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The Contribution of the Negro to the Drama

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The drama of Negro life is developing primarily because a native drama is in process of evolution. It is, although it borrows the elements of the dramatic genius of the Negro and has found the place and rise within a decade's span of a Negro drama and a possible Negro Theatre. For pioneering credit in the development of the native American drama such as Eugene O'Neill, Edgely Lorraine, and Paul Green, now we recognize the dramatically undeveloped potentialities of Negro life and folk ways as a promising province of native ideas and sources material in which

Books - Plays of Negro Life.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Start

"The Negro has had some part in American drama practically from its inception."¹ Whatever else the Negro may contribute as a gift to this composite civilization, there is already the general recognition that his folk-music born of the pangs and sorrows of slavery, has made America and the world his eternal debtor. The same racial characteristics that are responsible for this music are destined to express themselves with similar excellences in the kindred art of drama.

The drama of Negro life is developing primarily because a native drama is in process of evolution. This, although it heralds the awakening of the dormant dramatic gifts of the Negro and has meant the phenomenal rise within a decade's span of a Negro drama and a possible Negro Theatre. For pioneering geni in the development of the native American drama such as Eugene O'Neill, Ridgely Torrence, and Paul Green, now see and recognize the dramatically undeveloped potentialities of Negro life and folk ways as a promising province of native idioms and source material in which



¹Locke - Plays of Negro Life.

a developing national drama can find distinctive new themes, characteristics, and typical situations, authentic atmosphere. "The growing number of successful and representative plays of this type form a valuable and significant contribution to the theatre of today, and open intriguing and fascinating possibilities for the theatre of tomorrow."²

Locke in his book "Plays of Negro Life" has said: "The Negro experience has been inherently dramatic; surely the substance of great drama is there. The racial experience of the Negro in America has plumbed the great emotional depths, and passed dramatically through many levels of life and has caught into itself many of these elements of social conflict and complication in which the modern dramatist must find the only tragedy that our realistic, scientific philosophy of life allows us."³ Indeed, the essential elemental forces of great drama in all time - epic turns of experience, tragic intensity of life, discipline and refinement of the emotions, have been accumulating like underground wellsprings, for generations in Negro life, and now are beginning to seek artistic vent and find free-flowing expression"⁴

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

He has further said, "Certainly the vitalizing spirit of drama is there. Generations of enforced buffoonery and caricature have not completely stifled the dramatic endowment of the Negro; his temperament still moves natively and spontaneously in the world of make believe with the primitive power of imaginative abandon and emotional conviction!"⁵ It is agreed that as an actor and as an audience, the Negro temperament promises to bring back to the stage some of the powers of the early drama. If to these unpurchasable things are added a worthwhile medium of serious dramatic expression and a seasoned intelligent contact with the arts of the theatre, the future appears most promising both for the Negro drama and the Negro actor. With such a sporadic background, Negro geniuses like Ira Aldridge, in the past, and Paul Robeson, Charles Gilpin, Frank Wilson in the present, will take shape in the company of talents they focus around them as fixed constellations of the American stage, and eventually there is destined to use a National Negro Theatre where the black play wright and the black actor will interpret the soul of their people in a way to win the attention and admiration of the world.

If the expectations of Negro drama as a fruitful phase of American drama are to be fully realized, the

⁵Ibid.

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field even when it finds its peculiar ingredients in the problems and issues of racial conflicts and partisan-
ships or takes its cues from particular folkways must be a freeman's estate with that reciprocity and univer-
sality of spirit which truly great art requires and it-
self helps to establish.

The purpose of this thesis is to determine whether or not the Negro has made a contribution to the drama, and if so what has been his contribution.

In attempting to solve the problem of, "The Contribution of The Negro To The Drama", the writer will discuss it from three points: (1) The Negro as Subject Matter for Drama, (2) The Negro as Creator of Drama, and (3) The Negro as Interpreter of Drama.

