

In her own words

Seacole's video true to her spirit

BY GWYNETH HAROLD
Observer writer

The legacy of Mary Seacole lives on in a new video on her life, *The Doctress: Mary Seacole of Jamaica* that retells her adventures in her own words.

Done as a documentary-drama the producers, Video For Change, stayed as true to Seacole's spirit by using words taken from her autobiography. The 40-minute video was launched at the Bob Marley Theatre on Friday, May 16, where director of the Mary Seacole Foundation, Sonia Mills, pointed out that this "work could be done because Mary Seacole wrote a book", and urged persons to write down what they knew about distinguished women so that future documentary makers could have material to work with.

Five years in the making, the video is a joint project of the Mary Seacole Foundation, Video for Change, with UNESCO/IPDC as the main sponsor. Jocelyne Josiah, UNESCO Advisor for Communication and Information for the Caribbean, says that they became involved in the project as Seacole was a "very inspiring subject" and "a way to create more positive images" of women in the media.

The project also excited interest at the Bureau of Women's Affairs and practitioners in the medical and nursing communities, many of whom see Mary Seacole as a symbol of all that is heroic in their professions. Sonia Mills, said they were grateful to "individual doctors as well as groups like The Nurses of Black River" for their contributions.

In the feature, a first year university student, played by Sebrena McDonald, wants to become a doctor and is intrigued by Seacole's life. She travels back in time to a house in 19th Century Kingston to visit Seacole, played by Marguerite Newland. Seacole retells her adventures, starting with her witness of the destruction of Kingston by fire in 1843, and the epidemic cholera outbreak a few years later where she became an expert in the control of the spread of that disease. She recalls her trip to Panama where her work became essential as tropical diseases struck men who were avoiding "Red Indians" by taking the long way round to the Gold Rush in California. When she was nearly 50 years old, Seacole spent two years, from 1854-1856, in the port of Balaklava on the Black Seas, running a hotel and healing sick and dying soldiers who were fighting the Crimean War.

Newland describes Seacole as "very in control of her environment and determined that she would conquer all her difficulties, and she did. She was passionate about her work, but she did not blow up herself. She enjoyed her large size and could not understand why people were trying to put her down because of that and her colour."

Actress and drama teacher, Sebrena McDonald, who played the "time traveler" in the video, says that she sees Seacole as "Someone else for us Jamaicans to be proud of. It did not matter to her if someone was enemy or friend, she wanted to heal." She says that that Seacole's life could inspire more drama and musical work, as well as lessons on history.

Cynthia Wilmot who wrote the script said that producer Hilary Nicholson started production in December 2002 and was finished within four-months. The budget allowed the makers a three-day in-studio shooting schedule. Most of the dialogue takes place in studio on a set built to evoke a 19th Century Kingston dining room lit by a small gas lamp. The time period was also evoked by Newland's conservative Victorian era dress and elaborate bonnet with colourful ribbons. Seacole's tales were illustrated by inserting photographs of the places and people that she knew, or those influenced her life.



Mary Seacole



Margaret Newland plays Mary Seacole in *the Doctress*.

Mary Seacole was born a free mulatto in Kingston, 1805 and learned healing skills from her mother to become a respected "doctress" at a time when there were no nursing schools in Jamaica or even England. The wrong colour for her chosen profession, Seacole ignored the sexism and racism directed at her and carried on with her work. She was famously snubbed by Florence Nightingale who did not invite her to join her nursing corps and then reported her to the authorities for running a brothel in the Crimea. After the

war, "Mother Seacole" was publicly recognized by the British, French and Turkish governments for her humanitarian work with their troops; and she was a popular figure among ordinary people. A bust of Seacole stands in a place of honour at the Nurses Association of Jamaica HQ on Trevenion Park Road and The Government of Jamaica posthumously awarded her the Order of Merit in 1990. She died in London in 1881 and is buried there.