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Abstract: This article compares the theatrical careers in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) of two performers: Mme Marsan, a white European who dominated the public stage in 1780s Cap-Français, and a younger Creole woman of mixed racial ancestry, known as 'Minette', who performed in her home town of Port-au-Prince. Its focus is on performances of Dalayrac's *opéra-comique*, *Nina* (1786), in which both women performed the lead role. Although Minette is regarded as a singer, it is argued that, by electing to put on and star in *Nina*, she was taking on one of the most demanding acting roles in the repertoire. The article considers the self-positioning – and positioning by others – of both performers in relation to the metropolitan performance model and the possibility of creating creolized forms of theatre. While Mme Marsan acknowledged that she was playing a role previously performed successfully in Paris by Mme Dugazon, Minette's approach was more complex: drawing on unacknowledged references to a review of Dugazon's performance, Minette also invoked a common Creole background that she claimed to share with her local audience. The metropolitan 'model' was thus not always imitated; it was also used as inspiration for new, subtly creolized forms of theatre.

Keywords: Saint-Domingue, colonial theatre, Creole theatre, *opéra-comique*, female performers, Mme Marsan, Minette [if room: Mme Dugazon, *Nina*, acting technique]

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Parisian Palimpsests and Creole Creations:
Mme Marsan and Dlle Minette play *Nina* on the Caribbean Stage*

Introduction

The French Caribbean slave colony known as Saint-Domingue (in present-day Haiti) enjoyed a vibrant – if also erratic – tradition of public theatre between its tentative beginnings in the 1760s, its heyday in the 1780s and the slave revolts of 1791. Hundreds of theatrical works, including *opéras-comiques*, spoken comedies, some spoken tragedies as well as *dramas* and the occasional serious opera were performed before mixed but segregated audiences in several towns across the colony, mostly in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Français (also known as Le Cap and now called Cap-Haïtien).¹ The majority of works performed were imports from France, and frequent references were made in the local newspapers announcing upcoming performances to similarities between a production in Saint-Domingue and previous productions in the metropole. But despite this apparent privileging of the metropolitan model, some French works were deliberately adapted to local conditions (or ‘creolized’) in performance, and some new works were composed and created locally.² The number of documented theatrical performances in the colony peaked in the 1780s and the same decade saw the emergence of two star performers in the colony who are the subject of the present article: the white European-born actor-singer known in Saint-Domingue as Mme Marsan (c1747-1807), who dominated the stage in Cap-Français, and the Creole actor-singer of mixed racial origins known as Minette (1767-1807), who gradually became a star of the public stage in her home town of Port-au-Prince. As far as we know, the two women never performed together.

* *I gratefully acknowledge the generous support of The Leverhulme Trust, who awarded me a Research Fellowship in 2017-18 during which I researched the present article.*

¹ For more details, see my database of performances as documented by local newspapers at <https://www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org>.

² Some of these are considered in Julia Prest, ‘The Familiar Other: Blackface Performance in Creole Works from 1780s Saint-Domingue’ in *On History’s Stage: Theatre and Performance in the French Atlantic Slave Colonies*, ed. by Jeffrey Leichman and Karine Bénac (Oxford: OUSE, forthcoming).

We know of only one documented instance when the two were directly compared by their contemporaries: this was in a rare review in the local newspaper of a performance by Minette in 1787, when she played the heroine in Marsollier and Dalayrac's *opéra-comique* (or, more accurately, *comédie mêlée d'ariettes*), *Nina, ou la folle par amour*.³ Minette's performance is, revealingly, measured against performances of the same role by Mme Marsan in Le Cap a few months earlier. More revealing still is the fact that both women's performances are compared with the ultimate theatrical yardstick: the celebrated performance of the role of Nina in Paris at the Comédie-Italienne by Mme Dugazon.

This article offers a close examination of available contemporary responses (which are of course dominated by the opinions of white men) in Saint-Domingue to Minette and Marsan's performances of this demanding role and of the performers' own words – mediated by white male newspaper editors – about the particular musical and especially theatrical demands of the role as published in the local press. This will allow us to compare the self-positioning of two women who emerged from very different social and racial backgrounds and who were at different stages in their respective performing careers, as well as their positioning by contemporary commentators. It will also reassess Minette's status as a performer by paying due attention to the question of her acting skills alongside her evident skill as a singer. Bernard Camier, who has worked extensively on Minette's life and career, has noted recently that 'Minette a très peu joué des rôles de théâtre, elle a essentiellement *chanté*'.⁴ This is certainly true in that the great majority of roles performed by Minette required her to sing. However, the co-existence of spoken dialogue and song is the defining feature of *opéra-comique* (including the *opéra-comique en ariettes* which was the genre in which Minette excelled), so while Minette only seldom performed in purely spoken dramas, she did speak – as well as sing – when she performed her

³ This work should not be confused with an even more popular Italian version of the same story with music by Giovanni Paisiello, first performed in 1789.

⁴ Bernard Camier, 'Minette (Elisabeth, Alexandrine, Louise Ferrand dite) / artiste libre de couleur à Port-au-Prince à la fin du XVIII^e siècle,' *Revue de la Société d'Histoire de Géographie et de Géologie d'Haïti* (2018), 214-37 (223). His emphasis.

many roles on the stage in Port-au-Prince. I will argue, more precisely, that by electing to put on and star in *Nina*, Minette was choosing to take on one of the most demanding pieces in the repertoire in terms of the nature and range of *acting skills* on which the work's popular success depended. The article will also analyse the role of the Parisian model in the discourse surrounding Minette and Marsan's performances as Nina, asking to what extent the Parisian palimpsest of Mme Dugazon served as a constraint and/or a source of creative inspiration to our two performers.

Before embarking on a close analysis of *Nina*, brief personal biographies of Marsan and Minette will be provided as well as an overview of the theatrical works in which we know they each performed, including overlapping works and roles.

Mme Marsan⁵

Mme Marsan was born Jeanne-Marie Chapiseau (or Chapizot) near Paris.⁶ She married an actor called Pierre Legendre Marsan who moved to Saint-Domingue in 1774.⁷ Rather little is known about Mme Marsan's early theatrical career, but the records of the Comédie-Italienne in Paris record her début there on 28 March 1764 in 'les rôles d'amoureuses'.⁸ She also features in Lecouvreur's list of troupe members in Bordeaux for the 1774-75 season,⁹ and we know that Mme Marsan left Bordeaux with her two children on 1 May 1775 and travelled to Martinique

⁵ The most complete biography of Mme Marsan to date is by René Le Gardeur. See his book, *The First New Orleans Theatre, 1792-1803* (New Orleans: Leeward Books, 1963) and his article 'Les Premières Années du théâtre à la Nouvelle Orléans', *L'athénée Louisianais* (1954), 33-72.

