**Roy Williams and Black British playwriting**

The modern history of Black[[1]](#endnote-1) theatre in Britain is a story of a community, or a series of communities, forging a new cultural identity in public, and in the process making some of the most important artistic work of our time. There have been Black performers in Britain at least since the sixteenth century. When, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Oberon and Titania argue over ‘a lovely boy stol’n from an Indian king’,[[2]](#endnote-2) Shakespeare was very likely referring to the then-new practice of taking black servants, sometimes as entertainers.[[3]](#endnote-3) Opportunities for black people to be involved in theatre were limited largely to performance – and usually singing and dancing – until the early twentieth century.

In the 1930s the presence of Paul Robeson in London was a significant stimulus, both creatively and politically. He used his fame to get fledgling black theatre projects off the ground, including a production of Caribbean writer and intellectual C. L. R. James’s play *Toussaint Louverture*, dramatising a slave revolt in late eighteenth-century Haiti. which had two performances in March 1936 at the Westminster Theatre, then known for daring and experimental performance work. Despite only two performances, this was a landmark production: the first play on a British stage by a black playwright, performed by a black cast, dramatising a key event in black history. Performances like this and of the anti-racist drama *Stevedore* in 1935, in which he also starred, helped bring together key anti-colonial intellectuals like C. L. R. James and George Padmore and activists in exile in London, like Panditji Nehru, Eric Williams, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe, who would go on to shepherd India, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria into post-colonial independence. The imbrication of black theatre and political activism established in the 1930s established a pattern that would be repeated for the next seventy years.

Efforts to establish a black presence in British theatre over those years were heroic but often battled vainly against a lack of official support, unofficial prejudice, and a theatre industry that systematically choked off the resources needed to allow black theatre to flourish. Numerous theatre companies ignited, flickered and died in the years between 1940 and 1970. The Negro Repertory Theatre (established 1944), The Negro Theatre Company (1948), the West Indian Drama Group (1956), New Day Theatre Company (1960), New Negro Theatre Company (1960), The Ira Aldridge Players (1961), Negro Theatre Workshop (1961), the Pan-African Players (1966) mostly lasted for one or two productions before folding.

The problems regularly encountered were a lack of actors, training, subsidy and a permanent base. The relatively few - and relatively unrewarding – black characters in British theatre and television could offer only a very small number of actors regular work. As a result, theatre companies struggled to cast their plays from professionals. Ironically, this was the same reason that Drama Schools cited for not taking on many black students. In turn, because they were forced to use amateur actors, the Arts Council, which only offered subsidy to professional work, would not fund these new ventures. The lack of training, subsidy and actors undermined even the most high-profile work. When the Royal Court Theatre performed *Skyvers* by British Caribbean playwright Barry Reckord in 1963, the black cast of characters were performed by white actors because the Court could not find any black actors. When they revived the play in 1971, the situation had apparently not changed.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Barry Reckord was the first of a new wave of Black British playwrights to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s. His play *Della* was performed at the Theatre Centre in 1954 and was revived, under the title *Flesh to a Tiger*, at the Royal Court in 1958. *Skyvers*, his best known work, has been frequently revived, most recently on BBC Radio in December 2011, only a week before Reckord died. In 1958, the Court also staged *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* by Errol John, after it won an *Observer* play competition, and future Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka was a key figure in their early days, notably contributing to the innovative documentary-style play about British colonial atrocities in Nigeria *Eleven Dead at Hola Camp* (1959).

All three men were first-generation immigrants, from Jamaica, Trinidad and Nigeria, respectively. While there have been black people in Britain since the end of the first millennium,[[5]](#endnote-5) it was the arrival of the Empire Windrush from Jamaica on 22 June 1948, carrying 493 passengers, that heralded a significant increase of Black cultural influence in post-war Britain. Exact figures for Commonwealth immigration are hard to come by, but it has been estimated that in 1931 there were 137,000 people in the UK who had been born the Commonwealth (excluding Canada, Australia and NZ). By 1951, that figure was 218,000, by 1961 it was 541,000, and by 1971 1,140,000.[[6]](#endnote-6) The relatively swift expansion of the black British population was sometimes met with hostility, such as was seen in the Notting Hill and Nottingham race riots of summer 1958 and the racist murder of Antiguan migrant Kelso Cochrane in Notting Hill the following year.

