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From Politics to Therapy: Sistren Theatre Collective's Theatre and Outreach Work in Jamaica

Sistren Theatre Collective has been producing theatre and working with community groups in Jamaica for the last thirty-five years. Over the last decade the company has changed its profile to include male drama specialists and social workers in its team. This has come about due to new funding arrangements with the Jamaican Ministry of National Security, which won a large grant from the Inter-American Development Bank to establish the Citizen Security and Justice Programme (CSJP). The CSJP has a community outreach component in which Sistren has been employed to run socio-drama workshops and provide counselling to residents in Kingston's 'garrison' communities. In this article Karina Smith compares Sistren's theatre and outreach work under the CSJP programme with the group's previous theatre productions and workshops, devised when it was the leading women's popular theatre company and Women in Development non-government organization in the Caribbean region. Karina Smith is a Senior Lecturer in Literary and Gender Studies in the College of the Arts at Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia. She has published on Sistren Theatre Collective's work in *Modern Drama*, *Theatre Research International*, and in Suzanne Diamond's *Compelling Confessions: the Politics of Personal Disclosure* (2011). Her monograph on the Caribbean community's oral histories of migration to Victoria is forthcoming from Breakdown Press.

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SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE has been in existence for thirty-five years. In that time, it has transformed itself from a part-time theatre co-operative to a full-time professional women's theatre collective and women-in-development organization, and now into a mixed gender non-government organization (NGO) that offers drama workshops and counselling services in some of Kingston's most economically disadvantaged communities, such as Hannah Town and Tivoli Gardens.

The company was formed in 1977 under the 'democratic socialist' Manley government, renowned for giving working-class Jamaicans 'a voice'. The Manley government supported Sistren's activities by promoting its productions and outreach work and by providing it with a rehearsal space at the Jamaica School of Drama. In the late 1970s Sistren was important to the Manley government's political ideology because it demon-

strated that working-class Jamaicans had artistic talent and leadership abilities; as a result, it was targeted as a Manley government initiative, and threatened with dissolution when the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) won the 1980 political elections. Despite the JLP's hostility, Sistren became the foremost women's popular theatre company in the Caribbean region in the 1980s through its combination of outreach workshops in urban and rural Jamaica and its sophisticated stage productions that were performed not only in Kingston and the Caribbean region, but internationally.

Further, the company played a leading role in the Caribbean women's movement, providing feminist analysis of women's issues in Jamaica and entering into transnational alliances with women's organizations in the Caribbean region, North America, the UK, and Europe. During this period, Sistren's activities were made possible through fund-

ing provided by development agencies based in North America, the United Kingdom, and Europe; most financial support, however, came from Canada as it formed funding 'partnerships' with Canadian non-government organizations such as Inter Pares, the United Church of Canada, and Oxfam Canada, whose budgets were supplemented by funding provided by the Canadian International Development Agency.

In the late 1980s, some of the key members of Sistren, such as former Artistic Director Honor Ford-Smith, resigned from the company, leaving the other founding members without a strong leadership team to continue devising theatrical productions and organizing workshops in communities. In light of this, many of Sistren's key funders had discontinued their support by the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, Sistren's work continued, if in a somewhat reduced capacity.

Under the guidance of founding member Lana Finikin, who became Sistren's Executive Director in the 1990s, the company attracted funding from within Jamaica to continue working with economically disadvantaged groups. In 2001 the company was hired by the Jamaican Ministry of National Security to produce theatre with communities that have high rates of violent crime under the auspices of the Citizen Security and Justice Programme (CSJP), funded by a large grant of US\$20 million from the Inter-American Bank; the group also recently received funding from the United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women.

