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David Johnson

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The History, Theatrical Performance Work and Achievements of
Talawa Theatre Company 1986-2001

Volume I of 11

By David Vivian Johnson

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in British and Comparative Cultural Studies

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Very special thanks are given to my father Lloyd for teaching me that anything is possible, and to my son Gavin for making me laugh and helping me to keep everything in perspective.

Declaration

Appendix I consists of an edited version of a published interview by David Johnson with Yvonne Brewster that was published in 1998. Details are given below:

David Johnson, 'David Johnson talks to Yvonne Brewster about Louise Bennett', *Kunapipi*, Vol. x no.1 (1998) 72-82.

Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to provide a work that may be used to start a serious archive that documents the contemporary theatrical work of Britain's individuals and companies that have an Afro-Caribbean cultural background. Such an archive will allow later writers on aspects of modern British theatre the opportunity to move ahead where past generations have had to spend time reinventing themselves as documented resources have been lacking.

The thesis documents and discusses the history and achievements of Talawa Theatre Company. Prior to this discussion the main theories, original research and methodologies used to complete this study are presented in Chapter One.

The historical aspect of the work is divided into two sections. The first section is Chapter Two and provides a historical context for Talawa's performance work. This is done by presenting a chronology of Talawa's performance roots that are shown to begin in Africa, develop in Jamaica, and end in England. The second section is Chapter Three and looks at Talawa's history between 1986 and 2001. Analysis includes discussion of definitions of black British theatre, Talawa's mission statement and the company's residency in the West End.

Talawa's achievements are discussed in the body of the thesis. The notion of achievement is understood within the contemporary British theatrical context highlighting the originality of Talawa's work, and by extension the company's commitment to its mission statement. To this end aspects of Talawa's performance work are discussed thematically in the following three chapters:

Chapter Four: Caribbean Plays

Chapter Five: American Plays

Chapter Six: English Plays

Although Talawa has also performed African plays these performances are not part of the present study. The decision to omit this genre was due to a lack of archival evidence in this area.

The thesis concludes in Chapter Seven with a summing up of Talawa's history and achievements by highlighting Talawa's artistic accomplishment and the impact that Talawa's work can be seen to have had outside the company itself. This is followed by the present writer's recommendations for Talawa's future.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter sets out to clarify the overall perspective of the thesis and is divided into two sections. In the first section Definitions, the present writer details his stance as a black British writer, explains the sociolinguistic theories and concepts used to debate central parts of the thesis, and defines his notion of ‘accuracy of language use’ as used to discuss the oral language of Talawa’s productions. In the second section Original Research and Methodologies, all original research carried out for this thesis is outlined along with the methodologies used throughout the research process.

Definitions

The present writer considers the following thesis to be part of a live work that began some five hundred years ago. He also believes that it will continue to develop for centuries beyond the present discussion that highlights a small part of a wider whole in the history of Afro-Caribbean people and their relationship with Britain.

It may be suggested that the foundations of present-day multicultural Britain began in the fifteen hundreds as there have been black people (by whom the present writer means people of Afro-Caribbean descent), living and being born in England since that time.¹ This thesis examines their descendants’ contribution to a very specific area of the British stage.

This is done through the discussion of the history, theatrical performance work and

¹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. xi of preface.

achievements of Talawa Theatre Company from 1986 to 2001. As the founder members of Talawa and many of those who have later worked with the company have been of Afro-Caribbean descent it is important to look briefly at how many Afro-Caribbean people came to Britain at the beginning of the second half of the last century.

When the Empire Windrush docked in Tilbury in 1948 with 492 Jamaicans they were welcomed as 'Five Hundred Pairs of Willing Hands'.² Neither the new arrivals nor their hosts could have predicted that this event would later be used to mark the beginning of the 'en masse' arrival of Caribbean people into the United Kingdom. This arrival along with the influxes that followed in the ensuing decade may give the impression that most Caribbean people arriving at this time came in this way, as skilled non-professionals seeking work in the 'Motherland'.³ Many who arrived during this time had been enticed by the promise of secure well-paid work and educational opportunities.⁴ These opportunities saw West Indians taking up posts on London Transport and in nursing.⁵ These arrivals were British and 'took their British citizenship seriously, and many regarded themselves not as strangers, but as kinds of Englishmen'.⁶ Their right to the title of Englishman was however, disputed by some Britons:

The West Indian does not by being born in England become an

² Daily Worker, no.5226 (23 June 1948), p.3 as quoted by Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, p.372.

³ Fryer, *Staying Power*, p.372. Fryer points to the fact that the larger numbers of arrivals came from 1954 onwards and not immediately after the arrival of the Windrush. By 1958 Britain had received 125, 000 West Indians.

⁴ Elyse Dodgson, *Motherland: West Indian Women in Britain in the 1950s* (London: Heinemann, 1984), p.7.

⁵ Dodgson, *Motherland*, pp.31&33 respectively.

⁶ Nicholas Deakin and others, *Colour, Citizenship and British Society* (London: Panther Books, 1970), p.283.

Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom Citizen by birth;
in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still.⁷

Powell's notion was voiced at a time when those who were later defined by British society as the first generation of black Britons, were babies. Whilst the West Indian parents of these children may have seen their offspring as different to them because they were born here and were both by their definition, and legally British, their children were not always treated as equal to their white counterparts. In keeping with Powell's above notion of suggested 'difference' these children were being made to feel as foreign as their parents had, particularly in the key areas of education and later in employment and housing.⁸

Such discrimination can be seen as an active factor in encouraging questions around the complex cultural identity of later generations of Britons of Afro-Caribbean heritage. The present writer believes that seldom being accepted as British and always having to explain one's cultural heritage can encourage a sense that the 'host' nation lacks the will to fully accept those of a darker hue as entirely equal to them.⁹ Whilst some Britons of Afro-Caribbean heritage may respond to this by rejecting the British aspect of their cultural background others may encourage their countrymen to understand that England is indeed their home and that they are here to stay. One way of doing the latter, and encouraging other Britons of Afro-Caribbean heritage to recognise the roots that they have in the

⁷ Mary Karen Dahl, 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by J. Ellen Gainor (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.38-55 (pp.52-53). Quoting Enoch Powell's speech in Eastbourne on 16 November 1968.

⁸ David J. Smith, *Racial Disadvantage in Britain: the PEP Report* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p.13.

⁹ This has been the case for the present writer though born and raised in England.

United Kingdom is by documenting and publicising black contribution in all areas of British life.

The present writer was motivated to discuss the work of black people in British theatre after studying and working in the British theatre industry for two decades. The history of black people on the British stage and their contemporary presence was seldom profiled or rarely discussed in the mainstream. The main change to this was in the development of black theatre companies in the 1980s.¹⁰ Talawa Theatre Company emerging in the midst of this and later becoming the longest running of these companies can be seen to have leant itself to the task of beginning to redress the balance.

The present writer sees Talawa's work as a direct line in his Jamaican/English bicultural theatrical heritage as the subject of this thesis and the present writer are linked by their bicultural Jamaican/English background. They are both British of Jamaican heritage. Although this type of cultural fusion may be described as schizophrenic,¹¹ there is no intended schizophrenia here but rather the expression of a biculturalism that comes from the varying aspects of English and Jamaican theatre as explored through a varied research process.

Both in conducting the research and in writing up the findings the present writer has aimed at demonstrating how Talawa Theatre Company has made both a positive and innovative contribution to the contemporary British stage. He is also conscious of his changing role

¹⁰ The companies that emerged at this time are highlighted in Chapter Three.

at various points in the research process, from researcher to advocate for Talawa as he became more involved with specific aspects of the company's work.¹² This is seen in Chapters Three to Five where he played a key role in the development of three Talawa projects.

The present writer's role as a researcher has not been strictly typical with the ultimate research benefiting the investigator alone. The continuous dialogue throughout the process and working for the company can be seen to have encouraged work that also benefits Talawa. This does not mean that the present writer was inappropriately influenced by the subject and moved away from his original aim, but rather that the subject and the writer's aims have met on common ground throughout much of the research process.¹³ No discussion was held however, between the present writer and the subject on the chosen sociolinguistic framework used to discuss sections of Talawa's work in this thesis. The theoretical framework should be understood as the present writer's chosen angle and not the original design of Talawa's Artistic Director.

The sociolinguistic theories used to structure parts of the debate along with their meaning and source are explained below. The range of theories and concepts used throughout this thesis come from a single comprehensive reader.¹⁴ These theories can be divided into two

¹¹ Michael Gilkes, *Creative Schizophrenia: The Caribbean Cultural Challenge* (Warwick: Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick, 1986), p.6.

¹² Deborah Cameron, Elizabeth Frazer, Penelope Harvey, Ben Rampton and Kay Richardson, 'Ethics, Advocacy and Empowerment in Researching Language', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook*, ed. by Nikolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.145-162 (p.148).

¹³ Cameron et al., 'Ethics, Advocacy and Empowerment in Researching Language', p.159.

¹⁴ Other texts which further discuss the theories used in this thesis and which were used during the research process are acknowledged in the bibliography.

main groups. The first come under the heading of Sociology of Language. The second group under the heading of Language Style as Audience Design and Related Theories.

The Sociology of Language

Fishman's theory is referred to as it can be used as an umbrella term, referring to all aspects of language linked with language behaviour and the responses to it. It is used to examine the characteristics of language varieties, their functions and those that speak them.¹⁵ Within the general theory of the sociology of language is the theory of dynamic sociology of language. This is used to explain selective language change within a single community for different events and examines the factors that lead to this change and the responses to it. Within this theory are three sociolinguistic concepts used throughout this thesis.

Overt language behaviour is the term used to discuss how speech forms at risk of dying out are given a higher status to help revive them. In the case of West Indian and other related speech forms, the publication of West Indian language texts and the language of performance artists that use West Indian language in their work demonstrate overt language behaviour.¹⁶

¹⁵ Joshua A. Fishman, 'The Sociology of Language', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook*, ed. by Nikolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.25-30.

¹⁶ This is also seen in the case of the invention of French sounding words in Quebec to stop the domination of American English in French. Fishman, 'The Sociology of Language', p.26.

Verbal repertoire is the term used to discuss the language of a community that uses many forms of speech.¹⁷ The speaker decides which speech form is most appropriate for a particular occasion. This can be seen in the case of the black community in Britain where language can be seen to have evolved from African, British and Caribbean influences. This has equipped black Britons with a range of speech styles that differ from 'standard English' speech.¹⁸

Antilanguage Speech is the term used to discuss the specific language created from a more dominant speech form to show a rejection of the original form and what it represents. The antilanguage is the preferred form of speech for the antigroup (the speakers who use it). The aim of the antilanguage is to 'exclude outsiders and express the ideology of the antigroup'.¹⁹ The message at the core of the antilanguage is one of hostility from those in the marginalised group to those in the mainstream. In this study where the speech in performance is described as an antilanguage the aim of the performer is often to express a pride in their native speech rather than to demonstrate hostility.

Antilanguage speech can be used as the result of a range of factors including; the desire to express difference, create internal solidarity and exclude others. All of this may be

¹⁷ Fishman, 'The Sociology of Language', p.28.

¹⁸ The term 'standard English' is written in inverted commas to show that the present writer does not regard a single form of English speech as having a higher status than all other forms because of its sound and grammar. See Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.iii. Allsopp discusses Wyld's notion of 'received standard English' as the voice of the old English public schools that came to be recognised as the 'standard' speech form above all others. Similarly, the term 'standard American English' is written in inverted commas in Chapter Five to show that the present writer does not regard a single form of American speech as having higher status than other forms.

¹⁹ Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, 'Social Semiotics, Style and Ideology', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.49-54 (p.53).

expressed through a particular use of accent, grammar, unique phrases and themes that help to give the antilanguage group its identity whilst excluding others.²⁰

Language Style as Audience Design and Related Theories

The theory of language style as audience design is linked to Bell's 1984 Audience Design Framework that presents some of the factors identified as causing a change in speech.²¹

The audience referred to for each factor consists of whoever is spoken to. This may be individuals or groups. For the case of this study the audience tends to be the literal theatrical audience. The language of performance is premeditated aiming to attract a target audience that uses similar speech in everyday life to that being performed. This can be seen as a subversion of the theory that ordinarily examines the speaker's change of speech once the interlocutor has spoken. In the case of a performance there is no oral dialogue between the actor and the audience. For the length of the performance the actor can be seen to have a form of linguistic control over the silent audience yet their speech has been

²⁰ Hodge and Kress, 'Social Semiotics, Style and Ideology', p.54.

²¹ Allan Bell, 'Language Style as Audience Design', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.240-250 (pp.243-248).

Central points:

- Speakers design their speech style primarily for and in response to their audience.
- Audience design applies to all codes and levels of a language repertoire, monolingual and multilingual.
- Variation on the style dimension within the speech of a single speaker derives from and echoes the variation which exists between speakers on the 'social' dimension.
- Speakers show a fine-grained ability to design their style for a range of different addressees, and to a larger degree for other audience members.
- Style shifts according to topic or setting derive their meaning and direction of shift from the underlying association of topics or settings with typical audience members.
- As well as the 'responsive' dimension of style, there is the 'intuitive' dimension. Here the style shift itself initiates a change in the situation rather than resulting from such a change.
- Initiative style shifts are in essence 'referee design', by which the linguistic features associated with a group can be used to express identification with that shift.

guided by their anticipation of what they imagine the target audience expects to, or what they think they should hear.

In addition to the theory of language style as audience design the present writer uses two related sociolinguistic concepts throughout this thesis. These are the concepts of linguistic accommodation and linguistic behaviour. The accommodation theory expounded by Giles and Powesland presents the argument that speakers 'accommodate' their language to sound more like their listeners and thus gain a favourable impression from them.²² In addition to creating a favourable impression other factors for speech change may include: the subject under discussion, where the discussion takes place, the speaker's attempt to be better understood and the speaker's ability to make the change. Effort and external pressures may also lead to the attributions for accommodation.²³ Le Page's concept of linguistic behaviour is used to describe how speakers may change their language in an attempt to identify with another speaker or group. This concept differs to the accommodation theory as it is essentially concerned with the temporary nature of the language change and the reasons for it. Trudgill highlights the temporary nature of the linguistic behaviour of teenagers and their pronunciation of pop songs in his discussion of Le Page's theory.²⁴

In addition to using sociolinguistic theories and concepts to discuss and analyse the oral aspect of Talawa's performance work, the present writer also refers throughout to the

²² Howard Giles and Peter Powesland, 'Accommodation Theory', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.232-239.

²³ Giles and Powesland, 'Accommodation Theory', pp.235-236.

importance of Talawa's 'accuracy of language use' in performance. The use of this phrase is clarified here so that precisely what is meant by it and why it is viewed with such importance by the present writer can be understood within the context of the present thesis.

The phrase is used to refer to the performers' skill in producing a believable oral voice for the character they are playing. For the present writer credibility comes from the performers' ability to produce a sound that enables the audience to know precisely where the character is meant to come from. This kind of oral naturalism/realism is not essential to all theatre productions. American actors play Shakespeare in theatre and also to international public acclaim on film using American accents.²⁵ Similarly British actors perform American playwrights regularly on the British stage.²⁶ These conventions are widely accepted and audiences can reasonably be asked to use their imagination, suspend their disbelief and accept the oral 'inaccuracies' of a performer. For Talawa's performances however, and for their Caribbean productions in particular, the present writer argues the case for accuracy of language use in performance basing his argument on two central points.

²⁴ Peter Trudgill, 'Acts of Conflicting Identity: The Sociolinguistics of British Pop-song Pronunciation', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.251-265 (p.253).

²⁵ This is seen in Baz Luhrman's 1996 film version of *Romeo and Juliet* and Oliver Parker's 1995 film version of *Othello*.

²⁶ The work of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and David Mamet presently being performed on the London stage is highlighted in Chapter Five.

Burden of representation

As there are relatively few positive performances of black people on the British stage, those black people who find themselves representing their race in performance may be seen as having a responsibility to create favourable images. For the present writer this burden on artists will continue until black performers are performing on the British stage in equivalent numbers to their white counterparts. As Bertolt Brecht used his theatre to teach, the present writer believes that black theatre practitioners in Britain should also be didactic and use the 'burden of representation' to give a clear and accurate cultural representation of their people. An essential ingredient in this representation is 'accuracy of language use'.

Consequences of misrepresentation

Incorrect oral presentation gives a false impression of the speech community being represented. In cases where the voice is changed so that a wider audience may understand the work such variation may be seen as acceptable. If the speech form is altered to the extent that it becomes a stereotypical and inaccurate representation, and if this form is accepted, further dilution of black voices in public performance may occur, moving the performance voices further and further away from the real voices of the varied black communities they represent. Continual dilution in the public arena may also see black voices and their messages being taken less seriously in life off-stage. If Talawa accepts its performers using a general 'Caribbean type' accent (in Caribbean plays), the company may find that it is better appreciated by the wider mainstream white audience. By doing

this Talawa may also be likely to compromise its right to produce work that is truly culturally specific. This will add to a melting pot notion of black identity in Britain. Additionally, if a voice is inaccurate this may be seen as a lack of acting skill on the part of the performer. This in turn could lead to:

- Bad publicity.
- Poor audience attendance.
- Stigmatisation and marginalisation of black theatre.
- Lack of funding.
- Closure.

Original Research and Methodologies

Throughout the research process the present writer was aware of the fact that whilst the nature of what he was producing is new work to an academic circle this was not entirely the case for lay followers of Talawa Theatre Company or those who have worked with the company. The notion of original research then is relative to the community the research is presented to. For the present writer the research process highlighted that lay people can

benefit from working with academics and vice versa (with whom they may otherwise have little contact) if the common goal is to document original knowledge.²⁷

The original nature of this thesis' subject rests in the fact that it presents research on a British theatre company that has never been examined in its entirety. The nature of the research was mostly achieved in two ways:

1. By unearthing a mass of materials on Talawa Theatre Company that had been loosely archived and that had remained unexamined since the company's inception. The present writer was the first, and to date, only researcher given full access to all areas of Talawa's archives.
2. Through the professional working experiences of the present writer with Talawa over the past five years.

The wider research process however, highlighting all research techniques used is outlined below under the following headings:

- Talawa and the present writer - Initial contact.
- Talawa's production archives and the problems of using video as a primary resource.

²⁷ Deborah Cameron et al., 'Ethics, Advocacy and Empowerment in Researching Language' p.160. In the case of this thesis the lay people contributed by their comments on Talawa's work in interviews and

- Relevant projects that the present writer has worked on as an employee of Talawa.
- Talawa's Board of Directors.
- Surveys.
- Interviews.

Talawa and the present writer - Initial contact

The present writer's original intention in contacting Talawa Theatre Company and Artistic Director Yvonne Brewster in 1995 was in order to discuss the work of Jamaican writer/performer Louise Bennett who was originally the intended subject of this thesis. Brewster was the only established London based theatre practitioner who had learnt theatre directly under Bennett in Jamaica. The present writer hoped that a link could be made between the work that Bennett had done both in Jamaica and the UK, and aimed to reveal where her legacy could be seen in black British theatre work that had emerged in the 1980s. This would be seen through the work of contemporary British theatre companies such as Talawa.

In aiming to prove Bennett's effect on the later work of Talawa, unlimited access to the company's archives was granted. This led the present writer to a wealth of material on the work that the company had produced which he saw as a record of the work that Talawa

and by responding to surveys.

had done as well as a record of an aspect of British theatre history that would possibly remain unexplored. This feeling encouraged the present writer to change the central focus of this thesis from a study of Louise Bennett to one that centred on Talawa. Bennett would now be shown as a theatre practitioner whose own work would provide a historical context for the work of Talawa.²⁸

Talawa's production archives and the problems of using video as a primary resource

All of Talawa's archives are stored in the rehearsal room of the company's London offices at 23-25 Great Sutton Street, London ECV1 0DN. On starting the research for this thesis the present writer organised the production archives making them researcher friendly by creating sets of files (as outlined below) for each production where they did not already exist. The fact this needed to be done suggests that the information had been kept as administrative records rather than for archival purposes. Filing this material has generally been given to the company administrator although there is no member of staff officially designated as archives officer. Access to the archives can be gained with the permission of Talawa's Artistic Director.

The archives can be divided into two sections, the paper archives and the video archives.

The paper archives for each production (stored in chronological order of performance) consist of a set of files on each production labelled as follows:

- Contact and contract (details of performers).

²⁸ See Chapter Two Theatrical Roots.

- Correspondence (all letters regarding the production).
- Finance and funding (details of production costs and funding bodies).
- General file (miscellaneous information).
- Marketing and publicity file (all publicity including programmes and flyers).
- Production file (research and staging details).
- Rehearsal script.
- Reviews (from mainstream and fringe press).

The archives for Talawa's Education, Black Women Writer's, Summer School and Blackgrounds project are also housed in chronological order in the rehearsal room of the company's London offices.

The video archives are stored together in chronological order of performance. The existing videos are all single camera unedited versions of the performances (where the performance was recorded).²⁹ Each video was also made with the audience present (the audience responses are audible) suggesting that Talawa had not intended them to be used

for the analysis of the performances they represent, but simply as a record that the event took place.³⁰ Regardless of Talawa's original intention in making the videos those who access them later may have an agenda that gives the footage additional uses. Melzer presents Cate's notion of a video of a performance as:

a 'media piece', whose very purpose is defined in advance as of a different order: yes a performance document, but one to be shared with a wider audience, so as to 'initiate the beginning of a discussion'.³¹

In the present writer's view this can be seen to be the case with the videos used to discuss Talawa's work. It should be understood that the present writer's analysis of the video performances of Talawa's work does not claim to discuss the actual performance, but rather a recording of the event which is by its very nature second hand. The ensuing discussion is generally of Talawa's videos of their live performances as seen by the present writer after the original performance. It must be stated that the present writer recognises that whilst the recording is similar to, it is not identical to the live performance and however technologically advanced the quality of the video it is impossible for the video representation to replace the live performance. As Artistic Director Yvonne

²⁹ The following videos are no longer in the Talawa archives making any video analysis of the productions impossible: *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1991), *Smile Orange* (1992), *Necklaces* (1992), *King Lear* (1994), *Mooi Street Moves* (1994).

³⁰ Annabelle Melzer, 'Best Betrayal': the Documentation of Performance on Video and Film,' Part 1, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol.xi no.42 (May 1995), 147-157 (p.154). Melzer discusses issues surrounding the uses of the video of a theatrical performance and raises questions from whether such resources should be limited to schools and libraries, to whether actors should be paid for their video performances and who has copyright.

³¹ Melzer, 'Best Betrayal': the Documentation of Performance on Video and Film,' Part 1, p.150.

Brewster puts it 'a video is a poor cousin to seeing a show'.³² As no limitation was set on their use it has been possible for the present writer to use Talawa's archival videos as a primary resource for the analysis of aspects of the original performance as seen on video, and not just as documentation of the past event.

For this study the present writer believes that the usefulness of the videos rests in the fact that they have to be used as the closest representation to the performance as they are the entirety (in terms of moving visual evidence) of the past events. Where the present writer also saw the original production, the production is discussed along with the video, at which point the video is used as a valuable supplement to note-taking and human memory.³³

The present writer is aware that his discussion is influenced by his analysis of work that he has seen, and is able to keep seeing in the present on video, although the events occurred in the past.³⁴ Whilst the recorded event remains the same his perception of it may change due to external influences, additional information later gained about the performance and the company, and mood changes on watching the performance at different times.

A second major influence on the present writer's interpretation of Talawa's past performances as seen mostly on video is in the fact that many interviews and discussions held with the Artistic Director looked at pieces that had happened many years ago. The

³² Interview by David Johnson with Yvonne Brewster, Talawa offices London, 16 January 1997.

³³ Gay McAuley, 'Towards an Ethnography of Rehearsal', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. xiv Part 1 (NTQ 53) (Feb 1998), 75-85, (p.76).

³⁴ Annabelle Melzer, 'Best Betrayal': the Documentation of Performance on Video and Film,' Part 2, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. xi no.43 (May – Aug 1995), 259-276, (p.264).

Artistic Director's memory of the events may also have been influenced by Talawa's many performance events since the one under discussion. The present writer feels that these unavoidable research problems highlight the need to document the views and opinions of the Artistic Director at the time of the performance event to ensure an accurate response.

It is the present writer's considered belief that working from the archival videos as primary sources even though they do not seem to have been made with this kind of analysis in mind is a valuable task. Brook comments 'You must devote yourself to working on the filmed document whatever the losses involved, it can be very useful for our work.'³⁵ For all its pitfalls in not being able to provide totally accurate evidence of all aspects of the past event, the video is however, in the present writer's view, the most useful available recorded form of Talawa's performance work for the analysis of the company's stage work. Producing parts of the present thesis from these sources can be seen as the archives being used to create a further resource on the work of Talawa.

Throughout the discussion of the video performances the rehearsal script (as used in the production rehearsals) is also referred to. This happens where the discussion focuses on the language of the text where the present writer has felt that it is necessary to highlight the written language of the text in order to better understand Talawa's chosen oral speech. Additionally, the rehearsal script is referred to in conjunction with the video of the

³⁵ Peter Brook, 'Filmer Le Theatre', *Cahiers Theatre Louvain*, xlvii (1981), p.41 as quoted by Annabelle Melzer, 'Best Betrayal': the Documentation of Performance on Video and Film,' Part 1, p.153.

performance, for ease of access to specific points in the video. Unless otherwise stated the performance analysis is however, about the video representation of the performance.

Relevant projects that the present writer has worked on as an employee of Talawa

Much of the present writer's research process has evolved through work that he has been required to do as a freelance project based employee for Talawa Theatre Company. This process has provided the unique opportunity to work within the company without being part of the company's regular staffing body.

In terms of theatrical productions the present writer worked as Performance Researcher for Talawa's performance of Derek Walcott's *Beef No Chicken* from November 1996 to February 1997. He also worked as Pre-Production Researcher on Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* from March to May 1997. The research details for both productions, along with the analysis of the findings are presented in Chapters Four and Five respectively. Finally, he worked as the Project Worker, conducting all research and interviews for Talawa's first and only major video project to date, the Blackgrounds project. The research details and some discussion of the findings are presented in Chapter Three. Along with working for the company, the original nature of the research process for this thesis was enhanced by the present writer accepting membership to Talawa Theatre Company's Board of Directors in September 1998.

Talawa's Board of Directors

As a Board member the present writer has had to inform himself of the entirety of the workings of Talawa and not just focus on questions directly related to the present thesis. Whilst the general stance of a board member may be to deal with any general business concerning the company the present writer's detailed knowledge of Talawa has been further enhanced by being the board representative for Talawa's Education Programmes, along with sitting on the Personnel Sub-Committee. Additionally, he has had to consider the past, present and future of the company both as a researcher and as a Board member with some influence on all of the decisions that the company makes. The present writer is clear that it is possible that with even the greatest effort the roles of researcher and Board member have crossed.

In addition to this original research process further information was gained throughout by using traditional methods of research: principally surveys and interviews.

Surveys

Throughout the course of this study two types of survey were carried out. The first survey took the format of a questionnaire aimed at eliciting information on the respondents' knowledge of Talawa's work, their opinions on Talawa's use of language in performance and their opinions of their own language use. The questionnaire was handed to audience members during the first week of Talawa's performances of the following four runs:

- *Beef no Chicken* (18 December 1996 to 2 February 1997).
- *Flyin' West* (6 May 1997 to 28 June 1997).
- *Othello* (9 October 1997 to 1 November 1997).
- *Zebra Crossing II* (15 October 1998 to 7 November 1998).

Respondents were asked to either leave their completed questionnaires at the end of the performance or post them to Talawa Theatre Company. The returns from all four shows totalled at 4.3% of the three hundred surveys handed out.

The second survey was carried out over a one year period between January 1998 and January 1999. This survey also took the format of a questionnaire and was aimed at eliciting responses from pockets of London's Afro-Caribbean community on their perception of their personal language use. Respondents completed their questionnaires anonymously and came from the following groups as accessed by the present writer in South London:

- Blacks adults born in Britain after 1958 working as professionals.³⁶

³⁶ For the purpose of this survey, designation of professional and non-professional has been achieved by following the Index of Status Characteristics (ISC), as described by Walt Wolfram and Ralph W. Fasold, 'Field Methods in the Study of Social Dialects', in *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.89- 115 (p.94). The seven class categories are:

Class	Occupation
1	Major professionals

- Black adults born in Britain after 1958 working as non-professionals.
- Black children at state schools in the Borough of Southwark aged 14-16.³⁷

Survey findings are referred to in the thesis.

Interviews

In addition to the surveys extensive interviews were carried out between April 1996 and January 2001 with Talawa's Artistic Director Yvonne Brewster. This on going interview process included the specific discussion of each of Talawa's productions from the company's performance of CLR James's *The Black Jacobins* in February 1986 to the company's performance of *The Prayer* in July 2000. Interviews were also conducted with Talawa's performers for the productions that the present writer worked on (as outlined above), and extensively with Ben Thomas who is the actor who has played the most leading roles for Talawa. Additionally, interviews with post war (WWII) black theatre practitioners on the British stage were conducted throughout 1997 to complete Talawa's

2	Executives of large concerns
	Lesser professionals
3	Executives of medium sized concerns
	Semi-professionals
	Administrators of small businesses
4	Technicians
	Owners of petty businesses
5	Skilled workmen
6	Semi- skilled workmen
7	Unskilled workers

³⁷ As a Secondary Teacher in Southwark the present writer was able to access school pupils from this age group. This age-group were chosen as their use of language can be seen as indicative of their initial adult attempts to express their group and individual identity.

Blackgrounds project. These are commented on in Chapter Three. As shown in the bibliography a range of other interviews with theatre practitioners were also carried out between January 1996 and April 2001.

The collation of the above research has culminated in this first detailed analysis of Talawa Theatre Company's work. Whilst black British theatre may presently be a little studied aspect of contemporary British theatre its documentation and exposure is essential to its continued existence and development. Through this presentation of Talawa Theatre Company, its history, theatrical performance work and achievements from 1986 to 2001, the following six chapters document, analyse and celebrate a small part of black British theatrical achievement in what has been a historically white genre.

CHAPTER TWO

THEATRICAL ROOTS

The aim of this chapter is to provide a theatrical lineage for Talawa Theatre Company.

This is done by:

- Highlighting two African theatrical forms that have been passed down through West Indian theatre and can be seen in Talawa's work.
- Looking at the general style and wealth of theatrical activity in Jamaica from the 1700s to the 1990s. The theatrical history of Jamaica is highlighted due to Talawa's cultural heritage. This section includes a discussion of Jamaican writer and performer Louise Bennett and her Jamaican precursors. The impact Bennett's work can be seen to have had on contemporary black British theatre is also presented.¹
- Offering a contemporary black British perspective (that of the present writer), on the development of black theatre practitioners, theatrical movements and groups in Britain from 1948 to the 1990s.

