

# CENTRE STAGE

THE PIPELINE OF BAME TALENT



Andrew Lloyd Webber  
Foundation

# INTRODUCTION—

When I produced *Bombay Dreams* over a decade ago and was privileged to introduce the marvellous music of A R Rahman to a West End audience, one of our greatest difficulties was finding enough Asian actors. BAME diversity in the performing arts has once again been high on the agenda this year, from the runaway success of *Hamilton* on Broadway to the latest announcement from Arts Council England of £4.6 million to boost diversity.

Very often the discussion is focussed on increasing the representation of diverse ethnicities on stage and this is crucially important. However, I've been acutely aware that one of the biggest issues is the lack of trained diverse talent coming through. Casting directors and theatre producers alike often complain that they'd like to cast more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic performers but that they don't get enough turning up to audition.

Inspired by some of the success stories coming out of the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation's scholarship programme – such as Emmanuel Kojo who is interviewed in these pages – the Foundation decided to commission this research. The aim was to come up with some positive recommendations that can be adopted by people involved at every stage of the talent pipeline from school to stage.

I passionately believe that the stage needs to reflect the diversity of the UK population or it risks becoming side-lined. The Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation funds a range of projects that help to make a difference – from drama school scholarships to theatre outreach programmes. It will take action from everyone to effect significant change. We are asking arts sector bodies, drama schools, theatre producers, actors, creative teams and philanthropists to take responsibility and specific action. I urge you all to read the recommendations and get involved. ■

**Andrew Lloyd Webber**



**"I PASSIONATELY BELIEVE THAT THE STAGE NEEDS TO REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF THE UK POPULATION OR IT RISKS BECOMING SIDE-LINED."**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Lloyd Webber".

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# WHY WE NEED CENTRE STAGE—

The UK theatre is ‘hideously white’. This is the conclusion of more than 60 theatrical professionals from drama students and teachers to actors and theatre directors interviewed for this report. That matters to them and the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation because **if the theatre does not become more diverse it risks becoming irrelevant** to the majority of the British population who now live in a multicultural society.

Over the past 10 years British society has changed. Ethnic diversity has risen from eight per cent of the population to 14 per cent - in London, the hub of UK theatre, the percentage of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people has risen to 40 per cent.

Over the next 20 years the ethnic minority population of Britain is forecast to grow to 30 per cent, and the numbers of people of mixed heritage will double to over two million. These figures are against a white population that is ageing and among whom the birth rate is dropping.

Though those who want greater diversity on the stage are pushing against an open door, our research uncovered a disparity between desire for change and implementation. My colleague Mel Larsen and I found that the experience of Black and Asian actors and directors was at variance with the stated aims of their white counterparts.

A sense of isolation builds early for BAME theatre professionals. Representation of minority ethnic actors is as low as one student a year in some drama colleges, while once out of drama school respondents experienced far fewer opportunities for career changing lead roles than their white counterparts, even when the roles in question were not ethnicity-specific. As a result, BAME actors turning to the USA for their professional breaks or to setting up their own theatre companies outside the mainstream.

Look backstage and the problem is even greater, with only a handful of BAME senior executives in power to effect more rapid cultural change front of house. It was widely agreed that if change is to happen, it needs to be led from the top, not just in terms of commitment, but also in terms of personnel. Simply put, producers and directors of colour will spot cultural bias in casting and commissioning, as they are not part of the white, predominantly male group operating that bias.

Musical theatre has challenged the monoculture, with successful productions of shows such as *Dream Girls*, *Motown the Musical*, *Thriller Live*, *The Bodyguard* and, of course, *The Lion King*. But the success of these shows has bred another problem: the failure of drama schools to take in enough BAME talent has led to a shortage of actors suitable for the roles and, as a result, touring productions have been cancelled.

This report looks at what can be done to improve the supply chain to productions and how lasting cultural change can be brought to the stage so that Black and Asian talent is no longer missed or marginalised. It is timely because, if the situation continues, there is real danger that not only will Black and Asian young people stay away from the theatre as a profession, they will stay away as punters and without them in the audience, theatres will become unsustainable, as they are forced to compete for a dwindling ageing, white, middle class audience. And that is in the interests of no one. ■

## DANUTA KEAN AND MEL LARSEN

Editors, Centre Stage



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## SHOW STOPPER—

For Emmanuel Kojo, equality and diversity on the UK stage won't exist until people stop referring to him as a 'Black actor'.

Emmanuel Kojo embodies everything this report is about. The 25-year-old child of a Ghanaian single mother, he developed his passion for theatre at an inner city Manchester comprehensive. And, though his teachers encouraged his talent, the recognition that the annual fees for a London drama school would cost him more than his mother earned in a year meant he regarded pursuing a career in acting as an impossible dream.

And yet, huddled in a corner of the National Gallery Café, he is smiling, having just heard about receiving the best supporting nod in the nominations for the UK Theatre Awards for his role as Joe in Sheffield Crucible's acclaimed production of *Show Boat*. Not bad for an actor only two years out of drama school.

How did he do it? He is in no doubt: through the support of a lot of people, including the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation. 'The foundation made an investment - a huge amount of money - all my drama school fees. Quite simply, I couldn't have gone to drama school without it.' He sits back on the red leather banquette and takes a swig of water. He is entitled to look self-satisfied, because despite the journey to hotly tipped actor being short, it has not been easy.

Born in Ghana, his parents left him in the care of relatives until he was able to join them in Austria. Once in Austria the seven-year-old had some brutal experiences of racism - enough to give him what he describes as a 'hot temper' as well as the determination to succeed. There he also had his first experience of acting. 'People always laugh, but my first introduction to theatre was when I was in primary school and I really fancied this girl and she was in a drama club, so I went along because I liked her and from then on drama took my interest' he says.

He is laughing as he recounts the story, a laugh that hints at his rich bass baritone. It wasn't until he went to St Peter's Roman Catholic High School in Belle Vue that his enjoyment of drama developed into a passion, much to his mother's disapproval. Her disapproval was not of acting per se, but of the precariousness of the profession. 'She wanted me to be a doctor,' he explains, self-conscious of the cliché.



"THE RIGHT GUIDANCE IS SO IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU ARE YOUNG AND TRYING TO ESTABLISH YOURSELF"



## FEELING WELCOME

The part always left out of the cliché is what's behind African and Asian parents' antipathy towards theatre. 'My mum wanted her children to be financially stable,' Emmanuel adds. Not only did she balk at the insecurity of acting but at the lack of diversity. Were Black people welcome on stage? It didn't look that way. But, as every mother knows, opposing a child's chosen field has a habit of making it more attractive. Emmanuel was no exception. At 18 he turned down the chance to play American football professionally and applied for drama school.

