

The Jeffersons, The Rivals, and Their Romances That Winds Through a Century and a Quarter

The Jeffersons and The Rivals are so closely associated that he who would write a history of one must write the history of the other.

The Jeffersons and The Rivals! For 133 years those names have been linked together. For 133 years this distinguished family of Thespians have passed down from father to son the tradition of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's masterpiece until now, with the fifth generation presenting it, it is almost a part of the Jefferson family.

The Play Itself.

It was in August, 1774, that Richard Brinsley Sheridan, then a boy in his twenty-third year, was commissioned manager of the famous old Covent Garden theatre in London to write a comedy. With the exception of a very minor scene, young Sheridan had no idea whatever as to what should constitute the comedy.

Despite his youth, he was a writer of considerable note, and, confident of his ability and strong in his hopes, he set to work. Early in December of the same year, he delivered to the Covent Garden theatre manager the manuscript of The Rivals.

A masterpiece of comedy had been written and wonderful was the career that awaited it—a career that would have been lost to the world but for the persistence of its boyish author.

First Time Failed.

The play was immediately put in rehearsal and on Jan. 17th, 1775, was produced for the first time on the stage. It was a dismal failure; failure because of the wretched performance of the actor to whom was allotted the role of Sir Lucius O'Trigger.

His performance was so bad, and marred the work of the other artists to such an extent, that the play was almost hooted from the stage on the opening night.

Young Sheridan had faith in his play and insisted upon its being presented the second night. It was presented and failing again, was then withdrawn. The author took his manuscript, made several minor changes, secured another actor to portray Sir Lucius O'Trigger and prepared to try again.

A Dramatic Triumph.

The play, which had received the widest notoriety on account of its first night's fiasco, was again presented. The audience assembled at the theatre with the one idea of hooting the play from the stage. But nothing of the kind occurred. This night, the genius of young Sheridan was to be vindicated.

The new actor, in the part of Sir Lucius, had fully grasped all the delicacies of the role and added such grace and artistic atmosphere to the entire performance that the audience sat spell-bound. They left extolling its merits and the talent of him who had created it.

The play became a fad. The best people of London became enamored of it to such an extent that it was long until the fame of the play had reached the ears of the king. The royal family witnessed the production and with the approval of royalty, The Rivals soon developed into the most astounding comedy success that London had ever known.

Sheridan's fame was established and in The Rivals one finds that indescribable something that is a combination of boyish charm, youthful understanding, boyhood philosophy, and a knowledge of life that is totally different from that exploited by the writers whose youth, with its optimism, is lost to them, and upon whom the pessimism of age is steadily encroaching.

A Jefferson Enters.

In 1774, while Sheridan was working on the manuscript of The Rivals, Thomas Jefferson, an actor who was born in 1749 and who was the first of the distinguished family to adopt a stage career, became a member of the company then under the management of David Garrick, who was, at that time, considered the greatest actor of his day.

Mr. Jefferson was essentially a comedian, and about this time Garrick, who had a fondness for the heavier styles of playing, decided to refrain from appearing in any comedies. This was the opportunity for Jefferson, who at once assumed the principal comedy roles in all of the David Garrick productions.

It was about 1779 that Garrick produced The Rivals for the first time. Of course it was only natural that Garrick's principal comedian should be allotted the part of Bob Acres. Here it was that the combination of a Jefferson portraying the part of "Fighting Bob" began and ever since that memorable night that combination has continued.

A Joseph Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson, the first, died in 1807, leaving behind him a wife and two sons, the elder of whom was called Joseph. He was born in 1774.

As a young man, Joseph evinced a decided talent for the stage, and in 1795, in a very mediocre company, he portrayed Bob Acres in one of the small English cities. He appeared in the part for several performances and then, for some reason which is now unknown, abandoned the play.

Comes to America

He came to America in 1797, bringing with him a carefully constructed prompt-book of The Rivals. This he never personally used in America, yet he treasured it and gave it to his son, who was born in 1804.

This young man was also named Joseph after his father. This makes him Joseph Jefferson the second—although he represented the third generation concerned in this narrative.

This young man, at a very early age, showed a decided talent for painting. This talent was fostered by his parents, and it was not until he was nearly twenty years of age that the family trait asserted itself in a yearning for the stage.

Throughout his entire life, he never

abandoned his first love,—painting. He was a distinguished artist and some of the most precious heirlooms now in the possession of the Jefferson family are specimens of the artistic handiwork of Joseph Jefferson, the second.

