

Gabriel Gbadamosi on

Representation and Diversity



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I was born by a river

I GREW UP IN LONDON, WITHIN THE SOUND OF BIG BEN, A SHORT WALK TO THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT. IT WAS A LIVELY, CROWDED PLACE OF POOR, LARGELY IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AND BOMB-DAMAGED HOUSES. OUR FIRST PLAYGROUNDS WERE BOMBSITES. WE WERE LIVING ON THE RUINS OF A CITY OUR PARENTS CAME TO REBUILD. WE THOUGHT EVERYONE WAS LIKE US – LISTENING TO THE SOUND OF BIG BEN ON THE 10 O’CLOCK NEWS AND THEN, SLIGHTLY LATER, AND FAINTER, THE SOUND COMING ACROSS THE RIVER TO TELL US IT WAS TIME FOR BED.

We didn’t have Trevor MacDonald in those days, we had Reginald Bosanquet. (1) Black people were absent from the box which represented a world just to one side of the real world of people like us – the Irish, Nigerian, English, Indian, Maltese, Jamaican people we lived with. In fact, families like mine seemed to be in the majority at our local school because there were six children in our family and of the Akinyeles, also Irish-Nigerian but from Dublin rather than Limerick, there were 10. I’ve never been able to quite shake that idea of being in the majority. Foreigners were the middle class people we occasionally came into contact with at school or the hospital. But then our slum was cleared and we were scattered – to beside the Oval cricket ground. Summers in the 70s were interspersed with the roar of crowds when another wicket fell to the West Indies.

Then the trouble began. I went to the local grammar school and suddenly everyone was white. Black and white for me had been the same as mum and dad. Now they were being prised apart. By the time I went to University – Cambridge, where I never met another Black British person – I knew I was in trouble. I’d go back to Brixton and the Oval, and realise there were worlds I had to negotiate that didn’t meet, and people divided from each other I wouldn’t do without. After a year teaching English in North Africa, where suddenly everyone looked like me but no one saw things the way I did, I was persuaded by the injustice I couldn’t fight that I would have to go back to my own society to find a voice.

I decided to write for the fledgling Black theatre scene which at that time was mainly focused on people from the

Caribbean, only to find that our concerns were not the same. My efforts were to make a theatre that reflected the society I knew, as opposed to a concern to assert a Black identity and secure an opportunity to work that was, in my view, insufficiently critical of exclusion from mainstream theatre and not at all critical of the funding policies that subsidised and curated it. By the end of the 1980s, the Arts Council of England considered that its experiment with Black theatre had failed to produce work of quality and most of those theatres were cut. From now on, people would have to find their way into the mainstream of British theatre with the help of such strategies as integrated, or colour-blind, casting. I left the country to work in Europe and Africa, convinced that a stagnant ghetto had been created and culled by a policy that had failed to grasp the reality of our diversity. The Eclipse report in 2002 revealed a return to the effective disappearance of Black people from the British stage, aside from the occasional spear-carrier, minstrel show or star news reader. We still do not have a theatre that reflects the society we live in. That is as poor as I think theatre gets.

Now let's look at this from another angle. Who cares? Plays get written. Theatres get filled. The arts go on. Society doesn't fall apart. So what's the problem? In Britain we no longer face the spectre of Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' flowing from the social unrest sparked by post-war immigration. Previously immigrant populations – in Brixton, Bradford, Toxteth, Handsworth, anywhere – are

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now indigenous. And our native differences are as normal as those of the Ulster Scots, the Geordies and the Welsh. We are now a Balkanised nation, tolerant of difference. But that don't mean we get along when difference is tested. Take the example of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play, *Behzti* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 2004. There were some early negotiations between the theatre and the Sikh community about its depiction of sexual abuse in a religious space, but in the end the theatre was stormed by a mob that should have been an audience for the play. The values of art and religious identity found no common space. What went wrong?

You could say it's a shame people don't know the difference between a gurdwara, or Sikh holy place, and a theatre, but I think you'd be missing the point. We don't know it ourselves. We take a fundamentally mercantilist approach to funding, generating and marketing the arts to sectional interests. You're Sikhs, here's your play. We know nothing about you, and tomorrow is gay or Black or rural or OAPs. We have failed to grasp the reality of our diversity. We still make art in boxes, know nothing about each other, and the movement within our society escapes us.

Until we recognise it as a threat. The 'war on terror' which currently concentrates minds on our diversity – while turning the critical gaze of audiences into a form of surveillance – proposes a potential enemy-within that neatly dove-tails with the ending of the war on Irish terrorism. The Irish haven't gone away, but they have

disappeared off the radar. And perhaps that's the best we can hope for: to melt away unobserved into our real lives, no longer held as a troubling minority, out of that spotlight of the Troubles into which I woke as a teenager with the arrest of relatives and the scattering of cousins. It's worth reflecting that the same thing happened to Shakespeare's cousins, the Ardens, as part of the anti-Catholic terror that swept Elizabethan England. But then that was a society that made a theatre people still talk about.

