

Black women playwrights in Britain

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we are mistresses
of strong wild air,
leapers and sounders
of depth and barriers

(Barbara Burford, poet and playwright *Women Talking*¹)

The major impulse behind this essay is to begin to record the work of black – Afro-Caribbean and Asian – women playwrights in Britain, thus drawing attention to the growing body of often very powerful work produced by them. While the work will be mapped thematically, indicating matters of common concern, a few plays will be examined in more detail. Although some areas – particularly family relationships, sexuality, identity and abuse – are similar to those explored by white women playwrights, as indicated in other sections of this book, there are also plays about women's history and mythology. The legacies of imperialism and post-imperialism both recent and historical, with the specifics of black experience provide a different context for these issues. Disability as a black woman in a racist society is inevitably different from a white woman's position. Plays may focus directly on black history, particularly black woman's history, especially of the generation who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s; and on the search for identity of the generation born in Britain.

To compensate for the dearth of critical studies and published material, I have listed as many plays as possible to facilitate further investigation. Women playwrights in general are less than visible. Despite their increasing numbers their work often remains unpublished, often receiving only a first production. As black playwrights' work is rarely produced outside of a few black touring companies, the situation for black women is often one of double jeopardy. Nevertheless, since 1982/3, their numbers have grown enormously – over forty have received full productions, and many more rehearsed readings and workshops. Groups such as Munirah, Options Ltd.,

and Theatre of Black Women have performed collectively devised work, whilst Black American and Caribbean women writers have been produced in Britain. Because much evidence remains undocumented, this essay draws on unpublished scripts, although where possible a contact point for their location is given in the Bibliography. The London bias reflects its theatrical predominance, but may have resulted in inadvertent neglect of productions in other areas.² Similarly the pre-eminence of Afro-Caribbean writers reflects their more frequent production.

The vocal emergence of Black theatre in Britain was a phenomenon of the late 1970s and early 1980s, although groups and individuals such as Barry Reckord and Errol John predated this period. In 1976, Naseem Khan's ground-breaking report *The Arts Britain Ignores*³ discussed black theatre's problems; lack of training, venues, money and local institutional support: but showed that initiatives like the Temba theatre company were formally experimental as well as reflective of black life. In *Dreams and De-constructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*,⁴ in a small section 'Ethnic Theatre', she names almost twenty initiatives in Black (Afro-Caribbean) theatre, and details the growth of Asian theatre with the establishment of Tara Arts. During the 1980s new groups have replaced those mentioned by Khan, which have vanished, groups like Temba, Tara and the Black Theatre Co-op have consolidated their position, and funding bodies must perforce take Black Arts more seriously. Resourcing remains a struggle in a stark economic climate where commercial and marketing jargon controls the competitive funding arena.

In the earlier period, male writers involved with the companies included: Alfred Fagon, Mustapha Matura, Michael Abbenetts, Tunde Ikoli, Jimi Rand, T. Bone Wilson and, in Asian Theatre, Farrukh Dhondy and Jatinder Verma. Appearing only gradually in the early 1980s, women arrived in earnest from 1986 onwards as a result of their demand for a voice, and of the encouragement of new writers.⁵ Most black women writers were at some point helped significantly by company or theatre developmental work – workshops, rehearsed readings, discussion, script surgeries or festivals. Such new writing theatres, black or feminist groups generated such work either as a central policy or in response to pressure. The Royal Court Young People's Theatre under the enlightened David Sulkin spearheaded the opportunities for young black women who joined the Activists youth theatre or writers' workshops. Jude Alderson, founder-member of the feminist punk band/theatre group The Sadista Sisters, led 'Talking Black' workshops, which encouraged Bernadine Evaristo, Patricia Hilaire, Yasmin Judd, Paulette Randall and Carol Williams into theatre writing. Others – winners at the Younger Writers' Festival – have followed, including Maria Oshodi, Jyoti Patel and Soraya Jinton. Mainhouse performances included Winsome Pinnock's *A Hero's Welcome* 1986 (first a reading, then a Women's Playhouse Trust production), and Jaqueline Rudet's *Basin* and

God's Second In Command. Despite such positive policies, elsewhere a danger of tokenism can reduce opportunities for new writers only to rehearsed readings and studio productions. For this reason, the Second Wave Young Women's Project under Ann Considine, when establishing a National Young Women Playwright's Festival at the Albany, Deptford, South London, in 1986, made mainstage production for the winners central to policy. The area's high Afro-Caribbean population and an emphasis on working with local women ensured a high number of young black women competitors and workshop participants in 1986 and 1988. Mainstage productions included Nandita Ghose's *Ishtar Descends*, Killeon Gideon's *England is De Place for Me*, and Shorelle Cole's *Blind Faith*. Other Second Wave activities range from supporting the Bemarro Sisters group, commissioning plays, to workshops and schools playwriting projects.