By this time he had moved to Pendleton Sixth Form College in Salford before a brief spell at the University of Central Lancashire. 'It was my introduction to classical music and where I first learned *Old Man River*,' he recalls. Learning the song made famous by American singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson proved fortuitous when Emmanuel finally left drama school and found himself singing it in his audition for the part of Joe in *Show Boat*.

At this point Emmanuel's career almost faltered. Though Arts Educational Schools London (ArtsEd) offered him a place, the fees were a huge impediment. 'Even with a Dance and Drama Award I couldn't have gone. I needed a scholarship. I even started writing to people and

looking at getting a loan,' he recalls. As happens too often for talented actors of colour, fate as well as talent and hard work came to the rescue: Arts Ed invited him to an audition for an ALWF scholarship. If he passed the audition, he could go to drama school. If he failed, his route to the profession would be tougher or non-existent.

The part played in his story by supportive academics is not lost on the actor. 'Looking back I think there are so many people who pushed and supported me through that.' Across from our table a well-dressed middle-aged couple laugh raucously. The actor drums his fingers on the table, pauses and waits for them to stop. His voice is quiet and intense. 'I wouldn't be anywhere close to where I am now without those teachers being there. Anyone can say they want to be an actor, but if you don't have the right support, it's such a hard business. The right guidance is so important, especially when you are young and trying to establish yourself.'

The support of his teachers gave him a bulwark against his mother's disapproval - she was finally won over when he won the scholarship. The award underlined his belief that financing actors from disadvantaged backgrounds must be the top priority if the UK theatre is serious about diversity. 'The level of money you need to study at drama schools means inevitably acting is a middle to upper class thing and excludes working class people' he explains to me. *continued on page 7*

**LEFT:**  
EMMANUEL KOJO  
IN *SHOW BOAT*

**TOP RIGHT:**  
SANDRA MARVIN  
AS QUEENIE AND  
EMMANUEL KOJO AS  
JOE IN *SHOW BOAT*

## INVISIBLE CLASS

This lack of social as well as cultural diversity at drama schools affects theatre in unacknowledged ways, the actor believes. 'A big problem with drama schools is that everyone is similar and not a lot of people are willing to take the risk in the type of work they do.' His opinion was formed at ArtsEd, a place which he holds in high regard, especially its deputy principal Chris Hocking.

Though the school strives to be inclusive, Emmanuel was one of only eight actors of colour in a year of 63 students. He was in an even smaller minority of working class students. 'ArtsEd is really good at establishing a wide range of people, but you don't get that many working class people in drama schools, which is such a shame as there is a big pool of talent that just don't get seen.'

This lack of representation filters into the industry. With a sweep of his hand, he adds. 'Look at all the British leading actors in Hollywood, they are nearly all white and went to public school.' What this homogeneity means is that the stories being told in theatres and on screen do not reflect the reality of the majority of people. And that matters, he insists, because it means the theatre risks seeming irrelevant to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience brought up in a multicultural society.

His understanding of how lack of representation affects output was fuelled by *The Scottsboro Boys*, in which he made his professional and West End debut after graduating. 'It was a very politicising experience for me,' he recalls of the production, which featured many of the original Broadway cast. 'I saw the work that Forrest (McClendon) and Brandon (Victor Dixon) were doing in the US and I wanted to be like them.' He adds with growing intensity 'I wanted to work on something that changes things, that tells important stories.'

As a result he has taken a role on the council for Equity and is heavily involved in a campaign to improve awareness of hair, make up and lighting issues faced by Black performers. 'Make up artists are just not trained to deal with Black actors,' he says. So bad is the problem that many actors of colour take their own make up to jobs or, as in Emmanuel's case, don't wear any on stage. Ignorance about the specific needs of BAME actors can affect confidence, he says: 'It makes you feel so little. It's just not good enough. It is really important for people to have the right training and realise that this is important.'

## RISK TAKING

Emmanuel's determination to change something that undermines the confidence of fellow Black and Asian actors reflects the importance of support in his own career. It has helped him access training and opportunities and given him faith to pursue career roles rather than just jobs. After *Scottsboro* he turned down a touring production, because 'I wanted to working hard and playing roles that stood out. It took six months for the gamble to pay off.

It was worth it, he says: 'When you are so new if you are really serious about establishing yourself as an actor, you have to take a risk and work on roles that will further your career.' Emmanuel knew the risk was higher for him than a white actor because there are so few roles available. 'People always say that Black actors have to work three times as hard to establish themselves as their white counterparts and unfortunately it is true,' he says shrugging those American Footballer shoulders.

The part that rewarded him was Gremio in Opera North's touring production of *Kiss Me Kate*. It was a breakthrough in more ways than one: casting directors usually default to white. In that is a barrier Emmanuel hopes his early success will help break. 'The solution lies in just employing the best person for the job, no matter what their colour is,' he says in earnest. 'If that person comes in and does the audition and is right for it, why shouldn't they be employed whatever their skin colour?'

He looks around the café, both of us aware that his is the only Black face and adds: 'I have never identified myself as a *Black* Actor I have always just thought of myself as an *actor*, but since starting in this profession I have been made aware that I am a *Black* actor.' He pauses for emphasis: 'We won't be equal until there is no prefix when people talk about us.' ■

**"PEOPLE ALWAYS SAY BLACK ACTORS HAVE TO WORK THREE TIMES AS HARD TO ESTABLISH THEMSELVES... IT'S TRUE"**

**BELOW:**  
EMMANUEL KOJO  
IN *SHOW BOAT*



# THE LIE OF THE LAND—

For diversity in theatre to improve, it must address the barriers that keep Black and Asian talent out. Danuta Kean reveals the issues faced and what needs to change.



**"IT TOOK ME A LONG TIME TO REALISE THAT MIDDLE CLASS PEOPLE ALL LOOK AFTER EACH OTHER. THERE IS A LANGUAGE THAT THEY USE AND WAY OF BEING WITH EACH OTHER THAT THEY DON'T REALISE EXCLUDES OTHERS"**

— PEGGY FRASER, ACTOR

ABOVE:  
YURT DANCE  
YELLOW EARTH

Until recently every Friday night actor Kevin Yates would leave his class at London's ArtsEd drama school and take the Tube across London to a cocktail bar where he would start an eight-hour shift. Over the weekend he would work every shift, surviving on a few hours of sleep. On Monday he would head back to drama school for a week of 8a.m. to 6p.m. classes before returning to his job on Friday. With a punishing schedule like that it is no wonder he saw his grades slip in his second year, but he didn't have any choice. Though he is now enjoying a thriving career in musical theatre, his Dance and Drama Award grant barely covered his rent and, as the son of a single mother, had no Bank of Mum and Dad on which to draw.

