Moon on a Rainbow Shawl
by Errol John

Background pack
# Moon on a Rainbow Shawl

## Background pack

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Foreword

Welcome to the National Theatre’s background pack for *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, Errol John’s 1953 play set in post-WW2 Trinidad.

This document gives an insight into the play as well as the rehearsals, character exploration and some of the design influences at work on Michael Buffong’s spring 2012 production in the Cottesloe Theatre. If you’re using this in a school or college environment (or if you just fancy having a go yourself) there are also some writing exercises that should help you get into the minds of the play’s characters.

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National’s repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you’ve enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or 020 7452 3388.

Mark Londesborough
Programme Manager, NT Learning
May 2012
The National Theatre’s production of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

**Cast**

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<td>Ephraim</td>
<td>DANNY SAPANI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ketch / Taxi Driver</td>
<td>TREvor MICHAEL GEORGES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>TAHIRAH SHARIF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mavis</td>
<td>JENNY JULES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sailor / Soldier</td>
<td>JOSHUA McCORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia Adams, <em>Esther’s mother</em></td>
<td>MARTINA LAIRD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Mack</td>
<td>BURT CAESAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>JADE ANOUKA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policeman / Mr Murray / Man</td>
<td>LLOYD THOMAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince</td>
<td>RAY EMMET BROWN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Adams, <em>Esther’s father</em></td>
<td>JUDE AKUWUDIKE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Music played by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music Director</th>
<th>THE EBONY STEEL BAND</th>
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<tr>
<td>Music Director</td>
<td>PEPE FRANCIS</td>
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*Voices Off*

| Janette, Fisherwoman, Boy | AYESHA ANTOINE, DEEIVYA MEIR, KERRON DARBY |

**Director**

| Michael Buffong            |

**Designer**

| Soutuра Gilmour            |

**Lighting Designer**

| Johanna Town               |

**Music**

| Felix Cross                |

**Sound Designer**

| Steven Brown               |

**Fight Director**

| Bret Yount                 |

**Company Voice Work**

| Jeannette Nelson           |

**Staff Director**

| Anthony Ekundayo Lennon    |

**Rehearsal Photographer**

| Pamela Raith               |

**Production Photographer**

| Jonathan Keenan            |

This production opened in the Cottesloe Theatre on 14 March 2012.
ACT ONE

Scene 1 – Moonrise
1947, Port of Spain in Trinidad, a time when troops are returning from taking part in the Second World War. The sound of steel drums ‘sweet and low’ beat out a rhythm and the lights come up ‘stark and grey under the flooding light of a moon almost full’.

Ephraim (sometimes Eph for short), the catalyst of the play, comes home to his room within two dilapidated buildings of a backyard section of East Dry River. He has just completed his shift as a trolley car driver. It’s an oppressively hot night, the moon is almost full and Ephraim is quite unsettled. Ketch, a local Calypsonian, is working on a new song as Ephraim quickly splashes water onto his face from the yard’s communal water tap. While he has a brief exchange with Ketch, the Adams’ baby son cries. He is being looked after by Esther, the eldest daughter of Charlie and Sophia Adams. Ephraim soon calls her to bring the child out onto the porch. Ephraim shows himself to be caring and nurturing by encouraging Esther with her future aspirations and also by holding the baby to bestow a wish upon him: “Dream your dreams little man, dream your dreams.” Mavis, the yard prostitute, brings an American sailor back to her room, which is at the top of some steps overhanging Ephraim’s room.

Esther asks if he will take her and Rosa (Ephraim’s girlfriend) to a concert next week. There’s a sense that Ephraim may not be around next week but it isn’t explained. He makes a surreal and magical incantation for Esther to ‘One night, sometime reach up, touch that moon’ before retiring for the night to his room. Esther’s mother, Sophia, arrives and chastises her for being out so late – and with the baby! Old Mack, the slumlord and owner of a local café, drops Rosa home after working in the café. Soon he is on his knees, begging for Rosa to come back to his home to be sexually intimate. Sophia catches him and mocks him while he apologetically exits the yard and drives off feeling ashamed. Sophia, with motherly love, warns Rosa that if she wears the gifts that Old Mack has given to her, she could give him the wrong impression. She reminds Rosa to inform Ephraim of the news she has for him. Sophia goes into her room and Rosa crosses the yard into Ephraim’s, where he is laying on his bed. Ephraim tells her to leave him to get
Scene 2 – Next morning
While Esther and her mother have breakfast and prepare to do household chores, children are heard playing in the distance: “Yer can’t catch me tho! Yer can’t catch me tho… I caught yer – I caught yer! I caught… yer!” Esther begs to join her friends but Sophia is explicit in her reasons for needing her daughter home: “Them so over there have big house and they mother have servants to clean up after them. I ent have no help but you”. Charlie, Sophia’s husband, didn’t arrive home after going out last night.

Rosa returns from the café after work. She calls out for Ephraim but gets no reply. He is ignoring her call but she assumes he must be sleeping. She announces to Sophia and Esther that the café has been burgled, with $70 stolen from the cash register. Sophia’s seems pleased to hear about Old Mack’s misfortune. “Thief from thief, child, does make Jehovah laugh and I is only a mere mortal. The way he robbing us here with the rent on these nasty little rooms. Serve him blasted right!”

A policeman arrives to request that Rosa returns to the café as the police have not finished speaking with her. With Rosa gone, Ephraim comes out of his room to prepare to wash. During a short exchange, Sophia gets the feeling that Ephraim is ‘up to something’. An iceman is heard in the distance selling his wares and Ephraim gives Sophia a clue as to what is on his mind: “That iceman so warm! He don’t know. He don’t know! But the only ice I feeling for now is SNOW!”

Prince, a loud, ostentatious, local ‘entrepreneur’ interrupts. He is the kind of man who can get almost anything required, at the right price. He has arrived to collect Mavis and take her for a sea bath. Although Prince plays the tough man he is infatuated with her; and Mavis is harsh and stern with everyone except Ephraim, but does appreciate the attention that Prince shows her. After they’ve gone, Sophia expresses disgust at having a prostitute living among them in the yard. Ephraim directs his disgust at Old Mack. Sophia wishes that Charlie could get steady work so that her family can escape the yard. The sound of singing comes closer.

Charlie arrives, suffering the effects of too much rum, and speechifying about the reception he attended last night to welcome home the island’s WW2 troops. He speaks of ‘heroes’, to which Sophia asks scornfully if he has no shame. He avoids an argument by accepting Ephraim’s invitation to sleep off the drink in his room.

Alone in the yard with Ephraim, Sophia exposes her fears about needing to have everything ready for a new school that Rosa will attend soon after having received a scholarship. She tells Eph that Charlie loses all pride when he drinks too much. She recalls how different a man he was when he played world-class cricket many years ago. Ephraim blames the social and political conditions that exist in Trinidad. But Sophia disagrees, reminding Ephraim that many others on the island have succeeded without any special privileges. Ephraim replies “This Trinidad has nothing for me, nothing I want”. When Sophia asks about his relationship with Rosa he is dismissive so she decides to mind her own business. Ephraim hints at having a ‘plan’.

These two good friends need to talk more, but the time is not right. Before Ephraim leaves for work he leaves a message with Sophia that he will ‘maybe’ see Rosa tonight. He is due to attend a party for a ‘fellow that going away’ (from the island). When Sophia asks why he’s going, Ephraim replies “I’ll ask him when I see him”. Sophie’s response rings out in the yard: "Run boys! Run! I wish I could do a little running myself. They’d search hell to find me". Esther brings some needlework she’s completed as part of her chores for Sophia to inspect.
Sophia sends Esther over to Charlie for him to look at his daughter’s skills. Almost tearful, he is amazed at the cloth and its colours: "One day little girl, you are going to be a star".

Sophia asks if Charlie is hungry but they are interrupted when Rosa appears. She seems unnerved at seeing Charlie and goes to her room. He feels that Rosa looked at him as if she had seen a ghost. Sophia is about to question Charlie about being out all night when the playing children are heard: ‘I caught yer, I caught yer’.

Charlie is deep in thought and Sophia asks what is wrong but he brushes it off with “Nothing”. The children continue to play.”One, two, three, mother catch a flea. Flea die, mother cry, one two three, you to catch! You too catch.”

ACT TWO

Scene 1 – late that night
The wind stirs in the streets and the galvanized roofing squeaks and shudders. An owl hoots.

Mavis enters the yard with a soldier. Before taking him to her room she picks up a stone and throws it hard against the shutters of Sophia’s door – and when Sophia appears, Mavis accuses her of “peeping”. Their verbal spat wakes the baby. Sophia advises the soldier to see a doctor first thing in the morning. Mavis implores him to believe that she is ‘clean’, then chastises Sophia for always “washing her mouth on people”. Mavis hustles the man into her room. Sophia is alone on the porch while the baby continues to cry: “Yer hear the baby God? Yer hear him? No rest for me tonight. Grant me patience, I asking yer! Save mey from sinning mey soul!” She goes into her room.

Rosa calls out to Ephraim. She has just woken and lies next to him on his bed, on top of her rainbow-coloured shawl, some of which cascades to the floor. Ephraim seems distant and Rosa attempts to get him to relax, show her affection or talk about what’s on his mind. An owl hoots again, and she says “When the owl hootin’ so, somebody goin’ to die.” Ephraim replies by mimicking the sound of an owl hooting, which scares her. They laugh, they kiss: they seem at rest together. Rosa nervously tells him that Charlie was the one who stole the money from the café. Ephraim is concerned for his friend and then angry to learn that Rosa told the police she saw Mr Adams’ hat on the café floor. He accuses her of looking after Old Mack’s interests first and that the gifts she accepts from him are proof of her motives.
Scene by scene: *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

He tells suddenly her that he wasn’t sure until now, and shows her his passport, ticket and savings for his journey to Liverpool. He has thought of sending for her.

Pleading with him not to leave, Rosa confesses that she is pregnant; but he accuses her of trapping him. He reveals that he once put his Grandmother into a poor house because she was getting in the way of his plans – but four days later, she died. After a heated exchange of words Ephraim literally throws Rosa out into the yard.

There’s a taunting calypso: “Brown skin gal stay home and mind baby. Brown skin gal stay home and mind baby. I’m a gain away in a sailin’ boat – And if I don’t come back, throw ‘way the damn baby.”

**Scene 2 – The next morning**

Sophia shouts at Charlie to get on with fixing and preparing a set of cricket bats for a local rising-star cricketer known as Young Murray. Sophia notices Rosa out on the porch, barefoot, still in her slip and disorientated. Rosa admits she has told Ephraim.

