

Alternatives Within the Mainstream

Alternatives Within the Mainstream British Black and Asian Theatres

Edited by

Dimple Godiwala



CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PRESS

Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres, edited by Dimple Godiwala

This book first published 2006 by

Cambridge Scholars Press

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2006 by Dimple Godiwala and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN 1904303668

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>I. Introduction</i>	1
Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres. An Introduction	
Dimple Godiwala	3
<i>Outsider-oriented interstitial discourse</i>	3
Mapping the terrain	4
<i>Doxic field</i>	6
Enacting identity through performance	6
The Blacks in Britain	8
‘Blacking up’: The arbitrariness of colour	9
The Asians in Britain	11
<i>Nomadic acts</i>	14
Works cited	17
 <i>II. Histories and Trajectories</i>	 21
 CHAPTER ONE	
Mainstreaming African, Asian and Caribbean Theatre: The Experiments of the Black Theatre Forum	
Alda Terracciano	22
The Beginning of the Black Theatre Seasons	23
The Black Theatre Season 1985 and the establishment of the Black Theatre Forum	26
Challenges to internal cohesiveness and the re-interpretation of classics: the Black Theatre Season 1986	34
The enlarged base of the Forum and the Seasons 1987, 1989 and 1990	42
Widening perspectives	48
Works cited	50
 CHAPTER TWO	
Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain	
Deirdre Osborne	61
Food for thought	61
A View from Abroad: Black Performers (1830-1930)	65
From Unity to Foco Novo: Black (and White) Power (1936-1988)	71
Onwards and Upwards: The Nineties and beyond	77

Works cited.....	79
CHAPTER THREE	
The State of the Nation: Contemporary Black British Theatre and the Staging of the UK	
Deirdre Osborne	82
The Plays.....	86
i: ‘Incendiary plays’.....	88
ii: ‘Drama of family ties’.....	93
The critical voices: ‘to be or not to be...’.....	96
Works Cited.....	98
CHAPTER FOUR	
Genealogies, Archaeologies, Histories: The Revolutionary ‘Interculturalism’ of Asian Theatre in Britain	
Dimple Godiwala	101
Theatrical lineage and a ‘becoming-in-difference’.....	102
Doxa.....	104
Political and aesthetic strategies.....	107
Works cited.....	116
 <i>III. Histories of Theatre Companies and Arts Venues</i>	 121
CHAPTER FIVE	
Talawa Theatre Company: The ‘Likkle’ Matter of Black Creativity and Representation on the British Stage	
Victor Ukaegbu	123
Historical Background.....	123
Aims, Mission and Vision: The Name is the <i>Thing</i>	125
Talawa’s Artistic and Creative Legacies.....	127
Stylistic Approaches: To Perform is to be Ideological.....	129
<i>Talawa</i> Productions: Resisting Stereotypes, Contesting Misrepresentations.....	132
Classics to Shakespeare.....	132
Contemporary Scenes: Black Diaspora and the West Indies Context.....	140
A Growing Creative Platform and the tale of Talawa’s Peoples.....	148
Works Cited.....	151
CHAPTER SIX	
‘A Local Habitation and a Name’: The Development of Black and Asian Theatre in Birmingham since the 1970s	
Claire Cochrane	153
Birmingham Rep.....	154

The Drum.....	156
Midlands Arts Centre.....	157
Works Cited.....	171
CHAPTER SEVEN	
<i>Tara Arts and Tamasha: Producing Asian Performance – Two Approaches</i>	
Dominic Hingorani	174
A History of <i>Tara Arts</i> : From English to ‘Binglish’	174
<i>The Journey to the West</i> Trilogy.....	185
<i>Tamasha</i> Theatre Company: Practising ‘Authenticity’	187
Works cited.....	197
 IV. Controversies	 201
 CHAPTER EIGHT	
Drama in the Age of <i>Kalyug</i>: <i>Behzti</i> and Sikh self-censorship	
Anthony Frost	203
Birmingham Council of Gurdwaras.....	204
Sikhism in India.....	206
<i>Jo Bole So Nihaal</i>	207
Works cited:.....	222
 V. The Dramatists	 227
 CHAPTER NINE	
‘Black and Female is Some of Who I Am and I Want to Explore it’: Black Women’s Plays of the 1980s and 1990s	
Kathleen Starck	229
Women’s Theatre Groups.....	231
Anthologies	231
Migration and belonging	233
Ethnicity	241
Works cited.....	246
 CHAPTER TEN	
The Search for Identity and the Claim for an Ethnicity of Englishness in Jackie Kay’s <i>Chiaroscuro</i> and Valerie Mason-John’s <i>Brown Girl in the Ring</i>	
Dimple Godiwala	249
Identity.....	249

<i>Chiaroscuro</i>	250
<i>Brown Girl in the Ring</i>	257
The Ethnicity of Englishness.....	258
Works cited.....	263
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
A Scourge of the Empire: Wole Soyinka's Notorious Theatre at the Royal Court	
Zodwa Motsa	265
Angry Young Men.....	265
John Arden.....	272
Arnold Wesker.....	278
A history of productions.....	281
Works cited.....	282
CHAPTER TWELVE	
Theatre as Edutainment: Sol. B. River's Dramatic Burden	
Ashley Tellis	282
Textual performativity.....	284
<i>Moor Masterpieces</i>	286
<i>Two Tracks and Text Me</i>	289
48-98.....	293
<i>To Rahtid</i>	295
Works cited.....	296
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
Beyond Victimhood: Agency and Identity in the Theatre of Roy Williams	
Elizabeth Barry and William Boles	297
<i>Lift Off</i>	300
<i>Clubland</i>	303
<i>Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads</i>	306
<i>Little Sweet Thing</i>	310
Works Cited.....	312
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	
Aspects of Madness and Theatricality in Kwame Kwei-Armah's Drama	
Samuel Kasule	314
<i>Elmina's Kitchen</i>	315
<i>Fix Up</i>	323
Works cited:.....	328
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	
<i>Kali</i>: Providing a Forum for British-Asian Women Playwrights	
Dimple Godiwala	328
<i>Song for a Sanctuary</i>	330
<i>The Ecstasy</i>	333

