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Introduction to *El Numero Uno*

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Author Bio: Rachel L. Mordecai is Associate Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her teaching and research interests include Caribbean and African Diaspora literature, hemispheric American literature, popular literature, and material culture. She has published in *Small Axe*, the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, *Sargasso*, *Caribbean Quarterly*, *Wadabagei*, *Kunapipi,* the *Caribbean Review of Books,* and *sx salon*. Her book, *Citizenship Under Pressure: The 1970s in Jamaican Literature and Culture*, appeared from the University of the West Indies Press in 2014; her current book project is tentatively entitled *Caribbean Family Sagas in the Shadow of the Plantation*. She is the editor of *sx salon: a small axe literary platform*. Professor Mordecai's website, including her CV, can be found at rachelmordecai.com.

Pamela Mordecai's *El Numero Uno* was first produced in February 2010 by the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People (now known as Young People's Theatre) in Toronto, Canada. It was later re-staged in Kingston, Jamaica, at the School of Drama, Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, in March 2017. The play is a magical fable about the adventures of the titular character, an orphaned, teen-aged pig, as he overcomes both his own waywardness and the machinations of a pair of twin villains who have established a stranglehold over the village of Lopinot and the livelihoods of its villagers: a range of human and non-human characters including pigs, birds, and rabbits.

Mordecai is better known for her poetry and fiction than for playwriting: she has published nine collections of poetry and two works of fiction (a collection of short stories and a novel). Yet *El Numero Uno*'s most distinctive features – its incorporation of multiple linguistic codes, integration of music and dance, and manifest delight in rhythm, rhyme and word-play – make it coherent with Mordecai's broader literary output. In particular, Mordecai's interest in voice and in the aesthetic possibilities of Caribbean nation languages is a throughline that unites all her work and makes it seem almost inevitable that she would turn to writing for the stage.

Pamela Mordecai was born and raised in Jamaica and spent many years there working in education, media, and publishing before moving to Canada in the mid-1990s. Beyond her poetry and fiction, Mordecai has a considerable publication record as an anthologist, textbook author, and author of five books for children. She is also a publisher in her own right, most notably of the Caribbean Poetry Series produced by Sandberry Press from the 1990s through the mid-2000s. *El Numero Uno* was her first play produced on a major stage, building on a longstanding involvement in theatre which includes an early script, *The Birthday Party*, staged at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus in the mid-1960s while Mordecai was a student there. When asked about the origins of *El Numero Uno* during a personal conversation, Mordecai says that she didn't necessarily intend to write a play for children. She wanted to write a fable, she wanted the dialogue to be both funny and "tasty" (satisfying to the ear), and she wanted to incorporate Caribbean masquerade traditions (Pitchy-Patchy from Jamaican Jonkonnu and Jab-Jab from Trinidadian mas both feature in the harvest festival that anchors the plot). Although the play raises difficult issues (orphaned children, food scarcity, prejudice against perceived "others"), it focuses even more on the rich socio-cultural traditions by which Caribbean people sustain life and community in the face of hardship.

El Numero Uno is set in an identifiably Caribbean context – Lopinot is a village in the foothills of Trinidad's Northern Range – and features characters whose names and traits will be easily recognized by Caribbean children: the Rasta artisan and herbalist is named Ras Onelove; two of the younger characters are Ti Jacqui and Ti Lapin; Uno's mentor (also a pig)

is Chef Trenton. The dialogue moves fluidly between English and a non-specific anglophone Caribbean language bearing markers of both Jamaican and Trinidadian creoles, with regular interpolations of French and Spanish. While the play's linguistic hybridity is one of the elements that mark it as Caribbean, Mordecai says (in the same personal conversation) that she had the milieu of its first production, Canada, in mind when putting all those languages alongside each other. She wanted to make the point, through the play's linguistic richness, that "one needs to be aware of the world and of the multiplicity of cultures in Canada; that there are many cultures and ways of speaking is a wonderful thing, and one should have an open ear."

This message of openness to diversity extends beyond the play's languages and into its deft treatment of difference. Themes of disguise, misrecognition, and mistrust of the other are significant drivers of the plot, yet no one makes an issue of what might seem the most significant distinction among the characters: that some are human and some are animals. Rather, the horizon of exclusion and potential conflict is structured (in a quite Caribbean way) around familiarity and its lack: anyone not recognizable as part of the small, rural Lopinot community is a potential target of suspicion, especially in the times of scarcity brought on by the twin villains, Eddiebeast and Freddiebeast. The play opens with a group of villagers in their festival costumes challenging Uno because they do not recognize him and suspect him of stealing produce. He is saved when Brother Gordon vouches for him to the other masqueraders, yet Brother Gordon himself must remove his mask before Uno can recognize his rescuer. This theme continues throughout, as characters must recognize their own true natures and that of their neighbours to work together and solve the problems that beset them (the key being a recipe for "Turn-Me-Into-My-True-Self Soup"). Yet masking is not reduced in the play to a symbolic stand-in for deceit, as evidenced by the fact that, once all is resolved and harmony restored, the play ends with the characters putting their masks and costumes on for the harvest festival. While it may seem thematically incongruous to other audiences, this detail reflects the play's fidelity to the festival traditions of the Caribbean, according to which masquerade is a pathway to the revelation of submerged truths.

El Numero Uno is, to some degree, an artifact of its turn-of-the-century moment: the festival traditions upon which it draws are continually changing, and younger generations of Caribbean children may be less familiar with the stock characters of Pitchy-Patchy and Jab-Jab. The intimate rural milieu within which the play is set may also seem increasingly a gesture to an almost-vanished Caribbean past. But the play's achievement lies partly in its skillful transposition of Caribbean social and cultural elements into a realm just outside of any particular place and time, such that its wit, whimsy, joyous energies and salutary messages can be rendered accessible through a variety of stagings for a variety of audiences now and yet to come.