

## **Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain 1930- 2012**

**PI: Professor Tony Howard**

**Application to AHRC October 2012**

### **Case for Support**

This major research project will map the history of non-white actors' and directors' growing role in British cultural life over several generations, through an examination of their involvement in Shakespearean performance. This is a significant history that has not been written, and the project sets out to correct this omission.

It forms the next step in a continuing research programme into non-traditional Shakespearean performance and reception in the UK begun at the CAPITAL Centre, a HEFCE-funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, a collaboration between Warwick University and the Royal Shakespeare Company. In particular, Multicultural Shakespeare builds on Howard's successful Warwick/RSC Fellowship in Creativity and Performance project (2008-10), exploring Paul Robeson's career as both Shakespearean actor and political activist.

#### Research Questions:

The project will ask how Shakespearean production since Robeson reflected shifts in our national identity, how social inclusion can be encouraged both onstage and in the audience, and how practitioners believe their collective and individual artistic work might offer images for our future.

- How has the changing face of British Shakespearean performance since the 1930s reflected the development of a multi-cultural society? For example, how differently have core texts (including *The Tempest*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) been interpreted by mainstream and non-traditional companies? Through case studies it will investigate Shakespeare's changing social role and the development of adaptation strategies for multicultural audiences.
- What are the cultural consequences of this important but marginalised and poorly documented area of artistic achievement?
- How can key case studies investigating casting policies, directorial interpretations and public reception contribute to an historical analysis of changing attitudes to race within the British theatrical and broadcasting establishment? What is the place of Shakespeare in the formative experiences of second- and third-generation non-white British actors? For example how did British theatres respond to immigration and changing demographics in the 1950s; how did integrated casting develop within the subsidised classical companies from the early 1960s; how significant were Equity's equal opportunities policies; how did Shakespearean interpretation respond to the political debates on race in the UK?
- How have specific theatre groups (from Globe Education to the Theatre Royal Stratford East, from Tara Arts to Hip Hop Shakespeare) adapted, even translated, the plays for audiences in cities with substantial BME communities (e.g. Birmingham, Leicester, Liverpool), especially young people, in order to turn 'Shakespeare' into a focus for aspiration and a tool for self-expression?

- What is Shakespeare's current and potential place in multicultural Britain?

Research Context:

Multicultural Shakespeare builds on Warwick University's track record in this area. Workshops initiated by the CAPITAL Centre's Director Carol Rutter led directly to two major productions of *Othello* in 2009, by the RSC and Northern Broadsides. The project builds on David Johnson's 2001 Warwick PhD, 'The History of the Talawa Theatre Company', including archived interviews incorporated into the Theatre Museum/V&A oral history programme documenting the work of British Black performers.<sup>1</sup> Dissemination is a crucial component of Multicultural Shakespeare: it grows from the Robeson Project (Capital Centre, 2008-10), which set out to introduce both academic and popular audiences to new research into the relationship between theatre and politics. An exhibition, *A Slave's Son at Stratford: Paul Robeson 1898- 1976*, toured alongside the RSC's 2009 *Othello* and was seen by over 40,000 people at Warwick Arts Centre, Newcastle Northern Stage, Liverpool Playhouse and later at Shakespeare's Globe. The exhibition was presented to the Inclusion Group of the Association of Shakespearean Theatres of America conference (2010) and was featured twice by the Guardian.<sup>2</sup> Leading figures in the Black British communities in Birmingham and London were involved in creating the exhibition and an accompanying programme of talks, debates, performances and IT resources.<sup>3</sup>

