

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK THEATRE IN AMERICA

BLACK THEATRE IN THE 19TH & 20TH CENTURIES



Most Blacks in America arrived in the United States as enslaved people between 1619 and 1808. Many were transported to work on small farms and plantations in the South. There were, however, Blacks that earned their freedom and worked for small landowners or in the households of town dwellers. These Blacks were concentrated in the cities of Philadelphia, Boston and New York.

When we, as modern Americans, think of the cornerstone of theatre- we tend to think of Broadway. We think of this despite our ethnic ancestry. Given our modern notion of what constitutes theatre, we often don't realize that before the 20th century, theatre was an art-form that dominated Europe and

Eurasia and not the United States. The earliest exposure that America had to theatre came in the 18th century in the form of touring companies from England, when the territory was still a British colony. By the latter part of the century, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City became the theatrical centers of America.

Most of the theatrical entertainments that toured through those growing centers featured star performers who presented short dramatic excerpts from Shakespeare's plays and other European-born melodramas.

As the recently independent United States came upon the 19th century, there were a number of free Blacks who worked as skilled artisans in trades such as blacksmithing or carpentry. Then, there were those who worked on the docks loading and unloading boats and sailing on ships.

THE AFRICAN GROVE THEATRE

William Brown and James Hewlett founded the first formal black theatre company in New York City in 1821- **The African Company of The African Grove Theatre**, while slavery was still legal in the state of New York. There had been two previous unsuccessful attempts to create a black theatre company in New York City. Brown & Hewlett's venture proved to be the most commercially



successful. However, the theatre was burned down in 1826 after city officials shut it down due to complaints of "improper conduct" among the theatre's black audience (conduct that was acceptable and common among white theatre goers of the time). The African Grove launched the prestigious career of one of the 19th century's leading Shakespearean actors: Ira Aldridge. Aldridge went on to have greater success in Russia and England.

Two men who would unknowingly go on to make history, William Henry Brown and James Hewlett, were among those free men working on ships as stewards. Within this line of work, they found themselves traveling frequently between England, New York, and the Caribbean. During those travels, they were exposed to the world of theatre.

Both Hewlett and Brown lived primarily in New York City, where Black and White communities were segregated. Free Blacks were excluded from public schools, prohibited from interstate travel, barred from voting in many states, and harassed by hostile mobs. As a result, free Blacks formed their own institutions and organizations, which would soon include theatre.



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William Brown was a free Black, born somewhere in the West Indies who essentially retired from his job as a steward on a Liverpool liner and purchased a house at 38 Thompson Street in New York City's lower Manhattan. There, he offered a variety of vocal and instrumental entertainments in the tea garden of his home. One of his frequent guests was James Hewlett, a fellow steward and a theater enthusiast with whom Brown had observed performances from the balcony at Price Park Theater. After attracting a growing audience for the Sunday afternoon performances, and moving to a new home and garden at Mercer and Bleeker Street, Brown and Hewlett endeavored two years later to convert the second story of Brown's new home to a 300-seat theatre establishment that they called the African Grove Theatre. Performances there became a popular novelty amongst white audiences who came to take in the curiosity of Black actors imitating European nobles, as the African Company of the African Grove Theatre periodically took on the works of Shakespeare in such plays as *RICHARD III* and

OTHELLO, as well as productions such as *TOM AND JERRY*; *THE POOR SOLDIER*; *DON JUAN*; and *OBI, OR, THREE-FINGER'D JACK*. James Hewlett was the first Black actor on record to actually play the role of Othello. Brown also wrote the first recorded African-American play: *THE DRAMA OF KING SHOTAWAY* in 1823, about the 1796 Black Carib War in St. Vincent (a West Indian island). No draft of the actual play survived over time. For the African Company's production of *RICHARD III*, they had opened at the same time as the Park Theatre's production of the same play starring the English tragedian Junius Brutus Booth (father of Edwin Booth, Junius Booth, Jr. and John Wilkes Booth). Competition was intense, and Park Theatre owner Stephen Price funded and orchestrated a disturbance over the rival production so that the police would shut down the African Grove.

The African Company of the African Grove Theatre was operating in New York City six years before the enslavement of Blacks completely ended in New York state. For three years, the African Grove played with a black cast and crew to mostly black audiences. Within the African Grove, White audience members were confined to a separate section under the convention that "whites do not know how to conduct themselves at entertainments for ladies and gentlemen of color."

