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Abstract

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What is your memory of Louise Bennett as a personality?

Well, Louise Bennett is like a large comfortable duvet (laughter). Yes, I believe a duvet because a duvet has a very practical use in that it keeps you warm, what a European image eh? ... for such a sunny West Indian lady, but I expect it’s because it’s snowing outside why that comes to mind. Her warmth is all enveloping, but her precision is like the stitching around the edge of the duvet. The feathers stay where they are and have their uses which are defined and channelled because of the intelligence of the designer. She is well designed.

She thinks clearly, she thinks ironically and she thinks musically. She is an incredible source of inspiration for anybody who has any concern about the value of West Indian literature ... the value of our Jamaican to be precise, because she wouldn’t refer to herself as a West Indian, she’d refer to herself always as a Jamaican, rather as I do, because I think there is a vast difference between the islands.

And it isn’t Louise go lightly, it’s Louise go very detailedly. She has all her reference points. She knows her historical data, so when she takes things like immigration to England and writes, in that particular poem ‘Colonisation In Reverse’, which is probably one of the most important sociological pieces of poetry ever written in the West Indies, then you see how precise she can be in such a short poem, and even if you don’t speak the dialect you are in no doubt about what that poem actually means.

She would take on stuff like cricket and the poaching of people’s culture by the British and do it in such a precise and stinging way whilst smiling all the while. I love it. And it’s so Jamaican, cos Jamaicans, naturally speaking, don’t get heavy. There’s always that little kind of laugh but you’ve got to see below it. I remember always, and Louise says this, ‘Ha, better laugh than cry’ or ‘If I don’t laugh I will cry’, and the threat in the ‘cry’ is important to recognize. So Louise Bennett, her whole personality, her whole effervescence, is one of laid back gentility and proactive cultural invasiveness.

It’s a fantastic combination and I have to say that her husband Eric, and I think tribute must be paid to him, had a great deal to do with keeping her in the manner in which she would be able to continue being like this.
How did he do that?

Well, because he understood (laughter). Husbands often don’t, and he was a fantastic support. I mean it’s as simple as that. Husbands often get jealous of a person of large, I keep saying large personality, of course the woman weighs, she weighs an impressive amount, elle a de poids shall we say, but that’s not the heaviness I mean ... I mean heavy in terms of her comment, although it always appeared so light to the audiences, and with children.

I remember she used to have a television show in the early days of television in Jamaica called, ‘Ring Ding’, and it was on on a Saturday afternoon I think. A programme for young people, always recorded. That was very sophisticated in those days you know. Louise would go home to this amazing house that she had up in Gordon Town, in the coolth of Kingston, not too far from the centre, but the coolth, you know Kingston rises very suddenly. It was an old kind of manorial type of house the doors of which were so thick they almost appeared to be like barriers to the uncouth if you like. There was a big fireplace if you please, fireplace in Jamaica; sometimes it was lit as well because up in the hills there it got cool in the evening.

She had this enormous bedroom in which there was this huge four-poster with Jamaican kind of turn of the century, or late nineteenth century, cut turned wood and stuff, and it was a high thing you almost had to step up to get onto the bed. It must have been at least eight feet square, you know almost canopied, and stuck up in one corner of the room was this television on top of the wardrobe which was also in Jamaican mahogany. Now, it was before the time of colour television right, so over this screen was spread a bit of theatrical gel, coloured gel, to give it that warm glow right. So you had this kind of pinky straw coloured gel, and she would lie in the bed, frothed up with all these wonderfully embroidered white cushions and pillow cases, and she would lie down, in state, in the bed and watch ‘Ring Ding’ on Saturday afternoon when it was being transmitted. Now, those of us younger people who regarded Louise Bennett as a saint, would sometimes go up there and watch her watching herself on television.

Could you just explain how you came into contact with Louise Bennett in the first place?

Oh, I don’t know. It seems I was born in her lap. I’ve never known a time when I didn’t know Louise, I don’t know David. I don’t remember meeting her d’you see, so I must have come into her presence before memory jogged. Funny no one’s ever asked me that.

So the child came.

A little girl called Maxine, she was one of my mother’s, my mother adopted many many many children, twenty-one I think in all, and she was one of my mother’s adoptions who I took as my daughter if you like. Anyway, I took Maxine with me, and Maxine at the time was about three and a half, so
we went up to watch Miss Lou watch herself.

