Geoffrey Holder & Carmen de Lavallade

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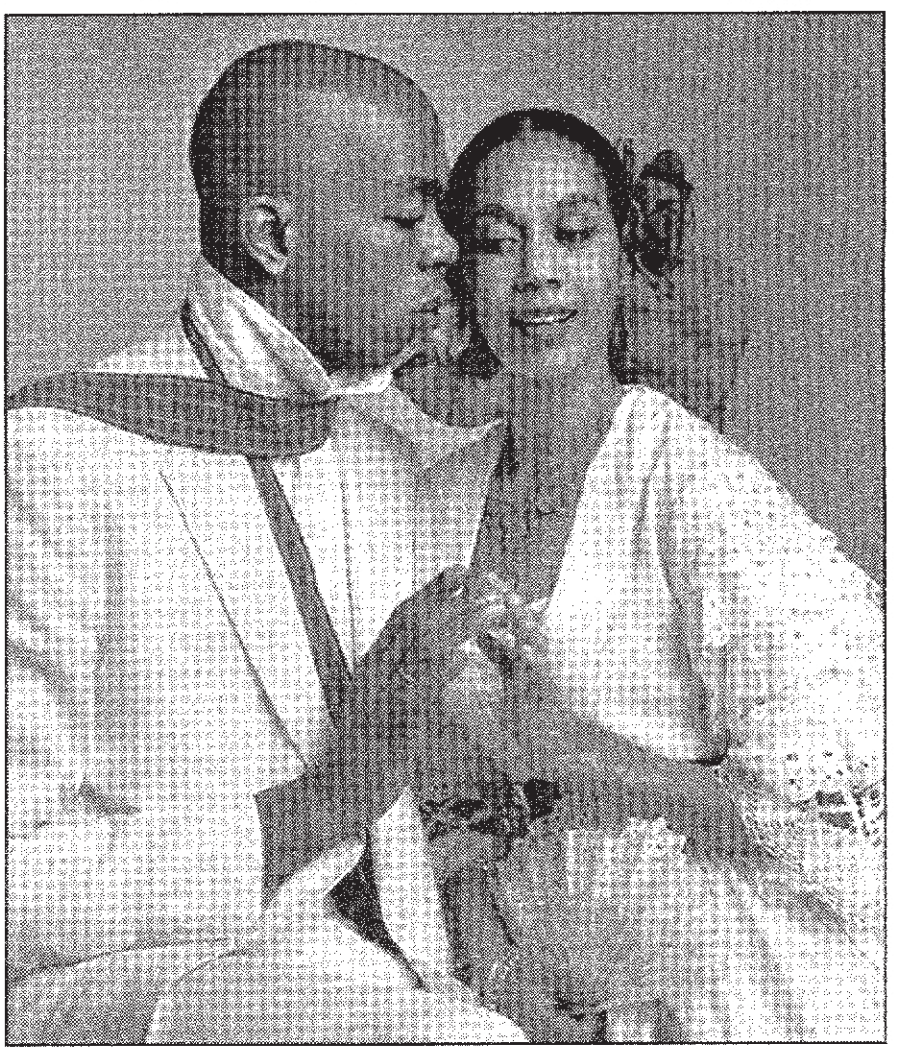

"Oh God, every day I look at Carmen and I see a painting."

BY KAREN KRAMER

For more than 50 years, Geoffrey Holder and his wife, Carmen de Lavallade, have shared a life filled with theater, dance, art, travel, and a true meeting of the minds.

Holder, a 6'6" Renaissance man, is a dancer, choreographer, painter, avid art collector, actor, Tony Award-winning director and costume designer – as well as the widely recognized voice of the 7-Up "un-cola" campaign. Born and raised in Trinidad, he is a natural storyteller whose deep bass voice and dramatic expression are punctuated by a hearty laugh.

De Lavallade, on the other hand, is as serene and elegant as her husband is fiery and passionate. A fine-boned beauty with wide cheekbones and expressive eyes, she came from an artistic family in California, and has spent more than five decades working as a dancer, teacher, choreographer and visual artist. At 77, she moves with more grace and fluidity than women half her age.

