

## Tracing Black America in black British theatre from the 1970s

By Dr. Michael Pearce

The Black Power movement that emerged in the USA in the mid-1960s has had significant consequences for black British theatre. Although Britain did not experience the mass political mobilization among blacks that occurred in the USA during this time, Black Power, with its emphasis on collective opposition, self-determination and self-consciousness, resonated strongly with the younger generation, especially among black activists and artists. For them, identification with the by then mostly independent 'third world' former colonies was becoming tenuous. The experience of African Americans as a disenfranchised minority in a white Western country was one with which they could more easily relate.

The spirit of Black Power was provoked in Britain with visits by Malcolm X in 1965 and Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis in 1967. In 1967 Nigerian playwright Obi Egbuna became president of The Universal Coloured People's Association, Britain's first Black Power organisation. A year later, Egbuna founded the British Black Panther Movement – the first Black Panther organization to form outside the USA. Playwright Farukh Dhondi and performance poet Linton Kwesi Johnson were both Black Panther members. Ironically, Black Power galvanized both black radicals and the white British right-wing. Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, delivered on 20 April 1968, envisaged a future for Britain marked by racial conflict through direct comparison with the race riots erupting across the USA in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination.

For black theatre in Britain, 1968 marked the beginning of a major shift. For the young Trinidadian Mustapha Matura (born Noel Matura: he changed his name to reflect his non-white ancestry) it was a time of heightened self-awareness and inspiration:

... as well as flower power in 1968 there was also Black Power. Information and knowledge about my life and history was arriving at breakneck speed, the effects of which were so

dramatic and inspiring I felt an urge, a need to speak, to tell it like it is, to pass it on, to confirm (Matura, 1992: ix).

1968 was also the year that white British director Roland Rees, recently returned from living in the States, began to stage works in London by the radical playwrights of America's Black Arts Movement (BAM). The BAM, with Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Ed Bullins at its vanguard, defined itself as 'the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept' (Neal, 1968: 29). For its members, inspired by the message of Black political and cultural nationalism expounded by activists like Malcolm X and the anti-colonial writings of Franz Fanon, the imperative to create a theatre about, by, for and near blacks advocated by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1926 became its driving force. Between 1968 and 1970, Rees directed seven British premieres of Ed Bullins' and Amiri Baraka's plays at American expatriate Ed Berman's Ambiance Theatre, including the world premiere of Bullins' *It Bees Day Way* in 1970. In these plays Rees perceived a 'political acumen' that he found 'totally lacking' in British playwriting (Rees quoted in Coveney, 1973); however, it was something he was keen to nurture. When Berman decided to stage a 'Black and White Power Season' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), Rees convinced him that the season should have a black British presence and in 1970, Mustapha Matura made his debut with a series of short vignettes entitled *Black Pieces*. Matura's plays are not only remarkable for depicting the black experience in Britain, they are also strikingly similar in theme, style and tone to the BAM plays that Rees had imported. The BAM plays, therefore, provided more than an impetus to find a black British voice; they also provided a model for its early utterances.

In their quest to create a Black aesthetic, the members of the BAM aligned their plays' messages with Black Power ideology, aiming them at ordinary people living on the 'front line'. In accordance, they rejected what they perceived to be a Western model of 'art for art's sake', embracing instead a theatre with a clear social function aimed first and foremost at black people. In the words of Larry Neal, a key member of the group:

The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in western society is [sic] symptomatic of a dying culture (Neal, 1968: 31).

In order for their art to mirror the political quest for autonomy and self-consciousness, the BAM advocated 'a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic' by developing a Black art with 'a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology' (Neal, 1968: 29). The search for this aesthetic led those involved with the BAM to draw upon African and African diasporic cultural forms as well as the contemporary black American urban experience and vernacular.