Black theatre groups originally working with male writers and directors are beginning to develop attitudes more responsive to black women's demands for participation. Black Theatre Co-operative staged Rudet's *Money to Live* 1984, Zindika Maccheol's *Paper & Stone* 1989, as well as the black American classic Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* and a black production of white writer Ruth Dunlap Barnett's *The Cocoa Party*. In 1988 rehearsed readings of six new plays, five directed by women, featured work by Jenifer Ramage and dub poet Jean Binta Breeze. Temba has produced Saira Essa's *You Can't Stop the Revolution* and Trish Cooke's *Back Street Mammy*; and others have produced work by women such as Judith Hepburn, Petronella Breiburg and Peggy Bennette Hume. Asian theatre provided few opportunities, Tara's policy presents classics, and British Asian theatre as Star Productions has emphasized film, although women have written for Tara-in-Education. In 1988 Asian Co-operative Theatre, with actress Rita Wolf as a prime mover, staged a double bill of bilingual plays, Jyoti Patel and Jez Simon's *Prem* and *Heartgame* scripted from a Leeds Bengali Women's group by a white writer Mary Cooper.

Women's theatre companies, initially dominated by the white middle-class, began under pressure to address the issue of representing black women's experience; for example the Women's Theatre Group, working with a black company of performers and a commissioned writer working from the devising process have involved Pinnock, Randall and Sandra Yaw. Sphinx, which works in schools, Theatre Centre Women's Company, Women's Playhouse Trust, Red Ladder and Monstrous Regiment have all performed black women's plays. An especially significant influence was the 1980 West End production and publication by Methuen of the Broadway version of Ntozake Shange's *for coloured girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf*. Receiving mixed reviews from the largely white male critics, it was a revelation for black women writers, then and later. Not only powerful, funny, joyful and angry; its original form, using music, dance and poetry was delivered by seven women who, dressed in

different colours, assumed a range of identities. Bernadine Evaristo, co-founder with Paulette Randall and Patricia Hilaire of the Theatre of Black Women in 1982 states, 'You could say that she (Shange) was a sort of role model, or that the play was.'⁶ The trio met at Rose Bruford College as part of an unusually high intake of black students, and were involved in the Royal Court Writers Workshops – devising and creating poems, the basis of *Silhouette* and *Pyeyucca* their first major works. Absorbing poetry drawn from the characters within a flexible structure, they evolved 'a rather surreal, timeless space which meant we were less restricted . . . our writing could be quite free'.⁷ *Silhouette* is a complex wide-ranging exploration of black female and mixed-race identity, in which a slave-woman leads Pat, the central character, through a journey of self-realization to rejection of internalized white racist values. Hilaire and Evaristo cite as other innovative influences poets Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Alexis de Veaux and the visionary black American playwright Adrienne Kennedy.⁸

This concern with experimenting with poetic language and form seems here, then, to have started not from theories about women's or black women's theatre, but from the women's practice as poets and the work they admired. As the Introduction to this book suggests, in relation to women's theatre in general, a pattern of work emerges, which moves from initially largely naturalistic – feminine/reflectionist – plays, through issue-based – feminist/revolutionary – work, thence towards an articulated need for a theatre language that would express women's exploration of their experience at a deeper level. This – female-ritualistic – performance language, confronting mythologies, desires, contradictions, memory and history would be more physical, allusive, visual and poetic.⁹ In British feminist theatre this quest can be seen both in first decades of the century with the movement from the comedy of *How the Vote Was Won* and much of the work of the Actresses Franchise League, to more exploratory work such as Edy Craig's.¹⁰ Similarly, in the 1970s there was a movement from more didactic plays such as those collected in Michelene Wandor's *Strike While the Iron is Hot* to experimental work by Bloodgroup or the Scarlet Harlots. In black women playwright's work, the issue-based style using more accessible forms somewhat resistant to experimentation can be seen in work by Theatre-In-Education groups such as Options Ltd, whereas Theatre of Black Women epitomizes the poetic experimental mode. A further strand allied to the former is the 'slice of life' approach, where companies have encouraged young writers to give immediate and powerful voice to their own lived experience; good examples are the black playwright Grace Daley's *Rose's Story* or the white working class writer Andrea Dunbar's *The Arbor*. Although in white women's theatre bitter ideological differences have arisen about the different approaches, black women's theatre, whether in companies or individual writing, has used the full range of modes within the same time span, developing alongside each other. Such mutual support

