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"PIGMEAT"

Makes His Hollywood Debut in

'ONE BIG MISTAKE'

A riot of laughter!

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Primary Source 45

Apollo Theater Playbill, 1941.

Primary Source 45

The Apollo Theater in Harlem opened in 1934 and still operates today. During the 1930s Jacob Lawrence made many visits to the Apollo. He recalled viewing performances there where “everything was jagged, bright, and brittle ... so maybe my color and my shapes have this quality and developed out of that [experience]” (Karlstrom, 2001).

Among the acts were jazz-age stars such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Duke Ellington (recordings of each are featured on the Teaching Kit CD-ROM). The Apollo was also a community center where many future stars launched their careers at well-publicized amateur nights.

This 1941 playbill gives a sense of the variety of entertainment one could enjoy at the Apollo. The Ink Spots were a vocal quartet who reached the height of their popularity in 1939 after they released the national hit “If I Didn’t Care.” Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham got his start as a singer in Bessie Smith’s legendary Traveling Revue. By the late 1930s, Markham was a famous comedian, dancer, and movie star.

Teaching Tips

Language Arts/Social Studies: What can be learned from this playbill as a document of the 1940s? Make lists that indicate the range of performances. Consider the language used, from “mirth and melody” to “the world’s greatest colored shows.” Consider how the content of the performances, the language used in the playbill, and the graphics convey this historical moment.

LA 1, 2, 4, 6, 11 SS 1, 3, 7

Social Studies/Theater: The Apollo Theater was famous for its amateur nights where members of the Harlem community performed on stage, hoping to achieve fame and fortune. Research the history of the Apollo and some of the acts that performed there. Working in groups or individually, put on your own Apollo Theater-inspired amateur show in which you and classmates perform.

SS 1, 2, 3, 7 TH 2, 4, 5, 8

Music/Visual Arts: Look carefully at the Apollo Theater playbill and note how its photographs feature singers, dancers, and actors in poses that highlight their respective genres. Now listen to the music on the CD-ROM and design mock Apollo Theater playbill images that evoke the feeling of each performer’s music. For example, draw an upbeat, lively image to accompany Duke Ellington’s “Harlem Airshaft” (Primary Source 46).

MU 6, 7, 8 VA 1, 2, 3, 4, 6