

ROY WILLIAMS: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS DRAMATIC OUTPUT (1995-2010)

UMA VISÃO GERAL DA PRODUÇÃO TEATRAL DE ROY WILLIAMS (1995-2010)

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This article intends to give an overview of Roy Williams' dramatic output. The playwright has started his career in fringe venues and gained visibility with time, moving to mainstream theatre rooms. In the early times of his career, Williams has presented theatre plays that showed his concern with the issues related to first and second generation immigrants in Britain. His following plays deal with the construction of British identity under a black perspective. Other plays discuss current configurations of the British nation. Williams' work has brought to the stage a set of themes that reflect previously unexplored areas of contemporary Britain in theatre, such as racism and stories of local black communities. Therefore, Williams' work explores key aspects of multiracial Britain and the issues raised by multiculturalism.

Keywords: Black, British, Diaspora, Multiculturalism, Post-colonial, Theatre

Este artigo pretende dar uma perspectiva global do trabalho dramático de Roy Williams. O dramaturgo iniciou a sua carreira em salas alternativas e foi ganhando visibilidade, movendo-se para salas de teatro do *mainstream*. No início da sua carreira, Williams escreveu peças que mostravam a sua preocupação com problemáticas relativas às primeira e segunda gerações de imigrantes na Grã-Bretonha. As suas peças seguintes tratam da questão da construção da identidade britânica, numa perspectiva negra. As outras peças discutem as atuais configurações da nação britânica. O trabalho de Williams trouxe para o palco um conjunto de temas que refletem áreas ainda por explorar no teatro britânico, tais como o racismo e histórias de comunidades negras locais. Por isso, a produção dramática de Williams

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explora aspetos fulcrais da Grã-Bretanha multiracial, assim como temas levantados pelo multiculturalismo.

Palavras-chave: Negro, Britânico, Diáspora, Multiculturalismo, Pós-colonial, Teatro

Roy Williams: a Dramatic Trajectory

Writing came inadvertently to Roy Williams. Roy Samuel Williams was born in 1968 in the United Kingdom to a four sibling Afro-Caribbean family. He was brought up in Notting Hill, London, in a single-parent home, after his father left when he was two years old. As a teenager, attending the Henry Compton Comprehensive Secondary School, he faced some difficulties. To counteract his difficulties, his mother arranged for him to have a private tutor every Saturday. His tutor, who would have a great influence on Williams' choice of a career in theatre, was Don Kinch, who, besides being a teacher, was also an actor, writer and director with the black company *Staunch Poets and Players*. Meeting Kinch was a turning point in Williams' life because he "was hooked" (Williams, 2002: ix) after his first real experience with theatre apart from attending occasional productions with the rest of his school.

He left school at the age of sixteen and, in 1985, he attended a Performing Arts course at Kingsway College. In 1986, he joined the Cockpit Youth Theatre, where every actor had to devise, write, act and direct his whole work. During that time, he joined Theatre Centre for a period of eighteen months as a professional actor, even though he had not studied acting at a drama school. At Theatre Centre, he worked with writers such as Philip Osment, Noël Greig and Lin Coghlan, which reignited his love of writing. He also attended an evening writing workshop with Noël Greig, the company's resident writer at the time, and after a few sessions he started to write his first play – *Luke for Gary* – which was based on a scene he had improvised with his friend Michael Lowe. For the next two years, Roy Williams worked at the stage door of the Royalty Theatre in London's West End and it was then that he decided to take writing seriously.

In 1992, he was accepted as a student on a writer's course at Rose Bruford College, Kent, using *Luke for Gary* for his application. He graduated in 1995 with a first-class honours degree in Writing and his second play *The No Boys Cricket Club* (1996). Following the suggestion of his teacher, Gilly Fraser, he sent the play to as many theatre companies as possible. Within two months of graduating from Rose Bruford College, he had received calls

from three of the theatre companies to whom he had sent copies of his play. Meanwhile, the BBC commissioned a radio play that he had written at Rose Bruford called *Homeboys* for their Young Writers festival. In the end, it was the Theatre Royal Stratford East, a theatre that is explicitly connected with black writing and mainly black audiences, that produced *The No Boys Cricket Club* but Williams had also received commissions to write for the Royal Court and Hampstead Theatre. With his debut play, Williams took the main stage by storm and the play “articulates his characteristic preoccupations, being ambitious in theme, imaginative in form and, most crucially, convincing in its characterisation and dialogue” (Sierz, 2006: 179).

Starstruck (1998), Williams’ second play, was commissioned two and a half years after the playwright’s first stage success with Stratford East but was performed at The Tricycle Theatre because Stratford East was being rebuilt. As with the first play, “good reviews followed a lovely response from the audience” (Williams, 2002: xii), which won Roy Williams three awards. The issue of Jamaica and the life of West Indians in London would also be the main theme in *The Gift* (2000), a play that would close this phase in Williams’ theatrical career.

