
Volume II of 11

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CHAPTER FIVE

AMERICAN PLAYS

This chapter aims to demonstrate some of what Talawa Theatre Company can be seen to have achieved through its performances of contemporary American plays on the British stage. As with Chapter Four the analysis of the productions also illustrates the company's commitment to its mission statement as is seen through Talawa presenting its audience with theatrical work that raises issues that are directly relevant to contemporary black British society.

The chapter is divided into two parts and firstly explains the genre within the context of the modern British stage in a bid to highlight the uniqueness and subsequent achievements of Talawa’s work. Secondly aspects of all three of the company’s performances in this genre are examined. The plays are discussed in chronological order of performance.

The first play to be examined is Talawa’s performance of Ntozke Shange’s *The Love Space Demands*. Comments focus on:

- The structure and performance language of the piece.

The second play to be looked at is Talawa’s performance of Dr Endesha Ida Mae’s *From The Mississippi Delta*. After a general introduction to the production analysis focuses on:

- The language of the performance and the critical reception the show received.
The third play for discussion is Talawa's performance of Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*.

Analysis focuses on:

- The present writer's stance as Pre-Production Researcher of the play.
- The pre-production research process and what the research package contains.
- The Artistic Director's intentions in choosing the play.
- The Artistic Director and the performers' response to and working with the research package.
- The performance.

Of the four genres that Talawa's productions have been divided into for this study it is the American plays that make up the smallest proportion of the company's work. With three such works to the company's credit the present writer defines Talawa's plays in this genre by the following criteria:

- They are all by black female American writers.

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1 The American plays that Talawa has performed are:
Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*, 1 April -1 May 1992.
• They present issues facing black people generally and black women specifically.

• They reveal aspects of black American life that may be connected to black British life.

• They take place in North America and require an American accent in performance.

There is no evidence to suggest that Talawa’s performance of American plays has aimed specifically at doing work that meets the above criteria. The criteria have been designed by the present writer for the purpose of this thesis and the categories have been drawn up to best demonstrate the work that Talawa has already done in this area. It is possible that later American plays performed by the company may require subsequent writers to add additional criteria if they too chose to define the company’s work by what has already been produced, as Talawa is likely to expand on the type of work it has done:

Whoever takes over from me should expand and not marginalise the company. As a black company if we produce too much of the same thing we have had it...it becomes too difficult to be seen for anything else.2

Additionally, Talawa’s Board are committed to the company producing work that is of quality regardless of the racial origins or gender of the writer.3

3 At Talawa’s Board meeting 7 December 1999 the company’s artistic policy was discussed. Board member Mary Lauder recommended that Talawa should be aiming to produce ‘quality full length plays’. This suggestion was supported by the Board.
For the present writer Talawa’s achievements in this genre are perhaps best understood within the recent historical context of the British stage and what can be seen as its acceptance of American theatre. There are two kinds of American theatre that have been regularly available to British audiences throughout the last century. The first group is made up of contemporary American classics produced by internationally renowned American writers in the last fifty years, such as Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), Arthur Miller (b.1915), Edward Albee (b.1928) and more recently David Mamet (b.1947).

Williams’s work can be seen to have been a regular feature of the London stage, both in the West End and on the fringe circuit for over five decades. His play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) was first performed at London’s Haymarket Theatre on 28 July 1948.4 His later plays *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in the same year) have also been continually performed in London since their creation. Williams’s work can be seen to have been representative of southern life without remaining regional. His depictions are from a white perspective that say little of the horror blacks lived through at his time of writing.5


5 Details of performance dates for productions footnoted throughout this chapter are up to date at the time of writing (May 2001). Extracts from *A Street Car Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (directed by the present writer), were performed in April 1997 by students at Ealing Tertiary College London, as part of their Performing Arts course. Additionally, Williams’s work was to be seen on the London stage with *Baby Doll* at the Albery Theatre until 26 August 2000, *Baby Doll* at The Royal National Theatre, from 6 June 2000 for ten weeks, and *Orpheus Descending* at the Donmar Warehouse until 12 August 2000. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html) - Albemarle of London’s West End Theatre Guide — Plays and Comedies - 24/07/00

None of Williams’s plays featured as part of London’s West End theatre throughout 2001. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html) - Albemarle of London’s West End Theatre Guide — Plays and Comedies - 02/04/01

Details of the life and work of Tennessee Williams can be found at the following internet site: [http://www.olemis.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/williams_tennessee.png](http://www.olemis.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/williams_tennessee.png) — Tennessee Williams — 01/08/00
Having an equally successful career at the same time was fellow American Arthur Miller. Miller’s most famous plays that can be seen to have had an extensive life on the British stage include; *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949, also 1949 Pulitzer Prize winner), *The Crucible* (1953) and *A View From The Bridge* (1955). As with Williams Miller’s plays seem to have become a part of British theatre as they are performed regularly in London, on the fringe circuit and by non-professional groups. Miller’s works present moral issues for his characters to work through that often highlight a past wrong-doing which the characters are forced to deal with in the course of the play.

The third of the American writers whose work still features on the British stage is Edward Albee (1928) perhaps best known for his plays *Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Wolf?* (1962) and *A Delicate Balance* (1964 and Pulitzer Prize winner in 1967). Albee’s work explores and attacks the ‘contentment’ of middle class suburban America. Along with Williams and

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6 Both *All My Sons* and *A View From The Bridge* were performed over a two year period between 1983/4 as part of the Liverpool University Drama Society repertoire. In 1992 *A View From The Bridge* was used as a GSCE Drama (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examination text at Warwick Park Secondary School, London. Additionally, Miller’s *All My Sons* was at The Royal National Theatre’s Cottesloe Theatre until 18 October 2000. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html) - Albemarle of London’s West End Theatre Guide - Plays and Comedies - 24/07/00

As with Tennessee Williams none of Miller’s plays featured as part of London’s West End theatre throughout 2001. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/plays.html) - Albemarle of London’s West End Theatre Guide - Plays and Comedies - 02/04/01

7 See internet site providing bibliographical information on Albee: [http://www.fas.harvard.edu/-art/albee2.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/-art/albee2.html) - Edward Albee - 24/07/00

8 *A Delicate Balance* was performed at London’s Haymarket Theatre between 21 October 1997 and 4 April 1998 starring Maggie Smith. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/delicate.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/delicate.html) - A Delicate Balance - 24/07/00

Miller, Albee’s work is both performed in London and on the fringe circuit and is also used as syllabus material for drama courses in British educational establishments.9

The younger contemporary classical American writer David Mamet continues to receive recognition both in American and British theatre. Mamet’s literary success can be seen to have begun in 1976 with three Off-Off Broadway plays *Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *American Buffalo*. Followed by *The Woods* (1977), *Edmund* (1982) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984, also Pulitzer Prize winner in the same year).10 Mamet as the most contemporary of this group explores American life and corruption and often deals with aspects of life in the theatre and business. Mamet’s work has also been performed on the London stage.11

In addition to their classics American playwrights have found a niche on the British stage in the form of musicals. This theatrical form has had an active life on the London stage throughout the last century.12 For the present writer it is noteworthy that none of this American work (like the contemporary classics referred to above) presented any aspect of black American life as a central focus. Where the musical genre saw black life being depicted on the British stage was more often through such work as the mammy style *Black and White Minstrel Show* that concentrated on a white perception of a black stereotype.

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9 Albee’s *Zoo Story* (1958) was used as a prescribed text on the Staging and Techniques element of the Masters Degree in Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, London University, between 1989 and 1991.

10 Further information on the writer and his work can be found at the following internet site: [http://www.levity.com/corduroy/](http://www.levity.com/corduroy/) - David Mamet - 23/07/00

Despite the degrading nature of the work depicting blacks as servile non-thinkers the work was hugely popular with British audiences.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1975 British musical theatre saw an important addition as regards black contribution to what may be seen essentially as a British/American domain, with the performance of two African productions \textit{Ipi Tombi} and \textit{Kwa Zulu}.\textsuperscript{14} Although this work that came from Africa did not depict any aspect of black British life, by the nature of its existence it can be seen to have created a black presence in mainstream British theatre. This did not however cause a surge of black British musical performance work in the mainstream. Considerably more significant in the British mainstream has been the continued performance of American musical work.

In the last twenty-five years popular American television shows and films have experienced a successful transformation to the format of musical theatre attracting audiences with production runs lasting up to five years. Representing this phenomenon are the following American musicals which were being performed in London during 2000: \textit{Annie} (1970), \textit{Beauty and The Beast} (1993), \textit{Bugsy Malone} (1997), \textit{Fame} (1994), \textit{Grease} (1978) \textit{The Lion King} (1997), \textit{The Little Shop of Horrors} (1982), \textit{Saturday Night Fever}

Manet’s \textit{Boston Marriage} was performed at the Donmar Warehouse, London between 8 March and 14 April 2001. See internet site: http://www.albemarle-london.com/bostonmarriage.html – Boston Marriage – 02/04/01

\textsuperscript{13} Brian Rust, \textit{London Musical Shows On Record 1897-1976} (Middlesex: General Gramophone Publications Ltd, 1977), p.43, “There have been seven LPs of this popular stage and television show since its inception in 1962.”
\textsuperscript{14} Rust, \textit{London Musical Shows On Record}, pp.145 and 159 respectively:
\textit{Ipi Tombi} 
Her Majesty’s Theatre, 19 November 1975.
\textit{Kwa Zulu} 
American Plays Johnson

(1998), *Titanic* (1997) and *The Wiz* (1975). Again none of this work deals with any aspect of black life with the exception perhaps of *The Wiz* a contemporary performance of the *Wizard of Oz* (1903) featuring an all-black cast.\(^{15}\)

Whilst this study is theatre-based it should be noted that although classical American theatre and musicals did little to highlight varied aspects of black American life, American film and television did. This is reflected in the number of films and series in the last six decades that have become widely popular in Britain.\(^{16}\) During this time many contemporary black American film and television stars have been born who have become significant role models to blacks in Britain.

Actor/rapper Will Smith is perhaps the most recent black American superstar. Seen on British television starring in Channel Four’s *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, at the cinema in Hollywood blockbusters *Independence Day* (1996) and *Men in Black* (1997), and making hit rap records including *Willeennium* (1999), Smith has become one of Hollywood’s hottest properties. The impact of his work has been so great on the black British public specifically and the British mainstream generally, that Britain appears to have modelled its own black television presenter/rapper Richard Blackwood directly on him. Blackwood

\(^{15}\) See internet site providing information on Broadway shows being performed in London: [http://musicals.net](http://musicals.net) - Musicals.net/Broadway Musicals - 25/07/00

Dates in brackets refer to original performance dates. Both *Fame* and *The Lion King* were performed throughout 2001. *Fame* ran until September 2001. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/fame.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/fame.html) - Fame -The Musical - 02/04/01

Bookings for *The Lion King* up until 31 March 2002 went on sale from 1 March 2001. See internet site: [http://www.albemarle-london.com/Lionking.html](http://www.albemarle-london.com/Lionking.html) - Disney’s The Lion King – 02/04/01

\(^{16}\) The following internet site presents a comprehensive listing of black American films with black performers in a major role. The work is divided into the following categories: Action, Blaxploitation, Comedy and Drama. All of the work has been available to British audiences. [http://www.crosswinds.net/-deeljea/movielist.html](http://www.crosswinds.net/-deeljea/movielist.html) - Black Movie List - 25/07/00
whose comic style can be seen as an English version of Smith now has his own television show on Channel Four, *The Richard Blackwood Show*, and one successful record, *Who Da Man?/Mamma Used To Say* (2000), behind him. This kind of American star being reproduced in an English style may feed the expectations of black Britons wishing to pursue a performance career. Additionally, the present writer suggests that it is partly due to the black film and television work that has come from America that more black performers have been seen in every British soap opera in the last decade. This presence will in turn influence how black people are viewed by wider society.\(^\text{17}\)

There is a case however, that suggests that successful black British performers are not necessarily encouraged to continue to work in Britain when their work has been recognised internationally. This can be seen to have been the case for black British actress Marianne Jean-Baptiste who was nominated for a Golden Globe in 1996, an Oscar and a Bafta in 1997 for best supporting actress in her role as Hortense Cumberbatch in Mike Leigh’s *Secrets and Lies* (1996). Jean Baptiste is the only black British person to have been nominated for an *Oscar*. Despite her success in this British film she found she received little attention in Britain but was in demand for work in the USA.\(^\text{18}\) There is evidence to support her claim that:

> The old men running the industry just have not got a clue.
> They’ve got to come to terms with the fact that Britain is no longer a totally white place where people ride horses, wear long

\(^{17}\) See internet site: http://www.eng.virginia.edu/~enwr1016/amc2d/cosby.html - The Cosby Show Changes the Way Blacks are Viewed - 28/07/00
frocks and drink tea. The national dish is no longer fish and chips it's curry.\textsuperscript{19}

When the British screen organised a parade of young stars to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Cannes film festival in 1997 Jean-Baptiste was not invited although \textit{Secrets and Lies} was a Cannes winner that year. The parade which included: Rufus Sewell, Emily Watson, Kate Winslet had no black actors.\textsuperscript{20}

In light of the above, Talawa's work in the American genre can be seen to be pioneering for the contemporary British stage as it offered a new kind of American work to British theatre. Whilst all of the plays discuss American life from a black female perspective the present writer believes Talawa's reasons for deciding to work within this genre are wider than the productions may at first appear to suggest, and may have included some of the following:

- There is a well documented and longer established /acknowledged history of black writing in the USA than in the UK, giving Talawa a wide range of texts to choose from for performance.

\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Marianne Jean-Baptiste by David Johnson, Ms Baptiste's London home, 20 March 1997.
\textsuperscript{19} Dan Glaister, 'Film stars snub is no secret: Oscar Actress, hits out at 'old men' of British film industry', \textit{Guardian}, 15 May 1997, p.3.
\textsuperscript{20} See internet site: http://www.filmunlimited.co.uk/news_story/guardian/0.4029.68705.00html #top -- Marianne Jean Baptiste – 31/07/00
• Introducing such work to the British stage would expand the repertoire of black British work thus ensuring that Talawa’s work does not become pigeonholed and perhaps later marginalised.

• Working with American texts would allow themes that mirror black experiences in the UK (and possibly internationally) to be explored.

• The work would help to create a body of international black theatrical history in Britain.

The fact that Talawa’s reasons for performing this work can be seen to be multiple is demonstrated in the ensuing discussion of each of Talawa’s American plays. This however, is a by-product of the central debate which aims to highlight what the present writer regards as Talawa’s specific achievements in this area of the company’s work.
The Love Space Demands

Between 1 and 31 October 1992 Talawa presented its tenth show and first American work with a production of Ntozake Shange’s *The Love Space Demands* at The Cochrane Theatre, London. The production, which discusses the writer’s black, American, female perspective on sex, love and relationships was part of the launch of the CLR James Institute, and was also performed to commemorate James’s ninetieth birthday. It was fitting that Shange’s work was used for the occasion as James held her work in high regard.21 Talawa also intended the production to show the company’s understanding of the black community’s creative journey in Britain so far.22 The following discussion outlines the structure of the work and comments on the oral language and use of music, dance and movement in the production.

The structure of Talawa’s performance was set by the written text. *The Love Space Demands* entitled a ‘choreopoem’ by Shange can be described as a series of poems loosely linked by their theme and style to create a sequence of short performance pieces flowing into each other to form a single longer performance. Shange can be seen to have constructed this format for her message as she felt it best suited her purpose of creating poetry specifically written for performance, ‘Poetry was written to be performed to everybody.’23 Shange describes *The Love Space Demands* as:

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21 See Talawa production archives for *The Love Space Demands* - publicity file - production flyer. James states, ‘I have read no finer modern poet.’
22 Ibid., Brewster states, ‘The festival will exhibit and celebrate the wealth of creative talent now at ease with itself after decades of frustration through having no sense of belonging.’
A collage of experience . . . the poems and monologues are real questions I have asked and the sharp edges of the answers. 24

Talawa performed the poem in the order set by Shange in its three equal sections as outlined below:

Section One;

Devotion to one love or another.
Serial Monogomy.
Intermittent Celibacy.

Section Two;

A third generation geechee myth for yr birthday.
Male English as a second language.
If I go all the way without you where would I go?

Section Three;

Loosening strings or give me an 'A'.
Open up/this is the police.
Crack Annie. 25

24 Shange describes her work in the production flyer.
25 Each title is written as it appears in the production programme for the show. Shange however, does not use any capital letters for her titles in the script.
Being divided in this way meant that Talawa's performance would automatically have an appearance of uniformity and balance that could be seen to represent the clarity of the outside world. This could be drawn in stark contrast to the stream of consciousness effect of the pieces delivered by Breeze that would offer the details of her characters' emotional state.

On a practical level Shange's structure also enabled Talawa to divide each piece with a musical interlude allowing the company to run the production from beginning to end with no interval. For the present writer Talawa's artistic decision can be seen to have been aimed at establishing a technique that would maintain the intensity of the piece without breaking its flow. Additionally, the choice may also point to the company's move towards a more experimental type of theatre that complemented both the structure and emotional roller-coaster theme of *The Love Space Demands*.

Whilst the structure of Talawa's performance was guided by Shange, the company's chosen oral language of performance enabled Talawa to demonstrate both the protagonist's skill in this area, and how the company can be seen to be working with a form of oral language and voice that is uncommon in black British theatre. In order to highlight the extent to which Talawa was able to make the work its own in this area some comment on Shange's text is firstly provided below.

Although Shange does not give a specific direction as to how the text should be spoken, the text itself indicates how the play should sound. The attempt to clarify the sound of the
work is achieved by Shange’s insistence on writing semi-phonetically. Words that would normally end in ‘ing’ are shown as ending with ‘in’, as in askin’ stoppin’ demandin’. Shange frequently uses her own spelling of the following words: ‘About’ is written as ‘abt’ or ‘bout’, ‘because’ as ‘cuz’, ‘could’ as ‘cd’, ‘full of’ as ‘fulla’, ‘mother fuckers’ as ‘muthafuckahs’, ‘wouldn’t’ as ‘wdn’t’, and ‘your’ as ‘yr’. Additionally, the writer chooses not to use any capital letters. Her work benefits from three kinds of punctuation only: question marks, speech marks and a sign written as / which indicates a comma. The majority of the language of the script remains however, in ‘standard American English’.

The present writer suggests that Shange’s choice of written language can be seen as a rejection of the ‘standard American’ form and in this regard can be seen as an antilanguage as it appears to break cultural norms of accepted oral forms. Shange does not want her characters to aspire to the ways of affluent American life that they are generally excluded from because of their low economic status. This linguistic specificity meant that as the entirety of the speech would be delivered by protagonist Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze much of the linguistic success of Talawa’s production would hinge on Breeze’s ability to find an appropriate range of language and voices for her characters that would work with Talawa’s audience.26

The language was determined by Breeze. I didn’t have to do any work. Jean and the cast worked through the octaves of the piece by discussion, and my job was to make the evenness of the keel

26 A biography of Jamaica’s dub-poet Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze is found at the following internet site: http://www.pandon.demon.co.uk/b.html#32 - Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze – On the Edge of an Island - 01/08/00
Talawa’s archival video of the performance illustrates that Breeze had no difficulty producing at least two American accents. Her accuracy can in part be attributed to the fact that she had lived and worked in America for many years. For the first poem, *devotion to one lover or another* Breeze’s character’s accent is that of the deep American South. For the second piece, *serial monogamy* the accent of the upper middle class nondescript strata of American executive society is used. In addition to highlighting her own talent Breeze’s use of multiple accents can be seen to add to Talawa’s presentation of verbal repertoire which once again illustrates the ease with which Talawa’s performers can be seen to work with an American accent. During the course of her performance Breeze produces at least two further speech styles further demonstrating her talent and verbal repertoire.

In the piece *open up/this is the police* Breeze is required to speak Spanish. Although the level of Spanish language use is basic, linguistically, culturally and intellectually the use of Spanish may appear to bring Talawa’s work to a more linguistically ‘sophisticated’ level. Unlike the majority of Talawa’s work, with *The love Space Demands* the languages of the text may be seen as having a dual status. On one level the status is higher than the Caribbean forms used in the majority of Talawa’s productions: American English and Spanish. On a second level their status is lessened because they are black American English and working class Spanish speech forms. Breeze demonstrates that she is able to deliver her Spanish voice with conviction and accuracy of accent. It is not clear how she is

able to do this as she was given no language coaching in this area. The present writer suggests that perhaps Breeze had become aware of this speech style whilst living in New York where Spanish is widely spoken.

In Talawa’s performance much of the Spanish provided by Shange’s text was omitted in favour of introducing a Caribbean blackness to the language through Breeze’s use of her native Jamaican monolingual patois. Here Breeze’s fourth speech style is demonstrated intermittently with the same ease with which she performed the entire poem.29 For the present writer this was a strategic artistic decision that would help to aim Breeze’s character’s language use at Talawa’s black British audience thus making the performance appear more relevant to them.

Prior to this production Talawa’s work could not be termed as linguistically offensive. The company’s performance of The Love Space Demands however, can be seen to have offered a new form of oral language to Talawa’s audience. This is demonstrated by the widespread use of American slang and expletives. For the present writer the violent language of the work is seen in the use of words that appear to have become a normal part of working class black American life. Whilst words such as ‘niggah’, as seen in a third generation geechee myth for yr birthday and ‘muthafucka’ in intermittent celibacy, may be part of everyday speech in some American communities, these words may have a greater impact on the black British audience. For the present writer this may be due to the fact that

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28 A translation of the Spanish is provided in the glossary on the last page of the production programme. See Talawa production archives for The Love Space Demands - publicity file.

29 The introduction of Jamaican patois to the performance is Talawa’s invention as this speech is not scripted. Perhaps stereotypically the speech is used in one liners to express anger or for jokes.
these words are used less freely in British speech and have therefore maintained a greater
depth of their original negative meaning. Also this language is encountered even less on
the British stage than in British society generally. In this regard Talawa can be seen to be
prepared to break new linguistic boundaries for itself and by extension black British
theatre generally. This is further demonstrated by Talawa’s performance of the sexual
language of *The Love Space Demands*.

For the present writer the oral language of Talawa’s performance is partly dictated by the
themes within each piece. As much of the work revolves around an aspect of sex, sexual
language is seen in each of the parts of the performance. Through this work Talawa may
be seen as presenting a passionately sexual voice that is seldom seen in contemporary
black British theatre.

Breeze’s performance can be seen to interpret the sexuality of the poems to deliver a range
of sexual voices. There is the sensual sexual voice she offers in her performance of
devotion to one lover or another, where talk is of flowers, their petals and erotic baths.
Breeze introduces the sexual voice of flirtation with serial monogomy, as she imagines her
various lovers. She moves away from the obviously gentle side of sex to produce a sexual
voice laced in animal passion in intermittent celibacy to demonstrate the losing of one’s
virginity. This voice is continued in *mesl* (*male english as a second language*): *in defence
of bilingualism*. 
In *mesl* Breeze portrays a character that believes the men she is watching reach a collective state of orgasm through the excitement they experience by viewing the baseball game and listening to the language of it. Through Shange's writing Breeze finds a passionately sexual voice that demonstrates to Talawa's audience how the neglected woman achieves sexual fulfilment by creating her own game out of her experience of being neglected by a man addicted to sport. She makes herself the centre of it enjoying all the sexual pleasure she reads into the game, ending the piece with a heavy orgasmic sigh. Breeze's character's pleasure and indeed her presence go entirely unnoticed by her partner who is part of the male group watching the game.

Of all the pieces however, it is Breeze's performance in *crack annie* that is the most sexually violent. The references to 'new pussy' and the use of sexual language to describe the horror of child abuse introduce an uncommon voice to Talawa's audience. Black theatre-going audiences of shows such as the Oliver Samuels monolingual patois speaking popular variety would however be familiar with sexual language in performance. For the present writer however, the feeling of the sexual language and the sexual voices that Breeze finds for her characters in *The Love Space Demands* are not of gratuitous sex.

The above discussion of oral language can be seen as the first layer of language for the performance. Added to this are the varied layers of Talawa's performance that include, music, dance and movement. In earlier productions music has generally been used in the following three ways: incidental music, music as a direct part of the background action (where accompanying a dance), or music as a central aspect of a performance (the protagonist or cast sing as part of the action).
In *The Love Space Demands* the company use music on a less obvious and more intense level as it is used throughout the performance to symbolise the psyche of Breeze’s characters or other characters around them. Breeze’s characters’ internal and outer battles are developed through their relationships with the men they confront and whose answers they coax through the musicians playing the double bass, the drums and the flute. The responses that Breeze’s characters imagine the men give them in terms of specifics are unclear but their musical tone and Breeze’s character’s further responses give Talawa’s audience a sure indication of their progression in each debate.

Whilst much of Talawa’s work has used music, in this production Talawa can be seen to use the musical instruments for more than the music they provide, as they act momentarily as symbols of the men Breeze’s characters feel they have been let down by. In this regard Talawa can be seen to have used the instruments as part of the dance and movement element of the performance.

This is seen in the piece *loosening strings or give me an ‘A’* where Breeze’s character describes a sexual experience through her interaction with both the double bass player and the dancer. Breeze’s character is free to move around her sexual partner in the piece, the double bass. The bass player does not have the same freedom of movement. He responds to her through his music whilst the male dancer represents him physically in the background.
Like music, dance and movement have featured prominently in Talawa's performances and as seen in the example above are also used to complement each other. Generally however, these aspects of the performance have been incorporated in what may be seen to be an obvious way. Characters dance at Carnival and during the performance of other songs. In The Love Space Demands dance and movement are used to explore and express the emotions of the performers in both obvious and more complex ways.

Talawa used two dancers Prince Morgan and Andrea Whiting for The Love Space Demands. Choreographed by Greta Mendez their appearances throughout the performance gave a physical dimension to the dialogue of Breeze's characters. Where obvious notions of choreography are used the dancers offer a straightforward physical interpretation to Breeze's dialogue.

