

## BLACK THEATRE IN THE UK

# I love telling African stories

## PLAYWRIGHT

Bola Agbaje is making waves in London's theatres, staging plays with African stories and names.

BY BELINDA OTAS

Bola Agbaje took the London theatre scene by storm with her first play, 'Gone Too Far.' What started as an assignment so she could get feedback, went on to win the prestigious Laurence Olivier Award for outstanding achievement in 2008. But her passion is to write plays with African names and tell African stories.

Her story reads like the classic tale of a writer's journey. By day, she is a Neighbourhood manager, managing over 600 residents in the East-End of London and at night, she is a writer. Bola Agbaje at 28 is taking it all in her stride and has Africa in sight, as the next place to conquer.



PHOTO COURTESY BA

The playwright, Bola Agbaje

Her first play 'Gone Too Far,' was a hit with critics and audience alike; the Royal Court Theatre, one of London's best known theatre venues, had no choice but to revisit the play; and staged it on its main stage. 'Gone Too Far,' explored the issues of identity, youth crime and clash of cultures with robust authenticity. Today, Agbaje is under commission with some of London's most elite theatre companies and she is delivering. Her latest offering, 'Detaining Justice,' examines the British immigration system through the lens of the African experience and has been described as a 'gripping drama with sharp humour and unsentimental compassion for its characters.'

## Plays with African names Born in

London to Nigerian parents, Agbaje explains that her first play was inspired by the fact that she really wanted "A play with African names in it. I felt that in terms of having young British Africans represented on the screen or in the theatre, that was never going to happen; and there were enough of us in London in general for there to be a great representation. The main aim was to have African names for my characters in it and then it spiralled into other areas of identity and culture."

'Gone Too Far' also dealt with the issue of accepting one's heritage and culture; especially for young Nigerians in London who straddle two worlds and often question where they truly belong. This stemmed from her own experience of going to Nigeria at the age of six, where she says she did not feel like she belonged and was often told she was British; and on her return to England with a



Detaining Justice examines immigration in the UK

Nigerian accent, was told she was 'African.' In addition to this, Agbaje had to learn to live with her two older sisters who had grown up in Nigeria, when they came to live in London with the family. "The culture shock and the change - we all had to adapt to a new way of living because we all had to live in one room, four of us in one room, it was almost a war ground because they had different ideologies and ways of doing things."

"Then there was my brother and I, who were very English and had an English way of doing things and the world collided at some point. It took a few years to know each other, get along and embrace each other's culture. That's why it was easy for me to explore one of my characters in 'Gone Too Far' - Yemi - as someone who didn't embrace his Africaness, unlike Ikudayesi who did. In a sense, I was Yemi," says Agbaje.

## Concerned with heritage

With six plays under her belt, Agbaje credits Tiata Fahodzi, one of Britain's foremost British-African theatre companies, for igniting her passion for the stage. "Tiata Fahodzi is one of the reasons I started writing. I went to watch the 'Gods Are Not To Blame' in 2005, a production of theirs; and it was one of the best productions I had ever seen. It was the first time that I had ever really been to the theatre. So when I saw the 'Gods Are Not To Blame,' I was really impressed with what they had done because their work is about African theatre and that was the first point of attraction."

Agbaje innately leans towards telling stories about her heritage and has written a few short plays and monologues based on Yoruba mythology. Her most famous to date is 'The Legend Of Moremi'. A big fan of Yoruba culture, she says her attraction is because, "I like the fact that there is no story that has never been told. Every story has been duplicated. What I like about them is that though

"I WOULD LOVE FOR MY PLAY TO BE ON AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE AND THAT IS SOMETHING I'M WORKING ON AT THE MOMENT, SO THAT I CAN GET MY WORK SHOWN THERE"

they are old stories, they have themes that still resonate now and run through other storylines. I just love the fact that they have a moral tale to them, I love moral stories and that is what I love about storytelling, that they have morals."

## Heading Nigeria's way

Her next stop is the National Theatre of Nigeria and Nollywood. While she admits she does not know everything about the state of theatre in Nigeria, she says she is learning and is aware of the fact that there is a thriving theatre. "Though, a lot of it, you have to get your own funding and there isn't government funding like [in Britain]," she adds. However, Agbaje remains unperturbed. "I would love for my play to be on at the National theatre and that is something I'm working on at the moment, so that I can get my work shown there."

If you are curious as to what her first play in Nigeria will be about, your guess is as good as hers because she has no idea. "I'm really not one who plans ahead. I plan for the moment. A lot of people think that because my plays are politically based, that I'm a political writer but it's not like that. I write what interests me. So, if someone asked me, I would write about what interests me at the moment because I'm not led by political statements or making one. It's just that

at present, those are the things that do interest me."

A young woman with a self-assured confidence in her own ability, Agbaje asserts she has no influences in the theatre world but there are people whose work she likes and respects. "You don't want to be like anybody because you want to be your own unique self. There are people who I like their work because of the way they do things. It's not that I like it because I want to copy it or be like them but because they have their own unique style. There is no one that I would say I want to be like or copy their style. I want to be my own person," she says.

