

Dramaturgy for Once on This Island

Haiti

Once dubbed the “Jewel of the Antilles,” Haiti is now the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Its history has been plagued by tragedy—natural disasters, political turmoil, poverty and famine, racial discord, and disastrous power struggles—but its people are resilient and its culture enduring. Despite their harrowing past, Haitians have the distinction of being the first people to execute a successful slave revolt, making theirs the first free black nation in the world. Although more than 90 percent of the population lives in abject poverty (only one percent of the population owns 60 percent of the fertile land and earns 44 percent of the national income), their culture is remarkably festive. They wear colorful clothing, decorate shantytowns and rundown buses with vibrant murals and artwork, and their primary religion, voodoo (an integration of African slave spirituality and enforced Catholicism from French colonialists) is grounded in music and dance. As the Haitian politician and diplomat Jean Price-Mars says:

“A Haitian could be accurately described as one who sings and suffers, who toils and laughs, who dances and resigns himself to his fate. With joy in his heart or tears in his eyes he sings.”



Haitian Culture:

Despite its tumultuous history and recent turmoil, Haitian culture is remarkably resilient. The people of Haiti have retained a deep connection to their roots from colorful art to exciting music and dance to storytelling to Haiti's primary religion, Voodoo, (also spelled Vodou).

During the colonization of Hispaniola, Africans from many different tribes brought their customs with them. These beliefs were blended with the native Taino Indians of Haiti, along with the influence of Spanish and French Catholicism. A wonderful blend of customs and cultures came from this interesting amalgamation.

Storytelling is an integral part of Haitian culture. As in *ONCE ON THIS ISLAND*, the storyteller provides his listeners with tales of ancient times, customs, beliefs, history and heroic deeds of the Haitian people. At its core, storytelling is a theatrical event; singing, dancing, and narrative are all intertwined to create an immersive communal experience.

Haitian art is notable for its brilliant colors, naïve perspective and sly humor. Big, delectable foods and lush landscapes are favorite subjects in this land of poverty and hunger. Going to market figures prominently into the subject matter as do jungle animals, rituals, dances, even the gods appear, evoking the African past.

For many Haitian people, dancing is deeply rooted in almost all of the important events of life, beginning with the christening of a child, and continuing beyond death. People dance in religious ceremonies or to celebrate or supplicate for countless needs or in honor of ancestors. In Haiti, dance is a positive statement of life.

The Voodoo religion is also emblematic of Haiti's vibrant culture. Voodoo is an African word for Spirit and represents the positive relationship between humans and spirits. Voodoo is often mistaken for black magic, witchcraft, and evil. This misconception possibly came about because it has been misrepresented in movies with the "Voodoo doll", symbolizing an enemy which may be cursed with misfortune, pain and even death by thrusting pins into the doll. This is not a part of traditional Vodou, which encompasses philosophy, medicine and justice as well as religion.

Voodooists believe in a distant and unknowable creator god named Bondye. Because Bondye does not intercede in human affairs, believers direct their worship to subservient spirits called Loa (also spelled Lwa or L'wha). Each Loa is responsible for a particular aspect in life.

In *ONCE ON THIS ISLAND*, the peasants pray constantly to the gods in order to gain favor and avoid their wrath. The four gods depicted are: Agwé, Asaka, Erzulie, and Papa Ge. While these characters are unique to the musical, their origins derive from the history of Vodou.

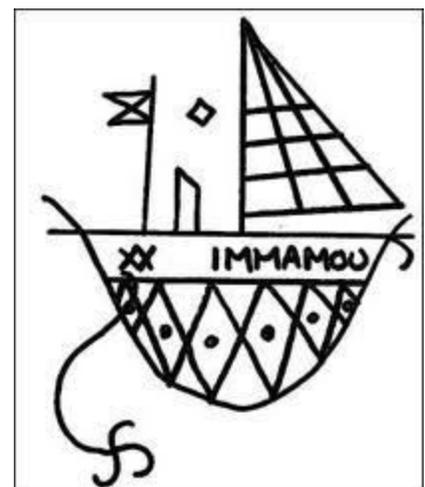
GODS

AGWÉ- Iwa of Water

Name: Often referred to as Admiral Agwe. He is sometimes invoked as "Shell of the Sea" and "Tadpole of the Pond."

