



Such Stuff podcast
Season 6, Episode 4: How whiteness dominates our theatres

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

This week we're bringing you another episode from our series on **Shakespeare and Race**. Last week's episode looked at the ways whiteness dominates the education sector. This week we turn to theatres to talk about the work that needs doing to make theatres and rehearsal rooms actively antiracist and reflect on some of the ways whiteness has dominated and continues to dominate our theatres, from the work that we stage to the people who make up our organisations.

Here's Artistic Director Michelle Terry.

Michelle Terry: Hello my name's Michelle Terry and welcome to this episode of Such Stuff where we continue our conversation about whiteness, specifically this week focusing on whiteness on our stages.

There are of course many stages to making theatre, the final one being the literal stage where we see and hear a story in a shared space. We know that historically those stages and spaces where we make and receive theatre have been dominated by a predominantly white, predominantly masculine way of seeing the world and reading the plays, and even when the casting or the company can appear diverse or representative, the stages preceding that have usually been mired in an unconscious white legacy and understanding. We unconsciously praise and promote that white male legacy and nowhere more so than when we talk about and perform Shakespeare. We may have difference and diversity in the rehearsal room but the presence of whiteness is always there. And we've talked before about the difference between colour blind and



colour conscious casting, when we're asked to bring our whole selves to a project or a play what happens when we then have to deny parts of ourselves in order to appropriate, conform and at worst just get through. Absence is one thing but being absent whilst present is too often an unspoken requirement in the interests of comfort, expediency, maintaining the status quo and not rocking the boat, but art and theatre is an act of rocking the boat so who's doing the rocking? Rehearsal rooms are a microcosm of the macrocosm and despite best efforts at collaboration the familiarity and legacy of hierarchy and pyramidal structures are hard to crack. When power is centralised and only sits with a few people in the room or the organisation then supremacy is affirmed and more often than not than power sits with white people. Of course, that is changing, but whiteness as an idea, as a construct, as a structure, as a dominant prism with which to view the world it's deep-rooted and incredibly powerful and familiar. Unless everyone in the room is consciously trying to offer an alternative point of view, an authentic point of view, then the dominant prism will always take president. Of course, our ultimate hope is for truly shared spaces but we are not there yet and there is work to do. For example, when the word Ethiopie appears in Shakespeare's plays but goes unchallenged in a room it also goes unchallenged in the theatre and an opportunity was missed for reflection, interrogation, interruption and ownership. When the word slave is said as it is many times throughout the canon and the sonnets when that word is not discussed not only does that actor have to experience that word every night, not only is that language normalised but so is ignoring it, and this avoidance or oversight reaches beyond the rehearsal room onto our stages and into our theatres.

Now the greatest thing about these plays is that they will always bend and flex to the alchemy of the company. The plays don't exist outside of a company they exist because of them. The play doesn't exist outside of a company it exists because of them. 'Let me play the lions part too' is an equation, me plus play plus lion equals character. But if I can't bring all of me to the equation then the sum of the parts is incomplete, I am left incomplete, so is the play and so is the experience for the audience.



So in this episode, we asked some of our artists to discuss their experience of whiteness via a series of provocations. Those provocations are:

This is a series about whiteness and specifically whiteness on our stages, what does whiteness mean to you and how does it impact your work as an artist?

What does antiracist theatre look and feel like for you?

What does an antiracist rehearsal room look and feel like for you?

How can we decolonise our rehearsal room and Shakespeare?

How could we decolonise our theatres?

What question do you wish we were asking you? And what would be your answer?

You'll hear the co-curator of our **Shakespeare and Race** festival Kobna Holdbrook-Smith in conversation with Jade Anouka, you will also hear Adjoa Andoh, Sarah Amankwah and Federay Holmes give their responses to those provocations and their experience and understanding of whiteness on our stages.

I hope you find this as interesting as it is enjoyable as we all continue our journey towards a greater understanding.

Kobna Holdbrook-Smith: Hello I'm Kobna Holdbrook-Smith and today I'm speaking to Jade Anouka and we are talking for or with the Globe Theatre about Shakespeare and race.

Jade, I'm just gonna jump in with some questions that Michelle and Farah and I were talking about, and Michelle kindly set down for us, and they're all about race and whiteness, theatre, Shakespeare – let's just jump in. Are you ok?



Jade Anouka: Yeah good. [laughs]

KH-S: Good good, good to hear it. Ok so what does antiracist theatre look and feel like for you?

