

CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF POPULAR THEATRE IN HAITI*

By

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For centuries, historians of dramatic expression have accepted as universal truth the unity of theatrical performance and ritual act. Recent investigations in Haiti, which seem to corroborate this truism, have uncovered a natural link between popular theatre forms on the island and the animist Vodoun religion. This paper questions the validity of the purely religious origins of theatre in the African Diaspora, and by studying various other social phenomena of collaboration in Haiti, describes both the sacred and secular components of Haitian popular theatre. Examples from the works of Félix Morisseau-Leroy and Les Caracos Bleus will be discussed.

Two contrasting modes of theatre history criticism exist in the Caribbean. One relies upon prevailing European norms to evaluate the work of Caribbean playwrights, theatre groups and schools. The other, by contrast, depends on a generalized African heritage where ritual and ceremony represent a certain golden age mean. Historically, the attraction to European theatre tradition has been an inexorable one in the Caribbean. What critics use as measure and theatre groups as model is a sophistication that European conventional theatre, in particular, is said to provide. Complexity in characterization and technique, and advanced methods of training within a recognizable system continue to fascinate contemporary Caribbean theatre people looking to compete in the international market of theatre expression.

Indigenous sources for theatre originating in the region, based largely on folk or peasant custom, have historically been ignored or derided because of their lack of savoir-faire. Where European theatre is sophisticated and literate, folk theatre has been labeled simplistic, non-literate, marginal and polymorphic. Some playwrights and theatre historians, particularly as of the 1950s, have begun to redefine the model and measure of Caribbean theatre. Reassessing folk performances in their countries, they have found in them a tradition as advanced as any other despite the ravages of the slave past and the mixture of cultures in the area. Errol Hill's study of Trinidad carnival, mandate for a national theatre, is perhaps the best illustration of this new tendency.¹

* Presented at the Modern Language Association Convention, Special Session: Third World Drama, December 30, 1982, Los Angeles, California, USA, under the title: "Fieldhands To Stagehands: Contemporary Forms of Popular Theatre in Haiti."

In Haiti, the works of Félix Morisseau-Leroy and Franck Fouché have demonstrated the value of indigenous traditions as opposed to imported ones. The two playwrights inaugurated the popular theatre movement with plays of and for the people in Creole. In the Vodoun religion, they discovered a comparable system of performance that heretofore had been considered Europe's domain. Franck Fouché's 1976 study, *Vodou et Théâtre*,² has in many ways become the Haitian analogue to Hill's carnival study. Though Fouché's analysis of Vodoun as model for theatre establishes pertinent criteria, still some of the more captivating aspects of drama are missing from it. Vodoun is depicted as a monolithic, isolated phenomenon and not as the one stable institution in a network of collective performances among the peasantry. Furthermore, few writers on Haitian folklore have investigated the psychological functions of collective performances which essentially afford a protected place for the acting out of inhibitions. If one looks at the diverse relationships that exist between three forms of participatory performance in folk theatre and especially what they permit the peasant to express in public, one may then apply the findings to the work of popular theatre groups in Haiti, the likes of Morisseau-Leroy's *Théâtre d'Haiti* (1950s), *Les Caracos Bleus* (1960s and *Théâtre Kouidor* (1970s).

Work, Religion and Performance

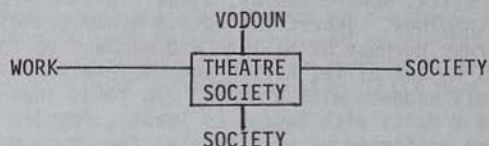
Three forms of collective performance thrive in Haiti. They are the work society (*coumbite* or *société*), the religious society (Vodoun) and performing society (Carnival or Rara bands). On the surface, the details that link these forms of peasant celebration have to do with social and formal organization. The work society, every Vodoun society and each Carnival or Rara band include the following components: 1) a name which distinguishes it -- like *Société la Fleur* or *Société la Rosée*; 2) its own flag; 3) a distinct hierarchy within the collective beginning with the president or *houngan* and ending with the soldiers in the work society, *hounsis* in Vodoun or non-costumed followers of the Rara bands; 4) a choral leader and chorus; 5) a battery of instruments -- the drums in Vodoun often being replaced by bamboo tubes called *vacines* in the work and Rara societies. Each participatory society is propelled by percussion and song into synchronous movement. One could describe the three in kinetic terms as moving earth, moving mysteries and moving masquerades.³

Although linkages between these *sociétés* have been observed by several anthropologists and folklorists alike, no observer of Haitian life and lore has uncovered concrete evidence of the historical or contemporary participation of any one individual in all three groups. While it is tempting to imagine the archetypal Haitian peasant who works, prays and plays within a specific *société*, we must await investigations that use oral historical

methods for living proof of what many scholars have sensed about the peasants need to belong. We do know that Haitian peasant farmers, like their West African ancestors, join various groupings to enhance their prestige and gain a modicum of insurance against the unexpected. Work societies in Haiti and in parts of West Africa furnish a stable work force for their members and the assurance that a proper burial for each will be correctly performed and well attended.

