

## **Book Review**

Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Early Years, 1807-1833* (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2011) ISBN: 13-978-1-58046-381-2 and *Ira Aldridge: the Vagabond Years, 1833-1852* (University of Rochester Press, Rochester, NY, 2011) ISBN: 13:978-1-58046-394-2.

Bernadette Bush & Paul Elliot

*Littleover Community School, Derby, UK & University of Derby, Derby, UK*

---

Following up the essay collection that he edited (*Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius*, University of Rochester Press, 2007), Bernth Lindfors, Professor Emeritus of English and African Literature at the University of Texas, Austin, has now completed a substantial two-volume biography of 'one of the world's first black classical actors' which appears in the same enterprising 'Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora' series. In the first volume we see how an early visit to a theatre inspired a young black man from lower Manhattan to seek his fortune in England as an actor after helping with a New York production by a British actor and possibly performing in a troupe at the African Theatre, which tried to cater for black audiences. In England there were runs at prestigious theatres such as the Royalty and Royal Coburg which attracted attention but never secured longer-term bookings. However, once he began touring in the English provinces and subsequently Ireland it was a different story, although critical reaction remained mixed. The second volume recounts Aldridge's experiences touring in Britain, Ireland and Europe, expanding his range of parts which included Shakespearean roles such as Shylock, Macbeth and Richard III as well as the more expected Othello and various comic and tragic black roles. Whilst he returned to the London stage in 1848, it was in the provinces and Ireland that Aldridge enjoyed his greatest success, remaining in the latter for six years and taking advantage of coverage in the provincial press and the growing demand amongst the labouring classes as well as the middle class for

theatrical entertainment. Lindfors shows how Aldridge increasingly turned to the European theatre for success. Originally he took over his own company to perform English-language productions but increasingly employed more German actors and eventually acquired enough German to perform in the language, attracting large audiences and being patronised by nobility and even royalty.

Without a surviving autobiography, personal papers or correspondence it is difficult to reach historical figures such as Aldridge and we are therefore very dependent upon observations by others, not all of which were favourable. Lindfors has gone to tremendous effort to search out sources which bring out the character of Aldridge and the qualities of his acting, for instance using local and regional newspapers. The book utilises sources such as playbills, critical accounts in local and regional newspapers and local histories of individual theatres to the maximum. Inevitably, it is therefore difficult to be certain of some basic facts such as what exactly Aldridge did at all stages of his life and his early years, for instance, remain shadowy as do his domestic life. Occasional details provide tantalising hints such as an account of a quarrel over payments with a Scottish theatre manager in which Aldridge's (white) wife Margaret emerges as a forceful character who manages his accounts and suffers from delusions of grandeur (if this hostile witness and the account of a humourist are to be trusted). Sometimes the sources contradict each other or supply few details and Lindfors is therefore obliged to fall back upon supposition. A conundrum that Lindfors seeks to answer is why despite Aldridge's evident success touring in the provincial theatre, he was never employed much by any of the great London theatres. Of course racist attitudes and Aldridge's lifestyle are part of the explanation and there remained an unwillingness to acknowledge that a black actor was capable of sophisticated acting in the classical tradition in fashionable London society. Hence the epithet 'African Roscius' was originally intended as a joke but came to be employed by Aldridge as part of his self-promotion, and the designation wonderfully captures the combination of classical tradition and exotic other that he exploited with claims to be son of a Prince of Senegal.

One fascinating thing to emerge from the biography is the variety of responses that Aldridge elicited from his audiences. The abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire had, of course, occurred in 1807, and just when Aldridge was touring Britain in the 1830s slavery itself was abolished in most of the British Empire. This was also the period between the Enlightenment and the height of European imperialism when racial attitudes became more entrenched. The 'scramble for Africa' that saw the Continent sliced up by predatory European powers between the 1860s

and 1880s had not yet occurred. Whilst London had a significant minority black population, many English and Irish audiences had little experience of seeing black actors in major roles. However, as Lindfors argues, they had preconceptions of black incompetence after having witnessed Charles Matthew's *A Trip to America* touring in 1824, a comic one man show in which eccentric Americans were lampooned including a black actor who 'blithely butchered' famous lines from Shakespeare and sang native airs in response to demands from his all black audience. Whilst some therefore expected incompetent performances and there were outright racist comments, equating him to the novelty of seeing a circus animal for instance, others had open minds and some critics were prepared to praise Aldridge's acting. One of his most successful roles was that of Oroonoko, archetype of a noble African in a popular melodrama about slavery and audiences were mostly impressed with Aldridge's portrayal which defied their expectations. Aldridge also adapted some works such as *The Black Doctor* to present black characters (in this case Fabian, a former slave) with a serious emotional range and depth, albeit within the constraints of contemporary melodrama. He was also prepared to 'white up' where necessary. However, he did, of course, have to perform many stereotypical black roles and pandered to audience tastes where necessary, probably from commercial necessity, frequently breaking into songs in the middle of performances such as 'Opossum up a gum tree'.

Lindfors has done an industrious job of reaching back to Aldridge through the fog of history. Short of a new major source discovery, he has done as much as anyone could have done to understand Aldridge's character and provide some of the context for his successes in Britain, Ireland and Europe. What emerges is the story of a doughty, tenacious and protean character, prepared to ignore or combat prejudice and racism and re-invent himself to succeed on the stage. Students of British, European and American history and African diasporas will find this well-crafted book fascinating and it will stimulate further scholarship concerning Aldridge and his milieu.