

INTERNATIONAL PRESS-CUTTING BUREAU
224-236 Walworth Road,
London SE17 1JE

Extract from
Nottingham Evening Post

2 JUL 1988

Desperate plea that paid off

HALFWAY through her A-levels at Beeston College, Jenny McLeod took a gamble, gave up conventional education and sat at home for four years — writing.

She wrote a play called *Cricket at Camp David* and hawked it round theatre after theatre and competition after competition.

She was just about to give up writing and get "a proper job" when she wrote a desperate letter to Nottingham Playhouse saying she would sweep floors, make the tea and do without pay just to get her foot in the door.

The result — her play was entered for the theatre's "Writing 87" competition only days away from its closing deadline.

And it won first prize.

Jenny, of Carlton, not only will have the exquisite pleasure of seeing her creation get its world premiere at Bolton's Octagon Theatre in October but a week later watch the Nottingham Playhouse stage another world premiere of hers.

In a co-production with Monstrous Regiment, one of the country's leading political theatre groups, her *Island Life* will be staged as a studio produc-

Curtain up on Jenny's plays

tion (the first in the new acting space created by the link with the Albert Hall) from October 18-29.

A touching and disturbing comedy, it centres round a girl who arrives lost and forlorn with one hurriedly packed suitcase and meets three women, living some of the time in an old people's home but most of the time on their respective islands.



● *Writer Jenny McLeod — a gamble*

The voices from nowhere

THE GUARDIAN
Tuesday October 11 1988

TALKING to Jenny McLeod, you keep expecting that she'll suddenly let slip the key to it all: some profound influence somewhere in her 25 years which drove her into writing plays. You search in vain for literary influences, beyond the fact that she read *The Crucible* for Eng Lit and that she's currently enjoying Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*. Nottingham born, she went to an inner city comprehensive school and an FE College, has a "horrible" novel stowed away upstairs, and wrote solidly four years on the dole before earning a penny.

She prefers to be labelled writer rather than playwright, although plays, she says, are what everyone expects of her at the moment. Her first, *Cricket At Camp David*, opens this week at the Bolton Octagon: her second, *Island Life*, next week at Nottingham's Playhouse. "I think I've got one foot on the ladder," she says cautiously. "But I've got a long way to go. Not many people have read the two plays, and until the productions start, I don't know what the reaction is going to be. I might fall back off the ladder at square one when the critics have seen them."

Cricket At Camp David was rejected time and time again when Jenny first sent it out to theatres and entered it for competitions. It isn't hard to see why: in its raw state, it was ragged and inconsistent, the speech patterns of the West Indian patois used by the older characters hard to tune in to at first. It's an exploration of family relationships and tensions prior to a wedding, and of the conflict between the black and white community, where the local cricket match becomes the battleground. Above all, it's about a desperate need for communication, about people screaming out to be heard.

People Jenny has no problem with: she found the characters in her head, ready to be picked off the shelf, and she let them ferment there for a while. "I go to sleep thinking about them. I wake up thinking about them. They develop on the page," she says simply. "They insist on their own identity and I think you struggle if you have to push them. You don't put words in their mouth: they put words on your paper." Too many words were the problem, too much waffle, an inability to pare, a lack of experience in construction which led to the play's rejection.

It's been revised many times since Les Smith, director of new writing at Nottingham's Playhouse, recognised its potential and suggested Jenny enter it for Writing '87, two days from the closing date for submissions. It came first, win-



Jenny McLeod . . . two premieres

PHOTOGRAPH: DENIS THORPE

ning her two rehearsed readings, one at Nottingham and one at Derby, and leading to a commission from *Monstrous Regiment* for a second play, *Island Life*. Suddenly, from writing being something that she did in private, she found herself involved with directors, actors, an agent, and had she been less naive, she says, she might have been intimidated by it all.

"Sometimes I'd go to a meeting and just get on with it. And then on the train coming back I'd start thinking, 'God, do they mean me?' They'd be talking about this character and I'd think, 'This is only someone on a page and they're getting into heated discussions about would this character do this or do that'. I still find that a bit odd. It's not that it's not significant to me, but at the moment I still see the characters on the page and they're talking about someone standing there."

"They see things I don't see. When I wrote *Island Life*, I was convinced I'd just written a story about three dotty old women in an old people's home, and they said it's about this and this. I thought, 'Yes, it could be'."

She's wary of the labels people will want to pin on her because she's black. She doesn't think she writes from a black perspective and she doesn't think she wants to. "It would be very limiting. I don't bang drums. I don't write to bang drums. I've met friends who've said, 'We've seen you in the paper — what's *Island Life* about?' I tell them and they say, 'But that's got nothing to do with black people.' They already think I should be writing

that way.

"Equally I don't want to get bogged down writing about things that only affect women, though I'm not going to run away from that either — if a play needs it, I'll do it. I just want to write anything that comes along."

She's hesitant about spelling out exactly what issues do concern her most, but concludes, "I think what gets me going is that people should get on with their lives and not sit back and hope for the best. Make a go of the things that they've got, try their best. I'm trying. I want to be able to write the best play I possibly can one day, but I'm not in a position to write it yet."

She's the fourth of five daughters, and there's a lot of her own family life reflected in *Cricket At Camp David*. Her mother came to the play's reading but refused to recognise herself as Alicia, the Jamaican-born mother in the play. *Emmy*, in *Island Life*, is based on Jenny's grandmother, and she admits there's probably something of herself in most of the characters she creates.

And they're complex characters, *Island Life* in particular displaying a maturity and a confidence which enables Jenny to tackle people and situations outside her own experience. After Bolton and Nottingham, she'll be working on a commission from The Theatre Centre, a play for nine to thirteen year olds about a child who withdraws from her problems into a fantasy world. "You keep returning to this theme of isolation" I suggest.

She looks surprised. "Do I?" She pauses. "Perhaps that says something about me."