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# Working: The Black Actress in the Twentieth Century

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## *Rosalind Cash*

# WORKING: THE BLACK ACTRESS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY\*

(An Interview Edited by Irma McClaurin-Allen)

**R**OSALIND CASH is a black "actor"<sup>1</sup> of incredible range and depth. She has appeared on almost every episodic show on television in a variety of roles and given numerous character portrayals in cult films such as "Buckaroo Bonsai" and "The Omega Man," and other more traditional ones like "The New Centurions" and "The All-American Boy." What all these films demonstrate, despite their dissimilarity, is the ability of Ms. Cash to create believable black characters at a time when television and movies appear to relish exaggerated stereotypes. Moreover, her appearances in film and television attest to the strength of her convictions, and her unwillingness to relinquish social and political values based upon the dignity and richness of an Afro-American heritage. This sagaciousness has enabled her to survive the pitfalls of Hollywood and stardom and resulted in being considered *persona non grata* in the eyes of those who determine which actors shall rise to the top.

On a personal level, Rosalind Cash is at peace with herself and the choices she has made. Despite the lack of suitable black roles in television and film, she has forged ahead and created an image of dignity and humaneness where white writers and producers have imagined none. She may not be considered by some standards a "big star," but she is most certainly the kind of actor one hopes their children will emulate.

What follows is a self-portrait of Rosalind Cash edited and derived from an interview conducted by Irma McClaurin-Allen during the former's residency at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, in November, 1986. During her short tenure there, Ms. Cash met with various members of the theater community and the community at large to talk about her own situation as a black actor and to discuss the plight of black actors in general. Those who attended these lectures and informal discussions were struck by her unique ability to "connect" with them on a personal level. The culmination of that connection was evident in the accolades and applause showered upon Ms. Cash after her grand finale, a

\* Title of lecture at Smith College given November 11, 1986 by Rosalind Cash.

<sup>1</sup> Ms. Cash refers to herself as an "actor" in the classical sense: "genderless."

*premier performance entitled "An Evening with Rosalind Cash." This one woman show, written by Ms. Cash and directed by Professor Chezia Thompson-Cager of Smith College's departments of Afro-American Studies and Theatre, was performed on November 14, 1986.*

I grew up in Atlantic City, New Jersey. I went to a segregated grammar school and lived on what they called the north side, which was the black section of town. I grew up in a housing project called Stanley Holmes Village that was for sub-income blacks. If you made a certain amount of money you couldn't live there. You had to stay under a certain median and we qualified very well. My mother and my father worked; they were both unskilled with limited education. Although my father, when I was born, worked as grocery "boy"—person—he also learned how to fix watches as an apprentice for a Jewish family who owned the biggest jewelry store in Atlantic City. He became accomplished at it.

My father was of West Indian heritage; his mother was from the Bahamas so we were considered West Indian in a way, and were made fun of. My mother's people were from Atlantic City, Baltimore, and Louisiana, going back. It was quite an interesting mixture. Both my parents were extremely bright but my father only went to the fifth grade. My mother came out of high school pregnant with my oldest brother but they decided to stick together. There weren't too many families in my neighborhood who had fathers because of the welfare set-up which, I think, encourages the man to stay away.

My parents worked very hard. My mother was a waitress in the local hotels. Atlantic City was a tourist town. It wasn't a gambling town at the time, but a tourist town which really catered to wealthy whites. And blacks came down from Philly and Washington, D.C., but my mother worked in a hotel which was serving white people. It was on the other side of town and blacks didn't even stay in the hotel where she worked.

I grew up very sensitive to the racial thing very early. I knew that there was disparity and I knew that I lived on one side of town and white people lived on another side of town and you weren't to go there unless you worked. Later on the high school was integrated and there were outbursts and fights. This was in the fifties—around junior high, high school. I became aware very early that there was a lot of prejudice, but I had my own little fantasy world.

I was planning to break out of Atlantic City. My parents wanted all of us to get an education. We were really really pushed. My mother used to say she never had any dumb children because we were all really bright academically. We went to a very fine high school with small classes; we had maybe twenty in a class and the high school taught college-preparatory courses. We all took classical college preparatory courses and I was in ARISTA (a program that gives students academic support outside of the schools). I grew up in Atlantic City and left as

soon as I graduated from high school. My sister and I ended up in New York. My sister is now Minority Administrator of the New York State Council for the Arts and she is doing a great job. My two brothers went to college: the oldest went to Rutgers and the other to Morgan. One of my brothers is a social worker in drug related programs. My oldest brother is a three time purple heart—101st Airborne—Vietnam veteran who is now a colonel living in D.C.

