

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Pride, Prejudice and Temptation

Andy Horwitz · Wednesday, September 12th, 2018

The first time I ever heard The Temptations, I mean, really *heard* The Temptations, was in the movie *The Big Chill*, and subsequently on the official motion picture soundtrack, which my friends and I listened to repeatedly on both vinyl and cassette. It was 1983, I was a sophomore in high school and had recently turned 15.

What I knew then was that The Temptations were from a magical place called Motown and a mythical time called the 60's, when people fought for civil rights and protested Vietnam and smoked marijuana. The implicit message of the movie, at least to this white, Jewish 15-year-old in suburban Baltimore, was that the 1960's was the best time ever to have been alive, and young, and idealistic. The kids really were going to change the world!! According to nostalgic Boomer narratives like *The Big Chill*, the ensuing hard road to adulthood was merely a letdown, a journey fraught with disappointment, disillusion and failure, even in success. So, when Kevin Kline's character finds an album on the shelf, puts the record on the turntable, and The Temptations' "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" plays, in short order the group of friends, reunited for a funeral, throw off their early-midlife malaise to dance joyfully around the kitchen of a well-appointed summer home and regain, for at least a moment, their youthful *joie de vivre*.

Since then, and for most of the ensuing 35 years, my relationship to The Temptations' music was as part of a soundtrack to the lives of white people.

The Broadway-bound new musical *Ain't Too Proud*, currently playing at the Ahmanson Theater through September 30<sup>th</sup>, brilliantly reclaims the particularity of The Temptations' music, in fact of all the Motown hits in the show, by placing the songs in cultural context. They are re-established as songs originating from the lives of real people, who loved and dreamed, struggled to succeed and sometimes died trying. The show tells the story of lives obscured by the very hit machine that made them famous, lives of people for whom the making of music was not merely a business or vehicle for social mobility, but as essential as eating, or breathing. I'm not ashamed to say I whooped and hollered (in a very restrained way), resisted the urge to sing along, teared up a few times and ended up giving the show a standing ovation alongside the rest of the rapturous audience.

I've always had a fraught relationship with musicals, especially jukebox musicals, so much so that, despite my rather longstanding and catholic theater-going habits, I had never attended even *Jersey Boys*, which is supposedly the starter yeast of jukebox musicals from which all others are grown.

My wife, however, grew up going to musicals. Her father was a history teacher in Queens, her mother a computer programmer for Con Ed. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, any special event, or nothing special at all, could occasion a trip to the theater. They've seen practically every stage musical since the late 1940s, and even further back if you count movie musicals starting in the 1930s. So, I knew that when we were planning the itinerary for my in-laws' most recent visit to Los Angeles, we would be going to *Ain't Too Proud*. I was dreading it.

Don't get me wrong, I knew the show would be "good," if by good you mean slick, commercial, entertaining and uncomplicated. Director Des McAnuff has been a reliable purveyor of quality staged entertainment since the 1980's; he essentially designed the template for the modern jukebox musical with *Jersey Boys*, incubating projects in the non-profit regional theater system (most notably the La Jolla Playhouse) before moving them to Broadway and commercial success. He works with the best designers, choreographers, musicians and producers in the business. When you go to a Des McAnuff show, you know what you're getting.

So, as we drove to the Ahmanson I had measured expectations. A Broadway-bound jukebox musical of Motown hits produced by old, rich white people in a theater filled with other old, rich white people reminiscing about the good old days? How could this possibly rise above the level of one of those interminable, nostalgic PBS fundraisers?

Upon taking our seats, I started to loosen up. The Ahmanson felt a little less stuffy than usual. Looking around I noticed that this was possibly the most integrated audience I have seen in a major regional theater since a recent trip to Baltimore's Center Stage. Los Angeles is a vibrant, dynamic city of extraordinary diversity and cultural complexity, but theater audiences – in Los Angeles and across the country – rarely reflect that.