Having analyzed elsewhere in history, social organization, performance structure and song texts of these three forms of folk performance, it is possible to isolate eight fundamental elements that are at the core of folk theatre. They operate within a framework of cooperation and competition⁴ which creates through cohesion-at-odds a type of dramatic tension. Six of the eight operate within the microcosm of a work, religious or performing society. The last two produce an ongoing opposition between the microcosm and the general mainstream society. For the purposes of discussion here, we will treat only the last two elements, *communitas* and the *ineffable*.

In his studies of ritual and non-ritual cults in Africa and the United States, Victor Turner has applied Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage to the relationship of cult members to the larger society. The notion of *communitas* with its attendant phases of separation from society, liminality and reincorporation is applicable to the three *sociétés* under discussion.⁵ If one observes the function of *coumbite*, Vodoun and Rara societies in their liminal social milieu, one begins to understand how they give a particular sense of belonging to peasants otherwise dismissed to the margins of a majority culture. As such then, it is not surprising that these *sociétés*, each in its own way, provide sanctioned release of inhibitions during performance. The work societies and Rara bands express in song emotions that the peasant would normally not pronounce in public before his boss, family or companions. During Vodoun possession, the servitor not only dances as a virtuoso, often beyond his own physical limitations, but also in a possessed state may express feelings that the normal *morae* would not expect.⁶



The relationship of the three societies to each other is a crossroads of expression. The eight components of linkage referred to earlier suggest a rapport in Haiti between secular and sacred performance during certain periods of the year. The daily

and the divine bind together into twin realities that may be defined as theatre. In the Haitian worldview, the tripartite connection between work, religion and masquerade reflects the Vodoun trinity of *les morts* (the dead), *les mystères* (the mysteries), and *les marassas* (the twins). One plus one equals three.⁷ In the work society, performance takes place in the fields bounded by the quotidian, horizontal plains of life and death (*les morts*). By contrast, Vodoun ceremonials are conducted around the *hounfor* (sanctuary) for the purpose of vertical communication with divine spirits (*les mystères*). At the interstice between work and religion stands the synthesis of the physical and metaphysical at right angles to each other. The climate created from that union is theatre (*les marassas*). In Haiti, this type of performance is seasonal. It functions as the pragmatic fulfillment of nature's fertility as well as the divine call for the deities to aid in regeneration. Spring rites celebrated annually during Carnival and Rara represent the folk form of coming together. Let us now examine how this tripartite measure of Haitian folk performance has served the popular theatre movement in Haiti beginning in the 1950s. For this purpose we will focus on two popular theatre groups with a view to measuring their activities against the folk theatre tradition of work, religion or ideology and masquerade.⁸

Caracos Bleus

Théâtre Kouidor of the 1970s participated fully in two of the three forms of Haitian folk society -- work and performance. Study of Vodoun as folklore existed among the group yet the major ideological focus for these educated Haitians was Marxism combined with the Piscator tradition. A theatre group organized in Haiti in 1962, participated in work and performance too, but in a very different manner. Vodoun for them also was less a belief system and more a repository of folkways.

Caracos Bleus, or the Blue Shirts, named after the denim jackets worn by peasant farmers, grew out of an educational theatre group begun in June 1962 by Gabriel Imbert, Director of the Conservatoire National d'Art Dramatique (CNAD) assisted by a young poet of the elite, Robert Bauduy, himself a CNAD graduate and a student of ethnology. Imbert called the group Comédiens d'Haiti for the express purpose of having CNAD members perform classical French drama by Corneille, Racine and Molière in those Port-au-Prince schools endowed with a stage. In 1963, several members of Comédiens d'Haiti with Bauduy as leader, founded Les Chantiers de la Culture Haitienne, a culture club for young people from the capitol aged 16-22 who would study aspects of Haitian culture that had not been included in their Catholic or Protestant upbringings.

