

Oliver Samuels: Undisputed King of Comedy

The minute he walks into the room he has the attention of everyone. One look in his face and you can already feel a smile forming at the corners of your mouth.

Such is the effect of Jamaica's king of comedy, Oliver Samuels.

"I have gotten used to that kind of effect I have on people," he said with laughter everyone has gotten accustomed to throughout one production or another.

The actor, who has appeared in at least 50 hit theatrical productions to date, including 13 LTM pantomimes, appearing alongside theatre icons, Louise Bennett-Coverly and Ranny Williams — Miss Lou and Mass Ran, is arguably Jamaica's most compelling theatre voice with a colourful mastery for the Jamaican style.

Over the years theatre has evolved with play lovers gravitating to a number of roots plays. Samuels weighed in on the issue, in his own inimitable fashion.

"I don't know what is roots play. Roots to me says the beginning. That is certainly not the beginning," Samuels quipped, adding, "If we should look at what we call roots in comparison to that of street or market theatre, ours seem to be quite different. Ours tends to be based on vulgarity in its broadest sense, to me it's a phenomenon rather than roots," Samuels stated when quizzed about the evolution of theatre in Jamaica.

Samuels has the ability to effortlessly engage his audience in whatever character he happens to be playing. That ability, Samuels says, is something that is not attained overnight. It takes "getting to know the character you are playing and literally transforming into it," the experienced actor shared.

"There are aspects of theatre that you can't escape. But no matter how good you are as an actor you still need a good director," he stressed.

The comedic actor has appeared in productions, such as Oliver, Oliver at Large and Oliver Large and in Charge. He has also appeared in the soap opera Royal Palm Estate produced by Lennie Little-White as Son-Son.

Born Oliver Adolphus Samuels in Harmony Hall, St Mary, his involvement in drama began in his childhood. At the age of seven, he and the other children on the plantation would sing and recite poetry on Friday nights.

Samuels went to the Salvation Army School, Rose Bank Primary and then attended the high school in Highgate, after which he went to the Dintill Technical High School. He said that his time at Dintill offered no scope for the

development of his innate dramatic creativity.

After school he worked as a storekeeper at the Orange River Agricultural Station and then moved to Kingston on the encouragement of his friends. He landed a clerical job at the National Water Commission and then took a job proofreading at the Gleaner Company, where he stayed for only one day.

After failing in his attempt to contact well-known theatre personalities, he enrolled in the Jamaica Theatre School from 1971 to 1973. During these years, participated in various productions.

The comedic actor has played many roles in his 40 years in theatre, but there is still one that he has not played yet, and it is something he would like to try. "I haven't played a serious or a tragic role. Hopefully it would be so strong it would move people to tears," said the man who tends to have his audience laughing uncontrollably.

Responding to the question if people would really gravitate towards him in that kind of a role, Samuels quickly responds, "that's the power of acting."

With his inspiration being the late Miss Lou, Samuels says being a great actor has to do with two elements – talent and passion.

From where he stands Samuels says there is great hope for the theatre movement with actors like Glen "Titus" Campbell, Aston Cooke and his group and other aspiring dramatic artistes.

His one wish though is that they will not "start to believe their own hype."

"They are exciting talent and I only hope they don't get star struck, we tend not to sustain things – I believe we don't have a passion for it. Some of us see it as the hype so there's no real heart in it," he said.

Presently Samuels plays the role of Dick in the play Puppy Love. Commenting on his character Samuels says, "I am so enjoying the character of Dick. Some audience members hate me, some love me, some are not sympathetic, but they are all very vocal – I enjoy it. It is a role that has its highs and lows, the audience has been so generous," he told Splash.

What's next for this actor? Although he has no details to share about his upcoming Christmas show, Oliver is promising it will be entertaining and something worth coming out to see.

His words of wisdom to upcoming players in the theatre are simple: "Be humble, humility can take you anywhere."