

Barnaby King

Landscapes of Fact and Fiction: Asian Theatre Arts in Britain

In the first of two essays which use academic discourses of cultural exchange to examine the intra-cultural situation in contemporary British society, Barnaby King analyzes the relationship between Black arts and mainstream arts on both a professional and community level, focusing on particular examples of practice in the Leeds and Kirklees region in which he lives and works. This first essay looks specifically at the Asian situation, reviewing the history of Arts Council policy on ethnic minority arts, and analyzing how this has shaped – and is reflected in – current practice. In the context of professional theatre, he uses the examples of the Tara and Tamasha companies, then explores the work of CHOL Theatre in Huddersfield as exemplifying multi-cultural work in the community. He also looks at the provision made by Yorkshire and Humberside Arts for the cultural needs of their Asian populations. In the second essay, to appear in NTQ62, he will be taking a similar approach towards African–Caribbean theatre in Britain. Barnaby King is a theatre practitioner based in Leeds, who completed his postgraduate studies at the University of Leeds Workshop Theatre in 1998. He is now working with theatre companies and small-scale venues – currently the Blah Blah Blah company and the Studio Theatre at Leeds Metropolitan University – to develop community participation in theatre and drama-based activities.

It can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of fact.¹

THE ARTS COUNCIL'S consultative 'Green Paper', *The Landscape of Fact: Towards a Policy for Cultural Diversity for the English Funding System*, is the most recent incarnation of a very slow development in attitudes towards the provision of arts for ethnic minority groups. Since the devolution of power to the Regional Arts Associations, Arts Council policy no longer directly controls practice, but in two important ways it retains a strong influence: first in that it expresses government attitudes, which the Regional Arts Boards may feel obliged to respond to; and secondly because it still makes broad funding decisions, which are inherently prejudiced in favour of the mainstream arts sector.

The creation of the Arts Council after the war sprang from a sincere desire to 'improve' people by taking culture to them. This culture, packaged and delivered by the state to the people, was essentially identified with the tradition of European high art, which

was hierarchically positioned above what might be called 'folk' art – this including all community-based creative activities. The Council's attitudes have developed since those days, but they are still saturated in this paternalistic and imperialist ideology. The arrival of completely *other* traditions of art along with immigrant communities from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, posed a deep threat to the Eurocentric tradition of art: they could not easily be incorporated into the mainstream because they derived from completely different aesthetics. The Arts Council's solution was to encourage the concept of 'ethnic arts'.

A report of 1976, entitled *The Arts Britain Ignores*, demanded support for what was then termed 'ethnic minorities' communities' arts', and suggested the structures needed to give such support. As a result of this, the MAAS (Minorities' Arts Advisory Service) was formed, to give advice and training to arts organizations. But a further survey, in 1980, showed that only 0.5 per cent of funding money was being spent on 'ethnic arts', and an 'Ethnic Minority Arts Action Plan' was

consequently initiated, which aimed in two years to commit four per cent of Arts Council expenditure to the sector.² The target was not reached, mainly due to the lack of a strategic plan for the investment of the money.

The next major policy initiative came in 1989 with a monitoring committee report, *Towards Cultural Diversity*. This was reinforced in 1993 by the publication of *A Creative Future*, which highlighted the need for Black theatre companies to be regularly funded; showed how Black audiences were limited due to perceived discrimination; and how Eurocentric definitions of performance inevitably excluded Black performers.

False Homogeneity – Fallible Diversity

The latest document, *The Landscape of Fact*, is the culmination of much of this work. It recognizes that the level of investment up to now has had little impact, and tries to establish the causes of inequality in the arts sector. It recommends a four-point strategy for development: *access*, to give equal opportunities to Black people to participate in arts activities; *resources*, to give effective, targeted funding; *training*, including job placements and business partnerships; and *infrastructure*, to enable Black arts organizations to gain strength and support from one another.³

At face value, these proposals seem both applaudable and comprehensive – but, as I have said, it is Regional Arts Boards who are responsible for implementing such policies in their own regions:

The purpose of the *Landscape of Fact* exercise was to establish what it is that's causing inequality in the arts sector. It came up with an action plan for key themes. But that sort of work has been going on in the regions for a number of years.

