

W I T H F E N C E S A R O U N D T H E M

By MAURICE COHEN

"THE LOCATIONS? When I saw them first, with the fences around them, I thought they were zoos. When I learnt that human beings stayed in them, I felt heartbroken."

This was one of the answers to my questions in a conversation I had with Mrs. Madie Hall Xuma, several days after seeing and enjoying her production of "Progress of a Race" at the Bantu Men's Social Centre on July 16th. It was a pageant portraying the progress of the Negroes since their introduction to America as slaves, through emancipation to the present day, and depicted vividly their lives on the plantations, the transition period when they found themselves free but with little trained aptitude to compete with other Americans in economic, industrial and social spheres, and ended with a presentation of a typical Negro family: a son qualified as a dentist, a daughter successfully running a fashion business.

In discussing the show, I suggested that some items were somewhat on the long side. For instance, the mannequin parade featured too many models. Mrs. Xuma replied by reminding me that Africans cannot go home from an evening's entertainment just when they like, due to curfews and pass regulations. For that reason, the show was prolonged where otherwise it would have been cut. And it was followed by dancing (to the music of the "Merry Blackbirds") until the small hours of the morning when the audience might leave in safety. Talk of civilisation and tolerance!

Mrs. Xuma hales from North Carolina, U.S.A., where, after graduating with an M.A. degree at Columbia University, she taught in a primary school at Winston-Salem. The school was the Kimberley School, named after our diamond metropolis. Mrs. Xuma came to the Union in June, 1940, crossing the equator at the time Germany violated Holland's freedom. Her preconceived notion of South Africa was typical of the usual American idea: that one lived in huts, there were no white men, apart from missionaries, and so on. Her first reaction to Johannesburg was that she had somehow lost her way en route and was back in the United States.

Our ways and customs seemed strange to Mrs. Xuma - as well they might - the colour prejudice bewildering. But now that she has gained friends, European and African, and is beginning to understand the environmental background, she is becoming very attached to South Africa. She has been studying Social Science and Anthropology at the Witwatersrand University, and is eager to get to grips with the history of the African. She wonders, too, whether there is any discoverable link between the African's and the Negro's music, which Dr. A.B. Xuma, regards as the only real American music in existence.

On her arrival here, Mrs. Xuma was bombarded with many questions about Negro life in the United States, and happened on the idea of answering through the visual medium of the stage. She adapted the pageant, "Progress of a Race", which was originally performed in Winston-Salem with a cast of 350, including Marion Anderson, the choir numbering 150 singers. Having prepared her scripts, the next step was the gathering of a cast. Being unacquainted with the African's ability she was assailed by many doubts. When she first lectured to ~~an~~ Africans, they sat so quietly, their features so immobile, that she feared they were not listening to, or were incapable of absorbing, her lecture. Question time, however, disposed of that.

The cast was soon forthcoming; in fact, there were many more offers than could be accepted. Mrs. Xuma, through not wishing to disappoint many of the aspiring performers, felt compelled at various stages to increase her cast. She found the African a natural actor, taking great delight in merely being seen on the stage - so much so,

that during the show, many of the models in the fashion parade somehow contrived to invade the stage, whether they were part of the legitimate cast for that particular scene, or not! The cabaret and mannequin parade items, by the way, were included in the programme for the purpose of showing Africans what such things are.

The staging of "Progress of a Race" was in the nature of a probing, with intention of gauging African capability. Mrs. Xuma is not only satisfied with her cast's job of work, she is delighted with it. Asked whether she intended to present another programme soon, she replied that there were no prospects of that being done until some time next year: she will be occupied with research and study. She is, however, in contact with May Edouin, one of our best-known stage personalities, with whom she may co-operate in future ventures. Besides, Mrs. Xuma's Non-European audiences will definitely not allow her to rest on her laurels: they are extremely eager for cultural tuition; they need sympathetic guidance and they are begging for the opportunity - so far denied to them - to act and sing.

As an aside, Mrs. Xuma mentioned that her friends in America are asking for material about the African for film purposes. There are quite a number of Negro film companies (one wonders why we have never seen their productions here), situated principally at California, New York and Long Island.

The success of "Progress of a Race", with its all-African cast, has convinced Mrs. Xuma of the fact that the African is not lacking in ability, intellect and talent, given the scope and direction to develop it.

In other words, if the fences were removed. . . .

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