JA: I think it feels safe and not in a bad way, it kind of feels like the kind of theatre that I belong in because I think there's been a lot of theatre or a lot of situations where I've either been at the theatre or in a rehearsal room or whatever and I've not felt like I belong and I feel like that a lot of the time has to do with, yeah, has to do with the set-up of that rehearsal room or the theatre as a whole, and I think an antiracist theatre or antiracist theatre is inclusive and representative of its audience and it should also be a kind of yeah, representative of the world that we live in here wherever that theatre is.

KH-S: Mm I feel like I'm not sure what it will look like exactly because I think it's— it's always going to have to shift and I also think that representation in terms of numbers it's— it's hugely important but I think it's sort of the first step and then if there's not perfect representation, if there's not 10% of such and such a group in 10% of our stages I think it's a better mistake to make to have people than to have fewer because has been the long-standing problem and that sometimes numbers, numbers can sort of help conceal the racist issues that we're trying to tackle and oppose.

Similar question then following on from that is, what does an antiracist rehearsal room look and feel like for you?

JA: I think, I mean it's similar isn't it but it's where that it's not just you know who's at the front, who's on stage, it's the whole rehearsal room. Where is this rehearsal taking place? Who are the members of the technical team? Who are the crew? You know, it's like the whole room, what is the make-up of that? And does everyone in that room feel like they are being spoken to or listened to? And also it's a place where you feel like that you could bring up things as



well, you feel like you can bring up things and that you will be taken seriously even though things that may affect you may not be affecting the other people in the room, and like you've talked about numbers before and if there aren't the numbers there if there aren't people, where you, that you feel like you can talk to well then at least the people in that room need to be willing to have those difficult conversations potentially and willing to accept that a room may be racist actually, a rehearsal room, and that, or that racist things have been said or that people feel like they are not included in some way, and they can be brought into the room and spoken about in a way that you know that, that's genuine I suppose.

KH-S: Yeah I think we've all experienced the issue of the word racist and racism being so incendiary that when you point out something somebody has done or that has been set up in a way that is racist people panic and they resist even the idea that something needs to change especially if it means that they have to take any responsibility and I feel like what I'm hearing from you about a room in which people feel safe, they feel able to speak, able to connect, to communicate, feel heard, I'm hearing collaboration and recently I was reading that Lola Olufemi book it's called **Feminism Interrupted** I recommend it so far, it was saying that collaboration vs competition seems to be this contest that's around in our society and I'm hearing from you this idea of collaboration that seems to be more useful certainly in theatre than competition, I think even competition should be— needs to be collaborative for it to work we have to agree to compete, we have to agree what the rules are, we have to agree how best to play whatever we're doing.

JA: I feel like as well in the rehearsal room as well in terms of playing being open to ideas that may not be the kind of ideas of a rehearsal room that you're used to, that somebody's used to and that actually in an antiracist rehearsal room we're gonna have ideas that incorporate different cultures and different structures and the norm isn't seen as, and you know something that's different, somebody who may come in with an idea that may not fit what most of the people in the rehearsal room believe to be what's normal or



what should happen, that actually those ideas are also involved.

[Music plays]

Sarah Amankwah: Hello my name is Sarah Amankwah and I'm an Actress. What does antiracist theatre look and feel like for you?

To me, I feel that anti-racist theatre firstly addresses the issue, addresses the problem that imperfect people make imperfect systems so with regards to fighting the reality of racism, because of course to be anti against it you have to, of course, acknowledge that racism does exist, so I think it's acknowledging the elephant in the room, to be aware of one's bias and the biases that everyone will have, being aware that from the moment we're born we are all raised and shaped to believe certain things, theories, narratives that are potentially false and I think it's being ready and being aware to address said narratives in a way that allows a space for people to exist. I think if we go into these institutions with our biases unchecked, we then have the potential to cultivate environments that will cause further dehumanisation without us realising. It's being active in how we check our biases consistently, because it is work, I definitely do think that. It's also being realistic with our expectations and knowing that we will get it wrong but I think for me there is definitely a sense of being culturally intelligent with the people who we are inviting into these spaces, and very much for me we can use I guess the golden word diversity, but I think it's being very intentional about how diversity bleeds into every sector of our institutions and that's not just with the collaborators that we bring in but the people who are actually running the space. So that then therefore also includes sharing power so with regards to the space being the Globe currently it's currently quite a very white space in terms of behind the scenes creatively speaking and of course there's much work and effort going into addressing that and changing that which is fantastic but then I— then I guess the question will then be is diversity reflected in the audiences. So, I think it's not just about having a shallow view of diversity but really sharing power and really valuing the opinions the thoughts and



feelings of people of colour and taking that on board not in a way that is tokenistic or just kind of checking boxes but actually going above and beyond.

