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Grupenhoff, Richard L.

WHATEVER THE OCCASION DEMANDS: THE STAGE AND SCREEN CAREER OF LORENZO TUCKER, "THE COLORED VALENTINO"

The Ohio State University

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WHATEVER THE OCCASION DEMANDS:

THE STAGE AND SCREEN CAREER OF LORENZO TUCKER,

"THE COLORED VALENTINO"

DISSERTATION
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By
Richard L. Grupenhoff, B.S., M.A.

* * * * *
The Ohio State University
1986

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Professor Roy Bowen
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Professor Clay Lowe

Approved By
Advisor
Department of Theatre
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1986
For Lorenzo Tucker
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank all those who have given me their support during this undertaking. My sincere appreciation goes to my advisor, Dr. Alan Woods, for his guidance and suggestions throughout my research, and to the other members of my reading committee, Drs. Roy Bowen, George Crepeau and Clay Lowe for their comments and support. My gratitude also goes to Ms. Kathy Loughney of the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress for her valuable assistance. I also thank my colleagues Drs. E. Michael Desilets and J. Denis Mercier for their critiques of the developing manuscript, and Cheryl Belfiglio and Pam Spencer for their help in preparing the text. Finally, I should thank my sons, Richard and James, and my wife, Carolyn, for their encouragement and faith in this endeavor.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

Lorenzo Tucker is not a familiar figure in the histories of American theatre and film, yet he has had a long and colorful career as a stage and screen actor; and it is the primary purpose of this study to gather and piece together the available historical evidence of his career in order to construct a biographical account that is as complete and objective as possible. In the process this biography will reveal that although Tucker has performed in twenty films and in numerous stage shows his career has not been limited to acting alone; indeed, he has worked in various capacities in show business during the past sixty years. In addition, Lorenzo Tucker remains one of the last first-hand witnesses of the evolution of black theatre and film from the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s to the present day, and his story helps to shed new light on a part of American entertainment history about which we know so very little, black show business. It is for these reasons that the career of Lorenzo Tucker is significant and worthy of study.

This biography of Lorenzo Tucker proceeds chronologically through the following six chapters. Chapter Two outlines Tucker's early years from his birth in Philadelphia to his entry into black
show business, highlighting those aspects of his early life that led him to choose such a career. Chapter Three covers Tucker's professional apprenticeship as a dancer, straight man and actor, and it places these activities in the context of the black theatre tradition in America. Chapter Four analyzes the development of black film history, and the collaboration between Oscar Micheaux and Tucker during the years from 1927 to 1933 that led to Tucker's early success as "The Colored Valentino."

Chapter Five also treats the period between 1927 and 1933, this time emphasizing Lorenzo Tucker's stage career, paying particular attention to his Broadway appearances. Chapter Six covers the years from 1933 to 1962, and follows Tucker through his first retirement from show business during the Depression to his re-emergence in black-cast films in the late 1930s, to World War Two and his work as a producer of camp shows while serving in the Army Air Corps, to his films of the late 1940s and his post-war tours in the United States and Great Britain, up to his second retirement in 1962. Chapter Seven covers the final period of Tucker's career, from 1962 to the present day, a period during which he has become a collector of black show business memorabilia and a commentator on black show business history. Also during this period Lorenzo Tucker has returned to show business for a third time, and to this day, at the age of seventy-nine, he continues to attend casting calls for film roles in Hollywood.

This narrative of the career of Lorenzo Tucker will reveal a man whose dedication to theatre and film is apparent in his willingness
to apply his talents whenever and wherever they are needed, or for, as he puts it, "Whatever the occasion demands." More than anything, Tucker's is a story of how a black man was able to survive in show business by adapting himself to a wide variety of production situations. Throughout his long career Tucker has performed as a film and stage actor, dancer, singer, vaudeville straight man and master of ceremonies. Behind the scenes he has been a company manager, lighting designer, producer, publicity man, photographer, actor's union organizer and chronicler of black theatre and film history.

This study will also show how the career of Lorenzo Tucker mirrored those of many black performers who came to Harlem in the 1920s when, as Carl Van Vechten noted, "The Negro was in the ascendency." They came seeking fame and fortune, but found, more often than not, obscurity and poverty. In the long view, Lorenzo Tucker belongs to his latter category, although he did bask for a few years in the limelight of early success. For the most part, however, Lorenzo Tucker was a skilled journeyman actor who, like thousands of other black performers, often had to seek temporary employment outside the entertainment world simply to survive. Thus, this career biography of Lorenzo Tucker is not a story of fame and riches, but rather a narrative of a life representative of the myriad of lesser-

---

1 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 27, 1985.

known black performers whose talent and contributions helped to shape the history of black theatre and film.

No one's career ever unfolds precisely as it may have been planned, since each person's life is in one way or another shaped by the milieu in which it evolves. This is especially true for members of oppressed minority groups in a world where choices are limited and where opportunities for success are hindered by the color of one's skin. Black men and women in the entertainment arts during the first half of this century were subjected to oppressive tactics and racial discrimination that reflected the society's prejudice against blacks as a whole, so much so that it is a wonder that blacks were able to establish such a rich and varied performance tradition at all.

Lorenzo Tucker was often a victim of this oppression and discrimination, and his story cannot be told without frequent references to the ever-present issue of race. But the ironies that accompany racial discrimination were carried a step further in Lorenzo Tucker's case, for he was a light-skinned black man. During the late 1920s his light complexion and handsome features fit the prevailing model for black leading men in black-cast films; years later, however, when Hollywood began to integrate, Tucker was too light-skinned to fit its image of what a black man should be. Throughout his life Lorenzo Tucker has had to struggle with the double irony that is the heritage of light-skinned blacks: too light to be black, and too black to be white, he was often discriminated against by both races. This is the story, therefore, of a man caught
between the two worlds of black and white, and what he did to survive.

Finally, although it is true that in the past twenty years there has been an upswing in scholarship in black theatre and film history in the United States, much work remains to be done in this long-neglected area. We know little, for example, about the structure of black film and theatre companies, or about how they trained their actors and financed their productions. The secondary purpose of this study, therefore, will be to uncover some of this information about the world of the black entertainment industry between 1910 and 1950. Since a biography is by extension an examination of the times and conditions in which its subject lived, this analysis of Lorenzo Tucker's career will also touch on some of the major black entertainers of the day, on the economics of producing black theatre and film, and on the technical and aesthetic limitations brought about by shoestring budgets and racial segregation.

Sources and Methods

A wide variety of sources were consulted in developing this study. An initial examination of past scholarships indicated that little was known about Tucker's career, although brief biographical sketches of Tucker appeared in Henry T. Sampson's Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films (1977), and Edward Mapp's Directory of Blacks in the Performing Arts (1978). Neither of these entries, however, was an attempt to inclusively document Tucker's career and place it in the context of black theatre and film history.
Much of the primary research of this study was undertaken at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center in New York, and at the George T. Johnson Collection in the Special Collections Library of the University of California in Los Angeles. Various sources were consulted at these three locations, including vertical files, microfilmed correspondence, photographs, programs and oral history tapes. Black newspapers such as the *Philadelphia Tribune, Amsterdam News, New York Age,* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* were also consulted for reviews and accounts of events that pertain to this study.

Another area of investigation was an examination of the films in which Lorenzo Tucker appeared. Essentially, these films were the primary source material for an analysis of Tucker's acting technique and ability. Eleven of the twenty films that constitute Tucker's filmography are known to exist. Ten of these films were screened at the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The remaining extant film is an archival master undergoing restoration and is consequently not yet available for viewing. The other nine films, including all of the silent films in which Tucker appeared, are now lost, although photographs, programs and cast records of these films do exist.

Additional information on Tucker and his career was acquired through interviews with men and women who were his contemporaries and fellow performers, including Fred O'Neal, Dick Campbell, Robert Earl Jones, Isabelle Cooley and Sylvia Birdsong. Finally, the central
source of information for this study was the group of personal
in-depth interviews conducted by the author with Lorenzo Tucker at
his home in Hollywood, California. In addition, Tucker also made
available his extensive collection of photographs, posters and
programs; and copies of some of these records appear in this study.

There are both advantages and disadvantages in undertaking a
biographical study of a living person. The greatest advantage,
according to Philip Ziegler, is that the contemporary biographer has
access to that person's oral testimony. Yet, this testimony must be
approached with caution, since oftentimes "Recollections are
embellished, [and] rococo details added to an unsatisfactorily stark
edifice of established fact . . . ."\textsuperscript{3} Obviously, each person
recounting his story for historical preservation has a vested
interest in the project, and no matter how objective and fair-minded
he may be about his own past, his memory may deceive him. The fact
is that we often remember the events we want to remember in the
version we want to remember them, regardless of our good intentions.
In such instances our emotional memory reinvents history.

It is the duty of the biographer, therefore, to verify as much
of the oral history presented to him as possible. Lorenzo Tucker's
recollections and accounts of his professional career (dates, films,
shows, etc.) have undergone careful scrutiny and have been verified,
and if they could not be verified they were not included in this
study. Tucker's recollections of his private life could not always

\textsuperscript{3}Philip Ziegler, "The Lure of Gossip, the Rules of History,"
be verified, of course, since most of the daily events in the life of an individual go unrecorded. It is difficult, for example, to verify everything Tucker says about his youth, since few records and witnesses remain. Consequently, only those elements of Tucker's private life that have a bearing on his career have been employed in this study.

What is important to note here is that the overwhelming majority of Lorenzo Tucker's recollections have proven to be accurate when placed up against the historical evidence. It will be the approach of this study, therefore, to weave together factual evidence and oral history to create the career biography of Lorenzo Tucker, using as its guide the advice of historian James Shenton:

I would say an oral history is a primary source, similar to a memoir, depending upon the individual. I suspect some people can remember through the spoken word better than through the written word. I think it's a source. It has to be used with the full knowledge that, like all sources, it has its vulnerabilities. It is a form of evidence which is important and allows you to gain access to the experiences of people who are not likely to write about them.\footnote{"An Interview with Historian James Shenton," \textit{The Dispatch}, The Newsletter of the Center for American Culture Studies, Columbia University, 4 (Fall, 1985): 18.}

Finally, a few remarks should be made about the terminology used in this study. The terms "colored," "negro," Afro-American" and "black" have had an intriguing linguistic and emotional history in the United States. Early in this century the terms "colored" and "negro" were widely used words to describe the members of that race; then both words were capitalized, apparently in an attempt to add dignity to the terms. Eventually, however, both terms were abandoned.
because of their negative connotations.

"Afro-American" was a term used in some intellectual circles in the 1920s and 1930s, and it enjoyed something of a rebirth in usage in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Unfortunately this term, which best describes the historical background of the race and is perhaps the least volatile, is nevertheless quite unwieldy, especially in a study that is required to use the description over and over again. Moreover, the term calls for the equal and opposite appellation for white people, "Anglo-American." "Black," however, is the term that enjoys the greatest currency and acceptability today in both worlds of day-to-day experience and scholarly endeavor. Consequently, this study will consistently employ the term "black" to describe the members of that race and their history. Capitalization of the term is avoided, since that device when used in this context is more political than scholarly. As Loften Mitchell has pointed out: "Now, of course, the term is 'black,' and polemics enter again, this time to support the capitalization of the 'B.' ... This could go on and on, but one thing is emphasized here, and that is that nomenclature and rhetoric do not change a condition."\(^5\) The only time the other terms will be used in this study is when they are part of quotations.

Evidence and Scholarship

The major problem confronting the study of black-cast films is that many of the primary pieces of information—the films themselves—have been either lost or destroyed. For example, this study has uncovered records of twenty films in which Lorenzo Tucker appeared between 1927 and 1948, yet only eleven of those films are known to exist today. In addition, only four of the eleven films that Tucker made under the direction of black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux remain available to us. Indeed, of the more than forty films made by Micheaux between 1919 and 1948 fewer than ten are left today, and only one of these is from Micheaux's prolific silent period. To compound the problem, not all of these remaining films are complete. Apparently later distributors of the surviving films often mutilated them by excising or re-arranging scenes, thus rendering the narratives difficult to comprehend. Then too, at least one film in which Tucker received credit for appearing is so cut up that he does not appear at all.

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6 This is not unusual, however. In fact, it has been estimated that more than half of all the films ever made in the United States have been lost or destroyed. See Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 29.

7 Body and Soul (1924). This was the first film in which Paul Robeson appeared.

8 The print of Miracle in Harlem (1938) in the Library of Congress is so cut up and rearranged that its plot is difficult to follow.

9 Apparently large sections of the Library of Congress' print of The Exile (1931) have been excised.
A second problem is that most of these black-cast films received little or no recognition outside the black community and, consequently, little is known about them. By 1920 the majority of professional feature filmmaking companies had moved to Hollywood and, if general histories of film are to be used as a guide, few professional productions were being shot anywhere else in the United States. This parochial attitude is in part due to the fact that by 1915 Hollywood films had already become the standards for comparison, and films produced without Hollywood budgets and their concomitant technical sophistication were simply not recognized by critics or historians.

The fact is, however, that even though the majority of the large motion picture companies had moved to the West Coast before 1920, there remained in New York (and in other cities) motion picture companies dedicated to making films about the black experience for black audiences. 10 The most important of these companies in terms of longevity and output was that of producer–writer–director–distributor Oscar Micheaux, that enigmatic black filmmaker who made Lorenzo Tucker one of the earliest leading men of black-cast films. Although these black film companies almost always operated on very low budgets they were able to produce, between 1910 and 1950, over three hundred black-cast films that were screened in approximately

seven hundred segregated theatres throughout the United States. Because these films were shown only to black audiences they were virtually unknown by white America for a long time, and have remained a rather obscure part of film history. Much scholarly work on these films still needs to be accomplished if we are to understand fully the black contribution to the history of motion pictures in the United States.

The first important study of the history of blacks in film was Peter Noble's *The Negro in Film* (1948), but this was primarily a study of black performers in Hollywood films. Seldom did Noble discuss black performers in films made outside Hollywood, and important black producers like Noble Johnson and Oscar Micheaux were mentioned only in passing, and only as they related to the dominant Hollywood industry. Very little scholarship on black film history was done in the following twenty years, but one of the results of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was that blacks became increasingly aware of the need to recover their heritage and history. This new consciousness led to an upsurge, in the 1970s, of publications on the topic of black film history.

Out of that publication activity came a series of source books and compilations that have come to serve as the bedrock of black film scholarship. These include Edward Mapp's *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday* (1972), and Ann Powers' *Blacks in American Movies: A Selected Bibliography* (1974). Perhaps a best of these

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11Ibid., p. 4.
collections are Henry T. Sampson's *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (1977), which also contains short biographical entries on many nearly forgotten black performers; and Phyllis R. Klotman's *Frame by Frame: A Black Filmography* (1979), a comprehensive list of black films and film practitioners. Also important is the recent study by Marshall Hyatt, *The Afro-American Cinematic Experience: An Annotated Bibliography and Filmography* (1983), a compilation of nearly 1,000 entries on articles about black films and filmmakers.

The second type of works published in the 1970s include interpretive studies that were aimed at a larger audience, but nevertheless provided valuable insights into the history of black filmmaking. Included among these were Don Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973); Eileen Landay's *Black Film Stars* (1973); James P. Murray's *To Find an Image: Black Film from Uncle Tom to Superfly* (1973); David J. Leab's *From Sambo to "Super­spades": The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (1975); Gary Null's *Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures* (1975); and the book edited by Lindsay Patterson, *Black Films and Filmmakers: A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero* (1975).

Perhaps the most important critical studies to emerge in the last decade are Thomas Cripp's impressive works, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (1977), and *Black Film as Genre* (1978). This latter work contains a comprehensive summary of criticism and scholarship about black films and blacks in
films prior to 1978. Slow Fade to Black treats Hollywood films as well as all-black independent films; in it Cripps develops a penetrating analysis of the films and production practices of Oscar Micheaux. Also of value is James R. Nesteby's Black Images in American Films, 1896-1954 (1982), a cultural study that traces the changing image of blacks in films from the 1896 Supreme Court decision on Plessy versus Ferguson (permitting "separate but equal" public facilities, thereby legitimizing de facto segregation), to the 1954 decision on Brown versus the Board of Education (marking the beginning of school desegregation and, to an extent, the beginning of the civil rights movement).

The student of early 20th century black theatre history confronts the same problem besetting the study of black film history—limited evidence. Unlike film, theatre leaves behind no visible record of performance. Moreover, scripts from early black vaudeville, cabaret and variety shows are virtually non-existent, since these shows were lightly scripted at best, consisting primarily of a series of specialty acts and headliners usually organized into a program by a producer with assistance from his composer and choreographer. Even the comedy acts were not scripted, since they consisted of traditional, well-worn routines catalogued in the memories of the comedians.

In addition, these shows opened and closed in rapid succession. During the late 1920s and early 1930s theatrical activity in Harlem was so fast-paced that a new show might typically be performed three times a day from Thursday through Sunday, and the bill changed
weekly. Finally, records of performance are scarce. White newspapers did not generally run advertisements of black shows, and did not send their critics to review them. Then too, black newspapers have not been properly collected and preserved over the years, and library holdings of them are often woefully incomplete. Sometimes the only records that remain are posters and programs,¹² and the memories of those performers who were part of the shows.

This work's departure point for the study of early black theatre has been Henry T. Sampson's Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows (1980), which was written to fill the significant gap in American musical theatre history created by the omission from previous studies of the contributions of pioneering blacks and their musical shows. Sampson's sources of information were the thousands of issues of black newspapers from the period. Also of general value has been Allen Woll's Dictionary of the Black Theatre (1983), and James V. Hatch's Black Images on the American Stage: A Bibliography of Plays and Musicals, 1770-1970. Edward Mapp's Directory of Blacks in the Performing Arts (1978) is a good introduction to the performers and personalities of black theatre. Finally, an in-depth study of an important black theatre company of the 1920s is Sister Mary F. Thompson's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "The Lafayette Players, 1915-1932" (1972).

¹² A recent attempt to recapture the flavor of some of these shows is Jack Shiffman's Harlem Heyday (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1984), in which the author relates the history of the Apollo Theatre by employing vintage programs as his guide.
Robert C. Toll's *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (1974) is helpful in tracing American minstrelsy as it evolved from antebellum shows with white men in blackface to the post-Civil War shows staged and performed by blacks in blackface. Carl Wittke's *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (1968) provides a good analysis in understanding of the structure of the minstrel shows, and Jack Haverly's *Negro Minstrels: A Complete Guide* (1968) is a reprint of a quaint yet instructive 1902 compilation of scripts of some of the many comic routines between end men and interlocutor. Also valuable has been Brooks McNamara's *Step Right Up: An Illustrated History of the American Medicine Show* (1976), which traces the history of the medicine shows and indicates their relationship to vaudeville and minstrel shows. All of these works are important to this study for the insights they provide on the structure of the minstrel shows, which was partly absorbed by the black vaudeville and musical shows of the 1920s; and for the information they provide on the role of the interlocutor (later the straight man and master of ceremonies), that indispensible member of the minstrel show cast, and one of the first roles played by Lorenzo Tucker when he began his show business career in black vaudeville in 1926.

While black theatre in America had its roots in the countless performances of black minstrel shows and musical variety acts that criss-crossed the country from about 1865 to 1920, it was in New York City that black theatre grew to maturity. By 1915 Harlem had begun to be significantly and irrevocably changed by the migration of
blacks from the South, and by the late 1920s Harlem was almost exclusively black.

In effect, Harlem evolved into a city within a city, the geographical boundaries of which were the few square blocks centered around 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. There were other boundaries to contend with, however, including the walls of economic and social discrimination that are often imposed on the racial minorities. As a result, Harlem developed its own mores and social practices, and although these lifestyles were often imitative of those of the white culture, blacks were always aware of their separateness, if only because of the color of their skin. Such segregation worked to infuse black artists and intellectuals with a conscious desire to record the black experience and define the black identity. Consequently, the 1920s saw an extraordinary flowering of creativity by blacks that has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Although probably best remembered as an intellectual and literary movement, the Harlem Renaissance also witnessed significant developments in the plastic and performing arts.

When Lorenzo Tucker arrived in New York City in 1927 the Harlem Renaissance was at its zenith. Within a short time Tucker became acquainted with many performers, and achieved entry into Harlem's soirees and intellectual circles as well. Early on he met Carl Van Vechten, the white savant and socialite whose criticism, reviews and novels had almost single-handedly introduced the Harlem Renaissance as a significant artistic movement to the outside world. Van Vechten was also responsible for bringing many white artists and intellectuals
to the teas and parties of the Harlem haut monde. His reviews for *Vanity Fair* and books such as *Nigger Heaven* (1926), *Parties* (1930), and *Sacred and Profane Memories* (1932), provide valuable perspectives on black society and performing arts of the period.

An informal social history of the period and a fine summary of black theatre history in Harlem by one who lived through it is provided by James Weldon Johnson in his *Black Manhattan* (1930). Also valuable is *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972), edited by Arna Bontemps, which includes essays about the age by those who participated in it. Perhaps the best overall introduction to the period is Jarvis Anderson's *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (1982), and a helpful general reference book to the period is *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary of the Era* (1984), edited by Bruce Kellner. Also useful to this study were Margaret Perry's *The Harlem Renaissance: An Annotated Bibliography and Commentary* (1982), and Jim Hoskin's lively study, *The Cotton Club* (1984).
CHAPTER 2

EARLY YEARS, 1907-1926

Childhood and Early Education

In the first decade of this century the city of Philadelphia had a population of about 1.3 million, of which approximately 63,000 were black. Most blacks lived in the segregated neighborhoods near the central part of the city, especially in the Seventh Ward and the Twenty-Ninth Ward. The Twenty-Ninth Ward was located in an area referred to as North Central Philadelphia, situated midway between the Delaware River to the east and the Schuylkill River to the west, and about ten blocks north of the central business area of Philadelphia. This area of about ten square blocks housed hundreds of low income families whose average earnings were about ten dollars a week.  

Around 1905 John Tucker, a construction laborer, and his wife, Virginia (Lee) Tucker, arrived in Philadelphia from Virginia and settled in the Twenty-Ninth Ward at 1736 North Woodstock Avenue. Located about five blocks west of Temple College between Montgomery

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2Ibid., p. 27.

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and Columbia Avenues, the 1700 block of North Woodstock was a narrow avenue of identical row houses joined together without any side passages between them, and the houses lined both sides of the street. The house at 1736 was a three-story brick structure with a wooden back porch that looked out over a small patch of land about fifteen feet square that served as a back yard. It was in this house during the early morning hours of June 28, 1907, that Virginia Tucker delivered her first-born child, a son, who was named Lorenzo.

Even as a baby Lorenzo was good-looking. His parents nicknamed him "Cutie," an appellation that would stick with him throughout his childhood, although his playmates would sometimes teasingly call him "Cootie" instead. The constant reinforcement from his parents and friends concerning his good looks had a positive effect on Lorenzo, and he soon came to realize that people enjoyed his presence, and he consequently developed an outgoing personality. For as long as he can remember, Lorenzo Tucker has been a performer:

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3 This house is one of the few still standing on North Woodstock as of June, 1986, although it has been long abandoned and boarded up. Almost all the surrounding buildings have been torn down, and the neighborhood is blighted.


5 Recorded by Virginia Lee Tucker in the family Bible; in the possession of Lorenzo Tucker.

6 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985. Some of the information in this chapter on Tucker's early life is based on the recollections of Tucker himself as recorded by the author; consequently, every single piece of information culled from these interviews has not been cited. Direct quotations and information from other sources, however, have been cited.
"Oh, as a child I used to go around reciting poems and famous passages, things like that. Things I was taught by rote, or conversations I had overheard and just remembered. I wanted, I guess, to be seen."^7

Little is known about Lorenzo's father, John Tucker. He was born in Lynchburg, Virginia around 1867, and he met and married Virginia Lee sometime before 1905, when they married and moved to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia John Tucker became a laborer, and worked for a time for Patrick H. Kelly, who amassed a fortune by constructing bridges and public buildings for the city of Philadelphia. One of Lorenzo Tucker's earliest recollections is that of his father coming home and telling him stories of Kelly's kindness and generosity, and about how Kelly often sat down and drank with his workers after quitting time.10

Apparently the construction crews that worked for Kelly were mostly comprised of Italian immigrants and black men. According to Lorenzo Tucker, his father had little formal education, but he did possess a natural ear for languages and a good memory for verbal patterns, and he learned to speak fluent Italian while on the job. It was this love of the Italian language the led John and Virginia

^7Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
^8Lorenzo Tucker's birth record.
^9Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985. Tucker says that Kelly was the brother of John B. Kelly, the father of Grace Kelly.
^10Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
Plate I

John Tucker (c. 1867-1913)
Tucker to name their first child Lorenzo.\footnote{Ibid. The Italian influence seemed to have stopped there, however, since the couple's second child, a daughter born on January 2, 1911, was named Emma.}

Virginia Lee had been born in Ware Neck, Gloucester County, Virginia around 1880.\footnote{Lorenzo Tucker's birth record.} She was the daughter of Jasper Lee, Jr., and Maria Louise (Scott) Lee, who were to play an important role in Lorenzo Tucker's early life. Jasper Lee, Jr. was born about 1847 as an "issue free" black—that is, he was declared free from slavery by the plantation master, whose name was also Lee and who was apparently part of the famous Lees of Virginia.\footnote{Interview with Augusta Lee Hawkins, September 25, 1985. Augusta Lee Hawkins is Lorenzo's aunt, the sister of Virginia Lee Tucker. Also, according to Virginia Lee Tucker's entries in the family Bible, Jasper Lee, Jr. was about ninety years old when he died on March 12, 1937; and Maria Louise Lee was seventy-nine when she died on April 29, 1939.} Maria Louise Scott was born around 1860 and was the daughter of a Native American Indian woman whose name has been forgotten, and a white man named Scott, an oyster farmer from the Maryland side of the Chesapeake Bay. Maria also had a brother named Andrew Brodus Scott who, according to family legend, was credited with saving Teddy Roosevelt's life during the battle of San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War of 1898.\footnote{Ibid.} By piecing together the records that remain it appears that Lorenzo Tucker's racial mixture was 3/4 black, 1/8 Native American Indian, and 1/8 white. And, by the chance mathematics of genetic selection, Lorenzo...
PLATE II

Virginia Lee Tucker (c. 1880-1963)
PLATE III

Lorenzo Tucker, 1908
Tucker was born light-skinned, even though both his parents and his sister, Emma, were darker-skinned. Lorenzo Tucker's light complexion was a condition that would play an important role in his life and career.

In the spring of 1913 John Tucker traveled to Johnstown, Pennsylvania to work on a construction site, and it was there that he contracted double pneumonia and died within a matter of days, on April 5, 1913. Virginia had her husband's body shipped back to Philadelphia and buried; Lorenzo Tucker was not yet six years old, and his sister was two.

John Tucker's death brought major changes to the lives of his family members. Virginia realized that it would be necessary for her to go to work to support herself and her children, but that would be difficult to manage since both her children were under six years old. After meeting with her parents, Jasper and Maria Louise, Virginia decided that it would be best to send her children to live much of the time with the Lees on their farm in Ware Neck, Virginia, and so Lorenzo Tucker and his sister Emma left for Ware Neck in the summer of 1913.

Ware Neck was a small farming and oyster fishing village situated on one of the many fingers of land that jut out into the Chesapeake Bay just above the York River, about sixty miles east of Richmond. At best there were only about a hundred residents of this

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15 Recorded in the family Bible by Virginia Lee Tucker; in the possession of Lorenzo Tucker.

