

Belonging and a sense of place

Patricia Cumper

I was once told off by my then partner for mocking a couple who had walked past us. They were deep in a lively conversation. After they passed us, I repeated what I had heard them say. I did out loud what I have always done in my head. I repeated what I heard around me. For me it was not what was said, or even the accent in which it was said, it was the intangibles: the rhythm within the words, the rise and fall of the voices, the force or softness of the delivery that had caught my attention.

When I came to live in the UK a quarter century ago, I was ignorant of the stereotypes, assumptions, and snobberies that underpin social interactions in the UK. There was as much music for me in a Scouse as in a Hampstead voice. Their turns of phrase were equally fascinating. The streets of London, bubbling with conversations in languages and accents from all over the country, all over the world, was a rich and varied learning ground. A bus ride, listening to the chatter of half a dozen schoolchildren, broadened my vocabulary. It was almost overwhelming. How do I write characters from this world so that they ring true?

I had spent years in Jamaica writing and producing nearly a thousand episodes of radio soaps. The studio conditions were basic but the technical operators and the actors I worked with were brilliant. I learnt when to get in and out of scenes, how to differentiate characters through accent, rhythm, age, even intent. I learnt and learnt. I could, and so I did, write a whole range of characters. My actors would laugh at me when I tried to read my own lines in deep rural patois, but I knew I could write the words. I was delighted to see a truck driver, his vehicle heavy laden with yams and bananas, stop

and park up in an uptown plaza of swanky shops, just so that he could listen to a pivotal episode on the radio in his cab. The soap characters I created even turned up in songs by local dancehall artists.

I had no such grounding when it came to writing in the UK. I had to attune my ear all over again. And it has been a fascinating process. It is like creating a pearl, the result of a constant irritant that forces the oyster to lay down coat after coat of nacre. No two pearls are exactly alike. The outcome is unpredictable. But it is always worth the effort. Changing countries has not silenced my voice. Instead, the range of characters and stories I can create has broadened. Though I no longer feel I belong entirely in any one place, I know I now write informed by a more nuanced and richer sense of place, wherever I choose to set my writing.

Patricia Cumper

Patricia began writing for the theatre in the Caribbean, where she had a dozen plays produced, many of which won awards or writing competitions. They include *The Rapist* and *The Fallen Angel and the Devil's Concubine*. In the UK, Patricia has been commissioned by Talawa Theatre Company, Carib Theatre Company, the Royal Court and Blue Mountain Theatre.

She was artistic director and CEO of Talawa Theatre Company from 2006 to 2012 and produced George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* in the Victoria & Albert Museum, and a touring production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the first all-Black production in the UK. She was made Member of the Order of the British Empire in 2013 for her work in Black British theatre.

Patricia founded and was co-artistic director of StrongBack Productions from 2013 to 2018, with work including her play on Jamaican soldiers in

World War One, *Chigger Foot Boys* (2017). A collection of three plays under the title *Inner Yardie* was published by Peepal Tree Press in 2014. She contributed to *The Diverse Bard* (2016), and *New Daughters of Africa* (2019).

Patricia was a member of the team of writers on *Westway*, the BBC World Service drama serial, and wrote more than 70 episodes. Adaptations for radio include Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (which won a silver Sony Award), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Marie Ndiaye's *Trois Femmes Puissantes* (nominated for the BBC Radio Contribution to Diversity award 2016). She adapted four of the six volumes of Maya Angelou's autobiographies broadcast in 2018 and 2019. Original radio plays include *Mr Trollope and the Labours of Hercules* (2016) and *Pardna* (2017).

She is currently working on *Red Dirt*, a play about the Windrush scandal, a musical adaptation of a Shakespeare play, and a screenplay about the Scottish Abolitionist movement.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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