

# **Whose Stories Are Being Told? Reflections on Contemporary Black British Theatre**

**Jessica Mensah**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Surrey in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of BA (Honours) in Theatre and Performance

Department of Acting and Performance

GSA

University of Surrey

**April 2019**

## **Contents:**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. “Black British Theatre” or (just) “British Theatre”</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2. On <i>Misty</i></b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3. On <i>Queens of Sheba</i></b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Extract of Interview with Ryan Calais Cameron (17 January 2019)</b>	
<b>Extract of Interview with Kwame Kwei-Armah (1 April 2019)</b>	
<b>Extract of Interview with Jessica Hagan (5 April 2019)</b>	

**Total Word Count: 8087**

**Designated Supervisor: Laura Cull**

# Acknowledgements

I would like to take the time to thank all the people who continued to pray, support and believe in me through this process.

I would like to first thank my family: Michael Mensah, Patricia Mensah, Jonathan Mensah and Joshua Mensah – your love, phone calls and overwhelming support is forever appreciated  
I am so grateful for how you stood with me in this from the beginning.

I want to especially thank my sister Josephine Mensah, who has put up with my tears, constant video calls, sending me encouraging words and music to push through, you are the best and my No.1. I could not ask for a better sister than you.

Next, I would like to thank Bukky Oluseye and Vanessa Gyamerah, for checking up on me constantly, and encouraging me to not give up even on the last day of submission, when I wanted to stop. I am eternally grateful for your love and your encouragement to continue.

Yassmin Foster – You are the best! There is nothing more I can say, thank you for your visits and dealing with my constant questions x

My library support: Cathryn, Lucia and Flo x

Thank you so much to the following people for your advice, prayers and support, I could not have completed this without you:

Sylvan Baker, Catherine Batson, Kwame-Kwei Armah, Olivia Nwabali, Lynette Goddard, Ryan Calais-Cameron, Shavani Cameron, Jessica L. Hagan, Chitalu, Viola, Maria, Suki, Michelle, Gabby, Priscilla, Osaria, Annabel, Pelumi, Elizabeth Essein, Deborah Amoah, Joiada, Tamsin, Hermela, Kwame, Nevardo, Lola, Tomi, Andrew (Youth Pastor), Ebenezer, Deanna, Gwen and many others!

And finally, I would like to thank **Dr Laura Cull** – You are the greatest, thanks for your immense support, dealing with my obsessive emailing, making sure I look after myself and helping me to get this far! I am so thankful. I have a dissertation!!

# Whose Stories Are Being Told? Reflections on Contemporary Black British Theatre

## Introduction

*In 2017, I saw Nouveau Riche's production called *Queens of Sheba* by Jessica L. Hagan. On entering the bare, small black-box theatre space, I did not expect to be brought to tears and laughter by this incredible piece. I identify as a Black British woman, with Ghanaian heritage. I watched this play and saw my truth, and my story being presented on stage; A truth I never imagined I could identify with, or even, share this experience with other black women in a theatre space.*

This dissertation seeks to reflect on the status and function of contemporary Black British Theatre<sup>1</sup> and the representation of the Black British identity and experience in theatre, with focus on two key case studies: *Misty* by Arinzé Kene (2018a) and *Queens of Sheba* by Jessica L Hagan (2018)<sup>2</sup>. I have chosen to discuss the work of Black British playwrights, as my experience of UK theatre has made me aware of the lack of representation of this work and its practitioners on the mainstream British stage. However, I have also noticed a shift in the London theatre scene that has suggested progress is being made for Black British playwrights.

In the chapters to follow, I first seek to discuss what is meant by term Black British Theatre and consider its importance in society today. To do so, I shall consider the differing views of contemporary Black British practitioners such as Kwame-Kwei Armah and Bola

---

<sup>1</sup> I am choosing to capitalise the letter B whenever I refer to the term Black British – to highlight the importance of the Black identity and voice that is needed in theatre.

<sup>2</sup> I watched both live performances of *Queens of Sheba* (2017) and *Misty* (2018). I saw *Queens of Sheba* at Camden People's Theatre in 2017 and I watched *Misty* at Bush Theatre in 2018.

Agbaje in relation to the meaning and value of this term. I will then move on to analysing my two case study plays: drawing from concepts such as misogynoir and the work of scholars like Lynette Godard (2015) to explore the narratives of these plays, to understand the significance of the stories they portray about the Black British experience and to argue for how these works are not only relevant for those who identify as black but also contain universal aspects that potentially speak to all audiences.

My interest in Black British Theatre began in 2017, when I conducted a year-long work placement with Kiln Theatre in London. During this year, I saw many works by Black British playwrights and companies, such as: Talawa Theatre Company, *The Barbershop Chronicles* (2017) by Inua Ellams, *Nine Night* (2018) by Natasha Gordon, *#Hashtag Lightie* (2017) by Lynette Linton, *a profoundly affectionate, passionate devotion to someone (-noun)* (2017) by debbie tucker green. Whilst being exposed to these works, I questioned why I had never heard or seen a lot of work by these playwrights before, or to be more specific, work made by black people. Of course, Black British playwrights such as Mustapha Matura, Winsome Pinnock, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Bola Agbaje had already been writing and publishing their work since the 1950s, 80s and onwards, long before the productions I stated above were created (National Theatre Black Plays Archive, 2019). However, I had not heard or read about these playwrights until my placement year and through initial research for this dissertation. One key reason for my lack of knowledge of this work was due to it not being present in my education. My degree curriculum, in Theatre and Performance, presents a largely Eurocentric theatrical canon; in which the work of white British practitioners dominates the curriculum and the work of Black British playwrights are not present<sup>3</sup>. This is problematic, as it suggests a racial

---

<sup>3</sup> I study a *BA Theatre and Performance degree* at the University of Surrey. An example in our modules where the work of Black British playwrights is not discussed is within the module 'Introduction to Theatre and Performance', which looks at the history and contemporary works of theatre and performance. Whilst the module has been updated since the time when I took it, to include a more diverse range of practitioners, it is still dominated by white European and American theatre makers.

dominance in terms of whose stories and views within the theatre are preferred and taught about and does not allow black students like me to see the theatre or the British education system as a place for our views, culture and experiences to be discussed.

During my time spent with Kiln Theatre, I had noticed the recent developments within the London theatre scene that suggested progress was being made in terms of the opportunities made available to black theatre playwrights and makers. For example, both *Misty* and *Nine Night* transferred to the West End. The transfer of both these works in the same year is not a usual achievement we hear for Black British playwrights. Therefore, the transfers of both these plays were significant as it meant: a change in theatre audiences, “widen[ing] the image of what a West End playwright looks like”, and a chance for black playwrights to own the creation of their own characters and stories (Minamore, 2018). Natasha Gordon was the “first black British female playwright” to have a show in the West End (Minamore, 2018). Whilst this is obviously a great achievement, her being the first Black British female playwright to have her work staged at a West End theatre in 2018, clearly points towards the persistent inequality and lack of representation in the amount of black and black female playwrights having their work in the West End. Gordon even states herself how this ongoing conversation about firsts “negates those who came before” (cited in Minamore, 2018), she explains how this ignores:

The work that’s been done by so many black playwrights, black theatre groups, companies that existed in the 80s but closed due to a lack of support.