Frequently harassed by the police and the white populace, the company moved several times, from Thompson Street to the Pantheon Theater on Mercer Street between Bleeker and Prince, to Houston and Mercer near the Park Theatre, to One Mile Stone on Broadway between Mercer and Prince, and finally to a rural site north of 14th Street. The theatre was "mysteriously" burned to the ground in 1826.

There are no records of the African Grove Theater after 1823 (the theatre opened circa 1822); however, the company was an important medium for Blacks to perform dignified roles for a cross-section of Black and White audiences during the time of its existence.

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While the African Grove was "mysteriously" burned to the ground in 1826, no one can really say with certainty exactly why the African Grove folded. Founder William Brown had also declared bankruptcy upon being unable to pay his debts. There was also a small pox epidemic in 1822 that may have had an impact on audiences, who could possibly be afraid to venture into the rural 14th street neighborhood.

When the African Company performed next door to Stephen Prices's Park Theater, newspaper

editor & sheriff Mordecai Noah had the actors jailed overnight until they promised not to perform there again. Noah assumed that they had gone away, but the African Company had something to show and they carried on.

Eventually, a band of thugs, many of whom worked for a circus which was actually owned by Price, bought tickets to an African Grove performance, and upon entering the theatre, beat up the actors and vandalized the stage. William Brown was assaulted on the streets. A 15-year-old actor by the name of Ira Aldridge was also attacked.

The actor Ira Aldridge, an important figure in theatre history, was nurtured in the African Grove and went on to international success after the theatre closed down.

Ira Aldridge was born free in the United States. He was the son of a Calvinist minister and he attended the African Free School in New York City. After participating in a few of the performances at the African Grove, he left for Europe where he achieved great success as a touring actor. He studied at the University of Glasgow and performed at theaters across Europe. He received the Prussian Gold Medal for Arts and Science, and was compared with the Roman actor Roscius (he was frequently called "the African Roscius" in publicity flyers). Aldridge died in Lodz, Poland at the age of sixty.

James Hewlett also enjoyed several years of success on his own after the African Grove Theatre was closed doing a one-man show.

After the African Grove is shut down, Hewlett began to break away from black theater. He ultimately became known for being a black actor impersonating famous white actors in their most famous roles: such as Edmund Kean's Richard III, or James Macready's Hamlet, as well as actors who hadn't yet come to America. It wasn't uncommon for rioting or trouble to break out at one of his performances. Hewlett began experimenting with the way theater was performed in New York City by having audience buy subscriptions and advance tickets, which would control the number of drunken attendees and limit the amount of trouble at a performance. Hewlett and his impersonations were popular for a while, but by the early 1830s, he was no longer in vogue. In fact, records indicate that Hewlett was twice convicted of theft and did two stints in prison. He ultimately returned to New York to die. The last known reference of James Hewlett is in Trinidad in 1839, where he had performed *Othello* to an audience of French planters.

When Charles Mathews satirized the African Grove Theater in their productions of Shakespeare, Hewlett wrote a letter which was published in the newspaper for which Mordecai Noah served as editor, saying:

"Why these reflections on our color, my dear Mathews, so unworthy of your genius and humanity, your justice and generosity? Our immortal bard says, (and he is our bard, as well as yours, for we are all descendents of the Plantagenets, the white and red rose;), our bard Shakespeare makes sweet Desdemona says, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind.' Now when you are ridiculing the 'chief black tragedian'- and burlesquing the 'real negro melody,' was it my 'mind' or my 'visage' which should have made an impression on you?"

It was the belief of the members of the African Company of the African Grove Theatre that the works of Shakespeare belong to all people, regardless of their skin color.



Ira Aldridge was an African-American stage actor, who later achieved true success on the British stage. He was known throughout London and Europe for his Shakespearean roles. Of the 33 actors of the English stage honored with bronze plaques at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, Ira Aldridge is the only one of African-American descent. He was also especially popular in Prussia (Germany) and Russia, where he received top honors from heads of state. Aldridge's first professional acting experience came while he was a teenager in the early 1820s with the African Company- the resident company of the African Grove Theatre. The African Company was a black theatre company operating in New York City while slavery was still legal there. While with the African Company, the young Aldridge appeared in small roles. After the African

Grove Theatre was closed down by police amidst racial tensions common of the time, Aldridge went to the Chatham Theatre to work backstage. He later made his debut in a leading role as Rolla in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *PIZZARO*, and went on to play Shakespeare's Romeo and Hamlet.

Confronted with the persistent discrimination which black actors endured in the United States, Aldridge (approximately 17 years-of-age) emigrated to England, where he first briefly attended the University of Glasgow in Scotland, then worked as a dresser to the British actor Henry Wallack.



