Clarence Muse, 89, actor 50 years founded Lafayette Players, made 219 films

By Ida Peters

Clarence Muse, producer - director - writer, radio star, founding member of the Screen Actor's Guild and a founder of Harlem's Lafayette Theatre, died in Hollywood, October 13, 1979, one day before his 90th birthday.

He was born in Baltimore and graduated from Douglass High School, Pennsylvania Avenue and Dolphin Streets where he was a classmate of Carl Murphy, J. Alvin Jones, Fred Young and B. Price Hughes.

His inspiration for music come from the late Llewellyn Wilson. He graduated from Dickerson School of Law in Carlisle, Pa. in 1911. While working in a winter resort in Florida to get enough money to open an office, he used his splendid bass voice to get into vaudeville. He starred in "Black Magic" on Broadway in 1912.

He estimated he had appeared in 219 films not counting the more than 200 other productions in vaudeville, all-black films and with the Lafayette Players, radio shows and other groups.

In recent years he appeared as the old man with Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte in "Buck and the Preacher" and as the old shoe shine boy in "Car Wash." His last film role was in "Black Stallion" a Francis For Coppola film recently shown at the New York Film Festival.

He was lured to Hollywood to play in the 1929 Fox film "Hearts In Dixie" the first all-black talking musical. His salary was $1,250 per week and three round trip tickets for his family.

It was a stereotyped film made for all white audiences. Clarence Muse played Nappus; Stepin Fetchit, Gummy;

As Nappus in first talking film "Hearts in Dixie," 1929.

Muse gained great acclaim from critics like Louella Parsons who found the film "a remarkable talking picture." He went on to great success and often was featured in 30 films a year.

He was the "Honey Man" in Sam Goldwyn's 12 million dollar production of "Porgy and Bess" with Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Sammy Davis Jr. and Pearl Bailey.

Other films included the 1934 race horse drama with Warner Baxter, "Broadway Bill." Also "Show Boat" and "Follow Your Heart."

He wrote the screenplay with Langston Hughes and 11 spirituals for the Hall Johnson Choir in "Way Down South." He also wrote the hig song "When It's Sleepy Time Down South."

In 1940, Muse wrote "Broken Strings" in which he played the role of a concert pianist whose career was threatened by an automobile accident.

He wrote the book, "Way Down South," composed dozens of sons, acted six years with the Lafayette Players memoralizee in "Bubbling Brown Sugar" and owned and operated musical tabloid companies which operated throughout the South known as "T.O.B.A." nicknamed by the actors as "Tough on Black Actors."

He lectured at the University of Chicago and was the Hollywood representative to the inauguration of President Frenklin D. Roosevelt where he sang at the Inaugural ball.

He was a life-long member of the Sigma Fraternity. He lived on his Muse-A-While Ranch, 60 miles from Los Angeles and is survived by his wife Ena, and two children, May and Dion.

1977 — In "Car Wash"

...On Uncle Tom Roles

Dilemma- two audiences One black...one white!

1936 in "Showboat" with Paul Robeson and Hattie McDaniel.

Clarence Muse was an early voice fighting for better portrayal of blacks on the movie screen.

He objected to the strange and estranged role of blacks the unreal stereotypes, the fawning simple - minded sub - human servant of the silent era to the virile heroes and heroines of "blackploitation" movies down to today's token "Benson" and the unreal "Paris."

In December, 1934, Muse printed a 26 page booklet in which he discussed the history of black actors and expressed the thought that "America just won't let Uncle Tom die".

He expressed the thought that there are two audiences, one white, one black. The white audience with a definite desire for black clowns and song and the "colored audience with the desire to see the real elements of colored life portrayed. He would love to satisfy and entertain his colored admirers, but the call of the mighty dollar of the white race compels his attention. White America controls the destiny of the colored actor."

". . . Americans are crying in their souls for black expression, yet drink with the wine of false presentations of life".

As early as July, 1935, Clarence Muse led a fight to raise funds for the NAACP under Walter White and raised $1,147. to fight the Costigan - Wagner anti - lynching bill.

