



Łódź Celebrates

Ira Aldridge

(1807–1867),
the First Black
Shakespeare Tragedian

Edited by

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Contents:

Part I

1.1. Foreword: Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney	07
1.1.1. Ira Aldridge's Life and Professional Achievements	08
1.1.2. Aldridge's State Funeral in Łódź	11
1.1.3. The Town's Care of Aldridge's Tomb	13
1.1.4. The International Symposium	14
1.1.5. The Plaque in 2014	15
1.1.6. The 2017 Celebrations	16
1.2. Welcoming addresses:	17
1.2.1. Elżbieta Żądzińska, Vice-Rector for Scientific Research	18
1.2.2. Joanna Jabłkowska, Dean of the Faculty of Philology	19
1.2.3. Ryszard Machnikowski, Vice-dean for Research and International Affairs, Faculty of International and Political Studies	21
1.2.4. Barbara Williams	22

Part 2: Symposium

2.1. Tony Howard: Against Prejudice: Ira Aldridge, Theatre Manager	24
2.2. Małgorzata Leyko: Ira Aldridge and German Theatre	33
2.3. Ted Lange: A Trip to Łódź	43
2.4. Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney: Selected Works on Ira Aldridge's Life	53

Part 3: Exhibition

3.1. Daniel Hastings, USA Cultural Attaché	57
3.2. Monika Sosnowska: Ira Aldridge's Legacy	59

Part 4: Theatre

4.1. Jacek Orłowski	63
4.2. Levi Fraser Jr.: A Choice of Weapons	65
4.3. Magdalena Cieślak and Agnieszka Rasmus: Interviews with Levi Fraser Jr. and Evelyn Little	73
4.4. Students reviews	80



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prof. zw. dr hab. Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney

Part 1



Prof. dr hab. Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney
University of Łódź



Foreword

Łódź has a special connection with Ira Aldridge (1807–1867), the first black Shakespeare tragedian. Though he never performed in our wthe rehearsals of Shakespeare’s *Othello* on August 7, 1867. This connection is not limited to the state funeral which the City organized for him. Over decades the city has taken care of his grave. In 2007 the International Shakespeare Studies Centre organized an international symposium devoted to the bicentennial anniversary of his birth. In 2014 we had a plaque installed to celebrate his name. And in 2017 several events – a conference, exhibition and theatrical performance – took place to celebrate the anniversaries of his birth (1807) and death (1867). This catalogue presents selected events celebrating the 150th anniversary of Ira Aldridge’s death in our town.

« Back to table of contents



Ira Aldridge's Life and Professional Achievements

Ira Aldridge was born in New York, in 1807. In 1825 he emigrated to Great Britain, where he performed in the London theatres as well as in the provincial venues. He began his European tours in 1852. Not only did he play the roles of black Shakespearean protagonists as Othello and Aaron, but also white-face characters, for instance Macbeth, Richard III, King Lear or Shylock. And it was precisely these performances in countries throughout Europe (i.e. Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Russia, the Czech Republic, France, Turkey, Ukraine, Denmark, Hungary, the Netherlands, Serbia and Poland, I give here the current names of these countries) that brought him international fame and recognition. Among other things, Aldridge introduced Shakespeare to Serbian culture. In 1858 he was cast as Richard III, Othello and Macbeth in Novi Sad, the centre of Vojvodina, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His visit accelerated, as some specialists maintain, the construction of the National Theatre in Belgrade. In 1858, when he acted as Richard III in Kraków, the Polish audience had the first opportunity to see that play in the theatre. His interpretation of the tragedy of Othello in Polish theatres, which he visited seven times, contributed to the emergence of the first Polish translation of the play. It was first staged in Warsaw, in 1862, with Aldridge in the title role. He was also the first actor to present the Shakespeare repertoire before the audience in Constantinople (1866).

[Read more »](#)[« Back to table of contents](#)

Welcoming addresses



Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all on behalf of the University of Łódź and it is an honour to open this special event celebrating the 150th anniversary of Ira Aldridge's death in Łódź. As Vice-Rector of the University of Łódź I would like to give a warm welcome to all the guests from other institutions and nations. It is the first time that the University of Łódź is hosting a one-day event consisting of an international symposium, a library exhibition and a theatrical event in AOIA theatre dedicated to Ira Aldridge. The event, which is organized under the auspices of the International Shakespeare Studies Centre at the University of Łódź, headed by Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, is of great cultural importance. It connects people from different locations who have come a long way with a noble

intention of commemorating the first black Shakespearean actor.

Undoubtedly, Ira Aldridge exists as a prominent and influential theatrical figure in our collective memory. He is also a source of inspiration for individuals, for people who have come to Łódź to share his story and remind our students about his theatrical achievements. By a strange turn of fate, the city of Łódź and Aldridge have been forever connected. And since Łódź happened to be his resting place, we – its inhabitants, representatives

of University authorities and cultural institutions – want to support the initiative of organizing an “Ira Aldridge’s Day” at our University. This venue – the Faculty of International Studies – seems to be an ideal place to gather an international group of researchers and theatre practitioners who care about Ira Aldridge’s cultural heritage. I sincerely wish you all a successful event today!

Prof. dr hab. Elżbieta Żądzińska
Vice-Rector for Scientific Research,
University of Łódź





Celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Ira Aldridge's death remind us of the black-skinned Shakespearean actor who came to give a guest performance in Paradyż theatre in Łódź, but fell ill and died during his rehearsals to *Othello*. It is a unique incident in the history of our textile city. In the 1960's, many things were happening in Łódź, a rapidly developing metropolis, but culture was not so important for its daily life. However, the ceremony of Ira Aldridge's funeral, in which thousands of people participated, including the city mayor, showed the importance of theatre to Łódź

citizens. They knew that they accompanied none else but a great Shakespearean actor on his last path.

The memory of the history of the place in which one lives plays an increasingly important role in shaping one's identity. For the citizens of Łódź – especially the young ones – events reminding them of the role of culture in what used to be an industrial developing city has primary significance. Ira Aldridge became a local site of memory for Łódź. His grave in the Old Cemetery is taken care of and people know who the black actor was. Today's commemorative events succeed in placing our small regional history in the history of the world culture, which is not obvious for Łódź as it is more associated with factories rather than great tradition. The anniversary events organized by the International Shakespeare Studies Centre at the University of Łódź, Mieczysław Hertz Theatre Institute in Łódź and the Library of the University of Łódź are very popular, not only with theatre researchers but also with Łódź inhabitants who wish to discover the city's history, not only that connected with the working-class and factories. The most important session for researchers is the one devoted to Aldridge,



and attended by many distinguished academics who do their research on Shakespearean theatre and Aldridge, like Professor Anthony Howard and Barbara Williams. The most spectacular event for the laymen and also students, in turn, is the exhibition in the Library of the University of Łódź. Many of the exhibits are artefacts of Ira Aldridge. As it turns out, the Library possesses many valuable books and photographs, and the organizer of the event – Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney – has her own private collection. Many of the exhibits come from the resources sent in by American institutions. The attendants of the exhibition can see photographs



of Aldridge playing various Shakespearean roles, as well as books devoted to the actor. An important aspect of the exhibition is underlining Polish reception of the artist and its importance for the development of theatre in Poland, which at that time was under partition. The exhibition, opened in the presence of Daniel Hastings, Cultural Attaché from the USA Embassy, is open till January 2018. The event is crowned by screening of a film *For Our Freedom and Yours* by Levi Frazier and directed by Evelyn Little, presenting the life of Ira Aldridge.

As the Dean of the Faculty of Philology I would like to thank all the organizers



for their effort put into the academic and popularizing part of the celebrations of Ira Aldridge's death. I hope the cooperation with the International Shakespeare Studies Centre at the University of Łódź remains fruitful in the future.

Prof. dr hab. Joanna Jabłkowska
Dean of the Faculty of Philology



Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Participants and Guests,



On behalf of the Dean of our Faculty, Professor Radoslaw Bania, and myself I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all the participants of this solemn commemoration of the 150th anniversary of death of Ira Aldridge, one of the most eminent Shakespearian actors of all times. By a sad act of fate he died on August 7, 1867 in our city – Łódź, preparing to play Othello. He was buried in the city's Evangelical part of the Old Cemetery. Today we have an opportunity to host the most distinguished guests and participants of this event from the US, UK, Poland and other countries, but not for the first time, as the memory of Ira Aldridge's achievements and legacy are carefully guarded by the prominent member of our faculty, Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, who is also the head of the International Shakespeare Studies Centre at the University of Łódź. Our faculty is honored to host so many outstanding research workers, teachers, artists and performers, and we hope very much you will be able to use this opportunity



to deepen and extend the knowledge of Aldridge's influence and legacy. As members of the Faculty of International Studies we are open to the international community of researchers and performers, and our mission is to provide them with the right environment to develop mutual understanding and share divergent experience.

Let me thank you very much for coming and wish you all fruitful meetings, discussions and opportunity to participate in the most interesting academic and cultural events.

Prof. dr hab. Ryszard Machnikowski
Vice-dean for Research
and International Affairs
Faculty of International and Political Studies,
University of Łódź





Hello Ira Aldridge fans, aficionados, experts, admirers, specialists and enthusiasts!

It is such a joy to pen this post Symposium and Exhibition note to you. Not being an academic or specialist in Shakespeare or Aldridge or theater at all, my perspective on Ira Frederick Aldridge is a bit different because I learned of him rather recently – in 2008. Based on what I discovered from Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney and Dr. Bernth Lindfors and their predecessor Aldridge biographers, I asked: Why, with all this scholarship, isn't Aldridge better recognized in the town where he is buried? Professor Kujawińska and others partially solved that issue in 2014, when the Piotrkowska Street bas-relief plaque designed by the eminent sculptor, Marian Konieczny, was unveiled.

Therefore, the Symposium and Exhibition for me were “icing on the cake,” an

unsuspected kind of culmination because it brought together people who had individually researched the life of a man who was relentless in following his calling and yet very humanistic in relations with others—a man long dead for 150 years. Individually, we had read the research of others or learned from them during the presentations – such as the German reception to Aldridge on his tours there – and contrast that with what had compelled a playwright 130 years later to write the first (and still only) musical about Aldridge. Succinctly, we were all on the same page, and it was about exploring the life of a man—not a scientific discovery or climate change breakthrough.

Finally, in the middle of everything Aldridge, my husband walked into his own surprise birthday party – only the second time I have ever pulled off such an event. He was surprised!!!!!! Thanks to all of you who came. You made the party what it was – just sensational!!!!!! No matter what else happened with the Aldridge experts he met, my husband will never forget this trip.

Neither will I.

Barbara J. Williams



« Back to table of contents

Part 2

Symposium





Tony Howard
University of Warwick



Against Prejudice: Ira Aldridge, Theatre Manager

England, January 1828: Ira Aldridge was hired to perform for Mr Melmoth, the new Manager of both the Theatre Royal Birmingham and the Coventry Theatre, about 30 km away. 18 months earlier, in August 1826, the African American actor and his English wife Margaret had been destitute. His attempt to build a career in Britain, the theatrical press reported, “has completely failed. He is now in the greatest distress.” An appeal went out to sympathisers “to supply him with funds to return to his native country with his wife, who shares her husband’s wretchedness.” And “whether his talents are too ‘original’ for our refined English tastes or whether they are really below mediocre, we stoop not to enquire.”



« [Back to table of contents](#)

» Aldridge’s critics had subjected him to racist abuse: “The days of theatrical dogs, horses, and elephants have passed away, those of monkeys seem to be on decline, and now for a more monstrous exhibition than all the rest, we are to be treated with a Black Actor.” And now, on January 21st 1828, Mr. Melmoth advertised him in not dissimilar terms – as an African curiosity: “A MOST EXTRAORDINARY NOVELTY, A MAN OF COLOUR.” Yet only five weeks later Ira Aldridge became the new Manager of the Coventry Theatre, the first black artist ever to run a British theatre. And he did so at the age of twenty. How did it happen? How *could* it happen, in the 1820s?



Ira Aldridge in Coventry: 1828

Melmoth’s plan was to shuffle the same attractions between Birmingham, which was already a thriving manufacturing hub, and the quieter and more rural Coventry, which relied on the silk weaving trade. Melmoth understood English taste well enough to offer both places a number of patriotic melodramas with songs, particularly plays using slavery as a plot device. They flattered audiences by contrasting the colonial system of the British (whose Parliament had made the slave trade illegal in 1807) with the attitudes of other, less enlightened, nations. For England, such melodramas repeatedly insisted, was “The Land of Freedom.”



But slavery actually remained legal in Britain’s *colonies* worldwide. The fact that some 46,000 Britons were profiting from investments in slave-owning plantations – were profiting, that is, from human pain – was ignored or romanticised out of existence in the theatre. For example Mr. Melmoth presented *Paul and Virginia*, featuring an argument between Diego, a cruel Spanish slave master in the West Indies, and his neighbour Mr. Tropic – a kindly English colonist:

DIEGO: I say you are wrong---very wrong!

TROPIC: What! Have I not absolute power over my slaves? Yes, I have; and I choose to show that power by rendering them as happy as I can!

DIEGO: And so they are to have *another holiday*?

TROPIC: Yes! And grog. I love grog myself; it makes *me* happy.

DIEGO: Ah, sir! Really! I am sorry to say you Englishmen do not understand how to deal with your slaves.

TROPIC: Nonsense! It is the boast of Britons: from the moment a slave steps on our English shore, the moment he breathes the air of our land of freedom, he becomes free!

[Read more »](#)

[« Back to table of contents](#)

Małgorzata Leyko
Drama and Theatre Faculty
University of Łódź



Ira Aldridge and German Theatre

I will start with an excerpt from a letter written by Ira Aldridge on 24th August 1854. It concerns his performances in the capital of France in which the artist, as justification for his stage fame, refers to his success on German stages as well as the acclaim which was given to him by the German rulers. In this letter Aldridge wrote:

Dear Sir, I have been on a tour for three years performing in the main cities of Germany, Austria, Hungary, etc. My performances have been well-received. Till now, the world has not heard about an actor of African origin who has dramatic roles. Achievements which I had in the main German cities, i.e. in Berlin, Vienna, Würtemberg, and Frankfurt am Main made me want to perform in France as well.

His Royal Highness, the King of Prussia, honoured me with the Great Gold Medal for my merits in the field of Art and Science, the Royal *Order* of Ferdinand from the Emperor of Austria and the White Cross from Switzerland. I also received two letters of commendation from the courts of Prussia, Austria and Sachsen-Coburg for the French court.¹

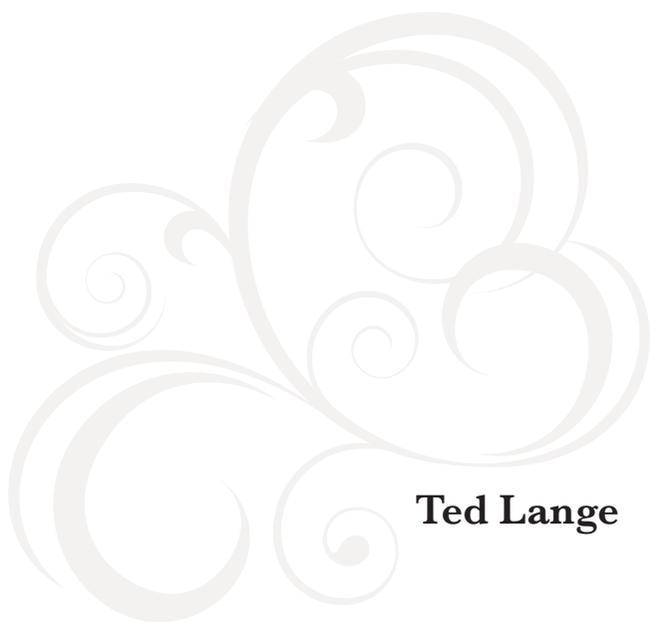
¹ Cit. from: Herbert Marshall, Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge. Ciemnoskóry tragik*, transl. Irena Tarłowska, PIW, Warszawa 1989, p. 203.



