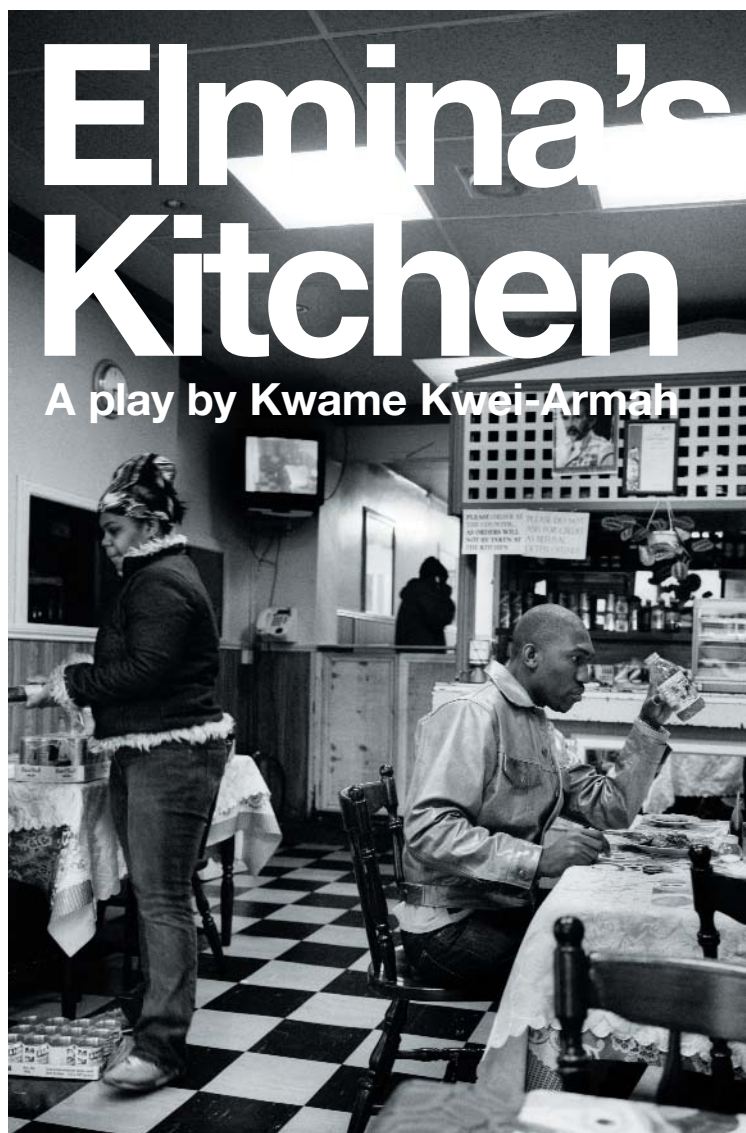


Elmina's Kitchen Background Pack

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Elmina's Kitchen

by Kwame Kwei-Armah
A touring production, co-produced by Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the National Theatre.

Director
Angus Jackson

Further production details
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk
www.birmingham-rep.co.uk

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The Play

TOURING CAST: (IN ORDER OF SPEAKING)

Digger :	Shaun Parkes
Deli :	Kwame Kwei-Armah
Ashley,	Deli's son :Michael Obiora
Baygee :	Oscar James
Clifton :	Don Warrington
Anastasia :	Doña Croll

UNDERSTUDIES

Anastasia :	Donna Berlin
Clifton, Baygee :	John Adewole
Deli, Digger, Ashley :	Gary Lawrence

The production opened at Birmingham Rep on 25 February 2005 before touring the UK.



Don Warrington
(Clifton) in rehearsal
Photo: Catherine Ashmore

Plot Synopsis

ACT 1, SCENE 1

It's a rainy Tuesday afternoon in 'Elmina's Kitchen', a scruffy, not very popular West Indian takeaway in Hackney, North London. DELI, the proprietor, is excited that his older brother, Dougie, is due out of prison and chats about this with his old friend, DIGGER, a local small time gangster, or 'Yardie', who passes his time in Deli's restaurant. ASHLEY, Deli's teenage son, comes into the restaurant angry at his dad for not having dealt properly with ROY, the owner of a takeaway across the road, who has had an argument with Deli. In a snatched moment, out of his father's earshot, Ashley asks Digger if he can join his jobs and dealings, but Digger refuses.

An older man, BAYGEE, who is a door-to-door clothes salesman and one of Deli's regulars, pops in for a shot of rum and is quickly followed by ANASTASIA, a woman in her early 40's, who comes in to apply for the vacancy of chef advertised in the window. After tasting the macaroni pie that she has made, Deli gives her the job. Digger warns Deli not to be taken in by her.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Anastasia has been working at the restaurant for a while and has helped Deli decorate the place for Dougie's return. Digger questions her about her developing relationship with Deli, but

Baygee tells him to lay off. Roy is about to re-open his premises across the road as a West Indian takeaway and therefore be in direct competition with 'Elmina's Kitchen' and Ashley, again, challenges his dad's ability to deal with the problem. After Deli exits to buy some plantain for his brother's welcome home party, Ashley asks Digger for a second time if he can work for him and this time, ends up with a punch in the face. As Anastasia cleans him up and tells him about her teenage son, Marvin, Deli rushes back with the news that Dougie has been killed in prison, just as he was about to be released.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

CLIFTON, Deli's dad, has travelled over from the West Indies to attend his son Dougie's funeral. Ashley is enjoying listening to his grandad's stories when Deli interrupts and offers a cold, formal welcome to his father. After a few awkward exchanges Clifton, alone with Deli, asks if he can stay until the funeral is over. Deli, not wanting Clifton to stay in the flat above 'Elmina's Kitchen' (which is named after his mother and Clifton's estranged wife), agrees to ask his ex-wife, Ashley's mum, if Clifton can stay with her instead.

