

Theatre Artists Aided by Negro Actors Guild

By Angelo Herndon

Organized a year and a half ago as a welfare agency to aid Negro actors, the Negro Actors Guild of America, 1674 Broadway, New York City, has already achieved a unique record.

Perhaps few organizations with a better equipped staff and sufficient operating funds could have accomplished as much in such a short span of time.

To appreciate the work of the Guild, one has to understand the special difficulties of Negro actors, who for years have been without protection of any kind. Consequently, during periods of employment they have been left at the mercy of their employers, and in times of unemployment have had to shift for themselves, unaided by anyone.

Even during the existence of the Federal Theatre, many talented Negro actors found it necessary to give up their professions and seek a livelihood through whatever source available.

With only a few ever reaching the mark of distinction in the theatrical field, and others finding it impossible to fully develop their talents because of restrictions based on race, what will happen to the Negro actor now that the one opportunity he once had has been destroyed by the reactionary Tories of Congress who wiped out the Federal Theatre Projects?

Obviously, he has less of a chance now than he ever had. Hence, the N.A.G. marks a new epic turn in the history of the Negro actors movement in America. Still in its stage of infancy, the Guild has meant the difference between life and death for many actors. Because its field of work has never before been touched by any group, its future is one of rendering a great service not only to the Negro actor, but to the whole Negro peoples movement.

Miss Edna Thomas, Acting Executive Secretary, explaining the function of the Guild said: "While we're working to aid the Negro actor in distress, we are at the same time striving to make a record of the Negro's contribution to the world of entertainment. We want to make it possible to give expression to the great reservoir of undeveloped talent in our group. Those of us who have been in the theatre profession for years, and are now getting old, feel it our duty to leave a way open for the young Negro actor."

Miss Thomas further explained the program of the Guild as being one—

To uphold the honorable and sacred traditions of the race; to elevate, foster, and promote good fellowship and the spiritual welfare of the Negro actor and actresses connected with all branches of the theatrical profession; to create and develop better understanding between the laity and people of the theatre; to render genuine service throughout the country to the actor and actress in time of illness and distress, and to offer sympathetic interest, and wherever possible, voluntary financial assistance to its members of the theatre; to champion and uphold the high standards of decency on stage and in other theatrical fields.

Creating Spirit of Group Solidarity

Quietly and without fanfare, the Guild has so far, fulfilled its tasks, and will undoubtedly do more than its aims and objectives call for in the way of creating a new spirit of group solidarity and social consciousness among all Negro actors.

With a membership of 705, according to Mr. Elmer A. Carter,

financial secretary and member of the Appeals Board of the Unemployment Insurance Fund, the Guild has given financial aid to more than 100 distressed actors since its formation.

It provided transportation back to America for a group of stranded Negro actors in Spain and South America. Similarly, it has aided actors who have traveled long distances only to find that their bookings had been postponed for periods of three weeks and more. Whole troupes of stranded actors uncovered by union protection have appealed to the Guild and received aid. The Guild has paid union dues for unemployed actors and bailed their instruments out of pawn shops.

Unfamiliarity with the terms of contracts have often been used by employers to the disadvantage of many Negro actors. For this reason, the Guild takes pride in furnishing legal advice to actors with respect to signing of contracts.

Through the close and friendly cooperation of Mr. Alan Corelli, executive secretary of Theatre Authority, Negro actors who formerly did not share in the proceeds from benefit performances on Broadway, now receive 15 per cent from all such benefits.

The Guild has taken an active part in union activities, demonstrations and mass meetings, and has sent letters and telegrams to Washington protesting against the drastic cuts in WPA.

Mr. Carter said the Guild is an agency for social welfare as well as social consciousness.

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Jascha Heifetz, currently *"Shall Have Music"* is one of taking an active part in the stop the "raid" upon their