Ira Aldridge's life in New York City
by Bernth Lindfors

Daniel Aldridge (2) had wanted his son Ira to follow in his footsteps and become a preacher. To this end he enrolled him in one of the two African Free Schools that had been established in New York City by the Manumission Society "for the special purpose of opening the avenues to a gratuitous education to the descendants of an injured race, who have a strong claim on the humanity and justice of our State." (3) A more explicit purpose was to educate "young men of colour, to be employed as teachers and preachers among the people of colour in these States [New York and New Jersey] and elsewhere." (4)

The first of these institutions had been opened in November 1787 with a single schoolmaster and twelve pupils. (5) In 1791 a female teacher was employed to instruct girls in needlework. (6) However, the school did not have a permanent building until one was constructed on Cliff Street in 1796. By then it had 122 pupils--63 males and 59 females, with an average attendance of about 80. (7) The curriculum consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic and geography, "with sewing, & c, in the girls' school." (8) When this school burnt down in 1814, a replacement measuring 30 by 60 feet, sufficient space for about two hundred students, was built at 245 William Street the following year. This later became known as African Free School No. 1. Within a few months of opening, "the room became so crowded with pupils that it was found necessary to engage a separate room, next to the school, to accommodate such of the females as were to be taught sewing." (9)

Apparently there was a great demand in the black community for basic elementary education, and many more of their youngsters were sent to school. As early as 1787 even the children of slaves were being admitted if they had permission from their masters. (10) By 1817 there were 308 students of both sexes enrolled, ranging in age from six to fifteen, and it was estimated that nearly three thousand children had received some education at the African Free School since its founding thirty years earlier. (11) This may have been a fairly rosy picture. Eve Thurston has pointed out that

> The children were often wretched products of miserable housing and sordid surroundings. They were crowded into dilapidated buildings; they had worn and tattered supplies (despite an occasional generous donation). Their teachers came and went with unsettling speed; their learning too often consisted of parroted Scripture passages. In the background was the question raised by John Jay [chairman-president of the Manumission Society]; "What was to become of them?" There might be a use of teaching the girls needlework, but of what value was either formal instruction or practical demonstration to the boys? In most cases backbreaking labor was their outlook, their only outlook. "To what am I graduating? What trade is open to me?" one of the most promising graduates is supposed to have cried. Naturally the more intelligent and sensitive were the ones who felt their lack of expectations keenly. (12)

Yet Thurston provides evidence that the African Free Schools did produce some remarkable graduates--not just Ira Aldridge but also "Dr. James McCune Smith; Henry Highland Garnett [a famous minister and abolitionist]; Alexander Crummell, [a prominent missionary in West Africa] who ... went to Cambridge University; George T. Downing, businessman and labor leader; Charles L. Reason and Charles L.

Redmond, educators." (13) Others had gone on to earn college degrees at Amherst, Dartmouth, Bowdoin, Princeton and Columbia. (14) This was an impressive record. As early as 1820 John Pintard, the founder of the New York Historical Society, was praising the school for turning out "prodigies of genius." (15)

A richer curriculum may have been offered now, described in an address discussing the African Free Schools in New York and New Jersey as follows:

> The usual term of study shall be at least four years, and longer if the Board deem it expedient. The first year shall be devoted, as the Principal may find necessary, to Reading, Writing, Spelling and learning the definition of English words, but chiefly to English Grammar, Arithmetic and Geography; the second to the elementary principles of Rhetoric, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and Astronomy; the third to Theology; the fourth to Theology, the elements of Ecclesiastical History, the more practical principles of Church Government, and the Composition of Sermons. The exercises in public Speaking and composition shall be kept up through the whole course. (16)

If this was actually the curriculum in the African Free School in New York City as well as that in a similar institution set up in Parsippany, New Jersey to train black missionaries for work in Africa, (17) it would have been precisely the kind of education that the Reverend Daniel Aldridge would have desired for his son Ira, the final two years being devoted entirely to religious matters, including the composition of sermons. What better preparation could there be for a future minister of the gospel? But there is evidence that the curriculum at the African Free School in New York City was more secular than religious. (18)

To cope with the growing student population in New York, a second African Free School large enough to accommodate an additional five hundred pupils was constructed on a Mulberry Street site in 1820. From all available accounts of young Ira's early education it is clear that this was the school from which he eventually graduated, but he must have started his education earlier at the African Free School No. 1 on William Street, less than a mile from his home, or possibly at a church school. His former classmate Philip A. Bell recalled that "in 1822 we both left [African Free School No. 2]--he to learn the shoemakers' trade and we to attend the Classical Academy of John E. Thompkins, No. 187 Broadway." (19)

That Ira intended to learn shoemaking has not been mentioned anywhere else in the biographical literature on him, not even in the anonymously authored Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius (ca. 1849). Since there was a shoemaker named Joshua B. Aldridge living nearby at 32 Barclay Street in 1820 and at the crossroads of Hudson and Chambers Streets in 1821, it is conceivable that Ira had a relative, possibly an uncle or grandfather, already engaged in this occupation and that he planned to learn the trade from him. (20) In any case, the date of Ira's departure from school--1822, when he was barely fifteen years old, the age at which boys could no longer continue to attend an African Free School (21)--suggests that he very likely attended the Williams Street branch earlier. He could have started at the original Cliff Street site as early as 1813 when he was only six years old, the minimum age for admission, (22) but he must have been enrolled for at least the basic four-year course of study and possibly considerably longer. It is hard to believe that he would have been able to win prizes for declamation (23) after having been in school at the Mulberry Street branch for only two years. His brother Joshua testified that Ira, "being a somewhat intelligent lad, was held in considerable favor for his quickness and attention to his studies, both by his teachers and his schoolmaster," (24) but it is unlikely that he would have progressed from learning rudimentary academic skills to reciting Shakespeare and other classic authors in such a short time.

James McCune Smith, who would have been a nine-year-old student at the Mulberry Street School in 1822, remembered Ira as having been "among the 'big boys' of our schoolmates, yet we do not recollect, nor do others of his schoolmates, that he especially distinguished himself in any direction ... His attainments were about the average of the scholars in attendance." (25) Smith also had "a dim remembrance of a great fight in which [Ira] was engaged with one Joe Prince, on the spot until recently occupied by the New York Gas Light Co., at the corner of Collect and Hester street, when one--but which of them, we cannot say--got terribly whipped." (26) This brawl apparently took place while Ira was still in

school, for Smith's recollection of it is sandwiched between two of his remarks about Ira's undistinguished academic career.

Another of Smith's memories refers to a time when Ira was out of school. Upon leaving home a few months after his father remarried, Ira is said to have "shipped on a brig, and sailed south. While in a port in North Carolina, he attracted the attention of a slave-dealer, who offered the captain five-hundred dollars for him; but the captain, who happened to be a Christian man, refused the offer, saying that 'the boy had trusted to his honor to carry him back to New York.' Shortly after his return home, Brown's theater was opened," (27) and this is when Ira and his brother Joshua "took to the stage," incurring their father's displeasure.

Smith recalls that Mr. Brown's theater was located "in Mercer Street, above Prince, then, of course, well up-town." (28) In fact, this was the fourth site for the theater that William Alexander Brown, an ex-ship steward from the West Indies, had attempted to set up in New York City. (29) When he had given up his seafaring job, Brown had rented part of a house on Thomas Street and had created a public garden in the back yard where blacks could socialize and drink. Known as the African Grove, this became a popular spot, especially after Brown added musical entertainment, but when neighbors complained about the noise, he may have been forced to close it down, for it no longer existed under that name after the summer of 1821. What Brown did at that point was to move everything indoors and upstairs, refashioning his pleasure garden as a theater where plays could be staged. This "African Theatre," the first black theater in the United States, opened on 17 September 1821 with a performance by an all black cast of Shakespeare's Richard III. However, the neighbors complained again so Brown promptly moved his theater to a vacant suburban house on the corner of Mercer and Bleeker Streets where a week later his troupe offered an evening's entertainment consisting of a reenactment of Richard III as well as an opera, a pantomime and a ballet.

Performances continued at this site on Monday evenings throughout October and November, with Friday evening shows eventually being added, but the venue was neither large enough nor near enough to the center of the city, so Brown moved his theater again, this time to a hotel on Park Row in the downtown business district near City Hall and next door to the Park Theatre, then the city's major playhouse. He also changed the name of his establishment to the Minor Theatre. Business was better here, but Stephen Price, the British manager of the Park Theatre, did not like the competition and sent hecklers to disrupt the performances. In early January, perhaps also at the instigation of Price and with the collusion of Mordecai Manual Noah, who was the Sheriff of New York county, (30) the police intervened, closing down the Minor Theatre, arresting its dramatic corps, and eliciting a promise from them that they would never again act Shakespeare, so Brown retreated to his house on Mercer and Bleeker Streets and resumed theatrical activities there for the rest of the season. By now he had bigger ambitions, so in the months that followed he arranged to have a theater specially built north of the corner of Mercer and Houston Streets (the location Smith identified as "Mercer street, above Prince"), which was opened to the public as the American Theatre in mid-July 1822. This is where Ira allegedly "took to the stage" shortly after his dangerous voyage to North Carolina.