is perhaps essential where an emergent interest is in competition with 'mainstream culture', and infighting would be self-destructive. This co-operation has been enhanced by the generous, empowering vision of black American women's culture as probably best exemplified in Alice Walker's definition of 'womanist', celebrating the qualities of black feminism: 'Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour'.¹¹ All three Theatre of Black Women's productions explored new possibilities for poetic language, visual and verbal imagery and form with varying degrees of success. *Chiaroscuro*, their third show was commissioned from Jackie Kay, one of four poets published by Sheba in the 1985 collection *A Dangerous Knowing*, which also contains work by the established Grace Nichols, together with Gabriela Pearse and Barbara Burford – now also theatre writers. Burford's *Patterns*, written for the multiracial Changing Women theatre company in 1985, shows the growing consciousness of their racial, sexual and cultural differences in a group of garment workers trapped during a sit-in at their workplace. Stylized movement, symbolism and poetic dialogue evoking a parallel with the mythic Trojan Women, alternate with naturalistic present-day scenes, many developed from group devising. Caribbean folk tales of Anansi the spider formed the basis of Gabriela and Jean Pearse's 1986 children's play *Miss Quarshie & the Tiger's Tail*, whilst Kay's 1985 *Chiaroscuro*, non-naturalistic in form, was structured as a series of rituals, including dance, song and percussion. This play, just predated by Jacqueline Rudet's *Basin*, was one of the first to focus on black lesbian experience. The four women move into walking dance to 'name the nameless ones' (p. 60). Naturalistic scenes trace a growing lesbian relationship between Beth and Opal, their friends' difficulties in accepting it, questions of self-identity and racism. Whilst Kay, in her afterword to the play, acknowledges the problem of integrating the poetry, monologues and ritual passages within the hybrid form, perhaps too many issues are included. Gay Sweatshop produced Kay's second play *Twice Over*, which is more dramatically successful. Exploring Evaki's response to the discovery that her grandmother Cora was a lesbian, the play presents a variety of responses to the revelation. The dead Cora both overlooks the action and participates in flashbacks, in an accomplished presentation of the interaction of the past and present in the process of self-definition. Rudet's *Basin* similarly explores the reactions of a third woman to a lesbian relationship, and the significance of naming lesbian experience in the context of black traditions. Susan's 'there's a Dominican word for it . . . tell people we're zammies' (*Basin*, p. 129) implies a spiritual bond taken one step further, as does Opal's:

I want to find the woman
 who in Dahomey in 1900
 loved another woman

tell me what did they call her
did they know her name
in Ashanti, do they know it in
Yoruba do they know it in patois . . .

(*Chiaroscuro*, p. 79)

Some plays extend the black individual's self-definition in relation with the past into an examination of history, for instance the Royal Court YPT devised *Women & Sisters*, scripted by Sandra Agard, Cassandra, Isaac and Marcia Smith, which centred on the antislavery campaign, especially the writings of Sojourner Truth. Others, by Judith Hepburn and Winsome Pinnock, respectively, are biographical, of Mary Seacole, the black nurse in the Crimean war, and of Claudia Jones, the 1950s political activist (*A Rock in the Water*). Shorelle Cole's *Blind Faith* draws on her father's experience of demobilization, to show a black soldier forced by his Second World War experience to re-evaluate and confront society's restrictions.

There is a genre of plays that looks at the experience of the previous generation that came to London from the Caribbean in the 1950s; ranging from themes of self-definition to those about the reasons for leaving home or the shock of the reality of arrival in contrast to the glowing 'motherland' images of the NHS and London transport recruitment campaign advertisements. Pinnock's accomplished *A Hero's Welcome* explores the lives and dreams of a group living on a West Indian island in 1947, and the desire to leave. Len, the returning wounded hero, intends to stay on and educate himself. Much of the play is about confrontations with reality and the betrayal of dreams of love or of leaving for England, through the intertwined relationships of the ambitious Minda, Ishbel and Sis, culminating in the revelation that Len's injury was caused by an accident in a Liverpool munitions factory, where white racism was a more immediate war than the one they were ostensibly fighting. But acceptance of the real is a positive force that unites Len and Sis in a commitment to changing their world, not escaping it. The portrayal of Minda also explores the way in which the sexually exploited may themselves turn to exploitation to escape poverty.

Relatively few black British plays focus on life in the islands after the exodus to England. Exceptionally, Gloria Hamilton, founder of Umoja Theatre Company, wrote *Mercy and In Nobody's Backyard*, about village life in Grenada under the harsh twenty-eight year Eric Gairy regime, then under the 1979 bloodless revolution's leader Maurice Bishop – later ousted and killed during the US invasion. She uses a mixture of naturalistic scenes, songs, story-telling, rap and rhyme in showing how politics impinge on the central character's lives. *Motherland*, devised then developed by Elyse Dodgson, co-ordinated by Marcia Smith, based on interviews conducted by girls from Vauxhall Manor School with their mothers and friends who arrived from the West Indies in the 1950s, is published with the workshop

exercises and interviews. Themes recurring elsewhere include housing difficulties, high rents for black tenants or 'No Coloureds' signs in windows, the pressure on relationships caused by long working hours and isolation from the community and racist attacks culminating in the right wing and fascist-provoked sustained campaign of violence in Nottingham and Notting Hill in 1958.

The struggle to maintain the family is shown in Lisselle Kayla's *When Last I Did See You*, which contrasts Blossom's efforts in Jamaica, where she supports unemployed husband and children through selling okra, with her problems when alone in England facing her children's difficulties within the new culture. As a comedy, the treatment of some themes, such as the women finding solace in religion, is rather superficial. However, Killian Gideon's first play *England Is De Place For Me*¹² manages to be both comic and serious in comparing two couples in South London in the early 1960s. Wilma and Dickie try to build a good life, and eventually fulfil their dream of returning home whilst, after a difficult marriage, Rose eventually divorces Winston, her poignant letter to her now absent friends contrasting the dreams of England and home. Gideon skilfully turns the horror of a racist attack on Winston into comedy through his exaggerated account of the experience – actually brought about by his feckless womanizing. The play also deals with male competitiveness, especially between generations, whilst Rose's letters reveal her son's problems – left in Jamaica until the money was there to bring him over, subjected to an interrupted education and to the unjust Stop and Search Laws, he becomes a Rasta. Pinnock's 1987 *The Wind of Change*, commissioned by the Half Moon Young People's Theatre for their community tour, is also effectively punctuated by the letters home of Ruth, a trainee nurse who wants 'to be the best Jamaican nurse since Mary Seacole' but is forced by the system to train at the lower SEN grade rather than the SRN. Failed unjustly, like other black girls, she learns to confront racism in hospital and the streets during the 1958 anti-black attacks. The play also deals with her relationship with Tina, the white friend who champions her, but whom she must reject – as 'Nurse Richards' little friend' Ruth is only 'allowed' to pass into the white world on sufferance. She comes to feel that her struggles are not only for herself, but for 'them bright-faced black girls who come up after me. This is what give me the strength to persevere.'

