Perspectives in Caribbean Theatre: Ritual, Festival, and Drama

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Few events can be more engrossing than a people's conscious effort to determine and define their identity. The anglophone Caribbean, for centuries culturally dominated by Europe, began its quest for identity in the 1930s when the whole region experienced marked social upheaval. Hard hit by the Great Depression, the export economies of the territories shriveled as sugar prices fell and wages plummeted. The traditional escape valve of northern migration was shut tight by stringent immigration laws. These conditions prompted the calypsonian, Growling Tiger, to compose his "Workers Appeal" calypso which he sang in the carnival season of 1936:

We are not asking for equality
To rank with the rich in society
To visit their homes in their motorcars

Or to go to their clubs and smoke their cigars
We are asking for a living wage
To exist now and provide for old age
Our kindhearted employers, I appeal now to you
Give us some work to do.

Many a day persons haven't a meal
They too decent to beg, too honest to steal
They went looking for work mostly everywhere
But saw signboard marked "No hands wanted here"
The Government should work the wastelands and hills
Build houses, factories and mills
Reduce taxation and then we would be
Really emancipated from slavery.

In the year, 1958, the short-lived experiment in West Indian Federation came into being. It was destined to last only four years. The event was marked by the writing and staging of a commissioned drama by the region's premier poet and playwright, Derek Walcott. His drama, titled Drums and Colours, attempted to trace the history of the Caribbean lands as pawns in the power struggle between western imperialist nations, until finally the old sugar colonies emerged into some form of nationhood. But what kind of nation? How to define the identity of Caribbean peoples? That is a quest that has been going on with increasing urgency and passion.

In its checkered history the Caribbean has been inhabited by many different races and cultures. First were the aboriginal Amerindians, now practically extinct. Then there were the voluntary immigrants from Europe and America, the Far East and the near East. Some came for profit or pleasure, others to work as replacements for slave labor, but all had the option of returning to their home countries when their work or play had ended. Finally, there were those whose arrival, historically, was not voluntary. They came in chains and had to abandon thoughts of returning to an ancestral home across the sea for there was no fixed period to their labor. These were the people of Africa, known first as slaves, then blacks, then Afro-Caribbeans. They formed the base of Caribbean society. For centuries they constituted that section of the population for whom the Caribbean was the only home they knew; that other home from which their ancestors were torn long ago survived only in racial memory.
Without denying the contributions made by other immigrants, I would submit that there exists today a significant body of Afro-Caribbean traditions that can be utilized by native dramatists, choreographers, musicians, and theatre practitioners if the theatre is truly to represent the needs and aspiration of Caribbean people. As the Jamaican scholar and cultural leader Rex Nettleford has written: "The African Presence must be given its proper place of centrality in that dynamic process of adjustment, rejection, renewal and innovation. For the products of this cultural process are what constitute the mandates for a national cultural expression."

The purpose of theatre is, in the first analysis, salutary. It began as a rite aimed at assuring the well-being of the tribe. By killing the actor dressed as a stag, his fellow actors were using sympathetic magic to capture the spirit of the real animal. This ritual would ensure a successful hunt thus providing food for the tribe. The death of the principal actor was a terrible sacrificial act solemnly undertaken by the victim for the good of his community.

Theatre must appeal to the whole community and was more than a pleasant diversion from the daily routine. It was central to the business of living. Without it life was not simply "stale, flat and unprofitable," in Hamlet's phrase; instead, the community's very existence was threatened. A theatre that approximates its ancient meaning justifies its claim to public recognition and support.

A more recent theory on the theatre's origin is that it began in a different kind of ritual, namely, shamanism. The shaman, or proto-priest, as the argument goes, is a "master of spirits" who puts himself in a trance and in this state performs many wonders. With elaborate use of voice, chant, dialogue, gesture, pantomime and dance, the shaman divines the future, cures the sick, expels evil, and conveys souls to the realm of the dead. In his trance, a phenomenon that most Caribbean people recognize as spirit possession, the shaman's body is occupied by a god. He manifests a supernatural presence to his audience, who witness the transformation that is occurring and believe in the efficacy of the god's presence among them. The shaman does not, as is the case with the Hunt Ritual, offer up his life for the good of his people, but he does temporarily surrender his will to the will of the gods for a similarly worthy purpose.

