

The Padlock

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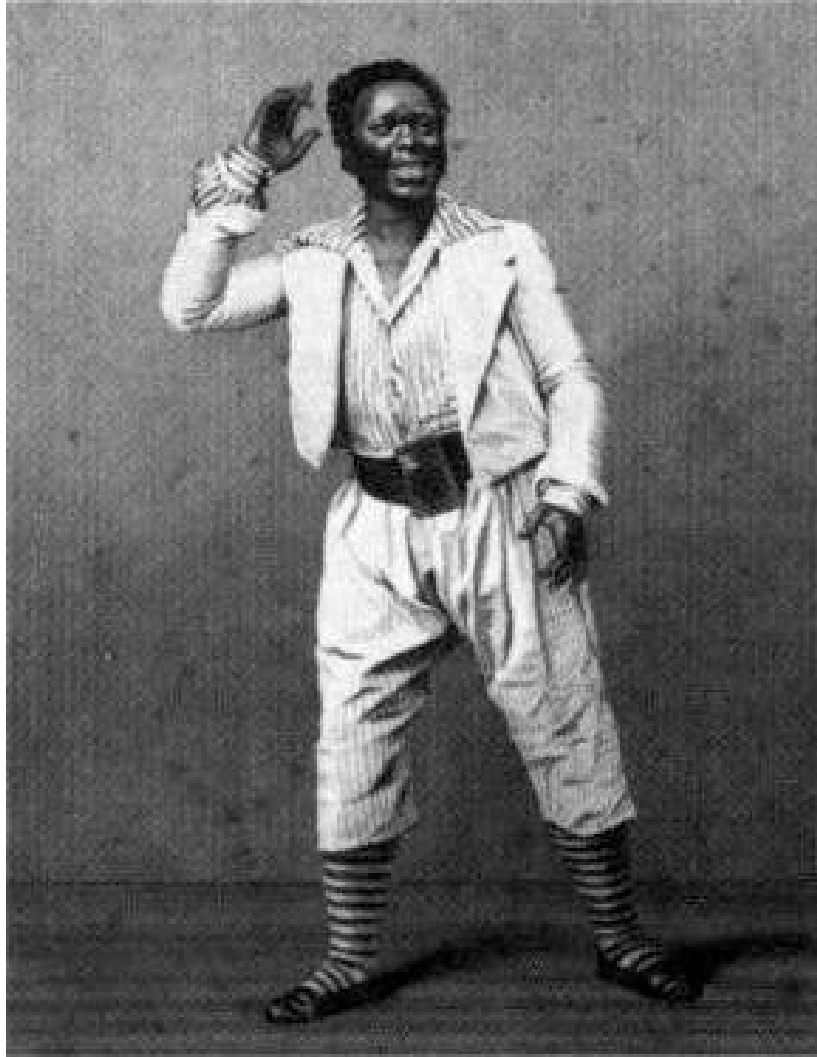
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The Padlock

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- *where, it would seem, the role of Mungo was changed to that of an Irish servant.*
- *The role of Mungo was, again, played by a white actor.*

The Padlock is a two-act 'afterpiece' opera by Charles Dibdin. The text was by Isaac Bickerstaffe. It debuted in 1768 at the Drury Lane Theatre in London as a companion piece to The Earl of Warwick. It partnered other plays before a run of six performances in tandem with "The Fatal Discovery" by John Home. "The Padlock" was a success, largely due to Dibdin's portrayal of Mungo, a blackface caricature of a black servant from the West Indies. The company took the production to the United States the next year, where a portrayal by Lewis Hallam, Jr. as Mungo met with even greater accolades. The libretto was first published in London in 1768 (?) and in Dublin in 1775. The play remained in regular circulation in the U.S. as late as 1843. It was revived by the Old Vic Company in London and on tour in the UK in 1979 in a new orchestration by Don Fraser and played in a double-bill with Garrick's Miss In Her Teens. The role of Mungo was, again, played by a white actor. Opera Theatre of Chicago have recently revived the piece (2007?) where, it would seem, the role of Mungo was changed to that of an Irish servant.



Ira Aldridge as Mungo in The Padlock

Story and music

- *In contrast to Cervantes's miser-centred story, The Padlock is centred on the old man's servant, a black man named Mungo from the West Indies, who also provides a large part of the comedy.*
- *Whate'ers to be done,
Poor blacky must run;
Mungo here, Mungo dere,
Mungo every where;
Above and below,
Sirrah, come; sirrah, go;
Do so, and do so.*

Bickerstaffe's libretto, based on Miguel de Cervantes' *El celoso extremeño* (a work translated into English as *The Jealous Husband*; the title literally means "the jealous

Extremaduran"), consists of normal dialogue with a few interludes of song. It tells the story of an old miser who keeps his fiancée behind the closed door of their home for fear that she will not be faithful to him (in Cervantes's version, the woman is his wife). The opera's title comes from the large padlock that the old man keeps on the cottage door.

In contrast to Cervantes's miser-centred story, *The Padlock* is centred on the old man's servant, a black man named Mungo from the West Indies, who also provides a large part of the comedy. The part was played by a white man in blackface, making *The Padlock* an early example of this practice, but not the earliest as claimed by some sources. Mungo is a stereotype: a musical, heavy drinking, money-grubbing servant who speaks in an approximation of the black dialect of West Indies slaves. Mungo's master beats him with a rattan cane and makes him sing and dance on cue. The servant's pretense at being an opera singer constitutes the aria for Act 2. He is normally obsequious to whites, but in moments of drunkenness or solitude, he becomes impudent:

Dear heart, what a terrible life am I led!

A dog has a better, that's shelter'd and fed;
Night and day, 'tis de same,
My pain is dere game:

Me wish to de Lord me was dead.
Whate'ers to be done,
Poor blacky must run;
Mungo here, Mungo dere,
Mungo every where;
Above and below,
Sirrah, come; sirrah, go;
Do so, and do so.
Oh! oh!

Me wish to de Lord me was dead.

An actor named John Moody, who was supposed to have been familiar with the dialect of the blacks in the West Indies, was originally scheduled to play the part. However, in the end, Dibdin stood in for him. Audience reactions to Dibdin's performance were overwhelmingly positive, and in 1787, he spun his fame as Mungo into a one-man show wherein he sang, gave speeches, and did impressions of black people. Ira Aldridge, an African American actor, played the role of Mungo in a later production of the opera. His portrayal was more serious and became one of his more lauded roles. Aldridge tried to play both *Othello* (as the title character) and *The Padlock* on his first night in more rural locations to show his acting range and generate good publicity.

Dibdin's music shows heavy influence from Italian operatic traditions. In fact, one Italian composer, today unknown, accused Dibdin of stealing material from him. Dibdin thus used the preface of the published version of *The Padlock* to refute the claims. Although touted as

a genuine depiction of a black character, Mungo's singing parts show no influence from African musical traditions.

There is an in-depth analysis of *The Padlock*; Mungo's character, speech, and dress; and the opera's popularity in the North American British colonies and the new United States in Monica L. Miller's *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* in her chapter "Mungo Macaroni," pp. 27-76 (bibliographic information in References below).

Notes

References

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- *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity.*
- *"The Minstrel Show".*
- *African American Review.*

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- *1787 Epilogue to The Padlock from the Gentleman's Magazine.*
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1787 Epilogue to *The Padlock* from the *Gentleman's Magazine*.