

## Black British Plays Post World War II -1970s

By Professor Colin Chambers

Britain's postwar decline as an imperial power was accompanied by an invited but unprecedented influx of peoples from the colonized countries who found the 'Mother Country' less than welcoming and far from the image which had featured in their upbringing and expectation. For those who joined the small but growing black theatre community in Britain, the struggle to create space for, and to voice, their own aspirations and views of themselves and the world was symptomatic of a wider struggle for national independence and dignified personal survival.

While radio provided a haven, exploiting the fact that the black body was hidden from view, and amateur or semi-professional club theatres, such as Unity or Bolton's, offered a few openings, access to the professional stage was severely restricted, as it was to television and film. The African-American presence in successful West End productions such as *Anna Lucasta* provided inspiration, but also caused frustration when jobs went to Americans. Inexperience was a major issue - opportunities were scarce and roles often demeaning. Following the demise of Robert Adams's wartime Negro Repertory Theatre, several attempts were made over the next three decades to rectify the situation in a desire to learn and practice the craft.

The first postwar steps were taken during the 1948 run of *Anna Lucasta* when the existence of a group of black British understudies allowed them time to work together. Heeding a call from the multi-talented Trinidadian Edric Connor, they formed the Negro Theatre Company to mount their own productions and try-outs, such as the programme of variety and dramatic items called *Something Different* directed by Pauline Henriques. They held other showings as well as lectures and classes, but the group began to disintegrate as people went on tour and it became difficult to find suitable venues at a reasonable rent.

Despite the obstacles, Britain still represented opportunity to those living in the colonies. Errol Hill, for example, came in 1949 from Trinidad and Tobago on a British Council scholarship, but found himself the only black student at RADA where he had to don whiteface. He saw as much theatre as possible, and, noting the absence of black actors, decided to stage his own productions, which included Sophocles's *Antigone* and the British première of Derek Walcott's *Henri Christophe* with Errol John, who had also come to England from Trinidad, in the lead. Back in the Caribbean, Hill became a prominent playwright and theatre historian. His best-known play, *Man Better Man* (1954) represented his homeland at the 1965 Commonwealth Festival in Britain in his own production.

John stayed in Britain and became a key figure in the development of black British theatre. His response to the lack of good roles was to write a play of his own, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, which tells the story of an impetuous young trolley bus driver who escapes Trinidad for the dream of a better life in Liverpool. A play of individual poetic realism enriched by the vibrant use of vernacular speech, it won an *Observer* competition and was produced at the Royal Court in 1958. John was unhappy with the stage production, however, which he found sentimental and which had Americans in the main parts, including the lead he had played on radio. The play received mixed reviews, and was better received when broadcast on television in 1960 with John back in his old role. The play was performed to much praise off-Broadway in 1962 and has been seen in more than two dozen countries since. Underlining its importance, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* was revived in 2003 as the first production of the Eclipse initiative aimed at overcoming racism in the British theatre. John, despite stage and film appearances, major roles in radio and television, and having three plays broadcast on television, remained unfulfilled, and he died in Britain in 1988, lonely and dejected.

Six months before *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, the Court had presented its first play by a black British subject, *Flesh to a Tiger* by Jamaican playwright Barry Reckord. It was also the first

production at the Court to have a substantial black cast, which was led by London-born Cleo Laine. The Court produced four more of Reckord's plays, including *Skyvvers* (1963), a vigorous portrait of comprehensive school students being failed by society. The Court became an important venue for the black theatre community, staging several productions that included black actors. Wole Soyinka became the best known of the black writers associated with the Court, where from 1957-9 he was a play reader. He directed his play *The Invention* at the Court, and acted in and contributed to the script and music for *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* (1959), a dramatization of the deaths of suspected Mau-Mau prisoners in Kenya. Soyinka had left Britain by the time British theatre took a closer interest in him in the mid-1960s, with the world première of *The Road* (1965), *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1966), and *The Lion and the Jewel* (1966).

During the late 1950s, another progressive white theatre company, Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, was also employing a few black actors. This was most prominent in Shelagh Delaney's 1958 play, *A Taste of Honey*, which caused controversy because of the sexual relationship between a white teenager and a black sailor, who fathers her child. This play, like Ted Willis's *Hot Summer Night*, was a rare example of white British playwrights' dealing with diasporic topics or characters. There were a few other white-led initiatives, and they co-opted western drama for the same end. For instance, Joan Clarke, who founded the West Indian Drama Group based at the West Indian Students' Union in 1956, directed all-black casts in plays by Čapek, Ardrey, Saroyan, Romain, Shaw and O'Neill, whereas the Ira Aldridge Players, set up by Herbert Marshall in 1961, produced, *Do Somethin' Addy Man!*, a re-working of the Alcestis story set in contemporary Camden Town, London with a twenty-two strong all-black cast.

The need for groups under black leadership grew stronger as a significant pool of black actors emerged, hungry for work they could believe in. Two-short lived attempts came in 1960: Lloyd Reckord, Barry's brother, founded the New Day Theatre Company and directed the British premières of *Sea at Dauphin* and *The Six in the Rain*, two short plays by Derek Walcott; and

Jamaican actor Clifton Jones launched the New Negro Theatre Company with two American plays, a Molière, and two plays by himself set in Jamaica.