We have these conversations about ‘the first’ as though there’s a sudden boom or it’s a fad, and I don’t think it helps us to sustain (ibid.).

Here Gordon points our attention to how these celebrations of ‘firsts’ suggests the industry, does not allow the legacy of Black British practitioners to remain constant. It appears to have moments of celebratory achievements and advances, which then appear to fade away until the

next wave or generation comes in. If such achievements only last a moment, it provides no strong foundations for the next generation of theatre makers or help in “moving us forward” (cited in, Minamore 2018) - to having the presence and work of black individuals remain constant in British Theatre.

Another sign of progress for Black British Theatre in 2018, was the appointment of Kwame-Kwei Armah as the Artistic Director of the Young Vic Theatre, in London. In a similar light to Natasha Gordon’s success, Kwei-Armah is “the first person of African-Caribbean descent to lead a major British theatre” (Harrod, 2018). Again however, one might ask: why is it only in 2018, that we are seeing a black person become the Artistic Director of a major British Theatre? I would argue that this is likely to be due to the history of racism and inequality that is prevalent within the theatre industry (and wider society), that have been the core barriers to the visibility of Black British playwrights, and for black individuals, to progress in other roles within the theatre. To support this claim, Lynette Goddard (2015) acknowledges two reports that had noted the issues of racism and unequal opportunities within the theatre industry. One of the reports, was the Macpherson report in 1999, which highlighted the “Institutional Racism” that was evident during the police investigations into the murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson Report, 1999, cited in Goddard, 2015, pp.7-8). This report influenced other institutions in society to create policies that dealt with racism. This leads onto the second report called *The Eclipse Report* (Goddard, 2015, p.9). *The Eclipse Report* was created “on the premise that racism exists within the theatre sector” (Arts Council England, 2016, p.3). The report created 21 recommendations to “combat racism” (ibid.) in the theatre industry – which then influenced art policies to develop equal opportunities for marginalised groups.

However, despite these changes within arts policies attempting to reduce racism and inequality of access– latest reports including the *Acting up Report* (Labour Party, 2017), demonstrates that these aspects are still a problem within the creative industries. The *Acting up*

*Report*, was an investigation into the barriers that limit diversity in the performing arts and aimed to provide possible solutions to the problem (ibid, p.3). A key point made by the report was that: “who we see on stage and on screen, what stories are being told and where they are set impacts the way we see ourselves and how the world sees us” (ibid.). This quote is significant to the argument I am making in this dissertation, as the report suggests that it is important for the industry to reflect the individuals and their “stories” within our society. Especially in a city as multicultural as London, it is essential for the industry to reflect its diversity, so that marginalised groups within the industry can see that the theatre is a space for them, their stories and experiences.

## **Literature Review**

As in the wider theatre industry and my degree, Black British Theatre has also been under-represented within theatre scholarship in the past. For example, Dimple Godiwala (2006, pp.5-6) notes how books such as *Changing Stages: A view of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Eyre and Wright, 2000) does not include the contribution of Black British Theatre to Britain. However, recent years, have seen a growth in academic scholarship that has brought this field into recognition and aims to document the contribution of Black British practitioners to the UK theatre landscape. For example, literature such as: *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain, A History* (Chambers, 2011), *Alternatives within the mainstream* (Godiwala, 2006), *Staging New Britain* (Davis and Fuchs, 2006), and *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature, 1945-2010* (Osborne, 2016), provide an overview of the history of Black British Theatre<sup>4</sup>. Other recent books and articles focus more on the work of contemporary

---

<sup>4</sup> Though these publications also state ‘British Asian Theatre’ in their titles (given the large Asian community in the UK), I will be focusing more on the ideas that the literature shares on Black British theatre.



Black British playwrights from the new millennium (Abram, 2014; Goddard, 2015; Peacock, 2016 and Pearce, 2017). Scholars in this field have also developed a focus in discussing the work of Black British female playwrights specifically, as work by black female playwrights began to increase in the 1980s (Griffin, 2003, p.2). Works in this area include: *Staging black feminisms* (Goddard, 2007), *The Cambridge Companion to modern British women playwrights* (Reinelt and Aston, 2000) and *Contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain* (Griffin, 2003). The gap in documenting the work of Black British dramatists has also been highlighted by Black British playwrights themselves such as, Kwame Kwei-Armah, who set up the *Black Plays Archive Project* (National Theatre Black Plays Archive, 2019) to document the work of Black British playwrights in Britain.

From looking at the dates of the scholarship, most of these books were published from the early 2000s. In this sense, the growth in scholarship correlates with the increased visibility of Black British dramatists in mainstream British theatre from 2003 (Davis and Fuchs, 2006; Goddard, 2015). This increased visibility is what scholars have noted as a “cultural renaissance” happening for Black British Theatre (Goddard, 2015, p.3; David and Fuchs, 2006). This is a significant step for Black British Theatre as it is a massive improvement from the decline in this work during the 90s (Goddard, 2015, p.8).

A common theme amongst most of the literature considered above (Davis and Fuchs, 2006; Godiwala; 2006; Peacock, 2016; Goddard, 2015) is the contestation of the terms ‘Black British Theatre’ and ‘Black Theatre’. Most of these books survey the views and debates by Black British playwrights on these terms. Playwrights such as Winsome Pinnock argue that the term Black Theatre reinforces the “reality of a division within theatrical institutions”, (1999, cited in Deirdre Osborne, 2006, p.97), whereas, others such as Roy Williams believe terms such as black theatre are needed to “ensure we are heard” (2009). Considering debates and notions of these terms are significant to my dissertation, as conversations surrounding the

notions and use of the terms Black theatre and Black British theatre are still being contested today. For example, Arinzé Kene - suggests we should move away from using terms such as a “black play”, and indeed it is this idea that inspired him to write *Misty* in the first place (2018a, p.3). I intend to contribute to these conversations by analysing current views on the terms Black theatre and Black British Theatre, to consider whether these categories are still necessary and useful today.

Goddard’s (2015) book *Contemporary Black British Playwrights* is particularly relevant to my study. In her book, Goddard foregrounds how Black British plays are important in contributing to our understanding of British society, by staging social issues from “black perspectives” (ibid, p.17). This is significant as it suggests Black British Theatre allows for the views of the black community in Britain to be shared and acknowledged through theatre. Goddard also argues how the work she analyses by Black British playwrights (Kwame Kwei-Armah, Bola Agbaje, Roy Williams and Debbie Tucker Green), stage “black experience as ‘universal’” rather than seeing them as stories that are for just the black community (ibid, p.17). This is an important concept that Goddard brings to our attention, as it points to perceptions of Black British Theatre being considered as an “exclusive barrier”, (Alfred cited in Goddard, 2015, p.53) in which the stories and characters on stage are only going to be of interest to a black audience. Whereas, the intentions of some plays by Black British playwrights is to represent the stories and experiences of black individuals – to bring a black audience in, but also to allow other audience members who are not black to see and understand these experiences. This assertion points to the overall argument Goddard and other playwrights make, which is to create work that represents the “black perspective” that should be an addition to mainstream British theatre, rather than being a separate category. I intend to contribute to this field of study by making more work by Black British playwrights known, as no literature has been written on *Misty* or *Queens of Sheba*.