Then the lights went down, the show started and out came The Temptations singing "The Way You Do The Things You Do." It is an irresistible, irrepressible song that everyone knows; resistance is futile, you have to tap your feet and sing along. I was settling in for a pleasant if unremarkable evening of nostalgic hits when Derrick Baskin as Otis Williams – the one surviving Temptation and narrator of the show – stepped out from the group, looked out at the audience and said, "The Way You Do The Things You Do: 'member that? Our first song on the charts. Took us 24 singles before we got it. Definitely didn't think we had a hit with those lyrics. *You got a smile so bright, you know you could have been a candle?* Ain't exactly Langston Hughes."

Baskin has a winning, charismatic stage presence that makes even a house as big as the Ahmanson feel intimate and friendly, and the line immediately makes you feel like you're Otis' confidante. He is self-aware and self-deprecating, mirthful but reflective, and by name-checking Langston Hughes, deftly places The Temptations in juxtaposition to one of America's greatest and most iconic poets.

This is a brilliant rhetorical move, one that immediately frames the music of The Temptations as culturally significant, more than "mere" pop music. And it frames "Ain't Too Proud" as more than mere confection, but rather a significant addition to the canon of American theater by and about African-Americans.

Otis continues, "We made history together. All of us. Thing about history though... there's no progress without sacrifice. Building this group was some kinda testimony of will. Like a shepherd herding sheep up the mountain to stand before the Almighty. When you finally reach the summit,

you realize all the flock have scattered and you're the only one left. That's when it's time to revisit your journey. Measure if it was worth the cost of losing your brothers: David, Eddie, Paul, Melvin...the classic men who built The Temptations. With these men, I felt the most magic I ever felt in my life."

Like the first part of the line, Otis is telling us that this isn't merely the story of a group of men trying to make it as singers and musicians, it is also the story of a people. It is Biblical, it is resonant and profound, it is about sacrifice and it starts with an Exodus – Otis' journey, along with millions of other black folks, the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North, to cities like Detroit, in search of well-paying work and a better life.

Now Des McAnuff knows how to produce slick jukebox musicals, but the poetry and rhetorical sophistication of *Ain't Too Proud*'s book is all Dominique Morisseau, the accomplished African-American playwright known especially for her "Detroit Trilogy" of plays. With *Ain't Too Proud*, Morisseau brings a level of historical perspective and formal sophistication to the script that elevates it beyond the well-worn tropes of the form.

In his 1917 essay *Art as Technique*, the Russian art critic Viktor Shklovsky introduced the idea of "defamiliarization". Simply put, the technique of art is to make the familiar *unfamiliar*, to compel us to look at something we think we already know and perceive it anew; to question our previous assumptions and perhaps apprehend the object with new insight, wider perception and deeper engagement. In so doing the art transforms our experience of, and way of being in, the world; it opens up the possibility of new worlds.

In *Ain't Too Proud* Morisseau manages to make the familiar unfamiliar and new in several ways. The first is in her approach to the music itself. She breaks up the songs, interpolating fragments in unexpected ways and often assigning different lines to different characters within a single song. This is not a new theatrical technique, but Morisseau does it with remarkable ingenuity, particularly at the top of the show with a montage structured around the Isley Brothers' hit song "Shout".

I first heard "Shout" in 1978 when I was in fourth grade and my delinquent friend Keith convinced a group of us to sneak into the movie *Animal House*, despite its "R" rating. It was years before I learned that this song, performed in the film by a group called Otis Day and the Knights, was originally an Isley Brothers song, and in the same way that I would later hear "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" and "My Girl" in *The Big Chill*, my relationship to "Shout" was as part of the soundtrack to a seminal moment in my white suburban childhood. In a way, my relationship to the song was defined by my identification with, and aspiration to be, John Belushi.

"Shout" has become a familiar party song. No matter who performs it, audiences and wedding party guests know – and anticipate- its distinct sections, variable dynamics and exclamations in a way that is almost like ecstatic religious ritual. Once you have heard the Isley Brothers's version of this song, even once, it is almost impossible to hear this song differently.