By 1825, he had top billing at London's Coburg Theatre as Oronoko in *SURINAM, OR A SLAVE'S REVENGE*, soon to be followed by the role of Gambia in *The Slave*, and the title role of Shakespeare's *OTHELLO*. He also played major roles in plays such as *THE CASTLE SPECTRE* and *THE PADLOCK*, and played several roles of specifically white characters, including Captain Dirk Hatteraick and Bertram in Rev. R. C. Maturin's *BERTRAM*, the title role in Shakespeare's *RICHARD III*, and Shylock in *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*, and revived *TITUS ANDRONICUS*, which had not been staged in England for nearly two hundred years.

Aldridge first toured to continental Europe in 1852 with successes in Germany, where he was presented to the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, performed for Frederick William IV of Prussia, and performed in Budapest. He also received high praises from the composer Richard Wagner and the renowned tragedian Edmund Kean. An 1858 tour took him to Serbia and to Imperial Russia, where he became acquainted with Count Fyodor Tolstoy, Mikhail Shchepkin and the Ukrainian poet and artist Taras

Shevchenko. While in Russia, Aldridge was given the highest honor of the students of Moscow University: they unhitched the horses of his carriage and pulled the carriage through the streets of Moscow themselves.

He purchased some property in England, toured Russia again in 1862, and applied for British citizenship in 1863.

He received awards for his art from European heads of state and governments: the Prussian Gold Medal for Arts and Sciences from King Frederick William III, the Golden Cross of Leopold from the Czar of Russia, and the Maltese Cross from Berne, Switzerland. Aldridge's legacy was the inspiration behind the dramatic writing of African-American playwright Henry Francis Downing, who in the early twentieth century became "probably the first person of African descent to have a play of his or her own written and published in Britain." In 1979, Ira Aldridge was inducted posthumously into the New York Theater Hall of Fame- 150 years after he actually performed on a New York stage. In 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Ira Aldridge on his 100 Greatest African-Americans. The life of Ira Aldridge was the subject of the play *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti starring Adrian Lester, at the Tricycle Theatre in 2012. The Howard University Department of Theatre Arts has a small theater named after Ira Aldridge.



THE LEGACY OF IRA ALDRIDGE



Ira Aldridge was an African-American stage actor, whose first professional acting experience came as a teenager in the early 1820s with the African Company- the resident company of the African Grove Theatre. He went on to get top billing at London's Coburg Theatre before scoring the title role of Shakespeare's *OTHELLO*- from which he became celebrated as THE pioneering black Shakespearean. He also received high praises from the composer Richard Wagner.

Over seventy years after Ira Aldridge's humble beginnings, a woman in her 30s traveled to Germany to perform Wagner's *RING OF THE NIBELUNG* (which was also 20 years after the composer's death). The opera singer was Luranah Aldridge- an English native born of a Swedish mother and African-American father. She was the daughter of Ira Aldridge, and was named after Ira's mother.



The most interesting aspect of Luranah's appointment and her father's earlier praises from the composer was that Richard Wagner was actually a notorious racist. Wagner's belief in the superiority of the German people and his anti-semitism would later make him Adolf Hitler's favorite composer. Upon closer inspection, it is not difficult to ascertain how Wagner could come to admire a performer such as Aldridge. Despite his superiority complex, Wagner spoke highly of the Zulu people during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879- going so far as to say that the Zulus are as human as everyone else. Another aspect of the paradox in Wagner's praises comes in his relentless anti-semitism. Aldridge's portrayal of the Jewish character of Shylock in *The Merchant*

of Venice was uncommonly humanizing. Spectators of the era were not used to viewing the character in such a manner.

Ira Aldridge also made a great impression on Georg- the soon-to-be Duke of Saxe-Meiningen whose acting company would help change the face of western theatre in the late 19th century. The fact that Aldridge was the most visible black man in a white world, in the middle of the 19th century no less, inspired the leaders of the New Negro movement in the early 1900s. Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois held Ira Aldridge in the highest esteem. Du Bois named Aldridge as one of the Talented Tenth who would lead the black population into salvation. Du Bois himself discovered what Aldridge had learned while in Europe, that blacks with an intellectual distinction were viewed with wonder, rather than the resentment that was more common in America at the time. Du Bois would bring the Aldridge/Wagner paradox full circle by praising the universality of the operatic work of Wagner.