In 1999, *Lift Off*, was produced at the Royal Court Theatre and it can be considered Williams’ “first ‘London’ play” (Williams, 2002: xii). With this play, Williams starts to explore contemporary issues, particularly the reasons why white teenagers might want to emulate black ones. With this play, Williams won the prestigious George Devine Award. The following year, Williams presented *Clubland* (2001), one of his most personal plays, as it is based heavily on experiences about going out clubbing with his friends in his twenties. His main aim in the play was to explore the stereotypes of black people, pointing to many aspects of cultural identity, namely what it means to be black in contemporary Britain.

2002 was a landmark in Williams’ career. He became writer in residence at the Royal Court Theatre and produced one of his most popular plays, *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002) at the National Theatre (Lyttelton).^[1] The play was inspired by a situation that the author witnessed at a local pub – a group of football fans watching a game between England and Germany in the European Championships, chanting, singing and shouting racist words at the German players. This situation made the playwright write a play “not just simply about race, but about British Nationalism” (Williams, 2004: x) and about what it means to be British in the twenty-first century. This focus

1 Revivals of *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* took place in 2004 at the Cottesloe space, National Theatre and in 2006 and 2007 by Pilot Theatre and national tour.

on 'nation' represents Williams' move from being a black dramatist to being a British black playwright. As a black dramatist, the emphasis of Williams' plays was black identity as well as issues that were concerned mainly with black people. On the other hand, by focusing on 'nation', Williams explores themes that concern every socio-cultural community in Britain, questioning the role they play and the place they occupy in British society. Therefore, Williams ceases to be the playwright whose work is exclusively about the black community and embraces the task of broaching issues that concern society as a whole.

Williams had a very profitable year in 2002. Other than writing stage plays, Williams wrote for the television and for the radio. For BBC Television, he wrote *Babyfather* (2002) and *Offside* (2002), which won him a BAFTA Award for Best Schools Drama. For BBC Radio 4, Williams wrote *Tell Tale* (2002).

With *Fallout* (2003), staged at the Royal Court Theatre, Downstairs, Williams returned to the world of black youth, presenting the fallout from the murder of a young black boy, an episode reminiscent of the high-profile Damilola Taylor case.^[2]

Williams decided to take the risk in reinforcing the preconceived idea that all black men are violent. The author's aim was to present the audience with what might have been an unknown reality, particularly for mainstream audience. Even though members of mainstream audience and members of fringe audiences live in the same society, they do not often meet each other publicly and often do not have a real perception of the other's reality. Thus, it was the playwright's objective to lead one community to meet and be aware of the reality of the other in order to recreate a post-colonial vision of society. Additionally, in *Fallout*, Williams explores the world of the Metropolitan Police in the light of the McPherson report. The police force was accused of being institutionally racist after the poor handling of the high-profile Stephen Lawrence case.

Two years later, Roy Williams continued with the world of British youth. Youth morality, teenagers' wishes, preoccupations as well as gang life and a life of crime are some of the themes broached in the following plays. *Little Sweet Thing* (2005) was staged at New Wolsey, Ipswich, Nottingham Playhouse and Birmingham Rep, and *Slow Time* (2005) was commissioned

2 The Damilola Taylor case refers to the murder of ten-year-old Nigerian schoolboy, who bled to death fifteen minutes after being stabbed in the thigh by two teenagers, who were later accused of manslaughter. Considered to be a racist murder, the death of the child in North Peckham Estate shocked British society.

by the National Theatre Department of Education and has toured schools since its premiere. With this educational play, Williams' aim was to warn teenagers about life in prison and keep them away from a life of crime. Other commissions for teenage audiences include *Baby Girl* (2007) for the National Theatre and *There's Only One Wayne Matthews* (2007) for Polka's Children Theatre.

In 2007, Williams wrote his two main adaptations for the stage. *Days of Significance* (2007), staged at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon is, appropriately enough given the setting, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598/99). With this play, Williams broaches the war in Iraq and its effect on ordinary citizens. Moreover, he explores the relationships that young people maintain with each other, their values and the way they value themselves and others. *Absolute Beginners* (2007), staged at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, is an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Colin MacInnes (1959). Using the 1950s as background, Williams explores the everyday issues that teenagers face in a more colourful and increasingly multiracial, post-war Britain. In the same year, Williams wrote *Out of the Fog* (2007) for the Almeida Theatre and *Joe Guy*, staged at the New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, and Soho Theatre, London.

