



The Yolande Chronicles

The Unusual Life of a Sri Lankan Actress

By Gerard Raymond

My life has always been serendipitous," says Yolande Bavan. It's a good word to describe the events of her unique career because it's derived from a name for Sri Lanka. We were both born in the Indian Ocean island-nation (formerly Ceylon) which ancient Arab traders called Serendib. Over a meal of lamprais—rice and curry baked in a banana leaf—the petite, raven-haired actress and singer chronicles for me the journey which has taken her from her native island to international renown as a jazz artist and to the stages of the West End and Broadway where she is currently appearing in the Lincoln Center production of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Here is her story.

Bavan was born Yolande Wolf in Colombo, the commercial capital of Sri Lanka, to parents of Dutch and Portuguese extraction (or burghers, as the mixed-race descendants of the country's former colonists are known). She learned the piano at age three under the tutelage of her mother, a leading classical pianist. At age 16, without any prior vocal training, Bavan won an amateur singing competition conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation; two years later, in 1953, she was invited to visit Australia. In Melbourne, jazz folk hero Graeme Bell took her under his wing, and throughout the following year, she toured Australia and Japan with Bell's band and sang for the troops in Korea. Not bad for a convent-educated 18-year-old who never had a singing lesson in her life.

A thirst for adventure and a certain fearlessness have been driving forces in Bavan's life. "I had already been to Australia, so I went to London," is how Bavan explains her move to London in 1957. She performed as often as she could in London and even sang in Paris, Rome, and Iceland. Then, unexpectedly, an agent sent her to audition for the part of an Algerian woman in a Play of the Month for BBC television. Though she had never acted before, Bavan got the part and was invited to do three other plays in the series.

Bavan's London stage debut occurred through equally chance circumstances. Hanging around jazz clubs, she had made friends with several musicians, particularly John Dankworth and Cleo Laine. One day Dankworth's pianist asked her to meet him at an address

which turned out to be the home of John Cranko, the Royal Ballet choreographer whose musical revue *Cranks* became a cult hit on Broadway in 1956. Without advance warning, Bavan's friend asked her to sing; Cranko promptly cast Bavan in his latest show *New Cranks*, which opened in London in 1960 with a cast that included Carole Shelley (currently in Neil Simon's *London Suite* off-Broadway) and Gillian Lynne (choreographer of *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*).

That same year, Bavan made her West End debut in Waris Hussein's production of Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Originating in Cambridge, this production featured as spear-carriers two university students who would later become superstars of the British theater—Trevor Nunn and Ian McKellen. Yolande's success as the Egyptian queen led to roles in an experimental production of *The Oresteia* at the Old Vic and the 1961 British premiere of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* at the Royal Court. She describes her meeting with Genet with a little quiver of delight. "There was a knock on our dressing room door after the opening night performance and there was this man with a slightly rotund, clean-shaven head. He looked like an evil little cherub and he kept saying, 'tres bien, tres bien.' Oooh, there was such an incredible energy about this man."

When she began her stage career in London, Bavan used only her first name—"Yolande." It was Waris Hussein (best known in this country as the director of *The Summer House*, the art-house movie hit starring Joan Plowright and Jeanne Moreau) who coined the name "Bavan." As Yolande Bavan, she returned to the Royal Court playing Hippolyta in Tony Richardson's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That production, though a notorious flop, featured a cast of several young actors whose careers were soon to take off in the emerging new wave of British theater and film: Lynn Redgrave, Rita Tushingham, Samantha Eggar, Nicol Williamson, and Corin Redgrave. Bavan's stage career, however, came to a temporary halt as she made another leap into the unknown.

On May 5th, 1962, Yolande Bavan stepped off a plane in New York at what was then

called Idlewild Airport; she was whisked off on another plane to Union College in Schenectady, New York. Minutes later she was singing in front of an audience with the jazz musicians Dave Lambert and Jon Hendricks. That moment, without prior rehearsal—wearing the sari that she had worn for the cross-Atlantic flight, her Pan Am travel bag still slung over her shoulder—she replaced Annie Ross in the famous trio, which, from then on, was known as Lambert, Hendricks and Bavan. "I heard their signature tune, 'One o'clock Jump' by Count Basie, they looked at me, and I started singing. When we got to the last chorus, Lambert nudged me telling me to go an octave higher, and I did. There was no time to think about it."

"It's still like a dream to me," Bavan tells me, pouring us a cup each of her favorite Ceylon tea. How did an unknown young woman from Sri Lanka come to join the innovative vocalese jazz trio? Serendipitously of course! Bavan happened to be invited to a party in London for Lambert, Hendricks and Ross who were touring with Count Basie. "I was helping the hosts, cleaning ashtrays and doing things like that and a Dizzy Gillespie album was on. He hit a very high note on his trumpet and I hit the same note, quietly to myself. I thought everybody was busy talking, but suddenly this voice next to me asked, 'Who did that?' 'Did what?,' I asked. 'Sing those last three notes.'" The man was Dave Lambert. A few weeks later, Bavan received a call from Jon Hendricks asking her to join the group in America.