Sajida Ismail, 7 April 1998

It is not the specific proposals, but rather the broad attitudes as reflected in the terminology and language shifts of Arts Council policy, that actually affect practice, because these have determined the patterns of funding within the sector.⁴

The earliest term used – 'ethnic minorities' communities' arts' – which has an exotic and non-threatening feel about it, regards

such artistic production as being rooted in a specific cultural experience and thus of no immediate danger to the mainstream. The obvious association with other forms of 'community arts' further marginalized this. The term 'Black arts', which came to be used more widely in the 'eighties, has a stronger air of political alignment, but nevertheless homogenizes the issue by not differentiating between the many diverse elements it is meant to include – especially between the African–Caribbean and the Asian elements.

Thus the term 'cultural diversity' began to be used as a further concession towards heterogeneity, while attempting at the same time to be inclusive and supportive. It remains, however, a highly problematic term which almost nobody is happy with. *The Landscape of Fact* opens by trying to justify the promotion of 'cultural diversity' in terms of the contributions that Black Arts have made to British culture:

Black Arts have enriched personal options. . . .

Black Arts have transformed popular culture. . . .

Black Arts have brought with them . . . creative influences. . . .

Black Arts have challenged notions about the place and form of arts. . . .

The Landscape of Fact (1997), p. 5–6

The language gives away the origins of the whole paper – that it is written from the centre, looking out at diverse cultures all around and trying to create patterns out of them. A term such as 'cultural diversity' can never depict all the voices that make up British society and, when unpacked, it turns out to refer to a mass of different groups with different aims and ambitions, both political and artistic. The term cannot hope to embrace the diverse groups within the Asian population, for example, or the continuum which exists between, say, the preservation of a culture's traditions and work which expresses a hybridization between two or more cultures coming together. The 'Green Paper' itself acknowledges that

Cultural diversity represents a number of often discrete components, with aesthetics that draw, to

differing degrees, on distinctive cultural forms; social, religious, and community functions; generational explorations; and deliberate interculturalism-cultural mixings.

The Landscape of Fact, p. 7

The long passages in the document which attempt to justify and define cultural diversity actually refute the Council's apparent faith in Black artists, since they acknowledge the artistic richness of those cultures but then marginalize them by seeking to fit them into broad categories and definitions in order to deal with them. Effectively, the Black Arts world is denied the ability to grapple for itself with issues of tradition and contemporary culture – this being seen as something which is the responsibility of the arts authorities.

The attitude is reflected in funding policy, which is to deal with Black Arts as a problem issue, discrete from the safe world of white, mainstream arts. Therefore funding for Black Arts is set aside and comes to the RABs principally in the form of Arts Development and Urban Renewal budgets, rather than through the main budgets for regularly funded arts organizations. As a result of this, only two Asian and two African-Caribbean theatre companies are currently working in England.

I would like briefly to shift focus and look at the work of one of these, Tara Arts, to see how Asian theatre workers have been grappling with issues of integration, assimilation and tradition, on their own terms rather than those set by the English funding system.

'Quotation', 'Translation', and Tara Arts

Jatinder Verma, Artistic Director of Tara Arts, is particularly concerned with the expression of Asian identity within a new cultural situation.⁵ He argues that it is the nature of the imperialist dominant culture to demonize the *other*, and then to absorb and reduce the *other* to its own image. The legacy of Macaulay's infamous *Note* has outlasted its original context of imperial rule and lives on in the *intra*-cultural politics of modern Britain.

