

Natasha Gordon in Conversation with Lucy Jeffery: 'It was around 7.27pm that suddenly diversity walked through the door'

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ABSTRACT

*Award-winning playwright Natasha Gordon talks to Lucy Jeffery about her experience as a Caribbean-British actor and playwright whose debut play *Nine Night* (2018) made her the first black British female playwright to have a play staged in London's West End. The discussion ranges from Gordon's own experiences of gendered and racial injustices as a young actor to how these prejudices are evident in the audience demographic of theatres today. It focuses on *Nine Night*'s exploration of how second-generation, specifically Jamaican-British, immigrants experience tensions concerning identity, belonging, and displacement in the wake of the 2018 Windrush Scandal. As the conversation evaluates the importance of Gordon's work and visibility on the National Theatre and West End stages, it contributes to the recent underrepresentation of black voices, a concern expressed in the widespread Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name protests that have*

taken place in America and the UK in 2020. The conversation, which took place at the University of Reading as part of the 'Race and Performance Today' series (organised by Jeffery and Matthew McFrederick), also responds to Michael Peters's (2015) call to challenge the whiteness of curricula in British and American universities.

In 1968, shortly after Tommie Smith and John Carlos clenched their fists and raised their arms in a Black Power salute at the Mexico Olympics, the Conservative MP Enoch Powell said: '[t]he West Indian or Asian does not by being born in England become an Englishman. In law he is a United Kingdom citizen, by birth in fact he is a West Indian or Asian still' (cited in Smithies and Fiddick, 1969, p. 77). Forty-eight years later, the then newly elected British Prime Minister Theresa May made the following comment during the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham: '[t]he lesson of Britain is that we are a country built on the bonds of family, community, citizenship [...] But if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word "citizenship" means.' (May, 2016) Whilst responses to May's speech have highlighted the fascist overtones in her rhetoric (Davis and Hollis, 2018), in 2018 William Galinsky led an enquiry into how and why theatre is made and for who, naming his five days of installations, performance, and debate that took place in the National Theatre of Scotland: 'Citizen of Nowhere.'¹ It is this scrutiny of and artistic retaliation to attitudes toward race, immigration, and belonging that is not only a rich source of creativity, but a necessary voice in an increasingly racially and politically divisive time. This is now promoted by #BlackLivesMatter (founded in 2013 by Patrice Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi) which aims to 'eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes' by 'combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black

¹ Joyce McMillan wrote for *The Scotsman* that Galinsky and the artistic director for the National Theatre of Scotland, Jackie Wylie, were inspired 'by the idea, as old as ancient Greece, of theatre as a civic space, in which a community can gather to reflect the crises it is experiencing, and— perhaps— to find a more human and humane way through those moments of disruption.' (McMillan, 2018)

imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy' (blacklivesmatter.com). Indeed, as the interview below with black British playwright Natasha Gordon (b. 1976) highlights, much of the energy in new British writing is coming from black writers whose work investigates both established society and the variety of cultures within it.

The interview with Gordon took place on 14 March 2019 and belongs to a two-part series of 'In Conversation' events organised by myself and Matthew McFrederick.² It falls under the umbrella of the 'Race in Performance Today' series that we initiated at the University of Reading in 2018 with the aim of diversifying the curriculum to encourage discussion of issues regarding racial representation. The conversations with playwrights Inua Ellams and Natasha Gordon acknowledge and challenge Michael Peters's (2015) observation that 'the curriculum is white comprised of "white ideas" by "white authors" and is a result of colonialism that has normalized whiteness and made blackness invisible' (p. 641). As the interview below reveals, Gordon's work focuses on themes of power and empowerment, implicitly challenging white hegemonic dominance by centralising the black body and its attendant signifiers of blackness. As the first black British female writer to have a play staged in the West End, Gordon herself breaks new ground and stands at the forefront of the whiteness debate in theatre and education sectors. Her debut play *Nine Night*, which premiered at the National's Dorfman Theatre on 30 April 2018 and had its first West End performance at Trafalgar Studios on 1 December 2018, allows us to recognise that race can be a unifying category as it captures a set of cultural experiences.³ At the end of the play, the young Anita (played by Rebekah Murrell) realises that '[w]e're all fragments of someone or something, a mitosis of souls fighting to find our core being' (Gordon, 2018, p. 74). As Harvey Young (2013) states, '[d]espite the historical baggage of race, the concept is not unredeemably negative. Although divisive—as all categories are—it can be used to rally a sense of cultural pride that is not necessarily

² The live recordings of these interviews can be viewed on YouTube: '[Inua Ellams In Conversation – Minghella Studios, University of Reading](#)', [accessed 8 July 2020]; '[Natasha Gordon In Conversation – Minghella Studios, University of Reading](#)', [accessed 8 July 2020]

³ For *Nine Night*, Gordon won the Most Promising Playwright award at the 2018 Evening Standard Theatre Awards and the Critics' Circle Theatre Award. She was awarded an MBE in 2020 for her services to drama.

dependent upon the denigration of others' (p. 7). The connection between racial representation and the arts is currently caught in a promising and precarious tension that, due to political divisiveness, does not always provide scope for race to be seen as a positive term. Even though the run of Gordon's play at the West End's Trafalgar Studios broke boundaries, its location, in the shadow of Nelson's Column, suggests that black British theatre still occupies a grey space between prejudice and equality. In his review of the play, Michael Billington acknowledges Gordon's sensitivity to this tension when he describes Gordon's overarching theme as 'the ability to inhabit two cultures and to acknowledge one's ancestral past while living fully in the present' (Billington, 2018), a dynamic that acquired added resonance in light of the contemporaneous Windrush Scandal and that has intensified since the 2020 Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name protests.⁴