⁶ The approximate year of her birth given in the sailing list when Mme Marsan travelled from Bordeaux to Martinique in 1775 is 1747, while the sacramental records for New Orleans following her death in 1807 suggest that she was born around 1757. The earlier date seems more accurate.

⁷ According to Le Gardeur, M. Marsan was forced to flee France for Martinique around 1765 (*The First New Orleans Theatre*, p. 26), but his name appears in the departure records in 1774 (ANOM F5B 41, 1774). My thanks to Bernard Camier for sharing this information with me.

⁸ According to her death notice, Mme Marsan also performed in Germany before moving to the Caribbean.

⁹ See ms1015, Bibliothèque de Bordeaux.

en route to join her husband in Saint-Domingue.¹⁰ Mme Marsan's performances in the town of Saint-Pierre, Martinique, that year were met with enthusiasm by local audiences. In the *Journal historique et critique des Antilles* for 4 August 1775, we find some complimentary verse in response to her performance as the marquise in Marivaux's *La Surprise de l'amour*, featuring the following couplet: 'Tes spectateurs surpris / Se sont crus transportés de Saint-Pierre à Paris'.¹¹ The idea that the successful performance of French theatre could transport Caribbean audiences (back) to Paris is crucial to our understanding of the reception and repertoire of our two performers in Saint-Domingue, where the theatre was billed precisely as a means of bringing the language and culture of France to the colonies.

After her stint in Martinique, Marsan joined her husband in Le Cap where she quickly established herself as the star of the public theatre there, performing an extraordinarily wide range of theatrical roles, both spoken and sung, throughout the 1780s.¹² Following the turbulence of the slave revolts in 1791 and the beginning of what would later be known as the Haitian Revolution, Mme Marsan's story can be picked up again in New Orleans, where there are records of her performing in several works at the French theatre on St Peter Street in 1796.¹³ According to Le Gardeur, Marsan left the stage in 1800,¹⁴ and we know that she died in New Orleans on 25 February 1807.¹⁵

¹⁰ ANOM F5B 41, 1775.

¹¹ Cited in Maurice Nicolas, *Les Grandes Heures du théâtre de Saint-Pierre* (NP: Berger Bellepage, 1974), p. 10.

¹² Local newspapers also document five benefit performances for Marsan's husband in Le Cap in the 1780s and one performance of Romagnesi's tragicomedy, *Samson*, in February 1783, in which his participation is explicitly mentioned. We know that at least one other member of the Marsan family performed in Le Cap: Dlle Marsan, who participated in two performances alongside her mother. See *Les Affiches américaines* (AA) 16 May 1780 and 23 January 1781.

¹³ It is possible that she and some other former members of the Le Cap troupe arrived there in time for the beginning of the 1795-96 theatrical season. See Le Gardeur, *The First New Orleans Theatre*, pp. 21-2 and Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) pp. 68-9.

¹⁴ *The First New Orleans Theatre*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Her death notice, featuring a short biography, appeared in the *Télégraphe* on 28 February and was reprinted in the *Moniteur de la Louisiane* on 4 March.

Mlle Minette¹⁶

The actor-singer who became known in Saint-Domingue as 'Minette' was born in Port-au-Prince on 4 July 1767, baptized Elisabeth Alexandrine Louise and described in the Parish register as a 'mestive libre'.¹⁷ Her status as a free-born woman of mixed racial origins is important both in terms of the history of black performers and in the context of the society from which she emerged. Camier has identified Minette's parents as Elisabeth Fillette, also known as Elisabeth Mahaultière, who was a slave-owning free woman of colour, and Marin Ferrand, Treasurer of the Navy in Port-au-Prince in the 1760s.¹⁸ Minette had only one black great-grandparent and was almost certainly pale-skinned. As Camier has demonstrated, she was from a relatively privileged background and well-connected to the white colonials of Port-au-Prince. Minette's successful career as an actor-singer of colour was, however, exceptional. Her younger half-singer 'Lise' is the only other actor of colour in Saint-Domingue whom we can even name, though we know of an unnamed island-born black man who performed in Cap-Français in 1788.¹⁹ Minette performed frequently, though sporadically, in theatrical performances in her home town of Port-au-Prince between 1781 and 1789. Camier has suggested that Minette may have been not just the protégée but also the partner and possibly the fiancée of François Victor Saint-Martin, director of the theatre in Port-au-Prince until his death in June 1784.²⁰ Minette's last documented performance in Port-au-Prince was on 4 October 1789. Camier has recently discovered that Minette was in the United States (in Baltimore and Philadelphia) between 1794 and 1798 and back in Saint-Domingue in 1799.²¹ She travelled to Santiago de Cuba in early 1802,²² and had moved to New Orleans

¹⁶ For the fullest and most recent account of Minette's biography, see Camier, 'Minette (Elisabeth, Alexandrine, Louise Ferrand dite)'.
¹⁷ See ANOM, Registres paroissiaux de Port-au-Prince, 11 August 1767.
¹⁸ See Bernard Camier, 'Minette: situation sociale d'une artiste de couleur à Saint-Domingue,' *Généalogie et histoire de la Caraïbe*, 185 (October 2005), 4638-42.
¹⁹ See *Supplément aux affiches américaines* (SAA) 8 March 1788.
²⁰ See 'Minette (Elisabeth, Alexandrine, Louise Ferrand dite)', p. 218.
²¹ See ANOM, Registres d'état-civil, Port-au-Prince, 1799, f49 (20-21) and Bernard Camier, 'Minette Ferrand: Actualisation des résultats de recherche', *Généalogie et histoire de la Caraïbe* (2019).
²² ANOM, DPPC, Consuls, Répertoire des minutes de l'agence de Guadeloupe à ST Yago de Cuba, 26 nivôse An 10 (16 January 1802).

by 1806, where she attempted to rekindle her theatrical career, but was dogged by ill-health.²³ Minette died in New Orleans on 2 January 1807.²⁴

