

MOMENTOUS PORTIA: THE OPERA SINGER WITH A POWERFUL LEGACY

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The True North Star, in all its glorious splendor, has not always been a constant symbol of warmth and freedom. Alas, African Canadians can attest to struggling, as for them the pursuit of happiness has been a continual battle. However, modern Black Canadians can use Portia White as a beacon of hope; an Afro Canadian woman with a melodious voice, her most powerful weapon of combat against the coiling chains of discrimination and poverty. In the same manner as Portia, Black Canadians, especially those who aspire to sing, can use their voices as clever instruments of talent to conquer similar difficulties that Portia White encountered.

Portia White was born on a blazing summer's day in June. The day was the 24th, the year 1911 and the location of her birth Truro, Nova Scotia. Portia White was the third child born among a lengthy line of thirteen children. Needless to say, it was difficult for Portia's family to make ends meet. Portia began the arduous road to earning her legacy by singing in her father's church choir at the tender age of six. At eight, she was singing the soprano parts of the challenging opera piece entitled *Lucia de Lammermoor* and singing it on Canadian radio broadcasts. Portia's family was plagued with poverty, so Portia had to walk 10 miles per week to receive music lessons, as her family did not possess an automobile. Portia's vibrant determination at such an early age showcased her persevering nature, a valuable quality of character that influenced the Government of Canada, in 1995, to dub her "a person of national historic significance."

As a young woman, Portia attended Dalhousie University to become a teacher, graduating in 1929. In the early 1930s, Portia taught at various primary schools in black communities of Nova Scotia, such as Africville. While she was teaching, Portia also competed at the Halifax Musical Festival. Her wondrous operatic voice shone through, earning her the Helen Kennedy Silver Cup in 1935, 1937 and 1938.

Acclaiming the prestigious Silver Cup led Portia to feel on top of the world, to soar through life with valiance; she gathered the courage to audition for the renowned voice teacher, Dr. Ernesto Vinci and was successful in her audition. Her canorous audition inspired The Halifax Ladies' Musical Club to entrust a scholarship for Portia to study under Ernesto's leadership. Portia's opera legacy was slowly, but surely being built.

It was Portia's appearance at the Toronto's Eaton Auditorium on the 7th of November 1941, which marked her as an internationally acclaimed vocalist. Her fine performance earned her many positive reviews. One astounded newspaper reviewer praised Portia for her "pungent expression and beauty of utterance." Another star struck reporter wrote that her voice was "a gift from heaven."

Upon receiving such superb reviews, Portia retired from teaching in 1941 and focused instead on creating a concert tour that crossed the vastness of Canada, the United States and Latin America. Regrettably, Portia faced innumerable difficulties in obtaining bookings; there were those who could see nothing past the smooth charcoal tone of her skin and her poor, difficult upbringing, immediately deciding that those factors gave them total dominion to judge Portia before hearing her angelic voice. Auspiciously, Portia overcame these difficulties with a radiant attitude, knowing that the sun would shine after the rain storm passed; she became widely praised at her acclaimed recital at New York's Town Hall on March 13, 1944. Portia was the first Canadian ever to perform at the historic venue.

As a fellow vocalist, I am in awe of what it took for Portia to become an opera singer. Her journey to stardom took many twists, but her champion spirit enabled her to go for the gold. She is my role model for she has taught me to value my voice and use it to its fullest potential.

Portia White's remarkable, wholehearted efforts to become an opera singer demonstrate how important it is to capture our dreams into the realm of reality. Her lifestyle is a golden nugget for Afro Canadians, an example of the amount of potential they possess. She shows us that The True North Star is a place of greatness after all, but only when we use our talents to enhance its greatness and make it a symbol of warmth and freedom.

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