

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Garland Lee Thompson: Developing A New Generation Of Writers

BY STEPHAN D. COLEMAN

Sitting amidst the memorabilia, logs, scripts and other historical material in the loft that has been the home of the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop (FSWW) for sixteen of its twenty years, Garland Lee Thompson is open and direct about his own rich and varied career. As FSWW's executive director (and co-founder with Morgan Freeman, Billie Allen and Clayton Riley), Thompson has overseen the day-to-day operations for all except five of the twenty years it has been in existence. Created as a living tribute to actor Frank Silvera, the workshop is devoted to the nurturing of writers of color. The impetus to start the workshop and the energy that has fueled it across twenty years are uniquely colored by Thompson's pre-workshop history as an actor, director, stage manager and writer.

Actually, Garland Lee Thompson's professional theatrical debut was the result of a "fluke." While on a visit to relatives in Southern California, the then-teenaged track and football athlete and dance student from Portland, Oregon, auditioned as a dancer for a group of cabaret artists scheduled for a USO tour to Southeast Asia. To Thompson's surprise, he was accepted into the company. As fate would have it, the tour was promptly canceled due to an outbreak of the Asiatic flu. However, the group's business manager "used a trump card" and secured an audition for 20th Century Fox Films for the entire company. "The next thing I knew," Thompson recalls, still incredulous, "I was in [the filmed version of] South Pacific with some very major people, like Ray Walston, Deborah Kerr, and Juanita Hall who was a Black woman who played an Asian. It was my first paid job of any kind and a very heady experience for a teenager."

However, after this illustrious entree into show business, Thompson realized "I'd better settle down and study [acting] because I saw very little future in Black dance in the 50s. So I got a day job and started studying to see if I wanted to stay in this business."

He soon landed the role of the newsboy in the L.A. production of Langston Hughes' *Simply Heavenly*, a major theatre event. "Simply Heavenly opened up a whole world for me. We had people in that show like Helen Humes and Pauline Myers, who played my mother and gave me my first acting lesson," he vividly recalls. Many of the elders in the play took Thompson under their wing, including Isabel Cooley, who remains a friend.

Concurrently, Thompson continued to study formally and informally. "Al Freeman Jr. and I were roommates in 1958 and I knew very quickly that he was somebody who could teach me something." Freeman did plays in the backyard of a quintessential early 60s L.A. coffeehouse that Thompson co-managed. Thompson exclaims, "I was just blown away by what he was doing!"

During the early to mid-60s, Thompson also honed his performing skills by acting in a variety of productions, and by "sitting at the feet" of people like Cooley, Freeman, and, eventually the renowned Frank Silvera. He attended Silvera's workshop and gradually went from student

to friend to Silvera's co-star in *Blues for Mr. Charlie*.

Around that time, Thompson also starred in live action short film, *The Legend of Jimmy Blue Eyes* about a New Orleans trumpet player's deal with the devil. It received an Oscar nomination as "The Best Short Film." He also appeared in an early episode of *Star Trek* where his dance and athletic background served him well in combat scenes with star William Shatner.

However, Thompson was already moving behind the scenes. He signed a contract to stage manager for the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles. It was at Inner City that Thompson fine-tuned his production skills. "At any given time, I was in rehearsal with one play while another was running." He stage managed or production stage managed eleven back-to-back productions.

It was also at Inner City that Thompson had his "baptism by fire," learning all the ins and outs of backstage politics. That baptism also took place at the Actors Studio West, where Thompson directed *Sisyphus* and the *Blue-Eyed Cyclops*, his own script. *Sisyphus*, which starred Al Freeman, Jr. and Adolph Caesar, told the story of an institutionalized African American whose alleged insanity could be a metaphor for the psychological oppression of African Americans.

Thompson's work at Actors Studio West would become a turning point in his career. "It was at Actors Studio that I learned how to run a writers' unit," he notes. When the writing and directing components were closed at the studio because "Lee Strasberg wanted to focus on the big money - the Marilyn Monroes and Marlon Brandos," the seeds had al-

ready been sown in Thompson for the creation of his own writers' workshop.

