

LEONIE

B/N - FORBES, Leonie

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FORBES

Burns with theatre concerns

BY CHRISTENE KING



Jamaica has gained much esteem in the wider world through its arts and artistes. However, that talented and versatile lady of the theatre, Leonie Forbes, insists that we could be much further ahead if the arts got the support it needed.

Acting is the lifeblood of this renowned actress but she is disgusted with the manner in which the society makes it difficult for the arts and artistes to survive.

In a recent rap with *Pure Class*, Leonie spoke candidly and passionately and from the "depths of her soul" about theatre in Jamaica — her inspirations, her concerns, and the changes and responsibilities that should be initiated and implemented to make theatre more vibrant and economically fulfilling in this fair isle.

She spoke first of the play, "Beyond the Horizon", recently staged at the Creative Arts Centre by The World Theatre Institute in cooperation with the German National Commission for UNESCO and local sponsors, such as NCB, Esso and Kentucky. Both herself and Glen Campbell also worked on the project, which focussed on the improvisations and writings coming

out of exchanges between two groups of people, found it very inspirational.

Working with the German group reinforced in her that artistes are the same, having the same concerns about their societies, and the same frustrations in trying to communicate a message across. The difference between the cultures may be sunshine and snow, she says, "but we're basically the same. They have the same fears for their people and their country as we have for ours. Once you understand people and you work with them," Leonie tells *Pure Class*, "you are not so prejudiced. You find peoples of the world are the same."

She praises Roland Reber, head of the World Theatre Project, for "doing something good." He feels

that through this kind of project, artistes throughout the world can get to know more about one another and perhaps foster a little world peace. Inspiring to her too, was the core sincerity she found within the group. Colour of skin was not of any importance whatsoever.

The World Theatre Project more than enticed this lady. "The artistic satisfaction was there," she enthuses. "The experience of learning about another people and their culture and learning other theatre techniques... me neva see dirt pon stage... yet, it's happening in other places in the world but its the first I'm seeing it here on stage."

JAMPRO must take the lead

This exercise made Leonie realise "how much harder it is for us to get anything for the arts." Sponsorship doesn't come easy for the arts not like for music. And it grieves her "because all our actors and actresses are so damn good."

She thinks it's good for us to encourage movie crews to come here but "we must push them so that our artistes get something out of them. Referring to the Lorimar ABC TV series *Going to Extremes* recently

filmed in St Ann, she says: "Whether 'good, bad or indifferent... at least we got a part, we played it and we saw it. But for the most part that doesn't happen, no matter what they tell you!"

Another of her burning concerns is that our actors and actresses don't have agents, save for the odd people like Oliver Samuels who has a manager. As a result of this, performers have to negotiate contracts on their own. This, Leonie stresses, is not a good thing and shouldn't happen.

"There's no set of rules to guide anybody who comes here to use us," she complains. "We get ripped off... right, left and centre. Even with *Going to the Extremes*, they can repeat it until the cows come home with bells, there are no royalties for any of the local performers."

Why don't actors and actresses organise themselves? *Pure Class* asked.

Leonie is insistent that this organisation of actors and actresses should come with the blessing of government through JAMPRO. "They are the ones who encourage film crews here and tell us not to ruffle their feathers because they are

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TOP LEFT: Leonie during rehearsals for "Your Handsome Captain". She too, gets nervous everytime she has to go on stage.

TOP RIGHT: "I will play one string of old women until the cows come home. I have to say no, I am not doing anymore this year. I want something else."

BOTTOM: Leonie as the rebellious wife, "Titta" with "Ezra" (Errol Jones) in the hilarious and thought-provoking play, "December".

- COLIN YOUNG PHOTOS

courting them to come here.

"I agree with all of that," she reasons, "but at the end of the day, I can't go home not having earned anything. We are not entitled to royalties, we are not members of their thing... so even when they come and do commercials of Jamaica we get ripped off same way."

From her point of view, JAMPRO must take the lead in this area. That is the only way she sees our local actors doing well. JAMPRO must insist that local crew and equipment, if available, must be hired from here; and some of the substantial roles must be cast from our actors and actresses.

She also believes that JAMPRO should set minimum rates; and above a certain level, the fee is negotiable for those who have proven themselves. She also thinks that JAMPRO should have a proper casting directory which one can glance through to see the talent one needs "instead of everytime somebody comes to cast, the hundreds of us are going for everything." She finds it very embarrassing both to her and the casting crew everytime she is sent to audition for a part to which she is not suited.

However, she suggests that one of the production houses could get involved in producing this directory which would include photographs and CVs of the better actors and actresses. Modern technology could be utilised, she explains, in the form of three or four one-minute snippets on videos which show the types of parts an actor/actress can play. Voice can be isolated on tapes to hear what the actor/actress sounds like. With these in hand, she believes a casting crew can view and hear and decide whom they want to see.