Appearance: Visualized as a mulatto with green eyes.

Personality: Understanding, patient and kind, He can also be cruel to those he does not like. It is said that he can bestow all the



riches, gold, and jewels that have been lost at the bottom of the ocean. He likes military uniforms and gunfire.

Patronage: Protector of seafaring men. Under his jurisdiction are not only all the flora and fauna of the sea, but all the boats that float upon it as well.

Colors: White and blue

Appearance: Tall and very handsome, he is light skinned with green eyes.

Symbols: Boats, small metal fishes, paddles

Offerings: Champagne, liqueurs, cakes, white sheep, white hens

Catholic Counterpart: St. Ulrich, usually depicted holding a fish

ASAKA- *Iwa* of Agriculture

Name: Also referred to as Papa Zaka, Mazaka, or Kouzen, Azaka's name is thought to be pre-Columbian, from the indigenous Taino Indian language, either deriving from *zada*, meaning corn, or *maza*, meaning maize.

Appearance: Azaka (or Papa Zaka,) wears the traditional dress of a peasant: straw hat, denim suit, and red neckerchief. He always carries a straw bag on his shoulder and wields a machete.

Personality: He is a hard worker and has a large appetite, preferring the simple foods of the Haitian peasant. He functions as a reminder of a shared inheritance: of peasant roots, family links, and a deep relationship with the soil.

Patronage: The patron of agriculture, Azaka is responsible for ensuring successful crops and harvests, and is an especially strong spirit for his people, the long-suffering mountain farmers of Haiti.

Colors: Blue, red

Symbols: A *makout*, pipe, machete, blue *paket kongo*

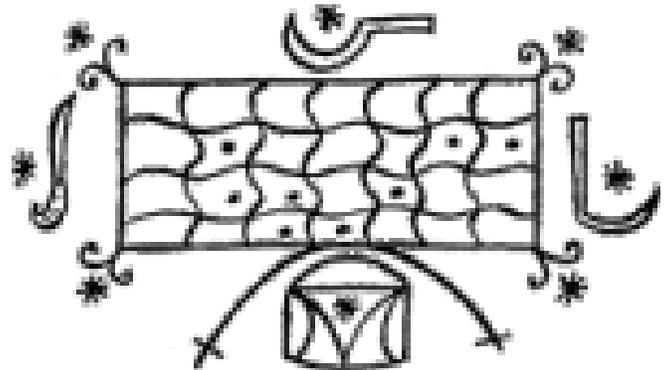
Offerings: Cassava bread, sugar cane, rice and beans, tobacco, *kleren*

Patron saint: St. Isidore, a devout farmer who was helped to complete the agrarian toil by guardian angels.

ERZULIE- *Iwa* of Love

Name: Sometimes called Ezil Freda or Ezili

Appearance: Envisioned as a feminine, light-skinned mullatress wearing a crown and surrounded by jewels and finery.



Personality: Considered the epitome of charm, she is lazy (she spends her whole days painting her nails instead of working) and temperamental. She is polygamous but wears three rings to signify her principal lovers. She can be jealous and vain, hopelessly demanding and never satisfied.

Patronage: Patron of love, concerned with all aspects of beauty

Colors: Pink, pale blue

Symbols: Checkered heart, white lamp with a white bulb

Offerings: Sweet cakes, pink champagne, perfume, makeup, Virginia Slim cigarettes, white doves

Tree: Laurel

Catholic Counterpart: Mater Dolorosa de Monte Cavrio

PAPA GE- *Iwa* of Death

Name: The name Gede actually encompasses an entire family of spirits, presided over by Bawon Samedi, the lord of all Gede. The family also includes Gran Brigitte, the Baron's red-eyed wife, Bawon Lakwa, his slow-witted brother and keeper of graves, Gede Fouye, who digs the graves, Gede Loraj, who protects those killed by the bullet, and Gede Janmensou, who is never drunk.