<i>Kali Shalwar</i>	334
<i>River on Fire</i>	337
<i>Singh Tangos</i>	339
<i>Sock 'Em With Honey</i>	343
Works cited	346
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	
'They call me an "Asian Writer" as well' – Tanika Gupta's <i>Sanctuary, Skeleton and Inside Out</i>	
Kathleen Starck	347
<i>Sanctuary</i>	348
<i>Skeleton</i>	354
<i>Inside Out</i>	357
Works cited	361
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	
'Shameless' – Women, sexuality and violence in British-Asian Drama	
Valerie Kaneko Lucas	363
<i>Ghostdancing</i>	364
<i>Behsharam (Shameless)</i>	367
<i>Behzti</i>	370
<i>Bells</i>	375
Works cited	378
 VI. <i>Theatremakers' voices</i>	
i. Jatinder Verma	
The Shape of a Heart	381
ii. Yvonne Brewster	
My Work in the Theatre	388
iii. Valerie Mason-John (aka Queenie)	
Uncensoring my Writing	395
iv. Sol B. River	
Serious Business	400
v. Bapsi Sidhwa	
My Experience as a Rookie Playwright	406
<i>Editor and contributor biographies</i>	409

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am grateful to Rukhsana Ahmad, Yvonne Brewster, Nizwar Karanj, Valerie Mason-John, Sol B. River, Bapsi Sidhwa and Jatinder Verma for their support of this project. I appreciate the generosity of Rukhsana Ahmad, Anu Kumar, Bapsi Sidhwa and *Kali* Theatre Company for lending me unpublished playscripts. Grateful thanks are due to Colin Chambers for his excellent advice on the MS and to Peter Thomson for his constructive comments on the chapters which made up the special issue of *Studies for Theatre and Performance*. I owe thanks to my husband Stephen Michael McGowan for his helpful comments on my writing and the warm support and encouragement he unfailingly provides. For the help they extended, my thanks to all the librarians and staff at York St John College Fountains Learning Centre, in particular, Lottie Alexander, Claire McCluskey, Adriana Lombardi, Fiona Ware and Linda West. Thanks also to *Kali*, Yvonne Brewster, Valerie Mason-John, Sol B. River, the Royal National Theatre, *Talawa*, *Tara Arts* and *Tamasha* for the photographs in this book.

This book is dedicated to Nizwar Karanj and also to my parents, Kaushalya and Prabodh Godiwala.

Other acknowledgements follow the chapters.

PERMISSIONS:

I am grateful to Peter Lang for permission to reproduce some of the critical material on *Chiaroscuro* which was first published in my monograph *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980*, New York & Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003.

Abridged versions of my Introduction ‘Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres’ and my chapters ‘Genealogies, Archaeologies, Histories: The Revolutionary “Interculturalism” of Asian Theatre in Britain’ and ‘*Kali*: Providing a Forum for British-Asian Women Playwrights’ first appeared in the special issue on Black and Asian theatre, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 26.1 (2006). Deirdre Osborne’s ‘Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain’; Kathleen Starck’s ‘Black and Female is Some of Who I Am and I Want to Explore it: Black Women’s Plays of the 1980s and 1990s’; Jatinder Verma’s ‘The Shape of a Heart’ and a slightly different version of Sol B. River’s ‘Serious Business’ also first appeared in the same issue.

Some material from Deirdre Osborne’s ‘The State of the Nation: Voicing the Margins in the Staging of the UK’, first appeared in ‘Proceedings of the

Thirteenth Annual Conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English', 3-6 June. Published in Christoph Houswitschka and Anja Muller-Muth (eds.), *Staging Displacement, Exile and Diaspora*, University of Bamberg, 2005.

Some material from Zodwa Motsa's 'A Scourge of the Empire: Wole Soyinka's Notorious Theatre at the Royal Court' first appeared in her introduction to *Wole Soyinka: The Invention & The Detainee* (ed.) Zodwa Motsa, Tshwane: University of South Africa Press, 2005.

WEBSITES:

All the websites used by contributors in this book were functioning when they were accessed. The editor and contributors take no responsibility for the subsequent dismantling or malfunctioning of websites.

I. INTRODUCTION

ALTERNATIVES WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM: BRITISH BLACK AND ASIAN THEATRES

AN INTRODUCTION

[2001: *A Ramayana Odyssey*: Tara Arts]

Reading Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* recently, I noticed, amongst the many excellent sociological uses he has put Michel Foucault's theories in *An Archaeology of Knowledge* to, an extension of the latter's definition of the ideal cultural analyst or anthropologist.¹ For Bourdieu, because agents of society are possessed by their *habitus* more than they possess it, because they take for granted the values, norms, practices and ideologies of their particular group, the unthinkable and the unnameable schema which are implicit in and make possible the *doxa experience* can only be partially identified or articulated by the native informant.² It takes an *outsider-*



¹ 'It is not possible for us to describe our own archive. Constituted and formed within it, it delimits us as we speak from within its very rules. It is that which gives to what we can say its modes of appearance, its forms of existence and co-existence, its system of accumulation, historicity, and disappearance. Who then can hold the mirror up to us? Who can describe us as we are, in the mode of our becoming, even as we transform ourselves? Is it not one who is interstitial—inside enough to understand fully our boundaries and delimitation, at once close to us, and yet different from our present existence, someone on the border of our time and our presence, someone who can indicate yet its otherness and our possibilities, one who is a presence in the gap between our own discursive practices?' Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.130–1; translation modified.

