



StarTribune **The 'NANNY' DIARIES; Queen Nanny, a messianic hero of Jamaica, comes to life in dance, song and puppetry at Heart of the Beast. (VARIETY**

Article from: [Star Tribune \(Minneapolis, MN\)](#) Article date: [January 17, 2003](#)

Author: [Royce, Graydon](#)

Byline: Graydon Royce; Staff Writer

Theater artist Elisha Whittington long has been intrigued by the Maroon culture of Jamaica. A hardy society of escaped slaves, the Maroons established themselves in the remote reaches of the Blue Mountains and fought British colonial powers to a standoff in the 18th century.

"How could they escape and, without the help of any European peoples, survive and hold off oppressors?" he said recently.

While reading some Maroon history and stories on the Internet, Whittington came across an unfamiliar name: Queen Nanny. He read her legend and thought, "This would make a great show."

The realization of Whittington's interest opens tonight at In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre. "Queen Nanny, Queen Nanny!" explores the history and myth behind this woman with actors, puppetry, music and dance.

Ghanaian-born, Queen Nanny escaped slavery in Jamaica and found her way to the mountains in the early 1700s. In "The Mother of Us All," writer Karla Gottlieb describes her as a Queen Mother, warrior, Obeah woman, chieftain, herbal healer and revolutionary.

"It is important," Gottlieb writes, "to retain the African conceptualization of Queen Nanny as a summation of her various roles when dealing with each of them. Her personas overlap and intertwine, each one influencing the other."

Obeah was the Jamaican expression of Ashanti beliefs that thrived in Africa's Gold Coast. It was similar to Haitian voodoo, Cuban Santeria, or Trinidad's Shango. The essential practice holds that one can use certain spirits or supernatural agents to hurt enemies or deter them from mischief.

Queen Nanny is purported to have led her people from Nanny Town in eastern Jamaica to scores of victories over British troops who were technologically and numerically superior. For 12 years, Queen Nanny's Maroons held the colonialists at bay, finally suing for peace. Her legend then continued to wax as leader of Nanny Town.

This messianic combination of warrior and spiritual leader recalls Joan of Arc - another woman who turned her spiritual calling into a crusade. Of course Joan's life was cruelly truncated while Nanny lived to old age. She is the only woman in the Jamaican register of national heroes.

So how to make this a play? Whittington wanted to employ many different forms - dance, puppetry, actors, music - to create an imagistic vision of the story.

"I want to portray Queen Nanny's inner strength and beauty," Whittington said, "as well as the mystique of the ancient religious practice of Obeah and the elements of Ghanaian and Jamaican music and dance."

To accomplish this, Whittington has drawn on noted visual artist Ta-Coumba Aiken to design the set and director-choreographer Djola Branner to help write a script and co-direct. There is a distinct narrative - essentially a biographical journey with some dramatic license through Queen Nanny's life. However, there are occasions when Whittington opted for precision. For example, he used excerpts of letters from the British general in Jamaica to King George, describing what the troops were facing with the Maroon insurrection.

Aiken was building the Blue Mountains on the Heart of the Beast stage recently when he paused to tell a visitor that he hopes for a magical setting, a patchwork quilt of literal and

figurative elements. Along the sides of the auditorium he has painted a long mural that swirls with action, like cave drawing or even Picasso's "Guernica" in its jumbled evocation of spirit and the interwoven connection of people. He calls the work "Spirit Writing."

In creating dances for the show, Branner absorbed the Queen Nanny legends and used his body to tell the story, he said. A student of Haitian dance and folklore for about 20 years, Branner is familiar with the region, if not specifically the Maroon culture.

"To me, it's a story about divine mission," he said. "Faith, courage, but also we get at the human aspect of Queen Nanny [portrayed by dancer/actor Patricia Brown]. She was a woman with human conflicts, moments of doubt."

The last piece of the puzzle was musical director Aaron Barnell, who has created a driving score of drums, wooden xylophone and flute.

"Queen Nanny could be anybody, she just happened to be an African woman," Whittington said. "The important attributes to bring out are her strength, determination and the respect that she commanded from her people."

- Graydon Royce is at groyce@startribune.com.

IF YOU GO

Queen Nanny, Queen Nanny!

What: Conceived by Elisha Whittington. Written and choreographed by Djola Branner. Co-directed by Whittington and Branner.

When: 7:30 p.m. today-Sat.; 2 p.m. Sat.-Sun.

Where: In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre, 1500 E. Lake St., Mpls.

Tickets: \$13-\$18. 612-721-2535.

COPYRIGHT 2003 Star Tribune Co. This material is published under license from the publisher through the Gale Group, Farmington Hills, Michigan. All inquiries regarding rights should be directed to the Gale Group. For permission to reuse this article, contact [Copyright Clearance Center](#).

HighBeam™ Research, Inc. © Copyright 2009. All rights reserved.

www.highbeam.com