When Hurricane Flora devastated the southern coastal city of Jacmel in 1963, Bauduy, a native of Jacmel, took members of

the club south to assist the Red Cross in its rescue efforts. When the work was completed, from the still fresh excitement of crisis and adventure, forty to fifty youths from the Chantier were organized into a theatre group in Port-au-Prince which called itself Les Caracos Bleus. The destruction caused by the hurricane worsened the economic gap separating some city residents from the urban and provincial poor. Caracos Bleus was seen as a way for the youth to take active responsibility for national rehabilitation. For Bauduy and others, the commitment meant interest in "all dimensions of issues relevant to national security: mores, customs, property rights and the like."⁹ The project, undoubtedly, was an ambitious one.

Despite a period of acute repression against its citizens, perpetrated by the Duvalier government during this period, Caracos Bleus succeeded in establishing the goals of its activities, rules for membership in the theatre group and several noteworthy spectacles presented at the Rex Théâtre. The group never performed its own original plays, rather it offered works by Haitian poets and playwrights for radio and stage. Bauduy, aged 22 at the time, served as secretary for the group and directed the spectacles. In September, Caracos Bleus produced a program which included folk and revolutionary songs for chorus and solo with compositions by Antoine Chéri. A minidrama, entitled *Foreman*, with music by Chéri and staged by Bauduy, was offered as well. In the piece, workers revolt against an aggressive foreman who represents for them the oppressor. The highlight of the program was a choral rendition of Franck Fouché's poem, "L'Atibonit,"¹⁰ dedicated to the river in northern Haiti that is for the Haitian as personalized, powerful and mysterious as the Mississippi, the Seine and the Niger are for others.

Caracos Bleus lasted through 1964 when many of its members began to flee the country with their families. The larger society could not, however, be held responsible for the demise of Caracos Bleus for, according to Bauduy, internal divisions caused the group to disband. But in its wake Caracos Bleus left a complex history of popular theatre ideology that at times reminds one of membership obligations in the American Screen Actors' Guild. The economic and political crisis of 1963 prompted in Caracos Bleus a rapport between work and performance more natural than that of Kouidor. Having access to both urban and provincial Haitians on their homeground, Caracos succeeded in continuing the tradition of popular theatre in Creole pioneered by Félix Morisseau-Leroy in 1953.

Théâtre D'Haiti

With the plays, method and theatre design of Morisseau-Leroy, Haitian popular theatre fashioned a technique that rivals in efficiency the most celebrated contemporary experiments in total

theatre. Unlike his successors of the sixties and seventies, Morisseau-Leroy has had a long career in theatre which encompasses both conventional and experimental European tradition and African ritual and modern drama. His work for UNESCO permitted him to observe various forms of theatre in the United States and, after his exile from Haiti in 1959, living in West Africa, he worked with theatre groups in Ghana and Senegal. His understanding of both European and African theatre traditions has been more particularized than that of any other Haitian director.

Born in 1912 in Grand-Gosier, Morisseau-Leroy is best known for his *Antigone in Creole* which he wrote in early 1953 in answer to a challenge. Haitian Francophile intellectuals argued at the time that Haitian Creole was not a suitable idiom for expressing abstract thought or high, dramatic action. Morisseau's response was a Creole adaptation of the Sophocles tragedy set in rural Haiti.¹¹ Performed at the Rex Théâtre for the first time on July 15, 1953 before a middle class and elite audience, *Antigone in Creole* proved the efficacy of Creole as a dramatic language and, at the same moment, inaugurated the popular theatre movement in Haiti that has since led to other experiments in the genre by Haiti's most prolific playwright, Franck Fouché and groups like Caracos Bleus, Coumbite Quisqueyenne and Kouidor. Morisseau-Leroy took the idea of *Antigone in Creole* with him to West Africa during the sixties and seventies where it has been performed in indigenous languages and local settings.¹²

It was not, however, with the adaptation of Greek tragedies that Morisseau-Leroy produced his distinctive performance method that has been called homemade, experimental, traveling or people's theatre. His inability to direct to his satisfaction some of the semi-professional actors who appeared in *Antigone* caused Morisseau Leroy to leave their ranks in 1956. On land adjoining property he owned at Morne Hercule in Pétionville near Port-au-Prince, he built his own theatre. Actors were recruited from among the peasantry residing in the surrounding area. Rather than treat Vodoun as a repository of folklore, Morisseau-Leroy brought practitioners of the religion to the stage where they enacted themes of daily peasant life centered around the *houmfor*. But Théâtre d'Haiti at Morne Hercule, although designed to replicate the feel and function of the sacred stage, was by no means meant to duplicate the activities of the *houmfor*. For one, Morisseau-Leroy's plays took place over a period of two hours where Vodoun ceremonies could be extended for hours, even days. The climax of possession expected of Vodoun ceremonies was built around intense dramatic action at Morne Hercule. These were secularized Vodoun performances. As a youngster at Grand-Gosier, Morisseau-Leroy had participated in Vodoun lore, but always with a certain objectivity that he describes as "one foot in and one foot out."¹³ His ease with and distance from Vodoun characterize the ideology of three works he directed at Morne Hercule from 1956 until his departure in 1959: viz., *Anatole*, *Rara* and *Ti Son Son*.

