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## From London with Love

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

DePaul alumna Bonnie Greer is profiled, from her upbringing on Chicago's South Side, to her time at DePaul as a history major, to her work in New York as a playwright, through to today as a television personality, playwright and Officer of the Order of the British Empire.



Photo by Rick Pushinsky /eyevine/Redux

# FROM LONDON WITH LOVE

ALTHOUGH PLAYWRIGHT **BONNIE GREER, O.B.E. (LAS '74)**, LIVES IN LONDON, SHE HAS NOTHING BUT LOVE FOR HER CHICAGO ROOTS.

BY JAMIE MILLER

It was 1948, and Willie Mae Greer, an expectant mother, stood in her kitchen on Chicago's West Side staring at her rounded belly. She was young by any standard, nervous and excited for this life that was soon to come—the first of seven, though she had no way of knowing that yet.

“This baby better be born at the exact same time Princess Elizabeth has hers,” she said to her husband, Ben, her eyes still on her stomach. He gave her a sweet but skeptical smile. She looked up. “What, Ben?” she said. “We need those diapers!”

Bonnie Greer was born 36 hours after Elizabeth, now Queen of England, gave birth to Prince Charles, also her firstborn. Unfortunately, this meant the Greers lost the competition, which promised a year's worth of free diapers for the parents of the baby born closest in time to the new prince. Willie Mae never let Bonnie forget it; after hearing

that the royal baby's nickname was “Bonnie Prince Charlie,” a reference to the famous and handsome 18th-century Scottish prince, Willie Mae and Ben decided to name their baby Bonnie.

“I've been connected to Britain since birth,” Greer says. “My parents needed those nappies, but I just didn't cooperate! My mom reminded me of that every year, and we always did something to recognize Prince Charles' birthday. The day I told him I was named after him, his wife laughed so hard we had to go find her some water.”

Yes, Greer has since met Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla Bowles, the Duchess of Cornwall, in 2012, when they were honored guests at the British Museum. Greer was a museum board member and was there to greet the royal couple upon their arrival.

“So, Prince Charles and I, we're connected,” Greer asserts.

Greer's story begins in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood, on the city's West Side. The daughter of a homemaker and a factory worker, Greer said her large family didn't have much, but they got by. Her father made sure his kids stayed out of trouble.

"Lawndale at the time was pretty gang-ridden," she says. "My father, he didn't want us to have anything to do with that. He was determined. So, he just worked, worked, worked, and he came up with the fees to send us to Catholic schools."

It was there that Greer first discovered her love of writing plays.

"I never read kids' books," she says. "They never did anything for me. I always liked reading adult books. So, I picked up this book one day, I don't remember what it was called, but there was a script in it, and I liked it. I liked that the people were talking to each other. I wanted to copy it, so I wrote a play for the class."

It turned out to be Greer's first of many plays. A precocious child, she found that writing plays was an effective way to explore the many questions she had about life.

"My mother had Alzheimer's before she died, and the only positive to that was the lack of a filter. She told me a lot about myself as a child that she might not have otherwise," Greer recalls. "Apparently, I was just constantly asking questions kids didn't usually

ask and weren't supposed to. She couldn't get me to shut up. That makes sense to me now."

Greer's first script was a school Christmas play, which was performed for the teachers, most of whom were nuns. The play portrayed the Virgin Mary as an unwed mother. One of Greer's classmates asked the teachers how this was possible, but they avoided answering the question.

"A nun leaned over to the others and said, 'How did she know this?'" Greer remembers.

Greer was only 8 years old, but that moment stayed with her. To this day, she views plays as a vehicle for inquiry. "For me, plays explore the unanswerable, or at least the questions no one will answer for you. It's important for me to do that. Someone has to, right?"

After Greer graduated from Harlan Community Academy High School on the South Side of Chicago, she enrolled at DePaul. Greer's parents couldn't afford the tuition, so she worked as a waitress at Wise Fools Pub, a Lincoln Park blues club, where local and national acts, like John Lee Hooker and Willie Dixon, played.

"You know, I don't know why I chose DePaul," she admits. "I'm not sure. I just kind of wound up there. But it's the only place I wanted to be. It took me a long time to get through because I had to work so much, but I did it—eventually."

*"Apparently, I was just constantly asking questions that kids didn't usually ask and weren't supposed to. She couldn't get me to shut up. That makes sense to me now."*

Greer joined members of the Black Student Union group protesting racial inequality on DePaul's campus in 1969.



