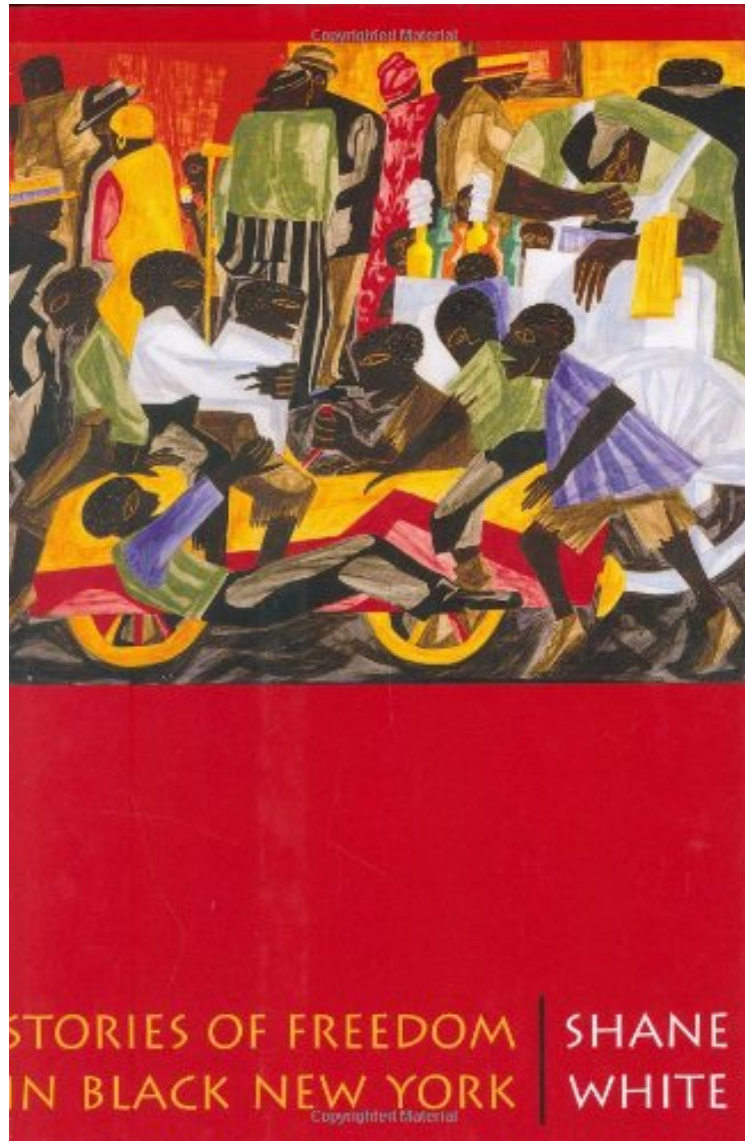


(Download free pdf) Stories of Freedom in Black New York

## Stories of Freedom in Black New York

*Shane White*

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**Shane White : Stories of Freedom in Black New York** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Stories of Freedom in Black New York:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Incredibly interesting book--some very sad stories By R. A Burt This is an extremely well-written and well-researched account of black New York in the nineteenth century, concentrating mostly on theater. Especially fascinating to me is the story of Shakespearean black actor James Hewlett and his published responses to an English actor who had tuaght Hewlett Shakespeare and later mocked his performances on

