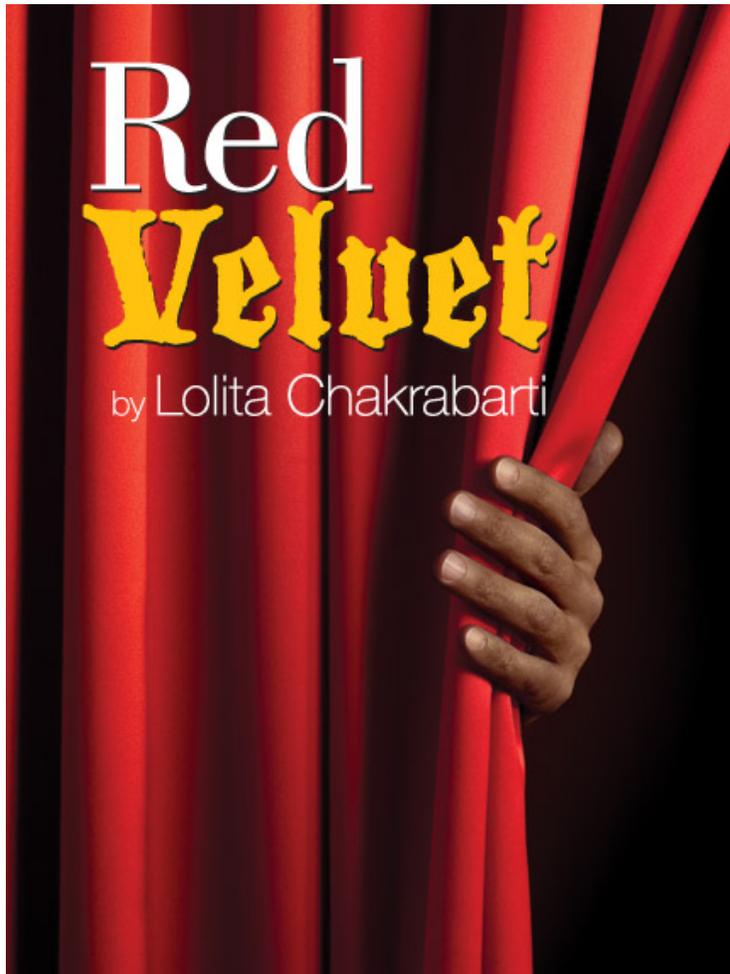


Jewel Theatre Audience Guide

Addendum: Ira Aldridge Timeline



directed by Bob Rumsby

by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturg
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IRA ALDRIDGE TIMELINE

Lolita Chakrabarti has written a timeline of Ira Aldridge's life and the historical events that surrounded it. What is reprinted below is not a complete chronology of all historical events in Aldridge's lifetime, but is selectively edited it for those entries most relevant to the text of the play. I have modified Chakrabarti's work and added some of my own entries. Information from Chakrabarti's timeline is reprinted here with permission of Samuel French's *Breaking Character* Magazine.

Between 1700 and 1807, ships out of Liverpool carry 1.5 million Africans across the Atlantic. Most ships went to the Caribbean where the slaves were sold to plantation owners. Liverpool controlled 80% of the British slave trade, and over 40% of the European slave trade.

1787 The first New York African Free School is established by the New York Manumission Society, a group dedicated to advocating for African-Americans. It begins as a single room with 12 pupils and is "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."

May 1787 The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade is founded in Britain by Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson.

14 July 1789 The Storming of the Bastille occurs during the French Revolution. The Bastille was used as a state prison by the kings of France. The event becomes an important symbol for the French Revolution.

1795 Poland is divided and "officially" non-existent for the next 123 years.

31 January 1798 The Park Theatre is opened in Manhattan, New York. Showers of fruits and nuts (and sometimes worse) from the upper reaches are common. Prostitutes openly transact business in the balcony, which encourages preachers to sermonize that theaters are "foyers of hell."

