

## **Front Matter**

### **[Title Page and Credits]**

#### THE DILEMMA OF THE NEGRO ACTOR

By CLARENCE MUSE

Los Angeles, California

### **Foreword**

Some years ago I was invited to give an address to a group of artists and writers at the California Art Club. At that time there was a keen interest in the Negro actor because of "Hearts in Dixie" and "Hallelujah" which had just been released. Many of the persons present on the above occasion expressed a desire for a copy of my remarks.

In appreciation of their interest and inspiration, I have, in the pages which follow, responded to their requests.

CLARENCE MUSE.

Los Angeles, California,

December 25, 1934.

### **The Dilemma of the Negro Actor**

The Negro actor is still a novelty to the American theatre. He is accepted as a clever entertainer abroad, but has no definite place in the international theatre. As yet he has not been received by theatre audiences as a serious dramatic force. There are two audiences in America to confront--the white audience with a definite desire for buffoonery and song, and the Negro audience with a desire to see the real elements of Negro life portrayed. He would love, for the sake of race pride, to satisfy and entertain his colored admirers, but the call of the mighty dollar of the white race compels his attention. White America controls the destiny of the Negro actor. The call of the blood controls his hidden ambitions. Hence, the dilemma of the Negro actor.

I sincerely doubt whether the Negro's relation to the theatre has ever been analyzed or even thought of by groups like this which is composed of people who have given their lives to art and its development. In such groups the Negro actor has been received merely as an entertainer. Customs and tradition of

the white stage and white audiences have demanded, principally, entertainers or "Uncle Tom" characterizations from the Negro actor. But the Negro audience is interested chiefly in the type of Negro characterizations that best represent the entire race. With these two audiences to satisfy, the Negro actor is perplexed.

In this connection one questions which would be the most valuable contribution to the American stage--the work of the Negro actor who artistically develops the slave characters demanded by white audiences, or the work of the Negro actor who presents the study of the Afro-American of today?

Let us discuss the "Uncle Tom" type. Why should the development of the Negro race be stopped with the slave period? The very fact that the Negro made a contribution to dramatic poetry in the form of the spiritual shows the potentialities of the race. Ironically enough, however, the very fact that he has made a contribution in the past serves to impede his progress now, for the white public insists that he stick to the slave period, to the spiritual, even though the factors which produced the spiritual are no longer operating in Negro life.

The outstanding example of the Negro on the modern stage is the primitive type

depicted by O'Neil in "Emperor Jones." The character was created on the stage by the Negro actor Charles Gilpin. In portraying this character, Mr. Gilpin mastered to the nth degree the modern dramatic conception of suppressed emotion. Yet those who saw the characterization felt the barbaric spirit and the tribal majesty of the type Emperor Brutus Jones, although these were only a few of the transitions painted by this great artist.

Mr. Gilpin's mastery of modern dramatic technique is an evidence of the development of the American Negro under present-day environment. You have only to think of the same character played by Kean, Booth, or any of the great-acting artists of a generation ago, to see the point I am endeavoring to make about Gilpin. The performance was smooth, tonal, rhythmic, poetic, at times, yet simple and true. If this artist in his delineation has mastered the art of suppressed emotion and has had the feeling, soul, and artistry to make an atavistic type like Brutus Jones a harmonious and picturesque concept, then why not demand to see him dissect and rebuild a modern type?

Let us pause here to trace briefly the cultural history of the American Negro. Art and culture in any race demand time. Every great art period came only after centuries of mental and emotional integration. Greek civilization

came only after centuries of colonization and commerce. Roman law and engineering came only after Rome had become, and for centuries had already been, the mistress of the then known world. The Renaissance came after seven centuries of feudalism and dominant Christianity. The flowering of capitalistic culture came three hundred years after Columbus and great commercial expansion. Note that time has been a great factor in all of these cultural developments. White America is not yet sufficiently integrated to develop a great art. America is still a European colony. Thirty-one millions are foreignborn and twenty millions more are in the first generation. These people have no genuine roots in this country. The rest are in such a constant state of flux that nothing culturally basic is possible for some time. The immigrant enters our shores restlessly, seeking economic opportunity chiefly. He will remain unas-similated as far as American cultural life is concerned for some time.

