

Contxto

International network for the distribution of French-language dramatic texts

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Documented file

The five times I saw my father

(Les cinq fois où j'ai vu mon père)

by Guy Régis Junior

(Gallimard)

translated by Judith Miller

Contxto is coordinated by ARTCENA, with the French Ministry of Culture, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Institut Français and the SACD (French Society of Dramatic Writers and Composers)

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*This file is part of a **full Contxto resource kit**, complete with a video interview with the author filmed by ARTCENA and available on our website.*

I . The play

1. OVERVIEW

My father has disappeared since I last saw him. He still hasn't got in touch. But everything seems fine. I've looked for him everywhere, though. Behind every moustache, in the eyes of every man. And still now, at my seasoned age, I look for him tirelessly. I write only so that he might help me. I'd like him to help me piece together the fragments of this story that I struggled to write in his absence. I am afraid I can't do it alone, so I decided to collect them with him. Wherever he is.

Overview provided by the playwright

2. PRESENTATION

"In my work, mother, father, son and daughter have collided indefinitely for years. I have never stopped seeing the family as the key to unlocking the enigma of the human experience. This play is part of that tradition. The theme here is personal, intimate even, despite resonating with many others. Because we have all suffered absence in some way.

This is my X-ray of the family unit, of the families that swear by leaving their country for other places, places where things are better: the States, Canada, France and beyond. Throughout my life, and still today, I've seen wave after wave of families that worship at the altar of departure. And that's what I examine here. People who erase themselves from one life in the hope of being resurrected in another, leaving everything behind them. Without taking stock of the absence they create.

In writing this, I realise that this is my personal story, too. I come from one of these families. In a way, I experienced this painful absence myself. My father has spent over twenty years living in the States. He's now an American citizen. I watched him leave when I was twelve. The next time I saw him (in New York), I was thirty. Over all those years, because we never heard from him at all, I often thought he was dead and that my mother was hiding the truth from us. How does absence shape us? What are the scars it leaves behind?

As the title here suggests, this was me attempting a highly personal approach in which I try to pinpoint the rare few times I was ever lucky enough to meet up with the man who fathered me. I wanted to dive deep into my memory. Take a step back to reflect. Because in order to grow, despite the thorn in my side, I needed to forget. And if possible, suppress. Suppress is the right word. You suppress these things with silence. You don't discuss them. And ultimately, this is where you find the scars. You cannot forget the marks made by someone as important as your parent. Although you might get on with the business of living, they rise back to the surface from time to time. As if they'd always been there.

Today, a far cry from the themes I've already covered before, such as migration in my play *The Father*, this play looks at silence. The silence that exists within all societies governed by the inalienable principles of life."

Guy Régis Junior

3. EXTRACTS FROM THE TEXT



1. *The Fifth Time*

The fifth time I saw my father was the last time. But can I really be sure of having seen him then? Was it really him I caught a glimpse of, so far away? Everything was in turmoil. The mood, the weather, the village, the whole country was in turmoil that day.

Mother was there. She was on the other side of the street. A man was standing near her, getting ready to leave. A well-dressed gentleman. At the tip of his fingers was a trunk, a wooden trunk - in which, in those days, we put everything.

From a distance, you would have said my father. That man, that silhouette, surely my father. Who could have possibly looked so much like him? It was him. For me, it was him, no question.

That man was not the only one. In those days, everybody was leaving, fleeing the country. Only mother stayed. She'd say, let them all leave. We will stay here even with the country upside down.

They can all leave. Let them gift us our upside-down country the way it is. After all, it's their fault if that's how it is. Maybe when they leave, we'll be able to breathe. The country will rebuild again.

Everybody seemed worried by something that was supposed to happen. The streets were jittery. A kind of crazy mood kept people strung out; they erupted over nothing. Yet nobody had announced a coming disaster.

With our uncontrollable weather, we're almost always waiting for something to happen. That day, we weren't waiting for anything. There wasn't a single hurricane on the horizon.

In fact, I remember very clearly that the bad weather had just passed. A hurricane, named after a young woman, Sophia. She'd threatened us, but the only harm she did was to mess up some trees.

Besides, even when the weather was really bad, people never behaved as if they couldn't stand it. They waited for the storm to be over and calmly resumed living their lives. What, in any case, could they have done? You can't do anything. You can't do anything against that kind of weather. »

4. SELECTED PRESS REVIEWS

Transcription of an interview with RFI as part of a reading at the Festival d'Avignon in 2018

"What interested me here is that Guy's point of view in this play, and perhaps even in all his plays as a matter of fact, is something you feel rather than hear directly. This point of view is him sometimes speaking for himself, while in fact speaking on behalf of an entire people. I think this is particularly apparent in this play: firstly, there's the theme of exile, as a very large proportion of people in Haiti leave. The absence of men, as in many Caribbean islands, where even the men who are still alive and living locally don't necessarily live in the family home. I think this is an extremely

political theme because it links back to the age-old issue of slavery, and therefore a family that isn't exactly western."

