
Book Report: Beryl McBurnie

This book is titled Beryl McBurnie is a Caribbean biography book written by Judy Raymond. This book focuses on biography of Beryl McBurnie (1913-2000), also called “Belle Rosette” (which means Beautiful Little Lady) is a Trinidadian dancer who established the Little Carib Theater in 1945 after returning to her native country leaving a successful career as a performer in New York City. She promoted the folk-dance, arts and culture of Trinidad and Tobago as her life's work. The book location is in New York and other countries, but is based in Trinidad and Tobago in the early 90's. This book report is about analyzing the text within the context of the themes and topics of Caribbean civilization, within its social and historical contexts and discussing the value of the book to understanding Caribbean Civilizations.

Firstly, Beryl McBurnie is a legend from Trinidad and Tobago who danced across the stream of history and changed the culture forever. Meanwhile, identifying one's heritage and developing a strong cultural identity is extremely important for indigenous people. Therefore, cultural identification includes recognizing one's cultural attributes, beliefs, values and traditions. However, through the story of Beryl McBurnie, we recover knowledge about the past and also help provide a sense of cultural identity. This is how families, groups and institutions were formed and how they have evolved. However, Beryl McBurnie provide identity to Trinidad and Tobago by promoting and performing the dance and art. Who we are today, comes from an understanding of Beryl McBurnie's history. However, Beryl McBurnie became influential in developing dance and the arts within Trinidad and Tobago and the region and introducing folk dance to the public education system and converting her parents' backyard into the Little Carib Theatre. Knowing our history and culture helps us build our identity and build a sense of pride around being part of a culture.

As a Caribbean, facing the task of building a society, is now set about developing and expanding our cultural heritage and this cultural heritage already developed with Beryl McBurnie and her Little Carib dance group. McBurnie, used West Indian dance at point in time before independence when the Caribbean islands were still adjusting to colonial culture and indigenous forms were ignored or disliked. Therefore, McBurnie's visible expression of her belief in an indigenous Caribbean culture is the Little Carib Theater. However, McBurnie solely pick up the colonial cultivated system by releasing Trinidad and Tobago's liberal and past heritage and remembering its French, African, and Venezuelan roots in both music and dance, and also represents what was common to her country.

On the other hand, McBurnie included every aspect of local culture in her work by reclaiming Trinidad and Tobago's African heritage and represented every nation that lived here which are the Spanish, African, French and Portuguese. Dressed in a white full-length flounced dress with lace at the wrist, topped with a colourful headwrap (a version of Martiniquan style *douillette*), McBurnie performed the history of Caribbean civilization by interpreting it into folk-dances. Therefore, one of her folk-dance that she performs is the “the shango”. The shango was developed in the 19th century and is one of many African inspired religions practised in the Americas. It is practised primarily in Trinidad, Grenada, and Brazil. During the 18th and 19th centuries, thousands of Yoruba, Bini, and Fon people were enslaved and transported to the Americas. Shango therefore, was brought from the African Yorba tribe during slavery.

Secondly, McBurnie also performed a dance called “the obeah woman” in 1941. This dance represents spiritual and healing practices developed among enslaved West Africans in the West Indies. However, slavery existed in West Africa long before it was brought to the Caribbean. African slaves became increasingly sought after to work in the unpleasant conditions of heat and humidity. Enslaved Africans were also much less expensive to maintain than indentured European servants or paid wage labourers. Enslaved Africans were often treated harshly and the death rate was high. For enslaved Africans the plantation relied almost solely on an imported enslaved workforce, and became an agricultural factory concentrating on one profitable crop for sale. Enslaved Africans were forced to engage in a variety of laborious activities, all of them back-breaking and the conditions were often worse, this resulted in the death rate on the plantations being high, because overwork, poor nutrition and work conditions, brutality and disease. However, by 1838, Caribbean enslavement came to an end.

Thirdly, another folk- dance that is interpreted is the “limbo”. The limbo is a dance in which participants have to cross under a stick by bending backwards at the waist and the stick is lowered a notch each time every one passes under it, and those who touch the stick are eliminated from the dance. However, the limbo is dated back to the mid to late 1800s in Trinidad and it gain mainstream popularity during the 1950s. Meanwhile, it was brought to Caribbean islands with slaves from Africa and were held separately with both men and women in different areas of the ship, but in order to get over to see each other, the slaves needed to cross under very low spaces. However, the version of the limbo performed in the nineteenth century Trinidad, was meant to symbolize slaves entering a slave ship that carry them to slavery, or a spirit crossing over into the afterworld.

Meanwhile, one of the main advantages of studying history is that it enables us to learn about who we are and where we came from and the people and events of the past can often influence light on the conditions and social norms of the present. Therefore, historical understanding can inform various aspects of our life as well as future objectives. Historical context is an important part of literature that gives us better understanding to all the details of the time and place in which a situation occurs, and those details are what enable us to interpret and analyze works or events of the past, and without it, memories have less meaning. On the other hand, social context is the surroundings, the people and the occasion that influences how things are interpreted such as how we speak, what we speak about, or how we act. Therefore, in understanding McBurnie’s history, the text will be analyzed in a historical and social context.

