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The canon and the contemporary: change, challenge, conceit.

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The canon and the contemporary: change, challenge, conceit.

The canon is widely recognised in drama school training contexts as the dramatic and practitioner texts with which actors can expect to work. The canon studied is often proscriptively - and therefore prohibitively - narrow. These two observations lead to the questioning of who, and for what industry, training actors are being prepared. Articulation of the Western bias and shortcomings of the hegemonic canon is well versed, but alternatives are often predicated on augmentation via addition. Examining and understanding the conceit by which canonical status is ascribed, achieved, and maintained, holds the answer to how the canon can be challenged and changed to allow for culture to evolve, through the plurality of stories and not regurgitation and perpetuation of those already lauded.

Keywords: canon; actor training; drama training; performing arts curriculum; inclusion; change

Drama School and the canon

Drama school training is an integral part of the established route in the UK for many actors on stages and screens. The texts and methods taught can be seen as transformative in their understanding of their craft and therefore, ultimately, translated into enjoyment for audiences. Those engaged in providing this training have disproportionate influence on how the craft of acting is taught, understood and utilised. In this there is understanding to be sought. Those in training should be given freedom to see as much of themselves in the work that they study with, and on, in order to make informed and transformative future work themselves.

This paper seeks to understand how the canon, as an entity, has been formed and propagated and use this information to question who drama school training includes and/or excludes. It will discuss whether the canon of texts - both dramatic and practitioner - is conducive to contemporary training, has relevance in the world outside of training institutions, as well as discussing whether augmentation of this (and by implication, other) canon(s) is as useful as might be argued.

What is the canon?

The canon, as a standalone word, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘a general law, rule, principle or criterion’, which raises questions as to who makes and polices that law, and where and how the centre of that ‘law making’ is created and defined, especially when ‘historically the gatekeepers to knowledge have often resembled the White middle-class’ (Arday, Belluigi and Thomas 2020, 299). The word literary is defined as ‘constituting, or occupied with books or written composition’. Putting the two words together, it could reasonably be assumed that the literary canon, as an umbrella term, be defined as ‘a general law occupied with books or written composition’.

Much writing about the canon focuses on what is *not* included and not what *is*. The conferring of canonical status seems to hinge around the work in question being ‘authoritative in our culture’ (Bloom 1994, 2) leading to those works being ‘[...] selected for both their sublimity and their representative nature’ (Bloom 1994, 2), further entrenching questions around ownership and propagation. Whilst it is acknowledged that Bloom’s 1994 text is concerned with the ‘*Western Canon*’ it is evident that that, almost exclusively, means White and male and therefore reinforces the idea that power is wielded and policed by dominant White, male groups. Bloom’s list was compiled over a quarter of a century ago, but still holds sway in canonical thinking – Green in 2017 introduced the open source ‘Corpus of the Canon of Western Literature’ which ‘operationalizes the western canon based on Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*’ (Green 2017, 282); it is still an ‘authoritative’ point of departure when critiquing the canon; and is the genesis for many ‘must read’ lists, in (and out of) academia. The list of 26 authors that Bloom posits comprise the canon, are overwhelmingly male (only four are women) and exclusively White. This problematises the notion of what ‘our’ culture is, how it is defined and what, or who, is excluded.

‘There has been a continual silencing, racial minoritisation and ‘othering’ of non-White people, which has inaccurately shaped the vernacular’ (Arday, Belluigi and Thomas 2020, 299), this shaping of the ways in which ‘non-White’ people have contributed to history and society is intrinsic in the canons that are defended and propagated. It positions the knowledge outside of the vernacular and therefore study, rendering it lost.