Shakespeare has called "Othello" a Moor, but it is quite reasonable to suppose from this that he thought of him as a Negro. There are sufficient indications in the play to show that Shakespeare had the Negro in mind; the "thick lips," and the repeated references to "blackness," which can not be understood of anything but the real African tint.

Still more conclusive is Shakespeare's conception of his character. He is not the proud, haughty, fantastic Arab, as Coleridge would have us believe. Surely he never made a greater mistake than in saying

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE NEGRO

TO THE DRAMA.

Chapter I

The Negro as Subject Matter for Drama

The Negro's greatest contribution to drama has been in subject matter. Negro life has been an outstanding source of subject matter for drama as far back as the time of Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare was the first dramatist to appreciate the intriguing opportunities in the Negro race, and in his master tragedy "Othello" he has given us the stellar role of the moor in a study of the effect of jealousy upon a nature of simple and overpowering emotion.

Shakespeare has called "Othello" a moor, but it is quite reasonable to suppose from this that he thought of him as a Negro. There are sufficient indications in the play to show that Shakespeare had the Negro in mind; the "thick lips," and the repeated references to "blackness," which can not be understood of anything but the real African tint.

Still more conclusive is Shakespeare's conception of his character. He is not the tough, haughty, fantastic Arab, as Coleridge would have us believe. Surely he never made a greater mistake than in saying

Shakespeare learned the spirit of the character from the Spanish poetry, which was prevalent in England in his time. The Caballeros Granadinos aunque moros, hijas I'algo prided themselves on the very qualities which are conspicuous by their absence in Othello. But anyone who has lived in Africa and been fortunate enough to come in contact with the better kind of Zulus or Basuto or a dozen other tribes might at once recognize the "moor" as their Kinsman!⁶

Certainly Shakespeare intended that Othello on the stage should be black, or some shade of dark brown. It ought to be clear by this day that his color does not make him into a christy minstrel.⁷

Ira Aldridge is thus the first Negro to surmount the bias race prejudice and to receive recognition on the legitimate English-speaking stage.

The Negro's characterization on the stage has of course reflected his contemporary condition in society and has been subject to dramatic craftsmanship of the time. As early as 1807, we find him in the low comedy part of Zeke in L. Beach's "Post-Free," and again in 1845 in the crudely sentimental "Caesar" in Mrs. Anna Cora Mowatt's "Fashion." As early as the forties, the

⁶The Crisis - Alice Werner - June 1926 p. 68

⁷Ibid

distinctive form of American amusement, the minstrel show, made its appearance. This was the gross caricature of Negro life and the minstrel formula has done much to thwart the proper development of Negro drama. The minstrel condition continued until the middle nineties when John W. Isham organized a musical show, which formed the inspiration for the long line of musical comedies. The later Negro musical comedies, "Shuffle Along", and "Runnin Wild", "From Dixie to Broadway" and "Black-Birds" have gained notable success. These musical comedies have added little to the sum total of Negro drama. Yet they have opened the doors of opportunity to the talented Negro actors, dancers, and musicians. Their work may yet furnish the material for the evolution of new dramatic forms.

Up until the Civil War, there was but meager interest in the drama of the African or Negro in England, and practically none in the United States.

That great sectional conflict aroused a tremendous sentimental interest in the black population of the South and gave us Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which enjoyed a wide popularity as a drama.

"There is no doubt concerning the nationality of the characters in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It is obvious that Uncle Tom and Topsy, two of the most popular characters in the drama were Negroes. This drama alone

was an important contribution to the emancipation movement to American literature".⁸

✓ Josiah Henson was the original of the character, Uncle Tom. Henson had neither intellect, nor what might be termed natural gifts, but he served as an example of the capability of the Negro. His experiences in slavery were so strange and peculiarly romantic that on hearing his story, Mrs. Stowe reconstructed it so as to produce the famous drama, Uncle Tom's Cabin. The experiences which Uncle Tom encounters in the play are the experiences of the Negro slave, Josiah Henson.⁹

Although "Uncle Tom's Cabin" passed into obscurity, "Topsy" survived. She was blissfully ignorant of any ancestors, but she has given us a fearful progeny. With her, popular dramatic interest in the Negro changed from serious moralistic drama to the comic phase. The earliest expression of Topsy's braveful influence is to be found in the minstrels made famous by the Callenders, Lew Dockstader, and Primrose and West. These comedians made up into grotesque caricature^d of the Negro race, fixed in the public taste a dramatic stereotype of the race that has been almost fatal to a sincere and authentic Negro drama.

