

ARTS

Vinnette Carroll, Playwright And Director, Is Dead at 80

By JESSE MCKINLEY NOV. 7, 2002

Vinnette Carroll, the trailblazing actress, director and playwright who was the first African-American woman to direct a production on Broadway, died Tuesday at her home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. She was 80.

The cause was complications from diabetes and heart disease, said Anita MacShane, a friend.

A black woman in a business often dominated by white men, Ms. Carroll's career included several theatrical milestones and a consistent sense of activity and ambition.

As a director, she was not only the first black woman to direct on Broadway -- the musical revue "Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope," in 1972 -- but she also brought her best-known show, the gospel-infused "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God," to Broadway on three separate occasions. As an actress, Ms. Carroll won an Emmy ("Beyond the Blues," in 1964), an Obie ("Moon on a Rainbow Shawl," in 1962) and was nominated for three Tony awards.

Ms. Carroll was also the founder and artistic director of the Urban Arts Corps, a New York-based training and producing organization devoted to supporting black and Hispanic theater and actors. The group fostered the careers of hundreds of performers, including Cicely Tyson and Sherman Hemsley, as well as presenting "Don't Bother Me" and "Your Arms Too Short." The onetime director of the New

York State Ghetto Arts Program, which brought theater and dance to poor neighborhoods, Ms. Carroll also worked in Los Angeles at the Inner City Repertory in the Watts district, presenting classical and modern works.

Born into a well-off Jamaican family, Ms. Carroll moved to Harlem when she was 10 and found an instant affinity for the arts, playing viola with the Dean Dixon Symphony when in high school. Her father, however, who was a dentist, had medical plans for her. After graduating from Long Island University, Ms. Carroll received a master's degree in psychology from New York University and worked briefly as a clinical psychologist in the New York City schools.

At the same time, though, she was moonlighting in acting classes; drama soon won her over. In 1948, she was accepted to the Erwin Piscator dramatic workshop at the New School, where she studied with Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler.

A tall woman with round cheeks and a high brow, Ms. Carroll was not classified as beautiful in the traditional sense, but still she impressed her teachers with her expressive eyes and resonant voice.

After honing her craft by acting at the Harlem Y.M.C.A., Ms. Carroll found some work in the theater in the 1950's, and also toured extensively with a one-woman show that she wrote. Her Broadway debut came in a short-lived revival of "A Small War on Murray Hill," open for a single week in January 1957.

It was during the 1960's and 70's, the height the national black theater movement, that Ms. Carroll's talents came into full bloom.

In 1962, she won her Obie in "Moon Over a Rainbow Shawl" Off Broadway, stealing scenes from her castmate James Earl Jones. A year later, "Trumpets of the Lord," Ms. Carroll's musical adaptation of seven sermons, became a runaway Off Broadway hit. In 1964, she won her Emmy. In 1966, she garnered more praise for directing and starring in the Langston Hughes play "Prodigal Son," a production that toured Europe.

In 1967, she founded the Urban Arts Corps, which produced dozens of shows out of a space on West 20th Street. In 1969, another production of "Trumpets of the

Lord" opened on Broadway, but closed in less than a week.

Ms. Carroll more than made up for the brevity of that run with two enormous success during the 1970's. The first was "Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope," a roof-raising gospel revue with songs by Micki Grant, which Ms. Carroll conceived, produced and directed at the Urban Arts Corps in 1970 and later took to Broadway, where it ran for 1,065 performances. Ms. Carroll's direction was nominated for a Tony, making her the first black woman ever to win that nomination. (She lost to Bob Fosse for "Pippin.")

Shortly after "I Can't Cope" closed, in 1974, Ms. Carroll began conceiving a followup, a gospel celebration of the Gospel of St. Matthew. That show, "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God," with music and lyrics by Alex Bradford and Micki Grant, turned out to be a big success, spawning several national tours and two return trips to Broadway, including a 1982 version starred Patti LaBelle and Al Green. A fourth trip to Broadway is being planned for next year.

Not all of Ms. Carroll's efforts were as successful. A pricey adaptation of "Alice in Wonderland," titled "But Never Jam Today," had a tortured route to Broadway, only to close within a week, in 1979.

Ms. Carroll divided her time between New York and Florida, where she bought a house in the 1980's. She is survived by a sister, Dorothy Carroll Hudgins, of Manhattan.

In the late 1980's, she founded a theater in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., devoted to featuring work by minority playwrights and actors. Throughout her life, Ms. Carroll was an eloquent speaker about the challenges of being black and female.

"I have had a great deal of hurt in the theater both as a Negro and as a woman, but I don't get immobilized by it," she said in an interview with The Los Angeles Times in 1967. "I tell myself that no one individual is going to make it impossible for me."