On Monday evening last, the New Theatre was opened to the most

overflowing house that was ever witnessed in this city. Though the Commissioners have been constrained to open it in an unfinished state, it still gave high satisfaction. ...The house is made to contain about 2,000 persons... The extensiveness of the scale upon which the scenes are executed, the correctness of the designs, and the elegance of the painting, presented the most beautiful views which the imagination can conceive." [The Daily Advertiser]

2 March 1807 The Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves is passed in the United States. It is not well enforced, and slavery continues until the end of the Civil War, almost 60 years later.

25 March 1807 An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Britain is passed. This does not include slavery in British colonies, which continues for 25 more years.

24 July 1807 Ira Aldridge is born in New York to Daniel and Luranah Aldridge. His father is a straw vendor and lay preacher; his mother is a cleaning person.

1811 The first published black author in Britain, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, has the ninth edition of his autobiography reprinted. In it, he writes, "this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black."

21 April 1817 Ira's mother dies. Ira is 9 years old.

1818 The actor James William Wallack (1791–1864) plays the Park Theatre.

1820 Ira attends the African Free School Number Two.

29 November 1820 Edmund Kean appears for the first time in New York playing Richard III. Samuel Taylor Coleridge says that "To see him act is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning."

17 September 1821 Brown's Theatre opens in Mercer Street, New York. This is the fourth site for the theater that William Alexander Brown,

an ex-ship steward from the West Indies, has attempted to establish. Upon leaving his seafaring job, Brown rented part of a house on Thomas Street and created a public garden in the back yard where black people could socialize. Known as the African Grove, and extremely popular, Brown added musical entertainment. Ira Aldridge joined this company as a teenager and played opposite James Hewlett, a talented young black actor. Following complaints about noise, Brown was forced to close it down. Unperturbed, he refashioned his pleasure garden as a theater. This "African Theatre," the first black theater in the United States, opens with a performance by an all-black cast of *Richard III*. Neighbors complained again so Brown promptly moved his theater again, where a week later his troupe offers an evening's entertainment consisting of *Richard III*, an opera, a pantomime and a ballet. The theater is subject to hate crimes of constant attacks and riots. It suffers financially and is completely burned down in 1826.

1820s Newspapers in England accept payments by lobbies to publish pro-slavery views. The *Times* reports: "That Southern masters are laboring for the good of the slave, to an encouraging extent, is apparent from the missionary efforts they are sustaining among the slave population. And when it is considered that the African race, under American slavery, have made much greater progress than they have ever done in any other part of the world; and that the elevating influences are now greatly increased among them; it is to be expected that dispassionate men will be disposed to leave the present condition of things undisturbed, rather than to rush madly into the adoption of measures that may prove fatal to the existence of the Union."

1821 Actor Henry Wallack (1790 – 1870) needs a dresser at Chatham Garden Theatre in New York. 14-year-old Ira steps in.

Ira is savagely beaten in the street by a hired white assailant for daring to act in Shakespeare's plays. He is 14.

1823 The Anti-Slavery Society is established in Britain and calls for measures to improve slave conditions in the West Indies, together with a plan for gradual emancipation leading ultimately to complete freedom.

1824 Aged 17, Ira arrives in Liverpool, bound for Glasgow University where he will study theology.

1825 Ira makes his debut at the Royalty Theatre, East London, playing Othello to mixed reviews.

Ira meets Margaret Gill at The Royal Coburg Theatre. Six weeks later they are married. She is nine years his senior.