Appearance: He delights in an old coat and pants and a torn hat. Vile to behold, he is often depicted with a cigar between his teeth. He also often carries a staff or a cane. His hat varies, sometimes depicted as a fedora, otherwise more traditionally as a top hat with a skull.

Personality: A powerful *Iwa*, Gede bites with sarcasm and mocks the upper classes.

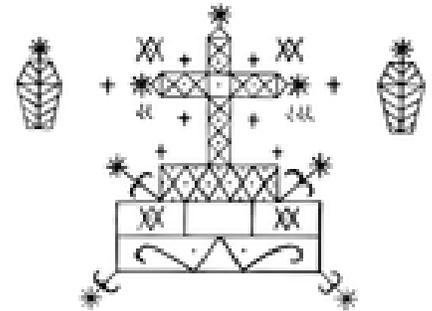
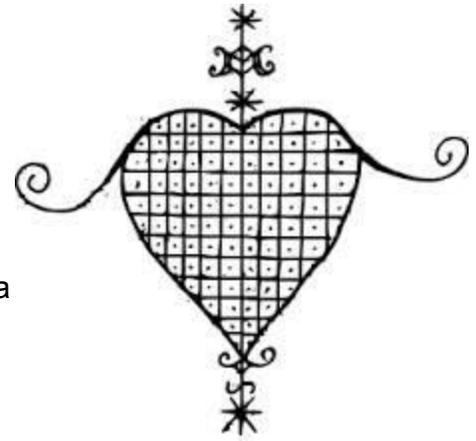
Patronage: Patron of the dead, he is also the protector of children and patron of ancestors.

Colors: Purple, black, white

Symbols: Skulls, black crosses, shovels, hot peppers.

Offerings: Black rooster, black goat

Catholic Counterpart: St. Gerard



Why Haiti?

When Rosa Guy read THE LITTLE MERMAID, she was so moved by the sadness and beauty of the Hans Christian Andersen tale she wanted to adapt it in a fresh way. She chose the island of Haiti as the setting for her version of the story and she incorporated many of the details of Haitian life she observed while living there. Guy's book in turn became the inspiration for ONCE ON THIS

ISLAND, which is infused with Haitian influences from the deeply rooted class divisions to the vibrant musical culture of the peasants to the great wealth and staggering poverty that exist side by side.

The rigid social distinctions on the island were based not only on wealth, but on skin color and ancestry. Understanding the roots of the story will give us better insight into the origins of the complex society the characters inhabit.

Haiti is located in the Greater Antilles, a chain of islands in the Caribbean. The country occupies the western, smaller portion of the island, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. The island was discovered by Christopher Columbus on his first voyage across the Atlantic in 1492. Columbus named the island Hispaniola, or Little Spain.

Many European nations, including Spain, Britain and France, held sovereignty over the island, but by 1667, the French gained control from Spain and formally claimed it as Saint-Domingue. The country is often called the Pearl of the Antilles because of its natural beauty.

The rich natural resources of the islands led the ruling Europeans to introduce a plantation system to cash in on their financial potential. The system created large estates that were mass farmed to cultivate local agriculture, including coffee, cocoa, cotton and sugar cane. Economically, the occupation was a runaway success, with Haiti becoming France's most prosperous colony in the Americas. But Haiti's riches could only be fully exploited by importing up to 40,000 slaves a year. For nearly a decade in the late 18th century, Haiti accounted for more than one-third of the entire Atlantic slave trade. Conditions for these people were atrocious; the average life expectancy for a slave on Haiti was 21 years.