Out of this adversity came a flourishing both of Black cultural activity and political self-assertion. Notting Hill in the 1950s was targeted by far-right groups like the White Defence League (forerunner of the British National Party) and Oswald Mosley’s Union Movement.[[7]](#endnote-7) In the aftermath of the riots, Claudia Jones, a migrant from Trinidad via the United States, organized a festival of Caribbean culture in St Pancras Town Hall which, a few years later, combined with Rhaune Laslett’s outdoor Festival from 1965 to create the Notting Hill Carnival, an annual celebration of Caribbean music, dance, food, and costume that. In Nottingham, the sight of an inter-racial couple in a pub had been met by racist violence, which in turn was met by unprecedented organization and self-assertion of Nottingham’s Black population. Over the next decade, supported by the example of the civil rights movement in America, Britain saw a significant politicising of the Black community. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael, a leading figure in the Black Panthers, came to the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London to offer a clear challenge to ‘the system of international white supremacy coupled with international capitalism. And we’re out to smash that system. And people who see themselves as part of that system are going to be smashed with it’.[[8]](#endnote-8) The Dialectics of Liberation conference was a key event in the development of the counter-culture which would lead to the student uprisings a year later, spur the development of second-wave feminism, and generate a wealth of social and cultural experiments.

Black theatre was an important part of that revival. Trinidadian playwright Mustapha Matura recalls ‘the fringe, the underground – the alternative culture’[[9]](#endnote-9) as the cultural ferment that prompted him to start writing plays, starting with three short plays under the title *Black Pieces* produced in 1970 at the impeccably countercultural Ambiance Lunch Hour ‘Black and White Power’ season at the ICA in London. Matura was taken up the Royal Court and became a leading playwright of the 1970s, with work like *Play Mas* (1974), *Rum an’ Coca Cola* (1976), *Independence* and *Welcome Home Jacko* (1979). The latter, a troubled first-generation portrait of second-generation black youths, struggling to find an identity amid the lure of crime and the threat of police harassment, is a clear forerunner of a play like Roy Williams’s *Fallout* twenty-five years later.

