

A Créole Performer Onstage: Minette

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Elisabeth Alexandrine Louise Ferrand, known as “Minette” (1767-1807), was an actor-singer of mixed racial ancestry.¹ She and her half-sister, Lise, are the only two performers of color known to have appeared on the Saint-Dominguan stage whose names have made their way down to us.²

Minette was born and raised in Port-au-Prince and her first public appearance, when she was only 13 years old, was as a soloist in a Christmas concert in 1780 at the **local playhouse**. The announcement in the *Supplément aux Affiches américaines* newspaper does not name Minette but refers to her respectfully, if also somewhat coyly, as “une jeune Demoiselle” (a young lady), noting that she will sing “plusieurs Ariettes dans le grand genre, & plusieurs Duo” (i.e. solos and duets from various *opéras-comiques*). Minette’s first full theatrical performance was in a benefit performance organized by her mentor, the actor-singer Mme Acquaire (née Dézi), in Port-au-Prince on 6 March 1781. Minette took the soprano role of Isabelle in the *opéra-comique*, *Isabelle et Gertrude* (by Blaise and Favart), which featured in a double bill alongside the Créole parody, *Thérèse et Jeannot*.

In the newspaper advertisement announcing this performance, Minette is referred to again as “une jeune Demoiselle,” and her age is wrongly given as 14 years (she was still only 13). In Moreau de Saint-Méry’s retrospective account of this event, he does not comment explicitly on Minette’s racial ancestry, but refers to her as “une jeune personne” (a young person rather than a young lady)—an epithet that was also used near the beginning of Minette’s career in the press, where she was subsequently referred to as “la jeune personne” (the young person) and later as “Demoiselle Minette”. Moreau de Saint-Méry notes that the young performer was “créole” (i.e. born locally) and indicates that her exceptional talents enabled her to overcome (unspecified) colonial prejudices. The launch of Minette’s career was facilitated by the then director of the Port-au-Prince playhouse, François Saint-Martin (died 1784), who may also have been Minette’s life partner.

This debut marked the beginning of a successful, if also somewhat erratic, solo career at the Port-au-Prince playhouse that lasted until 1789. During this time, Minette performed a wide range of roles, most of them in *opéras-comiques*—a genre combining sung and spoken elements and the most popular form of theatre in the colony. Minette participated in subscription performances as a regular member of the Port-au-Prince troupe; like other troupe members, she also organized occasional benefit performances where she was free to choose her own repertoire. Roles taken by Minette included Lucette in Grétry and Marmontel’s *Silvain*, Miris in Monsigny and Sedaine’s *La Belle Arsène*, Robinette in Duni and

¹ For more on Minette’s ancestry, see Bernard Camier, “A ‘Free Artist of Color’ in Late-Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue: The Life and Times of Minette,” *Music & Musical Performance*: 1. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/mmp/vol1/iss1/1>.

² For more on performers of colour, including enslaved performers, in the theatres of Saint-Domingue, see Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), chapter 5, pp. 153-87.

Favart's *La Fée Urgelle*, Zémire in Grétry and Marmontel's *Zémire et Azor*. Interestingly, when announcing her upcoming benefit performance in 1787 in which she would perform the demanding title role in Dalayrac and Marsollier's *Nina*, Minette addressed the locals in the Port-au-Prince theatre audience and reminded them of their shared status as créoles.³ In addition to her many roles in *opéras-comiques*, Minette played Galathée in Rousseau's melodrama, *Pygmalion*, Cupid in Gluck's *opera seria*, *Orphée et Eurydice* and, seemingly, the (spoken) trouser role of Chérubin in a performance of Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro*.⁴

Minette's final documented performance in Port-au-Prince was as herself in a metatheatrical work by the editor of the *Affiches américaines*, Charles Mozard, whose *La Répétition interrompue* was written as a local response to news from France about the French Revolution. Performed on 4 October 1789, the work responds specifically to—and purports to celebrate—the unification of the three (social) orders or estates, which led to the creation of a National Assembly.

The fact that Minette was not given a solo role in *La Répétition interrompue* is a telling reminder of the precarious nature of her social position as a successful performer of color in a theatrical world—and wider society—that was dominated by white people, particularly at a time of social change. However, it is important to acknowledge, too, the fact that Minette, as a free person of color from a relatively privileged background, belonged to a slave-owning community.

Minette's mother owned a house with a slave hut, and there is evidence to indicate that Minette herself was also an enslaver: in 1786, a man named Longuet left Minette two enslaved young women in his will and, in February 1790, a jail list in the *Affiches américaines* includes "*Isidore, se disant appartenir à la Dlle Minette*" (Isidore, claiming to belong to Mlle Minette). The purpose of such a list was for enslavers—or their representative—to go to the jail and reclaim and re-enslave their human "property".

Research into Minette's life and career, particularly during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, is ongoing. However, we know that she performed in Baltimore in 1796 and gave birth to a daughter in Philadelphia later that year. Minette was back in Saint-Domingue in 1799 and appears to have travelled to Cuba in 1802. She ended up in New Orleans, where she attempted to pursue her performing career but was dogged by ill-health and died in 1807. Minette's fascinating and complex life has been fictionalized in a novel by the Haitian writer Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *La Danse sur le volcan* (1957; 2008) (translated into English by Kaiama Glover in 2016), and, more recently, in a play, *Placeholder*, by Catherine Bisset (2023) (translated into French with Haitian Kreyòl by Elise Finielz).

³ For more on the significance and dynamics of Minette performing this role, see Julia Prest, "Parisian Palimpsests and Creole Creations: Mme Marsan and Dlle Minette perform *Nina* on the Caribbean Stage," *Early Modern French Studies* 41.2 (2019), 170-88. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20563035.2019.1592813>.

⁴ Details of all performances documented in the local press can be found at <https://www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org>.