² Pierre Bourdieu explains *doxa* as the experience of the *misrecognition* (and therefore, recognition) of the social practices of one's own group as 'natural', indisputable or taken for

oriented discourse to analyze and theorize the social practices of groups which exist as lacunae in the native's conscious mind (Bourdieu [1972] 1977: 18, 20, 164 ff). As an *interstitial-outsider* in British society, by virtue of being a permanent British Resident rather than a national, I hope 'to speak', as Bourdieu puts it, rather than '*be spoken*' in my introduction to contemporary forms of British theatre (Bourdieu [1984] 1993:3). In this book, these are Black and Asian theatres.³

Mapping the terrain

A publisher told me he did not approve of separatism when I proposed a critical anthology on Black and Asian drama; an admirable sentiment perhaps, as an attitude towards inclusion is always laudable.

However, locating the histories of subject-agents who belonged to previously colonized territories within the logic of western trajectories, defines Black by what it is not, by what it does not resemble. Black and Asian identity in Britain, therefore, is generally perceived as being located in a difference from, and not within the constructed ethnic identity (Englishness) of the mainstream. The latter may be defined as contemporary *White* writing which seldom represents the racial Other. It is only by locating themselves in an identity space which reflects the material of their histories, the forms of their own performance, their values and ideologies, their social practices, can dramatists of colour begin to write their identities and experience as subjects-in-the-world.

I hesitate to define this space yet again as 'post-colonial' drama. To use this now-tired term is to continue to locate the west in the centre of a discourse which has been more or less ignored by the (White, western) mainstream. As Anne McClintock puts it, the term postcolonial 'confers on colonialism the prestige of history proper'; it implies that it is colonialism which is 'the determining marker of history'. It further implies that '[o]ther cultures share only a chronological, prepositional relation to a Euro-centred epoch that is over [as implied in 'post'], or not yet begun [as implied in the prefix 'pre']'. In other words, the world's multitudinous cultures are marked, not positively by what distinguishes them, but

granted. The native informant therefore displays a practice and a discourse partially ignorant of its own truth. ([1972] 1977: 164 ff, 18-20).

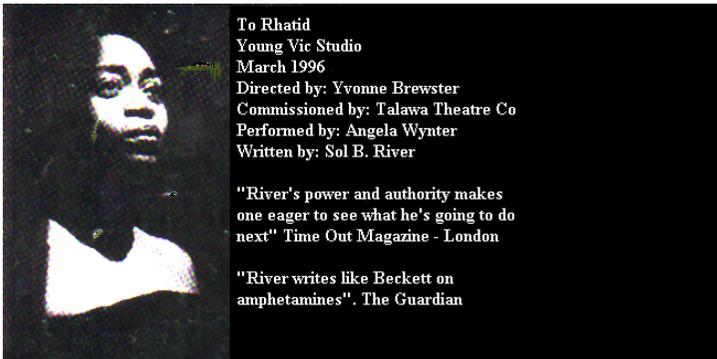
³ We have not, in the main, contested the terms 'Black' and 'Asian', taking them to denote those of Afro-Caribbean origins (Black) and those whose ancestors hail from the Indian sub-continent, which includes modern day Pakistan and Bangla Desh (Asian). We have taken those of mixed ethnic origins to belong to the category they identify with. However, we sometimes subsume those of colour under the monolithic rubric 'Black' to denote a common purpose and solidarity. For more on biological-hybrid identities see Dimple Godiwala, 'Postcolonial Desire: Mimicry, Hegemony, Identity', (in Kuorrti & Nyman 2006).

by a subordinate, retrospective relation to [Europe]’ (McClintock [1992] 2000: 84-97, 177).

In this respect, John Liu, analyzing race and ethnic relations in the west, contends that race and ethnic minorities have been relegated to a position of underdevelopment and dependency in a socio-economic structure similar to that of a classical colony. Thus the situation of the country is that of an ‘internal colony’. The policies and structures which arose in the classical colonial situation continue to exist in an internal colonial situation (Liu 2000: 1347-1348).

In a country such as Britain which is riven by the hierarchy of class, race then represents another kind of barrier. The institutionalization of racism allows for tokenism, by which a certain kind of liberal from the dominant classes can reassure himself of his multicultural inclusiveness whilst continuing to exclude his racial/economic others in very large part.

Tanika Gupta’s observation that Asian dramatists ‘don’t get nominated for mainstream awards. It still feels very much as if the theatre industry and TV and film really take only their own work seriously – meaning White work.’ (Marlowe, 2003) combined with the fact that a separate casting file exists for Black and Asian actors, confirms the simultaneous tokenization and ghettoization experienced by Blacks and Asians in the theatre.