In fact, he was referring to the two-year tour (not three as the actor had wrote) on the European continent which he began on the 14th July 1852 after leaving the British Isles. This date is very significant in Aldridge's stage career which he divided into two periods: the first of more than a quarter of a century starting from his stage debut in England in 1824 to the moment he started to perform in theatres on the continent. The other period which covered the next fifteen years – from 1852 to his death in 1867 – is very much a success story. “The African Roscius” was initially successful in German-speaking countries, which significantly contributed to his future international fame. In general, it can be said that Aldridge's stage activity embraced two cultural areas: English-speaking and German-speaking but contracts for guest performances led him to other countries as well, from Russia and France to Turkey and Sweden.

[Read more](#) »

« [Back to table of contents](#)



Ted Lange

A Trip to Łódź



I have never been to Poland. But I got an offer to share the date of November 6th, 2017 in Łódź, Poland with a bunch of Shakespearean Scholars. I know the word Łódź looks like it should be pronounced “LODS,” “LOTS,” but in the Polish language the letter “Ł” is pronounced like a “W” so Łódź becomes “Wooz.” At the University of Łódź there was going to be a celebration of the life of Ira Aldridge. Aldridge was the 19th century black actor that first appeared on the English stage as Othello.

He was born a Freeman in New York City, in 1807, and at 17 years old was part of a black theatre company, in NYC called “The African Grove Theatre.” Jealous white Theatre patrons were instrumental in closing the Negro theatre and Ira, already bitten by the acting bug wanted to be an actor. He got a job as a valet to the English actor Henry Wallack and migrated to London. Aldridge became the first black actor to stand on an English stage and perform as Shakespeare’s Othello.

« Back to table of contents

Now at this point you are probably asking yourself, why would an American TV actor be asked to join this auspicious occasion? An actor famous in America for being on TV, regularly playing the comedic role of Isaac the Bartender on the 1970's hit show *Love Boat*. Well, I am also a playwright, a director and a producer of Theatre for Minorities in Los Angeles. As a playwright back in 1981, I wrote a musical called, *Born a Unicorn*. It was a Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll musical based on the life of Ira Aldridge.



We performed it at the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles and we had a very successful run. The ICCC was a multi-ethnic theatre that serviced minorities in the L. A. area. Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans were welcomed to the Theatre as well as African Americans. Previously in 1978, I had directed a production of *Hamlet*. I wanted (as a performer, director and playwright) to educate and entertain our black audiences. So I felt having a black Hamlet and using our ethnic idiosyncratic culture could be something for black audiences to enjoy. They would get a sense of Shakespeare and see the humanity of his characters and this play did not just apply to white audiences, but could be interpreted as universal. Buried deep in those iambic pentameter lines is something for black folks to relate to.

[Read more](#) »

« [Back to table of contents](#)



Part 3

Exhibition





Honoring the Life of African-American Shakespearean Actor Ira Aldridge



Daniel Hastings, USA Cultural Attaché
November 6, 2017

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Daniel Hastings and I am the new Cultural Attaché at the US Embassy in Warsaw. I have been in Poland only a short time so this is my first visit to the beautiful city of Łódź.

I would like to thank the University of Łódź for the gracious invitation to attend the opening of this fascinating exhibit and organizing such a wonderful program on the amazing life of Ira Aldridge.

Aldridge was not only an exceptional American and British actor who achieved fame and honor in Europe. He was also a brave pioneer of his times, using his talents and heart to defy racial discrimination and show that art has no boundaries or limits.

While Aldridge's memory is enshrined at the Shakespearean Memorial Theater at Stratford-upon-Avon in England, the example that Aldridge set in using his performances to decry slavery and champion freedom for blacks still in chains is one that continues to inspire us around the world. Aldridge stood up and used his voice and position to argue passionately that justice be color blind.

I would like to thank the City of Łódź, the University of Łódź, and the International Shakespeare Studies Centre for honoring the life and achievements of Ira Aldridge. We are very grateful for everything you do to keep alive his memory, his courage and incredible legacy.

Thank you!



« Back to table of contents



Ira Aldridge's Legacy: An exhibition in the Library of the University of Łódź

Dr Monika Sosnowska

University of Łódź



On October 6, 2017 an exhibition celebrating 150th anniversary of Ira Aldridge's death in Łódź was opened in the Library of the University of Łódź. The initiative came from Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney (the Head of the International Shakespeare Studies Centre at the University of Łódź) and gained support from Professor Jacek Orłowski (from The Mieczysław Hertz Theatre Institute in Łódź).

The event in the library gathered honourable and distinguished guests: Daniel Hastings (cultural attaché, U.S. Embassy in Warsaw), as well as prominent actors, playwrights, theatre directors and academics of international fame to present the amazing career of Ira Aldridge: Barbara Williams, Richard Williams, Ted Lange, Levi Frazier, Jr., Deborah Frazier, Carl Slappy, Sharon Freeman, Evelyn Little, Lela Greene, Shannon Little, Jessica Muller, Annette Fournet, and Professor Anthony Howard from the University of Warwick.



« Back to table of contents



The University of Łódź was represented by Professor Wanda Krajewska (who was the Rector of the University of Łódź between 1996–2002) and Professor Joanna Jabłkowska (the Dean of Faculty of Philology), who both honored the opening of the exhibition with their presence. The opening meeting was also attended by Dr. Joanna Podolska-Płocka (the Director of The Marek Edelman Dialogue Center in Łódź). The meeting was hosted by Dorota Bartnik (the Director of the Library). Daniel Hastings, Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney and Professor Joanna Jabłkowska spoke at the opening. Dr. Marzena Kowalska (one of the exhibition's curators) told guests about the exhibition in detail. Dr. Michał Woźniak (from American Corner in Łódź) served as interpreter during the meeting. Local media recorded the event.



The organizers displayed a collection of materials presenting the artistic career and legacy of Ira Aldridge, coming from the local institution – the Library of Łódź archives and the private collection of Professor Kujawińska Courtney as well as from the USA – e.g. a movie from The Walters Art Museum or images from Northwestern University Libraries, Evanston, Illinois. The collection contained Ira Aldridge's theatrical portrayals that brought him international fame and recognition in Europe, namely those of Othello and Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), Macbeth, Richard III, King Lear, and Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*). Memorabilia from *The Padlock*, the first play in which Aldridge performed, was also presented. The exhibition included a gallery of images of Aldridge at different stages of his career, literary works inspired by his life and theatrical roles, for example an excerpt from *Kwiaty Polskie* [Polish Flowers] by Julian Tuwim, a Polish poet. A collection of biographies in Polish and English, including *Ira Aldridge: Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 1852–1855*, the third volume of Bernth Lindfors's award-winning biography, was displayed. Selected theatre announcements from the nineteenth

century Polish newspapers from the period of Aldridge's visit to Poland were shown. Ira Aldridge's death certificate, kept in The State Archive in Łódź, was available to the visitors. The exhibition also displayed critical reception of his achievements. In addition, materials from a musical entitled *Born a Unicorn*, devoted to Aldridge's achievements directed by Ted Lange was part of the exhibition.

The organizers accentuated something that specifically connected Ira Aldridge with Łódź. It was his last theatrical endeavour during the rehearsal of Shakespeare's *Othello*, on August 7, 1867 in Paradyż theatre and a hotel, located at 175 Piotrkowska Street. On November 10, 2014, a ceremony during which a plaque (designed by Professor Marian Konieczny, a Polish artist) was placed on the front of the house, was organized. They also reminded the guests that this great Shakespearean actor was buried in the Lutheran cemetery at Ogrodowa Street in Łódź. At the time of his death he was fifty-nine. Afterwards, the organizers showed a short recording of the 2017 commemorative ceremony of Ira Aldridge's death in Łódź.

The exhibition was open to visitors until January 5, 2018.



« Back to table of contents

Part 4

Theatre





I'm grateful to Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney for inviting the Mieczysław Hertz Theatre Institute to participate in the organisation of the events celebrating the 150th anniversary of Ira Aldridge's death. This incredible person who was also a great actor needs a special commemoration.

Ira Aldridge was an artistic phenomenon of his epoch. Thanks to his outstanding strength of character combined with acting talent he was able to overcome racial prejudices so prevalent in the second half of the 19th century America and Europe. What is more, as he thoroughly understood the nature of theatre, he was able to skilfully use his physical and mental attributes to create great Shakespearean characters. Thanks to this, he overcame barriers that no other black actor before him managed to. The fact that he became a successful theatrical performer admired by the public as well as the cultural elites of 19th century Europe was a blow to racial prejudices.





This is one of the reasons why the persona of Ira Aldridge is gaining even more importance today, since there is a growing concern that in Europe, which only recently was enlivened by the idea of destroying barriers between countries and nations, the ideology similar to the one Aldridge had to face is being reborn. Therefore, in remembering his life and artistic achievements I believe we show our disapproval and revolt against such ideologies and attitudes. I think that this aspect of our commemorative celebrations deserves a special mention because it gives it a bigger picture while placing Ira Aldridge as a person, and a theatre professional, in the context of contemporary tensions and controversies.

Prof. dr hab. Jacek Orłowski
Mieczysław Hertz Theatre Institute



A Choice of Weapons

Levi Fraser Jr.



On April 4, 1968, approximately five miles from where Dr. King was killed, army tanks rolled down the streets of my quiet middle-class Memphis neighborhood to “maintain order” while those who “gave the order” for his death have never been brought to justice and probably never will.

In that same year, a thirty-year old comedian created a sense of disorder in my life and the lives of many other African-Americans when he narrated a poignant fifty-one-minute television documentary, *Black History: Lost, Stolen or Strayed*. This narrative covered the untold contributions of African-Americans in the development of the United States. These contributions were left out of the history books, and to add insult to injury, positive images of African Americans were grossly distorted to give those writing the history a false sense of superiority and those left out the same sense of inferiority. As an eleventh grader viewing this documentary in 1968, I was struck with just how little I knew about the accomplishments of Black people and how I desperately needed to work overtime to discover the lost information, reclaim the stolen past, and step onto the path of a true education. Being introduced to Ira Aldridge was part of that

education. In the words of Chancellor Williams, famous sociologist, historian, and author of *Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* “In other words, there can be no real identity with our heritage until we know what our heritage really is. It is all hidden in our history, but we are ignorant of that history. We have been floating along, basking blissfully in the sunny heritage of other peoples!”



« [Back to table of contents](#)



Seven years after the tanks rolled down my street, I flew to Washington, D.C. to attend a communications conference at Howard University. While on break from one of the sessions, I toured the campus and soon found myself standing in front of the Ira Aldridge Theater, wondering who Ira Aldridge was because I had never encountered him in any of the theater or history books I had read. As I stood there quietly soaking up the information on the auditorium wall about this illustrious Thespian, I was determined to someday pen a play on the life of this larger-than-life 19th century actor-writer-producer.

The year was 1975, and, by then I had already written and produced plays on Richard Wright, author of poems, short stories and novels; Paul Robeson, performer and social activist; and W.C. Handy, “Father of the Blues”. Little did I know that forty years would expire before my play on Ira Aldridge would finally come to fruition, but not without conducting the necessary research, choosing the right genre for the play, as well as the dramatic structure I would employ.

[Read more](#) »

« [Back to table of contents](#)





dr Magdalena Cieślak
and dr Agnieszka Rasmus
in interviews
with Levi Frasier Jr.,
the author of
For Our Freedom and Yours,
and Evelyn Little,
the director of the production



Dr Agnieszka Rasmus (AR): How did you come up with the idea of writing a play about Ira Aldridge's life?

Levi Fraser Jr. (LF): *I have always been fascinated with “larger than life” individuals, especially African-Americans, who step beyond the bounds of time and place and overcome tremendous challenges to cement a place for themselves in history. More importantly, as a result of their achievements, these men and women inspire many generations of the unborn who may one day repeat the words of the main character in the children’s book. “The Little Engine Who Could”: “I think I can; I think I can; I think I can; I know I can!”*

Ira Aldridge was such an individual. I first learned about him on a trip to Howard University in Washington, D.C. for a Communications Conference in 1974. While there I visited the campus theater and discovered that it was named after Aldridge, of whom I had never heard, although I considered myself a learned Thespian. Upon reading the information on the theater wall about Aldridge, I felt that I had been, in the words of Malcom X, “...you have been

took, hoodwinked, bamboozled, led astray!” because I was intentionally lied to, through omission, by America about my American history.

That event motivated me to write about Aldridge, just as I had already written plays about, controversial ex-patriot author, Richard Wright, music aficionado, W.C. Handy and world renowned performer, Paul Robeson. I felt it was my duty to let the world know not only of Aldridge’s existence but the tremendous contributions he had made to the world stage. I didn’t know when I would pen the play, but I knew I would do it. It would, be, however, forty years later when the planets would properly align themselves that this project would finally come to fruition.

AR: How difficult was the biographical research?

LF: *Unlike the “old days” before the internet when most research was physically performed in the libraries, where I had gleaned most of the information for my previous plays, I was quite elated that for my play on Aldridge, much of my research could be performed on line from my desk at home. The basic research for my drama centered around Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock’s book, “Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian.” Most of the other information came from numerous articles and blogs I found on line. I always attempted to find at least two sources that would confirm each other, especially on information that may have seemed unsubstantiated. When I first traveled to Krakow in 2006 I tried to find someone at the American Consulate who could possibly provide me some information on Aldridge but the Consulate, at the time, was not familiar with Aldridge and I ended up providing information to him about the great Thespian. Prior to traveling to Krakow, I attended a “Doing Business In Poland” event sponsored by the Atlanta Georgia Chamber of Commerce. It was there that I had an opportunity to meet the U.S. Ambassador to Poland and the Polish Ambassador to the U.S. and provide them with some research on Aldridge by gifting each with the book, “Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian.”*



[Read more](#) »

« [Back to table of contents](#)



dr Magdalena Cieślak (MC): In the production, there are moments when Aldridge performs in his famous Shakespearean roles. How did you work on his acting style? Historical records only imply that his acting was extraordinary and quite innovative. What was your approach to that issue?

Evelyn Little (EL): *I was excited when asked to direct “For Our Freedom and Yours”, written by my friend and colleague, Levi Frazier, Jr. To be given the opportunity to be the original director of this well-written, thought provoking, and interesting script about such a world-renowned personality as Ira Aldridge was a dream come true. The play is a one-man drama about the life of Ira Aldridge, an African American actor who became famous for his portrayal of Shakespearean roles in Europe during the 19th Century. I was well-aware that directing a one-man drama is always a challenge. When coupled with the different personae and characters, the different tones, the historical,*

autobiographical, psychological, and social aspects presented in the script, I knew the task was going to be, not only a challenge, but also a great test of my expertise in directing and in oral interpretation.