stage in England. The book got a rave review in the New Republic from Christine Stansell. I highly recommend this book. 7 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Impressive research marred by P.C. agenda. By krebsmanI bought this book because I have an interest in the artistic life of early America. A book about a black American actor in the 1830s sounded like my kind of book. I must give author White credit for the outstanding research he has done. The biographical data on the life of James Hewlett is very scanty. It must be difficult to write a book on a subject when the actual evidence is virtually nonexistent. Alas, White has filled in the gaps with a lot of assumptions and wishful thinking. He takes the tack that Hewlett was a great actor denied his place in the pantheon of American artists because of Americans' innate racism. Because white audiences laughed at Hewlett's mangling of Shakespeare, White labels them racists. (But would not I get laughs if I recited Shakespeare with a Brooklyn or a West Texas accent? Would not audiences laugh if I said in a dialect, "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of NEW York"? No doubt they would also laugh if I substituted the phrase "brass candlesticks" for the word "basilisks.") Later in the book, when comparing Hewlett with the far more successful black actor Ira Aldredge, he admits that Hewlett was barely literate and lacked the training that Aldredge had received. The impression I get from the actual evidence is that Hewlett's ambition exceeded his abilities. But White finds racism lurking everywhere and attributes all of Hewlett's misfortunes to it. Among the farfetched assertions is that one Jewish newspaperman, Mordecai Noah consciously created an offensive stereotype of blacks. I personally do not see how one man could CREATE a stereotype. White also characterizes New Yorkers' reaction to the uncivilized behavior of the newly freed slaves as racism, when it seems to me that it was only a natural reaction to bad manners, regardless of the color of the perpetrators. White makes outrageous statements throughout the book, using as supporting evidence still more unsubstantiated opinion and unsupported speculation. White apparently does not know the difference between active racism and an unconscious lack of political correctness. The book is also poorly edited and liberally peppered with sentence fragments. There ought to be a book on the artistic life of African Americans in the early years of the republic, but this book can only offer a frustrating glimpse into that world.

Stories of Freedom in Black New York recreates the experience of black New Yorkers as they moved from slavery to freedom. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, New York City's black community strove to realize what freedom meant, to find a new sense of itself, and, in the process, created a vibrant urban culture. Through exhaustive research, Shane White imaginatively recovers the raucous world of the street, the elegance of the city's African American balls, and the grubbiness of the Police Office. It allows us to observe the style of black men and women, to watch their public behavior, and to hear the cries of black hawkers, the strident music of black parades, and the sly stories of black conmen. Taking center stage in this story is the African Company, a black theater troupe that exemplified the new spirit of experimentation that accompanied slavery's demise. For a few short years in the 1820s, a group of black New Yorkers, many of them ex-slaves, challenged pervasive prejudice and performed plays, including Shakespearean productions, before mixed race audiences. Their audacity provoked feelings of excitement and hope among blacks, but often of disgust by many whites for whom the theater's existence epitomized the horrors of emancipation. Stories of Freedom in Black New York brilliantly intertwines black theater and urban life into a powerful interpretation of what the end of slavery meant for blacks, whites, and New York City itself. White's story of the emergence of free black culture offers a unique understanding of emancipation's impact on everyday life, and on the many forms freedom can take.

From Publishers WeeklyNew York abolition, which was formally granted in 1817 but not fully carried out until July, 4, 1827, complicated the social structure of the state and city during an awkward, staggered process. During this period a theater troupe called the African Company emerged. White, a professor of history at Australia's University of Sydney, reconstructs the vital life of this troupe in the New York of the 1820s, situating its struggles within the larger context of a sometimes exuberant yet uneasy time. Not only did the company perform Shakespeare's Richard III, one of the era's most popular dramas, as its first production, but the cast often rewrote dialogue and inserted elements from other sources. As played by former slave Charles Taft, the reworked lead role took on an added dimension, becoming a version of the trickster figure from African folklore. Many white critics and community figures were, not surprisingly, scandalized by the productions, and company members suffered harassment at the hands of local toughs and authorities alike. Taft was jailed for theft, and his successor James Hewlitt became the victim of changing audience tastes that doomed his career before he ended up imprisoned as a smalltime con artist. While the African Company's existence has previously been noted by scholars, it has generally been dismissed as a novelty or aberration. Drawing on extensive research, White emphasizes such achievements as the on-stage depiction of slavery, and vividly depicts powerful personalities like Taft and Hewlitt. He makes a persuasive case for the company's cultural importance, particularly as a forerunner of the Harlem Renaissance that was still a century away. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist\*Starred\* The early decades of the nineteenth century were turbulent as blacks and whites struggled with the end of slavery in New York. It was an era marked by race riots, forced segregation, and degrading depictions of black life, even as whites demonstrated a voyeuristic fascination with New