A further category of plays about the immigrant generation explores the relationship of black people who have lived in England to their home country when they wish to return. In Rudet's *Take Back What's Yours*, although Beatie longs for the idyllic Dominica of her past, where she intends to marry Ronny, she is blind to the tensions that her dream of family reunion will arouse. Winsome Pinnock's 1991 play *Talking in Tongues* also explores the experience of a black British woman visiting Jamaica and her sense of being deprived of the language to describe her

experience isolated between two cultures. In *Zerri's Choice*, developed by the Women's Theatre Group with Sandra Yaw, family tension bubbles to the surface on the evening of Zerri's return to Guyana after twenty-five years of putting her two daughters before her own needs. Despite the provocative subtext, evoked by food imagery as a sign of giving or withholding love, the largely naturalistic form, with a few flashbacks does not give enough scope for deepening the presentation of the daughter's fears and resentments – especially of the separation as symbolic of maternal death. This theme is also presented in Trish Cooke's *Running Dream*, commissioned for Second Wave. Moving between Dominica and England, and across three generations, the play shows her daughter and grand-daughters mourning the death of Ma Effeline with traditional rites; whereby the spirit rests for three days and nights, with special food prepared on the third for friends and relatives to celebrate the dead. Prompted by her mother's distant death to return to Dominica, Florence and her daughter Bianca are reunited with the half of the family she had left behind. Despite meeting her elder siblings, Bianca feels both alienation and resentment because her mother's migration had cut her off from part of her identity. Florence now dies, suggesting ironically that she has remained spiritually if not geographically close to Ma, but the play leaves pain and loss unresolved. Estrangement between generations is also explored in Pinnock's *Leave Taking*, through the tradition of West Indian ritual and magic, handed down through women. Enid Matthews is separated from her own generation and becomes alienated from the children for whom she has slaved and denied herself to create a better life. The flashpoint is her daughter Del's pregnancy, as she accuses her mother of being repressive, 'I'll never be like you. I'm going to have everything: life, love, sex – everything that you wanted, but were too frightened to enjoy' (p. 157). Inevitably, the family is a site for conflict in many plays about the search for identity; for example Rudet's *God's Second in Command* about a son who resists his father's conventional male values, and Jenny Macleod's *Cricket at Camp David* about family and racial tensions prior to a wedding, focusing on a desperate need for communication.¹³ Family reactions to the discovery of sexuality is central to a number of black women's plays, some of which, like Grace Dayley's *Rose's Story*, examine the dilemmas of unplanned pregnancy. Running away from her ultra-religious home with her boyfriend Leroy, Rose becomes self-aware, angry and decisive; confronting family, friends and authority figures. As a first play, however, it centres on the protagonist to the detriment of full presentation of other characters; as 'Mai' wrote in *Spare Rib* (March, 1984), a more sophisticated analysis of the parents' vulnerable situation was needed: 'Rose had shattered their ultra-respectability, a protection they had made for themselves, using the ingredients of their own oppression'. The fierceness of Rose's character confronting authority figures is relieved when she reveals a vulnerable side in talking with her sister about the pain

of feeling that religion has replaced real family love. The prayer meetings that pray for Rose's straying soul are also wittily observed. Another first play, Christine George's *Family Bliss*, presented at the Albany Empire's Basement Youth Arts Project includes the theme of unplanned pregnancy in a plot that is rather overloaded with broken marriages, complicated sexual relationships, generational conflicts and a death. Despite this rather melodramatic narrative, George draws contradictory and complex characters well, producing very effective dialogue. The most subtle exploration of this theme is found in Trish Cooke's *Back Street Mammy*, developed through staged readings at the Half Moon and Second Wave to Temba's 1989 full-scale production. This evolutionary process is embodied in a wide-ranging and complex staging of sixteen-year-old Dynette's awareness of sexuality and confrontation with the dilemma of pregnancy. The play uses a chorus commentary to underline Dynette's adolescent awakening as, in the context of a Catholic upbringing, she is torn between her conflicting desires and the opinions of friends and family. Despite her decision for abortion, she speaks of her unborn child:

She listens . . . she wraps herself round me and makes me know that whatever I decide is right . . . I've never been so close to anyone before in my life.

