

BFI: Sunday 7 November 2010

Tribute to Cy Grant

8 November 1919 - 13 February 2010

Professor Gus John

In paying tribute to Cy today, I want to deal with some defining events in his early life experience with Britain and concentrate on his later work which is rather less well known and which to him was far more meaningful and defining in his quest for meaning than his earlier work, in television especially.

Cy Grant's entire life could best be described using the title of one of the poems in ***Rivers of Time - collected poems of Cy Grant***, the poem he called ***an interior journey***. His was a journey from: embracing life, seeking out opportunities and serving King and country, through to disillusionment and raging against racism and injustice and white supremacist proclivities, to the abandonment of a corrosive anger, the nurturing of the inner Self and seeking balance with the Universe. This, in a nutshell, is the life's journey Cy summarises so poignantly in the poem ***an interior journey***. I shall read it later.

The great-grandson of a slave, Cy Grant was born on November 8 1919 into an upper middle-class family in Beterverwagting in Demerara, British Guiana (now Guyana). He was one of seven children of his father, a Moravian minister and his mother, a music teacher. His father nurtured in him a love of books, and the importance of black figures in the development of western civilisation, impressing upon him that both Alexander Pushkin and Alexandre Dumas were black. His mother taught him music and he and she regularly sang together.

Even in the first half of the twentieth century, Cy was blest with parents who taught him that knowledge knows no colour, nor does music, and that throughout history people in Africa and the developing world were and are as responsible for the steady evolution of knowledge and of civilisations as were people from Western Europe.

When Cy was 11 the family moved to New Amsterdam, 50 miles down the coast. On leaving high school, he took a clerk's job in the office of the stipendiary magistrate.

In 1941 he joined the RAF, which was forced to abandon the colour bar it operated and begin to admit "men of colour" following the huge losses sustained during the Battle of Britain the previous year. Cy was one of some 400 young men from the Caribbean recruited as aircrew. He trained as a navigator in England following which he was commissioned as a flight lieutenant.

Assigned to No 103 Squadron of Bomber Command based at Elsham Wolds, Lincolnshire, he had flown three missions to the Ruhr valley as a navigator in Lancasters when, in June 1943, while returning from a raid, his aircraft was shot down over Holland.

He was rescued by a Dutch family with whom he was later to become close friends. He was betrayed by a Dutch policeman and spent two years in a German prisoner of war camp before he was released by advancing Russian forces in 1945.

After the war, Cy retrained as a barrister and read for the Bar at Middle Temple, qualifying in 1950. Despite the large number of black ex-servicemen and women who had settled in Britain after the Second World War and who constituted a sizeable black presence, especially in urban centres such as London, Birmingham and Liverpool, Cy found work hard to come by on account of his colour.

Instead, he turned to acting in order to make a living; he hoped that a stage career would help improve his diction in anticipation

of entering Chambers. A successful audition for Laurence Olivier and his Festival of Britain company led to appearances in London's West End and at the Zeigfeld Theatre in New York. Realising that there were few roles for black actors, Cy decided to diversify by turning to music, using the skills he had learned in his youth in Guyana, especially his guitar playing.

Revue and cabaret dates followed, as well as appearances on the BBC's Third Programme and the Overseas Service, and culminated in his own ITV television series, *For Members Only*. In 1956 he co-starred in a BBC Television drama about Caribbean immigrants, *Man from the Sun*, with Nadia Cattouse and Earl Cameron. In the following year he starred in *Home of the Brave* for Granada Television. It went out, live, on the day after his debut on *Tonight*. Also in 1957, he appeared in a war film, *Sea Wife*, alongside Richard Burton and Joan Collins.

His subsequent appearances on *Tonight* made him a household name, and after he left the show his stage and film career continued to flourish. He provided the voice-over for Lieutenant Green, the black defender of planet Earth in the 1960s ITV marionette series *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons*, and in 1965 he played Othello at the Phoenix Theatre, Leicester, a role for which at the time white actors habitually "blackened up".

In 1972 he returned briefly to the Bar, but after six months in the Middle Temple he decided he lacked the necessary passion for the law and turned to his background in the arts as a means of fighting racial discrimination.

"I moved from this smiling, nice, friendly character to someone who, by 1974, was a very angry black man," he explained.

Also in 1974, Cy founded Drum, Britain's first black arts centre, which provided a showcase not just for black acting talent but for the products of black playwrights. As such, Cy built upon and was influenced by the pioneering work of Edric and Pearl Nunez Connor who founded the Negro Theatre Company and the very first black-owned and black-run theatrical agency in Britain.

I was invited by Cy to become one of the founder trustees of Drum, with John Mapondera, Tania Rose and others who all shared Cy's vision for a non-racialised theatre and performing arts industry in Britain.

During the 1980s, Cy organised and was director of the Concord multicultural festivals which sought to highlight for mainly white communities across Britain the need for them to understand and celebrate their own culture, so that they might better embrace and understand the culture of the other communities that made up multiracial Britain, and the interconnectedness of their history as white British with that of the African and Asian communities that were so rapidly changing the social landscape in Britain.

One of the principal functions black people in Britain have performed in the last sixty years or so, and continue to perform, is to interpret the society to itself through the prism of our individual and collective experience of it. This has been part of the process of humanizing the society. That, too, has been integral to Cy's journey and it is that process he embarked upon and wrote about in his latter years.

Ever since his wartime captivity, Cy had kept notes for a memoir he was sure he would produce one day. What he brought to his note taking and to his interpretation of his world was later to be heavily influenced by his discovery of the ancient wisdom of the Tao te Ching and of the writings of Aime Cesaire. In **Our Time is Now**, Cy wrote of Cesaire:

[READ Page 7, second paragraph, line 12:]

'My particular hero has been Aime Cesaire.....gatekeepers of civilisation'.

But let Cy tell us in his own words about the memoir he incubated for all of sixty years before it was eventually published:

[READ passage from: **Our Time is Now**, page 10, all of para 2]

In ***Blackness and the Dreaming Soul***, Cy effectively demonstrates how what I have described elsewhere as the 'tools for analysis' and 'tools for understanding' he honed through his study of the Tao, of the myths and symbols of African traditional religion and the essence of African spirituality, of the philosophy and politics of Aime Cesaire, aided his conversion from one who was angry and ever raging against the racism, xenophobia and materialism of the country he made his home, claiming his inheritance as it were, to someone who no longer gave to others the power to infect his inner core and to create an imbalance between him and the primordial energy of the Universe.

Cy came to realise that people, governments, systems and circumstances might do things which make us feel a certain way or which shape and fashion our reactions and interactions; they might even help to determine how we see the world if not the purpose of life, but WE are responsible for what we become. The challenge for him was therefore to convert his anger and rage into a more positive and creative energy, to nurture the inner self and protect the core of his being such that it could not be dented by other people's omissions or commissions.

You strive towards that state of being in the world when you resolve to:

LET NO ONE, NO THING OR CIRCUMSTANCE RENDER YOU LESS THAN YOU ARE, OR LESS THAN YOU KNOW YOU HAVE THE CAPACITY TO BE.

For one thing, it helps you to be more firmly in control of YOU, irrespective of the battering gales of life.

Having known him well since the early 1970s, I believe that Cy led a much more fulfilled life as a result of his conversion to the later

Cy Grant and his own project of enriching his spirit. This is what his most recent writings and poetry conveys for me.

It is also what he summarises in his poem ***an interior journey*** with which I will now end:

[Read from ***Rivers of Time***, pages 79 to 83]

Gus John

London

30 October 2010