

Bashment Vibes

A WEEKLY LOOK AT THE REGGAE SCENE BY ORANTES MOORE

Black Heroes In The Hall of Fame, Britain's most successful African-Caribbean theatre production and the first black musical to appear in London's West End, returns with a national tour this month.

The show, which features more than 70 performers including popular singer Lloyd Brown, is best described as a live Madame Tussauds-style exhibition covering 5,000 years of black history.

According to its director, Flip Fraser, the return of *Black Heroes* is a fitting commemoration for the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act later this month.

Throughout an illustrious 30-year career, Fraser has been a successful radio-plugger (he's one of the men responsible for convincing Radio 1 to play reggae); worked as the chief publicist for Reggae Sunsplash (Jamaica's most popular music festival); and in 1982, became the founding editor of *The Voice* newspaper.

In this exclusive interview, Fraser, 55, talks about the changes he's seen in the reggae industry and explains how he conceived and wrote *Black Heroes* in one inspirational night.

You came to England in 1967 – how has the reggae scene changed since then?

Music is always evolving. The togetherness and purpose of making music has changed. In my day, it was the conscious man that made music. Now it's a fashion ting, and that reflects in the music, which is a shame. In the pursuit of money, I think the industry went off the rails a bit. It should have been following Bob [Marley].

What was it like working on Reggae Sunsplash?

Sunsplash was a phenomenon. I was responsible for promoting the event in Europe and encouraging black Britons to travel to Jamaica. It was a very dynamic organisation because they were doing something that had never been done before. Sunsplash was what really made reggae an international product.

How did you come up with the concept for *Black Heroes*?

I had an argument with my girlfriend one night and couldn't sleep. So I went downstairs, picked up a pen and paper and started thinking about great people like Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Menelik, Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X.

I thought to myself: 'These people should be in a hall of fame,' and I started putting them into categories – queens, kings, freedom fighters,

THE RETURN OF BLACK HEROES

FRASER REVIVES ICONIC FEELGOOD SHOW



Flip Fraser: the creator and inspiration behind *Black Heroes*

sportspeople, entertainers, etc.

By morning I'd written the whole show.

Between 1990 and 1994 you took the show to Jamaica and America – what was that like?

Jamaica was a great experience because we did 46 shows in 30 days. The demand was so great we had to do shows at midnight. Every performance was sold out. You had people walking barefoot from Trenchtown and others driving from uptown in their Mercedes Benz. The Prime Minister attended, as did Rita Marley and her family.

In 1992 we toured America – Washington DC, Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore – and broke pure box office records. We did well when we

went back in 1994, but many of our shows were cancelled because of severe snow. The experience, adulation and respect we have in America is amazing, especially Detroit; they love us there.

Who is your favourite black hero?

Bob Marley. From I was a little boy I looked up to him as a great communicator.

Did you ever meet him?

Yes. I knew Bob and Peter [Tosh] quite well. I used to play football with Bob.

Was he really as good at football as everyone says?

Nah (laughs). He knew the game,



Lloyd Brown: Heroes regular

but you couldn't touch him because before every match a man would say to you: 'Don't touch the Gong, y'kno.' So when Bob had the ball nobody troubled him. He did his little pretty moves and everybody would cheer and clap, but if you tackled him it was pure argument [laughs].

If you could change one thing, what would it be?

I'd like every black youth to know where they come from because the majority of black youths don't know where their roots are. Every non-European owes it to themselves to go and find out where home is.

Do you think projects such as *Black Heroes* can help reduce gun-crime in our communities?

Yes. Right now we're living in a world of violence and ignorance. We have to hold up our hands and admit that we didn't teach the youths right; we didn't show them what is important. Ignorance is about not knowing, but once you know... If every youth could come



Bob Marley: er... footballer

and watch this show and leave thinking 'Bloody hell, I could have done that,' then we've served a purpose. *Black Heroes* is about showing positive black achievements, and once you're proud of yourself you can achieve anything.

What does the future hold for Flip Fraser and *Black Heroes*?

The correction of ignorance begins at home so we are trying to get these ideas home to our people. But we'd like *Black Heroes* to be a mainstream show. We think white people need to learn about us just as much as we need to learn about ourselves.

■ Catch *Black Heroes* at Hackney Empire in London in early April; Royal Concert Hall in Nottingham on 25 April; and Ashcroft Theatre in Croydon on 5, 6 and 7 May. For more info visit www.myspace.com/black-heroesfame.