For Verma, as a diasporic Asian, there are two options for the demonized *other*. It can join the club, which would mean conforming and integrating on the terms of the host culture; or it can confront the dominant culture, which represents true interculturalism. Confronting the dominant culture also involves confronting one's own history, and gaining self-knowledge through an awareness of loss. Beyond that there is the challenge to create a new identity, one which is a true reflection of the fragmentary experience of the migrant groups, with its eclectic mix of cultures and influences.

The early work of Tara was based around the experiences of Asians who had come to England *via* East Africa. *Yes, Memsahib*, for example, compared the experiences of the Asian migrant in Kenya and in England, looking at the double displacement suffered by the diaspora communities. However, as Tara's work developed it became more pre-occupied with the search for cultural roots in India itself. The company explored traditional Indian forms and symbolically rejected western theatre conventions. This exploration was then brought to bear on a confrontation with European culture, by which means the company dissected traditional canonical texts, using them to set up a dialogue between India and England.

Verma says that the two principal motifs in this work were *quotation*, whereby language and text could represent 'a culture composed of fragments of memory' (Verma, 1997, p. 6), and *translation*, whereby the theatrical text undergoes an experience which is analogous to that of the immigrant, translated from one culture to another.

The essence of *translation*, as exemplified in Tara's production of *Tartuffe*, was thus to adapt the text in such a way that it 'allows the performers to make creative connections between their ancestral traditions and their English present' (Verma, 1997, p. 7). In *Tartuffe* this was achieved partially through the use of a popular theatre tradition of Gujurati, which mirrored the original *commedia* style on which the play was based.

Such creative interactions between cultures are, however, only one part of the work

of Asian artists in Britain. Tamasha Theatre Company, an off-shoot of Tara, has chosen a more naturalistic, westernized style of performance in order to present 'slice of life' portrayals of Indian life and of contemporary British-Asian life.

There are three contrasting approaches that have been taken by Asian theatre companies, according to Verma. The first is to present India to England, using western theatre forms so as to raise difficult issues of colonial history and the suffering of Asian people. The second is to present a picture of Asia, but to Asians themselves, here using traditional forms and trying to transport the Asian audience back to the sub-continent in a search for roots. The third and perhaps the most delicate is to employ a creative dialogue between the memory of the Asian migrant and modern England. The latter involves the development of new forms and aesthetics, still culture-specific to the Asian groups involved, but different from the traditional roots they sprang from. This, I would suggest, is interculturalism on one's own terms, not as dictated and orchestrated by the dominant culture of the country.

Asian Arts in the Local Community

Companies like Tara and Tamasha do crucial work in raising the profile of Asian arts in Britain, but evidence suggests that they have relatively little impact on Asian communities in the regions they visit. Tamasha's *A Tainted Dawn*, for example, came to the West Yorkshire Playhouse during the Black Theatre season in October 1997, but played to small, majority white audiences.

Tara have made more effort to visit communities, but in a recent YHA report on South Asian Arts it was stated that 'the drama work and short residencies by Tara Arts in the region were not particularly successful' (Malhotra, 1993, p. 9), the reasons being that not enough effort was made to prepare the ground beforehand, to develop community interest. This is not to devalue the work of Tara, but to suggest that as a national company they are unable to have the close contact and knowledge of a locality

which is needed in order to develop Asian participation in the arts. It is in this area that the RABs, such as Yorkshire and Humberside Arts, must take over responsibility from the Arts Council by researching the specific needs of the region, the better to direct its arts provision.

In 1992, the South Asian Arts Forum was initiated by the YHA as a loose network of Asian arts practitioners and organizations, whose primary aims were to advise on the development of Asian Arts strategies and to evaluate their impact. In 1994 the Forum produced a document called '*Aaj-Kal*' *Today and Tomorrow: Context and Recommendations*. Here, it was suggested that training schemes should be established and marketed towards Asians; that major venues should be encouraged to increase South Asian programming; and that Asian arts administrators should be brought into the organization.

