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**‘In Search of a New National  
Story’: Issues of Cultural  
Diversity in the Casting and  
Performance of Shakespeare  
in Britain 2012–2016**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
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Finally, to my Nan, who hoped 'that the PhD is as good as had'.

## Declaration

This thesis is my own work; no part of it has been submitted for a degree at another university. Parts of this thesis have been published by the author:

Sita Thomas, ‘*Much Ado About Nothing* dir. by Iqbal Khan (review)’, *Asian Theatre Journal*, 32 (2) (2015), pp. 570–572.

Sita Thomas, ‘Souks, saris and Shakespeare: Engaging young, diverse audiences at Shakespeare’s Globe and the National Theatre’ in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 163–174.

Sita Thomas, “‘The Dog, the Guard, the Horses and the Maid’: Diverse Casting at the Royal Shakespeare Company’ in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (4) (2014), pp. 475–485.

## Abstract

This thesis examines the contribution of British black, South Asian, and East Asian actors, directors and companies to Shakespearean performance in Britain between 2012 and 2016. Stephen Bourne's *Black in the British Frame* (2001), *British Asian Theatre* by Dominic Hingorani (2010), and Colin Chambers' *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History* (2011), are three important works that trace the artistic contributions by black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities in British theatre; yet Shakespearean achievements are under-represented here as well as in the wider body of published academic writing. This thesis aims to record the artistic achievements and cultural presence of non-white practitioners whose work has been marginalised and poorly documented. It aims to investigate the impact of casting practices and directorial interpretations in the representation of BAME communities in mainstream, non-traditional and educational settings. It also aims to contribute to the development of sustained dialogues about, and understanding of, issues of cultural and ethnic diversity in Shakespearean performance. To do this, several extended analytical case studies of historically significant and culturally important Shakespearean performances are provided.

The thesis is divided into four sections. The first examines issues of cultural diversity on Britain's main stages, particularly in the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Section two studies the praxis of BAME theatre companies: Talawa, Tara Arts, Phizzical Productions and Yellow Earth. Section three focuses on educational enterprises in mainstream organisations. Section four concludes with reflection and propositions as to how British Shakespearean production might move towards a more sustainable diverse ecology. The approach of this thesis is ethnographic, and draws on a range of sources of data surrounding these productions including archival resources (such as video recordings, production photographs, reviews and prompt books), interviews with practitioners, observations in rehearsal rooms and reports from funding bodies. This thesis examines important productions in recent history, and assesses major issues, problems and pitfalls, as well as models of best practice, in the casting and performance of culturally diverse Shakespeare in Britain 2012–2016.

## Preface

I was seventeen when I travelled with my mother from our small rural town in Wales to London to experience my first live professional Shakespearean production; it was Tim Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that had formed part of the RSC's Complete Works Festival in 2006. We arrived at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm, where the production had transferred, and made our way to our seats. The atmosphere was mystical and earthy; I felt I'd walked into a cocoon. The play began. There were two moments that were unforgettable for me. The first was when the fairies burst through the back wall from the height of the Roundhouse's ceiling, ripping, and tearing through paper that I was convinced was a solid, unbreakable structure. They called out, chattering, and catcalling, as they spun and wove their way down to the ground. My heart was pumping; it had been so unexpected. I was so excited to see Indian actors who looked like me, and to hear Indian languages, for the very first time. My mother whispered: 'That's *kalaripayattu* the martial arts form from Kerala, where your dad is from' – my distant half-homeland that I had yet to connect to. This was *mine*, their Shakespeare was part of me, representing parts of me that I had no knowledge of, but a yearning to connect with, and to understand. The second moment came when Titania, her hair so long it fell all the way down her back (just like mine), pounced on Oberon. She rolled him over and over in the earth, pausing for a moment, straddling him, before he tussled with her and pushed her back – a whirlwind of brown skin, red cloth, black hair, and sensuous bodies. It was so

sexy, so powerful, so unlike any Shakespeare I'd seen or heard about in the classroom. I didn't want to leave the world that had been created in the theatre, I wanted to be in it, performing, and exploring, with them. It was only seven years later, having moved to London, immersed myself in the debates, theories and performances of Shakespeare both historical and contemporary, that I began to deconstruct what had been a seminal experience for me. Had I been drawn into an exoticised misrepresentation of India, seduced by the sexualised and spectacular, stunned by the theatrical trickery, and drawn into believing that this was somehow the real India? This research documents complicated and complex encounters between Britain's BAME communities and Shakespearean performance. Growing up with mixed ethnic and cultural heritages – half Welsh, and half Indian – there were very few occasions where I saw myself reflected back – rarely on television, stage or in the films I watched, or even in the faces around me in my local community. Seeing these actors in my first Shakespearean production expanded my imagination, as well as my sense of identity and belonging. The experience suggests, for me, the importance of diverse cultural representation, so that arts and culture can be a place for everyone – no matter the colour of their skin or their ethnic background; so that people from all cultural backgrounds can feel included, represented, and part of the national, indeed global, story.

## Introduction

The year 2016 marked the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death. This anniversary was commemorated in academia with dedicated conferences and publications, in the arts industries with seasons of work dedicated to Shakespeare, and at government level with millions of pounds worth of funding invested in Shakespearean production across different sectors. Audiences across the UK, indeed across the globe, watched theatre productions and films, attended exhibitions, listened to radio programmes, lectures and recitals all about Shakespeare. Schoolchildren engaged with Shakespeare in lessons and workshops; and he was celebrated as Britain's greatest cultural export. In April 2016, the British Council published a report that declared that '400 years after his death, William Shakespeare has a positive impact on the UK economy and influence on the world', and that tourists were encouraged to visit the UK because of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare holds a particular place of prestige in British society; his works represent a significant part of the UK's cultural capital. If Shakespeare is an icon of British culture and identity, in 2016, the plethora of celebrations marking his death demonstrated that his works were more alive than ever. One reason for the lasting power of Shakespeare's plays, cited more than any other, is their purported 'universality': Shakespeare speaks to, for, and about everyone. Yet, we must remember Shakespeare's close ties with colonialism; his

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<sup>1</sup> British Council, 'Shakespeare is more popular abroad than in the UK', *British Council*, 20 April 2016, <<https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/press/shakespeare-more-popular-abroad-uk>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

works were used as a tool of the empire in colonial education across continents. Tied up in Shakespeare's works are issues of power and domination, issues of cultural and racial superiority and inferiority, issues of ownership and authenticity. Whether his universality is imposed, imagined, or inspired, it is certainly the case that Shakespeare is now part of the world's imaginary. But if Shakespeare is universal, why is it that British Black and Asian people have been historically excluded from performing his works in Britain? If Shakespeare is for everyone, why was it only in recent years that many leading Shakespearean roles were played by non-white actors in Britain for the first time?<sup>2</sup>

In the years 2012–2016, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced its first all-black *Julius Caesar*, first all-South Asian *Much Ado About Nothing*, first black Cleopatra, first black Hamlet and first black Iago. Thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays were performed in thirty-seven languages by companies from around the world on stage at Shakespeare's Globe.<sup>3</sup> The same theatre cast a British-black actor and a British-Pakistani actor to alternate in the role of Hamlet in a production that toured to every country in the world over two years and returned to Shakespeare's Globe for the anniversary weekend of 23-24 April 2016. Theatre companies such as Tara Arts, Talawa and Phizzical toured productions of *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* respectively with black and South Asian casts. Thousands of school children from different ethnic

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<sup>2</sup> See Jami Rogers, *British British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk>> [accessed 26 March 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's Globe, 'Annual Review 2012', *Shakespeare's Globe*, 2012, <<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/uploads/ffiles/2013/02/795720.pdf>> [accessed 23 March 2017]. See also *A Year of Shakespeare*, ed. by Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013).

backgrounds across the UK watched educational productions featuring non-white actors and took part in Shakespeare workshops led-by non-white practitioners. In contrast to the two recorded performances by a BAME actor in a Shakespeare production in Britain in 1964 and twenty-two in 1980, there are one hundred and eighty-three recorded in 2012 and a further one hundred and seventy-five in 2016. An original play, Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet*, premiered at the Tricycle Theatre in 2012 about Ira Aldridge, the first black man to play Othello in Britain in 1825, which then transferred to Broadway and to London's West End. Aldridge was portrayed by the actor Adrian Lester who then went on to play Othello at the National Theatre in 2013 in a production that the director declared was situated 'post-race'.<sup>4</sup> Yet do these examples indicate a development towards a sustainable diverse ecology in British theatrical production? Do these examples demonstrate successful diverse casting practices and representations of non-white communities? Do these examples tell a story of a Britain at ease with her diversity and multiculturalism in the twenty-first century? An examination of the narrative of British black and Asian actors' relationships to Shakespeare tells stories not only of achievements in casting but also tales of exclusion, essentialism, and exoticism.

In *Multiculturalism* (2007), Tariq Modood argued:

The story a country tells about itself to itself, the discourses, symbols and images in which national identity

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<sup>4</sup> National Theatre Discover, 'Othello: Representations of Race', *YouTube*, 25 October 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KkdBNETIOM&t=1s>> [accessed 23 March 2017].



resides and through which people acquire and renew their sense of national belonging, had to be revisited and recast through public debate in order to reflect the current and future, and not just the past, ethnic composition of the country.<sup>5</sup>

Such an enterprise, I believe, points to the precise importance of Shakespearean performance in shaping the national story. Shakespeare is a mirror for British cultural identity, reflecting our social, political and cultural concerns. Who performs Shakespeare, for whom, when, and where, tells particular stories that speak to who we are as a nation, and how we see ourselves changing.<sup>6</sup> In a Britain that has changed dramatically in terms of its ethnic composition, especially in recent decades, it is now more important than ever to tell diverse stories.<sup>7</sup> Who performs Shakespeare can inform peoples' sense of national belonging, as we shall see in this thesis. For the actor Meera Syal, 'Teachers made it clear that Shakespeare was not for the likes of me [...] I did not see it as part of my cultural heritage at all'.<sup>8</sup> Another actor, Clarence Smith, said, 'Even whilst training at drama school the cultural and artistic reference points were always white,' and

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<sup>5</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> See Tony Howard, 'Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain 1930-2010', *Research Councils UK*, 2012, <<http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FK000020%2F1>> [accessed 24 March 2017].

<sup>7</sup> See Office for National Statistics, 'Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales: 2011', *Office for National Statistics*, 11 December 2012, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

<sup>8</sup> Sian Griffiths, 'Bard can help make migrant children British', *The Sunday Times*, 9 February 2014.

‘that in itself wasn’t a problem’; but he stated: ‘Had I known about trailblazers, Mr. Aldridge and Mr. Robeson, then I would have felt more included and able to take ownership of all forms of classical work, not only Shakespeare’.<sup>9</sup> BAME practitioners have recognised Shakespeare as a tool for self-expression, self-inclusion and self-assertion. The director Jatinder Verma said: ‘It’s almost as if by digging into the history of England itself, I’m seeking to recover for England as much as for me a space in which I belong’.<sup>10</sup> BAME practitioners, in some cases in response to racism, have turned to the arts as a creative field of expression – a space to examine, interrogate, and indeed *heal* such concerns. Modood suggested that the renewal of the sense of national belonging could be revisited through public debate. I suggest Shakespearean performance can be a site to reflect current affairs and offer images for the future. The ways in which we approach the casting and performance of Shakespeare can impact on the sense of *belonging* for Britain’s culturally diverse communities as a valued and influential part of the national story.

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<sup>9</sup> Clarence Smith, ‘Clarence Smith: Every Day Is An Historical Day’, *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2016, <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/blogs/black-history-month-blog/clarence-smith>> [accessed 25 March 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Jatinder Verma quoted in Christiane Schlote, “‘Finding our Own Voice’ An Interview with Jatinder Verma’ in *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice*, ed. by Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs (Germany: P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A. 2006), pp. 309–322 (p. 313).

## **‘To tell your story...’: British Black and Asian Shakespeare**

In 2012, the Arts and Humanities Research Council awarded a grant to a proposed project ‘Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain 1930-2010’. The project, led by Professor Tony Howard, whose recent work had focused on the life and work of Paul Robeson, aimed to map the history of non-white actors’ and directors’ growing role in British cultural life over several generations, through an examination of their involvement in Shakespearean performance. The successful bid came at a time where there was a spotlight on issues concerning Britain’s ethnic, cultural and community cohesion due to the England riots in August 2011. For five days, areas of Britain had been marked by arson attacks, looting and rioting in response to the death of Mark Duggan, a twenty-nine-year-old black man from Tottenham who was shot dead by a member of the police. The death and the following days of anarchy drew attention to issues of racial and ethnic discrimination, and the continuation of a series of race-related deaths and riots in Britain. There was an urgent sense of displacement and dissatisfaction from different communities across the country. The Multicultural Shakespeare project sought to address such issues and analyse the shifting politics of race and multiculturalism in Britain through the lens of Shakespearean performance; an identical bid had been rejected days before the riots. The necessity for establishing a sense of cultural identity within urban communities, and of ensuring that the continuing history of new British contributions to mainstream culture was not marginalised was clear and inspired a key commitment to

disseminate research beyond conventional academic circles. As part of the project, an international Symposium ‘Mapping British Black and Asian Shakespeare from 1930 to 2012’ was held at the University of Warwick in 2013, bringing together academics and practitioners to generate debate and to highlight key issues in the production of Shakespeare in contemporary multicultural British society. Selected findings were published in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (2017) edited by Delia Jarrett-Macauley, the first comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Shakespeare and race in Britain.<sup>11</sup> An oral history archive was created of interviews with fifty practitioners, actors and directors from different generations documenting their stories of identity, migration, and their relationships with Shakespeare. A series of workshops was created for young people where practitioners worked in schools and theatres in Coventry, Bristol, Leicester and Lambeth aiming to encourage a sense of ownership and empowerment through Shakespearean performance. An exhibition charting the history of Shakespearean performances by black and Asian actors through a series of panels and artefacts toured the country in libraries, schools and theatres, and accompanied productions such as Talawa’s *King Lear*, Tara Arts’ *Macbeth*, and also Shakespeare’s Globe’s *King Lear* when it travelled internationally to St. Lucia. Developing the statistical research behind Jami Rogers’ essay on casting trends, ‘The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling’, a database was launched that collated information about the British black and Asian actors

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<sup>11</sup> *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017).

who had performed in Shakespeare productions in Britain since 1930.<sup>12</sup> This work generated debate in mainstream media with pieces including Lyn Gardner's *Guardian* article, 'Colour-blind casting: how far have we really come?' and Paul Gallagher's 'Shakespearean black and ethnic minority actors "still only getting minor roles"' for the *Independent*.<sup>13</sup> This thesis is situated within this research project and is intrinsically connected to all of the work it produced. My own research evolved and was shaped by my contributions both as a scholar and practitioner; I contributed material to the database and exhibition, delivered publications, conference presentations and interviews for the oral history archive, developed and facilitated Shakespeare workshops for young people, and also directed films about cultural diversity and Shakespeare for the National Theatre and Tara Arts. During this work, mapping and disseminating the history of non-white actors' and directors' changing role in British cultural life through an examination of their involvement in Shakespearean performance, the main aims of this thesis emerged:

- To record the artistic achievements and cultural presence of non-white practitioners whose work has been marginalised and poorly documented.

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<sup>12</sup> Jami Rogers, 'The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling: the State of Colorblind Casting in Contemporary British Theatre', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 31 (2013), pp. 405–430 and Rogers, *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*.

<sup>13</sup> Lyn Gardner, 'Colour-blind casting: how far have we really come?', *Guardian*, 13 January 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/jan/13/colour-blind-casting>> [accessed 23 March 2017] and Paul Gallagher, 'Shakespearean black and ethnic minority actors "still only getting minor roles"', *Independent*, 16 January 2016, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/shakespearean-black-and-ethnic-minority-actors-still-only-getting-minor-roles-a6816941.html>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

- To investigate the impact of casting practices and directorial interpretations in the representation of British black and Asian communities in mainstream, non-traditional, and educational settings.
- To contribute to the development of sustained dialogues about, and understanding of, issues of cultural and ethnic diversity in Shakespearean performance.

The work of the Multicultural Shakespeare project coincided with and contributed to a widespread movement within the entertainment professions calling for greater diversity and employment possibilities.<sup>14</sup> The years of the project contained moments of crisis, as well as moments of celebration that were significant in both reflecting and reacting against images of the past on the Shakespearean stage. This thesis will focus on the four-year period 2012–2016, and will assess the shifts in approaches to cultural diversity in the casting and performance of Shakespeare in Britain. This date range gives focus to the thesis, and a framework within which I will analyse key productions, incidents and changes to the landscape of culturally diverse casting and representational practices in Shakespearean performance. My aim is to use this period as a lens through which to examine the influences of past productions and practitioners on the present, and to posit questions and ideas for the future of culturally diverse Shakespearean production. This will mean that I will refer to earlier productions that have taken

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Act for Change, <<http://www.act-for-change.com>>, BFI, ‘Diversity’, <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/about-bfi/policy-strategy/diversity>> and BBC, ‘Diversity and Inclusion’, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/diversity>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

place outside of these four years and will point to changes that have happened since. These are crucial years for understanding how attitudes and approaches to diverse casting practices have changed, are changing and have yet to change enough. 2012, the year of the London Olympics, and 2016, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, were used by British theatres - and indeed the British Establishment - as celebratory years, affirming the centrality of Shakespeare's plays to British culture while advertising (internally and globally) their claim to be multicultural entities and agents of positive change. The validity, and the consequences, of those claims will be the subject of this dissertation.

### **Defining Diversity**

Within a larger time-frame, this thesis is situated amongst the ongoing debates about diversity in the arts that began in 1976 with Naseem Khan's publication *The Arts Britain Ignores*. Sponsored by the Arts Council of Great Britain, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and Community Relations Commission, Khan delivered a report that described and analysed the arts activities of ethnic minority communities in Britain. She argued that 'The assets of immigration – the acquisition of new cultural experiences, art forms and attitudes – have so far been only minimally recognised and far less encouraged'. Khan deemed the recognition and encouragement of the arts by and for non-white communities integral to a fair society, indeed she wrote: 'Unless that happens, there is no

justification for calling Britain a multi-cultural society.’<sup>15</sup> The presence of black and Asian people in Britain has been charted back to Roman times with seminal texts such as Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, Rozina Visram’s *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* and Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez’s *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-Present*.<sup>16</sup> The most recent data from the Office for National Statistics has shown that England and Wales had become increasingly ‘more ethnically diverse, with rising numbers of people identifying with minority ethnic groups in 2011’.<sup>17</sup> Eighty-six per cent of the population of England and Wales were white, with the remaining fourteen per cent being from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. The ‘Asian/British Asian’ group was the largest minority group, and the ‘Black/African/Caribbean/Black British’ group followed. London was the most ethnically diverse area, where forty-five per cent of residents were ‘White British’. In 1976, Naseem Khan argued: ‘Since cultural expressions spring out of social conditions, they should change with conditions’, and that by providing BAME artists with more financial and structural support, ‘Britain would gain a far richer cultural scene, and would moreover be giving minorities their due’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (London: Community Relations Commission, 1976), p. 11. Naseem Khan acted as Head of Diversity for Arts Council England between the years 1996-2003. Many documents relating to Khan’s report and its effects up to the 1990s can be found in the University of Warwick Modern Records Centre Minority Arts Archive, 1974-1995: <<http://mrc-catalogue.warwick.ac.uk/records/MAA>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

<sup>16</sup> Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1987) and *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-Present*, ed. by Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Office for National Statistics.

<sup>18</sup> Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, pp. 8 and 11.



The situation for BAME artists in the decades following Naseem Khan's report has been the subject of studies by Colin Chambers (*Black and Asian Theatre in Britain*) and by other scholars concerned with charting the history of BAME theatre in Britain.<sup>19</sup> There were waves of progress, particularly in the 1970s where black and Asian presence had been established in British theatre:

The political use of culture as a means of resistance reached new heights, especially in countering the rise of overt racism and far-right groups [...] Diasporic theatre was asserting and exploring a new sense of identity in crisis-ridden post-imperial Britain, moving beyond the immigrant Other to claim its stake and confront notions of what it meant to be British.<sup>20</sup>

However, it took thirty-eight years for Arts Council England to make a fundamental shift in its approach to diversity, and implement policies that demonstrated a commitment to developing diversity in the arts. In 2014, Peter Bazalgette, Chair of the Arts Council, delivered a speech at a national 'Creative

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<sup>19</sup> A. Ruth Tompsett, *Black Theatre in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2006), *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice*, ed. by Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs (New York: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2006), *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres*, ed. by Dimple Godiwala (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press: 2006), Dominic Hingorani, *British Asian Theatre: Dramaturgy, Process and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and *Critical Essays on British South Asian Theatre*, ed. by Grahem Ley and Sarah Dadswell (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Colin Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 156. Chambers wrote: 'identity-based groups started to flourish as fringe and alternative theatre expanded. Like much of the fringe, many diasporic groups came and went quickly in the 1970s, sometimes changing names for different projects or grant applications and sometimes fading as the personalities behind them moved on' (p. 151).

Case for Diversity’ event where he admitted that ‘despite many valuable, well-intentioned policies over the past decade, when it comes to diversity, we have not achieved what we intended.’ Despite efforts and advances in the arts industry in terms of better representation both on and off British stages, Bazalgette conceded, ‘We need to reflect immigration and ethnicity, and recognise that there are substantial parts of society that are still largely invisible’.<sup>21</sup> The measured action that Arts Council England committed to take was to ensure that all National Portfolio Organisations (those supported with core funding) would deploy a Creative Case plan demonstrating the reflection of diverse communities in their work. ACE also made available eight million pounds to invest in developing diversity. Bazalgette was optimistic in his summary: ‘If we make this work, diversity – and I’m talking ten years from now – will be no longer be an aspiration. It will be a reality.’<sup>22</sup>

Yet in response to the industry-wide concern with ‘diversity’, the novelist and Man Booker Prize winner Marlon James wrote in 2016: ‘We too often mistake discussing diversity with doing anything constructive about it. This might be something we picked up from academia, the idea that discussing an issue is somehow on par with solving it, or at least beginning the process.’ He further wrote: ‘The fact that we’re still having [panel discussions about diversity] not only means that we continue to fail, but the false sense of accomplishment in

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Bazalgette, ‘Arts Council and the Creative Case for Diversity’ (Sadler’s Wells, 8 December 2014) <[http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Sir\\_Peter\\_Bazalgette\\_Creative\\_Case\\_speech\\_8\\_Dec\\_2014.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Sir_Peter_Bazalgette_Creative_Case_speech_8_Dec_2014.pdf)> [accessed 23 March 2017].

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

simply having one is deceiving us into thinking that something was tried.’<sup>23</sup>

Reiterating this sense of a perpetual conversation, in 2015 the comedian Lenny Henry opened a television event by saying, ‘Welcome to this, my 927th speech on diversity in the television industry’.<sup>24</sup> Henry had made his Shakespearean debut as Othello for Northern Broadsides in 2009, and went on to play Antipholus of Syracuse alongside Lucien Msamati’s Dromio in *The Comedy of Errors* at the National Theatre. In 2014 he made headlines as he called for ‘new legislation to reverse the “appalling” percentage of black and Asian people in the creative industries.’<sup>25</sup> Henry’s statement contributed to a series of black actors publicly decrying the lack of diverse representation and casting opportunities in Britain – conversations that continued through the years 2012–2016. David Oyelowo – the RSC’s first black King of England, Henry VI (2000) – also called for more diversity in the industry.<sup>26</sup> Other black actors to speak out who had similarly played leading Shakespearean roles in the UK and had successful television or film careers included Adrian Lester, David Harewood and Paterson Joseph. Idris Elba delivered a keynote speech to Parliament on ‘Diversity in the Media’ on 18<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marlon James, ‘Marlon James: Why I’m Done Talking About Diversity: Or, Why We Should Try An All-White Diversity Panel’, *Literary Hub*, 20 October 2016, <<http://lithub.com/marlon-james-why-im-done-talking-about-diversity/>> [accessed 27 March 2017].

<sup>24</sup> Lenny Henry quoted in Richard Vine, ‘Lenny Henry reiterates his call for a “sea change” on diversity’, *Guardian*, 18 November 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/nov/18/lenny-henry-reiterates-his-call-for-a-sea-change-on-diversity>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

<sup>25</sup> Tara Conlan, ‘Lenny Henry calls for law to boost low numbers of black people in TV industry’, *Guardian*, 18 March 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/mar/18/lenny-henry-black-asian-television>> [accessed 2 November 2016].

<sup>26</sup> David Oyelowo, ‘Actor David Oyelowo calls for UK film diversity’, *BBC*, 7 October 2016, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-37584146>> [accessed 2 November 2016].

January 2016, where he declared: ‘I’m here to talk about diversity. Diversity in the modern world is more than just skin colour’.<sup>27</sup> Elba argued, ‘If you have genuine diversity of thought among people making TV and film, then you won’t accidentally shut out any of the groups I just mentioned’ – referring to gender, age, disability, sexual orientation and social background. Diversity was the ‘buzzword’ of the era, indeed Peter Bazalgette declared: ‘Diversity is a key issue for our society, and for the arts and cultural sector’.<sup>28</sup> This thesis will examine the responses of different practitioners, companies and institutions to issues of cultural diversity, specifically in relation to ethnicity. It will scope issues of casting and performance for British black and Asian practitioners on the Shakespearean stage.

### **Casting practices in British Shakespearean productions**

I absolutely think that on this topic, scholars in the US are more advanced than in the UK. They have had no dialogues, almost at all, around race and casting, because they have almost universally accepted the notion of colourblind casting, and that the audiences don’t see race, and the critics don’t see race, so then it doesn’t have to be a topic.

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<sup>27</sup> Idris Elba, ‘Idris Elba’s Keynote speech to Parliament on Diversity in the Media’, *Channel 4*, 18 January 2016, <<http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/idris-elba-s-keynote-speech-to-parliament-on-diversity-in-the-media>> [accessed 2 November 2016].

<sup>28</sup> Bazalgette.

(Ayanna Thompson)<sup>29</sup>

Conversations about improving diverse representation have often referred to the concept of colourblind casting. A report produced by the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation suggested that in order to tackle the issue of the lack of diversity in the arts, producers, directors, and creative teams should take a lead ‘by ensuring that auditions for non-race specific roles are “colour blind”’.<sup>30</sup> Lyn Gardner bemoaned the lack of ‘real change there has been in achieving a depth and breadth of diversity on our stages’, but celebrated certain ‘big step[s] forward in colour-blind casting’ in instigating such change. The reviewer Mark Shenton went as far as to suggest that ‘true diversity in casting will only be achieved when we simply stop noticing the race of the actor’.<sup>31</sup>

The pioneer of colourblind casting in the US was Joseph Papp, who ran the New York Shakespeare Festival. He drew attention to the need to deconstruct race in the theatre by adding his voice to those who had, like Paul Robeson, been protesting segregation in theatres since the 1940s. Papp devised the practice of colourblind casting as an act of protest in his Shakespearean productions,

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<sup>29</sup> Ayanna Thompson quoted in ‘Ayanna Thompson in conversation with Dawn Monique Williams, 2 July, 2015’, in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 49–62 (p. 59).

<sup>30</sup> ‘Centre Stage: The Pipeline of BAME Talent’, ed. by Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen (Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, 2016)  
<<http://andrewlloydwebberfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-01-ALW-Diversity-Report.pdf>> [accessed 23 March 2017], p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Shenton, ‘Mark Shenton: Colour-blind casting will have succeeded only when we no longer notice it’, *The Stage*, 6 September 2016,  
<<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2016/mark-shenton-colour-blind-casting-will-only-have-succeeded-when-we-no-longer-notice-it/>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

beginning in 1955. The idea behind the practice was one of Civil Rights and inclusivity – no actor should be barred from playing a role because of his or her colour. The beginnings of the use of this colourblind casting practice in Britain may be traced back to 1958 where Edric Connor, a singer and actor born in Trinidad, played Gower in *Pericles* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Here, a black artist was cast in a role outside the boundaries of the ‘black canon’ of Shakespearean characters. Yet, the director’s creative intentions complicated the premise of the colourblind model. Tony Richardson had originally offered the role of Gower to Paul Robeson because he imagined it as ‘a tale of endurance sung by Robeson’.<sup>32</sup> When Robeson was unable to play the part because of the US Government’s removal of his passport, he suggested Connor, who was then offered the role as a substitute who could also fulfil the director’s vision. For, like Papp and, later, directors such as David Thacker and Bill Alexander, Tony Richardson had a political agenda here (he directed many plays with black actors and racial themes in Britain and America).<sup>33</sup>

The practice of so-called ‘colourblind’ casting in Shakespeare has also led to the trafficking of race-based stereotypes. In an interview for the Multicultural Shakespeare archive, Baroness Lola Young remembered how a certain casting pattern began in her early childhood: ‘Going back to when I was at primary school [I was] always asked to play the witch in the playground’. She said, ‘I

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<sup>32</sup> Tony Howard, “‘My Travail’s History’”: Perspectives on the Roads to Othello, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1959”, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 28 (2010), pp. 93–110 (p. 103).

<sup>33</sup> See Jami Rogers, ‘David Thacker and Bill Alexander: mainstream directors and the development of multicultural Shakespeare’, in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 110–121.

could understand the historical context from which all those stereotypes [came] [...] I was always the disempowered black object'.<sup>34</sup> Young's subjection to such roles was repeated in 1984 when, now as a professional actor, she was cast as a witch in the Young Vic's *Macbeth*. Young was sharply aware of the tension between the importance of colourblind casting in providing actors with opportunities to play parts from which they had previously been excluded, and their assignment, under this model of practice, to stereotypical roles. She observed: 'That experience was not without its contradictions since for many years, Blacks have demanded the right to play as wide a range of characters as "white" actors are allowed to, and here I was stuck playing the witch again, albeit in Shakespeare'.<sup>35</sup> And Young was not alone in her experience. Between the years 1966 and 2016, there are fifty-nine recorded performances by BAME actors in the role of a witch in *Macbeth*.<sup>36</sup> Ayanna Thompson has suggested that 'Black witches make sense because of the stereotype of the "magical negro," [...] a figure who has other-worldly or earthly connections'.<sup>37</sup> From Brabantio's racist accusation in *Othello* –

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!

For I'll refer me to all things of sense,

If she in chains of magic were not bound, [...]

Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy

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<sup>34</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Lola Young, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 78.

<sup>36</sup> Rogers, *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 78.

Would ever have [...]  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
Of such a thing as thou?

(1.2.63-71)

– to British directors who have continued to cast BAME actors in roles associated with magic, the connection is one that assigns the person of colour to the ‘Other’. One reviewer’s response to the 1984 *Macbeth* encapsulates this. Young remembered the critic ‘basically saying that this whole “multi-culture thing” didn’t work’. ‘When he came to discuss Malcolm’s performance he said, “Our own Malcolm Tierney” and I thought, that explains so much about the writer – “our own”.’<sup>38</sup> This pattern of assigning roles connected to magic or the supernatural to BAME actors has been evident in productions of *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*. Other race-based stereotypes have also been trafficked on British stages, as will be seen in the forthcoming chapters.

On Britain’s main Shakespearean stages in 2012–2016, decisions by directors, casting directors and artistic directors demonstrated the need for clearer conversations about colour, ethnicity and representation on stage. For example, in 2016, in her first production as Artistic Director of Shakespeare’s Globe, Emma Rice cast BAME actors in leading roles in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which was set in modern Britain. However, when interviewed by Meera Syal on the BBC’s televised version of the show about the influence of Indian culture in the production, Rice referred to the supposed ‘exoticism’ of Shakespeare’s play. She

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<sup>38</sup> Howard, Interview with Young.

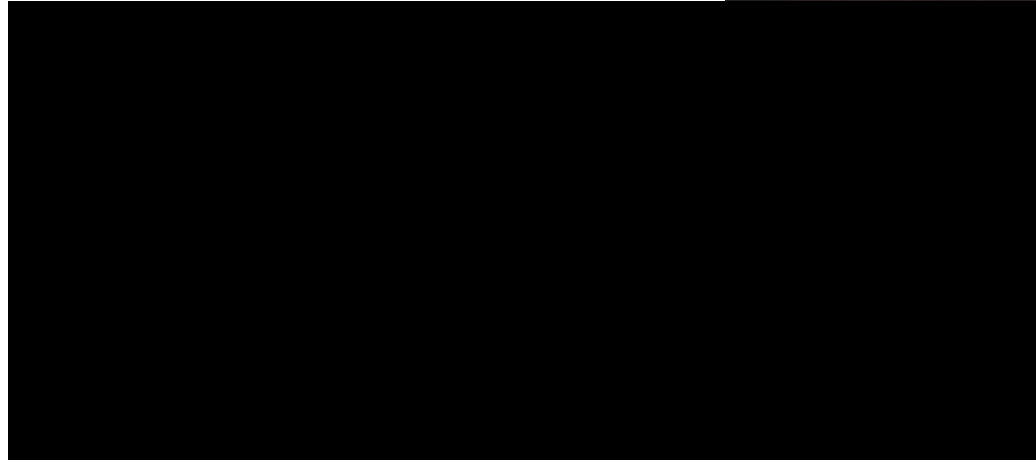


said ‘I feel that right at the heart of it there’s this fight over exoticism and beauty and something “other”’, and repeated: ‘There’s *exoticism* and the thought of faraway places that ripples throughout the whole piece’.<sup>39</sup> Rice used strings of marigolds (closely tied to Hindu rituals) in the stage design, as well as sitar music to underscore the entire production. She also chose to cast three actors with South Asian heritage: Anjana Vasan as Hermia, Ankur Bahl as Helenus, and Zubin Varla as Theseus/Oberon. Syal’s question intended to aid the audience’s understanding of Rice’s depiction of contemporary Britain, the face of which was represented with a diverse cast of British black and Asian actors as the lead roles (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). The multicultural casting was widely praised, yet Rice’s inability to discuss the issues of ethnicity and representation with clarity and purpose other than to assign the Indian aspects of the production, using Orientalist language, to something both ‘exotic’ and ‘other’ (like one reviewer’s stereotypical association that ‘the whole thing has the feel and energy of an Indian wedding’) is indicative of the industry as a whole.<sup>40</sup> We, as theatre critics, practitioners and audience members struggle to talk about cultural diversity and representation in Shakespearean performance. We need to deepen understandings of, and sensitivities to, different casting approaches through the establishment of new theoretical models that can be practically applied to productions on British stages.

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<sup>39</sup> Emma Rice in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream – Live from Shakespeare’s Globe’, *BBC iPlayer*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/events/ehw2mb/live/cw8g9r>> [accessed 14 October 2016].

<sup>40</sup> Natasha Tripney, ‘Emma Rice’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream review at Shakespeare’s Globe – “joyful”’, *The Stage*, 6 May 2016, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/a-midsummer-nights-dream-review-at-shakespeares-globe>> [accessed 14 October 2016].



**Fig. 1 Ncuti Gatwa as Demetrius, Ankur Bahl as Helenus (2016). Fig. 2 Anjana Vasan as Hermia and Edmund Derrington as Lysander (2016).**

In the North American context, Ayanna Thompson has examined the complexities of casting non-white actors and has theorised four categories that represent different approaches:

1. Colorblind casting: a meritocratic model in which actors are cast without regard to race; the best actor for the best role
2. Societal casting: a socially informed model in which actors of color are cast in roles originally conceived as being white if people of color perform these roles in society as a whole
3. Conceptual casting: a conceptually conceived model in which actors of color are cast in roles to enhance the play's social resonance

4. Cross-cultural casting: another conceptually conceived model in which the entire world of the play is translated to a different culture and location<sup>41</sup>

Thompson uses ‘non-traditional casting’ as the umbrella term to encompass these categories. The four definitions help to clarify the dominant, disparate attitudes to the semiotic meaning of ethnic difference onstage. Yet Thompson acknowledges that in practice this discourse is neither widely understood nor used by theatre companies.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in Britain, neither theatre practitioners – nor indeed academics – have developed a clear, distinct terminology or a model of casting practices. There has been much confusion and conflict in terms of casting choices, the conversations surrounding them, and the audience’s responses. Regarding her different approaches to productions with specific directorial choices and geographical settings, Hannah Miller, the RSC’s Head of Casting, declared ‘I think that is the difficult thing about trying to find just one phrase to sum up what we do’.<sup>43</sup> The following are just some of the terms currently used in the British theatre landscape to describe culturally diverse casting practices: ‘colourblind’, ‘colour-conscious’, ‘non-traditional’, ‘multicultural’, ‘multiracial’, ‘culturally

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<sup>41</sup> Ayanna Thompson uses the terms spelled out in the late 1980s by the ‘Non-Traditional Casting Project’ that ‘enumerated four different types of non-traditional casting (NTCP was renamed in 2007 as the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts)’ see Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Miller quoted in Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe, ‘Interview with the RSC’s Hannah Miller, Head of Casting, and Kevin Fitzmaurice, Producer’, in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, ed. by Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe, 24 (2014), p. 489.

diverse' and 'integrated'. They are neither widely agreed upon nor well-understood.

There are a small number of academics who have analysed casting practices in the British context including Lynette Goddard with a section – 'Race, diversity and inclusive casting' – in her 2016 essay, 'Will we ever have a black Desdemona? Casting Josette Simon at the Royal Shakespeare Company'. Goddard raised concerns about the panoply of terminology surrounding these issues, yet herself alternated indiscriminately between the terms 'inclusive', 'multiracial' and 'culturally diverse'. She argued that British 'directors [should] demonstrate an awareness of the potential significations of race when casting black performers in Shakespearean roles', and indeed 'adjust the text accordingly to challenge typecasting and avoid reaffirming stereotypical perceptions of race and gender'.<sup>44</sup> This call for intervention is commendable in its theoretical idealism, yet is underdeveloped in its consideration as a practical resource. She called this suggested practice 'colour-conscious colour-blindness', an overly wordy and contradictory term that once again draws attention to the need for a distinct vocabulary that can be applied in production contexts. 'Colourblind casting' indeed appears to remain the overriding term used and understood, at least on a surface level, by the industry. Thus, at the opposite extreme from Goddard's terminological complexity, as previously mentioned, Mark Shenton wrote, 'True diversity in casting will only be achieved when we simply stop

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<sup>44</sup> Lynette Goddard, 'Will we ever have a black Desdemona? Casting Josette Simon at the Royal Shakespeare Company', in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 84.

noticing the race of the actor'. 'A place of not seeing the colour of the actor', he argued, is 'the new utopia we should all be striving towards'.<sup>45</sup> Although as we shall see, it was seriously questioned after 2012, the fact remained that under the 'colourblind' model, BAME actors had rarely been given the opportunity to play leading Shakespearean roles.

Those productions where high numbers of BAME actors have been employed in Shakespearean productions, and not only in supporting roles, have usually been set in specific locations where the director requires the actors' appearance to physicalise an 'artistic vision'. In such instances, their presence is intended to have semiotic value onstage, for example setting the play in Africa and casting black actors to support that 'vision' (e.g. *Julius Caesar*, see Chapter one). This casting practice falls outside the 'colourblind' model. If the employment of more than a small number of BAME actors in Shakespearean roles relies on directors having a specific concept for a play, and changes its geographical location to a non-British setting, this suggests a failure in the British 'colourblind' model. As well as issues of employment, such a utopic vision as Shenton's is, as this thesis will argue, both inconceivable and undesirable because it denies the performers' experiences and cultural inheritances.

A shift in academic and industry thinking is required to develop sustained dialogues about and understanding of issues of race, ethnicity and diversity in performance. The fact that we struggle to define terms is connected to wider difficulties in attempting to discuss and define British society's postcolonial,

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<sup>45</sup> Shenton, 2016.

multicultural, diverse identity as a whole. As Ayanna Thompson notes, ‘The practice(s) of colourblind casting cannot resolve the larger societal tensions in which they are enmeshed. Instead, [... they] merely replicate the anxieties our society has about defining race’.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, when we reach a point in the theatre where we can talk about race, ethnicity and cultural diversity with clarity, fluency and consistency, it might indicate, or indeed help instigate, a cultural shift in society at large towards a more inclusive, less racist Britain at ease with its multiculturalism and its diverse demographic of citizens. It is impossible to advance the way we conceive of diverse casting in Britain without being equipped with clear terminology and clear discourse. When we establish a refined theoretical model of culturally diverse casting, we will be able to put it into practice, and then we may see a shift in the way we talk, conceive of and represent people of different colours and ethnicities on stage in Shakespearean performance.

### **Theorising cultural diversity and representation**

In order to better comprehend the processes and effects of culturally diverse casting and its place in performances of Shakespeare, it is important to consider representational practices. The work of Stuart Hall is central to framing many of the arguments made in this thesis concerning the representation of the ‘Other’.

Hall argued:

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<sup>46</sup> Ayanna Thompson, *Colorblind Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 8.

The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's "Orientalist" sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as "Other".<sup>47</sup>

Many scholars have theorised the discourses of the Other, including Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.<sup>48</sup> Bhabha writes that knowledge of the construction of that 'opposition' will be denied the colonial subject. He is constructed:

within an apparatus of power which *contains*, in both senses of the word, an 'other' knowledge – a knowledge that is arrested and fetishistic and circulates through colonial discourse as that limited form of otherness, that fixed form of difference, that I have called the stereotype.<sup>49</sup>

The practice of stereotyping counters the understanding that cultural identities undergo constant transformation and contributes to a 'racialized regime of

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<sup>47</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* ed. by Johnathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 225.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); Gayatri Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (London: Routledge, 1996); and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>49</sup> Bhabha, p. 111.

representation'. Indeed, as Hall wrote, '*Stereotypes* get hold of the few "simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized" characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity'.<sup>50</sup> Bhabha similarly theorised:

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the legation though the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.<sup>51</sup>

The binary system of representation that led to the *constructed* categories of race and ethnicity has been theorised by postcolonialists as a system that attempts to fix and naturalise difference according to diametrically opposed categories such as black/white, 'good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic'. And 'they are often required to be *both things at the same time!*'<sup>52</sup> Hall argued that the construction of identity across ethnic and cultural difference became "hegemonic" over other ethnic/racial identities' – communities with very different cultural histories, traditions and ethnic identities. Hall wrote that

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<sup>50</sup> *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 258.

<sup>51</sup> Bhabha, p. 107.

<sup>52</sup> Hall, *Representation*, p. 229.



‘Culturally, this analysis formulated itself in terms of a critique of the way blacks were positioned as the unspoken and invisible “other” of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses’.<sup>53</sup> He argued that this critique stems from the marginalisation of the black experience in British culture through the normalisation of stereotypical representational practices, and he asked: ‘How do we represent people and places which are significantly different from us? Why is “difference” so compelling a theme, so contested an area of representation?’<sup>54</sup> These questions are key in framing the representation of culturally diverse peoples and communities.

The work of black artists has been characterised as pursuing *access* to the rights to representation by the black artists themselves, and also the *contestation* of marginalisation, fetishisation and stereotypical representation through countering these images with ‘positive’ black imagery.<sup>55</sup> Alongside this, Hall recognised another counter-strategy that ‘locates itself *inside* a continuous struggle and politics around black representation’ and deliberately ‘contests the dominant gendered and sexual definitions of racial difference by *working on*’ issues such as black sexuality.<sup>56</sup> If, as Stuart Hall argued, scenarios of representation have a formative, and not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life, then the construction of and mimetic performance of identity in theatrical settings has real effects outside the realms of

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<sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 441.

<sup>54</sup> Hall, *Representation*, p. 215.

<sup>55</sup> Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, p. 442.

<sup>56</sup> Hall, *Representation*, p. 274.

the discursive. When he originally delivered his paper ‘New Ethnicities’ in the late 1980s, Hall discerned that a second phase characterising British black identity politics was just beginning. This phase, he argued, would lead to the recognition that “‘black” is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories’, and to the recognition of the ‘immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects’.<sup>57</sup> He wrote:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>58</sup>

To counter the representational practice of ‘Othering’, one must begin here, with the understanding that the black or postcolonial subject and experience are specifically constructed historically, culturally and politically. Hall argued for the construction of a politics that ‘works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle

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<sup>57</sup> Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, p. 443.

<sup>58</sup> Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 225.

and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities’ – without entering into an endlessly sliding ‘discursive liberal-pluralism’.<sup>59</sup> As such, this re-theorising of the concept of difference would lead to the conception of new ethnic identities. I would relate this to Bhabha’s theories of the ‘Third Space’:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself,  
which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation  
that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have  
no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can  
be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.<sup>60</sup>

I hope to open up a sustained critical exploration of the themes, the forms of representation, the subjects of representation, and the *regimes* of representation in British Shakespearean production. Practitioners have begun to think about how to represent a more diverse conception of ethnicity against the hegemonic conception of Britishness, thus destabilising the dominant political and cultural discourses. When the cultural capital and power of Shakespeare is so clear, the potential impact could be – as Hall argued in relation to transforming the politics of representation in black culture generally – wholly formative in the constitution of both political and cultural life. Bhabha warned of ‘the urgent need to contest singularities of difference and to articulate diverse “subjects” of differentiation’.<sup>61</sup> My thesis aims to shed light on practices that are still damaging in their

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<sup>59</sup> Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, p. 444.

<sup>60</sup> Bhabha, p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> Bhabha, p. 105.

representations of Britain's BAME communities. In mainstream theatre companies there is evidence of a continuing struggle over the relations of representation, especially in comparison to the Shakespearean work of BAME directors and companies whose output suggests a journey of discovering, developing and creating a new politics of representation for themselves.

### **Influences and methodologies**

The body of academic work in this field, specifically in the British context, is small and underdeveloped. As previously mentioned, Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (2016) is the first collection of essays dedicated to an examination of these issues. Previously Jami Roger's 'The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling: the state of colorblind casting in contemporary British theatre' (2013) had assessed casting patterns for black and Asian actors. Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe edited a special edition of *Contemporary Theatre Review* entitled 'A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*' that examined the employment and representation of East Asian actors. Other scholars who have examined issues of colour in British Shakespearean performance are Carol Rutter with 'Shadowing Cleopatra: Making whiteness strange' in *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage* and Celia Daileader with 'Casting black actors: Beyond Othellophilia' (in Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells' [eds.] *Shakespeare and Race* [2000]). Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen's *A*

*Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (2005) refers to questions of colourblind casting only in half a page (out of six hundred and eighty-eight).<sup>62</sup> American scholars working in the field include Ayanna Thompson who has published *Colourblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* (2006), *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (with Scott L. Newstok, 2010), and *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (2011).<sup>63</sup> Scholars focusing on postcolonial Shakespeare have paid little attention to the work of UK immigrant practitioners – see Ania Loomba’s *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (2002), *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (with Martin Orkin, 1998) and Thomas Cartelli’s *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (1999).<sup>64</sup> There is a lack of literature that analyses developments in contemporary British theatre practices in terms of the politics of diverse casting and representation.

I shall use Thompson’s theories of ‘non-traditional casting’ as a framework for my analysis of differing British Shakespearean practices and their impact and implications for the politics of representation. What were the

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<sup>62</sup> Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe, ‘A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC’s *The Orphan of Zhao*’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (4) (2014), pp. 428-435; Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare’s Stage* (London, Routledge, 2001); Celia Daileader, ‘Casting black actors: Beyond Othellophilia’ in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 177–202; *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. by Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> Ayanna Thompson, *Colourblind Shakespeare; Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson and Scott L. Newstok (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange*.

<sup>64</sup> Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, ed. by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (London: Routledge, 1998); Thomas Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (London: Routledge, 1999).

approaches to casting applied by directors and casting directors in Britain in the years 2012–2016? What were the intentions behind these approaches, and how have these creative decisions manifested on stage? What strategies have been used by theatre companies' different departments – such as marketing – to aid audiences' understanding of ethnic diversity, and with what success? How have theatre reviewers responded to the issues of culturally diverse politics in performance? Also, and perhaps most importantly, what has been the experience of British black and Asian actors of the casting, rehearsal and performance processes of Shakespearean production? How do they perceive the function of their ethnicity in these processes?

In order to pursue these questions, I offer case studies of British productions that took place on mainstream stages (the RSC, National Theatre and Shakespeare's Globe), those by BAME theatre companies (Talawa, Tara Arts, Phizzical and Yellow Earth), and in educational settings. The approach of this thesis is ethnographic, and draws on a range of sources of data surrounding these productions. For example, some data was collected from observation in rehearsal rooms. As a practitioner of film and theatre, I was involved in several of the rehearsal processes, including as a movement apprentice for the RSC's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Julius Caesar* (2012), and as a filmmaker in the rehearsal room of Tara Arts' *Macbeth*. Other data was collected through recorded interviews with artistic directors, directors, actors, writers and heads of departments. Data was also collected from such archival resources as the records held by each of the institutions or companies, including video recordings,

production photographs, reviews and prompt books. Further data was sourced from the British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance database, and reports from funding bodies including Arts Council England. Through analyses of each of these sets of data, this thesis aims to interpret the meanings, functions and consequences of the institutional practices of diverse representations, and to ask how the British Shakespearean stage has been implicated in wider debates.<sup>65</sup> Beyond this data acquisition, this thesis seeks to develop critical dialogues about what has been done historically and what might be done practically moving forwards.

### **Thesis structure**

The thesis is divided into four sections. The first examines issues of diversity on Britain's main stages, particularly in the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Section two studies the praxis of BAME theatre companies: Tara Arts, Talawa, Phizzical Productions and Yellow Earth. Section three focuses on educational enterprises in mainstream organisations. Section four concludes with reflection and propositions as to how British Shakespearean production might move towards a more sustainable diverse ecology.

Within this structure, Chapters one and two examine two productions that formed a major part of the RSC's contribution to the 2012 World Shakespeare

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<sup>65</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

Festival: *Julius Caesar*, directed by Gregory Doran, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Iqbal Khan. Both raised issues of stereotyping, cultural tourism, exoticism and tokenistic casting. I argue that the work on main stages indicates the dangers of institutionalised racism in Britain's largest theatrical institutions. Chapter three concentrates on the shift in contributions by black actors and directors from the margins to the mainstream through an analysis of Talawa theatre company, and the work of Tarell Alvin McCraney at the Royal Shakespeare Company. It considers how black practitioners have used Shakespeare to examine issues of black history, identity and the politics of sexuality and racism. Chapter four focuses on two BAME companies – Tara Arts and Phizzical Productions – and their productions of *Macbeth* (Tara) and *Romeo and Laila* and *Cymbeline* (Phizzical). Through an examination of these companies' histories, artistic aims, and theatrical praxes, I argue that South Asian Shakespeare productions have disturbed the homogeneous narrative of the British stage and helped minority diaspora communities to reflect and redefine their identities in the British cultural landscape. Chapter five looks at issues of invisibility, marginalisation, and exoticism for the British East Asian community. Several productions featuring British East Asian casts are analysed, including Yellow Earth's *King Lear*. The chapter also provides a study of *The Orphan of Zhao* casting controversy at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Chapter six examines issues of cultural diversity for young people, particularly focusing on how and why the education departments of the RSC, Shakespeare's Globe and the National Theatre make Shakespeare accessible, engaging and relevant for



Britain's young, diverse audiences. Chapter seven draws conclusions from the forgoing analysis of the politics of cultural diversity in the casting and performance of Shakespeare. It reflects on what I believe have been the failures and successes of mainstream theatrical establishments in developing sustainable diverse practices in the casting and representation of Britain's BAME communities and peoples; and it looks towards identifying structural changes that could result in a sustainable paradigm and praxis for the production of culturally diverse Shakespeare in the UK.

## Chapter One: The World Shakespeare Festival, 2012, London's Olympic Year

On 27 July 2012, an estimated one billion people across the globe turned on their televisions and beheld a vision of England's 'Green and Pleasant Land'. The cameras followed one figure as he stepped out of his horse-drawn carriage.

Kenneth Branagh walked up a mock-up of the green mound of Glastonbury Tor, raised his top-hatted head, drew a deep breath and began: 'Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, | Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not'.<sup>66</sup>

Caliban's words were the first to be spoken in the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games, and this moment asserted the importance of Shakespeare in contemporary British culture and society, and in the UK's international relationships.

Danny Boyle, the director of the Ceremony, explained, 'The speech is about the wondrous beauty of the island and his deep, deep affection and devotion to it. And that's what we felt in preparing the show'.<sup>67</sup> The spectacle's reception reflected this sentiment, even if the right-wing pundit Melanie Phillips described Boyle's 'fantasy of an inclusive, generous, warm-hearted, joyful' Britishness – embracing William Blake, the foundation of the National Health Service, and the invention of the internet – as 'gratuitous political propaganda'.<sup>68</sup> The national

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<sup>66</sup> *London 2012 Olympic Games*, dir. by Danny Boyle (BBC, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Jenny Minard, 'London 2012: How Shakespeare's *Tempest* shapes the ceremonies', *BBC News*, 27 January 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-16761126>> [accessed 2 January 2017].

<sup>68</sup> Melanie Phillips, 'Oscars all round for a spectacular feelgood fantasy of modern Britain', *Daily Mail*, 20 July 2012, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article->

myth of collective endeavour was reinforced by Branagh's delivery of the speech, with a soft smile and an energy that built steadily to a rousing crescendo, even as factory chimneys prepared to burst from under the earth. The themes of *The Tempest*, however, are of course much more complicated than visions of seeming harmony, 'beauty' and 'devotion'. Caliban speaks the speech whilst plotting to overthrow Prospero, who has colonised the land and enslaved him. How did Boyle and his collaborator, the writer Frank Cottrell Boyce, rationalise the complicated history they evoked through this choice, invoking both Utopia and imperialism? Boyce later admitted to Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, 'It's a madly inappropriate speech in a way'.<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere in the Opening Ceremony, Boyle was emphatically inclusive of present-day Britain's multiculturalism and diversity. The Empire Windrush – the ship that carried West Indian workers from Jamaica in 1948 – featured in a procession around the stadium that represented the waves of post-war immigration bringing different communities of BAME peoples into Britain. Later, a sequence titled 'Frankie and June Say Thanks Tim' depicted contemporary British life; June had dinner with her ethnically-mixed family, and then went out to party. She found romance with Frankie, a young black British man. Their story culminated in a kiss. The ideal that was presented was a Britain at ease with her multicultural self or selves. It was far from incidental: 'During the bid process

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[2180786/Olympics-2012-opening-ceremony-Oscars-round-spectacular-feelgood-fantasy-modern-Britain.html](http://www.bbc.com/news/2180786/Olympics-2012-opening-ceremony-Oscars-round-spectacular-feelgood-fantasy-modern-Britain.html)] > [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>69</sup> *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year*, ed. by Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), p. 48.

diversity was a key reason why London was chosen to host the 2012 Games.’<sup>70</sup>

The diversity and inclusion strategy of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) described London as:

one of the most diverse cities in the world, a city with more than 50 ethnic communities of 10,000 or more people and where an incredible 300 different languages are used.<sup>71</sup>

Yet, although this brief related directly to the policy of multiculturalism and the idea of a multicultural British identity, there were also tensions. In 2011 the Prime Minister David Cameron announced in a speech in Munich: ‘We’ve allowed the weakening of our collective identity under the doctrine of multiculturalism’.<sup>72</sup>

Claiming that the previous Labour Government had imposed ‘state multiculturalism’ and ‘passive tolerance’ on the country and that this policy was a ‘failure’, Cameron laid the foundation for a basic – in his terms ‘muscular’ – change in attitude towards Britain’s relationship with immigration and with its neighbours. The consequences became very visible in 2016, but in 2012 the Olympics and Paralympics for a moment kept alive a utopian vision of a British community made up of many groups and individuals, existing together and offering equal opportunity and interaction. As Paul Deighton, the Chief Executive Officer of LOCOG, suggested, ‘The Games offer a unique opportunity to break

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<sup>70</sup> LOCOG, *LOCOG Diversity and Inclusion Strategy* (London: London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Ltd, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> David Cameron, ‘State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron’, *BBC News*, 5 February 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

down ethnic, cultural, religious, political and economic barriers through sport'.<sup>73</sup> Diversity and inclusion, he said, 'must remain at the very heart of everything we do', and the Opening Ceremony, no exception to this rule, celebrated diversity as the *essence* of British identity, not a denial of it.<sup>74</sup> Shakespeare would be a significant part of this while 'the eyes of the world are on London'.<sup>75</sup>

Alongside the Olympic and Paralympic Games, London was also host to the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. This was promoted as the 'the largest cultural celebration in the history of the modern Olympic and Paralympic Movements'.<sup>76</sup> Its programmes and projects were required to display three core values, the first of which was to 'Celebrate London and the whole of the UK welcoming the world – our unique internationalism, cultural diversity, sharing and understanding'.<sup>77</sup> Shakespeare became central to this merging of the global and the local. The World Shakespeare Festival, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in collaboration with Shakespeare's Globe, ran from 23 April to November 2012 as part of the London 2012 Festival and as the culmination of the Cultural Olympiad. Ruth Mackenzie, the Cultural Olympiad's director, called the WSF a celebration

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<sup>73</sup> LOCOG, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, *World Shakespeare Festival* brochure (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> London 2012, 'Cultural Olympiad', *London 2012*, <<http://www.london2012.com/about-us/cultural-olympiad/>> [accessed 23 April 2013].

<sup>77</sup> LOCOG, 'Background Briefing Paper: The Cultural Olympiad', *London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games*, 11 March 2008, p. 4, <<http://www.sel.org.uk/uploads/LOCOG-Cultural-Olympiad-Background-Briefing.pdf>> [accessed 23 April 2013]. Additionally, it must 'Inspire and involve young people', and 'Generate a positive legacy (through, for example, cultural and sports participation, audience development, cultural skills, capacity building, urban regeneration, tourism and social cohesion, international linkages).'

of ‘Shakespeare as the world’s playwright’.<sup>78</sup> The language used in its introductory and publicity material (largely produced by the RSC) reflected the key values set out by the Cultural Olympiad brief. In their introduction to the WSF Brochure, Deborah Shaw (World Shakespeare Festival Director and previously Director of the RSC’s 2005 Complete Works Festival) and Michael Boyd (Artistic Director of the RSC) outlined their mission, which was: ‘[to celebrate] this most international of playwrights at a time when the eyes of the world are on London’.<sup>79</sup> Some of the productions would ‘reflect the rich mix of cultures within British society’, and Shaw added that the work of the artists would express ‘the cultural, social and political shifts of our contemporary world, through the prism of Shakespeare’s plays that continue to speak to us across geographies and generations.’<sup>80</sup> Organisations across the UK partnered to produce amateur and professional productions, events and exhibitions between April and September 2012, in hubs including Newcastle, Birmingham, Wales and Scotland. Funding allowed the RSC to contribute twelve productions to the WSF, including co-productions with the USA and Mexico. Companies from Russia, Iraq and Brazil were commissioned to perform versions of Shakespeare plays at Stratford-upon-Avon. The RSC’s own work began with a trilogy – *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*, grouped under the title ‘What Country Friends Is This?’ – that aimed to explore ‘migration, exile, shipwreck and the discovery of

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<sup>78</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, ‘World Shakespeare Festival Launches’, *RSC Updates and News Archive*, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/updates/world-shakespeare-festival-launch.aspx>> [accessed 23 April 2013].

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Deborah Shaw in Royal Shakespeare Company, *Much Ado About Nothing* programme (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012).

new worlds'.<sup>81</sup> The two RSC Shakespearean revivals which were commissioned especially to 'reflect the rich mix of cultures within British society' were a *Julius Caesar* set in sub-Saharan Africa (directed by Greg Doran) and *Much Ado About Nothing* set in Delhi, India (directed by Iqbal Khan). Meanwhile another partner organisation, Shakespeare's Globe, was contributing a season of work to the WSF: its Globe to Globe programme aimed to reflect the Cultural Olympiad's core value by 'welcoming the world'. Tom Bird, the director of the Globe to Globe season, invited companies from thirty-seven countries to perform Shakespeare's works in thirty-seven languages in London. His starting point was to connect to 'London Languages', for example, Bangla. He said: 'About a mile away from the Globe, in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, there are 60,000 people, I think, who speak Bangla as their native language'.<sup>82</sup> Bird's programming hoped to engage with different linguistic communities, and as an indication of the season's success, it was reported that eighty per cent of the Globe to Globe spectators were visiting the venue for the first time.<sup>83</sup> Yet if a sense of multilingualism and inclusion was encouraged in the audience, it was not encouraged by Britain's news sources. In *Reviewing Shakespeare*, Paul Prescott analysed the responses of mainstream critics: 'As far as most newspapers were concerned, these foreign Shakespeares could be safely ignored.'<sup>84</sup> Prescott

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<sup>81</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, *World Shakespeare Festival* brochure, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Tom Bird, 'The Globe to Globe Festival', plenary talk at the International Shakespeare Conference, the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, 9 August 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Shakespeare's Globe, 'Shakespeare's Globe Annual Review 2012', (Shakespeare's Globe, 2012), <<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/uploads/ffiles/2013/02/795720.pdf>> [accessed 5 January 2017], p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Prescott, *Reviewing Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 180.

ascertained that if one discounted the reviews of the *Guardian* and *Financial Times*, and the reviews of the Globe's English-language *Henry V*, 'the national press published only fifteen reviews *in total* of the remaining thirty-seven Globe to Globe productions.'<sup>85</sup> Prescott compared this figure with the seventeen national critics who attended the opening night of *Chariots of Fire*, celebrating the triumphs of two British Olympic athletes. Globe to Globe's internationalist achievement was to some extent undermined by its own final instalment, the English-language *Henry V* directed by Dominic Dromgoole. According to the *Sunday Telegraph*, Dromgoole had 'timed to perfection his production of Shakespeare's celebration of our country, our way of life and our willingness to defend it.' The reviewer looked forward, perhaps suspiciously, to 'the similarly upbeat and patriotic opening ceremony that Danny Boyle has created for next month's Olympic Games.'<sup>86</sup> Reminding *Telegraph* readers of Britain's all-round excellence, Walker's comments embraced nationalism unashamedly. So too would the Introduction to the 2013 Evaluation Report on the Cultural Olympiad, which opened with a photograph of the former Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt (by then Health Secretary) surrounded by flag-waving children and a text that ended by stressing the celebration of Britain's 'world icons such as William Shakespeare'.<sup>87</sup> The graphic design gave 'such as William Shakespeare' a separate line.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Tim Walker quoted in Prescott, p. 185.

<sup>87</sup> Beatriz Garcia, *The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad Evaluation* (University of Liverpool: Institute of Cultural Capital, 2013) <<http://www.culturalolympics.org.uk/2014/04/re-designed-version-of-the-london-2012-cultural-olympiad-evaluation-now-available/>> [accessed 7 March 2017].

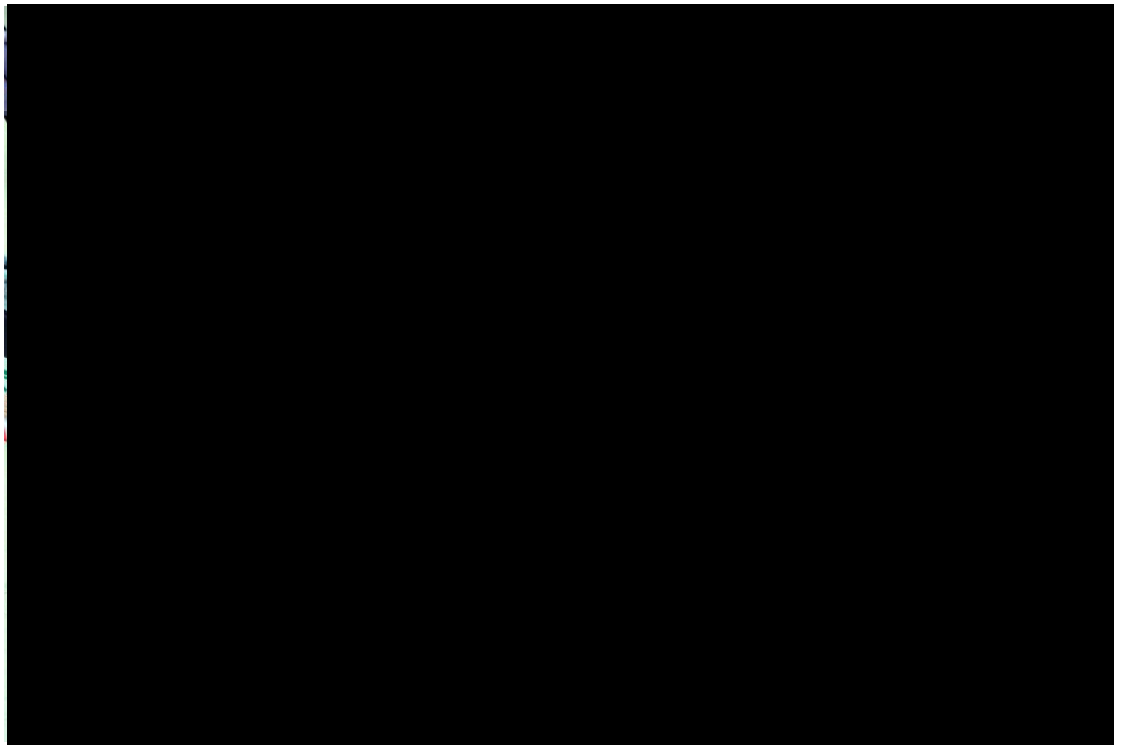


The Globe to Globe season was, nonetheless, widely regarded as an unprecedented introduction to staging techniques and attitudes to Shakespeare from around the world. It included five productions from Africa – *Venus and Adonis* by the South African company Isango Ensemble from Cape Town (which introduced even more local languages and an extra-dramatic text), Theatre Company Kenya’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Winter’s Tale* by Renegade Theatre from Lagos, Nigeria, and *Cymbeline* by the South Sudan Theatre Company – the first adaptation of Shakespeare into Juba Arabic. There were also three productions from South Asia: *The Tempest* in Bangla by Dhaka Theatre from Bangladesh, *The Taming of the Shrew* in Urdu by the Pakistani company Theatre Wallay and Kashf, and *Twelfth Night* in Hindi by Company Theatre from Mumbai. Culturally and politically, all these companies varied in their treatment of Shakespeare’s plays – from the use of different styles of music, dance and performance to their engagement with pertinent contemporary issues. The scholar Colette Gordon has analysed the extent to which Globe to Globe was guilty of ‘making up Africa’ and conforming to several stereotypes of colonial history; however the British theatre establishment’s most publicised allusion to the African continent during the Olympiad – and to India – were the RSC’s in-house contributions to the Festival, its *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado*.<sup>88</sup> The RSC used the season to draw high-profile attention to their opportunities for and engagement

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<sup>88</sup> Colette Gordon, “‘Mind the gap’: Globalism, Postcolonialism and Making up Africa in the Cultural Olympiad’ in *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year* ed. by Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015) p.191.

with British black and South Asian communities. At the launch of the World Shakespeare Festival, members of the National Youth Theatre appeared in a staged photograph holding multiple flags of the nations of the world (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3 Meera Syal and Ray Fearon at the launch of the World Shakespeare Festival (2012).**

They surrounded Meera Syal and Ray Fearon, who featured in this publicity because of their involvement in *Much Ado* and *Julius Caesar*. The twin RSC revivals would be historically significant because of their ethnically-specific casting. The message broadcast through the media was clear: while the cultures and peoples of the world were about to be presented and celebrated on British stages, so too were the talents of leading British actors from diverse communities.