In reference to Ira Aldridge’s performances of Shakespeare’s monologues in the production, the script was my blue print. The foundation is always the script! I took my clues from the script to create Ira Aldridge as presented in “For Our Freedom and Yours”, initially the playwright’s creation of Ira Aldridge but ultimately the director’s creation. I actually did not give the Shakespearean roles any more thought or consideration than I did any of the other roles in the script. Each and every role in the script was just as important as the other. First of all, I examined the text, or script, for each persona and action, determining who, what, when, where, and why. I examined the structure of each scene and each line for emotional tone, rhythm, and message for characterization, determining class, style, status, and intellect.

Read more »

« Back to table of contents

Students reviews





Maria:

I haven't heard about Ira Aldridge until I took a part in this breathtaking event. That day was undoubtedly significant, because Ira became my first answer to the question "Is it possible to do the impossible?" This actor achieved something that seems entirely unbelievable. I have the impression that Ira Aldridge is sometimes underestimated. Decisively more and more people ought to become familiar with his accomplishment connected with the theatre.

Khrystyna:

It was my first time when I went to a theatre in Łódź. I have to say I was very impressed. The play was very exciting and informative, including many facts about Shakespeare, and his work. But I was really surprised by the main protagonist, Ira Aldridge, who was the first African American who played Shakespeare's roles. For an hour and half he was talking about his adventures with such plays as *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and many others. His performance was fascinating, full

of emotions and a little bit funny. It was also wonderful to see how Ira Aldridge changed costumes and transformed from one character into another.

I also liked discussion after the play. We could ask a questions and some people answered them with pleasures. During this discussion, I have found out that died and was buried in Łódź.

It was very good experience because I learned a lot of about Shakespeare and his works, as well as about Ira Aldridge. I think that such events have a great impact on us, and help to make us more erudite.



Dmytro:

The screening made an overwhelmingly positive impression on the audience, myself included. The actor's performance was outstanding, successfully portraying both Ira Aldridge's persona and Shakespeare's characters. The script itself is a nice piece of a fictionalized biography. Even though it left a few questions by the end, they were all clarified in a post-screening discussion with the authors. The performance was also an interesting introduction into the American theatrical tradition, which is quite different from the European one.

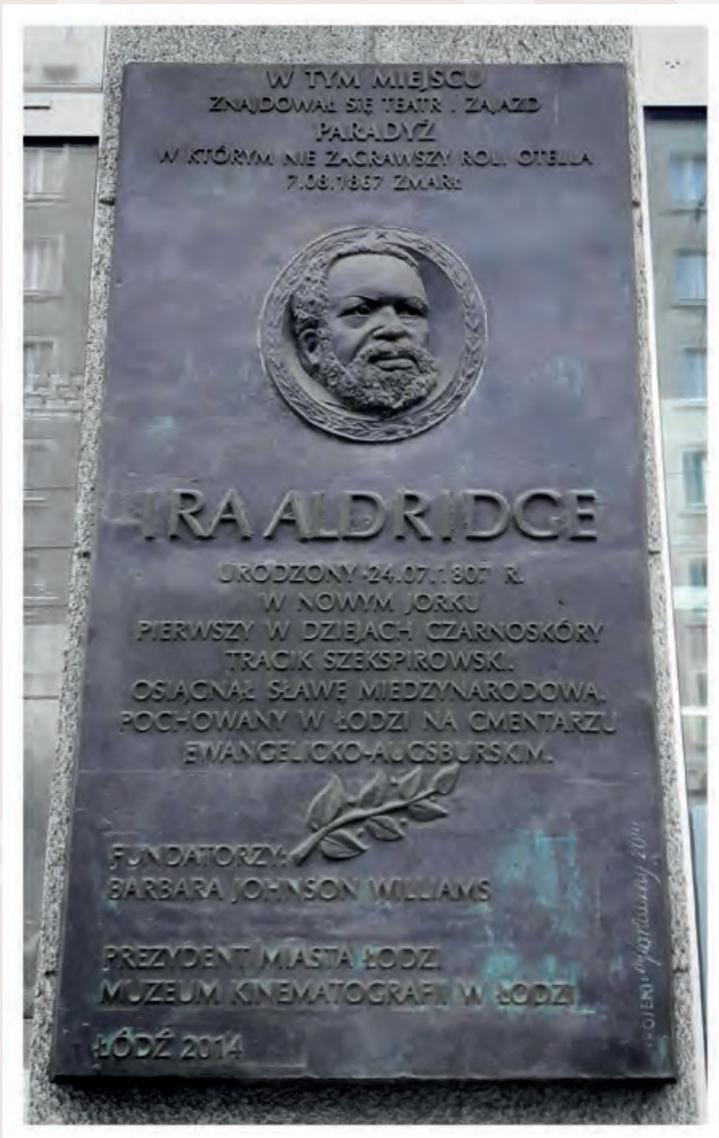
Lukasz:

For Our Freedom, and Yours is an amazing play that speaks not only of the life of Ira Aldridge, a remarkable Thespian, but also about Life in its most pure and base form. It is a tale of struggle, passion and ambition, as well as love and sorrow, all based on the life of one astonishing man. A man painfully aware of not only the chains of oppression that served to keep people of his color down, but also of the oppression of time, which enslave us all.

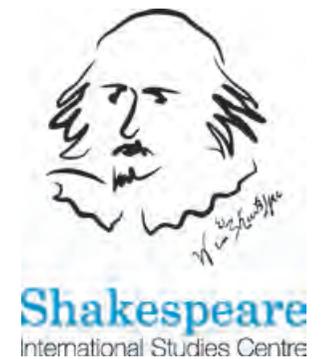
[Read more](#) »

« [Back to table of contents](#)





Ira Aldridge's memorial plaque in 175 Piotrkowska Str. in Łódź



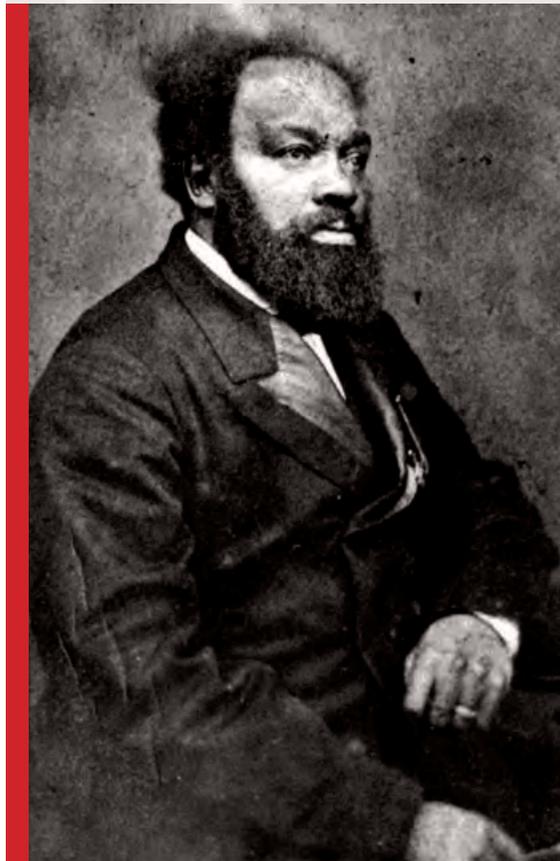
» During his tours Aldridge performed in big metropolitan cities and in small towns, wherever theatres had enough room and the right conditions to accommodate the crowds that wanted to see him. And he was successful everywhere he went. In recognition of his achievements, Aldridge received many national honours and awards. For example, the king of Prussia bestowed on him the Gold Medal of the First Class for Arts and Science – besides Aldridge the recipients included only baron Von Humboldt, German philosopher and scientist, Luigi Gasparo Sponti, Italian composer and Franz Liszt, Hungarian pianist and composer. In Austria, he received the Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold; in Switzerland, he was given the White Cross of Merit. He was made a honorary member of many scientific and cultural organizations, among them The Imperial and Arch-ducal Institution of 'Our Lady of the Manger' in Pest (Hungary), The Royal Czech Conservatory in Prague, Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg (Russia). He was also given the title of the Honorary Commission of Captain in the Republican Army of Haiti for the promotion of skills and talent of his race.

The theatre records and criticism, which recognized and appreciated Aldridge's professional achievements in his lifetime, mainly come from the European countries visited by him during his performances. *Gazeta Wielkiego Xięstwa Poznańskiego* of January 23, 1853 called him the "first magnitude star." He was, in the opinion of the reporter for the *Kurier Warszawski* newspaper, "greeted by a crowded houses everywhere, and princes and [ordinary] people were eager to see him, while honours, orders and medals were showered upon him." Richard Wagner (1813–1883) observed that during



» his performances Aldridge would stir uncontrollable enthusiasm, Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) described his unmatched success in his popular *Voyage en Russie* published in 1896, and Taras Shevchenko drew Aldridge's portrait as a token of their friendship.

The list of those who knew and remembered Aldridge, often enthusiastically, includes not only his colleagues and professional acquaintances such as Ellen Tree, Edmund Keene, Charles Keene, J. Philip Kemble, Madge Kendall. Among people who stayed in touch with him and took a special interest in following his career were also representatives of the literary and artistic world; among them Sir Walter Scott (1771–1831), Tyrone Powers (1791–1841), Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1837), Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), baron von Humboldt (1779–1859), Franz Liszt (1811–1886), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), Jenny Lind (1820–1887) and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910).



The Aldridge family memorabilia include a number of photo albums filled with pictures sent to him after his visits to Russia, Mongolia and the Ukraine with expressions of gratitude for his acting. Students at Kazan University bestowed upon him a special document written in Latin bearing an enormous wax seal and ribbons, in which they expressed their gratitude for his performance. In St. Petersburg, the enthusiastic audience unharnessed the horses after his performance and dragged the carriage to the hotel.



Aldridge's State Funeral in Łódź 1807

Aldridge's state funeral lasted over ten hours. *The Lodger Zeitung* (August 10, 1867) reporter wrote that the city authorities of that time rose to the occasion, generously providing financial resources for its organization. A few hours before the funeral service, countless crowds of local residents were already gathered in front of the theatre. The funeral procession was led by a pastor and a parish cantor of St. Matthew's. The cantor's responsibilities included the coordination of singing and the supervision of the appropriate ranking of school youth that belonged to a Musical Society of the local Lutheran parish. Young people sang songs, selected especially for the occasion. They were assisted by joined choirs and singing ensembles from the entire city, among them those that worked at Łódź factories. The orchestra of the Russian dragoon regiment that accompanied the singing marched right behind them. Members of the Rifle Society and the Theatrical Society proceeded with dignity behind the orchestra, carrying red and velvet cushions which held state awards conferred on Aldridge during his lifetime, as well as a huge laurel wreath.

The hearse on which the corpse was placed was pulled by four horses covered with a pall. Members of the Rifle Society dressed in ceremonial attire, carrying their banner and rifles on their shoulders, formed a natural protection for the hearse. As the first of the mourners, right behind the hearse, walked “in a deep regret August Hentschel, the theatre owner, who was accompanied by the Mayor, [...] and another person,” the latter being, unfortunately, unidentified. Next, twelve Łódź guilds paid their last respects to Aldridge. Their decorative banners were carried by respective delegations. In that order, right behind them, was the closed carriage, in which the bereaved widow was riding. Behind the carriage proceeded others. There were so many of them that the reporter was unable to specify the names of their owners. At the end of the funeral procession were countless crowds of Łódź residents.

To the sound of the music, singing and chiming of the church bells, the whole intricately organized funeral procession marched slowly along Piotrkowska Street, the main street of the town, towards the cemetery. Since there was no time to prepare a suitable place at the cemetery, the manufacturer Charles Frederick Moes, himself of German origin, agreed to place Aldridge’s body in his newly erected tomb. Over Aldridge’s grave, the pastor delivered a speech in which he paid his respects to the deceased, emphasizing the tragedian’s virtues and devotion to God. He drew attention of those present to “the fragility of human life and fate, which often casts people far away from their place of birth, where they have to rest for ever, away from the loved ones and friends.” Then the singers took up a dirge, and the pastor consecrated the corpse. A laurel wreath was mounted on the coffin and it was laid in the tomb; the sounds of trumpets could be heard, played by almost all professional and amateur trumpeters of the town. The tomb was showered with flowers and wreaths. Ira Aldridge was buried in the Lutheran cemetery (Cmentarz Ewangelicko-Augsburski) at Ogródowa Street.

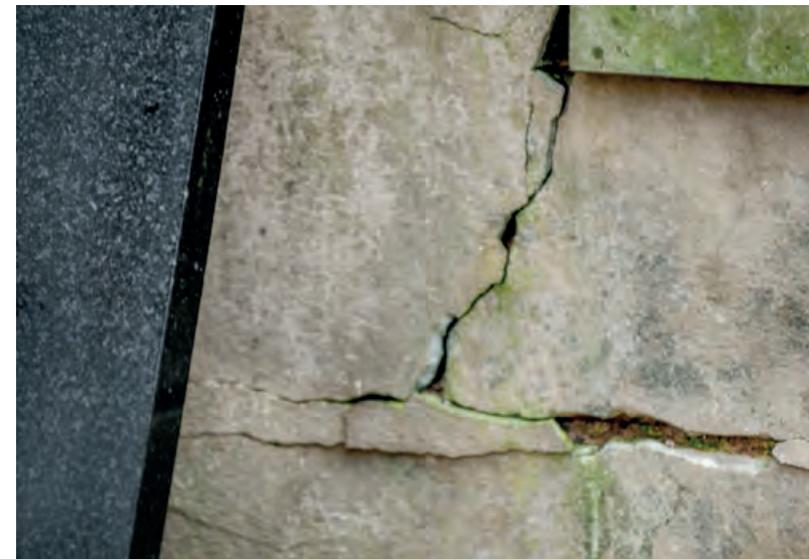
Thus, in 1867, according to the Warsaw reporter, our multicultural and multireligious Łódź paid her last respects to the great artist, taking on the responsibility of caring for his grave.





The Town's Care of Aldridge's Tomb

The grave was restored in 2001 – the money was collected at the Łódź cemetery during All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day – and is under the special protection of the inhabitants of the city. The tomb requires, however, urgent renovation; it is falling into pieces – see the attached pictures.



