

Praisesong for Mona Hammond (1931-2022)

Burt Caesar

Mona, dear Mona...

As a small boy growing up in the Caribbean, my first greeting of the day to her would have been 'Good morning, Miss Chin', that being her local, non professional, Chinese Jamaican surname...

Not merely as a show of courtesy to an older person: Mona's air of tranquil self possession and the understated elegance of her bearing would have impelled such acknowledgement from boy or man...

But, we in a different country now and, though still respectful, small island deference has also changed with more relaxed times...

So, Mona, dear Mona...

I first became aware of her striking presence, once-seen-never-forgotten, in a rare Play for Today broadcast by the BBC back in the 1970s. There were only three television channels then, and the appearance of any non-white face apart from news reports (war! flood! famine!) turned domestic telephones into grapevine hotlines as friends and neighbours alerted one another, sometimes simultaneously, with the sharp command, 'Turn on BBC/ITV! There's a black man/black woman on telly!'

Someone like Mona (and others, too) would have gifted an especially warm sense of vicarious pride to her primed and eager audience, particularly the ones from home, always watchful as we were in fear of embarrassment, our emotional antennae ready to pick up any inkling of The Race Being Let Down...

My personal acquaintance with Mona owes everything to serendipity. For a stretch of time in the early 80s she and I would intermittently end up on the same tube train, from Embankment or Victoria to my destination at Hammersmith. Strap hanging for that half hour or so I would have another opportunity to be totally, uninterruptedly admiring as we indulged in a li'l light-hearted old talk, an impromptu lime on the District Line...

It was on one of those journeys that Mona told me about her son, Michael Sanders, being an aspiring photographer. So, part of his apprenticeship for his current success in the Big Apple was taking my first Actors' Spotlight photographs on location in Ravenscourt Park round about 1981!

I got to work with Mona once only and, thing is, I can't recall much detail from the experience. It was an episode of the BBC sitcom *Us Girls* in the early 90s. Written by Lisselle Kayla, it was given a measly 12 episodes despite its quality and conceptual originality. Mona was the irrepressible matriarch of three generations of Caribbean women living under the same London roof. I played a local purveyor of religion, the aptly named Pastor Peach. Each episode was a couple days of hectic rehearsal for the multi-camera set-up, then recording before a live audience at White City

Television Centre. With Mona at pole position in the cast, we all got through on waves of generosity, trust and adrenaline...

But it was Mona's luminous performances elsewhere, on stage and on screen, during those decades – much too sporadic in her admirers' opinion – that gave us who witnessed those occasions (even just one or two of them) the kind of visceral thrill and splendour we readily associate with her stellar contemporaries and near contemporaries, for instance, Vanessa Redgrave, Liv Ullman, Isabelle Huppert, Alfre Woodard, Viola Davis...

Whether it was work by Shakespeare, Shaw, Oscar Wilde or by Barry Reckord, Trix Worrell, Lennie James, Mona possessed the awesome sensory and technical capacity for precision, depth and sensitivity to fully inhabit the lives of her characters...

More than that, it was as if she was reaching back, through her daring imagination, to the pen and mind of the author and bringing those fictional souls to a level of physical incarnation for the duration of the drama: the actor as a form of spirit medium, a unique character presence in space and time, dazzling in action the way light refracts from a jewel...

I'm thinking of Mona as Lady Macbeth (from accounts of some who saw her in the landmark Roundhouse production); I'm thinking of Mona as the Fool in *King Lear*; I'm thinking of Mona as Lady Bracknell; Mona as Auntie Susu in *Desmond's*; as Blossom in *EastEnders*...

In essence, Mona could achieve that ideal state of stage repose, a dynamic stillness that is the most potent default choice for any performer: it's a cast-iron spur to concentration and to close listening, to

being in the moment...

In very recent times, especially with the now ubiquitous streaming services, we've seen some exceptional and game-changing drama series and performances. Yet, for too long, and too frequently, on our stages and screens we've also had the plodding regurgitation of sponsored mediocrity when so much more is possible than shallow, slipshod, generalised ambition. That baleful m-word ('mediocrity') could never ever land in the vicinity of Mona: she belongs to the pantheon, a lodestar whose example and memory will never cease to move and to inspire...

I once asked Mona about the heavy and onerous burden of responsibility that was borne by her generation of non-white artists, when such public figures were rare. She replied:

We seemed to have always something to prove to the world... I still feel that to this day [in 2009]... we still on a journey of proving your worth, proving why you are in this space, and as a human being... my work was cut out to be here... everything I did, I wanted to do things that will make West Indians feel proud of coming from the West Indies: that is the most important thing to me... my struggle is somebody else's success.

In that Ubuntu spirit I list some of the venerable names of the cohort who helped blaze the professional trail all-o'-we now tread. Many have passed from that time when talent far outran opportunity, a number still survive in their dotage:

Earl Cameron, Nadia Cattouse, Cy Grant, Edric Connor, Pearl Connor, Pearl Prescod, Johnny Sekka, T-Bone Wilson, Horace James, Clifton Jones, Calvin

Lockhart, Barbara Kissoon, Frank Singuineau, Joan Hooley, Alaknanda Samarth, Zia Moyeddin, Norman Beaton, Errol John, Jacqui Chan, Badi Uzzman, Yemi Ajibade, Esther Anderson, Oscar James, Alfred Fagon, Jason Rose, Allister Bain, Ram John Holder, Loftus Burton, Thomas Baptiste, Pauline Henriques, Isabel Lucas, Cleo Sylvestre, Stephan Kalipha, Carmen Munroe, Rudolph Walker, Gordon Heath, Louis Mahoney, Larrington Walker, Corinne Skinner-Carter, Frank Cousins, Alton Kumalo, Leonie Forbes, Bari Johnson, Charles Hyatt...

...and, not least, of blessed and glorious memory, Mona Hammond: 'Good night, Miss Mavis Chin, go on off to glory, may your rest be eternal, in peace and in power.'

A commemoration for Mona Hammond, delivered 2 October 2022 at the Young Vic Theatre, London, organised by Talawa Theatre Company, which she co-founded.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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