

Black and Asian Theatre at the Theatre Museum: a Users' Guide

The Theatre Museum is Britain's National Museum of the Performing Arts and maintains the record of live performance across the country. My brief at the Museum includes ensuring it collects material on the whole explosion of 'alternative theatre' that emerged roughly from 1968 onwards. This includes experimental theatre and live art, physical and visual theatre, feminist and other political theatre, gay and lesbian, community theatre and community plays... and black theatre. These become the inspiration for exhibitions and displays reflecting that work such as the Black Theatre History Trail, originally created for Black History Month in 1999 which involved several different displays, covering Ira Aldridge the great nineteenth-century black Shakespearean actor, black performers featured in Hogarth's prints, minstrel puppets in the Victorian Tiller Clowes theatre, carnival exhibits by Mahogany Carnival Arts, material on Ballets Negres, the first black dance company established in Britain in 1946, and black performers' involvement in the productions of Unity, the Workers' Theatre. You don't need to spend very long researching a display or trail, event, exhibition or educational project at the Theatre Museum before you discover that there is an enormous amount of material already in the collections that relates to black theatre history. The difficulty has always been in locating it.

The Theatre Museum has extensive Special Collections where the relevance to black theatre history is sometimes easy to identify such as in the Temba and Black Theatre Collection, the Black Mime Theatre archive or the recently-acquired Tricycle Theatre archive. However, the Museum's Core Collections consist of a huge assembly of programmes, playbills, reviews, photographs, biographical files, stage designs, books, videos, prompt-scripts, paintings, costumes, props, set models, puppets, ceramics, prints etc., etc. The problem is to know that Loudon Sainthill's stage design for the Royal Court in 1958, for *Flesh to a Tiger* is for a play set in the Caribbean by a Jamaican-born writer, Barry Reckord. In order to know that this design relates to black British theatre history, you have to have prior knowledge. The challenge then is to find ways of making this material and this knowledge available – especially to the non-expert, the student, the beginning researcher, as well as other curators.

The Theatre Museum is not alone in facing this challenge and some of the solutions are collective ones involving other organisations. We are a partner in the resource discovery project, Backstage, which provides online Collections Level Descriptions (CLDs) of special and materials collections (www.backstage.ac.uk). We have also contributed CLDs to the CASBAH project which provides a gateway to discover materials on black British and Caribbean history in Britain (www.casbah.ac.uk). In the Museum's own New Opportunities Fund-supported online project PeoplePlay UK we are creating a black performance digital timeline, part of which will include scans of and information on key objects in our collection, (www.peopleplayuk.org).

But still theatre professionals are often unaware of the history of black theatre in Britain. Students and learners at all levels rarely have an opportunity to study this important aspect of cultural history and teachers often lack the means to teach it. To encourage future research and publication in this field and make it available to users, organisations like the Theatre Museum must both improve access to existing resources and develop its collections, ensuring that future materials in this field are represented and preserved. At the Theatre Museum we needed someone to do the real digging to discover what is in our collections, someone with existing knowledge who knew what to look for: who were the key individuals? what were the key productions in black theatre? We were fortunate in finding experts Stephen Bourne and Alda Terracciano. Each focusing on a different time frame, they had already



trawled through the collections for their own research and developed in-depth understanding of the subject. We commissioned them to select around 50-75 major productions and begin the detailed mapping of what is there – and what is

not. Their findings provide a starting point for further research on the topic and also for us where possible to start to fill the gaps in the collection. Throughout the Guide ‘black’ is used to include both African-Caribbean and Asian work but in the list sections it is generally specified where a work is Asian or African-Caribbean, and African-American imports are also noted.

This guide is the Museum’s first major step in bringing its collections on the vital history of black performance to life. It will lead, we hope, to larger research projects in the future that explore hundreds more theatre productions of drama, dance, musical theatre, as well as stand-up comedy, live art etc., for which there is crucial material in the Museum’s collections.

How You Can Help

The Theatre Museum is keen to update, fill gaps and enlarge its coverage of black performance and welcomes potential donations. We are keen to hear about videos, photographs, CDs, scripts and your memories of what you have seen or taken part in. Or if you have a store of material in the attic on Carib Theatre, programmes for the Ira Aldridge Players or a scrapbook about your great-aunt Connie’s

stage career, please contact us! we would be delighted to hear from you.

Susan Croft

Curator of Contemporary Performance

Tel: 020 7943 4717

s.croft@vam.ac.uk

or

Theatre Museum Donations Voicemail: 020 7943 4728

tmenquiries@vam.ac.uk



Cover of Ira Aldridge’s play *The Black Doctor* an adaptation from the French, *City of London Theatre 1841*