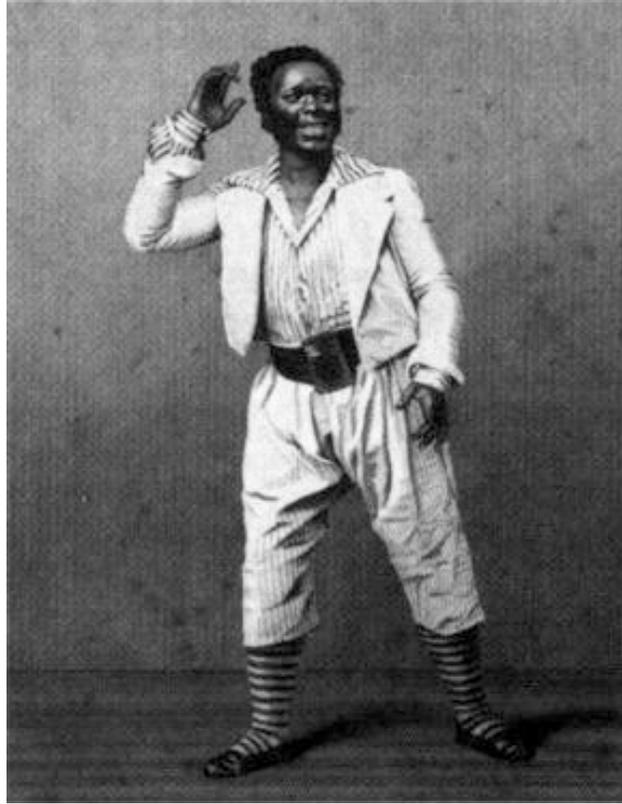
October 1825 Ira calls himself "The Celebrated Mr. Keene, Tragedian of Colour". Keene is a homonym of the name of England's most popular actor at that time, Edmund Kean. In those days, it was common in the theatre to assume the same or similar name as a current celebrity as a way of garnering attention.

Ira plays Prince Oroonoko in *A Slave's Revenge* at the Royal Coburg Theatre in London – today's Old Vic Theatre. He is the first black actor ever to play there.

1827 The Government of the Republic of Haiti honors Ira with a Commission in the Army of Haiti. It has been 23 years since the slaves of Haiti had ousted their French masters and created their own nation.

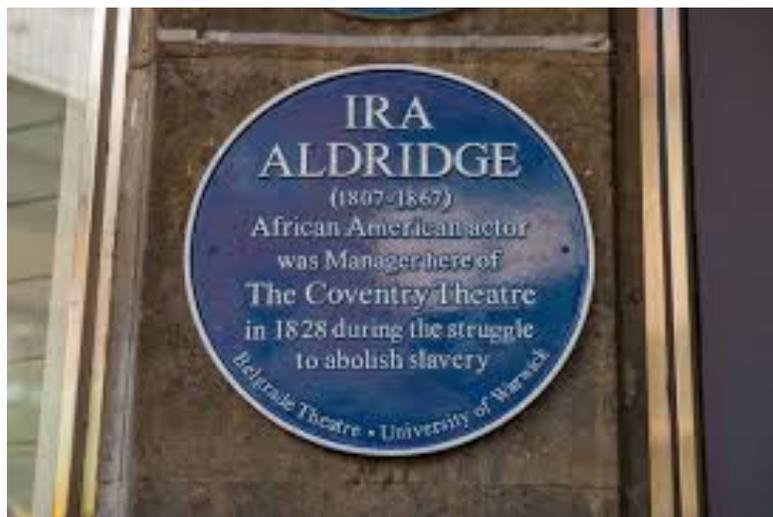
Ira tours Sheffield, Halifax, Newcastle, Manchester, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Liverpool, and Sunderland.

The Padlock by Isaac Bickerstaff is one of the plays in Ira's repertoire as he tours the provinces. He plays Mungo, a black servant from the West Indies, a role usually played by a white man in blackface. Mungo is a stereotype: a musical, heavy drinking, money-grubbing servant whose dialect imitates that of West Indies slaves. Mungo's master beats him with a rattan cane and makes him sing and dance on cue. Some of Mungo's lines from Act II, Scene 1 show how dehumanizing and exploitative this "comic" role was: "Me get supper ready, and now me go to de cellar - But I say, Massa, ax de old man now, what good him watching do, him bolts, and him bars, him walls, and him padlocks".



