

Charles Hyatt: In the real drama of life

BIG DATE

CHARLES HYATT has made generations of people literally roll with laughter and continues to do so today. During my interview with him I spent as much time holding my sides as I did holding my pen! His brand of humor is totally natural and spontaneous. It springs from his tolerance of human weaknesses, born out of his genuine love for people.

As a Valentine baby (he was born on February 14, 1931) love seems to be a central theme in the life of Charles Hyatt, or 'Charlie' as he is more affectionately known.

"Like half the population of Kingston, I was born 'down a lying-in' at the Victoria Jubilee Hospital". Being an only child Charlie had a multitude of relatives 'fighting for his attention'. "As a result, I managed to attend some 12 elementary schools before I reached the age of twelve, since I was always 'spending time' with this granny or that auntie, and my time and affections had to be shared equally between my maternal and paternal relatives" he reminisced with a chuckle.

Among the schools he reached were Windward Road All-Age, Colabar All-Age and St. Aloysius Primary School.

"Calabar, in particular made a lasting impression on me — or rather my hand middle", Charlie said while ruefully examining his palm "I caught it on the barbed wire fence that separated the junior and senior schools, while going for the only sharpener in the school that lived on the principal's desk!"

A more serious tone crept into his voice as he related how he became an orphan. "My father died when I was nine years old and my mother followed him two years later, just before I got a scholarship from St. Aloysius to St. Simon's College". The now defunct St. Simons has produced one Prime Minister in the form of the Rt. Hon Hugh Shearer, a governor of the Bank of Jamaica (G. Arthur Brown) many other Greats, and at least one outstanding actor/comedian Charles Hyatt!

● In short pants

On his mother's death, Charlie went to live with an aunt of his, whose husband and brother introduced him to the world of work. "To see poor people work is like hearing the best part of a symphony — it is a privilege" he said. He learnt how to do photography and photo-engraving from his uncles and cut-work embroidery from his aunt. As a youngster Charlie had an insatiable curiosity about how things worked or were done.

His first personal taste of work was at the Gleaner Company (where his uncles worked) where he packaged and posted The Catholic Opinion and sold it on Sundays. In his younger days Charlie was also quite involved in church activities. In fact, he was an acolyte at the Holy Cross Church along with Archbishop Samuel Carter.

At sixteen, Charlie sat and passed

several 1st class certificate exams, and applied for a job at E.A. Issa and Brothers Limited — in short pants! They must have been imposed with his earnestness and gave him a job as a licensing officer in their Customs department. His first week as a working man was spent in short pants, but it was arranged that he get "two pants length" and he was in long pants by his second week. These were happy times for Charlie. "Man, you were a big man about town when you had a job and a bicycle and long pants!" he laughed. He used to preen in front of Nathan's Department Store, and he was a regular patron of Carib Theatre and a place called Uncle's Inn where you could buy "nuff food — and it taste good — for little!"

1946 was perhaps the most important year in Charlie's life. He watched his cousin perform in a religious play called "The Confession" and was literally dumb-struck "I couldn't believe that someone could be so transformed by saying a few words on a stage." Charlie's mother used to carry him to recite at concerts, and as a scout he had placed second in a talent contest. (His song *Years* was pipped at the post by someone's rendition of Brahms' Lullaby, "It hot me you see".) However, his cousin's performance opened his eyes to the power and magic of the world of theatre group.

● The laughter

He joined the same theatre group as his cousin. The Group eventually split. The Caribbean Theatricals was one of the daughter movements, which was founded by Anthony Finn. It became a very popular amateur dramatic group, and in 1949 Charlie was one of two of its members who were selected to join the Little Theatre Movement's Productions of 'Aladdin'. Charlie did 10 more productions with



As Hoo Fat in the musical pantomime "Cindy"

LTM and it was thus that Charles Hyatt, the public figure was born. However, it was at one of Eric Coverley's Christmas Morning concerts that Charlie discovered that he had the power to make people laugh. "What really amazed me was that I did it without saying a word. The mime I did had the audience literally rolling in the aisles of Coke Methodist Church" he remembered with some amusement.

