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LOUIS REGIS: A WIDENING ABSENCE

(3 YEARS LATER)



Rawle Gibbons

At his retirement function from the UWI about a year ago, I referred to Louis Regis as one of a small group of socially committed scholars who had emerged from the ethos of the 1970's and wondered whether such dedication could be expected thereafter? I wondered whether, having succeeded Gordon Rohlehr as the flag-bearer of calypso scholarship, there was anyone to succeed Louis? Were we participating in the final rites, not of a career, but of a community? I questioned whether we had done enough at UWI to create the kind of curricula and culture to produce scholars socially conscious and committed to the Caribbean, not by historical happenstance, but design? I never imagined, however, that those rites of farewell would be this final, this physical or this abrupt.

My description of Louis on that occasion was based on a relationship spanning my own career at the UWI, from which I had retired a couple of years earlier. I first met Louis as the director of the Pleasantville Comprehensive entries for the Secondary Schools Drama Competition. He was part of a triumvirate who transformed the Competition into the Festival of national and regional status it holds today. Victor Edwards led the team as President and administrator; Zeno Constance, the most prolific and successful playwright in the history of the Festival and Louis Regis, the director who gave Zeno's work its finest staging.

Theatre is a medium Louis understood. His approach was intellectually confident, his craft completely assured. He enjoyed the challenge of the unorthodox, yet socially meaningful play. He enjoyed challenging his audiences into sharing his own sense of wonderment at the magic of the theatre. When the young Davlin Thomas won the National Playwriting Competition with his surreal poeticism, Louis was evident choice for directing the play. Thus began a relationship between playwright and a director whose experience and sensitivity would help to nurture another fine creative talent.

Louis' scholarly work on calypso is well known in the several books he published, papers delivered and programmes presented in the public media. They all speak to serious scholarship, careful analysis and creative interpretations, which he applied to his material. His purpose was always to give our local creative intelligence, the respect and critical attention he felt it deserved. To this undertaking he was thoroughly committed and, where he found an absence, would assume personal responsibility. After Pat Bishop's tenure, for instance, it was to Louis I turned to anchor the course 'Critical Readings in Caribbean Arts and Culture', the transdisciplinary, theoretical centre-pole of our teaching at Department of Creative and Festival Arts. Louis' legacy in this course was his even-handedness in managing the diversity of perspectives and experiences in the classroom, his capacity for listening and his understanding of subject, sequence and student.

A similar motive was at play in the critical attention he gave to my own work. While I did ask him to pen the Introduction to the *Calypso Trilogy* (1999), he felt strongly enough about the absence of commentary on my later work to undertake the task himself. In Trinidad and Tobago, the visual and performing arts, in particular, are all wanting of quality criticism.

There were other projects we worked on together. My family bookshop, The Blue Edition launched Louis' book *Black Stalin Kaisonian* (2007) at Lloyd Best Institute of the West Indies, Tunapuna, in 2007. It was at this 'Convois', Louis and I conceived the plan for Leroy Calliste to be nominated for the Doctor of Letters degree from the UWI. He was such a supremely deserving candidate. Louis wrote the recommendation, which, to the credit of the institution, was unanimously carried throughout its regional deliberations.

As a partner in Canboulay Productions, Louis also ably participated in the planning and execution of our projects to honour the Mighty Sparrow ('If Sparrow Say So...', 2014) and Black Stalin ('Sing for the Man', 2016).

Louis was practiced in the art of quiet, insightful observation. He was guided by a strong sense of ethics, rectitude even, which, when threatened, would see him retreat into some place of inner, impenetrable solitude. His expression would be cautious, though not tentative, measured, like a man not trusting words nor expecting too much of this world.

We are all bereaved by his departure, so sudden and final, but we are thankful for the friendship and trust, the love for a culture that we share and a legacy of work that challenges us all to sustained standards of excellence.