"The government," she reiterates emphatically, "must start this and after they have done that initial thing, a core group of people who have worked abroad and know what rates are and so on, should take over." She states that contact can be made with similar overseas entities in the USA, Canada and England to

find out their minimum operating rates, their structure and then tailor it to suit our needs here in Jamaica.

"We need an equivalent of a musicians' union...nobody can come here and dis the musicians...if you use them, you pay them and you treat them properly," she states emphatically.

"Everytime we try to do something on our own, our own people cut our throats..." She explained that herself, the late Ken Maxwell, Erica Allen and Rooney Chambers among others, had sat down and organised themselves after which they informed the agencies. But in a nutshell, the agencies, she intimates, were not supportive of them and went outside their group to find talent. "And what do you hear...oh, they are looking for fresh faces and new faces..." she mimicks. "Overseas, leading people are given advertising work...here it's not so."

Nothing to give to the arts

"This must be one of the few countries on earth where they have nothing to give to the arts," the lady of theatre moans. She says that it's not that she doesn't want to teach at the School of Drama, but the pay is poor and it takes forever to be paid. "As a freelancer or self-employed, I can't work like that as I have my commitments to meet."

On the question of payment of income tax, she feels that some sort of special schedule like that which is done in England, for instance, should be adopted here, "whereby they (the authorities) know that there are certain things you have to take care of and you make your returns on that."

"The society needs us," says Leonie, "but is not prepared to acknowledge that we must live. It's like the teachers, we can't do without them but we won't pay them. And then we quarrel and say that standards have fallen. Why? It's

just that you can't attract good people that way."

She wants the School of Drama to bubble, drama classes everywhere "but we can't do it for nothing. When I leave here," she points out during the interview, "I am going to do a class for Grace. That's a company that has an interest in their people and if they find something to interest them to give them an outlet, then they (the staffers) will work better. Not all companies do that and certainly not the general populace...somehow they never see the need for that and in the worst of times, is the more you need theatre and those things." She likens it unto a "safety valve", which if kept locked is going to blow.

"Maybe I am a voice crying in the wilderness," she moans. "I don't know," but she suggests that we open our eyes and take a good look at what is happening around us and how we are treating people.

"It was only last year for the first

time that we honoured our athletes. And look from when they have been doing good for the country." She considers it disgusting that Kid Harold died of malnutrition and Miss Lou having to live in another country. "That's not right," she gesticulates. "If we behave like that, we will never produce a Derek Walcott. Dennis (Scott) was the closest thing to him, and he had to go to North America to be able to live. Most of our professors have to go away to work during the summer in order to make a decent standard of living," she adds.

Nowadays, she says, it's difficult to get the overdraft or a pay-in-advance ticket to go abroad where you can find work. In addition, she adds, because other countries are having similar problems as we have they can no longer extend invitations. One can find many things here to occupy oneself but it does not bring in any money. "Stage doesn't pay you enough. You cannot be in a play and do only that," she laments. "You need all the support from the commercial people."

Leonie is adamant that the private sector has to help the arts. They have assisted in sports. And she thinks that one of the reasons for the minimal help from the private sector is the difficulty of actors/actresses to promote the companies' products. "Athletes wear the T-shirts and promote their products. When we go to act, we have to put on the costumes of the character so we can't wear a company's shirt. That makes us less likely to get sponsorship from those companies," she relates.

However, despite the high cost of staging the simplest production, a quarter-million dollars, she says: "We not giving up." She commends people such as Alwyn Bully fighting it through with Nitebox, and the Company Theatre for its "Keeping Company" Sunday morning readings. But it boils back down to money to stage these productions.

Does get nervous

She again backtracks to the World Theatre project. "It's quite exciting...it's good. Because a lot of times when you get a part, you wonder can I cope, can I manage it?" And for every time Leonie has to go on stage, she goes through the sleepless nights, the upset stomach, the headaches and the grinding of the teeth... As she says: "You are as good as your last performance. You can't take it for granted. The first bad one you do is probably your last and that's probably the one people will talk about the most."

Comments such as "good as usual", "that's what we expect," worries her, "cause that doesn't help me," she says. "It's nice, but it is not helpful. When a production is going on and it's one line I have, I have to go through the same process because I want it perfect."

There are people who think that Leonie can't be nervous because she does this thing all the while, but as she will tell you. "Every production





is a different run and you have to deal with each one on its own, what its merits are, where the strong points are, and will I do it well?"

Though Leonie is not exposed as often as she would like to fresh techniques... "At least I am maintaining when I knew," she declares.

Appealing to lowest common denominator

What are her views on theatre nowadays?

