

Subject: Brief sketch of Ira Aldridge.

By Arthur J. Gary.

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Ira Aldridge, one of the most colorful characters in Negro history, was a direct descendant of African Royalty. His grandfather, a prince of the Fulah tribe in Senegal, had caused a revolution by recommending the exchange of war prisoners, instead of the usual inhuman custom of auctioning captives into the hands of slave-holders. Having brought the wrath of the tribal chiefs upon his head, he and his family, and the attendants were "savagely butchered." "one son, only, then a boy, escaped the massacre; and, in conjunction with a missionary who had found his way to that rude and inhospitable tribe, fled to America."^{1.}

In America, the boy was educated in the ministry and exhibited unusual talent in his chosen profession. He married "a young wife of his own colour,"^{2.} and "desirous of establishing himself at the head of his tribe, and also of propagating amongst them the religion he had embraced, he returned to his native land,"^{3.} taking his wife with him. His advent in his native land caused a civil war in which his few followers were soon defeated and he was compelled to flee from the country. It was during this period of exile, that his son, Ira was born, "and until he was nine years old lived in the neighborhood of their foes, enduring every variety of hardships and vicissitudes."^{4.} At this time the family escaped and returned to New York, where the father resumed his ministerial duties and continued to preach his sacred, religious doctrines until his death "on the 27th of September, 1840."^{5.}

Writers and historians are neither agreed as to the year nor the

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place of young Aldridge's birth. The dates vary from 1804,^{6.} 1805,^{7.} to 1807,^{8.} and the place from New York City,^{9.} Bellaire, Maryland,^{10.} to Senegambia, Africa.^{11.}

When the boy, Ira, reached the age at which he must select a career or profession, the deep wish of his father was that he should follow him into the ministry; but the theater had already attracted Ira. "His first visit to a theater dazzled and fascinated him that he resolved at all hazards to adopt the stage as his profession and means of life. Having studied the part of Polla, in the play of Pizarro, he made his appearance in that character in a private theatre, where all his fellow performers were of his own sable complexion, and wore, as Shakespeare eloquently expressed it - 'The Shadowed livery of the burnished sun.' Having in some trivial capacity obtained the entree behind the scenes of the Chatham Theatre, New York, he hung nightly about the 'wings', and listened with delight to the various performers; whom he trusted, at some future time, to rival in the intellectual and intoxicating art which he passionately loved."^{12.} Despite this love for the theater and its people, he was destined to fulfill the wish of his father and enter theological school. "... An abrupt termination was put to these evening pleasures; through the interest of Bishops Prenton and Milner, he was entered at the Schenectady College, near New York, in order to prepare himself for the ministry; and here for a time he devoted himself to theological studies. He was eventually sent to Britain."^{13.} In 1825, he entered Glasgow University and won many honors, one of which was a medal for a meritorious Latin composition;^{14.} but "forsaking the pulpit for the stage, he made his debut as 'Othello' in a small London theater."^{15.} Thus began his brilliant career as a Shakespearian actor, in 1826.^{16.} "He played in English towns until 1852, and in Europe won a high reputation."^{17.}

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His appearance was striking. "In complexion he was dark brown, and with heavy whiskers; standing six feet in height, with heavy frame, African features, and yet with due proportions; he was graceful in his attitudes, highly polished in manners."^{18.} A noted critic of his day, says, "Ira Aldridge's race enabled him to dispense with dye of any sort; nor did he need to cover his arms with chocolate colored tights. His own skin was that required by the role. His entrance on the stage was magnificent. It was 'Othello' himself as Shakespeare had created him, with eyes half-closed as if dazzled from the African suns, his nonchalant, Oriental attitude and that negro free-and-easy air that no European can imitate. ...the great negro tragedian, ... was quiet, reserved, classic, majestic."^{19.} Mrs. Kendal, who as Miss Robertson played 'Desdemona' to his 'Othello' "speaks of him as a most courtly gentleman" and also mentions "a realistic piece of stage business", of how he used to "drag 'Desdemona' about by her hair."^{20.} Although, it is conceded that 'Othello' was his greatest role, his perfect mastery over himself in 'King Lear' was remarkable. "... in the flush of manhood, Ira Aldridge, did not let out during the whole evening, a single youthful movement; his voice, his step, his gestures, all were those becoming an octogenarian."^{21.}

His dramatic genius was recognized and many appreciative honors were bestowed upon him. "He was presented with wreaths from the Emperor of Austria, and a gold medal and the Order of Leopold. In Switzerland, a medal of merit set in gold and enamel; another at Agra, in Costia. A similar honor by the Ban, General and Countess Jellachish. At Vienna, his Royal Highness and the Duke of Wirtemberg received him and presented him a massive silver breakfast and tea service."^{22.} "...At Sax Meininger he was presented by the reigning sovereign (the brother of the late Queen Adelaide) with the Nassau gold medal of the Order of the House of Saxony, and was also made a member of several scientific and literary Continental institutions. ...He performed with signal success at the Convent Gardens,

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Sadler's, Well's, and at Surrey, - his best character is 'Othello',
but he is also successful in his impersonations^{23.} of several others.

