

EDITORIAL DIGEST & MANUSCRIPT FILE

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Nugent

On Georgette Harvey

It was just a few decades ago that St. Louis was a waterfront town with all of the color and high life that goes with the romantic memory of such places. America grows with such rapidity and changes are so startlingly sudden when viewed through the gauge of the history of this still new country, that our history achieves a deformed and telescoped congruity. But it was during the 'gay nineties' when travel was still a hardy adventure, when river traffic caused exciting towns to spread bawdy fingers back to caress the luxurious gentle folk, and there were rough and colorful characters; John Henry was still too alive to have become legend; Frankie and Johnnie were creating folk song with their love, and slavery was a word which St. Louis had not decided to recognize as obsolete.

With such life all around her and adventure being what it was, it is not surprising that the little girl with the coffee-brown complexion, with the deep, very deep contralto voice, should begin to find singing in the church choir and the compliments of the elders and sisters of that church just a little tame. So Georgette Harvey went 'bad.' She became a theatrical performer. There was still that opprobrium attached to such enterprise which the more respectable folk were not hardy enough to abide. No respectable female would associate with show folks. They were all of loose morals. They walked home alone at night. They exhibited themselves for money, they showed their ankles, (and clad in silk at that) and they used rouge. They were all 'fast.' So its easy to imagine the consternation which was caused when Georgette flouted her fairly respectable

family and the horror-raised hands of her church by going on the stage.

But Miss Harvey had her definite ideas about what was the world, and in little or no time had worked her sinful way to that Mecca of the theatrical world, New York. When she arrived New York was at its height for the Negro on the stage. Marshall's was catering to a Brown Bohemian world most of whose members were even then or later to become famous. Williams and Walker, Ada Overton, Abbie Mitchell, Jim Europe, Ella Madison, etc.; and in her mind and determination she was already adding her name to this host of personalities.

She organized a group of six girls and they did a song and dance turn of sorts. Of very high sorts. She played Snow White in a dramatic production. She sang. And soon of course, her exceptional voice was recognized. She and her five girls went abroad, England, France, Germany, Belgium, then back to America. Vaudeville had become an accepted form of entertainment here by then, and she and her aggregation soon became known and in demand.

This aggregation she ruled with an iron and autocratic hand. She husbanded them and their energies and talents, in more ways than one. She was the court of last resort for all their affairs: private, public, personal, legal and amatory. None of her girls ever got into trouble; she perspicaciously saw to it that they married in time to prevent that; and usually well. Such moral concern for her 'girls' frequently disrupted her act, however, and she was constantly having to discover newer and better talent. But she was well fitted for such a task, and each succeeding voice replaced

the leading one with one still better. So by 1911 or thereabouts she was the leader of a really exceptionally fine group of singers, each of whom, besides working perfectly in chorus with the rest, was a soloist of no little merit. It was about this time that she returned to Europe.

But this time she returned to greater glories. To the variety halls of England, Scotland, Ireland, the Scandinavian countries, Europe, all of the continent, with Georgette learning such language as she visited each country with that remarkable facility for tongues which some people, (Negroes and parrots) possess. Finally they arrived in Russia. Czardom was at its height. White Russia was at its apex. Diamonds, ruby and snow dripped over everything romantically. Sables clothes all drozhky-driven aristocrats. There was a plethora of nobility. Every head that bowed to every other in "Red Square" was a noble head. Palaces were not centrally heated but they were palaces, vast, empty, overstocked palaces with silver candelabra, crystal chandeliers, gallons of wine, tons of venison, banquets and gaudy guards, brilliant ladies and beribboned diplomats, vying for attention and attraction against shining marble and heavy dull damasks.

The many badly clothed and ill fed persons whom one was encountering always in droves of hundreds only tended to make this lavishness all the more exciting and desirable. Georgette Harvey and her troupe became favorites of the people who mattered. The people, the many, many people never saw them entertain; they were far too expensive. They were for the carriage trade, rare and exotic.

delicacies to be savored only by the noble palate and senses. Georgette Harvey was an excellent business woman. She took full advantage of this exciting strangeness which her color, and that of her troupe of course, afforded this sybaritic minority. They became the toast of the dance halls, and Georgette herself, with her florid gestures and generous physique; her stentorian tones and blustering personality easily became the focal point of any scene or situation in which they happened to find themselves. And scenes and situations were many and varied. All accompanied by a jewel or precious bauble; a few thousand rubles discreetly offered; sable coats and ermine stoles casually donated, along with the lavish dinners and extravagant displays at which they were the guests of moment.

Georgette was quite the curiosity. Her facile command of the rather difficult Russian tongue, her ability to speak to anyone in the tongue by which she was addressed, became a never-ending and seven-day wonder. She commanded her little troupe in the same high-handed manner that a Captain used with his Cossacks. And with his great success. She swept on her overpowering way acquiring money, friends, jewels, furs, prestige and newspaper clippings; dragging her cortege in her successful wake.

All was well when 'came the revolution.' There was mass-  
acring in the streets, everything was upset, the Romanoff family was decimated and the legend of Anastasia born, Rasputin murdered and the aristocrats put to rout. Georgette herded her little troupe before her, gathered her jewels, clippings, furs and rubles; bought, fought and schemed her way across turbulent Russia, dodging the Red

Army, fleeing the White Army, adopting incredible disguises, protecting her girls, floundering her incredible way all the thousands of impossible miles to Siberia. There after a short respite, her group now scattered, she made her lone way into Mongolia, then China and finally into Japan. There she stayed long enough to leave speaking Japanese.

Upon her return to America she again organized a quartet of girls. She had lost her White Russian wealth and one must live. She succeeded at that quite ably. When, in 1927, Rouben Mamoulian insisted upon her to play the part of Maria in the Theatre Guild's production of 'Porgy,' she loyally insisted that her three girls also receive a place in the play. After her success in that opus, she found herself much in demand for dramatic parts and from that time on could and can be seen at almost any time on Broadway in some successful production, her latest having been as Mamba, in 'Mamba's Daughters' produced in 1938.

Source:

Interviews.