Four years on there has been no official survey to evaluate progress, but one positive sign has been the appointment of an Asian Arts development officer, whose job is to identify Asian issues and link them with specific art forms within the YHA. This officer, Sajida Ismail, is highly aware that the problem facing Asian arts is principally one of inequality of opportunity. There is a great wealth of artistic activity in Asian communities, she claims, including orthodox drama work and even some experimental work in multi-media forms. But on the whole there have been very few ground-breaking initiatives, principally because nobody seems to be prepared to invest in allowing Asian artists to take such risks.

Ismail sees this as due to an inherent prejudice in the system, and also a lack of understanding of Asian art forms. Her personal goal is 'to provide a platform for existing South Asian arts work to flourish, which everyone else is allowed. We have to create a level playing field.' This process is about re-education of institutions in the mainstream infrastructure: 'There has to be an integral learning process, otherwise we will make very little movement forward.' Asian organizations must learn the inbuilt inequalities which make it harder for them

than for white groups to get funding, and accept that positive action is necessary.

This inequality of access to funding is clearly demonstrated by the fact that most of the arts organizations working with Asian communities are actually white-led, and as such they encounter many stumbling-blocks in working with communities they do not know well. Major Road theatre company, for example, had such difficulties setting up a drama project in Bradford in 1994 that it commissioned a report to look into ways of developing further successful work with the Asian communities in the area.⁶ Many important issues were raised by this report, including the common resistance to drama among Asian communities, typified by reactions such as 'our people are not interested in drama' and 'we like to watch, not participate' (Robinson and Singh, 1995, p. 11).

It also seemed that communities had difficulty in accepting outside workers: 'We are a traditional, closed community and we tend to stick within it' (Robinson and Singh, 1995, p. 11). This points to the need for more Asian arts workers, and for arts organizations to access communities through existing structures, such as mosques or schools, rather than contacting them directly.

The main emphasis of the research was on how to work successfully. The problem is not a lack of talent and interest, but rather a lack of research to inform work and resources to support it. The Mehfil report is based on only a very small locality, and it will help local workers in that area, but in a different areas the problems will be different. The only general advice which the report gives is that small initiatives based in real understanding of a community are the only way to proceed effectively:

Ambitious projects will stumble and fall before they are completed. Small steps. We need to be aware of lessons learnt. This will only come about through increased communication, discussion, community consultation and a sharing of good models of practice.

Robinson and Singh, 1995, p. 31

This element of 'sharing good models of practice' seems to me important, since it

raises the question of how practices can be documented and evaluated. How easy is it to identify a good model as opposed to a bad one? I would like to look briefly now at a particular model, that of CHOL Theatre company, in order to suggest a way in which its working practice may be analyzed and evaluated against the particular needs of the Asian community.

CHOL Theatre Company

Companies who practise cross-cultural and community-based work are more likely to attract funding than those which do culture-specific work, particularly through sources such as the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Challenge fund. The current vogue for urban renewal through cultural activity relies on the power of the arts to create 'confident, imaginative citizens who feel empowered' (Landry *et al.*, 1996, p. 2). The underlying concept and purpose of the SRB are primarily economic, and hence the fund attracts money not only from the government but also from industry and business, in whose interests it is to stimulate economic growth. Money goes to companies like CHOL, who have a good record of high-quality artistic work and a multicultural approach.

So is their approach good for the communities they work with, or just for the companies who give them funding? Adam Strickson, the director of CHOL, emphasizes what he sees as a problematic lack of contact between cultures, which is a root cause of racial tension. His aim is to enable a coming together of cultures through theatre:

It's trying to create original work that reflects a meeting between cultures, which is not just saying you can learn about our culture and we can learn about yours, but it's saying there are these issues, there is this land, this history – what can we say about it now, what forms can we evolve that might draw on Islamic art, on Indian theatre, on the English folk tradition? These forms are new, they are cultural statements for now.

