IRA FREDERICK ALDRIDGE (1807-1867)

19th century black American actor, known as the African Roscius

Born in New York City on 24th July 1807, son of Reverend Daniel and Luranah Aldridge, poor citizens of class known as "Free Negroes". Educated at New York's African Free School and briefly at University of Glasgow, Scotland. Active in New York amateur theatre. Made his professional stage debut as the first black actor at Royal Coburg Theatre, London on 10th October 1825 playing role of Prince Oroonoko of Africa sold into slavery in melodrama The Revolt of Surinam, or A Slave's Revenge. Tourd established theatre circuits in provinces of British Isles for 27 years as star of about 60 roles in melodrama, romantic drama, operetta, comedy and Shakespeare. Appeared at Theatre Royal Covent Garden in 1833 as Othello. First white role Dirk Hatteraick in Guy Mannering. First tour of Continent in 1852. In last 15 years of life appeared in Belgium, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Russia and Ukraine. Performed by royal command. "Crowded houses greeted him everywhere, princes and people eager to see him...Honors, orders and medals were showered upon him..."

Became first actor to be knighted when Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Meiningen bestowed on him Royal Ernestinischen House Order in 1858. Repertoire in final Continental phase winnowed to Shakespeare - the black Othello, the white Macbeth, the hurt and maddened old king, Lear, the splenetic villain, Richard III, his sympathetic portrayal of vilified Jewish patriarch, Shylock - and Mungo, West Indian house slave, in operetta The Padlock by Bickerstaffe, singing, dancing, playing guitar, mixing protest with comedy of the oppressed. Described as "a star of the first magnitude" and "the most beautiful male artist that one can imagine". Aldridge performed in English with fellow actors speaking their languages but his classical style of restrained realism and expressive body language triumphed : "You listen, it seems, to every beat of his heart..."

Honored as African prince and German baron, he remained a man of the people. Following performances he appealed to audiences for "respect for his African race". An estimated three million black Americans were slaves in U.S.A. until Civil War of 1860s - England's Anti-Slavery Society referred to Aldridge's majestic presence on stage as significant contribution to struggle for abolition; he said many times that he could never be happy while one of his people was held "in chains". With his wealth he contributed to fund-raising campaigns of Negro State Conventions prior to Emancipation. In 1863 became naturalised British subject of Queen Victoria. Died on 7th August 1867 on theatrical tour of Poland; buried with State Honors on 9th August 1867.

Married twice to European women: in 1825 to Miss Margaret Gill of England, who died in 1864; in 1865 to Countess Amanda von Brandt of Sweden. Issue: two sons and three daughters - Ira Daniel Aldridge, teacher of languages who migrated to Australia in 1867; Ira Frederick Olaff Aldridge, musician and composer; Irene Luranah Pauline Aldridge, opera singer; Amanda Christina Elizabeth Aldridge, known as Amanda Ira Aldridge, opera singer, teacher and composer under name of Montague Ring; and Rachael Margaret Frederika Aldridge, born posthumously, who died in infancy. The actor's widow, Baroness Aldridge, died in 1915, her ashes strewn in Highgate Woods, London. His grave in Lodz, Poland is national shrine cared for by Society of Polish Artists of the Film and Theatre. The name of Ira Aldridge is inscribed with other Shakespearean celebrities at Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

SPEAK OF ME AS I AM - THE STORY OF IRA ALDRIDGE

Golden Opinions of Owen Mortimer's biography of Ira Aldridge:

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