

FRANCO-AMAZONIAN THEATER – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION¹

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ABSTRACT

This text presents initial data on the theater of French Guiana. Here I outline cultural, political-social, and identity issues of Franco-Amazonian theater in Latin America, with a greater focus on Franco-Guyanese theater. To that end, I present a brief historical trajectory of this theater, and I also propose terminologies for the study of Franco-Guyanese theatrical production, namely: Black theater, Franco-Amazonian theater, and Black-Amazonian dramaturgies. Thus, this summary gathers some characteristics, practices, names of theatrical agents, and representative dramatic texts in French from this Amazonian region, as will be possible to see throughout the text and in its appendix. It is intended that this study be a brief introduction to the topic, and that it may motivate further studies on Franco-Amazonian theater.

KEYWORDS: French-Amazonian theater; French Guiana; Black-Amazonian dramaturgies.

TEATRO FRANCO-AMAZÔNICO – UMA BREVE INTRODUÇÃO

RESUMO

Este texto é a apresentação de dados iniciais sobre o teatro da Guiana Francesa. Traço aqui questões culturais, político-sociais e identitárias do teatro franco-amazônico na América Latina com enfoque maior no teatro franco-guianense. Para isso, apresento um pequeno percurso histórico deste teatro, bem como proponho terminologias de estudo da produção teatral franco-guianense, à saber: teatro negro, teatro franco-amazônico e dramaturgias negro-amazônicas. Assim, reúne-se nesta súpula algumas características, práticas, nomes de agentes teatrais e textos dramáticos representativos em língua francesa desta região amazônica - como será possível ver em todo o texto e no seu apêndice. Almeja-se que este estudo seja uma pequena introdução ao tema, bem como possa motivar outros estudos do teatro franco-amazônico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teatro franco-amazônico; Guiana Francesa; Dramaturgias negro-amazônicas.

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TEATRO FRANCO-AMAZÓNICO – UNA BREVE INTRODUCCIÓN

RESUMÉN

Este texto presenta datos iniciales sobre el teatro de la Guayana Francesa. Delineo aquí cuestiones culturales, político-sociales e identitarias del teatro franco-amazónico en América Latina, con un énfasis mayor en el teatro franco-guayanés. Para ello, presento un breve recorrido histórico de este teatro, así como propongo terminologías para el estudio de la producción teatral franco-guayanesa, a saber: teatro negro, teatro franco-amazónico y dramaturgias negro-amazónicas. De este modo, en esta síntesis se reúnen algunas características, prácticas, nombres de agentes teatrales y textos dramáticos representativos en lengua francesa de esta región amazónica, como será posible ver a lo largo del texto y en su anexo. Se espera que este estudio sea una breve introducción al tema y que, además, pueda motivar otros trabajos sobre el teatro franco-amazónico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teatro franco-amazónico; Guayana Francesa; dramaturgias negro-amazónicas.

INITIAL DENOUEMENT

Is there theater in French Guiana? This question is frequent when I mention that I study cultural manifestations in that French region of South America. In fact, this question has its origin in two causes: prejudice and lack of knowledge.

Prejudice in its two senses: discrimination and stereotype. Discrimination, because it is considered a subordinate, underdeveloped region, or even one lacking cultural education when compared to European models of “civilization”. Stereotyping, because for a long time it was believed that there was no locally formed culture there, or even a culture worth knowing, since it is something produced in the middle of the forest, alongside so-called “savage” populations, within the colonial and neocolonial context of the past and the present.

Such pre-judgment occurs because the Amazon region is a place that, for a long time, was difficult to access and therefore isolated. The isolation of the Amazon region brought, as a consequence, inventive ways of survival and of cultural, social, and ideological creation (Loureiro, 2015). The various populations brought to the region (among them, Black populations) had to share local space and build a common culture.

This Franco-Amazonian culture is little known, sometimes because of a lack of dissemination, sometimes because it has had few opportunities to show itself, since it is subordinated to a dominant culture: French culture (Silva-Reis, 2023a). Thus, in this work I aim to

bring to light some characteristics, practices, names, and texts of theater in French Guiana, to begin unveiling the veil of this cultural sphere. To do so, I adopt a few concepts in order to demarcate and elucidate, as directly and clearly as possible, Franco-Guyanese theatrical culture. It is worth mentioning that this text is a set of ideas still in progress, which I present here as a state of the art of ongoing research over the last six years (2020–2025).