The first group of Negro slaves was brought here about 1619. Most of the slaves brought into this country were from the Gold Coast of Africa. In tracing the history of these people who were enslaved in America, it is interesting to consider their racial background, as outlined by W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in his treatise on

"The Negro." He states in part:

"The primitive Negroid race of men developed in Asia wandered eastward as well as westward. They entered on the one hand Burmah and the South Sea Islands, and on the other hand they came through Mesopotamia and gave curly hair and a Negroid type to Jew, Syrian, and Assyrian. Ancient statues of Indian divinities show the Negro type with black face and close-curved hair, and early Babylonian culture was Negroid.....

"After a lapse of perhaps thirty thousand years there entered Africa a further migration of Asiatic people, Negroid in many characteristics, but lighter and straighter haired than the primitive Negroes.....

"The primitive African was not an extreme type..... Color was never a badge of slavery in the ancient or medieval world, nor has it been in the modern world outside of Christian states.....

"The natural desire to avoid a painful subject has led historians to gloss over the details of the slave trade and leave the impression that it was a local west-coast phenomenon and confined to a few years. It was, on the contrary, continent wide and

centuries long and an economic, social, and political catastrophe probably unparalleled in human history.

"The total number of slaves imported in America was not known. Dunbar estimates that nearly 900,000 came to America in the sixteenth century, 2,750,000 in the seventeenth, 7,000,000 in the eighteenth, and over 4,000,000 in the nineteenth --perhaps 15,000,000 in all... The slaves landing from 1619 onward were received by the colonies at first as laborers, on the same plane as other laborers."

But soon the plantation masters saw the economic advantage of enslaving these laborers for life. Fifteen million men of Africa were forced to lose their native customs and home life and blindly and humbly accept their fate.

This is the beginning of about two hundred years of slavery in America. it is also the beginning of the American environment of the Negro. The daily contact with plantation owners soon taught the slave a new means of expression. The African Negro lost his tribal language and acquired a barbaric interpretation of the English tongue, a dialect that became the language of the American Negro. The slaves were taught the American system of labor under the lash. For two hundred

years they lived in the environment of American customs, watched with eager eyes the dress and manners of the colonels and lords of the plantations, yearning and dreaming when they should adorn themselves in like paraphernalia. Black mammies nursed white babies from their breasts, and lived in Southern homes, loved and respected by the entire household, and even today they are one of the cherished heirlooms of Southern memory. African women had illegitimate contact with American gentlemen of breeding as well as with those of a lower type, and loved and caressed the offspring of these unions. Such was the environment of the American Negro up to the abolition of slavery.

It is easy for you to see that the African slave of over two hundred years, of American environment up to the day of emancipation, has evolved into a new type. I think "Afro-American" is the best term to describe him. The sorrows of slavery created mixed emotions--the heartaches of lost relatives, the yearning for old African festivals and dances, the advice of the African priest or doctor, the wise men's council to the many tribes, the tribal animosities, and the joys of conquering heroes. In short, all of the original culture of the African, with centuries of artistic development behind him, now fused with American environment, has made it a natural question

to ask, "Emotionally, what have you?"

Judging from what is offered as a true picture of this type, we have an entertainer or a genuine "Uncle Tom." Has the Negro lost all of his original self in white domination, or is there a hidden man of Afric heritage? I

say we know nothing real about this great type. Here is real drama for the dramatist, real characterization for the actor. But will white America manifest a genuine interest in this fertile field of research? Are the controlling forces of the theatre willing to develop this genuine Afro-American character? Or will white America keep smiling and ask only for the surface of the Negro, the entertainer, the clown, the white man's creation-"Uncle Tom"?

But what of this new character which cries for self-expression? The Negro actor is willing to depict him. The black audience, comparatively small in number, applauds loudly for him, but with no avail. When the white audience sees him, it smiles and seems to say, "That is good, but when will he sing and dance? That is what we want to see and hear." The Negro actor is truly perplexed. What will he do?

In the short period from 1864 to the present time, the Negro race has developed engineers, scientists, musicians,

artists, writers, athletes, educators, poets, historians, and men in every line of human endeavor. Granting this development, is it possible that the Negro is still to remain the slave of type?

