

# CRITIC REVIEWS UNUSUAL THEATRE SEASON OF 1936

## Year Is Distinguished By First Negro Theatre

"Macbeth" Gave WPA Project International  
 Attention—"Sweet River" Brought New  
 Star in Inge Hardison to Spotlight

By ROI OTTLEY

Footprints on the sands of the theatre were made this year by the Negro. True, they were at times halting, timid steps, but they left definite and unmistakable impressions. The trail blazed, the succeeding seasons should give us a developed art form in the theatre—and thus injecting a needed virus in a wan and failing American theatre.

Perhaps, the outstanding development of the 1936 season was the creation of a Negro Federal Theatre project, with Negro leadership. At the outset, the theatre was in the hands of John Housman, white, but it was recognized that it could never be a truly Negro theatre with him at the helm.

### Macbeth Significant.

"Macbeth" was John Housman's most commendable production from the box-office viewpoint. But it was not Negro theatre. The Shakespeare tragedy gave the Federal Theatre (insol and glamour but threatened to start a vicious vogue in drama.

With the Negro personnel now in charge of the destinies of the theatre there can no longer be any excuse for the Negro viewpoint not being intelligently and accurately interpreted. To be sure, we have a floundering, inexperienced leadership there. But since, at best, a Negro theatre is experimental, flaws in technique and writing are pardonable.

The present theatre should at least be distinguished for its authenticity and audaciousness at getting to the kernel of the subjects it treats.

The year began with "Mulatto" and "Porgy and Bess" still on the Broadway boards from the previous year 1935. "Porgy and Bess" with John W. Bubbles, Abbie Mitchell, Edward Matthews, Ruby Elzy, Todd Duncan, Anne Brown and Warren Coleman continued as one of the sensations of the theatre season, and justified its boast of being an "American folk operetta." It was, however, not a Negro operetta, as some would lead us to believe, since it contained nothing of the Negro idiom in its music or form.

### Mulatto Disappointing.

"Mulatto," with Mercedes, was also continued into the 1936 season and continued a disappointment to those who expected more than the "sensational" from a left-wing writer of the calibre of Langston Hughes. The author, however, was represented this year by two new productions, "Little Ham" and "Troubled Island," which were done by the Gilpin Players in Cleveland.

The WPA Negro theatre started its dramatic rise to national interest with Frank Wilson's "Walk Together Chillun," with Gus Smith in the lead supported by Alberta Perkins, Percy Verwayen and Lionel Monagas.

George White had his premiere of the "Scandals" with Sam, Ted and Ray dancing in a scene titled "Scassie and His Army," which proved the hit of the show. Edgar Battler, a trumpeter with unusual musicianship, lead a number called "The Pied Piper of Harlem" with success in the same production.

The WPA theatre came back with "Conjur Man," starring Lionel Monagas, with excellent performances by Wardell Saunders and Louis Sharpe. The production with its Frimbo gag drew to the theatre its first real audience.

### Baker Arrives.

About this time, Josephine Baker invaded these shores and in "Ziegfeld Follies" as the star, she was a distinct success. Across the street, Ethel Waters was stopping the show nightly in "At Home Abroad." These two performers carried the mantle of the Negro thespian with regal mein throughout their runs.

"Macbeth" arrived at the Lafayette amid much ballyhoo and fanfare. This production proved significant because of its subtle attack on

## Ten Best

(1936)

1. Edna Thomas, Lady Macbeth, "Macbeth."
2. John W. Bubbles, Sportin' Life, "Porgy and Bess."
3. Inge Hardison, Topsy, "Sweet River."
4. Jack Carter, Macbeth, "Macbeth."
5. Todd Duncan, Porgy, "Porgy and Bess."
6. Mercedes Gilbert, Mother, "Mulatto."
7. Anne Brown, Bess, "Porgy and Bess."
8. Walter Price, Uncle Tom, "Sweet River."
9. Thos. Moseley, Noah, "Noah."
10. James Adam, King, "Bassa Moona."

because of its subtle attack on belief that Negroes were not sufficiently finished as actors to play Shakespeare. This vehicle gave the Negro theatre international attention. Jack Carter and Edna Thomas easily distinguished themselves in this play.

Low Leslie, after casting about for performers, organized a new "Blackbirds" company, with Maude Russell, Rosamond Johnson's Choir, Jules Bledsoe, Nicholas Brothers, Four Bobs and Jim Moore, and took it to England, where it continues as one of the features of London's theatre season.

Following "Macbeth," the WPA theatre offered "Turpentine," a social drama by Gus Smith and Peter Morrell, with Gus Smith in the principal role. Thomas Moseley and Alberta Perkins aided considerably in making this effort a passable vehicle.

### Modernized Uncle Tom.

Harlem's eyes then turned toward the Flatlo where George Abbott was putting on a modernized version of Uncle Tom's Cabin under the label "Sweet River" with Juano Hernandez, as Gabe; Inge Hardison as Topsy and Juanita Hall's Choir, and Walter Price as a new Uncle Tom.

The show proved to be a personal triumph for the youngster, Inge Hardison, who gave a depth and humor that was previous lacking from this hoary character. Juano Hernandez was capable as Gabe and Walter Price sensitive as Tom. The vehicle also offered a timid but important beginning in interracial love teams. Margaret Mullen, white, playing Liza opposite Juano Hernandez.

Leonard Stillman offered his 1936 version of "New Faces" prominently casting Winnie Johnson, Stretch Johnson, Billie Haywood and Cliff Allen. Winnie Johnson's rendition of "It Must Be Religion" stood above a capable cast.

The Negro Theatre came through with a poetic piece titled "Noah" adapted by Carlton Moss. The title role was played by Thomas Moseley with skill and finesse, but this fine actor was unable to lift an indifferent play to any heights. The offering was badly geared for its public, because the stress was on acting rather than on story and action.

### Noah Poetic.

On the heels of "Noah" came "Bassa Moona," authored and directed by Momodu Johnson. This one proved to be an exciting though unimportant work. James Adams as the Village King gave strokes of reality and humor to his interpretation, which cause his acting to stand out from a large and competent cast.

The curtain of 1936 came down on a miserable thing by Donald Heywood titled "Black Rhythm" and produced by Earl Dancer. It gave Jenni LeGon, that bright Hollywood star, her first and lamented appearance on Broadway. The production should never had left the rehearsal hall.

### Cullen Represented.

Countee Cullen was represented by a piece called "One Way to Heaven," but it had a Philadelphia opening. It was the first Negro play to be presented by Jasper Decker and his group, since "In Abraham's Bosom" in 1927. The cast included, Robert Watson, Goldie Ervin and Mattie Johnson.

The year had its other significant happenings including the closing of the Cleveland Negro Theatre and a demand by the Colored Actors and



SCENES from the highlight plays of the year.—Top, left to right, Bubbles and Hardison shown in "Porgy and Bess"; Inge Hardison as Topsy in "Sweet River" and "Bassa Moona" dancers. Below, left to right, Winnie Johnson, who scored in "New Faces"; Louis Sharpe, who appeared in "Turpentine"; and Juano Hernandez as Gabe in "Sweet River." Bottom, a scene from "Macbeth," the WPA vehicle.

Performers Association for a probe of the Negro Theatre housed at the Lafayette Theatre.

On the whole the year proved a happy one for the Negro in the theatre, and indicated that a still happier year is ahead, despite the fact that the commercial theatre did not produce a single All-Negro production.