

# Intercultural theatre as a Paradigm for European Modernity

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Inter-culturalism has a paradoxical beginning. According to legend, Zeus, taking on the form of a dazzling white bull, added the Phoenician princess Europa to his retinue in Crete, and the rest, it could be said, is history. Europe emerges from this addition of Greek and Near Eastern, which takes us through the great challenges of the Greco-Roman and Christian eras to arrive in our own times of contesting faiths.

Seen from the eyes of the Phoenicians, of course, this genesis of Europe was in fact a theft, a forceful abduction. But then... who remembers the Phoenicians today? Power clearly rests with him who captures the princess!

The playwright Brian Friel, when talking of his play *Translations*, commented "It can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour, which no longer matches the landscape of fact."

What are the "linguistic contours" in which contemporary European civilization is imprisoned? The word "civilization" itself, for a start - having gained added potency since September 11<sup>th</sup> through the phrase 'clash of civilizations'. "Ethnicity", "Diversity", "Multi-cultural", "Inter-cultural", "Citizen", "Immigrant", "Refugee", "Asylum-seeker", "Mixed-race"... We appear to have developed an array of lexicons to describe, delineate, distinguish and even demarcate Us and Them. Them – the Others – who long to break through our borders and change our Way of Life.

Imagine for a moment an audio-CD lasting 60 minutes. 52 minutes of the track consisting of one song being endlessly repeated – say The Beatles' 'Can't Buy me Love'. The remaining eight minutes are packed tightly with songs from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, Africa, China, Indonesia. These kaleidoscopic – or cacophonous - eight minutes represent the percentage of Ethnics in relation to the total population of Britain today. If we were to take Europe as a whole, the Other songs would be packed into an even tighter four minutes. For many of us, running a mile in four minutes would be a great achievement, so we could say 4% non-European ethnics in Europe is not insignificant...

This is the bare landscape of fact today. Fact, which led the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to claim recently that 'attempts to build a multikulti society in Germany have utterly failed'. Failed? Surely they haven't begun yet?

Underpinning this landscape of fact is colour. Coloured Africa and Asia have leaked into dazzling white Europe. In Britain at least, this has led to another linguistic contortion – "asylum-seeker": a convenient veil or burkha for non-white.

More so than faith, language or class, colour in Europe is the undertow affecting intercultural relations. In Zeus' dazzling white continent, it is an obvious mark of distinction. Difficult to ignore, it is a constant visual barometer reflecting the changes in the beat of our heart. Our newly-formed Coalition government – which provides another way of characterizing Zeus and Europa (though I wouldn't want to guess which David is the Phoenician princess!) – has recently introduced curbs on non-EU economic migrants. As the majority of these are Asian and African, the intent is clear.

I say all this merely as a statement of fact, not as a comment on inequity. For the moment. Bearing this 4% – 8% fact in mind, I want to consider how in Britain we have sought to shape the contours of our heart in this new inter-cultural era.

The contemporary story begins in the 1960s, when Britain began to experience mass migration from the Caribbean and south Asia. The Beatles were all-conquering, Carnaby Street rocked, Mohammed Ali was shaking the world of sport and many urban centres were beginning to look worryingly similar to American cities on the East and West coasts. As Black and Asian citizens began to resist discriminatory practices in workplaces, successive governments, mindful of the potential for social unrest and also imbued with a sense of liberal humanity, began to introduce race relations legislation. These various laws progressively made racial discrimination illegal and punishable by law. As the whole basis of anti-racist legislation was a fundamental belief in the equality of all citizens, it was inevitable that this legislative consciousness of the Other began to pervade all aspects of life, including of course culture.

Naseem Khan's 1976 report for the Arts Council, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, first brought the cultural productions of metropolitan Britain's ethnic populations systematically to the consciousness of our political and cultural structure. In making the case for the official recognition of these Other arts, Khan's Report was also making the argument for equity. This report in short began Britain's long journey into the light of a diverse world of art.

The Report coincided with an extraordinary set of street explosions by the children of the first generation of migrants. Rebelling against parental and institutional authority, they sought to make sense of their lives in Britain – or as the title of book by Amrit Wilson published at the time had it, they were '*Finding A Voice*'.

The beginnings, therefore, of institutional support for what at the time was termed 'Ethnic Minority Arts' stemmed from a combination of the pull of artistic endeavor and the push of social circumstance. Our hearts, in other words, were being shaped by legislation and impulse.

One of the most significant plays in the early 1980s was Hanif Kureishi's *Borderline*. Produced by Joint Stock and The Royal Court Theatre, the play caught with vigour and verve the transgressions, the border crossings, along which Asian lives traversed in contemporary Britain; immigrant and native, traditional and modern, male and female, radical and conservative.