We can now attempt to construct a chronology of key events in Ira's life in 1822. First, presumably, would have been his father's remarriage which took place "a few months" before Ira shipped out on a brig headed south. Next would have come his graduation from African Free School No. 2 which may have occurred in April. In The History of the New-York African Free Schools written by his schoolmaster Charles C. Andrews, there are examples of valedictory addresses and public examinations given at these schools, one of which is dated 18 April 1822, (31) so this must have been when the school year ended. As we have seen, Ira's former schoolmate Philip A. Bell, who graduated with him that same year, remembered that Ira was aiming to learn the shoemakers' trade. However, perhaps this proved impossible or undesirable and he turned to the sea instead.

Andrews, toward the end of his book, bemoans the fact that few graduates of the African Free School were able to find employment equal to their abilities:

after a boy has spent five or six years in the school, and is deservedly encouraged by the teachers and the trustees, and (as in many instances is the case) is spoken of in terms of high, approbation by respectable visitors, for his manifest talent and superior intellect, he leaves school, with every avenue closed against him which is open to the white boy, for honorable and respectable rank in society, doomed to encounter as much prejudice and contempt, as if he were not only destitute of that education which distinguishes the civilized from the savage, but as if he were incapable of receiving it. All this must be endured, with the additional sensibility that it is the very nature of education, in some sense, to impart. (32)

He gives as an example a promising young man "with a respectable education, and an irreproachable character" that had apprenticed as a blacksmith for two years but could not find employment afterwards because white blacksmiths were unwilling to work beside him. Discouraged, this youth resolved to leave the country and go to Liberia. (33)

Others were destined to suffer the same kind of discrimination after their schooling:

Do our children know, that after they have passed their years in study, and laudable acquirements, they shall, even then, be held in the estimation of their fellow men, as beings of an inferior order? No, nor would we have it so, for the wealth of the world; yet this idea is conveyed to the mind of the child of color by almost every day's occurrence around him, and he feels the full force of it, in all after life. (34)

Andrews went on to say that

It may afford some relief however to the philanthropist, to learn that a few have obtained trades of the following descriptions; viz. Sail Makers, Shoe Makers, Tin Workers, Tailors, Carpenters, Blacksmiths, & c. But it must be remarked, that in almost every instance, difficulties have attended them on account of their color, either in their obtaining a thorough knowledge of the trades, or, after they have obtained them, in finding employ in good shops; and a general objection is made, by white journeymen to working in the same shop with them. Many of our best lads go to sea as stewards, cooks, sailors, & c. Those who cannot procure trades, and do not like to go to sea, become waiters, coachmen, barbers, servants, laborers, & c. It is a plausible argument which the ignorant are cunning enough to use, that they can do just as well, in all the stations filled by those whom we educate, and get as much wages as they can, and are as well off without education as with it; hence the great indifference which prevails among them to the acquisition of knowledge. (35)

As if to clinch his argument, Andrews quotes the valedictory address given by a pupil at a public examination in 1819:

Why should I strive hard, and acquire all the constituents of a man, if the prevailing genius of the land admit me not as such, or but in an inferior degree! Pardon me if 1 feel insignificant and weak. Pardon me if I feel discouragement to oppress me to the very earth. Am I arrived at the end of my education, just on the eve of setting honest pursuit, by which to earn a comfortable subsistence? What are my prospects? To what shall I turn my hand? Shall I be a mechanic? No one will employ me; white boys won't work with me. Shall I be a merchant? No one will have me in his office; white clerks won't associate with me. Drudgery and servitude, then, are my prospective portion. Can you be surprised at my discouragement? (36)

Perhaps Ira heard this address when it was given at African Free School No. 1, or perhaps he understood, as other black students must have, that formal education did not guarantee them employment in a skilled trade. Seafaring might have provided him with a better opportunity, for between 1800 and 1825 about 18 percent of the seamen on private ships out of New York City were blacks and some ships used all-black crews. (37) In those days it was not uncommon for black sailors to work

alongside white sailors, sometimes even earning the same pay. (38) Historian W. Jeffrey Bolster notes that the "best" black families in the north, aspiring to middle-class status, sent their sons to sea. (39) Moreover, "Northern free blacks in the early nineteenth century looked to exemplary mariners as role models and community leaders." (40) A cook or steward--positions that blacks traditionally occupied aboard ship--stood a chance of earning a decent living, enough to support a small family on shore. (41) It was unlikely that a black could rise as high as captain or second mate on a vessel, but a few managed to do so, particularly on whalers which were notorious for poor pay and abysmal living conditions so there was less competition from white sailors eager for promotion. (42)

All in all, a job at sea was not a bad choice for a young black man seeking work. By 1829 the African Free Schools had added the study of navigation as an optional course in their curriculum, the rationale being that since "a large portion of the most intelligent lads go to sea, after leaving school, a knowledge of practical navigation, must certainly contribute greatly to their interest and their usefulness." (43) This course came too late for Ira to benefit from it, but the logic behind it suggests that Ira, after completing his education and breaking from his father, was making a shrewd choice. Like other "intelligent lads" he was deciding to follow the tide of his classmates out to sea rather than subject himself to discriminatory hiring practices on land. He quickly learned, however, that it was dangerous for anyone like him to sail in a southward direction. (44) There is evidence that he subsequently signed up to work on ships plying the route between New York and Liverpool.

But before jumping ahead to that point in the story, let us return to our 1822 timeline and fill in a few more chronological details. We had left Ira in the middle of the summer back on shore at Mercer and Houston Streets and ready to enter Mr. Brown's new theater, now renamed the American Theatre. (45) Whether he had visited this or any other theater earlier is open to question, but we may address that question by looking again at the biographical sketches written by people who knew him personally at different stages of his career. The author of the Memoir gives a brief account of how Ira fell in love with the theater:

> At school he was awarded prizes for declamation, in which he excelled; and there his curiosity was excited by what he heard of theatrical representations--representations, he was told, which embodied all the fine ideas shadowed forth in the language he read and committed to memory. It became the wish of his heart to witness one of these performances, and that wish he soon contrived to gratify. His first visit to a theatre fixed the great purpose of his life, and established the sole end and aim of his existence. He would be an actor. He says at this hour that he was bewildered, amazed, dazzled, fascinated, by what to him was splendor beyond all that his mind had imagined, and mimic life so captivating, that his own real existence would be worthless unless he in some way participated in such imitations as he witnessed. (46)

Notice that it was Ira's success in declamation at school that stimulated his interest in the theater. J.J. Sheahan mentions this too: "At an early age he imbibed a strong taste for declamation." (47) However, neither source indicates the theater at which Ira had his transformational experience. The Memoir hints that it could have been at the Park, the only theater that had "an obscure portion of a highest gallery ... set aside for people of colour," but then denies this, stating flatly that "young Aldridge was cut off from witnessing the best performances" there, possibly because "the most respectable [spectators in that gallery] are expected to herd with sweeps and pickpockets." (48) This might have been the wrong crowd for a young schoolboy from a religious home to mingle with. But the Park was the one place open to him that would have had the splendid ambience and star performers capable of dazzling a teenager who had never before seen a stage play, so perhaps Ira at some moment did find a way of stealing off and ascending to that highest gallery.

Aldridge's former schoolmate Philip A. Bell tells a different story, claiming that it was Brown's African Theatre "where Shakespeare seduced young Aldridge," (49) but this may refer to his initial attempts at acting rather than to his first view of a theatrical performance. Bell dates the seduction as having occurred "about 1823," some time after he and Ira had left school. A preponderance of evidence supports the claim that Ira "took to the stage" at the African Theatre, even though none of its surviving playbills lists Ira in the cast of any of the plays performed there, at least not under his own name. Sheahan goes so far as to state that Ira became a "star" of this "goodly private company of amateurs," one or two other members of which Sheahan had met. (50) The Memoir documents Ira's "first appearance on any stage" as having

taken place in a "private theatre ... where all his fellow performers were of his own complexion" but does not name this as the African Theatre. Ira is said to have made his debut as Rolla in Sheridan's Pizarro (51) and to have performed subsequently as Romeo in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. It is not known whether these were full-scale productions or only enactments of famous scenes from these plays, but whatever the case, "riots ensued, and destruction fell upon the little theater" shortly after Romeo and Juliet was staged. (52)

This helps us to date the sequence of events more precisely, for in the New York City Municipal Archives there is a police court record of a complaint filed by William Brown against ten white men, three of them circus performers, who on Saturday, 10 August 1822, broke benches and lamps, tore curtains and costumes, and injured scenery "which damage this deponent calculates will cost him at least two hundred Dollars to repair." (53) This riot, like the rowdy disruption of performances seven months earlier when the so-called Minor Theatre sat next door to the Park Theatre, appears to have been instigated by the same person--Stephen Price, who seems to have been determined to destroy even the smallest of his competitors. Less than a week before the second rampage Price and his theater manager Edmund Simpson had used a ruse to purchase at a bargain price the very circus at which at least three of the rioters at the African Theatre were employed. (54) And not long afterwards Price resorted to morally questionable tactics in an effort to prevent a French immigrant, Hippolyte Barriere, from building the Chatham Garden Theatre. (55) Price was doing all he could, legally and illegally, to preserve his monopoly on theatrical entertainments. For several years his Park Theatre had been the only professional playhouse in all of New York City, and he evidently wanted to keep it that way. His ruthlessness and sharp practices had led Washington Irving and others to refer to him mockingly as "King Stephen." (56) Charles Durang said that "he was a kind of czar in government and ruled with an iron hand ... Price was certainly the Napoleon of managers in [America]. (57)