(p. 87)

Issues associated with health and disability are also found in black women's plays such as Kayla's *Don't Pay Dem No Mind*, which was written for Hi Time Theatre and presented at the 1988 conference on Black People and Mental Health in Islington. It focused on the high number of black people receiving treatment for mental illness or institutionalized – how white society often defines black behaviour as aberrant or sick – through following Desmond Walker and the pressures that force him towards breakdown. Maria Oshodi's 1989 play *Blood, Sweat & Fears* is about Ben, who suffers from sickle-cell anaemia, a life-threatening hereditary condition confined to people of Afro-Caribbean descent. Broader issues raised include the strain of coping with invisible disabilities, others' lack of understanding, society's fear of the sick and especially Ben's self-deluding pretence that his condition will improve. Blending comedy and seriousness, the play moves stylistically between naturalistic scenes with his girlfriend Ashley, through the Star-Trek Burger bar with its Vulcan pies, Klingon burgers and 'cosmic' greetings, to broad caricature of the medical profession and expressionistic scenes of Ben's delirium. Ashley, a proponent of self-help and alternative medicine, is a strong influence upon the way Ben, unlike his uncle, eventually comes to terms with his illness.

Society's assumptions about more overt disability are explored in Ruth Harris' *The Cripple*, based on the life of Pauline Wiltshire, a disabled black woman, and written for the actress T.M. Murphy for the Theatre of Black

Women in 1987. A simple but moving monologue conveys her struggle for self-determination, refusing society's attitude that a disabled body entails mental handicap, against the burden of maimed legs 'like heavy chains'. Often as a by-product of working from a devising process – which, like a consciousness-raising or therapy group, becomes a supportive space where experience may be shared and validated – many black women's plays start from women's relationships with each other. *A Slice of Life*, scripted by Pauline Jacobs, devised by the four Bemarro Sisters from Deptford who met through Second Wave, depicts post-school experiences and how different life-choices influence their relationships, although all encounter racism. Scripted by Deb'borá from devising, Akimbo Productions' *Where Do I Go From Here* drew upon five black women's relationships with their fathers, although the play shows the same woman at five different ages. Drawing powerfully on autobiography in the portrayal of her father's abuse of both mother and sister, it explores the writer's conflicting feelings for 'the invisible man called father.'¹⁴ As in many black plays, music is central, here produced and written by members of the band Akimbo. The subtext or theme of the abandoning father, his absent presence or his displacement of white society's harshness onto his family runs through other plays for example *Rose's Story*, *Zerri's Choice*, and *England Is De Place For Me*.

Friendship across races is the theme of Christine Belle's *Word of Mouth* and Oshodi's *The S Bend*, both first plays. The former, produced by Staying Power, a Nottingham-based multiracial company, questioned the intrusion of dominant culture and conditioning as barriers to interracial friendship. Set in a launderette, the play's structure integrated poetry and song around the wash-cycle as a metaphor for exploring the development of such friendships. A naturalistic piece, *The S Bend* stages a friendship between a studious young black woman, Fola, and white punk plumber, Mya. Both find common ground in their parallel experience within their peer group. Mya struggles to be accepted by male plumbers as an equal, Fola's West Indian friends' values are different from her Nigerian culture. Another aspect of the search for identity, the cultural conflict of being mixed race, is explored in Adjoa Andoh's *Just My Luck*, and Cindy Artiste's *Face Value*. In the latter, Sarah, a Citizens Advice worker wants to feel part of her client's black culture. Discovering she is a quarter black, although appearing white, she is received with unexpected hostility when she tries to ingratiate herself at an antiracist meeting, and accused of appropriating experience not her own. This provocative play challenges white liberal and left-wing audiences to question the motivation of their antiracist solidarity.

Artiste, like Bonnie Greer, Shorelle Cole, Cheryl Martin, and Deb'borá is a black American writer working in Britain. Some of her plays, like *Dreams With Teeth*, are set in America. This play, set in a 1970s University campus follows the first four black women 'integrated' students, and despite a rather pat resolution does confront the problems of their situation, as institutional

pressure isolates and alienates them in the all-white college. Greer's *Zebra Days*, produced by ReSisters, examines the collective past of black history, previously ignored by a young black British woman, through her meeting an older American. A numinous air of myth invests the older woman as a trickster and wise prophetess who produces history from her bag.