Marie-Agnès Sevestre, Director of the Festival des Francophonies en Limousin,
'Ça va, ça va le monde !' readings, RFI, 3 August 2018

"In *The Five Times I Saw My Father*, Guy Régis serves up a child's perspective of emptiness, absence and void by inventing a language of his own that is simultaneously simple, transparent and poetic. But beneath this measured narration, he draws parallels between a child's sense of loss and the absence that characterises the power struggles between Haiti's youth and the Duvalier dictatorship. (...)

Without sentimentality and using crisp, precise terms, Guy Régis (who primarily writes for the stage), succeeds in writing that which cannot be said and in painting the portrait of a childhood that unfolds despite, and because of, absence. And in gifting us a beautifully memorable book in the process."

Sébastien Omont, *En attendant Nadeau*, 25 February 2020

"This book isn't just the story of my father. It's the story of all fathers who are forced to leave. It is a huge chapter in the story of this country, and one that sees us bereft of a great many people. People who leave, die or disappear in tragic circumstances. It is also the story of the children who remain in the absence of their father or a loved one,' according to the writer. While not a biography, the author provides us with a fascinating account of absence, the sense of loss that lingers at his shoulder."

Elien Pierre, *Le Nouvelliste*, 29 January 2020

"Billed as autobiographical, Guy Régis Jr's story is so finely sculpted, almost 'choreographed', that it must be considered a literary work first and foremost in its own right. Its five parts mirror the five times that the narrator's father makes an appearance, as the child grows up close to his mother without ever truly knowing the story of his parents – despite it being his own. The number five is reiterated later on in resolving the enigma that is his presence. The father is therefore the hero of this tale, both present and absent, sometimes deeply missed and other times kept at arm's length; a character who keeps the little boy guessing, appearing and disappearing, and never speaking but for a single, fleeting declaration of love that leaves a lasting impression on his son. (...)

In recounting the painful relationship between a son and an absent father, Guy Régis Jr succeeds in lending form to the tragic absence of words and to the difficulty of growing up without a firm sense of one's identity. His story becomes the dramatic tale of exile and the plight of single mothers, too.

In its depth, rawness, structural complexity and the beauty of its high points, this story is undoubtedly a masterpiece."

Dominique Ranaivoson, *Africulture*, 15 January 2020

"Playwright, stage director and founder of the Festival des Quatre Chemins in Port-au-Prince, Guy Régis Jr turns his hand to the novel, drawing on childhood for inspiration. *The Five Times I Saw My Father*, published as part of Gallimard's *Haute Enfance* collection, is set in rural, bucolic Haiti, somewhere amidst the rice fields and river banks, where a little boy can be glimpsed, running until his breath comes ragged, playing with his friend the sun. It is a story rooted in the social realities of a country with a tumultuous past, elevated by the writer's poetic style."

Muriel Maalouf, RFI, 2 March 2020

5. THE PLAY IN FRANCE

Readings

The text was subject to different readings :

- under the direction of Armel Roussel within the scope of "Ça va, ça va le monde ! » at the Festival d'Avignon in 2018 (coproduction RFI-Festival d'Avignon-Cie Utopia, with the support of SACD.)
- under the direction of Elise Hote, within the scope of Zébrures du Printemps 2019 and 2020, Limoges
- under the direction of Guy Régis Junior with Théâtre Ouvert, Centre national des dramaturgies contemporaines, on the 26 of August 2020 in the courtyard of the Albret hotel

Stage direction by the author

The play will be created in a stage direction by the author in January 2022 in Théâtre Ouvert, co-hosted by Nanterre-Amandiers. It then will be staged in Tropiques Atrium, Scène Nationale de Martinique, in Artchipel, Scène Nationale de Guadeloupe, in Théâtre de Liège. (Production NOUS Théâtre)

Publisher

The so-called novel was published by Gallimard Collection haute enfance in 2020.

II. The playwright

GUY REGIS JUNIOR



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Guy Régis Junior is a writer, theater director and film director. Several of his texts, that includes poetry, prose and mostly theater, are translated into several languages. He was awarded the ETC Beaumarchais prize and the Jean-Brierre poetry prize. Translator into haitian creole of Albert Camus, Maurice Maeterlinck, Marcel Proust or Bernard-Marie Koltès, Guy Régis Jr has also created experimental short films.

In 2001, he founded the drama company NOUS Théâtre. With his company and the creation of Service Violence Series in 2005, he shook up the codes of contemporary theater. This founding play was a real political and dramaturgical act. His work is represented in Haiti, in France and internationally

(Belgium, Hungary, United States, Brazil, Italy, Togo, Congo, etc.).