Anastasia and Deli are left alone in the restaurant and he begins to tell her about the impossibility of investigating Dougie's death in



Oscar James
(Baygee), in rehearsal
Photo: Catherine Ashmore

Plot Synopsis

prison. She challenges his attitude to his life, accusing him of feeling sorry for himself and suggesting he should 'clean up his environment'. Their tempers rise, but then Deli cooks them both a plantain burger, which inspires Anastasia to suggest that he turn the restaurant into a West Indian fast food takeaway. Buoyed up by the excitement, Anastasia kisses Deli, but he breaks off and tells her to wait until he is ready for a relationship. This awkward moment is broken by Digger who comes in furious after an argument with 'Tricky' who he has cut with his knife to teach him a lesson. Deli's tolerance is waning and he argues with Digger about discussing that sort of business in 'Elmina's Kitchen'.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Following the funeral song at the beginning of the second half, the action resumes in the newly refurbished 'Elmina's Plantain Hut', at the end of the re-opening party. Clifton, the self-declared 'Culture master', sings calypso songs with Baygee and soon manoeuvres himself into an intimate dance with Anastasia. She had hoped this would be the night that she and Deli would get together but this is

Doña Croll
(Anastasia) in rehearsals
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



thwarted when Deli finds Ashley's college books in the rubbish. Deli is now keen for Anastasia, Clifton and Baygee to go home so he can confront his son.

Ashley rushes in and Deli sits him down and gives him a burger before challenging him about his books. This leads to a huge argument between Deli, who is trying to turn life around for both of them, and Ashley, who is increasingly frustrated at his father's inability to take action and defend his reputation in the neighbourhood. Deli hears approaching police sirens and discovers that Ashley's hands are cut and he has taken cocaine. It seems that Ashley has finally been accepted by Digger on a job; and soon to join it becomes apparent that he has helped Digger to beat up Roy and set fire to his shop.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

The following morning, Anastasia is late for work and she learns from Deli about last night's fire across the road. While Deli leaves the restaurant to prepare some food for Clifton, Anastasia warns Clifton not to tell anyone that they ended up spending the previous night together. But Clifton does not agree to it and warns Anastasia that unless she leaves Deli alone from now on, he will tell everyone exactly what happened.

Ashley appears in a flash new tracksuit, waving the keys to his new BMW, probably paid for with the money he earned from Digger on the previous night's job. He has another row with his father, who is furious at the decisions Ashley is making about his life. Ashley storms out and Deli is upbraided by Clifton.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Anastasia has decided to leave Deli and the restaurant. In her farewell to Deli, she reveals that her son Marvin is dead, a secret she had concealed until now. Deli cannot understand why she is going, but of course doesn't know about her night with his father, Clifton.

Plot Synopsis

After she leaves, Clifton comes into the restaurant and reveals to Deli that he spent the night with Anastasia. While Deli is still reeling from that news, Digger walks in and tells Deli that he has joined a rival gang, the 'Renton crew', that is demanding protection money for the restaurant from Deli. Outraged, Deli holds a knife to Digger's throat, tells him he will not pay and orders him to leave his son alone.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Baygee lightens the mood by telling Clifton one of his funny stories, but this mood is soon broken by Deli, who has returned from the police station. Deli tells Clifton that he and Ashley are leaving Hackney and the restaurant. Clifton panics at having nowhere to stay, which builds to a huge argument between father and son, with Deli releasing 18 years of pent up anger at his father. After a struggle, Clifton walks out.

Later, Deli tells Ashley that he has informed on Digger and that if Roy dies in hospital, the police will be coming to arrest Digger. He

wants to use the rest of the money that Dougie left him to flee the country with Ashley, but Ashley is shocked to the core at what his father has done. At this point, Digger walks in and tells Deli that he cannot get away with such an act of betrayal. He rearranges the restaurant to give the impression that there has been a struggle about drugs and then tells Ashley to earn his 'rep' by shooting his father. As Ashley is about to pull the trigger, Digger shoots Ashley dead, and he falls into his father's arms.

Kwame Kwei-Armah
(Deli) and Doña Croll
in rehearsals

Photo: Catherine Ashmore



Themes in the play

READING AND EDUCATION

The idea of reading and self-education is an important theme in *Elmina's Kitchen*. At one time or another during the play, all of the characters make reference to books, reading and learning. Baygee, in warning Digger about the destructive influence that his often brutal 'Yardie' activities have on the community, tells him "People should always read street signs, don't you think, Digger?" Here, he is ostensibly referring to the "couple of wild yard boys driving up a one way street" that he has seen, but there is also a subtext to his comment. Throughout the play, Baygee continues to tolerate Digger's presence in the restaurant whilst wholly disapproving of the ways in which he, and men like him, make their money and "eat up Hackney".

