

3-1-1950

The Wild Duck Comes Home

Anne Cooke
Howard University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/reprints>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cooke, Anne, "The Wild Duck Comes Home" (1950). *Faculty Reprints*. Paper 73.
<http://dh.howard.edu/reprints/73>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Reprints by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.

THE WILD DUCK COMES HOME

an exciting adventure in cultural exchange

By ANNE COOKE¹

ABOUT THIS STORY--For the outstanding contribution made through their good will tour of Europe last fall, the Howard University Players are soon to receive a special award from the American Public Relations Association. The citation, which will read "for international public relations," will be the third annual award for achievements in the field of international relations presented by the Association. The other two recipients of such awards were Drew Pearson, cited in 1947 in recognition of his contribution to the "Friendship Train" project, and International House in New Orleans, Louisiana, which was cited in 1948.

Reports from all who came in contact with the Howard University Players during their tour indicate that they reflected great credit on their university and on their country. Typical of the glowing tributes paid them by Europeans who were closely associated with them in this undertaking was that contained in a letter which Mr. Carl Heger, Director of the Alle Scenen Theater in Copenhagen, wrote to the American Ambassador there:

"Now that 'The Howard University Players' have completed their guest performance at the 'Alle-Scene' and have proceeded on their tour of the Scandinavian countries, I would like to take this first opportunity to send you my thanks for the interest you have shown these guest performances and the players during their stay in Copenhagen, please also accept my warmest thanks for all the helpfulness provided by your Embassy.

"I should be extremely pleased if you would tell your Government that the visit by the Negro students to this country was a great success also in the sense of international relationship. The private hosts among whom are leading men in Danish art and science have to me expressed their delight at the visit.

"These students and their leaders gave us such an admirable impression of the United States that I cannot think of any young representatives who could better act as a living propaganda for your people and country and its democracy.

"I sincerely hope that a similar arrangement can again be made."

¹/ Dr. Cooke is Professor of Drama at Howard University in Washington, D. C., and director of the Howard University Players.

THE WILD DUCK COMES HOME

The great moment we had dreamed of for months had come at last--the curtain was about to rise on our premiere of the Wild Duck in Det Nye Teater in Oslo and on a thrilling chapter in the lives of the Howard University Players! From the wings, we could glimpse in front-row seats Crown Prince Olaf and Crown Princess Martha with the young princesses Ragnhild and Astrid. And we knew that the capacity audience included high government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, cultural leaders, critics, and just plain citizens of Norway. These people had gathered to see an amateur college group from the United States--the first American Negro theatrical group to tour the Scandinavian countries--present their interpretation of a classic by the great Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen.

As coach of these student-actors, I was probably as nervous as any of them. At the invitation of the Norwegian Government, we had come a long way to perform. Many kind people had worked hard to make our trip possible, and we were deeply conscious of the responsibility which privilege had placed upon us. Two hours and fifteen minutes later, when the final curtain rang down to thunderous applause, we felt that we were off to a good start.

The story of our tour had its beginning back in November 1948 when the Howard players performed The Wild Duck in Spalding Hall on their university campus in Washington, D. C., before an audience which included several officials from the Norwegian Embassy and from the Norwegian Government Welfare Office for the Merchant Marine.

After the performance one of these Norwegians, Mr. Fredrik Haslund, asked me, "Would your University permit you to bring this production to Norway?" Not dreaming he was serious, I glibly replied, "Why certainly. When would you like us to come?" "Next fall," he said, and asked for an appointment to discuss the matter fully with other faculty members and me.

Mr. Haslund's project appealed to us strongly. We felt that the suggested trip not only would offer the Howard players a challenging opportunity to see and study the best of drama in the Scandinavian countries, but would help us to make new friends and thus contribute to international understanding. We agreed that the first step was to get some expert dramatic appraisal of our performance. So, when he returned to Norway a short time later, Mr. Haslund carried with him films, recordings and texts of our performance of



Scene in *The Wild Duck* by Henrik Ibsen, with Howard University Players Charles White as Hjalmar, Geraldine Haywood as Gina, and Marilyn Berry as Hedvig.

The Wild Duck and other plays. Mr. Hans Jacob Nilssen, one of Norway's leading producers, pronounced himself favorably impressed.