It is generally accepted that theatre developed from ritual, whose function was to reach an accommodation with powerful forces or gods without whose aid life would be intolerable. As settled communities developed, three principal means were adopted to achieve this basic aim. They are:

1. petitioning the gods to grant some communal need: be it a bountiful harvest or protection from a threatening disaster;
2. placating the gods against the evil in society that offends them, seeking their aid in purging the evil and asking forgiveness for wrongdoing as well as for reinstatement in the god's favor;
3. thanking the gods for their gifts and protection: for example, for a year that is free of disease, plague, famine, or wasteful war.

Although I am here referring to ritual drama, it is possible to argue that all good theatre through the ages retains these fundamental aims. Possibly some of us no longer believe in the power of gods to affect our daily lives. We may scoff at the notion of participating in rituals that seek the active involvement of supernatural beings in human affairs. For such skeptics, one may rephrase the function of theatre in secular terms that are no less essential to our well-being. Suppose, for instance, we were to substitute:

1. for petitioning the gods - the coercive power of the theatre;
2. for placating the gods - the corrective power of the theatre;
3. for thanking the gods - the celebrative power of the theatre;

we would retain the theatre's ancient purpose to secure communal well-being without mention of the supernatural.

The fact is that the large majority of Afro-Caribbean people are not religious skeptics. Religion continues to hold a significant place in their daily lives. Most important, the practice of their religion binds them, consciously or unconsciously, to their African past. Edward Brathwaite, poet-historian of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, has written pertinently on this topic. He reminds us of the well-documented fact that "African culture survived in the Caribbean through religion" and that "African culture is based upon religion ... There is no separation between religion and philosophy, religion and society, religion and art. Religion is the form and kernel or core of the
culture.. What we should alert ourselves to is the possibility, whenever 'religion' is mentioned, that a whole cultural complex is present."

One of the major differences between ritual and theatre is that in ritual one communicates with the gods whereas in theatre communication is established with a human audience. In the former case, participation of the audience, often comprising the whole community, could be taken for granted since everyone knew that the enactment was in their behalf and, if properly performed, would achieve the desired result. Members of this audience would be aware of what had to be done and how it should be done. They were vitally concerned it should be done right, and the actors who performed the ritual were expected to live up to their audience's expectations. The dynamics of this situation explain the quality of excellence in ritual performance. Here the celebrant-performers sought perfection, not to please their audience or to boost their egos but because the success of the enactment depended on it. The gods are jealous and will be satisfied only with the best. In a very real sense, the audience were participants in the action. Often they became, or were represented by, a chorus that was involved in the performance through singing, chanting, clapping, or other forms of group response. And there would be music, of course, and dancing. Audience recognition and participation were essential features that contributed to the efficacy of the ritual enactment.

The Nigerian scholar Joel Adedeji has explained the process by which ritual theatre becomes festival theatre, and festival theatre fragments into professional and amateur productions of secular theatre. Over time the religious purpose may diminish but the seasonal enactment would continue because people have become accustomed to it as a traditional event. Thus we have the conditions for festival theatre. Examples of this are multifaceted types of carnival that are held regularly in the Caribbean. The carnival festival may have been transplanted to the region by European settlers; but, once adopted by the Afro-Caribbeans, it was transformed into an expression of surviving African traditions, colored by local experience. Other festivals associated with the vegetation cycle, such as Crop-over in Barbados, or with the liturgical calendar such as the Christmas Jonkonnu in Jamaica, or the La Rose Flower Festival in St. Lucia, all contain strong traditional expressions drawn from Afro-Caribbean life.

