

Lorena Gale was a huge talent in a small package. Just 5' 1", this smart, beautiful, multi-faceted dynamo had great presence on and offstage, playing doctors and DA's, police lieutenants and military officers, Goneril, Hecuba, the Acid Queen in *Tommy*, and the powerful priestess Elosha in *Battlestar Galactica*. One of the busiest actresses in Canada, with 126 entries on imdb.com as well as dozens more theatrical and voice-over credits on her resumé, she was also an important dramatist whose plays *Angélique* and *Je me souviens* contributed significantly to the contemporary Canadian theatre.

Lorena was candid and outspoken. The commanding force of her personality and the probing, no-nonsense intellect behind those smouldering dark brown eyes, along with her grace and courage, were the qualities for which she will be best remembered by those who had the privilege to know her, the same qualities that made her such a formidable friend and social presence. The Union of BC Performers got her just right when it established the Lorena Gale Woman of Distinction Award this spring, citing "her enduring commitment to power, dignity, intelligence and truth."

A third-generation Canadian born and raised in Montreal, Lorena lived her last 20 years in Vancouver. She dramatized her love-hate relationship with both cities in *Je me souviens*, her autobiographical solo play subtitled "Memories of an expatriate Anglophone Montréalaise Québécoise exiled in Canada." Nominated for the Governor General's Award for Drama in 2002, the play explores cultural and linguistic tensions, particularly the reality of being marginalized in Jacques Parizeau's *pure laine* Québec. Lorena was candid about her experience of living and working in a white-dominated world. "To be Black and enlightened in today's society is to be in a constant state of rage," *Je me souviens* asserts, echoing her comments in a 1995 *Canadian Theatre Review* article: "A solitary battle against racism is waged every time an artist of colour approaches a theatre for employment." While her own rage and the battles she fought were seasoned by analytical self-consciousness and edgy humour, her innate sense of justice and honesty resonated through artistic and cultural barriers.

Lorena studied at Concordia and the National Theatre School in the late 1970s before going to work as an actress. Her first professional stage credits, with Montreal's Black Theatre Workshop, included *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The River Niger*, for which she won the *Montreal Gazette* Theatre Critics Award for Outstanding Performance in 1981. She went on to perform across Canada, spent a season at the Shaw Festival and another as Artistic Director of Black Theatre Workshop. After moving to Vancouver in 1988 she worked in most of BC's major theatres, garnering three Jessie Richardson Award nominations including best actress for her performance in *Je me souviens*, and won the Best Supporting Actress Jessie for *The Coloured Museum*. She married her frequent Vancouver collaborator, director John Cooper, in 1991. Their son Clayton was born the following year.

In Vancouver Lorena quickly became a mainstay of the thriving TV and film industry, appearing in multiple episodes of *The X-Files*, *The Outer Limits*, *Smallville*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, in features like *The Butterfly Effect*, *The Chronicles of Riddick*, and *Things We Lost in the Fire*, and in dozens of MOWs. It was on sets of movies like CBS's *The Survivors' Club* (2004) that I got to see Lorena's formidable acting talents up close, and hear her intelligent, no-bullshit monologues on every aspect of human glory and stupidity for which, among her friends, she was famous.

As a playwright Lorena's reputation rests on a small but strong corpus of work. *Angélique* dramatizes the life and death of Marie Joseph Angélique, a Black slave hanged in 1734 for purportedly starting a fire that destroyed much of Montreal. In the play Angélique and her slave owners are sometimes 18th century characters, sometimes anachronistically contemporary. Lorena dedicated the play to her mother, "who slaved all her life for minimum wage and still managed to house, feed, clothe, and educate 5 children," and to her son. First staged in 1998 by Calgary's Alberta Theatre Projects, where it was nominated for a Betty Mitchell Award for Outstanding New Play, *Angélique* had productions in Detroit and New York in 1999, the latter nominated for eight Audelco (Harlem Black Theatre) awards. Playwrights Canada Press published *Angélique* in 2000.

Lorena formed her own company, Curious Tongue Productions, to produce *Je me souviens* at Halifax's Eastern Front Theatre in 1998, and subsequently for Vancouver's Firehall, Victoria's Belfry, and CBC national radio. Written as an impassioned rebuttal to Parizeau's remarks about "ethnics" after the 1995 Quebec referendum, the play was also a love letter to Montreal and Lorena's fierce reclamation of her right as an Anglophone Black woman to declare herself Québécoise, and to be at home anywhere in Canada. *Je me souviens* was published by Talonbooks in 2001 and reprinted by Playwrights Canada in a collection of female monologues called *Voice of Her Own*.

Lorena's *The Darwinist*, a complex argument about theories of evolution and race, received readings at Playwrights Workshop Montreal, Nightwood Theatre, and Vancouver's Playwrights Theatre Centre but is as yet unproduced. *The Darwinist* was Lorena's thesis for her Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Simon Fraser University in 2005. She never finished her BA at Concordia so was particularly proud of this achievement. In her mind it confirmed her as a true intellectual, a fact already obvious to anyone who knew her.

Her most recent play, "The Voice," a monologue performed by Mercedes Baines and directed by John Cooper, was part of a show about faith called *True Believers*, produced by Vancouver's Solo Collective in 2008. Lorena's faith in herself, her family and friends remained strong to the end. A week before her death, after months in palliative care at Vancouver General Hospital, she managed to make it out to Clay's high school graduation. A few days later she rallied herself to receive a group of her women friends. When the nurse asked if

she was in pain, she answered, "Not so much pain that I can't enjoy a party." Lorena passed away peacefully on the morning of June 21, holding hands with John.

Lorena Gale was born on May 9, 1958, in Montreal and died of abdominal cancer in Vancouver on June 21, 2009, survived by her husband John and son Clayton Cooper. In lieu of flowers the family encourages donations to Vancouver General Hospital's Palliative Care Unit. A celebration of Lorena's life will be held sometime in July.

--Jerry Wasserman