Through these two Stratford productions, the World Shakespeare Festival provided the opportunity for performers and directors to engage with Britain's identity politics – to both assert and question Britain's own cultural identity and its relationships with continents it had colonised.

### ***Julius Caesar*, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2012, it was announced that Gregory Doran had been appointed as the Artistic Director of the RSC; he would take up the position in September 2012. As such, his *Julius Caesar*, which opened that June, was his first as the designated helmsman of the company. His choices for this project were expected to set a precedent for his future work, as well as establishing the ethos of his leadership. Doran decided to set the play in sub-Saharan Africa and work with an 'all-black' British cast. *Julius Caesar* ran from 28 May-7 July at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, then transferred to London's West End at the Noel Coward Theatre where it ran back-to-back with Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado* (August to October). It toured to venues across the UK and to Moscow, New York and Ohio. A film version was shown on BBC4 during the stage run, and was then issued on DVD.

Gregory Doran had previously set a Shakespearean tragedy in Africa: *Titus Andronicus* in 1995. The process was described in detail by Doran and his South African partner Antony Sher in their volume, *Woza Shakespeare*.<sup>89</sup> Doran

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<sup>89</sup> Antony Sher and Gregory Doran, *Woza Shakespeare: "Titus Andronicus" in South Africa* (London: Methuen Drama, 1996).

had previously thought of directing the play in West Africa, but after Nelson Mandela became President, *Titus* opened at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg. It then transferred to the National Theatre and other venues in the UK. When asked why he chose to set *Titus* in South Africa, Doran stated: ‘I suppose because of the violence. It can seem so gratuitous, just a gory melodrama [...] but not here somehow [...] And it’s got Shakespeare’s *other* great black part’.<sup>90</sup> Doran worked with a creative team of practitioners from the Market Theatre and a cast of black and white South African actors.<sup>91</sup> Through his casting choices the Romans became right-wing Afrikaner nationalists while the Goths were *tsotsis* (township criminals). The politics of race were particularly significant at a time where only a year previously the first democratic elections had been held in the country, and brought an end to apartheid. At a time of reconciliation, the play’s remorseless revenge ethic did provoke controversy and there were also arguments in the press over questions of colonialism and cultural inferiority. The actor and writer John Matshikiza described Doran and Sher as ‘opportunistic Eurocentric outsiders who became entangled in a cultural minefield that blew up in their faces’, and these issues have been discussed in detail by Adele Seeff in ‘*Titus Andronicus*: South Africa’s Shakespeare’.<sup>92</sup> Thus, two decades before the Olympics, Doran had encountered some of the complexities of connecting Shakespeare to contemporary African politics, particularly concerning issues of postcolonialism and race, and

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> Collaborators: Sue Steele as costume designer; Nadya Cohen as production designer; music by Dumisani Dhlamini.

<sup>92</sup> John Matshikiza quoted in Adele Seeff, ‘*Titus Andronicus*: South Africa's Shakespeare’, *Borrowers and Lenders*, 4 (2008-2009), 1–18 (p. 9).

this experience would surely influence his approach when he chose to set another of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies in Africa.

Several factors led to the genesis of the RSC's 'African' *Julius Caesar*. In a variety of press outlets used to promote the production, Doran explained that his first moment of inspiration came when he met Nelson Mandela and learned that he and other prisoners had access to a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare during their confinement on Robben Island. Mandela had signed his name next to a speech from Caesar – 'Cowards die many times before their deaths: The valiant never taste of death but once' – and had written the date 16<sup>th</sup> December 1977. The significance of this date was that it marked the anniversary of the Afrikaaner victory over the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1838. 'That made me look at the play in completely different eyes as a very immediate political struggle', said Doran, and he felt assured of *Caesar*'s relevance to African consciousness.<sup>93</sup>

A second factor was his discovery that Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania, had translated this play into Swahili, and that it had also been translated into the South African language Setswana in the 1920s. Doran found modern resonances in the play's debates surrounding democracy and tyranny, and he summed up what he saw as the parallels to postcolonial Africa with its 'series of freedom fighters turned democratically elected presidents, turned despotic rulers, who have pulled all the power to themselves in one party states.' He continued:

The fear of that tyranny has led to multiple military coups,

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<sup>93</sup> Gregory Doran, 'RSC director Greg Doran on his African Julius Caesar', *Theatre Voice*, 3 August 2012, <<http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/rsc-director-greg-doran-on-his-african-julius-caesar/>> [accessed 20 December 2016].

assassinations and civil wars which continue to ravage the continent. Caesar could be Amin or Bokassa, Mobutu or Mugabe.<sup>94</sup>

Doran added that he was finally convinced that he should set the play in Africa by the Market Theatre director John Kani's comment: 'It's very simple: *Julius Caesar* is Shakespeare's African play.'<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile the British Museum announced that the 'Robben Island Shakespeare' would be displayed as the crowning exhibit in its Olympic year exhibition, *Shakespeare: Staging the World*.<sup>96</sup> Video recordings of RSC actors were included in the exhibition, including Paterson Joseph as Brutus.<sup>97</sup>

### **'An African Rome': Designing and casting *Julius Caesar***

Despite having found connections to particular postcolonial regimes, Doran decided not to set his production in any specific country. Thus the design concept should evoke a generalised sense of Africa and, along with the set designer Michael Vale, Doran layered Roman and African architectural forms to create an

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<sup>94</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Ross Robertson, 'Hail Caesar!', *Sunderland Echo*, 5 July 2012, <<http://www.sunderlandecho.com/whats-on/theatre-and-comedy/hail-caesar-1-4709637>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>95</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Nick Ahad, 'The Big Interview: Gregory Doran', *Yorkshire Post*, 17 September 2012, <<http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/yorkshire-living/arts/theatre/the-big-interview-gregory-doran-1-4921430>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

<sup>96</sup> For an interrogation of the myth of this volume, see David Schalkwyk, *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

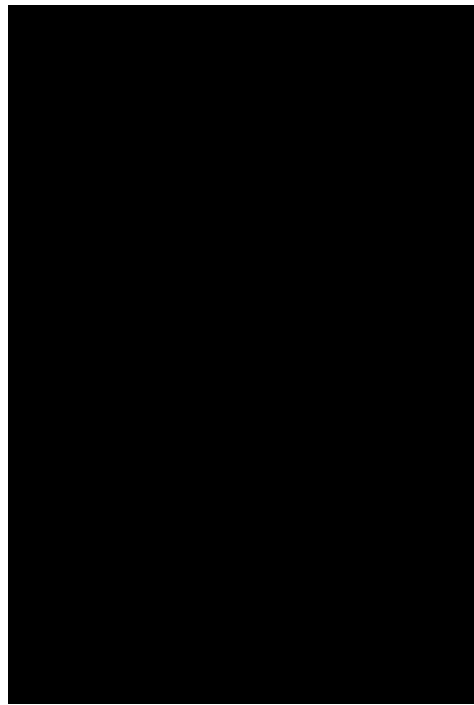
<sup>97</sup> Significantly, the production was recorded and broadcast on BBC4 during its run. Some scenes now took place on an escalator in a modern shopping mall. The Community Chorus did not appear when *Caesar* toured to London and beyond.

‘African Rome’ (see Fig. 4). They began by studying the architecture of the Roman forum and then imagined the functions of such a space in a contemporary African context. Doran and Vale concluded that, ‘Whether it’s a massacre of Hutus and Tutsis, whether it’s a Rumble in the Jungle, whether it’s an ANC rally, many of the big events in Africa take place in football stadia’.<sup>98</sup> Vale therefore designed a concrete auditorium with a central entrance that mirrored both the *vomitorium* of a Roman amphitheatre and the areas in modern sports stadia where crowds and footballers enter and exit the arena. Concrete steps on either side of the *vomitorium* led down onto the stage, where larger slabs of concrete formed a raised performance space. The upstage central focus of the design was a large statue of Caesar dressed in a toga, his arm raised high in a salute. The concept of modern dictatorship was central here but Doran also referenced the statues that adorned the Roman forum to aid his idea of an ‘African Rome’. It also clearly referenced another ruler; in 2003 the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled in Firdos Square, Baghdad, which announced a dictator’s overthrow and the end of an era – but the event triggered years of chaos. In Doran’s *mise en scène*, Caesar’s statue was pulled down after the assassination. With a ruler overthrown, and a void created symbolically in the set, the production asked ‘What would follow?’ The set also served Shakespeare’s text by allowing for rapid shifts of location, from a marketplace, to intimate domestic spaces, to a political arena. Vince Herbert’s lighting design and the actors’ physical reactions to the space aided these transitions. When, for example, in Act 2 Scene 1, Portia entered through the

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<sup>98</sup> Doran, ‘RSC director Greg Doran’.

central *vomitorium*, she conveyed a sense that this was her home, a domestic environment in which she was entirely comfortable, by the simple relationship between her body and the wall. She leaned against it, and ran her hand along it, as she pondered Brutus' condition. The contrast to the political arena displayed in the previous scene was intense. The space also became two alternating camps after the outbreak of civil war. A khaki tent covering was brought over the *vomitorium* and propped up by poles, forming a canopy under which Brutus' forces met by lamplight. The introduction of a desk at which Antony sat, discussing with Octavius, created the opposing camp.



**Fig. 4 Model box for *Julius Caesar* designed by Michael Vale (2012).**



The costumes similarly pointed towards Doran's 'African Rome' through a mixture of contemporary clothes (shirts, skirts and trousers for the citizens, using an earthy colour scheme of browns, green and orange, as well as head wraps for the women) and black togas for the conspirators. Indeed, the togas themselves allowed Doran to reference both Africa and Rome. He said: 'If you looked at particular kinds of ceremonial dress whether that's the *kente* cloth in Ghana, or the *agbada* in Nigeria, frequently they looked very, very like togas'.<sup>99</sup> His team 'decided that would allow us to smudge things together', creating an imagined time-frame and an imagined country with its flag of black, orange and green (again the designer chose dark and earthy colours).<sup>100</sup> The music was composed by Akintayo Akinbode and there was a band of musicians (they were all black) who appeared on stage and played at key moments including Caesar's celebrations in the opening scenes. Libby Purves in her *Times* review approved of this blending – 'There is a Rome/Africa match' – because 'Tidy northern Italians with a delicate shudder, say "Africa begins at Rome": flinching at the idea of heat, excitability, dark vivid faces, superstition, political volatility, corruption, dramatic emotional gestures and a general dearth of prudent bland modernity.'<sup>101</sup> What Purves's 'dark vivid' list indicates, however, is that Doran's concept might legitimise worrying, arguably even racist, associations in some spectators' minds.

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<sup>99</sup> Doran, 'RSC director Greg Doran'.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Libby Purves, 'Julius Caesar, RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon', *The Times*, 8 June 2012, <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/stage/theatre/article3439085.ece>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

The historic importance of Doran's *Julius Caesar*, and its immediate significance within the Cultural Olympiad, lay in the fact that he chose a company made up entirely of black British actors. Discussing the casting, however, he avoided the implication that this was his priority: 'Rather than this being a black production of *Julius Caesar*, this is a version of *Julius Caesar* set in a particular way, and therefore it requires black actors, and that's a distinct difference.'<sup>102</sup> As this thesis will argue, it would be helpful to have a clear terminology that British directors could use to describe their casting practices with specificity. Doran's explanation was not well-defined and it raised questions: what is a 'black' production of *Julius Caesar*, and how was Doran's different? If one were to apply Ayanna Thompson's categories it could be defined as an example of 'cross-cultural casting' where the entire world of the play is translated into a different location and culture.<sup>103</sup> These actors were chosen to represent that culture and location; their ethnicity was meant to function onstage, and the audience was expected to recognise this demarcation on the basis of colour. Some of the 2012 cast had first-hand experience of living in Africa, and even had lived experience of particular political upheavals. Cyril Nri's family was caught up in the Biafran conflict. Ivanno Jeremiah's mother fled the regime of Idi Amin, and Adjoa Andoh's father was a journalist who was forced to leave Ghana due to political conflict. Other cast members were born and brought up in Britain. But because of

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<sup>102</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Serena Davies, 'Julius Caesar with a little help from Idi Amin and Mugabe', *Telegraph*, 30 May 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9300978/Julius-Caesar-with-a-little-help-from-Idi-Amin-and-Mugabe.html>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

<sup>103</sup> Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 76.

Doran's generic African conceit, it was impossible for any of the actors to be culturally specific with their work. There was some disturbance amongst the cast when they were asked to put on an accent. Finally, the company used a generalised East African English accent, because it was felt by some members that it lent itself well to Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, but the disagreements were revealing.

All of these design and conceptual choices, framed by the lack of specificity in terms of time and place, led to problematic generalisations about Africa, its history, its future and its peoples. Doran argued that he did not wish to be seen to make parallels that were 'too specifically about a particular part of Africa'.<sup>104</sup> Yet I shall argue that, by avoiding specificity, this director unconsciously stereotyped a continent and further entrenched a hegemonic view of 'the African Other', as relating to violence, magic and the supernatural.

### **Stereotyping a continent: Images of Africa in the West**

Considering Britain's colonial history and relationship with Africa, it is important for directors approaching the representation of certain aspects of African culture to be aware of the tropes of racism and exoticism that have existed, and that have perpetuated cycles of subordination and suppression. In 1992 Jan Nederveen Pieterse wrote that, 'The legacy of several hundred years of western expansion and hegemony, manifested in racism and exoticism, continues to be recycled in

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<sup>104</sup> Doran, 'RSC director Greg Doran'.

western cultures in the form of stereotypical images of non-western cultures.’<sup>105</sup> He warned of a continued legacy of such stereotyping in Western forms of media that depict the ‘other’ in a general and non-specific manner. Analysing the dialectics of power at play in representation, Pieterse suggests that, ‘Generally, in examining images of “others”, one has first to ask, who are the producers and consumers of these images, and only then to question who are the objects of representation’.<sup>106</sup> To ask these questions in relation to the 2012 *Julius Caesar* reveals a dichotomy between the figures of production and consumption and the ‘objects of representation’. The RSC, a predominantly white British organisation, led by Gregory Doran, a white British male, produced the play for a theatre audience including only a small percentage of ethnic minorities. Doran admitted that he paused when considering his own cultural identity in relation to what he wished to represent: ‘I did think, here’s me, a white, middle-class, gay guy, going: “I think this play should be set in Africa”’.<sup>107</sup> Doran was right to consider the implications of the relationship between the producer and the objects of representation, and a study of the production in some detail is required to assess the effect of his doubts. Edward Said, theorising the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised, and representations of the non-Western ‘Other’, wrote in 2003: ‘The Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating

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<sup>105</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 9.

<sup>106</sup> Pieterse, p.10.

<sup>107</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Siobhan Murphy, ‘Julius Caesar director Gregory Doran: Africa lends itself well to Shakespeare’, *Metro*, 13 August 2012, <<http://metro.co.uk/2012/08/13/julius-caesar-director-gregory-doran-on-transporting-shakespeare-to-africa-534520/>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

frameworks'.<sup>108</sup> 'The essence of Orientalism,' he also stated, 'is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority'.<sup>109</sup> These distinctions were promoted by imperialism, and the divide between 'us' – the coloniser – and 'them' – the colonised – had deeply ingrained the suggestion of the 'Other's' difference and 'inferiority'. As Pieterse argued, this colonial legacy has continued to be recycled in the West in the form of reductive stereotypical images of non-Western cultures.

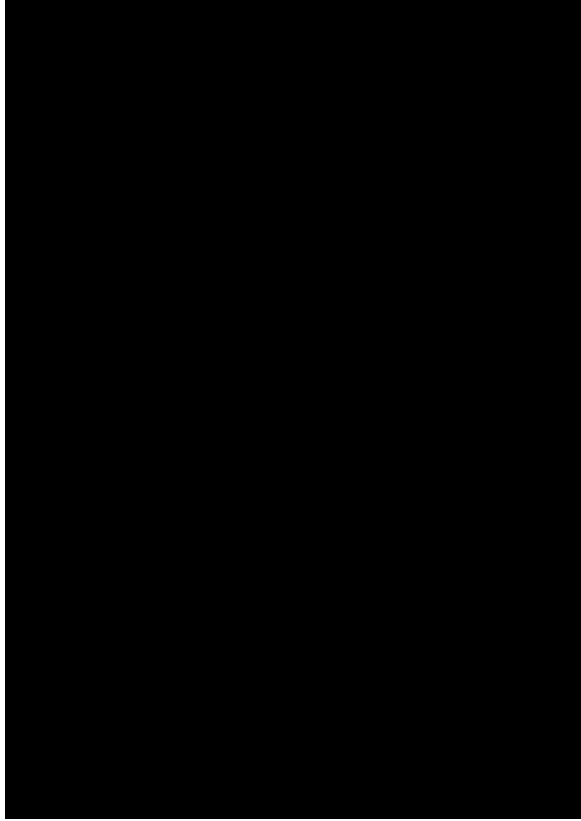
Such images could be found operating on stage in Doran's production and in some of the RSC's marketing materials. An examination of the artwork used to promote *Julius Caesar* demonstrates the legacy Pieterse refers to in action. Fig. 5 is taken from a double-page spread within an official brochure for the World Shakespeare Festival. It is a portrait of a demonic man with a burning red face and gaping eyes. This quotation, from a nineteenth-century German missionary log, would ironically make an appropriate caption: 'The devil has exercised unlimited dominion over them for so long that they have become his slaves and have sunk into beastly and hellish conditions'.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 40.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

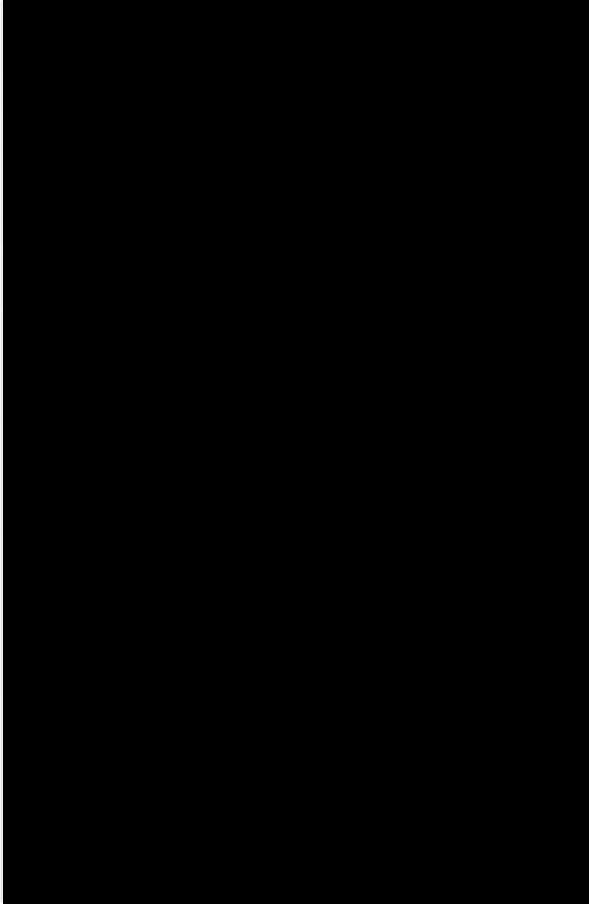
<sup>110</sup> Mallet quoted in Pieterse, p. 70.



**Fig. 5 *Julius Caesar* marketing image in the RSC's World Shakespeare Festival brochure (2012).**

There was a surprising resemblance between the 2012 marketing for *Julius Caesar* and the artwork for Britain's first 'all-black' Shakespearean production, Peter Coe's *The Black Macbeth* set in tribal Africa and performed at the Roundhouse, Chalk Farm, in 1972 (see Fig. 6). There the face of the actor Oscar James (Macbeth) was reworked in stark red and black with a background of undefined, chaotic patterns. Forty years later, and despite the rise to eminence of two generations of BAME performers (Jeffery Kissoon had played the Malcolm figure at the Roundhouse, his first Shakespearean performance after training as a

teacher – now he was Julius Caesar), the connotations of these images were exactly the same: a primitive culture, superstitious, mysterious, and dangerous.



**Fig. 6 *The Black Macbeth* poster, Roundhouse (1972).**

The legacy of such stereotypes of blackness can be traced back to Orson Welles' 'Voodoo' *Macbeth* for the Negro Theatre Unit of the Works Progress Administration in 1936. That Harlem production with its pioneering all-black cast was set in the nineteenth-century Caribbean and drew connections between *Macbeth* and the Haitian Emperor Henri Christophe. Welles's witches were voodoo priestesses and Hecate was a witchdoctor. In her 2010 study, 'Black Cast Conjures White Genius: Unravelling the Mystique of Orson Welles's "Voodoo"

*Macbeth*, Marguerite Rippy wrote that the 1936 production reflected ‘modernist conceits of “black” primitivism, commingling African, Afro-Caribbean, and African-American cultural referents to produce a fantasy of black culture’.<sup>111</sup> Many have criticized it for ‘re-enacting white colonial fantasies of race’ and Rippy argued that it depicted ‘blackness in heavily primitive terms as something powerful, compelling, and supernatural’.<sup>112</sup> The fact that this critique could also be applied to the depiction of blackness in the advertising material for the 2012 *Julius Caesar* was highly problematic. The extreme ‘heart of darkness’ imagery originally adopted to promote the play was reductive and regressive; it perpetuated cycles of imperialist, exoticised visions of non-western cultures; and if the marketing graphics connected to a history of racist depictions of blackness, the same could be said of some of the images created in performance – the generic despotic dictators, magical negroes and manipulated crowds.

### **Credulous masses: Cultural identity and the Community Chorus**

In addition to the fifteen core cast members, in Stratford-upon-Avon a group of fifty local volunteers were used as a chorus to add to Doran’s representation of an African community. The RSC website announced: ‘The production is specifically set in Africa so we needed black volunteers to perform as the crowd of up to 25

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<sup>111</sup> Marguerite Rippy in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 83–90 (p. 89).

<sup>112</sup> Marguerite Rippy, p. 84.



people at each performance.’<sup>113</sup> This was so important to Doran’s vision that the RSC used broadcast media to target their desired groups. They filmed *Julius Caesar*’s Associate Director, Gbolahan Obisesan, encouraging ‘volunteers from the black community and surrounding areas of Stratford’ to take part in the production.<sup>114</sup> This video was broadcast on the BBC and shared on YouTube and social-media sites. The BBC also filmed its own news report about this search for a black Community Chorus, and its reporter was more analytical in his approach to the advertisement: ‘Recruiting from one ethnic group may be contentious, but the RSC says it needs to, to make the play authentic and realistic, adding that it’s acting within the law’.<sup>115</sup> An article in the *Guardian* similarly recognised the exclusivity: ‘Amateur actors will get the chance to perform on the stage of the new Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and be directed by the RSC’s next artistic director, Gregory Doran – though only if they’re black.’<sup>116</sup> Specifically requesting volunteers according to their ethnicity seemed a contentious area to enter, but it was testament to the director’s commitment to his interpretation – he needed a large group of black people to represent his vision of sub-Saharan Africa. It also indicated a commitment to outreach work.

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<sup>113</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, ‘Community Chorus’, *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/whats-on/julius-caesar/community-chorus.aspx>> [accessed 19 September 2013].

<sup>114</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, “‘Be a part of the show” | Julius Caesar | Royal Shakespeare Company’, *YouTube*, 28 March 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AE3R6MYpCU&list=PL9F518CB9DC26DF9E>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>115</sup> Kevin Reid, ‘Royal Shakespeare Company recruits all black casts’, *YouTube*, 5 April 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HXwd2hi6ZE>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>116</sup> Matt Trueman, ‘RSC seeks volunteers for all-black Julius Caesar’, *Guardian*, 2 April 2012, <[http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/apr/02/rsc-volunteers-black-julius-caesar?CMP=tw\\_t\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/apr/02/rsc-volunteers-black-julius-caesar?CMP=tw_t_gu)> [accessed 20 December 2016].

Gbolahan Obisesan and Diane Alison-Mitchell, the movement director, were responsible for working with the Community Chorus to create a sense of citizenship and community loyalty in two scenes: the opening of the production and the forum scene. The chorus were active during the ‘pre-show’ as the audience took their seats. One by one, the Citizens entered. Some wore shirts of black, orange and green with a picture of Caesar’s face, showing their support for him and their willing participation in the celebrations. Their business included fanning themselves in the heat (their fans were also emblazoned with Caesar’s image), and some entered in a conga-line tooting horns and singing his praises. Other townsfolk sold their wares, with food in large silver pots or baskets on their heads, and others took photographs. These actions communicated a feeling of community, that these people were connected to one another, knew each other, and had grown up together. Such connections were developed in rehearsals through different ensemble-based exercises. The actions built to a crescendo and the small crowd burst into song and a dance choreographed by the movement director. Alison-Mitchell has spoken of her excitement at the prospect of working with a diverse group and ‘the physical nuances of African-ness [that] would potentially already [exist] in the group’.<sup>117</sup> There were members with Nigerian, Ghanaian, Ugandan, Zimbabwean, Jamaican, Brazilian, Trinidadian and Barbadian heritages. Yet since the director’s vision of the play required the representation of one nation – an essential Africanness – their distinctions would

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<sup>117</sup> Diane Alison-Mitchell, ‘Dancing since strapped to their mothers’ backs: movement directing on the Royal Shakespeare Company’s African *Julius Caesar*’, in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 146–153 (p. 149).

be essentialised and homogenised. Mitchell saw this as a difficulty: ‘One particular challenge of movement work with an entirely black British cast was its national and cultural range.’<sup>118</sup> Her solution was to discern key aesthetic principles in African dances as a starting point for her choreography.<sup>119</sup> The creation of their music went through a similar process. The company did not use pre-existing songs that were culturally and geographically specific, but instead created new ones based on the essential syllables used in East African languages. Mitchell worked with Akintayo Akinbode and the cast; they collaborated to devise a chant – ‘*Caesar n de eh*’ – set to the structure of a Ghanaian drumming pattern. Although it was necessary to create something new for this imagined nation, and the team were forced to essentialise aspects of different cultures, the creative practitioners used their knowledge of different African musical and movement forms to base the physical and aural world in some sense of an African reality. The result was received positively: Moya Hughes reviewing for *WhatsOnStage* wrote: ‘The all-black cast, supported in pre-set and crowd scenes by a “Community Chorus”, lend the piece of sense of cultural identity.’<sup>120</sup> Yet, this ‘sense’ lacked specificity and a level of detail that, in fact, the creative practitioners could have brought to the production with their distinct knowledges

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>119</sup> Alison-Mitchell said: ‘In dance terms, the cast’s diverse heritages epitomised forms that were vertical with leaping, some more horizontal and pounding the ground, while others were based on undulations in the body. This meant that I needed to be particularly attentive to discerning the key aesthetic principles of African dances, analysing what makes them identifiably African as a critical starting point for the choreography’ (Alison-Mitchell, p. 150)

<sup>120</sup> Moya Hughes, ‘Julius Caesar (RSC)’, *What’s On Stage*, 8 June 2012, <[http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/reviews/06-2012/julius-caesar-rsc\\_3921.html](http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/reviews/06-2012/julius-caesar-rsc_3921.html)> [accessed 31 December 2016].

and training. However, they were constrained by the generic framing of the director's concept.

If the 'cultural identity' of the Community Chorus remained generic, their stereotyping as credulous and easily manipulated in the forum scene was inherently 'problematic'.<sup>121</sup> In Act 3 Scene 2, members of the chorus re-gathered to represent the African crowd. They shouted, threw their arms in the air, and created an incoherent cacophony of noise. Obisesan's approach to this scene was to divide the citizens into groups of ten, each with a group leader from the professional cast. The group leader would say a Shakespearean line, such as 'Methinks there is much reason in his sayings', and the group would echo sections of the sentence and vocally support this sentiment. Thus a chorus of noise was built up around each individual line. Their hubbub was quelled easily by Brutus' arrival; they were rendered dumb by his argument. As Brutus made way for Antony, they once again struck up their choral noise before being convinced, and rallied Marc Antony's fervour. The Stratford audience were not an extension of the citizenry, with Brutus and Antony's speeches played to them. Some critics noted that the directorial decision to create this onstage crowd served to highlight the ethnic difference between 'us' – the white audience – and 'them' – the black community. Stephen Purcell wrote in *Shakespeare Survey*, 'We, unlike our easily-led "African" counterparts, were able to see precisely what Antony was doing'. He felt that: 'This split between a politically-savvy "us" and a superstitious and manipulable "them", was [...] a rather problematic one given the production's

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<sup>121</sup> Stephen Purcell, 'What country, Friends, is this?': cultural identity and the World Shakespeare Festival', in *Shakespeare Survey*, 66 (2013), p.157.

refusal to tie the onstage crowd's cultural identity to anything more specific than a general "African-ness".<sup>122</sup> Ian Shuttleworth for the *Financial Times* delved deeper into the power politics in the performance than other overnight reviewers. He wrote: 'This kind of interpretation may inadvertently point up the contrast between host and subject cultures.'<sup>123</sup> The 'host' and 'subject' as theorized by Said are fundamentally imbalanced, with one understood as 'strong' the other, 'weak'. Shakespeare has written a scene where the fickleness of the citizens is paramount – public opinion is written to be easily manipulable. However, by creating a cultural and ethnic divide between the audience and the crowd, Doran introduced an orientalist framework of representation, of the 'weak' subject dominated by the 'strong' host. The culmination of the crowd's involvement is the murder of Cinna the Poet. This was performed by RSC crowd-leaders, but since it was staged as a necklacing – a stock newsreel-image from South African history thrown into the generic mix – the citizens of 'African Rome' slipped seamlessly from intellectually 'weak' to unleashed and terrifying.

### **Despotic dictators: African politics and psychology**

Due to the lack of specificity in the African concept, it might have been easy to perform Shakespeare's characters as stereotypes themselves, such as the despotic dictator, the machiavel, the violent murderer, or the fool. However, alongside the

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, 'Julius Caesar, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon' *Financial Times*, 9 June 2012, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/93b4e228-b091-11e1-8b36-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2fzDjCnyL>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

Community Chorus Doran assembled a cast including three generations of highly accomplished BAME actors, whose performances transcended any sweeping suggestions made about Africa. Their detailed character-work refocused the tragedy on individual and collective humanity in the domestic and political spheres.

It was obviously remarkable for so many black actors of such calibre to be brought together by the RSC. Considering their Shakespearean experience, the older members of this company could be seen to have been the exceptions to the rule of ‘traditional casting’ that has – as the BBAS database shows – excluded black actors from ‘white’ roles, or pushed them into the margins as servants or minor characters. Jeffery Kissoon followed ‘Meru’ (Malcolm) in *The Black Macbeth* with Caliban for the RSC in 1974. Yet, he remembered: ‘When I started, the impression was black actors couldn’t do Shakespeare plays because of their accents’.<sup>124</sup> Indeed when he was Artistic Director, Terry Hands was quoted as saying, ‘The iambic pentameter just doesn’t sound right with a strong Asian or Caribbean accent’.<sup>125</sup> Kissoon went on to perform Shakespeare for mainstream theatre organisations including the National Theatre, Young Vic and Old Vic, as well as Talawa, Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the Peter Hall Company amongst others. He played the Prince of Morocco and Othello, but also roles that were ‘non-traditional’ for non-white actors, such as Henry Percy, Macbeth and

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<sup>124</sup> Colin Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 155.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

Prospero. In 2000 he doubled Claudius and the Ghost in Peter Brook's *Hamlet*.<sup>126</sup> Talking of the reason why Shakespeare continues to be reinterpreted he said: 'The more I look at Shakespeare the more he blows my mind. The words he's given to any actor interested in being the conveyor of amazing characters, placed in incredible situations with language that somehow originates in the soul reaches across all time and place.'<sup>127</sup> Kissoon was the sum of all of his Shakespearean experience when he stepped on stage to play Caesar with gravitas and power. Considering the significance of his inclusion in the *Julius Caesar* company, he said: 'For most of my life, as soon as I walked on stage it was to a certain extent a political statement; then I had to prove I could play the character. So to know we've come all this way is great.'<sup>128</sup>

Surrounded by other members of the senate, Kissoon's Caesar made his first entrance into the stadium to the accompaniment of singing and dancing to his name: '*Oh Caesar ce ce oh*'. Like his own statue he held one hand aloft, with his index finger pointed, acknowledging his status and power, and indicated that he enjoyed the adulation. He whipped a flywhisk over his shoulder and about his body. This prop evoked Hastings Banda, who famously carried a flywhisk as a

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<sup>126</sup> For further details of Kissoon's involvement in Shakespeare productions see Jami Rogers, 'Jeffery Kissoon', *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/people/jeffery-kissoon>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>127</sup> Jeffery Kissoon, 'Jeffery Kissoon on directing *Hamlet*', *Black Theatre Live*, 20 October 2016, <<http://blacktheatreive.co.uk/blog/jeffery-kissoon-on-directing-hamlet>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>128</sup> Jeffery Kissoon quoted in Siobhan Murphy, 'Julius Caesar director Gregory Doran: Africa lends itself well to Shakespeare', *Metro*, 13 August 2012, <<http://metro.co.uk/2012/08/13/julius-caesar-director-gregory-doran-on-transporting-shakespeare-to-africa-534520/>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

symbol of traditional African royalty and authority. Banda was known as the ‘lion of Africa’, and one does not need to look far in *Julius Caesar* to find the leonine imagery. This was not the only allusion to postcolonial dictatorship discussed by the cast. During the rehearsal period, the power struggle in response to the Arab Spring continued. Colonel Gaddafi had been found and killed in October 2011, and Doran suggested that ‘The big question on everybody’s lips was not “Will they get rid of Gaddafi?”’, the big question was “What happens after he’s gone?””<sup>129</sup> As we have seen, the power vacuum and the fear of what would fill it was conceptualised by the set design; it was Doran’s primary concern. In an interview for *Theatre Voice* he explained that in rehearsals he took time to discuss the line, ‘I fear there will a worse come in his place’ (3.2.111). Regarding this as the urgent political question of both the play and the postcolonial world, Doran did not decide to reference Gaddafi explicitly; rather, Caesar became an embodiment for the projected ideas of several African dictators. Amin, Bokassa, Mobutu and Mugabe, Gaddafi were all apparently referenced. However, it was in the domestic scenes that the humanity of the play’s characters was fully drawn.

In Act 2 Scene 2, Caesar walked along the top of the steps and looked across the space as if looking out into his garden over the wall. In this private setting, Kisson indicated the character’s inner conflict and insecurity, searching with his eyes before instructing, with cautious resolution, ‘Go bid the priests do present sacrifice, | And bring me their opinions of success’ (2.2.5-6). He was seeking the help of the omens to abate his fears. But as soon as Calpurnia entered

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<sup>129</sup> Doran, ‘RSC director Greg Doran’.



and suggested that Caesar should not go forth, he puffed out his chest and avoided her gaze, indicating his disapproval. Ann Ogbomo as Calpurnia tried to persuade her husband: ‘A lioness hath whelped in the streets [...] And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets’ (2.2.16-24). She used different vocal and physical techniques in order to try to persuade Caesar. Kisson growled: ‘Caesar shall go forth’. When her persuasion finally succeeded, she ended on her knees, and Kisson went to comfort his wife. He placed his arms on her shoulders; she held on to him in relief. The entrance of Decius interrupted the intimate moment, and broke the nervous couple apart to symbolise a stark return to the political domain. Caesar’s fate was sealed and Calpurnia departed, silenced. In the production’s interplay between essentialist statements about Africa and its politics, alongside the nuanced performances and detailed readings developed by the cast, the latter were more revealing. Through the actors’ exploration of their characters’ psychologies, the domestic became invaded by the political, and here – where Kisson’s Caesar unwittingly doomed himself – both love and the supernatural were shunned by a political embargo that instead valued blind ambition and ruthless political upheaval.

Alongside Jeffery Kisson were Ray Fearon as Antony, Paterson Joseph as Brutus, Cyril Nri as Cassius, and Joseph Mydell as Casca. Like Kisson, these actors had frequently performed Shakespeare through the decades of their respective careers.<sup>130</sup> Joseph in particular was lauded by the critics for bringing a great depth of nuance and detailed thought to Brutus – ‘played by Paterson

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<sup>130</sup> See *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Database* for further details.

Joseph, intriguingly, as a wrong-headed neurasthenic rather than the noblest Roman of them all.’<sup>131</sup> For Joseph, it was of utmost importance to connect to the humanity of *Julius Caesar*’s characters and it was actually for this reason that he strongly encouraged the cast to use African, and specifically East African, accents. He argued that the East African voice was ‘much gentler and it’s just asking yourself to be more open to the end. It doesn’t make bold statements, you know; it dreams, you know, it wonders, it is soft and it is inspirational’.<sup>132</sup> He admitted that not everybody found this an easy task and that in performance not all of the actors could adjust to it completely. However, what was crucial for Joseph was to be able to access the emotion through the text, and therefore to avoid Received Pronunciation: ‘When people reach for it [RP] – and they reach for it in a way that disconnects them with themselves and their own emotions, or their own take on that word and what it means to them then – it loses its humanity.’<sup>133</sup> His previous experience at the RSC had been frustrating. Joseph played Dumaine in Terry Hands’ *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in 1990 and he recalled: ‘When I was first at the RSC I was pretty much a solo black face.’<sup>134</sup> This affected the rehearsal process: ‘I hated every moment of rehearsing that. I wanted to do it in an African accent. [...] I wanted to make him very African, I wanted to do it in that way because I just thought, “I’m bored of this language”, bored of the

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<sup>131</sup> Laura Thompson, ‘Julius Caesar – Royal Shakespeare Company, Noel Coward Theatre, review’, *Telegraph*, 16 August 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9480522/Julius-Caesar-Royal-Shakespeare-Company-Noel-Coward-Theatre-review.html>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>132</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Paterson Joseph, 13 July 2015.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Joseph, quoted in Davies.

way we were doing it [...] It was very traditional.’<sup>135</sup> Therefore the prospect of an African setting for *Julius Caesar* was intriguing and persuaded him to return to the RSC twenty years later. Perhaps it allowed him to make a political statement; certainly it encouraged him to become part of the planning process. He said later, ‘This is a play about a dictator being assassinated and what happens in the civil war that follows it and I thought of all the times and places to do it, post-colonial Africa, seems really spot on’.<sup>136</sup> Joseph took part in a symposium that Doran held in order to explore the concept of an African *Julius Caesar*. There were talks with academics including James Shapiro, and readings of the play where Joseph first tried using the East African accent and convinced Doran that it worked. He played Brutus as a freedom fighter and idealist, a moral tragic hero, yet also a self-deceiver. In Act 2 Scene 1, Joseph spoke his soliloquies to the audience, only to have them interrupted by his interactions with Portia and Lucius. Each line was delivered with utter clarity of thought, and his Brutus was almost Hamlet-esque in his contemplation and angst over the decision he must make. Joseph’s belief that the East African accent ‘dreams’, ‘wonders’ and is ‘soft’ was evident in his performance as he spoke with a lyricism that floated through Brutus’ thought patterns. Considering the act that he was indeed going to commit, Brutus was on the edge of tears, which he quickly wiped away when Lucius once again interrupted to inform him that Cassius and others had arrived. Joseph hid his emotion with a smile, deepened his voice and hardened his demeanour as the conspirators entered. Joseph’s Brutus, the actor stressed, acted with integrity and a

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<sup>135</sup> Howard, Interview with Joseph.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

sense of righteousness: ‘Our freedom is not gained by being dictators ourselves, destroying everybody who stands in our way, that’s not the way of things.’<sup>137</sup> It was pride – aroused in him by remembrance of his ancestors – that precipitated his decision to commit murder. Yet he remained internally conflicted: ‘He still struggles with it [...] He still has a moment of incredible angst with his son.’<sup>138</sup>

In the interview for the Multicultural Shakespeare project quoted above, Paterson Joseph revealingly spoke of ‘his son’. He was referring to his servant the ‘boy’ Lucius, who in rehearsals for this production became a surrogate child to Brutus. Lucius was played by Simon Manyonda, one of the younger cast members, who had graduated from drama school in 2010. An analysis of Manyonda’s character work demonstrates the level of detailed imaginative creativity that went into building this role, and again testifies to the skill and commitment of the 2012 *Julius Caesar* company. Manyonda brought his own depth of empathy to the role, and this was important to him: ‘I think that I can understand humanity well, I can make characters that often people have never heard of into characters that all of them feel they’ve really heard of’.<sup>139</sup> He built a journey for Lucius that began with him as Brutus’s reluctant servant. Since in the text he seems to be constantly asleep when he is called on, Manyonda’s version suffered from narcolepsy. He ended as a boy soldier, forced into warfare. Ultimately, he killed his master and father figure. Doran had already decided on this ending, replacing the ‘common soldier’ Strato with Lucius, but rather than

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Simon Manyonda, 16 July 2015.

delving into research about African child combatants, the actor drew on his own feelings to build up this isolated victim of the war. At one rehearsal those feelings led to a creative discovery; Manyonda did not want to be in the battle scenes, but he reluctantly joined in and applied his own emotions to the character: ‘Lucius certainly does not want to be in this scene, so I’m going to have my gun upside down – because he doesn’t know what to do’. His work developed in such ways: ‘It goes back to [...] constantly trying to connect to my true [everyday] feelings.’ Manyonda preferred to free associate from the text and to think as a visual artist: ‘He was quite a nosy and curious fella, and so I was looking for detectives, and then for some reason I looked for an animal’. He came across a Disney cartoon image – Basil the Great Mouse Detective looking at a piece of paper through a magnifying glass – and Manyonda found moments to let the picture influence Lucius’s behaviour. ‘I used to always carry a magnifying glass in my pocket [...] He would always play detective and he would be wanting to look at things, he was always sneaking around.’ When his master received a letter, Manyonda decided to try to examine it before handing it over, which he described as ‘the jumping point for the relationship between Lucius and Brutus.’<sup>140</sup> It was the tiny and delicate details of interaction between the characters that contributed to a sense of their reality and warmth, and in the process Manyonda created a portrait of a vulnerable child pulled out of his element, and emotionally destroyed.

In contrast Cyril Nri (Cassius) and Adjoa Andoh (Portia) both had personal experience of political upheavals in Africa. Nri described a childhood

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

memory of serving nuts to his elders as they discussed ‘the programmes against the Ebo people that were taking place, which transformed into resistance and eventually into civil war and striving for emancipation that also led to the bloodbath of two million people.’<sup>141</sup> Nri felt able to connect his first-hand understanding of how power corrupts – and the urge to somehow intervene in the face of helplessness and disillusion – to *Julius Caesar*. It affected his physical presence, for instance: ‘Cassius was always moving – he is always dancing because he is always in danger of being caught and desperately wants his freedom’.<sup>142</sup> This was evident in all Cassius’ scenes, whether in the shifting of his feet and the excitement of his gestures or in the tinier, internalised movements of the eyes and his breathing. Adjoa Andoh made choices influenced by her own social experiences in, for example, Accra: ‘I’ve seen witchdoctors walking down the street with white stripes all across their body and it’s as normal as seeing someone talking on a mobile phone.’<sup>143</sup> Thus in Act 2 Scene 4, Portia sensed the presence of the Soothsayer before he arrived: ‘Hark boy! What noise is that?’ she asked Lucius, and stared out wildly in all directions before the Soothsayer appeared from a distance at the back of the stage, and walked, slowly, trance-like, forwards before leaving straight through the audience. She made Portia’s awareness and ‘connection’ to this figure inseparable from her panic, her deep

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<sup>141</sup> Michael McMillan, ‘The black body and Shakespeare: conversations with black actors’, in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 122–134 (p. 132–133).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>143</sup> Adjoa Andoh quoted in Gillian Fisher, ‘Adjoa Andoh, RSC’s *Julius Caesar*’, *Afridiziak*, 31 July 2012, <<http://www.afridiziak.com/theatrenews/interviews/july2012/adjoa-andoh.html>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

need to send a message to Brutus, or to hear a word back. Such moments indicate how the actors' detailed psychological work elevated the production above the realms of the stereotypical, and ensured that it explored these characters' disparate personalities and their interplay with each other in both the domestic and political spheres.

When Gregory Doran said, 'Rather than this being a black production of *Julius Caesar*, this is a version of *Julius Caesar* set in a particular way, and therefore it requires black actors, and that's a distinct difference,' he was gesturing at a distinction between two definitions of theatrical *representation* – one professional, one aesthetic, but both political.<sup>144</sup> His *Caesar* was progressive in its employment of a group of highly talented performers – though, as the BBAS Performance database shows, this must be set in the context of the RSC's general casting policies, both before and since. In some respects, however, the production was problematic in its aesthetic acceptance of reductive images of 'Africa' – past and present – and it raises questions regarding the degree to which a performer's creativity in such a context is autonomous or shaped by the director and the production team. Those questions become especially evident in the case of a key symbolic figure in this production: the Soothsayer.

### **'Beware the Ides of March': Playing the Soothsayer as an African witchdoctor**

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<sup>144</sup> Doran quoted in Davies.

Shakespeare's Soothsayer became a sub-Saharan *sangoma* (traditional healer) played by the actor Theo Ogundipe. He was born in Nigeria, and in a video produced by the RSC exploring the creation and preparation process for this role, Ogundipe stressed that there are 'mythical and spiritual undertones to our society in Africa' mirrored in his version of the Soothsayer: 'In the African context he's more close to [...] a witchdoctor or a herbalist'.<sup>145</sup> From his own travels in Nigeria, Gregory Doran was conscious of the relationship between magic and modernity. He remembered 'walking through a local market and realising that the Juju seller who's selling bits of bark and strange squashed frogs and bird beaks and little hands and monkey's heads and things' was next door to a 'person selling blocks of soap on one side and someone selling tomatoes on the other'. As a director, the fact that 'this witchcraft or Juju or magic if you like sits like Boots next to Sainsbury's' had 'an immediate effect, so that was a gift'.<sup>146</sup> Doran described his sightings like a collector of strange artefacts, however the central theme of juxtaposition – between the signs of capitalism and modernisation and the ancient traditions of the *sangomas* – was interestingly explored in the production. Doran devised a journey for the Soothsayer by adding extra moments of action, which began by highlighting the role of witchcraft in this hybrid society and ended with its demise, due to modernity and the community's refusal to heed his warnings.

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<sup>145</sup> Theo Ogundipe, 'Soothsayer | Julius Caesar | The Space | Royal Shakespeare Company', *YouTube*, 25 July 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6hh0rbtgmA>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>146</sup> Doran, 'RSC director Greg Doran'.



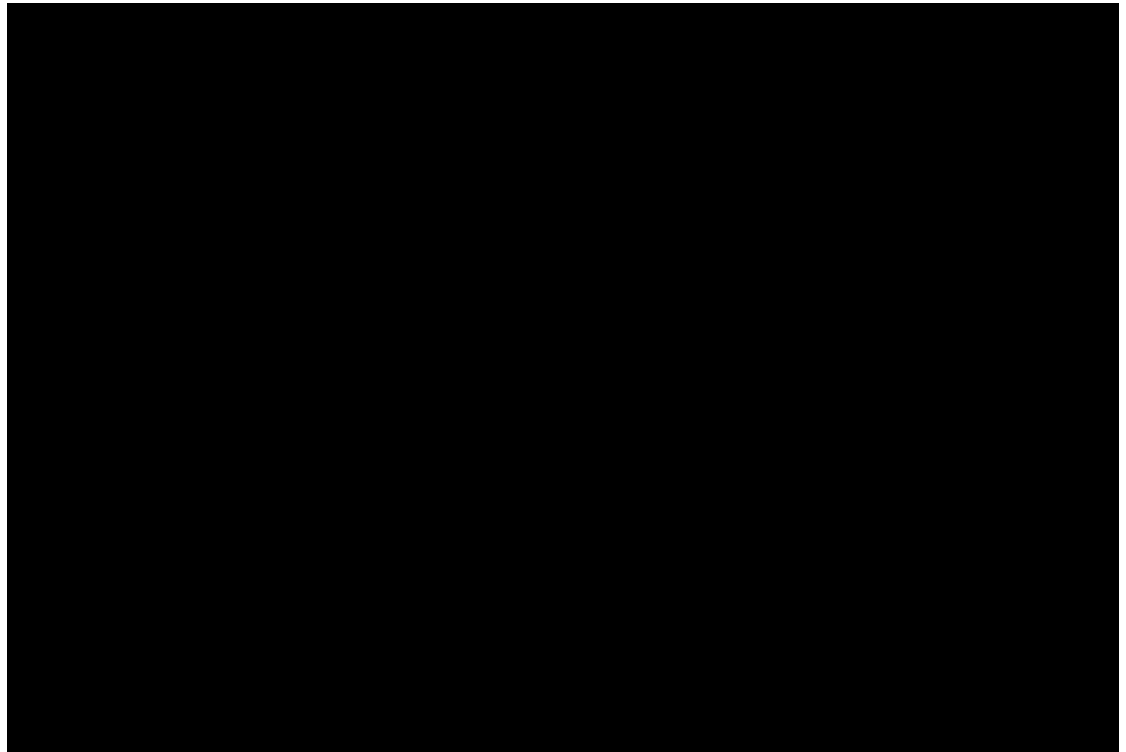
As the play began, the Soothsayer entered and joined in the dancing with the Community Chorus. The movement director Diane Alison-Mitchell worked with Ogunديpe to create a distinctive physicality for the character. She too drew on her own observations: ‘I recalled seeing spiritual leaders and healers in communities on visits to the Republic of Benin and South Africa. They had a certain charisma – their dress, demeanour and presence – and the Soothsayer provided the opportunity to give life to this.’<sup>147</sup> They built up a sense of the character’s prowess as a diviner through stance and movement. Alison-Mitchell remembered Doran asking for the Soothsayer to dance a jig – perhaps a reference to the ‘jigging fool’ that the Soothsayer, in his interpretation, would become – and although this idea did not come to fruition, she incorporated dance from a specific region: ‘In the Ivory Coast the Zagrobi dance is renowned for fast-paced footwork. I introduced Theo to a short sequence based on this dance to let the quick-footedness inspire the Soothsayer’s physicality and movement.’<sup>148</sup> Thus though the Soothsayer joined in with the dancing, he was clearly distinct from the other members of the community; he carried a different body knowledge, suggestive of his connection to a different world (see Fig. 7). When the celebrations ended and Caesar made to leave, the atmosphere changed suddenly. In terms of lighting, the orange wash was replaced by a dark blue, and a hissing voice reverberated over the music: ‘*Caesar!*’ Out of the darkness, the Soothsayer dropped his ragged cloak and revealed himself directly above Caesar on a raised platform, the central focus of the scene; his hierarchical position was clear. He

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<sup>147</sup> Alison-Mitchell, p. 151.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

wore a skirt of stripped rags, with a necklace over his collarbone, his biceps and ankles were bound with stripped cloth, and his entire body was covered in ash powder. The atmosphere was no longer celebratory, this was now a dark arena full of fearful premonition. The contrast between the two emotional environments heightened, firstly, the narrative tension imparted by the Soothsayer and, secondly, a sense of other-worldliness, a connection to a spiritual world present beneath the surface of Caesar's political domain. The witchdoctor threw his head back and breathed deeply, his arms outstretched. He seemed to be a vessel for a spirit that was warning Caesar of impending events. The characters onstage appeared shocked and fearful – until Caesar laughed disparagingly and left, ignoring the Soothsayer's claims.



**Fig. 7 Theo Ogunidipe as the Soothsayer in *Julius Caesar* (2012).**

For Act 1 Scene 3, where Casca and Cicero meet, Doran devised an additional moment to endorse the sense of the Soothsayer's power. He emerged from a deep blue wash of night, accompanied by thunder and flashes of lightning. He brandished a burning flame in his hand, then quickly disappeared. Casca's description of the 'portentous things' – that he had, in this version, certainly seen – signified the power of the supernatural to shape events, and the Soothsayer was central to this vision. He was therefore present at Caesar's death. During the assassination he was positioned above Caesar, as he had been in the first scene, and he acted as though every wound was affecting his own body; blood spurted over his torso and he writhed on the floor in pain. 'All he can do is say "Beware the Ides of March",' Doran noted, 'he can't do anything about the fact that Caesar is finally going to come to the assassins' knives'.<sup>149</sup> This sequence represented the witchdoctor's effective extinction. First Caesar's lack of respect or belief demonstrated the diminishment of the spiritual; and now, the director stated, 'There's almost a sense that his power has somehow evaporated through modern influences.'<sup>150</sup> By ignoring the Soothsayer, Kisson's Caesar stepped across the thin line that connected the spirit world to the postcolonial, and sealed his fate – and in this production the fate of the shamanistic culture as well. To elaborate on this theme, Doran decided that the Soothsayer should return in the form of the Poet in Act 4 Scene 2. Ogun-dipe now entered in shorts. The ash and clay over his torso, legs and hair had partly worn off. He was somehow aware that Brutus and Cassius were going to die but their lack of belief and his weakened power

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<sup>149</sup> Gregory Doran, 'RSC director Greg Doran'.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

demonstrated the ascent of a different way of thinking according to the influences of modernity. Brutus and Cassius' refusal to listen to the Poet's warnings signified, as with Caesar, their shunning of the warnings of those in touch with the supernatural world. Brutus' dismissal of 'these jiggling fools' mirrored Caesar's refusal to read the message of the portents, and the other characters' mockery marked the end of his journey in the action of the play. The production depicted an environment in which the supernatural was a thread sewn into the linings of the culture of the country, yet was treated with irreverence by those in power and those vying for it. Doran's choices concerning the Soothsayer ensured that his presence was felt throughout the piece, as a reminder of the belief in the supernatural in this society and its relationship to contemporary politics. However, this imposed narrative did not avoid the stereotype of the 'magical negro'. In fact, the production ran the risk of reinforcing primitivist stereotypes in their most controversial and questionable form.

In her analysis of 'societal casting', a category of 'non-traditional' casting where 'actors of color are cast in roles that might stereotypically be associated with them even if those roles were not originally written in that fashion', Ayanna Thompson discussed the stereotype of the 'magical negro'. With reference to casting black actors as the witches in *Macbeth*, she wrote: 'Black witches make sense because of the stereotype of the "magical negro," a stereotypical, stock character employed in many genres of contemporary popular culture'. This was 'a figure who has other-worldly or earthly connections, a figure who has no past, a

figure who helps to save a white protagonist.’<sup>151</sup> In creating the appearance of the Olympic Year Soothsayer, Ogundipe explained, ‘We were looking at the Nuba tribe and they cover themselves in ash powder[...]. So we decided that look would be quite striking first and foremost’.<sup>152</sup> The Nuba tribe originated in Southern Sudan and were famously photographed by Leni Riefenstahl, the former Nazi propagandist and the director of *Olympia*, the film of the 1936 Berlin Games. Her photographs of the Nuba showed the tribesmen naked – with some wearing loin cloths and bands around their calves, and some with necklaces – and covered entirely in ash. The ash was used as an enabler during the tribal sport of wrestling, so that the men could get a grip on each other.<sup>153</sup> However while working on Doran’s *Julius Caesar*, Ogundipe decided to imagine the ash had a supernatural significance: ‘I thought from the character’s point of view, it would be a great way for me to get in touch with the ritualistic’. It was ‘access if you will, to his power and his gifting’.<sup>154</sup> This indicates that the Nuba’s specific cultural activity was used simply for an interesting aesthetic; the look was appropriated for theatrical effect. Remarkably, in 1988 Cyril Nri was cast as Ariel in Jonathan Miller’s Old Vic production of *The Tempest* which, Nri recalled, ‘was set in a fictional African island, though having grown up in Africa it wasn’t quite authentic.’ Then, too, ‘I looked at photographs of the Nuba from southern Sudan in *The Last of the Nuba* (1973) by the [notorious Nazi] German photographer

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<sup>151</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 77.

<sup>152</sup> Ogundipe.

<sup>153</sup> S. F. Nadel, ‘A Study of Shamanism in the Nuba Mountains’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 76 (1946), pp. 25–37 (p. 25).

<sup>154</sup> Ogundipe.

Leni Riefenstahl. They used ash and dust from the earth [...] I used these bodily materials in preparing to play Ariel.’<sup>155</sup> Both Nri and – almost a quarter century later – Ogundipe were encouraged to look to the same problematic source to inspire the portrait of an alien figure. Here we can see a pattern of recycling, and its effect on the performers’ work. Both diasporic actors were cast as magical figures and used the same accessible images to represent their ‘otherness’. Even discounting the Riefenstahl connection and its particular insensitivity in an Olympic year, some critics were uncomfortable with the characterisation of the Soothsayer as an African witchdoctor. Peter J. Smith wrote that ‘*Julius Caesar*, with its witch doctor/soothsayer, utilised a clumsy shorthand, cultural and (in this particular case) racial’.<sup>156</sup> By not making a specific cultural or historical reference beyond the ‘quite striking’ sculptural look of the figure, the RSC turned the Soothsayer into a generic visual reference to a stereotypical understanding of African ‘backwardness’.

The idea of the primitivism of shamanistic culture was articulated in a commissioned programme note in which Richard Dowden, Executive Director of the Royal African Society, wrote: ‘*Julius Caesar* still speaks to African people’. ‘Shakespeare needs no explanation, no context setting here’ because of the ‘tribalism’ and the ‘powerful magic’ that is ‘instantly recognisable’. He continued: ‘Life for most Africans is closer to the way all human beings lived

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<sup>155</sup> McMillan, p. 127. NB: ‘[notorious Nazi]’ was McMillan’s editorial addition.

<sup>156</sup> Peter J. Smith, ‘Red Velvet’, *Times Higher Education*, 1 November 2012, <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/culture/red-velvet/421626.article>> [accessed 31 December 2012].

until recent times [...]. The sun feels closer, the sky higher, the rain heavier.<sup>157</sup> It is an argument that generalises the entire African continent as tribal and concerned with magic, and connects to a colonial discourse of primitivism. The implicit assumption of cultural similarity, that Elizabethans and contemporary Africans have much to share, reinforces the position of the modern West as superior to the continuing ‘backwardness’ of Africa. In order to assess the effects that different approaches to cultural *specificity* have on the representation of African culture on stage, it is revealing to compare Doran’s treatment of the supernatural with the South African director Yael Farber’s version of *Julius Caesar*, which toured Britain in 2001. Her production began with six actors standing together in traditional dress – they were the citizens. Below them on a circular platform stood a figure wearing a skirt and sandals, with cloth draped over his body and dreadlocked hair. He whipped his head back and forth to the accompaniment of music. The staging was easily comparable to the opening of Doran’s production where the Soothsayer, dressed very similarly, took centre stage and danced. Yet in Farber’s case this figure was not the Soothsayer, a small

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<sup>157</sup> Richard Dowden in Royal Shakespeare Company, *Julius Caesar* programme (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012). A highly experienced journalist, Dowden was the author of *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (London: Portobello, 2008), which set out to dispel stereotypical thinking about the continent.

Binyavanga Wainaina’s satirical essay, ‘How To Write About Africa’, *Granta*, 92, January 2006, <<https://granta.com/How-to-Write-about-Africa/>> [accessed 20 March 2017], is relevant to this RSC production: ‘Also useful are words such as “Guerrillas”, “Timeless”, “Primordial” and “Tribal” [...] In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. [...] Your African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers, ancient wise men living in hermitic splendour. Or corrupt politicians [...] The Loyal Servant always behaves like a seven-year-old and needs a firm hand. [...] Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.’

role promoted into a symbol of decline – he was SeZaR himself. A reviewer commented: ‘SeZaR is an almost unearthly figure, whose charisma seems to emanate from a direct connection to the spirit world: he dances, shakes, trances under the power that posses[ses] him, his every action imbued with ritual’.<sup>158</sup> Farber cast the professional praise singer Hope Sprinter Sekgobela as SeZaR. In Act 2 Scene 2, she staged the rituals that are only referred to in Shakespeare’s dialogue. The scene began with Calpurnia and SeZaR asleep on a mattress. Calpurnia cried out, woke, and spoke of her visions, and SeZaR listened attentively. Towards the end of the scene, a metal bowl was brought onstage containing raw meat and entrails of animals. SeZaR searched through it and was devastated to discover that there was no heart. He collapsed on the floor in a fit, so that Calpurnia’s final plea – ‘Say you are not well today’ – had immediate resonance.

Like Doran, Farber suggested that, ‘Modern Europeans are largely disconnected from such “superstitions”’ whereas ‘such facets of the invisible world remain a vital and integrated aspect of life in Africa.’<sup>159</sup> However, unlike Doran, Farber chose not to condense the supernatural world into an essentialist ‘African’ character but to present a clash of belief systems in those most embroiled in the political sphere. In her production, the Soothsayer was a cleaner. She was dressed in an orange boiler suit, her head wrapped in a plastic bin bag,

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<sup>158</sup> Sharae Deckard quoted in ‘Shakespeare in South Africa: Yael Farber's SeZar’, *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/Criticism/shakespearein/sasz4.html>> [accessed 31 December 2016].

<sup>159</sup> Yael Farber, ‘Sezar’, *Yael Farber*, <<http://www.yfarber.com/sezar/>> [accessed 11 January 2017].



with more bags tucked in at her waist forming a bin-liner skirt. This Soothsayer discovered knowledge not through supernatural gifts, but by remaining on stage to hear Cassius cajoling Brutus. She swept the floor with her broom in the shadows and paused to concentrate on their exchange. She hurriedly began cleaning again whenever either man moved closer to her. The actors spoke in a mixture of Shakespearean English and the Zulu, Tswana, Sotho and Shangaan languages and poetry; traditional and contemporary South African songs and dances were also incorporated. The success of her production stemmed from the fact that it was not based on the cultural representation of the 'Other' or of theatrical 'Africanisation' through largely cosmetic means. This was a production that was born out of South Africa, performed by its people, adapted and translated to heighten its local relevance. Discussing it, Farber began: 'In February 2000 *Newsweek* magazine ran an astonishing cover. A young guerrilla soldier, armed to the teeth and brandishing an AK-47, was framed by the shape of Africa. Emblazoned across the image were the words AFRICA: THE HOPELESS CONTINENT'. It was 'astonishing', she wrote, 'for its limited view of this extraordinary continent.'<sup>160</sup> Farber's critique could be applied to Doran's production, which unfortunately was indeed too limited in its view of the African continent.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The RSC's 2012 *Julius Caesar* raised many questions concerning the casting of BAME actors and the representation of non-Western cultures. To what extent should actors be cast to represent 'Africa' because of their skin colour, and in what ways might their personal knowledge, understanding or experience of African culture and heritage be permitted to shape the production? How should practitioners avoid reinforcing racist stereotypes? Is it advisable to segregate a group of actors from the rest of a national company on grounds of ethnicity, and what proportion of such a cast will find further employment there?<sup>161</sup> Why should black actors only be cast because of a director's 'vision', and in very particular political circumstances? The RSC considered the production a great achievement in terms of diverse casting. In their annual report for 2012 they celebrated the diversity on their stages and claimed to have 'reflected the diversity of Britishness at its very best', particularly in *Julius Caesar*.<sup>162</sup> However, the extent to which this casting practice demonstrated a successful diverse ecology is to be contested. *Julius Caesar* was referred to by the RSC, and hailed by the press, as the first production in the company's history to be performed by an all-black company of British actors. This was indeed cause for celebration in terms of the history of Shakespearean performance, and in its recognition of these actors' talent. Many of

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. Of the twenty-eight non-white performers hired for the National Theatre's 1981 'Caribbean' *Measure for Measure*, only three were retained for another production.

<sup>162</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, 'Annual Report and Accounts 2011/2012', (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012), <[http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/120910\\_rsc\\_annual\\_report\\_2011-12\\_final.pdf](http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/120910_rsc_annual_report_2011-12_final.pdf)> [accessed 6 February 2014], p. 5.

the cast had worked for the RSC before, yet as Adjoa Andoh put it, ‘It’s great to not be the one, or maybe one of two, members of a cast who is black’.<sup>163</sup> Many celebrated being part of the all-black company. Jeffery Kissoon said: ‘I think this is a ground-breaking moment here in British theatre. We are all highly experienced actors of many, many years’ experience [...]. We don’t have to prove anything anymore – we just want to do it.’<sup>164</sup> Andoh suggested a palpable shift in the landscape of casting for black actors. However, other members of the group were not so convinced. Paterson Joseph said, ‘They’re just blips. They’re things that happen and then the flavour goes and they’re left to black theatre companies to do.’<sup>165</sup> He added: ‘If every time somebody does a Shakespeare play and they want me in it, it’s an all-black cast, I think that would be insulting, frankly.’<sup>166</sup> Similarly, Cyril Nri was not convinced by the ethnic labelling or the motives behind the project: ‘In doing an all-black production there was a ticking of the diversity box as a token gesture’. But he concluded, ‘It went beyond expectations and became something magical.’<sup>167</sup> I would suggest this was because of the talent of the cast, which was remarked on by many of the reviewers. Michael Billington

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<sup>163</sup> Andjoa Andoh quoted in Bonnisa Gillings, ‘A Moment with Adjoah Andoh, *Precious*, 27 May 2013, <http://lifestyle.precioussuccess.com/2013/05/27/a-moment-with-adjoa-andoh/> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>164</sup> Jeffery Kissoon quoted in Shaun Ajamu Hutchinson, ‘Jeffery Kissoon as Julius Caesar’, *The New Black Magazine*, 15 August 2012, <<http://www.thenewblackmagazine.com/view.aspx?index=2962>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>165</sup> Paterson Joseph quoted in Charlotte Marshall, ‘The Big Interview: Paterson Joseph’, *Official London Theatre*, 22 August 2012, <<http://www.officallondontheatre.co.uk/news/backstagepass/article/item150172/the-big-interview-paterson-joseph>> [accessed 31 December 2016].