In 2007, Williams adapted E. R. Braithwaite's popular novel *To Sir, with Love* (1959), following the adaptation, in 2009, of *Choice of Straws* (1965) by the same author for the radio. Aside from the rural setting of *Josie's Boy* (Red Ladder, 1996) and the plays featuring Jamaican contexts – *The No Boys Cricket Club*, *Starstruck* and *The Gift* in Williams' early work – his work is definitely urban-centred and this urban setting is evident in *Local Boy* (Hampstead Theatre, 2000), *Category B* (Tricycle Theatre, 2009) and *Sucker Punch* (Royal Court, 2010).

Roy Williams, in 2008, rewrote *Fallout* as a screenplay for Channel 4, which was aired as part of the "Disarming Britain" season on urban gun and knife crime. In the same year, the playwright received further recognition with the award of an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for services to drama. The OBE award is the clear recognition of Roy Williams' move into the theatrical mainstream and the general acceptance that he is an important contributor to British culture and theatre in portraying a black perspective of the issues broached on stage. In fact, the OBE is the institutional recognition of Williams not only as a theatre figure but also as a public figure.

Williams' work can be seen within a context of an open-ended social realism, as he tries to portray British society and its dilemmas. By pre-

senting England and Britain as he perceives them, Roy Williams intends to show the reality around him and around the members of the audience without judgement, leading to reflection but not giving, however, any solution to the issues he presents on stage.

The Jamaica Set

The Jamaica set is composed by Williams' early work *The No Boys Cricket Club* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 1996), *Starstruck* (Tricycle Theatre, London, 1998) and *The Gift* (Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, 2000; Tricycle Theatre, London, 2000).

These plays deal with contemporary issues and the characters speak of the here and now of life in the United Kingdom from the perspective of a generation for whom the United Kingdom is not 'home'. In fact, the plays are mirrors of the nation as "most playwrights not only reflect and refract the reality around them; they sometimes anticipate and second guess the future" (Sierz, 2011: 1). The plays have 'national identity' as their central theme, which is part of the widespread conversation about who the people in the United Kingdom are as a nation. Theatre is a means of conveying notions of what is 'national' and what is 'alien' and it is through the way the playwrights write and rewrite these notions that the English have of themselves that they create new conceptions of Englishness for the present and future. In the words of Sierz, "British theatre made its own contribution to the continuing argument by offering highly individual and distinctive visions of Englishness and Britishness" (*Ibidem*). In the plays that compose the Jamaica set, Williams looks to the past to explain contemporary Britain. As such, it is Jamaica that represents the cultural imaginary for many characters rather than the United Kingdom.

The plays discuss themes that lead the audience to reflect upon themselves or, in some cases, lead the audience to recognize themselves either in the characters or in the situations they live through. In the Jamaica set plays, people from the black community are the most likely members in the audience as Dierdre Osborne argues:

Black writers write for black actors [...] staging issues of race, ethnicity, and colour as an explicit accompaniment to the thematic content of their work. [...] Not only are there culturally specific references in the form of names, behaviour, spirituality humour, gesture, use of patois, food, staging of the domestic environment and shared understandings of social

expectations but also inhabiting a space in a surrounding society in which both writers and their black characters are cast as a minority is registered, critiqued and displayed. (Osborne, 2006: 86)

It is through the gathering of the characteristics mentioned above that it is possible to say that there might indeed be a 'black' way of writing. On one hand, black writers generally share a writing style whose main characteristic is being critical of both established society and the black subcultures within it. However, each writer has his own individuality in searching into the theme of black British identity. In the analysis of this issue, with the presentation of black characters experiencing 'black' situations for a black audience, the dramatists use, as has already been mentioned, cultural manifestations of the black community, such as music, dance, cultural manifestations and language, among other aspects.

As far as language is concerned, the Caribbean form of English called *patois* is often used in black theatre plays. With the first generation of African Caribbean migrants, different varieties of Caribbean Creoles, including French-related Creoles, were introduced in Britain. Contrary to expectations, despite early linguistic assimilation and integration policies, these Creoles have survived. Jamaican Creole in particular, colloquially referred to as 'Creole' or 'Patois', has become the dominant Creole spoken within the British African Caribbean community, since about 60 per cent of African Caribbean migrants were Jamaican. Over the years Jamaican Creole, influenced by local forms of English, has changed and a distinct British Jamaican Creole, with minor regional differences, has emerged. The continued use of Creole in Britain has to be seen against the background of racism and discrimination in British society. For the second and third generation of African Caribbean, Creole, in particular Jamaican Creole, has become a symbol of a common black identity forged by a shared experience of racial discrimination. This common identity provides African Caribbean of different Caribbean origins and backgrounds with a common ground for political and cultural struggle against racism and for equality. Creole is also used as a form of establishing a particular identity, whose language is its main form to represent the cultural values of the West Indian in Britain. As language transmits common values, attitudes, beliefs and views of the world, it is an important part of identity, and a person's linguistic choice thus reflects an important part of their identity. Therefore, Jamaican-based Creole has become a significant symbol of black identity and resistance to assimilation, particularly for the younger generation of British African Caribbean.

