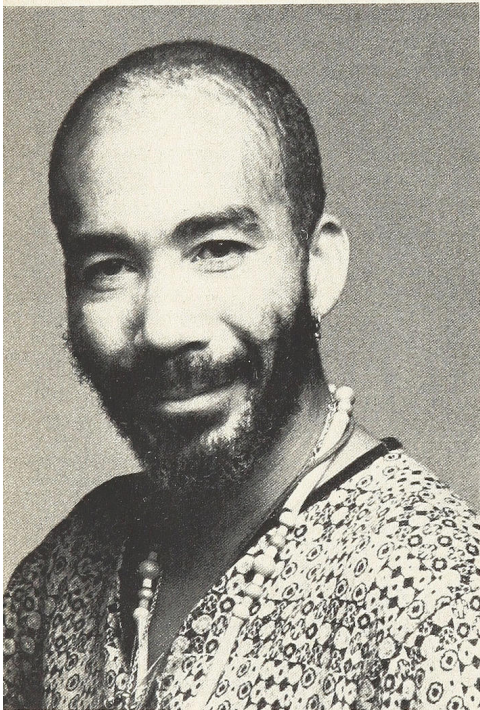


An eccentric talent says,  
"I'm not going to recommend our  
life-style to anyone,  
but it works for us."



John Vidal

It is ten-thirty, the pollution level is low this morning and summer is still with us. In New York, one learns to be ecstatic over an extra hour of sunlight, or coming—suddenly—upon a clean street, or hearing an old man laugh. I ring the doorbell to this Upper West Side apartment, and when a woman opens the door, I say, "Mrs. Gordone?" and she replies with some vigor, "Jeanne." She leads me into a large living room with one chair, a fake Oriental rug, a tape recorder, a broken couch covered with blue chambray and she asks me if I take sugar with my coffee.

While Jeanne gets the coffee, I looked around (there are paintings all over the walls). I decide that I am too well dressed—Jeanne is wearing denim shorts—so I loosen my tie, look for someplace to put my jacket, and finally throw it on the radiator. Charles Gordone, a skinny 44-year-old man, author of **No Place To Be Somebody**, the 1970 Pulitzer Prize play, hobbles into the room. He was born in Cleveland, raised in Elkhart, Indiana, schooled at U.C.L.A., Los Angeles State College, the Air Force, and the street-life of Greenwich Village. This morning, he is wearing an aqua body shirt, a pair of

## THERE IS A PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY

Charles Gordone By Orde Coombs

multicolored tapestry trousers, three kinds of Indian beads, and a gold earring in his left ear. He is barefoot and suffering from a torn ligament that has been giving him trouble all morning.

He sits down, bellows for some rye, and then announces, "I'm clairvoyant. I have that kind of gift. I know how to read palms, and when I meet people I don't like, I go into sign language. Jeanne gets uptight about that, but Marsha digs it."

Wondering if he was about to give me a demonstration, I ask, tentatively, "Who is Marsha?"

Gordone rubs his chin. He looks at me, then looks at his wife, "How would you define Marsha?" he asks.

His wife helpfully volunteers, "Marsha is his mistress. She's the woman he spends most of his nights with."

Gordone, non-plussed, goes on. "She's an actress, and I need her vibrations. I knew her when she was fourteen, before I knew my wife, and then I ran into her eight years ago. Marsha Haufrecht. She's fine. As you see, we live very existential lives. I'm not going to recommend our life-style to anyone, but it works for us."

Jeanne smiles, sips her coffee and says, "I have to



know the truth about things. I don't like being in the dark. Once I know what's happening, I can decide whether or not to accept it. Chuck's philosophy has always been to have your cake and eat it, too. One day I'm going to write a book about it all. I was going to call it **Have Your Cake and Eat It, Too**. But I was speaking to Elia Kazan the other day, about life, and love, about everything, and he said, 'You pay a high price for a warm ass in bed every night,' so I decided I'd call my book **The Price of Cake**."

The phone rings. Jeanne gets up and Gordone continues. "I don't know what compromise is. Jeanne and I have never been nine-to-fivers. She has always been close to my work and has always helped me. I guess I owe her a tremendous lot. When things were terrible and I was broke, she never said, 'Go out and get a job.' She knew what I was trying to do. She didn't always understand it, but we would rap for hours over the breakfast table, or we would talk through the night. Women, have a certain sense about things. They watch the footprints in the snow, they watch what you are doing—and what you are doing with them. Once they feel that you have included them and haven't lied to them, that you must do what you have to do, then their laughter becomes pleasant music."

