Ira Aldridge
1807-1867

Nationality: American
Occupation: Actor

INTRODUCTION

Ira Aldridge traveled to Europe and Russia, breaking racial barriers during a time when many of his black American contemporaries were enslaved. Defying the prevailing sentiment that the theater was the exclusive domain of white performers and patrons, Aldridge dared to claim acting as his livelihood. Known as the "African Roscius," Aldridge gained prominence as a Shakespearean tragedian in Europe, as well as Russia, and became one of the nineteenth century's most celebrated actors.

NARRATIVE ESSAY:

Ira Frederick Aldridge was born on July 24, 1807, in New York City, to Daniel Aldridge, who was a lay preacher and a straw vendor, and his wife, Lurona; Ira's parents were free blacks. Few additional details are known about Lurona Aldridge other than her birth in North Carolina and her death in 1818 while Ira was still a boy. Ira Aldridge attended New York City's African Free School, an institution for the education of free black American children, where he won oratory prizes. His father wanted him to become a minister. According to Ira's older brother Joshua, Ira ran away from home after his father remarried. He worked briefly on a ship that sailed South. When the ship docked in North Carolina, a slave dealer offered the captain $500 for young Aldridge. The captain, however, refused the offer and Aldridge later returned to New York.

While living in New York City, Ira Aldridge developed an intense interest in the theater. He obtained a backstage job at the Chatham Theatre, enabling him to watch actors as they performed. Aldridge gained acting experience with the African Theatre, an endeavor established by free black Americans in 1820. He made his acting debut as Rolla, a Peruvian character in the Richard Brinsley Sheridan adaptation of August von Kotzebue's Pizarro.

LEAVES AMERICA IN PURSUIT OF HIS DREAM

Aldridge soon realized that his race would hinder his development as an actor in the United States because opportunities for a black American actor were rare. Marshall and Stock wrote in Ira Aldridge that "The only recourse for a serious, determined and aspiring young Negro actor was to emigrate," and Aldridge was determined to go to England. Two brothers, James and Henry Wallack, frequently acted in New York and they became acquainted with Aldridge. When James hired him as his personal valet, Aldridge was able to sail to Liverpool, England along with his employer. When 17-year-old Aldridge arrived in England in 1824, he distinguished himself as the first black American to establish himself as an actor in a foreign country. Henry wrote a letter of recommendation for Ira that he later presented to various Londoners.

Aldridge attended the University of Glasgow for approximately 18 months. Fountain Peyton described his experiences there in Glance at the Life of Frederick Aldridge: The congenial surroundings, the obvious solicitude on the part of the faculty for his advancement and his eagerness to begin his life's work, encouraged him to greater endeavor. So creditable was the character of his work at this institution that Professor Sanford awarded him several premiums and a gold medal for excellence in Latin composition. Having completed his course in Glasgow, he at once began the study of a repertoire for performance in England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Henry Wallack's letter of recommendation, along with Aldridge's talent and determination, led to his engagement at London's Royal Coburg Theatre, which was primarily a playhouse for melodrama. Aldridge debuted on October 10, 1825, in the lead role of Oroonoko in The Revolt of Surinam, or A Slave's Revenge; this play was an adaptation of Thomas Southerne's Oroonoko. The playbill for this performance described Aldridge as the "Tragedian of Colour, from the African Theatre, New York," yet his surname was listed as Keene, rather than Aldridge. In adopting the name of Keene, Aldridge observed a common theatrical practice of assuming a name that was identical or similar to that of a celebrity (in this case, Edmund Kean, who was regarded as one of the outstanding actors of his time) in order to attract attention. Aldridge resumed use of his birth name sometime between 1831 and 1833.

Aldridge continued in the role of Oroonoko for one week. Beginning the week of October 17, 1825, he performed in Thomas Morton's The Ethiopian, or the Quadroon of the Mango Grove (The Slave). One week later, Aldridge appeared in The Libertine Defeated or African Ingratitude. During the weeks of October 31 and November 7, he was cast in H. M. Milner's The Death of Christophe, King of Hayti.

Aldridge continued his six-week engagement as a star attraction at the Royal Coburg, he earned admiration from his audiences, yet he was received less than favorably by most critics who generally attacked his lack of stage training and experience. One critic predicted that Aldridge, who was a mere lad of 18 at the time, would never find a theatrical career profitable. While it was true that Aldridge did lack training and experience, it was apparent that the London press did not welcome a black actor to the stage the way audiences did. Indeed the reaction of the press was, in general, one of indignation that Aldridge, a black man, audaciously attempted to set foot on the stage.
As a result of such hostile, negative criticism Aldridge's progress on the London stage was hindered, and he left the city in order to cultivate his craft. Aldridge retreated to the provinces where his popularity continued to grow as he toured. Aldridge's first provincial appearance was at Brighton's Theatre Royal where, in December 1825, he starred as Oroonoko and Othello, his first Shakespearean character. Aldridge's portrayal of Oroonoko was considered a strong performance while his portrayal of the Shakespearean protagonist was viewed as a weak performance. In the introduction to Ira Aldridge, Marshall and Stock wrote that, "The initial acceptance by provincial audiences gave Aldridge the seasoning needed before he would once again face London audiences and critics." Aldridge toured the provinces, including Halifax, Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Sunderland, and Liverpool, for seven years. His basic repertoire of Oroonoko, The Slave, and Othello was expanded to include Gregory Lewis's The Castle Spectre, Edward Young's The Revenge, and Issac Bickerstaff's The Padlock. Bickerstaff's work was a vehicle for two different types of expression for Aldridge: the role of Mungo allowed him to showcase for the first time his "fine singing voice" and to develop the character of a naive slave into a slave rebel.