Quoting from Du Bois again concerning the Negro's cultural progress, we find that Negroes have distinguished themselves in every age and land:

"In literature there is Terence in Rome, Nosseyeb and Antar in Arabia, Es-Sa'di in the Sudan, Pushkin in Russia, Dumas in France, Al Kanemi in Spain, Heredia in the West Indies, and Dunbar in the United States, not to mention the alleged Negro strain in Aesop and Robert Browning. As rulers and warriors we remember such Negroes as Queen Nefertari and Amenhotep III among many others in Egypt; Candace and Ergamenes in Ethiopia; Mansa Musa, Sonni Ali, and Mohammed Askia in the Sudan; Diaz in Brazil, Toussaint L'Ouverture in Hayti, Hannivalov in Russia, Sakanouye Tamuramaro in Japan, the elder Dumas in France, Calembe and Chaka among the Bantu, and Menelik, of Abyssinia .... and the mulatto strain of Alexander Hamilton. In music and art we recall Bridgewater, the friend of Beethoven, and the unexplained complexion of Beethoven's own father; Coleridge-Taylor in England,

Tanner in America, Gomez in Spain; Ira Aldridge, the actor, and Johnson, Cook, and Burleigh, who are making the new American syncopated music."

Here are names representing all degrees of genius and talent, from the mediocre to the highest; but they are strong human testimony to the ability of this race. With this as his heritage, is it possible that the Negro actor of today is able to portray only the laughing, weeping child of slave days? The Negro audience says "No!" Furthermore, the Negro audience desires to see its actors in studies covering a wide range of presentday life and wonders why the whites seem to demand only slave or underworld types. We do not want to give the impression that the slave or underworld types should be eliminated from the stage, but the delineation of these types is not sufficient to cover the life of any people, particularly the modern Negro.

That the Negro actor is still a novelty to the American stage is evident. He is received as a refreshing relief to things serious when he sings spiritual songs of slave days or dances the Charleston or Blackbottom.

Roland Hayes, one of America's outstanding concert artists, is expected to stick close to the spiritual. Mr. Hayes

is a well-trained artist who has been acclaimed by broad-minded critics as a singer of songs of all nations and languages and who has few equals in the classic melodies of the ages; yet it is the general comment in many audiences that he should stick to his spirituals and let the classics alone. Of course, we all know that he renders these types of songs with a native artistry that is hard for white artists to approach; yet some of our finest white artists have given credible renditions of spirituals.

So you see, Mr. Hayes is tolerated in the bigger things. If he should offer one or two arias from the operas of James Lawrence Freeman, a Negro composer who has electrified Harlem with dramatic themes of old Africa days when Ethiopia was a power, he would be criticised for poor judgment and bad taste. However, in this work of Mr. Freeman, able musicians like Burleigh, Cook, Rosamond Johnson, and some of New York's white critics who have been brave enough to go to Harlem and hear them, have found original material with creditable background. They discovered a type of work that makes the modern Negro throw off the so-called inferiority complex.

It is an expressive compliment to Dr. Du Bois and Mr. Carter Woodson, research historians who have scientifically given their lives to unearth the jewelled

past of black men. Black men have centuries of cultural background. However, the time factor is an important element when we discuss the potentialities of the Race. Modern examples are many of Negroes who are more than novelties in the theatre from the Negro viewpoint, but we are still mere novelties to white audiences. Bert Williams, Julius Bledsoe of "Show Boat," George Walker, Ernest Hogan, Black Patti, Abbie Mitchell, Stepin Fetchit, Rosamond Johnson, Bob Cole, Flora Batson, Miller and Lyles, Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, Moss and Frye, Bill Robinson, Florence Mills, Ethel Waters, Sam Lucas, the famous Lafayette Players, and a host of many other Negro artists have contributed much to the Negro stage, yet many of them are practically unknown to white audiences. All of these artists offered white audiences what they wanted and paid for. Their performances, however, to small Negro audiences were entirely different and oftentimes one would see unusual displays of rare histrionic ability.

The Lafayette Players have been satisfying the Negro's desire for serious things by imitating Broadway's white plays, but in New York, after twelve years of this mimicry, the colored audience revolted and failed to pay in their small sums for such entertainment. Then a young mail carrier, Francis Wilson, now appearing in the Carolina play of Negro

life, "Porgy," wrote some interesting Race plays that were received by the colored audiences. They were big successes, as far as an all-colored success goes financially, and, of course, the returns to Wilson and several others with such a limited output did not warrant these gentlemen or the producers to go on.

How well I remember the production of a real Negro drama from the pen of the Negro comedians Miller and Lyles! I produced this Race play back in 1923 and it was a sensation; but the jumps to Negro cities were so great and the top admission of fifty cents so small that we were unable to pay the artists their salaries regularly. We had what the Negroes wanted, but not what the white audience was ready to buy from Negroes. This vehicle was a story of Chicago flat life that was brimful of economic material and human interest, and concerned modern Negroes of all walks of life -the underworld as well as the Negro intelligentsia. White producers said it was great, but too far ahead of its time. White audiences want to see you dance and hear you sing only. "Write us more 'Shuffle Alongs.'" So, that was that!

