

Jami Rogers

Cross-Cultural Casting in Britain: The Path to Inclusion, 1972-2012

Abstract: This essay uses three productions to chart the progress of the integration of performers of African and Afro-Caribbean descent in professional British Shakespearean theatre. It argues that the three productions—from 1972, 1988 and 2012—each use cross-cultural casting in ways that illuminate the phases of inclusion for British performers of colour. Peter Coe’s 1972 *The Black Macbeth* was staged at a time when an implicit colour bar in Shakespeare was in place, but black performers were included in the production in ways that reinforced dominant racial stereotypes. Temba’s 1988 *Romeo and Juliet* used its Cuban setting to challenge stereotypes by presenting black actors in an environment that was meant to show them as “real human beings”. The RSC’s 2012 *Julius Caesar* was a black British staging of Shakespeare that allowed black actors to use their cultural heritages to claim Shakespeare, signalling the performers’ greater inclusion into British Shakespearean theatre.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Theatre; Diversity; Race; Black British; African.

Inclusivity in British production of Shakespeare—subliminally or not—often revolves around finding locales or characters that fit contemporary stereotypes of ethnic minorities. This category of production is one that Ayanna Thompson defines as “cross-cultural casting.” This shifting of a play’s time and/or place “to a different culture or location” (76) has been a useful tool for companies seeking to increase the diversity of their stages. The form has evolved in Britain since the early 1970s and has been utilized by touring companies, regional theatres, minority-led theatre companies and the major national theatre companies. Over time, cross-cultural productions have progressed from being staged in marginalized spaces to being fully absorbed into the contemporary mainstream theatrical ecology. This essay will look at three such productions as a way of investigating the evolution of cross-cultural casting from 1972 to 2012. These three productions—Peter Coe’s *The Black Macbeth* (1972), Alby James’ *Romeo and Juliet* (1988) and Gregory Doran’s *Julius Caesar* (2012)—trace the history of integrated casting in microcosm from the marginalization of black British

actors to their inclusion into mainstream Shakespearean production. There is not space for a full account of the challenges that have faced performers from diverse backgrounds, but a précis of the current climate is worth briefly noting here as it will be important context for cross-cultural productions.

While there has been progress in terms of casting black and Asian performers in Shakespeare since the 1970s, a glass ceiling remains stubbornly in place. In one respect this mirrors a common experience, described by Marcus Griffiths: “You’re lucky if you walk into a rehearsal room and see half the room filled with people who look like you. It’s a given that you’re going to walk in a room and see at least 75% white and then everyone else” (interview with author, 20 September 2017). For the majority of productions of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Shakespeare, Griffiths’ assertion is a confirmable fact. The initial data that underpins the British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database was a survey of the ethnic make-up of British Shakespeare casts, encompassing 225 productions and spanning thirty years. Published as “The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling”, its findings point starkly to an informal quota in which professional Shakespearean productions are composed of a ratio of 80-90% white performers with the remaining 10-20% of casts comprised of actors from Britain’s ethnic minority population, the majority of those being of African and Afro-Caribbean descent (Rogers, “The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling”). This ratio has remained remarkably stable and there are, on average, no more than two to four black and/or Asian actors per production, “a figure that has not significantly increased in numerical terms since the 1980s” (Rogers, “The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling” 421). The exceptions to this trend are productions that use settings that reflect the heritage of those same ethnic minority performers, enabling directors to hire casts with a higher than average proportion of black and Asian actors.

It is worth noting that although this essay focuses exclusively on cross-cultural productions that had African or Afro-Caribbean settings and used casts from those heritages, other ethnic population groups have similar stories in terms of integrating Shakespeare. Performers of south Asian heritage have more recently been achieving recognition for their work and are being included in Shakespearean productions, albeit in smaller quantities than their African and Afro-Caribbean counterparts. East Asian performers, however, remain virtually absent in twenty-first century British Shakespeare. It is these facts that underpin what follows and, although there has been much progress in the integration of British Shakespeare since the 1970s, there is still a basic inequality within the entertainment industry and, consequently, within British Shakespearean production in the twenty-first century.

The Black Macbeth

The first recorded all-black cast in a professional Shakespeare production in Britain occurred when Peter Coe directed *The Black Macbeth* at the Roundhouse in London in 1972. One report of its then forthcoming production noted about its milieu, “it is, we are assured [by Coe], not a gimmick but [done] ‘to put the important witch-craft element in a more credible setting’” (“Two black Macbeths”). By “a more credible setting”, Coe was referring to the transportation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* from Scotland to Barotseland in Zambia. There were a number of alterations to Shakespeare’s text in order to accommodate this shift in locale. The Witches became “ju ju”—described as such in the programme—and the eponymous couple were re-named Mbeth and Lady Mbeth while other tweaks to the script assuaged any doubt that the setting was no longer Scotland; “We hear our bloody cousins are bestowed in Somalia and the Congo” was one such modification and “The devil damn thee white thou black-faced loon” another. John Barber’s description in his *Daily Telegraph* review of the “ju ju”/witches illustrates the energy of the production, as he writes of “masked and befeathered dervishes in animal skins who dance to jungle-drums and intrude frequently into the action throughout.” Across the board, the picture the reviews build is of a *Macbeth* infused with the tribal heritage of Africa, but one that also left critics dissatisfied because the actors’ “speech-rhythms and intonations are not ours” (Barber).

