

**LAUNCH OF *THE JAMAICAN THEATRE: HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PERFORMING ARTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* BY WYCLIFFE BENNETT AND HAZEL BENNETT (Litte Theatre, October 25, 2011)**

I am remembering myself standing on this stage one night fifty years ago. We are rehearsing *Hamlet*. Reggie Carter is Hamlet, Judith Willoughby is Ophelia, Aubrey McLeod is Horatio, Ronnie Harrison is Polonius, Hope Sealy is Gertrud, and I am Claudius. The directors are Wycliffe Bennett and Carroll Dawes. At that time the theatre, in its infancy, was still open-air. The auditorium had no roof, but the stage was covered and the box seats at the back were covered. That night, just as the rehearsal began, the rain came pouring down. So we actors said to ourselves, “Good, no rehearsal tonight!” For Wycliffe wasn’t bothered by the clock, and rehearsals would go on well past midnight, even though we all had to go to work next morning. We should have known better. Wycliffe rejoiced. “Great,” he said, “great time to rehearse, to test your projection and enunciation.” So we had to rehearse, shouting, but with shading and expression, across the rain, so that Wycliffe and Carroll, sitting comfortably up there in the back, could hear every word we said. That was Wycliffe, always pushing you and himself beyond comfortable limits.

The only pity at this moment is that Wycliffe isn’t sitting there in the front row, secretly directing me, assessing my projection and my enunciation, and the flow of my voice. But, although Wycliffe did not stay with us long enough to participate in the launch of this the culminating work of his career in theatre, happily the other half of the team is with us, and what a team: Wycliffe and Hazel! They complemented each other, in life as in the writing of this book. I imagine that Wycliffe’s vast theatrical experience and knowledge, and the flair and “fling” that he brought to them, were balanced by Hazel’s librarian-and-scholar’s studiousness and care for precision, not only in editing and proof-reading, but also in the research, in which she played an invaluable part.

For instance, in the “Acknowledgements” we are told that, in the 1980s, when Wycliffe and Errol Hill were visiting “libraries and other places in England, the United States and Jamaica” to gather material on the history of Jamaican theatre, “Hazel Bennett, working overseas on another project at that time, also continued to record every item ...

on the subject which crossed her path. This enabled her to fill in gaps in the research that Hill and [Wycliffe] did not locate.” Besides, the writing of this book must have benefited from Hazel’s prior achievement in co-authoring with Sir Philip Sherlock *The Story of the Jamaican People*. Significantly, the first paragraph of *The Jamaican Theatre* quotes from *The Story of the Jamaican People*, to help set the “Background to the Jamaican [Theatre] Scene” and to suggest a central theme of the book: the Jamaicanizing of the performing arts in Jamaica . Incidentally, at the end of the “Acknowledgements” there is a lovely photograph of the two of them together, Wycliffe and Hazel, Wycliffe in his trademark braces. The photo could be captioned “Give Me Your Shoulder to Lean on.”

All that having been said, I know that Hazel won’t hold it against me if I say that this book is in my head as Wycliffe’s book, granted that “Wycliffe” always means “Wycliffe and Hazel.” Interestingly enough, in one chapter the phrase “the writer” (meaning the writer of the book) is used two or three times, in the singular, and there is even one instance when the first person singular is used: “I.”

I mentioned Errol Hill just now, the late Professor Errol Hill of Dartmouth College, the Extra-Mural Department of the UWI, and Trinidad and Tobago. He played a seminal role in the Jamaican theatre of the 1950s and is featured in the book at hand. I bring him forward now in order to point out that the Bennett book is a companion to an earlier work, by Hill, and is best read with that fact in mind. Errol and Wycliffe having embarked on a project to write the history of Jamaican theatre, they eventually agreed that Errol would write about the earlier part of that history, and Wycliffe the later – a plan which made sense in different ways. The Hill book, *The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre*, was published as long ago as 1992. I suspect that most persons here tonight have never even heard of it. Maybe, after you’ve read the Bennett book, you will feel curious enough to seek out the Hill book. Incidentally, Hazel figured prominently in that one too. In the “Acknowledgements” section of it, Errol thanked her “especially,” for having “perused an entire first draft and made detailed comments.”

As theatre director and producer, Wycliffe was known to “think big.” So it shouldn’t surprise us that this is a big book, not just in its physical dimensions, but also in the scope of its coverage. It covers more ground than I had anticipated. In all the years during which I had known that Wycliffe was working on this book, I had assumed that it

would be just about the drama, a subject more than large enough. It wasn't until I actually had the book in my hands a few weeks ago that I realized that it also covered the history of dance and of music. However, the space devoted to drama, dance and music respectively is in descending order of magnitude; but perhaps we should remember that there has been some appreciable recording of the story of the dance, and, in recent years, a good handful of books about ska, rocksteady and reggae, their performers and producers.

Altogether, though, this book is a great compendium of information, an invaluable archive, and, especially in respect of the drama, an act of record keeping which was too long overdue, and which, happily for us, comes from someone, or I should say someone and his wife, who lived so much of what is recorded. So, for instance, it's good to have here, readily accessible, a sizeable portion of George Bernard Shaw's little-known advice about decolonizing Jamaican culture, given in an interview by *The Daily Gleaner* when he visited his friend, Sir Sidney Oliver, then Governor of Jamaica, in 1911. It is a remarkable statement for its time, even when we remember not only Shaw's iconoclastic mind, but also the fact that he was Irish. The statement is thought-provoking and may even leave question marks not intended. Thought-provoking too, in different ways, may be the necessary account of Marcus Garvey's elocution contests at Edelweiss Park. Even if we have long known about this aspect of Garvey, the elocutionist, it might take on a fresh interest to see him bracketed here with, say, Wycliffe Bennett and Vere Johns, other famous elocutionists. We might find ourselves thinking about the nuances and complexities of what cultural decolonization might mean, has meant for us.

