

Robert Todd Duncan (1903-1998)



Robert Todd Duncan was an actor, musician, educator and pioneering civil rights activist who broke the color barrier in theater at a time when blacks had to use side entrances and sit in the balcony. This outstanding role model was born February 12, 1903, in Danville, Kentucky, and grew up in the town of Somerset.

The star, who is more commonly known as Todd Duncan, obtained his musical training at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, with a bachelor of arts in music, followed by a master of arts from Columbia University in New York. In 1933, he debuted in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* at the Mecca Temple in New York with the Aeolian Opera, a black opera company.

Duncan created the renowned role of "Porgy" in George and Ira Gershwin's classic opera, *Porgy and Bess*, which opened on Broadway on October 10, 1935. Duncan performed the role more than 1,800 times. When Gershwin heard of Duncan, he was already an established baritone and a voice professor at Howard University in Washington D.C. Duncan also made two films, *Syncopation* (1942) and *Unchained* (1955). In *Unchained*, Duncan introduced the song, "Unchained Melody". The song, which later became a rock and roll standard, earned Duncan an Academy Award nomination.

During the Washington, D.C. run of *Porgy and Bess*, Duncan led the cast in a strike to protest the National Theatre's segregation policy. The actors held out against offers by the theater to permit African Americans to attend a "blacks only" performance. As spokesman for the cast, Duncan stated that he would never play in a theater that barred him from purchasing tickets to certain seats because of his race. Theater management gave in to this demand and all performances of *Porgy and Bess* were integrated. This was the first time an integrated audience attended the National Theater.

Duncan continued his desegregation efforts when he returned to his native Kentucky for performances in the 1950s. While there, he refused to perform to segregated audiences. In Somerset, Duncan insisted the black audience, which had always been relegated to the back of the theatre, sit in the front during his performance.

Duncan taught at Howard University for over 50 years, during which time he continued to tour as a soloist with pianist William Allen. Among his many awards, in 1984, Duncan was awarded the George Peabody Medal of Music from the Peabody Conservatory of Music of Johns Hopkins University. After retirement, Duncan opened his own voice studio, teaching privately and giving periodic recitals. He inspired black artists to walk through the doors that he had helped open to them.

Today, many of the black stars of American opera list themselves as among the first, second, or third generation vocalists who were taught by Robert Todd Duncan. Duncan died February 28, 1998. He was 95 years old.

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