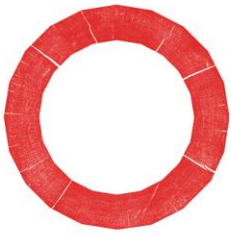
Federay Holmes: My name is Federay Holmes I'm an Actor and Director and Associate Artist at the Globe.

What does antiracist theatre look like?

I'm going to just tweak the question, I'm— I want to talk about what does an antiracist theatre look like. And that is a building that is very confident in its role as an investigator dedicated to unearthing how racial disparity, how racism, how historical racialisation of different groups has suppressed, has blocked our expression, our own human expression, our access to each other. And so, it's not just yeah, we definitely need brown and black faces on the posters and that is happening but the space is still a white space. I think it really has to begin in all institutions in the invisible spaces, behind doors, it needs to begin with the executive, and we talk a lot about the tables and being invited to the table and making space at the table but we need to think about who is doing the inviting, whose table is it? It's not enough to invite people of different ethnic and racial experience to come in and make white work in a white space.

SA: What does an antiracist rehearsal room look like and feel like for you?

I think it's just exactly the same I think if we are looking to cultivate a space where people are confident and comfortable, and I guess speaking as an actor there are times where I have to say you know what— what helps me to bring and perform and do my job to the very best of my ability and I think it means cultivating that space where— where questions can be asked especially with regards to Shakespeare. It's not rocket science to know that eventually having a multi-ethnic means at some point the conversation around race will come up in whatever play and I think it's being unafraid to shy away from those hard questions and also to not have answers I



think it's ok to not have those answers but to really at least know that we are creating that space to work through these themes and theories etcetera. If we are wanting to build a rehearsal room that is antiracist then we have to do the work of being culturally intelligent about the people that we're bringing into those rooms knowing full well that we're not a homogenous as a people group, they're very much you know a divergent of experiences and you know intersectionalities that we have, knowing that racism isn't the only ism that people are experiencing in their lives, and that does take work and it won't be perfect it's definitely going to be a work. And in a way of not kind of looking to the people of colour or let's say the minority group to come with those answers I think oh wow yeah that can just be traumatic to say the least and just that puts too much pressure and wrongly so because that's not the job of the minority to explain what should be done in the rehearsal room but I think it's – it's again sharing that power as opposed to let me ask all the questions to the black people or to the Asian people about how we should tackle these things but actually sharing the space to ask those questions to hear all the voices but at the same time giving the platform to again be culturally aware that there is a normality, there is a white normality, so it's how we address that normality head on together. And also being aware that there is a spectrum when it comes to racism and I say being aware not in a sense to be policing because I think that can just raise a sort of paranoia within us to tip toe around eggshells to try not to offend and I think it's also remembering that again we– we already are making mistakes, that's why we're having this conversation so I think it's being honest to go you know what I'm gonna get it wrong to have grace towards one another, towards ourselves, to know that this is gonna be a work but I need help, I need the support of my colleagues, I need the support of the people in the room, whether that means also checking in with the people in the rehearsal room, now that might not go down so well because I know for some actors they just want to get on and do their job the last thing most people wanna do when they come into a rehearsal room is talk about their blackness [laughs] so yeah I think it's being very sensitive to that as well. I think it is really about sharing power and asking questions and checking our biases



constantly.

Adjoa Andoh: My name's Adjoa Andoh and I'm an Actor and I'm a Director and I'm a Writer and I'm not white. I wanted when we did **Richard II** at the Globe for example, we did an all-women **Richard II**, I wanted to explore what happens when you put people from those colonised enslaved indentured nations back into the history from which they have been excluded, back into the story of the growth and prosperity of this country, and I wanted to do that almost as a thought experiment and I wanted to do it with people who are generally at the bottom of the heap in all these societies which is women. So, women of colour at the bottom of the heap to tell the story of the power and the agency of those at the top of the heap, what does that make us think? How do we respond to that story? What other aspects of the story are made live by telling it in that way? And as artists to be in a room as a woman of colour with other women of colour, not to have to represent your race or your gender but simply to represent your soul and your calling as an artist to come and be free in your imagination and your flights of fancy because you don't have to think about how you're being judged, I cannot tell you the freedom of that, grown women weeping with relief that they could just come and be is wonderful, it was wonderful, it was I— I— I can't tell you how thrilling that was. The Globe hosted us, Michelle Terry, Artistic Director of the Globe said yes and I can't thank you enough for that Michelle, and that was a wonderful opportunity for us and a thrilling experience for us to get to play those wonderful parts as actors, to have stage management of colour, to have a voice coach of colour, to have a movement fight director, a composer, all the musicians, a designer, a lighting designer all of colour, how thrilling. But the Globe is a theatre that's in society and as with all the major theatres of this country if you looked at the makeup of the people on stage and you look at the makeup of the people backstage, or in the back offices, or in the decision making parts of the building, the heads of departments, the departments you will find that they will struggle to reflect what is reflected on stage and that dissonance is a problem and it's a problem that needs to be addressed and I think it's a problem that will bring great riches if it is addressed and theatres take their