In the solo pieces this is seen in devotion to one lover or another where the dance reflects the bathing ritual that Breeze’s character discusses. In intermittent celibacy the female dancer presents Breeze’s character’s desire for sex. Her solo reflects the isolation that Breeze’s character feels in not being able to find a sex partner. In a third generation geechee myth for yr birthday the female dancer’s solo interprets Breeze’s character’s childbirth theme. The same simple technique is used effectively for both dancers in serial monogomy where they act the flirtation scene described by Breeze’s character and in if i go all the way without you where would i go? where togetherness and sexual energy are interpreted.
For the present writer, where Talawa’s use of dance is more innovative is where the notions of choreography are more complex and are used to predict the spoken language. The effect is one that the present writer describes as a surprise and echo. The surprise element is in the fact that what is said, does not immediately match the change in mood as performed by the dancers. Usually Breeze’s character is passive whilst the dance has progressed into a more lively stage of the argument. The echo is experienced when Breeze’s character in telling her tale describes the action that the audience has already seen interpreted through dance.

This is seen in *mesl (male english as a second language): in defense of bilingualism* where Breeze’s character’s description of her game follows the movement of the dancers. Through the dancers the audience is made aware that her game is an amalgamation of the games that keep her partner away from her. The dancers reveal how the new game revolves around Breeze’s character’s sexual fantasies and ultimate orgasm before we hear her version of it. Talawa uses the same technique to disturbing effect in *crack annie*. Whilst Breeze’s character expresses a confusion and tries to explain her reason for allowing the events which occurred to happen, the dancers perform the child rape scene before Breeze’s character can describe it. Presented in this way Breeze’s character’s lines can also be seen as a form of filling in the gaps as we learn that the victim is her daughter used for sex by Breeze’s character’s drug-pusher.

For the present writer Talawa’s use of music, dance and movement in the performance can be seen to mirror each other. They are used as a means of enhancing the messages of the oral speech. This can be seen to heighten the seriousness of the issues in the performance
which, already intense, can be seen to have their depth increased by being interpreted in multiple forms. Shange’s work may be regarded as having enabled Talawa to demonstrate both the will and ability to develop a contemporary and sophisticated style of direction that is entirely its own.

In light of the above discussion the present writer feels it would be fair to suggest that Talawa’s performance of *The Love Space Demands* can be seen to have presented the company and even its most forward thinking audience with many modern sexual and violent issues to work with:

Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze oozes ease and energy, embracing poetry, dance and music with brilliant laid back panache. Her monologue is a string of Ntozake Shange’s poems on sex and affection: a radical and outspoken work (‘niggers’ and ‘new pussy’) ranging from the comic sketches on ‘serial monogomy’ to a painful poem on child sexual abuse.\(^\text{30}\)

By the time Talawa had performed *The Love Space Demands* the company was thirteen years old. The present writer suggests that the early teenage years of the company reflected an adolescent desire to shock and rebel as Talawa’s work appeared to be entering

\(^\text{30}\) Kate Bassett, “The Love Space Demands”, *City Limits*, 15-22 October 1992. The page number of the review is unavailable. Records of *City Limits* are held in the newspaper section of the British Library London, until September 1992 only. After this point records cease due to what is documented in the newspaper archives as, ‘end of circulation’. The last formerly recorded contact details of *City Limits* appear in, *Willings Press Guide Vol. I* (West Sussex: Reed Information Services, Ltd., 1993), p.369. None of the given contact details pertain to *City Limits* any longer. The present writer possesses a copy of the review without the page number.
an overtly sexual arena in comparison with what had gone before. Or perhaps it was a case of the older black American theatrical sister leading its younger British sibling astray or showing her what life was really like.

For the present writer this production revealed that Talawa did not want to be seen as a staunch black theatre company performing black productions that were aimed at an aspiring black middle class audience that did not want to be offended. Additionally, Talawa had dared to get its feet wet by doing an American work which whilst it had not increased public response did, on the whole, receive comparatively better reviews than the majority of Talawa’s earlier productions.

All reviews from the mainstream press found something positive to say about Talawa’s production. Billington comments, ‘I’m not sure how to describe Ntozake Shange’s The Love Space Demands, presented by Talawa, but it’s certainly impressive.’ Bassett is equally enthusiastic, ‘...the choreography rises to excellence (capes fluttering like falling petals and a sexual deflowering powerfully symbolised by a foot forced through a skirt). ... It’s an interesting artistic format rarely seen in the UK, and Talawa are well worth a look.’ Curtis states, ‘...it’s a remarkable, lyrical experience of live poetry.’ Additionally Jean Breeze’s performance is heralded as a success in every review.

Her performance is described as, ‘mesmerising’, and Gould suggests, ‘Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze must surely be one of the more fascinating people to have graced the stage at Talawa’s Cochrane Theatre. As well as the success of the performance the rebellious nature of the work may appear to have set a precedent as far as the company’s performance of the American plays is concerned. This is demonstrated in Talawa’s second American production discussed below, Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland’s, *From The Mississippi Delta.*

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From the Mississippi Delta

Between 1 April and 1 May 1993 Talawa presented its thirteenth production in total and second American work, with its run of Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland's, *From the Mississippi Delta*, at The Cochrane Theatre, London and the Contact Theatre, Manchester.

In the following discussion after a general introduction to the language of *From the Mississippi Delta*, the present writer offers commentary on two key areas of Talawa's performance. Firstly, the oral language and the general performance of each actress are discussed (in the opinion of the present writer based on his viewing of the first London performance). Secondly, the critical reception the show received from the media is presented.

The language of the script of *From the Mississippi Delta* like that of *The Love Space Demands* reflects the writer's attempt to present a form of American speech that suggests how she intends her script to be spoken. In Holland's script this is the voice of the black American south. As seen with all of the scripts that Talawa has used for performance, the English in Holland's script is generally written in a 'standard' form. In this case 'standard American English' with American phraseology, and some southern American spellings. The pronunciation of the black south is highlighted by the repeated use of phonetic spellings in the text. Commonly used are; 'Dat' for 'That', 'Dis' for 'This', 'Wit' for 'With', 'Den' for 'Then', 'bout' for 'about', 'Chilluns' for 'Children', 'Aint' for 'Aunt', 'Nawth' for 'North', 'Useta' for 'Used to', 'Wimmens' for 'Women', 'Moe' for 'More', 'Gie' for 'Give', and 'Kin' for 'Can'. With these markers to work with Talawa can be seen
to have been given a clear indication of what the voices in the production should sound like.

For the present writer it seems that Talawa felt its audience would generally be able to understand the language of *From the Mississippi Delta* (as set out by Holland) in performance as no special attempt was made to change any aspect of the language. Where difficulty may have arisen was in the use of specific regional terminology. To help its audience Talawa took the step of providing a glossary in the production programme.\(^{36}\) This step had not been taken with its earlier African and Caribbean productions.

To ensure Talawa's performers would produce the required speech for the production, voice coaching was provided for them. Talawa employed the services of dialect coach Charmion Hoare who delivered ten workshop sessions. No other Talawa production to

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\(^{36}\) The production programme is found in Talawa's archives for *From the Mississippi Delta* - publicity file. As the glossary is short and gives a clear indication of some of the differences between 'standard American English' speech and the language required for the text the glossary is presented in full below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aint</td>
<td>Aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Powdered aspirin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catching</td>
<td>Delivering a baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead cat on the line</td>
<td>Something's not right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropsey</td>
<td>Catchall term for unspecific ailments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garry</td>
<td>Porch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haints</td>
<td>Ghosts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hog-head souse</td>
<td>Pork sausage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightrider</td>
<td>Ku Klux Klansman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outney sheet</td>
<td>Flour sack pieces used in doorways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picking in high cotton</td>
<td>Doing well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigeon drop</td>
<td>A money scam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See-berg</td>
<td>Jukebox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharpshooter casket</td>
<td>A pine coffin, wide at the shoulders, narrowing to the feet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shotgun house</td>
<td>House with rooms in a straight line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slop-jar</td>
<td>Used at night instead of the outhouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snick</td>
<td>Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teathers</td>
<td>Ringworms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
date has benefited from as much voice coaching. For the present writer whether this
degree of coaching was necessary is questionable as Talawa’s black British performers
demonstrated (in Talawa’s productions discussed so far) that they were on the whole
comfortable with performing and able to produce convincing American accents. For the
present writer there was no reason to suggest that the black British performers in *From the
Mississippi Delta* would show any less ability in this area of performance.

As no records have been kept on the precise nature of the work that was carried out in the
voice coaching sessions the present writer is unable to discuss the techniques used to
encourage the performers to develop the appropriate American voice. With no record of
the actresses’ linguistic starting point either, their development in this area is
immeasurable. The work of each performer can however, be discussed by commenting on
the end result.

It should be noted firstly however, that although the present discussion concerns Talawa’s
production it was because of the language of her script that Holland encountered problems
in putting on the production in America. Horwitz points out that Dr Holland’s work ‘Did
not fare well with several well-known black actresses’, 37 and quotes Holland, ‘They
refused to even consider the play because of the black dialect, they did not want to be
identified with it.’ 38 For the present writer this would appear to suggest that particular
‘black accents’ used in performance in America carry a certain stigma with them and may
guide and perhaps control a black performer’s career.

37 Simi Horwitz, ‘From Prostitute to Playwright: The Life And Times Of Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland’,
This can be seen to be the case in America where the pinnacle of performance success may be measured by a performer's notoriety in Hollywood's film industry. The absence of black performers in Hollywood may attest to the suggestion that black performers aiming to get there may be held back by the black roles that they play, and by extension the language that they use in their early work. The work of Hollywood's most celebrated contemporary black performers illustrates that where a black performer is used for a Hollywood film it is rarely because they are simply the best performer for a part that could be played by a performer of any colour. The fact that they are black is often relevant to the role and casting. This may discourage black performers who wish to work in the mainstream (and not play specifically 'black' roles) to steer away from work that uses such 'black accents' or black characterisation that they feel may later affect the work that they get.

In Britain a parallel may be drawn with what the present writer sees as the potential theatrical marginalisation of black British performers. Once seen in black work using a 'black voice' black actors in Britain may run the risk of being seen as black actors only suitable for such roles, rather than as an actor who appeared in a particular production.

38 Ibid.
39 See the following sites that highlight the work of black American performers who have made numerous films in Hollywood. Despite their success the majority of roles for each performer are black roles:

- Samuel L Jackson, . . . Mace Windu in The Phantom Menace - 03/04/01
http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Set/2608/sljabio.html - Biography of Samuel L Jackson - 03/04/01
http://www.us.imbd.com/Name?Bassett. Angela - Angela Bassett - 03/04/01
http://mrshowbiz.go.com/people/jadapinkettsmith/content/credits.html - Jada Pinkett Smith: Credits - 03/04/01
http://mrshowbiz.go.com/people/jadapinkettsmith/content/bio.html - Jada Pinkett Smith - 03/04/01
http://mrshowbiz.go.com/people/willsmith/content/credits.html - Will Smith: Credits - 03/04/01
http://mrshowbiz.go.com/people/wesleysnipes/content/credits.html - Wesley Snipes: Credits - 03/04/01
http://mrshowbiz.go.com/people/cubagoodingjr/content/credits.html - Cuba Gooding Jr.: Credits - 03/04/01
There is perhaps less stigma however, carried with the American voice for the black British performer as its sound is not representative of any area of British society. For the present writer much of the power of Talawa’s performance of *From The Mississippi Delta*, comes from the a cappella voices of the three performers, who swap roles throughout the piece to recount the life experiences of Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland.

Throughout the performance, it is generally Pauline Black who plays the part of Aint Baby, Dr Endesha Ida Mae’s mother. The present writer recalls Black’s opening night performance as being outstanding generally but more specifically so for its linguistic accuracy. Black, perhaps most famous for being the lead singer in her British chart topping group *Selector* (1979-1981) was able to entirely remove all oral signs that may have pointed to any non-southern American accent she may have used in previous work or to her own personality. The quality of Black’s language work can be partly explained by her general unassuming attitude to developing a character. In relation to creating Caribbean roles Black points out:

> Because I don’t have that tradition of the Caribbean, have not grown up in a West Indian family when I do a West Indian play I have to approach that play afresh as I would if I were trying to be a Russian in a Chekhov play.\(^{40}\)

As Black did not have the tradition of the deep south when she was growing up it is probable that she took the above approach in the creation of her characters in *From the Mississippi Delta* along with benefiting from the voice coaching sessions. Black's accurate use of American language once again serves to highlight the verbal repertoire of Talawa's black British performers in this area. As Black's natural speaking voice is recognisable for its lack of 'black influence', and her singing voice for its unique quality, her American accent in Talawa's production may appear all the more impressive as it has no link with the voices that she is known for.

In light of the talent Black displays throughout her performance the present writer questions why Black is not a major theatrical player in mainstream British theatre. It is possible to suggest that this may in part be because of her colour. Perhaps Black is perceived to be inappropriate for leading lady roles as they are still not generally played by black or mixed race actresses in the British theatrical mainstream. Another possibility is that Black could be considered to be too light skinned where directors are looking for a black actress for a part. Black's stance in aiming not to marginalise herself by doing a range of work and not only work that is black culture specific, along with the fact that she is not prepared to accept every part that she is offered to her, may also have contributed to her being seen less in mainstream acting roles than her talent deserves:

> I like the piece because it gives a very positive image of black people. As long as there are plays around like this I will want
American Plays

Johnson

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For the present writer it is important to highlight that Black can be seen here to be taking what may be regarded as an ‘unavoidable’ political stance. She is automatically political by the fact that she is a mixed race actress who carefully chooses her roles. It would appear that Black feels the work she does has an impact on wider black society and that she feels she has a responsibility not to contribute to any negative portrayals. Talawa’s production can be seen to have provided Black with the opportunity to further exhibit her talent as well as create a positive role for Talawa’s black audience in the strong female role model she present in Aint Baby.

After Black’s introduction to the protagonist Talawa’s audience is further introduced to her as an eleven-year old through the performance of black British actress Joy Richardson. Whilst the audience is sucked into the deep black south through the voice work of Pauline Black it is propelled back to black London through what the present writer regards as Richardson’s less successful attempts at the same sound.

In contrast to the work of Black, Richardson’s overall performance immediately loses credibility because of her wavering accent and the feeling that she is struggling to maintain a semblance of the correct sound. This difference in oral performance causes a constant movement from the theatrical reality created by the performers who get the voice right, to the theatrical lack of authenticity of the same world highlighted by Richardson’s
inaccurate linguistic work. In spite of this Richardson is given due credit for her performance:

Joy Richardson was able to turn a nasty cough into a character, but didn’t quite capture the Southern dialect.42

Whilst the production can be seen to be good experience for Richardson, for the present writer she is perhaps placed in an unfortunate position between two of Britain’s leading black actresses. Her lack of linguistic precision may be more obviously seen as such, due to the expertise of her fellow performers. Where Hines is able to appreciate the rest of Richardson’s performance in spite of her voice work, for the present writer the performance is difficult to value as so much of the character’s being is linked to the specificity of her oral expression. This is missing in Richardson’s performance. Consequently, the non-oral aspects of Richardson’s acting may become more difficult to identify as ‘credible’ as they are overshadowed by her lack of linguistic accuracy.

Richardson can be seen here to have the burden of accurate black theatrical representation on her. The present writer suggests that the young performer could reasonably be allowed to benefit from her early performance work by concentrating on honing her craft. This ‘luxury’ can be seen at least in part to be taken away from her as she is black and the lack of regularity with which black performers are seen on the British stage in leading roles is rare. Richardson then becomes a representative of the widest body of the black British

public each time she performs. The consequences of any misrepresentation in her performance could mean that her work is used to negatively label both herself and Talawa.

Of the three actresses in Talawa's production only Richardson had benefited from British Drama school training. The fact that she had most difficulty producing the American accent despite three years of training points to the role that Talawa is playing in developing black British performers by offering them a professional platform to work in. Additionally questions may be asked as to the relevance of Richardson's training in relation to her professional acting career.

After Richardson's first appearance the fact that her efforts are sandwiched in between two outstanding performers is highlighted by the appearance of Josette Bushell-Mingo who explains how Aint Baby became the second lady doctor. With each role Mingo adopts and the range of voices she uses for her varied characters her American accent is consistently credible. Whilst there is no available research on the techniques that Mingo used to get into character what is evident from her performance is that, whether centre stage or incidental, Mingo had developed an in depth understanding of her character both in and outside of the context of the play. Like Black, Mingo demonstrated her verbal repertoire by her accurate American accent. She was able to reveal her verbal repertoire further by exhibiting a range of American voices throughout the production. It is perhaps because of this ability to adopt various characters with easily identifiable voices that Mingo took on the majority of, and the most contrasting roles in Talawa's production.
Talawa's audience see Mingo perform almost every character that features in Aint Baby's life, as well as Aint Baby herself. Mingo, who plays a variety of male characters throughout the performance portrays the drunk mourner at Aint Baby's funeral.

From the unexaggerated deep voice that she uses and the doddering hooked stance she adopts for her character the audience are immediately able to define the obvious outer characteristics of this man. Mingo's performance of his incomprehensible speech and total drunkenness which causes him to fall into Aint baby's grave, steal the attention from anything else that is happening on the stage.

For the present writer Mingo, like her co-performer Black, demonstrates a unique ability to capture the audience. Despite the fact that many of the male character's Mingo plays can be seen to be negative because of their involvement with drugs and crime, the accuracy of Mingo's oral and physical performance generally focuses the audience on the immediate message that Holland is giving through her character rather than stoking anger at seeing black men portrayed in a negative way. Often Mingo's portrayal uses their tragedy to provide comedy. Mingo shows this particularly with the drunken old man who blurs his reality with alcohol. The tragedy that he has turned to alcohol although understood is lessened by Mingo's comic presentation of his faltering speech and stance. Whilst highlighting his tragedy, Mingo's drunk old man becomes endearing to Talawa's audience through her comic approach. For the present writer it is also possible that the fact Mingo is a woman may be seen to remove Talawa's audience from some of the tragedy of the male characters she presents. This is because Mingo's skill as a performer may become

43 Joy Richardson trained at Webber Douglas Drama School.
as equal an aspect of Talawa's audience's appreciation (after her scenes) as the despair of the situation that she has performed.

This type of praise for the performers and the production generally is not the sole opinion of the present writer. This is demonstrated by the fact that Talawa's production under Castledine's direction received nominations for the Manchester Evening News award for Best Production along with nominations for Best Actress for both Pauline Black and Josette Bushell-Mingo. Mingo won the award. Additionally, every review of the production was positive marking the piece as one of Talawa's major successes:

This, I would venture to say is the play which and the production that should at last put Yvonne Brewster's Cochrane theatre on the map.

And:

This is not just a play for these performers it is also about their lives and when they inhabit Ida Mae's world as they do here, they are transformed by it. So too, are we. An event not to be missed - and this time I really mean it.

For the present writer the first part of Woddis's comment is important because of its suggestion that the mainstream had been waiting for Talawa to prove itself. The fact that

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44 For the present discussion a selection of reviews are used to illustrate the point.
the performance she regards as the one to have made the difference is American may suggest that Talawa is well suited to this kind of work or illustrate that the mainstream had not understood, or perhaps was not as interested in Talawa’s African and Caribbean productions.

The second part of her comment may have meant more than she intended due to the insecurity that Talawa was facing at this stage with the question of the renewal of its lease and the company’s continued residency at The Cochrane. The present writer suggests that perhaps Brewster’s decision to perform *From the Mississippi Delta* at this point with this specific combination of actresses was aimed at reminding the funding bodies and a wider theatrical public that Talawa’s productions can be at least as good as its white mainstream counterparts.

Stafford Charles contributes to the positive reviews commenting:

> This is a production which can only go to strengthen the already excellent and deserved reputation which Talawa holds.\(^\text{46}\)

And McLauchlan adds:

> I will say that if you never go to the theatre, see this anyway; if you can’t afford it, save up; and if you haven’t got the time,

cancel something else.47

Whilst the strength of the last recommendation may appear to be exaggerated by its enthusiasm it gives a clear indication of the impact that Talawa’s performance had on the theatre critics. For the present writer it is significant that McLauchlan’s comment is interestingly backed in almost identical language by Morgan as it suggests that this view was not uncommon at the time, ‘Even if you are not a regular theatre-goer, you must make an exception for this latest Talawa Theatre production.’48 Morgan continues her support for the production:

...The three actresses give a passionate performance of each phase of Holland’s life and throw themselves into their roles with jubilation and complete dedication. Their individual strengths and talents work in perfect balance and the production flows with a natural ease.49

For the present writer what is clear from the above reviews is the fact that across a full range of critics the three black British female performers were given solid recognition for the artistic quality of their work. Being recognised in this way can be seen to send a clear and positive message to black theatre practitioners that wider British theatre accepts some kinds of black British theatre in its mainstream:

49 Ibid.
Just when there seems to be too much to be told in too little time, when the sheer number of characters runs the risk of incoherence the thread is always picked up by the extraordinary performances of Pauline Black, Josette Bushell Mingo and Joy Richardson.  

It can be said then that the two American productions that Talawa had performed up until this point received the best reception from the critics. The positive response to these works may also suggest that the issues and language of Talawa’s other styles of work, whilst serving an important purpose, were not perhaps as appealing to modern black British audiences or theatre critics as may have been previously perceived. The fact that the mainstream theatre critics were all positive in their appreciation of the show in a way that did not occur with any of the Caribbean or African productions merits further discussion that generally goes beyond the limits of the present thesis. For the present writer it should be noted here however, that it may be that the more favourable reviews were a result of the critics having a better understanding of the genre as American culture has a firm place on British television. Another possibility is that on a linguistic level the critics found the play easier to understand. Perhaps the critics considered the performers to be acting rather than copying the voices of their parents as they may have been perceived to be doing in the Caribbean and African plays. Or maybe the critics simply felt that they were able to write freely because the work was American and did not belong (culturally) to Talawa. Whilst it is not possible for the present writer to answer these questions it is important that they are raised to point to some of the issues that may influence mainstream writing on black art.
Finally, Talawa’s production through Holland’s earthy tale can be seen to be designed to shock as Holland herself appears to intend to by the way she introduces herself to new students at the start of each academic semester:

I’m from Greenwood Mississippi.
I’m an ex-whore and an ex-thief.
My mama ran the whorehouse.
My brothers were two town drunks.  

Prior to the American plays Talawa can be said never to have presented work to its audience with an intended shock value. Whilst some of the issues presented in *From the Mississippi Delta* may appear shocking this was not Talawa’s reason for doing the play:

This is a good play and will entertain our audience whilst giving some insight into an interesting black American life . . .
people’s lives can be interesting . . .  

Along with the interesting life that the show presented the overt discussion of sex and violence and the plight of blacks attempting to take a fighting stance against white American society, gave Talawa (at least momentarily) a more feisty and politically militant identity than many of the Caribbean plays can be seen to have done. Although the production reflected the black situation in America the response to the show suggests that

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51 Horwitz, ‘From prostitute to Playwright’, p.28.
Talawa was correct to believe that black British theatre was an appropriate forum for this straightforward language and the political issues the play presented.

For the present writer Talawa’s success in this production demonstrates the company’s determination to take risks and move black theatre into the mainstream and forefront of theatre in Britain. In Simi Horwitz’s article cited above, Dr Holland states, ‘When I was growing up I never even knew a black person had ever written a book.’ For many black Britons Talawa is the first they will see of established black theatre. Talawa’s ever-forward moving work, perhaps partly epitomised by the performance of the American plays, may encourage the growth of other black theatre companies in Britain to develop their own work and relevant contemporary voice. This will slowly erode the possibility of British blacks being able to ever remember a time when quality black theatre did not exist in Britain.

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52 Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 26 April 1996.
53 Horwitz, ‘From prostitute to Playwright’, p.27.
Flyin’ West

Talawa’s third American play and twenty-third production in total was the company’s performance of Pearle Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*. Directed by Yvonne Brewster the play ran from 5 to 28 June 1997 at The Drill Hall, London. Set in the all black town of Nicodemus Kansas in the autumn of 1898 the play tells a story of black pioneer life on the western frontier. The following discussion firstly examines the process of the present writer in producing the research package for the production as Pre-Production Researcher (including his understanding of Brewster’s intentions in doing the production), and the company’s response to the research package. Secondly, the media response to the production and the present writer’s comments on Talawa’s performance of the show on 28 June 1997 are presented.

Having researched the creative process of Talawa’s cast and Artistic Director as Performance Researcher for the production of *Beef no Chicken* the present writer had noted what appeared to be a lack of textual experience amongst the cast. This was demonstrated both by a lack of textual background knowledge and context, as well as (in some cases) a lack of understanding of the text itself. This may have been related to the Caribbean genre of the work and the fact that most actors in training do not encounter this kind of work in British drama schools. As it was not clear whether these difficulties stemmed from a lack of training/experience it could be argued that these black British actors who may not have been getting regular textual exposure needed further development in this area. As the cast of *Beef no Chicken* had responded positively to Brewster’s explanations of the background to the text and the text itself, the present writer
felt the cast of *Flyin' West*, given similar background explanations and information in a written format may see this as beneficial to their work.

As can be seen from the programme information for all Talawa productions, the company can be seen to have a body of regular actors. The present writer estimated then that at least some of the cast for *Flyin' West* would have worked with Talawa before and that an opportunity to work with understanding the text in a new way may benefit and be welcomed by the cast and Artistic Director. To this end he suggested that the cast be given a research package along with their script prior to rehearsals.

The present writer argued that in order to produce a thorough and relevant research package this important aspect of the Artistic Director's work should be left entirely in the researcher's hands. This would prevent any overlapping as the Artistic Director would not need to conduct any work in this area and would also oblige the researcher to cover all relevant themes.

From the present writer's perspective this was shown not to be an issue for Brewster who handed over this part of her work without questioning or advising the present writer on how to go about or present the research package. This in turn led the present writer to understand that he would be free to reach his own conclusions on what kind of research package would be most beneficial to Brewster and her cast. He would be able assess this after the initial stages of the pre-production research process.

