

SISTREN

THEATRE COLLECTIVE



SISTREN EUROPEAN TOUR
AUGUST – OCTOBER, 1983
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Spying on the lovebirds in Bellywoman Bangarang.



"So you'll call the baby Dennis... just Dennis?" asks Didi's Mama.

"God send him Son to die fe we!" QUEENIE tells her flock.



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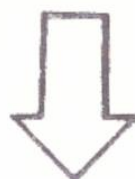
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SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE is an independent popular theatre company which works at advancing the awareness of our audiences on questions affecting women, particularly those from the Caribbean area.

The **COLLECTIVE** is the only theatre group in the Caribbean which has developed from the initiative of working class women. It is made up of women whose experience is a living testimony to the meaning of oppression.

SISTREN came together in 1977 when, for the annual Workers Week celebrations in Jamaica, we performed our first piece of theatre **DOWNPRESSION GET A BLOW**. It dealt with women in a garment factory forming a union and achieving their demands. At that time Sistren were employees of a "make-work" programme which created jobs such as street cleaning for thousands of unemployed women.

From 1977 to 1983, **SISTREN** has become a professional women's theatre collective, internationally known for identifying women's issues in the Caribbean. In six years, **SISTREN** has presented five major productions on such issues as women's work, teenage pregnancy, poverty, rape, and the role of women in Caribbean history. In addition,

SISTREN has offered hundreds of workshops to women working in sugar-cane fields, factories, schools, prison, and to urban women who are unemployed. The workshops are held as public, dramatic problem-solving devices, which involve women to analyze their situations and to collectively discuss possible solutions to pressing issues.

We derive our major productions from these workshops, from research, and from the experience of **SISTREN** members. Plays are then built from improvisations, scripted into short dramatic pieces, and developed further in workshops. Some of these pieces will evolve into full-length productions.

We women of **SISTREN** speak as women from the ghetto; we speak to women like ourselves who struggle for survival and for the well-being of our children.

Overall, **SISTREN** aims to:

- *Do drama within working class communities
- *Create theatre which challenges and stimulates questions about the situation of women
- *offer workshops where drama is used as a tool for problem-solving
- *provide Members of the Collective with the opportunity to participate in building a co-operative organization.



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ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF SISTREN.. HONOR FORDSMITH

Honor has guided SISTREN from a part-time drama group in 1977 to the professional SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE of 1983. Under her direction, SISTREN's first major work grew out of improvisations based on the women's personal experiences: BELLYWOMAN BANGARANG took Jamaica by surprise in 1978 and won several awards. Honor is a senior tutor at the Jamaica School of Drama and a talented director, actress and poet. She is now documenting the development and methodology of SISTREN.



"QPH" — THE DIRECTOR... HERTENCER LINDSAY

Hertencer Lindsay has been a tutor at the Jamaica School of Drama since 1978. Her special interest is Theatre-in-Education, and she has just completed her M.S. degree with special focus on Arts & Drama as therapy. Tencer developed and wrote "QPH" with SISTREN in 1981.



BELLYWOMAN BANGARANG '83 — THE DIRECTOR... RAWLE GIBBONS

SISTREN welcomes Rawle as guest director '82/'83. Rawle is Tutor in Directing at Jamaica School of Drama. He has been involved in theatre for over twelve years, as actor, director and playwright. Rawle's name has become prominent in the theatre in Jamaica, in his native Trinidad, and throughout the Caribbean.

SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE PRODUCTION TEAM

Stage Manager.	Lana Finikin
Asst. Stage Manager. . .	Pauline Crawford
Set & Graphic Design. .	Mbala/Jenny Chang
Costume Design.	Beti Campbell
Wardrobe.	Jerline Todd
Technical Director . . .	Calvin Mitchell
Choreography.	Tencer Lindsay/Jackie Guy/Jonathon Hanson
Public Relations.	Hilary Nicholson with Vivette Lewis/Honor Fordsmith/Joan French/Carmen Tipling.
Photography.	Ann Hodges/Margaret Jarrett
Production Co-ordinator	Hilary Nicholson/Jennifer Jones
Workshop Directors. . .	Honor Fordsmith/Joan French
Textile Production. . . .	Cerene, Jasmine, Jerline, Jennifer, Beky



DRUMMERS.... JOY ERSKINE & CALVIN MITCHELL

Joy Erskine's rhythmical talents have been an indispensable source of support and inspiration for SISTREN for six years. Joy's drumming has been a cornerstone of our plays & workshops in Jamaica and abroad. Calvin Mitchell, resident stage manager at the Jamaica School of Drama, is a talented actor and drummer, well-known on the Jamaican stage.