courage in their hands and decide to have back rooms, closeness of power and decision making that reflect society just as much as the onstage reflection of society. So it meant that people found it quite tough to have all women of colour, not everybody did but some people did, I think all institutions have really got to think about this when you have creative buildings, not so much the Globe, but other buildings that are funded by the general public that don't look like the general public, where most of your people of colour are either working as security or cleaners or catering and their not in places of power or decision making, they're not in the design department or the casting department or the commissioning department or the costumes, or hair and makeup, or set building whatever it is, when they're not running through the organisation and reflecting the world that funds them and they should be inviting, when that happens it's a problem. And it's a terrible cliché I remember doing comedy stuff with Steve Coogan at the end of the 80s spoofing the BBC about just this and we're still in that place 30 years later, it's time now and if it has taken a black man dying before our very eyes to provoke this conversation then please let's make something beautiful and something healing and something that gathers us together as human beings, let's make something come out of it that's in that vein.

[Music plays]

KH-S: This is a series about whiteness and specifically whiteness on our stages and I wanted to ask what whiteness means to you and how it impacts your work as an artist? Now I know we've discussed it before privately but I feel like it sort of links in what we were saying about antiracism, there's antiracism but there's also the acknowledgment of er what whiteness is, I wonder do— do you have a view on what you'd say it is before you answer specifically what it means to you on our stages?

JA: I suppose it's about, it's— it's an interesting one because I've sort of never before we chatted about it I'd never really thought about whiteness [laughs] and I think that is the kind of epitome of



what whiteness is and that I'm so in that because it's just what's normal it's just seen as normal actually and it's what seen as normal in a rehearsal room, it's what's seen as normal in our society, and then everything else is a break from that and— and what is seen as normal or the kind of baseline to which everything else is a kind of other is the whiteness and I guess that's what I've come to think of it as.

KH-S: Yeah yeah I think that's a really strong presentation of it. My understanding was that it's— it's what it's these ideas about whiteness about the normality, what we think is useful, what we think is acceptable, you know banal even plain is what actually supports the superstructures of er racism and historical— historical differences, these historical falsely presented differences and they— they what they ultimate in is privilege right like and privilege obviously is it's again it's another word where people think of Rolls Royce's or caviar or something but it's— it's not about luxury it's just about what it, what it must mean never to have to consider your appearance or your ethnicity or background or heritage in most situations.

JA: And that is the thing about you know white privilege, for example, is you're not aware of it because you have the privilege and so you're not aware of it whereas if you don't have that particular privilege you're very aware that you don't because that's what the structures are in place for you to feel, to know you're not aware.

KH-S: I heard an analogy of it being a bit like being right-handed or left-handed wherein if you're right-handed you've never had to think about which scissors to buy or which you know how you write or anything, none— none of that comes into your mind, it's a very trite example it's not by any sense an equal comparison but it's one that's enlightening never the less. So, regarding whiteness on our stages, I think the question extends to as much as being an actor but it also extends to productions and the history of performance particularly of Shakespeare, where does whiteness appear in Shakespeare and how? Like far beyond even **Othello**.



JA: Well it starts with its start with theatre as a whole I think in this country, theatre as a whole is like what theatre we put on, what theatre is studied at school, at drama school, what plays, what playwrights, what poets, who we decide are the ones that we should be reading and what kind of plays are ones that we decide are good ones, and I think that is very clear in terms of who they are in this country, who we study, and obviously Shakespeare is a big part of that.

KH-S: And did you feel as an artist, did you feel you had to do anything to yourself in order to play Shakespeare in the accepted ergo the white way?

JA: Totally I mean all through drama school. I mean this extends beyond Shakespeare but it is that whole idea about what is Shakespeare I mean it's sort of held up as this amazing body of work which indeed it is but it makes it feel like as a young, as a young black girl that it's really not for me and so in order to be accepted I have to from what you know to be, you know it's quite crass but I have to whiten myself in order to play those parts and that was definitely my feeling growing up and even at drama school and even for some of the early productions that I had done in Shakespeare and I think that is a thing for a lot of people where you think actually this isn't for me as I am and I have to mould myself to fit it.