Concerned, Sophia escorts Rosa to her room and prepares some coffee. Esther arrives home wearing a Union Jack flag tied as a bandana on her head. After being told to remove it she is sent to tell Old Mack that Rosa will not be at work today.

Prince calls again on Mavis and is angered to find she’s hiding a “Pink face Yankee soldier boy” in her room. Prince has been denying his friends’ claims that Mavis is sleeping with sailors on leave. He challenges the soldier to a fight; Mavis protests, pleading with the soldier not to hurt him. Prince accidentally hits her in the face and, noticing blood, she runs from the yard screaming for the police. Prince runs after her in a panic. To Sophia’s disgust, Charlie laughs at the whole incident.

Sophia chastises Charlie for not yet filling in an application form. She dreams of their own house and garden in Laventille: a home with a drawing room, a place where Esther could entertain her friends. Sophia takes Prince that Sophia left the yard dressed in her ‘Sunday best’ to borrow money to bail Charlie out. Esther returns from delivering the message to Old Mack, she is given permission to play with her friends. Sophia looks scornfully at Ephraim as he enters the yard after another trolley shift and disappears into Rosa’s room.

As Charlie works on the crickets bats out in the yard, he explains to Ephraim his fall from grace as a world-class cricketer; he once spoke up about the racially-motivated decision-making of members of the ‘Savanna Club’, and specifically about placing Black cricket players in boarding houses fit for ‘hogs’, and was never called on to play an intercolony series again. Ephraim seems more upset by this than Charlie, who himself seems resigned to accepting his fate: “Some men wasn’t born to make it”. Sophia comes out of Rosa’s to get something from the porch and requests a “little more work than talk”.

Mavis makes a grand entrance to the yard, singing the Wedding March. Prince has asked her to be his wife. After inviting Ephraim and Charlie to the wedding, Mavis and Prince disappear into their room. Sophia hasn’t been invited and calls Mavis a “bitch”, before returning to Rosa. Charlie wants to talk more, but Ephraim needs to collect something. When Old Mack passes and asks how Ephraim is, he replies “never better.” Old Mack knocks for Rosa. After a few sharp words from Sophia, he realises he won’t be allowed in and so waits out on Rosa’s porch. He tells Charlie that he suspects one of his staff, Stephen, of thieving the money from the café. Mavis and Prince re-appear to go for a Chinese meal.

When Mavis passes Rosa on the way out, she snidely comments that it’s better to “always get the ring first, then get the baby”. Old Mack escorts Rosa to work, confiding his suspicions about Stephen. Ephraim returns and though it seems he might prevent Rosa and Old Mack leaving together, he steps to one side to let them pass. Sophia witnesses this and says “And you call yourself a man!”. He ignores her and goes into his room.

Charlie is in deep thought. When Sophia asks what is wrong, he confesses to being the one who broke into the café. She is shocked and on the brink of tears. He shows her he still has most of the money. Sophia decides to ask Rosa to speak to Old Mack “for the sake of Esther and the baby.” Ephraim suddenly appears and offers to take the money to Old Mack himself; but then a policeman arrives and sees the money in Charlie’s hand.

**ACT THREE**

**Scene 1 – middle of the afternoon**

The sky is overcast and the atmosphere heavy with moisture. Prince sits in the yard, sipping a beer; Mavis stands outside her door throwing broken and discoloured bits from a bowl of uncooked rice. She tells Prince that Sophia left the yard dressed in her ‘Sunday best’ to borrow money to bail Charlie out. Esther returns from playing and goes into the family’s room.

Ephraim, slightly tipsy, asks for a cigarette from Prince who, showing off to Mavis, gives him a whole packet. She barely notices, being so distracted by her attraction to Ephraim. She claims that if Ephraim was her man he
Scene by scene: *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

could never treat her the way he does Rosa. Ephraim returns to his room to continue drinking.

Seemingly concerned, Mavis asks whether Esther has eaten. Esther, having nothing to do and oblivious to what is going on, enters Ephraim's room. They are interrupted by Young Murray, who has come to collect a cricket bat from Mr Adams. Esther fetches it for him. Sophia arrives home but when Young Murray announces that there's a job for Charlie as a cricket coach at a junior school next season, she seems unmoved. He leaves and Sophia tells Esther where her father is – and why. Esther blames Sophia for what Charlie has done by “always pushing him and making him feel shame in front of all kinds of people” before running out of the yard in hysterics. Ephraim also leaves the yard for his last shift on the Trolley bus.

Rosa brings word from Old Mack that the matter with Charlie is out of his hands. Sophia offers to speak with Ephraim about his current attitude and plan but Rosa dismisses the idea: “A wedding ring is too cheap to have to kiss a man's foot for”. Sophia advises her to consider the child growing inside her. Even though Charlie sometimes causes her pain, he is worth “a bowlful of tears.” She is concerned about “little Esther, gone out there, her heart breaking for him right now.” Rosa bursts into tears and Sophia tries to comfort her. Raindrops fall onto the tin roof. In the darkness a storm breaks, before the last wash of rain and thunder fades.

**Scene 2 – that night**
The rain has stopped and the night is fresh and cool. Ephraim packs the last of his things, including a *Reader's Digest* and other American magazines. Sinatra's ‘Polka Dots and Moonbeams’ plays on his radio. Prince waits for Mavis, to take her to a club. She appears, looking like she has just stepped out of a glamour magazine. They leave. In the distance, the clock of the tower of Queen’s Royal College begins to chime. Sophia returns from searching for Esther and calls out to her. She is invited over to Ephraim's for what may be the last time.

Sophia does everything she can to dissuade Ephraim from leaving Trinidad – he isn’t interested in hearing about how the island is changing for the better. She refuses a $10 note from him towards legal costs for Charlie. Thinking she has heard Esther out in the yard, she finds Rosa fetching water from the communal tap. Rosa says goodnight and goes into her room. Sophia urges Ephraim to go to her but he is indignant.

A taxi horn impatiently sounds outside the yard. Sophia reminds Ephraim that Rosa is pregnant with his child and that he had made the first moves when she first arrived in the yard, before having her laid up in his bed night after night. When he claims that she “liked it”, Sophia slaps him. Rushing off to the taxi, Ephraim exclaims “the baby born! It live! It dead! It make no damn difference to me!” Rosa runs out of her room screaming his name.

Sophia offers to help look after the baby. Old Mack calls out to Rosa from inside her room: she seems resigned to her situation and shrugs off Sophia's attempts to stop her from going to him.

Sophia is left alone in the yard, crying. Esther calls out to her, having returned home. Tapping into her last reserves of love and strength, Sophia reaches out and holds her daughter close. A Trolley car passes by.
Production history

Errol John, born in 1924, started as an actor in Trinidad, before moving to England in 1951, after the Second World War.

Alongside roles on stage and on screen, John launched a playwriting career, and in 1957 won an Observer competition with his play, Moon on a Rainbow Shawl. Although a London West End production was promised as a result, the play was instead recorded as a radio production, before being staged at the Royal Court Theatre in December 1958.

The cast was:

- Ephraim: Earle Hyman
- Esther: Jacqueline Chan
- Mavis: Barbara Assoon
- American Soldier: Robert Jackson
- Sophia Adams: Vinnette Carroll
- Old Mack: Lionel Ngakane
- Rosa: Soraya Rafat
- Policeman: Johnny Sekka
- Janette: Berril Briggs
- Prince: Leo Carera
- Charlie Adams: John Bouie
- American Soldier: Leonard Davies
- Young Murray: Clifton Jones
- Director: Frith Banbury
- Designer: Loudon Sainthill

In a revised version, it was first performed in New York at the East 11th Street Theatre, January 1962. The cast was:

- Ephraim: James Earl Jones
- Ketch: Robert Hill II
- Esther Adams: Kelly Marie Berry
- Mavis: Cicely Tyson
- Sailor: Michael Barton
- Sophia Adams: Vinnette Carroll
- Old Mack: Melvin Stewart
- Rosa: Ellen Holly
- Policeman: Ronald Mack
- Prince: Bill Gunn
- Charlie Adams: Robert Earl Jones
- Soldier: Peter Owens
- Janette: Carolyn Strickland
- A Boy: Wayne Grice
- Taxi Driver: Warren Berry
- Director: George Roy Hill
- Designer: Lloyd Burlingame

In its first London revival, directed by the author at Theatre Royal Stratford East, 1986:

- Ephraim: Tony Armatrading
- Ketch: Alan Cooke
- Esther Adams: Josephine Melville
- Mavis: Joanne Campbell
- Sailor: Paul Demuth
- Sophia Adams: Barbara Assoon
- Old Mack: Bertie Greene
- Rosa: Jaye Griffiths
- Policeman: Graeme Nelson
- Prince: Roy Lee
- Charlie Adams: Errol Jones
- Soldier: Fraser Downie
- Janette: Sarah Huntley
- Boy: Paul Alder
- Taxi Driver: Kaleem Janjua
- Director: Errol John
- Designer: Bernard Culshaw

Revived at the Almeida Theatre, London, in 1988, the cast was:

- Ephraim: Treva Etienne
- Ketch: Jude Akuwudike
- Esther Adams: Valerie Hunkins
- Mavis: Ellen Thomas
- Sailor / Taxi Driver: Aslie Pitter
- Sophia Adams: Claire Benedict
- Old Mack: Ram John Holder
- Rosa: Lachele Carl
- Policeman: Desmond Williams
- Prince: Jim Findley
- Charlie Adams: Trevor Laird
- Soldier: Ishmael Thomas
- A Boy: Freddie Brooks
- Director: Maya Angelou
- Designer: Ellen Cairns

Notice how the character list changes slightly with each production. This was, at first, due to a rewrite for the 1982 production, but later it may have been a directorial decision.
At the end of Act One, scene 2, Ephraim throws Rosa out of his room and his life. She is left alone, crying in the middle of the yard and, as the lights fade, the sound of a lone guitar fills the auditorium, followed by the voice of Felix Cross singing the internationally-known song ‘Brown Skin Girl’.

The original 1946 recording of ‘Brown Skin Gal’ was by King Radio, whose real name was Norman Span, an active Calypsonian in the 1930s and 1940s. He composed many calypsos which later became standards, such as ‘Mathilda’ and ‘Man Smart, Woman Smarter’. Most people came to know ‘Brown Skin Gal’ when it was recorded by Harry Belafonte and released in the United States in 1956.

The song criticised the presence of American servicemen in Trinidad, who fathered children with local women and left the babies behind. In the original chorus the last line is ‘And if he don’t come back, stay home and mind baby’. In the version in this production, the last few words are ‘throw away the damn baby’, as in the original. The change of lyrics in the Belafonte version came from a feeling that a more sanitised rendition would cause least offence to the American listening audience.

