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Ira Aldridge

One of the 19th century's greatest actors made a surprise visit to Arundel at the height of his fame, but the visit has remained largely unreported, a fate which befell the African American actor himself. His name was Ira Aldridge. Born in New York in 1807, he attended one of the city's African Free Schools, established by slavery abolitionists, and in his teens became fascinated with theatre much to the displeasure of his father, a lay preacher. Ira did odd jobs in white-run theatres and managed to glimpse Shakespeare performed by visiting English actors. He also saw performances at America's first black theatre, the African Theatre, which opened in New York in 1821, and where Ira probably made his stage debut. A year later, he was assaulted during a campaign by a white theatre manager to shut down the African Theatre, which was forced to close in 1824. Aldridge must have decided to try his luck abroad, because, armed with a letter of introduction from an English actor who had hired him as a costume carrier, he worked his passage to Liverpool.

Remarkably, he made his first stage appearance in Britain aged only seventeen, in May 1825 at the Royalty Theatre in London's East End. Presumably he was hired as a novelty – the record of black actors in the British theatre at this time is virtually blank. Billed as 'a Gentleman of Colour, from the New York Theatre', Aldridge performed Othello, a role with which he became synonymous. He stayed at the Royalty until the autumn, adding other roles, mostly as slaves in melodramas. In October that year, he was engaged to play a further series of black characters at the recently opened and larger Royal Coburg Theatre (later to become the Old Vic), and

during his seven-week run he met and then married Margaret Gill, a white woman whose father was a Yorkshire stocking weaver. Reviews generally acknowledged he was well received but critical opinion was divided; while some were favourable, others were openly racist, abhorring the very idea of a black actor appearing in the English theatre. Yet, by the end of the year, he was playing Othello at Brighton's Theatre Royal, with a local reviewer commending his 'real and undoubted talent'.

Despite many difficulties, he managed to establish himself very quickly and Royal Academician James Northcote painted his portrait (the painting hangs in the Manchester Art Gallery). Aldridge was dubbed the African Roscius, a reference to a leading Roman actor and a label commonly applied to precocious theatrical talent, but also a link to slavery, as it was common to name slaves after Roman figures. Aldridge turned the potential insult to his advantage, as he was to do so often, and adopted the title himself in order to own it.

It was outside London in the thriving regional network of theatres that he honed his craft, and was celebrated for his expertise in a wide range of contrasting roles as well as for playing the guitar, dancing, and singing. He did not return to London until 1833, when his appearance at Covent Garden, the equivalent of the National Theatre, followed the collapse of Edmund Kean, regarded as the leading actor of his day, who was playing Othello. The announcement of Aldridge replacing Kean gave rise to virulent press assaults against him in publications often funded by the pro-slavery lobby, and his appearances were cut short. He was virtually barred from the

capital's main stages thereafter, an enforced absence described at the time as the result of a boycott.

Aldridge had come to represent far more than an actor. He sympathized with national liberation movements, sent large sums of money to America to help fight slavery, and was particularly popular in Hull, the home town of the anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce. At the end of a show, Aldridge often addressed his audiences directly on 'the plight of the slave and his hope of freedom'. After one appearance, he is reported as saying he 'hoped the prejudice was fast dying away, when one man should be deprived of a hearing on the stage, because his face was another colour'. He was also known to end performances with a plea for the rights of all, regardless of colour.

He toured extensively, visiting in his early years places as far apart as Sheffield, Edinburgh, Manchester, Dublin, Belfast, Bath, Brighton, Norwich, Liverpool, Bury, Sunderland, Newcastle, Lancaster, and Halifax. In looking for new black roles, Aldridge commissioned plays and, sometimes in collaboration, adapted existing plays for his own purposes. When he revived Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, for example, he turned Aaron the Moor from villain to hero. Aldridge also - bravely - tackled 'non-black' roles, such as the count-turned-pirate hero William Tell, as well as playing 'white' Shakespearean roles: Shylock, Richard III, Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear. He played these roles in whiteface.

It was while on tour in 1847 that Aldridge performed in Arundel. The visit was unannounced and not covered in the local press. He had already been to the South-East, to Brighton and Chichester, for instance, and was to visit Worthing, Southampton, Canterbury, Margate, Dover, and Surrey later. He had first come to Chichester under the patronage of the Duke of Richmond in October 1846 at the Theatre Royal in South Street (where the clothing store White Stuff can be found). 'An extraordinary sensation in the city', according to a playbill, he was re-engaged in November when local reports say he did good business, and was invited back in January 1847. It was during this engagement that, according to the weekly newspaper *The Era*, he gave an evening performance on January 7 at Arundel Town Hall 'under the patronage and at the particular request of His Grace the Duke of Norfolk and his numerous guests sojourning at Arundel Castle'. Accounts in the weekly *Theatrical Times* and *Theatrical Journal* said the 'remarkably spacious' town hall was 'magnificently fitted up as a theatre' by Edwin Holmes, lessee of Chichester's Theatre Royal; the Duke of Richmond took two boxes for the performance. Aldridge played the two major roles of his career, Othello and Mungo, a black servant from a comic opera *The Padlock*, and the 'entertainments passed off with great éclat'.

Aldridge portrayed Othello majestically with wisdom and poise to show the general as someone who had lived a long time among Christians and was rightly valued by them. He played the part with great discretion, said one reviewer, in order to demonstrate that he was 'no less cultured than the white man.' Employing emotionally realistic acting ahead of its time, Aldridge offered an alternative to the

clichés of blackface and minstrelsy, the dominant conventions of the day. Another reviewer wrote that, having seen Aldridge on stage, he could not imagine any white actor, even the paramount David Garrick, playing Othello.

In contrast, Mungo was a stereotypical stage servant, dutiful when sober but defiant when drunk, a popular part written in the mid-18th century as a blackface role played by a white actor using patois: his signature line is 'My pain is dere gain'. Aldridge added his own material, which, as with the character's catchphrase, he would voice with realism not mockery. He brought pathos to Mungo's situation as well as delighting in the comic opportunities and celebrating the joys of singing as an escape, however fleeting, from his master's oppression.

Aldridge left Britain for mainland Europe in 1852 and spent much of the remainder of his life touring there, where he was lionized, even if he was sometimes suspected of being a spy and was followed by police. He visited Belgium, France, Prussia, Switzerland, Russia, Serbia, Hungary, and Poland, though his base was still Britain, and he bought a house in what was seen as a respectable part of south London before becoming a British citizen in 1863. His adopted country, however, unlike its European neighbours, never decorated him. His wife died in 1864 and Aldridge remarried the following year, to a Swedish concert singer, who had already borne him two children. He died of a serious lung condition in August 1867, aged 60, on tour in Poland where he was buried and given a state funeral.

After his death, he disappears from the records and was largely forgotten in Europe, though a few in the US saw him as an inspirational, pioneering figure, and his reputation has gradually been reclaimed. A bronze plate bearing his name was attached to a seat in the new theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon which opened in 1932. A bust of Aldridge sits in the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, and in 2004, the Old Vic agreed to display a picture of him as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. In 2007, English Heritage raised a commemorative blue plaque on his London house, and in 2017, another blue plaque was erected to him, in Coventry where he had briefly been manager of a theatre. He figures in several plays, including *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabati whose husband Adrian Lester played him in the West End, as well as in novels, a rock-and-roll musical, documentaries, and several biographies. According to his chief biographer, Aldridge was the most famous black man in Europe in the mid 19th century, and the actor who, of his era, had ‘travelled farther, was seen by more people in more nations, and won a greater number of prestigious honours, decorations, and awards than any other’.

Colin Chambers