In the particular case of the plays that form the Jamaican set, it is important to discuss themes that are transversal to all the plays, such as identity, constructing the self, a sense of belonging, memory and family.

In these plays, the theme of identity is represented by the main female characters, who have come to a point in their lives when all they have achieved is questioned by others and by themselves. The plays have specific cultural references in the most various forms – language^[3], behaviour^[4], social understanding, among others. There is the legacy of immigration and diasporic cultural forms that deeply influence contemporary black British writing and thus the form in which characters present their feelings and their attitudes towards Jamaica and Britain. In fact, in these plays by Roy Williams, Jamaica is regarded with nostalgia whereas Britain represents the frustration of the unfulfilled expectations. The diaspora now includes the different generations of indigenous black Britons and the plays in the Jamaica set show the different perspectives that the different female characters have on Britishness.

The fragmentation of the identities of the women in the plays is the result of their experiences of displacement and the nostalgia towards a past and the fact that they left the place where they were born for Britain. Thus diaspora plays an important role in the formation of fragmented identities. The female characters in the plays in Jamaica set, mainly Heather and Abi, are divided between what they are in Britain and their idea of what they would become there and what they were in Jamaica and their wish to return to the past and meet themselves and what they were in the place where they were born. On the other hand, Hope is divided between the woman that remained in Kingston and the woman she dreamed of becoming in Britain. The place where these characters chose to live, allied to racism, plays an important role in the shaping of their identity. They are not happy in either place, dreaming of the place where they are not. Therefore, a sense of belonging and identity are intimately connected and the characters, through their experiences, sense that they belong somewhere other than the place they are, which contributes to their fragmented identity.

3 In the Jamaica set there are characters that do use patois in a more evident way than the other characters as their form of language, as it is the case of Gravel and Hope in *Starstruck* and Bernice and Clarkey in *The Gift*.

4 The two main female characters, Abi and Masie, in *The No Boys Cricket Club*, play cricket in Kingston, a source of pride and collectivity. When they arrive in the United Kingdom they stop playing cricket because it becomes a sign of racist oppression.

Fantasy is of the utmost importance in the creation of identity because the female characters are unable to cope with the reality of displacement and racism. Therefore, they resort to fantasy to get the strength they need to live in the present with all the problems it brings them. However, the use of fantasy to build identity may lead to a false sense of security and strength which can contribute to a temporary sense of complete identity. These characters' identity may collapse at the sight of any grievance they may not be able to cope with and that glimpse of structured identity will disappear. To sum up, these identities are unstable and may not be able to face the difficulties of life, especially in the handling of the issues that are inherent to the fact of being immigrants in the United Kingdom.

As far as the issue of family is concerned, Roy Williams, through the cases of pregnancy in these three plays, intends to lead the audience to reflect on an important social issue in today's Britain: teenage pregnancy. In recent years, this has become a concern for British society and the British Government and it is a particular concern in the black community because of fathers abandoning their children and the fact that statistics show that "rates of teenage motherhood are significantly higher among mothers of 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean', 'Other Black' and 'Black Caribbean' ethnicity" (see DERA, 2006).

Roy Williams leads the audience to reflect on the causes and the consequences of getting pregnant during adolescence. Not discussing the blessing that a baby may be for a person, the author chose to show instead the immediate consequences of teenage pregnancy so that the discussion could be broadened, and the audience could seriously consider this issue. However, it is important to note that the scenario that Williams presents on this issue differs from the behaviour of female characters in the play, who seem quite happy with their babies. This happens because the author intended to give the perspective of an adult on the matter that generally is different from the perspective of the teenage mother, who probably has difficulty in having a wider perspective of what it means to be a mother at such a young age. By portraying reality, the dramatist intends to present a kind of documentary drama, not judging the issue, rather stating that this is what is happening in the world around audience members.

Another family theme broached in *The No Boys Cricket Club* is domestic violence. These two different cases of domestic abuse are the key for a more thorough reflection on a problem that has always existed independently of social evolution and the increase of knowledge. Following the actions of the countless organizations that fight against this familiar and

social dysfunction, Roy Williams alerts the audience to consider this issue so that it does not continue. The audience's reaction to these moments in this play shows that people become very upset and disturbed when they are faced with violence. However, all people are aware that domestic violence does exist and that is a very relevant social issue. What they are not used to is seeing it on stage. The proximity between actors and audience makes the situation a more personal one. This explains the nervous reaction from the people in the audience when the actor playing Michael hits his mother. It is by creating bonds with the characters and the situations represented on stage that audience members can be more sensitized to this issue. The situations shown in a play can become more personal through the establishment of personal connections rather than government campaigns that may not be as effective as a play because they frequently are regarded as impersonal. Moreover, Stratford East is quite an intimate theatre due to the small number of seats, which provides the connection between the actors and the audience.