Thomas Griffin was president of the Hollywood NAACP and Muse got such white screen actors as Jack Benny, Fred Keating, Alan Mowbray, and James Gleason to serve on his committee.

The affair was held at the Lincoln Theatre and Muse got all services donated free and seven newspapers in Los Angeles gave free space and brought $2. tickets. Entertainers included Lionel Hampton and Lillian Randolph.

The Baltimore AFRO - AMERICAN, became so incensed with blacks in Uncle Tom roles that the newspaper in January, 1943 sponsored a round - table discussion held at Ben Carter's home to discuss Uncle Tom roles.

Clarence Muse attended and called for the NAACP to keep their noses out of Hollywood, while agreeing that "colored should have better roles".

Blacks were afraid that if the NAACP and black newspapers kept up the pressure, blacks would be out of work.

In those days, veteran editor Ralph Matthews Sr. and Lillian Randolph were writing scorching articles on Uncle Toms in movies.

Muse said that the actor has an important role in this great search for economic freedom." His success along these lines depend upon team work from the citizens of every community, fair newspapers, fair reactions from the customers and above all, letters to the industry."

Muse as old black joe in "Harmony Lane," the life story of Stephen Foster.

Muse shares a laugh with Attorney George McMechen, first black school board member in AFRO file photo, 1942

Muse recalls Douglass High School days

Muse, June 5, 1926

In 1932, Clarence Muse visited Baltimore and David Arlen talked to him about his Douglass High School Days.

Muse had fan clubs all over the South and in Chicago and received thousands of letters from all over the world. Muse usually had excerpts from letters printed in a bound booklet.

In 1937, the president of the Chicago Fan Club was Mauvolyene Carpenter of Champlain Avenue and the fan booklet was printed by the Pioneer Press of Los Angeles.

Back to Muse's visit to Baltimore. Most fans wrote that Muse's portrayals on the stage and his singing of spirituals and his own composition "Sleepy Time Down South" made it seem that he had just walked out of the slave period, carrying the pains and sorrows of the race on his shoulders.

Muse was asked about this and here are his direct quotes.

Father a Deacon

"Perhaps," Muse pondered, "it's in my background. My father was a deacon in the Perkins Square Baptist Church in Baltimore and bass singer in the choir. In fact, he was general utility bass singer, because if he happened to be in the congregation, his resonant voice was just as much help in the soulful rendition of hymns and chants. Dad was a jovial fellow, had a million stories and anecdotes in his head — one for every situation. There was no besting him.

"My mother was a splendid soprano — she always carried the improvised, top, flute-like notes in the singing. An ardent church-goer, her voice, could be heard on a Sunday regularly, singing the good old hymns with a religious fervor unsurpassed by any member of that congregation.

Recalls High School Days

"My first outburst as a result of my musical background came at the old Baltimore High School at Pennsylvania Avenue and Dolphin Street, which I attended. The school didn't have a chapel. But down the street a few blocks was a Methodist church and the school conducted a fifteen minute chapel there for the students every morning.

"We got a little gang together at these chapel meetings particularly interested in singing — boys like Fred Young, Bob Boston, Carl Murphy, B. Price Hurst, Ridout and Alvin Jones, though this last fellow never could sing worth a darn. Then we tried to see how harmoniously we could lay it in with all the famous barber , shop chords, gentle nuances of sound and fine harmony — a sort of hangover from the hard shell Baptists — you know, improvising like till it satisfied the ear.

Llewellyn Wilson

"Now in the early stages of our new-found interest, none of the boys had any idea of tackling music as a scientific study. Then the school got Llewellyn Wilson, a very intelligient and able music teacher, to instruct the student body. Now we were taught to read music and sing certain definite parts in chorus, given lessons in applied harmony, etc. And we took it all in, too. However when Dr. Vernon Booker T. Washington or Dr. W. E. B. DuBois visited the school, our boys forgot all their training and sang in the original, old-time style. They knew they could always obtain more sensational results with their own primitive methods.