The work of the individuals and groups discussed here serve as an example of the history surrounding black British theatre and does not claim to be an entire history of the

¹ See Errol Hill, *The Jamaican Stage 1655-1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992). Hill's text has been used as a central resource for the writing of this section of this chapter, in particular, Chapter Four *Plays and Players*, Chapter Eight *Readers, Reciters and Storytellers*, Chapter Nine *Slave Performances* and Chapter Ten *Performance Modes after Slavery*.

genre.

African Ritual

Two main areas of African tradition that have filtered through to West Indian and black British theatre as can be seen in the work of Talawa Theatre Company are Ritual, and Storytelling.

Ritual was part of African daily life as can be seen in African religion and was extended into African performance as such work was often based on real life events. Even in performance these ritual acts were believed to be real and were worked through with an audience who knew how to respond to their development. Performers saw themselves as taking part in a ritual event rather than acting a role. Such ritual served to highlight communal beliefs as well as preserve cultural history.²

African drama ritual may be divided into two parts: the sacred rituals that allowed spectators only, and the profane rituals that allowed participants. Much of the revelry seen during the slave years which was later reproduced in West Indian and black British theatre, incorporated elements of the latter. Ritual revelry in the Caribbean that can be seen to have clear African roots include; Jonkonnu (Jamaica), Crop-over (Barbados),

² Helen Gilbert, and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial Drama: theory, practice, politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), p.57.

Carnival (Leeward/Windward islands, and Trinidad and Tobago), Papa Diable Mask, La Rose and la Marguerite (St.Lucia).³

This ritual tradition of African drama as further developed in the Caribbean, provided a legacy for the work, centuries later, of black artists that used ritual as a major element of their work. These include, Marina Omowale Maxwell, Lennox Brown (Trinidad), Henk Tjon (Surinam), and Zeno Constance.⁴ The theatrical legacy of Jonkonnu is seen in Sylvia Wynter's *Maskerade*, (1973). This legacy was brought to British audiences in 1994 through Talawa's performance of the show. Jonkunnu was the most popular masquerade in Jamaica prior to emancipation and saw the Jonkonnu (Jester) dancing in the streets accompanied by a band of musicians and followers. From the 1950s Jonkunnu was recognised with the new status of a Jamaican art form and has become part of the performance repertoire of the Jamaican National Dance Company. Similarly, fellow Jamaican Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*, (1974) displays the inheritance of African religious ritual through its presentation of the nine nights ritual where the body of a dead person is watched over by relatives and friends for nine days and nights. Talawa performed the play to British audiences in 1986.⁵

The second legacy of African drama in Caribbean and black British theatre is seen in the tradition of storytelling. The importance of storytelling lay in its dual aim to tell the history of the community and to entertain. The story was not fixed, and neither then was

³ Kole Omotoso, *The Theatrical into Theatre: a study of drama and theatre in the English speaking Caribbean* (London/Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1982), p.33.

⁴ Judy S.J. Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre* (London/Basingstoke: Macmillan Caribbean, 1994), pp.155-6.

history. The storytellers' gift was in making the tale their own by adding local colour through carefully chosen themes, characters and popular situations. The artists would also perform multiple characters and incorporate music and dance into their work.⁶ Storytellers performed in their native tongue. This display of what may be described as overt language behaviour has remained a fundamental feature of storytelling across the centuries as the tradition has evolved.

The fact that women played a central role in African tradition was reflected in the storytellers who were female. For Europeans their gender made their historical accounts dubious which some saw as no more than 'Little fictitious histories.'⁷ The tradition continued, producing many later West Indian storytellers, male and female alike. Amongst the best known are Derek Burrows (The Bahamas), Paul Keens Douglas (Trinidad), Shake Keane (Saint Vincent), Bill Trotman (Guyana), and Louise Bennett (Jamaica).

Working within the African theatrical tradition has sometimes gained low artistic status for black theatre practitioners. Biodun Jeyifo argues that this is due to three common Western views on African drama. Firstly, that there are no native drama traditions. Secondly, that Africa's theatrical tradition does not compare to that of Europe and Asia, and finally, that what exists in Africa comes from Western sources.⁸ Throughout slavery and colonisation it was difficult for black theatre practitioners to alter the above perceptions and since emancipation black theatre practitioners have seen that these ideas

⁵ Talawa's Caribbean Plays are discussed in Chapter Four.

⁶ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-colonial Drama*, pp.126-131.

⁷ Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*, p.226.

have been ingrained not only into the Western psyche, but also into that of their own people. This can be demonstrated through an examination of the work that emerged over two hundred years in Jamaica.

Jamaican Theatre 1700s –1900s

When Jamaica became a British colony in 1655 all public theatre performance was banned ensuring that theatrical styles developed under Spanish rule were erased. In 1682 when theatre spaces were established to bring British theatre to the Jamaican expatriate community there were three main groups of performers.

1. Touring professionals from Britain and the North American colonies that later became the USA.
2. Resident amateurs.
3. Theatre from the Jamaican working classes.⁹

It was the first group that brought the most theatrically respected work to the island. They brought the latest work from home, which was imitated by rich locals. 'Real' theatre then, meant British work, and especially, Shakespeare. The Creole actors (local whites) could not reach this British ideal but were able to produce work depicting their own expatriate

⁸ Biodun Jeyifo, 'The Reinvention of Theatrical Tradition', in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. by Patrice Pavis (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.149-161 (pp.153-154).

life. This consisted of living apart from other islanders and concentrating on material gain and luxury. The work also made fun of island-born Creoles and discussed plantation life, historical figures and politics.

For more than thirty years from the 1750s, The Hallam Theatre Company provided a large part of the theatrical entertainment on the island and during 1783 the company performed two favourite pieces that focused on expatriate life.

The first of these was Bickerstaffe's *The Padlock* (1770).¹⁰ The picture of West Indian life is presented from a privileged white land-owning perspective. Much of what is gleaned about expatriate life is learned through the presence of the black character Mungo. The depiction of him demonstrates the period's notions of slavery based on colour. His blackness automatically acquires him the lowest position in society as a slave. Throughout the play his language is distinguished from the other characters as it is written in what appears to be a recognisable pidgin. This chosen form serves to present the notion that the character lacks the intelligence of the white people around him. This would in part help to justify their perceived superiority and enslavement of him. Similarly, his later drunkenness can be seen as a sign of his projected backwardness.¹¹ The play demonstrates that the white West Indians are 'superior' in every way. Once slavery was abolished in 1834 the play was no longer performed.

⁹ Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*, p.4.

¹⁰ The premise of the play is taken from Cervantes's *El Celoso Extremeno* (1631) in which the protagonist Carrizales becomes obsessively jealous after marrying a young girl. See Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Dos Novelas Ejemplares*, (London: George G. Harrap and Co.Ltd, 1971), p.29.

The second piece was Richard Cumberland's melodrama, *The West Indian*, performed in 1771, which satirises the cultural problems of a wealthy Creole male in England.

Despite his physical whiteness the West Indian protagonist Belcour is shown to be inferior to the Englishman. He arrives in England with inappropriate luggage from Jamaica including, 'grey parrots, a Jamaica sow and pigs, and a mongrove dog'.¹² Belcour sums up the English idea of a West Indian whilst seemingly accepting the notion, "I am an idle dissipated, unthinking fellow, not worth your notice: in short, I am a West Indian".¹³

Some years later the cultural dilemmas of Creoles were highlighted by the response to Margaret Cheer Cameron's *West Indian lady's Arrival in London* (1781). The play offended Jamaican society as the 'lady' used dialect speech. The author argued that her protagonist, '...for a time lay aside the elegance of her character and assumed an awkwardness.'¹⁴ The response reveals how some expatriates expected to live on the islands without adopting the native black aspects of West Indian language and culture.

In addition to the above work Jamaican theatre continued to show European classics and with time the emergence of the black performers was seen. The following highlights what the present writer views as significant developments in Jamaican theatrical activity between 1781 and 1912:

¹¹ Isaac Bickerstaffe, *The Padlock*, (Cork: Anon, 1770), p.26.

¹² Richard Cumberland, *The West Indian*, (Perth: Morison and Son, 1771), p.4.

¹³ Cumberland, *The West Indian*, pp.44-45.

¹⁴ Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*, pp.161.

- 1781 - Reciters and the development of the single performer.
- 1802 - Designated seating for people of colour in Kingston Theatre.¹⁵
- 1813 - John Anderson Costello - The Guyanese actor, the Infant Roscius came to the fore on the Jamaican stage.
- 1824 - French operatic society at Kingston theatre for five months.
- 1827 - Mr and Mrs Castells's Company performed English work only.
- 1829 - The English company performed twice weekly.
- 1841 - The Italian Opera visited Jamaica.
- 1842 - The Monier family performed their work from America including Jamaica's first production of *Othello*.
- 1847 - 1850 at Kingston's Theatre Royal:
Kingston Amateur Association, Philo-Dramatic Association, Amateur Thespian Association, an Amateur French Troupe, Ethiopian Amateur Society, Numidian Amateur Association.¹⁶
- 1850s onwards - Blacks were creating their own theatre with Bruckins and Tea Meetings.
- 1862 - *Obi* or *Three Fingered Jack*. The true story of the runaway slave who waged war on Jamaican plantation society.
- 1865 - The first quartet of Minstrels performed in Jamaica.¹⁷
- 1873 - Charles Rampini published *Letters from Jamaica . . . with Negro Proverbs*, demonstrating white academic interest in native Jamaican speech.

¹⁵ Richardson Wright, *Revels in Jamaica* (New York/London: Benjamin Blom, 1937) p.305.

¹⁶ The black groups did the same work as their white counterparts.

1890 - Reverend D.J. Reynolds wrote the article *Jamaica Proverbial Philosophy* for *Timehri*, the Demerera journal.

1900 - Old Theatre Royal in Kingston was torn down, rebuilt, then destroyed once more by the 1907 earthquake.

1912 - Ward theatre was built in Kingston. The Ward Theatre would later become the home of the annual Christmas pantomime which from 1943 and Louise Bennett's initial performance in *Soliday and the Wicked Bird*, would incorporate more and more black talent.

The first part of the 1900s saw two artistic movements that centred on the development of black performance. The first was the 1920s Harlem Renaissance that produced black writers and performers who placed their blackness centre stage. Though based in the United States the movement had gained international attention, and produced artists such as Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston and the Jamaican Claude McKay.¹⁷ Additionally Jamaica had its anti-colonial champion and political figure in Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), who also played a key role in the Harlem Renaissance.

Garvey had dedicated his life to the development of the black race and in the 1920s formed the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) based in Harlem. He played a fundamental role in the development of Jamaican theatre and the wider West Indies by demonstrating that theatre should have a social responsibility. Stone celebrates Garvey as

¹⁷ Their work encouraged a tradition amongst black and white performers that produced the double acts of Cupes and Abe, Ike and Mike, Harold and Trim, Racca and Sandy. Minstrel work remained successful throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Jamaica with the work of Bim and Bam.

¹⁸ See note on McKay in this chapter under Precursors to Louise Bennett.

being the first West Indian to break the stereotype of blacks as mammy types in subservient roles.¹⁹ In 1930 Garvey's plays *The Coronation of an African King*, *Roaming Jamaicans*, and *Slavery from Hut to Mansion*, were performed in Kingston.

Garvey's plays were accompanied on a literary level by the novels being written by Jamaican artists in the 1930s that were writing about the West Indies from a black perspective. These included: Herbert George De Lisser's *Susan Proudleigh*, *The White Witch of Rose Hall* and *Jane's Career*, and G. Ogilvie's *Ethelred Marlow and One Soja Man*.²⁰ The West Indies was also producing other political artists including Norman Cameron of British Guiana, and Trinidad's CLR James.²¹

Importantly the mood of the Harlem Renaissance was echoed in Europe by the 1930s with the rise of Negritude heralded by Martinique's Aimé Césaire. He encouraged a rejection of French colonialism and embraced his African heritage through theatre. His work was to prove long-lasting, and in 1948 Léopold Sédar Senghor published *New Negro and Malagasy Poetry*, featuring excerpts from Césaire's 1930s *Return to my native land*. In the 1960s Césaire himself launched a resurgence of his Negritude theme in theatre to advance his politics of black consciousness. All of this would provide an artistic and political backdrop for the developing West Indian theatre and the work of Jamaica's Louise Bennett that would influence the development of black theatre in Britain decades later.

¹⁹ Errol Hill, *The Pioneers of West Indian Theatre 1900-1950*, as quoted by Stone in *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, p.17.

²⁰ The present writer is aware that De Lisser may seem an unusual choice here due to his elitist perspective and at best 'ambiguous' attitude to black working class Jamaicans. His inclusion here serves to highlight the contemporary black British perspective of the present writer that celebrates work featuring black characters. This perspective comes from the lack of readily available work featuring a black presence in the education of the majority of second and third generation West Indians educated in Britain throughout the 1960s and the 1970s.

Louise Bennett

1930s Jamaica saw the emergence of one of its most celebrated contemporary performers in writer/performer Louise Bennett. Bennett had been born in Kingston Jamaica on 7 September 1919. It was Bennett's presence and her linguistic style that gave her performance its impact. Her work being epitomised by her dialect performance poetry was drawn in stark contrast to her British colonial education and the mainly British literary influences she had grown up with. Her determination to work in her chosen style ultimately brought her considerable recognition in the shape of many awards. These include an MBE in 1960, the Order of Jamaica in 1974 and an Honorary D. Litt from the University of the West Indies in 1983²²

Precursors

Much of Bennett's eventual fame and recognition stems from the fact that she is regarded as being a pioneer in using Jamaican language in her performance work. Bennett can however be seen as part of a line of Jamaican artists who like herself chose to use the language of the people as the main medium of their work. Morris comments, 'Louise Bennett was not the first West Indian, nor even the first Jamaican poet to make extensive use of dialect. Her best known predecessor in Jamaican dialect verse was Claude McKay.'²³ McKay (1890-1948) started his literary career in Jamaica in 1912 with two

²¹ Talawa's 1986 performance of James's play, *The Black Jacobins* is discussed in Chapter Four and demonstrates the nature of James's political writing.

²² Bennett's career and awards have now been documented by academics, principally Jamaica's Mervyn Morris. Also see internet site: <http://www.pacifinet.net/jaweb/lou-b.01.html> – Louise Bennett, Jamaica Labrish - 20/02/01

²³ Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems*, (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores Ltd., 1982), p. xiv of introduction by Mervyn Morris.

volumes of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* (January) and *Constab Ballads* (November).²⁴

Bennett can however be seen to have a theatrical history that begins a century prior to McKay's work.

In 1781, a new style of acting was introduced to the Jamaican stage when the Hallam's Company began recitals, lead by readers. The recitals featured a single performer who recited known and new poetry in multiple characters. The earliest recitals were based on George Alexander Stevens's satirical monologue *The Lecture on Heads*. Papier mâché busts represented characters who were satirised in turn.

Of the many expatriate, Creole and foreign performers who visited Jamaica to recite, the work of Rafael J. de Cordova who Hill describes as a "humorous reader",²⁵ can be seen to have a similar content to that of Louise Bennett. De Cordova, a wealthy white Jamaican who wrote in the 'standard English' of the period may be seen culturally as Bennett's polar opposite, yet they wrote on the same subjects.

De Cordova wrote *Broadway*, the story of an omnibus ride. Bennett's first dialect poem was *On a Tramcar*. She wrote further on the same subject, *Rough Riding Tram*, *Tan-Up Seat*, *Buy a Tram*, *Bear Up* and *Ole-Time Tram*.²⁶ Additionally, both de Cordova and Bennett wrote extensively on royal visits.

²⁴ Wayne F Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), p.35.

²⁵ Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*, p.191.

De Cordova wrote a poem to celebrate the 1860 royal visit to the United States of the British Prince of Wales, Albert Edward. Some eighty-five years later, and for the next thirty years, Bennett produced works on royal visits. Both *Victory* and *De Victory Parade* written in 1945 celebrated the end of the Second World War and the British victory.²⁷

Bennett's poem *Ben Dung* deals with the visit of Princess Margaret and the Earl of Snowdon to Jamaica's Independence celebrations.²⁸ In 1973 on her Jamaican Broadcasting Company (JBC) radio show *Miss Lou's Views*, Bennett delivered a piece entitled *Dear Princess*, on the honeymoon visit of Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips to Jamaica in the same year.²⁹

Further similarities exist with both writers and their poetry commenting on social situations. Hill states, "During the war years he (de Cordova) produced some of his most enduring pieces such as *Courtship and Marriage*, and its sequel *Our First Baby*".³⁰

Bennett produced similar works as observations in response to the Second World War including *Married*, *Solja Work* and *White Pickney*.³¹ Like her predecessor her comment on social institutions and behaviour was not limited to wartime. She also wrote *Mass Wedding*, *Registration*, *Colour Bar*, and *Pass Fe White*.³²

²⁶ All of the poems appear in Louise Bennett's *Jamaica Labrish* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Store Ltd., 1966), pp.47, 48, 51, 52, &53 respectively.

²⁷ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, pp.106-110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.172.

²⁹ This show ran from 1965 to 1982. Some fifty of these 'views' are presented in Louise Bennett's *Aunty Roachy Seh*, (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores Ltd., 1993), Dear Princess is at p.20.

³⁰ Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*, p.195.

³¹ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, pp. 90-1, 97-98 and 111-112 respectively.

³² *Ibid.*, pp.30-31, 42-43, 211-212 and 212-213 respectively.

Similarities between the work of de Cordova and Bennett are not limited to subject matter alone but can also be seen in their style:

In the tradition of the solo performer de Cordova peopled the stage with a cast of imagined characters “with whom he laughed, and talked and pleaded, and remonstrated, never for a moment losing his identity, or making confusion among his lively motley company”.³³

In the same way Bennett presented multiple characters in her work as seen in her poem *Cus Cus*.³⁴ The popularity of the single performer from de Cordova’s time led to the emergence of readers who unlike de Cordova worked in the patois of the people and hence can be seen to provide a more direct theatrical history to Bennett’s work.

Three performers of this kind are Henry Garland Murray (d.1877) and his two sons Andrew C. Murray and William Coleman Murray. Like Bennett they were black, wrote about Jamaica in the language of the people and displayed overt language behaviour. The elder Murray also used proverbs and Anancy tales in his work as Bennett was to do later.

Their success was enhanced by the fact that they were performing when white intellectuals and leaders of the Kingstonian Presbyterian community were taking an interest in Jamaican language. The case for dialect being carried forward by white intellectuals meant

³³ Hill, *The Jamaican Stage*, p.195.

³⁴ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, pp.188-189

that in 1866 dialect writing occurred in the press for the first time and can now be seen as having started a legacy of scribal overt language behaviour.

A century later, Bennett had her own column in the local press writing in patois. This in turn paved the way for later patois writers who continue Bennett's legacy today. This is seen with Dr Carolyn Cooper's weekly *Zig Zag Talk*, in the *Jamaican Gleaner* written in a Jamaican phonetic script, and Jennifer Kean-Dawes's weekly *Dear Jamaica*. . . in *Outlook Magazine* written in her own brand of Jamaican English. The popularity of both articles gives an indication of the need for the Jamaican public to see forms of their own language in print. Similarly, Bennett's work can also be seen as providing an historical background to more recent works pertaining to the folklore of the Caribbean generally and to Jamaica specifically. This is seen in such works as Elder's *Folk Songs From Tobago*, Marshall, Mc Geary and Thompson's *Folk Songs of Barbados*, and Tanna's *Jamaican Folk Tales and Oral Histories*, all of which aim to document some of the folklore of their respective islands.³⁵

Bennett made a conscious decision to demonstrate what can now be seen as overt language behaviour by working in the vernacular of the people, for the people, at a time when Jamaicans were encouraged to achieve 'standard English' speech. The patois speech of Jamaica's economic poor that Bennett used may have been seen as a form of rebellion

³⁵ D, J, Elder, *Folk Songs from Tobago* (London: Karnak House, 1994). Marshall, McGeary, and Thompson, *Folk Songs of Barbados* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1981). Laura Tanna, *Jamaican Folk Tales and Oral Histories*, no. 1. Jamaica 21 Anthology Series (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica Publications Limited, 1984).

to the language of powerful Jamaican society, and in this context can be described as antilanguage speech.

Bennett's use of patois then took on a political dimension particularly as she used it in the 'standard' English setting of the theatre. For those who supported her work she was seen as '... helping Jamaicans to express their identity and cultural heritage through drama.'³⁶ Those who did not support her use of patois seemed to find it difficult to appreciate her work. This lack of support came generally from the middle classes that had the power to choose to leave her out of published anthologies of West Indian literature despite all printed evidence of her work.³⁷ She was seen as '... a local joke; a good, high-spirited joke, but, in the end, only a joke.'³⁸

By the time Bennett no longer travelled to her audience, they were able to access her work through a variety of forms, including through written stories, readers, and records.³⁹ Her work was also televised principally through her children's programme, *Ring Ding*. It was through the medium of radio however that Bennett's talent would be best transmitted to her audience in the early years. Bennett became so popular on radio that

³⁶ Barbara Gloudon, 'The Hon. Louise Bennett, O.J. Fifty Years of Laughter', *Jamaica Journal*, Vol.19 No.3, Aug/Oct (1986), 10.

³⁷ Mervyn Morris, 'On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously', in *Jamaica Journal*, Vol.1 no.1 (December 1967), 69-74.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.69.

³⁹ Louise Bennett, *Anancy and Miss Lou* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores Ltd., 1979). Bennett recorded her Anancy stories that have been compiled by Morris. In his introduction to the stories Morris places ownership of them with Bennett, p. viii of introduction: 'I say Louise Bennett's Anancy stories, because part of our delight is to hear the voice of Louise Bennett talking from the page. Most of the stories are common property, but in re-telling them Louise Bennett contributes the personal flavour of her own distinctive art'.

when JBC celebrated thirty-five years in business the *Lou and Ranny show* was aired live from the Carib Theatre.⁴⁰ Her Radio show *Aunty Roachy Seh* was aired from 1965 to 1982.

Once Bennett became fashionable the criticism that she had had to accept for many years was put behind her. By the seventies she was widely accepted as a heroine of Jamaican folklore and culture. Academic recognition of her work, whilst praising her also focused on the ill treatment and lack of recognition she had received in the early days.⁴¹ Morris describes her as the 'only poet who has really hit the truth about her society through its own language', and as an important contributor to her country of valid social documents reflecting the ways Jamaicans think and feel and live.'⁴²

In the present writer's view Bennett has also been a major influence on the development of present day language use in black British performance. Her career can be seen to have affected two specific groups of black theatre practitioners in Britain. The first group are those born and raised in Jamaica that would later move permanently to Britain to work in theatre, and secondly are the generations of black Britons born to Caribbean parents who work in the British performance industry today. Of the first group Yvonne Brewster and Linton Kwesi Johnson are perhaps the best known.

Both Brewster and Johnson have been major influences for many black Britons developing a career on stage. Johnson's use of patois in performance, and Brewster's

⁴⁰ Anon, 'JBC – Thirty-five years of Broadcasting', *Outlook Magazine*, 10 July 1994, p.14.

⁴¹ Bennett, *Selected Poems*, p.viii of introduction by Morris. Her work was not included in the Jamaican Anthology Focus (1943, 1948, 1956, 1960) and she was not welcomed as part of the Jamaica Poetry League.

⁴² Morris as quoted by Nettleford in his introduction to Bennett's *Jamaica Labrish*, p.9.

direction of it may now be seen as the historical linguistic background for black British performers following in their footsteps.

Brewster's initial theatrical influence was Bennett, who considered Brewster her protégé. Brewster's work in providing British audiences with performance work in many of the voices of the Caribbean over the past decade is in part due to Bennett's influence. The fact that Brewster may be seen as having been successful in creating and raising the profile of black theatre in Britain remains her own achievement but has both a personal and linguistic theatrical root in Bennett.⁴³

Linton Kwesi Johnson, (unlike Brewster who came to England as a young adult to study and then return to Jamaica), came as a child and came for good. He would form part of a new generation of black people in Britain (those Caribbean immigrants who were less than a generation older than the first generation of blacks born here), all of whom would later be termed 'black Britons'. Johnson was born in Jamaica in 1952 and came to England in 1963. He is now recognised in England and Jamaica alike as a prolific 'dub poet' as he uses his native Jamaican patois as the language of his poetry. Johnson acknowledges Bennett's poetry in BBC television's Arena documentary, *Upon Westminster Bridge*, which is a tribute to the work of fellow 'dub poet' Mikey Smith, famed in Jamaica for his poem *Me Cyaan believe I*. Johnson describes Bennett as revolutionary for her chosen form

⁴³ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 9 January 1997.

of language.⁴⁴ In the same documentary Smith describes her as ‘The mother of Jamaican poets which I think is responsible for all of us.’⁴⁵

Johnson, like Bennett, uses patois uncompromisingly in his work and similarly has secured an audience from the dispossessed and the middle classes alike. Johnson’s language can be seen as a purposeful sign of rebellion and of non-conformity to British linguistic performance standards and as a refusal to be dominated by British colonial attitudes past and present. This rebellion, an echo of the initial development of the language, born out of repression and used as a code,⁴⁶ perhaps demonstrates that in Britain patois speakers are using their language to display both overt language behaviour and that they have a need to use patois as an antilanguage. Johnson’s choice of language can be seen as an intentional political act, which is aimed at, and attracts a specific audience, for whom the message within the antilanguage would be fully understood.⁴⁷ The indigenous language serves to empower the West Indian speaking community in Britain, as well as ensure that white British audiences would find themselves at least partially excluded.

As Jamaican patois has influenced English and particularly London speech over the past four decades, academic interest from a linguistic point of view has also developed. This is

⁴⁴ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Upon Westminster Bridge: A tribute to Jamaica’s dub poet Mikey Smith*, BBC television’s *Arena*, 23 November 1982.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ G. Ilewellyn Watson, *Jamaican Sayings: with notes on Folklore, Aesthetics, and Social Control* (Tallahassee: Florida A&M University Press, 1991), p.6 and p.7 respectively. ‘In the plantation context in which it was hammered out among the blacks, it was important that, as much as possible, the master or white overseer was to be confused linguistically or kept guessing as to the meaning of what later came to be called pidgin or trade language.’ He continues: ‘Clearly, what is so remarkable about these languages is that they could develop under repressive social conditions until they became the first or native language of millions of people.’

⁴⁷ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, pp.168-170.

demonstrated in the work that has been steadily produced on the subject. Such work includes Wells's *Jamaican Pronunciation in London*, Hewitt's *White Talk Black Talk: Inter-racial Friendship and Communication Amongst Adolescents*, and Sebba's *London Jamaican*.⁴⁸ Sebba comments:

...Caribbean usages have spread outwards beyond the Caribbean community itself, so that there are a number of expressions of Caribbean origin now in use in London both within and outside the black community. Speakers from outside the black community, however, may not have any idea of the origin of these expressions, while even those within the black community may not realise their Caribbean connections.⁴⁹

The most recent influence that Jamaican patois has had on London English has been powerful due to both the revolutionary work of the artists using it, as well as the access to patois from other performance media. Whilst this thesis is about theatre, the music industry should be acknowledged for the wider role it has played in bringing patois to Britain and the rest of the world. This has occurred most recently through the widespread popularity of Jamaican music in the last decade.

⁴⁸ C.J.Wells, *Jamaican Pronunciation in London* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), R Hewitt, *White Talk Black Talk: Inter-Racial Friendship and Communication Amongst Adolescents*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Mark Sebba, *London Jamaican* (London: Longman, 1993).

⁴⁹ Sebba, *London Jamaican*, p.59.

One aspect of Jamaican culture is presented through the reggae, dance hall and ragga artists who are now achieving international fame. These include: Beenie Man, Shabba Ranks, Yellow Man, Buju Banton, Patra, Shaggy and Diana King, all of whom use Jamaican patois uncompromisingly and, through the sale of their music, can be seen to be teaching Jamaican patois to the rest of the world. Unlike Bennett, who condemned the use of 'bad' language and curse words, later artists using Jamaican patois often use sexually explicit and violent lyrics. This is seen in Buju Banton's 1994 hit *Boom Bye Bye*, promoting gun violence against gays.

Less obvious artists are buying into Jamaican patois speech and the ragga beat.

International French Canadian pop star, Celine Dion in her 1997 album, *Let's talk about love*, teams up with Diana King, Andy Marvel and Billy Mann, to produce the track, *Treat Her Like a Lady*. Whilst all fifteen tracks on the album discuss aspects of love, *Treat Her Like a Lady*, the only reggae song on the album, deals with the two timing man and the woman who goes to jail for attacking him, (verse two):

Right in her face with another woman

Now she's in jail for attacking her man.

Nettleford's comment in the introduction to *Jamaica Labrish*, although some thirty one years prior to the release of *Treat her Like a Lady* seems sadly confirmed by the lyrics of the song:

Although it has been accepted for entertainment largely through the efforts of people like Louise Bennett, and even though its literary merit is conceded by some, it still carries with it the stigma of ignorance and nonsophistication.⁵⁰

Prior to the introduction of Jamaican patois to the British stage, Jamaican theatre saw various attempts to promote this form of speech. In the fifties and sixties this was seen in the shape of the Yard Plays that discussed the harsh realities of West Indian life using the language of the people. The plays produced throughout and beyond the pre-independence era included; Douglas Archibald's *Junction Village*, and *The Rose Slip*, (Trinidad 1954 and 1962), Barry Reckord's *Della* (Jamaica 1954), Samuel Hillary's *Departure in the Dark*, (Jamaica 1960), Errol Hill's *The Ping Pong* (Trinidad, 1966), Eric Roach's *Belle Fanto* (1966), and Slade Hopkinson's *A Spawning of Eels*, (Guyana 1968).

Although the Yard Plays 'as a coherent body of work was comparatively short-lived, being rooted in a particular time, and largely dependent on that time's particular social conditions',⁵¹ both Hill's *The Ping Pong*, and Douglas's *Junction Village* have been preserved by being published in print form.⁵² Stone suggests that productions of the Yard Plays were popular throughout the Caribbean with Archibald's *Junction Village* and Hilary's *Departure in the Dark* being the most performed to date.⁵³ Whilst the Yard Plays cannot be seen to have had an impact on British theatre Reckord's *Della* was performed at

⁵⁰ Bennett, *Jamaica Labrish*, p.23 of introduction by Rex Nettleford.

⁵¹ Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, p.33.