KH-S: I recognise that completely as an actor. It's reminded me of it's not just who chooses it's who chooses the choosers and so even as you describe it like as I— I was thinking somebody might say well what's whiteness what does that even mean like how do you act white and so on, I remember people saying I didn't seem black or I acted white because of how I sound but I'm still black, I still— I'm still black I've lived the experiences and yeah you've had that as well right?



JA: I've had that before.

KH-S: So when I think of what I've had to adjust to play Shakespeare or to join in I wonder what it was I felt I needed to and I know that I thought I needed to sound a certain ways on stage and how I sound already sort of suits it but it was something about what we play like what you say about being a girl at drama school when I was a boy at drama school I had thoughts, I hadn't even thought I would get to play leads, I mean haven't played that many classical leads, but I— I had always thought when it comes down to it they're only gonna ever get a white person because that's who plays leads and I know a lot of Directors and Artistic Directors who are, I'm gonna, I'm gonna throw some people under the bus but they, they're great champions of diversity but actually when you look back at their track record they don't have many black leads unless it was **Othello** or unless there was, it was **Antony and Cleopatra**, they just didn't and wouldn't and I'm sure there's an— there's an issue there with audiences too and what they thought would be acceptable and what they thought critics would say they are doing or trying to do and the politics of it is never, it's never granular, it's never, it's never a case of one thing like if you think of stages you necessarily have to think of the actors, the directors the stage managers, the audience, the producers, everybody involved you know.

[Music plays]

SA: This is a series about whiteness and specifically whiteness on our stages. What does whiteness mean to you and how does it impact your work as an artist?

[laughs] Er I think the question is so loaded so I'll do my best to answer. Ok so I guess I can only go from my experience of being going you know through the education system to drama schools and BTEC diplomas. So interestingly enough my desire and passion for wanting to act came from obviously outside of the rehearsal room and outside of theatre, I wasn't exposed to it much



growing up as a kid but I— I knew from very early on that I wanted to perform, now what I found interesting is when I started going into said performing arts and drama schools I then started to realise that there was a particular formula in some of those spaces that I had to adopt and even now I am adopting a particular tone [laughs] which I guess from most people would say that's how Sarah talks all the time but I guess in my mind what has I guess unconsciously happened there has been this normative way of like this is how you speak [laughs] this is how one should address a group of people when they're interviewing or whatever, er in drama schools it's very much the sense of we're well-spoken and well-spoken meaning that you know you talk with a very kind of Eurocentric tone, you pronounce your you know cross your t's and dot your i's all that kind of stuff and I think that then it kind of cuts off the things that make me an individual. So I think whiteness on our stages, man [laughs] I think it impacts my work in a way that it basically shapes, it gives me a lens to know ok this is what's expected of me, now I could do what's expected or I could just do what I want to do or what you know what speaks to me and what makes me kind of be the unique individual that I am. Now there's always a kind of wrestling for me as to do I strive to please the masses in terms of what they expect of me or do I just you know go against that be the rebel that I am and I try something different I think it's honestly it's a real battle I don't know if I can speak for other creatives but that a lot of us fight through and wade through and I think it's— it's extremely challenging especially when even doing plays like Shakespeare there is a history with the play, there is you know it's been done many times, and I think equally it's then re-anchoring the vision of what the play is, of course, we're actors so we are collaborators with the directors, the writers, designers, what have you, so I think it's having a clear idea of what we, what are we trying to create, what world are we painting? And I think at times it— it again depending on who's cultivating the space in terms of you know creating that culture that affirms our identities and our differences it then will affect how one works I believe. So there's an interesting analogy that I heard not long ago about being thermostats as opposed to thermometers, so I feel that when it comes to the whiteness [laughs] oh man erm, I think there's is definitely a sense of for those who are I guess



cultivating those environments that you know allow creatives to do what they do well I think there is a sense of being we're striving to be thermostats not thermometers so I'm not here to just check the temperature I'm here to set the tone for you know flourishing of the people that are coming into it how am I gonna enable them to be all that they can be, to be free in that and I think in engaging in this whole whiteness thing is— is important. But yeah so for me it affects how I talk, as I said earlier, it just gives me that automatic lens that I'm having to just adopt to make people comfortable. It's very of hard to say but it kind of just makes you feel like you're a body just in the space [laughs] so the sense of whiteness kind of erases your, your voice, your black voice, your mind, but obviously your body is still there but then even with that I think then the conversation could also you know go to hair, conversations about hair and how— how that's being portrayed, one's physique, attire, all of those things, like there are biases that come with whiteness that again make the audience or the said whoever the consumers are comfortable. So I think for me it affects my work in the sense that it just morphs me into something that I'm not so that's actually not very good [laughs] so I think it's having the support from other people around me, from my co-workers to challenge those things and also from individually to really like decolonise the whiteness that I— I guess I've adopted along the years through said institutions.

