

## **ROBERT ROBERTSON**

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### ***The Kingdom, an Opera about the Haitian Revolution***

**Robert Robertson**

This is an account of the evolution of the opera *The Kingdom*, its relation to Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Kingdom of This World* and the Haitian Revolution, and the significance of its subject today. I hope to provide a glimpse into why a work which deals with one of the most exposed nerves in European and North American society has been pushed into the back of this society's psyche.

#### **The laboratory of musical cultures**

The idea for *The Kingdom* was born in the teeming activity of two inner city schools in London - in Southwark, then in Camberwell, where I taught music from 1979 to 1981. My classes comprised an astonishing mix of different cultures and faiths: children from Chile, China, children from families from the different cultures of the Indian subcontinent, from Italy, from Spain, from Greece, from Turkey, children from local families just down the road, the occasional middle-class child from further down the road, and children from a culture which had featured this type of mix much earlier - the Caribbean.

The Caribbean, this wonderfully diverse civilisation, a mix comprising West African cultures, East Indian, Chinese, Spanish, Latin-American, English, Irish, Scottish, French, Dutch, Syrian cultures, as well as influences from the previous inhabitants of the

Caribbean islands. This laboratory of musical cultures caught my imagination and led me to find out more about its origins. Consequently I was drawn to Caribbean literature, particularly the novels of the great Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, who for me evoked most effectively of all the sense of this rich variety which is the energy of Caribbean culture, like the creative energy I experienced daily in my classes in the inner London schools.

In my teaching I would draw on the musical traditions and experiences of my pupils. They would work from these and compose songs (both new ones and their own arrangements of traditional melodies), instrumental pieces, and works involving a synthesis of music, dance, mime and theatre.

Ever since I'd left university, on completion of my composition studies and music degree, I'd wanted to create a new form of opera, a seamless unity of music, dance and theatre.<sup>1</sup> This unity had existed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian origins of this form, and in most non-Western forms of theatre, including the variety of theatre traditions from various parts of the African continent. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Richard Wagner had brought to the form his concept of a total art work, the *gesamtkunstwerk*. However I found Wagner's operas rather static in terms of dance - somehow dance didn't really become a significant part of Wagner's total art works. Wagner called them music dramas, but they could not really be termed music and dance dramas. However I found in Caribbean culture the complete unity of music, theatre and dance I was looking for.

### **The libretto - the spine of the opera**

As a potential subject for an opera I was particularly drawn to Carpentier's short historical novel *The Kingdom of This World*. In it he gives a vivid account of the transformation of Saint Domingue, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the wealthiest French Caribbean colony, into Haiti, the first Black republic in the Western hemisphere. Not only does he present events which are ideally suited to a transfer to the medium of theatre, but in *The Kingdom of This World* Carpentier describes a history which is full of music and dance - integral elements in the struggle for emancipation from slavery and the creation of an independent state.

In 1980 I read C L R James' *The Black Jacobins*, a detailed history of slavery and the slave rebellions in the West Indies, and I spent a year researching traditional Haitian music. I

worked on the adaptation of Carpentier's book and drew from it the libretto, the structural spine of *The Kingdom*. I didn't want the pace of the action in the opera to be slowed down by the music, as in previous operas, so I decided to use a dynamic form to structure the libretto, a form based on the dynamism of maximum contrasts, the *montage of attractions*, which Eisenstein had conceived in his early work in the theatre and had developed in his films.<sup>2</sup> By this means I could have the combinations of music, theatre and dance all take place in real time, as well as having mostly short cinematic scenes, building via strong contrasts to one or two climaxes per act, with what I call *climaxes of stasis* at the opposite end of the spectrum of theatrical tension.

### **About Carpentier**

Alejo Carpentier was born in Havana in 1904. His father was Breton, his mother Russian. He earned his living as a journalist and also became a musicologist (he later wrote a history of Cuban music). He was imprisoned in 1927 for signing a manifesto against the dictator Gerardo Machado. In 1928, the French Surrealist poet Robert Desnos, on a visit to Havana, helped Carpentier to escape to Paris. There he found himself in the middle of a lively Surrealist circle, meeting many artists, writers and poets, amongst them Queneau, Leiris, Prévert, Vitrac, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Masson and Artaud. In 1933 he published his first novel, *Ecué-Yamba-O*, based on his earlier researches in African-Caribbean culture. In 1939, because of the Nazi threat he returned to Cuba. In 1943, in the company of his wife Lilia and Louis Jouvet, he visited Haï ti.

