



Monday, Aug. 10, 1931

Religion: Heaven Bound

Religion has led the U. S. Negro, as it led John Bunyan, to regard life as a pilgrimage through many pitfalls for gain and rewards. This is the import of almost every Negro spiritual; it is the import of a morality play called Heaven Bound which has made its appearance in Atlanta, performed by the choir of Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. First wide public to hear about Heaven Bound was the theatrical world. Theatre Guild Magazine for August called it "the first great American folk drama" and said: "It should and probably will make Georgia an American Oberammergau." Recalling the power of The Green Pastures, a Negro religion play written by a white man (TIME, March 10, 1930), observers hastened to inspect a genuine all-Negro product of the same kind, produced for religious instead of commercial purposes. Last week in Atlanta was given the 31st performance of Heaven Bound. Its conflict is the effort of the Devil to catch pilgrims on their way to Heaven.

The action starts with a parade of Saints. Wearing white clothes and paper crowns, they march to the stage singing a song familiar to all Southern Negro churches, "When the Saints Go Marching By." When they reach the stage, ornamented with posts to represent the gates of Heaven, the Saints sit down, except St. Peter who, bearded and austere, stands behind the gates holding open his account book. The Saints sing "When We All Get to Heaven," and then "Let Us Move Up on the King's Highway." After this, the Saints keep quiet. A woman moves into the aisles singing "Beautiful City of Zion" and the procession of people trying to get to Heaven starts, moving up through the audience-congregation to the stage, like penitents at a revival.

To get to Heaven, the people have to get past the Devil. The Devil wears red trousers and horns, but it is easy to see what he really is. He is a sporting blood, a race-track Satan, a ginmill Beelzebub; he has a bottle of red-eye liquor in his hand and is not stingy with his drinks. The Wayworn Traveler, the Pilgrim of Faith, the Troubled Soul, the Poor Blind Girl, the Pilgrim of Hope, the Widow and her Children and the Bedridden Woman all get past him safely. Walking up to St. Peter's throne, they sing "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," "Bye and Bye I'm Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load and other true songs, while the Devil jumps up & down waving at them with a hayfork. The Millionaire comes down the road to Heaven, carrying two enormous bags. Each bag is simply, eloquently labeled ONE MILLION DOLLARS. He refuses to give money to the Widow and her Children but offers one bag and then the other to St. Peter. St. Peter shakes his head. The Devil gets the Rich Man.

Also the Devil gets the Wayward Girl. She comes toward Heaven drinking out of the bottle he has given her, very gay in her demeanor. When she gets to Heaven, they turn her out. She whispers "Too late!" and goes down to the Devil. He also gets the Hypocrite, a housewife who follows Satan and wears his flowers while singing "I'm on My Way to Heaven." The Devil keeps her dancing. Finally, the Pilgrim of Determination marches past the Devil, singing "I'm Going Through." When she reaches the throne, the Negro audiences at Heaven Bound shout loudly.

The choir of Saints, Angels and Pilgrims sing more songs—"Great Day," "Going to Shout All Over God's Heaven," "Every Time I Feel the Spirit"—easing down the wild excitement of the play before the audience goes home.

Heaven Bound was performed publicly for the first time at the Atlanta City Auditorium last October. Eight thousand saw it then, 5,000 more failed to get in. Subsequently it has been performed in Savannah and Macon, copied by other Negro churches. In September it will be presented at a church in Philadelphia.

According to legend, the idea of the play originated in the dream-ridden brain of a hard-worked laundress in Jacksonville, Fla. Actually, it originated in the fervent head of one Lula B. Jones, onetime member of Big Bethel's enthusiastic choir. She told her idea to the choir leader, Mrs. Nellie Davis, Atlanta night-school teacher, a graduate of Atlanta University in 1922. Nellie Davis built the idea into Heaven Bound, a play that is part pageant, part revival meeting, part spiritual charades in which the only part not sung is the sob of the Wayward Girl, "Too late!"

In performances of Heaven Bound, Nellie Davis plays the part of the Wayward Girl. The other actors are members of the Big Bethel, choir supplemented, outside Atlanta, by singers from other colored churches. St. Peter is Henry Mathews, a onetime slave who is sexton of Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. He wears white robes, golden keys around his neck and his own long, crinkly beard. Pilgrim of Determination is Esther Jones, a dry-cleaner; Millionaire is Hubert Jones, an Atlanta barber; Devil is George A. Pullum, a railway postal clerk. Reader or interpreter, who also helps guide the action of the play, has been Estella Z. Wright, 20-year-old Negro stenographer, soon to join the staff of Pittsburgh's Negro Courier. None of the actors in Heaven Bound receives wages. The first production cost \$155, realized a fat profit for Big Bethel's trustee fund with admissions at 25¢. Not very many white people have yet seen Heaven Bound but most of those who have were observed to look sorry with everyone else for the Wayward Girl, smile and hum in their throats when the Saints started singing.

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