[Sol B. River and Talawa’s *To Rhatid*. Photo courtesy: Sol B. River]

To return to my argument for a separate anthology: many British mainstream critical

anthologies of drama were nothing but representations of White male writing, and, since Christopher Innes’ hesitant and naïve analysis of contemporary women’s plays in the short end-chapter to the otherwise excellent *Modern Drama* published by Routledge in 1992, White women’s writing. In relation to the writing of Black and Asian dramatists, the work of White writers represents the very impulse that the former are resisting, as the portrayal of English society as fixed by whiteness is implicit in the dramatic and production texts of almost every White English dramatist and director, in their collective neglect to portray Britain as multicultural

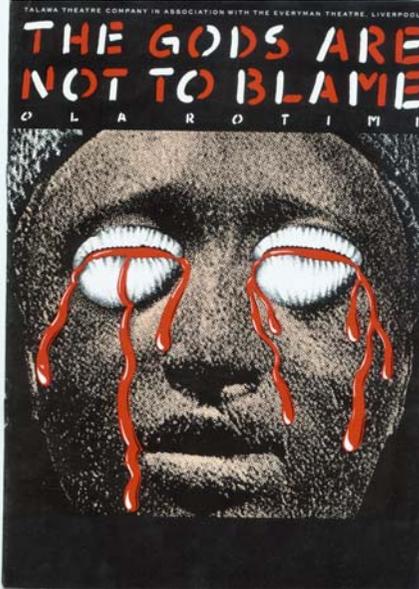
(See Godiwala 2003; 2004; 2006a). Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright's wide-ranging survey, *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, which was also a television series in 2000, does not even pretend to include British Black and Asian theatres as part of Britain's changing stages (Eyre & Wright 2000). These self-conscious makers of a continued fixity of 'Englishness' in theatre write by means of an anachronistic authorized discourse in their particular *doxic field* which operates by means of exclusion.⁴ Perhaps it is this tendency which constitutes the impossibility of the notion of an intercultural theatre which Patrice Pavis speaks of. He opines that it may be 'more productive to speak of *intercultural exchanges* within theatre practice rather than of the constitution of a new genre emerging for the synthesis of heterogeneous traditions (Pavis 1996: 1). However, the racial heterogeneity of contemporary Britain seems to be a subject tackled largely (and excellently) by the strangers in diaspora rather than the indigenous or 'ethnic English' dramatist or director. Furthermore, it is these very theatres which function as sites of genuine interculturalism within the changing structures of British stages. There is thus a very real need at this moment in the early years of the twenty-first century, when many scholars are engaged with writing about and analyzing Black and Asian theatre, to record these theatre histories and the work of the many dramatists and theatre companies, as well as make generally known the identities of those responsible for some of the best work on the British stage.

Enacting identity through performance

Contemporary Black and Asian dramaturgy is born of immigrant lineage. The makers of this theatre (playwrights, directors and actors) are mainly first and second generation British nationals and citizens; but they may also include *expatriate* writers who choose to live and work in Britain for personal reasons but are not British. Identity may well be a much theorized postmodern issue; but for Black and Asian writers of diaspora, located in a culture quite different from their familial and/ or geographic originary culture/s, identity and its construction becomes an urgent, often fraught, issue. Necessarily hybridized by the geographical and cultural locus of their productions which can often be at odds with the culture (or imagined culture) they feel they belong to, Black and Asian

⁴ Colonial ideology has reified the ideas of English superiority which are then infused through the exclusions of discourses such as the one within which the idea of Eyre & Wright's English theatre is constituted. For an analysis of the patriarchal, colonial and capitalist impulses which substrate western culture and drama, see *Breaking the Bounds* (Godiwala 2003: 3-36).

theatremakers inscribe within British drama a space which is informed by a dual history of belonging.



[*The Gods are not to Blame*, Talawa Theatre Company and Yvonne Brewster's adaptation of Ola Rotimi's *Oedipus*.
Photo courtesy: Yvonne Brewster]

Black and Asian producers of theatre enact performance differently as they have their own systems of significations. An audience of a Caribbean-Black or Indian or Pakistani play has different expectations from the performance. Often, they expect to see their own group's cultural and social codes, in the verbal and non-verbal elements of the performance text: language (and if this is English, an enaction of, for example, Indian or Caribbean forms of English); gesture; performance forms such as music or dance and other non-verbal

elements.

Culturally – or by means of rigorous training – programmed, an actor's *disposition* is inscribed in schemes of thought, perceptions, mental dispositions and, at a deeper level, in the form of body schema: bodily postures and stances, ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking, walking. The cultivated disposition enables each agent (actor) to convey modes of social practice and ideology which are inherently cultural (cf. Bourdieu [1972]1977: 15).

This sets Afro-Caribbean-Black apart from 'Indian' or 'Pakistani', and further distinguishes the subtleties of a Muslim play from a Hindustani or Parsi one. Especially, it also distinguishes Black and Asian theatre from the British mainstream. For the critic of these theatres, it often calls for an assessment and analysis of twin histories: those indigenous to English theatre and culture, which may be employed often as the play, many a time employing a multicultural cast, and playing to mixed-audiences, borrows freely of the practices and forms from the locus of its existence; and those indigenous to the culture the play originates in, either in the imagination or lived experience of social practices of its producers and performers. Black and Asian theatres are (formalistically and stylistically) ideally a

marriage of minds of the best of the performance forms of both cultures they represent; at their most provocative, and in terms of content, they flag up the indignities suffered by the strangers in Western society and induce a change in attitudes in the host culture/s by producing what Pierre Bourdieu calls a *genuine counterculture*: one which is capable of distancing and analyzing the practices and ideology of the dominant culture rather than

inverting it or, rather, imposing an inverted form of it. [...A] genuine counterculture is able to supply weapons for use against the soft forms of domination, the advanced forms of mobilization, the gentle violence of the new professional ideologists, who often rely on a kind of quasi-scientific rationalization of the dominant ideology; against the political uses of science, not to mention the biology or sociology of the advanced (and highly euphemized) forms of racism. [...It] would mean proliferating the weapons of defence against symbolic domination. (Bourdieu [1984] 1993: 3 my emphasis)

The Blacks in Britain

The Afro-Caribbean Black presence in Britain goes back several centuries, rather than, as popularly believed, their mass arrival on *Empire Windrush*. The Black presence on the stage, though not very well documented, goes back to the tournament of the wild knight and the black lady, Renaissance representations in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blacknesse*, John Marston's *The Wonder of Women* and, of course, *Othello* (Gundara & Duffield 1992; MacDonald 2002: 1-11).