When Anastasia first appears in the play, she clutches a copy of *The Celestine Prophecies*, "like a bible". The book and its teachings have offered her a lifeline and a coping mechanism following the death of her son, Marvin. As she says to Deli, "this is life healing stuff" and she, unknown at this point to both Deli and the audience, is living testament to this comment. Deli picks up on Anastasia's passion for self-discovery through reading and, as we learn from his scornful son Ashley, is soon reading, "all breed of self help books like you was a blasted white man." Ashley's comments here also touch on the subject of education and race, and the characters in *Elmina's Kitchen* run the full gamut of attitudes towards black self-education within a primarily white wider community, from Deli's attempts at self-improvement through a new-found willingness to read, to Digger's rejection of any orthodox, educated form of living his life. For Digger, education means equipping yourself with an ability to survive on the mean streets that are run by gangs and 'crews', as can be seen clearly in his use of language when he is upbraiding Ashley for his naïve appreciation of how he lives;

"And you wanna be a bad man? Go back to **school**, youth, and **learn**. You can't just walk into dis bad man ting, you gotta **learn** the whole science of it." (my emphasis)

Kwame Kwei-Armah continues this theme in his next play, *Fix Up* – at the National Theatre in spring 2005 – in which one of the

characters, Kiyi, owns a 'conscious' bookstore which is threatened by redevelopment. It questions further the importance of reading and educated self-awareness within in a black community.

FATHER AND SON

There are several father and son relationships in the play – Clifton and Deli, Deli and Ashley, and a suggestion that Baygee has perhaps been something of a father to Deli in Clifton's absence. These relationships allow the writer to explore themes of inheritance and to examine what is handed down and what is rejected by succeeding generations. It's interesting that, in this world of extended family, there is never any mention of Digger's family. Even Anastasia, a relative stranger to the men who are connected with 'Elmina's Kitchen', makes several references to her son, Marvin. Digger stands alone in this play and even his social 'brother', Deli, rejects him as he makes efforts to change his life throughout the play.

Deli is at pains not to play his part in a repeating cycle of history in terms of his relationship with his son. We learn of the built-up anger and resentment that Deli feels towards his father from the first moment Clifton arrives in the restaurant, feelings which are given full release in their last scene together in the play. Perhaps the play's greatest tragedy is Deli's inability to get Ashley "on line" with the ways in which he is trying to improve both of their lives and so he, in turn, becomes a father who has failed his son, albeit in a different way to Clifton.

There is a touching moment in Deli and Anastasia's argument in Act 1, Scene 3 in which Anastasia, in response to Deli's assertion that there is nothing good in his life says; "You have your child. Anything better than having your child?"

This catalytic comment provides Deli with the motivation he needs to try to keep his son on the straight and narrow, but the change comes as too much, too late. His attempts to clean up and re-decorate the restaurant are the physical manifestation of his attempts to make things better in life, but the stronger forces of the lawless culture that Digger embodies eventually mean that the futures of both he and his son become hopeless.

Rehearsal Diary

Abbreviations

SM – Stage Management/Stage Manager

DSM – Deputy Stage Manager

ASM – Assistant Stage Manager

AD – Assistant Director

Day 1

Normally we would start at 10am, but today we gather an hour later. Kwame has been directing a production of *Elmina's Kitchen* in America and has only just returned. Strange to have been directing the play over there only to journey back to be directed in a different production of the same play!

Representatives from National Theatre, Birmingham Rep, the cast and production team assemble and exchange hellos. Nicholas Hytner and Jonathan Church, the respective Artistic Directors, say how glad they are that the play is being revived and then we are left with the usual rehearsal room personnel-the cast, director, Assistant Director, Stage Manager, Deputy Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Manager-for a read through of the script. As AD, I read out the stage directions. The cast are already at ease with the play and their characters, many of them having been in the original production at the National Theatre in 2003.

In the afternoon, SM do the 'mark up', which involves replicating the exact ground plan of

the set with coloured tape on the rehearsal room floor, so the actors can be sure of spacing and positioning from day one. We are lucky to already have key pieces of the set, like the food cabinets and the restaurant tables and chairs. Bunny (Christie, the Designer) talks through the model box with the company, which is a 1:25 scale model replica of the set she has designed for the production and, along with Angus, answers any questions the actors have at this stage, such as 'Am I visible from this point?' or 'Where is the imagined upstairs flat in relation to the set?'

We then start the long process of slowly working through the scenes, reading them first, and then discussing them. Angus asks the actors a lot of 'who, where, what, why' questions about their characters and clarifies their collective back stories. This is so that all of the actors are absolutely clear on key information such as the biographical detail of the characters' lives and where they have come from immediately prior to any scene, which will inform the way they play the character.

Meanwhile, in the production office, the SM team have inherited the original props list from the first production and begin work sourcing and researching all of the props needed in the play, from guns to Guinness punch!



Michael Obiora
(Ashley), in rehearsal
Photo: Catherine Ashmore

Rehearsal Diary

Day 2

We continue where we left off – slowly progressing through the early scenes, reading and discussing and then, after lunch, start to ‘put it on its feet’. At this early stage, Angus is happy to let actors wander about the floor, finding their feet, feeling their way and familiarising themselves with the set. It’s all very relaxed and informal. Then we re-trace these instinctive moves and think about them more specifically. At this stage Ruth, the DSM, starts to make a pencil note of where people are moving to and from for the prompt book. This is the performance bible for the production and contains details and timings of every light and sound cue and also where actors enter, move and exit.

Day 3

The AD will often be asked to do some research, either to help the actors’ practical understanding of their roles or to inform the specifics of the set design. Today, these queries range from finding some information about Parkinson’s disease for Don (playing Clifton), to questions about where bins go for food disposal in a restaurant, according to Heath and Hygiene regulations.