By 1985, sufficient culturally diverse work had begun to emerge for The Arts Council to not only make ethnic arts a strategic priority for funding, but also to propose a target for all public funding. While this target, even in the early eighties, fell short of the total population of ethnic minorities in the country, it represented an important shift in thinking. Needless to say that target was never achieved, because stories can never be that good... Even according to the 2007/08 figures published by the Arts Council, culturally diverse arts received a total of just over 3% of the total Arts budget.

In Britain, we do have a tendency to keep one eye on developments in the United States, and certainly with regard to matters of race. Our race relations legislation followed the civil rights legislation in America. In matters of cultural policy America paved the way with positive discrimination legislation, and while we fell short of legislating this practice, we certainly took on the spirit in the Arts Council's 1985 report. This Report was an incredibly brave expression, because Britain at the time was being governed by the extraordinary Mrs. Thatcher. She presided over what was almost certainly the most philistine government in recent memory. (It's too early to say how the present Coalition government will be judged...) She herself came to power on the back of fears, as she put it in an election address, of the native population feeling "swamped by alien cultures in their midst" and with a very clear programme to take publicly subsidised arts kicking and screaming into the market place.

Despite Thatcher, however, in the decades since the 1980s, a host of independent, Black-led and culturally-diverse arts organisations have emerged. While I accept there remain inequities in levels of state support, these organisations nevertheless can be said to constitute a new landscape of contemporary British cultural fact. They are independent arts producers. The climate which led to their emergence also contributed to the rise of extraordinary individual artists who continue to present a Europa face, as I would characterize them, to Britain's Zeus image. Novelists like Zadie Smith, Nadeem Aslam and Hanif Kureishi, visual artists like Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare and Anish Kapoor, dancers like Akram Khan and Shobana Jeyasingh, playwrights like Kwame Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams, Ayub Khan Din, and Gurpreet Bhatti, musicians like Nitin Sawhney, poets like Benjamin Zephaniah... the list can go on and on.

As I speak, I have a horrible feeling I may be describing a past Golden Age. The rampant greed fuelled by financiers that has led to the current government imposing some of the most draconian cuts in public expenditure seen in our lifetime, may well yet undo the work of the past decades. Diversity is no longer an explicit priority for the Arts Council and the notion of multikulti – as Angela Merkel puts it – or inter-culturalism is under severe strain on the backs of economic austerity and Islamic terrorism.

However, the road Britain has travelled since the 1960s suggests that social and political progress is in an intimate embrace with intercultural work. The modernity of Britain is enshrined in its interculturalism. It is impossible to walk the streets of London or any other British city and not encounter inter-cultural sights, sounds and smells. Interculturalism has introduced a critical taste of the Other. And this brings me to a crucial point: culturally diverse arts, perhaps more than any other sector of the arts is peculiarly burdened by the push and pull of social worth versus artistic value. Often, the arguments for diverse and intercultural arts are premised on their social value. I would strongly argue that without artistic merit, the social agenda cannot endure. Indeed, if such artistic endeavor were to be justified purely in terms of social value, it would fail, falling prey to the changing winds of political fashion.

To return, however, to the ‘taste of the Other’: this is most directly experienced in intercultural theatre. Theatre making, it seems to me, is shaped by contesting certainties and constructing worlds from a patchwork of other Arts – literature, painting, dance, music, sculpture. Intercultural theatre adds another layer: quotation. A willful inter-leaving of other languages, stories, sensibilities into the unfolding narrative. Intercultural theatre affirms the Sanskrit dictum “Tat tvam assi” – ‘The Other is Me’.

As a case in point, several years ago, I adapted Moliere’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, setting it in 18<sup>th</sup> century French India. To characterize Monsieur Jourdain’s increasing frustration with his family impeding his ambition to rise in social class, I thought of the Hindi phrase “*kebab mein haDi*”. Recognizing that Britain’s diet had changed radically since the time I’d arrived in 1968 and my mother was refused rooms to rent because of the smell of her cooking, I chose to translate the phrase – “bone in the kebab” was the closest I could get to the meaning, and it proved entirely adequate, as predominantly white audiences laughed in recognition. This is an example of linguistic inter-culturalism. I am rushing off after this talk to final rehearsals of a Bollywood version of Cinderella, which is being presented by a group of extremely diverse young people, none of whom have any direct experience of Bollywood or India but all of whom want to do a different kind of pantomime!

The challenging of certainties, a kaleidoscope of forms, the quotational imperative – these are all characteristics of modernity. Baudelaire describes modernity as “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent”. Immigrants like myself have transited into Europe, sometimes feel and are made to feel fugitive and are reliant on the Other (the natives in this case) to make sense of their new world. It seems to me,

therefore, that conversation is an inherent condition of intercultural work. And just as inherent is the impulse for equity. It is these two conditions – conversation and equity – that enable me to continue to wonder whether Zeus's relationship with Europa was an addition or a theft! And that, in turn, offers a suitably theatrical paradigm for European modernity.

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