16 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
all-black village, most of whom were the descendants of the slaves that had been freed after the Civil War from the estates of the Lees of Virginia (including, apparently, that of Robert E. Lee), and many of them took the name of their former masters. There were so many Lees in Ware Neck, in fact, that it was unofficially called "Lee Town."17

The Lees lived just up the road from the Ware Neck elementary school, where Lorenzo enrolled in September, 1913. His aunt, Augusta Lee, was seven years his senior, and she would tutor Lorenzo privately in the evening after they came home from school. She recalls that Lorenzo was a bright student and did well in his studies.18 On the farm young Lorenzo took care of the cows and horses, and he became familiar with agricultural matters. But he was never very happy living on the farm.

You see, from the very beginning I hated the country. Even at that young age I knew in my heart that I was a city boy, and I would write my mother letter after letter begging her to take me back to Philadelphia. My sister loved the farm, but I never did.19

Partly as a cure for his boredom young Lorenzo began performing.

On the hot weekend afternoons and evenings his grandparents and their relatives and friends would sit on the shaded porch behind the Lee house to relax and pass the day. It was a perfect setting for a show, and it was here that Lorenzo had his first taste of theatre:

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18 Ibid.
19 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
Oh, I was about seven or eight. I don't know, I guess it was just in me because I did it without thinking. While the adults were on the porch I'd get all the kids—my friends and cousins—behind the two big trees in the yard that faced the porch. And then I'd tell them what to say: poems, pieces of conversations, little skits, and so forth. And then I'd push them out from behind the trees and make them say it right then and there to all the adults. There I was, a producer and an actor, and I didn't even know it. I remember they used to call me "show off." Well, if that's what I was, then so be it. I didn't mind; I was enjoying myself. 20

The Lees had a little shed to the rear of their property that had once served as a smoke house, and Lorenzo and his cousins would play in it and use it as a meeting place. But Lorenzo soon took the house over and began using it as his retreat. His aunt recalls:

Lorenzo would go down there for hours on end and paint pictures to hang on the walls for decorations. And he would write things, poems and plays and things like that. He would lock the windows and bolt the door with a stick when he left, and he warned everyone not to go in there unless he was with them. He was always creative, and we loved his skits and applauded them loudly. It's no wonder he went into show business; he was preparing for it right there in that shed. I always know he was going to do it. 21

Lorenzo Tucker's first formal public appearance came on the stage of the Ware Neck school when he was about ten years old. Every year the school would mount an oratory contest in which the student speakers would memorize verses from the Bible and deliver them before parents and judges. The year he was chosen for the contest Lorenzo decided immediately what verse he would memorize: the shortest, John, 11:35. He prepared for the event not by memorizing a long

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20 Ibid.

passage, but by thinking about how he would present it. 22

On the evening of the contest, when his turn came, Lorenzo strode to the front of the stage, stopped, posed dramatically, and with a mixture of formality and tenderness delivered his speech: "Jesus wept." He paused, and then bowed. According to Tucker, the audience did not know at first that his presentation was over, and remained silent for a moment. But then they began to applaud, and Lorenzo felt he had struck an emotional chord in his audience. The judges agreed: they awarded him first prize. 23

The most memorable times of Lorenzo Tucker's stay in Virginia were the monthly "Court House Days," held in Gloucester, the county seat, which was located just four miles south of Ware Neck. "Court House Days" were those monthly Mondays when the circuit judge would come to town to hear the cases that had mounted up on the docket. Outside the court house a festive mood prevailed. Farmers sold or bartered their produce from the backs of wagons while horse traders and stock buyers bargained shrewdly over their animals. Crowds milled about; money changed hands. Packs of children roamed up and down the square, taking it all in. A Native American Indian woman who owned a hotel that catered to blacks would light a fire in the middle of the square and hang a huge pot over it. From it she sold oyster stew made from oysters fresh from the York River just two miles away. Itinerant performers, fortune tellers and medicine men

22 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.

23 Ibid. Tucker's story was confirmed by his aunt, Augusta Lee Hawkins, in an interview on September 25, 1985.
would also set up their wagons around the square. It was their habit to follow the circuit judge from town to town, performing and selling their wares to the crowds that came to town when the judge visited.²⁴

Among the children in the crowd who would watch the shows was an impressionable Lorenzo Tucker, whose favorite entertainer was the medicine man:

It was in Gloucester that I saw my first black-faced entertainer, a medicine man who was white and he darkened down and put on a show of jokes and dancing. He would get the crowd laughing and then hawk his elixir off his wagon, sending a couple of kids through the crowd selling the bottles. My grandfather always bought a bottle of elixir to cure his aches and pains. He believed in the medicine man. I was just crazy about the medicine and his show, and I liked the fortune tellers, too.²⁵

Every summer, too, the circus would come to town, and every summer, like many other kids, Lorenzo swore he would run away and join it, if not this year, then next year for sure. But he never did. It was also during this time that Lorenzo saw his first motion picture. It was around 1918, Tucker recalls:

I had heard of motion pictures before, of course, but I'd never seen one. Then this man by the name of Haley came to town and threw up a tent with a sign announcing "Haley's Moving Pictures." I went to see it, and the first film I ever saw was the World War I documentary of the 369th Colored Battalion fighting in Europe. I was so proud of those men it drove me crazy.²⁶

²⁵ Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, August 21, 1985.
²⁶ Ibid.
In December, 1920 Lorenzo's mother, Virginia, remarried in Philadelphia. Her new husband was Charles Mitchell, whose presence added stability to her life and provided her the chance to bring her children back to Philadelphia more often, although not permanently. Lorenzo remembers Charles Mitchell taking him to the black vaudeville theatre in Philadelphia, where he saw professional live theatre for the first time.

It was there at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia that I saw my first real idol, the straight man by the name of George Cooper. He was the best dressed and most dapper straight man of them all: top hat, tails, cane—the works! I knew right then and there that I wanted to be like him someday.

High School and College Days

Whether he was in Philadelphia or in Virginia, Lorenzo Tucker was always aware of the discrimination practiced against his race; yet, because of his light complexion, that discrimination did not always come from white people. It was to be a constant irony of his life that black people sometimes resented his presence. When he finished elementary school his mother enrolled him in the Gloucester Agricultural and Industrial Institute in Capahosic, Virginia, not far from Ware Neck. His first day at school was not all he had hoped it to be, for some of his fellow students soon took exception to his light complexion. Upon his arrival at the school he had struggled to drag his trunk to the second floor landing. He left the trunk there

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27 Ibid.

28 Recorded by Virginia Lee Tucker in the family Bible; in the possession of Lorenzo Tucker.
to go out and get other belongings, and when he returned someone had
rolled the trunk down the steps and all his possessions were
strewn about. Then he was cornered by one of the students: "We
don't like your skin," the student said, "and if you report this,
we'll beat you up." 29

Despite such an unfortunate beginning, Lorenzo Tucker came to
like the school very much, for it provided him with a wide variety of
experiences.

All hours of the day, evenings too, there was something
going on. I was in the music program, and I learned how
to play the trumpet and the piano. I decided I wanted to
be a musician and play in a big band someday. And there
was athletics and manual training, too. I took up cabinet
making and helped the carpenters build the school's dining
room. And one summer I stayed on there just to learn how
to grow strawberries. I became an expert at growing
strawberries. 30

Lorenzo Tucker graduated from Gloucester A & I in 1924, just as
he turned seventeen. It was decided that he would return to
Philadelphia and live with his mother, who had enrolled him in Temple
College, where he was to begin his studies in September. He wasn't
sure that college was exactly what he wanted, but Virginia had
decided long ago that education was important. It was her dream that
her son be a doctor, and so she enrolled him in Temple's pre-med
program. But at least he was leaving the farm behind. The person
most disappointed was his grandfather, Jasper Lee, Jr.

I left Virginia by boat for Baltimore, where I would catch
a train for Philadelphia. My grandfather was disappointed,

29 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, August 21, 1985.
30 Ibid.
because he thought I was going to return to farming after I got out of school, but I said, "No, I'm going back to Philadelphi." I can still remember how sad he looked, standing on that dock, an old man, waving to me. I didn't return to the farm for over twenty years, I hated it so much. So when I left, when I waved goodbye to him, it was a real goodbye: to the farm, the horses, the chickens and the cows.

But Tucker wasn't happy at Temple either, felt he was being discriminated against. He tried out for the school band as a trumpet player, but he thought he had been passed over in favor of white boys, some who were just learning to play the trumpet. Next he tried out for plays, but he was not cast, and the track team wouldn't have him either. According to Tucker, he was shunned by every group he tried to join.

On top of these disappointments he was made to study constantly. Virginia was pushing him hard. She had engaged a private tutor to instruct her son in Latin after school, sometimes for three or four hours a night. "I was having no fun at all," Tucker recalls. "I was studying around the clock, and I hated it. So by the time I was in my second year of school I just wanted to get away."  

During his third semester in the 1925-26 school term the anxieties and unhappiness had affected Lorenzo so much that he decided to sabotage his chances of academic success. He began cutting classes, often to go to the movies and watch his favorite stars, especially Rudolph Valentino. And then, during final exams, he answered every question with the same answer, "I don't know." The authorities called in his mother, and it was thought, that after a

31Ibid. 32Ibid. 33Ibid.
period of probation his attitude might turn around. Saddened by her son's performance but still hopeful he would reverse himself and become the doctor she had always dreamed he would be, Virginia agreed.

Lorenzo got a job in Philadelphia in early 1926 working in a candy factory that was preparing for Easter by making thousands upon thousands of chocolate Easter eggs. He got his fill of chocolate eggs, but didn't enjoy the work very much. Then one day, while on his way to church with his mother, he saw a hand-written sign posted on a street corner that read, "Busboys and Waiters Wanted in Atlantic City—The World's Greatest Playground." This, he decided was his chance to get away, so he asked his mother to permit him to go there. She refused, but he persisted, convincing her that he could save a lot of money from his earnings that would help her pay his tuition when he re-enrolled at Temple in September.

At last Virginia relented and agreed to let him go, under the condition that he write or phone her weekly to let her know how he was getting along. Lorenzo agreed, and in late March of 1926, just after the winter weather broke, Lorenzo packed his belongings and caught a train from Philadelphia for the seventy-mile trip to Atlantic City. He was still three months shy of nineteen, but he was

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34 Ms. Miriam Crawford, Curator of Temple University's Special Collections, indicated in an interview (June 25, 1986) that existing records show that Tucker attended Temple in the fall semester, 1925, and took courses in English, Latin and algebra. These courses, however, were part of Temple's high school division, and not part of the University's pre-med program.
Atlantic City, 1926

It wasn't easy at first. Unfamiliar with Atlantic City, Tucker took a room in the cheapest boardinghouse he could find, but it turned out to be little more than a flop-house. The mattresses were infested with bed bugs and he didn't sleep much at all that first night. The following morning he went down the Chalfonte Hotel, one of the biggest and best in Atlantic City at the time, and got a job as a dishwasher. Although it was one of the lowliest jobs in "The World's Greatest Playground," Tucker was happy to be away from Philadelphia and out on his own.

but he wasn't to remain a dishwasher for very long. The next day in the hotel kitchen the salad man called him over and asked him if he'd ever made a salad. "Yep," he lied. "Good," said the salad man, "let me show you what I want here." So now Tucker was the salad man's assistant. A few days later the head waiter, an elderly German man who was very refined and formal, came to the kitchen and asked him if he were a college boy.

I said "Yes," and he asked me if I wanted to be a waiter for the summer, and I said, "Sure." He asked me if I had a black coat, and I shook my head. So he went out and got me a black coat, and I became a waiter. I don't know if he knew I was a Negro or not. He didn't ask any questions

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36 Ibid.
and neither did I.  

Within a week after he started as a dishwasher in the kitchen Tucker had risen to be a waiter in the dining room. His first table was the one near the front door that was always occupied by an elderly couple who had a bad reputation among the waiters for not tipping. Tucker got the table because no one else wanted it, and he serviced them well. When they got up to leave they tipped him five dollars. The other waiters were astonished, and the head waiter was impressed. Within three weeks Tucker was the head waiter's assistant.

In early May, shortly before the beginning of the tourist season, a woman came into the restaurant and took an immediate liking to Tucker. She told him she owned a small hotel and restaurant near the Boardwalk and was looking for a maître d' to run it. Since Tucker was so handsome and personable, she asked him if he wanted the job. He took it, but soon regretted it. "She was a real pain, that woman. She have me so many instructions I didn't know what as going on. I was really sorry I had quit my old job."

Tucker tolerated the job for a while longer because it helped pay his rent. More important to him however, was the Atlantic City nightlife. He began visiting the black cabarets and nightclubs in order to watch and socialize with the entertainers. One night at the Blue Kitten, a black cabaret on Baltic Avenue, he met a black chorus girl by the name of Rae Hewitt:

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37Ibid.  38Ibid.  39Ibid.
I wasn't even in Atlantic City for six weeks, that's how fast it went. So this girl tells me she wants to get out of the chorus by starting a specialty act, and she said I was a nice-looking type and asked if I knew how to do the adagio, the Spanish Tango. I didn't, so she taught me. In the morning we would go over to the Blue Kitten and rehearse.

Within days Tucker had quit his job as maître d' and thrown in with Rae Hewitt. He enjoyed the idea of being involved with show business people and even though he still expected to return to Philadelphia and college in September, for the present he was free to live on the fringes of the entertainment world. He and Rae continued to rehearse in the mornings, and at night she danced with the chorus at the Blue Kitten. Tucker went to the cabaret every night to watch the floor show and socialize. Claude Hopkins' band was playing at the Blue Kitten at the time, and now and then Hopkins would allow Tucker to sit in and play his trumpet for two or three songs. Even though Tucker wasn't good enough to play regularly, he was able to fulfill his childhood dream of playing trumpet in a big band.41

But Tucker never got paid for this work, and he was running low on cash. Also, by this time his relationship with Rae had become more than a professional one, and during the weeks they were rehearsing he moved into her apartment; for a time Rae supported both

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid. Records of the black experience in Atlantic City are extremely scarce. White newspapers, like the Atlantic City Press, carried no advertisements for black entertainment. William C. Wright and Paul A. Stellhorn, in The Directory of New Jersey Newspapers: 1765-1970 (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1977), indicate that there were no black newspapers published in Atlantic City from 1925 through 1928.
of them on the salary she got as a chorus girl. To complicate matters, Tucker had failed to contact his mother, and Virginia had become so worried about her son that she called the Atlantic City police and asked them to find him. The police found Tucker and took him to jail overnight, but they didn't know what to charge him with. Tucker called his mother in Philadelphia, who was surprised to find him in jail. "I didn't know they would put you in jail," she said, "I just wanted them to find you and tell me you were safe." Within hours Virginia and Charles Mitchell had taken a train to Atlantic City, got Tucker out of jail, and took him home to Philadelphia. But as soon as they arrived in Philadelphia he pleaded with his mother and step-father to let him return to Atlantic City. Realizing he would probably go even without their permission, they relented. The very next day Tucker caught a train and returned to Atlantic City. He was never to live in Philadelphia again.

A short time later Rae and Tucker had put their dance act together and were showcasing it at the Blue Kitten. One night the notorious Evelyn Nesbit saw them perform, and afterwards she approached Tucker and asked him to appear with her in her nightly show on the boardwalk. All he had to do was to strut on stage with a straw hat and sit down at a table while she danced to the music of "Tea for Two" around him. Lorenzo took the job, since he could continue to dance with Rae in the early evening and then run over to

\[42\text{Ibid.} \quad 43\text{Ibid}\]
the Boardwalk and work with Evelyn Nesbit later on.\footnote{Evelyn Nesbit, billed as the "World's Greatest Attraction," was appearing nightly at the Follies Bergere at New York Avenue and the Boardwalk in the latter part of May, 1926. (Atlantic City Press, May 17, 1926, p. 17.)} According to Tucker, Evelyn Nesbit was pleased with his work and was also personally attracted to him. She rented him a room at an expensive hotel on the Boardwalk and Tucker soon came to realize that she did this because she wanted to come visit him any evening she liked. Young and impressionable, Tucker enjoyed this attention and luxury, but he realized his private life was getting too complicated, and within two weeks he quit working with Evelyn Nesbit and returned to Rae Hewitt.\footnote{Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.}

By now it was the height of the 1926 summer season. Amusement palaces, restaurants, vaudeville houses and movie theatres all vied for the tourists' dollars. The Atlantic City Press reported that over 300,000 people had crowded onto the beaches and Boardwalk for the July 4th holiday.\footnote{"300,000 Holiday Makers Throng Resort," Atlantic City Press, July 5, 1926, p. 1.} John Philip Sousa and his band were on hand to entertain, and Texas Guinan shared top billing at the Silver Slipper Supper club with Hilda Ferguson, the "Great Shimmy Dancer."\footnote{Ibid., p. 6.} On August first Rudolph Valentino arrived for a publicity appearance to help inaugurate Atlantic City's "Greater Movie Week,"\footnote{"Rudy to Work for Daily Press Tonight," Atlantic City Press, August 1, 1926, p. 1. and now}
and then during the next few days he could be seen strolling the Boardwalk with Pola Negri, to whom, it was later revealed, he was secretly engaged. Tucker decided that since Valentino had been one of his screen idols he would try to get a glimpse of him on the Boardwalk. "Yeah, I saw them, and even said hello. It looked like they had been fighting. He had scratches all over his cheeks and jaw." 49

The remainder of Tucker's summer was spent living with Rae Hewitt, rehearsing their act, socializing at the clubs, and learning how to smoke and drink gin. Yet during those carefree days it was always in the back of Tucker's mind that after Labor Day his holiday would be over and he would have to make a decision about returning to Philadelphia and college. He had not been able to save any money as he promised his mother he would, and there was yet another complication: Rae Hewitt was pregnant with their child. In spite of this Tucker decided to return to Philadelphia.

We argued and Rae cried, but then we made a peace together. So when I made my exit in the morning she cried again. And I was at the train station ready to board the train back to Philadelphia when it hit me: if someone had done that to my sister I would have killed him. So I turned around and went back to the apartment. Well, Rae went crazy when I came back. I rang the doorbell and she appeared at the top of the stairs. It was one helluva scene. She said, "You're back!" Yes, I was the man who came back. And then we had

49 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker March 2, 1985. Just two weeks after this meeting Valentino underwent an operation for a gastric ulcer and appendicitis. A week later during recovery he developed pleurisy and died on August 23, 1926. Within three years Lorenzo Tucker would be billed as "The Colored Valentino" by his director, Oscar Micheaux. Almost a half a century later Lorenzo Tucker was chosen to deliver one of the annual eulogies at Rudolph Valentino's tomb in Hollywood's Forest Lawn Cemetery.
one helluva love scene, and afterwards I said to her, "Well, here we are. The season's over, you're pregnant and I ain't going back to school. And here we are and we ain't got a dime."  

But Rae was a resourceful woman and knew how to look for work. She interviewed with Billy Mitchell, a black comedian who was fairly well known on the black vaudeville circuit. According to Tucker, Mitchell had an act with a little dog named Toby, and when Billy sang the dog would bark and "sing" along with him. The audiences loved the dog and Mitchell became well-known for his act. 

More importantly, Mitchell was the producer of a vaudeville show that was scheduled to leave Atlantic City at the end of the season and open in Baltimore in mid-September. Rae asked Mitchell to sign her and Lorenzo on as performers. She and Lorenzo would dance under the name of "Tucker and Tucker," and later in the show she would dance in the chorus and Lorenzo could do some lines as either M.C. or straight man to the comedians. She didn't reveal to Mitchell that she was pregnant.

Mitchell agreed. In September the show left Atlantic City for its first engagement in Baltimore. Its opening would mark the debut of "Tucker and Tucker" as a vaudeville dance team, and Lorenzo Tucker would begin his professional career in show business.

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50 Ibid.
51 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
52 Ibid.
53 For the next three years the team would bill themselves as "Tucker and Tucker" even though they were not married.
CHAPTER 3

APPRENTICESHIP, 1926-1927

Entering the Black Theatrical Tradition

When Lorenzo Tucker and Rae Hewitt arrived in Baltimore in the middle of September, 1926 to begin their dance-team career as "Tucker and Tucker," they became one of a number of dance teams on the black entertainment circuit who performed specialty dance acts that were basically stylized variations of ballroom dancing. Some of these teams, including Tucker and Tucker, were dancing the current rage, "Adagio," or "Spanish Dancing," which was achieved by combining a number of basic Latin dance steps with ballroom dancing. These dance performances lasted just a few minutes, being only one segment of a program of various entertainment acts. In the 1920s these variety shows came to be known generally as black vaudeville, a popular theatre form that had its roots in the nineteenth-century blackface minstrel shows.

The minstrel shows evolved out of the great shift towards popular entertainment in America that began just after the War of 1812 and lasted into mid-century. This shift to mass entertainment was partly the result of the spirit of the age that called for a severing of ties with traditional European culture and the

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1 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
establishment of a "common man's culture." The print media began to issue cheap magazines and pulp novels with larger-than-life heroes that sold very well on the mass market. This was also the period of the rise of live entertainments like circuses and traveling variety shows, and it also marked the appearance of promotional genius P.T. Barnum, who advertised natural wonders and bogus curiosities for mass consumption. On the stage, antiaristocratic depictions of folk heroes like The Yankee, the Frontiersman, and Mose the Bowery Boy Fireman began to draw large crowds, as did white men who performed comedy routines in blackface.²

At first blackface comedy was developed by individual performers who by the 1820s were touring with circuses and plays and performing songs and dances between the acts. One of these performers, Thomas D. Rice (Dan Rice), is said to have become popular by imitating a dance he had seen performed by a disfigured black man on the street of Cincinnati. He named his act after the song the black man sang, "Jump Jim Crow," and performed it in blackface.³ According to James Weldon Johnson, Rice then developed an act in which he would arrive on stage carrying a sack over his shoulder that contained his four-year old partner. Rice announced to the audience, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd love for you to know that I've got a little darky here


that jumps Jim Crow!" He then emptied the boy from his sack. Dressed in rags and made-up in blackface, the boy tumbled out and began dancing: it was the debut of Joe Jefferson, who was destined to become one of America's most popular stage performers of the nineteenth century.5

Single blackface entertainers were soon replaced by troupes of white men who called themselves "minstrels." Among the first were Dan Emmett and his Virginia Minstrels, a troupe of four blackface comics who opened in New York City in 1843. Other minstrel troupes soon followed, and from 1840 to 18870 blackface minstrelsy became one of the more popular entertainment forms in the United States.6

Blacks had little to do with the origination of the first minstrel shows, however, except for the important fact that their manners and lifestyle served as the sources for comic imitation. Rather, the first minstrel shows were originated by white entertainers who darkened down their faces with burnt cork and depicted (or "delineated," as it was often called) both southern plantation slaves and northern city blacks. The minstrel show depiction of the black man's experience in antebellum America was an exaggerated and stereotypical version of black behavior from a white man's point of view, one that "fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being."7

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4Ibid. 5Ibid. 6Toll, p. 48. 7Johnson, p. 93.
After much experimentation and audience-performer interaction the structural components of the minstrel show began to develop and by the 1850s the basic conventions of the minstrel performance were set. The typical show had three parts. In the first part the company appeared in a semi-circle close to the front of the stage. On each of the down-stage ends of the semi-circle sat the endmen, named Brudder Tambo and Brudder Bones, after the tambourines and animal bones each employed as musical instruments. In the center of the semi-circle was the interlocutor, usually a tall, imposing, handsome, well-spoken white man without blackface who served as the master of ceremonies and the director of the stage proceedings. His other task was to serve as the straight man who would converse with the endmen and set up the punchlines to their jokes.

With a precise if somewhat pompous command of the language, an extensive vocabulary, and a resonant voice, the interlocutor personified dignity, which made the raucous comedy of the endmen even funnier. When the endmen mocked his pomposity, audiences could indulge in their anti-intellectualism and antielitism by laughing at him. But when he patiently corrected the ignorant comedians with their malaprop-laden dialects, audiences could feel superior to stupid "niggers" and laugh with him.

The first part of the show began with a patter of jokes and songs, "interspersed between 'serious' songs and dances performed by individuals with the full cast often singing the chorus." Then the semi-circle dissolved and gave way to the second part of the show, called the olio. The olio was the variety section of the show, where each specialty act was given its chance to perform:

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8Toll, p. 53. 9Ibid., p. 52.
Song and dance men, acrobats, men playing combs, porcupine quills, or glasses, and any number of other novelties might appear in this miscellaneous section. Other than diversity, its distinctive feature was the stump speech. Usually given by one of the endmen, it was a discourse as much on the infinite possibilities for malaprops as on the chosen subject. 10

The third and final part of the show was often a one-act musical skit that was usually set on a southern plantation. The skit concluded with a full-cast song and dance number.

Long before the Civil War plantation slaves had performed as dancers, singers and musicians in impromptu gatherings for their own amusement and for that of their masters. Often these groups would become so polished that they were employed to entertain their master's guests. In the 1850s some freed blacks parlayed their earlier performance experience and formed black minstrel shows of their own, all the time conforming to the conventions of the white shows, even to the point of darkening down their already black skin. Ironically, their shows had become "an imitation of an imitation of the plantation life of southern blacks." 11

The first successful all-black minstrel troupe was the Georgia Minstrels, formed by Charles Hicks, a black, in 1865. 12 For the next thirty years the black shows existed alongside their white counterparts. Touring in an all-black company was more complicated

10 Ibid., p. 55.


12 Johnson, p. 90.
than touring with an all-white company, however. Constant
harassment, racial threats, poor lodgings, dishonest producers—all
were the lot of the black minstrel company. Yet, despite the
oppressive conditions under which they lived while off the stage, and
despite the fact that they had to perform parodies of themselves on
the stage, the black minstrels of the late nineteenth century
developed the foundations of the first period of black theatre
history in the United States.

They provided an essential training and theatrical experi­
ence which, at the time, could not have been acquired from
any other source. Many of these men, as the vogue of min­
strelsy waned, passed into the second phase, or middle
period, of the Negro on the theatrical stage in America;
and it was mainly upon the training that had gained that
this second period rested.13

By 1890 the minstrel shows had begun to lose their popularity,
and new forms of black entertainment began to develop that broke with
the conventions of the minstrel shows. In 1890, Sam T. Jack and Sam
Lucas developed The Creole Show, a forerunner of black musical
comedies that departed from the tradition minstrel show conventions
by featuring for the first time a female chorus and a female inter­
locutor. Oriental America, staged by John William Isham in 1896,
was the first black show to break away from the slapstick and
burlesque of the minstrel show, and it was also the first all-black
show to play on Broadway.14

Then, in 1898, Bob Cole wrote and produced on Broadway A Trip
to Coontown.

This show was the first to make a complete break from the minstrel pattern, being written with a continuity and having a cast of characters working out the story from beginning to end. It was the first musical comedy featuring an all-black cast and was the first show to be written, produced, managed and staged by blacks. 15

By 1900 the minstrel shows had spawned two significant offshoots, black musical comedy and black vaudeville (originally called black variety shows). 16 Both absorbed some of the conventions of the minstrel shows, but while the musical comedies began to rely more on their books for the structure of the show, black vaudeville shows, because of their variety nature, absorbed some of what remained of the minstrel structure. As we shall see, the minstrel show's semi-circular opening with black-face endmen and an interlocutor remained part of many black vaudeville shows even into the late 1920s.