COSTUME DESIGNER BETI CAMPBELL

A textile designer. Designed costumes for Nottingham Carnival, for West Indian Drama groups in England, and for SISTREN, since 1979. She devised the SISTREN TEXTILE PROJECT which now produces hand-printed textiles using the silk-screen method.

ABOUT THE PLAY BELLYWOMAN BANGARANG

BELLYWOMAN BANGARANG was developed in 1978 in workshop, through improvisation, by SISTREN with Honor Fordsmith. The play emerged from the collective experience of members of SISTREN. In the beginning each member of the group went into the centre of a circle and sang a folk song from her childhood until the song evoked an incident in her memory. Then she would tell the story or act it out. If anyone else in the group felt that the experience being described aroused a

memory of a similar incident in her own life, she would join in, linking her experience through story-telling or improvised action. From these simple exercises the theme of teenage pregnancy and the rites of passage from girlhood to adulthood emerged. As we created "BELLYWOMAN" we touched on many taboo areas which we present to our audience through riddles and proverbs. These stimulate the audience to think about themes we aren't used to dealing with openly.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE:

The play interests me as Sistren's first major work; it explores the use of children's games as a theatrical medium; and, derived from improvisation, the play reverses the standard script-to-actor process.

My interest has been in approaching the script as a dramatic text in its own right. The actors are challenged to re-visualize the production, and to regard character and situation with objectivity, rather than through personal experience.

The play presents a composite, collective character, rather than sharply distinguishable individuals. The four characters whose story we follow are finally able to come to terms with their experience only by responding with active sympathy to one another.

This action implies an acknowledgement of responsibility. A responsibility we share as friends, as parents, as people — the thrust of the play's statement.

DIDI. Vivette LEWIS
MARIE. Jasmin SMITH

YVONNE. ... Pauline CRAWFORD
GLORIA. ... Rebecca KNOWLES

Didi's Mother/Patsy/Dennis/Nurse 1
Gloria's Mother/Didi's Friend/
Cherry/Winston/Miss Freeman/Nurse 2
Goddy / Nurse 3
Gloria's Auntie / Nurse 4

Lorna HASLAM
May THOMPSON
Lillian FOSTER
Cerene STEPHENSON
Beverly HANSON

ABOUT THE PLAY "QPH"

"And some there be who have no memorial, who are buried as though they had never been..."

On the night of May 20, 1980, fire broke out in the overcrowded women's ward of Kingston's Alms House. 167 destitute women died. In May, 1981 the result of the Inquest was that no one was criminally responsible.

The play is about 3 women who by chance met, lived and two of them died at the Alms House. Women who struggled bravely in an uncaring society. We have changed some details of their lives but this much is fact:

QUEENIE is alive and still lives at the home, badly scarred but a beautiful, strong, black woman. PEARLIE, famous prostitute Pearl Harbour, died of Tuberculosis one year before the fire. HOPIE died in the fire.

"QPH" was developed by SISTREN* through improvisation after a great deal of research. We use the Etu Ritual* as a vehicle for the women to "play" out the different routes they took to arrive at "de Alms House".

ABOUT ETU* : "Etu" is a ritual for the dead: a celebration.

Traditionally most players are women. Therefore we chose Etu to honour Queenie, Pearlie and Hopie. An African retention, Etu is now only practised in Western Jamaica. The Ritual contains singing, dancing and feasting. A table is laid with white rum, foo-foo, okra stew and soft drinks for the ancestors. Blood from the goat is used to make a cross on the forehead of the players, and bisi is put on the tip of the tongue.

The drummers on the Ire drum and Achata (kerosene tin) control the proceedings. The Queen as lead dancer controls the dancers. Each Soloist represents a family with its own song and dance patterns. The Queen "shawls" the soloist. Movements are centered on the pelvic area, symbol of fertility, birth and rebirth. As Queenie says, it is the women who have the key to the future because they hold the secrets of the past.

This production is dedicated to all the women who have struggled for independence in spite of being oppressed. This play attempts to make "their names live for evermore".

QUEENIE Beverley Elliott
PEARLIE Cerene Stephenson
HOPIE Beverly Hanson

Aunt Vantie/Sister James/Dreadie
Sissy/Sister Francis/Eva
Ivy/Bartender/Fire Victim's daughter
"Sailor"/Begga
Sister Penny / Dread
Rocka
Mummy / Fire Victim
Nurse

DRUMMERS Joy Erskine &
Calvin Mitchell

Jasmin Smith
Rebecca Knowles
Pauline Crawford
Vivette Lewis
Lillian Foster
Lorna Haslam
May Thompson
Jerline Todd / Lana Finikin

In addition to our Theatre work, SISTREN has a TEXTILE PRINTING PROJECT. From hand-cut stencils, SISTREN silkscreens original designs that reflect the themes of our work,

as women working in a developing country. We make functional articles such as bags, aprons, cushion covers, t-shirts, and wall-hangings.