By 1791, African slaves far outnumbered their European rulers by over three to one. At the peak of Haiti's prosperity, the slave population totaled at least 500,000; by comparison there were only 32,000 whites and 28,000 free blacks living in the colony.

What followed was a history of social segregation leading to the formation of a caste system dividing society into different classes. The caste system in ONCE ON THIS ISLAND resembles Haiti where the three-tiered caste system assigned social status to people based on the shade of their skin. This had significance in everyday lives affecting education, employment, love and marriage. The division of the social structure was: at the top, the white elites. These were free whites, divided socially between the plantation-class (grands blancs) and the working-class (petits blancs); in the middle, the mulatto, (grand hommes called affranchis) were the wealthy ruling class descended from the unions between early French settlers and their black slaves. The affranchis had legal and social advantages; they became a distinct class in the society between whites and slaves. They were able to get some education, own land, gain sizable wealth and attend certain French colonial entertainments. The grands blancs, however, were still considered socially and politically superior. The black slaves (noirs), most of which had been brought from Africa, were at the bottom of society.

The constant contempt towards the African population pushed the slaves to mobilize an insurrection. Led by former slave Toussaint l'Overture, the enslaved began rebelling against the planters in 1791. Napoleon Bonaparte, then the ruler of France, dispatched French troops to capture l'Overture and restore both French rule and slavery. l'Overture was taken and sent to France where he died in prison in 1803. What followed was a long period of insurrection. Ultimately, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of l'Overture's generals and himself a former slave, led the revolutionaries and in 1803 the French forces were defeated.

On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the nation independent and renamed it Haiti. Haiti was the first black republic in the world, and the second nation in the western hemisphere after the U.S. to win its independence from a European power.

Nevertheless, as decades passed, class distinctions between lighterskinned Haitians of mixed blood and black former slaves continued to separate the people of the island. For all the fighting and bloodshed undertaken to create a free country, the Haitian peasant class still found themselves socially, politically, and economically weaker than the mixed population. **ONCE ON THIS ISLAND** explores these post-revolution themes and examines the power that love has to mend this divide.

History

1492 Christopher Columbus lands and names the island Hispaniola, or Little Spain. Haiti (meaning “mountainous country”) is the name given to the land by its indigenous peoples.

1697 The island loses its place as the preeminent Spanish colony, and Spain cedes the western part of Hispaniola to France.

1791 A group of former slaves, led by Toussant Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, organize the first successful slave revolt in history.

1804 On January 1, after driving out Napoleon’s troops, Haiti becomes the world’s first free black republic and the first independent state in the Caribbean.

1806 Dessalines is assassinated, leading to a civil war between a black controlled north and a mulatto-ruled south. Over the next century, 17 of the country’s 24 presidents are overthrown.

1915 The US invades Haiti under the premise that the racial friction is a threat to US investments in Haiti. The US withdraws troops in 1934, but maintains fiscal control until 1947.

1956 Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier seizes power in a military coup. He declares himself president-for-life and establishes a dictatorship.

1971 Papa Doc dies. His son, JeanClaude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, continues his father’s brutal reign.

1978 Baby Doc’s widespread corruption has extremely detrimental effects on the Haitian economy and he is forced out of power.

1990 Former Roman Catholic priest Jean-Bertand Aristide becomes the first freely elected Haitian leader. One year later, he is overthrown in a military coup and forced into exile.

1994 The US government leads a multinational force to restore the island’s constitutionally elected government to power. By October, Aristide and other elected officials return.

1996, Aristide steps down and his top aide and former prime minister Rene Preval is elected President, leading to six years of economic growth.

1998 Hurricane Georges destroys 80 percent of Haiti’s crops, killing more than 400 people.

2000 Aristide is re-elected, followed by an economic recession.

2003 Vodou is recognized as an official religion, on par with Christianity.

2004 President Aristide is exiled and Preval is reelected president. Severe floods hit southern Haiti, leaving more than 2,000 dead or missing.

