Theme Scholar: Karen Campbell Kuebler

As an undergraduate dance major, Kuebler realized her knowledge in dance history was severely lacking. This initiated a career long research initiative to explore, connect, and apply dance history in her teaching and learning process. Since 2009, Kuebler has taught Dance History courses here at Towson University and presented her research at conferences near and far since the 1990s. In this process, Kuebler identified numerous people who did not appear in many of the history books, but their stories are revealed in the social media of the day—newspapers! Their stories need to be told in the 21st century world. One of these stories involves a family who dominated the Vaudeville circuit for forty years and trained entertainers who continued to influence stage, screen, and society throughout the 20th century. This ROARING Twenties and beyond group is The Whitman Sisters.

Kuebler will focus on the connections of The Whitman Sisters to dance, music, theatre, social justice, and civil rights through the lens of entertainment. From students involved in Tap Dance, Charleston, and Cakewalk pop-ups to virtual vaudeville themed shows, to collaborative media arts presentations, the campus will revisit this century old group and discover their continued relevance today.

Kuebler has taught, presented, and experienced dance with babies through adults for four decades. She also advocates for dance programming at all levels and is actively involved in various Dance organizations including National Dance Education Organization (NDEO) and Deep Vision Dance Company (DVDC). Kuebler is a founding board member of the Maryland Dance Education Association (MDEA) and continues to serve as the Advocacy Chair on the Board of Directors.

As a result of Kuebler’s research, she published *Whitman Women* (2021).

Available for purchase: [https://he.kendallhunt.com/product/whitman-women](https://he.kendallhunt.com/product/whitman-women)
Scholar Essay

Karen Campbell Kuebler, adjunct professor in the Department of Dance, explores the connections of the Whitman Sisters to dance, music, theatre, social justice, and civil rights through the lens of entertainment.

The Whitman Sisters: Challenging, Building, ROARING

The controversies, the scandals, the media, the stereotypes, the ROARING Twenties and 2020. Similarties between a century ago and today make us question progress, challenge norms and build awareness. What can we learn from the past? How can four powerful, entrepreneurial women engage and enlighten our pathway forward?

Enter the Whitman Sisters. Coined the Royalty of Negro Vaudeville (George-Groves, 2000) for their crowd-pleasing performances and well-managed company, this group of four women was the only company on the vaudeville circuit led by a female manager (Baltimore Afro-American, 1908). The oldest sister Mabel Whitman "ran the show business from A to Z and [was] a thorough and efficient business woman" (Whitman Sisters Attract Large Crowds, 1932, para. 5). This leadership in the entertainment business afforded the sisters opportunities in the theatre that were not possible in the general public especially for African American women in the 1900s.

When their father and former slave Reverend Abbey Alston Whitman gave them song and dance lessons as children so they could accompany him on evangelical tours to benefit the church, he never imagined his girls would perform on the vaudeville stage (George-Groves, 2000). With their talent and talent, the Whitman Sisters were empowered to confront the controversies of race and the stereotypes of gender on the stage in front of capacity audiences (DeFrantz, 2002). From cross-dressing and solo acts, to blackface and blonde wigs, the Whitman Sisters provided their audiences with issues of race and gender during each performance.

As leaders on the vaudeville circuit, the Whitman Sisters were more trusted than their male counterparts. Parents would send their child on tour with the Whitman Sisters because the perception was women would be better caretakers (DeFrantz, 2002). This benefit of nurturing young talent enabled the sisters to train some famous performers including Catherine and Count Basie, Willis Bryan, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Pops Whitman (George-Groves, 2000). In addition to bringing talented child performers into their company, the Whitman Sisters also had the Royal Night Hawks Orchestra and Bennie Moten's Band as a part of their touring company at different times through the years (Midnight Matinee for White Tonight, 1932; The Public Demands a Second Week, 1939).

Alberta adapted the stage name of Bert and would cross-dress during different scenes in the show. Essie did a drunken comedy act and sang in a contralto voice, something reserved for men only in the early 1900s. Alice performed solo tap dances. During this time women only performed tap dances as chorus girls and men did the solo acts. Within the same show the sisters would perform in blackface highlighting elements of a minstrel show, but then come out later with white faces and blonde wigs. Audience members would check their program and be surprised at the ability of the sisters to challenge societal norms as well as negotiate the expectations of race and gender (George-Groves, 2000).