While still a young man, he married Miss Cornelia Frances Thompson,—at that time the most noted singer in America. There were four children born of this union,—two of whom died in infancy. The other two were Joseph Jefferson, the third,—our Joe Jefferson, and Cornelia Jefferson.

The Great Jefferson.

We are now down to our own dear old Joseph Jefferson,—the best known of all that talented family of Thespians,—the beloved actor whose name has been written on every heart.

Joseph Jefferson, the third (representing the fourth generation), was born in Philadelphia on Feb. 20th, 1820, and at the early age of three years, made his theatrical debut.

His first appearance on the stage was a very unexpected affair, so far as the audience was concerned.

Appears in Chicago.

In 1838, the boy's father, after negotiations with the manager of a theatre in Chicago, then a town with a population of a little more than 2000, journeyed to the city for which such a brilliant history was just beginning.

With him, over that memorable journey by canal and on horseback, he took his son, the family paying for their passage by giving a number of entertainments on the old, slow moving boat, the proceeds of which went to the captain.

In Chicago, the children were given every advantage possible at that time. The father, with his great fondness for drawing and painting, instilled his knowledge into the mind of his son, but always the longing for the stage was uppermost in the boy's mind.

As Legitimate Actor.

During the awkward age, from 12 to 15, young Jefferson appeared but seldom. In the meantime, the first theatre in Chicago burned and on its

it was this version that the famous all star cast used during their memorable tour of this country in 1896. This company, composed of Joseph Jefferson, Nat Goodwin, Wm. H. Crane, Francis Wilson, Joseph and E. M. Holland, Robert Taber, Mrs. John Drew, Julia Marlowe, and Fannie Rice was it must be admitted, the greatest company that ever appeared in any one play and the full value of Mr. Jefferson's version of The Rivals was in every way worthy of its ability.

The Jefferson Favorite.

During the many years that Mr. Jefferson was before the public although he was well known for his rendition of several other parts, but of Bob Acres was always his favorite. He claimed he found more pleasure in portraying Bob than any other character in his entire repertoire. He played it more than one thousand times and in each performance, found something of new interest.

When Mr. Jefferson and W. J. Florence formed their famous combination, Mr. Florence found in the

Willie Jefferson's Daring.

Meanwhile the younger son, William, was begging for the opportunity to play Bob Acres, his father's role. He knew every line, every gesture, of the entire play. He had faith in his ability and his father shared it with him.

In 1838, when the father was appearing in Pittsburg, Pa., Willie went to visit him. That trip to the Smoky City is an epoch in the boy's life. The father was taken suddenly ill. It was impossible for the old gentleman to appear that evening, and with every seat in the house sold, disaster seemed imminent.

Willie begged for the opportunity to play the part; to take the place of him who stood foremost on the American stage. It was the height of daring, but finally the father, believing in his boy, and his boy's faith, consented that Willie should appear as Bob.

A Pronounced Success.

What dreams were his that night Willie Jefferson alone can tell. He

dressed for the part, and with a vast audience waiting there to see the great Joe Jefferson (for the substitution was not announced), he stepped out upon the stage as Bob Acres. For him, too, ambition had been realized.

So masterly was his performance; so accurate was it in every detail; so closely did it resemble the work of the elder Jefferson, that few in the audience were aware that a change had been made. Voice, eyes, gesture, every movement of the body, were identically the same. The long years of waiting and patient study had borne fruit.

The next day the change was announced to the Pittsburg papers and with one voice,—the critics sounded the praise of another Jefferson. Willie Jefferson, playing in his father's very shoes, had jumped into fame. Another Jefferson had been given to the world.

So faithful was his performance that from that night until dear old Joe Jefferson closed his eyes forever, Willie always went with his father's company as his father's understudy.

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first really began in what was then the rage, Living Statues. The boy witnessed many of these entertainments, and won a juvenile reputation for himself for his imitations of these statues. In fact, young Jefferson was imitating everything and everybody that came to his notice. Genius began to show its presence early in Joseph Jefferson, the third.

Mimics T. D. Rice.

It happened that eventually the boy saw T. D. Rice, a popular performer of that period, who was creating a furore as a burnt cork comedian. Mr. Rice's performance was filled with little mannerisms capable of imitation and to the surprise of everyone, our Joseph Jefferson—then only three years old—began giving imitations of Mr. Rice that were screamingly funny.

Mr. Rice himself saw them and waxed enthusiastic. Much to the boy's delight, Rice helped him to perfect his imitations, and it was but a few weeks until this mere baby could accomplish nearly every move made by Rice himself.

