



*HYATT... one dimensional characters are no good for theatre*

# Charles Hyatt made it to Appollo!

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BY HOWARD CAMPBELL

**T**WO sturdy dogs greet me as I make my way up the pathway to Charles Hyatt's home. Their bulk and approach inspire fear which is not diminished when my host makes his appearance, peering down from the balcony.

"Do they bite?" I asked. "If they did, they would have done so already," came Hyatt's tongue-in-cheek response.

Jamaicans have become accustomed to such one-liners from Charles Hyatt for too long to remember. Whether he's playing the fool on stage or plugging skimmed milk in a commercial, Hyatt's fuzzy beard and wide-eyed gimmickry has been winning over audiences for five decades.

Fifty years. That's how long Hyatt has been involved in Jamaican theatre. Though he's also known for playing other roles in broadcasting and jobs in his lifetime, Hyatt is glad to be known as an actor, though you would never know it once you step into his spacious living room.

A line of books is packed into a cabinet in the hallway, a couple of Harlem laureate James Baldwin's works being notable standouts. His literary collection is nothing compared to the reams of records, compact discs and tapes (mostly jazz) he has stacked in the room. As we make our way to the balcony, Hyatt offers to play any request from his vast catalogue. After a brief browse, I choose Roy Orbison, one of his favourites.

He's not willing to discuss certain details of his life, like his age ("I'm a pensioner," he says), but you would have to look long and hard to find a Jamaican not familiar with the name Charles Hyatt.

That name isn't as prominent on the marquee these days, but Hyatt, like fellow pioneers Louise Bennett and Ranny Williams, was part of a cast that changed the face of Jamaican theatre at the height of British colonialism.

**H**e was still active when the movement became more progressive during the sixties and even more radical during the heady days of the seventies, though he isn't too keen on contemporary Jamaican theatre.

"Theatre today is without guidance and that can destroy society without enhancing it," he said. "The one-dimensional character is no good for theatre; eventually people will get bored because it has nowhere going."

Getting on the stage is something Hyatt has thrived on since he made his debut in *The Upper Room*, a play based on Christ's trial. It came shortly after he was "enthralled" by a cousin's performance in a play at

Winchester Park, which influenced his move into the theatre.

"I couldn't believe it was my cousin, who lived in the same house as me," Hyatt recalled. "It was wonderful, fantastic! From then, I knew that was what I was interested in doing."

Between jobs as an accounting clerk and a tile maker, Hyatt, the son of a taxi driver and dressmaker, joined up with a drama group and began nurturing the talent that was to have audiences laughing from the Ward Theatre in Kingston to stages in London's West End. He believes that development was helped significantly by a landmark event in Caribbean history.

"I was fortunate that the University of the West Indies opened during that time," he said. "Students from all over the region started coming in. Among them were some very talented writers and performers, so we in Jamaica started to see our people in a different light."

**L**ocal audiences were to enjoy the acting of Hyatt in drama festivals and noted plays like *Bedward* and *The Shepherd* for 14 years before the Kingston-born actor packed his bags and headed for England to hone his broadcasting skills.

Though he worked at the British Broadcasting Corporation on that station's Caribbean Service programme, Hyatt never left the theatre. While in England, he linked with a young playwright by the name of Trevor Rhone who was also residing at the time in Britain. It was the start of a fruitful association.

"Trevor felt he had something important to say in his plays, just like Shakespeare in his time and as a result you have classic things from him," said Hyatt, who was to star in some of Rhone's biggest hits, including *Smile Orange* (as Ringo, who else?), *Old Story Time* and *Two Can Play*.

When Hyatt returned to Jamaica in the seventies after 14 years in England, it wasn't for an extended career in theatre but at the invitation of the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation where he had started his career in broadcasting, as host of the "Good Morning Man Show". "They made me an offer I couldn't refuse," he remembers with a sombre face.

The Jamaica Hyatt left for England in 1960 had gone through a dramatic metamorphosis upon his return in 1974. The rasta culture was in full bloom, so was political violence, and the governing People's National Party was experimenting with socialism. Working at the state-owned radio station, it was hard for him not to be affected by the political overtones. "I got a first-hand view of what was going on at the time," Hyatt stated. "I



*Mas Challe refuses to tell his age*

wasn't really affected because I was not into news, but it was tough."

After eleven years in his second stint at the JBC, Hyatt was fired in the so-called political purge of 1985 when over 100 workers were axed. "It was an unfortunate thing, because we were said to be released because of our political views," says Hyatt. "That move set back broadcasting at least four generations."

**T**he fickleness of Jamaica's politics has not set back Hyatt's career on the stage and elsewhere. The twice-married father of five recently became a great-grandfather and hosts "It's

Charlie's Time", a four-hour music programme on KLAS. He can still be seen (and heard) in commercials and was featured on the recent Caribbean Comedy Festival.

There are no big plans to celebrate his fifty years in theatre. He had enough reason to kick his heels earlier this year when Harlem's famed Appollo Theatre invited him for a stand-up comedy date.

"What better can one ask for than to perform at the Appollo?" Hyatt asks with a childish smirk. "As far as I am concerned, that's the icing on the cake."