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# The Advocate

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Features

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## DOES BLACKFACE ACTING EXERT A MAGIC SPELL OVER AMERICAN AUDIENCES?

Ever since the great Bert Williams began the now prevalent artifice of corking the face, there has been a strange epidemic of blackface actors both bad and good — an epidemic that shows no sign of abating

By GEORGE SANTA

Blackening the face has not only become an art, it has become an almost sure ticket to great popularity on the stage. Since many years ago when Bert Williams, America's greatest comedian of all time, first began the now prevalent practice of corking the face on the stage, it has remained for virtually every actor who claimed any degree of finesse in the art of entertaining to smear his face with a goodly portion of soot, coloring, or any substance which created the exaggerated effect of a typical Negro, and mimic what is conceived to be the everyday colored brother.



The late "Bert" Williams, conceded by the most "hard-boiled" critics to have been the greatest comedian of all times. He, it was, who began the now prevalent custom of blacking the face. It was rumored that this master actor hit upon the idea accidentally but there can be no doubt that the custom has become a deeply imbedded essential to American stage humor.



The inimitable Johnny Huggins, who spent quite a successful period abroad and is still a recipient of great ovations whenever he appears



Ethel Barrymore, called by many "America's Greatest actress," who, undoubtedly, is one of the foremost players on the English-speaking stage. This is a picture showing the beauty she was ever so reluctant to conceal in order to win fame via the blackface route.

Amateurs, professionals, bad and good actors have reaped the lucrative profits of the corked face. The success of blackface acting has been little short of phenomenal.

Over the radio by far the most popular comedy team has been the mirth-provoking Amos 'n' Andy. These two by sheer exaltation of the listener's imagination have created an unprecedented demand for the ridiculing type of blackface acting. The listener-in on Amos 'n' Andy derives his primary entertainment from imagining that these two comedians are thoroughly blacked so far as their faces are concerned and are going through all of the ludicrous motions of the most preposterous so-called Negro jargon.

If for one moment the radio "bug" imagined his comedy idols as white in appearance, as they are supposed to be in actuality, the whole dubious illusion of Amos 'n' Andy would be lost, and to Amos 'n' Andy their \$100,000 contract would be an evanescent dream instead of a potent reality.

That they may not lose the advantages of this blackfaced effect, Correl and Gosden have both cleverly handled their publicity so that far more pictures of them are published with their "moneyed" faces than appear without their magic makeup.

Al Jolson, the originator of the "mammy" racket, did so only with the use of the

ubiquitous blackfaced mask. One thinks of Al Jolson not as a Hebrew song writer but as a blackfaced sentiment dispenser on his knees, his arms out howling "mammy." He received his inspiration from the inimitable Bert Williams years before Jolson had ever received the acclaim and, of course, the wealth, that has fallen his lot.

Perhaps more than Jolson's unusual ability to "put over" a song, it was the blackfaced scene in the "Singing Fool" that brought such widespread success to that weeping picture.

Again, Eddie Cantor, Jolson's fellow Hebrew, has capitalized most magnificently on "mammy" yowling. In the picture "Whoopie," one of the very best shots was the clever manner in which this smart little actor managed to get himself into the blackface attitude without deliberately sooting his face.

The song he sang while in this makeup was one of the best of the picture. But on numerous other occasions Eddie Cantor has used unsparingly the Bert Williams method of making himself funny.

And now comes Ethel Barrymore, "America's greatest actress," in "Scarlet Sister Mary" with a face necessarily so dark that she was many weeks in deciding whether she would allow it to appear in print as it appeared in this unusual play.

### "Scarlet Sister Mary"



A scene from one of the year's most unusual plays in which Ethel Barrymore, on the left, appeared in blackface in an effort to duplicate the success of Al Jolson, Amos and Andy and a host of other whites who have attained fame and fortune through the burnt cork route.

Scarlet Sister Mary, the principal character, is a most unmoral colored girl who knows nothing of birth control and possessing no sort of contraceptive intelligence, allows her nonchalance in matters of sex to simply color her life without the slightest bit of remorse.

It has been up to Ethel Barrymore to portray this character in bold outlines in order to fully create the atmosphere alleged to exist among Negroes in certain sections of the United States.

This aspect of the great actress's step does not here concern this article. It is far more significant that she, too, has felt the magic spell of blackface acting. Not satisfied with being considered America's greatest actress, she wishes to establish herself as immortally in the minds and hearts of her public as did Bert Williams, her prototype.

The most colorful Negro exponents of blackface acting are Miller and Lyles. From the famous "Shuffle Along" down to the present time this team has had marked success in this field. Recently, they separated as a team to follow their chosen professions separately, but now they have united again, realizing that they are far more effective together than apart.

It has been rumored that Amos 'n' Andy

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