'I was the only student who did this,' recalls the mixed-Zambian heritage actor. One of only four actors of colour in his year, he was the only one not from a middle class background. It is a mark of Kevin's grit and determination that rather than feel bitter, he says: 'I'm grateful for the work ethic I have because of having to pay my way through school.' He points to a stream of roles since graduating, including in West End shows and touring productions, the latest of which is in *Motown the Musical*, and adds: 'This is what I wanted to do and that was what I had to do to get here.'

Kevin's approach may be commendable, but his experience highlights issues raised in the 40 hour-long interviews conducted with actors of colour for this research. My findings were reflected by those of focus groups run by Mel Larsen with a range of theatre performers of different genders, ages and ethnicities, the majority of whom were British African or British African-Caribbean and aged under 35. The sensitivity of the subject matter led some to ask for their names to be changed for the purpose of this report.

## ISOLATION

BAME actors were asked about their pipeline into the industry: how they started out; what educational and family support they received; what training they undertook; and how their careers progressed. A surprisingly uniform picture emerged, one that mirrors closely early findings from an academic survey being undertaken by David O'Brien of Goldsmiths University across the creative industries due for publication next year. While all said outright racism was comparatively rare now, those who went to drama school spoke of feelings of isolation among predominantly *continued on page 8*

## ACTORS

white student bodies, feelings intensified if the BAME student was from a disadvantaged background.

Exclusion for minority actors starts before they cross the threshold into RADA, ArtsEd or other drama schools thanks to the poor representation of Black and Asian people on stage. First experiences of theatre, whether through family or school, are vital to create a sense of entitlement to theatrical participation whether you are white, Black, rich or poor. Witnessing few if any 'people like me' on stage was the reason many interviewed chose alternative first degrees before switching to acting.

It is telling that the role models cited by focus group participants included few stage actors. Sidney Poitier, Viola Davis, John Boyega, Lin Manuel Miranda and Michaela Cole were all cited as early inspirations. 'Michaela Cole wrote her own play, she put it on twice, she got a show out of it and now she's a BAFTA winner. I think that's amazing and inspiring for a young Black woman, to just go out there and just be fearless and write her own stuff' said one. But also cited was Stephen Schwartz - for writing *Wicked* with a protagonist that confounds expectations.

Outside minority communities, cultural or religious resistance are oft cited as reasons why they are poorly represented on stage. The image of the Asian woman discouraged from acting because it is 'not a fit place for a female' is a well stereotype: Asian parents want their children to be 'respectable' doctors, accountants and lawyers. However, though pockets of some communities may regard the stage as anathema, this blanket stereotype of familial disapproval was not borne out by our research.

Parental opposition was economic not cultural or religious. Simply put: parents do not see their children reflected in leading actors on stage or screen. Actor, producer and writer of Chinese origin Kevin Shen explains: 'My parents would have encouraged me into acting if they had seen others like me doing well, making a lot of money.' Ambitious to act from an early age, Kevin's parents opposed his plans because, he says: 'They looked at it and said it is racist.' This harsh judgement was based upon a perceived lack of career success for Black and Asian actors, who were downgraded to secondary roles as hoods, hoodlums and hookers rather than career defining leads. 'They assumed people like me didn't belong. This was not just a question of representation but of the *success* of existing actors of colour.'

Family opposition to *Rajiv*, an Indian musical theatre student, had similar roots, 'When I decided



I was not going to be a lawyer but a singer, my father and mother were not happy about it at all, even though they had supported my singing as a hobby,' he explains. Again, the reason cited for this opposition was financial not cultural. However, his defiance of their wishes was severely punished. 'The second they saw that it was going to become something serious they cut me off financially.'

As is discussed later in this report, theatres recognise that the white middle classes still dominate audiences. Even in London where the BAME population is now 44 per cent (source: 2011 Census), audiences outside specialist theatres and theatre groups remain overwhelmingly white. Family participation was cited by only three of those interviewed as their primary introduction to the medium. Instead first exposure to the theatre was dominated by school trips and productions.

Though the role of school drama departments in promoting diversity cannot be underestimated, teachers face resource issues, not least in providing a more nurturing environment for talented students. Sharing classes with those whose reasons for being there have nothing to do with acting, can be a disincentive to those with talent and enthusiasm, as Jordan Shaw found out. Dubbed 'The Entertainer' by his family the Black musical theatre actor found the lack of enthusiasm from other school students off-putting. 'I was in lessons with people who didn't really want to do it, which I found very frustrating,' he recalls.

Jordan's passion for musical theatre was supported by his family, while elsewhere interviewees said supportive school teachers and active local drama groups with Black or Asian leadership compensated for the lack of family interest. 'I used to feel that theatre was for old people, you know older middle class, and

**ABOVE:**  
GRANTS AWARDED  
2014, TRICYCLE  
THEATRE YASIN, DEVN  
MODHA AND ANTONY



**"THE DEARTH IS IN THE WORK AVAILABLE, NOT IN THOSE WHO MAKE IT. WHAT IS LACKING IS A CAREER PATH, ANY KIND OF POSSIBLE PROGRESSION."**

— **PAT CUMPER,**  
PRODUCER, DIRECTOR  
PLAYWRIGHT.

that's what I used to think of theatre when I was younger,' said Akin, a 15-year old Black school student. The difference for him was an active youth theatre and school drama club. 'As I've gotten older I've seen that there's lots of opportunities for young people to go to the theatre and to be in plays,' he explains. It is notable that where there is an active youth theatre movement – such as Birmingham – there is a more visible stream of BAME talent to drama schools and theatre companies.

Teenager John, a Black school student from London, reflects Akin's feelings. 'One of the things that helped me with getting into theatre is young companies and young initiatives...opportunities for young people so whether that be summer projects, Easter projects - like join the Young Company for a year - or cheap theatre tickets for students.' Time and again interviewees pointed to meeting working Black or Asian actors as pivotal in their recognition that the pipeline to acting was not closed to them.

## **MONEY**

Although drama school was regarded as the most desired route into theatre, the costs involved were off-putting. Funding issues for minority actors chime with those faced by white students from poorer backgrounds. Although grants, such as the DaDA Awards and bursaries, such as those available from the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, are available to help gifted students in straitened circumstances, they are not always widely known about. In the case of Kevin Yates, it was not until his course work suffered and he confessed to the pressure he was under that he learned of the extra support available.

Dennis, a Black actor living in London, says it is wrong to assume that students will know where to look for funding information: 'There's just a lack of information, of knowing what's available to you, that there are young discounts and that there are initiatives for young people,' he says. Providing a central online database of resources should be one of the easiest quick wins for the theatre world.

High course fees and living expenses are not only an economic disincentive for BAME talent from less well off backgrounds. The dominance of those from privileged families both on stage and back stage has created a culture unconsciously biased against outsiders, a bias exacerbated by the added difference of ethnicity.

