

Leon Robinson

Imagine living in a world where you don't have access to music, art and culture, just imagine that. You know there are a lot of people out there that are fed on a diet of MTV. Just think about what we all, as agents of change, can start to bring forward. As a performer, as somebody who was born here and went through the theatre school system you suddenly think you want more people to become aware of the richness that has taken place in this country.

The Victorians were the greatest hoarders on this planet and we have so much theatrical history that we should all be proud of. You know, many years ago through The Arts Council, Hilary Carty who's Director of the Cultural Leadership Programme, arranged for me to go to The Schomburg Museum in Harlem. My whole reasoning behind going to The Schomburg Museum was because I wanted to get a sense how the Americans honour, and revere and preserve their history. And what was exciting to me about being in Harlem, it wasn't about the people that were inside the building, it was the people that were outside the building who felt this is a part of their history. Although a lot of them hadn't been up into any of the research libraries they still felt proud that there was somewhere in Harlem that acknowledged the richness that had happened on the streets of Harlem and they were really really excited because they could go back to the Harlem Renaissance period.

When I walked into the foyer of The Schomburg they had a bust of Ira Aldridge, I just had a quick look and went straight upstairs. I didn't realise they had me on camera and they were saying, 'you didn't go over and look at the bust.' I said, 'well I've seen that bust because they've got a bust of Ira Aldridge in The Drury Lane Theatre,' and I said 'as a matter of fact before I came here, only the day before I'd just bought ten playbills on Ira Aldridge'. Now what that made me aware of is that we have more black entertainment history in this country than there is anywhere in the world. Once you start to uncover and research you become aware that in the Victorian period and the Edwardian period there were hundreds of black entertainers working in this country and I think this is something that we should all be proud of.

An interesting thing, I've been working with the Arts Council on the Sustained Theatre Regional Tours, presenting archival workshops. We were going into the regions talking to Arts council officers and meeting artists but the most exciting thing for me was you'd get tea ladies and security staff who, once you'd started taking down the exhibition, would say things like 'I remember the Nicholas Brothers, they were great tap dancers,' 'I went to see Anna Lucasta.' 'I grew up listening to Hutch.'

We're in the situation now where we're in the 21st Century and have access to so much media and yet this chapter of Britain's history is so often overlooked. In the future I'd like to see more resources made available so that we can bring it to the fore and engage and inspire generations to come.

Simon Callow

If you've never met Leon before, you've got the full measure of him. That's our man. I met Leon 20 years ago when I directed him in my production of Carmen Jones at The Old Vic. He was a dancer in the ballet sequence and throughout the piece and wonderful he was to, a lovely artist, exquisite stage personality. I got to know him a little bit and I found that he was even more remarkable than I'd imagined because he's a poet, a dreamer, a visionary. Also incredibly hardworking and determined and his will is invincible.

And what he taught me, which I didn't know really, this was the first time that I'd worked with a large number of people from the black community and I was incredibly exhilarated by the experience, we had an extraordinary time really, working together. And Leon taught me, to my surprise, he taught me two things, which were completely interconnected. One of which was not nearly enough young people, young black people were training as dancers and singers and actors. And secondly that almost all the black artists he meets were oblivious to their own history and these things are absolutely true today, absolutely interconnected. Because too many people didn't know of the extraordinary achievements, the amazing variety and depth of work of black artists, they hadn't got a terrifically good sense of themselves. It's the old story if you and your history becomes invisible to you, you don't know who you are, you don't know what you're worth. And therefore out of that comes the reluctance to become an actor or to submit to training because you don't feel you have place in the world particularly. And what Leon, this ray of light has dedicated his life to in the last 20 years is to try and develop these two interconnected forms and he's gone at it with, like a real genius. Genuinely, this man, if he chose research, could become one of the greatest collectors and researchers in the world. The collection he's amassed is the envy of collectors around the world, and this is a man who has negative financial capacity.

He has built a collection, which any museum in the world would slather over and have slathered over and have wanted, wanted to buy from him. But no, the point about Leon's work is that he wanted to create that here, visibly, for everybody in this country to see what these amazing achievements have been. He chose to name his company Positive Steps and he is a positive step. He is one of the most valuable people that I can think of that we've got in the world of the Arts today. And it's obviously time now that proper money was put into this, god knows he's auditioned for this for 20 years and it's about time he's given the part.

He is a cultural commissary and anything that can be done to advance his work can only advance all of us, enrich all of us, make our lives better.

Steve Clark

Now I know how Obama felt when he made his inaugural speech. Most of the time that we get a chance to talk to the audience I always say what I consider true to our profession. I've been very fortunate in working with a little bit of everybody, the Lena Hornes, the Duke Ellingtons, and I especially appreciate the fact that we are in The Palladium. In The Palladium, we've been here on several occasions. We've worked with the Max Bygraves, the Bruce Forsyths, I can go on and on, Jimmy Tarbuck, all these people. And the strange thing about our presentation is the fact that we are dancers, tap dancers.

I've adopted Leon, my adopted son. And we have the same thought in terms of presentation. I've been in this country for quite sometime. My first show was at the Casino in Soho with a show called Hell's a Poppin with Olsen and Johnson. We did that show and we came back again from America, but before we came back we were the first dancers that opened The Sands Hotel, Vegas, we opened it with Danny Thomas. We were the first lounge act in Vegas. We did a show for some bad boys, people like Al Capone, people like Frank Costello. They controlled our profession in America.

We played The Cotton Club and The Apollo Theatre with people like Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, all of these big bands and people that came on the scene. Fortunately we were dancers, we didn't conflict with anybody but we got to know everybody. So we'd like to say this, I could go on for two hours, but yeah, I'd like to say that we hope that Leon get's his ideas across and I'll do anything to help him reach his goal.