

Canadians exposed to Marcus Garvey's life

Canadians living in Toronto have been fortunate to find out more about Jamaica's first National Hero, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, through a documentary and a stage play.

The 90-minute documentary was a one-time showing by the Caribbean Studies Department of the University of Toronto, while the stage play will continue playing until March 27 at the Papermill Theatre on Pottery Road, in Toronto.

Originally produced in 2000 by award-winning American film maker and director, Stanley Nelson, the documentary – ‘Marcus Garvey: Look For Me In The Whirlwind’ - explores the life of Mr. Garvey, including the organisation he founded – the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), believed to be the ‘most influential Pan-African organisation in history.’

The documentary features first-hand accounts from Garveyites, former members of the UNIA, many of whom joined with their parents and are now in their 80s and 90s, plus insights and comments from at least seven historians, including Canadian Robert Hill, Professor of History at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), who was present, along with the Director, to answer questions from the audience.

At the height of the Garvey movement, there were 500 chapters of the UNIA in 22 countries in North America, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean. The UNIA had 750,000 followers and employed more than 1,000 persons. The documentary won the 2000 Black International Cinema Festival award, and the title came from a Marcus Garvey quote, ‘In death, I shall be a terror to the foes of Negro liberty. Look for me in the whirlwind or the song of the storm; look for me all around you.’

While much of the film focuses on Garvey’s life in the United States (USA) and the rise of the UNIA, including the 1920 staging of the International Convention of Negroes, Garvey’s arrest and subsequent deportation to Jamaica; the play, ‘I Marcus Garvey’, shows his life in England, Jamaica, the USA, and a trip to Canada, his relationship with Amy Jacques Garvey and interactions with his sister.

Written by Edgar Nkosi White and directed by the founder and artistic director of Theatre Archipelago, Trinidadian-born Rhoma Spencer, the play stars Richard Stewart as ‘Marcus Garvey’ and Beryl Bain as ‘Amy Jacques Garvey’, and is interspersed with music, including Jamaican folk songs such as Evening Time, Chi Chi Bud, Rukumbine, Brown Skin Gal and Jamaica Farewell.

The Director noted that Garvey’s ideology has stood the test of time. ‘Long before Barack Obama’s ‘the Audacity of Hope’, Marcus Garvey walked with an audacity without fear or favour,’ said Ms. Spencer.

Jamaica’s Consul General to Toronto, Seth George Ramocan, said he is pleased to see the re-awakened consciousness of the role and contribution of Marcus Garvey that is taking place.

‘I’m encouraged by the numerous activities to build awareness of Marcus Garvey and I must commend the

work of the playwright, Edgar Nkosi White and the director, Rhoma Spencer, for putting on such an extraordinary and beautiful production," said Mr. Ramocan, who was in attendance with his wife and grandson.

The Consul General noted that the production has also highlighted that, "we have fallen short, both in Jamaica and on the international scene, of giving the work of Marcus Garvey the kind of support it deserves, particularly because he made such a great impact and much of the benefits we derive today must be attributed to the foundation he laid."

The Toronto-Dominion (TD) Bank group is the lead sponsor of the production and Manager of Community Relations and Volunteer Programmes, Janelle St. Omer, said the play is being presented as part of a series entitled, "Then and Now".

"It is an extraordinary collection of performance, art and cultural events that started in late January. Events in the series include Ruined by Obsidian Theatre, Haitian Voices performed by the Nathaniel Dett Chorale, and An Evening with Spike Lee at the Canadian Film Centre. We're so thrilled to be presenting entertaining and inspiring series. It's another way we're making a difference in the community," she said.

By CAROLYN GOULBOURNE-WARREN