Peter Coe had assembled a largely untrained cast of African, Caribbean and African-American heritage performers for *The Black Macbeth*. “Untrained” at least in the manner that critics would recognize as an English stage convention, epitomized by the technique of stars such as Olivier, Gielgud, Guinness and Ashcroft at this time. Many of the cast also clearly spoke Shakespeare’s verse in their natural accents, or at least an approximation of one from its African setting. In the days before Barrie Rutter’s Northern Broadsides forced British Shakespearean production to be more inclusive of regional—and international—accents, speaking Shakespeare in anything other than Received Pronunciation (RP) was met with varying degrees of scorn, derision and superiority from the critics.

Most of the cast were dismissed outright by the critics, largely on the basis of poor verse speaking, but two were rewarded with accolades. In praising Jeffery Kissoon’s Malcolm (Meru) and Mona Hammond’s Lady Mbeth, Irving Wardle in *The Times* was ebullient, describing Hammond’s Lady Macbeth as “a reading of true passion and originality whose stone-faced exhaustion after the banquet and sleep-walk scene are as good as any I have ever seen.” Seemingly oblivious as to the primary reason for his approbation of Hammond and Kissoon, Wardle continued, “Both performances, interestingly, are delivered with the fluency of standard British acting.” Wardle was, in effect, praising the pair for

their ability to speak verse according to unwritten specifications of English classical theatre. This response to the “fluency” of the verse speaking—and the dismissal of the rest of the cast—speaks to deeply ingrained notions about the ownership of Shakespeare’s plays and highlights the ways in which speech has been used to exclude performers of colour from the classical canon. The importance of RP to the British theatrical establishment had been understood by the African-American actor Paul Robeson when preparing to play Othello at the Savoy Theatre in 1930, who took elocution lessons from Amanda Ira Aldridge in order to assimilate.

The Black Macbeth’s African setting came under scrutiny from some critics, in ways that also highlight cultural prejudices that permeate white, British society. There are two primary sources for stereotypes of Africa in Coe’s *Macbeth*, both of which were noted by Frank Marcus in his *Sunday Telegraph* review. First, the perception of the continent as “exotic” and, to a large extent, “primitive” is visible in the drums, animal skins, “ju ju”/witchdoctors that permeated Coe’s recreation of Africa. Commenting on these aspects, Marcus stated that “The tribal rivalries of ancient Scotland, the witchcraft and the ghosts (although Banquo’s remains surprisingly invisible here) have much in common with African folklore.” While tribal ceremonies occur in Africa, the *perception* by western Europeans and North Americans about the continent is driven in part by media coverage. In a recent *National Geographic* issue on race, the magazine issued a *mea culpa* regarding its own part in perpetuating these “exotic” images of Africans and their descendants in the western world:

...until the 1970s *National Geographic* all but ignored people of color who lived in the United States, rarely acknowledging them beyond laborers or domestic workers. Meanwhile it pictured “natives” elsewhere as exotics, famously and frequently unclothed, happy hunters, noble savages—every type of cliché. (Goldberg)

The use of African rituals within *The Black Macbeth*, placing the production in the context of a specific tribal culture and the entire spectacle that accompanied these decisions similarly perpetuated the stereotypes of black people.

The portrayal of Malcolm also drew on images that would have been familiar to a contemporary, white English audience, in this case the shorthand for the brutal politics of postcolonial African regimes. Malcolm—who, after Macbeth’s death, inherits his father Duncan’s throne—was, in Coe’s production, the Shakespearean equivalent of the western-educated African leader: “The king’s son...alone among ebony torsos and heavy fur robes, wears colonial khaki (an Oxbridge graduate perhaps?)” (Dawson). It was likely this very image of the Oxbridge graduate that enabled reviewers to praise Kissoon’s acting, given the familiarity of its semiotics to a presumably educated audience.

However along with the familiar khaki, there is also an image of post-colonial turmoil embedded in Frank Marcus's perception of this particular son of a monarch: "Mr. Coe finds in his *Black Macbeth* a modern political analogy, namely a transition from feudal barbarism to a new-style military efficiency, represented by Malcolm (played with relaxed assurance by Jeffery Kissoon)". In using the African setting, both for its tribal and post-colonial semiotics, Coe was presenting his largely white English audience with simple signifiers that were readily identifiable—and simultaneously stereotypical.