The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the continued elaboration of this second period of black theatre. By 1900 the famous black comedy team of Bert Williams and George Walker began producing a series of comedy farces with The Sons of Ham that brought them fame not only in black theatres, but on white Broadway as well, where they remained until 1908. 17 The team of Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson were equally important to the development of black musical comedy. Their The Shoofly Regiment (1906) and The Red Moon (1908) were well-written and well-constructed operettas that played on Broadway. 18 By 1910, however, Cole and Walker were

15 Ibid., p. 9. 16 Ibid., p. 8. 17 Ibid., p. 27. 18 Ibid., p. 10.
gone from the theatre and Bert Williams had joined the all-white Ziegfield Follies, and the Broadway development of the black musical comedy had come to an end. No more black musical comedies would appear on Broadway for the next decade. 19

Between 1910 and 1920 the center of black theatre production shifted from downtown Manhattan to Harlem, formerly a white middle-class section above 125th Street that was quickly developing into the neighborhood with the largest black population in the United States. Segregated from the rest of New York City, Harlem became virtually a city within a city, generating its own black cabarets and theatres that provided new venues for black talent. Although black theatre was now operating outside the mainstream of white American theatre, it nevertheless provided black producers and performers opportunities for collaboration they never had before.

This was a unique period in the history of black theatrics. It was a period when blacks produced, directed, wrote, and staged shows performed in black theatres, many of which were owned by blacks, before black audiences. In short, it was a period when blacks had a significant measure of control over every aspect of their productions. 20

One form that grew out of this activity was black dramatic theatre. During the nineteenth century there had been a few attempts to establish black dramatic theatre companies, but none had been successful for very long. In 1912, however, Anita Bush organized a troupe of players under her name that played for two seasons in the Lincoln Theatre in Harlem. In 1915 she move the company to the Lafayette Theatre just a few blocks away and reorganized under the

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name of the Lafayette Players Stock Company. For the next eighteen years this company was the most important black drama company in the United States, staging over 250 plays.  

Minstrel shows had faded from the entertainment scene by 1920, just as the second period of black theatre history was beginning its phase of highest achievement. Fueled by the black cultural phenomenon known as the Harlem Renaissance, all the arts—literary, plastic and performance—flowered during the 1920s. In theatre the period is marked by the 1921 musical comedy production of Shuffle Along. With music and lyrics by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake and a book by Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, Shuffle Along opened at Daley's Sixty-Third Street Theatre in New York. The production marked the return of black shows to Broadway. By the time Lorenzo Tucker entered the profession in 1926 the three major forms of black theatre—musical comedy, vaudeville shows, and legitimate drama—all had reached their peak of popularity and polish, and, one by one, they would each play an important part in his career.

From Baltimore to New York

Lorenzo Tucker recalls that he had opening-night jitters when he made his debut on the stage in Baltimore in September, 1926, but after a few moments dancing with Rae Hewitt he relaxed and everything

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went well. The show closed after two weeks; Billy Mitchell paid his troupe members and left alone for Chicago, his home base, to put together another show. It was now October, 1926, and Tucker and Rae Hewitt were stranded in Baltimore. Rae Hewitt's pregnancy was now so far advanced that she had to stop dancing, and although there were a number of black theatres in Baltimore, Tucker's lack of experience kept him from getting work in the black shows. Consequently, he spent most of the following months working as an elevator operator and tailor's assistant.

These were the dark days of Tucker's early career. The few dollars a week he earned were barely sufficient to support both him and Rae, and they could not afford to pay the rent for the small apartment in which they were staying. Their landlord, however, commiserated with them, and allowed them to owe him for the time being. Then, shortly before Christmas, Rae Hewitt went into labor and was rushed to the hospital. The baby was born dead; the doctor said that apparently she had danced too long into her pregnancy.

After a short recuperation Rae Hewitt proved once again to be self-sufficient. She contracted with another show as a chorus girl in a production that was to open in Wilmington, Delaware in January, 1927. But the show was too small to hire Tucker and Tucker as a team for the Wilmington engagement. After Wilmington the show was

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23 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker March 2, 1985. Most of the following pages are based upon Tucker's recollections of this early period.

24 Ibid.
scheduled to open in Newark, New Jersey, and the larger theatre in Newark meant the show could be expanded, so Tucker was expected to join it there. It was agreed that Rae Hewitt would go to Wilmington and then send Tucker the money for him to pay the back rent and take the train to Newark. But on the day the money was to arrive Lorenzo stuck a few neckties into his suit pockets and put on the overcoat his landlord had loaned him and went out for a walk. He met the Western Union messenger just around the corner from the house, out of sight of the landlord.

Yeah, I skipped out on the rent. Many performers had to do it in those days. I didn't like the idea, but I was young and didn't know any better. I had to leave my trunk and all my clothes behind. I hoped that someday I could pay my landlord back.25

Tucker converted the telegram to cash and bought a ticket for the evening train to Newark. He visited with friends until he left for the station, but somehow had contracted food poisoning.

By the time I got to Newark I was almost dead. They took me out on a stretcher and had to pump my stomach. I spent the next week recovering at the house of the doctor who treated me. So I never did join the show in Newark. And when it left town it left without me and Rae, who stayed behind to nurse me. So we were broke again, and I owed the doctor bills and rent. We had a rough time of it in the beginning.26

Lorenzo Tucker and Rae Hewitt joined another show shortly thereafter, just as it was getting ready to open at the Standard

25 Ibid. 26 Ibid.
Theatre in Philadelphia. The Standard was one of the principal theatres in Philadelphia that catered to black audiences, and it was on this stage just ten years earlier that Tucker had seen some of his first live theatre shows. It was operated by John T. Gibson, a black entrepreneur who owned two theatres in Philadelphia in the 1920s. The best of the black vaudeville entertainers made the Standard a regular stop on the circuit. Among those who played the house were Ethel Walters, Buck and Bubbles, Butterbeans and Susie, Bessie Smith, and the Nicholas Brothers.

Tucker and Tucker danced for a week on the Standard stage, and Lorenzo Tucker also got a chance to do some straight "bits," as they were called, short stints with the comedians in which he would set up their jokes. After a week the show closed at the Standard and the company finished its run. Lorenzo and Rae were now stranded in his home town, but he still would not call his mother and let her know what had happened to him. According to Augusta Lee Hawkins, Tucker's mother, Virginia, "went looking for him all over Atlantic City in September, but all she could find out was that he had joined some show. Nobody knew where he had gone. She was very unhappy about it all. She was heartbroken."

An advertisement in Philadelphia's black newspaper, the Philadelphia Tribune, February 5, 1927, p. 3, lists Rae Tucker as a member of "the ginger chorus" in Dewey Wineglass' vaudeville show, Stoppin' the Traffic, which ran at the Standard from January 31 to February 6, 1927. Although Tucker says he was part of that show, his name was not mentioned.

Sampson, p. 38.

Once again the couple was almost penniless, but their luck was about to change. Shortly after their show closed they heard that another show was being put together in South Philadelphia by the legendary blues singer, Bessie Smith. So they hurried down to her house on Christian Street to see if they could get into the show.

By 1927 Bessie Smith already had many years of show business experience behind her, and she was at the high point of her career. Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee around 1894, Bessie Smith left home while still in her teens to perform with Ma Rainey's troupe, and by the mid-1920s had established a reputation as one of the foremost blues singers in America. As Don Bogle has pointed out:

With Bessie Smith's arrival too, there came the idea of a black woman's life as a drama, a lopsided morality play with the mythic cycle of birth, life, death, rebirth. Through her records, her road tours, her inimitable high diva stage style, and her hotly-discussed life-style, Bessie Smith became the most famous black woman of her age. . . .[She was] a distinctive twenties diva persona so powerful that later she was transformed into social symbol, legend, myth.  

Bessie Smith began recording in 1923 for Columbia, and within a year she had sold over a million copies of her records and had been dubbed "The Empress" of blues singers.  

In the early twenties she married and moved to Philadelphia. It was from there that she would rehearse for recording sessions and mount her stage shows that would tour the large cities of the East and Midwest. The show she was

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31 Ibid.
preparing in early 1927 was called The Harlem Follies, which was produced by her husband, Jack Gee, a former Philadelphia policeman. Its cast included Bessie Smith, Clarence Smith, Dina Scott, Red Hot Chorus, Gert, Darlin' and Philips (dancers), "Long" Johnny Madlock, James Collins, and Tucker and Tucker. 32

Aside from being hired as a dance team in the show, Rae Hewitt and Lorenzo Tucker were contracted for other duties as well. Rae was to dance in the chorus, and Tucker was selected to escort Bessie onto the stage for her featured song near the end of the show.

During the rehearsal period Bessie said, "Lorenzo, I want you to bring me out." So, I was the guy who would bring her out for her number when the music began for her song. I'd escort her on my arm down to center stage, bow, and then leave. But I was so poor that the suit I had on was worn out and shiny on the bottom. So I couldn't turn my back to the audience, and I would sort of backtrack off the stage so it couldn't be seen. 33

While escorting America's foremost blues singer might have been choice assignment for a handsome young man not yet twenty, it was nevertheless a task any good-looking chorus boy could perform. Of far more importance, both to the show and to his career, was the third job Tucker was hired to perform, that of the show's interlocutor, or master of ceremonies. Although he was not one of the featured entertainers, the interlocutor could spell the difference between a successful and unsuccessful show, for he was at once part of the stage show and an on-stage observer of the action and director of the stage proceedings. Finally, Tucker was also the

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32 Sampson, p. 495.
33 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 26, 1985.
straight man to the endmen, engaging them in dialogue and setting up their jokes for the punchline. According to Tucker, many of the interlocutors in the black vaudeville shows of the late 1920s were light skinned-black men. The audience knew these interlocutors were sometimes symbolic of the white man, and were often the objects of thinly disguised racial ridicule from the blackface endmen.\textsuperscript{34}

During the rehearsal period The Harlem Follies established its structure. It would begin with a minstrel opening with the full cast revealed in a semi-circular pattern copied directly from the old minstrel shows.

Nearly all the black vaudeville shows would have a minstrel opening. It gave the whole cast a chance to be seen, and it gave the interlocutor a chance to introduce the endmen, the comics. In those days the blacks were trying to get rid of the old minstrel shows, but they couldn't get rid of the minstrel openings to save their souls.\textsuperscript{35}

After a short musical overture from the musicians the curtain rose, revealing the performers in the semi-circle. There were the endmen, the interlocutor, the chorus girls, the specialty acts, and the star. After a brief welcome, the interlocutor would introduce the endmen,

\begin{quote}
and we would go through a comedy routine or two to sort of warm things, up. It went something like this:

\texttt{BONES}
\texttt{Hi ya, Doc, how's it goin'}?

\texttt{INTERLOCUTOR}
\texttt{Why, just fine. And how are you, Stovepipe?}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid. \textsuperscript{35}Ibid.
BONES
I's feeling' fine. But dere's sometin' that's troublin' me.

INTERLOCUTOR
And what's that, Stovepipe?

BONES
Well, Doc, when you die, where you gonna be buried?

INTERLOCUTOR
Why, I imagine when I die I'll be buried at that fine mortuary at the top of the hill, and every month someone will bring me flowers.

BONES
Yeah? Well, that won't fit me any.

INTERLOCUTOR
Well, where will you be buried then?

BONES
In the Jewish Cemetery.

INTERLOCUTOR
In the Jewish Cemetery? Why's that?

BONES
'Cause that's de last place de Devil will come lookin' for us niggers!

And the crowd would laugh, and after the laughter died down Tambo would start in:

TAMBO
Say, doc, what kind of coffin is you gittin'?

INTERLOCUTOR
Why, I'm getting a nice and shiny mahogany one. But not too expensive.

TAMBO
That may be good for you, but I'm gettin' a rubber coffin.

INTERLOCUTOR
A rubber coffin? But why?
TAMBO
So I can keep bouncin' around through
Hell, 'cause it's sure gonna be too
hot for me!

That kind of exchange was known as the "crossfire," you
see, and there aren't many straight men left anymore who
can do it.\textsuperscript{36}

This initial wordplay would be followed by the introduction of
the cast with brief performances by some of them. Then, when the
interlocutor sensed it was time to start the show he gave the signal,
"Gentlemen, be seated. And let the show begin."\textsuperscript{37}

The second part of the show was equivalent to the olio section
of the old minstrel shows. Each of the specialty acts would be
highlighted, and there would be chorus numbers, acrobats, jugglers,
and the endmen in skits of their own. The climax of the show was the
appearance of the star. In \textit{The Harlem Follies} there was no grand
finale, for

after Bessie got finished working the crowd there was no
need for a grand finale. Nothing could have topped her
performance anyway. So when she finished the rest of the
cast would walk on stage behind her and take our bows.\textsuperscript{38}

\textit{The Harlem Follies} opened in the spring of 1927 in Baltimore.
One day after a matinee performance Tucker was confronted backstage
by the irate landlord he had skipped out on just a few weeks before.
The landlord had heard that Tucker was back in town with the Bessie
Smith show and he came to collect his back rent and his overcoat.
Bessie happened to hear the landlord yelling at Tucker.

And Bessie came up and said, "What is it? What's the
trouble?" The landlord said, "Tucker owes me a hundred

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.  \textsuperscript{37}Ibid.  \textsuperscript{38}Ibid.
dollars and a coat, and I want it now." Bessie said, "Don't worry, I'll give you the money." And she did. And she told me, "Get him the coat; I'll buy you another one."39

After closing in Baltimore the show headed for New York City. Before the show arrived in New York, however, Bessie announced that after the New York run the show would work its way South on a train and tent tour. "But I didn't want to have anything to do with that," Tucker said. "I had my fill of the South and I didn't want to work in those tents on hot summer days. Besides, I was still thinking about going back to school in Philadelphia."40

When The Harlem Follies reached New York City it opened at the famous Lincoln Theatre on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem. Established in 1908, the Lincoln was the oldest operating theatre in Harlem that staged all-black shows for all-black audiences. For a quarter of a century it was one of the most important black theatres in the United States, and almost every major black performer of the period appeared on its stage.41 Barely twenty and not yet fully committed to a life in the theatre, Lorenzo Tucker had nevertheless risen in less than a year from the cabarets of Atlantic City to the stage of one of the most important black theatres in the United States in a show headlined by one of the most important black entertainers of the day.

Oh, the Lincoln was the big time. It was the tops. Celebrities like Paul Whiteman would come out to see Bessie's show. And Bessie wanted us all to look our best, so she came to me and she gave me some money. "I want you to go down to Layton's on 47th Street and buy yourself a Chester-

39Ibid. 40Ibid. 41Kellner, p. 219.
field coat and a Stetson hat and some patent leather shoes," she said, but her husband, Jack Gee, found out about what she did, and he didn't like the idea at all, and he was suspicious of Bessie and me getting close like that, so he came to me and said, "You s.o.b., when this show closes in New York, you're finished, you understand?" I think he wanted to shoot me. So when the show closed two weeks later there we were, left in New York, and I was out of work again.\footnote{Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 26, 1985.}

The Harlem Follies completed its run at the Lincoln Theatre in the spring of 1927 and headed south, leaving Lorenzo and Rae behind in New York. Once again they were unemployed and penniless, but by this time Lorenzo had some experience behind him, and he began picking up work as a straight man and interlocutor in a number of black shows.

Most of those shows I forget now, they were so long ago. But this is when I was really doing my apprenticeship, so to speak. I worked for people like Bumpky and Bailey, Eddie Hunter, Dink Stewert, and the Nat Cash Revue. And I'll name you one guy that nobody remembers anymore: Arthur Allen and his fiddle. He used to wear tight pants, like Butterbeans did, and he played his fiddle. He was a comic, too, and he owned his own show. He was terrific.

I decided that being a straight man was the thing I really wanted to do. But I was only twenty and just getting started and there were a lot of other straight men who were older and had more experience. People like Jimy Baskette, who became Uncle Remus in the movies, and George Wilshire and Norman Ashwood and Lionel Monagas. In fact, if they ever gave an Academy Award for straight men, Lionel Monagas should have gotten one. He was great.\footnote{Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985.}

Tucker's reputation as a handsome, urbane type began to grow, and soon he was invited to join the Lafayette Players Stock Company. At first he resisted doing legitimate theatre because he had had no formal training as a stage actor playing fictional roles,
PLATE IV

Lorenzo Tucker, c. 1927
PLATE V

Rae Hewitt, c. 1935
but he decided that the experience might be good for him.

They knew me because I was working with other shows, and they were after me to come on with them, because they wanted a certain type that I was. They did everything: stock plays, melodramas, classics. The Lafayette Players had more legitimate stage experience than any other black company in the business. They were considered a class act. That's where I cut my teeth in stage acting. When they broke you in they would put you right on, but you'd have to apprentice for them for a while in bit parts.\(^4^4\)

The list of performers who were members of the Lafayette Players Stock Company reads like a black hall of fame of acting: Anita Bush, the woman who started the company and became known as "the little mother of black drama in Harlem\(^4^5\); Charles Gilpin, who originated the role of the Emperor Jones in O'Neill's play that was first staged in 1921; Evelyn Preer, who became an early black movie star; Dooley Wilson, who was Sam in the 1942 film classic, Casablanca; and others, including Clarence Muse, Leigh Whipper, A.B. Comathiere, Charlotte Freeman, Laura Bowman, Andrew S. Bishop, and Lonel Monagas. These actors were to become Tucker's friends and teachers.

I became friends with actors like Andrew S. Bishop, the matinee stage idol, and A.B. Comathiere and Lionel Monagas. They called me "Youth," and took me under their wing. They would take me home and coach me about acting and how to walk across the stage and how to say lines. They would say, "No, you young s.o.b., that's not how you say it. This is now it's said," and the would give me the line, and they were always right. Laura Bowman helped me a lot, too.\(^4^6\)

\(^4^4\)Ibid.


\(^4^6\)Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 26, 1985.
The Lafayette Players Stock Company had a long and illustrious existence in New York, but on August 6, 1928, the core of the company folded its New York operation and moved to Los Angeles, where it would survive until 1932. During the time he worked with them, Lorenzo Tucker appeared in minor roles in three or four plays.

But really I wasn't interested in that. I was a straight man in black entertainment shows, and the Lafayette Players didn't do any of that there. I could have just as well followed the classics, but it has always been a non-profit situation, you see, and I wanted to make some money.

Although Lorenzo Tucker and Rae Hewitt were now getting jobs in different shows they were still living together, and still considered themselves a team. One day in the late spring of 1927 they took the train to Philadelphia to audition for a show then in try-outs. The show was called Rang-Tang, and was written and produced by the famous black comedy team of Flournoy E. Miller and Aubrey Lyles, who had written the book and co-produced the landmark production of Shuffle Along in 1921. Rang Tang was scheduled to open in New York on Broadway in July, and it was still being revised and reworked while playing in Philadelphia. Rae Hewitt had heard that there were positions open for chorus girls in the show, and Tucker went along to see if he could get into the show as an actor.

The trip proved to be only half successful. Rae Hewitt was offered a position in the chorus, but there was nothing available for

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48 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.

Tucker. So Rae turned the job down because she felt that staying with Lorenzo and working as a specialty dance team held more of a future than did chorus work. While she negotiated with the show's managers on stage, Tucker waited in one of the seats at the rear of the empty auditorium. Then a stranger passed up the aisle, glanced at him, and sat down in back of him. After a few moments the man leaned forward to speak. It was a chance meeting that was to change Lorenzo Tucker's life.

The stranger tapped Tucker on the shoulder and asked, "Are you an actor?" "Yes," replied Tucker. "Maybe you are, or maybe you're just one of those who think you are," the man replied. Somewhat annoyed, Tucker turned to answer and was met face-to-face by a large smiling black man with his hand stretched out. "My name's Oscar Micheaux," the man said. "I make movies. Here's my card. If you ever want to act in the movies, look me up."^50

Tucker kept Micheaux's card, but had no intention of acting in the movies. He felt there were far too many opportunities in black vaudeville as a straight man to concern himself about making black-cast movies. A few weeks later back in New York, however, Tucker was out of work and walking along Seventh Avenue near the Lafayette Theatre when he happened to meet Oscar Micheaux once again. Micheaux stopped him. "You didn't get that job with Rang Tang, did you," he asked. "No," said Tucker, "I didn't." Well, then," said

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50 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985. This meeting has also been dramatized in the film, Oscar Micheaux, a documentary made by Szabo Films, San Francisco, California, 1982.
Micheaux, "do you want to be in the movies?" Tucker thought for a moment and then said, "Why not?" So the two of them went up to Micheaux's office, and Tucker agreed to work in Micheaux's next film, A Fool's Errand, which was about to go into production. Upon making the agreement, Tucker thought, "Well, what the hell. I'll do this; I'll do that. It doesn't matter to me, as long as I'm getting paid. After all, something might come of it all, you never know."  

51 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 26, 1985.
CHAPTER 4

THE EARLY FILMS OF LORENZO TUCKER

Black Images in White Films

The history of black images in early American films is a record of racial discrimination. White production companies had employed black images in their films from the very beginning of filmmaking and, although some early ethnographic films documented blacks in a rather objective manner without prejudice (such as Edison's early kinetoscopes of West Indian laborers in 1895\(^1\)), it wasn't long before negative, demeaning stereotypes became the rule rather than the exception.\(^2\)

The stock stereotypes of black characters that evolved in white produced films included the shiftless fool, the brute, the comic female pickaninny, the faithful servant, the unfortunate mulatto and the mammy.\(^3\) White producers had adopted these stereotypes from

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 8. Cripps' provocative theory suggests that pre-narrative movie technique (an immobile camera recording unfolding, unstaged events) was the reason why early black images were generally benign. The development of narrative technique through editing, however, made fictional films possible, and the rise of cinema storytelling brought with it negative black stereotypes.

earlier entertainment forms like the minstrel shows, from existing literary descriptions, and from the popular stereotypes of the society at large. Indeed, the early images of blacks in films mirrored the attitudes of white society: blacks were "subhuman, simpleminded, superstitious and submissive." A survey of some of the pejorative titles of fictional films about blacks from this early period provide an insight into the ways their behavior was stereotyped. The titles include *Chicken Thieves* (1897), *An Interrupted Crap Game* (1898), *A Prize Fight in Coontown* (1898), *The Watermelon Contest* (1899), *Nigger in the Woodpile* (1907), and *How Rastus Got His Pork Chops* (1908). All these "comedies" revolved around some negative behavioral trait assigned to the black race.

In these early all-black cast films white producers employed black actors as comic stereotypes, and in films with white actors in leading roles black actors sometimes appeared in minor background roles. But in mixed-cast films where a black man was central to the action, the black character was played by a white actor in blackface. Edwin S. Porter's 1903 production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, had a white actor in blackface playing the title role, as did two other film versions of Stowe's novel that followed. It

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4 *Cripps*, p. 10. 5 *Leab*, p. 10.

6 The last film in this list was one of a series of "Rastus" shorts made by Philadelphia filmmaker Sigmund Lubin. Included in this series was a film entitled *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), in which Rastus dreams he is shipwrecked and captured by cannibals. He is being prepared for dinner when he is rescued by the obese Zulu princess. He chooses the pot instead. (See *Leab*, p. 1.)
wasn't until 1914 that the black minstrel comedian Sam Lucas was allowed to play Tom. In that same year black vaudevillian Bert Williams starred in a film short entitled Darktown Jubilee, but the film was a financial disaster because it was boycotted by whites who were apparently upset that a black man would have the effrontery to play a leading role.

Advances in motion picture technology and theory had brought a number of innovations to filmmaking by 1915, among them being the rise of the full-length narrative feature film. One of the earliest triumphs of this new form was D.W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation, which also contained one of the most negative depictions of the black race up to that time. Released in 1915, The Birth of a Nation was a landmark production from the point of view of cinematic art, but it also depicted a bleak and racist vision of the Reconstruction Era. The film set off a storm of controversy that was to last for years, and despite its overt racism and attempts by black leaders and organizations to have the film censored, The Birth of a Nation was permitted to be screened throughout the United States. Rather than quiet its critics, however, the screening of the film had an opposite effect, for it helped solidify a growing black consciousness that had been pioneered by such leaders as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Ibid., p. 13.

The power of the motion picture as a new medium for education had already been realized by 1915, and its potential as a polemical tool had been made blatantly apparent by *The Birth of a Nation*. Recognizing Griffith's genius as a filmmaker, Du Bois suggested that the answer to *The Birth of a Nation* was not for blacks to condemn its shortcomings, but rather for blacks to create a film aesthetic of their own. Consequently, after twenty years of being stereotyped in negative roles by white producers, blacks came to realize that the only way they were going to achieve positive images of blacks in films was to form production companies of their own. The rise of all-black cast films made by black producers for segregated black audiences came as a response to the white producers' demonstrated unwillingness to represent blacks in other than pejorative stereotypes. White discrimination was, paradoxically, the primary cause for the rise of independent black filmmaking, a movement that was still in its early stages when Lorenzo Tucker made his first film with Oscar Micheaux in 1927.

**The Rise of Race Movies**

All-black cast films produced exclusively for segregated black audiences ("race movies," as they came to be known) actually began around 1913, two years before *The Birth of a Nation*. It was then that black showman William Foster, who had been a booking agent for

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the Williams and Walker revues and for Cole and Johnson's *A Trip to Coontown*, began producing a number of "all-colored" comedy shorts. At first Foster's films employed some of the same stereotypes that the white producers were exploiting, but his later works attempted to deal with the realities of the black experience. It was, in fact, Foster who outlined the economic and educational aspirations of most black filmmakers: to make money and to redeem the black race by showing it in its true condition. But Foster's early efforts were not financially successful and his company soon foundered, a victim of three aspects of filmmaking that were to plague black filmmakers for the next forty years: lack of capital, lack of technical sophistication, and lack of distribution outlets.

The first successful black production company to make feature films about blacks in positive roles was the Lincoln Motion Picture Company of Los Angeles. Formed in 1916, Lincoln was headed by a handsome, light-skinned black actor named Noble Johnson, and that same year the company produced its first two-reeler feature short, *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, with Johnson as its star. The film was "the first feature film produced in the United States which featured blacks in dramatic, non-stereotypical roles."

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11 Leab, p. 59. 12 Ibid. 13 Sampson, p. 2.
Based on the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches theme, The Realization of a Negro's Ambition details the adventures of a black hero who graduates from college with an engineering degree and leaves his home and sweetheart behind as he heads to the California oilfields to seek his fortune. After saving a white oilman's daughter from certain death, the hero is rewarded with a job, and he soon works his way up to become a successful engineer. He marries the girl he left behind and settles down to a secure and happy life.14 The Realization of a Negro's Ambition is a success story of black assimilation into the white middle class—a theme that would run through black films in the years that followed.

Lincoln was to make a handful of short dramatic features with all-black casts in the next six years, but the company was never able to achieve financial stability. Moreover, Universal Studios had Noble Johnson under contract as a character actor and, after seeing that Johnson's Lincoln film had fared better than theirs in direct competition in the black neighborhoods of large cities, Universal gave Johnson an ultimatum: either he was to work for Lincoln or for Universal, but not for both. Realizing that there was more security with the larger company, Johnson chose Universal; he resigned from Lincoln in 1918 after having made only two films with the new company. Johnson went on to a long and distinguished career, appearing in more than eighty Hollywood films, although he was never cast by Hollywood in black roles or advertised as a black actor.15

14 Ibid. 15 Sampson, p. 225.
By 1918 at least eight film production companies were engaged in producing race movies, and over the next thirty years more than 150 companies would be formed for the same purpose. Yet of this number only 75% would actually produce one or more films, and only 33% would be totally owned and operated by blacks. Limited by lack of capital, technical sophistication and distribution networks, these companies could simply not compete with Hollywood. The most they might hope for were the marginal profits they could gain from screening their films to segregated black audiences in the urban areas of the North and Midwest, and in the small southern towns where screening facilities existed for black audiences.

