

# Actor extraordinaire man of many voices

Sunday Sun, March 20, 1980 page 15-16

## By Verena Reckord

**HERE COMES CHARLIE**, the inimitable veteran of stage, radio, screen, TV... Actor par excellence, comedian, master impersonator. A legend in his own time, who makes people laugh through their tears... a performer whose business is maximum entertainment for his audience of one thousand or one... a man who has been 36 years on the trot in show business...

CHARLES HYATT's first words on any stage in Jamaica was: "Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb. Walla! Walla!". No it didn't make the audience die laughing. Along with other "soldiers" he was creating background sounds in the passion play, *The Upper Room*, staged by The Caribbean Thespians where Charlie's life as an actor began. And thereby hangs a tale...

"The person who introduced me to theatre and made me take it seriously is someone whom, after thirty years and a measure of personal success in theatre, I have, myself, encouraged to get back into theatre. I have been successful and he is now a success and enjoying every minute of it.

"It was about 1947 and this cousin-of-mine, a St. George's student, was acting as a priest in a school production *The Confession*. In the story, a murderer had confessed his deed to a priest, but the priest could not divulge his name and so an innocent man was going to the gallows. At the last moment the guilty man came forward,

the innocent man was saved and the priest, my cousin, held up the crucifix and said, "The Cross! The Cross! The hope of all humanity!" Buff, curtain. I thought it was the most fantastic exit line ever. And he was good throughout the play, besides.

"That turned me on and my cousin introduced me to The Cathedral Players. At the time the Roman Catholic priests, Father Judah and others, fostered drama. But soon The Cathedral Players split and became The Surrey Players and The Caribbean Thespians, with Tony Finn, who is still alive and deserves a measure of honour, as director."

The historical "Rhubarb" line came about the next Easter with the Thespians. Charlie's next appearance was in a comic operetta, *Hearts and Blossoms* in which he played Sampson Bonapart Flickers. Then he was *Hot Foot* in a thing called *Soap To Nuts*. And so it went with the Thespians. In the meantime his cousin (who had introduced him to theatre where, by now, Charlie was a man in demand) had dropped out "entering the world of the norm," as Charlie puts it. But Charlie had always thought that his cousin's absence was a loss to local theatre. So last year, after all those years, he managed to persuade the man to return to acting. "He had lost the self-assurance and the security, but not the love or the ability for theatre." That man now plays the very popular Pastor Williams, Flora Lee's stepfather, in the radio's number one serial, produced by Charles Hyatt. He is Egerton Rhoden.

"...and he went on to *Remembrance*.

Believe me if I do nothing else in life, that's one of the things weh goin' please me forever. All when a dead, when yuh see a smile pon me face weh the undertaker can' get off, yuh will know why."

Through the Caribbean Thespians Charlie got his first professional break when he did a mime extract, from a Thespians production, on Eric Coverley's *Christmas Morning Concert*, at Coke Hall, with actress Dorothy Bennett. He played a drunk. It was so successful that Charlie decided to create his own mime piece. It was about a woman getting dressed in the morning.

### SHORT PANTS WORK

"Listen, I never see people behave so from a born. Me alone on the stage, no words and people literally wetting themselves with laughter. I remember looking down a woman's throat, a nice fat lady who I used to see about the place. And when I see her laugh with total abandon. She couldn't give a damn. And me look right down in her throat. A seh 'father almighty'. A pause for a moment, wait 'till she settle down again, and a seh, 'a goin' mek yuh open yuh mou' again. And a go deh again. It was a great omment."

Charlie's popularity and demand grew from there and he went on doing emceeing. The first MC stint was on Merrill Ferguson's variety show at Rialto. (Ferguson a poet and writer now lives in England). It was a howling success which Charlie says he can't believe to this day.

This was during the early fifties. By then

Charlie had already been five years in the labour market. His first job, at age sixteen, was with Issa's on King Street.