This visit led to his concept of 'magic realism' and inspired his novel *The Kingdom of This World*. The influence of Artaud is discernible in this novel, in his description of the plague of poisonings instigated by Macandal, one of the first leaders of what became the Haitian Revolution<sup>3</sup>, as well as in his evocation of Macandal 'signalling through the flames' when he was burnt at the stake by the French colonists.<sup>4</sup> Both of these relate to themes mentioned by Artaud in his influential *The Theatre and its Double*, a book which also influenced my libretto for *The Kingdom*.

### **Haitian Summer**

Following my research and on completion of the libretto, I felt that I had to experience first-hand the sites where these extraordinary events took place, extraordinary because they led to the overthrowing of one of the richest and most powerful cultures, by a

people barely surviving in conditions of enslavement so appalling that in Saint Domingue, thousands of slaves died every year, to be replaced methodically by another generation brought over in slave ships from West Africa.

In 1981 I spent the summer in Haiti, and visited historical sites like King Henry Christophe's palace of Sans Souci, and his stupendous Citadelle on the Bonnet l'Evêque mountain, near Cap-Haï tien, which are featured in Act 3 of the opera.

My visit to Haiti also gave me the opportunity to speak to many people about their history. I found that all of them, from professors and diplomats to guides on the street, and people in bars and cafes, knew about the Independence movement and its history, sometimes in considerable detail. In Cap-Haï tien, where most of the events shown in the opera took place, I was fortunate to meet, in a newspaper shop, a *vaudou* master drummer, François Cyriac, who earned his living as a local disc-jockey and as a newsagent's assistant.

By an extraordinary coincidence, I was there when his *vaudou* church, the Temple Nago, in the harbour district of Cap-Haï tien, celebrated one of the key events in the Black Independence movement, the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man*. This celebration, which is held each year during the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> August (the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary) involves a reconstruction of the original ceremony. The master drummer invited me to attend it, as I'd explained to him that the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man* was to be one of the key scenes in Act 2 of *The Kingdom*. At about 10.30 that evening he took me to the Temple Nago:

*From the main street we hear now and again faint new sounds of drums, we turn into a steep dark alleyway, go down into a tiny courtyard and face the vaudou temple, a small house with glassless windows, people are looking inside, craning their necks through the windows, the rattling of drums is louder, this place is well hidden amongst the frayed buildings*

*François goes in first, the courtyard outside the temple is packed with people, he is arranging a seat for us, we squeeze in through the tightly packed crowd inside, the torrent of the drums descends on us all at once, the light is bright after the stumbling darkness outside*

*our ears adjust themselves to the loud rhythmic stretches of the drums, the ogan player striking a piece of scrap metal with a metal beater repeating the rhythm to*

*keep the three drummers in time, the ogan rhythm rides over the drums tripping deftly over their beats yet strict in time with the tiniest of changes in the patterns*

*the houngan<sup>5</sup> rises to greet us as we enter and gives up his seat for us, behind us the engine of the three drummers thunders away propelling us through the night, in front a tight circle of gracefully restrained dancing women, all in light blue serge dresses, all sizes, all ages, all shapes*

*the houngan shakes the asson (the gourd rattle) to call down the gods*

*at times a woman becomes possessed by a loa, a mystère, a spirit, a god, they move aggressively, or gently and lovingly, taking on the characteristics, age, appearance, gestures, tone of voice, personality of the spirit who is possessing them, riding them,*

*out of the tight anticlockwise gently circling dance around the central wooden post down which the spirits descend, a woman leans, spins or trembles out of the circle to move away with wild motions, to be gently restrained, protected, supported*

*then the woman sits and recovers in some quiet corner*

*the houngan keeps an eye on everything all aspects of the ceremony, uses his assistant to help, to prevent anyone getting hurt while possessed, man or woman, the houngan halts the drummers when he feels the moment is right, to bring people back to earth, to get them to feel the earth under their feet again*

*the drums start again on a different rhythm, the people sing the vaudou hymn of consecration (mainly women sing) the solo voice starts, either man or woman, answered by the chorus, and the great oscillations between solo chorus carry through the song*

*the vaudou priest and his two assistants draw an elaborate vévé<sup>6</sup> in white flour on the earth floor, underneath are drawn symbolic letters*

*there are reminders of what had happened in the historic Bois Caï man ceremony, the houngan stops the drummers, as the drums roll to a stop dancers spin round each at her own speed spinning out of the tight circle at the centre, spinning outwards*