Black Theater

In the French American colonies, theater served as entertainment for settlers and, likewise, as a playful way of “civilizing” enslaved people. In this way, theater was always a privileged medium for maintaining French culture, thus sustaining the policy of assimilation (Bérard, 2009). “Street performances” (vaudeville, mime, pantomime) were common in the colonies, as were more prestigious theatrical forms (operas, ballet, comic operas). Initially, many French actors traveled to the colonies to stage their productions; over time, however, these trips diminished. To compensate for the lack of French human resources, many Creoles³ and enslaved Black people were made available for performances, which resulted in what came to be called the local color of French colonial Latin-American theater (Bérard, 2009).

In the nineteenth century, many actors who visited the French colonies died, in particular of yellow fever. In the 1850s, French theater entered a “decline”, and a more vigorous Creole-language theater emerged, with plays written and staged by settlers, mostly in Creole (Hazaël-Massieux, 2000). The Guadeloupean playwright Philippe Pinel Dumanoir (1806–1856) achieved great success, including in the metropole, with his plays in Creole and French, which, in the nineteenth century, brought major debates on ethnic-racial issues, whether in a comic or a serious register (Chalaye, 1998). These plays were presented on many stages in South America, including Brazilian stages.

With the development of theater in Creole, France reinvested, in the first half of the twentieth century, in a classical repertoire in the Latin-American colonies (Les départements d’Outre-mer - DOM), to continue its soft power of cultural assimilation (Ruprecht, 2000, 2003; Bérard, 2009). In this way, Creole theater became more community-based, especially in rural areas, with amateur actors and local texts. The exception was Aimé Césaire’s Black theater, written in

³ From a historical, and also colorism perspective, this term refers to people of lighter Black skin tone, as opposed to a darker Black skin tone.

French and claiming cultural, linguistic, economic, and social specificities (Chalaye, 1998; Bérard, 2009).

In the 1970s, with the flow of students from the DOM to France, militant theater developed strongly as a form of political denunciation (Hazaël-Massieux, 2000). Theater began to be seen as a place of debate, exchange of arguments and ideologies, and identity affirmation (Chalaye, 1998). Diglossic or bilingual texts are quite common (Ruprecht, 2000, 2003; Bérard, 2009). Moreover, many of these texts remain unpublished to this day, in manuscript form, filed away in the homes of authors or their relatives (Ndagano; Blérard-Ndagano, 1996; Ruprecht, 2000, 2003; Bérard, 2009). It is worth noting that in 1998 the festival Théâtres d’Outre-Mer (TOMA) was created in Avignon, giving greater visibility to many Latin-American productions in French (Chalaye, 1998; Bérard, 2009).

All these historical and social traits of theater are common to Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Haiti. However, the Franco-Guyanese playwright and theater theorist Odile Pedro Leal (2001) draws attention to the “Getting-by System” (*Système D (Débrouille)*), specific to Black people’s artistic manifestations.

According to Pedro Leal (2001), since colonial times, *marronage*, or the Black practice of being creative to survive, made Black populations develop their own strategies of artistic manifestation in order to fight slavery in all its spheres, including cultural slavery. In this way, the *Système D* brought some important elements that contribute to a Black theater in French Guiana: the use of a language (Creole), the unsaid (especially gesture and pantomime), dance (a privileged place for the gestation of gesture and the trance of dramatic roles), and the *chanté-voyé* (“word cast”/the sending of the word directly to someone).

Pedro Leal (2001) mentions that verbal writing is the only non-Black concession of Guyanese theater and that, in this sense, its use, added to elements stemming from the *Système D*, makes Guyanese theater an ethical, theatricalized writing. For, in Guyanese theater, the scenic space of the real, once reappropriated in consonance with the *Système D*, is a theater “hidden in plain sight” (*caché-montré*). This theater presents both in festive street performative manifestations (such as Carnival) and in theatrical texts and dramatic stagings on stage (Ribeiro; Leal; Barbosa, 2022).

Thus, the adjective “Black”/ “noir” applied to theater produced in French Guiana has a historical basis and a rationale, and it continues into the present regarding contemporary production.