« Back to main text

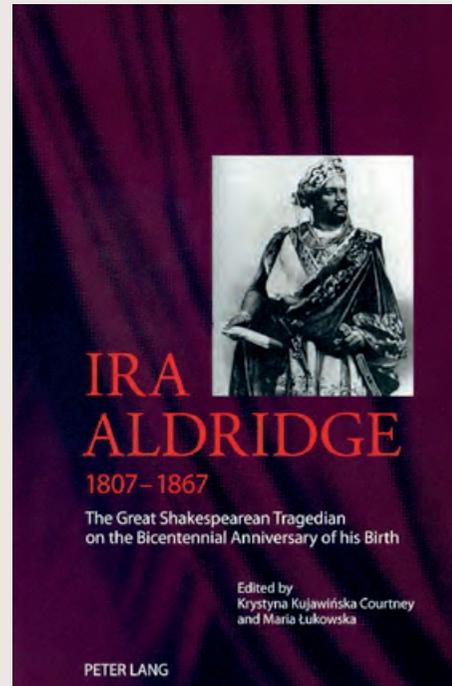
« Back to table of contents

The International Symposium 2007

To celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of Ira Aldridge, the British and Commonwealth Studies Department, University of Łódź, organized an international symposium. The Symposium, held on 23–25 July 2007, attracted eminent scholars and specialists in the field from the USA, Britain, Australia and Poland, who arrived with curiosity and vigour, as if on a pilgrimage to the actor's grave. The programme of our meeting included not only the formal presentations of papers, but also the presentation of a documentary produced by Joseph Mydell, a Royal Shakespeare Company actor, and visits to the places associated with Aldridge's visit in Łódź in 1867. Since the Symposium was the first in the world forum solely devoted to various aspects

of the great Shakespearean tragedian's life and professional achievements, our discussions usually lasted till the late evening hours: we were sharing not only the results of our research, but also the experiences and frequent difficulties which we had encountered while trying to reconstruct and interpret the archival and critical material connected with Aldridge. We were honoured with

the presence of Professor Berth Lindfors, the most famous Ira Aldridge's specialist, who published in 2011–2015 his four volume opera omnia *Ira Aldridge: the Early Years, 1807–1833; Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years, 1833–1852; Ira Aldridge: Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 1852–1855* and *Ira Aldridge: The Last Years, 1855–1867* (Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora).



CONTENTS	
Preface	vii
SANDRA L. RICHARDS	
Introduction	1
KRYSTYNA KUJAWIŃSKA COURTNEY, MARIA ŁUKOWSKA	
Part I: Ira Aldridge – Man, Actor and Playwright	9
<i>The Lives of Ira Aldridge</i>	11
BERNTH LINDFORS	
<i>Ira Aldridge (1807–1867): From “Playing the African Prince” to Becoming the Great Interpreter of the Ever-Living Shakespeare”</i>	21
KRYSTYNA KUJAWIŃSKA COURTNEY	
<i>Ira Aldridge: Prophet of Protest</i>	33
BARON KELLY	
<i>Creating the Black Hero: Ira Aldridge’s the Black Doctor</i> KEITH BYERMAN	41
Part II: European Career of Ira Aldridge	51
<i>Ira Aldridge, Multiculturalism and the Theatre of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Wrocław</i>	53
KATARZYNA KWAPISZ WILLIAMS, EVAN WILLIAMS	
<i>Ira Aldridge in Cracow (1854 and 1858): A Difficult Reception</i>	65
OLGA MASTELA	
<i>Ira Aldridge – Lodzermensch</i> LUKASZ ROMANOWSKI	77
<i>In the Defence of “Otherness”: Ira Aldridge as Shylock in Poland from 1853 to 1867</i>	91
AGATA DĄBROWSKA	

The Plaque in 2014



On November 10, 2014, a plaque was unveiled commemorating the connections of Ira Aldridge with the city of Łódź. The ceremony was attended by numerous representatives of the Łódź world of politics, culture and science. The plaque was placed on the front of the house located at Piotrkowska Street no. 175, the former hotel and Paradyż theatre, where the actor died unexpectedly during the rehearsal of Shakespeare's *Othello*, on August 7, 1867 Attempting to honour

the memory of this great artist, over the past few years American schools, theatres, and Aldridge's devotees have been appealing to the current authorities of Łódź, initially to place his name on the Walk of Fame in Piotrkowska Street. However, this turned out to be impossible due to formal reasons. Since 2010, I have corresponded with Ms. Barbara Johnson Williams, from Memphis, conducting on her behalf the negotiations with the Museum of Cinematography, which, with time, agreed to help with posting the commemorative plate (Ms. Williams visited our town four times during this process). And so, as of October 10, 2014 we have a plaque, designed by Professor Marian Konieczny, a famous Polish artist, which reminds the residents of Łódź not only about this prominent actor, but also about the location of the first stationary theatre in the city. The speakers at the ceremony of the unveiling of the plaque, led by Ms. Elżbieta Czarnecka, curator of the Museum of Cinematography, included Ms. Barbara Johnson Williams, Mr. Mieczysław Kuźmicki, director of the Museum of Cinematography, Senator Ryszard Bonisławski, Professor Zofia Wysokińska, Vice-Rector of the University

of Łódź for International Cooperation, as well as myself. The laudatory speech of Professor Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniowska was read by Łódź actors: Jarosław Wójcik and Gracjan Kielanowski. The spectators who gathered listened to selected jazz standards performed by alumni of Wyższa Szkoła Muzyczna (Higher School of Music) from the class of Professor Jacek Deląg. I wholeheartedly invite you to watch the recordings of the event on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqv-VAmMX9g&feature=youtu.be>, made by Professor Sławomir Kalwinek of the National Higher School of Film, Television and Theatre in Łódź.

The 2017 Celebrations



The celebrations started on August 7th, when the town honoured Aldridge by a meeting of the City Council representatives, Mr. Olgierd Łukaszewicz, the Chairman of the Polish Association of Theatre, Film, Radio and TV Actors, eminent theatre professors e.g. Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, Małgorzata Leyko and prof. dr hab. Jacek Orłowski as well as Mr. Omar Sangare, a black actor of Polish origin, recently residing in the USA. After a short commemoration of the event in the

Poznański Museum, the invited guests moved to the cemetery, where they placed flowers and wreaths, and lit many candles on Aldridge's grave.

The main celebrations, presented in this catalogue, which were organised by such institutions of the University of Łódź as: the International Shakespeare Studies Center, The Philological Faculty, the Faculty of International and Political Studies, and the Main University Library, took place on November 10th. They included an international symposium, attended by distinguished Polish, American and British academics and actors, the exhibition devoted to Aldridge's life and theatrical achievements, especially his connection with Poland and with Łódź, which was also attended by the Cultural Attaché of the US Embassy in Warsaw and the President of the Polish Fulbright Association.

In the evening a theatre troupe from Memphis staged a play *For My Freedom and Yours* which showed a creative presentation of Aldridge's life and his connection with Łódź. The following day the guests visited the cemetery and other places connected with Aldridge in town as well as some local theatres.

The 2017 Conference participants stressed that any work devoted to a historically important African American figure contains challenges of a special kind. One of them is the fact that the subject of the research was born and lived in a special relationship to the politics, society, and history of his times. The biographers must frequently struggle with the ignorance, resistance, and disbelief of their potential readers/respondents, black or white, to a relatively unknown history of individuals who have many times been relegated to footnotes or completely excluded from the "officially" recognized history. The intersection of the unknown, little known, or marginalized history, and the forgotten and/or regularly misrepresented people constitutes an almost insurmountable obstacle. Furthermore, as Dominic La Capra states, "it is virtually impossible to write or say anything on the topic of race that is not in some way objectionable or embarrassing" (1991).

Ira Aldridge made his Coventry debut in *The Slave*, playing Gambia, a slave who admires the British so much that he fights alongside them – to crush a slave rebellion. Three factors coincided and begin to explain why Coventry, uniquely, gave Aldridge the keys to its playhouse, and made history.

Firstly, as Bernt Lindfors showed in his great four-volume biography of Aldridge, one explanation was that Melmoth's management was disastrous. Melmoth supplied a troupe of weak, miscast and unrehearsed actors who did not know their lines. The local press were patient at first, then irritated ("Very great complaints have been made to us"), and finally outraged. Melmoth was "negligent," said the *Coventry Herald*, "as the public and his creditors are sufficiently aware. The pieces were frequently performed without a previous rehearsal" and his "carelessness and indolence" was "an insult to the audience."

The mismanagement of the Coventry Theatre was a serious local scandal. It was built and was owned by the local businessman Sir Skears Rew, who had twice been Mayor of the city. Now he was

gravely ill, and he had no child to pass the theatre on to.

The second factor, of course, was that Ira Aldridge – he was then still known by his early stage name, Mr. Keene, the African Roscius – was an extraordinary talent. Aldridge's Birmingham and Coventry reviewers came expecting to mock him. The popular comedian Charles Matthews had recently scored a huge success with

a one-man-show where he "blacked up" to play an incompetent and illiterate black American actor ruining *Hamlet*. The press assumed Aldridge would be just such a buffoon. But "We were astonished": anyone "who expects any similar absurdity will be disappointed."

The *Coventry Herald* had expected only "physical force" and "some boisterous declamation," but "the text was understood



and perfectly delivered, while there was great good sense and considerable discrimination of taste.” His voice was “as fine, flexible and manly, as any on the London stage” – in fact “we could easily have supposed him an Englishman” (!). Audiences were impressed and moved by Aldridge’s “bursts of passion,” his “uncommon energy,” and “the deep tones of his grief,” “as touching as they were manly.” The press reported that he had the skills of a theatrical “veteran”; they compared him to the great actors Edmund Kean and Charles Macready. And above all “Mr Keene” compelled people to *think*: his “display of intellectual power,” one Coventry journalist wrote,



“gives the negative to those ... who argue for the inferiority of the *dark races*”.
(*Coventry Observer* January 17).

This was crucial.

For the third factor leading to Aldridge’s warm welcome in Coventry was the political situation. The week he arrived, a new Government was being formed in London behind closed doors. A group of extreme conservatives, the Ultra Tories, were manoeuvring to fill the power vacuum. And so Ira Aldridge shared the front page of the *Coventry Herald* with an editorial by its progressive editor Henry Merridew, who asked: “What is this Toryism?” Its only goal, he insisted, was “despotism.” The Ultra Tories aimed to “oppose *every* increase of the people’s rights and liberties – to keep the people in ignorance” and suppress education. But was there any possibility that they could gain power? Surely not, because “the people can read, and schools for all will flourish.” But a week later Merridew reported the Ultra Tories had won. He was shocked: “The Duke of Wellington is Prime Minister ... He is a soldier and a brave one, but as a politician he is the worst we know” – he was a man defined by “prejudice” and “ignorance.”

In particular the Duke of Wellington was, and was determined to remain, one of England’s most powerful defenders of slavery: “Look to our own colonies in tropical climates,” he told Parliament, “and see whether you can find any disposition in the *free* negro to work ... He thinks of nothing save the luxury of reposing in listless idleness beneath the shade.” For years Wellington defended “the practice of flogging females” by slave owners, and questioned Parliament’s right to interfere “in this matter of internal regulation.”

And it was in this atmosphere that Henry Merridew’s paper issued a public invitation to “The African Roscius:” “Should he appear in town, as we are told he intends to do, as a stranger and a foreigner we heartily wish him success.” For “a wide field is open for his exertions.” Merridew’s language was important. To come to “town” was to meet its leading citizens; “*a stranger and a foreigner*” was an allusion to the Bible and to the fellowship of all mankind: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

Slavery and a city

Henry Merridew and his father Nathaniel – who founded the *Herald* and like Skears Rew had twice been Mayor of Coventry – were passionate Abolitionists. Henry frequently used his newspaper to condemn slavery and those who profited from it. For example: “Does not the English nation participate in this iniquity? ... There is not one pound of West India Sugar purchased, but tends to perpetuate this system of inhumanity and crime.” In 1825 Nathaniel Merridew was one of those who invited the famous Abolitionist lecturer George Cropper to Coventry to influence local opinion (Cropper was visiting “The larger towns, and especially where the leading people are intelligent” (George Cropper, *Letters*). However the Coventry meeting was a disappointment: “It was not so numerous as could have been wished.” For Coventry was not an Abolitionist stronghold in the 1820s. Here the decline of the silk weaving trade and the struggle to win equal rights for Catholics were more urgent issues. So when Merridew and his allies organised a large anti-slavery meeting the next year – it included an eye-witness report on

slavery in America from a visiting (white) Quaker, “a stranger and foreigner among you” as he said – a local parson argued that slaves were simply too primitive to be liberated: “Negroes are at present unfit for freedom.” For Henry Merridew, this was not a matter of intelligence, but education: “The colonists are opposed to having their slaves taught to read the Bible: we cannot wonder at this. They cannot wish them to learn that the violation of almost every divine precept is expressed in that single word SLAVERY.”

So the arrival of the brilliant Ira Aldridge was a godsend: since his “display of intellectual power gives the lie to those who argue that the dark races are inferior,” he must meet the “town.” No direct account of those meetings survives, but Aldridge certainly talked with Henry Merridew and Skears Rew and told his Coventry hosts about some aspects of his early life.

Today, thanks to his biographers, we know those stories in brutal detail. For example, at the age of 14 in New York, Aldridge was badly beaten by a thug hired by a white theatre manager who was determined to destroy the all-black theatre group the African Company, which Ira had joined.

On January 29th 1828 the *Coventry Herald* urged its readers to attend Aldridge’s special benefit performance as “the royal slave” Oroonoko, a rebel against oppression. “When it is remembered the peculiar difficulties Mr. Keene has had to battle with, his success is far beyond what might have been expected and is very honourable.” He undoubtedly impressed them with his dignity and also with his practical understanding of what needed to be done to steer Rew’s theatre out of its crisis. Soon, in an eloquent open letter and still using his stage name, he told the town.

F.W. KEENE (THE AFRICAN ROSCIUS) most respectfully informs the Inhabitants of Coventry and its Vicinity, that he has taken the Theatre for a short Season, to commence on the 3rd of March. It is not the intention of the present Manager to expatiate on the conduct of his predecessor – as he rests his hopes for success on his own exertions, rather than on the failures of others.

He would improve timekeeping and efficiency, “improve the fittings of theatre as far as time permits,” and above all he announced that “He has already engaged several Performers of known talent and he intends to rely upon a Settled Company – rather than on

the occasional assistance of Stars.” To help create that “settled company,” Aldridge never billed himself as the Star, and he brought in three theatrical families to be the Coventry ensemble’s heart.

Those families were the three Penley sisters (local favourites); Mrs. Cooke from the Cheltenham Theatre and her two children (including a boy actor aged five); and the brothers William and Leman Rede (known as “the inseparables”). William Rede became Aldridge’s highly competent Stage Manager and Leman would secure “A supply from London of Dramatic



Novelties.” Aldridge pointed out that Leman Rede was the author of *The Road to the Stage*, an encyclopaedic guide to life to contemporary English theatre which included pages on discipline in the playhouse and stressed that the first rule for every actor must be “Learn the lines.” The professionalism of the young manager was immediately evident.

“The business of our stage is better conducted than we are accustomed to with a greater regard paid to properties, scenery and stage business... And the company is decidedly improved. Those excellent actresses the Miss Penleys played with even more than their usual ability” (“Coventry Herald”). Aldridge opened with *Othello*

and went on to present impassioned characters of African origin who – like Oronooko but unlike Gambia – fought against slavery. Young’s *The Revenge*, for example, was *Othello* in reverse, where a jealous white officer is destroyed by his trusted servant (Zanga, played by Aldridge). Unlike Shakespeare’s Iago, Zanga explained his motive:

I am just.
Thou seest a prince, whose father thou hast slain,
Whose native country thou hast laid in blood,
What was left to me? No kingdom but revenge.

Ira Aldridge’s historic management of the Coventry Theatre came to an end when Sir Skears Rew died on April 23rd 1828 – Shakespeare’s birthday. His household furniture was sold at auction. Gradually the “settled company” dissolved. The three Miss Penleys retired from the stage but stayed in Coventry and opened a dress shop. Mrs Cooke’s husband applied to take on the theatre. Leman Rede wrote a black-face farce for a racist white comedian. But the effect of Aldridge lingered. The characters he played in Coventry had denounced slavery – and now his audience did too.