We sat down on the bed, and she's giving us cashew nuts and Christmas pudding and plantain; she was always eating, right. So we lay down in this bed, three women, one three and a half, me in my thirties or or late twenties, I can't remember, and Louise Bennett, I don't know how old, no one asks Louise's age. So we're watching this and Maxine starts to cry. We can't understand and then Louise realizes what is wrong. Maxine is looking at the television and looking at the bed, and looking at the television and looking at the bed, and she's not seeing the same thing coming out of the mouth of Louise, and you know Louise repeated what she was saying on television to put the child at rest. Isn't that a fascinating thing?

That's Louise Bennett. She appealed to everyone from small children to adults who would go and watch her and Maas Ranny in pantomime every year. These people felt they were watching their culture, their life distilled if you like.

*What was the pantomime actually like?*

Well pantomime in Jamaica started nearly sixty years ago. It started with the expatriates, the white expatriates wanting 'something to do' (accent). There was this amazing Frank Matcham theatre, the exact spitting image of The Theatre Royal Stratford East, but twice the size darling and twice as nice. It had all the plush, all the cupids and that's where they did the first pantomime. I'm trying to remember the name of it. I think it was either 'Sinbad The Sailor' or 'Jack and the Beanstalk' or one of these things. I'm not too sure of the exact details of the history of the pantomime.

So all of the white people were dressed up in lederhosen and slapping their thighs and had principal boys and stuff. This existed for quite a few years whilst they amused themselves you see ... and then the Jamaicans, typical Jamaican, decided (kissing her teeth) 'Tekin' ova yu noh!' And this is when Louise and Ranny started to do it. I think that the first Jamaican pantomime with Jamaican overtones was a thing called 'Busha Bluebeard', where we had some black people on stage dealing with Anancy, the folkloric hero we celebrate. Anancy's genesis is in Ghana ... which is where I think most Jamaicans came from and not Nigeria. Anyway, this new Jamaican pantomime started to take over. Now it has actually, dare I say this, fallen into disrepute. Well, I wouldn't say disrepute because it's not for me to say, but pantomime isn't what it used to be. It has become a kind of annual excuse for putting on some kind of really rather cheap jokes. The ones I've seen recently, I don't think they inspire like they used to because they used to be traditionally based. Now I think they've got a pantomime company and it's always produced by the same people, so there's a kind of *détêt vu* edness about it.

In the Golden Age of the Jamaican pantomime it was produced by the Fowlers. They must not be forgotten, people sort of try and go on as if they didn't do anything, they did. Greta and Henry Fowler were white
Jamaicans, but Jamaicans with a sense of history, who encouraged the Jamaicanization of the pantomime. They were the ones who put the money behind it to produce it so that Louise could do it. That's what Louise is best known for, and wasn't she marvellous!

I always remember as a youngster helping out with the direction of the pantomime called, 'Morgan’s Dream Of Old Port Royal'. It was a kind of historical pantomime about the buckaneer, who became Governor of Jamaica, on the principle that if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em. He was such a pirate, they made him Governor so that Jamaica stopped being pirated, it was a lovely thing and I was assisting Rex Nettleford I think, who was directing it. This was my foray into directing, yes. I learnt very quickly. I used to act at the time, I was terrible actually, but I learnt very quickly, and any time anybody was sick, who would do the part? Yvonne. So I was the kind of roving male as well you know, understudy. Louise was starring in the thing, but she was sick, for the first time in the history of the pantomime someone went on and did Louise’s part ... and it was me.

That’s something!

I know, I know, I know, and I knew the lines and everything, and I thought yeah, I wasn’t nervous or anything, cos when you’re young you’re so stupid, and I did four parts. I mean all different parts, but that is the one when I came on the stage darling.

And you say you can’t act?

I am a great respecter of actors. For instance when you are working with really great actors, I think Mona Hammond, up there on the wall behind you is a great actress. When you’re working with people like that, Jeffrey Kissoon, Norman Beaton, they’re all in that room the people I really regard, when you work with them and you see the depth of their talent you know that you’re a joker.

So what about that part then? What happened when you performed it? Stepping into Louise Bennett’s shoes.