An Amazonian Theater

If, on the one hand, Black performance is present in Guyanese theater, on the other hand, Amazonian identity is also something considerable. Three factors differentiate the Antilles from French Guiana: (1) enslavement for the plantation system failed in the Amazon, unusually facilitating the flight of Black people and their social organization (*marronage*); (2) for a long time, French Guiana was known only as the land of forced labor (*les bagnes*), unfit for any kind of economy and receiving the most dangerous criminals and subversive people from the metropole; (3) Kourou is a sui generis Guyanese city because it has a space base in the middle of the forest, something that modifies both the imaginary and the lived experience of its inhabitants (Ndagano; Blérard-Ndagano, 1996; Silva-Reis, 2021).

It is impossible to dissociate Amazonian identity without mentioning this place and its historical-social evolution over time. Therefore, the idea that there is an extremely traditional way of life or one distant from urban realities simply because it is a space within the Amazon biome is false (Silva-Reis, 2023a). The coexistence of these different peoples, Amerindians, Black people, Europeans, and Brazilians, syncretizing their cultures among themselves, creates a point of cultural balance. This trait guides their belonging to this space, because these cultural manifestations are part of their everyday life. They are what exalt natural resources, but they also lead to the understanding of behaviors as a Guyanese people.

A very frequent feature is the Amazonian lifestyle of transmitting customs and cultural practices from generation to generation, often without political legitimation of their existence (Loureiro, 2015). Ancestrality, or plural ethnic inheritance, especially among Black and Amerindian peoples, is an identity element present in the Amazon. As regards theater, this heritage is oral, as Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant tell us in *Lettres creoles*:

Since time immemorial, right after the collapse of the hearths, the skit (*sainete*), a small, almost spontaneous comedy, appeared in places of collective life: markets, presbyteries, parish halls, small neighborhood shows, school festivities... Everyone took part, children and adults, in a natural mixture of Creole and French; and the occasions for skits were numerous. [...] Where did the skit come from? From the storyteller, of course. The storyteller telling a story before a company at night is the beginning of our theater: its language, its intonations, its

onomatopoeias, its gestures, its silent or noisy facial expressions, its dance steps, its songs, its symbolizations of water, wind, rain were an almost total theatricalization. The skit developed scenically theatricalizations of the living tale, theatricalizations that carried the seeds of many of the prejudices of modern theater: absence of stage, absence of curtain, participation and integration of the spectator in the dramatic play, distancing, all measures that aimed to recover a functionality that oral cultures, and the Creole storyteller, already mastered⁴ (1991, pp. 136–137) [our translation].

The skit (*sainete*) was something quite usual in French Guiana, since initially there was little professionalism among theater groups, and there was also a lack of performance venues and public investment for this art (Ndagano; Blérard-Ndagano, 1996). In short, theater was a folkloric practice of troupes or Guyanese community groups. Published texts by authors known in Guyanese literature appear only in the 1980s, which made theater something quite ephemeral and only experienced by small groups of spectators (Le Pellitier, 2014). Obviously, the lack of means of archiving and dissemination meant that theater was always made invisible or even considered nonexistent.

I also highlight that, as in French Guiana, Amazonian theater, in general, has always been made invisible by the total lack of knowledge among critics or academics from major research centers or national media. This leads to today's surprise at this type of study, as well as to the desire to deepen research and seek out productions in all their spheres: creation, production, and reception.

Black-Amazonian Dramaturgies

It should be noted that the success of the skits (*sainetes*) was due to the fact that they were theatrical plays that portrayed everyday life or human relations specific to the Guyanese community. They were simple plays with few characters, and most were in Creole. The status of Guyanese literary theater was born only later, with the publication of plays in printed form (Ndagano; Blérard-Ndagano, 1996; Ndagano, 2018; Fauquenory, 2023).

⁴ In French: De toute éternité, sitôt après l'effondrement des habitations, la saynète, petite comédie quasi spontanée, avait fait son apparition dans les lieux de la vie collective : marchés, presbytères, salles paroissiales, petits spectacles de quartiers, fêtes scolaires... Tout un chacun y participait, enfants et grandes personnes, dans un mélange naturel de créole et de français ; et les occasions de saynètes étaient nombreuses. [...] D'où provenait la saynète ? Du conteur bien sûr. Le conteur tirant un conte face à une compagnie de veillée est le début de notre théâtre : son langage, ses intonations, ses onomatopées, sa gestuelle, ses mimiques muettes ou bruitées, ses pas de danse, ses chantés, ses symbolisations de l'eau, du vent, de la pluie relevaient d'une théâtralisation presque totale. La saynète développa scéniquement les théâtralisations du conte vivant, théâtralisations qui portaient en germe bien des partis pris du théâtre moderne : absence de scène, absence de rideau, participation et intégration du spectateur au jeu dramatique, distanciation... toutes mesures qui visaient à récupérer une fonctionnalité que les cultures orales - et le conteur créole - maîtrisaient déjà (1991, p. 136-137).