This was the start of the Christmas Concert Circuit from Coke Methodist Church to Ward Theatre and on to Carib Theatre. Each performance earned him the princely some of 3 pounds sterling!

● 'Broke a leg'

In the 1950's Charlie was involved in RJR's programme "Poppycock" alongside such people as Ken Maxwell, Alma Mock-Yen, Fred and Cynthia Wilmot.

"This is where I really began to learn ... you don't learn anything at school, all you do is go there and play somewhere out of your parents way!" he stated.

He continued to do stage work too. In fact, it was around this time that he slipped on an over polished floor, and

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Charles Hyatt...



When CHARLES HYATT presented a copy of his book of cartoons to Governor General, the Most Hon. Sir Florizel Glasspole.

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broke his leg while on stage". The crowd was in stitches they thought that I was very clever to arrange my leg at such an odd angle. Anyway, I had to deliver a cue line for the next actor so I didn't come off immediately. Mrs. Vere Johns, who was also called 'Lady Day' always used to travel with a medicinal flask of 'treasure Rum' and

this she kindly poured over my broken limb to ease the pain' he recalled with a twinkle in his eye.

1960 was another turning point for Charlie. He was awarded a scholarship by the Jamaican Arts Council in England, and a bursary by the British Arts Council. He spent the next 14 years based in England while he toured the continent. He worked for

the Caribbean Services of the British Broadcasting Corporation, who even sent him to Germany to teach English! He decided to free-lance with the BBC so that he could be free to explore various avenue in acting.

● His movies

He established himself as a serious actor, and has appeared in several movies. His first film was *High Wind in Jamaica* starring Anthony Quinn, and was filmed in 1964 on location in Jamaica. Next came *Cross Plot* with Roger Moore, *The Free Lance*, and the film version of *Love Thy Neighbour*. More recently Charlie has been featured in *The Marijuana Affair* and *Club Paradise*.

Charlie did some work on the West End Stage, and actually starred in a television programme called *Jezabel*; EX-UK. He was a story-teller in another television series called *Six Bites of the Cherry* and played opposite Athol Fugard in *Blood-knot* which was net-worked to the U.S.A.

● Years at JBC

On his return to Jamaica in 1974, Charlie joined J.B.C. as a freelance radio presenter. He started to write radio plays and was promoted to the Head of the Department of Theatre. He conceptualised the outstanding serial "The Fortunes of Flora Lee" which ran every week-day for four years, "we never missed a day". Eventually we were like a family, a family that was held together by love." These were Charlie's happiest and most productive years at J.B.C.

Bobby Ghisays' play *Tuesday Crowd* was Charlie's first step back into dramatic waters since his return. Then came "Old Story Time", the most satisfying thing I've done to date. Wherever it was performed, here or aboard, it really made people sit up and look!" According to Charlie, his next play *Two Can Play* went one step further. "It gave me an opportunity to pass on what I had gleaned through years of experience to other, younger actors!"

Charlie is the proud owner of two comedy albums and a '45'. One pleased fan rated his L.Ps as among "the top five comedy LP's."

Charlie has been married for 26 years. "It has been a great experience — marriage gives you a unique insight on life!" He has four children 3 girls, and a boy (the youngest). "None of my children must ever feel that I have a favourite. They've all got their own special place and title in my life. They are special people."

He is a great believer in physical fitness. "Acting is the only profession that places demands on your mind, body, and soul", so he works out at Holborn and jogs regularly too. He doesn't indulge in cigarettes, drugs or much alcohol. "There is too much to be aware of consciously to miss out by being unconscious", he said seriously.

Charlie feels that "whatever good that has happened to me is due to the theatre." I would like to end using Charlie's own words taken from a sort of comic-book that he has written;

"Some of (what has been written here) is true, but the rest is not lie."



*Charles Hyatt as Pa Ben in
'Old story time'*

As an actor I am as good as my director' as a director I am as great as the actor. As a father I am a failure; as a husband I'm a burden; but as a comedian, I can be a pain in the butt. People laugh at me and with me.

To think that over the years I have received a Certificate of Appreciation, a Silver Musgrave medal and been awarded a National Honour (Officer of the Order of Distinction — O.D.) for doing what I like best; what more can I ask?"