We continue to work through the scenes. Angus stresses that, at this stage, he is not ‘blocking’ the actors’ moves with any precision: we are just ‘playing’, one of the key

Kwame Kwei-Armah
and Michael Obiora
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



benefits of this relatively generous amount of rehearsal time. It allows the actors to discover at a calmly productive pace, rather than being under pressure to nail things down right away. Because several of the cast and Angus were involved in the original production of the play, everyone is at pains to discover the play anew and not lapse into ‘when we did it last time’ thinking. This approach is key in keeping the new production fresh and vital.

Day 4

Neil McArthur, the show’s composer, holds a music call in the morning with Don (Clifton), who is required to sing in the play, and which he is feeling a bit nervous about. Meanwhile, parallel rehearsals continue in the main rehearsal space. We have a lovely rehearsal room – big, light and bright with natural light – the holy grail of rehearsal rooms!

This afternoon, we reach scene 3 in rehearsal which is Don’s first scene as Clifton in the play. We spend a lot of time reading through and discussing this man. Why has he come? What is the history of his relationship with his son? Later, Don and I spend some time discussing Parkinsons and how this may affect the way Clifton walks; the likely moments in which he might shake; and whether he would be in any pain.

After lunch, a boxer comes in to spend an hour with Kwame (whose character Deli is an ex-boxer), to ensure that Kwame knows how a boxer stands, moves and holds himself.

Day 5

It’s been a quietly productive first week. Today feels like a good point to break for the weekend and let things settle with the cast. Neil leads a singing session with the company to round off the day. Their voices are uplifting and moving and it becomes apparent this play will have emotional impact.

Rehearsal Diary

WEEK 2

Day 6

It's important to publicise the tour as much as possible before we start, so Graeme, the Company Manager, is busy scheduling various interviews with press and radio for Kwame and Angus.

In the morning, we pick up where we left off on Friday, at the beginning of Act 2, and continue to work through the scene, discussing character objectives and discovering where this leads them. At the moment, we are still 'playing' and trying various things out. Ruth, the DSM, is not noting any exact positioning yet but as we progress through the next few weeks and begin to make firm decisions about traffic across the stage, it will be important for her to do this for the understudy rehearsals. Then if the need arises, an understudy will know exactly where their character needs to be on stage and come into a performance with the least possible difficulty for them and the rest of the company.

Shaun Parkes
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



As AD, it's my job to organise and oversee the understudy casting process, so today, I email the casting 'breakdown' (requirements) to lots of agents so they can offer suggestions for the understudy actors who will join us in Birmingham.

We rehearse a scene in the afternoon in which Michael (Ashley) will need blood on his hands. We discuss the off-stage scene that precedes the one in the play in which Ashley beats someone up, so Michael can be absolutely clear of his back story. The pain in his hands will inform Michael's movements in the scene, for example, even putting his hands in his pockets will be painful.

Day 7

The Costume team pays a visit so that Don can choose a pair of shoes for Clifton. Some actors find a piece of character clothing – especially shoes – very useful to rehearse with. In the afternoon, there is a fight call with Terry King, the Fight Director, and we choreograph the various slaps, arm twists, punches and shooting that take place in the play. Terry speaks about the importance of sound in a fight as the "cement between the bricks" of the movements. This is the element that an audience really needs in order to believe that the fight is real. Michael then practices his slap noise over and over again! Shaun tells us about one night in the last production of this play when the sound of the gun at the end didn't work, and he was forced to say 'bang', and ruin what is an incredibly tense and powerful end scene. Ruth makes a note to have 3 back-up sound effects in the wings, just in case!

Day 8

Rehearsing the confrontation between Clifton and Deli towards the end of the play, brings the central theme of fathers and sons (see Themes section, page 6) into sharp relief. Kwame talks of the moment that Clifton offers Deli "some fatherly advice" as the 'emotional gate' to the scene, opening his character up to 18 years of built-up anger and resentment. Angus encourages the actors to run through this scene where they let rip emotionally, and do not attempt any form of emotional

Rehearsal Diary

ensorship as they may usually do, either as actors judging a performance or as real life people in this situation; “it may be coarse but we may discover something”. Sure enough, once the actors have been given licence to do this, we discover the emotional boundaries of the scene and Don as Clifton, in particular, delivers a powerful reading which demonstrates Clifton’s emotional desperation and vulnerability. Had we not done this exercise, he may not have accessed those emotions.

By the end of the afternoon, we have reached the end of the play and have now ‘staggered through’ every scene.

Day 9

Today sees costume fittings for the actors with Bunny Christie.

Afterwards, we return to rehearsal and get a bit stuck when we re-visit the last scene of the play: the actors and Angus feel that, in its current layout, the set is restricting movement too much and leaves us with very few options in terms of the configuration of the actors’ positions on stage. Bunny is in rehearsals today, so she and Angus organise a hasty re-arrangement of the set, which involves removing a table and some chairs and shifting the serving area a metre or so upstage.

Instantly, everyone feels freer and the stage seems to have grown. Kwame points out that he doesn’t need to smell the burgers to know

he is in a restaurant, in other words, two tables to signify a restaurant interior is enough of a compromise between reality and stage practicality.

Day 10

Today, a photographer comes to rehearsals to take pictures for the programme and the front of house display. Whenever someone new comes into the rehearsal space, it does alter the energy of the room but a good rehearsal photographer will always work with as much stealth and discretion as possible so as not to disturb the work.

