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Black Expressive Culture Narrative Stage: The Scanner Boys; Willie "Ashcan" Jones

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WEBVTT

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<i>Host</i>: So when you were traveling with Irvin C. Miller, in those first years that you brought a group of Lindy-hoppers onto that stage, were you working in theaters then?

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<i>Willie Jones</i>: Oh yeah, we were working theaters.

<i>Host</i>: So you were back basically on the Vaudeville circuit.

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Oh yeah, I was on the vaudeville circuit. But after we got on that circuit, it was right after World War II then,

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and nobody wanted you into the theaters because everybody had plenty money, and the theater man didn't need nobody to come into theater then,

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so he usually went to the theater to make - sort of a man to make more money.

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But then they didn't need you then, they had plenty of, uh you know, pictures, and everybody had plenty of money to come to it. So that's when Irvin C. Miller bought the Florida Blossom and it was called the Brown Skin Models and the Florida Blossom combined.

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<i>Host</i>: Now how many of you all are familiar with the black tradition of minstrel shows?

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You know, when people think of minstrel shows, especially younger people and white audiences, they tend to think immediately of the minstrel shows of the 1800's,

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when groups of white people would put on burnt cork and begin to do caricatures of African-American dance, of African-American humour, of African-American song and music.

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In the late 1800's however, a number of blacks themselves began not only to enter into minstrel shows, but also to own and manage their own shows.

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By the 1920's and 30's, there were a number of very large travelling tent shows, owned and operated by blacks, showing primarily to black audiences,

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working with entirely black casts that went under the name of minstrel shows and followed somewhat the format of the old 19th century minstrel shows.

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Now in this century, the most popular of those were probably the Florida Blossom Minstrels and the Silas Green from New Orleans. The Florida Blossoms showed under-tent until the late 1940's, when they joined with Irvin C. Miller who was working a Vaudeville show.

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And the two forms went together and went out on the road, showing under a huge black-top, or not black-top, big-top I should say--

<i>Willie Jones</i>: Yeah, big top, yeah.

<i>Host</i>: -to African-American audiences.

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Now in that sort of show Willie, what sort of entertainment would you present to the audiences?

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<i>Willie Jones</i>: Well that, at first you would have to have a big band. You had a band, and the next thing you'd have was chorus girls. You had to have a line of girl.

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So then you have twelve at least, twelve, twelve girls: six in the front row and six in the back row. Then after that you'd have some kind of act, don't care what kind of act, it may be a dance act, a Spanish dance act,

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a tap dance act, a Blues singer, a somebody maybe, some woman or other, with an act- then they used to play trumpet, they played saxophone, and they did an act with it because it was rare to see a lady do that.

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<i>Host</i>: Right.

<i>Willie Jones</i>: We had all those kind of acts with us. One woman doing a chair dance, dancing with a rope, yeah all them was specialist---



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