[Music plays]

KH-S: So, following from that in terms of what it— you know that was about what whiteness means to you and impact on your work as an artist, how could we decolonise our rehearsal rooms? It's similar to the antiracist question but if we make the distinction, like antiracism is I think it's good to oppose and speak out against or to help educate or enhance ideas about what people think it means when a black person walks in the room, or what they think it means when someone East Asian is doing a sonnet, or you know that's one thing but I think the decolonisation is to do with organisations structure and traditional modes of doing things I get the sense that we do Shakespeare in certain ways because we've done Shakespeare in certain ways and so we want to have it you know we think oh it's



English so it must be spoken with an English accent, Americans can't do Shakespeare, I think all those ideas, yeah.

JA: It's kind of you know, if it's not broke don't fix it, oh it's worked this way all this time so why would we change why would we do it, try anything new, whereas is it new or is it just how you've always done it you know. But yeah I think we have to constantly in the rehearsal room question why we think doing things a certain way is the right way, why that person cast as that is, why do you think that person's better for that part, or why do we approach Shakespeare in this way, why do we approach a rehearsal room in this way and constantly question those things, and question our own inbuilt prejudices that we've been subconsciously have not you know realised that we have kind of inherited this yeah, this sort of colonial way of— of being so the world around us, the structures that are in place the kind of, they're actually racist structures that are in place, we need to constantly ask ourselves those questions as well and be willing to change on a bigger stage or just and try different ways and not just think there is only one way to do something.

KH-S: That sounds erm really cogent thank you. In light of that do you think hierarchies have anything to do with it?

JA: Definitely.

KH-S: Or do you think that— yeah do you want to speak a bit about hierarchies?

JA: Definitely. Well I think it's and I don't know if this is exactly what you mean when you ask that but in a rehearsal room even when you go into a room that is you know trying to put on a play and in an antiracist rehearsal room, trying to— trying to be diverse, trying to do all of these things actually once you get outside of the rehearsal room suddenly it stops and the further up you go, the kind of the less representation there is and I feel that actually then it can feel like it's just a kind of, I don't know what the word is, but it— it feels like this is just a kind of project a kind of one idea, a kind of outing



rather than actually rethinking about structures, and I think you need to start at the top.

KH-S: Do you mean an outing into antiracism or an outing into decolonisation and then they'll return to form is that what you're saying?

JA: Exactly, exactly that.

KH-S: Yeah, do you direct?

JA: [laughs] No not really, well I haven't let's put it that way, I haven't in the past.

KH-S: Have you had any interest in directing Shakespeare at any stage?

JA: It's a funny one, probably yeah because I feel like I've— well I've always said that you know Shakespeare is forever going to be in our curriculum, it's forever going to be one of the great British things that we study and love in this country and so if that is going to be a constant let's make sure that we're not just doing it the same old ways, let's make sure that we can feel included, let's make sure that that black boy and that black girl at school when they're approached with it don't feel like they have to for whatever reason change themselves in order to work out what Shakespeare is in order to understand a play or in order to perform a play that they don't have to necessarily change themselves that actually the story within it there are universal themes and that actually you can find your own interpretations of it, rather than feeling like you have to change yourself, and I feel like in that respect yeah, I would like, I would like to give it a go and be part of that change.

KH-S: Super.

[Music plays]



FH: Is Shakespeare the problem?

Every single day I ask why Shakespeare? Every single day that I work at the Globe because I feel that if I'm not asking that question then I'm not doing my job properly. Why Shakespeare? Shakespeare has been appropriated, Shakespeare has been, has had the talons of supremacy deep in its flesh for centuries now and it's our big job to extract those talons and all of those associations and the expectations that Shakespeare brings with him. But I think it's worth really tackling the issue and also recognising that Shakespeare is a problem because if we keep kind of protesting that there's no problem about Shakespeare and Shakespeare is for everybody without listening without really looking at how Shakespeare has been problematised, then we're going to miss what we really need to see and what we really need to be listening to. We have a young audience coming out, we have acting students, we have young actors emerging into the industry now and who are not going to swallow Shakespeare is for all and quite rightly and this is a wake-up call for all of us. The binary of traditional and modern comes up all the time and I think that epitomises what I think is problematic about Shakespeare, traditional Shakespeare there's just no such thing there just isn't, part of the wonder of this amazingness and why Shakespeare is so useful now is because he doesn't make any decisions for us because he's so ineffable, because he's so moveable because those plays can be so many different things.