Since my goal is to provide a brief panorama of this Guyanese theatrical creation, in order to show the current state of the art of my research in this area, I divide Black-Guyanese dramaturgies into two types: (1) Creole-Amazonian theater and (2) Franco-Amazonian theater. I propose these two terms in order to limit our scope of research and facilitate its study.

Creole-Amazonian theater is practically unpublished and little published. It is written in Creole, but it also represents the scene of the common life of Guyanese people (Ndagano, 2000, 1994). Probably the best-known name in this theater is the playwright Rosange Blérald (1928–2017), who animated the Guyanese theatrical scene for many years with her troupe Wapa. Her theater is strongly inspired by African theater, with explorations of comic, spontaneous, and popular gesture. Themes of Creole life, together with the concert-party format (a kind of festive musical staging, including gastronomic tasting), made this dramaturgy a local theater with African roots.

Biringanine Ndagano (2000) considers Rosange Blérald's plays as people's memories, putting into action historical facts of French Guiana, such as the arrival of Arabs, gold mining, and Senegalese soldiers (*Tirailleurs*), as well as discussing issues of Creole life, such as moralities among Guyanese people. These plays were essentially comic, playful, didactic and, at times, incorporated elements of Guyanese superstition and belief (such as *piaye*, a kind of curse cast). It is worth remembering that improvisation was a striking feature in the troupe's productions, with many uses of proverbs, sayings, songs, and popular gestures.

Another Creole-Amazonian playwright is Constantin Verderosa (1889–1970), who also has a vast repertoire of plays written in Creole, especially for school community audiences (parents, students, teachers, etc.). His plays also addressed everyday issues, but with a strongly assimilationist slant, in which all happiness for a Guyanese man or woman was found when characters left French Guiana to live or work in France (Ndagano, 1994).

Franco-Amazonian theater in French Guiana, in turn, is a more militant theater that deals with pressing social and political issues in the territory. This is a theater that prevails today and that has also gained more space on bookstore shelves. It is theater staged and conceived to make Guyanese people reflect on their condition as French citizens in Amazonian space. Its main representative is the playwright Élie Stéphenson, who initially wrote his plays in Creole, then in diglossia, and finally in French (Ndagano, 2018). This evolution is explained by the understanding

that not only Guyanese people should know what happens in French Guiana, but also all those who read in French.

Stéphenson wrote numerous plays that deal with the poor living conditions of Guyanese people (Braz, 2023), the emptying out of the department due to the search for opportunities in the metropole, and how illegal gold mining affects “the country” and the lives of Guyanese people, among other themes that Rodrigo Ielpo (2023) calls Guyanese situations (*situações guianenses*). Stéphenson also wrote on historical themes, such as the story of the maroon Black figure D’Chimbo, known for terrorizing French Guiana in colonial times (Le Pellitier, 2014). The author sees his theater as a political weapon for raising awareness in the region and as a manifestation of Guyanese identity (Ielpo; Stephenson; Weigel, 2022).

Many other authors have written and continue to write plays in French to this day, following the same rhetoric as Stéphenson. Among them we can cite: Odile Pedro Leal, Emmelyne Octavie, Jacques Sabatier, Fabien Lima, Yves Rollus, Grégory Alexander, Françoise James Ousénie, Harry Hodebourg, HK Bronson, Bérékia Yergeau, and others. It is interesting to note that all these playwrights are also actors, choreographers, dancers, theater directors, literati, and cultural activists in French Guiana. Their texts speak poetically about the problems of French Guiana, while also prompting reflection on social solutions. Moreover, they are infused with ethnic-racial and Amazonian issues. Some of these playwrights have won awards either for the text or for the staging of the play and are recognized in French Guiana as an important fraction of the local theater developed there today. In the appendix to this text, I present what I have been able to gather up to the present moment as a list of publications of Franco-Guyanese theatrical texts.