✓ The "Octoroon," written on the same pattern as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" soon followed on the American stage. These works mark the first instance where an attempt is

⁸The Americana, Vol. 27 pp. 269 - 270

⁹Woodson - The Negro in Our History.

made to present to the American public the life of the Negro in a realistic manner. They accustomed the theatre-goer to the appearance of a number of Negro characters on the stage, and this fact was in itself a distinct gain for Negro drama.

"The fifth of April, 1917, the day of America's official entrance into the world war, marks the beginning of the development of an authentic drama of Negro life. It was then that Mrs. Norman Hapgood, in association with Robert Edmond Jones and others, presented the Hapgood Players - All Negroes - in a program of three one act plays written by a well-known American poet, Ridgely Torrence. It was most unfortunate that such a significant project should have been launched at such a tragic hour. Yet in spite of its un-timeliness the production created a tremendous impression and marked the beginning of a large public interest in the legitimate drama of Negro life interpreted by Negroes. Mrs. Hapgood's venture in presenting these plays acted by Negroes is really the first noteworthy achievement of this kind on an elevated plane and worth considering."¹⁰ After the presentation of the plays by the Hapgood Players, Mr. Torrence stated, "I have sometimes imagined that the Negro, other things being equal, might produce the greatest, the most direct,

¹⁰Locke - The New Negro.

the most powerful drama in the world."

For the first time Broadway beheld Negro actors in serious drama. The superb acting of Opal Cooper, Blanche Deas, and others revealed the wonderful natural histrionic powers of the race.¹¹

Serious drama is a matter of recent growth, and is still in its infancy. It is in this field of legitimate drama that the Negro must achieve success if he is to win real recognition in the onward sweep of American drama. The year 1910 may be said to make the first significant step in this direction, for it witnessed the production with a distinguished cast, including Guy Bates Post and Annie Russell, at the new Theatre in New York City of Edward Sheldon's, "The Nigger" (later called "The Governor") a somewhat melodramatic treatment of the tragedy of racial admixture in the South. It marks the first sincere attempt to sound the depth of our racial experience for modern drama.

In 1923 Raymond O'Neill assembled a noteworthy group of Negro actors in Chicago and founded the Ethiopian Art Theatre. His chief success was the production of "The Chip Woman's Fortune," a one-act race play by the young Negro dramatist, Willis Richardson. This untimely collapse of a most promising enterprise should hold a valuable lesson for other promoters of Negro drama.

¹¹ Ibid

Contemporary dramatists have made use of Negro life as subject matter also for their dramas. Green Pastures is a drama by Marc Connelly in which he translates Negro folk religion to the stage. In "Green Pastures," the Bible story of God and his creature, man, comes to beautiful life through the faith in the heart of the Southern rural Negro. It was a miracle that in New York 1930, people high and low were moved, as they have not been moved in generations, by this play that tells in simple, gay, and reverend drama how God made the Earth and Adam and Eve, and how God suffers and labors to save his blind and wanton children from their folly. The Negro poets who made the spirituals on which the play is founded, created a loving and patient God.

The fable is simple: the Negro children at Sunday school are questioning the preacher about the Old Testament. The answer is the play in terms of Negro myth. The angels are discovered at a heavenly fish-fry, pruning their wings, while a heavenly choir sings spirituals. For each scene, we hear a new spiritual by this unseen chorus. The Lord enters to the thunderous line. He is calm and benevolent, in the black tail-coat, soft hat, and string tie of the old time minister. The Lord creates the earth and forgets all about the place. Then descends on a visit and makes Adam and Eve; Cain

and Abel bring tragedy; and the Lord walks the earth again and discovers its wickedness, and he meets Noah and sends the flood.