Price could not have closed down Brown's establishment without the assistance of his friend Sheriff Mordecai Manual Noah, an inveterate theatergoer who had been keeping an eye on black entertainments at the African Grove and elsewhere and writing or commissioning satirical articles on them for the National Advocate, an influential newspaper he edited. Noah had been responsible for sending in police to close down performances at all these sites and arrest some of the leading performers. He must have known Brown personally for on 30 November 1821 he permitted him to stage She Would Be a Soldier; or the Plains of Chippewa, an historical drama set during the war of 1812 that Noah had written and published in 1819. (58) Not long after the riot in January 1822 that forced the Minor Theatre troupe to return to Mercer and Bleeker Streets, Brown was making plans to produce Noah's first drama The Fortress of Sorrento (written in 1808, published in 1822), perhaps to placate the Sheriff, but it is not known whether this play was actually staged. (59) In any case, Noah does not appear to have been won over by such gestures.

Samuel Hay, who has investigated Noah's proslavery political affiliations in detail, suspects that he ridiculed and arrested Brown's performers in order to gain support for pending state legislation aimed at restricting the rights of black voters. Hay believes Noah also may have wanted to demean the thespians in the eyes of black preachers and other community leaders who might otherwise have felt some sympathy for them. (60) So Noah was quite willing to help Price harass Brown's theater, bringing it to the point of early extinction.

Given Price's willingness to use violence to achieve his ends, one wonders if he had a hand in another outrage committed twenty-two days before the second riot at Brown's theater. On Friday, July 19th, a circus rider and clown named James Bellmont had assaulted Ira Aldridge. (61) Since the newly constructed African Theatre opened only four days later, it is conceivable that Ira was by then involved in rehearsals for some of the plays that were to be put on. The only shows advertised in the press during the next three weeks were part of a double bill featuring "The Poor Soldier," a comic opera by John O'Keefe, and "Don Juan, or, The Libertine Destroyed," a pantomime by Carlo Delpini, performed on August 9th. (62) The day following the first performance of these plays a humorous review appeared in the Commercial Advertiser that made a number of satirical comparisons to productions at the Park Theatre:

We cannot however pass over one or two little faults in the performers, which are the more inexcusable, as they clearly are borrowed from the Park Theatre. In the first place, most of the actors did not know their parts; but here the resemblance ended, for instead of pausing or hobbling on, as at the Park, the gentleman or lady who had the best memory, struck in some distance in advance; and, in order to do the audience and the author justice, they would uniformly play the scene backwards. In one instance, a player for a moment forgot his line and said "farevell," but with a propriety seldom equalled at the Park, he returned and corrected himself by saying with a delightful emphasis, "farewell." I do not know that I have ever witnessed this familiar play with more interest since I first saw it represented, for so artfully was it managed, that with all my ingenuity, I found it impossible to tell what would come next.... The pantomime was very fine ... The fighting was admirable: it was preceeded [sic] by a good deal of action, and loud declamation; and when it really began, wore the air of dreadful reality. I never saw any actor at the [P]ark, lay about him with the fury of Don Juan. (63)

Perhaps this drollery was enough to prompt the riot the next evening, in which James Bellmont was also named as a perpetrator. The case against James and the others was dismissed as defective a month later when William Brown filed an action against George Belmont [sic] for assault and battery. Brown evidently had confused James with his brother George, who may have been connected in some way with the circus too. (64)

Ira's case against James Bellmont was filed on August 12th, the day after Brown lodged his complaint against the rioters for property damage. Perhaps Ira had been encouraged by Brown or emboldened by Brown's example to seek redress for the beating he had suffered weeks earlier. Bellmont entered a plea of not guilty when he answered the indictment in August and September, but there is no evidence showing that the case was ever tried and resolved, perhaps because the defendant had soon afterwards moved with the circus to another city. (65) The plaintiff may have moved on by then too.

It is reasonable to assume that Ira's father Daniel would have taken him away from the African Theatre after hearing about the riot there or about Ira's suit against James Bellmont, but since Ira was no longer living in his father's house, (66) it is possible that Daniel may not have learned about these events until some time later. It is also possible, and perhaps more likely, that he may have taken his sons away from the theater earlier, when one or both were still living with him. This would place Ira's involvement with the African Theatre earlier, before he finished school in April 1822. Since the African Free Schools had "two vacations in a year, of five weeks each; one beginning the day before the fourth Tuesday in April, the other the day before the first Tuesday in October," (67) Ira might have had enough free time between October 1st and November 5th of 1821 to witness and perhaps participate in some of the plays done at the African Theatre's new location at Mercer and Bleek Streets. It is even conceivable that the show that so dazzled him, persuading him to pursue a career in acting, was the production of Richard III, preceded by an opera and followed by a pantomime, that he could have seen staged there on the first night of his autumn vacation. His father, presumably getting wind of this new interest and wanting him to concentrate on his religious studies, would have yanked him away from such a potentially harmful influence. But after Ira graduated from African Free School No. 2 and started living on his own, free from his father's control, he may have gravitated back to the African Theatre as a spectator, performer or perhaps as both.

Whatever the case, the drubbing he got from James Bellmont, whether or not it was precipitated by his new or renewed connection with Brown's theater, did little to dampen Ira's enthusiasm for acting. However, the second riot at the African Theatre may have denied him a stage for such activities because two months later Brown decided to relocate his theater again, this time to a small town of about 15,000 inhabitants almost 150 miles from New York City. According to the National Advocate of 12 October 1822, "The African Company have closed their Theater, in Mercer-street, in consequence of the epidemic, and have gone to Albany to perform a few nights. They will probably rusticate until frost." (68)

The yellow fever epidemic in New York was actually starting to abate by mid-October, so it is more likely that Brown moved his theater north in order to escape further harassment by hooligans hired by Stephen Price. It appears to have taken Brown a few months to get organized in Albany. H.P. Phelps's record of the Albany stage states that "A house opposite the Columbian hotel was also fitted up by a Mr. Brown, for

an African theatrical company, which opened December 19th, with 'Pizarro.'" (69) Could this have been the production in which Ira had his first starring role as Rolla? Perhaps so, but without corroborating evidence this must remain no more than a tantalizing speculation.

The experiment in Albany did not last long. Surviving playbills for March, June and August of 1823 and January of 1824 (70) reveal that the theater building at Mercer and Houston Streets, now renamed the American Theatre, was being used during those months for performances by members of the original company, augmented by a handful of newcomers. However, Brown may have gradually relinquished his responsibilities as manager because his name no longer appears on these bills after benefit performances were given in his honor by the company on 20-21 June 1823. Whether Ira was attached to the company at this point remains uncertain.

For all we know, Ira may have been back on the high seas by then. Smith tells us that some time after his father had taken him away from the African Theatre, "Ira again shipped, this time as steward in a vessel bound for Liverpool. It happened that Mr. James Wallack, the actor, was passenger in the same vessel. Mr. Wallack engaged Ira as his personal attendant while on the passage, and on the arrival of the vessel in Liverpool, Aldridge left her with that view." (71) Both Sheahan and Bell confirm this, Sheahan stating that Ira "managed to 'scrape an acquaintance' with the late James Wallack, then manager of a theater at New York, and when that gentleman resolved upon returning to England, he conceived the idea of introducing young Aldridge to his fellow country people, and thus making money by him." (72) Bell noted, "while acting [at Brown's theater, Ira] became acquainted with Mr. Wallack, who, seeing talent in the youthful aspirant for histrionic honors, induced him to accompany him to England, and try his fortunes in another hemisphere, where prejudice against color would be no barrier to his advancement." (73)

This is fascinating information, for it gives us another specific date to add to our chronology if we can determine when Wallack traveled back to England. James William Wallack (1795?-1864) was one of a parade of British stars whom Stephen Price had imported to tone up productions at the Park Theatre, which he had started managing in 1808. Wallack opened there as Macbeth on 7 September 1818 and was an instant success. (74) "Though short and not heroic in stature," New York theater historian George C.D. Odell tells us, he was "a handsome attractive man" who could play a great variety of roles. (75) A contemporary source spoke of his "possession of a well-formed figure ... a handsome set of features, a variety of well chosen attitudes, a pleasing voice, and being well versed in what may be termed the mechanical business of his art, such as knowing the exact moment when he should cross the stage, tap his breast, & c." (76) It was his versatility that made him useful to Price and to other theater managers in America who engaged him, for he could play tragic, comic and melodramatic parts on alternate nights with equal ease. After performing for two years in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Savannah to great acclaim, he returned to England in September 1820 but made less of an impression there and stayed for only the 1820-21 season before rejoining Price at the Park in November 1821. He enacted Hamlet, Rolla, Macbeth, Richard III and Romeo in his first appearances and then left to fill an engagement in Philadelphia. Unfortunately, "the stage coach in which he was traveling broke down, and he received a compound fracture of the leg, which laid him up for nearly eighteen months. As soon as he recovered he departed for England, leaving his wardrobe in New York, to which he quickly returned." (77) One of his friends, William Burton, provided further details on his movements after the accident:

> For upwards of four months, he was compelled to keep his bed in the tavern at New Brunswick, and when able to leave his room, he was carried down the Raritan in a sloop, for there were no steam packets in those days, and when he arrived at New York, he was confined to his house for nearly three months. The bone, having been badly set, had twice to be ruptured by main force, before the knitting was allowed to remain ... Having played but one short engagement [at the Park Theatre in November [821], Wallack began to feel the effects of his long illness in the atrophy of his purse. Price recommended him to study Captain Bertram, in Dunlap's version of Kotzebue's Birth Day, called Fraternal Discord. The accident had caused much sensation amongst the theatrical public, and the announcement of Wallack's name in a play bill excited unusual sympathy. The house was crowded. Wallack was received with enthusiasm, and played the gouty, irritable, but warm-hearted old officer with characteristic effect. His broken leg, encased in tin and flannels, did very well for a gouty limb, and assisted the reality of the

scene. He also gave Readings, at a table on the stage ... He then went on to Philadelphia, hired the Walnut Street theatre, fiddlers, lamps, and doorkeepers, and gave, unassisted, a night's entertainment, similar to those presented in New York ... He returned to England as soon as he was able to undergo the worry of the removal. (78)

The performances in New York took place on May 6th, 8th and 10th, and the one in Philadelphia on the 13th. Barnard Hewitt, in an article on Stephen Price, reports that Wallack and Price departed on the same ship to England after these performances. (79) According to Wallack's memorandum book in the Folger Library, this happened on May 16th-17th on board the Columbia. (80) Wallack did not return to New York until the end of the year, opening at the Park the day after Christmas in a reprise of Fraternal Discord that he played again on crutches, leading the audience to believe that he was still crippled by his accident. However, in the afterpiece, a play called My Aunt, "the crutches were thrown aside, and he who lay so many months in bed, with a leg shockingly fractured in two places, and who never was expected to have again the use of that limb, walked firmly on the stage, and went through Dick Dashall in a most spirited and elegant style, loudly cheered and applauded through the piece, and exhibiting his usual animation." (81) He continued performing in New York for three weeks, spent the following month acting a variety of roles (26 in all) in Philadelphia, and then played at theaters in Boston and other cities before setting off to England again on 16 May 1823 aboard the Columbia, a ship bound for Liverpool which arrived there seventeen days later, on June 2nd. (82) By July he was performing in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London, and he remained in the United Kingdom for the next five years, much of that time acting and serving as stage manager at the Drury Lane Theatre under Robert Elliston and later under the irrepressible Stephen Price, who leased that theater in 1826. (83) He did not reappear in the United States until September 1828.

There are thus three possible times when Ira could have accompanied James Wallack across the Atlantic: September 1820, May 1822, and May 1823. The first of these dates can be ruled out because Ira would have been only thirteen years old, newly enrolled at African Free School No. 2, and lacking any exposure to the theater. Moreover, both Sheahan and Bell report that Ira's meeting with Wallack occurred after Ira got involved in performances at the African Theatre, which in 1820 did not yet exist. The second date is possible but improbable because we know that Ira was present in New York two months later on the 19th of July when James Bellmont assaulted him. There would have been enough time for him to get back to the United States as steward on another ship, but Sheahan, Bell and Smith believe that he remained in the United Kingdom after first setting foot there. Sheahan says that Ira quarreled with Wallack and "was left to his own resources in a strange land, and without much money in his purse." (84) The third date thus seems to be the best possibility for Ira's transatlantic voyage with Wallack if the recollections of his three friends can be trusted as being accurate so many decades after the event. (85)

However, another important piece of evidence that would appear to contradict these accounts comes from Ira himself. In May 1833 he wrote a letter to the editor of The National Omnibus and General Advertiser in response to innuendos in the press that he "had been a black servant to Mr. Wallack, during his sojourn in the United States." This untruth, he said, had been repeated

so extensively as to require public refutation.--Thus then:--I had the pleasure of Mr. Wallack's friendship whilst he performed in Chatham Street Theatre, New York, but I never was his servant,--nor the servant of any man. [M]y respected father's circumstances, have thank Providence, been at all times too good to admit that any of his family should be placed in a state of servitude; moreover, the period of my acquaintance with Mr. Wallack, was during the latter days of my pupilage; whilst preparing to be removed to Schenectady College, near New York, in order to be brought up to my father's profession--the Church. (86)

The rumor of Ira's servitude to Wallack had indeed been in circulation in the days preceding his first appearance as Othello at Covent Garden, The Town identifying him as "formerly a valet to Mr. Wallack," (87) and The Age claiming on good authority that "but a few years ago he was Jemmy Wallack's footman,

and, (to use Jemmy's own emphatic words) a very queer one too." (88) When reviews of his performance came out afterwards, there was further discussion of Ira's humble background, some of it sympathetic and some sharply derisive. One of the harshest appraisals was published in The Athenaeum whose critic protested that Ellen Tree, the actress who played Desdemona, should never have been subjected "to the indignity of being pawed about by Mr. Henry Wallack's black servant." (89) What is most interesting here is not just the scathing reference to Ira's brutish race and class but also the identification of his former master as Henry Wallack, not James Wallack.

Henry John Wallack (1790-1870), James's elder brother, was also an actor of some distinction who had performed in many cities in the United States and the United Kingdom. Odell tells us that "like his more famous brother, he aimed high at first and gradually found his level. He is remembered for no single great performance, but for general excellence in a wide variety of parts." (90) In Great Britain the response to him was mixed. The Monthly Theatrical Review wrote of his reputation as "the most gentlemanly representative of Irish characters at present on the stage," (91) and the Court Journal said he had "a good stage person" but appeared in "characters little calculated to show forth any stage qualities but those of external appearance and bearing, and a knowledge of the ordinary duties of stage business in the secondary line of tragic characters." (92) The Satirist, however, pegged him as a bore:

> Whenever we see him come on the stage, we watch the place of ingress with anxious hope that it may speedily prove his place of egress; and we take the credit to ourselves of being the only persons who applaud his exit. The feeling towards this actor appears contagious throughout the house, if we may judge from the yawning around us when he appears. At the time this gentleman took up the profession of an actor, he spoiled a very serviceable and able-bodied millwright or stonemason; and we think he would find it to his account to apprentice himself immediately to one or the other of these trades. (93)

Nevertheless, Henry Wallack's professional competence and versatility made him a valuable asset on the American stage, and he enjoyed long runs in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington DC as well as briefer engagements in a number of southern cities. He made his New York debut at the Anthony Street Theatre on 9 May 1821 and served as leading man at the Chatham Garden Theatre from May to November of 1824 and again in the summer and fall seasons of 1825. It would have been in one or both of those years that Ira had the opportunity to work for him, for neither this Wallack nor his brother had ever before performed at Chatham Garden, which had functioned mainly as a venue for musical entertainments until Hyppolyte Barriere (94) built a permanent theater there that opened in May 1824 with Henry Wallack as its first big foreign star.

The Memoir gives this account of Ira's lucky break:

> Mr. Aldridge was bent upon witnessing the performances which took place in the country of his father's adoption [the U.S.A.], and opportunities for so doing presented themselves under the following, to him fortuitous, circumstances:___ He had a school-fellow who was in the habit of taking Mr. Henry Wallack's dresses to the Chatham Theatre, and the acquaintance of this boy he assiduously cultivated. With a little contrivance and the assistance of this privileged individual, young Aldridge obtained an introduction to the mysteries of the Stage. The boy soon after died of the yellow fever, and the coloured aspirant eagerly tendered his services, and obtained the wished-for entree to "behind the scenes," by becoming the bearer of the leading actor's dresses, and making himself generally useful in the way of running to and fro. This employment, if known to his father, was not that in which he wished to see his son engaged; but amply was that son repaid for his services, by being permitted to gaze upon the scenes which presented themselves. It has been said by good natured people who rejoice in distorting facts to the prejudice of those to whom they can be disadvantageously applied, that Mr. Aldridge, when a youth, was the errand-boy of Mr. H. Wallack, and in that capacity picked up whatever theatrical knowledge he acquired. There is no doubt but he availed himself as much as possible of whatever lessons fell in his way, and the greatest actor of any age must have done something of the kind; with this difference, that others had less difficulty in obtaining instruction. Young Aldridge derived no pecuniary profit from his services but was too happy to

render them in exchange for the delight he experienced in gaining to the precincts of what he most admired. There the young Roscius hung about the "wings," receiving intoxicating pleasure, listening with rapture to the wildest rant, and strengthening his hopes of emulating the most admired actors who presented themselves. (95)

Yellow fever recurred in New York City fairly frequently at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early years of the nineteenth century. There had been serious outbreaks of the disease in the late summer and early fall (usually September and October) of 1798, 1799, 1801, 1803, 1805, 1819 and 1822 (96) that closed the theaters and other places of amusement in the areas of the city most affected. Many inhabitants fled to the suburbs or to distant towns. There is no record of a major epidemic in 1824 or 1825, but there were smaller outbreaks during those years that had proved fatal to some of those infected. In 1824, for instance, 28 people were stricken, of whom at least 8 died. In 1825 only one person is known to have perished from the disease. (97) Ira's young friend could have been among these unfortunate few.