The shaping of education centres ‘Whiteness as an instrument of power and privilege’ (Arday, Belluigi and Thomas 2020, 298) which in part explains Bloom’s findings and is laid bare by the ‘Why is my curriculum so White?’ campaign spearheaded by UCL (University College London) students. Being inculcated and nourished by the canon that Bloom sought to codify creates an obvious conflict of interest for him which would nullify much outright and seemingly counter-intuitive critique. ‘Questions raised by the movements for social change’ (Lauter 1985) are a driver for the debate, thinking which has been reenergised by the recent movements for social change, along the same fault lines of race, gender, and class. In reference to the ‘Why is my curriculum so White?’ campaign, Peters notes that efforts to resolve the ‘general philosophical problem concerning the curriculum [have] so far been only partially effective’ (Peters 2015, 644) in bringing about a standardised way of thinking about the canon and the curricula they give rise to. Its restructuring – should that be deemed necessary – and, more importantly, who it is that decides what that is, is not agreed on. To say that the canonical works, as described by Bloom, are the zenith of human achievement, implies that there are sections of humanity who are not, by this definition, able to be seen as ‘human’, who are inferior - a debate authoritatively articulated by Said, who dissects ‘the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison to all the non-European peoples and cultures’ (1979, 7). In order to embolden and enrich our collective cultures ‘there is and should be long range vision of what defines humanity. There should be endless revision to accommodate greater inclusion and understanding’ (MacKenzie 2020, 460), there is a need to

consistently ensure that the awareness of the multitude of possible voices is heightened in the formative discussions that inform curriculum decisions. Critique of Bloom's ideas seem easy to make, alternatives less so. Ironically, Bloom's tome on the canon has become canonical itself; the hinge that holds the door attached. But how can that be changed? By identifying what it is that Bloom's philosophy represents and where and how that has gained and maintained legitimacy and currency, decades after its initial publication.

The dramatic canon and the actor training canon

The canon within undergraduate acting degrees at the eighteen Federation of Drama School (FDS) member institutions may be said to fall into two camps; (i) the writers whose work is performed (which varies year to year, but *always* includes Shakespeare) and (ii) the practitioners and theorists studied to facilitate performance. (Stanislavski, Meisner, and Chekhov are common names on course overviews at these schools, indicating a centrality and commonality of training philosophies). Embodied training methods often sit alongside this canon but are not codified and centralised in the same way, and as such, will not be critiqued explicitly here.

The dramatic canon, or works that could be seen as canonical, is fraught with difficulty. Oddly, the dramatic canon, seems to broadly follow – or have been co-opted into – the literary canon. Odd, because a dramatic work is distinct from a piece of pure literary interest by virtue of the fact that it is a blueprint for action as opposed to the action itself, a criticism levelled at Bloom by MacKenzie, who challenges that his canon 'consciously, or unconsciously edits out his own influence and bias, while knowingly limiting drama to its written value, all but ignoring performance' (MacKenzie 2020, 456). The writer for whom history has allowed to straddle both camps serves to prove the point. Whilst it may be true to say that,

Shakespeare for hundreds of millions who are not white Europeans is a signifier for their own pathos, their sense of identity with the characters that Shakespeare fleshed out by his language. For them his universality is not historical but fundamental; he puts their lives upon his stage. In his characters they behold and confront their own anguish and their own fantasies, not the manifested social energies of early mercantile London (Bloom 1994, 38-39).

It is not, when we consider the ‘blueprint for action’ nature of performative texts, accurate to suggest that ‘Shakespeare [...] invented all of us’ (Bloom 1994, 17). Indeed, ‘limiting the critical exploration of drama to words is reductive and short-sighted’ (MacKenzie 2020) but the knowledge of how to perform is codified in the major dramatic texts of the actor training canon. That in ‘2019/20 the most performed playwright [at FDS institutions] was Mike Bartlett [and] in 2020/21 Caryl Churchill and Simon Stephens’ (Daly 2022, 8) demonstrates a White Eurocentric focus as the bedrock for the canon.

Stanislavski, Meisner and Chekhov, are – unlike all of the students at UK Drama schools – dead, male, White, and European (with the exception of Meisner who was one generation removed). The inclusion of them ‘can and often does serve dominantly hegemonic functions’ (Lauter 1991, 165), excluding access to broad and multifaceted training, stifling active debate. In order to have an active, balanced debate, both sides must have a point of view and a standing that is comparable. Maintaining the dominance or ‘mastery’ of one line of thinking removes the space, and diminishes the power and potency, of any other.

