

Jewish Actors.

During his recent engagement at the Grand Opera House in this city, Henry Irving, the celebrated English actor, in a published interview, expressed himself of the opinion that Jews were the principal patrons of the theatre. I do not think there is a single theatrical manager in any of the larger cities of the Union but who will corroborate Mr. Irving's statement. So far as San Francisco is concerned, if anyone doubts the assertion, let him step into any of our leading temples of Thespis, especially on a "first night," and in all likelihood his skepticism will at once be removed. And since our Jewish fellow-citizens are so liberal in their patronage of the art, I have often wondered why it is that there were not a larger number of our co-religionists who had acquired fame and fortune in the deamatic profession.

To be sure one often hears the remark that this actor or that actress is an Israelite, but when one commences to investigate it does not take long to become convinced of the fact that the statement is entirely without foundation. For instance, I have often heard it said (and the saying was embellished with no small amount of positiveness) that Junius Brutus Booth, the father of Edwin Booth, was a Hebrew. It is an absolute fact that he was a thorough Hebrew scholar. He had received an excellent classical education, and not only read the Talmud, but strictly adhered to some of its laws. He loved to frequent synagogues and converse with rabbis and learned doctors in the sacred tongue. He even joined them in their worship, and some years ago, while on a professional visit to New Orleans, I was informed that during one of his spells of inebriety he had fallen on his knees on the sidewalk and boldly proclaimed: "*Shema Yisroel, Adonia Elo-hainuh, Adonai Echod.*"

On September 17, 1822, during his autumn engagement at Covent Garden, London, in imitation of the attempt of a foreign actor, he essayed the role of Shylock, playing it in the Jewish dialect. It is even said that he interpolated many Hebrew phrases, and occasionally spoke entire scenes in the language. When he purchased "The Farm," as his country residence near Belair, Maryland, was called, he fenced in a little graveyard, where the Jewish althea bushes had their place among the yews and weeping willows. In the face of all this cumulative evidence one naturally is led to believe that there must have been Jewish blood in his veins. But then Mr. Booth was as familiar with the Koran as with the Talmud, and visited the cathedral of the Catholic as often as he did the synagogue of the Jew, and so I am inclined to think that the statement as to that brilliant actor's Jewish origin is apocryphal, to say the least.

The Wallacks have also often been quoted as being of Hebraic origin. William Wallack, the progenitor of the well-known theatrical family, was an actor and vocalist at Astley's Amphitheatre in London. That many Astley's equestrians there were many Jews cannot be gainsaid. And that Mr. Wallack, in his association with the latter, may have picked up a smattering of Hebrew, is within the range of possibilities. It is barely possible that Mrs. Wallack may have been of the faith, but there is considerable doubt about it.

Did it ever occur to you how the mistake is apt to be made? Did you ever notice that the most successful actors were men with pronounced features? A prominent nose and brilliant eyes are natural concomitants to success on the stage, and as those features are distinctive marks of the Jewish race, is it not barely possible that the mere fact of an actor possessing them may lead to his being classed among the chosen?

But so far as the drama is concerned, it is not surprising that the Jew is not found participating in theatrical productions in the early history of the English stage. The first performances were mysteries and miracle plays, depicting the suffering of the martyrs, and the principal performers were monks and priests. Missionaries would combine preaching with playing, and it is narrated of St. Adhelm that when his audience became weary he would take a small harp from under his gown and strike up a song. In the year 1119, Geoffrey, a monk, was a manager at Dunstable, and produced "The Life of St. Katherine." For several centuries the Church employed the stage for religious ends, but in 1587, after the birth of legitimate tragedy and comedy, theatres were bitterly attacked by Gosson, the parson of St. Botolph's, in his book entitled "A School of Abuse," and aimed, as he said, "against poets, players, jesters, and such like Caterpillars of a Commonwealth." About this time was passed a statute classing players as rogues and vagabonds, unless they could procure a license from two justices. In view of all these facts, it is not strange that Jewish actors were comparatively unknown until the present century. Be that as it may, the first recorded instance of Jewish acting antedates the Roman Thespians, Roscius and Æsopus many centuries. It is narrated in I Samuel, 21, that David fled for fear of Saul to Achish, the King of Gath; but finding the latter unfriendly, "changed his behavior before them and feigned himself mad in their hands and scrambled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard." David must have performed his part remarkably well, for Achish said unto his servants: "Lo, ye see the man is mad: wherefore then have ye brought him to me? Have I need of madmen, that ye have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?" After this successful portrayal David was allowed to depart thence and escaped to the cave of Adullam.