As the Whitman Sisters grew in popularity, so did their reputation as high-class entertainment (Whitman Sisters Open at Belmont Theater Apr. 29, 1928). This reputation meant more pay as they traveled to the 49 theaters in the Theatre Owners' Booking Association (TOBA) throughout the United States (George-Groves, 2000). As the top paid vaudeville company on the circuit, manager Mabel Whitman would demand black people be allowed in the theaters (Seibert, 2015). If the theatre owners refused, three members of women in the early Twentieth Century were uncommon, the vaudeville shows provided employment opportunities for black women as professional entertainers and this empowered women and enabled them to be financially independent (Jones, 1963).

The Whitman Sisters incorporated comedy, music, and dance into their shows. Their company was also one of the first to popularize The Cakewalk, The Charleston and Tap Dance throughout the United States. The Cakewalk Dance was used in the company finale and the youngest sister Alice won many Cakewalk contests (DeFrantz, 2002). The history of this dance is rooted in the contrasting roles between slaves and slave owners. Developed by slaves as a way to mimic the Eurocentric traditions of slave owners with walks, turns, strutting, and parodies of waiters and ministers, the Cakewalk was the first dance to urbanize, formalize, and popularize black dance traditions in the white community (Clark & Johnson, 2006; Thompson, 2014). As the signature dance of the 1920s, The Charleston developed from West African traditions and was fully adapted by the white community in the ballroom dances (Jones, 1963). The Charleston was a staple in the Whitman Sisters company and just like the Cakewalk became a world-wide sensation (Seams & Swarns, 1994). As Tap Dance developed primarily among male artists, Alice Whitman did not stay in the chorus, she was so skilled she would do solos as well as perform with groups of men. Alice was coined the best tap dancer in the world leading the way for more women to embrace tap dancing. She also passed the tap dancing talent to her son Pops Whitman who began touring and tapping with the company at age four (Seibert, 2015).

Newspapers acting as the Social Media of the time always praised the Whitman Sisters for their top-notch entertainment. Beyond the pages and the performances, the Whitman Sisters made progress for blacks and women, challenged the societal norms by confronting gender and racial issues onstage, and built an awareness for us to be creative, courageous, and let our spirits ROAR!

References

Dear Suzie,
Everyone up here in The Big Apple is bumping their gums about how the Whitman Sisters are doing their thing with entertainment! They have Miss Curry here singing like a canary and so many other black artists performing. The best part is, the sisters are still hold true to their Christian values. You have to come up here and see it, I promise it will blow your wig.
Sincerely,
Mica

Dear Lisa,
Oh Lisa, it's been such a long time since we wrote to each other. I hope you're doing swell in that ruck of a town you moved to. Anyways, you would not believe the fun I have found in Baltimore. The Whitman Sisters came through town this past weekend, and I had the wonderful pleasure of attending! Lisa, they sang my favorite song "I Can't Get Along Without You." Their voices are so heavenly, I felt the spirit of God flow right through me. You know how excited I was to see Mabel and Essie, my two favorite sisters perform. I had to bust out the Charleston midway, hopefully I did not embarrass myself. They will be passing through Chicago at the end of the month, you must attend!
Best Regards, Joan

Dear Martha,
Blow your wig! I am down watchin' the Whitman Sisters perform at the Lafayette Theatre. This production is my cup of tea. I am all nerves as I see Bennie Moten and his Band performing I love how it ain't just a one woman show, but more! Man, I be lovin' the music, the actin' the dancin' everything. Wishing you were here with me, I could've saved ya a hot seat in the theatre. What do you say for next time?
Your dear friend,
Rachell

Dear Dorothy,
I hope that this letter reaches you well. I saw the most spectacular show over the weekend. You may have heard of it as well because it has been quite a hit over the past couple of years. It is most definitely a sight to be seen. I heard the most beautiful voices sing. Bert and Alice are two of the performing sisters. The accompaniment of the ukulele was just magnificent. The Whitman Sisters really put together something great and I'm glad that it is getting the recognition that it has so far. If the Whitman Sisters are ever in your part of town, I hope you would do yourself a favor and attend the show.
Farewell, Enna

Dear Lisa,
Everyone up here in The Big Apple is bumping their gums about how the Whitman Sisters are doing their thing with entertainment! They have Miss Curry here singing like a canary and so many other black artists performing. The best part is, the sisters are still hold true to their Christian values. You have to come up here and see it, I promise it will blow your wig.
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