

IRVIN C. MILLER WRITES ON PROBLEMS OF THE THEATRE

Says Negro Public Claims It Wants Better Shows, But Isn't Ready To Pay For 'Em

Declares, However, That With All Its Handicaps and Its Ups and Downs, the Future Negro Theatre is Bright and Hopeful.

By FLOYD J. CALVIN

NEW YORK, Feb. 10.—What kind of a man is Irvin C. Miller? Well, for one thing, I know he is a hard man to interview. I trailed him two weeks before I could make him sit still long enough to talk things over. He made an appointment with me for 6 o'clock. At 20 seconds to six I walked into the new "Foot-Lights" Club, Inc., of which he is president, at 115 West 131st street. He was picking up his hat. "Gee, you're prompt," he said, taking out his watch. "I was just getting ready to go. My chauffeur will be here in a minute and we will go to dinner."

The chauffeur was delayed and I was glad. I immediately took out my scribbling utensils, assumed an air of importance, and began writing away.

Mr. Miller is still a comedian at heart. "What songs have you written?" I queried. "Well," he answered, "I have written 'Suwannee River,' 'Old Black Joe,' and 'Kentucky Home,' the only trouble is somebody else wrote them before I did." "Did you ever play comedian in any of your shows?" I asked further. "Why, yes," he replied. "And I went over big. The public raved over me and is crying for me to come back. Everywhere I go the people are glad to see me. Even when I go down home my folks are glad to see me, my friends are glad to see me, the sheriff is glad to see me—in fact, everybody is glad to see me." And then he laughed heartily at his old jokes used back when he himself, was on the stage.

Mr. Miller at present has three shows on the road doing a gross average of \$6,000 a week (Brown-skin Models, Red Hot Mama and Desires of 1927) and is opening a fourth on January 31 in Washington called "Gay Harlem," which is now in rehearsal. He employs over 160 performers and has a payroll of about \$6,000 a week. His shows average 42 weeks a season. He owns and controls both Broadway Rastus, Inc., and the Irvin C. Miller Productions, Inc. Mr. Miller works on an average of 17 and 18 hours a day. He eats four and five meals a day, but weighs only 176 pounds and looks slim, since he is about six feet, one inch. He is 47 years old and has had more than one show on the road each season since 1921.

Irvin Colloden Miller was born in Columbia, Tenn. He graduated from Fisk University at Nashville in 1904, played left half back on the Fisk football team, played baseball, basketball, was boxer and runner. Mr. Miller said with a smile: "The only two things I still use from my athletic training is my running and boxing. When I do big talk, if my boxing can't back me up, my running can."

Finally Mr. Miller had had all the fun he wanted and we got down to business. "The greatest thing in my life is Time," he said decisively. "I am a student of time, and I can talk on that subject for hours. I do everything by a certain tempo. If I am back stage, without even seeing my audience or seeing a performer, I can tell if the show is fast enough to suit the audience, or too slow. If I am on the stage I can tell if a joke is too long before it gets to the point. I can tell if an audience is getting tired, and what takes it. I just feel those things instinctively, but that comes from studying them so long it has become a part of me. I run my business the same way—by a certain tempo."

Mr. Miller would punctuate his serious flashes by a joke or two, then he would get down to business again. "In business there is no Santa Claus," and he pounded on the table before him. "Colored men, especially, have got to learn this. Business is like the old Bible saying: 'You reap what you sow.' You won't get out of anything any more than what you put into it. Negroes have got to quit looking for somebody to give them something. They have got to learn to do business like anybody else, and rise or fall on their merits. There used to be a time when the white man coddled the Negro, because in a way he felt responsible for his condition, but that is not so any more. The only way any of us will get anything now is to go out and get it. Otherwise we won't get anything. Some day colored men will own theaters down town, but they will own them

to make money just like other people own them, and not for foolish notion of race pride. It is hard for colored men to get capital, but the only way they will get capital, is to get out and get it. The white man won't give it to them. Some few colored men, who have been in the business a long time are known for their integrity and business ability, may be able to command capital, but they will command it because the people who have money will believe they can make more money, and not because they are colored. In other words, the Negro has got to quit living in the past and learn the modern way of doing things, and do them that way, or he will be left behind, abused and exploited."

"What about the Negro public?" I asked. "The Negro public pretends it wants better shows," he said, "but it isn't willing to pay for them. Negroes will go into white theaters where they can only sit in the balcony and pay double the price they are charged in a colored theater for orchestra seats. And some of the shows they see are no better than those offered in their own theaters. What the Negro public must learn is it is up to change conditions if it is not satisfied with the present. If they don't appreciate anything better by patronizing it, they won't get anything better."

The highest price Mr. Miller ever paid a performer was \$3,000 a week. This sum went to Jack Johnson. The highest he ever paid a woman performer was \$750 a week. "What of the colored performer?" I asked. "The colored performers are loyal," he said. "Most of them, be it said to their credit, would rather work for a colored man than a white man. The men are further advanced than the women, but this is because women have been discouraged from the stage. Still, women can make more money in an honest way in this field than in any other. The grade of the performer is improving. Many college people are coming in, simply because the stage is becoming better understood. The average person, when thinking of going on the stage, used to fear it because they didn't understand it. Now they know it is all right if they make it all right, and better talent is coming in."

"What of the press' attitude?" I asked, with fear and trembling. Mr. Miller looked at me with a smile. "Well," he began, "since you asked me I'm going to tell you. The press is inadequate in its theatrical department. It doesn't have competent men in charge of the work. First of all, the reporters who come to see the shows are more interested in the chorus girls than in the shows. I have had them to come to review my shows and never ask to see me or the company manager. They don't know what kind of handicaps we are under, and don't care. The owners of the newspapers are fair in their attitude, and want to help, but it's the men assigned to the jobs who fall down. I want to give *The Pittsburgh Courier* credit, however, for making an intelligent effort to get the stage and performers understood. The *Courier's* feature articles are educating the public to an understanding of our problems, and that means we won't be so badly misjudged in the future. Our stage needs criticism all right, but it needs constructive criticism. I remember when my 'Put and Take' first opened on Broadway. All the white papers gave us fine reviews. But one colored man on an important white paper, knew the truth about what a shoestring basis we were working on and came out and told about it in his paper, and that one review did us more harm than would be imagined. Now there were 70 colored people there trying hard to do something worth while, and a favorable word from him would have made it unanimous and our prospects would have been much improved. But his article actually made our road harder to travel. The Negro show business isn't strong enough for real criticism yet. We have first got to get a show business."

Two of Mr. Miller's productions are revues and one a musical comedy. A revue is a series of beautiful scenes, without any necessary connection. A musical comedy must have a book, and have a thread of a story. "Red Hot Mama" is the musical comedy. The revue is more in favor because it can be cut or lengthened, according to the theatre management's desire or policy. It costs about \$6,000 to produce a show of the Miller type. The largest he has produced cost \$10,000, *Brownskin Models*. All this money must be gotten back in one season, with profit, he explained, as a new season must see new scenery, property and everything. Women performers average \$30 a week, while men average \$40; men taking principals average \$75; women principals average \$60.

"What of the future of the business?" I asked. "The future is bright and hopeful," he answered. "My generation of producers inherited absolutely nothing in a business way from the old. All we got was a good name in acting, while the white man handled the money. Our present day producers have had to learn everything on the business side. But we are making the way easier for the next generation. Before my day it was unheard of for a colored man to get pay for stage material, but now I buy it from our own writers, and others buy it. We are also training company managers, stage managers, artists, etc. I am a Tufts graduate. We are training men in all departments and the next generation should do much more than we have been able to do."

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