Religious and festival performances by no means exhaust the sources of African continuity that provide ingredients for a Caribbean theatre. To give another example, there is the area of storytelling that involves idiomatic speech and idiosyncratic pantomime, when the teller of tales assumes the characteristics of all the active participants in his story, whether they be human, animal, bird or plant, objects animate or inanimate.

After ritual and festival enactments, the next logical phase in the emergence of an indigenous Caribbean theatre should have occurred when gifted individuals began to perform in and out of season for the edification and entertainment of spectators. In constructing their plays and designing their performances, these individuals would normally have built their theatre on the traditions of the past. They would have incorporated the meanings and methods, signs and symbols associated with the religions, rites, festivals, myths, storytelling and other forms of enactment belonging to their culture. Had this development occurred, the present quest to identify and establish an indigenous Caribbean theatre would probably be unnecessary.

It did not happen that way, of course, for reasons that are now understood. The formal theatre adopted in the Caribbean came neither from Africa nor from Afro-Caribbean experience, but from Europe. It came as a ready made package, wrapped in the glory of its acknowledged achievement. It was peddled by touring professionals from abroad and ardently imitated by local amateurs, many claiming links to whatever little European ancestry they could trace. It was admired by the learned and taught in the schools. It became the model on which the Caribbean theatre was wont to be fashioned.

This theatre was art. It enjoyed the status of the imported over the homegrown product, which, when not totally banned, was disparaged and relegated to inferior status. Often, the Afro-Caribbean theatre had no buildings other than a backyard shed or a village pasture to house it, no playwrights other than the old storyteller or calypsonian, no professional actors, singers, dancers, musicians or technicians trained in the academies abroad. What the native theatre produced was deemed to be at the level of quaint folkways, stuff for ethnologists. The art theatre was something quite different: it was the product of a people of greater sophistication belonging to a superior culture.

That this allegation is not mere rhetoric can be instanced by developments that arose in Afro-Caribbean festivities following the end of slavery. Ironically, among those who worked hardest for slave liberation were people prominent in demanding the suppression of so-called slave culture. Reasons given for suppressing the Christmastime masquerade in Jamaica in 1842, for example, were that they obstructed the progress of civilization and were derogatory to the dignity of freemen. At the other end of the Caribbean, similar attitudes prevailed regarding the Trinidad Carnival. Once it was taken over and transformed by the black freedmen, the leading newspaper castigated
the festival in the severest terms throughout the Nineteenth Century and urged its abolition. These attacks served only to alienate the revellers and to stiffen their resistance to any form of control. The results unsurprisingly were more riots and a widening gulf between Government and the people.

In most communities one finds historically two streams of theatre, just as there are two streams of most cultural expressions. These two streams are characterized as the informal and the formal, the subconscious and the conscious, the folk and the art. Informal theatre embraces all types of traditional enactments deriving from ritual, festival, and other inherited theatre forms that spring from group consciousness. This type of theatre is rooted in customs that manifest a community's ethos.

Formal theatre, on the other hand, represents a conscious attempt to create theatre as an art form. In one sense it is a way of conserving, enhancing, and disseminating the products of folk theatre. In another sense, it represents an attempt by a single individual, the playwright, scenarist, choreographer or musical composer, assisted by interpreters, to communicate through the medium of the stage some personal vision, insight, or understanding of the life experience as he or she has perceived it and hopes will be of value to audiences. Since the artist is creating, in the first place, for his society, the experiences he seeks to interpret and those of his audience will coincide. Since he wishes to communicate effectively he will use the means of communication indigenous to that society - language, movement and gesture, song and dance, patterns and rhythms, images and icons, that belong to, and have meaning for, his people.

We call this kind of theatre "art theatre" for a special reason. In the realm of art, creators and interpreters are not content simply to represent faithfully the folk forms of expression, but will consciously strive to reconstruct and reinterpret them in a particular style most fitting to the personal vision of the artist involved, and most resonant of the life being presented on stage. The folk theatre enriches the art theatre, gives it validity and meaning, while the art theatre seeks to interpret folk performance, to give what is a communal, traditional form an individual and personal voice and vision.