McBurnie was born in 1913, however, around this time between the 1830’s and 1917, there were a lot of persons immigrated to the West Indies according to Look Lai. This is because there were labour shortages facing the colonies since Government encouraged schemes that would allow for the importation of immigrant labour. But years later while training to become a teacher, McBurnie developed an interest in Caribbean folk dance and, as a teacher she worked on extracurricular activities such as plays, concerts. However, in 1938, she left Trinidad because of her father to study medicine at Columbia University New York, where she briefly studied painting, drama, and theatre, and learned dance from Martha Graham, the famous American dance instructor, by this time, most Caribbean girls had experienced some form of this basic primary school education since the majority of the regular school-going enrollment was mostly boys. In 1940, McBurnie visited Trinidad and pulled together a troupe of dancers to present a show “A Walk Through the Tropics” and was booked to star in a coffee concert on November 10th 1941 in Antillana, but in April of 1942, she performed at the 92nd “Y” (YMCA) and in that same year, she returned to Trinidad for good and took over her dance troupe, and

from 1942 to 1945 she worked with highly talented group of dancers called the Beryl McBurnie Dance Troupe.

Encouraged to study Caribbean folk heritage and influences, McBurnie visited France, England, French Guiana, Brazil, and Suriname in the mid 1940's. Meanwhile, McBurnie went home to Trinidad for most of 1945, but returned to New York in full. However, in her quest for a home for the performing arts, she converted her parents' backyard into a theatre and in 1948 there was the opening of The Little Carib Theatre. She organized dance classes and choreographed many shows at the Little Carib, and was the first person in Trinidad to showcase the steelband when she included the Invaders Steelband in her program. At various times in the 1950 to 1952 period, she visited England as a guest of Council and later toured Europe and North Africa herself seeking cultural ties with the west Indies. In 1957, also called the 'Great Lady of Dance' taught dance at the Jamaica campus of the University of the West Indies and later lectured at various colleges and universities in the USA. Meanwhile, by 1970, there was no Little Carib Dance Company, although occasionally there were shows that were staged. So Therefore, by 1972, McBurnie stopped dancing after the Dingolay production of that year dancers recall. And in November 1978, she was recognized by the Alvin Ailey Dance Group as one of the three Black women who had a 'profound influence' on American dance. McBurnie found many friends, allies and helpers along the way of her journey who shared her vision, meanwhile, there were moments of despair, but she retained the endless confidence that sustained her for decades and her achievements were recognized. So, because of her work and dedication in establishing folk-dance as a cultural heritage, McBurnie was awarded the Order of empire in 1959, two national awards from Trinidad and Tobago which is the Humming Bird Gold Medal in 1969 and the country's highest award, the Trinity Cross, in 1989 and an honorary doctorate from the St Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies in 1976.

Finally, in order to understand Caribbean civilization, we must understand the historical make-up of the Caribbean. The Caribbean can be defined as islands consisting of the Caribbean Sea or it can also be defined as communities who share a similar past influenced by colonialism and slavery and has been here since even before the beginning of recorded time. On the other hand, civilization can be defined as reaching the stage of human social and cultural development and organization that is considered most advanced. Caribbean Civilization, therefore, is the norms and values and the different cultures that are indigenous to its people. The Caribbean however, have gone through a lot before civilization and therefore societies have developed and obtained an identity of its own through its historical and cultural experiences and we understand some part of its history before civilization from Beryl McBurnie written by Judy Raymond. However, in understanding Caribbean Civilization, this book explains the story behind the culture of dance and art after the years of slavery and also shows Beryl McBurnie displaying the Caribbean culture in New York, England and other countries by performing some of her best dances and arts. However, the 1948 opening of the Little Carib Theatre was a triumph. and it became the first venue of influential culture brokers and also represented the cultural side of the West Indies.

Therefore, McBurnie added folk-dance to the cultural development of the Caribbean and its societies, in which today is one of a multi-coloured society and the outcome of its historical pass. On the other hand, McBurnie showcase Caribbean civilization by performing three dances, "The Obeah Woman", "Bourroquite" dance (a Trinidad Carnival character) and the "Shango". The value of the book shows that she help develop the cultural legitimacy of Trinidad and Tobago that would ultimately arm its people to handle independence psychologically and

healthily and it also highlights the Caribbean historical past and that we should be appreciative of that culture that was created for us to continue.

In conclusion, this book which was written by Judy Raymond, is a very nice educational biography that showcase the establishment of the culture of the Caribbean today and represents colonial education by dance. While, this book was located in other parts of the country, it was primarily based in Trinidad, and focuses on a legend Beryl McBurnie who is from Trinidad and Tobago. Beryl McBurnie who is a dancer, established a theatre called a Little Carib Theatre to showcase the cultural heritage of Caribbean civilization. Because of McBurnie, the Caribbean today have a sense of identity which is a cultural identity by dance and art. Meanwhile, Beryl McBurnie picked up the colonial cultivated system by displaying the heritage past in a form of dance and art. However, McBurnie included every aspect of her work by interpreting the history of Caribbean civilization into folk-dances which are "The Shango", "The Obeah Woman" and "The Limbo". However, one of the main advantages of studying history is that it enables us to learn about who we are and where we came from and the people and events of the past can often influence light on the conditions and social norms of the present. Therefore, historical understanding can inform various aspects of our life as well as future objectives. With that in mind, understanding the historical and social context of Beryl McBurnie life, her objective was to maintain a cultural heritage of folk dances and art that represents every nation that lived in the Caribbean and performing it in different countries and establishing an understanding of Caribbean civilization. With her hard work and achievement of the development of the Little Carib Theater in Trinidad and highlighting a cultural aspect of dance and art, McBurnie was rewarded for the things that she has achieve. The Caribbean however, have gone through a lot before civilization and therefore societies have developed and obtained an identity of its own through its historical and cultural experiences and we understand some part of its history before civilization from Beryl McBurnie's folk dances. Therefore, the value of the book in understanding Caribbean Civilization, shows that McBurnie help develop the cultural legitimacy of Trinidad and Tobago and highlight the Caribbean historical pass and it therefore shows that we should be appreciative for what is created for us.