His adaptability to any condition that might arise in his profession was demonstrated by his performance of 'Othello' in Russia. At the time of this particular performance there was no English speaking troupe in St. Petersburg. There was a German troupe, so it was finally arranged to produce the drama, with Aldridge speaking in English and the balance of the cast speaking German. This was done and the majority of the audience, who spoke neither English nor German, was able to understand by the pantomime and the actions of the players.^{24.}

For many years, Ira Aldridge was known to the theater-going world as the "African Roscius". He carefully concealed his true identity in deference to his father, who like all ecclesiastics of the time, strongly disapproved of the theater, and would have felt more disgraced than honored by his son's success.

Aldridge's life as the "African Roscius" was so brilliantly dramatic that historians have neglected to give many details of his private life. The following story of heroism, with its tragic ending, furnishes proof of his having had a sister. "...During the frost, some ice, on which several boys were skating, in the outskirts of the city, and several of them were drowned. During the confusion and terror, a colored boy, whose courage and hardihood were well known, was called to render assistance. He immediately threw himself into the water with his skates on, and succeeded in saving two lads; while exerting himself to rescue a third, he was drawn under the ice,^{25.} and was unable to extricate himself. No one would risk his life to save him."... one of the newspapers (the New York American) offered to receive subscriptions for the mother, who was left with a sick husband and a young family.^{26.} ... Such was the history of Susannah Peterson and her heroic boy. Mrs. Peterson's brother, who is known in England as the African Roscius, has

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occasionally sent her remittances of money, and had expressed, in one of his letters from this country, an intention to provide for her unfortunate boy's education."^{27.}

There is a romantic story behind the first marriage of Aldridge. "One evening, after representing 'Gambia', in the Slaves, Mr. Aldridge was invited by a friend to a private box, to receive the congratulations of a party who had witnessed the performance; among the company was a young lady, who appeared to have entertained something more than an admiration for the dark actor, who stood alone in a land of strangers. ...and within brief period from the accidental introduction entered into a matrimonial alliance with him."^{28.} The young wife died a short time after her marriage and later Aldridge married again. The second wife was "a Swedish baroness of dignity and beauty,"^{29.} and she bore him two daughters, who became well "known in connection with the musical profession."^{30.} Madame Aldridge died at the age of eighty-two years.^{31.} One of the daughters, Miss "A. Ira Aldridge, who writes African songs and dances under the name of Montague Ring...is quite dark in spite of the fact that her mother who is believed, a Swedish Countess - is fair. Miss Aldridge has undoubted talent and is sure to become better known as a composer."^{32.} Mrs. Kendal, who after her theatrical career, became a teacher at the Royal College of Music, states: "...when I first called over the names of my pupils, I found the name of 'Miss Aldridge' and was informed that she was the daughter of the gentleman with whom I had acted Desdemona as a girl at the Haymarket, a fact which immediately gave me the strongest feeling for her."^{33.} She has since given singing lessons and concerts."^{34.} Mr. Aldridge was popular with the cultured and wealthy aristocrats and an associate of most of the prominent men of his time, numbering Alexander Dumas among his friends.^{35.} "In all his triumphs he never lost any interest in the condition of his race. He always took an interest in everything touching their welfare."^{36.}

"...as both a tragic and comic actor, Mr. Aldridge's talents are

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undeniable. He possesses every mental and physical requisite for both walks of the profession. ...A fugitive from his fatherland, and an enthusiastic follower of an elegant and refining art, the African tragedian has made this country the land of his adoption; and we sincerely trust that no ungenerous prejudice against his colour or his race may be permitted to interfere with his professional progress, or to rob him of one leaf of that histrionic laurel which we believe he is destined to enjoy. Genius is not confined to any one race or country; it is of all complexions and of all climes; and its mission is uniformly beneficial or elevating to humanity. Be its recipient white or black, let none dare to despise it."^{37.}

After many years of European successes, Mr. Aldridge planned to fill an American engagement in New York City, but before his sailing date "August 16, 1867,"^{38.} - death claimed him. He "died at Lodes, in Poland, August 7, 1867."^{39.}

"The tragedian was accorded a great civic funeral, and the decorations conferred upon him by various Continental Monarchs were borne on a State cushion. ...The chevalier Ira Aldridge, as he was called on his last visit to London, ... will be remembered for restoring to the stage 'Titus Andronicus', which previous to 1854 had not been acted for two centuries."^{40.}

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(Gautier, continued) - International Press., The John C. Winston Co. 1905. (Call No.914.7-Schomburg Collection. 136th Street Library.)