With the hindsight of over four decades of socio-political change, Coe's *Black Macbeth* contains a level of discomfort because of the stereotypes deployed in the production—and their reception by critics. With the few productions at that time that were providing black actors with opportunities, it was most often through the use of cultural stereotypes. Like Peter Coe, William Gaskill used the African tribal image when incorporating three black actors as the Witches in his 1966 *Macbeth* at the Royal Court and Jonathan Miller cast Norman Beaton and Rudolph Walker to play Ariel and Caliban in a postcolonial *Tempest* in 1970. All three directors—Coe, Gaskill and Miller—were radical in their casting, but conservative in the execution of concepts that were based on the dominant cultural stereotypes of people of colour. That the stereotype was in play can be seen in Coe's own comment about his rationale for staging *Macbeth* in Africa, that the supernatural aspect of the play sits better within the context of western perceptions of the continent.

Where Coe—as well as Gaskill and Miller—were radical was in their casting of performers of colour at all. As late as 1979, the actor Norman Beaton had described classical theatre in Britain as "virtually a closed shop" for home grown black British talent. As actor Frank Cousins recalled, there were few opportunities as a result of the systemic prejudice performers of colour encountered:

In those days black actors were only used if a script specifically called for a Caribbean or African character. Mainstream parts were never considered appropriate for ethnic actors, and if one put oneself forward you were told you were too black, the accent wasn't right or you were just "not suitable". (King-Dorset 159)

The subtext of being "too black" or speaking in an accent that was not RP permeates the reviews of *The Black Macbeth*, which combined to view the performers as "not suitable" for Shakespeare. Thus hiring even one black actor would have been far from the norm, but to hire twenty-two—as Coe did—was revolutionary. That the director had to hone the script so that it would specifically require actors of African and Afro-Caribbean heritage perhaps speaks more to the prejudices of the establishment and its audiences than the stereotypical signifiers that dominated Coe's production.

That *The Black Macbeth* also existed—and could probably *only* exist—on the margins can be seen in the casting of mainstream classical theatre at the same time. While Oscar James and Mona Hammond were playing leading roles in *The Black Macbeth*—the first performers of colour to play Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Britain—black actors at the RSC in 1972 were, as Stewart Trotter (25) wrote about Trevor Nunn’s *Coriolanus*, “do[ing] little more than whoop round bonfires and die in battle. All the verse speaking is done by white actors blacked up”. The statement is perhaps harsh, as the context was the RSC hiring a core group of young, black actors at the beginning of their careers. Yet Trotter’s description is not entirely unfair either, as Alton Kumalo—one of the young, black performers who had been in the RSC in the 1968 and 1969 seasons—recalled: “For about two years, all I ever played [at the RSC] was messengers. I got tired of playing the same roles because they are limiting. So, I made a very vocal protest. But they argued that Shakespeare did not write black roles and that there were not many blacks in England in Elizabethan times” (Baker). The contrast between the two experiences is stark: Alton Kumalo was playing messengers for the Royal Shakespeare Company, yet Kumalo’s co-founder of Temba Theatre Company, Oscar James, was playing a leading role in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in a fringe space in Camden.

“Nobody was Offering Black Actors Shakespeare”

The theatre companies Temba and Talawa had direct connections with Peter Coe’s *The Black Macbeth*. Oscar James and Mona Hammond—Coe’s “Mbeth”’s—were at the forefront of the black British theatre movement, each a key figure in the history of these two important companies. Mona Hammond was one of four women that established Talawa in 1986, while Oscar James co-founded Temba in 1972 with Alton Kumalo. Alby James, Alton Kumalo’s successor as artistic director of Temba, expressed surprise in a 1987 piece in *The Independent* that black actors were still being told by “some directors...that though they were very impressed by their audition pieces, they could not yet see a way in which they could be cast in certain roles”. The phrases “see a way” and “in certain roles” are key to understanding the subtle ways in which actors of colour have been systematically denied opportunities, including in the classics. They also illustrate that the experiences that Frank Cousins had recalled of actors being told they were “not suitable” because of their skin colour or accent were still prevalent in the late 1980s. Reflecting in 2016 on the reasons Talawa began staging the classics, Yvonne Brewster stated it had been Talawa’s policy “to give black actors work they weren’t being offered—and nobody was offering them the chance to do Shakespeare” (Jays). A new phase in the history of the integration of Shakespearean production in the UK began when Alby James took

over from Alton Kumalo as Temba's artistic director, as minority-led theatre companies began to claim the classics for themselves.

Alby James brought to Temba a significant amount of experience in mainstream theatre—including the Royal Shakespeare Company—and an ambition “to produce the highest quality classical work” (Shand 19). Speaking to *City Limits* as Temba was mid-way through its Manchester residency in 1985, the conversation segued to a discussion of integrated casting, sparked by the example of Hugh Quarshie having played Posthumus in *Cymbeline* at the Royal Exchange the previous year. James observed that “Too many directors don't know how to use integrated casting. They leave the actor to do the job and that leads to racist responses from reviewers.” Temba's solution to the conundrum, the director noted, “might include transposition to the Caribbean or Africa” (Shand 19), an option that had only been done twice in professional theatre: *The Black Macbeth* and a Caribbean-set *Measure for Measure* at the National in 1981, directed by Michael Rudman with Norman Beaton as Angelo in what was his second—and final—professional Shakespeare production.