In these plays, the audience is thus a key factor in the creation of meaning. Sierz (2011) argues that the meaning of a play lies in the experience of the audience. Different audiences have different reactions to the plays presented. A predominantly black audience has a different reaction to that of a predominantly white audience; a younger audience might feel differently to an older one; white different to black, Asian different to white. Different audience members experience the same plays in different ways and it is possible to observe, in some cases, different reactions to the same play, according to the audience members.

Black drama exposes mainstream (predominantly white) theatre-goers to aspects of black British cultural input that is as indigenous to contemporary British cultural identity as that provided by white playwrights. It provides Black audiences with authentically rendered cultural representations which have not as yet been able to develop a flourishing continuum in Britain's cultural psyche. (Osborne, 2006: 84)

White audience are not continuously exposed to black British drama which leads to the continuous presence of preconceived ideas about black people in Britain's cultural psyche. Few are the cases of black British playwrights presenting their work in mainstream theatres as well as theatres that accept alternative black theatre work and, in some cases, white audiences are reticent about the themes presented in black plays.

Therefore, the meaning of the three plays that form the Jamaican set would be different, depending on the audience members. A predominantly West Indian audience is more likely to establish a bond to the plays rather than a white or Asian audience, but it does not invalidate the case that audiences other than black can also create bonds to what is presented on stage. The West Indian audience members are more likely to recognize themselves in the issues broached, according to their own experiences or through the experiences of someone they know; they will be able to see their problems and their questions reflected in the characters and in their stories. Therefore, many people from the black community end up seeing the productions of black companies because they reflect their experiences, or the experiences of people they know.

As an example, there is the case of the audience reaction to the way the *The No Boys Cricket Club* was staged. In order to stage the juxtaposed worlds of London and Jamaica, the designer, Rosa Maggiora, created two scenarios that changed according to the setting in the play, which caused a great impact on the audience.

[...] you could hear gasps from the audience when the stage changed for the first time from contemporary, grey London to the magical beach in Jamaica. As one audience member told the designer, 'Thank you, you took me back home!' (Rubasingham, 2002: xvi)

The plays in Jamaica set show a world that is immediately recognizable not only to the black audience, who create bonds of recognition, but also to any other audience because the themes broached in the plays are not exclusive to the black community. However, for the black community there would be extra layers of meaning not available to white audiences. Williams explores themes that are social concerns for all races and all social classes, but from the perspective of the black community.

Constructions of Britishness

After the plays about Jamaica, Roy Williams turned his attention to the reality that surrounded him, dealing with the issues of the present rather than those of the past.

The present issues concern the experiences of second and third generation immigrants, the children of first generation immigrants. Initially encouraged to go to England as part of the post-war reconstruction and

economic expansion, the presence of these migrants began to question what being British meant, as Gabriele Griffin suggests:

Their arrival into Britain shattered the presumed dichotomy between Britain and its colonial 'others', creating the beginning of a transformation of what 'being British' means, a shift encoded, inter alia, in the various successive immigration and race relations acts designed to regulate the collapse between 'margins' and 'centre' as a consequence of migration. (Griffin, 2003: 8)

The collapse between margins and centre may not be very visible in the first generation of immigrants because these people tended to remain within their own communities, being, on one hand, marginalized by the dominant white society and, on the other, retaining their own marginalization because they did not feel part of the culture and the society that received them. However, this situation was not maintained by the later generations of immigrants because, born in Britain, they had a different experience of the need to socialize and blend in at all social levels. Therefore, the second and the third generations of immigrants did not feel themselves to be marginal because they were part of British society more permanently. Their presence in Britain influenced British society in the same way as they were influenced by the people to whom they related. People are highly influenced by the cultures they live in, independently of their origins. A black person can be influenced by an Asian person or a white British person and vice-versa. They cross cultural and identity barriers and influence each other and the idea of margin and centre blend. However, the asymmetries of power on the basis of race are not removed so easily.

In this line, the work of Williams focuses on the issues of identity and what being British means in the more recent plays. However, he is still specifically concerned with black British experience even if he includes white characters in his plays.