But in the *Ain't Too Proud* montage version of "Shout," where Otis Williams is breaking things off with his first manager, Johnny Mae, a notable Detroit figure in her own right, Morisseau assigns the iconic middle section of the song, where the backing band almost drops out to spotlight the vocals, to Johnny Mae:

*I want you to know*

*I said I want you to know right now, yeah!  
 I've been good to you baby=  
 Better than I been to myself, Hey! Hey!  
 Now that you want to leave me  
 You won't find nobody else, Hey! Hey!*

Admittedly, she sings the line from a *moving car that we never see again*, but it isn't the extravagant staging that makes this moment stand out, rather that the line is sung by a woman, a powerful woman, who turns the rejection around to reclaim her power. She is, to use the vernacular, *fierce*.

It is comparatively easy to tell a story by stringing together a bunch of hit songs with a few lines of dialogue here and there; it is something else entirely to not only use the songs to move the story forward, but tell the story *behind* the songs while also allowing us to hear the songs in a new way, almost as if for the first time.

The thing about popular music is that it is *popular*. The Motown catalogue generally, and the music of The Temptations specifically, because of its massive success, became ubiquitous in mid-60s pop culture and beyond. This is a function of mass media: over time the music detaches from its point of origin and becomes something else, first familiar and then almost invisible. It becomes a snippet of aural nostalgia flickering into and out of your awareness as you walk through the mall, background music to make-out scenes and dance parties, reliably played at almost every wedding and Bar Mitzvah I've ever attended. Heard everywhere from movies to tv shows to commercials to oldies radio, the music becomes merely a signifier, shorthand, a placeholder standing in for a supposedly shared memory of a time and moment, a generalized feeling for a simplified past recalled with bittersweet fondness.

And this is, as Morrisseau's script tells us, completely by design. Berry Gordy was very intentional about "crossing over". He assertively shaped a Motown sound and image that would appeal to a white audience, even as the music originated in, and continued to speak to, a black audience. But crossing over comes at a cost.

In one pivotal scene, the group is in the studio where they have laid down the original vocal tracks for an openly political song "War (What Is It Good For?)" , written for them by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong. But Gordy refuses to allow them to finish the recording and release the record, which he gives to unknown up-and-comer Edwin Starr for whom it is a huge hit.

"The Temps are a crossover group. Can't use it, Norman," he says. "Because once the White audience thinks they know you, you can't go switching on them. "TV" Black. "Radio" Black. Not the same as "Political" Black. You have to serve them music in a way that's digestible. Otherwise they jump ship and we lose all we worked for. Can't use it, Norman."

As if the cost of crossing over wasn't high enough already, an ancillary, unintended effect of crossing over was to create in white society the illusion of progress, of being more inclusive and less racist than we actually were. Like David Ruffin passionately declaims in an earlier scene, "They listen to our music long as they ain't gotta deal with us in the flesh!"

Black artists successfully crossing over were performing an idealized version of an integrated America. This made it possible for white liberal audiences, like the characters portrayed in *The Big Chill*, to believe that they were participating in a process of political and cultural progress that

would culminate, finally, with the election of Barack Obama in 2008. For nearly fifty years well-intentioned people like myself believed this narrative until the 2016 election once and for all stripped away the veneer of civility, making clear to white people what African-Americans had known all along – that this social progress was, if not a myth entirely, then a powerful act of self-delusion with brutal, if unintended, consequences. *Ain't Too Proud* tells the other side of the story.

In 2018 it would require an act of willful blindness to look at the struggles of the men in the Temptations – David Ruffin's battles with drug abuse and domestic violence, the recurring theme of Otis as absent father – and *not* see how they are, in some way, a response to the structural violence of racism.

At the same time, major American cultural institutions like the historically white spaces of regional theater, are finally, viscerally aware of their own whiteness. Many of them are, belatedly, trying to change by increasing their efforts to make their audiences, and stages, reflect the diversity of the country at large. And as the audiences of traditionally white cultural spaces become more diverse, the negotiations of cultural difference playing out in society are playing out in the audiences of theaters as well.

