

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF LIGHTNIN'

STANLEY O WILLIFORD

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By day, he shuffled around a TV studio as Lightnin', the slow-witted, slow-moving, slow-talking janitor on the "Amos 'n' Andy" TV show. By night, he built the Ebony Showcase Theatre.

Though the contrast between those two roles may have always bothered Nick Stewart, it epitomized the black experience in the arts for most of this century.

"When I took the part (in the early '50s), I had the Ebony Showcase," Stewart recalls, as Black History month draws to a close. "In the daytime I played Lightnin' and at night I built this theater, presenting blacks in positive roles. I was trying to erase some of that (stereotyping) then."

Stewart would be the last to defend the image he portrayed so effectively, but TV roles depicting real blacks were virtually non-existent in the 1950s.

"What is sad is that people I have helped, belittle what I've done. . . .

"I'd been featured in some top radio shows, but I knew the part they had picked out for me. They would never show (blacks) any other parts but the mummies, the Lightnin's, the Nicodemuses, the stereotypes, the servants. (Stewart played a Stepin Fetchit-like character named Nicodemus for years in black touring stage shows before "Amos 'n' Andy" came along.)

"The only roles that we could play were these roles," Stewart, now in his 70s, remembers. "At one time a black man could not get on the stage in America in his natural face. He had to wear blackface. The black humor influence was not our concept; it was started by white minstrels. In order for us to work we had to imitate them. It was buffoonery, an image created by the white man.

"I understood. This didn't only happen with the black community. It happened in the Irish and the Jewish communities. It fits in with the whole concept of black art. One would have to understand what

By STANLEY O. WILLIFORD

that's all about. The theater and the arts have been used to vilify any person and any group that it wants to destroy. For some reason, there's been a fear of black people, that's why the stereotyping developed."

Stewart says he took the role of Lightnin' because "I saw it as an opportunity. I couldn't have learned without an opportunity to play these roles, but I saw how this was poisoning the black community. My peers said things were not going to change until we start producing ourselves."

So, Stewart and his wife, Edna, began encouraging black playwrights and adapting such (white) works as "Detective Story," "Three Men on a Horse" and "No Exit" for

when black-owned theaters are all but non-existent. And "without government subsidy and foundation grants," Stewart is wont to say.

That success has helped the black theater move beyond the Lightnin' stereotypes and launched the careers of several major black actors, including John Amos, Isabel Sanford, Abby Lincoln, Al Freeman Jr. and Greg Morris.

"I knew something had to be done," Stewart recalls. "The whole black community was in the same bag. We were programmed to think of ourselves as maids and butlers. You walked into a courtroom in those days talking correctly and you lost the case. That was the way it was. . . . When I started my theater, all you saw were the mummies."

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the Ebony.

"We established a record of continuously presenting blacks in the best of life styles." If the theater was "used to project blacks in negatives," Stewart reasoned, "then it could be used to project blacks in positives."

That philosophy has undergirded the Ebony Showcase Theatre since he founded it in 1950, a year before the TV version of "Amos 'n' Andy."

"People used to say to my children, 'Hey, let me see you talk like your daddy,'" Stewart remembers. "People relate you to the images they've seen on the screen."

Though his slow, soft-spoken voice may remind many of the character he played, Stewart is a smart and tenacious businessman. He and his wife have managed to not only survive but to keep their theater complex growing in an era

Stewart left "Amos 'n' Andy" in 1953 after the producers confronted him about his theater.

"The producers told me I was diverting my attention in too many different directions," he says. "They told me it was the theater or the program."

By then, the choice wasn't that difficult. As Lightnin', "I wasn't saying nothing. I wasn't helping anybody. I got my satisfaction in the evening with my theater."

The theater outlived the show, which went off the air in 1953 after it came under heavy criticism from the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People.

"Amos 'n' Andy" was the brainchild of Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden, two whites who first broadcast the show over radio in 1929. The radio show lasted through the '40s, but in 1951 became a TV

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Nick Stewart, left, as character Lightnin' from "Amos 'n' Andy" show and Stewart today, more than 30 years later.

GARY FRIEDMAN / Los Angeles Times

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series featuring blacks. The NAACP criticized its depiction of "the Negro in a stereotyped and derogatory manner" and as "inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest."

"In my opinion, what got the show off the air is that the original Amos 'n' Andy didn't want us to do the show in the first place," Stewart says. "They wanted to continue to blacken up and do the show," which they had done on radio, movies and as the voices of animal characters in cartoons.

The TV series continued in reruns until 1966, when, despite its reputed popularity among blacks and whites, CBS pulled the show from syndication, in a move generally regarded as acceding to pressure from civil-rights organizations. Stewart says he "understood" the thinking of those who objected to the show and that "the (stereotyping) comedy was destroying us."

But Stewart has no regrets.

"All my comedy has been clean," he says. "Lightnin' the character won a lot of friends. A lot of people liked him, and they liked me."

For that reason, Stewart maintains that his experience as Lightnin' "was not painful." But the lack of opportunities for black actors in roles with positive images bothers Stewart these days. "It's more painful now," he says.

As he has for the last 30 years, he still tries to ameliorate the situation by providing work at the Ebony Showcase. The theater, which Stewart is renovating to meet earthquake standards, is considered by many to be the city's most impressive case of black theatrical entrepreneurship. What began in 1950 as a 99-seater, has grown to include a complex that takes up almost a whole city block. Today, the Ebony Showcase at 4720 W. Washington Blvd., near La Brea Avenue, includes a 300-seat main stage, a restaurant, a smaller theater for

meetings and conferences, a dance studio, a video and film center, a print shop, apartments and a multipurpose auditorium.

The Stewarts have put the complex together with their own money and muscle, doing much of the heavy renovation themselves. Much of the seating, the lighting, the paneling, the fixtures had once seen service in other buildings. "My wife used to work right along with the carpenters, reading the blueprints, which I couldn't do. She was devastating with a hammer," Stewart says.

"People don't know the importance of theater," Stewart emphasizes. "A theater should be a school, a church, a college. An actor should be a teacher, a minister."