Other Theatricalities

It is also worth highlighting, within this brief history of Guyanese theater, its strong connection with African theater. This is due to two African playwrights who took French Guiana as a physical and imagined homeland: Jules Nago and Valérie Goma. Nago is a precursor of Guyanese theater in the 1970s, inaugurating an Africanist theatrical current and addressing themes such as the encounter of cultures, education, the value of tradition, and African practices such as witchcraft and spells (Ndagano, 1996). Goma is Congolese and responsible for adapting many texts by Black authors with ethnic-racial themes for the stage. Founder of the Théâtre de la Ruche, she

has sought to establish in French Guiana a kind of multilingual theater with multicultural themes from the Amazonian region of the Guianas (French, Dutch, English, and Brazilian).

Beyond these two playwrights, Emmelyne Octavie, a young Guyanese writer, has been standing out in the department's cultural scene for her feminist dramaturgical writing. It should also be mentioned that Octavie is an important contemporary author for bringing valuable performances of the word through the union of the poetic Slam genre with stagings and recordings of the poem-video on social networks, a kind of theatricalization of her poems. Her theatrical texts are among the most awarded in French Guiana in recent years: in 2022, for *À contre-courant, nos larmes*, the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques* – SACD (Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers) Prize for Francophone Dramaturgy; in 2023, for *Mère prison*, the Jean-Jacques Lerrant Prize at the *Journées des Auteurs de Théâtre* in Lyon and the Jeanne Laurent des lycéens 2023 Prize, in Rouen (Silva-Reis, 2023b).

It is also worth emphasizing the work of Marie-Thérèse Picard, a Guyanese author who lives in Guadeloupe and writes children's and young-adult theater. Author of *Ourson* (2009), *La Médaille* (2011), and *L'enfant* (2013), she has won, several times, the Prize for contemporary playwriting in the Caribbean - ETC-Caraïbe, in various categories. In addition, Picard directs the association *Auteurs d'ici et d'Ailleurs* and is annually responsible for conducting the *Changelle d'écriture lycéenne* prize, which seeks to value theatrical writing by children and adolescents in basic education in French schools of the DROM (*Départements et régions d'outre-mer*) in Latin America.

Another highlight in French Guiana is the theater school *Centre Dramatique Kokolampoe*⁵, which seeks to work with the idea of equitable theater through respect, valorization, and the bringing together of Amazonian cultures (Black, Indigenous, European, and South American). The school's vision consists of observing Guiana as an orographic, topographic, imaginary, and cultural theatrical stage from which new multiple Amazonian theatricalities can emerge for the world (Chambert, 2015).

One also notices, more recently, a strand of novelist-playwrights, that is, authors of novels and short stories who suddenly began to write plays. Notably, beyond Emmelyne Octavie and Élie Stéphenson, I refer here to Françoise James Ousénie, with the publication of *Adé, La Majorine de l'Oyack* (2022); to Harry Hodebourg with the play *La Tragédie du Roi Vaval* (2023); and to HK

⁵ Website: <https://www.kokolampoe.fr/>

Bronson with the dramaturgy *Après la chair* (2023). One can see that such authors value writing with many peripeteias in their dramatic works, and they write from cultural themes of French Guiana to universal themes.

Final Linkage

It is impossible to describe, show, and analyze in full the theater of French Guiana. Certainly, the sample of the small research presented here is only a panorama of the richness that theater in French Guiana possesses. It is believed that its geographic space greatly influences both its themes and its formats of theatrical existence. However, what is observed is that word, gesture, body, discourse, and images come together as essential elements of theater, alongside the power of the exuberant forest of the Amazon, forming a unique cultural amalgam.

Research on the theater of French Guiana is to unveil unknown Black performativities in seemingly unimaginable geographies, which evolve as Black history is rewritten and retold from its own time and its own spaces. It is considered that deepening investigations into theater in French Guiana is, in some way, to awaken to Amazonian theater in all its forms and modes of existence, in addition to contributing to increase an anti-racist and decolonial Amazonian theatrical cultural repertoire.

I hope that, based on the first data presented here, new researchers will feel motivated to scrutinize the still unexplored paths of Francophone theater in French Guiana, thus contributing to strengthening Amazonian Francophonie, but also to establishing a more plural, diverse, and ethnic Amazonian literary canon.

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APPENDIX

Published Franco-Guianese plays⁶:

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⁶ Many plays by the authors in this list, as well as by authors from other Amazonian regions, are still unpublished or unavailable in published form; therefore, they do not appear in the present list in this appendix.

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