## Methodology

I have used a variety of methods to conduct my research, such as an autoethnographic approach (Chang, 2008) to contribute to the conversations on what we mean by Black British Theatre and to analyse the case study plays. This method involves the use of my own “autobiographical data” (ibid, p.9), where I will use my experience to frame and analyse the ideas I present in this dissertation. It is useful to reflect on my experience, as my identity as a Black British woman and student has affected how I perceive the works of Black British playwrights and my own identity within the wider context of theatre. My experience will also inform the importance of this research for other young Black British individuals who are interested in theatre and maybe able to relate my experience.

As a second method, I also conducted face-to-face interviews with current Black British playwrights in the field such as Kwame Kwei-Armah, Ryan Calais-Cameron and Jessica L. Hagan. The interviews provided a better picture of the current views of contemporary Black British playwrights in relation to discussions on the term and the intentions behind the work they create. Thirdly, I use performance and textual analysis of my two case studies and draw from Goddard’s (2015) idea of “black experience as universal” to consider the universality of the plays presented. The first case study play will be *Misty* which is pertinent to this dissertation as it is another example of progress in Black British Theatre work transferring to the West-End. However, it is specifically key to my dissertation as Kene created *Misty* out of his reluctance to use the term a “black play” (Kene, 2018a, p.3), which contributes to contemporary conversations about this term. Kene also explores the assumptions and expectations of society that arise in trying to tell a story as a black writer. In turn, my second case study *Queens of Sheba* is key to this research due to the impact the play had on me as a

black woman in changing my perspective of the stories that can be explored in theatre. I will argue that *Queens of Sheba* provides an important example of why stories that reflect personal experiences are relevant, particularly in how it addresses the issue of gender and race to present the black woman's experience. Both case studies were written by Black British Playwrights and both stage the complexities and different experiences of the Black British identity. Where they differ is that *Misty* partly focuses on the experiences of black men, whereas *Queens of Sheba* focuses on the experiences of black women, which could be seen as linked to ideas of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991;1989) explored through the concept of misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy, 2018).

## 1. On Black British Theatre or (just) British Theatre?

It is important to begin with the interrogation of the term Black British Theatre. What do we mean by this term? Do we still need it to define the work created by Black British playwrights, or can their work be part of the “norm” (Agbaje, 2018) known as “British theatre”? The use of the term Black British Theatre alongside its counterpart term Black Theatre has been contested and debated by many Black British practitioners (Godiwala, 2006; Davis and Fuchs, 2006). This section intends to look at the following debates surrounding this term and to understand whether it is still needed today. I shall begin this chapter with a brief history of the term Black British theatre and then introduce and analyse the views of Black British playwrights in relation to this term, ultimately arguing that the term Black British Theatre is still necessary today.

Michael Pearce (2018) states that the “Black British voice in theatre has been dominated by the Afro-Caribbean experience”. This is reflective of the immigration of Caribbean and African migrants to Britain from the 1950s and onwards (ibid; Godiwala, 2006; Chambers, 2011; Peacock, 2016). Therefore, Pearce allows us to understand that the core of Black British theatre is that it reflects the experiences and perspectives of African and Caribbean people in Britain. A key factor that influenced the need and growth of this work was the lack of authentic “Black presence” on the British stage (Godiwala, 2006, p.10). The lack of black presence meant that British Theatre did not reflect the stories or culture of these black communities in Britain. Therefore, British theatre was dominated by the voices and ideologies of the white British culture (ibid, pp.8-10; Osborne, 2006, p.84). As a result, Black playwrights began to create theatre work that represented diasporic cultures, language and their intersectional understandings of what it means to be Black and British (Godiwala, 2006, pp.6-7). For example, Black British playwright Mustapha Matura’s play *As Time Goes By*, explored

“diasporic dislocation, cultural adjustment and individual social identity” (Peacock, 2016, p.113).

The work produced by first and second generation Black British playwrights, such as Mustapha Matura, from the 1950s and 70s appeared to reflect the migration experiences of these playwrights in post-war Britain (Goddard, 2015, pp.6-7; Peacock, 2016, p.111). Whereas, Goddard (ibid.) notes there has been “a shift” in Black British playwriting since the early 2000s. From this decade, Black British playwrights such as Kwei-Armah and Agbaje created work that began to reflect “topical social issues and concerns [of the time] that arise from living in London” (ibid.). The work of these playwrights was rooted in social issues such as: social realism, urban gang violence, the portrayal of black identities and the interrelationships between fathers and sons (ibid.). Therefore, Goddard suggests that Black British theatre as a term today can be understood as work created by African and Caribbean playwrights that explore their current experiences of the society they live in.

Dawn Walton (2008), the Founder and Artistic Director of the Eclipse Theatre, suggests that trying to define Black British theatre is more complex than solely being based on the current experiences of African and Caribbean playwrights. And indeed, it is hard to assume a “fixed idea” (ibid.) of what Black British Theatre is. For example, Walton states how some people define black theatre based on it having an “all-black cast” or even a “black director” (ibid.). However, she suggests this is a limiting view to define this work as it removes the work by Black British playwrights such as Debbie Tucker Green’s *Stoning Mary*, which had white actors and Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s kitchen* which was directed by a white director, Angus Jackson (ibid.). Thus, Walton suggests that Black British Theatre “cannot be defined by race alone” (2008), as it can have a variety of narratives and actors, it is diverse, constantly evolving and cannot be limited to one story, or even race.

The diverse nature of Black British Theatre is also a point Kwei-Armah (2019) made about Black British Theatre when I interviewed him for this project. For example, Kwei-Armah suggests that “the word black ...is diverse as anything” and that “There isn’t a prescription when it comes to the Black British play and I think that is quite healthy” (ibid.). This diversity of the Black British play alternates with how diverse the Black British experience is, leading to the creation of many different plays created by Black British playwrights in society. This is important to consider through my later analysis of *Misty* and *Queens of Sheba*, as they are two plays I would consider as work created by Black British playwrights, yet the perspectives and stories they tell about the Black British experience are very different. In addition, to this view, Kwei-Armah suggests seeing the term “Black British...[as] the cultural lens from which [he] write[s]” (2005); Kwei-Armah implies that the term Black British is the way he sees the world and experiences it as a Black British man, therefore it influences what he writes. Thus, the term Black British can be understood as marking the Black British perspective or lens on society.