Consequently, many of these companies existed only on paper, and they often dissolved when their stock offerings failed to raise the capital required to enter production; others produced only one picture and folded. Few achieved even the modest success of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, which produced a handful of shorts before its demise in 1923. As historian Thomas Cripps has noted, these black production companies "survived travail, white infiltration, inept productions and unheard releases. . . . They formed an underground cinema that attempted a black aesthetic to fill the vacuum left by Hollywood. They did not fail so much as they were overwhelmed by the impossible."
Of all the motion picture companies formed to produce black-cast movies none were as successful as that of Oscar Micheaux, who was to become the most prolific and consistent producer in the history of black filmmaking, and who was to make Lorenzo Tucker one of the first leading men of race movies.

**Oscar Micheaux**

Gregarious, flamboyant, and engaged in the issues of the day, Oscar Micheaux was an important public figure in the black entertainment world for over thirty years, yet the details of his private life remain shrouded in mystery, almost as if he chose to be enigmatic. While the few films of his that have not been lost have been the object of some study, no one has yet attempted to publish his biography. What little is known about him has had to be pieced together from the few revelations he made about himself in his autobiographical films and novels, and from new information gathered in recent interviews with his last living relative and friends who knew him.

Born on January 2, 1884 in Illinois, some forty miles above Cairo on the Ohio River, Oscar Micheaux was the fifth child and fourth son of the marriage between Swan Micheaux and Belle Goff, who had eleven children in all. In the late 1880s the family moved

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20 Interview with Verna Louise Crow, Pasadena, California, July 1, 1985. Verna Louise Crow is Oscar Micheaux's niece and closest blood relative who is still living. See also *The Conquest*, p. 10.
to nearby Metropolis, Illinois, and it was there that Oscar was raised.\(^1\)

A bright, independent and strong-willed child, Oscar Micheaux usually avoided most childhood games and was always off working on some project of his own, a behavior that earned him the nickname of "Oddball."\(^2\) Years later Micheaux wrote about his early childhood and his realization that for the rest of his life he would be his own man:

My father complained of my poor service in the field and in disgust I was sent off to do the marketing—which pleased me, for it was not only easy but gave me a chance to meet and talk with many people—and I always sold the goods and engaged more for the afternoon delivery. This was my first experience in real business and I found that from that time ever afterward I could always do better business for myself than for anybody else.\(^3\)

By the time he was a teenager Micheaux was a free-thinker prone to disagree with the prevailing conventional wisdom, and he would counter discussions about the miserable plight of blacks with arguments for self-improvement and success that were to become his standards for the rest of his life.

Another thing that added to my unpopularity, perhaps, was my persistent declarations that there were not enough competent colored people to grasp the many opportunities that presented themselves, and that if white people could possess such nice homes, wealth and luxuries, so, in time, could the colored people. "You're a fool," I would be told, and then would follow a lecture describing the time-worn long and cruel

\(^1\)Micheaux, p. 18.

\(^2\)Interview with Lylaus Keyes, Denver, Colorado, April 2, 1985. Mrs. Keyes is Oscar Micheaux's second cousin.

\(^3\)Micheaux, p. 14.
slavery, and after the emancipation, the prejudice and hatred of the white race, whose chief object was to prevent the progress and betterment of the negro. ... and I became so tired of it all that I declared that if I could ever ever leave M____pils [sic] I would never return. More, I would disprove such a theory.  

Micheaux left home in 1901 at the age of seventeen, and went to live for a short time with his brother in Chicago, where he worked briefly as a stockyard hand and as a coal hauler. Then he got a job as a Pullman porter, and for the next three years he traveled by rail throughout the United States. 25 By 1904 he had saved enough money to buy a relinquishment on a homestead located on the edge of the Indian Territory in South Dakota, and by 1907 (the year Lorenzo Tucker was born in Philadelphia) Micheaux, who was now twenty-three, had parlayed his original investment into a considerable tract of land. 26

On a trip to Chicago in 1909 Micheaux witnessed a performance of a minstrel show, and was so taken by the performance that he decided to begin his writing career by turning out short observational pieces and reviews for local newspapers. 27 The following year he fell in love with the white daughter of a nearby homesteader, but, realizing that public opinion would be opposed to their marriage, he married instead a black woman from Chicago whose father was a preacher. According to Micheaux, the father-in-law cheated him out of his property and ruined the marriage. 28 Micheaux quit farming and

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A rambling and uneven work, The Conquest is the fictionalized version of Micheaux's early economic success and marital difficulties—events that would be re-told again and again in his later films and novels. In effect, the novel is a self-vindication of Micheaux's first thirty years, containing many of the early hopes and desires that were guide him for the rest of his life. The Conquest was dedicated to the black champion of self-improvement and economic independence, Booker T. Washington, and it contained one of Micheaux's primary goals: "One of the greatest tasks of my life has been to convince a certain class of my racial acquaintances that a colored man can be anything." 29

Micheaux sold his first novel door-to-door to his white neighbors and in nearby towns. With the revenues from this book he formed his own publishing company, and soon wrote and published a second novel, The Forged Note (1915), and a third, The Homesteader (1917), which was a reworking of the events depicted in The Conquest. It was this one-man cottage-industry pattern of writing, publishing, and door-to-door distribution of his books and films that Micheaux was to follow for the rest of his life.

In early 1918 George Johnson, the brother of Noble Johnson and the Omaha-based distributor of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company's films, read The Homesteader, and suggested to Noble that the novel

29 Ibid., p. 145.
might be worth developing into a film dramatization. The Johnsons contacted Micheaux and began negotiating with him for the rights to the novel. Micheaux agreed to allow them to film the novel, under the condition that they form a new production company for the purpose of making the film, with Micheaux as President, Noble Johnson as Vice-President, and George Johnson as Secretary. The Johnsons, however, were not about to relinquish the control of their production to this upstart prairie novelist, and the deal fell through.\textsuperscript{30}

Undaunted, Micheaux combined his book company with film production, and called it The Micheaux Book and Film Company.\textsuperscript{31} He financed his first production by selling stock in the company at $75 a share to the same farmers who had bought his books.\textsuperscript{32} Then he set about teaching himself how to make films, and within a year he had surpassed all the black filmmakers who had preceded him by producing the first full-length feature film with an all-black cast, The Homesteader.\textsuperscript{33} The film version of The Homesteader was a retelling of the story of the novel. Jean Baptiste, a black homesteader in the Dakotas, falls in love with a white woman, Agnes, but leaves her and marries instead a black woman whose father is a preacher. The wife's family conspires to take Jean Baptiste's land,

\textsuperscript{30} Letter from Micheaux to the Johnsons dated May 18, 1918, in the George P. Johnson Collection, Special Collections Library of the University of California at Los Angeles.

\textsuperscript{31} Sampson, p. 44.   \textsuperscript{32} Leab, p. 75.

but in a fit of insanity, his wife stabs her father to death and then commits suicide. Grief stricken, Jean Baptiste returns to the Dakotas to discover that Agnes, although light-skinned, has black blood in her from her mother's side, and the two marry as a happy ending is insured.

Micheaux followed _The Homesteader_ immediately with the controversial film, _Within Our Gates_ (1920), which contained a realistic scene of a black man being lynched in the South. The film was initially rejected by the Chicago Board of Movie Censors who feared it might cause a race riot, but ultimately the film was allowed into general release.  

With his production company now in full-swing, Micheaux became a production dynamo, turning out in quick succession over twenty silent films, including _Symbol of the Unconquered_ (1920), a film with a strong anti-Ku Klux Klan stance; _Deceit_ (1921), about rural blacks who come to the city and pass as whites; _The Gunsaulas Mystery_ (1921), about a black man unjustly accused of murdering a white woman; _Birthright_ (1924), which concerned black achievement in the face of white prejudice; _Body and Soul_ (1924), starring Paul Robeson in his first film, about black religious leaders and gamblers who exploit the community; _The Devil's Disciple_ (1926), about prostitution on the streets of New York; _The Broken Violin_ (1926), another black-achievement film about a talented black female violinist; and _The Spider's Web_ (1927), about the numbers racket,

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34 Leab, p. 76.
murder, and a black woman's resistance of a white man's sexual advances. All these films were made before he met Lorenzo Tucker.

It is true, as most critics claim, that by Hollywood standards Micheaux's films were often technically inept and poorly structured. It is also apparent that Micheaux gave little consideration to the formal conventions of film art that had recently been formulated by his contemporaries, Porter and Griffith. Micheaux was not a film artist, nor was he the best of craftsmen; he was the quintessential self-taught grass-roots filmmaker, which probably accounts for his naive approach to the technology of cinematography and his pedestrian sense of visualization and mise-en-scene. Yet his rural background also brought to his work a straightforward pragmatism and a refreshing outspokenness. His films consistently dealt realistically and openly with the social and economic conditions blacks had to face on a day-to-day basis.

Micheaux approached the business of motion pictures from the perspective of a pre-corporate, turn-of-the-century farmer and frontiersman. His life as a homesteader trained him to learn and perform all the different yet essential tasks that needed to be done in order to insure survival and success. Micheaux brought this rugged individualism to his films. He taught himself the craft of filmmaking, and performed most of the tasks himself. He was the producer, writer, director, lighting director, editor and distributor of all of his silent films. Finally, Micheaux is important to this study because of his impact on the career of Lorenzo Tucker.
"The Colored Valentino"

In 1927 Lorenzo Tucker agreed to act in Oscar Micheaux's film, *A Fool's Errand*. Thus began a six-year collaboration during which Tucker would act in nine films for the pioneering director. The work Tucker did with Micheaux would lift him from obscurity and launch him into the celebrity status of a handsome matinee idol of all-black films. The recognition, of course, would extend no further than his race, since few whites would ever see his films; yet, within the context of the period and under the conditions of exhibition, Lorenzo Tucker was to achieve a fair amount of fame, if not fortune.

The irony that always seems to lurk just below the surface of Lorenzo Tucker's life made its presence known in the very first collaboration between Micheaux and Tucker. No one seems to know for sure whether *A Fool's Errand*, shot in the spring of 1927, was ever seen in the United States. According to Tucker, Micheaux had enough capital to finish shooting the film, but his funds ran out while the film was in the middle of post-production, and he didn't have enough money to pay the processing lab for its work. As time passed it became apparent that Micheaux would not be able to pay for the prints of the film, and so the lab took possession of the original footage and prints in lieu of payment. The lab then decided to edit the film, shoot title cards, and distribute the completed product themselves.

The Stern Labs called me up and offered to pay me to come down and write the titles, since I knew what the script was about. So I went to Micheaux to get his permission. "Hell," he said, "I don't care what they do with it." "Then you don't mind me doing the titles?" I asked. "Are
"they paying you?" he replied. "Yes," I said. "Good," said Micheaux. "Get as much as you can from them." 35

Tucker went down to the lab and wrote the titles and collected his fee. "I'm not sure what happened to the film. Someone told me later that they released it in South America under another name. It's lost now; but we made it." 36

Few of the filmographies of Micheaux's work mention A Fool's Errand, so it's not exactly clear what the fate of the film was. An advertisement in the Inter-State Tattler (a weekly paper commenting on the black social and entertainment world published between 1925 and 1932), dated March 29, 1929, however, lists A Fool's Errand as one of "three new films" being offered for


36 Ibid. The fact that this film by Micheaux is lost is more the norm than the exception. From 1918 to 1948, Micheaux produced approximately forty-five films, of which fewer than ten are known to exist today. Consequently, constructing a definitive filmography of Micheaux's works has become an almost impossible task. Research has shown that few scholars agree on either the total number of Micheaux's films, on their titles, on their subject matter, or on their dates of production. It is not clear that there were forty-five films, since Micheaux apparently engaged in the rather common practice of releasing old films under new titles. Tucker says that Micheaux also recut old films to make new ones. Confusion over the dates of production arise from the fact that Micheaux's working habit was to shoot two or three films in the spring and summer of every year, edit them in the fall, and then head south to distribute them in the winter and spring of the following year. Oftentimes he did not release a film he shot the previous spring until the following spring. Tucker also says that Micheaux, like most independent producers, gave little thought to a film's rerun value or historical significance, and once the film's initial run was over, Micheaux would get rid of the prints. It was dangerous, after all, to have prints on highly combustible nitrate stock stored in one's apartment.
distribution by the Micheaux Film Corporation.\(^37\) No account of the subject of the film have been found, and Tucker no longer remembers what the film was about. It is possible, however, that the film was Micheaux's adaptation of "Fool's Errand," a one-act play by Eulalie Spense, first produced in 1927 by the KRIGWA Players in the basement theatre of the New York Public Library at 135th and Lenox Streets in Harlem.\(^38\) Perhaps Micheaux saw this production and appropriated its title, if nothing else.

After completing work on *A Fool's Errand* Tucker returned to the theatre, picking up a variety of jobs as a straight man and as a dancer with Rae Hewitt, the dancer with whom he was still living. He was to continue this pattern of moving back and forth between theatre and film for the next few years, working in whichever medium offered employment. Micheaux had obviously been satisfied with Tucker's first efforts, for he called him back to play another role in the early summer of 1927. This film was to be a melodrama entitled *When Men Betray*; it was shot in the summer of 1927 but was not released until the spring of 1929. Like *A Fool's Errand*, little is

\(^{37}\) The Inter-State Tattler, March 29, 1929, p. 9.

\(^{38}\) W.E.B. Du Bois organized this little theatre group in 1926 and named it CRIGWA, and acronym for Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists. It is not clear why the "C" was changed to a "K." See Bruce Kellner, editor, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era* (Westport, Connecticut: The Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 212. Sylvia Birdsong, Tucker's romantic lead in *The Fool's Errand*, does not recall the plot of the film either. She does remember, however, Tucker's long kisses, which he would hold for seconds after Micheaux had called for a cut in action. (Telephone interview with Sylvia Birdsong, January 15, 1986.)
known about this film; prints of it have been lost for some time.  

In the late spring of 1928 Lorenzo Tucker and Rae Hewitt had just completed a tour with Mamie Smith's musical show, Black Diamond Express. Tucker went to see Micheaux about working in another film. "Stay in town," said Micheaux, "I've got another role for you in a film coming up soon." Tucker was interested, but couldn't afford the luxury of waiting around for production to begin. "I'd like to, but I can't wait, and unless you can give me an advance, I'll have to go where the work is," he told Micheaux.

Tucker had already been offered work as a master of ceremonies at a cabaret in Saratoga Springs, New York, and took the job. But he was there only a short time when a telegram arrived from Micheaux, along with a small advance.

The telegram said something like: "Role for you in film. Start next week. Get your suit out of hock." See, those were the days before we had actors unions, and we had to provide our own costumes for many of the roles we were cast in. And often between shows we had to hock our suits to get money to live on until our next show. Part of the agreement when you signed on to do another show or film was that you negotiated for an advance to get your suits out of hock. That's what Micheaux meant by that.

Within the week Tucker was back in New York City to begin work on his third film with Micheaux, Wages of Sin.

In Wages of Sin Lorenzo Tucker played Winston, a motion picture producer who agrees to honor his dying mother's wish that he

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39 Some of Micheaux's filmographies do not list this film.

40 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.

41 Ibid.
PLATE VI


LORENZO TUCKER (ain't he handsome?), KATHERINE NOISSETTE (ain't she pretty?) and WILLIAM A. CLAYTON, Jr. (ain't he naughty?)—three stars in "The Wages of Sin."
take care of his youngest brother, J. Lee (played by William Clayton, Jr.). Winston brings his younger brother to the big city and gives him a job, but within a short time J. Lee begins to embezzle company funds, which he squanders on women and whiskey. Winston, discovering that his company is in debt, fires his brother and takes to the road to raise capital to save the company. Later, in a gesture of reconciliation, Winston allows J. Lee back into the company; but, in a fit of revenge, J. Lee sets about once again to destroy the company. J. Lee is thwarted in his attempt, however, and the film has a happy ending.  

At first the plot of *Wages of Sin* seems to have been another updated version of the Cain and Abel story, but it is possible that there is more to it than that. Given Micheaux's penchant for using the events of his own life as raw material for his novels and films, it seems that *Wages of Sin* was a thinly disguised autobiography, being Micheaux's public revelation of his private relationship with his younger brother, Swan Micheaux, Jr.

While the records of the Micheaux Book and Film Company are now lost—as are the prints of *Wages of Sin*—it seems that Swan Micheaux was the model for J. Lee. Swan was brought to Chicago by Oscar in 1920 and put to work as manager of the Micheaux Book and Film Company offices there. When Oscar moved to New York City in 1921 to be closer to a larger number of professional black actors and to take advantage of the better studio production facilities there,

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42 Sampson, p. 133.
he left Swan in Chicago and appointed him Secretary, Treasurer and Booking Manager of the company.  

By 1927 Oscar Micheaux had produced approximately twenty full-length silent feature films, only to find, after all that work, that his company was insolvent. It seems that a central reason for this was Swan's mismanagement of funds. After a confrontation with Oscar, Swan resigned his post with the company. In February, 1928, Oscar Micheaux filed a voluntary petition of bankruptcy in the U.S. 7th District Court, listing liabilities of $7,837 and assets of $1,400.

Lorenzo Tucker was also aware of the difficulties between the two brothers: "I came on with Micheaux after Swan had left, so I don't really know what went on between them. But there was bad blood, you could tell, and Oscar never wanted to talk about Swan." In any case, Wages of Sin was an important film in

43 Ibid., p. 45.
45 Sampson, p. 49. After Swan left Oscar he produced and directed one movie, The Midnight Ace, for the Dunbar Film company in New York, and that was apparently the last film work he ever did. His niece, Verna Louise Crow, says he lived in New York until around 1949, when he returned to live with his family, in Great Bend, Kansas. He lived there until he died around 1975. He is buried in the family plot in Great Bend. (Interview with Verna Louise Crow, January 15, 1986.)
46 Bankruptcy records dated February 25, 1928, in the George P. Johnson Collection, Special Collections Library, University of California at Los Angeles.
Tucker's early film career, as it helped to earn him the title of "The Colored Valentino."

It was Micheaux's habit to leave New York City in the autumn of every year and head south to book the films he had just completed, using their projected future receipts as security against an advance from the theatre owners for the films he hoped to produce in the coming year. On one of his trips Micheaux met with a white theatre manager whose marquee announced the screening of Valentino's last film, Son of the Sheik. Noting the title, Micheaux pulled out a publicity still of Lorenzo Tucker. "Here's my leading man, Lorenzo Tucker," said Micheaux. "He's the Colored Valentino." It began as an on-the-spot publicity gimmick, and from that time forward Lorenzo Tucker has been referred to as "The Colored Valentino."

Yeah, it worked. And I kind of looked like Valentino, too. But I never got any white press at all, and very few people outside the black community ever heard of me. But I want to make one thing straight: these historians today always say that I was called "The Black Valentino." Well, I was never called that because we never used the word "black" like that in those days. Micheaux only called me "The Colored Valentino," nothing else. In fact, if you really want to know, I was even lighter than Valentino himself.

Lorenzo Tucker's light complexion was perhaps the central anomaly of his life and show business career. Although he had black blood in him, he was light-skinned, and he could have chosen to pass

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48 Nesteby, p. 75.

49 See the documentary film, Oscar Micheaux, produced as part of the "Were You There?" series by Szabo Films, San Francisco, California, 1982.

50 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
as white and hide his ancestry. Instead, he remained true to his heritage, a decision that often left him stranded between the two worlds of black and white. The irony was that although he could travel in both black and white societies, he would never be fully accepted by either.

Light Skin in Black Films

In the summer of 1929 Lorenzo Tucker was back again with Micheaux, this time as the leading man in Micheaux's first venture into sound, A Daughter of the Congo, which was released in April, 1930. After Hollywood's debut of the first sound film, Al Jolson's blackface rendition of The Jazz Singer in October of 1927, Micheaux realized that sooner or later he too would have to contend with the new technology of motion picture sound if he intended to continue to compete at all with Hollywood for the small market of movie theatres that catered to black audiences. But financial instability and lack of technical sophistication inhibited him from making sound films until 1929; instead, he had continued to turn out low-budget silent features, hoping to turn a profit on their

51 Off and on between 1928 and 1930 Micheaux was also shooting a melodrama entitled Easy Street. Little is known about this film, which is also lost, except that the cast included Lorenzo Tucker, Alice B. Russell (Micheaux's wife), and Richard B. Harrison. The film received its New York State license on August 1, 1930. (Peterson, p. 140.) Tucker recalls nothing of the film except that he enjoyed working with veteran actor Richard B. Harrison, who was over sixty years old when he completed Easy Street. (Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985.) Soon after this film was completed Harrison was cast as "De Lawd" in the original Broadway production of The Green Pastures.

52 Peterson, p. 140.
distribution in spite of the fact that they were silents. He knew
he was working in a marginal industry. As Tucker points out:

Micheaux would laugh when he saw some of the money that
white producers were putting into black-cast films. He
knew that the market wouldn't support the investment. He
would put just so much and nothing more into a film, be­
cause he knew he would only make so much money. That's
why his films were technically poor. And the acting was
sometimes bad because he would only allow one take. He
could have made better films, but he knew they wouldn't
make any more money anyway.  

Micheaux had not completely mastered the new medium of sound by
the time he went into production with A Daughter of the Congo, nor
did he have the capital to mount a full-scale sound production. But
with A Daughter of the Congo he did manage to produce a partial
sound track, which included a few talking sequences and a musical
score. And, since all the theatres had not yet completed the
changeover to sound, he released a silent version of the film as
well.  

In A Daughter of the Congo Micheaux moved away from his usual
urban setting and attempted to tell an action-packed story that takes
place in the jungles of Africa. The plot of the story is a variation
of the Tarzan myth, as Lupelta (played by Katherine Noisette), a
beautiful mulatto girl who has been stolen as a baby and brought up
among a savage tribe, is on her way to marry a tribal chief. But she
and her retinue are captured in the jungle by a band of Arab slave
traders. Captain Paul Dale of the U.S. Cavalry (played by Lorenzo

53 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, October 22, 1985.
54 Peterson, p. 140. All the prints of this film are lost.
Tucker) is on air reconnaissance duty as constable of the small, fictional republic of Monravi. He intercepts the slave traders and frees Lupelta, reintroducing her to civilization at the mission school where "she readily succumbs to learning and soon becomes the most popular maid of the Monravis in spite of her frequent inclination to revert to the wild life of the jungle from which she has been rescued."  

Also appearing in the cast were Alice B. Russell, Percy VerWayne, Willard Lee Guilford, and the legendary showman, Salem Tutt Whitney. Tucker's strongest memories of the production are of the time he spent at a Long Island airfield.

We spent hours taking off and landing in those old bi­planes. It was dangerous, but it was exciting, too. And we flew all over Long Island as another plane followed alongside us with a camera and shot us looking over the side, like we were searching the jungles below.

Most of Micheaux's films were the subject of controversy, and A Daughter of the Congo proved no exception. Theophilus Lewis, a leading black critic writing for the New York Amsterdam News, the major black newspaper in Harlem, accused Micheaux of supporting a caste system in his film:

The first offense of the new film is its persistent vaunting of intraracial color fetishism. . . . All the noble characters are high yellows; all the ignoble ones

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55 Sampson, p. 135.
56 Ibid., p. 264. Whitney wrote over twenty-five musical comedies and hundreds of sketches, "Tab" shows, poems and songs. He died on February 12, 1934.
57 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, October 22, 1985.
PLATE VIII

Far left: Lorenzo Tucker as Captain Paul Dale. Photocopy of production program from Oscar Micheaux's A Daughter of the Congo (1930).
are black. . . . Even if the picture possessed no other defects, this artificial association of nobility with lightness and villainy with blackness will be enough to ruin it. It is based on a false assumption that has no connection with the realities of life, as Mr. Micheaux could have been convinced by five minutes' reflection on the progress of his race.

From the very beginning of his filmmaking career, Micheaux had been concerned (some might say obsessed) with the issue of light-versus dark-skinned blacks, and it was probably one of the reasons why he cast Lorenzo Tucker in his films. Himself a dark-skinned black, Micheaux had married two light-skinned black women during his lifetime. The Homesteader was an account of the first marriage: the hero falls in love with what he presumes to be a white woman, rejects her, and then marries her later when she reveals that she possesses black blood from her mother's side. The same story would be repeated again in later films: The Exile (1931), and The Betrayal (1948).

The themes of mulattoism, caste, and light-skinned blacks passing as white run throughout Micheaux's work, and while it is certainly true that in a number of films, including A Daughter of the Congo, light-skinned blacks like Lorenzo Tucker did play the leading roles, it is nevertheless also true that in other Micheaux films dark-skinned blacks were the leading players in positive roles (Paul Robeson in Body and Soul is the best example). It is not enough for Lewis simply to charge Micheaux with a kind of caste racism. To do so would be to implicate Micheaux in a perverted

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58 Theophilus Lewis, Amsterdam News, April 16, 1931, as quoted in Sampson, p. 51. See also Cripps, p. 426.
game: since Micheaux was dark-skinned it would hardly benefit him to admit that he too was inferior to the light-skinned blacks he cast in his films.

The problem is deeper and more complex. The social purposes of Micheaux's films were two-fold. First, he wanted to depict the black race in its natural settings, facing everyday problems; the question of mulattoism was one of these problems. In *A Daughter of the Congo*, Micheaux used Africa as a backdrop to discuss the larger issues of racial, blood and skin color. It is therefore proper that the heroine of *A Daughter of the Congo* be light-skinned, for by being so she sets up a number of issues for discussion: the narrative is rich in tensions between white and black, male and female, and civilization and the jungle.

Second, Micheaux sought to provide role models for the poor black sharecroppers of the South and urban blacks of the northern ghettos who saw his films, so they could aspire to bettering themselves. According to Tucker, in casting light-skinned black as role models Micheaux was trying to get as far away as possible from Hollywood's stereotypical "darkies":

Micheaux automatically integrated his films. He gave all different kinds of roles to different shades. He used different-looking people, not stereotypes. I played bad guys, too, and I was light-skinned. He wrote his stories to use all the shades of the black race, because that's the way we are.

Micheaux was not unaware of the criticism leveled at his films, and more than once he replied to it with an appeal for understanding.

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of what he was trying to do. As early as 1925 he wrote:

I have always tried to make my photoplays present the truth, to lay before the race a cross section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range. My results might have been narrow at times, due perhaps to certain limited situations, which I endeavored to portray, but in those limited situations, the truth was the pre-dominant characteristic. It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights.  

By summer of 1930 Micheaux was prepared to make his first full-length sound feature, and Lorenzo Tucker was hired to play a small role. The film was to be called The Exile; it was adapted from his novel The Conquest, and was also a re-working of his first silent film, The Homesteader. Shot at the Metropolitan Studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey, The Exile was apparently the first all-black feature sound film ever made by an independent black producer.  