Morisseau-Leroy feels that *Anatole* (1956) was his most successful contribution to Haitian popular theatre. The three-act play matches the powers of the right hand (sorcery). A young man, Anatole and his mother who is a *mambo*, representing the moral tradition of Vodoun, struggle against Anatole's father, himself a *houngan* who has been practicing with both hands. During the course of the play, the mother installs her son as head of the *houngan* despite the father's remonstrations. A second act installation ceremony in which Anatole is advanced to the degree of *houngan* and confirmed by his mother in the commandments, as it were, of correct Vodoun ritual, is followed by a funeral ceremony in the third act when the father dies. The first act defines the conflict, the second reaches a climax in the commandment scene and the third is a typical Haitian folk denouement -- a *bamboche* to release tensions.¹⁴

The Morisseau Method of training actors is a collective process that he once termed *homemade*. Rather than distribute play-scripts to performers -- literate or not -- Morisseau-Leroy prefers to devote intense sessions discussing the characters and dramatic action with each actor individually and as a group. He serves as raconteur in the initial meetings like the Haitian *samba* or teller of tales until such time as his actors have become involved in the play, can recount the action and contribute, if necessary, their personal revisions of character and dialogue. Particularly when working with *vaudouisants* who were *mambos* (priestesses of the religion), Morisseau-Leroy found that they would often change the rendition of a song or a gesture to suit their individual knowledge of it. Thus at Morne Hercule Morisseau-Leroy gave to Haitian popular theatre a positive technique for integrating storytelling customs and peasant traditions of performance into what was literally a people's theatre.

Careful study of European and American theatre and stage practice in Anglophone, Francophone and indigenous West African theatre have allowed Morisseau-Leroy to create a vision and practice of theatre that by the measure of Haitian folk theatre tradition is full. It works, it invokes, it celebrates, it re-educates the educated.

NOTES

¹ Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival, Mandate for a National Theatre*, University of Texas, Austin, 1972.

² Franck Fouché, *Vodou et Théâtre: Pour un Nouveau Théâtre Populaire*, Editions Nouvelle Optique, Montréal, 1976.

³ This paper is a condensation of a study-in-progress of Haitian folk and popular theatre by the present author. Details

of dance, song and social structure have been omitted here in order to present the broad outlines of the relationship that exists between folk and popular theatre in Haiti.

4 Studies of the phenomenon of cooperation and competition in agrarian societies were initiated in the 1930s by Dr. Margaret Mead and others. See her introduction to *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1937, pp. 1-9.

5 A detailed application of Turner's findings appear in the full study of which this is merely a summary. For a preliminary development of the dynamics of *communitas* and liminality, see Victor W. Turner's *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publication Co., Chicago, 1969 and a further treatment, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, 1974.

6 Sanctioned release of inhibitions in Haiti and West Africa have been described by Melville Herskovits in a little known but important article by him "Freudian Mechanism in Primitive Negro Psychology" in *Essays Presented to C. G. Seligman*, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, et al, eds., Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., London, 1934, pp. 75-84. See also the doctoral dissertation by Karen Brown, "The 'Vèvè' of Haitian Vodou: A Structural Analysis of Visual Imagery," Temple University, 1976, regarding release of inhibitions in Vodoun ceremonies.

7 I owe this insight to Maya Deren who devoted the first chapter of *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Chelsea House, New York, 1970, to a discussion of the Vodoun triad. See in particular p. 41.

8 Other popular theatre adherents include Théodore Beaubrun (Languichatte), Franck Fouché and Coumbite Quisqueyenne.

9 From interviews with Robert Bauduy, August 16-17, 1973, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

10 From interviews with Bauduy, August 16-17, 1973.

11 Morisseau-Leroy knows Greek but used the Leconte de Lisle translation of *Antigone* in French.

12 From an interview with Félix Morisseau-Leroy, July 1, 1982, Miami, Florida.

13 Interview with Morisseau-Leroy, July 1, 1982.

14 Ibid.