See and hear clips online:
‘Brown Skin Girl’ (Harry Belafonte)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iqg2cKUp74A

‘Mathilda’ (King Radio)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkrB4oL3SW0

‘Man Smart, Woman Smarter’
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50nS2ldCXJk

Brown Skin Gal
Words and music by Norman Span

Everythin’ to keep me from sleepin’
A lot of sailor boys they were leavin’
And everybody there were jumpin’
To hear the sailor boys in our chorus singin’
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
I’m goin’ away, in a sailing boat
And if I don’t come back
Stay home and mind baby

Now de Americans made an invasion
We thought it was a help to the island
Until they left from here on vacation
They left de native boy home to mind their children
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
I’m goin’ away, in a sailing boat
And if I don’t come back
Stay home and mind baby

Now I tell you de story ‘bout Millie
Well she made a nice blue-eyed baby
And dey say she fancy the mother
But the blue-eyed baby ain’t know she father
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
I’m goin’ away, in a sailing boat
And if I don’t come back
Stay home and mind baby

Now de Americans all have their pleasure
While the music played to their leisure
Everybody there they were jumpin’
To hear the sailor boys in our chorus singin’
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
Brown skin girl stay home and mind baby
I’m goin’ away, in a sailing boat
And if I don’t come back
Stay home and mind baby
Michael Buffong, the production’s director, shares his thoughts on the staging the play.

My initial preparation – when I first knew I had the opportunity to direct Moon on a Rainbow Shawl at the National Theatre – was to look at timelines for the island of Trinidad: the origins of the country, and its history up until the story in the play takes place. I looked at the influences of who colonised it, where the people came from, details of the Second World War, and the language and music of the play. I was, of course, also thinking about who I would cast in the roles of Ephraim, Sophia and others. But my initial and main focus was to research the history of the island and the world of the play that Errol John had created.

I first saw this play about twenty years ago and I’ve loved it since that moment. It’s always been one of my favourite plays. There’s a line in the first scene where Ephraim says to the little baby boy, “dream your dreams little man, dream your dreams...” The first time I heard those words being said on stage I just thought, Wow! It just strikes you with the possibility of what one’s life can be. So when the idea came around that I could direct the play I realised that at last I was going to get to direct the play with those words: “dream your dreams little man, dream your dreams...”

My intentions and hopes for the set design of Moon on a Rainbow Shawl, and with all productions I direct, were two-fold. Firstly, the actors have to feel totally at home within the created environment – and secondly, that feeling has to be the same for the audience. When they come into the auditorium or first see the set they should be totally immersed within the environment. The actors should be at home there, and their characters should live in that place; so the audience can’t believe it’s acting that’s happening, or that they are not watching a yard in Port of Spain, Trinidad, as with this production. That’s the intention.

As to the overall look of the play, the production’s designer, Soutra Gilmore, is an amazing talent. She has a phenomenal grasp of knowing not only the play but what the play needs, and the space in which the set lives. After each meeting I had with her she would come back with ideas that were always fantastic! And it’s that designed environment which the cast are currently inhabiting with great success.

One of the most pleasing aspects of working each day has been when collectively, as actors, directors and stage management, we have all discovered something new about the play, or about the world of the play. To discover those moments collectively is glorious. And they also help bond your company. It’s been a pleasure to work with a great cast, as clichéd as it might sound. Plus, the sheer joy of playing with the words that Errol John has written – it has been a delight to come into rehearsals each day and work on such a great piece of classic writing.

Since childhood I’ve loved telling and being told stories and as a director I get the chance to be a story teller. I love it. I remember being told that when I was a child if someone had seen a film and I hadn’t, I would get them to tell it to me so I could feel like I had seen it too, imagine what it must have been like to see it. I think as I’ve grown older I have taken that feeling into my career. When I read a play I’m imagining and seeing the world it inhabits. Being fortunate to have that as a job is fantastic! And I get the chance to work with people who share a vision and a passion for what we do.
The production’s staff director, Anthony Ekundayo Lennon, shares extracts from his rehearsal diary.

Before my first day – Friday 20 January 2012

Prior to the rehearsal week I am excited and privileged to meet some of the various departments with which I’ll be working over the next few months. Part of my work as staff director, aside from assisting Michael with the play, will involve helping to widen access to the production and to the National Theatre as a whole via outreach work, workshops, Q&As. Plus there’s a chance to access an amazing range of scripts (both old and new) in the Literary department!

I am met at the NT’s stage door by Mark Rosenblatt, my manager and the Associate Director at the National Studio. He’s looking at me as if he knows exactly how I’m feeling about this opportunity: ecstatic. I’m signed in and led along some yellow flooring, a winding corridor deep within the National Theatre. Mark opens the door to Rehearsal Room 2.

The first thing I see is the rehearsal set, which is near completion. I am introduced to the stage management team: Tariq Hussain (Production Manager), Janice Heyes (Stage Manager), Julia Wickham (Deputy Stage Manager) and Cynthia Duberry (Assistant Stage Manager). Their excitement and enthusiasm about the forthcoming production is brilliant!

The conversation is a mixture of catching up, reminders of possible future duties (like preparing the cast after they have a few days off from the play etc) and each of us speak about how long we have been doing what we do and how happy we are to be part of the National Theatre and what it’s creating.

I’m soon whisked off and meeting the staff in the Literary and Learning departments where somebody advises me not to worry while I’m hurriedly scribbling down the names of each person in front of me. I receive a typed list.

It doesn’t take me long to realise the degree of enthusiasm from the whole Learning team, and the scope to explore new and innovative outreach work. (There is no aspect of society that this department do not reach: commercial, public sector, housing, secondary/primary schools, colleges, youth, community and Connexions, to name a few). I have the chance to work with this team and reach even more people who will benefit from coming into contact with the play and the National Theatre. I’m really looking forward to it.

WEEK ONE: day one

After hearing each other’s names and responsibilities, the Company are invited to gather around the set model. Soutra (Gilmour, designer) talks it through. Moon On a Rainbow Shawl is being staged in the Cottesloe theatre, a space where a lot of new or experimental work is seen. The Cottesloe can be re-configured into a myriad of different layouts (something to bear in mind if you have an idea that could work in there).

I scan the actors’ faces; they are hanging on every one of Soutra’s words. The detail is astounding and beautiful all at once. We are looking at the pathway, Ephraim’s room, a bed dominating its cramped area and how Mavis’ room slightly hangs above it with stairs that spiral up to her door. We see Sophia’s and Rosa’s homes and, although they are opposite Ephraim’s and Mavis’ areas, the design gives a sense of claustrophobia, of a built-up place where everybody knows your business and a sense of not being able to think for the lack of physical and emotional space. The design is brilliant and I feel it’s like looking at a microcosm of the world of the play, a splintered family structure in which Ephraim lives, feeling stuck and needing to escape.

The staging is ‘short traverse’: the audience will be close up to the entire world as it is lived before them. Imagine a tennis court as a stage – most of the action takes place in the playing area where the net would be (it’s a wide net!) Most of the audience won’t be sitting along the sides though. A few seats will be in that area but most of the seats will be at each end of the space.

Michael and Soutra hope the audience will feel connected to the characters, rather than separate from them. The cast will be surrounded by audience.

WEEK ONE: mid-week

Research discussions reveal there was no national service in the Caribbean. The love felt for the mother country (Britain) was enough to commit to the war and to fighting Hitler.

We discuss the old Victrolas (gramophone record players) and the important influence of music from overseas and, of course, home-grown Calypso. In 1947 (the time of the play), steel pan or steel bands were not yet not established: they didn’t really grow until ‘48, ‘49 and the 50s. Another actor reminds us that during and after the period of slavery in the Caribbean, the playing of drums was outlawed! It was feared that African people were communicating with one another and worse, planning attacks and escape. As part of this legacy many new ways of creating rhythms, beats and
tones were developed, using objects like biscuit tins, bamboo hit with sticks, dustbin lids as replacement for traditional drums. And of course with the amount of oil drums on the island it was not going to be long before hearing sounds created on a ‘steel drum’ was common place.

Tahirah Sharif (playing Esther) reads aloud a quote that she’s discovered whilst researching on the internet. Coincidentally, Michael and I had discussed the same quote that morning with the intention to show it to the cast. It came from an essay by Shelley Cole Nimblett, a copy of which I had just delivered to the Publications department for Michael, to be considered for the production programme. The quote perfectly sums up some of the cast’s discussions about the moon being a dominant symbol in the play: ‘The Moon reflects the mystery and the fear within our souls. It reflects to us all that we cannot see inside ourselves’ (1. Inner Traditions, 1997, see appendix at the end of this resource).

Continuing to read scene 1, the cast and Michael delve deeper into the characters and their unique relationships with each other: how long they have known each other; Old Mack’s ‘intoxication’ for Rosa; the daily reality of living in a ‘slum’ and the mind-set of Old Mack, the landlord – or ‘slumlord’. This process continues through reading scene 2. While the cast leave the room for lunch, the creative and production teams prepare for the first production meeting, which will take place each Wednesday lunchtime.

WEEK ONE: first production meeting

The meeting is chaired by production manager Tariq Hussain who invites each department to report on how things are going with their given tasks for the production. The kinds of things we discussed were:

Set – coming along well. Walls and doors are being built quickly. More foliage for the rehearsal set will arrive soon.

Props. The stove will be gas. If a hurricane lamp is to be used on set there are issues regarding the flame, so possibly use an imitation flame instead? Running water can be arranged with no problem via some long plastic piping. Mango tree – no problems. Pepper plant – no problems. Smoking cigarettes is requested by Michael – and Tariq says it will be okay. Baby for Sophia – dolls coming soon… (they should look like they’re breathing).

Costumes. Fittings done, discussions with Michael and the cast are going well.

Lighting. A ‘Squirrel cage’ can be used for the light bulb in Ephraim’s room. A street light will be fine.

Sound. Small radio to be used on stage, fitted so as to play music into it via wireless system. Recorded ‘Pans’ (Calypso music) to be recorded in next two weeks. All preparations going well.

Hair & Make-up. Sessions to take place soon with some actors regarding their specific styles etc.

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**WEEK ONE: nearly done**

After lunch the process continues. As each moment is worked, the ‘actor’ is beginning to disappear and is gradually being replaced by a kind of half character, a persona who is attempting to be who they have always been but then suddenly interrupted by a deep-thinking actor making sure s/he is in the right place at the right time and speaking in the right way. It’s one of the most mesmerising aspects of an actor’s work and I wonder whether people would buy tickets to sit in on rehearsals of future productions.

Things are progressing very well. Aside from the hard work that the cast are putting into ‘blocking’ the beginning of the play (blocking is where actors would stand in relation to each other and to the stage set), I am aware of something else that is going on in the room: both a sense of respect and connection between the cast and also Michael’s quietly determined and caring nature of working and how much the cast trust his vision.