Three years after the Manchester residency Alby James directed a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1988, featuring a young David Harewood in his first job out of RADA as Romeo, opposite Georgia Slowe as Juliet. The play featured a multi-racial cast and was transposed from Verona to pre-revolutionary Cuba in 1878. Using the history of the island, James rooted his production in a society that had evolved from its slave-owning beginnings. As the director explained, the black population of Cuba had been able to buy their freedom and, as a consequence, “there was considerable mixing of the two races” (Carpenter 31). Africans had also become the single largest ethnic group in Cuba and with that came the fear of an uprising on the scale of the Haitian revolution (Carpenter 31-32). The Cuban town was represented by slatted mahogany, a Spanish guitarist playing live music and a prologue portraying the violent death of a woman attempting to raise the Cuban national flag. The multicultural cast was also split down ethnic lines: “The Capulets were intermarried Spaniards and Cubans, the Montagues descendants of African slaves” (Loehlin 80). There was also a dreadlocked Mercutio (Joe Dixon) and a Rosaline—normally Romeo's off-stage beloved, prior to his meeting Juliet—who dabbled in Flamenco dancing.

Temba's *Romeo and Juliet* was the first recorded production of a Shakespeare play by a minority-led theatre company (Rogers, British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database) and, as such, received unfavourable treatment from the mainstream press. While Peter Coe's *The Black Macbeth* placed black actors in situations that the largely white audience could accept (stereotypical settings, as shown above), Alby James presented a production that deliberately challenged racial perceptions. It is clear from

reviews that the “white gaze” of the mainstream critics was bewildered about James’ production: Grevel Lindop (33) remarked in *Plays and Players* that the “Cuban detail fails to illuminate”, a sentiment that Michael Billington shared in his review for *The Guardian*. Those members of the cast who were RADA-trained actors, however, generally exceeded expectations. In a similar bias for British-trained verse speakers that was apparent in reviews of *The Black Macbeth*, David Harewood and, particularly, Joe Dixon as Mercutio were singled out for praise. Despite the critical response, Temba’s achievement with *Romeo and Juliet* was to look beyond the stereotypes and at the humanity of Shakespeare’s characters within the Cuban context, an aspect that some critics could not—or would not—see.

Temba’s staging of a Shakespeare play was undoubtedly a challenge to the establishment, what James phrased as a “political” message: “For one thing, as far as some whites are concerned, Temba ought to be doing its own thing—always separate” (Carpenter 32). This separation speaks to a view that guided arts policy, epitomized by the solutions posited by *The Arts That Britain Ignores* in that “black” theatre should be a place for the expression of “black” concerns. Yet James went on to get at the core of the issue, observing that some people “don’t wish to see us integrated into the *mainstream* of English theatre” (Carpenter 32). Staging a Shakespeare play with an interracial cast was a challenge to that status quo, because what is more mainstream in British theatre than Shakespeare? An extra layer of complexity—and one that is barely acknowledged in discussions of race and Shakespeare—can be found in the reaction to Temba’s challenge to the status quo. As James tells it, by staging western classics with an integrated cast, “that kind of presentation flies in the face of their [the detractors’] denial—that is, that blacks are real human beings just like whites are” (Carpenter 33)—and, I would add, that talent in portraying humanity does not lie solely with human beings in greater proportions depending on the whiteness of their skin.

For Temba, an interracial cast in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* was less about the setting and more about presenting people of colour in ways designed to break dominant negative stereotypes. It is this aspect that signals a shift between using cross-cultural casting to present an idea of black people that harnessed those stereotypes—as did *The Black Macbeth*—and portraying characters for their innate humanity. Alby James’ message was deceptively simple, he staged *Romeo and Juliet* so that “you can see black and white people in the same drama.” That itself was radical because, as he explained, although there were casts that had both white and black actors, “In those productions, blacks and whites are antagonistic to one another. The black people are mad, hysterical, aggressive. In those dramas, no black person can love any white person...and it reinforces the fear the white person has of black people.” In

many ways, this is the dynamic that many productions of *Romeo and Juliet* portray, when the casting depicts an interracial conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets. Often utilizing contemporary urban settings, this approach to the play has allowed a simple binary to be read and reinforced. For example, Andrew Visnevski's 1982 production at the Young Vic elicited descriptions from reviewers that were steeped in stereotypes. Benedict Nightingale took Visnevski's Verona to be "Newark or Detroit" (both cities with large African-American populations) and delineated the families as "*tribe* Capulet" and "*tribe* Montague" (my italics). In this racially encoded production, the critic's choice of "tribe" evokes the repetitious media representation of Africans and their western descendants as "primitive".