But not yet. First Thompson was on his way to New York to stage manage *The River Niger* for The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), after "other [stage managing] biggies" had been unavailable. Not the NEC's first choice and an unknown quantity in New York, Thompson sold himself by dropping two names: Vincette Carroll and Charles Gordone.

When *River Niger* closed prematurely in spite of its Tony for "Best Play," Thompson did freelance stage managing for Wynn Handman (American Place Theater) and Joe Papp (New York Shakespeare Festival). However, he was relieved of duty from NYSF while Papp was out of town and an individual who was apparently threatened, saw an opportunity to remove Thompson.

Then in 1970, Frank Silvera died. "It took all of us out," Thompson recalls in a quiet voice. Frank Silvera had been an artist of compelling skill, range, and dedication. Between his professional debut in 1934 and his death in 1970, the fair-skinned, charismatic African-Jamaican created a body of work few actors of any race can match. Long before the term "non-traditional casting" was coined, Silvera, who debuted on Broadway in the historic American Negro Theatre (ANT) production of *Anna Lucasta*, played a variety of men of various ethnic backgrounds. He created the role of the Italian father in *A Hatful of Rain*; played the Latino General Huerta in the film, *Viva Zapata!*; an Irishman in *Longitude 49*; and an African American in the play, *Nat Turner*. His *King Lear* at The New York Shakespeare Festival is still considered a major event in theatre history.

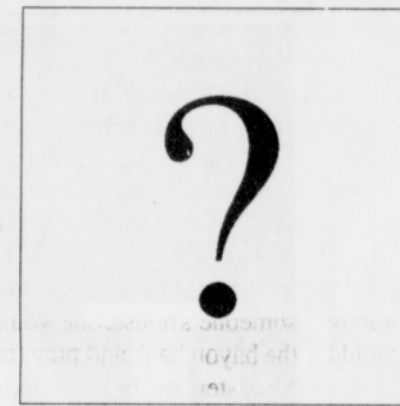


Legendary performer Isaac Hayes and famed songstress Amanda Ambrose performed recently with Big Band leader Glenn Zottola at the Church of Scientology Celebrity Centre International's Grand Masked Ball for the benefit of the Hollywood Arts Council. Helping to "put the Hollywood back into Hollywood," the glittering fundraiser was held in the Garden Pavilion, a popular performing facility built on the Church grounds in 1992.

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|---|---------------------------------------|
| Ladysmith Black Mambazo
with NW Afrikan-American Ballet | Saturday, Jan. 29
9pm-21 & Over |
| Leo Kottke
with Cindy Banks & Gary Valentine | Thursday, Feb 3
8pm - 21 & Over |
| Bullet Boys
with Havuk and Thunderjelly | Wednesday, Feb 9
8pm - 21 & Over |
| Dave Koz
with Roger Sause | Friday, Feb. 11
8:30pm - 21 & Over |
| B.B. King
with Curtis Salgado & Friends | Sunday, Feb. 20
8pm - 21 & Over |
| West Coast Alternative Jam
Cement, Symon/Asher,
April's Motel Room and Bungee Chord | Saturday, Feb. 26
8pm - All Ages |
| Stanley Clarke Band
with Dennis Springer | Friday, April 1
9pm - 21 & Over |

For more information call 224-TIXX

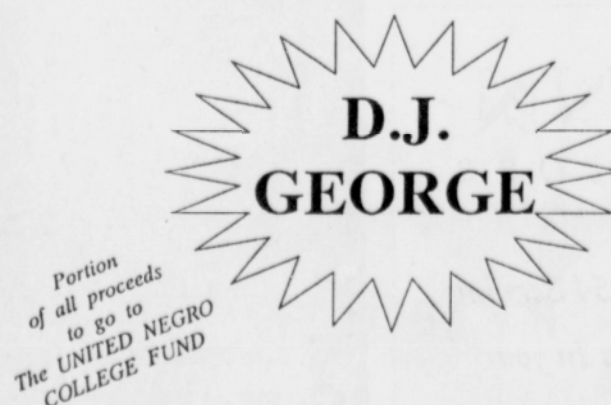
"BROTHERS FROM THE EAST"
Derek Rasheed Present: Noah Jackson

A
CABARET

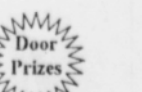
Dance & Fashion Show
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