

BOOK REVIEW

Brian Valente-Quinn, *Senegalese Stagecraft: Decolonizing Theatre-Making in Francophone Africa*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021. 201 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0810143654.

In his monograph *Senegalese Stagecraft: Decolonizing Theatre-Making in Francophone Africa*, Brian Valente-Quinn endeavors to demonstrate that theater in Senegal represents a singular “craft” which echoes the socio-political concerns of several generations of Senegalese. Theater is alive in Senegal, not only through the multi-pronged legacy of its manifestations and its multiple historical ramifications, but also through the plasticity of its contemporary applications.

By undertaking an archeology of theatrical practices in Senegal since the time of the William Ponty school, as well as by mapping these different “stages,” Valente-Quinn intends to shed light on the different methods of “crafting” of the Senegalese stage, or in other words, “the contextual work of stage artists as they contend with, respond to, and reconfigure the implicit rules and expectations of the theatrical stage” (6). This concept allows him to explore how theater practitioners in Senegal were historically able to commandeer the theatrical stage to deploy a critical discourse on colonialism and its aftermath, and more broadly, on patterns of domination and economic and social inequality.

The structure of Valente-Quinn’s argument essentially follows a chronological logic, beginning with a fascinating study of theatrical practice at the William Ponty school, which brought together, on the island of Gorée, students from all over AOF (*Afrique Occidentale Française*) who were destined to become the future elite of their respective countries. The style and spirit of Ponty was carried over to the French cultural centers which emerged in AOF following the creation, in 1946, of the French Union, which succeeded the French Empire. Using the example of a theatrical competition organized within the network of French cultural centers, the author demonstrates that these centers were used by their beneficiaries as platforms for exchanges and debates on the definition—political, social, and cultural—of these upcoming developing African states.

After having shown, throughout the first three chapters, the progression from a theater under the influence—of the “colonial humanism” of the William Ponty school—to the quest for a syncretic and total theater, Chapters Four, Five, and Six explore the legacies of the two founding stagecrafts. The heroization of the holy founder of Mouridism, Shaykh Amadu Bamba, via a successful theatrical tour which left a vivid memory in the minds of many Senegalese, is finely analyzed as a process of cultural hybridization at the intersection of a Sufi narrative of the hagiographic type and a popular theater attached to the education (and therefore also to the edification) of the people.


There is much more to say about this captivating work than the space here allows. The experience of the author caught up in the dynamics of the theatre company, the analysis of his acting feelings, and finally the knowledge that he draws from them in a reflective approach all underscore the richness of his immersive experience in this field. The author’s critical distance, shown vis-à-vis all types of prejudices and preconceived ideas, is especially to be commended.

Valente-Quinn’s attention to all types of dialogue (even that mediated by the television stations) and participatory expression, without limitation to any literary, aesthetic, or linguistic choice criteria, allows him to consider stagecrafts hitherto understudied in their literary and spectacular aspects because they are suspected of being either direct supporters of colonialism (William Ponty and the CCF) or tools of political propaganda for parties or NGOs (popular theater), which would automatically make them theaters devoid of literary and aesthetic merit. However, it is because the author disassociates himself from a radical posture which would refuse to pay much attention to genres of theater directly grappling with the visible structures of domination that make them structurally possible that Valente-Quinn deftly manages to extract from each of these stagecrafts its emancipatory and decolonizing potential.

This critical distance is made possible by the epistemological openness of the author, who claims in his introduction, as well as in his conclusion, a fundamental multidisciplinary for the analysis of African theaters. In order to understand the theatrical dynamic of a country and its articulation with the social fabric, it is important to be able to make room for the memory of the theater, not to reserve literary and aesthetic study only for plays published in French and performed in the North, and at the same time not to confine the brand of theater in Africa to a strictly anthropological approach, at the risk of echoing the essentialist tendencies of the constitution of the theater in Senegal and its reception from Ponty to Sorano.

Senegalese Stagecraft is a rigorously conducted, fluid, and coherent study, a valuable work that is already a benchmark in the field of African literary, theatrical, and cultural studies. It accomplishes its primary ambition, which is to present the plurality of Senegalese stagecrafts as well as their multiple connections, while showing how ultimately theater is also a “Senegalese invention,” a formula that Valente-Quinn uses to express the need, in

research on African theaters, to provincialize the western ways of doing theater.

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