In The Exile Micheaux was to address the issue of complexion and blood. This time Micheaux hired a light-skinned black actor by the name of Stanley Morell to play the title role of Jean Baptiste, modeled after Micheaux. The Exile is a story of a rural, upstanding black man who must choose between the speakeasies of Chicago and the rugged farm life of South Dakota. He chooses the latter, and while farming falls in love with a neighbor's daughter, Agnes, who is white. Jean Baptiste leaves her because he knows they would be ostracized from society all their lives if they were to

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60 Oscar Micheaux, writing in the Philadelphia Afro-American, January 24, 1925, as quoted in Sampson, pp. 54-55.

61 Peterson, p. 140.
PLATE IX

Photocopy of lobby poster from Oscar Micheaux's *The Exile* (1931).
marry. "I love you too much to suffer all that," he writes. Later, Agnes' father reveals that her mother was black and she therefore has black blood also. Agnes hurries off to Chicago to find Jean Baptiste, who has just been cleared of a murder charge, and they ride off together to South Dakota on a train.

It is a happy but ironic ending to this racial melodrama. Love is restored, but the issue of interracial love is ultimately avoided. Yet Micheaux knew that the censorship boards would never grant the film a license if there were any interracial kissing scenes. In fact, The Exile was banned after it was reviewed by the Pittsburgh Censorship Board because of its suggestions of interracial love, and because a black man is allowed to beat up a white man who tries to seduce the mulatto heroine.

In one of the film's central scenes Micheaux grapples with the dilemma of light-skinned blacks. A white neighbor boy visits the cabin of Jean Baptiste and, as they sit at the table, the boy tells Jean Baptiste that a new farm family has moved in nearby, headed by a Scotsman named Jack Stewart, who has two sons and a pretty daughter:

JEAN BAPTISTE
They're white, I suppose?

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62 The Exile (1931); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
63 Ibid.
64 Peterson, p. 140. Lorenzo Tucker is listed in the cast of characters in the Library of Congress print of The Exile, but apparently his scene has been cut out of the film. In an interview on October 22, 1985, Tucker said that he was the white man who attempted to seduce the heroine.
BOY
Yes. Ain't that funny?

JEAN BAPTISTE
What's funny?

BOY
You're askin' me if they're white people. What difference does it make? Anyway, you're not all colored, are you?

JEAN BAPTISTE
Yes, brother, all colored.

BOY
Aren't you sort of mixed, got some white blood in you?

JEAN BAPTISTE
If you're part white and part colored, it's all the same. You're considered all colored.65

It is a scene haunting in its simplicity, yet in a few lines of dialogue Micheaux outlines a major theme of the black experience in America: blackness is not necessarily the color of a man's skin; rather, it is the idea of the inferiority of black blood that is at issue.

Working With Micheaux

Always working under the limitations of low budgets and time constraints, Micheaux was apparently willing to sacrifice quality for

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65The Exile (1931); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. In the same interview on October 22, 1985, Tucker insisted that a second version of the film was made shortly after the first version because Micheaux was unhappy with the performance of Stanley Morrell in the title role. Tucker said that numerous scenes were shot over with him in the lead role, which accounts for the posters which show him as the leading man. If Micheaux did indeed make another version of The Exile it has been lost. The print of the film in the Library of Congress is the one with Morrell in the title role.
quantity. The few films that remain of Micheaux's canon indicate that his directing technique was primarily pragmatic. He was not concerned with the elements of film art; rather, he was concerned with the logistics of moving the actors through the scene and getting the film made. Tucker says that while Micheaux excelled in preparing and arranging a shot, the work of directing actors did not come naturally to him.

According to Tucker, Micheaux's usual practice was to direct while lying on a couch and swallowing handfuls of raw starch from an Argo box. "It soothes my aching stomach," he would say.66

Working with actors was one of the elements of the director's craft that Micheaux never developed, and he was of little assistance to actors once the scene was technically prepared. He rarely granted actors the chance to rehearse a scene after it had been blocked. Tucker, whose theater background had taught him the importance of rehearsals, would often ask Micheaux for time to rehearse, but Micheaux, always aware that time meant money, would refuse.

He would get frustrated and yell at me. "You young actor! I don't know what I'm going to do with you. What's the matter, Tucker, you can talk, can't you? And you can walk, can't you? Well, then, let's shoot the scene."67

Micheaux's attitude about second takes was even more tightfisted. If an actor forgot a line while the cameras were

66 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985. Verna Louise Crow also recalls that whenever Micheaux came to visit his sister (her mother, Ethel Micheaux) he would always carry a box of Argo starch to help soothe his upset stomach. (Interview, January 16, 1986.)

rolling, Micheaux sometimes let it pass. Hardly ever would he shoot a scene over. As a concession to an actor he might begin the next shot from the point where the mistake was made—sometimes from the middle of a sentence. Since both takes of the same line were made from the same camera set up and edited without the benefit of an insert, the shot has the jarring effect of a jump cut. Indeed, another of Micheaux's films, The Girl From Chicago, is so poorly produced and edited that one can hear Micheaux's off-camera voice cueing the actors as they gesture on camera for him to be quiet. Micheaux's films are replete with these strange, revealing moments in which we are able to see both the character and the actor behind the character in self-conscious behavior. Writing in 1975, J. Hoberman called Micheaux's work a kind of "ipso facto avant-gardism":

To call Micheaux's work problematic is to say the least. His films were made on a shoestring and are characterized by a surreal degree of corner-cutting. He seemed to be oblivious to the laws of cinematic continuity. . . . Micheaux's actors ran the gamut from B-movie competent to would-be matinee idols, to utter amateurs. Thus, most of his big dramatic moments are played to utter cross-purpose. Left stranded by their director—in scenes grossly overextended—Micheaux's performers strike fantastic poses or stare affectingly into the camera, revealing their individual personalities. Thirty years before Warhol, Micheaux approached a mise-en-scene "degree zero."

According to Tucker, when Micheaux shot on the sound stage his lighting was supplied by the technicians who were part of the rental package, but when shooting on location Micheaux was on his own.

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68 The Girl From Chicago (1932); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

He had fellows he would tell what to do, but he designed the lighting, he was in charge. He'd tell them, "Put that mirror out there; bring it up here." He could light a whole apartment with reflectors that would bring the natural light in and bend it around here and bend it in there. It's called "bending light," and he had the technique down and we paid no attention to it. He rarely used electric lights. Kodak might send a camera and crew with a couple of spots or something like that, and he might use one or two of them now and then, but mostly he used natural light.70

The spring and summer of 1931 found Lorenzo Tucker involved in a number of different projects. In May he had been cast in a Broadway-bound play entitled The Constant Sinner, which was written and produced by Mae West, who would also be the leading lady. (See Chapter 5.) While in rehearsals for this play Lorenzo was also working on two film productions for Micheaux, Ten Minutes to Live and Veiled Aristocrats.

Ten Minutes to Live was a full-length film that consisted of two short films only tangentially related by the fact that they were adaptations from two short stories, "The Father" and "The Killer."71 Micheaux adapted and directed the film, employing the accomplished black stage actor A.B. Comathiere as his assistant director, and composer Donald Heywood as his choreographer and music arranger.72 The cast also included Lawrence Chenault, Laura Bowman and Comathiere, all important members of the Lafayette Players. Lorenzo Tucker was cast in a non-speaking minor role, appearing as a

70 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.

71 Ten Minutes to Live (1932); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

72 Ibid.
gangster in one small scene in which he delivers a note to
the heroine, warning her that she has "ten minutes to live."\(^{73}\)

The film is a weak entry by Micheaux, full of editing errors and
a confusing script. Title cards are used once again to condense the
story and moralize about actions. The major contribution of Ten
Minutes to Live is in its representation of Harlem's night life.
In the fictional cabaret, The Lybia, we get a glimpse of what Harlem
night life must have been like. There are three chorus interludes in
"The Father," featuring the light-skinned chorus girls recruited by
Micheaux from the Cotton Club.

Micheaux would rent the studios to shoot the night club
numbers for his films. After the chorus girls finished
their work at the Cotton Club, Micheaux would bus them
down to the studio and shoot the scenes at four o'clock
in the morning.\(^{74}\)

The second film that Tucker was working on in the summer of 1931
was Veiled Aristocrats. Released in 1932, this film is now lost.
Tucker recalls little about the film, except that it was shot at "The
Homestead," the residence of Alice B. Russell's mother in Montclair,
New Jersey:

Sometimes we would get on the set and Micheaux would hand
out the scene that he had written only the night before, so
we had to memorize it quickly. I could do it because of my
theatre training, but some actors had problems. Because we
worked this way I was never quite sure of what the plot was
in some of these show, and that's why it's so difficult for
me to remember what they were about.\(^{75}\)

\(^{73}\)Ibid.

\(^{74}\)Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.

\(^{75}\)Ibid.
By this time Lorenzo Tucker's reputation as a career actor had been firmly established, and he had achieved celebrity status with black moviegoers throughout the country. Fred O'Neal, who was to direct Tucker on stage in the 1950s, recalls growing up in St. Louis and watching Tucker on screen:

Back in St. Louis I used to see Micheaux's films and watch Tucker act. We thought he was wonderful, and many blacks looked up to him as a role model. I never dreamed, sitting there in the dark theatre, that I would someday direct Tucker myself.76

Now and then Micheaux would have Tucker travel to cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh to make personal appearances at the screenings of new releases. When he traveled to Philadelphia Tucker would contact his mother and take her to the premiere of his film.

Part of the package Micheaux would offer with the film was the personal appearances of the leading players. He would include their expenses in with the screening fees. So I would get on a train and go back to Philadelphia now and then and get up on stage to say a few words and sign a few autographs before the movie began. I would even take my mother to see the movie. She said she liked seeing me up on the screen and that it made her feel good, but I still think she never did forgive me for leaving home and quitting school. To this day I feel guilty about it.77

Even though his work for Micheaux had garnered Lorenzo Tucker a certain amount of fame, he grew increasingly impatient with Micheaux's unwillingness to give his actors room to create:

76 Interview with Fred O'Neal, New York City, August 9, 1985. Actor, director, and organizer, O'Neal has had a long and distinguished career in the American theatre. Aside from his many credits, O'Neal was one of the founding members of the American Negro Theatre, the Negro Actors Guild, and the Rose McClendon Players. In 1964 he became the first black man to be elected the Executive Director of Actors Equity.

77 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, October 22, 1985.
You see, Micheaux was always hurting for money when he did these pictures, so he never let his actors do their best work. I think deep down he didn't want actors to get big-headed about their performances, because they might demand more money for their next movie. I can remember going up to his apartment to see if he had any work for me. He showed me his next script. "My name's not in the cast," I said. "I know," he replied, and said nothing more. Later, when I got up to leave, he said, "Take a script on the way out—you're playing the lead." That way he always had me at his mercy. "I made more money with you as my leading man than anybody else," he once told me, but that's as far as he would go. He always paid me on time, and even loaned me money at times, but he would never let me get too big. So after a while I stopped working with him. I just got tired of doing things that way."

While Tucker had grown tired of Micheaux's shoestring production techniques and confining directorial methods, Micheaux had become increasingly impatient with Tucker's lack of interest and growing tardiness.

His pet names for me were "Big Boy" and "Useless." "I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Useless," he would say when I arrived late for a scene. And we would play practical jokes on him sometimes. He always enjoyed them, but he would say, "You boys are going to pay for this someday."

Tucker would make only one more film for Micheaux during this first period of their collaboration, Harlem After Midnight. Little is known about this film, since it too is lost; there are, however, some production photographs that remain which have been duplicated in this study. Tucker recalls only that he played a gangster in the film, which was made early in 1933 and released in 1934.

78 Ibid. 79 Ibid. 80 All photos in this study are from the collection of Lorenzo Tucker.
PLATE X

From left: Lorenzo Tucker, Lionel Monagas and Alfred "Slick" Chester. Production still from Oscar Micheaux's Harlem After Midnight (1934).
PLATE XII

Photocopy of production program for Oscar Micheaux's *Harlem After Midnight* (1934).
Other Films

Tucker was to make two more films before the first period of his film career came to a close. Early in 1932 he was cast in a film called The Black King. Originally entitled Empire, Inc., the film was written by the black composer, Donald Heywood, with capital provided by white producers under the banner of the Southland Pictures Corporation. Billed as a satire on the life of Marcus Garvey, the story of The Black King follows the rise and fall of "Charcoal" Johnson (played by A.B. Comartheire), a black minister who insinuates himself into the pastorship of a Mississippi church in order to swindle his flock out of their money and to start a back-to-Africa movement, complete with all the costumes, trappings and rituals of the European courts.

In The Black King Lorenzo Tucker played the role of Stephen Charmichael, a lawyer who visits Johnson and his cronies at the end of the film to tell them that legally, financially and politically their scheme has failed. Even though the role is a small one, it is nevertheless the best representation of Tucker's early acting style and screen persona that survives from the period: he is handsome, well-dressed, suave, intelligent and smooth-talking. As the sophisticated light-skinned lawyer, Tucker puts the bumbling black

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81 The Inter-State Tattler, April 13, 1932, p. 9.
82 Sampson, p. 137. The film was released again around 1936 by Alfred N. Sack under the title, Harlem Big Shot. A print of the film is in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
83 The Black King (1932); VHS print in author's collection.
PLATE XIII

Lorenzo Tucker as Stephen Charmichael in Southland Pictures' The Black King (1932).
PLATE XIV

Photocopy of lobby poster for Southland Pictures' The Black King (1932). Lorenzo Tucker (lower left) and Vivienne Baber (lower right).
schemers in their place, and in the end he is responsible for their downfall. Comarthiere and other blacks in the cast are made to speak in stereotypical "darkie" accents so that the whole idea of a black king in America could be held up to ridicule. What results is a kind of self-conscious performance style in which the comedy becomes indistinguishable from the drama. This, coupled with the film's weak technical quality, led to the film's poor reception and ultimate failure. Within a week after *The Black King* opened Southland Pictures Corporation was being sued for outstanding debts, and the company never made another picture. 84

In early 1933 Tucker received a phone call from his friend, Lionel Monagas, who reported that a big-budget black-cast film was to be shot soon at the Astoria Studios in Long Island. Monagas suggested that they both attend the casting call to try to get work as extras in the film, which they did. Ironically, the film in which Lorenzo Tucker would play one of his smallest roles was destined to become one of the most important films about the black experience ever made: the screen version of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, starring Paul Robeson.

DuBose Heywood, the white playwright who had earlier written *Porgy*, was in charge of adapting *The Emperor Jones* for the screen. With O'Neill's blessing, Heywood wrote a prologue to the central action that included scenes in a rural church and in a Harlem cabaret. 85 It was in these latter scenes that Tucker would appear:

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84 Cripps, p. 326. 85 Ibid., p. 216.
Lionel and I went out to the casting call and I told the casting director that I had made movies before for Micheaux, and he said, "Sure, I can use you." So I worked for two or three days as an extra in the cabaret scenes, sitting at a table in the background with my back to the camera and then dancing on the dance floor. So I got in the movie for all of ten or fifteen seconds. And then I collected my pay and walked out the door.

By 1933 the Depression had all but put an end to independent black filmmaking. Between 1930 and 1933 only thirteen all-black films were produced, and the only black company that remained in business from 1930 through 1936 was that of Oscar Micheaux. There was little film work for actors during these dark days, and after The Emperor Jones Lorenzo Tucker stopped making films altogether.

The completion of the cabaret scenes in The Emperor Jones brought an end to the first and most important period of Lorenzo Tucker's career as a film actor. Between 1927 and 1933 he had acted in eleven feature films; nine had been made under the guidance of his early mentor, Oscar Micheaux, and two more had been made with other producers. During these six years Lorenzo Tucker had developed from an inexperienced young actor of twenty to a rather polished film veteran who had survived the transition from silent to sound films and had achieved a limited but credible reputation as a light-skinned star of all-black films. Tucker would later return to work with Micheaux in two more films, and would act in numerous black-cast

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86 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 26, 1985.
87 The Emperor Jones (1933); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
films for other producers throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Never again, however, would he be used as a leading man, and never again would he achieve the celebrity status he enjoyed during this first period.
CHAPTER 5

FROM HARLEM TO BROADWAY, 1927-1933

The Harlem Renaissance

While Lorenzo Tucker was busy developing his career as an actor in all-black motion pictures he was also working as a stage performer; in fact, the eleven films Tucker made between 1927 and 1933 constituted only a small part of his professional accomplishments during that period. Tucker also performed regularly in black vaudeville and legitimate stage productions that were mounted in Harlem and other parts of New York City, and he often spent weeks at a time on the road with black shows that played in cities and small towns throughout the eastern United States. In addition, Tucker made his first Broadway appearance in 1929, and in the following four years played Broadway three more times. Theatre and film work was plentiful, and Lorenzo Tucker's first six years in show business would prove to be his busiest and most successful.

When Lorenzo Tucker arrived in Harlem in 1927 it was the largest and most influential black community in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of blacks had migrated there in the first two decades of the twentieth century, lured by the promise of jobs and improved living conditions. For many of these migrants, Harlem was the Promised Land. In reality, however, Harlem was at least a few steps
short of the Promised Land. Most who came there remained mired in poverty, and most had few opportunities to change their condition.¹

Thousands of blacks were squeezed into the few square blocks around 7th Avenue and 135th Street that defined black Harlem and, as a result of this high concentration of blacks in such a small area, and because the neighborhood was segregated from the white community that surrounded it, Harlem developed a sub-culture of its own. In its manners, morals, economic aspirations and social customs Harlem reflected the values of the dominant white society; yet it also evolved a sense of its own identity apart from American society as a whole. Among the many who came to Harlem in these years were the most important black intellectuals and artists of the generation who would announce the rise of a new black consciousness and would shape a period that was even then referred to as "The Harlem Renaissance."²

More than a short-lived literary movement of minor black writers, the Harlem Renaissance was a rather broad cultural flowering spawned by a variety of historical events and social tendencies, and nurtured by a new artistic and political consciousness. Chief among its ideologues were W.E.B. Du Bois, the Harvard Ph.D. who became a leading voice of black progress through his editorship of the N.A.A.C.P. journal, The Crisis, and Alain Locke, the Howard


University professor whose book, *The New Negro* (1925), became a seminal tract in the movement's attempt to redefine the black experience. Joining these men were the artists and intellectuals like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Wallace Thurman and others—all who wrote the poems, essays, and novels that provided a brief glimpse of the black experience and its aspirations. In addition, there were the sculptors, painters, and the hundreds of black entertainers who contributed their energy and spirit through drama, music, dance and song. This was Harlem's golden age, when its sense of self and its influence upon the outside world was at its peak. As Carl Van Vechten pointed out, it was a time "when the Negro was in the ascendancy."  

Lorenzo Tucker's early success took place during the Harlem Renaissance, and he is one of the few remaining witnesses who lived near the center of this cultural drama and who was familiar with many of its major figures.

**On the Road**

Even though Lorenzo Tucker and Rae Hewitt set up an apartment and established Harlem as their home base in 1927, they spent little time as permanent residents there. Much of the following two years were spent on the road, where they appeared in various musical shows, vaudeville performances and dramatic productions.

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The late 1920s were the high point of black vaudeville. Numerous touring companies criss-crossed the country in automobiles, busses and trains, through the often hostile country of the white society, in order to play to the isolated communities of blacks outside New York. These shows feature headliners such as the Whitman Sisters, Sissle and Blake, Buck and Bubbles, Blake and Walker, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Salem Tutt Whitney and Billy Mitchell. Other stars, like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Chappelle and Stinnette, and the Four Chocolate Dandies were able to cross over and join the more established and more lucrative white vaudeville circuits, such as the Keith-Albee, the Orpheum, and the Pantages. Yet, while this was the age of vaudeville's greatest popularity, its days were numbered; the advent of radio and talking movies, along with the Depression, would bring an end to it within five years. But nobody could have predicted it.

We were having fun in those days, and we had no goals, really, except to keep on working in vaudeville. We thought we would grow old and die doing vaudeville. Had anybody told us that within five years vaudeville would be through we would have laughed him out of sight. We thought we would last forever, and that's why a lot of performers dropped out of show business later on, because when vaudeville was gone they had nothing else to do.

The most important black touring circuit in the 1920s was the Theatre Owners and Booking Association (T.O.B.A.). Organized in Chattanooga in 1920, the T.O.B.A. circuit grew to include over 80

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5Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
white owners of theatres that catered to black audiences. For three hundred dollars each, the theatre owners were given exclusive franchises for life to the cities in which their theatres were located. In effect, the owners had joined together to organize a booking circuit for the purpose of routing the black shows in the most efficient and most profitable manner possible.

One of the positive effects of the T.O.B.A. circuit was that it provided employment for hundreds of black entertainers; on the other hand, however, there were constant complaints by blacks about the unfair labor treatment and discrimination practiced by many white theatre owners. Clarence Muse, at the time a well-known black actor and producer, discussed part of the problem in the August 28, 1929 issue of the Pittsburgh Courier:

At the beginning of the season, on or about Labor Day, six or seven week contracts will be issued to well-known producers and managers of shows. The terms of the contract are carefully worded, unlike any other theatrical contracts in the world. But if the show fails to appear, they pay and pay dearly even more than the contract is the party of the first part, meaning the manager of the theatre, and the party of the second part, meaning the show is only mentioned with no protection at all.

In spite of the hardships, however, life on the road for a twenty-one year old performer was often exciting and carefree. As Tucker recalls,

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6 Sampson, p. 16.

7 Lorenzo Tucker, Dick Campbell and Fred O'Neal, all actors on the T.O.B.A. circuit, indicated in interviews that black performers often did not get paid, and for this reason the vulgarization of the organization's abbreviation was "Tough on Black Asses."

8 Quoted in Sampson, p. 16.
We'd pull in some place like Chicago or Detroit and decide we'd like to stay for a while and see what was happening in this town, so I'd go up to the show's producer and say, "Look here, Jim, I like it here, and I think I'm going to stay for a while." Oh, some of them hated you when you jumped the show, but everybody did it. So your show left and you stayed and took it easy for a while. Then, in a couple of weeks or so, when the money was getting low, I'd get a job as a single, doing an emcee in a speakeasy cabaret. Most of them were owned by gangsters, but they treated us well enough, and you made real good money working for them. Then, when I wanted to get back on the circuit, I'd look in the trade papers to see what shows were opening and I'd call them up and ask if I could join the show. In those days we pretty much knew each other, so you hardly ever had to audition. Getting jobs then was as easy as catching the next subway train.

In early 1928 Lorenzo Tucker and Rae Hewitt worked together in the musical show, Black Diamond Express, whose producer and featured star was Mamie Smith. The principals also included Apus Brooks, Joe Russell, Whirley Wiggins and Lorenzo Tucker. Rae Hewitt was part of the chorus. Whirley Wiggins was the stage manager and primary straight man of the company, but Tucker would substitute for him on occasion.

Later that year Tucker succeeded in getting a job as a Roman soldier in a production of Queen of Sheba, with a cast headed by Louis Calhern and Gretta Nissen. This all-white show played the

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10 Like Bessie Smith (to whom she was not related), Mamie Smith was one of the great blues singers of the 1920s. Born in Cincinnati, Mamie came to New York in her teens, and in 1920 recorded "Crazy Blues" for Okeh Records. An instant hit, the song was "the first recording of an actual blues performance by a Negro actress with a Negro accompaniment." (Anderson, p. 131.)

11 Sampson, p. 498.

12 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, October 11, 1985.
subway circuit, "from the Apollo on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City to Long Island and the Bronx." But the show never made it to Broadway. About his decision to play a white role, Tucker said, "It wasn't that I turned my back on being black. I needed the work, and I just went down there and auditioned, and they took me and never asked me any questions about my race, and I didn't offer any answers. It wouldn't be the last time I had to pass for white."  

Early in 1929 Lorenzo Tucker worked again with Bessie Smith (whom he had performed with in 1927), playing the straight man in her production of Midnight Steppers, and during that year he worked in a variety of other situations, from film actor to straight man to stage performer to master of ceremonies. He was now twenty-two and working steadily in black show business.

Many of those jobs I got while standing under the Tree of Hope, which was on 7th Avenue just across the Connie's Inn and the Lafayette Theatre. The Tree of Hope was an old oak tree or something, and black entertainers would go there every day and stand under it and touch the bark for good luck, hoping they would get a job. Then the agents who were casting shows would come out there to see who was standing under the tree, and would sign up people right there. You'd sign for a week's show with somebody, and your friend would sign for a week or two with somebody else. And that's how it was done. The Tree of Hope was like our employment office in those days.

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13 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 2, 1985.
14 Ibid.
15 Sampson, p. 505.
16 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 27, 1985.
Broadway Years, 1929-1933

When the Stock Market crashed in October, 1929, Lorenzo Tucker was in dress rehearsals for his first Broadway show, Make Me Know It. Although it was sub-titled "A Panorama of Negro Life," Make Me Know It was a black cast comedy about the narrow world of black politics and racketeering. A.B. Comathiere played the central role of Bulge Bannon, a political manipulator who tries to get a black politician elected by defeating the white incumbent who has been discriminating against blacks. The action included a gun fight and the dynamiting of a safe.  

Tucker's Broadway premiere was the occasion for another irony in his life, for in playing the minor role of Dr. Robbins, a physician, he realized at least a fictional version of his mother's real life ambition for him.

Opening on November 4, 1929, a week after the Stock Market Crash, Make Me Know It folded after only four performances. Critics dismissed the comedy as humorless, but found the highlight of the evening to be Vivienne Baber, who sang the show's title song.

Make Me Know It closed quickly, but cast members Lorenzo Tucker and Vivienne Baber had already become friends, and he began escorting her to parties and cabarets around Harlem. Tucker was now moving in the highest circles of Harlem's social life, and was also attending the soirees at the apartment of Alelia Walker. A famous

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Harlem socialite during the Harlem Renaissance, Alelia Walker was the daughter of Madame C.J. Walker, a black woman who began as a hairdresser and became the multi-millionaire owner of a chain of black beauty parlors that specialized in her patented hairstaightening process. At times called "da queen of da kink," Madame Walker died in 1919, leaving her fortune to her daughter. In 1928 Alelia Walker began hosting weekly gatherings of black and white literati, entertainers and socialites at her fifth-floor apartment, which was dubbed "The Dark Tower." Tucker maintains that at one of Alelia Walker's early gatherings he had met Carl Van Vechten, who had encouraged him to bring Vivienne Baber with him to future parties. Van Vechten was always on the lookout for new black talent; he had heard Vivienne Baber sing in Make Me Know It, and had admired her voice.

Journalist, music critic, novelist, party-goer and photographer, Carl Van Vechten was at the center of the Harlem Renaissance and one of its principal white supporters. As early as 1917 he had supported the idea of an all-black theatre; his interest in black music led him to write one of the earliest serious studies of the blues and their significance for Vanity Fair in 1925; and in 1926

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19Kellner, p. xxii.

20Anderson, p. 231. "The Dark Tower" was the name of Countee Collen's column in the black journal, Opportunity.