We have a Production Meeting in the afternoon, which provides an opportunity to raise any practical issues to do with the show, such as whether to blunt a real knife or use a plastic one when Deli holds the knife to Digger’s throat, or discussing how we present the food on stage, or how the set will fit into all of the different venues we are touring to: none of the stages are the same size or shape! Bunny takes Michael shopping for the tracksuit Ashley has to appear in when Deli says he is “*dressed up like a circus clown*” – they take a digital camera so Angus can have a look later and help select the best.

Day 11

Don has another singing lesson and, in the main rehearsal room, Angus tries a scene with Kwame and Dona standing. Their initial instinct is to sit down throughout the scene but standing changes the rhythm and it’s great that we have time to explore these avenues. Rehearsing this scene leads to a discussion of boundaries between these two characters. They are employer and employee but there is another, much stronger and largely unspoken relationship at work here and it’s interesting to peel back the layers of it.

Day 12

Bunny reappears with the costumes, which the actors try on. A few adjustments will be made. Neil McArthur comes in again to run a music call but also to provide musical accompaniment to the calypso scene that opens the second act, which is incredibly helpful for the actors. Ruth now has a CD of

Kwame Kwei Armah
and Michael Obiora
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



Rehearsal Diary

the music that will be played by the live musicians in performance. Up to now it's been hard to imagine how this music will change the show – and the musicians won't be on board until the week before the play opens in Birmingham – but when Ruth plays the music in rehearsals today, the scenes become punctuated by a rich, vital sound which helps to lift the performance and add a depth and polish to the work.

Day 15

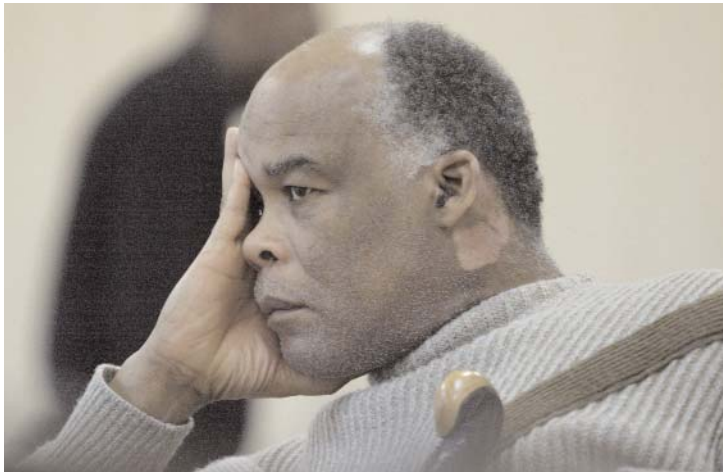
This is our last day in London before we transfer rehearsals to Birmingham. We do the first full run of the play today and it feels new, untested, a bit scrappy, but solid at its core. It is a good way to mark the shift in the focus of the rehearsals. While we have been in London the (largely London-based) company have been combining work on this play with their regular lives but this will all change in Birmingham. The actors will be living away from home in 'digs', and we will be rehearsing in the building that the play will be performed in, so there will inevitably be a greater intensity to the work as we draw closer to the opening night.

WEEK 4

Day 16

Once everyone has negotiated the M1 and the joys of looking for a parking space in central Birmingham where the theatre is located, we all convene in our new rehearsal space at

Oscar James
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



Birmingham Rep in the afternoon. Ruth is on hand to provide answers to questions like 'Where can I get a nice sandwich at lunchtime?' and 'Is there a gym nearby?' Following Friday's run, during which Angus made detailed notes, he works through the play scene-by-scene and addresses these points. We are now beginning a sort of secondary stage of refining the piece.

Day 17

Another production meeting. The Wigs and Wardrobe departments are keen to find out the measurements of the understudies to see if they will match the actors they are covering or if new clothes or wigs will have to be made or bought. I have scheduled the understudy auditions for Friday so have to ask them to wait!

Angus doesn't like to see members of Stage Management doing scene changes on stage during a performance, so today he is choreographing the actors to carry out the scene changes themselves. It helps that our set is a restaurant, where characters like Anastasia and Deli would naturally move furniture and clear tables anyway.

I have made a shortlist of actors to call to understudy auditions on Friday, so I make appointments via their agents and send out scripts so the actors have a chance to read the play and do any necessary preparation prior to their audition.

Perhaps because they are all away from home, the sense of company is really growing in the cast, which is enjoyable but also useful, as we are all about to go on tour, with only each other for company.

Day 19

I travel to London to audition the understudies and Angus watches the second full run of the play. We are now a week away from the end of rehearsals and suddenly the weeks feel shorter! This time next week, we will all be on stage for the first time. The set will have been 'got in', the musicians, lighting designer and full stage crew will have joined us and we will begin the technical rehearsals.

The Director: Angus Jackson

Why was it important for you to direct this play?

I was attracted to the world of this play: it's a high status world where decisions have the importance of life and death. The writing is rich and naturalistic and the characters are real, which always makes the casting and directing very enjoyable. The play also has a strong narrative and an epic quality, not epic in the traditional sense of lasting over a long period of time but epic in its huge, universal themes. Some of the reviews of the original production picked up on this and likened it to a Greek tragedy, in its scale and universality, which I think is right.

When you directed the original production, what sort of development work did you and Kwame do on the script?

I worked closely on the early drafts of the script with Kwame and also with Nick Drake, from the National Theatre's Literary Department. Nick ensured that the play had the right structural turning points, such as in the argument between Digger and Deli at the end of the first act. We then did a workshop

Angus Jackson
(Director), in rehearsal
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



and a rehearsed reading of the play at the National Theatre Studio and probably, throughout this process, worked through two or three drafts of the play.