The white producer's word is law. Fortunately, the Negro artist is of the type that believes in Art for Art's sake. That is to say, if he cannot express himself as artistically as he feels

he prefers not to express himself at all. Yes; the Negro artist is flexible. He will do well that which is demanded of him, but he never loses his desire to do bigger things. Every chance he has he warms up this artistic expression on his colored hearers. He is ready for the day when they will permit him to be himself. Look what the whites are losing from these true, dyed-in-the-wool Americans -Americans who have already contributed the music of this country, Americans crying in their souls for black expression, yet drunk with the wine of false presentations of life.

Would that the words of my old Grandmother would come true! Hers was a soul gifted to more than joy and sorrow. Her words re-echo in my ears: "Son, now that the war is over and we are free, no more hard work, no more beatings." There was a long pause and her fingers nervously beat upon each arm of the rockingchair. Suddenly a stern, proud expression ran across her face and she spoke in soft, commanding tones: "Now Ethiopia can stretch forth its arms and soon the Negro will come into his own." My friends, this was a latent call of the generations. This black soul mustered up all the proud heritage of the noble blacks of old and in a supernatural way gave to me the real soul of the black folks.

Another very modern demonstration of

the conventional boundary of the Negro actor and a fine example that he is still a novelty was the recent operatic production sponsored by a white producer entitled "Deep River." Mr. Jules Bledsoe was the star. This was a tremendous effort to magnify the spiritual. The story is of the life of Negroes around New Orleans told in music with a definite theme. It was received and admitted by all of the New York critics as a great contribution to the American theatre, but "not what we expected from Negroes." That was the cue for the final curtain. A few weeks after its closing, the artist, Mr. Bledsoe, who distinguished himself as a master musician and singer, was engaged by Mr. Flo Ziegfeld to play and sing "Old Man River." Bledsoe has greater ability than this, but will he ever have the chance to exhibit it before the world? Mr. Bledsoe accepts his position cheerfully. He often says to the Harlem colored people to whom he sings at private recitals, "Folks, we can't offer these songs on Broadway," (meaning real Negro songs of the modern Negro), "but maybe some day they will take down the barrier and they will find us ready." This is a dilemma--two audiences, white and black.

That the Negro actor has no definite place in the international theatre is evident. He has been received as an entertainer and singer of folk songs abroad. Dancing, the foreign countries can understand,

the melody of the songs is soothing to their ears, but the limited language of Negro drama makes his position weak. American dialect will never be understood abroad. It is also so limited that one must even in America guess the true meaning of such expressions. Furthermore, it is not the real up-to-date language of the Negro. An excellent example of this was the recent New York success, "Porgy," Pulitzer Prize play of Carolina Negro life. This play enjoyed a run of almost a year in New York. Mr. Cochran, the London producer, saw it and was elated. He thought he had the real thing for the English audience. He engaged the company and took it to London intact. The English came to see it. The dialect of Carolina in full sway was used by all of the artists on the stage. What was the result? The English audience went home trying to solve the language of the actors. The characters were so impressive that they came often, yet left each time disgusted because they could not get the "lingo." Mr. Cochran who was very patient had finally to give up and send the play back to New York.

How much more graphically these Negro artists could have told their story if they had been permitted to speak English while living the characters. The English would have understood and the Negro drama would have found a footing in the international theatre. Negroes can

and do talk good English. The Negro artist is capable of translating his so-called dialects into more acceptable, understandable language without losing the richness of his character. We translate French stories into English and vice versa -in fact, any language is translated into English. Why limit the Negro artists? Because of this language handicap, he is still not accepted seriously abroad. He faces here another element of the dilemma. He is hemmed in by the limited medium of expression of his slave days.

You who think that the cultural development of the Negro has no bearing on the masses have but to turn your attentions to the Negro press. The poignant editorials of the "Chicago Defender," "Afro-American," "Pittsburgh Courier," "Amsterdam News," "New York Age," "St. Louis Argus," "Norfolk Journal and Guide," "The Crisis," "Opportunity," and hundreds of other nationally distributed periodicals among the colored people have attracted thousands to come to our Northern cities in order to escape the evils of the South. They have taught the rural Negroes the value of fine homes, awakened their political power, advised them in their economic struggle as well as championed their many battles against prejudice.