22Anderson, p. 231.
he wrote a novel about Harlem titled Nigger Heaven, which caused something of a critical stir because of its title; yet it was a positive work about the black experience from a white perspective. Throughout the 1920s Van Vechten made frequent visits to the Harlem clubs and speakeasies, introducing the cabaret culture to white intellectuals and writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. Van Vechten was also one of the first white men to mix black and white guests at parties at his apartment, "often having his white friends serve as audiences for Negro entertainers who had won his enthusiasm."\(^{23}\) Tucker maintains that he and Van Vechten became friends, and he would often accompany Van Vechten on his rounds of the Harlem nightlife.\(^{24}\)

Stops on the theatrical nightlife circuit in Harlem included not only the well-known establishments that catered mostly to whites, like Connie's Inn, Small's Paradise and the Cotton Club, but also other, lesser known clubs like Edmond's, Barron-Wilkins, Pod's and Jerry's, The Clam House, Mexico's, and Blue's Chicken Shack, where blacks and whites mingled more freely. Tucker never worked in the Cotton Club, because it staged shows using only black singers, dancers and musicians.


\(^{24}\) Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985. Tucker says that Van Vechten often asked Tucker to escort him around Harlem in the late 1920s and early 1930s when gangs of black toughs began roaming the streets looking for unprotected white socialites to rob them of their money. Tucker would confront the gangs and indicate to them who Van Vechten was, thereby gaining safe passage. Tucker, however, is not mentioned in any of Van Vechten's biographies.
Now, the Cotton Club never really barred black, you see. Blacks just couldn't afford it. Anyway, if you were black you just didn't go there because everybody knew that Owney Madden had built it for the white carriage trade who came uptown "slumming," as they call it. Connie's Inn was the same thing, but I could go into Connie's and sit down at a table in the back and catch the whole floor show without even having to buy a drink. And then I'd walk out and wave goodbye to the folks. They didn't bother you if you were black—it wasn't like that at all.25

According to Tucker, in 1930 Rae Hewitt was dancing in the chorus line at Barron-Wilkins. After three years of working with Lorenzo Tucker she still had not been able to escape chorus work, partly because Tucker was often busy working alone in films and on the stage, and their dance-team act was all but over.26 Nor would the relationship between Rae Hewitt and Lorenzo Tucker last the year. Although they were still living with each other, Tucker had been escorting other women about town, and Rae was growing dissatisfied with their relationship:

The last straw came when a friend of mine bought a brand new automobile, and we went out riding together and picked up a couple of women and went down to Radio City to see a show. Rae heard about it and when I came home I found all my clothes—shirts, shoes, ties, suits, everything—in the middle of the floor. And she had slashed every piece of my clothes with a razor. I left all of it right there in a pile and walked out. It was over between us.27

In June, 1931 Tucker was shooting Veiled Aristocrats with Micheaux when he got a call from his agent, Stanley Rayburn, to go

25 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985. Of course, since Tucker was light-skinned, it was easier for him to move in white circles.

26 Ibid.

27 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, October 11, 1985.
downtown for an audition for a new Broadway show.

My agent was trying to get me in as many of these new shows as possible, and he wanted me to stop working for Micheaux and to pass for white. He said I could get more shows that way, and if the people downtown knew that I was working with Micheaux they would drop me. But I had to keep on working. Oh, I could have passed for white and left Harlem behind, but I didn't. Maybe that was a mistake as far as my career was concerned, but I didn't do it.28

Tucker went downtown to audition for a show called The Constant Sinner, which had been written by Mae West as her next Broadway vehicle. Tucker says he read for and was cast in the role of Money Johnson, a handsome black pimp from Harlem with whom Mae's character would become romantically involved.29

The Constant Sinner began rehearsals in July, 1931 for an out-of-town opening in Atlantic City on August 24, 1931.30 But complications soon arose. The show's backers convinced Mae West that it would be best to open the show with a white man playing the role of Money Johnson in blackface, in order to avoid a possible racial controversy that might develop when the public found out the Mae was kissing a black man, Lorenzo Tucker, on stage. Mae didn't like the idea, but agreed to go along with it as long as Tucker would eventually be allowed to perform the role. When she broke the news to Tucker she told him that he would be replaced by a white actor named George Givet. Tucker was to understudy Givet and would eventually be able to play the role.

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29 Ibid.
30 Kellner, p. 80.
At the same time, Tucker would play a minor role as the Headwaiter in a Harlem cafe:

Mae was very nice about it. She told me I would go on in New York after the run had settled in. I told her that I understood. They were worried about what the public's reaction might be if Mae were to kiss me, a Negro, on the stage. The public wouldn't mind her kissing George Givet, even though he was in blackface, because they knew he was, underneath it all, a white man, and that was acceptable. During the curtain call George would even take off the wig he was wearing so the audience could see the line where the burnt cork ended and his white skin began.31

After tryouts in Atlantic City, Brighton Beach, and the Fordham Road Theatre in the Bronx, The Constant Sinner opened at the Royale Theatre in New York on September 14, 1931. That same day the newspapers were filled with reports of the proceedings in the trial of the Scottsboro Boys, the young black men who were accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama. Opening that same night a block away was George White's Scandals of 1931, with Rudy Vallee, Ray Bolger and Ethel Merman, who assured everyone that despite the Depression, "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries."32

Mae West played the lead role in The Constant Sinner, Babe Gordon, with Russell Hardie as Bearcat Delaney and George Givet as Money Johnson. Lorenzo Tucker was the Headwaiter,33 and he also played a minor, non-speaking role as a handsome Spaniard. As he walked across the stage at the beginning of the show, a woman remarked on his handsomeness, and asked Babe who he was. "Oh,

33 Ibid.
he's Spanish," said Babe, "he's my Spanish Fly."\textsuperscript{34}

The line was typical of the kind of vulgar humor that made Mae West famous, and it came under attack from the critic from the New York Times, who noted that "seldom has fouler talk been heard on the Broadway stage, even in these frank and forward times."\textsuperscript{35} He also remarked of Mae West,

However credible as an impersonator of scarlet roles Mae West may be, a variety of attack is not among her qualifications as an actress. In The Constant Sinner her bag of acting tricks becomes familiar before the long evening has run its course. Her peculiar slouching about the stage, which "seems to provide first-hand evidence that, as the program says, she originated the Shimmy dance, her vocal stunts, her exploitation of blonde buxomness—all these grow tired through repetition."\textsuperscript{36}

The Constant Sinner ran on Broadway for only sixty-four performances, but it was to be the longest running show that Tucker would be a part of on Broadway, and it earned him his card with Actors Equity.\textsuperscript{37} The show's producers, however, had already made plans for a tour. The company was to stop first in Washington, D.C., and then move on to Chicago. The last performance on Broadway was November 14, 1931, and The Constant Sinner was opened in Washington during the week of Thanksgiving.\textsuperscript{38} George Givet had played Money

\textsuperscript{34}Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, October 11, 1985.


\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37}Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985. Tucker's Actors Equity card is dated November, 1931.

\textsuperscript{38}Washington Herald, November 24, 1931, p. 12.
Johnson for the entire run on Broadway, but he was not asked to go on the road with the show. Mae West had decided that Lorenzo Tucker would take over the role when the show reached Washington.\(^{39}\)

According to Tucker, by the time the show arrived in Washington word had gotten out that he would be playing the role of Money Johnson and that he was to kiss Mae West on stage. The district attorney from Washington came by before the opening to tell Mae West that if she intended to kiss Lorenzo Tucker on stage the show would not be permitted to open. This time, however, Mae stood her ground and insisted that Tucker would remain in the role of Money Johnson and that the show would go on.\(^{40}\) Two performances went on, but when the cast showed up for the Thanksgiving Eve performance they found that the theatre had been padlocked by the police and the show had been closed down. Mae paid off the cast and disbanded the company; she and Tucker would never work together again.\(^{41}\)

\(^{39}\) Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Newspaper accounts corroborate Tucker's recollections, at least to the point that the show had been cancelled after only two performances. In a frontpage story dated Wednesday, November 25, 1931, the Washington News reported that District Attorney Rovener had banned The Constant Sinner because of its "lewd and lascivious lines and actions," and that he had threatened the performers with fines of $50 to $500 or a year in jail, or both, for violating a section of the District code. There is, however, no mention that the show was banned because Tucker kissed Mae West on stage. Tucker insists that this was the reason, however, pointing out that the show had played in Atlantic City, Philadelphia and New York before it played in Washington, and no attempt was made to close the show down because of its language and lewdness. In those cities, of course, his role was played by a white man in blackface. Tucker says that the official story was a convenient way to close the show down and avoid a possible racial confrontation. Perhaps the real reason for
She called me in and paid me, and she said she was sorry for what had happened. She gave me an extra two weeks' pay and told me to lay low in a Washington hotel, because there were gangs of white vigilantes looking for me at the railroad station. They were going to lynch me! So I checked into a black hotel under an assumed name and didn't go out for a couple of days. Then I went to see a movie at the Howard Theatre, and before the show they had the radio playing over the loud speaker, and on the news they were talking about how Lorenzo Tucker couldn't be found. And there I was, right in the middle of the audience! I inched down in my seat and hoped that nobody would recognize me.

In early 1932 Tucker was cast as the romantic lead in a musical show titled *Ham's Daughter*, which opened for a short run at the Lafayette Theatre with the hope that it would be a success and move to Broadway. Written and produced by Dennis Donoghue, *Ham's Daughter* is the story of a southern girl, Eliza (Dr. Mary Jane Watkins), who is lured away from her comfortable rural home and boyfriend, Ned Daniels (Lorenzo Tucker), by a smooth-talking city boy, Slick Harris (Alvin Childress). Eliza runs away with Slick

the banning of *The Constant Sinner* in Washington will never be known, but a few oblique comments by newspaper reviewers might support Tucker's case. Mabelle Jenny, writing in the Washington Herald (November 27, 1931, p. 12), states that the reason for the censorship might have been due to the mixed racial cast, and E. de S. Melcher of the Evening Star (November 24, 1931, p. 8) said, "Incidentally, the mixture of race in this play is not a pleasant quality." Yet, mixed casts had been seen before on stage; a black man kissing a white woman had not.

42 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 27, 1985.

43 Sampson, p. 217. Donoghue also wrote *Malinda*, a successful musical comedy, in 1929. The plot of *Ham's Daughter* is similar to that of *Malinda*.

44 Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 201. This was one of the first professional stage appearances by
to a northern city, but she is soon abandoned by him. Eventually Eliza is found by a likable detective named Jim Bronson (Marty Crossman), who takes her back home, where she is reunited with her parents and marries Ned Daniels.  

Ham's Daughter was only one of many shows that had their sights set on Broadway but never made it. Experience was the only thing black entertainers gained from many of these shows, since they often rehearsed without pay. Tucker's next show, however, did make it to Broadway, but only after it had been in rehearsals for over a year.

Billed as a "musical pageant," Ol' Man Satan was written by Donald Heywood, directed by William Shilling, and co-produced by both men under the banner of Shillwood Productions. This show was groomed to be the financial and critical successor to The Green Pastures, one of the most successful stage productions in the history of black theatre. The producers' idea was to capitalize on the success of the Biblical approach of The Green Pastures; only this time the narrative of good versus evil would center on Satan rather than De Lawd.

Childress, who later was featured as Amos on "The Amos 'n' Andy Show" in network television in the early 1950s.

45 Ibid.

46 Woll, p. 118.

47 Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, pp. 214-217. The Green Pastures ran initially on Broadway from February 26, 1930 to August 29, 1931, for a total of 557 performances. It was followed by road shows and revivals that lasted into 1935. The motion picture version with Rex Ingram as De Lawd, was produced by Warner Brothers in 1936.
The project was conceived shortly after *The Green Pastures* opened in early 1930, and within a year the script was outlined, casting was complete and rehearsals (without pay) had begun. The script evolved out of a year of rehearsals by the black troupe of actors that included A.B. Comarthiere (Satan), Laurence Chenault (Moses), Hayes L. Prior (Noah), Lionel Monagas (Peter), Dr. Mary Jane Watkins (Becky), Bea Freeman (David's Temptress), and Lorenzo Tucker (The Teacher). The show, with thirty-six scenes and a cast of 125, opened on Broadway at the Forrest Theatre on October 3, 1932.\(^{48}\)

The reviews the next morning were not very favorable. The critic from the *New York Times* suggested that Donald Heywood "writes earnestly, but with a childish crudity," and that the play was "confused, over-ambitious, and somewhat repetitious," and contained "neither exultation nor emotional depth." He also chided the stagehands who, "while they managed to change speedily enough, frequently made a tremendous clatter, against which neither the forces of good nor evil could triumph."\(^{49}\)

Tucker recalls, however, that there was another reason for the noise created by the stagehands:

> You see, the stagehands were scared, because even though I was called "The Teacher," I was really Jesus, and Jesus hadn't been played on Broadway before, except in the Passion Play, and never by a black man. Now, there was this scene where I was supposed to heal the sick in front of the temple. There must have been a hundred people on stage. The choir was there singing, and the crippled and

\(^{48}\) Woll, p. 118; Kellner, p. 272.

blind were waiting for me. And, as the light slowly faded up on the temple door, there I was, as Jesus. I stepped into the light and a halo appeared above me, and when that happened there were screams all over the theatre, because it was so uncanny. And all I did was fold my arms and said, "Father!" That was it: people screamed so much that they had to call the curtain. They screamed out of fright and fear. And the curtain came down and the choir stopped, and I said, "What the hell is going on?" And one of the women in the chorus said, "I'll never forget this as long as I live. It scared the daylights out of me!" And the stagehands operating the lightboard were frightened and running around yelling. It was fantastic! I think that was one of the greatest scenes I ever did.

In early 1933 Tucker was in rehearsals for what was to be his last and least successful appearance on Broadway, Hummin' Sam. A black musical version of the In Old Kentucky story, Hummin' Sam is the tale of a black jockey who rides the horse named BooGoo to victory in the Kentucky Derby. The dramatic tension in the play is provided by the two gambling villains, Yellow George (Lionel Monagas) and Edward Bolton (Lorenzo Tucker), who attempt to fix the race so BooGoo will lose. One of the twists in the show was that Hummin' Sam, the black jockey, was played by a woman (Gertrude "Baby" Cox), disguised as a man. 51

Produced by Allan K. Foster, with a book by Eileen Nutter and lyrics by Alexander Hall, the play opened at the New Yorker Theatre on 54th Street on April 8, 1933. 52 Prohibition had been repealed

50 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985. Apparently the audience was so astonished by the staging effects that they started screaming, and the stagehands rang down the curtain to avoid a panic. The New York Times review of the show did not mention the confusion.

51 Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, p. 233; Woll, p. 83.

52 Kellner, p. 178.
just the day before, but the fact that free beer was being served in the theatre lobby didn't help the show succeed. The New York Times review called it a "grim" production:

The Negro musical show habitually is fast—it tap dances on its genial way, with or without abandon. Someone trained Hummin' Sam so that it lost all its native vitality, and then just didn't bother to set anything up in its place. . . . some of the performers looked a little perplexed, and others appeared troubled. They had been in Negro comedies before. They knew.

Hummin' Sam closed immediately after its opening performance.

Tucker recalls that during rehearsals the actors suggested to Nutter to make some story changes, but to no avail:

Oh, there were some good ideas in the show. They had all these beautiful white horses running on treadmills on the stage. And Baby Cox was the star; she was one of the hottest singers and dancers around then. She played the jockey, and the characters in the play didn't know she was a woman, you see, until she reveals it at the end of the show. But the show wasn't put together right, and we pleaded with Miss Nutter to change things. Lionel Monagas and I were gangsters at the race track, but we didn't know just how we were connected to the story. And anytime you don't even know the story and you're the actor, well, you're in trouble.

The End of an Era

By 1933 the Great Depression was at its worst, and nowhere was it more in evidence than in Harlem, where poverty was widespread and thousands of black families were on relief, as early as February, 1930 the New York Herald Tribune reported that the collapse of the


55 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 26, 1985.
Stock Market had "produced five times as much unemployment in Harlem than in other parts of the city." The golden age of the Harlem Renaissance was also over by 1933, it too at least partly a victim of the Depression. Black intellectuals and artists, forced to turn to more practical concerns in order to survive, abandoned their quest to establish a viable black culture, and many of them left Harlem for good. Moreover, white interest in Harlem was waning. As Langston Hughes noted,

We were no longer in vogue, anyway, we Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money. The cycle that had charlestoned into being on the dancing heels of Shuffle Along now ended in The Green Pastures with De Lawd.

The black entertainment industry centered in New York collapsed between 1930 and 1933. Most of Harlem's little theatre groups failed as a result of the Depression, and the leading commercial theatres like the Lafayette, Lincoln and Alhambra had gone from weekly full-scale live stage productions in 1927 to the screening of motion pictures by 1933. During the four-year period between 1930 and 1934, there were only sixteen black-cast films released by independent producers. The repeal of Prohibition in April, 1933 helped to bring about the end of the great Harlem night clubs and

56 Quoted in Anderson, p. 242.
58 Anderson, p. 275.
59 Sampson, Blacks in Blackface, p. 23.
lesser-known speakeasies, and vaudeville was all but finished by 1933, a victim not only of the Depression, but of the rise of the new entertainment technologies of radio and talking motion pictures. It was the end of an era, and few black entertainers survived the downfall.

Of all the artists to experience the effects of the Depression, the worst off were the show people. Unable to compete with the motion picture industry, actors, stagehands, technicians, musicians, and vaudeville performers found themselves displaced by technology even before the Crash. Sound films replaced the orchestra; mechanical music replaced musicians; actors were eclipsed by the Hollywood star system; and stagehands and stage mechanics were no longer needed. Professional theatre people were stranded without work in major cities all over the country.

It was about a week after Hummin' Sam closed that Lionel Monagas called Tucker to tell him about the filming of The Emperor Jones at the Astoria Studios on Long Island. And a few days after they finished work there the two of them took a long bus ride through Manhattan.

We took a ride on top of one of those open-air buses and went all the way downtown to the Battery and back again. We talked and talked about what we were going to do next. Things were real bad then and there was little work left for black actors. Vaudeville was over, and the Depression had set in. Lionel decided to stick with it for a while longer, but I was tired of it all and decided it was time to try something new. I had met a nice girl from Long Island named Katherine Godfrey by that time, so I quit show business and asked her to marry me. She did, and we moved out to Long Island to set up house, and I went looking for a regular job.

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Lorenzo Tucker's decision to quit show business in the summer of 1933 brought an end to his first period as a black entertainer and, although he would return to acting within three years, he would never again achieve the success and celebrity that he had briefly experienced in the years between 1927 and 1933. Yet in that short time his achievements were quite remarkable. He had appeared in eleven films, four Broadway plays and countless vaudeville and cabaret shows. In addition, he met and worked with many of the most celebrated performers of the period, and he had participated in one of the most important flowerings of black culture in American history, the Harlem Renaissance. Although the golden age of Harlem was over and the intellectual and artistic energies that created it had dissipated and would never again be rekindled, Lorenzo Tucker took with him the experiences and memories that would later make him an important source of information about the period.
CHAPTER 6

MIDDLE YEARS, 1933-1962

Depression Days

Black film and theatre production reached its low point in 1933, primarily as a result of the Great Depression, and jobs for black entertainers were few and far between. Caught in this economic downturn and generally disenchanted with the life of a performer, Lorenzo Tucker, at twenty-six, quit show business for the first time. He met and married Katherine Godfrey in the summer of 1933, and even though she did not demand that he give up his career, he thought it was important to find a regular job that could promise a steady income and some security.

Although it was the Depression, Tucker found that getting a job was fairly easy; keeping it was another problem altogether. Tucker recalls his first few weeks outside of show business:

First I took a job as a cook at this high-class restaurant in Great Neck, Long Island, but I didn't last the day. When the waitress asked for an order of bluefish, I opened the refrigerator and couldn't find it, because I didn't know what it looked like. Another cook came up and said, "There it is, right in front of you. What kind of cook are you, anyway?" So he told the owner and she let me eat dinner there and then fired me. Then I took a job as a presser in a dry cleaning shop, but the owner soon found out that I didn't know how to operate a steam presser, so he gave me a dollar and showed me the door. The next day I went into a paint store and asked if they needed painters. "You a
painter?" the guy asked. "Yes, I am," I said. So he reached up and got me a pair of overalls and a set of paint brushes and signed me up. And he never knew that before that day I never had a paint brush in my hand. So I learned to paint real fast. And I learned plastering and stained-glass work and floor sanding, too. And I got so good at it that after a while I started my own business, and that's how I got through the dark days of the Depression.

For most of the two years he lived and worked on Long Island, Tucker admits, he thought little about the world of black entertainment he had left behind. But reversals of fortune in his business and domestic life would soon cause him to return to Harlem.

You see, I had rented this storefront and got this painting business together, and after a while I had about a dozen or so guys working for me. Business was good for about two years or so, and then the unions got on me. But I couldn't afford to pay my workers what the union demanded, so they broke in one night and busted up my store and threw all my sanding machines into the street. I was so angry and depressed that I decided to go back to Harlem. But my wife refused to go, so we separated and she went back to live with her parents.

I went back to Harlem, and when I got there I picked up a paper and saw that one of my old pictures was playing down on 42nd Street. So I called up the manager of the theatre and told him that I was Lorenzo Tucker's agent, and the Tucker was back in town and that I could get him down there to make a personal appearance, and this guy agreed. So I went down there and the guy says, "Where's your agent?" And I said, "He's busy, so I'll take care of things." And he asked, "How much do you want for three days' work?" And I said, "Not much, just give me a hundred bucks." He said OK, and so there I am, back in show business!

It was now the summer of 1935, and Lorenzo Tucker decided to find out if there was any film work available. He heard that Oscar

1 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985.

2 Ibid.
Micheaux was planning another film, and he went up to his office. Tucker remembers that when he walked into the office Micheaux looked up in surprise and asked him where he had been. Tucker told Micheaux about his marriage and his painting business, and that he was again looking for film work. Before the afternoon was out Tucker had agreed to work on a new film Micheaux had in the planning stage, *Temptation*.  

During the Depression Micheaux had continued on his independent course and, although constantly teetering on the edge of insolvency, was somehow always able to complete the next film. By 1935, however, white financing had all but cornered the market on black-cast film production, and even the iconoclast Micheaux had found it necessary to depend on white capital, and had given over some of the distribution tasks to such white companies as Alfred Sack Amusements. Still, Micheaux continued to have artistic control, writing and directing films in this period that mirrored the popular Hollywood genres. Apparently *Temptation* was Micheaux's attempt to combine the gangster film with the sultry seduction films that Mae West and Jean Harlow had recently made popular.

Heading the cast of *Temptation* was Ethel Moses, who played a light-skinned black model involved in underworld enterprises who desires to go straight, and Andrew S. Bishop, the gang leader who

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3. Ibid.

PLATE XV

Lorenzo Tucker and Ethel Moses. Production still probably from Oscar Micheaux's Temptation (1936).
tries to stop her. Supporting them were Lorenzo Tucker, Hilda Rogers and Slick Chester. Tucker remembers little of the movie's plot, but he does recall working on the production:

You see, many of these race movies were made in the old studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey, the ones that the white production companies abandoned when they left for Hollywood. Now, Andrew Bishop and I had been friends before he quit the business and got a job working for the city of Cleveland. Micheaux wanted Bishop in this film, so he waited until Bishop took his vacation just so he could get him. How I remember this is because Bishop came East in his brand new Hudson automobile, and one morning before shooting we decided to go over to Harlem for some drinks. Well, we proceeded to get drunk, and on the way back to Fort Lee he had an auto accident on the George Washington Bridge. So, we were late; but when we got to the set we hid behind some flats, and when we sobered up some we came out. "Where the hell have you two been?" Micheaux yelled. "Well," Bishop said, "we've been back there all the while. We fell asleep, that's all." Micheaux didn't believe us, and he never forgave us for that one.

In late 1935 and early 1936 Tucker continued to work at reviving his acting career in theatre and film. He acquired an agent who was not very successful at getting Tucker acting assignments, but who did get him jobs as a master of ceremonies in small clubs and cabarets in New York and New Jersey. In order to support himself Tucker freelanced as a contract painter during the daytime and performed as a master of ceremonies on the weekends.

You see, most black performers in those days had to have other jobs, because there just wasn't enough

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5 Henry T. Sampson, Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 140. This film is lost. The Library of Congress has a nitrate trailer of the film, but it is in the process of transferring it to acetate, and it is not available for viewing.
show business work to go around. So I decided that if I wanted to stay in show business I was going to have to work as a painter on the side. Many of my friends had joined the Negro Theatre Project's production of Macbeth at the Lafayette Theatre, but they were only getting about eighteen dollars a week or so, and I could make more at my painting job. So I didn't act then, but I did go drinking with them at the Hollywood Bar just across the street from the Lafayette.

In the spring of 1936 Tucker performed in what was to be his eleventh and last film with Micheaux, who was now fifty-two and fighting an uphill battle against the disintegration of the black film market. The film was called Underworld; it was written and directed by Micheaux, but financed and distributed by Alfred Sack Amusements, and it starred Bea Freeman as "The Sepia Mae West," Ethel Moses, Oscar Polk, Lorenzo Tucker, and Sol Johnson.8

Another of Micheaux's entries into the ganster genre, Underworld is the story of a black college student who leaves the South for Chicago, where he becomes a member of a black gang and gets involved in fights, conspiracies, drugs, sex and gambling.9

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7Ibid. Tucker says he was on hand for the rehearsals and run of Orson Welles' landmark production of Macbeth (often referred to as Voodoo Macbeth) that opened on April 14, 1936 at the Lafayette. Produced by John Houseman, this all-black production of Macbeth was transposed by Director Welles from 16th-century Scotland to 19th-century Haiti. See John Houseman's Run Through (1902-1941): A Memoir (New York: Touchstone Books, 1980), pp. 185-205.

8Card catalogue of the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. It seems that a nitrate print of this film (or its trailer) exists in the Library of Congress, but it too is on disintegrating nitrate stock waiting to be transferred to acetate, and is not available for examination.

9Sampson, p. 143.
film, which was apparently one of Micheaux's better efforts, was not successful at the box office however; as usual, Micheaux had cut corners, using amateurs in minor roles, employing make-shift sets, and relying on narrative devices like title cards to push the action forward. In its initial release Underworld ran for only four days at the Harlem Opera House.  

In 1937 Tucker took time away from performing to help organize an association of black performers, and he became one of the first members of the Negro Actors Guild, which was formed that same year with Bill Robinson as honorary president, Fredi Washington as Executive Director, Murial Rahn as Recording Secretary, W.C. Handy as Treasurer, and Cab Calloway as Chairman of the executive board. The Negro Actors Guild was organized as a benevolent association to assist indigent black actors and to lobby for better working opportunities and conditions. 

Pre-War Years

By 1937 the bleakest days of the Great Depression were past, and a significant upswing in the production of independent black-cast films occurred. Sampson computes that only eleven black-cast films

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10 Cripps, p. 331.  11 Sampson, p. 34.

12 Interview with Fred O'Neal, New York City, August 9, 1985. According to O'Neal, the Negro Actors Guild was the first of its kind and is still in existence, having been revived in 1985 as the Afro-American Guild of Performing Artists, Inc. Now eighty years old, O'Neal remains one of the leading members of the Guild.
were made during the low four-year period between 1933 and 1936; however, in the following four years, for 1937 to 1940, over sixty were produced. There were various reasons for this revival of production, among them the fact that motion picture theatres in the South began the policy in these years of opening up their balconies to black audiences, and also began the practice of screening black-cast films for black audiences late at night after the regular program for white customers was over. These "midnight shows" became popular in the South in the late 1930s.