Perhaps the most telling statement to come from the "white gaze" of mainstream critics was from Charles Spencer in *The Daily Telegraph*: "For this multi-racial company, it must have appeared sensible to set the play among the blacks, whites and mulattos of 19th century colonial Cuba". Spencer's "it must have appeared sensible" is patronizing and also indicative of a confusion caused by the lack of the standard binary narrative of black and white racial conflict that reflected recent British history in the "race riots" of the 1980s. What betrays the need for a narrative along black and white lines was Spencer's comment about Shakespeare's play itself and the analogy he used, that it "is in any case a timeless story which would fit just as easily into contemporary Belfast as it does into 16th-century Verona". In imagining the play transposed to the site of sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Spencer inadvertently exposes a subtle bias inherent in the criticism of the Temba production. For Spencer, it appears that Shakespeare's play had more relevancy as a depiction of "The Troubles"—a conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism at a basic level—than as a site to explore race relations in Britain in the 1980s in a less binary, less combative way, which is the approach that Alby James was offering.

With *Romeo and Juliet*, Alby James' Temba was advocating for "accurate, realistic portrayals" of people of colour—and people of colour in love with white people, and vice versa—because the "theatre, cinema, and television, never focuses on these love relationships. Instead, the powers that be in the media and politics pretend these relationships don't happen...[Black people] can't be so easily stereotyped if we have dimensions and humanity" (Carpenter 33-34). Although some critics could not see past the setting, ultimately Temba's foray into Shakespearean production was a vital piece of theatre that went beyond cultural stereotypes to find the humanity within the play using an integrated cast. The twenty-first century would bring about its own challenges in terms of "cross-cultural casting", but the rewards of this method also brought it fully into mainstream theatre with London 2012's Cultural Olympiad.

“Shakespeare’s African Play”

One very real indicator of progress for black actors in the twenty-first century is that the “closed shop”—as Norman Beaton phrased it—for black actors in classical theatre is no longer operative. Performers of African, Afro-Caribbean and south Asian heritage now regularly appear in productions of Shakespeare’s plays. For example, young actors of African and Afro-Caribbean heritage frequently work in classical theatre, as Marcus Griffiths has done since leaving Guildhall in 2011. Griffiths’ early work at Shakespeare’s Globe in *Much Ado About Nothing* was quickly followed by four seasons with the RSC, where he rose through the ranks from playing a host of small roles in *Julius Caesar* in 2012 (Marullus, Pindarus, Publius, Octavius’ Servant, Coffin bearer) going on to appear in David Tennant’s *Richard II* in 2013 (Greene), a season in the Swan performing Shakespeare’s contemporaries in 2015 to the 2016 season (Laertes in *Hamlet*, Cloten in *Cymbeline* and the King of France in *King Lear*). His experience—and that of many other young actors—speaks to the level at which BAME performers are now regularly working within mainstream classical theatre.

Cross-cultural casting has also become increasingly visible in mainstream theatre since Temba’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In the late 1980s, the form became increasingly popular in regional theatre particularly in cities with multiracial populations as a way to appeal to a wider, underserved (or potential) audience. Cross-cultural casting has since become one way mainstream theatres become more inclusive in their casting, providing the impetus to hire more actors from minority backgrounds. It has also often given performers of colour the opportunity to play the leading roles that go more often to their white counterparts. The final production in this study is the 2012 RSC production of *Julius Caesar* which was directed by Gregory Doran, set in Africa and was the first—and thus far only—time the company had staged a Shakespeare play with an all-black cast. Not since Michael Rudman’s *Measure for Measure* at the National Theatre in 1981 had there been such a large ethnic minority presence in a Shakespeare play on one of Britain’s major national stages.

Gregory Doran’s production of *Julius Caesar* was inspired, in part, by a conversation the director had with the South African actor John Kani, who told him “*Julius Caesar* is Shakespeare’s African play” (Davies). The genesis of this production is far more complicated than this isolated comment can express, but it encompasses both the global reach of Shakespeare’s work while simultaneously speaking to its parallels with Africa. Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* is effectively a play about politics, power (and its abuse) and philosophies of governing. It is little wonder that the impetus for setting *Julius Caesar* in Africa was primarily political, although this is often mistaken in criticism as a “wash” of African dictatorships. The title of the article, from

which I intentionally drew the quotation about “Shakespeare’s African play” is one example, as the subeditor’s craftsmanship directed the reader’s attention to the twentieth century’s post-colonial dictators: “*Julius Caesar* with a little help from Idi Amin and Mugabe” (Davies). As mentioned previously, one of the ways that western culture tends to read African narratives is through the narrow prism of postcolonial dictatorships, which limits the perception of both the continent and its inhabitants—and their descendants around the globe. In reality, Doran’s production narrative—and its motivation, which was stated repeatedly in the publicity surrounding the show—came from the African *opponents* to those dictators, from Nelson Mandela to Sonny Venkatrathnam to the Market Theatre, Johannesburg’s own John Kani. While the play itself—and the critics’ “white gaze”—may allow for the simple narrative of African dictatorship, the production itself was aligned with the struggle for human rights and racial equality.