Roles and Repertoire

The *Theatre in Saint-Domingue* database indicates that Marsan performed in over sixty different works in Cap-Français between 1780 and 1788. The documentation indicates that Marsan almost always took the female lead. Given that the newspapers do not document all the subscription performances in local theatres, it is likely that she performed in many additional works including La Chaussée's *La Gouvernante*²⁵ and *Tartuffe* (in which she took the role of Elmire).²⁶ Over forty of the documented works feature integral music and may be classified generically as *opéras-comiques* (the most popular theatrical genre in the colony by a wide margin); the only serious operas in which we have a record of Marsan performing in Saint-Domingue are Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice* and his *Iphigénie en Tauride*.²⁷ Of the spoken works in which Marsan performed, we find a preponderance of comedies (the second most popular genre in the colony), alongside a handful of *dramas* and only one tragedy (Racine's *Iphigénie*). It is important to note too that Mme Marsan performed in a locally-written Creole-language musical parody of a parody of Rousseau's *Devin du village*, called *Jeannot et Thérèse* and featuring black characters who were sometimes performed in blackface.²⁸

²³ The *Moniteur de La Louisiane* on 19 November 1806 announced an upcoming performance 'Au bénéfice de Mlle Minette Ferrand, ancienne artiste et chargée d'une nombreuse famille, dont les débuts ont été et sont encore retardés par l'état de maladie où elle se trouve depuis très longtemps'. The performance was postponed from 25 November to 2 December and then to 9 December, and Minette died less than a month later.

²⁴ Interestingly, her funeral notice is found under 'white persons'. See Le Gardeur, *The First New Orleans Theatre*, p. 14n. See also *Archdiocese of New Orleans, Sacramental Record*, IX, 1807-1809, ed. by Charles Nolan (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1994), p. 144.

²⁵ *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* ed. by Etienne Taillemite and Marcel Dorigny, 3 vols (Saint-Denis: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer, 2004), I, p. 361.

²⁶ AA 10 March 1787.

²⁷ For more on this and on the status of Gluck's work in Saint-Domingue, see Julia Prest, 'Iphigénie en Haïti: Performing Gluck's Paris Operas in the French Colonial Caribbean', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 14.1 (March 2017), 13-29.

²⁸ For more on her performances in this work, see Julia Prest, 'The Familiar Other'.

Local newspapers indicate that Minette, for her part, performed in over thirty different theatrical works between 1781 and 1789 and, as for Marsan, the actual number was no doubt higher. The great majority of works in which we know Minette performed were *opéras-comiques*, mostly, as Camier has noted, *opéras-comiques en ariettes* rather than *en vaudevilles*.²⁹ As far as we know, Minette performed in only one serious opera: Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice*. She also performed in a small handful of spoken works comprising three comedies, one *drame* and one local metatheatrical work, *La Répétition interrompue* in which she performed as herself. We know of eleven works in which Minette and Marsan both performed (in Port-au-Prince and Le Cap respectively). Apart from Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice*, all of these may be broadly classified as *opéras-comiques*.³⁰

It is interesting to compare the roles taken by our two female actor-singers in these overlapping works when this information is known. In most instances, particularly in the early stages of Minette's career, Marsan took the female lead while Minette performed a prominent but secondary role: in the Gluck, for instance, Marsan played Eurydice, while Minette played Cupid; in *L'Infante de Zamora*, Marsan played the title character (crossed-dressed as a Spanish page), who is described as 'noble & tendre', while Minette played a servant, Juliette, who has fallen in love with the cross-dressed Infante), described as 'gaie, tendre & toujours naïve'. In *L'Amoureux de quinze ans*, Marsan played the eighteen-year-old Hélène, while Minette played the male role of fifteen-year-old Lindor; in *La Belle Arsène*, Marsan played the beautiful, proud heroine, while Minette played a young woman who had been turned into a statue as punishment for her pride and whose example serves as a lesson to Arsène; in *Les Trois fermiers*, Marsan played the older sister, Louise, while Minette played the younger sister, Babet. This discrepancy in casting may not have had anything to do with Minette's racial difference; the difference in age and experience between the two

²⁹ 'Minette (Elisabeth, Alexandrine, Louise Ferrand dite)', p. 215.

³⁰ They are *L'Amoureux de quinze ans* (Laujon and Martini); *L'Infante de Zamora* (Framery and Paisiello); *La Belle Arsène* (Favart and Monsigny); *La Fée Urgelle* (Favart and Duni); *La Nouvelle école des femmes* (Moissy and Philidor); *Le Jugement de Midas* (Hèle and Grétry); *Les Trois fermiers* (Monvel and Dezède); *Silvain* (Marmontel and Grétry); *Zémire et Azor* (Marmontel and Grétry) and *Nina*.

women would seem to be the most significant factor (and, of course, the availability of several other talented and established female actors in Port-au-Prince such as Mme Acquaire). Moreover, in the case of *Zémire et Azor*, we note that Minette took the secondary role of one of the sisters very early in her professional career in 1781, but cast herself in the lead role in 1783 in a benefit performance that she organized herself. This progression from sister to lead gives a clear sense of Minette's personal ambition as a performer and theatre maker. An even clearer sense of this emerges from her decision to cast herself in the lead role in *Nina* for its Port-au-Prince premiere.

Reception

In order to enhance our reading of Minette's performance as Nina, it is useful to consider first some earlier responses to other performances, particular in relation to the question of Minette's acting and singing. Minette's very appearance on the public stage as a performer of colour was remarkable, and Moreau de Saint-Méry's retrospective account of her first performance in Port-au-Prince summarizes the situation at the same time that it reveals a certain ambivalence on his part:³¹

Le 13 Février 1781, M. Saint-Martin, alors directeur, consentit à voir mettre le préjugé aux prises avec le plaisir, en laissant débiter sur ce théâtre, pour la première fois, une *jeune personne* de 14 ans, créole du Port-au-Prince, dans le rôle d'*Isabelle*, de l'opéra d'Isabelle et Gertrude. Ses talents et son zèle, auxquels on accorde encore chaque jour de justes applaudissemens, la soutinrent dès son entrée dans la carrière, contre des préventions coloniales, dont tout être sensible et juste est charmé qu'elle ait triomphé.³²

The reference to Minette as 'une jeune personne' reminds us of the fact that she was not named in the newspaper announcements until she returned to the public stage on 11 December 1784 after a hiatus of nearly a year following Saint-

³¹ There is no such ambivalence in Moreau de Saint-Méry's assessment of Mme Marsan. See *Description topographique*, I, p. 361.

³² *Description topographique*, II, p. 989.