Despite this interview focusing on black British theatre, I do not want to suggest that there is one 'black theatre.' As Felix Cross, the artistic director of Nitro (previously, the Black Theatre Co-operative) said in response to being asked 'what is black theatre?':

Is it when Black actors get on the stage? Is it when a Black writer writes a play? Is it when the company's owned by Black people? Is it when it comes from a certain sensibility? Is there a style? Is there a different kind of language? Is there a different play structure? I don't know. (cited in Davis and Fuchs, 2006, p. 224)

In line with Cross's comment, the interview makes clear the extraordinary range of social experiences and cultural identities that compose the category 'black.' As a politically and culturally constructed category which resists being pinned-down by a fixed set of cultural 'norms', black theatre offers us new ways of thinking about what it is to be a citizen in an increasingly fractured world; a world that seems intent on defining by difference and determining the ethnicity of its people depending on what side of a wall they reside. On the back of

⁴ The 1948 Windrush Scandal affected British subjects who had arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1971. It is named after the Empire Windrush ship that brought one of the first groups of West Indian migrants to the UK in 1948. Eighty-three people of the so called 'Windrush generation' were deported from the UK by the Home Office and many more were detained, denied benefits and medical care, and lost their jobs or homes.

such challenges, we celebrate the fact that the Black Theatre Archives project at the National Theatre in London is cataloguing information for every play written by a Black British playwright and that with *Nine Night* Natasha Gordon became the first black British female to have a play staged in the West End.⁵ These are signs, perhaps, that barriers, or even walls, can be taken down.⁶

THE INTERVIEW

Lucy Jeffery: Natasha welcome to the Bulmershe Theatre at the University of Reading.

Natasha Gordon: Thank you.

LJ: Just to give everyone a little bit of context of Natasha's visit, this year we added Natasha's play *Nine Night* to the curriculum for 'Introduction to Theatre' [convened by Jeffery in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television] to explore issues surrounding race and representation in British theatre, which we might talk about in a little bit more detail shortly, but I would like to begin by asking you about your learning. Natasha, perhaps we could start at the beginning. I was wondering if you could speak about your British-Jamaican upbringing in terms of the literature and stories you heard and read growing up.

NG: That's a good one. Hello everybody. That's such a good question because I think the assumption is made that when you are a writer that you've had a literary influence in your upbringing, which wasn't the case with me at all. I was raised singlehandedly by my mother [who] raised me and my brother, and she had a job looking after the elderly and worked really long shifts so there was no sense of bedtime stories or passing on stories from her family, it was really that you went to school to learn and it was school that you got your literary knowledge. The only books we really had in the house were two massive encyclopaedias because she wanted us to learn and she wanted us to study but didn't really realise that two massive encyclopaedias was not

⁵ For a discussion between Winsome Pinnock and Jasmine Lee-Jones about the presence of black female playwrights in Britain, see Akbar (2020).

⁶ Please note that to improve clarity of expression, the interview has been lightly edited.

the way to help your children to tackle literature.

LJ: No Harry Potter? [*Laughter.*]

NG: No Harry Potter. She didn't have the time. So my brother is seven years older than me and it was going to one of his parent's evenings that his English teacher took out a book of stories from Anansi and I think—I'm trying to remember how old I was, I was probably age seven—that was the first book or collection of stories that I remember reading and remember being...I wouldn't have been able to articulate it at the time but there was something about a white woman handing to my family a book about stories that come from an African folklore and culture that sort of opened something up inside.⁷ I'm a slow reader as well so books were always a chore for me so it was really much later on, when I was in secondary school probably and I started to discover plays because you can read them much more quickly and there's a sort of visceral connection to a play that is less cerebral, that I started to discover and appreciate the power of the spoken word.

LJ: So, what then were your early experiences of seeing and first performing in theatre like, having had this enthusiastic enjoyment of reading plays?

NG: Well it was just amazing to me. Probably the first ever play I performed was *Song of the Dark Queen*, based on Boudicca.⁸ It was a production that my drama school teacher, when I was thirteen or fourteen, took to Edinburgh and, for me, just being able to use words to express emotion, energy, dialogue in a safe space, I remember that being a moment of waking up and realising there was a way to experience words that was something other than reading a book.

LJ: And then did you find that enhance later on as you started to think of this as a profession that you'd go into?

NG: Yeah, I mean it was this same drama teacher that encouraged me

⁷ The *Jamaica Anansi Stories* was written by Martha Warren Beckwith, published in 1924. These stories are a collection of folklore, riddles, and transcriptions of folk music centred on the Jamaican trickster Anansi.

⁸ Nigel Bryant's *The Play of 'Song for a Dark Queen' from the novel by Rosemary Sutcliff* was published in 1984.

to go to drama school. I'd never heard of drama school, didn't know what it was, but I'd done some drama lessons with Anna Scher who used to run a drama club in North London.⁹ Anna Scher's approach was all completely improvisational so no text at all, but it was much later on being at drama school that I immersed myself more in different works from [Harold] Pinter to [Henrik] Ibsen to August Wilson.

LJ: Okay, so a huge variety of...

NG: A huge variety, yeah.

LJ: And so how then did that move into you starting to create theatre? Did you have these ideas and want to write them down early on?