*the houngan explains what had happened at the same hour on that night in Bois Caï man in 1791, this is followed by a long reading from the bible from Exodus, verses explaining in detail the preparation and sacrifice of a lamb*

*then more singing and dancing, the backbone of the drum rhythms running through the body of the songs, then a long speech about the early slave revolts telling their story ending with Dessalines<sup>7</sup> and all sing a song to Dessalines*

*various grunts and snorts begin to punctuate the music and speeches and sermons and explanations, the houngan stopping the music whenever he has something to say*

*he directs everything, from tending to a girl who has become deeply possessed and almost unable to stand to the smallest details to do with the entry of the black pig which has in the meantime been loudly snorting outside*

*it is led in slowly as it snorts and snuffles around it is brought in to the centre of the circle*

*the excitement increases, a string of different songs follow on the same dance rhythm, the speed increasing gradually increasing, the houngan still very much in control but mounting excitement, propositions in speeches now greeted with clapping and enthusiastic cries of aie! aie! aie! aie! and rolls of applause on all the drums*

*the pig shrieks a few times but not often it is led to a large enamel basin with rum in it, which it drinks noisily*

*now a huge machete-like sword knife appears, waving above the heads of the crowd*

*the circle closes round the pig the drums thunder at red-hot speed steadily accelerating, I feel this is the moment I stay seated not wanting to see the pig's throat slit*

*they have killed the pig François tells me, the large bowl which previously held the rum is now held to the pig's throat to catch the blood*

*a bowl of popcorn is passed round, some is sprinkled on the pig's body, the houngan sprinkles rum on the pig's body*

*then follow more explanations, more songs and a long speech about slavery, mentioning Canning, Wilberforce, and Sonthonax who had given thousands of rifles and ammunition to the slaves*

*then the speech moves to present-day concerns, contemporary politics, nuclear disarmament, apt criticisms of the superpowers*

*paraphrasing the original ceremony, like Boukman the houngan and his assistants take bowls of the pig's blood and call people up to have the sign of the cross marked in blood on their forehead*

*I am asked to get up I stand and the houngan dips his finger in the bowl and on my brow I feel the wet cross being traced*

*this, the last part of the ceremony is felt in the slackening relaxed rhythms of the tired drummers it is approaching 3 in the morning and the vaudou service has been going nonstop for over four and a half hours*

*the people slowly leave, the pig's body is dragged away scrubbing out the remains of the flour drawing now scattered into the dust only a few drops of the blood remain, soaked into the earth*

I quote this extensive extract from *Haitian Summer*<sup>8</sup> to give a sense of the powerful and controlled energies involved in the *vaudou* ceremonies, which were the main fuel for the thrust of the Independence movement. These religious ceremonies, with their complex interaction of ideas expressed in movement, dance, various levels of trance states, music, speeches, explanations, propositions, and their complete syncretism of West African and Catholic elements of worship, provide a powerful focus for action.

In this article I have consistently used the French word *vaudou*, as *voodoo* is so heavily incrustated with European and North American superstition, with Hollywood's ignorant evocations of chaotic orgies. We have been formed by and we have grown up with these simplistic superstitions, to the extent that they can completely over-simplify and distort the views we have about Haitian culture. For example, the reason the ceremonies were held at night during the colonial period wasn't because they were associated with 'black magic', but because the slaves worked all day, and night was the only time they could assemble to worship and have a communal exchange of ideas, maintain their cultural and spiritual identities, and plan public actions. Night also provided the necessary secrecy needed for the planning of subversive actions and revolts. The Independence movement and the creation of the state of Haiti in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be clearly explained without understanding the complex and all-important characteristics and role of the *vaudou* religion in the fabric of these historical events.

### **Back in the UK**

On my return from Haiti I wished to share my experiences and something of what I'd learnt there, with the classes who had unknowingly led me to explore in this direction in the first place. It was when I tried to do this that I met at first hand some of the problems I would later encounter after *The Kingdom* had been successfully produced and performed.

I showed my classes slides and examples of the instruments I'd bought in Haiti: a set of bamboo horns, and a conch shell trumpet. My slides showed parts of the annual reconstruction of the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man* - not the night-time ceremony, but the

one I attended the next afternoon, at what was thought to be the original Bois Cai man site of the ceremony, in the countryside near Cap-Hai tien.

