**Bush Theatre Strange Fruit**

Welcome to this introduction to Strange Fruit at the Bush Theatre. The audio described performance will be on Saturday 6th January and lasts for approximately three hours including a 15 minute interval. The programme notes will begin at 2.15 and the performance itself at 2.30. The audio describer will be Di Langford.

Caryl Phillips wrote Strange Fruit in the late 70s. The action takes place in England in an inner city area. An exhibition in the foyer of the theatre represents a typical room in a West Indian home, during that period, traditionally reserved for receiving guests and visitors. A low olive green velvet sofa stands against a wall papered with a pink and gold pattern. Black and white wedding photographs hang on the wall, next to a sunburst clock and a flight of three china birds. Lace antimacassars are draped over the back and arms of the sofa and a low coffee table stands in front of it with a crocheted plastic mat and a vase of artificial flowers. To the right stands a glass fronted wooden cabinet containing several glasses, - a lava lamp and more family photographs stand on top of it. To the left is a wooden lamp standard with a fringed pink lampshade. The statue of a dog stands beside the left arm of the sofa. A small green rug with a dark green floral design is spread on the floor.

To the left of the display a door leads into the auditorium. Here we pass a sideboard with a large radio come record player. A Johnny Mathis record is propped up on top of it, next to a china dish celebrating Queen Elizabeth IIs Jubilee and a yellow dial telephone. Several religious pictures hang on the wall. To the right, a wooden bead curtain is fastened back to allow entrance to the main theatre space.

The roof of the auditorium is supported on 4 grey pillars which each stand at a corner of the central acting area. The audience is seated on all four sides. While the space represents the living room where the action takes place, in comparison with the room on display outside, the set is bare and unrealistic. A section of the floor about 4 metres square and 60 cms deep is sunk into the centre of the room with one step leading down to the bottom – like a square swimming pool. This takes up most of the space. The whole of the set is covered in green carpet with a darker green floral pattern. Diagonally across from the audience entrance, an open ironing board stands against a pillar, with an iron and a radio on the floor behind it. During the action it becomes clear that more props are clustered around the base of the other pillars – these include a yellow dial telephone, bottles and glasses and a photograph album. There are four doorways into the auditorium. Each doorway has a wooden bead curtain hanging in front of it, or tied back to one side. The door opposite where the audience comes in leads out to the front door and the two others lead to the kitchen and the rest of the house.

There are five performers, The play is set in the home of the Marshall family who are of Afro Caribbean heritage. **Mother** is a slight woman in her late forties with dark skin and collar length dark hair brushed to one side in a fringe. She is neatly dressed in a white cardigan over a slim, button through floral cotton dress – it’s calf length and she is wearing nylon stockings. When she first appears she has already changed into slippers but still has on a beige jacket, which she hangs on a hook beside the door. Later she changes into a finely pleated pale green skirt and a floral black and white blouse, still worn with the white cardigan. Mother looks resigned and weary and at times seems to shrink into herself.

By comparison herneighbour **Vernice** is very outspoken. Her complexion is light brown and she has flashing dark eyes. Her curling black hair is twisted up in a scarf in a traditional style. She appears in several outfits of similar design and favours cotton fabrics in bright colours and a variety of patterns. We first see her in a red top with a patterned white border, a scoop neck and wide sleeves like a cape. Her ankle length brown skirt is close fitting and patterned with leaves and flowers. It has a split at the back revealing her bare legs and slip on sandals. She wears a short gold chain, and several bead necklaces and large brightly coloured earrings. Vernice fills the room with her energy which at times can seem to be quite aggressive. She lets herself into the house by the back door which leads in through the kitchen.

Mother has two sons who are both dark-skinned. We first meet **Errol** who is in his early twenties – and of medium height with a muscular build. He has a small moustache and a slight beard. His short dreadlocks are hidden under a navy blue woollen beanie. A white vest is just visible under a zip up jumper, which he wears with green denims and casual trainers. Errol has a wide smile and a physical ease – he sprawls on the side of the sunken area, but can change in an instant like a coiled spring.

Errol has a white girlfriend – **Shelley** - who is sixteen and still at school. She is slight and retiring, and for such a young girl seems to have little energy. Her straight, shoulder length hair has a central parting and is caught back on each side with a clip. Shelley stands with her shoulders slightly stooped, her hands just hanging at her sides. Her face is pale and at times she keeps her head down, looking up warily especially when Errol throws her a warning glance. She is dressed like a child in a short-sleeved yellow and white striped top and a black and white checked skirt, white ankle socks and black shoes with a strap. Over this she wears a beige mac with a hood and she is carrying an umbrella and some records. Later she is ready to go out with Errol in a flowery cotton dress with a vee neck, and black shoes with a small heel. She wears no makeup except for a smear of pink lipstick and carries a small shoulder bag.

It is not until Act 2 that we meet Errol’s older brother **Alvin** who is slightly taller and in his mid twenties. He is also dark-skinned. He is slim and clean shaven with close cut hair and wears a reddish brown polo necked sweater tucked into well fitting brown trousers, fastened with a black leather belt. Alvin wears a well cut black leather jacket and slip on brown shoes. Round his neck is a narrow gold chain and he has a gold ring on one hand. When he first appears he is carrying a suitcase.

Mother is played by Rakie Ayola

Vernice by Debra Michaels

Errol by Jonathan Ajayi

Shelley by Tilly Steele

And Alvin by Tok Stephens

Strange Fruit was written by Caryl Phillips

Designed by Max Johns

And directed by Nancy Medina

That is the end of the introductory notes to Strange Fruit.