The countercultural atmosphere of the late sixties/early seventies saw a renewal of interest in setting up Black theatre companies and venues, including the Dark and Light Theatre in Brixton (1969), the Keskidee Centre in Islington (1971), Temba (1972), the Drum Arts Centre (1974), and Black Theatre Cooperative (1978), which is still running under the new name, Nitro. Unlike previous ventures, these had some longevity, building audiences and aiding the careers of black writers like Michael Abbensetts, Jimi Rand, T-Bone Wilson, Jamal Ali and the dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. Despite this activity, subsidy and critical attention were slow coming, so much so that in 1976 Naseem Khan could title her report on minority ethnic arts for the Arts Council, *The Arts That Britain Ignores.*[[10]](#endnote-10) This report, as Dominic Hingorani writes, ‘revolutionised the Arts Council conceptually and financially engaged with the work of artists from ethnic minorities’.[[11]](#endnote-11) ‘Revolutionised’ might seem a strong word, and certainly many Black and Asian theatre makers have had reason to criticise the Council’s policies towards minority ethnic arts, but given the near-invisibility of Black theatre to the funding bodies until the late seventies, the change was decisive. By the end of the decade, the number of Black theatre groups had multiplied remarkably. Colin Chambers, in his history of Black and Asian theatre in Britain, lists twenty-nine separate companies in operation as the 1980s dawned.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The advent of the Thatcher governments, however, put a brake on this expansion. Its preference for private sponsorship over state subsidy saw some severe cuts in the Arts Council’s grant. The Council’s 1984 report *The Glory of the Garden* retained enough of the spirit of Naseem Khan to insist that it would single out Black and Asian arts for support, but nowhere indicated how this might happen.[[13]](#endnote-13) Indeed, what became clear in the 1980s that Black theatre was mainly treated by funding bodies as, in the words of playwright Farrukh Dhondy put it ‘an off-shoot of the political phenomenon of immigrant settlement’.[[14]](#endnote-14) In other words, while mainstream white theatre could aspire to be art, Black theatre could only ever be social work. Understandably, many Black theatre makers were frustrated to be confined in this way. For playwright Winsome Pinnock, placing the burden only on black writers to represent the racial complexity of British life has a distorting effect on the work and the way it is received: ‘every play by a black playwright, whether or not issues of race and identity are its subject, is weighted with the absence of other plays, the absence of other playwrights. The play becomes representative’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Artistic Director Alby James insisted: ‘I wanted Temba to gain national status. I didn’t want to stand around in community halls’.[[16]](#endnote-16) James’s attempt to intervene in the western canon by using black actors in ‘white’ classics was not appreciated by the Arts Council which withdrew their funding in the early 1990s, citing falling artistic standards. Many believed that Temba was being punished for refusing to ‘know its place’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In the 1980s, a new wave of Black British playwrights emerged, including Caryl Phillips, Michael Ellis, Jacqueline Rudet, Winsome Pinnock, Tunde Ikoli, Nigel Moffatt, Trish Cooke, Jenny McLeod. Some writers, like Pinnock and McLeod, initially wanted to reject the label ‘Black playwright’ with all the ghettoizing that it implied. However the continuing efflorescence of Black theatre in the 1980s – with new companies like Theatre of Black Women (established 1982), Umoja (1983), Imani-Faith (1983), Black Mime Theatre (1984), Talawa (1986) – began to fade sharply in the 1990s. The continuingly parlous state of British race relations was horrifically exposed by murder of Stephen Lawrence at the hands of a gang of known racist thugs, and the apparently deliberate negligence of the police in their conduct of the investigation. A report into the fiasco, under Sir William Macpherson, concluded that the Metropolitan Police was ‘institutionally racist’.[[18]](#endnote-18) The phrase captured what many in the Black community had always known, that racism was built into the structures, policies, attitudes, and behaviour of British society. The phrase was echoed three years later in *Eclipse: Developing Strategies to Combat Racism in the Theatre*, a report arising from a conference held at the Nottingham Playhouse in June 2001, which noted the drastic under-representation of Afro-Caribbean and Asian people at the upper levels of British theatre to ask the question: is British theatre institutionally racist? (In one startling statistic, a survey revealed that in 19 organisations surveyed by the Arts Council, only 177 out of 2900 staff members were African Caribbean, Asian or Chinese, and of those 100 worked in catering or Front of House; one worked in senior management[[19]](#endnote-19)).

While in 1991, Yvonne Brewster, a distinguished and pioneering Black British theatre director, could assert, ‘My ultimate aim is never to have to say “black theatre” again’,[[20]](#endnote-20) by the end of the decade, many theatre makers were drawn back to the political value of identifying themselves as ‘Black’. Jenny McLeod observed in the mid-nineties: ‘originally didn’t want to speak as a black woman, but now my point of view has changed slightly [...] before, I was afraid to be pigeon-holed. I just wanted to be a writer. But my definition I’m not just a writer. I’m a black woman as well’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Another writer who emerged in the mid-nineties initially insisted that ‘If you want to worry about the label black, go ahead, but I’m not’ though later revised his view to embrace the label Black British: ‘I think we need that phrase more than ever’.[[22]](#endnote-22) That writer is Roy Williams.