In March 1949, the Norwegian Government extended the hoped-for invitation through its Embassy in Washington. It was proposed that the Howard players make a tour in the fall, opening in mid-September in Oslo with a six-day appearance in The Wild Duck at the New Theater, and continuing with a series of guest performances of that play and of Mamba's Daughters, by Dorothy and duBose Heyward, in Norway, Denmark and Sweden.

In extending the invitation, Embassy officials pointed out the broad cultural aspects of the tour. At that time there were more Norwegian than any other foreign students in American colleges and over 200 Americans were attending the Oslo University Summer School. The Embassy regarded the invitation to the Howard students as a natural extension of Norway's widespread post-war interest in the international exchange of students. They stressed the growing interest of their country in amateur dramatics and pointed out that the primary purpose of the tour would be to acquaint Norwegian audiences with the development of amateur theatricals in the United States.

We were to appear on a non-profit basis and the proceeds from ticket sales were to be used to cover the expenses of the group while in Scandinavia. The student association in Norway had arranged for the Howard players to be billeted in the homes of students and faculty members. There remained only the problem of providing transportation funds. These were solicited by the cultural attache of the Norwegian Embassy from Norwegians in the United States. By June, he was able to guarantee \$3,500--enough for one-way passage to Europe. And Mr. Blevins Davis, of Independence, Missouri, who had backed the presentation of Shakespeare's Hamlet in Elsinore, Denmark by a group of American actors in June 1949, generously contributed \$4,500 toward the project so that travel arrangements could be completed.

On August 31, we boarded the S. S. Stavengerfjord. Among those who bade us bon voyage was Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a trustee of Howard University. As our ship pulled out of New York harbor, we were both thrilled and awed at the realization that we were on our way to present the most celebrated work of Norway's most celebrated dramatist in his own country!

The State Department Helps

The Department of State was of great assistance. Advance publicity by the United States Information Service helped to gain public interest and assure our group of a cordial welcome.

On arriving at Oslo, where our tour opened, we were met by representatives of the American Embassy, the United States Information Service, the press and the theater, as well as by the hospitable Norwegians who were to be our hosts during our stay there.

Tradition Poses a Problem

A small incident revealed the extreme care and respectful tradition surrounding the production of The Wild Duck in Norway.

When I arrived at Det Nye Teater shortly before the curtain was to rise on the premiere of The Wild Duck, I found the theater chief anxiously awaiting me. He was upset because a chair had been placed in a certain spot on the stage where it would not have been located in a traditional presentation of the play. "Never is The Wild Duck played with a chair in that position," he declared, and insisted that it be removed. We compromised by having it removed for the opening scene and brought on later by a character in the play.



Reception at American Embassy in Oslo, Norway, in honor of the Howard University players. Left to right: Crown Princess Martha, Mrs. Bay, Crown Prince Olaf, Princess Ragnhild, Dr. Anne Cooke, U. S. Ambassador Charles U. Bay.

This incident posed a problem which we had to face squarely. And, since we felt that our only justification for presenting Ibsen's play to the Norwegians lay in being true to our concept of it, we decided that regardless of criticism we would stick to our interpretation.

The reactions to our presentation proved that we were right. While some critics missed the mature actors they were used to seeing in certain roles, others enjoyed the fresh and freer interpretation offered by the Howard players. Most press reviews were marked by a scholarly approach. Here are some typical comments on The Wild Duck:

Morgenposten, Oslo, September 14, 1949.

"... It was interesting to meet this American interpretation so marked by a deep, almost bitter earnestness.

"The performance was so filled with fine and secure stage culture that it became a living proof of what it must mean to young students to study at a university which brings them into such intimate contact with dramatic art."

Vergens Gang, Oslo, September 14, 1949.

"The encompassing preparation and study that the performance gives evidence of, has led the students to perform Ibsen's play so naturally and so right that the results came very close to the understanding and interpretation which Ibsen's own country has arrived at ..."

Bergens Tidende, Bergen, November 10, 1949.

"... One discovered that one in fact was looking at an almost revolutionary, liberated every-day Ibsen. We were meeting the man on the street--you and me. There was something freshly vacuum-cleaned, something uncurtained and real about this American Wild Duck."

In addition to a crowded schedule of performances, including an extra Sunday matinee to meet the demand, we were kept on the go with many other activities during our week in Oslo. The American Ambassador gave a reception for the Howard players at the Embassy which was attended by the Crown Prince and Crown Princess. The Foreign Office arranged a sightseeing tour. We were invited to the National Theater to see how their company interprets The Wild Duck. The Norwegian State Radio broadcast excerpts of our opening-night performance, sandwiching them between the scenes from the National Theater production with a commentary on the two different conceptions.

