

## Gender and Race Debat(tl)ed on the London Stage

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1 Within a week, two new plays opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London that are both plot-based and dedicated to naturalism, if not social realism. Whereas Mick Mahoney's *Food Chain* on the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs investigates family values and materialism, Roy Williams' *Fallout* at the main stage downstairs centres on the investigation of a murder on the streets of London's black neighbourhood. The play deals with questions of race, deprivation, sexual and social rivalry, and street loyalty.

2 As in his last play at the Royal Court, *Clubland* (presented in the smaller venue upstairs), Williams depicts the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood and the need to take on (self-)responsibility. After the young, ambitious black pupil was killed by the boy-gang around Emile and Dwayne, the lads have to come to terms with their deed and the circumstances and mechanisms that led to it. The questions and accusations of the black D.C. Joe Stephens, who returns to his old neighbourhood to investigate the case, reinforce the lads' unease with their past deed and, above all, with their future prospects. Dwayne's father, a deluded alcoholic who repeatedly crosses the stage begging for money is a constant reminder of how bleak the future for those young boys might be. Individually, all of the boys seem to long for a different life elsewhere, but as soon as they get together, peer pressure makes them celebrate masculine toughness and indifference to any idea of change. The urge to leave a life of random brutality behind is branded as cowardice and a romantic illusion - the reproach "You're too soft" recurs throughout the play. The danger of male softening is (as ever since *Othello*) associated with the intimate and frequent contact with the other sex: Emile is increasingly influenced by his girlfriend Shanice who more quickly than the boys realises the damaging effects and fatal potential of their lifestyle.

3 However, the beautiful Shanice and her girlfriend Ronnie are not merely minor female figures within this male-dominated world. Shanice (played by the riveting Ony Uhiara) quickly becomes the centre of the play - she not only has to deal with the police (Stephens and his white superior Matt) who keep interrogating her about Emile, the main suspect of the murder case, but also with the insecure and tense Emile himself, with his boyfriends who try to "sex her up", and with the jealous outbreaks of the less attractive Ronnie. An impressive scene shows that street violence is not only a phenomenon of masculine street credibility: being teased about her cowardice by Ronnie, Shanice turns to violence and attacks and robs her former (white) teacher. Instead of glamorising violence, Ian Rickson's production clearly

points out the desperation and insecurity that is at the heart of the destructive and boasting behaviour of both the boys and the girls. The play also shows how difficult the communication between the white middle-class authorities (the police and the teacher) and the black street kids remains, as the mutual mistrust is enormous. D.C. Joe Stephens, who has made his way out of the black neighbourhood, is meant to function as a mediator between the worlds. However, the kids accuse him of having changed sides and do not trust him at all, whereas his white colleague suspects him of too much personal involvement. That Stephens indeed begins to over-identify with the murdered bright young Kwame, who was about to leave the quarter, is one of the predictable elements of Williams' story, but the excellent acting of Lennie James makes Stephens' tragic downfall (who is so keen on arresting Emile and the others that he manipulates Ronnie's testimony) nevertheless moving.

4 *Fallout* is part of the current trend of "non-white new writing" that is promoted at the Royal Court and elsewhere, e.g. the NT's current production of *Elmina's Kitchen* by Kwame Kwei-Armah that deals with Hackney's Yardies, Jamaican and West Indian criminal street gangs, and the next play at the RC's main stage, Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* that again deals with black male street rivalry. This trend is not least due to the Arts Council's declared interest in promoting and subsidising productions of new writing that deal with ethnic minorities.

5 Ian Rickson's dynamic but nevertheless meticulous direction, the innovative stage design by Ultz that makes the audience sit in the round and partly behind wire fences that protect and separate them from the street gang's basketball games and punch-ups, and the amazing acting make *Fallout* a very enjoyable and at the same time disorientating experience. I left the theatre with the feeling of indeed having seen "a slice of contemporary Britain," as the Court advertises the production.