A recent example of the power of the

Negro press was indicated by its pressure against the play "Harlem" that enjoyed a good run in New York and Detroit and a short one in Chicago. This play was ideal for white audiences. It was written by a young white author in collaboration with a young Negro writer. The Negro press, however, voiced the sentiment of the Negro and took to task a play that deliberately disqualified the entire Negro race. "How could trained, cultured Negroes remain silent, sit by, and permit race slander to go unchallenged merely for the sake of amusement for the whites?" The Negro press forced an investigation in Chicago and the play was closed. I mention this incident to show that our Negro intellectuals are a part of our modern life. We long to see the work of these presented in plays, as well as the antics, immorals, and sufferings of the lowly.

I am indeed glad we have organs powerful enough to stop the desire of most white producers to poke fun. It is not our intention to give you the impression that we want our writers to offer nothing but stories of the educated fringe. We know full well that the great bulk of Negro life is to be found among laborers or people who work, but, my dear friends, there is an inseparable tieup with the Negro of culture.

I believe there is an audience among

whites large enough to support some real efforts by the Negro actor. The excellent acceptance of the first all-colored movietone, "Hearts in Dixie," was encouraging. Negroes enjoyed this production because it was romantic, beautiful, and entertaining. There is still more romance in the modern type. Let the broad-thinking whites demand artistic expression from the trained Negro artists of today and the dilemma of the Negro actor would pass into oblivion. But as things are today on the stage, I am compelled to leave these facts as indices of the present situation. The dilemma of the Negro actor still exists. He is perplexed -two audiences, white and black. What shall he do if he wants to move to higher things?

I would like to present a poem by Mr. James Weldon Johnson, a modern poet, who has capably portrayed a sermon by a Negro preacher with all of the native fervor and color and which happens to be written in real King's English.

GO DOWN, DEATH!

A Funeral Sermon

By James Weldon Johnson

Weep not, weep not,  
She is not dead;  
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.  
Heart-broken husband -weep no more;  
Grief-stricken son -weep no more;  
Left-lonesome daughter -weep no more;  
She's only just gone home.

Day before yesterday morning,  
God was looking down from His great, high Heaven,  
Looking down on all His children,  
And His eye fell on Sister Caroline,  
Tossing on her bed of pain,  
And God's big heart was touched with pity,  
With the everlasting pity.

And God sat back on His throne,  
And He commanded that tall, bright  
angel standing at His right hand,  
Call me Death!  
And that tall, bright angel cried in  
a voice  
That broke like a clap of thunder,

Call Death! Call Death!  
And the echo sounded down the streets  
of Heaven  
Till it reached away back to that  
shadowy place  
Where Death waits with his pale,  
white horses.

And Death heard the summons,  
And he leaped on his fastest horse,  
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.  
Up the golden street Death galloped,  
And the hoofs of his horse struck  
fire from the gold,  
But they didn't make no sound.  
Up Death rode to the great, white  
throne,  
And waited for God's command.

And God said, Go down, Death, go down,  
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,  
Down in Yamacraw,



And find Sister Caroline.  
She's borne the burden and heat of  
the day,  
She's labored long in my vineyard,  
And she's tired--  
She's weary--  
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

And Death didn't say a word,  
But he loosed the reins on his pale,  
white horse,

And he clamped the spurs to his  
bloodless sides,  
And out and down he rode,  
Through Heaven's pearly gates,  
Past suns and moons and stars.  
On Death rode,  
And the foam from his horse was like  
a comet in the sky;  
On Death rode,  
Leaving the lightning's flash behind,  
Straight on down he came.

While we were watching round her bed,  
She turned her eyes and looked away,  
She saw what we couldn't see;  
She saw old Death. She saw old  
Death,  
Coming like a falling star.  
But Death didn't frighten Sister  
Caroline;  
He looked to her like a welcome friend.  
And she whispered to us, I'm going  
home,  
And she smiled and closed her eyes.

And Death took her up like a baby,  
And she lay in his icy arms,  
But she didn't feel no chill.  
And Death began to ride again--  
Up beyond the evening star,  
Out beyond the morning star,  
Into the glittering light of glory,  
On to the great white throne.  
And there he laid Sister Caroline

On the loving breast of Jesus.

And Jesus took His own hand and wiped  
away her tears,  
And He smoothed the furrows from her  
face,  
And the angels sang a little song,  
And Jesus rocked her in His arms,  
And kept a-saying, Take your rest,  
Take your rest, take your rest!

Weep not--weep not,  
She is not dead;  
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.