

JAMAICA PRIMETIME

Review: Actress and Author Andrene Bonner - Old Jamaican Bragadaps - New Age Performance

Published Oct 17, 2011



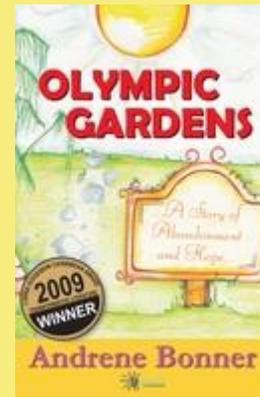
Andrene Bonner's new approach to living room entertainment is a bonoonoonos boost for the Caribbean and its Diaspora. She is one of a handful who has carried the light of Jamaican theatre to North America. The theatre scene in Jamaica is rich, multilayered, and Caribbean-affirming. It's black people being able to do classical Equus, The Taming of the Shrew or their own award-winning works. It's Trevor Rhone, Dennis Scott and Miss Lou and many who have come after. At the core, it's our own day to day experience, bitter, triumphant, joyful, reflecting back at us. Actors are reflectors and when a good one comes along and mirrors the humor and pathos of our ordinary lives in his or her unique way, we can step out of the immediacy of our problems and smile, even heal ourselves. We find theatre in the most unusual moments. I've done my share of house parties at home and abroad. The Caribbean students' parties around Howard University in Washington DC come to mind. It was fun to put on good clothes (loud gold brocade for me) and arrive 9 people deep around 12 midnight. We would do everything, Heineken, curry goat, roots Reggae, soca, dancehall, and the requisite dance competition until around 4 am, at which time, police would arrive and lock down proceedings. This was perfect time to linger for an hour, cuss the police from a safe distance in patois and then run off to breakfast with friends. The regularity of the police event added a layer of engagement to the party going experience, street theater if you will.

Before that there was my joy of singing and LTM Pantomime. There was also High Tea back home. Genteel friends and benefactors would gather around the pianoforte in the drawing room to hear the newest voices in Jamaica (I was one of those voices) sing a repertoire of Schubert and Mozart liberally sprinkled with songs like Jamaica Farewell and Evening Time shepherded by Noel Dexter. Of course, my high tea at home was my grandmother's fortifying early-morning bissy tea or fresh picked mint which I could cool and slurp contentedly. One can't do that at High Tea. Still, the tea parties were a fabulous window into some of the goings on among the hoity toity class. The show, the drama in the living room was formal but fun. It was quite the change from my drama at home. In the yard, every time I raised a song (classical) like Handel's, And He Shall Purify, my neighbor Lloydie would start one of his own, without fail, a revival rendition of My Journey Man Jesus and have us out sing each other. And then, things would steadily go downhill with the two of us furiously competing for loudest singer credits. I would lose to him every time because it would be straight nine-night alto while ignoring my mother's repeated cry to "let her ears eat grass." Looking back, it was classic zinc fence theatre.

Gone are those days, or so I thought until actress and author, Andrene Bonner recently brought them back in the New York area. It was wonderful to be reintroduced to the force of Jamaican theatre through this actress whom I saw perform in the LTM Pantomime Johnny Reggae. This orchestral Reggae tour de force is written by Barbara Gloudon and Peter Ashbourne. As I ask Bonner about those Panto days, she breaks out into song -- Miss Inez Oh Ah Weh You Gwine Do and moves to Time hard life hard grief Ah Yawd Landlawd Wan Fi Get Him Rent Lawd, Not Ah dollar

not Ah Cent Lawd. I thought it quite a feat since Johnny Reggae happened some time ago. She breezes through the impromptu performance rounding it off with the title song Go Deh. I brought her back to 2011. She has been touring quite a bit with her book, Olympic Gardens. The book is about the ever present reality of abandonment. In it, a young child, Roderick is passed from parent to extended family member in Jamaica. In Jamaican parlance de pickney dis fling weh. The new caretakers, a jaundiced bunch, refuse to send the child to school and promptly turns him into a day laborer. The tension in this book sometimes gives you flashbacks of your days getting the switch and not being allowed to cry. The town is a recognizable character in the story and it's eye-opening to be introduced to the 60s Olympic Gardens which, according to the Gleaner was named in celebration of Jamaica's stellar performance at the 1962 Olympic Games in Helsinki. The big story payoff here though is watching the protagonist wake up to his inner rebel. I am looking forward to the sequels.

I am most fascinated by the way Bonner brings the story to audiences here in the US. It's an unusual book tour. She has transported the Jamaican drawing room with a few changes to New York. Imposing post-colonial drawing rooms have given way to open-concept spaces with marble-topped kitchen islands. Spicy jerk chicken sandwiches have taken the place of the delicate green, yellow and red crushed cheese varieties of earlier days. Things are not as formal now. Come Miss Claire, the famous lead in to Evening Time sails out on a coloratura voice from some other location in the house. Heads turn to welcome Bonner as she enters the intimate gathering in her 21st Century interpretation of the costume. From then on you are transported home. She is a pleasure to watch as she weaves her years of theatre and musical skill into this special form of storytelling.



Hers is not the typical reading. She brings the story alive. Your heart unfolds as Bonner takes you through the Olympic Gardens story. It's a return to old passions and family, Sunday rice and peas and fricassee chicken as well as the dirt-laden emotional laundry of your missing mother and father, if such is your case. Can anything be more painful than an absentee mother or father? Absolutely not, as it is buried deep in our subconscious and the national psyche. Yes, Bonner touches this taboo with warm and kind hands by wrapping it in the folk that is our familiar. It's 'Jamaican theatre come a farin' at its finest. Bonner's performance is bountiful - a Broadway show without the travel, a visit to a very understanding psychologist, and a necessary trip to the motherland Jamaica. It's not to be missed.

About the Author:

Faith Nelson comes from a tradition of music and theatre in Jamaica. She now lives in the Washington DC where she continues to perform and work as a writer and brand strategist.