Ira Aldridge as Mungo in *The Padlock*

1828 Ira becomes manager of the Coventry Theatre for one season, making him the first black theater manager in the UK. His season uses melodrama, music and Shakespeare to challenge racist stereotypes to much success.



A plaque at the Coventry Theatre honoring Aldridge's management of their 1828 season

1828–1830 Parliament is deluged with over 5000 petitions calling for the gradual abolition of slavery, but progress in the Commons is slow and halting.

Nineteenth century acting style is demonstrated in *Engaged* at the Haymarket Theatre.

1829 Ira tours Kings Lynn, Norwich, Yarmouth, Bury, Hull, Richmond, Belfast, and Lancaster.

Ira Aldridge plays Othello and Charles Kean (1811–1868) plays Iago in Belfast.

29 September 1829 Sir Robert Peel sets up the Metropolitan Police, establishing the first paid, uniformed constabulary, called “Peelers” or “Bobbies”.

Between 1829 and 1855 Ira Aldridge performs the monologue “The Negro Boy” as a song on at least 104 occasions. Written expressly for him by the prolific local writer James Bisset, it is an attack on slavery.

December 1831 A Baptist minister named Sam ‘Daddy’ Sharpe leads 20,000 slaves in Jamaica to revolt. Leaders call for a general work stoppage, urging slaves to refuse to work without pay. That night, fires across the horizon signal the beginning of the insurrection. Slaves are instructed to sit down and refuse to work, and if they are attacked, to retaliate by burning buildings, not by harming persons or crops. The slaves are persuaded to surrender peacefully when the British governor prematurely announces that slavery has been abolished by Parliament; Sharpe and more than 1,000 of his followers are executed. Public opinion in Britain is outraged and this hastens the demise of slavery.

1832 Pierre Laporte becomes manager of Theatre Royal Covent Garden. *The Theatrical Journal and Stranger’s Guide* (1841) reports, “whatever M. Laporte’s failings may be, he is certainly an indefatigable caterer for his supporters; season after season producing some extraordinary novelty, whether in the shape of a new singer, a new dancer, or the child of the Tragic muse in *Mademoiselle Rachel*”.

1833 Richard H. Colfax's *Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs, of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* is published in New York. A passage: "The lengthy arguments concerning the intellect of the negro ... and the numerous explanations of his mental inferiority ... are rendered totally useless, if it can be shown, that the portion of his brain, which presides over the animal functions, exceeds, to any great extent, that from which the mental endowments arise ... His jaws large and projecting, his chin retreating, his forehead low ... his eyeballs are very prominent ... Can any such man become great or elevated?"

25 March 1833 Edmund Kean collapses on stage playing Othello to his son's Iago. William Hazlitt, considered one of the greatest critics and essayists in the history of the English language, had termed Edmund's performance as "beyond all praise". A description of Kean's performance as Othello by writer Gabriel Harrison: "He amazed his hearers by its loudness and his wonderful rapidity of enunciation of syllables and words. In his rage of jealousy, fire streamed from his eyes, and the emotions of his body were so great that he shook the spangles from off his silk tunic ... His eyes were polished jets, large and penetrating, and produced an instant effect. There was no expression of love in them. Deceit, anger and revenge was their field of power."

10 and 12 April 1833 Ira takes over Kean's role of Othello at Theatre Royal Covent Garden. He plays with the same company, but Charles Kean does not go on.

16 April 1833 Covent Garden closes for 5 days.

26 July 1833 The Abolition of Slavery Act is passed. It receives Royal Assent on August 28 and takes effect on August 1, 1834.

1833 Ira tours Surrey Theatre, Whitechapel Pavilion Theatre, City Theatre Cripplegate, Bath, Swansea; Landillo and Aberystwyth, Wales; Dublin and Cork Ireland; and Hull and Chatham.

