

# Our Stage History, Almost Forgotten, Is Well Worth Knowing and Being Proud Of

New York, Aug. 1.—Diggers and delvers into the beginning of things find the name Ira Aldrich when they search for facts concerning the American Negro and the stage. As far back as 1789 Aldrich was acclaimed a great Othello, one of the greatest, but he never performed in this country.

All his stage appearances were in England and the tradition is handed down that royalty often swooned or was rendered limp by the dramatic intensity of his acting. Thus the Colored actor of today ought not to be without some hereditary acting genius.

However, there appears to be a great hiatus in Aframerican dramatic talent bridging Ira Aldrich and the first Colored performers of any import. Perhaps there were earlier attempts to worship at the shrine of the nubian Thespiis, but none has been handed down for the records prior to 1821-'23, which saw the first organized attempt by the Race in New York city to establish a theater of their own. The star of the troupe was one Hewlett, first name unknown, and the most successful play was "Richard III." Their theater was situated in the African grove at the corner of Bleecker and Mercer Sts. But the project, according to G. C. D. Odell, in his "Annals of the New York Stage," was short-lived. The authorities feared civic disturbances and ordered the players to appear before a magistrate. Upon a promise never to act Shakespearean drama again, they were dismissed.

The next important dramatic movement, and the first which the old folks and other authoritative persons in Harlem can call to mind, were the Hyar sisters, who thrived about 1870 in all western cities where the Colored population was sizeable and theater-going. The Hyar sisters had been well known as concert singers among their Race, but failure to make the popularity grade in white music circles prompted their producing venture. With Dad Lucas as their mainstay, they presented a limited repertoire in which the most popular fare was "The Octoroon" and "Out of Bondage." Dad Lucas later became famous under the Frohman management as the original Uncle Tom. But the most versatile member of the troupe, it is said, was Tom Brown, whom many a dusky old woman still remembers with fluttering heart.

Knowledge of other negroid dramatic enterprises is not available again until 1897, when Lew Payton, who played Pa Williams in "Harlem," attempted an all-Colored version of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," himself playing "Uncle Tom."

"Black Patti's Troubadours" The beginning of the 20 century was more prodigious in nurturing Colored theatricals. Between 1901 and 1904 were crystallized what were perhaps the most important and practical movements toward the realization of acting equality. In a way they might be called the emancipators of the Race actor, for unconsciously they were his training school, his beginning as a factor in American drama, a beginning which only his present status on Broadway makes manifest.

These were the efforts of the brothers, Tutt (Salem Whitney and J. Homer) and Jed Green. The former were actors who decided to branch out as producers. So Salem Tutt-Whitney, as he was called, wrote and directed "The Ex-President of Liberia," a musical comedy, and also played its blackface comedian. This toured and retoured all the available Colored theaters in the country for about five years. Upon its cessation, Salem Tutt wrote "Black Patti's Troubadours" and toured with it until 1908. In 1909 the brothers Tutt settled down to the experiment of a stock company in Knoxville, Tenn., with the idea of venturing one dramatic offering in every four musicals. The experiment was short-lived, lasting less than a full season, and shortly afterward the Tutts returned to musical things exclusively.

Jed Green was responsible for the first dramatic movement recorded for the North. He founded the Pekin Stock company in Chicago. The group got its name from the old Pe-

kin theater owned by Bob Motts. Among those who got their start with the Pekines are Charles Gilpin, Miller and Lyles, Lieutenant Tim Brynna, J. Frances More, Pearl White (not the former serial film star), Earnest Hogan, Lawrence Chenault, William Cook, Joe Jordan, Jessie Ship and Lotta Grady.

## The Beginnings in Chicago

Another stock company was founded almost simultaneously at the Indiana theater in Chicago. Charles Moore was its chief attraction and he performed colored versions of such plays as "My Lady's Garter" and "The Voice in the Dark." Things were more or less uneventful, since the growth of the Race theater is marked mainly by the development of its stars. Thus nothing was heard of the Indiana theater again until 1909, when Susie Sutton came to the fore in "The Return of Eve." The Pekin, however, continued as the really enterprising unit. It adventured with new plays and players prodigally. In 1908, for instance, it made history with the advent of Clarence Muse in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and in "Hearts in Dixie"—the stage play, not the picture.

Then, about 1912, Philadelphia's theatrical actor was heard from. Evelyn Ellis, who played one of the leads in "Porgy," beguiled with "Goat Alley." But Chicago continued in the dramatic lead up to and including 1916, when the Pekin presented Cleo Desmond and Andrew Bishop (the same Bishop who played Kid Vamp in the Chicago company of "Harlem") in "Parlor, Bedroom and Bath," and Shirlette Freeman in "The Brute." A year later Andrew Bishop was instrumental in starting a dramatic company at the Howard theater in Washington, playing "The Servant in the House."

In 1917 an actress named Anita Bush, fired with the success of her brethren in Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington, started a playlet company at the Lincoln theater, New York being the goal of all actors, white or black. Miss Bush had no difficulty in attracting the best of her race from other cities. When they were banded together dissension apparently arose within the ranks, and so Charles Gilpin moved his compatriots over to the Lafayette theater and founded the now famous Lafayette Players.