So the ancient tales unroll (with God sometimes puzzled in his office on high; cleaned by maids with wings in dust-covers) and reaches its supreme emotions when the children of Israel march across the stage in sight of Can-yan. Moses first seen as a bold youth before Pharaoh, falters to a rock, weary, denied entrance to the Promised Land. The Lord finds him, comforts him and leads him up the mountain saying, "I'll show you a Promised Land on earth."¹²

Since the play was depicting Negro folk religious beliefs, Negro actors and singers were used to lend their own images, life, and beauty.

The "Green-Pastures" is the Negro's conception of God and the Bible, and this is what gives it its appeal.¹³

"It is quite possible that some Negroes visualized the Almighty as He is portrayed in the play without irreverence."¹⁴

"There is no ground to bring the charge of blasphemy or irreverence, as some claim, because the things

¹² Leon Whipple - Letters and Life p 156

¹³ Literary Digest Dec. 1920 - Dean of Manchester

¹⁴ Ibid - Roman Catholic Bishop of Salford.

the Negroes say in the play are daily expressions of the average Negro.¹⁵

"Paul Green has been impelled to write of the Negro, not for sentimental reasons nor to start a movement to free the race from economic and social injustices, but because he is an artist looking for material and seeing beauty and tragedy in any deep and moving struggle of human beings."¹⁶ The Negro as Green has known him, sweating in the fields, shouting in religious ecstasy, brutal in his poverty and sin, or grasping in his struggle after an idea - this Negro peasant exists as a human figure, subject for comedy or tragedy to one who can interpret him in terms of his life. And this is what Paul Green attempts in his one-act and longer plays.

"The No Count Boy" is probably the best of his one-act Negro plays. The plot grows out of the characterization, and the comedy is dependant on the characters and the action. The preparation for the Boy's effect on Pheelie, and her romantic and rebellious mood are very impressive. The changes of Pheelie's heart are very convincing. The characters are true representatives of Negro life among the low class. One reason for the appeal of this play is that it reveals two sides of a universal problem of living - the practical and the romantic. The language and poetry of the play are in simple images and homely dialect.

¹⁵Ibid -- A Layman, Mr. Arden Foster

¹⁶Green - The Negro in Contemporary Literature

"In Abraham's Bosom" is one among the best of Green's longer plays of Negro life. It is based upon two one act plays from "Lonesome Road." "In Abraham's Bosom" is a biography of a Negro in seven scenes. The drama possesses the Universal quality of tragedy which arises both from Abraham's own self obsessions and from those obstacles which his race bequeathed him. The author attempts to show how the lower class of Negroes have objections of certain Negro leaders and believe that they will be a failure. Green sees Abraham as a universally tragic figure when, at the climax of the drama he cries out to the ghost of his parents that they should never have conceived him. So any human, utterly defeated might cry out after having a super-human struggle. There is a swift characterization of the minor figures in the drama. The language of the play is very simple. The baptism prayer and the soliloquy in the closing scenes are very impressive.

In these two plays we have squalor and sin, ecstasy of religion or sex. Here are the sting of sweat, the music of simple emotion, laughter, homely speech and elements of a life growing out of the soil and returning to it in death. It is not simply a faithful picture of lowly folk which the author attempts. He sees the Negro struggling and the human significance of that struggle, the tragedy of its frequent defeat. He interprets dramatically what appeals to him as

moving in the life and character with which he is familiar. The result is drama not bound to a narrow locality but measureable by the test of humanity."¹⁷

Because Eugene O'Neill finds dramatic the life of simple, unsophisticated folk, he has seen a wealth of drama in the Negro race. It is a tribute to the variety and richness of Negro life as well as to the author's originality that his two plays of the black man are so dissimilar."

