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Performance

Julia Prest

Performance and Performance Studies are broad fields that encompass a vast array of phenomena, ranging from formal public theatre and improvised street dance to the Olympic Games, selfies, and even, according to some critics, modern terrorist activity.¹ Here I shall focus on theatre in performance. One of the defining characteristics of performance is the emphasis on the spectator or audience. Bennett notes that ‘a performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product’.² The ‘meaning’ of a performance is not fixed; rather it depends on and is partly created by the audience, both as a group and as a set of individuals. Indeed, performance is as much about experience as it is about meaning; performance is experienced by the audience who then ascribe meaning to what they have experienced. Another defining feature of performance is the relatively modest role that is played by the text. France’s most famous playwright, Molière (1622–1673), offered some sage advice for individuals reading play texts in the preamble to the published edition of his comedy-ballet, *L’Amour médecin*: ‘On sait bien que les comédies ne sont faites que pour être jouées, et je ne conseille de lire celle-ci qu’aux personnes qui ont des yeux pour découvrir, dans la lecture, tout le jeu du théâtre’.³

¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 270–80.

² Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 156.

³ We know that plays are only written to be performed, and I would advise that only people who have the eyes to discern, when reading, the whole art of the theatre, read this one.

Molière's 'tout le jeu du théâtre' can be understood to encompass everything that is included in a performance in addition to the written text, such as the actors' bodies, their movements and gestures, their speech, the stage set, the lighting, the musical score and danced choreography, and the audience response as it unfolds in real time. One of the biggest challenges for students and scholars of performance is that we are often required to produce text-based accounts of non-text-based phenomena. Modern technology has been a boon to contemporary Performance Studies in recent years, making sources such as audiovisual recordings more readily available than ever before. Those of us who work on the pre-modern era must continue to follow Molière's advice in the absence of such materials.

Transnational performance arises – or can arise – when people and works move across perceived national boundaries. Transnational performance as I understand it here is different from other kinds of international performance. The distinction lies with the nature and response to the interaction as two or more cultures come into contact. Many international performances, be they theatrical or social, result in the experience of cultural dissonance (the discomfort felt by the spectator or performer when encountering something alien) or of bemused interest. When this jarring is left hanging, the performance is not transnational; when, on the other hand, the jarring leads to the creation, deliberate or otherwise, of a new kind of performance, this may be described as transnational.

To illustrate this important but admittedly rather slippery distinction, I shall use an example taken from Japanese performance culture in the form of the *kakegoe*, words (often the guild name of the actor) shouted out by well-trained audience members during Kabuki performances. Western visitors to Japan often report that they experience these interventions as unwelcome heckling (interestingly, the *kakegoe* may have their origins in heckling practices that took place during the flower festivals of Middle Japan). Meanwhile, from the performer's perspective, the lack of *kakegoe* when Kabuki troupes go on foreign tours 'can seriously unsettle the performers'.⁴ If this unsettling does not produce a creative response, then one might not speak of transnationalism, only of internationalism and cultural dissonance. On the other hand, the fact that the *absence* of *kakegoe* does not unsettle the local audience *outside Japan* suggests that a transnational element may be emerging in the form of a new way of responding to Kabuki, even if it is unintended. For some, this kind of transnationalism threatens the alleged 'purity' of the form; for others who believe that performance – like language – is a living and organic phenomenon in a constant

⁴ Robert Cohen, *Theatre*, 5th edn (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 2000), p. 175.

state of flux and development, such evolutions are inevitable and often desirable.

Theatre and Performance in Colonial Saint-Domingue

The remainder of this short essay will be devoted to an examination of theatrical performance in the former French slave colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) in the late eighteenth century. While transnational Saint-Dominguan performances will be celebrated up to a point, this is in no way intended to justify the fact that they all reflect a broadly colonial viewpoint.

The public theatres in Saint-Domingue were set up to bring a bit of France to displaced citizens living in their country's most lucrative colony. Announcements in the press detailing upcoming performances in, particularly, the towns of Port-au-Prince and Cap-Français (now Cap-Haïtien) sometimes liken them to earlier performances in France's major cities, especially Paris and Bordeaux. As dozens of plays, opéras-comiques, and opéras-ballets were transported across the Atlantic for performance in the colonial Caribbean, one can certainly speak of a *transatlantic* tradition of French theatre, but its status as transnational needs some unpicking. Theatre in Saint-Domingue was aimed principally at a French audience and Saint-Domingue was a French colony, so one might argue that we are dealing with something that presented itself as a *national* theatre tradition. However, a number of factors would suggest otherwise, the most important of which being the process of theatre production, the composition of the theatre audience, and the emergence of local theatrical forms.

Theatre Production and 'National' Status

As we have seen, theatre productions in Saint-Domingue often claimed to be like theatre productions in metropolitan France, but often the only element that was physically transported from one side of the Atlantic to the other was the text of a play or the libretto and score of an opera. If and when the theatre text arrived safely in Saint-Domingue, this was only one element in the process of creating a new performance. The remaining elements had to be built up using local resources. While those did sometimes include the occasional actor visiting from France, or even costumes and stage properties from France, the majority of the materials of the production (the stage sets, the lighting, the costumes, the stage itself, the playhouse, the people who built the playhouse, and so forth) were local. More importantly, the process of putting together the production was entirely local even if it sometimes drew on the occasional memory of an individual who had attended the theatre in

France. In short, the work was rehearsed, developed, performed, and received in Saint-Domingue: it was both global and local or, to use an anachronistic term, glocal.

