

A Caribbean Usable Past: Derek Walcott, Errol Hill, and the Birth of a National West Indian Theatre

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ABSTRACT

“Caribbean history,” the great Barbadian novelist George Lamming recently observed, “really begins with Haiti and the Haitian Revolution – that is the real beginning of the *Caribbean*.” In twentieth-century anticolonial movements in the African diaspora, the story of the Haitian Revolution has served as an adaptable origin story, a “usable past.” In his 1949 play *Henri Christophe*, the young St. Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott molded the Haitian Revolutionary figure of Henry Christophe (1767-1820) into a Tragic usable past to explore questions of separatism, self-determination, and the impasse that anticolonial leaders and subjects faced during the process of independence. The script fell into the hands of Errol Hill, a Trinidadian director who staged Walcott’s play in London in 1952. The production marked the beginning of Walcott and Hill’s quest to found a national Caribbean theatre with the hope that the British West Indies would one day form its country, the West Indies Federation (1958-1962), under the British Commonwealth. This paper explores the 1952 production as an overlooked inflection point in Caribbean drama, nationalism, and anticolonial philosophy – through the usable past of Henry Christophe.