'Unconscious bias' in this instance signifies a dominant culture that never questions its own values and judges others according to its own 'norm'. Black theatre director Kojo articulated its impact when discussing drama colleges' summer schools, which offer an important opportunity for showcasing talent, though at a price: up to £700 for a short course. 'I think a lot of people in the acting world don't realise what barriers there are because they've been brought up in families that can afford to pay for them to go to summer school,' he says.

Those interviewed found a disconnect between white actors' and directors' desire for diversity and recognition of their own role in creating it. 'I talk to white actors,' Saphia, an African-Caribbean participant said, 'and, they all read the *Guardian*, but you can tell they don't really understand why it matters.' Without their recognition of the wider importance of diversity to create theatre that is relevant to all and sustainable in the future, she adds, their buy-in is superficial, based on liberal philanthropy. 'They don't realise that they are part of the problem,' she adds.

## **CAREERS**

Where bias manifests most is in the *careers* of actors of colour. Musical theatre specialists fare particularly well on graduation: their combination of skills mark them out from the competition and they benefit from the recent upsurge of US imports, such as *Hairspray*, *Motown the Musical* and *Dream Girls*, with diverse or all-Black casts. The relatively small talent pool from which casting directors are able to draw means there is less competition for places – in fact some majority-Black touring productions have been cancelled due to a dearth of actors available for roles let alone audition. It is a supply-side market.

*continued on page 10*

**BELOW:**  
KANJOOS THE MISER  
2012, MEHRISH  
YASIN, DEVN MODHA  
AND ANTONY



## ACTORS

But only for so long says Dream Girls' resident director Hazel Holder. Actors of colour may have 'jobs' in abundance, but *career* defining lead and supporting roles are rare. Every actor spoken to for this survey said the odds were stacked against minorities in a profession where the default lead is white unless specifically written for a Black or Asian actor. For actors to emerge from the corps, these roles are vital, not just to get noticed, but to provide a CV that will convince casting directors that they have the experience to carry future lead roles.

In 2012 British Chinese actor and activist Daniel York led a campaign against the Royal Shakespeare Company when it staged James Fenton's adaptation of the Chinese classic *The Orphan of Zhao*. Only three East Asian-origin actors were in the 17-strong company, none in lead roles. This contrasted heavily with previous productions of Black and Asian plays by RSC.

The controversy shows, Daniel says, that the issue of race is still alive and is kicking minority actors into the undergrowth. 'I was never aware of my race when I was growing up but on becoming an actor there has never been a day when I wasn't made aware that I am Chinese,' he says. 'I organised a mass social media campaign over the RSC's casting and that did create awareness, but we still have a very long way to go.'

Unconscious bias is blamed for the default-to-white for roles without a specified ethnicity. So-called 'colour-blind auditions', in which no ethnicity is specified, are on the increase but there is scepticism among BAME actors about their efficacy. One interviewee says: 'When there is blind casting and they pick out a white actor, it's always because "he was the best"'. But when you look at who is involved in casting the production they are all white and you can't help but think they are simply more comfortable with a white guy.'

Those actors of colour involved in research for this report believe that the industry needs to show a greater commitment to diversity through practical, sustainable measures. But there is anger and scepticism that this will change unless unconscious bias is addressed in the industry: for that, all agree, there needs to be greater diversity among those involved in casting and directing productions so that the automatic default to white ends. 'What is the solution?' says one angry interviewee. 'We just have to wait for a lot of old white men to die. We need to get rid of the old white dinosaurs who think the only audience out there is the same as them.' ■

— Some names have been changed at the request of the participants.



## LOOKING BACK— LOOKING FORWARD

Hazel Holder, resident director for Dream Girls, is also a respected voice and dialect coach. It took resilience and determination to get where she is.

'I started out because I was inspired by watching my older brother perform. After performing in school productions I wanted to take it further. I did a local course in theatre studies and was told I was good enough to go to drama school. Throughout both courses, I was always the minority. In some respects it was positive because I stood out. But the downside was that I felt isolated because people expected that my journey was exactly the same as theirs and it wasn't. There was no one else in my class who had suffered racism and in the 80s they simply didn't understand how to cope with that.'

The first overt racism I experienced in the profession was at an audition in 1992 when someone voiced their disappointment that I looked "more Caucasian" in my black and white photograph than I did in real life.

How racism manifested in the past is that you knew you would only get small parts and never the lead unless the role was specifically written for a minority actor. I remember in the third year of drama school when the casting list was posted everyone would run to see what part they had. I was always disappointed. In fact it became so bad that in one show — Mother Goose's Golden Christmas

— even before they put the cast list up I offered to play the goose because I knew I would never be chosen to play a fairytale princess. It turned out to be a really good decision because I wasn't needed in rehearsal and was free to go to lots of auditions. In fact I was cast in the ensemble of *Carmen Jones* at the Old Vic.

You have to have resilience as an actor of colour. There is a perception among white students that they *will* have a career and that the industry is waiting for them. They have opportunities in all parts of the industry that aren't open to Black actors. Let's face it, you're unlikely to see a Black actor in a small regional theatre production, which are bread and butter roles for most actors. I remind students of colour that they have to work twice as hard to be seen by the industry and that there is not the same sense of career progression that their peers may have.

Because there are fewer lead roles open to them it is very depressing to see minority actors who are really talented not getting the same breaks as a white actor would. If things are to improve we need to see more minority staff in theatre companies and on production not just on stage. The work starts before we get to casting.' ■

# FUTURE PROOF—

Diversity is key to the survival of UK theatre in a multicultural society, but it needs to be reflected at the very top of organisations, Danuta Kean says.



Two years ago the director of a multicultural theatre went to a conference about diversity aimed at touring theatres. Black and Asian faces peppered the audience, but, says the director, every single speaker was white. ‘Every single one of them and when the conference organisers were challenged about it, it was as if we were speaking a foreign language,’ he says.

When it comes to diversity his frustration at the dissonance between the theatrical world’s intention and understanding is shared by fellow BAME professionals. This failure of white management to properly engage with diversity has undermined attempts to attract the Black and Asian middle class audiences. Suba Das of Leicester Curve Theatre explains: ‘There is a ghettoised perception of what diversity looks like in this country and that’s because a lot of the gatekeepers think only of the lower economic groups.’

## STEREOTYPES

Bias about BAME communities is why actors of colour are offered roles that are little more than racial stereotypes which he adds, fail to reflect the reality of life for BAME in the UK and, therefore, alienate Black and Asian audiences. ‘I have lost count of BAME actors and directors who have told me that they have said to agents and directors they are great at Shakespeare, but instead they are told they need to “develop a London accent” if they are to get work,’ Das adds.