There is a grim aspect of the Ira Aldridge legacy, however. Of his four children, only one would have a story that did not end in tragedy. Ira Daniel Aldridge, the eldest son, had a failed acting career in Australia and fell into a life of crime. Ira Frederick Aldridge, a pianist and composer, suffered from delirium and committed suicide at the age of twenty-four. Luranah Aldridge was the child with the most promise. Many prominent critics praised her as one of the greatest voices...ever. After auditioning for

Augustus Harris, she was featured as one of the Valkyries in *THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG* in



London in 1898 and 1905. She also auditioned for Cosima Wagner (Richard Wagner's widow-who had become the most powerful woman in music) in Bayreuth. Ultimately, Luranah was denied a role in the Bayreuth production of *THE RING*, due to falling ill. Luranah went on to give recitals until the first World War, after which she became bed-ridden with rheumatism. In 1932, Luranah over-dosed on aspirin.

The light at the end of the dark tunnel of the Aldridge legacy actually came in the form of Amanda Aldridge- a singer, composer and teacher whose vocal students included Roland Hayes (the first African American man to win international fame as a concert performer), Marian Anderson (the first African American to perform with the New York Metropolitan Opera) and Paul Robeson. Robeson would later go on a career path similar to that of Ira Aldridge.

THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY



While the African Grove was "thriving" (as much as a black-owned business could at the time) in the free North, much of the wealth of the American South in the 1820s and 1830s depended upon the buying and selling of cotton. Field workers harvested and seeded the cotton so that it could be woven into high priced cotton thread.

By 1820 the institution of slavery had spread to the new "cotton kingdom" which included the more western states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. Many slaves were relocated, bought and sold, to support large plantations that were developing in these states.

In order to regulate the movements of enslaved blacks, individual states began to pass "black codes" or "slave codes" that limited the travel of both enslaved and free Blacks. For example, In 1793, the state of Virginia passed a law that prevented free blacks from even entering the state. Nine years later, the Virginia law was amended so that any free blacks in the state would be seized and sold as a slave. The slave codes were enacted at different times in the various Southern states.

Other examples include this Alabama law:

"any free person found in company with any slave in any kitchen, or house, or Negro quarter, without a written permission from the owner or overseer of such slave must, for every such offence, receive fifteen lashes; which may be inflicted by the owner, or overseer of the slave, or by any officer or member of a patrol company."

And then there is this North Carolina law:

"where the punishment of a white person might be imprisonment, the court may sentence the free Negro to be both whipped and imprisoned."

This was the environment that Blacks were living in while Black Theatre was in its early development.

As the United States spread westward in pursuit of its Manifest Destiny, controversy came about as each new state debated whether or not they should be a slave states or free states. This dissension reflected the growing tension between the industrial north and the agricultural south.

To diffuse that tension, there were those that believed that the solution rested in returning all Blacks to Africa. Such an effort came in 1816, when Paul Cuffe founded the American Colonization Society which sponsored the resettlement of nearly 20,000 Blacks in Liberia. Although some abolitionist and pro-slavery supporters, both black and white, supported the back-to Africa-movement, it gradually lost popularity. One reason was that it was ultimately too complicated and expensive to relocate so many free Blacks. Another was that the absence of enslaved Blacks would have created a huge labor shortage, thereby halting the nation's economic growth. A third reason for the loss of popularity of the back-to-Africa movement: Blacks had been so far removed from their African origins that the idea of being shipped back to Africa had the same social implications as shipping Africans to the Americas in the first place. After all, those Africans were now Americans for all intents and purposes.

During the abolitionist movement, Literature became a valuable tool in the illustration of the brutalities of slavery and was a way of depicting the humanity of Black people both enslaved and free. This is where Slave Narratives and novels about Black plantation life gained popularity among white audiences. Most people are at least somewhat familiar with the most popular abolitionist novel- *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher-Stowe.

Slave narratives, which were authored or co-authored by African Americans, countered the prevailing belief held by whites at the time that plantation life was a happy life.

Harriet Beecher-Stowe was the daughter of a white minister, and her book's portrayals of pious Black characters appealed to Northern Christian audiences, making the novel a best-seller, and such depictions intriguing to whites. Many of the characters were later seen as stereotypical. Uncle Tom, for instance, was the subservient protagonist. Then you had characters such as Topsy, the dark-skinned roustabout girl, Emmeline, the "beautiful" Octaroon (one-eighth black), and the Mammy figures represented of the house servants.