Errol Hill's important *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (University of Massachusetts Press: 1984) is long out of date; indeed its publication coincided with two historic London performances which confirmed the emergence of a generation of brilliant British Shakespearean actors of West Indian descent, the *Othellos* of Rudolph Walker and Joseph Marcell. By 1987 Hugh Quarshie's *Hotspur* and Josette Simon's *Isabella* promised new casting principles at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Errol Hill's focus was largely American, as is also true of Ayanna Thompson's provocative essay collections, *Colorblind Shakespeare* (Routledge: 2006) and *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (with Scott L. Newstok, Palgrave Macmillan: 2010). Carol Rutter's examination of the casting of Cleopatra in *Enter the Body* (Routledge: 2000) and Celia Daileader's 'Beyond Othellophilia', in Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells' *Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), remain rare examinations of race and casting in UK classical theatre, and no sustained attempt to study Shakespeare within the evolution of British multi-racial politics has been published. Important post-colonial work on Shakespeare following Anita Loomba and Martin Orkin's *Post-Colonial Shakespeare* (Routledge: 1998) and Thomas Cartelli's *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (Routledge: 1999) paid little attention to the theatrical goals and achievements of practitioners from UK immigrant communities. Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen (eds.) in *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (Blackwell: 2005) devote only half a page (out of 688) to questions of 'colour-blind' casting in the UK.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file\\_upload/37030\\_file.pdf](http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/37030_file.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 29 April 2008

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/apr/29/research.highereducation>); 26 January 2010

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan/26/sam-wanamaker-uk-security-forces>)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/podcasts/culture/82-paul-robeson>

Issues of ethnic identity in Shakespearean performance have been addressed more directly in America - both in theory and practice — through, for example, the Non-Traditional Casting Project (renamed the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, 2007) which, in *Beyond Tradition: Transcripts of the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting* (Non-Traditional Casting Project, 1988) identified four main tendencies in non-traditional casting: cross-cultural, colour-blind, conceptual and societal. Parallel developments in British theatre practices — and their political significance — need to be charted and analysed.

#### Research methods:

This project will address theoretical debates within Shakespearean, Postcolonial, and Performance Studies but its methods will be historicist, concentrating on oral history, documentation, and the analysis of policies and practice. This collaborative project will co-opt the first-hand experience of those involved in this history: theatre practitioners and administrators, audiences, members of the BME communities who have been involved in or witnessed the developments to be charted and the young people who are their beneficiaries.

It aims to:

- create a detailed historical chronicle, tracing the involvement of Black practitioners in British stage, film and television productions of Shakespeare 1930 - 2010, through desk-based research and up to 60 visits to relevant archive collections by members of the project team;
- create an oral history archive of focused interviews with a) approximately 30 performers, directors, and producers - selected on the basis of their significance in the cultural development of multi-ethnic Shakespeare; b) with audience members past and present captured at events accompanying the exhibitions, through the online forum, supplemented by questionnaires and surveys;
- document Shakespeare's significance within the formative educational and professional experiences of performers from British ethnic communities;
- provide a forum where British Black and Asian actors and directors can reflect on the role of Shakespeare in their career development, inviting them to share their interpretation of specific plays and roles at the Colloquium in Year 2;
- develop a range of digital materials, for use by arts, education and community workers, exploring social identity through Shakespeare.

We will be working closely with a range of consultants from the BME theatre, cultural and social communities who can bring specialist knowledge, experience and connections with key players in the history of non-traditional Shakespeare performance and its place in the community.

The creation of a detailed chronology of casting and production personnel since the 1930s, will provide the first full documentation of changing ethnic casting practices in British Shakespearean theatre, creating an essential database. This will involve sustained archive work in the major theatre collections, for example the V&A Theatre Collection, the Royal Shakespeare Company archive at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the National Theatre archive, the Bristol University Theatre Collection,

and in the records of regional and touring companies, as well as secondary materials such as newspapers, biographies, etc. The project will enumerate, document and analyse the often-marginalised Shakespearean achievements of pioneering artists of African and Asian origin, and will address issues of reception. It will write a lost history.

In parallel with this archival work, Multicultural Shakespeare will conduct a programme of comprehensive and detailed interviews with actors from several generations and backgrounds, as well as with directors, casting directors, agents and company managers to build into a collective oral account of Black British Shakespeare, placing performance in the context of family histories, social change, and first-hand experience. The interviews will address practitioners' responses to the casting debates, initiated by Hugh Quarshie,<sup>4</sup> for example, and the charges of Errol Hill, Cy Grant and others, that Black Shakespearean actors in Britain confronted institutional racism into at least the late 1980s. The project aims further to take the pulse of contemporary multi-ethnic classical theatre.