Lisella Kayla also crosses generations in her ReSister-produced *Don't Chat Me Business*. Here, Sharon an aggressive eighteen-year-old is assigned to working in a very respectable day centre with rules: 'No joking. No smoking. No untidy mess. No gum. No rum. No scum in de bath.' With humour, the play shows how, despite her attitude, 'stop chatting me business', two old ladies – bossy Miss Pearly who is in charge, and a resident Miss Cissy – manage, partly in rivalry, to bring the lonely girl to accept and return their affection. A relationship between three slightly dotty old people is also explored in Jenny Macleod's second play *Island Life* (1988). Plays about division between friends include Zindika's 1989 *Paper and Stone*, about quiet Brenda and tough Juliette for Black Theatre Co-op, and Ann Ogidi's funny, award-winning radio play *Ragamuffin*. The former blends naturalism with poetry, stylized narrative between Paper and Stone the two girls' alter egos, a capella singing, snatches of children's games and rhymes in exploring questions of identity and independence. Brenda realizes that her mother's religion and Juliette's toughness are both defences against past hurt. The second play examines the reaction of a group of Rastas when one of their number joins the police, thus raising questions about black people's relationship with white authority and institutions. Although the politics of life in a racist society underpin at some level every play described, and are consciously addressed in many, relatively few plays are specifically sited in political struggle. Exceptions include Artiste's adaptations of Alice Walker's *Meridian* – about an activist during the 1960's American Civil Rights Campaign, Hamilton's Grenada plays, and Saira Essa's *You Can't Stop the Revolution* and Olusola Oyelele's *Many Voices, One Chant*, written and directed for Battersea Arts Centre as an award winning 'Young Director', both about South African struggle.¹⁵ Their experience of apartheid and exile is expressed by South Africans Dorcas Faku and Diana Taylor one black, one white in *Wenanzi – What Are You Doing?* (1984). It draws upon poems, songs, family and friend's letters, accounts by women like veteran campaigner Helen Joseph and Dorothy Numzani Nyembi – imprisoned for fifteen years – and scenes improvised between them. Like the riveting *You Strike the Woman, You Strike the Rock*, toured to Britain by Vusizwe Players as part of the LIFT festival,¹⁶ it voiced South African women's struggle and endurance.

Despite the influence upon British black writers of work from abroad in terms of role models and creating new possibilities of form and content, relatively little American work – in proportion to its quality and quantity – has been produced in Britain. Black Theatre Co-op produced Lorraine

Hansberry's classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, about the Younger family's struggle to realize their dreams in 1950s America, in 1985. This play is brilliantly parodied as one of George Wolfe's vignettes 'The Last Mama on the Couch Play' in *The Colored Museum*. Although Annie Castledine produced Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From The Mississippi Delta*, about growing up in the Deep South, at the Young Vic in 1989, neither contemporaries such as Adrienne Kennedy, Aishah Rahman, Elaine Jackson, Kathleen Collins nor earlier writers like Zora Neale Hurston and May Miller from Kathie Perkins' anthology *Black Female Playwrights*¹⁷ have been performed in Britain. However, dance drama and dazzling physical theatre that escapes categorizing, by American groups Urban Bush Women and Reduta Dux has been influentially present.

Contemporary West Indian work has introduced new, hybrid forms drawn from Caribbean and British traditions to create black boulevard farces in strong patois, as staged by Roots Theatre Company at Brixton Village, including Hyacinth Brown's *BUPS*. Both the Half Moon and Black Theatre Forum have produced Barbara Glouden's Jamaican pantomimes, *Flash Trash* and *The Pirate Princess*, attracting new black audiences by mixing traditional panto devices – the dame and principal boy – with reggae or ska music and Jamaican plots. Powerful populist theatre, extremely successful in Britain, created by Sistren, a collective of Jamaican women, most of them former street-cleaners, is based on workshops, improvisation, music, songs and sketches that confront the brutal realities of poverty in shows like *Muffet*, *Inna All We*.

British Asian women playwrights have been slower to emerge than their Afro-Caribbean counterparts and still number only a few. Factors include the social expectations of women in some Asian communities, although this is something that Jyoti Patel challenges:

The only area (at school) where individuality and my 'lived culture' were recognised was in Drama . . . here I ran up against the stereotype categorisation of Hindu Asians; 'Hindu Asian girls don't do Theatre, it's against their religion. No one will come and see it anyway.'¹⁸

English language Asian theatre in general is less common than Afro-Caribbean, although traditional Asian forms of folk drama, dance and storytelling thrive as living cultural expression. Dance forms like bharata natyam, best known in Britain through Shobhana Jeyasingh, have been a site for tradition and experiment. Nevertheless, Asian Theatre companies now include British Asian Theatre, Tara Arts, Asian Co-operative Theatre, Hounslow Arts Co-op, Tamasha and others, although funding cuts continually threaten them, while the Royal Court, Theatre Royal Stratford East and the RSC have produced the work of Hanif Kureishi and Harwant Bains. Women's plays, though not numerous, do exist: Nandita Ghose, a winner of the 1986 Second Wave Young Women Playwrights Festival

with the haunting and poetic *Ishtar Descends*, uses the Sumerian myth of the descent of the goddess Ishtar to retrieve her consort Tammuz from the underworld as a metaphor for the mental crisis of Ishtar, a contemporary young woman. Fasting, she talks to herself and an imaginary Tammuz, whilst details of an abortion and her lover's desertion emerge. When hospitalized she meets the other Ishtar, transformed into a bird.

Ishtar 2:

She made these movements, trying to brush away the thing that was hurting her, but it always came back . . . Sometimes she scratched her own face, was she mad? She was somewhere, where she couldn't get out. I wanted to help her, but I knew she was dead.¹⁹

Rather unfinished, yet a compelling piece, it bears the hallmarks of the experimental approach of Dartington College of Arts where Ghose trained. Her second play *Land*, presented at Oval House, about three young people's fight to save a piece of dockland from developers, is also poetic, but lacks dramatic development and effective characterization. Half Bengali, Ghose works as a workshop leader, story-teller and director, and was commissioned by Red Ladder to work with four Asian actresses for her third play. *Bhangra Girls* about four women setting up a bhangra band was evolved, exploring their differences and agreements over work, sexuality and finding their identity as British Asians – all positively imaged in the songs and music drawn from both cultural traditions.