May 1828: “Petitions to Parliament, praying for the abolition of slavery, are now lying for signatures at the County Hall in the City” (*Coventry Herald*).

June 1828: “Slavery: Petition for the abolition thereof,” from “Coventry and its Vicinity” (*Proceedings of the House of Commons*).

July 1828: “From Coventry ... against slavery” (House of Lords, *The Spectator*).

Though Aldridge’s Management of the Coventry Theatre was forgotten, it left a legacy that proved his influence. James Bisset, a poet living nearby in Leamington Spa, wrote a song for Aldridge which survives in Birmingham Library in the author’s notebooks. Here Aldridge transformed himself into a child seized by slave traders in Guinea: “Me the Negro Boy/ Once my parents’ joy/ From dere bosom torn/ O’er de Ocean borne” – to be “chained and lashed and whipped.” He performed it more than a hundred times around the British Isles.

Concluding his open letter to Coventry’s citizens, Aldridge had struck a personal note. He admitted that when he first came to the city he “might have feared that, unknown and unfriended, he had little claim to public notice – did he not feel that **being a foreigner and a stranger**

are universal passports to British sympathy.” His words resonate to this day.

Ira Aldridge in Coventry 2017

I have worked all my adult life in Coventry. Since 2012 I have been part of a project investigating the major contribution that artists of different ethnicities have made to our understanding of Shakespeare – that icon of “Britishness.” So I was astonished by Bernt Lindfors’ discovery that Aldridge had actually managed the theatre here, at the height of the fight against slavery.

In Autumn 2016 I wrote a drama-documentary to help me understand and share that story. At Coventry’s Belgrade Theatre it was given a rehearsed reading led by the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Ray Fearon as Ira Aldridge, brilliantly supported by the Belgrade’s Black Youth Theatre and Choir. The theatre was packed.

When the performance, ended the performers led the audience on a torchlit procession to the site of Aldridge’s long-lost theatre and the veteran film star Earl Cameron laid flowers on the spot. This was doubly important because more than seventy

years ago Mr. Cameron's voice teacher was Ira Aldridge's daughter, Amanda. The Black Youth Theatre sang songs that "Mr. Keene" himself had performed on that spot nearly two centuries ago, and they sang them to a gentleman who owed his career to Ira's daughter.

The effect was overwhelming. Ray Fearon said, "This is my story as a black actor. Why was I never told it?" Coventry residents from many backgrounds used almost the same words: "Why was I never told this about my city?" Ira Aldridge's struggle and the unique welcome he was given here meant one thing was clear: there had to be a permanent memorial.

In August 2017, marking the 150th anniversary of Ira Aldridge's death – and Earl Cameron's 100th birthday(!) – we installed a blue plaque in Aldridge's memory. It was unveiled by Earl Cameron and Lord Mayor Tony Skipper, who recalled the achievements of his nineteenth-century predecessors and pointed out to the crowd that recently Coventry has taken in more Syrian refugees than any other UK city. "People from all around the world have come to this city and are working hard to rebuild their lives and become part of our community."



Skears Rew's playhouse was demolished long ago, and during World War II the horrific Coventry Blitz even obliterated the streets around it. But though things pass, things are renewed. So now the plaque marking that site is in a shopping centre right in the heart of modern Coventry – testament to the power of a community to suffer but bring itself back to life. Every day now, hundreds of shoppers are reminded of a great African American and of this city's openness to “foreigners and strangers.”

On the 19th September 2017, Shakespeare's Globe in London presented an event honouring Aldridge in its candle-lit Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. It revived our drama-documentary, titled *Against Prejudice*, and followed it with a conversation between historians, actors and directors for whom the life of Ira Aldridge has been an inspiration. A member of the audience wrote in her blog:

The entire evening was absolutely fantastic, and if you were not there, you really missed out on a superb evening... [Aldridge] paid tribute to all the Africans who had been ripped from the shores of Africa, to be branded, bought, sold, and degraded... While Ray Fearon, a brilliant actor himself, read his lines, the Coventry Belgrade Black Youth Theatre group sang a beautiful Yoruba song – traditionally a worship song (Ise Oluwa) ... I had to fight back my tears.

Mr Cameron performed a piece of *Othello* ... The audience was beside itself, ... giving a standing ovation to Mr Cameron. This moment, this performance, was as close as we would ever come to seeing Ira Aldridge.

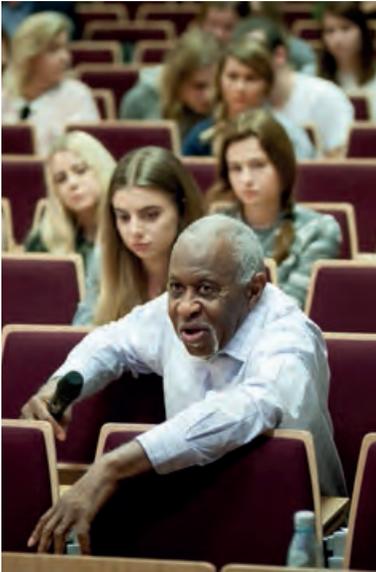


In November 2017 I was proud to attend Lodz's wonderful commemoration of Aldridge and to stand alongside the distinguished participants from Poland and the USA. It was a privilege to visit his grave and see his beautiful memorial in another city where many cultures meet.

Meanwhile, our celebration of Coventry's relationship with the young Ira Aldridge became part of its campaign to become UK City of Culture in 2021. That bid was successful, announced live on national television, and so this English city will remember Aldridge's courage and genius again. Its modern theatres will be handed over to young creative artists from many backgrounds in 2021 – and some, as Ira Aldridge was, will be 20, not yet 21. Long after his death, the story of Ira Aldridge keeps binding peoples and generations together.

« Back to main text

« Back to table of contents



It is worth reflecting what, after twenty-six years of performances on English and Irish stages, motivated Ira Aldridge to look for a new audience on the European continent which at that time was unknown to him. He was 45 so he was at the peak of his acting skills and bearing in mind the limited number of roles (not only of characters of colour), we may presume that he could not expect any further career development in the British Isles. Obstacles which he had experienced in the previous quarter of a century were rooted in the social and aesthetic prejudice of the theatrical world, critics and the British audience. Quoting documents to which Marshall and Stock refer to, “he was always applauded in Ireland, but he was not necessarily appealing.”¹ However, before his performances at London Covent Garden in 1833, his adherents were fighting with the audience’s prejudice that “his skin was too dark to be allowed to play the role of a dark-complexioned Moor.”² Even if his first two appearances on stage as Othello were well-received, the third was cancelled because the lease-holder of the theatre, Laporte, “could not allow himself to ignore [...] threats and hostility of an influential section of the press.”³ Besides, after the first two decades of Aldridge’s performances, mainly in the provinces,

the repertoire of melodrama and **comedies of manners** (apart from his Shakespearean parts) in which he was successful were already less well-regarded by both reviewers and audiences. Playing such parts as Roll in Pizarro, Aldridge was increasingly subject to criticism. Even if he still had guest performances in which “the theatre was full”⁴ and even if in 1852 “he was really successful”⁵ for a month in the London Britannia theatre, Aldridge did not have a stable professional career since he was not able to form his own team and he did not hold out hope for a residency in one of London’s theatres because “he was not invited by any West End theatre.”⁶ And even when he later had spectacular achievements in England it was undeniable that the fame that he had achieved on the continent contributed to this.

1 *Ibidem*, p. 110.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 126.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 139.

4 As for example in Dundee in 1848, *ibidem*, p. 177.

5 *Ibidem*, pp. 185–186.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 186.

Thus, it is worth considering the circumstances which contributed to Ira Aldridge's success on German-speaking stages because the acclaim which he received was the best recommendation for future performances abroad. Let us try to piece together these trips to theatres in German-speaking countries. It comprises the German countries between The Kingdom of Bavaria and Prussia, including the Polish lands under Prussian partition, the lands of Austro-Hungarian Empire (with Prague and Budapest) together with Galicia under Austrian partition and Swiss cities. It must be underlined that visiting cities located in Polish lands under partitions e.g. Gdańsk, Poznan, Cracow and Lodz, Aldridge performed on German stages where the audience was probably partially Polish but where the German directors took it upon themselves to organize the performances.

Already during the first years of his German tour, Aldridge had made a name for himself as "an African tragedian" which opens the door to every stage. Undeniably, he had a perfect strategy for self-promotion, but in the letter quoted at the beginning concerning his performances in Paris we cannot find any embellishments. He really did attract the attention of the German theatrical community which saw him as a "completely

original phenomenon". In 1852 in Leipzig, he was introduced to the royal family, in Coburg and was similarly honoured by the Duchess Sachesn-Coburg Gotha. In 1853 the King of Prussia, Frederick IV awarded Aldridge with the Gold Medal for his achievements in Arts and Science. Furthermore, when performing in Vienna, Emperor Franz Joseph awarded him the Ferdinand Medal and in 1858 he was given the Gold Medal of Reigning Sovereign of Saxe Meiningen. He received similar honours from the theatrical world and he performed in Vienna in the old Hofburgtheater which had an excellent reputation thanks to Heinrich Laube. In 1854 in Zurich, he was seen by Richard Wagner who was attracted by the fame of the black-skinned Othello actor. In the same year during his performances in Munich Aldridge would attract the attention of Franz Dingelstedt, the reformer of German theatre and the creator of great versions of Shakespearean plays.

In order to explain the wonderful reception of Ira Aldridge in German theatres, I would like to highlight two factors of an aesthetic nature which were specific for the theatrical culture of that time. The first one was the special significance which the Shakespearean repertoire had in Germany with the other being the style of historical verismo which started to dominate the stage in the middle of 19th century.



The fact that Aldridge came to the European continent with his own troupe of English actors can be compared with the wave of “English comedians” that flowed from England 250 years earlier. These troupes of which there were many, had been created in the Elizabethan Age and had had a positive influence on the development of the theatre. However, when the Puritans introduced a ban on organizing theatrical performances, the actors started to look for new audiences on the continent. They were well-received by local audiences, especially in the German lands which, at that time, did not have well-developed theatrical traditions. The German theatre owed its organization model of professional theatres to the English comedians and their repertoire, the main part of which were Shakespearean plays. Over the course of time, the actors from the Isles were replaced by German actors, but the “English comedian” brand guaranteed greater success. Plays by Shakespeare, at that time in the German repertoire, even at this early stage of the national theatre, constituted an important development in German theatrical culture. In discussions about German national theatre, Shakespeare was always involved and it could be summarized in the words of the history

of theatre researcher, Margaret Berthold, “Shakespeare was the motto and the cause, but the matter was called: German theatre.”⁷

The culmination of this process was in the first few decades of the 19th century when the first translation of Shakespeare’s works in their original form was made by August Wilhelm Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck. “Following the example of German Romantics France, Spain, Italy, Russia were beginning to express their admiration for the poet from Stratford.”⁸ Thus the Germans were attached to Shakespeare whose plays had been on their stages for more than 200 years, however, in other areas the process of becoming familiar with Shakespeare was to last much longer: in France only in the first decades of the 20th century were his plays introduced in their original forms, and not as remakes. Thus, German audiences knew *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice* very well and even if the main part was performed in English it was not any barrier to its reception. This is why, viewers in German theatres could accept this repertoire with greater ease.

7 Margot Berthold, *Historia teatru*, transl. Danuta Żmij-Zielińska, Warszawa 1980, p. 438.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 428.



Moreover, Aldridge was able to fit into this “shakespearemania” perfectly and he flattered the Germans recommending them to stage *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* in Schlegel and Tieck’s translations, just like the one in Cracow in 1854. What was also a nod to German literary culture was the lecture given in Budapest at the meeting of the Hungarian Dramatic Conservatory on the works by Shakespeare, Schiller and Goethe. However, the expertise of the “African tragedian” concerning both German poets may be in question. Finally, Aldridge felt so comfortable in Germany that he created his own interpretation of plays in which he acted, but this initiative was not welcomed by the German critics who were unanimous in their displeasure writing, “We will not let anybody stand between us and Shakespeare.” This bold statement shows however, how well-acquainted German viewers were with the oeuvre of the English bard and that they were very much in favour of original interpretations. It should be emphasized that in German countries “the web of theatres” was much more extensive than in other countries with the theatre, since the times of Goethe and Schiller and they were treated as moral institutions, which



spread a common culture and served in the nation's upbringing. That is why, in German-speaking countries Aldridge could count on an exceptionally big audience in cities.

The second argument for Ira Aldridge's spectacular stage success in German theatres is his unique acting style. After the first few months of performing with his own troupe on the European continent, the actor dismissed the English actors who accompanied him and made the decision to organize a solo tour. There were a few aspects in favour of this decision. Firstly, the organization of performances of the whole troupe was more complicated: a journey and accommodation had to be planned and they had to rent a theatre and props. Such undertakings were costly and did not guarantee a satisfactory income, especially because Aldridge's troupe performed in English, which was the second reason. This is why the actor preferred another way of organizing his tour as his name recognition in German society was an advantage. Aldridge travelled on his own and as the main actor he 'inserted himself' into performances staged by local troupes; later he not only did this in German theatres but also on all other stages on



which local actors spoke in their native language while he used English.

Ira Aldridge's creations of theatrical roles drew admiration, above all, thanks to their uniqueness in comparison to other acting techniques which were known by German viewers. It is worth quoting two testimonies. After his performances in Cologne they wrote: "The Actor, Negro,

escapes the tradition of English theatre and English school of recitation so much, that he must be acclaimed as a completely original phenomenon. He does not know what the studied effects are [...]. However, he can masterfully express the feelings of passion, sorrow, quiet tones of tenderness and kindness."⁹ What's more, after his

⁹ Herbert Marshall, Mildred Stock, *op. cit.*, p. 188.



performances in Frankfurt am Mein, actors from the troupe in which he acted honoured him with a gift and congratulatory letter, in which they wrote, “You showed your great performances on this stage on which there were not only great actors; France and Italy, and even England sent us their best interpreters of art. However, we all unequivocally agree that your acting is perfect.”¹⁰

The enthusiastic tone of reviews evaluating Aldridge’s German performances was mainly because of the staging style defined as realism or historical verismo which undeniably crystallized around the mid-19th century and became increasingly popular. It was based on a reconstruction of time and place of a story that was as faithful as possible and in agreement with the age in which the play took place.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 188–189.

