

Foreword

Errol Hill's 1972 study, *The Trinidad Carnival*, confirmed the innovative function that folk performance assumed in the renewal of Caribbean theatre production during the post-Independence 1960s. Hill's purpose was to redefine Caribbean theatre as a synthesis of colonial and indigenous forms, the example of which he located in Trinidad's nineteenth-century Carnival. During the 1970s and 80s, his analysis transformed the aesthetic principles of numerous contemporary dramas and reoriented critical perspectives on theatre history. 'Mandate for a National Theatre', the sub-title of Hill's text, defined Caribbean performance in ideological terms. As a result, the obscured techniques of orature and processions reclaimed their rightful place in the history and development of Caribbean theatre. *The Trinidad Carnival* reflected a similar resolve in two Haitian dramatists whose radical plays from 1953 – Félix Morisseau-Leroy's *Antigone en créole* and Franck Fouché's *Œdipe roi* – transposed ancient classics into indigenous environments performed in the language of the majority – Creole. Fouché's later analysis, *Vodou and Theatre: Towards a New Popular Theatre* (1976) would become the analogue of Hill's Carnival aesthetics. In retrospect, *The Trinidad Carnival* occupies the scholarly site on which Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean new histories and performance converge.

Caribbean literary history begins with English and French travelling troupes offering European dramas to elite audiences in the colonies. The classics exported to Jamaica (1682) and Haiti (1764) shared a tradition, as Hill reminds us, with home-grown, secular entertainments such as military parades and Carnival celebrations in 1830s Trinidad. To this day, much of theatre research in the Caribbean is concerned with the documentation of colonial performance history (Richardson and Fouchard, cited in an appended Select Bibliography) and the traditional motifs in drama centred primarily on the better known male playwrights, such as Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott and Edouard Glissant.

New histories and performance in Caribbean theatre are products of post-independence strategies – citizens reacting forcefully to the residues of colonial rule. Reaction has focused as well on alienation among a largely black, dispossessed majority whose identities were once defined according to old world European, non-indigenous norms. Post-independence theatre techniques attempted to overcome the dramatists' distance from seasonal festivals such as Carnival in which the majority despite class and colour barriers participated. Essentially, dramatists were invited to come home; to reject mere imitation of European art forms. Out of this

awareness, contemporary ritual and festival theatre emerged. From the 1950s–80s reformation of Caribbean performance aesthetics occurred on three levels: 1) influences from world theatre theoreticians, the likes of Brecht, Grotowski, Boal, Hill and Soyinka; 2) Pan-Caribbean annual theatre festivals in the Caribbean and Europe; 3) the migration of Caribbean playwrights and directors within the diaphora. The ethos of this revival was similar to the consciousness-raising developed throughout the diaphora during the Harlem Renaissance, Indigenist and Négritude movements of the 1920s and 30s.

Contemporary theatre in the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean does not adhere to the cohesive portrait presented by ATINT for Latin American New Theatre (see *Theatre Research International* 14.2, Summer 1989) due largely to the absence of transnational theatre organizations, and the presence of diverse political ideologies articulated in four separate languages – English, French and Creoles. Nonetheless, much new theatre shares a common objective to reveal the indigenous performance history of the colonial era and to develop innovative techniques deriving from peasant and working class sources. In that regard, research-to-performance and collective creation (the latter based on Latin American definitions of the term) have become the preferred modes of experimentation.

The studies included in this issue expand our notions of Caribbean theatre history beyond the perennial divisions according to race and colour by examining age, class and gender differences in performance. Errol Hill's reconstruction of Morton Tavares's career – the nineteenth-century Jamaican actor of Jewish descent – revises continental histories of Shakespearean and Romantic theatre beyond the racial and national boundaries of their conception; Bridget Jones examines Ina Césaire's transformations of oral history and folklore research into vital sources for Martinican drama; Rhonda Cobham details the Sistren collective's efforts at raising community consciousness among working-class women in Jamaica; Elaine Fido's concluding essay on Rawle Gibbons's *I, Lawah*, recalls Errol Hill's mandate for the establishment of 'Carnival Theatre'. Gibbons's historical drama examines the importance of gender in festival theatre by focusing our attention on definitions of manhood and social change within a single, Trinidadian community.

Special issues such as this one are deceptive primarily because they create an allusion of inclusiveness for the non-specialist reader. The field of new theatre in the Caribbean is much broader than the representative examples gathered here would suggest. Another collection might well examine works by distinguished playwrights such as Derek Walcott, Dennis Scott, Maryse Condé, Frankétienne and Simone Schwarz-Bart. Current research in Caribbean performance history is encouraging albeit

incomplete and less extensive than scholarship devoted to poetry, the novel and literary theory. Serious lacunae remain, notably histories of theatre production in Barbados and Guadeloupe to cite the most obvious silences. The scholars whose essays appear in this issue are engaged in a noble enterprise; they are rescuing from obscurity one of the most provocative forms of expression within the wider Caribbean and its diaspora.

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