Never thinking ... never thinking you know that all these twenty how many years of tradition everybody came to see Louise Bennett. Louise Bennett sick you know, and usually if Louise was sick they just cancelled the show. Now things were getting much more commercial in those days you know, and cancelling a show, ‘can’t cancel show’. Louise really was sick. ‘Well you will do it Yvonne’ ‘OK fine’. Right, look at the lines, remember them, yeah yeah, well this costume, they’re gonna have to wrap it round me twice, like the skirt forty-five inch waist ... boom boom ... (action of wrapping) they cut and try to puff me out a bit ... I went on. Without thinking that these people would be so shocked, when I went on and I heard the reaction, like, ‘A weh di!’ That’s when I was shocked, but darling I’m a trouper right. I won them over, because they didn’t want me, they didn’t know who the hell I was. I was a nobody you know,
nobody knew me. At that time, maybe I was on radio but they didn’t know my face. I used to have a dastardly kind of programme on radio called ‘Open House’, and I was producing some television, what was it? My time scale is getting all mixed up. There was no announcement made or anything, and I went on, and I thought oh my god, but I went through and by the end of the show I have to say, when I came down for my bow, and Louise was the last person and everything, I said to Lois Kelly Barrow, you do the last bow, you know, I’m not doing it. She said, ‘Don’t be so daft’. So she came down with me and Ranny and the audience really applauded ... through the generosity of the other actors ... I have to say.

But it must have been good.

I’m not gonna say it wasn’t good, it was fantastic. It’s one of my lifelong memories actually. The cheek, and the sort of ... the arrogance. I don’t know I think it was arrogance, I think it was, well the show must go on.

What did Louise say?

Louise was great. She said, ‘Well A cyan get sick again now’, and of course she never was because she’s a trouper. She was great. Louise doesn’t have time for petty rubbish. I never felt any small mindedness or pettiness from her. She’s a giant.

After the pantomime I think what happened next was the Radio shows, in the sixties, ‘Miss Lou’s Views’.

Oh no, those were happening all the time, pantomime went straight through, until the middle seventies you know. ‘Miss Lou’s Views’ existed all the time, you see she wasn’t just doing one thing, commercials, Louise was jetting all over the world, giving lectures. Did you know Louise went to RADA?

Did she ever speak to you about her experience of being in England?

Not that I remember. I never thought to ask about it. I would be interested to find out what it was like. She wasn’t here for very long. I think she was here for a year at RADA or something like that, I’m not too sure.

So what about the radio shows?

Radio shows? ... look, dem tings changed cultural perception, political perception. Aunty Roachy? ... Look at all the things that Aunty Roachy would say ... you couldn’t say them things but, ‘As my Aunty Roachy said to me the other day, don’t you think is about time the Prime Minister get a haircut?’. She wouldn’t be as crass as that. The haircut could really mean, ‘cut arf ‘im ed’. She was very political, and that is why she is invirtual I think. You can ask her about this, but the fact that she doesn’t live in Jamaica is an enduring shame to that country.

Why is it that she is not in Jamaica?

Well I mean I think it’s politics, but she would be the best person to answer
that, if she will ... cos she doesn’t, but then this is a serious piece of work so she would probably answer you. I think she felt she had to leave.

*It's also interesting that she chose Canada.*

Yes, but I think she had family up there and her husband is sick with his heart, and that was where he could get the best treatment you see. She has some things wrong with her as well, I think that’s where it’s best for her too. I read an article in a Toronto newspaper that a friend of mine at CBS sent to me, and she is really recognized as an important person in Toronto. I think that somebody like that, not living out their last years in Jamaica is a dying shame.

*It’s interesting listening to what you’re saying because it’s so positive, yet speaking to Jamaicans who came here in the 50s, they seemed to have little, if any interest in Louise Bennett and her work at the time.*

Why was that?

*Why? I think it was because it highlighted so much of what they were about ... what they actually came from.*

So it was embarrassing?

*I think so ... but this attitude has changed with succeeding generations. There’s more pride. What was the initial general response to Louise Bennett in Jamaica and how it has actually changed towards her. Now she’s regarded as a cultural figure?*

Louise Bennett is a very sophisticated lady. Louise Bennett’s education is first rate. She couldn’t be so politically accurate, and such a mover and shaker on the cultural scene, if she wasn’t in the possession of a very large brain so in our house she was quoted. I’m in a maze now you see, because I’m only one person, and I’m not a cultural historian, so my thing is coming from my particular perspective and I have never heard anybody say that they found Louise embarrassing. They found her hysterical, they found her annoying ...

*Embarrassing is my word, through actually trying to probe ... that age group of Jamaicans here.*

That’s possible here you see. Let me give you an example ... Barry Record had the first black television play in this country, called, ‘In The Beautiful Caribbean’. He’s a Rhodes scholar, he is so bright, and frustrated beyond words because he hasn’t had a play on since 1981, I think. He’s a brilliant man, a brilliant West Indian, he’s highly political, verging on Communist at that time. Right, Barry wrote about the truth in the West Indies and this was a ninety minute play on BBC One at peak time in the 1970s. They brought over Louise Bennett to be in it, they brought Calvin Lochardt from Hollywood, Joan-Anne Maynard, she played the ingénue, was Norman Beaton in it? I can’t remember. I was in some kind of funny production role
you know, I was always around behind the scenes trying to learn. It was showing the West Indies as it is, those people who have culturally closed minds and who can be politically inactive. I mean the people sometimes deserve the situation that they are in because they think guns answer.