NG: No, never. [*Laughter.*] I always just wanted to be an actor. You know, I think you go to drama school at whatever age you are, I was twenty-one when I started, and for me I just wanted to act because that was something that I understood, I knew how to do that, I understood how that worked. And when I left drama school, I was really lucky for the first seven to eight years where I pretty much worked constantly. I was on tour lots and then I sort of got to this point where I was no longer young enough, I was twenty-eight, I no longer *looked* young enough to play the mouthy South Londoners that I was going up for, and then I didn't look old enough to upgrade to the mother roles and so the work started to dry up and become much less interesting. If I was going up for a TV job it was always to be the support to the lead or even in theatre it was never the lead roles, it was always about supporting or being part of an ensemble, which I absolutely love, but at the same time there was this frustration that after this three years of intense classical training that I felt like I wasn't being allowed to explore my craft. A very good actress friend of mine Sharon Duncan-Brewster, [who] lots of you would recognise, she gathered together me and a few of her other actress friends, all of a similar age, all over forty or approaching forty, and said: '[i]s it just me or does it feel like parts are becoming less interesting the older we get and, if that's the case, are

⁹ The Anna Scher Theatre School is a community-based drama school based in Islington. It was founded by Scher in 1968.

we happy with that? No. And what can we do about it?’¹⁰ One of the things we decided to do about that was to come together every four to six weeks and support each other. First of all just to get out gripes and groans about injustices in the business, and then it evolved from there to: ‘[h]old on, we’ve been doing this job for twenty years, there must be something else in our skill set that we want to explore.’ So that was the first time that I picked up a pen and decided to have a go at writing. I didn’t even know that it was going to be a play, I was just writing a few scenes, voices that I could hear in my head, and I’d always had this fascination between a Jamaican funeral and British funerals that I’d been to. They’re polar opposites, just down to the basics, the length. I’d go to British funerals, predominantly the ones I’ve been to have been cremations, the whole service is over within half an hour; you go to a Jamaican funeral at half an hour you’ve just greeted. *[Laughter.]* So I had this thing in the back of my mind that I wanted to do something about that but didn’t know, didn’t feel like I had the tools to explore what that was. So it was through this group—we called *[ourselves]* the ‘Brunch Discussion’ because we would meet at eleven o’clock and for ages we tried to think of a different name but couldn’t come up with one so just left it as ‘The Brunch’—that I would bring scenes to the group and we would read them, the actresses would give me notes, I’d go away and write a bit more and then would put them down. Then my grandmother passed away, so we’re talking coming up to five years ago now, and that was the first time that I experienced *Nine Night* and was completely blown away by the force of this tradition and couldn’t quite believe that I didn’t know anything about it.

LJ: For some audience members who might not have had the good fortune to see *Nine Night*, could you explain the ritual?

NG: Yes, so the ritual is nine nights of mourning that takes place before the funeral. It can be after *[the funeral]*; the thing is with nine night, there are no rules per se, it’s a flexible tradition. But at the heart of it, it’s the family and friends of the deceased coming together to celebrate the life of the deceased. It takes on this other element in that it’s really important that the spirit goes well. So the thinking behind it is

¹⁰ Sharon Duncan-Brewster (b. 1976) has appeared in several television dramas including the BBC’s *EastEnders* (2009), *Doctor Who* (2009), *Years and Years* (2019), and is currently playing Roz Marchetti in Netflix’s *Sex Education* (2019-present).

that it's on the ninth night that the spirit will return to the house and it's up to the family and friends to help the spirit to move through the house and pass on to the other world, wherever the other world may be, whatever the other world means to you. There's that sense that you don't hold on to the dead energy, you let the energy go. Essentially it's a celebration where people come together, they tell stories about the deceased, they eat food, there's lots of eating, there's lots of drinking. [Laughter.] I wrote the play as a way to explore my own feelings about it because I found the whole thing completely overwhelming and didn't know what to expect.

LJ: So it was necessary then, perhaps, on a personal level for you to write this, but also for us to see this, to get a chance to be introduced to this ritual.

NG: Yes.

LJ: That's absolutely amazing. I imagine that on that more political side, the Windrush Generation and the news from the Home Office in 2014 must have really been in your mind and in your heart when writing the play. Were you aware of the political weight that it would carry because it's quite a prescient moment?¹¹

NG: No, it's coincidence. When I wrote the play, the scandal hadn't blown up. *The Guardian* had been, I think, reporting on it but it hadn't blown up to the scandal that it turned into last year [2018] but I suppose what we can take from that is that [one] of the themes that I'm exploring in the play is this thing about being a second generation Jamaican and how, wherever you're from, actually when you're a second generation [there's] always that conflict between holding on to your parents culture and rituals and what they pass on to you but at the same time you're having to find your own way here. So you're a bit of them and you're a little bit of here, you're a little bit of this and you're a little bit of that, and you're constantly working out and recalibrating how you fit in and where your voice fits. I remember the point that the

¹¹ The 2014 Immigration Act, which the Government called its 'hostile environment' approach, led to many from the Windrush generation not having formal papers to prove their lawful status and facing immigration checks, with some being wrongly detained and deported, in spite of their British citizenship.

scandal hit; I had just been tackling in rehearsals with a line that Lorraine has in the last scene where she says to Trudy her half-sister about her mother Gloria, she says to Trudy 'You were right not to come to England. Mum wanted you but England didn't' (Gordon, 2018, p. 83) and it was a line that always, it never sat easy with me. I think it never sat easy with me because it suddenly felt like quite a big political theme that I wasn't covering anywhere else and I touselled with how much can this line sit in this domestic piece and not take it off track. And I remember saying to the actress at the time, because I played Lorraine in the West End but not at the National, and I kept saying to her 'I'm going to do something about that line because it's not quite it', and then of course the scandal hit and we all went 'No, that line has to absolutely stand as it is.'

LJ: Yes, it's implications with regards to immigration and diaspora communities really packs a punch, you're right it's an important line that does stand out. I suppose two strands that maybe we could talk about are the intercultural hybridity that you're mentioning, yourself being British-Jamaican, and the intergenerational conversations. Was any of your own upbringing coming to the fore when you were writing?

