

Tribute to Geoff Davis

Justina Hart

justinahart@mac.com

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Abstract: A tribute to Geoff Davis and a poem inspired by meeting him

Keywords: Geoff Davis, inspiration, generosity

I met Geoffrey Davis only once: during the three-day SPACLALS conference at UNE in Parramatta in February 2019, to which I had travelled from England to give a paper as a UK poet and fiction writer, thanks to an Artists' International Development Fund from the British Council/Arts Council England.

After his keynote speech about literature and activism, which I found deeply inspiring and which raised new possibilities for my own work, I went up to where he was sitting and asked if he might email me a copy. He thanked me and instantly took from his briefcase his only spare hard copy of the speech, neatly typed and paper-clipped, and handed it to me to keep.

His spirit of kindness and generosity shone through that one encounter. Geoffrey showed me how, with a single speech, conversation, or unexpected gesture, you can change a life. I shall not forget him.

The following poem was written for a close friend, Joy Vellapah, who I heard had died when I was in Cairns after the SPACLALS conference. Joy was of Mauritian heritage and she and I worked together at the British Council in Spring Gardens, London, in the noughties. This poem had added poignancy for me when I received the news about Geoff.

In Cairns I take refuge

from tropical deluge in a church,
shake out my broolly. Eight huge ceiling fans
are switched off as there's no one here:
the air's left to cool itself – blowing
through open, facing doors like sound
drifting in one ear and out the other.
After glancing at the 1918 memorial cross
and a leaflet informing ministers about new
same-sex marriage laws, I take a pew,
shut my eyes, run through all those I know
who are ill or under my umbrella.
But I forget the friend who cried for help
before Christmas; and who, I'm to hear
that night, died the day I flew out.

Bionote: Justina Hart is an award-winning British poet, fiction writer, and singer-songwriter, who has performed her work internationally. For more information, see justinahart.com.