54 Of the six cast members only two had not worked with Talawa before: Syan Blake as Minnie and Angie Le Mar as Fanny.
The pre-production research process began with a general meeting between Brewster and
the present writer on 1 March 1997 to discuss the themes in the play along with Brewster’s
vision of how she felt some of the play’s issues would impact on Talawa’s audience. The
meeting also served for the present writer to gain a sense of Brewster’s understanding of
the play and the enthusiasm that she had for it. It seemed that Brewster’s main concern
was that her audience should see the strength of the four black female protagonists:

When black people here complain about how hard life is
they don’t know what they’re talking about. These women
had to do everything men did and still find time to raise their
families. 55

In this light Brewster can be seen to be intentionally using theatre both didactically and
politically. Whilst her comment does not appear to be intended to incite rebellion there is
an intention to encourage black women in Britain to see themselves as people who are able
to work with and improve any situation that they may find themselves in. Whilst the
present writer agrees with Brewster’s intention it is important to comment briefly on the
kind of criticism that could be levelled at Talawa for working with a text that is perhaps
blinkerer by its main theme.

The idea of aiming at a specific group within the black community through this text could
be seen to encourage divisions within the very community it sets out to empower. For the
present writer this is demonstrated by the way the play and by extension Talawa’s
performance of it, can be seen to draw black men and women against each other. Black men feature little in the play. When they do they can be seen to be stark stereotypes. Wil, played by David Webber in Talawa’s production, is drawn as passive and shy whilst the other black man, the wife-beater Frank, played by Ben Thomas does not appear to have a single redeeming feature. Focus here does not appear to be concerned with the representation of the character as a black man but rather on how the black women are able to deal with him. The present writer questions whether Talawa’s performance of *Flyin’ West* was the best way to meet Brewster’s intention expressed above.

In addition to exploring the plight of the black pioneer frontier women there are a number of additional areas of black interest that Cleage’s play raised and that the present writer felt could be further explored as part of the background to the play in the research package. Before deciding on which areas of the play would be further studied for inclusion in the research package the present writer developed the following general aim for his work:

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56 Potential areas for relevant research for *Flyin’ West*:

- The American Civil War (1861-1865)
- The Homestead Act of 1860
- 1892 Tennessee lynching and riots
- Exodus of 1897 migration to Kansas
- Life in Nicodemus, Kansas, 1898
- Land laws of the time and farmers’ federations
- Jim Crow Laws
- Black cowboys and farmers
- The lives of those who experienced both slavery and freedom
- Views of mulatto life
- Images of black men
- Male insecurity due to lack of financial resources
- Women and politics
- Physical abuse as suffered by women
- Slavery, children and child bearing
- White land speculators
To produce a research package on *Flyin' West* that would inform Talawa's cast of all the necessary information that the performers would need to fully understand the text. Additionally, the research package would aim to support Talawa's mission statement.

This would be achieved by developing a tripartite research package that:

- Provided structured and comprehensive, general, historical and cultural information on the background of *Flyin' West* that would mean the performers would not need to do any additional research for the piece.

- Ensured the particular aspects of black history that were presented in the play were explored and presented to enhance the active building of heritage facts.

- Would encourage further exploration of the issues presented and that would point those who wanted to in the direction of how to find out more.

Working from this basis the present writer was then able to define the specific subject areas that would be used in the research package.57

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57 The research package is outlined below:

**Introduction:**
Explanation of the contents. p.ii
Outline of the play. p.iii

**Section One:**
The American Civil War. p.iv

Although the action of the play starts in 1898 the present writer felt that the research package should look briefly over the proceeding century to understand the events which lead up to, as well as the events which
It can be shown that the possible range of reasons for Talawa’s decision to perform *Flyin’ West* were many. For the Afro/Caribbean and black British performers working on a black American text (as with the African and Caribbean plays produced by Talawa) the performer is able to benefit from a theatrical experience that s/he may not otherwise get on the British stage. For the black British audience the work may expand their viewing repertoire. Additionally, performing the play would enable Talawa’s audience to become

 occurred during and immediately after the American Civil war. The key role that slavery played in the war is highlighted as it demonstrates the differing opinions of the northern and southern colonies of the United States (formed in 1783) on this issue.  
Changes to the American constitution after the Civil War that helped the advancement of blacks are outlined.  
**The Farmers Alliance**, pp.vii-ix  
This section deals with how white farmers formed the Alliance in 1877 to work together and protect themselves on their land and how as the Alliance spread across the country it included more and more black farmers as well as a Coloured Farmers Alliance in the south.  
**Section Two:**  
**Black Life In The West**, pp.x-xi.  
**General.**  
This note points to the notion of the American dream being based on the idea of owning land and how black people played a crucial and often unacknowledged role in the development of America generally and the west in particular.  
**The Homesteaders**, pp.xii-xiv.  
This discusses the two main factors that encouraged black people to go west:  
1. The Homestead Act of 1860. This offered 320 acres of land to U.S. citizens prepared to settle in the west.  
2. White supremacy in the south which led to the Exodus of 1879 and saw twenty to forty thousand blacks migrate to Kansas in the hope of owning their own homes and land.  
**Black Laws**, pp.xv-xvi.  
As black people were considered to be workhorses the laws that existed tended to work against them as is shown by the laws highlighted in this section.  
**The Black Cowboys and leading Frontier Personalities**, pp.xvi-xxi.  
The lives of the most sensational black characters from the west are detailed providing images of the personalities mentioned.  
This section highlights the achievements of the black infantry and cavalry. The information would also help the actors to acknowledge that whilst *Flyin West* celebrates the extraordinary achievements of black women, black men were also making their contribution to the development of the western frontier.  
**Black Women On The Last Frontier.**  
Here a chapter of Katz’s text is used to demonstrate the achievements of black women in the west. See:  
**Bibliography**, p.xxiv.  
The additional written material added to the package was made up of two pieces of writing:  
familiar with a lesser-known black American female playwright. Whilst the above are the suggestions of the present writer Brewster's intentions in doing the play are equally varied.

As mentioned above Brewster's central focus appeared to be to highlight the strength of the pioneer black women of the west. In addition to this Brewster (in keeping with the company's mission statement) showed a concern for her cast and audience to learn the heritage facts that are revealed in the play and hoped that they would be motivated by them. To this end Brewster asked everyone involved with the production to comment on the impact working on the production had on them. This information was then used in the publicity programme. For the present writer there is a suggestion, that as Brewster took this unprecedented step she perhaps felt that in terms of giving heritage facts Cleage's play did this more than some other Talawa productions:

...it has allowed us to explore creatively so many aspects of under-recorded Black history, attitudes and taboos as they existed in the 19th Century. It also highlighted the relevance of these issues here in multicultural Britain a hundred years later...

The performers and the production crew felt that the work had given them the opportunity to learn about and discuss the specific heritage facts presented in the play along with

In addition to the two essays attached to the end of the package a bibliography of easy to access texts is provided to encourage further personal research on the subject.

Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 1 March 1997.

Brewster, production programme of *Flyin' West*, p.7. See Talawa production archives for *Flyin' West* - publicity file.
giving them the opportunity to discuss other heritage facts more generally. The nature of
the work as managed by Talawa can be seen to have fostered an environment where the
team wanted to share other pieces of heritage information. 60

Of the actors’ comments that appeared in the production programme David Webber’s was
unique for the present writer:

Flyin’ West offers a powerful message of hope for Africans
everywhere. The sight of two strong and successful Black people,
so clearly in love is almost revolutionary in today’s theatre. I am
delighted and absolutely thrilled to be part of it. Pearl Cleage clearly
loves our people and manages to show how awesome we can be and
that the tremendous bonds of sisterhood complement and enhance the
Black man. Let us celebrate. One love. 61

Webber’s response reflects the inclusiveness that he appears to see in the play. He was
able to extract from it and his experience of performing in it that there were good things
being demonstrated about black men. This, along with his notion that the strength of the
female relationships in the play is also beneficial to black men should be taken within the
context of the character that he plays.

60 Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 12 June 1997.
61 David Webber (Wil), production programme of Flyin’ West, p.8. See Talawa production archives for
Flyin’ West – publicity file.
Through Webber’s performance Talawa’s audience see how Wil is brought into the sisters’ fold once they perceive him to be entirely harmless and on their side. He is welcomed as part of the family. On the other hand, the sisters deal with the perceived threatening behaviour of the other black man, Thomas’s Frank, by killing him. Webber’s comment appears to ignore this. Perhaps part of Webber’s enthusiasm was due to the fact that he was given the opportunity to play what may be seen as the antithesis of the negative stereotype of the black man. It is also possible that Webber did not see Thomas’s character as an entirely black man due to his mixed race heritage, and therefore was less concerned about his representation.

Comments on the impact of the show were not the sole privilege of the cast and production crew but were also welcomed from Talawa’s administrative team. These contributions were printed in the production programme alongside the others. Through these efforts Brewster can be seen to have used the play to get a documented response from those who were involved in the production at all levels. For the present writer two comments from members of the administrative team highlight the degree to which the play had impacted on them and possibly by extension those members of the black British audience who could relate to the reasons for the impact:

As much as Medieval jousting, Gothic Architecture and the six wives of Henry VIII interested me as a child, it was never going to answer a number of nagging questions. Questions like, ‘why am I the only black face in this classroom’, ‘why do schools
only teach the slavery aspect of Black history' and 'why do they keep putting me in the football team'. I learned as I went along.

A strong sense of origin and purpose helped. The understanding process would have been aided if the other children in that classroom could have taken home something positive about my heritage. *Flyin' West* redresses this and will light the touch-paper to the further learning of our roots and culture. 62

For the present writer Brewster's efforts to encourage her team to discuss the issues in *Flyin' West* can be seen to have provided some of the kind of information that would have helped Desire with those 'nagging childhood questions'. Desire's notion that this kind of information would have been beneficial to his white classmates points to the all inclusive sharing of cultural information that needs to occur if people living in a culturally diverse society are to fully understand each other. The fact that Desire was able to voice his opinion in this forum in addition to making his voice heard also created the possibility for other young black people in Talawa's audience to see that their experiences are not unique. Knowing this could help them to feel less isolated.

For Talawa's secretary/administrative support worker Sonji Clayton:

... *Flyin' West* is about knowledge, 'overstanding', fear and finally gaining the truth, a test of strength that four strong black women, pass with *Flyin'* colours. 63
As a black British woman Clayton was able (as Brewster had intended) to draw inspiration from the life achievements of the characters in the play. Clayton's stated understanding that the play is about knowledge suggests that she felt she was able to benefit from the heritage facts from within the work. Clayton had however, demonstrated a yearning for knowing more heritage facts relevant to her from the outset of Talawa's work on *Flyin' West*. When the present writer presented the research package to Talawa Clayton requested a personal copy commenting, 'I want to be able to study this and have something that I can refer back to . . . and show my friends.' The present writer suggests that had Clayton experienced more of this kind of information throughout her upbringing in England the research package may have been less important to her.

As there was no process of monitoring audience reaction to the programme put in place it is not known if audiences generally felt that they benefited from information supplied by the team on how the show had impacted on them. The fact that Brewster had chosen this method of encouraging the team to express their views meant that the audience could be influenced by these impressions before seeing the show. It is not the present writer's belief however, that she had aimed at eliciting a specific reaction from the audience before they had seen the show. The present writer suggests that Brewster had intended to make her

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62 Alf Desire, Marketing Officer for Talawa, production programme of *Flyin' West*, p.8.
63 Sonji Clayton, Secretary/Administrative support for Talawa, production programme of *Flyin' West*, p.8.
64 Brewster's intention can also be seen to have been successful by the comments made by some of the actresses:
Anni Domingo (Miss Leah) comments in the production programme, p.7,
'Flyin' West has certainly been an informative and joyous journey into the world of sisterhood. It has helped me remember and celebrate the strength, tenacity and love of Black women through the ages.'
Angie Le Mar (Fannie) comments in the production programme, p.8,
'When you know what has happened you realise that Black women and their experiences should be applauded and cherished. I question when will the backbone to the Black race ever rest! Only in peace. Coloured to black -still no changes.'
production programme as interesting as possible by incorporating an original and cast-
wide personal touch that would create interest for the production.

By choosing to do the production and actively encouraging the process of discussing the
impact of the show and additional black heritage facts, Brewster can be seen to have
intended that all those who came into contact with Talawa’s production would gain some
form of heritage information. Brewster’s approach also demonstrates how effectively
heritage facts can be disseminated through the theatre forum. For the present writer in the
case of Flyin’ West this can be seen to have been partly facilitated by the research
package.

As recording a detailed response to the research package had not been undertaken the
information that follows should be seen as the present writer’s suggestions based on what
he was able to deduce as reactions to the research package. These responses are divided
into two groups. The first looks at the responses of the Artistic Director whilst the second
discusses those of the performers.

The present writer was able to monitor Brewster’s initial response to the package through
the direct feedback that she gave to him.66 Her initial reaction of taking the package to the
administrative team and sharing its contents as an example of what she considered to be
good work highlighted to the present writer that Brewster had maintained her confidence
in the work of the researcher without reading it. Bearing in mind the comparative youth

66 The present writer was contracted to work on the research package between 1 March 1997 and 11 April
1997.
and experience of the administrative team and the researcher to Brewster, her reaction can be seen as intentionally motivating a new generation of black theatre workers. This would perhaps encourage more work.

Once Brewster had read the research package it became clear to the present writer that she had been supplied with more information than she had expected or needed for the production. This was partly demonstrated by the fact that she took the decision to use as much of it as possible in the production programme (information that could not be used in the production) by dedicating three pages to heritage facts taken from the research package. By offering the information to Talawa’s audience in this way and by not keeping it solely for the performers for whom it was initially intended, Brewster had found a further means for the dissemination of the heritage facts.

Available in this way these pages of heritage facts would possibly impact on the audience before they saw the show perhaps even more so than the above comments from the performers. This is suggested as the cold facts may have had more impact than the more personal information found in the performers’ comments. Equally, the fact that the work was now in print meant that Talawa’s audience would be able to refer to it long after the performance event.

The response to the research package from the actors was reported back to the researcher through two sources. The first was the oral reaction as mentally recorded by Brewster and then passed onto the researcher. The second was through a later discussion between one of the performers and the present writer.
Brewster pointed out that there had been two main responses from the performers. Firstly there were those who held the majority opinion that the research package had been of benefit to them. Secondly was the response of one performer who stated that the package was of no benefit to her as she was already aware of all the information it contained. She was not prepared to read through the package in her own time as she felt it would be too time consuming and she argued that time presenting the package to the cast would be better spent on rehearsing the production.

This reaction suggested to the present writer that perhaps the cast should have been surveyed before being given the research package and asked about their knowledge of the intended contents. Their responses may have enabled the researcher to produce a package that contained new areas of knowledge for the whole cast.

Brewster's feedback also pointed to the fact that the majority of the cast aimed to use the information in the research package in two ways. Firstly, to enhance their practical performance (through the deeper understanding that the work had afforded them of their characters' situation), and secondly, by using the package to gain knowledge of heritage facts. A discussion of actor Ben Thomas's experience illustrates how he was able to put the research package to use.

Thomas, a British actor of mixed race playing the part of Frank, described in the text as a light skinned black man (also of mixed race), saw the research package as:

67 Brewster verbally passed this information to the present writer throughout the rehearsal period of the show (6 May - 4 June 1997).
... serious information that helped me to know more about myself and my character. We really need to know this stuff.\textsuperscript{68}

Although Thomas has a different personality, and lived in very different circumstances to his character in \textit{Flyin'West}, he had experienced emotionally comparable situations (induced by both black and white sections of British society) to those his character experiences in Talawa's production. These situations tended towards a tacit suggestion that he was different. Thomas attributes these experiences to his colour.

He explains that although he was never aware of any hostility from the white community he lived in he was aware of their perception of his difference. Whilst he did not feel different he could see that he looked different. In relation to the black community Thomas again was not aware of any hostility towards him and although as a child he had not lived amongst a black community he knew that he belonged (at least in part) to it. He could see that he looked similar but again was aware of others' perception that he was different. Thomas noted that he felt this perception of difference cast on him more from the black community once he was living in London where he felt he was seen by them to be living outside the black community.\textsuperscript{69}

Thomas maintains that both the play and the research package however, helped him to begin to understand some of the kind of black history that can be seen to have encouraged a divide between black and mixed race people. He had not wanted or needed to choose to

\textsuperscript{68} Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 8 December 1998.  
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
be on one side or the other though his formative family life experiences saw him living happily within a white community. Through working on *Flyin’ West* and studying the research package he could see how this era of black history had forced people of mixed race to identify either with the black struggle or to aim to pass for white and enjoy some of the many privileges of that community. The black perception (as explored in *Flyin’ West*) that being of mixed race was seen as advantageous partly explained to Thomas some of the difference that he felt the black community saw in him:

> I think there is still a school of thought that sees lighter skinned black people as more acceptable and that doesn’t get addressed very much.\(^70\)

As he had not been equipped with black heritage facts in his younger years gaining this specific knowledge through his career as a professional actor with Talawa can be seen then to have helped to put some of his earlier experiences into a new perspective. Thomas felt that the wider knowledge he gained on the American Civil War also helped to fully contextualise Cleage’s work and this aspect of black history:

> I now knew how black people got to this part of America.

> None of the films that I ever saw about Cowboys and Indians ever included any black people.\(^71\)

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\(^{70}\) Anon, ‘*Flyin’ West*’, *Attitude*, June 1997, p.38. The writer quotes Oscar Watson who was Talawa’s Administrator at the time of the production.

\(^{71}\) Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 8 December 1998.
For black performers in Britain unless they are performing in a black production it is unlikely that they will receive positive heritage facts as a normal part of their stage work. This is in stark contrast to white performers on the British stage who are likely to receive heritage facts from most productions that they are involved in. White performers also have the luxury of being able to enjoy the performance of what may be seen as negative heritage facts because there is a wealth and range of work for them. A white performer could enjoy the role of a demonic slave owner as he could fully explore the character without running the risk of limiting his career. A black performer may not be so happy to play the slave as this could cause him to be type cast where other black performers refuse such parts in a bid to discontinue the portrayal of black people being seen only in submissive roles.

This points to the need to create more black and colour blind work that would ease the burden on contemporary black theatre practitioners who may feel a need to give only positive information about the black characters (or communities) they portray. For the present writer this type of professional approach to their work can partly be seen as a reaction from black theatre practitioners to the generally negative mainstream theatrical offerings on black life.

In terms of his role in *Flyin' West* Thomas can be seen to have used his new knowledge of the pioneer black women on the western frontier to understand the plight of the light skinned black man he played. With this knowledge he was able to delve deeper into the psyche of his character:
The research package made it easier for me to understand the motivations of the women around Frank. Whilst he waited for his inheritance from his white father, these women were trying to get on with life. You can see why they acted the way they did when he tried to take their land away from them.\textsuperscript{72}

Thomas being of mixed race and playing a bad character of mixed race in Talawa's production potentially presented the issue of whether the role helped to continue or develop a negative stereotype. For Thomas this was not a concern as ‘It is rare to see the bad guy being portrayed as such because he is of mixed race.’\textsuperscript{73} This is however, commonly the case for black male characters. A possible interpretation of Thomas's comment is that he feels comfortable with a range of work. This may also imply that his experiences are different and perhaps generally more positive to other darker black British actors and darker black men generally in Britain. In this regard Thomas's view can be seen to be akin to the white actors who have the luxury of playing any role without their work appearing to be a reflection of all white men.

The reality however, is that his colour does not allow him this same kind of freedom. This is reflected in the fact that Thomas's work in black theatre has seen him playing leading male parts in some of the most prestigious plays of the English canon. In mainstream theatre this has not always been his experience. For the present writer whilst Thomas's talent is not in question it is significant that mainstream British theatre has not used his

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
ability in the same way as black British theatre. Perhaps Thomas's mixed race status has been of benefit to him in black theatre but a disadvantage in securing him leading roles in the mainstream.

An additional factor in determining Thomas's performance work as demonstrated in *Flyin West* can be seen to be his voice. Thomas is able to work with Shakespeare and other English classics with the same ease as his white counterparts. This should not be so surprising as he was born and raised in Britain and is an actor. Through Talawa's productions Thomas has shown himself to be better skilled in this area than many of his black contemporaries and consequently has played many of the classical leading roles in Talawa's repertoire. It is also his voice however, that has contributed to his lack of presence in a single one of Talawa's Caribbean productions. Despite being half Jamaican having had little exposure to this voice Thomas feels unable to reproduce the voice with a sufficient degree of accuracy for performance. For his performance in *Flyin' West* however, he was able to produce a convincing American voice having had no parental or cultural influences in this area. For the present writer Thomas's work indicates that he cannot be put into any hard and fast category, particularly of the type that may aim to stereotype him as a black male.

Whilst Thomas felt strongly that he had gained on both a personal and a professional level from the research package the present writer feels some of this notion is based on the fact that Thomas was open to the additional information. He had not anticipated it would be of

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74 Ibid.
use to him on a personal level and initially only saw the package as helping him with his work.\footnote{Ibid.}

Additionally, Thomas was able to learn about the laws of the time that actively discriminated against blacks making him question what these laws would mean to his mixed race character and by extension himself. The present writer suggests that Thomas’s effort was enhanced by the fact the production did not deal purely with black and white but significantly with people of mixed race. It was about him. It is not impossible that his response should be mirrored by later generations of mixed race performers where a production specifically highlights an aspect of their heritage. For the present writer this is an area that should be addressed in black British theatre as more and more black Britons become more culturally mixed but remain defined wholly as part of the black British community. Specific heritage facts should perhaps not be presented to those of mixed race as a by-product of other cultural facts as this could be to the exclusion of another essential part of their being.

Although the research package was used by the performers to varying degrees and heavily used in the publicity programme for the production it was used in a limited way with the performers. This can be demonstrated by the fact that it was briefly introduced to the cast at their first rehearsal and handed out for them to read in their own time. The package was then disassociated with the rest of the rehearsal process apart from where it was used to help explain the subtext and give further evidence (anecdotal or otherwise) of events in the text.
The present writer believes that the package could have been made better use of by sending it to the cast prior to rehearsals. This would have given them the opportunity to question the package and arrive at the first rehearsal well informed. Additionally, running an activity based workshop as part of the rehearsal process on the issues raised in the package and the play could have helped the performers to develop a thorough and rapid understanding of the themes that they were working on. It is important to remember however, that Talawa had the innovation and saw the practical need for the use of such a research package and in future may consider working with this type of information in different ways to enhance each artist’s performance.

The precise degree to which the research package benefited the final performance of the artists in *Flyin’ West* is unknown as steps were not taken from the outset to measure this result. This is explained by the fact that the concept of the research package had never been devised to measure performance but to aid performers with acquiring background information to their text. The performance itself however, (and archival video recording) stand as a marker of the final product achieved.

The following discussion of Talawa’s performance of *Flyin’ West* is divided into two parts looking firstly, at the public response that the production received from the critics and secondly at the present writer’s comments on Talawa’s performance of the show on 28 June 1997.
The response of the critics can be grouped into three types: those that avoid mention of the production in their writing, those that dislike it and those which celebrate it. Of those that avoid discussing the actual production this seems to be because their intention is to highlight another area of the work. This is demonstrated by Winsome Hines in *The Voice* and by an anonymous writer for *The Stage*.

Hines's first article is entirely dedicated to one of the lead performers, Syan Blake (Minnie). For the present writer this is due to the fact that Blake (at the time) may have been seen as one of Britain's up and coming leading black performers due to her role as Frankie in the BBC's *Eastenders*. The article focuses more on Blake's ability to cope with her new role in the public eye than her role as battered wife in *Flyin' West*. When Hines comments on the play in a later article it is only to provide a brief description of the action. A similar focus is evident in the write up of the production in *The Stage*. In this article the writer's entire attention is also placed on a black British celebrity rather than any aspect of the production itself. On this occasion the artist is stand-up comic Angie Le Mar. The present writer suggests that the Artistic Director may have taken a chance on working with well-known names as she may have felt that:

- Talawa could benefit from the publicity.
- Talawa might see an increase in audience attendance.

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If these were Talawa’s intentions the company did not appear to have benefited from this action. This can be demonstrated by the fact that a third of the reviews and articles on the production dedicated their whole piece to the above two performers with only the merest mention of Talawa’s production. Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that audience attendance was any higher than for previous productions. Whilst employing these performers did not give Talawa the recognition that it was perhaps seeking, the articles cannot be seen to have done harm to the company by giving positive publicity to the performers concerned. Conversely some of the negative reviews can be seen to have been attempting to do harm to Talawa and the company’s work:

Unfortunately, the play is as slow as an arthritic snail in an advanced state of depression. The pace may evoke for you the laid-back atmosphere of a sun-baked cotton field . . . or it may just send you to sleep. Given the important matters at the heart of the work, that is a very great shame. 79

The present writer notes the critic’s view that the pace is slow but the play has potential. What makes it slow? What is it about Talawa’s performance that makes the critic suggest it has potential? Whilst the present writer believes that critics must have the right to comment honestly on the work they critique they should also demonstrate a fair sense of responsibility by explaining their assertions which may otherwise, and unfairly harm a company’s reputation.

78 Anon, ‘Jokes are on hold for now’, Stage, 19 June 1997, p.10.
James Christopher in addition to being more scathing than McPherson can be seen to be demonstrating a lack of understanding of Talawa’s work:

Yvonne Brewster has misspent most of her directing career trying to turn messages about black empowerment into frontline theatre. She must imagine that her stilted productions have been dropping rednecks on their knees for 20 odd years. Let’s get real. This is the Drill Hall, the cultural epicentre of the politically correct. To all but the converted Pearl Cleage’s ‘Flyin’ West’ is not news it is worthy rubbish.80

Christopher’s comments can be seen to suggest that messages promoting black advancement, or shows depicting historical events that do so should not make mainstream theatrical productions. As the critic has the power to comment in an influential public forum on work that is representative of non-mainstream aspects of British culture, this work should be at least partly understood by the critic for its relevance to the section of the population that it primarily aims to serve. Like McPherson above, Christopher makes assertions that he does not justify. He offers no explanation as to how he knows what Brewster imagines the effects of her work to be, or how he knows who is going to think the production is ‘rubbish’. This kind of unqualified criticism can be dangerous to Talawa precisely because it comes from the mainstream press that Talawa needs in order to access a wider British audience. Christopher’s comments also hint at a feeling of personal irritation towards both Brewster and her work (not just for her production of Flyin’ West
but for the company’s work generally). With this in mind the present writer questions whether a critic working from this starting point is able to make a fair judgement of Talawa’s work.

