

# *A Brief History of Theatre in Dominica*

By **Albert Williams**

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**Alick Lazare**, editor of the Dawbiney Literary Club Magazine from 1961 to 1965 reminiscing in an interview once remarked, “In my childhood there was not much to do outside school, except on the playing field. There were no televisions, no boom boxes ...”

Maybe it was this lack of activities that prompted Lazare and a group of young talented writers to form the Dawbiney Literary Club in 1961. Some of the club’s members were **Frank Watty, Alfred Levy, Havis Shillingford**. Also in the club were some of the more well-known and accomplished writers of the day. They included **Ed Scobie, Phillys Shand-Allfrey, Ralph Casimir, Cynthia Watt** and former premier, **Edward Leblanc**.

During this period, many works of artistic expression, in song and dance, in drama, art and poetry were produced by members of the club, says Chief Cultural Officer, **Raymond Lawrence**. Lawrence is the artistic Director of his Waitikubuli Dance Theatre, and a member of the People’s Action Theater (PAT) formerly called The Little Theatre.

According to Lawrence, two talented individuals, former Chief Cultural Officer, **Alwin Bully** and writer and dramatist, **Daniel Caudeiron**, founded The Little Theatre in 1967. At that time, dramatic productions were being staged by students and teachers of the Saint Martin School, the Dominica Grammar School and Convent High School he said.

He also remembers the musicals of **Marie Davis-Pierre** and **Mable Caudeiron**, as well as the Secondary Schools Drama Society assisted by **Amah Harris**. Lawrence told The Chronicle that in 1969 the group renamed The Little Theatre that was thereafter known as The People’s Action Theatre or PAT.

Bully wrote and directed many of the group’s stage productions between 1973 and 1985. Many may remember, ‘Speak Brother Speak’ written in 1971 by Daniel Caudeiron. They would also remember plays like ‘Streak’ which was a social commentary of life in Dominica in the 70’s written by Bully. Adaptations were done of ‘Ruler in Hiroona,’ ‘Dream on Monkey Island’ and ‘Jesus Christ Superstar.’ But original works like, ‘Pio Pio’, and ‘Night Box,’ were big hits,” Lawrence said.

Bully was also instrumental in the establishment of the Cultural Division as a Government department in 1978. He became its first Chief Cultural Officer, and remained in that position until 1987 when he accepted a position with the UNESCO.

Under Bully, the arts flourished. One of the drama groups founded at that time was 'Aquarian Expression' that was formed in 1977. Unfortunately, that group only performed two plays - 'Quest' written and directed by **Clement 'Baba' Richards**, and 'Mirrors' written and directed by **Minchington Israel**. Members of that group included **Severin McKenzie, Holden Labad, Corintha Walsh** and **Michael Richards**. Since then, a wave of new writers and actors has entered the theatre scene.

Organisations like the Movement of Cultural Awareness (MCA), established by **Delamance 'Ras Mo' Moses; Clement Richards** and **Sobers Esprit** pioneered a new form of theatre using the arts as a form for social change. They experimented with an art form they called 'performance poetry' that utilised drama and music, particularly drumming. Ras Mo travelled the island and the region to showcase the art form. Today, Ras Mo lives in the United States where he continues to be a cultural enthusiast.

### Modern Theatre

The modern-day theatre scene in Dominica is dominated by the 'New Dimension Theatre,' TE-yat Pawol and the Caribbean Richarts and Cultural Foundation.

The 'New Dimension Theatre' was formed by **Steve Hyacinth** in 1984. Hyacinth received the Best Director FAME Award in 2002. Among Hyacinth's recent plays are 'Your Son, My Husband;' 'Masquerader;' 'Drum Voices;' 'Why Sweetie' and 'Hidden Crisis' which was written this year. He believes it is time that more opportunities be made available to persons to become trained actors, directors and playwrights. He also noted that there is a need for more appropriate venues to present plays.

**Nigel Francis** rose through the ranks of PAT and formed his own drama group - the New Artist Movement Guild and wrote and directed 'Echoes of the Mill' in 2000 and 'Love Knows No Boundaries' in 2002. He also opened the 'Cafe Des Arts' at Goodwill where he sought to establish a mini-theater. 'Dem Two,' a 'performance poetry' stage production was staged there, featuring, the multi-talented, Ian 'Jacko' Jackson and Trinidad-born, dramatist and writer, Harold Sealy. However, Cafe des Arts was short lived.