<sup>166</sup> Joseph quoted in Marshall.

<sup>167</sup> McMillan, p. 133.

wrote, ‘To see it played by an all-black British cast is [...] to be reminded of the wealth of classical acting talent in this country’.<sup>168</sup> Ian Shuttleworth also acknowledged this – ‘The principal cast all give expressive performances throughout’ – but he did note, ‘I do not know how much is a considered portrait of African culture and how much, conversely, is a by-product of attempts to make it more accessible to a European audience.’<sup>169</sup> Despite the talent of the actors, there was still discomfort about the representation of the continent. Other critics also remarked on this tension: ‘A British director and a British cast affecting African accents implicitly reasserts the right of European culture to define a generic African identity based on otherness’.<sup>170</sup> It was problematic that Doran did not wish to be specific about where he set the production whilst claiming it to be ‘Africa’, because the society presented could only be generic through its lack of geographic and cultural precision. The stereotypes trafficked on stage veered worryingly close to reiterating a hegemonic view of the ‘Other’ as shaped by magic, superstition and violence. The non-specificity may have encouraged spectators to imagine that the West has culturally, socially and politically evolved beyond what was represented onstage. Ian Shuttleworth recognised the issue: ‘Especially at a time of heritage-centred celebration like this, it may evoke

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<sup>168</sup> Michael Billington, ‘Julius Caesar – review’, *Guardian*, 7 June 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/jun/07/julius-caesar-review>> [accessed 23 April 2013].

<sup>169</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, ‘Julius Caesar, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon’ *Financial Times*, 9 June 2012, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/93b4e228-b091-11e1-8b36-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2fzDjCnyL>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

<sup>170</sup> Andrew Cowie, ‘A post-colonial view of *Julius Caesar*’, *Blogging Shakespeare*, 20 June 2012, <<http://bloggingshakespeare.com/a-post-colonial-view-of-julius-caesar>> [accessed 31 December 2016].

complacent (not to say racist) self-congratulation that we ourselves are not prone to such African-style instability and conflict'.<sup>171</sup> At the time of the Olympics, when communities from countries around the world were in London, the power relations between nations was a live issue and the politics of representation was highly contested. The RSC's *Julius Caesar* exposed the complexities and sensitivities involved in casting an all-black company and setting Shakespearean violence in Africa. How would other practitioners approach the representation of specific cultural identities and the translocation of Shakespeare's plays to other geographical and cultural settings?

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<sup>171</sup> Shuttleworth.

## Chapter Two: *Much Ado About Nothing*, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012

Michael Boyd, the RSC's Artistic Director, initiated the idea of including a British Indian production within the World Shakespeare Festival. He approached Meera Syal and they discussed several Shakespearean roles that could be suitable for her, including Cleopatra and Katherina. They decided on Beatrice, and the British-born Pakistani director Iqbal Khan was brought on board to direct *Much Ado About Nothing*. He had recently directed Syal in *The Killing of Sister George* (Arts Theatre, 2011) and had directed and performed in productions of *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Syal had never before acted Shakespeare professionally, but had played Caliban in a school production of *The Tempest*. 'I didn't understand it,' she said, 'and played the role for broad comedy, as one would at fourteen'.<sup>172</sup> Syal had worked across film and television, in musicals and sitcoms; she had written a novel, *Anita and Me* (1996) and – for instance through her groundbreaking BBC series *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998–2001) – in many ways she was the foremost representative of the British Asian experience in popular culture. Her return to Shakespeare as Beatrice for the RSC was, she told Megan Conner, 'scary' but well matched to her talents. Khan's work had by no means centred on British Asian identity or represented a relationship with South Asia, and he did not want the Indian concept to be a requisite to his

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<sup>172</sup> Meera Syal quoted in Megan Conner, 'Shakespeare and Me: Meera Syal', *Guardian*, 1 July 2012, <<http://www.the-guardian.com/culture/2012/jul/01/meera-syal-shakespeare-and-me-much-ado-about-nothing>> [accessed 23 February 2014].

joining the company, although it was clear that this was what would satisfy Michael Boyd. The fundamental difference between the 2012 *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado* lay in the granting of directorial authority to a non-white director. Khan was placed in a unique position as the first British Asian to direct a main-house production at the RSC, and it seems he had to navigate between certain expectations. Actually ‘my heart sank’, he said, ‘because the idea of doing something exotic, for me, is an anathema.’<sup>173</sup> He seems to have had in mind the unstable manner in which race signifies in some cross-cultural productions, which recycle the kind of ‘exotic’ stereotypes theorised in the works of Rustom Bharucha.<sup>174</sup> Here we can see the beginnings of a tension between imposed constraints and the director’s personal vision; he was determined not to be reductive in his representation of Indian culture.

The RSC had previously set a production of *Much Ado* in India in 1976. The director John Barton relocated it to the time of the British Raj, so that Judi Dench and Donald Sinden played Beatrice and Benedick in a Messina transported to an outpost of the Empire. Leonato’s household were members of the Indian Civil Service ‘keeping up the British traditions and the British customs in the heat’.<sup>175</sup> Rather than employing South Asian actors to represent Indian characters – the comic local Watch – the RSC chose to use white actors in brownface. To

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<sup>173</sup> Iqbal Khan, ‘Director Q and A’, *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/shakespeare/plays/much-ado-about-nothing/much-ado-about-nothing-iqbal-khan-2012/much-ado-about-nothing-2012-director-q-and-a.aspx>> [accessed 3 July 2014].

<sup>174</sup> Rustom Bharucha, ‘Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*, A View From India’, in *Theatre and the World, Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 68–87.

<sup>175</sup> Don Chapman, ‘Much Splendid ado in Victoria’s empire’, *Oxford Mail*, 9 April 1976.

play *Dogberry*, John Woodvine wore dark makeup, added a large moustache, and donned a turban. He was described in one review as a ‘gentle Sikh murdering the English language with [...] oriental decorum’.<sup>176</sup> Most reviewers were delighted. However, Harold Hobson found the performance innately racist: ‘Mr. Barton’s premise is that a coloured man is funny merely by being coloured. Ridicule his salaams [...] and too precise forms of speech and you have something that sends audiences into paroxysms of delight’. Hobson suggested that audiences were encouraged to mock this subaltern Indian figure and his inability to speak clear English – a sign of his servility and backwardness: ‘It clearly filled the theatre with a comforting sense that if the British have lost an Empire they can at least jeer at those who have gained it.’<sup>177</sup> Again, the circumstances of the production are important: not only did Barton’s direction and Woodvine’s performance result in a colonial misappropriation of South Asian ethnicity for comic effect, but the decision to *exclude* South Asian actors from the production was in itself remarkable. South Asian actors were actually working at Stratford at the time. Marc Zuber and Dev Sagoo were employed to play Gurjeet Singh Khera and Razak Khan in David Edgar’s campaigning anti-racist drama *Destiny*. The RSC’s presentation of the relationship between Britain and India in the 1970s demonstrated a strangely conflicted stance towards multiculturalism and Anglo-Indian history.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Harold Hobson quoted in Michael L. Greenwald, *Directions by Indirections, John Barton of the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Newark: University of Delaware Press 1985), p.149.



The company's next transportation of Shakespeare to an Indian context was in 2006 with Tim Supple's *Dream*. This was a venture co-conceived with the British Council, who commissioned the director in 2006 to work with actors from across India in order to 'develop relationships between the UK and Indian arts sectors, and support creative entrepreneurship'.<sup>178</sup> It premiered in Delhi in 2006 and toured to Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. It then joined the RSC's 2006–2007 Complete Works Festival. In the process of casting, Supple said, 'I travelled for over a year, I met many, many people, I watched people's work, and I worked with people for a long time before casting them – days, weeks sometimes.'<sup>179</sup> He brought together a group of twenty-two actors and musicians from across India and Sri Lanka, all of whom had different sets of theatrical, physical and verbal skills. Each actor worked in his or her own language so that in this production Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, Sinhalese and English were used. This was a celebration of Indian culture and heritage; Shakespeare was performed through the diverse methods and backgrounds of the Indian actors themselves. Michael Billington suggested, 'in its strangeness, sexuality, and communal joy this is the most life-enhancing production of Shakespeare's play'.<sup>180</sup> It was in these areas – 'strangeness' and 'sexuality' – that the production veered into the territory of exoticism. The choice of a play that centres on magic and sexuality, to

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<sup>178</sup> National Audit Office, 'The British Council: Achieving Impact', (The Stationary Office, 2008), p.12. <<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-british-council-achieving-impact/>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>179</sup> Tim Supple, 'Video Interview with Tim Supple', *Victoria and Albert Museum*, <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/i/video-interview-with-tim-supple,-director-of-amidsummer-nights-dream/>> [accessed 11 January 2015].

<sup>180</sup> Michael Billington, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *Guardian*, 14 March 2007, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/mar/14/theatre1>> [accessed 5 January 2017].

be performed by Indians speaking in multiple languages that most of the Western audience would not understand, lent itself towards stereotypical associations of the Oriental ‘Other’. The actors’ costumes were minimal and bared a lot of flesh: Puck wore only a loincloth; the lovers’ clothes were ripped off during the performance, leaving small pieces of cloth to cover the ladies’ chests and bottoms; and the fairies were similarly scantily clad. Paul Taylor in the *Independent* described how Supple had welded his cast into a vision that was ‘at once ravishingly beautiful, sexy, wild’.<sup>181</sup> Another reviewer wrote, ‘At times it looks like a staged version of the Kama Sutra’.<sup>182</sup> For Michael Dobson, ‘It is also so consistently enjoyable – not least, frankly, because its cast are all unnaturally good-looking and wear few clothes, and those beautiful – that criticism is largely in abeyance for its duration’.<sup>183</sup> But for some spectators, the picture of rambunctious, exotic sexuality was orientalist in its reminiscence of the ‘precolonial body’ (savages who must be tamed, sexual beings asking to be ravished). In her analysis of Supple’s *Dream*, the Indian scholar Poonam Trivedi wrote: ‘Most such performances inevitably lapse into orientalist spectacles

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<sup>181</sup> Paul Taylor, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon’, *Independent*, 11 June 2006, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/a-midsummer-nights-dream-swan-theatre-stratford-upon-avon-6098441.html>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>182</sup> Maxwell Cooter quoted in Poonam Trivedi, ‘Shakespeare and the Indian Image(nary), Embod(y)ment in Versions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’ in *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp 54–75 (p.63).

<sup>183</sup> Michael Dobson, ‘Shakespeare Performances in England, 2006: January 2006’, in *Shakespeare Survey* ed. by Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 284–319 (p. 302).

which are literal “fleshing out” with eroticized and sexualized bodies on display’.<sup>184</sup>

Poonam was critical of the kind of “cultural tourism” that flies in a celebrity director to work with grateful locals and exports exotica for the delectation of western audiences’.<sup>185</sup> Supple’s more nuanced aims – to explore the social construction of power relations through patriarchy and authoritarianism, as well as the gulf between the aristocracy and the workmen – were lost on reviewers who preferred to comment upon the ‘ravishing spectacle’.<sup>186</sup> Although the director was clearly committed to exploring issues of cultural diversity and migration in his work – for example his television *Twelfth Night* (2003) featuring Parminda Nagra as Viola and Chiwetel Ejiofor as Orsino, and his *As You Like It* at the Leicester Curve (2009) that explored British multiculturalism with a cast from thirteen different countries – his work was still subject to serious critiques. There was a history and legacy of problematic misrepresentations of Indian peoples, cultures and traditions on stage at the RSC when Iqbal Khan was invited to set *Much Ado* in an Indian context.

Iqbal Khan took a different approach from both Barton and Supple, and set *Much Ado* in post-independence India: contemporary Delhi in the year 2012. He considered casting actors from India and met with Sanjana Kapur (Director of Prithvi Theatre) and Anuradha Kapur (Director of the National School of Drama,

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<sup>184</sup> Poonam Trivedi, ‘Shakespeare and the Indian Image(nary), Embod(y)ment in Versions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’ in *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 56.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Billington, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’.

Delhi) to ask for their recommendations. However, these ideas did not materialise and instead the RSC's casting director Helena Palmer chose British actors from South Asian diasporic communities. Far fewer of the *Much Ado* cast had previous experience performing the classical repertoire for the RSC than was the case with *Julius Caesar*. Indeed, the majority made their RSC debut in this production. Amara Karan (playing Hero) had been in the RSC's 2008 *Taming of the Shrew* and *Merchant of Venice* (as Bianca and Jessica). Robert Mountford had played Solanio for the RSC in 2001, and Simon Nagra was Alexas in a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* alongside non-white actors playing Charmian and Eros – Noma Dumezweni and Israel Aduramo (I shall discuss the politics of this in the following chapter). The other actors who had worked for the company had been employed in non-Shakespearean productions with South Asian characters, such as *Arabian Nights* and *Midnight's Children*. Considering the RSC's limited track record, the production of *Much Ado* with twenty-one actors from South Asian backgrounds was a major departure. Following the *Julius Caesar* precedent, *Much Ado* was hailed in the press as the first 'all-Asian' production at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and again in the West End when it transferred to the Noel Coward. Sailesh Ram wrote: 'It's rare, perhaps unprecedented, for a West End show to have so many Asians on stage'.<sup>187</sup> It was only at this time, when the RSC was required to display the core value of cultural diversity, that these actors were hired, and this suggests that the casting was tokenistic or opportunistic. As with

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<sup>187</sup> Sailesh Ram, 'Much Ado About Nothing Review', *Asian Times*, 1 October 2012, p. 17.

Doran's *Caesar* concept, the production was set in a location that required or justified employing actors of a certain colour. Once again the casting model could also be defined, in Ayanna Thompson's terminology, as 'cross-cultural', with the entire world of the play translated to a different culture and location. The actors' ethnicities were meant to function on stage in the representation of Indian culture and geography, and the audience was expected to read into the semiotics of their colour.

These actors were from different backgrounds, some had been born in South Asia and migrated to Britain with their parents, others were born and brought up in the UK. Unlike Doran's generalised African setting, here the play was set in a specific time and place, and the accents were required to be accordingly specific. Some of the actors had lived experience and connections to the themes that Khan aimed to foreground. He felt that 'modern India, particularly Northern India and Delhi, which is a place of transition, would provide a tremendously compelling way into the play'.<sup>188</sup> Similarly Syal stated that she felt the Indian setting made *Much Ado* 'sing with urgency', and that 'modern India does seem to be the ideal place as so many of its major themes have such present-day relevance in a city like Delhi'.<sup>189</sup> In this production the political details became sophisticated and complex. The connections between the text and contemporary Delhi society were made through Khan's premise that the soldiers

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Meera Syal quoted in Lucy Cavendish, 'Much Ado about Nothing: Much ado about Meera Syal', 26 July 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9403719/Much-Ado-about-Nothing-Much-ado-about-Meera-Syal.html>> [accessed 15 April 2013].

Don Pedro, Don John, Claudio and Benedick were members of the Indian army returning from a UN Peacekeeping mission. Leonato became a wealthy upper-class nobleman running a household divided by caste and social hierarchy. The Watch was made up of servants led by Dogberry, the master of the house. The modern connections were strongest when they focused on domesticity, the household and the roles of men and women within it. Links were made through rituals such as the marriage and funeral rites, and the set and costume design supported these themes. The proposed Peacekeeping mission did little to explain the motivation of the men in this society, but the domesticity, romance, wooing and wedding were particularly resonant within Khan's Indian contextualisation. An examination of the set design, roles of women and aborted wedding rituals will lead to an assessment of the ways in which the debates embedded in Shakespeare's text concerning personal identity and wider moral debates were used to explore contemporary issues in British and Indian society in Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado*.

### **Designing Delhi: A collision of thrusting commercialism and conservative tradition**

*Much Ado*'s designer Tom Piper was, as was the case with *Julius Caesar*, white and British. Along with the (white) producer Kevin Fitzmaurice and Iqbal Khan, Piper went on a five-day research trip to India. The issues of orientalism, exoticism, stereotyping and cultural tourism in such transnational projects have

been theorised by Rustom Bharucha in his critique of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*. In 1990 Bharucha argued that Brook's process relived 'the bad old days of the British Raj' in its 'appropriation of non-western material within an orientalist framework of thought and action'.<sup>190</sup> Piper stressed that he was concerned with authenticity in his representation of India: 'If you are, as we are, fundamentally a British-Asian cast, there's the danger of having a rather expat view of India'.<sup>191</sup> He stated: 'I think we have a chance to treat India seriously in our production for the World Shakespeare Festival and hope to tread the line on cultural imperialism and avoid a postcard production.' He was conscious that 'by its very nature theatre is a selection, an editing of reality', and wondered 'how can we prevent that selection seeming decorative?'.<sup>192</sup> Piper's way of avoiding the pitfalls of exoticism and cultural cliché was through detailed work intended to locate the characters within a very specific environment, and through his use of symbolism to generate connections to broader themes in the Indian setting and in Shakespeare's text.

One aspect of Indian society and culture that Piper was keen to highlight was the collision of thrusting commercialism and modernity with ancient, conservative tradition. As Piper discovered, this could be seen literally in the architectural landscape: 'When I went to Delhi, I loved the old part of the city, the

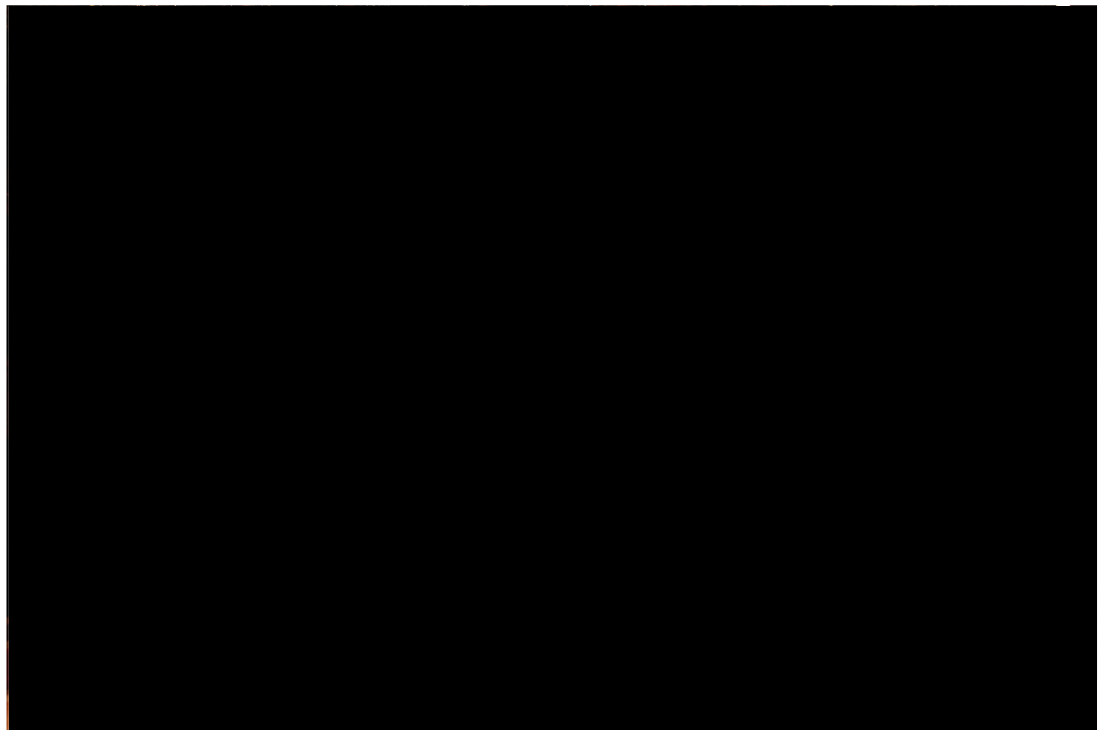
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<sup>190</sup> Bharucha, 'Peter Brook's Mahabharata', p. 68.

<sup>191</sup> Tom Piper quoted in Rebecca McLaughlin-Duane, 'Much Ado About Nothing spiced up with Meera Syal', *The National*, 13 May 2012, <<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/on-stage/much-ado-about-nothing-spiced-up-with-meera-syal>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>192</sup> Tom Piper, 'Coming Home', *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 27 March 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/blogs/designers-dreams-and-doodles/coming-home/>> [accessed 15 April 2013].

layering of buildings, the way everything just grew on top of everything else, where you didn't know if something was a tree or electric cables.'<sup>193</sup> He took photographs which he then used as inspiration to sketch ideas for the set, and applied this sense of 'layering' in his designs for an old courtyard with a large tree wrapped in cables (see Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8 *Much Ado*, Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon (2012).**

Piper's choices helped pin the play in a specific cultural landscape. The style he chose for Leonato's house was based on the structural architecture of the *haveli* (traditional townhouse) – a term originally applied to Gujarati temples in Northern India. The grandeur of this ancient design indicated the wealth, power

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.



and status of the household; Leonato was evidently an upper-class and upper-caste patriarch. The floral and geometric patterning of the lattice windows and doors demonstrated Mughal influences, rooting the design in Indian history. A statue of the deity Ganesh at the head of the up-centre door established the household as Hindu in its faith. The towering tree stretched from floor to ceiling, and its branches were intertwined with wires, cables, rope and lightbulbs. The juxtaposition of the old (the great tree), with the new (the electric cables), made the collision between a traditional culture and modernity visible and concrete. Not only was the tree symbolic of issues in contemporary Delhi society, it also provided a meaningful setting for the development of Beatrice and Benedick's relationship and their personal identities – a drama that similarly transited between tradition and modernity. In their mirrored gulling scenes, they underwent transformations that centred on the tree. Benedick, who had previously been dressed in his army uniform, with rugged stubble, smoking and wearing sunglasses, became filled with a boyish energy on hearing of Beatrice's 'love'. He clambered around the tree and swung on it buoyantly. In this space he was no longer confined by the boundaries of military etiquette. The set had the potential to mirror and highlight different aspects of their relationship – whether the electric energy of their modern flirting and banter (alone in Act 2 Scene 3, Benedick flew forward on the swing towards Beatrice, who caught his legs and wrapped them round her in a daringly flirtatious manner), or in an archetypal picture of traditional and mythical love (in Act 5 Scene 2 they sat side-by-side on the swing, and talked). Through a process of abstraction – 'my response is

normally to abstract things slightly so they don't become a literal filmic look for something' – Piper found a balance between specificity and symbolism.<sup>194</sup> His design provided a physical landscape for the action that symbolically united the socio-cultural sphere of contemporary Delhi with the relationship between Beatrice and Benedick.

However, Piper was not entirely successful in 'treading the line on cultural imperialism and avoiding a postcard production'. *Much Ado* was the only show performed in Stratford's Courtyard Theatre at the time, and this gave him the liberty to give the whole building an 'Indian make-over', so that the design began at the front door. Piper's aim was to 'create the atmosphere of a bustling Indian city and then move into something that's simpler when we get to the space for the play itself'.<sup>195</sup> (This was only true at Stratford; the RSC was not granted permission to decorate the Noel Coward building when *Much Ado* transferred.) Actors and musicians spilled outside, and played and interacted with the audience. Inside the foyer there was a welcoming *rangoli* pattern on the floor, a rickshaw, bicycles hanging from the ceiling, and Bollywood film posters. As part of the decorations, images of Hindu gods were displayed on the walls by the bar. But this last decision indicated a lack of understanding of Hindu cultural and religious practices. Sacred images were used purely for visual effect, for Western consumption. They were later taken down after complaints from audience members about the positioning of the deities next to the sale of alcohol. This profound *faux pas* draws attention to the need for practitioners to have specific

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<sup>194</sup> Tom Piper, 'Much Ado spiced up'.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

knowledge of the culture they represent; the RSC's imperfect understanding led to offence to people from that culture. However, most reviewers felt they were experiencing an authentic representation of India: 'One step through the doors of the Warwickshire theatre, you are instantly transported across the Globe to India'.<sup>196</sup> Or, again: 'It's hard to resist whipping out your camera-phone and taking a souvenir snap'.<sup>197</sup> These comments also draw attention to the power dynamics at play between the culture that was represented, who was doing the representing, and who was consuming the representation. In this case a majority-white production team employing British-South Asian actors, and a majority white audience, veered towards a tourist-orientalist framework. It is necessary to explore the sets of knowledge that the actors themselves, in conjunction with Khan, brought to their performances and the play.

### **A modern Indian woman: the changing roles of Beatrice**

Meera Syal believed that one aspect of *Much Ado* had significant resonance given the transplant to modern Delhi: the role of women in society. 'Every discovery during rehearsal', she said, 'has been layered and enhanced by setting this play in

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<sup>196</sup> Marion MucMullen, 'Review, Much Ado About Nothing at Courtyard Theatre, Stratford', *Coventry Telegraph*, 6 August 2012, <<http://www.coventrytelegraph.net/entertainment/theatre-coventry/2012/08/06/review-much-ado-about-nothing-at-courtyard-theatre-stratford-92746-31559354/>> [accessed 15 April 2013].

<sup>197</sup> Dominic Cavendish, 'Much Ado About Nothing, RSC Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, review', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 August 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9447812/Much-Ado-About-Nothing-RSC-Courtyard-Theatre-Stratford-upon-Avon-review.html>> [accessed 15 April 2013].

India where so many of the scenes [...] suddenly come alive and have real current significance: most of all, the changing roles of women.’<sup>198</sup> The relationship between modernity and tradition – and how this functioned in the social construction of femininity and womanhood – was explored through Syal’s interpretation of Beatrice, and in Khan’s direction. Their choices engaged with the play’s internal debates and heightened their contemporary resonance in the context of gender politics in India.

The audience was first introduced to Syal’s Beatrice in a pre-show performed as they entered. The actors, in character, interacted with the spectators from onstage and amongst the audience themselves. Sounds of a bustling Indian street with tooting horns established a sense of the social landscape of Delhi. Beatrice entered with Balthasar (a servant) and approached the front row of the stalls. He tried to persuade her to marry a suitor (he displayed a picture of the gentleman on his iPad) – a middle-aged, balding Indian businessman. Beatrice mocked him indignantly and left to find sanctuary upstage in a window-seat on the house’s balcony. In this retreat, she lit a cigarette from behind the red cover of her iPad and happily puffed away, her gaze hidden behind her sunglasses. It was an image of a modern Indian woman breaking the conventions of traditional female roles. Beatrice had taken her marriage prospects into her own hands and laughed at the men; she rebelled against the patriarchal norm. Demonstrating Western influences, she wore a stylishly-cut jacket and pencil skirt. Her red heels signified her powerful and perhaps dangerous femininity; it was in these shoes

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<sup>198</sup> Meera Syal in Royal Shakespeare Company, *Much Ado About Nothing* programme (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012).

that she trod the unstable metaphorical line between self-constructed female modernity and an adherence to the socio-cultural traditions of a patriarchal society and its ingrained gender hierarchies. ‘The women have a line they have to tread throughout,’ Syal said in her analysis of their roles in *Much Ado*: ‘Their freedoms only extend so far, it’s like being on a leash and the minute you step too far you’re yanked back. And Beatrice treads that line quite dangerously in the first half.’<sup>199</sup>

This became clear through her relationship with Leonato. Beatrice was shown adhering to the rituals of tradition. In Act 1 Scene 1 of the Quarto, Shakespeare introduces the wordless figure Innogen, Hero’s mother; Khan’s decision to cut the character was not unusual, but it was significant in the Indian setting. It gave Beatrice an extra role and function. She performed rituals which in Indian culture are expected to be carried out by the mother. For example, on Don Pedro’s entrance to Leonato’s household, Beatrice performed a ritual. She put a scarf over her head as a sign of respect and performed *aarti* (prayer) with a tray of incense. She marked a red dot on Don Pedro’s forehead and placed a garland around his neck. In her analysis of the roles of women in Indian society, Uma Chakravarti writes, ‘The compliance of women, or the consent they extend to structures that are oppressive is [...] “invisibilized” under the seemingly more neutral notion of upholding “tradition”, or the specific “cultures” of families, or of communities’.<sup>200</sup> The significance of this ritual was that it established Beatrice as a traditional mother figure; she conformed to a socially dictated role in a

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<sup>199</sup> Syal in RSC, *Much Ado* programme.

<sup>200</sup> Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: STREE, 2003), p. 144.

respectful manner and in doing so ‘invisibilised’ the oppressive power of the patriarchy. Chakravarti suggested that women’s lives are located at the ‘intersection of class, caste and patriarchy/ies’, and that these structures ‘can all work to oppress them’. With regards to upper-caste women (Beatrice was clearly one of these), Chakravarti wrote that they could be ‘both subordinated and also wield a degree of power’.<sup>201</sup> This fine balance was displayed in Khan’s production. As the traditional head of the household, Leonato exercised power over Beatrice, reaffirming the hierarchy. Whenever she stepped too far over the line defining acceptable behaviour, he curtailed her transgressive actions. For example, during her verbal sparring match with Benedick, when Benedick declared ‘I have done’, Leonato placed his hand on her shoulder to force her into submission. Furthermore, during Beatrice’s speech in Act 2 Scene 1 (61-70) Leonato not only made a physical intervention, he also interrupted with added lines to control her behaviour: ‘Hey’, ‘*Beti*’, and finally a loud shout – ‘*Beti!*’ – that brought her to a halt. She had crossed the line by mocking the tradition of marriage and ‘*Beti*’, meaning ‘daughter’ in Hindi, was a reminder of Beatrice’s subordination and Leonato’s demand for respect. The interpretation of this relationship and the additions to the text served to suggest the position of women in Indian society, and the rules defined by the patriarchy.

However, a scenario was created where the women could transgress these boundaries. Iqbal Khan made the masked dance in Act 2 Scene 1 a space for cross-dressing, and an event where gendered roles could be re-imagined. A

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

section was added to the beginning of the scene where Beatrice entered with Hero, Margaret and Ursula, all cross-dressed in the soldiers' army jackets and blue berets. They made their way to the stage through the auditorium smoking, drinking alcohol, and singing a Punjabi song '*Tere bada karara pudna*', about women's 'very sexy figures'. Their rebellious behaviour became sexually explicit as they danced provocatively, thrusting their hips and rippling their bodies. It was evident that they were aware of risks of their transgressive behaviour; when Leonato entered, Beatrice, Hero and Margaret quickly avoided punishment by handing Ursula their glasses and stuffing their cigarettes in her mouth. In their research into honour rationales, Nancy V. Baker *et al* have found that 'Women in traditional honor-bound societies seldom step out of line but instead conform their behaviour to societal dictates'.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, in Khan's *Much Ado* the women acted as they liked when alone and reverted to conformity to social dictates as soon as the space was dominated by the patriarchy. However, in this scene they were allowed to stay dressed as men, and the reversal of gendered roles was particularly emphasised by the dance. This worked on motifs of masculinity and femininity. The men bounced their hips in a mock-Bollywood fashion, and the women marched like soldiers. Tom Piper remembered: 'Iqbal described some Rajasthan folk dance where the men dress as women [...] I like the idea of the machismo soldiers letting their hair down by cross-dressing, also if the women

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<sup>202</sup> Nancy V. Baker, Peter R. Gregware and Margery A. Cassidy, 'Family Killing Fields: Honor Rationales in the Murder of Women', *Violence Against Women*, 5 (1999), 164–184 (p.167).

then dress as soldiers that could be fairly empowering.<sup>203</sup> Unfortunately the Rajasthani influence was not evident in the performance; the problem with not grounding the masquerade in a specific Indian dance form was that it broke with the social and cultural aesthetic and traditions that had been established elsewhere through the performance of Hindu rituals. The dance appeared as an imposed piece of choreography by a practitioner with little knowledge of Indian dance forms. It was non-specific in its cultural movement style, and seemed to sit uncomfortably on the performers' bodies, rather than stemming from their own cultural heritage and body knowledges. Nonetheless, the notion of experiencing empowerment through cross-dressing was suggested when at one point in the dance the women threw their male partners to the floor in a symbolic gesture of violence. They stood towering over the men, a total reversal of the hierarchy.

Through the cross-dressing sequence, Khan created a moment where the women could escape the boundaries of societal dictates. Yet any symbolic suggestion of empowerment was short-lived, the roles reversed once more, and the night of festivity where restrictions could be overcome was spent. Beatrice's frustrations towards the traditional role-confinement of women were explosively vocalised in Act 4 Scene 1, when, devastatingly, she cried, 'O that I were a man!' (315) The social theorist Somnath Batabyal wrote that Meera Syal 'effortlessly stepped into the role of Shakespeare's best-drawn feminist character' and delivered this moment 'with an unsurpassed delivery' that 'drew added potency

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<sup>203</sup> Tom Piper, 'If in doubt, back to the text...', *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 27 March 2012, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/blogs/designers-dreams-and-doodles/if-in-doubt-back-to-the-text/>> [accessed 15 April 2013].



from the Indian setting'.<sup>204</sup> This Beatrice knew the overt rationales that dictated the position of women, and understood the honour system inherent in society's structures. As Baker *et al* wrote, 'Behaviour expectations are widely known and shared in those cultures that expressly recognize honor; a woman may be repressed and even tyrannized but she will generally know where the safety parameters lie'.<sup>205</sup> Syal's character managed to stay on the right side of the line to avoid serious punishment. Hero, on the other hand, was not so lucky.

As Beatrice began to consider different possibilities for her future, her demeanour, her clothes, and the style of performance all shifted. Rather than the jeans and high-heeled shoes of earlier scenes, she wore a traditional white Indian outfit. In the final Act, Khan aimed to demonstrate a shift from the modern to the mythical in terms of the roles of the women, to move towards an 'ancient kind of sensibility [...], not a rejection of the modern but an exploration of that which exists beyond the modern'.<sup>206</sup> He especially emphasised this shift in the funeral rites scene. The lighting changed to a blue wash, and the actors, all in white, appeared one by one carrying umbrellas above their heads. They moved slowly upstage, accompanied by one actor singing in Hindi. The image was timeless, taking the play towards a more abstract vision of ancient tradition and ritual. Kahn described how 'we strip away [...] detail, we abstract the images' as the drama 'becomes about more mythic things'. This was also the case at the end of the play

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<sup>204</sup> Somnath Batabyal, 'Giving new voice to Shakespeare's silenced stalwarts', *Sunday Guardian*, 2012, <<http://www.sunday-guardian.com/artbeat/giving-new-voice-to-shakespeares-silenced-stalwarts>> [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>205</sup> Baker *et al*, 'Family Killing Fields', p. 179.

<sup>206</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Iqbal Khan, 2012.

where Hero, Beatrice and Margaret and Ursula appeared masked. They wore veils over their faces, a traditional image of submissive Indian womanhood. And yet there was a tension still. Khan said, 'I'm not sure she's completely comfortable, so in the final wedding scene we still have her sort of struggling to as it were, to fulfil that role'.<sup>207</sup> Earlier, after hearing of Benedick's 'love' for her, Syal had taken off the towel that was wrapped around her head and cradled it in her arms like a baby. When she realised what she was doing (subconsciously indicating a subtextual desire for children) she looked out to the audience in comic horror and ran offstage. Similarly, at the end of the play, after unveiling herself she made to run away before Benedick caught and kissed her. Khan's sense of what this scene conveyed about gender politics in the Indian setting was interesting: 'When they start sparring again, I think it is about her saying despite this beautiful ritual which she's completely invested in, "There is a certain kind of challenging freedom that I need and expect."<sup>208</sup> The changing roles of women, and their location at the intersection of class, caste and patriarchy, were explored in detail in Khan's production, and the choices he and the actors made contributed to a complex examination of gender politics in contemporary India.

### **Imagining India: The spectacular wedding**

Despite such detailed work, the 2012 *Much Ado* did not avoid certain stereotypes of India, particularly as an 'all-singing, all-dancing' nation. This was encouraged

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

by the ways in which the RSC's marketing department chose to frame and package it. Before Khan began rehearsals, this team had decided that 'the appeal of Bollywood is significant and could attract a lot of attention to the production.'<sup>209</sup> They designed publicity materials – newspaper adverts, posters, leaflets, and noticeboards outside the theatre – that used a colour scheme of bright pink and orange, and included photographs of the actors captioned 'The Bride', 'The Villain' 'The Wit', and 'The Cynic'. This colour scheme, and the reduction of the characters to such archetypal roles, suggested a bright and colourful, exotic Bollywoodised production. But it misrepresented Khan's vision entirely; the director was keen to avoid the commercialism of Bollywood. Hindi cinema is famous for elaborate wedding sequences with songs and dance, yet Khan was determined to represent a Hindu wedding accurately. He dedicated time in the rehearsal process to exploring the nuances of the ceremony, and asked each cast member to share their personal experiences. Some even shared photographs of their own wedding services. Kimberley Sykes, the Assistant Director, described how 'For every part of the play, we've asked: "What is the ritual and meaning behind the tradition?"' and then found our own way to stage it'.<sup>210</sup> This was evident during Hero's wedding scene, which Khan began with the striking of the *dhol* drums. In their analysis of Hindu and Sikh wedding ceremonies, Ramesh Chander Dogra and Urmila Dogra write, 'It is mentioned in the Vedas that dance

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<sup>209</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, 'Much ADO Audience Development Plan', (Unpublished, 2012).

<sup>210</sup> Kimberley Sykes quoted in Royal Shakespeare Company, *Much ADO About Nothing* Education Interview Pack, <[http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc\\_edu\\_much\\_ado\\_2012\\_interviews.pdf](http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc_edu_much_ado_2012_interviews.pdf)> [accessed 15 April 2013].

and music are arts associated with worship and ritual, and therefore it is clothed in sanctity'.<sup>211</sup> As the music built to a jubilant beat, members of the household entered with decorations and lights, clapping, cheering and dancing, setting up the room, and transforming the space into the marriage arena. The theatre house lights were brought up, which suggested that the audience were guests at the wedding. The sacred fire, *agni*, was brought on and placed at the front of the *mandap*, the temporary temple erected for the marriage ceremony. The family and friends of the bride and groom met each other one by one, offering a garland and carrying out the rituals of the *milni*. The *milni* ceremony represented the joining and bonds between the families (in this case Claudio's family was represented by Don Pedro and Benedick). The *Panditji*, the Hindu priest, entered from upstage centre and everyone onstage put their hands together in respectful *namaste*. There was a break in the music, and the *dhol* was struck to punctuate Hero's entrance. She walked through the audience in her Indian bridal clothes. Leonato met her, took her by the hands and presented her, centre-stage, to the audience. He then led Hero to the *mandap* where she exchanged garlands with Claudio, signifying 'their acceptance of each other as lifelong companions'.<sup>212</sup> Each moment before any of Shakespeare's dialogue was spoken was staged precisely in order to represent the important stages of the Hindu ceremony. Paul Taylor wrote, 'as we see here, Indians make such a gorgeously dressed, garland-exchanging song-and-dance of a

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<sup>211</sup> Ramesh Chander Dogra and Urmila Dogra, *Hindu and Sikh Wedding Ceremonies*, (New Delhi, 2000), p.38.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

wedding ceremony'.<sup>213</sup> His Eurocentric language demonstrated a lack of understanding of the scene and reflected the framing of the production as 'exotic'. The RSC itself saw the benefit of making the easy generic connection to Bollywood. They chose to use a phrase from the *Daily Mail* review in a sign outside the Noel Coward Theatre; it read, in bold capital letters: 'A BOLLYWOOD EXTRAVAGANZA'. In fact Khan had deliberately avoided the use of Bollywood dance or other references to Hindi cinema: 'I wanted to try and resist a kind of Marigold Indian Shakespeare experience', the kind of theatre 'that would delight, I would imagine [...] conservative visitors to Stratford'.<sup>214</sup> As the reviews showed, the marketing distracted from the production's concern with the complexities of Indian socio-culture.

### **Hero and *Izzat*: A Shakespearean Honour Killing**

Khan chose to confront the issue of honour killings in the South Asian setting. Meera Syal said it was as they worked on Hero's wedding scene that she felt she understood *Much Ado*: 'What shocked me as we rehearsed it was how the men in the play turn like a pack of dogs on an innocent woman'. She added: 'At the centre of the play is something that is almost an honour killing.'<sup>215</sup> In a programme note Jyotsna Singh agreed: 'This familiar early modern scene of a

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<sup>213</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Much Ado About Nothing', *Independent*, 2 August 2012, p. 21. Taylor did note that the staging made Hero's shaming 'all the more devastating a violation'.

<sup>214</sup> Iqbal Khan, 'Symposium Address', plenary talk at the British Black and Asian Shakespeare Symposium, University of Warwick, Coventry, 2 July 2012.

<sup>215</sup> Syal in RSC, *Much Ado* programme.

woman's loss of reputation has distinctive resonances in an Indian setting, in which even today the honour, or *izzat*, of a family is closely intertwined with the reputation of its women.<sup>216</sup> *Izzat* is a factor 'serving as both impetus and rationale for social action'. Crucially in the context of this production, 'Maintaining the reputation of oneself and one's family (especially women) is part of the concept of *izzat*, as is the obligatory taking of revenge when one's *izzat* has been violated'.<sup>217</sup> Shakespeare's Early Modern references to the concept of honour are clear in the text. Don John says in Act 3 Scene 2: 'If you love her then tomorrow, wed her. But it would better fit your honour to change your mind' (3.2.103). Claudio's response – 'If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her,' (3.3.111) – links honour and shame as twin concepts. Uma Chakravarti, in her analysis of gender, caste, class and state in India, suggested that such ideas remain the underpinning of beliefs and practices in the twenty-first century. 'The honour and respectability of men', she wrote, 'is protected and preserved through their women'.<sup>218</sup> Further, her research demonstrated that 'women are regarded as upholding the traditions by conforming to them; *men* on the other hand *uphold* traditions *by enforcing* them – *not* upon themselves but *upon women*. The greatest impact of the upholding/enforcing of such codes is in the arena of marriage'.<sup>219</sup> Iqbal Khan's treatment of the wedding scene established this clearly.

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<sup>216</sup> Jyotsna Singh in RSC, *Much Ado* programme.

<sup>217</sup> Owen M. Lynch, *Divine passions: the social construction of emotion in India* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), p. 243.

<sup>218</sup> Uma Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 (1993), pp. 579–585 (p. 579).

<sup>219</sup> Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste*, p. 144.

Much of the business of the marriage rites happened over and around Hero's body. She sat as all the other characters stood above her; she was the object of everyone's view and was denied a voice in her own marriage. Khan chose to cut Hero's line, 'I do' (4.1.9); instead, the other characters spoke for her. Leonato took the microphone from the *Pandit* and Beatrice then took it to say: 'She does'. In her examination of marriage in contemporary South Delhi, Devika Chawla wrote that 'the structure of the Hindu marriage creates a constraining framework of power within which women are placed in disadvantaged positions'.<sup>220</sup> This applied to Hero as her right to speak was lost. Claudio then made his devastating accusation: 'She knows the heat of a luxurious bed; | Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty' (4.1.39). As he spoke, the actor Sagar Arya used the microphone to heighten his shaming of Hero. His amplified voice filled the auditorium and assumed the audience's complicity; their mass presence was juxtaposed to the isolation of Hero helpless on the *mandap*. She collapsed into Beatrice's arms as all the guests deserted the scene of shame, abandoning the women. Beatrice frantically asked for help, but Leonato was content that her death would be his household's salvation: 'O Fate, take not away thy heavy hand! | Death is the fairest cover for her shame | That may be wished for' (4.1.115). When Hero stirred, his dejection gave way to a roar – 'Do not ope thine eyes!' (4.1.123) – and his rage built. He took Hero by the hands then in a burst of violence threw her to the floor, physicalising his suggestion to 'Strike at thy life'

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<sup>220</sup> Devika Chawla, 'I will speak out: Narratives of resistance in contemporary Indian women's discourses in Hindu arranged marriages', *Women and Language*, 30 (2009), pp. 5–15 (p. 5).

(4.1.127). Baker *et al* wrote that ‘The entire family experiences acute shame when a female member violates an honor norm, and the shame can only be redressed through a clear punitive response’.<sup>221</sup> To counter the loss of honour, Leonato’s answer was to wish his daughter dead, and when he learnt that Beatrice had not been her bedfellow his resolution became finite. He took off the pink turban he had so proudly worn and threw it at Hero’s feet; he waved his hand as if erasing the bonds between them and wiping her with the stain of shame that had tarnished her in his mind: ‘Hence from her, let her die’ (4.1.154). Chakravarti observed that ‘since a woman’s sexuality is still under patriarchal and caste control, and still requires to be formally transferred from father to husband, these killings have the explicit consent of the community, especially that to which the woman belongs’.<sup>222</sup>

Most reviewers commented on the relevance of this scene to contemporary Indian society. Christopher Gray said Leonato’s ‘willingness to do the deed himself, cannot fail to have resonances with the disgraceful honour killings of today’.<sup>223</sup> James Drew wrote that ‘The choice of setting becomes more than aesthetic’ at the wedding because ‘the themes of ‘chastity’ and ‘honour’ [...] resonate with India in the modern day and the still-recent news of familial honour

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<sup>221</sup> Baker *et al*, ‘Family Killing Fields’, p. 169.

<sup>222</sup> Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste*, p. 157.

<sup>223</sup> Christopher Gray, ‘Much Ado About Nothing: The Royal Shakespeare Company, Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon’, *Asian Image*, 9 August 2012, <[http://www.asianimage.co.uk/leisure/whats\\_on/9864489.Much\\_Ado\\_About\\_Nothing\\_The\\_Royal\\_Shakespeare\\_Company\\_Courtyard\\_Theatre\\_Stratford\\_upon\\_Avon/](http://www.asianimage.co.uk/leisure/whats_on/9864489.Much_Ado_About_Nothing_The_Royal_Shakespeare_Company_Courtyard_Theatre_Stratford_upon_Avon/)> [accessed 15 April 2013].



killings in Asian communities'.<sup>224</sup> Iqbal Khan himself argued: 'The parallels between early modern England and modern Delhi are very strong, hierarchical structures still exist, chastity of women is a strong generative force'.<sup>225</sup> Honour killings in South Asian communities were clearly a cause of anxiety. However, there is a danger of reinforcing stereotypes of the abusive patriarch that are not representative of the majority of Indian men. In two other examples of Shakespearean productions translocated to Indian contexts (see Chapter four), the image of the violent father was repeated onstage. Whatever their backgrounds, practitioners need to be aware of their contribution to the repertoire of negative stereotypical images. It is important to engage with contemporary issues of concern to diverse communities, but it becomes problematic when the same negative images are offered repeatedly. The recycling of negative images – whether in news bulletins, press headlines or Shakespearean revivals – can lead to the normalisation of stereotypical representational practices; and as Stuart Hall argued, to move beyond this one needs to represent the 'immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of [non-white] subjects'.<sup>226</sup> It is easy to draw parallels between Shakespeare's patriarchal figures and *izzat*, but there are many aspects of South Asian socio-politics and culture to be explored – whether through closely-observed details or through metaphor –

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<sup>224</sup> James Drew, 'Theatre Review: Much Ado About Nothing @ Noel Coward Theatre', *Londonist*, 3 October 2012, <<http://londonist.com/2012/10/theatre-review-much-ado-about-nothing-noel-coward-theatre.php>> [accessed 15 April 2013].

<sup>225</sup> Khan, 'Director Q and A'.

<sup>226</sup> Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441–449 (p.443).

without continually returning to the same images of the repressed South Asian woman.

## **Conclusion**

Like *Julius Caesar*, the RSC's 2012 production of *Much Ado About Nothing* raised many issues concerning the representation of non-Western cultures, communities and peoples on the British stage; the framing of both productions led to stereotypical associations. That year Michael Boyd admitted: 'We are a very white organisation. Only two percent of our audience at Stratford is Asian, black or from an ethnic minority'.<sup>227</sup> Anna Mitchelson, the RSC's Marketing Manager, stated that it was a primary objective to target a wider audience for this *Much Ado*. A document stating the marketing plan and objectives specified that 'We want to reach deeper into BME communities particularly than we have done before.' The strategy was to create 'targeted campaigns for those communities and bespoke tactical marketing aimed at a different and wider audience than normal.' For this project the RSC's focus would be 'on Birmingham, Leicester, Solihull, Wolverhampton and other areas after BME postcode analysis has been conducted'.<sup>228</sup> The Marketing Department approached media outlets not normally used to promote the company's work – including specifically Asian television channels, radio stations, the BBC Asian Network, magazines and newspapers

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<sup>227</sup> Michael Boyd quoted in Richard Brooks, 'All the world's an ethnic stage', *Sunday Times*, 15 July 2012, p.15.

<sup>228</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, 'Much Ado Audience Development Plan'.

such as *The Asian Today* – and worked on reciprocal marketing with Arts organisations with a South Asian interest or influence, including Sampad and Kala Sangam. In terms of unique selling-points, the highest priority factor was Meera Syal herself. The RSC recognised her as a powerful role-model and representative of British Asian communities: ‘Meera Syal has a huge appeal and is a widely known name, and particularly has ticket pulling power to BME /Asian audiences.’<sup>229</sup> Thus, in much of the publicity Syal became a powerful tool of leverage and attraction. The posters and programme cover, the interviews and discussions in the news, on the radio and in online forums – these all featured images and discussions with, and items about, her. Discussing the audiences of *Much Ado*, and the idea of reaching out to non-traditional audiences, Paul Bhattarcharjee (Benedick) commented: ‘I was really pleased as far as the audience was concerned, [it] was really mixed. A lot of Asian presence, a lot of Asian families came and that was brilliant to see.’<sup>230</sup> Iqbal Khan was more tentative: ‘Part of the problem is that there is little theatre-going tradition among British Asians. Also, for some, Shakespeare still represents a colonial power’.<sup>231</sup> These comments gave rise to questions concerning the relationship between Britain’s main subsidised stages and BAME communities. How were potential audiences targeted, and were there sustainable strategies in place to encourage a more diverse audience? Would the RSC continue to develop their new audiences

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Paul Bhattarcharjee, ‘Shakespeare’s South Asian Stage’, (Bush Theatre, 3 November 2012).

<sup>231</sup> Iqbal Khan quoted in Richard Brooks, ‘All the world on Bard’s stage’, *Sunday Times*, 15 July 2012, p. 15.

and attract them to productions for their future seasons, which might not have specific black or Asian connections? As we shall see, these became live issues within weeks of the end of the Olympics.

The critical reception of the British South Asian actors' performances was not as positive as it was for the cast of *Julius Caesar*. Kate Bassett wrote: 'The snag with *Much Ado* is that the acting is uneven in calibre, many of the cast members having had few previous chances to perform Shakespeare'.<sup>232</sup> Similarly, Robert Gore-Langton declared, 'With the majority of the actors making their Shakespearean debuts, the verse ends up being delivered to the back of the set with nil emphasis on diction'.<sup>233</sup> Dominic Cavendish was equally concerned with the quality of the spoken text: 'What's lacking at the moment is the more boring virtue of delivering the text with clarity, comic confidence and grace'.<sup>234</sup> As we have seen, far fewer of the *Much Ado* company had previous experience of performing the classical repertoire, and the senior male actor Madhav Sharma stated: 'I started as a Shakespeare Wallah, since my entire career started with the Kendalls, touring India and going round the Far East, so it's like a full cycle. I only came to this country to do Shakespeare at Stratford. After 50 years I've finally made it!'<sup>235</sup> In 1976 Naseem Khan's *The Arts Britain Ignores* pinpointed the lack of opportunities for black and Asian actors to develop their skills through

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<sup>232</sup> Kate Bassett, 'Shakespeare Goes East', *Theatre News Online*, 2012, <<http://www.theaternewsonline.com/LondonTheatreReviews/SHAKESPEAREGOESEA-ST.cfm>> [accessed 23 April 2013].

<sup>233</sup> Robert Gore-Langton, 'Much Ado About Nothing' *The Mail on Sunday*, 2012, p. 12.

<sup>234</sup> Cavendish, 'Much Ado'.

<sup>235</sup> Madhav Sharma, 'Actor Madhav Sharma tackles Much Ado About Nothing', *Theatre Voice*, 1 September 2012, <[http://www.theatrevoice.com/8628/actor-madhav-sharma-tackles-much-ado-about-nothing/#.UXaUS7\\_3Dm0](http://www.theatrevoice.com/8628/actor-madhav-sharma-tackles-much-ado-about-nothing/#.UXaUS7_3Dm0)> [accessed 23 April 2013].

experience: ‘The “vicious circle” remained: black actors blamed directors/agents for not casting them, whereas directors/agents said they did not cast black actors because they lacked experience’.<sup>236</sup> Over three decades later, the same issue was debated in relation to South Asian actors in Shakespeare, and the need for greater opportunities was clear.

As the first RSC productions to feature so many actors from BAME backgrounds, the 2012 *Much Ado* and *Julius Caesar* were similarly significant for British black and Asian Shakespearean artists. Given the context in which these funding and casting decisions were made, and given that the World Shakespeare Festival and the Cultural Olympiad aimed to celebrate – or at least assert – Britain’s cultural diversity, some core questions remained. Were these productions opportunistic? Was the casting tokenistic? How handicapped were mainstream arts organisations by stereotyped aesthetics and inherited historical prejudice? Was the creativity of BAME performers limited by the structures of power within the organisation? The conclusion to this thesis will consider how the relationship between the RSC and the BAME actors was sustained, and how the practices relating to the representation of ethnically diverse peoples were developed over the years 2012–2016.

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<sup>236</sup> Chambers, p. 155.

### Chapter Three: *Antony and Cleopatra*: Claiming Cleopatra black

The RSC's 2012 productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado* indicated the possible problems when a national cultural organisation transposes Shakespearean texts into an 'African' or; 'Asian' context because the play seems to fit a European stereotype, or because it represents a chance to reinforce a company's social claim to inclusivity. The case of *Antony and Cleopatra* is rather different. This is a play which specifically dramatises the political – indeed, imperialist – clash between Europe and Africa, as well as the allegedly exotic – indeed erotic – fascination of 'the East'. For twenty years, therefore, *Antony and Cleopatra* has been the stage for a concerted attempt to rewrite the presence of black artists in British theatre – and of black activity within world history.

*Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado* (2012) had demonstrated 'cross-cultural' models of casting and representation by a white-led organisation. They had aimed to demonstrate inclusivity and cultural diversity by implementing concept-driven directorial interpretations imposed onto Shakespeare's plays to examine 'non-Western' issues. The following year at the RSC, a black director turned to one of Shakespeare's plays with issues of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity written into it in order to disrupt the white hegemonic practice and claim power as a black practitioner. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a play based on the dichotomy between Rome and Egypt, the Self and the Other, with themes of racism, subordination, colonialism, and imperialism written into its core. Rome is a place of pragmatism, stability, militarism, action, masculinity. Alexandria is everything that Rome is

not; it is sensual, sexual, excessive, feminine, a place of pleasure, music, and feasting. The Roman Octavia is of a ‘holy, cold and still conversation’ (2.6.125); Cleopatra by contrast is ‘with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black’ (1.5.29). The myth of Cleopatra’s exoticism has been fixed in Enobarbus’ speech:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Burned on the water; the poop was beaten gold;  
Purple the sails, and so perfumed that  
The winds were love-sick with them;  
[...]  
For her own person,  
It beggared all description: she did lie  
In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,  
O’er-picturing that Venus where we see  
The fancy outwork nature.

(2.2.201-211)

The inherent tropes in Shakespeare’s text are problematic in a postcolonial context, where the portrayal of the East as ‘exotic’ recycles racist Orientalist stereotypes. Considering the cultures and locations of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, the choices surrounding casting – particularly the role of Cleopatra – have evoked issues of identity and representation politics in different ways.

Cleopatra has not been widely considered part of the canon of Shakespeare’s black characters alongside Othello, Aaron and the Prince of Morocco. Yet some scholars are convinced that Shakespeare intended Cleopatra

to be black; for Celia R. Daileader, for example, it is ‘stupefyingly obvious’: ‘Shakespeare’s Cleopatra calls herself “black,” and the historical Cleopatra was queen of an African nation’.<sup>237</sup> Actually the historical figure’s race is still an issue of contention, with certain historians arguing that Cleopatra was ethnically Macedonian Greek. She was the descendant of Ptolemy I, the Macedonian general whose rule in Egypt began in 305 BC. However, the ethnicity of Cleopatra’s mother remains unclear; she may have been Egyptian, and the fact that Cleopatra spoke the Egyptian language has led to the argument that she was taught by her mother.<sup>238</sup> Shakespeare’s own Cleopatra declares: ‘Think on me | That am with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black’ (1.5.28-29). For Carol Chillington Rutter, Shakespeare’s references to Cleopatra’s blackness are ‘as explicit as Othello’s [...] “I am black”’<sup>239</sup>, and the character Philo refers to her ‘tawny front’ (1.1.6). Yet it is also true that Antony describes her ‘white hand’ (3.13.140) and perhaps these descriptions suggest more about the characters’ ways of seeing than about Cleopatra’s true ethnic identity. Similarly, the way modern practitioners and audiences see Cleopatra speaks volumes regarding their frameworks of assumptions and spectatorship. Ever since Beerbohm Tree’s Edwardian-imperialist production asserted the play’s breadth and significance in 1906, the performance history of the role of Cleopatra in the West has read as a catalogue of

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<sup>237</sup> Celia R. Daileader, ‘The Cleopatra Complex: White Actresses on the Interracial “Classic” Stage’ in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 205–220 (p. 208).

<sup>238</sup> See, for example, Duane W. Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 15.

<sup>239</sup> Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare’s Stage* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 62.



white representation. From such iconic screen performances as Vivien Leigh's (1945) and Elizabeth Taylor's (1963), to the on-stage Cleopatras of British stars including Helen Mirren (1982/1998), Judi Dench (1987) and Harriet Walter (2006), the actors' whiteness went unremarked: it was taken for granted that the casting of this role depended solely on the performer's eminence near the very peak of the profession. Ethnicity, diversity and access were all thought irrelevant.

However, the treatment of Cleopatra's race in performance has always been more revealing of dominant – conscious or unconscious – institutional attitudes towards ethnic and cultural identity than it has been about historical 'accuracy'. Although her race is unfixed, granting stage practitioners the freedom to choose, the *myth* of Cleopatra has been fixed in cultural representations, the majority of which depict her as white.<sup>240</sup> Her whiteness has come to be understood as the hegemonic norm. It is not history but gender – her power of attraction, her independence, and the threat she presents to male authority – that has rendered her 'Other' to the Roman characters and to generations of directors, and just as Antony saw Cleopatra's 'white hand', so too for generations of audiences Cleopatra's 'whiteness' has been 'naturalised'. To quote Rutter:

Until white spectators encounter images of blackness where we don't expect them, we won't be impelled to examine white, hegemonic cultural assumptions or dismantle the

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<sup>240</sup> See for example, Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams, and Distortions* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990).

structures of spectatorship that have naturalized ‘white looking’.<sup>241</sup>

Yet if blackness has been absent in the central figure of the Queen, it has been present in her shadows. A casting pattern has emerged on the post-Windrush British stage where non-white actors have been employed to offset Cleopatra’s whiteness. Since the Anglo-Iranian Darien Angadi played Alexas for the RSC in 1972 (and for BBC TV in 1981), BAME actors have been placed in supporting roles to surround Cleopatra with their darkness – their ‘exotic’ bodies.

In line with Said’s discourse of Orientalism (2003), it is clear that Shakespeare constructed Cleopatra as the exotic ‘Other’: she is ‘Egyptian’, a ‘gipsy’, ‘Egypt’. Indeed Ania Loomba has critiqued the Orientalist nature of Shakespeare’s descriptions; for Loomba, Cleopatra’s ‘waywardness, emotionality, unreliability and exotic appeal are all derived from the stereotypes that Said identifies as recurrent in that discourse’.<sup>242</sup> But it has been through the bodies surrounding her that Cleopatra’s exoticism has found its strongest expression onstage. Her Otherness has been constructed by the supporting actors, who have stood in as accessories; human beings becoming theatrical properties. And whereas Otherness was once normally enhanced by putting tawny make-up on her attendants Charmian, Iras, Alexas and Mardian, – for example when Peggy Ashcroft played the Queen in 1953 – increasingly these have become roles which

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>242</sup> Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 79.

BAME actors play, placed in positions of subservience and subordination.<sup>243</sup> This practice was still evident in 2014 on a mainstream stage: Shakespeare's Globe. Here Eve Best and Clive Wood played Cleopatra and Antony in a production directed by Jonathan Munby. Cleopatra's exoticism was constructed by her attendants. They looked on from the shadows, pulled her chariot, fanned her, dressed her and played for her; BAME bodies were props and scenery. All the non-white actors employed in this production were used as her support: Peter Bankolé (Messenger/Eros), Jonathan Bonnici (Soothsayer/Thidias), Kammy Darweish (Alexas), Sirine Saba (Charmian), and Obioma Ugoala (Mardian). These actors hailed from varying British-ethnic backgrounds but all contributed to a generic sense of Orientalist spectacle. Whilst the white leading actors performed the text, as the centre of attention, on the peripheries brown bodies were poised with fans. At one point, the men, with brown chests bared and decorated with gold necklaces, were used to pull Cleopatra onstage as she lounged on a carpet. They moved slowly forwards, tugging at the ropes attached to her chariot, in an image reminiscent of slavery.

It is difficult to apply a model of casting to this practice, certainly none of Thompson's four 'non-traditional' categories apply. Munby and the Globe management purposefully chose non-white actors to evoke a sense of exoticism without any specificity; this, as I shall argue later, was Subaltern casting. For one reviewer, the ambiguity of ethnicity and culture was confusing and self-defeating.

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<sup>243</sup> For full details see Jami Rogers, 'Roles', *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/roles>> [accessed 18 January 2017].

Paul Taylor wrote that Eve Best played a ‘curiously English-seeming ‘serpent of old Nile’’, and this ‘despite the warbling eunuch and the bare chested flunkies who haul her round on a bed and keep her cool with pulley-operated carpet-fans’.<sup>244</sup> In fact, to have cast BAME actors as ‘bare chested flunkies’ to drag in a leading white actress in a ‘Duchess of Cambridge coiffure’ was indicative of the levels of inequalities in contemporary British multicultural relations, and demonstrated the limitations for non-white performers in Shakespearean roles. Once again, in the twenty-first century, reconstructed images of black servitude, framed by the white gaze, the white experience, were placed by a white British director on a major Shakespearean stage. Munby was ignoring changes that had been advancing for years in British theatre, and demonstrating how difficult it is within mainstream institutions to effect fundamental changes. Outside of the mainstream, however, Cleopatra *was* a black woman; she had become a cultural symbol of potential black empowerment.

In 1991 Yvonne Brewster, the Jamaican-born actor, director and producer, used Cleopatra as a figure to reaffirm black identity. For her own Talawa Theatre Company she presented Dona Croll as the first black woman to play the role on a British stage. Two decades later, in 2013, Joaquina Kalukango, an African American, became the first black actress cast to play the role for the RSC.<sup>245</sup> This

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<sup>244</sup> Paul Taylor, ‘Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare’s Globe, theatre review: “Exquisitely understated”’, *Independent*, 30 May 2014, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/antony-and-cleopatra-shakespeares-globe-theatre-review-exquisitely-understated-9460457.html>> [accessed 18 January 2016].

<sup>245</sup> Croll’s performance of Cleopatra had actually been preceded by Pauline Black who played the role in an adaptation entitled *Cleopatra and Antony* ‘by William Shakespeare and others’, performed by four actors for the Actors Touring Company in 1989. See Jami

production also had a black American director: Tarell Alvin McCraney. For in 1991 and 2013 both Brewster and McCraney had visions that aimed to put black identity at the heart of this play, and to claim their productions for black actors and communities; they claimed Cleopatra *black*. As we shall see, the similarity of their concepts, contexts and reception demonstrated how difficult this was to achieve and how important to try. Both productions embraced black scholarship, black retellings of history; both created an environment which enlarged on the text's sense of poetic fluidity – and both refused to locate the play within the Edwardian/imperialist clichés of ancient Rome and Egypt – ‘th’ East [where] my pleasure lies’ (2.3.39).

### ***Antony and Cleopatra, Talawa, 1991***

Yvonne Brewster was resolutely clear that Cleopatra was historically black. She said: ‘I am not a historian, but I think this play is important because it tells the truth: Cleopatra and the Egypt she ruled was African’. Moreover, ‘this heritage – with all its great achievements and shortcoming – is *ours*’.<sup>246</sup> She argued in her production and in interviews that the construction of Cleopatra’s identity as

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Rogers, ‘Cleopatra and Antony (1989)’, *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016,  
<<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/productions/cleopatra-and-antony-1989-actors-touring-company>> [accessed 27 March 2017].