⁵² Errol Hill, *The Ping Pong* (Trinidad and Tobago: U.W.I. Extra-Mural Department, 1966), and Douglas Arhibald, *Junction Village* (Trinidad and Tobago: U.W.I. Extra-Mural Department, 1967).

the Royal Court Theatre London in 1958, under the new title of *Flesh to a Tiger*.⁵⁴ The Yard Plays are not to be confused with the later Yard Theatre which became popular in the Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad, and whose name came from the use of the yard as a performance space.⁵⁵

The wider advancement of West Indian theatrical activity was helped in the fifties by BBC Radio's *Caribbean Voices* and the first publication of the *Caribbean Plays* series edited by Errol Hill. The introduction of the series into British and Caribbean literature would signal the beginnings of such work being taken as worthy literature on an international level and by extension afforded the work the possibility of being seen as 'serious' performance material.⁵⁶ Additionally Caribbean theatre received an important accolade when Errol John won the *Observer Prize* in Britain (1957), for *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. Along with second, third prize winners, and those awarded an honourable mention John's play was published in 1958.⁵⁷ Of the seven prize winners only Simpson's (one of three third prize winners) *A Resounding Tinkle* was performed at the Royal Court the same year.⁵⁸ John's play was a produced the following year in 1958 (also at the Royal Court).

Running concurrently with the development of Jamaican patois usage on the British stage were two main theatre companies that emerged in Jamaica in the 1960s and 70s. The work exemplified the range of activity that was being produced by a new generation of West Indian artists that continued to use Jamaican patois in performance. Yvonne Clarke and

⁵³ Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, p.33.

⁵⁴ Reckord's work is further discussed below.

⁵⁵ Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, p.33.

⁵⁶ Also see internet site: <http://www.westindiesbooks.com/> - West Indian Literature – 21/02/01

Trevor Rhone set up The Barn in 1965.⁵⁹ This was followed by the emergence of the all female group Sistren.

In 1977 Sistren formed in Jamaica. The company, still in existence, was unique on two grounds; firstly, they were an all-female group, and secondly, they used Jamaican language as the exclusive linguistic mode of their performance work. Their choice of language was both political and strategic. Politically, they sought to return to black women the voice that had been denied them during slavery, whilst strategically they aimed to attract a predominantly working class audience.⁶⁰ The thirteen founder members all came from the Kingston ghettos and were casual labourers. They created *Downpression Get a Blow* under the dramatist Honor Ford-Smith, using the technique of collective creation from actual experiences, to explore exploitation of factory workers. This was followed in 1978 by a second devised piece, *Bellywoman Bangarang*, which explored motherhood. Sistren have subsequently produced on average at least one play a year, including the celebrated *Lionheart Gal* also under the dramatist Honor Ford Smith, using the same technique.⁶¹

In addition to the work of Sistren, theatre in the West Indies developed from the late seventies to include various specialised groups. In Jamaica this has included Jamaican Community Theatre, Children's Theatre and The Gun Court Cultural Movement. The

⁵⁷ Kenneth Tynan, ed., *The Observer Plays* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1958)

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.11 of preface by Tynan.

⁵⁹ The Barn is discussed in Chapter Three.

⁶⁰ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.186.

⁶¹ Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, pp.63-64. Also see Sistren internet site: <http://www.oneworld.org/ni/issue270/sista.htm> – A cartoon in the local Creole language by the Jamaican women's theatre collective, Sistren - 21/02/01

latter consisted of performers serving life sentences at Gun Court Prisons.⁶² This activity was followed in the early eighties, by the innovative Caribbean Lab, which was set up at the Jamaican School of Drama, and was run for three years by Barbadian Earl Warner with the aim of developing indigenous theatrical techniques.⁶³ Whilst Jamaican and wider Caribbean theatre evolved, some of the roots established by Caribbean theatre practitioners would be transported to Britain as these people went to live and work there.

The Development of Black Theatre Practitioners, Theatrical Movements and Groups in Britain, from 1948 to the 1990s

According to Anne Walmsley the black people that were in Britain after the war could be divided into the three following groups: graduates from the West Indies, students from the West Indies and post-war cleaners.⁶⁴ Most of the immigrants belonged to the latter group, and like those who came in the period immediately leading up to, and following independence in the West Indies, theatre was not a priority for them:

. . . do you think the Windrush people were looking about theatre, they was looking 'bout blues dance and how to get somewhere to live and how to find a nice woman . . .⁶⁵

⁶² Omotoso, *The Theatrical into Theatre*, p.85.

⁶³ Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, p.143.

⁶⁴ Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artist's Movement 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London/Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1992), p.xvii of Preface.

⁶⁵ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 9 January 1997.

From the other groups of West Indians and Africans, however, theatrical in-roads had already been made. In 1907, Kobina Sekyi's play *The Blinkards*, 'was the first black play to be published in Britain.'⁶⁶ Despite the little that has been published about the author his friends nicknamed him 'the George Bernard Shaw of West Africa.'⁶⁷ Sekyi's play deals with the Europeanisation of all things African and his:

. . . concern about anglicisation and the inability of the younger generation who had grown up in colonial boarding schools and under missionary influence, to speak the Fante of their ancestors.⁶⁸

Despite Sekyi's efforts and perhaps others like him, black theatrical activity remained minimal throughout the first three decades of the century when black artists were seen on the London stage either in subservient roles or working as musicians and dancers. It was not until the 1940s that significant numbers of black performers appeared.

Achieving considerable success at this time were Paul Robeson playing *Othello* at the Savoy, and Louise Bennett working in repertory theatre and for the BBC's *Caribbean Service*, presenting her own show later that decade entitled *Caribbean Carnival*.⁶⁹

Although acting work for black artists was scarce during this time, both Earl Cameron, (Bermuda), and Cy Grant, (Guyana) made their mark in Britain. Their legacy was later

⁶⁶ Michael McMillan (Theatre Writing Associate), *Black Writing: A Guide for Black Writers* (London: London Arts Board, 1998), p.2 McMillan's spelling of the author's name is 'Kobena Sekeye'. Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards* (London: Heinemann, 1974), p.1 of introduction by J. Ayo Langley, the play is dated as 1915.

⁶⁷ Sekyi, *Blinkards*, p.5 of introduction by Langley.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

added to by writer, Barry Reckord, (Jamaica), and theatre practitioner, Pearl Connor, (Trinidad).

Cameron arrived in England in 1939, and by 1942 was playing a non-speaking role at London's Palace Theatre, in *Chu Chin Chow*. His professional career developed with larger speaking roles in 1943 and 1944 in *The Petrified Forest* and *All God's Children* respectively. During the early part of his career Cameron performed regularly on the London stage, working with Dirk Bogarde, amongst others, as well as touring to India with the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA). In 1950, after working on the stage play, *13 Death Street Harlem*, Cameron got his first film role in *The Pool of London*. This was to be the first of some thirty two films he would make over the next twenty years. On leaving *13 Death Street Harlem* in 1950, Cameron was replaced by Cy Grant.⁷⁰

Cy Grant arrived in Britain in 1941 and joined the Airforce. After the war Grant became a Barrister, although he never worked in law. After taking over from Cameron, his run in *13 Death Street Harlem* secured him a minor role in the Olivier Company, with whom he later toured to America. Grant's career like that of Cameron saw him working with major artists including Joan Collins and Richard Burton (*Seawife*, 1956). His career was both made and perhaps broken in 1957 however when he worked on BBC television's *Tonight*. Grant became a household name presenting aspects of the news in calypso for three years. The role had stereotyped him and hampered his acting career. He found he was not being

⁶⁹ Ashante Infantry, 'Jamaican 'royal' reigns here by fostering joy of language', *Toronto Star*, 3 February 1996, p.A2.

considered for serious acting roles. Grant went on to work in theatre, films, television and radio throughout the following decades, and like his contemporary Cameron, continues to live and work in London.⁷¹ The main obstacle that both Cameron and Grant faced in developing their careers was in the fact that their colour would generally have made them unsuitable for parts in traditional British theatre. Material written for black performers was limited and where it did exist was confined to minor roles. This would change by the late 1950s, with the above-mentioned success of Errol John, and the later work of Barry Reckord.

Reckord, who had graduated from Cambridge saw his plays performed at London's Royal Court Theatre for six successive years between 1958 and 1963, including *Flesh to a Tiger* (originally *Della*), *You in Your Small Corner*, *Skyvers*, *X*, and *Liberated Woman*. Whilst he achieved personal success, he attributes the general lack of it in black theatre to backstabbing amongst black performers.⁷²

It was perhaps the work of Pearl Connor that most clearly aimed at bringing London's black performers together. Although Connor did not perform in her own right she became an important port of call for all black performers throughout the fifties and sixties. Having married actor and fellow Trinidadian Edric Connor the couple set up the Edric Connor Agency in 1956, aiming to represent Afro-Asian and Caribbean artists. The agency sought work for performers as well as campaigned for artists' rights through equity. Edric

⁷⁰ From video recorded interview with Earl Cameron by David Johnson, Cameron's London home, 29 May 1997.

⁷¹ From video recorded interview with Cy Grant by David Johnson, Grant's London home, 7 May 1997.

⁷² From video recorded interview with Barry Reckord by David Johnson, Reckord's London home, 22 April 1997.

Connor, though 'the first black actor to play at Stratford upon-Avon', (where he played Gower in *Pericles*, directed by Tony Richardson in 1958), knew how difficult it was for black performers to get work.⁷³

The company provided dancers for stage shows and films, including the 1963 film classic *Anthony and Cleopatra*, directed by Zanuck and Mankiewicz starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Many of the artists who came through the agency form part of what is now increasingly recognised as a black British theatre legacy. These include; Joan Armatrading, Floella Benjamin, Patti Boulaye, Ena Bab, Nadia Catouse, Mona Hammond, Bosco Holder, Ram John Holder, Horace James, Elroy Joseph, Barry Johnson, Carmen Munroe, Everol Puckering, Lloyd and Barry Reckord, Johny Sekka, Nina Baden Semper and Coreen Skinner. Additionally Connor founded The Negro Theatre Workshop in 1963.⁷⁴

In the same year, black theatre developed further in Britain when Trinidad's John La Rose, Barbados's Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Jamaica's Andrew Salkey founded The Caribbean Artist's Movement (CAM). The work of the Movement from 1966 to 1972 is detailed in Walmsley's text, and demonstrates the Movement's commitment and determination to developing West Indian theatre and literature in Britain.

CAM's first public reading was held on 3 March 1967 at London's Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre. The meeting at which Braithwaite read *Rights of Passage* was to be the first of

⁷³ From video recorded interview with Pearl Connor by David Johnson, Connor's London home, 25 June 1997.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

monthly reunions to take place over the next three years. By the second meeting the group was already discussing the importance of West Indian language based work, particularly, that of Louise Bennett, and Calypsonian, Sparrow.⁷⁵ This marked the beginnings of their quest for appropriate cultural representation.

Eight months later, the Movement held a conference at the University of Kent on 10 November 1967. Amongst the group were; Lloyd Reckord, Marina Maxwell, Evan Jones, Ram John Holder, Celia Robinson and Pearl Connor. Whilst some members saw black people as living in the ghettos of the world and as the world's true proletariat, Pearl Connor's message was concerned with theatre standards:

We must have a critical faculty about ourselves. We can't just be submerged in self-love for our own peoples' sake, we must give them a standardlet us present this thing properly.⁷⁶

Connor's plea was twofold; as performers they should aim high, whilst seeking, as West Indians, to give the fairest impression of themselves and their cultural identity. Having made themselves responsible for the theatrical representation of West Indian culture in Britain, they could not afford to do bad work.

The question of how they should present themselves would cause difficulties as the newly immigrated West Indian was not the same as the West Indian back home, and with time

⁷⁵ Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement*, p.68.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.117.

would become less so. Increasingly, impressions of home were based partly on nostalgia whilst the language that had originally so clearly defined each islander would, with time, become transformed. Dealing with all of these changes, and the fact that few were trained in theatre resulted in Brewster's opinion, in a series of 'amateurish' performances.⁷⁷

At the second conference in 1968, Stuart Hall continued the cultural identity theme:

. . .it is only the very deep breaking of links with that complex past which I think happens not in the first but in the second and third immigrant generations that we begin to see what the truly immigrated West Indian is actually like.⁷⁸

During the 'angry decade' in British theatre the question of immigration had been entirely ignored.⁷⁹ Ironically, Black Britons were being created at this point. This theatrical and political climate encouraged the emergence of a new kind of black theatre in Britain throughout the 1970s.

The work of Roland Rees and Clive Barker with Interraction at this time opened the theatrical door to many black artists. This gave black performers a chance to be seen. In 1970 Roland Rees directed Matura's *Black Pieces* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), and in 1971 Matura's *As Time Goes By* was performed both in Edinburgh and at

⁷⁷ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 2 October 1998.

⁷⁸ Warmlesley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement*, p.163.

⁷⁹ Jatinder Verma, 'Cultural Transformations', in *Contemporary British Theatre*, ed. by Theodore Shank (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 48-60 (p.55).

London's Royal Court. Twenty years later in 1991 Matura's play *The Coup* was the first Caribbean play to be performed at London's National Theatre.⁸⁰

Many of the artists who worked with Interraction became key players in the development of black theatre. Amongst them; Mustafa Matura, Mona Hammond, Oscar James, Alfred Fagin, Carmen Monroe, and Horace James. Brewster acknowledges Interraction's work, 'It was a platform because there was no other platform as black people were not going to be given any money to do things like that.'⁸¹

In the early seventies, the Dark and Light Theatre Company was formed by Frank Cousins, and produced work which used African theatrical, West Indian and African English language forms. From its inception to its closure in 1977, the company produced; *Evolution of the Blues*, by John Hendricks, *Kataki*, by Shiman Wincalbert, *The Slave*, by Amiri Baraka, *The Tenant*, by Richard Cron, *Raas*, by Robert Lamb, *Anansi and Brer Englishman*, by Manley Young, *Twisted knots*, *Dark Days and Light Nights*, and *Jericho*, by Jamal Ali, *Jumbie Street March*, by T. Bone Wilson, and *Seduced*, by Jimi Rand. The company became the Black Theatre of Brixton and existed into the eighties.⁸² This work in turn can be seen to have encouraged continued black theatrical development. In the late seventies, Alton Kumolo founded Temba Theatre Company, who within two years had produced more black work than the English theatre had done in the last twenty five.⁸³ Despite the impressive record of performance work, Temba under the direction of Alby James was forced to fold in 1990 due to lack of funding.

⁸⁰ Stone gives an account of Matura's success, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre*, pp.167-173.

⁸¹ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 2 October 1998.

Throughout the seventies, the voice of black theatre developed due to the efforts of black artists as well as available funding. The Greater London Council (GLC), offered financial support to black theatre and other 'minority' projects under a Labour Government. As the political climate changed, so did interest in the development of such projects, and the people such funding benefited. On 31 January 1978, Margaret Thatcher (as Leader of the Opposition) was quoted in the *Daily Mirror*:

People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture . . .the British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world, that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.⁸⁴

Thatcher's victory in 1979, followed by eighteen years of Conservative Government did not nurture 'minority' arts. Their major source of funding was soon cut in the early eighties with the abolition of the GLC. This however, did not stop the renaissance of black theatre in the 1980s, which featured those already mentioned along with a new generation of black British artists, whose ideas, expectations, experiences and language differed from that of previous generations. From this talent a wealth of theatre companies emerged, including; Black Mime Theatre, Black Theatre Co-op, Carib, Double Edge, Hounslow Arts Co-op, L'Ouverture, Roots Theatre, Tamasha, Talawa, Theatre of Black Women, and

⁸² McMillan, *Black Writing*, p.3.

⁸³ McMillan, loc.cit.

⁸⁴ Mary Karen Dahl, 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre Drama and Performance*, ed. by J. Ellen Gainor (London: Routledge, 1995) pp.38-55 (p.46).

Umoja. All were using African theatrical/ritual forms, and non-‘standard English’ speech. Talawa added to this, their innovative work on the classics.⁸⁵

The work of the above groups highlighted the multiplicity of what the black theatrical experience had to offer. Additionally, a wealth of black theatre meant that neither individuals nor groups would become marginalised, and that no one group could be held up as a flagship. As the legacy of funds from the late seventies and early eighties dried, companies folded and individuals either left England, or gave up theatre entirely. As the nineties approached, the future of black British theatre looked bleak. For those who remained in existence, they would both be held up as flagships as well as be marginalised from mainstream theatre as being for a ‘minority’ audience.

Apart from the individual success in the nineties of Brewster directing Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* at the National Theatre (1991), the general success of her company, and Matura’s work, much of the black theatre to emerge in the nineties has come from black British artists. The BiBi Crew (all female), and The Posse (all male), both started at The Theatre Royal Stratford East performing devised work around identity and topical issues in a mixture of West Indian speech forms, ‘standard English’ and, black British speech. This period also saw new comedy artists such as Llewella Gideon, Angie La Mar and Felicity Ethnic, whose issues and stance parallel those of their performance ancestor

⁸⁵ See Chapter Six, The English Plays.

Louise Bennett. In the male role we see Felix Dexter, along with the comedy duos of Jefferson and Whitfield, and Curtis and Ishmael.⁸⁶

Black British playwrights have remained faithful to the stage and have continued to produce work that gives black actors new and challenging roles conceived from a contemporary black British perspective. This work includes; Caryl Phillips's *Strange Fruit*,(1988) and *Where There Is Darkness*,(1990), Killian Gideon's *England Is De Place For Me*,(1985), Winsome Pinnock's *A Hero's Welcome*,(1990) and *Rock in the water*,(1989), Trish Cook's *Back Street Mammy*,(1991) and, *Running Dream*,(1992), and Edgar White's *Redemption Song*,(1993).

With the work of previous generations, and the coming of age of a third generation of British born blacks, black theatre is now ready to define itself. The multiple definitions heaped upon the black community, (and by extension black theatre), from those outside it are being shed. Half-caste, coloured, multicultural, Afro-Caribbean and black, may not be the words that black theatre practitioners choose to define themselves. Black theatre practitioners must now provide what they regard as the appropriate alternatives, 'Let's have some definition coming from the people who are being defined, rather than it coming from those who will define us.'⁸⁷

⁸⁶ It should be noted that whilst this last group are all stage performers they have gained widespread public attention through their regular television appearances.

⁸⁷ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 2 October 1998.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY OF TALAWA

The aim of this chapter is to present a history of Talawa Theatre Company. This is achieved through a tripartite discussion:

In part one a brief biography of Artistic Director Yvonne Brewster is presented.¹

In order for Talawa's performance work to be understood the context and definition of Talawa as a black British theatre company is analysed in part two. This section also offers a definition of black British theatre and examines Talawa's mission statement. This is followed by an explanation of the popular theatre and classical theatre forms that make up the genre of contemporary black British theatre. In part three an analysis of Talawa's residency at The Cochrane Theatre is presented along with an outline of Talawa's projects developed during and after the residency.

Part One – Biography of Yvonne Brewster

On 6 October 1939 Yvonne Brewster, née Clarke, was born into an upper middle class family in Kingston Jamaica. She attended St. Hilda's boarding school for girls where her father sat on the Board of Governors. Efforts to expel her were exercised on more than one occasion, once for disguising her Daphne Du Maurier *Frenchman's Creek* as *The Bible*, and again for translating the school's latin motto into Jamaican patois.

¹ Biographical details are taken from interviews with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 9 and 16 January 1997.

At seventeen she set off for England accompanied by a chaperone and stayed at the Cumberland Hotel. She became England's first black female drama student by attending the Rose Bruford School of Speech and Drama where she studied speech, drama and mime. On entry, Brewster was warned, 'You'll never work. We'll take your money but you'll never work... you do know this don't you?' She is now patron of Rose Bruford.

Whilst at drama school Brewster became familiar with the work of European international writers and theatre practitioners including; Brecht, Chekhov, Ibsen, Shakespeare and Strindberg. As she had come to England knowing that she would be studying European theatre she did not expect her Jamaican roots to feature in her work. Brewster however, saw the opportunity to use non 'standard English' when performing poetry arguing that poetry is personal and has its own voice. As this view was not encouraged at Rose Bruford at the time Brewster knew that her decision to work in this way meant that she could be threatened with course failure, and she took additional examinations at the Royal College of Music.

After four years studying in Britain Brewster returned to Jamaica where she taught drama before taking up a post as a radio presenter and producer, soon moving to produce and present her own show for The Jamaican Broadcasting Company (JBC). Additionally, Brewster recognised that there was a need for a national theatre in Jamaica and set up The Barn.²

² All of the information on The Barn (which to date remains undocumented) is taken from an interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 9 January 1997.

The Barn

The Barn, established in 1965 as Jamaica's first professional theatre company was designed by Brewster's father. The theatre (seating one hundred and forty four) was built in the garage of their Kingston home. The Barn was named after the practice theatre at Rose Bruford and also after Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca's (1899 -1936) theatre, La Barraca, which translates as The Barn.

The idea for The Barn was developed by Brewster and her contemporaries who had also been studying theatre abroad: Trevor Rhone had also studied at Rose Bruford, Leonie Forbes had been at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London (R.A.D.A) and Sydney Hibbert had studied in America. They had expected to return home to Jamaica and 'set the world on fire.'³ What they found however, was a theatre set up that continued to be dominated by expatriates.

In The Barn they were free to do the work they wanted to. At the time unable to find any West Indian plays that interested them they ran through modern classics including Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888) and Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1958). This was new work to the island as theatrical tradition was largely pantomime and some Shakespeare. The latter was produced by the expatriate Paul Methuen who ran The Garden Theatre.

The Barn members soon turned to creating their own work that can now be seen to have launched Rhone as a writer and Brewster as a director. They based their work on the experiences they had had abroad, and how on returning to Jamaica they felt that they were

regarded as ridiculous because of the perception that they were spoilt. They also found that they were subject to ridicule because of the way they spoke as their Jamaican English was now peppered with words and intonation from either England or North America. As a response to this they devised *It's Not My Fault Baby: A play in dialect* (1966). Whilst performance work in dialect was not new to the island, The Barn presented a new forum for this kind of work to thrive in without excluding the middle class Jamaicans who were also accustomed to attending the expatriate style of performance.

Thirty-six years on The Barn presents four plays each year. It is non-profit making ensuring that Jamaicans can access cheap theatre. Groups are not permitted to stay for longer than three months to guarantee that profits are not made. Although there is no artistic policy the work shown must have a black perspective and/or be written and directed by a black artist:

Young Jamaican artists especially playwrights, must have a place where they can put their work on without too much expense and know that they will get an audience. My wish is that we produce more playwrights and the only way we can do this is if they can get a chance to put their work on..... so I subsidise.⁴

After more than a decade of artistic success in Jamaica Brewster returned to England, this time for good.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Brewster's career in England from the 1970s saw her displaying film making talents as production manager and assistant director on; *The Harder They Come* (1970), *Smile Orange* (1975) and *The Marijuana Affair* (1976). As a filmmaker she also produced and cast for BBC television; *The Fight Against Slavery* (1975), *My Father Sun Sun Johnson* (1976), and later *Romeo and Juliet* (1997). Brewster also produced *The Gods Are Not To Blame* (1995) for BBC radio. Continuous and successful projects have meant that her renown as a director has spread beyond Britain and Jamaica where she is best known. In 1997 Brewster directed Harold Pinter's *The Lover* (1997) in Florence.⁵

Brewster has donated her time generously to the positive development of British theatre where she can be seen to have maintained a prominent and respected position. She has sat on numerous theatre boards including Arts Council Committees (she was Drama officer of the Arts Council), The Black Theatre Forum, The British Council's Drama and Dance Advisory Committee, The Gulbenkian enquiry into Director training in Britain along with numerous theatre enquiries. Brewster presently sits on The London Arts Board, The Royal Victoria Hall Foundation, The Theatres' Trust, and The Riverside Mental Health Trust. She is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. In 1993 Brewster received an OBE for her work in the arts, along with an Arts Council Woman of Achievement Award. Of all her achievements Brewster is probably best known for her role as co-founder and to date only Artistic Director of Talawa Theatre Company. Talawa, has however, not existed in isolation and forms part of a contemporary genre in British theatre defined as black British.

⁵ See internet site: <http://www.talawa.com/yvonnebrewster.htm> – Yvonne Brewster – 08/03/01

Part Two – Black British Theatre

For the present writer an important part of defining black theatre in Britain is in clarifying that the practitioners responsible for the genre can be divided into two groups that have worked together. In Roland Rees's *Fringe First*, Caribbean theatre practitioners living and working in Britain and later black British theatre practitioners are all considered in the same group of people producing black British theatre. The fusion of the two groups may be explained by the fact that it is the former who originally performed on the British stage whilst the latter are their British-born theatrical descendants. Their issues, experiences, attitudes and expectations (those of the latter group) are however not identical to their Caribbean theatrical forebears.⁶

In the first section of Rees's text the artists interviewed were all born and raised in the Caribbean but started their professional theatrical working life through the author's company, Interaction, in London. The artists taking part in the discussion are: Mustafa Matura, Stefan Kalipha, Oscar James and Malcolm Fredericks all from Trinidad, and Norman Beaton, T-Bone Wilson and Gordon Case from Guyana.⁷ Whilst the interviews allow each practitioner the opportunity to describe how he came to work in theatre and provide needed documentation on this aspect of black British theatre the speakers' attitudes display a feeling of repaying a debt to Rees:

⁶ The difference in attitude of these two groups is demonstrated in Roland Rees's, *Fringe First: Pioneers of Fringe Theatre on Record* (London: Oberon, 1992).

James:

. . . . if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have made it in theatre. I am really grateful to you and all the time you put into those plays, because as far as black theatre goes, nobody cared until you came along and got in there and did it.⁸

Later black British theatre practitioners can be seen to have a less 'grateful' attitude. This may stem from the groundwork having been done for them. Additionally, British born black theatre practitioners may feel that it is their right to have access to the British stage as Britain is their only home. Those who worked before them, were (despite their British colonial nationality) foreigners, and perhaps did not expect to be given the same professional opportunities as their white counterparts. Interviewed by Rees Pauline Black demonstrates what the present writer sees as a contemporary black British proactive stance, ' . . . if you, in the RSC and National won't cast us, then we will do that work ourselves and cast all the parts with black actors.'⁹

Black's comment points to what can be seen as an essential ingredient in the longevity of Brewster's work which is characterised by her belief that black theatre practitioners should not only create their own work but define themselves. For Brewster lack of self-definition on the British stage will lead to non-white theatre practitioners falling under the heading of, 'culturally diverse theatre . . .this is the term used by the London Arts Board for all

⁷ Rees, *Fringe First*, pp.96-116.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.105.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

minority theatre . . . meaning . . . when the black people come and muddy up the water.’¹⁰

The present writer suggests that such a dilution of cultures will lead to poor representation across a range of cultures and will be less likely to be used to inform theatregoers of the cultural heritage facts of their specific communities. In addition to this ‘culturally diverse’ may be perceived by audiences and practitioners alike as an inferior form of theatre as it is not a central part of mainstream performance. Brewster points to the fact that this is already reflected in the attitude of some black performers, ‘People don’t even want to say that they are in black theatre. . . they don’t want to be associated with something that is always on the fringes, no money.’¹¹

It is perhaps partly due to the above and similar ways of thinking expressed here by Black and Brewster that contemporary black British theatre emerged in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. This emergence coincided with the coming of age of many second and third generation blacks in Britain. The new theatrical activity gave black practitioners a creative forum for developing their own theatrical voice within the contemporary British context. In spite of the fact that black theatre practitioners were seeking to create their own work, their efforts were not generally recognised by the mainstream. This has meant that the work achieved has not always been documented thus giving rise to a lack of clarity around the precise dates of when companies started and when specific productions occurred. Additionally, very few of the companies that emerged at this time appear to have kept systematic records, or even collections of accessible programmes for their own

¹⁰ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 2 October 1998.

¹¹ Ibid.

productions. Contemporary researchers find that they are often dependent on the memories of those that were involved in the work at the time for a record of events.

As the companies came onto the theatrical scene many pointed to their black identity by their names. Black Mime, The Black Theatre Forum, and The Black Theatre Co-operative amongst them. The names not only acted as an identification tag but can also be seen as a rejection of the historical negation of words preceded by 'black'.¹² In Britain the negative notions and images that have surrounded black people and their language can be seen to have played a central part in encouraging the lack of development of black performers on the British stage.¹³ This theatrical and cultural history may be deemed responsible for having left contemporary black theatre practitioners reinventing themselves and redefining their work as they attempt to find a permanent place for their art, and give it a clear oral and non-spoken performance vocabulary on the modern British stage.

The work of the modern black theatre companies in Britain generally fits into and continues to be defined by one or more of the following categories:

- The work is usually performed by black people from Africa, and/or the Caribbean or their British born descendants.
- The work has a black theme that deals with issues affecting aspects of black life.

¹² See discussion of the language of the British stage in Chapter Six.

- The work is usually written and directed by black theatre practitioners.

Whilst some of the black theatre groups and their work may have naturally fallen into some or all of the above categories, such definition was also encouraged by the requirements of funding bodies. In the case of many early black theatre companies funding could only be secured by doing defined 'black' work as is discussed with the inception of Talawa (outlined below). Additionally, in 1986 the Arts Council of Great Britain introduced an Ethnic Minority Arts Policy giving 4% of any subsidy offered to a theatre company to the development of work for black artists within the company.¹⁴ The fact that a percentage of the funding life span of a theatre company was (and perhaps still is), measured by the company's employment of black artists may be seen to have given such black theatre practitioners a 'political' dimension that they would not otherwise have requested for themselves. In this light the present writer suggests that boundaries put in place by the criteria of funding bodies can be seen to have denied black theatre practitioners the possibility of exploring creatively.

Black theatre practitioners working in Britain may be seen to face a further creative dilemma that stems purely from their colour. The dilemma is threefold. If the work has a black cultural stance they are running the risk of marginalising themselves and this in turn may affect the amount and type of funding that they receive. Marginalisation can be seen to be particularly problematic where the starting point of the company's creative work is within a genre that is not fully celebrated on the British stage as in the case of black

¹³ Ibid.

theatre. Secondly choosing to do black cultural work may also encourage the company to be held up as a flagship for the genre leaving no space for expansion within or, indeed, beyond the genre. This would also be detrimental to other black performance groups that would not be able to thrive if all mainstream focus was on one black company. Finally, if black theatre practitioners do identical work to their white counterparts they may be seen as producing more of the same and will stand little chance of being considered for funding. For the present writer it is important for able black performers to be seen in the widest possible range of performance work if black performers are to be cast more for their talent than their colour. Seeing black performers working only in designated black performance work would give the false impression that this is the only work that they can do.

The expectations and desires that black theatre practitioners have for their own work may include those who wish to cover a full range of cultural work, to those who wish to concentrate on presenting what they perceive to be uniquely theirs. Others may wish to cross between the two. Carlson suggests that regardless of the wishes of black theatre practitioners, their work will be highlighted by contemporary theatre because of what is different about them.¹⁵ These perceived differences may also help exclude them from mainstream theatre. Despite having to work around the kinds of restrictions outlined above, it is the present writer's belief that Talawa has continuously determined its own

¹⁴ Elizabeth Clarke, 'Black Theatre in England: A Perspective', in *Banja: A Magazine of Barbadian Life and Culture*, No.2 (1988), 60-64 (p.63).

¹⁵ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London, Routledge, 1986), pp.144-164.

agenda within what has been on offer and has consequently been able both explore and develop whilst securing funding.

