

# Introduction to *Champagne and Sky Juice*

Mervyn Morris

*Manchineel + Seagrape* 3 • October 2024

---

**Author Bio:** Mervyn Morris is a poet, critic, and Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing and West Indian Literature at the University of the West Indies, Mona. His critical publications include *'Is English We Speaking' and Other Essays* (1999), *Making West Indian Literature* (2005) and *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture* (2014). His books of poetry include *Shadowboxing* (1979), *Examination Centre* (1992), *I Been There, Sort Of* (2006), *Peelin Orange* (2017), and most recently, *Last Reel* (2024). He has also edited several anthologies of Caribbean poetry. Professor Morris received the Order of Merit in 2009 and served as Jamaica's first Poet Laureate since Independence from 2014 to 2017.

---

The fourth play by Basil Dawkins, *Champagne and Sky Juice*, opened at the Barn Theatre in Kingston on October 24, 1986. Reviewers deemed it “thoroughly professional,” with two of Jamaica’s finest actors, Leonie Forbes and Charles Hyatt, as “true-to-life characters” directed “at a cracking pace” by Lloyd Reckord. There was also praise for Henry Muttoo’s “tastefully arranged and coloured realistic set of a middle class living and dining room – where the play is located throughout.”

The title of the play alludes to differing environments. “Champagne” suggests celebration, privilege and expense. “Sky juice” suggests limited resources – in Jamaica, shaved ice sold in a plastic bag with a straw and a little syrup. In this two-hander one sky juice denizen, Gregory, imagines himself, through political connections, to be sipping champagne soon; the other, Beverley, is doggedly self-reliant.

The political background is a contest in 1980 between the People’s National Party (PNP) led by Michael Manley and the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) led by Edward Seaga. The PNP defined itself as democratic socialist but from the mid-1970s was accused of communist inclinations. Re-elected in December 1976, a PNP government entered into an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which required the implementation of economic and structural reforms. In February 1980, only three years into a five-year term, the PNP government, faltering, promised a general election by the end of the year. There was increasing violence, much of it political. Manley’s rhetoric and his friendship with Fidel Castro annoyed the US and alienated some commercial and business interests. Many qualified persons emigrated. As the government tightened foreign exchange controls, some Jamaicans bought US dollars wherever they could find them and smuggled the money out. Shops and supermarket shelves were understocked, and customers often battled for essentials. Soon after the JLP victory in the October 30 elections, many imported items became available again. Local entrepreneurs were overwhelmed. (Beverley asks: “Wey so much money come from fe buy so much foreign tings all of a sudden?”) The Cuban ambassador was declared *persona non grata*, and Jamaica’s new Prime Minister, Mr. Seaga, was one of the earliest foreign leaders received by President Reagan.

Through the characters of Gregory and Beverley and their response to various challenges, the play identifies salient trends and moments in this critical year. The ‘Deliverance’ campaign, says Gregory, “is a cause – the last chance to save this country from the red blood stain hands of these vile communists.” Heavily committed as a JLP organizer, he is an insensitive man who pays little attention to his wife. When she reveals she has been made redundant, he does not imagine how she may feel. To him, the work she has been doing and the money she has been earning are not important. He boasts of being her provider. He is not happy to see her tackling problems independently, though he will later claim joint ownership of her success. Part of his contribution to the business, he says, is doing without

sex sometimes while she is “setting up dat dam place” – their garment factory. He says that women are driven by emotion; but it is he, unlike his wife, who will lash out emotionally and propose dangerous courses of action. Looking forward to the spoils of victory, he fantasizes that he and Beverley will move from their middle-class home into an upscale community. He will get himself a new car and teach his wife to drive the one being repaired.

After the election, reality intrudes. The landlord, a fellow campaign-worker, will not be pleaded with. A man who had migrated returns to a job which Gregory thought would soon be his, and in the reorganization recommended by foreign consultants, Gregory is made redundant. (‘Don’t take it personal,’ says Beverley, ironically.) He loses contact with the candidate he worked to elect. Humiliations weaken his self-esteem and, for a while, his sexual vitality. He is more and more grateful for his wife’s resourcefulness, but he must still pretend to be her boss. Status-conscious and fearing violence downtown, he is reluctant to even visit the factory; and because, unlike Beverley, he actually grew up in a ghetto, he says “fe work down there a day time and live down there is two different business.” In the end, though he has so often said she could not do without him, he seems ready to accept her leadership and her exemplary resilience.

For much of the play, Beverley quietly defends her own perceptions. She keeps inviting Gregory to talk with her, and plan with her, but he does not listen. She wants them to take action together, but the ‘provider’ will not comply. (“Everything used to go nice till you come change de rules.”) He is insecure, suspicious of other men with whom she interacts. Though he accuses her of “simplicity,” she is in fact a realist with positive values. She attests that PNP policies have fostered pride in herself and her work. With what Gregory calls her “poor relief mentality,” she is concerned about employees and how they will manage if the business fails. She is troubled by conscience when impelled towards dishonest action. Her principled concern is markedly unlike the attitude of her husband, who is ready to frame an innocent person. When, exasperated by his selfishness and irresponsibility, Beverley eventually contemplates deliverance from the shackles of marriage, Gregory edges towards the repair of their relationship and accepts the job she has offered.

One reviewer of the initial production was bothered by what he deemed a clash of styles. But the opposition is clearly intentional. For most of the play, Gregory is ridiculously unaware, and Beverley knows more than she will say. The play is often winking at gender stereotypes: man thinking he must be master and provider; woman absorbing hurts and gently guiding man into her feelings; woman holding things together by practical action and showing a stick-to-it-iveness the man only talks about. *Champagne and Sky Juice* is very readable, with convincing and often witty dialogue. It is efficiently constructed, with momentary triumphs and urgent challenges carefully spaced. A good production vivifies the ebb and flow of feeling, the physical interplay between the characters, the costume changes and the variable look of the set – cluttered, bare, or partially dismantled. Much is conveyed in the sounds of laughter, celebration, anger, pleading, sobs, or a door slammed shut.