In this article, I will compare Sistren's approaches to creating popular theatre in the 1970s and 1980s with its current work in Kingston's inner-city areas, looking particularly at the group's past political affiliations and its present role as a sub-contracted employee of the Jamaican government. While Sistren's work with inner-city communities is extremely important, it differs significantly from the political commentary underlying the group's previous popular theatre productions. There are a few reasons for this, which I will explore in more detail later: first, Sistren members are at risk when they enter inner-city areas; second, Sistren is focused on

unifying the so-called 'garrison' communities, which are divided across political lines; and, third, the Jamaican government is Sistren's major funding body. This article, which is based on field research in Kingston between May and July 2010, will trace the way in which Sistren has adapted to Jamaica's changing socio-political milieu and the impact of Sistren's latest source of funding on the group's public profile and community activities.

Outreach Work in Inner-City Communities

In May 2010, violence erupted between Kingston's criminal gangs and the State defence forces over the US extradition request for Tivoli Gardens don, Christopher 'Dudus' Coke. The violence, which was at its most intense for one week, resulted in the deaths of at least seventy-five people, the majority at the hands of the police.¹ A State of Emergency was declared which remained in place for some months following the violence; it was lifted in July 2010 despite calls from Jamaica's security chiefs for its extension.²

The Tivoli Gardens intervention and State of Emergency made stark the problems beleaguering Jamaica, where since the 1960s the two main political parties have been garnering support from inner-city residents by providing housing and utilities in return for votes; in the 1970s and 1980s, they supplied criminal gangs in these areas with guns in order to enforce political allegiance from residents. In return for their support, gang leaders, known as 'dons', were rewarded with government contracts and protection from the law.³

In 2007, the then governing JLP, led by Bruce Golding, ran an election campaign based on anti-crime and anti-corruption, but it hesitated to extradite Dudus, who was the don of a JLP stronghold, Tivoli Gardens.⁴ Although Glaister Leslie suggests that the gangs are now supported more by the drug trade than through political connections, he identifies the links between Jamaica's political parties and the dons as a persistent problem.⁵ Further, the Jamaican police force is complicit in criminal activities, evidenced

by the rounds of Jamaican constabulary ammunition found in gang raids. The police force is also renowned for indiscriminate killings and other human rights abuses, particularly in the inner-city areas.⁶

The CSJP was established in 2001 in response to increasing concerns about the level of violent crime in Jamaica, particularly in Kingston, as illustrated by the Tivoli Gardens intervention. It draws on the help of NGOs such as Sistren to pave the way for its programmes, presumably because people living in downtown Kingston do not trust the government, the police, or the defence forces but have traditionally trusted groups such as Sistren,⁷ which since its inception in the late 1970s has been trusted by community groups because the majority of its members were living in downtown Kingston when they first formed the company; and the theatre work the group was doing directly addressed the conditions under which working-class Jamaican women were living. But although Sistren members were from Kingston's impoverished communities, they met with violent threats when they staged plays dealing with taboo topics such as rape and domestic violence⁸ or performed in areas that were not politically aligned with the group's work.⁹

Working with the CSJP Programme

The CSJP programme has many branches, including a community action component, which, according to the Jamaica Information Service, aims to improve community infrastructure and to deliver violence prevention services with the assistance of NGOs. It 'seeks to improve the human resource base in the communities, through educational programmes or initiatives aimed at improving values and attitudes, and re-socializing persons into ways of living that will not involve violence and crime'.¹⁰ But CSJP coordinator Orville Simmonds admitted that

the CSJP had to face frustration, disappointment, and cynicism from the communities participating in the programme. . . . Initially, these persons did not take up the services, people were pessimistic and used to say it's just another government talk.

But after seeing the commitment of the programme to stay in the communities, persons have become increasingly interested in the programme and want to be a part of it and want to be empowered.¹¹

Sistren is one of six NGOs¹² that work in communities nominated by the CSJP, which include: Waterhouse, Tower Hill, Drewsland, Denham Town, Trench Town, Hannah Town, Fletchers Land, August Town, Parade Gardens, Rockfort, Mountain View, Kencot, Cassia Park, Allman Town, and, after the State of Emergency in 2010, Tivoli Gardens.