Inevitably, many preoccupations found in Afro-Caribbean plays recur – especially self-definition in the space between parental and dominant white culture. Soraya Jinton's *Lalita's Way*, a winner of the Royal Court 1989 Young Writers Competition, deals with the pressures of an arranged marriage. In straightforward naturalistic style it shows how Lalita tries to avoid marrying Rajesh, as she does not love him. Comic touches include Lalita's attempts to deter his parents by being a terrible cook, loading their food with curry powder. Conveniently she escapes when she discovers that Rajesh already has an illegitimate child by a white woman. Mixed race problems are also evident in plays like Yasmin Sidhwa's one-woman show *Chameleon*, written with Euton Daley, a journey of discovery showing how the mixed-race are 'claimed and rejected by both sides'.²⁰ Meera Syal has performed *One of Us*, co-written with Jaqui Shapiro, a comic, forceful piece about a young Indian girl's ambition to be an actress. It was described by Naseem Khan as 'a comic Pilgrim's Progress'. Syal, who works as an actress has largely worked for television, including *The Leather Mongoose* for Channel Four.²¹ *How's Your Skull? Does It Fit?* about an actress's attempt to avoid being stereotyped and sexually exploited was to have been scripted by Kanta Talukhdar for Hounslow Arts Co-op, but company disagreement led to two male members writing the play. Talukhdar has, it seems, written for television, and a new play had a rehearsed reading at Theatre Centre.

Although covering all forms of writing, Asian Women Writers Collective has encouraged playwrights: members like Leena Dhingra and Ravi Randawa have apparently written for Tara-in-Education, whilst Randawa was also commissioned for a new play by the Half Moon. Common Stock presented Ruhksana Ahmad's *Song for a Sanctuary* as a reading. Set in a women's refuge, written after the murder of Balwant Kaur by her violent husband it emphasizes the importance of mutual support there, and the terrible consequences of mistrust and misunderstanding.²²

The most sustained body of work by an Asian woman playwright is that of Jyoti Patel, who works with Jez Simons, her former youth theatre leader on bilingual plays, mostly English/Gujerati, although they continually struggle to get their work accepted and sustained rather than temporarily feted as a novelty. Growing out of the dearth of apt material for the youth theatre Hathi, in Leicester, their first scripted play *Awaaj* (Voices) was given at the Royal Court Young Writers Festival as a one-woman performance, partly because of the apparent lack of bilingual actors. The central character is a girl who hears in her head one voice from the East, the other from the West, arguing about the symbolic issue of whether she should get her hair permed in the face of traditionalist family opposition. Undoubtedly these plays make particular but stimulating demands on actors – the authors point to the performance of Dhirenda as Rashid in their second play *Prem*, which was excellently reviewed. Audience members who do not know both languages are surprised at how much they understand, and how little they need linguistic skills to understand, and thus are challenged to consider the implications of biculturalism and bilingualism. In *Prem*, scenes between a Muslim boy and a Hindu girl stage the complexities of culture clash and religious prejudice, and are interspersed with fourth-century Tamil poems. Despite Patel and Simons' nightmare experience in working and constantly revising *Kirti*, *Sona & Ba* in rehearsal for the Leicester Haymarket, with little support from theatre staff, the performances received standing ovations, audiences in tears, excellent reviews and sell-out performances, bringing a new Asian audience to the theatre. Emblematic of three generations and hence different experiences, an African Asian mother, a runaway rebel daughter in her late twenties and a well-adapted bicultural Asian are involved in a five-day Hindu fast. Although comically exploring the tensions arising between mother and returning daughter, gradually tragedy overtakes them as long-hidden child abuse within the family comes to light, and the play's closure involves the mother's death:

We tend to work by drawing people into our work and then hitting them with something. You get to like everybody, to relate to them and then have fun with everybody. Then when you realise that something's wrong you look back and think my God! what was I laughing at. That's our principal method of working.²³

Most recently *Subah O Shaam* (Open All Hours) also mixes comedy and serious issues in the life of interlinked characters, during one day in a local Indian-run store. Shy Parminder, bullied by her brother, unsupported by her religious mother, befriends and is welcomed by an old soldier, veteran of an Italian campaign. Following the mother's unprecedented liberating evening out with friends, valid communication with Parminder is restored. Patel and Simons, now writing for television soap *Eastenders*, feel that this experience has been their most instructive in terms of structuring skills, which will inform their commitment to creating theatre which reflects Asian experience truthfully for Asian audiences.

Recently, two British Chinese women playwrights, Lin-Shu Fern and Su-Lin Looi, have appeared. The former's *Sale of the Century*, workshopped in 1989, focused on issues raised by a London local authority's sale of cemeteries, the 1997 change of government in Hong Kong and the plight of Hong Kong prisoners of conscience – all refracted through the relationship of an elderly Chinese woman and her son. Looi's *All Sewn Up*, written with Beth Porter for Eastern Actors Studio, explored the issue of what it means to be Chinese in Britain today through the experience of three generations of Chinese women meeting in London.

