

A BRITISH THEATRE CONFERENCE:
ALL TOGETHER NOW? BRITISH THEATRE
AFTER MULTICULTURALISM
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Recent theatre writing addressing some of the issues raised by this conference brought about strong public reaction. These included: Nicholas Kent's commission of playwrights for a series of plays, *The Great Game*, which sought to engage with the history and current situation in Afghanistan, Richard Bean's play *England People Very Nice* and Caryl Churchill's ten-minute play *Seven Jewish Children*, written in response to recent events in Gaza.

It was not surprising, therefore, that debate concerning the subject of multiculturalism commenced as soon as the delegates began to arrive for The British Theatre Conference, held at Warwick University's Arts Centre from 13 to 14 June 2009. Many voiced concerns about the conference title. At one end of the scale, some were disputing whether multiculturalism had happened at all, and claimed that the title implied that a unified Britain already existed. At the other end of the scale, some people considered that the term *interculturalism* would have conveyed the idea of integrated communities much more aptly than multiculturalism which implied many separate self-contained cultures. Others focused on the scope of the different cultures which would be discussed, interrogating whether they included disabled communities, gay rights or women's rights. Where would the boundaries lie?

A whole host of speakers with impressive credentials proceeded to address these and many other issues to an audience largely consisting of theatre professionals and academics. The keynote address, *A National Narrative*, gave the RSC's Artistic Director, Michael Boyd, the opportunity to talk about Shakespeare's relevance to the contemporary world. His driving point was that Shakespeare also lived through a time of change. Boyd began by reminding delegates of British theatrical history's origins in the tradition of the medieval Mystery Plays and of the fundamentally important place of religion in society. He particularly highlighted England's Catholic past and the culture shock brought about by Henry VIII's decision to become the Supreme Head of the Church of England and the subsequent threat of Spanish invasion (alternatively perceived as the potential saviour of the Catholic population). The submergence and incorporation of England's Catholic past into its Protestant future provides a mirror for our own time. We are supposed to feel a connection with England's emerging multiculturalism, and if some audience members failed to be moved by this at all, it did

give several participants the opportunity to discuss the lack of roles and opportunities for Black and Asian actors.

This particular concern was raised at several points during the conference and sometimes threatened to dominate the discussions held at the end of each panel. Boyd explained that in some cases a cast of actors with mixed racial origins would be a travesty, for example, in the case of *Othello*, where to have more than one black man would make nonsense of the play. It did not seem to have occurred to him that Othello could be played by a white man and all the other actors could be Black or Asian.

Other panellists focused their debates in various directions including funding for the arts; the question of identity; whether the theatre serves local communities; the question of offending the audience and whether audiences have the right to be offended; and, lastly, the question of whether it is possible to have a national theatre. The panellists often held opposing views.

Asked whether the theatre serves the community, Lisa O'Neill-Rogan of the Bolton Octagon said that mistakes had been made, whereas Stuart Rogers of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre asserted that his company had been successfully serving the very diverse community by actively looking for innovative theatrical events to meet local needs. Asked the question of whether a national theatre is possible, Vicky Featherstone, Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Scotland, said that it was not possible to have a national identity because British society is too multifarious, whereas theatre and film director Richard Eyre said that they were intentionally outward looking.

The panel's discussion on *Offending the Audience* had one of the liveliest debates with Stewart Lee, who helped write and direct *Jerry Springer – The Opera*, insisting that he did not deliberately set out to offend; and playwright Richard Bean explained that people in fact want to take offence, because this gives them an opportunity to define themselves more clearly. The most eloquent speaker of the conference was writer Kenan Malik who spoke about the need to keep clashes out in the open and not suppress them merely in an effort to encourage tolerance. He talked about offence acting as a dialogue of debate with different strands of opinion which should not represent entire cultures. It was a beautifully profound response displaying a belief in the individual, and offered an encouragement to theatre professionals to bravely represent different cultures. In many ways, this summed up the overarching principal of the entire conference.