A number of black British plays exhibit the BAM's – and Black Power's – influence, evidenced in their thematic and stylistic approach. This is particularly apparent in plays written in the 1970s and 1980s, during which time increased social tensions in the UK ensured that the imperatives of community - and self-empowerment remained pertinent. 'Revolutionary'-style plays which convey a message of solidarity and critique the white Establishment include Linton Kwesi Johnson's performed poem *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1973) and Michael McMillan's *On Duty* (1983). Numerous plays feature (and critique) Black Power characters and stage a conflict between 'conscious' characters versus 'uncle Toms', such as Jimi Rand's *Say Hallelujah* (1977), Caryl Phillips' *Strange Fruit* (1980) and Michael Ellis' *Chameleon* (1985). Individuals battling against a white Western construction of identity are portrayed in dramas such as McMillan's *The School Leaver* (1978), Matura's *Welcome Home Jacko* (1979), Kwei-Armah's *Bitter Herb* (2001), Courttia Newland's *B is for Black* (2003) and Roy Williams' 1980s retrospective *Sucker Punch* (2010). Plays by women such as Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* (1986), Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* (1991) and Zindika's *Leonora's Dance* (1993) reveal the painful internalization of white conceptions of beauty and identity and feature protagonists who must discover, to echo a Black Power slogan, that 'Black is Beautiful'.

In line with the BAM playwrights who viewed Black art as an instructive tool to teach African Americans about their history and present predicament, a didactic tone emerges in a number of earlier black British plays. Contemporary dramatists who weave 'education' with 'entertainment' include Sol. B. Rivers and Kwame Kwei-Armah. Despite the BAM's rejection of Western forms, a

realist style dominates black British drama, particularly in plays by men. Less linear works which echo the symbolism and revolutionary tone of some of Baraka's plays include Matura's *Black Slaves, White Chains* (1975) and McMillan's *Brother to Brother* (1998). The focus on the ghetto and street life which emerged strongly in Ed Bullins' 'theatre of experience' plays can also be seen in many current black British plays which depict black youth in urban settings with a focus on themes of crime and violence. (The persistent dramatization of the 'underclass' prompted Lindsay John's angry article in the *Evening Standard*, 'Black theatre is blighted by its ghetto mentality' in 2010). Dialogue written in black 'street' vernacular – a trademark of Roy Williams' plays but which originated among black British performance poets in the 1970s and 1980s – is also indebted to BAM artists like Ed Bullins and Sonia Sanchez who sought a dramatic language that reflected the realities of black urban life as well as the poetic artistry of African American music such as jazz and the blues.

Black Power's imperatives of self-determination and collective opposition also fuelled the creation of a number of black British organizations, for which Black nationalism provided an ideological foundation. The Dark and Light theatre company, established in 1969 by the Jamaican Frank Cousins, set its sights on becoming 'the first professional Multi-Racial theatre Company in Great Britain' (quoted in Chambers, 2011: 140). However, it soon found itself out of sync with the increasingly radical mood among black youth. When Cousins left Dark and Light in 1975, it was taken over by Norman Beaton (Guyana), Jamal Ali (Guyana) and Rufus Collins (USA). The company was also renamed Black Theatre of Brixton. The new title was significant. The term 'Black' was indicative of the, by then, widespread adoption of the American term as a marker of identity among non-whites in political solidarity against racial oppression, a fact reflected in the company's multi-ethnic leadership. The incorporation of 'Brixton', a multi-ethnic area of London with a large population of African and Caribbean descent, into the name highlighted the company's community-oriented approach aimed at the grass-roots level, or what African American activists called 'the front-line' (Chambers, 2001: 143). The 1970s and 1980s saw a proliferation of theatre companies and organizations whose names equally embraced and proclaimed an alternate Black cultural identity and political commitment. Black organizations included Keskidee and Drum and the theatre companies include Temba, Black Theatre Co-operative, Theatre of Black Women, Umoja, Roots Theatre, Unlock the Chains, Talawa and Black Mime Theatre to name a few. The frequent programming of African American plays by black British

theatre companies since the 1970s further attests to the importance attributed to the African American experience, and its capacity to illuminate the black British situation.

