

Vinnette Carroll

Pioneering black actress and theatre director

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by Stephen Bourne – The Independent

In 1972, the talented actress, playwright and director Vinnette Carroll was heralded as the first African-American woman to direct on Broadway and receive a Tony nomination. A decade earlier, she had become the first black woman to direct on the West End stage in London.

Vinnette Carroll was born in 1922 in New York to Edgar Carroll, a dentist, and his wife Florence, but spent much of her childhood in Jamaica. She graduated from Long Island University in 1944 with a BA and from New York University in 1946 with an MA in psychology. Following doctoral work at Columbia University, she worked as a clinical psychologist with the NYC Bureau of Child Guidance before studying acting with Lee Strasberg at the New School for Social Research, other students including Marlon Brando and Rod Steiger. Realising there was a scarcity of decent roles for black actresses, Carroll turned to teaching drama. From 1955 to 1966 she taught theatre arts and directed productions at the High School of Performing Arts in New York.

In 1958 Carroll made an impressive London stage debut at the Royal Court in *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, a play by the Trinidadian actor Errol John. This was described by the critic Kenneth Tynan as a "hauntingly hot-climate tragicomedy about backyard life in Trinidad". Carroll was praised for her portrayal of the tough, warm-hearted Sophia who holds her family together against poverty and an alcoholic husband. Carroll recreated the role in a highly regarded off-Broadway production in 1962. Both Carroll and her co-star, James Earl Jones, received Obie awards.

In 1960 Carroll returned to Britain to co-star with Frances Cuka and Dennis Waterman in a Granada Television *Play of the Week* production of Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*. Two years later she made another impressive appearance on the London stage at the Criterion, as the Narrator in Langston Hughes's gospel-song play *Black Nativity*. Carroll also directed this highly successful production, which featured Marion Williams and the Stars of Faith, one of America's outstanding gospel singing groups. *Black Nativity* was then produced for British television by Associated Rediffusion and screened on Christmas Day 1962. A telerecording was made and deposited in the National Film and Television Archive.

The following year, in London, Carroll recorded *Beyond the Blues*, an album of African-American poetry, with Cleo Laine, Brock Peters and Gordon Heath, and also directed a revival of *Black Nativity* at the Vaudeville.

Trumpets of the Lord was Carroll's 1963 off-Broadway adaptation of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: seven negro sermons in verse* (1927). Johnson's work celebrated the black preachers he recalled from his youth in the South and as a young man in New York City. What Johnson had succeeded in doing in 1927, Carroll and the show's stars Theresa Merritt, Cicely Tyson and Al Freeman Jnr accomplished in 1963. The electric gospel singing again captured New York critics, and gave the show a healthy initial run, as well as a Broadway revival in 1969.

During the 1960s Carroll applied to the New York State Council on the Arts for the establishment of a theatre where, she said, "a black actor could have a place to learn his art and not have to rely on just being black to get a job". The Urban Arts Corps (UAC) was founded in 1967. Located on West 20th Street, the company staged a variety of dramas and musicals by black artists with minority casts.

As UAC's artistic director, Carroll propelled several musicals from its workshops to Broadway including *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* (1972). A spiritual/blues/gospel show, it earned her a Tony nomination for Best Director of a Musical, in an illustrious line-up that also included Bob Fosse (who won for *Pippin*), Gower Champion (*Sugar*) and Harold Prince (*A Little Night Music*).

Four years later, Carroll conceived and directed *Your Arms Too Short to Box With God* (1976), an adaptation of St Matthew's Gospel. While the last days of Christ were clearly central to the musical, Carroll later admitted that she saw Christ as a Martin Luther King: "a man who was saying things that people didn't want to hear", she said. The show harked back to gospel traditions within the black church and also, in a theatrical sense, to Langston Hughes's gospel musicals. Carroll received two Tony nominations and, after a year-long run in New York, the show toured 66 American cities, returning to Broadway in 1980.

Carroll's triumph with musicals rather than dramas was partially unintentional. In 1976 she explained to *The New York Times* that the chief reason she did musicals was that white producers won't pick up anything intellectual by us, no matter how good it is. They only want the singing and dancing. It's where the quick money is.

In 1979 Carroll's production of *When Hell Freezes Over I'll Skate* was performed at the Lincoln Center, New York, and on national public television. She made only occasional film and television appearances. She played supporting roles in the films *Two Potato* (1964), *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), *The Reivers* (1969) and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), and in 1976 she made a guest appearance on American television in the popular comedy series *All in the Family*. In 1980 Carroll moved to Florida and five years later established the Vinnette Carroll Repertory Company in Fort Lauderdale.
