

Introduction: Francophone Theatre Today

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In the wake of French colonization, exploration and trade throughout the world, the French language permeated cultures on five continents. Depending on the source of the statistics, today's world-wide French-speaking population numbers anywhere from 67 to 450 million people.¹ It is estimated that in the year 2000 there will be 500 million French speakers. French is the world's twelfth language, but next to English, the only language to be spoken on all five major continents. From such statistics we might project a community, but do these figures represent a genuinely united people? And, why, if the francophone community is growing should French governmental and cultural organizations be so concerned about the preservation of French? Before examining these questions, let us briefly outline the evolution of 'la francophonie'.

The city of Quebec, founded in 1608, was the first francophone outpost. In the aftermath of mid-eighteenth-century military defeats at the hands of the British, Louis XV surrendered the city in 1759 and the surrounding province to the British in 1760. Though Voltaire expressed the common French opinion of the time that 'but a few acres of snow' had been lost, it would not be long before the French re-embarked on colonizing projects. Napoleon I led the first wave of nineteenth-century expansionist missions, and the two ensuing Republics, the restored monarchy and the Second Empire continued his work in the Caribbean, South-East Asia, and North and sub-Saharan Africa.

In all of its colonies, the French government endeavoured to set up primary schools for native children. According to official French policy, the education of the indigenous populations was part of a 'civilizing mission' which would show the indigenous populations the benefits of colonization. Ironically, this assimilationist tactic was *de*

facto elitist, since only an urban upper class could attend the schools. Despite this drawback, the French language became the keystone of the colonial education system. French administrators viewed all other regional or ethnic languages as spoken dialects with limited local influence. French was therefore the official and generally exclusive language used in teaching since indigenous languages, including Arabic, were thought to be 'incapables d'exprimer les idées de la civilisation'.² Put simply, through its linguistic and educational policies, France promoted the French language and civilization to the detriment of indigenous languages and socio-cultural values.

As for French-speaking Canadians, the Treaty of Paris (1763) made them subject to British authority.³ Descendants of trappers, merchants, explorers, and pioneers, they clung to their linguistic and cultural heritage. Their religion and their heritage set them apart from the British since their Catholicism put them in opposition to the Protestant leaders from Great Britain. After the French Revolution, French-speaking Canadians felt that France had turned its back on their religious beliefs.

Although Canada was a cauldron of opposition between France and Great Britain, hostilities also embroiled the native populations of the Americas—the Iroquois, the Huron—as allies or enemies of the European military powers. The tribal councils of the Iroquois and Huron were not mere pawns in a European chess game, they too were trying to retain their lands and traditions, to forge their destiny in the face of potent overseas invasion. The history of French-speaking culture in Canada is inextricably entwined with the ambiguous historical situation of the French descendants: French speakers in provinces where they are in the majority—such as Quebec—or in those

where they are in the minority, find themselves wedged between a national government whose seat is in the strongly anglophone province of Ontario, a powerful English-speaking neighbour in the USA, a 'classical' French heritage from France, and a greater nation emerging from the clash between Amerindian and European cultures.

Given the domineering French policy in Africa and Asia and the French government's apparent rejection of French-speaking Canadian communities, it is perhaps surprising to note that francophone populations from outside of France founded the notion of 'francophonie'. Léopold Sédar Senghor, poet, member of the Académie française and first President of post-colonial Senegal, persistently promoted the francophone ideal. He played a leading role in organizing the annual post-independence Franco-African summits, originally held between France and the leaders of its former colonies but increasingly open to all of Africa. In 1986, francophone heads of state met at a summit conference in Paris presided by François Mitterrand. This summit was followed by others in Quebec City (1987), Dakar (1989), Kinshasa (1991), Saint-Louis in the Mauritius isles (1993), and Hanoi (1995). The summits have been attended by leaders of the former French colonies in Africa and various state representatives of Switzerland, Belgium, Monaco, Louisiana, New England, Vietnam, Laos, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Canada. The Canadian government in Ottawa sends its representatives, and the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick send separate delegations.