Eliza O'Neill (1791– 1872), one of Ireland's greatest actresses, declares, "During my professional and private life, I never saw so correct a

portraiture of Othello amidst the principal luminaires of my age. It is true, Kean reserved himself for particular passages, which were made to deliver with startling effect; but as a whole, his performance was not superior to the Roscius, whose acting throughout is transcendently uniform”.

1837 Victoria becomes Queen of England at the age of 18. She reigns for more than 60 years, during which time significant social, economic and technological changes take place, including the expansion of Britain’s industrial power and of the British Empire.

1838 Ira performs in Belfast and is made Brother Mason of the Grand Lodge of Ireland on August 1, 1838.

Over 700,000 slaves are freed in the British Caribbean. Plantation owners receive about £20 million in government compensation for the loss of their slaves, the equivalent of \$222 billion today. The former slaves receive nothing.

1839 Ira is made excellent Brother of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Ireland.

1840 Daniel Aldridge, Ira’s father, dies aged 68. Having left America over 16 years previously, Ira never saw his father again.

1841 Pierre Laporte dies.

1842 Charles Kean and Ellen Tree marry. They perform and manage The Princess Theatre together.

1848 Ira plays Theatre Royal Chichester and Arundel Castle. He struggles to gain and sustain provincial audiences in the UK, and soon turns to the rest of Europe.



Arundel Castle, Sussex, present day

1848 Ira has a son, Ira Daniel. His mother is unknown. Ira Daniel lives with Margaret Aldridge, Ira's wife, who brings him up as her own.



Ira as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* in an illustration that appeared in J. Tallis & Co.'s edition of *The Complete Works of Shakspeare* (1851–53)

1850 To provide more scope for his talents, Aldridge commissions a radical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, which he stages at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh, in 1850. In this version, the Machiavellian Aaron becomes the hero of the drama, breaking free of chains to leap into a river and save his child. The *Theatrical Journal* declared it to be an "exceedingly clever and effective" performance, "tempered by dignity and discretion".

14 July 1852 Ira leaves England for his first tour of the Continent; his travels include St Hubert, Aix-la-Chapelle, Elberfeld, Cologne, Frankfurt-on-Main, Basel, Bonn, Leipzig, Vienna, Berlin and other cities in the German Federation, and Prague, Brunn, Budapest, Munich, and Poland.

1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe is published. It crystallizes anti-slavery sentiment in the US. More than 500,000 copies are sold in the first five years in the US alone.

1853 Ira plays Berlin and Potsdam.

Ira is awarded the Prussian Gold Medal of the First Class for Art and Science by the King of Prussia.

Ira plays Prague and Vienna.

Emperor Franz Joseph presents Ira with the Medal of Ferdinand.

Ira plays Budapest.

Ira becomes Honorary member of the Hungarian Dramatic Conservatoire.

1854 Ira plays Germany, Switzerland, Lithuania, Holland, and Krakow.

Ira receives The Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold, presented by the Emperor Of Austria.

Ira is awarded Switzerland's White Cross.

1855 Ira is in London, sick for several months.

After recuperating, Ira then plays Plymouth, Yarmouth, and Norwich.

William John Grayson, a US Representative from South Carolina, publishes his second edition of *The Hireling and the Slave*. He writes: "Slavery is the negro system of labor. He is lazy and improvident. Slavery makes all work, and it ensures homes, food and clothing for all. It permits no idleness, and it provides for sickness, infancy and old age. It allows no tramping or skulking, and it knows no pauperism. This is the whole system substantially ... What more can be required of Slavery, in reference to the negro, than has been done? It has made him, from a savage, an orderly and efficient laborer. It supports him in comfort and peace. It restrains his vices. It improves his mind, morals and manners. It instructs him in Christian knowledge".

January-March 1857 Ira plays Cork, Ireland and Newcastle, England.

6 March 1857 The Supreme Court of the United States, in the Dred Scott case, rules that African-Americans, free or slave, are not citizens and have no recourse in federal courts.

