



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

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[[image – partial advertisement for Parkay Margarine]]

Black Broadway

My interest in the legitimate theatre began when I was pressured into taking part in an amateur production at St. Luke Episcopal Church by my Sunday school teacher.

My next onslaught of the great White Way came when, as a member of the De Witt Clinton High School play goers Club; I and other students were given tickets to see the great Richard B. Harrison portray the role of "De Lawd" in Marc Connerlys, "The Green Pastures".

While watching this production I became a stage door Johnnie, hooked on the beauty of Inez Pesard, a diminutive Lena Horne, one of the Cherubs in the heavenly choir.

Well some six years later, I saw my second Broadway play when I took Fanny Smith who later married me, to the old Hippodrome, long gone from 43rd and Sixth Avenue, to see Paul Whitman, a portly man in a white suit known as the 'King of Jazz'; Came into a stage arena a top a big white horse. The voices of Donald Novis and Gloria Grafton sent thrills up and down our spines when they sung "My Romance" from "Jumbo" (1935).

I got closer to the stage when a group of us, from the Harlem YMCA began hanging out backstage at the Lafayette theatre hoping to get a day 'gig' as a stage hand or a go-for, as Orson Welles, a 19 year old genius wrote and directed plays inside the Lafayette theatre with a group of Black actors financed by a WPA grant.

The actors were called the Lafayette Player and thespians like Canada Lee, Rex Ingram and all those wonderful writers and stars of the 135th Street Library theatre; Clarence Muse, and the Rose McClendon players got in on the action.

Welles was later to shock the world with his Mercury Theatre production of a Radio play which had Martians landing on the State of New Jersey (1938).

Backstage at the Lafayette, I met Ed, Dudley, then a stagehand, who later became a United States Ambassador, Judge, Manhattan Borough Prsident and again a Judge. Canada Lee, a one time pugilist until he lost sight in one eye in the ring. Lee was later to gain fame as "Bigger Thomas" in Richard Wright's Native Son, which was directed by Orson Welles.

I met Abraham Hill, who would write, direct and produce his original plays at the 135th Street Library theatre—two I vividly remember, were "On Strivers Row" a tale of our society of the time striving to make it on 139th Street. This play was moved from the Library and presented on stage at the Apollo theatre on 125th Street. The other play I recall was, "Anna Lucasta". This one was a tale of family conflict. It was picked up and brought to Broadway by Philip Yordan and later presented to world wide movie audiences, with an all white cast of course.



And then there was another young man whom we saw backstage. He lived in a private house with his aunts between Madison and Fifth Avenues on 127th Street. The young man was a prolific writer. He wrote a weekly column in the Chicago Defender newspaper recounting the trials and tribulation of our race through a character whom he called "Jesse Simple".

Jesse Simple was a hip guy who practiced his own EEO in relations with the white folks. The young man who was later called the Poet laureate of our race, put some of his columns together, and presented them on 80th Street and later down town as "Simply Heavenly". In the musical, "Simple" took a wife—in person of Anna English, and Claudia McNeil, a singing bar maid whom we called the Marian Andersen of the Cafes. (Claudia sang until she took to acting seriously) was cast as a friend. Melvin Stewart played "Simple".

Oh, the young man—his name was Langston Hughes and everybody in harlem knew "old homebody" Langston.

During my year as a reporter for the St. Louis Call, the Shubert Theatre booked "Native Son" the sensation of 1941. The Shubert people brought in Canada and his cast and his play delivered.

But what the Shuberts failed to tell Canada however was that Saint Louis was segregated and there were places and things Negroes were not supposed to question.

So what did Canada do—he brought his play to "Mound City" but Canada insisted like Adam Powell, another fellow to follow him in another profession, that he be given all rights and privileges given a star of a hit show.

The rights and privileges Canada insisted on were first class lodging accommodation, good pay and the adulation from the audience.

