

**Yvonne Brewster**

in conversation with Colin Grant

**COLIN GRANT:** Can you remember, Yvonne, when you first met Alfred Fagon?

**YVONNE BREWSTER:** Yes, I can.

**CG:** What was that like?

**YB:** I didn't know Alfred in Jamaica at all. I did not know anything about Alfred. We were living close to the Strand, and I was walking up and down there. I saw where there was something going on at the ICA, some black show, and that was very rare in those days, remember. So, of course I wanted to go and see what was going on. And that is how I met Alfred, and Alfred realised that we lived only five minutes away from the ICA. So, Alfred became a regular visitor.

He left Clarendon, in Jamaica, with very little education, but he made sure that he learned. Then he said he was an actor, because it must be 'easy', and he was in a play by Mustapha Matura at the ICA and he said to me one day, 'You mean this is play?' So, I said... 'Well, yes.' 'That is easy man. Me go write one.'

**CG:** What was the first play he wrote? Do you remember?

**YB:** Oh yes, it was *11 Josephine House*. Nobody talks about it but, in my humble opinion – and I suppose I shouldn't go on too humble-humble, because I've read all his plays and I know his work intimately – to me, it's the best play he ever wrote because it was straight off the cuff, it was his own experience. It went on at the

Almost Free Theatre in Rupert Street in London, and it had a significant success, when most people at that time didn't even know what 'black' was, much less black theatre.

He had fantastic actors in it, of course he was in every play he wrote, so he was in it playing himself and just an amazing set of people who just was so happy to be saying words that they didn't have to make sound 'real'. Because he wrote the dialogue, and when you said it, it was proper, you know, you didn't... A lot of times when you get a phrase supposedly from Africa, various parts of Africa and various parts of the Caribbean, you kind of have to put your own stamp on it, and say, I wonder what they really wanted.

With Alfred, it was so Clarendon-Jamaican that there was no way you could get away from it. And so, his audio recognition was immense. His characterisation was very good, too, because he was talking about people who he knew, you know priests and parsons who had these little, small churches and then used all the sisters in the church for... Well, sometimes not only collecting collections...

**CG:** Amorous relationships?

**YB:** Oh rather! But then he's found out. So, it's quite a moral play, and he is made to realise the error of his ways and he's stripped of his dignity. He didn't have any position really, but he's stripped of his dignity. And he looked at racism as well because there was a white woman in it... a girl, and the young son had this girlfriend and, you know, he brought that up gently as to how the people in the family reacted to this white person, because remember Caribbean people in those days – very early seventies – didn't really much move with too much white people.

Yes, so significant I find this play, and I find it actually quite well done. Roland Rees was the director who saw that Alfred had a strange and wonderful talent. Very strange and wonderful, in a way which is not wondrous.

**CG:** Can you dig into that a bit more deeply? What was strange and what was wonderful about it?

**YB:** Well, what was wonderful about it is that he didn't have the constraints of having been brought up to write a play: *This is how you write a play, my dear, you have two characters, and they have to relate one to the other and you have, you know, a modicum of discussion and stuff.* He didn't know anything about that. He was just putting life on a stage. It hardly happened before, and it hardly happened since, because there's always that step up, you know: we're in a play, we're not real, we're in a play. And no matter how common or garden you try to make the thing, it always looks somewhat achieved, you're trying to *achieve*, but for Alfred, that was I think his joy.

**CG:** So, it had a kind of rawness did it, the plays?

**YB:** Well, I suppose. Michael Billington might call it raw. But I would call it real.

**CG:** OK.

**YB:** You know, it's threatening. It threatens you with the truth and with stuff that you sometimes don't want to come face to face with, which is actually, after all, what a play should be about, I think.

**CG:** So, the circumstances of his death, they were rather pitiful, weren't they? Those circumstances: he was out jogging, and he had a heart attack and died, but his body was not identified by the police, and he was buried in a pauper's grave without his relatives being alerted.

**YB:** That's right.

**CG:** That must have been quite a shock for you.

**YB:** Well, it's easy to say that he was not identified by the police. All the identification was on him. He was actually going to a reading at the BBC and his

appointment was there and everything. But they didn't bother to do anything about that. Had they rung the BBC... He was on the books – a play of his, or he was acting or something – it was all on his body. He was right outside his house, and they didn't even go inside, they just scooped him up and that was it. It was one of the most blatant forms of racism that suggested that, you know, one man's life is worth rather less than another man's life. Yes, that's always stayed with me. I couldn't understand how the police could do that.

**CG:** This was 1986, wasn't it?

**YB:** [Agrees] Mmmhmmm.

**CG:** What then led to the founding of the award?

**YB:** A lot of us, Roland, and Jason Rose, and one or two other people who were friends of Alfred, they said, 'What happened to Alfred?' Anyway, we did some sort of searching around and we discovered what had happened, and there was a shock in the community because it was totally unnecessary that this should've happened, and you couldn't believe it. It was one of the instances where the disparate community of theatrically inclined people of colour got together. So, we thought, we have got to make something to mark this man's passing, because we realised what an important thing it was. The Tricycle was being run by Ken Chubb...

**CG:** The Tricycle Theatre.

**YB:** He said, 'You could have the auditorium.' Fine. So, we went, and we got people to come and read poems – some of Alfred's poems, because he wrote poems as well. Yemi Ajibade. you know, from Africa – he's a Nigerian actor, unfortunately, he's left us now – and he did some Yoruba stuff and Jason did 'If We Must Die', the Claude McKay poem, which brought the house down, because somehow, we had not recognised that that was a Jamaican man who wrote that.