Martin's death.³³ At this point (and for reasons that are not entirely clear), she was granted both her stage name and the respectful title of 'Demoiselle'. Her early anonymity is the most discernible way in which Minette was discriminated against as a young performer of colour, though she may have suffered other forms of discrimination as well.³⁴ The use of the term *créole*, here and elsewhere, in relation to Minette is significant as it stresses the fact that she was born in Saint-Domingue over her racial ancestry (indeed, the term, when used without a qualifier, was most frequently used to designate island-born white people). Moreau de Saint-Méry rightly emphasizes Minette's talents and enthusiasm, and suggests it was these that enabled her to forge an on-stage career despite the challenges posed in a colonial context by her racial background. Certainly, Minette's talents were recognized, perhaps to differing degrees and in different areas, by both locals and visitors to the colony.

There is little doubt that Minette was a talented singer. Durand, formerly of the Académie Royale in Paris, was in Saint-Domingue between 1783 and 1785, and Camier notes that the only female singer with whom he sang duets was Minette.³⁵ Minette's fellow performer, Durosier (who also went to New Orleans in the 1790s), when announcing the Port-au-Prince premiere of Dalayrac's *L'Amant statue* confidently likened her abilities to those of Rose Renaud, who had performed in the Paris premiere of the same work at the Comédie-Italienne the previous year. Durosier's announcement asserts that while the work is rightly considered 'l'écueil des meilleures Chanteuses', experience has taught him that Minette is capable of this type of singing, which we might now describe as coloratura, and requires considerable vocal agility. Moreover, it was, he claims, her specific singing skills that determined his choice of repertoire.³⁶

³³ Indeed, the first recorded instance of Minette's name is in Saint-Martin's will.

³⁴ Further evidence may perhaps be found in the fact that Saint-Martin's will, dated June 1784, reveals that while he had signed a private contract with Minette hiring her as a performer for a period of three years at the fairly standard rate of £8000 per year, the sum had never been paid. ANOM, DPPC, Notaire Michel, minutes of 9 June 1784 'Testament du Sr Saint-Martin'. Excerpt reproduced in Camier, 'Minette (Elisabeth, Alexandrine, Louise Ferrand dite)', p. 224.

³⁵ Camier, 'Minette (1767-1807)', p. 5.

³⁶ See AA 7 October 1786. For a fascinating discussion of Minette's performance in *L'Amant statue*, see Pedro Memelsdorff, *L'Amant statue: Staging Slavery in pre-*

By contrast, a visiting Frenchman with a particular interest in *acting* (he notes that even in France there are many *comédiens* or players but few accomplished *acteurs* or actors) made the following set of observations that can only be about Minette:

nous aurions d'abord à applaudir à l'ame, à l'intelligence, à la finesse, à la gentillesse, au maintien aisé & decent d'une jeune Actrice Créole, qui serait goûtée, même à Paris, dans plusieurs rôles *des pièces à ariettes*; nous l'inviterions cependant à moins déclamer le dialogue, à se moins fatiguer pour prononcer purement, à se mieux costumer quelquefois dans les rôles de Paysannes ; à se moins surcharger de gaze, de rubans & de taffetas; car, non-seulement des parures déplacées & ridiculement bouffantes font contraste avec les rôles de Villageoises, mais elles la font encore paraître souvent comme un joli petit buste placé sur un énorme piédestal.³⁷

Although his tone is patronizing, some of the author's words are also deeply flattering, and feature the ultimate compliment that could be paid to a performer in the colonies at the time: the suggestion that they would succeed even in Paris. With regard to his criticisms, it was not, of course, unusual for female actors of any social or racial background to be criticized for their appearance, and earlier in the article the author criticizes metropolitan actors for their inappropriate costuming.³⁸ But in the context of 1780s Saint-Domingue these comments about Minette's costuming acquire additional resonance given the increasingly harsh measures, including sumptuary laws, that were being passed in order to try to clip the wings of the free people of colour.³⁹ Although no explicit mention is

revolutionary Haiti', in *Music in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, ed. by Kate van Orden (Florence: I Tatti Studies, forthcoming). Memelsdorff's subtle analysis of the resonances in Saint-Domingue of the mechanical flute player also brings to mind contemporary discussions about different acting styles.

³⁷ AA 25 June 1785.

³⁸ For more on costume reform in eighteenth-century France, see Marvin Carlson, 'The Eighteenth Century Pioneers in French Costume Reform', *Theatre Survey* 28.1 (May 1987), 37-47.

³⁹ On the rise of the free people of colour, see John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), Chapter Six.

made of Minette's racial difference, the reference to peasants and villagers invokes the broader question of social standing, and while theatrical arguments in favour of verisimilitude were increasingly popular at this time, it is difficult to escape the sense that the author is also reminding Minette of her correct place in society *off-stage*. His invitation to Minette to adopt a less declamatory style in the spoken dialogues, by contrast, appears to be an aesthetic preference grounded in contemporary notions of naturalness, particularly when performing conversations in prose.

The author's comment about Minette's efforts to 'prononcer purement' relates to this point, and he seems to suggest that Minette's efforts to speak 'purely' (i.e. like a metropolitan French performer) may be in vain and are detracting from the very appearance of naturalness that is being sought. It would seem that, for the reviewer, it would be preferable for Minette to pronounce impurely (possibly with a Creole-inflected accent or intonation?) in order to retain the appearance of effortlessness. The need for apparent naturalness in an actor's performance thus perhaps allowed for some modest regional and geographical variations in diction and pronunciation, even if this was not considered ideal. The notion of a localized performance will re-emerge in Minette's own presentation of her performance in *Nina*.

Nina

Readers of the *Affiches américaines* learned on 19 August 1786 of the first performance of *Nina, ou la folle par amour* in Paris nearly three months earlier. They were told that the work 'a obtenu un très-grand succès' but no further details are provided. After its Parisian premiere at the Comédie-Italienne on 15 May 1786 (following a private performance at Choisy for the comte de Coigny), *Nina* was performed regularly in Paris until the mid-nineteenth century. Stefano Castelvechi has rightly reminded us of the pitfalls of attempting to classify musical dramas or 'operas' from this period. As he observes, *Nina* demonstrates an affinity with the century's 'paradigmatic bourgeois sentimental drama', but

has also been likened to tragedy.⁴⁰ Nina herself is from a noble family and one element of her goodness lies in the way that she responds to the local peasants (and they to her). The work may be understood generically as an *opéra-comique* in its combination of spoken prose dialogue with a series of short arias. What is clear is that it was a popular tear-jerker: *Nina* provided the opportunity for the audience to cry copiously -- something that they liked to do and liked to be seen to do.⁴¹ Moreover, its portrayal of human suffering and especially of the subtleties of female derangement 'initiated a trend that was to have major consequences for the European stage'.⁴² Nina's story is based on a literary account by d'Arnaud published as 'La nouvelle Clémentine' in his *Délassemens de l'homme sensible* of what was heralded as a true story, featuring a young French woman (from Rouen or, in some sources, Sedan) who went mad upon learning of her lover's death and waited every day in the same place for him to return.⁴³ The story also recalls, among other influences, the character of Clementina in Samuel Richardson's novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, who is also a 'folle par amour'.⁴⁴ Although, as Manuel Couvreur has demonstrated, *Nina* draws on a wide variety of literary sources relating to portrayals of (female) insanity, the work nonetheless represents 'un moment crucial dans le développement du thème de la folie en France au XVIII^e siècle'.⁴⁵ As the *Année littéraire* noted, somewhat disapprovingly, 'Depuis le Roi Léar, sur-tout depuis *Nina*, on n'entend parler que