Herbert and Stock called Aldridge's Liverpool appearance significant because Liverpool was: the greatest centre of the slave trade in the United Kingdom, where only three years before he had landed as an unknown, penniless stranger. One can imagine the feelings of the pro-slavery elements at the presumption of this Negro to appear in anti-slavery plays like Oroonoko, The Revenge and The Padlock, and furthermore to see a well-known star like Vandenhoff playing his lago and a white woman, Miss F. H. Kelly, playing his Desdemona! Such a leap in so short a time was indeed something unprecedented in theatre history, as well as a unique challenge to racial superiority.

Indeed Aldridge, who continued to feel racism's sting throughout his career, used his talent and money to support the abolitionists. It was not uncommon for him, at the close of an evening's performance, to play a guitar and sing an anti-slavery song. In 1829, on the final nights of his engagements, Aldridge began delivering farewell addresses that focused on slavery's injustices and hope for the freedom of the enslaved. In 1832 the 25-year-old's farewell address was distributed to the audience; it was his poetic attempt entitled "William Tell, the Swiss Patriot." Cited by Marshall and Stock, among its lines are: "I risk my all upon thy power: / Life--son--yea, country, too; / To free my brethren, fetter'd slaves, / From sinking in inglorious graves." Aldridge, who reportedly asserted frequently that he could never be happy as long as one black person was enslaved, contributed significant amounts of money to the abolitionist movement and, from 1830 to 1861, to the Negro State Conventions.

One of his most memorable deeds involved the Wilson family, five slaves who escaped from Baltimore to New York; however, each family member was captured, arrested and put up for sale. When Aldridge learned of their fate, he purchased their freedom. William J. Simmons wrote in Men of Mark: "In all his triumphs he never lost any interest in the condition of his race."

After Liverpool, Aldridge continued to tour the provinces. He appeared in Norwich, Yarmouth, Bury, Hull, Richmond, and Belfast. In Belfast, he starred with Charles Kean, Edward's son. Aldridge was Othello to Kean's lago; they also appeared together with Aldridge playing Aboan to Kean's Oroonoko.

Aldridge's acting style was described as realistic without ranting, exaggeration, or gimmicks. He was known for his power to captivate audiences. Having exhausted the limited number of black roles, Aldridge began playing nonblack parts. Whites had been portraying black characters; now Aldridge, donning wigs and white make-up, reversed the theatrical practice. His first white role before foreign audiences was Rolla, the same character he played years earlier at New York's African Theatre. His first white European role, performed in August 1830, was Captain Dirk Hatterack in Daniel Terry's adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's novel, Guy Mannering; his second white European role, performed in May 1831, was Bertram in R. C. Maturin's Bertram, or the Castle of St. Aldobrand. Additional plays added to Aldridge's repertoire were The Merchant of Venice; The Brigand, or Alessandro Massaroni; Obi, or Three-fingered Jack; The African's Vengeance; Paul and Virginia; The Siberian Exile; The Coronation Day of William IV; Valentine and Orson; Rob Roy; The Galey Slaves; Macbeth; The Cannibal King; Father and Son, or the Rock of La Charbonnieres; Laugh While You Can; Banks of the Hudson, or the Congress Trooper; William Tell; The French Pirate; and Frankenstein, or the Man and Monster. During this period, he enjoyed considerable success in Hull. Aldridge played at least 16 roles at the Royal Aldelphi, and six months later in March 1832, after appearances in Dublin and Bath, he returned to Hull, where over seven weeks he appeared at the Aldelphi and the Royal Clarence.

The suave and determined Aldridge continued to battle racism. Dublin's Theatre Royal was an important house, and he was repeatedly denied the opportunity to perform there. Aldridge traveled there and met John William Calcraft, the theater's manager who had previously stated that Aldridge's acting at the Royal would be "absurd." However, after their meeting, Aldridge starred at the theater in December 1831, where Edmund Kean saw him perform. Kean praised Aldridge's "wondrous versatility" in a letter of recommendation.