Besides his role as an artist, he actively works for the development of living arts in Haiti. From 2012 to 2014, Guy Régis Jr directed the theater section of the National School of Arts of Haiti. And since January 2014 he has been the Artistic Director of the Association 4 Chemins which manages the Festival 4 Chemins, a key moment for living arts in Port-au-Prince's life.

OTHER PLAYS

Quel dernier grand conflit pour satisfaire la haine entre les hommes, 2020
Goebbels, juif et footballeur, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2020
Comme dans un film de Robert Bresson, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2020
Reconstruction(s), *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2018
Mourir tendre, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2013
De toute la terre le grand effarement, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2011
Moi, fardeau inhérent, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2011
Incessants, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2011
Le Père, *Les Solitaires Intempestifs*, 2011
Noire nuit, 2010
La Mort de soi dans sa longue robe de mariée, 2009
Bethsabée ou Experimental Betty, 2008-2011
Service Violence Série, 2001-2005

NOVELS

Les cinq fois où j'ai vu mon père, Gallimard, 2020 (Coll. Haute Enfance)
Le Trophée des capitaux, Editions Vents d'ailleurs, La Roque-d'Anthéron, 2011

POETRY

Powèm entèdi, Legs Editions, Port-au-Prince, 2016
Le Temps des Carnassiers, 2000

OTHER TEXTS

Une enfance haïtienne, collective text, Gallimard, 2017

Ida, éditions Rivarticollecion, New York, 2006 ; éditions Vents d'Ailleurs, 2013 (translated in Spanish, in Hungarian, in German and in Romanian)
Incessants (fiction), Les Solitaires Intempestifs, 2007 (translated in Spanish and in English)

SHORT MOVIES

Monsieur le Président, 2011

Epi, 2010

Pays sauve qui peut, 2001

Black out, 2001

III. The translator

JUDITH MILLER



Judith Miller is Professor of French and Collegiate Professor at New York University, where she has also served as Chair of the French Department and Dean of Arts and Humanities at New York University Abu Dhabi. She has published numerous articles on French and Francophone theatre (text and production) and has translated some twenty-five plays (including works by H el ene Cixous, Werewere Liking, Jos e Pliya, Koffi Kwahul e, Bernard-Marie Kolt es, and Olivier Kemeid). Her latest books include an anthology of plays by Ivorian playwright Koffi Kwahul e (*Seven plays by Koffi Kwahul e: In and Out of Africa*, Michigan, 2017), a translation of Guadeloupian artist Gerty Dambury's novel *Les R etifs* (*The Restless*) for the Feminist Press, 2018, an updated study of director Ariane Mnouchkine for Routledge, 2018; and a translation of B eatrice Picon-Vallin's prize-winning study of the *Th eatre du Soleil*, forthcoming, Routledge, 2020.

« *A monologue and a tour de force, this play emanates from the mind of an unnamed middle-aged Haitian, who asks the question that has haunted him since he began to retrieve his memories: "Just who is this man who calls himself my father?" Organized in five episodes, the five times the speaker, as a child, saw his father, the story takes us backwards from the father's departure from Haiti (and the possible connection to the messy political situation of Haiti itself) to the first time the father imprinted his son with the notion of disappearance. Disappearance, will, in fact, mark every episode and every aspect of the speaker's life, as he cannot hold onto the truth of his relationship to the man who engendered him. Was it really his father he kept on seeing?*

In bonding so fiercely with the speaker while loving and hating the man who gave her a son, his mother, the other central presence in the speaker's meditation, has helped keep the relationship murky. The father may have disappeared from both of their lives; but his presence lives on in the turbulence of a ghostly connection to both.

*As in his theatre work in general, Guy R egis Jr. collages styles and registers. Each of the five segments of this play, while situated at a specific moment in the child's life (from 12 years old to 3 years old), moves back and forth in time from the now of the speaker's questioning, to the scene of an early encounter with the father and, often, one with the mother, to an imaginary dialogue between the speaker and the absent father. Just as the speaker's relationship to his father shifts and wavers, so does his voice. We hear, even in the middle-aged man, the little boy who has never recovered from not knowing his father. The play, then, shows us how traumatic memory works -- how stuck one can become, how unfinished one can feel, obsessing, in this case, over what should be an unquestionable anchoring in love. In the telling snapshots of the child's everyday life, and especially in the lyrical depictions of the ferocious elements that both ravage Haiti and elevate the country to a land of myth, *The Five Times I Saw My Father* also suggests how the idea of family founders in a country plagued by political and natural disasters. »*

VI. The Contxto network



In order to raise the international profile of francophone dramatic writing, ARTCENA joined with the **French Ministry of Culture**, the **French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs**, the **Institut Français** and the **SACD** (French Society of Dramatic Writers and Composers) to launch Contxto.

This network aims to support the translation, promotion and international staging of works by Francophone playwrights. Contxto enjoys international presence thanks to its partner members, Instituts Français branches around the world and embassy services, drawing on their expertise and networks of local operators.

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