Being based in the most multicultural city in Europe means he understands why British theatres fail to engage BAME communities. They lack awareness and understanding of the breath of BAME communities in the UK, he believes. ‘As a cultural organisation in Leicester, we need to think of our South Asian audience as relatively sophisticated, so have created, for instance, a lot of high end contemporary dance for them.’ As with other BAME theatres, Curve has resorted to creating work from scratch due to a lack of available plays that show contemporary British Black or Asian life.

Assumptions are not just made about BAME audiences: some producers instead of challenging cultural stereotypes held by white audiences reinforce them with their programming. Others make assumptions about ‘how ethnic’ an actor must be to be acceptable to white audiences, as witnessed by Vera Chok, an East Asian actor: ‘A director said in my hearing that actors of colour who succeed tend to be acceptable to white audiences so are quite white.’

Where, she believes, white actors are auditioned according to their suitability for a role, casting directors expect actors of colour to represent the perceived ‘oppression’ of their race – whatever the actor’s background. ‘I have been to auditions where I have felt that the director wanted to establish whether I had “suffered enough” and to prove my class credentials,’ adds the Oxford educated performer.

*continued on page 12*

ABOVE:  
SCHOLARSHIPS  
2013-14  
ROYAL CENTRAL  
SCHOOL OF SPEECH  
AND DRAMA



This is a form of ‘othering’ that the performer believes reflects a narrative in theatre that culturally diverse work must be ‘worthy’ and so effectively excludes diverse performers, writers and directors from more mainstream productions. ‘There is that thing of creating a piece of work that is “important” for people to see. It is like exhibiting us. You get *The Syria Play* or *The Islamic Play*, making it okay to have brown people on stage because it is a play about Islam. There is always the need to justify why a person of colour is on stage.’

A way to challenge both the stereotyping of BAME audiences and actors is the creation of new work. Though theatre directors spoken to for this study were keen to have a broader representation of communities in productions, they said home-grown plays were in short supply, forcing directors to look to America, where diverse theatre has grown out of its niche to take centre stage.

Though musical theatre has taken a lead with imported shows like *Motown the Musical* from Broadway and soon the Broadway hit *Hamilton*, work that reflects the uniqueness of British culture is in demand. As a result theatres like the Old Vic, Tara Arts, Curve and Oldham Colliseum encourage new voices through community outreach programmes that range from school drama workshops to storytelling for older people.

Typical is the Foundry Showcase run by Birmingham Rep. It offers year long attachments for writers, theatre makers and directors, providing mentoring and resources. It also runs Write Away, a series of free workshops for writers in the region

to learn playwriting. The reasoning behind the schemes is simple, says Tessa Walker, associate director: ‘We want to be the theatre for Birmingham and for that to be possible we need to be diverse.’

## SPECTRUM

The inclusion of technical staff in the Rep’s programme addresses a significant problem identified in research for *Centre Stage*. Diversity needs to be across the spectrum of theatrical roles if it is to last. ‘There is a real question about diversity among production staff,’ Walker adds. ‘At the moment we are not seeing people coming through and it is something we see nationally, not just here, that needs to be addressed.’

Addressing diversity back stage is at the heart of the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries, says director Kate Danielson, because unpaid internships are the usual route into technical and directing careers. ‘It’s about helping people who could be lost to the industry because they can’t afford to do unpaid internships,’ she explains. Crews matter as much as cast because otherwise diversity initiatives fail to address unconscious bias among theatre executives, including casting directors and producers. Danielson adds: ‘A middle class white workforce is going to produce art that reflects its culture and appeals to a white middle class audience, it doesn’t necessarily appeal to a diverse audience.’

It isn’t just front of house: monocultures at the top maintain monocultures at the bottom of the industry, says Jonathan Kennedy, executive producer of Tara Arts. ‘All those in leadership are the same,’ he says. ‘The effect this has on the supply chain starts with those who think that they could have a career in theatre and will be welcomed by it and so apply for drama school.’

One of a handful of BAME executives running a London theatre, Madani Younis of the Bush Theatre, believes if diversity in leadership isn’t addressed the theatre will become irrelevant. ‘To look at theatre in isolation is naïve. Theatre is a metaphor for what’s happening in wider society,’ he says. More Black or Asian casting directors and directors would challenge roles offered to actors of colour that reinforce white middle class privilege and negative stereotypes that limit perception the expectations of BAME actors and BAME communities. ‘I believe theatre is a motor for change,’ he says. Then warns: ‘But if we miss the great cultural richness of society because we are not diverse, we won’t power those changes and theatre will become irrelevant.’ It is why UK theatre’s commitment to diversity must go deeper than desire. ■

**“I KNOW ONE MIXED RACE DANCER AND SHE ISN’T AS GOOD AS SOME BLACK DANCERS, BUT SHE HAS HAD FAR BETTER ROLES. I CAN ONLY THINK THERE IS AN UNCONSCIOUS DISCRIMINATION GOING ON THERE.”**

— **NATHALIE TEITLIER**  
WRITER/ARTISTS SUPPORT

**TOP LEFT:**  
MACBETH-2015  
JOHN AFZAL,  
DEVEN MODHA,  
RALPH BIRTWELL  
AND ROBERT  
MOUNTFORD.  
PHOTO: TALULAH  
SHEPPARD

# POWER PLAY—

**Gail Babb**, producer for learning and participation, Talawa, says diversity has to penetrate all levels not just on stage.

I've worked in theatre for over 13 years. As well as my role at Talawa, I'm an associate lecturer on the MA Applied Theatre course at Goldsmiths and a freelance drama facilitator. From what I can see, the people on stage are getting more diverse but the stories and the people behind the scenes are getting less diverse.



I mean diverse in the widest sense; in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, ability and such. Talawa is one of the oldest and most successful Black theatre companies in the UK and we continue to offer as much as we can to strategically address this imbalance. As less money is available, the industry gets more risk averse. I think people subconsciously employ those who look and sound like them. They are also less likely to take a risk on a 20-something and since the mid-career guys are stuck, finding it hard to move up into senior leadership roles, there's scarce chance for the younger ones to find an entry point.

I do agree with the notion that BAME students face financial challenges. There is of course a Black middle-class and it's not true for all BAME students but many have to work while they train and have no disposable cash to fully engage in

university culture and reap all the benefits that it provides. If you are working while studying, that impacts the time you have to read, study and get out to see work. At Talawa for example, one in five of our participants on our programme for emerging theatre-makers, TYPT, are carers.

We need more writing and casting opportunities. Diversity projects tend to be just that – projects – and as a plaster, quick fix approach, they are not building an infrastructure. A long-term strategy is essential. In truth, actors are the ones with the least power, more importantly we need to look at the whole theatre structure: producers, artistic directors and casting, if they were more diverse then things would almost certainly change.