York's black citizenry. Drawing on newspaper accounts, court records, and other documents, White recounts the black theater, balls, cotillions, and other social expressions that provoked virulent attacks and editorializing from whites uneasy with the new freedom blacks enjoyed. The author, a history professor, focuses on a black theater group, its leading actor, James Hewlett, and a Jewish newspaper editor, Mordecai Noah, as telling representatives of how blacks sought to express their freedom and whites sought to keep them in their place. Hewlett was prominent among performers trying to maintain their dignity in a range of dramatic productions, including Shakespeare, at a time when minstrel shows were coming into vogue. White captures the vibrancy and difficulties of the era when a distinct black culture began to emerge, and draws parallels to the current American cultural melange and contemporary racial attitudes. Vanessa Bush Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved A dazzling history of the first African-American theater company in New York, focusing on principal actor James Hewlett...Superb, well-researched history, brilliantly alive. (Kirkus s 2002-09-01)The early decades of the nineteenth century were turbulent as blacks and whites struggled with the end of slavery in New York. It was an era marked by race riots, forced segregation, and degrading depictions of black life, even as whites demonstrated a voyeuristic fascination with New York's black citizenry...[White] focuses on a black theater group, its leading actor, James Hewlett, and a Jewish newspaper editor, Mordecai Noah, as telling representatives of how blacks sought to express their freedom and whites sought to keep them in their place...White captures the vibrancy and difficulties of the era when a distinct black culture began to emerge, and draws parallels to the current American cultural mélange and contemporary racial attitudes. (Vanessa Bush Booklist 2002-10-01)New York abolition, which was formally granted in 1817 but not fully carried out until July 4, 1827, complicated the social structure of the state and city during an awkward, staggered process. During this period a theater troupe called the African Company emerged. White...reconstructs the vital life of this troupe in the New York of the 1820s, situating its struggles within the larger context of a sometimes exuberant yet uneasy time...[White] makes a persuasive case for the company's cultural importance, particularly as a forerunner of the Harlem Renaissance that was still a century away. (Publishers Weekly 2002-12-02)Claiming New York's public space as their own through balls, music, fashion, and language, Hewlett and his fellow actors are presented as both theater pioneers and forerunners of the dynamic and exhilarating New York we know today...[A] thought-provoking analysis. (Sherri Barnes Library Journal 2003-01-01)A treasure of historical thinking, a beautifully composed study, an extraordinary book to read...As moving and erudite a meditation as you will find on African Americans at a historical juncture when things might have turned out differently. White's point of departure is the wave of optimism and hope that surged through the black community on the heels of freedom, conferring an "edgy vitality" on street life, politics, colloquial speech, and theater in the 1820s and 1830s...The core of White's account is the story of James Hewlett, the pre-eminent black Shakespearean of his day, who played Richard in the African Company's production. With extraordinary deftness and perseverance, White has put together his biography from faint traces that Hewlett left in the historical record. (Christine Stansell New Republic 2003-03-23)Shane White's superb history of black life in New York during the early 19th century examines African-American culture from the bottom (instead of from the top) by focusing on the audacious African Company, a theatrical group that dared to present Shakespeare with non-white casts for non-white audiences. The author also describes the growth of minstrels, black dialect and social opportunity in this extremely important book. (Dallas Morning News 2003-04-13)This is a rich and insightful book. Shane White draws on his extensive knowledge of black New York and on painstaking research to reconstruct two obscure stories. One is of the African Company, the first theatrical group to be conducted by African American, which functioned in New York City from 1821-23...The other is of one of its actors, James Hewlett...who was for a time the most prominent black actor working in the United States...White's accounts of Hewlett and the theatre are fascinating in themselves, but the real interest lies in the skill with which he weaves them into the bigger story of African New York at the end of slavery...Shane White is to be congratulated for so ably recovering that moment of possibilities. (Christopher Clark History 2004-10-01)Shane White's short but creative book about "slavery and its lingering death" and the struggle over the "boundaries of freedom" listens closely to black New Yorkers' stories, evocatively bringing them to life for contemporary readers. (Eric Arnesen Chicago Tribune 2008-02-23)