

ERROL HILL

Chancellor

"This boy has retained the premier position in the class. His percentage is slightly higher. He applies himself diligently to his work. With this zeal and application he shall reach far in the world."

I am quoting from the school-leaving report on Errol Hill written in July 1935 by a teacher from New Town Boys R.C. School.

Chancellor, ever since the publication of his classic work The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre in 1972, The John D. Willard Professor of Drama and Oratory at Dartmouth College has held the premier position in scholarship relating to the West Indian Drama.

In 1992 he published the monumental The Jamaican Stage 1655-1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre a history of plays players playhouses in Jamaica, and visits from professional troupes. This is accompanied by his tracing of the emergence of an indigenous theatre especially in the cultural practice of the down-pressed. Both strands and strata are documented and examined against the background of a changing society. The book allows us to imagine the significance for the form and content of West Indian, art, theatre and life of the cultural explosion and fusions that have been taking place in our society of many cultures since Emancipation.

In 1984 he had published the acclaimed Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors. It is a book of painstaking scholarly detective-work. It is also a dispassionate account of the theatre of racial discrimination and racial prejudice and the heroic struggles carried out by talent and dreaming to breach unlawful impediments.

Chancellor, Errol Hill has reached far in the world, and a large part of the credit for that must be attributed to Dartmouth College where he is now Professor Emeritus. Dartmouth has been good to him and his family. It is where he has lived and worked since 1968, bringing up his children and publishing so many books and articles, the base from which he has sallied forth to spread the creating word through Visiting Professorships, Lectureships, Colloquiums and Conferences. Of the more than 120 dramatic productions he has done all over the world, thirty-one have been at Dartmouth. His record as a teacher at the institution has been formally recognised as outstanding. ~~Echoes Sparrow he might~~
claim, D is my home He might well echo Sparrow and say "Dartmouth is my home".

I am sure I do not have to argue the case, Chancellor, that on his academic record during the Dartmouth years alone Professor Errol Hill more than deserves the title we propose to confer upon him today.

I move to claim him now for the region not just because his father was Guyanese, his mother Trinidadian, and his mother's parents and his wife Barbadian, but because his work is rooted in the language and the voices of the region- its song, story, dance and music, its secular and religious events and festivals. The titles of four of his plays illustrate the point: Dance Bongo, Wey Wey, The Ping Pong and Man Better Man. In Man Better Man, the pioneering Hill uses calypso rhythm and the calypso line to build a verse drama around the stickfighter as warrior and custodian of values, and to make a calypso music of the big names of the past:

Crow, little cock! This poui chastise
Warriors who measure twice your size.
Ti Bomina and the great Moscobee
Myler, renowned for agility,
Johnny Oak, the only human ram,
And Jules Tiepin of the iron arm,
Mungo the dentist, able to pick
Out a troublesome tooth with a single flick,
Fisherman Brush, the Tobago find
And Fizzie Bainwright who fight even blind!
What you know about stick, Mr Hurry-come-up
I rule the ring when you was a pup
Still wetting your pants. Now I getting down
And hope to relinquish a spotless crown,
But instead we have a shadow-king!
Is not you is the obeahman rulin

Any account of his work with West Indian people and communities Mr Chancellor will show that the people are not only his source, they are his audience and target.

Chancellor, Errol Hill sailed out of Trinidad on a British Council Scholarship and attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art from 1949-1950. ~~HERE HE HAUNTED THE LONDON THEATRES, PRODUCED AND ACTED IN WEST INDIAN PLAYS AND WORKED CLOSELY WITH PEOPLE LIKE ERROL JOHN AND CARLISLE CHANG~~ He selected a cutting from Othello to present at his finals; acted in plays using make-up to appear White; soaked in the London theatres and staged Derek Walcott's 'Henri Christophe' at Hans Crescent with a West Indian cast and Sophocles's 'Antigone' in a West African tribal setting. In both productions he had the support of painter and scenic designer Carlisle Chang. The lead actor in both plays was the immensely talented and versatile

Errol John. . He predicted a great career in the classical theatre for Errol John. "That has not happened. He is black." The comment occurs in Shakespeare in Sable . In this period, Hill was witnessing at close quarters the complex of problems he was to tackle in his history of Black Shakespearean actors.

He left London in July 1952 to run the first residential drama school at the UCWI in Jamaica. (There were 40 students, Chancellor, including a high school senior called Rex Nettleford.)

When the School ended, Hill accepted an invitation from the Head of the Extra-Mural Department, Dr Philip Sherlock to help promote adult education "with a special oversight in drama". It was a job in drama. It was a job that sent him out into the communities. It was a job that allowed him to travel and work with practitioners and students in the other English-speaking territories. It was just the job for a man who wanted to encourage people to write and perform plays and to "lay the groundwork for a West Indian national theatre".

He served the University College for eight years (1953-1958 and 1962-1965). "A new awareness of theatre as an expression of a people's culture and heritage" was growing in Jamaica, inspired no doubt by the combination of island talents on the Mona campus in the golden years of the UWI.