April-May 1857 Ira plays Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* at Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, City of London and is reviewed in *The Era*: "... Mr. Aldridge's conception of the art of Aaron is excellent – gentle and impassioned by turns; now, burning with jealousy, as he suspects the honour of the Queen; anon, fierce with rage, as he reflects upon the wrongs which have been done him – the murder of Alarbus and the abduction of his son: and then all tenderness and emotion in the gentler passages with his infant. All these phases of the character Mr. Aldridge delineated with judgement and great force of expression."

10 May 1857 Members of the Bengal army mutiny in Meerut and march towards Delhi, which they take two days later. It is retaken in September. Lucknow is twice besieged before the rebels are suppressed.

June 1857 Ira plays Stockholm, Sweden.



Newspaper illustration of Aldridge in Sweden, June 1857

October 1857 Ira returns to England and plays at the City of London Theatre in London.

July 1858 Ira plays the Lyceum Theatre in Westminster.

September 1858 Ira plays in Prague in the Czech Republic.

December 1858-January 1859 Ira plays St. Petersburg during his first tour of Russia. He meets Taras Shevchenko. Despite the barrier of language—one of Tolstoy's daughters, Katherine, serves as an early translator between them—the two, who share similar artistic

temperaments, values and politics, become good friends.



Sketch of Ira Aldridge by Ukrainian artist Taras Shevchenko, 1858, signed by him and Aldridge

Shevchenko and his artist friends are enthralled by Aldridge's acting and interpretation of Shakespeare. The group attend every performance in St. Petersburg. Despite their inability to comprehend a single word of the original English Aldridge is speaking, they are so enthusiastic and react so vociferously that they are often expelled from the theater.

1859 John Brown begins a war for the liberation of all slaves in the United States. An armed uprising by him and his eighteen supporters is crushed. Brown is tried, convicted and hanged.

Charles Darwin has been sitting on his *Origin of the Species* for 21 years. He has it published.

January-April 1859 Aldridge finishes his tour of Russia in February and moves on to Germany.



Aldridge as Shylock in St. Petersburg, Russia

May-June 1859 Ira recovers from rheumatism.

29 May 1859 Amanda Von Brandt (1834-1915) arrives from Hamburg by ship. She is identified on the manifest as a native of Sweden, originally from Stockholm, and a singer. It soon becomes evident that she has come to be with Aldridge.

June-9 July 1859 Aldridge performs at Hull, Wolverhampton, and Hanley. His next stop is to be a two-month engagement at Leicester's Theatre Royal on July 9, but an illness keeps him grounded for two months. Amanda Brandt becomes pregnant with their first child.

September 1859-November 1860 Aldridge tours the English provinces of Richmond, Cambridge, Cheltenham, Gloucester, Cardiff, Leicester, King's Lynn, Cork, Birmingham, Jersey, Ryde, Southampton,

and Brighton, followed by Cork, Ireland and Glasgow, Scotland.

29 March 1860 Irene Luranah Aldridge is born to Ira and Amanda.

1860 International trade has been increasing. World exports are 4.53 times what they were in 1800.

A network in the US of abolitionist Quakers, Unitarians, Transcendentalists and Underground Railroad organizers have been practicing nonviolent civil disobedience for about ten years, preceding Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience by several decades. They have been working against the capture of fugitive slaves. Prominent among them is the Unitarian Theodore Parker.

1861 Abraham Lincoln takes office as the President of the United States. He tries to reassure southern states, announcing that he does not intend to interfere, directly or indirectly, with the institution of slavery. Nevertheless, southern politicians are contriving reasons to panic. Some southern states proclaim secession. Gun battles erupt in the South over who will possess federal forts. The US Civil War begins.



Russian Lithograph of Aldridge as Othello

June 1861-December 1862 Ira tours Russia again. Amanda accompanies him.