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QUEENIE....

PEARLIE...

HOPIE ...of "QPH"

HOW AND WHY WE DO OUR WORK

SISTREN is a COLLECTIVE

This means that all of us are involved in evaluating where our work is going and in gaining new skills. We have had to learn to be not just actresses, but teachers, stagemanager, secretaries, graphic artists and designers, community animators.

The process of working in drama for women involves the creating of a community in which some of the hidden or taboo subjects about women can be exposed and the audience confronted with them. As such, drama is not a reflection of life,

but a de-mystification of it. SISTREN explores life.

SISTREN brings to the public the voices of women from the labouring poor and in so doing helps to pressure for change. By confronting what has been considered indecent or accepted, we have begun to make a recorded refusal of ways in which our lives have been thwarted and restricted. We have searched for new understandings which can lead to new knowledge and new collective action.

BUILDING OUR PLAYS: FROM "BELLYWOMAN" to "DOMESTICKS"

BELLYWOMAN BANGARANG was developed using a method almost completely based on folk traditions. We played ring games from our childhood, told riddles, and sang childhood folks songs which evoked incidents in our memory. Through storytelling and improvisation, we created the play based on our collective experience of teenage pregnancy, and young womanhood. By 1980 with "NANA YAH", and 1981 with "QPH" & "DOMESTICKS" our work was being informed by the collective experiences of Caribbean

women. Women from the distant past — such as NANNY, guerilla warrior who fought with her people for independence from the British in 17th Century Jamaica. "NANA YAH" celebrates women's courage. For most of us, our courage hasn't meant acts of daring; our strength is a silent energy which continues in unspectacular ways to give life and to see to its continuance.

Women from the recent past — such as QUEENIE, PEARLIE & HOPIE — who by chance met, lived and two of whom died, at the Kingston



Workshop with sugar workers.

Almshouse, in the fire of 1980. "QPH" is a tribute to "the forgotten", a celebration of life.

Women of the present — whose stories we tell in "DOMESTICKS" & "TRIBUTE", our one-act pieces. Women we've met in our workshops in factories, markets, urban ghettos, schools, sugar estates... women who've migrated and some who'd like to. We've found that women often see their lives solely in terms of the continuous responsibilities of their work in, and for, the home. Yet there is an absence of information on domestic workers and housewives in the official reports and research about our society. Our quest for this information led to our WORKSHOPS on women's work, paid & unpaid — recognizing domestic work — and on migration. DOMESTICKS & TRIBUTE have become a process of continuous research and workshop; of seeking answers to our questions.

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We care

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SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE — HIGHLIGHTS 1977-83

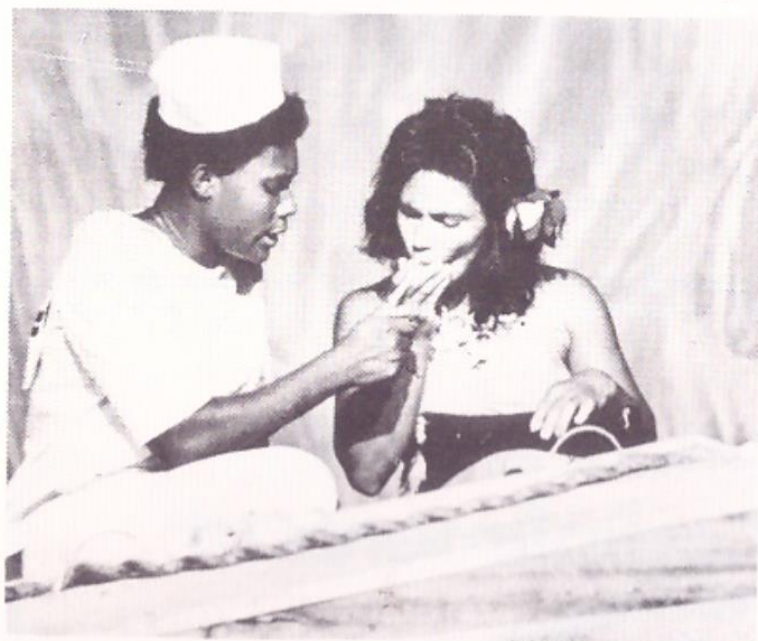
- 1977 — "DOWNPRESSION GET A BLOW" at Workers Week Celebrations.
- 1978 — "BELLYWOMAN BANGARANG" — Gold Medal, Jamaica Festival Commission. 1st place in Mass Media Contest of O.A.S. Commission of Women.
- 1979 — "BANDOOLU VERSION" — the struggle of ghetto women forming a co-op. Certificate of Merit (O.A.S. Commission of Women) for promoting the role of Women in Development. Documentary FILM on SISTREN produced by the University of West Indies
- 1980 — "NANA YAH" — Life of Maroon warrior/heroine Nanny. Jean Small directs. Birth of the SISTREN TEXTILE PROJECT.
- 1981 — 3 Workshop/Research Series on women's work: "DOMESTICK", "TRIBUTE".
- 1981 — "QPH" — National Theatre Critic Award, Jamaica. Guest performances at CARIFESTA '81, Barbados and tour of Canada.
- 1982 — SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE's 5th Anniversary. John Figueroa Award. Eastern Caribbean Tour. "CARIBUSTE" Award for contribution to development of Caribbean theatre.
- 1982 — 3 SISTREN produce DOCUMENTARY FILM on our Workshop Methods in drama-in-education, and on WOMEN WORKING IN SUGAR. SISTREN produce written work on the development and process of the Collective.
- 1983 — SISTREN appear at London International Festival of Theatre, LIFT '83 LIFT & WIWA sponsor tour of London, Midlands, Berlin & Amsterdam.