But the first Hebrew in modern times to achieve distinction on the stage was John Braham, 1774-1856. His father's name was Abraham, and as he was short and stout his neighbors nicknamed him "Punch." The title clung and always after he was spoken of as "Abe Punch." Now and then young Abraham made a few shillings singing at the synagogue, where his voice eventually attracted the attention of one of the wealth Goldsmid family. The latter introduced himself to Leoni Lee, a clever musician, who instructed Abraham in the rudiments of music and singing. After studying for two years, he made his first appearance at the Garrick Theatre under the name of Braham, where his success was at once prompt and decisive. His voice was a tenor, of the purest

quality, and ranged from *La* below the line to the upper *St*. In 1796 he appeared in the opera on *Mahmoud* at Drury Lane and then visited the principal Italian cities. In 1801 he returned to Convent Garden, where his success was triumphant. He was also a composer, and wrote numerous songs, besides incidental music to a large number of dramas. It is a singular circumstance that a few years later, in 1809, the management of this same theatre engaged large numbers of Jewish pugilists, headed by Mendoza, to quell the famous "O. P." riots. The house had been rebuilt, and on reopening, the price of seats was increased. The British public resented the manager's temerity by howling, hissing and shouting, and demanded that they be admitted at the *old price*. The riots lasted for fifty nights, and when the Hebrew fighters were admitted to the boxes (they had always previously been confined to the pit) there was no end of derisive hooting. It is needless to say, the managers were victorious, and the O. P.'s did not prevail.

Eliza Rachel Felix Rachel, the daughter of the Jewish peddler, was born in Munf, Switzerland, in 1820. In 1831 the family moved to Paris, where Sarah, an elder sister, used to sing at the various cafes to the accompaniment of an old guitar, while Rachel went from table to table to collect the offerings of the spectators. In 1833 she made her *debut* as an actress, and in 1838 made a decided hit as Camille in Corneille's "Les Horaces." Her fame culminated in 1843 in Racine's tragedy of "Phedre." In 1848 her public recital of the Marseilles Hymn created a perfect furor, and her name will always be connected with the history of that trying period. She visited with equal success England, Russia and America, but while in this country her health failed and she returned to France utterly prostrated. On January 3, 1858, she died at Cannes, after having amassed a fortune. It is said of her that she was constant in her home affections, and freely shared her prosperity with her family.

Adah Isaacs Menken was born on June 15th, 1835, under the scorching sun of Louisiana. Her real name was Adelaide McCord. At fourteen she was first seen as a danseuse in New Orleans. In 1856 she married Alexander Isaacs Menken, a musician, at Galveston, Tex., and two years later made her first appearance at the New Orleans Varieties in "Fazio." She finally made a pronounced success as "Mazeppa," and in 1864 sailed for England, where she appeared at Astley's. She also performed in Paris, the play running 100 nights. On the occasion of the last performance there were present Napoleon III, the King of Greece, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince Imperial. She then visited Vienna, but finally died at the age of 33 in the French capital. I will not dwell upon her matrimonial experiences, which were varied and numerous. She had considerable literary ability, and reckoned among her more or less intimate associates such men as Charles Dickens, Alexander Dumas, Theophile Gautier and Swinburne. She died in the Jewish faith and lies buried in Mount Parnasse Cemetery.

—Julius Kahn, in *San Francisco Jewish Progress*.

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