

## THE BIRTH OF A NOTION: the beginning of a Black Theater in Lower Manhattan

**B**y 1820, Lower Manhattan had a vibrant, largely free community of 10,000 Americans of African descent that developed over 200 years. In his writings, James Weldon Johnson described an African-American community living from Greenwich Village to Little Italy with a large enclave living on Sullivan, Thompson, Bleecker, Grove, Minetta Lane and adjacent streets.

It was natural, then, that entrepreneur William Alexander Brown might come up with the provocative idea of establishing a theatre to serve ladies and gentlemen of colour. With such actors as Ira Aldridge, a New York-born son of a minister who was given a classical education and eventually became famous across two continents for his acting, and partner James Hewlett, Brown set up the African Grove Theatre in 1821, the first resident African American theater in the United States.

Brown himself was from the West Indies and served many years as a ship's steward. His radical entertainment idea drew both blacks and whites, who were seated separately. But before long, the struggle to create a permanent home for African American art and entertainment was often seen as an affront to the police, businessmen and low-lives of a brutal, renegade city that still had dwindling slave markets.

The temporary success of performances of such plays as Shakespeare's "Richard III" started

to give way to constant complaints, threats and violence. Brown had to find many locations for his establishment. At one site on Mercer Street, paid thugs raided the location, stripped the actors on stage of their costumes, destroyed scenery and beat Brown. Eleven men were arrested but there were no charges. In 1826, the African Grove was burned to the ground.

The theatre journey north to Harlem followed the ongoing migration of an African-American community in search of better housing and employment opportunities for the next 100 years. Along the way such companies as the Astor Place Colored Tragedy Company in 1878 and the All-Star Stock Company (1895) began to dot the map from downtown to uptown. These efforts were supported along the way by liberal venues willing to take chances on African-American plays including the legendary Greenwich Mews, the Provincetown Playhouse and the Henry Street Playhouse. By the third quarter of the 20th century African-American owned theaters had been established, notably Douglas Turner Ward's Negro Ensemble Company and Woodie King's New Federal Theatre. Although the full impact of these enterprises may not be yet known, they do reflect the ongoing spirit of black thespians and entrepreneurs following in the tradition of William Alexander Brown and the African Theatre.