African American theatre practitioners who periodically settled in Britain also brought ideas and trends from the USA to the UK and played an important role in shaping black British theatre. Rufus Collins moved from New York to London in the 1970s where he worked as a director for Dark and Light and the Keswidee Centre. He brought with him his experience of working for the experimental Living Theatre as well as a Black Power political awareness fostered in Harlem during the 1960s. Collins directed a number of British premieres of African American plays, including a number of premieres by Edgar Nkosi White who also spent time in London. Although White was born in Montserrat, he grew up in Harlem and later moved to London where he lived from 1981 to 1987. His cosmopolitan life is reflected in his plays, which explore issues of cultural heritage, migration and exile and are set in, and sometimes between, the Caribbean, the USA and the UK. White's work is unmistakably influenced by 1960s African American politics and the BAM's drama traditions. The number of his plays that were produced in Britain, often as world premieres, make White an important initiator of diasporic themes and aesthetics, which emerged in black British drama in the 1980s and 1990s. Other African American theatre practitioners in Britain include playwright and cultural critic Bonnie Greer, actor/playwright/director Ray Shell and playwright Harold Finley. Through his theatre company Collective Artists, African American (via Nigeria) Chuck Mike has brought an African American Afrocentric presence to British theatre.

In terms of playwrights, aside from Jamaican Una Marson's (with Horace Vaz) *At What A Price*, staged in London in 1933 at the YWCA for one night followed by a three-day run at the Scala Theatre in 1934, the voice of black women on the British stage initially came from the USA. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which premiered in Britain in 1959 at the Adelphi, remains the only play by a black woman to be staged in the West End. Nevertheless, before the 1980s, two key black American woman playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange, made important contributions to black theatre in Britain.

Adrienne Kennedy spent time in England between 1966 and 1969, and London features as a location in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* which, along with *A Lesson in Dead Language*, received its British premier at the Royal Court in 1968. In that same year, the Royal Court commissioned *Sun*, a tribute to Malcolm X written in a choreopoem style which would later become the hallmark of poet/playwright Ntozake Shange. In 1968, Kennedy also co-wrote the one act play *The Lennon Play: In His Own Write* with John Lennon and Victor Spinetti, which was performed at the National Theatre (then at the Old Vic) and is the first example of a play by a black woman to be performed at the National. In 1970 her play *A Rat's Mass* was staged at the Royal Court by the New York theatre/company, La Mama. Despite Kennedy's relative visibility, her surreal and heavily symbolic style made little impact on the black British theatre scene of the 1970s, which was dominated by men who tended towards a social realist mode. However, her pioneering style influenced Ntozake Shange who has in turn had an important impact on black British women playwrights. In particular, Shange's play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, which premiered in Britain in 1979, challenged form and subject matter and her approach has been frequently emulated. She is cited as a major influence by a number of black British playwrights including Jackie Kay, Valeria Mason-John, Mojisola Adebayo and debbie tucker green.

August Wilson, arguably African America's most successful playwright, has inspired both Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah. But it is in Kwei-Armah's work that Wilson's influence is most prominent, particularly in his triptych of plays *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003), *Fix Up* (2004) and *Statement of Regret* (2007). Taking the lead from Wilson, Kwei-Armah's plays draw attention to the history of the black British experience and highlight the persistent impact of the past on the present, employing the spirit world as an aesthetic device to reiterate this notion.

It is no surprise that as a result of American global dominance, the culture, icons and myths of black America have provided potent inspiration for black British dramatists. As African American culture gained prominence in the USA, its accoutrements from hairstyles to slang have travelled across the Atlantic. However, the adoption and adaptation of African American culture in the British context draws attention to the experience of marginalization and racism that has often forced blacks in Britain to seek identification and inspiration beyond the nation. The lack of black role models in Britain,

especially in the 1970s, is underlined in Mojisola Adebayo's *Muhammad Ali and Me* (2008). The play depicts a mixed-race girl, Mojitola, growing up in London in white care during the 1970s. Mojitola forges an imaginary friendship with Muhammad Ali whose biography as a political activist and pugilist helps her confront oppression and find a positive identity. Boxing as a metaphor for race relations also emerges in Roy Williams' *Sucker Punch* (2010). In the play, set against the race riots and SUS laws of the 1980s, Roy Williams draws on, among other boxing legends, the now mythic 1908 fight between African American Jack Johnson and white Canadian Tommy Burns, which led to Burns' defeat and the search for a white champion to take the American title from Johnson. The fight, first dramatized in Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope* (1967), has come to symbolize black achievement over white supremacy and provides a fertile launch pad for Williams' exploration of British racism and Black solidarity.

