Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

17 | 2018

Paysages et héritages de David Bowie

“A Play That Provides:” the 2017 Broadway revival of *Once on this Island*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/13878>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.13878

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Anouk Bottero, ““A Play That Provides:” the 2017 Broadway revival of *Once on this Island*”, *Miranda* [Online], 17 | 2018, Online since 01 October 2018, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/13878> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.13878>

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"A Play That Provides:" the 2017 Broadway revival of *Once on this Island*

Anouk Bottero

Factual information about the show

- 1 Play: *Once on this Island* (1990) - 1h30 (no intermission).
- 2 Venue: Circle in the Square Theatre 235 W 50th St, New York, NY 10019.
- 3 Opening: Circle in the Square Theatre, December 3rd, 2017.
- 4 Book & Lyrics: Lynn Ahrens
- 5 Music: Stephen Flaherty
- 6 Director: Michael Arden
- 7 Choreography: Camille A. Brown
- 8 Cast: Hailey Kilgore (Ti Moune), Lea Salonga (Erzulie), Aurelia Williams (Asaka), Quentin Earl Darrington (Agwe), Tamyra Gray (Papa Ge), Isaac Powell (Daniel), Kenita R. Miller (Mama Euralie), Phillip Boykin (Tonton Julian), Alysha Deslorieux (Andrea/Storyteller), Darlesia Cearcy ("Beauxhommes" Narrator/Storyteller), Rodrick Covington ("Beauxhommes" Narrator/Storyteller), Tyler Hardwick (Storyteller), Cassandra James (Storyteller), David Jennings (Armand/Storyteller), Grasan Kingsberry (Beauxhomme/Storyteller), Loren Lott (Storyteller), T. Oliver Reid (Storyteller), Mia Williamson (Little Girl).¹
- 9 Website: <https://www.onceonthisisland.com/>
- 10 Trailer: <https://youtu.be/MbJUAGIa-NU>

Review

- 11 Inventiveness, fluidity and generosity are only some of the few substantives that might characterize the dazzling revival of this formerly relatively unknown 1991 Broadway musical. Set to Stephen Flaherty's Caribbean-infused score and to Camille A. Brown's powerful and energetic choreography, Lynn Ahrens's musical is joyous and buoyant in every possible respect. Recipient of the 2017 Tony Award for "Best Revival of a Musical," the new production of *Once on this Island* opened on December 3, 2017 and is still running on Broadway at Circle in the Square Theatre.
- 12 An adaptation of Rosa Guy's *My Love, My Love*, *Once on this Island* is set on an island, "jewel of the Antilles," that has long been divided between "the peasants, black as night" and the rich mulattos or "grands hommes" of French descent, "with their pale brown skin and their French ways" (Ahrens & Flaherty 1). At the beginning of the play, a hurricane has just wrecked the island and a little girl is crying; villagers gather round to reassure her and tell her of the ill-fated story of Ti Moune², an orphaned peasant girl who falls in love with Daniel Beauxhomme, the son of a *grand homme*, and embarks onto a journey of self-discovery. The tragic Shakespearean subtext of the star-crossed lovers is juxtaposed onto a Caribbean setting bearing much resemblance to Haiti, where the director and part of his creative team travelled for research, and peopled by colorful characters, especially the four Gods who watch over Ti Moune throughout her journey: Asaka, Mother of the Earth, Erzulie, the Goddess of Love, Agwe, the God of Water and Papa Ge, the terrifying demon of Death.

[Fig 1]

"Cast of *Once on this Island*".
Credits: Joan Marcus. Playbill.

- 13 *Once on this Island* relies on storytelling as a framing device ("Why We Tell The Story" ends the play, the same way a story had started the play), as well as a source material. Not only does the play draw heavily from Caribbean oral storytelling traditions but it also finds roots in fairy tales, such as Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. And Michael Arden's³ staging definitely makes the most of this embedded storytelling.

Enhanced by Dane Laffrey's scenic design, Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhower's lighting design, as well as Peter Hylenski's sound design, this production immerses the spectators within the world of the island through storytelling

- 14 Circle in the Square Theatre is a small and intimate theatre in the round, which allows the audience to surround the stage and experience the play from many different viewpoints.⁴ For this production, speakers were hidden around the stage so that sound and music would not only surround spectators but would also contribute to creating a physical environment. The circular seating chart directly replicates the disposition of a storytelling session. And sitting in circle amidst my fellow listeners, eagerly waiting for the chorus to start, I never felt alienated from the world of the play, even though I was clearly reminded of my role as spectator. Perhaps because, in this play, both storytellers and listeners never really care for the fourth wall.
- 15 Indeed, the immersive quality and integration of the audience is particularly striking, even before the performance starts. The *pre-show* moment happens outside the time-frame of the play, until the lights are dimmed. But Arden's production plunges the audience within the world of the island with the lights on. Each night, as theatre-goers take their seats looking somewhat dumbfounded, actors improvise with each other on stage while a goat in diapers (and on a leash) gently saunters around the stage and nibbles at elements of the décor. If the ultimate goal of this improv act is to tell audience members to turn off their phones, even this staple of nights at the theatre is playfully disturbed.

[Fig 2]

GODS.

CREDITS: JOAN MARCUS. PLAYBILL.

