

The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus

Opening Ceremony –Annual African Theatre Association Conference

Thursday, July 06, 2017

9:30 a.m.

A glorious good morning to all.

On behalf of The University of the West Indies Cave Hill campus family, I extend a very vibrant warm Barbadian/Caribbean greeting to those visiting from across the Caribbean and beyond, especially participants who have journeyed from various parts of Africa; and to everyone, including our own circle of friends and well-wishers in the local creative arts community - a very special welcome to the Cave Hill campus.

We at Cave Hill, are mindful of the significance of the hosting of this tenth annual conference of the African Theatre Association which is being held for the first time, not only in Barbados, but also in the Caribbean. Of course, we are aware that you selected this venue from among dozens of possible locations and so we are delighted that you have chosen to be here. The decision to take this conference beyond the shores of Africa and into its Diaspora is a powerful symbol and affirmation of connectivity between Africa and its Peoples wherever we are scattered. That decision also demonstrates an understanding of the significance of the creative arts, and in particular, the specific role of performance, in strengthening national identity and the building of the nation state.

This conference coincides with our own 10th anniversary of the Errol Barrow Centre for Creative Imagination, which houses the auditorium where you are currently seated. It also is the site of a cinematique, a dance theatre and several other rooms which will host your various sessions. The Centre has been named in honour of this country's first Prime Minister, one of the founding fathers of this campus and who is numbered among the country's ten National Heroes. The EBCCI enjoys and offers a spectacular vista overlooking the Caribbean Sea, one which I hope you took time to savour before entering this Walcott Warner theatre, a theatre that honours the late Barbadian/Caribbean dramatist Earl Warner and the late, internationally renowned St. Lucian/Caribbean poet and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott. We are confident that this location, imbued with such historic meaning, helps to create the right environment and ambience for nurturing some of the region's finest talent.

After Barbados became Independent in 1966 increasing indigenization of artistic exploration, sought to give creative expression to the Black African experience. A cultural explosion witnessed theatre showing significant promise in the 1970's. Since that incredibly energetic decade, there has been somewhat of a decline in thespian talent and activity. Given the renewed focus on the creative arts in recent times, I believe the time is ripe for a resurgence of local theatre.

Indeed, it is my hope that years from now, when historians and others reflect on the role played by the Errol Barrow Centre for Creative Imagination in the development of the arts, that this Centre will be regarded as the ancestral home that fostered a cultural renaissance and nurtured a modern creative arts industry in Barbados and the wider Caribbean, such that it enables theatre to flourish. As regional governments look beyond traditional industries, and more and more towards modern, creative industries to help loosen the shackles of recession that have bedeviled our post-colonial economies and societies, a thriving creative arts industry nourished by this

Errol Barrow Centre could, indeed, be a fitting honour to the memory of this country's first post-Independent Prime Minister.

As I look upon this audience this morning, I am heartened that the rich intellectual and artistic talent gathered here can help to give impetus to that journey. As post-colonial societies utilize creative art forms to reflect our culture, identities and aspirations of our people, and to assist in decolonising the university's curricula, my optimism is no midsummer night's dream. It is instead a confident expectation of how African-centric painters, poets, playwrights and other creative artistes can help to reposition African learning at the centre of global intellectual thought.

It is therefore quite fortuitous that this conference is taking place in the midst of Barbados' largest annual cultural festival - Crop Over - and on the cusp of CARIFESTA XIII, the region's biennial celebration of Caribbean Culture. The hosting of this conference at this time is highly relevant to these major festivals.

When we consider that the Creative Arts industries contributed twenty-seven **billion** pounds sterling to the economy of the UK in 2015 and these industries are major contributors to business and employment creation in the US and elsewhere, it is obvious that our regional economies are missing out on major socio-economic benefits as a result of our under developed cultural sectors.

Ladies and gentlemen, in addition to exploring how Diasporic thought and talent can have greater influence on global epistemologies, and how it can be a catalyst for regional creative industries to prosper, what that this gathering also represents, is an opportunity to show how the Humanities can be made more relevant and can exert greater influence on societies. This is vital in an era when greater academic focus is shifting to the STEM disciplines.

To illustrate my point, a recent White Paper in Norway sought to highlight this very issue and pointed to the need for strengthening the humanities in universities so that they may make a greater contribution to major challenges in society and be more relevant to life in general. At Cave Hill, we are clear the Humanities is a vital component of the Campus' academic life and teaching.

As a social scientist, I have long shared a belief of one of the paper's observations: namely that the humanities play a key role as the guardian of fundamental values and essential knowledge on which societies and civilisations are built.

Although you will unlikely be grappling with this major epistemological and pedagogical issue over the course of the next four days, I urge, nonetheless, that your conference deliberations be underpinned by one of the paper's conclusion which is that "the humanities contribute to an understanding of what we are living for and not only what we are living by".

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you four days of rich, fruitful deliberation, and I encourage you to take the time to enjoy some of the country's attractions and the warm hospitality of Barbadians. Please take in the night light and various forms of entertainment and of course do enjoy the Caribbean cuisine some of which borrows heavily from African dishes.

I am sure that whatever part of the world you currently call home, you find many similarities with your way of life as you move around this country.

I thank you.