Kwame Kwei-Armah
in conversation with Deirdre Osborne

'Know Whence You Came': Dramatic Art and Black British Identity

Kwame Kwei-Armah's play *Elmina's Kitchen* was a landmark in British theatre history as the first drama by an indigenous black writer to be staged in London's commercial West End. The play's success since its premiere at the Royal National Theatre included a national tour and a season at Center Stage, Baltimore, directed by August Wilson's director Marion McClinton. In this interview with Deirdre Osborne, Kwei-Armah testifies to Wilson's considerable influence and the inspiration he derives from Wilson's project to account for the history of black people's experience in every decade of the twentieth century. Deirdre Osborne is a lecturer in drama at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and has published essays on the work of black British dramatists and poets including Kwame Kwei-Armah, Dona Daley, debbie tucker green, Lemn Sissay, SuAndi, and Roy Williams.

Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but know whence you came.

James Baldwin,
The Price of the Ticket, p. xix

Deirdre Osborne *A hero of yours, Linton Kwesi Johnson, asserts that no black writer working in England today can afford 'art for art's sake'.*

Kwame Kwei-Armah Correct, and I believe in that. Let's not mince words here, my work is political work.

My work comes from a cultural perspective that is supported by my Pan-Africanist politics. Which is why, for instance, the American black establishment have looked at *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003). *Elmina* is currently being performed at the Center Stage, Baltimore, directed by August Wilson's director, Marion McClinton. For me that is a dream come true. My politics is a diasporic, black politics influenced by the philosophies of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and the writings of James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka. It is non-apologetic politics. I make no bones in talking about the cultural specificity of my work and my desire always for it to be so, and not somehow to blend into this morph-like thing of 'Hey, isn't it great that I can write white characters?' I don't give a shit about that, excuse my language!

You have cited your influences as Ibsen, Chekhov, Miller, Wilson, and Baldwin . . .

I might add to those, David Hare.

What is it about each particular writer that inspires you, bearing in mind that David Hare is the only British dramatist – albeit a white British writer?

Well, let me start with who influences me the most, August Wilson. The reason is twofold. First of all, it is the stories he tells, his brief to himself, to leave behind – these are my words, not his – a canon of work that explores the African-American experience in the twentieth century. That to me is the most magnificent thing because it equals legacy, and the one thing about 'black' history, for want of a better term, is that it is often disposable. It goes into the realm of popular culture and is then quite quickly dismissed or forgotten. Consequently, every generation has to build again, start again, and believe they are the beginning.

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X07000152

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Invariably, before now a lot of the work that got through was primarily protest work. The following generations would tend to cast it into the wastebasket of the previous generation's angst. August does not allow that to happen in terms of the legacy he's leaving behind. I went to hear him speak once and he said, 'I am the same man now that I was when I walked into manhood. I was escorted into manhood by the Black Panthers, by Malcolm X,' and that's the same for me. I was escorted into manhood by Public Enemy and Malcolm X and James Baldwin. Baldwin inspires me because there was unmitigated brilliance and anger in his work – as a novelist, as an essay writer and as a playwright.

My favourite play of his is *Blues for Mr Charlie*, simply because he taught me a huge lesson in that play. He allowed the white antagonist to be sympathetic at a certain point in the structure of the play. Even though this character is a member of the Ku Klux Klan and wants to kill the new black voice, he is doing it because he wants his child to inherit more than the world he inherited and that's universal, that's humanity. The method that he chooses may be abhorrent to me, but the motivation I understand.

Baldwin was, unashamedly, a most brilliant articulator of black artistic rage. Once in the establishment, he was not afraid to say, 'See me as a black writer.' There was no need for him to eject himself from his cultural heritage. It was the specificity of his cultural heritage that allowed him to create his work and he used this gift to articulate the woe, the rage, the pain, but also the glories of coming from his specific cultural background.

But at Le Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs (Paris, 1956), he also asked if it is possible to describe as a culture what may simply be, after all, a shared history of oppression, with regards to writing born of the African diaspora.

