Cultural Diversity and Black British Playwriting on the Mainstream 2000-2012

By Dr. Lynette Goddard

At a 2004 debate about ‘the state of black theatre’, prominent black practitioners Paulette Randall, Steven Luckie, and Kwame Kwei-Armah discussed whether the first decade of the twenty-first century was witnessing a ‘cultural renaissance’ of black British playwriting, marked particularly by the increased production of black plays in London’s established theatre venues.¹ During the 1970s and 1980s black plays appeared primarily as the output of companies such as Black Theatre Co-operative (now Nitro), Black Mime Theatre, Talawa, Tara Arts, Temba, and Theatre of Black Women who took performances to studio spaces, arts, youth and community centres in cities with a significant black and/or Asian demographic. But, as Winsome Pinnock states, black practitioners wanted mainstream recognition: ‘As one of the playwrights to emerge in the Eighties, I would say that I, like others of my generation, did not feel that my work should only be produced by the black theatre companies but that they should have a place within the mainstream’ (Pinnock, 32). Arts funding cuts led to the closure of a number of black theatre companies during the 1990s, appearing to sound the death knell of a dedicated black British theatre sector. However, these closures coincided with the Arts Council of England’s development of cultural diversity initiatives that aimed to foster greater inclusion of black practitioners in mainstream theatre venues.

The Arts Council’s commitment to recognising the fundamental role that black arts could play in diversifying British culture is published in a series of key reports including Towards Cultural Diversity (1989), The Landscape of Fact: Towards a Policy for Cultural Diversity for the English Funding System (1997) and Cultural Diversity Action Plan (1998). Naseem Khan argues that Arts Council cultural diversity initiatives were important for looking at the very

¹ An edited transcript of this debate is published in Dominic Cavendish, ‘It’s boom time for black theatre – but will it last?’ Daily Telegraph, 4 December 2004 and a full recording can be heard at www.theatrevoice.com
infrastructure of British theatre, and ‘for the first time identified the causes of inequality as not just inequalities of funding but also organisational culture, tradition and privilege that restricted entry’ (ACE, 2005, 23).

The long-term impact of cultural diversity initiatives becomes evident in the mainstream recognition that black British playwrights achieved during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Productions of plays by Kwame Kwei-Armah, debbie tucker green and Roy Williams at the Royal Court Downstairs and at the National Theatre placed them at the forefront of black British playwriting in the first decade of the new millennium, and they were latterly joined by Bola Agbaje, one of a raft of British African playwrights to emerge during this era. 2003 was a particularly fortuitous year with an unprecedented eleven black plays produced, including tucker green’s Dirty Butterfly (Soho Theatre) and Born Bad (Hampstead Theatre), Kwei-Armah’s Elmina’s Kitchen (National Theatre), and an extended run of Williams’ Fallout (Royal Court). The transfer of Kwei-Armah’s Elmina’s Kitchen to the West End (Garrick Theatre) in 2005 seemed to be further proof of a groundbreaking moment in the trajectory of black British theatre, and an acknowledgement of the commercial viability of this work. Aleks Sierz comments ‘This was also the moment when it became clear that much of the energy in British new writing was now coming from black writers whose point of view was critical of both established society and the black subcultures within it’ (Sierz, 2000, ix). These achievements are promising signs of vibrant black British playwriting activity that was at last being recognized for having a wider appeal necessary for success with the predominately white, middle-class, theatre-going audiences, while also being seen as a way of attracting new young, black and working class audiences to attend these prestigious theatre venues in London.

The increased profile of black playwriting in the new millennium can be further accounted to a range of initiatives specifically developed to address institutional racism in the British theatre. Sir William Macpherson’s report for The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1999) concluded that the Metropolitan Police investigation into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in April 1993 was marred by institutional racism.
“Institutional Racism” consists of the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.’

(Macpherson, 321)

Macpherson’s report led to other institutions reflecting on their policies and procedures, the urgency of which was underlined by The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which ‘extends protection against racial discrimination by public authorities [and…] places a new, enforceable positive duty on public authorities’ (CRE, 1). The Eclipse Conference, held in Nottingham in 2001, and subsequent report, published in 2002, aimed to ‘discuss and devise strategies to combat racism in British theatre [and…] explore ways of developing our understanding and knowledge of African Caribbean and Asian theatre’ (ACE, 4). The Eclipse conference reinforced the Arts Council’s commitment to increase cultural diversity in established theatres throughout Britain. The conference was aimed primarily at regional theatres, but its twenty-one recommendations can be linked to the flourishing of black plays on the mainstream in the early twenty-first century. Recommendation 20 summarizes that ‘By March 2003, every publicly funded theatre organisation in England will have reviewed its Equal Opportunities policy, ascertained whether its set targets are being achieved and, if not, drawn up a comprehensive Positive Action plan which actively develops opportunities for African Caribbean and Asian practitioners.’ (24). The deadline for the Eclipse recommendations to be implemented coincides with the breakthrough for black British playwrights on the mainstream.

