Stéphanie Bérard

Theater of the French Caribbean: Traditions and Contemporary Stages. Coconut Creek FL: Caribbean Studies Press, 2014. viii + 330 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.50)

“*Es lakou dò?*” (Is the court asleep?) So runs the storyteller’s familiar question at the start of a *veillée*, a story-telling evening in both Guadeloupe and Martinique, the islands that are the locus for Stéphanie Bérard’s magisterial *Theater of the French Caribbean*. Of course, the answer from the audience is no.

The storyteller inhabits a circular space, *lawonn*, surrounded by spectators, and sometimes accompanied by a single drummer. The storyteller’s art is often as physical as it is verbal. Storytellers engage in a partly ritualized verbal battle with their spectator-sparring-partners, addressing them directly and encouraging them to participate in lively, semi-improvised, sporting exchanges.

Fittingly, another name for this performance space in the round is *pitacock* (cockpit). The narrative itself tends toward the agonistic—the folktale being, historically, a covert form of satire and symbolical revenge employed by slaves against their masters. An irreverent trickster such as Ti-Jean (cf. Brer Rabbit and Anancy) is the genre’s antihero. In Ina Césaire’s *Geste de Ti-Jean*, with a satirical nod to the *chansons de geste* of old, the protagonist cuts out the tongues of the apocalyptic-sounding Beast with Seven Heads who represents colonial oppression and tyranny, thus symbolizing the triumph of Creole over French, the imposed language of the oppressor.

Creole popular culture and orality in all its diversity has profoundly nourished scripted Caribbean dramaturgy. The “transmission of culture from one generation to another has long been carried out almost exclusively by word of mouth” (p. 117). Storytellers embody popular wisdom and stand as guardians of the people’s history, protecting their inheritance from imperialist oblivion.

Each chapter is characterized by a rich and illuminating analysis of both Francophone and, crucially, the underdiscussed Creole theaters of the French Antilles, with accompanying discussion concerning creole cultural politics. Chapter 1 provides a cogent history of French Caribbean theater from colonial times to the present, and felicitously marries together sociopolitical context, cultural history, and aesthetic and scenographic examination—a methodology that is repeated throughout the study. Bérard’s intertextual references, pertinent annotation, and authoritative command of the field, seasoned with wider references, for example to Derek Walcott and key dramatic theorist-practitioners like Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, also contribute to the book’s success.

French Caribbean theater in general is concerned with asserting an authen-

tic cultural identity, different from that imposed by colonialism. Chapter 4, “Ritual and Stage Aesthetics,” explores the way French Antillean theaters embody their own ritual, aesthetic forms, culturally syncretic but infused with a prevailing African soul, rooted in the history of slavery and resistance to imperialism. This precious communal reservoir of vibrant cultural practices (carnival, *vodou*, *gwoka*—all featuring drums, music, dance, and ritual) contributes to the reappropriation, reappraisal, and revitalizing of a threatened popular heritage, simultaneously renewing theatrical practice. Much contemporary ritual theater rejects linearity and logic, notes Bérard, reflecting the kaleidoscopic sweep of the creole universe, the complex *métissage* of Édouard Glissant’s “Chaos-World.”

Chapter 2, “Dramas of the In-Between,” traces the way Martinican and Guadeloupean playwrights and practitioners, from Aimé Césaire onward, have been concerned with a restitution from the oblivion of (in Glissant’s terms) the “*migrant nu*,” the “*Africain traité*” (the stripped migrant, the enslaved and slave-traded African), stripped of almost everything. One way of doing this has been to “cannibalize” the Western canon, as Césaire put it, to translate, adapt, and “re-territorialize” in a cross-cultural negotiation.

By transposing classics from the European canon into the Caribbean, alienation is replaced by riposte and an affirmation of presence; the occluded other is given a voice. Falsifying western history is revised; the empire “writes back.” Hence the erstwhile “salvage and deformed slave” Caliban is transformed into the rebel-hero of Césaire’s *Une tempête*, who identifies his stolen identity by calling himself X and demands “*uhuru*” and “freedom now” in other resonant appeals to black solidarity and resistance. Here it is Caliban who, mastering the language of the oppressor, becomes the most effective of verbal artificers and a celebrant of Caribbean culture and ecology.

In these stirring plays, there is encounter and exchange, an articulation of cultural difference, in the “new synthesis” prophesied by Césaire. In Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Une manière d’Antigone*, the female protagonist is no longer royal but a poor, anonymous, mixed-race *capresse* who faces up to Creon—here a bureaucratic puppet-prefect of metropolitan France—when she honors the gunned-down body of a demonstrating student, speaking truth to power and preventing colonial amnesia. Other history plays lionize the heroes of emancipation and anticolonial struggle, a ferment mirrored in the names of 1970s political theater companies such as the Théâtre du Cyclone, the Théâtre du Volcan, Anbajouk (“under the yoke”), and Nèg Mawon.

Aside from minor quibbles about form, my one real perplexity is the absence of detailed discussion of Césaire’s *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*, which would chime with so much here. But this is a fine translation (by Tessa Thiery

and Jonathan S. Skinner) of an excellent book. I wholeheartedly recommend it.

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