This putting together of the many elements of a theatre performance using a combination of French sources and local resources chimes with Vertovec's account of 'syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation and hybridity' and with Rosenau's 'distant proximities'.⁵ More specifically, the process of theatre production drew on the works and talents of metropolitan French and Creole (Creole in this context meaning local or Caribbean) individuals, including free people of colour, as well as, occasionally, in the theatre orchestra, the enslaved population.

While the metropolitan and Creole French were citizens within the nation state of France, their geographical distance from the seat of that nation set them apart. And, of course, it was widely understood that individuals born in metropolitan France were more French than French Creoles (and that Creoles who had visited France were more French than those who had not). A sense of one's belonging to a nation thus varied from one group to another and from one individual to another. It is perhaps useful here to think in terms of 'theatrical citizenship', which, according to McKinnie, 'has often been conceived in more communitarian ways, either in contradistinction from the national state, or in opposition to it'.⁶ While, as will be seen below, the theatre community in Saint-Domingue perpetuated social division and was not as communitarian as McKinnie's model, this separation of formal nationhood from a sense of theatrical belonging remains useful.

The Theatre Audience and Social Status

Although theatre began in Saint-Domingue as a white, colonial activity, performed by and for French people nostalgic for life in the metropole, the increasingly business-like nature of the public theatre combined with the expanding numbers of free people of colour in the colony (many of whom were wealthy land and slave-owners) led to the admittance to the playhouse of a small number of non-white, not fully French audience members. With the admittance of the free people of colour came segregation on the basis of

⁵ For an exposition of these theoretical points in this volume, see Bond, 'Stories', pp. 280–81.

⁶ Michael McKinnie, 'Performing the Civic Transnational: Cultural Production, Governance and Citizenship in Contemporary London', in *Performance and the City*, ed. by D.J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr and Kim Solga (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 110–27 (123).

racial ancestry. There was no designated area for enslaved people, but they accompanied their masters to the playhouse and may have stayed for some performances. Although segregation by ticket price is a familiar feature of the traditional playhouse to this day, the racialized approach to segregation in France's Caribbean colonies sets its performance context apart from that of metropolitan France in some significant ways.

Some manuscript documents from 1780 arguing in favour of the founding of a new playhouse in Saint-Pierre in the French Caribbean colony of Martinique offer further insights into the social performance dimension of attending the theatre. The 'Mémoire Concernant l'Etablissement d'un Spectacle à St-Pierre de la Martinique' (1780), tells of 'les avantages sans nombre qui résultent du spectacle' (the innumerable advantages that spring from the theatre) and specifically of the effect of theatre on social behaviour (*les mœurs*). While it is acknowledged that the previous theatre in Saint-Pierre had been badly run, the authors of the document insist on its positive, visible effects on the local population. They claim that island-born whites, who had been subject to the much-feared phenomenon of degeneration 'y ont puisé tout à coup de l'énergie, le gout et l'ardeur de s'instruire, tellement que plusieurs aujourd'hui se distinguent avec avantage parmi leurs concitoyens' (promptly found in the theatre the energy, inclination and drive to better themselves, so much so that many among them are seen today to outshine their fellow citizens). As for the free people of colour in the theatre audience, the authors claim that they have lost 'la barbarie de leur origine, se policent et prennent des mœurs' (their original barbarity, police themselves and behave better). They even predict, rather hyperbolically, that with the help of the theatre, in a few years' time the only difference between those people born on the island and those born in metropolitan France will be the climate. In Martinique as in Saint-Domingue, there was, then, a sense that the theatre audience went to the playhouse to learn how to perform their roles as full French citizens. Theatrical citizenship could, it is suggested, lead to national citizenship. While this idea attempts to shift theatre in Saint-Domingue back towards a would-be national tradition, the very fact that the audience's Frenchness is in question owing to the risk of degeneration in the stifling heat of the Caribbean supports my contention that this was a form of transnational theatre.