One feature of the scope of this book is that, although it is "by Wycliffe Bennett and Hazel Bennett," it is to some small but appreciable extent also a book by many hands. For instance, two of the chapters are by other persons: the chapter on "Drama at the University College of the West Indies in the 1950s" is by Mary Morgan, while the chapter on "The School of Drama" is by Honor Ford-Smith and Eugene Williams. In addition, there are quite a few "insets," so to speak, by other writers, the sort of thing which we might imagine normally placed in an appendix. However, a few of them could really be chapters in their own right, constituting the book's substantial material on their particular topics, topics which are crucial to the main narrative. I'm thinking, first, of

Yvonne Brewster's piece on the Barn Theatre, titled "Forty Years in the Garage." The Barn is otherwise mentioned only three times and in passing, in the main narrative. Similarly central and crucial is Cheryl Ryman's stimulatingly informative piece on "The Frats Quintet," which is excerpted from her *Jamaica Journal* article of 1989. The Frats are not otherwise mentioned in the book. I'm thinking too of Maria Smith's "The Revival Iconography," an authoritative piece, from her PhD thesis, about aspects of Revival performance that have influenced dance on the Jamaican stage.

The variations of voice provided by these "insets," and the book's shifting modes of presentation, which are more pronounced as the book progresses, may add to its appeal, not least to anyone just window-shopping through it. This feature of the book is also happily in keeping with Wycliffe's free-wheeling, adventurous style as theatre producer-director. Four of the insets, while being expansions on material well covered in the main narrative, also give the added pleasure of evoking the legendary personality of Wycliffe the director-producer, who is himself one of the major figures in the story he tells.

In the Table of Contents, the chapters are grouped in acts, as in a play, and in the climactic Act IV, entitled "Major Productions," the focus is on Wycliffe's largest, most challenging and most widely remembered productions, which he was asked or commissioned to do, he being the obvious person. These were pageants or "spectaculars," including the one celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City of Kingston, in 1972, and then, even more spectacular, the Carifesta Grand Gala in 1976, both staged at the National Stadium. Wycliffe and Hazel tell the story of these, but witness to their effect on audiences and participants is fittingly left to other writers, and these others recreate the unforgettable force of Wycliffe's personality. We get Marina Maxwell's hitherto unpublished piece, "Kingston 100: Grand Spectacular," and then three accounts of the Carifesta Gala, by Yvonne Brewster, Jean Lowrie-Chin and Lorna Goodison. These three were all involved in that production. For Wycliffe to get such luminous ladies to sing his praises is proof enough! I'll read just one snippet, from Brewster: "This man called Wycliffe Bennett I had always found a little pompous and patronizing, but after his success with managing Carifesta as a whole and the gala in

particular I can forgive him anything. It was his larger-than-life approach to life which allowed his special brand of creativity to flourish in this arena.”

Then there is an appendix of profiles of many of the persons who have featured in the history recorded by the book. However, these profiles (with photographs) greet us, happily, less as an appendix than as the final chapter of the book. Similarly, the numerous photographs, some of them rare items, interspersed throughout the book, are more than just engaging illustrations, but part of the substantial record that must be preserved. For a start, there's the tastefully catching cover, with a close-up action shot of Miss Lou and Mass Ran superimposed on the shining front of the Ward theatre. It's good to see, for example, petite and pensive Madame May Soohih against a silhouette of her dancers in motion. Or take the rare “find” of a group called “the Negro Ballet from Jamaica,” performing a Revivalist piece called “De Bredren” before the Queen of England, i.e. Victoria, in 1882.

The book is comprehensive, but it doesn't claim to be exhaustive, and the qualifying word “Highlights” is sensibly included in the title. It is a natural hazard of such a work that many a reader will find something which he or she thinks should have been included, or given more space. That is, as we say, “par for the course.” I'll indulge myself by mentioning two of my “spottings.” The more surprising one to me, though not at all the most important, is how little mention is made of a unique achievement in our theatre history, all the more surprising because it was Wycliffe's doing. I refer to what, to the best of my knowledge, is the only full-length and completely Jamaican television production of a Shakespeare play, *Macbeth*, on JBC television in 1973. In her piece on the Carifesta Grand Gala, Lowrie-Chin refers in passing to Wyciffe's “television production of *Macbeth*.” In the main narrative there is a reference to “Edward Baugh's enviably noble Banquo” (Wycliffe's words, not mine!), but readers who don't know, wouldn't have any idea as to the specific production.

More important though is the virtual silence on Sistren, the Sistren Theatre Collective. It is mentioned in the chapter on the School of Drama, but even though Honor Ford-Smith is one of the authors of that chapter, that would not have been the place for focus on the Collective. More suggestively, the one other passing mention is in Brewster's piece on the Barn Theatre, when she says, “The theatre even played host to

the revolutionary Sistren Collective productions when they could not find accommodation elsewhere.”

If cracks such as these are worth filling, no doubt they can be easily filled in due course. In any event, the book remains, a bounty, welcome, indispensable.

While I was working through it, trying to be thorough and critically observant and to concoct some ideas for this occasion, one day I got a sudden, uncanny, energizing jolt of awareness. I sensed that I was experiencing the book as giving us to ourselves, acting out the knowledge that we are a people, in all our variety and with all our frictions, a people in process, as evidenced in the evolution of the performing arts. I sensed that the book is not just an invaluable record, but that it is an experience. We say thanks to Bennett and Bennett, to the UWI Press, and to the sponsors who made the publication possible. As Wycliffe would say, “Cool breeze,” or, even at night, “Top of the morning to you!”

*Edward Baugh*

*23 October 2011*