Slave narratives also began to appear in the theatrical realm. The play *The Escape* (1858) was an abolitionist treatise that was read (rather than performed) at anti-slavery gatherings. The characters were developed to show the diversity of Black archetypes. The play features Cato- a stereotypical "Sambo" slave who follows his master's orders.

As depictions of "Black life" moved from the page to the stage, the ultimate irony of showing such a life is realized: it was not Blacks who were performing these representations on the

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THE MINSTREL SHOW



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One could hardly call this Black Theatre, but it was what white America would have considered Black Theatre at that

time.

The Minstrel Show not only came out of the idea of the "slave narrative", but the structure and style also evolved from other American entertainments of the time. Such entertainments included the traveling circus, medicine shows (traveling horse and wagon teams which peddled "miracle cure" medications like 'snake oil'), shivaree (a raucous punishment dramatically enacted to humiliate), Irish dance, music with African syncopated rhythms, musical halls and traveling theatre. It was essentially a precursor to the Variety Show.

Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice (1808-60), considered the father of American minstrelsy, performed a song-and-dance routine in blackface and tattered clothes in a New York City theatre in 1828. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this followed the closing of the African Grove Theatre. Especially since he opened the act at the Park Theatre where the African Company caught the wrath of theatre owner Stephen Price. Rice based his blackface persona on the folk trickster Jim Crow- known among black slaves. Rice also adapted, developed and popularized a traditional slave song called "Jump Jim Crow":

Come listen all you gals and boys/I've jist from Tuckyhoe,/I'm goin to sing a little song,/My name is Jim Crow/Fist on de heel tap,/Den on the toe/Ebry time I weel about/I jump Jim Crow.

Weel about and turn about/En do jus so,/And every time I weel about,/I jump Jim Crow.

"Daddy" Rice's act was a hit, and he gained great acclaim by performing it all over the U.S. and in England.

In 1842, four white performers: Daniel Decatur Emmett, Frank Bower, Frank Belham and Billy Whitlock; devised a program of minstrelsy accompanied by bone castanets, fiddle, banjo, and tambourine. Calling themselves the Virginia Minstrels, they appeared in public in February 1843 in a New York City theater. The show was so popular that as imitators emerged, like the blackface minstrel troupe called the Ethiopian



Serenaders who played at the White House for the "Especial Amusement of the President of the United States (John Tyler), His Family and Friends", the demand for minstrel shows grew significantly.

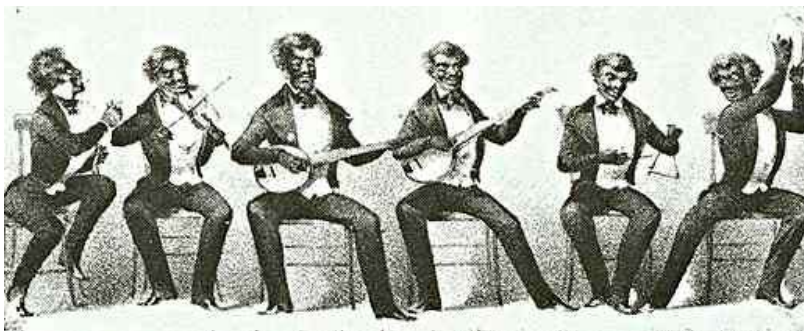
Over time, minstrel shows were developed into a standard three-part format incorporating skits and songs performed in an imitation of black "plantation" dialect. The show began with a walkaround- the company marching onto the stage singing and dancing, typically the cakewalk. White audiences loved the cakewalk, not realizing that it originated with plantation slaves imitating the way privileged whites tended to walk.

The troupe was then seated in a semicircle, with one member on each end (called Brother Tambo and Brother Bones) playing the tambourine or the bone casinets and exchanging jokes between songs and dances. A character called Mr. Interlocutor sat in the middle of the group as the master of ceremonies.

Part two- called the olio, was the variety section that included singers, dancers, comedians, and other novelty acts, and parodies of legitimate theater. The second act would introduce the Zip Coon- a caricature figure who aspired to great wisdom and intelligence, but his mangling of language always made him appear foolish and ignorant. This entertained the white audiences of the time greatly.

Part three ended the show with a one-act play, typically a vignette of carefree life on the plantation. After *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852 and the play became famous, minstrel shows appropriated the major characters for sketches that changed the abolitionist themes in the original into an argument for the supposedly benign character of slavery. Pro-slavery Whites used the racist stereotypes of the minstrel show to counter the growing abolitionist movement. The minstrel show presented Blacks as though they needed the influence of slavery to be kept in check. Black slaves were portrayed as though they were content with plantation life and fearful of the life outside.