My mother is the only person that had faith in me and encouraged me to be anything I wanted to be. I remember my mother used to be so tired and we didn't have time to talk a lot; I had to do a lot of her work because she worked all the time. There were four of us and we didn't have much money and, you know, as small children we ran around a lot and always seemed hungry. My father didn't make much money and my mother made even less, but they were determined to keep their family together. There was always enough to eat because my father kept a garden which we ate from and my mother, working at the hotel, used to slide little bits of food home. We didn't really know we were poor. The housing project in which we grew up had a lot of trees and was very well kept. And my aunts lived down there and my grandmother lived there and another grandmother and my grandfather lived there and my great grandmother lived there, so I grew up with a sense of community. I had forgotten that.

I wasn't trained in high school as an actor. I couldn't enter the drama club in Langston High School because it was all white. There were a few little openings for blacks but the kind of plays like "Oklahoma" really didn't encourage us to come and we were always doing something way in the back. I joined the speakers guild. I didn't want to be in the drama guild—that is, I wanted to but I didn't feel wanted so I joined the speakers bureau. Anybody could join the speakers bureau. It meant you got to read the Bible at nine o'clock on Wednesday mornings at assembly. I would read the Bible and act out everything. I would practice with my diaphragm breathing, reading the Bible, and I'd act out all the stories and my friends would sit in the front and laugh at me, try to crack me up—you know how teenage girls are, they're so silly. They would just sit there and they'd snicker and the task was to keep from breaking up or to keep from getting angry or responding to the silly girls. I'd throw my head up and I would look around, pretend to be a great orator and they would say "You did that good."

Earlier than that I used to mimmick everybody. And my family would say "She's good! Watch her do Aunt Clara's walk." I was good at that, and people would say "She's good. She can do that." I think I touched upon something I did well at a very early age—*very* early age. I could be anybody. I could sing like anybody. I used to imitate Billy Holiday, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughn, and I could do them right to the "tee." I imitated people's little mannerisms and I think that was the beginning, and then in school being able to read the Bible at the Wednesday assembly.

When I went to New York I joined the Harlem YMCA's little theater group that was up on a 116th Street and Lenox and I got pretty solid training there: speech, stage movement, elocution. Later on I studied scene breakdowns, Stanislavsky, which was *the* method. This method was digging from within, opening up inside and bringing forth the emotion as opposed to putting on the costume and acting like the character. You became the character—very gut-wrenching stuff. There were certain exercises to help you get into this, and I studied those. And then I began to just work, in anything and everything.

If you had a play I would do it for a meal. I did shows in churches, basements, people's houses, and storefronts. I traveled through the South—before the Civil Rights Bill was passed—in a station wagon with a little heater in the middle. I went to a lot of junior colleges, dressed in the ladies' room, stayed over in people's houses because we couldn't afford to stay anywhere. So I had a lot of rough training. I never went to an institution to learn.

As for traditional training, I think workshops are good because everybody is pretty much in the same boat. You're just kind of floundering, searching, and making mistakes in front of an audience made up of your colleagues. Then sometimes these workshop groups put on plays and the best way to learn to act is to get out there and do it even if it means falling on your face. You don't learn to act in a classroom. You really don't.

One of the problems facing contemporary black actors is the lack of viable roles, lack of materials to express, I think, the diversity of black experience in this country. That's the main problem to me. And black females face greater difficulty because I think many roles are written, for the most part, by white males in the film and television industries. I've played some black male roles written by white male writers and translated them into female roles. For the most part white males write 90% of what you see on TV for blacks, whites, asians, everybody. There are some white female writers I noticed that get produced on the networks more often than black female writers. Black male writers sometimes show up on the "crawl," the end of the show, and on the sitcoms, usually the black sitcoms. These black sitcoms use only a sprinkling of black and a few female writers, from my knowledge.

The African-American is not a part of the white consciousness, therefore, we do not appear in most of these movies unless we are comics or singers, which to me is the old throwback that we can laugh, dance, sing and make jokes. But we are not taken seriously, as though anyone would want to know about our experiences.

I think this is the same problem as in the 50's, 60's and 70's. It's about whose in control and who wants to keep the control and who wants to keep the monopoly on the industries of film and television. There's a tight grasp on it by the powers—the people who've been running it have been running it for years and they only

pass it down through the buddy system. And I'm sensitive to it. I'm so conscious of it because I find many lies in their portrayals of African-Americans and also because the absence of our experiences is very loud.