*Ain't Too Proud* is a show about African-Americans, featuring an almost all-black cast (but for the role of Shelly Berger, the group's Jewish manager), designed to attract an African-American audience, and produced by white institutions who want to cross over. The music, lyrics and story are written by African-American artists; and though the show may not have been created explicitly and exclusively *for* a black audience, it has been created for a general audience that is *finally* acknowledged to have black people in it. It shouldn't feel revolutionary, but it does.

For many white audience members, it is a new experience to watch a show (or movie) that is not expressly written for them, where the story is not told from a white perspective with white people at the center, where they are only represented onstage by one character out of dozens.

For some African-American audience members it is likely a rare experience to sit in a traditionally white space that has been historically – if implicitly – unwelcoming and see theater made for black people, by black people, (The same could probably be said of the Latinx audiences for CTG's recent production of *Zoot Suit*).

The conventions of pop music concerts call for a relaxing of social constrictions. Everyone is allowed to dance, shout out, vocally react, sing along (until the person next to you gets annoyed) and generally have a good time.

The conventions of theater in predominantly white cultural institutions have traditionally called for a more restrained set of behaviors. Audiences are expected to sit silently and attentively, laugh when appropriate, clap when appropriate and, mostly, be as polite and unobtrusive as possible so as not to disturb your fellow audience members or the performers.

A few days before the show we received a reminder email from CTG, suggesting we arrive 30 minutes early, alerting us to the construction on the plaza in front of the theater, and so on. It also included the following language:

*As artists, we rely on you—our audience—to make the show happen. So please laugh when you feel like laughing, gasp when you feel like gasping, and clap when you feel*

*like clapping. We have a feeling you're going to find it impossible not to react to this powerful show. Enjoy, and please don't be shy about it.*

The night I attended the show there was palpable, occasionally comic, confusion about what constituted appropriate behavior. During the songs – even when prompted by the actors – many audience members, myself included, still seemed to feel beholden to the traditional expectations of restraint. It was funny to see, hear and feel the audience around me loosen up, to come to some kind of shared agreement, a middle ground if you will, on what was too little and what was too much.

But there were moments where the distance between expectations was profound, even disruptive, starkly highlighting the cultural differences of a diverse audience.

After the scene where David Ruffin loses his temper and says, ‘They listen to our music long as they ain’t gotta deal with us in the flesh. I ain’t just no song and dance. They got to take us all or nothing,’ some members of the audience vocally assented, clapped their hands or at the very least snapped their fingers. Many others sat there and did nothing, waiting for the scene to continue.

Earlier in the show there was an incident in our row of balcony seats where a group of middle-aged Russian women, observing traditional decorum, were offended by a group of young African-American women vocally enjoying themselves. Loud shushing and verbal sparring ensued until the altercation became so loud and disruptive that several ushers had to intervene.

To CTG’s credit, the ushers – all young people of color – did an excellent job of de-escalating the situation and, from what I could gather at intermission, moved the African-American women to better seats where they wouldn’t be shushed by the Russians. There’s only so much conflict resolution one can do while a performance is in progress.

These moments are difficult and awkward, sometimes comic, sometimes painful, but confronting and constructively negotiating cultural difference is central to the work of building an inclusive, pluralistic democracy. And America’s non-profit cultural institutions have an essential role to play by fostering audiences that reflect the composition of their communities and the public at large; by making the effort to model, in microcosm, society as it might be.

It is easy to forget the ideals of the era that gave rise to Motown. Faced with the stark reality of 2018 it is easy to see only the missteps, flaws, failings and shortcomings. But falling short requires reaching beyond your grasp. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the creation of The Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, these were all part of an effort to build a Great Society, predicated on a set of values and vision of democracy that seems almost unimaginable in today’s political climate.

Shows like *Ain’t Too Proud*, like *Hamilton* before it, offers us the chance to revisit and re-write American history, to restore voices that have been excised, to tell the story of this country in new, expansive, inclusive ways; to reveal what this history looked like from a different perspective- all through catchy songs and big dance numbers! What more could you ask for?

The song “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” is both a declaration of love and an admonition. If you love someone, or something, don’t be too proud to admit when you’ve been wrong: own it, understand it, and change. At this moment in America, this is a message worth listening to again, as if for the

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first time.

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