"The Emperor Jones" is a drama in which fear becomes a protagonist, working on the mind of the Charlatan emperor to uncover his experiences of terror and also those of his race embodied in him. The Emperor Jones is a Negro who has broken out of jail in the United States and escaped to what is termed "A West Indian Island not yet self-determined by white marines". Here he is sufficiently bold and ingenious to make himself ruler within two years. He moves unharmed among his sullen subjects by virtue of a legend of his invention that only a silver bullet can harm him; but at length, when he has reaped all the riches in sight, he deems it advisable to flee. As the play begins, the measured sound of a beating tom-tom in the hills gives warning that the natives are in concave, using all kinds of incantations to work themselves up to the point of rebellion. Night-fall finds the Emperor at the edge of the forest where he has food hidden and through

¹⁷Ibid

whose trackless waste he knows a way to safety and freedom. His revolver carries five bullets for his pursuers, and a silver one for himself in case of need. Bold and adventurous, he plunges into the jungle at sunset; but he stumbles back to the starting place, only to find the natives quietly waiting for him. Now follows a vivid succession of strange sounds and shadows, with terrible visions from the past. As the Emperor's fear quickens, the forest seems filled with threatening people who stare at and bid for him. Finally shrieking at the worst vision of all, he is driven back to the clearing and to his death, the tom-tom beating ever faster as the fatal moment nears.

"The Emperor Jones" is a play in eight scenes, and is an effective stage piece. It is one among the fantastic dramas, and is a distinguishing example of how O'Neill has expressed the high imagination and superstition among Negroes.

"All God's Chillun Got Wings" is a drama more tragic in intent. In this drama O'Neill has depicted the lower life of Negroes. The central action of the play is around the union of a white woman and a Negro. O'Neill selected a weakling Negro and a coarse and spiritually undeveloped white girl. He has handled this difficult situation with delicacy, and builds up the situation with a pureness that the characters are led to inevitable ruin. The tragedy is the result not only

of external forces, but of flaws in the character of each.

O'Neill in this play held no thesis concerning the intermarriage of whites and blacks. He saw and depicted two human beings caught by a passion stronger than their inherited and instinctive inhibitions, and defeated because these very racial traits in their natures would permit no happiness in a union. The individuals are the one concern of this drama. The forces which crush them are the hatred and prejudice of both races and the shrinking and torture of the characters themselves in facing the problem.

The use of soliloquy, the number of scenes, the use of crowds of both races in the first act, and the narrowing to intimate scenes in the second are appealing and interesting.

By the foregoing facts, it can be clearly seen that the Negro has contributed the various phases of his life as subject matter for drama as far back as the time of Shakespeare, and continued to do so in contemporary drama.

The Negro as Creator of Drama X

There has been a notable collaboration between the Negro playwright attempting, on one side, to advance Negro drama as such, and to provide the talent of the Negro actor with a fit vehicle and a native medium and, on the other side, to find in modern American realism new materials, and a deeper, firmer grip upon the actualities of American life. ✓ Negro playwrights have given us several of the most noteworthy and representative American plays that have ever been written, and they have raised the general level of plays of this subject matter from vaudeville and farce to significant folk comedy and tragedy. Eugene O'Neill said, "The possibilities are limitless and to a dramatist open up new and intriguing opportunities; the gifts the Negro can and will bring to our native drama are invaluable ones." Ridgely Torrence has said, "I have sometimes imagined that the Negro, other things being equal, might produce the greatest, the most direct, the most powerful drama in the world."¹⁸

Most of the dramas by Negro playwrights are written in dialect, and are very simple. They deal with such themes as sex, sacrifice, religion, heroism and romance. They have written both tragedies and comedies. Among the outstanding Negro playwrights are: Willis

¹⁸ Locke - The New Negro

Richardson, Thelma Duncan, Maud Cuney-Hare, John Mathews, May Miller, Inez M. Burke, Dorothy C. Guinn, Frances Gunner, and Edward J. McCoo.

Willis Richardson is perhaps one among the greatest Negro playwrights. His first play to be staged was "The Deacon's Awakening" at St. Paul Minnesota in 1921. This was followed by "The Chip Woman's Fortune," which was produced by the Raymond O'Neill's Ethiopian Art Players in Chicago, Washington, and on Broadway, New York in 1922.