Despite the success of the francophone summits, all is not harmonious in the 'francophone community'. The French government, which has a *Ministre de la Francophonie*, tends to see the francophone summits as an extension of the metropolis. At the 1993 summit, Alain Decaux, the *Francophonie* Minister, called on France's African partners to fight against the Anglo-Saxon commercial and cultural invasion of francophone space. African critics wonder why Africans should wage cultural war against the English-speaking world when both the French and English-speaking economies flood the African market with diverse forms of imperialism.⁴ Furthermore, despite the Ministry of *Francophonie*, the perceived need to defend the French-speaking world, and prizes

given to authors from former colonies, most works in French written by authors from outside of France are unknown to the French. Paradoxically the vast majority of books from French-speaking Africa are published in Paris, as were the leading Africanist journals *L'Étudiant noir* and *Présence africaine* (the latter became the major publishing house for scholarly and fictional writing of francophone Africa). Though France acts at times as a neo-colonialist power, important francophone leaders are convinced that 'la francophonie' plays an important role in world affairs since it offsets the dominant role of English as the only diplomatic language. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Egyptian Secretary-General of the United Nations, said that he liked to think of French as a non-aligned language.⁵ Similarly, President Senghor supported an assembly of the former French colonies in Africa around the French language in order to avoid what he feared would be a 'Balkanization' of African countries according to African language ties. At the same time, he made it clear that France should withdraw culturally as well as politically from Africa. These supportive and critical sentiments are an integral part of the francophone situation. The idea of a francophone culture is fraught with contradiction as El Tayeb El Madhi, a Sudanese francophone playwright, intimates in his response to a question about how Sudanese writers, scholars and journalists react to the fact that he writes in French.⁶ He responds that some people encourage him whilst for others the use of another colonial language is problematic.⁷ Within the simplicity of his response lie many questions about national and individual identity.

What durable, perhaps subtle, but nonetheless significant factors can we find behind the figures, the brief history and the declarations we have mentioned above?

One of the most revealing ways to approach 'la francophonie' is to investigate francophone culture. As Vaclav Havel points out, culture plays an important role in discovering a society:

The main route by which society is inwardly enlarged, enriched and cultivated is that of coming to know itself in ever greater depth, range and subtlety.

The main instrument of *society's self-knowledge* is its *culture*: culture as a specific field

of human activity, influencing the general state of mind—albeit often very indirectly—and at the same time continually subject to its influence.⁸

'La francophonie' is a cultural product that was moulded by the linguistic, political, economic, artistic, and indeed academic exigencies of French colonization and trade. On the other hand, from the dynamic and contrasting mix of old, sometimes ancient cultures in the cauldron of relations with modern France springs a vibrant and diverse francophone culture. In the realm of theatre, francophone theatrical traditions emerge from the clash, conflict, or meeting of an indigenous culture and the foreign or imported language of French: *joual* theatre and the *théâtre des cuisines* in Quebec, epic griotic dramas of the Côte d'Ivoire, Senegalese theatre rooted in traditional participatory rites, Caribbean voodoo dramas. There is French-speaking theatre from all over Africa, the Caribbean, Louisiana, Quebec, Acadia, South-East Asia, Switzerland, Belgium, and more.

The goal of this special issue is to introduce francophone theatre today by focusing on the work of some of the leading contemporary playwrights from these countries. The sections are divided along geographic lines: francophone theatre of North America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Within each section, articles investigate contrasting types of theatre from that area.

North America

In the North American section, Jane Moss and Ingrid Joubert treat divergent aspects of French theatre in Canada. Moss's article analyses the theatre of Michel Tremblay and Marie Laberge, two of Quebec's outstanding dramatists of the past three decades. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Quebec underwent a period of severe self-questioning. In order to thwart the anglophone cultural threat of Great Britain, the USA and Western Canada, the Québécois clung to their French heritage. However, their collective patrimony was born of a colonial and religious past. France had originally colonized Quebec, and though the province had been given up to the British in the 1700s, the French heritage was nonetheless from France. Given that the