In contrast, to Kwei-Armah’s view, Ryan Calais-Cameron (2019), playwright and Artistic Director of Nouveau Riché theatre company, would suggest that we move away from using terms such as Black Theatre:

I think we all revert to it because we have been so incredibly marginalised. If you say black theatre, we know what you are talking about. I don’t think it is a term going forward that we should be comfortable with...I see our work as being good generally and universally. I want you to go that was an amazing show, not that was an amazing black show... (ibid.).

In a similar way, Agbaje (2018) argues how the term enforces a feeling of difference within the theatre industry:

When [Black British Theatre] becomes the norm, then we are not going to need it...  
[we] are striving to become part of the mainstream... I hate this idea that I am an other  
(ibid.)

To an extent, I do agree with Cameron and Agbaje's views. They both imply that the term Black British Theatre or Black Theatre can refer to the work of Black British playwrights as an "other" to the already established mainstream British theatre. Therefore, if Black British playwrights were given the scope to thrive within the British theatre industry then their work would be seen as part of the norm, and perhaps these terms would not be needed. Instead the work created by Black British playwrights could be seen as being theatre that is "good generally and universally" (Calais-Cameron, 2019). Although it has proven difficult for the work of Black British playwrights to be seen as the norm due to the continuing inequalities and racism that is evident within the industry.

However, I would suggest that terms such as Black British Theatre or Black theatre should remain, even if this means that the work of Black British playwrights will never be perceived as part of the "norm". This is because seeing the term Black British Theatre, allows me (and indeed others who identify as black) to find theatre that I can relate to and recognise the work as describing a reflection of myself and my experiences. Yes, the term does suggest a point of difference – but Black British theatre is naturally different to what British theatre was established to be, which is what makes it unique. Therefore, I would agree with Roy Williams (2009) who suggested that we need the term "Black theatre...to ensure we are heard"; we are a different voice that needs to be heard and seen as an addition to mainstream British theatre. Although, I am aware that not all Black British playwrights work may explore black experiences, I would argue that the term is useful to refer to work that does explore our



experiences or even to describe the playwright who created the work – though they are not bound to have their work or themselves described in this way.

To conclude this section, Black British Theatre as a term can be understood as describing theatre work created by African and Caribbean Black British playwrights, that is about the black experience and their perspective on society or it can be perceived as a term that refers to the artist creating the work. This is the definition of Black British Theatre I will use throughout this dissertation. In the following chapters, I shall analyse my selected case studies *Misty* and *Queens of Sheba* to understand the narratives these playwrights portray about the black experience.

## 2. On *Misty*

*“Can’t it just be a play? Can a play from a person like me just be a f\*\*\*\* play already?”*

*(Kene, 2018a, p.54)*

Building on the discussion of what is meant by the term Black British Theatre, this chapter intends to analyse the aspects of *Misty* that explore the key issues Kene raises about the representations of the black experience; particularly interrogating the ways in which they are being portrayed through theatre and asking how this links to our understanding of what we mean by a ‘black play’. I also intend to argue how and why I would refer to *Misty* as a Black play or rather as Black British Theatre.

*Misty* was written and performed by actor and playwright Arinzé Kene. Other works by Kene include: *Little Baby Jesus* (2011), *God’s property* (2013) and *good dog* (2017). Kene was born in Lagos, Nigeria and was raised in Hackney, East London (WhatsOnStage, 2018).

Set in London, Kene adopts various roles consisting of himself and the characters of Virus and Lucas. During the play Kene writes a story about a character called Virus. We follow Virus on his journey through the night time streets of London. Throughout the play Virus is involved in a fight on the night bus, is chased by police, kicked out of the house by his mum for the trouble he gets into and visits his friend Jade – who also has troubles of her own. Virus also talks to the audience about the way the city is changing, due to the gentrification in London. However, Kene later reveals in the story of Virus, that the real viruses (or rather perceived problems of the city) are the people in charge of the gentrification taking place within the city.

Kene uses *Misty* to highlight the stereotypical narratives that are perceived as constituting a “black play” (Kene, 2018a, p.3). For example, there are moments in the play

where the characters (who are both black) criticise Kene for the story he writes about Virus for example:

RAYMOND: ... What I'm saying is that your falling into the trap that some of our black writers fall into. It seems that some black writers 'conveniently' wanna write narratives that majority white audiences are interested in seeing about black people.

(Kene, 2018a, p.40)

DONNA: Black trauma ought to be a genre of its own cos under the umbrella of black trauma comes your typical stories of racism, slavery, crime and violence you know...

(ibid.)

RAYMOND: And I ain't saying you've written Django but, you've written just another hood story.

(Kene, 2018a, p.41)

DONNA: Generic angry young black man!

(ibid, p.13)

In these quotes the characters touch on the tiresome narratives about the black experience that are being portrayed through Kene's story, that are also reflected within wider society. They refer to Kene's story about Virus as another "hood story". By a "hood story" they refer to the narratives that tend to represent black people, particularly black males, as criminals who are involved in gangs, violence and get into trouble by the police. These representations of the black male are what Goddard notes are the images and representations echoed in the media about "black masculinity" (2015, p.12) that feed into other industries such as the theatre; these

stereotypical stories about the black experience are mostly filtered through “white-managed” theatres that fit their ideal representations of the black experience (ibid.). Thus, in these moments, Kene shows how these repetitive narratives of the black experience create a shared understanding and association of what society perceives as a black play.

As well as *Misty* pointing towards associations ascribed to the term black play, the play also points to how a general term such as a black play can be quite limiting for a black writer:

ARINZÉ: I just. I write. I just wanna write my s\*\*\*\* unencumbered...and not even... I don't wanna write the enlightening play that ticks all the boxes and bridges the racial and sexual and LGBT abyss, that some people expect of me. I just wanna write a play, man. A regular play. It's really not that deep. Everybody's just... the pressure, from a ... an exotic... urban thing to someone, or a n\*\*\*\* play or without you thinking it ought to be unpolitical – what the f\*\*\*\* can you possibly know about what I wanna say? Can't it just be a play? Can a play from a person like me just be a f\*\*\*\*\* play already? ...

(Kene, 2018a, pp. 53-54)

Here Kene portrays the frustration he encounters with the expectations and criticisms he receives from simply wanting to tell a story. He questions why the work he creates cannot “just be a play?”, rather than being labelled as a “hood story”, an “urban thing” or even simply a “black play”. Therefore, he suggests that such labels box the work of black writers like himself into these expected narratives. Thus, Kene shows how such labels and perceptions appear to be applied to the work of black writers due to their race and the associated narratives to their race. This in effect dismisses the core and universal theme of *Misty* which is to tell a story about gentrification from the perspective of “people like him” (Kene, 2018a, p.54), who live in this changing city.