Since the Lumière brothers captured on film blackface minstrels on a London street in 1896, the Blacks have been

[Bert Williams, before and after blacking up]

represented in film and later, in television drama (Bourne 2001). The act of Blacks blacking up emphasized their difference to the ‘notion of a fixed English identity [which] was doubtless a product of, and reaction to, the rapid change and transformation of both metropolitan and colonial societies which meant that, as with nationalism[s], such identities needed to be constructed to counter schisms, friction and dissent. [...] Fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change’ (Young 1995: 3-4).

In a narrative which resembles blacked-up blacks, the expatriate Parsi-Indian actor Nizwar Karanj was forced to ‘brown up’ for his role as sacrificial victim in Steven Spielberg’s 1984 film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and his role as servant in the 80s BBC production *The Jewel in the Crown* as he was ‘not quite brown enough’ (Godiwala 1995). On the other hand, the Indo-English actor, Karan Kapoor, who played an English public school-boy in the same series was not required to use brown make-up. Homi Bhabha’s theory that the not-quite-whiteness of colonized subjects poses a ‘threat’ to White culture seems contested by the experience of the minstrels and Indian actors *who might be far too light-skinned to conform to received stereotyped images of blackness or brownness of the colonised represented in performance*.⁵ What is performed – blacked-up blackness – conceals and disavows ‘what remains, opaque, unconscious, unperformable’, (Butler via Lacan, 1993: 234) i.e. the arbitrariness of colour. The materiality of the racialized body is abstracted into ‘Blackface’ impersonation which remains purely representational, to convey certain racial ideologies which are embodied in blackness; it becomes an allusion to what race embodies, an appropriation and control, a displacement and an abstraction (cf. MacDonald 2002: 4-5) in white cultures, such as ‘the savage other’ in *Temple of Doom*, and the hierarchies of the colonized in *The Jewel in the Crown*.⁶

Blacks have been historically represented on the English stage with the curious ambivalence found famously in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. The continuing fixities that determine the construction of Black identity in the rigid White space of the British

⁵ For a response to Homi Bhabha’s theory of *mimicry* (Bhabha 1994), and an analysis of the arbitrariness of the binarily opposed colour divide between coloniser and colonised, see Dimple Godiwala, ‘Postcolonial Desire: Mimicry, Hegemony, Identity’, (in Kuortti & Nyman 2006).

⁶ Originally, slaves mocked their masters by performing slapstick imitations called ‘puttin’ on ole massa’. Whites, assuming these were representations of authentic black culture, blacked up as minstrels to imitate African Americans. Blacks blacking up is the irony of blacks imitating whites imitating blacks who were mocking whites in the first place (Hill 2003: 8).

stage often means that although the host culture is often represented in plays by writers of colour, White dramatists seldom represent Black or Asian British cultures or social practices in their work, even though Britain has seen the heterogeneity of the racial presence for several centuries.

There is thus a need for the contemporary Black presence on the British stage. Deirdre Osborne opines in ‘The State of the Nation’: ‘The importance of including and perpetuating indigenous Black British drama in the mainstream theatrescape



[*Urban Afro Saxons*, photo courtesy: Talawa Theatre Company]

can be neither under-estimated nor over-emphasised [...] Black drama exposes mainstream (predominantly White) theatre-goers to aspects of Black British cultural input that is *as* indigenous to contemporary British cultural identity as that provided by White playwrights. It provides Black audiences with authentically rendered cultural representations which have not as yet been able to develop a flourishing continuum in Britain’s cultural psyche’ (Osborne in this anthology). Kathleen Starck points out that ‘The emergence of plays by Black women writers in Britain is a later phenomenon. Although there have been male Black playwrights such as Errol John, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott whose plays had been produced by the end of the 1960s, and later those such as Caryl Phillips and Mustapha Matura, women remained largely invisible until the late 1970s/early 1980s.’ Furthermore, ‘Black women often did not feel represented by their White

sisters' writings. In addition to White women's oppression based on gender and class, Black women's experience not only included but often placed at the centre the category of race. Coinciding with the theorising of issues of national, cultural, sexual and ethnic identities in cultural, literary, lesbian and feminist studies, Black women started finding 'stage voices' of their own only from the 1980s' (Starck in this anthology).

The need for a separate space for Black writing *arises from the neglect of Black and Asian theatre and culture by White female and male playwrights alike*. The urgent need for radical societal change felt by Black dramatist, novelist and poet Jackie Kay led her to write *Chiaroscuro* which dealt with issues that Blacks in Britain found most difficult to confront and deal with: the total erasure of their identities, histories, names. In identifying wholly with a host culture which constantly rejects them, Kay's play reveals characters with misshapen ideas of their own self-worth, their appearance, their tastes, their practices (Godiwala 2003: 16-23). Examples of the latest work in Black theatre by women are the late Dona Daley and Debbie Tucker Green's texts.