Talawa Theatre Company was set up in 1985. Talawa, whose name comes from the Jamaican word of West African origin 'Tallawah', meaning little but tough made history by becoming the first professional black theatre company in Britain. The founder members of Talawa along with Yvonne Brewster were Mona Hammond, Carmen Munroe and Inigo Espejel.

Talawa's inception can be seen to have come about due to the offer of culturally specific funding as Brewster was asked to direct a black theatre performance as part of a season to celebrate the life and work of Trinidadian writer and activist CLR James. The production would be funded as part of the Greater London Council's (GLC) (Race Equality Unit) 'Black Experience Arts Programme' dedicated to enhancing the profile of black work. For the present writer, the impact of Talawa's first performance responding to the request of the funding body meant that Talawa's work could not avoid becoming political in the funding arena. Additionally, Brewster was aware that the political subject matter of the chosen production (CLR James's *The Black Jacobins*) along with that of the overall showcase meant that Talawa's initial work would be seen by the press as essentially black and political:

I don't see anything wrong with having a political reason
for wanting to do something artistic, but what particularly

pleases me about this production is that I began by wanting to revive it because I thought that the politics of CLR James were so immensely important to black people in this country today. Then I realised that not only are the politics correct, but it is also a smashing play.¹⁶

Receiving GLC funds also opened the company's eyes to the funding body's notion of the quality of work that it could expect from a non-white theatre company when Talawa were asked, 'What do you want with six weeks of rehearsals, black plays don't need more than three.'¹⁷ Brewster went ahead with the production despite this challenge, because of the strength of her belief that 'Theatrically speaking, England is the most receptive place in the world.'¹⁸

The fact that Brewster took this opportunity to start a black theatre company and not simply work on a particular black production may be seen as a sign of her desire to create a forum where black theatre in Britain could begin to establish and define itself. The company would also be able to provide a space for black performance artists to develop in as an adjunct to any other formal theatre educational training and/or experience they may have.

¹⁶ Lyn Gardener, Interview with Yvonne Brewster, *City Limits*, 21-27 February 1986, p.75.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

As Talawa has continued to receive funding for the past fifteen years it may be suggested that the company has steadily increased in recognition. After initial funding from the GLC, Talawa received continuous funding from The Arts Council of England until 1994.

When Talawa moved into its permanent base at The Cochrane Theatre the company also received funding from the London Arts Board. Since 1994 The London Arts Board has remained Talawa's core revenue funding body. As Talawa's work and range of projects has evolved the company has received further funding from a wide body of organisations from 1993 to 2001.¹⁹ Whilst Talawa's initial work may have been at least partly guided by funding criteria, the range of funding that the company is now able to attract suggests that it is recognised as a reputable company as much as for being able to meet a wide range of funding criteria.

The present writer believes that if black theatre companies aim to keep their identity and have a medium to long term life span on the fringe circuit (and possibly in the mainstream), they need to be clear about their aims and should not be seduced by funding criteria. Talawa Theatre Company has addressed these issues since its inception and has consequently been Britain's longest running contemporary black British theatre. Although Talawa's coming into existence may be seen as accidental or be attributed to Brewster's

¹⁹ During this period Talawa has received funding from the following organisations: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Baring Foundation, John Lewis Partnership, Stoll Moss Theatres, Lionel Rogosin, British Telecom, Contact Theatre, Ward Theatre Foundation, British Council, London Weekend Television, John Lyons, London Hispanic Foundation, Department for the Environment, Cilntec, Wates Foundation, Princes Trust, LAB Women Writers, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Esmee Fairbairn, The London Institute and The Festival Theatre.

identifying and seizing of an opportunity the company developed a mission statement setting out the company's three main aims as:²⁰

- To use black culture and experience to further enrich British theatre.
- To provide high quality productions that reflect the significant creative role that black theatre plays within the national and international arena.
- To enlarge theatre audiences from the black community.

Talawa's first aim would add a new dimension to British theatre by presenting African and Caribbean cultures and societies in performance. European classical and modern texts would also be explored bringing to them relevant issues of black African/Caribbean and British life that may be ignored by the wider mainstream British theatre companies. The second aim was to move black theatre out of small church halls. Moving black Theatre into the middle/large scale arena could help to establish a sense of seriousness around the genre that had hitherto not existed. Finally, prior to the conscious development of black theatre in Britain, black people may generally have seen British theatre as largely irrelevant to them in terms of cultural representation. This may have inspired a feeling that mainstream British theatre was not targeted at Africans, West Indians, and their subsequent British-born offspring. Additionally, the cost of theatre tickets may have been regarded as an unnecessary expense and may have limited black

²⁰ Talawa's original policies are found in Talawa's company profile. See internet site: <http://www.talawa.com/index.htm> – Who is Talawa?: Talawa's Profile and Mission Statement – 06/03/01

attendance at the British theatre. Talawa's third aim then was to create theatre that would show black people that British theatre was not one dimensional but relevant, accessible and affordable.

Talawa's mission can be signalled as part of the fabric that has made the company's longevity possible on the British stage. In addition to this is the fact that Talawa is placed at the upper end of what the present writer sees as a black British theatre continuum. This status has been achieved by the style of work that the company has chosen to do. The present writer believes that the work produced within the genre of contemporary black British theatre can be divided into two groups:

- Popular Theatre.
- Classical Theatre.

These two forms are not unique to contemporary black British theatre. In Hill's description of two theatre forms developing in Jamaica this century he refers to Folk Theatre and Art Theatre. These correspond to the present writer's notion of the popular and classical forms in contemporary black British theatre:

The Folk Theatre enriches the Art Theatre, gives it validity and meaning, while the Art Theatre seeks to interpret folk performance, to give what is a communal, traditional form an individual and personal

voice and vision.²¹

One of the central distinguishing factors between the forms is seen in the oral language of performance. Popular Theatre often uses 'dialect' speech both in Britain and the Caribbean. As Caribbean language forms have low international status their role in performance in the Caribbean was initially seen to have a limited though very specific function:

Years ago, when West Indian plays were first written, dialects were often used in plays for comic purposes, the implication being that dialect speakers were illiterate and therefore not deserving of serious attention.²²

In Britain such speech (that of the Afro-Caribbean working class) had no place at all on the established British stage.

Despite the initial and, to a degree, continued low status given to native Caribbean speech in performance, Caribbean language in performance in the Caribbean has evolved to make it accessible across the region. This has been achieved through the standardisation of native Caribbean speech for performance. For the present writer standardisation has consisted of making Caribbean speech in its spoken and written forms more akin to 'standard English' speech. Omotoso points to the problems of orthography posed by

²¹ Errol Hill, *The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900: Profile Of A Colonial Theatre* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p.280.

standardisation by comparing extracts from work by Trinidad's Rupert Douglas Archibald in 1967 and 1972:

ELLY: No. Ah didn wan'ter opset him onduly. He did get de four years hard labour, an' den day bring he out on anudder charge, an' de judge say is two moh years, an' he wouldn let it run current. So Ernes' spirits was low.

And:

ISODORE: I has me drain to dig, and me tree to prune, and me garden to plant. That is the first thing I has to do. Then I has this house to fix up, and a kitchen to build on, with shed, at the back of it. And all the furniture does need to be fix. (pause) The place all right for one man. But, rather, I has me pride, and Elsie must have only the best there is.²³

Clearly the orthography of the second extract has been standardised thus enabling any literate English speaker to read and understand the text. Only the most obvious differences from the 'standard English' usage, such as the third person 'has', and 'me' used as the possessive pronoun 'my' indicate what the text should sound like.

²² Michael Gilkes, *Couvade*, as quoted by Omotoso, *The Theatrical into Theatre*, p.148.

²³ Omotoso, *The Theatrical into Theatre*, p.151. Omotoso has taken the first extract from Rupert Douglas Archibald's *The Rose Slip* (Trinidad and Tobago: U.W.I. Extra-Mural Department, Caribbean Plays, Full

For the black British theatre practitioners emerging from the 1980s the questions of orthography have not been the same as for their Caribbean predecessors. The black British companies either worked from established Caribbean scripts (scripts written in ‘standard English’), which can be regarded as a result of the standardisation process, or as in the case of those working within the popular genre they entirely devised their work. One of the most successful²⁴ companies working on the British stage in the popular genre throughout the 1980s and 1990s is the Jamaican Oliver Samuels Company performing the *Boops* plays.²⁵

In the *Boops* plays the central theme is of a working class Jamaican woman using a man for her material gain. He is her ‘boops’. The work can be seen as light-hearted diversion with social comment thrown in for good measure. In addition to the work being available to British audiences through tours all of the shows are recorded onto video. The most recent show and video is the *Big Yard* plays dealing with the struggle of life in a tenement yard in Kingston (set in the early 1990s), which discusses the inhabitants’ dream of a better life.²⁶

Both the *Boops* and *Big Yard* plays are comedies in which the characters laugh at their difficult life situation. Much of the comedy is also rooted in the language of the performance. The characters use the Jamaican language of the monolingual patois speaker

Length, no.4, 1967), p.37, and the second by the same author is taken from *Island Tide* (Trinidad and Tobago: U.W.I. Extra- Mural Department, Caribbean Plays, Full Length, no.6, 1972), p.55.

²⁴ Success here is measured by the company’s sell out tours.

²⁵ During both the 1980s and 1990s the London performances have taken place at both the Lewisham Theatre and the Hackney Empire. See internet site: <http://www.hackneyempire.co.uk/html/about.htm> – The Hackney Empire – 06/03/01

and laugh at their 'misuse' of 'standard English'. This is demonstrated through using words in the wrong context and by the invention of new and generally long words aimed at giving greater weight to the point that the character is making. This type of language use can be seen to be a trademark of the popular genre.

In contrast to Omotoso's example above, Oliver Samuels and Company have not refined their performance language for black British audiences and demonstrate uncompromising overt language behaviour. This choice of language has been beneficial in enabling the company to be specific in targeting its British-based Jamaican-patois-speaking audience.

The British audience for this work can be divided into the following three groups:

- Non-professional Caribbean blacks who arrived and have remained in Britain from the 1950s.
- Descendants of the above.
- New arrivals from the Caribbean.

The work can be seen to be of particular interest to the above groups due to their familiarity with both the style of language, and the issues raised in the plays.

²⁶ See internet site: <http://members.tripod.com/~bigyard/index.html> – Big Yard Videos starring Oliver Samuels - 06/03/01

Whilst on the one hand this popular work gives British blacks a taste of working class life in Jamaica it may also be seen as both an outlet and rebellion to mainstream British theatre and the 'standard' language of wider British society. In addition to subjects featured in the plays described above much of the work revolves around sex-based farcical situations showing love triangles and free attitudes to sex, no tolerance of issues such as homosexuality, rejection of African heritage and jocular arguments on the relationship between the Caribbean islands. In short a bigoted society. Despite negative images of lack of education, class and economic status that the popular genre carries with it, the work meets the theatrical demands of specific sections of the black British theatre-going community.

Of all Britain's black theatre companies it is Talawa that can be seen to have aimed at meeting the demands of the black community on the widest social, intellectual and linguistic scale. This has meant that Talawa has been able to meet the demands of the above audience as well as that of an audience seeking a greater intellectual challenge. Along with all of the groups defined above as the audience for the popular genre Talawa's audience also consists of the following three groups:

- Professional black Britons.²⁷
- Professional white Britons.
- Black Britons under thirty.

Though much of Talawa's work consists of plays from the Caribbean the work is from established writers who use Caribbean speech as a part of their work and not as its entirety. Talawa is also the only black British theatre company to work within the traditional canon of British theatre. This is exemplified by the company's performances of plays such as Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1989), Forde's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1995), and Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1991), *King Lear* (1994) and *Othello* (1999).²⁸

Whilst Talawa's work in the classical genre has consisted principally of Shakespeare plays, the genre encompasses the internationally celebrated works of great writers that may be performed by any theatre company wishing to reach a wide audience. Talawa's performing of the classics can be seen to give the message that work that can be understood by everyone over centuries should not, in Britain, be the performance preserve of Britain's white theatre companies. Similarly Talawa has not wanted to remain on the fringes of the British stage in terms of performance venue, and made theatre history by becoming the first black theatre in Britain to be permanently housed in the West End.

²⁷ The definition of 'professional' is in line with that described in Chapter One.

²⁸ The date following the play title refers to Talawa's performance.

Part Three – Talawa’s Residency at The Cochrane

1992 saw a new phase in the company’s development. Discussions with The London Institute and Central St. Martin’s School of Art and Design led to Talawa’s successful bid for development funds both from The London Institute and the Arts Council. Additionally, Talawa received a three year lease to work at the newly named and refurbished Cochrane theatre owned by The London Institute.²⁹

The theatre space designed by architect Abiodun Odedina was light, airy, accessible and aimed at creating a theatrical environment that focused on the whole theatre adventure. The entirety of this experience lay in the understanding that the theatrical outing is not limited to merely watching a show. To this end Afro-Caribbean images were used as part of the front of house design and highlighted the cultural identity of the work that would take place at The Cochrane. In a new high-profile home Talawa would be able to raise its status and in so doing take the opportunity to be inclusive by attempting to make the theatre accessible to all members of the community. With this notion of theatre for all in mind, the theatre was fitted with lifts for easy access to the bars and offices, disabled lavatories and an induction loop in the auditorium that had been technically upgraded with new lighting and sound. The refurbishment cost a total of three hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

Talawa’s theatrical aim during the residency at The Cochrane was artistically specific with a contractual remit to produce an annual performance programme of three/four

²⁹ Found between Holborn tube station and Charing Cross and Euston Train stations, The Cochrane was ideally placed to attract a West End audience. Exact location: Southampton Row, London WC1B 4 AP.

productions that would run for periods of four to five weeks. During the residency at The Cochrane Talawa produced a total of ten productions covering the full range of genres that the company has dedicated itself to. The work can be divided into the following genres:

- Three African plays.³⁰
- One English play.³¹
- Two American plays.³²
- Four Caribbean plays.³³

Such work had not, nor has since been the staple of West End productions, and in this regard Talawa can be seen to have been meeting the needs of a specific community as well as widening the scope of what West End theatre had to offer.

Talawa's production archives and Brewster's discussion of the company's time at The Cochrane point to, along with the achievements, some of the difficult issues that Talawa

³⁰ *The Road* - Wole Soyinka. 26 February - 28 March 1992. Director -Yvonne Brewster.

Mooi Street Moves - Paul Slabolepszy. 6 September - 17 September 1994. Director - Paul Slabolepszy.

Resurrections - Biyi Bandele-Thomas. 28 September - 29 October 1994. Director Yvonne Brewster.

³¹ *King Lear* - William Shakespeare. 16 March - 16 April 1994. Director Yvonne Brewster.

³² *The love Space Demands* - Ntozake Shange. 1 October - 31 October 1992. Director Yvonne Brewster.
From The Mississippi Delta - Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland. 1 April - 1 May 1993. Director Annie Castledine.

³³ *Smile Orange* - Trevor Rhone. 28 April - 30 May 1992. Director Trevor Rhone.

Arawak Gold - Carmen Tipling and Ted Dwyer. 9 December 1992 - 16 January 1993. Director Yvonne Brewster.

The Lion - Michael Abbensetts. 30 September - 30 October 1993. Director Horace Ove.

dealt with whilst in the West End.³⁴ These difficulties can be divided into those that stemmed from the mainstream view of Talawa's performance work, and those that stemmed from the relationship between Talawa and the resident staff at The Cochrane. The present writer feels that it is important to give brief examples of the two kinds of difficulties in relation to Talawa's first production at The Cochrane as careful reading of Talawa's production archives suggests that the same problems continued throughout Talawa's residency at The Cochrane.

The mediocre reviews that Talawa's first production at The Cochrane, Wole Soyinka's *The Road* received, reflect a view that suggests to the present writer that the work was either badly performed, misunderstood, or offensive in some way to the reviewers which encouraged their negative commentary:

As promised please find enclosed copies of the reviews of *The Road* not quite what we would have wished for but of no consequence to our commitment to providing our audience with work that is representative of the classics of black culture rather than the diluted 'feel good' offerings which prevail in the West End.³⁵

All of the reviews state that Soyinka's play is too difficult to understand and question Brewster's choice. The mainstream press adds to this by being particularly scathing:

Maskerade - Sylvia Wynter. 9 December 1994 - 14 January 1995. Director Yvonne Brewster.

³⁴ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 21 February 1998.

³⁵ Letter from Angela McSherry (Talawa Administrator) to Richard Moffatt (Lighting Designer for *The Road*), 16 March 1992. See Talawa production archives for *The Road* – personnel file.

I could make no sense of the work . . . Talawa will have to do better if they are not to be challenged by other ethnic minority companies with an equal or better claim to a roof over their heads.³⁶

Wardle's comment does not appear to be justified by any assessment that he offers of the performance but rather can be seen to stem from a preconceived notion that Talawa's work will be disappointing:

The Cochrane Theatre, long lost to the general public, reopened last week, stunningly redesigned by Abiodun Odedina as a permanent home of Talawa Company – at which point my enthusiasm cools.³⁷

Again there is no explanation for this negative impression. Perhaps slightly less negative is Armistead's judgement which ignores the acting and direction to point to the set design as, 'the best feature of Yvonne Brewster's production.'³⁸

Whilst the press generally felt that Brewster had not made a wise decision in doing *The Road*, their poor impression of Talawa's version can be partly understood within the context of their acceptance that Talawa was attempting a very difficult play. What is also apparent is that the mainstream offered no support for Talawa by omitting to highlight individual performances or aspects of Brewster's direction that worked well.

³⁶ Irving Wardle, 'Further scenes from the execution of culture', *Independent on Sunday*, 8 March 1992, p.18.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Claire Armistead, 'Twisty Road', *Guardian*, 4 March 1992, p.36.

The black production that 'prevailed' in the West End at the time was the Cameron Mackintosh/Theatre Royal Stratford East musical production of *Five Guys Named Mo* at The Lyric Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue. Was Talawa expected to use its West End venue to fall in line and produce the kind of musical work that black artists had been allowed to do on the British stage since the 1940s? Perhaps the mainstream was still not prepared to see black actors in serious roles in carefully crafted black plays discussing aspects of African life in what is an established white domain in Britain.

Additional correspondence suggests that during the rehearsal period and the run that Talawa's company members did not feel that they were being treated reasonably by the established workers at The Cochrane. In a letter to Ms Teerth Chung (General Manager of The Cochrane Theatre), from Diane Wilmott (Talawa's company Stage Manager for *The Road*), Ms Wilmott complains of the abusive behaviour of a cleaner to her company.³⁹ The suggestion is that The Cochrane staff had no respect for Talawa's company members. As Talawa was new to The Cochrane it was not clear where the hostility came from. Talawa's archival records also demonstrate that challenges made to perceived hostility from established Cochrane staff throughout the time at The Cochrane were never brought to a conclusion.

The stay at The Cochrane lasted for two and a half years ending in January 1995.

Although Talawa's residency at The Cochrane made British theatre history, the experience that held so much promise for Talawa specifically and black theatre practitioners generally had by the end of the process not been entirely positive. The period of three years for

which The Cochrane had been leased was seen (from the outset), by Talawa's Artistic Director and the company's Board of Directors as a formality. They imagined that the lease would automatically be renewed.⁴⁰ This view had come in part from the contents of a letter from the Chairman of the Arts Council:

Dear Ms Brewster,

I am delighted to welcome the establishment of Talawa Theatre at The Cochrane Theatre, London. This marks a major step forward in the progress of Black Theatre in this country.

The development of the company has been consistently supported by the Arts Council. This year an increased level of funding has been given, which includes a special enhancement grant, in order to facilitate Talawa's move into a permanent theatre base.

My very best wishes go with the company for the future .

Lord Palumbo.⁴¹

When Talawa's lease was not extended and the company had no home to go to the negative events of the past two and a half years made the conclusion seem like an inevitability that those at Talawa were powerless to control.⁴² In spite of this, Artistic

³⁹ Letter dated 21/2/92 - See Talawa production archives for *The Road* - personnel file.

⁴⁰ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 21 February 1998

⁴¹ The letter was used in Talawa's debut publicity campaign to mark their arrival at The Cochrane.

⁴² Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 21 February 1998.

Director Yvonne Brewster regards the process of her longevity at The Cochrane as her biggest achievement:

. . . it is almost an achievement to recognise when you are being undermined and walk away. I think it's quite an achievement to walk away as well, and I think that's important although it was hell, because it wasn't only me, it was a whole group, and to actually take a whole group of people and keep them together I think that was an achievement.⁴³

The present writer feels that Brewster's attitude to discussing The Cochrane within the context of this study should be documented. Brewster's response was limited as her feeling remains that the problems Talawa encountered at The Cochrane were due to racism. Brewster did not wish to expand on this view.⁴⁴ It would appear that the issue has remained equally sensitive for those at The London Institute who might have been able to shed some light on the decision not to renew Talawa's lease as no representative has been available to discuss Talawa's residency at The Cochrane with the present writer.

What is certain is that Talawa met the artistic terms and conditions of its agreement with The London Institute. In addition to the annual productions at The Cochrane, Talawa was to devise and follow an education programme that aimed at serving the wider community. This programme included collaboration with the theatre design degree course at Central St. Martin's (offering students practical set design experience on Talawa productions), along with the setting up of a series of new projects.

⁴³ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 16 January 1997.

⁴⁴ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 21 February 1998.

Education Programmes

The programmes were designed to provide experience for those wanting to become involved in the performing arts industry. The first programme was Talawa's collaboration with Hackney Theatre Education Focus that enabled Talawa to provide five Hackney schools and a number of community groups with theatre based outreach programmes funded by Hackney Task force. The programme has been running since 1992.

From 1992 to 1996 Talawa also developed the Long Term Link, in conjunction with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The programme focused on developing productions for schools and colleges. Additionally Talawa has provided after-show discussions and workshops on its wide range of productions. This work has been aimed at secondary, tertiary and higher education offering students the opportunity to work with Talawa's professional theatre practitioners in a variety of areas including:

- Character and textual analysis.
- Exploring cultural nuances within specific productions.
- Analysing the historical and political issues of the text.
- The use of body language in the performance space.
- Directing.

- Movement and Music.
- Role play.
- Rehearsal and performance techniques.
- The transition from the page to the stage.

A further development of Talawa's education programme was the Black Women Writers' Programme that started in 1992 and gives three Afro-Caribbean and/or Asian female writers each year the opportunity to work with professionals within a purely developmental writing process. The participants are offered a tailor made experience designed around their specific needs, in addition to the time and financial support to develop their craft. Practitioners who have worked with participants include: Bryony Lavery, Matthew Lloyd, Claire Luckham, Matthew Rooke, Elyse Dodgson, Don Warrington, Carole Woddis, Deborah Yhip, Carl Miller and Myra Brenner. Since its inception the project has provided a platform for many of the participants to secure openings as writers, including:

- Readings of their plays at the Edinburgh festival, Salisbury Playhouse, the Oval House and Talawa studio (Joan Hooley and Funmi Adewole).
- Workshops of plays at the National Theatre Studio (Tanika Gupta's *BandeMataram*).

- Commissions from theatre companies such as the Royal Court (Donna Daley).
- Commissions from literary agents on the strength of plays developed through the project (Kara Miller).
- Opportunities within TV writing (Millie Murray).⁴⁵

In 1995 this project (which has been funded since its inception by the London Arts Board) became part of Talawa's core work. Since it started some thirty Afro-Caribbean and Asian women writers have benefited from the project. It is hoped that the project will expand to allow similar opportunities for Afro-Caribbean and Asian male playwrights.

Shortly after Talawa left The Cochrane the company introduced a new initiative. This was the two-week pilot summer school in 1995. The summer school was aimed at young Londoners of Afro/Caribbean descent from challenging backgrounds and was supported by the John Lyon's Charity. It was felt that the summer school would be able to help develop the skills of Britain's next generation of black theatre practitioners. The summer school has run successfully each year since it began. The same structure is applied for each summer school where participants are guided to devise an original performance piece over a four-week period that deals with the issues they wish to explore in performance.

⁴⁵ See internet site: http://www.talawa.com/educational_projects.htm – Education Projects (Script Development Programme) – 06/03/01

The first summer school was directed by Kully Thiari and Topher Campbell, whilst all subsequent summer school projects have been directed by Greta Mendez. In addition to the director the summer school is run with the aid of black professionals from the theatre industry who act as workshop facilitators. Past facilitators have included: Steve Toussaint, Syan Blake, Dennis Charles, Jacqui Chan, Keith Khan, Winsome Pinnock, Nitin Chandra-Ganatra, Indhu Rubasingham, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Paa C Quaye and Claudette Williams. In 1998 actress Cathy Tyson became patron of the summer school.

In summer 2000, Talawa's summer school took place in Ilfracombe, Devon and was Talawa's most ambitious summer school to date involving eight hundred young people from all over Britain. The play, *The Game*, was featured with performances from both the English National Opera and the National Theatre, and dealt with intergenerational issues affecting Afro-Caribbean life in Britain.⁴⁶

Finally, Talawa's most recent non-theatre based project is Blackgrounds. This is an oral history video project that documents the achievements of black theatre practitioners on the British stage from the 1940s to the 1960s. The project was launched in 1997 with the collaboration of the Arts Council of England and the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden. This first phase of the project culminated in the production of five video interviews between the present writer and Earl Cameron, Pearl Connor, Cy Grant, Barry Reckord and Alaknanda Samarth. The videos that are housed at the Theatre Museum Covent Garden provide researchers into black theatre history in Britain with a catalogue of accounts of,

⁴⁶ See internet site: <http://www.talawa.com/educationalprojects.htm> – Education Projects (Summer School) – 06/03/01

the life of a black performer in Britain during this period. It is hoped that the project will enter a second phase where the work of pioneering black performers who worked on the British stage between the 1950s and the 1970s will be documented.

Throughout the company's history Talawa can be seen to have endeavoured to create innovative work and new theatrical directions for black theatre practitioners. This can be seen to have been achieved at least in part by Talawa's resilience to negative mainstream views, the company's ability to secure appropriate funding for its varying projects, and through the company defining itself and adhering to its clear mission statement. Having provided both a historical context for Talawa and a history of the company the following three chapters now focus on the theatrical performance work of the group.

CHAPTER FOUR

CARIBBEAN PLAYS

This chapter aims to demonstrate some of what Talawa Theatre Company can be seen to have achieved through a discussion of the company's performances of contemporary Caribbean plays. By analysing the productions the present writer hopes that the company's commitment to its tripartite mission statement will also be illustrated, in particular Talawa's aim 'To use black culture and experience to further enrich British theatre.'¹ In this chapter Talawa can be seen to achieve this by presenting its audience with theatrical work that raises issues that are directly relevant to contemporary black British society. After an introductory note the chapter focuses on four of Talawa's performances and examines a range of performance and thematic issues within each of them. The plays that are analysed are presented in chronological order of performance. The first one to be discussed is Talawa's performance of CLR James's *The Black Jacobins*. Analysis centres on:

- *The Black Jacobins* as the show that launched Talawa.
- The oral language of the performance.
- The non-spoken performance vocabulary focusing on the themes of colonialism and Voodoo.

¹ See discussion of Talawa's mission statement in Chapter Three.

The second play for discussion is Talawa's performance of Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*. The following areas are discussed:

- The oral language of the performance.
- The non-spoken performance vocabulary focusing on the use of music and calypso, and the presentation of Carnival.

Thirdly, Talawa's performance of Michael Abbensetts's *The Lion* is analysed. The following areas are examined:

- The oral language of the performance.
- Notions of black identity.

The last play to be discussed in this section is Talawa's performance of Derek Walcott's *Beef no Chicken*. The present writer examines:

- Yvonne Brewster's approach to language use and methods of language direction as seen during the rehearsal process of the play.

As seen in Chapter Three the rise of contemporary black theatre in Britain took place throughout the late 1970s and 1980s with the development of black theatre companies that chose names and performance material that highlighted their Afro-Caribbean heritage. This emergence was not accidental and is seen by the present writer as a response by black theatre practitioners in Britain to the mainstream British theatre establishment that effectively excluded them by the minimal roles that black performers were often offered prior to this period.²

The new black companies provided a forum for black theatre practitioners as they were not as easily employed on the British stage as their white counterparts. In creating their own work black artists would give themselves the opportunity to show their theatrical ability, whilst doing work that was more culturally representative of themselves and their varying communities both in the Caribbean and in Britain. The by-product of this culturally specific work can be seen to have partly resulted in the development of the contemporary Caribbean genre on the British stage.

The contemporary Caribbean genre was not new in itself but had not been as actively promoted on the contemporary British stage as it was to be by black theatre companies such as Talawa.³ Talawa's continual performance of such work can be seen as the company's attempt to create a black theatrical history for black theatre practitioners in Britain. Additionally, the company was providing British audiences with the work of established Caribbean writers (or writers of Caribbean descent), plays and styles of

² Interview with Earl Cameron by David Johnson, Cameron's London home, 26 May 1997.

Caribbean writing that perhaps remained little known in Britain. Working within this genre also enabled the company to use theatre to demonstrate aspects of Afro-Caribbean cultural history to the British audience. Although this can be seen with almost all of the plays that Talawa has performed in this genre, the company's 1986 performance of Dennis Scot's *An Echo in the Bone*, and its 1994 performance of Sylvia Wynter's *Maskerade* neatly illustrate this point.

An Echo in the Bone was Talawa's second production performed at the Drill Hall, London between 24 June and 19 July 1986. Scot's play set in Jamaica deals with the nine nights tradition. As part of this tradition living friends and relatives of a recently departed loved one watch over the deceased's body as it is believed that this will protect its soul from evil during its journey into the after life. The newness of Talawa's work prompted a positive response from sections of the black press in Britain who welcomed seeing aspects of their cultural history displayed in a theatrical forum:

This play is a beautiful blend of history, folk tradition, superstition, social commentary, Caribbean rhythms and Jamaican dialect.⁴

Comments from factions of the mainstream can be seen to have focused on an alternate view of what the play offered culturally:

³ The contemporary Caribbean plays can be defined as works written by artists from the Caribbean region and later artists of Caribbean descent.

After centuries of blacking up it is something of a novelty to watch black actors playing at being white.⁵

The journalist is referring to the fact that the black actors also play white characters. For the present writer the journalist's expression 'playing at being white' may also suggest that for her the actual act of blacks working in theatre (despite the Caribbean nature of the play), was an attempt to mimic what may have been perceived in Britain as a historically 'white pursuit'. The fact that Brewster continued to work in this genre can be seen to have enabled Talawa's performers to develop in this area as well as continue to inform audiences both black and white of black historical and cultural information.

This is seen in Talawa's eighth Caribbean work and eighteenth production in total, Sylvia Wynter's musical *Maskerade*, performed at The Cochrane between 9 December 1994 and 14 January 1995. This Jamaican tale is the story of the Jamaican Christmas street parade known as Jonkunnu. The production enabled British audiences to learn about the Jonkunnu celebrations (that had developed from slave times) with its Actor Boys and Set Girls.⁶ The play's overt use of Jamaican patois speech elicited comments from sections of the mainstream press that suggest the cultural subject matter had not been fully appreciated as the language could not be fully understood:

⁴ Laurel B. Ince, 'An Echo in the Bone by Dennis Scott', *Caribbean Times*, 4 July 1986, p.31.