<sup>246</sup> Claudette Williams, ‘Queen Cleopatra: The Truth’, *Spare Rib Magazine*, April 1991, p. 35.

purely Greek Macedonian was ‘part of the colonial miseducation used to fuel a whole anthropology of racism’,<sup>247</sup> and she added:

There is an unwillingness on the part of Europeans to acknowledge the contribution of Africa. The fable of the white Cleopatra is just another way of bleaching out history, cutting the nose off the sphinx.<sup>248</sup>

Just as history books had been part of the misrepresentation of African history, so too, Brewster felt, had British theatre stages, and her company existed to redress this narrative. Brewster used Shakespeare’s play to place black heritage and history centre-stage; she was determined to claim Cleopatra back, and claim her black. Talawa was founded in 1986 by four theatre practitioners, three of them women: Brewster, Carmen Munroe and Mona Hammond, with Inigo Espejel. The company was created by this group in response to their dissatisfaction with the ‘lack of creative opportunities for actors from minority ethnic backgrounds and the general marginalisation of Black peoples from cultural processes’ (Brewster).<sup>249</sup> The name Talawa was taken from Jamaican patois, meaning ‘small but feisty’, and the founding message of inner resilience and determination that gave the company its name represented the ethos of gusto with which the founders sought to pursue their wider aims. Their manifesto was threefold: to provide opportunities for black actors, to use black culture to enrich British

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Dea Birkett, ‘Dark star’, *Guardian*, 15 May 1991.

<sup>249</sup> Talawa, ‘About Talawa’, *Talawa*, 2013, <[http://www.tawala.com/about\\_talawa.php](http://www.tawala.com/about_talawa.php)> [accessed 1 March 2013].

theatre, and to enlarge theatre audiences among black communities.<sup>250</sup> The staging of Western classics including Shakespeare alongside African classics and black writers such as C.L.R. James and Derek Walcott was important to the company. Brewster aimed to adapt the canon in order to examine different migrant cultures and experiences. Her selection of work was focused on the expression of black experience in Britain, particularly of racism – for example the staging of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* with an all-black cast as a comment upon the ‘barely hidden vulgarities of English snobbery’.<sup>251</sup> The plays were also used as vehicles to provide black actors with opportunities to play parts that they otherwise would not have had; the work was actor-centred rather than being focused on developing a distinct theatrical praxis or dramaturgy in the ways that other BAME theatre companies did (such as Tara Arts [see Chapter four]). Brewster stated unambiguously: ‘At Talawa theatre company, our policy was to give black actors work they weren’t being offered – and nobody was offering them the chance to do Shakespeare.’<sup>252</sup>

*Antony and Cleopatra* was Brewster’s first Shakespearean production. The company was made up of fourteen actors from various ethnic backgrounds. She chose three British black actors to play the leading roles: Dona Croll as Cleopatra, Jeffery Kissoon as Antony, and Ben Thomas as Octavius Caesar. The Indian-born Renu Setna played Enobarbus. Dona Croll remembered asking the director why

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<sup>250</sup> Chambers, p. 190.

<sup>251</sup> Chambers, p. 191.

<sup>252</sup> Yvonne Brewster quoted in David Jays, ‘Yvonne Brewster: Nobody was offering black actors Shakespeare so we staged our King Lear’, *Guardian*, 1 February 2016, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/01/yvonne-brewster-king-lear-william-shakespeare-how-we-staged>> [accessed 20 January 2017].

she didn't highlight the play's cultural dialectics by casting the Romans as white: Brewster replied, 'I didn't start Talawa Theatre Company to give parts to white actors'.<sup>253</sup> Croll herself said later: 'I want to do the play with all the Romans white and all the Egyptians black so that you get that colonisation; you get the dominance of the Romans, and then how [Cleopatra]'s regarded, the way they speak about her, would make more sense'.<sup>254</sup> Brewster, however, decided not to make overt geographic or cultural references to Africa, the Caribbean or America as she had done in previous Talawa productions. Her programme note referred to the theme of colonisation with some emphasis, and noted that when her production was first planned, war had not yet been declared on Iraq. 'We, as an all black company,' she wrote, 'could not escape some of the indelible images of this most recent of wars [Iraq] [...] appropriation, greed, colonisation, black oil, black foot soldier fighting black foot soldier'.<sup>255</sup> Yet she did not specify where her version was situated in relation to contemporary or historical politics. Perhaps what was most important to her was the casting of a black Cleopatra. An entire page of the programme was dedicated to this. Brewster included a photograph of a painting of the Egyptian Queen Ahrus-Nofretari, dated 1200BC, and a caption stated: 'The queen is depicted as a goddess, her skin coloured deepest black'. Moreover 'she is shown as black to enhance her chance of achieving resurrection in the next world. Cleopatra (as an Egyptian queen) would have dressed in this

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<sup>253</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Dona Croll, 21 January 2015.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.



manner'.<sup>256</sup> Brewster's vision was unambiguous.

Helen Turner's production design featured several sets of stairs leading to a raised, curved promenade. A backdrop changed colour depending on the lighting. Cushions, rugs and metres of fabric were brought on stage to evoke Egypt, while metal chairs represented the masculine Roman world. The costumes were made from drapes of material fashioned into loose robes, shirts, dresses and wraps, with a colour palette of fawn, green, brown and white. They were not specifically illustrative of any period or civilisation, but were designed to 'hint' at 'ancient Egyptian culture'.<sup>257</sup> Antony and Octavius additionally wore puffed waistcoats as armour. Yvonne Brewster, who was determined not to tap into any white fantasies concerning race, aimed to convey Shakespearean themes and politics rather than rework stereotypes of black culture. Yet stereotypes seemed to be precisely what at least one critic wished to see: 'It may be that we have rapidly learnt to expect too much of our black theatre companies', wrote Jeffrey Wainwright for the *Independent*: 'We have come to look for newly exciting, uninhibited acting styles and less naturalistic staging which we think in some vague way might draw upon 'ritual''.<sup>258</sup> 'We hope', Wainwright concluded, 'that their approach to the European classics will produce radically new perspectives and references to surprise us'.<sup>259</sup> A sense of cultural ownership was implicit in this 'hope', with its distinction between 'us' and the 'surprising' 'them'. In 1991

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<sup>256</sup> Talawa, *Antony and Cleopatra* programme (Liverpool: Merseyside Everyman Theatre, 1991).

<sup>257</sup> Yvonne Brewster in Lew Baxter, 'The Bard and a lass unparalleled', *Daily Telegraph*, 1991.

<sup>258</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, 'An African Queen', *Independent*, 30 April 1991.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

black theatre companies were by default the Other, yet it was this type of Eurocentricism and orientalism that Brewster fought against: ‘When will stereotypes of black theatre die?’ she asked, ‘When will people stop expecting black actors to relate themes to “back home”?’<sup>260</sup> Brewster berated the idea that she was expected to produce a ‘reggae’ production or an ‘Afro rap musical’: it was through her approach to casting Cleopatra that she aimed to derail the white hegemonic norm. Regarding her choice of a Jamaican-born black British actress, Brewster exclaimed: ‘Let’s face it, who would have given Dona Croll the chance to do Cleopatra otherwise? Nobody’.<sup>261</sup>

### **Speaking for Cleopatra: Dona Croll**

At this point in her career Croll, who migrated to England when she was four, was no stranger to Shakespeare. Her first Shakespearean role was as Bottom in her grammar school production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, after which her teachers convinced her to become an actress. Her first professional Shakespeare was *The Merchant of Venice* at the Royal Exchange, Manchester in 1987, where she played Nerissa alongside Harriet Walter’s Portia. Reviewing her career in the English classics, Croll pointed out, ‘The only thing I’ll say about my parts I have played, apart from Cleopatra, is that they have never been romantic leads’, and she continued: ‘I always get, you know, the servant or the gentlewoman or

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<sup>260</sup> Yvonne Brewster in Naseem Khan, ‘Art of Darkness’, *City Limits*, 502 (1991), 16–23, (p. 16).

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

somebody's handmaiden and I can think of very few black actresses who are ever offered those [leading romantic] parts'.<sup>262</sup> She remembered writing to theatres, introducing herself and saying 'I'd love to play Titania', and they wrote back: 'We are doing the production straight'. Croll wondered what 'straight' meant.<sup>263</sup> Her experience draws attention to the tradition where mainstream companies did not consider black or Asian actors outside a 'concept'-led version. Croll tried to understand the reasoning behind the lack of opportunities: 'We've lived here for so long we're all part of that culture, we know all the history of it, we've taught the history, we can speak the language and all of that', and yet, 'We don't get a chance to play those kind of parts'. She summed it up: 'It isn't that the theatre establishment is racist as such, rather that it is governed from and through the lens of white people'.<sup>264</sup> Croll, that is, stressed the need to dismantle the structures of spectatorship that encourage 'white looking', and she regarded Talawa as a space for work that would challenge the hegemonic norm: 'It's just to have the chance to do it. It was well worth having Yvonne there just so we got the opportunity to do things'.<sup>265</sup> Given the opportunity to play Cleopatra, therefore, she fully embraced the Queen's blackness: 'I am going', she decided, 'to play her like an African Queen'.<sup>266</sup> This affected her choices in terms of voice and movement. In an interview for the *Guardian*, which was then beginning to publicise the work of

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<sup>262</sup> Howard, Interview with Croll.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Michael McMillan, 'The black body and Shakespeare: conversations with black actors' in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 122–134 (p. 123).

<sup>265</sup> Howard, Interview with Croll.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

black stage artists, she suggested: ‘My physical movement is going to be very distinct’. She also said: ‘It is important that Cleopatra is black, there is an earthiness and movement about her. European actors are not very good at using their bodies. But there is an African side of me, so I can do these things.’<sup>267</sup>

It could be argued that at the same time as claiming an affinity to the character because of her race and heritage, here Croll collapsed racial categories into stereotypes. But, discussing the black body and Shakespeare decades later, she suggested that certain innate physical qualities improved her performance. ‘Black actors’, she said, ‘enrich Shakespeare because they speak from their gut and from the ground’.<sup>268</sup> With a ‘looseness’ and ‘grounding’ of the body as her starting point, she looked to powerful female figures for inspiration: ‘She is somewhere between Maya Angelou and Tina Turner’.<sup>269</sup> Yet it wasn’t only black American icons that Croll channelled: ‘I played it like Margaret Thatcher when Octavian came to negotiate with Cleopatra.’<sup>270</sup> She wanted to focus on the strength and authority of the role: ‘White actresses play her as a sexy queen. I play the politics and power’.<sup>271</sup> How did British reviewers respond to the first ‘African’ Cleopatra most of them had seen? They did not focus on political skill. Michael Billington wrote that ‘she captures the Egyptian dish’s violent changeability’, particularly in the Messenger scene.<sup>272</sup> For Alaister Macauley, she provided ‘the untrammelled force that makes Cleopatra the most imperious and

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<sup>267</sup> Birkett.

<sup>268</sup> McMillan, p. 126.

<sup>269</sup> Birkett.

<sup>270</sup> McMillan, p. 129.

<sup>271</sup> Birkett.

<sup>272</sup> Michael Billington, ‘Antony and Cleopatra’, *Guardian*, 1991.

the most animal person in the play'.<sup>273</sup> These descriptions of the 'Egyptian dish' reveal tensions that tend to emerge in critiques of a black woman in this role. The use of 'animal' to describe Croll connects to the history of racialised discourse that labelled the people of Africa and the diaspora as subhuman. The issue of gendered stereotyping is innate in the play, and coupled with racialised responses when the role is performed by black artists, this doubly damaging depiction has led some to question the suitability of the role for black women. For example in 2006 Celia R. Daileader suggested that black women should avoid playing her, and referenced Hugh Quarshie's declaration that black men should not play Othello because 'doing so reinforces racial stereotypes'.<sup>274</sup> She believed 'the same to be true of Cleopatra on both antiracist and feminist grounds'.<sup>275</sup> Shakespeare's Cleopatra is sexualised by those around her – she is called 'whore', 'strumpet' and 'nag' – and in original performances the role would have been played by a young, white male actor: it was not a black body that was eroticised. However, performances by black women can be seen to tap into certain stereotypes. For centuries, women of African origin have been portrayed as 'hypersexual'. For Stuart Hall the case study of Saartje Baartmann, who became known as the 'Hottentot Venus', was a stark reminder of the treatment of black women by Western men as 'spectacle'. She was exhibited and 'produced on a raised stage

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<sup>273</sup> Alastair Macaulay, 'Antony and Cleopatra, Bloomsbury Theatre', *Financial Times*, 1991.

<sup>274</sup> Hugh Quarshie, 'Second Thoughts About Othello', *International Shakespeare Association Occasional Papers*, 7 (1999) 1–25 (p. 14).

<sup>275</sup> Daileader, *Cleopatra Complex*, p. 218.

like a wild beast, came and went from her cage when ordered'.<sup>276</sup> Waxen moulds and plaster casts of her anatomy were displayed for the public and analysed by naturalists and ethnologists. Hall argued that 'Saartje Baartman became the embodiment of "difference"'. 'What's more, her difference was "pathologized": represented as a pathological form of "otherness"'. For, 'falling outside a western classificatory system of what "women" are like, she had to be constructed as "Other"'. Her body was – according to the logic of oppositional binaries and pornographic 'reductionism' – 'primitive' and 'wild' in contrast to the white female body, and her 'primitive' anatomy signified her 'primitive' sexual appetite. Hall argued that her body was "'read", like a text, for the living evidence – the proof, the Truth – which it provided of her absolute "otherness"'.<sup>277</sup> In her examination of black women and feminism (1982), bell hooks offered similar arguments. Pointing out that 'Stereotypical images of black womanhood during slavery were based on the myth that all black women were immoral and sexually loose',<sup>278</sup> hooks charted how, during the years of Reconstruction (1867– 77), 'black women struggled to change negative images of black womanhood perpetuated by whites'. She has argued that the media played a crucial role in deliberately perpetuating those myths and stereotypes, as a method of social control, to maintain white supremacy.<sup>279</sup> Given the power of representation, we must ask whether the modern British press – unconsciously or otherwise and

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<sup>276</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 264.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>278</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 54.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55–60.

obviously on a much smaller scale – perpetuated this tendency, in relation to another ‘case study’: the staging of Cleopatra. In order to change views about black humanity, male and female, it is necessary to disrupt white primacy and unfix the white gaze. Frantz Fanon described how ‘the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by dye’.<sup>280</sup> It is necessary to shift the fixity of the discriminatory glance.

In order to decolonise culturally ingrained concepts of ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality, the repeated portrayal of racist and sexist stereotypes must of course be avoided, and new ways of seeing imagined. For Daileader, therefore, Cleopatra ‘embodies a stereotype that poses as many problems on feminist as antiracist grounds’ and should not be performed by black women.<sup>281</sup> However, for Yvonne Brewster and Dana Croll, it was precisely through performance that they aimed to render blackness appropriate, to stake a claim in a history they believed was whitewashed, and to unsettle the structures of spectatorship that established white as the hegemonic norm. In 1978 Edward Said wrote in *Orientalism*, ‘We must take seriously Vico’s great observation that men make their own history’; in 1991 Brewster and Croll set out to demonstrate that women, black women, could do so too.<sup>282</sup> Brewster felt certain that her production of *Antony and Cleopatra* would mark a moment of change:

It’ll be quite difficult for people to forget in the future that  
Shakespeare wrote the part thinking of a black woman. It’s

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<sup>280</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 82.

<sup>281</sup> Daileader, p. 207.

<sup>282</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 4–5.

called going for centre stage, not for the margins or the fringe. And that, is that.<sup>283</sup>

Britain would wait, however, another twenty-three years for the next performance of Cleopatra by a black woman on a main UK stage. ‘White looking’ at the role had not become unnatural; whiteness was yet to be made strange.

### **Contesting Cleopatra**

In a short period following Croll’s performance, several directors did cast black women as Cleopatra. Sabra Williams played the role in 1992, albeit not in a fully mounted production but in an excerpt as part of *Enemy to the People, Shakespeare and Revolution*, an anthology by the English Shakespeare Company with accompanying workshops, directed by Tim Carroll. In 1997 Alphonsia Emmanuel played Cleopatra at the Bridewell Theatre in London. She was well known at the time from her appearances on television, and critics commended her: ‘Emmanuel's performance is for real. She seizes the opportunity afforded by Shakespeare’s wonderfully rich characterisation and elegantly combines regality and playfulness, political wit and emotional vulnerability, eroticism and intellect’.<sup>284</sup> One reviewer commented: ‘You feel Alphonsia Emmanuel ought to be giving her Cleopatra on stage at the Barbican, accompanied by trumpets and profiles in the national press. But the RSC has quit town for the summer and,

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<sup>283</sup> Khan, ‘Art of Darkness’.

<sup>284</sup> Clare Bayley, ‘Royal fling, movie-style’, *The Times*, 15 April 1997.



besides, they never invited her'.<sup>285</sup> Indeed Emmanuel herself said, 'Like Hamlet, Cleopatra is a wonderful part to get your teeth into and see how far you can go and nobody was offering me it at the RSC so I thought, yeah why not have a go'.<sup>286</sup> Cathy Tyson was the next black British actress to play the role in 1998, for the English Shakespeare Company, followed by Josette Bushell Mingo in 2005 at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester. There was evidently a subculture of practitioners eager to extend this work. But the dominant culture did not shift. Black women on main stages remained at the hem of Cleopatra's skirts, as her maids and her subordinates. A year after Talawa's production, Claire Benedict performed the role in the RSC's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1992). But she was cast as Charmian, and was understudying Clare Higgins, who was taken ill on the third preview night. In the rehearsal room, the director John Caird had been insistent that 'Cleopatra wasn't black. She was Macedonian Greek'. Benedict stated: 'I was the only black actor in the rehearsal room. Clearly I wasn't meant to be playing Cleopatra'.<sup>287</sup> When the opportunity arose for her to do so, 'It was the most wonderful night I had ever had in the theatre'.<sup>288</sup> Even though she was only Cleopatra for one night, Benedict clearly made an impact on audiences: 'I got letters from teachers at schools saying it was wonderful to see the way Afro-Caribbean children related to me on the stage'.<sup>289</sup> The performance had a

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<sup>285</sup> *Curtains Up*, Midweek, 16 April 1997 quoted in Jami Rogers, 'Antony and Cleopatra (1997)', *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/roles>> [accessed 18 January 2017].

<sup>286</sup> Alphonsia Emmanuel in Matthew A. James, 'Peter's Friend', *Lowdown*, 11 April 1997.

<sup>287</sup> Daileader, p. 218.

<sup>288</sup> McMillan, p. 130.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

formative impact on her own future decisions: ‘I made a stand not to continue the tour to London in the role of understudy because I felt that on a matter of principle I should be playing the role of Cleopatra.’ ‘Had I not had this experience’, she said, ‘I might have been contented to play lesser Shakespearean roles as so many black actors find themselves being offered’.<sup>290</sup> Benedict was frustrated: ‘Cleopatra is a woman of power, beauty, emotional intelligence, intellectual mastery – and somehow black women are not given that role. Is this another trope of unconscious racism?’<sup>291</sup> Finally, a decade later, Joaquina Kalukango was cast as Cleopatra for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

### ***Antony and Cleopatra, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2013***

Tarell Alvin McCraney, the African American playwright, actor and director, was invited by Michael Boyd to ‘reedit and reorder a radical rendition’ of *Antony and Cleopatra* in 2010.<sup>292</sup> Two years earlier McCraney had been appointed by the RSC as an International Writer in Residence – a role that involved embedding himself in the RSC’s work and creating an original script for members of its ensemble.<sup>293</sup> Actually he immersed himself in so many aspects of the company’s work that he spearheaded a production of *Hamlet* for the RSC’s Young People’s Shakespeare which he both adapted and directed (see Chapter six). His previous –

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<sup>290</sup> McMillan, p. 131.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Tarell Alvin McCraney, ‘RSC Key Hangout with Director Tarell Alvin McCraney’, *YouTube*, 11 November 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-h7nLd74iA>> [accessed 4 February 2017].

<sup>293</sup> *African Trade*, Hampstead Theatre (2011).

and internationally acclaimed – plays had focused on issues of race and African American culture, and his politics fed into his period at the RSC. He was struck and concerned by the Company’s lack of cultural diversity: ‘If you’re from a minority and in the first show you see, everyone is white, a pattern builds’.<sup>294</sup> He wanted to make Shakespeare accessible for a diverse audience. He cast the RSC’s first British-Asian Hamlet (Dharmesh Patel) and black female Horatio (Simone Saunders) in order to reflect Britain’s communities and to ensure that young non-white audiences could see themselves reflected on stage. His concept for *Antony and Cleopatra* similarly exemplified his preoccupation with issues of diversity, black identity, and Afro-Caribbean heritage. His response to Boyd’s invitation to explore this tragedy was to set it in a precise place and period: Saint-Domingue at the time of the Haitian revolution (1791–1804). McCraney said of the play: ‘It’s about colonising Egypt and trying to tame it and put it under Rome’s domination’, and that he had thought ‘it must have been that way in Haiti or in the Caribbean in general’.<sup>295</sup> He edited and reordered scenes in order to heighten the resonance of the play in this changed setting, and to highlight themes of colonisation, slavery, and black liberation.

It took several years for McCraney’s version to be programmed at the RSC. Boyd decided not to direct his text, and instead staged a ‘modern-dress’

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<sup>294</sup> Tarell Alvin McCraney in Nosheen Iqbal, ‘How Tarell Alvin McCraney took Hamlet back to school’, *Guardian*, 5 February 2010, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/05/shakespeare-school-theatre-hamlet>> [accessed 1 February 2017].

<sup>295</sup> Bill Hirschman, ‘Tarell McCraney’s Hamlet Is First Step Toward Dream Of A Winter Festival In Miami’, *Florida Theater on Stage*, 6 January 2013, <<http://www.floridatheateronstage.com/features/tarell-mccraneys-hamlet-is-first-step-toward-dream-of-a-winter-festival-in-miami/>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

version of the play with Kathryn Hunter as Cleopatra (2010). One of the reasons Boyd gave was that ‘the RSC did not have instant access to enough actors of color’ – an argument that was used by Gregory Doran with regards to British East Asian actors (see Chapter five), and was surely disproved by the company itself with the casting of *Julius Caesar* two years later.<sup>296</sup> Nonetheless, with additional funding from New York’s Public Theatre and the writer’s own local company, Miami’s GableStage, McCraney’s production went ahead two years later. The playwright agreed to direct the production himself in order to create a work that would ‘speak to the whole of the community in his native Miami’, and indeed his concept engaged in a specific cultural milieu that had resonance for the community’s cultural and political history.<sup>297</sup> The casting process was fundamental in conveying the narrative that McCraney wished to deliver. He chose to work with a mixed cast of American and British actors of varying ethnicities. The American actors played the Egyptians, or in this case, the Haitians, and the British actors played Shakespeare’s Romans – in this vision, the French colonisers (with occasional cross-over due to some actors playing multiple roles). The model here could be characterised as ‘cross-cultural’, with the world of the play relocated to a different time and place, and with actors chosen to represent the peoples of this alternative cultural location. In Thompson’s definition, ‘cross-cultural’ casting ‘assumes that an actor’s race carries a wealth of semiotic meaning that can and should inform a production’s cultural, historical,

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

and perhaps even political landscape'.<sup>298</sup> Thus Joaquina Kalukango was cast as Cleopatra, her court consisted of black actors, and Antony was played by the white British actor Jonathan Cake. McCraney's choice of setting, and his conscious decision to cast a black Cleopatra were central to his exploration of Afro-Caribbean history, identity, and Empire, using the Shakespearean text. The director rendered his actors' ethnicities meaningful onstage. However, describing his practice, McCraney stated: 'We wanted to make sure that we had a cast that was colour conscious', so that 'instantly when you saw Cleopatra and Antony standing in the garb that they're standing in, speaking in the languages that they're speaking, you could be put into a social, historical context immediately'.<sup>299</sup> His use of the phrase 'colour conscious' points to his determination to describe and apply a practice that was diverse, representative, and that purposefully connected the actors' ethnicities to his conceptual world for the play. McCraney's intervention was significant, and his example remains so in this country no less than seventeen years after, for example, the Artistic Director of Kali Theatre, Rukhsana Ahmad, insisted that mainstream companies 'need to step out of their Eurocentric cocoons and begin to apprehend and appreciate Britain's diverse cultures and communities.'<sup>300</sup> Since Ayanna Thompson's terms

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<sup>298</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 79.

<sup>299</sup> Tarell Alvin McCraney, 'Interview with director Tarell Alvin McCraney | Antony and Cleopatra | Royal Shakespeare Company', *YouTube*, 24 October 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JGjyDcWR1w&t=4s>> [accessed 1 February 2017].

<sup>300</sup> Arts Council England, *Eclipse Report: Developing strategies to combat racism in theatre. A one-day working conference held on two consecutive days at Nottingham Playhouse: 12 and 13 June 2001* (Arts Council England, 2001), p. 65, <[https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Eclipse\\_report\\_2011.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Eclipse_report_2011.pdf)> [accessed 27 June 2018].

do not apply precisely to McCraney's approach – though elements of both 'conceptual' and 'cross-cultural' casting could be seen in his *Antony and Cleopatra* – it would be useful to develop a new UK model of casting that defines and highlights this positive practice. On a day-to-day linguistic level, action in the field of terminology may empower artists and administrators to disrupt white hegemonic practices at mainstream institutions. This is a subject to which I shall return in the conclusion to this thesis.

### **Cleopatra, Queen of Haiti**

The history of Haiti has been a source of inspiration which has been returned to repeatedly by black artists as testimony to black empowerment, successful revolution, and hegemony overturned. The revolution of slaves working the plantations in the French colony Saint-Domingue was the first successful slave revolt leading to the foundation of the Independent State of Haiti in 1804. In 1936, Orson Welles set his 'Voodoo *Macbeth*' in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. *Macbeth* became a version of the Haitian Emperor Henri Christophe, and Macduff recalled Touissant L'Ouverture who led the revolution until his death in 1803. Welles' production was seen as encouraging 'multiracial social agitation' through the political act of staging a hugely popular all-black production that sold out, toured, and attracted thousands of audience members – and dozens of participants – from the black American community. However, the production was also – and continues to be – criticised for 'reenacting white

colonial fantasies of race’, especially through its inclusion of supposed voodoo rituals. From one direction Welles was accused of presenting grossly stereotypical depictions of black people as primitive; conversely, some black practitioners have returned to this moment in cultural history as a source of inspiration for their work. In several ways, Haiti haunts *Macbeth*.<sup>301</sup>

Talawa’s premiere production (1986) was *The Black Jacobins* by C. L. R. James, based on his seminal study of the Haitian Revolution. Brewster decided to revive it on the fiftieth anniversary of its original production because, ‘The politics of C. L. R. James were so immensely important to black people in this country today’.<sup>302</sup> James’ writing was fuelled by his dismay that ‘there weren’t any plays that said black people had created any distinct events of the time’.<sup>303</sup> Brewster aimed to counter this absence. For David Vivian Johnson, her production marked the ‘birth of a new black British theatrical voice that can be seen to have both changed the face, and raised the profile of black theatre in Britain’.<sup>304</sup> Three decades later the rap artist – and the founder of the Hip-Hop Shakespeare Company – Akala argued that the Haitian revolution should be taught in the mainstream as part of the curriculum. Though he had learned about the revolution at his African-Caribbean Saturday school, he insisted that it was not only important for ‘black history’ but was seminal in terms of ‘global history’.

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<sup>301</sup> See *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, ed. by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>302</sup> Yvonne Brewster in David Vivian Johnson, ‘The History, Theatrical Performance Work and Achievements of Talawa Theatre Company 1986-2001’ (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2001), p. 72.

<sup>303</sup> Johnson, ‘Talawa Theatre Company’, p. 101.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

He said, ‘For me it’s about human relations’ in the context of globalisation, and ‘if we have an understanding of the relationship between different cultures historically I don’t think we’d be so quick to support wars, to support unjust foreign policy, to view people as less than ourselves’.<sup>305</sup> The Haitian revolution was the first successful founding of democracy by previously enslaved peoples. Given its significance in terms of the fundamental principles of freedom, democracy and human rights, McCraney’s decision to set *Antony and Cleopatra* in the context of the Haitian revolution is far from surprising. It demonstrated his intention not only to challenge racist practices and examine black agency and black nationhood, but also to claim the importance of black movements in *global* history.

The RSC gave McCraney a trusted production team, including Tom Piper as the designer. Much more explicitly than in Welles’s ‘primitivist’ *Macbeth*, Piper’s costume designs aimed to align each character with a historical French or Haitian counterpart. He drew inspiration from portraits of French revolutionary figures. Caesar was dressed in a late eighteenth-century-style high-collared red cutaway tailcoat with gold embroidered embellishments and epaulettes, to connect him to Napoleon Bonaparte. Antony’s costume was modelled on Napoleon’s brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc. Leclerc had been sent to lead the expedition to Saint-Domingue to re-establish control over the rebels, and his marriage to Napoleon’s sister Pauline also paralleled Antony’s journey in the

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<sup>305</sup> Akala, ‘Akala | Full Address and Q&A | Oxford Union’, *YouTube*, 26 November 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUtAxUQjwB4>> [accessed 21 January 2017].



play. Crucially, McCraney made Enobarbus a figure of divided loyalties; Antony's close friend was played by Chuk Iwuji, and his costume was designed with reference to a portrait of Touissant L'Ouverture (although this character's journey would have less correlation to the historical events). The Haitian characters wore plain white costumes; the women in white dresses with bodices and head wraps, and the men in loose white shirts and trousers. Cleopatra wore several outfits through the production, all white. Her first appearance was in a long white skirt and a white top that evoked a sense of the 'gypsy' with its shoulder sleeves and above-the-navel style. Her outline became progressively tighter as she changed into a corset that sexualised the body.

The set design needed to work in three different theatres. Simplicity was also key in enabling the rapid transformation from one cultural world to another. The basis of the design was the use of four pillars joined by archways of plain stone, inspired by the neo-classical architecture of the Napoleonic period (see Fig. 9). Piper explained, 'I've tried to melt the design into the venue', and indeed the pillars stretched from the floor of the thrust stage to the dress circle level, so that the theatres themselves, on two continents, became an extension of the grandeur of the Western colonial world.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Tom Piper, 'Designing Antony and Cleopatra | Royal Shakespeare Shakespeare', *YouTube*, 8 October 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-mH9PgvN3U>> [accessed 23 January 2017].



**Fig. 9 Model box for *Antony and Cleopatra* designed by Top Piper (2013).**

The back wall was painted to represent the sky, and was either lit with a bright blue wash to depict the Caribbean, or with orange and purple to reflect different atmospheres. One reviewer felt that the design was simplistic, it lacked specificity, and that the visuals were infected by ‘junk orientalism’. Andrew Dickson wrote that the ‘Haitian-Egyptians’ were ‘drenched in the syrupy golden light that has apparently become Equity minimum for depictions of the exotic’.<sup>307</sup> He felt that this kind of cliché could often be found in versions of the play, and that McCraney’s design did not manage to escape it. As we have already seen,

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<sup>307</sup> Andrew Dickson, ‘Antony and Cleopatra – review’, *Guardian*, 15 November 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/nov/15/antony-and-cleopatra-tarell-alvin-mccraney-rsc-review>> [accessed 22 January 2017].

McCraney did not intend to promote exoticism; Piper, on the other hand, did. ‘The island, the Caribbean gives you that exoticism of Egypt, gives you an other place which is sexy and attractive’.<sup>308</sup> Piper’s association between the Caribbean and Egypt as two ‘exotic’ and ‘other’ locations invites questions regarding stereotyping and Orientalism in contemporary performances of the play.

The actor McCraney chose to play Cleopatra was Joaquina Kalukango (see Fig. 10). She had recently graduated from Juilliard School, the New York performing arts conservatoire (2011) and this was her debut professional Shakespearean performance. She had however acted in several classical productions whilst training, including *Henry V*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Cymbeline*. Like Yvonne Brewster and Dona Croll, Kalukango was adamant that Cleopatra was black. She said: ‘It’s ridiculous, she’s an *African* queen, it’s 2014, it’s crazy’.<sup>309</sup> She was convinced of the importance of claiming the role to counter the lack of strong black female narratives in mainstream media. She asked, ‘When have you ever seen an African queen portrayed to you in TV, film, in a real beautiful way?’ Kalukango could find no examples, and felt that ‘this is hugely important, it’s our history being told in a real beautiful way, she’s Haitian, she’s undeniably black, I’m undeniably dark’.<sup>310</sup> Kalukango hoped to use Cleopatra as a role model for the black communities in Miami and New York, and felt that her performance, the

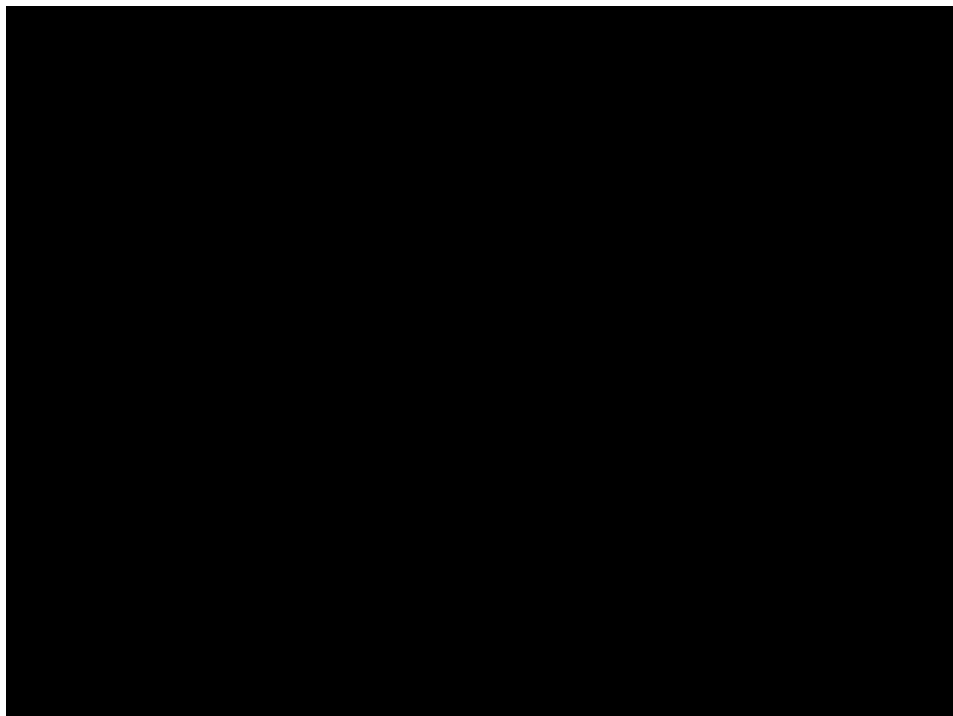
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<sup>308</sup> Piper, ‘Designing Antony and Cleopatra’.

<sup>309</sup> Joaquina Kalukango in Kimille Howard, ‘Joaquina Kalukango of Antony and Cleopatra’, *Arts in Color*, 12 February 2014, <<http://artsincolor.com/2014/02/antony-cleopatra-joaquina-kalukango/>> [accessed 20 March 2015]

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

representation of powerful female blackness, would have social ramifications. Director and actress alike used Shakespeare to place black history and culture centre-stage. Given McCraney's concept, Kalugango aimed to be specific in her characterisation. She asked: 'What is the Haitian queen and how can we bring a culture and history on stage without being general and offensive?'<sup>311</sup> Hoping to be truthful to both the culture and the history, she researched the Haitian revolution, studied documentaries, worked on the Haitian accent, and learnt cultural nuances.



**Fig. 10 Sarah Niles, Joaquina Kalukango, Chivas Michael and Charise Castro-Smith in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2013).**

As with the Talawa version, British reviews were again generally cool, with little appreciation of the production's frame of reference or its aims, and

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

Kalukango's depth and range, particularly, were criticised. Though Andrew Dickson felt she was an 'unexpected, and interesting' casting choice, a 'heartfelt and youthful Cleopatra', he couldn't 'quite believe she's a seasoned political operator'.<sup>312</sup> In the *Financial Times* Ian Shuttleworth agreed – she was 'pert and peremptory without being imperious; she is used to getting her own way, but not on a global scale'.<sup>313</sup> Charles Spencer made the point more crudely for *Daily Telegraph* readers: 'Far from being a woman of infinite variety Cleopatra mostly just seems grumpy. She also struggles desperately with the verse.' He complained that 'the actors playing Antony and Cleopatra seem bizarrely mismatched', and that there was 'barely a hint of a sexual chemistry between them even when they are getting it on'.<sup>314</sup> British reviewers chose to focus on her sexuality and 'getting it on' when it would have been more interesting to focus on the impact of her performance in terms of politics and history. Yet it is true that Cleopatra's sexuality had been emphasised by McCraney himself, particularly in his use of water as the tragedy opened.

Behind the colonnade was a space filled with a pool of aquamarine water, which represented the ocean surrounding the Caribbean island. As the play began, out of the darkness the auditorium was filled with a bright azure light. In walked a figure in silhouette, pitch black against the blue. The curves of her body were

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<sup>312</sup> Dickson.

<sup>313</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, 'Antony and Cleopatra – Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon review', *Financial Times*, 15 November 2013, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1b11740e-4d24-11e3-9f40-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2zouT0aOf>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

<sup>314</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Antony and Cleopatra, RSC, review', *Telegraph*, 14 November 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10449633/Antony-and-Cleopatra-RSC-review.html>> [accessed 23 January 2017].

outlined and she appeared to be naked. She walked through the turquoise water then came to a pause centre-stage. She sat, with her legs spread wide at the water's edge. The recorded sound of a rasping sigh suggested her sensual satisfaction. This was Cleopatra, and the image was symbolic of fertility, sexuality, femininity and negritude. Intriguingly, it was not the first time this stage image had been used in *Antony and Cleopatra* to connect black femininity to overt sexuality. In 1997 when Alphonsia Emmanuel played the role at the Bridewell Theatre, one reviewer wrote:

A small water pool shimmers, reminding the audience of the Bridewell's former incarnation as a bath house and serving as a neat symbol of the sensuality and pleasure which hold sway in Egypt under Mark Antony and Cleopatra's rule. Alphonsia Emmanuel's commanding Cleopatra frolics in the water, swathed in fabric which leaves her back and shoulders bare, quite in contrast to the stiff 1940s-style army fatigues of the Romans.<sup>315</sup>

Here too the trope of onstage water signified the pleasures of Egypt and highlighted – indeed objectified – Cleopatra's sexuality. The framework of representation and the structure of spectatorship are key in understanding the trafficking of race-based stereotypes. We should ask whether these directors Orientalised Cleopatra and their two actresses by deploying similar images of her body in its 'natural' element? However, for McCraney (whose imagery of black

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<sup>315</sup> Clare Bayley, 'Royal fling, movie-style', *The Times*, 15 April 1997.

bodies escaping into water is complex, and central to the semi-autobiographical film *Moonlight*), the erotic was certainly part of his representation of the Other – but from the Other’s perspective.<sup>316</sup>

In McCraney’s staging, Cleopatra’s idyll in the sea, rather than the first in a sequence of sexualised images, signified merely one aspect of her character and culture; it was placed within a plethora of different representations of black identity. Several key areas in the production – including his edits and additions to the text – disrupted established frameworks of assumption and spectatorship, and encouraged a different way of *seeing*. In one added scene a French colonist whipped a black Haitian. The stage was empty except for them. A woman, played by black British actor Sarah Niles, had her hands and neck bound by a rope. She was thrown to the floor and beaten. She was pushed around the stage, paraded by her abuser. McCraney made explicit the effects of colonisation. This image of barbaric slavery served to contest the Orientalist narrative, and to demonstrate the dehumanised horrors enacted by the West. The scene was key in layering different historical moments that examined racial identity: rather than celebrating Caesar’s triumph, the production put black experience at its heart. The significance of this addition reframed the play as a vehicle with which to highlight Afro-Caribbean history, American history, indeed *global* history. As Akala said, if we understand the relationship between different cultures historically, we are less likely to view people as less than ourselves. This concept was lost on the reviewer Charles Spencer: ‘For reasons best known to himself, McCraney has

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<sup>316</sup> *Moonlight*, dir. by Barry Jenkins (A24, 2016). Based on McCraney’s play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*.

relocated the action to Haiti in Napoleonic times [...] There is a scene depicting slavery undreamt of by Shakespeare'.<sup>317</sup> McCraney had realised however that in order to create a theatrical experience that challenges ingrained Western readings effectively, deeper, dramaturgical, intervention is often necessary. Because of the always ambiguous and fragmented nature of spectator responses, he had imposed a new narrative voice onto the play.

### **Enobarbus and Voodoo**

McCraney edited and at times re-ordered the text to reframe the tragedy and give the power of the storytelling to the Other. Chuk Iwuji was essential to this and his Enobarbus began the production:

I will tell you.

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Burned on the water

(2.2.200-202)

McCraney focused the play onto Cleopatra through the eyes of a black storyteller. The images were conjured from his perspective, and the action began with her solo entrance and Enobarbus's poetry, not the complaints of Caesar's ambassadors bemoaning Antony's decline into a 'strumpet's fool', and the 'tawny' 'gypsy's lust'. His narration continued throughout and gave him quasi-authorial status; he became the audience's guide to the action, speaking such stage

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<sup>317</sup> Spencer.



directions as 'Enter Messenger' and 'Act II, Octavius Caesar's house'. Through this device, McCraney put history into the hands of those who have not historically told it. Enobarbus' journey begins, of course, on the side of Empire; in this case an Empire simultaneously evoking Rome and France. Touissant L'Ouverture apparently supported the French but was forced by Napoleon to resign; in parallel with his history, Enobarbus' decision to abandon Antony and commit suicide became the narrator's decision to reject the colonial legacy. Touissant was deceived by France; he was captured and died in prison before the revolution succeeded. For McCraney, however, Enobarbus' change in loyalties triggered a change in the production's quasi-historicist conventions: discarding first his European costume and then Shakespeare's text, Enobarbus became connected to Voodoo ritual. The director added a defining moment at the end of a scene in Act 4 where Enobarbus and the Soothsayer stayed on stage and shared eye contact with each other. The Soothsayer held a ritual doll, performed ritualistic movements, seemed to foreshadow Enobarbus' death. Several scenes later, after his anguished suicide, the two came together again. Enobarbus' corpse lay on the stage floor and the Soothsayer anointed it with water from the ocean. The body began to writhe, and then Enobarbus jolted upright, as though in spirit form. He exited into the water. Cleopatra performed a similar ritual after Antony's death. She ran to the water, cupped her hands and sprinkled it over Antony's body. Taking on priestly authority herself now, she enacted a physical ritual over him; she shook her clasped hands as she jumped around his body. And then dead Enobarbus re-entered. Now most of his military clothing was gone but white paint

covered his face. He danced, rippling his spine, leaping, landing with his legs wide apart, as Cleopatra and her women sang a song of lamentation in the water.

These rituals connected to the religion of Haiti, the Voodoo that was a ‘driving force of resistance in the daily lives of the slaves’, to quote Carolyn E. Fick.<sup>318</sup> White mainstream reviewers of this production were dismissive. Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* scoffed: ‘There is also a good deal of calypso music and spirituals, and moments evocative of voodoo. The arrogance of all this is matched only by its incompetence’.<sup>319</sup> The *New York Times*’ Ben Brantley added: ‘Such exotic touches dangle from the script like skull earrings on a woman at a formal ball, clipped on in a desperate bid to stand out’.<sup>320</sup> But however this might seem to resemble the primitivism of Orson Welles’s *Macbeth* or the Leni Reifenstahl-inspired spectacle of the Soothsayer’s whitened body in Doran’s *Julius Caesar*, McCraney’s strategy was very different, and it related to his use of Yoruba religious archetypes shadowing the lives of modern black Americans in such acclaimed plays as *The Brothers Size* (2007) and *The Red and Brown Water* (2009). Fick explained that although voodoo was prohibited, it was ‘one of the few areas of totally autonomous activity for the African slaves’ – ‘a source of psychological liberation in that it enabled them to express and reaffirm that self-

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<sup>318</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 45.

<sup>319</sup> Spencer.

<sup>320</sup> Ben Brantley, ‘Shakespeare Hits the Beach’, *New York Times*, 5 March 2014, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/theater/an-antony-and-cleopatra-set-in-the-caribbean.html>> [accessed 4 February 2017]. Cf. David Cote, ‘A voodoo-resurrected Enobarbus is merely distracting’, *Time Out*, 23 March 2014, <<https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/antony-and-cleopatra-public-theater-march-23-2014-1>> [accessed 4 February].

existence they objectively recognized through their own labor'.<sup>321</sup> At the end of *Antony and Cleopatra* McCraney's voodoo references built to a climax. Enobarbus once more returned, this time wearing the top hat and carrying the walking stick of Baron Samedi, a *Loa* of the dead. In McCraney's circular dramaturgical structure, Enobarbus narrated the end of the play as he had opened it, except that now he was a voodoo spirit, performing a diasporic rite. In the Haitian revolutionary context the production had established, this moment might be read as a representation of the oppressed peoples' ritual that began the rising. 'Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy', wrote C. L. R. James of the prelude to the 1791 revolution. Slaves, he explained, 'travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the ties and talk [...] to hear the political news and make their plans'.<sup>322</sup> Their leader, a High Priest called Boukman, 'gave the last instructions' to start the rising, 'and, after Voodoo incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, he stimulated his followers by a prayer spoken in creole'.<sup>323</sup> McCraney's inclusion of voodoo at the finale could be read as signifying the birth of a revolution and another way of being. Enobarbus strode towards Antony and Cleopatra as they circled each other in the water. The whole cast gathered at the edge of the ocean, singing the song that had been sung after the characters' deaths, but now accompanied by string instruments and drumming. James wrote that, from their masters, the slaves had known 'rape, torture, degradation, and, at

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<sup>321</sup> Fick, p. 44.

<sup>322</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 69.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

the slightest provocation, death'.<sup>324</sup> Because McCraney had made this explicit, indeed iconic, with his inclusion of the whipping of a woman, Cleopatra's decision to take control of her own life took on a different resonance. The colonial abuse of power had been demonstrated starkly, and Cleopatra would not submit to it. Her death scene, re-interpreted through the lens of slavery, became a statement of resistance. She chose death rather than the bonds of Europe, and her self-sacrificial rejection of the identity Caesar sought to impose on her registered, for her world and her people, as a new beginning. This is of course a rewriting of Shakespeare's play, but that was McCraney's intention: to adapt, reorder, and edit the text in order to create a radical new version that might speak to diverse British and American communities in a globally specific way.

Michel S. Laguerre has argued that 'the active participation of Voodoo leaders in the Haitian revolution was of critical importance to the independence of the colony in 1804'.<sup>325</sup> For the reviewers of this *Antony and Cleopatra*, the rituals were merely 'exotic' touches, but I would argue that in McCraney's hands their inclusion was fundamental to the parallels with the story of the Haitian revolution. His central re-positioning of Enobarbus allowed him to reshape the tragedy into a positive narrative in cultural and historical terms; these characters' personal sacrifices might well lead to a different future for colonised peoples. For the black audiences in Miami and New York, McCraney believed that his vision would have been a source of positive affirmation of Afro-Caribbean and American

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>325</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 1.

identity, demonstrating the treatment of black communities by their white oppressors, and their struggles and successes in overcoming racial enslavement and the fight for liberation. It had always been his aim to take the production to his home city: ‘Where else could you do a Haitian *Antony and Cleopatra* except in one of largest populations of Haitians that you will find outside of Haiti?’<sup>326</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The unfixed ethnic identity of Shakespeare’s *Cleopatra* invites ethnically diverse interpretations, yet white directors in mainstream theatrical organisations have historically excluded black women from the role. This draws attention to the part that white gatekeepers – producers, directors, and casting directors – continue to play in shaping the identities of black women on the British stage. *Talawa* – mainly founded and run by actresses – was instrumental in providing an alternative space for non-white actors to play previously inaccessible leading roles. *Talawa*’s tacit message was not only that black lives are worthy of enactment, but worthy of enactment on the classical stage, by black artists with experience, talent and the ability to represent them fully and accurately.

This was inspirational and transformative in terms of employment and representation: thanks to Brewster’s trailblazing, *Antony and Cleopatra* could become ethnically kaleidoscopic. When Vanessa Redgrave produced and starred as *Cleopatra* for her own Moving Theatre Company in 1995, she provided work

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<sup>326</sup> McCraney quoted in Hirschman.

for refugees and political exiles from the Balkan conflict and chose black actors as both Antony and Enobarbus (the American Paul Butler and the British David Harewood, who became Antony on the international tour). Jeffery Kissoon would play an older version of his Antony in Janet Suzman's 2010 Liverpool Playhouse version, also with a very diverse cast.<sup>327</sup> Yet the narratives of racial and gender representation do not always proceed in synchrony. The leading male actors in Brewster's production – Kissoon, Ben Thomas and Cyril Nri – went on to play leading Shakespearean roles at many theatres. After Cleopatra, however, Dona Croll was limited to Shakespeare's female world of servants and prostitutes: Alice, Maria, Mistress Quickly, Mistress Overdone.<sup>328</sup> In 2006 Croll was invited to audition for the Globe's *Antony and Cleopatra*; but she was not considered for the Queen (who would be played by Frances Barber). She was seen for Charmian: 'I thought "I couldn't be seen for Cleopatra, but I can be seen for Charmian," I said to my agent, "No, I don't want to." [...] I am just saying, one never gets even the chance to get in the door.'<sup>329</sup> Theatrical history repeated itself. I would suggest that this pattern should be termed and recognised as *Subaltern casting*.

A clear critical terminology is needed to define damaging practices where the actor's ethnicity still functions in representing the exotic and largely silent Other. From Antonio Gramsci's coining of the term 'subaltern' to define communities who are situated outside of the hegemonic power structure, to

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<sup>327</sup> Kissoon played Antony opposite Kim Cattrall as Cleopatra. He was however replaced by Michael Pennington for the 2012 Chichester Festival Theatre revival.

<sup>328</sup> *Henry V* for the RSC (1997), *Measure for Measure* (2009), English Touring Theatre's *Twelfth Night* (2014).

<sup>329</sup> Howard, Interview with Croll.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (2008), Subaltern Studies have become a central strand in postcolonial thinking.<sup>330</sup> The practical effects of this in mainstream British theatre, however, remain limited. The Subaltern casting model absorbs non-white actors into a hegemonic cultural institution, and although there has certainly been a real increase in the number of BAME performers on the Shakespearean stage, as the British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database has established most are still assigned roles that are outside of this power structure. As such, black women have continually been cast into the shadows of leading white ladies playing an African queen and, as noted earlier, in 2014 Shakespeare's Globe added yet another production to the catalogue of images perpetuating and reinforcing ethnic servitude. This damaging pattern - whereby white British directors have consciously chosen BAME actors to contribute to their exoticising agenda - needs to be made conspicuous in order to challenge and potentially halt harmful practices of discrimination, marginalisation and stereotyping. I offer this definition in the knowledge that terminology is important; with its connection to post-colonial theory, 'subaltern casting' challenges and may empower actors, critics and audiences to recognise and reject Orientalist practices.

By wresting Shakespeare's plots and language from the theatrical Establishment, both Brewster and McCraney told history from the point of view

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<sup>330</sup> See El Habib Louai, 'Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical developments and new applications', *African Journal of History and Culture*, 4 (2011), 4–8.

of the colonised rather than the colonisers. This was affirmative action, and a political act of self-inclusion and self-expression. It is important to ensure that images of blackness are not always in the hands of white practitioners, that black identity can be controlled and constructed by black artists themselves. Yet, as the marginalisation of McCraney's project by the RSC, the financial problems faced repeatedly by Talawa and Brewster, and the dismissive tone of the mainstream press reviews all demonstrated, the institutional pressures preventing this remain manifold.<sup>331</sup>

Discussing Shakespeare's 'institutional or cultural life', Edward Said in his essay 'Orientalism Reconsidered' observed:

Each age [...] re-interperts Shakespeare, not because Shakespeare changes, but because there is no such fixed and trivial object as Shakespeare independent of his editors, the actors who played his roles, the translators who put him in other languages, the hundreds of millions of readers who have read him or watched performances of his plays since the late sixteenth century [...] [E]ven so relatively inert an object as a literary text [...] gain[s] some of its identity from its historical moment interacting with the attentions, judgements, scholarship and performances of its readers.<sup>332</sup>

In the specific 'historical moment' of contemporary Britain such 'interaction' demands *access*. The case of *Antony and Cleopatra* demonstrates the importance

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<sup>331</sup> See Johnson, 'Talawa Theatre Company'.

<sup>332</sup> Edward Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, 1 (1985), p. 92.



of gatekeepers aware of, and striving for, better representation for BAME actors. Brewster and McCraney were political and conscious in their casting choices, and it took their visions to place a black Cleopatra on Britain's stages. Let me offer another image. At the final of a national 'performing Shakespeare' competition run by the English Speaking Union for secondary school students at the Gielgud Theatre in 2016, a young black female student performed one of Cleopatra's speeches. Her teacher had encouraged her to choose the character. Here the role became a practical tool to develop her performance, speaking and listening skills, and a vehicle for self-expression. The confidence engendered from speaking Queen Cleopatra's words on a West End stage, and the strengthening of her communication skills through the process, testified to the power of Shakespeare in young people's personal growth. To see a black teenager take ownership of the role was a reminder of the importance of inspiring future generations of young black women to connect to Shakespeare – and the importance of seeing themselves centre-stage.

*Antony and Cleopatra* was not celebrated as a success for diverse casting in the ways that *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado* were. This could be due to the fact that the director and half of the cast were American, so it was not seen as a 'triumph' of British diversity. Charles Spencer undermined McCraney's work further by hinting that the RSC were not keen to claim the production as their own: 'Greg Doran points out in the programme for this production of *Antony and Cleopatra* that it was commissioned by his predecessor Michael Boyd'. He continued: 'I couldn't help wondering whether the subtext of Doran's remark was

“For heaven’s sake don’t blame me for this fiasco”.<sup>333</sup> As it happens, the production was not discussed in the RSC’s annual report and no photographs of it were included.

In 2016 the RSC finally chose to hire a non-white director, and a non-white leading actor for their 2017 *Antony and Cleopatra* on the Stratford main stage: Iqbal Khan would direct Josette Simon as Cleopatra, twenty-five years after she appeared as Iras, supporting Helen Mirren. The politics surrounding this play, indeed built into it, highlights the growing calls for more black women and men in positions of power in the industry – to make the choices, to explore and examine the ways that ethnicity can signify in performance, and to find socio-cultural and historic resonances for non-white communities. *Antony and Cleopatra* can be used to examine the flaws of colonialism, the traps of Orientalism, to remind us of the past relations between East and West, and to help forge new relations in the future.

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<sup>333</sup> Spencer.

## Chapter Four: British South Asian Shakespeare

At the same time as such mainstream arts institutions as the RSC and Shakespeare's Globe were trying to engage British black and Asian communities, and grappling with complex issues of cultural diversity in the process, in the underfunded margins British South Asian practitioners were using Shakespearean performance to confront those – for them very immediate – issues in different ways. The two companies Tara Arts and Phizzical Productions both staged significant Shakespeare productions between the 'festival' years of 2012 and 2016. We have seen how Iqbal Khan operated within a white-led organisation when he directed the RSC's second *Much Ado* set in India; how have directors from the South Asian diaspora engaged with Shakespeare on their own terms, away from Britain's established classical theatrical conventions?

Tara Arts is the longest surviving BAME theatre company in Britain. It was founded by Jatinder Verma, Sunil Saggar, Praveen Bahl, Vijay Shaunak and Ovais Kadri in 1977, in direct response to the racist murder of the eighteen-year-old Gurdip Singh Chaggar on 4 July 1976. The company was born out of the necessity for a public presence, political proactivity, and a sense of communal solidarity. Regarding cultural diversity in performance, Verma has said: 'Brook can raid the world and create a different kind of theatre which is then acclaimed as an advance for western theatre; I do the same and it is called ethnic.'<sup>334</sup> He voices a sense of continued marginalisation, of a reception that was unwilling to

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<sup>334</sup> Jatinder Verma quoted in Jim Hiley, 'The Molliere Wallah', *Independent*, 11 September 1989.

embrace difference from within the homogeneous cultural space; and it was precisely this sense of exclusion that fuelled Verma's engagement with Western classics, and especially Shakespeare. As we shall see, he aimed to bridge cultures and to provide a confident voice for British South Asian communities by developing a distinctive theatrical methodology. Since 2003 Samir Bhamra has similarly developed a personal theatrical practice with his company, Phizzical. This group emerged in a different cultural climate several decades after Tara Arts, and Bhamra's approach to diversity in Shakespearean performance built on Verma's legacy in many ways; but he also introduced new theatrical techniques to dramatise the diasporic experience and reach new audiences. This chapter will focus on Tara Arts' *Macbeth* (2015) and Phizzical's *Cymbeline* (2013) and will examine their processes of adaptation, key staging choices, and the representation of cultural diversity. It will examine the ways in which Verma and Bhamra developed dramaturgical and aesthetic practices that channelled their cultural heritages. Both directors used Shakespeare to address their immediate aesthetic concerns alongside the issues of migration, identity and visibility. Outside the mainstream theatrical establishments, in response to racism and marginalisation, South Asian directors have used Shakespeare as a tool of self-expression and self-inclusion; in the process they have developed new forms of theatrical practice on the British Shakespearean stage.

## Tara Arts: A Bilingual approach

Jatinder Verma's relationship with Shakespeare began before his family's migration to the UK. He grew up in Kenya, where he received a 'colonial education': 'I saw the independence of Kenya, and up to independence you studied whatever was being studied in London; and that has been a key element in terms of my journey in the theatre'.<sup>335</sup> Verma remembered that he 'had been taught English and Englishness. In my dusty Nairobi classroom I heard about green meadows and red buses, fair play, parliament and Shakespeare'.<sup>336</sup> His parents had migrated from India to Tanzania to Nairobi, and when he was fourteen the family moved to Britain as part of the first wave of forced mass-migration from Kenya. It was 1968, the year of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Race relations were fraught, and in 1976 the unprovoked killing of Sikh Gurdip Singh Chaggar by white racists in Southall galvanised Asian civil liberties movements. Many people took to the streets to protest against racial violence. The murder was for Verma 'the most dramatic statement of what it would mean to live in this country as an Asian' – 'that one act made our entry into England meaningless – if the whole point was to die on the street – why bother leaving?'<sup>337</sup> He remembered: 'Our anger told us we needed to inhabit a public space', and 'that's what Gurdip Singh gave us, a kind of cause, a reason to be in the

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<sup>335</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Jatinder Verma, October 2014.

<sup>336</sup> Jatinder Verma, 'What the Migrant Saw', *Guardian*, 10 January 2008, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/jan/10/theatre1>> [accessed 13 February 2017].

<sup>337</sup> Jatinder Verma, 'Jatinder Verma (British South Asian Theatre Memories)', *YouTube*, 25 March 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WcJux902S8>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

theatre'.<sup>338</sup> Verma and his friends and colleagues were determined to respond to the situation by affirming their identity and presence in Britain; they were 'here to stay', and they began the project of finding their voice through theatre: 'When we started, the target was, we had one wish, one goal, it was that in the imaginations of anyone, white, black or Asian, the Asian would sit equally with the white'. From this perspective it would mean 'that while one talked of Shakespeare, one could equally talk of Kalidasa.' For Verma, 'this sense of a cross-cultural multicultural imagination, was the goal and that still remains the goal'.<sup>339</sup>

His production choices mirrored his aim to inspire such an 'imagination'. The company produced both Eastern and Western works, from adaptations of South Asian literature – Tara's inaugural production in 1977 was *Sacrifice* by the Bengali writer and Nobel prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore – to *Tartuffe* at the National Theatre. It was through his attitude and approach to Western classics, and Shakespeare specifically, that Verma developed a distinct praxis. He aimed not to imitate the dominant Western voice but to develop an independent theatrical vocabulary by exploring the meeting points between different traditions and forms. This territory has been theorised by Patrice Pavis, Erica Fischer-Lichte, Ric Knowles and many others as 'intercultural theatre'. Knowles describes such practices as 'theatrical attempts to bridge cultures through performance, to bring different cultures into productive dialogue with one another on the stage, in

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<sup>338</sup> Jatinder Verma quoted in Colin Chambers, *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain A History* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 159.

<sup>339</sup> Verma, 'British South Asian Theatre Memories'.

the space between the stage and the audience, and within the audience.<sup>340</sup>

Whereas such scholars tended to theorise the output of practitioners working from a dominant standpoint and encountering dominated or minority cultures (for example Peter Brook), Jatinder Verma was working from the position *of* the minority. His awareness of this was clear in his definition of interculturalism as:

a sensibility of Otherness, of being an Outsider, a Demon.

Starting from this premise, there seems to me one of two choices: either try and become an “insider” – join the Club, as it were – or try and change the rules of the game.<sup>341</sup>

Verma would not try to become an ‘insider’ through imitation but, through an encounter with the host culture, would in an act of hybridisation and assimilation create a new approach to the ‘game’. He called this approach ‘Binglish’:

Binglish is a term I propose to denote a distinct contemporary theatre praxis: featuring Asian or Black casts, produced by independent Asian or black theatre companies. The attempt here, I would argue is directly to challenge or provoke the dominant conventions of the English stage.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Ric Knowles, *Theatre & Interculturalism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>341</sup> Jatinder Verma, ‘Binglish: a Jungli Approach to Multi-Cultural Theatre by Jatinder Verma’, Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, Scarborough, 19 April 1996, <<https://www.tara-arts.com/news-blog/articles/binglish-a-jungli-approach-to-multi-cultural-theatre>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

<sup>342</sup> Jatinder Verma, ‘The challenge of Binglish: analysing multi-cultural productions’ in *Analysing Performance, A Critical Reader*, ed. by Patrick Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 193–202 (p. 194).

Disturbing the ‘dominant conventions’ of the British stage, Verma aimed to transcend the position of the colonialisised subject, and create a unique cultural domain: a space in which South Asian minority communities could negotiate and affirm their British identities.

### **Encountering Shakespeare: ‘to curse the traditions’**

Throughout its history, Tara Arts has recurrently turned to Shakespeare; these plays became an important site of negotiation for several reasons. Firstly, Verma aimed to use canonical texts as a ‘vehicle for the negotiation of the modern’ – to express, contest and formulate his contemporary identity and experience.<sup>343</sup> He believed that by creating encounters between his own cultural history and his new homeland – using the classic literature that testifies to Britain’s cultural legacy – he would discover a new voice:

I think part of finding the voice, it seems to me as a migrant, is finding your own space in the history of the country you’re in. [...] It’s almost as if by digging into the history of England itself, I’m seeking to recover for England as much as for me a space in which I belong.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2014.

<sup>344</sup> Jatinder Verma quoted in Christiane Schlote, “‘Finding our Own Voice’ An Interview with Jatinder Verma’ in *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice*, ed. by Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs (Germany: P.I.E.-Peter Lang S.A. 2006), pp. 309–322 (p. 313).



Secondly, Verma chose to perform Western classics as a direct provocative challenge to the power held in their cultural capital. The ‘Binglish’ strategy decentered European forms of performance, stretching the boundaries of what was presented on UK stages and contesting the notion of a supreme cultural authority. He hoped to draw attention to other methods of representation and other forms of authenticity, destabilising the hegemony of British Shakespearean performance and re-imagining it in the context and from the perspective of the Other. Thirdly, Verma engaged with Shakespeare out of necessity. Cultural capital and the sheer weight of Shakespeare’s name meant that producers, theatres and funding bodies would support Tara Arts’ work more rapidly. As Verma explained:

If I was to say, ‘We are going to do Kalidas’, most people will say, ‘Who?’ And then I have to explain that he’s a playwright and he comes from the classical period of India, by that time everyone’s got bored stiff. So I say, ‘Moliere’, and they say, ‘Okay, we’ll book you.’<sup>345</sup>

However, Verma’s riders to this account are of utmost importance: ‘Fine if that’s the case, but what Molière? Whose Molière?’ He had ‘learned to curse the traditions’:

If there was one thing in Shakespeare, it was always that line of Caliban’s, ‘You taught me language and my profit

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<sup>345</sup> Jatinder Verma, ‘Jatinder Verma at the Manchester University Drama Department, 10 February 1995’ in *In Contact With the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre*, ed. by Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 285.

on it is, I know how to curse,’ and it seemed to me, for a very, very long time, that, that defined my life in England both as a person and as a theatre maker, that I had learned to curse the traditions.<sup>346</sup>

Verma would engage with the conventions of Shakespeare, yet he would do so from his specific perspective as a postcolonial member of the Indian diaspora.<sup>347</sup>

This double-edged agenda has run through Tara’s selection of work and deep into the core of its creative praxis in the rehearsal room and eventually on stage.

The company’s first Shakespeare-infused performance was *Heer and Romeo* in 1992, by two actors responding to *Romeo and Juliet* and the 18<sup>th</sup> century poem *Heer and Ranjha* by the Punjabi poet Waris Shah. *Troilus and Cressida* followed in 1993 at the time of the collapse of former Yugoslavia. Verma was aware that ‘inherent in that breakup was a hitherto multicultural society under threat’. Therefore, he decided to make the Trojans ‘multicultural, in terms of the casting but also in the languages’.<sup>348</sup> He made use of Shakespeare’s text in English, but also introduced Hindi and French. *The Tempest* was performed in 1994. In 1996–1997, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was co-produced with the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, and the following line was used to describe this version: ‘An immaculate English lawn, complete with a small rock garden, trod upon by a diverse company of Asian, African, Caribbean, Arab and English

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<sup>346</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2014.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Jatinder Verma quoted in Catherine Love, “‘A great feast of languages’’: let’s liberate Shakespeare from the RP accent’, *Guardian*, 21 March 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/mar/21/troilus-and-cressida-tara-arts-multicultural-shakespeare>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

performers.<sup>349</sup> This analogy could well be used for all Verma’s productions, indicating his practice of opening up the well-kept, well-maintained garden of British Shakespeare, exploring it and adding to it with performers from migrant backgrounds. Verma described how with his early work he approached Shakespeare’s text ‘with a kind of iconoclasm that seemed to me suggested by Caliban’s life, so “Bugger the rules really!” Put in anything that you like, anything that was appropriate’.<sup>350</sup> The critical responses to Verma’s disregard for ‘the rules’ were not always positive; indeed Verma remembered one review by Irving Wardle who wrote: ‘He must learn the rules before he’s allowed into the club, but I suppose that this kind of multiculturalism is now a fact.’<sup>351</sup> Yet it is clear that this very disregard of the rules, as Naseem Khan argued, ‘stretched British cultural life’, and helped to make the stories of those from different backgrounds visible.<sup>352</sup> Verma’s engagement with Shakespeare continued with *The Merchant of Venice* in 2005, which was set in South India amidst ‘one of the oldest Christian and Jewish communities in the world’.<sup>353</sup> The company returned to *The Tempest* in 2007 and 2008, when Verma referenced Islamic Jihadist militants, and Miranda, though significantly veiled in a *niqab*, was unusually dynamic and physically liberated. *People’s Romeo* in 2010 encountered *Romeo and Juliet* through the forms of Bangladeshi theatre, and Tara’s *Julius Caesar* in

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<sup>349</sup> Tara Arts, ‘Company History’, *Tara Arts*, 2014, <<http://tara-arts.com/show-archive/a-midsummer-nights-dream-1996>> [accessed 4 December 2014]

<sup>350</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2014.

