

Institution: University of Warwick
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Multi-Cultural Shakespeare in Britain
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Shakespeare is at the heart of British culture, and the ways in which we stage his plays help define our understanding of ourselves. Tony Howard's research has highlighted the central role of outstanding Black and Asian actors in shaping and enriching our relationship with those plays. By uncovering the history of these performers in <i>The Robeson Project</i> and <i>Multi-Cultural Shakespeare in Britain</i>, the research describes how Shakespeare has mediated between BME cultures and concepts of national identity and inclusion. It has restored the contribution of Black and Asian actors to the history of British theatre and re-connected contemporary Black and Asian actors with their artistic and cultural heritage. It has stimulated tourism through exhibitions and festivals, and inspired new forms of artistic expression.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Embedded in his broader research interests in the social and political contexts of Shakespearean performance, the two projects – <i>The Robeson Project</i> and <i>Multi-Cultural Shakespeare in Britain</i> – explore the use of the classical theatrical repertoire, especially Shakespeare, as a vehicle for ideological debate and for political self-expression. Combined, the research offers a history of Black and Asian actors playing Shakespeare within the turbulent social and political landscape of race relations in the USA and UK, and Cold War politics.</p> <p>In 2008 Professor Tony Howard (1973 – present) was awarded a Creative Fellowship by CAPITAL, a HEFCE-funded collaboration between Warwick University and the Royal Shakespeare Company, to investigate the career of singer, actor and human rights activist Paul Robeson. In 1930, Robeson became the first black actor to play <i>Othello</i> in Britain since 1860. Timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Robeson's performance of <i>Othello</i> at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1959 – a landmark performance in the history of British theatre – the project both celebrated this milestone and explored the social conflicts surrounding it.</p> <p>During 2008 Howard examined almost 3,000 British and American security surveillance documents (released under the US Freedom of Information Act or by the UK Public Records Office) on Robeson, his wife Eslanda, and his compatriot Sam Wanamaker (who played Iago at Stratford), to reveal the authorities' response to Robeson's presence in Britain and the ways in which Robeson's art was affected by surveillance and suppression. Howard recorded and archived interviews with politicians and supporters who had campaigned for Robeson, actors from the 1959 <i>Othello</i> company and audience members who saw the performance, and members of the Black community – actors, directors, producers from several generations – who have been inspired by his example. The research was published in an article in <i>Shakespeare Bulletin</i> (2010) which focused on the ways in which Robeson made <i>Othello</i> a symbol of race relations in the twentieth century and how his opponents, namely the FBI and MI5, had attempted to write him out of history. The project also resulted in exhibitions, podcasts, multi-media-presentations, a verbatim theatre piece and a radio documentary.</p> <p>Building on his research into Robeson as an important figure in the history of black theatre in Britain, Howard embarked on his current research project, <i>Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain</i>, which maps the history of non-white actors' and directors' growing role in British cultural life over several generations, through an examination of their involvement in Shakespearean performance. Howard is exploring ways in which the changing face of British Shakespearean performance since the 1930s has reflected the emergence of a multicultural society, providing an insight into the evolution of British society since World War II. Following Robeson's performance of <i>Othello</i> at Stratford in 1959, opportunities for black actors grew in the 1960s. However, integrated opportunities were hard to come by as inclusive casting policies were not adopted by major theatres until the 1980s. As the country's demographics changed, innovations were introduced and Black and Asian theatre companies were using Shakespeare to address their concerns: postcolonialism, social integration, and fundamentalism. Together these projects represent the reclamation of brilliant but largely marginalised or forgotten artists.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>Howard's most relevant publications include:</p>

'Blood on the Bright Young Things: Shakespeare in the Thirties', in Maggie Gale and Clive Barker (ed.), *British Theatre Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.135-161. [chapter, edited volume; peer reviewed]

'Icons and Labourers: Some Political Actresses', in Maggie Gale and John Stokes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.134-153. [chapter, edited volume; peer reviewed]

'Shakespeare and Television Genres: Evolving Forms and Shifting Definitions', Anthony Guneratne (ed.), *Shakespeare and Genre* (London: Macmillan, 2011), pp.205-222. [chapter, edited volume; peer reviewed]

"'My Travail's History': Perspectives on the Road to *Othello*, Stratford 1959', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 28.1 (2010): 93-100 [peer reviewed journal article]

Evidence of Quality:

British Theatre Between the Wars was described as an 'excellent collection', *Modern Language Review*, 98:3 (Jul 2003), 701-2 and was reviewed in *Theatre Journal*, 54:4 (Dec 2002), 659-661.

Research Grants:

CAPITAL Fellowship (2008), £48,298 (pro rata).

AHRC Standard Research Grant, 'Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain, 1930-2010', PI Howard (2012-2015), £609,997 (f.e.c).

AHRC peer reviews: 'An original, important, timely and necessary project, affecting not just theatre and academia but life in the UK at many levels'; 'A much-needed political history ... a very high quality proposal, arising out of an excellent body of work...a project of immense reach and range... This project has the most outputs and greatest dissemination strategy of any AHRC project I have seen.'

