

THE OTHER HYBRID ARCHIPELAGO



INTRODUCTION TO
THE LITERATURES
AND CULTURES OF
THE FRANCOPHONE
INDIAN OCEAN

PETER HAWKINS

Postcolonial theater, neo-colonial subsidies

At around the same time as the Creole revival at the end of the 1970s, Emmanuel Genvrin, of metropolitan French origin, and Jean-Luc Trulès, a Reunionese returning to his native island, decided to launch a theater company, which they named after Ambroise Vollard, the art dealer of Reunionese extraction who was a friend of Alfred Jarry, and continued the series of Jarry's *Ubu roi* with his own *Ubu colonial*, after the original author's death. The first production of the Théâtre Vollard, appropriately enough, was a staging in 1979 of Jarry's *Ubu roi* at the Luc Donat Theater in Le Tampon, on a shoestring budget and making use of masks, sacks and packing cases as its décor. This was followed by an adaptation of Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, itself adapted from Shakespeare's celebrated *The Tempest*. It took until 1981 for the troupe to come up with an original play, written and directed by Emmanuel Genvrin, called *Marie Desseembre*.⁶⁹ This was a drama of transgressive rela-

tions between a plantation-owner's son and a slave girl, who falls pregnant just prior to the abolition of slavery in 1848. Her illegitimate, mixed-race daughter is born as the heroine, who becomes a December 1848, hence the name of the heroine, who becomes a symbol of liberty. The play was performed at the municipal theater in the former covered market in Saint-Denis, the *Théâtre du Grand Marché*, where the Volland troupe were to become intermittently resident. This was followed by *Nina Ségamour*⁷⁰ in 1882, the story of a "Miss Réunion" of 1940 who travels to Paris under the German Occupation. Their next original show, again written by Genvrin, was called *Etuves*,⁷¹ and incorporated a performance by slaves of the revolutionary drama *L'Esclavage des Nègres* by Olympe de Gouges in 1792, at the time when the French Revolution was proposing to abolish slavery. But the Colonial Assembly avoids the issue and the slaves are not granted their freedom. These early productions set the pattern of dramatizations of crucial moments in Reuniones history, using a mixture of French and Creole dialogue, and featuring songs and musical interludes; but their radicalism was not popular with the municipal authorities of Saint-Denis, and the company was obliged to take over a disused cinema in the neighbouring town of La Possession. *Etuves* was also performed in mainland France at the Festival des Francophonies in Limoges. Their next major creation, *Lepervanche chemin de fer*⁷² in 1990, was a drama about the beginnings of trade unionism on the railways in Réunion in the period of the Popular Front in 1936, and the rivalry between the left-wing politicians Léon de Lepervanche and Raymond Vergès, architects of the 1946 law introducing "Départementalisation." This show began the policy of the company using non-theatrical locations for their productions: the play was staged at a disused railway halt between La Possession and Saint-Denis and the old diesel train was brought back into service to bring in the audience. When the play was produced in metropolitan France, it was similarly staged in disused railway sheds near Paris, at Trappes, and at Vitry-sur-Seine. Another feature of the company's productions from this point onwards was the provision of a typically Creole meal and refreshments as an integral part of the show.

Their next major independent production, *Votez Ubu Colonial*⁷³ in 1994 was a freewheeling adaptation of Ambroise Volland's *Ubu*

colonial after Jarry, targeting the well-documented political corruption in Réunion by presenting the island's politics as those of an African dictatorship. It was performed at the disused factory of Jeumon in Saint Denis, the home provided for the company by the local authorities. The latter were none too pleased at this corrosive satirical attack, however, and this marked the beginning of their withdrawal of financial support for the company. The show was a considerable popular success, however, and toured in France under a circus big top.

Genvrin was not the only author working with the Volland troupe during this period: Reuniones playwright Jean-Louis Rivière also wrote and directed *Garson* in 1987, *Carouse!*⁷⁴ in 1992 and *Emeutes*⁷⁵ in 1996, the latter a dramatisation of the notorious riots of the Chaudron district of Saint-Denis in 1991. Genvrin's last production in Réunion for the Volland troupe was the much more literary and traditional *Baudelaire au Paradis*⁷⁶ of 1997, which embroidered on the story of the youthful poet's visit to the islands of Réunion and Mauritius in 1842.

Despite the prolific output of original plays, inventive and innovative productions and popular success, the local authorities eventually withdrew their subsidies and the local representatives of the French Ministry of Culture publicly criticized Genvrin and the troupe and also withdrew financial support. The company was obliged to go into liquidation at the end of 1999.⁷⁷ Since then the French Ministry of Culture has set up an "Indian Ocean Centre for Drama" at the sometime home of the Volland company in the Théâtre du Grand Marché in Saint-Denis, where its programming has been considerably less controversial and more conservative. Volland, unbowed by this reverse in their fortunes took a lively show, *Sega Tremblad*, a musical comedy about the tribulations of Reuniones immigrants in metropolitan France, to the Divan du Monde theater in Paris in 2000. The company still re-surfaces from time to time but, having lost their institutional base and support, are less able to maintain their former creativity.⁷⁸