⁴⁰ Castelvechi, *Sentimental Opera: Questions of Genre in the Age of Bourgeois Drama* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), p. 132.

⁴¹ See Anne Vincent-Buffault, *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 54. An actor's ability to make an audience cry or 'le don des larmes' was one that Voltaire, among others, actively sought when choosing actresses for his plays (*The History of Tears*, p. 63). For Diderot and others, the collective experience of shedding tears offered the potential for moral improvement among the theatre audience. See especially Denis Diderot, 'De la poésie dramatique', in *Œuvres complètes*, 33 vols (Paris: Hermann, 1975--), X, p. 338.

⁴² Castelvechi, *Sentimental Opera*, pp. 130-31.

⁴³ François-Thomas-Marie de Baculard d'Arnaud, *Délassemens de l'homme sensible, ou Anecdotes diverses*, 6 vols (Paris: chez l'auteur et la Veuve Ballard, 1783-85), I (1783), pp. 50-8.

⁴⁴ For details of other possible sources of inspiration for Marsollier's libretto, see Castelvechi, *Sentimental Opera*, pp. 140-42 and Manuel Couvreur, 'La Folie à l'Opéra-Comique: Des grelots de Momus aux larmes de Nina', in *Grétry et l'Europe de l'opéra-comique* ed. by Philippe Vendrix (Liège: Mardaga, 1992), pp. 201-19 (210-12).

⁴⁵ Couvreur, p. 212.

de fous & de folles'.⁴⁶ Moreover, Castelvechi has suggested that it also draws on contemporary medical views of the deranged mind and, crucially, on new therapeutic practices. As he notes, one key difference between Marsollier's plot and that of its closest source as narrated by Baculard d'Arnaud, lies in the fact that Nina, unlike her model, is finally cured of her madness.⁴⁷ Marsollier and Dalayrac's *Nina*, then, tells the story of a woman who went mad and of her therapy and, finally, her cure via a re-enactment of her initial traumatic event in a safe environment and with a different, happy outcome.⁴⁸

According to the operatic version, prior to the beginning of the work, as Elise conveniently explains to the assembled villagers, Nina and Germeuil had fallen in love and, with the consent of Nina's father, the count, become engaged to be married. However, when a wealthier suitor appeared on the scene, the count reneged on the agreement. Nina's two suitors embarked on a duel in which Germeuil was badly wounded. Nina, believing Germeuil to be dead and upon being asked by her father to marry the man she believed has killed her beloved, has lost her reason and is now confined to her father's country estate. Nina's daily routine sees her waiting for Germeuil to return, surrounded by kind servants and local peasants, all of whom are moved by Nina's goodness and above all by her plight. In the course of the opera, Nina's remorseful father returns but she does not recognize him; Germeuil too returns and is welcomed by the count, but Nina does not recognize him either. Finally, she comes to understand who he is and brought to her senses by a kiss. The opera ends with a celebration of their impending marriage.

The work is certainly not action-packed but it is filled with emotion. Nina's father is so racked with remorse that he thinks he would rather be dead (scene 3), while Germeuil has come to express his love to Nina before dying of sorrow (scene 12). Nina's governess, Elise, reports that she regularly combines her own

⁴⁶ *L'Année littéraire* (1786) VIII, p. 38.

⁴⁷ The alleged improbability of Nina's cure by Germeuil's kiss is one of several elements of the work that are criticized in *L'Année littéraire* (1786) VIII, pp. 22-3.

⁴⁸ Castelvechi, *Sentimental Opera*, pp. 143-57. See also Castelvechi's earlier article, 'From *Nina* to *Nina*: Psychodrama, absorption and sentiment in the 1780s,' *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8.2 (1996), 91-112.

tears with those of her mistress who, she notes, was 'née sensible' (scene 1), and the count's former tutor, Georges, sings of how the whole village weeps with Nina (scene 4). Georges's rhetorical question in the opening scene – 'Qui pourroit n'être pas touché de sa triste situation?' – not only sums up the viewpoint of all characters in the work, but also guides the spectator's response. Nina's plight, and the actor-singer's performance of her experience of that plight, is supposed to move the audience deeply and to move it to tears. This is achieved not simply by portraying a good and sensitive young woman in distress, but also by the nuanced and shifting range of emotions that she experiences from one moment to the next. At the opening of the work, Nina is described as being 'calme', for she is resting; Nina's first on-stage appearance in scene 5, however, suggests that she is now in a subtle state of disarray – something that is conveyed by a number of actorly elements: her physical appearance ('ses cheveux sont sans poudre, bouclés au hasard'), her gait ('sa marche est inégale'), her vocal gestures ('elle soupire') and her speech, which is in the 'style haché', broken and punctuated with ellipses: 'Voici l'heure où il doit venir ... il viendra ... aujourd'hui ... ce soir ... il me l'a promis ...'. To a limited extent, Nina's careful characterisation is borne out in the opening song that she sings, 'Quand le bien-aimé reviendra', which features rests in the vocal line to indicate a degree of disjointedness and hesitation in the moments when Nina realizes that her lover has not returned -- a moment that is captured by Jean-François Janinet's print of the Parisian performer, Mme Dugazon, in the role. [Insert Figure 1 near here] But the song's strophic structure, clear rhyme scheme and slightly jaunty 6/8 rhythm ultimately do little to enhance Nina's portrayal as a troubled soul. Rather, this is left to the actorly abilities of the performer – something that explains why reviewers make almost no mention of the performers' singing, and concentrate instead on their acting skills.