These slides showed the musicians (the *vaudou* drummers), the women dancing anti-clockwise round the huge trunk of a giant *corossol*<sup>9</sup> tree, the extrovert *houngan* who had encouraged me to take the photographs, a young girl who had become possessed by a middle-aged male god, and the people who attended the ceremony, some of whom were middle-class and wearing their 'Sunday best.'

The reaction to these images from the African-Caribbean British children in the classes was one of acute embarrassment. I was totally unprepared for this response, which completely shattered my desire to share the excitement and wonderment I had experienced at the ceremony. Subsequently I realised that this embarrassment was due to a secondary effect of racism: an extreme distrust and conscious distancing from cultures which are still perceived by Eurocentric people as being under-developed, and worse, as being primitive and uncivilised. The reaction from the African-Caribbean British children was also an extreme form of the normal generational lack of respect shown by young people when they are confronted by their parents' culture. This feeling is exacerbated by the primacy of Western (mostly North American and European) corporate culture, and its attendant prejudices.

Unwittingly I had divided my classes both culturally, and worse, racially. However, instead of putting me off composing the music for *The Kingdom*, this experience provided me with additional motivation. If the subject produced such intensely negative feelings, then the ignorance and lack of respect towards the culture portrayed in the opera would have to be overturned, making the opera itself a deep incursion into the less pleasant and mostly unvisited parts of our society's unconscious.

### **A film about the drug trade**

From early 1982 to the summer of 1983, I wrote the music for each scene of *The Kingdom*. It was in 1981 or early in 1982 that I saw a fascinating documentary about the Colombian drug trade on television. The use of music set this documentary apart from others I'd seen about this popular subject. In this film the changes in the Colombian drug trade, and the



corresponding changes in Colombian society, were underlined and clarified by the type of music heard at different periods.

At the beginning of the film, when the drug barons were largely local, their favourite style of music was the *llanos* style, music for harp and guitar from the cowboys of the *llanos* plains in Colombia and Venezuela. One could see this style being performed by favoured musicians in recording studios funded by the drug barons. When the power behind the drug trade shifted to the Italian mafia, the style of dance music changed, and a more international disco sound was favoured: the style of the dominant music followed the style and taste of the dominant culture. Underpinning this were musical elements which didn't change: the extraordinarily loud and raucous playing of the trombone bands at the funerals of the victims of the drug gang wars.

This phenomenon, where the style of the music reflects the character of a society, and the changes in the style of the music follow the changes in society, became the key idea underlying the structure of the music for *The Kingdom*.

### **Orchestration, style and society**

This technique became another way of avoiding Wagner's dominant legacy in the form of the *leitmotif*. The use of the *leitmotif* wasn't really suited to the libretto as *The Kingdom* is more about the dynamics of historical forces than the interaction of individual human relationships. Instead of the *leitmotif* I decided to use style itself as a key means of structuring the music. Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* provided me with a useful model. In this late work, Beethoven uses an extensive array of musical styles, almost one for each variation. Some variations are stylistically retrospective, with echoes of historically earlier styles, while others pre-figure Chopin, Webern and even a boogie-woogie stride bass. Yet Beethoven still achieves an astonishing coherence and forward motion in the work, despite the fantastic array of styles he uses in it.

Then arose the question of an orchestra, the traditional support for the voices in the vocal score for an opera. I decided that I didn't need an orchestra throughout the work - besides I didn't like the continuous orchestral tapestry running through 19<sup>th</sup> century operas, with its complex weaving of leitmotifs and waves of sound underlining the emotions of the characters on the stage. Though I conceived *The Kingdom* as an opera which would work

in a cinematic way, I didn't want to mirror the mainstream Hollywood films of the forties with a 19<sup>th</sup> century style redundantly continuous orchestral score. This was another reason why the Colombian drug trade documentary also became a useful model - I would have only the instruments I would need to express the nature and personality of the society at each particular point in the opera. Consequently not only did the style of the music change as the society portrayed in the opera changed, but the instrumentation changed too, creating a *horizontal* orchestration, one not more or less fixed throughout, but continually changing and evolving.

The first act is dominated by the brass and woodwind, a military band line-up which reflects the dominance of French colonial rule in Saint-Domingue. The second act takes on a different instrumental colour, that of the string quartet, a milder more recreational sound which evokes weakening French rule. The military band sound returns in Act 3, which shows the last days of Henry Christophe's reign - the first Black King of Haiti, who liked the military band sound. Act 3 is a neo-colonial reflection of Act 1, where King Henry Christophe uses the trappings of colonial rule (fine uniforms, fine titles and French-style rituals of recreation and worship) to keep the new state of Haiti under his control. Then in the fourth and final act, in the unravelling of the state following the death of Henry Christophe, the fragile sound of the solo acoustic guitar remains.

