Introducing *Four Saints in Three Acts*

In early February 1934, a red velvet curtain slowly parted in the Wadsworth Atheneum's intimate subterranean theater. After a long drumroll, the stage began to fill with black singers draped in richly colored vestments. Artfully posed beneath feathered trees and beaded arches, the ersatz sixteenth-century saints began to sing:

> To know to know to love her so
> Four saints prepare for saints.
> It makes well fish.
> Four saints it makes well fish.

The 299 members of the audience who heard these words to the orchestra's vigorous oompah rhythm could use no conventional measure to evaluate what they were seeing and hearing. Even the opera's title, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, was misleading: there were more than a dozen saints and four acts. Nor did anything that followed the opening chorus offer more

One of Al Hirschfeld's earliest caricatures, of *Four Saints in Three Acts.* (Copyright © Al Hirschfeld. Art reproduced by special arrangement with Hirschfeld's exclusive representative, the Margo Feiden Galleries, Ltd., New York.)

than a hint of meaning. The libretto told no coherent story, the staging and costumes were deeply eccentric, and most of the lines made no apparent sense. The cellophane set, brilliantly lit to evoke a sky hung with rock crystal, defied comparison to anything the audience had ever seen. The music was too naïve, too simple, and too American for an opera. Yet when the final curtain fell, many found themselves caught between tears and wild applause. Later they found that they could no more explain their extravagant reactions than they could the opera they had just seen.

After its move to Broadway two weeks later, it became difficult to recapture the novelty of that evening. *Variety* reported that the opera had appeared in more newspaper columns than any production in the past decade. Nationally broadcast over Columbia Radio, the phrase "pigeons in the grass alas" entered popular vocabulary. Along Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf

Goodman and Elizabeth Arden rushed *Four Saints* motifs into their Easter store windows, and Gimbel's advertised a new line of patterned linen tablecloths called "Instead of," "After a While," and "Have to Have," phrases taken from the libretto. Against all odds, *Four Saints in Three Acts* became the longest-running opera in Broadway history and America's most legendary, and unlikely, performance collaboration.

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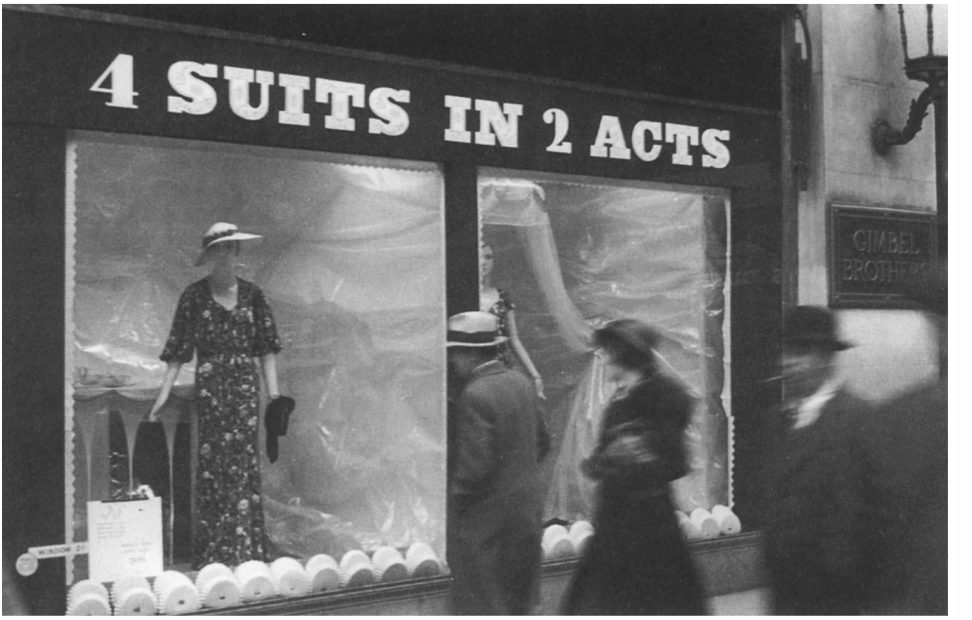
Gertrude Stein wrote the libretto, and Virgil Thomson set her words to music. Florine Stettheimer designed its fantastic sets and costumes, John Houseman made his debut as theater director, and Frederick Ashton sailed from London to choreograph dancers whom he recruited from Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. Chick Austin, director of Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum, produced the opera to christen the first architecturally modern wing in an American museum.

For some the opera was a onetime brush with modernism; for others a vehicle for long-overdue recognition. For all involved it remained a touchstone. Chick Austin's wife, Helen, called it "the great period." Thirteen years after the opera's premiere, high-bohemian hostess Constance



Four Saints invades Gimbel's and other Fifth Avenue stores, Easter 1934.

Askew sweepingly declared its collective importance for her generation: "It *does* stand for the best part of our lives."[1] The elaborately intertwined lives of the collaborators provide a window onto the brilliant generation that defined modern taste and stylishness in the early years of the Depression.

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The eldest of the collaborators, sixty-three-year-old Florine Stettheimer, became the first American painter to participate in a stage production, extending Sergei Diaghilev's practice of inviting artists to design sets and costumes. The opera offered Stettheimer a chance—the only chance in her life—to see her work realized on a lavish scale.

Four Saints opened six months after the publication of Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas.* Stein had always desired *la gloire,* and, at sixty, she had finally been transformed from an object of ridicule into a best-selling author. Yet, as the waves of publicity for *Autobiography* and *Four Saints* engulfed her throughout the opera's runs in Hartford and New York, Stein couldn't write. She had at last found fame in her native land, but lost her literary identity.

Virgil Thomson used the opera's success to storm the citadel of America's musical establishment—what he called the "German-American musical complex"—which had excluded him. Thomson's music did not fit the dissonant vogue of the contemporary avant-garde, and those who championed modern music had largely ignored him. He would look back on the opera as a pivotal moment in his career.

For the black cast, the opera was a landmark event. Never before had African Americans been cast in a work that did not depict black life. Never before had they been paid for rehearsals. And never before had an all-black cast performed in an opera before white audiences.

For thirty-three-year-old impresario and museum director Chick Austin, the night of the opera's premiere was the pinnacle of his career. With *Four Saints* he inaugurated the world's first architecturally modern museum wing and simultaneously staged America's first Pablo Picasso museum retrospective. Friends and colleagues called him the three-ring-circus master of modernism. He wedded stylishness and modern museum practice, daring and caprice, and in the process transformed Hartford into "the New Athens."

Director John Houseman referred to the opera as "the womb of my career."[2] He had previously supported himself by selling grain futures and