The present writer also questions the starting point when Cavendish comments:

> What should offer a powerful conflict between people who have been driven to extremes, becomes a simplistic stand-off between a demonic wife-beater and women who seem to spend more time celebrating their strength than minding the crops.  

There is a suggestion that Cavendish has not recognised the value that an oppressed people may put on celebrating the strengths and achievements of those that have gone before them and who have helped them to get to where they are today. For Talawa this kind of representation is an important aspect of the company’s work as it offers the black British audience specific cultural information.

With this lack of sensitivity from a section of the mainstream press to Talawa’s work it is perhaps unlikely that such critics would be willing to find something good about the company. The present writer suggests that those whose opinions must be considered perhaps more seriously then are those who are ready to embrace this kind of performance work without seeing it as unnecessary or perhaps even as a threat.

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In the case of the newspaper critics this is mostly demonstrated by the non-mainstream/specialist, and less powerful arm of the press and highlights an affinity between the non-mainstream theatre and press. It is no surprise that the black press is supportive of the production:

What holds the action together, apart from the quality of the writing, is Brewster’s excellent stage direction.

And:

Talawa theatre has been going for ten years and on the strength of this production, it should keep going pioneering Black European theatre for many more.\(^{82}\)

What is most notable here is the difference in perception between the black writer and the white mainstream writers of the same piece of work. This difference is perhaps due to differing expectations that will have been partly formed by each writer’s past experience of British theatre generally. For the black writer the appreciation of Brewster’s work may be partly due to the fact that she is bothering to do the work at all and therefore catering to a group that may otherwise be neglected. The fact that Brewster’s quality and style of work are also praised here may suggest that this writer has a clear understanding of what it is Brewster is trying to achieve and is able to assess the degree to which she has been

\(^{82}\) Uju Aslika, ‘Flyin’ West to freedom’, *Journal*, 18-24 June 1997. The page number of the review is unavailable. Archives of the *Journal* are housed at the newspaper section of London’s British Library for 1993 only. The *Journal* collapsed in 1999 and no public archival records have been kept. Former features writer Michael Cave is not aware of any archival records to date – 10 April 2001. The present writer possesses a copy of the review without the page number.
successful in this aim. Brewster can be seen then to be pleasing her primary target audience.

Perhaps for Talawa to reach and have a similar impact in the mainstream, the mainstream need to expand their expectations of British theatre to genuinely include more culturally diverse work as produced by the recognised experts in each area. For the present writer part of the problem of Talawa’s work not receiving positive recognition from the mainstream is in part due to the nature of the work being both black and British. If the work were one or the other theatrical styles and themes rooted in the theatrical histories of either Africa, Britain or the Caribbean could be expected. The fact that this genre is a comparatively new and developing phenomenon may mean that whilst black Britons welcome it as it progresses and matures, their white counterparts may need to come to terms with the existence of the genre before being able to appreciate it fully.

Whilst this may be the case for some mainstream British theatre critics not all should be assumed to have the same opinion, level of interest or understanding of black British theatre. Thaxter comments, ‘The result is a witty hugely enjoyable melodrama.' For the present writer it is the anonymous comment in the Big Issue however, that seems to have fully understood at least one of the messages to be taken from Talawa’s performance:

The Talawa Theatre Company addresses the difficult questions of cultural identity and of the women’s struggle to survive in a harsh and unforgiving frontier land. It certainly puts paid to the
Spice Girls’ claims to have invented girl power.\textsuperscript{84}

Deciding which group of the contrasting above reviews best represented Talawa’s production would have been impossible had the present writer not (along with watching various showings of the company’s archival video performance) witnessed Talawa Theatre Company’s final performance of *Flyin’ West* at London’s Drill Hall on 28 June 1997. From this live performance he was able to gauge the general effect of the performance on the audience as well as develop his own opinion of Talawa’s production.

The Drill Hall was filled to eighty percent capacity and the ticket paying audience were one hundred percent black.\textsuperscript{85} What was apparent to the present writer was a readiness on the part of the audience to react to Talawa’s performance. This was displayed at any high point by mutterings, comments, sighs and laughter. For the present writer this behaviour was epitomised by a lady on his left who appeared to want to share her theatrical experience at various points throughout the performance. This was particularly the case for scenes that either showed or made reference to the domestic violence being suffered by Blake’s Minnie, and ultimately when Thomas’s Frank enjoyed eating the poisoned apple pie:

\begin{quote}
Good, Good, Good, that’s all I can say, they did the best thing with him. He didn’t deserve any better than that.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[84] S.K., ‘Flyin’ West’, *Big Issue*, 2-8 June 1997, p.32.
\item[85] The white members of the audience were known to the present writer as Drill Hall staff.
\item[86] Voice of audience member at Talawa’s performance of *Flyin’ West*, 28 June 1997.
\end{footnotes}
Smiling, the lady then apologised to the present writer. The fact that this audience member had become overtly involved in the show was neither a new experience at a Talawa performance specifically or in black theatre generally.\(^{87}\) Where what may be seen as what the present writer refers to here as a black British 'dilemma' appearing to assert itself was in the fact that the lady was apologising in case she had disturbed the present writer's viewing. Her tentative apology demonstrated that she was not sure whether she had acted appropriately or not. She can be seen to have been exhibiting her natural and generally accepted reaction in black theatre, mixed with her knowledge of the fact that the company is British and may perhaps expect a less vocal reaction. She may also have seen the present writer as reserved and could have been reacting entirely to her perception of him. Her reaction however was not unique, and as this behaviour was not objected to it appeared to be generally understood by the wider audience as a reasonable way of responding. Such reactions indicated to the present writer that the audience had been drawn into and were enjoying the performance. Unless all of the other audiences were less involved the present writer questions why this positive audience reaction went unmentioned by all of the critics. It is possible that for the black press the reaction may have been considered to be normal and therefore not worthy of mention whilst for the mainstream press the reactions may have been interpreted as a disturbance.

For the present writer Talawa had achieved a high standard of performance overall. For him the production held what he has come to recognise as some of the physical hallmarks of a Talawa show. This is in part due to the fact that designer Ellen Cairns has created over seventy percent of the sets for Talawa, including *Flyin' West* and on each occasion has

\(^{87}\) See Chapter Two and the discussion of black theatrical forms and audience participation.
developed an ambience of the main themes of the play through her minimalist designs. The sparse two-tiered set for this production left ample space for Talawa's performance. As Talawa toed the 'conventional' theatrical line and did not introduce any physical special effects, sound effects, or inappropriately elaborate theatre forms or costumes to the production the audience were left to focus entirely on the actors' performances.

For any audience member who follows Talawa's work the fact that many of the actors' faces were recognisable from previous Talawa shows was immediately evident. The present writer questioned how versatile these actors would prove to be. As the majority of Talawa's work has been of the Caribbean genre many of the performers had taken part in this kind of work demonstrating that they were able to work with at least the semblance of a Caribbean voice. In *Flyin' West* all of the performers with previous experience of Talawa demonstrated that they were able to give a convincing performance using an American voice and thus demonstrated some versatility with their use of verbal repertoire.

As with *From the Mississippi Delta* the performers in *Flyin' West* received voice coaching. The sessions were delivered by Claudette Williams and may have contributed to the oral success of the performers. There is however, no documentation in Talawa's archival files of the voice sessions that were led by Williams and no indication of the starting point the performers were working from. The present writer is only able to comment then on the end result that demonstrates (as seen in previous productions) that Talawa's performers generally appeared to have little difficulty in reproducing an appropriate American voice.

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88 Claudette Williams had provided dialect coaching for Talawa's production of *Beef no Chicken.*
For the present writer it was the performances of Ben Thomas and Angie Le Mar that were most memorable. Ben Thomas as Frank (in addition to demonstrating a credible American voice) showed more versatility and theatrical depth than the rest of Talawa’s cast. His performance can be seen to have been a brave endeavour as he was cast in the role of the outsider and playing to an audience who may also have regarded both Thomas’s character and Thomas the actor as such. His outsider status defined by his mixed race roots, as discussed above, will also have given the mixed race members of the audience the experience of seeing a portrayal of a perceived aspect of themselves (although negative), represented on the British stage. The strength of Thomas’s performance created a discernible hatred from the audience throughout each of his appearances. Thomas managed to display a detestable arrogance and dislike of black people with every movement he made and phrase he uttered. For the present writer the critics do not appear to have appreciated the skill of Thomas’s performance as little or no mention is made of his work in the reviews. Conversely the performance of Angie Le Mar (who lacked the skill and depth displayed by Thomas) received considerably more press attention although little reference was made to the details of her actual performance.

As Angie Le Mar is known and respected as a stand-up comic it was perhaps expected that she would be equally entertaining in Flyin’ West. It is also possible that some audience members may have assumed that the play would be a comedy because she was in it. Her popularity within her usual performance genre may also have encouraged high performance expectations in this new forum. For the present writer Le Mar’s initial entry
on stage put all questions on her acting ability to rest as three central factors of her performance became apparent.

Firstly, Le Mar was unable to produce any kind of believable American voice:

*Although the play is set in the American West, Angie Le Mar’s accent brings you down South with a jolt,*

*South London, that is.*

This instantly took away from the credibility of her character Fannie.

Secondly, Le Mar’s lack of stage acting experience was shown by the way she stumbled through her lines and moved around the stage as if following specific directions she had memorised. Whilst Le Mar is skilled and accustomed to having a stage and audience to herself her lesser stage acting ability was highlighted in the company of others who have dedicated themselves to this area of performance.

Thirdly, Le Mar exhibited an embarrassing lack of confidence throughout the entire performance. This may have stemmed from some of the following: Possibly Le Mar felt under pressure knowing that her popularity and skill as a stand-up comic went before her. She may also have been aware that her lack of acting ability and experience showed. Importantly, prior to accepting the role Brewster had commented to the present writer, ‘I

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am trying to get Angie Le Mar for this but she can't decide if she wants to do it or not. Perhaps Le Mar was aware of her shortcomings in this area.

In spite of the above Talawa's audience responded to her performance with what may be described as compassion. Seemingly aware that the role was perhaps beyond her, there was as a feeling of support for Le Mar from the audience. This was demonstrated by the audience's focus when she spoke. The audience seemed somehow to be willing her on. Additionally, there were no mutterings during or after her appearances as occurred during other parts of the performance. This also confirmed to the present writer that the mutterings were a positive sign.

For the present writer the audience seemed to be treating Le Mar like a close friend. This was perhaps a testament to her popularity but may also have indicated that black British audiences, in a bid to support black theatre, are prepared to see the positive in what is presented primarily for the black British theatre-going community. This may also indicate the extent to which contemporary black audiences are ready for theatre that is relevant to them.

Talawa's performance of the American plays discussed throughout this chapter can be seen as a multiple achievement. In addition to highlighting some of the versatility of the black talent available to contemporary British theatre and providing training in this genre

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90 Comment by Yvonne Brewster to David Johnson at Talawa offices London, 1 March 1997 after initial discussions on *Flyin' West*.
there are three further achievements that the present writer feels Talawa’s work in this
genre demonstrates.

Firstly, the fact that Talawa took the risk of introducing this genre to its audience and
made what the present writer regards as an uncalculated commitment to the presentation of
this kind of work demonstrates the company’s innovative approach to its artistic
commitment. Secondly, the performance of the American plays show Talawa continuing
to recognise the widespread needs of both its diverse black audience and its developing
mainstream followers. Thirdly, the work points to Talawa’s determination to produce
work that it regards as quality writing. This approach may also lessen the possibility of the
company being easily marginalised by the mainstream.

Finally, the work that Talawa Theatre Company has produced in presenting work in the
American genre, points to an artistic and managerial flexibility that perhaps partly
accounts for the company’s longevity to date. Additionally, the work highlights the
company’s awareness of the need to move forward in its performance work, whilst
continually demonstrating its commitment to its mission statement. With this in mind the
present writer feels that the possibility of the company continuing to produce American
work presenting further heritage facts from a range of perspectives is great. Due to the
comparative positive mainstream response to the American plays the present writer
estimates that Talawa’s future mainstream successes are likely to come from work in this
area. As Talawa continues to perform this genre its expertise will develop and may
ultimately see the company moving into additional genres of performance work. With time
this may see the company being regarded as able to accurately represent a range of cultures in performance without being limited to those with an Afro/Caribbean heritage.
CHAPTER SIX

ENGLISH PLAYS

Chapter Six aims to highlight some of what Talawa Theatre Company can be seen to have achieved through its performance of English plays. Additionally, as seen with the previous two chapters, the present writer’s analysis of the productions also illustrates Talawa’s commitment to its tripartite mission statement.

This chapter is divided into two parts as follows:

Part One - The Genre

This section aims to provide a backdrop to Talawa’s work in this area and is divided into three parts:

- No place for blacks within the oral language of the traditional British stage.

- Understanding the genre within the context of contemporary black British theatre.

- An introduction to Talawa’s productions in this genre through a brief analysis of the company’s productions of *Anthony and Cleopatra, King Lear* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore.*
Part Two - The Plays

The plays that are discussed in this section are dealt with in chronological order of performance. Firstly is Talawa's performance of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*. Four areas are discussed:

- Talawa's initial foray into this genre and the company's aims in doing the play.
- Audience and media responses to the production.
- How can contemporary blacks play white Victorians?
- The language of the text versus the colour of the performers.

The second play to be discussed is Talawa's performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Four areas are discussed:

- Talawa's aims in doing the play.
- Audience and media responses to the production.
- The language of the text versus the colour of the performers.
- Playing Othello - The Actors' perspective.
Part One - The Genre

‘And then to summon riffraff to mock my mother tongue.’

Both whilst Britain was a leading colonial power and for decades after colonial rule had ended the oral language for British stage performance was principally the voice of the wealthy British upper middle classes. This was the voice of an élite group that was and remains powerful in British theatre, literature and education. The upper middle classes used the reference points of their own existence to provide dramatic entertainment for each other. Speech forms that did not meet this standard were not generally used centre stage.

Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe demonstrate the importance of language in justifying how the speakers of less popular forms may be treated. In the case they cite those who are perceived to use the incorrect language forms are also considered less worthy of living. Whilst not using the specific oral language of the British theatre has probably never resulted in death, performers who would not, or could not produce the required sound could expect to have a less active performance life than those who did.

It is perhaps the speech of black performers that has been most harshly treated in opposition to the British stage ‘standard’. Negative opinions of speech produced by black people can be seen to have been in existence for centuries as is demonstrated by the work

of writers in the 1600s who sought to reduce black people to a subhuman level by likening their speech to that of animals.\(^4\) Whilst such thoughts were prevalent there was probably no healthy place for blacks in 'serious' British performance. It was not merely the sound of the language that caused it to be perceived as 'animalistic' but notions surrounding the physical blackness of the people who spoke it that suggested blacks were less human than whites.

Where it was apparent that a black person could produce the 'standard' speech of her/his white counterparts writers in the same period (1678) seemed to need to explain this. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, is described:

> His face was not of that brown, rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony, or polish'd Jett. His Eyes were the most awful, (impressive) that cou'd be seen, and very piercing; the White of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His Nose was rising and *Roman*, instead of *African*, and flat. His Mouth, the finest shap'd that could be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips which are so natural to the rest of the *Negroes*.\(^5\)

Only people with European features were believed then capable of producing European 'standard' speech. This notion would help keep black people from the British stage. In

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\(^4\) Ibid. 'In 1634, Sir Thomas Herbert suggested that Africans and apes mated with each other, the evidence of this being that African speech sounded 'more like that of apes than men...their language is rather apishly than articulately founded'.

\(^5\) pp. 272-273, Book of Judges, Chapter 12, verses 4 - 6.
addition to the negative stereotypes surrounding the physical appearance of black people it can be shown how historically the general negative connotations surrounding the word black may also have contributed to the negative status black people and their speech have received. Fryer demonstrates how the word black negated anything it preceded.  

Although a negative attitude to things black may have prevailed from at least as early as the sixteen hundreds a black presence in British theatre can still be proven to have existed prior to and during this period. This is seen perhaps most obviously in Shakespeare's Othello. Whilst the character of Othello is perhaps the clearest example of an historical black character on the British stage, for the present writer the work of the black actor Ira Aldridge some two hundred years later can be seen as the real life historical equivalent.  

Despite this historical black presence on the British stage and the eloquence of both Othello and Aldridge, when black performers were introduced to the British and colonial stages it was generally because their language and culture were to be used to heighten their baseness and perceived lack of intelligence. This would then justify their lowly position in society.

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7 Aldridge emerged in the early 1830s. He is believed to have acted with the African Theatre in New York, which was established around 1820. The theatre was also known as the Brown's theatre, named after the founder Mr Brown who had been a steward on a Liverpool liner. His theatre developed from the 'bruckins' and 'tea meetings' he held. The 'bruckins' and 'tea meetings' are discussed in Errol Hill's, The Jamaican Stage 1655-1900: A Profile of Colonial Theatre (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), pp. 253-257 and pp.257-261 respectively. Although the entertainment was aimed at the black gentry it also became popular with whites. Aldridge’s life and work is discussed by Herbert Marshall and Midlred Stock in Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian (London: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1958), pp.31 and 36 and pp.40-43.  
8 This is seen in the following texts: Richard Cumberland, The West Indian (Perth: Morison and Son, 1771), and Bickestaffe, The Padlock, (Cork: Anon., 1770).
Until the late 1960s this meant performing servile roles with little in terms of speech. This treatment of black performers can be seen as an act of oppression that served to instil the notion that these were the only roles they were believed capable of occupying in society. Perhaps they were not shown as speaking because society did not want to hear their voice. For the present writer any acknowledgement that their voice was heard would perhaps force wider society to deal with a section of its populace that it was choosing to ignore. Additionally, if society listened to the message it would then have to respond to it.

Contemporary black theatre practitioners can be seen to have had few choices if they wished to work on the British stage. They could either accept the inherited notions of the mainstream that would on the whole not make for an active career, or they could create their own theatre. Talawa can be shown to have done the latter. Whilst creating its own work Talawa can be seen to have felt comfortable to work within the British traditional canon.

In light of the fact that ‘Shakespeare’s achievements have been more consistently recognized, and throughout the Western world he has come to be regarded as the greatest dramatist ever,’ it can be expected that any British theatre company would wish to do his work. Talawa’s resolve to work in this area can also be seen to have stemmed from the fact that, ‘The young Yvonne was sent to a smart boarding school. St.Hilda’s Diocesan, in

9 Interview with Earl Cameron by David Johnson, Cameron’s London home, 28 May 1997.
Kingston. There she developed what was to become a lifelong passion for European and British theatre.¹¹

In the view of the present writer Talawa's decision to work in this area (in addition to demonstrating the company's commitment to its mission statement), can be seen to have impacted positively on both mainstream and black British theatre by:

- Vigorously challenging perceptions of black theatre as English classics may not be seen as the obvious choice of work for a black theatre company. Talawa can be seen here to be commenting that black theatre should not be limited to the performance of black plays alone and that it accepts the British classics as an important part of its varied performance history.

- Affording black actors (who may miss out on performing within the British classical genre because they may be deemed as inappropriate because of their colour) the opportunity to work professionally within the genre. This provides black actors with training in this area. As Talawa has consistently used white actors in the performance of its classical productions it can also be seen to be providing a training ground for white performers working within the genre in a black setting. This practical study of black theatre is presently unavailable to blacks and whites alike in British drama schools.

Expanding the language of black theatre to incorporate the ‘highest’ standards of British theatrical ‘standard’ speech.

Approaching the texts from a new perspective. The fact that plays that were probably not intended for black actors and are later performed by them can be seen to automatically give the work a new meaning. This is both because of the colour of the actors that may affect the meaning of the text,\(^\text{12}\) and the new context of black performers doing ‘white’ work in Britain.

For the present writer a further achievement is in the fact that Talawa has not aimed to give its productions of the classics a black stance and therefore can be seen not to have entered into the realms of stereotypical black theatre. The notion that Talawa should choose to perform British classical scripts as they are, may appear to go against the criteria that black theatre companies often have to meet in order to secure funding.\(^\text{13}\) Additionally, it may be queried why it is that a ‘black’ theatre company should choose to do work that may not be stereotypically representative of them. Talawa, had after all been given funding to create work that was essentially written, performed and directed by black people. In this regard performances of the classics may have been seen as not strictly meeting funding criteria and presumably could have presented Talawa with some opposition. Brewster presents a further argument that may explain opposition from the mainstream, ‘People only act funny about Black actors playing Shakespeare because it’s

\(^{12}\) This is seen in Part Two in the discussion of Talawa’s productions of both The Importance of Being Earnest and Othello.

\(^{13}\) See discussion in Chapter Three of Talawa’s funding.
England's greatest export. It's like having a black woman playing the queen and I don't seen anything wrong with that.  

Additionally, Brewster can be seen to have felt that this genre of work was an intrinsic part of her heritage and that of her company and could therefore be seen to be meeting all funding criteria:

Actors who worked with her on Shakespeare plays blithely recall how she would haul out from nowhere a classical painting depicting images of black figures - in order to hammer home the fact of black people's participation in European civilisation and art.

For the present writer it is reasonable that there should be expectations on Talawa's work. These expectations would perhaps be most beneficial to the company and the audience alike if they focused on the development of the quality of the company's work. If Talawa is to work within the remit of what the mainstream regards as suitable for 'black' theatre, and thereby avoid the classics, there is a risk that the company's work will be narrow only performing work that has the most obvious black link. The present writer suggests that Talawa's performance of classical work is a relevant demonstration of the company's need to create and break its own artistic boundaries as well as to demonstrate that black theatre is all encompassing.

Through the performance of such work Talawa can be seen to have been committed to making a difference by taking the plunge for inclusiveness in all aspects of British theatre. This effort can be taken to mean that Talawa is aiming to build its repertoire and give black performers the opportunity to play great leading roles. For the present writer Talawa is not aiming to create its own version of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). This can be demonstrated by the fact that Talawa has only produced a total of five productions in this genre in its fifteen-year history.¹⁶

Of the five productions that are featured in this genre for the purpose of this study two are discussed in depth in the second part of this chapter. The remaining three works are discussed below. The present writer’s decision to discuss the following three productions to a lesser degree is twofold:

- Talawa’s archival records, materials and documentation of the work (including video resources) are scarce.

- Given the word limit and nature of the present study it was felt that in depth discussion of The Importance of Being Earnest and Othello was more beneficial to the overall work.

¹⁶ In order of performance the productions that Talawa has produced in this area are: Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest (1989), Shakespeare’s Anthony and Cleopatra (1991) and King Lear (1994), John Ford’s ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore (1995), and Shakespeare’s Othello, 1997.
The following discussion of Talawa’s productions of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* are used here to demonstrate the present writer’s notions of Talawa’s achievements in this area by pointing to both the range of Talawa’s work in this genre, and the company’s general approach to the productions.

Talawa’s production of *Anthony and Cleopatra* ran from 16 May to 15 June 1991, and was the first all black production in the available documented history of British theatre. According to Mark Borkowski’s press release for Talawa:

> Stagings of Shakespeare’s work with black casts in the past have been rare: in the 1930s, Orson Welles directed the famous ‘voodoo’ *Macbeth*: in the 1970s, there was ‘Umabatha’, the Zulu version of the play, and in the early 80s, the National Theatre staged a mixed cast, ‘Measure for Measure’.¹⁷

For the present writer, this kind of press release helped to provide a build up to the show that could have added pressure to what was perhaps already an insecure moment in the company’s performance history. At the pre-performance stage of its production of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Talawa was in no position to gauge what the response to its production would be.

This first foray into Shakespeare is perhaps noteworthy because of the lack of 'black voice' in the production. Talawa can be seen not to have used its unique 'blackness' as a central part of its performance. It can be argued that it was not necessary for the company to do so because of the fact that the performers' skin colour was obvious to the audience and bore no relevance to the performance. For the present writer the fact that Talawa did not feel that it had to become involved in the presentation of what may have been artistically expected of the company had at least one serious potential consequence. Talawa ran the risk of limiting its audience. White audiences may not have wished to see black performers do what they can see white performers doing all the time, whilst black audiences may not have wished to see work that they may feel does not represent them.

One reaction from the mainstream press accurately points to what the present writer regards as the unfair burden placed on black theatre practitioners to provide what may be seen as unlimited exoticism:

It may be that we have rapidly learnt to expect too much of our black theatre companies. We have come to look for newly exciting, uninhibited acting styles – an anticipation which in itself may rest upon stereotypes – and less naturalistic staging which we think in some vague way might draw upon ritual. More reasonably we hope that their approach to the European classics will produce radically new perspectives and references
There would be a further lack of ‘surprise’ by the fact that Brewster had decided not to use any kind of oral Afro/Caribbean voice to stamp the company’s ‘blackness’ all over the play. The speech produced was a clear attempt to use the established voice of the RSC. Bearing in mind that none of the actors or director were RSC trained the attempt to copy the style can be seen to have been used because Talawa felt that this was the appropriate voice for the performance of Shakespeare. As no voice training was provided the actors’ job can be seen to have been particularly difficult. Talawa was not doing what was expected of a black theatre group and was in effect performing what may have been seen as a rather British production. This would inevitably lead to comparisons with a history of ‘successful’ British Shakespearean productions.

For the present writer what should be borne in mind is the fact that Talawa was perhaps attempting to find its own voice within this genre. The oral imitation should be understood within the context of the company’s British theatre history and the British/colonial history of the Artistic Director and performers. It is possible that attempting to stick to established models was what the company felt most comfortable with at this point in its theatrical evolution.

Talawa’s movement from working within a range of Caribbean, African, American, and experimental productions to its production of *Anthony and Cleopatra* highlights what can be seen as the company’s attempt to create an intellectual depth and wealth of work for the

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company’s repertoire. The approach to the work (as can be seen from what is discussed above) was creatively limited and perhaps necessarily so if Talawa was to be able to continue to work within this genre without stereotypical expectations. Whether intentionally or not Talawa can be seen to have given itself the possibility of later performing within the genre without having to live up to set expectations. This would also afford the company the opportunity to later experiment within its range of performance approaches to Shakespeare and other classics.

Having performed *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Talawa had the advantage of being able to use its notion of the media reaction to it to gauge when the company’s next classical production should be and how it would be approached. The present writer suggests that it was perhaps the generally unfavourable reviews of *Anthony and Cleopatra* that discouraged Talawa from attempting another classic immediately.