**COVENT GARDEN ENGAGEMENT A CAREER MILESTONE**

On March 25, 1833, Kean was on stage at London's Covent Garden Theatre playing Othello to his son's lago when he collapsed and later died. It was Aldridge's dream to appear at Covent Garden, and two weeks after Kean's death, he had the opportunity. At 26 and with only eight-years acting experience, according to Marshall and Stock, he replaced England's most respected tragedian in his signature role: with characteristic courage, determination and dignity, Aldridge steps on to the stage of this great theatre, taking up the challenge. ... Those two days, 10th and 12th April 1833, will for ever be red-letter days in the history of world theatre and human progress, for in those days a lone Negro from an enslaved people challenged the great white actors in the very heart of their Empire, in their own Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, in one of the greatest roles conceived by Shakespeare.

Aldridge's performance as Othello at the Covent Garden marked his return to the London stage after a seven-year tour of the provinces. After his 1833 London engagement, Aldridge continued to tour the provinces for the next 19 years. Among the additions to his repertoire were The Black Doctor-A Romantic Drama in Four Acts, an Aldridge adaptation of Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Paul Dumanri's Le Docteur Noir as well as Shakespeare's Richard III and Titus Andronicus, a work that had not been staged in over a century. After his provincial tour, Aldridge appeared at London's Britannia Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

**begins first continental tour**

http://www.africanpubs.com/Apps/bios/1003AldridgeIra.asp?pic=none
On July 14, 1852, Aldridge left England and began his first tour of the Continent; his travels included Cologne, Frankfurt-on-Main, Basel Leipzig, Vienna, Berlin and other cities in the German Federation, and Prague, Brunn, Budapest, Munich, and Poland. During this successful tour, the plays were frequently performed in the audiences' languages with the exception of Aldridge's roles. In *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, it is said that "He was acclaimed for his acting in England, but especially on the continent was he accorded unqualified success."

Aldridge returned to London in the spring of 1855. For the next three years, he continued to perform in English theaters. A highlight of those years was his journey to Stockholm where he appeared at the Theatre Royal. In 1858 Aldridge again toured the Continent briefly before returning to London later that year, where he appeared at the Lyceum Theatre. Aldridge, who had performed in many English East-End theaters as well as most of Europe's royal theaters, was finally accepted at a principal West-End theater. His interpretation of Othello finally brought him critical acclaim from the London press that denigrated him more than 30 years before while audiences enthusiastically applauded him. At last the entire London metropolis hailed Aldridge’s talents.

**TOURS RUSSIA**

In November of 1858 Aldridge traveled to Russia for the first time. While it has yet to be determined if Aldridge ever starred as Hamlet, he had added King Lear, another Shakespearean character, to his repertoire by the time of his arrival. Later during 1861—66, Aldridge made several additional, extensive, and successful tours of Russia and its provinces. Indeed, during the final years of his life, Aldridge primarily toured in Russia and the Continent, adding Paris to his itinerary, with occasional returns to England. Aldridge was the first actor to perform in Serbia and Croatia and to perform Shakespeare in the Russian provinces. He arrived in Lodz, Poland, in 1867, and although in ill health, he began rehearsals only to have them discontinued and the opening performance postponed after his condition deteriorated. Aldridge died on August 7 and was buried two days later in Lodz's Evangelical Cemetery. In 1890 a tombstone with a cross was erected on his gravesite, and until at least 1958, the grave was tended by members of the Society of Polish Artists of Film and Theatre.

Aldridge was survived by his wife, the former Amanda Pauline von Brandt of Sweden and four children: Ira Daniel, Luranah, Ira Frederick, and Amanda. Aldridge married von Brandt in 1865, one year after the death of his first wife, the former Margaret Gill from England and three years after he applied for and was granted British citizenship. Among his property were Luranah Villa, the family home on Hamlet Road in Upper Norwood, as well as other homes on Hamlet Road. Aldridge considered American acting engagements as early as 1834 and in 1867, the year of his death, he was planning to travel to the United States, but he never returned to the country of his birth.

Aldridge received many honors and awards during his lifetime, including a commission in the Army of Haiti in the Seventeenth Regiment of the Grenadiers (1827); membership in the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences and receipt of the Prussian Gold Medal of the First Class for the Academy, (1853); receipt of Switzerland's White Cross (1854); membership in the Imperial and Archducal Institution of Hungary's Our Lady of the Manger (1856); knighthood in the Royal Saxon Ernestinischen House Order and receipt of the Verdienst Medal of the Order in Gold (1858); receipt of the Imperial Jubilee de Tolstoy Medal (1858); and membership in the National Dramatic Conservatoire of Hungary (1858). Aldridge lectured on the drama of Shakespeare, Schiller, and Goethe at a meeting of the Conservatoire.

The Ira Aldridge Memorial Chair is located in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. In 1928 writer James Weldon Johnson spearheaded a successful effort by black Americans who raised $1,000 for the chair's endowment. There are additional black American tributes to Aldridge including the Ira Aldridge Theatre at Howard University, in Washington, D.C., and the Ira Aldridge Players at Morgan State University, in Baltimore, Maryland.

Ira Frederick Aldridge, a theatrical star and black American luminary, remains an inspiration to contemporary thespians.

**SOURCES:**