Homage to African American singers and music appears in a number of guises. It features in a play's soundtrack, such as Felix Cross and Paulette Randall's *Up Against the Wall* (1999) for Nitro, a tribute to the blaxploitation film genre and the funk, soul and disco music of the 1970s. African American music references also appear in plays' titles which borrow from songs, such as Caryl Phillips' *Strange Fruit* (1980), named after the song made famous by Billie Holiday; and Kwei-Armah's *Let There Be Love* (2008), after the Nat King Cole version. Femi Elufuwoju Jr. uses Sammy Davis Jr.'s biography in his play *Sammy* (2002) as a means to draw attention to the challenges facing blacks in the performing arts. For Debbie Tucker Green, the influence of African American music occurs at the level of writing: she attributes singer/songwriters Lauryn Hill and Jill Scott as influences on her poetic style.

The biographies of African Americans who played an important role in British history have also been dramatized. Winsome Pinnock's *A Rock in Water* (1989) traces the life of Trinidadian-born, American-raised Claudia Jones, a Civil Rights activist, journalist and member of the American Communist Party who was eventually deported to Britain in 1955 where she founded and edited *The West Indian Gazette* in 1958 and was involved in establishing the Notting Hill Carnival in 1959. Michael McMillan's *Master Juba* (2006) chronicles the life of William Henry Lane, the only black member of the nineteenth century minstrel troupe The Ethiopian Serenaders. Lane found fame in London when he danced for Queen Victoria in 1848. Mojisola Adebayo's *Moj of the Antarctic* (2006) is inspired by the true story of

American slaves Ellen and William Craft who escaped from the South (and eventually ended up in England) by Ellen dressing up as a white man and pretending her darker husband William was her slave. The centuries-long relationship between Britain and black America is further highlighted in Caryl Phillips' *Rough Crossings* (2007) and Mojisola Adebayo's *Desert Boy* (2010). Both plays dramatize the history of the many escaped slaves in America who fought on the side of the British during the American War of Independence.

In *Rough Crossings*, the conflict between the play's African American protagonists prefigures the political difference between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (see McLeod, 2009). Indeed, the conflict between integrationist and separatist camps defines a number of character relationships in black British dramas such as Kwei-Armah's *Statement of Regret* (2007). Similarly, the continued importance placed on African American political figures as role models is highlighted by David Levi Addai's play for young people *I have a Dream* (2011), about Martin Luther King Jr. and Kwei-Armah's *Seize the Day* (2009) which, inspired by Obama's election victory, imagines a black mayor of London.

In a number of plays, particularly those more oriented towards performance art, the names of famous black icons from around the world are listed as a means of emphasizing the genealogy of global black achievement and solidarity. However, the names of African Americans are the most prominent, underlining the degree to which African America has captured the black British imagination. Names invoked in plays such as Sol B River's *Moor Masterpieces* (1994), SuAndi's *This is all I've got to Say* (1993) and Valerie Mason-John's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) include, among others, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, James Baldwin, Booker T Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

The adoption of African American culture by black Britons is not without its critics. Some see it as an inappropriate imitation based on cultural imperialism. It has also been noted that the programming of black theatre by mainstream venues in Britain is often dominated by African American plays. However, the acknowledgement of the impact of African America is not a slight to the field. Neither does it assume a cultural hegemony. Rather, the African American influence draws attention to black British transnational identification with other black cultures borne from the postwar experience of

racial exclusion and marginalization. It also highlights the persistence of a tradition of cultural borrowing and adaptation which has always marked black theatre in Britain as an artistic practice characterized by negotiations with multiple histories, politics, cultures and performance traditions.

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