



Ira Aldridge

(24 July, 1807-7 August, 1867)

Ira Aldridge was born in New York City to Reverend Daniel and Luranah Aldridge July 24, 1807. According to Aldridge, his paternal grandfather was a Christian Chief of the Fula in Senegal. At age 13, Aldridge went to the African Free School in New York City, established by the New York Manumission Society for the children of free blacks and slaves. They were given a classical education, with the study of English grammar, writing, mathematics, geography, and astronomy. His early exposure to theater included viewing plays from the high balcony of the Park Theatre, New York's leading theater of the time. He is the only actor of African-American descent among the 33 actors of the English stage honored with bronze plaques at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. He was especially popular in Prussia and Russia, where he received top honors from heads of state. He was the son of a straw vendor and lay preacher. Remarkably for the times, Aldridge received an education. His father, a church minister, sent him to the African Free School. As a young man Aldridge developed a love of the theatre.

Aldridge's first professional acting experience was in the early 1820s with the company associated with the African Grove, an African-American theatre. He debuted as Rolla in *Pizzaro*. He went on to play Shakespeare's Romeo and later became a notable Hamlet.

In the early 1820s, Aldridge began his acting career with the African Grove Theatre, also known as the African Theatre. Feeling that America wasn't a hospitable place for a black actor, however, he decided to seek his fortune elsewhere. He decided to immigrate to England. He obtained employment as a ship's steward and arrived in Liverpool in 1824.

Immigrating to England, where he seemed to find more creative opportunities, Aldridge immigrated to England, where he first worked as a dresser to the British actor Henry Wallack. According to the scholar Shane White, English people had heard of the African Theatre because of British actor and comedian Charles Mathews, so Aldridge associated himself with that. When he moves over to the, Royal Coburg he's advertised in the first playbill as the American Tragedian from the African Theater New York City. The second playbill refers to him as 'The African Tragedian.' So everybody goes to the theater expecting to laugh because this is the man they think Mathews saw in New York City. Aldridge appeared as Oroonoko in *A Slave's Revenge* at the Royal Coburg Theatre in October, 1825. The reviews were mixed. Although *The Globe* found his voice "distinct and sonorous". This fine performance, however, failed to launch a career for him on the London stage. Over the next few years appeared in plays in Manchester, Sheffield, Halifax, New Castle, Liverpool, Hull, Sunderland and Belfast. After his performance in *Othello* in Scarborough he was described as "an actor of genius". He also appeared in several white roles as Shylock, Macbeth and Richard III. Aldridge ended up spending years touring the United Kingdom, playing the title role in such Shakespearean works as *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*. A well-regarded actor, Aldridge was called the "**African Roscius**" after the legendary Roman actor Quintus Roscius Gallus. He returned to London to play *Othello* in 1833, when he was only 26 years old, taking over the role for famed actor Edmund Kean, who had recently passed away.

In 1833 newspaper critics began to make openly racist comments about Aldridge. One critic protested "in the name of propriety and decency" about the decision to pair Aldridge with the actress Ellen Tree. He added that he disliked Tree being "pawed about on the stage by a black man."

As a result of these attacks London theatres refused to employ him. However, he was in great demand in the provincial theatre and one newspaper described his performance as *Othello* as being so good that it could only "be equaled by very few actors of the present day."

In 1831 Aldridge successfully played in Dublin; several locations in southern Ireland, where he created a sensation in the small towns; as well as in Bath, England and Edinburgh, Scotland. The actor Edmund Kean praised his *Othello*; some took him to task for taking liberties with the text, while others attacked his race. Since he was an American black actor from the African Theater, the *Times* called him the "African Roscius", after the famed actor of ancient Rome. Aldridge used this to his benefit and expanded African references in his biography that appeared in playbills.

Frustrated by being blacklisted in London he decided to leave England. In 1852, Aldridge went on his first European tour. There, he earned great acclaim for his performances. Five years later, Aldridge took the stage in St. Petersburg, Russia, in a series of well-received shows. Aldridge first toured to continental Europe in 1852, with successes in Germany, where he was presented to the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, performed for Fredrick William IV of Prussia, and performed in Budapest. An 1858 tour took him to Serbia and to Imperial Russia, where he became acquainted with Count Fyodor Tolstoy, Mikhail Shchepkin and the Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevchenko, who did his portrait in pastel.

Now of an appropriate age, about this time, he played the title role of *King Lear* (in England) for the first time. He purchased some property in England, toured Russia again (1862), and applied for British citizenship (1863).

He appeared on the stage in Brussels, Cologne, Basle, Leipzig, Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Danzig, St. Petersburg, Moscow and Munich. While in Russia he became one of the highest paid actors in the world when he received £60 for every performance. One Russian critic stated that the evenings on which he saw Aldridge's *Othello*, *Lear*, *Shylock* and *Macbeth* "were undoubtedly the best that I have ever spent in the theatre". He spent little time in England, launching his last major tour of the United Kingdom in 1859.

Aldridge spent most of his final years with his family in Russia and continental Europe, interspersed with occasional visits to England. He planned to return to the post-Civil War United States, but he died in August 1867 while visiting Lodz, Poland.

His remains were buried in the city's Evangelical Cemetery; 23 years passed before a proper tombstone was erected. His grave is tended by the Society of Polish Artists of Film and Theatre.

A half-length portrait of 1826 by James Northcote of Aldridge dressed for the role of *Othello*, but in a relatively undramatic portrait pose, is on display at the Manchester Art Gallery (in the Manchester section); Aldridge performed in the city many times. A blue plaque unveiled in 2007 commemorates Aldridge at 5 Hamlet Road in Upper Norwood, London. The plaque describes him as the 'African Roscius'.