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- Schomburg, Arthur A. "A scrapbook containing a variety of hand-bills of Ira Aldridge -The 'African Roscius', covering a period of two decades. The photostats are undated, but were evidently taken from a London periodical about the year of Aldridge's arrival in England, 1826. (Schomburg Collection, 136th Street Library.

NOTE 1. - The Shakespearian Memorial at Stratford-on-the-Avon has an inscription to Aldridge written by James Weldon Johnson and paid for by the money raised by American Negroes.
(The Crisis. Vol.39.p.459. January 1932. "Gautier on Aldridge" by W.Napoleon Rivers, Jr. -)

NOTE 2. - In his article, W.Napoleon Rivers, Jr. the translator of "Gautier on Aldridge" states that during his preparation on a doctrinal thesis in Romance Languages at Cornell he "...discovered this unbiased criticism of Ira Aldridge which led him to make a page for page and line for line comparison between the French text and the twenty-four volume English translation of Gautier's work by Professor F.A.De Sumichrast of the French Department of Harvard University and to his surprise, it is omitted. ...His investigation of the doctrinal dissertation of Helen Patch, at Bryn Mawr, 1922 bearing the title "The Dramatic Criticisms of Theophile Gautier", mention of the criticism of Aldridge could not be found. Louis Bulkey Dillingham writing another doctrinal dissertation on Gautier, at Bryn Mawr, five years later, does not touch upon the subject. Thus we see that this tribute to Aldridge has been denied an available or permanent form in English."

(The Crisis.Vol.39.p.460.January 1932."Gautier on Aldridge" by W.Napoleon Rivers, Jr.-).

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NOTE 2. -A List of Ira Aldridge, depicting the role of 'Othello' was presented to the Schomburg Collection by friends of the 135th Street Library as a memorial to Ira Aldridge as a Shakespearian actor. The artist, Pietro Calvi, witnessed a performance by Aldridge, in the role of 'Othello' in Vienna.

References used in Sketch of Ira Aldridge.

<u>Reference number</u>	<u>Book Page</u>	<u>Name of Book.</u>
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, -----	1. -----	Schomburg's Scrapbook.
12, 13, 14, 22, 27, -----	128. -----	" "
22, 23. -----	Photostats -----	" "
16, 28, 30, 40. -----	27. -----	" "
7, 11, 15. -----	265. -----	Funk & Wagnalls, Vol. 1.
17. -----	266. -----	" " " " "
6, 10, 18. -----	723. -----	"Men of Mark".
29, 31. -----	737. -----	" " " "
25. -----	726. -----	" " " "
26, 28, 39. -----	738. -----	" " " "
29. -----	42. -----	"The Kendals".
19, 24. -----	230. -----	"Russia".
31. -----	460. -----	"The Crisis".
25. -----	44. -----	"Journal of Residence in the U.S."
28. -----	45. -----	" " " " " " "
27. -----	46. -----	" " " " " " "
29. -----	12. -----	"Dramatic Opinions".
24. -----	12. -----	" " " "
2 2 2 -----	-----	Taken from the inscription on bust in the Schomburg Collection of the 135th Street Library.

Harper, Odette
Aug. 16, 1940

Interview with Ira Aldridge, 1947 7th Av. NYC

~~Mr. Ira Aldridge knows exactly~~

Mr. Ira Aldridge knows exactly nothing about the actor Aldridge. He does not know in just ~~what~~ way he is related to the actor although he is certain of relationship. He does not know the actor's place of birth but says it might be Maryland, Virginia, or New York or anywhere along the Eastern Seaboard. There are four press clippings in the house relative to the actor's career all date since 1925, Among them is one in which the actor is quoted as saying he came from a chief's family on the African Gold Coast. This Mr. Aldridge discredits but says that any of the other places often given could be true.

The address of the actor's daughter, now very old is

Miss Ira Aldridge
2 Bedford Gardens
Kensington London
W-8

All the family records were destroyed in a fire at the home of the interviewed Mr Aldridge's aunt when the former was 13 years old.

The four clippings possessed by this family are from Negro weeklies and can be seen at the Shomburg collection-post mortem accounts with data from doubtful sources.