Some people are satisfied with seeing a black on an occasional soap or a black on a sitcom and there are black people who get absorbed in the sitcoms, so they will be made. They will continue to be made because there is a part of our population that says, "well, you know it beats the blank." I've had people (a black woman from Brooklyn) come up to me and say, "You know, you and Cicely Tyson just make me sick." I said, "Why?" She says, "You're so picky. You don't want to be on this and you don't want to be on that. We don't care what we see you in—we want to see you." I find that this is the attitude, where after a hard day's work, we come in, take off our shoes and turn on the box and see ourselves in the television series "227" or what have you. We all want to see ourselves. And some of us are not so quick to criticize—we're just happy to see ourselves. But I'm watching it in a different way. I always feel we can do better. I'm not a "settler." I don't settle for crumbs! I think we are worthy of more and I think we have more to say than what's being projected.

But the word was out a few years ago among white film makers and producers that we would go to see their movies. And if this is so, why should they even think about making movies using us as a part of the "American experience?" Now the human cry to that in every symposium, in every meeting I've gone to of black people, is that we have to make our own.

I agree—wholeheartedly. We are making our own. There are black filmmakers churning out movies and working on their films as I sit here and talk now. I'm beginning to know a lot of them. They have very small budgets. They don't have all the equipment and all the staffs and crews that these big projects have. But I see it happening and I'm going to work with one of these filmmakers and just offer my services to be a part of this phase of black filmmaking. In the past blacks were making films and they couldn't get them distributed. It's not that black films are not being made, but now there are blacks growing up who will watch "Dynasty" and want to be on "Dynasty" and "Hotel."

One great accomplishment I can recall occurred in the 60's with the setting up of black theaters in the different inner cities around the country. There were theaters, *black* theaters. And it brought out a new audience of black people who hadn't gone to theaters up until that point and they began to share the experience of theater and know that this was our legacy. Blacks were trained as playwrights, actors, sound people, and technicians to work in the mainstream of theater, but coming from a black perspective. I wasn't really involved in films in the sixties, but think what came out of the so-called black exploitation era was an interest by our youth to explore film as a viable expression of theater. Before that we were just in theater and we were in music even though we had made films back in the

thirties and forties—we had a golden period then.

*Theater is our legacy.* It's not something you pay \$40 a head to go downtown and say "marvelous, marvelous." Theater should reflect what's going on in our times, it is a very valuable mode of expression. *It's necessary! Theater is necessary!* And I think blacks are looked upon in this country in a very peculiar way where I don't think we are taken seriously as a group that has something to say in film and theater. As I said before, I think musically we're more apt to be accepted and in comedy. But there's great drama in our lives, in our past, in our culture, and in our Africanisms: I'd like to see more of that portrayed. See, people are frightened of that because it's so powerful. But I know I get tired of seeing the same thing. I try to watch soap operas and I realize that these characters sit around and talk about the same old thing. But so many blacks are hung up on soap operas. And then when I see black actors integrating soap operas, a lot of them don't look like they're really there in that white world. They seem like they're just there to integrate it.

I hope for something richer and more expressive. I think theater has done it and music has done it. I'm thinking of the jazz expression—some musicians don't even like the term "jazz." Jazz, some musicians feel, is our classical music and it is. I'm very influenced by jazz. It's a spontaneous, root derivative mode of music that came out of blues which came out of spirituals, which came out of the church—well the church is the spirituals—which came out of the call and response forms from Africa. And I think the music in this country that we know and enjoy as rock comes from that. But when you trace our music, there's great theater there, great drama, and jazz is very dramatic because it's urban, and when we moved up to the city and became really disenfranchised that was the expression of the cities.

I know when I was growing up jazz was relegated to being the background to television shows like "Peter Gunn," to stories that were white-oriented that dealt with crime and the seamy side of life. It seems as if jazz was viewed as just a narrow expression of dark nightclubs, watered-down blues. But jazz is a majestic art form and it comes out of the black urban experience. And our lives are a lot like that and everybody's scared because it's powerful, it really is *very* powerful. I see it this way because I've been in all those areas. I've worked in theater, I sang in the church, I sang as a jazz singer and worked in movies. I've worked in white movies, I've worked in black theaters, in white theaters, white repertory companies and black repertory companies. I have been on practically every episodic television show that you can name as a guest star but I've never had the distinction of having a hit TV series where I made a whole lot of money. I might not be sitting here having this conversation then because I would think that everything is "OK" because it's given me a thousand dollars a week and maybe I would have a house in Beverly Hills with a big iron gate around it.