From the present writer’s reading of the reviews it would seem that all areas of Talawa’s production received some negative response. This is exemplified by comments taken from three reviews of the show. The set design is described as ‘.. a simple one. Almost too simple: There’s a line of steps, a wall, a backdrop. And that’s about it.’

Philip Key, agreeing that the set is simplistic also explains why this is problematic:

Unfortunately it is not a great help with narrative drive.

Rome and Egypt are played out in the same space as the battles that occur: and even the costumes — fun as they may be make it difficult to
judge who exactly is whom.²⁰

In addition to this Brewster’s direction is seen to be ‘simplistic’ in her choice of staging techniques,²¹ and ‘as a conceptual re-interpretation Yvonne Brewster’s production is disappointing.’²² Perhaps most biting is Key’s comment that ‘No-one on stage seems quite aware of what they are doing, the words often delivered in a tum te tum style.’²³

Similarly the performers are discussed with a suggestion that the roles they played were (as demonstrated by their performances) beyond them at this stage in their careers. Phillips comments, ‘Not all of the speechifying is clear. Reny Setna’s Enobarbus is often garbled.’²⁴ After a general comment that ‘the acting is uneven’²⁵, Wainwright states, ‘Renu Setna, trying a more fastidious than gruff Enobarbus, is not convincing.’²⁶ Equally both Jeffrey Kissoon as Anthony and Dona Croll as Cleopatra received comments on their work that point to what may be seen as emotionally immature performances. ‘Mr Kissoon does not entirely solve the paradox of a man overwhelmed by Cleopatra’.²⁷ ‘Cleopatra, meanwhile, gets the loud treatment from Dona Croll. Not so much seductive as aggressive.’²⁸ Additionally, for Wainwright on press night Croll was ‘...just snatching a little at the role.’²⁹

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²² Ibid.
²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ Ibid.
In amongst the negative comments it is worth noting that the critics were able to point to the success of Ben Thomas playing Caesar. 'Only Ben Thomas's Caesar makes an impression, his anguish over his friend's desertion only too clear, and, 'He (the character Caesar) is played by Ben Thomas, another forceful character and the most understandable.' The critics can be seen then to have given credit where they felt it was due.

It may be that what can be seen as the critics' general disappointment with Talawa's performance of *Anthony and Cleopatra* partly stemmed from their notion of what they expected from a black theatre company. Perhaps Talawa's attempted RSC approach whilst 'mimicking' the established oral style for the performance of Shakespeare on the British stage seemed boring or even irrelevant for the British press coming from a black theatre group. It is possible that there had been expectations of the production having an obvious Caribbean performance style, perhaps set in the Caribbean with the performers using a Caribbean 'lilt', with some singing and dancing somehow incorporated into the show. For the present writer, whilst the critics' disappointment may come from what may be seen as Brewster's 'lack of innovation', by not highlighting the 'ethnicity' of her group in her performance other than by the incidental visual aspect of their skin colour, Brewster can be commended for her decision not to work within what may be seen as expected stereotypes. Three years after the company's initial foray into the classical genre Talawa presented its audience with a second classical play.

Between 16 March and 16 April 1994 Talawa performed *King Lear*. This was the company’s fifteenth production. With performances at Talawa’s home in The Cochrane Theatre, Talawa can be credited with bringing its production of *King Lear* to the West End.\(^{32}\) The novelty of Shakespeare being performed in the West End by black actors possibly gave black theatre practitioners confidence that theatre as performed by blacks in Britain was being taken more seriously by the mainstream and perhaps had less limits imposed on it than in earlier decades. Additionally, where black performers were not seen in the majority of West End performances (as is the case today), Talawa can be seen to have put them, albeit briefly, centre stage.

Talawa chose to dedicate this historic performance to the inspiration of Norman Beaton.\(^{33}\) Beaton is perhaps the best-known contemporary black actor in Britain to date most widely known for his starring role as Desmond in Channel Four’s television situation comedy *Desmond’s*. The Guyanese Mr Beaton was to play Lear until he became too ill. Black British born Ben Thomas was brought in at a week’s notice to play the part.\(^{34}\)

Around the time Talawa performed *King Lear* the company can be seen to have been enjoying positive theatrical recognition. The company was now eight years old and had been awarded the new accolade of ‘Performing Arts Company of the Decade’ by *The Voice* newspaper.\(^{35}\) For the present writer it is symbolic of the black theatre going community’s appreciation of the range of work that Talawa had given them that they

\(^{32}\) The production also toured England playing at: The Nia Centre, Manchester, The Queens Theatre, Barnstable and The Playhouse, Oxford.

\(^{33}\) See Talawa production archives for *King Lear* – publicity flyer and programme for the production.

\(^{34}\) Beaton’s image however, was still used on the publicity as it was too late to change it.
received this accolade just before the production of *King Lear*. A year later the company was also described as, ‘... Britain’s leading black theatre company’\(^6\) as ‘...the internationally renowned Talawa Theatre, ...’\(^7\), and as being, ‘... Britain’s leading black theatre group.’\(^8\)

Appreciation for Talawa’s work was not limited to the black community as Yvonne Brewster was awarded her OBE in 1993 for her original contribution to British theatre. Much of this contribution had been achieved through her artistic directorship of Talawa. Brewster comments, ‘I decided to accept it for Talawa’s hard work not because we were accepted by the establishment.’\(^9\)

The support of mainstream theatre practitioners for the production of *King Lear* was demonstrated as Talawa had been selected at this time, along with the RSC and The National Theatre to do a series of trial videos for the national video archive of stage performances. The videos would be housed at London’s Theatre Museum, Covent Garden. The Theatre Museum also wanted Talawa (with this production) to take part in an exhibition being prepared on interpreting Shakespeare. Archival video performances of Talawa’s *King Lear* and *Othello* have since been housed as permanent features at the Theatre Museum.

\(^{35}\) See Talawa production archives for *King Lear* – publicity flyer and programme for the production.  
\(^{36}\) Anon, ‘*Tis Pity She’s a Whore, What’s on in London*, 8 November 1995, p.57.  
In terms of the production itself the possibility of exploring a depth and range of theatrical approaches for the production does not seem to have generally been a main intention of the Artistic Director. Where Brewster can be seen to have made a conscious attempt to put her own mark on the production and expand the performance range of her actors however, was in her choice of language use.

The artistic decision that was most intended to influence the direction of the language of the production was that of setting it in the future. Setting the play in 2001 with a mostly black population Brewster decided that a new language form should be found to reflect the time and ethnicity of the community. The language developed came from extending a range of present day British accents. The performers were required to work on developing their perceived and imaginary evolution of vowel sounds from the present day cockney accent, until touching upon a sound that worked for each character. Each performer was encouraged to find their voice. Actors found voices, presented them, and developed them until they had found a sound that made the character alive and original as well as harmonise with the other voices.

For the present writer Brewster can be seen here to have been aiming to make the play her own but had possibly not fully exploited the route she had chosen to go down. This is suggested for two reasons. Firstly, setting the play just four years in the future raises the question of how significantly the general language of any speech community would have changed within this relatively short time. There is perhaps an uncharacteristic fear being

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41 Ibid.
demonstrated here by Brewster by not going at least twenty years into the future. Also problematic for the present writer is the fact that (in terms of judging Brewster’s originality or intention to be so) Brewster also gives no real indication of the original language base that she is working from. We cannot assume that Brewster uses a range of voices from the black community as her previous work within this genre appears to have attempted to have no links with such speech forms. Secondly, (in addition to her commitment to allowing her performers to find their own voice for the piece) Brewster also appears to display a clear and contrary control of the language to be produced by what the present writer regards as her efforts to ‘get to the voice right’ by employing a voice coach for the production. Whilst the former strategy can be seen to complement Brewster’s ambitions to produce original work, the latter suggests that the voice work may have steered the performers into attempting to produce the traditional RSC style. This mixing of both forms of creating a voice however, although may make Brewster’s dual strategy appear contradictory, can be seen to have been successful in terms of generating audience response.

Brewster recounts how when David Harewood’s Edmund stated, ‘To both these women have I pledged my love, now which one shall it be, shall I take one both or neither?’ He met the roar of a black woman in the audience ‘Typical Black man!’ Whilst it is possible that she was responding to the message alone, the present writer suggests that she felt that her behaviour was exhibited in an appropriate forum as the language she was hearing around her was in some way reminiscent of an aspect of her own.

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42 Voice coach Cicely Berry was employed to provide three days training for the production.
Whilst the language had reached the audience, the issue that had grabbed this particular audience member’s attention was an echo of the issues which are dealt with in the folk Theatre of the Oliver Samuels style work.\textsuperscript{44} We do not know if Shakespeare had ever intended these lines to be performed by a black Edmund. Had Edmund been white would the woman in the audience have made a similar comment? Had it been a white production would this particular woman have gone at all? For the present writer the attendance of a vocal black female audience member suggests that Talawa’s appeal was not lessened (in terms of attracting its black audience) by performing a classical work.

What is generally seen from the above, is that within this genre Talawa under Brewster’s direction appear unwilling to aim at breaking new theatrical boundaries, in terms of performance style and range. Bearing in mind the fact that the company can be seen to have constantly broken boundaries in British theatre it would perhaps seem natural that it would do the same on a creative level in all genres of its work. It is also possible that the company would be able to do so without focusing on the blackness of its performers. In spite of outside expectations of exoticism Talawa continued to work within the genre.

For three weeks from 1 to 18 November 1995 Talawa presented its nineteenth production and third attempt at English classical drama in the form of John Ford’s 1633 Jacobean drama, ‘\textit{Tis pity she’s a whore}. With this third production and again what appears to be no major attempt to put a recognisable Talawa stamp on it, it may be suggested that Talawa intended to remind the British public the company was at liberty to perform what it wanted.

\textsuperscript{44} The work of Oliver Samuels and company is discussed in contrast to Talawa’s performing of the classics in Chapter Three.
to. On the other hand the comments of some critics suggest that the production may have exhibited a lack of clarity in terms of what Talawa was trying to achieve: "History will applaud Talawa for its many ground-breaking coups de theatre, but this is certainly not one of them." And, "Whatever Talawa director Yvonne Brewster was aiming for – despite programme notes – remains obscured and the result is desperately wide of the mark."

How much of this kind of mainstream response is due to obvious Afro/Caribbean references not being met by Talawa's efforts is not clear. Given the potential that the critics appear to have seen in the prospect of a black British theatre company performing Shakespeare it may be suggested that the mainstream exhibited a mild frustration with Talawa's conventional performance. Whilst the critics do not define what it is that they expected from Talawa, possibly through fear of unwittingly branding the company with black theatrical stereotypes, their response makes it clear that what they were presented with did not inspire them.

For the present writer perhaps the most valuable factor regarding Talawa's continued performance of such work was that black performers were (relatively regularly) being given the opportunity to work in this area. Talawa's performance also highlighted the need to give black performers exposure in speech and language training for this genre. From Talawa's archival video of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, the company can be seen to be imitating the classical English speech style appropriate for a traditional performance of the

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45 Phil Gilby, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore", Stage, 9 November 1995, p.12.
46 John O'Mahony, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore", Time Out, 8-15 November 1995, p.133.
play. In the present writers view however, the actors launch into oral stereotypes of actors playing classical roles, with classical voices, ‘... the acting does not have the passion to match the picturesqueness. Almost everyone in Parma is guilty of underacting or overacting.147 Perhaps it was this kind of performance of the company’s verbal repertoire that encouraged critics to be disappointed as well as hope that Talawa would take advantage of its wide ranging Afro/Caribbean voice to enhance its performance and ultimately produce original work in this area.

The under/over acting referred to above is seen in Talawa’s production in particular when actors play two characters and consequently use two ways of speaking. This is seen with: Andrew Dennis playing Grimaldi and Poggio, Simon Clayton playing Bergetto and the Cardinal, and Hassani Shapi who plays both Friar Bonaventura and Donado. The present writer suggests that the oral acting ‘extremes’ can be understood within the context of inexperienced performers trying to demonstrate acting versatility and thus play two characters as differently as possible by adopting contrasting speech styles for each character.48 This approach can be seen to have resulted in the creation of stereotypes rather than rounded characters whose subtleties could have been explored through their language use.

Additionally, with no voice coach for this piece, any difficulties that Talawa’s performers experienced with the language could not be referred to a specialist. For the present writer it is ironic that a concerted effort is made to get the pronunciation of the Italian names

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47 Anon, 'Pity it's a bore', The Times, 4 November 1995, p.19.
48 Brewster had decided to use several new performers in the production.
correct, leaving the rest of the script to falter. The overriding feeling is that the actors struggle with the text, do not understand the subtleties of the play and consequently it is impossible for them to express them. This notion is reflected in the reviews of the show:

And when the action takes place the reading of the lines is often undistinguished. Giovanni and Annabella seem content to deliver their words without injecting passion and they are not alone in failing to fire the script.49

And,

... others have barely grasped their lines and display nothing more than a grim determination to reach the end.50

For the present writer, despite the negative commentary a positive outcome can be gained from it. It is important to note that the critics do not appear to comment on any perceived general lack of ability of the performers but focus on their particular performance in this production. The comments also illustrate what appears to be the performers’ lack of experience in what is acknowledged as a difficult area of performance work. Once again the importance of what Talawa is doing by giving its performers acting opportunities in this genre is highlighted.

On a more positive note the left wing press congratulate the performance of the most senior and established member of the cast as well as Talawa’s tackling the classics:

49 Phil Gilbey, “‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore”, Stage, 9 November 1995, p.12.
50 John Mahoney, “‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore”, Time Out, 8-15 November 1995, p.133.
Don Warrington’s excellent Vasques shows us how pitifully underused he was in ‘Rising Damp’, and what a crying shame it is there haven’t been good television roles since he played that good-natured token black man smiling amiably at the prejudices of those around him. But then how many television roles have there been since then for good actors who happen to be black? 51

Michaels’s comments point to what may appear to be a gulf between an excellent actor who happens to be black and the limited work they get because of their colour. Despite her question being about television the same may be asked of British theatre. The response in both cases would be a few if any at all. For the present writer Michaels’s comment is heartening as it is a recognition from the mainstream that good black performers exist and that they are underused by the mainstream. This strengthens the case for Talawa and other performance companies whose actors are excluded by the mainstream to create their own forum for developing the widest range of experience in theatrical genres.

Finally Gardener comments:

Perhaps it’s not an inspired production but it is an intelligent and eminently watchable one, and it’s a pleasure to see Talawa consolidating its reputation for tackling the classics and developing a coherent performance style. 52
This positive response, though pointing to the fact there are problems with the production (without dwelling on them), chooses to take an actively encouraging approach by focusing on what can be considered to be good about Talawa's efforts. From the present writer's understanding of the comment there appears to be an acknowledgement that Talawa's work, and particularly within this genre, is new, finding its feet and maturing. Perhaps most important is the fact that Gardner appears to both welcome Talawa's work and give the impression that it has a place on the British stage. This kind of overt mainstream support (although limited) for Talawa's work in this area may have been a factor in the company's decision to continue performing English classics as part of its varied performance repertoire. This chapter continues to examine Talawa's achievements in this area by analysing two of Talawa's later performances within this genre.

51 Melissa Michaels, "’Tis Pity She’s a Whore,' What's on in London, 8 November 1995, p.54. 52 Lyn Gardner, "’Tis Pity She’s a Whore', Guardian, 7 November 1995, p.s2.10.
Part Two - The Plays

The Importance of Being Earnest

Talawa presented its version of the Oscar Wilde classic at The Tyne Theatre, Newcastle and The Bloomsbury Theatre, London, between 19 April and 13 May 1989. The production also toured the U.K. and was Talawa’s fifth production in total.

Unlike British mainstream theatre companies generally, Talawa can be seen to have learnt to have a specific aim, beyond the purely creative for doing work in the classical genre. This is perhaps due to the possibility that the company may have felt that it would have to justify its work in this area or any work that was not ‘obviously black’. In addition to entertaining its audience, Talawa’s production of The Importance of Being Earnest aimed ‘to try and impress the British theatrical community with their own text.’

The fact that Talawa’s aim is apparent for this production may also be linked to the fact that the company was working in this area for the first time. The Importance of Being Earnest had been preceded by three Caribbean and one African production and was groundbreaking in that it moved Talawa away from the kinds of so called ‘black’ work that the company had become associated with. It would potentially attract new audiences, as well as help Talawa to become established in the mainstream as the only black British theatre company performing ‘English’ works.

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53 Interview with Ben Thomas (playing Algernon in this production) by David Johnson, Thomas’s London home, 3 September 2000.
54 It should be noted that Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest (though the work of an Irishman) is discussed under English plays within the context of Talawa.
Apart from mainstream attention this first foray into the classical genre would also stand
to provide new opportunities for black actors. Whilst there is little contemporary
documented evidence that black performers are not deemed suitable for classical roles the
fact they hardly appear in them on the British stage may suggest that they are either
incapable of doing them or that they are not being selected for other reasons. James
comments, 'We are not even given a chance to fail, which is why this company is so
important in allowing black actors a chance at the classical.'^55

With black actors in 'white roles' Talawa provided evidence of the genuine possibility of
what the present writer refers to as 'colour crossover' in theatre. This crossover whilst on a
practical level (in the case of Talawa) is the straightforward movement of physically black
actors into roles historically played by whites on the British stage, the impact on the black
performers may not be as straightforward, 'You had to remind yourself especially with
this all black production . . . you are not the people it was intended for, you are yourself . .
so you must use your own life as the emotional bedrock for the characters.'^56

Thomas's notion that this type of work was not intended for black performers may have
put an additional burden on Talawa to produce a particularly impressive performance
despite the fact that it was the company's first attempt at this kind of work. For the present
writer this highlights what he regards as Talawa's 'pioneering burden.' As there are so few
black theatre companies each time the company performs, the work has to be exemplary or
it may be quickly disregarded by the mainstream. With the English plays Talawa has had

^55 Keith Duston, 'Importance of being Oscar', Sunday Sun, 9 April 1989, p.27. Duston is quoting Oscar James.
to be determined in its resolve to demonstrate that it has both the right and ability to perform all work that makes up its multicultural theatrical heritage. Part of this conviction is in the company’s belief that, ‘... you can as a black theatre company do what ostensibly is English work and it still works.’

This idea is highlighted by the Victorian nature of the play that can be seen both to support and reject Talawa’s performance of the work. Whilst much of the storyline and performance of Victorian manners in the play seem to have little in common with black people, it can be shown that some central aspects of Victorian thought are mirrored by Talawa and perhaps point to the relevance of the company performing such work. For the present writer the most obvious is the Victorian notion that man has the power to effect and positively change his environment. Talawa came into existence because the founding members were discontented with the limited work that British theatre had to offer black performers. Once Talawa had established itself as a company that primarily focused on black work it maintained control of its own future by launching itself into the classical genre whilst continuing to work within the genres of African, Caribbean and American plays. Additionally, Talawa’s work in this area having introduced many performers and audiences (both black and white) to the idea of black actors performing a range of roles demonstrates what the present writer regards as Brewster encouraging black theatre practitioners to work in all areas of British theatre. This behaviour can be linked to

56 Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas’s London home, 3 September 2000.
57 Ibid.
58 See internet site: http://landow.ste.brown.edu/victorian/vn/victor4.html – Victorian and Victorianism – 02/09/00 - George P. Landow states, ‘In science and technology, the Victorians invented the modern idea of invention — the notion that one can create solutions to problems, that man can create new means of bettering himself and his environment.’
what Landow describes as a key characteristic of the Victorians, ‘More than anything else what makes Victorians Victorian is their sense of social responsibility.’

Talawa’s decision to do the performance can be further understood when compared to the fact that Wilde as an Irishman was laughing at the English in his play. The contemporary laugh can be seen to rest with Talawa as the English are ridiculed by both the Irish and blacks in Talawa’s production, the very people the Victorians can be seen to have regarded as least fitting of being Victorians.

Whilst Talawa may appear to be Victorian in nature in some areas, it is the Victorian dislike of the above groups however, that encourages the present writer to question Talawa’s decision for doing the production. Black people during the Victorian era (and perhaps for a long time after due to how these attitudes had been embedded into the psyche of the British people) suffered very low status in Britain. Blacks were regarded, along with the Irish and other ‘lower classes’ in Victorian science and literature as:

- Unreasonable, irrational and easily excited
- Childlike
- Having no religion but only superstition
- Criminal: no respect for private property, no notions of property
- Excessively sexual
- Filthy
- Inhabitants of unknown dark lands or territories.

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59 Ibid.

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This would not be reflected in Talawa’s performance that followed rather than adapted the script. In spite of the negatives above Brewster is clear about why the work should be done:

Black theatre has as many facets as any other sort of theatre, and the ambitions held by black theatre practitioners are probably not much different from anyone else in this challenging business; but because opportunities for realising these ambitions are much fewer and certainly farther apart, so much depends on the success or failure of every endeavour. This is even more true if the black theatre practitioner is attempting to interpret what has been seen for centuries as the rightful property of others. It is important, indeed vital, that the black companies continue to celebrate and to investigate the wealth of non European material which exists as this is the ultimate source of their inspiration. However, always to be expected to defend one’s work from the ever present question, HOW RELEVANT IS THIS TO YOU?, (meaning if the obvious connection of colour is not immediately apparent, the matter of common humanity is irrelevant) is debilitating and suggests that the questioner would prefer us to exist culturally in a cocoon. The good and great work from all cultures belongs to everyone. A Wole Soyinka play should be as

See also, Douglas Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians: English attitudes to the Negro in the mid-nineteenth century (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978).
important a source of inspiration to the Norwegians as Strindberg is to the English.\(^{61}\)

Additionally, the programme information, mentioning two black performers offers a scant but interesting history of black performance on the British stage, stating just how long black people have been doing this kind of theatre work for.\(^{62}\) The present writer questions whether these black performers would have been allowed to perform on the British stage in their time, if their performance work was anything less than outstanding? Given the degree of known prejudice to black people at the time it is possible that they would have mirrored or bettered those of their white contemporaries.

Talawa’s programme information continues by adding what is seen by the present writer as a challenge to contemporary British theatre, ‘The success of these 2 black men seems to suggest that England provided a safe and creative haven for the talent of black performers in the 19\(^{th}\) Century. We wish to test this theory in 1989.’\(^{63}\)

It is unlikely that the contemporary theatrical mainstream would wish to be perceived as having moved backwards politically, particularly at a time (the late 1980s) when Britain can be seen to have been aiming to be more politically correct than at any other time in its

\(^{61}\) See Talawa production archives for \textit{The Importance of Being Earnest} – production programme, p.6.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

‘Ira Aldridge, born New York 1807, died Lodz, Poland 1867, first acted in England in 1782 and by the end of a successful career, which spanned four decades he had played Richard III, Shylock, Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Othello and most of the major Shakespearan roles here and in Europe. Samuel Morgan Smith, born Philadelphia USA 1833, died Sheffield England 1882, arrived in England from America to set up his own theatre company in Gravesend of all places in 1866, and successfully produced and acted in a wide range of plays from Shakespeare to contemporary work.’

\(^{63}\) Ibid.
recent history. Contemporary British audiences then were challenged (perhaps unfairly) to accept these black performers depicting life in the shires, English manners and Victorian values or be accused of racism. Sadly, this was perhaps one of the only ways that the company felt that it would be able to encourage a lively response to the show.

In spite of what may be seen as forcing the audience’s hand the audience response to the production was as varied as the range of work that Talawa does:

> It was a wonderful response . . I think that there might have been some particularly ethnic orientated comments about how could black people play this obviously white play . . but when they saw the confidence that we did it in . . one of the reviews which for me was one of my best I’ve ever had . . and I didn’t even understand what it meant . . said ‘Ben Thomas is more blue book than any actor I have seen before.’

The book referred to is the book of Victorian manners that acted as a handbook of middle class Victorian behaviour. The fact that Thomas was apparently so adept at displaying them points to the possibility of how easily the appropriate manners may be learnt by people of other races and classes. This in effect can be seen to challenge the worthiness and pride that white Victorians gave this behaviour and also points to the arbitrariness of the Victorian codes of good breeding.

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64 Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas’s London home, 3 September 2000.
The media response can be seen to have echoed some of Thomas's perceptions above. Renton comments, 'I cannot remember another where the actors seemed to perform and live each scene with such ease.'\textsuperscript{65} Similarly Issacs states, 'The standard of the performance is high.'\textsuperscript{66} Other critics can be seen to have ignored the performances and focused on various aspects of what they appear to see as a colour issue. As Talawa had not sought to highlight any such themes in the performance the present writer suggests this type of commentary materialised purely because the production of this 'white play' had an all black cast.

De Jongh believes that, 'Short of finding herself in bed with a manservant or two, Lady Bracknell could scarcely have envisaged anything worse than to find herself and her associates being impersonated by blacks.'\textsuperscript{67} For the present writer, De Jongh's suggested notion of 'impersonation' hints that the black actors are playing at being something that is entirely foreign to black existence and that it is something that they should perhaps not chose to do as part of their performance repertoire. There is no reason given for this opposition other than that Wilde's fictional character would not have liked it. What the critic imagines are Lady Bracknell's feelings may also be representative of the mainstream press as yet unwilling to understand the relevance of such work to a company like Talawa, and highlights some of the negative notions that Talawa may have been up against in putting the production on.

\textsuperscript{65} Alex Renton, 'Something Wilde', \textit{Independent}, 18 May 1989, p.18.
\textsuperscript{66} David Issacs, 'Skills sweep doubt away', \textit{Journal}, 21 April 1989. The page number of the article is unavailable. See references to review in the \textit{Journal} by Uju Aslka in Chapter Five. The present writer possesses a copy of the article without the page number.
Equally, Armistead’s suggestion points to the discomfort that the white theatre establishment appears to feel when offered black work that it may regard as not being black enough:

There is something oddly disarming about seeing the black theatre establishment investing time, talent and energy in a play that is so much a part of white theatre tradition, without any perceivable intention to subvert or reinterpret it.\(^{68}\)

What is not being recognised is that this work is equally part of black theatre traditions both in Britain and internationally. For the present writer that mainstream theatre critics should show a lack of awareness of the theatrical impact of colonisation is perhaps a reason why companies like Talawa should continue to work within this genre. Perhaps British colonisation consisted of forcing natives of Africa and the Caribbean to be stripped of everything but their indigenous theatre?