NG: Yeah, definitely. My mum is highly spiritual, I would say, over being highly religious, and she would tell me things about her upbringing that would just seem so odd and so strange. Her grandparents were Maroons, the Maroons were slaves that fought the British for their independence, and she would say things about her grandfather speaking in his native tongue and she'd talk about him flying up, he'd get into a, not frenzy what's the word, a trance, and he would easily fly up into a tree and it would be for his wife, her grandmother, to coax him down speaking their native tongue that my mother never learned. Now you could imagine growing up here being told this stuff was not something that you could then go to the playground and chat to with your friends about because it was too weird. There would be rituals that she would have about how you would hang washing up on the washing line. She would go mad if she came out and saw that a t-shirt was hung the wrong way around, she would go mad because that would disturb the spirits. There were all these sorts of supernatural elements to my childhood that were never explained, they were just put out there. So, in the last scene of the play

where, and for those people who didn't see it, part of the nine night tradition and disorientating the spirit is that on the ninth night you move into the deceased bedroom and you rearrange their furniture so that they'll be disorientated when they return; this was something that my mum wanted to do, but my grandad [who's] still alive and with us, me, and my siblings felt really uncomfortable about doing that but it was really important to my mum that we did. Anyway we did it because there was no way we can go into grandad's bedroom and start moving his furniture around when he's just lost his wife of fifty-odd years. That was the first time that I really felt a huge clash between our cultures and understanding and I just remember feeling like I had really let her down, which I still feel because at the end of the day we didn't do that. But then it was all so strange because she never explained any of these rituals. I think there is something as well about when you're an immigrant and you, especially for my mum's generation and for the Windrush generation even more, when you come to a country and you're trying to fit in and you're trying to assimilate, you don't make so much reference to how things were back home. You're just trying to get on, get your head down and make it work, make it work for your family, or certainly that was my family's choice.

LJ: Largely I've been thinking about it and it seems to be about passing on from generation to generation, as you're saying. And a lot to do with mothers and daughters, or aunts and nieces—with Gloria or Aunt Maggie, and Lorraine, Anita and Anita's daughter Rosa—and the sense of continuing that. And also [about] that sense of what the home actually is as you go on from generation to generation, the consciousness of your culture, and how rooted you then feel in your home; whether you feel it adopted or that it is your home. How much then did you put the idea of immigration at the heart of *Nine Night* when you were writing it?

NG: Well I guess subconsciously it had to have been leading me the whole way because it starts with Gloria but has travelled from Jamaica and Lorraine and Robert's generation is my generation so I'm looking at what it means to fight back in a different way to Gloria's generation which is really reflective, I think, of what we've seen in society for my generation [who] have gone: '[a]ctually, no we're not just going to fit in and shut up, we are going to challenge the status quo.' It's not

something that is referenced so much in *Nine Night* because essentially it's a play about grief, but certainly those themes are skirting around the outside.

LJ: I made a note here of Anita dealing with this struggle when she talks about everybody 'jamming in [the] room and making a space for [her]' (Gordon, 2018, p. 74) and that wonderful realist set full of colour, full of vibrancy and *life*, and I wondered how your work with Rajha Shakiry, the designer for *Nine Night*, helped you develop this sense of space and home.

NG: Well I showed Rajha photos from my grandparent's home and that look [*Points to backdrop image of set.*] is iconic. It's different because this is the kitchen so typically what you have in a Jamaican household, you would have a front room that would almost be like the museum piece [*Laughter.*] and it's where all the crockery is from the wedding or things you've bought with your hard earned cash and it all is [on] display in the glass cabinet and it's not to be touched, it is only to be looked at. And there are ornaments all over the place. Because it was set in the kitchen, I guess it's mine and Rajha's cheat of how much you can bring the living room element into the kitchen space. So you can see there is a glass cabinet just behind the table there, but it is a room that most people from the Caribbean would look at completely recognise, I think.

LJ: In places, you get a sense of it from this image, the play is so joyous and it's hilarious. I think the comedy is a really important facet in a play that, as you say, is dealing with loss and grief. How much of the tone of the play is shaped by the director, Roy Alexander Weise? I heard that he would often start with dance warm-ups or introduce games and music into rehearsals.

NG: Yes, so, in terms of the comedy then those are the sounds, I mean the dialogue that I've grown up with. We had a fantastic movement director, Shelley Maxwell, [who] is Jamaican. She brought with her this extra added element that I could only have dreamt of really because she's grown up in the nine night tradition, and the Kumina Dance, which is the dance that takes place after that moment, Shelley knew really well because she'd grown up dancing it and then

studied it at dance school.¹² So she would lead a warm-up every warming and the warm-up would be really general at the beginning and then the last five minutes we would come together and do the Kumina. She also brought in with her two fantastic drummers that go to funerals and nine nights and play the African drums as part of the Kumina ceremony. So we had this amazing session where they came in and they spent two hours with us and talked us through the ritual and showed us the dance and it was such a fantastic moment for us because it suddenly embedded the whole ritual into something really *real*. After the end of that two hour session you felt as though the ancestors were in the room with us which was the whole, which was exactly what I wanted to achieve for Anita, that moment when she's in that nine night room that she comes out and she expresses to us something that she's experienced back there that we haven't been party to, or certainly Lorraine hasn't been party to because she's still so locked in her 'traditional' grief, let's say.

LJ: For an audience, you really get a terrific sense of that rhythm and that energy, and it's just a joy in those moments, especially when Anita is dancing and swirling around by the back door; it's a wonderful moment. Something that really struck me when I first saw *Nine Night* at the Trafalgar Studios was the audience demographic and, in the moment where Trudy who's in the striped top comes in and opens her suitcase and takes out the mangoes, the...