The Shuberts acquiesced by lodging Canada Lee and his cast in the Chase Park Hotel, the leading hostelry of the town which incidentally at that time did not accommodate Negroes. They also met Canada's money arrangement. But what they fail to tell Canada how his deportment at the Chase should be conducted.

Canada, like the star he was, decided to stage an opening night theatre party in the Grill of the Chase and this caused the problem.

The Chase did not want to lose the Shubert Theatre business and were willing, so they said, to accommodate Canada's party, if Canada adhered to custom, and would hold his party in the rooms the Chase assigned him.

Of course, Canada refused. The hotel management and then appealed to the Shuberts asking them to explain custom to Canada. When the Shuberts half heartedly tried to talk to Canada—Lee simple told everybody that he did not have time to look into details of his party and told them to leave him alone because he had to concentrate on the histrionics of his opening nite performance of "Bigger"; And with a flourish he dismissed the Chase and Shubert people, then went out on

stage to give a show stopping performance of 'Bigger Thomas', to an over flow opening nite cheering audience.

When the performance was over and the patron flocked backstage to congratulate hm—Canada told everybody that he was holding a party at the Chase and invited about 100 people to follow him immediately to the Chase.

The folks accepted and away they went.

When Canada and his party got to the Chase, he led everybody to the door of the Grill—And then all hell broke loose.

The Maitre'D tried to gently block Canada from entering the room but on sensing the mood of Canada's party, he decided it was the better part of valor to get out of the way and allow the Lee party in the room.

The Matre'D directed Canada's group to one side of the room and seated them all.

Then Canada placed his order—Champagne and food for everybody. The waiters were afraid to take the order so the Maitre'D called the hotel manager, who told them to serve Mr. Lee.

After everyone was seated and served—The Manager orders the waiters to bring in some screens and place them around the Lee Party so that the other guests in the room would not be disturbed.

Canada waited until all the screens were placed around them, then filled a glass with Champagne got up on one of the tables and went into a soliloquy of some lines from the Play. At the end of his speech Canada threw the glass against one of the screens and went around the room kicking them all down.

Everyone in the room including the hotel guests began to clap and applaud Lee's action. When Canada announced that the party was on the house, everyone joined in.

May I say from that night on the Chase Park Hotel was desegregated.

A few weeks later a young white singer, Roberta Peters making her debut concert on a Sunday afternoon in the St. Louis Auditorium repeated Canada's act when she asked the balcony audience made up of Negroes to come down and fill up the orchestra, a first for that hall.

The great Diva, Marian Andersen followed Miss Peters a few weeks later and when she appeared there the seats were sold on a first come basis. After I returned to harlem from World War II, I can still see the late James Fuller and the great, real great Ossie Davis, sitting on that Park bench in St. Nicholas Park, talking about their future. Jimmy wanted to be a reporter and, by luck, was hired by George Schuyler the editor of the New York Courier. Ossie, holding onto his dream and struggling all the way later made it to Broadway.

And on the picture spread of these pages are friends with whom I

became acquainted covering their performances on the legitimate stage for the New York Courier.

We came a long way from WPA and the Negro thespians continued and succeeded in their struggle to make it to Broadway.

Some I remember who left performing in little neighborhood halls and rep theaters in Harlem and the Village were; Mr. Burton's daughter, Rosetta Le Noire, Hilda Haynes, Hilda Sims, Gordon Heath, Nina Mae McKinney, Muriel Rhan, Muriel Smith, Earl Hyman, Canada Lee, who stunned Broadway in White face, in "The Duchess of Mafi"; William Branch, Ed Bullins, Ossie Davis, Melvin Van Peebles, Loftin Mitchell, Lorraine Hansberry, Louis Peterson presented their plays as our writers.

Harry Belafonte, Louis Gossett, Fred O'Neil, Dorothy Carter (Take a Giant Step) and Alice Childress; Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee (in Raisin in the Sun) which Lorraine Hansberry

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