I don't perceive that to be a contradiction actually, because I believe that there comes a certain time when you have been articulating from so deep a place that you get to the point where you question, 'Can I be this voice?' I find that Baldwin does what every artist must do. He looks not only within himself but also at the art form, the art form of articulating black rage, and asks, 'Should I be doing it? Can I do it? Is it limiting me? Should I not be reaching for something else?' Malcolm X referred to a similar thing when speaking at Yale. He was assumed only to be able to speak about black issues, but in fact he was a man of knowledge and would have loved to have been asked to speak about other things. But that does not contradict his role as primarily being to articulate the angst, pain, and glory of his cultural group.

Baldwin suffered so much in living not only in a homophobic society, but also being a black man in a pre-civil rights era. This double source of oppression is conveniently forgotten a lot of the time amongst certain people who are not particularly gay-friendly in their outlook . . .

[*Laughter.*] I thought that was beautifully phrased . . .

The director Paulette Randall has said that homophobia in the black community is a real issue still to be articulated and dealt with in black drama.

Of course it should be . . .

But not by you?

But not by me, that's not my gig. However, I would support and encourage that as an agenda. It must be written from the truth; it's not my truth. I remember having a huge argument with someone, years ago, in fact someone I respect very much, who said, 'James Baldwin is not a black hero because he's gay and you can't be gay and a black hero!' Baldwin never hid the fact that he was a gay, black male. But I remember when asked he said, 'I am what you see first when you're walking down the street – a black male. That's what you react to. My sexuality is secondary to what you perceive first.' If his homosexuality is negated or sidelined, it's madness as you have to take the man as he is, the writers as they are. But if you look at the balance of his work, I think that you'll see that he dealt far more with issues of ethnicity and race than he dealt with sexuality. Again

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Background *by Deirdre Osborne*

Since 2003, black British drama has achieved an unprecedented profile in the British theatrescape. Eleven plays by black indigenous writers were staged in London's mainstream theatres in 2003–2004, and subsequently both the Theatre Royal, Stratford East's production of *The Big Life* and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (which had premiered at the Royal National Theatre) were revived for seasons in London's commercial West End.

Kwame Kwei-Armah and Roy Williams are predominant amongst a coterie of contemporary black British writers of African descent who have been commissioned by key regional and London-based venues.[1] Others include debbie tucker green, Courttia Newland, Dona Daley, and Sol B. River. As black indigenous Britons, these writers inherit the legacies of British theatre – theatre, practice, and performance which has persistently restricted and even made invisible black people's presence and input until the mid-twentieth century. Whilst sharing profiles in many ways, Kwei-Armah and Williams have followed distinctive routes to writing. Curiously, they have not intersected in terms of commissioning venues, implying the existence of a one-through-at-a-time dynamic. Kwei-Armah was Writer-in-Residence at the Bristol Old Vic and commissioned by the Royal National Theatre, whereas Williams has been commissioned by the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, the Hampstead, Tricycle, and Royal Court theatres, Birmingham Rep, and the Eclipse Theatre. Williams notes, 'Critics compared *Fallout* to *Elmina's Kitchen* as though you have to choose between us. These plays may touch on similar worlds but the way Kwame and I write about them is very different. Yes, we're both black but why is there the need to create a league table between us?' (personal interview 24 October 2005).

Not customarily recognized as constituents of the canon nor conceived of as meriting a place within its elitist circumference, the work of black British dramatists has faced a longevity problem across generations and successive decades. It is important to query the means whereby this current group of black playwrights will be planted in the canon of British drama and the cultural legitimacy this implies. As Kwei-Armah points out in this interview, the relationship between black people's literary output and high culture requires re-establishing with each subsequent generation.

In his NTQ interview with Williams,[2] Aleks Sierz describes him as 'one of the outstanding new voices in contemporary British theatre'. Yet Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2000) does not include one black writer, despite its claims to 'remind society at large that living writers are not only symbols of theatre's vitality but also a crucial resource for the whole culture' (Sierz, 2000, p. 249). Eyre and Wright in *Changing Stages: a View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (2000) likewise 'do not even pretend to include British black and Asian theatres as part of Britain's recently changing stages' (Godiwala, 2006, p. 5).

What could be more visible and indeed 'in-yer-face' than staging black experience with black actors? Jill Olumide argues that 'Struggles over ethnic or racial classification are emblematic of struggles over the right to a social identity and over the matter of self-definition' (Olumide, 2002, p. 62). This idea can be located in both Williams and Kwei-Armah's drama as they stage the UK and thereby engage in critical interrogations of their own cultural citizenship. Kwei-Armah in particular asserts a universality of black people's experience in a context where the onus of representationalism still exists for black writers and performers – something that their white counterparts simply do not face. Furthermore, the impetus for dramatists to create a black British aesthetic chafes against the binds of social realism – a genre of drama elicited by issues-based contingencies – which has frequently accommodated black drama's staging in the first place.