The complexities and limitations Kene portrays about the term a black play, does lead to the most common asked question about this play, which is whether *Misty* is a black play? As I stated in the debates on Black British Theatre, I chose to define Black British Theatre or a black play as work created by African and Caribbean British playwrights, that is about the black experience or their perspective on society. In relation to *Misty*, Kene does present part of the black experience by presenting the story of a young black man who is roaming through the streets of London and presents his perspective on the society he lives in and the criticisms Kene receives for writing a black play. Kene himself is also a Black British playwright and *Misty* is based on his personal experience of the “opposition” he received from friends, in the beginning stages of writing *Misty* (Kene, 2018b). Therefore, due to these reasons, I would refer to *Misty* as a black play or as Black British Theatre. On the other hand, the other narrative that follows through *Misty* is about gentrification, which is not a specific experience for a black individual in society, but rather a universal issue that Kene presents from the perspective of a young black man.

Despite this, Kene would not refer to his work as a black play (Kene, 2018b). For example, he states he doesn’t know “what makes a black play”, or if a play is “written by a white person, and if it is put on by white people, is that a white production?” (ibid.). The latter point he makes is true, as the work by white playwrights are not defined by their race, however this is due to how society has been set up on racial grounds. For Kene, he sees *Misty* as a play that is “for London” (ibid.) - therefore implying that his work is for all and should be seen first and foremost as a play, rather than a black play, that is based on the race of the person. Despite Kene’s resistance of the term a black play, it is fair to say that *Misty* partly portrays experiences of Black British men living in London and discusses the wider perceptions of their experiences. Therefore, this ties in with my understanding of Black British Theatre as detailed in the previous chapter.

### 3. On *Queens of Sheba*

*“I am a mix. of both racism and sexism – they lay equally on my skin”* (Hagan, 2018, p.2)

In this chapter, I will analyse the play *Queens of Sheba*, to understand how the play presents the intersectional experience of black women: in other words, how black women are subjected to both sexism and racism in intersecting ways. I will use concepts such as misogynoir and intersectionality, to analyse how gender and race plays a part in a black woman’s experience and how this is represented in the play. I will argue for the importance of having stories by Black British playwrights that portray the experience of black individuals, in this case black women, but will also claim that although this play tells a story about black woman’s experience it is still a play for all to hear that also contains universal themes. In this sense I will consider the ways in which this play contributes to wider conversations about the term Black British theatre.

*Queens of Sheba* was written by Jessica L. Hagan. Hagan identifies as a “British-Ghanaian”, who grew up in Marylebone, London (Hagan 2018, n.p.). Hagan began her creative career as a spoken word artist, where most of her work surrounds the “black women’s experience” (ibid.). Hagan’s first written play, *Queens of Sheba* is set in London and presents the story of four black women: Koko, Rachel, Veronica and Jacoba who is mixed-race. The play is partly inspired by the DSTRKT club incident in 2015, in which women were denied entry into the club “for having dark skin” (Elgot, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Reflecting this incident, the characters prepare to get ready for a night out at a club. Later in the play we witness the club owners, portrayed by the female cast, refuse the women entry based on their skin being too dark and

---

<sup>5</sup> DSKRT is a nightclub in London (Elgot, 2015). A female clubber stated that one of the promoters of the clubs said he would allow the clubber and her other “lighter-skinned friend” entry into the club, but not their friends with “darker -skin” (ibid). This incident caused party goers to protest outside the club and led to an uproar on social media, where “other party goers said they experienced racist-door policies at high-end clubs” (ibid).

their body shapes not fitting the club's ideal standards of a woman. From the outset of the play, the characters take the audience on a journey to reflect on the prejudice that they experience as black women and present the strength that comes with their sisterhood to rise above misogynoir: the "anti-Black racist misogyny that black women experience" (Bailey and Trudy, 2018 p.762)

*Queens of Sheba* covers part of the "Black Woman's experience in a white, male-dominated world" (Hagan, 2018, n.p.). This journey includes: the "microaggressions" black women experience at the work place, the fetishization of the black female body by white men, the "adultification of young Black girls" (ibid.), the prejudice towards black women through hip-hop music and the treatment of black females by black men. The words written in *Queens of Sheba* have a poetic flow as Hagan states the entire play is "one big poem" (ibid.), developed from spoken word pieces that Hagan wrote in response to the experiences shared by various Black women for this play. The piece is performed through spoken word, dance, and songs - many of which are by prominent black female vocalists, such as *The Supremes* and Aretha Franklin.

The play deals with the concept of "misogynoir" (Bailey and Trudy, 2018, p.762). Misogynoir refers to the ways in which being black, and female influences the prejudice black women receive. The term was first created by African American, feminist scholar, Moya Bailey (Northeastern University, 2012; ibid.) to describe the anti-black and misogynistic representations of black women in American digital and visual popular culture, and how these representations feed into the negative societal ideologies and treatment of black women (ibid.). Further work on this term has also involved the contribution of artist and social critic Trudy (Bailey and Trudy, 2018)<sup>6</sup>. Both Bailey and Trudy explain the importance of using the term

---

<sup>6</sup> Trudy is her artist name and what she is referred to within academic sources (Bailey and Trudy, 2018).

misogynoir to specifically describe the experience of black women (2018, p.763). Therefore, they both argue that misogynoir describes the “unique” and “particular experience” (ibid.) that black women face, due to their race and gender intersecting. Rather than generalising misogynoir amongst all “women of colour” they use the term to explore our specific experience. This is the case with *Queens of Sheba*, as it is a Black British play that presents the “particular experience” of black women.

In addition, Bailey further states that “Misogynoir can come from Black men, white men and women, and even other Black women” (ibid, p.762). However, Hagan presents misogynoir in *Queens of Sheba* specifically from black men and white men in social and institutional settings, such as the work place and the club. For example, in the play there is a scene where the characters describe their misogynistic experience from dating a white man, they refer to as “Charlie” (Hagan, 2018, p.18). In this scene, the women describe the stereotypical racist and sexist perceptions some white men have about black women:

**Veronica:** But I’ll play into his fantasy for the sake of a first date...

Exotic

**Koko/Jacoba/Veronica:** Check!

**Veronica:** Sexual,

**Koko/Jacoba/Veronica:** Check!

**Veronica:** Wild,

**Koko/Jacoba/Veronica:** Check

(Hagan, 2018, p.13)



The words “Exotic”, “Sexual” and “Wild” connote racist and sexist perceptions white men have about a black women’s body. Where, the white man sees us as a commodity or foreign prize for their pleasurable desires, due to how they view black women as an “Other”, (hooks, 1992, p.23).

The combination of race and gender within the concept of misogynoir links closely to the notion of intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991; 1989) introduced intersectionality to examine how discourses such as feminism and “antiracist policy discourse” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140), tend to exclude the experiences of Black women, as they fail to recognise that the intersections of black women’s experiences are built on race and gender. Feminism and anti-racist policy discourse only provide a “single-axis” (ibid, p.139) of race or gender, as a lens to examine an individual’s experience. Therefore, intersectionality can be used as a lens to describe the ways being black, and female contributes to the discrimination black women experience.