In truth and in qualitative terms, the distinction between folk and art is often blurred. Many folk artists achieve a high degree of individuality in their performances which can rise to the level of true art. On the other hand, there are professional artists whose work is of little consequence and soon forgotten. But whether we speak of informal or formal theatre, folk or art, the fundamental purpose of both should be the same - namely, to preserve, nurture, and uplift the community to which it belongs and from which it draws its sustenance.

The art theatre of Europe had helped to inculcate a love of stage plays in Caribbean audiences. Dominant in Caribbean playhouses for centuries, it could not, however, fulfill the theatre's essential function as we have defined it. Although its repertoire included some plays that dealt with universal human problems, such plays did nothing to solve the problem of cultural identity. This theatre was alien to its environment and spoke only to a small segment of the population. The vast majority were ignored. It said nothing of their gods or their religion; it did nothing to enhance, to amend, or to celebrate their lives. It was exclusive, not unifying. It separated the privileged from the underprivileged, the well-educated from the partly or non-educated; the townie from the country-bookie, the Creole from the Black.

The European and Euro-American theatre had for centuries used black characters in subordinate positions. They were the fetchers and carriers, often the villains; only occasionally would one appear as a romanticized noble savage. Thus, the first step on the road to a truly indigenous drama was for Caribbean dramatists to write and perform plays about black people as central rather than peripheral figures in the stage action. The dramatic pageants of Marcus Garvey, staged at Edelweiss Park in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1930, and the drama of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the slave who led the victorious Haitian revolution, written by the Trinidad historian C.L.R. James and performed in London in 1936, are among the earliest examples of this development in the anglophone Caribbean theatre.

A prevailing view in the imported Western theatre was that the concerns of black folk were most suited to comedic interpretation. Thus, a further step for Caribbean playwrights was to choose issues that were part of the common experience of the folk and, not to remove all comedy, but to give these concerns the serious consideration they deserved. The 1938 drama Pocomania, by Una Marson, showing the impact of a Jamaican religious cult on a staid middleclass family, is an early witness of this development.

A third step in the effort to bring home the art theatre was the initial experiment with language. At the beginning this took the form of a journalistic recapitulation of vernacular expression, too often employed as a way to ridicule peasant or working class characters who could not use what passed for standard English speech. This attitude contributed to a further widening of the cultural gap between the educated upper layer and the broad base of Caribbean society. Occasionally, however, an author would capture the rhythm and emotive power of folk language in a way that raised the speaker to tragic grandeur.
The late Jamaican playwright Archie Lindo, in his 1945 dramatization of Herbert De Lisser's novel *The White Witch of Rosehall*, achieves this level of folk speech in a crucial scene of the play. Takoo, the obeahman, and a group of rebellious slaves capture the witch, Annie, who has been accused of killing several of their people. Her white bookkeeper, cognizant of her evil deeds, threatens the slaves with hanging if they should harm her. Takoo replies in his proud, authoritative dialect:

Who deserve hanging more, she or me? She kill Millicent. I pass sentence on her tonight over the grave of me dead grand-daughter. I sentence her to dead. You talk about me hang, Mr. Burbridge. It is white man who got to look out for themself now for we is free tonight. Every slave in Jamaica is free and we is tekking to the mountains to fight. I expec' to die one day but me spirit will live forever. An' before I die, this dam' woman mus' dead ... no power from heaven or hell can save her.

Advocating that young people should write and perform plays in local dialect was certain to provoke an outcry from teachers of English who spent their lives trying to get students to use standard Southern English in order to pass school-leaving examinations which at that time were prepared by examining boards in England. The vehemence of their anger can be gauged by a letter to the Press in which one teacher urged "all people, from the artisans up, found speaking broken English would be thrown into jail, and anyone found daring to introduce it into the higher literary forms like the drama would be hanged." I hasten to assure you that the threat was not taken seriously and is not responsible for at least one dialect advocate leaving the sunny Caribbean for cold New Hampshire.