Adam Strickson, 6 January 1998

Such aims seem commendable, but how are they achieved in practice, and do they allow for cultural difference to be maintained?

Based in Huddersfield, CHOL has done work in many areas of Yorkshire. Strickson perceives the work of the company as very much tailored to the needs of those specific communities where they run projects. For them, a community is defined by the mix of people within one geographical location, so when the company begins working in a community, a considerable time is spent on familiarization – identifying different groups and devising ways of bringing them together creatively. The nature of the work in each project is therefore defined by the cultural mix in the area, and the finished ‘product’ (there always is one) is a creative amalgamation of different cultural groups’ creative input.

Though the process often involves drama, the product is not always a conventional performance. *The Riches of the Living Green* was a walk in the Thornhill Lees area of Dewsbury, with an accompanying glossy leaflet with a map, pictures, poems, and other contributions from various – and varied – community groups. Savile Town Youth Club had provided the Islamic texts, a bird bath, and some wooden fish shapes, to be seen on the walk; Howland Centre for the Disabled donated poems and silk leaves; Savile Town Elderly Men’s Group had created some designs for the leaflet. This project had the double benefit of bringing diverse elements of the community together, and celebrating the natural beauty of the area. Strickson, however, is realistic about the long-term benefit which such work has:

I’ve never been convinced by the idea that community workers can go into communities and that in the end communities will be empowered to do it all on their own. We’re trying to find ways of empowering people, but it is a very long-term process. . . . Because of the funding situation we can’t spend as long as we need to in any one community.

Adam Strickson, 6 January 1998

Because there is neither money for such long-term projects nor for the personal artistic development the company aspires to, a compromise is made whereby every two years the company aims to put together a piece of performance with professional actors, which

draws on ongoing community involvement in one or two neighbourhoods. This performance is then toured to other neighbourhoods in the region, along with residencies and workshop programmes which enable the communities to engage in a dialogue with one another, *via* the company.

Images of Transience and Migration

The most recent example of this was *The Bird House*, a potent natural image of transience and migration, but also of safety and refuge. In the publicity it is described as one of three possible events:

A colourful procession of bright plumage followed by multi-lingual stories and songs from England, Poland, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

A choice of two workshops where groups can either create their own procession or a story for the bird house.

One or two weeks in a village, a city neighbourhood, school, or college creating a sculptural ‘bird house’ and its stories. The architecture of the house and the content of the stories will reflect the place and people who make them.

Though the work was originally inspired by the refugee experiences of Bangladeshi communities, the final product distances itself from the original subject and achieves relevance for everybody. It also self-consciously involves elements from different cultures, such as puppets, stories and musical instruments. Such work is characteristic of CHOL’s aim of ‘seeking to develop peace and understanding between people of different racial backgrounds’ (CHOL Theatre, 1997), since the work emphasizes similarities and links, and plays down differences and divisions.

The idea of creating art forms to reflect a multiplicity of cultures is open to the criticism that people’s own cultural traditions are being exploited for the benefit of the dominant culture. CHOL claims to have ‘explored the feelings and history of the minorities, the visionaries, and the neglected’ – which I think is true, in that it is, indeed, the company that has explored these areas, rather than letting the minorities explore it for themselves.

CHOL's claim to multiculturalism is thus questionable, because no culturally-specific forms are developed in their own context, but are taken out of context and placed into a new framework – a kind of hybrid performance, which could be seen as a meaningless hotchpotch of cultural activities. In so doing, they place *other* cultures within their own cultural map: rituals and language are taken and replayed in their barest form as theatre.

I would suggest that transfer of culture in this way is valid only if the culture is familiar to you in the first place (as with Tara), so that its basic meanings are accessible and can be faithfully transposed into another cultural milieu. To put it at its simplest and most brutal, the cultural exchange needs to be initiated by the source culture, rather than externally, if it is to not be an instrument of oppression.