I first watched the staged production at Camden People’s Theatre in 2017 - directed by Jessica Kaliisa and produced by Nouveau Riché theatre company. On entering the bare, small black-box theatre space, I did not expect to be brought to tears and laughter by this incredible piece. The poetic flow of Hagan’s words *resonated with me deeply as a black female*, especially the quote “Our mothers have made us mothers before our wombs have” (Hagan, 2018, p.36). This quote summed up my own adultification experience from childhood, an experience where “Black girls ... are treated as if they are wilfully engaging in behaviours typically expected of Black women” (Morris cited in Epstein, Blake and González, p.4, 2017). An example of such behaviours, are black girls being expected to know how to nurture their siblings and share in the responsibility of looking after the family, cooking and other chores - no matter how young the black girl is, which is what Hagan’s quote in the play points to.

As I related at the start of the Dissertation: I watched this play and *saw my truth, and my story being presented on stage; A truth I never imagined I could identify with, or even, share this experience with other black women in a theatre space*. It is this personal and relatable experience that Black British playwrights offer to a black audience, or in this case black women (who made up most of the audience on the day I went). My experience ties in with the Labour party's *Acting Up Report* that comments: "who we see on stage... what stories are being told, impact the way we see ourselves and how the world sees us". In this way, *Queens of Sheba* allowed me to understand how my intersectional identity of being a black woman effects how the world sees me and how I see the world. In this way, not only is it important for Black British playwrights to create work that is personal for its audience, but it is also important to see work about the Black British experience, that is created by black individuals. Especially, in this case, as *Queens of Sheba* is about the black woman's experience and so it was written and directed by two black women. This allows for what Ryan Calais-Cameron (2019) stated as an "authentic" representation of the black woman's experience, where she is in control of telling her *truth* and *her story*.

However, though *Queens of Sheba* provided me with a personal experience of being a black woman and it was written "for Black Women" (Hagan, 2018, n.p.), it does not mean that this play is limited to this audience. The intersectional experience of being Black and a woman in the play would allow for an audience of white women, or indeed all women, to relate to the discrimination the characters in *Queens of Sheba* receive for being a woman. Therefore, this points to how Black British playwrights create work that presents the "black experience as universal" (Goddard, 2015, p.17). Hagan even agrees that her play can be relatable and universal to those who "can fit into categories where race and gender plays a part in [their] experience" (Hagan, 2019). Thus, though *Queens of Sheba* is grounded in the particular experience of being a black woman, it can still be relatable to others who can identify with

some of the themes presented such as the concerns of a first date, feeling betrayed or experiencing pressure from the family.

It could also be argued that for those who cannot identify with the experience, it allows them an insight into the world and perspectives of black women who make up the society that they live in. For example, I have stated how a black woman would be able to relate to *Queens of Sheba* and how others who fall into the categories of race or gender could potentially relate to the play. However, the play could still be relatable to a white and black male audience. As *Queens of Sheba* presents the discrimination black females receive from white and black men. For example, in the scene below, the women criticise the expectations and ‘chat up’ lines they receive from “roadmen” (Hagan, 2018, p.27)<sup>7</sup>:

JACOBA: ... and no I am not a lesbian!

KOKO: And no this girl next to me isn’t actually my sister!

RACHEL: And no I am not stoosh!

And no we can’t be friends!

(Hagan, 2018, p.28)

KOKO: And no, I wasn’t asking for it!

RACHEL: And no I did not dress up for you!

ALL: And no this outfit isn’t to catch your attention!!!

(Hagan, 2018, p.29)

---

<sup>7</sup> Roadmen is a common slang term used in London to describe a “young man who spends a lot of time on the streets and may use or sell drugs, or cause trouble.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019)

Therefore, the play allows both black and white male audiences to relate to the preconceptions and discrimination presented in the play about black women, allowing them to reflect on their own attitudes and treatment of black women. The play also allows men to understand how black women feel about the discrimination that they receive.

To conclude, *Queens of Sheba* presents an intersectional understanding of the black woman's experience, where race and gender play a role. The play reinforces the importance of having stories and a theatre, in this case a Black British Theatre, where the stories reflect the individuals experience. However, though this play presents a particular experience of being a black woman, it does not mean the play cannot be accessible to others who are not black women. There are themes in the play that some audience members could potentially relate to and other aspects that maybe new or provide an insight into a black woman's world.

## Conclusion

To conclude, in my first chapter I provided a brief history and analysed the views of the term Black British theatre. This chapter demonstrated that the term Black British Theatre can be understood as a word that defines the work of Black British playwrights or the Black artist creating the work. The debates presented also show that this term can be useful in defining work that is specifically about the black experience and for black people. I demonstrated that the term Black British Theatre is useful in highlighting the racism that is prevalent within the theatre industry. However, some artists find that the term alienates the work of Black British playwrights from the established “norm” of British Theatre.

In the analysis of *Misty*, I have presented how this play contributes to this discussion of the terms Black British Theatre and a black play, and how these terms can be viewed as carrying negative associations of the black experience and the work created by black writers, which limits the diversity of narratives created by Black British playwrights. I have also shown how *Misty* is also a play that explores part of the black experience and aims to be a play that shares universal issues such as gentrification.

The chapter on *Queens of Sheba* explored how the play presents a specific experience of being a black woman, that I could relate too. Therefore, reinforcing the importance of the term Black British Theatre to define work that presents the specific experience of a black person. Although, it presents a personal experience and story, an audience can find elements of the story to identify with via the universal themes presented; as well as this, audiences can also learn about an experience that differs from their own.

The debates surrounding Black British Theatre, alongside my analysis of *Misty* and *Queens of Sheba*, present the complex, diverse and plurality of meanings the term Black British Theatre has for individuals and for the work created and defined by this term.

I hope through this dissertation, I have demonstrated the importance of the term Black British Theatre and the work created by Black British playwrights. This work plays an important and beneficial role for Black British individuals such as me. I hope to have illuminated the need for the visibility of this work to continue to grow and to be seen as part of the mainstream within theatre, education and wider academic sources as a whole. Above all, I hope that this dissertation sets up space for a continuing discussion about Black British Theatre amongst both scholars and students such as myself.

*Black British voices... we are here and it's time to be heard!*

## Bibliography:

*#Hashtag Lightie* by Lynette Linton (2017) Directed by Rikki Beadle-Blair [Arcola Theatre. 28 November]

*a profoundly affectionate, passionate devotion to someone (-noun)* by debbie tucker green (2017) Directed by debbie tucker green [The Royal Court. 22 March]

Abram, N. (2014) Staging the unsayable: debbie tucker green's political theatre. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 2(1), pp.113–130.

Agbaje, B. (2018) 'African Accents'. Interviewed by Lenny Henry for *BBC radio 4 extra*, 3 August. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06phflx/broadcasts/2018/08> (Accessed: 2 March 2019)

Arts Council England (2016) *Eclipse Report*. Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/eclipse-report> (Accessed: 4 March 2019)

Bailey, M. and Trudy. (2018) On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), pp.762 -768.

Calais -Cameron, R. (2019) Interviewed by Jessica Mensah, 17 January.

Cambridge Dictionary (2019) *Cambridge Dictionary*. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/roadman> (Accessed: 27 April 2019)

Chambers, C. (2011) *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A history*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Chang, H. (2008) *Autoethnography as Method*. London: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989) Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. 1(8), pp.139-169.