Agbaje is currently adapting 'Gone Too Far' for the screen in association with the British Film Council while also making short films with her friends. For a playwright, who did not go to a creative writing school to learn the craft of writing, Agbaje is winning the respect of her contemporaries and her journey to conquer the world looks like it has already started.



Sharon Duncan-Brewster Aml Ameen in Detaining Justice

# Britain and the immigrant's burden

## REVIEW

Given the strong feelings aroused by immigration in the UK, Bola Agbaje's exploration of the subject in her play, *Detaining Justice*, is a brave but necessary one

BY TOSIN SULAIMAN

Foreigners examining the headlines of British newspapers would be forgiven for thinking that, along with celebrities and football, the only other subject Britons are obsessed with is immigration.

Depending on which British newspaper you read, immigrants are either flooding the UK and taking jobs from the native population, or they are the key to its economic prosperity and should be welcomed for the skills and knowledge they bring.

While immigration fears are not unique to the UK, they do appear to be more widespread there. A recent survey on attitudes towards immigration in eight countries suggests that Britons are more hostile to immigrants than the French, Germans, Italians and the Dutch. According to the study by the German-Marshall Fund, 66 per cent of British respondents said immigration was more a problem than

an opportunity, the highest percentage of all countries polled. The UK was also the only country where the majority of respondents (54 per cent) agreed that immigrants take away jobs from native workers; they also overestimated the number of immigrants in the country, believing it to be 27 per cent when it is only 10.

Given the strong feelings aroused by immigration, Bola Agbaje's decision to explore the subject in her new play, *Detaining Justice*, is a brave, but necessary one. Directed by Indhu Rubasingham, *Detaining Justice* follows Grace Neube, a Zimbabwean immigrant (played by Sharon Duncan-Brewster) whose brother Justice (Aml Ameen) is being held in an immigration detention centre after entering the country with a fake passport.

The lawyer handling the case is the taciturn Mark Cole (Karl Collins), one of the country's top prosecutors who has just won a high-profile murder trial but has to live with the knowledge that he sent an innocent man to prison. When Grace visits Cole, who now works at an immigration advisory centre, he tells her that her brother's appeal has been refused because the Home Office believes he is not a proper asylum seeker. Sensing Justice's case is one he can't win, he advises Grace against fighting the Home Office and says her brother can



Rebecca Scroggs, right, plays Chi Chi in the play

A RECENT SURVEY ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRATION IN EIGHT COUNTRIES SUGGESTS THAT BRITONS ARE MORE HOSTILE TO IMMIGRANTS THAN THE FRENCH, GERMANS, ITALIANS AND THE DUTCH

avoid deportation if he returns to Zimbabwe voluntarily. Though unmoved by Grace's tears and her insistence that her brother will be killed if he goes back, Cole agrees to continue working on the case, egged on by his young, garrulous assistant, Chi Chi (Rebecca Scroggs).

Grace's life in Britain is a lonely one and her only friends are three cleaners: Pra from Ghana, Javon from Eastern Europe and a Nigerian woman, Abeni. All three are illegal immigrants and although they have avoided detection, their freedom comes at a price and they live in fear of being caught.

The bad guy in the story is, somewhat predictably, the Home Office official who denies Justice's claim. Alfred (Jimmy Akingbola) has seen it all before and thinks Justice is just another economic migrant claiming political asylum. He even thinks the name Justice is

all part of the act.

Through these characters, the play poses and attempts to answer some tough questions, for example: what is justice, why is it a crime to want a better life, and why are some Britons, including those from ethnic minorities, so hostile to immigrants? By choosing to focus on the story of one asylum seeker, Agbaje tries to tackle the complex issues that sensational newspaper headlines tend to gloss over and to humanise a group of people that she clearly feels are misunderstood. Thanks to the fast-paced and often witty dialogue, the play is thought-provoking without being preachy, and Scroggs' excellent acting makes the debates between Cole and Chi Chi on the meaning of justice entertaining rather than tediously academic.

Other characters who stand out are the cleaners Abeni (Cecilia Noble) and Pra (Kobna

Holdbrook-Smith), who trade insults throughout the play and disagree on everything, from the origins of jollof rice to the best way for their friend, Javon (Robert Whitelock), to get new papers.

They also star in a boisterous church scene, where Pra, who is a pastor, leads his congregation in an energetic rendition of a gospel song and exhorts them to cast their burdens on the Lord. Although it was a big hit with the audience and provided welcome comic relief, the scene was an all-too-familiar caricature of pentecostal churches, which hinted at but ultimately shed little light on the issue of faith in the lives of the oppressed, something which Agbaje said she wanted to explore.

Writing in the programme, Agbaje also said she was drawn to the topic of immigration because of its ability to divide opinion. If there is one point she is trying to get across in *Detaining Justice*, it is that the dividing lines are not just between white and black people. Alfred, the Home Office official, is black and worries that there will be no jobs for his countrymen if people like Justice are granted asylum. When Grace asks him how he can condemn his own, it is clear where his sympathies lie. "I'm British," he replies.



A scene from Detaining Justice by Bola Agbaje

*Detaining Justice* is at the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn, London until December 15.