A second reason for this surge in production was that white producers began to realize that the market for black-cast films could provide reasonable profits. With few exceptions, almost all of the producers of black-cast films in the late 1930s were white, and a new trend began that saw a collaboration between black talent and white financing and distribution. The era of black producers who controlled the development, production and distribution of black-cast films was all but over, and in the decade from 1940 to 1949 only four new black-owned companies were formed for the purpose of making

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13 Sampson, p. 4. Sampson reviewed thousands of back issues of black newspapers in reconstructing this production history of black films.

14 Ibid., p. 7.

15 Cripps, p. 328. According to Cripps, this take-over of black-cast film production by white producers in the late 1930s put an end to any possible evolution of an independent black film aesthetic.
black-cast films. 16

Among the most successful collaborations between black talent and white producers were the films made by Million Dollar Productions, a company headed by Leo and Harry Popkin, two white brothers with Hollywood experience who turned out a handful of pictures that were technically—if not thematically—more sophisticated than most of the independent black-cast films that had gone before. In 1938 Harry Popkin produced Straight to Heaven, a story of mob blackmail and violence revolving around canned food that has been deliberately tainted with cyanide. The film starred Nina Mae McKinney as Ida Williams, and Jack Carter as Stanley Jackson, her lawyer. Supporting roles were played by Percy VerWayne as Lucky John Simon, the leader of the mob, and Lorenzo Tucker as Ace, his chief henchman. 17

Lorenzo Tucker was thirty-one years old when Straight to Heaven was made. He had aged somewhat and put on a few pounds—although he was not as bulky as he was solidly built—and he was no longer suited for the young romantic lead roles he had played a few years earlier; rather, he was now at the point in his career where he would begin to play character roles exclusively. In Straight to Heaven, for

16 Sampson, p. 3.

17 Straight to Heaven (1938); print in Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. McKinney achieved fame at sixteen when she was cast by King Vidor to star in Hollywood's first all-black sound film, Hallelujah, in 1929. Her career did not take off, however, and she spent time in England in the 1930s as a nightclub singer. She returned to the United States in the late 1930s to star in a few black-cast films. She died in 1967. (See Sampson, pp. 233-34.)
PLATE XVI

Lorenzo Tucker (center, standing). Production still from Million Dollar Productions' *Straight to Heaven* (1938).
example, he played a gunman who kidnaps Ida Williams' son and lawyer. In the role of Ace, Tucker created an amoral, gum-chewing, casual hit-man who prefers to take no prisoners. As he enters for the first time he sticks a gun into the back of the lawyer who is threatening his boss, and says, "Reach, punk. And keep that water pistol in your pocket. . . . Let me get rid of this guy, chief." But his boss, Lucky John, demurs, and this decision to keep the lawyer as prisoner leads to the gangsters' downfall. Later, in a cabin in the woods, surrounded by police, Ace reminds Lucky John of his mistake. "Cops! I told you we should have gotten rid of this guy right away." Murder, clean and uncomplicated, would have kept them out of trouble. Although his role was a minor one, Tucker's acting was effective nevertheless.

Tucker would appear in one more film before World War II, taking a brief role as a doctor in Paradise in Harlem, a 1939 film produced by another white brother team, Jack and Bert Goldberg, which starred Mamie Smith and Frank Wilson, who also received story credit. Tucker appeared once again in the role of a doctor in 1939, this time in a live stage production of Black Women in White. This production was mounted by the Rose McClendon Players, under the direction of Dick Campbell. The Rose McClendon Players was a

18Ibid.

19Paradise in Harlem (1939); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A complex but fascinating film, Paradise in Harlem features scenes of black vaudeville, blues singing, and an all-black production of Shakespeare's Othello.
small professional company in Harlem named after Campbell's former collaborator who had recently died. Dick Campbell recalls that "Tucker was what you would call a technical, or external actor, and he would sometimes have a tendency to play a little too big in rehearsals. But I could tone him down. He took direction well, and was a strong presence on stage." Tucker continued working with Campbell for the next three years, and they became good friends. Campbell cast Tucker in other roles in the early 1940s.20

In 1941 Campbell was asked by A. Philip Randolph, the head of the National Urban league, to sketch a dramatization of Randolph's "March on Washington" movement that was to protest the discrimination against blacks in the Armed Forces and the exclusion of blacks from employment in the defense industries. Campbell wrote and staged the show—in which Tucker played a white union boss sympathetic to the black cause—and it was performed before more than 20,000 people in the old Madison Square Garden on June 16, 1942.21 Randolph's mass march on Washington never took place, however; it was cancelled after Randolph was summoned to Washington and assured by President

20 Interview with Dick Campbell, July 18, 1985.

21 Campbell went on to produce a number of these socially-motivated Garden spectacles up through 1964. Toll the Liberty Bell (1951), for example, was a dramatization of the bombing murder of Harry T. Moore and his wife in Mims, Florida while they were organizing for the NAACP. In its cast were Harry Belafonte, Canada Lee, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee and Muriel Rahn. Unpublished and unsigned biographical essay on the life of Dick Campbell, 1983; given to the author by Dick Campbell. New York Times (June 17, 1942, p. 1, 11) reported that 18,000 people attended the "March on Washington" rally the night before.
PLATE XVII

From left: Dick Campbell, Lorenzo Tucker, Monty Hawley, Jimmy Dillard, Mercedes Gibbins, Rex Ingram, Canada Lee and Willie Bryant. Production team in support of A. Philip Randolph's "March on Washington," 1942.
Franklin D. Roosevelt that his demands would be met through legislation.  

The War Years

During the summer months of 1942 Lorenzo Tucker was working as a painter during the week, performing as a master of ceremonies on the weekends in clubs in towns north of New York and in New Jersey, and volunteering his Mondays to the local draft board as a medical assistant, administering blood tests to prospective inductees. But one day in September, 1942, Tucker walked into the draft board only to discover that the board had exhausted its pool and he was next on the list.

So I walked in and they said, "Well, it looks like we'll have to take you next." And I said, "The hell you say," and I went back to the show I was emceeing in Newburgh, New York. I was thirty-five, and I didn't want to go. So there I was on stage, in my top hat and tails, and the M.P.s walked right out and took me off and drove me to West Point, and then down to Fort Jay, New York. And this Special Services guy found out who I was and said, "Oh, man, I'm going to angle for you; don't worry, you'll be in Special Services." But then a mumps epidemic broke out in our barracks and we were quarantined for thirty days, and the next thing we know is they put us on a train and shipped us off to Tampa, Florida, where our black company became a part of the 847th Army Air Corps Aviation Battalion.

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22 Roosevelt signed Executive Order #8802, putting into effect the first Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), the forerunner to today's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Noted in Campbell's biographical essay. See also Nesteby, Black Images in American Films, 1896-1954, p. 213.


24 Ibid. Tucker's discharge papers indicate that he was inducted into the U.S. Army on September 26, 1942 at Ft. Jay, New York. (Honorable discharge papers in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker.)
All through his army career Tucker never got into the Special Services. While in Tampa, Tucker says, he helped to quell a race riot on the Fort McDill Base between black and white soldiers, and his commanding officer began to rely on him as a mediator.

Before the war the Colonel had owned a movie theatre in Texas, and he had shown some of my movies there. So he said, "Do you think you can get one of your old movies and show it to the colored troops? It'll be a great morale booster for these guys." So I called up Micheaux, and he told me that Jack Goldberg had all his films. And I called Goldberg and he sent one down. I think it was When Men Betray, but I'm not sure. Anyway, we showed it and I made a personal appearance, and the troops went wild over it. The next day the Colonel called me up to his office and gave me three stripes. Then I did a stage show, and I got together all these guys who had talent, and we called it "Hepsters of '43." They loved it, and I was hoping this was my ticket to the Special Services, but the Colonel said, "Tucker, as long as you're with me you'll never get into the Special Services, because you're too valuable. I need you to help me handle these colored troops." I produced and directed more than a dozen shows while I was in the Army, and I didn't spend one day in Special Services.

On June 24, 1943 Tucker shipped out for the European Theatre of Operations, and when the company arrived at their base in Debbish, England, Tucker was ordered to put on a variety show for the troops and the English townspeople. Tucker decided to fashion the show after the cabarets of prohibition-era Harlem:

I got some guys together and we mounted a show, and I called it "Small's Little Paradise," after Small's Paradise in Harlem. And we took the fuselage of a wrecked bomber and cut out the side and made a cabaret out of it, with tables on the stage and everything, and I got these big empty tomato cans from the mess hall and put my lights in

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25Ibid. Most of the information about Tucker's experience in World War II is from interviews with Tucker himself. A copy of the program for "Hepsters of '43" is in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker, listing him as associate producer and performer. (February 15, 1943.)
them, and that's how we set it up. I was the master of ceremonies and band leader. Then the day of the show I told the guys in the motor pool to go down into town at the Red Cross and bring up two truckloads of English women, and when they came I sat them on stage at the tables, sitting with the black troops. And some of the white officers in the audience were fit to be tied because I had integrated this club right before their eyes. Oh, man, they were angry, but they couldn't do anything because this was England. So I walked up to the microphone and said, "This club is integrated; that's how it was back in Harlem in the old days, and that's how it's going to be now." And we went on with the show.  

In between these shows Tucker had regular duties to perform, since he wasn't in the Special Services. He performed a variety of jobs but he remembers that the most dangerous times were those spent on bombing missions over Germany:

I was a waist-gunner with the Flying Fortresses. I flew about fifteen or sixteen missions until the plane I was in got shot down. We were just about safely back to England when the tail of our plane, which had been hit earlier, just blew away, tailgunner and all. I was manning my gun on the right side when I looked back and said, "Oh, oh, this it it!" When we went down we crashed into a cement factory; we were buried in piles of sand bags they were going to make into cement, and that's what saved us. They had to dig us out. Of our nine crewmen, I was one of two that survived.

After the crash Tucker was transferred to the infantry. In late 1943 and early 1944, while the Allies were preparing the invasion of Europe, Tucker went to school and learned field surgery and demoli-

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. Tucker admits there is no evidence to support this story. He received no medals for this action, not even the Purple Heart, because, he says, the Army was not supposed to be sending the black troops up in the planes, but did so because they were running out of men to man the guns. To give him a medal, Tucker asserts, would be to recognize he went up in the plane, and this the Army refused to do.
tion techniques. In addition he was often called upon to be the company's unofficial public relations man, escorting visiting entertainers around the base. Then, on the night of June 5, 1944, he found himself sitting on the deck of a ship crossing the English Channel.

The next morning was very cold. I was out on deck with our first sergeant; we had our overcoats on and were drinking from a bottle of gin. And then we heard it: "Woomp! Woomp!" The big guns were firing, and when we saw land I said, "Shit, man. Is that where we're going?" And he said, "I don't think we're going to turn around. I guess this is the real thing!" And the sirens started and the word was passed, "Get ready. Battle positions." And when it dawned on us that this was it, well, you talk about some cats scrambling to get their gear. And praying. It was about five in the morning and the gates to the boat went down and we jumped into the water. It was Normandy, and the whole beach was full of blood. And there was this body of a dead German soldier on the beach, and I got down behind it and used it for protection. And all day long I rolled him over and over, staying behind him for protection as we advanced. I think he's the reason I'm alive today.

During the remainder of 1944 Tucker fought with the infantry through France and into Germany. In May of 1945 he left the front and was on a train heading to Paris for rest and relaxation when the end of the war was announced.

There was a French woman sitting next to me nursing her baby when the train stopped at the station on the outside of Paris. She looked out the window to see what was happening, and then turned to me with a big smile and yelled, "La guerre est finie! La guerre est finie!" I looked out and the people were going mad. By the time we got to Paris things were wild, and the people were so happy they were tearing our uniforms off for souvenirs. That's the night all the lights went on in Paris for the first time in years. That's right. And all the cafes were open and you could get anything you wanted for free. And I just

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28 Ibid.
PLATE XVIII

Sgt. Lorenzo Tucker, U.S. Army Air Corps, 1944.
stood there and watched the whole thing. It was something! 29

For the following six months, Tucker recalls, he remained in Europe with the occupation forces, waiting for his discharge, occasionally staging shows for his company, and flying into Paris on a regular basis.

I had every weekend off and I would go back to Paris whenever I could hitch a ride with the mail plane. Because I was doing shows I could sort of write my own ticket. And I'd go off to Paris and have a good time, and fly back for duty on Monday morning. I didn't get any favors; I had to do regular duty like everybody else. But I really enjoyed Paris, and when it came time to go back to the States I almost decided to get discharged in Paris and stay right there. But at the last moment I decided to go back to Harlem. 30

Tucker shipped out of Europe on October 20, 1945, and arrived back in the United States on October 29. On November 3, 1945 he was honorably discharged from the Army as an "Entertainment Specialist" at Fort Dix, New Jersey. 31

Post-War Years

Ironically, after Tucker spent nearly three years while in the Army trying to get into the Special Services, his first job after his discharge was with the Army's U.S.O. Since 1942 Tucker's friend and former director, Dick Campbell, had been the Coordinator of the Negro U.S.O. Camp Shows, and it was to Campbell that Tucker came to for employment on his return to civilian life. Campbell recalls the meeting he had with Tucker:

29 Ibid. 30 Ibid.

31 Honorable Discharge papers in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker.
Now, I had tried for the longest time to get Tucker assigned to me during the war, but they would never let him go. So when he finally showed up I told him, "Look, Tuck, things are rough out here, so you'd better take this job I got for you now." I had an all-black company of *Porgy and Bess* on a tour of 300 military bases in the U.S. They were traveling through Texas at the time, and the manager of the company was having a helluva time getting messages and mail at the hotels because he was black. So we needed somebody who could become the road manager and who could pass for white when he had to. So I asked Tucker to go to Brownsville, Texas and join up with *Porgy and Bess*, where he would act the role of the Sheriff and serve as road manager, too.

After having spent the last two years in Europe Lorenzo Tucker was somewhat reluctant to leave New York for a tour of the United States that might last another year. But all he had was his mustering-out pay and the uniform he was wearing. So I said, "So, the U.S.O. needs me now? Well, I'll be damned!" So I took it. Now, I never had a suit of clothes, just my uniform, and Dick told me to go out and buy a suit. Well, that brown suit I bought and the Palm Beach suit they gave me for the show were all the clothes I had. And when I got to Brownsville I went over to Mexico and bought a leather belt, a pair of snake skin boots, and a ten gallon hat, and that's how I dressed as the company manager. Then I would walk into those white hotels all through Texas, you know, right up to the desk, in my brown suit and my hat and boots and all, and say, "Good Morning! You got any mail for *Porgy and Bess*, Unit 217?" And I'd spit in the spittoon and keep the brim of my hat down and just keep moving around, so they couldn't get a good look at me. And they'd give me the mail and I'd thank them and walk out. So here I was, traveling through the South with a show that was sponsored by the United States Government, and I had to pass as white because of the discrimination, or else the show wouldn't go on.

But this time Tucker's situation carried the double edge that was common for light-skinned black men. While he was passing for

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32 Interview with Dick Campbell, July 18, 1985.
33 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 4, 1985.
white in order to keep *Porgy and Bess* on the road, he was getting negative reactions from the black soldiers in the audience.

You see, I was playing the white Sheriff in *Porgy and Bess*, when I walked out on stage in my Palm Beach suit and straw hat and pistol, I would say my line, "I wanna know what nigger killed Porgy. Answer me!" Well, the black soldiers in the audience would get real angry with me, and when I went off stage some of them would come up to me and say, "Come on outside; I want to see you." They thought I was a white guy. So I had to get into the habit of telling the Special Services officers when we arrived to do a show to spread the word to the enlisted men that I was colored too. Yeah, some of those guys really wanted to get me.  

After the U.S.O. tour was over in 1946, Tucker joined up with the popular black comedian, Eddie Green, who had recently formed his own independent motion picture company, Sepia Arts Productions. Green had formed the company specifically to film his comedy routines in a series of shorts that were to be screened to audiences before or between the double features. In 1946 Green made a film that is now lost, *One-Round Jones*, which starred Green as a boxer and Tucker as his manager. Green imagines he is sitting in the corner of the ring, while in the far corner, off-screen, sits his opponent, Joe Louis. Green is obviously afraid, but his manager tries to encourage him.

This was how it was done: I was sort of his straight man, you see. I said, "Now, look, I can see you in the ring, Eddie. People are cheering you all over the place and you can hardly believe your ears. And now you go down." He says, "I'm down?" And I says, "Yeah, you're down on the floor, but you get up, and you know, I see blood." He says, "Blood? It ain't on me, is it?" And I say, "It's all over you." And he says, "Well, that's it. I'm finished." And that was it, basically. It was one of them kind of things, short and fast, just like that.

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34 Ibid. 35 Ibid.
PLATE XIX

Tucker's 1946 appearance in *One-Round Jones* marked the beginning of his third and final phase of acting in black-cast films. It was destined to be a short-lived period, for by 1950 there were no longer any independent producers, white or black, making black-cast films. By the late 1940s Hollywood was integrating slowly but surely, and even though black actors were still playing stereotypical roles, some progress was being made. The market for low-budget black cast films had all but dried up, and only a few independent companies struggled on in the face of dimming prospects.\(^{36}\)

Between 1946 and 1948 Tucker made four films for the last of these companies. In 1946 he appeared in Jack Goldberg's Herald Pictures production of *Boyl What a Girl*, with Tim Moore\(^ {37}\) and Sheila Guyse, the popular songstress. Tucker also appeared briefly in Goldberg's *Sepia Cinderella* (1947), in the role of the maitre d' at the nightclub where the main action takes place between the leads, Billy Daniels and Sheila Guyse.\(^ {38}\) Shortly thereafter Tucker appeared in his last featured role, this time as Talbot, a crooked lawyer, in the Astor Pictures production of *Reet, Petite & Gone*.

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\(^{36}\) Sampson, p. 4.

\(^{37}\) *Boyl What a Girl* (1946); VHS copy in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker. In this film Tucker plays a bit role as a comic French gangster who kidnaps Tim Moore, who is pretending to be a woman. Moore who had a long career in black show business, was to achieve fame in the early 1950s in the role of Kingfish on the *Amos 'n' Andy Show* on network television.

\(^{38}\) *Sepia Cinderella* (1947); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
PLATE XX

Lorenzo Tucker (second from left). Photocopy of lobby poster from Astor Pictures' *Reet-Petite and Gone* (1947).
Reet, Petite & Gone (1947) starred popular black bandleader Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five. The plot is complex: Jordan must find and marry the woman with the precise dimensions stipulated in his father's will, which was drawn up by Talbot, his attorney, just before he died, or else Jordan would forfeit his inheritance. But Talbot had forged the dying man's signature and substituted his secretary's measurements instead, in the expectation that Talbot and his secretary would share in the wealth when the son came to realize that he would have to marry her in order to get his inheritance. Jordan steadfastly refuses to marry the secretary, however, and through an overheard conversation Talbot is caught in his crime and taken off to prison. 39

After Reet, Petite & Gone Lorenzo Tucker played only one more role in black-cast pictures, this time as a doctor in a brief scene in Miracle in Harlem, made in 1948 by Jack Goldberg and his Herald Pictures company. The film starred Sheila Guyse, Stepin Fetchit, Jack Carter and Hilda Offley, as a candyshop owner who was being swindled by the mob. 40

With Miracle in Harlem Tucker's third phase of film acting was over. He had begun his film career over twenty years before with [39 Reet, Petite & Gone (1947); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Tucker presents a strong image in his role as the film's "heavy." Indeed the roles of Talbot in this film, and that of Steven Charmichael in The Black King (1932), are Tucker's best performances on the screen, at least of those films that are still available for screening. 40 Miracle in Harlem (1948); print in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.]
Oscar Micheaux, and in the ensuing years he had appeared in more than twenty black-cast films. In 1949 Tucker visited Micheaux for the last time, and he recalls that by then Micheaux was confined to a wheelchair, suffering from painful arthritis.

Micheaux was about sixty-five then, and he had given up making films. He didn't want to have anything more to do with films, but he was writing another novel while I was there, and he was determined to distribute it the same way he had done before, door-to-door, if he had to. That was the last time I saw him alive.  

Micheaux, one of the first independent black filmmakers, was also one of the last. In 1948 he wrote and directed his last film, The Betrayal, which was distributed by Astor Pictures. The Betrayal was a reworking of the same story he had used in his first film, The Homesteader, in 1919, and in The Exile, in 1931. Micheaux died in Charlotte, North Carolina on April 1, 1951, while promoting his last novel.  

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41 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985.

42 In the obituary appearing in the Amsterdam News on April 7, 1951, pp. 1,4, Micheaux is quoted as saying, "I'm tired of reading about the Negro in an inferior position in society. I want to see them in dignified roles." Micheaux's body was not returned to New York; rather, it was shipped to Great Bend, Kansas, where it was buried by his sister, Ethel, in the family plot. According to Verna Louise Crow, his niece, there was only enough money to bury Micheaux, and to this day his grave remains unmarked by a tombstone. It is the final irony in the life of this important but enigmatic black film pioneer. Recently, however, new interest in Micheaux's work and career has surfaced, and on May 18, 1986 the Directors Guild of America honored Micheaux with a special lifetime achievement award, which was the first posthumous award the Guild has ever given, and the first such award given to a black director. The award was presented in Hollywood to Mrs. Crow by Sidney Poitier. Lorenzo Tucker also spoke briefly about his work with Micheaux.

Mrs. Crow was traced down and "found" by the author. To him she gave a letter from Mrs. Oscar Micheaux (Alice B. Russell) to Mrs. Crow's mother, Ethel, dated January 7, 1948, which reads, in part,
On the Road Again

By 1950 the independent black film industry was a thing of the past, having finally succumbed to the economic woes that had plagued it from the very beginning. The lack of production capital and distribution outlets had made it unprofitable to compete any longer with Hollywood, which by this time had co-opted its markets, talent, and themes anyway. Yet economics was not the only cause for the failure of independent black filmmaking; there was also a sociological element that contributed to its demise: integration.

In earlier decades the existence of racial segregation in American society had been one of the root causes of the development of an independent black cinema, for it was there that black filmmakers could attempt to define the black experience and provide positive images of blacks for its segregated black audiences. But in post-war years the climate of public opinion began to shift away from

"Things are just so-so with us right now. Dad [Micheaux] has arthritis all over his body, but he keeps going. I have to help him put on his clothes and take them off. And I have to help him take a bath. His hands are slightly swollen and he can't grip or hold anything tightly, but as I said, he keeps on working. . . .

"Last spring, Dad saw that the Book business was going down, so he decided that he would try to get back in Pictures as soon as possible. Therefore, he took all his little money and went to Chicago last summer and made a big picture [The Betrayal]. He took me along to help him. We came back home in November with the Picture. He has been cutting it since and finished last week. He must get $500 which he is working on now and then he will start matching the negative so he can get a print for screening, then he will start booking the Picture and he hopes to be ready to play by April. He has already made up some of his advertising matter. I'm enclosing a Program. So you can see dear, he is doing a big job. And he is doing it alone. Isn't that wonderful?" (Letter in the collection of the author.)
segregation toward integration, and in such a climate the demand for a black cinema apart from and outside of the mainstream no longer existed. By the time of the Korean War the Armed Forces were completely integrated and Hollywood, too, was at least making feeble attempts at integration. Indeed, many of the top black actors from New York went to Hollywood with the hope that they might find employment in the film industry there, but most were unsuccessful. Lorenzo Tucker stayed in New York, however, turning once again to the live stage for employment, and he began acting in a series of plays that would tour throughout the southern United States and Great Britain.

But before he embarked upon his travels Tucker was to make his last important stage appearance in New York in 1951, as Lt. Monoghan in the black-cast production of Sidney Kingsley's *Detective Story* that was staged at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. This production featured Sidney Poitier as Detective McLeod. Poitier, on the threshold of his twenty-year run as the top black actor in Hollywood, had been in two films prior to *Detective Story*, and would be in three more before his breakthrough performance opposite Glenn Ford in

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43 In *Slow Fade to Black* Thomas Cripps points out that "because American racial arrangements themselves were changing, Afro-American leadership tended to affect a studied equalitarian assimilationism that discouraged attempts to emphasize black values and attitudes, for this might seem to support segregation. Therefore no one set about shaping a black rhetoric, an aesthetics, or a politics." (pp. 388-89.)

Blackboard Jungle (1955). Also included in the cast, as Detective Brody, was Robert Earl Jones, the father of James Earl Jones, and an accomplished actor in his own right. Robert Earl Jones recalls Tucker as "one of those actors who had been around longer than most of us. He was very strong on stage and always knew what was going on. He was good to act with."  

In late 1951 and early 1952 Tucker was a member of the Negro Drama Guild's touring production of Harvey, with an all-black cast that included Dooley Wilson as Elwood P. Dowd and Butterfly McQueen as Myrtle Mae Simmons. The production toured the Southwest early in 1952, and between playing Texarkana, Texas on February 29 and Austin, Texas on March 17, it appeared in eleven other towns and cities, including Tulsa, Oklahoma and Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

We were putting on Harvey for black audiences at town halls and black colleges, and we had to drive all the way there in two station wagons from New York. Now, the sponsors of these shows were sometimes leading black citizens, like undertakers, who would put us up and drive us around in their limousines. So we got to this one place and this

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45 Program cast list of Detective Story, Apollo Theatre, 1951, in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker. Robert Earl Jones had acted for Micheaux in the late 1930s in Lying Lips and The Notorious Elinor Lee. He has continued to act throughout the years, and was seen in The Sting. At this writing he is playing Creon in Lee Bruer's national tour of Gospel at Colonus. He is seventy-five years old.


47 Harvey program in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker. Dooley Wilson had achieved fame in the role of Sam, the piano player, in the film Casablanca in 1942. Butterfly McQueen was Prissy, the maid, in Gone With the Wind (1939).

undertaker had a wonderful seafood brunch all set out for us. But he looked at me and said, "This ain't for you. You can't stay here." And I said, "What?" And he said, "No, man, you're white." And I said, "No I'm not." And he said, "Well, you look white, and these white folks here won't let me operate if I don't do right. I can't have no white folks in this house." And I said, "Well, can't I just eat first?" And he said, "No." And he called up a hotel and made a reservation for me. So I left. I had to stay at a lot of white hotels on that tour, and then go to the theatre and stay there until it was time to leave. No sashaying around town. And then I'd go to my room and leave town the next day. 49

Very early in 1953 Tucker got a phone call for Fred O'Neal, who was casting a production of Anna Lucasta that was to be staged in London, England, and then taken on tour throughout the British Isles. "I was painting a house when Fred called," Tucker recalls. "He wanted me to play Joe, the father, in Anna Lucasta, and told me I had to be ready in about three days." 50 The show toured for over a year and a half, playing weekly bookings throughout England, Scotland and Wales. 51

Upon his return to the United States Tucker found few opportunities in New York show business, and during most of 1955 he supported himself through his painting business. In early 1956, however, he decided to mount his own production of Anna Lucasta at a small


50 Lorenzo Tucker's passport from that period shows that he left for England on January 28, 1953. Passport in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker.

51 Anna Lucasta playbill in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker. Tucker's collection includes over forty programs from the tour, dating from April 23, 1953 to August 9, 1954.
PLATE XXI

From left: Kenn Freeman, Lorenzo Tucker and Bea Freeman. Production still from Anna Lucasta tour of British Isles, 1953-54.
theater in Greenwich Village. A Borscht Circuit producer by the name of Stanley Woolf agreed to book Tucker's black-cast production for a series of one-night engagements at the hotels in the Catskills. But Tucker was willing to do it only on one condition:

You see, in those days segregation was still around, no matter what anybody says. Now, we were going to play all these hotels that catered mostly to Jewish clientele, and in all these places black entertainers had to come in the back door, eat their meals in the kitchen, and were forbidden to mingle with the guests. Well, I told Stanley Woolf if that's what was going to happen, I wouldn't do the show. And so he talked to the managers and they agreed to try it out, and so we got to eat in the cafeteria, and use the swimming pool, if we wanted. We even split up the cast and put one at every table with the guests, so they could socialize and talk to them about theatre, and the London tour. You see, nobody believed it could be done, but we did it.