NG: Rum.

LJ: Of course the rum, many a rum, and the sweet potatoes, the plantains; people in the audience around me were saying these words aloud, it was such a familiar culture to them. For me, as a Welsh-British theatre goer, I was not familiar with this and then I read a review by Paul Taylor in *The Independent* that said the play 'generates an atmosphere of inclusion' (Taylor, 2018) and that's certainly true, we all experience loss and we have a connection with one or many of the characters, but I was very aware that I was outside of a community that

¹² In the play, Uncle Vince (played by Karl Collins) explains that Trudy's (Michelle Greenidge) Kumina dance is 'more dan a dance. Is a way of life. [...] Dem can dance it all dem like but is only de people weh grow inna it, know de real Kumina.' (Gordon, 2018, p. 65)

I hadn't previously had access to. It was a fantastic experience for me, therefore, to be engaged with this but I was wondering, did you have an audience in mind when you were writing *Nine Night*?

NG: So it's really, I was in both a fortunate and unfortunate position in that when I wrote *Nine Night* I wasn't writing it for the National Theatre. I was writing it for myself. I was writing it because I needed to get this feeling out of being a second generation coming [for] the first time to this tradition that I had no previous knowledge of. That also gave me freedom because I wasn't thinking about censoring myself, I wasn't thinking about making the Patois understandable for a National Theatre, traditional audience. It was purely inner expression, for me. So I wasn't thinking about an audience in mind until, obviously, I hear that the National want to do it and then of course I started to panic and I started to panic because, exactly that, knowing what a National Theatre audience looks like typically, the worry about how much would they understand, how much would they be able to connect to the characters and the experience. And then knowing the reality that the Jamaican and Caribbean and African people that I would want to see it probably wouldn't get to the National in time anyway, before the end of the run because it was only a five week run...So marketing worked really hard to make sure that the posters went out into the right places and into the community.¹³ I remember the feeling in the first preview of being in the auditorium around 7:24PM and looking around and seeing a traditional National Theatre audience and thinking 'Here we go' and then I kid you not, it was around 7:27PM that suddenly diversity walked through the door.¹⁴ [Laughter.]

LJ: Kept you waiting.

NG: Completely. And it was just the most incredible...it was already an experience for me to just sit and watch to see how many people of colour were in that audience, and when I use that term I don't mean to

¹³ For Winsome Pinnock the audience demographic of both the National Theatre and the Royal Court remains a contentious issue. As Elizabeth Sakellariidou (2011) explains, '[i]n an interview in 1997 and a short essay on black British theatre in 1999, [Pinnock] expresses her disappointment with these institutions' failure to introduce effective mixed-audience policies.' (p. 383)

¹⁴ Founded in 2018, the Black Ticket Project, a crowdfunded scheme aimed at ensuring young black people see plays with a black British focus, supported *Nine Night*.

offend anybody. It's also because I can't quite bear BAME and haven't quite worked out what the expression should be so if I say 'people of colour' we understand what I mean. So for me the play had already begun sitting in the audience and going 'Oh my God word has spread' because what I expected might happen is that word would spread towards the end of the run, but it was right there from the beginning. I sat and I watched that first preview and, no offense to the actors but I have to say, I was just mostly looking around the room in the auditorium and watching the different responses. You had some black people rolling around in laughter, hitting the chairs in front of them, and a more traditional audience watching *that* experience taking place around them [*Laughter.*] and then looking out front and experiencing something that they felt outside of but were still able to connect to the sense of family. You know grief being such a universal story, there is something in that story that you can connect to whether you get all of the Patois, whether you get the essence of the Patois, we know what those relationships look like.

LJ: Absolutely, and it was the joy that was delivered from the stage into the audience that certainly made it a wonderful learning experience for me and also a very fun evening at the theatre. And I continue to learn because I notice that in the programme there's a recipe for Guinness Punch and I'm just wondering if you [can] make a mean rum cocktail or help me with mine? [*Laughter.*]

NG: I can certainly help you with yours, Lucy. Or at least I think I can. I mean, this is what I mean sometimes about suddenly turning so British, I haven't made a mean Guinness Punch for years yet it is something that I would have every Sunday as part of my rice and peas and chicken. There's a lot of Guinness in Guinness Punch, there's quite a bit of rum in Guinness Punch and this is something that I would be drinking from age dot.

LJ: Excellent. [*Laughter.*] Palmed off with the idea of some milk in there as well I hear.

NG: Yeah, I'm happy to help you out with yours.

LJ: Just more rum really, isn't it?

NG: Just more rum, exactly.

LJ: On a more serious note, on the one hand I think we should celebrate the fact that you are the first black British female playwright to have a play on at the West End. It's a tremendous achievement. But, on the other hand, it's quite unsettling that it's 2018, or was 2018, when this first happened. How do *you* feel about this?

NG: It's a very bittersweet experience, really. I was saying to Lucy that the first time I heard that was the case was from the playwright Winsome Pinnock and we were having a very casual conversation after the play finished in the Dorfman and she asked if there [were] any future plans for the play and I said, I wasn't actually supposed to say at that point because it hadn't been announced yet, 'It looks like we're going to get a West End transfer.'¹⁵ Winsome turned to me and said, 'You do realise that will make you the first black British female playwright to have a play on in the West End?' And my mouth just dropped. I said to her 'Winsome that's impossible, who can we ask, who would know this, where can we get clarification about that because that's just not possible?' There I was sat next to a fantastic established playwright of twenty-odd years asking who we should check-in with, whether that was the case. [*Laughter.*] So it immediately made me feel sick inside and then immediately very angry, it was a while before it was anything that I could celebrate, really. I only celebrate it in the vein of...I see it as a collective achievement, I see it as the achievement of the Winsome Pinnocks and the Debbie Tucker Greens and the Bola Agbajes that have worked for years and because of their excellence [have] paved the path for me to be able to be labelled as the first. But for me, more importantly, it's when we're talking about the second, the third, the fourth, that is when we're talking about real progress.