Additionally, both De Jongh and Armistead’s comments (in the parts of their reviews quoted above) may be seen to suggest they imagine that black British theatre practitioners are divorced from traditional British theatre to the degree that they should never want to perform it in its original form. If black British theatre practitioners can expect only to be accepted by the theatrical mainstream if their performance work is culture specific the

\(^{67}\) Nicholas De Jongh, "The Importance of Being Earnest", *Guardian*, 18 May 1989, p.28.
\(^{68}\) Claire Armistead, "The Importance of Being Earnest", *Financial Times*, 18 May 1989, p.27.
possible backlash of this is that artistically these practitioners will never feel just British without the ‘black’.

The present writer questions what may appear to be what those who are bemused by this kind of performance perceive as a lack of impact on the part of British society on those black people that have been born and raised here. In this context their blackness is not seen as part of their bi-cultural existence, but mistakenly, in the view of the present writer as the entirety of their being. Barker quotes Brewster citing a white audience member, ‘Oh mah deahh! I reahhly don’t know what they are going to do with this, because it is so utterly, utterly English.’

In a press release before the production, Brewster stated, ‘My aim is not to attempt a West Indian version of the play but to stage this Oscar Wilde classic with black actors.’ Brewster would however, need to concentrate on an area of the performance that would present the performers as English upper middle class Victorians without being white. For the present writer, Brewster can be seen to have been supported by the fact that the language of the text leant itself to achieving this goal. This notion is demonstrated by the fact that she does not change the language of the text at all. Additionally De Jongh comments, ‘The revelation of this production is that the sight of black actors inhabiting the skins and minds of upper middle class white Victorians does not seem strange or perverse. As long as they sound right you accept them. Elocution transcends colour.’

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70 Press release for the production. See Talawa production archives for The Importance of Being Earnest – publicity file.
71 Interview with Yvonne Brewster by David Johnson, Talawa offices London, 4 September 2000.
The text written in 'standard English' should present no difficulties (as this is their first official language) to the black British performers. Unlike the Caribbean and African plays which require the performers to read text which approximates the necessary African/Caribbean voice in a style of writing that the performer is likely not to have much experience of. Before coming to Talawa black British performers will often have worked mainly with 'standard English' written forms and will therefore be used to the written language of The Importance of Being Earnest. For the present writer, the black British performers should also be able to identify the required voice of the text as that of the white English upper middle class.

There is however, what appears to be a constant struggle to achieve the upper middle class English voice from some of the black British performers. In the performances of Gary McDonald playing Jack Worthing and Juanita Waterman playing Gwendolen, the accents waver, the former from black British to a slightly cockney sound, the latter from the required upper middle class sound to a distinct cockney voice. In the same way difficulties emerge in the voice of the character, Lane, the Manservant, played by Christopher Tajah. He speaks with a general northern voice. This gives rise to problems in the stereotypical sound he creates as the voice fast becomes indistinct in its exaggerated form. This in turn leads to a lack of oral realism and consequently becomes difficult to understand.

For the present writer, the question is why these black British performers demonstrate difficulty in achieving accurate linguistic performances of an aspect of their own language. What may be seen as their 'lack of Englishness' in this area may appear to provide a shred

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of truth for the notion (mentioned and dismissed) above that some black Britons are somehow able to live separately from the rest of British society although they are an integral part of it.

Of the non-black British performers Oscar James as the Reverend remains (to the British ear) consistently West Indian in tone, as the voice produced (from the present writer’s perspective) is reminiscent of a general middle class Caribbean sound. Amongst the possible reasons for James’s chosen voice may be that he does not know how his character should sound, or he is unable to reproduce the voice. Whilst it may be argued that absolute linguistic accuracy may not be as important as a clear demonstration of the linguistic intent, the present writer maintains that accuracy is important in all aspects of the work of a pioneering performance group that (as in the case of Talawa) can already be seen to be undervalued by the mainstream. The production of work that sets itself up for negative criticism by being inaccurate will possibly be seen to justify its less than favourable treatment by the mainstream. In the present writer’s view this could in turn lead to bad reviews, poor audience attendance, a lack of funding and the ultimate demise of the company.

Not all of the actors however demonstrated the aforementioned difficulty with the language of the text as both black British and West Indian performers can be shown to have produced ‘accurate’ (in the traditional context of the performance voices used for The Importance of Being Earnest) voice work. De Jongh comments, ‘Ben Thomas’ elegant
Algernon Moncrief, a smooth aesthete done out in a crisp moustache and cream suit, manages the authentic Wildean noise and cultivates the right langour and artifice.\textsuperscript{73} Thomas explains that he is able to produce the appropriate voice as:

\begin{quote}
I am a particularly Anglicized black man. I am quite an English Englishman despite coming from Yorkshire... which allowed me not to be worried about the text in any shape or form as it was familiar to me... I was able to relax the other actors into not being afraid of what that text was about... words that they weren't familiar with and I was.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

Along with Ben Thomas Jamaican Leonie Forbes demonstrates that part of a performers job is to be able to adopt the appropriate voice for the character they are playing. Forbes produces an accurate voice in her role as Miss Prism despite not being British or living in England. For the present writer this points to the fact that where some black British performers are still in the process of developing their craft there are other black performers who are able to achieve accurate oral performances in playing a traditionally white character.

For the present writer, the use of accent to create Victorian characters that are black can be seen to have worked with those performers such as Thomas and Forbes who were able to produce the 'correct' recognised sound. These performers demonstrated that they were

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas's London home, 30 August 2000.
able to accommodate their language to suit the upper middle class Victorian characters of
the script, and simultaneously illustrate their verbal repertoire. As this skill was not seen
cast-wide the present writer suggests that there was a danger that this strategy may have
gone unnoticed. This in turn could have made the characters on the whole, appear quite
'traditionally' un-Victorian both because of their skin colour and their inaccurate
elocution.

Due to Talawa's decision to concentrate on what may be seen as its right and
'nativeness' to perform the play without changing any of the language of the original
text, sentences in the play can be seen to have taken on a new meaning as the actors were
black, and the play was performed in a contemporary setting.

When Williams's Cecily tells Thomas's Algernon, 'What wonderfully blue eyes you
have', followed by 'I hope your hair curls naturally', the audience response is one of
laughter. The comedy is in the fact that Thomas does not have blue eyes and indeed as a
black man has hair that curls naturally. Perhaps in Talawa's (unintended) context she is
asking him if he is a real black man as this is what she really wants for herself and she
regards hair texture as one way of gauging the particular black authenticity she requires.
For the present writer, there is further irony in Williams's Cecily's latter comment as
Thomas, at the time of Talawa's performance has artificially curled hair as it is perm'd.
Thomas explains, 'This is another Afro/Caribbean sort of problem about hair curl being
straight and so on . . . so when black people were in the audience that meant much more
to them . . .\(^{75}\)

When Williams's Cecily later states, 'When I see a spade I call it a spade' to which
Waterman's Gwendolen replies, 'I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade' the
racial connotations for the British audience are many, ' . . . half of the audience are
screaming with delight, the black half, the other half are saying do they realise what they
just said then . . . Cecily is saying 'When I see a nigger I call it a nigger.'\(^{76}\) Following
Thomas's suggestion Waterman's Gwendolen's later comment of 'I'm glad to say I've
never seen a spade' could presumably mean for Talawa's audience, 'I'm glad to say I've
never seen a nigger.'

What is clear for the present writer is the range of interpretation Talawa leaves its
production open to by using the original language with black performers. Whilst this in
itself is not problematic, creating a production with multiple interpretations may leave the
audience and critics wondering if Talawa had a specifically detailed set of aims for its
production. It is also possible that by not changing the language, Talawa can be seen to be
simply saying that in doing the work the company is rising above the 'superficial' as the
meaning of the text is clear. In the present writer's opinion however, it is unthinkable that
the inherent 'racist' nature of the language of the text, as understood by a contemporary
audience and expressed by black performers, can be transferred to a black cast without
affecting the original meaning.

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\(^{75}\) Ibid.
\(^{76}\) Ibid.
The above quotes from the production may also raise the question of why Talawa should want to present 'white' plays without adapting, or bringing controlled attention to them, and additionally, may promote an idea that in the eyes of the mainstream this is not appropriate work for these black performers. The latter notion is expressed by David Issacs's summing up of the media response and the expressions of doubt that he came across about the production, 'I feel bound to say, however, that some of them have also been tinged with malice and expressed in tones overtly racist.' Issacs's comment suggests that the racist attitude towards Talawa's production of the *The Importance of Being Earnest* was being expressed by the mainstream loud enough for critics who did not share the same opinion to both know about it and feel it important enough to comment on it in their own reviews. This perhaps gives a clearer indication of the opposition to Talawa's production than is voiced in the reviews.

In spite of the 'conflict' between the black skin of the performers and the language of the text Talawa's resolve to do the production was beneficial in at least two areas. Firstly, it showed that if black actors were given the chance some could prove themselves just as capable as some white actors of delivering a classical text. Secondly, it would impact on other black theatre companies:

I think it (the work) bumped them (Talawa) up on the stakes really. It meant that there might be a credible competition now

...the other thing was that the other black theatre companies that

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existed in those days and don't now got extra confidence that they could be experimental too in whatever they wanted to do. 78

For the present writer, (as well as possibly encouraging others) whether Talawa knew it at the time or not, it was setting itself up with the performance of this production to produce further work within this genre. On the level of innovation alone Talawa can be seen to have cast a net that would allow its performance repertoire to incorporate whatever work the company wanted to do. By the time the company decided to do a production of Othello in 1997 (almost a decade after its original foray into English plays) Talawa's audience and the mainstream had come to expect the unexpected from the company along with intermittent performances of plays from the classical genre.
Part Two - The Plays

Othello

Talawa's production of Shakespeare's *Othello* ran from 9 October to 1 November 1997 at The Drill Hall, London. This was Talawa's twenty third production in total and its fifth work within the classical genre.

By the time Talawa performed *Othello* the company had been in existence for twelve years. During this period many black theatre companies had come and gone where Talawa had remained.79 The present writer suggests that part of the reason for Talawa's longevity was due to the fact that the company was innovative in the nature of its creative work, marked perhaps not least by its occasional forays into classical performance. Whilst performing Shakespeare was no longer a novelty for Talawa a production of *Othello* however, could be regarded slightly differently because of the fact that of all Shakespeare's plays *Othello* was perhaps the most obvious one for the company to do. The fact that a new black company choosing to do it would perhaps have been predictable may explain why Talawa did not perform the play until the company was well established.

When Talawa decided to do *Othello* the production could then seem long awaited rather than expected.

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78 Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas's London home, 3 September 2000.
79 Anon, 'Black Theatre British Theatre', *Prompt*, 14 August 1998, pp.8-9, 'In 1988 Dr. Elizabeth Clarke was commissioned by the Arts Council to make a report into Black Theatre in England, which never proceeded past the draft phase to allow for public scrutiny. The report did however identify some thirty English theatre companies in receipt of varying amounts of public subsidy, happy to call themselves black or Asian. Ten years on, only a fraction of this number still exist. There are now only four revenue funded companies: two black; two Asian.'
Having decided to take on the production Talawa can be seen to have made clear decisions on how its production would be contemporary yet differ to those that had gone before it. This can firstly be seen in Talawa’s decision on who to cast in the roles of Desdemona and Othello and how they would be portrayed.

Brewster’s decision to cast Paula Stockbridge as Desdemona created unforeseen problems for Talawa. The Drill Hall’s Artistic Director, Julie Parker was concerned that Talawa’s choice may lead to what the present writer interprets as Parker’s fears of negative publicity for the production which would in turn impact on The Drill Hall:

> Your letter seeks a written assurance that no “quasi” characterisation of the Princess of Wales will be presented or “...indeed any direct or indirect references” to her will be made.
> None will. ......... It has never been the view of the Creative Team or intimated by any member of our staff, that the characterisation of Desdemona be that of “a quasi Princess Diana”. 80

As the production opened shortly after the death of HRH Princess Diana the creative management of The Drill Hall’s concern about possible references being made to her through Stockbridge’s Desdemona was realistic. For the present writer, this was conceivable due to the fact that in Talawa’s production Stockbridge’s Desdemona wears army fatigues whilst at sea and can be seen to be reminiscent of the late Princess Diana

80 Letter from Yvonne Brewster to Julie Parker (Artistic Director of The Drill Hall), 2 October 1997. See Talawa production archives for Othello – correspondence file.
crossing minefields. Princess Diana and Stockbridge’s Desdemona can be seen to have a further link in the love that they each have for a black man that arguably leads to their death. Whilst Talawa maintains that it did not intend to cash in on the death of the Princess, this may be questioned when it is shown that the company had chosen to base aspects of its portrayal of Othello on American black sporting superstar and suspected murderer OJ Simpson.\(^8\) As the company was clear in its aim to use OJ Simpson as an inspiration for its leading male the notion of Talawa’s Desdemona being based on Princess Diana appears more likely.

Talawa’s production programme consists almost entirely of the specifically designed research package that compares Othello and the OJ Simpson trial.\(^8\) The lengths that Talawa can be seen to have gone to here, to highlight the comparisons suggest to the present writer that Talawa wanted to cash in on the publicity of the OJ Simpson trial and create a controversial backdrop for its work.\(^8\) This said, whilst connotations (suspected or real) of HRH The Princess of Wales and OJ Simpson may permeate Talawa’s production and suggest some of the company’s aims in doing Othello, for the present writer it is Brewster’s colour casting that gives a clearer picture of Talawa’s aim to make the work inimitably its own.

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\(^8\) Simpson’s 1997 trial for the murder of his white wife Nichole Simpson was and remains one of the longest and most publicised trials in North American history.

\(^8\) The research package produced for Talawa’s production of Othello made up ninety percent of all additional non-advertising and biographical information of the production programme. The package consists of an unpublished essay by Austin Clarke, ‘Orenthal and Othello: Phobogenic statements made in the opening statement and in the prologue of the play, Othello’, 1997.

\(^8\) Austin Clarke, ‘Orenthal and Othello’, p.23. All of the comparisons allude to what the present writer regards as attempts to show how both men replace cultural ‘blackness’ with ‘whiteness’. For example like Othello, Simpson is seen as having ‘...erased his oppositeness with his speech.’ Clarke continues, ‘This ‘white’ voice, or this ‘whitening’ of speech, which is more than an articulation of language, is the deliberate attempt to be clothed in the colonialist’s rhetoric and culture.’
As seen above when Talawa is given accolades the company is often referred to as 'black'. This definition then marks an important part of the company’s being. What is immediately evident in this production however, is the fact that the cast also contains white members.\(^{84}\) The present writer suggests that Brewster’s decision to use white performers may be seen as an initiative to complement the traditionally white roles that she had given to black performers in the production. This would allow Talawa to pursue two possible aims. Firstly, the company would be able to make original statements on the racial dynamics of the characters in its performance. Secondly, it would enable the company to use its performance to highlight and challenge stereotypes that persist around black people.

In this context, changing the traditional physical appearance of Othello can be seen as Brewster’s consistency with the aims suggested above. In white performances where the notion appears to be that the blacker the performer playing Othello whether naturally made up or not the better, Brewster presents a mixed race Othello in Ben Thomas.

For the present writer Thomas’s Othello’s mixed race identity can appear to water down the effect of Shakespeare’s ‘racist’ language in Talawa’s production. This is seen in the fact that Othello’s negative traits, attributed to his physical blackness, do not describe the light-skinned Othello we see before us. What is understood from Talawa’s production however, is that the white characters in using negative language in reference to Thomas’s Othello’s blackness are angling to find ways of making him an outsider although his skin colour is not far removed from their own. In Americanising Thomas’s Othello, Brewster

\(^{84}\) The following roles are played by white performers: Brabantio (Peter Mair), Desdemona (Paula Stockbridge), Iago (Dominic Letts), Lodovico (Peter Mair), and Rodrigo (Ian Driver).
achieves the effect of making him sound like the outsider the white characters need him to be.

In addition to casting Othello as a mixed race man the greatest impact on Talawa’s production as a direct result of colour casting is where central characters (that are normally played by white actors in traditional British performances of the play) are played by black performers.\(^85\)

For the present writer the fact that Buffong’s Cassio is also black means that perhaps two of the most prominent and likeable men in the play are black. This casting presents Talawa’s audience with two positive male role models and also diminishes the degree to which Buffong’s Cassio can be drawn as good and white in opposition to Thomas’s Othello’s badness being seen as an inherent part of his blackness. So whilst the two can be compared in all areas on and off the battlefield making distinctions between them because of their colour becomes more difficult. Equally their redeeming features along with what may be seen as their negative traits (Thomas’s Othello’s jealousy and Buffong’s Cassio’s tendency to drink) cannot be seen to be colour based.

There is a colour dynamic that has been set up by these two characters being played by black men that may suggest the blacker the man the better his soul. Buffong’s Cassio the physically blackest man, is the most deservedly victorious by the end of the production.

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\(^85\) Cassio is played by Michael Buffong, Emilia by Sam Adams, and Bianca by Amantha Edmead. The blackness of the performers can be seen to change the dynamics of the central relationships in the play giving many parts of Talawa’s production an entirely original interpretation.
Directly below him is the light-skinned Thomas's Othello who although has murdered his wife can perhaps be forgiven as he was misled. Below him is the white Letts's Iago who has no redeeming features. With this interpretation of the colour hierarchy the present writer notes a further racial dynamic relevant to the contemporary audience in what may be seen as black on black hatred being instigated and encouraged by white Letts's Iago between the two black men, Thomas's Othello and Buffong's Cassio.

Buffong's Cassio's physical blackness also creates new dynamics with the other character that he is most connected to in the production. Buffong's Cassio having a relationship with Edmead's Bianca can be seen to be casting the black woman into a negatively stereotypical role. As a black prostitute on the British stage where black female performers are rarely featured the role may appear to be reminiscent of black female performers as sexy dancer types. Further negative stereotypes that can be seen to surround this relationship may point to Buffong’s Cassio being over sexed and immoral and thus seeking the services of a prostitute. Whilst the same may be said if both characters are played by white performers they have the reassurance that white performers are seen in a range of roles. On a more positive note, in his minimal relationship with Adams's Emilia, Buffong’s Cassio can be seen to be another good black man (including Thomas’s Othello) in the eyes of the less powerful black maid.

As suggested above the effects of Talawa’s colour casting are not linked to the characters being played by black performers alone.
Talawa can be seen to be making further original statements on racial dynamics by the fact that the male characters that the company keeps white are perhaps the weakest characters in its production. This is seen firstly in Letts’s Iago who can be seen to have a more general jealousy of black men than in traditional productions where all characters (except perhaps Othello) are white. His jealousy is a psychological weakness, and Talawa add to that weakness by choosing a white performer who is considerably smaller (physically) than all the black men in the production. Although he causes death and destruction in their lives in Talawa’s production Letts’s Iago also unintentionally succeeds in replacing one black General for another and thus empowers another black man. The second is even darker than the first.

For the present writer there is a further suggestion in Talawa’s production that Letts’s Iago’s problem with black men is one of a general jealousy of their status, success and lifestyle. This is coupled with his frustration that he is unable to live up to what can be shown perhaps to be seen as their physical and sexual prowess. Talawa can be seen here to have moved the stereotype of the black man’s physical/sexual power to being the object of the white man’s jealousy. This is partly demonstrated by the fact that Brewster gives Letts’s Iago a black wife.

Within the context of Talawa’s racially mixed production Letts’s Iago’s general lack of respect of Adams’s Emilia (despite his marriage to her) may appear to be racially engendered. He has little regard for her as a human being because he perhaps does not really see her as his equal. Where in traditional performances this may be seen as how he
is towards women, Talawa’s production may be seen to suggest that her colour causes him to treat her negatively. Perhaps Letts’s Iago also treats her badly as he is unable to mistreat the male members of her race. He is after all in a less powerful position in society than they are. On a physical level he appears to be sexually abusive as he is violent whilst she remains passive during their lovemaking. During these scenes Letts’s Iago does however appear nervous of Adams’s Emilia as if he is aware that she appears able to physically dominate him and could perhaps overpower him if she were to choose to do so. As she does not Talawa’s audience understand that she allows him to live what may be seen as a fantasy where he is able to compare himself to the black male sexually and prove himself to be at least their equal in his mind.

Whilst on the one hand Letts’s Iago may be seen to be more racist in Talawa’s production (than in traditional versions, due to his treatment of Buffong’s Cassio and Adams’s Emilia) the argument is weakened by the fact that his behaviour towards the white characters is no more favourable. This is seen with his manipulation of Driver’s Rodrigo. Seen perhaps as the other significant white man in Talawa’s production Driver’s Rodrigo’s all round weakness is what helps him to pale into the background. Brewster clearly divides the men into strong and black (Thomas’s Othello and Buffong’s Cassio) and weak and white (Letts’s Iago and Driver’s Rodrigo). This type of male representation is uncommon in contemporary British theatre and would, in the present writer’s view, impact principally on the black male audience unused to seeing themselves portrayed in positions of power. Talawa’s production can be seen however, to have impacted on its
audience generally and not only on its male members. This is mainly documented in the company’s archival video of the production, and in the media response to the show.

For the present writer the company’s archival footage demonstrates that Talawa’s audience in going to see the show can be seen to have gone primarily to enjoy themselves. This is shown by the many occurrences of laughter during the performance, some of which occur at points where such a response would not generally have been predicted. Along with outlining where the unpredictable laughter is seen the ensuing analysis suggests reasons to which the response may be attributed.

The first incident of unpredictable laughter can be shown to have occurred when Letts’s Iago tells Thomas’s Othello of Buffong’s Cassio’s relationship with Stockbridge’s Desdemona. He encourages the idea that he has seen a relationship developing between them with his comment, ‘Lie with her, on her, what you will.’ For the present writer the audience’s laughter is perhaps a suggestion that they recognise this language as an accurate description of how casually black men may stereotypically be seen to treat women. Additionally, if it is accepted that some of Talawa’s audience primarily went to see the production because it was the work of a black theatre company rather than because it was Shakespeare, their laughter maybe seen to have come from not knowing what to expect of a Shakespeare play. At this point their response may have been due then both to embarrassment and surprise at the sexual tone of Letts’s Iago’s statement in this theatrical forum.
The response may also illustrate that some of the audience members were perhaps unsure of how they should respond. On the one hand within the black theatre setting they may have felt that it was appropriate to have an oral response. On the other hand, the fact that the production was Shakespeare may have dampened the extent of their response if they felt uncertain that laughter was appropriate here. It should also be stated that the response was probably a natural gut reaction to what was seen as entertaining and probably did not cause the audience members who responded in this way to think about their individual reactions.

Later in Talawa’s production when Stockbridge’s Desdemona realises that she is about to be killed and says ‘I am not yet to die . . .’ and Thomas’s Othello responds with ‘Yes presently . . .’ this is accompanied by laughter from the audience. In addition to the reasons suggested above for the first incident of unpredictable laughter the response here may also be due to the calmness with which the lines are delivered and suggests to the present writer that the audience feel little attachment to the couple and are not particularly concerned about their fate. It may also be suggested that Talawa’s audience whilst becoming involved (as is seen below by the accepted calling out during the performance) keep the show in its perspective as a piece of theatre. They are not overly affected by the emotional nature of events presented in the performance as they demonstrate a lighter emotional reaction to the tragedy through their collective laughter.

Thirdly, laughter was elicited from the audience in all situations where physical scuffles occurred and which resulted in one character being made to look physically weaker than
another. This is seen where Thomas’s Othello demands proof of Stockbridge’s Desdemona’s betrayal. Thomas lifts Letts from the floor with one hand in a show of brute strength. The audience find this hilarious and appear to ignore Thomas’s Othello’s emotional pain. Similarly, where Driver’s Rodrigo tries to kill Buffong’s Cassio and fails the laughter points to what the audience may be seen to regard as a pathetically failed attempt at aiming to sort out the situation. Again his anguish is ignored in favour of fun. Finally, when Edmead’s Bianca physically moves Letts’s Iago out of the way so that she can try to stab Buffong’s Cassio the audience laugh heartily. It is possible to suggest here (given the racial mix of the cast) that the audience laugh as they see the black woman showing herself to be physically stronger than the white man. Additionally, the laughter may have been evoked as the situation could have been seen (by the predominantly black audience) as an occurrence that would not have been accepted by a ‘stereotypical’ black man. Once again Talawa’s production can be seen to present the white man in an unusually weak position.

The fact that the audience laugh aloud at many ‘serious’ points during the performance, along with the fact that the work ends with rapturous applause points to the degree to which the audience feel they have been entertained. In addition to their applause and laughter further evidence of the audience having gone to see Talawa’s production to enjoy themselves is demonstrated by their active oral participation during the show. Thomas comments, ‘I remember that on one occasion when I was about to kill Desdemona
someone shouted out something like, ‘If you don’t get out he’s going to kill you, and you foolish girl, you should never give men like that a chance.’

This kind of response was not uncommon throughout the run, which according to Thomas pointed to the extent to which some of the audience members were engaged. Thomas highlights this reaction as being typical of Talawa’s audiences:

... when some of my white friends came to see the show they didn’t know what to think about these people shouting out they said to me ‘wasn’t it terrible spoiling it for the whole audience.’

I said they were loving it, they pay their money they do what they want and that’s that at Talawa.

In addition to the above ‘live’ response the wider general documented reaction to the show is found in the production reviews. Talawa had tried to get public attention for the show by selling it in three ways. Firstly the press would be invited to do pre-show ‘exclusive’ interviews with Brewster as Othello was billed as her last Talawa show. None of the papers approached took up the offer. Secondly the show was sold as unique as it was being performed by Britain’s leading black theatre company. The final strategy was to advertise Talawa’s new Blackgrounds project as part of the Othello publicity.

