

STAGE G

Colin Shearman on
the problems facing
black plays and
players

Stage stuck



Alby James: going mainstream

THE talented new artistic director of Temba Theatre Company, Alby James could talk for hours about the number of black plays that were good enough for the West End but never got there: the American Negro Ensemble's production of *A Soldier's Play*, which received such good reviews at last year's Edinburgh Festival that a London transfer seemed inevitable; Trevor Rhone's *Two Can Play*, which performed night after night to packed houses at Stratford East; Errol John's much-under-rated *Moon On A Rainbow Shawl*.

Partly this is the result of promoters' traditional reluctance to take risks but it also shows the extent to which black theatre, in spite of now having a wealth of actors, writers and directors, still hasn't really found an audience. In spite of the touring efforts of Temba and groups like it, most black people still see the theatre as an alien tradition while many white audiences, in what is probably an oblique form of racism, assume the plays will be amateurishly acted or will display concerns far too insular to bother with.

Quite what to do about this long-running problem remains a contentious issue. Smaller politically based outfits prefer to plug away at their local communities but more ambitious characters, like Alby James, feel that if they're ever to make major West End venues at all then their best bet is to opt for a more mainstream audience now.

This is probably the most popular view since Alby, who came up through provincial university and assistant directorship at the Royal Court and RSC, is typical of a new generation of British born black people who are beginning to make their mark in the theatre and are sick to death of being — for the most part — shut away on the fringe.

"In any case plays cannot be sustained by black audiences long enough to pay their way. We have no choice but to consider whether the content of each particular production will appeal to a wider audience," he says.

This is certainly the attitude behind the second Black Theatre Season which opened at the Arts Theatre last night with Temba's revival of Tunde Ikoli's *Scrape Off The Black*. All three plays have partly been chosen for their accessibility to a white audience but also as a skilful marketing device which hopes at one fell swoop to entice black people into the building, convince their white counterparts that the work is interesting and of an excellent standard and to prove to West End promoters that black plays can fill a conventional theatre in central London.

"Black plays are often most successful when firmly rooted. Look at something like Trevor Rhone's *Welcome Home Jacko*, set in a black youth centre. Or you can make a cross comparison with a film like *Kes*, that was immensely successful even with sub-titles. As long as it's true to what it's trying to do, and honest to itself, it will succeed."

Anton Phillips, artistic director of Carib Theatre Productions and with overall responsibility for the season, agrees with James on these points but Farrukh Dhondy, co-founder with H.O. Nazareth of the Asian Co-operative Theatre, which appears in February, is much more sceptical.

The prolific Dhondy, who also writes the TV sit-com *No Problem!* and is C4's commissioning editor for multi-cultural programmes, believes that talk of the West End is wildly optimistic — in terms of the style of writing and acting available — and that white audiences should, in any case, be treated cautiously.

However the season does mean that for three months companies of varying interests will have access to the kind of building and apparatus which white theatre groups normally take for granted, rather than the draughty ill-equipped community centres and church halls they normally use.

The success of this venture will also — through common financial links with the GLC — make even more likely the establishment of the Black Arts Centre at the Roundhouse early next year. If that does come off, black theatre companies will finally have a permanent venue of their own, which, in itself, should help in their struggle to attract larger audiences.

The Black Theatre Season runs at the Arts Theatre, Great Newport Street, London WC2 until March 30.

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