The play "Mortgaged" was staged by the Howard Players under the direction of Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke at Howard University, in 1923. This play was produced by the Dunbar Players at Plainfield, New Jersey in 1924.

Richardson was awarded the Amy Spingarin Prize in the contest conducted by the Crisis in 1925 for his play, "The Broken Banjo" which was staged under the auspices of the Crisis. He was awarded the Amy Spingarin Prize in 1926 for his drama in three acts, "Black-buck Lover."

Thelma Duncan is the author of the following Negro dramas: "Sacrifice," "The Scarlet Shawl," and "The Death Dance." The latter play was written while she was a student in Montgomery Gregory's class in dramatics at Howard University, and was among the first of the Negro

dramas produced by the Howard University Players.

Maude Cuney Hare, author of "Antar of Arab" is well known in the Negro Little Theatre Movement of Boston. She is one of the leading spirits in the Allied Arts Theatre group which mothers the Negro drama in the New England capital.

John Mathews who is a very excellent short story writer, has turned to the writing of plays. In his writing of plays, he very nearly matches the excellence of his short stories. Among his best plays are:

"Ti Yette," "Cruiter" and "Black Damp".

One of the most promising of the Negro playwrights is May Miller, whose two plays, "Graven Images" and "Riding The Goat" have helped to make Negro drama worthy of attention. Miss Miller's name first came to the public notice when her play, "The Bog Guide" was one of the prize winners in Opportunity's first literary contest, and she continued to retain public notice by competing at reasonable intervals such plays as "Scratches," "Stragglers of The Dusk," and "The Cussed Thing."

The Reverend Edward J. McCoo, a minister of the A. M. E. Church, has given much attention to the strivings and achievements of the Negro; and to visualize these things he wrote "Ethiopa at The Bar of Justice." This play was presented as one of the features of the quadrennial Conference of the A. M. E. Church in Louisville, Kentucky in 1924. Since then, the play has been

used extensively in connection with Negro History week.

Inez M. Burke whose outstanding drama is "Two Races" is also the author of several other plays which have been presented by her own pupils in Washington Public Schools. Her plays are suggestive of what may be done in the lower grades to make history teaching realistic by frequent dramatizations.

Dorothy C. Guinn, in collaboration with her assistants wrote "Out of The Dark" to direct nationwide attention to the romantic story of the Negro. The drama was presented with great success in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and made an equally favorable impression in Atlanta where it was staged soon after.

As secretary of the Y. W. C. A. in Brooklyn, Frances Gunner experienced the difficulty encountered by others in acquainting the Negro with himself. She considered it especially unfortunate that Negro women knew nothing of those of their sex who have achieved so much as heroines of the critical period through which the race had to pass. This was what prompted her to write the drama entitled "The Light of Women."¹⁹

The Negro playwright has had to abandon his puppets of protest and propaganda and take to flesh and blood characters and situations. Without doubt, the

¹⁹Richardson - Play and Pageants of Negro Life.

Negro playwright will claim his natural advantage of greater intimacy of knowledge and feeling. But if the mastery which is within sight, but not yet achieved, is to come at all, it must arise from the deep spiritual penetration into the heart and spirit of Negro life.²⁰

The Negro's Contribution to the drama as creator is gradually increasing. He has created dramas that may compete with dramas written by playwrights of other races. The dramas of many of our Negro playwrights have entered contests staged by the "Crisis" and "Opportunity" and have won the prize. Thus we see he has created noteworthy dramas.

The Negro playwright or creator is able to take the life of his own race and create plays just as other dramatist. He knows the life of his own race better than others, and he is thereby better able to use it as subject matter. His greatest contribution as creator then has been the creation of dramas using Negro life as subject matter, and attempting to raise the general level of plays from vaudeville and farce to significant folk comedy and tragedy.

²⁰Locke - Plays of Negro Life.

The Negro as Interpreter of The Drama

The Negro's Contribution to drama as interpreter has been great. Because of the vivid interpretations of some outstanding dramas by Negroes, many dramatists have achieved great fame.

