

Dustin' off the NEWS

By LUCIUS C HARPER

A GREAT STORY OF THE NEGRO IN THE THEATRE

IT HAS BEEN left to Edith J. R. Isaacs, former editor of Theatre Arts magazine, to give us the best arranged and very interesting history of the Negro on the American stage. Heretofore, such a chronicle

has been attempted, and to some degree there can be found much worthy information regarding our contributions to the world of entertainment. In modern times Dr. Alain Locke of Howard university and the late James Weldon Johnson preserved much



Lucius Harper

of this data in book form: Johnson in his "Black Manhattan," but it was rather sketchy and unfinished.

Prior to their efforts the only work of recognized calibre — now long out of print — came from the pen of the late James M. Trotter of Boston, who published in 1880 a work under the title: "Music and Some Highly Musical People," containing the history up to that time of remarkable and talented musicians, stage folk, and minstrels of the colored race. It required 505 pages to tell his story with portraits of the famous Negro performers of that day.

While I struck no reference in Miss Isaacs' book, "The Negro in the American Theatre," just recently issued, of the rare historical data contained in Mr. Trotter's

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early work, there are, however, some chapters which indicate that the Trotter book was not entirely overlooked in the compilation of this latest literary output. Mr. Trotter was the father of the late Monroe Trotter, who as editor of the Boston Guardian, differed and fought bitterly with Booker T. Washington over what type of education was best suited to the needs of the Negro. Trotter, the author, was also once Recorder of Deeds in Washington.

MISS ISAACS does a splendid job in recounting the Negro's itinerary on the American stage from the origin of the African Company of Negro Actors from the year 1821 when the black James Hewlett was the leading player in an improvised playhouse in New York at the corner of Bleeker and Mercer streets, where such performances as Othello and Richard The Third were presented. She threads her story rather completely from this event down to the present appearances of Negro stage stars on Broadway. Her chapter on the Negro in minstrelsy is most interesting and entertaining, even though she didn't dwell on some latter day versions, owned and operated by Negroes, such as travel through the South today: "The Rabbit Foot Comedy Co." owned by the late Pat Chappell, of Jacksonville, Fla., "Silas Green from New Orleans," owned by the late Eph Williams; "The Florida Blossoms," owned by the late Charlie Douglas and Pete Worthy. But that history, yet unwritten, will probably come from another source, preferably from a Southern writer.

Referring to the minstrel, Miss Isaacs gives the Negro credit for developing some new angles in entertainment, though he was not the first to bring the idea North. White men who watched the capers of the slaves on Virginia plantations copied their witticisms and under burnt cork introduced the minstrel to New York. For almost fifty years thereafter it became the most popular form of American entertainment. Then came George B. Hicks, a Negro. (Miss Isaacs is mistaken in calling him Charles Hicks) to organize a complete company of his own people as the "Georgia Minstrels." He carried on until financial troubles forced him to sell the outfit to George B. Callender, a white man, who not only reaped a harvest in America, but took it to England where it ran over a year and played before Crowned heads. We are indebted to this outfit for many worthy contributions to the American stage. They introduced the monologue, ballad singing and the "olio," less traditional in form and more like a burlesque or vaudeville show with witty sketches.

OUT OF THIS group came some of the greatest Negro gifts to minstrelsy. It produced Billy Kersands, the famous end-man, who as late as 1909 headed his own aggregation of minstrels. It was my delight as a boy to carry the banner (working for a pass) in his street parade when he came to our town. Kersands could stretch his mouth wide enough to encircle a billiard ball. He was, however, funnier behind the stage than on it. Also out of this bunch came the greatest Negro writers of popular songs of that day. James

Bland, to rival the white Stephen Foster. Bland wrote for the "Georgia Minstrel," the ballad "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny," and "In the Evening by the Moonlight," while Foster wrote, "Old Black Joe," and "My Old Kentucky Home," for the white Cristy's Minstrels. The works of both composers are with us today.

In both, the book by Mr. Trotter in 1880 and recent work by Miss Isaacs in October, 1947; written some sixty-seven years apart, there is registration of protest against the type of minstrel entertainment. Trotter said: "... these performances consist, for the most part, in a disgusting caricaturing ostensibly of the speech and action of the more unfortunate members of the colored races ... these public performances do much to belittle their race generally, arouse and keep alive in the breasts of other races a feeling of contempt for it; and that these effects are greatly enhanced when colored men themselves engage in such performances, as they thus give aid and comfort to the enemy."

Miss Isaacs ends her chapter with almost a similar warning. She says: "Minstrelsy, as a theatre form, is gone today, perhaps never to return, and it may just as well. There is little doubt that it helped to create and to fix the Negro stereotypes — passive or scheming, over-dull or over-shrewd, but always irresponsible and caricatured — which have burdened our theatre ever since. Yet it was our first authentic American theatre form. It left us the vaudeville monologue, many dance routines, and double forms of music ... and it trained many of the next generation of Negro singers, dancers, composers and comedians."

HAS THE NEGRO minstrel left us the present-day legacy at Hollywood; the part of the buffoon? Is he to be only laughed at? From both conclusions, written 67 years apart, it appears that they are in perfect conformity. As Trotter said such performances "give aid and comfort to the enemy," and Miss Isaacs remarks that it created the Negro stereotypes "which have burdened our theatre ever since." And which we could add, have also burdened our race on and off the stage.