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86 Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas’s London home, 3 September 2000.
87 Ibid.
88 Cameron Duncan PR, production press pack, for Talawa’s Othello, p.1. To this end the following papers were contacted: Stage, Telegraph, Independent, Guardian, Radio 4 Kaleidoscope, Sunday Times, The Times. See Talawa production archives for Othello – publicity file.
89 Ibid.,p.2.
90 Ibid., p.3.
production press pack sums up the result of the three approaches aimed at encouraging media and by extension public interest:

The response, particularly from the national media, was disappointing, especially on the review front. However, I have found that the national critics are often unwilling to commit to a Talawa theatre production and this was no exception, sadly.91

There is no explanation given for the silence that the press appeared to demonstrate towards Talawa’s work. This suggests however a lack of interest either in Talawa or in the fact that it was billed as Brewster’s last work for the company. Whilst racism may be seen to be the cause of this response the present writer suggests that this is possibly not entirely the case as all of the mainstream papers have regularly reviewed Talawa’s productions in the past. Perhaps the response was more personal and directed at Brewster herself.

The final comment of the press pack points to the fact that the majority of the write-ups that do exist on the production simply state that the production is happening. For the present writer the two reviews that comment further are worth looking at in more detail. In the first review that the show received, and which is in part blamed for the later lack of response from other papers,92 Cavendish comments, ‘Sad to report then, that what should

91 Ibid., p.4.
92 Ibid., Cameron Duncan PR, ‘If we had had a good review in Time Out then I think I could have encouraged one or two critics to come along.’
be a crowning glory is nothing to write home about.'

This points to the possibility that too much expectation may have been placed on the quality of what the company would produce as Brewster's swan song. Perhaps more important however, is the fact that questions concerning the reasons why an experienced black British theatre company appears unable to produce Othello successfully for the mainstream are not asked. For the present writer a possible answer may rest in what may be seen to be the differences between white mainstream and black fringe notions of success along with conflicting ideas of how Shakespeare should be produced for the British stage within the context of these two theatrical areas.

In a later review Marlowe comments:

There is a ham-fisted feel to the whole production. The crass stereotyping of Desdemona (played by Paula Stockbridge) as a Sloane Ranger in Barbour jacket and loafers robs her of individuality and renders her death a matter of indifference to us. Michael Buffong as Cassio seems profoundly ill-at-ease, while Ben Thomas is a plodding Othello. There is a severe lack of pace generally, and little sense of growing misunderstandings, mental torment and imminent disaster.

The damning comments speak for themselves, and are drawn in stark contrast to the fact that Othello was, at the point of performance, one of Talawa's biggest box office

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successes.\textsuperscript{95} This suggests to the present writer that the negative response from the white media did not best reflect the experience of Talawa's audience, and also calls into question how it was possible that the audience and the press responded so differently to the same work. Perhaps expectations were widely opposed or as indicated by the press pack, the press did not want to see Brewster exit with a successful production.

Another element of the production that was not commented on by the press but for the present writer formed a central aspect of the work was the impact of the language of the performance versus the colour of the actors delivering it. Quarshie illustrates how for the contemporary black performer the language of \textit{Othello} may present difficulties:

\begin{quote}
Othello is given lines to speak which might have been quite unremarkable for a white Elizabethan actor in black make-up, but which, particularly for a modern black actor, are problematic. He must make no comment when his wife effectively says, 'I know he's as ugly as sin, but he has a beautiful mind' ('I saw Othello's visage in his mind').\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

The present writer suggests that the contemporary black Othello working with an all-white cast would probably be expected to get on with delivering and coping with the impact of such language and its connotations alone. With Talawa's mixed cast however,

\textsuperscript{95} Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas's London home, 3 September 2000.
\textsuperscript{96} Hugh Quarshie, 'Second Thoughts about \textit{Othello}', based on Quarshie's ‘Hesitations on Othello’, given by the author as the Birthday Lecture at the Shakespeare centre, Stratford upon Avon, 24 April 1998, p.13.
‘racially offensive’ language (in a contemporary context) can be creatively dealt with to set up the possibility for the language of the performance to be interpreted in ways that were perhaps not originally intended. This means that the ‘burden’ of ‘problematic’ language can be handled by the whole cast and offer multiple interpretations. This is seen in the following incidences in Talawa’s performance.

When Letts’s Iago tells Mair’s Brabantio that ‘the old black ram is tupping your white ewe . . .’ the disgust that Letts’s Iago is meant to impart with his statement has an element of comedy for the present writer. This is due to the fact that Adams’s Emilia is black and Letts’s Iago is married to her. How disgusted can he really be then by a mixed race union? Similarly if Thomas’s Othello and Stockbridge’s Desdemona are ‘making the beast with two backs’, presumably this is what Letts’s Iago thinks of the sexual activity that he has with his own wife. As Thomas’s Othello is already the product of such a union there can then be no mystery as to the type of human being that can result from cross-cultural sexual activity. Perhaps Brabantio need not be so afraid after all.

When Letts’s Iago expounds on the nature of women for the benefit of Adams’s Emilia, Stockbridge’s Othello and Buffong’s Cassio, ‘If she be black and there to have a wit, she’ll find a white that shall her blackness fit,’ his statement can be seen to refer to his own personal life. In productions where Emilia is white Iago’s comment is not founded in any fact that he offers to his listeners and appears simply to be loutish bravado.
Bearing in mind his marriage into black culture his comment to Driver's Rodrigo, '...we work by wit and not by witchcraft' may either appear to be founded because of his black connections, or seen to be ridiculous precisely because of them. This connection also turns his comment to Cassio, '...to the health of black Othello', on its head. Buffong's considerably darker Cassio must wonder what colour he is described as by Letts's Iago.

Additionally, for the present writer there are comments in traditional English productions of Othello that may define or cast aspersions on a character's social status. Due to Talawa's mixed casting however, some of these comments may appear to reflect contemporary stereotypical statements on black people. This is seen where Adams's Emilia questions Stockbridge's Desdemona, 'Who would not make their husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?' The present writer suggests that it is possible to interpret this 'free' attitude to infidelity as a part of Adams's Emilia's blackness. A possible image that is understood from this is that whilst the black wife appears to think little of an infidelity that brings reward, a white wife remains faithful. Also, when Adams's Emilia asks Thomas's Othello, 'What should such a fool do with so good a wife' there is a suggestion that the black man is perhaps not good enough for the white woman even from a black perspective.

The above comment and traditional performances of the play may invite the suggestion that the black man both on and off stage is in many ways inadequate. For the present writer however, there are aspects of Thomas's thought process prior to accepting, and then in developing his Othello in Talawa's production, that demonstrate the contemporary
black actor (and by extension his approach to the roles he plays), is both creatively able, and in theatrical terms politically conscious.

On noting Thomas as Talawa’s Othello the present writer felt that there were potentially two physical areas that would make it difficult for Thomas to be a credible Othello without traditional stereotypes being broken. The first was Thomas’s light skin colour as discussed above. Secondly, was Thomas’s youthful appearance. Whilst Thomas was in his early forties at the time of the performance, and there is no mention in Shakespeare’s play that Othello is a particularly old man, traditional productions have tended to have Othello played by older performers. The young looking light-skinned Othello would not have been the most obvious physical choice. Similarly for Thomas the role of Othello was not his first choice of Shakespearean roles, ‘I resisted it, I was resentful personally, honestly because it’s the cage I expected people to want me to sit in occasionally, to be the black Shakespeare role.’ 97

The fact that Thomas was able to delay playing the role points to what may be seen as a lack of need to accept all work that came his way. Whilst the majority of black performers may not be in an equally fortunate position Thomas can be seen to attribute a portion of this privileged situation to his belief that ‘lighter skinned black actors have a better chance in this country than darker ones . . . they’re (in Thomas’s opinion of the mainstream) more palatable to the audience.’ 98

97 Interview with Ben Thomas by David Johnson, Thomas’s London home, 3 September 2000.
98 Ibid.
Another part of Thomas's resistance to the role was based on what can be seen as the burden he felt the role carried with it. His theatrical conscience did not allow him to ignore the fact that unlike his white counterparts Thomas was not at liberty to play the role without the possibility of the negative aspects of Othello's character, and the play generally, appearing representative of all black men and black actors. Thomas states, 'Othello is bound up in so much bigotry . . . it seems to pander even to today's audience about their prejudices . . . put an alien in a position of authority and they'll screw it up.'

He continues:

On the sexual side of things . . . anything that is exciting and exotic might steal away our most beautiful prizes . . . and no good will come of it . . . it's not a story that I think is necessarily as interesting as some of the others . . . particularly if you and your race are cast in the role of the thief.

Thomas had the choice of not accepting the role or playing it and running the risk of living up to the negative images he felt it carried. He chose to approach the role with the idea of making a difference and attempted to do this by creating a reason for all of Othello's actions aiming to show that Othello ' . . . was not a fool but had just been foolish.'

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
With this in mind Thomas can be seen to have developed his character’s history so that his presentation of Othello would make sense within the context of the range of behaviour he displays in the play. In this regard negative behaviour could not be attributed to his blackness but rather related to concrete personal facts. So in order to justify his killing of Stockbridge’s Desdemona, Thomas’s Othello was made a Muslim. As a Muslim it could be argued that the death of evil was a good thing. In spite of his intentions, efforts and insights, Thomas was however, unable to give the audience the Othello he wanted to present:

... I played a character that I couldn’t be proud of because he was less of a man than I wanted him to be and I couldn’t make him an icon with a flaw... his flaws were too great... we would have had to totally change the play.¹⁰²

Whilst Thomas’s social conscience is admirable, it must be remembered that he is an actor. Is it reasonable then that Thomas should feel he has to change the characters he plays so that they are all flawless rather than human in order to ensure that blacks are more fairly represented? Whilst this question is not answered here, it points through Thomas, to one of the many dilemmas that contemporary black performers face in considering the role of Othello.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Ibid.
Quarshie echoes Thomas’s thoughts, ‘...if a genuinely black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate or even true?’\textsuperscript{103} He goes further, ‘Of all the parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor.’\textsuperscript{104} The present writer suggests that the latter comment can be understood as a reasonable statement within the knowledge that Othello was perhaps never intended to be a real black man, but was rather to remain a white impersonation of one. This notion can be supported by the fact that Shakespeare appears to suggest that Othello behaves negatively because he is black, thereby creating a role that would perhaps not be attractive to blacks and by extension may be seen to suggest that the play was never intended for them.\textsuperscript{105}

As it seems, Othello was originally intended for a white actor and white audience, it may also be argued that when played by a black actor the actor is perhaps required to shed himself of all vestiges of his natural ‘blackness’ in favour of impersonating a black man to a remit and description prepared for and aimed at feeding the prejudices of whites. Quarshie suggests a possible solution to the black ‘dilemma’ of playing Othello, ‘... perhaps black actors could simply decline to play the role on the grounds that it should only be played by a white actor, with or without black make-up. This would of course have the merit of allowing black actors to play Iago.’\textsuperscript{106}

Whilst the present writer agrees with Quarshie that black actors should be able to play the

\textsuperscript{103} Quarshie, ‘Second Thoughts about Othello’, p.4.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p.8.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p.22.
role of Iago this should not be instead of playing Othello, and suggests that it would be more beneficial for black performers generally for black theatre companies like Talawa to continue doing the work. Such productions would create the opportunity for the outdated elements of the work (in the context of a contemporary multicultural audience) to be challenged creatively and would eventually allow black actors to feel less burdened with having to have a social conscience with every play they work on. New productions may also bring unforeseen performance issues to the fore.

In this light Talawa’s performance of *Othello* can be seen to have impacted on mainstream theatre and helped to fuel the debate as to whether the role of Othello is the preserve of one particular race. That Talawa should have performed the work and highlighted that it can indeed be performed by blacks, and that the Royal National Theatre, featuring a black Othello (David Harewood) at the same time as Talawa’s production did the same, does not appear to have been welcomed by factions the mainstream press:

I don’t know whether anyone has actually decreed that the part of Othello should only be played by black actors, but such is the convention which has come into force in contemporary theatre. It is a serious restriction on artistic freedom, and its chief practical effect is that Othello now gets produced less often than any of the other major Shakespeare tragedies.107
For the present writer Gross is failing to acknowledge that it would seem reasonable that where a character has been created specifically to make a comment on his blackness that that character may also be played by a black actor on the contemporary British stage. If, as Gross appears to state, Othello is being produced less because the theatre establishment now view the part as a black role, he can also be seen to be suggesting that British theatre is not greatly interested in attracting the black performers who could be cast in the role. Gross’s notion that only black performers can play the part appears to stem from two 1997 London productions of the show, one of which is Talawa’s. Gross’s statement can be seen then to be an exaggeration. For the present writer it is Gross’s anxiety that indicates the nature of how some theatre practitioners and critics may feel about black artists performing Shakespeare at all, and how ill prepared they can be seen to be to lend their support to this development in British theatre.

What the present writer regards as a continued lack of support from the white mainstream at the time of the 1997 performances can be seen in Lister’s comments in reference to the Royal National Theatre’s production of Othello:

... no white actor with a similar background would be playing the lead in a Shakespeare tragedy at the NT.

Harewood, 32, has never yet acted in a national company or West End play, but has starred in British regional theatre and in Anthony and Cleopatra off Broadway. Meanwhile the role is barred at the highest level to every white actor in the

There is an edge and bitterness in Lister's comment that perhaps demonstrates part of the attitude that Talawa and indeed all black theatre practitioners may be up against from the mainstream. For the present writer, this kind of attitude encourages marginalisation. As Talawa does not wish to marginalise itself this may be problematic for the company and critics like Lister. Lister continues, '. . .it's a great shame to deprive white actors of one of the most demanding roles in the repertoire.' The fact that he does not mention the possibility of another black actor (with in his view better credentials for the part), perhaps suggests that he either does not think there is one, or that he does not wish to entertain this idea as his focus is on the notion that the part should only be played by a white actor. Additionally, his use of the emotive verb 'deprive' in relation to white actors on the British stage (who cannot be seen to have been denied access to any area of work in British theatre), may be seen to illustrate that the critic is perhaps unwilling to encourage black actors to perform in Shakespeare plays generally. A single mainstream theatre critic's expression of what can be seen as a negative view towards black performers and their prospects of playing Shakespeare could have a detrimental effect on the general mainstream view of such work. With this in mind Lister's comments may be regarded by some as strategic to achieve this aim.

For the present writer this range of attitudes towards the performance of the character Othello would suggest that the interest and thought the role provokes for black and white

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108 David Lister, 'Can it be wrong to 'black up' for Othello?', Independent, 7 August 1997, p.13.
109 Ibid.
theatre practitioners alike makes the role too important for it not to be performed by a particular racial group. Performances from the widest cultural sphere may, like Talawa's version, present the work in a new, contemporary and relevant light. Is it not time to welcome this type of theatrical change?

Throughout this chapter the present writer has illustrated some of what Talawa Theatre Company can be seen to have achieved through its performance of English plays. The company has challenged notions of black theatre in Britain generally, but also specifically by demonstrating how black theatre practitioners may wish to approach and perform this type of work. The work also gave black performers the opportunity to work within a genre that they may otherwise have been excluded from, as well as afforded white performers the possibility to experience this type of work with black performers. Additionally, Talawa's performances also gave its audience the chance to expand its viewing repertoire.

In keeping with the company's mission statement Talawa's performances of the English plays can be seen to have met all three of the company's aims by enriching British theatre through showing how black culture and experience can change the meaning of the traditional text thus making it more relevant to Talawa's contemporary British audience. By extension this achievement may also be regarded as having helped the company to reflect the important role of black British theatre in the national and international arena, and to have encouraged the growth of Talawa's audience by making the English plays accessible to both the black community and the mainstream. Finally, the present writer
believes that Talawa should be actively encouraged to continue to produce work in this area, both to enable the company to develop artistically and so that performances of English plays with black actors are no longer seen as a novelty but ultimately accepted as a part of contemporary British theatre.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction the present writer has aimed to demonstrate the positive and innovative contribution that Talawa Theatre Company can be seen to have made to modern British theatre through what he describes as his contemporary black British perspective. The present writer’s comments in the proceeding chapters are shown to be the result of his study of a range of sociolinguistic theories and Talawa’s mission statement used to highlight the company’s achievements. Additionally, extensive research conducted using Talawa’s archives, in particular Talawa’s production videos, working professionally with Talawa both as a theatre practitioner and as a Board member, and carrying out numerous interviews and surveys, have provided the evidence for much of the discussion throughout this thesis. The following conclusion is divided into two areas. Firstly, Talawa’s history and achievements as discussed throughout this thesis are briefly summed up. Secondly, the present writer offers his recommendations for the company’s future.

It may be argued that the history of a theatre company is reflected in the history of the country that the company comes from. The present writer points to this being the case for Talawa (as discussed in Chapter Two) because the company’s theatrical roots are shown by the present writer to have originated in Africa. These were added to by the removal of Africans from Africa to Jamaica with slavery, and finally further developed with the permanent movement of Jamaican Yvonne Brewster to England in 1970. Talawa’s history as a performance company as illustrated in Chapter Three demonstrates the wealth and
range of work that the company has achieved between 1986 and 2001, whilst pointing to the company’s ability to break artistic barriers and establish Talawa as Britain’s leading black theatre company.

Throughout this thesis the present writer has illustrated how Talawa’s artistic achievement is seen in a range of areas. Firstly, the company has been both innovative and forward thinking in the magnitude of performance work it has covered since its inception. Regularly performing work within the four distinct genres of African, American, Caribbean and English plays Talawa has demonstrated both the company’s flexibility and willingness to extend the accepted repertoire of black British theatre. Secondly, the themes that the company’s performances explore allow Talawa’s audience to be introduced to, and examine parts of its history in a theatrical forum that is generally unavailable in British theatre. The range of work that Talawa performs and the themes explored within the work lead to what the present writer sees as Talawa’s third significant artistic achievement. This is Talawa’s use of oral language for performance.

The present writer has shown that Talawa’s work within this area can be described within the sociolinguistic theories of sociology of language and language style as audience design, and a range of sociolinguistic concepts related to these theories in addition to the sociolinguistic concepts of linguistic accommodation and linguistic behaviour. Talawa’s range of language use was also suggested to have highlighted the complexity of language within the wider black British community.
Performing in voices from Africa, the Caribbean, America and England Talawa has also been able to highlight the relevance of this range of speech to the black British community. Additionally, the company's attempts to develop accurate speech for its performances within each speech form performed points to the close link between language and specific cultural identity. In portraying a range of black communities Talawa can be seen throughout the thesis to have aimed to distinguish each community by its speech style.

Fourthly, Talawa's mission statement as outlined in Chapter Three has allowed the company to maintain a clear artistic vision which has led the company in all of the artistic achievements outlined above. Without exception all Talawa's work can be seen to have achieved the company's first aim 'to use black culture and experience to further enrich British theatre'. Without Talawa's work the London stage would have seen much less black performance generally over the past fifteen years. It is at least in part due to the company's consistency since its inception that black British theatre is now recognised as a genre within British theatre. The acceptance of this genre may also be seen as the acknowledgement of a new dimension to a branch of British theatre history as seen in Chapter Three.

Talawa's productions can also be seen to have met the criteria for its second and third aims in its mission statement by 'providing productions that reflect the significant creative role that black theatre plays within the national and international arena', and by 'enlarging theatre audiences from the black community'. Though the quality of the productions may
be debated as has been seen throughout the thesis, the company’s work has shown that black theatre is a necessary and growing aspect of national and international theatre. For the present writer this last point is highlighted by the success of Talawa’s American plays showing how black theatre from either side of the Atlantic can be appreciated and understood by Talawa’s audience. Similarly, Talawa’s success may be measured by its growing black audience that appears to be loyal to the company regardless of the genre of the work that is being performed.

For the present writer, Talawa’s artistic achievements can also be said to have directly benefited individual performers as Talawa’s work has undoubtedly provided black performers with acting opportunities that do not appear to have been available to them in the wider mainstream. The work that the company has performed has meant that both Caribbean and black British performers have been able to develop both in culture specific as well as mainstream styles of work. For the present writer this allows each performer the chance to demonstrate her/his multiple performance skills that should in turn discourage any pigeon holing from the mainstream. Talawa’s artistic work can be seen to have provided a significant training ground then for black performers in Britain. The company has also enabled white performers to develop an understanding of black British theatre by the roles that it has given to white actors.

As shown in Chapter Three Talawa’s artistic achievements go far beyond theatrical performances. The company can be seen to have offered numerous black artists the opportunity to develop their art through: The Women’s Writers Project, Talawa’s
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Education Programme, two Zebra Crossing Seasons, Talawa’s Summer School, and the company’s Blackgrounds video project. Talawa’s biggest artistic achievement however, may be seen as the company’s moving black British theatre to the West End by obtaining its residency at The Cochrane Theatre. Despite the lack of clarity surrounding the reasons for Talawa not being allowed to extend its lease, Talawa showed that reaching the West End (although this has not been achieved by any black theatre company since), was not beyond a black theatre company in Britain.

In addition to what Talawa has achieved artistically the present writer further suggests that the company’s artistic achievements may also be shown to have impacted on areas outside Talawa. This may firstly be illustrated with the company’s audience that has been able to see many more black performers on the British stage as well as white performers in black productions. Talawa was initially presenting a new kind of work for an Afro/Caribbean audience. In the past black audience members may have seen work by black companies with a black audience in mind but their existence was often short-lived with the performance of one-off shows. Through Talawa’s performances the black audience members were able to witness their issues being dealt with analysed and discussed in a creative forum in a long-term way that the mainstream had not generally offered. This in turn could lead to the raising of self-esteem, pride in cultural history and language for Talawa’s audience.

Additionally, Talawa’s work can also be shown to have had a significant impact for the wider black community as the company’s regular performances can be seen as a sign of
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Talawa's continued success. This success would suggest that there was a space in the theatrical market for black theatre performers within a black British theatre setting. This in turn could also intimate to members of Talawa's audience in other industries that they could be successful working within a niche market catering to a specific client. When Talawa introduced its audience to American and English works the company was also aiming at widening its audience. Similarly, Talawa's audience members could have used the impact of this expansion to be inspired to enlarge their own business endeavours by trying to attract a wider client base that was not made up purely of black people. For the present writer there are two specific areas of work outside theatre that Talawa can be seen to have impacted on that should also be briefly noted.

For the black media Talawa can be seen to have been at the centre of all artistic discussion from being reviewed by them, running features on Brewster and other Talawa performers, to awarding accolades to the company. The Black press have also demonstrated their support for Talawa's productions and have always offered positive reviews. Additionally, Talawa's work can be seen to have impacted on the teaching of drama, and specifically on the development of the range of approaches to text. This is seen in Talawa's after performance workshops that are aimed at secondary school students. Talawa has offered its educational packages for all genres of the company's work. Talawa's Blackgrounds project may also be seen as illustrating part of the impact that Talawa has had in education. As the video project is seen as a valuable research and educational resource it has been housed both on video and CD rom at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden.
In addition to the impact on its audience members, the press and education, Talawa's work can be seen to have had a considerable effect on the British theatre world as a whole. This is illustrated by the fact that initially the company was in competition for funding with other British small-scale theatre groups, continually got funding and was able to gradually increase to middle scale theatre. Additionally, as the longest surviving black British theatre company Talawa has secured a place for itself in contemporary British theatre history.

For the present writer Talawa's success and longevity has at least in part stemmed from a willingness to dare. Aspects of this trait can also be seen however to have received a negative reception from the mainstream as is demonstrated by part of the response to Talawa's productions of English plays. The negative reviews as discussed in Chapter Six can be seen at least to partly suggest that the mainstream was not in favour of a black company taking up the challenge of this kind of work.

The present writer's discussion of Talawa's artistic achievements throughout this thesis and the above note on the impact that the company's work has had outside of Talawa itself, demonstrate both the burden of representation that the company carries on its shoulders and a possible consequence of misrepresentation. From Talawa's array of artistic achievements the present writer suggests that the company has successfully carried the artistic burden of representation as defined in the introduction. Additionally, the present writer can be seen to have shown throughout this thesis that where the mainstream has commented negatively on Talawa's work the consequences of misrepresentation
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(whether on the part of Talawa or the press) have not gone beyond bad reviews. It should be remembered however, that further consequences of misrepresentation as outlined in the introduction still remain a possibility for Talawa.

In order for the company to avoid these consequences as it has for the past fifteen years and to continue to make a positive contribution over the next fifteen years in British theatre, the present writer believes that Talawa will need to focus on its development in four central areas:

- The role of the board.

- The development of an Artistic Director to succeed Brewster.

- Implementation of new artistic projects.

- Establishing a permanent base for the company.

For the present writer the existing hands-on Board could be divided into two groups with clear responsibilities. The first group could plan and ensure the development of work that would allow Talawa to fully document its history and the lives and work of those black artists working in Britain who have influenced Talawa’s inception and work to date. The second group could focus on Talawa’s present and work specifically on developing Talawa’s vision. The recommended structure would allow Talawa to focus on actively
using its past whilst developing its present and future. The present writer further recommends that the Board members use their specific career expertise to enhance the development of the company. In this regard Board members would become a specific resource to those involved in the day to day running of the company.

In terms of artistic direction it is important to recognise that Talawa may have difficulty finding a new Artistic Director if the hope is that the company should be artistically led by a black theatre practitioner on Brewster’s retirement. This is due to the fact that there appears presently to be a lack of black theatre directors with the experience to take on the artistic directorship of the company. Additionally, from initial research conducted by both Brewster and Talawa’s Board those theatre directors of African and Caribbean descent who have the appropriate experience do not appear eager to express an interest in the post. With this in mind the post of Artistic Director may well be awarded to a candidate with exceptional potential rather than experience.

The present writer is of the belief that the second phase of the company’s story should be led by a black British Artistic Director. It would seem fitting that the British born theatrical descendants of those who started Talawa would be most appropriate to take the company forward. Where Talawa’s work can be seen to have established an historical performance base for black theatre in Britain, the present writer recommends that a central aspect of its future is in work which discusses the contemporary existence of blacks who were born here.

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In addition to the range of projects that Talawa already runs the present writer recommends that the company considers developing the following three types of work:

- A director's training programme.

- Black British writing.

- Archival and heritage projects.

In a bid to create new theatre directors Talawa could seek to second trainees and offer them the opportunity of working alongside the established Artistic Director of the company. Talawa could also consider the possibility of working with a new trainee director for one production each year. Implementation of the above ideas would help to start the process of creating a store of needed black theatre directors in Britain. The consequences of such work not being undertaken in the near future could result in Talawa being artistically leaderless when the company enters a new phase in years to come.