A fourth innovation in the drive to establish an indigenous theatre is the conscious effort to synthesize dramatic dialogue, music, song, and dance in a single expressive theatrical event, thus challenging the conventional separation of these allied performing skills into specialized types of production. The American musical comedy comes close to this integrated form, although too much emphasis is often given to musical and dance numbers at the expense of language and to spectacle to the detriment of story. The most notable instance of Caribbean integrated theatre is the Jamaican Pantomime, first introduced by the Little Theatre Movement in 1941 in imitation of the English version. Eight years later, under the inspired direction of Noel Vaz and folklorist Louise Bennett, the Pantomime produced *Bluebeard and Brer Anancy*. The experiment of moving to the popular folk character Anancy - the spider who lives by his wits - was so successful that he reappeared in successive productions. In the process the annual Pantomime has evolved to become identifiably Jamaican in its use of indigenous material including song, drama, improvisation, and pithy commentary on the contemporary social and political scene. It plays to audiences in the tens of thousands over several months.

The Trinidad Carnival has produced a number of traditional masquerades each with characteristic oration, gesture, mime, and dance. In her 1948 show *Bélé*, the choreographer Beryl McBurnie was the first to create novel and arresting modern stage dances based on the movements and gestures of the different masquerades. Miss McBurnie, the acknowledged pioneer in Caribbean dance forms, has influenced the work of successive generations of dancers and choreographers throughout the region. In productions of the Jamaican National Dance Theatre Company, which observes the principle of integration of theatrical elements - vocal, choral, musical, visual and kinesthetic - indigenous dance arguably has reached its highest level of achievement. Carnival is also responsible for retaining the primacy of the mask, an ancient theatrical device that has largely disappeared from the modern theatre. On stage it remains a symbol of tremendous power, more so for audiences that harbor a belief in the efficacy of gods and spirits. Several plays have been written within recent times using the carnival experience as a focal point. Time will permit mention of only one. In *Devil Mas*, written in 1971, the playwright Lennox Brown has his hero assume the Devil masquerade in defiance of church caveat. Descending into hell, he brings back the bodied souls of ancestral freedom fighters to indict the established religion that continues to enslave the minds of his people.

In the matter of spirit possession, it is readily seen how this most significant transformation of an individual's appearance and conduct can be reinterpreted in drama and dance. Summoning the presence of supernatural beings through the trance state speaks to the traditional belief in ancestral spirits who protect the community and in guardian spirits of all living things who demand to be recognized and reverenced by human beings. Spirit possession places man in his proper context in the natural universe, not as super-creature who abuses nature out of indifference or greed, but as part of the balance of nature, paying his dues and respecting the rights of other natural things to their way of existence.

In his play *An Echo in the Bone* (1974), the late Jamaican playwright Dennis Scott finds an ingenious use for the phenomenon of the trance state. An estate owner has been killed by a peasant gardener who then commits suicide. The celebrants in a dead-wake ceremony want to know why this tragedy occurred. They become possessed
by the spirit of the gardener and reveal untold parts of his story. Unconsciously they assume the personas of different people and reenact conflicts and antagonisms that have existed between the races in time past. The moments of possession become climactic episodes. They provide historical perspective and serve as transition points from one scene to another. Time and place are fused and compressed with the present by the force of spirit possession.

No truly indigenous theatre can afford to ignore the role of the audience or, rather, the relationship between audience and performer. We have seen that in ritual drama, audience members are participants in the unfolding action primarily because they have an interest in the outcome of the performance. How may one translate that interest into a communal theatrical experience? One area of great relevance to this question is the physical arrangement of the place of performance. It is hardly necessary to state that the old-fashioned proscenium or picture-frame stage with darkened auditorium, inherited from Europe in the last century, is the least suitable arrangement for involving an audience. Space-staging has become fashionable of late in the Caribbean; a few platforms and boxes painted gray on an otherwise empty and uncurtained stage are often used to supplant costly representational scenery. The problem with this approach, which is usually adopted for reasons of economy, is that the stage space is seldom transformed into a setting that captures the imagination and evokes the empathy of an audience. Designers and directors need to be more adventurous in creating environments that place actors in evocative and workable settings that will excite an audience's anticipation of the theatrical event to come.