**WEEK TWO: Monday**

Martina Laird will discuss with Michael what ‘exactly’ Sophia may have been doing by that time of day in Act 1, scene 2. Then she can progress with the scene without it feeling somehow false or as if she is doing something just to fill time.

At one point, the latter part of scene 2 stops and Michael asks Martina how Sophia is feeling. After a moment’s pause, Martina replies – and Sophia’s life in this yard is much more fully understood by everyone: “It hurts her, you know – the disrespect from this man [Charlie]. Sophia is here doing her best to love and look after the family, Esther her daughter, plus a baby, and then there’s Rosa next door who has no mother or father of her own.”

At this point, Sophia suddenly seemed to take over in Martina’s description: “So I’m doing my best to guide and nurture her. Then there’s Ephraim who, I don’t know what’s up with him today, but something’s not right. And my husband is out all hours of the night – could be laid in a gutter somewhere, don’t know if he’s alive or dead – and then he’s turning up drunk, singing a song, welcoming the island’s troops home after the war. Drunk. No apology, no shame. Doesn’t come inside, but slips into Ephraim’s room to sleep the drink off. It hurts: this man seems to have no idea how much I’m doing my best to hold things together, how much I love him. And then I’m arguing with my good friend Ephraim who seems so unsettled and is suddenly announcing that Trinidad has nothing’ for him. Nothing? (Silence) It’s hard. Just because I’m not agreeing with Ephraim doesn’t mean that I don’t wish to be away from all this slum living. We live here but that doesn’t mean that we don’t have our sights elsewhere”.

You could hear a pin drop in the rehearsal room. Michael says to Martina, ‘play all that in the scene.”

**WEEK TWO: Tuesday**

Continuing Monday’s work on Act 1, scene 2, Michael decides to go back to page 30, at the point where Charlie enters. The actors sit at the reading table and see what more there is to discover before stepping back onto the set.

There’s talk about Charlie’s drunkenness: that it is a ‘mask’ as well as something that numbs the pain he feels about who he now is and the chance he missed to be a more successful cricketer. The Charlie in this story is not the same Charlie that Sophia married.
Rehearsing *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

Michael gets the actors on the set and runs the scene, starting from Charlie’s entrance. As happened on Monday, there is much stopping and starting, but not in a way that disrupts the momentum or energy of the work. It’s all part of it. Each stop and start further defines the point of each line, each move, each pause. For a moment it is decided that Charlie, rather than being too drunk, will be sobering up a little and will front up to Sophia.

**WEEK THREE: Monday**

Jeannette Nelson, Head of the NT’s Voice Department, talks to the cast about *inspiration* (as in breathing/inhalation) and reminds them that the word is used in another context, as in when we ‘inspire’ others. Jeannette reconnects the actors to what they will be doing with their breathing, voices and bodies – in effect ‘inspiring’ them, which in turn leads to inspiring those who will watch the play.

**WEEK THREE: Wednesday**

Bret [Yount, fight director] works with Michael and the actors on four fight/struggle sequences. The agreed choreography of each segment is painstakingly repeated so as to develop an element of second nature for all the moves. Each scene needs all the actors involved to be confident, focussed and disciplined with any assigned action.

We continue the scene work from yesterday. We start on page 12, with the actors still being invited to dig deep and ask questions that will assist them for the floor work [putting the action on its feet on the set].

**WEEK THREE: Thursday**

In the morning the cast are able not only to have another voice session with Jeannette Nelson, but do so in the Cottesloe Theatre. They have to be careful because they are working on the set of *Collaborators*, but there is no mistaking how important and inspiring it is for them to be in there together.

Each actor walks around the theatre, including anywhere that the audience will be in a few weeks’ time. It is clearly essential that they become acclimatised to the whole space, and not only the playing area. The actors have a brilliant session. Being able to run lines, do all their vocal exercises and even run a few scenes while hearing the kind of necessary projection needed for the Cottesloe is another major step towards getting the play to the intended level of performance.

**WEEK FOUR: Tuesday**

Everyone sits along the length of one of the walls in the rehearsal room. Michael then invites each character (not actor) to take a seat in front of the rest of us. It is brilliant watching each actor stand up and approach their seat, because even without speaking you can see that they are already assuming the attitude of who they are portraying in the play. So much takes place; so much history and back-story comes out whilst each character is questioned that it would fill a small book. We hear from the Policeman, Old Mack, Sophia, Mavis, Charlie, Esther, Rosa and Ephraim. We would hear from the Sailor too, if the actor, Joshua, didn’t need to go for a pre-booked session with the hair & make-up department! Each character has a good 20 minutes or so to describe who they are and talk about their pasts. I carefully observe many of the actors while they listen and see that they’re sometimes astounded, amused, shocked and/or emotional – especially by Mavis’ story about her childhood and life as a prostitute. The exercise is a brilliant affirmation of all the character work that has been taking place over the past few weeks and it bonds the already tight and connected company even more.

**WEEK FOUR: Friday**

The day starts with Michael listening to some music sent in from Felix Cross while they continue to have on-going discussions about creating the music that will begin the whole play. Michael then joins the actors who are called to rehearse Act 1, scene 2 and the scene is read at the table. It is then run on the floor three times, and Michael always allows time for the actors to pause a moment and clarify intentions of lines or re-set some blocking. For a moment a discussion takes place about the closed-in, claustrophobic and oppressive nature of the set design, and the lives of the characters in the play. This leads to a discussion about the way in which having wealth or nothing can affect mentality and ways of associating with people. One of the cast members says, “when you have very little (like the characters in this story), the little that you have becomes very important, not necessarily in material ways but with aspects of privacy, pride and respect.”

Another member of the cast develops this context of
‘class’ and the ways it is manifest, by conjuring up an image of big houses with big windows – windows with the curtains wide open – juxtaposed with the image of rundown yard areas with small windows and curtains shut tight where the inhabitants don’t want anyone to ‘know their business out on the street’.

WEEK FIVE: Wednesday

Michael suggests creating improvisations around events taking place as part of the play’s story. None of this work will be seen in the finished production, but Michael is giving the actors an opportunity to experience, watch and feel as a whole company the funny or desperately upsetting moments experienced by characters. This will feed into work being done with the script. Today is also a pre-booked costume day, which means each actor will spend between 30 mins and 1¾ hrs in the Costume Department to have fittings and on-going discussions about each character’s distinctive look.

We are visited by a group of students from the London campus of Florida State University. They are brought in by the writer Oladipo Agboluaje. As part of their course they are studying Gender, Race and Performance, so with all these various dynamics within Moon On A Rainbow Shawl, Oladipo asked Michael if they could sit in on some of our work. After a few minutes of introductions, we launch into the improvisational work. Scene by scene, we witness Ephraim and Rosa meeting each other for the very first time (Rosa is smitten and Ephraim is a charmer!), all under the watchful eye of Sophia. We also see Charlie returning home to Sophia, having not found a job at the local docks, and a café scene during which Old Mack gives Rosa some gold earrings.

WEEK FIVE: Thursday

After lunch we run Act One, scene 2, “stopping for nothing.” It goes well and after a few notes some focussed work is done on page 32 (Sophia and Ephraim’s discussion in the yard while Charlie sleeps off the alcohol in Ephraim’s room). It is run a few times up until Esther’s entrance to make sure that Martina and Danny feel comfortable with the dynamics of each moment. Afterwards, everyone prepares to start running Act One, scene 2 again from the top through to its end but the actors are allowed to stop for any moment that isn’t working for them.

The scene runs again with no stops. However, after having made some notes about pace and blocking, Michael looks again at the latter part of the scene, particularly the moment when Charlie stands by Ephraim’s steps after having told Sophia that there is ‘nothing’ wrong with him. Charlie goes into Ephraim’s room to sit or lay down immediately.

This moment is reworked. Rather than Charlie seeming as dismissive of Sophia and giving the impression that there is a problem between them, Michael and Jude [Akuwudike, actor] give Charlie a different reason for going back into Ephraim’s: to collect the glass he came in with, plus the hat, and a ‘Halloween nose/moustache’ that he was wearing. When Charlie is alone in the room he appears to look even more troubled, then sits on Ephraim’s bed. In the production, the lights will fade to the sound of a child singing ‘One, two, three, mother catch a flea. Flea die, mother cry – one, two, three. You to catch, you to catch!’

WEEK FIVE: Friday

Today the whole of the first half of the play will be run. The first part of the morning is spent briefly topping and tailing scenes in part one. Steven Brown (Sound) comes to watch the scene transitions. The last few lines of Act One, scene 1 are run on the floor until it ends. Julia Wickham (DSM) calls out “lights down, scene change”, after which she plays any scene-change music. Cynthia Duberry (ASM) quickly moves in and then out, retrieving Old Mack’s hat and Rosa’s earrings from Rosa’s small table. Simultaneously, Tahirah Sharif (Esther) steps out of the Adams’ home, sets some plates, cups and cutlery onto a table and sits. Martina Laird (Sophia) follows swiftly behind her and begins pacing the porch while gently holding the ‘baby’ in her arms. Danny Sapani (Ephraim) takes his position in his room. Julia calls “lights up”, and scene 2 begins.

After a few seconds, scene 2 is stopped and everyone resets to the top of the play. This process is repeated. Once everyone is happy the same thing is done for the end of scene 2 and into Act Two, scene 1. This happens twice to make sure everyone is satisfied.

Michael discusses some possible scene-change music for page 17 where Rosa, having told Sophia that she will tell Ephraim “soon” crosses the yard from her porch and
Rehearsing *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

into his room. The music used at this moment might be replaced or possibly not used at all. An interesting part of Michael and Steven’s discussion is centred around often having to make a decision as whether to have a piece of music end a scene (staying with its energy and pace) or to begin a next scene (creating a new pace and momentum).

When Michael and everyone else are happy, we all move over to the reading table and read Act Two, scene 1. Jeannette Nelson arrives and sits close by, making notes. The cast then get onto the floor.

Danny and Jade go through the moves of the fight before the cast run the scene. It is now at its tightest and most intense yet. It is clear from the way that Jade Anouka plays the moment that she knows Ephraim could react in any way to her news – and her apprehension is palpable. Danny tries a new action for Ephraim, having him leave his room just after accusing Rosa of trapping him into staying in Trinidad. After Mavis bangs on her wall, Ephraim shouts up to her and slams his hand against the stairway up to her room. The scene ends. Michael is very pleased with the work, and the cast are confident that the scene is in its best condition yet. After giving a few notes, Michael looks at the moment during which the taxi arrives for Ephraim. He has Danny and Trevor Michael Georges repeat the action to get the timing tight and clear.

