

Anita Williams-Holzhausen

*African American Musicals Translated into German:
An Empirical Exploration of Their Transcultural Communicability
and Artistic Veracity*

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Joachim Kornelius, Jekatherina Lebedewa (Hg.)

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0 Introduction and Purpose of the Investigation

The purpose of this research is to bring awareness to the immense potential the discipline Translation Studies has for becoming an essential tool for successful intercultural communication when using an artistic medium such as American Musical Theatre for the sharing of works pertaining to American subcultures – in this case, African American Musicals – in translation.

In recent years, more calls have been made to place more focus on song translation or the translation of texts for music within Translation Studies. Because this is such a new field, many aspects of this discipline remain unexplored, including pertinent elements such as assessing the transcultural communicability of selected texts as well as the maintenance of artistic veracity in translation. This remains true concerning the translation of African American Musicals for German Musical Theatre venues. Although numerous American Musicals have been consistently and successfully transferred to Germany and have been performed in the German language since the 1950s, at this writing, this cannot be said of any African American Musical.

This research does not attempt to determine why this has been the case in the past; instead, the following research takes a more progressive approach. This investigation is interdisciplinary; the fields of Cultural Studies, Musical Theatre History and Translation Studies have been consistently researched and addressed throughout the work. Therefore, this work is targeted towards aspiring translators from various disciplines, including the above mentioned, and more specifically for those who are interested in the sharing of the African American cultural, linguistic and artistic contributions to and influences on American society in the German language.

The methodological approach towards the investigation can be divided into three parts. The first part (chapters one and two) is descriptive; the second part (chapters three and four) is primarily investigative; and the third and final part concerns the practical applications involved in the research process. The goal of this work is to investigate the contextual elements of the longest-running and highest-grossing African American Musical on Broadway in order to identify perceived barriers in intercultural communication which may hinder the fluid translation of such a musical in German. Upon the identification and thorough analysis of these elements, a further goal will be to create a manual and guide to assist translators in more effectively understanding, and when necessary, localizing or implementing the unique cultural elements in the translations of African American Musicals. The final goal will be to apply the use of this manual in a practical situation involving student translators at the University of Heidelberg's Institute for Translating and Interpreting.

This work can also be divided into three parts. The first part of the research is composed of chapters one and two. The collective function of these chapters is descriptive and serves to present a concise history of African American Musical Theatre and its origins so that the translator will undoubtedly be made aware of the powerful cultural significance – and influence – this genre has had on American society and

continues to have on it to this day. By understanding how this genre is derived from culturally-rich classical music genres and has been consistently and strategically used as a vehicle to reflect American values, ideals and perspectives, aspiring translators in this field will be made aware that the often nuanced implementation of specific cultural elements into translated Musical Theatre song texts is imperative for transcultural, mutual understanding.

The first chapter focuses on black or African American Musical Theatre: Because the circumstances surrounding its development differ vastly from that of mainstream American Musical Theatre, it is necessary to present the historical origins of this subgenre, thereby providing translators with a concise, yet in-depth account of the political, theatrical, financial and subcultural influences. Throughout the history of African American Musical Theatre, the sociological factors surrounding this style of entertainment and the depiction of black or African American characters on stage have either starkly contributed to or detrimentally impeded the advancements of and exposure to the art form. The research in this chapter will provide more information and insight to translators on the cultural perspectives reflected concerning black or African American Musical Theatre. Ultimately, the translator will be presented with the profound significance of both the lexical, sociological and cultural factors which are pertinent to the accurate interpretation and comprehension of the subgenre, stressing the importance of reflecting on all three of these factors during the translation process.

The second chapter of research provides a succinct description of Germany's historical relationship to the genre Musical Theatre. The uniqueness of the German culture as well as the historical development of the nation has had great influence on the level of Musical Theatre's acceptance throughout the country. Until very recently, there has been a drastic deficit in the cultivation of the performing art in Germany. However, the fact that there has been a steady increase in interest within the country since the 1990s, coupled with the established practice of exposing younger generations to Musicals in schools as a state requirement within German states such as Bavaria and Baden Wuerttemberg, proves that the nation is attempting to overcome the extensive limitations placed upon the development and acceptance of Musical Theatre as a culturally-significant performing art form since it was introduced to the country after World War II. These signals are clear indications that Musical Theatre will continue to gain stature within Germany and be used for both entertainment and the transcultural edification of the nation, thus emulating the practices already implemented in the American and British cultures.

The second part of the research focuses on the investigation of student translators at the University of Heidelberg's Seminar für Übersetzen und Dolmetschen and is immediately followed by an investigation into analyzing contents of African American Musicals. These investigations, the process and their findings are divided into chapters four and five.

Chapter three takes into consideration how the biography of a translator can directly affect his or her ability to successfully produce translations of Musicals using