What's it like working with the writer in the rehearsal room?

Well, I've only ever directed new work, so I've always been lucky to have to the writer in rehearsals, as part of the process. The director works as an interpretive filter on a play, deciding what's important and ensuring that this is realised in performance and, for me, it's useful to have the writer there to hear their insight into their work and enable me to understand the play and all its themes fully.

There are moments when it's good for the writer to be absent – the odd afternoon when it's just the actors and me and they probably feel they can speak truthfully about the text and their characters and not have to censor their feelings in front of the writer. On this play, Kwame is very easy to have in rehearsal. Because he is also an actor, he understands the practical process of rehearsing a new play and the negotiation involved. He lets me try things that might prove to be blind alleys and, equally, I am prepared to do that with the actors. It's all negotiation.

Touching on the subject of actors, I've noticed you ask them a lot of questions in rehearsal. You often respond to an actor's question with another question. Is this a deliberate strategy?

Yes, very much so. If you tell someone what to do, that won't get them invested in the role. Asking them questions will force them to think about their involvement with the character, scene or play and if they can come up with the answers themselves, this will enable them to gain ownership. The worst performances I've seen in theatre are where the actors do not own their performances.

But doesn't that sometimes mean that you are waiting for them to catch up, to say what you have already thought of?

Sometimes, but you need a lot of patience as a director! Also, it's important to say that I

The Director: Angus Jackson

think the actors are working with me, not for me. I let them explore and experiment just as Kwame allows me to do the same with his script, even though, when he's in the room watching me work, I might be exploring something that ultimately isn't right. I'm quite honest, though; my cards are on the table. If an actor makes a choice that I don't feel is right I will say "I don't buy that" and there are times when you have to say, "you should do this".

Have you encountered any difficulties in rehearsing this play for the second time with some of the same actors from the original production?

My approach has been to treat this production as if it's happening for the first time, but because some of the same people are involved; some decisions have inevitably been made in the same way. It's interesting, actually, to watch the actors move across the stage. Even the ones who weren't in the original production are taking up a lot of the same positions on stage, making the same moves as their predecessors, as if there is a right way of doing it. In other instances, though, such as Don playing Clifton, a lot of the decisions he is making about the character are very different

and that is a good thing, because it keeps it fresh and alive. I've also been struck by how the actors from the first production are still prepared to enter into a spirit of investigation, even if they end up reaching the same conclusions. I have directed a revival before where the cast were a mix of old and new and somehow they weren't quite in step, but this hasn't happened here, perhaps because I have learnt from past experience.

Finally, can you talk about the set? You mentioned that you were drawn to the play's naturalism but the set is quite abstract, isn't it?

Well, Bunny Christie and I didn't want a naturalistic set as we felt it would be too limiting and reductive for a play with such big, universal themes. Before I directed the original production, Bunny, Kwame and I visited a lot of West Indian Cafes and Takeaways in Hackney, where the play is set. We ate a lot of patties and curried goat! There was one in particular which had bright yellow walls with black and white photos of black heroes and that was the place from which Bunny drew her inspiration for our set. We abstracted that place to get our set.

The Company Manager: Graeme Braidwood

Can you explain what a Company Manager is?

A Company Manager is the connection between the touring company and the producer of the play, whether that's a commercial producer or a repertory theatre, like with *Elmina's Kitchen*. You make sure that the show happens, in every way; on time, in the right place...!

In the right place?

Well, yes, I'm not joking. I was once on a tour with a show where we were performing in small venues, a different one each day. I remember one morning looking up the next little town on a map and driving there with the actors in the minibus, only to find that we were actually booked to play in a town with the same name, but in the next county! Anyway, we got to the right place in the end, and did the show; we just drove very quickly on windy roads and overtook lots of tractors on bends!

What is your day-to-day routine on tour?

It's really dependent on the scale and nature of the show. My first duty would be to sort out any problems that may have arisen from the night before. If the show is well organised, there may not be much to do. It's certainly the case in Stage Management that the job gets interesting when things go wrong. Quite often, the most enjoyable days are when I have lots of problems to sort out and troubleshoot, and they could range from organising a doctor's appointment for an actor with a sore throat, to liaising with the financiers of the show about stage crew overtime.

On a show like this, when I am involved during the rehearsal period, I am busy putting plans in place for the tour but my main role is to support the Stage Management team which, again, could involve helping and co-ordinating anything and everything to do with props. Yesterday, for instance, I trawled the posh shops of Birmingham to find the carrier bags that Baygee brings in for his first entrance in the play. You can't be too grand in this job!

What will be the particular challenges of this production on tour?

Well the obvious one will be understudies. If they are called upon, they need to be ready and fully prepared to do the job. It's a time thing. They don't start with us until the Press Night in Birmingham and yet, a week later, they have to be prepared and confident to give a performance if needed. It will be tight! Also, there is a lot of food in this show and it can be a struggle to find a suitable place to prepare edible food in every backstage area.

You are 'on the road' a lot in your job. What are the difficulties of touring?

Sometimes as Company Manager, it can be quite lonely. The temptation is to join in with the on-tour social activities but it's important to remember I'm on tour to do a job that carries a lot of responsibility. I have learnt that it's sometimes necessary for me to exist separately from the social aspects.