This horizontal instrumentation reflects the changing characteristics of the European influences in this period, from the 1750s (Act 1) and the late 18<sup>th</sup> century - the 1790s (Act 2), the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Act 3) and the 1820s (Act 4). Underlying and piercing this European instrumental layer is the West African influenced *vaudou* music, which the slaves had brought with them to Saint-Domingue. Here the instrumentation is more or less fixed: the large 'mother' drum, the medium-sized middle drum and the small drum, all kept in time by the *ogan* player. (The *ogan* is a sort of cowbell or other resonant piece of metal struck with a metal beater). At various points this Haitian/West African instrumentation changes: in Acts 1 and 4 an ensemble of four bamboo horns appears (I believe that their music is closely related to the Dahomean ivory horn ensembles). In Act 2, one of the slave revolts is heralded by a polyrhythmic fanfare on conch shells. In the beginning of the first act, the French colonial layer of music is presented as dominating the slaves' music layer, and as the opera progresses the music of the slaves becomes increasingly powerful and dominant.

*The Kingdom* begins in an outdoor market in Cap-Haï tien. The scattered calls of the market traders are counterpointed with the rigid four-square rhythmic structures of the French military band which passes by in the street. This military rhythm is soon to be juxtaposed with the supple pulsating rhythms of the West African-influenced music of the slaves.

### **Orchestration and climax**

However, in spite of these ideas for the orchestration for *The Kingdom* I felt I needed an orchestral sound, a big sound for the big historical climaxes shown in the work: in Act 1 the burning of Macandal at the stake, in Act 3 the burning of Henry Christophe's palace, and the hurricane which completes the opera at the end of Act 4. I envisaged that each of these three dynamic climaxes would be heightened by a superimposition of all the music which had been heard in the opera up to that point. My idea was that these climactic events, historical paroxysms, were really an ignited sum of many previous much smaller events.

Technically the only way these parts of my score could be achieved was by having a pre-recorded tape. It was this tape which became my orchestra, a multi-track recording which could be projected into the audience at these climactic points, and which would provide the necessary orchestral scale, but without the huge expense of an orchestra, one which would largely be idle during the other scenes.

### **Voice and Society in *The Kingdom***

Along with the tape score and the instrumental score, there is of course the key element of the vocal score, which I wrote at the same time. My models for the vocal score were twofold: the singing style of southern Africa and Haiti, and Moussorgsky's opera *Boris Godounov*.

*Boris* provided an excellent model, because in his opera Moussorgsky presents a series of historical events, and the role of the chorus, which shows aspects of the Russian people, is vital. In this work the chorus functions as the leading character or hero. From this mass of voices the key individuals emerge, and their role in the historical outcome of events is shown on stage. I was strongly attracted to this idea, as it enabled me to circumvent the

traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century vibrato-laden operatic voice, which I find causes harmonic havoc in opera choruses and melodic mayhem in vocal solos. Moussorgsky was able to avoid both of these shortcomings, as he drew on the powerful Russian choral tradition in his operas. Another tradition where the choral singing produces a glowing fusion of clear harmonies is found in South Africa. I found an equivalent in Haiti one afternoon, in an empty sun-filled street in Cap-Haï tien:

*A lorry, full of women returning after a day's work in the fields, stops at the traffic lights just outside the open doorway. The clear harmonies of their song fills the street, a glowing sound of richly blended voices.<sup>10</sup>*

## **Two Cultures**

The second act of *The Kingdom* takes place during the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a period of increasing turbulence and violence in Saint-Domingue, influenced by the French Revolution. This act shows us the context and principal events of the second major slave revolt, led by the slave of Jamaican origin, Boukman. I called this act *Two Cultures*. A key scene in this act features the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man*.

### ***The Cérémonie du Bois Cai man***

To avoid detection by the French, the slaves held their religious ceremonies late at night, after their daily work was finished. This activity was a key factor in the Black Independence movement, as these gatherings permitted the free transmittal of news, information, and the planning of future revolts, as well as enabling the maintenance of the slaves' identity, dignity, and spiritual traditions. The ceremonies also provided an important focus for the bringing together of people originally from different West African nations, people from a wide variety of religious traditions, practices and beliefs.