Lorenzo Tucker joined the Negro Drama Players of New York in 1957, where he was cast in a production of Bell, Book, and Candle that was to tour the southern United States much the same way that the tour of Harvey did five years earlier. Part of the money for this production, says Tucker, was put up by Butterfly McQueen, who was also in the cast, along with Lynn Hamilton, Clark Morgan and Bush Hunter. Once again, Lorenzo Tucker was hired to serve as the manager.

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53 An Anna Lucasta program in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker indicates that the show was performed at Grossinger's Straw Hat Theatre on August 8, 1956.

54 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 20, 1986.
Since the end of World War II Tucker had had a considerable amount of experience as a road manager with all-black stage companies. In 1961, therefore, he decided to start his own production company, Universal Theatre, Inc., the aim of which was "to bring high-calibre authentic theatre to the most appreciative communities, North and South, and to all parts of the world."  

The first production that went out on the road under the Universal Theatre auspices was a all-black version of the comedy, Springtime for Henry, and included in the cast were Edna Mae Harris, Kenn Freeman, Claire Leyba and Lorenzo Tucker. The show toured Southern towns and black colleges in 1961, but it barely broke even financially. Apparently the booking agents were not able to enlist enough colleges to make the tour a success. According to Tucker, it was the spirit of integration that was the reason for the failure of his company in the early 1960s:

You see, many of the places we wanted to play were the black colleges, because after the war they were a pretty good circuit to work with these plays and stars we'd bring in from New York. But in the early 'sixties these colleges had caught on to the spirit of integration, which was beginning to happen then. So what did they do? Well, they started booking all-white acts into their auditoriums, and we didn't have a chance. The company lasted a little over a year, into 1962; but then I saw that it was useless to go

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55 Bell, Book and Candle program in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker. The program indicates that the show played Kentucky State College on October 27, 1957.

56 Universal Theatre, Inc., brochure in the collection of Lorenzo Tucker.

57 Ibid.
on, and I turned to other things. 58

With the demise of his Universal Theatre Company in 1962 Lorenzo Tucker's second period of professional theatre and film activity came to an end. In the twenty-five years since his re-entry into show business in 1935—a period that spanned from the Depression through World War II and into the civil rights movement of the 1960s—Tucker had acted in numerous stage and screen roles, performed as a night club master of ceremonies, produced war-time camp shows for the U.S. Army, and toured the United States and Great Britain as an actor, road manager and producer. In almost every instance his work was with other black performers in black-cast stage and screen productions. Although many of these shows had white financial backers and directors, the fact is that with the exception of the Anna Lucasta tour in England, the shows remained minority productions for a minority market. Consequently, Lorenzo Tucker never became rich and famous; indeed, periodically during these twenty-five years he had to support himself as a house painter.

Perhaps his status might have changed had Tucker decided to pass as a white actor and avoid the prejudice that was a daily fact of life for black actors, but he refused to do so more than once. Perhaps, too, Hollywood might have been the way to turn, but Tucker remained in New York, convinced he was too light to fit the prevailing Hollywood image of a black man. 59 With his show business options exhausted, Tucker, who was now fifty-five years old, once again turned away from the world of entertainment.

58 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 4, 1985. 59 Ibid.
CHAPTER 7

LATER YEARS, 1962-1986

Black Film and Theatre in Transition

Often depicted as a quiet decade of postwar conservatism under the guidance of President Dwight Eisenhower, the 1950s in America were in fact years of considerable social change, change that was to create repercussions which would be felt throughout the ensuing decades. One of the important changes was the shift in the official and public attitudes concerning race—namely, the shift away from racial segregation towards integration. As William Loren Katz noted, "One of the biggest problems faced by Americans of the postwar years was that of making America a land of liberty and justice for all. Many whites had returned from Europe and Asia believing that if the idea of a master race was wrong for our enemies, it was wrong for America too."¹

Blacks had integrated professional baseball when Jackie Robinson began playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, and by the time of the Korean War (1950-1953) all the branches of the U.S. Military had lowered racial barriers; units were integrated and black soldiers were fighting alongside their white counterparts. "Jim Crow" laws

that had fostered de facto segregation since 1896 were being challenged in the courts. In May, 1954 black attorney Thurgood Marshall successfully represented the N.A.A.C.P. before the United States Supreme Court in Brown vs. the Board of Education when he argued that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. These same laws were challenged in the streets in 1955 when the black woman Rosa Parks refused to sit at the back of a Montgomery, Alabama bus, a refusal that was the catalyst for boycotts and other non-violent protests against racial segregation.2

This gradual shift towards integration was reflected in both film and theatre, albeit in different ways. Black independent film production was essentially a by-product of segregation, and the end of segregation also brought with it the end of segregated filmmaking.3 Independent black-cast feature film production effectively came to a close with Oscar Micheaux's 1948 production of The Betrayal; the markets that black filmmaking had once vied for would now be serviced entirely by Hollywood.

But while Hollywood had publicly agreed to move towards integration as early as 1942,4 it had made little headway in twenty years

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3The idea of films directed by blacks with black actors for black audiences would be revived twenty years later, only this time the early black stereotypes would be replaced by the black image of the hip super hero, or "Superspade," in the "blaxploitation" films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Daniel J. Leab, From Sambo to "Superspade": The Black Experience in Motion Pictures (1975).

in replacing the old stereotypical images of blacks with more positive ones. Only with the gradual acceptance by white America of a talented young actor like Sidney Poitier in the 1950s did the images of blacks on the white-controlled screens begin to change.5

Since there was no black film production of the East Coast during the 1950s and 1960s there were, consequently, no roles for black actors. As a result, numerous black actors left New York for Hollywood during those years. Lorenzo Tucker did not leave, however, convinced as he was that there would be no jobs available in Hollywood for light-skinned black actors like himself.6 One of the greatest ironies of Tucker's career in films was that as a light-skinned black actor he had played leading roles in the all-black films of the 1920s and 1930s; but, when Hollywood integrated in the 1950s and 1960s, only dark-skinned black actors were cast in black male roles, and Tucker could not get an acting job—unless, of course, he was willing to pass as white and play Latino or Middle-Eastern characters.7 In effect, the decline of independent black

5 Various reasons have been advanced for Hollywood's gradualism concerning integration. Perhaps because it relies upon the mass market and public acceptance for its livelihood Hollywood had seldom taken the lead on issues of social concerns, and in the matter of racial integration it has been a follower instead of a leader.


7 The intriguing and long-neglected history of the light-skinned black performer in show business is a study of its own, yet a few remarks are appropriate here. It is interesting to note, for example, that although many of the leading men in the black-cast films for black audiences were light-skinned, no light-skinned black has ever been accorded leading man status by Hollywood. Black stars, it seems, have to be dark-skinned. On the other hand, young, light-
film production and the narrow requirements of Hollywood helped to put an end to Tucker's film career. It was as if the changes in the film industry had left Tucker—who, because of his light complexion, was often caught between the two worlds of blacks and whites—something of an unnecessary outsider. By 1962 it had been more than a decade since he last acted in a film.

Live theatre presented Tucker with a different set of problems. His Universal Theatre tour of the South in 1962 had been only a break-even venture financially and, although there were already some bookings for 1963, Tucker realized that the kind of theatre he was doing (producing past Broadway hits with all-black casts) was no longer popular with black audiences newly concerned with issues of civil rights. Nor could his theatre compete with the serious new plays being written about black identity and experience in America, one of the first and most important among them being Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Now fifty-five years

skinned black female performers were sought after in both black-cast films and Hollywood. For more than forty years, from the time King Vidor cast Nina Mae McKinney in *Hallelujah* in 1929 up to the 1970s, light-skinned black females like McKinney, Lena Horne, Fredi Washington, Dorothy Dandridge, and Eartha Kitt were the only black females allowed romantic lead status. Obviously, these women were used because their beauty was close to the standards of white females. But a light-skinned black man, even though he might have matched the prevailing image of white handsomeness, was apparently not looked upon favorably by Hollywood, perhaps because he constituted a social threat. In a white male dominated industry a light-skinned black woman in a relationship with a white man was tentatively acceptable; but a relationship on screen between a light-skinned black man and a white woman was still taboo. Consequently, light-skinned black actors like Lorenzo Tucker are conspicuously absent from Hollywood films.
old, Tucker felt it was time to leave show business again.\(^8\)

Tired of trying to earn a living in the unpredictable world of show business, Tucker began looking for a steady job that might provide him with a pension that would allow him to spend his retirement years in some comfort. For the past thirty years he had worked off and on as a house painter, but as his own employer he had failed to set aside enough money for retirement.

Then, too, there was also a domestic issue that had to be resolved. Although Tucker was still legally married to Katherine Godfrey, they had lived together only sporadically over the past thirty years, and their chances for reconciliation were very slim. Moreover, Tucker had been seeing another woman, Julia Garnett, and they had hopes to marry soon.

"Doctor" Tucker

Lorenzo Tucker was at the moment of his second career crisis, one which paralleled his first separation from the world of entertainment nearly thirty years earlier: in both instances he decided to leave show business for financial and domestic reasons. Only this time he fared better in both areas, for he was able to find employment that was both relevant and satisfying, and he was able to solve his domestic problems.\(^9\) But at first it was another bleak period, Tucker remembers,

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\(^8\) Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985.

\(^9\) Tucker divorced Katherine Godfrey in August, 1963 and married Julia Garnett soon after. (Divorce decree and marriage license in the private papers of Lorenzo Tucker.)
Show business was bad and I was painting a lot now. One day I went into a restaurant for a cup of coffee and I sat across from two Italian guys who were looking at the employment section of the newspaper. They saw this ad for an assistant medical examiner. "What the hell is that?" one of them asked. "I don't know," said the other, "but I think it has something to do with dead people." And they tossed the paper down and got up and left. I picked it up and looked at it and it said, "NO AGE LIMIT." And I said to myself, "Well, this might be a chance for me to get some security by working for the city."

Tucker filed for the position and, after a series of interviews, met with the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City, Milton Helpren.

When Helpren interviewed me he said, I see in your application that you have been in show business. So why do want a job like this?" I said, "Because I'm hungry and I'm afraid I'll starve to death." After seeing I had field surgery training he said, "Well, I need somebody with me that I can tell what to do, somebody who won't second-guess me, like some of these young doctors. How good are you at taking orders?" And I said, "Well, I was in the Army." He said, "You got the job."

For the next twelve years Tucker would serve as Helpren's autopsy assistant, mortuary supervisor, veterinary assistant in the


11 Milton Helpren served as Chief Medical Examiner from 1953 to 1973. Known as a "Sherlock Holmes of medicine," Helpren acquired a national reputation as a forensic pathologist and medical detective, and was a key witness in a number of sensational murder trials. He died on April 22, 1977 at the age of seventy-five. ("Milton Helpren, Ex-Chief Medical Examiner, 75, Dies," New York Times, April 23, 1977, p. 22.)

animal suite for laboratory specimens, and wet-tissue orderly.

When they had medical conventions we laid out all these lungs and hearts and other organs on a long table for doctors from all over the world to examine. Now, these were wet tissues, actual organs that we brought from the medical examiner’s office where they did the autopsies the night before, and we laid them out on dry ice to preserve them. We gave the doctors rubber gloves so they could pick them up and examine them, and I would help show them what a bad lung or diseased heart looked like.

By working with Helpren, Tucker had once again realized something of his mother’s ambition for him to become a doctor. He had portrayed doctors a number of times in film and on the stage, but this job would be the closest thing to a real-life doctor he would ever get. The irony this time, however, was that he was not giving aid to the living; rather, he would be operating on the dead. According to his long-time co-worker, John Griffin, Tucker became very proficient at his work.

In an interview on March 29, 1986, Tucker said that he assisted Helpren in hundreds of autopsies, and included among them were those of some of his old friends, like Nina Mae McKinney, the singing star of black films of the 1930s, and Donald Heywood, the black composer who wrote Ol’ Man Satan. Tucker said he also helped perform the autopsy on Malcolm X. According to Alex Haley, in the epilogue to The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, 1966, p. 439), Medical Examiner Hilton Helpren reported that the first shotgun blast killed Malcolm X. It’s entirely plausible, therefore, that Tucker assisted Helpren.


Tucker’s mother, Virginia Lee Tucker, died in January, 1963, just a few months after Tucker began working for Helpren.

Interview with John Griffin, April 11, 1986. According to Griffin, Tucker was very good at the delicate job of cutting through the cranium and removing the brain.
PLATE XXII

Tucker found working with Helpren to be a fascinating and rewarding occupation, and during these years he thought very little about acting. He did not turn his back completely on show business, however, for during this time he took a course in photography and became a free-lance professional photographer. He photographed autopsies in the day time, but in the evening he shot photographs for the Catholic Actors Guild, covering their dinners and fundraising functions. He also worked as a free-lance photographer for International News and Pictures in New York.

I went on what you might call working vacations. My wife and I often went on vacations with Dick Campbell and his wife in the Caribbean, and if I saw a couple that was staying at our hotel on their honeymoon, I'd take their photograph for them and get it to their local newspapers. I would get my vacations practically free that way. I shot all the Caribbean islands and Hawaii, and when Howard Hughes put up the Landmark Hotel in Las Vegas, I was sent on assignment by Pan Am and photographed Vegas from off the roof of that hotel. All the way down. Wide angle. Oh, man!

Witness and Historian

The rising expectations generated by the civil right movement of the 1960s sparked a new black consciousness that sought to define the black experience and identity. But the establishment of a black identity required a rediscovery of black history, of which very little had been recorded. It was during these years, therefore, that an interest in the past achievements of blacks began to be cultivated in the United States, an interest that began at the grass-roots level.


18 Ibid. Photographs in Lorenzo Tucker's collection.
and was later to be formalized by historians and by universities, which began to establish Black Studies programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Sometime around 1963, Tucker recalls, he and his wife Julia were invited by Dick Campbell to a lecture at a museum in Harlem, where a woman spoke about unearthing the lost history of black show business. It was then that Tucker began to realize from an historical perspective the importance of his years as a performer in black films and stage shows, and his years as a witness to the events and personalities that helped to shape black entertainment history. Also, from almost the very beginning of his career, Tucker had collected and saved programs, photographs, posters and other memorabilia from the films and shows he had been in and others he had seen. These, too, he realized were important artifacts, and from the time of that lecture he decided he would devote his energies to keeping alive the history of black show business.\(^{19}\)

To this day Lorenzo Tucker has continued to collect black film and theatre memorabilia, from which part of the information in this study has been obtained, and from which the photographs contained herein have been copied. Having performed and participated in black films and theatre for the past sixty years, Tucker remains one of the few living witnesses who possesses a broad knowledge of the times and a desire to share that knowledge. As such, he is one of the few first-hand resources of information about what it was like to be a

\(^{19}\)Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, March 3, 1985. Tucker says he has lost more records than he has been able to save.
performer in an entertainment tradition that has been virtually
ignored by historians. In the past few years he has contributed his
knowledge of the period and has opened his collection to a number of
important studies of black film and theatre history that have been
undertaken. In addition, Tucker has appeared on numerous
television shows, has served as an advisor on a documentary film
about Oscar Micheaux, has recently spoken of his experiences with
Micheaux at the Directors Guild of America's tribute to Micheaux,
and is currently producing his own half-hour cable television show,
"Video Memorabilia," in Los Angeles, on which he interviews black
performers who contribute their recollections about black show
business.

In 1973 and 1974 Tucker provided his recollections and
memorabilia for the development of the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame
in Oakland, California. He and former black actor Clarence Muse
appeared on numerous panels and television shows to discuss black

20 Tucker has contributed to a number of studies of black
entertainment history including Don Bogle's Toms, Coons, Mulattoes,
Mammies, and Bucks (1973); Gary Null's Black Hollywood: The Negro
in Motion Pictures (1975); Thomas Cripp's Slow Fade to Black
(1977); and Henry T. Sampson's Blacks in Black and White (1977) and
Blacks in Blackface (1980).

21 Tucker's most recent national appearance has been on "Tony

22 Szabo Films' Oscar Micheaux, with Danny Glover as Micheaux,
San Francisco, California, 1982.

23 At the Directors Guild Theatre, Hollywood, California, May 18,
1986.

24 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, January 16, 1986.
entertainment history and promote the Hall of Fame. Tucker and Muse were two of the first black actors to be given the Oscar Micheaux Award in recognition of their pioneering efforts in black filmmaking, and they were inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in February, 1974.

Finally, Lorenzo Tucker has recently been appointed the West Coast representative of the Afro-American Actors Guild (formerly the Negro Actors Guild), which will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 1987. In all of these activities Lorenzo Tucker's main goal has been to keep alive the history of black entertainment in the United States, in order to permit both blacks and whites a better understanding of the contributions of blacks to the entertainment industry.

Show Business Again

In the summer of 1974 Lorenzo Tucker retired from his position as assistant to the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City; he was now sixty-seven year old. His second wife, Julia, had died in September, 1973, and his mentor, Milton Helpren, had retired as Chief Medical Examiner in December, 1973. Also in December of 1973 married his third wife, Mildred Childs, and they retired to Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. For the next three years Tucker eased into retirement, although he did continue to work on his black

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25 No historical study of the Negro Actors Guild has been published.

26 Interview with Lorenzo Tucker, June 27, 1985.
history collection and taught a photography class on the side.\footnote{Ibid., March 3, 1985.}

But it wasn't long before Tucker grew bored with retirement living and began to yearn for New York City and show business once again. In the summer of 1977 he left his wife Mildred and returned to New York, taking a room at the Ansonia Hotel, where he set up a small photography studio for shooting actors' resume photos. Between photo assignments he made the rounds of film agents and auditions.\footnote{Ibid. Tucker maintains that while in New York he found work in two films, \textit{Saturday Night Fever} (Paramount, 1977), and \textit{Slow Dancing in the City} (United Artists, 1978), but that in both cases his performance was edited out of the picture.} After spending a year in New York, Tucker decided it was time for a change of scene and, at the age of seventy-one, he finally arrived in Hollywood, on August 11, 1978.\footnote{Ibid.}

When he left his third wife in Massachusetts Tucker gave up claim to his property,\footnote{Tucker was divorced by Mildred Childs in Edgartown, Massachusetts on October 5, 1977. Private papers of Lorenzo Tucker.} so when he arrived in Hollywood he had to begin again financially. At first he set up a photography studio in his apartment on North Los Palmas Avenue in Hollywood to take photos of aspiring actors, but he soon decided he was not happy doing that because what he really wanted to do was get back into motion pictures. So he gave up photography and went to work as a night security guard in a Wilshire Boulevard office building so he and
his fourth wife, Paulina, could live comfortably, and so he could use his mornings to go on auditions for acting jobs. By his own reckoning, Tucker has gone on countless auditions, now and then getting a commercial or a voice-over job, but never a movie. As of this writing, Lorenzo Tucker is now seventy-nine years old, and maintains he'll continue acting until he dies. He also insists that he still has something to prove:

Throughout my career I could have passed for white and forgotten all about my race, and at times I have taken roles meant for whites. It would have been easier that way, passing for white and keeping my past a secret, like other actors did, but I chose to be considered as colored. You see, I still want to prove that the Negro race is not all black-skinned; we're all shades of the rainbow. Micheaux knew that, but he was criticized for casting us. People just didn't understand what he was trying to do. And even today Hollywood producers won't cast someone like me in a black role because I just don't fit their stereotypical image of what a black man should be. If anybody thinks that discrimination no longer exists in Hollywood they're mistaken. Somebody like me they don't know what to do with. But that's why I believe the color of a man's skin shouldn't be considered at all in a film. Use everybody; use all the different shades of black and white. Mix it up; that's the way it should be. Sometimes my agent calls me and asks, "Well, Tucker, what do you want to play today?" And I answer, "Whatever the occasion demands."

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31 Tucker married his fourth wife, Paulina Segura, on February 12, 1983. Marriage license in the private papers of Lorenzo Tucker.

PLATE XXIII

PLATE XXIV

Lorenzo Tucker (resume photograph), 1985.
Lorenzo Tucker at the Directors Guild of America's Lifetime Achievement Tribute to Oscar Micheaux. Hollywood, California, June 18, 1986.
CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY

The primary purpose of this study has been to reconstruct the long and colorful stage and screen career of Lorenzo Tucker. To achieve this goal the study has employed various methods of information gathering, verification and assessment. The initial source of information has been the many personal interviews conducted by the author with Lorenzo Tucker himself, interviews that have provided this biography with a general outline of his life and career, and with an oral history of his times. Additional supporting evidence employed to piece together and verify the details of Tucker's career has been culled from interviews with those who knew Tucker and worked with him in show business; private and public collections of written records and artifacts; programs, posters and photographs; newspapers; films; and previous scholarship on the history of black film and theatre.

This study began with Lorenzo Tucker's early years in Philadelphia. From a very early age he had a good memory and the talent for mimicry, and he would spend hours around the house reciting verses and passages that had been read to him, or repeating overheard conversations. While growing up on his grandparent's farm in Virginia he would spend his free time writing little show and
skits that he would produce for his relatives' pleasure, using his cousins and playmates as cast members. As a youngster he witnessed and was influenced by the "Court House Days," those periods when the circuit judge would ride to the county seat to hear the docket of cases that had mounted up. These were also festive days, since medicine shows, acrobats and other itinerant performers would follow the judge to town and entertain the crowd that gathered there. It was at one such gathering, around 1918, that he saw his first movie, a documentary on black soldiers fighting in the first World War.

Tucker's inclinations were always artistic. Aside from being a child actor he also learned to play the piano and trumpet. His mother, however, had other plans for him, and after he graduated from secondary school she brought him back to Philadelphia and enrolled him in Temple University. But the rigors of formal study were too much for Tucker, and in the spring of 1926 he got his mother's permission to leave school and go to nearby Atlantic City, where he had hoped to spend the summer as a waiter at a resort hotel. Before long, however, Lorenzo Tucker was spending his free time at the black clubs and cabarets in Atlantic City, and within a few weeks he had developed a dance routine with his first love, Rae Hewitt. By the end of the summer he had decided not to return to college, choosing instead to try his luck as a professional black entertainer.

The next six years, from 1927 to 1933, were Tucker's most productive years in black show business. He became a vaudeville performer and appeared with great black stars like Bessie and Mamie
Smith; he apprenticed in live theatre at the famous Lafayette Theatre under the tutelage of some of the best black actors of the period; he became a screen actor and appeared in eleven black-cast films, nine of them for the most prolific and durable director in the history of black filmmaking, Oscar Micheaux; he achieved a certain level of celebrity as one of the first matinee idols of black films; and he acted on the stages of Harlem and in four Broadway productions.

But just as quickly as his early success had come, it was gone. By 1933 the Depression had seriously crippled black film and theatre enterprise, and work for black actors became scarce. Newly married and in need of a steady income, Lorenzo Tucker retired from black show business in 1933 and, although he would return in two years, he would never again achieve the popularity and success that he enjoyed in his first period.

Returning to Harlem in 1935 Tucker took up acting once more, and during the next four years would act in two final films for Oscar Micheaux and two more black-cast films for white-owned independent film companies, appearing mostly in gangster roles. It was also during this period that Tucker became involved in social concerns, first by helping to establish the Negro Actors Guild, a benevolent association formed to assist indigent black actors. Second, Tucker performed in the stage show that supported A. Philip Randolph's "March on Washington" movement in 1942, which successfully pressured the federal government to initiate the first equal employment opportunity legislation.
Tucker was drafted during World War Two and while serving in the Army Air Corps he produced and performed in numerous camp shows. After the war he toured with a USO show and with black-cast shows in the United States and Great Britain. At the same time he acted in five more black-cast films. No longer the young romantic lead, Tucker now became a character actor; yet he retained his debonair attitude and good looks, and brought an air of authority to the screen, this time playing mostly doctor and lawyer roles. Finally, he produced black-cast stage shows under his own banner, The Universal Theatre Company. In 1962 Tucker quit show business a second time and became an autopsy assistant to the New York Medical Examiner. Retiring from that position in 1974, Tucker returned to show business a third time in 1977 and moved to Hollywood, where he lives today.

An analysis of this chronology has lead to one of the most important discoveries of this study; namely, that Lorenzo Tucker is one of the few black entertainers whose career has spanned almost every phase of black film and theatre production in America in the past sixty years. That achievement, along with his testimony as a witness of the events and people who shaped his times, ensures him a place in the history of black film and theatre.

There is also a secondary purpose to this study, since the practice of biography yields more than just a reconstruction of the life of a single individual. By extension, biography also discloses the context of that individual's society and the ideas that shaped his times. It is through an analysis of this information that we can
better understand both the individual and the age in which he lived. This biography has uncovered, for example, new information on the life of black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, who is now recognized as having been the most important black film pioneer in America. It has also shown Micheaux's friendship and working relationship with Lorenzo Tucker, and it has revealed information on Micheaux' later years, death, and final resting place. This study has also touched upon the problems faced by independent black filmmakers, pointing out their difficulties in acquiring capitalization and distributing their products, and indicating the consequent aesthetic shortcomings of many of their films. It has discussed black vaudeville's absorption of minstrel show techniques and staging; T.O.B.A., the black theatre booking circuit of the 1920s; cabaret entertainment in the Harlem Renaissance; the formation of the Negro Actors Guild; the production of military camp shows; and the contributions of little-known black performers. Finally, behind this study of Tucker's career has been the ever-present reality of race and the struggle for racial equality in America during the twentieth century. Consequently, Tucker's career story is representative of the hundreds of untold stories of black performers who lived as segregated second-class citizens and were forced to shape their lives and their careers under the daily specter of racial discrimination.

What at last can we conclude about Tucker's abilities as an actor? Unfortunately, since half of the films in which he appeared are lost, there is not enough documentation to judge whether he had the potential to be a truly fine actor. There is enough evidence,
however, to say with certainty that he was a good journeyman actor, dedicated to his craft, believable and adequate in his roles, disciplined in his performances, articulate, handsome, and the possessor of a strong screen image and stage presence. One can only speculate as to what Tucker's career might have been had he not been subjected to the daily discrimination that has been the lot of black entertainers over the past sixty years, or what might have occurred had he not decided to retire from black show business twice, or what might have happened had he gone to Hollywood early on and passed as a white actor. Certainly it is true that racial discrimination must have had some negative effect on Tucker's career, but there are other issues to consider as well. Wrong career choices, a depressed economy, war, domestic considerations, twists of fate—all these things have also had a bearing on the career of Lorenzo Tucker.

Happily, this study remains necessarily incomplete, for Lorenzo Tucker is alive and well and living in Hollywood, where he continues to develop his career. And, while he waits to be cast in films, he continues to document black film and theatre history, and to spread that history through his interview, lectures and television appearances. By popular standards of measurement, of course, Lorenzo Tucker's show business career was not entirely successful, for he became neither a famous celebrity nor a rich man. From an historical perspective, however, his career has been quite successful, for his legacy as a witness to and a performer in black film and theatre has made us richer in our knowledge of the past.
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