A sense of quite how nuanced the role is can be gleaned from a brief survey of the stage directions that accompany Nina's words, sung but above all spoken, in her encounter with her estranged father. In scene 9, these include the following indications: 'Nina ... témoigne un léger mouvement d'inquiétude', 'cherchant à rappeler ses idées', 'vivement, d'abord', 'avec âme', 'avec l'air de la profonde

douleur', 'douloureusement', 'étonnée', 'dans une rêverie profonde', 'pensive et triste', 'l'œil égaré', 'elle sourit avec l'œil égaré', 'elle soupire', 'elle tombe dans une tristesse sombre', 'avec l'empressement d'un enfant', 'avec une joie naïve', 'reprenant l'air triste', and 'avec la plus grande expression'. It seems clear that the success or otherwise of this work rests most heavily on the acting ability of the woman playing its lead role.

In Paris, this role was taken by Louise-Rosalie or Rose Dugazon (1755-1821), who was widely praised for her moving performance of female derangement and its fluctuating emotions.⁴⁹ The *Correspondence littéraire* was somewhat critical of the work but praised Dugazon's performance:

Elle y a paru supérieure à elle-même, et peut-être à toutes les actrices dont s'enorgueillissent nos autres théâtres; jamais on n'a déployé une sensibilité plus exquise et plus profonde; jamais on n'a su prendre plus heureusement des tons plus divers; jamais on ne les a nuancés avec plus de justesse; c'est la sublimité de son jeu qui a décidé essentiellement le succès de l'ouvrage.⁵⁰

It was likewise the varied acting demands of the role that attracted the attention of the *Annales du théâtre*, which wrote of Dugazon's performance:

Quelquefois la douleur rend sa voix sans accent, quelquefois elle la rend déchirante. Ses yeux hagards indiquent le désordre de ses idées; sa physionomie mobile, son action indécise, les vives saillies ou l'agitation concentrée de sa passion, l'expression variée & toujours sentie des

⁴⁹ Mme Dugazon, née Lefevre, was born in Berlin, where her father danced in operas performed for Frederick the Great, before moving to Paris. In 1767, she danced at the Comédie-Italienne. Both Grétry and Mme Favart encouraged her to learn music and she made her singing début at the Comédie-Italienne in 1774 where she became one of the most celebrated performers of her day. A committed royalist, Dugazon did not perform onstage between 1792 and 1794. Her last performance was as Zémaïde in Boieldieu's *Le Calife de Bagdad* in 1804.

⁵⁰ *La Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot, depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1790* (Paris: Furne, 1830), XIII, p. 132. We note that Dugazon is commonly described as an 'actrice'.

mouvemens de son ame, portent les Spectateurs à plaindre sans cesse le personnage, & à admirer continuellement l'Actrice.⁵¹

By the time *Nina* was performed in Saint-Domingue, the work was inescapably bound up with the Parisian palimpsest of Dugazon's famously actorly performance in its lead role. Moreover, the impossibility of anyone successfully imitating Dugazon in that role had surfaced early on, first at the end of a slightly lukewarm review in the *Journal encyclopédique*, where it was noted that Mme Dugazon 'a porté le funeste état de Nina à un point inconcevable d'imitation'.⁵² The idea was repeated on many occasions, perhaps most compellingly by the artist, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, who wrote in a letter describing Dugazon in a role 'dans lequel on a toujours vainement essayé de la copier. Jamais on n'a pu nous rendre Nina.'⁵³

Why, then, did two female performers in the French colony of Saint-Domingue elect to perform such a demanding role, and how did they each negotiate the palimpsest of their metropolitan predecessor? It was Mme Marsan who organized the Saint-Dominguan première of *Nina* (on a double bill with Maillé de Marencour's comedy, *L'homme comme il y en a peu*) in Cap-Français on 23 December 1786. Marsan's announcement in the local press alludes to Dugazon's performance in fairly matter-of-fact tones:

Madame *Dugazon* a mis le comble à sa réputation dans le rôle de *Nina*. Madame *Marsan*, dont l'unique but est toujours de plaire au Public, fera tous ses efforts pour obtenir son suffrage dans ce même rôle; elle a pour elle deux motifs d'espoir bien puissants, l'indulgence du Public et l'intérêt du drame, tant dans les paroles que dans la musique.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Antoine d'Origny, *Annales du théâtre italien depuis son origine jusqu'à ce jour*, 3 vols (Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1788; Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), III, p. 251.

⁵² *Journal encyclopédique ou universel* (Bouillon: Imprimerie du journal, 1786), IV:3, pp. 491-92.

⁵³ Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Souvenirs 1755-1842*, ed. by Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac (Paris: Champion, 2008), p. 219.

⁵⁴ SAA 20 December 1786.

Although the announcement includes some customary elements of false modesty, we can also discern considerable confidence in Mme Marsan's journalistic and performative voice. It is significant that Marsan states that she will perform *in the same role* as Dugazon and not that she will try explicitly to imitate Dugazon's performance of that role. Marsan seeks to please her public through her own performance in a work that is, she claims, as appealing for its spoken portions ('paroles') as for its sung portions ('musique').

Like Marsan, Minette's first performance as Nina was a benefit performance that she arranged herself, and it seems inconceivable that Minette did not know of Marsan's recent success as well as Dugazon's. Minette's announcement on 1 March 1787 of the upcoming performance of *Nina* (on a double bill with Marmontel and Grétry's *Silvain*) is unusually long and detailed, and acknowledges the particular actorly challenges of her role:

La D^{lle} *Minette* ne se dissimule pas combien il est difficile de rendre un rôle qui exige tout à la fois un débit tantôt inaccentué, tantôt passionné & douloureux; un œil vague, une gesticulation tour à tour énergique & indéterminée, une mobilité de physionomie: enfin des élans du cœur toujours eloquens pour l'ame même quand ils sont muets pour l'oreille. Elle a donc moins consulté ses forces que vos plaisirs, & sur-tout votre indulgence.

