

Angelica Lopez

Professor Sharron Greaves

Public Speaking

February 19th, 2021

Ira Aldridge

In remembrance of Black History month, I would like to address an important and historical Black American figure by Ira Frederick Aldridge. The first African American to act internationally. He paved the way for many African American actors after him to attain roles of white characters and all types of roles thereafter. He was known as "the preeminent Shakespearean actor and tragedian of the 19th Century" (Williams 1).

Aldridge was born on July 24, 1807, in New York City, New York. Ira Aldridge was born to two free parents, Lurona and Daniel Aldridge. He was the son of a preacher, and his father wanted him to pursue a faith career. Ira attended New York's African Free School, likely with a schooling span of about 2 years. The school was founded in 1787 to teach and educate black students, whether free or slave. It was during his time studying classical education where Ira found his true calling to entertain through storytelling. Though Aldridge's father wanted him to follow in his footsteps of becoming a pastor, Aldridge found himself being pulled towards the theater. He found his true passion in acting.

At the young age of fifteen, in the early 1820s, Aldridge began networking with other black actors in New York. This opened up his first door into the world of performing arts, as they invited him into the African Grove Theatre, the first "all-black theatre troupe founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett in 1821." (Williams 1) James Hewlett took Aldridge

under his wing and began to teach the young aspiring actor. James Hewlett was also a legend. He was the first African American man to play in a Shakespeare play. After getting a taste of the world of acting, Aldridge wanted more. Yet, in the 1820s, there was much racism and hatred toward people of color in New York. This made it very hard and disheartening for Ira Aldridge to move up socially. Aldridge received hate from many white audiences, as they despised the idea of a black man playing the role of white characters or roles written by white authors, but this did not stop him. He pushed on because he was determined to achieve his dreams.

He did the next best thing and moved to Europe, Liverpool, in 1824, as there was more social mobility. Aldridge's emigration to Liverpool was at just the right time. London was going through the changes of industrialization and began to construct more and more theatres. Also, the fact that the slave trade was illegal and outlawed in 1807 made it easier for Aldridge to be accepted by an audience (Rob 1). Aldridge took on the job of British-American James William Wallacks' valet at the age of seventeen and made his way to Europe.

Though the less racist setting of Liverpool made it better for Aldridge's well-being, it didn't mean he would land a role in the competitive world of acting. Aldridge did not have much experience or credibility, so to get a role and spruce up himself, he lied about his background and claimed to be descended from the African Fulani prince lineage. Aldridge struck his first role in England at the age of eighteen. He made history on October 10, 1825, when he made his debut in London's Royal Coburg Theatre, "making him the first African-American actor to establish himself professionally in a foreign country." (Rob 1) He went on to play some great and huge roles, such as Othello, Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the Gambia in *the Slave*. (Rob 1)

The very fact that he played such renowned roles was groundbreaking. He did not settle there. After his shows, he would use his platform to speak up on Britain and America's racial

injustice. He acted in Liverpool, Edinburgh, Bath, Germany, Budapest, Serbia, and Imperial Russia. He later died at the age of 60 on August 7, 1867, in Poland. Ira Aldridge is the "only African American to have a bronze plaque among the 33 actors honoured at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon." (Rob 1). His life inspired countless minorities of his day to pursue their dreams in the face of opposition. The legacy he left behind is beautiful and even inspired African-American Henry Francis Downing, playwright, who became known as the first African American to have his own play written and published in Britain.

In conclusion, Ira Aldridge was a powerful force. He knew what he wanted and achieved it. He did not allow racist rules to define him. He made new rules. Rules that would allow for generations of African American citizens to fight for their rights and express themselves. In the performing arts world, he made himself a name and marked the way for future African-American artists, and really anyone that faced prejudice, to continue what he started.

Work Cited

Black History Month. "Ira Aldridge." *Black History Month 2021*, 28 Apr. 2016,
[www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/bhm-firsts/ira-aldridge/#:
%7E:text=On%20October%2010%2C%201825%2C%20Aldridge,professionally
%20in%20a%20foreign%20country.](http://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/bhm-firsts/ira-aldridge/#:~:text=On%20October%2010%2C%201825%2C%20Aldridge,professionally%20in%20a%20foreign%20country.)

"Ira Aldridge, Actor and Activist." *National Museum of African American History and
Culture*, 30 Sept. 2016, nmaahc.si.edu/ira-aldridge-actor-activist.

"The Life of Ira Aldridge." Chicago Shakespeare Theatre,
[www.chicagoshakes.com/education/teaching_resources/teacher_handbooks/
red_velvet/ira_aldridge](http://www.chicagoshakes.com/education/teaching_resources/teacher_handbooks/red_velvet/ira_aldridge).

Williams, Michael. "Ira Aldridge (1807-1867)." *BlackPast*, 11 Feb. 2007,
www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/aldridge-ira-1807-1867.