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In the May issue of Karibbean Expressions, we introduced you to Author and Caribbean Arts extraordinaire, Andrene Bonner. This month we continue with an in-depth interview with this prolific woman whose stalwart contributions have paved the way for so many in the Caribbean community.

The Making of a Masterpiece...

Author & Caribbean Arts Icon shares the story of her success

Andrene Bonner, M.S.Ed., M.A., B.A., is an educator, writer, producer, singer, songwriter, poet, folk life specialist, and an accomplished actress. She teaches English Language Arts at Mount Vernon High School in New York. Ms. Bonner is the Founder and Artistic Director of Caribbean World Arts and Culture, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to research, advocacy, preservation, and exhibition of works that reflect the Caribbean experience. Bonner's writings have been published in Kapu-Sens: California State University Northridge Literary Journal, Carib Press News Magazine, and Café Africana Journal. She is the recipient of the 2009 Lorna Goodison Caribbean Award for Transformative Literature for her coming-of-age fiction "Olympic Gardens."

KEE WEBSTAGE: Tell us about your background?

I was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica and followed the normal prescribed primary and high school curriculum at Central Branch Primary School and Merl Grove High School. I hold a Master of Science in Education with Distinction, a Master of Arts in Language and Literacy and a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts and Dance. I am a New York State Certified English Teacher.

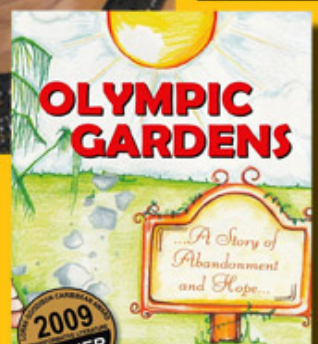
KEE WEBSTAGE: You have been involved in Caribbean cultural affairs in one way or another for many years; tell us when/how you developed a passion for the Arts?

During my high school years, the famous writer of the *Harder They Come* and *Smile Orange*, Trevor D. Rhone discovered and nurtured my dramatic talents. He exposed me to Irish, British, and Caribbean playwrights. I remember days trekking with Trevor to local high schools where he taught drama. We would both demonstrate theatre principles to his students. It was so awe-inspiring to see this passion up close and personal. As a teenager I became deeply immersed in this well of creative expression. It was sheer poetry. In fact I got into a lot of trouble at school when my parents were called to the principal's office with concerns that I focused too much attention on theatre.

During my years at the school of drama, I had the good fortune to work with celebrated professional theatre directors including, Hyacinth Brown, Tom Cross, Keith Noel, Lloyd Reckord, Dennis Scott, and Bobby Ghisays who could see in me this thirst for the stage. This notable cadre of directors and professors, over time and in different ways, created the space for me to explore my passion. When I was to present my transcripts to California State University Los Angeles' Theatre Arts and Dance program, the academic advisor, a former Yale professor immediately sought an endorsement of my work from director Dennis Scott who himself had come to Yale's faculty with the formidable Jamaican theatre credits. These were some of the people who let me fly.

Though a small island nation, Jamaica has one of the most vibrant theatre scenes in the Western hemisphere. During my early years in the theatre, there were a relatively high number of plays, sometimes half a dozen running simultaneously. I was a very busy working actress in Jamaica doing two productions per year.

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I must give credit to my parents. My exposure to the arts began with reading literature at home, from Chaucer to Shakespeare, the sacred texts, and further developed through my professional training. My parents played the piano and sang, and so I would sing my way into the hearts of every family member and guest who entered the Bonner home. Mother recited classic verses and long scripture passages and dad was famous for his intelligent yet funny Kiplingesque anecdotes. Concomitantly, the anansi stories brought to Jamaica by my Ghanaian ancestors was central to our folkways.

My classical vocal training was developed under the distinguished conductorship of award winning pianist and composer, Maestro Lloyd Hall, alumni of the Royal College of Music. For ten years, I sang first soprano with his 400 Voice Mass Choir at St. Andrew Scots Kirk and participated in his children's television broadcasting program.