<sup>351</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2014.

<sup>352</sup> Naseem Khan quoted in Tara Arts, ‘Tara History’, *Tara Arts*, 2017, <<https://www.tara-arts.com/about-us/history>> [accessed 27 March 2017].

<sup>353</sup> Tara Arts, ‘The Merchant of Venice (2005)’, *Tara Arts*, 2017, <<https://www.tara-arts.com/whats-on/the-merchant-of-venice-2005/about>> [accessed 13 February 2017].

2010 similarly drew on Bangladeshi modes of prose, dance and music. Verma presented *Othello* in the same year, and in 2011 staged a *Taming of the Shrew* that focused on an Asian family in modern Britain.

Through Tara Arts' Shakespeare productions over several decades, a range of cultures, peoples and places were given visibility and were encountered by British audiences attracted by the plays' reputations; and through each project the nature of 'Binglish' dramaturgy became more refined and clear in its stylisation. Verma's approach aligned to Homi Bhabha's theories concerning the emergence of a representative discourse of minorities. Through challenges to the validity and authenticity of an essentialist cultural identity (the 'English lawn' of Shakespeare), a new hybrid identity emerged and was made visible. Bhabha noted: 'Having been coerced into a negative, generic subject position, the oppressed individual transforms it into a positive collective one'.<sup>354</sup> Bhabha also asked the question: 'How does [the minority] name itself, author its agency?'<sup>355</sup> I would argue that in the specifically postcolonial performance of reinscription, whereby South Asian theatrical forms and practices were fused with Shakespearean texts, the migrant identities of the company members were publicly redefined, reimagined and reclaimed within the landscape of British theatrical performance. A case study of Tara Arts' most recent Shakespeare allows us to analyse this notion in practice, and to understand the process through which this negotiation of a British Indian identity was achieved.

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<sup>354</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 328.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

### **A contemporary British South Asian *Macbeth***

In 2015, Jatinder Verma directed a production of *Macbeth* set in contemporary Britain. It centred on a British Asian extended family. The cast had a range of Shakespearean experience and Tara Arts' core role in providing British Asian actors with opportunities to develop their skills was very evident in the leads' careers. Verma said that the production was 'fashioned around' Robert Mountford (Macbeth).<sup>356</sup> They had previously worked together on *The Merchant of Venice*, where the actor took the role of Shylock, and the 2007–2008 *Tempest* where he played Prospero. Outside Tara, Mountford had toured the USA in several Shakespeare productions, went on a world tour with an RSC *Merchant of Venice*, and played the Priest in Iqbal Khan's *Much Ado*. Lady Macbeth was Shaheen Khan, who had received her training at Tara, appearing in its first productions. She then went on to work in television and films, including Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*. Some of the younger cast members also had Shakespearean experience; Umar Pasha and Mitesh Soni were in *Romeo and Juliet* for the National Theatre (see Chapter six).

The intercultural encounters between a Western canonical text, Eastern art forms and the migrant experience embodied by Tara's practitioners were evident in many aspects of this *Macbeth*, including the transposition of the context, the design, and the movement and music styles. Verma described how his search for a different kind of dramaturgy – a distinct theatrical form – was premised on

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<sup>356</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Jatinder Verma, April 2015.

classical Indian aesthetics. *Bharata* (to quote *Natya-Shastra*) ‘posits four constituent elements of theatre: *Abhinaya* – Gesture (which includes movement); *Vacikam* – Speech (which includes music); *Aharayam* – Costume (which includes make-up); and *Sattvikam* – the Mind (which includes emotion).’<sup>357</sup> Drawing upon non-European vocabularies of movement, music and imagery was, as Verma stated, ‘a defining characteristic of all Bilingual productions’, and could be seen in his treatment of *Macbeth*.<sup>358</sup>

It was integral to the concept that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth should be played as contemporary British Asians.<sup>359</sup> An education pack noted:

As migrants and descendants of migrants, Asians share with all other migrants a sense of another place – a sense of the ‘ancestral homeland’, which is often the source of another culture, language and faith.<sup>360</sup>

The migrant experience was a key focus of the production, and Verma used the relationships between the characters as vehicles to express the complexity of this identity. In the terms of Bhabha’s theories of hybridisation, Verma created a ‘third space’ whereby the characters demonstrated the signs of their Britishness – through (Northern) accents, costumes and physicality – and yet it was made clear that they also carried in them a different world – the world of India’s past, and of

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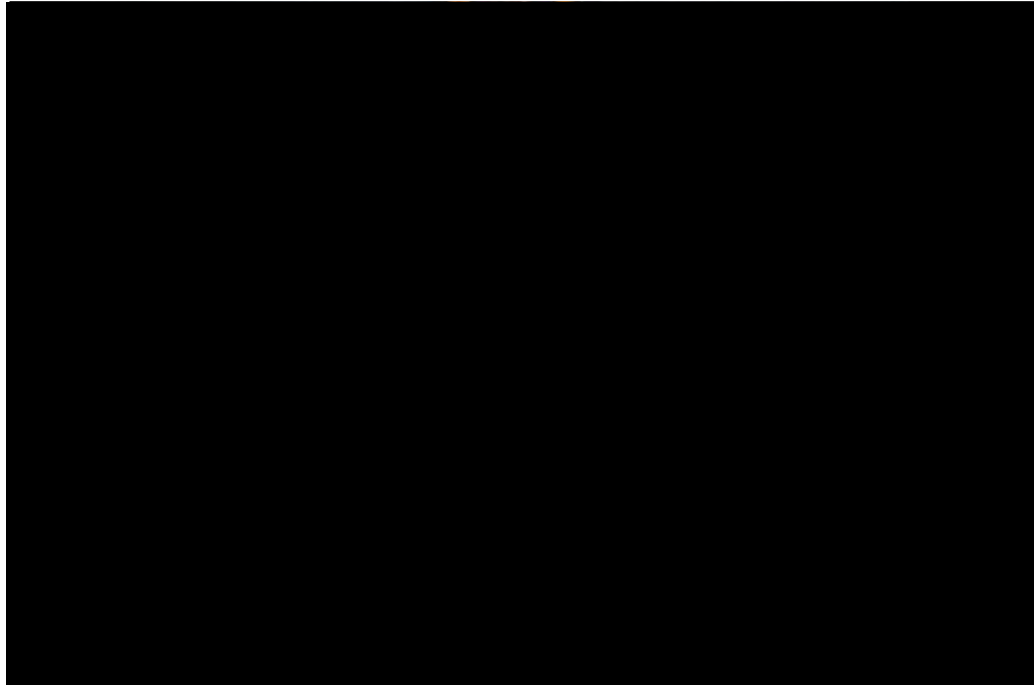
<sup>357</sup> Verma, ‘The challenge of Bilingual’, p. 199.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>359</sup> Although Verma’s approach shared similarities with Thompson’s ‘cross-cultural’ casting model where the entire play was transported to a different cultural location, his own terminology successfully communicated his casting choices with clarity, both internally within his organisation and externally to press outlets and audiences.

<sup>360</sup> Tara Arts, ‘Tara Arts – Education Resource Pack’ (Tara Arts, 2015), p. 11.

its faith.<sup>361</sup> This cultural and psychological hybridity was further communicated by the design, which incorporated a mix of aesthetics. The characters were dressed in Western clothes, including hoodies, shirts, suits, long coats and dresses, yet they also went barefoot. When Macbeth was crowned – with a red turban – both he and his wife wore robes in the style of Indian traditional dress (see Fig. 11). Their ‘pleasant’ household was signified by minimal domestic props, including a modern electric standard lamp, with the more symbolic central backdrop of a tall imposing lattice wall, to which was fixed a portrait of the last ruling king, garlanded *as per* Indian tradition. This was updated as the play went on, firstly being replaced with a painting of Duncan, and then by Macbeth’s image.



**Fig. 11 Shalini Peiris, Robert Mountford, Shaheen Khan and John Afzal in**

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<sup>361</sup> See Bhabha, p. 55.

***Macbeth* (2015).**

The production incorporated specific gestures, rituals and actions performed by the actors that denoted their complex identities and connected to the sense of a past homeland. For example, the banquet took place without a table: the dishes were served on a rug on the ground, where the actors sat cross-legged as in a traditional Indian household. When Shaheen Khan delivered Lady Macbeth's speech, 'Come, you spirits | That tend on mortal thoughts' (1.5.40-41) she held a devotional *aarti* (ritual of worship) tray in front of her, circling it as she spoke. She was initiating Hindu gestures of prayer to the gods to help her. There were also Indian-based movement sequences. For example, the actors themselves – choreographed by Kali Chandrasegaram, a specialist in the classical South Asian dance form *Odissi* – represented the moving of Burnham Wood. The cast travelled across the stage in shifting patterns and formations, with steps punctuated by foot stamps and arm gestures. Kev McCurdy choreographed stylised fight sequences, set to the beat of drums. 'The fighting', said Verma, 'is a language that is material to the play, it's serving the story.'<sup>362</sup> Reviewers commented on the music and dance; one wrote: 'One of the company's strengths was their expressive movement, whether the poignant portrayal of the slaughter of MacDuff's family or the menacing stylised dance of the advancing army'.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Jatinder Verma, 'Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Tara Arts', *YouTube*, 12 March 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMsl-mnN34Q&t=76s>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

<sup>363</sup> Marion Codd and Annie Morgan, 'Review: Tara Arts performance of *Macbeth* at Buxton Opera House', *Derbyshire Times*, 10 March 2015, <<http://www.derbyshiretimes.co.uk/whats-on/theatre-and-comedy/review-tara-arts-performance-of-macbeth-at-buxton-opera-house-1-7153048#comments-area>> [accessed 5



Music, too, was crucial to the entire production. Rax Timyr worked in the rehearsal room to create a live sound score using percussive instruments: a snare drum, a cymbal, and a microphone to amplify his vocal beatboxing. Verma stated: ‘The music enhances, underscores, underlines or punctuates the text that we have, the music of the text itself – just to step that up from the mundane into something bigger.’<sup>364</sup> Indeed one reviewer wrote that the music ‘cleverly punctuates the action and mingles a cinematic feel to the heightened sense of theatricality’.<sup>365</sup> The music and movement styles inspired by South Asian traditions underpinned this *Macbeth* as an ever-present reminder of the intricate and not always comfortable fusion of two worlds.

This time, Verma did not change the text or add other languages. It was important to him that the actors spoke in the way most natural to them, so there was a diversity of accents and the life stories they suggest. Robert Mountford and Shaheen Khan did speak with their own Received Pronunciation accents, but ‘Duncan’s from Manchester, fine; the person who played Ross, he’s from Wigan. I don’t want you to shift into RP, nor do I want you to put on an Indian accent’.<sup>366</sup> Verma had said that ‘someone who’s black or Asian [may speak] Shakespeare no differently from Ian McKellen’ – and ‘that’s where it becomes complicated, because then part of your head is saying “Well, they’re English”, yet your eyes

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February 2017].

<sup>364</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Jatinder Verma, 10 February 2015.

<sup>365</sup> Honour Bayes, ‘Macbeth’, *The Stage*, 30 March 2015,

<<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2015/macbeth/>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

<sup>366</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2015.

are saying, “Well, they’re not””.<sup>367</sup> Verma’s ambition to develop a ‘cross-cultural multicultural imagination’ required that audiences be confronted with layered or juxtaposed identities they were not used to seeing or hearing. By enabling British Asian actors to stand on stage and speak Shakespeare’s text with their own accents, rather than an imposed ‘Stratford voice’ or stereotypical or generalised ‘Indian’ inflections, Verma allowed his *Macbeth* cast to embody the complex hybrid identities of second generation migrants from the Indian diaspora.

### **Why *Macbeth*? Encountering the past to make sense of the present**

Verma explained that his search for ‘sensations of what the play is “about” for me connects with the Indian aesthetic of *rasa* – *rasa* is taste.’ He continued: ‘Each moment has a dominant *rasa* – it doesn’t mean that it’s the only one; but from this process you see what the dominant colour is.’<sup>368</sup> For example, the bond of love between the Macbeths was something he hoped to express. He said: ‘Here is this pair of lovers [...] They’re in a vortex which is dark and bloody and yet they remain this pair of lovers. I keep thinking of those musical boxes where you open the box and there’s this pair of ballerina lovers.’<sup>369</sup> This *rasa* was emphasised through the actors’ physicalities and the use of props. When Macbeth returned home for the first time in the play, Lady Macbeth greeted him by throwing red rose petals into the air. The reunited couple chased each other playfully, and

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<sup>367</sup> Jatinder Verma quoted in Justine McConnell, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora Since 1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 267.

<sup>368</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2014.

<sup>369</sup> Thomas, Interview with Verma.

ended in an embrace on the floor. That symbol of falling red material would return at the end of the play, when vast red banners fell from the top of the back latticed wall as Macduff delivered the blow that ended Macbeth's life. The tragedy moved from a sketch of domestic life in a British Indian home towards an increasingly symbolic, heightened and violent arena, all approached through Verma's sense of *rasa*. He described the transition: 'It starts with something which was quite natural, an ambition. You read the stars and stars say tomorrow you'll have a payday. You kind of believe it, it's all understandable.' However, 'As you *act* upon it, it moves to something beyond just the sitting room.'<sup>370</sup> Shaheen Khan felt this concept connected with the British Asian community. She referred to 'the extended families and the inter-family squabbles' concerning 'who's got more money?'. 'And sometimes' she added, 'it does lead to murder.'<sup>371</sup> For Robert Mountford, 'The exciting thing about playing Macbeth is there's elements of humanity that we can all relate to.' 'We might all have felt', he suggested, 'If I could just elbow that person out of the way I might get the promotion I'm after. Well, Shakespeare allows us to go that extra, extra, extra mile and say I'm going to kill him.'<sup>372</sup> In Verma's production, Macbeth's ambition was part of his drive to progress in the modern world, as well as his sense of being shadowed by a different cultural landscape. The director wondered, 'What would happen if a young man had grown up [in Britain] but had also been fed at home by stories of an extraordinary past of grandeur, full of bling and full

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<sup>370</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2015.

<sup>371</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Shaheen Khan, 10 February 2015.

<sup>372</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Robert Mountford, 10 February 2015.

of power.<sup>373</sup> There were multiple driving forces behind this Macbeth's ambition – from his wife, and a strained relationship with a powerful British Asian family, to a wider multi-cultural imaginary suggested by Verma's treatment of the Witches. More than any other element of the production, it was the Witches that pointed to a contradiction within Indian diasporic communities – between their present and inherited identities, between a simple drive to success and dreamlike echoes of the subcontinent.

Verma decided to characterise the three Weird Sisters as *hijras*, a transgender community recognised by the Indian government as the third sex (see Fig. 12). In her anthropological study *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Serena Nanda described how 'Hindu society accords the *hijras*, as sexually ambiguous figures, a measure of power and requires (or at least accepts) their presence on auspicious occasions.' She also noted, however, 'Hindu society's attitude toward the *hijras* is ambivalent. Although *hijras* have an auspicious presence, they also have inauspicious potential.'<sup>374</sup> Verma commented, 'They are prophetic in that if you don't give them what they want, they'll curse you; they'll also bless you in terms of what your future might hold.'<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Verma, 'Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Tara Arts'.

<sup>374</sup> Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Canada: Wadsworth 1998), p. 6.

<sup>375</sup> Thomas, Interview with Verma.



**Fig. 12 The three witches in *Macbeth* (2015).**

Tara's *Macbeth* opened with a battle represented by two martial arts fighters, their blows punctuated by drumbeats and the crashing of cymbals. The witches appeared on the outskirts, behind this action, and watched – a portentous, lurking presence. They were male actors dressed in saris, with long black wigs and flowers in their hair. They wore shining gold and brightly-coloured outfits decorated with glittering jewellery. Their voices were deep and masculine – their 'ancestral' presence necessarily required Indian accents – and two of them were bearded. When they stepped forwards, the conflict froze in a *tableau*; time stood still, introducing the concept of the *hijras*' supernatural power. They seemed to stand outside the construct of time, and outside the boundaries of gender. One proclaimed, 'When the battle's lost and won' (1.1.4), and gave a gesture that

unfroze time. The fight continued. This indicated the witches' control over the future of the war, and their foresight into what was to come. Their incantation – 'There to meet with Macbeth' (1.1.7) – followed by a song in the style of a Bollywood song, enhanced the power of their prophecies. They repeated 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' (1.1.10), singing the line and dancing through the space, twirling and spinning, casting a spell. The 'sisters' proceeded to enact specific Indian rituals upon Macbeth. They carried a *tilak* (red powder) tray and circled him, speaking their prophecies – 'All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!', 'All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!', 'All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!' (1.3. 48-50) – and with each new exclamation, accompanied by a loud beat of the drum, one placed a red mark of blessing on his forehead with the *tilak*. Before their exit, the witches held their hands together in a gesture of *namaskar* (traditional sign of respect). Robert Mountford returned their gesture, placing his hands together, mirroring them and demonstrating Macbeth's cautious acceptance of an Indian tradition. He had been confronted with a vision of those stories of the past, from the migrants' 'other world'.

Verma had found a community with specific cultural resonance with Shakespeare's liminal beings – in terms of the stigma surrounding them, their ostracisation from society, and their prophetic powers. The *hijras* underlined Tara Arts' exploration of the challenges of identity for British Indians. This encounter dramatised an internal cross-culturalism, whereby *Macbeth*'s middle-generation characters – second generation British Asians – entered a (tragic) dialogue with a distant part of themselves, and this in itself fulfilled an aim of Verma's Bilingual

dramaturgy: ‘Binglish, by definition almost, is inherently inclusive. It is an expression of the Other in constant dialogue with the Self.’<sup>376</sup> In a review for 1623 Theatre Company, Farrah Chaudhry described ‘the countless details perfectly injected by Tara Arts to show the multi layered and sometimes disjointed and complex lives of British Asians.’ Chaudhry felt that this represented her own experience as a British Asian: ‘My life is full of strangeness and eccentricities, so the bearded *hijras* made perfect sense to me and the entire production made sense of the nonsensical.’<sup>377</sup> For as well as providing a haunting and disarming presence, these witches were also a source of comedy. For example, in response to Banquo’s ‘You should be women, | And yet your beards forbid me to interpret | That you are so’ (1.3.45-47), all three simultaneously stuck their middle fingers up at him – a rude gesture of defiance accompanied by another grand cymbal crash. Their comedy also brought light relief, but Matt Trueman, a non-Asian reviewer, saw them only as camp: ‘They trip into the tradition of drag, coming across first and foremost as bearded men in saris. They’re sent up as such, with song and dance routines’.<sup>378</sup> Chaudhry, in contrast, appreciated the *hijras*’ role in Indian society and in this *Macbeth*: ‘They smash those stereotypes right up and beautifully move away from the notion that British Asians need to fit into a box and conform to their aligned clichés’.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Verma, ‘Binglish: a Jungli Approach’.

<sup>377</sup> Farrah Chaudhry, ‘Farrah reviews Tara Arts’s *Macbeth*’, *1623 Theatre Company*, 23 April 2015, <<http://1623theatre.co.uk/news/latest-news/355-farrah-reviews-tara-artss-macbeth>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

<sup>378</sup> Matt Trueman, ‘*Macbeth* (Tour)’, *What’s On Stage*, 30 March 2015, <[http://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/tara-arts-macbeth\\_37486.html](http://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/tara-arts-macbeth_37486.html)> [accessed 5 February 2017].

<sup>379</sup> Chaudhry.

An unexpected source of comedy that emerged from the rehearsal process was the characterisation of the Porter played by Shalini Peiris that was described as ‘delightfully detailed’.<sup>380</sup> The director realised that the actor had ‘very lovely physical training in terms of dance movement and so could be quite precise in her gestures’, and together they built a physical sequence of gestures to accompany the text.<sup>381</sup> The actor used an Indian accent to heighten the class divide between the Macbeths and their servants (the actor played both the Porter and Seyton, and so the roles became conflated). The actor herself was bilingual and had access to Singhalese, and Verma worked the dynamics of her voice into the piece to energise different ideas. Here, the Porter’s speech became a moment of empowerment for the (newly) female character; it became a commentary by a woman about men. Peiris’s delivery and comic timing was ‘fantastically funny’, and was commended by reviewers, ‘Shalini Peiris deserving special mention for her inspired and very funny Servant and Porter’.<sup>382</sup>

Discussing the impact and effect of Bilingual dramaturgy for a Western spectator, Verma wrote: ‘A modern white audience in Britain experiencing a Bilingual production could be said to be oscillating continuously between the sense of the native, the familiar and the foreign.’<sup>383</sup> It was an equalising strategy: just as *Macbeth*’s British South Asian characters must negotiate between a sense of the familiar and the foreign, so too must Anglo-Saxon audiences when confronted with the disruptive presence of peoples and traditions unfamiliar to

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<sup>380</sup> Bayes.

<sup>381</sup> Howard, Interview with Verma, 2015.

<sup>382</sup> Codd and Morgan.

<sup>383</sup> Verma in Campbell, p. 200.



them. The result might be comic, it may feel uneasily ‘other’, but the oscillation between the native, the familiar and the foreign is something *all* members of a post-colonial and multicultural society must learn to handle. In his three-way marriage of Shakespeare, current politics and the long legacy of classical Indian performance, Jatinder Verma made *Macbeth* and other plays a testing ground for the development of genuinely multi-cultural relations beyond the theatre. Giving voice to the expression of British South Asian identities, he hoped to provoke, in his words, other ways of ‘seeing’. Meanwhile Tara Arts’ Shakespearean projects commented on the divide within Indian diasporic communities, between their everyday British identity and its relationship to the alternative worlds of the migrants’ intricate heritage. Whether frightening or amusing or both at once, for a person from the diaspora that duality has undeniable and inescapable consequences for the future.

### **Phizzical Productions: Bollywoodising Shakespeare**

Samir Bhamra founded Phizzical Productions in 2003. At this time there seemed to be a zeitgeist that celebrated Indian film culture in the UK, and Bollywood had become part of mainstream British consciousness for the first time. British Asian films such as Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend It like Beckham* (2002) had been given a general release. Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Bombay Dreams* (also 2002), composed by Bollywood’s most famous composer, the Oscar-award winning A. R. Rahman, opened in the West End. Selfridges stores in London and Manchester

launched ‘23 ½ days of Bollywood’, a campaign with dance performances, film screenings, fashion shows and discussions with Indian authors. The Indian superstar Amitabh Bachchan was a guest of honour at events promoting Indian film, while the Victoria and Albert Museum curated an Indian cinema exhibition. Samir Bhamra’s wish was to contribute to the British cultural scene and also to bring British Asian audiences into UK theatres, particularly through his, and their, love of Bollywood. Indeed, Phizzical was originally set up with the aim of producing films. Bhamra said:

I write cinematically, I even think cinematically. It comes from the years of watching Indian films with my mother, sometimes two films a night and on the weekends it could be four films – after I’d done my homework. That’s possibly also the reason why Bollywood is heavily part of my life, I am strongly influenced by Indian cinema.<sup>384</sup>

Bhamra shares a similar story of migration with Jatinder Verma. He grew up and was educated in Kenya, and moved to the UK with his family in 1989; he studied the performing arts at a young age and continued working with dance and arts events as he read Mathematics at university. But whereas Verma formed Tara Arts as an act of political protest, and turned to theatre tactically through the need to create a public space from which to combat racism and affirm his community’s identity, Bhamra has suggested that he was fuelled purely by his passion for Bollywood and the arts. Personal circumstances meant that he had neither the

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<sup>384</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Samir Bhamra, 28 June 2015.

time nor the resources to invest in producing a film as he had hoped, and so he recalls saying to himself: ‘Even though I think cinematically I’m just going to have to do it in theatre.’<sup>385</sup> Thus Phizzical was born with the aim to ‘increase and improve opportunities for culturally diverse communities to engage with arts’.<sup>386</sup> Bhamra initially applied to the Arts Council to receive funding but was not successful. So he put all his savings into creating a talent show, a Bollywood entertainment inspired by *Pop Idol* (ITV, 2001-2003). He received the support of the BBC, who broadcast sections of his project: *Bolly Idol*. The winners of the competition won roles in his musical *Precious Bazaar*, which toured the UK for two years. Bhamra was surprised by the demand for this production:

People wanted the opportunities to be in Bollywood, and if they couldn’t, then to be in a Bollywood show in the UK was the next best thing, because at least they were getting training, at least they were getting the opportunity to perform.<sup>387</sup>

From the beginning of his journey as Artistic Director, the notion of providing a space for British Asians to develop their talent was important to Bhamra. He saw his work as providing a performance training ground, and this ‘British Bollywood’ style continued to infuse his work when he turned to staging Shakespeare.

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

<sup>386</sup> Phizzical, ‘About Phizzical’, *Phizzical Productions*, 2017, <<http://www.phizzical.com/about/>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

<sup>387</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

As with Jatinder Verma, Bhamra's personal connection to Shakespeare had begun at school in Kenya where he played Romeo and Puck. His mother was influential in cultivating his appreciation of the plays; he would go home from school for lunch and there would be a book put in front of him – often one of Shakespeare's texts. His education continued in Lancashire, and Shakespeare was part of his curriculum. Bhamra recalls that when he formed his company, he was 'walking around Leicester, passing a pub called the Shakespeare's Head' followed by 'another pub called the Phixx', and he thought 'That's how I need the name of my company to be, it needs to be different, it needs to be fizzy and dynamic, [with] movement – and be enchanting'.<sup>388</sup> Thus 'Phizzical', like Yvonne Brewster's 'Talawa' decades earlier, defined the collective creative energy with which Bhamra wished to work. He had watched Indian films adaptations of Shakespeare – which, led by Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003) and *Omkara* (2006), were about to become admired worldwide – but although he knew of Tara Arts' *Tempest*, he had not seen it. In fact, his first experience with Shakespeare as a director developed unintentionally from an exercise in an audition for a different play.

Bhamra had decided to launch another *Bolly Idol* competition – to find talented, 'thinking' actors who could look at a text, connect it to Bollywood genres, and merge the two. As part of the audition process he divided forty actors into four groups and gave them each a Shakespeare play; they were to create a twenty-minute version of it and perform it in a Bollywood style. Entertainment

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

would become a watchword for Phizzical's Shakespeare, but not escapism: Bhamra was interested in issues of mental health, which had personal resonance, and he chose scripts that would allow the casts to explore them: *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*. He had not planned to produce Shakespeare, he used the texts as a creative exercise. However, he 'loved the process so much that [he] decided to commission one of those plays'.<sup>389</sup> An important future partner for Bhamra auditioned for *Bolly Idol*: Omar Khan. It was his twenty-minute version of *Twelfth Night* that caught Bhamra's imagination, and he decided to collaborate with Khan as a writer. Soon after *Bolly Idol*, Phizzical was commissioned by the Leicester Asian Youth Association (LAYA) to run drama workshops that would lead to a performance. It was this funding body that asked if they might do *Romeo and Juliet*, which led to his first Shakespeare adaptation. Bhamra now established a particular methodology, adapting Shakespeare into a Bollywood style incorporating song and dance; he would continue to develop it in the following years.

### ***Romeo and Laila***

Bhamra remembers that when LAYA asked him, 'Can you do *Romeo and Juliet*?', he replied 'Can we do *Laila Majnu* instead?' They responded, 'Can we just do *Romeo and Laila*?', so it was 'a compromise'.<sup>390</sup> Thus began Bhamra's enterprise of Bollywoodising Shakespeare. He received a budget of £2000 to

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<sup>389</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

stage the production. There was no question but that it would embrace Bollywood; as Bhamra said, ‘That was inherent to me’.<sup>391</sup> Using two classics, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Laila and Majnun* (originating in ninth-century Persia and later, for instance, the basis for the much-loved [1976] Hindi film *Laila Majnu*), Bhamra overlapped and interlaced them to tell an epic story from the British Asian perspective for a specific regional and BAME-majority audience. In many respects Bhamra’s dramaturgical model resembles Verma’s, and it operates on four levels. The starting point is the Shakespearean text that provides the structural framework, scenes, plot, and relationships (though there are differences between the two directors’ attitudes to the language, which I shall examine later). Bhamra then develops a contextual transposition, to dramatise a British Asian community experience. However, the style of performance is irrevocably Bollywood in terms of acting, costume, and the importance of song and dance. Finally, Bhamra’s cast hail from mixed ethnic backgrounds and he particularly aims to give a platform to ‘emerging talent’.<sup>392</sup>

Phizzical’s praxis of Bollywoodising Shakespeare began in *Romeo and Laila* with the overlapping of the plot of the film *Laila Majnu* with the structure of *Romeo and Juliet*. The Bollywood movie tells the story of Laila and Qais – ‘star-crossed lovers’ born into rival clans – the Amaris and the Sharwaris.<sup>393</sup> The

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Similarly to Jatinder Verma’s casting practice, Bhamra’s was closely aligned with Thompson’s ‘cross-cultural’ model. However, Bhamra was also specific in his own Bollywood methodology and developed a terminology specifically to communicate his vision and mission.

<sup>393</sup> Laila and Qais have loved each other from the time of their childhood, but were separated by the rivalry between their families. They meet again in adulthood at the marketplace where they fall in love and continue their relationship in secret. Laila’s

narratives share many similarities, and Bhamra worked to combine the two in the context of contemporary Britain: Romeo, a white Christian Montague, falls in love with Laila, a Muslim Sharwari. They have known each other since childhood but their families would not allow their relationship, due to their prejudices and discrimination towards each other's different religious and cultural beliefs. Laila's brother Tabrej kills Romeo's best friend Mercutio, and to revenge his friend's death Romeo kills Tabrej. The matriarch of the family, Grand Mother Sharwari, fakes a stroke in order to convince Laila to agree to an arranged marriage with Paris. Encouraged by Grand Mother Sharwari, Paris murders Romeo to maintain his family's honour, and Laila stabs herself, committing suicide due to her grief. Bhamra described the writing process as 'negotiating between the two texts to try to find a resolution'.<sup>394</sup>

Omar Khan provided the structure of this piece, which used contemporary dialogue entirely, and none of Shakespeare's text. Bhamra described how 'Omar wrote a draft of the script and then I worked on that script with the cast. So each scene evolved in the rehearsal room – "Would we say this, does it make sense, how would you want to do it?"'<sup>395</sup> Thus the scenarios were improvised, and the dialogue was written using the actors' own words, their personal imaginative response. Whereas Verma originally aimed to derail the authority of the colonialist voice, the reason why Bhamra chose not to incorporate Shakespeare's

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brother Tabrej kills Qais's father, and to avenge his father's murder Qais retaliates by killing Tabrej. He is exiled for his actions and his separation from Laila, who is married to another man, causes him to descend into madness.

<sup>394</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

words was nervousness: ‘I didn’t know the iambic [...] That’s why the early Shakespeares were very much adaptations, because I can deal with that.’<sup>396</sup> He removed the sixteenth-century text to allow young people and his other community collaborators to express themselves. The LAYA cast united actors who had auditioned for *Bolly Idol*, plus local amateurs and other members of the community, all using their own accents. This contributed to an essential aspect of *Romeo and Laila*, which strongly represented the voices of contemporary British Asians living in Leicester, telling their own stories and exploring themes of immediate local and personal importance. Meanwhile Bhamra’s stylisation and referencing of Hindi cinematic spectacle also added a more heightened layer of theatricality.<sup>397</sup> These different layers can be seen through an analysis of the opening scene.

Instead of using the conceit of a sonnet prologue to outline the plot and the main characters, Bhamra drew on the Bollywood genre to introduce the audience to the style of performance, the lead characters, and a sense of their doomed connection. *Romeo and Laila* began with the lovers seated at opposite ends of the stage. Fairy lights decorated the space, twinkling in between them. Their differences in cultural upbringing were made clear through the props and

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Tejaswini Ganti, in *A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), described the conventions of Bollywood cinema as follows: ‘Hindi cinema is a hybrid form, absorbing influences from mythology, folklore, literature, Indian-language films, European cinema, and Hollywood.’ (p. 106) She references popular Indian cinema as a “cinema of interruptions” where elements such as song sequences and the interval interrupt the narrative. [...] Most popular Hindi films are melodramas’ (p. 106). Furthermore, ‘song sequences have a wide variety of functions within a film’s narrative as well as provide the main element of cinematic spectacle’ (p. 92).



costumes: Laila sat reading a book, dressed in a white *shalwar kameez* (Indian suit), whereas Romeo, dressed in jeans and a hoodie, sat drinking a can of lager.

Yet they were connected through the poetry of their monologues:

LAILA You ever just wish, you could... like a bird, just spread your wings, you know the way they do – and rest in the air – not even have to fly. Just glide like that.

ROMEO Look at them, out there? Just floating. Not having to do anything. Just spreading their wings. You ever wish... nah, it's silly.<sup>398</sup>

Their words echoed Hindi film dialogue, where lovers use heightened language marked by such images and similes as the birds here. This intimate moment was underscored musically by an epic cinematic theme that elevated the hero and heroine's situation and love to the heights of Bollywood romance. This moment was mirrored in the play's final image where Bhamra presented a reversal of the opening. Romeo and Laila, rather than being isolated on separate sides of the stage, lay side-by-side. Petals fell from the ceiling onto the dead lovers. The Bollywood score swelled. Bhamra used this music throughout to underline the drama of specific moments in a filmic style, and as an ever-present reminder of the Bollywood genre.

Bhamra also aimed to connect to issues personal to himself and to members of his local community. Setting Shakespeare in an Indian context, he argued, was a matter of looking for 'a real tangible connection to make it even

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<sup>398</sup> Omar Khan, *Romeo and Laila* (Unpublished, 2006), p. 2.

stronger, to make it even more relevant. If it's a connection that I personally have then that's great,' and 'if it's something that the audience has that's even better.'<sup>399</sup> The difficulty of interfaith marriages was an issue relevant to the director's own life – his parents were from different backgrounds – his mother was Sikh and his father was Muslim, 'two religions that apparently don't get along since the Mughal period' – and they eloped.<sup>400</sup> As Bhamra has stated, 'essentially when I make work I look at some part of my life'.<sup>401</sup> In this case, the personal factor, and the issues of interfaith relationships in Britain, came together. Thus the distinction between the two families, and the reason why Romeo and Laila were not allowed to be together, was because the Montagues were Christians and the Sharwaris were Muslims. The religious and racial clash was made clear through the use of music, costume and text. After a brawl in a nightclub over a drugs deal, the Christian Mrs. Montague exclaimed to Mercutio:

Thank goodness. You boys need to control yourselves.

Those Paki people are really dangerous. You hear the news.

You hear what they get up to. If they're not scared to blow themselves up, just imagine what they could do to you.<sup>402</sup>

Her racism, and the stereotypical discrimination against Tabrej and his family because of their religion, extended to her feelings about her son's involvement with Laila. Meanwhile the Muslim Mrs. Sharwari, Leila's mother, rejected Romeo as her daughter's lover due to her sense of the traditions of her own

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<sup>399</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Omar Khan, p. 10.

religion. She declared: ‘What you are doing is *haram*. As your *ami* [(mother)], it is my duty to guide you onto the right path.’<sup>403</sup> The introduction of the concept of what is *haram* (forbidden by Islamic law) deepened the conflict; for her, a relationship with someone outside their own religious community was simply prohibited. Thus Bhamra’s experiences and identity fuelled his creative direction and encouraged him to explore his own story on stage through Shakespeare: ‘My mother eloped, and my sister wanted a marriage of her choice and my father wasn’t happy about that, so I know that story, I know that history.’<sup>404</sup> Laila expressed this type of conflict to Romeo:

LAILA You know that I can’t be with someone who isn’t  
Muslim.

ROMEO Is this religion thing really such a big problem?

LAILA Not for me, but for them.<sup>405</sup>

Romeo and Laila, as third-generation migrants, born and brought up in Britain, found themselves straddling two worlds – the traditional religions, cultures and customs of their parents’ homelands that conflicted with the cultural norms of British society. For the writer Omar Khan too, this wasn’t simply an exercise in adaptation but was also an expression of personal testimony, of difficulties he encountered because of his hybrid identity. His father too was Muslim, and his mother Hindu, and he was brought up as agnostic. For him, this caused problems when it came to any question of marriage; in his words there was a ‘judgement

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>404</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

<sup>405</sup> Omar Khan, p. 32.

call, automatically'; he was not Hindu enough for Hindu families because of his Muslim name, and was not suitable to marry a Muslim woman because he did not practice Islam. Khan connected with Shakespeare in this sense: 'I was the product of a Romeo and Juliet union, so a lot of this story really hit home with me.'<sup>406</sup>

Another personal struggle within the British South Asian context that Bhamra wished to explore concerned violence towards women and forced marriage. In his own experience, 'It would happen in an Asian household where if a girl had fallen in love with someone else, she would be locked up. Everyone would be against it'.<sup>407</sup> The arranged marriage was a reality for many British Asians' forebears, as well as for first-, even second- generation migrants in Britain, and the obvious connections to Shakespeare were resonant. Just as it is arranged for Juliet to marry Paris, so too is Laila told to fulfil her duty and marry the suitor of her family's choosing. Shakespeare's Lady Capulet says:

LADY CAPULET	Marry, that 'marry' is the very theme I came to talk of. Tell me, daughter Juliet, How stands your disposition to be married?
JULIET	It is an honour that I dream not of.
NURSE	An honour! were not I thine only nurse, I would say thou hadst suck'd wisdom from thy teat.
LADY CAPULET	Well, think of marriage now; younger than you, Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,

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<sup>406</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Omar Khan, 3 July 2015.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

Are made already mothers: by my count,  
I was your mother much upon these years  
That you are now a maid. Thus then in brief:  
The valiant Paris seeks you for his love.

(1.3.64–75)

Omar Khan freely modernised the language and highlighted the issues:

MRS SHARWARI That is not your decision to make. It's mine and your grandmother's and we've decided you will marry him.

LAILA You are asking me to sacrifice my life.

MRS SHARWARI No, just to fulfil your duty to this family.<sup>408</sup>

This scene is recognisable in the South Asian context; and as we have seen, recent UK productions with Indian casts and settings have explored the concept of *izzat* in relation to Shakespeare's treatment of honour, shame, duty and marriage. The hierarchical image of the patriarch in a physical position of dominance over his daughter has been repeatedly enacted. In the RSC's *Much Ado* Leonato threw Hero to the floor and towered over her in a rage, driven by the questioning of his *izzat*. In the National Theatre's *Romeo and Juliet* (2014–17; see Chapter six) Capulet tore a magazine from Juliet's hands and forced her violently down as she cowered below him, refusing to marry Paris. In Bhamra's version, Laila was twice the subject of physical abuse by the men in her life. First her elder brother

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<sup>408</sup> Omar Khan, p. 67.

Tabrej threw her to the floor whilst he accused her of dancing with Romeo: ‘If I ever saw the two of you together I would kill him while you watched [...] and then kill you.’<sup>409</sup> After Tabrej’s death, her other brother Genghis assumed the role of protector of the family’s honour; he slapped Laila around the face, she fell to the floor, and now he stood over her in his turn: ‘You will not dishonour the Sharwari name [...] Honour is the greatest sacrifice of all. So, you will get married to Paris tomorrow.’<sup>410</sup> For Bhamra, ‘The deeper issue is the violence towards the daughter or towards Asian woman. That’s the message we’re trying to get across.’<sup>411</sup> Honour killings in South Asian communities are clearly a cause of anxiety for British South Asian practitioners and for the wider community. However, there is a danger of reinforcing stereotypes through the repetition of the same images of the violent Indian or Muslim patriarch. In fact, Bhamra’s producer had been unhappy about his representation of Muslims in *Romeo and Laila*, and the director had difficulty convincing her to proceed with the production. It is easy to connect Early Modern scenarios to such contemporary problems, but there were many other aspects of British South Asian socio-politics which Bhamra wished to explore through the Shakespearean prism.

Representing the diasporic experience, Bhamra’s production depicted a stark contrast between Western and Eastern cultures and religions in the British context. One *Romeo and Laila* scene opened in a UK club with the spectacle of a choreographed dance routine set to the song ‘Lady Marmalade’. The female

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>411</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

dancers wore raunchy corsets, black lace, and high heels; one brandished a whip. This satirical picture of the extremes of Western culture was contrasted to a highly traditional Islamic bridal ceremony, where the cast all wore appropriate Muslim wedding attire (Laila was in green, symbolising her Muslim identity) and the Imam followed the traditional text: ‘*Mohammad Pervaiz Malik, nikaah qabool hai?*’<sup>412</sup> This demonstrated that while first generation migrants still held on to their traditions, the children were not always eager to obey. At this point in their collaboration, the main message with which Bhamra and Khan left the audience was potent: in modern Britain racism and the violent imposition of traditional religious values might be subtler, yet they were still present, and still traumatic.

### ***Twelfth Night or What You Fancy***

Phizzical’s second Shakespearean adaptation, in 2008, was a version of *Twelfth Night*, retitled *What You Fancy*. Bhamra did not direct this himself because he had taken on a full-time job at the People’s Centre in Leicester as part of Phizzical’s long-term strategy:

I realised at that point that, yes, I’ve been making work for three years now, but what I don’t actually have is the full understanding of what the *venue* wants, what I need. How does a venue operate – marketing – the whole business?

[...] So I got a job as an arts marketing assistant and ended

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<sup>412</sup> Omar Khan, p. 75.

up becoming the film programmer, the theatre programmer, marketing, and running the schools.<sup>413</sup>

For the *What You Fancy* project, he worked with the director Leylah; Bhamra remained involved in the scriptwriting process and attended some rehearsals. Omar Khan had been working on his adaptation of *Twelfth Night* since the *Bolly Idol* competition concurrently with *Romeo and Laila*, which was produced first due to the funding provided by the LAYA. Whereas that script used the plot of a much-loved Bollywood film as the point of *fusion*, *What You Fancy* used the context of the Bollywood film industry itself as the point of *transposition* for Shakespeare's characters. Here was a departure from the tragic themes the company had explored in *Romeo and Laila*; 'It wasn't high-brow entertainment,' Khan stated: 'If you wanted farce then you came to the right place'.<sup>414</sup> He used modern language again, with what he called some 'Bollywoodisms' ('Come on yaar!')<sup>415</sup> It was almost a scene-by-scene reconstruction of *Twelfth Night*, but relocated into a Bollywood studio context, and with very contemporary allusions.

Duke Orsino became a Bollywood star, Dhruv Raj Singh, who was in love with the Bollywood actress (and Miss World), Olivia Kapoor. She had taken out a restraining order against him, which forced him to use a 'man-servant' – Vidya, in the guise of 'Casim' – to deliver his messages. Members of Olivia's household staff became the actors' agents and management. The source of this Malvolio's 'otherness' was that he was educated in England and wanted to

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<sup>413</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

<sup>414</sup> Thomas, Interview with Khan.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.



comply with health and safety regulations; he was imposing an ethos the Indian servants couldn't comprehend. Phizzical used *What You Fancy* as a springboard to examine celebrity culture. It embraced multimedia in the form of a filmed chat show modelled on a popular programme called *Koffee with Karan*, broadcast on the Indian TV channel STAR World India. In Leylah's production, Dhruv Raj and Olivia were interviewed on *Chai with Charan*. As regards the acting style and script, Omar Khan described it as 'the opposite' of *Romeo and Laila*: 'It was fun, it was frothy, it was Bollywood, it was dance, it was basically a full on Bollywood production' with songs. It was a 'homage to Bollywood, full of cheesy looks to the camera [...] The acting is very melodramatic, over the top',<sup>416</sup> and for one reviewer the 'gloriously hammy overacting from Jas Binag playing "The Dhruv", The King of Bollywood,' was 'one of the highlights of the evening'.<sup>417</sup>

As with Phizzical's incorporation of dance numbers into *Romeo and Laila* in accordance to the Bollywood genre, musical routines were added to introduce the characters. Dhruv Raj launched himself onstage with the Bollywood hit 'Dard-E-Disco'. Even when the twins were separated in the Gujarat earthquake – a serious reference to the 2001 disaster – they were introduced with the song '*Hum Tumhe Chathe Hain Aise*'. Laylah's song choices were significantly popular and familiar; British South Asian audiences would recognise their meaning, and this added layers to the characters' personalities and problems. For example, 'Dard-E-Disco' is performed in the almost legendary movie *Om Shanti*

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Kevin McNally, 'Review', 20 May 2007, quoted in Phizzical, 'What You Fancy – A Bollywood Love Triangle Based On Shakespeare's The Twelfth Night', *Phizzical*, 2017, <[www.phizzical.com/whatyoufancy](http://www.phizzical.com/whatyoufancy)> [accessed 5 February 2017].

*Om* by the (real) Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan, who is playing Shah Rukh Khan, a famous (fictional) Bollywood actor. So Dhruv Raj Khan/Orsino was established at a stroke as the ‘King of Bollywood’ and the epitome of preening masculinity and self-admiring success.

*What You Fancy* was performed over two years, beginning at The Drum in Birmingham; in the second year it toured to seven regional venues from April–July 2008 as well as to Rich Mix in London.<sup>418</sup> This production consolidated Bhamra’s approach to Shakespeare as popular entertainment for new communities. It retained the dramatic structure and adapted it into the Bollywood film-factory context; it incorporated dance, songs and music; it gave opportunities to British Asian actors to develop their craft; and the text was written in accessible contemporary English. After this, however, Bhamra decided to shift Phizzical’s strategy. He wanted to stake the company’s – and their public’s – claim to a more mainstream space, and at the core of this project he decided to reinforce the role of the Shakespearean language.

### ***Cymbeline***

In the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics, Bhamra was keen to pitch a production of *Cymbeline* as part of the World Shakespeare Festival. He could not yet see this through, but he completed a development programme at the National Theatre at

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<sup>418</sup> *What You Fancy* was performed at Ludlow Assembly Rooms, Roses Theatre, Key Theatre, The Broadway, Millfield Theatre, Rich Mix, Lawrence Batley Theatre and The Lowry.

the time of the WSF, which led to him shadowing Gregory Doran at the RSC. Here we see a British Asian director who has benefited from learning and observing in a mainstream theatrical establishment, but who used the experience to move in an independent direction. Bhamra developed a youth board, and worked with them to determine which Shakespeare play he would stage. Eventually, *Cymbeline* was chosen and Bhamra stated: ‘*Cymbeline* has something that all men and women will enjoy watching together – romance, action, comedy, song and live music. Just like a Bollywood film, then’. And he now adds, ‘I started to look at the connections I could make with my life about it’.<sup>419</sup>

As with *Romeo and Laila* and *What You Fancy*, the Phizzical *Cymbeline* embraced the cultural references of Hindi cinema, and in fact Bollywood’s films and Bollywood’s industry became integral to every aspect of the piece, from the aesthetic to the basic plot conceits. Bhamra edited the text so that the majority of references were Indianised. Shakespeare’s fantasy Britain became Mumbai, ruled by the Bollywood movie mogul King Cymbeline. His Hindu daughter Innojaan had married a Muslim, Sherruddin Khan, who was banished to Dubai. Cymbeline’s idiot step-son Cloten became a ludicrous and paranoid would-be superstar. Bhamra developed further themes that offered particularly close parallels to the Bollywood genre, including the father-daughter relationship, and the representations of different cultures, religions and stratas of society. His own family history – as well as his memories of Manmohan Desai’s films made in the 1970s – inspired this focus. With *Cymbeline*, Phizzical continued to use

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<sup>419</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

Shakespeare to forge links between Midlands theatres and diverse Midlands communities, and it now went wider; the play premiered at the Coventry Belgrade in 2013 and then toured to twenty-two regional venues across the country. This was the longest tour to date for a play by a British Asian theatre company.

The production's relationship with Bollywood was announced by the marketing design (see Fig. 13). Bhamra was responsible for the concept himself, working with the photographer Hitz Rao. At that point Bhamra intended to set *Cymbeline* in the Mughal period, and he planned the photoshoot to represent this concept. But the iconography of the images also specifically alluded to the 2008 romantic film *Jodhaa Akbar*. Even though he eventually changed the context of the play to the late twentieth-century, the opulent imagery Bhamra used promised a sense of a timeless love story.



**Fig. 13 Marketing leaflet for *Cymbeline* (2013).**

Thus the marketing campaign related this *Cymbeline* to sixteenth century India, Hindi cinema, Shakespeare's Roman/Jacobean Britain, and (since Hitz Rao was also a wedding photographer) the familiar highpoints and ceremonies of British South Asian life. Phizzical triggered and endorsed a hierarchy of responses. While the company targeted those with specific cultural knowledge, it also promised entertainment, lush escapism, and the universal pleasures of over-the-top romance.

The director's handling of the essential generic elements of Bollywood was manifest in each aspect of the production, particularly music, movement and costume. This was evident from the very opening with an additional song composed by the cast and Ajay Srivastava. Fusing Shakespeare's sonnets and the tune of a Bollywood song, the hero and heroine sang: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? My Jaan, you're lovelier in every way.'<sup>420</sup> Sophie Levy Khan and Adam Youssefbeygi had prerecorded their voices, and in performance they mimed to the track in the style of 'play-back' singers. As star-crossed lovers should, they were drawn to each other from opposite wings and took up archetypal Bollywood poses. This company worked with the movement director Sonia Sabri, a renowned British South Asian dancer and choreographer who specialised in Kathak. Asian critics picked out this prologue, enjoying the way it presented the 'honoured Bollywood tradition'.<sup>421</sup> The song embodied the essence

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<sup>420</sup> *Cymbeline*, dir. Samir Bhamra (Unpublished, 2013).

<sup>421</sup> Sanjeevini Dutta, 'Cymbeline', *Pulse*, 17 September 2013, <<http://www.pulseconnects.com/content/Cymbeline1>> [accessed 12 February 2017]

of Shakespeare's plot, introduced the protagonists and expressed their plight. This essential aesthetic feature of Bollywood might have been taken much further, and Bhamra initially hoped to include at least three more play-back numbers, but these had to be cut due to rehearsal time and budget constraints. Phizzical, like all UK multi-ethnic theatres at some point, faced serious financial struggles. Even so, Bollywoodesque music ran throughout the evening, with a score composed by the nineteen-year-old Leicester-based Devesh Sodha. His music top-and-tailed scenes with a mixture of 1970s and 1980s tunes mixed with contemporary sounds, to create a self-aware, magical, threatening, and even nightmarish world – like the original play.

The production worked best in its complex interplay between the contemporary Bollywood aesthetic, and the mythological (and indeed often Shakespearean) origins and influences on Indian cinema.<sup>422</sup> This was particularly apparent in Act 2 Scene 2 where Yakim/Iachimo intruded into Innojaan's bedchamber. Tony Hasnath (Yakim) entered from underneath her bed, topless, in leather trousers, and his hair loose. Hasnath's characterisation was based on the archetypal Bollywood villain, with melodramatic physicality and furrowed eyebrows. Audiences were encouraged to see links to the *Ramayana* (the ancient Sanskrit text telling the story of the Hindu gods Rama and Sita). This allusion to the mythological was introduced at the beginning of the scene, where Bhamra adapted Iachimo's reference to Tarquin and Cytherea: instead Yakim whispered: 'Your Ravana thus | Did softly press the rushes, ere he waken'd | The chastity he

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<sup>422</sup> For the continuing interplay between Shakespeare and Indian cinema, see the work of the film director Vishal Bhardwaj.

wounded. O Sita'.<sup>423</sup> Again, Bhamra's Shakespeare was embracing very familiar, not esoteric, sources; he had been struck by an image from Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* (seventy-eight one-hour television episodes first screened in the 1980s): 'I'd watched the entire *Ramayan*, I remembered this one scene where Sita holds a green leaf and says you will not come as close as this... and that's how I imagined Yakim and Innojaan'.<sup>424</sup> Thus there was always a barrier between the characters, seen in the white sheet separating them. Innojaan lay on her bed, beneath the sheet – the essence of purity and virtue, a true Sita. Bhamra translated the significant prop in Shakespeare, a bracelet, into a *mangalsutra* (necklace given to a bride). This hugely elevated the object's significance in the Indian context. The *mangalsutra* was not only a gift from her husband, it was the symbol of her identity as a Hindu married woman. There was nothing more precious to her. Another instance where the director took inspiration from the *Ramayan* in order to energise Shakespeare's text was his treatment of the character Belarius who became Bela, played by Liz Jadev. Similarly to Verma's treatment of the Porter, Bhamra wrote a woman's experience into the text. He aligned the character to Sita, who after being banished to the forest, brings up her two children Lava and his twin brother Kusha. For Bhamra, 'It was just the story of Sita to me' and so, the character 'had to be a woman'.<sup>425</sup> In such ways this reimagining of *Cymbeline* achieved a symbiosis between Shakespeare and Indian cultural heritage – as equal partners in the 'third space' of the diasporic stage. The production's complex

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<sup>423</sup> *Cymbeline*, dir. Samir Bhamra

<sup>424</sup> Thomas, Interview with Bhamra.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

layering of Indian references, both mythological and contemporarily cinematic, not only served as a relocation of the story, but also added further cultural meaning to Shakespeare's play.

## **Conclusion**

The work of both Jatinder Verma and Samir Bhamra demonstrates the way in which members of the South Asian diaspora have used Shakespeare as a site of negotiation, in order to explore, examine and represent their identities, to achieve presence and give a voice to South Asian communities in Britain.

Tara Arts' *Macbeth* was produced as part of the Black Theatre Live initiative supported by Arts Council England, a national consortium of eight regional theatres 'committed to effecting change for BAME touring theatre through a sustainable three-year programme of national touring, structural support and audience development'.<sup>426</sup> This funding project aimed to ensure that opportunities were given to BAME companies to produce work that would tour across England. One of its strands included the launch of audience development and community engagement programmes, including live digital streaming. *Macbeth* was seen live online, with the goal of taking British Asian Shakespeare to wider and more diverse audience.

Tara Arts' contribution as the leading BAME theatre company specialising in telling stories of the British South Asian communities can be seen in the

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<sup>426</sup> Black Theatre Live, 'About Us', *Black Theatre Live*, 2017, <<http://blacktheatrelive.co.uk/about>> [accessed 5 February 2017].



subsequent work by BAME artists who developed their skills with the company. They have included actors, writers, directors and producers such as Meera Syal, Sanjeev Bhaskar, Tanika Gupta, Ayub Khan-Din, Kristin Landon-Smith and Sudha Buchar, all of whom began working with Tara Arts. The company paved the way for others and has survived through different political and economic climates, including many arts funding cuts. Tara's history provides a model of sustainable practice for the development and production of BAME work: a business model that has helped the company maintain NPO status and has engendered infrastructural change to the UK touring landscape; a model for the development of both new and classic work; a model for audience engagement within its new (2016) building; a model for the development of a unique theatrical praxis; and a sustained model to support and nurture the careers of BAME actors and artists.

As a company whose origins were sparked by an act of racism, Tara Arts has continually worked towards promoting equality so that people from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds have a voice, place, and identity within the cultural landscape and thus in the national consciousness. Tara Arts has consistently opened dialogues between east and west, promoting positive social change, understanding and greater diversity. And it has long recognised the symbolic and strategic role of Shakespeare in this. Naseem Khan wrote: 'Tara Arts has had an extraordinary journey. They have brought another sensibility onto

the scene, stretched British cultural life and helped to make those of us with different origins visible to both ourselves and others.’<sup>427</sup>

Although both directors drew from their South Asian cultural heritages in their Shakespearean productions, there are clear differences between Verma and Bhamra’s approaches. Whereas Verma stressed the meeting points between British and South Asian classical traditions, Bhamra was populist and aimed to reach a new audience through referencing contemporary cinematic tropes. Even though some similar issues – with regards to the treatment of Indian women, arranged marriage and violence – that were seen on mainstream stages were present in Phizzical’s earlier work, Bhamra appreciated Shakespeare as a dramatist who celebrated diversity in terms of class, genre, style, period and, potentially, his audience. Both Verma and Bhamra improved the gender imbalance written into Shakespeare with their casting and treatment of the Porter and Belario. In these instances, they empowered women in ways that Shakespeare did not; the women become key energy sources in the productions, and enriched the emotional fabric of the plays.

Bhamra was concerned with making Shakespeare accessible for British South Asian communities and developing a new audience, as well as engaging the traditional theatre audience. In both practitioners’ works, there were layers of styles and meanings that clearly came from diverse cultures; an Anglo-Saxon audience may not necessarily know the details of these cultures, but the productions still communicated on many levels. From production to production,

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<sup>427</sup> Tara Arts, ‘Company History’, *Tara Arts*, 2014, <<http://tara-arts.com/about-us/company-history>> [accessed 4 December 2014].

Bhamra grew his audience and increased his artistic ambition. *Cymbeline* marked a significant step in the development of his own unique theatrical praxis. He aimed to continue to Bollywoodise Shakespeare in future productions, and to continue to create work that would engage Britain's minority communities and encouraged young culturally diverse talent. Through his practice Bhamra aimed to make Shakespeare relevant for BAME communities, and to represent personal experiences of British Asians in a space where minority diaspora communities could negotiate their identities. It was significant that the final performance in Tara Arts' theatre space in Earlsfield before it was renovated in 2016 (see thesis Conclusion) was Phizzical's *Cymbeline*. Bhamra's work was staged in a space carved out by Jatinder Verma, a space that encouraged a merging of equals – South Asian and British traditions – with the aim of building a new, and more culturally diverse, audience.

Jatinder Verma stated: 'In England, Shakespeare quite rightly has enormous status, but what comes with it is a sense that "we know best".' Yet, he argued, 'when we look at Shakespeare over the centuries some of the best versions have been foreign versions. They've given us another insight into Shakespeare. It gets a lot more vexed when the foreignness is within.' Verma draws attention here to the sense of Otherness even as a British migrant. He said, 'We at Tara were not a foreign troupe coming and doing the whole text in a foreign language; we were and are British with foreign connections and with other languages.' Through his treatment of the Shakespearean text – and the same can be said of Bhamra's practice – this director encouraged a multiplicity of ways of looking at the world

by challenging the dominant conventions. Verma insisted that his ambition would always be to change the rules of the ‘game’: ‘Such unspoken rules of the game are being challenged (rightly so) by the new sounds of English spoken by migrants and refugees today’.<sup>428</sup>

It is through their practices of Bilingualising and Bollywoodising Shakespeare that Verma and Bhamra have written their migrant experience into the fabric of British cultural life. Their voices were heard, in tune with Shakespeare’s, and their experiences were rendered visible. Their work, however, remained in the margins with little public subsidy in comparison to the Shakespearean work being produced on Britain’s main stages. Their impact was primarily felt by the actors and creatives who gained the opportunity to perform leading Shakespearean roles, to develop their skills, and find pathways for progression, and also by the local audiences who attended the productions. I would argue that mainstream organisations, such as the RSC, can and should learn from the strategies used by both Tara Arts and Phizzical in three key areas: *sustained engagement*, *clarity of terminology*, and *holistic integration of diversity strategies*. As we saw in Chapters one and two, the RSC employed a large number of BAME actors for the first time in their ‘all-black’ and ‘all-South Asian’ contributions to the World Shakespeare Festival, and some actors felt a sense of tokenism; Paterson Joseph stated, ‘They’re just blips. They’re things that happen and then the flavour goes and they’re left to black theatre companies to do’.<sup>429</sup> Mainstream organisations

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<sup>428</sup> Verma quoted in Love.

<sup>429</sup> Paterson Joseph quoted in Charlotte Marshall, ‘The Big Interview: Paterson Joseph’, *Official London Theatre*, 22 August 2012,

should reassess their casting practices and engagement with BAME actors to ensure that they build sustainable relationships and are not solely casting the actor because of their ethnicity for a specific tokenistic production. This would lead to a greater development of skills and a track record for BAME actors that would shift the theatrical ecology and break the cycle whereby actors are not cast in leading Shakespearean roles because of their lack of experience. With regards to terminology, both Verma and Bhamra demonstrated their ability to define and discuss their practices with great clarity. Their use of language to communicate their choices was specific to their own visions and clearly articulated their aims and ambitions which encouraged greater understanding from all involved in the productions as well as audiences. Where for the RSC, Gregory Doran had lacked clarity in his discussion of his casting choices - 'Rather than this being a black production of *Julius Caesar*, this is a version of *Julius Caesar* set in a particular way, and therefore it requires black actors, and that's a distinct difference' – the artistic directors of Tara Arts and Phizzical were distinct and precise in their definitions of theatrical representation. Finally, both Verma and Bhamra articulated their visions successfully internally and externally; they demonstrated a holistic integration of diversity strategies. Whereas in Chapter two we saw a disparity between Iqbal Khan's articulation of his vision for *Much Ado* and the marketing department's stereotypical presentation in their promotional materials, for Bhamra's *Cymbeline*, it was clear from the marketing work that every department understood and supported the leader's vision for the culturally diverse

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<<http://www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk/news/backstagepass/article/item150172/the-big-interview-paterson-joseph>> [accessed 31 December 2016].

Shakespearean production. Verma's strategic plan was holistically integrated and communicated with every member of his organisation, the press, academia, and audiences; he facilitated dialogues about what his diverse practice meant both offstage and onstage. By learning from and replicating aspects of the practices of two British South Asian organisations in these key areas, mainstream organisations could move towards better practice, and towards a more sustainable culturally diverse future of Shakespearean performance in the UK.

## Chapter Five: British East Asian Shakespeare

It's the 21st century and we have yet to see more than a few British East Asian actors on stage in a Shakespearean production – and even fewer actresses – in major roles.

(Lucy Sheen)<sup>430</sup>

Our theatrical 'centres of excellence' are [...] spectacularly out of reach [...] to practitioners from East Asian backgrounds, the most marginalised of the lot, perennially forced into corners of exotic decoration and geo-political affirmation of notions of Western 'superiority'.

(Daniel York)<sup>431</sup>

These quotations present personal testimonies from two British East Asian actors, and encapsulate the most important thematic debates and concerns regarding the representation of the BEA minority community on the Shakespearean stage. The first issue as exemplified by Lucy Sheen's statement is *invisibility*; there has been, historically, a severe lack of presence of BEA artists in UK classical theatre.

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<sup>430</sup> Lucy Sheen, 'Can an over fifty non-white, non-Oxbridge educated creative ever succeed?', *Lucy Sheen*, 7 September 2014, <<https://lucylaituenchausheen.wordpress.com/category/royal-shakespeare-company/>> [accessed 6 February 2017].

<sup>431</sup> Daniel York, 'The Orphan of Zhao Redux', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2014, <<http://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2014/the-orphan-of-zhao-redux/>> [accessed 6 February 2017].

Second, as Daniel York suggests, is institutional *marginalisation*, and a lack of access and opportunity. Thirdly, with regards to the politics of representation, BEA practitioners face *stereotyping*, *exoticism* and *Orientalism*. These key issues form the backbone of this chapter's investigation into the work of BEA artists in the Shakespearean field. I hope it can contribute to the continued project of rendering *visible* a community of people who, Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe argue, have largely been ignored both in academic studies and in the cultural sphere.<sup>432</sup>

I will sketch an overview of Shakespearean performances by BEA actors in Britain, followed by a discussion of four productions: *Julius Caesar* (1987) directed by Roger Rees; *Romeo and Juliet* (2001) directed by Alasdair Ramsey and Paul Courtenay Hyu; *King Lear* (2006) directed by David Tse; and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2009) directed by Jonathan Man. These productions each demonstrate different approaches to, and effects of, casting and the representation of the BEA community. Finally, I will analyse *The Orphan of Zhao*'s casting crisis at the RSC (2013) – a catalyst that led to the politicisation and collectivisation of British East Asian theatre workers. As we shall see, it took what was perceived as an act of marginalisation by a mainstream company to ignite a resistance, whereby this group carved out a space of visibility for themselves, and began to affirm a new 'British East Asian' identity. Working to counter Orientalism, and through a committed endeavour to gain better

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<sup>432</sup> 'Certainly, if BEA actors are invisible on Britain's stages, this is matched only by their invisibility in British academic discourse.' Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe, 'A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), p. 434.



representation and inclusion, York, Sheen and others have caused a cultural shift in the mainstream British arts arena.

### **Cultural invisibility and stereotypical representation: the historical context**

In a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* entitled ‘A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC’s *The Orphan of Zhao*’ (2014), the editors Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe argued that ‘BEA actors have so far, with one exception, only been offered supporting parts in performances of Shakespeare’.<sup>433</sup> Indeed, aside from the casts of the four productions on which I will focus, a mere handful have played any Shakespearean roles in the UK at all. Thorpe and Rogers’ ‘one exception’ is presumably Benedict Wong, Laertes in Ian Rickson’s production of *Hamlet* at the Young Vic (2011). Revealingly, his performance was given the space of one sentence in a damning *Daily Mail* review: ‘Benedict Wong’s Laertes speaks indistinctly.’<sup>434</sup> Wong, who was born in Eccles and brought up in Salford, Manchester, had already played leading roles on stage and screen, and continued to do so – at the Hampstead Theatre in *The Arrest of Ai Weiwei* (2013), and on screen in Hollywood films including Marvel’s *Doctor Strange* (2016). His skill and experience have been recognised with award nominations, and yet Lois Jeary’s review of his Shakespearean performance for *A*

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<sup>433</sup> Rogers and Thorpe, ‘A Controversial Company’, p. 434.