Other aspects of production offer opportunities to enlist audience participating. One of these is the use of the chorus, a device known to the ancient Greeks, passed down to Elizabethan dramatists, and current in African theatre today. The chorus is the communal voice. It ensures that the action on stage is relevant to the body politic. It joins past and present by its recital of historical incidents pertinent to the plot. It invites the audience to consider its point of view against the conflicting claims of the central characters. It expresses communal hopes and fears, joys and tribulations. The chorus, seldom seen on the modern western stage, may well be reactivated for the Caribbean theatre.

The most recent experiment in audience involvement was undertaken in February this year by Rawle Gibbons, director of the University's Creative Arts Center in Trinidad. He created a show called Sing De Chorus that was based on well-known and renowned calypsoes of the 1930s and '40s. Each calypso was introduced by a group of performers who, by changing roles, acted out the event that inspired its composition. When the calypso was eventually sung, members of the audience, many of whom recalled the lyrics, simultaneously joined in singing the chorus, as they might have done in a calypso tent or on the streets at carnival time. Although the format made for an episodic script, the underlying theme of the calypsonians' personal and professional lives and their defiance of official censorship gave the performance a unity of its own.

Two final components of a theatre rooted in the Caribbean experience are the salutation and closure. Traditional societies are aware of the importance of greeting and of showing hospitality. In West Africa when travelling players approach a town, they sing praises to the townspeople and to the town itself in expectation of a warm welcome. The traditional storyteller invariably prefaces his tale by greeting his audience. What form shall the salutation take in Caribbean theatre? Since the play about to be acted is for the audience, should not the performers begin by recognizing its presence? Perhaps the production might be dedicated to some worthy representative of the community. If there is an overture of words or music, the piece might be chosen as much for audience recognition as for relevance to the play being presented.

Applause at the final curtain is a conventional way of bringing a performance to a close. But a joyous ending could be marked by a festive dance on stage to which the audience members would be conducted by the actors. This used to be standard practice in dance performances at the Little Carib Theatre in Trinidad; and it never failed to have an electrifying and bonding effect on the assembly. It has also proved effective, where appropriate, to end a play with a celebrative dance, the audience being invited to participate. The reverse is possible; the audience might join in a choral chant of sorrow when the play ends in tragedy.

Although I have emphasized the importance of indigenous forms in the making of Caribbean theatre, I do not suggest that Caribbean theatre artists should become cultural chauvinists and isolate themselves from the rest of world theatre. They need to be versatile, not only in technical skills but also in their ability to understand and appreciate other cultures. World literature contains great works of theatre that should be regularly rediscovered and reinterpreted in the Caribbean as elsewhere, and theatre artists must be accomplished in their craft in order to stage such works with intelligence and sensitivity. In any event, the western stage tradition remains strong in the region, for it too is part of Caribbean history.

Yet the words of the late Norman Manley, Jamaican statesman and national hero, written in 1939 and still cautionary today, apply not only to British but to all foreign influences: "We can take everything that English
education has to offer us, but ultimately we must reject the domination of her influence because we are not English nor should we ever want to be. Instead we must dig deep into our own consciousness and accept and reject only those things of which we, from our superior knowledge of our own cultural needs, must be the best judge."

The Caribbean theatre needs the assurance of its own idioms; it needs to speak with its own authentic voices, to move to its own rhythms, to shape its own images, to captivate its own audiences. To reach these goals it must be grounded in its own traditions. That is the challenge facing contemporary Caribbean dramatists, choreographers, composers, and theatre practitioners as they look towards the Twenty-first Century.