As the popularity of minstrel shows increased, Whites continued to wear black face in performances that would serve to define the meaning of blackness for many Americans who had little contact with Blacks.



The aesthetic of the minstrel show may have been conceived and developed by white performers in blackface, but Blacks eventually came to do minstrel shows, as well. One of the first Blacks to perform in blackface for White audiences was William Henry Lane, known to audiences as Master Juba. When Blacks began to work as minstrels in the mid-1840s, becoming established as performers by the 1860s, their contribution ironically did little to alter the black

face tradition, reinforcing the racist stereotypes already ingrained both in theatre and in the society.

Blacks participating in minstrelsy were billed as "authentic coons" To meet the expectations of White audiences. They donned burnt cork to blacken their already dark skin and performed the traditional caricatures of minstrelsy developed by the White performers.

Some of the most popular songs in American history began as minstrel songs -- "Dixie", "Oh! Susanna", "Camptown Races", "Swanee River" and "Polly Wolly Doodle". These songs were written by Stephen Foster, the most famous American songwriter of the 19th century.

The minstrel show was in its heyday from 1850 to 1870. However, after this period, the popularity of the minstrel show began to decline rapidly, with only three minstrel troupes by 1919.

Despite the inherent depravity toward Blacks participating in minstrelsy, this was the catalyst that propelled numerous Black entertainers into 'legitimate theatre'. Figures such as Bert Williams and George Walker got their start in minstrelsy. Bert Williams and George Walker starred in the first black musical to perform on Broadway- *IN DAHOMEY* (1903). The successful production later moved to London. The duo performed together for several vaudevillian shows including *THE GOLD BUG* (1895), *CLORINDY* (1897), *THE POLICY PLAYER* (1899), *SONS OF HAM* (1900), *ABYSSINIA* (1906) and *BANDANNA LAND* (1906). It was after the latter performance that George Walker fell ill and retired from performing. Bert Williams was one of the most famous comedic performers for all audiences of the era.



George Walker (ca.1873 - 1911) was an African-American vaudevillian. In 1893, while in San Francisco, Walker met Bert Williams, who became his performing partner. At the same time, white duos were billing themselves as "coons." Williams and Walker decided to market themselves as the "Two Real Coons". In 1896, they appeared in a New York production called *THE GOLD BUG* at the Casino Theatre. It was a short run and the production did not receive good reviews, but then they were hired by another theatre for a record run of twenty-eight weeks; during that time, they popularized the cakewalk. This dance became very popular in high society in New York. Their next project was *THE SONS OF HAM*.

When Bert Williams and George Walker appeared on the scene, they wanted to change the dynamics of the theatre with their creative minds and talents. But there were strict limits on

the changes they wanted to make because white people were buying the theatre tickets, and they had to present to their standards. The cakewalk was rooted in West African festive dances commonly performed during harvest festivals. Couples would form a circle, promenade, prance with buckets of water on their heads to the sound of banjos playing, and clap their hands. The winning couple got the cake. When Williams and Walker worked with the cakewalk, the dance had many variations. After Williams and Walker introduced this dance into their act, the cakewalk started appearing in stage shows, exhibitions, contests, and ballrooms, but only open to the wealthy, to the middle class and to the lower-class white communities. It eventually spread through the United States and over to Europe.

George Walker was married to dancer and choreographer Ada Overton Walker. He retired from performing after he fell ill during the run of *BANDANNA LAND*.



Egbert Austin Williams (1874- 1922) was a key figure in the development of African-American entertainment. In an age when racial inequality and stereotyping were commonplace, he became the first black American to take a lead role on the Broadway stage, and did much to push back racial barriers during his career. Fellow vaudevillian W.C. Fields, who appeared in productions with Williams, described him as "the funniest man I ever saw - and the saddest man I ever knew."

Williams, who was born in the British West Indies before emigrating to the US and settling in San Francisco, joined a minstrel company known as "The Mastoden Minstrels", which played the lumber and mining camps of California. In 1893, he formed the team of Williams and Walker, his partner being equally celebrated straight man George Walker.

He and George Walker performed song-and-dance numbers, comic dialogues and skits, and humorous songs. They fell into stereotypical vaudevillian roles: originally Williams portrayed a slick conniver, while Walker played the "dumb coon" victim of Williams' schemes. However, they soon discovered that they got a better reaction by switching roles. The sharp-featured and slender Walker eventually developed a persona as a strutting dandy, while the stocky Williams played the languorous oaf. Despite his thickset physique, Williams was a master of body language and physical "stage business." A New York Times reviewer wrote, "He holds a face for minutes at a time, seemingly, and when he alters it, bring[s] a laugh by the least movement."