In the new millennium the assembling of a critical mass regarding black British writing has begun to evolve more extensively than before. The field of drama requires the same aesthetic examination that has only recently developed in relation to poetry and prose.[3] Kwei-Armah writes with an eye focused on history, mindful of his part in anchoring indigenous black drama in Britain's cultural landscape.

we never talk about his religious upbringing and that was a fundamental element to him, a fundamental motivating factor. We can see it in his play titles – *The Fire Next Time, The Amen Corner.*[4]

Often the so-called diasporic plays are now considered to be outdated material from the seventies and eighties, and it's said that we should be looking at present-day indigenousness in Britain. Do you believe that heritage plays can evolve in ways

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comparable to Wilson's cycle, in terms of black British experience?

We're still too caught up in being contemporary. That is no fault of our own. How many black British plays over the last twenty to thirty years have been published? What theatre companies do we have that are able to say, 'Now I'll do a black classic'? That's why I liked the Eclipse programme (at the Tricycle Theatre, London, in 2000), when they revived [Trinidadian-born] Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, from 1956. It's classic writing. Contemporize it in its interpretation, but it's still a classic. It's the tale of our parents or grandparents – pre-England. In many respects, this is part of what I'm trying to do, starting with *Big Nose* (1999), an adaptation of Cyrano de Bergerac, placed in a Caribbean island of the fifties. Cyrano is a calypsonian who uses his calypsos rather than poetry. That was my attempt at celebrating the pioneer generation, and all the things they had to do to survive here.

But one has to look at it from two angles: what the establishment ask for – as in what they then produce – and what the black British artist or writer perceives will be sold. Which areas should I go into that will guarantee host-majority interest? We're at a very interesting time in our evolution as people who are black British. For the first time in Great Britain, we're beginning to see signs of a sizeable black middle class. Many of my friends say that I am middle-class. To me, I'm working-class. I use the old sociological definition of whatever your parents did is your background. Although I would describe myself as having a working-class background, without a shadow of a doubt my mother had middle-class aspirations. What we're seeing, I perceive, is the rise in the number of black people who have middle-class aspirations and are living middle-class kinds of lives. Conversely, while that is happening, there's also a much bigger explosion of the underclasses among the black community.

Elmina's Kitchen is a direct extension from *A Bitter Herb* (1999), which is set around a racist murder. It isn't about the racist murder, it is about the notions of assimilation that the black middle-class family have in terms of saying, 'Here we are, we've made it now, so let's move out, let's not be where any other black people are, let's leave all of that behind.' That was chronicling the mid-nineties and late nineties. *Elmina's Kitchen* is centred on what was – I'm glad to say is not now – 'Murder Mile' in Hackney, East London.

Fix Up (2004) is a play both about history and the future, looking at issues of being mixed-race in this community, in this world that we now live in. It's the second part of a trilogy of works set in a black establishment starting with Elmina's restaurant, then a cultural bookstore, and the final one will be in a church. I don't necessarily perceive that there is a huge aim to create chronicled stories of our existence. There seems to be a need to eject that which has gone before us – I mean literally our parents' generation – so we can now concentrate on this new wonderful world of integration, this new wonderful world where everybody speaks street black! In a kind of way, people like you will be able to create the legacy, see the links.

Previously Michael Abbensetts said that black authors are 'graded by their rage'; Felix Cross has noted that it is only when black theatre develops something white theatre doesn't have will it have the power and influence to move forward; and Jatinder Verma argues that if there is going to be any point in using the term 'black theatre' it has to find a theatrical form for itself. It seems that evidence of a black British aesthetic or form becomes the measuring stick as to how successful a piece of drama is. Is the experientially unfamiliar a major innovative contribution to theatre? Do you consciously strive to find a new aesthetic or form, or are you very much concerned with the theatre of your front room?