1862 Sometime during this year, Ira and Amanda's son, Ira Frederick Aldridge, Jr. is born

In Prussia, the largest of the German states, a member of the landed aristocracy, Otto von Bismarck, becomes minister-president. Representing the king, he declares that his government is to rule without parliament.

The Frenchman Victor Hugo has his historical novel *Les Misérables* published. About the rebellion in Paris that began in 1830 against King Charles X, the book is serialized in ten installments and becomes a best seller across Europe and North America. It is so popular that police are called in to control impatient crowds at bookstores. Conservatives see it as a dangerous work and a manual for insurgency. Hugo favors revolution, but contrary to Karl Marx, he aims to unite revolution and religion. Also unlike Marx, who wants to eliminate the ruling class as a class, Hugo wants to inspire them to humanitarianism, proposing freedom and justice for all.

May 1863-December 1863 Ira returns to Russia for another tour.

1863 President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation becomes law.

Slavery ends in Dutch-ruled Indonesia.

31 March 1864 Margaret Aldridge dies after a long period of ill health. She is buried in London.

May 1864-October 1864 Ira returns to Russia for another tour, including Rybinsk, which he mentions in the play.

January 1865 Aldridge performs in Kazan, Russia.

20 April 1865 Ira marries Amanda von Brandt at St. John the

Evangelist Parish Church in Penge, a southern suburb of London.

August 1865 Ira plays the Haymarket in London.

1865 The US Civil War ends with General Robert E. Lee and his officers surrendering their swords. President Lincoln is assassinated. With the end of the Civil War, Ira begins to consider a tour of the US.

Excessive force in crushing a rebellion in Jamaica prompts an investigation in England. The governor of the island is widely condemned and extradited to London, where many demand that he be tried for murder. He is removed from office but a grand jury refuses to indict him.

February-March 1866 Ira Plays Odessa, Russia.

March 1866 Ira plays Constantinople, Turkey.

10 March 1866 Amanda Christina Elizabeth Aldridge (1866-1956) is born to Ira and Amanda.

March-August 1866 Ira tours Russia again.

August 1866 Ira plays in Warsaw, Poland.

December 1866-April 1867 Ira tours France. In Paris, Amanda urges him to rewrite his last will and testament, which he does on June 25. She may have insisted on this revision because she was worried about Aldridge's declining health.

1867 In the US, the Republican Party has gained more seats in Congress, and Congress overrides President Andrew Johnson's veto of the "Reconstruction Act." An army, including a black militia, is sent to the South to enforce the law.

Five all-black colleges are founded in the US: Howard University in Washington D.C., Morgan State College in Maryland, Talladega College

in Alabama, St. Augustine's College and Johnson C. Smith College in North Carolina.



Sketch of Aldridge as Othello in the *Encyclopedie Theatrale Illustree*

June 1867 Ira Plays Moscow on his way to Łódź, Poland, where he has an engagement starting the following month. In the aftermath of the American Civil War, he has agreed to a North American tour through the New York theater agents Robert H. and Thomas Francis Gibbons. It is slated to start in September. He is "ready to return and establish his presence on the legitimate stage in New York City and elsewhere in an effort to serve his people by making through his art an effective argument for racial equality, as he had done so successfully in Europe. And in the course of attempting to accomplish this feat, risky as it was, he was prepared to try out a role he had never played before—Caliban, the half-human monster in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. He would also play his favorite white roles—Shylock, Macbeth, and Lear—as well as Othello. This was a bold and courageous undertaking. He must have been aware that no other black man had ever done this in America. By stepping on stage in the New World, he would be making his mark in theatrical

history". (Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Last Years, 1855-1867*)