In general, our choice of these texts is rooted in assumptions derived from the particular characteristics of our class, race, sex, reshaped to be sure by the powerful influence exerted – especially over those of us from “minority” or otherwise “marginal” origins – by the professors of the dominant culture (Lauter 1985, 95)

Notwithstanding the problematic colonial connotations which can be inferred through the uses of the terms ‘mastery’ and ‘masters’, the inculcation of the students into this ‘mastery’ ,

and its purpose, is to be critically engaged with. Guildhall School of Music and Drama – a member of the FDS – are the only school to have included Lockett and Shaffer’s ‘Black Acting Methods’ (2017) on their publicly available reading list, which indicates a level of critical engagement with the practitioner canon at this particular school and potentially a live discussion with, and in, their Federation partners.

Stanislavski – whose ‘system has been taken up as the *lingua franca* of the contemporary conservatoire and rehearsal room’ (Landon-Smith 2020, 345) – is a titanic monolith of theory and practice which has only been with us for a little over a century. It is hard to overstate his place and centrality in actor training and understanding of it in the western world (he is mentioned in the undergraduate course details of all of the FDS institutions where practitioners are named). But why is that the case? Is it the circularity of training which means that lecturers and teachers, lecture on and teach what it is that they have been taught without a second thought, ‘with respect both to the imaginative texts worth studying and to the language and procedures by which they ought to be studied’ (Lauter 1991, 156) or, conversely, that ‘actor training transmission is often a negotiation between previous teachings and the exposure to new ideas and techniques’ (Aquilina 2019, 8) and in this there is an adherence to what has gone before, serving as the building blocks of what is to come? A noteworthy point is that the unified traces of actor training before Stanislavski have been marginalised, or lost to time. It might be cogently argued that this survival could be partly down to the immersion in his ‘world’ that new creatives and artists are steeped, making it almost impossible to see out and/or beyond the ever-growing sphere of influence, or as Aquilina (2019) suggests, he is the foundation stone upon which everything is built, limiting the field of future vision. There are many reasons as to why canonical works stand the test of time – if indeed time does actually ‘test’ – it could be that there is a universal truth imbued in the work that every subsequent generation discovers and understands to be truth, or, it could

be that once a piece of work, a theorist, a 'Stanislavski', has secured their place atop the canonical mountain it would take nothing short of the largest seismic shock to even dislodge, let alone shift it. When it's considered that drama schools, part of educational 'real estate', which serve to 'establish and transmit our society's cultural signals, [...] an elaborate set of signals directing students onto the various tracks they will likely follow throughout their lives' (Lauter 1991, 256), propagate, often uncritically, these works, there is less chance of this seismic shock to occur. It is 'extremely important for students from marginalized backgrounds to know that the domain named "literature" belongs to them as well as to others' (Lauter 1991, 160), but these students' identities are not contained or referenced in these practitioners' practice. Landon-Smith argues that the 'full cultural context of the performer; rather than disavowing different cultural contexts, or promoting a singular benchmark of quality drawn from the cultural authority' (Landon-Smith 2020, 343) is a methodology that can enhance actor training.

'Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches' (Luckett and Shaffer 2017) contains a number of 'offerings' which speak directly to this through a Black actor training lens. In Emeka's 'offering' on Shakespeare, it is suggested that,

[A]n actor's success will largely be determined by their ability to take ownership of the language and experience Shakespeare's characters through their own eyes. For the artist of color, this can pose a unique challenge if there is not a clear discussion or agreement as to the significance of race and culture in the construction of character within the production. (Emeka 2017, 89)

Thus, leading to the need for the uncovering of ways for the actor to access the world of the work and contextualise it in the world in which it is to be performed. Emeka goes on to posit, in agreeance with Landon-Smith, that seeing the actor – and what they bring – in the role brings a richness that is lost if the actor is not acknowledged, arguing that 'we can employ

race and culture as a creative way to better understand the characters, settings, conflict, and story within a given text [which will invite] stronger performances from actors [and] revitalize texts for contemporary audiences' (Emeka 2017, 104).