In the darkness we hear the loud cicada-maracas, then the deep slides of three bass drums, electronically slowed down to a physically deep pitch. The slaps on the mother drum indicate the first few heavy drops of rain, which gather momentum into the three powerful planes of tropical rainsound: near, middle distance and far. Then emerge 35 voices intoning a list of fourteen Ogouns, from the Dahomean pantheon of gods.

Out of the darkness of a thunder-filled night, the powerful figure of Boukman, the Jamaican *voudou* priest or *houngan*, first makes his appearance, already possessed. He

sprays the assembled slaves with perfume (and the audience, as they become part of the *vaudou* ceremony as spectators, as in an actual ceremony). The perfume is a syncretic influence of Catholic aspergillation.

During the first of a sequence of dances, Boukman makes a *vévé*, a symbolic flour drawing on the stage. He then addresses the slaves. In his speech (which has survived in written records from the time) he tells of what he has overheard from the French colonists' conversations about the French Revolution, and the resulting nascent movement in France to abolish slavery. As in the ceremonies I attended at the Temple Nago in Cap-Haï tien, and nearby in the countryside, at the presumed location of the original ceremony at Bois Cai man, the priest's key phrases are punctuated and underlined by rolls on the *vaudou* drums.

At the end of Boukman's speech everyone applauds, and Ti Noel leads the gathering in the first hymn and dance, in a sequence of accelerating dances and choruses. A pig is brought in and given rum to drink, in preparation for its sacrifice. A woman appears, possessed, dancing and whirling a machete above her head. As the dance accelerates she cuts the pig's throat with the razor-sharp machete. Boukman calls out "Aiebobo!" - the signal to bring the music and dance to a halt. Then he calls together three slaves who went on to play key roles in the Independence movement: Jean-François, Biassou and Jeannot.

Placing his index finger in the bowl of fresh pig's blood, he traces the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the three leaders, who each swear an oath of allegiance to Boukman, against the background of the increasingly distant sounds of thunder, and rain.

### **The search for a director**

I finished writing the music for *The Kingdom* in 1983. I spent the summer of that year looking for a theatre director who would be ready to mount a production of the opera, as the work hadn't been commissioned. I met with several theatre directors. Then Jo Welan, the administrator of the Black Theatre Cooperative at that time suggested I contact Rufus Collins. Rufus had been an actor with the Living Theatre, and before that had worked as a dancer. After his time with the Living Theatre, he became known as a director of West End musicals. So by the time I met Rufus, he had directed plays, dance productions (including ballet) and musicals, but he had never produced an opera, something he dearly

wanted to have the opportunity to do. With the Living Theatre Rufus had worked using a wide variety of different theatre techniques, especially combinations of theatre, movement and music, where these media were given equal importance. A close interaction with the audience were a key part of the experience of performances by the Living Theatre, and Rufus would have become familiar with the ideas of Antonin Artaud when working with Julian Beck and Judith Malina.

I met with Rufus in London and we went over the libretto and score of the opera. At this time he was a resident theatre director at the Engelenbak Theatre in the centre of Amsterdam. A few weeks later he told me that the administration at the theatre had accepted the opera for production in early 1984. They had been looking for a large-scale work to start the new year, and *The Kingdom* was deemed suitable.

In September 1983 I was invited to Amsterdam for three days of auditions to select the cast of 35 actors/singers/dancers. No previously existing theatre company was suitable for *The Kingdom*: we had to start from 'scratch' and choose a cast with the necessary mix of black and white actors.

As well as the abilities needed for the roles in the opera, Rufus was looking for 'types' who corresponded to the historical figures in the work, very much along the lines of Eisenstein's 'typage' method of selecting actors for his films.

For two days we were short of a Henry Christophe, then later on the third day, as if by miracle, he appeared. Ed Gumbs looked just like Henry-Christophe's surviving portraits! And he had the necessary *gravitas* for the part.

Another lucky break came when Rufus and I were walking in Kalverstraat in Amsterdam and Rufus saw the Martiniquan choreographer Jean-Firmin Guion. He had worked with him before, but hadn't known he was in the Netherlands at this time. Guion had had (like Rufus) a training in ballet, but he had also studied Caribbean and West African dance forms. He proved to be an ideal choice for the choreography for *The Kingdom*, where he hybridised balletic forms with Caribbean movement in the *Animal Dances* scene, and the Pauline and Soliman duet, as well as creating the vibrant choreographies for all the scenes involving the *vaudou* dances, including for the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man* scene.