Rice suggested the idea of having the boy appear on the stage with him and the father,—realizing that the Thespian mantle was to fall upon the shoulders of his son, interposed no objection and the stage career of Joseph Jefferson, the third, began.

Thrown on Stage.

It had not been publicly announced that young Jefferson would appear with Mr. Rice, and only a few of the actors themselves knew that the boy was to appear. Those who did, however, were thrown into consternation when Rice, in grotesque make-up, and carrying his old carpet bag, appeared on the stage without the boy.

Rice began his performance as usual and after about three minutes, opened the carpet bag to get, as he stated, his handkerchief. Then came a gasp of feigned surprise and after a severe shaking of the bag, out rolled young Joe Jefferson. The audience fairly shrieked its approval. It may be said with all truth that the greatest actor America has ever known was fairly "thrown on the stage."

Rice recognized in the boy a worthy rival, for his work that evening was as clear cut, as distinct, as much imbued with personality, as that of any professional could have been.

site was erected a more modern play house.

It was in this temple of amusement that our Joseph Jefferson, whose name is revered throughout all stagerland, first appeared as a legitimate actor. It was in Chicago, too, that he was given the treasured manuscript of The Rivals, which the father had brought from England.

The boy had often heard his father talk of the possibilities of the part of Bob Acres and he remembered that his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, had all achieved success in the role. Then came the idea to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors—the ambition to again give the world another Jefferson as Bob Acres.

Carefully he read the play and learned, with something akin to absolute horror, that it was almost totally unfit for modern presentation.

When Sheridan wrote the play performances began at 5.30 and 6 o'clock in the evening and lasted until midnight. Long talky scenes were, at that time, prevailing marks of dramatic construction. It was on these antiquated lines that Sheridan had constructed The Rivals. The original ending of the comedy was not in accord with modern ideas, so young Jefferson set to work to revise the play and make it conform to the demands of the modern audiences.

The Graceful Epilogue.

With him, this work was a labor of love.

Carefully he did his work and wonderfully well, too. The abrupt ending of the old play he changed and, thanks to his effort, The Rivals can now boast of a graceful and beautiful epilogue.

The All Star Cast.

This version Mr. Jefferson used for upward of fifteen years, during which time the possibilities of the role of Bob Acres to him to such an extent that he was continually making minor improvements, and studying out and planning a generally reconstructed version.

About twenty years ago, Mr. Jefferson finally completed a manuscript of The Rivals. In it, he had eliminated every talky scene and every superfluous word. He gave the play its most delightful ending, and it was this version that he used during the remainder of his life, and which he handed down to his son and namesake, Joseph Jefferson the fourth.

part of Sir Lucius just as many things to interest him as Mr. Jefferson found in Bob.

The Boys Follow.

And now comes the most peculiar coincidence of the entire romance of The Rivals and the Jeffersons.

Two of Mr. Jefferson's sons, Joseph and William, each considered the play the finest example of theatrical literature in existence. They have never abandoned this idea, and even to-day, either of these two young actors advance argument after argument in support of their contention.

When Jefferson and Florence were at the height of their fame, the two young Jeffersons never missed a production of the old play. Joseph, the elder of the two, from the time he was a boy had but one ambition,—the one desire to play the part of Sir Lucius O'Trigger in his father's company.

The younger son had just as great ambition, only his dream was to live out again the life of Bob Acres, as his ancestors, for generations back, had lived it out for the delight of thousands.

Joe Realizes Ambition.

After Mr. Florence died, young Joe Jefferson was chosen to succeed him as Sir Lucius. He claimed at that time, that his life's ambition had been realized, for, at last, he was Sir Lucius.

How thoroughly artistic was his first performance can be attested by the tremendous ovation he received on his first appearance. Both press and public, the country over, had been fairly imbued with the idea that Sir Lucius O'Trigger had virtually died with Mr. Florence. How erroneous was this idea can be appreciated when the younger Jefferson fairly electrified the theatre-going world with his performance of that role in his father's company.

Critics attended the first night to ridicule the young Jefferson,—to kill him by comparisons of his work with that of Florence. Nothing awful happened. Those who were prepared to belittle the efforts of the young player changed their ridicule to praise and he was unanimously pronounced a distinguished success.

Once again The Rivals had changed ridicule to praise, as it had done away back there in England, more than a century before. As long as the elder Jefferson appeared upon the stage, his son was prominent in his support and naught but praise has been showered upon his efforts.

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