Completely disregarding the 'Master Teachers' is not the aim of this paper, but augmenting and allowing those teachings to sit in a cultural, societal, and personal context, can and – Landon-Smith goes on to stress – does, enrich training and empower makers. This has the effect of enriching and empowering the industry as a whole, and breed the conditions, it is argued here, for new works to be made and recognised by, and alongside, a more diverse canon. The idea that the canon embodies and sustains power relationships is a moot point (Lauter 1991, 157) but there is a definite element of decentralisation of power which is not necessarily a bad thing, especially in pursuit of progress. Using Foucauldian thought, the only way to shift power from a central to a local level is through decentralisation, and that central level *is* the canon. When Stanislavski first formulated his ideas, they themselves were seen by some as the antithesis of the craft, an incursion to be curtailed, but he persevered – surely engendering and facilitating the same to occur in our time is exactly what should be happening?

Who is the training for?

A core principle for training at a FDS drama school is that there is 'an emphasis on the training, development and assessment of the practical, intellectual, physical and emotional skills of students in an environment that is enabling, supportive and empowering' (Federation of Drama Schools 2019). The purpose, therefore, of actor training can be said to be the act (or art) of giving tools to an actor which they will then draw upon in their career with the aim of giving life to the stories that they tell, to facilitate and engender the learning that will liberate them in the telling (Lauter 1991, 270). The stories that are told can only be varied and diverse

if the methods and tools given to those storytellers are equally as varied and diverse. Kwei-Armah talks about ‘slash artists’ (Harrod 2018) - those who work in multiple disciplines, separated by a slash (/) - and it is argued that to extend training into providing tools for ‘actor-creators’, ‘creative beings’ or a ‘slash generation’ necessitates the need to work ‘from a place of holistic capability’ (Murphy 2020, 287), this can only be enacted if the old and centralised methods of work are disrupted, or at the very least, reassessed.

The stories that we tell today often inform the realities that we live in tomorrow. Fixing the necessary creative tools to a narrow set of toolmakers (or practitioners, to root this metaphor) is restrictive. Taking into account the wide and widening stories that our interconnected world needs - and wants - to tell, seems to be at odds with a canon that gives precedence and privilege to those whose stories and ideas are already lauded in the world and are therefore instrumental in shaping and moulding it, a point eloquently made in an open letter challenging Eurocentric dramaturgy,

Theatre is a huge umbrella. The Eurocentric version is just one of many traditions. British theatre has been influenced by Brecht and Artaud who were in turn influenced by Asian theatre practice. We look forward to a constructive and beautiful relationship embracing this diversity as a strength, not a threat to established modes of storytelling in this culture.

(Abdulrazzak et al. 2021)

Training outside of the ‘white patriarchal heterosexist paradigm’ (Landon-Smith 2020, 344) is exclusionary, therefore not challenging the subjective idea of what a ‘good’ actor is. Doing the same thing in the same way, brings about the same thing. Challenging what ‘good’ actually is could provide a step out of this paradigm. Without a definition of ‘good’ the movement of the tension between what was and what could be, is held down and held back by the ‘accepted’ wisdom of what has gone before. Setting new parameters provides a way forward. It can be argued the aim of ‘good’ art is to provoke a reaction and/or

engender a debate, embracing the challenge of the new in the knowledge that ‘theatre provides a unique opportunity for transformation’ (Johnson and Sicre 2017, 187). Indeed, if the challenge of the new was not embraced in the first half of the twentieth century there would be no Stanislavski.