*What was the response here?*

You know the switchboard was jammed with West Indians but principally Jamaicans phoning up to complain that one of the people in the thing had no shoes on, 'An to seh as if everybody in Jamaica walk wid barefoot!' I think that killed Barry Record. I don't think that he's been the same since. It was brilliantly done, Mona was in it, everybody was in it, they just swept the board, yes, and it was a damn good piece, Philip Saville, one of the most senior directors at the BBC directed it. They threw money at it, more than they would have done for a white production. There were the other things you know, all set up and sophisticated, but there were some scenes in down-town Kingston in the wretched of the earth sort of scenario, and the people complained. Now you see where is our sense of place not to be able to recognize ... mind you those people were having a hard time and people would laugh at them because the uninformed white trash didn't know any better anyway, and when you get white trash it's much worse than black trash will ever be. They went to work the next day, 'I saw your people and they didn't have any shoes on did they?' ... but the sum total of all the people phoning up to complain was that the BBC had shown some black people without shoes.

Now I ask you, where is our sense of place? Where is our pride? Where is our kind of sense of humour?

*It says a lot about many of the people that came over.*

I understand what you are saying to me, Louise would have been an embarrassment to them, because it's dialect that she's speaking. I have come across this attitude with this kind of people when doing pantomime. Remember, I've been working in this country since 1971 you know, right, and I mean I was here before then as well, working in theatre, and I did a Louise Bennett pantomime and the white people came but the black people didn't want to. They said, 'Oh they're just showing us as if we can't speak proper English'. They thought that for their children the only thing to be was British, and even now there is still some leaveover from that. There are some black youngsters who have been thrown out of their house because they were rude to a policeman, 'Yu should know 'ow to behave yuself because is a nice white man.' So there is a kind of self hatred and a kind of cultural disavowment that happens.

*So what about the response in Jamaica to Louise Bennett?*

I have never seen it ... never seen it ... I never felt that. Well at that level I have to say I don't know too many people. Well look, it's no good pretending, that's not the normal set of people that I deal with, right. I mean
if I dealt with people like that, it’s people who are working, because my grandfather was very wealthy and he had a big firm and a lot of people working for him ... but then they wouldn’t discuss that kind of thing with me anyway. I can’t say how people reacted to Louise in the privacy of their own homes, but my impression, from pantomime is that they adored her. These were the people that went up into the Gods. They saw themselves being shown on the stage, in their own true sense, and I don’t feel that there was an embarrassment. There’s embarrassment here because when you come to England, people make black people feel that they are insufficient, not quite human. In a way some people kind of try to make up for it by being more English than the English. So when you see the houses with the antimacassars and all the exaggerated suburban Englishness, it’s pathetic, but then you can’t laugh at the people because they had no guidance.

When you first came here ... when Enoch Powell brought black people over from the West Indies to come and work ... they came here by invitation you know. They never thought that they would ever breed, that they would ever need anywhere to live. They just thought that they were a kind of extension of the slave trade ... so they wouldn’t have any personal needs. So as a black person facing an attitude of no dogs, no Irish and certainly no blacks, you have to have some kind of reaction, and I can’t knock it. I’m becoming much more understanding of that attitude to Louise Bennett now as we discuss it, but I’d never really thought about it you see, because I’ve never really taken on board that sociological point.

The attitude is changing within that generation because their children and grandchildren have a need to hold onto their roots and are more positive about their history. They are being influenced by succeeding generations, and so if anything like Louise Bennett’s work is brought into the home, the response, in many cases, is more welcoming than it would have been twenty years ago.

Well I know, I know that myself from working with younger actors, and hearing my son’s views. He is twenty-two.

What about Louise Bennett’s direct influence on the work that you initially did in theatre? You played her part and then?

Well, in the pantomime the influence is there totally. In the other work I have to say that I don’t think that she influenced me ... directly. Overall, I think as a primary source that was very important. My bent was more for, not for writing you see, because I always knew I couldn’t write, not even a letter ... I always wanted to interpret. I was always into history. I want to see the forebearance rather than the present.

So Louise Bennett is not a direct influence?