Although Doran’s *Caesar* has been written about and described amply—most importantly by Paterson Joseph, who played Brutus, in his newly published memoir *Julius Caesar and Me*—it is worth précising here before discussing its implications. Unlike its two predecessors *The Black Macbeth* and Temba’s *Romeo and Juliet* which both depicted specific locales, the setting for Doran’s production was a fictional postcolonial African country. Michael Vale’s set was “like a war-damaged, concrete cross between the kind of football stadium where the ANC [African National Congress, the party of Nelson Mandela] held rallies and a Roman amphitheatre” (Taylor). Julius Caesar (Jeffery Kissoon) was a suave leader in a safari suit, waving a flywhisk as a subtle reminder of his growing power. As well as the obvious signifiers of African dictatorship, there was also joy in the carnival atmosphere with which the play started. “The air pulses with festive drumming as the populace parties under a baking sun, celebrating Caesar’s latest victory alongside a traditional shaman, who’ll soon double as the herald of doom,” wrote Kate Bassett (62). It is worth noting that, unlike with Coe’s *Black Macbeth* and James’ *Romeo and Juliet*, there was no critical sniping at the verse speaking in Doran’s production. Instead, the cast was heralded as “a superb ensemble of black British actors” (Bassett 62), perhaps an indication that the critics recognized a familiar form of Shakespearean verse speaking. After all, as Marcus Griffiths recounts, “If you look at it technically, we were doing everything [great British classical actors like Gielgud and Olivier] were doing: the poetry was there and the metre was being honoured” (interview with author, 20 September 2017).

If Peter Coe had seen an African setting as a way in to the supernatural aspect of *Macbeth* and Alby James staged a cross-cultural *Romeo and Juliet* in an effort to both portray black peoples’ humanity and to integrate performers of colour into mainstream theatre, the theatrical politics of Doran’s *Julius Caesar* were global in origin. Under Michael Boyd the Royal Shakespeare Company

became a more internationally orientated organization and one of his signature achievements was the “Complete Works Festival” in 2006. Its purpose was to celebrate Shakespeare’s work by staging the entire canon within a year, undertaken by both the RSC and a number of national and—importantly—international guest companies. It was, as Boyd noted, a fulfilment of his ambition “to make the RSC a more outward-looking theatre company, a company that would show real curiosity in trying to find the best practice in Shakespeare production elsewhere, looking for inspiration and lessons to be learned” (Smith 13). The 2012 World Shakespeare Festival—of which *Julius Caesar* was a part—was the logical extension of both Boyd’s philosophy of internationalism and the “Complete Works Festival”. Transnational Shakespeare in London’s Olympic year was no accident and the rhetoric surrounding the capital’s Olympic bid was distinctly inclusive, epitomized by Tony Blair’s words in 2005 upon London’s successful acquisition of the 2012 Summer Olympics: “London is an open, multi-racial, multi-religious, multicultural city and rather proud of it. People of all races and nationalities mix in with each other and mix in with each other well” (Tran). The World Shakespeare Festival (WSF) grew out of this philosophy, which had been embedded in London’s bid to the International Olympic Committee as “Olympism and Culture”, a full arts programme that was unveiled at the National Theatre in September 2008. The WSF was to be “be spearheaded by the Royal Shakespeare Company” with a focus “on international collaborations and the notion of Shakespeare as a world figure” (Higgins 2008). While the RSC presented the work of companies from Russia, Iraq and Brazil, their most high-profile home-grown productions were two that used cross-cultural settings and British casts that reflected their international heritage: *Julius Caesar* and a *Much Ado* with a British south Asian cast.

Each of Boyd’s programme notes for the World Shakespeare Festival picks up on the global themes of the Olympics. His welcome to the *Julius Caesar* audience noted, “The internationalism that informs all the RSC’s work this season...reflects the fact that Shakespeare is no longer English property.” Michael Boyd’s use of “English” in describing the ownership of Shakespeare is in distinct contrast with the description in his *Much Ado* programme note of *Julius Caesar* as “British-African.” While to the un-attuned ear definitions of “English” and “British” may elide, integrated Shakespeare is a concept that sits more comfortably on the “British” side of the discourse because of the racial connotations both hold. “Englishness” is a term loaded with implications of racial politics that were made visible in the co-option of the English flag in the 1970s and 1980s by neo-fascist groups. As Afua Hirsch (266) puts it, “Englishness is not an identity that many English people feel is open to immigrants”. Whether intentionally or not, by stating that Shakespeare was no longer *English* property Michael Boyd signalled a greater level of inclusion for

Britain's ethnic minority population in home grown Shakespeare by describing Doran's *Julius Caesar* as "British-African".