An example of what has been exposed above is Williams' play *Lift Off* (1999), which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, on 19 February 1999, which was inspired by London teenagers. This play discusses what it means to be 'black' and the implications inherent to this construction, such as machismo, language, strength, verbal and physical aggressiveness, and sexual potency. It also looks at the meaning of friendship and identity in a racially-divided urban setting. As Osborne points out:

Typical Williams motifs converge in this play: urban inter-racial relationships between young people, racism and its effects upon them; the fluidity of possible cultural affinities relational to socio-racial identities; young people's traumatizing by peers; adult inadequacy to sustain emotionally, support or encourage youth into maturity, and the intense compensatory (but insufficient) bonds they form with each other. (Osborne 2011: 491)

The ethnicity of the characters of the play is never specified explicitly except with Rich who is detailed as "a young black schoolboy" (Williams, 2002: 163). However, the reader can infer the other characters' ethnic background throughout the play, "opening to scrutiny just what informs these socio-cultural categories of blackness and whiteness" (Osborne, 2011: 491). This scrutiny can lead to the questioning among spectators of pre-conceived ideas of what it means to be black or white nowadays. Ethnic background is 'performed' in the play through characteristics such as behaviour, language, psychological characteristics as well as through the arguments and points of view that they defend. Therefore, it is through Mal, Tone and Rich and the relationship they maintain that Roy Williams explores what it means to be black and issues related to black identity. Mal is the "cool black guy on the estate" (Rubasingham, 2002: xx) and Tone wishes to be like him, copying Mal's characteristics to make him the most popular boy in the neighbourhood. He talks and dresses 'black'. The authors Barry and Williams note the phenomenon whereby "white boys, in particular, are starting to emulate their black peers, responding to a cultural formation wherein machismo, strength, and sexual potency are all being aligned to the signifier 'black'" (Barry & Boles, 2006: 299).

The emulation expressed above shows the desperation of Tone to be like Mal in order to cover his own absence of identity as a young white man. Here, identity definition is intimately connected to cultural stereotypes related to racialized masculine characteristics. Tone ventriloquizes black street talk and engages in cultural cross-dressing in order to reproduce Mal's hyper-sexualized version of black masculinity. Black identity is also identified with a certain attitude to sexual behaviour, as if sex can establish position among peers.

In order to show Mal's interior struggle with his own identity and the silent fight between all the male characters in the definition of their identity, the play was performed on a raised concrete stage "that resembled a boxing-ring, as several reviewers pointed out, providing a fitting space for the dissection of the aggression and competitiveness of the male community that

Williams presents” (Barry & Boles, 2006: 301). Indhu Rubasingham, the director of the play, used the stage to illustrate the issues raised by the play and the interaction between those characters. Once again, the staging plays as a fundamental part in the creation of meaning. It is rather appropriate that the stage resembled a boxing-ring because the different characters do fight each other in the construction of their identity, and its preservation, as well as in the pressure they put on the others to fulfil the brand of identity they have conceived for them.

In the play, there is an interesting triangle (Mal, Tone, Rich) which explores the ways in which both black and white have become detached from skin colour and coded as forms of behaviour which permit cross-racial affiliations. Yet it also explores the ways in which it may be possible for white young men to ‘pass’ as black men; it is less possible for a black man to ‘pass’ as a white man because of institutionalized racism. Therefore, the possibilities of cross-cultural affiliations are conditioned by the material practices of racism.

The State of the Nation

As Roy Williams continues his career, he becomes more concerned with the issues and the events that take place around him in his own time, encouraging a development in his writing style towards a particular form of social realistic drama. The critic Charles Spencer, for instance, indicated “the proximity of Williams’s work to a new kind of theatre, called ‘verbatim theatre’ or ‘docu-drama’, an art-form with a particular relationship to current events” (Spencer *apud* Barry & Boles, 2006: 311).

Although Williams does not use material from real transcripts or interviews, the main characteristic of verbatim drama, the proximity between real life and drama has meant that his theatre has a particular social relevance. From *Fallout* (2003) onwards, he treats issues that concern both the white and the black community and that are indeed the focus of government policy as reported daily in all type of news media, such as the ‘Damilola Case’ broached in *Fallout* (2003) or football violence as presented in *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002).

The playwright balances the brutality and stylized violence of in-yer-face theatre, as seen in the murder of Kwane by a group of teenagers on stage in *Fallout* and the stabbing of Mark by a teenager at the end of the play in *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, with the social complexity and emotive

power of documentary drama present in other Williams plays. However, Williams' drama focuses more on drama than documentary because he does not simplify the topical issues with stereotyped characterizations or well-ordered dramatic resolutions.

By broaching current themes that concern all sectors of society, Williams's later plays echo the shifts and changes in English society in such a way that they can be seen as contemporary examples of the 'state of the nation' play⁵, in other words a form of large-scale drama that "has always been involved in the project of rewriting our ideas about national identity" (Sierz, 2011: 16). According to Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt (2011), the state of the nation play is a model of political theatre developed in the 1970's in plays by authors such as David Edgar, Howard Brenton and David Hare. The plays by these authors shared some characteristics as they were "large-scale plays, with a panoramic range of public settings, employing epic time-spans and usually performed in large theatres, preferably theatres with a national profile" (Reinelt & Hewitt, 2011: 11). The main aspects of the state of the nation plays in the 1970's were the hostility towards domestic and familial settings as well as the determination to set the plot in the present-day England, so that it would be possible to discuss the issues that had made England what it was. Furthermore, a state-of-the-nation play "can be one that deals with the condition of the nation rather than, more narrowly, the relation of the nation to the formal institutional forms of its governance through the state" (*Idem*, 13). It is by discussing the social problems of the nation that dramatists express their view of the state of the nation rather than merely examining governance issues.