An amusing incident occurred at a reception given by the American Embassy in Oslo. A gentleman in military uniform introduced the Crown Prince without giving his name, saying, "His Majesty the Crown Prince." One of the Howard players, whose duty it was to introduce the arriving guests to the person next in line, said "Sorry, I didn't get the name." "Welkommen til Norge" (Welcome to Norway) replied Prince Olaf. Thinking that he still had not got the name straight, the player asked "Mr. Who?" Afterwards the Prince told the story, laughingly referring to himself as "Mr. Who."

On to Denmark

Our last performance of The Wild Duck in Oslo carried us to within twenty minutes of the time to sail for Copenhagen, where we were to open two days later in Mamba's Daughters. The weekly newsreel in Oslo caught the actors rushing from the theater in nineteenth-century costumes, a bag in one hand, a passport in the other. And thus the tempo was set for ten weeks of touring in Europe.

Mamba's Daughters, the Negro folk play by Dorothy and duBose Heyward, opened in the Alle-Scenen Theater in Copenhagen. There, as in Oslo, we were cordially received and played to full houses during our week's stay. The Danish press was as favorable to us as the Norwegian:

Borsen, Copenhagen, September 21, 1949.

"The Howard players played with heart and affection and carried the audience with them. They are often touching and primitive in their expressions and they fully cover the subject which is so closely related to them ..."

National Tidende, Copenhagen, September 21, 1949:

"The faces, the songs, the movements will long be remembered and so will the purity, the naturalness and enthusiasm with which the group comported itself in the very dramatic scenes ..."

The American Charge d'Affaires in Copenhagen gave a reception for us at the United States Library, which was attended by the Danish Minister of Education, the president of the University of Copenhagen, the director of the Royal Theater, and a number of other cultural leaders.

The Danes literally showered us with flowers, both on the stage and in our quarters. But each country has its own peculiar way of expressing its good wishes. One of our girl players, Shauneille Perry, was shocked at being spit at as she was going on the stage! I had failed to pass on to her the warning given me by the theater chief that the Danes spit for good luck on the costumes of the actors.

The spirituals sung in Mamba's Daughters deeply impressed the Danes, many of whom had never heard Negro spirituals before. The personnel of the theater and the people with whom we stayed were eager to learn the words and music. We were happy to teach them and in return to learn some of their songs.

On the day we left Copenhagen, about a hundred of our friends were at the dock to see us off. As we stood on the deck of our ship, we started to sing the "Goodbye" spiritual from Mamba's Daughters, "Goodbye, Sister, Going to Leave You in the Hand," substituting the word Denmark for Sister. Immediately they joined in with us, singing "Goodbye, Players." We were so overcome that we finished the song with a quaver in our voices and tears in our eyes.

From Copenhagen we went to Sweden to present Mamba's Daughters.

After one and half hours' crossing from Copenhagen to Malmo, the company was completely "washed up"--we had had a hard run in Copenhagen, with no rest after theater hours. We pulled into Malmo tired and emotionally spent. I took the students to task: "This is a new country--perk up--you must be lively young people from America!"

When we docked we found the local fire department band waiting to greet us with "Carry Me Back to Ol' Virginny." The band had learned all the Stephen Foster songs and Sousa marches with which to serenade our group. Not one of us, as it happened, was from "ol' Virginny," but we were deeply touched by this gesture.



Howard University Players in *Mamba's Daughters*. Center: Mary Nelson as Hager and Roxie Roker as Mamba.



Lars Hanson, noted Swedish actor, engaged in an animated discussion of the theater with Zaida Coles of the Howard University Players, appears to be teaching her to speak his language.

We opened with a performance at the University of Lund, which inaugurated the University season, and were most enthusiastically received. We played at Malmo two days later, then proceeded to Stockholm where we presented the play during the first week of October. A performance in Uppsala wound up our tour of Sweden, and we returned to Norway to present both plays in Trondheim, Stavanger and Bergen.

The people of Norway were friendly and interested in us. Occasionally their interest took an amusing turn. In Stavanger, a six-year old girl, was very excited to have one of the Negro students staying at her house. "But, mother;" she asked, "where is his black face?" --Mother explained that not all Negroes were dark-skinned. "Tell him to wear his black face on the stage," promptly replied the child, "but here I like him as he is."