The significance of the RSC's 2012 *Julius Caesar* in terms of the history of integrated casting should not be underestimated. In order to understand its importance, I want to interrogate—with assistance from the production's cast and other black British practitioners—Michael Boyd's description of it as "British-African". The term itself is more specific than those usually applied to the non-white population of Britain: "BAME" and "minority ethnic". These labels were rightly queried by the director Roy Alexander Weise in a recent blog post on Tiata Fahodzi's website, with much more complexity than there is space here to relay. Two points stand out from Weise's writing: that the acronym BAME (Black and Asian Minority Ethnic) is "lazy" because this "shortcut removes the complexity of Black and Asian people, cultures and experiences" and that the word "minority" implies that "people like me—people who aren't white and European, essentially—as 'having little importance, influence, or effect'", as something lesser within the dominant white cultural framework. Or, to put it another way, stories that stem from these backgrounds are viewed by the dominant, white culture as not important enough to be told. Michael Boyd's use of the description British-African brings some cultural specificity—and, consequently, respect—to the black British practitioners whose work created Doran's *Julius Caesar*. In being staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company—the top of the profession—the production itself also sent out a powerful message of inclusion.

In a majority white country with a majority white theatre audience, the semiotics of inclusion were lost in the "white gaze" of the critical reception of Doran's *Julius Caesar*. In her essay "Making up Africa in the Cultural Olympiad," Colette Gordon (206) stated that the mixture of signifiers of "East African accents, West African music, and the elements of South African political iconography...elicited some concern about staging Africa as a country". There is no doubt that there was some crossover with the stereotypical ways in which African narratives are read by the "white gaze", what Gordon misses in her analysis is that Doran and his cast never meant their *Julius Caesar* to be a naturalistic representation of a specific postcolonial African nation. The cast's varied personal histories provided the historical foundation for the aspects of the play that deal with dictatorships and the aftermath of revolution. Adjoa Andoh's (Portia) father was a Ghanaian journalist who came to Britain as a political émigré and Ivanno Jeremiah's mother fled Idi Amin's Uganda (*Caesar* 6). Cyril Nri (Cassius) had "fled the Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, as an infant" (Joseph 68). This multiplicity of experiences and backgrounds enabled a melding of different African customs which, as Theo Ogunidipe (Soothsayer) explains, provided the cast with "ways to assist the narrative" via their rich, multiple heritages (interview with author, 11 October 2017).

Echoing Alby James thirty years previously, the most important point regarding this production of “Shakespeare’s African play” with its all black British cast was encapsulated by Marcus Griffiths: “We were going to own Shakespeare for our own culture” (interview with author, 20 September 2017). By “our own culture”, Griffiths did not just mean the cultures of the cast’s African heritage but by the broader terms of what it means to be—in Boyd’s phrase—British-African. While the family histories of the cast underpinned their understanding of the politics in *Julius Caesar* and the play’s parallels with events that have recurred across the African continent, Griffiths’ point was about inclusion—and about the pioneers in his cast. Griffiths recounted having seen Paterson Joseph (Brutus) in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* at the National Theatre when he was seventeen, never thinking he would share the stage with him a few years later:

He’s as British as they come, he grew up in Harlesden. Ray (Fearon) [Mark Antony] grew up in Harlesden, too. Cyril (Nri) moved over here, but he’s lived here for years and went to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. Jeffery Kissoon was one of the very first black faces on television. They are part of this culture. They’re a fundamental part of this culture. (interview with author, 20 September 2017)

For Griffiths the epitome of modern Britishness is “a melting pot,” which encompasses its multiple heritages. As he puts it, he was “born in this country. I’m a UK resident and I’m a proud Brit, but I’m also a proud Jamaican. Can’t I be all three?” (interview with author, 20 September 2017). What this *British-African* production of *Julius Caesar*—with all the complexity that entails—achieved was to bring the British African experience into mainstream classical theatre, alongside the more traditional, *English*-centric ways of telling this story. British-African stories were being presented in Shakespearean form on the stage of one of the world’s premier classical theatres, heralding the full inclusion of black British actors into the centre of the country’s cultural life.

Coda

There is a coda to the progress that has occurred in British theatre since the 1970s, sketched here through three productions. Despite the growth in cross-cultural productions, outside of this Shakespearean method of producing the plays an ingrained tendency remains to cast black and Asian performers in the same, stereotypical catalogue of roles. These parts make up what I have referred to elsewhere as an “unofficial black canon” (see Rogers, “The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling”). For example, of the three productions of *Macbeth* staged in