It turns out that jazz great Sarah Vaughan had been impressed with Bavan's prodigiously high vocal register as well and had also suggested Bavan as a replacement for Annie Ross, who had decided to leave the group after the London tour. "I told him [Hendricks] I was an actress, not a singer, and that I certainly couldn't do what they did," Bavan recalls. "He said there was a plane ticket and a work permit at the American Embassy and asked me to get their albums and study as many songs as I can. I thought, why not, I wanted to see New York. I'll go there, we'll rehearse and they'll realize they made a mistake; I'll be back in a few weeks." She stayed with the trio for two years, touring extensively, and she cut three records with the

TheaterWeek

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FOCUS

Issue #415 • On Stands July 17 • Ad Close July 10

RESERVE YOUR AD SPACE NOW!

**Call TheaterWeek Advertising at
212-627-2120**



Yolande Bavan as Placida in a scene from the Lincoln Center Theater production of the world premiere of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, a musical adaptation of the novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. *Joan Marcus*

summer repertory theatre
Santa Rosa, California

June 20th through August 6th

- The Secret Garden
- Paradise Hotel
- The Grapes of Wrath
- Lettice & Lovage
- Jesus Christ Superstar
- Lost in Yonkers



For the Best Summer Theatre in
Northern California...
Call (707) 527-4307 for reservations!

located 60 miles north of San Francisco

santa rosa
junior college
theatre arts
department
presents

group.

Bavan always wore a sari when she performed with the group. "I thought it would look exotic," she says. It was also politically advantageous. In the pre-Civil Rights era, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, despite their international renown, didn't get booked on the major network shows because some viewers objected to seeing Ross, a white woman, standing next to Hendricks, who is black. Once Bavan joined the group there was no problem. "I was an unknown quantity. I was not white, I was not black, and I didn't fit into any racial lines."

By 1964 Bavan says she got weary of the jazz lifestyle with its after-hours sets at 1:30 a.m. and decided to return to acting. Her first New York role was playing Puck in Joseph Papp's 1966 mobile touring production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and from then on through the '70s she worked steadily both in New York and the regional theater. Musical aficionados still treasure her performance as the naive Haitian prostitute in the 1968 revival of the Truman

Capote/Harold Arlen musical *House of Flowers*.

Ironically, Bavan notes that, despite her South Asian looks and complexion, she had less trouble being cast in roles in the '70s than in the '80s and this era of non-traditional casting. Today, because there is a large pool of non-white actors, Bavan is less likely to be cast in the black or hispanic roles she might have played in the past. And, of course, there isn't exactly a surfeit of South Asian roles. In fact, her acting career went through a fallow period in the mid-'80s (her memorable performance in the movie *Parting Glances*, a contemporary gay comedy, was an exception), prompting her to rejuvenate her singing career by performing a cabaret show at various clubs in New York City.

But Bavan's acting career has been on the upswing lately, particularly since her performance in Valeria Vasilevsky's production of *Song of Lawino* at Dance Theater Workshop in New York and ICA in London. She appeared in Novella Nelson's production *Bailey's Cafe* at Hartford Stage, and most recently, in Tobe Armour's *Voices from the Resplendent Island* at Theater for the New City, in which she played a Sri Lankan character for the first time. Now she's in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, which is based on a novella by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Although the stage adaptation of this hot-blooded South American tale of revenge combines music and dance, Bavan does not sing in this production; she plays Placida, a mother who unwittingly facilitates the murder of her only son.

Always the perfect host, Bavan offers me a second cup of tea before she finishes her tale by telling me how happy she is to be working in a show again. It seems difficult sometimes to reconcile Bavan's adventure-packed story with its seemingly fragile protagonist, but that contrast is perhaps her unique quality. A few days later, Graciela Daniele, the Argentinean-born director and choreographer of *Chronicle*, expresses a similar thought to me when I ask her about Bavan. "She has this elegance and mystery and she seems to float," says Daniele. "She is like someone who is going to break down any moment, but yet she seems to hold together. She is one of the most wonderful actresses I have worked with."

"Where the chef cooks like mom, and the dining room feels like a den."
—*New York Times*

Sami's
263

SERVING BROADWAY'S FAVORITE DISH... CASUAL, FUN, DELICIOUS.

LUNCH • DINNER • LATE SUPPER
Complete Dinner Special \$16.95 5-7pm & 8-10pm
SUNDAY BRUNCH

AMERICAN/ITALIAN CUISINE

Steps from
LES MIZ, PHANTOM, SUNSET BOULEVARD 212-719-5416
OPEN 7 DAYS

263 WEST 45th STREET
between Broadway & 8th Ave.

Simply PASTA
A Nice Place to Mangia

MONDAY - FRIDAY
11:30am - 9:00pm

Minutes away from the
Theatre District and all
Midtown Hotels

120 WEST 41ST ST. NYC 10036
212-391-0805


EXPLORE A TIMELESS TRADITION

NISSHO
JAPANESE RESTAURANT

Sushi Bar Happy Hour
All Sushi at \$1 per piece
DINING IN ONLY!

Open 7 Days Lunch-Dinner
Pre- & After Theater Dining

607 Ninth Ave. (at 43rd St.)
NYC 212-265-1782



THOMAS SCOTT'S
on Bedford

Rated "VERY GOOD TO EXCELLENT!" for food, service and decor.
ZAGAT'S Survey, 1995

"Reminiscent of the little restaurants that flourish in London and Paris"
Sheldon Landwehr, N.Y.
Post

Full service off premise catering available.
Corporate accounts Welcome!
72 Bedford St., N.Y.C.
212-627-4011