In the same city, a taxi-driver said to one of our players, in English, "I suppose you find it very cold here." The player replied "Well, not too cold." "You mean you are not freezing?" "No." The driver shook his head, "I thought it was always hot in India."

Between our visits to Trondheim and Stavanger, we returned to Oslo and Det Nye Teater, which we considered home, to present Mamba's Daughters. We had five free days there, which were a life-saver for the entire company. During this interim, the Howard students joined with the students of the University of Oslo at their ski lodge for a week-end of winter sports. We saw productions in the State theaters of Oslo, caught up on laundry, rest, and correspondence, and strengthened ties with our new friends.

Our Scandinavian tour ended in mid-November in Bergen at the National Scene, Norway's oldest theater and the one in which Ibsen first produced The Wild Duck.

In the Scandinavian countries the theaters hang out a red lantern to indicate a sold-out house. And it was heartwarming to be greeted by a red lantern every night as we approached the national theater in Bergen.

We had been in Scandinavia exactly two months and had played 49 performances in 9 Norwegian, Danish and Swedish cities.

We Tour Germany

While we were in Scandinavia, arrangements had been worked out for us to extend our stay in Europe for another month and tour the American zone in Germany. We were to present Mamba's Daughters under the joint sponsorship of the Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany and Special Services of the United States Army. And so, on leaving Bergen, we boarded the train for Germany. The two-day trip carried us through Oslo and Copenhagen. At the railway stations in both cities we found many of our new friends, awaiting us with flowers and souvenirs.

The moment we embarked on our tour of Germany our pattern of life changed. In the Scandinavian cities we usually settled down in a certain theater and performed there for at least a week. In Germany we became troupers in every sense of the word. One-night stands carried us across the



Howard Players enjoying winter sports as guests of University of Oslo students at their ski lodge.

American zone for performances in Berlin, Munich, Frankfort, Mannheim and Kitzingen.

We found the German theaters seriously damaged by the war, many of them operating in partially bombed-out buildings. It was frequently necessary for our troupe to perform in places not equipped for dramatic productions, and demanding a great deal of ingenuity and patience both on our part and that of our sponsors. In Berlin, for example, we played in the concert hall used by the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. In Frankfort we presented our play in an arena at the zoo where there was no lighting equipment of any kind and microphones were arranged like a picket fence across the stage. Only in Munich was our theater situation adequate. Our two-day stay there was memorable both both for pleasant working conditions and for our attendance at the opera in the Prince Regenten Theater.

We met in Berlin and elsewhere German students who had performed some of the same plays that we had. And they were very much interested in com-

paring notes about our respective interpretations. One of these students, who saw us play Mamba's Daughters later applied for admission to Howard University, where there are now over 50 foreign students.

We worked hard to overcome the physical handicaps we encountered in our tour of Germany, but felt amply rewarded by the interest and enthusiasm of our audiences. The programs of our plays carried this statement by President Mordecai W. Johnson of Howard University:

"Behind and beneath the barriers of geography, religion and color there is a common country where the precious human heart--everywhere alike--is bruised, defeated, struggling, victorious and dying, and everywhere hungering to put the evil past behind, to gather the threads of love together and to go on establishing a community of friends."

A German doctor who had seen our performance of Mamba's Daughters in Berlin wrote:

"... This play was much more than a play for me. It was a true contact with a world I had not known before.... The words of Dr. Mordecai Johnson are right.... we did live together in that common country for a few hours! The world is wide and full of wonders. And we all do belong together somehow. That play did really lead us into that common country."

We all felt that our associations with the Scandinavian and German students were enriching and stimulating. We found them keenly interested in the arts and culture of America and aware of the value of international cultural exchanges as a means of correcting some of the misconceptions about our country. Their attitude is most effectively summed up in a statement by the leader of the Studentensamfundet (students' club) in Bergen:

"You have chosen to give us a glimpse into your life by showing us your interpretation of human conflicts and human problems which are not bound to countries or nations... A Norwegian author, Gunnar Heiberg, said that the theater is the tuning fork of a nation. Honestly, for a foreigner it is difficult to find the tuning fork of the United States. What we usually see is not the tuning fork but a battery called Hollywood. Your means are the noblest and most valuable you could have chosen--heart-to-heart talk among friends."