The two met in 1954 while appearing in a Broadway musical written by Truman Capote and Harold Arlen. They still finish each other's sentences.

Carmen says, "We actually met in the show House of Flowers. The show was in Philadelphia and was coming into New York. I came in from Los Angeles—"

Geoffrey: "In 1953..."

Carmen: "...and it was for their pre-showing before New York City. That's when director Herbert Ross took over from—"

Geoffrey: "George Balanchine—"

Carmen: "—and Peter Brook. I came in with the dancer Alvin Ailey from California, and Geoffrey was with the show. That's how it started."

"Let me go back before that," Geoffrey says. "Carmen was performing at Jacob's Pillow that summer and I had just come back [from Jacob's Pillow]. I didn't see Carmen up there but I knew who she was. I'd seen her in marvelous movies like Demetrius and the Gladiators and The Egyptians, and Lydia Bailey. I remember because the film Lydia Bailey dealt with the Haitian Revolution.

"That summer, she came into town to audition for House of Flowers, and I was at the theater seeing Tea and Sympathy, which was playing on Broadway. I had to get up because somebody wanted to pass in my row. It was Carmen de Lavallade. And I said, 'Oh my Goooooooood, that's Carmen de Lavallade looking GORGEOUS, with this long black hair, this face, a beautiful woman.' Next thing you know, on the 19th of December, I heard somebody knocking on the stage door, and I was on my way out to dinner, but here was that same beautiful lady. I freaked out."

Carmen had known of Geoffrey as well, from a picture she'd seen years earlier. "I think I had seen a photograph of him in Dance magazine. And Alvin [Ailey, the choreographer] had said there's this guy who's going to be in the show, this tall guy."

This tall guy, as Carmen puts it, proposed marriage four days after he met her.

At first Carmen didn't accept, but Geoffrey was sure it would happen. "I said, 'You don't know me, but I would love for you to be my wife.' I have good taste. When I see something I know it, and there's no b.s. I'm a lion!"

They were married in 1955, about a year after the closing of House of Flowers. For the next few decades, they worked both together and separately. Carmen performed at the Met, City Opera, and with the Alvin Ailey Company. "We went to Southeast Asia, we came back, and then I went and performed with the Yale Repertory Theater, so this has been constant change from one thing to another. And Geoffrey developed his paintings and he developed The Wiz so it's been quite a whirlwind."

Although they've lived in other countries, such as France, they've made their home in New York for many years and love the multi-culturalism of it.

Geoffrey did more than simply develop the 1975 Broadway show The Wiz. He also directed and choreographed the musical for which he won two Tony Awards, for best direction of a musical and best costume design. Three years later, he again won the Tony for best costume design for the show Timbuktu, which he also directed and choreographed.

He credits Carmen as being the muse for the clothes he creates. "When I saw Carmen that first day, she was in a wonderful dress. I saw how Carmen dressed and since then I've been doing a variation on them. It's her taste. Carmen was wearing black before it was chic. She wore high-necked dresses with that beautiful face. Carmen's hair does not compete with her clothes. She has a sense of architecture."

Carmen's influence on Geoffrey was not limited to clothing design. Many of the women in his paintings are Creole women bear a striking resemblance to Carmen. But what surprises both of them is that Geoffrey was painting these women long before he even knew his wife.

"It's very funny because I had been painting that type of beauty before I ever met her," he says. "If you see my early paintings, they look like Carmen."

This equally intrigues Carmen. "Yes, he had an exhibit, and I went to see some of his early paintings and got a little freaked. The shape of the face is the same."

"You see, this was over 50 years ago, and the face is still beautiful," Geoffrey says.

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When asked about how have they influenced each other's art, Geoffrey says without hesitation, "Oh God, every day I look at Carmen and I see a painting."

Carmen, in turn, was introduced to a world of Haitian culture and dance when she met Geoffrey. Although Holder was born in and grew up on the island of Trinidad, he was very much influenced by the culture of Haiti. He incorporated Haitian Vodou dance movements into his work, and became an avid collector of some of Haiti's finest painters.

