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Brian Valente-Quinn. *Senegalese Stagecraft: Decolonizing Theater-Making in Francophone Africa*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021. xi + 202 pp. Index, bibliography, and illustrations. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0810143661; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0810143654.

Review by Rebecca Infield, Leeds University.

The role of theatre and theatrical production in the decolonization process has been largely overlooked by cultural historians. Brian Valente-Quinn's study aims to fill this gap in scholarship but with a specific focus on Francophone Africa, in particular Senegal. Valente-Quinn takes an approach that encompasses both archival research and theatrical analysis, drawing on interviews gathered in the field, the intention being to consider the link between theatrical innovation and decolonization.

The book begins by arguing that the theatre provided a space via which colonized individuals could challenge the colonial order and "enact African myths and customs" whilst at the same time telling "stories of local rules and their confrontations with colonial forces" (p. 3). Valente-Quinn returns on a number of occasions to the idea of combining "French-style dramaturgy" and "African forms of music, ritual, and dance" (p. 3), reminiscent of Christopher Balme's concept of "syncretic theatre" in which a performance uses "forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other." [1] Valente-Quinn seems to want to build on this somewhat theoretical stance and illustrate exactly how syncretic theatre actually worked and continues to work on the stage during and after the colonial period. His book aims to do this by focusing on three elements of performance: text, embodiment, and place. These terms are taken both literally and in a broader, metaphorical sense, "text" in particular encompassing the "para-text" and events surrounding the creation of a performance such as interviews and correspondence.

Senegalese Stagecraft is split into six chapters and organized largely chronologically, starting in the mid-colonial period of the 1930s. Chapter one presents an in-depth account of the workings of the infamous École Normale William Ponty and the teaching that took place at the institution. Valente-Quinn places theatre workshops within the context of colonial education and deftly illustrates how theatre was taught to further entrench and justify the civilizing mission. Although the colonial authorities believed the school to be a "symbol" for the "success of new approaches to colonial education and administration," Valente-Quinn shows how the *pontins* who attended the institution employed a syncretic theatre which often drew on "re-enactments of African customs and ceremonies" (p. 28). Nevertheless, when these shows were performed to audiences both in colonial countries and in the metropole, they were framed as representatives

and examples of indigenous life—not as innovative texts.

Chapter two moves location and time period to focus on the decade leading up to independence in the 1950s. The author situates the change in approach to theatrical production within the post-war re-consideration of empire and the “abolition” of the “colonial subject” in 1946 (p. 41). The focus shifts to theatrical productions performed in French “cultural centers” within the colonies as opposed to schools or festivals which we encounter elsewhere in the book (p. 41). Due to funding from the French state, much of what could be staged in these centers was still dictated by European tastes and European understandings of what “good” drama meant. There was significant debate as to whether performances which drew less on the written word could be considered as “theatre” (p. 54). This existential questioning of how to define theatre was particularly pertinent given the advent of the theatre of the absurd in France and other European countries at this time. Valente-Quinn places these cultural innovations in a political context, arguing that they provided a springboard from which future elites and leaders could “try their hand” at mobilizing local communities (p. 59).

Chapter three engages with the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts, an event which has already received considerable attention from scholars such as Ruth Bush and David Murphy.^[2] The innovative and original research of the previous chapters is less prevalent at this point; however, the discussion of *Lat Joor*, a play that combined political history with theatrical performance, is certainly enlightening. Valente-Quinn suggests that the performance at the festival in Dakar in 1966 was more “accessible” to the local Senegalese audiences in attendance than, for instance, French director Jean-Marie Serreau’s staging of Aimé Césaire’s *La Tragedie du roi Christophe* for which the festival is most famous (p. 72).

The following three chapters focus on three different theatrical spaces; what Valente-Quinn calls “Sufi, pageant plays,” television, and popular theatre (p. 81). Here the originality of the research gathers steam with a meticulous analysis of *Bamba Mos Xam*, a touring production that started in 1968 and continued for fifteen years. The piece recounts the life of Shaykh Amadu Bamba, the founder of the Sufi order of the Murids. The case study is used as a turning point in Senegalese theatre practice. Valente-Quinn convincingly illustrates how this change in approach permitted a polyphonic understanding of religion to be expressed. This was especially important in a newly independent Senegal as the work addressed the question of religion but without adhering too overtly to one particular religion. This was an important distinction, given the religious diversity of Senegal and the need for inter-community understanding at this crucial moment in the defining of a newly formed national identity.

The focus on television as a space via which the population was able to express their frustrations and disillusionment with the independent government is a significant contribution to postcolonial understandings of theatrical production. The author demonstrates, using a number of case studies, that the main criticism of these works is concerning corruption and he argues that technology, the television in particular, provided the ideal “private, domestic” space in which these issues could be addressed (p. 105). Some may argue that the inclusion of a chapter on television in a book on theatre is irrelevant, but Valente-Quinn convincingly demonstrates that television provides a means by which government corruption can be held to account, and the ills of Senegalese society more generally can be criticized in front of a large, national audience.

The final chapter on popular theatre returns to and addresses more directly the question of decolonizing theatre in the contemporary era. Valente-Quinn draws on personal experiences

following and participating in productions by the company Kàddu Yaraax. Much discussion is dedicated to how exactly “popular theatre” can be defined in contemporary Senegal, the author’s conclusion being that it should not be regarded as a form, but instead a “practice” open to a great deal of interpretation (p. 147). Although the new approaches to creating theatre, such as moving away from the proscenium arch or actively trying to engage local communities in the onstage events, have received a mixed reception in Senegalese cultural circles, Valente-Quinn encourages us not to consider these productions as failures but as a means of exposing underlying inequalities in contemporary society.

Senegalese Stagecraft is an ambitious, wide-ranging study which seeks to broaden our understanding of what we qualify as theatre and how this contributes to the process of decolonizing artistic production. Valente-Quinn provides a significant contribution to Francophone theatre studies by forcing us to re-consider our modes and models of what constitutes theatre and theatre practice. The author rightly encourages us as readers and scholars to move away from continual comparisons with European theatre production and instead consider places such as Senegal as sites ripe for theatrical innovation and experimentation.

NOTES

[1] Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 2.

[2] See for instance: David Murphy, “Archiving the First World Festival of Negro Arts (Dakar 1966): recuperation, nostalgia and utopianism” *World Art* (2016) no. 6 (1), 125–146 or Ruth Bush, “Making History: Performances of the Past at the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts,” in David Murphy, ed., *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 107–122.

Rebecca Infield
Leeds University
R.Infield@leeds.ac.uk

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