Williams & Walker headlined the Koster and Bial's vaudeville house for 36 weeks in 1896-97, where their spirited version of the 'cakewalk' helped popularize the dance. The pair performed in burnt-cork blackface, as was customary at the time, billing themselves as "Two Real Coons" to distinguish their act from the many white minstrels also performing in blackface. While playing off the "coon" formula, Williams & Walker's act and demeanor subtly undermined it as well. Camille Forbes wrote, "They called into question the possible realness of blackface performers who only emphasized their artificiality by recourse to burnt cork; after all, Williams

did not really need the burnt cork to be black." Audiences noted the layered irony in Williams' & Walker's cakewalk routine, which presented them as mainstream blacks performing a dance in a way that lampooned whites who had been mocking a black dance that originally satirized plantation whites' mannerisms.

After 16 years as half of a duo, Williams needed to reestablish himself as a solo act once Walker fell ill. In 1909, Williams returned to the high-class vaudeville circuit. His new act consisted of several songs, comic monologues in dialect, and a concluding dance. He received top billing and a high salary, but "the White Rats," an organization of vaudevillians opposed to encroachments from blacks and women, intimidated the theater managers into reducing Williams' billing.

On February 27, 1922 Williams collapsed during a performance in Detroit, Michigan. He died on March 4, at the age of forty-seven. Few had suspected that he was sick, and news of his death came as a public shock. More than 5,000 fans filed past his casket, and thousands more were turned away. A private service was held at the Masonic Lodge in Manhattan, where Williams broke his last barrier. He was the first Negro to be so honored by the all-white Grand Lodge. When the Masons opened their doors for a public service, nearly 2,000 mourners of both races were admitted.

Williams, by far the best-selling black recording artist before 1920, made his first recordings in 1896, but none are known to survive.



IN DAHOMEY was a landmark American musical comedy, in that it was one of the first full-length musical written and played by blacks to be performed at a major Broadway house. The musical play featured music by Will Marion Cook, book by Jesse A. Shipp, and lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar. The production, produced by McVon Hurtig and Harry Seamon, was also the first to star African Americans James Smith and George Sisay, as well as, George Walker, Bert Williams and their wives. *In Dahomey* opened on February 18, 1903, at the New York Theater, and ran for 53 performances (a successful run in that era).

Dahomey was an African kingdom (in the present-day country of Benin) which lasted from about 1600 until 1900. Dahomey developed on the Abomey Plateau amongst the Fon people in the early 1600s and became a regional power in the 1700s by conquering key cities on the Atlantic coast. For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Kingdom of Dahomey was a key regional state, eventually ending tributary status to the Oyo Empire and being a major location for the Atlantic slave trade, possibly supplying up to 20% of the slaves to Europe and the Americas.

The Kingdom of Dahomey was an important regional power that had an organized domestic economy, significant international trade with European powers, a centralized administration, significant taxation systems, and an organized military. Notable in the kingdom were significant artwork, all-female military units known as the Dahomey Amazons, and elaborate religious practices of Vodun with the large festival of the Annual Customs of Dahomey. The Kingdom of Dahomey serves as the context for a number of works of fiction dealing with West African ideas and the slave trade.

The international success of Bert Williams and George Walker established them as the most visible black performers in the world. They hoped to use that fact in their desire to present new and elaborate stage productions that would be shown in the high-end theaters and feature black performers in high fashion.

In February 1906, *ABYSSINIA*, with a score co-written by Williams, premiered at the Majestic Theater. The show was an immediate success, and with aristocratic characters involved in romantic plots, took steps toward securing greater creative pride and freedom for black performers. It also reflected an important interest in Africa and operetta.

The nation of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) where the story takes place was the only African nation at the time to remain sovereign during the era of European colonization, repelling Italy's attempts at control in 1896 (Italy would later fight to reverse this during the second World War).

Williams and Walker's production also included a love story- something that had never been tolerated within a black stage production before. Appropriately, both Williams and Walker performed with their respective wives. *Abyssinia* told the story of Kansas tourist Rastus Johnson (Walker) winning a lottery and taking his dim-witted pal Jasmine Johnson (Williams) to the African country of their ancestors. The duo's misadventures ultimately land them before Abyssinia's ruthless monarch Menelik, who bangs a gong to determine whether they'll live or die: three bangs meant death, four indicate life. At the show's climax, after an extremely memorable pause, Menelik banged it a fourth time.



