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American Music Theatre

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 The negative Effects of Social Injustices in 1975 America

 From the commencement of the United States, there has always been prejudice. As of now we can look in retrospect and see the millions of mistakes that this country has made and continues to make. What is truly remarkable or ironic is that this nation has had so many cultures contribute to its success, but those same cultures have been discriminated against for centuries. The year 1975 was a time in America where prejudice and negativity continued especially in the arena of employment which was uniquely displayed in the musical ‘A Chorus Line.’ 1975 was a year in which the dominant forces of racial discrimination, sexual prejudice, and gender inequality in the labor force devastated the lives of millions.

 Primarily, the issue of race has undeniably been one of the most grotesque concerns in America since its birth. Eleven years after the Civil Rights Act and still no change for the lives of minorities. African Americans had fought through wars and been the backbone of industrial agencies yet struggled to find jobs. In Judith Cummings historical book “Blacks gain Broadway: Lag in 2 other Arts,” we see how black people were discriminated against even in the music industry. Despite the talent that any of these individuals acquired they still had to assimilate into this white culture, which is impossible. The book explained the history of African Americans in the musical theatre from the late 1800s all the way until award winners like ‘Dreamgirls’ and ‘The Wiz.’ The purpose of the book was to prove that black people were always associated with the music theatre and its evolution from classical to ragtime and jazz. In the seventies there was an increase in African American audiences coming to Broadway and being a part of this culture, and the question arose, why are blacks beginning to follow these different types of entertainment. According to Cummings there was a specific appetite for black themes that proliferated in Hollywood. She states, “Public appetite for black-related themes that was whetted by Hollywood a few years ago to a mass audience by popular television series such as “The Jefferson’s” and “Good Times.” However, the article continues to discuss how African Americans were not able to express themselves in the same way in the predominately white theatres.

Most importantly the effects of this gender bias, racial prejudice and sexual discrimination caused problems in our economy and the unemployment rate. America was already struggling, besides the fact that many employers were denying willing workers, nevertheless the economy was indeed struggling. In the 1975 NYT (New York Times) article, “Down and Out in America” anecdotes from different people were written to convey the true struggle that regular Americans were experiencing from a day to day basis. This financial decline wasn’t a black or white issue, but everyone suffered from it. The factories of old were being closed for reasons that still cannot be understood and unfortunately it affected people of all ages. One story is told by Pete Horvath who has been working in Buffalo plant where he is a wire cutter. He has been a wire cutter for over 31 years and one day he was let go and the business was completely shut down. Horvath elaborated, “I think another reason why they closed up\_ all these people, including myself, were getting up in age.” People were being denied jobs for no reason of their own. Many of these anecdotes are told by African Americans because of the obvious struggles that they faced.

In addition, ‘A Chorus Line’ was a trailblazer of its time due to its major theme of equality for all. Warren Hoffman, author of the “Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical,” emphasizes the issues of the time and explains why musicals like ‘A Chorus Line’ are unique. Hoffman spoke about many aspects of the musical such as its racial equality, its commencement and history, the main themes, and the way of casting. In his chapter dedicated to this music he begins with speaking about the impact ‘A Chorus Line’ had on society. One theme he elucidates is “the desire to be picked, the desire to be loved, the desire to ‘make it’ in the world.” Everyone has an unconscious desire to be wanted because whatever field one chooses, it is difficult to be successful when the people around disapprove your presence. We can also conclude that minorities aren’t the only people who find it difficult assimilating into other cultures. Furthermore, Hoffman also analyzes the musical and notices that Zach, the director of the musical, gives everyone the same level of respect without regarding their race or gender, which demonstrates total equality in the casting process. Another important issue during this time was the gay rights movement. Two of the contestants, Greg and Paul identified themselves as gay in the musical, nevertheless the process of picked for the show remained the same, in fact Paul was one of the dancers selected for the chorus. Hoffman elaborates on this subject when he states, “That said, A Chorus Line well reflects the racial and cultural zeitgeist of the 1970s, a decade of multiculturalism, ethnic and racial pride, and gay rights in which cultural and racial minorities were finding new ways to perform and exhibit their identities.” Both Paul and Greg in the story had quite peculiar coming out stories, but they were not scoffed at by the cast or the director, in fact, they were embraced.

Additionally, as aforementioned there was a stagnation in America because truly those in power did not seek change. Chorus lines, plays, and musicals are known for their skilled dancers, singers or actors, their uniformity, repeatability, and interchangeability. However, in the times of old there was not diversity in the casting for these forms of entertainment, you mostly saw white men and women performing. As a result, directors wouldn’t hire minorities to be in choruses because they looked different, they couldn’t be casted for plays because they never fit the description, they sing, and act differently so how could they be in musicals? Victor Holtcamp, author of the academic article, “Working on the Line: Industrial Capitalism in a Chorus line,” states that Zach, the director in ‘A Chorus line,’ “is actually after control and uniformity.” Employers even out of the music industry wanted workers that looked like them, spoke like them, and understood them, thus minorities or people with eccentric lifestyles were always looked down upon and denied a chance. Holtcamp affirms that during this time people were rejected simply because of their ethnic backgrounds.