With the help of the Engelenbak administration, musicians were found to record the pre-recorded parts of the score, as well as to realise the electro-acoustic superimpositions. They found a choral director, Jos Schohaus, to train the cast to sing in several parts.

Because of the scale of the work, Rufus took on a Co-Director, the Surinamese theatre director, Henk Tjon. He was essential in the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man* scene, which Rufus asked him to direct. This was because Henk had had first-hand experience of similar ceremonies in the inland areas of Surinam, where escaped 'maroon' slaves had kept to their West African traditions as strongly as the Haitians.

During the autumn of 1983 the rehearsal floor of the Engelenbak Theatre shook to the rhythm of the dancers' steps for the *vaudou* dances, and moved much less to the demure steps of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century courtly dances, in which the cast also had to be trained.

Back in the UK at this time, I was making the difficult transition out of teaching into office work, so much of what happened that autumn I heard about after the premiere of the opera. Prior to the first night there had been an intensive period involving over sixty rehearsals and workshops, from mid-September right through to the opening performance on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January 1984.

I'd been invited over for the dress rehearsal. Before it began, I found myself sitting in front of a group of over sixty participants, including costume and lighting people.

### **The first night**

By the time Friday 13<sup>th</sup> January arrived, the activities over the previous months at the former warehouse for storing sugar from the West Indies (which is what the Engelenbak Theatre used to be) had been noticed by the Dutch arts journalists. The story of Haitian Independence had been told in the press, and there had been several long articles about Rufus' work to date.

On the first night the theatre was full. At the end, Rufus and the cast called me on to the stage to acknowledge the applause, and to my astonishment I could see people beginning to stand up. This was to happen at all the subsequent performances in Amsterdam - all

received standing ovations. Around eighty people each day had to be turned away as the theatre could only seat two hundred.

### **The Amsterdam run**

The relatives of many of the cast were unable to see the performance, so an extra 15<sup>th</sup> night was arranged to accommodate them. I was initially turned away at the last performance, as a theatre official explained that it was sold out.

Rufus had successfully transmitted and expressed the spirit of the work to the cast, the theatre and the audience. He had added some wonderful ideas. Taking up the cinematic character of the work, he had the unsuspecting audience enter the theatre space to arrive right in the middle of a Caribbean market, where the cast, as market traders, sold them carrots, citrus fruits and mangoes. At one performance I noticed a member of the audience sitting through the whole work with several oranges in his lap.

Rufus had assembled an extraordinarily multi-talented cast, including a lighting team who had devised an intriguing system using silhouettes of the Citadelle and shadows on stretched sheets to suggest various scenery, so that cumbersome sets had not been necessary. This was especially effective as the work was performed in a space with the audience on three sides.

Rufus' production had the total unity of music, theatre and dance which I had wanted, and the work had succeeded as an example of total theatre. Unusually for total theatre, *The Kingdom* had *not* been collectively devised, but had been through-composed in great detail as an opera, so in its realisation it had all the force of largely uncompromised artistic decisions. And it was uncompromised in its sense of direction.

### **A three-camera recording of *The Kingdom***

Rufus had the foresight to have a three-camera video recording made of the whole Amsterdam production of the opera. As well as giving a sense of the focussed energy of the work, one can also see in it highly effective details of the production, like the sculptural use of light on the bodies of Jean-François, Biassou and Jeannot in the conjuration section of the *Cérémonie du Bois Cai man* scene, and the evocative interplay of light and shadow underlining Jean-Firmin Guion's expressive and sensual choreography for the Pauline and Soliman bathing dance.



As Rufus died in November 1996, aged 61, this film is the only tangible record of his tremendously exciting production of *The Kingdom*.

### **The Society of West End Theatre (SWET), London**

The head of SWET flew over from London to see the production. He was interested in setting up a version of the opera for the West End. I was informed that in its current form *The Kingdom* was too long for a West End audience: it would have to be cut by an hour. I felt that in Rufus' production several scenes had been over-extended, but Rufus and I could not agree as to which parts of the opera should be cut. I was concerned that a West End production might involve an increasing amount of compromises, until the original work would lose all its individual character and punch to become a flaccid and sugary musical. The idea was dropped, but our disappointment was mitigated by a steady stream of excellent press reviews of the opera.