At that time in Germany Franz Dingelstedt became famous as a stage-arranger. In the 19th century he fascinated the Germans with the cycle of “model” (Mustervorstellungen) Shakespearean performances. Obviously, these were very costly performances and presenting the illusion of historical truth was not possible in each theatre but in fact the truth was the ultimate goal. Thus, if we imagine a scene in which the action of *Othello* took place, a black-skinned actor playing the role of the Venetian Moor completely met this truth. Here are a few excerpts from the reviews. After his performances in Berlin in 1853 “Preussische Zeitung” wrote: “The viewer forgets that one is in the theatre and gets engaged fully. [...] After this Othello, other ordinary Othellos may prove to be disappointing.”¹¹ In the same year, a critic from Vienna admired the role of Othello: “Could Shakespeare himself dream that his masterpiece, *Othello*, would have such a masterful, as well as truthful interpretation.”¹² In 1858, after a series of successful performances in Germany, this actor of colour was finally appreciated in England in 1858 and was kindly

11 *Ibidem*, p. 191.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 194.

named “the black-skinned gentleman.” They noticed his undeniable naturalness: “There is Othello with no gloves in front of us, his nails are very visible. We observe the acting of his hands; the multiplicity of gestures helps, it underlines its meaning and, to our surprise, we claim that it is an advantage which Othello did not have till this moment,” wrote the reviewer of “Athenaeum.”¹³ Thus, especially as Othello, Aldridge was an irreplaceable actor, who not only had to make his face black with glycyrrhiza juice, but also, according to theatre-goers of the time, had a natural temperament, he was “real” and he was “a piece of real life.” It was exactly this aspect which people in other countries admired him for. The aspect which stopped him from making a stage career in England – racial discrimination – was not an obstacle on the continent. Quite the contrary, as the African identity which Aldridge created for the sake of his promotion made him a special – educated and civilized – representative of African culture.¹⁴

13 *Ibidem*, p. 223.

14 These issues were discussed by Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, *Ira Aldridge (1807–1867). Dzieje pierwszego czarnoskórego tragika szekspirowskiego*, Universitas, Kraków 2009, pp. 208–231.



Unfortunately, audiences in Łódź in 1867 could not admire this artist. But it should be remembered that he came here at the director August Henschel’s (German theatre in Paradyż) invitation. Only on 19th May of that year did the first season of a permanent German theatre in Lodz open. Before theatrical entertainment was provided by travelling or amateur troupes. A permanent Polish theatre had only been established from 1888, so the announced performances of “the famous European tragedian, chevalier Ira Aldridge, Negro” were a big event to which Polish audiences were invited by Henschel who placed a long advertisement in Polish in the German “Lodzer Zeitung” newspaper. Unfortunately, Aldridge became a hero of other social performances which attracted the inhabitants of Lodz in numbers that the theatre could not accommodate. However, the ceremonial funeral of the great artist did not end the case of Łódź *Othello*. The city barely cooled off from mourning and the director of Paradyż invited the audience from Łódź to two performances which they prepared

with Aldridge. In “Lodzer Zeitung,” August Hentschel announced that the effort put into rehearsals and the money which invested in scenery and costumes for *Othello* together with the big star cannot be wasted, so they decided to present the fruits of their labour on 22nd August. The eponymous hero was to be played by the first actor and director of the German troupe Wehn, and Miss Bentkowska who was to play Desdemona. “I think I will not be wrong if I say, wrote Hentschel, that the majority of our theatrical personnel will act in a play by Shakespeare for the first time, that is why we should not be surprised if the intimidation of actors [will make their acting] seem imperfect to some people”¹⁵. We do not know anything about the reception of this performance but surely Aldridge deserves recognition for the first *Othello* performance in Łódź.



Researchers of Ira Aldridge’s artistic biography often underline that it was still full of secrets, at some points it is unclear and based on unverified documents. It also refers to the last period of this artist’s performances on Polish soil, to be exact his cooperation with Anastazy Trapszo. Before his arrival in Łódź, Aldridge performed with his Lublin troupe in Radom and Piotrków. In his afterword to Marshall and Stock’s book, Krzysztof Swala states that after these performances “having fallen out with Trapsza he went to Łódź.”¹⁶ Bearing in mind this piece of information, it seems surprising that in “Lodzer Zeitung” a Anastazy Trapsza advertisement (about the cycle of performances which his troupe from Lublin was to give in Łódź) next to Hentschel’s announcement about Aldridge’s arrival in Łódź. In fact, the performances were from 24th August to 17th October 1867 in Sellin’s Theatre. However, there were no plays by Shakespeare in the repertoire,

which Trapszo was supposed to play with Aldridge in Piotrków and Radom. Yet a question remains about the relations between the two artists and that the supposition that their concurrent performances in Łódź may have been planned in advance.

Translated by dr Agnieszka Miksza

15 „Lodzer Zeitung” 1867, no. 94.

16 Krzysztof Swala, *Polskie losy afrykańskiego Roscjusza*, [in:] Herbert Marshall, Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge, op. cit.*, p. 370.

Certainly the local white theatre, The Mark Taper Forum, was not going to cast a black actor as Hamlet. It might have been the same kind of obstacle that Ira Aldridge faced in 19th century English theatre. During the *Hamlet* production Aldridge's name came up and I asked actors if they had ever heard of Aldridge, most didn't and the ones that did were old-timers, but thespians my age had no clue as to what place Aldridge held in Shakespearean theatre. I decided to write a show about Aldridge. Again using the culture best suited to bring a black audience in to educate and entertain, my show would be a musical. I would have the music of the day contained in the story telling.

When I was in high school my drama teacher, Tom Whyne, directed a production of *Macbeth*. His take on Shakespeare has always stayed with me. He used Jazz music as the sound track to the play and when the characters did their soliloquys, the music of Miles Davis was there to back up the characters' thoughts. What was possible in theatre sometimes only required imagination.

I knew the Aldridge story, I had read the book by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*, published in 1958. So I would write the text to the play. Next what I needed was a songwriter that could write the songs. That turned out to be an easy problem to solve. I would get a white songwriter to write the rock and roll songs and I would get a black songwriter to write the Gospel and Rhythm and Blues songs.



I enlisted two songwriters from my past. Beverly Breamers and I had appeared on Broadway at the Biltmore Theatre in the musical, *HAIR*. She was blonde, cute and had a powerhouse of a voice, and mixed into all of that talent was an ear for lyrics. She actually was a rock and roll singer. I told her my idea and she was on board. The other part of the songwriting team duo was Phyllis St. James. She came out of the church and she was my 9th grade sweetheart. We fell madly in love at 14 years old and by tenth grade in high school we parted friends, not lovers. She was singing back up for white performers like Boz Skaggs in the evening and writing songs in the day time. She had an amazing ear for music and a bright touch for lyrics.

« Back to main text





The story of Aldridge starts in Church, as his father was the local pastor. So, I needed some gospel tinged songs, Phyllis would write those. As he comes to realize his purpose he moves to London and I would need his alone moments to be done in rhythm and blues. Beverly would write the songs for the white English characters

to sing in rock and roll. I unfolded Aldridge's story to the ladies and we discussed the kind of songs we would need to advance the story.

We got busy. By the time we opened we had a 7 piece band, a company of dancers and some of the finest singers Los Angeles

had to offer. It was a first class production, thanks to using my Love Boat funds. We were a hit! My past had come together with my present. That was in 1981.

This year before November rolled around I got a call from Mabel Robinson. I had done a revival of 'Born a Unicorn', a few years ago when she was artistic director of the North Carolina Black Repertory Company. She had gotten a call from a scholar named Shirley Basfield Dunlap, Associate Professor of Fine and Performing Arts at Morgan State University. She had heard about my play. Mabel wanted to know if I would be interested in the Aldridge celebration? Easy answer, "Hell yes." Once again my past was informing my present.

« Back to main text



Okay, so this went through a series of calls. Shirley called Barbara Williams, She was organizing the trip and was very set on preserving the name of Ira Aldridge. Barbara called prof. zw. dr hab. Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney, a distinguished Shakespearean scholar and head of the British Commonwealth Studies Department at the University of Łódź. Krystyna called Dr. Magda Cieślak, and she would help me get to Łódź. I was at first just going to be an observer, I wanted to make the pilgrimage to Aldridge's grave. He died while on tour in Europe, in 1867. Krystyna later asked me to tell my story of mounting my musical production. Easy peasy.

The first thing I had to do was establish what language I would be speaking in and if I would have an interpreter? Krystyna assured me that speaking English was fine. Most Polish students at the University spoke English. Cool, I was ready to rock and roll. I would not give a speech in the usual sense. I would lay down some talking points and extemporaneously hit the most salient factors that contributed to my putting the musical together. I would use my skill as a performer and my ability to read the audience and try to keep them engaged. The question was how to open

and get their attention and then hold them. Around Los Angeles I have been known to participate in poetry jams. My favorite poet is Oscar Brown, Jr. and I love a poem he wrote called, *I Apologize*. I started low; as in a conversation and as I drew in the audience's attention I built it to a performance.

I Apologize by Oscar Brown, Jr.

I apologize for being black
 For all I am and all I lack,
 Please sir, please mam, give me some slack
 Cause I apologize.
 I apologize for being po'
 For being sick and tired and so
 Since I ain't slick, don't know the sco'
 I do apologize.
 I apologize because I bear
 Resemblance most black people share
 Thick lips, flat nose and nappy hair,
 Yes, I apologize.
 I apologize for how I look
 For all the lows and blows, I took
 On those, Lord knows, I closed the book,
 As I apologize.
 I apologize for all I gave
 For lettin' you make me your slave,
 And goin' to my early grave,
 Yes, I apologize.

I apologize for being caught,
 For bein' sold, for bein' bought
 While being told I count for naught,
 Yea, I apologize.
 I apologize for all I done
 For all my toil out in the sun,
 Don't want to spoil your righteous fun
 So, I apologize.
 I apologize and curse my kind,
 For bein' fooled, for bein' blind
 For bein' ruled and in your bind,
 Yes, I apologize.
 I apologize and curse my fate
 For bein' slow, for being late
 Because I know it's me you hate,
 Why not apologize?
 I apologize and tip my hat
 Cause you so rich and free and fat
 Son of a Bitch that's where it's at
 and I Apologize.

I got their attention... then I explained that they would not know who I am but, after my speech, when they got home, they could Google my name. Well, they didn't wait till they got home, they pulled out their phones and googled me right away. Thank goodness for the internet. Once they saw my history as a TV actor, the rest was easy. I had their attention, I then referenced parallels to the poem and to Aldridge's career, then juxtaposed that to being a black actor today in Hollywood. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Part of what I wanted to introduce to the students is how the past plays an important part to the present. My high school production of *Macbeth* played a part in shaping my theatre experience. The past of Aldridge made it possible for the English theatre in 1930 to accept a production of Paul Robeson as Othello, with Peggy Ashcroft as his Desdemona. 13 years later Robson would reprise this role on Broadway in New York City with Uta Hagan as his Desdemona. I myself would do Othello in Los Angeles at the Inner City Cultural Center in 1989. My inspiration was of course, Ira Aldridge. I went on to make a film version with that cast. I was one of the few black actors to appear on film

as Othello. English racism had trumped James Earl Jones from doing Othello on film, he was replaced by Anthony Hopkins, or William Marshall from doing it for public television, as they ran out of money and were unable to complete the project.

How do you measure the success of what Aldridge did? Reviews? Box office? Or the integration of the white English stage? Once a failure on any of these levels arises, how does an actor continue? How do you pick yourself up and get back in the race? What kind of spirit must a person have to endure the negative and still have the will to pursue your





dream? In my mind, a person must have the spirit of a unicorn. There must be some magical and mysterious ability to defy your preacher father, leave America at the height of slavery, get a job as a valet and work your way up from playing slaves roles on the English stage to doing Shakespearean roles. Only a unicorn could envision putting together a troupe of actors and touring Europe. It was obvious to me that the unicorn must be the symbol of Aldridge. That would be the theme of my musical... but a unicorn is white. I wanted a black unicorn, a friend introduced me to the painter, Dale Terbush. I asked Terbush if he knew the legend on the unicorn? He didn't. I then asked my audience (in Łódź) if they knew the legend of the Unicorn? They didn't. Legend has it that a unicorn is a magical beast that cannot be captured. The only way to subdue a unicorn is to bring a virgin into the English forest and leave her there. A unicorn will come to her and lay his head in her lap and fall asleep. Only then can you capture a unicorn. I would use Margaret as a model for the virgin that captures Aldridge's heart. They marry and she manages his career and together she helps him navigate the murky waters of English theatre, and they become very famous.

As I related this story to the audience I had a poster of the painting I used for publicity for my production. In the unicorn painting, Terbush put the virgin of the legend, in the clouds. Look closely in those clouds and you can see her face.

Every time Aldridge got beat down he used his unicorn magic to regain his confidence and persevere, he couldn't be captured. He was my inspiration. Aldridge received horrible reviews when he started out. Some of the reviews were read to the audience. I read one of the reviews that I received in 1978 for my *Hamlet* production. Not a good review, but like Aldridge I had to persevere. If we give up our dreams for our critics, we deny the possibilities of a life lived for your art. Here is the review of my *Hamlet* that can be found in the book, *Shakespeare in Sable, A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* by Errol Hill on page 179:

Critic Sullivan felt "A carnival of special effects and odd images but the ground technique isn't there, director technique as well as actors technique." Critic Sullivan felt considerable energy in the cast much of it misplaced. For instance, "Ophelia's soul train funeral with minstrel show pall bearers wiggling their hands, got lots

of laughs and Glynn Turman was curiously unmelancholic for a bereaved Prince." This give you an idea, the rest of the review is pretty much the same.

In my defense, this was a white critic and he did not understand some of the cultural references. For instance, the funeral was an homage to New Orleans funerals, and the famous **second line**, which of course the black audiences recognized, but the white critic failed to understand. In New Orleans, when there is a funeral, there is the family that is mourning the death of a loved one and they march through the streets of the city; that is the first line. If you are passing bye and not related to the deceased but want to join in the march to the grave site, there is a **second line** to the funeral. Occasionally, there are musicians in the second line and it actually can turn into a celebration of the deceased life. The second line folks will carry umbrellas and open them up as they dance to the beat and handkerchiefs are waved about as everyone moves dancing toward the cemetery. That is when I realized that maybe the Los Angeles Times newspaper should hire black critics to review black plays because sometimes themes are missed or misunderstood.



There were other points made about the production that were misunderstood, but too numerous to address.

Here is a review that Aldridge received from one of his early performances: “In the name of decency and propriety we protest against an interesting actress and a decent girl like Miss Ellen Tree, being pawed about by Mr. Henry Wallack’s Black servant. His figure is unlucky for the stage. He is baker-kneed and narrow-chested, and owing to the shape of his lips, it is impossible for him to pronounce the English language. His complexion is light brown and incapable of varied expression.”

So how does a black actor survive that kind of criticism? He has to be a unicorn. He has to have faith in his ability to get better and learn from his past.

When I wrote the musical, *Born a Unicorn* I had certain actors in mind. When I was on tour in the musical *Hair* I met a singer/actor Carl Anderson. He had a powerful voice and you may know him from the Film, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I wanted Carl for the role of Aldridge. When I first auditioned for *Hair* I auditioned for an actor/singer named Teddy Neely. He played *Jesus Christ* in the

same movie with Anderson. I wanted him for the role of Edmund Kean.

Neither would happen and I ended up using a friend of mine who I started out with in our first professional show together, which was a musical, called, *Big Time Buck White*. All the songs were written by Oscar Brown, Jr. The actor that would play Aldridge was Charles Weldon and he was living in Los Angeles at the time. He now lives in New York City and is the Artistic Director of the Negro Ensemble Company. We have a great chemistry together and I believe our excitement for the project caught on to the other members of the cast. It was a great experience. I related all of these stories to my Łódź audience.

After my speech, later that evening we of the symposium went to the main library of the University of Łódź, where I met the US Cultural Attaché to Poland. Biographical films were shown to educate audiences on Aldridge’s life and there was an exhibit of memorabilia on people that have written about Aldridge. In my case, I had the script, some photos, a poster and reviews of my production of *Born a Unicorn*. Reviews that were much better than my *Hamlet* review. We were interviewed on Polish TV and at the end of the day we made plans to visit the gravesite of Aldridge

the next morning and visit the Stefan Jaracz theatre and Łódź Film School.