Jeanne comes back, sits down and her eyes never leave her husband. Gordone takes a gulp of his rye without ice and continues: "Even my little daughter has a sense of things. At six, she is into her own bag." Suddenly he calls, "Leah Carla," and his daughter says, "Oh brother, I'm just in the middle of combing my hair." But she comes, anyway, her hair sticking up, a front tooth pushing its way out of her gums.

Jeanne adds, "When she was four, Chuck was working in Woodstock, and once when he came to New York, she wanted to go back with him. I told her she couldn't, and she said rather stoically, 'I know he has to be free.'"

"Do you move around with any black theatrical cliques," I ask Gordone? "Who are your friends?"

The playwright scowls. "Friends? My close friends are my family. And I don't mean only by blood relations. Anyone who is connected with what we are doing, with the show, is family. I have thousands of acquaintances, and about five or six mistresses, the closest one being my wife. As for theatrical cliques, I don't have much contact with any group. The Negro Ensemble Company is too middle-class for me. They regard me as an iconoclast, and I think they are irrelevant. Then, too, I don't have any contact with writers. Of course, I've known Lonnie Elder for years. It's ironic, but when he was writing **Ceremonies in Dark Old Men**, I was writing **No Place To Be Somebody**. He would come downstairs, we would have coffee, we would rap, and he would go back up to write. Black actors are constantly putting each other down. I won't do that. The jobs are scarce and there is this fever to get what's available, so they spend nights talking about how bad someone else is. I won't do what they feel they have to do."

**No Place To Be Somebody** is a cold-eyed look at the urban maelstrom in which the black and white lower classes find themselves. The story is told with unrelenting candor. Its vernacular is of the street, its vision

mainly bleak, and it ends in an expurgation of blood. I ask Gordone what advice he would give to young black playwrights as they try to learn their craft and begin to hear the authoritative sound of their voices. He answers, "None. No advice whatsoever. Thomas Edison said that young men take no advice, and he was right. For myself, I know that I learned by doing. I directed **Ghosts** and felt Ibsen's power. I did **Desire Under the Elms** and touched O'Neill. I learned about Japanese Noh plays, and now I want to be influenced by ritual. Ben Shawn said that to move on, expand the limits of art, one has to go back to the beginning, and I want to go back. This black awareness has forced us all to look back and I want to grasp the meaning of the rituals our ancestors knew.

"What about the future? I'm so busy now, I really shouldn't sleep. I'm already fifty subjects behind. I'm doing a stage Western. I have coauthored a play with Sidney Easton (he's a black man in his eighties) called **A Little More Light Around The Place**. It's all about light-skinned blacks. There is the screen version of **No Place To Be Somebody**, and then **Baba-Chops**, a ritual history about the black sojourn in this country. The cast will be all men, forty of them, and some will play women's roles. Then I'm finishing the screenplay for **The W.A.S.P.** by Julius Horowitz. So you see, I'm going to be putting in a lot of time behind the typewriter."

I look around. Other members of Gordone's "family" are coming in. "Where do you write?" I ask.

"I find, now, that I have to get out of New York," the playwright answers. "I have a place in Woodstock. I also rent a house in Nassau. The work gets done."

Gordone is leaving for Woodstock later that day. There is going to be a party in his honor and he wants to be slightly plastered when he gets there. Jeanne, who has been looking in from time to time, comes in again. I look at her. Blonde. Very direct. Not glamorous. Trying hard to look less vulnerable than she is. I ask her if she thinks her husband is as arrogant as one has been led to believe.

"He is that," she says, "and for good reason. The Actors Studio gave him the Shelley Winters Chutzpah Award in June, and they knew what they were talking about. I have never doubted his ability. He's arrogant, eccentric, brilliant, and hell to live with, but one makes a choice. Long ago, he said to me 'you'll never be bored,' and I haven't been. We argue, we have problems but we have both grown."

I look at them. Jeanne in her denim shorts. Gordone in his tapestry-patterned trousers. I was curious. Forget about race. What about normal human despair. They have been evicted and broke and destitute in the hostile caldron of New York. Gordone, despite everything, continues to write, continues to believe in his ability, refusing to take the advice of the straights who urge him to take a nine-to-five job. Any job. He ignores the execrations of those who saw him as a lunatic in pigtails pretending he was a writer, when in fact, he was a lazy lout living off his white woman. And so I said, "Have you both thought the struggle unending, have you ever wavered, have you ever despaired?"

They said, no, and shouted in unison, "**There has never been despair in this house.**"