

# ALLEY THEATRE

Entry Point: As you read this biography of Derek Walcott below, ask yourself:

- What was the difference between the Caribbean experience of race and the one Walcott found in the United States in 1971.
- Why do you think Walcott mixes both Caribbean and Western Cultures?
- How do you think Walcott mixed both the Caribbean and Western Cultures?

## THE CARIBBEAN NOBEL LAUREATE

Born Derek Alton Walcott, January 23, 1930, on Castries, St. Lucia, West Indies, Walcott's family was mixed race, something common in the Caribbean. Walcott's paternal grandfather, Charles, was a white Englishman whose family immigrated to Barbados. Charles went to St. Lucia in the late eighteenth-hundreds to acquire a plantation near Choiseul, on the southwest coast of the island. There he met Christiana Wardrope, a black woman with whom he had five children; one of them was Warwick, Derek's father.

As a young man, Warwick, Derek's father, worked at the Education Office and eventually worked for St. Lucia's Attorney General and Acting Chief Justice. Warwick painted, read Shakespeare and Dickens, and gathered around him like-minded friends, who put on amateur theatricals. One of the members of this group, was Alix Maarlin, the daughter of Johannes van Romondt, a white estate owner on St. Maarten, and Caroline Maarlin, a black woman. Alix had moved to St. Lucia as a young girl, apparently to finish her schooling. Her guardian, a Dutch trader.

Derek's mixed-race parents met and married and lived in a two-story house with Gothic gables on the east side of Castries, their first child, Pamela, in 1928; sixteen months later, Derek and Roderick, twins, were born. Warwick Walcott died at the age of thirty-four, when the Derek and his brother were a year old.

## A NEW CARIBBEAN VOICE

After graduating from High School, Walcott lost little time in making his own contribution to Caribbean arts. His first play, *Henri Christophe: A Chronicle*, was written and produced in St. Lucia while he was still an undergraduate. Another piece, *Henri Dernier*, played on radio in 1950. He also began to publish poetry, art criticism, and essays in periodicals such as the *Trinidad Guardian* and *Jamaica's Public Opinion*. After earning his bachelor's degree in 1953, he returned to St. Lucia to teach at St. Mary's College, the high school he had attended.

By 1954 Walcott was spending substantial time in Trinidad. His plays *The Sea at Dauphin* and *Ione* premiered there in the mid-fifties, and he became deeply involved with the establishment of a resident theatre project on the island. In 1957 he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to study theatre arts in New York City. There he worked with Off-Broadway directors and companies, appropriating the skills he would need to establish a repertory group in Trinidad. **"The New York experience was an unhappy one**

for Walcott,” claimed Anderson. “He felt terribly alone in the city, an alien in its racial and theatrical communities—repelled, almost, by its segregated sensibilities. Neither Broadway nor Off-Broadway seemed the right model for the kind of theatre he had envisioned for the West Indies.” Walcott returned to Trinidad and founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop in the capital city of Port of Spain. The group performed some of Walcott’s plays and others that explored the myths, rituals, and superstitions of West Indian folk life. The workshop eventually folded, but Walcott found an audience for his plays in New York City at the Off-Broadway Public Theatre. There, in 1971, his most famous drama, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, drew enthusiastic reviews and an Obie Award as best foreign play of the year.

Poetry drew more and more of the writer’s energies as the 1960s began. At first, he published primarily in magazines, but in 1962 his verse came to the attention of editors at the British publisher Jonathan Cape. Cape released Walcott’s first major collection, *In a Green Night*, in 1962. The volume was well received.

Walcott turned out numerous books of verse. His work was hailed for its expressive language—“**an old-fashioned love of eloquence, an Elizabethan richness of words and a penchant for complicated, formal rhymes,**” to quote New York Times reviewer Michiko Kakutani. Critics also commended Walcott for his brave exploration of the question of cultural ancestry. The New York Review of Books called the Caribbean “**the place discovered by Columbus, colonized by the British, and immortalized by Walcott.**”

In the early 1970s Walcott began to spend part of the year in the United States, teaching creative writing at universities such as Columbia, Rutgers, Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. In 1981 Walcott received a sizeable sum of money from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation—a no-strings attached award that has come to be called the “genius grant.”

In 1990 Derek Walcott’s masterful *Omeros* was published. The poem loosely echoes Homer’s *Iliad*. It is a “palimpsest” or writing loosely based on an earlier piece of writing. The poem is structured as an odyssey, shifting from the present-day Caribbean to modern-day Europe and seventeenth-century Africa before returning to Walcott’s home island. It is the tension between rootedness in the Caribbean and participation in the “global republic” of English that Walcott explores in his imagination of a postcolonial world.

## WINNING THE NOBEL

The Nobel committee announced Walcott’s selection on October 8, 1992. The date is doubly significant since 1992 marked the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s landing in the Caribbean. From Sweden came the announcement that Walcott had been chosen for his “**poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by historical vision**” and his “**multi-cultural commitment.**” In Walcott, the committee stated, “West Indian culture has found its great poet.” Perhaps nowhere was the joy more visible than on St. Lucia, where the weekly newspaper in Castries devoted an entire 40-page issue to its native son.

The 1992 Nobel Prize for literature came with a cash award of \$1.2 million. Walcott accepted the gift and the renown with humility. His work, he told the New Yorker, “**Had already been written in the mouths of the Caribbean tribe. And I felt that I had been chosen, somehow, to give it voice. So the utterance was inevitable.... I was writing it for the island people from whom I come. In a sense, I saw it as a long thank-you note.**”

He is the first native Caribbean writer ever to win a Nobel for literature. His poetry confronts his own mixed ethnic legacy—Walcott is of African, Dutch, and English descent—as well as the multi-ethnic character of the West Indies in general. In the 1981 biography *Derek Walcott*, Robert D. Hamner wrote: **“Nurtured on oral tales of gods, devils, and cunning tricksters passed down by generations of slaves, Walcott should retell folk stories; and he does. On the other hand, since he has an affinity for and is educated in Western classics, he should retell the traditional themes of European experience; and he does. As inheritor of two vitally rich cultures, he utilizes one, then the other, and finally creates out of the two his own personal style.”**

Entry Point:

- As a group or individually, list 3 facts about Derek Walcott that might have influenced his writing the most. Why?
- If you were to become a poet or writer, what three facts would you list that would influence your writing the most?