The present writer also recommends that significant energy is put into finding and nurturing new black British writing. This is important if Talawa's work is to be relevant to a new generation of black people in Britain. Nurturing of black writing should not be gender based but should welcome black Britons of both sexes as the amount and range of work that is presently available to black theatregoers is too limited for new endeavours to be restricted by gender.

\[2\text{Ibid., p.3.}\]
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Whilst Talawa forges ahead to retain and improve its standing in black British theatre specifically and British theatre generally, the work that has already been achieved should be carefully documented. In this regard Talawa should develop a theatre archive. The present writer also recommends that video materials, publications, and all other records are housed in an archive that may be accessible to the public. If Talawa’s work and that of other black theatre practitioners’ is not documented, later generations will find that they are constantly reinventing the wheel or, that they are buying into the notion that black theatre has not existed for long, or where it has, has not been ‘serious’ or ‘important’ enough to document.

As a last recommendation the present writer suggests that Talawa would benefit from having its own permanent residence. This would give the company a home that it could control and manage. In addition to being able to perform in its own space a permanent residence would enable the company to use the facility as a venue for new black theatre companies to showcase their work, as well provide room for housing a public archive of black theatre history. As Talawa has always been a London based company it has built its reputation in the London region. Due to the fact that London has the largest groups of Afro/Caribbean people, it would be advisable to keep the base there as this would allow the company to continue to cater for an essential part of its target audience.3 If Talawa

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3 In January 1999 a group of consultants, under the leadership of Judith Strong, were commissioned by Talawa to research and produce a report on the company. In May 1999 they produced the following document: *Talawa Theatre Company Feasibility Study Phase 1: Final Report Comprising Executive Summary, Options Analysis, Buildings Search and Appraisal* (unpublished), prepared for Talawa’s Board, May 1999. P.6. of *Options Analysis* gives the percentages of black people living in Greater London: 58% of Black Caribbeans, 79% of Black Africans, and 44% of other black people. (Figures taken from the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) fact sheet 1999).
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continues to develop and has its own space it is possible that this growth will inspire new black theatre companies to develop in Britain.

For the present writer Talawa has set the stage for its continued development and also for black theatre companies not to be seen as a novelty on the British stage. If the novelty factor is taken out of black performance because it is seen as a regular and accepted part of British theatre, there is also a possibility that this will happen with other areas of black artistic endeavour in Britain. As these black artists break into the mainstream they will further impact on all areas of artistic work in Britain possibly creating more openings for black artists along the way.

Finally, as an established company in a secure space the present writer suggests that (in light of the achievements that have gone before), Talawa is likely to continue to break new ground by presenting a range of theatre based work that will speak with relevance to all those who consider themselves part of Britain’s increasingly multicultural society. For the present writer, the fact that Talawa, firstly as a small and then middle scale theatre company has continued to perform as well as develop and run new projects despite a lack of funding, and (at times) mainstream support, shows both that the company is probably here to stay and also illustrates the accuracy of the company’s name. What has been discussed here as fifteen years of Talawa’s history, performance work and achievements between 1986 and 2001 is perhaps only the beginning of what the company has to offer contemporary British theatre generally, and the genre of black British theatre specifically. If this is the case this is an aspect of
modern British theatre that its audience and critics alike can look forward to being entertained and challenged by throughout the twenty first century.
APPENDIX I

DAVID JOHNSON TALKS TO YVONNE BREWSTER ABOUT LOUISE BENNETT

The following interview is an edited version of the interview published in Kunappi, Vol. x. no.1 (1998) 72-82.

YB: Well, Louise Bennett is like a large comfortable duvet (laughter). Yes, I believe a duvet because a duvet has a very practical use in that it keeps you warm.... what a European image eh? .....for such a sunny West Indian lady, but I expect it’s because it’s snowing outside why that comes to mind. Her warmth is all enveloping, but her precision is like the stitching around the edge of the duvet.

She thinks clearly, she thinks ironically and she thinks musically. She is an incredible source of inspiration for anybody who has any concern about the value of West Indian literature......the value of our Jamaican to be precise, because she wouldn’t refer to herself as a West Indian she’d refer to herself always as a Jamaican, rather as I do, because I think there is a vast difference between the islands...

And it isn’t Louise go lightly it’s Louise go very detailedly. She has all her reference points she knows her historical data, so when she can take things like immigration to England and write, in that particular poem about, Colonisation
in Reverse, which is probably one of the most important sociological pieces of poetry ever written in the West Indies... then you understand how she can be so precise in such a short poem, and even if you don’t speak the dialect you are in no doubt about what that poem actually means.

She would take on stuff like cricket and the poaching of people’s culture by the British and do it in such a precise and stinging way whilst smiling all the while. I love it. And it’s so Jamaican, cos Jamaicans actually naturally speaking don’t get heavy. There’s always that little kind of laugh but you’ve got to see below it. I remember always, and Louise says this, ‘Ha, better laugh than cry’ or ‘If I don’t laugh I will cry’, and the threat in the ‘cry’ is important to recognise. So Louise Bennett, her whole personality, her whole effervescence, is one of laid back gentility and proactive cultural invasiveness. It’s a fantastic combination and I have to say that her husband Eric, and I think tribute must be paid to him, had a great deal to do with keeping her in the manner in which she would be able to continue being like this.

DJ: How did he do that?

YB: Well, because he understood (laughter). Husbands often don’t... and he was a fantastic support. Husbands often get jealous of a person of large, I keep saying
large of course the woman weighs an impressive amount, but that’s not the heaviness I mean...I mean heavy in terms of her comment, although it always appeared so light to the audiences, and with children.

I remember she used to have a television show in the early days of television in Jamaica called, *Ring Ding*. A programme for young people always recorded. That was very sophisticated in those days you know. Louise would go home to this amazing house that she had up in Gordon Town, Kingston. She had this enormous bedroom in which there was this huge four-poster. It must have been at least eight feet square, you know almost canopied ...... and stuck up at one corner of the room was this television on top of the wardrobe.

Now, it was before the time of colour television right, so over this screen was spread a bit of theatrical gel, coloured gel, to give it that warm glow. So you had this kind of pinky straw coloured gel, and she would lie in the bed, frothed up with all these wonderfully embroidered white cushions and pillow cases, and she would lie down, in state, in the bed and watch *Ring Ding* on Saturday afternoon when it was being transmitted. Now, those of us younger people who regarded Louise Bennett as a saint would sometimes go up there and watch her watching herself on television.
DJ: Could you just explain how you came into contact with Louise Bennett in the first place?

YB: Oh, I don’t know. It seems I was born in her lap. I’ve never known a time when I didn’t know Louise, I don’t remember meeting her d’you see, so I must have come into her presence before memory jogged. Funny no one’s ever asked me that. Anyway, one day I took a little girl called Maxine... she was one of my mother’s many adopted children, who I took as my daughter if you like. I took Maxine with me, and Maxine at the time was about three and a half. So we sat down on the bed, and Louise is giving cashew nuts and Christmas pudding and plantain and she was always eating, right. So we lay down in this bed, three women, one three and a half, me in my thirties or something, or late twenties, and Louise Bennett, I don’t know how old, no one asks Louise’s age. So we’re watching this, and then and Maxine starts to cry. We can’t understand and then Louise realises what is wrong. Maxine is looking at the television and looking at the bed, and looking at the television and looking at the bed, and she’s not seeing the same thing coming out of the mouth of Louise, and so you know Louise said it to put the child at rest. Isn’t that a fascinating thing? That’s Louise Bennett. She appealed to everyone from small children to adults who would go and watch her and Maas Ranny in pantomime every year. These people felt they were watching their culture, their life distilled if you like.
DJ: What was the pantomime actually like?

YB: Well pantomime in Jamaica started nearly sixty years ago. It started with the expatriates, the white expatriates wanting 'something to do'. There was this amazing Frank Matcham theatre, the exact spitting image of The Theatre Royal Stratford East, but twice the size darling and twice as nice. It had all the plush, all the cupids and that's where they did the first pantomime. I think it was either *Sinbad the Sailor* or *Jack and the Beanstalk*. So all of the white people were dressed up in lederhosen and slapping their thighs and had principal boys and stuff. This existed for quite a few years whilst they amused themselves you see...and then the Jamaicans, typical Jamaican, decided (kissing her teeth) 'Tekin' ova yu noh!' So this is when Louise and Ranny started to do it. I think that the first Jamaican pantomime with Jamaican overtones was a thing called *Busha Bluebeard*, where we had some black people on stage dealing with Anancy, the folkloric hero we celebrate. Anancy’s genesis is in Ghana... which is where I think most Jamaicans came from.

In the Golden Age of the Jamaican pantomime it was produced by the Fowlers. They must not be forgotten, people sort of try and go on as if they didn’t do anything. They did. Greta and Henry Fowler were white Jamaicans, but Jamaicans with a sense of history, who encouraged the Jamaicanisation of the pantomime. They were the ones who put the money behind it to produce it so
that Louise could do it. That’s what Louise is best known for, and wasn’t she marvellous!

I always remember as a youngster helping out with the direction of the pantomime called *Morgan’s Dream of Old Port Royal*. It was a kind of historical pantomime about the buccaneer, who became governor of Jamaica, on the principle that if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em. He was such a pirate they made him governor so that Jamaica stopped being pirated. It was a lovely thing... and I was assisting Rex Nettleford I think, who was directing this. This was my foray into directing. I used to act at the time, I was terrible actually, but I learnt very quickly, and any time anybody was sick, who would do the part? Yvonne.

So I was the kind of roving male understudy. Louise was starring in the thing, but she was sick, and for the first time in the history of the pantomime someone went on and did Louise’s part... and it was me. I knew the lines and everything, And I thought ‘Yeah!’, I wasn’t nervous or anything, cos when you’re young you’re so stupid.... and I did four parts.

**DJ:** And you say you can’t act?

**YB:** I respect great actors.. when you are working with really great actors...
I think Mona Hammond, up there on the wall behind you is a great actress. When you’re working with people like that, Jeffrey Kissoon, Norman Beaton, they’re all in this room the people I really regard. Yes, when you work with them and you see the depth of their talent you know that you’re a joker.

DJ: So what about that part then? What happened when you performed it?

Stepping into Louise Bennett’s shoes...

YB: Never thinking you know that all these twenty how many years of tradition everybody came to see Louise Bennett. Louise Bennett sick you know, and usually if Louise was sick they just cancelled the show. Now things were getting much more commercial in those days you know, and cancelling a show, ‘can’t cancel show’.

Without thinking that these people would be so shocked, when I went on and I heard the reaction, like, ‘A weh di’l’, that’s when I was shocked, but darling I’m a trouper right. I won them over, because they didn’t want me, they didn’t know who the hell I was. I was a nobody you know, nobody knew me. At that time, I
was on radio, they didn’t know my face. I used to have a dastardly kind of programme on radio called *Open House*, and I was producing some television. When I came down for my bow, and Louise was the last person and everything...I said to Lois Kelly Barrow, ‘You do the last bow, I’m not doing it’. She said, ‘Don’t be so daft’. So she came down with me and Ranny ...... and the audience really applauded... through the generosity of the other actors.... I have to say....

DJ: But it must have been good...

YB: I’m not gonna say it wasn’t good, it was fantastic it’s one of my life long memories actually. The cheek, and the sort of....arrogance, I don’t know I think it was arrogance, I think it was, well the show must go on....

DJ: What did Louise say?

YB: Louise was great.. she said, ‘Well A cyan get sick again now’, and of course she never was because she’s a trouper. She was great...Louise doesn’t have time for petty rubbish. She’s a giant.
DJ: After the pantomime I think what happened next was the Radio shows, in the sixties, *Miss Lou's Views*....

YB: Oh no, those were happening all the time, pantomime went straight through until the middle seventies you know.. *Miss Lou's Views* existed all the time... you see she wasn’t just doing one thing....commercials, Louise was jetting all over the world..... um... giving lectures, Louise went to RADA you know?.....

DJ: Did she ever speak to you about her experience of being in England?

YB: I never thought to ask ... I would be interested to find out what it was like. She wasn’t here for very long. I think she was here for a year at RADA.

DJ: So what about the radio shows?

YB: Radio shows? ..look, dem tings changed cultural perception, political perception. Aunty Roachy?. Look at all the things that Aunty Roachy would say.... you couldn’t say them things but, 'As my Aunty Roachy said to me the other day, don’t you think is about time the Prime Minister get a haircut?’. She wouldn’t be as crass as that. The haircut could really mean, ‘cut arf ‘im ed’. She
was very political. You can ask her about this, but the fact that she doesn’t live in Jamaica is an enduring shame to that country.

DJ: Why is it that she is not in Jamaica?

YB: Well I mean I think it was politics. I think she felt she had to leave.

DJ: It’s also interesting that she chose Canada.

YB: Yeah, but I think she had family up there and her husband is sick with his heart, and that was where he could get the best treatment you see. She has some things wrong with her as well, I think that’s where it’s best for her too. I read an article in a Toronto newspaper that a friend of mine at CBS sent to me, and she is really recognised as an important person in Toronto. Louise Bennett is a very sophisticated lady. Her education is first rate. She couldn’t be so politically accurate, and such a mover and shaker on the cultural scene, if she wasn’t in the possession of a very large brain.....in our house she was quoted. I think that somebody like that not living out their last years in Jamaica is a dying shame.

DJ: What you are saying is so positive yet speaking to Jamaicans who came here in
the 1950s, they seemed to have little, if any interest in Bennett and her work at
the time. I think it was because it highlighted so much of what they were about.

.......

YB: So it was embarrassing . . . ?

DJ: I think so...

YB: That's possible here you see. Let me give you an example....Barry Record had
the first black television play on in this country, called, *In the Beautiful
Caribbean* . . . he's a brilliant man, a brilliant West Indian.... he's highly
political. Barry wrote about the truth in the West Indies and this was a ninety
minute play on BBC 1 at peak time in the 1970s. They brought over Louise
Bennett to be in it, they brought Calvin Lochardt from Hollywood, Joan-Anne
Maynard, she played the ingenue. I was in some kind of funny production role.
It was showing the West Indies as it is, those people who have culturally closed
minds and who can be politically inactive.

DJ: What was the response here?
YB: First let me tell you it was brilliantly done, Philip Saville, one of most senior directors at the BBC directed it. They threw money at it, more than they would have done for a white production. There were things you know, all set up and sophisticated, but there were some scenes in down town Kingston in the wretched of the earth sort of scenario, and the people here complained. You know the switchboard was jammed with West Indians but principally Jamaicans phoning up to complain that one of the people in the thing had no shoes on, ‘An to seh as if everybody in Jamaica walk wid barefoot!’ The sum total of all the people phoning up to complain was that the BBC had shown some black people without shoes. Now I ask you, Where is our pride? Where is our kind of sense of humour? Where is our sense of place not to be able to recognise..... mind you those people were having a hard time here and people would laugh at them because the uninformed white trash didn’t know any better anyway. They went to work the next day, ‘I saw your people and they didn’t have any shoes on did they?’

In this sense Louise would have been an embarrassment to them, because it’s dialect that she’s speaking. I have come across this attitude with this kind of people when doing pantomime. Remember, I’ve been working in this country since 1971 you know, right, and I mean I was here before then as well, working in theatre, and I did a Louise Bennett pantomime and the white people came but the black people didn’t want to. They said, ‘Oh they’re just showing us as if we
can't speak proper English'. So there is a kind of self-hatred and a kind of
cultural disavowment that happens...

DJ: So what about the response in Jamaica to Louise Bennett?

YB: My impression, from pantomime is that she was adored. These were the people
that went up into the Gods. They saw themselves being shown on the stage, in
their own true sense, and I don't feel that there was an embarrassment. There's
embarrassment here because when you come to England, people make black
people feel that they are insufficient, not quite human. In a way some people
kind of try to make up for it by being more English than the English. When
Enoch Powell brought black people over from the West Indies to come and
work.. they came here by invitation you know. They never thought that they
would ever breed that they would ever need anywhere to live. They just thought
that they were a kind of extension of the slave trade.. so they wouldn't have any
personal needs. So as a black person facing an attitude of no dogs no Irish and
certainly no blacks, you have to have some kind of reaction, and I can't knock
it. I'm becoming much more understanding of that attitude to Louise
Bennett now as we discuss it, but I'd never really thought about it you see,
because I've never really taken on board that sociological point.
DJ: The attitude is changing within that generation because their children and grandchildren have a need to hold onto their roots and are more positive about their history. They are being influenced by succeeding generations, and so if anything like Louise Bennett’s work is brought into the home, the response, in many cases, is more welcoming than it would have been twenty years ago.

YB: Well I know, I know that myself from working with younger actors, and hearing my son’s views.

DJ: What about Louise Bennett’s direct influence on the work that you initially did in theatre? You played her part and then.....?

YB: Well, in the pantomime the influence is there totally. In the other work I have to say that I don’t think that she influenced me directly. Overall, I think as a primary source that was very important. My bent was more for, not for writing you see, because I always knew I couldn’t write, not even a letter...I always wanted to interpret. I want to see the forbearance rather than the present.

DJ: So Louise Bennett is not a direct influence?

YB: Not on my directing work but on the language, and how to approach text.
DJ: Tell me about that.

YB: Louise's text is so muscular and so paired down. I have to cut a lot of the plays that I do because I find sometimes that West Indian playwrights overwrite, kind of garrulous on the page. In working with Louise on pantomimes I learnt how she would use an inflection, and cut out a whole half a speech. That's the kind of thing I learnt from her.

DJ: So it's about structure?

YB: Yes. She will use one word to sum up, so it requires attention. Maas Ran was her cohort you know, but completely different to her. He came from the minstrel background, and had a different approach. The two of them were chalk and cheese and so made a good team. He would go on and on. Ranny would add words, add and add, and she'd be cutting. If you look at the structure of her poems, few of them are longer than a page, and look at what they say.

DJ: What about putting her poems into performance?

YB: The first thing I ever directed was when I was 14 and I was at school. They wanted something for some Harvest festival. I got the whole of the fourth form,
dressed them up, insisted on designing all these costumes and everything, and did a dramatised version of *Linseed Market*, ‘Carry me ackee go a Linseed Market.’ Now that is not a Louise Bennett poem, but I made the main character into a kind of Louise Bennett person, and then stole lines from various poems. I added them so that it elongated the thing and it lasted about twenty minutes. She wouldn’t know about this, because it was a school thing. I was nicking lines from her poems to illustrate Linseed Market you see. It was a big success, and the school made a postcard of the cast with a wheelbarrow and.... it’s all very pathetic but that was the first thing.

DJ: What about now and doing some of Louise Bennett’s work through Talawa?

YB: I have never thought about that... She is a major cultural figure in Jamaica, but I’m not sure how it would work here. I used to run the Festival Commission for the Jamaican Government, Mr Michael Manley you know. I’d go all round the island judging, adjudicating voice and speech, and never, in all the years of doing that, did I attend a recital where there weren’t at least five Louise Bennett poems. Everybody was a miniature Louise. That’s what you call having cultural influence. Today, if you go into the countryside especially, because Kingston is too into Dancehall and Ragga, Even go to St. Catherine, go to Spanish Town, and Louise is in force. *Colonisation in Reverse*, by Louise Bennett.’ Han’ a kimbo and they are off.
DJ: Can you imagine for example, a repeat of, or something similar to the *Zebra Crossing Season*, having a section where, some of Louise's poems are performed?

YB: Yes I could imagine it, but I would give it to somebody to do who wasn’t me. I would give it to a young black British person, and say right, what is cutting edge about this? It couldn’t be, oh let’s just go and have some recital of poems in dialect. For it to work it would have to go out on a limb of its own. You’ve set me thinking there...just as we’ve run out of time.

DJ: It would be great to see Louise’s work performed by Talawa. Yvonne, thank you very much for sharing your fascinating experiences and for giving me so much of your time.

YB: It has been a pleasure.
APPENDIX II

LIST OF TALAWA PRODUCTIONS

1986
THE BLACK JACOBINS
by CLR James
21 February - 15 March
Performed at the Riverside Studios London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1986
AN ECHO IN THE BONE
by Dennis Scott
24 June - 19 July
Performed at Drill Hall Arts Centre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1988
O BABYLON - The Musical
by Derek Walcott and Galt McDermot
4 February - 12 March
Performed at the Riverside Studios London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1989
THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME
by Ola Rotimi
31 October - 25 November
In association with the Everyman Theatre Liverpool
Performed at the Riverside Studios London and the Everyman Theatre Liverpool
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1989
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
by Oscar Wilde
19 April - 13 May
Co-production with the Tyne Theatre Company Newcastle
Performed at the Tyne Theatre and Opera House Newcastle and the Bloomsbury Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster
1990
THE DRAGON CAN'T DANCE
by Earl Lovelace
29 June - 4 August
Co-production with the Theatre Royal Stratford East
Performed at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1991
ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA
by William Shakespeare
16 May - 15 June
Co-production with the Everyman Theatre Liverpool
Performed at the Everyman Theatre Liverpool and the Bloomsbury Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1992
THE ROAD
by Wole Soyinka
26 February - 28 March
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1992
SMILE ORANGE
by Trevor Rhone
28 April - 30 May
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Trevor Rhone

1992
THE LOVE SPACE DEMANDS
by Ntozake Shange
1 - 31 October
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster
1992
NECKLACES
by Tariq Ali
6 - 31 October
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Topher Campbell

1992
ARAWAK GOLD
by Carmen Tipling and Ted Dwyer
10 December - 16 January
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1993
FROM THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA
by Dr Endesha Ida Mae Holland
1 April - 1 May
Co-produced with the Contact Theatre Company Manchester
Performed at the Contact Theatre Manchester and the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Annie Castledine

1993
THE LION
by Michael Abbensetts
30 September - 23 October
3 - 13 November
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London and the Ward Theatre Foundation
Kingston, Jamaica
Director London: Horace Ové
Director Kingston: Yvonne Brewster

1994
KING LEAR
by William Shakespeare
24 February - 12 March
Performed at the Nia Centre Manchester, the Queen’s Theatre Barnstable, the Oxford Playhouse and the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster
1994

**MOOI STREET MOVES**
by Paul Slabolepszy
6 - 17 September
A production by the South African Company Footpaul presented by Talawa
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Lara Foot

1994

**RESURRECTIONS**
by Biyi Bandele-Thomas
28 September - 29 October
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1994

**MASKERADE**
by Sylvia Wynter
9 December - 14 January
Performed at the Cochrane Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1995

**TIS PITY SHE’S A WHORE**
by John Ford
1 - 18 November
Performed at the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1996

**ZEBRA CROSSING**
A six week experimental season
19 February - 30 March
Performed at the Young Vic Studio London
From you to me to you
by Dorothea Smartt and Sherlee Mitchell
Directed by the writers

A Doll's House
by Henrik Ibsen
Director: Indhu Rubashingham

The men I've had
by Amanda Symonds and Warren Mills
Directed by the writers

Le soir avec Roney F-M!
by Ronald Fraser Munro
Directed by the writer

The Looking Glass
by Kole Onile-Ere
Directed by the writer

To Rahtid
by Sol B River
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1996
MEDEA IN THE MIRROR
by José Triana
27 June – 27 July
Performed at the Brixton Shaw Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster
1996/7
BEEF, NO CHICKEN
by Derek Walcott
18 December - 2 February
Performed at the Tricycle Theatre London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1997
FLYIN’ WEST
by Pearl Cleage
6 May – 28 June
Performed at the Drill Hall London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1997
OTHELLO
by William Shakespeare
9 October – 1 November
Performed at the Drill Hall London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

1998
ZEBRA CROSSING 2
15 October – 7 November
Performed at the Lyric Studio Hammersmith London

Brother to Brother
by Michael McMillan
Director: Michael Buffong

Brown Girl in the Ring
by Valerie Mason-John aka Queenie
Director: Valerie Mason-John assisted by Greta Mendez
**Feelin' Different**  
by Elijah Morais  
Director: Paul J Medford

**48-98**  
by Sol B River  
Director: Ben Thomas

**Getting Ready**  
by Rita Keegan  
Director: Hassani Shapi

**Lost and Found**  
by Richard Hansom and Warren Wills  
Directed by the writers

**Rum Shop Opera**  
by Alexander D Great  
Director: Greta Mendez

**Splinters**  
by Maya Chowdhry  
Director: Dawn Walton

**1998**  
**COUPS AND CALYPSOS**  
by M Nourbese Philip  
4 - 28 February  
Performed at the Oval House London  
Director: Greta Mendez
1999
UNFINISHED BUSINESS
by Yazmine Judd
30 September - 31 October
Performed at the Oval House London
Director: Michael Buffong

2000
THE PRAYER
by Grant Buchannan Marshall
5 July – 29 July
Performed at the Young Vic Studio London
Director: Yvonne Brewster

2001
ONE LOVE
by Kwame Dawes
6 – 28 April
10 – 28 July
Performed at the Bristol Old Vic and the Lyric Hammersmith London
Director: Yvonne Brewster
The following bibliography is made up of seven parts as follows:

- Materials from Talawa's Archives.
- Interviews.
- Newspaper Articles and Reviews.
- Articles from Journals and Books.
- Books and Pamphlets.
- Internet Sites.
- Other Materials.
Materials from Talawa's Archives

As part of researching Talawa's archives (details given in Chapter One), videos of Talawa's productions, rehearsal scripts, and additional archival material were analysed (listed below). The production videos and the rehearsal scripts are listed together. Where only the script was used as no video was available (see Chapter One) this is indicated with the words 'script only' after the year of Talawa's production. In the case of One Love the production video will be filmed in July 2001.

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Chowdhry, Maya, Splinters (Zebra Crossing Season 2 1998)
Cleage, Pearle, Flyin' West (1997)
Dawes, Kwame, One Love (2001, script only)
Ford, John, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore (1995)
Great, Alexander D., Rum Shop Opera (Zebra Crossing Season 2 1998)
Hanson, Richard, and Warren Wills, Lost and Found (Zebra Crossing Season 2 1998)
Holland, Endesha Ida Mae, From the Mississippi Delta (1993)
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