Minette's account of the role's particular challenges acknowledges the need for variety and nuance and a range of acting skills that draw on the performer's capacity to vary the delivery of her speech, on her ability to perform a wide range of emotions and physical gestures, particularly facial gestures, and her ability to move the spectator even when vocally silent. She makes no mention of any challenges that the role makes on her as a singer. We note that, by contrast with Marsan's announcement, Minette's does not mention Dugazon's success in the same role – rather, she appears to be taking the role on its own terms. However, an examination of the reviews of Dugazon's performances as Nina in Paris reveals something that has until now passed unnoticed: Minette's account of the peculiar demands of the role of Nina are in fact taken almost

verbatim from a review of Mme Dugazon's performance that had appeared in the *Mercure de France* in May 1786:

Jamais Mme Dugazon n'a montré plus de talent que dans le rôle de Nina: son débit quelquefois inaccentué, quelquefois douloureux & passionné; son œil vague, sa gesticulation tour-à-tour énergique & indéterminée, la mobilité de sa physionomie, les élans de son cœur et la variété de son expression, toujours éloquente pour l'âme, même quand elle est muette pour l'oreille; tout, dans son jeu, porte à la pitié pour le personnage, & à l'admiration pour l'Actrice.⁵⁵

Where the Paris review is an account of what Mme Dugazon has achieved in her performance as Nina, Minette's derivative account of the actorly demands of the role conflates Dugazon's accomplishments with her own aspirations as an actor in an upcoming performance. It is clear now that Minette *did* aspire to imitate Dugazon's successful performance as Nina, rather than, as was the case for Mme Marsan, simply to perform the role successfully.

Alongside this obscured (or, to use Minette's term, 'dissimulated') reference to the model of Dugazon's performance in Paris, Minette's announcement overtly appeals to a sense of solidarity between herself and the local audience in Port-au-Prince on the grounds of a shared geography and background:

C'est dans cette Pièce principalement qu'elle aura besoin de se rappeler, que, née au milieu de vous, formée par vous dans cette carrière difficile & épineuse, ses talens sont à vous, & ses défauts tous à elle.

Minette here attempts to turn her apparent disadvantage (a lack of theatrical experience in metropolitan France and, probably, a lack of formal training) to her advantage by appealing to what she and a large portion of the audience have in common: their Creole-ness. It is a colour-blind claim that emphasizes geography and local culture over racial difference. Minette thus offers herself up as an

⁵⁵ *Mercure de France* (May 1786), p. 185.

example of local talent who has been nurtured or trained ('formée') locally. Although we know nothing of Minette's training as a singer or actor,⁵⁶ the notion of her having undergone a local form of training – even if that simply means, in the case of her acting, observing local people around her – subtly challenges the predominant idea in the colony that talented Creoles should be trained in their chosen profession in France. Minette's self-positioning is thus paradoxical: she hides the explicitly Parisian aspect to her performing aspirations at the same time that she seeks the sympathy of a local, Port-au-Princian theatre audience, who are invited to recognize themselves in her.⁵⁷

Minette's performance was met with a lengthy review on 10 March in the *Affiches américaines* by someone using the pseudonym Draminagrobis -- probably the newspaper's editor, Charles Mozard. The reviewer compares Minette's rendering of the role with Mme Dugazon's in Paris (by reputation only) and especially with Mme Marsan's in Le Cap. The review opens with a note of condescension, but its overriding tone is one of commendation and belief in Minette's talents. It also displays an interest in the craft of acting:

On ne s'attendait pas que la D^{lle} *Minette* s'acquitterait aussi bien du rôle de *Nina*. Je le considère comme le plus difficile de tous ceux des pièces à ariettes. *Richardson* a tracé avec profondeur ce caractère attachant. *Clémentine* fait verser des larmes qui ôtent la respiration; les Actrices qui jouent *Nina* doivent produire le même effet, car les événemens mis en action émeuvent encore plus que les récits. La D^{lle} *Minette* a eu des moments d'abandon qui annoncent qu'elle sent bien ce qu'elle dit. Son faible organe ne comporte pas une forte expression, mais elle a remplacé par de l'esprit tout ce que le physique ne lui a point permis.

⁵⁶ In AA 3 May 1787, Minette mentions a woman who guided her, who may have been Mme Acquaire. See also Camier, 'Minette (Elisabeth, Alexandrine, Louise Ferrand dite)', p. 224n35.

⁵⁷ The existence in the Moreau de Saint-Méry collection (ANOM F3 133, f187) of a Creole-language version of Nina's aria 'Quand le bien-aimé reviendra' ('Quand cher zami moin va rivé') may suggest further Creolisations of this and other theatrical works. My thanks to Bernard Camier for drawing my attention to this document.

The reviewer acknowledges the difficulty of the role (labelling those who perform it actors rather than singers); he reminds the reader of the work's literary sources and of the necessity to produce tears in the audience; he also detects in Minette's performance a truthfulness that for him is indicative of a certain method of acting that requires the actor to feel the emotions s/he performs (and which would be roundly rebuffed by Diderot in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien*).⁵⁸ On the question of Minette's small voice, it is interesting to note that Vigée Le Brun described Dugazon's voice as 'assez faible', but commented that this was enough to express and incite laughter, tears and all manner of emotions in all manner of roles.⁵⁹ The review of Minette's performance continues with a detailed assessment of the nuances of her chosen role and the need for further nuance in Minette's performance of it:

Il m'a semblé cependant qu'on aurait désiré qu'elle variât son jeu d'avantage; quelle marquât, par moins de promptitude dans le débit, par des repos, des égaremens plus fréquens, les situations déchirantes qu'elle devait peindre. Le cœur de la bonne *Nina* est un volcan, qui doit sans cesse lancer des sentimens tendres, douloureux, excessivement exaltés. Elle est possédée de l'amour jusqu'au délire. Lorsque son cœur est épuisé des traits enflammés qu'il a exhalés, elle doit être abattue, presque anéantie de ces efforts ... & retomber encore dans de nouveaux élans d'amour, d'amitié, de rage, de folie. Les rôles sont des tableaux, dont les couleurs ne doivent pas être monotones.

Alongside the nuances of physical movement and changing emotion sits a revealing reference to the importance of contrasting moments of stasis, or tableaux, that allowed the audience time to absorb what was portrayed and

⁵⁸ The extent to which a successful actor fully embodied her or his role at an emotional level and the extent to which s/he drew on authentic emotions experienced earlier in life and then applied them to a character in performance or simply pretended to experience those emotions was the subject of vigorous debate in the eighteenth century. For a full and nuanced account of acting theory in the period, see Jeffrey M. Leichman, *Acting Up: Staging the Subject in Enlightenment France* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2016). See also Laurence Marie, *Inventer l'acteur: émotions et spectacle dans l'Europe des lumières* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne, 2019).

⁵⁹ Vigée Le Brun, p. 219.

respond emotionally to it.⁶⁰ Uncoincidentally, this description of a desired portrayal of Nina is followed by a reference first to Mme Dugazon and then to Mme Marsan:

On dit que M^{me} *Dugazon* est effrayante dans ce rôle, qu'elle l'a étudié pendant plusieurs mois dans les maisons de force qui, à Paris, renferment les folles. La D^{lle} *Minette* n'a pas eu ces modèles, il a fallu qu'en peu de jours elle tirât tout d'elle-même; mais M^{me} *Marsan*, au Cap, est dans le même cas, & elle a joué cette pièce sous mes yeux avec une vérité qui m'a fait mal.