In 1971, I brought home the drama award to Merl Grove High School, at the time, a relatively unknown school for girls. This is how I got to the Jamaica School of Drama. That year, I was awarded two full scholarships, one to the Jamaica School of Speech and Drama and the other to the Jamaica School of Art. I wanted to pursue both the visual and the performing arts but my passion for theatre won the toss and I studied drama and dance. The awards and recognition have been tremendous, but none more rewarding than the Andrene Bonner Drama Award, established in 1993 by Merl Grove High School. This award is bestowed annually upon a deserving student who demonstrates excellence in the performing arts.

Now that I am residing in the United States, I am even more passionate to share my talents with the community through local theatre companies and efforts of foreign missions and tourism organizations. I have had the opportunity to perform with the critically acclaimed, Dr. Albert McNeil's Jubilee Singers in many great concert halls including Carnegie Hall and the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

KEE WEBSTAGE: How/where do you find inspiration for your work?

O' for a muse! Art is in all of matter and so I find inspiration in observing, being able to feel, question, and participate in life. I revel in the kind of inspiration drawn from life's awkward moments. My ideas are born out of the transforming power of nature, man at his worst, and man at his best. Quiet time affords me the opportunity to create. I write most of the time and no surface is safe from my pen when inspiration calls.

KEE WEBSTAGE: You are the Founder and Artistic Director for Caribbean World Arts and Culture, Inc. Tell us about the journey to that role and what motivated you to create the organization?

Caribbean World Arts and Culture (CARIWAC), was established 20 years ago during my residency in Los Angeles. The organization is dedicated to research, advocacy, preservation, and exhibition of works that reflect the Caribbean experience. I have spent most of my adult life in the United States and always find myself drawn to the Caribbean aesthetic which I express through theatre. I have nurtured several youth theatre companies through CARIWAC, whose participants are second generation Caribbean children in search of culture and identity. For Caribbean immigrants, CARIWAC serves a slightly different and more immediate need. It has been a rare vehicle for self-expression in the Caribbean community. Like many other immigrant groups, a large majority of people of Caribbean heritage feel the separation from home in unique ways and continue to live life on the periphery. CARIWAC attempts to heal the cultural gap.

KEE WEBSTAGE: Your latest Novel Olympic Gardens has been receiving rave reviews; tell me about the book and what influenced your decision to write that story?

First of all, the title, Olympic Gardens is borrowed from a real town in Kingston. The story is important work that has not been done so far in this genre and set in Olympic Gardens. In Olympic Gardens, I am driven by the love of country—the love of community. The main protagonist, Roderick, is the embodiment of the abandoned and uneducated youth who must find ways to come of age and take ones place in the world.

KEE WEBSTAGE: You are quite an accomplished woman, what would you say are some of the biggest challenges you have faced on your journey to success?

This is a tough one. Challenges build character when you can surmount them and put them in their place. For years, maximizing my full potential as an artist and being able to support myself exclusively from my many talents has been my biggest challenge. Balancing home and art is no walk in the park as the various art forms demand quality time and attention. I pride myself on being a skilled craftsperson and so I tend to have high expectations for final product. This is has been accomplished through good work ethics.

KEE WEBSTAGE: Congratulations on your recent Lorna Goodison Award, you have accomplished quite a lot – what would you say has been your greatest accomplishment?

The Lorna Goodison Caribbean Award for Transformative Literature feels almost surreal, considering this is my first novel. Lorna Goodison is a leading writer of Caribbean literature whose works are heavily cited in academia and finds audiences all over the world. To be associated with her in this art form is a tremendous honor. After I received the award, Lorna had this to say: "I am deeply honored to have such an award named after me, I am even more honored that you are the honoree." The honor is mine.

Completing Olympic Gardens was great joy because it allowed me to tell one of the many stories of Jamaica. As a writer of post-colonial literature it was important that I add this layer of storytelling to avoid what Chimamanda Adichie calls the "single story."

KEE WEBSTAGE: You are being featured on Karibbean Expressions because of your accomplishments. What advice do you have for young aspiring writers or anyone interested in following your pathway?

As I say to my students, the reading and the writing has to happen at the same time. Do not restrict yourself to a single genre, read widely and write everyday.

Olympic Gardens is available online and is available in Jamaica at Sangster's Book Stores and Bookophilia. For more information on Andrene's work, please visit www.andrenebonner.wordpress.com

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