mainland French generally treated Quebec culture with a condescending sneer, it was difficult to find strength in an allegiance with the former motherland. On the other hand, in Quebec the conservative Catholic Church remained the strongest established francophone rallying point. Finding little solace in either the modern contemporary scene dominated by English, nor in the politically and culturally conservative religious establishment, playwrights endeavoured to create an agenda independent of their religious and French past and their Anglo-American affiliations to the South and West. In their new plays, popular dialect and local slang girded drama which reflected on Quebec's modern reality. Accustomed to plays from France, or Quebec plays written in classical French, some critics and audiences were shocked to hear Michel Tremblay's use of vulgar Montreal dialect in a serious dramatic production. Others, however, championed Tremblay's break with the artificiality of 'foreign' standard French, and his creation through *joual* of a poignant lyricism. His work gave the nationalist movement in Quebec a very important cultural wing, and has laid the cornerstone for a proud and innovative new theatrical tradition. This new tradition would see men and women playwrights endeavouring to come to grips with issues of social and sexual exploitation, and repressive stereotypes. In her article, Jane Moss analyses how Tremblay's and Marie Laberge's dramatizations of gender roles, family and sexuality reflect upon the social transformation of Quebec society over the past thirty years.

Moving westward to an area where French speakers are a distinct minority, Ingrid Joubert focuses on recent plays of Manitoba which adapt and adopt legendary events of the Indian and French collective past. As we mentioned earlier, the history of French-speaking Canada—and the Americas in general we might add—is inextricably entwined with the plight of indigenous civilization. Initially, the conquering Anglo-Saxon culture played down the importance of Amerindian or Native American cultures, whereas the French spoke of a 'politique de douceur' toward the Amerindians without ever officially accepting that they were anything other than 'sans roy, sans loy, sans foy'.⁹ Contemporary francophone theatre in the Canadian mid-west has

re-examined the lives of some historical and legendary figures of Amerindian descent. In her article, Joubert traces the significant evolution of the Louis Riel myth. Riel is a 'métisse' of French and Amerindian descent whose exemplary opposition to the British made him into a folk hero for the francophone minority of anglophone Canada.

Africa

Taking on issues of cultural revision in a different geographical and political context, Emmanuel Yewah investigates some of the Congo's most innovative and politically daring theatre. Highlighting the growth in theatrical groups and productions, Yewah introduces us to a number of Congolese playwrights who have used the theatre to dramatize socio-economic and political problems facing the Congo today. Although the article investigates the work of quite a few playwrights, it pays particular attention to Sylvain Bemba's work. The plays of all of the dramatists in Yewah's article stage the chronic aftermath of colonization and African dictators who have replaced the colonial powers with their own brand of oppression and hegemonic collusion with neo-colonial industrialists. Although, they show rampant oppression in Africa, the playwrights conceive of new dramatic heroes who wish to break the cycle of the past in order to found a new order disavowing the manichean European world view for a more inclusive communitarian African perspective.

By contrast, Werewere Liking, a Cameroonian playwright living in the Ivory Coast, refuses to attack leadership issues head on. In her article on Liking's work, Judith Miller shows how Liking assails the patriarchy and delves into the complex questions of maternity in Africa today. Giving a thorough exposition of Liking's dramatic techniques and training, Miller shows how Liking's pan-African aesthetic developed. Through her intercultural approach, Liking denounces breakdowns in African society while celebrating 'a strength of spirit and vital set of artistic traditions which potentially unite her audience'. Liking's KiYi M'bock theatre company works within the KiYi village arts complex in Abidjan to bring together traditional and contemporary African music, dance and drama conveying 'a

sense of dignity and wonder possible in a life in which deep cultural connections are still viable'.

In her investigation of Oyônô-Mbia's *Trois prétendants: un mari*, Hélène Sanko offers another part of this complex cultural mix. Focusing on the influence of Molière's classical French comedy on Oyônô-Mbia's play, Sanko suggests that the incorporation of French theatrical models into African drama does not represent a subordination of African culture to that of France. African playwrights borrow from the French and create a hybrid form of theatre which is not an imitation but a probing of the relationship between French and African dramatic forms.