Bloom argues that the canon places those who have created ‘a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange’ (Bloom 1994, 3) above all others, but assimilation takes time and an ability to allow culture – and the gatekeepers that form and propagate it – to take a step away from what has been and look to what could be; doggedly holding on to what was held to be the ‘truth’ stymies the ability to synthesise disparate truths into assimilation. Marginalised voices can be used as a counterpoint or a way of challenging and contextualising the voices in the centre ‘comparing the European and non-European worlds, indeed the task of comparison itself, exercised many eighteenth and nineteenth century minds’ (Gopal 2021, 878). Indeed, canons ‘are constructed and reconstructed by people, people of particular stations in life, people with certain ideas and tastes and definable interests and views of what is desirable’ (Lauter 1991, 261). The gatekeepers themselves need to be diversified, or at the very least, cognisant of their ideas and tastes; ‘knowledge emerges through a series of intersecting ideas flowing in multiple directions. Rather than delink histories and cultures, our task is to identify these engagements and influences’ (Gopal 2021, 880) – who it is that teaches, really matters.

In looking at the politics and tensions between native and European language use in African literature, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o observes that ‘culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world’ (Wa Thiong’o 1986, 16); what that culture is, and how it is spoken and propagated, is to be scrutinised.

If understanding of the world is created by language, a form of decolonisation of the canon could look to what language is being offered to create and challenge the understanding of the world.

The argument that ‘[...] actors would reflect on how their experiences in training and subsequently in industry had conditioned them to flatten their cultural contexts and engage “in a process of mimickry”’ (Friedman and O’Brien 2017, 6) – ‘mimicking in a white, patriarchal, heterosexist paradigm’ (Landon-Smith 2020, 344) begins before undergraduate drama school education – it is seeded in the lessons taught between the ages of 11 and 16 at the secondary level of UK education.

The road to drama school

The UK education system, prior to undergraduate study, has two major examination points: at 16, principally through the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and at 18, to a large extent through Advanced level qualification (A-Level). Looking at the syllabi for GCSE Drama and A-Level Theatre Studies is instructive in understanding how the normalisation of canonical works is elevated and held aloft. The GCSE syllabus for the AQA examination board, who account ‘for more than half of the GCSE and A-level qualifications taken and marked in the UK each year’ (Which Are the UK’s Biggest Exam Boards?, 2019) is representative of many syllabi at this level - key components of assessment are stated as ‘knowledge and understanding of drama and theatre’ and the ‘analysis and evaluation of the work of live theatre makers’ (AQA 2020a, 13-14). The set plays in the syllabus list ten plays, seven of which are solely authored by men; White men. Blooms contention that ‘if literary canons are the product only of class, racial, gender, and national interests, presumably the same should be true of all other aesthetic traditions, including music and the visual arts’ (Bloom 1994, 527) is clearly at odds with the work made within the spheres of, for example;

Black, Queer, Feminist, and/or Community/Socially engaged work which is happening in theatres now. Lauter's thirty-year-old assertion that 'the question of the canon becomes a conflict of values' (Lauter 1991, 156) holds true. The fact that this is not reflected adequately in the choices made by the GCSE syllabi serves to reinforce the notion that these areas of work are less 'worthy'. Yes, Malorie Blackman is on the AQA list, yes, Shelagh Delaney is also on the list, but where are the Winsome Pinnocks, the Travis Alabanzas, the Chris Bushes? It is plays upon which the learning, from Stanislavskian practice, is utilised and evidenced inasmuch as the plays chosen have a relationship with the theoretical base that they are used to evidence and teach. If works aren't diversified there could be a risk of confirmation bias, rendering the theory, which underpins the practice, untested with newer writers and thought. 'Knowledge and understanding' and 'analysis and evaluation of the work of live theatre makers' (AQA 2020b, 13-14) are key components of A-Level study with a slightly expanded list, of thirteen plays, ten of which authored by White men – statistically a higher percentage than at GCSE and therefore even more homogeneous. The propagation of White, male writers as canonical is hardwired into this nascent training, potentially creating the thinking that it is only men who write plays which are worthy of study. If all that can be seen are the works that are 'worthy' then the works that are 'worthy' become the only ones seen – this tautology seems to be at the crux of any canon debate. To ensure that the canon is not 'narrowed to the problem of what one has time to add to an otherwise unaltered course' (Lauter 1991, 161), what is needed is questioning. Questioning as to why these pieces are there in the first place. Questioning around what is being left out. Questioning of who is being left out, and why. Indeed, 'if you do not know plays from a variety of cultures it's because you're not reading them' (Dunn, Luckett and Sicre, 2020, 278). This questioning and reading, will, almost certainly, lead to the refutation of Blooms assertion that 'class, racial,

gender, and national interests' (Bloom 1994, 527) are not a concern of the canon, literary or otherwise.