Sistren has a new profile under its current funding arrangement because it has hired a number of young professional drama specialists and social workers, many of whom are male. Following the 2004 fire that destroyed its headquarters, Sistren, through the opportunities provided by the CSJP, was encouraged to welcome new people into its fold and as a result the company has survived, albeit in a different configuration. Sistren member Myrtle Thompson-Rose said, in an interview with this author, that at first 'we thought we wouldn't work very well with the men, as we are a women's organization. However, they are really brothers. . . . They are lovely to work with.'¹³

The drama specialists have been trained at Ashe, Area Youth Foundation, and the Edna Manley School of Visual and Performing Arts; one of the social workers was originally employed by the Peace Management Initiative, and another is a graduate of the University of the West Indies (Mona) Social Work Department. There are five original Sistren members still involved with the group: Lana Finikin (Executive Director), Myrtle Thompson-Rose (Project Officer), Jerline Todd, Afolashade, and Carmen Hanson (Administrative Assistant).

The founding members continue to run workshops and assist with the administration of Sistren, but they no longer produce the full-scale theatrical productions for which the group is renowned, partly because the company no longer has the funding to hire theatre venues and equipment but also because not one of the founding members has stepped into the role of the Artistic

Director since Ford-Smith's departure in the late 1980s. Over the years, Sistren's full-scale productions have been in the hands of guest directors, the majority of whom have been male. For example, Sistren's last major production, *Lady Chance and the Butterfly Dance*, was directed by CSJP co-ordinator Orville Simmonds (formerly a Sistren board member) and staged at Kingston's Ward Theatre in 2006.¹⁴

During its first ten years of existence, Sistren developed an innovative approach to creating popular theatre which initially drew on the personal testimonies of Sistren members themselves and later incorporated material from interviews with Jamaican women from diverse communities, such as those living in an age-care facility. In the late 1970s, Sistren performed plays that discussed issues such as teenage pregnancy and maternity leave, and while their work was 'politically off-track' to some extent, it was firmly aligned with the People's National Party's Women's Movement, led by Beverley Manley, wife of the then Prime Minister.¹⁵

The major productions the group staged in the 1980s were explicit political commentaries, largely aimed at the JLP's conservative, neo-liberal policies, which utilized Jamaica's oral tradition – such as rituals, games, and songs, and personal testimony – to create the drama. Each of Sistren's productions focused on the impact on women of the relationship between the US and Jamaica, the debt burden, gang violence, and labour conditions. Further, the productions were complemented by Sistren's work with women's community groups on topics such as domestic work, the International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment programme, domestic violence, and so forth.

In 1980, after staging *Nana Yah*, which critiqued the violence that ensued in the lead-up to the political elections, the group's work was banned from radio and television by the JLP.¹⁶ Following this incident, Sistren sought large grants from development agencies located outside Jamaica and the Caribbean, which afforded the group some protection from the unsupportive political climate in the 1980s. However, Sistren then

found itself having to conform to development agency agendas which dictated to some extent the way in which the money was to be spent.¹⁷

Sistren's Use of Socio-drama

Sistren's focus is now solely on its outreach work in Kingston's inner-city communities which, according to Sharon Green in her article 'Sistren Theatre Collective: Struggling to Remain Radical in an Era of Globalization' (2004), is where group members always 'felt Sistren's heart lay'.¹⁸ The new drama specialists, Ricardo Nicholas and Alwyn Allen, run workshops with young people aged between eight and seventeen years; the Sistren founding members and the female social workers have formed cultural groups, such as the Hannah Town Cultural Group, with older women in the downtown area to explore the issues around violence in their communities.