**Alex Bruno**, and his cast of actors from TE-yat Pawol, brought a fresh energy to the world of drama. His plays include 'The Way We Were' (2000); 'Pampo' (2001) and 'Negres Marons' (2002). Bruno's plays were unusual as they dramatised actual events. **Roosevelt Richards** who also has a long involvement with the arts in Dominica is especially remembered for his stint as barman on the American TV soap opera, 'Young and the Restless.' For the past two years, Richards has been nurturing a group of actors under his 'Caribbean Richarts and Cultural Foundation,' and to date

has produced a play 'Full Moon,' a full-length production written by Ricardo Keens-Douglas of Grenada.

The Grand Bay Secondary School theatre group under the direction of cultural enthusiasts, **Addrienna Henderson** has made its contribution to modern theatre. Last year, the group made off with four awards at the Secondary Schools' Drama Festival in Antigua, including that of Best Actor.

The Alliance Francaise de La Dominique has also made a significant contribution to drama. Last year, teaming up with the Cultural Division, it hosted a Creole Theater Festival showcasing groups from Dominica, Martinique and St.Lucia. To support these new energies, the Cultural Division established the Annual Drama Festival to be held every two years.

Bully also continues to make his contribution to theatre. Recently, he established the Caribbean Theatre Network and along with the Cultural Division produced two plays in the late 90's - 'Once on this Island' and the hilarious 'Run for Your Wife.' According to Lawrence, patrons can expect more plays from Bully in the future.

Marie Davis-Pierre, one of the leading producers of plays in the 1960s said that that modern plays are too 'bacchanal.' According to her, they are always set in a 'rum shop' and usually include fight scenes. Their use of language is also vulgar, Davis-Pierre noted.

According to Davis-Pierre, in her day, the plays included a lot of singing, dancing and good acting. They were also amusing and entertaining, she said.

Programme Coordinator for MCA, Marcia Dublin, also thinks that modern plays in Dominica are not as intellectually fulfilling as those of the 1970s, in the heyday of PAT.

"Back in the 70s, there was a high level of consciousness among the actors and the patrons and the plays were of a different level. I think people were really looking for plays of a high quality. There was a lot to learn in the 70s," Dublin said.

Dublin believes that theatre goers today are only interested in plays that would make them laugh and not engage them in serious thinking or reflection. "That is a difficulty that, if we have to bring back the plays from the 70s, we will not get that type of following," she said.

"We need to help change people's attitudes because the plays ought to be mixed and balanced," Dublin added.

Former member of PAT, Aquarian Expression and MCA, Severin McKenzie, said that in his time, actors were not cast without proper preparatory training. McKenzie

noted that in the 1970s, actors would have to undergo at least 12 months of training before the cast was selected.

“Today you only hear productions and not about workshops,” McKenzie said. He noted that the approach was much more professional in the 1970s.

McKenzie said that when there was no television, PAT produced a version of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ and ‘First Nativity’ on 16mm film. PAT also produced two radio serials. “We were able to do all those things with limited resources,” McKenzie said, adding that he is disappointed that television has not been used as a tool to promote theatre.

### Arawak House of Culture

Most of the plays in the early 1970s were held at the St. Gerard’s Hall or at school auditoriums. Today, however, The Arawak House of Culture, formerly the Arawak Cinema on Kennedy Avenue is Dominica’s premier center for dramatic productions. In 1979, the cinema was destroyed by Hurricane David. The building was renovated in 1984 with funds from the Republic of China on Taiwan, while the Japanese Government financed the purchasing of lighting and sound equipment.

Today, the Arawak House of Culture is in need of much improvement. Lawrence says a Barbadian consultant who was brought in by the Division, estimates that \$200,000 is needed to cover costs to restore the lighting and sound equipment systems to its former state. “We would like to install air conditioning ...,” Lawrence said. He is appealing to corporate citizens to come forward to assist the Division in the restoration of the Arawak House of Culture.

Lawrence in summing up remarked that drama is a type of reflection of society. It gives society an opportunity to look at its self and life in the country, and can be entertaining and informative. “It helps individuals to develop talent and self expression. It develops self-esteem and more confidence to appear in public. Drama is on the rise again,” Lawrence said.

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