We all take our creature comforts at home for granted, so without them, on tour, it can be hard. There's the whole world of 'digs' (homes in which actors and the production team rent a room while they are in a particular city), but when it's not your home, no matter how friendly your hosts are, you can never totally relax and switch off. You have to be polite and chat to them even if you have had a long and gruelling day in the theatre. You are, existing under someone else's rules.

So, what coping strategies have you developed to help with this?

The ability to sleep anywhere is crucial! I think it's also important to give yourself little treats when you are on tour and away from home. My thing is music and CDs. I drive my Stage Management team mad with all of the music I play and listen to!

Do you have to like the show you are working on?

Well it does help. If you are on a six-month tour with a show that you don't think is any good, it's an incredibly demoralising

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experience – like pushing a heavy object up a steep hill. Luckily, I think *Elmina's Kitchen* is a great show and an important one, too.

How did you become a Company Manager and what qualities does the job require?

I did a three-year Performing Arts degree, learnt about Stage Management in the process and discovered I really liked it. I would suggest that if anyone was interested in doing this job, they should try and get as much experience as they can, whether by doing school plays, amateur dramatics or work experience. Many regional theatres like Birmingham Rep offer good work experience opportunities. You need to be patient, calm and generous. Being a good Company Manager or working in any area of Stage Management is like being a great party host. You have to be able to take enjoyment from knowing that you have enabled this great event to happen. The

Company Manager is the one that fills the glasses and makes sure the vol-au-vents are on the table so that others can enjoy them. You do get recognition, but only in a background way, so you have to be the sort of person for whom that is fulfilling.

Finally, have you any funny stories from your experience of being a Company Manager?

Well, I got some very strange looks a few weeks ago when I was ripping down posters from walls and lampposts in Hackney to use on the *Elmina's Kitchen* set! I also remember a particular show I was on tour with when the only rehearsal time the actors had was on an overnight train from Edinburgh to London. In fact, that was the same show in which I had to provide the voice of a ninja turtle on stage: it's not all glamour, you know!

The Scenic Artist: David Williams

The Scenic Artist: DAVID WILLIAMS (Head Scenic Artist on *Elmina's Kitchen*, resident at Birmingham Rep).

Can you explain what you do and at what stage of the production you become involved?

It's our responsibility in this department (known as the 'paintshop') to paint all areas of the set. On *Elmina's Kitchen*, we are responsible for creating all of the textures on the 'walls' and 'floor' of the restaurant, including making them look grubby and worn in the first act. We are also protecting the floor against the spilling of Ashley's 'blood' when he is shot at the end of the play, so that it can be wiped down and made to look new for the next performance.

The process started when Bunny Christie, showed us the set model of her design. We made comments, gave our impressions and together, came to an agreement of how we would practically interpret her design. The next stage was when we began painting the three-dimensional set, constructed in the workshop



Shaun Parkes
Photo: Catherine Ashmore

here at Birmingham Rep. It's all a process of interpretation, really: it's my job to interpret the designer's ideas, just as it is up to the director and actors to interpret the script.

What made you want to do the job?

I've loved theatre since I was a small boy and used to make a miniature theatre out of a stool, my mum's scarf and my dad's bicycle lamp! I wondered about becoming an actor but I've always loved scenery. I did reach a stage when I was younger of thinking 'I can't hold it in any longer, I have to paint a set!'

It's good to get as much amateur experience as you can. I think I have an instinct for colour, which you need in order to do this job. There's no such thing as a 'good' colour or a 'bad' colour, it's how you combine them and how they are affected by the lights on stage.

Don't you ever want to design a show yourself?

Well, I used to do that. Being a theatre designer used to be a much more 'hands on' job – you would design the set and then paint it yourself – but over the last 60 years or so, there's been a separation of these two jobs. I enjoy my job and my attitude to the design I have been given is "it's not mine, it's the designer's" and I try to execute it to the best of my ability. Working in rep, you don't get time to think about it much, anyway. You finish one job and move straight onto the next production – sometimes we have to do a set in a week. We are at the end of the production line, so to speak. Our department is the last one the set comes to before it is put up in the theatre, so how long we get to paint it and create the effects depends on whether all of the other departments are running to schedule.

What materials do you use?

All of the paint we use is water-based, either acrylic or emulsion. We also mix in things to create texture, such as the chipping and sawdust the workshop have created in building the set. This set is fairly orthodox in terms of the effects we are creating, but I did recently work on a set that was covered in lots of bright glitter. That was like eating food with a very strong flavour; *Elmina's Kitchen* is a more simple dish.

The Scenic Artist: David Williams

Do you have any favourite effects or designs?

It isn't really like that. Each show is different and everything is a one-off. I don't actually repeat much in this job; you don't think "oh, another wall that has to look like it's made of red brick". It's more individual than that. You have to think, How old is the wall? Has it received a lot of sunlight or rain? Is it well built? There's a lot of experimentation involved. In the set for *Elmina's Kitchen*, for example, Bunny gave me a sample of a lino tile because she wanted us to replicate the effect of it for the walls of the restaurant. It has a slightly marbled effect so I have to interpret that, and scale it up for our set, and ensure that the colours will work on this scale and under theatre lights.

What other challenges were involved in painting the set for this production?

I mentioned before that when a character gets shot at the end of the play, there will be a lot of fake blood on the stage, so it's vital that we seal the paintwork on the floor extremely well, otherwise the red stain, however much it is washed away at the end of a performance, will build up on the floor over time. The texture of the floor that we have created will trap particles of colour and a pinkish blush will develop there. Obviously, this would be a disaster, as it would give away the end of the show!

