

Lafayette Theater

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The Lafayette Theater at 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue was built in 1912 by John Mulon-ski; during the 1910s and 1920s it became one of the most important theaters in Harlem catering to the African American community. The Lafayette, which at one time was called the "House Beautiful", was the largest theater in Harlem; it was also the first major playhouse there to desegregate: as early as 1912 African American theatergoers were allowed to sit in the orchestra. From 1915 to 1923 the Lafayette was home to an important theatrical troupe, the Lafayette Players. The theater became known as "the cradle of stars" (Anderson 1982, 236); among the many prominent actors, singers, and musicians who appeared on its stage were Charles Gilpin, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Florence Mills, Bessie and Mamie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Arthur "Dooley" Wilson. Because of the variety and high artistic standards of its productions, the Lafayette was both a popular and critical success. Its presentations were received nationwide in black newspapers, and critics acknowledged its significance in the development of African American theater and acting during the Harlem Renaissance.

Like most other theaters of the time, the Lafayette Theater was originally owned and managed by whites. This began to change in 1914, however, when Lester Walton, a black journalist, leased the Lafayette—which had been a vaudeville and movie theater—and took over the duties of comanager. Walton broadened the Lafayette's range of productions and in 1915 persuaded Anita Bush to transfer her theatrical company to the Lafayette from a rival theater, the Lincoln. Less than a year later, the Anita Bush Stock Company changed its name to the Lafayette Players Stock Company; the troupe soon became known simply as the Lafayette Players. Walton also pushed for a black-only employment policy at the Lafayette. Owing to disagreements within the management, Walton left the Lafayette Theater in 1916 but continued to support it in his journalistic writings. Management rights of the theater and its stock company were sold to the Elite Amusement Corporation, a theatrical syndicate controlling African American playhouses; and then were sold to another syndicate, the Quality Amusement corporation. In 1919 the Lafayette became a completely African American enterprise, when two black Philadelphians—the bankers E.C. Brown and Andrew F. Stevens—

bought controlling ownership of Quality Amusement. They also brought Lester Walton back to the management staff. Walton left the Lafayette again in 1923, when Frank Schiffman and Leo Brechler bought the theater in order to turn it into a vaudeville house.

The economic downturn of the Depression forced Schiffman and Brechler to close the Lafayette in 1934. During the New Deal era, however, it was revived as a legitimate theater for the Federal Theater Project (FTP) of the Works Progress Administration; from 1935 to 1939 the theater served as the headquarters of the FTP's New York Negro Unit. During this period the Lafayette became famous as the theater where Orson Welles' production of a "voodoo"-*Macbeth* (1936) was staged. This was an adaptation of Shakespeare's play set in Haiti of the 1820s and included elements of African American and Afro-Caribbean culture. In 1939 the Lafayette Theater was turned into a movie theater; eventually, it was turned into a church. A black theater impresario, Robert Macbeth, revived the Lafayette's dramatic tradition in 1966, when he leased a wing of the building and founded the New Lafayette Theater.

The Lafayette Theater seated 200 patrons, and its audiences were almost exclusively African American. Productions offered there followed the typical stock repertoire schedule, with a bill that changed weekly and with daily matinee and evening performances on Monday through Saturday. On Fridays an additional midnight show lasted until four o'clock in the morning. Wallace Thurman vividly recalled the lively atmosphere of these shows, which usually attracted a noisy crowd, turning the auditorium itself into a stage. The Lafayette offered a wide range of productions. The Lafayette Players regularly presented abridged versions of Broadway comedies and melodrama as well as classics, such as *Within the Law* (1915-16), *Madame X* (1916-17), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1916-17). In 1916 the Lafayette Theater participated in the tercentenary celebrations of Shakespeare's death with a production of *Othello*, and in 1923 the theater was host to productions of *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew* performed by the Ethiopian Players, a company based in Chicago. The Lafayette's fame, however, rested mainly on its productions of musical revues, such as Porter Grainger and Freddie Johnson's *Aces and Queens* (1925), and *Mississippi Days* (1928), starring Bessie Smith. Many of the shows presented at the Lafayette were simply replicas of recent Broadway hits. A popular success could also inspire new version; Lew Leslie's *Plantation Revue* (1922), for instance, was immediately modified and revived as *Club Alabam* within the same season.

Although reviews of the productions at the Lafayette generally favorable, progressive theater critics, writers, and intellectuals, such as Theophilus Lewis, Lester Walton, Wallace

Thurman, and Harold Cruse, complained that the Lafayette's was too "white" in the content and style of its presentations. In those days, however, legitimate drama that dealt seriously with black life and race relations was rare. Thus, not only criticism of its policies but also time was needed before the Lafayette began to produce works by African American playwrights, such as Andrew Bishop's *It Happened in Harlem* (1918) and Frank Wilson's *Pa Williams' Gal* (1923). Critics also objected to the Lafayette's practice of casting mostly light-skinned performers who might pass for white. There were no dark-complexioned chorus girls at the Lafayette, and dark-skinned actors occasionally whitened their faces for performances.

Although the Lafayette Theater never resolved the tension between the taste of its mass audience and the aesthetic or political demands of some of its critics, it did have a prominent place in the cultural life of Harlem during the 1910s and 1920s, and it was widely acclaimed by patrons and reviewers alike. As a completely black-operated house offering employment and theatrical training to a whole generation of African American actors, the Lafayette Theater came to represent a "focal point of ethnic pride" (Vorder Brugge 1987, 254) to Harlem's black community.

Further Reading

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