After lunch, the cast gather on the floor and Michael prepares them for a run of the first half: “This is your chance to see what it feels like to connect the scenes, whilst clocking all the necessary transitions between them. A chance for you to feel the energy needed to sustain all the various levels and necessary focus for all the through lines.”

The cast get into their first positions or take a seat at the edge of the rehearsal room to watch. Jeannette Nelson has joined us again, and so has Tariq Hussain. The air is filled with an energy of focussed concentration and preparation.

The run goes smoothly and there’s plenty of both serious and playful craft at work. It’s difficult to express here how deep the actors dig to find moments of pain, despair, and confusion, and how high they fly while expressing moments of delight, humour and excitement.

After a quick break and a few notes, the first half is run again, and it is just as inspiring as the first! A few of the actors use this second chance to get a deeper sense of the blocking and to re-approach moments that they feel could warrant further exploration.
The characters

During the rehearsal process it was intriguing to take part in and witness conversations about the characters whilst the actors created them. Whether from talking one-on-one with an actor, listening in on discussions between Michael Buffong and the cast, or scribbling down my own observations whilst he gave notes, my appreciation for Errol John’s classic and deeply symbolic writing increased week by week. This character analysis is drawn from the observations I made, and the ideas that were drawn from the script. (It will help if you have read the script or seen the National Theatre production)

(In order of speaking)

KETCH

“It seem nobody does care, poverty and corruption everywhere.”

Ketch’s music opens the play. A Calypsonian, he works (out of sight) on a new song as Ephraim, the catalyst of the play, enters the yard. To call Ketch’s lyrics and guitar-strumming a ‘song’ would be an understatement: the play is consciously opened with a respectful acknowledgement of one of Trinidad’s major contributions to the world with its history of oral tradition. Ketch isn’t just penning a song, he is meditating on and preparing for community and public consumption the latest news, thoughts, comments and feelings circulating the area and the whole Island at that time. He is, as part of African traditional culture, the ‘Griot’, the guardian of history, myths, a bringer of news, local gossip, information, and reflections. Ephraim overhears these lyrics whilst arriving home from work as a trolley bus driver. The words speak for themselves and perfectly sum up the political and social climate of the time when the play is set, and are an insightful introduction to the atmosphere in Trinidad as World War II was ending and celebrations for returning heroes were taking place.

‘Who To Blame’

It seem nobody does care, poverty and corruption everywhere, stealing we dollars. Tightening we collars. This ting hot like dynamite but do we still have the will to fight? They belly hungry, man, they should be angry. Boy I mad for so but everyone I know seem to forget. Dey ain’t have no revenue and all they want to do is fete, fete, fete. When I look around this place all I see is a damn disgrace. It’s a shame. Yes! And we ain’t know who to blame.

Ketch’s song is also a soundscape and backdrop to the thoughts and feelings simmering in Ephraim whilst he aches with the need to escape Trinidad and find a new life in England. At the time, Trinidad was a member state of the Commonwealth, and England was lovingly spoken of as the ‘Mother Country’. There’s an inherent symbolism here of a mother being sought by a man who was once abandoned by his own blood mother.

EPHRAIM

From the moment Ephraim appears, he is hot, tired and thirsty (hot and bothered, tired of his life on the island and thirsty for what the world outside Trinidad may have on offer for him). He is pensive about something which he is yet to share with anyone.

As with all the characters in the play, he is not an individual existing in a vacuum: he represents or at least has an historic connection to those once held captive on the island during the process of enslavement. The history of Trinidad and Tobago involves invasion, conquest and colonisation and, although Errol John does not have Ephraim speaking specifically about Trinidad’s history, his psychology definitely represents the notion of being trapped and yearning for a sense of freedom from his restrictive environment. It’s important to acknowledge Trinidad’s colonised past when thinking of or watching Moon on a Rainbow Shawl.

Ephraim is the hero, or anti-hero, of the story. Regardless of your attitude towards his actions in the play, he is no different from other sons of the village, town or city in a long history of stories, who long to
The characters

pursue their dreams and ambitions, or escape from stifling circumstances. Without that persona in this story – and many other stories like it – there would be none of the dramatic friction which is generated as characters around him react to his choices.

Ephraim is haunted by his past and wishes for a better future. He is not fully present nor wishes to remain connected to his current surroundings. Sometimes called Eph for short, he works as a trolley bus driver. As a tenant of Old Mack’s yard, he lives opposite Rosa, his girlfriend, and also the Adams family. Ephraim’s father was a transport mule cart driver, for which Ephraim expresses no respect or positive acknowledgement: “My ole man was nothin’…Everybody stinkin’ dustbin, hawk, spit, crap” (Act 3, scene 2).

Ephraim is suffocating from the history of the island and its continuing lack of independence from outside forces. His personal family history also troubles and haunts him, especially with regards to the death of his Grandmother, a death which Rosa goes so far as to call a “murder” (Act 2, scene 1). Near the end of this scene, Ephraim expresses thoughts that are possibly being shared for the first time in his life with another human: “My ole man died when I was five years old. When I was six my mother pick up with another man, went off to Curacao and left me flat! For nearly a whole week I went hungry till Grandma came and found me and took me home with her.”

He goes on to put his grandmother into a poor house so as to progress with his ‘plan’ to leave Trinidad and continues to make his heart heavy:

“When they knew she was dying... They send and call me. She was lying there on the bed. I couldn’t believe it was she. In four days she has sort of wasted away. I stood there by the door. I couldn’t go no further. She was looking at me. But I just stood there. Shame eating me... I heard her ask the nurse for me to come near. Perhaps to forgive me, I don’t know. But I couldn’t go. I couldn’t go. Then she told the nurse: Tell that boy if he can’t come nearer, he might as well go... She died that night.”

The fact that Ephraim imagines that his grandmother might possibly have been about to forgive him could point to his need to be forgiven. He has a deep longing to be released from the act of abandoning her in the poor house and her consequent death.

Ephraim throws Rosa’s dress at her and pushes her towards his doorway, but only at the point that she calls his grandmother’s death “murder”, does he literally throw her out of his room as if discarding a piece of rubbish. There are obviously not the actions of the man we see in the company of Esther in Act 1, scene 1. However, the feeling of being trapped on the island combined with his memories of a dead and ‘nothing’ father, and of being abandoned by his own mother followed by days of going hungry, all within a context of heroes returning from WWII and a society hungry for “the Yankee dollar”, it is almost no surprise that Ephraim was always on course to behave this way.

Although Ephraim describes himself as a “big man, not no damn little boy” in Act 2, scene 1, he is in reality a hungry and abandoned child whose ancestors were held captive.

Whether subtle or blatant, Errol John layers the whole play with symbolism. For example, it is no coincidence that some of the first words we hear from Ephraim (referring to Esther’s little baby brother) are that “he wanted a little air”. The same can also be said for Ephraim, existing in his stifled and claustrophobic reality.

Ephraim is gradually detaching himself from the yard and its inhabitants. Although within the context of banter, there is an exchange of lines in which Rosa calls Ephraim with famous leading Hollywood actors. Ephraim agrees to a likeness to the actor William Holden: “That’s right, he and me is twins.” Though they are referring to Holden’s physical appearance, it is ironic that William Holden became famous initially for playing a series of roles that are said to be a combination of good looks and cynical detachment.

Before he leaves, Ephraim’s comments on his unborn child sound cruel and heartless – “The baby born, it live, it dead... It make no damn difference to me”. But the words do not originate from a thoughtless man with a cold heart. One of the current cast of the play observed that “in the tradition of story-telling that is influenced by the Judeo-Christian teachings, Ephraim is a mythical ‘Christ’ figure. Although he refuses to be nailed to the cross, he will do almost anything to pursue the future that he feels is calling him.” This painful moment is all the more uncomfortable when we’ve seen how loving, caring and nurturing Ephraim can be.

When we first see Ephraim he is arriving home, but this home is not one with which he feels any sense of belonging: “This Trinidad has nothing for me, nothing I want”. It is where he is for now and, just like anyone who has no sense of peace, rest or true stillness, he will not be himself until he feels settled.

The last time he is seen, he departs the yard shouting “Go, go, go!” He is swapping home for another ‘home’, in a place that he does not know yet and which gives no definite idea as to what lays in waiting for him. He is leaving for an idea. He is leaving for a far-away place that is spoken about and dreamed of by many, not a place somewhere over a rainbow hill, but a real place and the promise of a great future. It is not without irony that he seeks the ‘Mother country’. Who knows, maybe the little boy once abandoned will get another chance to “dream his dreams” in his new home and to “touch that moon” in a bigger part of the world.
The characters

ESTHER

The first sight of Esther is of a child playing her part in business (or home). She is up late, taking care of her “fretful” little brother (a word that can be used to describe quite a few inhabitants of the yard). She wishes that her “Ma would come home”, and in the meantime gets assurance and support from Ephraim. He advises her how to soothe the baby and also encourages her about her intelligence and possibilities for her future. Esther is caught up in the here and now, with hope for a future that feels at once so near and yet so far. Her current surroundings are a constant reminder as to why things cannot improve, both physically and educationally. She is, aged 12, bridging that frustrating gap between childhood and womanhood. All the way through the play she asks questions and often is either not given the answer, or not given the answer that she wants. A high-school scholarship winner, she looks forward to attending school in a few weeks’ time, but is aware that the family’s lack of funds will make it unlikely that she will ever get there.

Although Esther does not long to leave the island she is a subtle mirror image of Ephraim. She constantly yearns to be away from the yard to play with her richer friends. She is curious about the future but does not yet know what she wishes to be. After meeting the talented boy cricketer Young Murray (a symbol of what her own father used to be), she calls “‘bye” to him as he leaves as if she is really saying ‘please come back’, or even ‘can I come with you?’

She is not a dreamer, though: hers is a thoughtful, enquiring mind: “The moon is a stone, did you know that Eph?” She is perplexed by those who still believe that the light of the moon is made by a man holding a lantern inside it: “I want to know the truth.” However her mind is also conscious of the world of poetry and imagination to the point that she hopes her little brother might not only write poetry when he grows up but that he could even be named after John Byron, the English romantic poet.

Esther appears to be on the outside of the life of the yard most of the time. Her mother does not wish her to loiter there, what with the likes of Mavis around. When she speaks, she is either asking questions or quoting big ideas taught to her by others: “now am I a tin whistle, through which God blows. And I wish to God I were a trumpet and why, God only knows”. She seeks to see and to understand.

Rightly or wrongly, near the play’s conclusion, Esther accuses her mother of always pushing her father and making him feel ashamed of himself. Although said in anger, she makes truthful observations of her parents’ relationship. Sophia later admits to Rosa that she is indeed “always picking on Charlie”.