2018—at the RSC, the National and Bristol’s Tobacco Factory—each one cast a black or Asian performer as Banquo; the touring version of the NT’s 2018 *Macbeth* also continued on form, casting Patrick Robinson in the role. These parts are often large enough for an actor—any actor, regardless of ethnicity—to make an impact within the production, yet rarely do BAME actors play leading roles. Since 1930, only eight actors from minority backgrounds have played Hamlet, for example, and the two in 2016 (RSC, Black Theatre Live) were both cast in cross-cultural productions. Hamlet, King Lear and *Macbeth* are among the most coveted roles in the Shakespearean canon and in 2016, against all prevailing trends, there were four black British actors cast in those three roles: Paapa Essiedu (Hamlet), Ray Fearon (*Macbeth*), Raphael Sowole (Hamlet) and Don Warrington (Lear). However, only the *Macbeth* at the Globe could be considered to fully exist outside the cross-cultural milieu. The combination of a semi-static “unofficial black canon” combined with the overall rarity of a black British actor playing a leading Shakespearean character indicates that although access to jobs in classical theatre has improved exponentially since *The Black Macbeth*, systemic inequality remains stubbornly in place in twenty-first century British classical theatre.

WORKS CITED

- Baker, Richard Anthony. “Alton Kumalo.” *The Stage* 26 November 2013. 31 July 2018. <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/obituaries/2013/alton-kumalo/>>.
- Barber, John. “Robust novelties of *The Black Macbeth*.” *Daily Telegraph* 24 February 1972: n.p.
- Bassett, Kate. “Theatre.” *Independent on Sunday* 10 June 2012: 62.
- Beaton, Norman. “A taste of nothing much.” *The Guardian* 9 February 1979: n.p.
- Billington, Michael. “Lovers lost for words.” *The Guardian* 2 July 1988: n.p.
- Caesar, Ed. “Modern Africa loves the deadly political passions of *Julius Caesar*...” *Sunday Times. Culture* 3 June 2012: 6.
- Carpenter, Sandy. “Black and British Temba Theatre Forges the Mainstream.” *TDR* 34.1 (1990): 28-35.
- Davies, Serena. “*Julius Caesar* with a little help from Idi Amin and Mugabe...” *Daily Telegraph* 31 May 2012: 33.
- Dawson, Helen. “A black view of *Macbeth*.” *Observer* 27 February 1972: n.p.
- Goldberg, Susan. “For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It.” *National Geographic*. April 2018. 31 July 2018. <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/from-the-editor-race-racism-history/>>.
- Gordon, Colette. “‘Mind the gap’: Globalism, Postcolonialism and Making up Africa in the Cultural Olympiad.” *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year*. Eds. Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015.

- Griffiths, Marcus. Interview with author. 20 September 2017.
- Higgins, Charlotte. "Physical Culture: 2012 Organisers Pledge to Marry the Arts With Sport." *The Guardian* 5 September 2008: n.p.
- Hirsch, Afua. *BRIT(ISH): On Race, Identity and Belonging*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2018.
- James, Alby. "Taking a Black Stage View." *The Independent* 31 December 1987: n.p.
- Jays, David. "Yvonne Brewster: Nobody was Offering Black Actors Shakespeare so we Stage *King Lear*." *The Guardian* 1 February 2016: n.p.
- Joseph, Paterson. *Julius Caesar and Me*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- King-Dorset, Rodriguez. *Black British Theatre Pioneers: Yvonne Brewster and the First Generation of Actors, Playwrights and Other Practitioners*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2014.
- Lindop, Grevel. "Romeo and Juliet." *Plays and Players* May 1988: 33.
- Loehlin, James N., ed. *Shakespeare in Production: Romeo and Juliet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Marcus, Frank. "Black Power." *Sunday Telegraph* 27 February 1972: n.p.
- "Michael Boyd speaks to Peter J. Smith." *Cahiers Elisabethains* 71.1 suppl (2007): 13-18.
- Ogundipe, Theo. Interview with author. 11 October 2017.
- Rogers, Jami. "The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling: The State of Colorblind Casting in Contemporary British Theatre." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31.3 (2013): 405-30.
- Rogers, Jami, Ed. *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database*. 2016. <<https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk>>.
- Shand, Paul. "Black Stage." *City Life* (Manchester) 3-7 May 1985: 19.
- Spencer, Charles. "Blighted love." *Daily Telegraph* 2 July 1988: n.p.
- Taylor, Paul. "All Hail Caesar as Some New Blood Reinvigorates a Roman Tragedy." *Independent* 11 June 2012: 42.
- Thompson, Ayanna. *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Tran, Mark. "London Celebrates Olympics Decision." *The Guardian* 6 July 2005. 31 July 2018. <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/jul/06/olympics2012.olympicgames3>>.
- Trotter, Stewart. "The Black Actor in Britain." *Plays and Players* October 1972: 23-25.
- "Two black Macbeths." *Sunday Telegraph* 9 January 1972: n.p.
- Wardle, Irving. "The Black Macbeth". *The Times* 25 February 1972: n.p.
- Weise, Roy Alexander. "The Problem with 'BAME'." Tiata Fahodzi Guest Blog 17 November 2017. 31 July 2018. <<http://www.tiatafahodzi.com/blog/guest-blog-the-problem-with-bame-roy-alexander-weise/>>.