Crenshaw, K. (1991) Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law review*. 43(6), pp.1241-1299.

Davis, V. D and Fuchs, A. (eds.) (2006) *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre practice*. Brussels: P.I.E - Peter Lang

Elgot, J. (2015) *Dstrkt nightclub denies ban on dark and overweight women*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/oct/01/dstrkt-nightclub-denies-ban-dark-overweight-women-west-end-london> (Accessed: 5 January 2019)

Epstein, R, Blake, J and González, T. (2017) *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. Available at: <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf> (Accessed: 4 February 2019).

Eyre, R. and Wright, N. (2000) *Changing Stages: A view of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Goddard, L. (2007) *Staging Black Feminisms*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goddard, L. (2015) *Contemporary Black British Playwrights*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Godiwala, D. (ed.) (2006) *Alternatives within the mainstream British Black and Asian Theatres*. Newcastle. Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Griffin, G. (2003) *Contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Hagan, L. J. (2018) *Queens of Sheba*. London: Oberon books.
- Hagan, L. J. (2019) Interviewed by Jessica Mensah, 5 April.
- Harrod, H. (2018) *Kwame Kwei-Armah: 'people of colour, the main stage is for you'*. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/bc90863c-4313-11e8-803a-295c97e6fd0b> (Accessed: 22 September 2018).
- hooks, b. (1992) *Black Looks: race and representation*. New York: Routledge.
- Kene, A. (2011) *Little Baby Jesus*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Kene, A. (2013) *God's property*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Kene, A. (2017) *good dog*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Kene, A. (2018a) *Misty*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Kene, A. (2018b) 'Misty playwright Arinze Kene: What is a black play?' Interviewed by Krishnan Guru-Murthy for *Channel 4 news*, 28 September. Available at: <https://www.channel4.com/news/misty-playwright-arinze-kene-what-is-a-black-play> (Accessed: 6 April 2019)
- Kwei-Armah, K. (2005) "This is a Cultural Renaissance" An Interview with Kwame Kwei-Armah. Interviewed by Geoffrey Davis, in Davis, V. and Fuchs, A. (eds.) *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice*. Brussels. P.I.E -Peter Lang.
- Kwei-Armah, K. (2019) Interviewed by Jessica Mensah, 1 April.
- Labour Party (2017) *Acting Up Report*. Available at: <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/campaigncountdown/pages/1157/attachments/original/1502725031/Acting-Up-Report.pdf?1502725031> (Accessed: 20 April 2018).
- Minamore, B. (2018) 'We're here!' *The black playwrights storming the West End*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/oct/03/west-end-black-theatre-misty-arinze-kene-nine-night-natasha-gordon> (Accessed: 22 September 2018).
- Misty* by Arinze Kene (2018) Directed by Omar Elerian [Bush Theatre. 23 March 2018]
- National Theatre Black Plays Archive (2019) *National Theatre Black Plays Archive*. Available at: <http://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/> (Accessed: 7 September 2018)



*Nine Night* by Natasha Gordon (2018) Directed by Roy Alexander Weise [Dorfman Theatre. 23 May]

Northeastern University (2012) *Contesting Misogynoir: Black Women's Digital Resistance In American Culture With Moya Bailey*. Available at:

<https://web.northeastern.edu/nulab/contesting-misogynoir-black-womens-digital-resistance-in-american-culture-with-moya-bailey/> (Accessed: 4 February 2019)

Osborne, D. (2006) 'The state of the Nation: Contemporary Black British Theatre and the staging of the UK', in Godiwala, D. (ed.) *Alternatives within the Mainstream British Black and Asian Theatres*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp. 82-98

Osborne, D. (ed.) (2016) *The Cambridge companion to British Black and Asian literature (1945-2010)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peacock, D. K. (2016) "Stages of Representation," in Osborne, D. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945–2010)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 110–126.

Pearce, M. (2017) *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story*. Abingdon: Routledge

Pearce, M. (2018) 'African Accents'. Interviewed by Lenny Henry for *BBC radio 4 extra*, 3 August. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06phflx/broadcasts/2018/08> (Accessed: 2 March 2019)

*Queens of Sheba* by Jessica L. Hagan (2017) Directed by Jessica Kaliisa [Camden People's Theatre. 14 October]

Reinelt, J. and Aston, E. (eds) (2000) *The Cambridge Companion to modern British women playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*The Barbershop Chronicles* by Inua Ellams (2017) Directed by Bijan Sheibani [Dorfman Theatre. 4 December].

Walton, D. (2008) *Stop trying to define Black Theatre*. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/oct/29/black-theatre-dawn-walton-eclipse> (Accessed: 5 September 2018)

WhatsOnStage (2018) *Arinze Kene on Misty*. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FY1qwTF3j1Q&t=98s> (Accessed: 9 January 2019)

Williams, R. (2009) *Black theatre's big breakout*. Available

at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/27/black-theatre-roy-williams> (Accessed: 2 February).

## Appendix:

### Extract of Interview with Ryan Calais Cameron (17 January 2019)

**Jessica Mensah:** Why did you begin Nouveau Riché?

**Ryan Calais-Cameron:** I wanted to own a piece of the industry, I worked in the industry for almost a decade and I felt like I didn't have a say on anything in the industry. Just being able to write twitter statuses was not enough. If I really cared about my people and the state of the industry, then I have to do more. Nouveau Riché is a new opportunity for emerging artists to showcase their talents.

**Jessica Mensah:** The Nina Simone quote on your website states "I believe an artist's work is to reflect the times"... do you think your work is doing this and if so how?

**Ryan Calais Cameron:** Yeah, again its about taking back control. Peoples' social consciousness is based on what they see and what they hear, for me it was very important to then be able to take back control of the narrative. If I watch for the past 10 years a black guy on screen just shoot people, and I am uncomfortable about that, I do not have to scream and shout anymore, I can just create a narrative that can combat that. Okay yes there are black boys that do that, but what led him to do that... let's extend the narrative and show other depictions of that boy... like we did with *Timbuktu*, there is not one image of a black man or one image of anybody from that class... So for us it was about taking back the narrative and showing what our reality really is...and I think that's why many of our productions resonate with people, they go finally we have something that sounds like us, we have character's that speak like us and tell the stories we have been wanting to tell. Especially in our earlier

productions that have people of colour in every department... in order to tell a real authentic story.

**Jessica Mensah:** Your productions so far appear to contain black actors: *Queens*, *Cascade*, *Rhapsody*, *Timbuktu* ... is this deliberate? And would you call your company a black theatre company?

**Ryan Calais Cameron:** No you will never find any of that on any of our marketing, the onus is on unheard voices... obviously being black that is what pushed me, there had to be a level of rebellion. What pushed me was I do not see enough stories of myself, I do not see enough stories of people from my own backyard. So that is what pushed us...