This grounding leads a training actor – should they continue to follow that career path – into tertiary education where the confirmation seeded in their teenage years is easily held as unimpeachable 'truth' and serves as the foundation upon which training for their careers should be, and is, built on. If there is no conception of 'something else', how can 'something else' come into being?

Asking questions

The periodisation of history helps to form canonical lists and trends but this periodisation is dependent on the social, class, gender, and racial biases of the historian. 'The canonization of the performing arts, therefore, downplays diversity, fuels periodization, and develops a binary view of history' (Aquilina 2020, 197) this can be averted if there is a more open approach to the canon and how it is formed in critical engagement. Aquilina uses this thought process in the teaching of Stanislavski - using it as the bedrock for exploration as opposed to a site for, and of, reverence. Time and again, phrases and sentiments, such as 'Give attention to the "how", the technical approach used' (Aquilina 2020, 200) appear in the exercises detailed. The prominence to 'what', 'how' and 'why' give life to the theoretical words on the page. This is not only a way to critique the canon, but a way in which it can be uncovered for what it is – a political monolith, and such monoliths can only stand if they are allowed to. Lauter argues that 'it is in the realms of ethics and politics that the question of the canon must now be contested' (Lauter 1991, 170) a realm that work such as Margolis and Renaud's 'The Politics of American Actor Training' seeks to engage in 'assess[ing] current and past training policies and practices, and to propose new ideas that will inform twenty-first-century actor training' (Margolis and Renaud 2011, 2).

A logical step from training is ‘the industry’. For change to happen for those in training now, the seeds need to be sown within their training, else they will not have the tools to challenge the industry. It is arguable that industry – if it is to be imagined as a homogenous mass, which, of course it is not – does *not* want change. The industry wishes for there to be a level of predictability. The initial ostracization of the playwrights who were lumped together as the ‘in-yer-face’ generation underscores this. Ravenhill, Kane and their contemporaries were making theatre that was unpredictable, singular, outside of the ‘normal’ constraints and because of this they were able to tell the stories that were missing, include the ideas that were excluded and have a marked influence on theatre and wider culture itself from outside the canon.

To challenge the industry, students need to be ‘familiar with the disparate, often conflicting, traditions which constitute the glory and the tragedy of our world’ (Lauter 1985, 96) and in order to do this, those traditions need to be available, studied, critiqued and maybe even revered. Critical engagement with training methodologies, such as those collated by Luckett and Shaffer (2017), will begin to create new unions, new ways of seeing and therefore new and different art. A prime example of which is evidenced in Banks’ essay exploring the union of two seemingly disparate art forms.

As there are now more and more instructors working in higher education fluent in both Afrocentrism and a Stanislavski -based approach, it is increasingly possible at a pedagogical level to connect the dots and make these crucial connections legible to Hip Hop generation students. (Banks 2017, 141)

A union of this kind can, it is suggested, only happen through a thorough interrogation of the canon and not merely through additive augmentation which serves to stifle critical engagement through (often) tokenistic superficial engagement. If it is to be believed that ‘canonical works are also those that have influenced other literature; for example, by