While the drama workshops contain elements of Sistren's previous approach to community theatre, they have been revised to suit the professional training of the new Sistren members. In order to build a rapport with people living in the inner-city areas, Sistren members always walk through the community to introduce themselves and to talk to people about the problems they're facing, in part because the new members of Sistren are not from the communities the group now serves but also to build trust with community members.¹⁹

Sistren holds drama workshops and provides counselling for those people who feel they need it. This differs from the group's previous work which focused on sharing personal testimonies rather than on psychological assessment by social workers. The workshops with children focus on promoting positive vibes through dance and drama activities, as Ricardo Nicholas explains in an interview for *Citizen Security and Justice Programme News*: 'We use a lot of Afro-Caribbean and modern themes, then through the dance come up with pieces which the children have themselves created. So that we don't go and say here is what we think about a particular issue.'²⁰



Workshops with children, focusing on 'promoting positive vibes through dance and drama activities'. Photos by the author.



The drama workshops with the women's cultural groups encourage the participants to theatricalize their issues using socio-drama techniques, an approach for which Sistren is renowned. The group also uses street theatre, such as Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre, to get people interested in the work they're doing in the community. This may involve staging an argument on the street to grab people's attention before the real drama begins. One of Sistren's major achievements under the CSJP programme has been an annual gala concert bringing together children from all the inner-city communities. At the concert, each community group performs a short drama or dance with the aim of promoting unification of the downtown areas.²¹

The residents of the so-called 'garrison' communities, such as Tivoli Gardens and Hannah Town, have been living with increasing levels of violence for years. Despite the Ministry of National Security's programme, over two hundred and sixty-eight criminal gangs were operating in Jamaica in 2010.²² Further, the Jamaican Defence forces are still being accused of human rights abuses, particularly in situations such as the Tivoli Gardens intervention. As Anthony Harriot points out in his book *Understanding Crime in Jamaica: New Challenges for Public Policy*, there have been protests against human rights abuses in Jamaica which have been associated with the use of States of Emergency, the military, and the Suppression of Crimes Act, but these 'tools' are still being used by the Jamaican government to suppress crime in the inner-city areas.²³

This is mainly because the 'most tightly controlled garrisons', to quote Mark Figueroa and Amanda Sives, are now 'states within states'. 'The Jamaican state has no authority or power there, except in as far as its forces are able to invade in the form of policy and military raids.'²⁴ Sistren's presence in the downtown area is welcomed by residents who have nowhere else to turn for help, let alone anyone who will listen to their concerns.²⁵ According to Lana Finikin, kids from the inner-city communities 'keep on calling me and saying, "When are you coming back?"'²⁶

Confronting Violence against Women

One of the manifestations of the violence between gang members and the police is violence towards women and children in the form of domestic and/or sexual abuse. While women bear the brunt of this from their male counterparts, they can also be perpetrators of violence within the domestic sphere.²⁷ Drawing on their previous practice of using personal testimony as the basis for collective creation, Sistren members interviewed women and girls in Hannah Town and Rockfort communities as part of their UN funded project *Tek it to Dem and Rise Up Wi Community*. The interviews formed the basis of a major report on violence in those areas as well as providing the impetus for creating socio-drama skits.

In the interviews, conducted prior to 2010, women living in Hannah Town spoke of the violence that ensued after Edward Seaga divided the area into 'warring turfs'. Hannah Town remained a PNP garrison despite being harassed by neighbouring JLP communities. The women in Rockfort spoke of the community having been peaceful prior to the 1970s: 'The men would commit "outside" robberies' but would not trouble community members.²⁸ Now, the situation is different with the number of homicides and rapes increasing. According to Horace Levy in his book *Killing Streets and Community Revival* (2009), there were 1,611 homicides in 2008 compared with 63 in 1962.²⁹

The women Sistren members interviewed spoke of witnessing men being shot by the police or shooting each other; they said they were too frightened to go to the shops; and they complained of suffering physical symptoms such as diarrhoea, trembling, loss of appetite, and constant weeping.³⁰

In the aftermath of the violence in 2010, Sistren was in constant demand from the communities it serves to provide counselling for residents. This included making psychosocial assessments, offering coping skills, visiting people's homes, and working with community groups. Sistren social worker Janice Blake described the group's work in the inner-city communities as 'a drop in the



Workshop with children aged between five and seventeen years in the Hannah Town community hall.

bucket'.³¹ Despite the pleas for assistance, Sistren's activities were somewhat curtailed due to the curfews that were in place under the State of Emergency: those living downtown had to be in their homes between six p.m. and six a.m. In the month following the State of Emergency, Sistren was only able to do two workshops.