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L.P. AZAAR



"mirror, mirror ..." Sistren rehearse Bellywoman Bangarang.



Yankkee sailor & Prostitute Pearl Harbour, in "QPH"



*"You too big fe play with dolly!"
Scene from Bellywoman Bangarang.*



Sistren with Honor Fordsmith

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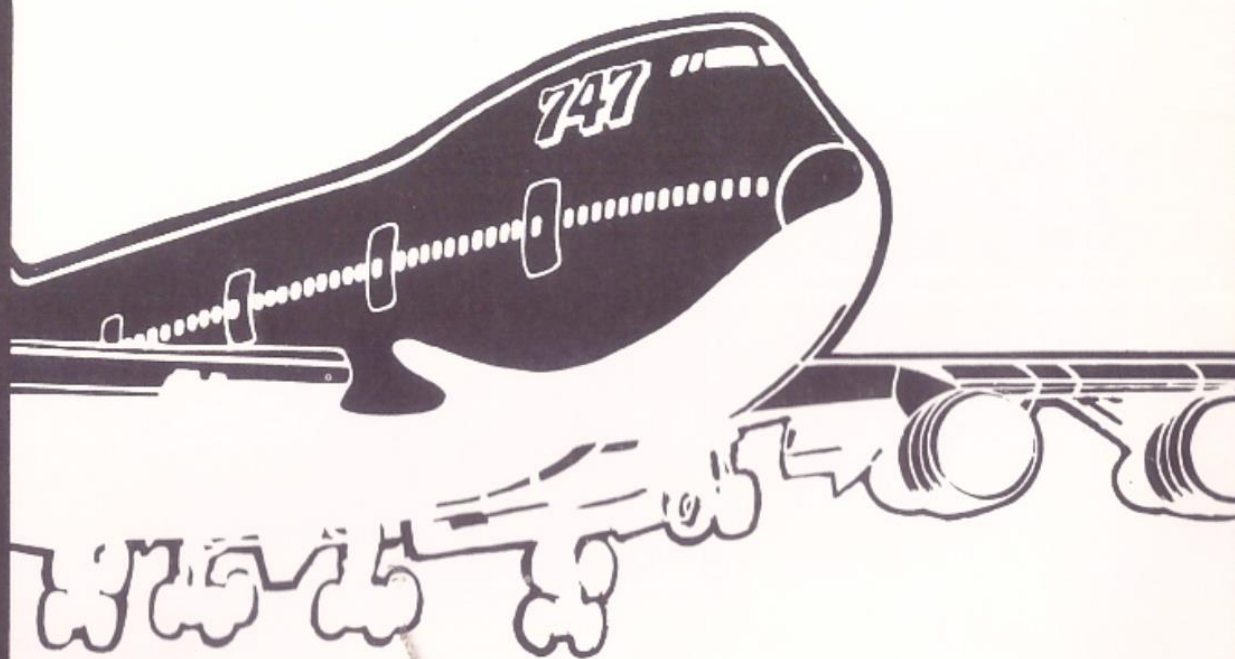
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