"When I met him, I didn't know very much about real drumming but then I familiarized myself with more of the Haitian culture, and the sounds and the stories. I was from east LA. It's a very rich part of Los Angeles that was Black and Mexican and so it was very rich culturally there. Because he was from Trinidad, it seemed the similarities were like some of the Mexican stories. I love tales about people from around the world. You bump into similarities all the time."

"This is part of why I ADORE Carmen," says her husband emphatically. "Because in House of Flowers when all the other dancers were busy talking about their Italian shoes, Carmen and I were busy talking about all this other stuff. I learned more about other cultures that I didn't know anything about. Carmen reads a lot and she would tell me all these incredible stories. And we had so much to talk about, and it wasn't just about dance."

The other co-production of which Holder is most proud is his son, Leo, a graphic designer who lives in the city. "He is half Carmen, half me. Carmen would go to rehearsals when she worked with John Butler. She would take Leo in the baby carriage two flights up to rehearse. She would take him to Spoleto, in Italy. She would travel with him and perform. He was sitting in a box listening to music."

"His favorite was the Guarani String Quartet," says Carmen. "Our lives have always been like that. Because I had the dance world, and Geoffrey not only had the dance world, he had the art world, the painters. So what happened is that I learned about that part of the world. And I knew some composers so it just kind of cross-pollinated."

Although they've lived in other countries, such as France, they've made their home in New York for many years and love the multi-culturalism of it. "In the subway, you get a man from India, a man from China, a man from Italy. We're near Little Italy and Chinatown is next door. We have the whole world here," says Geoffrey.

Their large loft on lower Broadway is furnished with plants and books and art (their own and that of others), records, treasures from their travels. Everywhere the eye looks there is pleasure. "I'm a hoarder," says Geoffrey. "The house is a mess. I see things. I have to have it. I see art in Haiti, and I must have one. I go to France, I love a painting, I must have it. In order for me to move here, I had to sell a little Matisse drawing that I had so that I could buy this place."

Carmen adds, "Needless to say, we've had over 50 years of collecting. It's just books, really, and archives. And what do you do with that? They're all art books, or research books on theater, or research on art, research on dance, or research on just people. So it's like a mini-library in a funny kind of way. I'm really the opposite of him. I like space."

How do two people – one who loves to collect, and one who likes minimalism – deal with their disparate philosophies? Carmen laughs. "Oh, we argue all the time."

They do agree on how the city and the art world have changed over time. "When we came to Soho [in 1981] it was beautiful, it was quiet," says Geoffrey. "Today when you walk in the street here they can't hear you because they have cell phones. You have to say excuse me ten times before they move." And then, laughing his sunny laugh, he adds, " I could have a gun and say to some lady 'Stick 'em up' and she wouldn't hear me because she's on her cell phone."

"We're at an age now," muses Carmen, "where we wonder how you can continue your art form without falling in a crack. I mean, you always create, but it's just different now. People have become famous overnight just doing nothing. The poor darlings, I guess kids all want to be famous, but something's left out."

Geoffrey adds, "There's no heart."

Carmen concurs. "I'm for anybody who has a heart and they do what they do and they just do it beautifully instead of slipshod."

Putting heart and soul into their creations is what Carmen and Geoffrey have always done best, and although they are both in their seventies, they show no sign of stopping. They're excited about the work they still have ahead of them.

"We're off on our own projects," Carmen says. "I'm trying to discover other things now. I'm working with a company called Paradigm and everybody's older than 50. It's more theater-oriented, with movement. We have a nice group of people and we try and do interesting things and see what we can do. There are still a lot of things we can do physically."

"And I'm painting all the time," adds Geoffrey. "I've been painting all my life, since I was 12 years old. I sit here and I create all day. We have a rich, full life because mentally we are rich; we have ideas, we never stop. That's the creative mind."

Karen Kramer is a free-lance writer and documentary filmmaker who specializes in stories about New York City and the Caribbean.