Lana Finikin was recently quoted in *The Jamaica Observer* as saying that 'the group is sometimes forced to scale back significantly on the programme offerings within some of these communities once violence flares up'.³² When I visited Sistren in late June 2010, the group was beginning to go back to their normal routine following the violence; I was able to accompany them to Hannah Town to observe a workshop with children aged between five and seventeen years. During the workshop, which was held in the Hannah Town community hall, some of the children became distressed when they saw armed soldiers and tanks patrolling the area. One of the Sistren team, a male social worker, reassured the children that the soldiers were only doing their job and that there was nothing to worry about.

The violence experienced by residents of inner-city communities is not new to the founding members of Sistren. In the company's book *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*, the final two testimonies, particularly 'Foxy and the Macca Palace War', describe in detail the effects of politically motivated gang warfare on inner-city residents. In fact, Sistren's testimonies are historical documents that attest to the beginnings of the 'don' system in the 1960s and 1970s and the way in which women and children are impacted by violence which is played out largely between Jamaican men.

One night when di area was under curfew, we was outside chatting. Di soldiers come. Dem run we off a di street. We go inside and when di soldiers gone, we come out again. Me and a youth name Babyface did run a some joke, when me see some soldier man come round di corner and smash di lightbulb.

'What's di position?' dem say. When me look good, me recognize a man who come from down Limbo. Me realize seh a di Limbo man dress up demself as soldier and tek time come inna fi-we yard. Dem mussy did walk through di cemetery. Das what dem do when dem waan terrorize di area. . . .

Den one a dem stop me, 'Mek me see yuh finger.' Me quail up, cause me a tell yuh, me fraid. It was only me leave back wid Babyface. Di boy open me hand gently and tek off di ring. Him go fe tek out me earring. It wouldn't come off. Him pull-pull till him split di ears and draw it out. Dat time di pee-pee a run down me leg. 'Go inside,' him say. Me go in and run straight under di bed. Den me hear three shots. Me see di light from di shot dem clear.³³

In this testimony, Babyface is shot by gang members because he is mistaken for someone else; he is barely a teenager. The shooting has a profound effect on Ava, who moves out of the area and starts working in the Crash Programme where she meets the women who would form Sistren. In the late 1970s, Sistren provided solace and support for group members themselves: their feminist analysis of Jamaican society was based on the lives of the women in the company. As Ava remarks in her diary, 'We discuss what is politics and how it affects woman. After we done talk ah get to feel dat di little day-to-day tings dat happen to we as women, is politics too.'³⁴

Sistren Theatre Collective: Past and Present

There is no doubt that Sistren has been revitalized through the funding provided by the CSJP and the UN. However, the company is not what it used to be in its use of popular theatre to draw attention to women's issues in the Caribbean region, or playing a leading role in the regional women's movement. Sistren's fraught relationship with development agencies notwithstanding, the company's work was at its political peak during the 1980s when it was no longer receiving support from either Jamaican political party. North American development agency funding legitimated Sistren's activities at a time when members of feminist collectives were being branded and dismissed as either 'lesbian man-haters' or 'communists'. Sally Yudelman writes:

Private philanthropy is not a tradition in Latin America and the Caribbean, and women's organizations have even more trouble than men's in raising local funds. Any hint that these organizations harbour feminist tendencies raises a red flag, and makes it still more difficult to gain

government support, raise private-sector funds, or in general establish credibility within society.³⁵