I think each one of those are wonderful observations. About creating form: I attempted this a little with the 'Prologue' in *Elmina's Kitchen* (which didn't make it into the NT production), and discovered how difficult it is in a very secular, non-spiritual world to integrate the spiritual. The instrument I specify that should open the play, the gherkel, is famed in West Africa for bringing out the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spirits from the mountains. It was that invocation which should bring us to the conclusion that when the boy – Ashley, the teenage would-be 'gangsta' – dies, it is the spirit of Africa saying you need to overcome the shackles that started here. The first scene after the interval echoed that invocation – they all walk round and sing the blues, 'When the Lord gets ready, you gotta move' – merging the traditions of song, movement, and image.

I couldn't find a way of making the host population understand what I was talking about while trying to fit that into the traditional structure of the three-act play. It's not just about how successfully one shapes one's cultural story around a classical three-act structure, but the way that you create your own structure and your own rules. It's very interesting for me, as often there is a different reaction between the black and white communities' receptions of my work. There are things that I've written before where nearly every black person – for want of a better term – has gone, 'This is brilliant, this is telling my tale,' and actually many white people are going, 'I don't quite get it.' That's always the challenge for me.

A parallel would be the music of Public Enemy, the rap, hip-hop band. Now when I first listened to it, I was motivated and inspired by it and then I broke it down – far more importantly. Right at the root of that kind of political hip-hop was also the need to create a slammin' tune. The melody needs to be brilliant, the music needs to be multilayered and fantastic, so that if you don't want to hear the words you can just get off on the music. But if you want to take something from the words, then the potion is doubled in strength. I think it's a similar thing when we try merging western dramatic structures with what are inherently African sensibilities. One needs to be able to find a way that the indigenous population can go, 'Ah, I know what you're talking about. I know this because . . . ', and the European is able to go, 'I know what you're trying to say to me,' literally and metaphorically.

I'm interested in your use of 'indigenous'. Would you say there are black, white, and Asian British indigenous identities now that didn't exist in the same ways twenty years ago? Are they permeating the British cultural psyche?

I'm always terribly suspicious of that. I'm interested in the interlocking communities of Great Britain. The notion of assimilation is not one I perceive, nor one that I personally am tremendously comfortable with. I think assimilation means that you just blend into the host community's morality. It supports notions of inferiority and superiority.

I wondered to what extent the white press inhibits experiment? Do you think there are plays that are defying the white critics' misreadings of the culturally unfamiliar?

August Wilson talked about white American critics actually needing to go to school, to go into a black church and understand the theatre of the black church so that when it is on the stage they are able to critique it in the context of black experience. That is the wall I'm forced to climb, the challenge I face. That is not to blame critics only, but actually to lay blame on myself for not being able to articulate something in a universal form. When you are able to produce work on your own terms and it is accepted, I think that's magnificent. We have to do that in theatre. I don't think we're quite there yet.

I try not to read the criticism of my work. It's the hardest thing when we have very narrow ways of formatting and of receiving. The challenge is to create something that the indigenous community and the wider community can both access. Although you don't necessarily have to get the same thing from it, it needs to be understood by both in the terms by which *you* mean it. The establishment are accepting on the whole that we are articulating stories from our cultural background. But often as we get into the establishment, we then start saying, 'Well, I don't need to do that any more, I can be global,' somehow forgetting that we're only there in the first place because we are *black British*.

But having said that, debbie tucker green's plays are real left-side-of-the-brain pieces of writing. She's writing out of this poetic, kind of near-esoteric place. I'm very

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interested in the nature of her storytelling, her sensibility. It's about creating a new kind of response, a step on the way to creating a black British aesthetic. But I feel that the theatrical establishment needs to find itself in a position where it also nurtures proactively plays that are written by females – that can tell the female story.

In 2003, you, Roy Williams, and Mark Norfolk had plays staged which share the characteristic of male characters in emotional cul-de-sacs, circumstances where violence or explosive behaviour is their only way out. What I've noticed about these 'incendiary plays' (my term) is the absence of living, loving mothers. Deceased Elmina is portrayed in an idolized fashion or she's referred to in derogatory terms – the nagging wife, a justification for womanizing. The waitress Anastasia's son is dead. In Fix Up, *Alice's mother has been murdered. No mention is made of Norma, the only other woman, as being a parent.*

It's very interesting. In *A Bitter Herb* you'll see that it's quite the opposite, that the lead character is the mother. In my life my mother is my leading role model, period.[5] A mother is the centre of the family and everything actually happens through her, through her notions of femininity and success. However, you are right about the 'incendiary plays' of 2003. I'm fundamentally concerned about black masculinity, and so I find myself wanting to speak about that, and – this is where it can seem like arrogance – I want to find a way of articulating it so that it can truly represent what *I* feel. I'm phenomenally interested in the effect that institutionalized slavery and institutionalized racism has had in emasculating the black male, forcing him to create a false personality. That personality creates mental shackles; a void of pain, confusion, and perpetuation of the very hell hole he was cast into.