Ira Aldridge is the most famous of Negro actors. He has had few equals in the part of Othello, the Moor. Because of his origin, he was able to forego the use of the usual artificial make-up paint; nor did he need to cover his arms with the sleeves of a dark colored knitted vest. He had the natural complexion for the role, and did not need to exert any effort to adapt himself to it. Therefore his appearance on the stage was one of supreme magnificance. "It was Othello himself, just as Shakespeare created him, with his eyes half closed as if dazzled by the African sun, his nonchalant oriental bearing, and that easy negroid gracefulness." ²¹

The repertory of a Negro actor seems to have to be limited to colored plays; but when one thinks about it, if a white comedian besmears himself with bister in order to play a Negro role, why shouldn't a Negro comedian sprinkle himself with ceruse in order to play a white role? This is what happened: The following week after Aldridge played the role of Othello, the Moor, he interpreted the role of King Lear in a fashion to pro-

²¹ N. W. Rivers - The Crisis January 1932

duce every illusion desirable. "The transformation was perfect. Cordelia herself would never have been able to suspect her father of being a Negro. Never was the art of dramatic illusion extended so far."²²

Edbert Austin Williams is known to the public as Bert Williams, and he is regarded by many as the greatest comedian on the American stage. His first experiences were with a Mountebank Minstrel Company that played in the mining and lumber camps. In 1895, he joined George Walker in a partnership which lasted until the latter's death in 1909. They made the name of Williams and Walker famous throughout the English-speaking world.

Among the productions interpreted and made famous by this team were: "The Policy Players", "Bandanna Land" and "Abyssinia."

"Bert" Williams played for a time in the vaudeville, and then joined the Ziegfield "Follies", remaining as the feature attraction for several years.

"Williams is an example of dramatic genius who has elevated his work in these productions to the highest art."²³

Charles S. Gilpin also received notable distinction in the drama, and was the most talked of actor on the stage in America in 1921. His own statement is that he drifted into acting because he earned so little money in the printing trade. In time he had a desire to do serious dramatic work, and was one of the organizers

²²Ibid

²³Work ----- The Negro Year Book, 1931 - 32

in 1906 of the Pekin Players in Chicago. When Drinkwater's "Abraham Lincoln" was being staged, difficulty was experienced in securing an actor to play William Curtis, the Negro character in the play. This unimportant role was given to Gilpin, and attracted attention to his ability. When Provincetown Players staged "Emperor Jones," Gilpin was secured to take the leading role. Concerning Mr. Gilpin's ability as an interpreter, the critic of the New York Times said, "Of course, Charles S. Gilpin continues to give his amazing unforgettable performance. It is superb acting, and the success of O'Neill's play is dependent upon it. Gilpin was selected by the Drama League of New York City as one of the persons who had contributed the most during the year, 1921, to the art of the drama.

Another great actor and interpreter of modern drama is Paul Robeson. Robeson in 1924, achieved fame in the leading roles of two of Eugene O'Neill's plays. "He was acclaimed as superb actor, extra-ordinarily sincere and eloquent."²⁴

The Provincetown Playhouse that O'Neill made famous had already produced one of his Negro plays, "The Emperor Jones," with Charles Gilpin in the title role. Now O'Neill had written another with a bolder theme, "All God's Children Got Wings." It dealt with inter-marriage between the races, and it needed a colored man, not only

²⁴Ovington - "Portraits in Color"

with dramatic power, but with sensitiveness and with the intelligence to interpret a difficult theme. Robeson had been called on the New York boards a few matinees in a play called "Taboo" which had a short run on Broadway. Some one suggested his name at the Provincetown, he was given O'Neill's text, and learned the part of Jim Harris. To his friends there was something amusing in his depicting a Negro who always failed when he came into competition with whites; but Robeson showed himself an actor from the start.