The Asians in Britain

The Asian presence in Britain goes back to the 1630s (Visram 1995: 4). Visram narrates how Indian sailors (lascars) who journeyed to England during the Raj were poor and suffered 'ill-treatment, sickness and long waits in British ports. Pay and conditions were very poor.' Although there were some rich Indians in Britain in the 19th century, and some professionals, the majority were working class and desperately poor. Most wealthy Asians, such as Prince Ranjitsinji and Maharajah Duleep Singh were royal. Wealthy Indian women (the *Bourgeoisie Noire*) such as the Oxford-educated Cornelia Sohrabji (the first woman law student in Britain) and Sophia Duleep Singh (suffragette) were educated and politically active. There were a number of Indian MPs in England: Dadabhai Naoroji (MP in 1892), Sir Mancherjee Bhowanagree (1895), Shapurji Saklatvala (1922) (Visram 1995: 13-25).⁷ In the 50s many rural poor from India emigrated to Britain. Visram's narrates the history of one man which typifies most Asian origins in Britain:

⁷ *La Bourgeoisie Noire* was a phrase coined by E. Franklin Frazier, to describe the business class of Harlem. These were the people who escaped the white man's kitchen and dining room; families of professional and upper class men. (Hill 2003: 84). I think the phrase particularly apt here to describe the upwardly mobile Indians who were facilitated in their upward social and economic progress by the hierarchical British caste system which, like India, also operated on the basis of *varna*.

My father had come here in 1956, one of the first Pakistanis to come. He came to improve his standard of living, to earn some money and go back home. (Visram 1995: 41).

Meanwhile the Kenyan and Ugandan Asians were admitted into Britain as refugees in 1967 and 1972.

For the most part, Indians in England have been poor and from the lower classes. Denied an economic and social mobility in the caste-ridden, and, after the British presence, *class*-ridden subcontinent, Indians came to Britain as servants to the East India Company officers and royalty during the British Raj in the 17th to 19th centuries. The subsequent mid-20th century migrations from Africa and India consisted of the poor labourers who had no (or low) caste and had crossed *kala pani* to emigrate to Africa and elsewhere as they had ‘no caste to lose’ and everything to gain from the British system which afforded economic mobility to those who worked hard and practiced a discrimination similar to the caste system.⁸ Caste which was originally determined on the basis of *varna* (colour) placed the Indians in Africa in a hierarchical order with the British on top and the Africans beneath them, enabling them to progress socially in a manner denied them in India.



[Members of the community and cast. Tara Arts' *Exodus*, Battersea Arts Centre, 1998]

British-Asian culture has needed to have a diasporic obsession with all traditions and rituals ‘authentically’ Indian, and, in the pursuit of the preservation

⁸ *Kala pani*, literally ‘the black waters’, signified the oceans which no person of caste could cross without putting themselves in jeopardy of self-pollution, thereby losing caste. It was only those who were poor or of no caste, those that had ‘no caste to lose’ who would make the journey as servants and labourers to lands as distant as Africa, Malaysia and England.

of these, fossilizes them.⁹ As Nissim Ezekiel put it: this is ‘a kind of sterile continuity’ of the migrant, ‘a continuity without cultivation’ (1965). The identity of the British-Asian is contingent on the particular Indian-ness of his sacraments, as he ‘carrie[s] his village with him’. As Sartre put it in his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, the sacred is turned into a weapon against despair and humiliation, ‘in other words, the colonized defend themselves against colonial alienation by taking religious alienation to greater lengths’.¹⁰ Originating in the need for the formation and preservation of identity as a collective resistance to the hostile exclusivity of the host culture, this collective longing to be constituted within the discursive matrix of the subcontinent, bizarrely – but also perhaps appropriately – extends to the mass commercial Bollywood film. Merged with this collective fantasmatic is the tradition and ritual carried so long and so rigidly by the diaspora, as to become ossified and almost meaningless except to the still – through all the generations – displaced subject to whom it offers the comforts of solidity and the connectedness and rootedness which was never offered by England.

Born and bred in England these subjects constituted in an almost forcible and forced difference are denied any definitions which would confer on them an English-ness through the long generations of their residence and citizenship. Thus the simulacra of customs past are a necessary fixation bestowing identity in a schizophrenic existence which offered social and economic mobility to so many but withheld any sense of belonging. These subjects are then, for the most part, structurally – and schizophrenically – constituted by the very terms of doxic English exclusion¹¹ to create and remain in the Indias of the mind whilst they

⁹ Radio presenter Saadia Nasiri ‘was surprised to find that in Pakistan [...] women had more freedom. ‘Our parents are more strict [...] When we are in Pakistan my cousins [...] say, ‘We are going to the disco tonight...’ I think, ‘Oh my God! Discos in Karachi!’“ This ‘time-warp’ the British-Asians live in is explained by Sita Narasimhan. ‘[We Asians in Britain] perpetuate outworn customs, habits, languages and attitudes from twice-dispaced communities’ (See Gifford 1990: 73-74).

¹⁰ Sartre conflates sacrality with religion which is appropriate in this context (Sartre 2001: 146).

¹¹ Cf. Robert Young speaks of Englishness as a becoming, ‘a fluidity’ and a ‘need for otherness’. Yet this Kojévian-Hegelian otherness he speaks of is in terms of a sexual need and desire for a *genderized* other which is *also* a racial other, a difference which almost always fulfils the need to define what English is *not*. Although his portrait of the contemporary London landscape is inclusive, imaginative and multicultural, much as Young would like to establish that the fluidity of Englishness is all embracing it cannot be ignored that Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw are part of the White (washed?) English canon, but Salman Rushdie and Tanika Gupta will never be *English*. Englishness, however

partake of and contribute to the economy of their country of migrancy (Godiwala 2001).