**Jessica Mensah:** What are your personal thoughts on the term black theatre?

**Ryan Calais Cameron:** I think we all revert to it because we have been so incredibly marginalised. If you say black theatre, we know what you are talking about. I don't think it is a term going forward that we should be comfortable with...I see our work as being good generally and universally. I want you to go that was an amazing show, not that was an amazing black show, like it was not amazing for black people it was an amazing show full stop. When *Queens of Sheba* sold out at Edinburgh it was not because it was an amazing black show it was one of the most banging shows out there full stop. That's what I want the narrative to be.

What does black theatre even mean? The work I create is not just for black people, they are universal productions. In the same way I have never heard someone market a show as white theatre, you watch a show by a white person and expect everyone to relate to the story universally and it's the same with us. Women of all different races

can watch *Queens of Sheba* and say you know what that really hit home and there were parts of that that were new to me.

Like I understand what people mean by black theatre, but I do not really push for that narrative. Like what is black theatre? The black experience or black community? what does that mean? The story from a Zimbabwean family and a Jamaican family is totally different, but they still get classed as a black story. But it is a completely different experience. However, as we start to grow, I hope we can move away from that narrative and get more specific about what we are talking about, not black, no it's a Zimbabwean show.

**Jessica Mensah:** Is there a specific audience you are trying to reach with your work?

**Ryan Calais Cameron:** I want to create work that is universal that is the main thing. But first and foremost, I want work that is authentic. If I put something on as *Queens of Sheba* then that project needs to ring true to black women universally, and if it does not do that, then I do not care about anybody watching it or anybody else's opinion at all. I have created it for everybody, but there has to be a level of ownership with black women, they have to go that's my story. To hear Black women go this is my story on twitter that was better than any review.

### **Extract of Interview with Kwame Kwei-Armah (1 April 2019)**

**Jessica Mensah:** In an interview with Geoffrey Davis in 2005, you have stated that there was a “Cultural renaissance” in Black British Theatre, do you think this renaissance has recently happened again in the past two years? Especially with the transfer of *Misty* and *Nine Night* to the West End.

**Kwame Kwei Armah:** I would say it’s a year. When I got back to Britain, after being in America for a while, I went, and I spoke to all of the artists and directors and said, what’s going on? Why am I seeing no new black playwrights or new black names on the scene and everybody said the same thing, we can’t find them, or we do not know. The same names were being spoken about Roy, Debbie Tucker Green. It is literally in the last year that we are seeing Natasha and Arinze come out. So now, I don’t know if I would call it a renaissance, but I am going to say that we have something more to talk about, in that regard. And those plays are very different. *Nine Night* is a naturalistic play, *Misty* was an abstracted play. *Barbershop Chronicles* is again a different kind of play. I think it’s good to be able to see a new crop of artists stroke playwrights. I mean their work is produced in main institutions and they are beginning to be transferred to the West-End.

**Jessica Mensah:** In 2019, would you still describe yourself as a Black British Theatre maker?

**Kwame Kwei- Armah:** Absolutely. Black is a political construction. When I am in Ghana and everybody is black, I don’t need to describe myself as black. But in the West, we are a numeric minority, that is part of a global majority. Here the word black means something. I don’t want to shy away from it. So I describe myself absolutely as a black British artist. But I often think about the word black and it is as diverse as anything. For instance, I am a firm believer in Black post-modernism.

There are some people who look at my season and they go oh my God, Kwame is doing a lot of diversity in his new season. But what they mean is colour diversity. But I might go *Twelfth Night* was an all access multi-cultural casting, *The Convert* was based in Africa, actually based in Rhodesia. It is a different story to *Jesus Hopped-The A Train*, which has two people of colour, who ask questions about faith, which is different to *Death of a Salesman*, which is a world classic play, which is different from *Tree*, which is a musical and I could go on... Each story is as diverse a story as you would find if each actor was monolithically, Caucasian.

**Jessica Mensah:** Black British Theatre or Black Theatre? Do you see these terms as different or the same thing? And would you say that they are still needed today?

**Kwame Kwei – Armah:** Yeah, I think they are still needed. They just do not have to be the only place that you have to do work. If I wanted to, I could do a piece with *Talawa* and that would be the same as me wanting to do a piece at the Royal Court. It's about audience, it's about sensibility, but some plays are more right for a general consumption and other plays maybe for just a minority audience to come and take that in. So absolutely, I do not believe in the assimilation model, that the moment you are allowed into the mainstream, it means that you are black and so your culture has to fade away, a bit like the segregated self. That the moment that we were integrated, we lost many of our doctors and our teachers, because everybody wanted to be part of the mainstream. These things can run concurrently.

**Jessica Mensah:** How would you describe the current state of Black British Theatre?

**Kwame Kwei-Armah:** I would say there is such a thing as Black British Theatre. There is a culture that is Black British Theatre, that articulates itself in particular ways. And those artists invariably are black and sometimes they're not and sometimes

they are just heavily influenced by that. Jazz is a black music form, but there are some white people who play jazz and play it well, but it doesn't take it away from it being a black art form. And so I think there is such a thing as Black British Theatre and I think it is a deep investigation and a mid-exposure of people looking at it again and saying, you don't just have to write a naturalistic play, you can go off in three to four different directions. There isn't a prescription when it comes to the Black British play and that I think is very healthy.

**Jessica Mensah:** Would you say the term Black British theatre describes the artist making the work or the work that is being made?

**Kwame Kwei- Armah:** I would say both...Sometimes it's about the artist, sometimes exclusively, sometimes it's about the material, sometimes it's about both.

**Jessica Mensah:** Would you say Black British Theatre is just about the black British experience? Or about bringing other works into that?

**Kwame-Kwei Armah:** No, Black British Theatre can be about anything. The political construction of Blackness can give you access to everything. I am tri-cultural, I am Black African, Caribbean and British, and I have lived sometime in America. I can tell any story that I want, and it will still be a Black British story. It will certainly come from the lens of a Black British Artist. My blackness my cultural influences will absolutely seep through into the narrative in a certain way, it will definitely seep into the narrative.

### **Extract of Interview with Jessica Hagan (5 April 2019)**

**Jessica Mensah:** Would you say the themes in *Queens* are universal for other females? Or if it is a play that others can relate to?

**Jessica L. Hagan:** In misogynoir age does not play a part and it is a universal theme.

If you can fit into a category where race and gender play a part in your experience you can relate.

**Jessica Mensah:** You state you made this play for black women, is that the only audience you wanted to see this play?

**Jessica L. Hagan:** The play is open for everyone, but it was intentionally made for black women.

**Jessica Mensah:** How would you describe your relationship with theatre growing up? did you see many representations of yourself?

**Jessica L. Hagan:** I grew up with theatre. My mum took me to Sylvia Young's theatre school. She also took me to see shows that featured black women, because she understood the importance of representation.

**Jessica Mensah:** Would you identify yourself and your work as Black British Theatre?

**Jessica L. Hagan:** I would not call it Black British Theatre, but black theatre. My work is very black, though many view it as a negative, you can still have the work without the British aspect. *Queens of Sheba* can be relatable beyond the British lens or perspective.