The membership listed those who have since come to be regarded as the dramatic stars of the acting profession—Charles Gilpin, Abbie Mitchell, Laura Bowman, Clarence Muse, Cleo Desmond, Ida Anderson, Andrew Bishop, Sidney Kirkpatrick, Evelyn Ellis, Charles Olden, A. B. De Comalliere, Jack Carter and Frank Wilson. Those among them who later became famous for their characterizations in ofay (white) plays are Charles Gilpin, who was seen in "Abraham Lincoln," "The Emperor Jones" and "White Mule," and Abbie Mitchell in "Coquette" and "Porgy." Another actress to win favor among white audiences is Rose McClendon, whose performances in "Porgy," "Earth" and "In Abraham's Bosom," were tantamount to stardom.

The foregoing by no means exhausts the list of present-day players.

In 1917 Boston was the scene of the attempts of Sterling Wright to make off with the laurels of his forerunner, Ira Aldrich. His Othello apparently took the Bostonians by storm, for the Lafayette Players invited him down to New York and he gave a series of performances here. And in 1918, risen out of comparative obscurity, there were Emily Hagood's Colored Players, who was so compelling a troupe that Robert Edmund Jones staged one of their productions at the Garrick theater, "Simon the Cyrinlian." This was probably the first instance of a Colored company holding the stage in the glare of the Broadway lights.

According to my informant, Billy Pierce, the veteran dance instructor who happened to be the manager of the theater in Norfolk at the time. The Attacks had one Luke Scott as their guiding spirit. For four years or more he presented Colored versions of such popular successes as "Way Down East," "Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl," "Madame X" and "999." These were made unique by the fact that Colored audiences were most unsympathetic toward their serious themes and, in order to make them attractive, blackface comedians

had to be dragged in by the heels for each.

In "999," for example, the hero was a locomotive engineer who knelt on the cowcatcher of the onrushing train and scooped up the beautiful heroine in the nick of time. Scott's favorite stunt was to do acrobatics across the length of the prop engine as it lumbered and snorted onto the stage. Then, by cooing a few words of love as the train approached the prostrate form of the girl on the tracks, had her leap into his arms at the crucial moment. For this climax, and burlesques of similar nature the audiences came back night after night, else Mr. Scott could never have endured for such long seasons, for Race audiences are sparse, even in such Colored-abounding towns as Norfolk, Va.

Though the Colored person is generally regarded as a comedian first and a dramatic actor last, the Race musical field had comparatively no outstanding personalities, save Bert Williams and George Walker, until "Shuffle Along," the first musical comedy designer for white consumption, came into the ken of Broadway. But the Race musical comedy stage was not without fine representation during the intervening years. Salem Tutt-Whitney and J. Homer Tutt, shortly after their dramatic venture in Knoxville, Tenn., took over Gus Hill's "Smart Set" company and called its new version "The Smarter Set." It prospered during its tour and Whitney and Tutt thus were enabled to produce something like 12 musical comedies between 1909 and 1915, or at the rate of two a year. They helped to bring out such Colored musical comedy talent as Mamie Smith, the phonograph songstress; Adelaide Hall and Eddie Rector of "Blackbirds," Blanche Calloway, Harriette Calloway, star of the second "Blackbirds" company; Blanche Thompson of "Show Boat," and Margaret Simms. Those in the Colored dramatic sector who first got their start with Whitney and Tutt are Charles Olden, Leigh Whipper of "Porgy," Clarence Robinson, Alonzo Fenderson of the Chicago company of "Harlem," and Edna Wise Barr and Nat Cash of the resident "Harlem" company at the Times Square.

The humble though distorted efforts of the Attacks cannot be overlooked as contributory to the development of Race histrionism in America. The Attacks flourished in Norfolk, Va., in 1917. Most of the Colored theaters in the country, incidentally, are named Attacks theater, so called in tribute to Crispus Attacks, a slave whose memory is perpetuated historically by a statue on the Boston common. Attacks was reputed to be an entertainer in his own small way and in the riot against the British in 1775 he was shot down by the Redcoats, a circumstance which made him the first human killed in defense of this country. The more facetious members of the "Harlem" company had another theory. They are inclined to think that he had performed for the British the day before, and that the British, upon recognizing him in the front ranks of the rioters, instantly revenged themselves.

It is interesting to note that the total number of Race theaters in America is approximately 400, and that most of them alternate between musical and dramatic stock. Eighty of these theaters comprise a sort of vaudeville chain known as T. O. B. A., or "Toba." Its full name is Theater Owners' Booking association, but the incorrigibles among the Colored vaudevillians prefer to interpret the initials as representing "Tough on Black Actors." The most popular performers on the circuit is a team called "Butterbeans and Susie," or Mr. and Mrs. Edwards in private life. Their reputed salary is \$700 a week, which indubitably makes them the biggest stars on the chain.

But the invasion of manuscripts depicting Race life, coupled with the cycle of kindred photoplays, is bringing the Colored dramatic actor into the foreground of contemporary histrionism, and possibly into his deserving own, for he is emotionally equipped to give the art of acting a savor of genuineness.—C. A. Leonard, New York Times.