4. Details of the impact

By exploring how ethnic minorities have performed, understood and re-interpreted Shakespeare, the research has contributed to a greater understanding of the dramatic social, cultural and demographic changes in twentieth-century Britain. Public beneficiaries include theatre goers, theatre professionals – actors, directors and producers – especially those from the British Black and Asian communities, activists and community groups. Having collaborated at every stage with leading UK multi-ethnic cultural organisations and individuals, the research has preserved and re-presented the multicultural nature of Britain's theatre history contributing to public discourse about contemporary Britain, multiculturalism and the arts. It has provided stimulus to tourism through exhibitions and festival activities, and has resulted in the creation of new forms of artistic expression.

1. The Robeson Project

A Slave's Son at Stratford

To connect theatregoers with the life and legacy of Paul Robeson, Howard created two panel exhibitions. The first *A Slave's Son at Stratford*, toured alongside the RSC's 2009 production of *Othello* which played in Coventry (30 Jan – 7 Feb; 5,015 audiences); Hackney Borough, London (10-14 Feb; 5,662 audience); Newcastle-upon-Tyne (17-21 Feb; 3,069 audience); Oxford (24-28 Feb) and Liverpool (3-7 Mar). During the rehearsals of *Othello*, Howard presented the research, including sound tapes of Robeson's 1944 and 1959 performances to the director and cast. The effect on the production – in which Ghanaian actor, Patrice Naiambana, related his performance to the African diaspora and to Robeson as a crucial model for the black artist – is recorded in John Russell Brown, *The Routledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 178.

To accompany the exhibition, Howard gave multi-media presentations (including sound tapes never heard publicly before) in these theatres as well as at Bristol Old Vic (5 Jun 2009) and Shakespeare's Globe in London (approx. audience 110). In the cities where, in 1949, Robeson gave concerts under police surveillance, Howard discussed the local police reports and the local authorities' attempts to control or prevent the event. Many members of Howard's audience had attended Robeson's performances in 1959 (and even 1949) and their recollections were recorded and subsequently added to the project's digital archive, available on the project website.

A Slave's Son at Stratford (augmented with items related to Robeson's three *Othellos* and a sound

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installation) was invited to become a temporary exhibition at Shakespeare's Globe Exhibition for two months (4 January– 28 February 2010). The Globe Exhibition (rated one of the top 10 London visitor attractions: London Pass Scheme) receives 300,000 visitors annually; the Robeson exhibit was seen by an estimated 40,000 people. Howard presented the exhibition to the Shakespeare Theatres of America Association (January 2010), a forum for artistic, managerial and educational leadership involving over 100 US and Canadian theatres, and addressed the practitioners' Inclusion Committee. As a result, he was invited to deliver the keynote paper to the Inaugural Meeting of the Shakespeare Theatre Association (the SAA re-launched as an international organisation) in Florida (March 2012), and invited to curate the film programme for the first Harlem Shakespeare Festival which takes place Aug-Dec 2013.

Let Robeson Sing

The second exhibition, *Let Robeson Sing*, used documents from Warwick's Modern Records Centre, the RSC, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, and private lenders. It focused on the international campaign led by the British Trades Union (1950-1958) to restore Robeson's confiscated passport and allow him to act at Stratford. Objects brought together included petitions, materials related to his transatlantic concert (1957) conducted via telephone to St Pancras Town Hall, and Robeson's Stratford Othello costume. It was opened on 3 February 2009 by Baroness Lola Young (Former Chair of the Arts Council's Cultural Diversity Panel and Founder of the arts consultancy Cultural Brokers), and was on display until May being seen by the visitors to the search room (approx. 100). The material was digitised and presented as an online exhibition, extending the reach of the research to broader audiences (approx. 5,000 hits).

To accompany the exhibitions and to maximise access to the research findings, Howard created a series of podcasts: 'The Robeson Exhibition': introduced by Howard; 'I Have Done the State Some Service: Robeson and the FBI': a presentation by Howard and a discussion with members of the 1959 *Othello* company including audience contributions; 'Speak of Me as I am: Inside Othello': a round-table discussion on the Robeson legacy and on the significance of *Othello* for Black British actors and directors, with Joseph Marcell and Baroness Lola Young; 'Sam Wanamaker': a discussion of surveillance documents on the actor; 'Waiting for Robeson': A dramatised reading from the diaries of Chris Penny, a Stratford schoolgirl whose richly detailed diaries about the 1959 production and Robeson's popularity were uncovered during the research. The podcasts were made publicly available on the project website and the university's iTunes channel. By July 2013, the podcasts had a total of 80,755 downloads.

