

# Ira Aldridge, the Negro Dramatic Genius

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## The Amazing Story of a Negro Stage-Hand to Whom the World's Greatest Monarchs Threw Open their Palace Gates.

HE Chevalier Ira Frederick Aldridge, Negro America's most illustrious son, was born in the opening years of the nineteenth century, probably in 1810.

Like many another great man who rose from humble surroundings and left no autobiography, his early life is clouded in conjecture.

There are two stories. One is that he was born in New York City, the son of an African prince and a colored American woman. This prince, it is said, was the sole survivor of a revolt, in which the king, his father, together with his family, had been massacred. Rescued by missionaries the prince was taken to America and trained for the ministry, becoming a successful and well-known preacher.

With the aid of the missionaries, the prince sent Ira to be educated for the ministry at Glasgow University, but enamored by the stage, he left the church.

The second, the more romantic, and yet more likely story, is that he was born of humble parents at Baltimore or Belaire, Md., or probably New York City.

### Taught by German

In his youth he was apprenticed to a German ship-carpenter, thus reminding one of another great Negro who also lived at that time; Frederick Douglass. Here, it is said, Aldridge learned German and picked up what education he could.

From the shipyard he went to Wallack's Theatre, where he filled some menial employment. But here he met many of the most noted ac-

tors of the day and was fired by their example to reach that goal which nearly every ambitious actor of the time had set for himself, namely, to be a great interpreter of Shakespeare.

### Taken to England.

It was here also, that he met Edmund Kean, one of the greatest of all Shakespearean actors. Kean, it is said, was so struck by the young Ira, that he took him back with him to England in some sort of capacity—as servant or secretary, probably.

As the encyclopedias point out, there is invention somewhere in the story of Aldridge's early life. It is probably that of the prince and king story which may have originated with some enterprising press-agent.

In those days, and even in these, the dark Negro who distinguished himself, was given royal origin. If he was light, it was his white ancestry. Another dark American Negro, very much known in both Europe and America and who comes from the humblest environment, was recently spoken of by a leading European newspaper as being of royal African descent, although to the best of our knowledge, there is no foundation whatever for the story.

### Life of Thrills.

But let us leave these questions of origin and early life aside and come down to that part of Aldridge's life of which there is no doubt. For independent of them, his life is full of thrills and inspiration.

Living at the time he did—that's before the Civil War, his life sounds like a fairy tale—except that in fairy-tales things happen by magic while in Aldridge's case it was the magic of work—hard, grinding, nerve testing work.

Shakespeare said: "Some men are born great; some achieve greatness; while others have greatness thrust upon them." Of Ira Aldridge all three were, in a measure, true.

### Possessed Great Intellect

Aldridge's first appearance was as an amateur in Sheridan's "Pizarro," where he played the role of Rolla, with distinction. Following this he played in minor theatres with success, and returned to America in 1830. But the proposed American tour ended in flat failure, and he returned to England.

It was a bitter blow for him but years of disappointment and almost despair were ahead of him. He had set his heart on playing Othello and during this period he tried manager after manager in vain. But he studied hard in the meanwhile, mastering the minutest details of the role.

### Made Remarkable Debut

At last his opportunity arrived. He

made his debut at the Royal Theatre in London, where the excellence of at once stamped him as a Shakespearean actor of the first rank. The critics were most effusive in their praise, and from then onwards he was a made man. Letters of congratulation poured in on him, among them being one from Kean himself, and another from Knowles, one of the foremost dramatists of the time.

### Acclaimed on Tour

From London he began a tour of the provinces accumulating fame as he went. Nor did he confine himself to Othello. He had mastered other Shakespearean roles and he played these as well. But it was in the dark-skinned roles such as Othello, Aaron in "Titus Andronicus," also Gambia in "The Slave"; Narambo, and Oranooko, he was at his best. In Belfast he played Othello to Kean's Iago.

Crowds flocked to see him and so great was his name that the theatres were sold out days in advance of his coming. The press hailed him as "The African Roscius," and as such he was now known.

Roscius, it will be recalled, was preeminently the greatest actor of ancient Rome. Though born a slave he rose by sheer force of genius to a position of first rank under Julius Caesar. Cicero himself, esteemed him as a friend, and did not disdain to learn from him.