One of my favourite directors, a great friend and someone I adore, Claire Grove, directed *Elmina's Kitchen* for BBC Radio. I remember when I first showed her the script, she said. 'Where is the mother? Where are the women?' I said, 'Elmina's there, she's all-dominant.' 'No but where are the *active* women in it?' I mugged up a few answers that Anastasia was a proactive woman who made choices that were not like the majority of her generation – or that not a lot of black women characters make on stage. For me, Anastasia was the incitement – it's slightly schematic, I know – the one who walks into Elmina's cafe and says to the owner, Deli, Ashley's father, 'I smell death in here and you need to clean it up or you will die.'

I suppose what I'm saying is that the brief to myself when I became a writer was to write what I complain about not seeing, the things that I don't see staged. My job is to create good female characters if I can. But ultimately it's to serve what I want to talk about, the attack on black masculinity and how it has bastardized its perception of manhood.

But do you think this taps into the kind of negative affirmation of black cultural products that bell hooks has referred to? The consumerist affirming of misogynist lyrics in rap are an example – albeit the music industry represents a different discipline.

No, I don't think it is a different discipline, actually. I see them very much as integrated. I like to have a lot of music in my plays because I'd like to get to a point where I can just swing between the two. I'd love to create a form, an acceptable form, where people can sing and talk and it can be drama and music. But I disagree with bell hooks. The rapper 50 Cents says, 'I'm going to shoot you in the head, and aren't I tough?' In *Elmina* the character who actually most relates to that idea, Ashley, ends the play by dying – that was his action, he dies. So the characters that relate the most to this bastardized notion of black masculinity are actually the ones I make most comment on. If one articulates it well enough, then actually it should contradict those products and not reinforce them and endorse them.

I would like to ask about the stage direction which first describes Anastasia – in quite salacious terms. I wondered about the specificity of physique that you don't extend to the male characters?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I would challenge that – no, I would accept it, but add an amendment to it. The character who I most describe is Clifton, Elmina's ex-husband and Deli's absent father. [*Refers to text.*] Here it says, 'Clifton, sixty-three but looks mid-fifties, he's a large-built man with a mouth full of gold teeth, dressed in a very flash three-piece suit; his cashmere coat is over the back of the chair. A boastful man who defines himself by how much attention he gets from those in his immediate surroundings.' I would say that that dealt with both the physical and the . . .

His sexuality though? 'Anastasia . . . has the kind of body most men of colour fantasize about: big hips and buxom waist and full, full breasts.' I'm not labouring the point, but I'm intrigued.

As far as I am concerned, I'm talking about the world of the underclass. A woman walks into this specific world, and what are the attributes that these specific men would react to? 'Ah man, she's fit!' What Deli responds to – as part of his growth – is not, 'I want to grind you because you're fit.' Because of her words and books, he goes, 'Oh my God, you could be quite special because you use your mind. You're bringing letters to me. You're bringing words to me. You're bringing another philosophy to me that no male in my environment can bring. I want to pass that on to Ashley and ask Ashley, why are you not reading?'

So yes, I accept absolutely that she's described far more in physical terms. I don't say 'Clifton's butt is Y' or 'his penis is X'. But with every character, I've tried to write how I want the audience to perceive them immediately. I felt it necessary to do it. So that's number one.

Number two is that I wrote it specifically for Dona Croll. Anastasia didn't exist in the first draft. There was another character who didn't work. When Anastasia walks into the room, they go, 'I will give you attention.' The only way you get attention in that world is either by being as masculine and vocal as they are, or by being something that they want to fuck – as opposed to being the *only* way that I would describe a female.

The anticipated audience is a way of reforming mainstream cultural agendas, and you've said that you assumed ninety per cent of your audience in the National Theatre would be white. It didn't prove to be the case in Elmina's Kitchen.