LJ: That generosity of spirit that you've shared is really tremendous

¹⁵ Winsome Pinnock (b. 1961) is the first black British female writer to have a play produced by the National Theatre. Her play *Leave Taking* shares similar themes to *Nine Night* as it is about a woman from the West Indies who, having come to England to raise her two daughters in North London, experiences frictions between the two countries and cultures. It premiered at the Liverpool Playhouse Studio on 11 November 1987, was toured by the National Theatre's education department in 1994, and was revived at the Bush Theatre, London, on 24 May 2018.

and quite empowering, I think, maybe even to people in this room thinking about working on their own productions and plays. More broadly then, where do you think we are in terms of Britain's relationship to representations of race in its theatres?

NG: We're getting better. There is no doubt that we're getting better because I'm here, right? So we're definitely getting better. Inua [Ellams] was here. But we have a long way to go. I've just come back from New York and in New York the theatre scene in terms of diversity and the canon of work by African American playwrights; it is completely different. You're seeing work being produced by African American playwrights *all the time* and that was a revelation to me to go and experience last week. I think that they would themselves say that this is a breakthrough for them too, but even if it is a breakthrough for them too it's still happening on a much larger scale than it is happening here. We're doing better, but we've got a *long*, long way to go.

LJ: To pick up on that thought of you being here, one of the ongoing initiatives in this Department is to deliver modules that are appropriately inclusive and diverse and then to bring the conversation full circle, picking up on Matt's [Matthew McFrederick] introduction, what do you think of the project of British universities in terms of broadening their curriculum?¹⁶

NG: It's excellent. It can only be excellent and therefore end up truly changing the landscape. When I was at drama school twenty years ago, when I say that we looked at August Wilson, it was really a tiny part of the module that we looked at the history of theatre, but as an influence I learned much more [about] the structure of Pinter and Ibsen and [Samuel] Beckett, Shakespeare. All of course incredible playwrights, but there was nothing like this when I was at drama school and therefore, even though I had the most incredible experience, it was also really difficult because I turned myself inside out in order to try not to feel constantly like I was on the outside of an experience. So [the

¹⁶ In an article for *The Guardian* in 2019, Alison Flood reported on Swansea University's new module that focuses on books longlisted each year for the International Dylan Thomas Prize, making initial steps towards the decolonisation of the English Literature curriculum by replacing dead, white male authors with more black and ethnic writers (Flood, 2019).

fact] universities are addressing that and not [paying] lip service to it but are actually putting on these modules is incredible.

LJ: Do you have any advice for us to keep doing it and to get better at it, or is that a bit of an unfair question to put you on the spot?

NG: It's a huge question, I mean I think that you're already doing fantastic things in that you're taking your students to see what's out there...

LJ: First-hand.

NG: Yes so they're getting that first-hand experience and going to *all* theatres and not just it being London centric but going to the regionals. I think that's really important, and getting people in as much as you can. It sounds like you're doing the things that you should be doing that'll make the difference. I'll definitely have a think about it, if things come to me then I will for sure.

LJ: Well we're lucky if you can give us some ideas. Before I continue to bombard you with unfair questions can I open it out to the audience because I'm sure that students and colleagues have so many things to ask, so if you just pop your hand up.

Audience member: Can I ask a bit more about your choice to include a white character within the play?

NG: Great question. For me growing up in my family, having a white person has always been a part of my family so, like lots of people have said to me, it's been interesting introducing a white character almost as the outsider that we learn, for an audience that is not Caribbean, about the tradition through her which was never really my intention. I think it goes back to the Windrush generation assimilating when they came to this country and there being mixed relationships in this country from the 30s, 40s, 50s, so that when I look at a Caribbean family I never see just a sea of black faces, I see people from everywhere. So that's what Sophie [played by Hattie Ladbury] represents for me—she represents the assimilation that happens when two cultures come together. What's interesting is that in one of the early drafts, a director friend that

I'd sent the play to really questioned the use of Sophie and said 'I don't think you need her.' I really tussled with that for a while and in the end I sort of went I think that the point I'm taking is that I'm not quite earning her on the page so if I do have this white character in this black family then I need to be really clear about why she's there, what she's saying, and what she's representing. Does that make sense?

Audience member: Do you have a thinking process or things you usually do, a method that helps you build a play?

NG: This is my first play so I haven't quite discovered a process yet but what I know is helpful is being able to be in the world of the play for four consecutive days before I take my head out and do anything else. There's something about the accumulation of thinking 'in the world of' that allows me to deepen the voices or deepen the experience that I'm trying to convey. What else? Sometimes things come to me having a run, getting out. I think I spend a lot of time thinking before I actually get down to writing which means by the time I come to sit down to write there's actually a lot more than I think that's going to come out in this splurge on the page, if that makes any sense. I think that because I haven't really discovered what my process is, I'm learning that now to be honest.

Audience member: So, like Lucy was talking about, [for] some members of your audience unfamiliar with Jamaican culture, [were] there any parts of the play [...] besides Patois that you thought they might struggle with or feel alienated by within your work?