TYPT, Talawa's theatre scheme for theatre makers aged between 18 and 25 has been going for 21 years, over 50 people apply annually. We find our participants via social media, our mailing list, sixth form colleges and through theatres that house young people's companies such as Theatre Royal Stratford East and Oval House. Our alumni come back and show others what's possible.

Our best-known alumni include, Nonso Anozie (HBO's *Zoo*, *Game of Thrones*, *Midsummer Nights Dream* for BBC), Michaela Coel (BAFTA winning writer/performer for E4's *Chewing Gum*, *Medea* at the National Theatre, Channel 4's *Aliens*), Femi Oguns (now CEO of Identity drama School).

The industry needs to create training and development projects for casting directors and producers too. One frustration is that you develop talent and then there's nowhere for them to go. What is the value of strengthening the pipeline of talent for musical theatre if there are no roles to go to? There's just *Motown*, *The Color Purple* and *The Lion King*.

Maybe as Broadway gets more diverse, with shows like *Hamilton*, the West End will too. At the National, the Tricycle and other mainstream theatres, Black stories tend to be African-American. We urgently need more Black British plays, but there are more roles for Black actors in theatre than in musical theatre, even if they are American. ■

— Interview Mel Larsen

**ABOVE:**  
RAKIE AYOLA AND  
DEBBIE KORLEY  
IN TALAWA  
THEATRE COMPANY'S  
KING LEAR

# DRAMATIC TENSION—

Drama schools remain the primary route into theatre, **but access to them militates against students from BAME backgrounds.** — Danuta Kean reports

Celia Greenwood is unequivocal. 'I think the entertainment industry is institutionally racist,' says the CEO of WAC Arts, the Hampstead-based performing arts school with a focus on economically disadvantaged students. Money is at the root of the issue. 'The arts scene is for wealthy people and not those without a disposable income,' she explains. 'Arts education has been reduced and reduced over the last 20 years and unless money is put into it, it won't change.'

Warming to her subject Greenwood adds: 'Look at the training centres: where is the diversity in staffing or the curriculum? We are stuck in a place that is completely out of step with what the industry could be if we were to provide more diverse performers.' It is also out of step with the wider British population and one of the reasons the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation commissioned this report.

She is not alone in her criticism of drama schools. 'If I go to a drama school and see one non-white student in a year that is unusual,' the director of one leading black-identified theatre tells me. He adds: 'It is a systematic issue to do with the structure of an industry that mitigates against diversity of artists in terms of race, background and disability.'

Drama schools are not the only pipeline into theatre, but it is universally recognised that they are a primary route, providing a grounding in the craft, exposure to agents and casting directors, and instilling the work ethic needed for a successful stage career. 'Entry to the industry, which is very drama school centric, feels like it is very middle class and white in part because it is very expensive,' says Chinese origin actor Kevin Shen, who used amateur drama groups rather than drama school to launch his acting career.

## EARLY START

The issue of how money undermines diversity was underlined in interviews with drama schools and theatres as well as actors. It begins with the first exposure of young people to theatre. Primary and secondary school remain the chief providers of theatre experiences for young BAME people, whether through school trips or well-supported drama departments that stage full scale productions. Though there has been a proliferation of privately run out-of-hours drama clubs, high fees exclude those from the poorest background with a nascent interest in the stage.



**"PRODUCERS TOLD US THEY HAD GIVEN UP ON DRAMA SCHOOLS. THEY WERE SICK OF THE WHITE MIDDLE-CLASS 'IDENTIKIT ACTORS' BEING CHURNED OUT"**

— HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE  
DRAMA SCHOOL GOVERNOR



**MAIN IMAGE:**  
SCHOLARSHIPS 2014-15  
ARTS ED - KISS  
**INSET:**  
SCHOLARSHIPS 2013-14  
URDANG

The reason this impacts on cultural diversity is because minority ethnic communities are disproportionately represented in the lowest socio-economic groups. According to the latest UK Census data Asian, including Chinese (40%), Black/African/Caribbean (39%) and other ethnic groups, including Arab (48%) had higher percentages of unemployed or economically inactive people. This means BAME communities are less likely to be able to pay for theatre tickets or theatre clubs.

Added to this government policy has refocused school syllabuses on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), resulting in cutbacks to drama departments across the country. As a result the success of theatre and drama school drives to engage with school age students varies greatly from school to school. 'Our success in schools is all down to the personality of the drama teachers and their ability to take it on,' admits Alexander Ferris, director of the Old Vic's outreach programme, Old Vic New Voices.

Even where schools have good relationships with outreach programmes, the change in teaching priorities has forced drama workshops out of popular lunchtime slots into end of the day clubs, where, says Ferris, students' energy levels are lower. 'There is less impetus for young people to stay behind at the end of the day and, if they do, they are hungry and tired and in a different head space.' Old Vic New Voices has dealt with this by changing its teaching methods.

The end of the requirement that GCSE and A Level students attend performances of set texts means another opportunity for engagement risks being closed down. There was strong feeling among those surveyed that the industry needs to lobby the government about the value of drama within the curriculum, not just to bring in more diverse talent, to promote skills invaluable in all walks of life – from public performance to collaboration. 'My worry is that if this happens now then the infrastructure that helps children from a wider background into theatre will disappear,' Celia Greenwood points out.

## YOUTH THEATRES

Though everyone surveyed acknowledged BAME students are under-represented in drama courses, drama schools are adamant they are doing more to address the problem. But the evidence of Simon Stephens, director of the BRIT School in south London, implies that more needs to be done to draw in talent from outside the handful of prestige specialist secondary institutions like his. 'We have students at all the 19 major drama schools in the UK, including RADA, Lamda, Oxford, Manchester,' he says.

While this reflects the high standard of performing arts' education at the BRIT School, that it's students take up a high percentage of BAME places, implies its provision is the exception rather than the rule. In the past actors unable to access specialist schools like the BRIT School benefitted from regional youth theatres says Ed Kemp, director of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

*continued on page 16*

## EDUCATION

But that pipeline is closing down, with cuts to youth theatres across the country. Students of colour at RADA remain under-representative of the wider population – numbers vary each year but are as low as one or two students in a year, and no higher than six. There is a direct correlation, he adds, between active youth theatres, such as in Birmingham, and BAME students. ‘You have freakish examples like Port Talbot, which though small has produced an extraordinary number of great actors who have all got here through youth theatres. There is a real issue concerning provision of such free access across the country.’

Urdang Academy, which was founded by Leonie Urdang with the intention of supporting the performing arts’ ambitions of BAME young people, underlines Kemp’s point. It has no shortage of BAME applicants for its courses Solange Urdang, managing director, says. ‘We audition around 1,500 young people a year. Last year we had 117 graduates of which a quarter identified as non-white.’ (see opposite).

