

'America, be seated!'

By Frederick H. Guidry

"America, Be Seated!" sings out a lighthearted call for people all over the United States to find refuge from racial tension in a relaxed acceptance of the American ideal of equality.

Mike Todd, Jr. has produced what he is pleased to term a "modern minstrel show." Let the purists argue how far it strays from traditional forms and emerges as a flashy, determinedly integrated revue. Audiences may puzzle over how it ever found a prospective home in the Louisiana Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. But traditions and prejudices alike are cheerfully bulldozed aside by this high-powered variety show.



The 16-member cast comes on like 60, with shining faces set in permanent grins, spanking new costumes a blaze of yellow and orange, and a ring of sincerity in their song: "Things are getting better all the time!"

Of course, "America, Be Seated!" is not by a long shot devoted only to optimistic jesting about integration. Much of the time the blending of dark and light-skinned performers is unobtrusive, and the audience is allowed to concentrate on the entertainment at hand.

But the struggle for full equality is never very far from a lyric or a joke. The opening number—that one about how things are getting better—wryly observes "We haven't a lot of time to read/ But can we picket, yes indeed!"

And a comedy routine finds a white director blithely trying to get a Negro to take a plantation-era role in his heavily dialectal play. Blurts the incredulous Negro: "I'm chairman of the local chapter of CORE, and you're going to call me Rastus?"

Still later, Mae Barnes sings her refusal to "play Topsy." As the piano sidles into "Swanee River," she snaps querulously, "That's your river, not mine!"



Timmie Rogers, whose integration jokes refreshingly cut both ways, joshes the audience with this entry: "I know what you all are thinking out there: Just another Italian singer. . . ." With a sympathetic nod to worried whites, he invents an organization to vie with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality). He calls it SPONGE. (See the show to find out what it stands for).

"America, Be Seated!" makes at least a few of the proper gestures in the direction of traditional minstrelsy: there's a "Please, Mr. Banjo" number, and one with tambourines; once or twice a semicircle shapes up behind the interlocutor, and two endmen come forward for a timeworn joke; there's

a song about the hummingbird, and a priceless quartet extolling the dubious joys of a life at sea.

But the show's real era is not that of 19th-century blackface but of 20th-century vaudeville and nightclub. Sy Oliver's sophisticated arrangements are a far cry from twanging banjos, and Ronny Graham's direc-

tion aims at the slick precision of the hit Broadway musical. David Axlerod's sketches and lyrics, and Sam Pottle's easily forgettable but eminently servicable music, Winn Morton's settings and costumes, and Peter Conlow's choreography mesh neatly to guarantee a two-hour grin to fair-minded Fair-goers.