Photo by DePaul University Archives and Special Collections



Greer participates in a panel discussion at the 2017 Henley Literary Festival, one of the U.K.'s most popular literary festivals.

At DePaul, Greer was encouraged to think critically and question norms. She decided to major in history in part because it provided a blueprint to ask questions and seek answers in the past.

"We were taught to look for patterns and how to put them together to come to a conclusion about the present or the future," Greer says. "At DePaul, [my professors] sent me on a path of respecting and loving learning, while also emphasizing the importance of going against the stream and asking the tough questions."

This encouragement led to direct action in 1969, when Greer joined other members of the Black Student Union in a teach-in protest in the office of Edward Schillinger, the dean of students.

"He was very cool about it," she says. "We came in, sat down and told him we really needed black studies. We really needed anti-war studies. We really needed these things in the curriculum. And he listened. He also knew we weren't going to let him leave because he called his family to tell them he wouldn't be home for dinner!" Individual classes were added, and eventually, programs in African and Black Diaspora Studies and Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies were launched in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences in 2003-04 and 2008-09, respectively.

*"For me, plays explore the unanswerable, or at least the questions no one will answer for you. It's important for me to do that."*

Greer continued to write plays while at DePaul. Upon graduating, she decided to pursue playwriting seriously. She found an apartment close to St. Nicholas Theatre in Lincoln Park, where she studied with famed playwright David Mamet. It wasn't long before her play "1919," which told the story of the Chicago race riots of 1919, was produced by the Black Ensemble Theater, based in Uptown. Greer was praised by critics

and audiences. Bolstered by this early success, she decided to move to New York City in 1978.

"New York was the center of theatre, and I needed to put myself out there," she says.

Greer joined the Playwrights Workshop of the acclaimed Negro Ensemble Company under the direction of West Indian-American playwright Steve Carter, and she worked with other theatres, such as the Phoenix Theatre Ensemble, as well. She also studied at The Actors Studio with Academy Award-winning director Elia Kazan.

"I had so many things moving at once, but then New York just started changing."

She felt the shift profoundly. As she often did with her work, Greer followed her instincts.

"It felt like a lot of big money was coming in, and that was changing the theatre scene," Greer continues. "So, in 1985, I thought I'd go to

Edinburgh Festival Fringe with a play that I'd written, and I'd meet some people there."

The visit to Scotland was successful; she made connections that eventually brought her to London, where she started writing plays for a women's theatre group. To obtain her visa, Greer taught literacy classes, using Shakespeare's works for classroom assignments.

In 1992, she joined Tricycle Theatre in London's Kilburn neighborhood. At Tricycle, she worked with director Nicholas Kent, who put her in touch with TimeOut when the magazine was in need of a theatre critic.

"I made the mistake of being a theatre critic for many, many years," she says. Greer realized that she didn't enjoy critiquing other people's plays, in part because she understood that creating public work was often a deeply personal process. Additionally, she wearied of seeing the same plays over and over, regardless of the differences in casting and approach each restaging might provide.

"As a critic, you see a lot of revivals. It's a business, so they like to do the shows they know will bring in money," Greer explains. "I had just seen everything at that point. I'm a playwright but not so much a theatergoer anymore."

Although the critic's life wasn't for her, it did lead to many other wonderful opportunities. In addition to gaining name recognition in the theatre community, Greer also had a fateful encounter with a fellow audience member at a play she was reviewing.

"I was at this play with the guy I was getting ready to break up with," she recalls. "The man in the seat in front of me turned around before the show started, and we just started talking. Six months later, we were married. We're still married." David Hutchins, Greer's husband since 1993, is a solicitor who also teaches law.

Between her work with local theatre companies and her insightful

reviews, Greer continued to build her professional reputation. In the late 1990s, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) contacted her about producing radio plays. Then the BBC tapped her to do a black version of their popular television program "Late Review," a talk show of pop-culture intellectuals discussing and reviewing the artistic news of the week. Greer caught the attention of the original program's producers and was asked to be a regular panelist on the show.

She obliged and was on the program from 1998 to 2005.

Greer's face and name recognition were still on the rise. In 2005, she was appointed to the board of the British Museum. She continued her work as a critic and also wrote for local publications on a variety of topics. Ever her father's daughter, Greer always stayed up-to-date on current events, particularly the arts, popular culture and politics. She added political commentator and editorialist to her curriculum vitae, which eventually resulted in one of her most notorious television appearances.

