken back to England with the intention of him receiving a formal education. Instead, this venture resulted in his attempting to run away with the circus twice, before ultimately joining the Edward Terry theatre company. Burnside's career truly began when he met Lillian Russell, a singer and actress who inspired him to move to America and begin directing and writing.

After spearheading nineteen semi-successful productions, Burnside was invited to join the creative team at the Hippodrome Theatre in New York, which was hailed as the world's largest theatre in its day. Utilizing his diverse life experiences and current professional interests, Burnside and his collaborators created eye-catching and extravagant musical spectacles filled with elements of circus, dance, and aquatics along with the more expected vaudevillian musical themes ("Creator History"). At the Hippodrome, Burnside was able to create his most memorable and innovative works, such as *The Tourists*, *Fascinating Flora*, *Happy Days*, and, of course, *Good Times* and *Tip Top* (Woollcott).

The analysis of characters in a pre-book musical era may seem counterintuitive, however these works demonstrate that Broadway was driven more by types than by characters. However, although difficult, it is still advantageous to examine the intricacies of characterization in these works, because they showcase the diverse attributes of human nature that these works sought to represent. In both *Good Times* and *Tip Top*, the themes of character difference are aided by Burnside's diverse theatrical interests which influenced him to showcase distinct character types and performers. Thus, I focus on the performers, as they themselves were the true 'characters' of *Good Times*. In contrast, I focus on the scripted characters in *Tip Top*, who were written with the influences of Burnside's unique style.

Good Times was a spectacle musical, which included drastically different actors, each with a unique and diverse background. Notably, each performer had a distinct, non-cohesive identity that spoke to the influence of identity and difference even in the earliest American musicals. One of the most notable inclusions in the cast of *Good Times* was Belle Story (occasionally spelled Storey), a vaudeville performer who was a coloratura soprano. Stylistically, Story's voice was often described as, "sweet, flute-like, and bird-like" ("Biographical Note"). This information came from the Arizona Archives, which provides an overview of American vaudeville performers in general. Although drastically different in style than Belle Story, vaudeville and circus performer Joe Jackson Sr. was also an important addition to the musical. He was most famous for a comical bicycle routine and other humorous clown-like sets ("Vet Joe Jackson", 15). Another interesting inclusion in this vaudeville lineup was the Pender Troupe, a comedy group that included performers of many different ages and genders. As the script of *Good Times* has been lost, not much more about the musical is known. However, using Burnside's other work, *Tip Top*, one may be able to gain further insight into the important details of *Good Times*.

The characters in *Tip Top* are vastly different than those you may see in modern-day Broadway productions, because the emphasis of the musical is placed more on the entertainment value than keeping a cohesive plot. The characters in the opening scene, Lawyer Pussyfoot, Judge Tiger, and Miss. Puff, whose unique personalities and distinct differences encapsulate well the themes of the musical. Miss. Puff, the defendant in the legal case presented in scene one of the musical, is very emotional and dramatic. She listlessly flirts with the judge and jury in between bouts of intense emotion and denial of wrongdoing. In direct contradiction to his, unlike what his name may suggest, Lawyer Pussyfoot does not tend to tip-toe around the conclusions he makes. Making no allowance for the feelings, phony or not, of Miss. Puff, he presents his case directly and without emotion throughout the course of the first section of the musical. Judge Tiger, on the other hand, falls for Miss. Puff immediately, and easily abandons his commitment to being impartial in favor of his attraction to the defendant. These three characters encapsulate the exaggerated and theatrical influences of Burnside by vastly contradicting each other. Just as many of the performers in *Good Times* had no upfront or obvious similarities to one another, these three characters are connected primarily by Burnside's wild imagination and appreciation for diversity.

It would be remiss not to examine the titular character of the musical himself, Tip-Top. The eccentric five and ten cent shop owner exemplifies Vaudevillian humor in a show that isn't exclusively centered around vaudevillian themes. Tip-Top's live-and-let-live attitude can be considered a reflection of the musical as a whole; incohesive, entertaining, and light. Both the show and Tip-Top himself don't necessarily communicate a big or important message to the audience. Instead, they provide distraction and entertainment in an era before Broadway was meant to make one think. Both *Good Times* and *Tip-Top* include diverse themes and characters reminiscent of Burnside's unique style. Due to this, the shows exemplify the wide range of characters and styles found in early twentieth-century American musicals.

Works Cited:

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