In the past, the state-of-the-nation play had largely reflected the anxieties of white, middle-class writers. However, with the emergence of a new generation of black and Asian writers, that changed, as drama became clearly alert to the ethnic diversity of British pluralistic, multicultural diversity. With all the changes that have been taking place during the last few years of the new millennium, it is possible to widen notions of the state of the nation play to stage the new conjecture or interrogate the new uncertainty of the nation.

New writing deals with contemporary concerns and aims to convey the author's perspective on the state of the nation. In the article "A Tyrant for all time", where David Greig is critical of the tendencies of the new writing, he outlines the characteristics of this new typically English new genre:

5 As used by Aleks Sierz about New Writing in "Rewriting the Nation – British Theatre Today" (2011).

This English realism, this “new writing” genre which has so thrived in subsidised spaces over the past 40 years, attempts, as one of our leading playwrights put it, to “show the nation to itself”. It seeks out and exposes issues for the public gaze. It voices “debates” rather like columnists in the broadsheets. Its practitioners are praised for their “ear” for dialogue as though they were tape recorders or archivists recording the funny way people talk in particular sections of society and editing it into a plausibly illustrative story. English realism prides itself on having no “style” or “aesthetic” that might get in the way of the truth. It works with a kind of shorthand naturalism which says, “this is basically the way I see it”. Distrustful of metaphor, it is a theatre founded on mimicry. In English realism, the real world is brought in to the theatre and plonked on the stage like a familiar old sofa. (Greig, 2003)

Aiming to bring to public the debate of issues that characterize the nation in the present, Roy Williams, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, wrote two plays that began to move away from the worries and the pressures of young British teenagers and the theme of black cultural identity and broach the issues that are contemporary to him and were wider concerns of British society, whether white or black, young or old. His plays intended to portray British reality as he perceived it, not disguising that reality with theatre aesthetics. It is by presenting reality in this way that these plays are excellent examples of contemporary social realism.

Rewriting the Present

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Roy Williams embraced the task of writing “contemporary youth morality” (Osborne, 2011: 501) and two plays were written – *Days of Significance* (2007) and *Absolute Beginners* (2007). Broaching several themes, such as war, drugs, racism, battle of the sexes, among many others, these plays aim to focus on the dilemmas and the challenges that teenagers and young adults face, especially in times such as these in which we are living. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century brought times of great change, leaving people struggling to cope with the speed and extent of such changes.

In order to deal with these current issues, Williams felt confident enough to adapt a canonical play^[6] and a very well-known novel to the

6 Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598/99).

author's generation^[7] and rewrote them, adapting their structures and to current times. Thus, in 2007, two of Williams' works were greatly inspired by two very well-known works by the British audience.

In 2004, The Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned Williams to write a play inspired by a Shakespeare text and rather than choosing the obvious texts about the war to make a contemporary point, the playwright chose *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598/99). The author took this play because "its returning soldiers, battle of sexes, girls and boys in packs resonated" (Williams, 2007: v) in him as he wanted to write something about the war in Iraq. From this Shakespeare play, Roy Williams wrote *Days of Significance* (2007).

David Farr also asked Williams to adapt Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* (1959), a task that the playwright embraced because "the energy of Colin MacInnes' writing is just spectacular" (Williams, 2007: iv). However, the fact that the original text is a novel will lead to the necessary reduction of the plot to its essential so that the attention of the spectator is not lost during the performance. Moreover, the description will be substituted by gesture, tone of voice and the visual, among other features. Williams points out that he chose *Absolute Beginners* to give rise to the stage play *Absolute Beginners* (2007) for the following reason:

MacInnes was so ahead of his time, in terms of what he was saying about the exploitation of those young people living in the fifties, who first coined the term 'teenagers', and about Britain emerging from the post-war years to a more colourful and, for the first time multicultural, nation.

In his *Introduction to Plays 3* (2008), Williams declared that adapting texts was a new way of working and that it was not easier than writing a completely original work. By the time the opportunity of writing adaptations of the canon came in Williams' career, the playwright was considered to be one of the most promising black playwrights in the British theatre landscape so much that, in 2002, he became a Writer in Residence at the prestigious Royal Court Theatre, reaching mainstream theatres and audiences.

Williams has achieved and sustained mainstream visibility and, from the mid-1990s, he has produced plays continuously, "consolidating his place in the canon of British theatre history" (Osborne, 2011: 487). Roy Williams' consolidation within the theatre landscape allowed him a posi-

⁷ Colin MacInnes' *Absolute Beginners* (1959). The novel is well-known to people of Williams' generation but not so much to younger people.

tion where adaptation is regarded as admissible and even a sign of creativity and talent rather than being derivative or secondary to the 'original' as well as the recognition of his capacity to select other texts and give them another form and adapt them to current times.

