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Playing in the War Zone

Brett Bailey

I arrived in Haiti in early February for a two-week stint to find a cast for the show I’m currently writing and designing, Vodou Nation, and to give training workshops to the performers I’ll be directing. It’s now mid-March. I arrived almost five weeks ago, when the threat of war was just a rumor.

Until September last year, when I made my first trip here to get a feel for the country, I had little idea of what Haiti was about aside from the common stereotypes: poverty, tyranny, vodou. I didn’t really even know where the island was.

English producer Jan Ryan of UK Arts International—who tours my South African work in the UK—had fallen for the “vodou rock” music of the Port-au-Prince–based band, RAM, and decided we would make a dynamic partnership in developing a stage show. My company, Third World Bunfight, consists of actors and musicians from the South African townships [see “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Cultural Divide?: Brett Bailey and Third World Bunfight’s iMumbo Jumbo” by Judith Rudakoff (TDR 48:2, T182, Summer 2004)]. Jan also pulled in Trinidadian director Geraldine Connor—who is based at the West Yorkshire Playhouse—to codirect with me.

During the past few months I’ve read a good deal about Haitian culture, history, and religion, trying to make sense of this convoluted, multilayered nation. I decided to tell an allegorical story of the rise and fall of a dictator (since Haiti has had its fair share of those), beginning from when Christopher Columbus made boot prints on the beach here in 1492, moving through slavery and liberation, and ending more or less now, but with an image of transformation and hope.

I envision Vodou Nation as a celebration of sorts: of the endurance and prolific creativity of an amalgamation of once-enslaved people who have managed to forge a vivid and distinctive culture, religion, and language out of so many fragments. I want to acknowledge the spirit of these people who have suffered

1. Anti-Aristide protest float on the campus of Port-au-Prince University a few days before President Aristide fell, February 2004. (Photo by Brett Bailey)
so much at the hands of the world's Big Men. But as the shadow of civil war fell across the country my upbeat ending felt increasingly like wishful thinking.

I have been fascinated with entranced performance and the interaction of ritual and drama since my return to South Africa in 1994 from a year in India. I spent several months living in the rural villages of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa investigating the ceremonies of the local traditional healers (sangomas), who dance themselves into trance to channel the healing wisdom of their ancestors. I formulated training exercises to harness similar states of consciousness in the performers I work with. Using the chants and dances of African ceremony—fused with a tongue-in-cheek pop sensibility—I model my shows on the underlying structure of these ceremonies.

In 2001, while writing a play on C.G. Jung's 1925 journey to East Africa, I underwent a 10-day initiation ceremony with diviners in a remote Ugandan village in an attempt to understand the cultural-spiritual landscape.

Vodou ceremonies, in which initiates are possessed by the vodou deities (lwa), and incarnate these often volatile spiritual personalities—each with her or his own costume and behavior—within the arena of the peristyle (temple), has immense appeal for me. I believe that working with such energies creates a force field: the way a sacred shrine blesses the landscape in which it is located.

During 1999 I spent a couple of months touring Ghana, Benin, and Togo to enrich my understanding of this phenomenon, but until Vodou Nation came along, Haiti remained a dull bleep on my radar screen.

I see the Vodou lwa as powerful externalized archetypes, and in devising my performance text I have tried to fuse these principles with the characters I am creating: Ogou, the warrior, with the political leader who gets out of control; Bawon Samedi, the cemetery Lord of the Gate between life and death, with the brother of the despot, who chooses a life of reflection and eventually brings the tyrant to his knees. Other lwa, and the various characters of Haitian mythology and carnival, make up the remainder of the dramatis personae. These characters will be brought to life by the dances of the lwa and by cartoon-style acting.

I was given five CDs of the songs of RAM to select a score from, and, with a pile of literature, set about devising the musical show, quite a challenging endeavor without a libretto: the lyrics of the songs are elliptical and enigmatic to say the least.

About 60 hopefuls turned up for the auditions—mostly dancers, as drama does not feature prominently on the cultural scene here. I selected seven of these—including Paris/New York–based Haitian choreographer, Erol Josue—to perform alongside the eight musicians of RAM. During the workshops—conducted with the aid of an interpreter, my Creole being limited to a few pleasantries—my performers and I worked on the dances and songs of the various vodou deities, doing improvisatory exercises to free the mind and body.

The contrast between the rehearsal room and the streets was startling. Angry red graffiti shouted from the walls. Time and again my car ride to the rehearsal room made hasty U-turns as armed mobs moved toward us. Everywhere, roads were cordoned off by concrete blocks, vehicle carcasses, and rubble. Smoldering rubber pyres left black bruises on the tarmac.

During the second week of my stay all hell broke loose in the northern towns of Gonaives, Saint Marc, and Cap Haitian as various rebel factions rose up and
slaughtered the stalwarts of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Tourists and Peace Corps workers left the hotel where I was housed. These pleasure-seekers and social helpers were replaced by reporters and photographers, some direct from the bloodbaths of Iraq, others fresh-faced from college and embarking on their first action-adventure.