NG: Yeah, completely. But in the end I thought well, do you know what, especially for a National Theatre audience, if they were to go and see a Chaucer and come out and understand Chaucer most of them would give themselves a pat on the back at how well they did at tuning in their ear. I think the Patois is exactly the same in that respect, you just have to tune in. Or when you sit down and you watch Shakespeare, the first ten, twenty minutes you're recalibrating and your ear is finely tuning, all of your senses, everything becomes heightened to be able to grasp onto and catch the experience. For me, making the audience work hard is really important.

Audience member: I want to know what your experience was like playing as Lorraine and I guess with that comes the question of how much of you was in her and how much of her was in you?

NG: It was hard and I had made lots of assumptions about learning the lines. Generally as an actor I learn lines quite quickly. Lorraine was probably the hardest part I have ever learned and there was something about as the writer thinking that I knew a general sense of one of her speeches and then realising when I'd get up on my feet that I hadn't quite made the link between one word joining and the next. It was also hard because some of her was so close to home because she was my voice questioning the tradition. When you don't have that distance, your perspective can become skew-whiffed. So it's definitely the most challenging part I have ever played, but then here's the beauty of being an actor over being a writer: when you're an actor you're in a room in a scene with other people so it's never just about you, you have your co-workers to rely on. As an actor my process, which is similar to being a writer, is thinking about what I'm trying to get from the other person in the scene, what's the action that I'm actively trying to achieve. As soon as you do that you take the pressure off 'how am I doing' and you're just thinking about what you're trying to do so whenever I would feel panicked or overwhelmed then those are the tools that I would take myself back to. It was also the most incredible experience to be able to speak my own words and there came a point where I stopped seeing it as my own words, it became an acting job like any other acting job.

LJ: I can't promise to play Sophie but could you give us a little bit of Lorraine now, would that be alright? I know that you've left *Nine Night* behind, but I've got a copy.

NG: Yes! Have you got a bit in mind?

LJ: Up to you entirely. I know there's plenty to choose from but have a flick through. How cruel I'm being.

NG: Okay, has anybody got any ideas about which bit I should do, anybody that's seen the play? Go on dive in.

LJ: Maybe the '[i]'t's not about money' bit later on?

NG: 'It's not about money.' Okay maybe, as I don't have my glasses [*Laughter.*]

LJ: I've set you up for a fall, I'm so sorry...

NG: Not at all. So let's see what I can remember of '[i]t's not about money', Robert...'It's not about money, Robert. Look at her. I know exactly what she wants. But I don't know what she's going to do with it. All that bitterness, blistering inside of [her]. You sent her from this life to the next carrying shame. You can't do any more. She was sick for months. Where were you she asked me over and over again, "Trudy call?" "Trudy coming?" I've always been rubbish at lying, but, my God, I got good at it by the end. Have you ever seen disappointment on a dying face? It's not like she didn't try and make it up to you. When Alvin left. She sent for you. Finally, she could have the family she'd always wanted. She called you up. Begged you to come. Didn't she? What? Can't you remember? We do—don't we, Robert' (Gordon, 2018, p. 83) I've just completely, looking at you going that's not Robert...[*Laughter and applause.*]

LJ: I'm not quite embodying Robert [played by Oliver Alvin-Wilson]. That was wonderful, a real treat. I'll have to work on that. [*Laughter.*] Any more questions from the audience?

Audience member: You mentioned coming together with a group of fellow actors and workshopping the script with them, how does one get the best out of a similar arrangement?

NG: You mean gathering a group of friends to read your work?

Audience member: Yes, or just having a group in which to bounce ideas back and forth.

NG: So these are actresses [who] I completely trust, we've been friends for a long time and I think the most important thing when you show somebody your piece of work or you're getting advice or feedback is that they are people, it doesn't matter how long you've known them, but they are people whose opinions you trust and that's something that's harder to call because it's about a gut instinct. You

want people to understand your work, your vision, your voice as true and as like you as possible, you want to be critiqued, you want feedback, you want them to open out your thinking but you ultimately want them to have understood the essence of what you're trying to say. That's key for me. I had shown *Nine Night* to three directors and they all had a completely different response. If it wasn't for one of those directors then the play may never have gone on, so it's really important that you share your work too, I think. Does that answer your question?

Audience member: I'm interested in British identity and relationships to colonialism and why it seems much harder to have the conversations about people of colour when it's British. We had, for example, Lorraine Hansberry on the West End in the 60s, why is it that dominant images of what it means to be British don't include diaspora, don't include immigrants, don't include the range of people that actually live here? I guess I'm interested in how you might speak to that and have you felt an opening up at any point in relationship to that?¹⁷

NG: I'm just trying to unpick the question.

Audience member: It seems like British people can talk about race when it's happening in America but it's hard for them to talk about it [in] a British context.

NG: Got you. I think it's because of our connection to slavery. I think it's easier to talk about race in America and see the story of the African slaves in America different to here because we didn't have slaves in that immense workforce way on British soil. We had it over in the colonies. So I think that's the key essence to the problem. It's so difficult because when I speak to a younger generation that have grown up with Black British Month that takes place every October, I get this swelling sense of frustration from them that they also don't want slavery thrown in their faces constantly, they want a positive connection to their race. So this is the battle and the tension that we always have because at the same time I feel like we don't talk about slavery enough and the ramification, and how still today we can see

¹⁷ Five months after Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* debuted in New York, making it the first play written by a black woman to be performed on Broadway, it appeared in London's West End, playing at the Adelphi Theatre from 4 August 1959.

the fallout of slavery. It's a very difficult thing to talk about and I think it's also one of the reasons for my mum and my grandparent's generation, why they speak less about their African ancestry. I remember having a conversation, or trying to have a conversation, with my grandma once about slavery and she said to me: 'I don't know about that.' It was a complete lockdown because it's still so painful and it's still so close. We haven't had the same level of movement, we haven't had a Civil Rights Movement here in the same way that there has been in the States and so therefore the progression in terms of talking about race is different, we're still behind. Until we can find a way to get over that, we're always going to be at this sticking point.

