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Genius Defeated by Race

BERT WILLIAMS.

THERE WAS A TRAGEDY in Bert Williams’ career. The negro comedian who has just died at less than fifty achieved a high position on the American stage, but not the position he craved, nor the one he felt his talents best fitted him to fill. By reason of the “labor of color” among us he could not in his earlier years mount to a position in higher comedy. By the time Eugene O’Neill had written a play that brought Charles Gilpin to the legitimate stage, it was too late for Williams. “His ambition and his talents both had waxed.” So Mr. Percy Hammond states in the New York Tribune, and the point receives considerable attention in other papers now that death makes the tragedy seem keen. The New York Evening Post tries to find another reason for Williams’s defeat in “the upwelled of the tide of jazz in these later years.” His “admirable art was not for the operatic jazz, but for that plainspoken humor of the ‘blues’ that is now coming to the front.” Mr. Hammond writes of him:

“A reticent fellow, Mr. Williams seldom talked of himself, save in modest reference to his work as a comedian. Yet he was the repository of a secret sorrow.

“There was, unquestionably, once a comic artist of the first rank, destined for the rest of his career to an environment of songs and dances, with the doors of advancement closed against him, as they were not to Mr. Warfield and others. He could not, with success, aspire to make his genius an instrument of characterization in the more eminent realms of the theater, to fix his fame in the more permanent foundation of the drama. He humbly proceeded along his antie pathway, exciting the ephemeral admiration of the knowing, and remaining, in the delicate and not descriptive phraseology of the press agent, a “distinguished color.”

“It was intimated above that Mr. Williams passed this distressful circumstance as a private man and was quite unsentimental about it. He did not give expression to his thwarted aesthetic yearnings, he did at times hint his mild resentment at what he termed an American phase. You may be surprised to hear that Mr. Williams described the frontier between him and his audience, the American frontier? Yet these are the words he employed one evening in a somewhat reluctant exposition of his emotions in the matter. He talked well. Said he: “This may sound mobby, but it isn’t; I’m not a native of the United States, but a West Indian, and I must take issue from my philosophy so long as I care my livelihood in this country. The rebellion is all out of me; for I know that it is up to me, and that this is the only civilization in all the world where a man’s color makes a difference, other matters being regarded as equal, and you must admit that there’s food for thought, not necessarily bitter, in the fact that in London I may sit in open lodge with a grenier of Great Britain, and be entertained in the home of a distinguished novelist. While, in the United States, which fought four years for a certain principle, I am often treated with an air of personal and social condescension by the gentleman who receives out my dressing-room or the gentle- man whose duty it is to turn the spotlights on me in the various cities as the roadways call upon him to do it.”

Williams was born in Nassau of the British Bahamas; his grandfather, who was white, married a negro woman. To this day the negro blood in him was less than the white. He was...
Bert Williams brought to the United States when quite young and educated in California. When he went on the stage minstrelsy was the only career open to him.

In the Tribune's notice we read:

"In 1903, when the Williams and Walker company were playing at the Shaftesbury Theater, in London, Bert was invited to attend a lawn party at Buxton. He entertained guests at the birthday celebration of the Duke of Wales. His demeanor so delighted royalty that he received an invitation to do a series of concerts with Londoners."

"Reader T. W. Williamson once wrote of Williams:"

"It was a comical scene. The momentous asset of the negro race. The last of his series aids the negro, the picture of negro men and negro women could have helped the race by merely contenting itself with white, that is giving itself a showcase."

"At the time of his death Williams was appearing in "Under the Jolly Tree." Simon, the most successful productions in which Williams and Walker appeared as a team were "Two Real Coons," "The Gold Bug," "Senegambian Carnival," "Sons of Ham," and "In Dahomey." It was with the last-named production that they appeared so successfully in London. George Walker died in 1907, and William was featured alone in "A Load of Coal." In 1911 he made a Ziegfeld contract under which he appeared in "The Folies" for ten years."

An interesting story is told in The World by Mr. Heywood Broun:

"Bert Williams found prosperity and success in the theater, but his old mate, Walker, was always a bit of a flake, wasted. His death must have been the end of the career. Color was a factor, but not the only one in the circumstances which led to his death. There was a suspicion in the white world that he blacked in Williams, but the Caucasian in America is customarily modest in such cases, and by all accounts he was pronounced as having declared that any discernible strain, however slight, of negro blood extraction outweighs all others.

"It would not be quite fair to say that the theater discriminates in favor of him. The fact is, he has been generously and laughingly hurled the moment he came before the footlights. There was only one restriction which limited him. Since he was a negro, he was kept in a separate cabin. A funny man. It did not seem to us that Williams was a great comedian, and certainly he was not one of the most beautiful men. He was the bale to which he was assigned season after season. Every round of laughter bound him more securely into the stage establishment. Even indifferent audiences during the last few seasons was of no aid in freeing him from the thrall. Someone or other laughing at Bert Williams came to be tied up in popular affection with liberalism, charity and the Thirteenth Amendment."

"To our minds Williams did have a gift in which he was supreme, but it was not exactly comic. No man in the 'team of our day could think to think as well. He had in his repertoire at one time a tale about a negro parson and a haunted house. This was very popular. Audience applied it to build about the refrain, 'We can't do nothin' till Martin comes.' You may remember that it was said that by the first cast, the negro parson and the fireside placed to eat the ladies, it was a full house, friendly o'at. The next cast was that of a B. F. Barrow and after it had dined and spit out the sparks, it asked, 'When are we going to get a negro cast? We can't do nothin' till Martin comes.'"

"It was at this point that the negro preacher rose (in the story as we remember it) he was the father of Bert (Williams) and when Mr. Williams asked you to tell him he was there, but I was not.

"For all the humorous fancy of incident and the whim- lic, Bert Williams, Mark Twain, and Longfellow are not to tell the story as a comic necessity. You see one of his many themes he lifted it to the stature of a true ghost story. We could see the old negro fearfully turning the pages of the presentments from the fireside took form before our eyes. Sparks drift from their jaws and wind howling out the chimney wall, the house is shut up, and for us by a tall man, his face eloquently blackened with burnt cork, who stands at the center of the stage and used no gesture which traveled more than a foot, but said nothing."

"The memory of the happening remains with us so vividly that sleeping in a haunted house is one of the all too numerous OldMagazineArticles.com
things which we are afraid to do. Of course, we laughed at the message which was left for Martin, but it was more or less defensive laughter, because we knew in our heart that the preacher of the story had outstayed us by at least one cat.”

Mr. H. D. Renton, an expert on minstrelsy, writes to the New York Herald:

“Your editorial article on the stage art of Bert Williams voices the general opinion exactly and the concluding sentence is true indeed: ‘The task of carrying on the work of the blackface funny man will hereafter be the white comedian’s burden.”

“But with due regard for the talents of genuine negroes like Sam Lucas, Bob McIntyre and Billy Kernanda, the idol of the negroes of the South, the white comedian has always been the best delineator of servileman humor. Lolu Schoelbroph was the superior of any genuine negro in his charactizations. So were John Milligan and Billy Manning of a past generation.”