The establishment of the Negro Theatre Workshop (NTW) in 1961 made a more lasting impact. It was organised by Edric and Pearl Connor, two people who were central to the postwar history of British black theatre. Edric moved between theatre, radio, film and TV, appearing in the West End and club theatres. Pearl was an actress, theatrical and literary agent, publisher and, like Edric, a cultural activist. Their house became a gathering place for aspiring artists, providing a forum for initiatives such as the creation in 1959 of London's Carnival. When they called together a large group of black actors and writers, mostly Caribbean, to found the NTW, the aim was to put on productions that would provide experience and help develop and improve standards in every branch of the theatre. Through lack of finance, it never acquired a base, but it organized classes and produced plays in churches, town halls and community centres as well as in purpose-built theatres. The company emphasised inclusivity in its repertoire and ethos.

The first production with which it was associated was *A Wreath for Udomo* at the Lyric, Hammersmith in November 1961. A preview was given in aid of, and to launch, the NTW. Unfortunately, Edric collapsed during the next performance on the official opening night, and the understudy was not ready to go on. Pearl had difficulty getting the money the NTW was owed from the show's producers, and the trauma left the company in disarray. It was not until 1964 that the NTW mounted its first own production, *Bethlehem Blues*, which was followed by two more biblical shows, *The Dark Disciples*, which was adapted for BBC TV, and *The Prodigal Son*.

In 1966, the NTW was invited to represent Britain at the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal with *The Dark Disciples*, along with another British group, the Pan African Players, which performed its only show, *Wind versus Polygamy* by Obi Egbuna. That year, the NTW also received an Arts Council grant of £300, probably the first awarded to a black theatre company, and produced Henry A Zeiger's *Mr Hubert*, an American play about a Harlem Everyman figure with a cast of more than thirty. As it toured the country, the NTW added to its

repertoire plays by Walcott, Hill and Chekhov (adapted to the Caribbean), and programmes of poetry, song, dance and music. By the time of Edric Connor's death in 1968, funding for a base had not been found, and the company had ceased to be active.

New notions of black identity were now being debated, influenced by black consciousness ideology from America. The Caribbean Artists' Movement, for example, founded in 1966 amid this debate, became an important catalyst for British diasporic cultural activity, including theatre. The influence of this new thinking was also seen in the plays of African-American Ed Bullins, which Roland Rees directed at InterAction's Ambiance Lunch Hour theatre in west London. As a consequence, the theatre mounted a Black and White Power season in 1970, the pick of which was a trio of plays by Mustapha Matura called *Black Pieces*, written in the everyday language of people living in contemporary Britain. Matura had come from Trinidad to Britain in 1961 and taken a number of jobs, including hospital porter and stockroom assistant. His next play, *As Time Goes By* (1971), won the prestigious John Whiting and George Devine playwriting awards, and *Play Mas* (1974), set either side of Trinidadian independence, became the first play by a Caribbean writer to appear in the West End when it transferred from the Royal Court. Matura's reputation was confirmed with subsequent work such as *Rum an' Coca Cola* (1976, Royal Court), but success was no guarantee that his plays would be produced. As a result of rejection, he co-founded the Black Theatre Co-operative, which produced his iconic play *Welcome Home Jacko* (1979). In the 1980s, as well as writing for television, Matura notably reworked two European classics, *Playboy of the West Indies* (1984) and *Trinidad Sisters* (1988, later renamed *Three Sisters*), and in 1991, with the production of *The Coup* at the Cottesloe Theatre, he became the first British-based black writer to be performed at the National Theatre.

Although the accomplishment of individuals like Matura and fellow playwright Michael Abbensetts was important for raising the profile of the black theatre community, the fight for collective presence remained crucial. The 1970s saw a burgeoning of such activity - for instance, by the Dark and Light Theatre, Keskidee, Temba and Drum - which laid the foundations for greater

achievements in the following decades. Dark and Light, founded by Jamaican actor Frank Cousins, a former Post Office worker, became the first British theatre company with its own base to be shaped and defined by black talent. The local council helped with bills and charged only nominal rent for the 150-year-old church community hall in south London where the company was located, but there was no money to turn the hall into a well-equipped theatre, let alone the multiracial arts centre Cousins had envisaged. It opened in 1971 with a revival of Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, and then toured as well as performed at its home venue, where its most popular productions were Caribbean pantomimes *Anansi and Brer Englishman* (1972 and '73) and *Anansi and the Strawberry Queen* (1974). The growing black presence elsewhere in the theatre marginalized Dark and Light and its inclusive approach, and in 1975 it became the Black Theatre of Brixton. This change reflected a shift towards a more radical stance and one with which the local community could more strongly identify. A powerful new team of Norman Beaton, Jamal Ali and Rufus Collins was running the company, but within a short space of time there was no more money and they had lost the building. The company became peripatetic until it closed in 1978.