LJ: That's a fascinating response. Any more questions?

Audience member: As far as national identity is concerned, [...] would you ever consider putting this play on outside of Britain or do you think it is a British play, from where you've written it?

NG: I would love to put this play on outside of Britain. In fact, it has been on at a drama school in Jamaica which I would've loved to have seen. I think it went really well. I would love to see it in America where there's also a huge Caribbean population. I'd be really interested to see it, of course there are certain references, my mother in law said something, it wasn't even to do with America, '[i]f it went outside of London Tash, you'd have to take out the bus references because nobody would know the 236 and the 43' [*Laughter.*], which I don't think is the case because the point is not the bus numbers themselves it's just the fact that Auntie Maggie [played by Cecilia Noble] thinks that she needs to name all of these different buses. I would love to see the response outside of London and outside of the UK, I think it would be really fascinating to see what holds. My sense of it is there are certain things that are specific to growing up in North London, but I think my general sense of it is because it's about grief I think it would reach quite far and wide, I think, I hope.

LJ: Perhaps we have time for just another couple of questions.

Audience member: You mentioned, fairly quickly, that 'and then the National Theatre was interested.' [*Laughter.*] It's a huge step, it seems

to me, and I was wondering if you could talk just a little bit about how the National Theatre became interested and particularly given that the National Theatre haven't been noted for...I mean there have been some plays by quite a diverse group but they're not common, they're few and far between. So I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about how the National became interested and the relationship of the director to that process.

NG: Sure. As I said, I sent the play out to three different directors. One of those directors was Dominic Cooke who's an associate at the National.¹⁸ I had worked with Dom three times as an actor and, talking about showing your work to people you can trust, Dom was absolutely one of those people, and so I had this feedback meeting with Dom where he said 'I love the play.' So that was the first 'okay.' And then he said: 'I hope you don't mind, but I've sent it on to the National Theatre studio.' So that was the second 'okay.' And then he said '[l]ook, I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, I'm not saying that it's going to end up on the National stage but what I'm saying is that you've invested enough in this play that I think it's a great play and I think the studio should give you a workshop.' So I got in touch with the studio and I think within a month I was in doing a workshop with a different director, with Indhu Rubasingham [who] runs the Kiln.¹⁹ We had a two or three day workshop and they asked me to go away and write another draft based on that, based on the notes that I received. I wrote another draft and they came back within six weeks to two months. I opened my emails and saw an email from Emily McLaughlin [who] is head of new work at the National studio saying 'Meeting with Rufus' and that was the third 'okay.'²⁰ Even then at that point, seeing the email, I didn't dare believe that that meeting was saying 'yes we love it and we want to do it.' I thought it might be Rufus taking time out to say

¹⁸ Dominic Cooke is a National Theatre Associate Director. He made his directing debut at the National in November 2011 with Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* starring Lenny Henry and Claude Blakey. At the National, he has also directed plays by Caryl Churchill, August Wilson, and Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman

¹⁹ Located in Brent, London's most culturally diverse borough, the Kiln Theatre prioritises its multicultural perspective and international vision. It was initially known as the Tricycle Theatre, founded by Shirley Barrie and Ken Chubb. In 1984 it gained reputation as a major political theatre under the artistic direction of Nicolas Kent. In 2012, Indu Rubasingham became artistic director and, after architectural renovation, it reopened in September 2018 as the Kiln Theatre.

²⁰ Rufus Norris has been the Director of the National Theatre since March 2015.

‘[I]look, this is great, it’s not quite there yet, we’ll give you a few more workshops, we’ll stay with you, we’ll help you develop it and keep talking about it.’ And it was my partner [who] pointed out that Rufus Norris was not going to take time out of his diary to give me a pep-talk. [Laughter.] It was the most incredible feeling when he said it, I remember saying to him ‘[c]an you just not talk for a minute because I need to take in what you’ve said otherwise nothing will go in.’ So we did sit in an awkward two minute silence whilst I composed myself. Then, as to how Roy [Alexander Weise] became involved; that was through the National really. I hadn’t seen Roy’s work and at the time it was a tough decision because the directors that I really loved or had worked with before who I trust were all unavailable and the National had been tracking Roy’s career for the past couple of years so they brought us together and also brought in the lovely and amazing Shelley Maxwell, the Movement Director. It was a real collaboration between the three of us.

Audience member: You weren’t worried that it wasn’t a woman director?

NG: No, I wasn’t and for me it didn’t even need to be a black director either. It just needed to be somebody [who] understood my vision. There is obviously something really useful when working with somebody who has that shorthand, but for me a good director is a good director and they will investigate and interrogate a script in the same way that anybody would. I’d love to work with a woman director next time around though, that’s for sure. It would be amazing.

LJ: After the huge success of *Nine Night*, before you go, what’s next for Natasha Gordon?

NG: Wow, wow, wow. [Laughter.] So I am currently, possibly, turning *Nine Night* into a TV adaptation but I’m hesitant about that because it’s a long process and writing for TV is so completely different to theatre so I really do feel like I’m learning from scratch. I have another commission with the National so I’m just looking at what there is to say next.

LJ: Well you’re keeping a sense of mystery. [Laughter.] I’m very

excited to find out what that will be and I'm hoping that you'll come back again and talk with us about that, should the occasion arise.

NG: For sure.

LJ: Could you all please join me in applauding Natasha Gordon. Thank you so much.

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