"To me, the reality is something that is not peculiar to theatre," replies Leonie. "Radio does the same thing and television has finally jumped foot first into it... where we are appealing to the lowest common denominator and we say that it is to educate, inform and entertain. I don't know who some of it is to entertain and the only education it is giving me is what to tell the pickney dem that come under my care... you don't do that!"

"In other words," she continues, "people like to laugh and Ralph Holness found a formula that works and now everybody has jumped on the bandwagon. When that formula ceases to work as everybody is now doing it, we begin to get vulgar, common and slapdash and instead of standards lifting and people demanding a little more from us, they will say 'yeah, we will go cause we will get a good laugh' and they come out and forget it... nothing to think about."

She explains that on the other hand you put on a play which demands a little thinking and people complain that it's long, it's not funny

and they don't understand it. A mixture of theatre is what we need, she reminisces... "like Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Trevor Rhone, Dennis Scott, Derek Walcott and an overseas company passing through with a play or musical like *Ain't Misbehaving*. It's a kind of theatre that we don't do anymore."

Leonie also recalls the times of *Playhouse, 8 o'clock Jamaica Time* with Tony Gambrell, and other good productions... "and even though some may think them dated there is still a certain style about them that is very today... the control of the body... the beauty... the handling of the language."

Pantomime, she believes, "should go back to the days when it was the best that the island had to offer. It is not enough now just to coast on what they (people) like or what you think they'll come to see. You have to take a chance," she expresses passionately.

She affirms that we have to stop catering to the lowest common denominator. "We have to rethink, replan, and go small, and the LTM should do one other production for the year, something different." She doesn't have anything against roots theatre "because we all started there acting in the church hall and that's precisely what we are still doing... acting. So we don't grow and develop. At least, we have to be exposed to the other things so that we can make choices."

Need costume shop

In the area of costuming, one way in which Leonie sees the high

From Centrespread

cost of costumes being licked is for one of the theatre houses whether its LTM, School of Drama, Creative Arts Centre, the new Island Life Theatre or some enterprising person with space to establish a costume shop. Here, she says, fancy and period clothes, shoes, costume jewellery, wigs, etc that people throw out every day would be collected, cleaned, repaired, renovated and rented to productions.

"It would be infinitely cheaper than trying to buy them and thousands of dollars can be saved," she adds. For herself. "I run out of space at home so I can't keep nothing more. Every production I have, I can always run into the box and find something that suits me. And there's no place that I can give them to where I can go back and get it." However, in all of this, Leonie frowns at the thought that "we always think that everything must be new."

Media can help

She thinks the printing industry could help the arts in that one printer could offer special rates for a set format of programmes, flyers, etc. She mentions that Henry (Fowler) was talking about these things with a little group that he's trying to put together.

The media, she states, could also do more in the promotion of theatre. JBC TV, she suggests, could tape a play, edit it properly, and after the run is completed, show it on television with sponsorship so that the actors can earn from it. She believes that in the same way sponsorship is secured for overseas programmes, the same can be done for plays.

Though JBC helps with discounted rates for advertisements and they'll do an interview at certain times, she feels that they can help a lot more. She also feels the TV ought to have a review programme. "What Young (Anthony) Miller is doing... if he gets the kind of support, could develop into something like that. I like his programme," she says. "I like where's he heading and his personality is fine."

Leonie also laments the lack of reviews on radio, and the calibre of some reviewers around. "We need reviewers that we can respect, not reviewers who are going to take their gall out on people because they are frustrated directors or actors or something. We need people of substance who are willing to commit their thought and their opinions the same way like we have 'In My Opinion'. We need it in theatre... not to destroy or tear down but to give an honest, subjective opinion of what a play is all about. Well, that you could have

something to inform and encourage youngsters coming into the business."

The print media could offer a page, she says, again at a special rate, where one could advertise their productions. People should be able to pick up this page and know what productions are on and "it's not clouded with what's at the cinema and what the overseas stars are doing. Leonie was of the opinion that sometimes, small advertisements got lost on what existed now. "Let them (the print media) offer a service to us. One page which is for theatrical productions. That would be their contribution to the arts," she

you to be here for the rest of your life. Where else are you going to go and work?" she asks. "Try and correct some of the wrong pronunciations of the drama school students and they take offence," she says in despair.

She sees talent oozing out of our performers but if you take them out of Jamaica they can't cope. Her stated reasons are their inability to handle the language and the general lack of discipline. "Those little things put us at a disadvantage," she opines. It's a sweet-bitter experience for her when she sees some of our young performers. "Mi heart grow big... it glad... but then immediately I start cry because them going get spoilt... the instant stardom," she shakes her head.