AA: Yeah, I mean Shakespeare is wonderful because he's such an open canvas because he is this great humanitarian, you can make your world as broad or as narrow as your imagination allows. And I think of it quite often we see the narrower perspectives of the contemporary society manifested on the stage. So, you had all-male casts at one time because women weren't on the stage, and you still see to this day quite often when women are portrayed in Shakespeare they are domineering and calculating or they're infantilised and whining. It's not necessary and it's not in the text, and we need to think about that we need to think about what



prejudices are we reinforcing via the staging of the work that we do. You know why are the comic characters often portrayed as working class— are the working class stupid, are they worthy of being laughed at? Why do we do that? You know my experience of people who are living in a much more fragile economic situation is that they are super switched on and they are super alert to everything that's going on because they have to be for survival, so why do we have to make them stupid? I don't understand, it's not necessary. So, I think these are the things we have to do. You know why are representations of disability on stage in Shakespeare often the mad people or the bad people, why do we have that? It's not necessary. I just think we need to release our minds and I think you know when people talk about intersectionality what they are talking about is the way we are many things all at once. I am dyspraxic, I am black, I'm female, I'm a mother, I'm in my fifties, you know there are many— there are many areas in which I am crossing several boundaries all at the same time. You know we are all doing that all the time and we just need to breathe out and embrace all of those complexities in Shakespeare.

[Music plays]

KH-S: Which question do you wish we were asking you and what would be your answer?

JA: Yeah I don't know with this one I can't think off the top of my head, so what I'm gonna do, what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna ask you what question do you wished you'd asked me? I'm gonna flip it round because I can't think right now [laughs].

KH-S: [laughs] That's brilliant, ok, ok, I accept your challenge. I want to ask you about playing Shakespeare, about the detail of the language and the text, and the life of it and where you think— I think it's a question about you mentioned about it being in our curriculum and being something British we study and love and I— I had a thought about the way we love Shakespeare and how I have the sense that part of the decolonisation is that nobody should any



longer tell me or encourage me to love Shakespeare in their way, right, that's what I'm thinking, so I just wondered in terms of playing Shakespeare what is it for you that is a part of your secret love, what is it for you that links with your ethnicity or maybe not, that just links with your appetites that you— you think is alive and relevant and germane in Shakespeare now?

JA: Hmm good question. Well my love came only after I started performing Shakespeare because once I kind of embodied it and once I understood what was being said, you know interpreting the lines because you know it can feel almost like a different language when you first come to it and so once I started understanding what the characters were actually saying and actually embodying it then I found a love because then I found what I love about acting, then I found what I love about theatre, and the kind of the action, and the purpose, and the immediacy, and the challenge of— of getting what you want, and how are you gonna go about that, and all the different ways you're gonna achieve that goal, and that's where my love came from it, not from reading it and thinking oh this is you know thinking in my head it was actually being in my body and then even after that it was, you know I really didn't fall in love until— with it— until I actually started playing some of the male roles and I think part of that was because the female roles that I play just didn't fit in with my life or world or experience of women, they didn't seem like any of the women in my life and I sort of like didn't get it, but when I you know for example played Hotspur I found him as a character the energy of it the drive of him, I was like yeah that's— that's kind of like me, that's what I was like as a teenager I had the energy, the drive and the willingness to want to do it and the kind of ambition, and that's the kind of stuff I connected to and that's when I found my love for it, so it was like not people telling me you should really love to play Ophelia it's a really great part, or you should love to play whatever it is, it's actually finding those roles where the stories connect you and I think maybe that's got something to do with the culture and the history that I know the— the family around me and seeing kind of like that and seeing yourself reflected seeing your world reflected and that actually when I realise that actually where I saw things and characteristics that reflected that I knew wasn't in



the places where I was told they should be and that was really exciting.

KH-S: I found so much identification with that, even with the Hotspur thing, I always wanted to play Hotspur. I've never played a female Shakespeare character and now I think I'd really like to like I always wanted to play Paulina– Paulina– Paulina– Paulina in **The Winter's Tale**, I think I'd quite like to play I've forgotten the name of the queen in **Richard II** but yeah, that's– that is exactly right I think what you've described about the traditions, even the tradition of which gender plays which role there's something about the story that's being told that is about humans and what they want, what their appetites are rather than the just the linear facts of– of you know of gender or of the description of what we ascribe to them and maybe that's part of the decolonisation we were talking about, the next, the last question is how do we– how could we decolonise our theatres? And I was going to ask you that as well so shall we continue pulling on that thread? I would like to ask now how do we decolonise our theatres? And if we think of tradition as safety and the things people think they know work and won't bruise Shakespeare's work too much, where do you think we can take better risks in our theatres, from our makers, even from on a producing level, where do think perhaps Shakespeare can be interrogated or rattled to see what else falls out?