The writer suggests that Dugazon had learned to play Nina by spending time in Parisian madhouses, whereas Minette and Marsan had to create their own performances without the benefit of real-life models.⁶¹ It is far from certain that Dugazon did model her performance on women deemed insane by contemporary society. The closest reference that I have found to this possibility is in the *Journal encyclopédique*:

On nous offre le tableau d'une longue démence ... qu'une actrice habile s'étudie à représenter d'après nature ce qu'on soutient à peine dans ces maisons de force où l'on peut trouver quelques Ninas.⁶²

The important thing is that Dugazon gave the impression of having studied from real-life models, and more than one contemporary critic commented on the 'truthfulness' of Dugazon's acting style and of her portrayal of Nina in

⁶⁰ According to Joseph Roach, a 'structured sequence of passions, accented by moments in which the actors held a climactic tableau indefinitely, became the signature of eighteenth-century acting style'. *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), p. 69.

⁶¹ On the particular question of performing madness, the great English actor, David Garrick, is alleged to have studied the antics of a madman near his lodgings as part of his preparation for the role of King Lear. Seneca too tells of the actor Gallus Vibius who went mad while learning to imitate the movements of a madman (Roach, pp. 141 and 144).

⁶² *Journal encyclopédique ou universel* (Bouillon: Imprimerie du journal, 1786), IV: 3, p. 490.

particular.⁶³ Quite how this was achieved remains a matter for debate but the reviewer seems to suggest a range of options for a convincing performance: in addition to a Dugazon-like authenticity based supposedly on real-life models, there is the Marsan model, which seems, from his account, to rest on sheer natural talent. The author's advice to Minette is that she turn her attention not to any real-life examples of female insanity but rather to the literary sources for *Nina*:

Je veux l'inviter à lire avec attention l'histoire de *Clémentine* dans *Grandisson*, & je suis assuré que si elle se rend à cet avis, elle laissera beaucoup moins à désirer à la prochaine représentation de *Nina*.⁶⁴

What the reviewer appears to perceive in Minette is neither the natural instinctive acting that he has seen in Marsan nor the carefully modelled acting that he associates (by reputation) with Dugazon, but something that already has the capacity to move and which has the potential to become even more moving in future performances and with additional rehearsal time.⁶⁵

The review culminates in a poem dedicated to Minette that places her in the position of seductress of the (white male) audience:

A M^{LLE} MINETTE.

Après la première Représentation de NINA:

Salut à la folle sensible
Qui m'a tant fait verser de pleurs.
Jamais l'amour & ses douleurs
N'avaient attendri tous les cœurs
D'une façon aussi terrible.

⁶³ Vigée Le Brun commented that 'jamais on n'a porté sur la scène autant de vérité' p. 218.

⁶⁴ AA 10 March 1787.

⁶⁵ For Diderot, adequate rehearsal time was crucial to an actor's success. As far as we know, Minette did not perform the role again. In the next documented performance of *Nina* in Port-au-Prince (on 12 May 1787), the lead role was taken by Mme Bourgeois, even though Minette performed in another work that evening.

Ah! qu'il est doux de rendre à la raison
 Une aussi séduisante folle!
 Heureux celui qui la console,
 Qui lui fit prendre le poison
 Dont son tendre cœur est idole,
 Mais je crains que le Médecin ...

.....

In terms that draw on the story of Nina's illness and cure, the poem confirms that, as required, Minette succeeded in making the audience cry. The most intriguing part of the poem is the four-line ellipsis with which it concludes. We can be confident that at least one of the missing lines would have ended with a word rhyming with the '-in' of 'médecin' (that octosyllabic line is complete even though it is printed with an ellipsis of its own), and that the others would have ended with a feminine rhyme.⁶⁶ The reviewer here allows himself to imagine seducing and being seduced by Minette (the 'poison' is probably a reference to the curative effects of Germeuil's kiss) to the point where what is imagined must be censored. It seems clear that the ellipsis covers some kind of reflection on Minette's sexual activity couched in terms of what the imagined 'doctor' may have done to his 'patient', and that it invokes at some level the common colonial fantasy of sexual relations with an attractive woman of mixed race.⁶⁷

Conclusion

If Minette's primary talent lay in her singing voice, it is now clear that she also aspired to considerable actorly skill and that her decision to put on and star in *Nina* represented, among other things, a bid to explore and display her potential

⁶⁶ The reviewer's pseudonym, Draminagrobis, is probably a reference to Rabelais' old poet, Raminagrobis, who features in *Pantagruel*, and the name given by La Fontaine to cats in 'Le chat, la belette et le petit lapin' and 'Le vieux chat et la jeune souris'.

⁶⁷ For more on this, see Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

to equal not just her talented rival in Cap-Français, but even the supposedly unsurpassable acting of Mme Dugazon in Paris. At the same time that Minette kept the full extent of her ambition hidden by not acknowledging the reference to Dugazon, she sought the sympathy of the theatre-going public in Saint-Domingue by appealing to a shared history and geography and possibly even to a local form of theatrical training. Where Mme Marsan demonstrated her versatility by bringing Paris to the Caribbean in a wide range of roles *and* performing in at least one local Creole-language work, Minette avoided local works;⁶⁸ but she performed, not necessarily by choice, in her own rendering of the French language and claimed a shared Creole – but not specifically a mixed-race – heritage. The palimpsest of Dugazon’s Nina was calmly negotiated in the press by Marsan, whose status as lead performer in Le Cap was undisputed, while Minette used her Parisian model, unacknowledged, as a source of theatrical inspiration and as a means of establishing her reputation in what was still a relatively new career. The one extant review suggests that Minette’s bid was largely successful and that she demonstrated the potential to become an even more skilled actor-performer in the future. The full extent to which Minette’s career was held back by her racial ancestry may never be known, but she remains an example of a locally-produced, highly-talented performer of colour at a time and in a context when the odds were against her. The careers of both Minette and Marsan serve above all as evidence that theatre in the French colony of Saint-Domingue cannot be dismissed merely as an inferior copy of theatre in metropolitan France. Moreover, the case of Minette in particular suggests that some distinctly Creole forms of theatre were emerging earlier than has been widely understood.

8,919 words (including footnotes)

⁶⁸ See her famous pronouncement on this matter in SAA 25 October 1783.