I have done the state some service

Howard developed a verbatim drama-documentary *I have Done the State Some Service* using materials from the FBI and MI5 files on Paul and Eslanda Robeson, together with extracts from their own speeches and writings, and from HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearing transcripts. In July 2010 actors from the Black British community presented this in a rehearsed reading at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of the Black Heritage outreach project (capacity audience: 57% Black or Ethnic Minority). As a result, the group were invited to revive the event for the Camden Black History Month (November 2010) and at the Warwick Arts Centre (May 2011; December 2012). The performers unanimously expressed their enthusiasm for the project and their wish to develop it further: 'I wanted to thank and congratulate you on a really compelling piece of drama and a very inspirational event.' (Nick Bailey); 'It was an honour to work on this project.' (Sarah Paul). Tom Cornford, who directed the production, commented that: 'All of the actors who we worked with were visibly moved by the opportunity to discover and then read and hear in public Robeson's appeals for a time when people of colour would stand centre stage. They were also brought to a new awareness of their position within the theatre, film and television industry today, informed by the history which the play revealed. ... I can report their repeated expression of the significance of this perspective for their work and their careers'.

The V&A Programme Manager (Theatre and Performance) described *I Have Done the State Some Service* as 'moving, intellectually stimulating and important for V&A audiences'; 'a dynamic learning and interpretation tool, engaging the audience on an emotional level... [and], though emotive, the depth of the research ensured that the historical facts were not lost, inspiring the audience into a passionate debate about Paul Robeson's social struggles, but also, the role of Black performers in Shakespeare since Robeson and in contemporary theatre'. Further, 'The Robeson play brought together a wide range of audiences: students, seasoned theatregoers, those interested in black and working class histories and those to whom its political content was previously unknown.

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Question and answer sessions offered an opportunity that I have rarely, if ever, witnessed before to explore the history and politics of theatre-making and theatre-going between those on-stage and off, and to reflect on the ways in which momentous change was captured by the theatre’.

The Robeson Files

As a result of the exhibitions and theatre piece, and the associated press coverage, Howard was invited to be the academic consultant and lead participant for the BBC Radio 2 documentary *The Robeson Files* (6.7. 2011; 350,000+ listeners, BBC figures), delivering the research to wider audiences. It was featured on *Pick of the Week* (BBC Radio 4 10.7.2011) and in *The Mail on Sunday’s* Programme of the Week (3.7.2011); it was called ‘fascinating’ (*The Stage*, 5.7.2011) and ‘riveting’ (One Stop Digital). Hilary Robinson, Producer of *The Robeson Files*, has said that: ‘[Howard’s] authority and passion for the subject adds considerable depth and gives us an angle which has never been aired quite so fully’.

2. Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain

Howard’s current project extends the research from a case study on Robeson to a comprehensive history of British Black and Asian artists’ contribution to twentieth-century Shakespearean theatre in Britain. The project launched with the exhibition *To Tell My Story* at the Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry (4 Dec 2012 – 24 Jan 2013) celebrating the multicultural achievements in Shakespearean performance in Britain. The exhibition was invited to become a Special Temporary Exhibition at the Globe Theatre, London (19 April – 23 June 2013; 78,876 visitors), and by Bristol Heritage to the Bristol Shakespeare Festival (5-21 July). The project’s work at Bristol also included two Shakespeare schools workshops (*Othello* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) and a panel discussion led by Howard, featured in the *Bristol Evening Post* (9.7.2013). Material for the exhibition was contributed by major theatre companies including the RSC, Leicester Curve, Tricycle, Kilburn, Talawa and Tara Arts. The significance of the research impact is demonstrated by additional invitations to collaborate. *To Tell my Story* has been invited to appear in libraries and schools in Bristol, Slough, and Lambeth; in theatres throughout the country (The Broadway, Barking, and The Curve, Leicester); and internationally, accompanying The Globe’s King Lear to St Lucia (Aug 2013) to celebrate the Caribbean contribution to British culture, invited by J.D. Douglas productions.

The significance of the impact is further indicated by social and mainstream media interest. The project film, *British Black and Asian Shakespeare*, traces the development of British Black and Asian actors on the Shakespearean stage from the 1930s to present day, inspired by Robeson’s sensational success playing *Othello* in London in 1930. It is available on the AHRC’s website (441 views) and on YouTube (491 views) The project’s live twitter event attracted 24 participants, generating 188 tweets and a potential reach of 15,000 followers. The project has also been featured on BBC West Midlands’ *Chatback* programme for the region’s African and Asian communities (21.07.13; avg 122,000 listeners, RAJAR figures).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Media coverage: *The Guardian* (29.4.2008; 26.1.2010); *Birmingham Post* (16.1.2009); *Liverpool Daily Post* (6.3.2009); *Wales Online* (7.6.2011); *Western Mail* (6.7.2011).
2. Website Hits: Robeson Project 2,849 page views; Multicultural Shakespeare 1,285 page views
3. Podcast downloads: 80,775; figures provided by IT Services
4. AHRC film: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Watch-and-Listen/Pages/Black-British-and-Asian-Shakespeare.aspx>; viewing figures: 441 views since 23.05.13 and 491 views on YouTube.
5. Testimonials from Research Users (Actors Nick Bailey and Sarah Paul; Director Tom Cornford)
6. Testimonial from the V&A Programme Manager (Theatre and Performance)
7. Exhibition visitor numbers provided by Shakespeare’s Globe
8. Details of MRC exhibition provided by the Head of the MRC