While the show was praised, many white critics were uncomfortable or uncertain about the cast's ambitions. Critics declared that audiences "do not care to see their own ways copied when they can have the real thing better done by white people." The New York Evening Post thought the score "is at times too elaborate for them and a return to the plantation melodies would be a great improvement upon the 'grand opera' type, for which they are not suited either by temperament or by education." The Chicago Tribune actually censured that "there is hardly a trace of negroism in the play." These were, of course, the very attitudes toward black theatre of the era that the duo was endeavoring to kill. It is known that Walker had no reservations about speaking out against the racial prejudice and limitations of the day, whereas Williams was known to suppress his feelings on the matter. There were, on the other hand, reviews that praised the production. The New York Times asserted, "Negro Comedians Seen in 'Abyssinia,' the Best Comedy They Have Had." The reviewer extolled that Williams and Walker "make their most ambitious effort. The piece is far in advance of their last vehicle, 'IN DAHOMEY,' in costumes, scenery, and effects, while the work of the singers, especially in the choruses, surpasses all their previous efforts. An audience which filled the large auditorium of the Majestic showed its approval with frequent and hearty applause."

Williams committed many of *ABYSSINIA'S* songs to disc and cylinder. One of them, "Nobody", became his signature theme, and the song he is best remembered for today.

When life seems full of clouds and rain,/And I am filled with naught but pain,/Who soothes my thumping, bumping brain?/ Nobody.

When winter comes with snow and sleet,/And me with hunger and cold feet,/Who says, "Here's two bits, go and eat"?/Nobody.

I ain't never done nothin' to Nobody./I ain't never got nothin' from Nobody, no time./And, until I get somethin' from somebody sometime,/I don't intend to do nothin' for Nobody, no time.

Williams considered the song's success both a blessing and a curse. "Nobody" remained active in Columbia's sales catalogue into the 1930s, and the musicologist Tim Brooks estimates that it sold between 100,000 and 150,000 copies- a major accomplishment for the era (like going 'multi-platinum' today).

Williams & Walker's on-stage chemistry often disguised the fact that the duo had grown apart. Despite their rift, they were involved in one significant off-stage enterprise with several of their show business peers - bandleader James Reese Europe, actor Bob Cole, and songwriters Alex Rogers, J. Rosamond Johnson, and Jesse A. Shipp - they co-founded The Frogs. This top-hatted, tuxedo-clad brotherhood was the first important theatrical organization for African-Americans.



Aida Overton Walker, also billed as "The Queen of the Cakewalk", was a vaudeville performer, actress, singer, dancer, choreographer, and wife of vaudevillian George Walker. She appeared with her husband and his performing partner Bert Williams, and in groups such as Black Patti's Troubadours. She was also a solo dancer and choreographer for vaudeville shows *THE RED MOON* (1908) by Bob Cole, Joe Jordan, and J. Rosamond Johnson and *HIS HONOR THE BARBER* (1911) by S. H. Dudley. Walker is also well known for her 1912

performance of the “Salome” dance at Hammerstein’s Victoria Theatre, a response to the national “salamania” craze of 1907 that spread through the white vaudeville circuit.

Aida Overton Walker grew up in New York City, where her family moved when she was young and where she gained an education and considerable musical training.

At 15, she joined John Isham’s “Octoroons” Black touring group, in the 1890s. The following years he started her career as a chorus member in Black Patti’s Troubadours, where she met her husband. She first gained national attention in 1900, with her performance of “Miss Hannah from Savannah” in the show *SONS OF HAM*. For the next ten years, Aida would be known primarily for her work in musical theater. Her song and dance made her an instant hit with audiences at the time. She, George, and Bert continued to produce even more successful shows such as *IN DAHOMEY* (1902), *ABYSSINIA* (1906), and *BANDANA LAND* (1908). In 1904, after two seasons in England, the group returned to New York.

Working alongside her husband, Walker’s career and performances were praised by critics and her successes well known. She was both financially successful and respected by the industry.

In late 1908, Walker’s husband fell ill and the show had to close in 1909. She left the stage briefly to take care of her husband. In 1910, she joined the Smart Set Company. During this time she also began touring the vaudeville circuit as a solo act. In 1911, she performed in *HIS HONOR THE BARBER* with Smart Set Company. Walker performed as a male character in *LOVIE DEAR*, as well as in *BANDANA LAND*, in which she took over her husband’s role.