Two other important initiatives include the Arts Council’s Decibel programme, launched in 2003 to promote diversity through regular showcasing of emergent artists, and the Arts Council funded Sustained Theatre initiative, which was established to promote connections and collaborations for a diverse arts sector in Britain (See
The Arts Council’s ‘Race Equality Scheme 2004-7’ set out further aims to eradicate racism in the British theatre industry by ‘support[ing] Black and minority ethnic artists and organisations to enable them to create and develop projects that encourage confidence and self-sufficiency in developing arts for their communities and for society as a whole’ (ACE, 2005, 4). ACE’s Race Equality Scheme 2009-11 updates the previous scheme to outline a special focus on digital opportunity, visual arts, children and young people, and the London Olympics 2012.

Cultural diversity initiatives can be viewed as an important way of integrating black practitioners into the mainstream, or, more sceptically, as a way in which ‘the Black Arts world is denied the ability to grapple for itself with issues of tradition and contemporary culture – this being seen as something which is the responsibility of the arts authorities’ (King, 28). Barnaby King is wary of the term cultural diversity, which he claims ‘can never depict all the voices that make up British society and, when unpacked, it turns out to refer to a mass of different groups with different aims and ambitions, both political and artistic’ (King, 27). In a related article, King implies that the move towards cultural diversity invigorates and empowers the mainstream, whilst black and Asian artists ‘feel their autonomy being threatened, and therefore marginalized, by what should be an inclusive institution’ (King, 133). Indeed, one potentially problematic dimension of cultural diversity initiatives is that they place the onus on mainstream (predominately white) artistic directors to determine the kinds of black plays that are produced and the roles that black actors are cast into, the danger being that they will programme plays that fulfil their own perceptions and biases of black Britain. Thus, an increased mainstream profile for black theatre could come at a cost to the kinds of representations of black Britain that are regularly staged. That both Kwei-Armah’s and Williams’s acclaimed plays in 2003 were about urban teenage violence, for example, seems to suggest that mainstream institutions can fulfil the obligations for cultural diversity by programming plays that correspond with prevailing ideas about black experience in the UK.

In 2010, journalist Lindsay Johns’ controversial article Evening Standard article claimed that ‘black theatre is cruelly blighted by the ghetto mentality that passes for the only acceptable
face of black British culture.' Johns noted that 'the overwhelming majority of black British theatre over the past decade [...] can be categorised as being about guns, drugs and council estates' and warned '[c]ontrary to the all-pervasive mood of multicultural bonhomie and self-congratulation, there is actually something rotten in the state of black British theatre [which is] languishing in an intellectually vapid, almost pre-literate cacophony of expletives, incoherent street babble and plots which revolve around the clichéd staples of hoodies, guns and drugs. [...] At best, these plays succeed by masquerading as the voice of the marginalised black underclass, which by dint of acute white guilt and a commitment to diversity get an immediate audience at the capital’s most prestigious venues.’

A more optimistic assessment of new millennial trends recognises that black British playwrights have garnered a wider appeal by portraying some urgent topical issues that would otherwise be rarely seen on the contemporary British stage. These productions attract new audiences, diversifying the typically white, middle class demographic, thus making British theatre more inclusive and implying a shared cultural ownership of Britain’s institutions. Roy Williams wrote Fallout (2003) in response to the failure of the Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor murder trials and the declaration of institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police. The play was adapted for Channel 4’s ‘Disarming Britain’ season (3 July in 2008). Kwame Kwei-Armah wrote Elmina’s Kitchen (2003) after seeing two black boys shot and dying in a car that was wrapped around a tree in Hackney; he wanted to warn his son about the dangers of criminality and gang violence. A televised version was shown on BBC 4 (13 June 2005). Bola Agbaje wrote Gone Too Far! (2007) for her younger brother, and wrote to then Prime Minister Gordon Brown inviting him to come to see the production to get an insight into the problems of Britain’s urban youth violence. debbie tucker green’s random (2008) was a poignant response to the epidemic of teenage knife murder that swept through London in 2007 and 2008. The play opened the Royal Court’s first Theatre Local season at Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre and was also adapted for radio (BBC Radio 3, 13 March 2010) and a BAFTA Award winning screenplay (Channel 4, 23 August 2011).
Many of these plays are not entirely located within the ‘ghetto’ or dealing and their reach is wider than guns, knives and violence. Agbaje’s *Off the Endz* (the play that prompted Johns’ furore) is set on a council estate, but the story is fundamentally about a young black couple that are seeking the means to ‘get off da endz’. The ghetto is the starting point for a play about routes of upward mobility, which linked to wider concerns about the particular impact of the global financial crisis and credit crunch on opportunities for young black professionals. Williams examines the disenfranchisement of the black teenage protagonists in *Fallout*, while also highlighting the failures of institutional structures (within schools and the police force) that are supposed to support them. Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s Kitchen* is located in Hackney’s murder mile, but the stage setting is a West Indian takeaway and the story focuses on relationships between fathers and sons as a metaphor for exploring the legacy of slavery on contemporary black psyches. *Elmina’s Kitchen* is named after a real slave castle, Elmina’s Castle, in Ghana – ‘the oldest slave fort on the West African coast, built in 1492, where enslaved Africans were kept until the European ship was ready to bring them to the new World.’ (Programme, ‘Kwei Armah and director Angus Jackson in conversation). Kwei-Armah explains ‘it's all about inheritance, which is why I call it Elmina’s Kitchen. Some of us are still living with the vestiges of being in that slave dungeon.’ He links contemporary gun crime and ‘black on black violence’ to how legacies of slavery manifest in the continued disadvantage of black people. Programme notes present statistics about black boys being three times more likely to be excluded from schools as their white peers for the same offences, giving a clear context for understanding the play as about much more than the backdrop of gang violence that informs it. Kwei-Armah portrays stereotypes of black masculinity to raise pertinent debates about the limited opportunities for young black men in Britain.