It was just wonderful and it was a beautiful evening. There was about 200 people in there, rammed to the rafters as it were, and we thought, 'Well, let's put the hat

around.’ And you know, Colin, we’re talking about the 1980s. We collected £2,000 that evening. That was a miracle, because when you think it’s out-of-work black actors who didn’t have £2,000 to spare, and people gave generously. And, so, at the end of the night, they said, ‘What are we going to do with all this money? Give it to Yvonne.’ I said, ‘You, mad?’ Anyway, we thought that it was best to do something and give it to an emerging black playwright. So that’s how the Alfred Fagon Award started. The Peggy Ramsay Foundation has supported us for 25 years. So, it’s now 25 years old, and I think as a black organisation, that is cutting some stuff, because we don’t usually last.

**CG:** So, what would you say today is the importance of the award?

**YB:** Look... [Laughs]... It has become quite big, you know, because black writers who had nowhere else to go would go; but those who had openings would think it’s just a bit of nonsense. Well, my dear, you see the entries. Everybody who is writing, who is black, it seems to me. That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but nearly everybody puts in a play every year and we have had some winners, like Michaela Coel and people like that, who have gone on to do incredible stuff. And the National, to give the National Theatre its due, they have supported us incredibly. They pay for so much. It’s just a lovely story and when people are always sort of saying, you know, black people this, black people that. I think we have to pause a way, and look at some of the things in which people have gone out of their way, because the people that are helping us, most of all, is all white people. Now that’s me. I tend to rock the boat a bit. But that’s it.

**CG:** So, Yvonne, if Alfred Fagon was alive today, would he ever win the prize, the award in his name, do you think?

**YB:** That is a very... Oh, I was hoping you wouldn’t ask me that. Because I find it hard to... You know, I don’t think so.

**CG:** Why not?

**YB:** It's much more sophisticated now. I mean, the plays are multi-linear, multi-layered, international concerns etc. And Alfred's plays, they're good plays, but it's not Shakespeare, you know.

**CG:** [Laughs]

**YB:** And you see, I would get into trouble for saying a thing like that, because everyone would say, 'Oh, Alfred, Alfred, Alfred...' I think if it was good enough, he would have done, but he'd have to come damn good. Put it that way.

**CG:** Sure, sure. So, what do you think now about the revival of his work? So, there's this play on at the Hampstead Theatre, *Death of a Black Man*, do you think it's a timely revival? Do you think there are lessons to be learnt for the kinds of plays he was writing in the seventies and eighties?

**YB:** Yes, it's a timely revival and I must point out that Hampstead had planned to do it a whole year ago, before, you know, the Covid, and they kept it on there because it was first done there some 25 years ago. So, I have to lift my hat to Hampstead for their generosity and for their vision.

**CG:** But the actual play itself, does the play resonate today, do you think?

**YB:** You know, you are a terrible interviewer because I was trying to get out without answering. [Laughs] But you caught me. Um, yes, I suppose so, in a way. His treatment of women was not always great; so, there's always a little thing about that. When he wrote about women, he didn't understand them very much, I have to say, as much as he understood his brothers. But it's all right, I think... You're trying to get me to say it's dated. I don't think it's dated.

**CG:** No, no. I wasn't trying to get you to say anything. Because I can't get you to say anything you don't want to say...

**YB:** [Laughs]

**CG:** No, I just wondered whether you might consider it to be a history play because, as you say, it's of a particular time.

**YB:** Yes, yes.

**CG:** It spoke to that particular time, and it illuminated the truth at the time.

**YB:** Yes, I agree with you. You said it much better than me.

**CG:** [Laughs]

**YB:** [Laughs]

**CG:** But I think, what is important of what you just said, is that it was a pioneering work, and he was a kind of pioneering writer (and actor, I suppose), at a time when there were few black actors around and black writers.

**YB:** Absolutely, absolutely. And because he had no fear, you know. Alfred had no fear. I've never seen a man who...he feared nothing. *Him say because him born in Clarendon, and when you born in Clarendon, you don't have no fear.*

**CG:** Could I just ask you a final question? If you were sat at a dinner party and you had to describe succinctly the kind of writer and actor that Alfred was, what would you say?

**YB:** Alfred was a writer who thought writing was fun and he thought fun should be shared, hence he wrote the plays. Alfred was a man who didn't take things very seriously, although he was a very serious, political man. But I remember Alfred always giggling. He giggled a lot and that hid his intense intelligence.

**CG:** But we all want to be remembered for having a uniqueness, and I just wondered what his uniqueness was. As a writer, what was his theme? What was his subject? What was his writer's voice, would you say?

**YB:** A writer's voice was a man in Brixton. People don't realise what Brixton used to be like. Used to be like a foreign country in London. He's a man of Brixton. He recorded – and so even in *Lonely Cowboy*, he was recording this gentrification of Brixton. It's a sad play because all the people who were there were being pushed away. Now, you know you can't buy not even a broom cupboard there, but that was beginning to happen. It was a place where black people always – because you could buy yam, you know, and stuff like that – they always felt comfortable. And I think he was a man who recognised that. I think he wouldn't have expected all these questions to be asked about him.

**CG:** [Laughs]

**YB:** [Laughs] Really, you know, he's a man make you laugh, you know. Alfred was a man for all seasons.

**CG:** Very good. Yes, yes, well put. Well, thank you very much, Yvonne. We got there in the end!

**YB:** [Laughs]

**CG:** Thank you for paying tribute to Alfred and thank you for appearing on *WritersMosaic*.

**YB:** Thank you very much, Colin, and it's nice to see you. Bye, bye.

**CG:** Bye, bye.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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