On the other hand, the choice of the works for adaptation indicated above is due to the fact that the themes broached in these well-known works were as contemporary at the time of their writing as they are nowadays, such as the problems that teenagers face in a multicultural and multi-racial Britain, in the case of *Absolute Beginners*, or the problem of war and the battle of sexes, in *Days of Significance*.

The adaptations raise the issue of intertextuality and influence of works from the past in today's literary landscape as well as the role of the author in literary production and authorship.

According to Linda Hutcheon (2006), there is an intimate relationship between the adapted work with other work or works. However, this does not mean that the adapted work cannot be regarded as "autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such" (Hutcheon, 2006: 6).

As a "formal entity or product" (*Idem*, 7), an adaptation involves shifts of medium or genre^[8] or a change of frame and thus context.^[9] Moreover, the process of adaptation is always a "process of creation" (*Idem*, 8) because it always "involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" (*Ibidem*). As a "process of reception" (*Ibidem*), an adaptation is a form of intertextuality because the experience of adaptation often resonates other works.

In short, an adaptation is "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works; a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation / salvaging; an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (*Ibidem*). Therefore, an adaptation is second to another work without being secondary, as it is a creative process of another author who aims to repeat the story at the same time that he changes it.

Adapting a work may also be "one way to gain respectability or increase cultural capital" (*Idem*, 91). Most of the stage adaptations have an educational pretention today as "there is now a secondary educational industry devoted to helping students and teachers 'make the most' of the adaptations" (*Idem*, 92). In this sense, it is created educational material, such as workshop material or lesson plans and websites, which are developed to have an educational aim.

8 As it is the case of Williams' adaptation of the novel *Absolute Beginners* (1959) written by Collin MacInnes into a stage play.

9 It is the case of the adaptation that Williams does of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Adapters also have personal reasons to make an adaptation or to choose a certain work to adapt, choosing the medium they believe is the best. In their process of adaptation, the adapters interpret the work and, in doing so, they take a position on it. Therefore, adaptations are tributes to the original work or its author, as well as it can “be used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique” (*Idem*, 94). Post-colonial dramatists have used adaptations to express their political and social positions, as it is the case of both of Williams’ adaptations, as raises important issues that concern current politics and society, such as the war, the dilemmas that young people face, among others.

When a text is adapted, the adaptor has to bear in mind the characteristics of the audience and the expectations viewers may have, either because they have read the text they will see adapted, or due to what they may hope to see. Taking into account that audiences react in different ways to different media, adaptations have to be made considering the need to appeal to the viewers’ sense of repetition and difference and familiarity and novelty.

In this way, there is a need to distinguish between knowing and unknowing audiences. The former, usually, are very reticent in relation to adaptations because they have expectations about the plot, characters, scenery, among other features. Therefore, when faced with an adaptation the viewer / spectator expects to see what he has imagined as a reader. On the other hand, the unknowing audiences, as they do not know the text, look on the adaptation as any other work, enjoying what they are given without any kind of expectations or demands. Nonetheless, as well as reading influencing the appreciation of the adaptation by the viewer/spectator (due to the use of imagination on the act of reading), the adaptation will influence the reading of the text because, when reading, the imagination will be conditioned by the images from the adaptation – film, stage, television or interactive.

Different adaptations will create different reactions in audiences. In films and in stage performances, audiences have different perspectives. In films, the audience is only shown the director’s view and just what (s)he wants to show. In stage performances, the viewer has the possibility to look at what (s)he wants to see and to connect elements more autonomously. So, stage performances allow further involvement of the audience and its imagination. In interaction, there is a deep engagement between the body and the computer, being the latest as the extension of the body, involving the audience in what they are presented with.

Therefore, the audience will create their own meaning from Williams' adapted plays, not only because they will find a resonance of the original texts of the plays¹⁰ but because they will also have their own interpretation of the issues broached in the play through Williams' point of view. It is important to note that Williams does not intend to present the characters by judging them from the start; he does not use the characters as a mouth-piece of his own views. It is through the experiences of the members of the audience that meanings will be created, transforming the audience into co-authors of the plays. Here, as the plays broach current issues that concern all sectors of society that will make spectators reflect upon and possibly react. The playwright as a member of the black community brings a different perspective to mainstream theatre, which can contribute to this role of theatre as a mechanism to introduce and to debate social problems.

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¹⁰ The audience members may not find resonance of the original text as it is not likely that all spectators have read the original texts by Shakespeare and MacInnes. However, spectators may find resonance in the film adaptations that were made of the two works.

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