<sup>434</sup> Quentin Letts, ‘First Night Review: Hamlet the play is undone with too many look-at-me larks from the director’, *Daily Telegraph*, 10 November 2011, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2059669/HAMLET-REVIEW-Undone-look-larks-director.html>> [accessed 14 February 2017].

*Younger Theatre* similarly suggested that she could not understand him: ‘Benedict Wong, however, is practically incoherent in his forced anguish as Laertes, and displays such little feeling towards his sister that it borders on animosity.’<sup>435</sup>

Accent intersects with ethnicity and class, and all of these factors apparently influenced reviewers’ attitudes towards this performance. Benedict Wong is one of the most successful BEA actors of many generations, yet his ethnic background seemed to have affected his classical reception. He was Othered by his critics because of the way he sounded.

Before this, Daniel York played Fortinbras in *Hamlet* starring Alan Rickman (Riverside Studios, 1992), and Claudio in *Measure for Measure* (Manchester Library, 2000). Julian Lyon played Ariel opposite Mark Rylance as Prospero in *The Tempest* (Phoebus Cart, 1991). Gabby Wong had played Soldier, Attendant and Barmaid at Shakespeare’s Globe (*Othello*, 2007). In 2012 David Lee Jones was Richard III for the Festival Players in a UK tour as part of the Cultural Olympiad; two years later Elizabeth Chan played Northumberland and Peto in Phyllida Lloyd’s all-female *Julius Caesar* (Donmar Warehouse, 2014); and David Yip has appeared in several productions since 1976.<sup>436</sup> Their performances were on the whole unremarked upon by the press. The limited presence of BEA actors was not confined to Shakespearean productions, but was

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<sup>435</sup> Lois Jeary, ‘Review: Hamlet’, *A Younger Theatre*, 10 November 2011, <<http://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-hamlet-young-vic-theatre-michael-sheen/>> [accessed 26 May 2016]

<sup>436</sup> *Twelfth Night* (1976), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1976), *Romeo and Juliet* (1977), *Julius Caesar* (1987), *Hamlet* (1996) and *King Lear* (2006). See Jami Rogers, ‘David Yip’, *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/people/david-yip>> [accessed 27 March 2017].

industry-wide; they were largely absent across theatre, television and film in Britain. Lucy Sheen expressed her frustration: ‘We grew up in Britain, we went to a normal British school like every other British kid’, and therefore, she asked, ‘Why aren’t I seeing these characters on TV, British funded films and West End theatres?’<sup>437</sup> Similarly, the actor, playwright and director David Tse stated: ‘I’m sick and tired of watching *Downton Abbey* and not seeing myself reflected in any shape or form, and on *Eastenders*. It’s not just period stuff it’s also modern stuff – we’re culturally invisible’.<sup>438</sup> The notion of invisibility recurs in many such personal testimonies; why does it permeate so many aspects of cultural representation? An examination of the history of East Asian migration into Britain provides a context for this ingrained phenomenon of absence and exclusion.

In their detailed overview of the history of the Chinese UK presence, Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez acknowledged the lack of visibility and clear identity for East Asian migrants. Yet they argued that originally this might not have been a source of grievance: ‘Many members of the immigrant generation were not unhappy with the invisibility that became their hallmark.’<sup>439</sup> Benton and Gomez suggest that it was a coping mechanism:

Chinese immigrant’s self-imposed segregation and refusal to compete on the open market were therefore the main reasons for their relative exception from racist harassment.

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<sup>437</sup> Lucy Sheen, ‘I recently just read this article...’, *Lucy Sheen*, 11 June 2014, <<https://lucylaituenchausheen.wordpress.com/category/elizabeth-chan/>> [accessed 16 February 2017].

<sup>438</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with David Tse, 8 April 2016.

<sup>439</sup> Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800-Present* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 315.

They shaped their strategies according to a collective memory of the pioneers' experience of racism, and as a reaction to residual racism.<sup>440</sup>

As a survival tactic, in order to protect themselves from the racist acts that had plagued Chinese traders from the late nineteenth-century, Chinese immigrants congregated together locally, rather than integrated. Other key factors also contributed to the sense of the 'invisible' community, including changes to immigration policy, the types of employment open to East Asians arrivals, and their geographically diverse settlements.

The Chinese were more vulnerable than other ethnic minority migrants because they could be legally repatriated. The British Nationality Act of 1948 conferred citizenship on inhabitants of the colonies and Commonwealth, and meant that Chinese citizens from Hong Kong had the same rights to enter and remain in the UK as other British citizens. However, when the British economy had absorbed as much labour as it needed, policies changed sequentially in order to make migration more difficult, through the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962, 1968 and 1971. This legislation required migrants to obtain work permits from an employer in Britain. This led to the consolidation of East Asians in specific types of employment – namely in the catering and laundering industries where they would face less competition. The limited nature of this type of work necessarily meant communities needed to disperse. Whereas South Asian communities, soon working in varied trades and industries, could live in close

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

proximity without threatening each other's livelihood, as the Chinese dispersed they became isolated from one another

In the 1970s and 1980s, East Asian migrants did not form political movements in the ways that Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities did in response to racism. Enoch Powell, in his attack on immigrants in the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, did not single out the Chinese in Britain. So whereas strong political identities were formed elsewhere, as we saw in Jatinder Verma's formation of Tara Arts, the Chinese were not the focus of hostility, and did not actively protest as such. Also, due to their geographical fragmentation, political campaigns were more difficult to launch, and there appeared to be safety in staying quiet, outside the spotlight of racial tension that at the time was focused on the two largest ethnic minority groups. Benton and Gomez state: 'Partly because of their fragmentation, few Chinese have replicated the political activism of other ethnic minorities, which have stronger social and religious organisations.'<sup>441</sup> However, they were far from exempt from racial tension, as can be seen through their representation in the media, newspapers, films and theatre.

From the end of the nineteenth-century, stereotypes had emerged and had become ingrained in cultural consciousness through repetition, including the notion of 'Yellow Peril': 'The Yellow Peril myth grew out of the false perception of a deadly threat posed to the whites by Asiatic hordes, who had only to "walk slowly westwards" to overwhelm Europe'.<sup>442</sup> This fear manifested in newspaper headlines while Yellow Peril themes and the fiendish genius of Sax Rohmer's Fu

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

Manchu featured in British publishing and entertainment. Racist representations of Chinese as either subhuman or frighteningly clever, and a threat to the world, were perpetuated. A production entitled *Mr Wu* (1913) provoked a group of Chinese students to protest; they were 'afraid that this attempt to foist it upon the British public as a specimen of modern Chinese civilisation might engender prejudices unfavourable to the Chinese in their midst'.<sup>443</sup> The fantasy of Chinatown as 'mysterious, vice-ridden and dangerous' survived in Britain into the 1960s in Hammer films, and beyond.<sup>444</sup> In fact this view persisted right through to the new millennium, as was evident in the plot of the second episode of the sensationally popular British television series *Sherlock*. Entitled *The Blind Banker* (2010), and written by Stephen Thompson, this programme was broadcast on BBC One and was viewed on the night by 8.07 million viewers. Holmes and Watson uncovered a Chinese smuggling ring, and the episode featured 'beautiful women who must die, gangsters, opium dens, torture, circus acrobatics and the use of cod accents'.<sup>445</sup> In response to such stereotypes, Daniel York remarked: 'I was asked if Yellow Peril was an outdated idea [...] I watched it and I was astounded by some of it. [...] It is 2010! Really, it was just ridiculous'.<sup>446</sup> In 1998 David Parker had analysed the representation of East Asians on television and concluded that dramas commonly featured storylines centring on Chinatown, and issues of drugs, gambling and extortion. Such stereotypical representations have

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>445</sup> Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe, 'Interview with Daniel York, Actor, Writer, and Director and Anna Chen, Writer, Performer, and Broadcaster', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), 496–503 (p. 502).

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

been particularly damaging for a small ethnic minority group that is primarily culturally ‘invisible’.

It was in this context that BEA practitioners sought to affirm their presence through the arts and represent their experiences accurately and authentically. Two theatre companies were formed, Mu-Lan (1988) and Yellow Earth (1995), in response to the dearth of non-stereotypical roles for actors of East Asian origin. They aimed to forge a new cultural space to represent liminal communities that had been Orientalised, marginalised or simply excluded by the mainstream, and Shakespeare was important to their missions. Prior to the work of these companies, moreover, Roger Rees had employed a culturally diverse practice and cast two BEA actors in his production of *Julius Caesar* in 1987. This was an instance where ethnically diverse actors were not treated as ‘Other’, and for many it became a seminal example.

### ***Julius Caesar*, directed by Roger Rees, 1987**

Here was a Company that was doing a classical play that everybody’s heard of [...] that had people that looked like them in it. They weren't playing maids or, you know, slaves or eunuchs. We were the protagonists and it was incredibly successful.

(Lucy Sheen)<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Lucy Sheen, 18 October 2015.

Roger Rees, the star of the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby* in London, New York and on television, became an associate director at Bristol Old Vic for a period, and he staged *Julius Caesar* with an unprecedentedly mixed cast from Caribbean, Indian and Chinese backgrounds. Rees' work on the production still demonstrates a model of best practice with regards to diverse Shakespeare casting in the following respects: his mission statement; the actors; the setting of the play; the rehearsal process; and audience engagement.

Bristol in the 1980s had been the scene of riots, and in response Bristol Old Vic set out to expand its relationship with the community, especially young people. Rees's *Julius Caesar* ran in the New Vic Studio and visited numerous schools, prisons, factories and youth clubs between 16 March and 11 April 1987. It was part of 'Company 3', which was formed, under Roger Rees's leadership, to showcase work by a multi-ethnic creative team and cast. Its mission statement was:

Company 3 aims to encourage an approach to theatre that reflects a truly multi-cultural society, taking its work out to as wide an audience as possible and welcoming that audience back into its home base.<sup>448</sup>

Rees cast Ram John Holder as Caesar, with Shope Shodeinde (Calphurnia), Peter Straker (Cassius), Leo Wringer (Brutus), Kammy Darweish (Decius Brutus) and

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<sup>448</sup> Company 3, *Julius Caesar* programme quoted in Jami Rogers, 'Julius Caesar (1987)', *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/productions/julius-caesar-1987-company-3-bristol-old-vic-new-vic-studio-bristol>> [accessed 17 February 2017].



Evroy Deer (Octavius Caesar). Crucially, he did not exclude British East Asians from this multicultural group. The highly experienced David Yip (star of the television series *The Chinese Detective* in 1981-82) played Mark Antony and the newcomer Lucy Sheen was Portia. The company wore modern dress with additions from different periods – ‘beginning with oak garlands and breastplates over business suits’.<sup>449</sup>

Rees did not employ a diverse cast because he wanted to locate Shakespeare’s tragedy into a specific cultural context. However, he also did not ignore their ethnicities and cultural heritages as ‘colour-blind’ casting often tries to do. Sheen recalled: ‘It was a production that was rich in a multitude of influences – mainly from the actors that he chose, which reflected who and what we are, which is why it was successful’. In her case her specific cultural influences informed her portrayal of Portia and her character choices: ‘He used me and the fact that I’m East Asian to tap into a side of Portia which I think can very often get lost, in that she is perhaps in some senses more masculine than Brutus is’.<sup>450</sup> In his review for *The Times*, Irving Wardle was particularly struck by the quality of the acting and described Yip’s performance as ‘illuminating’: ‘Mr. Yip’s Antony is a neat, high-speed little politician who reveals himself as a “masker” well before that insult is hurled in his face.’ Yip delivered a ‘tremendous explosion of grief-stricken hatred [...] as soon as he is alone with the corpse’.<sup>451</sup> It is clear that Roger Rees took away the actors’ ‘fear’ of Elizabethan

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<sup>449</sup> Irving Wardle, ‘Plethora of divergent elements’, *The Times*, 26 February 1987.

<sup>450</sup> Howard, Interview with Sheen.

<sup>451</sup> Wardle.

blank verse; he alleviated the pressure of a certain mode of Shakespeare associated with a ‘museum mentality’. Sheen remembered how, ‘We read all sorts of things including lyrics from Madonna just to get our brains around the fact Roger was just showing us was that, you know, there’s poetry in everything that we do’.<sup>452</sup>

The director was determined to connect with the Bristol communities surrounding the Old Vic who were not traditional theatregoers. His choice of actors was part of this cultural shake-up. Sheen thought, ‘There were many working in that building that had not seen as many black, brown and non-white faces coming in and out of those hallowed portals before’, and that ‘to a certain extent, people from the black community in and around Bristol had never really had a reason to go into that theatre’.<sup>453</sup> Daniel York saw the production as a young aspiring actor when he was studying at Weston-super-Mare College, and it had a lasting impact on his aspirations to work in the industry. He felt so connected to the production that he ‘went back and watched it twice’. ‘I sat there, and it was Lucy and David [who] were in [it] who [were] both East Asian [...] I thought if someone like that can do it why can’t I?’ It was a rare occasion to see non-white actors on stage, especially in a classical play; ‘In those days what you saw was mainly all white Caucasians, maybe two black people, one of them understudying the other one, occasionally a South Asian person, never an East Asian.’ For York, ‘It’s kind of informed me of what theatres can be like and what Shakespeare could be like actually, because there’s something quite beautiful about people of

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<sup>452</sup> Howard, Interview with Sheen.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

different backgrounds doing a [Shakespeare] play together’. However, he soon realised that this staging was ‘an anomaly rather than the norm’.<sup>454</sup> The Company’s social experiment was not extended. ‘It was a brave new era,’ wrote Rees’s assistant Deborah Paige, ‘although it barely lasted both our contracts.’<sup>455</sup> Indeed, the next British production of Shakespeare in Britain to feature a partly East Asian cast – this time including Daniel York – demonstrated a fundamentally different approach to casting and representation of the BEA community.

***Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Alasdair Ramsey and Paul Courtenay Hyu, 2001**

*Romeo and Juliet* was the first Shakespearean production in this country with a majority British-Chinese cast. It was co-produced by the Haymarket Theatre, Basingstoke, and Mu-Lan Theatre Company, and co-directed by the organisations’ artistic directors: Alasdair Ramsey and Paul Courtenay Hyu. Glen Goei founded Mu-Lan in 1988, and Courtenay Hyu became artistic director ten years later. The company’s primary aim was ‘providing a voice for the British-East-Asian community’ and developing opportunities for new writing.<sup>456</sup> Mu-Lan was instrumental in providing BEA actors with opportunities to develop their

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<sup>454</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Daniel York, 2 July 2015.

<sup>455</sup> Deborah Paige, ‘Letter: Roger Rees’s love of anarchy and adventure’, *Guardian*, 16 July 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jul/16/letter-roger-rees-obituary>> [accessed 27 March 2017].

<sup>456</sup> Mu-Lan, ‘Mu-Lan Theatre Company’, *Facebook*, 2017, <<https://www.facebook.com/pg/MuLanTheatreCompany/about/>> [accessed 17 February 2017].

careers. Daniel York has declared: ‘I wouldn’t have anything at all if it wasn’t for Mu-Lan’.<sup>457</sup> Ramsey approached Hyu with the vision of a Shakespearean production set in 1930s Shanghai, with a focus on the opium drug market and the criminal world. The Capulets were played by East Asian actors. Bronwyn Mei Lim played Juliet, with Li-Leng Au as Lady Capulet, Paul Chan as Tybalt, Lobo Chan as the (now central) Apothecary, Daniel York as Mercutio and Pik-sen Lim as the Nurse. The Montagues were portrayed by Caucasian actors. The central conflict of the families’ feud was shown to lie in cultural and ethnic difference. Daniel York was not convinced by this interpretation, or superimposition: ‘I get annoyed when they do this, the Montagues were all white and the Capulets were Chinese [...] You know people do that all the time’.<sup>458</sup>

The audience were expected to read the Asian actors’ ethnicity as an indicator of their allegiance to the criminal underworld; the Capulet family were a clan of Chinese drug dealers. Ramsey’s concept was problematic, particularly considering the cliché, especially on film, of the Chinese as a source of corruption. To quote Diane L. Ahmad, ‘Opium dens became a lasting part of the Chinese stereotype. Even modern Hollywood filmmakers who include a Chinatown in their productions frequently feature an opium den in their movies or television episodes’.<sup>459</sup> In 1998 David Parker had noted how television police dramas still commonly featured storylines set in Chinatown and involving drugs, gambling and extortion. He argued that such images were difficult to change, and

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<sup>457</sup> Thomas, Interview with York.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Diana L. Ahmad, *The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2007), p. 25.

that Chinese actors were often ‘hard pressed to find parts other than as gang members’.<sup>460</sup> So it was unfortunate that even though the *Romeo and Juliet* company had the opportunity to perform one of the most popular of all classical tragedies, they still could not escape stereotypical associations. This type of representation is inherently problematic even though it increases access and visibility, due to the power of repeated theatrical or media representations to crystallise such stereotypes as ‘natural’. As Said argued, it was via stereotyping that ‘European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily and ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively’ as inferior to the West.<sup>461</sup> I would argue that theatre – and especially in the high-status arena of ‘Shakespeare’ – has the power, just as Stuart Hall said of the mass media, to ‘reduce, naturalize and fix difference’ in the cultural imagination.<sup>462</sup>

The Basingstoke Company received racist letters of complaint from audience members. One said: ‘My husband and I enjoy Shakespeare the way it was intended; it’s certainly not Chinese’.<sup>463</sup> Such a reception affected the cast. York remembered Li-Leng Au ‘picking the letters up and just bursting into tears’.<sup>464</sup> Fortunately, however, the public response was by no means solely negative; for example after a matinee performance to a schools audience, the

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<sup>460</sup> David Parker, ‘Rethinking British Chinese Identities’ in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* ed. by T. Skelton and G. Valentine (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 66–82 (p. 69).

<sup>461</sup> Said, p. 3.

<sup>462</sup> Hall, *Representation*, p. 258.

<sup>463</sup> Thomas, Interview with York.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*

students excitedly engaged with the actors. The disparity between these responses highlights societal and generational racism, as well as the positive connection between educational settings and culturally diverse casts (see Chapter six). Although Alasdair Ramsey opened his theatre's doors to Mu-Lan and provided several BEA actors with an unprecedented opportunity to play classical roles, his collaboration with Paul Courtenay Hyu replicated stereotypes that were particularly damaging for a small and underrepresented minority group. Mu-Lan struggled to secure further funding for their productions and ceased to produce work in 2005. Yellow Earth, who received Arts Council revenue funding from 1995–2008, became the sole British East Asian theatre company, and it in turn approached Shakespeare in a radically different way.

***King Lear*, directed by David Tse, 2006**

There was a real need for Yellow Earth because in the 1990s having spent three years learning Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen, I then found that I was being seen for very stereotyped roles – of martial artists, criminals, triads, waiters – and not at all anything that I'd prepared for at drama school.

(David Tse)<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with David Tse, 8 April 2016.

Yellow Earth was formed in 1995 by a group of East Asian actors – Kwong Loke, Kumiko Mendl, Veronica Needa, David K.S. Tse and Tom Wu – who were unhappy with the lack of opportunities of actors with their background. Led by Tse (the founding Artistic Director until 2008), the company aimed to expand the horizons of possibility concerning the number and types of roles available to BEA performers. In terms of the development of a particular theatrical style and praxis, the group aimed to bring ‘together our physical skills and Western drama school training to present plays that explored our own cultural heritage’.<sup>466</sup> In many ways this echoed the objectives of Tara Arts decades earlier, with regards to the meeting points between the migrants’ artistic legacy and the dominant host culture. Also like Tara Arts, Yellow Earth produced work ranging from new writing by BEA playwrights to classical literature from both the East and West. The foremost aim of the company was to strengthen the cultural presence of the ‘severely under-represented’ East Asian community. Yellow Earth defined its vision thus: ‘We aim to make the invisible, visible, by bringing unheard voices and stories to audiences worldwide, by taking timeless classics and approaching them with fresh eyes.’<sup>467</sup>

The company’s first engagement with Shakespeare was in 2003 with a revival of *Lear’s Daughters*, written by the Women’s Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein in 1987 and now directed by David Tse. Taking the years leading up to the beginning of Shakespeare’s tragedy as the focus of exploration, this play used

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<sup>466</sup> Yellow Earth, ‘Our Story’, *Yellow Earth Theatre*, 2017, <<http://yellowearth.org/about-yellow-earth/>> [accessed 6 February 2017].

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

music, painting, sculpture, video and an all-female British East Asian cast to explore the question, ‘What happened to the three daughters of King Lear before they made their entrances in Shakespeare’s classic?’<sup>468</sup> Tse established a methodology of adaptation here that used digital technology and media, as well as a combination of contemporary British and traditional Chinese cultural forms to connect with local BEA communities. Michael Billington observed that ‘even if the text looks dated, Tse creates a magical world on stage in which an eldritch fable exists in a world of hi-tech sophistication’.<sup>469</sup> This was an aesthetic discovery that Tse would further develop in his first full-length Shakespeare production.

Three years later, David Tse co-produced *King Lear* with the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (2006). It premiered in Shanghai and was then performed as part of the RSC’s ‘Complete Works Festival’ in the temporary theatre space The Cube in Stratford-upon-Avon. Similarly to Jatinder Verma and Samir Bhamra’s processes of adaptation, Tse’s dramaturgical model functioned on five levels. The starting point was the Shakespearean text, which provided the structural framework, scenes, and character relationships. Tse then located the play in a different context in order to represent East Asian experiences. The style of performance was infused with East Asian aesthetics and forms in terms of acting, movement and design. Tse’s approach to the Shakespearean language was an

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<sup>468</sup> Yellow Earth, ‘Lear’s Daughters’, *Yellow Earth*, 2017, <<http://yellowearth.org/productions/lears-daughters/>> [accessed 16 February 2017].

<sup>469</sup> Michael Billington, ‘Lear’s Daughters’, *Guardian*, 20 November 2003, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/nov/20/theatre2>> [accessed 17 February 2017].

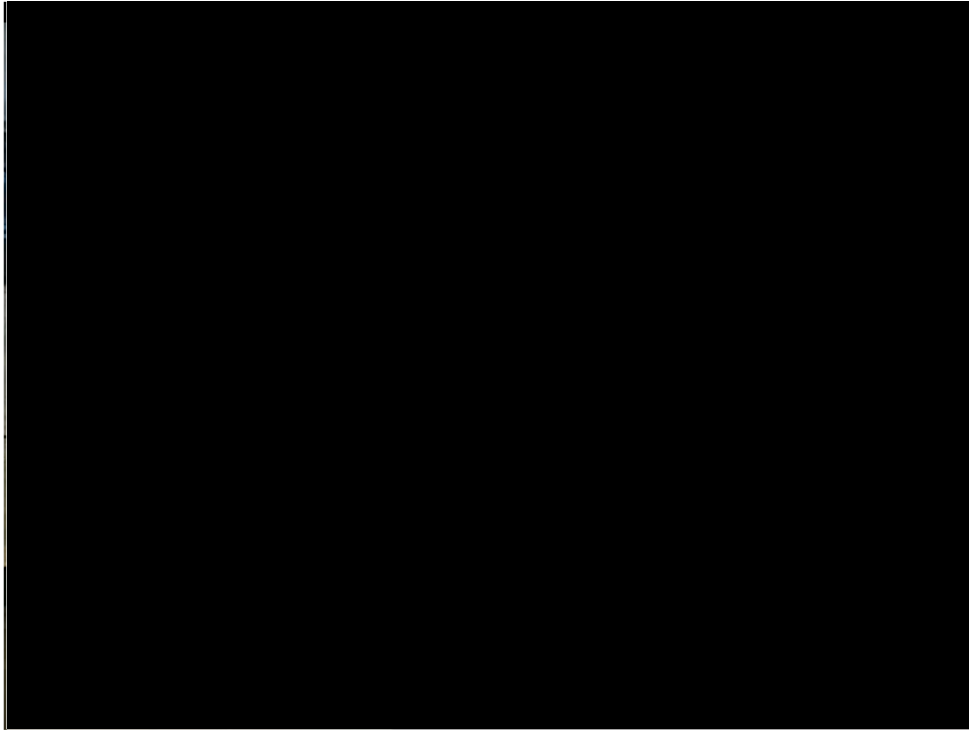


important feature of his practice. Finally, the cast and creative team were from East Asian backgrounds.<sup>470</sup>

Set in the near future, in 2020, Tse imagined Lear as the CEO of a global business conglomerate in Shanghai. He would divide his business assets between his three daughters. The battle was to seize control of Lear's company. The cast consisted of Chinese as well as British East Asian actors. The Chinese movie star Zhou Yemang played Lear. David Yip doubled Gloucester and Albany, Daniel York played Edgar/Cornwall, Matt McCooey was Edmund and Nina Kwok played Cordelia/Oswald. The Chinese actresses Zhang Lu and Xie Li played Goneril and Regan respectively, and the Chinese actor He Ju was Kent. The creative team comprised East Asian practitioners with Jonathan Man as Assistant Director, and Sang Qi as stage designer. Doug Kuhrt designed the lighting and music was created by Wang Jiwei. The script was performed in English and Mandarin, and surtitles were displayed in both languages; Zhu Sheng Hao provided the Chinese translation. Tse's choices in each aspect of this production were targeted towards an examination of patriarchal social structures in contemporary China, intergenerational migrant experience and conflict, and Lear's search for Taoist enlightenment in a climate of globalisation and convulsive social change.

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<sup>470</sup> Ayanna Thompson's 'cross-cultural' model once again overlaps with this culturally specific approach, which provided British East Asian actors with new opportunities. However, just as was the case with Verma and Bhamra's practices in Chapter four, Tse's use of language to clearly define and communicate the reasons behind his casting choices were clear and unique to his company's mission.



**Fig. 14 Nina Kwok, Zhang Lu, and Zhou Yemang in *King Lear* (2006).**

In designing the futuristic aesthetic, Tse and his team fused ‘tradition with modernity’.<sup>471</sup> The set was made of panels of metallic translucent material linked together (see Fig. 14), a dual reference to the Emperor of China’s armour and to modern skyscrapers. The use of video projections onto the panels added to the technological visual language. The costume design incorporated modern western suits as well as *qipao* (traditional Chinese dress). The acting style was ‘Chinese naturalistic’, which Tse described as ‘slightly more heightened’ and which he felt was ‘if anything, more Shakespearean’.<sup>472</sup> The director also incorporated Chinese sleeve dance through his treatment of the Fool, whom he replaced with an

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<sup>471</sup> Thomas, Interview with Tse.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

ensemble of actors. Tse aimed to present a ‘more modern interpretation of Lear going mad’, and the ensemble performed sections of the Fool’s text dressed in ‘Chinese water sleeves’. The slow movements and gestures conveyed an ethereal, spirit-like quality that represented the world within Lear’s mind; they were an echo of his subconscious.

The production was most successful in its use of the Early Modern text to examine the intergenerational relationship between Chinese parents and their diasporic migrant children. Cordelia, who had received her education in Britain, spoke in English, in contrast to her sisters – who had stayed in China, were both played by Chinese actresses, and who upheld their use of Mandarin throughout the tragedy. In Act 1 Scene 1, Lear entered his Shanghai office and ordered, ‘Call London, call Cordelia’.<sup>473</sup> Cordelia subsequently appeared, separated from the other actors by a screen with a translucent frame that signified her digital presence on a Skype call. When Lear asked his daughters to describe their love for him, both Goneril and Regan spoke in florid Mandarin, satisfying their father; but as they continued, the digital projection displayed scrolling scripts of Mandarin that surrounded Cordelia’s face. She appeared to be drowning in the language that her sisters were manipulating to their advantage. Her asides – ‘My love is more ponderous than my tongue’ and ‘I cannot heave my heart into my mouth’<sup>474</sup> – became admissions of her inability to express her feelings adequately in

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<sup>473</sup> *King Lear*, dir. David Tse, <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/king-lear-tse-david-2006/>> [accessed 17 February 2017].

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*

Mandarin. All she could say was, ‘Nothing’. Cordelia’s inarticulacy except in English became the cause of the conflict between Lear and his daughter.

Language is a key feature of the processes of change and identity development for migrants settling in a new country: ‘As a primary channel of self-expression, socialisation and cognition, language is at the heart of identity and linguistic practices and can be a telling measure of ethnic loyalty’.<sup>475</sup> The scenario had personal resonance for Tse; his older siblings almost completed their secondary education in Hong Kong, whereas he only studied for one term before he moved to England. He recently explained, ‘My siblings can read and write Chinese and their vocabulary is much better than mine, whereas my vocabulary is just based on conversations that I have within my family’.<sup>476</sup> In his ethnographic study of sociolinguistic practices amongst the British Chinese community, Li Wei reported that ‘the subjects used English more in their daily lives due to social networks, as younger generations tend to relate more with the host community compared to older generations’.<sup>477</sup> Tse remembered a time in his childhood when he became reticent speaking to his father, who asked, ‘David, what’s the matter, you used to talk to me a lot, why don’t you talk to me anymore?’.<sup>478</sup> Tse was ‘worried about using the wrong word or phrase’. Tse said that he ‘suddenly realised I might say the wrong thing, and I didn’t want to miscommunicate’. The assimilation of the English language was an important tool of integration, yet it

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<sup>475</sup> Benton and Gomez, p. 335.

<sup>476</sup> Thomas, Interview with Tse.

<sup>477</sup> Li Wei, *Three Generations, Two Languages, One Family: Language Choice and Language Shift in a Chinese Community in Britain* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1994), p. 51.

<sup>478</sup> Thomas, Interview with Tse.

could distance parents and their children due to the increased chance of miscommunication. To play Cordelia, Tse purposefully chose a performer, Nina Kwok, who had an authentic connection to this theme:

The actress I cast, this was her life, she came to England when she was six years old, and she was sent to boarding school in the UK. So again, her older sister who had grown up in Hong Kong, her Chinese was better than hers and she was more fluent in English. So, this was also her life. It's a reality of modern international families.<sup>479</sup>

Questions of language functioned on multiple levels in this *King Lear*. Firstly, speech served to highlight the plight of migrants and the issues that arise for bilingual children with different socio-cultural and linguistic identities from their parents. On another level, Tse's choice of language was also significant in relation to his different audiences. Since *Lear* was to be performed both in Britain and in China, Tse was aware that it would sometimes be received by solely Mandarin speakers, and elsewhere by those who could only speak and understand English.

The use of surtitles in both languages served to cater to both audiences and transcend international and linguistic barriers. However, there was also a more political purpose for Tse's incorporation of the two. He was dismayed that 'Many Chinese kids grow up in this country and they don't want to be sent off to Chinese school on the weekends because there's no affirmation of it other than in their homes'.<sup>480</sup> As Benton and Gomez found in their studies, 'Children exposed to an

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

English-language education and aware of the role of language in ensuring upward social mobility put little energy into mastering Chinese.<sup>481</sup> Despite acknowledging the children's desire to belong and to be 'British', Tse believed it was important to hold on to the language: 'Some of them do really reject their mother culture and their mother language in order to fit in – especially if you're growing up as the only Chinese kid in your town as I did.'<sup>482</sup> By representing this issue of identity on stage, Tse highlighted the issues of language, bilingualism and inter-generational communication within migrant families. As Benton and Gomez noted, 'Given the community's lack of cohesion, Chinese children have little chance to speak Chinese outside the home.' They continued, 'The language movement seems destined to lose the battle to preserve even Chinese oracy, just as it is already on the point of losing that to preserve literacy'.<sup>483</sup> Tse used the theatrical space to acknowledge and counter the sense of this loss of the mother tongue for third-generation migrants. He aimed 'to reaffirm the duality of our audience's linguistic background – just as I'm bilingual'.<sup>484</sup> By re-telling Shakespeare's story from an East Asian perspective, and relating the text to points of conflict in the contemporary lived experience of BEA migrants, Tse represented the reality of contemporary struggles for those with dual-heritage, dual-language, and 'hybrid' identities.

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<sup>481</sup> Benton and Gomez, p. 336.

<sup>482</sup> Thomas, Interview with Tse.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

***A Midsummer Night's Dream, Southwark Playhouse, 2009***

In 2009 at the Southwark Playhouse, Jonathan Man – who had been Assistant Director on the Yellow Earth *King Lear* – staged a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in Japan. Man was born in Surrey to parents from Hong Kong. He had entered a competition run by the venue where directors were invited to pitch their visions for a production. His Japanese imagining of the play won him the contest. He decided to incorporate three traditional forms of Japanese theatre: Kabuki, Noh and Kyogen, and assembled a creative team with expertise in these forms. He worked with Billy Sy and Tanroh Ishida, who shared Tadashi Suzuki Japanese movement bases, as well as the set and costume designer Wai Yin Kwok and the advice of the Japanese academic Masae Suzuki, whose PhD thesis examined Shakespeare in Asia. He was also joined by the voice coach Corin Mellinger. Man raised the issue of access for BEA actors wishing to be involved in Shakespearean productions. When casting the play, he suggested that ‘there were probably about four hundred and sixty odd people, professional East Asian actors, and from that, on the *Spotlight* directories [...], about two hundred put themselves forward’. He continued:

There isn't access for British East Asians to work in Shakespeare, or from back behind the scenes to on stage [...]. It was easy and straightforward to put together, I could have cast it twice over easily, you know so – maybe three times over.

Man rejected ‘the opinion that there aren't East Asian actors available to act Shakespeare [...] You just needed to sit in those rehearsals [...] Southwark Playhouse just could not believe the calibre of actors coming through the door – of East Asian actors.’<sup>485</sup>

The company were as follows: Kenji Watanabe as Oberon/ Theseus; You-Ri Yamanaka as Titania/Hippolyta; Jay Oliver Yip as Puck, Peter Quince and Egeus; Matt McCooey as Lysander and Bottom; David Lee-Jones as Demetrius and Flute; and Nina Kwok as Hermia and Snug. Julia Sandiford was Helena. The actors hailed from varying British East Asian backgrounds; Man said they had not performed Shakespeare previously, but had experience working with Japanese movement. One of the director’s earliest memories of Shakespeare was when a touring production of *King Lear* visited his sixth form college; it was set in feudal Japan: ‘That’s I think the first exposure I had to Shakespeare’ he recalled in 2014. ‘It was a small cast but they really captured the spirit of *King Lear* [...] It certainly worked even if it wasn’t culturally specific’. The experience provoked him to imagine Shakespeare differently, and made him consider: ‘Oh, is this a possibility?’<sup>486</sup> Subsequently, Man’s direct connection to Japanese theatrical forms sprang from his time spent living and working in the country himself. In Japan he was involved with amateur stage productions, including a version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which he produced, directed, and in which he played Oberon. He directed a Japanese Noh play which he ‘reimagined inter-culturally’. He said: ‘I didn’t know what we were doing then, but [we were] just using lots of

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<sup>485</sup> Tony Howard, Unpublished interview with Jonathan Man, 2015.

<sup>486</sup> Howard, Interview with Man.



different cultures: Chinese, Japanese, Canadian, French, Indian, the Noh, [...] all mixed and matched'.<sup>487</sup>

Man decided to set his Southwark *Midsummer Night's Dream* in feudal Japan. The space was configured in traverse, and the set design was based on the architecture of the *hanamichi* (the stage used in the *Kabuki*). The actors were dressed in simple *kimono*. Man directed the different groups of characters via different styles of Japanese theatre. The movement of the Court was based on *Noh*, the classical form of drama that originated in the fourteenth century. In contrast the Mechanicals' characteristics were influenced by *Kyogen*, the traditional comic theatre. The Fairies were inspired by *Kabuki*, the nineteenth-century popular drama. Fans were used as props to signify such objects as drinking cups, the Mechanicals' scripts and the magic flower. One audience member, Susan Meehan, who saw it along with members of the Japan Society, wrote: 'This relocation to *samurai* Japan with rigid hierarchical strictures was entirely plausible given the prominence of the court and ancient laws in this play.'<sup>488</sup> The majority of the text was performed in English, but both Oberon and Titania spoke some Japanese. Meehan approved: 'The insertion of Japanese was

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid. These experiences informed his choices in his Southwark *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but he cited three formative experiences as paramount in the development of his creative practice for the direction of Shakespeare. Firstly, he had participated in a summer school at the Young Vic led by David Lan and Matthew Dunster where he learnt basic tools concerning how to direct Shakespeare. As part of the course, he watched Lan's production of *Twelfth Night*, which he was inspired by. Secondly was his role as Assistant Director on Yellow Earth's *King Lear*. Thirdly was his experience of watching the Japanese production of *Pericles* (2003) at the National Theatre directed by Yukio Ninagawa.

<sup>488</sup> Susan Meehan, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', *The Japan Society*, 19 February 2009, <<http://www.japansociety.org.uk/8276/a-midsummer-night's-dream/>> [accessed 6 February 2017].

great fun for anyone with a smattering of the language. I picked out the use of *dame*, *honto ni*, *utsukushii*, *anata* and *demo* amongst other expressions.’ Elizabeth Peasley, another online reviewer, felt that ‘the Japanese language serves well as magical speak for the fairy world’.<sup>489</sup> Significantly, the production, which ran at ninety minutes, attracted substantial school audiences: ‘We had one and a half thousand school children, [aged] seven onwards, so it was their first experience of Shakespeare, their first experience of going to theatre, their first experience of Japanese culture’.<sup>490</sup> Thus Man’s work drew attention to the importance of engaging young audiences not only with Shakespeare but with cultural diversity, and the varied forms of cultures, ethnicities, traditions and histories that contribute to a multicultural society. However, although there were several reviews from online sources, this production was not reviewed at all by the mainstream press. Man saw his work as part of the development of British East Asian Shakespeare: ‘You’ve got Mu-Lan’s *Romeo and Juliet* [...] and then you’ve got *King Lear* [...] and after that came my production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. So those three – you can see an evolution, I think.’<sup>491</sup> Each of these productions demonstrated a different approach to representing East Asian experiences and identity, and they indeed marked an ‘evolution’ – especially in relation to earlier productions such as the 1955 Stratford *King Lear* directed by George Devine with John Gielgud in the title role. The Japanese-American

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<sup>489</sup> Elizabeth Peasley, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream at Southwark Playhouse’, *London SE1 Community Website*, 9 February 2009, < <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/3735> > [accessed 6 February 2017].

<sup>490</sup> Howard, Interview with Man.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

sculptor Isamu Noguchi had been brought in to design the production. No Asian actors were involved, and the Caucasian cast dressed in ‘oriental’ costumes – Lear for example wore stylized hair – that reviewers thought ludicrous. Decades later, however, Stratford would make a similar mistake.<sup>492</sup>

### ***The Orphan of Zhao, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2013***

The landscape of representation for East Asian migrants on the Shakespearean stage had been improving, slowly but significantly. Yet in October 2012 a catalyst sparked an unparalleled level of outrage and a BEA-led protest against a casting decision catapulted this relatively invisible group into the media spotlight. A few weeks after the publicity accorded to the ‘African’ *Julius Caesar* and the ‘Delhi’ *Much Ado*, the Royal Shakespeare Company announced the casting for what it referred to as ‘the Chinese *Hamlet*’. *The Orphan of Zhao*, originally attributed to the thirteenth-century dramatist Ji Junxiang and here adapted by James Fenton, was programmed as part of a season strap-lined ‘*A World Elsewhere*’ that also included new adaptations of Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* and Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*. One ensemble performed all three plays, and Gregory Doran (who had just been appointed Boyd’s successor as Artistic Director), commented: ‘We have assembled an ethnically diverse company to present three world classics’.<sup>493</sup> This ‘ethnically diverse’ group of seventeen actors included three of East Asian

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<sup>492</sup> See also the RSC’s Anglo-Japanese collaboration on *King Lear* (1999) with the Ninagawa Company, with its ‘abstract’ storm scene of falling stones.

<sup>493</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Royal Shakespeare Company, *The Orphan of Zhao* programme (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2012).

heritage – Siu Hun Li, Susan Momoko Hingley and Chris Lew Kum Hoi – as well as one black actress and two mixed-race actors. Daniel York mobilised discussions about the casting and asked people to write to the Arts Council in complaint. Anna Chen, a writer, performer and broadcaster, wrote an article for the *Guardian* titled ‘Memo to the RSC: East Asians Can Be More than Just Dogs and Maids’.<sup>494</sup> She drew attention to the types of roles the actors had been allotted to and connected them to a history of racist and stereotypical depictions of, for example, the Chinese as ‘subhuman dogs’. Doran issued a response to Chen’s article and defended his position, stating that the decision was determined by the play’s place in the repertory: ‘There was no way I was going to do [*Zhao*] with an exclusively Chinese cast’ because *Galileo* and *Gudonov* would be performed by the same actors. He continued, ‘I have to say, partly, it feels a bit like sour grapes’, referring to the fact that Daniel York had auditioned for the season but had not been successful.<sup>495</sup> A furore of previously unseen proportions with regards to the casting policies of the Royal Shakespeare Company broke out on Facebook and Twitter. Statements were issued internationally, as well as on blog posts and social media networks, and the mainstream British press, including the *Guardian*, *BBC News* and *BBC Radio 4*, covered the events.

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<sup>494</sup> Anna Chen, ‘Memo to the RSC: east Asians can be more than just dogs and maids’, *Guardian*, 22 October 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/22/royal-shakespeare-company-east-asians>> [accessed 29 March 2017].

<sup>495</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Matt Trueman, ‘East Asian actors seek RSC apology over Orphan of Zhao casting’, *Guardian*, 31 October 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/31/east-asian-actors-rsc-apology>> [accessed 6 February 2014].

The Tony Award-winning East Asian-American playwright David Henry Hwang wrote, ‘*The Orphan of Zhao* casting controversy says less about Britain's Asian acting community, that it does about the RSC's laziness and lack of artistic integrity’.<sup>496</sup> The BEA actor Paul Courtenay Hyu voiced his sense of injustice: ‘Like elsewhere in the diversity equal opportunities spectrum, the same courtesy and forward thinking that has aided the Black and South Asian communities is not afforded the East Asian’ – who, he pointed out, ‘have historically been overlooked and ignored’.<sup>497</sup> Considering the previous ‘cross-cultural’ models for casting culturally specific concepts – where Doran had insisted on having black actors to represent his envisioning of the African *Caesar* – there was inconsistency in depriving East Asian actors of a similar opportunity in this culturally specific play. ‘They have an all-black *Julius Caesar* and an all-Indian *Much Ado*,’ Hyu protested, ‘but when they decide to do the Chinese *Hamlet*, they cast fourteen out of seventeen actors and all of the major parts as non-Chinese. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that's unbelievable.’<sup>498</sup> He argued that if *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado* required actors from specific ethnicities in order to represent specific geographical locations, then in the current climate of underrepresentation, ‘only BEA actors should perform as East Asian characters’ – not as a rule but, ‘just as

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<sup>496</sup> Henry Hwang quoted in Anna Chen, ‘The Orphan of Zhao: RSC casts Asians as dogs and maid in Chinese classic’, *Madam Miaow Says*, 17 October 2012, <<http://madammiaow.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/the-orphan-of-zhao-rsc-casts-asians-as.html>> [accessed 29 March 2017].

<sup>497</sup> Paul Courtenay Hyu quoted in Matt Trueman, ‘Royal Shakespeare Company under fire for not casting enough Asian actors’, *Guardian*, 19 October 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/19/royal-shakespeare-company-asian-actors>> [accessed 1 February 2014].

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*

most white actors would never dream of playing Othello, not because it is illegal, but because it would be embarrassing for them.<sup>499</sup> This model had not been applied to *Zhao*. Indeed, in this instance Doran adopted the discourse of colourblind casting. He insisted that his decisions had been based on finding the best actor for the role and ‘not on ethnicity’.<sup>500</sup> Hyu asked, ‘Why does colourblind casting not apply to us? It applies to black or south Asian actors. Blacks can play white, whites black and Asian, but Chinese can’t. The rules don’t apply to us’.<sup>501</sup> Daniel York, by then Vice Chair of Equity’s Ethnic Minority Committee, wrote: ‘I fully support casting “the best actor for the role” but [...] only as a mechanism for creating opportunities for actors from minority groups for whom chances are few and far between – not as a means of protecting those opportunities for the dominant social demographic.’<sup>502</sup> ‘Colourblind’ casting has generally been promoted because this model of representation acts as an antidote to racism and exclusion; Ayanna Thompson, however, also suggests that at times colourblind casting can actually replicate problematic stereotypes when the unstable semiotics of race are not addressed.<sup>503</sup> The fact that so few East Asian actors worked at the RSC over the previous decades but that then three were employed for this production alone, suggests that Siu Hun Li, Susan Momoko Hingley and Chris Lew Kum Hoi *were* cast because of their ethnicity, precisely to respond to the

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Doran quoted in Trueman, ‘RSC under fire’.

<sup>501</sup> Hyu quoted in Trueman, ‘RSC under fire’.

<sup>502</sup> Daniel York, ‘British East Asian actors speak out against “The Orphan of Zhao”’, *Racebending*, 19 November 2012, <<http://www.racebending.com/v4/featured/british-east-asian-actors-speak-the-orphan-zhao/>> [accessed 1 February 2014].

<sup>503</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 77.

Chinese setting of this play.<sup>504</sup> The issue of problematic ethnic stereotyping was evident in several scenes of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao* and are revealing in terms of the internal politics of diverse representation.

Gregory Doran went on a research trip to China, demonstrating a desire to engage with the culture and undoubtedly to provide inspiration for his creative choices. He made use of a specific culture, heritage and history in *The Orphan of Zhao* and used a Chinese-inspired set, music and movement. A Chinese boy's face stared out from the posters and the marketing material for the production. The cast were dressed entirely in traditional Chinese costumes. Yet there were unclear attitudes towards authenticity – it was negated in some respects but not in others, giving an impression of cultural pillage. This cast did not adopt Chinese accents, unlike the use of African and Indian accents in *Julius Caesar* and *Much Ado*. The reviewer Natasha Tripney acknowledged this tension: 'There's an occasional sense of cultural dress-up, of appropriation, to this production'.<sup>505</sup> On the other hand Michael Billington seemed oblivious to this and remarked: 'There's no fake chinoiserie: simply a skilful use of many of the stylised techniques of Chinese classical theatre.'<sup>506</sup> Here Billington implied that Chinese culture was not appropriated as an aesthetic, but was invoked through the actors'

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<sup>504</sup> Eleanor Matsuura in *Coriolanus* (2007), Mo Zainal in *King Lear* (2002), and Daniel York in *The Merchant of Venice* (1993), *Moby Dick* (1993), *Christie in Love* (1994), *The Country Wife* (1993), *King Lear* (2006).

<sup>505</sup> Natasha Tripney, 'The Orphan of Zhao', *The Stage*, 9 November 2012, <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/37681/the-orphan-of-zhao>> [accessed 3 July 2014].

<sup>506</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Orphan of Zhao – Review', *Guardian*, 9 November 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/nov/09/the-orphan-of-zao-review>> [accessed 6 February 2012].

performance of traditional forms. This is surprising considering the years of training required to become ‘skilful’ practitioners of ‘Chinese classical theatre’.

Given the extent of these cultural references and the production’s focus on China, what was astonishing was that the three East Asian actors were marginalised within the production itself. The parts they were given generated much of the criticism surrounding of the RSC’s *The Orphan of Zhao*. Chris Lew Kum Hoi and Susan Momoko Hingley played the Demon Mastiff – a puppet dog. Their bodies were largely invisible, and their voices were silent aside from the occasional growl. Hingley later returned as the Princess’ Maid, Hoi as a Ghost, and Li played a Guard. This assignation of subordinate roles brought into question the ethics of colourblind casting. I spoke to Siu Hun Li to try to investigate the process of cultural representation for the cast in rehearsal. Unlike Billington, Siu Hun Li knew precisely the kind of ‘fake chinoiserie’ that made it into the production – for example in a scene where prayer was performed. ‘I’ve prayed all my life,’ he said, and ‘could have said, “That’s not really the way you pray”’. However, Doran and the company weren’t looking for authenticity or the performance of the correct techniques of Chinese classical theatre. Li continued: ‘they were not going down that avenue’. Rather, they were ‘going down the storytelling avenue’.<sup>507</sup> A question that Bharucha asked of Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* might be asked here: why assemble an ‘ethnically diverse’ group of actors, if the expressive possibilities of their cultural knowledge is negated in production?<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>507</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Siu Hun Li, 1 February 2014.

<sup>508</sup> Bharucha, ‘Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*’, p. 80.



Rather than being given the opportunity to bring their understandings and insights to the world of the play, they were assigned to menial roles, stripped of their voices, and remained marginalised in the telling of the story. In one scene between the characters Cheng Bo and Tu'an Gu (played by Jake Fairbrother and Joe Dixon), Siu Hun Li and Chris Lew Kum Hoi entered and knelt behind them, holding reins in their hands, which Fairbrother and Dixon picked up. The East Asian actors moved in a forward-and-backwards motion, making the sounds of horses; the shadows of Fairbrother and Dixon towered ominously above them. Could the creative team have addressed the visual implications of ethnicity in the stage picture they constructed? Did they consider how spectators might interpret what they were looking at, in terms of ethnic difference and racial/professional hierarchy? This was, quite legibly, an image of East Asian actors as animals, heads bowed to the floor, bridled and mounted, the sounds of the chain-like reins audible: an image reminiscent of slavery. Was this demonstration of a minority being treated with contempt intentional? This was a case where clearly talented actors were enrolled in peripheral tasks that indicated that their casting barely exceeded tokenism. Given the broader debates concerning the representation of the British East Asian minority, these sequences crossed a boundary of theatrical license into a worryingly exploitative arena of symbolic imagery, and emphasised the marginalisation of the BEA actors within the production.

Quite unpredictably, *Zhao* proved momentous in provoking a new awareness of the contemporary situation of British East Asian actors. Aware at the time that the negative press might damage Doran's announced leadership of

the Company, the institution through its Press Office moved quickly to forestall further criticism, and mobilised this rubric of commitment to firmer policies of inclusivity:

We do recognise that the lack of visibility for Chinese and East Asian actors in theatre and on screen is a live and very serious issue. We are beginning the process of talking to industry colleagues, representing employers and actors, to set up a forum for wider debate, which we hope will make a meaningful difference.<sup>509</sup>

The RSC sent five members of staff to ‘Opening the Door: East Asians in British Theatre’, an Open Space event organised by Devoted and Disgruntled at the Young Vic (13 February 2013) in partnership with Arts Council England, The Society of London Theatre/Theatre Management Association, the Casting Director’s Guild, Equity and the Independent Theatre Council. This meeting aimed to address issues of BEA under-representation in mainstream theatre. Then a day of general auditions for BEA actors was organised by the RSC itself in partnership with Equity, the National Theatre, and other casting directors working in theatre, film, and television. Hannah Miller, an RSC casting director, said, ‘I hope a lot of positive things will come out of the debates arising both with casting professionals getting to know more actors and that the British East Asian

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<sup>509</sup> Doran quoted in Trueman, ‘East Asian actors seek RSC apology’.

community of actors feel more engaged with their industry and with each other'.<sup>510</sup>

## **Conclusion**

*The Orphan of Zhao* controversy led to the collectivising of a group who had been historically marginalised and under-represented on Britain's stages, particularly in the iconic field of Shakespeare. The protest brought together very different members of an artistic community who aimed to render themselves visible in the mainstream, and to change their lack of professional representation. On the importance of minority groups in formulating their own discourses of identity, Tariq Modood wrote in 2007: 'While societal effort, including from dominant groups, will be required to formulate appropriate policies and adjust social relations, this movement from the "inside", these identity discourses are critical in the formation of a multiculturalist society'.<sup>511</sup> In this case the professional Establishment had excluded a minority, and through their active resistance the minority aimed to adjust social relations. Modood suggested that 'Multiculturalism is characterized by the challenging, the dismantling and the remaking of public identities'.<sup>512</sup> Here the public identity of a major subsidised organisation was challenged and so too was the identity of British East Asian

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<sup>510</sup> Hannah Miller quoted in Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe, 'Interview with the RSC's Hannah Miller, Head of Casting, and Kevin Fitzmaurice, Producer', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), 486–493 (p. 493).

<sup>511</sup> Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 42.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

migrants. The group ‘British East Asian Artists’ was founded by Lucy Sheen, Daniel York and others,<sup>513</sup> with the core aims of raising the profile of BEA practitioners and challenging prejudice and stereotypical presentations of their communities in media and the arts.<sup>514</sup> Bhikhu Parekh argued (2000) that ‘Membership of a cultural community, then, has two major consequences. It structures and shapes the individual’s personality in a certain way and gives it a content or identity’. The importance of such an identity for individuals to connect to was that ‘one’s identification with them gives that identity a social basis, emotional energy and a measure of stability and objectivity’.<sup>515</sup> For Daniel York, the result of the collectivisation garnered from the *Zhao* protest was certainly a sense of emotional energy. He said: ‘I think for six weeks I didn’t sleep, it was just like full on protest every day [...] It’s adjusted the landscape [...] I think East Asians have far more presence now in the theatre because of that, there’s no doubt about it, they really do.’<sup>516</sup>

In the months following the debate, several plays were produced that featured British East Asian casts: *The World of Extreme Happiness* at the National Theatre (October 2013), *Chimerica* at the Almeida Theatre with a West End transfer to the Harold Pinter Theatre (August 2013), *The Arrest of Ai Wei Wei* at the Hampstead Theatre (April 2013, then livestreamed) and *Yellow Face* at the

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<sup>513</sup> Anna Chen, Broderick Chow, Kathryn Golding, Paul Hyu, Michelle Lee, Chowee Lee, Jennifer Lim, Dr. Amanda Rogers, Dr. Ashley Thorpe, and Dr. Diana Yeh.

<sup>514</sup> Lucy Sheen, ‘British East Asian Artists’, *British East Asian Artists*, 2014, <<http://britisheastaa.wixsite.com/beaa>> [accessed 6 February 2017].

<sup>515</sup> Bhikhu C. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 156.

<sup>516</sup> Thomas, Interview with York.

National Theatre (May 2014). York believed, ‘if *The Orphan of Zhao* hadn’t happened they might have cast white people and they might have flown Americans in. I don’t think those things will be happening any time soon now’.<sup>517</sup> It is important to note the problematics of a collective identity in that it may homogenise difference across the lines of ethnicity, religion, cultural, social, historical and political positions. Parekh has argued that ‘belonging to a cultural community admits of much variation and is not homogenous in nature’, and that ‘membership of a cultural community [...] is sometimes a subject of deep disagreement’.<sup>518</sup> Indeed there was no universal internal coherence on this issue for all East Asians, not even in their response to the RSC’s casting. David Tse acknowledged the campaign’s achievements and legacy but did not agree with the manner in which they were delivered.<sup>519</sup> The East Asian actors in the production wrote an open letter: ‘It is distressing to see that [some BEA performers] are simultaneously attempting to ensure that we, their fellow actors, are not adequately or appropriately seen and heard simply because of our part in this show’. They continued: ‘We see this as a celebration and cannot fathom why this fact is being ignored, meanwhile charges of racism are levelled at our director and the RSC’.<sup>520</sup> Nonetheless, though not everyone with an East Asian background felt represented by this campaign, Amanda Rogers suggested: ‘Actors claim

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

<sup>518</sup> Parekh, p. 148.

<sup>519</sup> Thomas, interview with Tse.

<sup>520</sup> Youssef Kerkour, ‘Letter to Malcolm Sinclair, Equity, from *The Orphan of Zhao* company’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), 494–495 (p. 495). Daniel York wished to state on record: ‘Neither I, nor myself nor any British East Asian actor or artist used the word “racist” or “racism” in relationship to Greg Doran or the RSC’ (Private correspondence).

“British East Asian” as a strength-in-numbers “associational” identity that allows them to collectively struggle against a perceived – and palpably felt – sense of discrimination’.<sup>521</sup> If theatre history, exemplified by the stage history of Shakespeare, had been marked by the absence of British East Asian artists from representation and from major public dialogues, the *Zhao* controversy helped to fashion a new, visible and vocal presence in the arts arena that countered racism, exclusion, and invisibility. York stressed the importance of figures able to speak for their sector: ‘Jatinder is a very good spokesman, he’s very articulate, a brilliant politician [...] I listen to black actors, Adrian [Lester], Idris [Elba] and Dona Croll. They’re very good at being assertive about their own – I hate the word, but their own community.’<sup>522</sup> For York, the sudden establishment of such a visible identity for British East Asian artists ‘altered the landscape completely’.<sup>523</sup>

Since 2013, the RSC, aided by the British government, formed a partnership with the Chinese Ministry of Culture and JP Morgan, contributing to the building of economic ties between Britain and China, and devised a programme of work including the ‘Shakespeare Folio Project’, ‘Chinese classics project’, and the ‘King & Country’ tour.<sup>524</sup> The RSC’s Executive Director Catherine Mallyon accompanied the Chancellor George Osborne on his visit to China in 2015 symbolising the power of Shakespeare in forming socio-cultural and economic bonds and exchanges. The RSC appointed a new Governor: Professor Ruru Li, a

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<sup>521</sup> Rogers and Thorpe, ‘A Controversial Company’, p. 433.

<sup>522</sup> Thomas, Interview with York.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, ‘RSC in China’, *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2015, <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/rsc-in-china>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

Senior Lecturer in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Leeds. The RSC was clearly engaged in global politics in its relationship with China, yet how was the ethos of cultural, artistic and educational exchange with China through Shakespeare extended to Britons of Chinese descent? Chris Lew Kum Hoi returned to the RSC after *Zhao* to perform in a one-off digital theatre project: *A Midsummer Night's Dreaming* (2013) as Flute, and a co-production with Garsington Opera of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2015) that toured the UK, as Flute/Mustardseed. In 2016, the RSC announced a new version of Guan Hanqing's classic Chinese play *Snow in Midsummer*, which would be adapted by the American playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig. The RSC demonstrated a shift in their approach to casting for this production, and assembled a company of fifteen BEA actors, including Lucy Sheen, Daniel York and Katie Leung. York disclosed that Gregory Doran had addressed the company at the beginning of the rehearsal period, and admitted that he had been wrong in 2013. The controversy surrounding *The Orphan of Zhao* links to the discussions of *Caesar* and *Much Ado* (Chapters one and two). Where the 'cross-cultural' casting models of these two productions had led to an increase of opportunities for and visibility of British black and South Asian actors, in this instance the same opportunities had not been afforded to British East Asian actors. The lack of clarity around communicating the reasons for the casting choices across different productions within one organisation led to British East Asian actors feeling misrepresented and excluded. Within the production itself, the model for *Zhao* had led to marginalisation and stereotyping. The RSC's subsequent programming of *Snow in Midsummer*

returned to a previous tokenistic model the organisation had used. The production marked a considerable shift in terms of employment, however, the BEA community still remained in a separate non-Shakespearean production, as opposed to being integrated in the RSC's main seasons of Shakespearean work. This pattern points towards the need for a new casting model that is inclusive and representative. It points towards the need for a diversity of leadership, as demonstrated by the work of McCraney, where he worked within existing structures to cause an institutional shift leading to a more positive model of culturally diverse casting and representation in Shakespearean performance. In the words of Lucy Sheen, 'We all want to fit in, we all want to belong. If Shakespeare truly does belong to all, as the great British Bard, then isn't it about time that our national theatres started telling the tales using everyone?'<sup>525</sup>

Sheen powerfully imagined a leadership role for herself, and considered the development of a production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, which she would choose to stage at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in the Egyptian gallery. She said: 'Imagine how that would feel for a BAME youngster who has never seen a Shakespearian production. Someone who sees few substantive UK media productions where with the cast of characters is truly representative of modern Britain'. She wished to address this, and saw *Antony and Cleopatra* as a play to do so, because, she reasoned, 'there is a historical basis as to why one might cast *Antony and Cleopatra* with Black and Asian actors'.<sup>526</sup> 'In the end it is all about

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<sup>525</sup> Lucy Sheen, 'The new curriculum kids to study two Shakespeares – great but...', *Lucy Sheen*, 7 September 2014, <<https://lucylaituenchausheen.wordpress.com/2014/09/07/the-new-ciriculum-kids-to-study-two-shakespeares-great-but/>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.



the will to be inclusive and diverse’, she argued, and she recognised her role in contributing to changing attitudes. In her mind, a multicultural historical Shakespearean project was one way of doing this. She bemoaned the use of overseas actors from China ‘to give us a different voice and worldview using Shakespeare’ rather than BEA actors themselves. But she argued, ‘We have the talent here, we have an immense amount of talent in the BAME sector, but it’s all British, and we should celebrate that, and we should be more open to using that to add to the social and cultural voice’.<sup>527</sup> For Sheen, Shakespeare was a source that could help ‘enhance people’s lives’.<sup>528</sup> All it would take, she believed, was a stretch of the imagination, for subsidised theatre companies and arts organisations ‘to be willing to truly embrace and reflect the diversity of British society’, and by doing so they would include, and render visible, BEA actors on mainstream stages through Shakespearean performance.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Howard, Interview with Lucy Sheen.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Sheen, ‘The new curriculum’.

**Chapter Six: Souks, Saris and Shakespeare: Engaging young, diverse audiences at the RSC, Shakespeare’s Globe and National Theatre**

Teachers made it clear that Shakespeare was not for the likes of me [...] I did not see it as part of my cultural heritage at all [...] If it is not taught the right way when you are young, Shakespeare can seem like an elitist and intellectual exercise.

(Meera Syal)<sup>530</sup>

If you’re from a minority and in the first [Shakespeare] show you see, everyone is white, followed by another that's the same and so on, you think: “Oh, this is for them.” A pattern builds. And it’s difficult to overcome.

(Tarell Alvin McCraney)<sup>531</sup>

Both Meera Syal and Tarell Alvin McCraney suggested how important a child’s first experience of Shakespeare is in terms of inspiring accessibility and ownership of the works. The practitioners drew attention to the particular importance of the first encounter for young people from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds with what is regarded as the quintessential feature of British

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<sup>530</sup> Sian Griffiths, ‘Bard can help make migrant children British’, *The Sunday Times*, 9 February 2014.

<sup>531</sup> Nosheen Iqbal, ‘How Tarell Alvin McCraney took Hamlet back to school’, *Guardian*, 5 February 2010, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/05/shakespeare-school-theatre-hamlet>> [accessed 24 September 2015].

literature and culture. They argued that diversity in the approach to teaching, casting and performing of Shakespeare is vital to making him accessible, engaging and relevant to young, diverse audiences. Shakespeare is not only an integral part of British heritage, but is also a curriculum requirement, and it is perhaps the meeting point between these two things that major British arts organisations recognise as being a vital link to their work and public remit. Educational performances of Shakespeare have proved particularly diverse in terms of casting, settings and audiences in comparison to the majority of main-house productions at these theatres.<sup>532</sup> In Shakespeare's Globe, National Theatre, and the RSC's Annual Reports, as well as on the institutions' websites in sections dedicated to education, photographs displayed images of ethnic diversity more so than in any other department of the theatre. With a focus on the educational schemes of these three theatres, this chapter will analyse different models of engagement with culturally diverse young communities. There is a trend that is similar across the institutions, namely shortened versions of Shakespeare productions created specifically for young people, which tour to local boroughs and across the UK with accompanying teacher resources and workshops. At Shakespeare's Globe this work came under the scheme Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank, at the RSC the Young People's Shakespeare and First Encounter productions, and the National Theatre's Primary Theatre. However, prior to this type of work, Shakespeare's Globe Education department offered a different approach to social engagement. Through my analysis of three different cases, I

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<sup>532</sup> See Jami Rogers, *British British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*, 2016, <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk>> [accessed 20 March 2017].

seek to address how Shakespeare has been used as a tool to engage second and third generation migrants with their own cultural heritages and identities, and to form bridges between Britain's multicultural communities.

### **Playing Shakespeare, Shakespeare's Globe**

Before Shakespeare's Globe Theatre had opened in 1997, education was already a founding principle of what the theatre would become and how it would engage with diverse audiences. Patrick Spottiswoode joined Shakespeare's Globe in 1984 and became the founding Director of Globe Education in 1989. He remembered when Sam Wanamaker – the founder of the establishment, who didn't live to see its opening – made his last visit to the Globe when it was a building site: 'This very frail man crouched down on the piazza then lifted himself up and said, "That wall – it's too high, children won't be able to look in".' For Spottiswoode, this was seminal in his thinking about the role of education in the institution's work. 'I think what education departments' jobs are to do', Spottiswoode declared, 'is to knock down any walls – they could be financial, psychological, pedagogical – that prevent not only children but anyone from looking in, walking in, and working in the theatre.' Continuing the metaphor, Spottiswoode added with importance: 'But also education departments knock down those same walls that prevent theatres from looking *out*, walking out and working out in the community.'<sup>533</sup> This declaration of the moral ethics driving the department's work demonstrated a

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<sup>533</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Patrick Spottiswoode, 22 September 2014.

sense of the symbiotic relationship between the Globe and its surrounding communities. The politics of power were described less in hierarchical terms and more on an equal basis – aiming to work outwards as well as inviting in – seeking *collaborations* with audiences of all ages, religions and ethnicities. This ambition fuelled the development of Globe Education’s work. Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank was established in 2007 and was their flagship project for London schools. Each year, a production was created specifically for young people, particularly targeting secondary schools and A-level students, and 100,000 free tickets were given out. Productions were chosen because of their place on the National Curriculum, and the Globe suggested that the programme was designed to support the teaching of English.<sup>534</sup> Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank provided many non-white actors with opportunities to play leading roles. Between 2012 and 2016 Carlyss Peer played Helena, Peter Bray was Lysander, and Chook Sibtain was Theuseus/Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (2012). Jade Anouka was Juliet, Josh Williams played Benvolio and Beruce Khan was Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* (2013). In *The Merchant of Venice* (2014), Racheal Ofori played Nerissa and Tyler Fayose was Lorenzo. *Othello* (2015) had a white company with one black actor, Lloyd Everitt, as Othello. In *Twelfth Night* (2016) Akiya Henry played Olivia, Alex Mugnaioni was Malvolia, Natasha Magigi was cast as Maria, and Peter Bray appeared as Antonio. Aside from *Othello*, the productions were ‘colourblind’; the actors’ ethnicities were not imbued with

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<sup>534</sup> Shakespeare’s Globe, ‘Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank’, *Shakespeare’s Globe*, 2014, <<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/education/discovery-space/playing-shakespeare>> [accessed 7 March 2015].

meaning in relation to the director's concept for the piece. The diversity of the actors served to reflect the ethnically diverse school audiences, but conversations about religion, ethnicity or race were not purposefully mobilised (with the exception of *Othello*). One season at the venue that certainly generated such discussions, and that I believe offers an ideal model for culturally diverse engagement for young people with Shakespeare, was 'Shakespeare and Islam' that began in 2004. This season adhered to the mission of knocking down walls and engaging with specific communities, in this case British Muslims. It took Islam as its starting point – a religion that was isolated, stereotyped and stigmatized in the media – and aimed to use Shakespeare as a bridge, a tool of education and peace to build and engender positive relations between communities.

