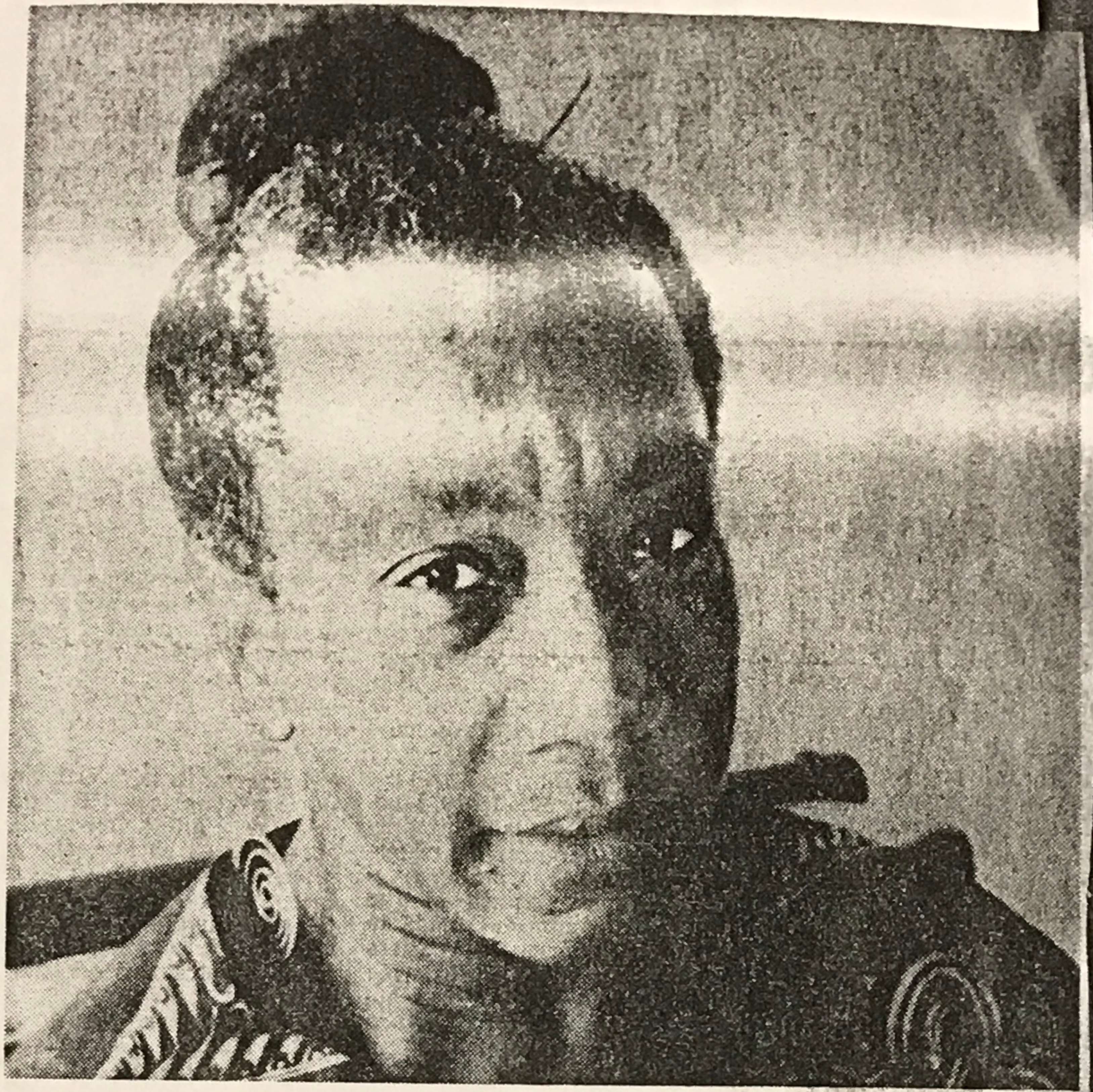


Vinnette Carroll



VINETTE CARROLL is an extraordinary symbol of protest and survival. She is the only Negro woman director in the commercial theatre in America. A native of Jamaica, she emigrated to New York with her family when she was a child, and began her working life as a clinical psychologist in the New York Bureau of Child Guidance.

