THE GIFT OF A CREATIVE LIFE

...laughter, legacy and the fearless joy of storytelling

A CONVERSATION WITH FRANCES-ANNE SOLOMON · BY GISELLE HUDSON

There is a point in every artist's journey where instinct begins to outrun intention. Where you stop trying to prove that what you're doing makes sense, and start trusting that it will find meaning on its own.

For Frances-Anne Solomon, that moment has repeated itself across decades: from early theatre productions and BBC radio dramas to the founding of CaribbeanTales, and now *Garvey's Ghost*, the irreverent, award-winning web and TV series heading into its second season. When we spoke, she told me simply:

> *"I think the key thing has always been joy."*

That word, joy, sits like a refrain in her creative language. Joy not as an escape, but as resistance. Joy as the engine behind work that is unflinching, mischievous and often controversial.

THE LAUGHTER THAT STARTED IT ALL

"We laughed all the time," she said, recalling the earliest days of *Garvey's Ghost*. "We laughed without knowing why, without knowing if what we were doing was any good or even allowed."

That laughter would become the heartbeat of a series that took one of Pan-Africanism's most revered figures, Marcus Garvey, and reimagined him as an impish, giggling ghost haunting a West Indian matriarch in 1950s Toronto.

The premise sounds outrageous until you hear the story behind it. While artist-in-residence at Toronto Metropolitan University, Frances-Anne met a Scottish student who wanted to shoot something with her. "I'd just optioned Denham Jolly's memoir," she explained, "and I thought of this story: a young Jamaican immigrant arriving in Toronto in 1955 to stay at a boarding house run by Miss Violet Williams, the Lady President of the UNIA."

It began as a half-hour drama. But during a workshop, an actor said he wanted to play Marcus Garvey. "Everyone laughed. Garvey was dead in the story! But he said, I'll play him as a ghost. And that one suggestion changed everything."

THE AUDACITY OF JOY

What followed was a creative leap that would have frightened most filmmakers. Turning Garvey into a comic figure, a cross between Garvey and Anansi, as

actor Owen "Blakka" Ellis later put it, was both risky and radical.

Letters from Garvey associations soon followed, asking how she could make fun of such a monumental figure. Her answer was clear: "Part of our culture is to deal with trauma through humour. That's what we do."

For Frances-Anne, humour is not deflection; it's reclamation.

> *"We didn't have the right to tell our stories for so long. So I've always felt it's my responsibility to make it up, because we didn't inherit enough. I can do whatever I want. I'm a child of this soil."*

"We don't remember," she added. "We were brainwashed into British traditions." In her world, laughter is not light; it's liberation. It's how we make meaning from what was once meant to silence us.

STORIES THAT POSSESS YOU

When she speaks of storytelling, Frances-Anne uses the language of embodiment, not career.

"Some stories just possess me," she said. "Not in a bad way. They just take hold. I can't keep them inside."

Writing was her first outlet, but it became too solitary, even physically painful. "I used to get migraines when I went too deep," she confessed. "So I started sharing stories instead. The stories that matter most to me are never just mine. They belong to everyone in the room."

That room has always been full. Her creative process is deeply collaborative, shaped by improvisation, feedback and a kind of joyful surrender. "It's never isolation," she said. "I work with too many other people. I borrow their ideas. I use them. It's a rich process, and yes, I make the final decisions, but it's never just me."

THE DIASPORA AS ONE STORY

Frances-Anne's work has always spanned borders, because her life has. Born in England to Trinidadian parents, she grew up in Switzerland, Guyana, Trinidad, Denmark, Venezuela, the US and Canada before eventually returning to the Caribbean.

> *"I've always been a child of the diaspora. Everywhere I go, I find Caribbean people."*

"It always made perfect sense to tell stories of that reality," she said. That philosophy gave birth to CaribbeanTales and the Cross-Continental Forum, both dedicated to connecting storytellers across the African and Caribbean diasporas.

"Cross-Continental was about bringing together the communities I knew in England with those I knew in South Africa or Ghana or Canada. It was self-evident to me: the same story was being told everywhere."

Garvey's Ghost, she explained, sits squarely in that continuum. It's not a departure; it's an evolution. "It's a Pan-African story," she said, "about a Caribbean community in 1950s Canada. And I know it's going to resonate, because that experience, of migration, of holding humour and hardship together, is universal across our diaspora."

SERIOUS FOOLISHNESS

Frances-Anne calls *Garvey's Ghost* "serious foolishness," a phrase that captures her dual gift for depth and irreverence. She's proud that the series honours "the generation who went before us": the ones who survived the cold, the racism, the absurdity, and still found reasons to laugh.

> *"We think our lives are tough. But it's nothing compared to what those people went through. And yet they laughed, and they gave us so much to stand on."*

Not everyone understood her approach. At one screening, a viewer asked why she made it a comedy. “Because it is serious,” she laughed. “But also because that’s how we’ve survived.”

LEGACY REVISITED

When asked about her legacy, Frances-Anne surprised me with her answer.

“I don’t think the next generation needs my advice,” she said. “They’re brilliant. The future is bright. What I’d say instead is: be kind to us. To yourselves. To those who came before.”

After forty-five years of telling stories, from *What My Mother Told Me* to *A Winter Tale*, *Hero*, and now *Garvey’s Ghost*, she has come to see creativity not as a possession, but as grace.

> *“Creativity is a gift. It doesn’t belong to us. The opportunity to live a creative life, that’s the gift.”*

There’s something deeply freeing about that statement. It’s not humility disguised as wisdom; it’s the hard-won truth of someone who has built worlds out of laughter, risk and faith.

And perhaps that’s the real ghost haunting *Garvey’s Ghost*: not Marcus Garvey himself, but the spirit of invention that refuses to rest.

THREE TAKEAWAYS FROM FRANCES-ANNE'S SPOTLIGHT

1 *Joy is a creative act of resistance.*
Humour and joy aren't trivial; they're survival tools. Caribbean people have always turned pain into laughter to process trauma, reclaim dignity and keep history alive.

2 *Collaboration fuels creative freedom.*
Frances-Anne treats creation as dialogue, not isolation, holding vision and flexibility at once and trusting the creative flow.

3 *The diaspora is one story.*
The Caribbean isn't bound by geography but by shared history, humour and imagination. Wherever we are, we belong to one continuous narrative.



Frances-Anne Solomon

Filmmaker, writer and producer, born in England to Trinidadian parents. Founder of CaribbeanTales and the Cross-Continental Forum, and creator of the award-winning series *Garvey's Ghost*. Her work spans forty-five years, from BBC radio drama to *A Winter Tale* and *Hero*.

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