### **Shakespeare and Islam: Embracing Britain's Muslim Communities**

In 2004, Patrick Spottiswoode launched 'Islam Awareness Week' in association with the Islamic Society of Britain, as well as a wider series of events in the Shakespeare and Islam season. The idea for this programme began with Spottiswoode wanting to mark the 400th anniversary of the first recorded performance of *Othello*, which took place in 1604. He saw 'the opportunity to explore *Othello* then and now, or rather *Islam* then and now', and to use the play as a springboard 'to think about our audiences, and to think about attitudes towards Islam after 9/11 [...] really just to put Islamic issues back into that

play'.<sup>535</sup> Spottiswoode's motive was to 'to see how I could build bridges with the theatre audiences here, with Muslim communities'. As an interjection in the interview, Spottiswoode added with honesty: 'actually then I would have said *the* Muslim community – I've learnt a bit!'<sup>536</sup> The director's frank revealing of his self-proclaimed naivety represents the influence of the mainstream media representations of Muslims as a homogenous entity that is 'foreign', 'other' and different from 'British' identity. As Elizabeth Poole described in *Reporting Islam, Media representations of British Muslims*: 'The increasing visibility of Muslims to non-Muslims in the UK in a global mediated world, in which Muslims are homogenised, has resulted in their construction as a threat to non-Muslims. This ideological threat (in the UK) allows Muslims to be suppressed.'<sup>537</sup> This sense of exclusion of Muslims from identifications with 'Britishness' was countered by the choices and pluralistic approach to representing different facets of Islamic arts and socio-culture in Spottiswoode's season.

The work that was specifically programmed for young people was created to share, inform and inspire the relationship between Shakespeare, Islam and British cultural diversity. It functioned on multiple levels, and engaged British students with Islam in their own classrooms, outside in their surrounding communities, and finally, internationally. A company of four actors toured to sixty-three Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Protestant schools throughout the UK with a piece of forum theatre called 'There's Magic In The Web', exploring

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<sup>535</sup> Thomas, Interview with Spottiswoode.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> E. Poole, *Reporting Islam, Media representations of British Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p.22.

scenes from *Othello*. Workshops used English, Arabic and British Sign Language and explored Shakespeare's text and themes from *Othello*, as well as an Egyptian folktale called *Bir Atallah* (The Well of Truth). As well as experiencing this production, school children were invited to create their own handkerchiefs inspired by the props in Shakespeare's play. Students artistically engaged with Islamic principles of symmetry, calligraphy, geometry and *islimi* (arabesque), and based their own works on the measurements of surviving Ottoman handkerchiefs. The aim of this work was 'to allow Muslim schoolchildren to discover part of their cultural heritage in this British classic and to share this heritage with their classmates'.<sup>538</sup> Activities were organised that took the children out into their local communities: 'As part of the workshop, all of the children will visit a church and a mosque together in order to get to know both Othello's world and their own a little better.'<sup>539</sup> Globe Education connected with schools from each of the countries referenced in *Othello*, including Cyprus, Morocco, Turkey, Egypt and Palestine. Students from schools in these countries contributed their own handkerchief designs, and along with those chosen from each British school, they were embroidered by people in Morocco to be part of 'The Tent for Peace'.<sup>540</sup> The handkerchiefs were sewn together to create the lining of a *Yurt* (a Mongolian tent with an 'o' shaped hole in the top, akin to the Globe's architecture) which was a space where people could meet and share stories. The result was a tent with

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<sup>538</sup> Patricia Benecke, 'Shakespeare and Islam at London's Globe theatre', *Qantara*, 16 December 2004, <<http://en.qantara.de/content/the-moroccan-of-venice-shakespeare-and-islam-at-londons-globe-theatre>> [accessed 7 October 2014].

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

<sup>540</sup> Globe Education, 'The Tent for Peace' leaflet, (Shakespeare's Globe, 2004).



the principles of global community, togetherness, peace and understanding symbolically sewn into its linings; an international and multi-faith statement promoting peace. Here, a social agenda replaced the conventional educational exploration of a Shakespearean text. The programme provided learning opportunities that opened young people's eyes and minds to different religious faiths. It empowered students and teachers with self-affirmation of their personal identities, and it enabled discussions about difference and togetherness.

As well as the outreach projects in schools, work took place within the Globe theatre. Globe Education in collaboration with Khayaal theatre company – ‘an arts enterprise dedicated to the dramatic interpretation of classic Muslim world literature and heritage and the experience of Muslims in the modern world’<sup>541</sup> – and The Princes School of Islamic Arts, designed a *souk* (marketplace). The aim was to represent and replicate the atmosphere of a bustling street-market. Spottiswoode recalled that there was apprehension about this kind of reconstruction. ‘Everyone was worried about [it], they thought it was going to be really naff’ he said, and indeed, representations of ‘other’ cultures have proved problematic, falling into traps of exoticism and cultural stereotyping (see Chapters one and two).<sup>542</sup> Muslim audience members also noted concern; Raania Rizvi writing for *Q News* said: ‘I found myself wondering whether the organisers could possibly deliver a realistic representation of the kaleidoscope of attributes that define the traditional *souk*.’<sup>543</sup> Yet, she was pleasantly surprised:

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<sup>541</sup> Khayaal, ‘Mission Statement’, *Khayaal Theatre Company*, 2003, <<http://www.khayaal.co.uk/home.html>> [accessed 7 October 2014].

<sup>542</sup> Thomas, Interview with Spottiswoode.

<sup>543</sup> Raania Rizvi, ‘A Many Splendour’d Thing’, *Q News*, 359, January 2005, p. 34.

‘This is amazing, *this* is Islam’, she thought; ‘they represented the collective and inspiring diversity ever present in Islam’.<sup>544</sup> Spottiswoode’s methodology of working with experts and retailers in the field themselves to design the space ensured that the result was not ‘naïf’ or stereotypical in its cultural representation. The Princes School of Islamic Arts created archways that joined with the building; Spottiswoode felt that ‘the design of it was very beautiful’.<sup>545</sup> By focusing on the aspect of the *arts* in Islamic socio-culture, with a specialist Chinese Muslim calligrapher, and storytelling from Khayaal, the *souk* was faithful in its representation of Islamic practices. It was a celebration and sharing of Islamic practices, rooted in historical traditions and embodied by artists and professionals embedded in the culture. Some British Muslim audience members felt the impact powerfully: ‘The *souk* at Shakespeare’s Globe rekindled for many the pride of being both British and Muslim.’<sup>546</sup> As well as the artistic additions to the space, prayer room facilities were made available for the duration of the festival – a fundamental practical consideration that Spottiswoode declared he received most positive feedback for. Shakespeare’s Globe demonstrated awareness and understanding of their audiences’ religious needs, and this proactive thinking reflected Globe Education’s active engagement with and promotion of equality and diversity in this instance.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> Thomas, Interview with Spottiswoode.

<sup>546</sup> Rizvi, p. 34.

<sup>547</sup> An OFSTED report suggested that the practice of equality and diversity in education requires: ‘actively promoting positive relationships and respect for human rights’ and ‘understanding and respecting differences’. Peter Green, ‘Equality and Inspection – an Ofsted perspective of Impact’, *Multifaiths*, October 2011, <[http://www.multifaiths.com/pdf/peter\\_green\\_ofsted.pdf](http://www.multifaiths.com/pdf/peter_green_ofsted.pdf)> [accessed 7 October 2014].

Not only did events take place within the walls of Shakespeare's Globe, but every evening during Islam Awareness Week, images of Islamic life and culture were projected onto the exterior walls, illuminating the building on Southbank. The photographs were taken by Peter Sanders, a specialist photographer of the Islamic world. Spottiswoode explained: 'We came up with the idea of projecting photographs of Islamic lands, peoples and architecture onto the white walls of the Globe so that Islam enfolds the Globe'.<sup>548</sup> He continued, 'Shakespeare and the Globe are icons of Britishness. This way the Globe is being embraced by Islam. I thought it would be a beautiful, visual symbol of what we're trying to do'.<sup>549</sup>

It is evident that the season did not lack in spirit of openness, diversity, sharing and understanding. What we can see throughout of all of the events encompassed by the Shakespeare and Islam season is a grammar of representation that was not based on 'exoticism' or 'othering', but on consultation with members of Muslim communities and experts within the field. The ethics of Spottiswoode's approach cannot be critiqued along the lines of Bharucha's theories of cultural appropriation. Spottiswoode sidestepped the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and dismantled the hierarchy whereby Shakespeare's Globe would hold the power and represent Islam. Instead, he created the space for members of Muslim communities to represent themselves through the medium, and under the umbrella, of Shakespeare. However, despite advocating to the board at

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<sup>548</sup> Thomas, Interview with Spottiswoode.

<sup>549</sup> Patrick Spottiswoode, "I can no other answer make, but, thanks, and thanks", *Q News*, 359, January 2005, p. 30.

Shakespeare's Globe that the prayer room be made a permanent feature of the building, the notion was rejected due to 'space issues'.<sup>550</sup> The bridge that had been built seemed only to stand during that season, and once it was over, so too was the sense of devotion and encouragement to Muslims of all ages that this building was for them. Ten years on from the season in 2014, I asked Patrick Spottiswoode: 'How has the Globe endeavoured to foster and sustain relationships with members of Muslim communities?' He declared that 'it's very difficult [...] We're not the "Shakespeare and Islam centre", we're a theatre'.<sup>551</sup> Spottiswoode did argue that the work and its impact were still happening, with relationships continually developing through other seasons, such as Globe to Globe. As a one-off season, it is clear that Shakespeare and Islam was a powerful demonstration of the ways in which our quintessential representative of English heritage can be used as a bridge to generate encounters with Islamic culture and communities in contemporary British society. Several years later, the Globe's peer – the RSC – developed a different approach to sustaining the relationship between Britain's diverse minority communities, Shakespeare and their theatre spaces.

### **Young People's Shakespeare, Royal Shakespeare Company**

As one of Arts Council England's three largest National Portfolio Organisations, the RSC's responsibility to the public differed from Shakespeare's Globe due to the terms of their funding resources. The RSC is funded by taxpayers' money,

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<sup>550</sup> Thomas, Interview with Spottiswoode.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

with £47.1 million granted in the years 2012–2015.<sup>552</sup> Jacqui O’Hanlon, the RSC’s Director of Education stated: ‘We see our education work as very much part of our public benefit remit’. She continued, ‘there’s a very tangible responsibility that we have as a publicly funded organisation [...] to the taxpayer to demonstrate value. And education is one of the ways we do that’. She talked about how the RSC was differently placed from other arts organisations, due to the fact of course, that Shakespeare is the ‘house playwright’, and because of his place on the national curriculum. She said: ‘so it’s both a cultural entitlement and curriculum requirement – and that’s a quite rare combination in the arts.’<sup>553</sup>

In March 2008 the RSC defined the role of education in delivering the public benefit remit through the launch of ‘Stand Up For Shakespeare’. Included in this programme’s manifesto was ‘a vision for establishing a universal cultural entitlement for young people’ whereby the RSC would ‘give young people access to a cultural heritage that can otherwise feel alien and irrelevant’.<sup>554</sup> This notion speaks to Meera Syal’s views – herself a governor at the RSC – that ‘more performances of Shakespeare’s plays [should] be set abroad and feature black and Asian actors to help to “create a shared sense of heritage” among immigrant children’. Syal declared: ‘I did not see it as part of my cultural heritage at all. Rather I saw it as part of the canon of English literature’.<sup>555</sup> Syal stated explicitly

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<sup>552</sup> Arts Council England, ‘The new portfolio’, *Arts Council England*, 2014, <<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/our-investment-2015-18/national-portfolio/new-portfolio/>> [accessed 7 March 2015].

<sup>553</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Jacqui O’Hanlon, 26 September 2014.

<sup>554</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, ‘Stand Up For Shakespeare Manifesto’, *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2008, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/stand-up-for-shakespeare-manifesto.pdf>> [accessed 7 March 2015], p. 6.

<sup>555</sup> Syal in Griffiths.

what was implied in the RSC's manifesto; changes to casting and representational practices were needed in order to ensure children of *all* backgrounds, classes, cultures and ethnicities, immigrant or British-born, would be encouraged to connect to a part of their collective British cultural heritage.

As part of the programme, the company developed a strand of work entitled Young People's Shakespeare. Similarly to Globe Education's Playing Shakespeare, YPS productions were shortened versions, typically between seventy-five and ninety minutes in length. For Michael Boyd, 'The YPS gave us access to the nation as a whole. Theatre is viewed as having very high social status, as being quite a middle-class preoccupation, still very white for instance'.<sup>556</sup> He hoped that the education work would cross such class barriers and reach students from different backgrounds. *Hamlet*, directed by Tarell Alvin McCraney (2010) was the second YPS production (following *The Comedy of Errors* directed by Paul Hunter, the co-Artistic Director of Told By An Idiot theatre company, who specialise in theatre and storytelling for young audiences). McCraney was particularly concerned with ethnic and cultural diversity, and the ways in which the RSC could encourage non-white students to engage with Shakespeare.

It was not part of McCraney's remit as International Writer in Residence to direct a play for the company. However, he had immersed himself as much as possible in all aspects of the RSC's work, and strongly felt the need for 'the barrier of accessibility to be brought down'. He could see that 'the obstacles

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<sup>556</sup> Michael Boyd quoted in Joe Winston, *Transforming the Teaching of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), p. 15.

preventing most young people from enjoying Shakespeare [were] access and engagement'.<sup>557</sup> Michael Boyd invited him to address these issues through a production for YPS. Boyd remarked: 'Tarell didn't need to work with young people, he wanted to for biographical and socio-political reasons'.<sup>558</sup> As a fourteen-year-old boy living in Miami, McCraney had his own transformative experience of engaging with theatre when a company came and performed in his school. He came from an impoverished background; he was brought up by his mother, a drug abuser, who died from an Aids-related illness. He said: 'Theatre is what saved my life [...] It changed my life, and gave me a life in art.'<sup>559</sup> McCraney understood deeply the importance of live theatre for young audiences. His first experience of a professional Shakespeare production was when he was twenty years old; he saw a production of *Hamlet* at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. He had fostered a great love for the poetry as a student, and continued to be inspired as he developed his work as a playwright; he said: 'the language of Shakespeare; you can see it a lot in my work'.<sup>560</sup> He also performed Shakespeare at his high school and acting classes. Throughout his training, he had always been conscious about the lack of roles for black actors, and addressing this became part of his mission as an artist: 'There weren't enough roles for a black actor I thought,

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<sup>557</sup> Jane Nead, 'Q & A with Tarell Alvin McCraney', *RSC Friends*, 15 January 2010, <<https://rscfriends.org.uk/2010/01/15/q-a-with-tarell-alvin-mccraney/>> [accessed 24 February 2017].

<sup>558</sup> Boyd quoted in Winston, p. 15.

<sup>559</sup> McCraney in Iqbal.

<sup>560</sup> Tarell Alvin McCraney quoted in Karla Williams, 'Tarell Alvin McCraney: The New Shakespeare', *Afridiziak*, 6 December 2008, <<http://www.afridiziak.com/theatrenews/interviews/interview-with-tarell-alvin-mccraney.html>> [accessed 7 March 2015].

not enough varied roles.’ So McCraney decided: ‘I’m going to keep creating roles for actors of colour so that we’ll have lots of stuff to do. I figured I’d rather be trying to be a solution to the problem than adding to it.’<sup>561</sup> His two-pronged mission, in terms of creating roles for actors, and presenting culturally diverse experiences for ethnic-minority audiences, drove his approach to directing the *YPS Hamlet*.

The play was performed by nine actors – members of the RSC’s ensemble that performed a repertoire of plays between 2008–2011. *Hamlet* opened in the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2010, and then toured to schools and local theatre venues in Newcastle and outer London boroughs. It then relocated to New York for a summer residency, and returned in 2011 for a six-week tour in the areas of West Midlands, Cornwall, Plymouth (including Torbay), North East England, Liverpool, Rotherham and Merseyside. Bijan Sheibani co-edited the script to a seventy-minute performance time, and the designer was Jean Chan. The production was set in Britain, and oscillated between the Victorian era and present-day society. This was conveyed through the costume design that utilised a black and white colour-scheme. Hamlet was dressed in a Victorian-style black waist-coat, trousers, breeches and a white shirt, and Horatio wore a white beanie hat with a bobble on the end, black boots, modern trousers and a white top. For simplicity, as the company travelled across the country and performed in school halls, there was minimal set. A simple backdrop curtain with a black-to-white colour gradient was used to conceal and reveal certain characters at opportune

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid.



moments – for example, Claudius and Polonius hid behind it as Ophelia returned her remembrances – as well as six boxes on which characters could sit and interact.

The expression of cultural identity was confined to the differences of the actors' ethnicities; McCraney did not include, for example, culturally specific rituals traditions, accents or languages. However, there was one motif that was a symbolic reference to a tradition from McCraney's homeland, which was drawn upon to create the cultural and physical landscape for the piece. The director explained the emblematic significance of umbrellas in funerals in the American South where he hails from; 'You take an umbrella for the processional to and from the funeral' he said, 'so sometimes these devices are there just for the comfort, just for the notion of protection'.<sup>562</sup> The personal prop became a symbolic motif that characters returned to at heightened emotional moments in their journeys through the play. The device was established at the very beginning of the production when the company enacted an abstract physical sequence representing the death of Hamlet's father. Six umbrellas were laid out on the floor as the actors took their opening positions. Hamlet's father collapsed into his arms, and the company members picked up their umbrellas, holding them towards the ceiling and opening them in synchronicity, before creating a shield around the body. Also, when Hamlet and Ophelia met for the first time, they flirted by twirling their umbrellas, and shielded their backs to exchange a secret. 'For me',

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<sup>562</sup> Tarell Alvin McCraney quoted in Royal Shakespeare Company, 'YPS Hamlet', *RSC Video*, 2010, <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/education/yps/2010/video.aspx>> [accessed 8 March 2015].

McCraney continued, ‘it was all about getting underneath the umbrellas and finding out who the people were who were trying to hide or secure themselves’.<sup>563</sup> Whether hiding or securing, the props were also a visual demonstration and extension of the characters’ emotional states; Ophelia cradled and sang to an umbrella in her madness, Hamlet used an umbrella as a sword to demonstrate his violent anger, and he fatally stabbed through an umbrella behind which Polonius was hiding. The significance of the umbrellas to South American community members’ experiences may not have resonated with young British audiences, however, their incorporation can be seen as a stepping stone in the director’s development of incorporating cultural specificity that would become an important feature of his future Shakespearean work.

The primary method that McCraney used in his aim to redress the balance of diversity reflected for young audiences – above his dramaturgy or cultural translocation of the play – was his casting process. ‘It was hugely important for me to cast a Hamlet of colour’, McCraney stated; ‘we’re in London, for God’s sake, where around 40% of people are non-white’.<sup>564</sup> To counter the sense of an institutionalised bias that saw most leading roles given to white actors, he chose Dharmesh Patel – a twenty-nine year old British South-Asian actor from London of Bengali heritage, who had never performed Shakespeare before this season at the RSC – to play Hamlet. He chose the black-British actress Simone Saunders to play Horatio, and another black-British actress Debbie Korley to play Ophelia. Parents and families were of differing ethnicities; Kirsty Woodward, a white

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>564</sup> McCraney in Iqbal.

actress, played Gertrude, and Peter Peverley and Dyfan Dwyfor, both white actors, were Ophelia's father and brother respectively. According to Ayanna Thompson's non-traditional casting models, this approach would be most closely aligned with 'colorblind casting', which 'assumes that an actor's color has no semiotic value onstage unless it is invested with one by the director'.<sup>565</sup> However, in interviews the director very clearly described his commitment to culturally diverse representation in this production; he had purposefully chosen an actor of colour in order to reflect and represent London's young and diverse audiences. A development in discourse surrounding casting practices in the UK is needed, to frame methods that address the historical structural imbalances in Shakespearean production. I shall suggest a positive strategy in the conclusion to this thesis.

The main character was the primary vehicle with which the director hoped to connect with young audiences, and Dharmesh Patel treated this responsibility seriously. Discussing his own experience as a student, he said: 'When I was at school I hated Shakespeare. It's because we were forced to sit at the table and just read a play'. He discovered that 'by performing Shakespeare, it brings Shakespeare to life, it allows young people to understand such a complex and beautiful text'.<sup>566</sup> His work on the soliloquies was targeted towards connecting with the young people, as part of the director's mission to engage them with Shakespeare's language, especially through audience interaction. McCraney explained: 'Their main focus will be Hamlet because he speaks to them in direct

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<sup>565</sup> Thompson, *Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America*, p. 77.

<sup>566</sup> Dharmesh Patel, 'The first British-Asian Hamlet makes the Bard popular', *Theatre Voice*, 26 January 2011, <<http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/the-first-british-asian-hamlet-makes-the-bard-popular/>> [accessed 7 March 2015].

conversation'. He 'made sure the actor knew that it was important to speak directly to them because it's for them that the story is being told'.<sup>567</sup> The soliloquies served as moments of stillness that stood out from the physical business of the rest of the production. They were moments of reflection where Hamlet, surrounded by young students on three sides, could test and contest ideas. Patel explained: 'Speaking soliloquies to a young audience, I'm trying to use the audience as my conscience'.<sup>568</sup> Engaging them in direct conversation he hoped would ensure that they felt a strong connection to Hamlet throughout the play. 'The audience are the tenth member of our ensemble' Patel continued; 'they go on that journey with Hamlet – that dark, sinister, beautiful journey'.<sup>569</sup> Their interactions developed through Hamlet's madness, with the audience becoming even more physically involved in the character's plight. By going right up to audience members, and speaking to them whilst other characters were on stage, Patel made the students complicit in his game of madness. Peter Kirwan, in his review of the production, described how 'he sat on the lap of a man in the front row so they could read a book together, [...] it was his youthful confusion that most stood out'.<sup>570</sup> At other moments, students were invited up on stage to play different roles – to greet Hamlet and to play dead during the recounting of Hamlet's travels. These moments were met with great cheers, laughter and

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<sup>567</sup> Alvin McCraney quoted in RSC, 'YPS Hamlet'.

<sup>568</sup> Dharmesh Patel quoted in RSC, 'YPS Hamlet'.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> Peter Kirwan, 'Hamlet (RSC Young People's Shakespeare) @ The Courtyard Theatre', *The Bardathon*, 27 August 2010, <<http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2010/08/27/hamlet-rsc-young-peoples-shakespeare-the-courtyard-theatre/>> [accessed 7 March 2015].

excitement, and Nosheen Iqbal described how after ‘some audience participation, the year sevens are on their feet’. Iqbal visited a school in London to report on the production, and said: ‘before I visit Claremont, I still feel skeptical [...] the play’s themes are undeniably heavy. In the wrong hands they could be leaden.’<sup>571</sup> It seems that reviewers appreciated that the role was in the right hands: Dharmesh Patel ‘managed the role splendidly’<sup>572</sup>, ‘he has zest and intelligence’<sup>573</sup>, and was ‘impressive throughout’.<sup>574</sup> The actor mused: ‘just because they’re young, doesn’t mean they haven’t suffered, grieved, [or felt the] deepest darkest emotions a person can possibly feel.’<sup>575</sup> Patel recounted his own upbringing in the London districts Whitechapel and Harrow: ‘There were riots every day between the skinheads and the Bengalis. My best friend Clifton was black, we got beaten the crap out of every day’. Patel lost his best friend at a young age; ‘Clifton’s not with us anymore. If those things never happened I wonder if I’d be playing Hamlet in the way that it’s happened now’.<sup>576</sup> Patel was an advocate of the workshops that accompanied the touring production; the actors facilitated them and engaged the school-pupils in exercises on their feet. Recalling the outcome of one of these workshops, Patel was enthused: ‘What the RSC does, is just phenomenal, it

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<sup>571</sup> Iqbal.

<sup>572</sup> Kirwan.

<sup>573</sup> Dominic Cavendish, ‘Young People’s Shakespeare: Hamlet at Claremont School, Kingsbury’, *Telegraph*, 26 January 2010, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/7078548/Young-Peoples-Shakespeare-Hamlet-at-Claremont-School-Kingsbury.html>> [accessed 16 September 2014].

<sup>574</sup> Laura Maley, ‘Hamlet - YPS (RSC Tour - Liverpool)’, *What’s On Stage*, 15 October 2011, <[http://www.whatsonstage.com/blackpool-theatre/reviews/10-2011/hamlet-yps-rsc-tour-liverpool\\_6614.html](http://www.whatsonstage.com/blackpool-theatre/reviews/10-2011/hamlet-yps-rsc-tour-liverpool_6614.html)> [accessed 7 March 2015].

<sup>575</sup> Patel, ‘The first British-Asian Hamlet’.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*

allows young people from such a range of backgrounds, like myself, I'm from a very working class background', to find self-expression and emotional fluency.<sup>577</sup> Despite her reservations and preconceptions about the suitability of the play for a young audience, Iqbal appreciated the company's work with school children, including the post-show workshop where she felt it was 'clear how teaching techniques respond to the kids' innate energy and enthusiasm'. She acknowledged that her original fears about the heaviness of the play for young people were absolutely 'misplaced'.<sup>578</sup>

Considering both Patel and McCraney's personal testimonies, a strong argument comes across concerning the importance of Shakespearean performance in schools: it can provide a playing field, a creative space, for young people to explore the issues and prejudices in their personal experiences of contemporary society. For both practitioners, theatre provided a lifeline during their struggles, whether racial, sexual or concerning loss, and it is clear that this gave them their purpose for working with young people to provide them with the same opportunities. YPS *Hamlet* reached 9,922 people over six weeks with twenty-nine performances in school venues, and eighty-five schools who saw the production at the Swan Theatre. The 'RSC Audience Research Hamlet YPS Touring Production' document (a review of the audience statistics) focused on the social backgrounds of the young people, particularly the demographic category 'C2DE' (the three lowest social and economic groups in society). It was reported that '10% of the audience surveyed are from a C2DE background, higher even than

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Iqbal.

Matilda at 9%'.<sup>579</sup> Social diversity was higher on the agenda than ethnic diversity, although it was noted that the audiences varied between the North, South and the Midlands – the Midlands was 'more ethnically diverse' with '5% from BME backgrounds'. The summary of the report declared: 'The *Hamlet* YPS tour ticked nearly all the boxes', with 'a more socially diverse audience' and '1 in 5 new to live Shakespeare'.<sup>580</sup>

YPS eventually became 'First Encounter' – a name-change under the new artistic directorship of Gregory Doran – and began with *The Taming of the Shrew* featuring Anjana Vasan as Tranio and Mimi Ndiweni as Lucentio. Cultural diversity was central to the marketing image for the production; a black model was dressed in a suit as the centrepiece, and a white man in an Elizabethan dress stood behind her (the actors cross-dressed in the production). When I questioned Jacqui O'Hanlon about the reason that the YPS and First Encounter productions had been more ethnically diverse than the RSC's main-house productions, her response was one of flummox. 'I honestly hadn't thought about it before', she said; 'that's absolutely fascinating.' She began to think through the chain of relations between audience, institution and output, and where the source of more diverse work might spring:

I wonder if it's about [...] that sense of public engagement  
has become an increasingly critical part of the way

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<sup>579</sup> The RSC's world premiere production of *Matilda The Musical* opened in 2010 and subsequently transferred to London's Cambridge Theatre (2011) and Shubert Theatre on Broadway in 2013. It received seven Laurence Olivier Awards (2012) including 'Best New Musical'.

<sup>580</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company Education Department, 'RSC Audience Research Hamlet YPS Touring Production' (Unpublished, 2011).

organisations have to think about themselves. But it starts in what's defined as an education department. Why is it that it starts there? I think there are some disturbing answers to it.<sup>581</sup>

If the analysis of ethnic diversity in the casting of productions for young people had only just begun internally at the RSC, the National Theatre's approach to cultural diversity in their educational work was at a different stage of progress in these years.

### **Primary Theatre, National Theatre**

Working in 2004 in a non-public funded organisation, Patrick Spottiswoode essentially made a social intervention and marked Shakespeare's Globe as a community space; he defined a function for theatre within the Southwark community. Ten years later, in a building nearby, Nicholas Hytner was working within the framework and legacy created by the success of Spottiswoode's work for and with diverse audiences. NT is to date one of the three largest National Portfolio Organisations receiving funding from Arts Council England. In the years 2012–2015, NT received £52.4 million, and Hytner was required to meet expectations that understandably came hand-in-hand with this level of public investment.<sup>582</sup> He said:

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<sup>581</sup> Thomas, Interview with O'Hanlon.

<sup>582</sup> Arts Council England, 'The new portfolio', *Arts Council England*, 2014, <<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/our-investment-2015-18/national-portfolio/new-portfolio/>> [accessed 7 October 2014].



Ten years ago, when I became Director of the National Theatre, I was plunged into a fascinating and lively debate about the purpose of tax payers' investment in the arts. The Labour government had become increasingly instrumental in its vision for the arts and expected, in return for its funding, measurable outcomes in the diversity of our audiences, in our educational outreach and in the social benefit of our activities.<sup>583</sup>

Educational work once more can be seen as the principal sector where Britain's largest theatrical institutions engaged with issues of diversity. The NT's 'Primary Theatre' *Romeo and Juliet* is one example of a production where each of the measurable outcomes that Hytner marked as being fundamental to meeting funding bodies requirements – namely, diversity of audiences, educational outreach and social benefit – were in evidence.

Similarly to both the RSC's YPS and First Encounter programmes, and the Globe's Playing Shakespeare, the production was an abridged version of Shakespeare's text, running at sixty minutes, and was accompanied by workshops led by the actors in the schools following the performance. It toured to primary and secondary schools across the UK and ran at the NT Shed from 24 July to 18 August 2013. The main aim from the Learning department's perspective was: 'to introduce children to theatre and performance through a

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<sup>583</sup> Nicholas Hytner quoted in National Theatre, 'Annual Report 2012-2013', *National Theatre*, 2013, <[http://d1wf8hd6ovssje.cloudfront.net/documents/Annual\\_Report\\_2012-2013.pdf](http://d1wf8hd6ovssje.cloudfront.net/documents/Annual_Report_2012-2013.pdf)> [accessed 8 October 2013], p. 9.

high-quality touring production, alongside a creative learning programme with a focus on literacy'.<sup>584</sup> Although not specifically referring to Shakespeare, this statement mirrors the aims from both companies that have already been examined, and particularly speaks to the needs of the national curriculum. The creative team behind *Romeo and Juliet* consisted of the director Bijan Sheibani – who we recognise from co-editing Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Hamlet* – and the adaptor Ben Power.

Bijan Sheibani was new to directing Shakespeare, although he was certainly influenced by his work with McCraney. Thinking of his young audience, he said: 'I was excited at the idea of this potentially being one of their first experiences of theatre, and particularly their first experience of Shakespeare [...] and that was the guiding principle for how we adapted it'.<sup>585</sup> Sheibani devised a concept that he believed would be accessible, engaging and relevant for London's school audiences. Expressing sentiments similar to McCraney's about the importance of reflecting British ethnic minorities on stage, he decided to cast the Montague and Capulet families as black-British and British South Asian respectively.<sup>586</sup> The Capulet family comprised of actors including Natalie

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<sup>584</sup> National Theatre, 'Primary Theatre: Romeo and Juliet', *National Theatre*, 2014, <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/learning/for-schools/for-primary-schools-and-nurseries/primary-programme-201314>> [accessed 8 October 2013].

<sup>585</sup> Bijan Sheibani quoted in National Theatre Discover, 'Romeo and Juliet: Adaptation', *YouTube*, 3 October 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wl6sc9Genj0>> [accessed 8 October 2013].

<sup>586</sup> As with McCraney's casting choices, at certain points there are connections between Sheibani's practice and Thompson's models, specifically in this example the 'cross-cultural'. However, the directors' shared ambition to be representative of the diversity of London's young audiences requires more significant terminology, to define their active methods of engaging with culturally and ethnically diverse actors. I suggest the use of the term 'inclusive casting' and will address this in the conclusion to this thesis.

Dew as Juliet, and Archana Ramaswamy as the Nurse. The Montagues included Tendayi Jembere as Romeo and Ashley Chin as Mercutio. However, the director's casting choices and concept proved problematic before the production opened. The company had held a research and development phase before rehearsals officially began, and school pupils were invited to a sharing at the end of this process. The teachers and students were encouraged to give their feedback, and the teachers voiced their concerns about the presentation of racial and cultural differences between the African and Indian families being the cause of the dissent. They felt that this was a negative representation that did not promote socio-cultural harmony. As a result, despite being an important production in terms of diverse casting and one that surely met the NT's aims ('The National Theatre aspires to reflect in its repertoire the diversity of the nation's culture') with the entirety of the cast hailing from ethnic minority backgrounds, discourses of multiculturalism and diversity were no longer mobilised in discussions surrounding the play by the creative team.<sup>587</sup> In a series of educational films about the production, as well as a teacher's resource pack produced by the Learning department at NT, conversations instead centred on the plot, and the company's use of different theatrical tools of storytelling.

Ben Power described: 'We wanted different theatrical languages like music and movement to support the language', so that 'these young people could really get an authentic experience of the Shakespearean language but in a way

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<sup>587</sup> National Theatre, 'About the National Theatre', *National Theatre*, 2014, <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/welcome-to-the-national-theatre/about-the-national-theatre>> [accessed 8 October 2014].

which made sense to them'.<sup>588</sup> Thus the company made use of audience interaction, contemporary pop songs, live music, drumming, singing, dance and rap. At the beginning of the play, the actor Ashley Chin spoke the Prologue to the audience, who surrounded the square playing space on all four sides – 'in the round'. This introduced the audience to the Shakespearean language before the director added layer after layer of different theatrical languages. Chin called in each member of the cast, introducing them by name to the audience and encouraged the young people to give a round of applause. The fourth wall was dismantled, helping the audience to feel like they were part of the action and to develop affiliations with the characters. The next language to be introduced was music: a guitar chord structure and drumbeat established a rhythm and the cast sang in harmony. Finally, on top of this musical structure, Ashley Chin repeated the Prologue text, but this time broke the iambic pentameter and rapped the speech, making sense of the language with his own interpretive rhythm. This opening demonstrated the adaptor's aims of using theatrical languages to support Shakespeare's language, making the production engaging, accessible and energetic from the beginning.

The incorporation of contemporary music was similar to McCraney's use of modern songs. During the *Hamlet* rehearsal process, McCraney had asked the actors to present a contemporary song that they felt connected with their character at different moments in the play. Thus, when Hamlet met Ophelia, the ensemble sang 'Anyone Else But You', a love song featured in the film *Juno*

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<sup>588</sup> Ben Power quoted in National Theatre Discover, 'Romeo and Juliet: Adaptation'.

(2008). In a Teacher's Resource Pack provided to schools by the RSC, this exercise was included with the aim of introducing students to different methods of storytelling, and to encourage them to consider the 'number of choices that are available for every element of the play'.<sup>589</sup> The resource pack instructed teachers to: 'Explain to the students that in a theatre, actors don't only use their scripts but also music and sound effects to help audiences get a sense of character and atmosphere'.<sup>590</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* also employed the use of contemporary songs including 'Someone Like You', a chart-topping single by singer-songwriter Adele about heartbreak. Romeo sang this song demonstrating his unrequited love for Rosaline and provoked laughs of acknowledgement and appreciation from the audience.<sup>591</sup> This particular song immediately situated the play in the students' contemporary cultural world. As well as using music as an aural signifier, the costumes were designed with symbolic cultural significance.

Although the Montagues and Capulets could clearly be differentiated by their skin colour, most reviewers described how the distinctions between the families were suggested by their costumes rather than their ethnicities. The Montagues wore colourful bowler hats and the Capulets had feathered Mohican hats. The costume designer used bright neon colours, and a range of cultural influences: punk fishnet stockings for the young Capulets, and suits, shirts, ties and trouser braces for the young Montagues. This 'mash-up' of cultural

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<sup>589</sup> Royal Shakespeare Company, 'Education Pack Young People's Shakespeare Hamlet', *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2010, <[http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc\\_edu\\_ham\\_2010\\_full\\_pack.pdf](http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc_edu_ham_2010_full_pack.pdf)> [accessed 8 March 2015], p. 2.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid.

<sup>591</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Bijan Sheibani (Unpublished, 2013).

references and vibrant colour-palette contributed to the representation of contemporary multicultural Britain. A promotional summary described the production as: ‘Set against a vibrant urban backdrop, bursting full of excitement, colour, dancing and live song, a company of eight recreate the most famous love story of all time.’<sup>592</sup> One Year 5 teacher from Lauriston Primary school described how: ‘The costumes, the production, the multi-cultural cast together reminded me of the great tradition of contemporary theatre our lucky children are being exposed to, via the National Theatre’.<sup>593</sup> Interestingly none of the mainstream critics commented at all upon the South Asian and African diasporic identities in performance. However, Ekua Ekumah reviewing for *Afridiziak* – a website dedicated to reviewing African-Caribbean theatre – wrote: ‘The complexities of identity and belonging that the younger generation living in Britain has to contend with are cleverly highlighted in this adaptation.’<sup>594</sup> This draws attention to the role of theatre critics in becoming more fluent in their analysis of performances that deal with issues surrounding British diversity and multiculturalism, particularly because the specific cultural identities of the characters were inseparable from the plot and the director’s concept for the piece.

Despite the feedback from teachers hoping to reduce the notion of racial tensions and culture clashes causing enmity, the distinctions between the two

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<sup>592</sup> National Theatre, ‘Primary Theatre: Romeo and Juliet’, *National Theatre*, 2014, <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/learning/for-schools/for-primary-schools-and-nurseries/primary-programme-201314>> [accessed 8 October 2013].

<sup>593</sup> Ibid.

<sup>594</sup> Ekua Ekumah, ‘Romeo and Juliet, The Shed, National Theatre’, *Afridiziak*, 3 August 2013, <<http://www.afridiziak.com/theatrenews/reviews/august2013/romeo-and-juliet-the-shed-national-theatre.html>> [accessed 27 March 2017].

households were in fact defined along cultural lines in performance. For those with first-hand experience and knowledge of British black-African and South Asian immigrants, and second, even third, generation diasporic communities, the production functioned on multiple levels. Sheibani presented a complex layering and exploration of contemporary British identity, and gave a particularly nuanced interpretation of the cultural hybridity, even 'biculturalism' experienced by young people from British diasporic communities. The semiotics of race and ethnicity were mobilised through the performance of culturally specific actions. This was portrayed through choices made about characterisation, the treatment of inter-generational familial relations, the use of bilingualism and accents, and by connecting themes to experiences of specific BAME communities.

The exploration of diasporic identity politics was firstly clear in the portrayal of the Montague and Capulet parents as first generation migrants. Romeo's mother wore a *batik caftan* (a traditional African dress) and headwrap, and spoke with an African accent. Lord Capulet, played by Umar Pasha, was depicted as a South Asian patriarch. He wore a *sharwani* (a traditional Indian suit) and spoke with an Indian accent. The director established clear distinctions between the migrant parents and their British born children. Lady Montague first appeared as Romeo sat on the floor listening to a British pop-song through large green headphones. She tried unsuccessfully to get her son's attention as he sang along to the music, and communicated a sense of watching her son grow up within this urban city from the peripheries. There was a division between the mother's African cultural heritage, represented through her clothing and accent,

and her son's unsettling of this identity – he spoke in a 'London street' accent, and wore a different style of clothing to his parent. This connects with Bob Morris Jones and Paul Avtar Singh Ghuman's research into bilingualism, identity and education in diverse British communities (1995) where one of the 'salient findings' was that 'the second generation was more willing to accept British customs and social practices'.<sup>595</sup> Similarly, the inter-generational divide between identities was represented in the relationship between Juliet and her father, as demonstrated through clothing and language. Lord Capulet interjected Hindi sentences into the dialogue. For example, when he introduced Paris to Juliet he asked: '*Meri beti bahut khub surat hai na?*' (My daughter is very beautiful isn't she?), to which Paris replied with utter incomprehension: 'What?!' In her paper 'Being Bilingual: Perspectives of Third Generation Asian Children on Language, Culture and Identity', Jean Mills analysed the impact of language and multi-cultures on identity formation for third-generation British South Asian children. She defined biculturalism as 'in the sense of two distinct cultures co-existing or combining, in some way, in one individual'.<sup>596</sup> For Paris, his biculturalism manifested through the semiotics of his South Asian ethnicity, and through his wearing of a *sharwani*. However, he could only understand English, further highlighting the divide between first, second and third generation identity formation.

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<sup>595</sup> Bob Morris Jones and Paul Avtar Singh Ghuman, *Bilingualism, Education and Identity* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 1995), p. 215.

<sup>596</sup> Jean Mills, 'Being Bilingual: Perspectives of Third Generation Asian Children on Language, Culture and Identity', in *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, ed. by Colin Baker, 4 (2001), pp. 383–402, (p. 389).



Juliet's biculturalism was shown through the practice of core customs of her South Asian background. Jones and Ghuman argued that through the second generation was more likely to assimilate British social practices, they did so 'whilst not entirely rejecting their own way of life'.<sup>597</sup> In preparation for her father's masked ball, Juliet was shown honouring the traditions of her cultural heritage in a dressing scene where the Nurse wrapped a *sari* (a South Asian garment) around her. With this action, she consolidated her identity as an Indian girl bound by the customs of ingrained patriarchy. As she dressed herself in the *sari*, the Nurse warned Juliet of the rules of arranged marriage that she was about to be bound by. Juliet then joined her friends and family and entered the masked ball – but only by giving the secret code to the bouncer to get in. The physical secret code was a further visual symbol of South Asian cultural heritage. The actors each placed their hands together above their heads, and isolating the neck, moved their head from side to side – a recognisable Bollywood dance move. This represented a cultural difference from the Montagues who did not know the move and could not get into the ball without learning and practising it. At this point in the production, the audience were invited to learn the dance moves and join in with the characters, demonstrating how it is easy to transcend difference through sharing and a willingness to learn (see Appendix). This was a depiction of young British people moving between two cultural spheres: the culture of their parents at home, and the mainstream culture outside the home and in school. As Dosanjh and Ghuman describe in *Child-rearing in ethnic minorities*, 'the

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<sup>597</sup> Morris Jones and Avtar Singh Ghuman, p. 215.

bicultural identities are constructed as a functional response to their predicament – to be Sikh at home and English at school or place of work is an effective way of dealing with the world’ and being accepted in, belonging to, both.<sup>598</sup> However, Mills argued that this process of developing a ‘hyphenated’ identity is ‘not necessarily a trauma-free enterprise, especially when the values of the home and society have to be reconciled’.<sup>599</sup>

Sheibani’s directorial interpretation combined with Shakespeare’s themes produced a scene whose undertones provoked resonance with South Asian social issues (see Chapters two and four for similarities with *Much Ado* and *Cymbeline*). When Juliet refused Paris’ hand in marriage, Capulet towered over his daughter, tore her magazine out of her hands and threw it violently on the floor as she cowered in the corner. This anger and violence read through the layered semiotics of the South Asian father-daughter relationship, inter-generational divide and complex negotiation of third-generation British South Asian identity as a daughter transgressing the codes of *izzat* and being violently reprimanded by the patriarch for doing so. Whereas Capulet wanted his culture to remain pure, to retain the values of his heritage through an arranged marriage, Juliet wanted to forge her own future, and to define her own cultural identity.

In ‘Between policy and reality: multiculturalism, the second generation, and the third space in Britain’, Gabriel *et al* wrote:

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<sup>598</sup> Jagjit Singh Dosanjh and Paul Avtar Singh Ghuman, *Child-rearing in ethnic minorities* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>599</sup> Mills, p. 390.

It is the unstable space of cross-over and *mélange* they inhabit and the various boundaries they traverse in the course of their day-to-day lives that deliver a powerful critique to the fixed and hierarchical cultural codes governing “Asianness” and “Britishness”, creating in the process radically new and composite “Londonstani” identities.<sup>600</sup>

Sheibani represented a critique to the fixed hierarchical cultural codes governed by the parents’ heritages and showed the lovers creating radically new rituals and identities. Juliet transcended the boundaries of tradition and initiated new signs of identity as was demonstrated in her wedding rituals. Romeo and Juliet were blindfolded and walked towards each other almost in a children’s game of ‘blind man’s buff’. They met each other, untied their blinds, and used them as garlands echoing the *milni* (Hindi wedding ritual). They exchanged rings, lit a candle and moved around one another in a circle palm-to-palm. Juliet was shown in a balancing act between holding on to the cultural identity of the earlier generation and assimilating into the dominant culture, and in the process, a radically new cultural configuration was created. This act mirrors the ‘second generation’ in Dosanjh and Ghuman’s survey who were ‘in the process of developing and shaping a new form of culture, which combines elements of British and their own culture’.<sup>601</sup> A third culture was created by the contact between two different

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<sup>600</sup> Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, Edmund Terence Gomez, and Zarine Rocha, ‘Between policy and reality: multiculturalism, the second generation, and the third space in Britain’, in *Asia Europe Journal*, 10 (2012), pp 267–285 (p. 276).

<sup>601</sup> Singh Dosanjh and Avtar Singh Ghuman, p. 143.

cultures where Romeo and Juliet took on aspects from both, and with this, they defined themselves in terms of a new variety of contemporary, young, urban, British individuals.

Sheibani's multicultural production reflected issues of cultural difference and identity that many of Britain's young students from diasporic backgrounds faced. By using Shakespeare's text as a springboard to examine the complexities of these very real concerns, the production mobilised conversations about overcoming difference and the cultural divides between different generations and communities. Not only were children from ethnically diverse backgrounds able to see themselves in leading roles on stage, in the way that McCraney had encouraged, but by merging Shakespeare's text with specific ideas about cultural heritage and identity formation, the young audiences were able to see and partake in innovative possibilities, forging new paths for the future. This specific model, I would suggest, is particularly useful for areas in Britain with high percentages of the BAME population such as London, and that by theatre practitioners working with teachers to support rather than shun questions of difference, Shakespeare can be used as a site of navigation of multicultural relations for the next generation.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these cases demonstrated a different approach to culturally diverse engagement: from a season at Shakespeare's Globe that filtered through the entire

building and invited members from Islamic communities to take ownership of the space, to a production at the RSC that changed the face of what was being seen by young audiences, to an adaptation at the National Theatre that wove issues of cultural diversity into Shakespeare's text. All three examples were led by individual practitioners committed to the endeavour of increasing accessibility to Shakespeare and the arts as a whole. These three institutions continued to develop the ways in which they make Shakespeare engaging, relevant and accessible for London's diverse audiences. A decade on from Shakespeare and Islam, Shakespeare's Globe produced *Playing Shakespeare with Deutsche Bank Othello* (2015) that referenced the contribution of black British soldiers to World War I through the director's contextual reimagining. This demonstrated a continued preoccupation with presenting British school children with issues of race, racism, difference and otherness. There was also a 'Shakespeare Inspired Talk' entitled 'Shakespeare Othello and Islam' led by two academics in July 2015. In 2016, the Tent for Peace was exhibited in the building's foyer, and continued to be used for storytelling events, symbolically keeping the legacy of the event alive in the building.

The RSC's First Encounter programme continued to cast BAME actors in significant roles, with a cross-gendered production of *The Taming of the Shrew* (2014) with Mimi Ndiweni as Lucentio and Anjana Vasan as Tranio. The production of *The Tempest* (2016) directed by Aileen Gonsalves featured Caleb Frederick as Antonio, Sarah Kameela Impey as Ariel, and Darren Raymond as Prospero. Tarell Alvin McCraney took his work, and the discoveries he had made

about engaging young people and the wider community with Shakespeare back to his home city Miami. He received funding to stage his adaptation of *Hamlet* with a five-week run at GableStage before travelling to high schools in Cutler Bay and Liberty City where it was performed for 15,000 students.<sup>602</sup> *Hamlet* was played by Edgar Miguel Sanchez, a Dominican raised in Miami. This version was directed by Joseph Adler, the Artistic Director of GableStage, who believed ‘it could be transformative for South Florida’.<sup>603</sup> Steven Weinger, the chairman of GableStage’s board, said: ‘We hope that the Shakespeare presentation will raise our visibility and reaffirm our value to the community.’<sup>604</sup> The organisation showed a commitment to a sustained relationship with the practitioner, and *Hamlet* would be followed by *Antony and Cleopatra* (see Chapter three), this time in co-partnership with the RSC. McCraney hoped to instigate social change through Shakespeare, and to affect the lives of young people and his community in the way that the arts were transformative for him as young boy. He was committed to changing the theatrical ecology in a way that ‘speaks to tourism, that speaks to our cultural past, our cultural cachet, but it also speaks to an infrastructure for our children who want to grow up in a city that has more than a baseball stadium’.<sup>605</sup> Sheibani’s *Romeo and Juliet* was re-mounted in 2014 and

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<sup>602</sup> John Thomason, ‘Tarell McCraney’s *Hamlet*, Now With Explosions’, *Miami New Times*, 10 January 2013, <<http://www.miaminewtimes.com/arts/tarell-mccraneys-hamlet-now-with-explosions-6391530>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>603</sup> Miami Herald, ‘Tarell McCraney’s Haitian ‘*Antony and Cleopatra*’ set for Miami’, *Miami Herald*, 14 November 2012, <<http://newdramatists.org/news/14/11/2012/tarell-mccraney-s-haitian-antony-and-cleopatra-set-miami>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> Bill Hirschman, ‘Tarell McCraney’s *Hamlet* Is First Step Toward Dream Of A Winter Festival In Miami’, *Florida Theater on Stage*, 6 January 2013, <<http://www.floridatheateronstage.com/features/tarell-mccraneys-hamlet-is-first-step->

was performed at the NT Shed demonstrating how the NT's education work was not ghettoised for schools but was brought into their main spaces to reach wider audiences. It was brought back in 2016 in repertoire with a young people's production of *Macbeth* performed by the same cast at the Dorfman theatre before touring to schools, demonstrating the success of the production and a commitment to building upon the work.<sup>606</sup> A trend can be seen whereby theatre institutions initiate diverse educational work for children then broaden the work to make it accessible for people of all ages and backgrounds. As the newly appointed artistic director of the NT, Rufus Norris promised that his programming would become more representative of Britain's ethnically diverse peoples.<sup>607</sup>

The analysis of these cases has demonstrated the importance of education departments in creating work that crosses barriers of race, ethnicity and culture, and in providing a space where London children can connect with their own cultural heritage of which Shakespeare is most certainly a part. It is clear that Shakespeare's work can be used as a site of negotiation for culturally diverse identities, and as a place to explore issues central to the experiences of second and third generation migrants navigating their 'Britishness' in a multicultural society. The Bard is not just for 'us' or 'them', and can be used to educate people of all cultures and religious faiths. As Shafeeq Sadiq, the national coordinator of

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[toward-dream-of-a-winter-festival-in-miami/](#)> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>606</sup> National Theatre, 'Romeo and Juliet', *National Theatre*, 2017, <<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/romeo-and-juliet>> [accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>607</sup> 'Rufus Norris said that the NT would pursue a policy to "reflect this city and country" in relation to ethnicity, gender and disability'. Lyn Gardner, 'Do we need diversity quotas for theatre?', *Guardian*, 9 June 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2015/jun/09/do-we-need-diversity-quotas-for-theatre>> [accessed 24 September 2015].

Islamic Awareness Week said, ‘Shakespeare is part of our heritage, his plays remind us of the global communities that we live in and the need for respect and goodwill.’<sup>608</sup>

However, in relation to the landscape of culturally diverse Shakespearean performance as a whole, and especially at mainstream theatrical establishments, these successes remained relatively invisible. In comparison to the level of press attention given to Paapa Essiedu as the ‘first black Hamlet’ for the RSC on its main stage in 2016, Dharmesh Patel - as the first British South Asian actor in the role at same organisation - received minimal focus. This demonstrated the disparity between main stage and educational productions, both in terms of media attention and audience reach. Where advances in culturally diverse casting in leading Shakespearean roles were evident in educational productions, this work remained side-lined, and opportunities for pathways of progression to such roles on main stages were scarce.<sup>609</sup>

Specific strategies that have been discussed in this chapter are useful to learn from. Patrick Spottiswoode demonstrated best practice at Shakespeare’s Globe; he engaged and worked with diverse local communities to build a grammar of representation that avoided cultural appropriation. Where in Chapter two we saw a lack of understanding about Hindu cultural and religious practices

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<sup>608</sup> Shafeeq Sadiq quoted in Al Jazeera, ‘UK Muslims get help from the Bard’, *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2004, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/11/20084914493668535.html>> [accessed 7 October 2014].

<sup>609</sup> See Jami Rogers, ‘Is the door really open for black actors to star in Shakespeare?’, *The Stage*, 6 October 2016, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/2016/door-really-open-black-actors-star-shakespeare/>> [accessed 18 June 2018].



at the RSC with the placement of images of Hindu gods in the bar area, Spottiswoode worked *with* diverse communities who represented *themselves* within the building. In this way, such offences were avoided through appropriate consultation and a more democratic and empowering practice of representation. Organisations should learn from successes of culturally diverse engagement in educational work and find sustainable solutions. For example, the prayer room at Shakespeare's Globe was a strong symbol of inclusivity and was appreciated greatly by Muslim patrons. Yet it was removed once the Shakespeare and Islam season had ended. Artistic leaders should learn from feedback from their patrons and find inclusive strategies that would shift the culture of the entire building in a sustained way.

The pattern of higher numbers of BAME actors being cast in Shakespeare productions for young people certainly offers opportunities. However, as there is clearly such a wealth of ethnically diverse classical acting talent, why is there not a correlation between the number of leading roles in educational work and in main stage productions? Mainstream organisations should learn from McCraney and Sheibani's representative approaches to casting, and proffer actors of colour leading roles to reflect the diversity of the UK's population. At the RSC, Michael Boyd suggested: 'Theatre is viewed as having very high social status, as being quite a middle-class preoccupation, still very white for instance',<sup>610</sup> and saw educational work as the means to change this. I would argue that the same attitude and approaches should be taken for the work on the main stage. It is clear that

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<sup>610</sup> Michael Boyd quoted in Joe Winston, *Transforming the Teaching of Shakespeare with the Royal Shakespeare Company* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), p. 15.

positive inclusive casting strategies have real impact in engaging young and diverse audiences with Shakespeare's plays; they can and should be applied to mainstream productions, especially in publicly funded organisations. Where Jacqui O'Hanlon was prompted to consider: 'Why is it that we can make it happen in work for young people that we find harder to make happen on a main stage? That's a *really* important question',<sup>611</sup> such consideration ought to be driving the mission of the entire company. There *must* be an inclusive diversity strategy that is adopted by all departments. It was clear that such a strategy was not in place or even part of the agenda as set by the Director of Education at the RSC in 2014 - 'I honestly hadn't thought about it before'<sup>612</sup> – despite individual practitioners such as McCraney being progressive in their casting and representational practices within the RSC. The marginalisation of educational work, particularly in the lead up to 2012, as well as in the following years, was a serious problem. *Romeo and Juliet* marked an important step in the development of such work at the National Theatre, but terminology and the communication of the director's vision internally and externally remained problematic.

In the context of educational work at mainstream theatrical establishments, we have seen how Shakespearean performance can be used as a space for young people of all ethnicities to see themselves represented, to encourage the exploration of cultural difference, to evoke empathy, and to imagine new possibilities. Moving towards a sustainable future of culturally diverse Shakespearean performance, institutions must address the distance between their

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<sup>611</sup> Thomas, Interview with O'Hanlon.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid.

mainstage and educational practices, and allow representative educational strategies to inform casting practices and creative approaches throughout the entire organisation's output.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

2012–2016 were formative years with developments towards a maintainable culturally diverse future for Shakespearean performance in Britain. These developments can be categorised in relation to individual practitioners' careers and practices, to individual companies or institutions, and to the cultural sector as a whole. In these years, Shakespeare was a site of on the one hand, marginalisation, misrepresentation, stereotyping, exoticism and Orientalism, and on the other hand, inclusion, opportunity, access, diverse representation, the development of new cultural identities, new theatrical spaces, new audiences and the expression of culturally diverse voices. There were many 'firsts' for mainstream organisations, such as – for the RSC - the *first* all-black *Julius Caesar*, the *first* all-South Asian *Much Ado*, the *first* black Cleopatra, the *first* black Hamlet, and the *first* black Iago in the company's history. The productions were celebrated as successes for cultural diversity in the press, and as huge achievements for the individual actors involved. However, sustainable change is not signified by one-off occasions, and the extent of the cultural shift in terms of diversity and representation is yet to be seen in mainstream institutions. A continued examination of the companies' work in the following years is required to assess the extent of the shift towards a more integrated and maintainable diverse theatrical ecology. In the margins, practitioners used Shakespeare to make cultural interventions. Shakespeare became the site of negotiation of complex identity formation, and a space to activate the meeting points between diverse

cultural heritages and traditions. From the margins, practitioners worked to make Shakespeare more accessible; to develop new audiences and to encourage traditional theatregoers to see, hear, and think differently. Drawing conclusions from my examination of different case studies in the previous chapters, it is possible to suggest the major issues, problems and pitfalls, as well as models of best practice, in the representation of cultural diversity in Shakespearean performance. To make progress, I wish to posit that it is necessary to address the following key issues: *leadership*; *terminology*; and *partnerships*. The implementation of different strategies concerning these issues could contribute to shaping the national story to reflect better who we are as a society. The stories we tell impact our culture. We hold the power to use Shakespeare to expand the imagination and to shape future relations between Britain's culturally diverse communities. We must ensure, therefore, that Shakespearean performance is representative of the broad diversity that exists in Britain, and that the canon is used not just to tell stories for and about certain echelons of society, but to tell stories that challenge and represent us all.

### **Paapa Essiedu: An actor's journey to the mainstream**

The career trajectory of the actor Paapa Essiedu, who is British-born and of Ghanaian heritage, between the years 2012–2016 demonstrates many of those developments in the ecology of British Shakespearean performance, and the shifts in attitudes, activism and in relation to culturally diverse casting and

representation. Key moments and Shakespearean performances in the development of his career illustrate both the advances and the problems explored within this thesis; particularly the pattern of ‘cross-cultural’ casting that still leads to stereotypical productions, and the politics of giving black actors leading roles only within predominantly all-black casts.

I first interviewed Essiedu in relation to this thesis in 2014, and then again in 2017 to discuss the developments in his career. Describing his background, Essiedu said: ‘I grew up in a single parent, low income household, so I started off going to a local comprehensive’. He did not enjoy his first encounter with Shakespeare - ‘I remember we did Romeo and Juliet for GCSE and I remember not really caring about it at all’ – but the act of performing, playing Macbeth in his A-level Drama class, ignited a passion. ‘I threw myself into this character and into this story’, he said, ‘and that’s when it began’. Speaking in 2014, he said: ‘It’s nearly an obsession now – Shakespeare for me [...] It makes your imagination fizz in a way that nothing else really can’. For the main school production, he played Othello, which was a pivotal moment in his career; he said: ‘that made me think I want to be an actor’.<sup>613</sup> Essiedu’s early experiences are typical, they demonstrate the importance of making Shakespeare accessible and engaging for young people from diverse backgrounds through performance. This was a key issue for Tarell Alvin McCraney as we saw in Chapter six, and led to his conscious casting choices for *Hamlet*; similarly, Shakespeare’s Globe and the National Theatre have demonstrated the importance of diverse casting to represent

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<sup>613</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Paapa Essiedu, 6 June 2014.

and present role models for culturally diverse young people in their programming. Essiedu and McCraney knew from their different perspectives that first experiences contribute to a sense of ownership and entitlement to Shakespeare and theatrical participation. Positive encounters can lead to an expansion of the sense of career opportunities in the creative arts. McCraney's choices were *representative* and *inclusive*, and Essiedu's personal experience points to the pathways to success created when Shakespearean actors reflect the diversity of the population of London and the UK. This thesis has shown how three major institutions showed a commitment to diverse casting in productions for young people. However, in balance with the casting practices in their main season productions, such advances made in the educational work were not always practiced on the main stages.

Essiedu trained at Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Choosing an audition monologue, he did *not* want to do Othello, despite holding Chiwetel Ejiofor's performance at the Donmar Warehouse (2007) as one of his most cherished and inspiring moments. 'Ejiofor is like my idol, and I saw him play Othello when I was in school', he said - 'I think he's amazing and noble and powerful and moving and affecting and his Othello was incredible' - yet he was already aware of putting himself into an ethnic casting box. He wanted to prove a point: 'I can play anything just as well as anyone else of any creed, or colour or class, so I didn't want to do Othello'. This continued to be Essiedu's attitude towards his ethnicity, and it impacted his approach to different Shakespearean roles and the formation of his relationships with directors and actors in the

rehearsal room. At drama school, he learnt the skills needed to perform Shakespearean verse. He studied with Patsy Rodenburg how to ‘be able to use your body and use your voice to honour that text’. He said: ‘it’s robust and muscular stuff and you need to be physically able to do it so you need to work on your body, stretch your ribs, get your breath down, and work on your voice capacity before you start thinking about linking the thoughts to what you’re saying’. The opportunity to work with practitioners including Cicely Berry at the RSC helped Essiedu to continue to develop his skills: ‘It was the best environment to watch and learn as well as to try things out yourself [...] I think it was a crucial developing point in my fledgling career’.<sup>614</sup> The importance of drama schools and training opportunities in the development of BAME talent became clear during the research for this thesis, and it has become an increasingly public issue. As the 2016 report *Centre Stage: The Pipeline of BAME Talent* recorded, accessibility for students from BAME and varying class backgrounds is an issue that the industry must address; high fees impact on cultural diversity because ‘minority ethnic communities are disproportionately represented in the lowest socio-economic groups’.<sup>615</sup>

In 2012, after graduating from drama school, Essiedu was cast as Fenton in Phillip Breen’s production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The director said of the process that he was ‘made aware by the RSC that we were expected to cast colourblind’. Breen had been struck by Essiedu when he ‘went round every single

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

<sup>615</sup> Danuta Kean, ‘Dramatic Tension’ in *Centre Stage: The Pipeline of BAME Talent*, ed. by Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen (Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, 2016), pp. 14-16 (p. 15).



drama school and saw every showcase and show’, and said that the fact that he was black ‘never came into it’.<sup>616</sup> ‘Colourblind’ was the term used by RSC employees and their artistic director in order to describe and defend their casting choices; for example (see above, Chapter five), Gregory Doran used the discourse of meritocracy: his decisions had been based on finding the best actor for the role and ‘not on ethnicity’.<sup>617</sup> Following his time at the RSC, Essiedu was cast in Sam Mendes’ production of *King Lear* at the National Theatre (2014) as Burgundy and understudy to Edmund.<sup>618</sup> In this production, Essiedu became the focus for press attention when he went on one night after the white actor Sam Troughton, playing Edmund, lost his voice part way through the show. Essiedu’s performance was described as ‘like watching a team win after a main player has been sent off’.<sup>619</sup> As in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *King Lear* was ‘colourblind’ in that that actor’s ethnicity had no semiotic value onstage invested by the director. Considering the model of casting of these two productions Essiedu said: ‘it’s a sensitive topic, colourblind casting and the plight of the black actor or the ethnic minority actor, and I definitely think in certain ways it works in your favour and in certain ways it works against you.’ He explained: ‘Often you’ll see in production with a couple of ethnic people playing some side supporting roles [...] I think at the moment there’re still the remnants of a glass ceiling’ and ‘I still think there’s a level of tokenism very prevalent in productions.’ Essiedu

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<sup>616</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Phillip Breen, June 2014.

<sup>617</sup> Doran quoted in Trueman, ‘RSC under fire’.

<sup>618</sup> Simon Manyonda was also cast in this production as Oswald.

<sup>619</sup> Ben Beaumont-Thomas, ‘Actor loses voice on stage during Sam Mendes’s *King Lear*’, *Guardian*, 23 January 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/23/actor-loses-voice-stage-king-lear-sam-mendes-national>> [accessed 27 February 2017].

recognised the need for a shift in the attitudes of casting directors, whom he described as having ‘very little imagination in general’. He felt that there were two results of ‘colourblind’ casting. Firstly, ‘as a black actor you’re often just put up against other black actors’, which meant an increased chance of getting the part. On the other hand, ‘it works against you in the fact that if someone’s in a new production of *Hamlet*, they’re going to see nine white actors and one black actor’. Essiedu was aware of the politics of ethnically diverse casting, and of the system that he needed to navigate in order to develop his career. ‘I suppose the career of an actor involves climbing a ladder [...] I’ve got to do certain things to break into an institution or to get the attention of a director, it’s a long game’, and it was a game that he was invested in playing. In 2014, he felt that ‘although in general views and opinions are changing, I think we’ve still got a long way to go’. With determination, he declared: ‘I’d like to be a part of changing that’.<sup>620</sup>

Without knowing what the future held for him, Essiedu voiced his hopes at the end of that first interview: ‘I hope Shakespeare plays have a constant presence in my future. I’d like to kind of continue learning about it, and continue improving my knowledge of it and my appreciation of it’. In terms of roles, he said: ‘I’ve had this kind of internal battle with Hamlet for a long time [...] I’d love to play Hamlet one day’, and ‘Edmund – I’d really love to play him again and have a proper whack at it’.<sup>621</sup> For many actors in Essiedu’s position, the idea of playing these leading Shakespearean roles, particularly on a mainstage, would have been an almost impossible dream. Yet a year later Essiedu played Romeo at

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<sup>620</sup> Thomas, Interview with Essiedu, 2014.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

the Tobacco Factory, Bristol, (2015) then went on to play Edmund again in Gregory Doran's production of *King Lear* also at the RSC (2016), Demetrius in Russell T Davies' version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on BBC1 (2016), Pericles for BBC Radio 4 (2016) and crucially, indeed historically, the title role in Simon Godwin's *Hamlet* at the RSC (2016-2018). Essiedu had built a career path playing leading Shakespearean roles that had been unattainable for many non-white actors. This type of progression had tended not to be seen in other black actors' development on Britain's main stages aside from a fortunate few such as Ray Fearon, and indeed many of those interviewed for the Warwick-AHRC Multicultural Shakespeare project (of which this thesis has been a part) expressed their sense that there might never be a mainstream black Hamlet in the UK.<sup>622</sup> Each of Essiedu's Shakespeare productions differed in terms of the treatment of race and ethnicity in the casting process, in the director's concept and in the audience reception – all of which contribute to painting a picture of the problems and successes of culturally diverse representation for this actor.