"I went to work in short pants. Took my first week's pay and bought two pairs of long pants, one brown, one blue, a kind of light serge material. 26" knee 18" cuff. Cho, yuh a jester."

Young Charlie was soon fired by Abe Issa who rehired him when he (Issa) discovered he'd made a mistake. In a short while however, Charlie was again "kicking stone". It was during this period that he made his pact with theatre.

"During the no-work period the Thespians put on a play called *The Tangled Webb*. I was playing an absent-minded professor. I played a lot of old parts when I was a little boy. Anyway, I had no shoes and the part called for the professor to step in a bucket of water with his shoes on. Well, I went to my guardian and literally begged him for thirty shillings to buy a pair of shoes. He said he didn't have it. That Friday evening, the opening of the play, I took an oath that never again would I bare my soul that way to anybody and beg. I had a pair of shoes that a friend of mine had bought for me earlier on, but it was two sizes too big. And I went home and I shined up the shoes and put them on and went on stage.

"The theatre was at the corner of Church and Sutton Streets. It was the old Cathedral Church and the Thespians got it to work in. Errol Hill, it was, who came and showed us how to convert

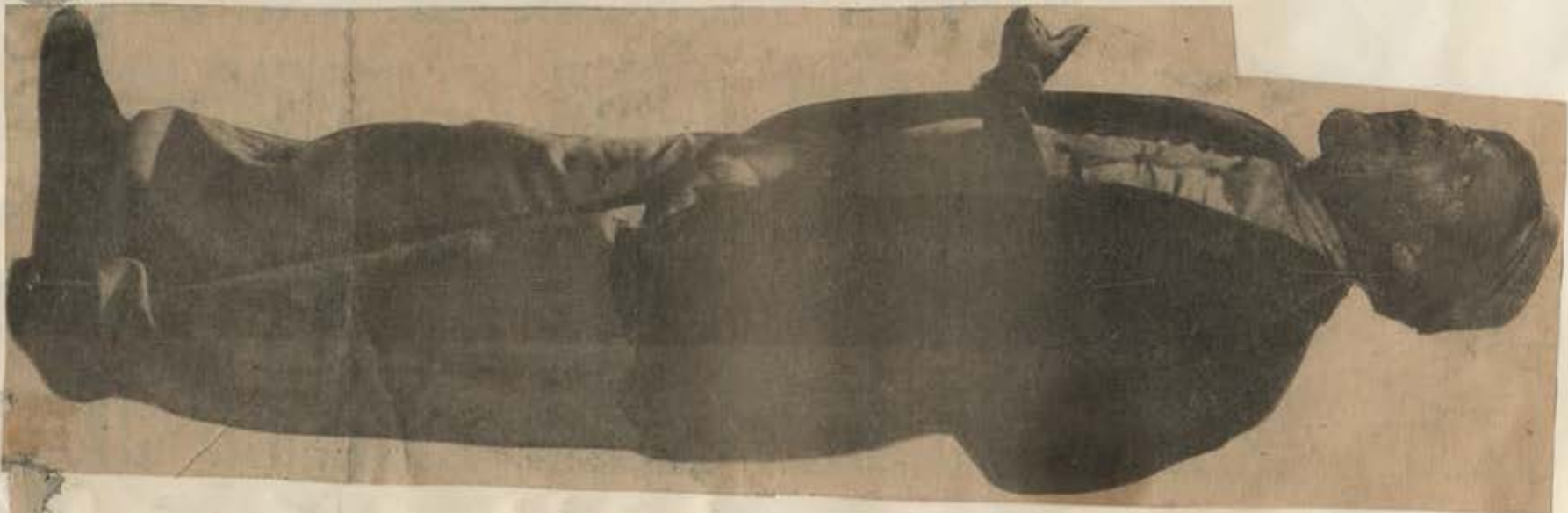
Cont'd on Page 16



# CHARLES HYATT

Taking a break during rehearsals at Little Theatre. And at right, in one of his most striking characterisations as the storyteller in *Old Story Time*. Above: The offstage Charles Hyatt.





ADU