In any case, the letter that Ira wrote to the editor of the National Omnibus and General Advertiser in 1833, as well as the Memoir that he arranged to have published some fifteen years later, establish with certainty that he was still living in New York City in 1824 while Henry Wallack was performing at the Chatham Garden Theatre. We can thus add one more tentative set of dates to our hypothetical chronology.

The statement in The Age quoting James Wallack tends to lend credence to the reports by Smith, Bell and Sheahan that Ira also had had contact with Henry's brother, probably on a vessel bound for England in 1822 or 1823. If this happened in 1822, while James was still on crutches, it is easy to imagine that the "queer" service that Ira rendered to him was little more than the usual solicitousness required of a steward aboard ship who had to cater to the needs of an injured passenger. Ira may have desired to cultivate that relationship in order to improve his chances of getting on stage in Britain, and James, as Sheahan suggests, may have wanted to make money by introducing a young black thespian to his countrymen, but for some reason they chose not to collaborate in such a scheme, and Ira returned to the United States shortly thereafter. Perhaps this is reading too much into what after all may have been only the briefest of encounters, but is doubtful that so many of Ira's acquaintances would have remembered a trip that Ira and James took together if it had not happened. And it is strange that they did not mention Ira's friendship with Henry Wallack at all. Sheahan, a former actor who had toured with Ira for several years, certainly would have been able to distinguish one Wallack from another.

The editor of the National Omnibus and General Advertiser appended a note to Ira's letter, saying

> We are inclined to think that Mr. Aldridge's liberality has prevented his telling the whole truth. We believe the fact is, that Mr. Wallack, when he arrived in America was not only suffering from ill health, but also from want of pecuniary means; and Mr. Aldridge being much interested in all persons connected with the stage, kindly gave Mr. Wallack the shelter and protection of which he stood in so much need, and hence may have arisen the report of Mr. Aldridge having been the servant of Mr. Wallack--If kindness such as this be servitude, it is that to which the free are slaves. (98)

It is inconceivable that a boy as young as Ira was when the Wallacks arrived in America would have been in a position to provide shelter, protection and financial assistance to an ailing adult actor, but it is possible that he might have helped out in some small way during James Wallack's months of convalescence in New York City in the spring of 1822.

Three weeks after Ira's letter and the editor's footnote were published, the paper carried the following notice:

> Mr. Wallack, of Drury Lane Theatre, has requested us to contradict the statement of Mr. Aldridge. It is due to the latter gentleman to say, he made that statement openly. If he has been guilty of falsehoods,

why does not Mr. Wallack as openly refute them--we cannot consider the request of Mr. Wallack in the light of an authorized refutation. (99)

Henry Wallack never responded to this invitation, possibly because he was busy preparing to depart once more for New York, where he began a long run at the American Theatre, Bowery, on September 11th. (100) However, he and Ira evidently remained on friendly terms in later years. (101)

There is one more matter that needs to be examined before we turn to Ira's first experiences on stage in Britain. In his letter to the National Omnibus and General Advertiser Ira stated that he had met Henry Wallack "during the last days of my pupilage; whilst preparing to be removed to Schenectady College, near New York, in order to be brought up to my father's profession--the Church."

If Ira's years of formal education at African Free School No. 2 ended in 1822, as recalled by his classmate Bell, this statement would appear to suggest that he underwent further academic or practical training afterwards, perhaps at Old Zion, his father's church, in order to qualify for admission to Schenectady College. However, there was no college by that name near New York City at that time. Schenectady Academy, founded in 1785, became "Union College in the Town of Schenectady in the State of New York" ten years later, (102) and applicants to it had to demonstrate knowledge of Latin as well as Greek or French to gain entry. (103) Moreover, the curriculum in its early years, as proposed by its first president, Reverend John Blair Smith, was meant to consist of instruction not only in these languages but also in history, ethnology, geography, chronology, mythology, "antiquities of the most renowned peoples," criticism, elocution, poetry, "all types of literary classics," mathematics, philosophy, physics, astronomy, ethics, economics, jurisprudence and logic. There was no separate course in religion, but the discipline of philosophy was defined as embracing "the knowledge of things divine as well as things human." (104) However, students were not trained in natural philosophy, moral philosophy and metaphysics ("or the philosophy of the human mind") until their fourth and final year. The first-year curriculum, to which Daniel and Ira would have been introduced, consisted of the following subjects: Virgil; Cicero's orations; Greek Testament (or Gil Bias, in French); Lucian; Roman Antiquities; Arithmetic; and English grammar and composition.

In 1824 some changes were made to the freshman curriculum, but "Union enrolled few freshmen at that time, preferring that they attend a preparatory school instead." (105) The aim of Union College evidently was to provide a broad, liberal education, not theological training of the sort that would prepare a young man to become an ordained minister. It is unlikely that Ira or his father before him would have gone to Union College to prepare for a career in the Church. It is also doubtful that either one of them would have been able to satisfy the language requirement for admission. In any case, Union College has no record of their matriculation there. (106)

The Memoir alleges that Ira dropped out of Schenectady College early because of the racial prejudice he encountered there:

> But a sudden termination was put to his nightly enjoyment [at] Chatham Garden Theatre]; through the interest of Bishops Brenton and Milner, (107) he was entered at Schenectady College, near New York, in order to prepare himself for the ministry; and here for awhile he entered into theological studies. Notwithstanding the progress he made in learning, he lacked advancement in his religious profession. No qualities of mind could compensate in the eyes of Americans for the dark hue of his skin; the prevailing prejudice, so strong among all classes, was against him, and it was deemed advisable to send him to Great Britain. He was accordingly shipped for the Old Country, and entered at the Glasgow University, where, under Professor Sandford, he obtained several premiums and the medal for Latin composition. Here he remained about eighteen months, when he broke entirely from the scholastic thralldom imposed on him. (108)

Could this interruption of Ira's backstage pleasures at Chatham Garden Theatre have been the time that his father took him away from the theater? Brown's Theater by now may have closed its doors forever,

the last known performance in its building at Mercer and Houston Streets having taken place, possibly as a one-man show, in May of 1824. (109) Perhaps Daniel Aldridge, having found out about his son's nocturnal activities in so sinful a place as a theater, intervened to turn him in a more wholesome direction. Sending him off for further theological training might have been meant as a measure to save his soul, and if this could not be accomplished at Schenectady College, maybe it could be done at a foreign institution such as Glasgow University.

But Glasgow University, like Union College, has no record of his matriculation either. (110) A letter from George Bradley, Senior Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the University Court and Registrar there, to Edward Scobie explains why this may be so:

> Mr. Aldridge is not shown in our list of graduates, nor does the name appear in our list of matriculated students covering the period 1728-1858. Unfortunately, matriculation, or official registration as a student of this University was compulsory only for 'Gown' students in the Faculty of Arts. It was optional in the case of all other students, and as the 'Gown' classes embraced only Latin, Greek, Logic, Ethics and Physics, it will be seen that a large field-- Mathematics, Medicine, Law, and Theology was left untraversed. In view of this, the fact that Mr. Aldridge was not a matriculated student and therefore does not appear in our records, obviously does not preclude him from having been in attendance at this University, but unfortunately we are not in a position to quote records showing his attendance ... The search through our University records has been particularly exhaustive, because, for one thing, Sir Daniel Sandford was, in fact, Professor of Greek in this University from 1821-1837. (111)

As a student of theology, then, Ira would remain invisible in the University of Glasgow's official records. Marshall and Stock are willing to credit the claim that he studied there, saying "it is doubtful that he would have issued a statement about his attendance that could have been disproved at the time." (112) However, only once in numerous reviews of his more than one hundred known appearances on stage in Glasgow and Edinburgh between 1827 and 1860 was there any mention of his education, the Glasgow Argus in 1845 noting laconically that he "received a classical education at our University." (113)

Even after the Memoir was published a few years later, the local press said nothing about the "several premiums and the medal for Latin composition" that Ira allegedly won while studying under Professor Sandford. Another letter to Scobie, this time from the Assistant Registrar at the University, reported that "Professor Sir Daniel Keyte Sandford, M.A., D.C.L., and M.P.... held the Chair of Greek from 1838-1874," (114) this after serving as Professor of Greek there from 1821 to 1837. Given the length of this Professor's tenure at the University, it might have been unwise for Ira to name him as his teacher if nothing of the sort was true. The near absence of such an assertion, except among the exaggerations in the Memoir, suggests that Ira's "classical education" at Glasgow was as mythical as his Senegalese birth and upbringing.

