

How I Met composer Claibe Richardson
And Worked With Him On Two Musicals:
“CONGO SQUARE “
And
“FROM THE BODONI COUNTY SONGBOOK ANTHOLOGY.”

By Frank Gagliano

MEETING CLAIBE RICHARDSON:

In the 1970's, I was on the faculty of Theatre at the University of Texas in Austin. I was also the Artistic Director there of the E.P. Conkle Workshop for Playwrights. While at UT, I got a call from Broadway composer Claibe Richardson. He had heard that I had written a play called, *“In The Voodoo Parlour of Marie Laveau (an unsung voodoo chamber opera).”* The international star, Eartha Kitt, Claibe said, was trying to create a starring Broadway vehicle for herself about the legendary Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, and had asked Claibe to write the score. Claibe asked me if I'd be interested in writing the book. I had known of Claibe's Broadway musical adaptation of Truman Capote's, *“The Grass Harp”* (starring Barbara Cook). So, yes, I *was* interested in working with him — but not interested in *that* project. At the time I had already started work on— and was consumed by — *“Congo Square.”* I asked Claibe if *he'd* be interested in taking a look at what I had so far created (with lyrics) of *“Congo Square,”* to see if he'd be interested in working with *me on that* piece. He took a look at the developing book with lyrics and said, yes. We completed that project, got *“Congo Square”* on, and looked for our next project together.

I then joined the faculty of the then Division of Theatre at West Virginia University in Morgantown, WV (it is now a School Of Theatre), as the Benedum Professor of Playwriting. During my first WVU sabbatical (and now living in Mount Lebanon, PA), I began writing character poems, a la *“Spoon River Anthology.”* I soon realized that they could possibly be set to music and that they each seemed to be coming from the same town. Or County.

My *Bodoni County* came to mind. Claibe agreed to set the pieces to music.

BODONI COUNTY:

In the 1960s I wrote a companion piece to my one act, Off-Broadway play, *“Conerico Was Here To Stay,”* which was being revived, also Off Broadway. The companion piece was called, *“Paradise Gardens East.”* Somehow, it became a little musical, with brilliant composer Mildred Kayden writing the score and my rewriting my original non-musical piece into a little book musical with my first lyrics for a professional Off-Broadway show. The cast included Raul Julia, a young Michael Douglas and Dominick Chianese (later, Uncle Junior in *The Sopranos*). The plot dealt with the goings on in one apartment in a building called Paradise Gardens East. A woman from a place called Bodoni County is visiting with her strange brother for an extended stay — a brother who becomes obsessed with protecting his sister, he says, from being raped in New York — and who starts making the apartment into a prison. The plot, too, involves a young man who appears on the building's ledge, threatening to jump — and with the New York City mobs below, goading him on. One song in the piece was a voice over for the now jailed sister (who has a case of severe laryngitis) and is about Bodoni County, where she recently came from. It was sung by Ely Stone, who was then appearing in the first production of the long running hit, *“Jacque Brel Is Alive And Well and Living In Paris.”* As far as I can

tell, "*Paradise Garden East*," was the first time I used Bodoni County in a piece. I'm not sure where the name came from. Bodoni, of course, is a typeface and I think it just seemed funny to me. It obviously stuck because, subsequently, many of my plays took place in my Bodoni County: *My Chekhov Light*, *The Farewell Concert of Irene and Vernon Castle* and the musical revue, *From The Bodoni County Songbook Anthology*. Characters, in other pieces, came from my Bodoni County (Jeremy Chester, from my *Big Sur*) — and characters in other pieces took on the name of the County: Father Bodoni (from the Rock musical with composer Raymond Benson; "*The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer*;" and Hiram Bodoni, from the Theatre piece, "*The Private Eye Of Hiram Bodoni*." Hiram is showing up again in the novel I'm working on, "*The Black Box Murders*."

MOVING ON:

The next public reading was in Pittsburgh, at Carnegie Mellon's first season of *The Showcase of New Plays* in the CMU Studio Theatre. Larry Arrick, who was directing a musical on the main stage, put my musical reading together and the musical director was Keith Lockhart, then a CMU graduate student and now the Conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra. It was from that CMU presentation that Claibe and I realized we had the making of a show.

Claibe and I were then invited to work on developing the piece at The Eugene O'Neill Theatre Conference, in the Barn basement, amid puppets left over from the then recent Puppetry Conference — including, I recall, a penis puppet. Douglas Aibel and Andre Ernotte, Directors at the O'Neill then working on the main stage shows, picked up Bodoni and we opened next season in the first workshop at New York's Vineyard Theatre — where new pieces were (still are) created.

After more work on it, *FROM THE BODONI COUNTY SONGBOOK ANTHOLOGY* was performed at the Pittsburgh City Theatre Hamburg Theatre, produced by then Pyramid Productions (Melissa Martin, Tammy Ryan and Ted Hoover), Ted Hoover, directing. That production shaped the piece we're presenting now, in this Concert Reading. This Concert presentation has some new songs and monologues added — and with a new first-rate cast and new wonderful director, Melissa Martin — and with the same superb musical director, Doug Levine.

My presenting it now is because the emotional roller coaster view of the US, when I first wrote the piece decades ago, resonates, I think, even more so today — in these fragmented, surreal, USA times. I think, too, that my signature style of combining in characters, what I call, their *centers of pain*, with outrageous absurd humor, is much more a reality mix for today's sensibilities.

Also, I felt it was time to bring attention to the great melodic musical gifts of my late composer collaborator, Claibe Richardson. Claibe was a genius at setting theatre lyrics with melodies that dramatize the dramatic moment, and that stick in the *need-to-leave-the-theatre-humming-the-melody* part of your brain.

This one's for you Claibe. And for all of us, living — and looking for the hum— in our own Bodoni Counties.

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