I was excited about visiting a Polish theatre. Earlier in the week, some of us had gone to the Łódź City Museum and we saw some selected scenes from Shakespeare read by some wonderful Polish actors. Three scenes from three plays were chosen from Shakespeare’s canon. *Richard III* with Mariusz Siudziński as Richard and Monika Buchowiec as Lady Anne. They spoke the lines in Polish, and the odd thing about this is that I understood which scene they were reading, and their state of mind in the scene. Their talent as actors made the intention of each character crystal clear. A tribute to their talent, because I do not speak a word of the Polish language except to say, “Thank you.” *Macbeth* was the second scene with Bartosz Turzyński as Macbeth and Monika played Lady Macbeth. The third and final scene was from *Othello*, a play which I am intimately familiar with. This time Dariusz Kowalski was Othello and Monika once again played the female lead of Desdemona. Of course I was familiar with all three plays. I had done *Macbeth* in junior high school, then again in high school. I had directed a production of *Richard III* in 1975 at the Oakland Ensemble Theatre, and I had directed

and starred in my own production of *Othello* at the Inner City Cultural Center in 1989. I was truly excited by this experience in Łódź, as it proved what a brilliant playwright Shakespeare was indeed. He transcends borders and languages.

As a side note I wandered around the museum and found the Arthur Rubinstein room. I am friends with his son, John Rubinstein. We have almost worked together, a number of times. For various reasons it never happened, but certainly we have been to social events together and are friends. A great guy John, the world of theatre becomes a small world.

Next day, our first stop was the Stefan Jaracz Theatre. We got the grand tour, seeing the set department and costume shop. They have 3 stages. A 90 seat house, a 100 seat house and the main theatre which seats about 400. I was drooling, I would sure like to work in this theatre. A beautiful set up, very similar to the theatre set up in Ashland Oregon. Just a few months earlier I had acted in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *Henry IV, part 2*. I played Falstaff, as well as later doing Warwick and Northumberland.

« Back to main text

« Back to table of contents

At the end of the tour we met Director, prof. dr hab. Jacek Orłowski of the Mieczysław Hertz Theatre Institute. He told us that his theatre was looking for contemporary American plays. I asked him to repeat that statement. I am a playwright and I have written 25 plays, what kind of plays were they looking for? I specialize in African American stories but I also have some plays that could easily be translated to Polish. I told them I had a comedy about 5 blondes, called, *Lemon Meringue Façade*. They were interested. On my return to America

I made sure the first thing I did was to send Jacek that play.

After the Theatre Tour we all made our pilgrimage to the grave site of Ira Aldridge. It was a humbling experience, to think what this black man accomplished as an actor and man of the theatre in a foreign country is monumental. We lit candles and placed them on his grave site. The grave was already covered in flowers as well as candles from other well-wishers. We all felt a sense of awe and the reality settled in that Aldridge once really lived and is now not just a legend, he is a part of the world's theatre history.

Fig. 1. Ted and Tony at Ira Aldridge's grave



Selected Works on Ira Aldridge's Life

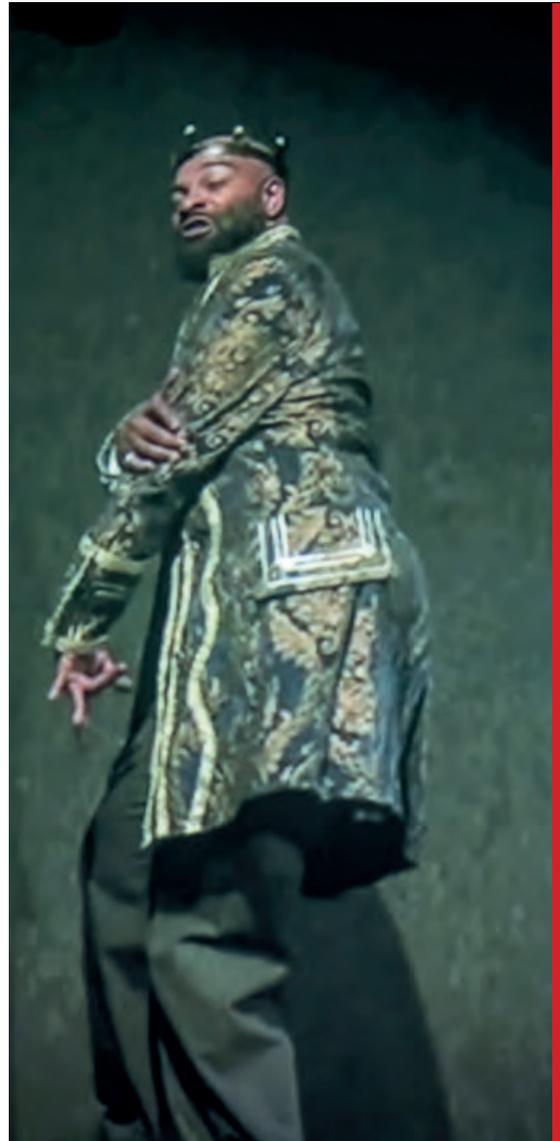
compiled by Professor Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney

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After having been introduced to Aldridge, I wanted to begin researching and writing immediately, but, in 1975, I was onto a much larger project: working with friends to give birth to one of Memphis earliest African-American theater companies which fit well within my efforts to educate others about the contributions of black people. Our company, Beale Street Repertory Company, was a great forum for it, and it wasn't until the new millennium that my interest in writing an Aldridge play was renewed when I discovered Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock's book, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*. What a find! It was akin to the same feeling I had in 1968 when I viewed *Black History: Lost, Stolen and Strayed*. Like, but much better than a good detective novel, this book had me glued to each word and constantly rereading passages. Had it not been for the researched cited, I would have viewed many of the accounts as fictional embellishments. True, I had been amazed by the accomplishments of ex-patriot Richard Wright, world renown yet domestically demonized Paul Robeson, and musical and entrepreneurial genius W. C. Handy. All three had overcome tremendous obstacles during a period in American history when segregation and racism was an accepted norm, especially below the Mason-Dixon line.



Ira Aldridge, on the other hand, was born into a much worse condition where slavery was not only accepted, but in some states, the backbone of the economy. To make matters worse, at times, a slave was only considered 3/5 of a person. This was the world that the African Roscius inhabited, and the world where he made his mark. The more I read and discovered about Aldridge the more I discovered about myself. To this point, Chancellor Williams states, "For no matter what the factual data were, all the books written about Blacks by their conquerors reflected the conquerors viewpoints." So, as I continued read about Aldridge, my international self-awareness grew along with a myriad of personal possibilities far beyond what I had previously considered. I thought, "Surely if Ira Aldridge could accomplish so much internationally as a performer with so little, what's holding me back as a writer?" The answer: "Nothing and no one!" With the advent of the internet and the abundance of material that I discovered from blogs, on-line news articles, journals and books I soon found myself inundated with information written by people all over the world who regarded *The Negro Tragedian* with the greatest respect, so I joyously prodded through the extensive information.

Once the research had been completed, I had to decide on the type of drama to write. How would I lay out all the information to tell the story? First, I knew that I would probably incorporate chronology with a clear beginning, middle and end even though I would use flashbacks from time to time. Next, although I didn't have a crystal ball to know exactly how the play would progress from beginning to end, I knew I wanted Aldridge to be engaging yet unglamorized. This idea was reinforced while conducting my research. It was at that time that I had discovered a review of the one man show, *Thurgood*, starring Laurence Fishburne. The critic

praised Fishburne's performance, but lambasted the script because he said it did not completely depict the true Thurgood Marshall: a womanizer and a legalist who was often at odds with Martin Luther King, Jr. for his lawbreaking tactics in obtaining justice for his people. Reading this review fueled my desire to present a full composite of Aldridge, the man, by relating the good, the bad and the ugly and to fight my desire to present him as a flawless black super hero. As I worked on the script, I recalled the words of stage, television and film performer and producer, Oscar Brown Jr., "I may not make it if I try. But I damn sure won't if I don't..."



Next, I knew the play would not be a comedy although Aldridge had the ability to make others laugh with his excellent acting and comic timing, but all that I had read about his life on and off the stage indicated he was a serious creative artist and an astute businessman, so I did not intuit that a comedy would do justice to his true persona. Neither did I feel like his story should be told in a musical format, although I had written several musicals prior to creating the piece. Aldridge also sang in some of his productions, but it did not seem that the piece should have the celebratory loftiness that musicals tend to bring to the stage. Although I wanted the production to celebrate the life of Aldridge, I also wanted it to be a down to earth dramatic celebration of life, amid personal and professional hardships, incorporating his shortcomings as well as his triumphs.

Just as I knew what the play should not be, I also knew what it should be. For instance, I knew it would be a one man show (monodrama) because this format would give me the greatest flexibility with Aldridge narrating his own story. Although technically, a one man show, there are three attendants who have no lines but who assist Aldridge with food and drink and costume changes throughout the play. I also reasoned that another plus

for creating the monodrama would be the ease in mounting the show for touring. The show only has four characters, and all the characters apart from Aldridge have no lines, which meant that in the spirit of Ira Aldridge, I could procure actors from the performance venues, have a couple of rehearsals with them, and place them in the production as Aldridge did when he toured his productions. On the other hand, since the attendants have no lines, if necessary, they could be dropped from the production, and Aldridge at the appropriate time, could dress and refresh himself with a drink of water on stage.

Next, in choosing the monodrama format, I had already decided that the dramatic structure would be climatic vs. episodic. With the climatic structure, there are fewer characters; the action generally takes place in a single location; time is compressed, such that the show occurs in a single day or a week at the most, and you get into the story late but get out early. *For My Freedom & Yours* closely follows the climatic structure format.

First, the drama takes place in a single location which happens to be Hotel Paradyz [Paradise] in Lodz, Poland on November 7, 1867. This is where Aldridge stayed and was to perform the following night. I felt that



the selection of this sight for its historical and dramatic significance was providential. I also believe that limited locations help the audience focus on the drama and avoid the confusion of “Where are we now?” Other locations are alluded to in the show and even dramatized, but the audience is always aware of being in Hotel Paradyz, waiting to be engaged by Ira Aldridge. Also, in the show, as in real life Aldridge speaks to his audience about his life and his abolitionist views. Research on the African Roscius reveals that his very open stand against slavery from the stage may have contributed to the demise of that institution in Great Britain.

The next mark of climatic drama is that time is compressed. Shakespeare's *Anthony & Cleopatra* (episodic drama) takes place over ten years. The Bard's *Hamlet* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, on the other hand occur over a period of several days (more climatic than episodic). *For Our Freedom & Yours* evolves in an evening for an hour and a half, real time. With compressed time, it's much easier to create a sense of urgency than with expansive story lines as found in episodic drama. In *For Our Freedom and Yours*, the audience witnesses Aldridge's gradual deterioration as the evening progresses, leading the audience



to wonder about the eventuality of the performer's worsening condition. At the beginning of the play, it's also established that on August 7, 1867 Aldridge is only there to formally introduce himself to the audience and not to stage a full production, so the audience has a sense that the presentation will only last so long. Lastly, compressed time also means that the writer gets into the story late after much has already happened but is then revealed through monologue or conversation to set up the story. Compressed time also means that the audience gets out of the story early after many of the exciting elements have occurred. As Alfred Hitchcock once said, "Drama is life with the boring bits cut out."

Finally, in writing the play, I focused on several elements of the well-made poem/play as extolled by Aristotle in his book, *The Poetics*. Several that I am most drawn to are Plot (the arrangement of actions), Character (the way in which a man should live) and Spectacle. According to Aristotle, Spectacle includes all aspects of the tragedy that contribute to its sensory effects: scenery, costumes, the gestures of the actors, the resonance of the actors' voices and the sound of the music.

In putting together the plot of the story, I had to incorporate the right actions to tell Aldridge's story. This was one of the biggest

challenges in writing the drama because there were so many actions I could have chosen. I chose, however, those that I felt were most impacting and could be easily used to move the story along. For example, in the first part of the show, I selected Aldridge's elementary school fight with Joe Prince and later, a riot, where he is being assaulted by a white circus clown. Towards the end of the show, I chose to show Aldridge's uncontrollable anger at his son, Ira Daniel, for disrespecting Aldridge's new wife, whom Ira Daniel never loved or even accepted.

Since in real life, Aldridge, was such a "well-drawn character", incorporating Aristotle's element of character in the play was quite easy. Throughout Aldridge's life, beginning



with his teenage years, we see how he attempts to live well, or obtain happiness. We first see this concept when he chooses the theatre, where he finds true happiness, as over the ministry, which would have made his father happy. Also, as a teen he chose to leave the U.S. and go abroad to find his own way to live since he could not discover it at home. Not unlike many performers, even today, Aldridge's acting, traveling, marriages, and affairs were all attempts at obtaining the elusive happiness, which we

all crave. The natural highs and lows of the tragedian's life and how he reacted to them swiftly moved the play along to its inevitable conclusion – his death.

The third element I consciously incorporated in *For Our Freedom & Yours* was Spectacle. Of the six elements of a well-made play, Aristotle considers this one to be the least important because he believes a well-made tragedy, when read, should be just as engaging as when

performed. Maybe in 5th century Athens prior to dramatic realism, film, the internet, and reality T.V., this may have been true, but it is certainly not the case for today's very excitement hungry audience which for many years has witnessed all kinds of violence and sexual acts on a variety of screens, both large and small. It is therefore understandable that the theatre must incorporate more spectacle, just to keep today's audience engaged. According to a study conducted by the Parents Television Council, in 1998 ABC averaged 113 instances of violence during the family hour. By 2006, it had increased 1615%. Conversely, according to Prezi's *The History of Radio Drama*, written by Jamie Fisher on July 6, 2016, "In the 1960's the popularity of radio drama began to decline due to changes in television and by the end of the 60's Australia had completely abandoned radio drama." Aristotle would be shocked!

Because I often like to utilize audience participation in my productions, I created an opportunity at the very beginning of the show for Aldridge to teach his Polish audience some English by translating a few Polish expressions into English and have the audience repeat after him. I learned years ago that such moments tend to endear the audience to the performer and make him/her more personable. At the same



time, it creates a sense of spectacle which audiences tend to enjoy. In the first draft, I had an audience member come on stage to read one of Aldridge's reviews, but decided against it in the final version because of potential undesired surprises.

Lastly, I chose the Polish slogan, *For Our Freedom & Yours* as the title of my play because Aldridge apparently loved the Polish people, and they loved him. Also, this slogan was the mantra of exiled Polish soldiers who fought in various independence movements all over the world. The spirit of the slogan, moreover, reflects Aldridge's personal attitude in his fight for the freedom and independence for blacks in America and Great Britain as well as for the non-black universally downtrodden whom he had often portrayed in his performances. In addition, the slogan was used in Warsaw on January 25, 1831 during a patriotic demonstration to commemorate the Decembrists whose revolution was fueled, by the writings of Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, who was also of African heritage. This was yet another fact of which I was unaware when the National Guard tanks rambled through our neighborhood in 1968 to squash what they assumed would be an "Aprilists" uprising over the death of Dr. King. Little did they know, however, that my choice of weapons for the uprising would be the pen and the great examples set by Ira Aldridge and others who, from their graves, still motivate me today to take up my pen and fight the good fight of faith.