Besides, it would have been impossible for him to have spent eighteen months in such "scholastic thralldom." Henry Wallack began performing at the Chatham Garden Theatre on 25 May 1824, and Ira's debut in London took place on 11 May 1825. If we subtract the amount of time Ira spent backstage at the Chatham Garden Theatre, purportedly in theology studies at Schenectady College and on board the ship that took him to England--possibly three or more months--we are left with less than a year in which he could win prizes for his scholarly achievements at Glasgow University. The story just doesn't add up to anything plausible.

More revealing is the admission in the Memoir that Ira left for the "Old Mother Country" under false pretenses:

> Even religious pursuits could not damp his ardour for the Stage. His early preference "grew with his growth and strengthened with his strength;" and while yet young he started for England, determined to make an attempt to appear in public before an audience who, whatever the severity of their criticism, he believed, would not condemn him on account of colour ... He brought with him ... a letter of introduction from Mr. Henry Wallack. (115)

Ira obviously was preparing himself more carefully for the stage than for the pulpit. He wanted to perform rather than preach. He believed the letter from Wallack might open some doors for him, and one suspects he knocked on a number of them soon after he stepped off the boat that carried him across the sea. This would place his arrival in England at the end of 1824 or the beginning of 1825.

But before following him there, it may be well to review what happened in the years immediately prior to his departure. Here is a timeline of events that may have been important in shaping his future:

1820
May -- African Free School No. 2 opens and Ira enrolls, perhaps having transferred from African Free School No. 1
September -- James Wallack returns to England

1821
9 May -- Henry Wallack's debut at New York's Anthony Street Theatre
August -- African Grove ice cream and tea garden is closed down
17 September -- First performance at the African Theatre, Thomas Street
24 September -- Second performance at the African Theatre, Mercer and Bleeker Streets
1 October -- Third performance at the African Theatre, Mercer and Bleeker Streets
20-27 November -- James Wallack performs at Park Theatre
30 November -- James Wallack breaks a leg en route to Philadelphia

1822
7 January -- Riot at the Minor Theatre, Park Row
February/March -- Daniel Aldridge remarries
March to May -- James Wallack convalesces in New York City
Mid-April and after -- Ira graduates from African Free School No. 2 with the ambition of becoming a shoemaker but takes to the sea instead, sailing not long afterwards to North Carolina
6-10 May -- James Wallack performs on crutches at the Park Theatre
13 May -- James Wallack performs at the Walnut Theatre in Philadelphia
16-17 May -- James Wallack and Stephen Price leave New York for Liverpool on board the Columbia
10 July to 5 November -- Yellow fever contracted by at least 415 people in New York City, 230 of whom die
Mid-July -- Brown opens specially built American Theatre, Mercer and Houston Streets
19 July -- Ira is assaulted by James Bellmont
10 August -- Riot at the American Theatre, Mercer and Houston Streets
11 August -- Brown files a complaint against the rioters for property damage
12 August -- Ira files a complaint against James Bellmont for assault and battery
10 September -- Brown files a complaint against George Bellmont for assault and battery
October -- Brown closes the American Theatre at Mercer and Houston Streets and moves the company to Albany
19 December -- Brown's African Theatre in Albany opens
26-27 December -- James Wallack performs at the Park Theatre without crutches

1823
2-15 January -- James Wallack continues performing at the Park

Theatre
16 May -- James Wallack leaves New York for Liverpool on board the Columbia
7 June -- Performances of the African Company resume at Mercer and Houston Streets
20-21 June -- The African Company holds benefit performances for Brown at Mercer and Houston Streets
8 and 11 August -- More performances of the African Company at Mercer and Houston Streets

1824
19 January -- Last known performance of the African Company at Mercer and Houston Streets
17 May -- Hippolyte Barriere opens the newly constructed Chatham Garden Theatre
25 May to mid -- November with occasional breaks--Henry Wallack performs at the Chatham Garden Theatre

1825
11 May -- Ira's debut at the Royalty Theatre (also called the East London Theatre), London (116)
20 June to mid-November -- Henry Wallack performs again at the Chatham Garden Theatre
10 October to 21 November -- Ira performs at the Royal Coburg Theatre, London

Using this same series of events it might be possible to arrive at a different set of assumptions than has been presented here concerning Ira's movements and experiences during this formative period in his life. But there are certain irrefutable facts that would have to be acknowledged in any new interpretation of the forces that shaped him. For instance, at that time in New York City there were only three theaters into which this stage-struck black youth was able to gain entry: the Park, the African (later called the Minor, then the American), and the Chatham Garden. And though many actors and actresses passed through these theaters between 1820 and 1825, one or possibly two individuals in particular--the Wallack brothers, Henry and James--had a direct influence on young Ira, serving as mentors and promoters of his theatrical ambitions. He may have seen many other gifted actors perform--Edmund Kean as early as 1820, Thomas Abthorpe Cooper and Junius Brutus Booth in 1821, Charles Mathews in 1822, Cooper and Booth again in 1823, William Augustus Conway and Lydia Kelly in 1824-and some of these as well as a number of lesser lights must have inspired him too, giving him a wide range of models to emulate. By the time he set out for London to fulfill his dream of becoming an actor, he had learned enough about the art and craft of performing to face with courage the challenges ahead. To help him get a foot in the door he had a letter of introduction from a well-known British actor. And as it happens, at the outset of his search for engagements in London he also had a good bit of luck.

(1) Bernth Lindfors is Professor Emeritus of English and African Literatures, The University of Texas at Austin.

(2) For information on Ira Aldridge's father and other family members see Bernth Lindfors, "Ira Aldridge's Relatives in New York City," Afro-Americans in New York Life and History 31.1 (January 2007), 81-89.

(3) William Oland Bourne, History of the Public School Society of the City of New York (New York: George P. Putnam's Sons, 1873) 135.

(4) Anon. An Address to the Public on the Subject of the African School, Lately Established Under the Care of the Synod of New-York and New-Jersey by the Directors of the Institution (New York: J. Seymour, 1816) 3. This refers specifically to the African School established at Parsipanny, New Jersey in 1816 that

took in its first two students the following year, but the objectives appear to be essentially the same as those for the African Free School in New York City. Unfortunately, the school at Parsipanny did not last long, closing its doors in 1824. For details see Jesse Belmont Barber, A History of the Work of the Presbyterian Church among the Negroes in the United States of America (New York: Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1936) 17.

(5) Bourne 668. Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, in their biography Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian (London: Rockliff, 1958) 25, state that this school opened with forty pupils, evidently basing that number on a statement made by Charles C. Andrews in his The History of the New-York African Free-Schools (New York: Mahlon Day, 1830) 15.

(6) Andrews 16.

(7) Bourne 670.

(8) Bourne 670.

(9) Andrews 21. Repeated verbatim by Bourne 672.

(10) Leslie M. Harris, In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863 (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2003) 64. Slavery was not abolished in New York State until 4 July 1827.

(11) Edward D. Griffin, A Plea for Africa: A Sermon Preached October 26, 1817, in the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, before the Synod of New York and New Jersey, at the Request of the Board of Directors of the African School Established by the Synod (New York: Gould, 1817) 56. According to Shane White's tabulation in Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810 (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1991) 16, in 1810 blacks in New York City numbered 8,916 out of a total population of 91,659, and 1,446 (16.2%) of the blacks were slaves. Assuming that most of the children educated at the African Free Schools remained in New York City as adults, they would have constituted perhaps as much as 15 to 20 percent of the total black population in 1810.

(12) Eve Thurston, "Ethiopia Unshackled: A Brief History of the Education of Negro Children in New York City," Bulletin of the New York Public Library 69.4 (1965): 218.

(13) Thurston 218.

(14) Andrews 34.

(15) Qtd. by Thurston 217.

(16) Griffin 67. This may have been the curriculum designed for the African School at Parsippany, New Jersey which, according to Carleton Mabee's Black Education in New York State from Colonial to Modern Times (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1979) 17, had been established "to give ministerial training to Negroes for service in Africa." The African Free Schools in New York City appear to have offered a more liberal form of education, with less emphasis on theological training for missionaries.

(17) See footnote 3.

(18) The best source of information on the curriculum in the African Free School in New York City is the fourth chapter of Thomas Robert Moseley's unpublished "A History of the New York Manumission Society, 1785-1849" (diss., New York U, 1963) which relies heavily on Andrews and surviving papers of the Manumission Society. Moseley states that, "instruction was carried on in a strongly religious and moral climate, though the curriculum itself was dominantly secular" (174).

(19) Philip A. Bell, "Men We Have Known: Ira Aldridge," Elevator 20 September 1867: 2. Bell, editor of this San Francisco newspaper, had corresponded with Aldridge while Aldridge was abroad. For information on Bell, see Victor A. Walsh, "Philip A. Bell: Crusading S.F. Editor," Oakland Post 27 February 1994, and Anon., "Chronicles of the Black Press," Miami Times 17 February 2004.