There are lots of pressures on young black males to live up to stereotypes. I wrote the play as a plea, as an investigation into what kind of character it takes to supercede their circumstance.  

Kwei-Armah, programme interview

tucker green’s *random* uniquely foregoes a realistic setting altogether, placing one black woman on stage to account a day in the life of a black family, which starts off mundane and ordinary and ends in tragedy as the youngest son is stabbed to death in a random altercation
in the street in his school lunch hour. Though most knife crime victims are black boys and men, tucker green brings a fresh angle by narrating the story through a solo black female voice and focusing on the emotional shock and grief of those left behind to grieve. Aleks Sierz’s review commends tucker green for provocatively ‘dar[ing] to give us a brief glimpse of the emotional truth behind the depressingly familiar headlines about knife crime’ (Sierz, Tribune, 21 March 2008) and Claire Allfree’s review notes, tucker green ‘makes no concessions to the liberal conscience eager to understand black teenage violence. Her interest is in giving voice to the people left behind’ (Allfree, Metro, 12 March 2008). tucker green transcends the ghetto environment by focusing on an ordinary family in a domestic environment, highlighting a random murder that could potentially happen to anyone.

Contemporary black British playwrights are not limited by a ‘ghetto mentality’, but rather depict such experiences as a way of interrogating the state of the nation and addressing some of the urgent issues of the times.

Social, political, and material contexts are an important backdrop for assessing developments in black theatre in Britain and evaluating the stories of black experience that prevail at certain moments. Black British theatre thrived during the first decade of the twenty-first century, which can be accounted to the impact of cultural diversity initiatives throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium. The Tricycle Theatre’s Not Black and White’ season in 2009 mounted a trilogy of plays exploring black playwrights’ perspectives on the state-of-the-nation at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Artistic Director, Nicolas Kent, outlines the motivation for programming as a recognition of changing demographics in which ‘London’s black and Asian children outnumber white British children by about six to four (Kent, in Williams et al, vii). These figures also suggest the importance of culturally diversity for integration, equal opportunities and access for all in British theatre. However, in the late 2000s the Arts Council had replaced the diversity agenda with a ‘strategic framework for excellence in the arts’, where the impact of black theatre practice will undoubtedly manifest in the future.
At the 2004 debate about the boom in black theatre, the three panelists generally agreed that it was too early to see whether the achievements of the previous year signaled the beginning of a sustainable 'cultural renaissance'. Paulette Randall described the increased profile of black theatre in 2003 as a 'fluke.' Kwame Kwei-Armah acknowledged that the unprecedented number of black plays produced during that year alone was 'a wonderful thing [...] a signal that we are being allowed into the mainstream.' Steven Luckie asserted 'I wouldn't really say a renaissance, because I think we have to wait and see. It takes time to create a renaissance, not just a year.' Whether the number of mainstream productions of black plays produced in London will continue through the second decade is yet to be known. Notably, however, three significant productions already produced were by Williams (Sucker Punch, Royal Court, 2010), tucker green (truth and reconciliation, Royal Court, 2011) and Agbaje (Belong, Royal Court, 2012) suggesting that they are continuing to lead the way, while Kwei-Armah has relocated to the USA to become Artistic Director of Center Stage Baltimore.

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