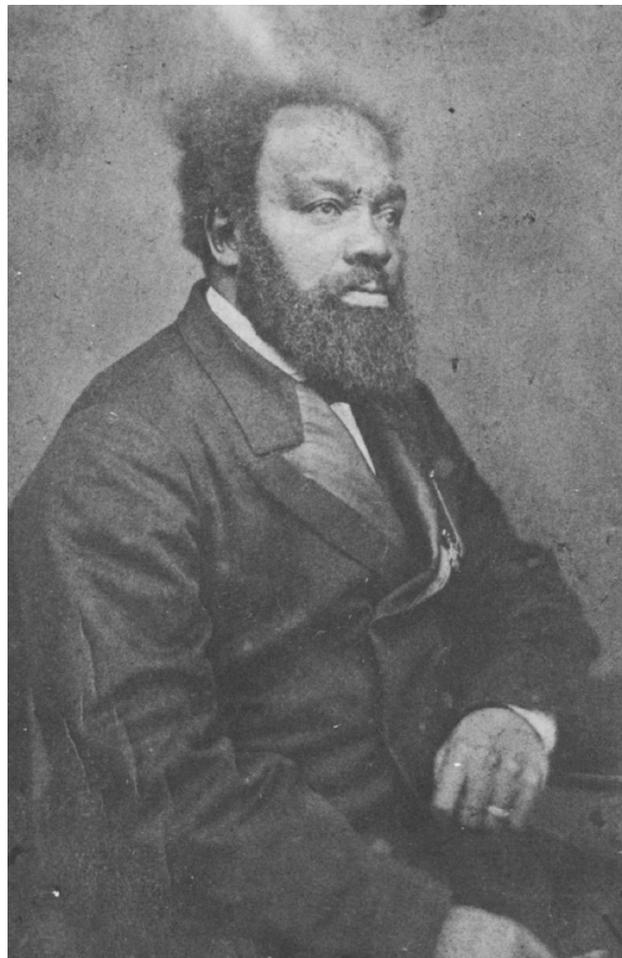
4 August 1867 In a letter to Robert and Thomas Gibbons, Ira apologizes for his "protracted silence", which he attributes to "illness of a Choleraic character," but assures them that he is "very much better". His recovery didn't last; he grew weaker over the next few days, and his much-anticipated debut as Othello in Łódź on August 6 is canceled.

7 August 1867 Ira Aldridge dies in Łódź, reportedly of a lung infection, although accounts differ. He is given a state funeral that lasts over 10 hours, of which the local newspaper, *The Lodzer Zeitung*, writes, "we cannot remember ever having seen a funeral procession in Łódź that matched this one in grandness". The article notes that the city authorities generously provide financial resources for it with the help of the theater owner, August Hentschel. The procession crosses the city, witnessed by countless crowds of the city's residents, who had been gathering for hours beforehand. Choirs and vocal ensembles, some of which consist of workers from the Łódź factories, fill the streets with song. The orchestra of the Russian dragoon regiment marches behind them, followed by the Theatrical Society, who carry red velvet cushions holding state awards conferred on Aldridge during his lifetime, as well as a huge laurel wreath.

Ira's hearse is flanked by members of the Rifle Society dressed in ceremonial attire. Mourners walk behind the hearse, led by August Hentschel and the Mayor. Twelve Lodz guilds next pay their last respects to Aldridge. Behind them is the closed carriage, in which Amanda Aldridge is riding. Crowds of people follow the carriage as the procession makes its way to the burial grounds, accompanied by sounds of music, singing and church bells chiming. There Aldridge's body is placed in a newly erected tomb, donated by a citizen who had recently built it for himself. The pastor delivered a speech over Aldridge's grave, describing "the fragility of human life and fate, which often casts people far away from their place of birth, where they have to rest for ever, away from their loved ones and friends." The tomb is then piled with flowers and wreaths.



Ira Aldridge's grave in Łódź, Poland



Ira Aldridge in Łódź, Poland, August 1867



Engraving of Aldridge as Othello from his obituary in the Aug 24, 1867
New York Clipper

RESOURCES

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"*The work of Ira Aldridge rediscovered 190 years on is evidence of his battle with prejudice*" contributed by Shakespeare's Globe. *Medium*, Sep 18, 2017