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DAWN/DECEMBER 1986

FEATURE STORY

BY HUGH WYATT

OSSIEDAVIS

W THENT WHITE WIN

orty years ago, two gifted young actors named Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee made their Broadway debuts in "Jeb." Now they have five grandchildren and are celebrating their 38th wedding anniversary.

And Davis is back on Broadway for the 15th time, starring with Hal Linden in the hit show, "I'm Not Rappaport." The play has been critically acclaimed, as has the man, who has a long, distinguished career as an actor, writer, director, producer, scholar and civil rights leader.

Even at age 69, Davis, who was a close friend of the late Malcolm X, among others, remains active. He was among major leaders in New York City recently spearheading a campaign to fight the spread of crack, the killer cocaine-derived drug that is killing thousands of youngsters, especially blacks.

But it is his work as an actor that has given Davis worldwide recognition. In fact, he is one of the few black actors accepted by Broadway's elite theater world as a serious performer.

Simultaneously, he's even regarded by the black nationalist sector — certainly not an easy group to please — as being totally relevant to the black American experience.

During a recent interview, Davis talked about his long career, his current play and the many blacks who preceded him in the theater district ironically known as "The Great White Way."

Blacks have been on Broadway for more than a century. The first major black stars there were Bert Williams and George Walker, who became a Broadway sensation in 1896.

In those days, Davis said, the near-Broadway area where Rockefeller Center and the New York Hilton now stand was a genteel cultural oasis where "blacks of quality" lived in a neighborhood then called "Negro New York."

"But, in 1900, there was a big race riot downtown," Davis continued. As a result, black folks began moving uptown. Their midtown theatrical activities also moved up to Harlem and whites followed."

Davis came to New York in 1939 from Waycross, Ga., as a product of Howard University and a burning desire to succeed as an actor. Soon after his arrival, he joined the Rose McClendon Players, a Harlem community theater group.

His first visit to a Broadway theater was to see Ethel Waters in "Cabin in the Sky." After the show, he was taken backstage to meet the star. And the gracious, warm-hearted actress became his idol and inspiration.

Now the wide-eyed young actor is back as a white-haired old man. "'Rappaport'", Davis said, "is about these two old guys, in their 80s, who are sort of refugees from society. They meet in Central Park and establish a rapport with each other. They argue, they fight, they do all kinds of things together. They learn to depend on each other.

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"He is one of the few black actors accepted by Broadway's elite . . . as a serious performer."

columnist

Hugh Wyatt is a syndicated music