Having previously run off, the last time Esther appears is on her return to the yard to find her mother distraught and alone, having lost her innocent ‘adopted’ daughter Rosa, to the “old devil” Old Mack. She speaks only one word – “Ma” – at the close of the play, which Errol John specifically requested to have ‘warmth – immediacy and strength’.

Esther’s physical return symbolises a hope not only for herself and the family but for the whole island. But the image of the returning child is juxtaposed with the sound of a bell and hiss of the last trolley bus as it passes by the yard, compounding the symbolism of the play’s last moment, when Ephraim’s spirit leaves.

The Esther that has returned is more a young woman now, than the child at the beginning of the story. She has experienced an event that has shifted her world view and change her relationship with her mother for ever and for the better.

MAVIS

Mavis is first seen in the play on the arm of an American sailor, a client who will soon be paying her for sex. She appears frivolous, light-hearted and without a care in the world. Mavis can too easily be described as the yard’s ‘hooker’, living for today and for herself, having a good time and ignoring the world that exists around her. That would be a mistake.

Not only a source of unease, upset and disgust to some of her neighbours, Mavis is also the most vivid symbol of...
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The lengths some of the island’s inhabitants have gone to in order to survive. She represents those women in a period of Trinidad’s history who would sell sex to sailors and soldiers stationed on the island during WW2. This reality had a deep impact on many of the island’s people and provoked much gossip, jealousy and also anger in many of the men. A famous calypso at the time, called ‘Jean and Dinah’, became a worldwide hit when it was released by the Calypsonian, Mighty Sparrow. The lyrics centred on the huge numbers of women selling their bodies to the personnel of the US bases and on how people felt after the bases closed down at the end of the war:

Jean and Dinah, Rosita and Clemontina
Round de corner posin’
Bet your life is something dey sellin’
But when you catch them broken you could get dem all for nuttin’

Many prostitutes on the island were not only seduced by these visitors but were often raped with no thought for the children that would result.

Mavis knows who she is and what others might think of what she does. But she also knows that nobody living in the yard is as saintly or high and mighty as they might appear. It is this mind-set that lays behind her verbal explosion at Sophia who advises a visiting soldier to “see the doctor first thing in the mornin’”: “I clean, what you know about me? Always washing yer blasted mouth on people!” Mavis may not be as self-righteous as Sophia sometimes appears but her words indicate a self-awareness, that she has feelings like anybody else in the yard and that none of the others are necessarily far away from committing a sin or making a mistake in need of correction by others.

The last image of Mavis shows her as a beautiful, glamorous woman in the moonlight being escorted out on a date by a man who cares very much for her. Her life may not be as perfect as she might wish nor as moral as others might expect, but she appears genuinely happy, and there is a possibility that her future has the potential for positive change. This last image is not one of a woman entering again the claustrophobic, ramshackle surroundings of a yard with a man seeking to pay for sex. It is of a woman leaving on the arm of a man who loves her and cares about her future. He may not be ‘perfect’ – whatever that means – but Mavis’ path has more promise than even she allows herself to acknowledge.

SAILOR/SOLDIER

Although the sailor that Mavis brings back to the yard at the top of the play only appears in this scene, his presence is powerfully-charged in the context of the setting of the story. He (and the soldier later in the play) symbolise the presence of the American military on the island in World War 2: not only as allies involved in the fight against Hitler but also for their impact on Trinidadian society, a subject which is not often addressed. The famous Calypso song ‘Brown Skin Girl’ (by King Radio, 1946) spoke about this situation, criticising servicemen who fathered children with local Trinidadian women and left the babies behind. Mavis first appears in the play just as Ephraim has told Esther to “go on, bring him” (referring to Esther’s little baby brother). There is no mistaking why this sailor is in the yard and what his intentions are. Creating a baby is not part of his plan but the act he is about to perform with Mavis could lead to that – and he would want nothing to do with the baby. As soon as he disappears into Mavis’ room, Esther appears from her home with a baby in her arms. Placing this action so close together is possibly coincidental by Errol John; but I like to think it wasn’t.

SOPHIA

Sophia first appears looking tired, laden with someone else’s washing and with much on her mind. It is past midnight and, it may not be a trolley bus she has just finished driving like Ephraim, but she is still returning home from work. The driving that she does throughout the whole play is metaphorical – driving the whole family, guiding Rosa as best she can and eventually doing everything in her power to try and prevent Ephraim from abandoning Rosa.

Her usual homecoming ritual is interrupted by seeing Esther out on the veranda with the baby. Sophia’s first words leave no illusion about her ability to express her
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mind clearly. To many she could come across as harsh but this woman – and many like her – stands for the kind of love that many cultures call ‘tough love’. Sophia is not only the central character of this play, she is a reminder of the many thousands of women worldwide who are heavily relied upon but not truly seen or acknowledged for who they are and what they do.

‘Sophia’ literally means ‘wisdom’. Although she might not always be the perfect example of pure wisdom and truths, she acts like a ‘see’ in the story, somebody with a wealth of knowledge, history and integrity. Her first words in the play might come across to many as too harsh, unfair even: wondering why Esther has her little brother outside so late in the evening, she asks: “Child, you crazy or what? Is kill yer trying to kill him?” Her reaction is indicative of her culture: a deliberately heightened level of communication to symbolise the importance of the message.

It is a mistake to focus on what is said. Sophia does not really think her daughter is “crazy”, nor does she seriously fear that the baby could die of pneumonia as a result. She is making a point, and on a deeper level, is reminding her child who is in charge. Even if harm is perceived from the use of the words, it is not the intention. Some may know this communication style as ‘tough love’. And that is what Sophia personifies in the play: that tough, deep down and yet vulnerable kind of love that more often than not knows better and sees the full scale of a situation. If Sophia were an animal she would be an owl, keeping a knowing and watchful eye on the yard and protecting her environment – whilst seeking a better home elsewhere.

Sophia could easily be labelled as constantly irritated, nagging and self-righteous. But with all that she has endured and continues to suffer, she is a symbol of strength, with deep insight and wisdom. If those around her paid heed to even half of what she says, their lives would be much improved.

Is Sophia perfect? No. But her strength, honesty and sometimes sharp tongue have resulted from battles which she – like so many women before her – has had to fight. Ultimately, Sophia is a woman who loves. She loves her ‘broken’ husband, her bright and inquisitive daughter, she loves Rosa as her own daughter, Ephraim (with a care that he is probably too scared to accept) and also, in the deepest of ways, her country of Trinidad. Sophia represents a long line of women who still exist today who refuse to allow their spirits to be broken or dominated by unjust, cruel and corrupt forces.

The last sight of Sophia in the story is when she hears the call of her own daughter arriving back home with a renewed sense of a better future. This is what Sophia stands for: a belief in the fight for a better future, and a reminder that remaining wherever we call ‘here’ to make things better can also be of value, insight and integrity.

OLD MACK

Old Mack is first seen escorting Rosa home. He is not only making sure that she gets home safe and sound, he has an ulterior motive: he hopes to be sexually intimate with her. Initially, he appears to be a lonely middle-aged man seeking light conversation, but his sudden attempt at embracing Rosa becomes threatening until he ends up on his knees offering mumbled apologies with a forced dignity.

Old Mack owns the rooms in the yard, and is the easiest character in the play to dislike. He could be said to represent greed – but in spite of his actions and choices in relation to the yard and its upkeep he is a person with a plan, wishes and aspirations. In that regard, he is no different from any of the yard’s inhabitants. The “unfinished three-storey building” that Errol John describes in the opening directions might become rooms that Old Mack intends to rent out, or it could be a new home for the family he still wants to have. He is lonely and the son he does have has left the island for London and seems unlikely to return.

Old Mack is powerful in that he has a degree of wealth, but he is not happy and seeks someone to share his life with. The object of his affections is Rosa who, he must know, has little experience with men. Although his approaches to her would be scorned upon by his community, his influential status on the island would allow him to choose whoever he wanted to live or share his life with.
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ROSA

At the beginning of the story, Rosa has polite and easy-going conversation with Old Mack, who has just been given her a lift home. At first she seems unaware of his interests in her and sees nothing wrong in accepting any of his numerous gifts. Rosa can easily be perceived as innocent, naive and unwise – and to a certain degree this is true – but it should be acknowledged that she was raised in an orphanage by nuns who seem to have sheltered her from many aspects of the outside world, and from the harsh realities of living in Old Mack’s yard. However, she has been able get a job in the local café: and though she might live in the yard she is not of the yard. She has aspirations for a better life.

At one stage in the play, during an exchange with Ephraim, he speaks of the “tension” of the yard and she asks in reply: “what tension?” She isn’t stupid nor belittling her neighbours: she quite simply has not yet plugged into that energy of the yard. If it weren’t for the attentions of Old Mack and her relationship with Ephraim, her life could be on a path to success. Ultimately, all Rosa seeks is love and a family, and even after hearing Ephraim describe how he treated his mother there is still a possibility she can forgive him and find a way to make a life together. After literally being thrown out of Ephraim’s room she is able to express her mind (though possibly in anger or hurt) in a way that leaves Ephraim in no doubt that this young woman has the ability to stand up for herself.

However, she is naturally caring and hardworking, and looks forward to living with her own family. Her comments about the meanings of an owl’s hoot or about the good fortune of being born on the day of a full moon demonstrate her connection to the superstitious.

The shock of Ephraim’s abusive treatment towards her, added to the fact that she has never known her own blood family, changes her from being optimistic and loving into someone who needs to appear hard, cold and prepared for life’s harsh realities.

At the beginning Rosa is a happy woman in love, but the last image of her is of a saddened, hardened soul who has been abandoned by the man she loves and whose child she is carrying. She appears to give in to her new fate with a degree of forced indignation, by accepting Old Mack and the security and stability he provides. In another story perhaps (maybe a secret dream of Rosa’s) Ephraim would halt the taxi, throw his ticket into the reservoir and beg Rosa to make the best out of the little they have. Or in a few weeks he would change his mind and send for her. However, until that moment, Rosa will make do, even if it means sacrificing her reputation and heart for the sake of her future child.

THE POLICEMAN

Although the policeman isn’t present in many scenes, he facilitates the narrative, and his involvement in the ongoing investigation of the café break-in. He also represents the influence that England has on the political and legal aspects of the island, represented by his uniform, which is reminiscent of a late 1940s UK police uniform. This symbol of colonialism struts in and out of the yard with all the authority that wearing a uniform can offer and is also influenced by overseas principles that had little or no regard for the island’s inhabitants.

