

PLACEHOLDER

Presented by Fronteiras Theatre Lab in association with the Colonial-Era Caribbean Theatre and Opera Network.

Written and performed by Catherine Bisset.

Dramaturgy by Jaïrus Obayomi.

Directed by Flavia D'Avila.



Catherine Bisset is a Scottish actor of Jamaican and English heritage who started her training with Edinburgh Acting School (EAS) in 2019 where she achieved her Diploma in Speech and Drama from Trinity College London (with distinction). Catherine is often cast against type: she played Mary Queen of Scots in Jen McGregor's *Eggshells* and she also played the lead role in *Macbeth*. She was recently the head artist leading a verbatim development project entitled *Toxic Thrivers* supported by Stellar Quines.



Jaïrus Obayomi is a director and dramaturg with a strong interest in new writing development and the experience of performance, in script editing and translation. A member of the Classical and Contemporary Text MA programme at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Jaïrus has an MLitt in Playwriting and Dramaturgy from the University of Glasgow, where her final dissertation, a recasting of *The Bacchae*, drew on ideas relating to West African diaspora, translation theory, postcolonialism and visibility, as well as her undergraduate Classics background. Jaïrus is interested in audio drama and recently directed *HIDE/BOUND*, an experimental piece based on the selkie myth and looking at the politics of metamorphosis through various lenses including womxnhood and queer identity, toxic masculinity, online radicalization and eco-sustainability. Jaïrus has facilitated spoken word and Science Communication projects with Edinburgh-based group, Illicit Ink, and worked as an arts administrator for the black-led touring opera company Pegasus Opera.



Flavia D'Avila is a Latin American theatre director and researcher based in Edinburgh. A graduate in English and Drama, she is writing her PhD on devised syncretic theatre. Flavia has directed and produced original work with her company, Fronteiras Theatre Lab, both in the UK and internationally, including award-winning show *La Niña Barro* and Jen McGregor's Italian Triptych, *Volante, Canto X* and *Screech*. Freelance directing credits include Jen McGregor's *Fragmental*, Debbie Cannon's *Green Knight* and *The Remarkable Deliverances of Alice Thornton*, Mara Menzies's *The Illusion of Truth*, and Dave Robb's *The Devil in the Belfry*. Flavia has been a Review Editor for the Scottish Journal of Performance and visiting tutor at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Edinburgh Acting School.

Director's note

When Prof. Julia Prest first contacted me about setting up the Colonial-Era Caribbean Theatre and Opera Network (CECTON), I wasn't sure about my role as a collaborator given my position as a Postcolonialist. As an interculturalist, however, CECTON appealed to me. I then pitched the idea of creating a new piece of theatre that would communicate scholarly work to a non-specialist audience but would also be enjoyable - and dare I say, even *useful* - to academics working in the same field.

Placeholder has not been a straightforward piece to create, reflecting the methodological challenges faced by the CECTON scholars, and unlike other similar work I have done before, is based on various people's studies, not just one. Our starting points come from studies about theatre and opera performances in St Domingue and Jamaica and the chilling fact that ads for runaway slaves used to be published on the same pages as ads for those shows. The title comes from the practice of sending domestic servants to hold seats for their masters and mistresses in the theatre before the performance. Minette was a real-life Creole opera singer whose poetically licensed form here serves as a metaphor for the Haitian Revolution. Though rooted in historical fact, my wonderful collaborators Catherine and Jäirus have chosen to focus on the questions the research and archives cannot answer, the silences and the unknown. We hope you enjoy this performance as much we have enjoyed imagining ways to fill those gaps.

Writer's note

As a first-time writer, the idea of translating academic research findings into a script was a hugely daunting prospect but not entirely unfamiliar one. In my day job as a researcher at the Scottish Government, we are always trying to find creative ways of presenting research evidence to different audiences, but it was a pretty terrifying challenge nonetheless given the longest thing I ever written was an email.

Unsurprisingly (and depressingly), the common thread I picked up from the range of research papers produced by Julia and the CECTON members was the dearth of historical information on slaves as people. As so little is known about their lived experience, I was determined to breathe life into these characters and present them as complete human beings – in my own tiny way, to restore a simple right denied by slavery. Finding traces of evidence from which to build characters and a narrative was the greatest challenge but finding Minette, who was a real singer in 18th century St Domingue, was the starting point I needed.

There were other pieces of evidence which made an impact – the dehumanising purpose of blackface, runaway slave notices as standard adverts and the almost complete erasure of talented non-white people from history. Performing the piece as a one-person show presented another huge challenge as I wanted to avoid a 'preachy' lecture or to present only the horror of the time, which we are already familiar with. Thanks to my brilliant and more experienced collaborators providing advice and support, I hope we avoided that and created a piece which honours the lives of those who were stolen.

Dramaturg's note

Dramaturgy – something of an obscure theatrical “dark art” – often seems more at home in an academic context, as a “concept” at a remove from the real business of real theatremaking in the real world. It should be hardly surprising, then, that a project conceived of in response to CECTON academic research should have specifically engaged a dramaturg...!

So much is said about/made of authorial voice in discussions about writing, and often a substantial part of the dramaturg's job (in the theatremaking real world) is listening for that authorial voice, for its distinctiveness as well as its clarity. This was especially true on this project, where there needed to be enough space and faith first for Catherine as writer, and then Flavia as director, to approach filling the historiographic lacunae.

What was, and indeed remains, fascinating about *Placeholder* was the role 'voice', in a variety of senses, has ended up playing in the piece. Within the show, voice plays an important role in both the show's narrative and its execution. More powerfully still, in relation to CECTON members' research, the presentation and interrogation of voice is really the piece's central premise: the black silence(d) in the archives.

RESOURCES

[Prof. Julia Prest's paper on Minette](#)

[The story of Yarico](#)

[Dr Jill Lane's book *Blackface Cuba 1840-1895*](#)

[Black music-making in the British Colonial Caribbean](#)

[Dr. Jenna Gibbs' book on slavery and theatre in London and Philadelphia 1760-1850](#)

[Dr Logan Connor's book chapter on military-theatrical events in St Domingue](#)

[The Haitian Revolution](#)

[Plainsight Sound, a database of classical musicians of African and Caribbean descent](#)

[University of Glasgow's *Runaway Slaves in Britain* research project](#)

[City of Edinburgh Council's consultation on the legacy of slavery and Colonialism in Edinburgh](#)

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