No, not really. Not on my work but on the language, and how to approach the text, yes. Louise’s text is so muscular and so pared down. I have to cut a lot of the plays that I do because I find sometimes that West Indian
playwrights overwrite, kind of garrulous on the page ... and I think they say the same thing over and over again ... a bit like Shakespeare. Shakespeare did too you know, in case the people are talking and laughing and miss it the first time. I am a great respecter of Shakespeare but then everybody cuts Shakespeare, probably to cut out characters, but I cut it to cut out repeats. It's an art, I think I'm quite good at cutting Shakespeare actually, and I think I'm quite good at editing plays. In working with Louise on pantomimes I learnt how she would use an inflection, and cut out a whole half a speech. That's the kind of thing I learnt from her.

So it's about structure?

Yes. She will use one word to sum up, so it requires attention. If you can't give it the attention well tough titties, you've got to. Maas Ran, who was her cohort you know, they were always together, he died, and he was a lovely man actually, but completely different you know. He came from the minstrel background, and had a different approach. The two of them were chalk and cheese and so made a good team. He would go on and on. Ranny would add words, add and add, and she'd be cutting. If you look at the structure of her poems, I mean none of them are longer than a page, that's a bit of an exaggeration, one or two of them, but not many, and look at what they say.

What about putting her poems into performance?

Alright, here we go. The first thing I ever directed right, well directed in a way was when I was 14 and I was at school. I was terrible at school, they kept expelling me, because I was always busily arranging some kind of theatrical coup. Anyway, they wanted something for some Harvest festival or something. I got the whole of the fourth form, dressed them up, insisted on designing all these costumes and everything, and did a dramatized version of Linstead Market. 'Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market'. Now that is not a Louise Bennett poem, but I made the main character into a kind of Louise Bennett person, and then stole lines from various poems. I added them so that it elongated the thing and it lasted about twenty minutes. It's only one song you know. (Singing) 'Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market', you know, 'everybody come feel up feel up', and then you would go, 'everybody come feel up feel up, everybody come squeeze up, squeeze up', and we go, 'everybody come feel up feel up', and then a line out of Louise Bennett, 'Bwoy tek yu han outta mi ting yu noh', 'everybody come ... She wouldn't know about this, because it was a school thing. I never paid any royalties either. I was nicking lines from her poems to illustrate Linstead Market you see. It was a big success, and the school made a postcard of the cast with a wheelbarrow and ... it's all very pathetic but that was the first thing. So I was always doing little bits like that.

What about now and doing some of Louise Bennett's work through Talawa?

I have never thought about that ... I don't know but it's worthy of a thought ... um, a kind of evening with Louise 'Cool Breeze', got the title, right, um,
but, 'Every little breeze seems to whisper Louise' (singing). She is a major cultural figure in Jamaica, but I'm not sure how it would work here.

I used to run the Festival Commission for the Jamaican Government, Mr Michael Manley you know. I'd go all round the island judging, adjudicating voice and speech, and never, in all the years of doing that, did I attend a recital where there weren't at least five Louise Bennett poems. The way in which these children used to come in and stand, han' a kimbo. Everybody was a miniature Louise. That's what you call having cultural influence. Today, if you go into the countryside especially, because Kingston is too into Dancehall and Ragga, I mean, they've made outsiders come and tell them what the culture is in a way. Even go to St. Catherine, go to Spanish Town, and Louise is in force. 'Colonisation in Reverse, by Louise Bennett'. Han' a kimbo and they are off. You think this is just monkeying, sort of just a parody, but ask them what it means ... they know. Some of the other poems, 'I wondered lonely as a cloud that floats on high'.

'What does it mean?'

'Well ...'

'What is a daffodil?'

'Well ... is a flower'

'What colour? ... It says it in the poem'

'Is yellow?'

They don't know, ... but you ask them about a Louise Bennett poem and they know.

Is that just because it's close to home and the language?

Well the teachers can teach them better. I used to encourage it. I used to give a Louise prize. Louise could be persuaded to come down and listen to the final thing. Louise is an integral part of Jamaican culture and so her work effects you whether you like it or not. In my work though, I don't want to say yes yes yes yes, when I'm directing a play I'm thinking about Louise because I'm not.

Can you imagine for example, a repeat of, or something similar to 'The Zebra Crossing Season', having a section where, some of Louise's poems were performed?

Yes I could imagine it, but I would give it to somebody to do who wasn't me. I would give it to a young black British person, and say right, what is cutting edge about this? It couldn't be, oh let's just go and have some recital of poems in dialect. For it to work it would have to go out on a limb of its own. You've set me thinking there ... just as we've run out of time.

It would be great to see Louise's work performed by Talawa. Yvonne, thank you very much for sharing your fascinating experiences with me, and giving me so much of your time.

It has been a pleasure.