AR: Were you hoping to write a biographical piece, or is it to be taken as more fictional impressions on the life of a real person?

LF: *From the very beginning, the play was meant to be more biographical than fictional impressions of the man because Ira Aldridge was a larger than life individual whose very existence mimicked the adage, “Truth is stranger than fiction.” In putting together the one man presentation, I viewed myself as a detective/dramatist, determined “to find” a black man I truly admired who had disappeared in Lodz, Poland on November 7, 1867. To solve this cold case, I had to obtain clues and evidence had been intentionally tampered with and hidden by certain individuals for over one-hundred and fifty years. Their purpose: to keep the African Roscius from ever being discovered! My first job, however, as a detective was to piece together the complex puzzle as to his whereabouts, track him down and find him. After discovering the African Tragedian, my next job was that of a dramatist whose charge was to return him to the people who love him as well as those who desperately wanted to meet him. To accomplish this task, I would bring him to the world stage to let him tell his own story.*

To find Mr. Aldridge, as any good detective would do, I sometimes had to rely on my instinct or hunches I acquired from working for many hours and rather closely with the abundance of clues I found. Some would call these “fictionalized impressions,” but in actuality, these hunches and personal revelations are just as valuable to an investigation as hard physical evidence gleaned by the greatest of detectives.

AR: Could you comment on the title?

LF: *I chose the title “For Our Freedom & Yours” because it was the mantra of exiled Polish soldiers who fought in various independence movements all over the world, and the spirit of the slogan was compatible with Aldridge’s personal fight for the freedom and independence of blacks in America and Great*

Britain as well as for the universally downtrodden whom he had portrayed in his performances. Lastly, I chose the slogan because it was used in Warsaw on January 25, 1831 during a patriotic demonstration to commemorate the Decembrists whose revolution was fueled, to a great extent, by the writings of Alexander Pushkin, Russia’s greatest poet, who was also of African heritage.

AR: Why did you think of a monodrama? Was that the way to confront the myth of an amazing theatre star?

LF: *As a dramatist, I asked myself, “What is the best format and who is the best person to tell Aldridge’s story other than Aldridge himself?” The answer to the second question was, “No one!” Answering this question led me to the monodrama format. In reality, there are three other characters on stage who assist Mr. Aldridge in telling his story, but they never utter a single syllable. Lastly, I felt it was not my duty to confront the myth of the amazing theatre star as much as reveal the true legendary Aldridge in all of his mythological proportions, including his personal and professional highest of highs and lowest of lows.*



Yes, historical records do indicate that Aldridge's style was extraordinary and very captivating, but that's exactly my view of creating any character onstage. Like Ira Aldridge, I want all of my stage creations to be extraordinary, to capture the essence of a human being, using the voice and body to embody the character, physically, intellectually and emotionally. Of course, the historical setting was taken into consideration in the creation of the roles, as well as the period in history, the audience and the performer.

In addition, in my mind's eye, thinking like Ira, his performances of Shakespeare had to be the best, better than any other actor who had ever graced the stage in these roles. Think about it – a “black” man performing Shakespearean roles, at times, opposite of “white” women for “white” audiences during a period in European history where those of African descent were mostly enslaved. His “African-ness” being a major part to the spectacle, it was not sufficient for Ira to be only as good as the whites; he had to surpass them in all aspects of his stage performances. Having been reared in Fayette County, Tennessee, a southern state of the USA, during a time, the 1960's, when racism and segregation of the races were the norm, I, personally, understand and was taught what it is like to be in competition with those who are ethnocentric. I was taught that as an African American, I would never be given the job or win the prize if I were only “as good as” or just “better than” my white counterparts, I had to be “10 times better”. Ira had to be the “best”, “10 times better and more”!

Before Aldridge's European experience, he had studied in the African Free School in New York, where he no doubt was exposed to the arts, literature, elocution, rhetoric, public speaking and other elements that comprised a formal education in the early 19th century. At an early age, he was exposed to great performances of famous stage actors of the day, including African American actors. He was reared by a father who was an African American preacher, indicating that Aldridge would obviously have been exposed to the oratorical style of the African American preacher, which is iconic, with its powerful messages and emotional and rhythmic

cadences. Also, Ira was born in a time in history when the Negro Spiritual and the natural sorrowful musical utterances that would later be dubbed the Blues were an integral part of the experience of African Americans. Surely, these experiences played a major role in Aldridge's presentational style as a stage performer.

More importantly, there is something unique about the African American experience that gives impetus to grand performers, whether it's a Michael Jackson, the “king of pop” music, a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister, a profound orator, and the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, or a B. B. King, famous blues musician, often referred to as “King of the Blues”. Like these individuals, Ira Aldridge had the “gift”, the gift of touching the souls of humanity, whether one was American, European, or just a human being. That's how I see the character of Ira Aldridge. He is the African Tragedian,



the African Roscius! Given all of this, even Shakespeare's characters had to be real, live, emotional human beings who touched the souls of all who watched and listened.

MC: Were you hoping to confront and challenge the myth of Aldridge, or rather celebrate it?

EL: *As a director, I am driven by the script. The script does both, confronts and celebrates the myth of the man. The script addresses the humanness and vulnerabilities of an individual who is regarded as larger than life, like most famous or heroic figures, and, at the same time, it exposes the character flaws of the protagonist. Ira Aldridge's accomplishments and fame came with challenges, suffering and pain. In his journey, he faced all types of human issues such as cultural biases, personal sacrifices, family problems, financial issues, and more. Nevertheless, during the 19th century, for an African American to be recognized as an accomplished Thespian is an attainment to be celebrated. In fact, I am amazed that this man was so well respected then and continues to be so, even today.*

MC: What was Delvyn's part in co-creating the character of Aldridge?

EL: *Fortunately, Delvyn Brown is a very talented and an experienced actor. Delvyn was Ira! In fact, the playwright wrote the script with Delvyn in mind to play the character. Being presented this script, along with Delvyn Brown to play Ira Aldridge, was a blessed assurance, a guaranteed success. Levi, Delvyn, and I worked extremely well and closely together for the first production. At our initial meeting, it was evident we were all "on the same page". Our concepts and interpretations of the character were mostly the same.*

After reading the script and researching information on Ira's journey from the U.S. to Europe, Delvyn had a workable concept of Ira Aldridge. Furthermore, the challenges that Delvyn continually faces as an aspiring present-

day actor, helped to create the character of Ira in "For Our Freedom and Yours". Delvyn was encouraged not to view other actors' interpretations or performances of Ira Aldridge, but Delvyn did study the different photographs of Aldridge in different costumes and poses as the Shakespearean characters.

In addition, to the message being presented, I was also interested in the body language, gestures, facial expressions, and natural mannerisms of the characters. Experimentation with the delivery of the lines and characterization helped to develop an Ira Aldridge who was an accomplished Shakespearean actor and who was noted in Europe, but also an individual who was challenged by his personal demons. Delvyn and I worked together and enjoyed the process of creating "our" Ira Aldridge.

And, to be honest, most of my expectations for characterization were met, but, of course, a few were not. However, that's how it is in staging a production. As Delvyn took his final bow, I was wondering to myself about different aspects of the performance, "Would this have been more effective had it been done differently? Would this have worked better? I must to do this play again!"

« Back to main text



MC: Did you have a particular audience in mind, and how was the production received in various places over time?

EL: *I would consider “For Our Freedom and Yours” a play for audiences that may be interested in the life of Ira Aldridge and the challenges he faced in different seasons and landscapes of his life, but the play may be more appealing to those who have knowledge and/or at least interest in various aspects of history, cultures, theater, or social issues. The play has only been presented at Southwest Tennessee Community College in Memphis, Tennessee, May and October, 2015 where it was well received. In fact, both, Delvyn and I, were nominated for 2015–2016 Ostrander Awards for best actor and best director for the college division in Memphis, Tennessee. The video of the May 2015 Southwest production was presented in Lodz in November 2017. After the performance, the questions and comments during the discussion seemed to have indicated that the audience was somewhat interested and impressed.*

Let me end by noting that my visit to Lodz is one that will always be remembered. There are so many things mentioned in “For Our Freedom and Yours” that I was able to experience, first hand. But most importantly, the amazing hospitality and graciousness of the residents of Lodz will always be comforting and pleasantly pleasing as I reminisce and tell my story to friends and family about my stay in Poland. I never dreamt that I would visit Lodz, a city that Ira Aldridge loved and visited several times during his European tours and a city that loves him in return. I am totally impressed that Lodz recognized and applauded this 19th century African American Thespian, Ira Aldridge, during his lifetime and still continues to celebrate and honor him today. If ever given the opportunity to direct “For Our Freedom and Yours” again, my visit to this magnificent and wonderful city will have a major impact on my interpretation of the character of Ira Aldridge and will be most significant and influential in the directorial process.



« Back to main text

« Back to table of contents

From his rebellion against his father's wishes, through the backlash of American society against the African Grove Theatre where he performed, to the loss of his wife and the fights with both his son and his health, Aldridge constantly set his eyes on his remarkable ambition, thinking towards his next role. "Men must endure?" says the on-stage Ira, repeating the words of *King Lear*, one of the many white roles Aldridge managed to make his own. These are the arc words of the production and the last words of Aldridge, before he succumbs to his sickness and "perishes" before our eyes. A fitting epitaph for such an extraordinary man and an ideal ending for such a moving performance, which simply has to be experienced.

Bartosz:

Watching *For Our Freedom, and Yours*, a play about Ira Aldridge, the first African-American actor to portray Shakespearean characters was quite a unique experience. We not only got to see a really good performance, but also saw it with Levi Frazier, the author of the play, and his crew. After the play we asked the author



a few questions and got some insight on playwriting, acting, and theatre, which was very helpful in understanding the process of creating a play. I enjoyed the experience and I think it was a valuable lesson.

Klaudia:

After seeing *For Our Freedom and Yours* I was impressed by the talent of the actor who performed in it. Delvyn Brown in a wonderful way showed how Ira Aldridge lived, how he acted, and he even managed to show what kind of a person he was.



I think that everybody should know who Ira Aldridge was, because he is a very important person in the history of theater, and an admirable actor.

Dominika:

In *For Our Freedom and Yours* Delvyn Brown, the actor who portrayed Ira Aldridge, convinces the audience of Aldridge's mental strength and determination. There is no evidence of hesitation in the way he delivers his words. He even courageously identifies himself with Ira Aldridge saying a few times "I am Ira Aldridge" with a sense of pride. He does not feel a need to hide the fact of who he is, what he looks like and what he is heading for. His self-confidence and a powerful voice indicate readiness to fight for his dreams. Ira Aldridge, fascinated with Shakespeare and his works, was brave enough to prove that his skin colour would not blight his journey towards his destination.

The play is exciting and contains not only brilliant acting but a few unexpected twists and turns that make it more attractive to watch. The narrative carries several

deep messages, and for this Levi Frazier, the author, should receive separate applause. The play acts as a medium for the audience to truly experience the challenges Ira Aldridge must have dealt with in his life. The issues presented touch upon some of the most significant aspects of past times, referring to the time of slavery in the USA, and the difficulties that must have assailed a black actor seeking to act in a theatre.

An integral part of the meeting was a discussion with the author of the play, Levi Frazier, his wife and other crew members helped us understand how the play had been made and why the idea of creating it appeared, while also covering many other questions about theatre in general. The involvement, passion and interest with which the invited guests were talking about those things impressed me the most.



Ela:

Learning about Ira Aldridge and his incredible achievements made me realize, once again, how powerful our dreams are. When I heard Aldridge's story for the first time I couldn't believe that it was a life of only one human being. He proved the true power of art – capable of crossing any boundaries and bringing people together.

Many, if not all of us, often face times of self-doubt and anxiety. The bravery and passion of Ira Aldridge is a great example showing that the impossibilities are there only until we get rid of fear and conquer them.



Nik:

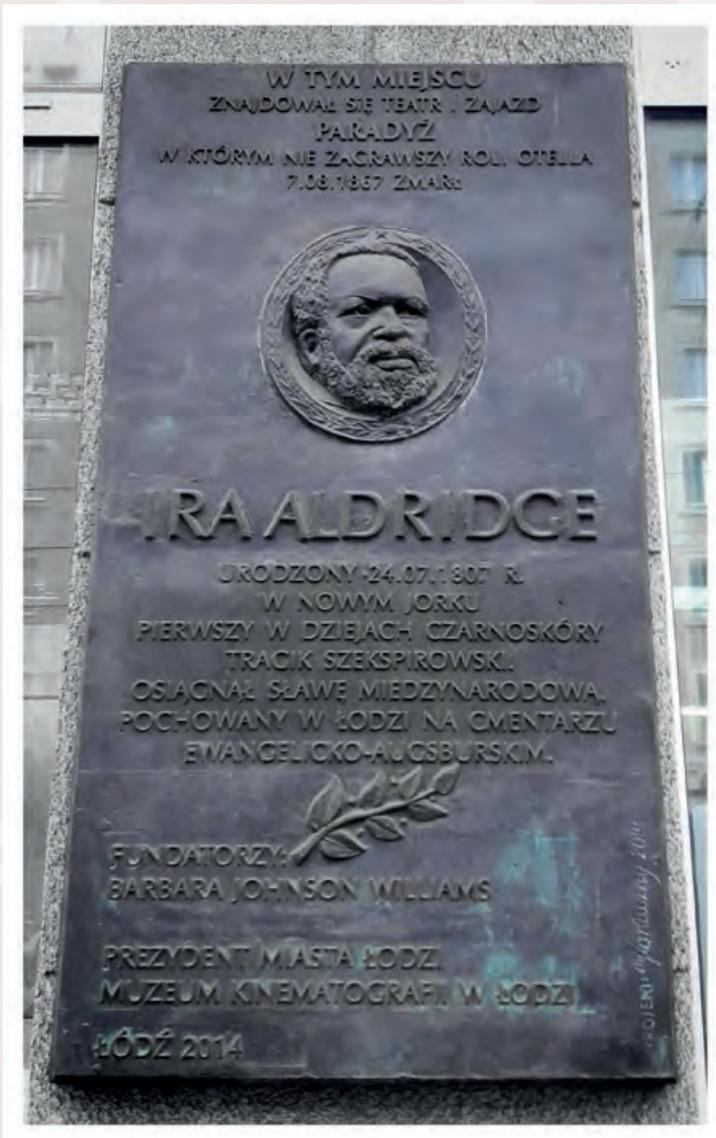
I didn't know anything about Ira Aldridge before I saw the play. I consider Ira to be a man of unique possibilities, inimitable talent and inborn courage. Everyone knows the famous sayings: "No man is an island" and "Fortune favours the bold." And you know what? Ira Aldridge shows us that everything is possible, you just need to believe in yourself, never give up, and move only forward to new achievements. Even if the whole world is against you...

Sayat:

It was my second time when I went to the theatre. I really enjoyed the performance about the life of Ira Aldridge because biographies of strong people are one of my favourite topics. I was really fascinated, also because the actor's performance was spectacular!

« [Back to main text](#)





Ira Aldridge's memorial plaque in 175 Piotrkowska Str. in Łódź