⁵ Jane Edwardes, 'An echo in the Bone', *Time Out*, 2 – 8 July 1986, p.38.

⁶ Errol Hill, *The Jamaican Stage 1655-1900: Profile of Colonial Theatre* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 229-253.

... there is a certain intelligibility problem with the Jamaican dialect, but that rather enhances the exotic charm of the piece.⁷

Murray's description of the piece as having an 'exotic charm' points to a what may be seen as a narrow eurocentric perspective of an aspect of contemporary British theatre performance. It is possible that Talawa did not view this work as either exotic or charming but rather as culturally representative of the majority of its performers and audience.

Talawa's performance history demonstrates that the company made a concerted effort to move away from the stereotypical work of the black theatre movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In so doing the company can be seen to have created what may be regarded as a 'canon' of work within the contemporary Caribbean genre having produced thirteen contemporary Caribbean plays to date.

The Black Jacobins

In 1986 Talawa Theatre Company was formed to revive CLR James's *The Black Jacobins*.⁸ The production took place at the Riverside Studios Hammersmith, between 21 February and 15 March 1986. Talawa's last performance was fifty years to the day after the first London performance in 1936.⁹ This earlier production was seen with scepticism:

. . . , the play is altogether too propagandist. Propaganda - in this case the cause of the negro races - is all very well in its proper place, but it is not permissible in a play which purports to be substantially true to history. The coloured races have certainly been persecuted by the whites, but the author's bias in their favour would appear to deny the whites a shred of nobility of character or honesty of purpose. In his play the blacks are white and the whites are black.¹⁰

The response to Talawa's later performance revealed that times had moved on and that pockets of the mainstream press now saw a place for black theatre on the British stage:

⁷ David Murray, 'Caribbean Carnival', *Financial Times*, 17 December 1984, p.16.

⁸ Cyril Lionel Robert James was born on 4 January 1901 in Tunapuna Trinidad and came to London in 1932. Early publications include his first book, *The Life of Captain Cipriani* (1932). This first work became the 1933 pamphlet entitled *The Case for West-Indian Self Government*. This was followed by *Minty Alley* (1936 novel), *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, (1936 play), *World Revolution* (1937 political history), *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938 history), *The Black Jacobins* (1938 novel), and *Breaking a Boundary* (1963 writing on cricket). James was also an active political activist. See *CLR James: A Bibliographical Introduction* (unpublished) by Margaret Busby (1985) – prepared for Talawa's production. See Talawa production archives for *The Black Jacobins* – publicity file. See internet site:

<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/poldiscourse/james/james3.html> –

CLR James: an Introduction – 17/07/99

⁹ In 1936 Paul Robeson played James's Toussaint in *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (later re-titled, *The Black Jacobins*), at the Westminster Theatre, London, 15 and 16 March.

But how marvellous to see a large scale project presented by the newly formed Talawa company, but full of familiar faces tackling such important and pertinent historical issues.¹¹

James's motivation for writing the play which documents the successful 1791 slave revolt in San Domingue that led to the establishment of an independent black republic, stemmed from his feeling that '...there weren't any plays that said black people had created any distinct events of the time.'¹² Similarly, Brewster was motivated to direct the play due to her dissatisfaction with what she perceived to be the unacceptable lot of black theatre in Britain. *The Black Jacobins* would give her the opportunity to do a black production her way:

I'm not very impressed with the black theatre over here. There's too much grovelling, too much emphasis on how marvellous it is that blacks are actually at last being allowed to do their own thing in a white man's country, too many introspective plays about racism: too many blacks laughing at the comic stereotypes of themselves.¹³

This new production allowed Talawa to demonstrate James's concern to a new generation of black people in Britain whilst simultaneously giving contemporary black performers in

¹⁰ Anon, 'Toussaint L'Ouverture' (review of the performance of *Touissant L'Ouverture* of 15 March 1936), *Stage*, 19 March 1936, p.9.

¹¹ Michael Coveney, 'The Black Jacobins/Riverside Studios', *Financial Times*, 27 February 1986, p.27.

¹² Daryll Cumber Dance, *Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Books, 1992), p.18. Additionally, Cumber Dance describes the work as '...one of the most influential books of the century', p.14.

¹³ Tom Vaughan, 'Haiti – the roots of rebellion', *Morning Star*, 17 February 1986, p.4.

Britain access to the fringes of British theatre. Additionally, the production would challenge uninformed perceptions of black theatre, provide a fresh start of what could be made accessible to black theatre practitioners in Britain and mark the beginning of Talawa Theatre Company's performance career.

Oral Language

CLR James's text is generally written in 'standard English'. The occasions where the text indicates a specific language style are rare, (except for songs, which are dealt with under non-spoken performance vocabulary), and generally point to class, cultural and political differences between characters. The language of Talawa's video performance demonstrates a clear shift away from the text in its move away from non-'standard' British speech.

Throughout Talawa's performance the hierarchy of languages in San Domingue is highlighted, showing French at the top (the language of the rich white land-owning class) and Creole and Pidgins beneath (the language of the black land-workers). For the present writer a general rule on language (reflecting the period) can be taken from Talawa's performance. This is that the darker the speaker the lower the status and the more African sounding the language.¹⁴

¹⁴ This notion was explored in Aphra Benn's, *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave. A True Story* (London: Will. Canning, 1688) as illustrated in Chapter Six.

Whilst the use of pidgins were seen to be (and may still be considered) debilitating in British society,¹⁵ through Talawa's performance contemporary black British audiences may have felt encouraged witnessing a part of their history spoken in a form of their own language on the British stage. Black theatregoers may ordinarily feel excluded from mainstream British theatre because the language most commonly used for performance differs from theirs.

In the case of Talawa's performance of *The Black Jacobins* the interlocutor would be correct to assess that the language of the piece is aimed at those who speak and understand it: Caribbean people and Britons of Afro-Caribbean heritage. Whilst others are not excluded they may question the relevance of such performance work to themselves if they do not belong to or have an interest in these groups. These feelings can be seen to mirror the experiences of Caribbean and black British people at mainstream British theatre performances.

All of Talawa's black characters in the performance use a non-'standard English' voice. The black cast made up of a range of native West Indians and black British performers offers a range of authentic Caribbean and black British voices. Due to the linguistic mix, Talawa inadvertently presents a range of language that may help to reinforce a sense of black national linguistic identity for black British theatregoers as all of the language used is linked by its Afro-Caribbean trademark.

¹⁵ Viv Edwards, *Language in a Black Community* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1986), p.24, 'There is a long tradition of negative attitudes towards non-standard speech and only in recent times have attempts been made to explain different varieties in terms of social and historical development, rather than as a result of laziness or stupidity.'

This notion of the creation of a trademark can be seen in Ireland's Abbey Theatre's attempts to create work aimed at reflecting Irish identity. This process which began in the late 1890s (at a time when Irish theatre was dominated by British cultural norms), and is still developing to date was principally done through the oral language of performance.¹⁶ Some of the aims and indeed problems of the Abbey Theatre can be compared with those of Talawa's development as both aimed to use theatre to promote their cultures in a theatrical setting that had been stifled by English imperialism.

For the Abbey Theatre where Gaelic was initially considered the language that could be used problems occurred including the fact that: Gaelic language had no formal history of association with theatrical presentation. There were no Gaelic plays, actors or audiences. There was no traditional form of drama written in Gaelic.¹⁷ Theatre practitioners in Britain of African or Caribbean descent however, could access the documented history of their respective theatres although earlier Afro-Caribbean work had not always been recognised in Britain and black British born theatre practitioners were not readily made aware of this aspect of their cultural history. Talawa's work in this genre can be seen to be enlightening black British audiences of their oral theatrical voice. The use of a specific performance voice to heighten the cultural identity of a performance can be seen as a political statement. Sartre points to the use of black language forms as a marker of freedom from repression:

¹⁶ Josephine Lee, 'Linguistic Imperialism, The Early Abbey Theatre, and The Translations of Brian Friel', in *Imperialism and Theatre, Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by J. Ellen Gainer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.164-181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.165-166.

What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that had muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises? Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes?¹⁸

Similarly, given the chance to do its own work in its own way, Talawa has chosen not to use the 'standard English' of the text and mainstream British theatre but instead explore the sound of its own cultural voice. Talawa's chosen oral language in *The Black Jacobins* is discussed through an analysis of the central characters Toussaint L'Ouverture, Maire-Jeanne, Dessalines and Moïse in Talawa's archival video performance.

As Toussaint L'Ouverture, Norman Beaton provides a consistent example of linguistic accommodation by adapting his character's language to sound more like his character's French masters when he is speaking to them. Directed in this way this linguistic flexibility is used strategically to point out how Toussaint uses language to achieve his political ambitions. The fact that Beaton's Toussaint also demonstrates that he can use local speech serves to highlight his conviction that whilst he wants San Domingue to remain a French colony, he and his fellow islanders are determined to maintain their own local identity. The message mirrors Talawa's emergence as a black theatre company that has chosen to display its cultural roots by performing culturally specific themes in non-'standard

¹⁸ Jean Paul Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, preceding Léopold Sédar Senghor's, *Anthologie de La Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), p.ix. The above translation is taken from, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p.29.

English'. It may also be seen as pertinent to Talawa's black audience, who live in a society where their home language has no real function outside of their community.

Although Beaton's Toussaint has a Guyanese accent, his voice is easily definable as the 'standard' educated West Indian voice of the kind Cassidy attributes to the educated English-speaking man anywhere, with his regional differences.¹⁹ Beaton's Toussaint, presents the voice of the well to do black man whose politics are revealed in his voice. His voice is similar to that of those Europeans who have traditionally been classed as his oppressors. Although he does not want to be ruled by them, neither does he want to have complete control of his country, 'France will be elder brother, guide and mentor.'²⁰ His inner desire to remain linked to them is demonstrated in his choice to use speech that approximates that of the colonial rulers. For Talawa's black audience generally unused to seeing Caribbean language forms used with consistency and in leadership roles on the British stage this may serve to create a momentary sense of esteem for an aspect of their home language, even if used to emulate Europe.

Mona Hammond's Marie-Jeanne is orally characterised by her use of verbal repertoire. This term, as coined by sociolinguists has become a feature of black British speech, described by those who use it as 'flexing'.²¹ In black British society 'flexing' refers to the mixing of 'standard' British speech in combination with Afro-Caribbean language forms, from one sentence to the next. The script does not indicate that the character is

¹⁹ Frederic G. Cassidy, *Jamaica Talk: Three Hundred Years of the English Language in Jamaica* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p.26.

²⁰ Rehearsal script, p.389.

linguistically dextrous as all of her text is in 'standard English'. Talawa's performance highlights then, the subtlety and range of language used by some black Britons, and Caribbean peoples in the UK. The character's verbal repertoire may be seen to reflect the question of language choice linked to identity as experienced by black Britons, who change their speech according to how they wish to be perceived in a given environment.²² This can also be seen throughout the Caribbean and is in part demonstrated by Talawa's performance of Michael Abbenetts's play *The Lion*, discussed later in this chapter. Edwards's discussion of the motivation of language choice of black Britons points to speakers choosing between 'standard English' and code switching within their patois usage.²³

Hammond's linguistic portrayal allows Talawa to raise issues of adaptability around the bilingual/cultural aspect of black British existence. Throughout the performance Hammond mainly uses 'standard English' speech for her character. When she is emotional she reverts to her native Caribbean, and in this case Jamaican language. This is seen when

²¹ 61% of Talawa's audience surveyed indicated that they use more than one speech form as a normal part of their oral communication.

²² Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1995), p.122. Harris in Sam Selvon's novel provides a history to this usage of verbal repertoire that has been handed down to and developed by black Britons for their own needs.

²³ Edwards, *Language in a Black Community*, pp.116-117. 'Any discussion of the motivation for language choice in a British Black community will necessarily be on two levels. The first level affects the marking of a situation as either "English" or "Patois". It should be remembered however, that the linguistic opposition we are considering is not in fact a direct opposition between English and Patois, since the Patois situations most frequently involve code-switching behaviour between Patois and English. The second level thus concerns this code-switching behaviour. The mechanisms which underlie switching are of central importance for our understanding of the linguistic behaviour of British-born black people.' Language choice is dependent on how much the speaker wishes to be part of the social grouping of the interlocutor. This will result in either speech convergence or speech divergence. p117. 'Depending on their perceptions of the interactive situation, they can either shift their speech style towards (speech convergence) or away from (speech divergence) the speech style of their interlocutors. Speech convergence reduces the linguistic (and hence social) differences between speakers and is motivated by the desire to express or receive approval. Similarly, speech divergence serves to accentuate these differences and can be used to communicate disapproval.'

Marie Jeanne is either angry or in a comedy situation. Notably, she also reverts back to 'standard English' when she wants to be taken seriously, thus indicating the low status of native speech on the island and perhaps by extension of Caribbean speech in Britain.

Hammond's portrayal of Marie Jeanne's sexual relationship with General Hédouville of the French army also highlights how their intimacy leads to her use of verbal repertoire.

When she accuses him of wishing she were a white woman her accent is Jamaican.

Perhaps she has chosen to use this voice as she is dealing with a question that is pertinent to her race. In so doing she is pointing to her blackness and moving away from the whiteness she perceives Hédouville wishes on her.

Hammond shows Marie-Jeanne not only moving physically and sexually through the full range of society but also linguistically as she communicates comfortably with black and white alike. Through Hammond's portrayal Marie Jeanne's speech may be seen to mirror the verbal repertoire of members of the black British audience and wider community as she uses her artistic license to adapt her character's linguistic codes strategically according to her desired outcome with each interlocutor.²⁴ Hammond's mixed 'standard English' and Jamaican speech, coupled with Beaton's Guyanese accent, highlight the generic nature of Caribbean language use by Talawa in this production:

²⁴ Helen Gilbert, and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama. Theory, Practice and Politics* (London/New York: Routledge Press 1996), p.177. 'Performative aspects of speech such as tonality, diction, accent, inflection, and rhythm are clearly important tools here (within the context of using non-'standard English'

The company chooses to use the natural voices of its Caribbean actors when the aim is to represent the Caribbean generally. In order to make the voices comprehensible to most English speaking listeners Caribbeanisms which would identify a speaker specifically to an island are avoided.²⁵

This apparent flexible uniformity is appropriate to the developing range of British Caribbean forms, and may have been chosen by Talawa for this production in order to include the widest possible Caribbean audience whilst remaining culturally specific. Talawa's aim was and remains, to allow black performers to begin defining themselves linguistically, rather than, ' . . . to find a space within something else, thus giving them less exposure and less historical reference.'²⁶

In the archival video performance, whilst the Caribbean performers use their native voice the black British performers display what Le Page refers to as linguistic behaviour. This is seen in Trevor Laird's, and Brian Bovell's respective performances of Dessalines and Moïse. Both performers worked to a specific oral remit:

I needed the actors to use their voices to show that they were rebellious but to speak in a way that the black audience could

forms in favour of 'standard English') because they can be used to establish social registers, showing that s/he is quite capable of using all manner of linguistic codes but chooses certain ones strategically'.

²⁵ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 30 March 1999.

²⁶ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 16 January 1997.

identify with.²⁷

The choice of language for these two central characters, although generally 'standard English', becomes strategically pidginised when the subject is revolution. As the only characters willing to stand up to Toussaint L'Ouverture in their fight for San Domingue's independence, Talawa's actors can be seen to be using non-'standard' language to highlight the characters' 'rebellious' streak.

Laird's Dessalines, sometimes aided by the suggestion of a pidginised language form, (through incomplete sentences and a lack of clear sentence structure in the text), adopts a British African voice. Here the present writer is referring to a black British performer adopting an African accent. Laird can be seen to have chosen a voice that reveals the identity of the underdog in a society where he would be more acceptable if his speech were closer to the 'standard' form. This strategic choice of voice may be regarded as a voluntary act aimed at those who do not accept its use, and as such is a form of linguistic rebellion, described by Hodge and Kress as an antilanguage. In this context the voice may be seen to mirror one of the uses of a black British voice as a way of distancing oneself from mainstream British society by using speech divergence. Such speech behaviour may be seen as the speaker's attempt to regain power in a society where s/he otherwise feels powerless.

As Laird's Dessalines develops professionally, his attempts to hide his 'savage' past are shown in his quest to develop his language and education, and become more European.²⁸

²⁷ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 30 March 1999.

His language, though politically reflective of, is different from that of the black British community. Native black British speakers, though they can sound like their white counterparts, can also choose to sound differently in what may be interpreted as a desire to assert their cultural identity. Laird's Dessalines, on the other hand, despite his concerted efforts, is unable to sound like the French when he decides that this is what he wants to do. This can be understood by the fact that he was neither born, nor has lived in France.

Laird's portrayal of Dessalines stresses how his character's desire to accommodate linguistically is a constant effort. The more prosperous he becomes, the less African he aims to sound. When faced with the French, English and American army men Laird's Dessalines's voice is almost robotic in his attempts to control both his speech and accent. When he is later accused of whipping slaves on his plantation his controlled voice can be seen to represent his attempts to learn the power-based behaviour he experienced at the hands of the French.

Starting with his oral language Laird shows throughout his performance, how Dessalines has systematically tried to eradicate the most obvious elements associated with his blackness in the hope that this will make him more acceptable to those he aspires to be like. Laird demonstrates this neatly at the end of the production by creating a stilted dance that appears to symbolise the manner and language of his character's colonisers. The apparent difficulty with which he dances elicits laughter from Talawa's audience. Their laughter may be seen to be at the attempts of the black man 'acting' in a way that he perceives to be white in a setting that they would associate with freer physical movement.

²⁸ Rehearsal script, p.386.

Additionally, James has written the character to appear to ultimately despise his physical blackness. Whilst he cannot change his skin colour he sees having a wife who is close to the white phenotype as desirable.²⁹

Laird's presentation of Dessalines's language use and associated behaviour, puts the issues of class and language into a Caribbean context for the black British audience whose own range of language usage has not generally featured on the British stage. Caribbean and black British audience members may see aspects of their own language behaviour reflected in Talawa's performance. This in turn may open up the forum for further analysis of their own speech choices.

In contrast to Laird's Dessalines, who moves from antilanguage in rebellion to attempted linguistic accommodation in 'prosperity', Bovell plays Moïse using language that fits both antilanguage and overt language forms throughout the performance. As any linguistic accommodation is temporary, it is possible to deduce that Bovell wishes to demonstrate that at no point does his character reject antilanguage forms of speech.

Bovell Africanises Moïse's speech, adding a hint of a French accent to an African, though audibly London-based voice. Bovell's choice of language can be seen to represent the ex-slaves of San Domingue as the voice of the oppressed. It is a voice that maintains the character's cultural roots in Africa alongside the European influence of France. For the British audience the London voice helps define the actor as black British. His chosen voice

²⁹ Carl Stone, *Class Race and Political Behaviour in Urban Jamaica* (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1973), p.120. Stone points out how 'brown' (mixed race) people have enjoyed distinct

carries with it then the dual culture of the character and part of the native culture of the actor's reality. The exposure of this language in an environment where exposure has remained limited is threefold; it liberates it, reveals the rebellious nature compromising language is associated with, and alters 'the overwhelming power of English.'³⁰ Such speech can be seen to mirror sections of the black British community that display antilanguage behaviour in what may be regarded as an attempt to assert their cultural identity in a host culture.

With the French, English and American army men, Bovell's Moïse seems to have slightly accommodated his antilanguage speech. Bovell's interpretation suggests that where he feels what he has adopted as his character's natural regional speech will not be used to his advantage he takes the option of accommodating his character's speech. Perhaps Bovell allows his character this compromise as he feels Moïse would want to be certain that he got his message across to those who do not share his politics. Equally it may be suggested that Bovell's linguistic choice may aim to show that he sees his character as wanting to keep his antilanguage speech sacred, and is not prepared to share it with those who look down on it.

Consistent with Bovell's portrayal of his language, Moïse's behaviour as written by James is equally rebellious, resulting in his murder early on in the play. The implication may be seen to be that for those colonials he has little in common with he is a threat that must be removed. By extension, within the context of Bovell's linguistic portrayal it is conceivable

social advantages in all regions that have experienced African slavery.

³⁰ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.177.

that a similar message is being relayed to the black British audience that they should integrate into European society at the expense of losing their own culture and language, in order to survive. For the present writer this can also be seen as a theatrical history lesson reminding the black audience of the struggle black people have endured in asserting their cultural identity through speech.

Through the range of black language forms demonstrated in *The Black Jacobins*, Talawa had invited British theatre to open its doors to the voices of a community of British people whose voices were seldom heard on the British stage. This Afro-Caribbean section of the British Empire was working creatively on a linguistic level, and becoming part of an institution that generally had remained out of its grasp for centuries. This time, however, it was working from home.³¹

Non-spoken Performance Vocabulary

The non-spoken performance vocabulary of Afro-Caribbean theatre in Britain may be characterised in part by the inclusion of both music and movement in performances. These areas have also become regarded as a trademark of Afro-Caribbean and wider multicultural performance work, 'Everyone expects black performances to have singing and dancing.'³² Brewster, however remains concerned that the company's work should not be regarded as generally multicultural, believing that 'Multiculturalism is an excuse for ad

³¹ Karen Mary Dahl, 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre Drama and Performance*, ed by J. Ellen Gainor (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.38-53 (p.39). 'The empire is striking back, and - although some are reluctant to take the call - it's phoning from home.'

³² Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 30 March 1999.

hocism, I think cultural concerns have to be specific.’³³ In *The Black Jacobins*, Talawa’s specific cultural concerns for the production are demonstrated in the non-spoken performance vocabulary. This can be seen through an analysis of the themes of colonialism and Voodoo in this production.

The theme of colonialism is expressed throughout, in terms of non-spoken performance vocabulary through the company’s use of music in the production. The suffering and ultimate rebellion caused by colonialism is expressed (as written by James) by the black population through the recurrence of the song, *La Marseillaise*, expressing the black masses’ opposition to colonial rule. The point of CLR James using *La Marseillaise*, (and Talawa adapting it) is that it is originally a French revolutionary song (and has been the French national anthem for most of the period since the revolution of 1789). Its adoption and use by the slaves in St. Domingue makes a bold statement of their claim that ‘liberty’ cannot be limited to freeing white people from class oppression, but must also include freeing black people from oppression based on race.

Neither the script nor Talawa’s performance state the full lyrics of the song. Although the script states where the song should be sung ‘To arms Citizens’ are the only words given. Talawa chooses to use the original French phrase “Aux armes citoyens”. The fact that the song is sung in French in Talawa’s performance and that much of the black British audience may not understand the words seems not to be the central issue. They will understand from the context of the performance that the song is used as a bonding device within the ex-slave community. This facility of listening to the song can be seen as Talawa

³³ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 16 January 1997.

giving historical information to its audience with the aid of music. This is an offering of an aspect of black history from a black perspective which, ‘ . . . allows black, and in particular, mixed race people, who often find themselves not wanted by either side, the chance to resource themselves with heritage facts.’³⁴

La Marseillaise moves from being a song of rebellion whilst the blacks are slaves, to a song of freedom once they have been set free. In both cases the song points to the oppression caused by colonialism as Talawa use it to filter through the production at critical points prior to any action where the characters are being incited to take up their weapons and fight. The song can also be seen to demonstrate to the black British community how their ancestors used music as a source of unification against colonial oppression.

For the present writer Talawa’s prolonged use of the song throughout the production is innovative and appropriate. When Bovell’s Moïse announces the arrival of Monsieur Bullet at the beginning of the production it is to the undercurrent of the song. Whilst things appear to be well, the song sung low symbolises that something is brewing in the fields. Shortly after, it is announced that all blacks are free. By this time the rendition of *La Marseillaise* is loud and uncontrollable symbolising that the slaves can no longer be controlled by their former masters. *La Marseillaise* can be seen as a musical signature to black rebellion in the San Domingue of Talawa’s performance.

³⁴ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 2 October 1998. The term ‘heritage facts’ is used to refer to information that gives black and mixed race people cultural and historical details of their ancestry. The term ‘positive heritage facts’ is used in Chapter Five to refer to information that enables the aforementioned groups to have a sense of pride in their historical/cultural roots.

Talawa reintroduces the theme at the end of the first act of the performance when Beaton's Toussaint sends his constitution to Keith Hazemore's Napoleon. Throughout the scene the theme, (which is whistled in the background), is used to point to the brewing anger that is felt by the black population and the unrest that may be caused if Hazemore's Napoleon does not agree to the constitution. Talawa's additional introduction of the continuous whistling in the distance also creates the menacing effect of warriors on the fringes of a battlefield waiting for orders to attack. At this stage Talawa may be seen to have extended the significance of *La Marseillaise* as a rebellion song to the war anthem of the blacks.

As indicated by the script *La Marseillaise* becomes the war anthem of the past once Beaton's Toussaint is perceived to be too weak and a rival, more militant and less compromising faction emerges around him. The new rebels adopt the song of the man of the people, David Haynes's Samedi Smith.³⁵ Each time the song of rebellion goes against the politics of the black leader, those who are caught singing it are condemned to death. Brewster's cast sing Samedi Smith's song off stage in French, whilst Laird's Dessalines translates it to Bob Philips's Christophe, and by extension the audience. Whilst this bilingual performance of the song is not entirely Talawa's invention as this approach is suggested in the script, it presents two sides of black rebellion to the black British audience,³⁶ allowing them through theatre 'to re-examine and re-imagine' their history.³⁷

³⁵ Rehearsal script, p.407.

³⁶ There is the rebellion of those who want complete control of their existence, in contrast to those who wish to remain linked to their colonial history.

³⁷ A. Ruth Thompson, 'Re-imagining History: An Introduction to the Black Theatre Conference Papers', in *Black Theatre in Britain*, 1, (1996), 1-7(p.6). Thompson quotes Hazel Carey.

The European side of colonialism is expressed in non-spoken performance vocabulary through regular interjections of classical music throughout the performance. From the outset of the production Jean Hart's *Madame Bullet*'s signature is Mozart sung in Italian. The language of opera in the production can generally be seen to further distance the white plantation owners from their black slaves. Brewster however, presents the snippets of opera within an African dimension.

When Hart's *Madame Bullet* discusses and sings opera with Hammond's Marie-Jeanne, at the outset of the production we are aware of the beat of African drumming in the background. The beat acts as a reminder to the general unrest and gives the feeling of intrusion from the blacks that live on the other side of the luxury of the plantation walls. After her initial appearance Hart's *Madame Bullet* is scarcely seen, and when she is there is no theme tune. Her signature has been passed on to her servant Hammond's Marie-Jeanne and is used for her throughout the rest of the production to signal that she is of both African and European descent.

At the beginning of the production Hammond's Marie-Jeanne sings Mozart in perfect unison with her mistress. Talawa's interpretation is that she has been taught, and learnt from her mistress. Later, although she sings the same tune whilst she prepares for the arrival of Ian Collier's General Hédouville, it has been adapted. Hammond's Marie-Jeanne has developed her own style. This time Hammond's Marie-Jeanne, accompanied by her servant Jenny Jules's Celestine, (to whom we imagine she has taught the song) sings with a pronounced Caribbean intonation and performs a calypso style dance. This non-spoken performance vocabulary demonstrates how what once represented white colonialism is

incorporated into black existence. The through line from Hart's white Madame Bullet, to Hammond's mulatto Marie- Jeanne, to Jules's black Celestine can be seen to demonstrate a path by which blacks were influenced by, and how they adapted the white culture of their masters to their own.

At each stage of the performance the music is adapted to suit the cultural heritage of the performers and their characters. Hammond's Marie-Jeanne's renditions with Hart's Madame Bullet remain Italian whilst her own version, though also sung in Italian has a Caribbean flavour. By the time we hear Hammond's Marie-Jeanne and Jules's Celestine's rendition, Jules's Celestine's influence has added further African influences. Through what comes across in the performance as instinctive cultural adaptations it appears that Hammond's Marie-Jeanne has claimed her own version of the piece, whilst sharing another with Jules's Celestine. Talawa can be seen to have used the music to highlight the difference between Hammond's Marie-Jeanne's mulatto cultural heritage and Jules's Celestine's African roots. Both are drawn in musical contrast to their colonial rulers. When Hammond's Marie-Jeanne later sings the song for Collier's General Hédouville her Caribbean intonation is accompanied by the African dancing of her servants in silhouette. Brewster's directional choice seems to point to the mysterious qualities that Collier's General Hédouville is attracted to by his sexual relationship with a non-white woman.

The further use of Hammond's Marie-Jeanne's calypso style version of her Mozart theme when she writes to inform Beaton's Toussaint that Collier's General Hédouville is his enemy, provides an example of Talawa's use of cultural performance adaptation. Such

adaptation is akin to what Schechner refers to as 'culture of choice'.³⁸ Brewster has taken the colonials' Mozart and dressed it for a modern black British audience, enabling them to grasp the subtleties of cultural differences within the black community as written in James's play. The audience can then feel that the work has been directed with them in mind. This is not often the experience of Caribbean and black Britons in the British theatre.

Like music, religion is used as a marker to define a cultural community in the performance. For the black community in Talawa's performance this is shown to be Voodoo.

The presence of Voodoo in *The Black Jacobins* plays an important role in the presentation of Talawa's non-spoken performance vocabulary. Staging the concept and ritual of Voodoo once again affords Talawa the possibility of presenting an aspect of black culture relevant to the black British community as delivered from a black perspective. Olanyan explains, 'Blacks across the three continents studied are questing for cultural identity not because they are black but because they are black and dominated.'³⁹ Talawa's work can be seen to partly challenge this within the performance arena.

³⁸ Richard Schechner, 'Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice' in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. by Patrice Pavis (London/New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.41-50. The term is used generally to permit performers to work within their preferred cultural forms, as opposed to being obliged to work within the historical theatrical forms of their specific cultural heritage.

³⁹ Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest, Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), p.140.

The performance would allow black Britons to gain an insight into an African cultural ritual that in many black British communities is given little attention. The performance of the ritual, which features the dance of Laird's Dessalines and Jules's Celestine moving into a state of possession, is introduced musically by *La Mareillaise*. Talawa's inclusion of the ritual in the form of a loosely choreographed performance is in line with the company's commitment to use cultural rituals and African performance forms in their work.⁴⁰

The performance of the ritual possession unexplained but performed as a natural aspect of the characters' lives gives it credence. Talawa's performance imitates the state of those possessed as appearing to be drunk,⁴¹ but does not explain which god the characters are being possessed by. The visual image of the event must suffice. Despite what may be seen as Talawa's culturally didactic theatre, to offer unnatural explanation of the possession ritual would detract from the power of the theatrical experience. Audience members may be inspired to conduct their own research after the performance. Such performance work may be regarded as fundamental to Talawa's ideal in aiming towards the development of a distinctive black British performance voice and work.⁴² Parallels with Talawa's work in this area were seen earlier in The Jamaican School of Drama's Caribbean Lab. This was set up to establish local performance techniques, in the early eighties.⁴³

⁴⁰ Talawa's earliest mission statement included, 'Honouring the commitment to broaden the framework of language and performance beyond the narrow confines of the prevailing Eurocentric debate.' The statement was developed by co-founders of Talawa in 1985. Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices, London, 13 June 1996. A similar commitment is made in their later policy mission. Use of ritual is also seen in Talawa's later performance of *The Lion*. In the exposition of Obeah, Cleansing and Head Knock rituals are staged along with a discussion of African Cumfa dancing.