CHOL does not exclude culture-specific work. Strickson acknowledges the need for both kinds of practice, but he is perhaps unaware of the problems that face culturally-specific work, and that the two do not exist on a level playing-field. He is undeniably right that there should be a variety of different kinds of work going on, but at present the funding system doesn't provide for such variety.

Redressing the Balance

Sajida Ismail is very aware of this inequality and it is the primary motivation behind her work at Yorkshire and Humberside Arts:

We need to recognize that all different ways of working are perfectly valid and legitimate . . . but different methods will work better than others, possibly because the support mechanisms already exist that allow the method to flourish, and give people that confidence to be more experimental in the way they work.

There are a number of reasons for the inequality here identified by Sajida . At the professional end of Asian arts, there is little incentive for artists to stay in the region, due to lack of job opportunities, and many of the more talented artists are drawn to London. Arts organizations are going down because

of lack of funding. This is in part due to difficulty in attracting private sponsorship, and also because within the Asian arts sector there is generally much less administrative experience than in the mainstream, which means they are less able to manage finances effectively and make successful bids for lottery funding and the like. This lack of successful professionals in the region has a knock-on effect at a community level: there is little high-quality work to see and few role models for young people to aspire to. Continuing discrimination against Black people in all areas of employment also needs to be more openly acknowledged.

As the development officer for Asian arts, Ismail is responsible for two current initiatives, which seems to me to display more realism and commitment to real change than the politically correct rhetoric of countless Arts Council reports and recommendations. The first is an 'Arts 4 Everyone' lottery bid, to fund an Audience Development Research programme for re-educating venues' programmers, and marketing departments, encouraging them to tap into existing Asian markets and to establish a touring circuit for Asian artists.

The second and larger initiative is a bid to the European Regional Development Fund to set up a Business Exchange, which aims to create partnerships for business training, both for professional arts organizations and for community enterprises. This is a creative equal opportunities initiative to raise skill-levels and to create awareness within the mainstream infrastructure of its own inherent inequalities.

Both these programmes would have tangible and desirable benefits for the Asian communities. For work to be provided on a community level, there needs to be success at a professional level, and this can only come through positive action to redress the financial imbalance. If the bids are unsuccessful, however, the initiatives will be stopped in their tracks, since the budget provided by the Arts Council for development work is minimal, and most of the YHA's annual budget goes to regularly funded organizations, of which very few are Asian.

It is ironic that the successful development of Asian arts provision – something which both the Arts Council and the YHA profess to support wholeheartedly – hangs by a thread. The Arts Council, for all its rhetoric of ‘cultural diversity’, still pursues a policy of marginalization through funding patterns. The kind of work which allows Asians to explore their identity, represented by companies such as Tara, is thus becoming more sparse rather than increasing. Community-based work, such as CHOL’s, tends to be an artistic compromise which plays down cultural specificity, and which can be non-productive if it is not accompanied by sustained culturally-specific work, helping communities explore their own histories and identities.

This may appear to be a simplification of a complex situation, and in some ways it is, but it is in part the failure or refusal of those

in positions of power to face some of the simple realities that underly the lack of progress. Realists of clear vision such as Sajida Ismail are valuable, but they are also increasingly frustrated by being forced to bargain for much-needed money.

Notes and References

1. Brian Friel, *Translations* (1981). This quotation is used on the inside cover of the Arts Council document, *The Landscape of Fact* (1997).
2. According to an independent exercise. See Walter Baker, ‘The Arts of Ethnic Minorities: Status and Funding’ (1985).
3. For details see *The Landscape of Fact*, p. 19–26.
4. ‘Appendix 1: The Language Shift’, *ibid.*, p. 32–5.
5. See Verma, 1996; and Verma, 1997.
6. Sara Robinson and Harmage Kalari Singh, *Major Road: the Mehfil Project Report* (1995). This report was the result of three months of research, including face-to-face interviews and meetings. The quotations given are comments made by Asian people in response to specific questions by the researchers, which are documented in the report.