We gathered around the bar of the grand old Oloffson Hotel, on a hillside about a mile from the center of Port-au-Prince, with rum punches in hand watching CNN footage of towns falling. Gunshots peppered the night sky.

Between visits to vodou temples and the studios of ghetto artists who fashion saintly icons out of junk and the uptown painters with their jungle can-
vases of gaudy innocence, I dropped in on academics and intellectuals to milk them for information and to run my little narrative by them. These interviews were invariably interrupted by telephone calls and radio reports heralding the approaching civil storm.

Not knowing how long the unrest might last, our group had to consider the possibility of transplanting rehearsals to England rather than continue in Haiti as planned. With this in mind, I decided to extend my air ticket by five days so as to forage for more information and to attend carnival in the sleepy town of Jacmel three hours drive to the south. The masks and costumes of carnival are the inspiration for many of the costumes I am designing.

Everywhere I went I aimed my tiny digital camera at the crazy painted buses and the bright signage that adorns buildings and shops. For *Vodou Nation* these images and the vivid paintings of Haitian artists will be manipulated by Dutch 3-D animators, and projected on a screen behind the action. I bought icons, dolls, and sculptures to serve as models to be enlarged by the prop-makers in Leeds.

By Wednesday 25 February, the day I was to have flown out, Haiti had erupted in violence. Aristide’s slum-boy thugs, the Chimer, were manning roadblocks all over Port-au-Prince, robbing people at gunpoint. I tucked my laptop with my text on it under the seat of the taxi and headed blindly into the maelstrom.

The airport was a bunfight with people desperate to leave, bribes being offered to get to the front of the queue, American women weeping in frustration. Possessing an out-dated ticket I was sent from pillar to post, and in the
end made my way back to the Oloffson Hotel while my airplane soared overhead. I was cast to sit out the revolution in Haiti’s capital.

During a previous U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915–1935) the Oloffson served as a military hospital. My bedroom is the old surgery, decked out in green tiles and with a hole in the center of the floor where the blood drained out. I am writing this by the overhead operating light.

My room is named “The Graham Greene Suite.” The author who specialized in international intrigue stayed here while writing his novel, *The Comedians*, set in this hotel during the bloody reign of Papa Doc Duvalier and his Chimer, the Tonton Macoutes.

I never thought when I arrived in Haiti that I would witness drama with such relevance to the show I am creating. I have loved the romance of writing a play about this country in this suite, while a world gone haywire booms around me. The energy has been electrifying.

All night of Saturday 28 February the city was apocalyptic with explosions, automatic gunshots, and the baying of thousands of dogs. My mind was blank, I couldn’t write. I felt numb.

Sunday news broke that Aristide had left the country. The outraged Chimer were at large on the streets and terror chewed at the hotel. Where to go if they scaled the wall?

Reporters stayed indoors, wide-eyed and frozen in place. Screams at the big wrought-iron gate drew us to a man who had just been shot, blood welling from his pelvis.

Midday we watched helicopters landing at the palace and a calm began to descend, though gunfire continued to crackle and black smoke billowed from the city square.

When we went out in the afternoon, looters were busy at work ransacking shops, the streets were littered with debris, and bodies lay bleeding by the roadside.

Late Sunday night we heard the heavy thrum of U.S. cargo planes overhead. I accompanied journalists to the airport Monday morning where about 150 U.S. marines had taken control. They stood around looking mean and macho in their fatigues and helmets. Their haversacks and trunks of ammunition lay in neat rows. A stack of Evian water glittered in the early sunlight.

They were here to restore the rule of law, they told us, until a U.N. multinational team takes over.

Later I witnessed the blazing arrival to the city center of rebel leaders Jodel Chamblain and Guy Phillipe and their soldiers in four-by-four vehicles. Thousands of jubilant Haitians thronged the streets, singing and dancing, burning posters of Aristide on bonfires while white doves flocked overhead.

Is this the end of another bout of oppression and brutality in the Haitian chronicles? Does a new era of harmony begin now? I wondered. I still wonder.

The following Friday I am still stuck in Port-au-Prince. The airport is closed indefinitely. Marines patrol the streets in their big green vehicles bristling with weapons. I communicate with the outside world via email.

Passports for those of the cast who do not yet have them are going to be hell to organize. The officer who is in charge of issuing them has been directly implicated in a battle scene in front of the palace in which thirty people were shot, four of them killed, in the theatre of the absurd that is Haiti.

My performers arrive for their first English lesson—to enable them to get by in England during their three month tour beginning in June. Their smiling, eager faces brighten my spirits. In a country of so much pain and heaviness,
what is needed more than anything is acknowledgement, investment, and opportunity for growth. My conviction to end *Vodou Nation* on a positive note is stronger than ever.

*Brett Bailey* is a South African playwright and designer. His plays have toured extensively in Africa and Europe.