Okay, very interesting, because on the surface that would seem as if you're saying that I write my plays for a white audience.

No, no — but are mindful of one . . .

I certainly am very mindful of the audience that are coming in. Bob Marley called Chris Blackwell, who produced his first album and many others, his translator as opposed to his producer. I was very, very taken by that, because when I was writing *Elmina* I was very mindful that I was writing characters who were speaking in a way that most black people do – people of that class, that social background – with each other. Hitherto (in my view), in modern theatre, black people spoke what I called 'chocolate-covered' kind of black talk that I just didn't recognize and found inauthentic.

Courttia Newland does the former in his novels.

Definitely in his novels, his characters speak as people speak. That's a tremendous thing. But on the stage, specifically, I had found that the dialogue black people were given was not realistic. So I had to take into consideration that actually my agenda was to write quite specifically but also to find a way to explain the words or the phrases to the overwhelming majority of the audience members. For instance, you'll see that there's a technique I use all of the time. A character will say (for example), 'That was X', and someone else will say, 'X, what's that mean?' and a black kid'll go, 'That means . . .' I do that to validate my use of the real language but also so that most of the audience – and that includes some of the black audience, because street language evolves on a daily basis, as you know – can get to grips with it.

Dona Daley didn't do that in Blest Be the Tie (*2004*). *Isn't it a matter of some audience members' exposure to the lyricism of unfamiliar patois dialogue?*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Well, that's very interesting, because when I went to see that play at the Royal Court three-quarters of the gags went over the white audience's head. I was sitting next to people asking, 'What's that? What does that mean?' The most fantastic, the most illuminating time was where the character Florence got up and went over to the gramophone. As she pulled out a record I could hear whispers, black audience members laughing. They knew what record it was. As she said 'Jim Reeves' those people burst out laughing, but I could see the white audience members not quite getting that. And there's no reason why they should. For us, culturally, we all knew that Jamaicans and West Indians love country and western. I can probably sing you twenty of Jim Reeves's songs. It's a West Indian cultural thing. But actually the host majority's image of West Indian music is calypso and reggae, so why should they do that homework? I would have had a character say, 'Don't be pullin' out no country and western, you bloody West Indians love country and western,' before Florence takes out the record.

There are other examples of me being mindful that an audience might not get a lot of these cultural references. It is my job to explain them – not to make excuses for them, but to set them up, like you set up a gag. That's not a criticism of Dona, it's just an observation for me. Similarly with *Elmina*, a lot of gags were only understood by the black audience. I deliberately used a classical three-act tragic structure, so people who might not understand some of the cultural references would recognize that trajectory. So that is my feeling of how I try to be *mindful* of the host while trying to be true to the black theatre audience – it can be popular, but soulful.

Out of the eleven black-authored plays staged in London's mainstream theatres in 2003–2004, nine were directed by white directors. How did you come to work with a white male director on both plays staged at the National?

When Nick Hytner said, 'Do you need a black director?' I said, 'I need a director that can up my game,' and I feel that about Angus Jackson. We do have a great alchemy. That doesn't mean that I'm *always* going to work with Angus. Whoever it is, I suppose ultimately I need a director who challenges me and realizes my work in a way that I don't, an extension of what I perceive when I put it down on paper. I will always rebuke anybody who dares to challenge me on the issue of having a white director. My politics are in the characters, the words that I place in their mouths, and the characters I choose to place on the stage. How that is then realized I understand is also political, but there will be projects where that right director will be black or will be female. Ultimately what I want of my director is to be a good director first.

We need a new generation of black people to want to come into theatre and to direct. There are lots of black directors going into film. I did my Master's in screenwriting a couple of years ago, and I was the only black male on the course. On the screen directing course there were loads. I think that theatre is not yet proving itself as a place where a black director can go in and create a vision. It needs to be challenged, but I think it needs to happen at a governmental level. Funds need to be created to grab 'em and send them through the rep system and get them learning – not just operating on the Fringe, because that's a different context, but on the big stages in the regions so that they learn directing all across the board.

Does the casting of your plays concern you?