PRINCE

Although Prince brings an air of unintentional humour to the yard whenever he arrives, he is far from simple or foolish. He is a businessman selling his wares to Americans visiting the island (most likely tourists as well as US army personnel) and he needs the gift of the gab. Each time that Prince appears he is on a mission. It is Mavis – whom most other people would disrespect – whom he desires, and he seeks her out on each visit to the yard. His complaints are always centered on issues to do with their relationship, never about the island or its condition. He appears very happy with his connections to the Americans, to whom he probably sells more than cigarettes: maybe also alcohol, magazines, stockings, chocolate, lighters, watches and any other goods that he
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and his other contacts can lay their hands on. Prince symbolises a network of opportunistic traders, but he shouldn’t be assumed to be squandering all the money that he makes: his aspirations for a better life are not very different from Ephraim’s. Perhaps Prince is saving some of his cash towards one day being able to leave the island and make more money elsewhere, or to open up a business in a more affluent part of the island.

CHARLIE

The first, dominant image of Charlie is of a drunken, Union Jack-wearing man, singing a song of war heroes. And although it is clear that his wife is not at all pleased with his behaviour, his message for Ephraim that he “should have been there” (attending the reception for returning troops) is one of the many ironies of the play. Charlie himself “should have been there”: he was once a hero of the cricket world. Many sons of Trinidad perfected cricket to levels that changed the way the sport was played and viewed by the world. It also created the chance for these men to be respected and acknowledged in ways they’d never experienced before. It became a way for some to escape poverty in the Caribbean, or at least to find a way to relocate whilst remaining in spirit in the place they called home. But Charlie, once “spit and polished” and known to be at the height of his power as a bowler, lost his opportunity and is now a broken man, caught up in past dreams and current financial frustrations whilst wishing to find a way to support his daughter’s education.

Charlie, although obviously having no problem with acknowledging the potential of his own daughter, remains trapped in an era now out of his grasp and tainted by injustice. His past crime was to stand up for his rights as a human being after feeling that he and his colleagues were being treated like “hogs”. He is too often the worse for wear from alcohol, which takes his pride away and is possibly used to numb the pain of having such a bright future robbed from him by the racist Savannah Club elites of former years.

He has the eye and vision to be able to deeply see all the “colours put so beautifully together” within Esther’s needlework and is moved to say that one day she is “going to be star”. However, he has lost the ability to see himself with the same love, and therefore enthusiasm.

Charlie still has an intuitive feel for cricket and for making and repairing cricket bats for others. He points out that Young Murray’s bat hardly has “an edge”, even though it has been used for most of the season. Not until the story’s conclusion, after Charlie’s arrest, are his knowledge and wisdom offered a chance of being put into practice, through the offer of a job. Sadly though, with the shame that is associated with thievery and the stigma of having to pay a fine or serve a jail sentence, the job offer would be taken away.

His actions are not for pure greed or self-centered gratification: he is acutely aware of his inability to provide for his daughter’s future. When the deed is done he is at least able to salvage some degree of redemption by confessing to the crime rather than allow suspicions about Rosa’s co-worker Stephen to continue.

Above: Jude Akuwudike as Charlie
PHOTOS: JONATHAN KEENAN
Jade Anouka on Rosa

Although this play was written in the 1950s I believe Rosa’s story is just as relevant today.

She is in love but she is not getting the attention and affection she craves from the man who is supposed to be her boyfriend. More than that, she is pregnant with his child and wants a family and future with him, like the one she never had. Having grown up in an orphanage without any family unit, Rosa just wants to be loved.

Rosa’s story will be recognisable to anyone who has suffered from unrequited love, anyone who looks for the best in people and anyone who has a dream for their future. Rosa learns a lot throughout the story. She gets hurt, but she gets stronger. The experiences she has over these few days, for better or worse, change her forever.

Danny Sapani on Ephraim

The challenge in playing Ephraim is to bring to light the secrets that he holds in his heart – his high ideals, passion for life, dreams for new challenges and broader horizons – whilst being open to his obstacles: loneliness, self-doubt, shame, fear of abandonment and claustrophobia.

Playing Ephraim is to keep all these emotions at the surface whilst revealing very little, perhaps as typical of 1940s man. The effect of this suppression is explosive and potentially devastating when fully expressed.

With Errol John’s taut, well-constructed play there is space to reveal all this atomic power in safety, through his language and well-crafted structure. Following his rhythm, stresses and punctuation in the moment helps to unearth so much about how his characters are feeling.

What gives this play classic status is that even now in 2012, 60 years after it was first written, we can still hear and feel John, the world he created, the heartbeat of his characters. It is our world, and its centre is specific – to Trinidad – yet universal.

Like the poetic prose in the play, Ephraim’s character has many layers of meaning: expressed, unexpressed, complicit, contradictory but always truly, deeply felt and, though hidden or codified at times, always in the end brutally, beautifully honest.

Jenny Jules on Mavis

I begin by trying to see who the woman I will portray is from the first reading.

I then try to collect descriptions of her from what is written about her in the script, what other characters say about her. After that, it’s over to research: the era in which she lives, the continent and climate, plus significant historical events that occurred around the character’s lifetime and her present day.

A real and whole person

I then start to build a picture of her in my imagination, armed with facts and truths. If I am playing a leading role it is much easier to construct a whole, 3-D person. However, when I play supporting roles I flesh out the character quite substantially in order to make her a real and whole person.

Mavis is one of those characters that one can be totally inventive with because there is so little known about her story. I have enjoyed finding Mavis’ physicality in relation to her profession. I have made her a ‘feeding predator’, someone who is actively seeking physical contact from every man around her. She requires a different outcome from every individual. From Prince, she needs a partner who can take care of her financially and make her respectable. That’s why she agrees to marry him. From her clients – the US soldiers and sailors – she wants money and gifts (stockings, chewing gum, alcohol etc). From Ephraim she wants sex. She is in lust with him and pursues him sexually in the way he probably pursued Rosa. Mavis is a very feisty woman, courageous and brutally honest. I am really enjoying her mischievous nature. She can be playful and sweet, then spins on a dime, becoming vicious and spiteful. Her moral compass is of a dubious nature. However she is deliciously funny, cheeky and a true joy to play.

Moon on a Rainbow Shawl

I feel that this play is a true classic. As a woman from a Caribbean background I am proud to be a part of this production. The writing is extraordinary – poetic and beautiful.
Martina Laird on Sophia

After the call from my agent, I sought out my old copy of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. The title page bore the ink stamp “Campus Corner – Port Of Spain – Book Sellers”. I had bought the book as a schoolgirl in Trinidad, and Campus Corner was where we bought everything on the school reading list.

Now, after 25 years living in England, my agent was calling with an audition for the National Theatre’s production. Errol John’s 1958 piece was being recognised as a classic by the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain – and I was up for the part of Sophia Adams.

I looked again at the words that I had taken for granted as a child. The experience of childhood in an ex-colony taught that great works of literature were unfamiliar and alien. *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* had seemed easy, familiar. Reading it now, I was struck by the accuracy and poetry of Errol John’s observation of language and life in Trinidad.

*Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* is a wonderful example of the writing style of its period. It has echoes of my favourites, like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller; works I had always longed to play in but to which I had no access. But in this play the setting was a culture to which I belonged and which recognised the epic scale of the lives of people of a small island.

Sophia Adams was once played in London by a Trinidadian actress called Barbara Assoon. As a university student, seeing Barbara in Derek Walcott’s *Remembrance* with Norman Beaton was the moment I decided to pursue a dream and become an actor. Now a woman with childhood far behind me, Sophia Adams seemed to speak to me, woman to woman.

Sophia’s form of tough love is often seen as bullying, but Errol John’s writing flows with humanity and compassion. Sophia Adams is a wife, mother and friend confronting forces over which she has no control and who is desperate to promote in her loved ones a sense of self-worth that she has been denied. We glimpse how little she expects for herself as she lulls her baby boy to sleep and sings, “Pampalampa Likeelee, This little man don’t love me. Pampalampa Likeelee, This little man goin’ kill me.”

We hear her determination to see those around her reach something near their potential and to live a better circumstance, when she cries from the heart, “B’JESUS CHRIST, SOMETHING GOING TO GO RIGHT IN THIS PLACE TODAY!!”
Three Esthers

In recent years, there have been three notable productions in London of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. Each of the actors who have played the role of Esther in these three productions, share their thoughts on their character.

**Tahirah Sharif,**
Esther in the National Theatre production, 2012

**My three favourite moments in the play**
1) Nearing the end of Act One, scene one, Esther is sitting on a stool on the porch holding the baby, and Ephraim is sitting on the porch steps. They are both looking up at the moon, and Ephraim says: “Esther if yer have yer head screw on right… no matter where yer go… One night sometime yer reach up yer touch that moon…”

   This is one of my favourite moments in the play, because it is a calm and touching moment between the two characters, and makes Esther feel as though anything is possible. For me, this moment in the play sums up the hope and possibilities for the future which Esther could be about to embark on.

2) Nearing the end of Act One, scene two, Esther has gone over to show her father Charlie her needlework. Her mother Sophia looks on from her seat at the table on the porch where she prepares food.

   This is only time in the entire play when the audience see the Adams family together without conflict. Also, Esther and Charlie don’t share a lot of time on the stage together, so it is special when they do, both in terms of the play, and for us, the actors. This moment in the play shows the dynamics of the family so well, and is a tender moment which the family share before everything goes wrong.

3) Nearing the end of Act Two, scene two, newly-engaged Mavis and Prince are out in the yard telling Old Mack about their engagement when Rosa appears. Mavis says very maliciously: “Always get the ring first, then get the baby…”

   It’s a cruel thing to say, especially after the previous scene shows Rosa telling Ephraim about her pregnancy, and him announcing he’s leaving for England and is not taking her with him. One might wonder why this is one of my favourite moments in the play, but it is because it encapsulates Mavis’ character and personality so well. The fact that she can be so brutal is almost funny.

**Advice for the next actress that plays Esther**
Always remember that although she is only 12 years old, and the youngest character in the play, she is not naïve or stupid – quite the opposite. She has all the openness, enthusiasm and optimism of a child, but is still aware of the problems her and her family face.

Simply have fun, and remember what is was like to be a child, both physically and mentally.

**Jacqueline Chan,**
Esther in the Royal Court production, 1958

Seeing the excellent National Theatre production of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* has brought back many cherished memories. I am from Trinidad, where I’d seen and admired Errol John’s theatre work. Like Errol and Ephraim in the play, I also came to London to find something that I couldn’t find at home: in my case, to further my studies in classical dance and drama.

It was the most exciting thing for me to be cast as Esther in the original London production at the Royal Court Theatre; to have the opportunity to play this character on whom her family pin great hopes. She is someone with a poetic soul - she even wants her baby brother to be called Byron! And with her, Ephraim can reveal his own – mostly hidden – tender and poetic side; his dreams and his wishes. He says to Esther: “If yer have your head screw on right – No matter where yer go – One night – sometime – yer reach up – yer touch that moon.” But he’s also saying it to himself and it is good advice that I personally will always carry with me.