⁴¹ Laennec Hurbon, *Voodoo Truth and Fantasy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p.110.

⁴² Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 30 March 1999.

⁴³ See Chapter Two.

Through *The Black Jacobins*, Talawa was presenting Voodoo rituals to its audience along with the range of black reactions to it. Voodoo was a way of life for the poor and a threat to the wealthy that were often embarrassed by it.⁴⁴ Laird's Dessalines, who is featured dancing in the possession ritual has become anti-Voodoo by the end of the play in line with his desire to accept aspects of European life over indigenous ones. Talawa's presentation of the ritual coupled with the question of why some blacks may want to reject their cultural heritage may give the black British audience food for thought on their own situation. What is the cost of total assimilation? How much choice do they have? Equally the play shows how important Voodoo ritual is to much of San Domingue's population, and by extension may encourage the black British audience members to evaluate their level of cultural awareness.

Talawa's audience is shown how the black community of the production is resourceful in their suffering, creating their religious bond through need. Whilst European thought believed that mixing Africans from different areas would limit the possibilities of communication a whole new form of religious communication developed in Voodoo.⁴⁵ Such was the power of Voodoo that Jean Price-Mars in his discussion of the politicisation of Voodoo claims that were it not for '...Voodooist participation in the revolutionary movement, Haiti would not have become an independent nation in 1804.'⁴⁶

Witnessing the strength and the resourcefulness of this aspect of black cultural history may help to develop a similar source of strength in members of the black British audience in

⁴⁴ Michel, S.Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989), pp.19-20.

⁴⁵ See internet site: <http://www4.nando.net/prof/caribe/origins.html> – Origins of Voodoo – 17/07/99

dealing with their lesser struggles in British society. Talawa's performance can be seen to be providing some necessary links for its black audience to develop a deeper understanding of aspects of its own community. Talawa's tacit message is not only that black lives are worthy of performance, but worthy of such on the British stage, by people who are able to fully represent them and tell all aspects of their story accurately.

The positive response to Talawa's first production (as demonstrated by the audience attendance and positive reviews) pointed to the possibility that there was both space and an audience for, Afro-Caribbean theatre on the British stage. Gordon praises Norman Beaton's portrayal of Toussaint L'Ouverture describing it as , ' . . . a dignified performance of moral weight'.⁴⁷ Coveney goes further stating that the production is the sort of show, ' . . . that lends dignity and credibility to the British black theatre movement.'⁴⁸ *The Black Jacobins* set Talawa on a unique creative path that would become characterised by the company's intention to make whatever work they did their own.⁴⁹

Nine years after the production Dahl's general comment on black British theatre, may be used to describe the commitment and energy of black theatre practitioners. Her statement may be seen to be as relevant to Talawa's debut, as it is to practitioners (many having worked with Talawa along their journey), working through the end of the nineties and into the new millennium:

⁴⁶ Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*, p.101.

⁴⁷ Giles Gordon, 'Haiti's first revolutionaries', *Observer*, 2 March 1986, p.23.

⁴⁸ Michael Coveney, 'The Black Jacobins/Riverside Studios', *Financial Times*, 27 February 1986, p.27.

⁴⁹ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 30 March 1999, 'Whatever work we do, from Caribbean to African to Shakespeare we try to make the work our own.'

Certainly a new generation of black British Theatre workers are already on the field of play. Their tactical command of theatre's disciplines, and their diverse strategies are, I believe, producing visions of culture and of the new Britain that – like their histories – will not be contained, repressed or denied.⁵⁰

What had started as a one-off commission led to Talawa becoming an established black theatre company. *The Black Jacobins* came to mark the beginning of both Talawa's performance life and 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.

The Dragon Can't Dance

Talawa's *The Dragon Can't Dance* (co-produced with the Theatre Royal Stratford East), was performed between 29 June and 4 August of 1990 and was Talawa's fourth Caribbean play. Writer, Earl Lovelace produced the script from his original 1979 novel of the same name.⁵¹

The Dragon Can't Dance was first performed during Trinidad's Carnival in Port of Spain in 1986. The new play form faithfully presented the novel's central theme of the power of Carnival over the lives of the island's underprivileged and in particular that of the protagonist Aldrick.⁵² When Talawa emerged with its version four years later Lovelace was concerned that as the work is culturally specific the British production might only enjoy limited audiences. His concerns were perhaps valid if it is accepted that plays written, directed and performed by black artists in London Fringe theatres may not seem to be relevant to the majority of the non-black theatre going public in London. He did not want his work to be seen as just another black play '... Literature is literature anywhere. It is universal. It doesn't come with a tribal scar.'⁵³ Brewster, in agreement with Lovelace, declared her opposition to any specific ethnic labelling of the work in an attempt to stop any such naming occurring:

⁵⁰ Dahl, 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center', in *Imperialism and Theatre*, p.53.

⁵¹ Earl Lovelace was born in Trinidad in 1935. See internet site: <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/caribbean/lovelace/bio.html> – Literature of the Caribbean – A Brief Biography of Earl Lovelace - 17/07/99

⁵² In his preface to the play script used by Talawa Lovelace explains, 'The present play script of *The Dragon Can't Dance* has emerged out of the novel, from which it was adapted, through stage readings held in Trinidad in 1979, in New York's Black Theatre Alliance in 1980, in Barbados at The Caribbean Festival of Arts in 1981, in workshop at the Eugene O' Neil Theatre Centre, Connecticut in 1984, and finally, the play which ran in Port of Spain during the Carnival 1986.'

It is a very handy label to come up, black theatre. What that means is that black people presenting their arts, their culture, their life, can be ghetto-ised. When in fact stories like this are for everyone and speak to everyone.⁵⁴

By presenting the play *Talawa* had the opportunity to widen both press and public perception of Trinidad and Carnival. It may have been assumed that as Brewster is a Caribbean director working on a Caribbean text that she was working within her own culture. The Trinidadian nature of the play however, meant she had chosen to work outside her native Jamaican culture. Schechner explains:

There is probably more conscious and freely chosen ethnicity around now than there has been in the past. And it is possible to have ethnicity without racism. That's the Utopian dream anyway to have difference which is chosen and which is culture-specific, without it necessarily being hierarchical and authoritarian.⁵⁵

Brewster's, Trinidadian 'culture of choice', in the presentation of *The Dragon* demonstrated a specifically chosen ethnicity on her part. By choosing an ethnicity close to her own for performance on the British stage, Brewster was perhaps more likely to achieve success in the perceived accuracy of the performance. It is doubtful however, that all, or

⁵³ Biyi Bandele-Thomas, 'Conversation with Earl Lovelace', *Voice*, 5 -11 July 1990, p.21.

⁵⁴ Liz Gilbey, 'Dancing The Dragon', *What's on in London*, 27 June 1990, p.39.

even any of these considerations formed part of her process for deciding to direct *The Dragon*. What is more apparent from Talawa's range of Caribbean performance is Brewster's openness to the theatrical exploration and celebration of Caribbean works from across the region.

Oral Language

The following discussion of the oral language of *The Dragon* examines the speech used in Talawa's performance as seen in the company's archival video of the production.

In order to establish the extent to which Talawa made the oral language of the production its own it should be noted that Lovelace's novel of the same name (1979) and his script (1986) are in 'standard English' flavoured with Trinidadianisms. We see 'it have' for 'there are' and 'it ain't reach yet' for 'it hasn't come yet' and 'coulda' for 'could have', along with wider Trinidadian terminology. Lovelace's chosen language style acts both as a means of bringing alive the community in question and may also be interpreted as his refusal '...to submit to the dominance of the imposed standard language and to subscribe to the 'reality', it sustains.'⁵⁶

Generally the language demonstrated in Talawa's archival video of the performance is overt language behaviour. This, and the company's attempts to bring Caribbean English speech to Britain in an established forum went against the early theories of language conscious anti-colonialists who believed that exposure to 'proper' English after

⁵⁵ Schechner, 'Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice' in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, p.50.

⁵⁶ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.169.

colonialism would eradicate Creole speech patterns.⁵⁷ These thinkers were perhaps unable to see far enough ahead to imagine that once colonised peoples were given independence they may seek to revive their cultural identity through language, and may also wish to maintain it even if permanently living in the 'mother' country.

Additionally, as aspects of cultures and languages can be passed down from one generation to the next by living in an ethnic community (and without a conscious effort being made to 'pass on'), it could take generations to eradicate 'improper' English unless a concerted effort were made to do so. As Trinidadian accents are adopted throughout Talawa's performance, it may be suggested that the company was asserting its Caribbean identity and attempting to raise the profile of Caribbean island speech on the British stage. Such performance work could possibly lead to the opposite of the aforementioned anti-colonialist's thought on language.

The fact that approximately half of the cast were native Trinidadians helped with overall accent authenticity as there was linguistic access to native Trinidadian speech for the non-Trinidadian performers.⁵⁸ Though they maintained Trinidadian accents throughout, absolute accuracy of their Trinidadian accents was not Lovelace's and perhaps by extension Brewster's primary concern:

The actors in this production of *Dragon* will not have Trinidadian
or Tobagonian origins. They should not let this trouble them too

⁵⁷ Hubert Devonish, *Language and Liberation. Creole Language Politics in the Caribbean* (London: Karia Press, 1986), p.88.

much. Calvary Hill, in the time in which work is set, would have been one of the areas in Port of Spain to which immigrants from the nearby islands in the Eastern Caribbean would have settled as they came to seek opportunity in the bigger, more prosperous Trinidad, and it would not have been surprising to find a variety of islands' dialects sprinkling The Hill, making it, what I would like to signify, a Caribbean yard . . .⁵⁹

This approach to language suits the varied black British performer and theatre audience, reflecting both the mixed language of their community and that of their parents. For Brewster the language formed part of a more important whole, 'We are not just putting on Trinidadian accents and swanning around. This is a serious play.'⁶⁰

In line with the elements of Bell's theory of language style as audience design, language use in Talawa's performance of *The Dragon Can't Dance* can be seen to have been influenced in part by the expected audience. This is firstly demonstrated by the fact that Talawa had chosen work that was linguistically appropriate to part of its target audience. The Trinidadian voice performed in variation by all of the characters was easily recognisable by Trinidadian audience members.

⁵⁸ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 16 January 1997.

⁵⁹ Lovelace makes the statement in Talawa's publicity programme of the performance. See Talawa production archives for *The Dragon Can't Dance* - publicity file.

⁶⁰ Liz Gilbey, 'Dancing The Dragon', *What's on in London*, 27 June 1990, p.39.

Secondly, whilst the Trinidadian voice was culture specific it was (in the context of Talawa's performance) also general in its wider representation of the Caribbean. This can be seen to have been strategic to benefit other Caribbean and black British audience members. It can be argued that what is linguistically appropriate to Talawa's audience is speech that demonstrates a black cultural heritage.

Thirdly, the presentation of the diverse languages of Calvary Hill may have been seen to help authenticate the voices of Talawa's black British audience whose speech may also show signs of their multicultural existence. Where the black British performers may not have been able to reproduce the precise Caribbean voice required an approximation may have been seen to be adequate bearing in mind the nature of the diverse Caribbean make up of the inhabitants of Calvary Hill. For black British performers with limited access to native Caribbean voices, or who were unused to performing a Caribbean voice the result may have seemed something of a stereotype which did not take into account all of the subtleties of language and culture. This can be seen in the voice that black Briton Cyril Nri used for Aldrick. Whilst there is little to associate his voice to Trinidad or the rest of the Caribbean his black British voice was clear, and the black British audience would have identified with his speech where it was similar to their own.

Fourthly, it can be argued that the general stage Trinidadian voice that was used in the production was designed to include the widest possible English speaking audience whilst remaining culturally specific. Talawa may have wanted to attract its target audience but at the same time needed to attract the widest possible audience for economic reasons. Using

identifiable Caribbean voices that were easily understood may also have attracted audience members from outside of the target culture. Whilst they may not have been able to understand every nuance, their general understanding should have kept their interest.

As in *The Black Jacobins* the performers' use of verbal repertoire can be seen to be a feature of Talawa's production. In this case the verbal repertoire refers mostly to the black British actors and their ability to produce a convincing Caribbean voice. Geff Francis in his portrayal of Fisheye provides a clear example of verbal repertoire. Francis later commonly recognised for his role in Channel 4's 1990s sitcom *Desmond's* where he plays Michael the Bank Manager, demonstrates an aspect of his Caribbean linguistic range as Fisheye. His accurate movement from a working class Trinidadian voice to an upper working class London accent can be seen to attest to his black British bilingual/cultural reality, and that of Talawa's black British audience.

His handling of both voices with ease can be seen to point to the possibility of a completely bilingual/cultural existence. His language use in *The Dragon* is notably working class Caribbean speech that is seen in greater contrast to the middle class speech he uses in *Desmond's*. His use of verbal repertoire can be seen to cross class as well as culture. If Francis as a black Briton is able to absorb the central language forms of his mixed cultural existence then it is possible that other black Britons do the same. In seeing his performance the Caribbean aspect of their verbal repertoire is given a momentary spotlight in the theatrical forum. This may also encourage further use of varied speech forms.

Along with the range of oral behaviours in the performance that may encourage an imitative response from the audience are non-spoken performance vocabularies that both root the performance in aspects of its cultural heritage and teach them to the British audience.

Non-spoken Performance Vocabulary

The following analysis of Talawa's use of non-spoken performance vocabulary in *The Dragon* is presented in two parts; firstly there is an examination of Talawa's use of music and calypso, followed by a discussion of the presentation of Carnival in the production.

Talawa's performance helps to inform its audience of how calypso forms an integral part of the Trinidadian institution of Carnival. For the present writer the performance also provides the forum for stereotypical images around Carnival to be challenged whilst entertaining the audience. Although Talawa cannot claim to be the first theatre practitioners to use Caribbean music and Calypso in particular in performance work in Britain, the range of Calypso styles and music used in the production make the work innovative.⁶¹ This is partly achieved through the original calypsos and music written specifically for the production.

At the outset the audience are ushered into the auditorium to the sound of live steel pans to prepare them for what may be seen as a British-Caribbean theatrical experience. The

⁶¹ As seen in Chapter Two, Cy grant had used his Calypso skills on the BBC's *Tonight* show from 1957-1960.

sound of the steel pans highlights the genres ‘. . .links with the ‘percussive cultures’ of Africa . . .’⁶² This is followed by nine calypso-style songs and various musical interludes that recur throughout the performance.

Talawa uses its opening number *All A We Is One* (song one) to set the lively Carnival tone of the piece. The song also demonstrates the power that calypso has in bringing the racially and economically divided areas of Trinidadian society briefly together as everyone seems to have a part to play in Carnival. This coming together simultaneously points to the stark reality of a generally socially divided Trinidad and by extension, the notion that this may also be the case for the rest of the Caribbean. This division and coming together mocked in the satirical title of the song may be recognised by the British audience, whose own annual Notting Hill Carnival enjoys the mixing of both British and international races and all classes of people for two days each year.⁶³

Tro Me Out A She Yard and *Sylvia Ain’t Have No Man* (songs two and three), show calypso being used in Talawa’s production to express a range of everyday situations and emotions. From feelings of unrequited love (as expressed by Oscar James’s Philo in *Tro Me Out A She Yard*), to the importance of getting the right costume for Carnival (in James’s Philo’s *Sylvia Ain’t Have No Man*). For the present writer Talawa’s production shows calypso as a Trinidadian life force in much the same way that Talawa’s black British audience may recognise music as a fundamental aspect of their lives.

⁶² Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.85.

Although we understand that Laura Beckford's Sylvia has no costume and that James's Philo has been rejected the pleasant sound of each calypso may bring hope to their situations and in this respect may be seen to have a positive effect on those who listen to it. This is seen in the more popular calypso sound used for *Dance Dragon* (song four) as sung by Susan Aderin's Yvonne. The lively pace of Talawa's composition detracts from her message that society's down trodden should rebel. The same song reappears as song nine to end the show with a calypso pulse.

Additionally Talawa uses varying styles of calypso to enhance the message within a song. This is well expressed in *Come Out In The Road Warrior* (song five) which acts as a musical indicator to the rebellious 'badjohns'. The calypso sound though recognisable is accompanied by a clear African drum bass. The heavy drumming can be seen to represent both Africa and the rebellious streak of both Francis's Fisheye and Nri's Aldrick, indicating their feeling for their African roots and their move away from what they perceive to be the europeanisation of Carnival and by extension calypso.

Nri's Aldrick is given a second musical interpretation with *Man Alone* (song six). Talawa uses the song as the character's anthem and like songs two and three above does not strictly fit the popular calypso genre. It is slow with steel pans and a guitar accompaniment and is used to express the non-rebellious, solitary and despairing side of his character.

⁶³ Darnell Cadette, 'Carnival's Bumpy', *Voice*, 24 August 1990, p.31, 'People from all parts of the community who might not otherwise be associated are drawn together for Carnival.'

James's Philo's *Hooligans in Port of Spain* (song seven) is used by Talawa as the character's song of attack. This musical attack is responded to by both Francis's Fisheye and Nri's Aldrick who inter-cut the song with their own message of James's Philo being a sell out.⁶⁴ In an appropriate semi-reprise Nri's Aldrick sings *Man Alone* to the same beat as *Hooligans In Port Of Spain*. This is immediately followed by the angry *Come Out In The Road Warrior*. The combination of the three songs each with its own mood carried by a calypso beat again stresses the flexibility of the calypso genre. This range of music highlights the versatility of the steel pan that may be regarded with low musical status in Britain as it is not an established western orchestral or band instrument.

At the beginning of the second act Talawa uses more general calypso music to create the atmosphere of the Carnival. The steel pans are relied upon here to create the feeling of both excitement and fill the theatrical space with the movement and celebration of Carnival. Talawa may seem to be using the music to counter the lack of actors, to bring the life of Carnival to the stage. Stone comments, 'No novel, however, can convey the pulsating force of Carnival with the immediacy of theatre.'⁶⁵

In the second half of act two Talawa uses music to depict the everyday life of those on Calvary Hill and what has happened to them since Nri's Aldrick and Francis's Fisheye have been in prison. A slow calypso is used to highlight the tranquil atmosphere of the Hill five years on. As the pans play we watch the inhabitants of the hill go about their new

⁶⁴ Rehearsal script, p.34.

⁶⁵ Judy S. J. Stone, *Theatre: Studies in West Indian Literature* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1994), p.86.

daily routine. Both the oral and musical performance of Talawa's production bring out Lovelace's original musical style:

The music of *The Dragon* – calypso, rapso, road march, parang- is fully integrated with the drama, making Lovelace's adapted novel, rather than *Moon*, or any other precursors from the Calabash Folk Theatre, the first authentic yard musical.⁶⁶

Talawa presents the penultimate song *We Believe In Miracles* (song eight) in a cappella. This is doubly effective as it momentarily breaks away from the expected musical style. The song taking the form of a gospel church song is accompanied by hand claps and later drumming. The rendition is used to explain why the police did not stop the rebellious rampage and of what happened in court before Nri's Aldrick and Francis's Fisheye were sent to jail. This musical style impresses upon the audience the notion that the essential spirit of Carnival and the music of multiple steel pans is long gone. Now they have only their voices.

In addition to a cappella instrumental music in the performance also moves away from predominant calypso style. Often such music is slow steel pans that help to create an appropriate atmosphere for an intimate scene between two characters. The following examples serve to highlight where music is used to enhance the intimacy of the scene: When Trevor Marshall-Ward's Mr Guy tells Beckford's Sylvia she can have any dress she wants for Carnival (p.9a). When Beckford's Sylvia goes to see Nri's Aldrick for the first

time (p.10). When Aderin's Yvonne tells Francis's Fisheye that she can no longer be with him (p.17). When Dhirendra's Pariag tries to make friends with Nri's Aldrick by offering him cigarettes (p.20). When Shelley King's Dolly and Dhirendra's Pariag discuss how they were ignored at Christmas (p.21a), and when James's Philo tells Jacqui Chan's Cleothilda how he's being treated like a hero (p.39).⁶⁷

Talawa moves the musical direction effectively away from calypso when Dhirendra's Pariag tells King's Dolly that he wishes they could have all got on better with each other. The move is to Indian music and highlights their cultural identity that has been musically ignored throughout the performance, mirroring the way the couple are treated generally by their neighbours. The music is briefly used to point to their most intimate thoughts and feelings that separate them from their Creole neighbours. Earlier when the couple describe how they were ignored at Christmas the music accompanying the scene remains appropriately calypso. The music reminds us that they are celebrating Christmas because they are with Christian Creole people and they want to be accepted.

Additionally Talawa can be seen to use music instead of straightforward dialogue. This is seen in Chan's Cleothilda. Her distress at Dhirendra's Pariag acquiring a bike is shown in the regimented marching reggae chant, 'Something new happening in town, the crazy Indian coming down.'⁶⁸ Strategically the heavy beat is drawn in contrast to the calypso she has sung and danced to earlier. Her anger expressed through an African beat can be seen as Talawa's theatrical device to point to the character taking sides in the community

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.85.

⁶⁷ Page numbers refer to the rehearsal script.

as she wishes to disassociate from the Indian. Her chant demonstrates that at this point she now wants to be regarded as more similar to the non-racially mixed black people in her community.

Similarly, Talawa uses music later to add to the tension that Chan's Cleothilda wishes to cause once she has lost her Carnival spirit. Her solitary complaint about dog mess in the streets is accompanied by the stark rattling of spoons on bottles and bongo drumming. The hollowness of the spoons on the bottles can be seen to echo the emptiness she feels for those around her and the emptiness that she feels exists in the community once Carnival is over. This is in contrast to her earlier rendition of the Christian hymns, *Rock of Ages* and *Forty Nights*. Talawa can be seen to have used the hymns to occupy an emptiness within the character prior to the Carnival celebrations. In the aftermath of Carnival and before she can return to her hymn singing, there is only a void. There is no music to fill it resulting in her life being miserable.

Through Talawa's presentation of calypso and music we learn about the sound and range of the genre. Additionally the production demonstrates aspects of the history and importance of the institution of Carnival. For the present writer the historical aspects of Carnival should be brought to the contemporary multicultural British stage so Carnival is not presented in a vacuum or as a new theatrical form that has not changed.

Whilst Carnival may now appear to be a black controlled event this was not always the case. Prior to the abolition of slavery in Trinidad in 1834 the 'upper class community'

⁶⁸ Rehearsal script, p.22a.

consisted of the white landowners that mimicked the songs and dances of their slaves during Carnival. Many came from the French settler elite.⁶⁹ The period directly after emancipation saw the participation of former slaves and the poor. This caused whites to pull out of Carnival now regarding it as a 'disorderly amusement for the lower classes.'⁷⁰ Once there was no white involvement there was also little money to spend on Carnival celebrations.

For the black populace who spent much of the year looking forward to Carnival post-emancipation lack of funds did not act as a barrier but may rather be seen to have pushed their resourcefulness to the limit. The major sign of this was seen much later in the 1940s with the invention of the steel pan from oil drums discarded on the island by American military bases.⁷¹ The instrument was created out of necessity and consequently carried with it part of the history of the underprivileged who were forced to work within the little that they had and not dwell on a more comfortable way of life which seemed to be the preserve of the white populace. The necessity of its creation can be seen as what Savory refers to as a strategy for survival.⁷²

⁶⁹ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.79.

⁷⁰ Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest*, p.15.

⁷¹ Winston Normans, 'Celebration in Diversity', *Carnival 89*, August 1989, p.8.

⁷² Elaine Savory, 'Strategies for Survival: Anti-Imperialist Theatrical Forms in the Anglophone Caribbean', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by J. Ellen Gainer (London/New York: Routledge 1995), pp243-252 (p.245), '...in the context of the Caribbean, (the strategy) draws on the "little tradition" or suppressed inheritance and is expressed in a mode which both releases the self-defining energy of reconnection with a past ancestry denied by colonialism and carves out a space in a given context of repression.' Savory continues more specifically, 'Such strategies have tended to develop first in one territory. Calypso, for example, first turned into a highly organised art form in Trinidad. It originated as a song of resistance on the plantation among the slaves, and behind this is probably an ancestry in satirical African orature.'

As Carnival had taken on a new significance with mostly black participants the emergence of the steel pans and the bands playing them became an important aspect of life in Trinidad. For some, Carnival may have become the only important event in their lives. Through Talawa's production the present writer examines this notion through the portrayal of Francis's Fisheye and an exploration of his physical violence in relation to the Carnival theme, and comments on Nri's Aldrick and his internal intellectualisation of life inspired by his preparations for Carnival.

Through Geff Francis's portrayal of Fisheye Carnival is given the opportunity to take on a new significance for the British audience by showing how it impacts on those who view it as a central aspect of their lives. Becoming part of a steel band legitimises Francis's character's existence both in his own eyes and those of his new community. Francis's performance demonstrates how Carnival is used to allow a man weakened by society (as his professional and financial status is low), to show his physical strength and hold on to part of what he perceives to be his manhood. Belonging to the band and playing the badjohn means he can be part of an underprivileged whole, look out from the gutter, and empower himself by physically intimidating those in his community who are willing to conform. By making his presence felt and metaphorically shouting loud he is able to add meaning to his existence and attest to Wiley's notion that 'Most black people can't afford to be quiet.'⁷³ Francis's performance suggests emotional and psychological death would be the result of his character remaining silent.

⁷³ Ralph Wiley, *Why Black People Tend To Shout: Cold Facts and Wry Views from a Black Man's World* (New York: Penguin 1992), p.2.

For the present writer Talawa's presentation of the theme can be seen to be pertinent to its audience. The suffering that he demonstrates behind his macho stance may be seen to be mirrored by those members of the black British audience and their parents who can draw parallels with what they may perceive to be their weak position as outsiders in British society. Many of those who migrated from the Caribbean to Britain between 1948 and the 1960s were forced into positions of weakness by the strong arm of British society causing them to feel frustrated.⁷⁴ In the cases of the many men who found they were unable to support their families in the ways that they had anticipated before their arrival in Britain their frustration sometimes expressed violently often led to a relationship breakdown.⁷⁵ For those later born here where their situation mirrored that of their parents this may also have led to frustration.

Francis's portrayal of Fisheye is of a man who is only able to feel content when he can control his environment. Francis demonstrates that Fisheye is only able to do this through unpredictable violence. Whilst his violent character is written in the script Francis uses his physical size to dominate those around him. Talawa can be seen here to be highlighting his physical strength in contrast to the reality of his weak position in society. This is an image that may be familiar to black male members of Talawa's audience. Francis shows how his character needs to assert himself to those he can, as he is unable to access the authorities that have caused his situation. The anger he demonstrates at James's Philo's success leads him to slap James's Philo's lady friend. His violence is aimed at humiliating

⁷⁴ Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, p.73. Selvon points to how most blacks arriving at the time became part of the working class community in Britain.

⁷⁵ Elyse Dodgson, *Motherland: West Indian Women to Britain in the 1950's* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1984), p.43.

James's Philo by taking away some of the added manhood he has achieved by winning the calypso crown. The manhood that James's Philo has gained by compromising his approach to his area of Carnival is mirrored by the loss of manhood that France's Fisheye experiences through his unwillingness to do the same. Francis's performance shows how his character is further weakened and his entire existence threatened by the intervention of the sponsors offering to fund the band, and exclude Fisheye from fighting:

It was only in 1950s when this sponsorship and the destabilisation of Carnival began: a steel band might do something really important like all wear clean T-shirts.

Now they were taking to a uniform provided by a sponsoring company and conforming. Carnival became glamourised and pretty.

For a whole year a community would sustain their dragon man: he was their community arts worker, if you like, a microcosm of society and culture. Sponsorship undermined this.⁷⁶

Through Francis's Fisheye and the effects of steel band sponsorship on him, Talawa's audience are made aware of both the new politics of Carnival that emerged due to the availability of financial backing and how the poor Trinidadian blacks lost control over their Carnival. Neither Talawa nor its audience could have been aware at the time that Britain's Notting Hill Carnival would experience a similar fate in 1998. When sponsorship

fell through and Carnival organisers contemplated the possibility of cancelling the event
Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic provided funds for the event:

Quite a timely move on Mr Branson's part as there are a series
of scheduled Virgin Atlantic flights to the Caribbean this year!
Well, business is business.⁷⁷

Talawa's performance shows how while business may be the focal point of Carnival for
the sponsors, for those who create it Carnival is an essential part of their existence. For
Francis's Fisheye being in the band made him somebody, throwing him out to suit the
sponsors makes him nobody once more.⁷⁸

In contrast to Francis's Fisheye who is beaten by the sponsors, some Carnival organisers
in Britain feel the London event needs sponsorship and maintain the event can benefit
from involvement from the wider community.⁷⁹ The difference in feeling can be seen to
mark a change in attitude to Carnival between black Britons and their parents as they have
not had the same experience of Carnival. Talawa's performance once again may serve to
instruct the black British community.

⁷⁶ Gilbey, 'Dancing The Dragon', *What's on in London*, 27 June 1990, p.39.

⁷⁷ Cadette, 'Carnival's Bumpy', *Voice*, 24 August 1990, p.31.

⁷⁸ Judy S.J. Stone, *Theatre: Studies in West Indian Literature*, p.86.

⁷⁹ Anon, 'Carnival: Nottinghill Carnival is more popular than ever. But has its true spirit been lost for good?', *Journal*, 28 August 1998, p.20. Clare Holder, Chief Executive of the Notting Hill Carnival Trust states, 'People who say that Carnival has become too commercial are missing the point . . . we need money to survive', and later, ' . . . it is time that people stop looking at Carnival as solely their own property.'

Talawa's audience witness the effects of both Fisheye's unstructured rebellion and his ultimate decision to toe society's line. Both in rebellion and once he has compromised his situation remains the same. He is poor, powerless and black.⁸⁰ In contrast Talawa's presentation of Carnival through Nri's Aldrick, shows how this character can be seen to represent the articulate voice of the people.⁸¹

Through Nri's Aldrick, Talawa's audience is introduced to the internal and psychological effects of Carnival on those for whom it forms an integral part of their existence. For him this is a yearlong process that begins the moment the last Carnival is over. He turns his attention to himself and looks at his innermost emotions, demonstrating the Carnival tradition of 'self reflective criticism.'⁸²

Nri's portrayal of Aldrick highlights how the making of his dragon costume encourages him to focus on himself. Nri's portrayal opens up the psychological depth of the Carnival process that is seldom reflected in the reporting of British Carnival. As he sews, his conviction is that he cannot settle with anyone until things are put right on the island. This political commitment is didactic and a new experience for many black Britons who have not had to start battles of race and poverty from scratch, always having some form of

⁸⁰ Elaine Savory, 'Strategies for Survival: Anti-Imperialist Theatrical Forms in the Anglophone Caribbean', in *Imperialism and Theatre*, p.244, The following comment refers to rebellion against imperialism from slave rebellion to linguistic rebellion '...with a few exceptions, the most intense signs of rebellion were, and often still are, concentrated in the poorest members of society, who were (and still often are), darkest in skin colour and closest to African identity both physically and culturally.'

