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Colored Men and Women on the Stage

The Colored American Magazine, October 1905

COLORED people on the stage have been given very little consideration by our colored writers and critics; perhaps they have considered them unworthy of their attention, or perhaps it has just been a matter of oversight; be that as it may, I beg leave to write briefly on the past, present, and if possible, future of colored men and women on the Stage.

In the past the profession which I am now following may have merited severe criticism, but like every other calling or profession, the Stage has improved with time, and I am proud to say that there are many clever, honest and well deserving men and women of color in professional life who will compare favorably with men and women of other races in the profession or in other professions. There are good and bad in all vocations, and it does seem rather strange that many outsiders should judge us all alike—bad! When white people refuse to classify, in dealing with us, we get highly indignant and say we should not all be judged alike, and yet we often fail to classify and make distinctions when judging ourselves. Consistency is still a jewel!

Some of our so-called society people regard the Stage as a place to be ashamed of. Whenever it is my good fortune to meet such persons, I sympathize with them for I know they are ignorant as to what is really being done in their own behalf by members of their race on the Stage.

In this age we are all fighting the one problem—that is the color problem! I venture to think and dare to state that our profession does more toward the alleviation of color prejudice than any other profession among colored people. The fact of the matter is this, that we come in contact with more white people in a week than other professional colored people meet in a year and more than some meet in a whole decade.

We entertain thousands of people in the course of a Season. We do a great deal of private entertaining in connection with our public performances and to do it all successfully requires much hard study. It is quite true that God has blessed us with much ability along musical lines, but even genius requires nursing to be used to good advantage. When a large audience leaves a theatre after a creditable two hours and a half performance by Negroes, I am sure the Negro race is raised in the estimation of the people.

It has been my good fortune to entertain and instruct, privately, many members of the most select circles—both in this country and abroad—and I can truthfully state that my profession has given me entree to residences which members of my race in other professions would have a hard task in gaining if ever they did. What I have done, other members of the Williams and Walker Company have also accomplished.

For example: When the Williams and Walker Company played in London, during the Season of 1903-4, Messrs Williams and Walker were invited to the renowned City of Oxford by students of the famous Oxford University, to attend a "stag-party" given in honor of Williams and Walker. Every attention possible was shown to the distinguished colored actors. Students of Oxford entertained the visitors by giving performances from plays written by Oxford men.

I am sure Williams and Walker's visit to Oxford reflected credit on the race and left a lasting impression in the minds of proud and highly cultured Englishmen.

Following are some of the distinguished people whom both Mr. Williams and Mr. Walker and their wives have had the honor to entertain privately. At these entertainments the entertainers were not screened off, nor were we slighted in any way. We have performed in the drawing rooms of Mrs. Arthur Paget, Miss Muriel Wilson, Mrs. Frank Avery, Lady Constance Mackenzie, and many others. At the entertainments given in London, English Nobility were present and expressed pleasure and delight at being entertained as we entertained them.

When Sir Thomas Lipton was presented with the silver service from the American Yacht Club, Williams and Walker entertained Sir Thomas and his party at the Hyde Park Hotel in

London. Much has been said about the occasion on which the Williams and Walker Company appeared at Buckingham Palace by special command from His Most Gracious Majesty King Edward VII., and therefore I need not make further mention of that. I might call attention to many other events in which we have figured, but those mentioned are sufficient to call attention to the work professional colored people have done, and which I am sure has reflected credit on them personally and indirectly on their race.

I do not mention the work of the Williams and Walker Company from an egotistic standpoint, but merely because with them I am better acquainted and know that they have appeared privately as well as publicly before and been appreciated by members of the better classes of white people on both sides of the ocean.

As individuals we must strive all we can to show that we are as capable as white people. In all other walks of life when colored people have had fair play, they have proved their ability, those before the lights must do their part for the cause. We must produce good and great actors and actresses to demonstrate that our people move along with the progress of the times and improve as they move. Our people are capable and with advantages they will succeed.

As yet our profession is young and as yet we have been permitted to do but little. We are often compelled by sheer force of circumstance, to work at a disadvantage, but I think the time is fast approaching when talent will speak for itself and be accepted for its real worth. White people used to allow for us and say "that is good for a colored person," but to-day we are criticized as severely as white actors and actresses, who have every advantage. This is a rather strange fact: the only time white newspaper men speak of us as the equal of white people, is when they are severely criticizing us and our ability to act well; when we fall short they cry out and think it strange that our acting is inferior; of course there is a method in all this we know. But at best, when it comes to singing and dancing, our critics find much difficulty in showing us up to disadvantage; they often acknowledge that it is wonderful that we have done so well and accomplished so much in spite of overwhelming difficulties that do not overwhelm.

I have stated that we ought to strive to produce great actors and actresses; in this I do not mean that all our men and women who possess talent for the Stage, should commence the study of Shakespeare. Already too many of our people wish to master Shakespeare. This is really a ridiculous notion. There are characteristics and natural tendencies in our people which make just as beautiful studies for the Stage as any to be found in the make up of any other race, and perhaps far better. By carefully studying our own graces we learn to appreciate the noble and the beautiful within us, just as other peoples have discovered the graces and beauty in themselves from studying and by acting that which is noble in them. Unless we learn the lesson of self appreciation and practice it, we shall spend our lives imitating other people and depreciating ourselves.

There is nothing so strong as originality, and I think much time is lost in trying to do something that has been done—and “over-done”—much better than you will ever be able to do it.

MORALITY ON THE STAGE.

I do not wish to moralize. I only wish to say a few common sense words in closing this article. I am aware of the fact that many well-meaning people dislike stage life, especially our women. On this point I would say, a woman does not lose her dignity to-day—as used to be the case—when she enters upon Stage life. In claiming Stage life as a profession, the emphasis should not be put upon the avocation, but rather upon the purpose for which you make the choice. If a girl is gay and easily dazzled by the brilliant side of life on the Stage or off, then I should say to that girl: “Choose some other line of work; look to some other profession, for the Stage is certainly no place for you.” But if she be a girl of good thoughts and habits, and she chooses the Stage for the love of the profession and professional work, then I should say to her, “Come, for we need so many earnest workers in this field; and by hard work, I am sure the future will repay you and all of us.”

One of the greatest needs of the times is a good school in which colored actors and actresses may be properly trained for good acting. With such an institution we could make a great record in the Artistic World. Of course, it takes time to do anything worth while, and especially to carry out great aims

and accomplish good work, but when something has been accomplished we consider the time well spent, and so we must go on working in our profession, with the hope that the future will bring us more encouragement and better success and less criticism; not that we cannot stand criticism, for we can; but for the reason that our work is a great work and ought to be encouraged in these days when it needs help and encouragement.

Our Stage work is grand and our lives can be made beautiful. Just think; night after night we entertain people and make them laugh and be happy and forget all the troubles and sorrows with which they are burdened throughout the day. I am sure it is a pleasure to live and work and give pleasure to others as well as to receive pleasure ourselves.

When we look at the Stage from this standpoint, we can appreciate how much it means to ourselves and others. It is rather easy to stand the harsh things some people may say about us when we can feel that besides doing good for ourselves and our race, we are using the gifts that God has given us to a good purpose. With this view before us, we are bound to succeed.

My final word is to the men. You have your duties to perform on and off the stage, to women as well as to yourselves. Remember this fact: good men help women to be good; and remember also, that in helping women you are really helping yourselves. We must work together for the uplift of all and for the progress of all that is good and noble in life.