JA: Well I think actually it can and should be rattled at every aspect. I think we have been doing these plays for so long that actually there's a reason why they should stand the test of time if they should, it's because they can and should be able to withstand a good rattling, you know like you should be able to go ok well let's try lets mix up something there, let's try that there, let's see if we do that, let's not just fall back on what we– what is safe, let's not just do a nice safe casting of a safe production which is very traditional whenever we feel like we need to get some bums on seats, let's actually keep going with the advances that we have had in theatre of trying new ways of doing theatre and Shakespeare, and I'm saying new ways because they're new to us in this you know this



world of whiteness that we have in this country, let's look to other countries and other cultures and how they approach Shakespeare and theatre and maybe we can learn a bit from them rather than just relying and falling back on our traditional way of doing something.

KH-S: Fantastic. And that's also very exciting indeed, rattled on every level, shaken in every way because it sounds to me like the truth in the sense that no matter what the robustness of Shakespeare means that he can take it, I've seen productions set in the future or set in some town somewhere that doesn't exist or a mixture of various things and it can take it.

JA: Yeah and that's it, it's like as a, you know, as a country we— we love, we do love Shakespeare and we've said that before and there is a reason it's because as you say those plays are robust so why are we just doing them in a way that we know works, no that's not exciting, we know it can take it so let's push it, I mean that's my thought anyway.

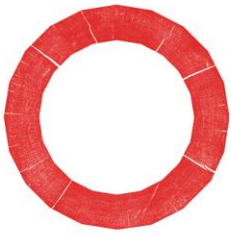
AA: I wanted to turn that into the great American, writer, essayist, thinker, activist James Baldwin, Jimmy Baldwin, black, gay, American, chain-smoking, funny, sharp, delightful, fearsome, a great critic of the homophobia and the racism that he experienced in his homeland of America, and someone who as a young man said that he saw nothing that connected him to Shakespeare but as an older man he came to— to look at Shakespeare again and this is what he said

"The greatest poet in the English language [Shakespeare] found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love — by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him... I think it is simply that he walked his streets and saw them, and tried not to lie about what he saw... to be part of a people who have ears to hear and hear not, who have eyes to see and see not... That is why he is called a poet [Shakespeare]. And his responsibility, which is also his joy and his



strength and his life, is to defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle, to bear witness, as long as breath is in him, to that mighty, unnameable, transfiguring force which lives in the soul of man, and to aspire to do his work so well that when the breath has left him, the people — all people! — who search in the rubble for a sign or a witness will be able to find him there."

Jimmy Baldwin is saying whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, whatever your life history, whatever your hopes, your dreams, your aspirations, the barriers that lie before you or behind you Shakespeare is there for you, he sees you, he understands you, he makes a space for you to be in his work, to be moved by his work, to be enlightened by his work, to be challenged by his work, but to be welcome always in his work. This is what James Baldwin came to understand about Shakespeare and it is my huge delight. I have played goodies and baddies, I have played men and I've played women, and always I find myself in whatever part I'm playing, always Shakespeare sees an aspect of a human being that is in all of us. Shakespeare is— is there for us, has something to say to us in every aspect of our life and I want that aspect, that broad canvas to be available to us, we are part of society and we have— we have the opportunity as theatre makers to allow all of society to sit with us at the table of the great humanitarian to share with each other and to see ourselves reflected in the work, and I can't bare anything that impedes peoples access to that, whether it's the way that we price our theatres, we market our shows, the way we stage our productions, the way we get out there in the community and invite everybody to come see them. You know I just— I want people— you know people may hate Shakespeare that's their choice but I want them at least to have a had good opportunity to experience it and then make a decision that's based on their own, you know their heart resonance to the work that's in front of them, not to the accident of their birth that means that they live in this income bracket, or their a part of that culture, or that gender, or that race, or whatever it is that may get in the way, that has to go and we have to have that conversation now and be bold and brave enough to say we won't be



racist, we won't be non-racist, we'll be actively antiracist, that takes activity and we have to engage with that. When George Floyd was murdered and I went to Trafalgar Square and I knelt at Trafalgar Square with everybody else for that 8 minutes and 46 seconds you know Shylock came into my head, the Shylock that says you know we are the same 'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?' we are the same, Shakespeare came to me, that was the prayer that came to me it was Shakespeare.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us but we'll be back next week with another episode in our **Shakespeare and Race** series, when we'll reflect on the series so far and begin to answer the question of how we decolonise our theatres, our education system and the works of Shakespeare.

You've been listening to Such Stuff with me Imogen Greenberg and Michelle Terry.

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