Cole and Johnson

"On one occasion, J. Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole visited the school and listened to our singing. They were so kind as to say afterwards, that there were enough superlatively fine voices among our boys to make such a brilliant stage chorus, as would with proper taining, vie with the best then on the boards. In return for their kind words we boys got together and by selling papers, better off fellows like Carl Murphy and Alvin Jones through the expedient of just asking their folks, gathered together sufficient money to go down and attend the Cole and Johnson show at the Holiday Street Theatre called, if I remember rightly, "Red Moon."

"Out of the inspiration derived from hearing the great singing in this show sprang our own little Glue (Glee) Club — if I say it myself one of the neatest little harmony groups in Baltimore. My, I can hear those boys now singing "Under the Bamboo Tree," "I Got a Castle on the River Nile," "Bleeding Moon." And old Fred Young our lyric tenor, who could always be depended upon to top a perfect performance of the choir by singing "Mighty Lak' A Rose," in his clear, bell-like voice.

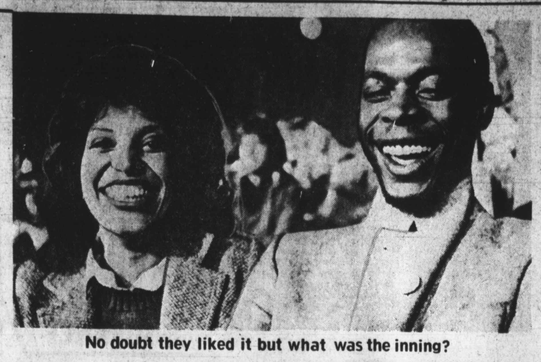
1935 — Muse arrived in Baltimore to premiere his film "Laughter In Hell," at the Harlem Theatre. Crowds jammed the streets and he was welcomed by Llewelyn Wilson shaking hands, Willard W. Allen, (L), and attorney Linwood Koger. Ike Dixon's band played "Sleepy Time Down South." Crowds milled around the theatre and stopped traffic. At the time he was a radio star under contract for Erwin Wasey Hollywood Producing unit.

Some liked Series finale, but some didn't

As interesting to watch at a spectacle such as the final and deciding game of the baseball World Series, is the facial expressions and reactions of the fans in the stands.

With the exception of the UPI photos of Pirates players Bill Madlock and Grant Jackson dousing themselves with victory champagne and Oriole manager Earl Weaver, the pictures here were shot at random by the AFRO photographer.

Caught were the countenances of glum Baltimore rooters and happy Pittsburgh partisans during and after the Pirates defeated the Orioles, 4 - 1, in Wednesday night's finale at Baltimore Memorial Stadium.



No doubt they liked it but what was the inning?

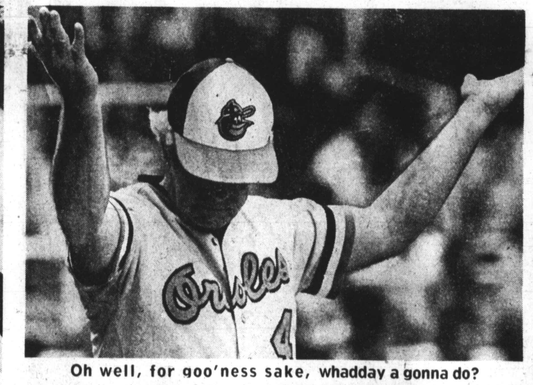
One was apparently pleased, the other wasn't sure

No doubt she was happy

Their doubts began to show as game progressed

She got something from it anyway

Champagne fun in the Bucs' post - game clubhouse

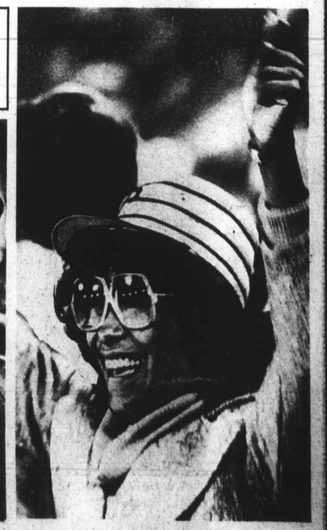


Oh well, for goo'ness sake, whadday a gonna do?

AFRO staff photos by Mark Gail

This young woman played it safe

Guess she was glum



It looks like she loved it

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