Caribbean

Unlike the dramatists we have considered so far, Jean Métellus, Haitian poet, novelist and dramatist, wrote most of his important theatre in exile. Though a man without a country, he would nonetheless try to build bridges between his native land and his adopted home in France. In her article, Ginette Adamson analyses Métellus's desire to use the past to examine the present and to ask questions about Haiti's future. Not only do his plays *Anacoana* and *Colomb* reflect upon the relationship between the New World before and after Columbus's arrival, they also may call to our minds contemporary international politics in such places as Rwanda and Bosnia. The title of each play refers to an important figure of the past: *Colomb* to Christopher Columbus, *Anacoana* to Anacoana, a celebrated Queen of Haiti who courageously confronted the cruelty of Ovando, the Spanish governor. By focusing on historical characters Métellus challenges us to learn from the *débâcles* of the past. However, his drama's classical poetic structure, likened by some commentators to Racinian tragedy, raises for some questions about Métellus's commitment to Haitian politics and culture.

Whereas Métellus has a classical and tragic leaning, Franck Fouché, the author featured in Carrol Coates's article, blends Haitian riddle, song and dance, traditional Haitian rites, such as Voodoo, and elements of Western drama and Christian ceremonies and images. Raucous laughter is ever present in Fouché's comedies which stand in brave opposition to civil and religious hierarchies. Like all of the playwrights

discussed above, Fouché's drama confronts the historical movement from colonization to liberation. He makes ample creative use of traditions imported by the colonizers and the religious and civil culture of his own people in his endeavours to create a veritable Haitian theatre.

The articles in this collection explore divergent forms of theatre by focusing on the work of one or two playwrights from a spectrum of francophone countries. By assembling a group of articles under the heading francophone theatre, we hope to raise questions and girder the debate about francophone culture in particular, and cross-cultural dramatic influences in general: what do these differing theatres have in common, what makes them distinct, and more importantly what is each theatre in its own right?

Notes

1. J.P. Lauby and D. Maureaux. *La France contemporaine* (Paris: Bordas, 1991). See also '100 questions-réponses sur la francophonie et la langue française', edited by the Ministère de la culture, *Les Incollables* (Paris: Bac-Hatier, 1994).

2. Omar Ka. 'Une nouvelle place pour le français au Sénégal', in *French Review* (Vol. 67, No. 2, December 1993), p. 277. In his succinct and probing article, Omar Ka traces the evolution of French in Sénégal with some illuminating observations. For instance, by insisting on the purely oral usage of African languages such as Oulof and Pulaar—widely spoken in Senegal—the French authorities chose to ignore the existence of a wealth of Pullar and Oulof literature written in Arabic characters. See also, A. Davesnes. *La Langue française, langue de civilisation en Afrique Occidentale Française* (Saint-Louis: Imprimerie du gouvernement du Sénégal, 1933), p. 4.

3. The Treaty of Paris of 1763 was signed in Paris on 10 February 1763. It brought to a close the Seven-Year War between Great Britain on one side and France, Spain and Portugal on the other. Under the provisions of the Treaty Great Britain received from France: Canada and Cape Breton; Grenada and Tobago in the Caribbean; Mobile and all the French territory east of the Mississippi except the island of Orleans (New Orleans); and French possessions on the Senegal River in Africa. Britain restored to France the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Lucia, St. Pierre and Miquelon; also Pondichéry and Chandernagor in Asia. In return for Florida, Britain restored Cuba to Spain. France had already ceded Louisiana to Spain the year before during the preliminary negotiations.

4. Ambrose Kom. 'Francophonie et enseignement des littératures africaines: quels enjeux?' *Revue Francophone* (Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 1993), p. 107.

5. "'Des pans entiers de l'activité nationale deviennent bilingues", regrette Philippe Séguin.' *Le Monde* (20 July 1993), p. 4.

6. As a Sudanese playwright one would have expected him to write in Arabic, his native language.

7. Bernard Magnier. 'El Tayeb El Mahadi, dramaturge soudanais et francophone', in *Théâtre, Théâtres* (No. 102, July-August 1990), p. 64.

8. Václav Havel, *Living in Truth*. Translated by Jan Valdislav. (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 16.

9. Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984), p. 273.

About the contributors

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Carrol Coates teaches French grammar and stylistics, francophone literature, and translation at the State University of New York in Binghamton. He has been associate editor of *Callaloo* (a prominent journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters). The University of Virginia published his translation of René Depestre's first novel, *Le Mât de cocagne* [The Festival of the Greasy Pole] in 1990.

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