There's a gag I heard the other day: 'Have you heard the one about the actress who slept with the writer? No, of course you haven't!' I get loads of letters from actors asking, can they get auditioned for whatever play that's going on. I'm the writer! I'm not the director, not the producer. So the letters should go to the directors, the artistic directors and the casting team, not to me. I wrote Anastasia for Dona Croll, but if the director had come to me and said, 'I don't like her,' that's the end of it. I'll argue my case and then the director will choose.

Was Fix Up (*the second play directed by Jackson*) *inspired by the unique and comprehensive col-*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lection of African-American slave memoirs – of which there is no African-Caribbean equivalent – housed in the Library of Congress?

I had read a book of extracts from those twelve years ago, and by coincidence my agent gave me the same book at the opening of *Elmina's Kitchen*. In December 2004, when I was actually writing something else, by chance I saw it on my bookshelf and grabbed it. The stories just jumped out at me again like they had twelve years before. I've quoted from the book where it says, 'When a slave died, we didn't mourn, we simply dug a hole and threw him in and said thank you.' Angus and I had a debate about whether or not it was right for me to re-create these narratives as African-Caribbean narratives. For me it was absolutely right. We have an oral tradition, but wouldn't it be wonderful and what would it mean for an African-Caribbean person to have such narratives – in the words of someone from Trinidad or Grenada? That was the route to *Fix Up*.

The published version of the play differs markedly from the play as performed at the National Theatre. In the Theatre Platform series, the cast referred to the large numbers of rewrites that occurred.

Fix Up was a huge work-in-progress! I firstly tried to write the play as one and a half hours long without an interval. The first performance ran at two hours fifteen and was not working. There are points I enjoyed, but they had to go. I cut whatever wasn't driving the narrative forward – some speeches of Baldwin, Berry, and Garvey. Originally Norma's character was in a wheelchair – I wanted a character who represented an aspect of the community in disability. At an earlier stage Alice had a son who was lighter skinned than she was, but he dominated and it was a huge problem – a mixed-race character who looked white, he took everything away from Alice, so he was cut. Magnificent Claire Benedict (Norma) wasn't finding enough in the wheelchair, and so I cut it and replaced it with her wearing a different wig in every scene to represent the newness of each generation. There's a whole play to be written about what the play was *before* the performed version! Eventually Nick Hytner came in and said, 'Write the play you want,' and we went back to the first draft.

Did the BAA's adoption policy of the sixties and seventies also influence your research for this play?

I was certainly very influenced by that, and also by remembering how many middle-class Nigerian parents came to this country and fostered their children to white middle-class families in the suburbs in order for them to have a good education. I used the character of Alice to explore the theme of dual heritage now. It's a thing we don't talk about, the pressure on young people of dual heritage to be black or white. As I'm not mixed-race, I didn't perceive that it would be valid to make Alice my protagonist – Brother Kiyi, the bookstore proprietor and cultural activist, is. But she's the character who allowed me to explore notions of identity.

What are your views about the prospective longevity of your work?

It's very interesting and it's relatively difficult when I sit here looking at the published versions of my plays. Am I worried about that? I can't say I'm preoccupied with it, but I'm aware of it, and it is most definitely a problem in terms of the last generation of writers. Mustapha Matura wrote about certain experiences, Caryl Phillips was caught up in the minutiae of integrated relationships. I am not an extension, but stand on both their shoulders. What we really need to be doing is bringing plays back, making sure they stay in print. That's my aim, to write a play of which hopefully in ten years' time someone will be able to say, 'That play not only just described a moment in history but also has its own history.'

History has taught us as black artists that our work is at best contemporary. Very few of our plays have fallen into the realm of the modern classic, to be revived again and again. That is the challenge, to create plays that can be brought back, and I think it is the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

challenge of the establishment actually to see that these black plays are not just the rage of today. Right now, I'd be really interested in seeing a play written in 1980, talking about the pressure that they were going through, because there's a whole forgotten generation. Each generation should understand that it is standing on a previous generation's shoulders, not just paying lip-service to them. I would really like to do a season of plays from twenty, thirty, fifty years ago, so we would know what we stand on.

Insertion into an educational or academic context helps expose young people to these plays . . .

That's why I'm doing this interview, it's phenomenally important. You know I'm tremendously pleased that *Elmina* was on the curriculum of, I don't know, maybe five or six different universities – fantastic! A friend of mine was doing a course in literature and she said, 'Oh my God, I'm going into my exam and there's a question about you!' Now apart from the ego side of it, it is not until our work goes into the realms of academia and can be studied that it can last and have some kind of longevity.