⁸¹ Ibid., p.252, 'In Caribbean plays, the least articulate folk are likely to be the most elite and often white, whereas the most verbally dextrous are most likely those who came from the poorest and most African-centred masses. This is not only a political perception, but a reflection of the way in which Caribbean people have seen language utilized by folk culture on the one hand and a restrictive colonial bureaucracy on the other.'

⁸² Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.95.

foundation set for them by their more politically active ancestors.⁸³ The superficial aspects of Carnival are challenged then as Nri's Aldrick continues to make his costume, and Talawa's audience come to appreciate the sincerity of his claim 'This is my whole life here.'⁸⁴

Aldrick's chosen masquerade (repeated each year) as performed by Nri, is symbolically that of the dragon.⁸⁵ Like the costume he wears those like Nri's Aldrick who are concerned about the political rebellion that Carnival has represented are becoming equally extinct.⁸⁶ The constant dragon masquerade symbolises Nri's Aldrick's rebellion and his fight against what he sees going on around him. Each day is based on adding to his new dragon costume. With each addition he cements the minor aspects of his life from the previous year to create the greater picture of his present existence. As with James's Philo and his calypsos and Francis's Fisheye with his fighting in the band, Nri's Aldrick's dragon is both his life and manhood.

Once incarcerated Nri's character realises the full extent of the hopelessness of his people's situation. It is this understanding and acceptance of it that distinguishes him from his neighbours who remain satisfied with what Carnival offers them.⁸⁷ Once he recognises

⁸³ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London/New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p.230.

⁸⁴ Rehearsal script, p.12a.

⁸⁵ Judy S.J. Stone, *Theatre: Studies in West Indian Literature*, p.85, 'The Dragon is one of Trinidad's old-time individual Carnival masquerades that today, with the development of the professionally designed 'pretty mas' costume bands several thousand members strong, has been driven to the edge of extinction.'

⁸⁶ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, p.79, 'Carnival became the vehicle for rebellion against colonial authority. For poor urban blacks in particular, Carnival represented more than a licensed inversion of accepted norms; it embodied an ongoing struggle against inequity and oppression. The spirit of protest was evident not only in the traditional calypso lyrics and various masquerades which satirised society, but also in a pattern of disorderly behaviour that culminated in riots during the 1881 and 1884 Carnivals.'

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.96.

that he has moved on spiritually, psychologically and emotionally Nri's Aldrick can no longer dance the dance of the dragon as he now views this type of rebellion as both misunderstood and fruitless:

. . . ,why the dragon couldn't dance, why he couldn't perform, you know, you couldn't carry on that one-dimensional almost rebellion all the time. And I suppose a question that man has to face, I mean even beyond Carnival is, 'Can one continue to rebel all the time in a certain dimension?'⁸⁸

Finally, Aldrick's comment can be seen to be pertinent to Britain's Notting Hill Carnival today. Whilst some support sponsorship others feel that the spirit of Carnival is being taken away because it is ultimately leaving the original spirit in a state of permanent disrepair.⁸⁹ For the present writer Talawa's performance encourages its audience to develop a greater understanding of the entire Caribbean Carnival process. This could impact on the further positive development of the portrayal and partaking of Carnival in Britain in the long term.

⁸⁸ Daryll Cumber Dance, *Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers*, p.156. Taken from interview with Earl Lovelace.

⁸⁹ Nigel Carter, 'Multi-cultural or multi-commercial?', *Caribbean Times incorporating African Times*, 15 September 1992, p.30, (quoting Mike Philips), 'The commercial concessions, the sponsorship and the framework of commercial organisation will increase and new money will bring in new forms of control.'

The Lion

The Lion by Guyana's Michael Abbensetts was Talawa's seventh Caribbean play and fourteenth production in total. The production marked two important firsts for the company; it was Talawa's first commissioned play in its West End home, performed at The Cochrane between 30 September and 23 October 1993, and was the company's first play to be taken abroad.⁹⁰ The following analysis of the production examines the oral language of Talawa's performance and notions of black identity as raised through Talawa's production.

Oral Language

The present writer's analysis of language use in Talawa's production is divided into two main areas. Firstly, the oral language of Talawa's performance is explored through a discussion of middle class Caribbean and middle class black British speech. Here some interpretation of English manners and ideas of sophistication are also examined as an integral part of what is presented as British English adopted by Caribbean speakers. This is followed by an analysis of the working class Caribbean speech as performed by a black British actor. Damourette and Pichon's idea that 'every dialect is a way of thinking' is demonstrated in this section as we see how three English language forms mark fundamental differences in people who have both a history and culture in common.⁹¹

But the bigger it gets the less the Carnival will belong to the Caribbeans . . . As it becomes mature and more varied, along the lines of a European festival, the Caribbeans who now govern its conduct and direction will be obliged to share or even lose their dominance.'

⁹⁰ In November 1993 the British cast did a ten-day run of the show at the Ward Theatre, Kingston, Jamaica.

The script of *The Lion* is written in 'standard English', peppered with Caribbeanisms as seen in both productions discussed above. One of the language forms featured in the performance is presented in the publicity programme with a quote from the production, 'Yuh seat of government is dis sofabed'.⁹² This could lead programme readers to imagine that the Caribbean language of the performance would be that of the monolingual patois speaker. Whilst this speech is used in the performance it takes second place to the varying forms of black middle class speech performed. Talawa can be seen then to be using the monolingual patois form to attract a section of its target audience.

The principal Caribbean language of Talawa's production is the general voice of the Caribbean black upper middle class as presented by the protagonists Stefan Kalipha's Ramsey James and Madge Sinclair's Isabella.⁹³ This black middle class speech in both the Caribbean and Britain, and the presentation of the lives of its speakers on stage demonstrates Mamet's belief that, 'As the society changes the theater Changes.'⁹⁴

Through Talawa's performance its audience is pointed to the fact that post-emancipation black culture has developed its own middle class both in England and the Caribbean. Due to their colonial history the black class system is akin to that of England where social hierarchy may be demonstrated by language use and accent.

⁹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.25.

⁹² Rehearsal script, Act 2, p.34.

⁹³ The language that they use is essentially 'standard English' with a Caribbean accent and some regional differences. In Cassidy's, *Jamaica Talk*, p.2, a description is offered of this kind of speech in the context of Jamaica, 'At one end is the type of Jamaica Talk that aims toward the London 'standard' or educated model, and, in many Jamaicans' usage, reaches it extremely well – certainly as well as the speech of many a Britisher living outside the 'home counties' around London.'

⁹⁴ David Mamet, *Writing in Restaurants*, (New York: Viking, Penguin Inc., 1986), p.19.

The importance and recognition of the range and hierarchy of Caribbean language as presented in Talawa's production is relevant to the present black British audience as they experience this aspect of the legacy of colonial rule in modern Britain. Where previously in colonial history black skin served as a barrier to upward mobility, Talawa's performance of *The Lion* shows how whilst lighter skin colour is advantageous, black skin need not be the hindrance it once was provided that the black speaker's language demonstrates an 'acceptable' level of education. This is seen in Sinclair's *Isabella*. In the treatment for the stage play, Abbensetts describes *Isabella*'s language, 'She has two ways of speaking: she can sound very English, and then suddenly, break into a bit of a Caribbean dialect.'⁹⁵

Embarrassment about Caribbean black working class language and manners in England is presented by Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners*. Selvon's section on the character Harris describes how he is black and imitates all that he regards as English. He wears a bowler hat and carries an umbrella with a briefcase and *The Times* under his arm.⁹⁶ He has used language to climb socially and is put on edge by his fellow countrymen whom he feels do not speak or act in an appropriately English manner around his white friends.

This need that some Afro-Caribbean people newly arrived in Britain throughout the 1950s had to demonstrate the ability to use 'standard English' can be seen to have become unnecessary with ensuing generations. This is seen in all of the aforementioned black British theatre companies that emerged throughout the late 1970s until the mid eighties

⁹⁵ The treatment for the stage play is found in Talawa's production archives files for *The Lion* – general file.

⁹⁶ Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, pp.110-122.

who used Afro-Caribbean speech forms as their major mode of expression. This is also seen in the wealth of African and Caribbean English language productions that Talawa has produced since its inception.

The linguistic prejudices once levelled at blacks by whites in the Caribbean have become the preserve of the middle class black Caribbean community who in imitating their ex-colonial masters mock black working class uneducated speech. They see this speech as inferior to their own linguistically recognised West Indian Standard speech (WIS). This is seen in Talawa's performance when Isabella corrects Hendrick's language:

Hendricks: Come 'n get it!

Isabella: Hendricks, you're in Britain now. Here they say
"coffee is served."⁹⁷

Her correction serves to enlighten him whilst pointing to her elevated status. David De Camp in his discussion of the case of Jamaica, gives a clear indication of the social status of Sinclair's character's type of speech in relation to other 'standard English' forms. The persons who head the continuum are Jamaicans who speak the most highly respected varieties of Jamaican English. They recognise that this is not the same as 'standard English'. Expatriates who speak public school 'standard English' do not even enter on the continuum as all expatriate speech is outside it.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Rehearsal script, p.3.

⁹⁸ David De Camp, 'Social and Geographical Factors in Jamaican Dialects', in *Creole Language Studies II*, ed. R.B. Le Page (London/New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp.61-84 (p.83).

Kalipha's Ramsey also uses educated middle class speech. His stated claim for this is based on his British education. This highlights the important fact to the British audience that not all those who came from the West Indies arrived in Tilbury Dock on the *Windrush* in 1948.⁹⁹ The adoption of middle class speech adapted by blacks to suit their Caribbean environment was a marker of upward mobility in both the pre- and post-independence Caribbean, and became the norm for the islands' rich and powerful.¹⁰⁰ Those in power like Kalipha's Ramsey seem however, not to have been fully aware of the cultural consequences surrounding their linguistic choices. Opting to imitate the language and manners of the old colonial rulers would serve to keep their society divided as it had been under colonial rule.

Talawa's performance shows how the use of Caribbean black middle class speech is accompanied by a display of colonial manners. The students of Kalipha's Ramsey's generation not only learnt British English but also how to 'act' English in a bid to distinguish themselves further from their Caribbean counterparts and demonstrate their privilege. Kalipha's Ramsey refers to his bodyguard as 'boy', and expresses his desire to accommodate both linguistically and socially when he instructs him, 'Next time instead of making me coffee, make me some tea. This is England; they drink tea here.'¹⁰¹ It is the aggressive manner in which Kalipha makes the statement, rather than the words

⁹⁹ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 16 March 1999, 'People here like to think that all black people came here on the *Windrush* to look for work.'

¹⁰⁰ Errol Miller, 'Educational Development in Independent Jamaica', in *Jamaica in Independence: Essays On The Early Years*, ed. by Rex Nettleford (London/Kingston: Heinemann Caribbean, 1989), pp.205 –227 (p.207), 'Mastery of the Anglo-culture, particularly mastery of the English language, became the most important criterion of upward mobility through education.'

¹⁰¹ Rehearsal script, p.4.

themselves that point to his interpretation of the character and the notion that having colonial manners allows his character to be rude to those who work for him.

It is through Colette Brown's *Sonia* and Danny Kwasi Sapani's *Gideon* that Talawa's audience experience the theatrical voice of black Briton's middle class. Within the context of the play they are the black British community who are drawn in linguistic contrast to the other characters who represent two opposite levels of the Caribbean class system. The language they use is representative of black middle class Britain and is identical to white middle class speech. For the present writer their use of general middle class English speech is beneficial to Talawa's wider representation of itself, as it both expands and demonstrates the verbal repertoire of the company whilst unveiling a second level of overt language behaviour. This overt language behaviour, like the Caribbean middle class speech is uncommon to the contemporary black British stage.

For the present writer, this speech remains generally unexplored in black British Theatre for two main reasons; firstly, its similarity to 'standard English' may cause blacks using it to be seen as moving away from the aspects of poverty and struggle that may be associated with black identity. Such poverty may be mistakenly taken to be representative of black culture.¹⁰² Secondly as, many blacks in Britain do not belong to this group the language is not representative of them.

¹⁰² Rex Nettleford, 'Cultural Action in Independence', in *Jamaica in Independence: Essays On The Early Years*, ed. by Rex Nettleford (London/Kingston: Heinemann Caribbean, 1989), 291-328 (p.326), 'Tom Mboya, a former Kenyan leader, once told the world that Africa's poverty (expressed in recycled motor-tyre sandals and semi-nudity) should not be taken for its culture. Cleanliness as a mark of personal hygiene is not a bourgeois indulgence as some 'revolutionary' youths would have us believe.'

Both Sapani's Gideon and Brown's Sonia are born into middle class families due to their fathers' political professions, though neither had been raised with them. As for their mothers little is known. Additionally, both characters are middle class by their own profession as both are teachers. There is however, nothing in Talawa's performance of their language that reflects their full cultural heritage.

For Brown's Sonia this is easily explained as we know that she has been raised by an English mother and we are never shown any long term direct contact that she has had with the Caribbean. For Sapani's Gideon the case is quite different. His mother, who has raised him as a single parent is from St. Judes. If he has been at all influenced by his mother's speech his Caribbean linguistic knowledge could feasibly be wider than is demonstrated by his language use in the play. It could be argued that it would not be unimaginable that like Sinclair's Isabella, Sapani's Gideon may occasionally use some form of the Caribbean expression he has heard all his life from his mother. This would reflect his bicultural life. Equally given the passionate nature of his situation and the fact that he is surrounded by Caribbean people from the same island as his parents we could be given to expect the occasional Caribbean word. The fact that this does not happen can be seen as a marker of Talawa's aim to highlight his entire 'Englishness' and the difference that he sees between himself and the Caribbean characters. By extension this may also represent the chosen linguistic and cultural differences between Caribbean nationals living in England and their black British counterparts who move away from orally expressing a Caribbean identity. When Sapani's Gideon tells Kalipha's Ramsey that he is proud of being a black Briton, his

linguistic tone reflects this. He uses the language of where he feels he belongs and provides food for thought for Talawa's black British audience.

The language of Sapani and Brown's characters as seen in Talawa's production may be deemed to have no place on any black language continuum as it is indistinguishable from that of their white counterparts. There are however, many black British professionals who use this speech. They are after all British. Despite this, when this voice is presented in the black British performance arena it can be used to highlight the speaker's apparent loss of cultural identity rather than point to an expression of part of one's mixed cultural roots and life experience.

This notion of black middle class speech portraying the user as having a cultural identity problem is seen in Geff Francis's portrayal of Michael in Channel 4's *Desmond's*, as discussed earlier. Mainstream television programming had presented the phenomenon of black upper middle class speech as identical to its British counterpart and moving away from its cultural roots in the 1970s in ITV's comedy series *Rising Damp* (September 1974-May 1978). The series starred Trinidadian-born Don Warrington in the role of Philip the African Prince student Doctor who shared a flat with his white friend, affectionately referred to as 'the layabout', played by Richard Beckonsale. Warrington's character became widely known as 'the posh black man', indicating what may be regarded as a perceived incompatibility of his speech to his skin colour.

In Talawa's production of *The Lion* it is the working class Caribbean speech of David Webber's Hendricks that may be seen as the common way of speaking for blacks. It is

distinctive by its differences from 'standard English' speech and its tonal similarities to West African speech.

Once again Talawa can be seen to be demonstrating the verbal repertoire of the black community with this choice of voice. This time however the linguistic dexterity is heightened as David Webber is British and is using this voice in performance. This third linguistic form, as is seen through Talawa's work, has been shown where the text requires the depiction of a black working class environment. For Talawa, the voice has tended towards Jamaican working class speech. This is partly due to the writers' Jamaican nationality, or in the case of non-Jamaican writers, the decision to demonstrate a Jamaican situation using Jamaican speech as is demonstrated by Walcott.¹⁰³

From the context of the production we know that Webber's Hendricks has spent much of his life on the Caribbean Island of St. Jude. His voice should then reflect his linguistic history. Given that the island is a fictitious one there is no exact model for the actor to follow. He must draw his own conclusions based on his experience of Caribbean speech and adapt it for performance on the British stage.¹⁰⁴

The result, as seen in Talawa's archival video, may be seen as a recognisable stage version of working class monolingual Jamaican patois speech. His chosen voice is defined enough for it to be culturally and socially identifiable whilst demonstrating a clarity that makes it

¹⁰³ This speech is used in the following Talawa Caribbean productions to depict the black working class: *An Echo In The Bone* (Dennis Scott), *O Babylon* (Derek Walcott), *Smile Orange* (Trevor Rhone), *Maskerade*, (Sylvia Wynter).

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 16 March 1999, 'David was familiar with the voice because of his Jamaican background.'

comprehensible to non-patois speakers. As the character is from St. Jude and not Jamaica it would seem that Webber's chosen voice is acceptable as he demonstrates the Caribbean class difference. It is an exaggerated and affected speech style.

In this light his language is akin to what De Camp refers to as Quashie Talk. This is the lowest form of language on the Jamaican continuum and is used generally by comedians.¹⁰⁵ This is fitting for Webber's character that by the nature of his uneducated speech is given comic status. In being directed to play dominoes with himself Webber's Hendricks simultaneously plays two characters. He moves from one seat to the other to identify a character change. For the present writer it is difficult for the audience to disassociate his actions from what we are given to be his appropriate speech. We understand that his actions are at best childlike and at worst ridiculous. Either way Talawa can be seen to use the language form to stress the comedy, low intellect and low status of the character.

Through Talawa's production the black British audience are given a picture of Caribbean language hierarchy which directly relates to them. Many of them will be as culturally familiar with the working class speech of Webber's Hendricks as the middle class speech of the other characters.¹⁰⁶ The use of Jamaican speech may encourage those less concerned with detail to assume incorrectly, that all Caribbean people come from Jamaica or that this

¹⁰⁵ De Camp, 'Social and Geographical Factors in Jamaican Dialects', in *Creole Language Studies II*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 373. Britain saw Caribbean people arriving from the West Indies in larger numbers from 1948. The largest groups arrived between 1953 and 1958. 1954 = 24,000, 1956 = 26,000, 1957 = 22,000, 1958 = 16,000. It is these people and their offspring who have formed the greater part of Britain's modern black community and brought a new dimension to Britain's working class.

voice may serve as the general example of working class Caribbean speech in performance.¹⁰⁷

Through Talawa's performance, additional clues are given as to how Webber's Hendricks's monolingual patois speech coupled with his personal taste and manners place him at the bottom end of St. Jude's hierarchical society. Talawa's audience may judge whether the linguistic and social characteristics displayed would also place Webber's Hendricks, or people like him at the bottom of British society. Drawn as the polar opposite to his employer his musical taste leans towards ragga and reggae (as opposed to Kalipha's Ramsey's love of opera), and throughout the production he is the only character who regularly uses expletives despite their absence in the script. The suggestion is that this is in keeping with his monolingual patois speech and that he is not capable of demonstrating the same kind of linguistic 'sophistication' as his employer. His language use can also be seen as a factor in legitimising how he is treated, and seems to expect to be treated negatively by those who are in a higher social group. Some forty-eight years ago a form of Creole was described as 'Inferiority made half articulate.'¹⁰⁸ From Webber's portrayal of Hendricks and his treatment in *The Lion* it would seem that this opinion has not been entirely disassociated from Caribbean monolingual patois based language forms used either in the West Indies or in Britain.

¹⁰⁷ Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, p.28, '... the English people believe that everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica.'

¹⁰⁸ J. Edward Chamberlin, *Come Back To Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.82.

The linguistic diversity demonstrated by Talawa's performance suggests, in agreement with Nettleford, that there is room and a given accepted place for more than one form of language within the scope of Caribbean, British and Afro-Caribbean based communities.¹⁰⁹ The introduction of upper middle class Caribbean language, black British middle class professional language, and working class Caribbean speech to the black British stage is threefold. Audiences are invited to acknowledge the three forms and the class based language/culture system within Caribbean society. These divisions may seem to be overlooked in Britain in preference to putting many black people into a singular and identical generic black group. Secondly, the three forms can work together. Finally, there is a clear hierarchy that once again places the voice of the monolingual patois speaker at the bottom of the pile.

In addition to what Talawa's performance can be seen to present to its audience linguistically, for the present writer a number of themes specific to Talawa's performance are pertinent or linked to black British life and are discussed below.

¹⁰⁹ Nettleford, 'Cultural Action in Independence', in *Jamaica in Independence: Essays On The Early Years*, p.292, 'The use of Standard English for official and formal discourse is not incompatible, after all, with the common usage of a tongue created by the Jamaican people over 300 years for their own use and to describe their own reality.'

Notions of Black Identity

The performance of issues surrounding race and working class life are not new to the contemporary British stage. This was seen particularly after the emergence of Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* in 1958,¹¹⁰ and the popularity of the earlier working class hero Jimmy Porter in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956.¹¹¹ This work however, was not from a black perspective. Throughout the 1970s when Caribbean writers living in Britain focused on their own working class life and racial issues that they were encountering as a result of being black people in Britain they were taking responsibility for their own representation into their own hands. This can be seen in the work of Trinidadian Mustafa Matura.¹¹² Additionally, Caribbean novelists and playwrights had been writing about Afro-Caribbean existence for decades both in and outside of Britain.

The following examines some of the questions that Talawa's production of *The Lion* can be seen to raise around notions of black British identity, differences between black Britons and Caribbeans on issues of masculinity, and how the Caribbean working class character Hendricks as portrayed by Webber adapts to life in Britain.

For the present writer, 'confusion' around Black British identity often stems from the range of views that appear to exist on what it is. Gilroy quotes Enoch Powell, 'The West Indian does not by being born in England become an Englishman. In law he becomes a

¹¹⁰ Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (London: Methuen, 1959). The play was first performed at the Theatre Royal Stratford, London, May 1958.

¹¹¹ John Osborne, *Look Back In Anger* (London: Faber, 1957). The play was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, May 1956.

¹¹² Mustafa Matura, *Six Plays: As Time Goes By, Play Mas, Independence, Welcome Home Jacko, Nice, Meetings* (London: Methuen, 1992).

United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still'.¹¹³ Dahl points to how being black and British has come to mean, 'anyone in Britain who is not white',¹¹⁴ thus clouding specificity of identity. So for Powell, Sapani's Gideon and Brown's Sonia are West Indians whilst for others they are black Britons. The task of self-definition for black Britons is made more difficult by clear definitions of identity from their parents' islands that appear to exclude them. Nettleford describes Dawes's definition of a Jamaican:

A Jamaican is anyone white, black or mixed who grew up in Jamaica and traces Jamaican ancestry back to the period of the institution of slavery in Jamaica.¹¹⁵

In the production the characters offer little explanation as to how they feel about their black British status. As it is not opposed or objected to in their performance, and as Sapani's Gideon uses the term to describe himself it is safe to assume that he at least is comfortable with this definition. His cultural roots are however, entirely Caribbean. For Brown's Sonia who is half white and perceived in British society as black, we understand that for British society the entirety of her blackness is based on her father's skin colour and that his British nationality is ignored. Brown's portrayal of Sonia shows that her character is clear about, and accepts the definition that wider society has given her. For

¹¹³ Dahl, 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Center', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre Drama and Performance*, p.52.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.41.

¹¹⁵ Neville Dawes, address to Lions Club Montego Bay, 2 May, 1974, as quoted by Rex Nettleford, *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica, An Essay in Cultural Dynamics* (Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1978), p.4.

Talawa's audience it is notable that her Britishness appears to come entirely from her white cultural roots.

It would seem that neither Sapani's Gideon nor Brown's Sonia view their Caribbean cultural roots as helping to attribute underdog status to them in British society. Their Caribbean side is the part of their heritage that they have not lived. This may mirror the experience of Talawa's black British audience who may have had no direct physical contact with the Caribbean and may make the characters particularly pertinent to them. In Talawa's performance the characters' quest for their Caribbean heritage is shown in their love/hate relationship with the Caribbean based on their relationships with specific Caribbean individuals.

Through Sapani's portrayal of Gideon Talawa's audience are made aware that his apparent rejection of the Caribbean is based on the political examples he has seen from the President for life and the fact that the President killed his father. When he tells Kalipha's Ramsey, 'It's no wonder some of us don't really want to be West Indian anymore', his statement is twofold.¹¹⁶ He personally does not want to be like Ramsey because of his political hypocrisy and tyrannical rule. This may also point to a notion that other black Britons are rejecting their Caribbean roots in favour of British ones. As this rejection can not be on the basis of characters like Ramsey alone, Talawa's performance can be seen to begin to encourage its audience to question the range of reasons why some black Britons are choosing to move away from their cultural roots. Having been presented with the issue, the black British audience members are able to draw their own conclusions.

Talawa's performance then can be regarded as showing, in contrast to the belief that cultural heritage is fixed, that cultural heritage can change, and is likely to do so with bicultural people.¹¹⁷ Bicultural existence can be seen to be an advantageous way of living. At best bicultural existence allows the individual to take for her/himself what s/he considers to be the most appropriate cultural forms for her/his present existence. At worst it may result in a need to catch up on the heritage facts of the less dominant culture. This in itself is not a problem but can become one when those who are being depended upon to fill in the cultural gaps are not prepared to do so.

This is highlighted in Talawa's performance through Brown's portrayal of Sonia. Once she has her father with her she needs to question him about her Caribbean relatives. Abbenetts's play and Talawa's performance of it point then to the black Briton's need for self-discovery through her cultural line. For the present writer the performance points to two main reasons why Kalipha's Ramsey does not recognise or understand his daughter's need to equip herself with facts about her heritage. Firstly, he can only think about himself, secondly, he would rather forget the experiences he had with his family because they only hold bad memories for him. For the black Briton represented by Sonia this message is mixed. She is meant to recognise that her cultural heritage is important, yet accept exclusion from certain crucial aspects of it. For the black British audience this aspect of Talawa's performance poses a range of questions; should black Britons accept less information about their culture in order not to upset the person who holds the

¹¹⁶ Rehearsal script, p.32.

¹¹⁷ Julie Stone Peters, 'Intercultural Performance, Theatre Anthropology, and the Imperialist Critique, Identities, Inheritances, and the Neo-Orthodoxies', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. by J.Ellen Gainor, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.199-213.

information they need? Is there an effect of being shown that the culture of one parent is being less valued than that of the other? Or that the culture of the host country is more valued than that of the black Briton's Afro-Caribbean heritage? Should black Britons be content with holding on to their Britishness and let go of their Afro-Caribbean heritage? Although Talawa's performance does not directly ask these questions or attempt to answer them, the present writer argues that the choice of material for performance helps to present these issues to the black British community.

When Kalipha's Ramsey tells Sapani's Gideon that, 'To me you're a black Briton, but to the British who the blasted hell are you?'¹¹⁸ he is playing on his notion of the black Briton's perceived lack of identity. He possibly sees Sapani's Gideon as black British for three reasons; firstly his skin colour is black, secondly he is British by law, and thirdly Kalipha's Ramsey refuses to see him as Caribbean as this would make him more like him. His rhetorical question is telling Sapani's Gideon that he has no real identity. The accusation provides further food for thought for Talawa's black British audience. If this is a realistic question from the older Caribbean generation, then where are black Britons to call home?

Through Talawa's performance Sapani's portrayal of Gideon's acceptance of his Britishness appears to be in a bid to escape the bad that has happened to his family in the Caribbean. If this is his motivation for choosing one cultural identity above another his choice can be seen as having less to do with cultural heritage and more to do with bad personal experience. Again the question can be posed to Talawa's black British audience

on where they stand as people with at least two cultures. Has Britain and the designation of black Briton become acceptable to those who have adopted the term because of negative views, images, stories and experiences of the Caribbean?

It is on issues of perceived masculinity that a further cultural distance is shown between the black British and Caribbean characters in Talawa's production of *The Lion*.

Throughout, notions of masculinity are presented in two forms. There is the masculinity of the Caribbean upper middle class and working class man, drawn in contrast to the masculinity of the black British man. The differences are stark with no grey areas and often adhere to fixed stereotypes. The conflict and contradictions both form part of the continued identity question for black Britons that ultimately have to choose where they best fit.

Kalipha's Ramsey is unable to see Sapani's Gideon as a real man because of his profession. He regards his teaching of cookery and his linguistic aptitude as having stripped him of his masculinity. Ramsey's notion of masculinity is dependent upon being able to rule as many other men as possible. His macho comments are perhaps best understood however, in the context of his present situation.

He is exiled abroad where he is stripped of power and hence an aspect of his masculinity. His insults to Sapani's Gideon stem from his frustration and recognition of the fact that Sapani's Gideon is in many ways in a stronger and therefore in Kalipha's Ramsey's mind a more masculine position. Sapani's Gideon is in Kalipha's Ramsey's eyes on his home

¹¹⁸ Rehearsal script, Act 1, p.33.

soil, he is still master of what he does, he has more control over Brown's Sonia than Kalipha's Ramsey has, and despite his physical attack on Sapani's Gideon, the latter is younger and stronger.

Along with the perceived power that is attached to the Caribbean notion of profession (as seen in Talawa's performance) is the connection of sexual prowess with masculinity. Webber's Hendricks as the basest of the three men openly discusses his sexual exploits. As he has no other accepted power he measures the mark of his masculinity by the quantity of exploits he has. Both Webber's Hendricks and Kalipha's Ramsey are described by Brown's Sonia as dinosaurs in regard to their 'outdated' apparently Caribbean attitude to women. Once again, Sapani's Gideon is shown in contrast to the Caribbean men.

The presentation of Sapani's Gideon as a 'standard' modern black British middle class man is in itself rare by virtue of the fact that his background, educational attainment and middle class lifestyle are not common to the majority of black British men. He is part of a small minority within a minority. Talawa's black male audience has the opportunity to see what they have in common with him and possibly work out where they fit, if at all, on the vast masculinity continuum between Webber's Hendricks, Sapani's Gideon and Kalipha's Ramsey. This is not to suggest that every black man seeing another perform in the theatre should necessarily aim to identify with either the actor or the character. There may however, be a case to suggest that as black men are not generally represented by mainstream British theatre when they see a character that others may regard as representative of them, they may look for both differences and similarities in a bid to decide whether the representation is fair.

