

Why Haiti?

And again I would say:

“My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who break down in the prison holes of despair.”

And on the way I would say to myself:

“And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, the sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear...”

- Aime Cesaire, “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” (1943)

When we see Haiti in the news today, it is usually about the challenges the country faces trying to rebuild after last year’s devastating earthquake. There are, of course, many challenges, and Haiti does need our help, but it also needs our respect and our honest attention. The history of Haiti is endlessly complex, as rich with joy and inspiration as tragedy and oppression. When Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared the Republic of Haiti independent of French rule on January 1, 1804, Haiti became the first black nation to expel colonial rule and served as a beacon of hope for those fighting for civil rights across the globe, including in the newly formed United States, where chattel slavery was still legal. The Republic’s epic 13 year battle for freedom forged an alliance between former slaves, defectors from European armies, and indigenous peoples that created and developed a contemporary culture that resonates its ancestral foundations. Haitian connections to African culture and its siblings throughout the African diaspora abound, despite persistent international political struggles that continue to command the persecution of Haitian indigenous cultural traditions. Although the recent earthquake in Haiti has inflamed the struggles Haitians continue to have to realize the ideals of their founders, the seeds for Haiti’s future triumphs are held in that cultural legacy which speaks to its strength, dignity and grace.

We chose to set our production of “Ti Jean and His Brothers” in a Haitian-inspired setting because we wanted the opportunity to celebrate and honor the beautiful music and the breathtaking art, the determined idealism and the enormous faith, that have characterized Haiti’s history. We hope that an encounter with our production may remind you to keep these elements of the Haitian experience alive in the local and national conversation.

The play also reminds us that we must all face evil on our own terms. We hope that, like the people of Haiti, and like Ti Jean, we have the courage to take on this enormously chaotic and unjust world with ingenuity, radical faith, and maybe even a mischievous glint in our eyes.

Megan Sandberg-Zakian, Director
Kera Washington, Musical Director
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