"We had a very achievement-driven mother who wanted us to work as close as possible to our capacity," she says. "She taught us never to use race as a peg to hang our neuroses on, and we had to be qualified." Psychology was less precarious than the theatre but she was stage-struck. She attended the night classes of The New School of Erwin Piscator, a friend of Brecht, won a scholarship to the day school and then gave up psychology to concentrate on the theatre. Among her classmates were Rod Steiger, Ben Gazzarra and Tony Curtis, but for the talented Negress the only available parts were southern mamies and characters in gospel plays.

Successes

Miss Carroll began her lone protest. She turned down all Negro bit parts and made up her own "One Woman Show" which she sold to Columbia Artists' who had had a recent success with a white one-woman show: Anna Russell. Since then Vinnette Carroll has won an OBIE award as a stage actress, an Emmy for her acting in television, a Grant for Directors award from the Ford Foundation, and now she is a consultant in drama to the New York State Council on the Arts. She has worked for Granada Television and appeared at Manchester Opera House.

Now she is dedicated to the integrated theatre and will not work with an all-white or an all-black production. Los

Angeles was recently one of the three key cities chosen by the Federal Government for a pilot experiment in integrated theatre known as "Project Discovery." The local Inner Repertory Company presented under Vinnette Carroll's direction William Hanley's "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground," which is an explosive tale of three people on the run from their conscience who meet by chance in a run-down pop and candy store. Old Glas, the owner, is a German ex-Communist who has abandoned his Jewish wife and child to Nazi extermination; Rosie, a brassy Brooklyn coed majoring in psychology, is on her way to an abortionist. Randall, a young Negro, has murdered the prostitute mother he adored. The audience which braved an unprecedented storm to attend the opening night stayed to stamp and cheer.

The miracle of the evening was the portrayal by 21-year-old Glynn Turman of Randall, the touchy Negro with the IQ of 185 who dances about the stage brandishing a tightly rolled umbrella within gouging distance of those he thinks have offended him. Miss Carroll has known Glynn Turman since he was a child. He came to the High School for the Performing Arts via Broadway where he played the part of Travis in "Raisin' in the Sun" when he was 11. It was when she was teaching drama at this school in the late fifties that Miss Carroll discovered her own talent for directing.

There is a tremendous respect between teacher and pupil, but the generation gap is visible. Glynn wants change now. Miss Carroll, is patient. Miss Carroll, a quick-witted aristocratic lady who laughs easily, was enveloped in a gorgeous tent of ashift made of purple and gold woven African cloth. "It hides the fat," she said. She knows that the integrated theatre has

to be tackled on two levels—the immediate and the long-term approach. A history of deprivation has created a dearth of Negro talent in every aspect of the theatre. To remedy this Miss Carroll would establish a national theatre workshop and stock it from the theatre arts departments of schools throughout the nation.

"I would approach people like Poitier and Belafonte (her friends) for scholarships, and apply for funds to the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundations," she says. There must be continuing education on both sides of the footlights. White theatregoers will have to become colourblind and Negro actors with southern accents who hope to play Shakespeare must have this ironed out.

"The Civil Rights movement has stimulated new playwrights now that there is some hope of being produced but until there is a substantial new repertory of plays the integrated theatre must do plays to accommodate the scope of present talent, otherwise actors will get a sense of inferiority and the audience a bad taste."

Disadvantage

Glynn Turman is as angry offstage as on. "She's a giant; she's a giant," he kept saying about Vinnette Carroll, "but she's at a disadvantage because she's a black woman." His eyes flash. "How do you think a black actor learns parts in Shakespeare? He acts to himself in his kitchen or bathroom. I want to play Romeo on the stage. It's my dream."

I asked him if he thought opportunities were better for the Negro in Europe. The Angry Young Man answered very quietly, "I hear it's better there. I've never been to Europe, but I want to crash the wall of this Establishment." SOPHIA WYATT