2008 Food prices in Haiti soar, leading to protests among lower class citizens, many of whom survive on less than \$2 a day. Nearly 800 people are killed and hundreds injured as Haiti is hit by a series of devastating storms and hurricanes.

2010 Up to 300,000 people are killed when a magnitude 7.0 earthquake hits the capital Port-au-Prince, the worst in 200 years.

2014 one percent of the population owns 60 percent of the fertile land and earns 44 percent of the national income.

Sources Of the Story

My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl by Rosa Guy

Rosa Guy's tropical retelling of "The Little Mermaid" is the gorgeous, tragic love story of Désirée, a beautiful peasant girl who devotes herself to the handsome, aristocratic young man whose life she has saved. When his upper-class family feels that Désirée's skin is too dark and her family too poor for a boy destined for power and wealth, Désirée proves that she is willing to give everything for love. (from Google books)

A brief biography of Guy's fascinating life and prolific career, courtesy of *The New York Times*:



Ms. Guy's own childhood was like something from a fairy tale, though not the kind suffused with light. Rosa Cuthbert was born in Diego Martin, Trinidad, on Sept. 1, 1922. (News accounts have erroneously given the year as 1925 and 1928.)

At 7, Rosa arrived in Harlem with her 10-year-old sister, Ameze, to join their parents, who had moved to New York to seek a better life.

Their mother died two years later, "leaving us," Ms. Guy said in a 1965 interview, "with a tyrant of a father, who was terrified at the prospect of raising two girls in the corrupting influence of the big-city life."

He soon married a well-to-do woman, and for a brief halcyon period, Ms. Guy recounted, the girls "were swept from abject poverty to a situation where we were being taken to picnics on the weekend in a chauffeur-driven car."

The marriage foundered, and the girls resumed life with their father, whose behavior was increasingly erratic. By the time Rosa was 14, he too had died. To support herself and her sister — Ameze was too frail for the task — Rosa left school for factory work in the garment district. The sisters were eventually shunted through a series of orphanages and foster homes. Hearing the personal narratives of the children she met there, Ms. Guy said, made her realize that her vocation lay in storytelling.

Before turning to writing, she studied acting at the American Negro Theater, a Harlem-based group of the 1940s where Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte received early training. With John Oliver Killens and others, Ms. Guy founded the Harlem Writers Guild in 1950.

Ms. Guy was a passionate participant in midcentury black nationalist organizations, and in more traditional civil rights groups. Her first book, “Bird at My Window,” a critically praised novel for adults published in 1966, told the story of a gifted young black man crushed by systemic poverty and violence.

An early marriage, to Warner Guy, ended in divorce; their son, Warner Jr., died in 1995. Ms. Guy’s survivors include five grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. Among her other books are “Children of Longing” (1971), a nonfiction volume of interviews with African-American youth she compiled after the assassinations of Malcolm X and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; a trilogy of young-adult novels featuring Imamu Jones, an inquisitive adolescent boy; several picture books; and the adult novel “A Measure of Time” (1983), about a self-made woman’s rise amid the Harlem Renaissance.

For all their surface bleakness, Ms. Guy’s books were far from hopeless. Characters often transcended their circumstances through newfound self-awareness and, in particular, through the capacity to forge durable bonds with others.

“She loved to write about love,” Ms. Angelou said on Wednesday. “If you thought a situation called for a kind of mournfulness, she was the one to laugh and turn music on and dance.”

The Little Mermaid, by Hans Christian Andersen

All of Andersen’s fairy tales are autobiographical in one way or another. However, “The Little Mermaid” reflects the author’s inner life as well as his life in the world. It was inspired by Andersen’s

obsession with Louise Collin and her brother Edvard—the daughter and son of Jonas Collin, Andersen’s most influential patron. In the tale, Andersen transforms himself into the mermaid hopelessly devoted to the prince, who stands in for both Louise and Edvard. The mermaid’s amphibious nature reflects the author’s own uncertain sexuality: both are alienated creatures living below the surface of their worlds, pining for acceptance.

