

BIN - SAMUELS, OLIVER

Oliver is determined to bite out a piece of life

He grew up on a banana plantation on Jamaica's north coast where his father worked as a labourer.

He readily admits that for a long time he faced poverty and hardship.

But today life is easier for Oliver Samuels, the island's leading stage and television comic.

"Oliver" is the man who brings laughter to thousands of Jamaicans and other West Indians at home in the Caribbean and in the metropolises where his half hour situation comedy "Oliver At Large" is telecast.

"Jamaicans like to hear themselves and they love to see themselves and I believe that I am acting as a mirror for them. So they easily identify with me," he said.

It is a strong comment from one who lacked self-confidence at the audition to enter drama school in the late 1960s.

"When I went to audition for the school which was then run solely by the Little Theatre Movement," he said, "I remember the man saying 'You will hear from us.' I felt so rejected. I felt that because I was from the country and did not know anybody that I would not be accepted.

"However three days later I received an acceptance letter from the school. That was the most glorious moment of my life," recalls Oliver, smiling broadly in the lobby of the elegant Pegasus Hotel in Kingston.

Cool and unflustered

Dressed casually in blue jeans and a white sports shirt, Samuels appears cool and unflustered in the sweltering morning heat.

He is stocky, with short kinky hair, a cheerful personality and directness.

For years he was liked and rated as one of Jamaica's top comedians. But it is his role as "Oliver" in the locally produced comedy series "Oliver At Large" which has catapulted him into stardom.

Most recently, it began showing on Barbadian television.

"I am ecstatic that there is a Caribbean link," he says, "and I hope that it is the start of a cultural exchange between countries of the region."

He recently returned from a

tour of Antigua where he was warmly received.

The theatre is Samuels' domain. He has appeared in 13 pantomimes locally, playing the lead role in all but one. He has also starred in more than 30 other local productions and was presented with the best actor award in 1975 by the local acting community.

Now cashing

He is now cashing in on his success as "Oliver" and has secured engagements in North America and Europe. He can command as much as 1,000 dollars (one Jamaican dollar — about 18 US cents) per night for a local performance and between US 1,000 and 2,000 dollars per night for overseas engagements.

Samuels credits Calvin Butler, an American television producer who was living in Jamaica, with his success in "Oliver At Large".

"It was Calvin who thought that a talent like mine should be exposed to a wider audience through television," he said.

Four years passed before the series became a reality.

Samuels and a group comprising Butler, and local actors Aston Cooke and Trevor Nairne, approached the late Gloria Lanaman, a prominent playwright, who was then general manager of the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation (JBC), with the idea of doing the show.

"She gave us a meagre sum of money with which we produced the first five vignettes. None of us foresaw the tremendous response we received. We became more ambitious, sought sponsorship and hence the birth of the half-hour series."

Oliver has since founded his own production company, Oliver Samuels Production Limited, which will produce the new episodes of the show. This, he says, came about because of the pirating of "Oliver At Large".

"I became very very popular in these countries (Canada, USA and England) and I don't have any money to show for it. I decided that something will have to be done," he said.

He admits though that he has not lost out because he is now

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known in these countries and has secured performing engagements as a result.

"But in business you have to think beyond just being known in the market," he maintains.

Shackles of poverty

One of his main goals is to buy a house for his children.

"I have experienced a life of hardship and poverty and I am determined that I must break it for my children. I want to break the shackle of poverty."

Samuels says success has not changed him, but it is clear that he is beginning to chafe at the intrusions which seem to accompany fame and success.

He feels he can no longer go to certain places or do some things because of what people are going to say.

"You can't take the bus because if you do, then people look at you and say "ah weh you a do pon bus? (what are you doing on the bus?)," he complained.

"People think that you should drive a certain kind of car. I drive a Lada and it shocks a lot of people because they think that I should be driving a Benz."

He is fearful that because his fans have put him on a pedestal that he will grow away from his friends and the ordinary Jamaican people.

"I am from the people. I am from the earth and I think that it is my right to return to the earth whenever I want to. I don't want anybody to set standards for me," says a defiant Samuels.

He has often said that his mother was a great influence in his life (she died a few years ago). His mother was a leader in the community and fiercely independent. He remembers her telling him to "look straight in people's eyes when saying

hello".

As a child, Samuels wanted to be many things when he grew up. First he wanted to be a teacher, then an architect. But deep down he longed to go to Hollywood and become a "big" movie star.

He recalls that he and the other children on the plantation would sing and recite poetry on Friday nights when the men came home from the fields.

He enjoys doing comedy because "it is the hardest branch of the art and I think that I am good at it."

Oliver concedes that it would be difficult to make the transition from comedy to "serious" acting as he is already established as a comic actor. However about two years ago, he auditioned to play the late Jamaican black consciousness leader Marcus Garvey in a production to celebrate Garvey's 100th birthday. He was unsuccessful.

Disappointed

"I was disappointed when I was not cast as Garvey. I wanted so much to test how strong an actor I am. I read for the part and thought I did well. But it was not to be," he says with a note of resignation.

And what about Hollywood?

"It is not important if I go there anymore," he says wistfully.

Samuels has been playing the lead role of Seefus Dolater, in a play by the same name.

He is also planning to expand his singing career. He already has two albums out and a hit single "Oliver Yu Large".

To many, Oliver Samuels is a funny man, someone who makes them laugh.

But if you stop long enough to look behind the laughter, you will see in his eyes a steely determination to "bite out a piece of life".