New Theatrical Forms

Further evidence of the transnational lies in the creation and performance of a small number of new theatrical works that draw on local influences. Extant examples are rare, but two will serve to illustrate this phenomenon here: first, an anonymous three-act comedy in French called *Les Veuves créoles*

(The Creole Widows) and, second, a Creole-language parody inspired by Rousseau's *Devin du village* (The Village Soothsayer). We understand that *Les Veuves créoles* (published in Paris in 1768) was performed in Saint-Domingue in 1769 and 1779. The play writes itself into the French comic tradition in terms of its techniques, structure, and so on, but also provides a distinctly Creole dimension thanks to its colonial setting and message.⁷ Set in Saint-Pierre in Martinique, the play includes references to local trading practices and other customs, it features enslaved characters, and while it satirizes the foibles of Creole society, the ultimate message of the play features the triumph of that society over the metropolitan imposter. One line of Gallicized Creole is included when one of the protagonists addresses her domestic slave at a moment of supposed crisis (II, 8). Spectators at the performances of *Les Veuves créoles* in Saint-Domingue will not, then, have been transported to France or had their social behaviour improved by their exposure to metropolitan French culture. This Creole hybrid features characters of European and African descent behaving in ways that drew on the daily lives of the theatre audience. The anonymous author of the play evidently hoped to succeed in his would-be transnational enterprise, for he included a series of explanatory footnotes in the published text aimed at reducing any jarring incomprehension in his metropolitan readership and potential audience. Although there is no evidence of *Les Veuves créoles* having ever been performed in metropolitan France, the play went on sale in Paris and descriptions of its content were provided in several metropolitan publications: the *Mercure de France*, *L'Année littéraire*, and the *Journal encyclopédique*. All three reviewers acknowledged the theatrical, and specifically, comic potential of the text in performance, but only one displayed a potentially transnational response when advising his readership to be ready sometimes for different codes of behaviour.⁸

The most popular local work to be performed in Saint-Domingue was by a man called Clément. His one-act musical comedy, *Jeannot et Thérèse*, is described in the local press as a Creole-language parody of Rousseau's *Devin du village* but is in fact a reworking of a patois parody of *Le Devin du village*, called *Les amours de Bastien et Bastienne* (The Loves of Bastien and Bastienne).⁹ The work is set in Saint-Domingue and features black characters.

⁷ *Les Veuves créoles, comédie*, ed. by Julia Prest (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), pp. 1–25.

⁸ See *Les Veuves créoles, comédie*, ed. by Julia Prest (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), pp. 4–5.

⁹ Bernard Camier and Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, 'Jeannot et Thérèse: un opéra comique en créole au milieu du XVIIIe siècle', *Revue de la société haïtienne d'histoire de géographie*, 215 (2003), 135–66 (p. 138). Camier's new edition of the work, including its musical scores, will be published in 2022.

Performances of *Jeannot et Thérèse* raise a number of ethical issues that are borne of the work's transnational status and that are of interest to the student or scholar: these include its cheerful depiction of slave life and the performance (with one known exception) of black roles by white performers, sometimes with darkened skin, before a non-representative and segregated audience. On the one hand, the creation of *Jeannot et Thérèse* is to be celebrated because it offers a direct alternative to the French national tradition in the form of a rare and early example of a sustained piece performed in the Creole language (interestingly, the stage directions are in French), and because it constitutes a new, hybrid form of theatrical performance depicting local life; on the other hand, *Jeannot et Thérèse*, for all its transnationality does nothing to address the more flagrant inequities of the society it depicts.

But what was the effect of *Jeannot et Thérèse* on its audience? In the absence of any recorded audience responses, we are obliged to fall back on informed guesswork. Here it is perhaps instructive to consider the one recorded instance of a performer of colour taking a lead role in a performance of *Jeannot et Thérèse* (or *Les Amours de Mirebalais* as it was referred to in this instance). The Saint-Dominguan newspaper *Les Affiches américaines* informs its readers of an upcoming performance in the town of Saint-Marc of a 'parodie nègre' (black parody) of *Le Devin du village* featuring 'la Demoiselle Lise' as Thérèse.¹⁰ Lise was one of only two named actor-performers of colour who are known to have performed in the public theatre. The other was her more famous half-sister, Minette. Their mother was of mixed European and African ancestry, while their fathers were European, and they were probably pale skinned. Nonetheless, the Saint-Dominguan audience would have recognized Lise as an exception to the tradition of white actors that otherwise dominated the public stage. While Minette never performed anything other than roles assumed (by default) to be white, Lise performed one role that was understood to be black. Her performance as Thérèse, then, was an exception among exceptions. We know that white performers sometimes wore skin-darkening make-up when performing *Thérèse et Jeannot*, but no mention is made of this in the case of Lise. How were these roles performed and what effect did Lise's appearance in a black role have alongside an otherwise white cast? It is impossible to know, but it seems inconceivable that no audience member on 6 February 1786 noticed that Lise's performance was different.

A transnational approach to performance is a useful one as many performances are by their very nature transnational. The transnational, in comparison with the international, can also be a useful yardstick by which

¹⁰ *Affiches américaines*, 28 January 1786.

to measure the effects of the movement of performance across perceived national contexts and global spaces. Furthermore, a transnational approach can be useful more generally as a means of bringing some healthy scepticism towards our overreliance on and sometimes casual use of categories, national and otherwise. Returning to the tradition of Kabuki theatre, one of its most celebrated features is its use of an all-male cast and the particular skill of the *onnagata* (male actors specializing in female roles). Yet, in its early days, Kabuki featured female actors, who were then banned from the stage for reasons of supposed (im)morality. Just as the international performance of Kabuki and other forms of theatre has the potential to evolve along transnational lines, so also does a transnational approach to the study of the form have the capacity to remind the researcher that nothing is fixed, especially in performance.

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