(20) This information has been gleaned from annual volumes of Longworth's American Almanac, New York Register, and City Directory, commonly referred to as Longworth's Directory. The same sources record that in 1820-21 another shoemaker, Edward Africanus, whose name suggests that he too was black, was living at 37 Mulberry Street, not far from the African Free School No. 2. This may have been the father of Edward C. Africanus, an accomplished scholar of Latin and Greek who "was considered the most talented minister in the New York Conference" of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1840s. For further details on the younger Edward's career, see Alexander W. Wayman, Cyclopaedia of African Methodism (Baltimore: Methodist Episcopal Book Depository, 1882) 13. Craig Steven Wilder, In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City (New York and London: New York UP, 2001) 84, notes that James Varick, one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and its first bishop, was also a shoemaker.

(21) Anon., Address to the Parents and Guardians of the Children Belonging to the New-York African Free School by the Trustees of the Institution (New York: Samuel Wood and Sons, 1818) 16.

(22) Anon., Address to the Parents and Guardians 16.

(23) Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius (London: Onwhyn [1849]) 10.

(24) Qtd. in James McCune Smith, "Ira Aldridge," Anglo-African Magazine 2.1 (1860): 29.

(25) Smith 29. Unlike Ira, Smith was a brilliant student who had distinguished himself in several subjects at school; some of his schoolwork was published in Andrews's History (see 6, 52, 136-38, 148). Smith went on to the University of Glasgow where he earned in rapid succession a BA (1835), MA (1836) and MD (1937); he returned to the United States at age 24 as the first university-trained black physician in America and emerged as a leader in the abolitionist movement. For further biographical information see David W. Blight, "In Search of Learning, Liberty, and Self Definition: James McCune Smith and the Ordeal of the Antebellum Black Intellectual," Afro-Americans in New York Life and History 9.2 (July 1985): 7-25; John Stauffer, The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 2001) and Thomas M. Morgan, "The Education and Medical Practice of Dr. James McCune Smith (1813-1865), First Black American to Hold a Medical Degree," Journal of the National Medical Association 95.7 (July 2003): 603-14.

(26) Smith 29. Smith had earlier recalled that he and his "old School-fellow and comrade" Ira had been involved "in many a heady fight amid the memorable marshes of the classic Collect. Little did I think when his fine eye flashed and his trumpet voice cheered us on to the conflict of stones and clubs, that the same eye and voice would one day rouse a shrill of admiration in an enlightened and polished [theatrical] audience." See The Colored American 30 June 1838.

(27) Smith 29.

(28) Smith 28.

(29) The history of Brown's efforts at establishing a black theater in various locations in the city has been traced in meticulous detail by George A. Thompson, Jr., whose A Documentary History of the African Theatre I am relying upon here. There have been two other excellent studies of the African Theatre published recently that build upon Thompson's pioneering work: Shane White, Stories of Freedom in Black New York (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 2002), and Marvin McAllister, White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater (Chapel Hill and London: U North Carolina P, 2003). Each

provides insightful commentary on the significance of Brown's theater, White writing as an historian of black New York, McAllister as a theater historian and performance theorist.

(30) Noah had been appointed Sheriff on 13 February 1821. For details on his appointment see Jonathan D. Sama, Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1981) 44.

(31) Andrews 133.

(32) Andrews 117-18.

(33) Andrews 118-19.

(34) Andrews 120.

(35) Andrews 122-23.

(36) Andrews 132. Carla L. Peterson claims that this speech was written for the student by trustee Reuben Leggett and that such students "were nothing more than ventriloquists, mouthing the words of their benefactors." See her "Black Life in Freedom: Creating an Elite Culture," Slavery in New York, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: New Press in conjunction with the New-York Historical Society, 2005) 189-90.

(37) Graham Russell Hodges, Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863 (Chapel Hill and London: U North Carolina P, 1999) 207.

(38) W. Jeffrey Bolster, Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard UP, 1997) 161. Bolster states that "black deckhands shipping from Liverpool to New York were paid equally."

(39) Bolster 160.

(40) Bolster 162.

(41) Bolster 168.

(42) Bolster 176.

(43) Andrews 86.

(44) It became even more dangerous for blacks to sail south after the summer of 1822 when Denmark Vesey was discovered to be planning a slave insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina. As a consequence, new repressive laws were enacted in the south aimed specifically at black seamen. See Bolster 193.

(45) McAllister 182-83, sees significance in these name changes, for Brown deliberately chose plays that included white, black and Indian characters, plays reflecting the heterogeneity of the American population. "As manager of the African Grove, American Theatre, Minor Theatre, and African Company, Brown realized that national possibilities like diversity and enfranchisement did not have to deteriorate into divisiveness and balkanization." The name changes thus reflected Brown's evolving "triracial, multiethnic, transcultural performative and managerial practices."

(46) Memoir 10.

(47) J.J. Sheahan, "'Titus Andronicus': Ira Aldridge," Notes and Queries 17 August 1872: 133. According to his obituary in the Hull Daily Mail, 26 December 1893, Sheahan spent "five happy years" as an actor touring Ireland, Scotland and northern England with Aldridge.

(48) Memoir 10.

(49) Bell 2.

(50) Sheahan 133.

(51) McAllister believes Aldridge "briefly appeared with Brown's company in the inaugural 1821 season" (43 and 90) but he offers no hard evidence to support this supposition.

(52) Memoir 10-11.

(53) Thompson 101-02, 106-07.

(54) In his autobiography, Thirty Years Passed Among the Players in England and America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844) 64, Joseph Cowell describes how they went about this. Cowell was asked to run the circus a year later. Thompson 112, assuming this to be when the property changed hands, dates the sale of the circus as having taken place in the summer of 1823, but Stuart Thayer's Annals of the American Circus (1976. Seattle: Stuart Thayer, 1993) 1: 104 documents the transaction as having been completed on 5 August 1822, five days before the riot at Brown's American Theatre.

(55) Thompson 90.

(56) Irving to Henry Brevoort, 15 March 1816, The Letters of Washington Irving to Henry Brevoort, I (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1918) 170; qtd. by Barnard Hewitt, "'King Stephen' of the Park and Drury Lane," The Theatrical Manager in England and America: Player of a Perilous Game, ed. Joseph W. Donohue, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1971) 87.

(57) Charles Durang, "History of the Philadelphia Stage between the Years 1749 and 1855, Second Series, Chapter 3," Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch 13 July 1856: 168. Alfred Bunn, a theater manager in London, wrote in his memoir The Stage: Both Before and Behind the Curtain, from "Observations Taken on the Spot" (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840) 1: 40-41 that "In his capacity of proprietor of the Park Theatre, New York, [Price] has lured away to the shores of America every performer of any distinction (and what is of equal importance--utility,) whom gold could tempt, or speculation seduce ... [T]he usual difficulties attendant upon management [in London] have become of course thereby materially increased." Monroe Lippman, in "Stephen Price: The American Theatre's First Commercial Manager," Southern Speech Journal 15 (March 1940): 13 and 17, claims that "Price's managerial career ... is marked by four outstanding achievements. First, he was our first successful commercial manager; second, he was the first manager to bring the great stars of a foreign stage to America; third, he was our first great theatrical speculator and our first monopolist; and finally, he was a prime factor in causing the eventual death of the resident stock company system." Indeed, "he was the first to be actuated primarily by the profit motive, and the first whose career was chiefly, if not entirely, devoted to the business aspects of the theatre. In contrast to his predecessors, Price considered the art of the theatre important only in proportion to its box-office appeal."

(58) McAllister 73, sees this as evidence of Brown's commitment to "American genius," but it may have been calculated more as a ploy to curry favor with Sheriff Noah. Since the Park Theatre had staged Noah's Marion; or, the Hero of Lake George just five days earlier, Brown may have been seeking for his theater the same kind of legitimacy in the eyes of authority that Price's theater enjoyed. Noah's remarks on the production at the Park Theatre can be found in George Alexander Kohut, "A Literary Autobiography of Mordecai Manuel Noah," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society 6 (1897): 119.

(59) McAllister 73, citing a newspaper preview on 16 January 1822 (rpt. in Thompson 87-88), reports that this "gothic melodrama" was staged in January 1822, "three months" [sic] after Brown staged "She Would Be a Soldier" in November, but Michael Schuldiner and Daniel J. Kleinfeld, editors of The Selected Writings of Mordecai Noah (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood, 1999) 6, claim that The Fortress of Sorrento was never produced.

(60) Samuel A. Hay, African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 5-14.

(61) Thompson 99-100.

(62) Thompson 93.

(63) Thompson 95.

(64) However, George is not named in Thayer's Annals, whereas James is mentioned several times, as an acrobat, rider and clown employed by various traveling circuses between 1812 and 1824. Thompson also found a record of James performing as a monkey in a circus pantomime in New York City on 28 June 1822 (109).

(65) Thayer 112-14, 122-23, documents that the Price and Simpson circuses that employed James Bellmont moved to Philadelphia in September 1822, to Baltimore in December, and finally to Washington DC in January 1823, by which time James no longer may have been connected with it. He turned up again in New York the following July working for another circus.