Also, when you are producing a set that will tour, and be used in lots of different venues and moved in and out of vans, it can easily get damaged so we tend to put extra coats of paint and an extra seal on most surfaces.

Writer and Performer: Kwame Kwei-Armah

You have now been involved in the show in many capacities – as writer, director and now performer. Has your perspective on your play changed at all?

Well, as an actor, I find I have no objectivity. I can only feel my way through this play. I'm also not really aware, or cannot feel, the overarching tragedy in the play – as I may do from the more objective viewpoints of writer or director – I can only feel the struggle. I've actually found that throughout the process of rehearsing this production of the play, I've been in quite an aggressive mood because of Deli and the journey he takes.

The experience of playing Deli has clarified for me that I should not act in the first production of my plays! I mean, I don't write to act in the plays anyway, but that is just the current circumstance.

Can you talk about your working process with Angus? He recently directed your play *Fix Up* at the National Theatre. What do you like about working with him?

I like that he seeks the truth, both aesthetically and cerebrally. That's why it's been so great to

work with him – he's a refining influence on my work and he has an intellectual honesty that I like. I view him as a translator: if there are things that a wider audience might not understand about the play, Angus will ensure that they do.

Are there any elements of the character of Deli that you share as a man? Do you believe there is universality in his experience of being a father of a teenager?

Yes, and that would be the thing that I suppose I do have in common with Deli, although my own son is not yet a teenager and is not like Ashley. That's probably why I have found the scenes in which Deli has real concern for his child the easiest to play. The scenes between Deli and his own father, Clifton, are more difficult because they require an element of disrespect that I do not have for my own father or for my elders, so that behaviour does not come naturally to me as a person.

Is it fair to say that this is a play about fathers and sons?

Yes, *Elmina's Kitchen* is fundamentally a play about three generations of black men trying to define themselves in their time.

The theme of reading is strong in this play and that continues into your next play, *Fix Up*. Is that the key theme of the trilogy you are writing?

The only true elevator in society is education. The only way to access that is through self-motivation. I was a 'B' grade student at school and didn't perceive myself in academic terms. My motivation for self-education as a man was political, personal and social, and I think we all have an obligation to fulfil our potential and not leave it to waste.

Kwame Kwei-Armah
Photo: Catherine Ashmore



FOR DISCUSSION

1. The character of Anastasia makes some interesting choices throughout the play.

Discuss;

- What her possible reasons might be for concealing that her son is dead until her final scene with Deli;
- Why she decides to spend the night with Clifton at the beginning of Act 2;
- Why she offers to clean Ashley up after Digger has hit him, although Ashley has been rude to her.

2. We talk a lot in rehearsals about characters 'back stories' (their biographies prior to the action of the play). There are two important father-son relationships in the play, Clifton and Deli, and Deli and Ashley.

What do you imagine these relationships were like in the past few years, months, or days and how does this inform the characters behaviour towards each other in the play?

3. Clifton has the beginnings of Parkinson's disease. How might this inform how his character behaves, both physically and psychologically? Do you think this is an important aspect of this character's story?

4. The characters speak in lots of different dialects in this play. What words in the play are unfamiliar to you? Why might characters choose to speak in a certain way? Can you identify the moments when characters choose specifically the language they speak in (one example is when Anastasia is on the phone to the police)? How important is the way we speak to our background and social behaviour?

5. The ideas of reputation and honour are important themes of the play. Why do you think Ashley wants to get involved with Digger? Why do you think Digger changes his mind about Ashley working for him?

6. What do you make of the line Deli says to Ashley, "*The true sign of intelligence is how a man deals with the problems of his environment*"?

7. Food is important in this play. Discuss how food can take on a deep cultural significance – the choices we make, and the way in which the restaurant changes between first and second acts.

PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. In small groups, improvise scenes that are not in the play, for example;

- Digger's conversation with Ashley about the 'job' they do across the road – beating Roy up and burning the shop down;
- Some of the party that opens Act 2, for example Deli and Anastasia setting the restaurant up for the party. Is Deli excited? How does Anastasia feel and what does she want from the evening?;
- Deli's conversation with the police when he tells them about Digger organising the attack on Roy.

2. Deli says that if Roy dies of his injuries and burns, the police will come to get Digger. Improvise the court case that may arise. Would Deli, Clifton and Anastasia be witnesses? What do you think they would say?

3. When Digger and Ashley attack Roy, this provides the play with a crucial turning point. If you could speak to Deli, Digger and Ashley in this moment, what advice would you give them? How do you think they would respond? Try to improvise these 'hot seat' situations.

WRITTEN WORK AND RESEARCH

1. Do some historical research into the background of London's Caribbean community. How might Baygee's experience of living in London be different to Ashley's?

2. Find out about the historical characters and the books referenced in the play, such as Haile Selassie, *The Celestine Prophecy*, *Acts of Faith*, the castle that Anastasia dreamt about and thinks the restaurant might be named after. What significance do such characters, books and places have in this play?

3. This is a play in which many characters face many obstacles. Plot a graph chart tracing the different character's objectives and obstacles scene-by-scene. Trace the progress of the characters through the story.

4. One of the key themes in *Elmina's Kitchen* is reading. Note the times characters talk about reading in the play, from Baygee warning Digger to read street signs to Anastasia reading a page out of her book, and write about how and why you think this theme is so important in the play.

The playtexts for Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (£8.99), and his new play, *Fix Up* (£8.99), both published by Methuen, are available from the National's Bookshop.

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