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A scene from the original 1927 production of *Show Boat*.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT...

- Before *Show Boat*, musical theater in America mostly consisted of sweet or silly scenes broken up by the occasional song, which may not be related to the plot. How is *Show Boat* different? How do you think the show's music helps you better understand the drama?
- What role do Queenie and Joe play in the story? Are they active participants or simply observers? What does their function say about the early years of the 20th century?
- The tune "Ol' Man River" keeps recurring throughout the performance. Why do you think Kern and Hammerstein repeated this song so often? Do you think the river acts as a symbol? If so, what might it symbolize?

WHAT TO LISTEN AND WATCH FOR...

- Famous songs you may have heard before, such as "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "Bill," or "Make Believe." Also listen for music that's used to set a mood or give the story a sense of time and place rather than to help move things along. Some of these pieces, like "The Washington Post March" and "After the Ball," were not written by Kern and Hammerstein.
- The sets and costumes. How do they help reflect the passing of time? How do the costumes give you clues about a character's age, mood, or social status?
- The moments when the showboat performs a "play within a play." The melodrama Julie and Steve (and later, Magnolia and Ravenal) perform is entitled *The Parson's Bride* and follows an ill-fated romance. Do the dramatic situations in *The Parson's Bride* remind you of the conflicts in *Show Boat*? Why or why not?

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WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

M&M'S® OPERA IN THE OUTFIELD

JEROME KERN AND OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II'S

Show Boat

Based on the novel by Edna Ferber

Directed by Francesca Zambello

Conducted by John DeMain

Captain Andy and his crew invite you on a thrilling ride aboard the "*Cotton Blossom*"—a travelling theater where the onstage melodrama is nothing compared to what happens behind the scenes. Expect some comedy, tragedy, romance, and intrigue as you follow Andy's troupe on a journey of self-discovery down the Mississippi River.

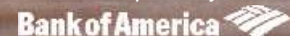


WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

David and Alice Rubenstein are the Presenting Underwriters of WNO.



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About Show Boat

BASED ON A 1926 NOVEL of the same name, *Show Boat* has gone down in American musical theater history as a revolutionary work—one of the first to successfully weave together an epic and dramatic storyline with beautiful and meaningful songs. The story, which spans forty years, follows the lives of the owners and workers aboard a turn-of-the-century vessel known as a “showboat,” a floating theater travelling along America’s Southern rivers.

ACT I: THE LATE 1880S

Captain Andy, his wife Parthy, and daughter Magnolia arrive in Natchez, Mississippi on the showboat *Cotton Blossom*. Though Andy claims the workers on board are one “happy family,” tempers flare as Pete, an engineer, and Steve, the lead actor, come to blows. Pete is abruptly fired.

Later, Gaylord Ravenal, a gambler, meets Magnolia and flirts with her by suggesting they “make believe” they’re in love. Smitten, Magnolia asks Joe, a workman, what he thinks of the stranger. Joe suggests she ask the mighty Mississippi River instead, but Julie, the showboat’s leading lady, and Queenie, the cook, offer their own advice.

Show Boat contains words and images that were common during the post-Civil War period in which it is set. Some of the language and stereotypical situations are considered offensive in today’s society.



Ravenal

That night, Julie rehearses with Steve—her co-star and husband—but Ellie, the boat’s comedienne, interrupts with news that the sheriff is on his way. Steve then shocks everyone

by stabbing Julie’s finger and drinking her blood. The sheriff arrives, claiming Pete has informed him that Julie, though passing as white, is legally black. Her marriage to the white actor Steve, the sheriff says, is therefore unlawful. Thanks to Steve’s quick thinking, however, everyone is able to swear the actor has “negro blood” in him and the marriage is declared legal. Still, Julie and Steve are forced to leave. Magnolia assumes the role of lead actress and Frank, a supporting player, suggests Ravenal as a leading man.

Weeks later, Ravenal and Magnolia’s real-life romance has made the showboat famous and the couple plans to marry. On the day of the wedding, the festivities are disrupted when Parthy bursts in shouting she’s just learned Ravenal is a murderer. The sheriff announces Ravenal’s crime was committed in self-defense and the wedding continues.



Joe

COVER PHOTO BY ROBERT KUSEL/LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO
SHOW BOAT COSTUME SKETCHES BY PAUL TAZEWELL

MAIN CHARACTERS

Captain Andy, showboat owner
Parthy, his wife
Magnolia, their daughter
Gaylord Ravenal, a gambler
Julie, leading lady on the showboat
Steve, her husband and leading man
Joe, a head workman on the showboat
Queenie, his wife and the boat’s cook

ACT II: 1893–1927

Years pass. Magnolia and Ravenal settle in Chicago with their daughter, Kim, but it’s



Julie

apparent the couple has run into financial trouble. Magnolia reunites with Frank and Ellie just as she discovers Ravenal, penniless and ashamed, has left her. Frank suggests Magnolia get a job singing at a local club. Elsewhere in town, Ravenal visits Kim to say goodbye.

At the club, everyone prepares for the upcoming New Year’s Eve show. Surprisingly, Julie, now alone and suffering from alcoholism, has been working as the club’s headliner. When Frank brings Magnolia in to audition, Julie recognizes the voice. Realizing the situation, she sneaks away unseen, allowing Magnolia to take her place.

On New Year’s Eve, Magnolia discovers her father is unexpectedly in the audience and, despite her nerves, gives a great performance. She becomes an overnight sensation and, eventually, blossoms into a Broadway star.

By 1927, Magnolia’s stardom has been passed to Kim. Back on the showboat, Andy orchestrates a reunion between Magnolia and Ravenal. But is the reunion a happy one?

ABOUT JEROME KERN and OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II

In the 1920s and 30s, Jerome Kern provided clever and compelling melodies while Oscar Hammerstein wrote the touching lyrics as well as the spoken lines between songs for several musicals. Each was famous in their own right—Kern won acclaim for several classic tunes (“The Way You Look Tonight,” “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” etc.), while Hammerstein went on to collaborate with composer Richard Rodgers on several Broadway shows, including *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The Sound of Music*.



Hammerstein (left) and Kern (right)

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ABOUT WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA

Originally founded in 1956, Washington National Opera (WNO) ranks as one of today’s largest American opera companies. WNO presents several operas each year at the Kennedy Center and its artists regularly perform throughout the city. WNO is also active in commissioning new operas. Among the most popular of WNO’s community programs is M&M’S® *Opera in the Outfield*, which brings free broadcasts of opera to Nationals Park.

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