Whilst Webber's Hendricks's motivations surrounding his masculinity are sexual, and Kalipha's Ramsey's are political, initially those of Sapani's Gideon's appear to be couched in his need for revenge. He has become romantically involved with Brown's Sonia in order to get to her father. As his central focus is with Ramsey and his present sex life is a by-product of his decision to deal with him it can appear that sex for Sapani's Gideon is not a central focus. This could then suggest that he does not relate his sex life to his masculinity. Additionally, whilst the other male characters advertise their sex lives Sapani's Gideon keeps his private life low key. The fact that he is the only black British male character in the production and that he is drawn in contrast to the West Indian men suggests that his attitudes and approaches differ to the other men precisely because he is British. How much of his behaviour is attributable to the fact that he is a new black British man and how much to his concentration on bringing his situation with Kalipha's Ramsey to a conclusion is debatable. It can be stated however, that Talawa's performance illustrates that the men are presented as demonstrating cultural differences within aspects of two closely linked cultures.

It should also be noted that through David Webber's performance of Hendricks it is made clear that it is not just the black British characters that are affected by questions surrounding their black identity by being in England but also the Caribbean ones. Webber's portrayal of Hendricks's behaviour and ability to adapt is reminiscent of Gilroy's claim that modernism began with slavery as it was African slaves who first had to cope with, and find their way round the problems of modern society.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness* (London/New York: Verso, 1993).

As Webber's Hendricks starts to experience new things and is making a conscious effort to adapt to, and make the most of his new environment, he takes up both betting and wine drinking, 'I'm in Englan' now. I'm not so crass an' crude anymore. I'm changin'.'¹²⁰ He appears to associate his new activities as having a certain amount of 'class'. Whether this is because of his perception of the nature of the activities or simply because they are activities that he considers to be particularly English is not made clear. Either way he is acquiring an 'Englishness' that he feels takes away some of his Caribbean 'roughness'. For the present writer the suggestion given to Talawa's audience through this character may be that the possibility of freedom to men of all classes is readily available in modern Britain. This does not however describe the reality of many black people in Britain.

For Talawa's audience Webber's Hendricks may represent the kinds of experiences they are more familiar with of the working class Caribbean man making his way in England. Webber's performance demonstrates that it is the character with the least in terms of material resources or connections that is able to take advantage of the situation that he finds himself in. He is able to adapt to British life without compromising his Caribbean identity in much the same way that the Caribbean arrivals to Britain did from the 1950s onwards.

Finally, Talawa's performance of *The Lion* and its demonstration of some of the issues surrounding black British and Caribbean language and identity in Britain support Julie Stone Peters's theory of one of theatre's uses:

¹²⁰ Rehearsal script, Act 2, p.26.

Theatre has a special place in history because it offers an aestheticized brand of performance, of the ways things happen on the political stage or the stage of war, in the courts and on the streets.¹²¹

For the present writer the performance can be seen to have been making a clear attempt to provide its audience with challenging heritage information and ideas that encourage its audience to question itself and its place both in British society and the Caribbean. This type of work should be a welcome dimension to the genre of black British theatre. A possible off shoot to the thoughts it inspires may materialise in further theatrical productions that take the above and new debates a step further with later generations of black British theatre practitioners.

Beef no Chicken

Beef no Chicken was Talawa's twenty-second production and tenth Caribbean work. The company performed the play at the Tricycle Theatre Kilburn from 18 December 1996 to 1 February 1997. Prior to the opening of the play Brewster had anticipated that performing the play at the Tricycle meant that audience numbers could be higher than for shows performed in less popular venues. This in turn could give greater exposure to both Talawa and Derek Walcott, one of the Caribbean's leading literary figures.¹²²

Work on the play started in June 1996 when the company's production of *Medea in the Mirror* was running at the new Shaw Theatre in Brixton. Brewster had strategically chosen to do this play at this juncture as she felt an obligation to remind British theatre-goers of the fact that talented Caribbean playwrights exist and because the company had dedicated the earlier part of the year to new and unknown writing.¹²³

The following analysis of the play centres on the present writer's examination of the approach to language use and direction of language during the rehearsal process of *Beef no Chicken*. Following the entire four-week rehearsal process as Performance Researcher, the present writer was able to document how the language of the text was dealt with and how the actors' performance of the chosen oral voice developed during rehearsals.

¹²¹ Julie Stone Peters, 'Intercultural Performance, Theatre Anthropology, and the Imperialist Critique, Identities, Inheritances, and the Neo-Orthodoxies', in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, p.200.

¹²² Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 20 November 1996.

¹²³ Ibid.

From previous analysis of the company's video and live performances the present writer was able to draw the following conclusions on the company's language work:

- Talawa is providing a training ground for black actors to experience working with Caribbean text and language by putting on Caribbean productions.
- The above is also being provided for white performers.
- Talawa's best linguistic work in this genre is achieved when a significant proportion of the cast is made up of native Caribbean language speakers.
- The range of Caribbean linguistic work is wide along with the consistent challenge of developing linguistic accuracy.
- Lack of linguistic accuracy may stem from a rehearsal period often limited to four weeks.

Initially the above led the present writer to believe that the linguistic process and result of *Beef no Chicken* would not be markedly different to Talawa's previous performances in this genre, where linguistic accuracy seemed dependent on both the number of native Caribbean speakers and the linguistic dexterity of the black British performers. The process that Artistic Director Yvonne Brewster arranged for her cast during rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken* however, can be seen to have had a central focus on developing linguistic

accuracy that was not the case for previous productions. For the present writer this could mean that the language of the production would be more accurate than for earlier performances. Brewster's linguistic focus can be divided into three sections:

- Brewster's initial approach.
- The work of Greta Mendez as choreographer.
- The impact of Claudette Williams as voice coach.

Brewster's language work can be symbolised by what may be seen as her keen text based approach. Like the majority of the Caribbean texts the language of *Beef no Chicken* is generally 'standard English' with Caribbeanisms. In this case the Caribbeanisms are from Trinidad as is the flavour of the text where the play is set. Brewster's approach may be seen as being in keeping with a general old school attitude towards language. She was raised with the idea that Jamaicans should speak as clearly (with their own accent) as possible, as did the two Jamaicans, Dwight Wiley and Dick Pixley whom she heralds as speaking perfect English on the BBC's overseas radio service in the 1950s. She describes the aim of her language work with Talawa as a need to get all of the voices of the text in harmony like a symphony, 'You're not going to listen to a whole symphony with bassoons.'¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 9 March 1997.

Brewster works towards her linguistic goal on a practical level in two ways; firstly, as stated earlier by providing voice training herself where the required voice is a Jamaican one, and secondly by tapping into the natural voices of the performers to find an appropriate voice for their characters.¹²⁵ Where appropriate both of the above may be used. For *Beef no Chicken* it was Brewster's expertise in the latter which was employed.

It became apparent to the present writer from the outset of Brewster's work on *Beef no Chicken*, that her process could not be clearly defined and put into equal stages. Her first readings of the text overlapped with her initial stage of directing and casting. As she read she cut and blocked the play as well as cast the roles with actors that she already knew. In the present writer's view auditions took the form of a discussion to assess the actor's availability and interest as opposed to discovering their ability to play the role. Whilst Brewster was able to select her performers from people that she already knew and in most cases had already worked with on previous Talawa productions, the present writer questioned whether this process created a situation that excluded new black actors:

All of these established faces were new black actors at one point, and some of them not too long ago. I like to give work to people that I know will work well together but at the same time take a risk on a new face in almost every production.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Once with her chosen cast for *Beef no Chicken* the start of Brewster's linguistic process can be seen to have been to encourage her actors to feel comfortable with the work they were about to embark upon. For the present writer this was achieved by her relaxed questioning of the performers on their general understanding of their characters. The actors were not told that Brewster had the specific aim of entering into a discussion on the performers' views of the language of the characters they would be playing.¹²⁷ Instead discussion meandered until actress Sandra Bee raised the issue of how she would be able to develop two different forms of Trinidadian speech.¹²⁸ The actress's question was then used to encourage all of the performers to access the knowledge that they already have of how they imagine their character to speak. Obvious and straightforward questions were asked: Do you know anybody that speaks like your character? Where do they come from? What social class do they belong to? What is specific about their speech patterns?

As all of the performers were either native Caribbean speakers or British born blacks of Afro-Caribbean descent all had the memory of a voice which they felt linked to their present character. For the present writer what materialised was the performers' notion of what was required for the character in terms of personality that was then later linked to a voice. All had linked their characters with similar voices to the Caribbean islands of their parents. These were from Grenada, Jamaica, St. Vincent and Trinidad. The one black British performer of African descent, Freddy Annobil-Dodoo also linked his characters' voices with those of the Caribbean.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 18 November 1996.

¹²⁸ The voices that Sandra Bee was required to produce are discussed below.

¹²⁹ Freddy Annobil-Dodoo's work is discussed below.

Once all of the performers had a voice that they could use as a base for their character they were asked to attempt that voice. Despite their performance background the majority of the black British performers were hesitant although they were being required to produce (in most cases) the voice of their parents that they had heard throughout their lives. For the present writer this hesitancy pointed to a lack of specific linguistic confidence that may have been inspired in the performers through living in an environment where their home 'dialect' speech was regarded with lesser status than the language of wider British society.

For the present writer the initial voices produced can be described as follows:

- The native Trinidadian speakers in the cast seemed to assume caricatures of the required voice.
 - The native Guyanese performer used his own voice peppered with his knowledge of Trinidadianisms.
 - The black British performers of Grenadian parents worked from this base as to the untrained ear the difference in the speech of the two islands is not vast.
 - The black British speakers of Jamaican parentage tended to approximate a Jamaican sound.
-

In addition to the difficulty of having to establish a harmonious voice cast-wide Brewster pointed to Walcott's nuances and language games which she felt would provide an added challenge to the performance of the piece.¹³⁰

In nurturing the results Brewster built the confidence of those British-born performers attempting a Caribbean voice in public for performance for the first time. For the present writer this can be seen as more than putting on a voice for a performance as the British-born performers can be seen to be reasserting a part of their cultural heritage that they may have felt has never been given a public forum. It is possible that in order to produce such a voice the speaker may have to surmount psychological obstacles developed by being told not to speak like their parents during their childhood.¹³¹ In this regard the black British performers can be described as reacquiring a lost or unexplored part of their voice and culture through their work with Talawa.

The initial linguistic development of each character can be seen to have emerged through gentle coaxing by Brewster, and allowing the performers to develop as many voices as possible before deciding on the one that they felt was most appropriate for their character. By the time the text was introduced each performer had begun to develop a voice that they were comfortable with for their character. Where difficulties resulted were where particular cast members were required to produce multiple voices as in the case of Sandra Bee and Freddy Annobil-Dodoo, playing three distinct roles. Both performers worked

¹³⁰ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 20 November 1996.

¹³¹ Interview with Sam Adams by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 26 November 1996.

through Brewster's process for each character until each had its own distinct voice.¹³²

Brewster seemed initially to coax the performers into working with a voice that resembled the stereotype of the required character. This exaggerated form was used to examine the mouth movements needed to create the voice. They could then be watered down to make the character a person rather than a symbol.

The potential difficulty at this stage lay in the fact that Brewster was attempting to teach her performers how to develop (in most cases) a range of Trinidadian voices though she was not a native speaker. For the present writer it seemed that Brewster was relying heavily on her belief that if performers are comfortable with their work and feel that they have real input into the development of their character natural speech will follow even if they are not given a native voice to copy. Additionally, Brewster was aware of the fact that performers learn voices through differing techniques and did not expect the entire cast to perfect the required accent at the beginning of the rehearsal period.¹³³

For the present writer it was noticeable that Brewster worked meticulously to her schedule. If she felt it was time for the text to be introduced and a performer was still finding his/her voice she continued with her plan of action arguing that this new and vital stage gave the performer a second opportunity to get to grips with the required voice.¹³⁴

¹³² Bee's work in this production is discussed below.

¹³³ Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 20 November 1996.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Although each of the performers had worked for at least a day on developing their characters' voice and all except Freddy Annobil-Dodoo had heard if not spoken a form of Caribbean speech throughout their lives, reading the text posed new language problems.

What was apparent from the initial readings was the fact that the performers were unaccustomed to reading speech with Caribbeanisms and consequently read hesitantly. Brewster appeared to be aware of the difficulties that the cast would encounter on initially working through the text and appeased this by explaining difficulties as they occurred. For the present writer this highlighted Talawa's role in preparing performers to work with the language of Caribbean plays at the most basic level. At this early stage in the rehearsal process Brewster appeared to the present writer as more of a school teacher than the Artistic Director of a theatre company. This was brought out further as Brewster was required to question the performers on the meaning of parts of the text. By questioning her performers she appeared to be making sure that they were able to read the clues in the script that would help elicit the kind of performance that she required of them. The performers showed themselves able to fully understand all aspects of the script once fully analysed with Brewster.

For the present writer this realisation made him question how the present performers would have coped in a less nurturing professional theatrical environment. Would this lack of familiarity with reading a specific type of language have been treated with the same sensitivity to the performer as Brewster had shown? A performer at the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company who stuttered on Shakespeare would possibly not

have been treated to similar patience. It must be expected however, that handling Caribbean language for non-native speakers and native speakers that are unaccustomed to seeing the language in written form will present some initial difficulties at least.

Importantly, what occurred highlighted the need for black performers to be given a forum such as that provided by Talawa to develop their craft in this particular genre. Brewster's textual approach provides a necessary form of training to a new generation of black British performers who are possibly at least one generation removed from native Caribbean speech and who perhaps have had no contact with Caribbean literature.

Although Brewster was able to introduce her performers to ways of finding an appropriate voice for their characters she was aware that for this particular production she would also need the practical help of native Trinidadians. This help came firstly in the form of choreographer Greta Mendez.

On 19 November 1996 choreographer Greta Mendez ran a workshop aimed at helping the cast develop their characters' voice. Mendez's philosophy developing specific speech for performance was identical to that of Brewster although executed differently. The idea was that if, through movement (for Brewster, knowing your character), the character becomes a living being for the performer and the performer is able to give the character a life outside the text, a natural voice for the character should follow.

Mendez gave the performers the initial task of improvising waking up and taking a walk in their local area. The work highlighted that those who already had the correct oral voice for

their character were able to easily develop appropriate movement and life outside the text. Those who were aiming to learn the voice for the first time only generally produced movement that highlighted the closeness or otherwise of their voice to what was needed. This was exemplified in the efforts of Freddy Annobil-Dodoo playing the Limer. There appeared to be a direct correlation between the rigidity of movement that the actor displayed in role and the lack of confidence and fluency he expressed orally. Annobil-Dodoo's speech was perhaps impaired by the fact that of all the performers he had least experience of the voice he was required to produce. Brewster had pointed out to the present writer:

Some do it immediately because they can, others just pick it up when they hear it around them. Most really get going when they get to grips with the script . . . I mean when they know their lines . . . Freddy will do it with the voice coach.¹³⁵

Even with this confidence Annobil-Dodoo would be put through the same process as his fellow actors. For the present writer the process had its benefits even if it did not produce 'perfect' Trinidadian speech from all of the performers because they were learning more about how they felt presenting their characters.

Mendez's next step was to allow the characters to improvise in varying situations that they could believably find themselves in outside the text. Much of the rehearsal centred around a game of dominoes being played by all of the male characters whilst the female

characters flitted in and out. The end result was once again that those who had already grasped their voice ran with it whilst others continued to struggle. Mendez had anticipated that not all of the performers would produce the voice that they required through the above two exercises and prepared a third route. She supplied a range of audiocassettes with Trinidadian music and lectures so that performers would be able to simply listen and then attempt to copy. Importantly, this method was not aimed at producing immediate results but more as a way of continuing to develop the Trinidadian voice outside of rehearsals.

It would seem that Brewster was aware of the difficulty that some of her performers would have in developing the appropriate voice for this production and offered her cast a further opportunity to obtain the correct voice. This was done through the work of voice coach Claudette Williams.

For the present writer 27 November 1996 was a linguistic turning point in the production of *Beef no Chicken* marking the first day of two voice coaching workshops run by Claudette Williams. The detailed and practical voice work session was new to many of the performers, dealing intensely with the shape of the mouth and the positioning of the tongue. Williams offered what appeared to be straightforward practical advice suggesting that the performers aim to keep their tongues forward and lips tight as if smiling. Speaking from this position would give the performer a point of reference. Becoming more confident the performer would be later able to produce the same sounds with less stress on tightening lips and positioning of the tongue, thus finding his/her own Trinidadian voice.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

This was one of a few times that the performers had been given a specific method to work with and one that they did not have to find from within themselves.¹³⁶

In addition to this the performers were given voice exercises that focused on producing a powerful sound. This was achieved by restricting the speech of the performer by covering the performers mouth which when unrestricted would be much more clear as although there was no restriction the performer acted as if there were one. The final practical advice that they were given was that they should practice their lines using the methods that they had been shown.

The following day those cast members who had already demonstrated an ability to use the Trinidadian voice continued to do so. Those who had previously had more difficulty were now using Williams's techniques and were approximating a Trinidadian voice. The main example here was Annobil-Dodoo who in accordance with Brewster's earlier prediction was now producing an accurate Trinidadian sound. The positive results were twofold bringing a higher degree of linguistic accuracy to the cast generally, and also enabling the physical dimensions of the character to come through, thus pointing to the close link between language and identity. For the present writer voice coaching proved that the performers were on the whole able to get the correct sound with the right training.

Although all of the performers had voice coaching the present writer believes that the cast can be divided into three main groups: The first group consists of native speakers. The main character (Otto Hogan) was played by Trinidadian Shango Baku. Linguistically,

¹³⁶ The present writer attended the rehearsal period from 18 November – 17 December 1996.

Shango was able to produce the appropriate voice with ease as well as provide coaching to other performers. Jim Findlay playing Mongroo and Deacon is also Trinidadian and again was able to provide voice coaching for cast members. The second group made up of one actor is of those with non-Trinidadian Caribbean accents that did not attempt a Trinidadian sound. This is seen with Guyanese actor Ram John Holder playing the role of Franco. The final group is made up of the black British performers who had to develop their own Trinidadian voice. For the present writer it is this last group that would appear to have had the biggest linguistic task in developing their stage voice for the performance. Of this last group the performances of Geff Francis, Sam Adams, Freddy Annobil-Dodoo, Sandra Bee, Faith Tingle and Danny John Jules are discussed below.

Having seen Geff Francis performing a convincing Trinidadian voice in Talawa's *The Dragon Can't Dance* the present writer was not surprised by Francis's equally accurate portrayal of both the Mayor, and the news reporter Cedric Heart in *Beef no Chicken*. If the result of Francis's work did not come about from four weeks of rehearsals on the show under discussion then for the present writer a valuable question to ask is how it is that this black British performer has developed such an accurate sense of Caribbean language for performance?

Looking at Francis's Grenadian family background perhaps helps to explain his ability in this area. The Trinidadian voice then was something that he was able to do and something that he knew he had already done successfully with Talawa. Although the Trinidadian and Grenadian accents are different the similarities are great and Francis was able to adapt his

Caribbean voice to the piece. This is not to be taken for granted as not all black British-born performers are able to reproduce the voice of their parents.

For the present writer Francis still benefited from the voice work done during rehearsals as he was able to take his linguistic ability to a new level. Where those who had difficulty with the voice were aiming to get it sounding generally correct Francis was able to perfect his Trinidadian accent. It would appear that Francis was at a distinct advantage because of the similarity of his home voice with the one required for performance. This was not the only voice however, that Francis had to adopt for the performance.

In his role as Cedric Heart he used a convincing American accent. For the present writer Francis produced both voices equally well although no training was provided for the American voice. Francis's linguistic performances seem to have come mostly from his own talent rather than specific training provided. For the present writer there are two main reasons that may explain why no voice training was provided for the American accent required in this performance. Firstly, Talawa working within a budget were unable to provide voice training in two areas and opted for the Trinidadian voice coaching as it is the major voice of the piece. Secondly, due to the many American influences that now form a natural part of British contemporary culture, in particular music and Television, it may have been felt that performers have enough access to American speech to be able to reproduce it without formal training. Either way the company is taking a risk on the quality of the end result if no direct training is offered. Similarly successful in playing a role requiring Trinidadian and American accents was Sam Adams.

This black British performer was familiar with the Caribbean sounds of the Eastern Caribbean being of Vincentian parentage. Producing an approximation of the voice was a revelation to her that she had maintained part of her linguistic cultural heritage without realising it. For Sam Adams (trained at Rose Bruford), as with many black British performers working with Talawa for the first time, all previous performance work had been in 'standard' or regional English. This new theatrical /linguistic dimension then was also coupled with a personal rediscovery of a linguistic and cultural identity for performance that would also expand her possible range of work.

The success of her Caribbean voice in *Beef no Chicken* also bonded her with her black community on a linguistic level she had until then never experienced, 'This performance gave my friends and family an opportunity to see me in a new light.'¹³⁷ Whilst this may be said for any performer in any production the 'new light' referred to here was one that was fully culturally and linguistically representative of her. The performer's work in this case worked on three positive levels:

- To entertain the audience.
- To give the audience a moment of Caribbean language and culture.
- To reawaken her own Caribbean voice and cultural identity.

¹³⁷ Interview with Sam Adams by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 12 June 1997.

Sam Adams in the same role was easily able to produce an American voice. This was achieved with no coaching. Like Geff Francis, Adams produced two contrasting voices for the performance though how much of her linguistic success can be attributed to voice coaching is difficult to assess as like Francis she was starting from a lifetime's aural experience of a similar voice. What the voice coaching and the experience of the show certainly allowed her to do was practice both voices in a professional theatre environment thus increasing her experience in this area.

Freddy Annobil-Dodoo, playing the parts of the Limer and the second Bandit, worked in three main voices. That of the Trinidadian lower register as the Limer, a New York street speech for a rap as the Limer, and the monolingual Jamaican patois form as the bandit. A black British performer Freddy Annobil-Dodoo is of Ghanaian parentage. In presenting three types of black language it was in his rendition of the New York rap voice that Freddy Annobil-Dodoo achieved most accuracy. His performance along with that of Sam Adams and Geff Francis draws light to the ease with which many black British performers reproduce an American voice in performance.

The present writer questions whether it is due to American language having higher status than any Caribbean form that makes it easier for non-native speakers to reproduce it. As there is no stigma attached performers can feel free to imitate. With Sam Adams and Geff Francis their Caribbean voice is produced from a cultural and linguistic pride increasing their desire for accuracy.¹³⁸ For Freddy Annobil-Dodoo this is not the case as his

¹³⁸ Interview with Sam Adams and Geff Francis by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 26 November 1996.

Caribbean point of reference is limited in comparison to the other performers.

Consequently his Caribbean voices are delivered with more difficulty. This performer's situation may be compared to that of the white performers in Talawa's performance of *Arawak Gold* (1992-3).¹³⁹ Although there will possibly be greater expectancy of his linguistic accuracy in performing a 'black' voice however, because he is black.

With the two Caribbean language forms Freddy Annobil-Doodoo achieves an equal degree of accuracy. Although voice coaching was received for the Trinidadian form only, the performer manages to develop a recognisable Jamaican voice. Once again the question of language and its importance to identity is raised. The young black man identifies strongly with black British youth culture and language, 'which is more Jamaican in style than any other Caribbean language form'.¹⁴⁰ He already then is partly versed in a watered down version of the voice needed for the bandit in this performance. His everyday linguistic experiences reflect the developing Caribbean voice of the black British community.¹⁴¹

Sandra Bee, another black British performer, (required in this production to use three voices) linguistically demonstrated how the black British performer may use all of her/his experiences to develop a range of voices for performance. For the character of Sumintra the voice was a lower middle class Trinidadian Indian speech. This speech has clear Indian inflections within its Caribbean voice. For Mitzi the voice was an educated middle class

¹³⁹ Talawa's performance of *Arawak Gold* was performed at The Cochrane between 10 December 1992 and 16 January 1993. See appendix II for further details.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Freddy Annobil-Doodoo by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 26 November 1996. See S. Jones's, *Black Culture, White Youth: The Reggae Tradition from JA to UK* (London: Macmillan, 1988), and Ben Rampton's, *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents* (London: Longman, 1995)

general Caribbean voice with Trinidadian overtones. Finally, for the part of the Bandit the voice was the monolingual Jamaican patois male voice as attempted by Freddy Annobil-Dodoo also playing a bandit. Brewster comments on Bee's efforts, 'Sandra Bee does three accents. Indian Trini, upper Trini and lower Jamaican, and she does them all brilliantly.'¹⁴² Do we simply accept that Sandra Bee is talented at doing accents whilst other performers may not be? Or have her voices developed from language training?

The monolingual Jamaican patois form may wrongly be taken for granted because Sandra Bee's background is Jamaican. Her skill at this voice could be linked to the fact that appearing in the BBC black sitcom, *Brothers and Sisters*, at the time, she was already working actively using a form of the Jamaican voice. It is more likely that she had received no coaching with this voice. Perhaps a pride in her origins had enabled her to break down any barriers regarding negative feeling about her Caribbean language status. For the present writer it is possible that as Bee uses 'standard English' and patois in her daily speech that adopting a further language form would prove easier for her than a monolingual speaker of any language as she is familiar with the concept of language change.¹⁴³ The fact that she needed to use other forms of Caribbean language which she did not regard as having lower status may have enabled her to concentrate entirely on the language and her task of getting it right.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, Bee playing the part of the Indian Sumintra, with no attempt to make her more Asian-looking reveals the depth to which she

¹⁴¹ Interview with Freddy Annobil-Dodoo by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 26 November 1996.

¹⁴² Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 20 November 1996.

¹⁴³ Interview with Sandra Bee by David Johnson, St. Gabriel's Parish House London, Talawa rehearsals for *Beef no Chicken*, 28 November 1996.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

was able to produce the correct sound for her character. The fact that the performer is clearly of Afro-Caribbean origin does not upset the audience's understanding of the Asian origin of the character she is playing as her identity is made clear both by her Indian accent and her sari. For the present writer, additional stereotypical Asian symbols would have made the actress seem like she was presenting a caricature and would have allowed her to rely almost entirely on her physical appearance. The way she is presented allows for a subtlety that encourages Bee to reveal her character's identity from the inside (voice) out (movement).

The present writer wishes to note that not all of the black British performers achieved the same degree of linguistic success although this did not detract from solid performances in other areas. This can be seen with both Faith Tingle playing Euphony Hogan and Danny John-Jules playing Cardiff Joe whose linguistic accuracy wavered from line to line.

Perhaps their lack of accuracy was shielded by the fact that they played a married couple and their style of speech complemented each other. This however, should not be an acceptable way of arguing around the fact that where black British performers are producing inaccurate language work that more training needs to be given or perhaps in more serious circumstances a different performer should be found for the part.

Although voice is seldom mentioned when the press commend Talawa's performances it is invariably the performers who achieve the highest degree of linguistic accuracy who are noted when the critics have enjoyed a production over all. The following review extracts

of *Beef no Chicken* show how some journalists approach the language issues of Caribbean performance work by expressing a range of language-linked views:

I'm looking, I'm listening, but frankly I'm having difficulty following. This is, of course, partly because I am a honky and cannot keep up with the patter. However, you do tune in after a while and the language in which the locals squabble and get saucy is a delightful combination of lyricism and comic inventiveness, lilting but delivered at a fair lick.¹⁴⁵

The critic chooses to refer to herself with the terminology popularised by whites for themselves in Britain as anti-white in the 1970s TV sitcom, *Love Thy Neighbour*. The present writer suggests that whites having coined the phrase themselves found it acceptable. It is doubtful however, that a black person watching a white production that they did not understand would equate their lack of understanding it with being a 'Sambo' (the term used by whites for blacks in the same TV sitcom). This may stem from the fact that neither word used in the context of the TV sitcom was invented by blacks. Both 'Honkey' and 'Sambo' can be seen to have African-American roots as Major explains:

Honkey: a white person; (Southern use, originally); an ice-cream bar.¹⁴⁶

Sambo: any black American who accepts meekly his or her oppression; from "Little Black Sambo," a story with stereotypes that serve the purpose of false propaganda.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Kate Bassett, 'A complicated menu with plenty of spice', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 1997, p.15.

The present writer suggests that the fact the writer of the article does not understand the 'patter' is not because she is white but because she has little experience of the Caribbean language used in the production.

A second review by journalist Francis James commits itself to highlighting individual efforts that for the present writer appear to stand out because of their linguistic accuracy:

Everyone's work is of the highest calibre. But having said that, two people are worthy of special mention - Shango Baku who plays the put upon central character Otto, and Geff Francis, who is outstanding in his two roles as a smooth as silk TV anchor man, and the rotund mayor longing for corruption, rape and other heinous crimes to bring his small town into the twenty first century.¹⁴⁸

Finally, John Thaxter's review of the production in *The Stage*, again without mentioning language work, hails the performances of those who are most linguistically adept:

Quite outstanding is roly-poly, lightsome Sandra Bee, with delicious cameos and as an operatic short-order cook in an Indian sari, a mafia-style gangster in Ray-Bans and the council's pinkly fashionable secretary reading back her shorthand notes in mincing

¹⁴⁶ Clarence Major, *Black Slang: A Dictionary of Afro-American Talk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.67.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.100.

¹⁴⁸ Francis James, 'A tour de farce by top class group', *Kilburn Times*, 9 January 1997, p.17.

ladylike tones.

Equally remarkable is Geff Francis doubling as a suave, redheaded television newscaster and as the pot-bellied mayor.¹⁴⁹

For the present writer Talawa's work demonstrates that the language of black British theatre is both diverse and developing. Whilst new generations find their own English and other voices they should not accept poor linguistic imitations as a satisfactory representation of their historical or present voice. The talent that exists in the black theatre community must continue its work and now begin to concentrate on specific areas so that black British performers reach a stage where their work is constantly and accurately representative of the area of black life they are presenting. Throughout history black people have had to be linguistically dextrous, this dexterity now needs to be transferred to the black British stage. Language range is a central part of complex and changing black identity.

The four productions discussed above point to the work that Talawa Theatre Company can be seen to have achieved in developing its own voice through culturally specific, oral and non-spoken performance vocabulary as well as illustrating the company's commitment to its mission statement.

The plays, though discussed in two main areas may not have been intended by the director to have so much in common and the similarities and patterns may have made themselves

clear to the present writer once the criteria for analysis were established. Can what has been discussed above really be considered to be Talawa's own voice, or is it a voice that has been given to the company's work in hindsight as the work has taken on its own life?

However the above questions are answered it would seem that from the company's archival videos, Talawa's work in the contemporary Caribbean genre is in its early developmental stages and is perhaps working towards establishing a range of Afro-Caribbean oral voices and cultural performance styles. If Talawa continues to remain at the heart of black theatre in Britain, performance styles particular to the company and by extension its Afro-Caribbean (and now British Afro-Caribbean heritage), will become more easily and significantly identifiable as well as more commonly accepted as a valued aspect of British theatre.

¹⁴⁹ John Thaxter, 'A meaty and happy revival', *Stage*, 9 January 1997, p.12.