I'm being facetious because that view is not completely fair. There are African-Americans on television series that are trying to put the money back into the community and do some very conscientious things. I'm making a joke because a lot of my friends say "I don't care about it, I just want to get me a TV series and get me one of them houses on the hill, one of them electronic gates, and don't bother me, and get me a couple of Rolls Royces, and blah blah blah." I've never wanted that. Having those things is not my idea of wealth. Wealth to me is only spiritual and every thing else is just icing on the cake or something to titillate, so I've never gone for these things in my career—to be a big movie star and be rich. I'm more concerned with quality.

I see myself as an actor, that's my craft, that's what I do. I've wanted to be an actor since a child and I became one; it's my way of life, in a very classic sense. I have never seen myself as a media personality or a glamour girl, or even Dorothy Dandridge, but as an *actor*, in the tradition of the actors we have come to know and love. That's the image I've had of myself—nose to the grindstone. Very workman-like. And I see myself as growing, developing, moving along and being able to work within the structure of this industry. And so when I was told that blacks were out of style in the 60's—that was around the time when I was in my thirties, and I definitely was out of style because this country is so obsessed with youth, and that's reflected in the film industry too—I began getting these messages that maybe I wasn't a viable entity in the context of Hollywood. I was a black woman growing older—there's not even that much for young black people—and there were questions of where to put me, in what kind of roles.

I continued to do theater, doing a variety of things, but we're talking about film. I was told when I would go for a role, right around the black exploitation genre, that they really wanted Pam Grier because they wanted a sex object. So I was never deemed a sex object. I began to do films where I wasn't always in a glamorous light. I was reprimanded for that by several people saying that if you're going to be in movies always look sexy and beautiful. I'd say, "Well I'm kind of like a character actor." You can't be that because it doesn't matter what you're doing in the film, you've always got to be beautiful. There was a whole train of thought that if you stayed beautiful as long as you could, it would ensure your working, but if you began to do roles that were less than glamorous you would get typed as an ugly. And they were saying, "How could you do that part and not wear make-up?" and "How could you do that part and let them shoot you like that?" I wasn't concerned with those issues because I work from inside. But my agent would reprimand me and say, "Well you didn't look so good in your last film, and they want a beautiful woman." And I became aware that I was not considered the glamorous black woman who was there to assuage all their fantasies about a hot black woman. You've always heard and you hear it today in Hollywood, and it's said with no shame: "tits and ass." And there are black



actors that they consider “tits and ass.” And I wasn’t one of them. I remember one producer saying, “Well why don’t you show a little leg.” You were supposed to wear revealing clothes and this was your persona, even off the screen, so that you would get the reputation of being the exotic. I have never played that type of role.

I didn’t even play those types as a young woman. I think I exuded a certain intelligence and seriousness which they didn’t want. This is why some of the projects in which I worked changed because I said I will not play your exotic. I will play love scenes, and I will be a love interest, but I will not be your exotic, I will not be your fantasy, knowingly. I gave my agent the blues because it was difficult for them to pigeon-hole me. And he’d say, “I don’t know what to do with you.” And I said, “Well, the white actresses are growing older with intelligence.” Fonda and all those people were getting to play very strong women as they grew older. I recall as a child seeing Louis Jordan, Lena Horne, Savannah Churchill, Dusty Fletcher, “Open-the-Door” Richard, and Moms Mabley. I saw romantic films, detective films, and cowboy films, and I remember how we used to laugh. We enjoyed it, but we used to laugh at ourselves because the other films we saw at the same theater were much better produced and of a more “serious nature”—like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. I remember seeing the white actresses of that day and thinking how brave and capable they were and how they were allowed to run the gamut of emotion. They were in positions of power and they had husbands, beautiful houses, children, jobs, and careers. They were even allowed to be “bad.” They were in responsible roles, grave and multi-faceted. I smelled a rat, then. I said, something is wrong here. In my neighborhood I saw people whom I respected: the shopkeeper, the butcher, the cobbler. I thought about the man who used to come through and sharpen knives, the way he would sing, and my teachers. I never saw that on screen.

They didn’t know what to do with me so I continued to perform plays in which I was able to play a few of these roles. Some by black playwrights, some by Spanish playwrights, and I even did Brecht. I did a Brecht play where I played a French aristocrat who collaborated with the Germans! And the director says, I want you to do this—he was Peter Sellers, a young white director—he says, “I want you to do this part because I want you to stand in La Jolla, California with all those . . .”—I won’t repeat what he called them—he said, “Stand up there and say ‘I am France!’” He said, “Shake ’em all up.” I played this horrible woman, but she was powerful.