An issue that seems to elude many Americans is gender discrimination. From the start of this country women have always been inferior. Women have never received the respect that they deserve in this country because the obvious male dominance and antifeminism. Unfortunately, throughout our history women have had to over-sexualize themselves to be successful. In ‘A Chorus Line’ Val Clarke vocalized a song called “Dance: Ten: looks: Three,” which served as a common story of a woman having to expose themselves in unusual ways in order to thrive in a specific arena. Val Clarke tells a story about how she was struggling to land the roles that she wanted until she had plastic surgery to add on to her body parts. For the duration of the song Val repeats the words “Tits and ass…Tits and ass” to emphasize the fact that those implants are what brought her success. In addition, the title of the songs is symbolic as well; what we see is not what we get. One would assume that in this song we would hear about a number that she performed, however we get a story about getting implants. That symbolizes what women had to do to be accepted, they had to appear to be these voluptuous women even if they truly were not just to accepted. If the song was named “Tits and ass” it certainly wouldn’t have the same effect.

 Additionally, we would’ve hoped that America was making progress with female rights, but there was no progress, only stagnation. In 1975 the Supreme Court held the case Taylor v. Louisiana which it questioned whether women should be exempt from serving as members of the jury. This case is discussed in Warren Weaver Jr’s article “High Court Backs Women's Jury Rights.” If nothing else after the world wars one would think, how dare anyone question the importance of women in this society, and why should women be restricted from any democratic operations that men participate? According to Justice Byron R. White, “If it ever was the case that women were unqualified to sit on juries or were so situated that none of them should be required to perform jury service… that time has long since passed.” White’s statement corroborated that women have long been the subordinates in society, and it is immoral to say that women don’t deserve better treatment. Fortunately, the woman won the case with an 8-1 decision, however it is shameful that women were not already unexempt for being jurors all around the country. They questioned whether women should be jurors and questioned whether they were even worth giving job to. This further proves that women were continually unappreciated throughout America’s history and discriminated against with no just cause.

In most cases, it would be said that 1975 was not a very good year in America, however one could say that 1975 was a year of progression and advancement. There were more opportunities in 1975 then there was 10 years before. Racial prejudice wasn’t as harmful as it 10 years prior and neither was gender inequity. One issue that seemed to be improving at an accelerated rate was homosexual acceptance. In 1969 the gay community formed what would be called the Stonewall Riots. Police officers had raided a gay club called the Stonewall Inn, thus causing this community to fight back in various ways. At random they would have violent demonstrations with police officers to demonstrate their strength. Only seven years later after this act of hate there were multiple musicals, movies, television shows giving opportunity to the gay population. In 1975, Doric Wilson’s musical ‘Lovers,’ a tale was told about finding love in the same sex partners and sharing a genuine relationship. It was a movement of freedom solely for the gay community to enjoy. According to Clive Barnes, writer of the article, “Lovers: A New Homosexual Musical,” the show is “a celebration of homosexual life and the right to be a homosexual.” With, some may look at 1975 as a year of liberation and peace, where those who were otherwise confined could express their true colors.

Finally, Michael Bennet’s, ‘A Chorus Line’ truly proves that America would have been more stable if employers didn’t see people only for their sex, race, or sexual preference, but their willingness to complete the job at hand. Firstly, the seventeen dancers were people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and who desired to have to find a job, but also follow their dreams. One of the most significant numbers in the musical was the song, ‘I Hope I Get It.’ This song was sung by all the dancers in that were auditioning for a spot in the musical. Unemployment wasn’t only a struggle for the minorities, but it was very difficult for the minorities as well. The main lyrics that convey this struggle is “God, I hope I get it, I hope I get it, how many people does he need?” These words aren’t sung by a selective few, but everyone sings with great passion and sincerity. Later in the song they ask the question, “How many boys, how many girls?” which intensifies their hopelessness because they know that their opportunity is extremely limited. They ask this question knowing that the director may not choose someone because of how they look or seem to act. However, at the ending of this musical a diverse group of dancers were selected proving that each person deserved in equal opportunity which symbolizes real life moments as well. Everyone should have equal opportunity no matter where they come from, how they look, how they dress, or how they live.

In conclusion, in 1975 we have seen that there was bigotry, gender prejudices, and sexuality injustices all over America and during time there was not much change. Musicals like ‘A Chorus Line’ gave us a description of a better world where finding a job had nothing to do with one’s ethnic background, partner choice, or natural identity.

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