



## Freedom of Speech

### From Haiti to Miami, Sosyete Koukouy champions Kreyol culture

On the evening of Saturday, February 28, as the capital of Haiti, Port-au-Prince, braced itself for a possible rebel attack, and President Jean-Bertrand Aristide defiantly clung to power for a few more hours, a small and peaceful demonstration took place in Miami's own Little Haiti.

Dozens of protesters marched on NE Second Avenue, carrying homemade posters and signs denouncing President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell as the perpetrators of a plot to oust Aristide, the Catholic priest turned politician who became Haiti's first democratically elected president in 1990, was deposed in a violent coup in 1991, returned to power with U.S. backing in 1994, was elected again in 2000 despite heavy international criticism for allegedly rigging the outcome, then was finally forced into exile on February 29 by rebel forces. That last chapter in his disappointing political career, however, had no bearing on the protesters who spent the drizzly evening chanting to their neighbors, "No Aristide, No Peace."

As the protest passed by Libreri Mapou, a bookstore and cultural center owned by writer, translator, journalist, and playwright Jan Mapou, several members of Sosyete Koukouy -- or Society of the Fireflies, a like-minded group of idealists that Mapou helped form in 1965 to serve as a "guiding light" by encouraging culture, education, and language -- came outside to see what was going on. They observed the demonstrators, and then retreated inside the two-story building, featuring a concrete terrace covered with a canopy that doubles as a rehearsal area for the dancers. Upstairs, the actors gathered in a room full of Haitian paintings to practice their lines.

Sosyete Koukouy has been gathering for several weekends now to work on *Libète ou Lanm* (Liberty or Death), which Mapou describes as "a musical with a historical dimension." It is rooted in events that took place two centuries ago, but its message resonates today. And no matter what new tragedies may befall his beloved Ayiti, he vows, "The play will go on."

*Libète ou Lanm* features a cast of 30, some of them trained actors, many others young Haitian-American amateurs eager to demonstrate how their ancestors fought bravely against the French and created the world's first black republic. Mapou wrote the play to commemorate the 1791 slave revolt in St. Domingue, when sugar cane plantations were burned and white colonials were massacred, unleashing the forces that would culminate with Haiti winning its freedom from France in 1804. The play's title is taken from the fighting credo of General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the country's first emperor. It will be performed in Kreyol, but Mapou says he plans to provide some sort of English translation.

Since gaining its independence, the island has known relatively little peace. Corruption, poverty, disease, hunger, violence, state-sponsored terror, ecological rape, and other maladies have earned it the sad distinction of being the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation. Now, in the year of its bicentennial, what should have been an occasion for joy has turned into yet another saga of uncertainty and turmoil.

When asked what significance *Libète ou Lanm* acquires at a time like this, Mapou says, "The play, in a way, will be an opportunity for the community to learn its history. Our ancestors have fought vehemently to give us a country to develop, but here we are, 200 years later, and we find ourselves in this situation. It means that we didn't learn from our ancestors."



The plight of those ancestors is what makes up the central theme of Mapou's four-act play, starting with the international slave trade that brought West Africans to the Americas. The horrors endured by those captives are depicted in *Libète ou Lanm* through scenes that are sure to make some uncomfortable. But, he explains, "This is all based on fact."

The storyline is also advanced by music and dance. There are traditional songs, and others written by musician and author Kiki Wainwright, who is Haitian despite his very English-sounding name (he did have a British ancestor). "Mapou and I have been collaborating for years, since 1982, when we were both living in New York," says Wainwright, who acts in the play as well as serving as its musical director. "The message today is still the same as that of our ancestors: liberty or death."

Mapou had fled to New York, and its large immigrant community, in 1971 after getting into too much trouble in Haiti. In the late Sixties, he and other like-minded colleagues had championed the use of Kreyol as a way to educate the population. "But that was something that [President Francois "Papa Doc"] Duvalier was not interested in," he remembers. "We realized the power and importance that culture and literacy could have, and that was a threat to the regime. Only French was taught in schools. Kreyol was not permitted. So then you had a bunch of zombies in the classroom who didn't speak the language they were being taught in and couldn't learn. In Haiti, 85 percent of the population cannot read or write, and Kreyol is the tool to educate people and cut down illiteracy."

After forming in 1965, Mapou and the rest of the Sosite Koukouy collective utilized the airwaves by forming their own radio station, *Caraibes*, to get their message across (something he still does in Miami by hosting a Sunday-morning community affairs program on Radio Carnivale, WRHB-AM 1020). But Duvalier's personal police force, the *Tonton Macoutes*, soon paid him and his partners a visit, shutting down their radio station in April of 1969 and throwing Mapou in jail (the notorious Fort Dimanche) for four months and four days.

When Mapou settled in New York City, he started a new chapter of Sosite Koukouy, working to educate the city's Haitian population about its culture and heritage. He did the same thing after he moved to Miami in the early Eighties, and has since founded chapters in Connecticut and Canada. Throughout, he has been a crusader for Haitian culture.

"Jan Mapou is the only one in the Haitian community who's doing what he's doing," says Dr. Jean-Robert Cadely, a professor of French linguistics and Kreyol at Florida International University. "His cultural center is not only for the Haitians in Miami, but it is well-known in all the communities of the Haitian diaspora."

Cadely believes Mapou's play could act as a unifying element in a notoriously divided Haitian community. "The community as a whole will go see the play, intellectuals as well as illiterates, because Haitian history in general touches every Haitian," says the academic. "You don't have to be educated to see *Libète ou Lanm*."