### Othello, Greatest Role

Madame Malibran, leading prima donna of the time, went to see Aldridge, and was so impressed by his acting that she wrote him: "Never in the whole course of my professional career have I witnessed a more powerful and interesting performance," while Lady V. Beecher, herself the most noted tragedienne of her time, wrote: "During my professional as well as my private life I never saw so correct a portraiture of Othello amidst the luminaries of my day."

Returning to London Aldridge appeared at the Covent Garden Theatre as Othello, where, according to The Illustrated Life of London, (April 30, 1864) "his success was the most complete."

So masterful, so perfect in every detail was his acting that one would have thought that Shakespeare in creating Othello, the majestic Moor—"The noble Moor whom the full senate of Venice called all-in-all sufficient," had used him as the very model.

Othello, it will be recalled, was the commander-in-chief of the armies of Venice at the time when that nation was at the height of its glory. He was a formidable warrior but with the soul of a child when it came to guile and intrigue.

### Possessed Commanding Physique

In physique, too, Aldridge fitted the

part admirably, he being of commanding height and presence with a well-developed body, and a carriage of great dignity.

Into his acting he would put so much fire, so much realism, that at times members of the audience would be forced under the tension to rise out of their seats. One of the passages in which he was most effective was the following in which he laments the death of the beautiful and innocent Desdemona whom he had just smothered:

### Famous Passage

"Whip me, ye devils,  
From the possession of this  
heavenly sight!  
Blow me about in winds! roast  
me in sulphur!  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of  
liquid fire.  
Oh Desdemona! Desdemona!  
Dead!  
Dead!  
Oh! Oh! Oh!"

At these moments he created such pity and indignation in the minds of his audience that some would rise to their feet demanding the punishment of the guilty Iago.

But immense as was his success in England it was as nothing compared with that he was yet to attain: In 1852 he left at the head of a troupe for Germany where he played for the next three years in that language in nearly all the chief towns. Duke Bernhard, ruler of Saxe-Meningen and brother of Queen Adelaide of England, knighted him, making him a Chevalier of the Royal Saxon Ernestinischen House Order, and presented him with the Verdienst Medal in Gold.

### Decorated by King

At the Royal Opera House in Berlin King Frederick William IV, was so thrilled by his acting that he ordered the Gold Medal of Science and the Arts struck in his honor. The only other personages to be so distinguished up to that period were Humboldt, famous naturalist and philosopher; Spontini the composer; and Liszt, the great musician.

In Austria-Hungary his triumphs continued. The imperial Histrionic Conservatory of Pesth elected him to membership and gave him the large gold medal. The Imperial and Arch-ducal Creche Institution, composed of the leading members of the nobility and artists of the first rank, elected him to membership for life. Accompanying the notification was an autograph letter from the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, complimenting him on his superb genius.

### Receives Medal

In Switzerland, the City of Bern presented him with the Gold Medal of Merit; in Sweden, where he went on the invitation of the king, still other honors awaited him as well as in Belgium. In Russia, as the guest of the Czar, he played before the latter and his Court in the Imperial Palace and so impressed the Czar that he presented him with the First Class Medal of the Arts. "He was also made a member of the Versammlung, and was elected to life membership in the Russian Imperial Academy.

Penetrating into Asiatic Russia he continued his triumphs. In Bessarabia, the highest honor possible was conferred on him: he was made an Associate of the Order of Nobles.

### Students Worship Him

At Kasan, the capital of Mongol Tartar, the students of the Imperial University presented him with an inscription in Latin, of which the following is a translation:

"The undersigned students of the Imperial University of Kasan feel bound to express their deep gratitude and veneration for the greatest actor of our time, the Master, Ira Aldridge, for the happy moments afforded them by his genius and artistic skill. They are aware that the great tragic actor is above all praise, but while convinced that their words are altogether too feeble to express his merit they are desirous of proving by this address that they will ever cherish the memory of him who first taught them to understand the immortal works of the British poet."

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But it was in the dark-skinned roles such as Othello that he was best.



Ira Aldridge as he appeared in Othello

Do You Want Some  
EXTRA MONEY?  
Look Over Our  
CLASSIFIED ADS  
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