"Robeson revealed his dramatic talent in "All God's Chillun Got Wings," but it was in a revival of "The Emperor Jones," a less subtle but more spectacular drama, that he took the theatrical world by storm. One could quote pages of exuberant praise." Even so difficult a critic to please as George Jean Nathan described Paul Robeson as one of the most eloquent, impressive, and convincing actors he had seen for twenty years.²⁵ "The Emperor Jones" was taken to London, and while it had a short run, since London today will not tolerate a gloomy play, the English critics were as enthusiastic over Robeson's art as the American ones. "An amazing individual achievement, a breathless exhibition of power and pathos." So the West Minster Gazette said, and

²⁵ Ibid

one feels the breathlessness of the English audiences, as this blackman of magnificent physique stands up before them and interprets O'Neill's powerful lines in his deep resonant voice, a voice that makes their careful speech insignificant."²⁶

Not only has the Negro interpreted dramas by acting, but also through the Little Theater movement. The most successful Negro Little Theater Movement in the United States is that of the Gilpin Players in Cleveland, Ohio.

The Gilpin Players presented "Roseanne" by Nan B. Stephens in New York with Charles Gilpin as preacher in 1923, and a second time with Chrystal Herne in the title role. The year 1930 the Gilpin Players produced it so successfully that the Ohio Theater, one of the leading commercial theaters of the city, put the play on for a week's run March 17.

"This was the most successful accomplishment of any amateur group in the city."²⁷ Who are the Gilpin Players? Rowena Woodham Jeliffe, the young white woman who leads them says, "The Gilpin Players are a group of fine young men and women organized into a social dramatic club and a drama study group."

Mrs. Jeliffe writes: "I had come to my own opinion about the potential contributions of the Negro to drama

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ The Crisis - June 1930

back in 1916 and 1917 from playing and watching Negro children playing with white children. I saw a definite difference in the play ways of the two races. It is hard now to say just what it was I saw, but it was something in the way in which they gave themselves to a situation - a surrender to the mood the game called for. And I came slowly to realize that this was the essence of drama, and that the Negro had racially the wherewithal from which to give abundantly to the art.

Finally we selected three one-act plays for performance. Our work was begun. And from that time to this the group has had continuous performance. They have played to date sixty four plays, are an incorporated group, and still have active in the group all charter members."

The players are proud and happy to do Negro plays, but the bulk of their playing is through the medium of so-called white plays.

C O N C L U S I O N

As a result of this study, I conclude that the Negro has made three distinct contributions to the drama. From the facts presented in this discourse, it is revealed that the Negro has been subject matter for the drama from the time of Shakespeare to the present. Opportunities for dramatists in this field are great. It has been discovered that much of the achievement of many outstanding dramatists is the result of their development of Negro folk traditions of the past, and in the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses of today.

The Negro's contribution as Creator is just beginning. Negro dramatists are using Negro life as subject matter, but so far the plays produced are only limited to one or two phases of Negro life. He has not made as great a contribution as the white dramatist because of this fact. Negro life as subject matter offers great opportunities for dramatists. Because the Negro knows more of his own life than any other dramatist, he should be able to make his contribution greater. White dramatists have achieved great success from this field, and by imitation of his drama the Negro playwright will be able to make his contribution greater. I believe if the Negro dramatist uses the

dramas of the white dramatist as his guide, and the production of plays for art as his aim, his contribution in the future will be great.

The Negro's third contribution has been in the role of interpreter. This contribution of the Negro has added greatly to the success of the dramas of many outstanding dramatists. For an example, the superb acting of Ira Aldridge in Shakespeare's "Othello," and of Gilpin and Robeson in Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" has added greatly to the success of the two plays. We can not forget the interpretations of Bert Williams, the great Negro comedian. He mounted the stage as jester and clown and thereby paved the way for the more serious interpreters who followed him.

The Negro's contributions are gradually increasing. With this increase comes a more charitable and friendly spirit toward him from other races. With this spirit I believe we may confidently await the great actor, notable creator, and moving interpreter.

X Therefore I conclude that with all due allowance for a possible mirage of special hope and interest on our part it is to be hoped that the Negro's contribution to the drama as subject matter, as Creator, and as interpreter will be great in the future.

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