During the 1980s, with the financial support of agencies outside Jamaica, the company was able to intervene in political discourses by publicly providing feminist commentary on Jamaican government policies, such as the decision to close down the sugar worker collectives and the circumstances surrounding the fire at the Eventide Home for the Aged. However, according to Sistren's Executive Director Lana Finikin, there is no movement for Sistren to be involved with these days. The group is part of various networks that are addressing the issues, but it is not at the forefront any more.³⁶

Having men involved with the organization has also changed the public image of Sistren and has reoriented the company's direction so that the group remains relevant in Jamaican society where, it is argued, interest in popular theatre is waning.³⁷ Afreen Akhter, echoing Sharon Green's research on Sistren, points out that the company is no longer cushioned by the supportive environment and political ideology that characterized Manley's 'democratic socialist' experiment; in addition, the popularity of film and television, mostly from North America, 'has limited the audience for grassroots theatre'.³⁸

Yet theatre is still a popular medium in Jamaica, with roots plays, slapstick, and farce continuing to draw large audiences.³⁹ It appears to be the political and/or socio-cultural aspect of Jamaican theatre created in the 1960s and 1970s that is no longer popular with audiences. Nonetheless, Sistren's performances in inner-city areas are inspiring people of all ages to become involved with popular theatre. 'We approach through the creative arts. . . . That is one of our strongest points,' stated Janice Blake, in an interview with this author.⁴⁰

There is also the view among the new Sistren members that young Jamaican men need positive male role models, particularly in downtown areas, as many boys grow up with absent fathers. It is also deemed necessary to reverse the perception of men as the perpetrators of violence.⁴¹ Akhter points out

that the don system promotes a type of masculinity known as 'badness-honour', which is affirmed through aggressive acts. 'A facet of badness-honour is the sexual domination of women'.⁴²

Changing Strategies

While the issues Sistren addresses, such as violence against women, have not changed since the 1970s, the strategies for dealing with these issues have changed; one of the new strategies is to employ male development workers to 'get the men to buy into the process'.⁴³ In workshops with young men in the inner-city communities, Sistren focuses on conflict resolution skills in an attempt to 'break the cycle of violence'.⁴⁴ In fact, one of the programmes that Sistren facilitated was called 'Shoot Cameras, Not Guns' from which nineteen young men graduated in 2006, one of whom, Timion Bowers, is currently employed as Sistren's company photographer.⁴⁵

Yet, the downside of Sistren's current activities is the depoliticization of the company's work; it no longer speaks out about the government's policies but instead keeps a low profile.⁴⁶ This notwithstanding, Sistren participated in 'Letters from the Dead' in 2009, which was a commemoration, theatrical event, and peaceful demonstration against violence in downtown areas;⁴⁷ the group also facilitated the Hannah Town cultural group's presentation to the Jamaican parliament on women's reproductive rights and access to abortion in response to the government's review of Jamaica's abortion laws.⁴⁸

It was also recently awarded the Otto Rene Castillo political theatre award for using 'the arts to confront the public on problems facing both genders' and bring 'pressure on society to change negative stereotypes'.⁴⁹ In a speech congratulating Sistren on winning the award, Jamaican People's National Party MP Lisa Hannah claimed: 'Jamaica is proud of this honour bestowed on one of our outstanding theatre companies. This is another outstanding evidence of Brand Jamaica'.⁵⁰

While I would argue that Sistren's intervention in inner-city communities is a political act, its current work is not focused on

mobilizing people to protest against the violence or to critique the Jamaican government's involvement in the don system or the abuses meted out by the Jamaican defence forces, but instead uses theatre as a form of therapy. Further, there is something inherently problematic about a political, feminist, and community theatre being used as an example of Jamaica's corporate, national, and touristic 'brand' in a global context.