## OUTREACH PROGRAMMES

Drama schools reach BAME talent through community-and school-based outreach programmes. PrimarySTEPS is an outreach programme run by the Royal Ballet School that has links with 27 junior schools in Blackpool, Bury St Edmunds, Dagenham, Mansfield and Swindon. Each centre provides ballet training for pupils in years three to six and is the centrepiece for the RBS’s drive to have a more inclusive student body.

It is supported by among others the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation. ‘It is very important that PrimarySTEPS reaches students from a wide range of backgrounds,’ Programme manager Pippa Cobbing explains. ‘The programme specifically targets areas of broad social, cultural and economic diversity, which have been identified by our partners as being most likely to benefit from a long-term programme.’

Urdang’s outreach programme includes commercial dance groups such as Strike, which is used to recruit new dancers. ‘The boys we encounter are initially very naïve to the fact that they can sing and have technical ability so we develop a lot of kids from that stage and then they realise they can do a lot more,’ Urdang says. ‘Our Four Corners dance group were in the Britain’s Got Talent semi-final.’

Drivers for diversity in drama schools include growing demand for actors of colour in musical theatre and drama schools’ funding base. Increasingly Foundations’ funding criteria include diversity as key. Typical of many is ArtsEd, whose BAME student base varies from 12 to 38 per cent depending on the year. It is also linked to several state schools, including Leyton Sixth Form College in East London. ‘Leyton has an amazing drama department that is 90 per cent pupils of colour,’ ArtsEd deputy principal Chris Hocking says. ArtsEd also runs Easter and summer schools for which bursaries are available to students from poor backgrounds. However students still have to fund their accommodation.

This raises the spectre of money, by far the greatest impediment to diversity within drama schools. Though 40 per cent of ArtsEd’s intake receives Dance and Drama Awards and 30 to 40 per cent bursaries or scholarships, Hocking says a significant proportion are privately funded. With fees and living expenses topping £60,000 for a three-year course, the disparity between the haves and have nots is clear.

All the drama schools spoken to for this report have contingencies to support deprived students. These include DaDA awards, subsidies, scholarships and bursaries mainly raised from private foundations and donors. These ensure talented actors like Emmanuel Kojo, profiled earlier, benefit from a top-level performing arts education. But there is wide agreement that two factors stop these subsidies creating greater diversity within drama schools. One is information – would-be students do not know they are available – and structure.

DaDA awards favour those who’ve had the opportunity to perform in school or other productions, but for a talented BAME actor from a poor background, opportunities to perform may be limited. ‘The structure of awards automatically discriminate against those with no access to theatre through family or education,’ Celia Greenwood says. This has important implications for the stage, she warns: ‘The Arts are meant to be giving insights into humanity and how can we do that when half that society is missing because they are not white and middle class?’ ■



TOP:  
MOUNTVIEW  
- CITY OF ANGELS  
IMAGE BY:  
MAX LACOMBE





## EARLY START—

How one London drama school is tackling diversity – Solange Urdang, Managing Director, Urdang Academy, London.

About 1,500 young people audition every year. Thirty per cent of our students are mixed-race or Black. Traditionally fewer Asian students apply, but since we offered a degree-level course more are auditioning.

As well as Dance & Drama Award Scheme (DaDA) and student loans, we raise up to £500,000 for scholarships and fee reductions every year. If someone just doesn't make the DaDA selection, we offer means-tested support of anything from 100 per cent funding to a small fee reduction. Two of our students are currently supported by Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation scholarships. Students can also earn money to pay their fees by working for us.

Our outreach includes a commercial street dance group Strike and our Four Corners dance group, which was in the 'Britain's Got Talent' semi-final. We also run a touring workshop called, 'Can you Dance?' Staff can accept talent on the spot rather than wait for auditions. We promote through Twitter and YouTube, plus run career days for local schools.

We ran a scheme called Adapt, but the funding stopped. We partnered CanDoCo for disabled and BAME kids. It offered holiday and intensive training every other weekend. There's a Centre for Advanced Training scheme for contemporary dance at places like The Place and Laban but there isn't an equivalent for musical theatre. We need one. ■

— Interview Mel Larsen



## GLORIA OBIANYO—

Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation scholarship recipient Gloria, 21, on her route into acting.

I became interested in musical theatre when I was 12 after watching High School Musical. Whilst studying Drama A-Level, I realised my favourite actors went to drama school and it seemed like the best option. I applied to as many London-based schools as I could. My mother set the condition that I was allowed to go for auditions so long as I applied to two universities at least. So I applied for both and when I got into drama school she knew I would go for it.

Once accepted at Rose Bruford, I was offered an audition for an Andrew Lloyd Webber Scholarship. As a young carer looking after my mum, the scholarship meant money was one less thing to worry about. At the audition I played a song I wrote myself which made me stand out and was offered a scholarship on the spot.

At college I noticed all the playwrights we focused on were white and every now and then I wondered why we never looked at Black or Asian writers. If I can relate to Miller or Chekhov then a white person can relate to Roy Williams, because it's the human condition we're looking at.

During my third year there were many assumptions that I would do well just because I'm Black. People said things like: 'Of course you're going to get an agent, you're Black'. It felt like people were

equating any success I had to my skin colour. It would be like if I said 'you only got into drama school because you're white,' since most of the year was white.

