Famous New Yorker
Ira Fredrick Aldridge

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Ira Aldridge overcame racial prejudice and language barriers to become the most famous black actor of the 19th century – but he had to leave the U.S. to do it.

Ira Frederick Aldridge was born in New York City on July 24, 1807. His family was free at a time when slavery was still legal in New York State. His father wanted Ira to follow him into a career as a preacher. After attending the progressive African Free School, where he discovered classical literature and won a prize for public speaking, Ira briefly studied religion at Union College in Schenectady. His real desire was to become an actor.

Against his father's wishes, Ira joined the African Company, a pioneer black theatrical troupe. The company performed Shakespeare plays with all-black casts along with contemporary works. The actors, including Ira, were attacked by rival performers and racists who hated the idea of blacks playing classical roles. Ira soon decided that his opportunities as an actor were limited in the U.S.

In 1824, Ira Aldridge worked his way across the Atlantic as a ship's steward. He hoped to improve his craft in England, the home of Shakespeare. He made his English debut in 1825. Some English critics thought him unfit for the stage while others recognized a developing talent. Aldridge soon found regular work playing dark-skinned ethnic characters in touring companies throughout the United Kingdom.

As he developed as an actor, Aldridge learned the art of self-promotion. For a time he changed his name to Keene to remind people of the famous English actor Edmund Kean. Kean himself saw Aldridge play Othello, Shakespeare's greatest black character, and wrote him a letter of recommendation. Embracing an older theatrical tradition, Aldridge billed himself as "the African Roscius," after the most famous actor of ancient Rome. He stretched the truth about the "African" part, claiming that he was a native of Senegal and the son of a Fulani prince.

Aldridge played Othello at the Theater-Royal at Covent Garden, England's most prestigious theater, in 1833. He received mixed reviews and never starred on the London stage again. Beginning in the 1850s, he achieved his greatest success on the European continent. He won praise for a wide range of Shakespearean roles, many played in "whiteface" makeup. Even when audiences didn't understand English, critics admired his stage presence and emotional power. As black slavery was abolished around the world, Aldridge embodied racial equality in the arts as both an actor and playwright. His own play, *The Black Doctor,* became an important part of his repertoire.

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the U.S., Aldridge began planning his first-ever American tour. Before he could return home, he died during a tour of Poland on August 7, 1867. Although few black Americans saw Aldridge perform, the black community followed his career closely. He remained an inspirational figure long after his death. Several black theater companies named themselves after Aldridge. Today, Howard University has an Ira Aldridge Theater. For his role in theatrical history, Aldridge was the first black actor honored with a memorial plaque at the Shakespeare Memorial Theater in Stratford-on-Avon. He is the only one to this day.

New York City consists of five boroughs—The Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island—which were consolidated into a single city in 1898.

To view the "Timeline of Ira Aldridge" from Samuel French go to **www.samuelfrench.com/breakingcharacter/?p=2397.** *This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program.* *All rights reserved 2015.*