It was 2008, and elections were approaching. The British National Party (BNP), an ultra-conservative political group, was gaining traction. Greer was contacted by the popular British talk show "Question Time" to serve as a panelist alongside then-BNP leader Nicholas Griffin and three other commentators. Griffin and his party routinely had been accused of fostering racist attitudes. Greer's friends warned her not to go on air, but she now had the ultimate resource at her fingertips. She

approached the prehistory experts at the British Museum and asked them about the BNP's claim to represent "indigenous British people."

"They told me that's not possible," she said. "There was an ice age in Britain, and nothing survived. So, the people here came across the Iberian Peninsula from other places. 'Indigenous,' in its truest sense, doesn't apply here."



Prince Charles honors Greer as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) at Buckingham Palace in London.

Photo by Lewis Whyld/PA Wire/Alamy Stock Photo

Backstage, Griffin tried to be friendly, but Greer had already decided it would be best to keep her distance. Little did she know that the producers would seat her right next to him during the broadcast. Griffin and Greer faced off the entire time.

“He was sitting right there, but it felt like every time he’d try to make his point, he got a little closer. It could have been my perspective, but that’s what it felt like,” Greer says. “He adamantly dismissed my information about the lack of indigenous people in Britain. He said, ‘Let’s not go too far back.’ I had gotten the information from the foremost experts. He was backtracking.”

Griffin scoffed at Greer’s research and refused to answer her questions. She held her own, but she felt belittled. The tension in the studio seeped through the television screen, and the at-home audience absorbed the intensity. Strangers stopped Greer on the street the next day to ask if she was okay. Friends sent flowers. “It was surreal,” she admits.

Greer was upset and confused by her interaction with Griffin, so she did what she always does when she needs answers that aren’t easy to find—she wrote about it. This time, she immortalized the experience in an opera called “Yes.”

“The critics didn’t love it,” she says. “I put myself, a black American woman, at the center of a play I wrote, and I was on stage. It was about my own personal experience. I think that angered a lot of people.”

“But that probably means it’s the kind of thing that should be done again,” she adds, laughing knowingly at the thought.

After the play’s run, Greer wrote the book “Obama Music.” Published in 2009, it’s a well-woven tapestry of reflections on her Chicago childhood, with discussion of how Obama’s political career was rooted in the ethos and rhythm of the South Side. The year before, her play “Marilyn and Ella,” about the friendship between Marilyn Monroe and Ella Fitzgerald, was produced in London’s West Side.

In 2010, she was honored as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) in recognition of her work championing the causes of underrepresented populations through her plays and journalistic endeavors. Since then she’s produced several more plays, including “The Hotel Cerise,” based on Anton Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard,” and published a second memoir, “A Parallel Life,” an account of her experiences prior to moving to New York. The book chronicles the profound influence her parents had and continue to have on her life, even after their passing.

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“I didn’t realize until I got to be older how much my parents sacrificed for my brothers and sisters and me,” she says. “They didn’t have much, but they made sure we had this kind of stable family life, which I feel has enabled me to go into the world and feel confident because I always have that template and stability in my mind.”

In 2017, makeup brand Lancôme asked Greer to be one of the spokespeople for their “My Shade, My Power” campaign, which introduced an extended color range of their signature foundation. Not one to wear much makeup, Greer was hesitant but intrigued by what this meant for women of color, and she appreciated that none of the images would be retouched.

“I thought, well, I’d like to show women of color that I’m a real woman, and I can do this, and it’s important that we’re represented in every way and in every shade.”

On the way to the Lancôme shoot, Greer received an unexpected phone call informing her that her beloved mother had died. “I thought about turning back and canceling, but then I realized that it was actually perfect timing to do this,” she says. “My mother was one of the most glamorous people I knew. And she was certainly one of the most important people in my life. She would have loved this. It was the perfect way to honor her.”

Greer is currently working on a new play about the Trump administration as told from the perspective of two black men. “It’s still very new, but you’ll be going along, and then all of a sudden, something will happen that the audience doesn’t expect,” she says. “That’s how I like to do it. I like to present things one way and then make you think about it in a way that maybe you hadn’t considered before.”

Between plays, books, articles and television appearances, Greer has little downtime. But when asked to reflect on her career, she’s puzzled.

“My career? I don’t really have a career,” she says. “Stuff has happened, and I’ve responded. But I’ve never been on an actual path. If I had wanted a career, I would have stayed connected to something, but I always had a feeling that there was something else coming next. I wanted to learn and absorb as much as I could. I wanted to be as many things as I could be. Do everything I didn’t even know I wanted to do.

“And I did. I followed my instincts because of the education I got and the upbringing I had. I’m grateful for that. So, that’s my little story.”