On being posted to Trinidad from Jamaica in 1954, Hill united three competing Companies into the Company of Players improving the pool of acting talent and incidentally representing the racial make-up of the country. He directed plays by West Indian authors, taught playwriting and published Caribbean plays through Esmond ramesar at Extra-Mural.

Chancellor, it looks as if Errol Hill has worked with every West Indian playwright, every West Indian actor, every group in every island. In this field Mr Chancellor he has the complex role and distinction of being our most reliable narrator and one of the central characters at the same time.

The years in Trinidad, London, Jamaica and Trinidad again were hectic and hopeful years, but in the Introduction to Shakespeare in Sable he describes how his dream "to lay the groundwork for a West Indian national theatre" was aborted by the collapse of the Federation and by the University not having any intention to include drama in the curriculum .

Between 1958 and 1962, Chancellor, Errol Hill got his B.A, and M.F.A from Yale and had taken his PhD orals. In 1966 he completed his Ph D. The UWI felt it could afford to let him be seconded to Ibadan for two years. When he returned, the post he expected as Director of the new Creative Arts Centre was not forthcoming. "UWI offered nothing. With heavy heart I decided to emigrate to the US."

Chancellor, on the question of what would have happened if those who left had stayed ~~and those who stayed had vacuumed the dust of this place out of their~~

~~heart~~ we cannot speculate. But it is right for us to instal him formally ^{now} as a senior in our company in the territory where he began his great career.

Chancellor, if you have ever wondered about the lean clarity of Errol Hill's style the directness of his vision, and his orientation towards action and working with people in groups and communities the reason is this: he entered the world of work early and came to academia as a self-taught self-motivating person.

At the age of fourteen he was obliged to leave school. But it was obvious he wasn't taking it so. His first job was as an office boy at the Trinidad Guardian at a salary of \$1.00 a week, less four cents for sports. In 1937 he got a job classified as 'laboratory assistant' at the Government Training College on St Vincent Street and worked as secretary to Moreland Hopkins the Scottish Principal. In 1939 he got his first travelling job and his first opportunity to experience and confirm his West Indianness as clerk to Stanley Hammond, Education Commissioner for the Windward and Leeward Islands.

All this time so he was taking courses. Typing, shorthand and book-keeping at Cummings's School of Commerce. Sign up with Wolsey Hall. Night classes at Ideal High School. A young man who was going far, Chancellor. He passed his London matriculation exam in 1944.

He was already into the cultural scene. The teacher who wrote the school report in 1935 was the novelist De Wilton Rogers, author of Lalaja. He joined Radical Literary and Debating Society and entered island-wide recitation competitions. He joined the Tand T Youth Council and edited their magazine 'Youth'. He was the first person to put pan on the local radio when he invited Ellie Manette to give an illustrated talk on Radio Trinidad and the Rediffusion Golden Network. Using the pseudonym Gaston Lorre, he wrote three sonnets 'Truce', 'Eclipse' and 'Judgment' about panmen during the steelband wars and about the middle class attitudes that were determined to make criminals out of them; he wrote a famous poem called 'Beggarmen' lamenting poverty, satirising middle-class indifference and distancing but castigating the beggar for his lack of spirit. He contributed to the collection Wind in the Palms with Joseph Penco and Lennox Oscar-Pierre.

By 1946 he was working with the British Council at Whitehall in Queen's Park West. He and Errol John, author of 'Moon on a Rainbow Shawl' founded the Whitehall Players. According to Hill: "The Council was very interested in the arts and Whitehall turned out to be a mecca not only for British but also for Caribbean arts. Errol John and I wrote our first plays and produced them on the stage of the training College. We sallied forth and presented plays at the alms house, in San Fernando, in country villages, in Tobago. Among the leading players were Cecil Gray, Rosie Farrell, Stella Armorer, Lydia Hill, Jean Hill, Donald Granado, Caps St Hill and Errol Jones. " Jean Hill was his mother, Chancellor, chorister in the Methodist congregation, veteran performer in religious plays, whose beautiful voice and clear diction were still in evidence when she played her last role in her mid-eighties. Well, the example set.

Chancellor, before he left for the United States Errol Hill lived and worked with all the people and institutions involved in theatre and drama. He immersed himself in all the arts of the islands and with every form of cultural expression. He recognised the centrality of the trinity of carnival, calypso and steelpan. He recognised theatre as a moral and educational force and a natural mode for all our people. He wanted desperately to see the emergence of a national and indigenous theatre. He was poised to carry out his life's work in his own country and engage in the process of taking it to them himself.

His manifesto and the most important single work in a programme that was really a program of decolonisation, cultural reconstruction, and cultural confidence based upon a domestic cultural economy was The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre.

Chancellor, the State may want to turn culture into a trade and tourism commodity and some of us may long to turn it into fetish or parochial barrier. Errol Hill knew from early that the role of the artist in West Indian society was to make cultural expression past and present into a living force by secreting it in contemporary forms of art.

Chancellor, I request you by the authority of Senate and Council to admit this extraordinary scholar and cultural activist, this learned and accessible citizen to the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.