Footnote: Sir Trevor MacDonald was the first black newsreader on ITN in Britain

Gabriel Gbadamosi is a poet, playwright & novelist. His novel, Vauxhall, won the 2011 Tibor Jones Pageturner Prize. (A version of this essay appeared in 'Navigating Difference' Arts Council England)



Image Egress:
Marie Brett and Kevin O'Shanahan

IN SHORT... WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO:

In the last couple of months Create:

Produced two more exciting events as part of The Prosperity Project with Jesse Jones, and new associate artists Anna Furse, theatre maker; actor Niamh McCann and opera singer Janyce Condon; Commissioned playwright Gabriel Gbadamosi to write on cultural diversity for Create News; got on the final shortlist for the Sky Arts Ignition Fund; welcomed Stephanie Dickenson, Ciaran Moore and Louise O'Reilly to Create's board – collectively they have expertise in communications, fundraising, legal issues and marketing; managed the Second Round of the Artist in the Community Scheme for 2013; worked with Cork Midsummer, Visual Arts Ireland and Dublin Dance Festival, programming workshops and artist talks on different types of artistic collaboration; gave information sessions in South County Dublin and Galway on The Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme Bursary Award: Arts & Cultural Diversity; programmed Art in the Built Environment think tank.

Per Cent for Art Commissions

In line with Create's remit to create opportunities in collaborative arts and to encourage public art with a participatory aspect, Create is delighted to be working with the Office of Public Works on a series of commission opportunities with Dublin City Council, Meath County Council and Fingal County Council. Create is going to be involved with a number of other in-development commissions. Watch this space.

New Benefits with Membership of Create

Members can now avail of reduced cost insurance; apply for a health plan from HSF; a discount on health insurance from Aviva; a range of discounts at arts venues around the country; access to short term 'hot desks' in the Create office at Curved Street.

Full details at www.create-ireland.ie



create national development
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WELCOME TO CREATE NEWS

This is the fifteenth edition of Create News. Create News is normally published twice yearly in May and October and with one extra digital edition.

It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer and offers the latest information on Create events and services.

If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. You will automatically receive copies unless you ask us to remove your details from the list. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

Create, 2 Curved Street, Dublin 2. www.create-ireland.ie



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SAVE THE DATE

Create Networking Day for Collaborative Arts

A day of networking & sharing

When: Thursday 5th December

Where: Filmbase, 2 Curved Street, Temple Bar, Dublin 2

Time: 10.00 – 18.00 **Cost:** 12 euro (lunch included)

NB: For Create members the event is free of charge

Create programmes activities and events to increase the profile of collaborative arts across all art-forms, encouraging new critical, artistic formations that bring to the fore modes of collective and collaborative production. Join us on 5 December for a National Networking event to meet other artists in the collaborative arts sector; to hear about the inspiring work of our guest artists including Claire Feeley (Situations) and Dr. Susanne Bosch (Artist /Curator) discussing curator-artist relationships. There will be a session on risk and experimentation featuring Rachel Anderson from Artangel and we will discuss archiving collaborative practice with Eve Olney.

Over the course of the day attendees will have the opportunity to connect with their peers, interact with commissioners, receive practical information and be inspired by dynamic and vibrant collaborative arts projects created here and elsewhere.

The day has been curated by the artist Michelle Browne in collaboration with the team at Create and focuses on both practical and conceptual supports for artists working collaboratively. For full details visit create-ireland.ie

WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

Artists across artform working in the context of participatory or socially engaged practice; arts organisations and festivals who programme socially engaged work; curators; outreach officers, cultural institutions; arts educators; community organisations.

Bookings via www.create-ireland.ie or Jane O'Rourke, 01-4736600.

This event is supported by the European Cultural Contact Point.

Art + Civil Society Lecture Series MA SPACE Limerick

Create has curated a series of talks for MA SPACE (Social Practice And the Creative Environment) at Limerick School of Art & Design that challenge and provoke the students. The guest lecturers are drawn from a broad spectrum of disciplines with different areas of expertise in civil society organisations and social policy. These series of 10 talks take place in Limerick from October to December, for a student and general public audience. Featured speakers include: Dr. Pauline Conroy; Declan Redmond, UCD; Robin Hanan, European Anti Poverty Network; Tonie Walsh, the Irish Queer Archive; Piaras Mac Éinrí, University College Cork; Edia Connole and Scott Wilson actionist art project MOUTH; Niamh McCann actor/voice coach; Rachel McAree, Irish Architecture Foundation. Dates for all talks are on Create website.

Artist in the Community Scheme Second Round 2013 Research and Development Award

Create manages the Artist in the Community Scheme on behalf of the Arts Council

There were sixteen awards in the area of research and development in the Second Round, four with mentoring.

(Full listing on Create website)

Project Realisation Community; Artist; Project; Context; Artform; Location

Long Term

COPE Foundation; Tara Brandel & Mary Nugent; West Cork Inclusive Dance Project; disability; dance; Co Cork

Coderdojo Drogheda & Droichead Arts Centre; Vivienne Byrne & Stephen Howell; The Real and Imaginative World; community of place; visual arts; Louth

Cork Chamber Choir; Ian Wilson; Singing the Space; community of interest; music; Cork

Kildare Family Resource Centre; Cathy O'Kennedy; Rituals of Experience; community of interest; dance; Kildare

High Rock Swimmers; Vanessa Daws; High Rock; community of interest; visual arts; Dublin

The Lantern Centre; Maud Hendricks & Sarah Jane Scaife; Between Land and Water; cultural diversity; theatre; Dublin

Panel: Declan Mallon, theatremaker; Jessica Fuller, arts management consultant & creative producer; Liz Burns, Fire Station Arts Studios & visual arts curator.

Observers: Sheila Gorman, Officer, Arts Participation, Arts Council; Emmett Scanlon, Architecture Adviser at Arts Council.

Mobile Homestead, Mike Kelley, 2012
Commissioned by Artangel in association with Mike Kelley
Foundation for the Arts, MOCAD & the LUMA Foundation.

