

## CHARLES HYATT REMINISCENCES

Fifty-six years ago, I first shared a stage with a then 24-year-old genius named Charles Hyatt whom I had seen before, playing the dame in LTM pantomimes and doing stand-up comedy in variety concerts.

Charles had no funny face. He had superb acting talent and artistic integrity that drove him to acquire an understanding of what an actor should seek to achieve; how to develop lifelong theatrical skills; how to prepare for specific roles; and how to prepare for every single scene and every performance. He never played the part of Charles Hyatt. Every role he played was different from the previous one; different from the one that would be next; and different from all others that he had played before and all others yet to come.

In that context, Charlie was impressive enough in any single work; moreso from one play to the next. But when you saw him in revue, in which he might have played eight or nine entirely different characters within two hours, with very little time for transition from one character to the next, and every role was totally convincing, and none was ever Charles Hyatt, then you'll understand why for me he was the best actor I have ever seen ... anywhere. And why the long-running "Here Comes Charley" was such a huge success. Charles Hyatt played the role of Charley in "Here Comes Charley"; but don't be confused. That "Charley" was a different character from Charles Hyatt. And Charles Hyatt was thoroughly convincing as that other Charley; as Charley's girlfriend "Sweetie"; as "Grandpa" and as every other character, whether young, old, or middle-aged; male, female or in-between.

### *Charlie's special assets*

Charles Hyatt combined his superb acting talent with great comic sense and impeccable timing. Besides, in the exquisite craft of mime, which he adored, Charlie was second to none. There, his accuracy was uncanny: where he located the imaginary props; the

configuration of his hands and fingers in manipulating tools; the spatial relationships and the consistency of the placement of invisible objects. He knew that a door took time to open; that it was fixed to the wall by hinges and opened not in a straight line but in an arc. He walked through the doorway; not through the door. When he returned to the doorknob, it was always exactly where he last left it. And he had clearly decided what kind of doorknob it was and handled it accordingly.

My favourite Charles Hyatt mime acts were his old lady sewing by hand, starting with threading the needle; his young woman dressing for work, from the under-garments to the high-heel shoes, lipstick and eye shadow; and his cyclist getting a puncture, dismounting and doing repairs. And such was Charlie's genius that we saw the invisible tyre rising as he pumped it.

Charlie and I worked together on numerous occasions on stage and in radio. We once constituted the entire cast of a one-hour radio play, portraying two men who went fishing during Holy Week in defiance of local superstition that fishing at that time would inevitably end in tragedy. As we were ready to record a scene in which the boat capsised, Charlie brought into the JBC studio a large footpan full of water, backed off his shirt, immersed his upper body in the footpan; flailed about with his arms; panted; gurgled; splashed water all over his script and the studio floor; and, finally, drowned. Scores of listeners called the JBC to report that the drama had moved them to tears, and the station was obliged to repeat it several times in response to insatiable public demand.

### London

When we both lived in London, between the 1960s and '70s, and Charlie was Resident Actor at the prestigious Oxford Playhouse and Phoenix Theatre, he sometimes picked me up to accompany him to his performances. And it always filled me with pride to see Charlie's mastery on stage and the great esteem in which he was held at the highest levels of British theatre.

This was no “buck-up”. He was an exemplary professional – almost always the first member of cast to arrive at the theatre, to comport himself; don his costume; apply his make-up and transform himself from Charles Hyatt into the character he was playing.

### *Back in Jamaica*

After Charlie’s return to Jamaica in 1974, he was still the quintessential stage, radio and screen actor but then also headed the JBC drama department; presented jazz programmes on radio; reminisced on his boyhood days through his “When Me Was a Boy” stories on RJR, later published in book form by the Institute of Jamaica; and even played an excellent ringmaster in a touring international circus.

When Charlie turned 70, in 2001, a group of us presented a variety concert to pay tribute to him while he sat among the audience. Then we brought him on stage for the finale, and he immediately displayed two of his greatest assets. At age 70 he demonstrated his physical fitness by kinning poopalik across the stage. Then he showed there was mental acuity too. Pierre Lemaire had performed a very funny mime act, baking a cake in appallingly insanitary conditions, even wiping away nose-naught with his hand and putting said hand right back into the cake mix. Long after, when Teddy Price surprised everybody by bringing a cake onstage to celebrate Charlie’s birthday, before we even realised what it was, Charlie quipped: “I hope that’s not the cake that Pierre baked.”

### *Generosity*

Add to all this Charlie’s legendary generosity. I once cast a promising young actor alongside Charlie and the youth told me that Charlie didn’t impress him. But he soon thanked me profusely for teaming him with the master and raved about not only Charlie’s genius but also the advice and tutoring that Charlie generously gave him, which he found invaluable. That young actor must have experienced what I had gone through many times. Charlie was so faithful to the character he was playing that you were automatically

triggered into being the character you were playing, to the greater glory of the work as a whole.

I'm pleased that Charles Hyatt Junior has decided – with the support of colleagues, friends, and Charlie's dear wife Marjorie – to preserve the Charles Hyatt legacy through the Foundation that's being launched here and now. I fervently hope that it will result in future arts and entertainment practitioners emulating the very high standards that Charles Hyatt established, and maintained throughout his illustrious career.