This is the exclusionary matrix within which the Blacks and Asians are constituted, denying both the ability or opportunity to ‘participate equally of the culture/s they inhabit’, just as Beth in *Chiaroscuro* has to reject ‘Dostoevsky, Dire Straits and Simon and Garfunkel’ in order to accept and come to terms with her blackness by ‘[rushing out to buy] the black records that had never sat on [her] shelves, the blues, funk, jazz and soul I’d been missing’ (Godiwala 2003: 22).

Nomadic acts

David Williams has reminded us that Peter Brook’s vision of theatre is one of a space made provisionally homogeneous by the act of mixed groups comprised of performers and audience coming together in a shared space. He notes that this is especially important to the notion of a multicultural theatre, where the provoking of an audience to individual and collective action beyond the space of the theatre, and the rewriting of histories and performances induce what may be called a reformative action within communities making multicultural theatres (such as that of the British Blacks and Asians), performance acts of perpetual crisis, causing British society to re-write its racial exclusions in the social, economic and political context (Williams in Pavis 1996: 68).

These theatres may also be named *nomadic acts* by way of Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of the *nomad’s deterritorialization and reterritorialization* ([1972] 1984). What I call ‘nomadic acts’ are contemporary acts (of theatre) which break the bounds of the exclusions and delimitations of the codes of White mainstream theatre and society, acts which cross and re-cross economic, political and social boundaries thereby transforming them, freeing individuals and communities by inspiring and provoking change in attitudes and behaviour to an acceptance of strangers in society.



This book seeks to promote an awareness of the other cultures and theatre forms and styles that make today’s British theatre the heterogeneous and dynamic space it is. Although this volume contains a substantial amount of new critical writing on Britain’s Black and Asian theatres, it has not been possible to attempt a

inclusive it may have been in its formation, has always excluded the racialized *black* other. (1995: 2).

full history, as this would be at the cost of close or deep readings of individual plays. This book is fairly comprehensive as a collection of writing on and analysis of Black and Asian British theatres. It does not claim, however, to be a record of the entirety of their theatrical production, however recent those origins may seem in the early years of the twenty-first century.

It is generally supposed that there is not and has not been much work by the producers and makers of Black and Asian theatres in Britain; nothing can be further from the truth. It is not so much that there is not enough of this kind of work than there is not enough critical attention focused on it. A case in point was when box-office takings during the Black Theatre Seasons contradicted the critics' lukewarm response (see Alda Terracciano's survey of the Black Theatre Seasons at the West End in the 80s and 90s). This critical anthology aims to bridge the gap caused by the paucity of serious critical attention to Black and Asian British theatres by presenting a wide-ranging series of chapters which address not only histories and the work of leading theatre companies and groups, but also the dramatic works of individual dramatists both female as well as male. The book includes chapters which are overarching surveys of the plays, the companies, the venues, and also contains detailed, focused critical studies. The autobiographical voices of a handful of seminal theatremakers closes the book.

It has not been intended to present a specific point of view in this volume. It is a collection of often divergent points of view, from a list of contributors who are a motley assortment of critics and historians. The one crucial thing in which we all believe is the importance of documenting, recording and analyzing the histories and dramaturgy of Britain's Black and Asian alternatives within the theatrical mainstream.

Jatinder Verma, director of Tara Arts, Yvonne Brewster, noted for her directorial work especially with Talawa Theatre, Rukhsana Ahmad, playwright and author who has been responsible for the setting up of Kali Theatre Company, Valerie Mason-John, actor, director, writer, Sol B. River, the famed Yorkshire playwright and Bapsi Sidhwa, author of the play *Sock 'Em With Honey* but perhaps better known as a leading novelist, have all supported this project with enthusiasm, some contributing essays which describe their work in British theatre.

This critical anthology is in six parts:

Part II (*Histories and Trajectories*) follows the *Introduction* and contains chapters which survey the work of the Black Theatre Forum, which in the 80s and 90s was an umbrella term for Black and Asian theatrical work ('Mainstreaming African, Asian and Caribbean Theatre' by Alda Terracciano); other chapters trace the histories of Black ('Writing Black Back' and 'State of the Nation' by Deirdre Osborne) and Asian ('Genealogies, Archaeologies, Histories' by Dimple Godiwala) theatres in Britain.

Part III (*Histories of Theatre Companies and Arts Venues*) charts brief histories of the major theatre companies, Talawa (by Victor Ukaegbu), Tara and Tamasha (by Dominic Hingorani) and contains a survey of Birmingham's changing arts venues (by Claire Cochrane).

Part IV called simply *Controversies* analyzes what is, at the time of writing, a recent example of how art can sometimes shock or offend orthodox sensibilities. I can vividly recall the staging of the adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* at the Royal National Theatre in October 1998. The heavy security which consisted of infra-red metal detectors and guards inside and outside the London theatre was not on offer for Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti or her audiences in 2004. This section contains one chapter ('Drama in the Age of *Kalyug*' by Anthony Frost) which documents the Sikh diaspora's uproar over *Behzti* and issues of censorship.