What do you see as the way through the 'addiction' to the short-term, especially as embodied in the character of Kwesi, in Fix Up, *and his self-interested embracing of materialism over cultural heritage?*

I don't know if there is an answer to that or if *I* have an answer. I find Kwesi's argument persuasive – 'If it's hair products they want now, then give them hair products, but one day I'll own the whole street and that's when I can influence things.' I think it is important that people understand life is long. We find ourselves in situations where communities in the underclass – we see it in South Africa, where I've just returned from, and in India – where it doesn't matter if you die tomorrow. If you don't, you probably will the day after. We have to create conditions where people understand life becomes long if you need to protect tomorrow, and the way to go about it is not through short-termism. How will what I do today affect me in twelve years' time? Between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five I went to bookstores and studied at home. I read books about slavery and black politics, and this has paid dividends in my life now. I was able to define my manhood by how much I understood about history as opposed to the short-termism of 'bling' or immediate gratification.

What about a home base for new black drama?

I have a lot of hope in Talawa, but their funding is such that they're probably only going to do three plays a year. Where are those new plays that they need to bring in? There are lots of other questions around that. The Americans dealt with this issue in the seventies and eighties when they created the National Black Theatre. August Wilson talks about the need to create an environment where black playwrights can write about what they want to write about, drama that can be accepted as culturally good work, and also make a living, have an audience that is made up of black people, and where directors can choose work and bring it to the artistic directors and say, 'This is what I want to do.' That challenge needs to be presented to the artistic directors up and down *this* country.

Notes

1. Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Contact Theatre Manchester, West Yorkshire and Nottingham Playhouses, the Eclipse Theatre at the New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, and the Royal Court, Tricycle, Soho, Hampstead and National Theatres.

2. Roy Williams was interviewed by Aleks Sierz in *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXII, No. 2 (May 2006), p. 113–21.

3. See Geoff Davis and Anna Fuchs, ed., *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006); and Dimple Godiwala, ed., *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), the first comprehensive (if at times uneven) anthologies dedicated to discussing black British and Asian British theatre and performance.

4. *The Amen Corner* was the first all-black cast, non-musical production in London's West End (1987) since Una Marson's *At What a Price!* (Scala Theatre, 1933).

5. Both Kwame's mother and August Wilson died in 2005. He commented, 'I lost my mother this year, my whole life's role model, then when I heard that August had died too I felt that death had been greedy.' See Jane Edwardes, 'Racing Through History', *Time Out* (4–11 January 2006), p. 120.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Michael Abbensetts, in Michelle Stoby, 'Black British Drama after *Empire Road*', *Wasafiri*, No. 35 (Spring 2002).

James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948–1985 (*London: Michael Joseph, 1985).

Felix Cross, 'Missing in Action: Our Black Stars', *The Independent*, 1 April 1998.

Dona Daley, *Blest Be the Tie* (London: Royal Court Theatre, 2004).

Jane Edwardes, 'Racing Through History', *Time Out*, 4–11 January 2006, p. 120.

Dimple Godiwala, ed., *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006).

debbie tucker green, *Dirty Butterfly (*London: Nick Hern Books, 2003).

Kwame Kwei-Armah, *A Bitter Herb* (1998), *Big Nose*, co-written with Christopher Monks (1999), both in *Plays by Kwame Kwei-Armah Vol. 1* (London: House of Theresa Books, 2001).

——— , *Elmina's Kitchen* (London: Methuen, 2003).

——— , *Fix Up* (London: Methuen, 2004).

Jill Olumide, *Raiding the Gene Pool: the Social Construction of Mixed Race (*London: Pluto Press, 2002).

Deirdre Osborne, personal interviews with Kwame Kwei-Armah, 15 October 2004 and 9 June 2005.

——— , personal interviews with Roy Williams, April 2004 and 24 October 2005.

Caryl Phillips, 'Lost Generation', *The Guardian*, 23 April 2005.

'Theatre Platform' series 2004–05, on the Cottesloe stage, National Theatre, London, 11 January 2005.

Jatinder Verma, in Nick Smurthwaite, 'It's a Classic Answer for Black Theatre', *The Observer*, 21 April 1991.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press