Authenticity in the staging was a crucial element for the director and his creative team. As Dane Laffrey expressed in an interview for *Playbill*, the team's trip to Haiti "totally altered the course of what we were doing" (Fierberg, "How Much Sand"). But more than just replicating the makeshift look of a Caribbean beach, the production moves with great fluidity in and out of the colorful world of Haitian folktales, gradually endowing this wrecked island with magic. Thanks to Clint Ramos's ingenious costumes, simple villagers gradually transform into magnificent Gods, using some of the trash

strewn all over the island after the hurricane. For instance, talking about Agwe's costume, he explains that

Agwe is the fisherman, who lost most of his boats, his nets, everything. In the beginning of the play, he's painting his last boat, trying to repair it. [...]. And then slowly as he transforms, and the stuff that you thought were just mundane stage business, actually play into eventually what he looks like as a god. So, the paints that he uses for his boat, he actually paints on his body. Then, he weaves those plastic bags into this kind of beard and headdress structure that he puts on top of his head and around his face. Then there's fisherman netting and some fisherman tools around his waist. That's his costume. We keep the board short that he wears in the beginning to not lose that idea that these are still people. (Ferri)

- 16 Similarly, the constant presence of the Little Girl to whom the story is told reminds us of the easiness with which we slip in and out of the story, and how easily reality and fiction are interwoven.
- 17 The genderblind casting of the Gods also accounts for the musical's fluidity. Papa Ge, usually interpreted by a man, is interpreted by two actresses (depending on the performance). Alex Newell, an actor who became known for his role as trans student "Unique" in the *Glee* TV series, usually interprets Asaka, and displays an impressive vocal range and tessitura—especially during the show-stopping number "Mama Will Provide." In a political climate in which women's rights and trans rights are constantly under threat in the United States, we can only welcome casting choices that do away with gendered conventions. In itself, the play is far from revolutionizing gender roles and the heterosexual tradition of the musical. But one might venture as far as saying that perhaps such casting choices reveal Broadway's (and mainstream theater's) newfound revolutionary potential.

[Fig 3.]

TI-MOUNE'S DANCE.

Credits: Joan Marcus. Playbill.

- 18 But for me, the true revolution came in the shape of Camille A. Brown's distinctly energetic choreography. Dance, as the title of the opening number "We Dance" suggests, strengthens the sense of community at the very core of the play. A

particularly memorable scene is the Ballroom scene where Ti Moune's dance contaminates the stiff assembly of the Hotel Beauxhomme, until everyone gives in and joins her in an unrefined, organic dance. Not only does it represent an important step in Ti Moune's journey of self-discovery, as she appropriates her own body and candidly relishes people's compliments on her beauty,⁵ but it also marks a return to choreography and dance as a language and a narrative—something that has been absent from most contemporary musicals, with the notable exception of *Hamilton* among a few others. Camille A. Brown's choreography is generous in so many ways: it gives the audience both entertainment and depth, a pure moment of pleasure (and quite a show stopper) as well as the expression of a distinct vernacular language, rooted in African-American dances.

- 19 If the sense of community is so strong, it is because said community evolves along the divisive lines of race and class. As Ahrens and Flaherty remind us in an "Author's note" at the beginning of the libretto,

Our original production in New York City was strictly cast along these racial lines [Black and mulatto actors] and the text makes reference in several places to skin color. We think the power of the story has a great deal to do with the issue of prejudice within the race, as well as with issues of wealth and class; we strongly hope that the casting of future companies will reflect our intent as far as possible.

- 20 Nowadays, questions of representation and diversity on Broadway are more important than ever.⁶ The political weight of colonial heritage and the race/class issues at the core of *Once on this Island* may be lost within the flourish and the musical numbers, but its final message of inclusivity, which bridges over the divisions, can't be lost on those who watch, especially for the often white and often privileged Broadway spectators. This revival of *Once on this Island* is a play that gives, without restraint, and opens its doors to all those who are willing to listen to the story.

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NOTES

1. Casting for the performance I saw on April 23rd, 2018. Notable changes in casting include Alex Newell in the role of Asaka and Merle Dandridge in the role of Papa Ge. Note that casting changes regularly, especially if the play runs for several months.
  2. Ti Moune means *child* in French Creole, although one character translates it by "little orphan" at the beginning of the play.
  3. As a stage director, Michael Arden is best known for his critically acclaimed revival of *Spring Awakening* by the Deaf West Theatre Company, which was performed by hearing and deaf actors, and simultaneously in Sign Language as well as in English. The revival transferred to Broadway in 2015.
  4. *Playbill* even issued a guide showing the different views of the stage, for spectators to choose their seats depending on the experience they want to have during the play, since actors often walk in the aisles as they travel on the island and each of the Gods has a designated area. They also revealed that a side of the room had been set up just for this particular production (see Fierberg, "*Once on this Island* Seating Chart").
  5. "TI MOUNE—Oh Daniel, did you see me? The Ambassador said I was beautiful! Everyone is so happy I'm here with you!" (Ahrens & Flaherty 46)
  6. The success of a show like *Hamilton*, whose racially diverse casting is one of the ingredients for its popularity, is only one of the many examples of Broadway's current concern with questions of diversity in mainstream theatre.
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ABSTRACTS

Musical review of *Once on this Island* directed by Michael Arden at Circle in the Square Theatre, New York, in December 2017.

Critique de la comédie musicale *Once on this Island* dirigée par Michael Arden présentée au Circle in the Square Theatre, New York, en décembre 2017.

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Subjects: Theater

Keywords: musical theatre, Broadway, *Once on this Island*, entertainment, color-conscious casting, Michael Arden

Mots-clés: comédie musicale, Broadway, *Once on this Island*, divertissement, color-conscious casting, Michael Arden

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