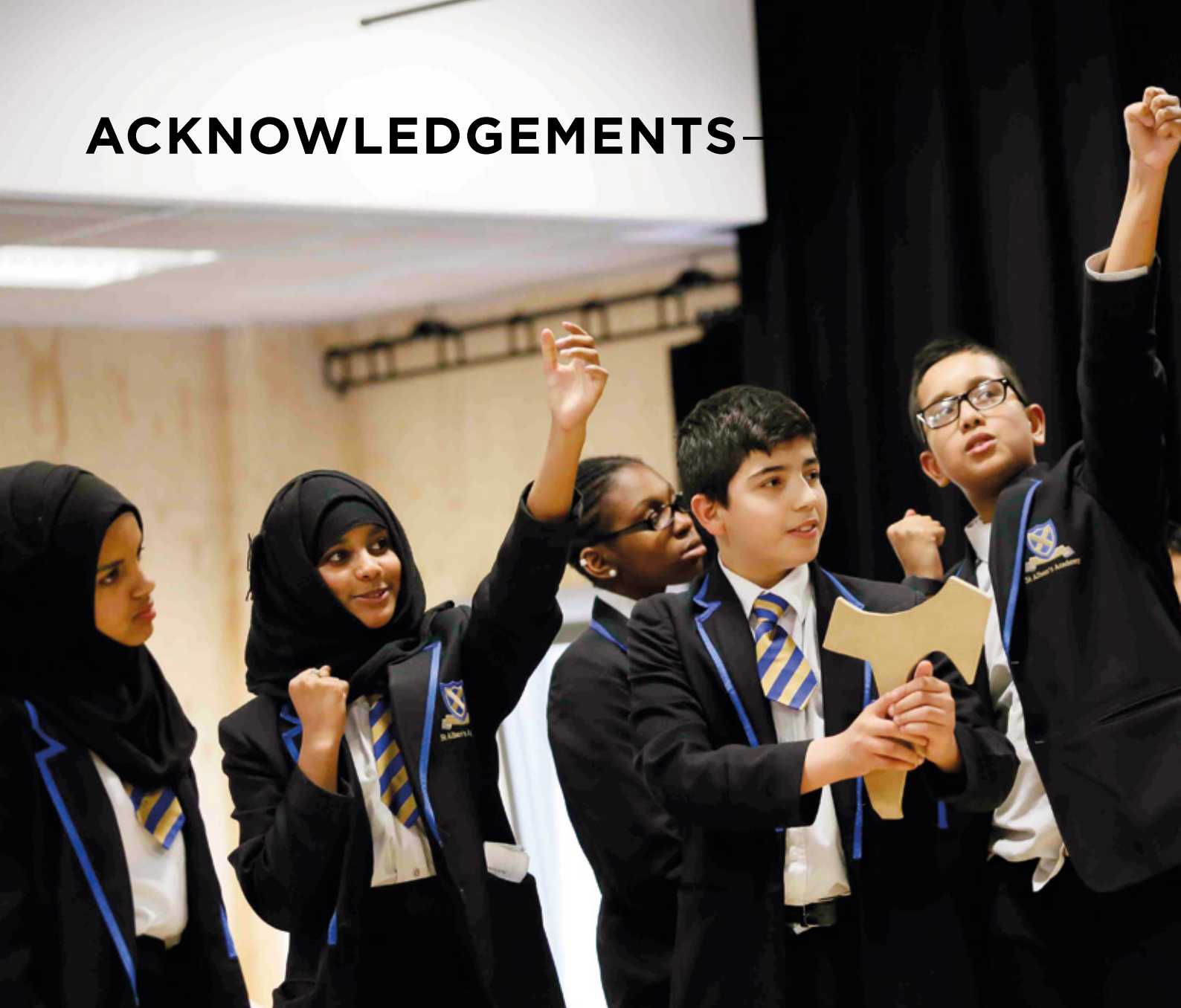
I left college a few months ago having landed an ensemble role in a London musical with such a diverse cast, it was amazing. The casting was so open in our show. Not one person looked the same. There is a stupid belief that an ethnic lead doesn't sell, which is ridiculous, because a more diverse cast brings in a more diverse audience.

People go on about there not being many ethnic actors around but I think that a lot of the time they're not looking hard enough. It doesn't help that a lot of ethnic people don't see it as an option, because they don't know how to get involved. Most don't know about The National Youth Theatre, the RADA Youth Company or the Bruford Youth Theatre. We should really look out for each other more, provide information and keep an eye out for those that are trying to find a way in.

There's something to be said about creating your own work too. Seeing the success of Michaela Cole's tv show Chewing Gum and where it began is amazing. If people keep telling you there's no space for you then you should make it yourself because there's so much potential for it. ■

— Interview Mel Larsen

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS—



## **THE AUTHORS OF THE REPORT WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING IN PARTICULAR FOR THEIR HELP WITH THIS REPORT**

Trustees of the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, David Grindrod, Truda Spruyt of Four Colman Getty, Kate Danielson of the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries, David O'Brien of Goldsmiths University, Pat Crumper of Strongback Productions, Act for Change, Equity, Future Talent, Arts Council England, Arts Educational Schools London, The BRIT School, Mountview, Rose Bruford School, Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Royal Ballet School, Stage One, Urdang Academy, Birmingham Rep, Bush Theatre, Clean Break, Curve Leicester, Hackney Empire, Manchester Royal Exchange, The Old Vic, Oldham Coliseum, Sheffield Theatres, Special Relationship Productions, Talawa, Tara Arts, Tricycle, UK Theatre, WAC Arts and the very many individual actors, students, directors, drama school, theatre and production staff who spoke to us anonymously.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research involved:

- Hour-long interviews with 53 individuals from theatre professionals, actors, drama students and drama school management by Danuta Kean.
- Twelve in depth interviews with BAME theatre companies and drama schools by Mel Larsen.
- Two focus groups with BAME theatre performers and drama students of different genders, ages and ethnicities, with the majority being British African or British African-Caribbean and aged under 35.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS—

The Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation commissioned this report to build upon its already long-standing work to improve pipelines for BAME talent into theatre. It has a solid foundation of funding programmes through theatres, drama schools and communities aimed not just at nurturing talent from culturally diverse backgrounds, but also broadening the audience for musical theatre in the UK.

This report has highlighted some of the reasons why theatre in the UK fails to attract and retain BAME talent. It has also highlighted some actions that will help to remove impediments to BAME participation.

The goal of this research is not just to attract more culturally diverse talent, but to ensure the widest possible participation in all parts of the theatre. For this to happen, we need leadership and action. The Foundation has therefore agreed the following recommendations aimed at bringing the change we believe is necessary:

— Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen, November 2016.

## **ARTS SECTOR BODIES**

Many organisations and individuals are working hard to find ways of encouraging and retaining BAME and other diverse talent in the theatre and many opportunities are available. The problem is accessing information, finding out what schemes exist and who can help. **An online resource of opportunities and successful BAME initiatives should be created.** We believe that such a resource should also include a **one-stop shop for aspiring BAME theatre professionals, secondary schools and sixth form colleges.** Arts Council England, as the national development agency for the arts, along with other sector bodies such as UK Theatre, should take a key role in driving forward the development of this resource.

## **DRAMA SCHOOLS**

Drama schools are aware of the wells of talent that exist in culturally diverse communities. If they were to award more places through bursaries, scholarships and grants they would help remove the financial impediments that hamper diversity on all levels. By adopting a self-imposed target of **providing finance so that 50 percent of their places are accessible to students from low-income backgrounds** there could be a dramatic impact on the diversity of their intakes.

## **PRODUCTION COMPANIES**

Producers, directors and creative teams can also take a lead in encouraging a more culturally diverse workforce. Simply by ensuring that **auditions for non-race specific roles are ‘colour blind’** the proportion of BAME actors can be increased. Theatres should **expand their repertoire** to include more shows written by BAME playwrights. Productions can also ensure that lighting and make up technicians are trained to deal with the specific needs of BAME actors.

## **PHILANTHROPIC ORGANISATIONS**

The Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation has paved the way for tackling the problem of BAME diversity in theatre by producing this report and funding scholarships and initiatives across the UK, as well as in the USA. It calls upon other trusts, foundations and individuals to follow this lead and **include diversity as a key criterion in awarding funding.**

[www.andrewlloydwebberfoundation.com](http://www.andrewlloydwebberfoundation.com)

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