Williams is one of a fourth generation of Black British playwrights who, while building on the work of those pioneers since the 1940s, have achieved a level of cultural prominence that outstrips anything they managed to achieve. Roy Williams is the first Black British playwright to have plays performed at the RSC, the National Theatre, and the Royal Court. Alongside him stands Kwame Kwei-Armah, an actor, director and playwright, with a strong sense of Black theatre history – he helped established the Black Plays Archive at the National Theatre.[[23]](#endnote-23) He wrote a trilogy of plays – *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003), *Fix Up* (2004), *Statement of Regret* (2007) - for the National Theatre debating issues in Black culture and has become a spokesman for Black culture and arts. debbie tucker green, after working for several years as a stage manager, came to sudden prominence with near-simultaneous premieres of *Born Bad* and *Dirty Butterfly*, which established her as a radical new voice in British playwriting. All three of these playwrights broke through onto main stages in 2003, which, as Goddard has observed, may come to be seen as the moment where a great renaissance of Black British theatre began.[[24]](#endnote-24) But the present successes should not obscure the achievements – partial and provisional though they may have sometimes seemed – of the previous seventy years. Nor should it simplify the debates that underpinned that work, between integration and multiculturalism, between authenticity and hybridity, between between politics and entertainment, between black and Black, between reasserting ancestral performance forms and launching raids on the canon of western theatre, and between British English and ‘nation language’. As Simon Shepherd has remarked, ‘In its restless reinvention of itself, driven very often by the question of what “black” might “mean”, black theatre has embraced and recycled forms that are definingly associated with black arts practice and, hence, not available to white theatre. In its staging of them, therefore, black theatre may be said to have developed forms that extend the language and practice of all theatre’.[[25]](#endnote-25)

1. . Black with a capital ‘B’ denotes both a broad non-white category that can include Asians alongside Afro-Caribbeans, and also a political statement of solidarity and self-determination. To avoid anachronism, I generally use it in reference to theatre after 1980. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.1.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Colin Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 10-14, and Deirdre Osborne, 'Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain', in *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre*, ed. by Dimple Godiwala (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2006), pp. 62-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain*, op. cit., p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Sue Niebrzydowski, 'The Sultana and Her Sisters: Black Women in the British Isles before 1530', *Women's History Review,* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2001), p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . David Butler and Gareth Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900-2000* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 351. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . See Daniel Trilling, *Bloody Nasty People: The Rise of Britain’s Far Right* (London: Verso, 2012), chapter 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Stokely Carmichael, ‘Black Power’, in David Cooper (ed), *The Dialectics of Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Mustapha Matura, *Six Plays* (London: Methuen, 1992), p. ix. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Naseem Khan, *The Arts That Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (Arts Council of Great Britain, Gulbenkian Foundation, and the Community Relations Commission, 1976). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Dominic Hingorani, *British Asian Theatre: Dramaturgy, Process and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain*, op. cit., p. 156-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Alda Terracciano, 'Mainstreaming African, Asian and Carribean Theatre the Experiments of the Black Theatre Forum', in *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre*, ed. by Dimple Godiwala (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2006), pp. 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Quoted in ibid., p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Winsome Pinnock, ‘Breaking Down the Door’, in Vera Gottlieb and Colin Chambers (eds), *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford: Amber Lane, 1999), p. 36. Lynette Goddard has similarly observed of representations of black women that the duty to provide audiences with basic information about their experiences meant that ‘the plays reiterated similar stories that amounted to rather essentialist archetypes of black women’s lives’ 'Middle-Class Aspirations and Black Women Mental (Ill) Health in Zindika's Leonora's Dance and Bonnie Greer's Munda Negra and Dancing on Blackwater', in Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s, ed. by Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Quoted in Osborne, ‘Writing Black Back’, op. cit., p. 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Ibid., p. 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny* (London: The Stationery Office, 1999), § 46.1, 46.25-28. http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm (Accessed 4 August 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . *Eclipse Report: Developing Strategies to Combat Racism in the Theatre* (Arts Council, 2002), p. 8. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication\_archive/eclipse-developing-strategies-to-combat-racism-in-theatre/ (accessed 10 August 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Quoted in Deirdre Osborne, 'Writing Black Back', op. cit., p. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Heidi Stephenson, and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . See Michael Pearce’s essay in this volume, p. xxx. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . See http://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/ (accessed 12 August 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 36-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . Simon Shepherd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)