*Romeo and Juliet* at the Tobacco Factory in Bristol was directed by Polina Kalinina with whom Essiedu had previously worked. In this case, Kalinina's concept loosely set the play in Verona in 1968, and she used a company of young actors. Ethnicity did not enter the conversation: 'It wasn't mentioned in the rehearsal room'. However, despite the silence around the topic, Essiedu was aware of how his ethnic distinction might be read by the audience. He was the

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<sup>622</sup> See Celia Daileader, 'Casting black actors: Beyond Othellophilia' in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 177–202.

only black actor in a company that was otherwise entirely white: ‘I did sometimes wonder how that looked, regardless of our intentions’. Indeed, he was confronted with this concern when the production toured to a Shakespeare festival in Germany. In a post-show question-and-answer session with the audience, one spectator took issue with Essiedu’s colour, and suggested that ‘[Juliet] married a *black man*, that’s why [Capulet]’s so angry, that’s why it’s so wrong’. When the man went on to make ‘a horrible metaphor to do with a dog’, for the actor, it was ‘a real shock’. The experience made it clear that, ‘no matter how much we make it irrelevant, an audience is always half of the relationship’, and that ‘they’re going to form their own connections’ to ethnicity.<sup>623</sup> As such, he dispelled the notion of ‘colourblind casting’. ‘We live in a world of prejudice, it is systemic’, Essiedu acknowledged; ‘as artists, we are working within a context’.<sup>624</sup> This experience suggests the need for increased clarity through terminology, and for a more systematic expression of the intentions behind casting choices. Issues of ethnicity must be addressed in the rehearsal room, between the actors and creative team, and expressed clearly for audiences. Ayanna Thompson has argued that companies ‘must move beyond the unspoken assumption that race, colour, and ethnicity do not matter onstage’.<sup>625</sup> This may render the concept of ‘colourblind’ obsolete – a discussion I shall return to below.

The experience of racism in response to Essiedu’s ethnicity in performance did not leave the actor feeling powerless; rather he was activated to

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<sup>623</sup> Sita Thomas, Unpublished interview with Paapa Essiedu, 14 February 2017.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid.

<sup>625</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 179.

contribute to social change: ‘We have a responsibility, and we have great power to do work which can challenge and change that, but it’s also foolish to ignore that we don’t live in a utopia’.<sup>626</sup> In his role as Romeo, critics noted the performer as ‘one to watch’; for example, Kris Hallett for *WhatsOnStage* wrote: ‘For those who like to collect actors before they hit big things a trip to Bristol to see Essiedu is definitely in order.’<sup>627</sup> His talents were recognised, and the positive responses contributed to his invitation to audition for *Hamlet*. The production was part of the RSC’s celebrations for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. When the casting was announced, the director stated: ‘I began to imagine a Denmark re-conceived as modern state influenced by the ritual, beauty and cosmology of West Africa.’<sup>628</sup> Essiedu was joined by an almost entirely black company including Clarence Smith as Claudius, Tanya Moodie as Gertrude, and Cyril Nri (a member of the 2012 *Julius Caesar* company) as Polonius. The first publicity suggested this was a replication of Doran’s ‘cross-cultural’ ‘African’ *Julius Caesar*, where the actors were cast because of their ethnicities, in order to represent a white director’s ‘reimagining’ of the play. However, Essiedu was offered the role six months before the rehearsal process began, and described how in fact it was a world that he and the director had conceived of together: ‘I spoke a lot about myself, and a lot about my heritage, and my connection to Hamlet’. What

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<sup>626</sup> Thomas, Interview with Essiedu, 2017.

<sup>627</sup> Kris Hallett, ‘Romeo and Juliet (Tobacco Factory, Bristol)’, *What’s On Stage*, 25 February 2015, <<http://www.whatsonstage.com/reviews/romeo-juliet-tobacco-factory-37239.html>> [accessed 28 February 2017].

<sup>628</sup> Simon Godwin quoted in Royal Shakespeare Company, ‘Casting announced for RSC’s 2016 production of *Hamlet*’, *Royal Shakespeare Company*, 2016, <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/casting-announced-for-rsc-s-2016-production-of-hamlet>> [accessed 28 February 2017].

appeared to be yet another concept driven by a cultural relocation was in fact led by the personal stories of the actor:

We talked a lot about alienation and isolation. I talked about my experience of having my entire family from Ghana, but growing up in London, and what that meant about my feelings of identity and nationality, and what are the anchors of those things, your parents and extended family. I've had specific experiences of grief with parents, which informed some of the choices I made.<sup>629</sup>

These themes were made clear throughout the production, particularly with the inclusion of a prologue that showed Hamlet graduating from the University of Wittenburg – a quaint English University – before being called home to West Africa after the death of his father.<sup>630</sup> Essiedu's Hamlet struggled with his identity between these two different worlds. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the only two white actors in the production, were his English friends. Now they were tourists out of place in the African context. Hamlet was confronted by his African ancestors as represented by the ghost, played by Ewart James Walters (Caius Ligarius and Lepidus in Doran's *Julius Caesar*). Essiedu had connected the supernatural to his Ghanian family's own experiences: 'My aunty is always talking about how she saw a ghost, it's not even questioned. That's a world where

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<sup>629</sup> Thomas, Interview with Essiedu, 2017.

<sup>630</sup> A digital trailer filmed for the production located Hamlet in a graduation party that was clearly set in a European context. He was interrupted from partying by a phone-call from 'Home'. See: Royal Shakespeare Company, 'Official trailer: Hamlet at the Royal Shakespeare Company', *YouTube*, 25 April 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A8uy3mPGp8>> [accessed 16 March 2017].

it gives you energy, it lifts up these themes as opposed to having to brush them under the carpet'. Because the concept was infused with his own heritage and personal experience, the actor 'never felt at any time' that the cultural representation was 'gross'; he said: 'at no point did we say let's do accents, or let's make cartoon characterised versions'. The experience had a profound impact for the actor personally: 'It opened a lot of doors into my psyche and into my history, and it was a big part of my growing up process.'<sup>631</sup>

A difficulty remains, however. Single successful projects cannot effect an institutional revolution. Personally, Essiedu was convinced, but politically, the director's choices mirrored Doran's in 2012. So soon after the RSC's *Julius Caesar*, it was encouraging to see excellent actors being given the opportunity to work in leading roles at the RSC, but yet again it was in a production set in Africa; the specificity of the locale of the white director's vision was the reasoning for the casting. I return to Paterson Joseph's summary of the casting choices for the RSC's *Julius Caesar* (2012): 'If every time somebody does a Shakespeare play and they want me in it, it's an all-black cast, I think that would be insulting, frankly.'<sup>632</sup> The 2016 *Hamlet* reasserted the company's pattern of only giving black actors major roles within wholly or predominantly all-black casts. It suggested that for the RSC's audience, a leading character could still not simply be black without a clear context of an 'Other' location. Within the existing systematic power structures: 'A character simply cannot be black without a pre-

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<sup>631</sup> Thomas, Interview with Essiedu, 2017.

<sup>632</sup> Joseph quoted in Marshall.

warning for an assumed white audience'.<sup>633</sup> The pre-warning in this instance, for the leading actors being black, was that this was another 'African' production. We saw once again the power structures being established; the right of European culture – with a white British male director – to define a generic West-African identity.

Gregory Doran's *King Lear* was part of the same season as *Hamlet* (the director had invited Essiedu to play Edgar but after several conversations, Essiedu convinced Doran that he should return to the role of Edmund). In the rehearsal room, there were some 'weird' conversations about ethnicity. According to Essiedu, Doran, 'in his intellectual head', tried to explain Edmund's ethnicity – for example, 'It could actually work if your mum was black, but wasn't married to Gloucester' – a clumsy nod towards a literal explanation for Essiedu's appearance in a play where whiteness would be the default assumption. The actor did not engage with this kind of reasoning - 'That is just such a non-interesting thing for me to be thinking about' - it would have been 'a waste of time' to pursue the hope of a literal explanation. Eventually it 'faded into the background'.<sup>634</sup> The white directors' approaches to *Hamlet* and *King Lear* in these instances adopted different attitudes towards ethnicity in performance, and it was clear that both struggled to articulate the function of the actors' ethnicities successfully – whether internally, in the case of Doran's rehearsal room, or externally in the case of Godwin's concept. In both mainstream productions there were developments in

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<sup>633</sup> Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 135.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*



the representation of cultural diversity; Essiedu was celebrated as the ‘first black Hamlet’ for the RSC, an achievement, yet still worrying with regards to tokenism and marginalisation in a production that seemed to be about the ‘Other’ following *Julius Caesar*’s suit, and in another ‘special’ year: the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. There were multiple and varied approaches to ethnic representation within one institution, indeed within one season of work; the multiplicity was not the issue, but the lack of clear dialogues articulating the visions and goals for the semiotics of colour in performance was problematic.

There were no such moves to ‘explain away’ the actors’ ethnicities – through an explicit geographical relocation or through familial genetic literalism – in Russell T Davies’ adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This film, aimed at family audiences, ran at ninety minutes, and was broadcast on BBC One. Paapa Essiedu played Demetrius. The production featured an ethnically diverse cast with Prisca Bakare as Hermia, Eleanor Matsuura as Hippolyta, Colin McFarlane as Egeus and Nonso Anozie as Oberon. Fisayo Akinade played Flute, Varada Sethu was Peaseblossom and Hiran Abeysekera played Puck. There were echoes of Davies’ science-fiction work as a writer for *Doctor Who* (2005–2010). Davies had been wanting to make the adaptation for twenty-five years, having played Bottom when he was eleven years old. It was his favourite play and he wanted ‘to make generations of people love it too’. Davies’ commitment to promoting diverse representation (specifically of the LGBT community with his popular television series *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *Tofu, Cucumber and Banana* (2015)) parallels McCraney’s aim to disrupt the homogeneous pattern of casting

Shakespearean roles with white actors, this production presented images of cultural diversity that were woven into the entire fabric of the production from leading to supporting roles. For Davies, ‘the whole point of it was to say, “This is for everyone”’, and this mission was in part achieved through the casting.<sup>635</sup> The *Metro* reported: ‘The gay themes and diverse cast were applauded by viewers.’<sup>636</sup> On the issue of diverse casting, Essiedu exclaimed:

We’ve got to get to a place where we’re not saying “Oh my god it’s so diverse!” This play exists in a fantasy world, a guy turns into a donkey. There are fairies. If you’re still getting caught up on “and there’s an Asian woman”, you’ve missed the point so catastrophically.<sup>637</sup>

He believed that the production was an important example of making Shakespeare accessible and engaging for young and diverse audiences. Essiedu himself began to deliver workshops for young people, something that he aimed to continue. He wanted to inspire the same passion that was ignited for himself: ‘I think Shakespeare is important for everybody and I think young people often just don’t get the opportunity to engage with it’. The integration of BAME actors in Russell T Davies’ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* contrasted with the BBC’s other

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<sup>635</sup> Russell T Davies quoted in Decca Aitkenhead, ‘Russell T Davies: “It sounds like a sex version of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. And it’s not”’, *Guardian*, 27 May 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/may/27/russell-t-davies-it-sounds-like-a-sex-version-of-midsummer-nights-dream-and-its-not>> [27 February 2017].

<sup>636</sup> Olivia Waring, ‘Viewers loved the gay kiss at the end of Russell T Davies’ *Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, *Metro*, 30 May 2016, <<http://metro.co.uk/2016/05/30/viewers-loved-the-gay-kiss-at-the-end-of-russell-t-davies-midsummer-nights-dream-5914243/>> [accessed 28 February 2017].

<sup>637</sup> Thomas, Interview with Essiedu, 2017.

Shakespearean adaptations in 2016, that were part of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations ‘Shakespeare Lives 2016’. *The Hollow Crown* series one consisted of *Richard II*, *Henry IV* parts one and two and *Henry V*, with Ben Wishaw, Tom Sturridge and Tom Hiddleston in the leading roles respectively. Series two, *The Wars of the Roses*, was significant with the casting of Sophie Okonedo as Queen Margaret. However, the films similarly featured white male actors in the main roles.<sup>638</sup> Essiedu questioned why someone like Adrian Lester was not given a leading role in the series, and wondered what this meant for his future; would he get the opportunity to play an English King, when the roles appeared to be reserved for white actors? Still, he was determined: ‘I really want to play Richard II, Richard III – English Kings – and maybe one day Lear.’ Ultimately, considering his opportunities and the role of his ethnicity in determining the roles available to him, Essiedu said: ‘I really feel like colourblind casting is a red herring. The more we focus on that, I think it’s going to slow down progress. Because colourblind casting maintains the assumption that non-colourblind casting, in the way it’s seen, is the right casting.’ For Essiedu, to improve representation and diversity, ‘it’s really important that the people behind the scenes are more diverse, so it’s not just about actors, it’s about directors, producers, and commissioners’.<sup>639</sup>

*Leadership* is key, it has been key in causing the cultural shifts towards more diverse representation examined in the body of this thesis, and it is key to

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<sup>638</sup> This series was directed by Dominic Cooke who had played an important role in encouraging diverse casts at the RSC.

<sup>639</sup> Thomas, Interview with Essiedu, 2017.

moving towards sustainable cultural change in the future. The plays of Shakespeare held significance for Paapa Essiedu; he was personally transformed, and contributed politically to a transformation on the mainstages, by playing a succession of leading roles. Essiedu's 2016 *Hamlet* was filmed, livestreamed, and marketed on DVD, it toured the UK, and visited America. He became a role model in these years, and represented BAME ownership and empowerment in the productions' rehearsal processes and on stage. However, as an actor, the power of reception and the model of representation within which he performed did not rest with him. He acknowledged himself the importance of diversity in *leadership* roles in moving towards a sustainable culturally diverse theatrical future.

### **Iqbal Khan: A director's journey to the mainstream**

Leadership roles that contribute to shaping the landscape of culturally diverse casting and representation in Shakespearean performance vary from gatekeepers such as casting directors to artistic directors who shape the vision and ethos for their entire organisation. The director plays a key role in shaping what is represented on stage, as well as facilitating conversations in the rehearsal room, and communicating their vision to the press and audiences. The development of Iqbal Khan's career in the years 2012-2016 also highlights the key issues and practices that this thesis has analysed. Similarly to Paapa Essiedu's journey in terms of a sustainable development of Shakespearean practice in these years,

Khan continued to work across mainstream institutions. Regarding the power of the actor to effect change, Khan agreed:

You're in a completely passive place unless the structures are shifted and the paradigm is to let all in, to present all on the stage, then the actors have very little voice [...] I think most artistic directors would agree with all of this in principle, it's just about how *we* effect the change.<sup>640</sup>

In 2015, Khan was invited back to the RSC to direct *Othello* with Hugh Quarshie in the title role. Quarshie, a Ghanaian-born British actor, had been approached in 2013 by Gregory Doran who had suggested he should play the character. It took some persuasion before Quarshie agreed; he had previously given a lecture that was later published as 'Second Thoughts About *Othello*', where he had argued that 'black actors who took on the role ran the risk of reinforcing racist attitudes towards black people'.<sup>641</sup> Iqbal Khan was brought on board to direct the production, thus demonstrating a commitment by the RSC to developing their relationship with the BAME practitioner. Lucien Msmati, a black British actor, was cast as Iago – the first occasion that this choice had been made at the RSC.<sup>642</sup> The decision was part of the British South Asian's director's mission to dismantle general expectations and to encourage new ways of seeing: 'I'm always interested in asking the radical question that challenges the easy assumptions that are made

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<sup>640</sup> Thomas, Interview with Khan.

<sup>641</sup> Hugh Quarshie, 'Playing *Othello*', *British Library*, <<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/playing-othello>> [accessed 1 March 2017].

<sup>642</sup> Quarshie had co-directed a production of *Othello* at the Greenwich Theatre (1989) with Paul Barber, a black actor, as Iago. Quarshie had worked on the idea decades before, and was now able to make it work on a large scale in the mainstream.

about plays. And so whenever I start working on any play I always ask why has it been done in this way, and is that still appropriate?’<sup>643</sup> He aimed to do this principally through his casting, and acknowledged the power of the director in contributing to a shift in culturally diverse representation. He articulated clearly:

I think it’s hard unless we take responsibility – theatre makers take responsibility. Of course the gatekeepers, the people that form its strategy are incredibly important, but it’s also our responsibility to use our imaginations to allow for a greater range of people who make the work.<sup>644</sup>

Khan decided to use a multi-ethnic company for *Othello*, with Ayesha Dharker as Emelia, David Ajao as Montano and Ken Nwosu as Gentleman of Cyprus. He also worked with a black British assistant director – Anthony Ekundayo Lennon. Khan declared: ‘In casting a black Iago all conventional and complacent responses to the piece are impossible.’<sup>645</sup> For Quarshie, this solved the issue that had unsettled him politically in that ‘there was no possibility of suggesting that a clever and cunning white man could easily dupe a credulous black man because in our production, both Othello and Iago were black’.<sup>646</sup> Msamati played the role with a Zimbabwean accent, in contrast to Quarshie who spoke in Received Pronunciation. This established Iago as the outsider; he was

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<sup>643</sup> Iqbal Khan quoted in Livi Dunlop, ‘Iqbal Khan Lets His Guard Down’, *Isis Magazine*, 14 January 2016, <<http://isismagazine.org.uk/2016/01/iqbal-khan-lets-his-guard-down/>> [accessed 1 March 2017].

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.

<sup>645</sup> Christopher Morley, ‘Director Iqbal Khan: My grim view of Birmingham has changed’, *Birmingham Post*, 20 April 2015, <<http://www.birminghampost.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/director-iqbal-khan-grim-view-9080699>> [accessed 1 March 2017].

<sup>646</sup> Quarshie, ‘Playing Othello’.

socially excluded and the issue of racism was immediately more complicated and nuanced. Iqbal Khan interrogated how racism might also fuel the actions of people of colour in a multicultural society. Msamati's Iago went along with the racism of Roderigo and Brabantio in an attempt to include himself, even laughing – after a telling pause – at Roderigo's mention of Othello as 'the thick-lips'. A reference to the character's specific cultural heritage was included at the beginning of Act 2 Scene 3 where Iago sang a song honouring his Zimbabwean roots. The scene became a playing-field for issues of racism to rise to the surface when Cassio proceeded to mock the song, and then started rapping. A soldier, played by David Ajao, joined in and began a rap battle. Cassio's ensuing violence was fuelled by his embarrassment at having lost the contest; his prejudicial taunting and awkward appropriation of black culture became the root of his own loss of reputation.

In 2013, Nicholas Hytner had declared his production of *Othello* on the Olivier stage at the National Theatre as 'post-race'.<sup>647</sup> The characters and audiences were supposed to be blind to the character's ethnicities; race was only one factor in Iago's panoply of motivations. Khan's production demonstrated that having more than one ethnicity on stage did not render the semiotics of ethnic difference meaningless. His choices suggested that racial insecurities persist, even when everybody is 'racialised'. The production had national and international resonance through its streaming as part of RSC Live. Referring to the dominant

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<sup>647</sup> I have intentionally not focused on *Othello* in this thesis, partially because there is a much broader scope of scholarly analysis about this play and the function of race and ethnicity, and also in order to privilege the performances of texts that are not necessarily laced with issues of ethnicity.

production mode in America that ‘privileges the uniqueness of Othello, *the Moor of Venice*’, (despite some instances where theatre companies experimented with casting black actors as Iago and Emilia), Ayanna Thompson wrote: ‘This narrative of racial insecurity based on racial solitude (or near solitude), of course, is outdated in our multicultural, and multilingual America because there are very few places in which a black man exists in isolation.’<sup>648</sup> In the context of British multiculturalism, Khan re-examined the politics of the play through his casting choices; he mobilised Shakespeare’s text to express something different about contemporary multicultural relations, and to examine how racism continues to exist in a more diverse society. Khan had questioned: ‘Why has [the play] been done in this way, and is that still appropriate?’ He had decided, ‘No’, and transformed it to examine racial politics through a different, more complicated lens.<sup>649</sup> Reviewers were alive to the issues, demonstrating that the director had clearly communicated his chosen semiotics of race in performance. Paul Taylor wrote: ‘The singularity of Iqbal Khan’s compelling new version is that the tragic protagonist and his nemesis are the same race in a contemporary, culturally diverse world where the army Othello commands is multi-racial but where racism still simmers below the surface.’<sup>650</sup> Similarly, Dominic Cavendish informed *Telegraph* readers: ‘At a stroke we move beyond black-and-white ideas of racism as a motivator for Iago, and racial difference as the reason for Othello’s ruinous

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<sup>648</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 171.

<sup>649</sup> Khan quoted in Dunlop.

<sup>650</sup> Paul Taylor, ‘Othello, RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon, review: Racism still simmers in black Iago production’, *Independent*, 15 June 2015, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/othello-rsc-stratford-upon-avon-review-racism-still-simmers-in-black-iago-production-10320449.html>> [accessed 7 March 2017].



suggestibility. In this version, they're both outsiders and that makes for a fascinating psychological dynamic.' Cavendish felt that the production represented 'a crucial shift of perspective that is long overdue'. The critic declared: 'Khan thinks big – he has brought the world of the play into the modern-age.'<sup>651</sup> Here was a director that was situated outside of the hegemonic power structure, then absorbed into a hegemonic cultural institution, but chose to make disruptions to existing traditions which stretched the imaginations of reviewers and audiences. Khan articulated his concept clearly both internally and externally, which enabled actors, reviewers, audiences and academics to discuss the semiotics of race with clarity and confidence. Khan's vision asked audiences to shift their perspective of the play's central relationship, asking them to see differently, and to identify with black humanity beyond the simplistic or the stereotype. I argue that this demonstrates the importance of ensuring that culturally diverse representations are not always in the hands of white practitioners. Directors, as well as other gatekeepers in leadership positions, must also reflect the cultural diversity of the UK as this has a direct correlation with what is represented on stage.

The following year (2016), Khan directed *Macbeth* at Shakespeare's Globe under the artistic leadership of Emma Rice. It was part of Rice's ambition to 'transform the experience of audiences', and Khan explained that 'she has given all artists working there, the provocation that they should think more

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<sup>651</sup> Dominic Cavendish, 'Othello, RSC Stratford, review: "electrifying"', *Telegraph*, 12 June 2015, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/11663749/Othello-RSC-Stratford-review-electrifying.html>> [accessed 7 March 2017].

diversely. There's no prescription but there is a provocation, and I can tell you now that I will embrace that whole-heartedly in terms of my casting, I will absolutely embrace it.'<sup>652</sup> The Artistic Director had said: 'I want people to understand that it's accessible, that they will see a diverse company of actors onstage like you would on a London bus, and a variety of different styles of work.'<sup>653</sup> Again, the clarity of the Artistic Director in articulating the organisation's diversity strategies was of utmost importance in encouraging her employees to carry out diverse casting and representation practices in their work. Khan chose to cast Ray Fearon as Macbeth. 'I thought it would actually be more radical if I cast a black Macbeth, and it wasn't about his race', he said, and 'I'm less interested in the colour of Othello, more in allowing and seeing all colours play Lear, Macbeth, and Hamlet'.<sup>654</sup> The achievement of Khan's vision could be seen in many reviews of the production that did not reference Fearon's ethnicity at all.<sup>655</sup> His acting was commended without reference to his colour; for example, David Lister wrote 'Fearon commands the stage, conveying utterly convincingly his journey from nervy enthusiasm to see the witches' predictions come true,

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<sup>652</sup> Khan quoted in Dunlop.

<sup>653</sup> Emma Rice quoted in Gordon Cox, 'New Shakespeare's Globe Chief Talks Diversity, Gay Updates and Brexit', *Variety*, 20 July 2016, <<http://variety.com/2016/legit/news/emma-rice-shakespeares-globe-diversity-brexity-1201818560/>> [accessed 8 March 2017].

<sup>654</sup> Iqbal Khan quoted in Tom Wicker, 'Iqbal Khan: "I want Shakespeare to speak urgently in a 21st-century context"', *The Stage*, 28 June 2016, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2016/iqbal-khan-want-shakespeare-speak-urgently-21st-century-context/>> [accessed 29 March 2017].

<sup>655</sup> Of the reviews of the production featured in the *Stage*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times*, *Financial Times*, *Telegraph*, *Evening Standard*, none referred to Ray Fearon's colour or ethnicity.

through palpable anxiety to blind ruthlessness.’<sup>656</sup> Sarah Hemming for the *Financial Times* similarly described how ‘Ray Fearon’s strong, vigorous and conflicted Macbeth is entirely convincing as a man whom war has both made and marred, riven between flashes of brutal action and terrifying periods of introspection, finishing up a burnt-out husk’.<sup>657</sup> Although the impact of Khan’s casting choice was similar to Ayanna Thompson’s theorising of ‘colourblind casting’, Khan did not use the language of ‘colourblind casting’ to describe his approach, and in actuality, Fearon’s ethnicity *was* important to Khan in his casting choices. Therefore, this casting model needs to be developed and I shall return to this in my discussion of terminology.

Khan’s politics remained clear across the productions: ‘There’s a lot of imbalance that needs righting.’<sup>658</sup> His approach across *Much Ado*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* addressed issues of ethnic and cultural diversity in different ways: from adhering to a framework set by the institution that Othered the Indian experience, to opening up a play that has racial difference implicit in the text itself, to casting a production where the colour of the actor was not intended to signify beyond presenting a non-white actor with the opportunity to play a leading Shakespearean role on a mainstream stage. Significantly, Khan was invited to direct another

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<sup>656</sup> David Lister, ‘Macbeth, Shakespeare’s Globe, review: Thrilling with riveting performances, this is the Globe at its best’, *Independent*, 24 June 2016, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/macbeth-shakespeares-globe-review-thrilling-with-riveting-performances-this-is-the-globe-at-its-best-a7100591.html>> [accessed 16 March 2017].

<sup>657</sup> Sarah Hemming, ‘Macbeth, Shakespeare’s Globe, London – “Patchy”’, *Financial Times*, 24 June 2016, <<https://www.ft.com/content/b889b04c-3a03-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7>> [accessed 16 March 2017].

<sup>658</sup> Thomas, Interview with Khan.

mainstage production for the RSC in 2017. He would direct *Antony and Cleopatra*, and cast Josette Simon, a black British actor with a history of mainstage performances of leading Shakespearean roles, as Cleopatra.<sup>659</sup> He was keen to see ‘greater training initiatives from theatres themselves, engaging the next generation’, and believed that this would be ‘critical to improving the diversity of the theatrical ecology’.<sup>660</sup>

Iqbal Khan believed that the legacy of his *Much Ado* for the RSC was ‘the chance to continue to create, to develop a relationship where you are not always feeling like you’re qualifying and justifying your presence’, and the chance to create work whereby he would not be ‘forced to state or manufacture otherness that is more research than reality’. With regards to the industry-wide conversations about diversity, he felt that even though in theory ‘everybody agrees that everyone can make work and it should be made for everyone’, the ‘DNA hasn’t shifted sufficiently’. ‘When people talk about inclusion and diversity and about developing the audiences’, he said, ‘these are marketing strategies’. Khan said, ‘I think it’s a lot to do with who has historically been entitled to work and to tell these truths, to work in these buildings, to run these buildings’, and that he felt this was where a shift was needed. Khan stated: ‘The audiences need their expectations to be shifted and that’s a big project’, and that ‘it’s really simple, ultimately they should have multi-racial casts on stage and it

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<sup>659</sup> For a discussion of Josette Simon’s previous work at the RSC, see Lynette Goddard, ‘Will we ever have a black Desdemona? Casting Josette Simon at the Royal Shakespeare Company’ in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 80-95.

<sup>660</sup> Thomas, Interview with Khan.

should be the norm rather than the exception'. He challenged the authority of the institutions from the inside, both purposefully and provocatively: 'I said: "Fuck the RSC", that mentality, you know; you can't think about what the RSC represents, you can't think about buildings, tradition and history, when trying to create work. It's essentially an irreverent act [...] to give your impulses the appropriate freedom, to give yourself agency.' By working with ethnically diverse casts, he also sought 'to challenge and liberate their voices'. Khan found that Shakespeare provided him with a source to energise his personal politics and philosophy. He said: 'theatre does words, theatre does arguments, incredibly well and Shakespeare obviously, is for me the supreme example of that [...] these are messy, violently charged, jarringly shifting in tone, bawdy and difficult texts [...] it's extraordinary work.' He continued: 'The glory of theatre for me, and great art is that the unremarked are given voice – particularly, in Shakespeare'.<sup>661</sup>

Assessing both Paapa Essiedu and Iqbal Khan's career trajectories, their creative choices, and the issues they faced in relation to culturally diverse casting and representation in Shakespearean performance working within different cultural organisations between the years 2012-2016 has highlighted pertinent issues that have arisen across the thesis. These issues demonstrate the need for practical developments in three key areas in order to move towards best practice and a sustainable future for the production of culturally diverse, inclusive and representative Shakespeare: *leadership*, *terminology* and *partnerships*.

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<sup>661</sup> Ibid.

## **Towards sustaining cultural diversity in the mainstream:**

### **1. Leadership**

In this thesis I have examined key companies that contributed to the production of Shakespeare in the UK with focus on the years 2012-2016. Of the mainstream organisations – the RSC, Shakespeare’s Globe and NT – all Artistic Directors were white, with only one a white woman. All of the heads of casting, marketing and education were white. The organisations publically declared their commitment to increasing diversity, yet those in the primary positions of power to influence cultural diversity in the casting and performance of Shakespeare remained starkly homogenous in their whiteness. The Arts Council England report ‘Analysis of Theatre in England’ (2016) found that ‘the National Portfolio Organisation leadership and workforce remain unrepresentative of contemporary England’. This has an impact on ‘the make-up of the workforce, the range of work on offer, talent development initiatives and the diversity of audiences’. The report found that ‘at the lower and mid-levels there is a lack of opportunities to develop leadership skills’, there was ‘a lack of movement at executive level in many of our National Portfolio Organisations, limiting the opportunities for a new leadership to emerge’ and ‘a lack of diversity at board level, which may in turn influence the choice of senior executives’.<sup>662</sup> These issues need to be addressed.

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<sup>662</sup> Arts Council England, ‘Analysis of Theatre in England: A Strategic Overview’, *Arts Council England*, 2016, <<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Analysis%20of%20Theatre%20in%20England%20report%20-%20Arts%20Council%20response.pdf>> [accessed 25 March 2017] p. 11. See also, BOP Consulting and Graham Devlin Associates, *Arts Council England, Analysis of Theatre in England* (Arts Council England, 13 September 2016),

Jonathan Kennedy argued: ‘monocultures at the top maintain monocultures at the bottom of the industry’, and Madani Younis, Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre, suggested that ‘more Black or Asian casting directors and directors would challenge roles offered to actors of colour that reinforce white middle class privilege and negative stereotypes that limit perception the expectations of BAME actors and BAME communities.’<sup>663</sup> From my examination of the work of Iqbal Khan (Chapters two and eight) and Tarell Alvin McCraney (Chapter three), it is clear that when directors of colour were given opportunities, they co-opted power to make cultural shifts within mainstream organisations, albeit with certain constraints. The directors aimed to use Shakespearean performance as a site for affirmative action. They wanted to change the patterns of representation, and challenged the company’s paradigms of making work. They demonstrated the importance of ensuring that images of blackness are not always in the hands of white practitioners, and rather that black and other identities can and should be controlled and constructed by artists of colour themselves. McCraney and Khan were political and conscious in their casting choices, and it took their visions to place non-white actors in leading roles on stage that they had never previously played at the RSC. Yet, as the marginalisation of McCraney’s project by the RSC, and the dismissive tone of the mainstream press reviews demonstrated, the

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<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Analysis%20of%20Theatre%20in%20England%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf> [accessed 25 March 2017].

<sup>663</sup> Jonathan Kennedy and Madani Younis quoted in *Centre Stage: The Pipeline of BAME Talent*, ed. by Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen (Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, 2016), <http://andrewlloydwebberfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-01-ALW-Diversity-Report.pdf> [accessed 23 March 2017], p. 12.

institutional pressures preventing this remain manifold. These instances point to the importance of *leadership*: a diversity of gatekeepers and people in positions of power across the organisation is needed to secure better representation for BAME actors.

The appointment of Emma Rice as Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe in 2016 caused a significant cultural shift for the institution. She was committed to increasing gender equality and cultural diversity in the work. She wanted to make the building 'the most accessible and inviting space in London'.<sup>664</sup> In her first season, she programmed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with dramaturgy by Tanika Gupta, and non-white actors in leading roles, followed by Caroline Burne's *Taming of the Shrew*, then Iqbal Khan's *Macbeth* and Matthew Dunster's *Imogen* – a new adaptation of *Cymbeline* with a cast from youth, young offender and disability groups. At the end of 2016, it was announced that Emma Rice would be leaving the Globe. The Board had reached the decision, after just one season, that Rice's vision did not fit the Globe's outlook. In a statement for the press, Neil Constable, the CEO of Shakespeare's Globe, said: 'Emma's mould-breaking work has brought our theatre new and diverse audiences, won huge creative and critical acclaim, and achieved exceptionally strong box office returns.' However,

whilst the realisation of Emma's vision has been a vital part  
of our continuing experimentation as a theatre we have now

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<sup>664</sup> Emma Rice quoted in Mark Brown, 'The Globe's Emma Rice: "If anybody bended gender it was Shakespeare"', *Guardian*, 5 January 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/05/shakespeares-globe-emma-rice-if-anybody-bended-gender>> [accessed 29 March 2017].



concluded that a predominant use of contemporary sound and lighting technology will not enable us to optimise further experimentation in our unique theatre spaces and the playing conditions which they offer.<sup>665</sup>

Rice's interventions aimed to make Shakespeare more accessible and representative of the Globe's audiences, by changing the stories that were being told to better reflect the nation. As Constable himself acknowledged, the work had brought in new, diverse audiences. Yet, the Board's decision suggested that power would remain with the same group. In the *Guardian*, Lauren Mooney wrote: 'This decision looks like the Globe's board choosing to honour one tradition over another: to honour their tradition of not having electric lights (because it was The Past) over their tradition of innovation and accessibility'. 'Emma Rice tried to shake up the Globe' she added, but 'sadly it's chosen to cling to the past'.<sup>666</sup> The Warwick Commission's report, 'Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth' assessed the importance of increasing diversity of leadership in the creative industries:

Despite commitment to the inclusion of the whole population, diversity of the creative workforce, leadership and consumers remains a key challenge to the future

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<sup>665</sup> Neil Constable quoted in Shakespeare's Globe, 'Statement regarding the Globe's future Artistic Direction', *Shakespeare's Globe*, 2016, <<http://blog.shakespearesglobe.com/post/152286922818/statement-regarding-the-globes-future-artistic>> [accessed 25 March 2017].

<sup>666</sup> Lauren Mooney, 'Emma Rice tried to shake up the Globe. Sadly it's chosen to cling to the past', *Guardian*, 26 October 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/26/emma-rice-globe-theatres-artistic-director>> [accessed 25 March 2017].

success of the Cultural and Creative Industries and to the cultural wellbeing of the British public. Making decisive progress is both a social and economic imperative, and work needs to be done across the Cultural and Creative Industries Ecosystem to achieve this goal. We cannot fully enrich Britain unless we do.<sup>667</sup>

The research has been done, now action is needed. Schemes have been set up in different organisations such as *Up Next* led by Artistic Directors of the Future in partnership with the Bush Theatre and Battersea Arts Centre, giving paid opportunities to BAME theatre professionals to develop leadership skills, and to hand over power and resources to diverse artists. The RSC, NT and Shakespeare's Globe should implement strategies in order to enable the diversification of their workforce to better represent contemporary multicultural Britain otherwise the sector is in danger of continuing to fail to represent the society in which it operates.

In the margins, the work being done by BAME-led organisations reflected different models and more sustainable approaches to cultural diversity in Shakespearean performance. The recent work of Talawa, Tara Arts, Phizzical and British East Asian practitioners demonstrates the ways in which members of the Afro-Caribbean, South and East Asian diasporas have used Shakespeare as a site

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<sup>667</sup> The Warwick Commission, *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth: The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value* (Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value, 2015), p. 14, <<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/>> [accessed 27 June 2018].

of negotiation, in order to explore, examine and represent their identities, to achieve presence and to give a voice to BAME communities in Britain (as was seen in Chapters three, four and five). The preceding analyses of different leadership models, where Artistic Directors such as Jatinder Verma and Samir Bhamra engaged with Shakespeare on their own terms, has demonstrated the development of new dramaturgical and aesthetic practices that channelled the practitioners' own cultural heritages. Whereas in mainstream organisations the predominant model of casting was described as either 'colourblind' - adhering to an imprecise discourse of diversity - or matched the 'cross-cultural' model - setting productions in an 'Other' location, leading to stereotypical representations - they used different theatrical techniques resulting, for example, in the new praxes of 'Bollywoodising' and 'Binglish'. As part of Talawa's thirtieth-anniversary season, the Artistic Director Michael Buffong chose to stage *King Lear* set in eighth-century Britain. This was significant. He turned to Shakespeare to make a statement about both contemporary and historic black presence in the UK, claiming and affirming black British identities as part of the national story through the classic text. The company was led by Don Warrington as Lear, along with a cast that was two-thirds black. Buffong emphasised: 'This production says, "Actually, we're here, and we always have been".' It was a political act of self-inclusion and self-expression. He declared: 'We decide how we're portrayed, rather than someone else saying: "I've decided to do an all-black cast set in this specific place where I understand black culture."' Buffong claimed power through self-representation, drawing on lived knowledge and personal experiences.

‘Where I’m sitting [black culture] is everywhere,’ he said; ‘It doesn’t always have to be found abroad or on a council estate.’<sup>668</sup> Buffong countered stereotyping and reductive representations by telling a different story including marginalised aspects of pre-colonial history, and argued for the importance of Talawa as a ‘beacon’ in the landscape of systemic under- and mis-representation. This black-led work conveyed the message (as was seen in Chapter three) that not only are black lives worthy of enactment, but they are worthy of enactment on the classical stage, by black artists with experience, talent and the ability to represent them fully and accurately. As we have seen, in order to counter tokenism, and stereotyping, ethnically diverse people need to be in positions of power, making creative choices about representation. Rather than having people of colour positioned as the unspoken “other” of hegemonic white aesthetic and cultural discourses, BAME practitioners must have the power to represent themselves, to disrupt traditional hegemonic power structures which have so often resulted in the marginalisation of diverse cultural experience through the normalisation of stereotypical representational practices. The leadership of our theatre and arts organisations must reflect the diversity of our population, and this must encompass all aspects of the theatre industry; diversity needs to be reflected holistically, and especially in leadership positions.

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<sup>668</sup> Michael Buffong quoted in Tom Wicker, ‘Michael Buffong: ‘Putting black actors on stage is the easy bit’, *The Stage*, 28 March 2016, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2016/michael-buffong-putting-black-actors-stage-easy-bit/>> [3 March 2017].

## 2. Terminology

As has been demonstrated by this thesis, the language used to describe and discuss diverse representation in the casting and performance of Shakespeare in Britain has been seriously inconsistent across individual productions, organisations and the arts sector as a whole. Ayanna Thompson's definitions of 'nontraditional casting' have framed my analyses in each chapter:

1. Colorblind casting: a meritocratic model in which actors are cast without regard to race; the best actor for the best role
2. Societal casting: a socially informed model in which actors of color are cast in roles originally conceived as being white if people of color perform these roles in society as a whole
3. Conceptual casting: a conceptually conceived model in which actors of color are cast in roles to enhance the play's social resonance
4. Cross-cultural casting: another conceptually conceived model in which the entire world of the play is translated to a different culture and location<sup>669</sup>

Thompson's terms of course originated in the USA and were a specific attempt to pinpoint and critique cultural practices in North American theatre and

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<sup>669</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 76.

broadcasting; two of her four terms in fact related to the politics of US social engineering – societal casting and conceptual casting. Neither term was used by the British practitioners whose work has been central to this thesis, and neither has fed into the emerging discourse surrounding culturally diverse casting and representation in the UK. The socio-political constructs to which Thompson referred – and which directors have capitalised upon in the American performance context – are not entrenched in the UK and thus do not inform British directors’ approaches in the same way. Where these two models have led to stereotyping in American productions as Thompson assesses - harmful practices in the representation of culturally diverse peoples and communities - I would argue for the use of the term ‘subaltern casting’ to encompass these practices in the UK. We must acknowledge the very different histories of generations of people of colour in the UK and US and find terminology that relates specifically to the different social contexts. In fact, Thompson’s terms that *do* apply to UK current practice have proved problematic; the casting model that has been most widely used relates to her ‘cross-cultural’ model. Doran’s *Julius Caesar*, Khan’s *Much Ado*, McCraney’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the Tara Arts, Phizzical and Yellow Earth case studies all used casting models that assumed the ‘actor’s race [carried] a wealth of semiotic meaning that can and should inform a production’s cultural, historical, and perhaps even political landscape’.<sup>670</sup> However, the language used by the directors of these ‘cross-cultural’ projects differed profoundly.

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<sup>670</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 79.

In both *Julius Caesar* (Chapter one) and *Much Ado* (Chapter two), high numbers of BAME actors were employed and not only in supporting roles, and the key reason for this was that the productions were set in specific non-western locations. The intentions behind these choices related to the season in which they were framed, namely the World Shakespeare Festival that sought to demonstrate and celebrate diversity and inclusion. It was a political necessity for Britain's cultural institutions to demonstrate cultural diversity, but what emerged were models of representation that often led to generalisation, stereotyping and exoticism; in the case of *Julius Caesar*, we saw credulous masses, despotic leaders and witchcraft. Similarly, off-stage, the strategies used by the theatre company's different departments presented stereotypes. The marketing image for *Julius Caesar* in the WSF brochure denoted a primitive culture, savage and dangerous; Iqbal Khan was frustrated by the framing of his work by different RSC departments that led to stereotypical associations. The way that the marketing department promoted the 2012 *Much Ado* impacted on the critical reception; the director was dismayed that his production was presented by the RSC and understood by reviewers as a Bollywood Shakespeare, as this aligned neither with his mission nor his values. The press responded to these two productions by celebrating the surprising diversity of 'all-black' and 'all-Asian' casts on main stages, but some were confused by the politics of what was presented, and while several actors valued the opportunity to be cast in leading roles, they were nonetheless mindful of a sense of tokenism. Cyril Nri was not

convinced by the RSC's gesture of inclusivity: 'In doing an all-black production there was a ticking of the diversity box as a token gesture'.<sup>671</sup>

The model of 'colorblind' casting is similarly problematic. The Anglicised term 'colourblind' has been used widely by British directors and organisations to support their casting choices, but not always for the benefit of actors of colour. Therefore, when late in 2012 Doran very publicly adopted the discourse of colourblind casting and insisted that his decisions in the case of *The Orphan of Zhao* had been based on finding the best actor for the role and 'not on ethnicity', British East Asian practitioners were dismayed.<sup>672</sup> Paul Courtenay Hyu asked, 'Why does colourblind casting not apply to us? It applies to black or south Asian actors. Blacks can play white, whites black and Asian, but Chinese can't. The rules don't apply to us'.<sup>673</sup> Daniel York wrote: 'I fully support casting "the best actor for the role" but [...] only as a mechanism for creating opportunities for actors from minority groups for whom chances are few and far between – not as a means of protecting those opportunities for the dominant social demographic.'<sup>674</sup> It needs to be stressed that 'colourblind' casting has generally been promoted in British mainstream theatres because this model of representation assumes that everyone can and should be blind to race. The aim is that an actor's colour should not inhibit or inform their casting opportunities in any way. However, this attitude

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<sup>671</sup> Jeffery Kissoon quoted in Michael McMillan, 'The black body and Shakespeare: conversations with black actors' in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*, ed. by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 122-134 (p. 133).

<sup>672</sup> Doran quoted in Trueman, 'RSC under fire'.

<sup>673</sup> Hyu quoted in Trueman, 'RSC under fire'.

<sup>674</sup> Daniel York, 'British East Asian actors speak out against "The Orphan of Zhao"', *Racebending*, 19 November 2012, <<http://www.racebending.com/v4/featured/british-east-asian-actors-speak-the-orphan-zhao/>> [accessed 1 February 2014].



is at best apolitical and idealistic: as we saw in Chapter one, the white reviewer Mark Shenton suggested that ‘true diversity in casting will only be achieved when we simply stop noticing the race of the actor’.<sup>675</sup> Nor has it been pursued consistently, even within a single company. Phillip Breen was ‘made aware by the RSC that we were expected to cast colourblind’, but then went on to cast a predominantly all-black *Hamlet* set in West Africa. He was certainly not blind to colour in his casting choices. As actors such as Paapa Essiedu testify, ‘colourblindness’ seems to be an impossible aspiration. ‘We live in a world of prejudice, it is systemic’, Essiedu acknowledged; ‘as artists, we are working within a context’.<sup>676</sup> As Reni Eddo-Lodge argues in *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, ‘We don’t live in a meritocracy, and to pretend that simple hard work will elevate all to success is an exercise in wilful ignorance’.<sup>677</sup> Colourblind as a model of meritocracy does not work, there is no equal playing field; structural imbalances are evident in all aspects of society, and certainly in the theatre industry. As press reviews repeatedly establish, and controversies within theatre companies confirm, there is no such thing as colourblind; everyone has a level of unconscious bias. Eddo-Lodge continues: ‘We placate ourselves with the fallacy of meritocracy by insisting that we just don’t see race.’<sup>678</sup> *Seeing colour and ethnicity is essential to changing the system. We need to establish a*

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<sup>675</sup> Mark Shenton, ‘Mark Shenton: Colour-blind casting will have succeeded only when we no longer notice it’, *The Stage*, 6 September 2016, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2016/mark-shenton-colour-blind-casting-will-only-have-succeeded-when-we-no-longer-notice-it/>> [accessed 23 March 2017].

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>677</sup> Eddo-Lodge, p. 79.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

language of representation, a definitive language that can be used to raise awareness via solutions that are not vague, and through progress that needs to be measured.

Where a lack of clarity in terminology and approach to casting has caused a crisis - as was seen in Chapter five and the case of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao* - such controversies could have been avoided. To reiterate, in casting *Julius Caesar*, Gregory Doran had declared: 'Rather than this being a black production of *Julius Caesar*, this is a version of *Julius Caesar* set in a particular way, and therefore it requires black actors';<sup>679</sup> yet when it came to casting *The Orphan of Zhao*, which was set specifically in China, he stated: 'I look at as many actors as I can, and choose not on ethnicity but the best actor for that role. That's the only way to do it'.<sup>680</sup> Throughout this thesis, there have been instances where the lack of clarity about and the validity of the intentions behind casting choices has led to communities feeling misrepresented, and even actors being subject to racist responses. It is clear that the RSC's default responses to diverse casting were either 'cross-cultural' (*Caesar*), or 'colourblind' (*Zhao*), and when their 'colourblind' model was unsuccessful in terms of the real-world politics of diverse casting, they reverted to the previous 'cross-cultural' template in 2016, and had an all-East Asian cast perform in a play set in an 'Other' location: Guan

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<sup>679</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Serena Davies, 'Julius Caesar with a little help from Idi Amin and Mugabe', *Telegraph*, 30 May 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9300978/Julius-Caesar-with-a-little-help-from-Idi-Amin-and-Mugabe.html>> [accessed 30 December 2016].

<sup>680</sup> Gregory Doran quoted in Matt Trueman, 'Royal Shakespeare Company under fire for not casting enough Asian actors', *Guardian*, 19 October 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/19/royal-shakespeare-company-asian-actors>> [accessed 13 March 2017].

Hanqing's classic Chinese drama *Snow in Midsummer*. Once again, however, these BEA actors were not integrated into the RSC's core Shakespearean programming but siloed into a non-Shakespearean production. Iqbal Khan suggested that rather than dealing with some of these points of conflict, institutions are 'very good at deflecting conflict and often those structures are about avoiding potential trauma or conflict rather than actually engaging with it'.<sup>681</sup>

In contrast, outside the mainstream, directors from culturally diverse backgrounds developed their own approaches to casting with great clarity, and in the process they can be seen to have advanced theatrical discourses and theatrical practices. Jatinder Verma memorably termed his own practice 'Binglish':

Binglish is a term I propose to denote a distinct contemporary theatre praxis: featuring Asian or Black casts, produced by independent Asian or black theatre companies. The attempt here, I would argue is directly to challenge or provoke the dominant conventions of the English stage.<sup>682</sup>

In many respects, Samir Bhamra for Phizzical and David Tse for Yellow Earth's dramaturgical models resembled Verma's, through locating the Shakespearean text in different specific locations in order to heighten the relevance for South Asian and East Asian communities respectively. Their aesthetics, approach to language, movement and acting styles were informed by culturally diverse

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<sup>681</sup> Thomas, Interview with Khan.

<sup>682</sup> Jatinder Verma, 'The challenge of Binglish: analysing multi-cultural productions' in *Analysing Performance, A Critical Reader*, ed. by Patrick Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 193–202 (p. 194).

practices, and the casts were from South and East Asian backgrounds. The directors' choices were all clearly articulated both internally, in their organisations, and externally through their public-facing platforms. This clarity enabled informed conversations and encouraged greater understanding about the directors' use of Shakespeare to explore specific concepts, communities and cultures.

Within the RSC itself, Tarell Alvin McCraney aimed to provide an antidote both to tokenistic occasional 'all-black' casting and the general lack of diversity at Stratford, which first informed his casting of *Hamlet* as seen in Chapter six. His choices might be seen to fall into Thompson's 'colourblind' model, with its Danish families consisting of actors from different ethnic backgrounds, but this director was in no way blind to colour when casting: 'It was hugely important for me to cast a Hamlet of colour', McCraney stated; 'we're in London, for God's sake, where around 40% of people are non-white'.<sup>683</sup> In Chapter three, we saw how McCraney next turned to one of Shakespeare's tragedies with issues of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity written into it, in order to disrupt the white hegemonic practice and claim power as a black practitioner. His choice of setting, and his conscious decision to cast a black Cleopatra, were central to the director's exploration of Afro-Caribbean history, identity, and Empire, using the Shakespearean text. McCraney stated: 'We wanted to make sure that we had a *cast* that was colour conscious', [italics mine] so that 'instantly when you saw Cleopatra and Antony standing in the garb that they're standing in,

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<sup>683</sup> McCraney in Iqbal.

speaking in the languages that they're speaking, you could be put into a social, historical context immediately'. McCraney advanced the casting practices at the RSC by casting a black woman in the leading role in this tragedy for the first time in the company's history, and by providing social, historical and cultural specificity in his dialogues with actors in the rehearsal room and in interviews with different press outlets. In the process he also progressed the discourse around casting by referring to his choices as 'colour-conscious'. I would argue that mainstream (predominantly white-led) organisations can and should learn from the strategies used by smaller BAME-led organisations and individual BAME practitioners in the articulation of diverse casting practices. Obviously, discussions about ethnic difference, its significance, and the possible interpretations of its semiotics on stage do need to be enabled.

Using the evidence of this thesis and considering the ambiguities that have been caused by the inconsistent use of terminology in the UK, I would venture to propose two different models of casting: two contrasting and unambiguous terms that have emerged through the research and writing of this thesis. One defines a negative practice which should be avoided: 'subaltern' casting; and one is positive and should be promoted as best practice: 'inclusive' casting. Inclusive casting builds upon Thompson's 'colourblind' model in its positive ambition to increase the opportunities for people of colour to play any Shakespearean role. However, it is not dependent on the notion that the ethnicity of the actor should be ignored, but rather it encourages the theatre industry to be *inclusive* of all differences such as ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, disability and socioeconomic background.

Actors from different backgrounds should be actively considered for leading roles in Shakespeare as elsewhere, and in productions where the directorial concept does not rest upon this difference or highlight ‘otherness’, but presents and represents – with clarity, nuance and specificity - the diversity of experience that the actors bring. This model of ‘inclusive’ casting aspires – in the rehearsal room and in the discourse - to redress the imbalance and historic lack of diversity in Shakespearean performance by casting BAME actors in any role. It acknowledges that actors from different backgrounds do not all share the same advantages and privileges, it encourages a practice that supports intersections of differences, and promotes equality that is representative of Britain’s cultural diversity on the Shakespearean stage. Inclusive casting aims to inhibit the discrimination that actors from a diverse range of backgrounds have experienced across the industry and especially in Shakespearean production, and aims to improve the reflection of an increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse audience that should be seen and represented on Britain’s stages especially in mainstream publically funded theatres.

In contrast, another type of casting has emerged in this thesis which I have argued must be labelled ‘subaltern’ casting. As we have seen, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some British directors still purposefully choose non-white actors to evoke a sense of exoticism. A firm critical terminology is required to help audiences recognise such instances – where the actor’s ethnicity still functions in representing the exotic and (largely silent) Other – and having reviewed the state of Shakespearean performances between 2012 and 2016, I must offer the term ‘subaltern’ to define

harmful practices of casting and representation. A prime example of this (Chapter three) occurred in the 2014 *Antony and Cleopatra* at Shakespeare's Globe, where BAME actors were cast as 'bare chested flunkies' to drag in a leading white actress in 'Duchess of Cambridge coiffure'.<sup>684</sup> In that year, reconstructed images of black servitude, framed by the white gaze and white experience, were placed by a white British director on a major stage and the spectacle was unacceptable and shocking. Language matters within the politics of the theatre professions, and I would argue that with its origins in colonial history and its relation to post-colonial theory, the term 'subaltern' casting can be empowering - for actors, asked to reduce themselves to Orientalist objects; for reviewers, analysing the positioning of BAME actors in the shadows of leading white actors; and for audiences, rejecting the production of images perpetuating and reinforcing ethnic servitude. The term 'subaltern' casting can be used in the Shakespearean context and beyond to define practices where an imbalance and lack of diversity is re-enforced; where casting choices replicate historical and societal patterns of discrimination; and to designate roles where BAME actors are placed outside of the hegemonic power structure. The term applies equally to scenarios where actors of colour have been marginalised within productions (such as *Zhao*), and where they are boxed into separate productions within the theatre's programmed seasons (such as *Snow in Midsummer*). 'Subaltern' casting leads to stereotyping and tokenism, it does not encourage diversity, it removes power from actors from culturally diverse backgrounds, and limits opportunities for actors of colour. It

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<sup>684</sup> Taylor, 'Antony and Cleopatra'.

should be avoided by casting directors and directors in the UK who should instead practice *inclusive* casting. Sadly, this study of contemporary Shakespeare has shown that it needs to be named.

What is most useful from Ayanna Thompson's analysis of casting practices in America that can and should be applied in the UK is her proposal of a strategic plan that is holistically integrated, in that 'every executive in your organization, every member of your board of directors, every department in your organization [...] must understand and support the initiative'.<sup>685</sup> Artistic directors with culturally diverse ambitions in the UK too need to conceive, articulate and shape their vision, and to make sure the entire organisation understands this clearly. The director, the leader of the production process, *must* facilitate 'the dialogues about what this diversification means both offstage and onstage'.<sup>686</sup> Communication of the vision should be cross-departmental and these conversations should then in turn influence the language used and dialogues about casting models and diverse representation between the organisation and those they engage with externally. This, the present thesis has argued, is why terminology is a crucial and urgent issue. To make progress, emphasis should be placed on how an audience can read into the semiotics of ethnicity, and it is the job of all departments involved, led by the director, to articulate the vision clearly. Working on this thesis has convinced me, as it convinces so many of the practitioners I have interviewed, that it is impossible to advance the way we conceive of diverse casting in Britain without being equipped with clear language to enable clear

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<sup>685</sup> Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 92.

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.



dialogues. I have suggested the use of ‘inclusive’ and ‘subaltern’ casting, to contribute to increased clarity of terminology and to a more systematic expression of the intentions behind casting choices. When we establish a refined theoretical model of diverse casting we will be able to put it into practice, and then we will see a shift in the way we talk, conceive and represent people of different colours and ethnicities on stage in Shakespearean performance.

### 3. Partnerships

Whilst mainstream organisations grappled with the external expression of their identities, and the role of cultural diversity within this, in the margins BAME-led companies used Shakespeare as a means of developing sustainable models of practice and audience engagement as we saw in Chapters four and five. A major development towards this was the creation of Black Theatre Live in 2015, a programme that focused on the importance of partnerships. In response to the industry-wide conversations about diversity, Tara Arts developed a national touring consortium of eight regional theatres in England, with support from Arts Council England. It was a three-year programme that aimed to effect change for BAME theatre through national touring, structural support and audience development.<sup>687</sup> The ambition of Jatinder Verma and Jonathan Kennedy (Tara

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<sup>687</sup> Black Theatre Live, ‘Black Theatre Live’, *Black Theatre Live*, 2016, <<https://www.tara-arts.com/about-us/black-theatre-live>> [accessed 4 March 2017]. Black Theatre Live is a partnership of Tara Arts (London), Derby Theatre, Queen’s Hall Arts (Hexham), the Lighthouse (Poole), Theatre Royal Bury St. Edmunds, Theatre Royal Margate, Stratford Circus (London) and Key Theatre (Peterborough). The eight core theatres represent rural and urban locations, producing and receiving houses, ACE-

Arts' Executive Producer) was to 'transform the national landscape of Black and Asian touring theatre in the coming years' with a national programme of mid- and small-scale tours accompanied by live digital streaming and cinema relays. Inevitably Shakespeare was given a major role in this. The programme began with Tara Arts' *Macbeth*, and also included Jeffery Kissoon's production of *Hamlet* in Autumn 2016. The leaders' mission was clear: 'to enlarge the repertoire available for venues and audiences and open opportunities for new creative talents in theatre to systematically address greater equality of opportunity for black and Asian touring companies.'<sup>688</sup> The organisers were particularly keen to ensure that the productions toured to venues whose audience demographics were predominantly white, as well as those in BAME communities. Verma and Kennedy stated that this was 'vital, if we are to guard against a mentality of separatist theatre – black theatre for black audiences and "white" theatre over "black" theatre.'<sup>689</sup> They hoped to challenge assumptions and expectations of the artistic directors programming work at their regional venues, as well as of their audiences. The productions were supported by additional packages of marketing, audience development and outreach work that were individually tailored to each venue. The productions were not limited to touring to the main eight venues; indeed the tours were extended to an additional fourteen touring theatres across the country.

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funded and non-NPO theatres, mid and small-scale auditoriums. The first two shows reached 11,700 people nationally.

<sup>688</sup> Jatinder Verma and Jonathan Kennedy, 'A thirst for diversity', *Arts Professional*, 22 March 2016, <<http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/thirst-diversity>> [accessed 7 March 2017].

<sup>689</sup> Ibid.

As an accompaniment to the Black Theatre Live touring productions, a website was created to profile BAME productions and companies. The aim of this online space was to render the work of such artists visible, and to aid artistic directors with their programming by making the plethora of diverse productions accessibly browseable in one area. Tara Arts also set up an academic research programme, where students from King's College London would examine audience development and provide data to aid the evaluation of the success of the strategies. In their report, 'Audience Development Report: A Study of the Impact of *Macbeth* at Margate and Poole', Helen Pack and Ketaki Varma asserted that the fact that it was a Shakespearean text was a primary factor of motivation for the audiences ('85.50% of which were white in Margate, and 93.26% in Poole') to attend, and that there was also an interest in seeing a cultural adaptation. 'For me it was the fact that it was *Macbeth* and the fact that it was an Indian take on it', said one audience member'.<sup>690</sup> Evidence that was collected from *Macbeth* showed that the programme had succeeded in encouraging new audiences; there was 'a huge rise in the numbers of audience members between those who had not previously seen any BAME theatre and those who felt it is desirable to have ethnically diverse productions after seeing the show'.<sup>691</sup> For the researchers, this evidence marked the first successful step in Black Theatre Live's agenda for audience development, and showed 'how a space for culturally diverse theatre must be created in the regional theatre scene'.<sup>692</sup> Through Black Theatre Live,

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<sup>690</sup> Helen Pack and Ketaki Varma, *Audience Development Report: A Study of the Impact of Macbeth at Margate and Poole* (Tara Arts, 2015), p. 11.

<sup>691</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.*

Verma and Kennedy built partnerships with the aim and effect of increasing culturally diverse programming nationally. *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* played an important role in this mission, bridging a gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar, challenging and broadening the imaginations of both artistic directors and the theatres' audiences. The programme, through its commitment and consistency over three years, suggested a new and successful way to embed a sustainable model of practice nationally to support BAME-led theatre for multicultural audiences.

**Towards the development of sustainable models of culturally diverse practice: Why does it matter?**

Although colour is only skin deep I think colour is an indication of culture. My heroes growing up were Sidney Poitier and Lenny Henry. There wasn't anyone else. [When I discovered] Ira Aldridge, I thought – 'Here's a role model!' For two years I researched; every bit of information took me somewhere else. We think black people came in with Windrush and Indian people came in the 1960s. We didn't; we came much earlier. It transformed my vision of what Britain was. All types of people would come to hear his story, no matter what age, male or female, black, white. They all felt empowered to discuss issues

– race, sexism, prejudice. We [may not be] empowered to say it,  
but we all have something to say.

(Lolita Chakrabarti)<sup>693</sup>

The way we choose to cast and perform Shakespeare today *matters*; our choices play a role in shaping British culture. In 2017, Riz Ahmed stated in his speech about diversity in the Houses of Parliament: ‘What people look for in the stories being told is the message that they belong. That they are seen and heard, and that despite or perhaps because of the uniqueness of their experience they are valued. They want to feel represented’.<sup>694</sup> A failure to do so could, he argued, have dire consequences: ‘If we don’t step up and tell a representative story [...] we are going to start losing British teenagers to the story that the next chapter in their lives is written with Isis in Syria’.<sup>695</sup> The stories we tell can enable the acquisition and renewal of a sense of national belonging. The way that we perform Shakespeare on the British stage today has the power to transform visions of what and who the nation is. As Lucy Sheen said, ‘We all want to fit in, we all want to belong. If Shakespeare truly does belong to all, as the great British Bard, then isn’t it about time that our national theatres started telling the tales using everyone?’<sup>696</sup> As we have seen, Shakespearean performance can be a site to

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<sup>693</sup> Lolita Chakrabarti quoted in Tony Howard, *In Robeson’s Footsteps*, performed at Tricycle Theatre, 15 January 2016.

<sup>694</sup> Riz Ahmed, Video recording of Riz Ahmed’s speech at the Houses of Parliament, 3 March 2017, <[https://www.facebook.com/rizmc/videos/10154393155118997/?hc\\_ref=PAGES\\_TIME\\_LINE](https://www.facebook.com/rizmc/videos/10154393155118997/?hc_ref=PAGES_TIME_LINE)> [accessed 25 March 2017].

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> Lucy Sheen, ‘The new curriculum kids to study two Shakespeares – great but...’, *Lucy Sheen*, 7 September 2014, <<https://lucylaituenchausheen.wordpress.com/2014/09/07/the-new-ciriculum-kids-to-study-two-shakespeares-great-but/>> [accessed 25 March 2017].

reflect current affairs and offer images for the future; the ways in which we approach the casting and performance of Shakespeare can impact on the sense of *belonging* for Britain's culturally diverse communities as a valued and influential part of the national story. There were many shifts and developments in approaches to cultural diversity in the casting and performance of Shakespeare in Britain in 2012–2016, but still more work needs to be done. Over the course of this study, I was given the experience of attending production rehearsals, leading educational workshops and creating educational videos to run alongside *Romeo and Juliet* at the NT, and alongside Tara Arts' *Macbeth* (see Appendix). My experiences have provoked my recognition of the importance of making Shakespeare accessible, engaging and relevant for Britain's culturally diverse communities. I offer this dissertation as evidence; I hope that if we as an industry continually work towards promoting equality, more people of colour from different backgrounds will feel that they have a valued voice, a place and an identity within the cultural landscape, and thus in the national consciousness as a whole. As Lolita Chakrabarti testified, we must give thanks and honour those whose work has come before us, and we should celebrate the role models of our present whose work is helping pave the way so that for the next generation, people from all different cultures and ethnic backgrounds may feel embraced and empowered. Shakespearean performance can help to expand our imaginations and our ideas of who we are. Shakespeare's works must be mobilised to tell stories that represent us all.

## Appendix

The following are films (digital educational resources) that I produced and directed for the National Theatre and Tara Arts during the course of this research.

Film one:

‘*Romeo and Juliet: Movement*’, *YouTube*, 18 July 2013,

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC-6gmyhNNs>> [accessed 28 March 2017].

Film two:

‘*Romeo and Juliet: Learn the Movement*’, *YouTube*, 18 July 2012,

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKsmKNnKppo>> [accessed 28 March 2017].

Film three:

‘Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* Tara Arts’, *YouTube*, 12 March 2015,

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMsL-mnN34Q&t=301s>> [accessed 28 March 2012].

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- , Unpublished interview with Omar Khan, 2015
- , Unpublished interview with Paapa Essiedu, 2014
- , Unpublished interview with Paapa Essiedu, 2017
- , Unpublished interview with Patrick Spottiswoode, 2014
- , Unpublished interview with Phillip Breen, 2014
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