Andersen documented his affections for the Collins in numerous letters and diary entries. In 1830, Andersen was smitten by Edvard, a 21-year-old law student at the time. The two became great friends and Andersen confided his affections for the lad solely to his private journal. Then, in the autumn of 1832, the author became infatuated with Louise and articulated his devotion in letters. Unfortunately, she was already in love with someone else, whom she eventually married. So, Andersen returned to his most enduring passion for Edvard. However, in the spring of 1833, Edvard’s engagement was also announced. In response, Andersen wrote him an emotional goodbye, saying, “I have been able to deceive myself into believing that intimate friends can exist in this world...Everyday you distance yourself more and more from me...[M]y pride gives in to my love for you! I do care for you so much, and despair that you cannot, do not want to, be the friend I would be to you, if our positions were reversed... I wish you well! In your new position you will acquire many friends but none who will love you as I do.”

Confused and emotionally shattered, Andersen reached a dead end in his writing. Jonas Collin prescribed a tour of Europe and secured a stipend for Andersen’s trip. Abroad, Andersen encountered the 1811 fairytale “Undine” by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, in which the water sprite Undine marries a human knight in order to gain a soul. Andersen wholly transformed “Undine” and used it to represent his thwarted relations with the Collins. In particular, Andersen changed the ending, making the mermaid—himself—the victor. In de la Motte Fouqué’s version, immortality comes through love and procreation; in Andersen’s, the mermaid is given the chance to acquire immortality through works—which we can take to mean Andersen’s literary work. In a letter to a friend, Andersen once wrote of “The Little Mermaid” that “it is... the only one of my works that has affected me while I was writing it.” He went on to say, “I don’t know how other writers feel! I suffer with my characters, I share their moods, whether good or bad, and I can be nice or nasty according to the scene on which I happen to be working.”

Creators:

Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty won the Tony Award, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards and received two Grammy nominations for their score of the Broadway musical *Ragtime*. For the songs and score of Twentieth Century Fox's animated feature film *Anastasia*, they garnered two Academy Award nominations and two Golden Globe nominations. They are recipients of the 2014 Oscar Hammerstein Award for Lifetime Achievement, and in 2015 were inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame.

Their mutual theatre credits include *Seussical* (Grammy nomination, now one of the most frequently-performed shows in America); *Once On This Island* (eight Tony nominations, London's Olivier Award for Best Musical); *My Favorite Year*; *A Man of No Importance* (Best Musical, 2003 Outer Critics Circle Award); *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life*; *Dessa Rose*; *Lucky Stiff*; *The Glorious Ones: Rocky*; and *Little Dancer*. (2014 world premiere, Kennedy Center).

They are Council members of the Dramatists Guild of America, and co-founders of the Dramatists Guild Fellows Program for Emerging Writers. They have been collaborators for more than thirty years.

Glossary:

Arrogant: Having too much pride and treating others with undeserved inferiority.

Beauxhommes: A French term that literally translates to "beautiful man."

Eucalyptus: Tall trees with leaves that produce oil commonly used for medicinal purposes and heavy wood used as timber.

Grands Hommes: A French term that literally translates to "great man."

Jewel of the Antilles: A description of Haiti, the Caribbean island, in the 1800's, when the colony was at its most prosperous.

Napoleon - an Emperor of France from 1804 to 1815. He is famous for engaging in a series of conflicts now referred to as the Napoleonic Wars. During his rule, France had conquered a large portion of Europe including Spain, Poland, Italy, Switzerland, Croatia, and the Netherlands. When the Haitian population rebelled from French rule, Napoleon was in power and dispatched a large force of soldiers to quell the uprising. The Haitians overcame the French soldiers and gained their independence.

Plantain: A type of green banana, usually fried. It is a food staple of island cultures.

Putting on Airs: To act snobbish or superior to those around you.

Superstition: A widely held belief or idea not based in reason.

Tempest: A very strong windstorm.

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