The main difference between Sistren's work past and present is the inclusion of social workers in its team and the provision of psycho-social assessments for community members with whom it works in conjunction with its theatre activity. According to Lana Finikin, 'Theatre is a therapeutic way of looking at our lives and helps us to understand our relationships with our daughters, our mothers and the men we live with – our spouses'.⁵¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, Sistren also used theatre as therapy, but it was a form of consciousness-raising about gender, race, and class issues and was supported by local, regional, and international women's movements. Sistren members' lives were not assessed by professional social workers and psychologists; their lives were not pathologized; they were given the space – an 'aesthetic space', to use Boal's terminology – to articulate the multiple oppressions they faced on a daily basis.

A 'Focus on Survival'

In *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal links the 'aesthetic space' to the 'therapeutic function' of theatre: 'In seeing oneself and hearing oneself the protagonist acquires knowledge about himself'.⁵² Although Boal received criticism over his identification of the therapeutic dimension of theatre, Paul Dwyer maintains that 'what Boal *intends* with these techniques is definitely not a form of therapy to substitute for politics'.⁵³ The way Sistren currently uses theatre as therapy, which appears to be devoid of political commentary, is no doubt related to the likelihood of reprisal if community members and/or Sistren members identify the perpetrators of violence in Kingston.

In 2011, the group held an event at the Edna Manley School of Visual and Performing Arts to mark the international day to Eliminate Violence Against Women. According to Sistren member Dannielle Toppin, 'Women were sitting down in the audience and they were crying and whispering to each other but no one would speak publicly because of fear of reprisal.'⁵⁴ The testimony titled 'Ava's Diary', included in Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*, demonstrates the strength and resilience Sistren Theatre Collective instilled in its members when it began, which differs from the scenario described above. Despite being physically abused many times, Ava, with the support of Sistren members, reports her abusive partner Bertie to the Jamaican police.⁵⁵

In the past, Sistren had the freedom to establish relationships with diverse groups of women; now it is contracted by the government to 'intervene' in selected communities. Nevertheless, Sistren is still viewed as 'a model for politically committed postcolonial dramaturgy'⁵⁶ outside Jamaica because of the feminist, political, and popular theatre performances the group used to stage in theatre spaces such as Kingston's Barn Theatre and in both rural and urban Jamaican communities. In Jamaica, however, Sistren is now one of a group of NGOs that provide very similar community-oriented violence prevention workshops in Kingston's downtown area.

In an interview with the author, Lana Finikin said that times have changed: Sistren's focus is on survival.⁵⁷ In a recent article published in *The Jamaica Observer*, it was very telling that Sistren members, when asked about the government's support of the group's work, remained silent. It was not in their interest to comment on the source of their funding.

In 2008, Afreen Akhter published an article on Sistren in *Signs* which she titled 'Sistren: the Vanguard in Popular Theatre in Jamaica', because the 'new methods of inclusion employed by Sistren have helped to sustain some version of popular theatre and to promote social reform'.⁵⁸ Akhter argues that Sistren's focus on both men and women

is a new form of feminist theatre because, by including men's issues in its ambit, the abuses suffered by women can be better understood and reform can take place.⁵⁹

I would argue that Sistren is no longer the 'vanguard' of popular theatre in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean because the company's work has been co-opted by the Jamaican government to carry out its social reform agenda. While Sistren's work in Jamaica's inner-city communities is important and, according to Sistren members and the CSJP, is bringing about social change, the issue of violence as it affects men, women, and children in Jamaica must be analyzed in relation to structures of power, in particular the way in which the don system has been supported by the major political parties. Providing an outlet for inner-city communities to dramatize their experiences of violence and offering counselling to those affected without any public critique of the Jamaican political system and the defence forces is not a solution to the overarching problem. But, as Lana Finikin said in her interview with this author: 'We don't want anyone to come and kill us. . . . We can't afford to put the staff at risk; they are already at risk.'⁶⁰

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