Leonie glows in the recollection

who have proven themselves to maintain standards, she points to

However, we are not the only ones who have problems with the language. Her experience in London in 1989, showed that black people there do have a problem with the language too.

Bands of talent abound in the country which Leonie sees in the likes of Owen Ellis, young Christopher Daley, even Ibo Coq. However, we are being too casual about it, she says, and goes back to her point that since JAMPRO is trying to attract foreign business here, "they must see to it that we benefit." Whatever they do, she surmises, "they are supposed to make some contribution to the country.

"Our government first have to acknowledge that we are of some importance because is not all that long ago that acting was accepted something serious and as a profession. Acting was for dropout. They have just begun to take it seriously because some of us have done so well and we have a Madge Sinclair, a Sheryl Lee Ralph, and Esther Anderson.

"There is no infrastructure to support us for anything like that. And since for everything in Jamaica, we have to get help from private sector then please let us start," she appeals.

Typecast roles

Typecast roles are not necessarily good for the development of an actor or actress. "If World Theatre had come who would have given Glen (Campbell) a part?" Leonie asks. "Everybody want him because him will make people laugh and everybody will come and pay them money. And the thought of what is happening to the man himself, what is happening to the talent inside of him, nobody gives a hoot," she says.

"I will play one string of old women until the cows come home have to say no, I am not doing anymore this year. I want something else." However, she considers herself lucky for having played Amy Garvey at 17 and when she was older. But she wonders how many people are going to give you that chance and how many plays are written like that. Normally, she says, two actresses would be used in such situations.

Getting into a groove like that doesn't make an actor grow neither does he/she learn anything from that experience. "You know the little trick things that will work and it becomes easy. You just earn money and go home." People like Glen don't like that, she advises.

Leonie also cites the realities no insurance, no pension; and no medical plan in the theatre. If you get injured while you are in a production, there's no insurance... you are on your own. If you get sick you are on your own. "What are insurance people doing to cover us," she asks. "Can't they come up with



advocates. "That's the only way we are going to mount the kind of productions that we are used to.

Talent but can't speak English

A disheartening factor for Leonie with some of today's crop of drama graduates is that they cannot speak English. "If the play is not in dialect, they are at sea," she observes. "They spend so much time fighting the words that you don't hear nothing, you don't understand the play and they don't have any time for the characterisation either.

"But it is a general thing in the society," she reflects, "where speech is so bad. And I am not talking about perfect English. I am talking about receivable English where I can understand what you are saying. English is our official language. It is our first language, so why shouldn't we do it well? When you can't speak English, it limits

Acting is the lifeblood of renowned actress, Leonie Forbes.

of gone-by festivals of grandeur, the varying versions of the Jamaican language which you heard from the children as you moved around Jamaica and the fact that they could speak standard English.

Maintain standards

What is going to be done to change the situation?

"Standards have to be maintained," was her response, and a start can be made with the School of Drama. She recognises and gives support to what Barbara Gloudon is doing with the LTM workshop in the middle of the year. However, she'd like to see more things being done and she doesn't believe that an expert from overseas is the answer "because they don't know our constraints. We have people here

some plan to insure voices, limbs, sight for singers, dancers, actors, etc. So there is something to get if anything goes wrong for us."

But the whole society, she reiterates, "has to acknowledge that we are necessary and that we are in fact making a hell of a contribution by keeping their spirits up by making them laugh, making them think about things other than their own problems."

Leonie had quite a mouthful to say which she thought needed to be said. At the time, she was working on a Haitian play, **Your Handsome Captain** directed by Jean Small. The French version will be on at the Sir Phillip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts this weekend with two Haitians in the principal roles.

Your Handsome Captain excites Leonie. "It's experimental theatre in that its using the basic principles of Kabuki (Japanese) noh-theatre. It's a whole new approach to the stage... creating the space and working with the body as an instrument, the voice also as we as musical instruments." This will take her to March and there are other possibilities on the horizon which she prefers not to talk about now until they are born.

To bring down her final curtain Leonie's message is that we can't expect our government to do everything for us because they don't have any money. However, what she expects them to do is "to give us the benefit of your authority. We need an umbrella and I see that since Jampro is around handling the film aspect, just make a complete department of that."

'Women in the Media' panel discussion

As part of the planned activities for the 1993 Jamaica Film Festival, a panel discussion titled 'Women in the Media' will be held on Tuesday, March 16 in the auditorium of the United States Information Services (USIS) at 5:30 pm.

The evening will see the screening of three short films from Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, respectively. All three films will look at the image of women in the media from different angles. Following the presentation each of the four panelists — Hillary Nicholson of Women and Development Studies, UWI; Marcia Forbes and Cynthia Wilmot of Phase Three Productions; and Dr Carolyn Cooper, English Department, UWI — will make a short presentation, after which the floor will be opened to the public.