

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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CHAUNCEY OLCOTT 1860-1932

Recently I went to a household sale conducted by Lorraine Oakley and there purchased two 78 RPM Red Label Victor records with the famous Irish singer John McCormick performing. On the record where he sings "Mother Machree" I noticed that Chauncey Olcott is given credit for the music. I was delighted for this because Chauncey Olcott was "discovered" in Albion by the Hon. E.K. Hart back in the 1870's. It seems that the young Olcott was working in an Albion restaurant at the time which the prominent Mr. Hart frequented. Hart was a local banker and Congressman of this time period and the two became acquainted, Olcott aspiring to be a professional singer/actor with E.K. Hart's encouragement. Perhaps Mr. Hart had some connections or knew the right people. At any rate, Chancellor John Olcott adopted the stage name Chauncey Olcott, perhaps as legend indicates, through Mr. Hart's suggestion.

By 1910 it was written "there is probably not in America another actor who has so faithful an individual following as Chauncey Olcott." Indeed, eighty years ago his name was common in most households. However, following World War I Olcott's popularity waned and he fell into oblivion.

He was born in Buffalo, N.Y. in 1860 to Mellon M. Olcott of Irish ancestry. Here are some of his accomplishments: He was educated in the public schools and made his first public appearance at the Academy of Music in Buffalo. In 1880 he found employment with the noted R.M. Hooley, manager of minstrel shows (perhaps Hart knew Hooley). "In 1882 he joined the Haverly Minstrels, and was also with the Thatcher, Primrose and West Minstrels, and the Carncross Minstrels in Philadelphia. His voice developed into a light tenor. While a black face," he frequently sang "When the Robins Nest Again," to the great delight of audiences."

Such musical shows traveled through Orleans County during this time period performing at the Frisbee Opera House in Holley, the Pratt Theater in Albion and Bent's Opera House in Medina.

In 1886 he sang Pablo in "Pepita" at the Union Square Theatre. Lillian Russell sang the title role. He was with Denman Thompson in "The Old Homestead" from 1888 to 1890, when he became leading tenor with the Duff Opera Company, and sang Nanki Poo in "The Mikado" and Ralph Rackstraw in "H.M.S. Pinafore."

In 1891 Olcott went to England and in London secured an Irish romantic role in a light opera, "Miss Decima," at the Criterion Theatre. His success in this role suggested to him his future career, and on his return to the United States he joined forces with August Pitou, who both managed his tours and sometimes wrote his plays, and succeeded to the mantle of W.J. Scanlan as a star in Irish musical dramas. One of his first acts on his return to the United States was to introduce the



song "Mother Macree." In 1894 he appeared in "The Irish Artist," for which he wrote both the words and music, and in 1896 in "Edmund Burke," and so on in a long list of now quite forgotten sentimental and romantic Irish comedies, with plentiful songs. Some of the songs he made famous were "I Love the Name of Mary," and "My Wild Irish Rose," the latter he himself wrote. His success continued for two decades. He did not as a rule play in the so-called "first-class" theatres, at top prices, and his audiences were to a great extent composed of men and women - especially women - who were immensely loyal, and responded to him year after year.

In 1925 he was taken sick and never recovered. He went to Monte Carlo to live, where he died in March 1932 of anemia. He was married three times. His last wife was Margaret O'Donovan of San Francisco, to whom he was married on Sept. 28, 1897, and who survived him. As an actor and singer he was pleasantly competent in both capacities and had a charming personality, well suited to the light sentimental or romantic roles which he assumed. His audiences were not exacting, but responsive to sentiment, to a tear and a smile. These he gave them with sincerity. His plays had little relation to realistic Irish drama and belong to an era of Irish-Americanism which has vanished.