### ***The Kingdom* tours**

In the summer of 1984 The Dutch government funded a very successful tour of The Netherlands, where *The Kingdom* was presented in much bigger theatres in Rotterdam, The Hague, Leiden, Utrecht and Groningen. Performances were mostly sold out, except in The Hague, where audiences proved to be more conservative in their taste.

### **Possibilities in Berlin and London**

At the Engelenbak Theatre there was talk of interest from a theatre in Berlin, who wanted to host the Amsterdam production, but nothing came of it.

Rufus gave me a list of his theatre contacts in London, so that I could meet with them to set up a new production of the opera in the UK.

### **The London meetings**

In order to write reasonably dispassionately and factually about the way *The Kingdom* was received in London, one has to take into account the mechanics of the cultural and intellectual context of that time. Under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher the door which led to experimentation and new forms in the arts was being firmly shut.

However at the Greater London Council there *was* interest in funding a new production of the work. As the GLC (the administrative body which governed London at the time) was lead by left-winger Ken Livingstone, Margaret Thatcher abolished it.

One of the contacts on Rufus' list watched only the first few minutes of the film of the opera and immediately stated that it was a piece of community theatre. Unaware of the years of work which had gone into the creation of *The Kingdom*, and unwilling to spend more than a few minutes of his time watching the improvised beginning of the work, he made the mistake of thinking that the whole opera was just a piece of devised theatre.

I tried other avenues. Due to the success of the opera there was interest from various people in the contemporary music community in London. One screening of the videotape of highlights from *The Kingdom* prompted an invitation to a piece of music theatre. Part of this piece showed semi-naked blacked-up white students wearing rasta wigs, pretending to be circus animals under the lash of the ring master's whip.

From these experiences it became clear to me that there was a disturbing psychological distance between what I was showing and what was being perceived.

At that time few classically-trained musicians had any knowledge of or respect for Caribbean and African musical traditions. Many looked unfavourably on music which used keys and modes, both of which are used extensively in *The Kingdom*. The later advent of the Minimalist composers, then the Neo-Romantic composers, created some leeway for the use of keys and modes, but only in these specific idioms. At a meeting of composers I was given to understand that *The Kingdom* was viewed as a 'Black' opera, instead of being understood to be a result of the hybridisation of various cultures.

### **Some conclusions**

Because of our ignorance of their power of resurgence, the self-perpetuating cycles of violence portrayed in *The Kingdom* continue their nefarious existence, as has been evidenced most recently in this Haitian Bicentenary year. And the legacy of ignorance surrounding the history of slavery survives in the latent and noxious forms of different types of psychological and institutionalised racism. For example, the colonial period of our history is still a well-kept secret and isn't adequately taught in our schools.

As long as this climate of ignorance continues, mutual suspicion, misunderstanding and lack of respect will continue to thrive between black, white and mixed communities, perpetuating an equivalent to apartheid-like positions. Those with these prejudices will never experience nor be able to understand a work like *The Kingdom*. This opera can only be performed successfully in a society where mutual understanding and respect can be achieved between these communities. Surely communities with such shared and intertwined histories, albeit in a formerly frequently violent context, should be not entirely without hope of a future peaceful and culturally enriching co-existence?

Recent sad developments in Europe – the ugly re-emergence of extreme right-wing ideologies – make it more urgent than ever that we read and teach what C.L.R. James and Alejo Carpentier wrote about the Haitian Revolution. What they uncovered about the historical roots of our cultural diversity is crucial to an understanding of our mixed cultures. From them we can learn how, in practical terms, we can foster and maintain a mutual respect for one another, and continue to be inspired by each other's rich cultural traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Robertson, 'Film and the Ocean of Music', *Filmwaves* #7, 1999, pp. 28-29.

<sup>2</sup> *S.M. Eisenstein, Selected Works, Volume 1: Writings, 1922-34*, ed. by Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), pp.39-58.

<sup>3</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le théâtre et son double* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1964), pp.21-47.

<sup>4</sup> Artaud, *Le theatre et son double*, p.20. Cf Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. by Harriet de Onís (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books Ltd.), 1975, p.31.

<sup>5</sup> The name for a male priest in the *voudou* religion.

<sup>6</sup> A sacred drawing used to call down the spirits.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806), the revolutionary General who presided over the proclamation of Haitian Independence in 1804. He became Emperor of Haiti in 1804, and was assassinated in 1806.

<sup>8</sup> An account of my research visit to Haiti in 1981, before I composed the music for *The Kingdom*.

<sup>9</sup> Soursop.

<sup>10</sup> From *Haitian Summer*.

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