Across the capital in north London in 1970, Oscar Abrams, a Guyanese architect, gave up his career, bought a rundown Victorian mission school and opened the Keskidee Centre, possibly the first black-led arts centre in Britain. Keskidee developed from an educational and social hub to become a major platform for African and Caribbean culture, whether in lectures, exhibitions, film, poetry, literature or plays. At the heart of Keskidee's work was the Theatre Workshop, which opened in 1971. Linton Kwesi Johnson, who was the centre's Library Resources and Education Officer, developed his dub poetry there. Rufus Collins, who became head of Keskidee in 1976, found new funding, revamped the building, and presented more regular programmes of work from Africa, African America, and the Caribbean. Keskidee gained a reputation at home as well as abroad with productions such as Jimi Rand's *Say Hallelujah* (1977), Edgar Nkosi White's *Lament for Rastafari* (1977) and *Masada* (1978), Steve Carter's *Eden* (1978), Lennox Brown's *The Throne in an Autumn Room* (1979), and Walcott's *Remembrance* (1980). By 1980, however,

Keskidee was badly in debt. Its occasional attempts at revival failed, it closed as a theatre space, and Abrams had to sell the building in 1992 to pay off debts.

Two actors, Trinidadian Oscar James and South African Alton Kumalo, founded Temba in 1972 to offer work to black actors. While James went on to enjoy a distinguished career as an actor, Kumalo ran Temba as its first artistic director. For the next decade, Temba toured new plays with a strong political commitment and anti-racist stance, often written by and starring Kumalo. Beginning in 1974/5, Temba became the first British black theatre company to receive an annual Arts Council subsidy, yet it faced similar audience and venue problems associated with low budget touring that had beset Dark and Light. Alby James replaced Kumalo in 1984 as artistic director. He broadened Temba's repertoire in order to increase audiences and re-position the company within the theatrical mainstream. He looked beyond, without ignoring, what he saw as the limiting focus of much black theatre on racism and a uniquely black experience. James put Temba on a new footing with a blend of its own shows and co-productions, for instance with theatres in Birmingham, Derby and Leicester. He revived and encouraged new black writing, undertook important outreach work and introduced a diasporic dimension to European classics through a policy of integrated casting. The company came under threat in 1990 when the Arts Council rejected James's plan for Temba to become a larger-scale touring company. The following year the Council's grant was withdrawn amid criticism of the company's artistic and management standards, and its final show came in 1992.

The Drum Arts Centre was set up in 1974 by Cy Grant from Guyana and John Mapondera from Zimbabwe (then called Rhodesia) with the aim of establishing a national centre for the arts of black people, in contrast to local centres such as Keskidee. In 1975, Drum presented two plays at the Commonwealth Institute and organized *Mas in the Mall*, a two-week season at the Institute of Contemporary Arts of plays by Caribbean writers combined with performances by steel bands and an exhibition of carnival photographs and costumes. Drum's most influential venture came with a workshop that resulted in the production of *Bread* by Mustapha Matura during the National

Theatre's 1976 summer season at the Young Vic. The workshop covered theatre production, writing, direction, and stage management, and attracted more than 70 participants. Workshops were also held with black actors at the National Theatre for two successive years. With Grant and Mapondera moving in different directions, Drum's final project occurred in 1980 in collaboration with Riverside Studios under fresh – and white - leadership. The Black Plays Umbrella season – three white writers, three non-white - was performed by a company of twenty actors, fifteen of whom were black or Asian. The season included *Scrape Off the Black* by Tunde Ikoli, a play that has come to be regarded as a major text in black British theatre.

A burgeoning diasporic culture, in danger of being diverted into social rather than artistic work, made increasing demands on funders during the 1970s, and the resulting report *The Arts Britain Ignores* (1976) brought the debate on cultural policy to new prominence. The major immediate outcome was the establishment of the Minorities' Arts Advisory Service, an agency that continued as an arts access unit until its demise in 1994. Among its publications were the first national register of black artists and groups, and a guide to medium- and small-scale venues in London for use by black and non-European groups.

As the 1970s spilled into the 1980s, the extraordinary mushrooming intensified, with groups such as Acacia, African Dawn, Birmingham Youth Theatre, Black Expression in Birmingham, Black Grass, Black Theatre Workshop, Brixton Arts Theatre, Calabash, Carib Theatre, Early Start, Grasshopper, Group 3, Hewanorra, Images Theatre Company, Impact Theatre, Lambeth Ensemble Theatre, Legba, L'Ouverture, Omnibus, Pigment Theatre in Nottingham, Sassafras, Staunch Poets and Players, Theatre of Black Youth, the United Caribbean Association of Leeds, Wall Theatre, and the West Indian Drama Group in Bristol.

The number and spread of these groups, along with the emergence of a diverse, British-based repertoire that introduced a new energy beyond the confines of naturalism, the availability of a growing pool of skilled actors, and the existence of a network of university, community and arts

venues prepared to present diasporic-influenced work, signalled a new reality. However fraught and fragmented, an irreversible black presence had been established in British theatre.

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