Shep Allen Calls It Quits

By Art Carter

Shep Allen, who managed the old Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. for 39 years, has retired.

He was honored recently by friends and associates at a luncheon which marked his retirement as a supervisor for District Theatres, the chain which operated the old Howard in addition to a number of film houses in the nation's capital.

Allen, now 86, said, "I'm only going to be semi-retired. Instead of working day and night I'll just work days . . ."

Shep started in the theatre business as an usher at the Mott Theatre in Chicago. He presided over Howard from 1931 to 1970 and was known around Washington and among the entertainment crowd for his immaculate attire and fondness for driving Cadillacs.

At the retirement, Shep was awarded cash and a plaque "In recognition of 46 years of loyal service and dedication to District Theatres."

Shep was cited as a man "loved by everybody, who made complicated life so simple, a man who goes through life with grace and ease."

Cy Hoffman recalled that Shep had "class in the way he talks, walks and dresses . . . a man of quality and class."

He also was described as a "gentleman who never offended anyone, although he had much to become offended by in his business."

He was a man who was at home with and respected by people in all walks of life, the greats and the near-greats. Many of Shep's associates, recalled the countless favors, suggestions and bits of advice he gave to entertainers who played the circuit.

Just out of the University of Chicago in 1908, Shep Allen worked as an usher in a Chicago theatre. In 1946, at 61 years of age he was the only general manager of the largest chain of black theatres. Allen also discovered some of the nation's top performers.

SHEP ALLEN, retired supervisor for District Theatres, chats with Portia Whittingham, who worked with Shep for nearly 49 years at the old Howard Theatre and other District Theatres, and Cy Hoffman, president of District Theatres, at Shep's retirement luncheon.

Allen was an emcee and actor as well as a manager and talent scout.

In 1910 he was promoted from usher to assistant manager of the theatre he worked in. It was called Pekin Theatre and located at 27th and State St., Chicago, Illinois.

In August 1912, he left the Pekin Theatre and took a job as manager of a nightclub called the Panama, because the contacts as well as the money were better. The Panama was on 35th and State Sts., Chicago.

In October, 1912, seeking talent for the Panama, Shep discovered Florence Mills. He formed an act which included Florence Mills, Mattie Hite, and Cora Green, called the Panama Trio.

Between 1912 and 1916, Shep took his act on the road over the Pantages Circuit in the West. He worked the act in Los Angeles during WWI. Mills eventually left Shep's act and became one of the "Blackbirds."

In 1924, Allen came East from Chicago and stopped in Philadelphia where he started working for the Stiefel Brothers, owners of a chain of small theatres. In 1931 the Stiefel Brothers leased Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C., and Shep was sent to Washington to supervise alterations and prepare the theatre for its opening in September, 1931.

In February, 1932 the lease of the Howard Theatre was taken over by A. E. Lichtman. In 1939, Shep was promoted to general supervisor of the Lichtman chain.

During the time he was manager of Howard Theatre, 1933 to 1938, he inaugurated an amateur show which produced such stars as Billy Eckstine, the Edwards Sisters and Bill Kenny of the Ink Spots.

The amateur show was aired by two local radio stations. It was the first local all-black show to be broadcast. Allen wrote the script and handled all of the announcing.

In March, 1946, the Lichtman Theatres were taken over by another firm and became known as the District Theatres with outlets in Washington, Richmond, Norfolk and Baltimore.

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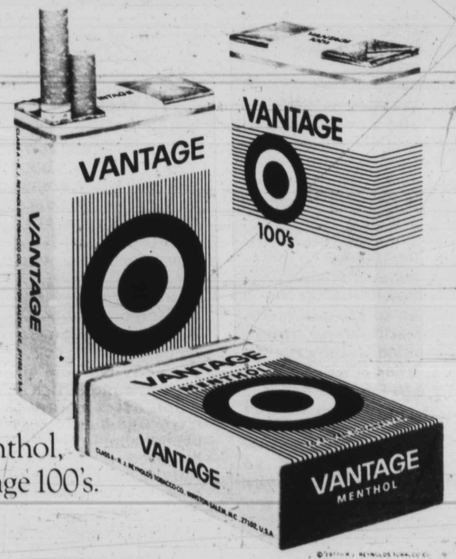

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