

Reflections of Black Actor

Amos 'n' Andy  
Left Far Behind

By JOHN L. MITCHELL Times Staff Writer

At the Ebony Showcase Theater in a small cocktail lounge, Horace (Nick) Stewart offered some guests a rare glimpse of his past, an episode from the old "Amos 'n' Andy Show."

It was a reunion, of sorts. Amos, the level-headed caddy of the Fresh Air Taxi Cab Co.; Andy, the inept romantic, and George (The Kingfish) Stevens, the con artist who was fond of saying "Holy mackerel, Andy." Then there was Lightnin', the slow moving, dim-witted janitor.

Stewart, his face expressionless, sat quietly through the half-hour television show. Time has done little to change his features; the dark brown complexion is still smooth, the grin still winning with eyes that can be both sad and happy at the same time.

He says he has forgotten many routines polished over the years on thousands of vaudeville stages or he refuses to perform them. Stewart played Lightnin', the Stepin Fetchit-type character whose shuffling portrayal caused many to laugh and others to feel embarrassed. "I was a master comic," he said with pride.

Stewart, now near 70, and his wife, Edna, own the Backstage Lounge, the 300-seat theater and the whole city block on Washington Boulevard near La Brea Avenue. Ebony Showcase is one of the oldest black theaters in the country and one of the oldest theaters in Los Angeles—built 32 years ago with money Stewart earned from his role as the shiftless janitor.

"The Ebony Showcase Theater has been a stable force, a major outlet for black performers, writers and technicians," said C. Bernard Jackson, executive director of the Inner City Cultural Center. "Almost every important black performer, at one time or another, has come through Nick's operation."

Ebony Showcase, however, like most theaters has hit hard times. It recently opened after being closed for almost three months because of problems meeting earthquake safety requirements and restrictions imposed by Actors Equity. The Stewarts, who run the theater as closely as a mom and pop store, without government subsidies or foundation grants, have had to mortgage their home to keep their dream alive.

"We've put our whole lives in this theater," said Edna Stewart, who co-produces plays with her husband of 42 years.

The Ebony Showcase Theater has been in three locations, and with each move the couple and their three children did most of the renovation themselves.

"I worked my fingers to the bone," Edna said. "Sawing wood, nailing, driving trucks with scraps we'd pick up to make sets...hauling plywood and 2-by-4s, everything from scrubbing floors, screwing in seats, climbing scaffolds and choosing plays."

Never Lost His Spirit

"A friend told me that if I wanted to raise money for the theater, all I had to do was say that the Showcase was dying," Nick said. "I told him, 'I couldn't say that Ebony Showcase is dying. These are good times for me, and I've been facing troubles like this all my life. Besides you only die when you lose your spirit.'"

Nick Stewart contends he never lost his spirit, despite an acting career that many considered tainted by stereotypical roles. The Amos 'n' Andy Show was created by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white men who performed the black characters on radio. The show was the first on television to appear with an all-black cast.

"This placed us in the position of being blacks imitating white men imitating blacks," Stewart snapped. "It was a time when the only other black face you would see on television was on the Saturday night fights."

And because whites dominated the image-making industry, Stewart said, "blacks were always relegated to play ignorant buffoons or sympathetic, kindly maids or butlers."

For example, he said, "On the Jack Benny Show, anybody (white) could call him Jack, but if a black was on, Rochester or me or anybody, we had to say Mr. Benny. It was used to suggest inferiority."

From the very beginning, civil rights groups, particularly the NAACP, protested the series for fostering racial stereotypes but with little success until the mid-1960s, when the Kenyan government banned the



Nick Stewart with his wife Edna at Ebony Showcase Theatre and, below, in former role as Lightnin'.



"I am asked all the time to play Lightnin', but I have to straighten people out. I'm not Lightnin'. My name is Mr. Stewart. I was paid to play Lightnin'. I'm not being paid to play Lightnin' on the streets. They don't understand that the person who played the part of Lightnin' is not Lightnin'. Lightnin' wasn't supposed to be able to do all this," he said, pointing to the theater complex.



show from distribution there. CBS quietly took it out of circulation.

For Stewart, however, the legacy of Lightnin' remains.