There are ways to work within the constraints of film and roles and achieve some measure of control. I think you have to speak up and try to collaborate on the parts like white actors are allowed to do. But what happens so often is that when you are hired to be in a movie, you’re happy to get the movie—you get a chance to act, you make a little money, plus you love to be up there on the screen,

so you're happy to have the role. Then when you see the script you say, "Oh, this embarrasses me." That's when you can speak out about it and talk to the director and talk to the writer. Many times you can change the role and change the whole movie. Like Lou Gosset, when he did "An Officer and A Gentleman"—that wasn't even written for a black man. He was able to change certain things that made it fit him. It's not enough for him to just be grateful that he got a movie. I'm sure Cicely Tyson as well as other actors who aren't "names" would take a script—I'm sure she turns a lot of things down—and be concerned about what she'd have to do, what she'd have to say. And they would change it for her or they wouldn't. I can't say this for sure since I haven't talked to her, but I'm beginning to see more actors do this.

For instance, in "The New Centurions" I had to rewrite the entire role. There have been other TV shows where I have refused to say a line or refused to do a certain action. I've gotten into a few rows with some white directors about it. And I've gotten to the point where they say "Well, do it!" And I've said, "Well, I have to walk off the set." And I could get sued, or get in trouble with the union, but they can't force me to say something that's not right, that's racist. That's just not right. I won't do it for love nor money. And so if they say "I command you"—one woman said, "this is my movie and you're going to do it"—then I have said, "I'm not going to do it. I'll walk." And I didn't do it. This film had something to do with the black experience and it wasn't right. It was a stereotype and I do not play stereotypes. And when I get on a set, if it's a white director, even if it's a black director, and they want me to play some stereotypical image, some tired worn-out stereotypical image, I tell them "I don't do that. When you hired me you didn't get that."

Rather than become more compromising as I've gone along I've gotten stronger because I don't care any more. What can they do, blacklist me? I've gone through periods where I haven't worked for years because I was blacklisted. What does that mean? For most of us, it seems like we've been on a black list anyway. So I stand up and assert myself—in a nice way, in a very nice way. When I play a role, it's the human dignity of the spirit which I look for.

As for this experience at Smith College? If I can get through it! Lord have mercy. I've been very stimulated. I'd like to do more of this. In fact, I've always talked about this, but I've backed off, in the hopes that I would get another movie, that I'd get something and be too busy to do this. *This* is something to do and I'm here and I'm just going along with it, just rolling right with it. I do wonder what I can tell these young people here. What can I say? I guess I have something to say, most of which is, don't give up. Try to stay healthy in mind and spirit. Take care of yourself. Keep your mind and your spirit clean and tuned in to the very best in you. Just keep going straight ahead. I see a lot of destruction in the wake of the racism which comes out of Hollywood and is reflective of this country, so don't give up.

## **A Partial Listing Of Performances by Rosalind Cash\***

### **Motion Pictures (Leading Role)**

From A Whisper to A Scream	with Vincent Price
Buckaroo Bonsai	with John Lithgow
Wrong is Right	with Sean Connery
The Class of Miss MacMichael	with Glenda Jackson
The Money Hustle	with Yaphet Kotto
Cornbread Earl and Me	with Moses Gunn
Uptown Saturday Night	with Sidney Poitier
Amazing Grace	with Moms Mabley
Melinda	with Calvin Lockhart
Hickey and Boggs (co-star)	with Bill Cosby and Robert Culp
The New Centurions	with George C. Scott and Stacey Keach
The Omega Man	with Charlton Heston
The All-American Boy (co-star)	with John Voight

### **Television (Special Guest or Leading Role)**

Hill Street Blues	Benson
Trapper John M.D.	Many Mansions (PBS)
Denmark Vesey (PBS)	Up and Coming (PBS)
The Guyana Tragedy (MOW/PBS)	Sister Sister (MOW/NBC)
The Killing Affair (MOW/NBC)	South by Northwest (PBS)
King Lear	Go Tell It On the Mountain (PBS)
Riptide	Kojak
Starsky and Hutch	Good Times
What's Happenin' (REC)	Mary Tyler Moore Show
Barney Miller	Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (ABC)
Special Bulletin (MOW/NBC)	The Sophisticated Gents (MOW/NBC)

### **Stage Performances with:**

The Negro Ensemble Company	The Center Stage
La Jolla Playhouse	American Repertory Theatre
Westward Playhouse	New York Shakespeare Festival
The World Theatre Company	The Arena Stage
The Harlem Y Little Theatre Group	

\* Taken from "An Evening with Rosalind Cash," Limited Edition Program compiled by Professor Chezia Thompson-Cager, designed by Roots and Branches, Inc.