Part V (*The Dramatists*) critically explores the work of several dramatists. Kathleen Starck's survey of Black women dramatists ('Black and Female is Some of Who I Am') focuses on some of the plays by Killion M. Gideon, Liselle Kayla, Roselia John Baptiste, Trish Cooke and Zindika whilst plays by Jackie Kay and Valerie Mason-John are examined in the light of a 'search for identity' and 'the claim for Englishness' (Dimple Godiwala). Wole Soyinka's 'The Invention' is critically evaluated by the editor of the play's first publication (University of South Africa Press, 2005) as she examines the marginalized role that Soyinka played at the Royal Court in the 50s ('A Scourge of the Empire' by Zodwa Motsa). Ashley Tellis looks at the best and worst of Sol B. River's theatrical strategies ('Theatre as Edutainment'); Roy Williams' work comes up for critical review as Elizabeth Barry and William Boles explore 'agency and identity' and Samuel Kasule explores 'madness and theatricality' in the work of Kwame Kwei-Armah. My chapter on Kali theatre company ('Providing a Forum for British-Asian Women Playwrights') focuses on its early productions, reading closely plays by Anu Kumar, Rukhsana Ahmad, Bettina Gracias and Bapsi Sidhwa. Kathleen Starck focuses on some of Tanika Gupta's plays analyzing how the playwright breaks the bounds of being solely a writer of race and Valerie Kaneko Lucas analyzes 'Women, Sexuality and Violence' in the plays of (the male playwright) Deepak Verma and (the women playwrights) Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti and Yasmin Whittaker Khan.

An author's synopsis precedes each chapter.

Part V (*Theatre Voices*) contains autobiographical essays by some of Britain's theatremakers. Jatinder Verma traces the histories of his emigration to England and the setting up of Tara Arts, both of which are inextricably intertwined; Yvonne Brewster's narrative tells us that she is more than just Talawa's leading director; Sol B. River ruminates on theatre as being more of a 'serious business' than he imagined; prize-winning novelist Bapsi Sidhwa describes her first experience of

writing for and being produced in the theatre; and Valerie Mason-John reveals herself as prolific in several modes of writing.

The British stage has been changing through the twentieth century to accommodate sites of radical and vital difference, from class and gender to sexuality, but it is Black and Asian theatres – England’s theatres of race – which acknowledge the plurality and heterogeneity of Britishness more than any other kind of theatre in Britain today.¹²

Dimple Godiwala
Summer 2005
York

Photo credit: The photographs of Egbert ‘Bert’ Williams (1875-1922) are from Laban Carrick Hill’s *Harlem Stomp! A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance*, Little Brown and Company, 2003. p.108.

Works cited

- Bhabha, Homi (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice* [*Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique, précédé de trois études d’ethnologie kabyle*, 1972], trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1993), *Sociology in Question* [*Questions de sociologie*, 1984], trans. Richard Nice, London: Sage.
- Bourne, Stephen (2001), *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television*, London: Continuum.
- Butler, Judith (1993), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*, London: Routledge.

¹² The Gunpowder Season opened at the Swan as this book was going to press in summer 2005. With a diverse cast which had an almost equal number of black actors as white, plays such as the anonymously scripted *Thomas More* and Massinger’s reworked and re-named *Believe What You Will* had blacks play some parts which would normally have been played by white actors. With directorial decisions such as these made within mainstream theatre the future of English theatre looks plural as the concept of Englishness is made to include those born and brought up in England regardless of race. The 21st century Englishman may be black or white, on or off the English stage. (For other examples of multicultural casts in white mainstream theatre, see Deirdre Osborne, ‘Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain’ and Claire Cochrane, ‘“A Local Habitation and a Name”: The Development of Black and Asian Theatre in Birmingham in the 1970s’ in this volume).

- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (1984), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Vol. 1 [*L'Anti-Oedipe*, 1972], trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, London: Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (1988), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Vol. 2 [*Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, 1980], trans. Brian Massumi, London: Athlone Press.
- Eyre, Richard and Nicholas Wright (2000), *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Ezekiel, Nissim (1974), 'Naipaul's India and Mine', [*Imprint*, 1965], *New Writing in India* (ed.) Adil Jussawalla, India: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (1997), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [*L'Archéologie du savoir*, 1969], trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith [1972], London: Routledge.
- Gifford, Zerbano, *The Golden Thread: Asian Experience of Post-Raj Britain*, London: Pandora, 1990.
- Godiwala, Dimple (2001), 'Hybridity/Invention/Identity: British-Asian Culture and its Postcolonial Theatres', *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 8, 1.
- Godiwala, Dimple (2003), *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980*, New York & Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Godiwala, Dimple (2004), "'The performativity of the dramatic text': domestic colonialism and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*", *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 24: 1.
- Godiwala, Dimple (2006a), 'Our Country's Good' (Timberlake Wertenbaker), *Encyclopaedia of Modern Drama*, Scholastic Library Publishing.
- Godiwala, Dimple (2006b), 'Postcolonial Desire: Mimicry, Hegemony, Identity', in *Reconstructing Hybridity*, (eds.) Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- Gundara, Jagdish S. and Ian Duffield (eds.) (1992), *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain From Roman Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, Aldershot: Avebury.
- Hill, Laban Carrick (2003), *Harlem Stomp! A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Little Brown and Company.
- Innes, Christopher (1992), *Modern Drama: 1890-1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Liu, John (2000), 'Towards an understanding of the internal colonial model', in Diana Brydon (ed.), *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts* Vol.4, London: Routledge.
- MacDonald, Joyce Green (2002), *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McClintock, Anne (1992), 'The Angel of Progress: pitfalls of the term "post-colonialism"', *Social Text*, 31/32 (Spring), 84-97. Also in Brydon (ed.), *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts*.