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Ironically, Stewart was fired from the show. "They said I was too much of a contradiction, because during the day I would play Lightnin' and at night I would go back to my theater," he said. "They said I should give up one or the other. I never went back."

He began devoting more time to building a theater and putting on good productions. Ebony theater put on all-black productions of "No Exit," "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Norman is That You?" It is responsible for the first all-black version of "The Odd Couple"—a similar version premiered this year on television. For two years, "Once in a Lifetime" was a feature at the theater.

To put on plays, Stewart said, he and his wife had to overcome another barrier: Some white writers refuse to allow their works to be performed by all-black casts.

Despite that, the theater has helped launch the careers of such successful black actors as John Amos, Isabel Sanford, Abby Lincoln, Al Freeman Jr. and Greg Morris.

Stewart says that the problems many blacks faced years ago should serve as bitter examples for today's young actors.

Stewart was born in Harlem and reared in Barbados by his West Indian grandparents so that his father, a seaman, and his mother could work.

Watched Whites 'Go Slumming'

He returned to Harlem around 1920, and his parents lived on the fifth floor of a tenement walk-up across the street from the Cotton Club. He would watch out his window as the limousines pulled up bringing rich downtown whites to Harlem to "go slumming."

It was the 1920s, the time of the Harlem Renaissance, when the community attracted black intellectuals and artists from around the country. It was also the time when Marcus Garvey preached that blacks should go back to Africa. His parents were loyal followers of Garvey, he said.

The cultural environment had little impact on Stewart, who frequently ran into trouble with the police. "I came from a strict family," he said. "Once the police caught me trying to sneak on the subway and took me home. My mother said, 'Oh my God! This is a shame. This is a crying shame!' She just knew that every one of our neighbors had seen him bring me up the stairs."

He spent two years in reform schools before running away from home at the age of 16. While away, he met an old buddy from reform school.

"We were both hungry," Stewart said. "We decided to run off to Atlantic City."

Outside a store, Stewart recalled his friend saying, "I'm going to get you something to eat." He went upstairs and he came down running. He ran, and I ran right behind him. We got a couple of blocks away, and I turned around and said, 'What happened?' He said, 'Just stuck up that place.'"

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# **ACTOR: Reflections**

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During that period in his life the streets became his home. He slept in basements and on the subway. He survived on odd jobs, hustling milk bottles for the deposits, running errands. Occasionally, when life on the streets got too rough, he would return home, he said.

Soon he discovered the "Hoofers' Club," where some of the great tap dancers used to go to hone their craft. The club became his new home, his school. He would watch the dancers trying to outdo each other, trading steps until early morning, and then find a place in the club to sleep. "I learned to dance by watching. It rubs off on you," he said.

### **Buck and Bubbles, Sammy Davis Sr.**

He watched some of the best dancers: Bill Robinson, Buck and Bubbles and Sammy Davis Sr., The Four Step Brothers and Honi Cole.

At the age of 19, he began performing in a Little Rascals comedy routine. Later he toured theaters in black communities, developing routines as a comic under the stage name of Nicodemus, a Stepin Fetchit type but better, he said.

In the 1930s, Stewart was playing in Los Angeles when Mae West came in and saw him perform. When Stewart's show moved on to Detroit, he received a telegram asking him to come back and perform in her movie, "Go West Young Man," his first appearance in a film.

He played on the same bills with George Burns and Gracie Allen and worked with Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong. The latter were some of the first black entertainers to break the segregation barriers and perform at all-white theaters in the deep South.

### **Many Movie Appearances**

Since then he has appeared in more films than he can remember. They include "Stormy Weather," "White Christmas," "Cabin in the Sky," "Carmen Jones" and Richard Pryor's "Silver Streak." His was voice of the bear in Walt Disney's "Song of the South."

"I always played the usual parts, the butler the chauffeur, ghost chasers," he said. "But I was one of the few actors who worked."

Stewart says that, with support, the black theater can become a public relations agency. "We are the artists, ministers, teachers and preachers. A theater should be the church, a school, a college." As he reflected on his career, Stewart was asked whether he ever wanted to see Amos 'n' Andy return to television.

"The negative reaction would be too great," he said. "There would be nothing to balance it off with. Black actors can't find work, and we can't afford to laugh at ourselves."