Yearning for a better life, struggle, ambition, survival and above all, hope are the themes of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* and all put together by Errol John in Trini rhythm and language. No wonder I was so happy to be part of this wonderful play that continues to speak to us today. Its themes have always been and will always be important and relevant in any age and in every culture. It is a classic of Caribbean literature that will always have the power to touch us.

National Theatre Learning Background Pack 28
In 1986, when I received the phone call to say I’d been offered the part of Esther, I was over the moon! The first day of the rehearsal was a blur of introductions and read-throughs. The beautiful lady who played Sophia, my mother, was Barbara Assoon and Charlie, my father, was played by Errol Jones. They had both been flown in from Trinidad. They were so warm and encouraging that we all really became a family. The company I grew to love included Tony Armatrading, Jaye Griffiths, Roy Lee, Alan Cook and the late Joanne Campbell, with whom I went on to form The BiBi Crew in the late 90s.

I remember during rehearsals one day, when Joanne Campbell (playing Mavis) asked “Where should I throw the rice grains?” Errol said “Just feel it and throw... Just feel it!”

Errol John directed the show with a strong passion for telling the story and I desperately wanted to get it right and play the truth of the character. It was my first production on the Theatre Royal Stratford East stage and I remember Errol John being a very hands-on director, who was not about to let his vision of the piece be distorted. It was a privilege to be a part of the company. And now, over twenty-five years on, it is so wonderful to see the play getting a well-earned opportunity to be produced again, at the National Theatre.
What inspires you most about being a set designer?
Being a set designer allows you to enter different places constantly. Whilst working on this play set in 1947 Trinidad, I am also working on The Duchess of Malfi set in 1600, a play set in New York, a play with music set in the coal mining district of Durham in 1968 and another in eighteenth-century London. Each has its own aesthetic, architecture and fashion to consider, as well as the complex requirements of the play and the qualities of the theatre. I get to channel them through my own taste, passions and opinion.
So you are constantly expanding your knowledge of the world as well as challenging your own abilities to respond to each new play and space.

What initial preparation did you do for Moon on a Rainbow Shawl?
I of course first searched for pictures of Trinidad in 1947 but it was quickly clear that there was only limited material available. So I looked at the surrounding area, as far afield as Havana and Buenos Aires, which had similarities in terms of the Hispanic architecture, colours and heat, levels of poverty and dilapidation to the buildings, paint finishes and colour – and the sunshine.
I had been in Buenos Aires three years ago and took a lot of pictures in the poorer parts of La Boca and Palermo which had very similar one-storey architecture. I looked at interesting housing projects in Mexico where buildings have been built on top of others. I even looked at the animation film Chico and Rita with its courtyards and simple rooms.

What is your intention for the play's set design and the audience's relationship to it?
One of the key elements is that I want them to feel that they are in the yard, that they are inhabitants of the yard staring in on the action. This adds to the sense of the pressure cooker. I want explicit evidence of the lack of privacy of the people that lives there, that everyone has a close knowledge of each other's personal business. I wanted the faces of the audience to be literally in the yard.

What was the most enjoyable aspect of the set design and creation?
I particularly enjoyed working with the painters, prop supervisor and costume department in making the world of the environment, and really developing the...
Design

patchwork quilt of colours and textures in the surfaces, objects and textiles on stage. I wanted the set to be a sort of giant version of the rainbow shawl, with each element having a distinct feel but somehow all melting together in their sun-bleached world.

Has there been any particular aspect of this set that has been especially problematic or challenging?
One of the most challenging aspects of the design was to fit so much architecture into such a tight space (in the Cottesloe theatre). This was deliberate, to create a claustrophobic feel, but presented lots of interesting issues in terms of the layout of the space. The text has so many specific requirements and in fact quite a specific geography once you start to pick it apart. All this needed to knit together in our traverse space, a configuration it was not initially written for.

How many productions have you worked on with Michael Buffong? What is it that you like or appreciate about working with him?
This is the first time I have worked with Michael, but from the first time we met it felt as though we were on a very similar wavelength, both in terms of the play and what we were interested in theatrically. It was a very simple and easy-going relationship, things unfolded in a very natural way in terms of what we ended up with.

Each new relationship sets up a new way of working, which is part of the constantly changing world of a set and costume designer.
“Two dilapidated buildings make up this backyard property of Ole Mack’s in the East Dry River district.

“The wooden walls of one building are weather grey and gnarled. The other, more pretentious, sports a veranda. It appears more solid in structure and design, being part wood and part concrete. The galvanized roof slopes, half winking to one side of the veranda, progressing upwards into an upturned vee, over the main body of the house. It stands on stone pillars, and can claim the distinction of having once been painted. It is even lit by electricity. Ephraim has taken advantage of this luxury. An extension cord, plugged to the socket in the veranda, trails across the yard through the lattice-work above the door and into Ephraim’s room. The cord - a naked bulb fitted to its socket - is secured to a beam by screwed-in metal braces.

“The Adams’ half of the veranda has been turned into a sort of make-shift kitchen-dinette, accommodating a two-burner kerosene stove, a food safe, a table and a bentwood chair. The Adams’ curtains are white and fragile, while Rosa’s are of a pretty flowered chintz. There is a water tap near the side of the veranda at Rosa’s end.

“In staging, we need see only that part of the veranda with the doors and windows leading off into the two rooms. The backyard playing area should lie between the veranda and the projecting platform that is Ephraim’s room. It should be possible to see clear through Ephraim’s room into the alley beyond. The entire furnishing of this room need only comprise a bed, bureau and medium-size metal camp trunk. Mounted on to the platform should be a practical working window and two doors. One door opening into Ephraim’s room. The other, hinged to the same support, leads off into the wings. Connecting wooden steps lead down into the yard.

“People leave the yard by going up some stone steps, past two crumbling columns from which swings a wrought-iron gate that opens into the alleyway. A rickety wooden fence cuts off the view at back. In the evenings a street-lamp illuminates an area of the alley near the gate.”

“Errol John starts the play with a page of notes to the director and designer on how the setting should be presented. It is then up to the creative team to take this advice on into their own design.

“If he so wishes, the designer may suggest by minimum construction or a projected image at back, beyond the fence, a corner section of an unfinished three-storey building. Its structure should appear to be of steel and concrete surrounded by interlaced pieces of wooden scaffolding. When incorporated into the design this structure should dominate, like some tall phantom, the two lowly dwellings in the yard.”
Extension activities

Letters

Dear Rosa/Ephraim

Use the templates on the following pages, headed ‘Dear Rosa’ and ‘Dear Ephraim’.

Beginning with any character, write a letter as if imagining that you are expressing as many of their feelings, thoughts, intentions, wants, needs and wishes for the future as is possible. Your only source of inspiration and context should be from having read Errol John’s script or watched the play. Explore the emotions that would be felt whilst writing the letter and for the purposes of this activity, imagine that Ephraim has not yet left the island. Add more words of explanation if needs be. Dig deep into how a person must be feeling while writing the kind of letter that is not written very often and which could change your entire future. Once you have written the first letter, write the reply to the first one. Allow the writing to flow without worrying about your spelling or grammar – you can check that later. What is most important is expressing the characters’ mind-sets.

Send it to them

Just before Ephraim leaves the island for good, he has an exchange of words with Mavis. After angrily telling her that in five weeks he will remember her and send her a postcard, she replies that he should “send it to them.”

Print off the postcard template provided on the following pages. Imagining that you are Ephraim, write a postcard to each of the characters he has left behind. Allow his feelings and views on each person to influence the messages and allow the writing to be as honest, open and truthful as possible.

Poems

Write a quatrains about each character in Moon On A Rainbow Shawl.

(A quatrains is a four-line poem that rhymes; a condensed beginning, middle and end. The first and third, second and fourth lines may rhyme, or the first and second and third and fourth).

An example of a quatrains:

Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Speech

Using the following speech by Ephraim as a source of inspiration, create a single picture, painting, or set of storyboards depicting the story being told. If creating a single picture or painting allow as many images as you wish to occupy the same area. You can also add any other images depicting aspects of Ephraim’s life.

“Yer see this picture of ole Grandma here?... She took care of me from the time I small – till I grow a man. My ole man died when I was five years old. When I was six – my mother pick up with another man – went off to Curacao – and left me flat! For nearly a whole week I went hungry till Grandma came and found me and took me home with her. So it was only me and Gram from all that time... Then come a time. I began to make my plans. I find that she was in my way. I wanted to save money – But she was in my way. So one day – I went to her – Told her – I was putting her in the poor house... Four days – After I took her there – she died. When they knew she was dying. They send and call me. She was lying there on the bed. I couldn’t believe it was she. In four days – she had sort of – wasted away. I stood up by the door – I couldn’t go no farther. She was looking at me. But I just stood there. Shame! Eating me!... I heard her ask the nurse for me to come near. Perhaps – to forgive me – I don’t know. But I couldn’t go. I couldn’t go. Then she told the nurse: Tell that boy if he can’t come nearer – he might as well go!.. She died that night.”
Extension activities: letter template

Dear Rosa
Dear Ephraim
Extension activities
Further resources: Merchandise, multimedia, links

This list of content may enhance learning on the themes, and the historical and theatrical context of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. Click on the arrow when you see it to access online content. (The National Theatre is not responsible for the content provided on linked websites.)

iTunesU
A repository for digital resources for National Theatre productions.

Programme
The illustrated programme for the National’s production of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* is available to purchase, at £2, from the National Theatre Bookshop, during the production’s run and, while stocks last, for a time afterwards. It contains an extract by Charles Duff on Errol John and the original production; articles by Margaret Busby on Trinidad and by Philip Hedley of Theatre Royal Stratford East on their 1986 production. There are photographs of Errol John, a painting by the play’s first designer, plus full information and rehearsal photos of the performing Company at the National Theatre.

Published script
The playtext of *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, published by Faber and Faber at £9.99 is also available to purchase from the National’s Bookshop.

[ nationaltheatre.org.uk/bookshop ]
020 7452 3456
bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk

Black Plays Archive
A project initiated by actor, playwright and director Kwame Kwei-Armah to catalogue Black British plays, some forgotten, since the 1960s. The project is led by the National Theatre Archive in partnership with Sustained Theatre and with support from Arts Council England. More information:
[ nationaltheatre.org.uk/70327/black-plays-archive/the-black-plays-archive.html ]

Sustained Theatre
[ sustainedtheatre.org.uk/about ]

Talawa Theatre Company
Michael Buffong, the director of this production, is the current artistic director of Talawa Theatre Company
[ talawa.com ]