

Langston Hughes—The Dream Keeper Speaks

The poetry of Langston Hughes, who died at the age of 65 in 1967, was brought back to life in a series of dynamic readings given by American performer John Patterson at the Petite Rue in Hara-juku this past May 25-27. "The Dream Keeper Speaks: The World of Langston Hughes," sponsored by the International Anti-Apartheid Group, the Japan Afro-American Friendship Association, and the Africa Tree Center Support Group, is a 90-minute one-man show, based entirely on 80 poems by one of the twentieth century's leading black poets. The show has been performed extensively throughout the United States, including at the Smithsonian Institute and the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, and now has finally made its way to Japan.

Patterson succeeds in transforming poetry from a literary art to a performing art: this was not the dull stuff of someone standing behind a podium holding a piece of a paper and reading poems from it. Patterson, who is an actor by profession, actually *performs* the poetry, taking on the expressions and the voices of Hughes' characters, bringing them to life with dance, song, and drama. I've read Hughes' poetry before—nose in book—but never really *heard* it with my ears until hearing Patterson's rendition, which picks up on Hughes' use of blues and jazz rhythms in a voice that oscillates from soft to loud, masculine to feminine, humor to pathos.

Patterson, a political activist involved with CORE during the civil rights movement and now working with the pro-gay, pro-socialist, pro-minority-rights New Alliance Party, makes Hughes' poetry sound as if it were written days, not decades, ago. The times haven't really changed all that much, only the names, as the following excerpts from the reading testify:

"James Powell shot dead by a New York City policeman's bullets . . . how many bullets does it take to kill a 15-year-old kid?"

"The little boy who sticks a needle in his arms seeks it out in otherworldly dreams."

"It's easier to get dope than to get a job."

"Memo to Third World people: they let have babies because they are quite willing to pauperize you."

"In Johannesburg there are 240,000 natives working in the mines. Hey, what kind of poem do you make out of *that*?"

"The gangsters of the world are riding high—it's not the underworld of which I speak. They leave that loot to smaller fry."

"Hungry child: I did not make this world for you. You didn't buy any stock in my railroads. You didn't invest in my corporation. Where are your shares of Standard Oil?"

—Richard Evanoff

Petite Rue in Tokyo schedules regular performances, exhibitions, concerts, and more. Contact Jonathan Seidenfeld at 03-400-9890 for info on upcoming events. The sponsors of the Langston Hughes reading can be contacted at the following numbers: the International Anti-Apartheid Group, 03-325-9832; the Japan Afro-American Friendship Association, 03-577-2383; and the Africa Tree Center Support Group, 0467-76-0811 or 0424-84-7913.

The personal, the political, and the poetical

An interview with John Patterson

EDGE: A lot of the things you were reading tonight sounded very contemporary.

John: One of the really wise things that I think Langston did, and was part of what he was trying accomplish in terms of literature, was that he based his poetry squarely on blues and jazz. That's really great music and it doesn't die. It grabs you. I think that's really what makes it live, combined with the fact that he had such a spare style.

EDGE: Where do you get the vocal cues for what you do?

John: Actually when I started out I didn't even feel it was acting—I was using models. These were all people I had grown up with. I grew up in a small black community in upstate New York—in Syracuse. My adolescence was the late '40s, '50s, and that was the time of a lot of what Langston wrote. So I just recognized the people he wrote about, and I guess even more than that I recognized the social situations that he wrote about.

EDGE: Apart from the style and the sound, there's also a political message that seems obvious in what you're doing.

John: Instead of poetry being about the "grands" of the world, Langston choosing to have his poetry be about the ordinary people is right at the heart of that message. It's not an overt message about taking specific political action, but it's very political in that it reassesses the value of a group of people who are despised. It's not just black people; it's working-class people. That's really what it's about when you get right down to it.

EDGE: What was Hughes' actual political involvement?

John: He was involved with a lot of the left, but he was not a member of any party, although he had a lot of fights about that with Congressional investigating committees. One of the things that always bothered them about Langston was that he was not a black activist, but he was merely a progressive person who approached things from a broad political spectrum. That's what I feel comes out of this show, because he does what any writer who writes about a nation does (in a way he treated black America as a nation): he writes very specifically about it, but it's so good you can abstract and generalize from it to appreciate any people or the decency and the life lived by working-class people anywhere. He did not conceive of freedom as being divisible—that you can have black people be free and oppress the white people who had been the oppressors. That's the reason that I do this show and

it's one of the things that I want to get across: that Langston really could look at the world and write about the very unpleasant things he saw—the lynchings, the shootings, the drugs, and all this—but he could also look at that and end up having hope for humanity. It's not a despairing, bleak view of the world.

EDGE: No, that didn't come through in the performance at all.

John: I don't think it's in the mate-

rial either. I think that's one of the things that attracts me to it. I think this is where he parted company with other writers of the '50s. He departed with the bleak "Wasteland" view of the world. That was not his view at all. There was this sense on his part that there's always a crazy spark in human beings that can push a little harder, bear a little more, go a little further, and that the people who are really that way are the working-class people—the ones that make the world go round.

EDGE: Is the problem more class or race?

John: I definitely see it as more class. I think about this a lot because of my political activities, but as the '80s have gone on and we're now into the '90s, it really seems to me that to concentrate a lot on race confuses matters, that you have to talk first about class divisions. And then within that you have all the problems that have to do with race, ethnicity, religion, and and so on. But the way the

world is getting reorganized, if you're not one of the people who's got some of the goods of the world, it's pretty hard to get them right now and pretty well divided up.

EDGE: In light of that, are you still hopeful?

John: Oh, very much so. One of the things about the show is discovering how similar my responses to the world are to Langston's. I think it's this sense of irony, this laughing to keep from crying. Some stuff is so serious and so heavy that you talk about it and then you laugh. I mean, you don't talk about it and then go commit suicide. What's the point of *that*? . . . Langston did so successfully what I would like to do, which is to have no division between politics and art. There never is really, but he was able to bring the two together very skillfully. You can't do a broad "party" political struggle and say that's enough, when it's disconnected from people's personal struggles. Just because you get people the right to vote, doesn't mean they're personally free.

There's another struggle that goes on. And you can't just say, well, my personal struggle's enough—I don't care who's president. So I want to say that these things are joined—they have to be joined or neither one can be effective.

EDGE: The political is the personal and the personal is the political.

John: Exactly.

EDGE: A lot of poets tend to be very introspective, I guess especially white poets. One approach to poetry is the

"expose-my-soul" type. But what you're doing seems to connect up with a larger cultural, political, and social matrix.

John: It's very easy for performers, especially actors, to get totally preoccupied with getting a job and making it—

EDGE:—which is just like people trying to make it in a big corporation—

John:—yeah, being a salaryman sort of thing. I look for poetry where people are talking about the world that communicates about the condition that we're living in. It may be true that some white men are becoming very introspective, but it's not true of the white women who are writing or of gay writers. They're really struggling with central questions in the society and culture of the times.

EDGE: A lot more interesting than just playing with language, isn't it?

John: Definitely.



John Patterson performing Langston Hughes at Petite Rue