(66) Thompson 100 records Ira's address at this time as No. 416 Broadway.

(67) Griffin 66.

(68) Qtd. in Thompson 124. The population estimate is given by H.P. Phelps, Players of a Century: A Record of the Albany Stage (Albany: Joseph McDonough, 1880) 56.

(69) Phelps 56. I believe Thompson 142 errs in interpreting this remark as referring to a performance in 1823, for Phelps places his statement between two paragraphs describing productions launched by rival white theater companies in January 1823, and from there he goes on to give a faithful chronological account of the other shows staged in Albany that year. If the African company's Pizarro had opened in December 1823, Phelps no doubt would have inserted his notice of it at the end of this tidy narrative, not at the beginning.

(70) Rpt. in Thompson 126-27, 132, 136, 140.

(71) Smith 29.

(72) Sheahan 133. Sheahan errs in identifying Wallack as a theater manager in New York at this early point in his career. In 1837 to 1841 he managed New York's National Theatre, and after taking up permanent residence in the United States in 1851, he took control of Brougham's Broadway Lyceum in 1852, renamed it Wallack's Theatre, and managed it for the next nine years.

(73) Bell 2.

(74) Anon. A Sketch of the Life of James William Wallack (Senior), Late Actor and Manager (New York: Morrell, 1865) 7.

(75) George C.D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage (New York: Columbia UP, 1927-1949) 2: 519. An obituary in The Orchestra 68 (14 January 1865): 247 claims he was "one of the handsomest men who ever trod the stage."

(76) Dramatic Magazine 1 January 1830: 344.

(77) The Era 15 January 1865: 10.

(78) [William E. Burton], "Memoirs of the Life and Theatrical Career of James W. Wallack," The Gentleman's Magazine, and Monthly American Review 4 (1839): 15-16.

(79) Hewitt 105.

(80) Folger MS T.a.3.

(81) National Advocate, 27 December 1822; qtd. in Philadelphia's Evening Post 28 December 1822.

(82) Albion 17 May 1823: 383; Theatrical Observer 30 June 1823. This would have been a quick crossing of the Atlantic. The Liverpool Mercury 27 August 1824: 70 indicated that a New York to Liverpool voyage took an average of 23 days and the return trip an average of 39 days.

(83) Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Theatres of London (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963) 67.

(84) Sheahan 133.

(85) Smith was writing in 1860, Bell in 1867, and Sheahan in 1872, so it is not surprising that their recollections differ. They are often in disagreement about dates.

(86) National Omnibus and General Advertiser 17 May 1833: 60.

(87) The Town 7 April 1833: 110.

(88) The Age 31 March 1833: 102. The rumor that Aldridge had been a servant of Wallack persisted in the theater world of that day. It was repeated many years later in Edward Stirling's Old Drury Lane: Fifty Years' Recollections of Author, Actor, and Manager (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881) 1: 45, and John Coleman, in his autobiography Fifty Years of an Actor's Life (London: Hutchinson, 1904) 1: 90 reported that several of his contemporaries believed that Aldridge, "the so-called prince[,] had been James Wallack's dresser in New York [and] that he had caught stage fever from Handsome Jim."

(89) The Athenaeum 13 April 1833 236.

(90) Odell 2: 594.

(91) Monthly Theatrical Review 3 (November 1829): 103.

(92) Court Journal 31 October 1829: 429.

(93) The Satirist 24 April 1831: 23.

(94) The fullest account of Barriere and the Chatham Garden Theatre can be found in Thomas Myers Garrett's unpublished "A History of Pleasure Gardens in New York City, 1700-1865" (diss., New York U, 1978) 2: 40-69.

(95) Memoir 11-12.

(96) John H. Griscom, A History, Chronological and Circumstantial, of the Visitations of Yellow Fever at New York (New York: Hall, Clayton and Co., 1858).

(97) Alexander F. Vache, Letters on Yellow Fever, Cholera and Quarantine; Addressed to the Legislature of the State of New York: with Additions and Notes (New York: McSpeddon and Baker, 1852) 26.

(98) National Omnibus and General Advertiser 17 May 1833: 60.

(99) National Omnibus and General Advertiser 7 June 1833: 75. Curiously enough, in the weeks preceding this exchange of letters to the press--specifically, between April 22nd and May 10th--Aldridge had been performing in the same London theater--the Surrey--as Henry Wallack, but not in the same plays. In a reversal of status Aldridge was now the leading tragedian featured in the playbills and Wallack only a minor player in comedies and farces. On May 7th Aldridge participated in a benefit performance for Wallack, a sign that they were still good friends. According to The Times 2 January 1833: 4, and The Satirist; or, Censor of the Times 6 January 1833: 430, Wallack had appeared in Insolvency Court on the 1st of January that year, attributing his insolvency to the failure of his trip to America the preceding year. Aldridge may have been trying to help him get back on his feet financially.

(100) Odell 3: 676.

(101) In his letter to Smith dated 4 June 1860 (rpt. in Marshall and Stock 249-50) Aldridge mentioned that "Mr. Henry Wallack suggested a visit to America in 1858, but my dear wife would not entertain the idea; her prejudice is so rooted against the Americans for their treatment of our oppressed race generally."

(102) Fannin Saffore Belcher, Jr., "The Place of the Negro in the Evolution of the American Theatre, 1767 to 1940," diss., Yale U, 1945: 308.

(103) Samuel B. Fortenbaugh, Jr., In Order to Form a More Perfect Union: An Inquiry into the Origins of a College (Schenectady: Union College P, 1978) 3.

(104) Fortenbaugh 105.

(105) "Curriculum," Encyclopedia of Union College History, ed. Wayne Somers (Schenectady: Union College P., 2003)199-200.

(106) Belcher states that "the records are complete after 1806 and the name of Ira Aldridge does not appear on any list." (308). An email sent on 24 March 2005 to Bernth Lindfors from Jeremy B. Dibbell, Archives Specialist, Special Collections, Shaffer Library, Union College, states that the first black student known to have been admitted there was enrolled in 1859.

(107) Francis J. Hawks, The Pictorial Cyclopaedia of Biography: Embracing a Series of Original Memoirs of the Most Distinguished Persons of All Times (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1861) 572 notes that James Milner [sic], "an American Episcopal clergyman, settled for thirty years as a pastor of St. George's Church, New York, [was] admired for his Christian liberality and beloved for his kindness of heart and practical charity. He was originally a lawyer, and became a member of Congress in 1812 for the city of Philadelphia." John S. Stone's A Memoir of the Life of James Milnor, D.D., Late Rector of St. George's Church, New York (New York: American Tract Society, 1848) 177-207, reports that Milnor disliked legal practice and loathed political life so he left Washington in 1813 with the intention of changing his profession by studying for the ministry. He was ordained the following year and by 1816 had taken up his position at St. George's Church, which he served until his death in 1845. He was never made a bishop. In the 1820s, while he was president of the New York City Sunday School Union, one quarter of all the pupils enrolled in such schools were black, so it is conceivable that Daniel Aldridge or his son Ira could have had some contact with him during that period. However, one wonders how likely it is that an Episcopalian pastor could have persuaded Schenectady [Union] College, a Presbyterian institution, to admit Ira. Milnor also served as president of the New York City Colonization Society, an organization that sought to repatriate blacks to Africa; see, for example, his Plea for the American Colonization Society: A Sermon (New York: John P. Haven, 1826). Perhaps he might have viewed Ira as a likely prospect for missionary work. However, there is no documentary evidence of any connection between Milnor and the Aldridges. According to the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion, ed. Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C.

O'Brien, and Sister Consuelo Maria Aherne, SSJ (Washington, DC: Corpus Publications, 1979) there was a Catholic bishop named John Milner (1752-1826). However, it is even less likely that he had any contact with the Aldridges (372-73). I have been unable to trace Bishop Brenton.

(108) Memoir 12.

(109) Thompson 147-48.

(110) Belcher finds it "strange indeed" that Smith, a student and graduate of the University of Glasgow, "would fail to mention that Aldridge had studied at the same University" (310).

(111) Bradley to Scobie, 2 November 1824. This letter is held among the Aldridge papers at the McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Library. Parts of it, as here, are reprinted by Marshall and Stock 49.

(112) Marshall and Stock 49. It is conceivable that Aldridge claimed a connection with Glasgow University because his friend James McCune Smith had studied there eight to ten years earlier. Perhaps Aldridge hoped to be mistaken for Smith. As noted earlier, it is significant that Smith made no mention of Aldridge's attendance at Glasgow University in the biographical essay he wrote on him and published in 1860. Had Aldridge studied at Smith's alma mater, Smith certainly would have mentioned it.

(113) Glasgow Argus 20 October 1845: 2.

(114) David Hood to Scobie, 14 August 1852. This letter is also held among the Aldridge papers at the McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University Library.

(115) Memoir 12.

(116) Bernth Lindfors, "Ira Aldridge's London Debut," Theatre Notebook 60.1 (2006): 30-44.
Bernth Lindfors (1)