The emergence of so many new black women playwrights has been encouraged by and thus further encouraged black women directors. Most prominent are Yvonne Brewster, founder of Talawa Theatre Company, and Paulette Randall; others include Pam Fraser Solomon, Gloria Hamilton, Olusola Oyeleye, and Rowena Rolton McGann. Actresses like Joan Ann Maynard, Decima Francis and Carmen Munroe have developed parallel careers as directors. Projects like Second Wave Young Women Playwrights Festival and the Albany Empire's Basement have also encouraged black women directors, often from a youth and community drama work base, like Deborah Rose and Wozzy Brewster. Among Asian women, Ghose and Patel have also directed, while recently Sudha Kumar Bhuchar and Christine Langdon-Smith directed their adaptation of the classic novel *Untouchable* as the first project of the woman-founded company, Tamasha.

Paulette Randall, who has worked with Artiste, Cooke, Cole, Gideon and Rudet helping their development, as well as directing Jamaican Barbara Glouden's plays, says, 'I desperately want to remain as close friends as possible with these women and that's rare. They're talented wonderful people.'²⁴ She sees the current upsurge of new, black and especially women's writing as a London equivalent of the Harlem Renaissance. As almost all these writers have emerged over the past eight years, the extent of their experiments with a range of subjects and stylistic approaches testifies to a creative energy and burning response to the need to voice experiences previously marginalized, to stage and explore issues confronting black, Afro-Caribbean and Asian women in contemporary society. Black women playwrights clearly intend to make themselves heard.

5 Black women playwrights in Britain

- 1 Women Talking from *A Dangerous Knowing*, Sheba, 1985.
- 2 As far as possible, I have indicated where scripts may be obtained if not published. I would be very interested to hear of or receive copies of plays not mentioned, and would encourage playwrights and companies to lodge copies of their work with both the British Library and the New Playwrights Trust, Interchange Studios, Dalby Street, Kentish Town, London, NW 3NG where they can be accessible for reading, to encourage further productions and study of work by black women. NPT, with Black Audio and Film Collective, have recently commissioned a Black Playwrights Directory, to list all published and produced black and Third World playwrights and screen writers. Page references given are to published versions listed in the bibliography. No page reference is given for unpublished scripts.
- 3 Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, Commission for Racial Equality, 1979.
- 4 Sandy Craig, ed., *Dreams & Deconstructions*, Amber Lane, 1980, pp. 59-75.
- 5 Prabhu Gupta mentions in *Black British Literature*, p. 119 that Una Marston wrote the first play performed by a black company in Britain. She had other plays produced in the 1930s in Jamaica, published poetry, and presented 'Caribbean Voices' for the BBC.
- 6 Susan Croft, Interview with Theatre of Black Women, *The Plot*, 2, 1985.
- 7 See quotation about *Pyeyucca* in Alphabet of Apocrypha (p. 206, Chapter 9). Poems by Evaristo and Hilaire, including work from *Pyeyucca*, are included in Maud Sulter, ed., *Passion: Discourses on Black Women's Creativity*, Urban Fox Press, 1990. Sulter is herself a visual artist who also creates performance art, a field where black women and men are only recently beginning to emerge. See

- Michael MacMillan, *Live Art and Cultural Diversity*, Art Council, 1991, for discussion of this area.
- 8 Croft, Interview with Theatre of Black Women, *The Plot*, 2, 1985.
 - 9 See Alphabet of Apocrypha (Chapter 9) for further discussion.
 - 10 See Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, Virago, 1981.
 - 11 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, Women's Press, 1984, p. xi.
 - 12 References to *England is de Place for Me* are to the unpublished script, not the recently published revised Sheffield version.
 - 13 From 'The Voices from Nowhere' by Pat Ashworth, in *The Guardian*, 11 October 1989.
 - 14 From 'Moving On' by Sheryl Garratt in *City Limits*, July 1984.
 - 15 LIFT, London International Festival of Theatre, has been responsible for bringing to Britain important black work, including *The Colored Museum*, Methuen, 1987, Reduta Deux Company, *Sistren's Fallen Angel & The Devil Concubine*.
 - 16 Oyeleye's account of working as a director at the English National Opera is included in Sulter, ed., *Passion: Discourses on Black Women's Creativity*, Urban Fox Press, 1990. Oyeleye is also Chair of the Writers' Guild Women's Committee.
 - 17 Kathie Perkins, ed., *Black Female Playwrights: An anthology before 1950*, Indiana University Press, 1989.
 - 18 See article by Jyoti Patel and Jez Simons in 'Doing the Write Thing' *Bazaar Magazine*, issue 9, 1990.
 - 19 Quotations and references to *Ishtaar Descends* are to an unpublished manuscript version, not the partly revised recently published Sheffield edition.
 - 20 Quotation from publicity for *Chameleon*, by Yasmin Sidwha.
 - 21 See Sulter, ed., *Passion*.
 - 22 Review in *Spare Rib*, April 1990.
 - 23 Jyoti Patel and Jez Simons, interviewed by Croft, Derby 1990.
 - 24 Paulette Randall, interviewed by Croft, London 1989.