exhibiting intertextuality and impacting culture’ (Green 2017, 283) then the canon must exist as a living entity, as influences change and are changeable. Looking at what there is, and how it came to be, might well uncover forks in the road which may serve to show a broadened canon, a canon that includes more than it excludes. The canon ‘is not something that simply exists, but rather, is something we construct—and we construct that past on the basis of our visions of the future’ (Lauter 1991, 257); having ideas of what that more equitable and diverse future could be within the industry (and wider society) contextualises and puts a lens on the past. It is impossible to ‘rewrite history’ but it is possible - desirable - to contextualise it, to see where else it could point, to see what has been ‘conveniently’ lost. ‘What gets selected is neither accidental nor inevitable, but is determined, I am suggesting, by an implicit vision of what students "ought" to know to live in the world they will inhabit’ (Lauter 1991, 257). Addressing the dreams of a new world begins by seeing it. This can be done directly, crafting a space where ‘current students can see the canon of powerful messages other students have previously created, making it easier to write something on a topic they feel passionate about’ (Johnson and Sicre 2017, 197)

What has been lost?

Critically engaging with the texts taught, and instigating investigation into their geneses can work as a teaching tool. By way of example, in Macbeth – by canonical stalwart Shakespeare – there is opportunity to look at its genesis - Holinshed's ‘Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland’ (1587), whilst also looking at Kurosawa’s film ‘Throne of Blood’ (1957) and through that comparison, opening conversations and teaching opportunities around the influence of Noh theatre whilst simultaneously investigating the historical and contextual grounding, thus creating new synergy; the same process could be replicated for many canonical writers.

In the United Kingdom the Licensing Act of 1737 states,

[...] every person who shall, for hire, gain, or reward, act, represent, or perform, or cause to be acted, represented, or performed, any interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, play, farce, or other entertainment of the stage, or any part or parts therein, in case such person shall not have any legal settlement in the place where the same shall be acted, represented, or performed, without authority by virtue of letters patent from his Majesty, his heirs, successors or predecessors, or without licence from the lord chamberlain of his Majesty's household [sic] for the time being, shall be deemed to be a rogue and a vagabond within the intent and meaning of the said recited act, and shall be liable and subject to all such penalties and punishments, and by such methods of conviction, as are inflicted on or appointed by the said act for the punishment of rogues and vagabonds who shall be found wandering, begging, and misordering themselves, within the intent and meaning of the said recited act. (The Statutes Project, 2021)

The direct influence of this on the formation of the dramatic canon is stark. That there was censorship of plays – and therefore voices and stories – through this act means that there is potentially a huge swathe of work that has not been performed, and therefore not necessarily deemed *worthy* of archival care or academic study. Aiming to rectify this is the ‘Archives of Cultural Surveillance and the Making of Black Histories’ project by Dossett (ISRF 2022) which is aiming to unearth Black artistic work which was ‘written out of the archive, credited to White theatre practitioners, or catalogued in ways that make it hard to find’ (The British Library 2022), taking Dunn, Luckett and Sicre’s (2020) provocation – to read widely – practically. These plays exist but are often forgotten; the only known physical copy of Una Marson’s unpublished 1932 play, ‘At What A Price’, is in the British Library, it's recent digitisation – a direct result of Dossett’s work – means that this work, which saw Marson in 1934 become the first Black writer to author a West End play, can be experienced by a wider audience.

This, clearly, opens the question around what it is that has been missed and/or forgotten on a societal and cultural level, but also what has been kept alive through the oral tradition. Indeed, the use of Polari by the characters Julian and Sandy in 'Round the Horne' (Took, Feldman, and Horner 1976) could suggest that there was a tradition of Polari based theatre and entertainment that was simply not written down, serving to embolden this thought process – an area for further exploration. The fact that those plays that were deemed unworthy of performance, by the Lord Chamberlains office, were to be held at the same level as the lowest rungs of society may seem, to modern eyes, ears, and brains, incomprehensible, but this is arguably exactly what the dramatic canon is doing within theatre. To make clear challenge, and subsequent change, there needs to be an evaluation of the status quo, in relation to the status quo ante – indeed the 231 year 'reign' of the Licensing Act was curtailed, in part, by an 'illegal' performance at the Royal Court in London. Emboldening those who do not hold to the status quo would facilitate and maintain a theatrical tradition of boundary pushing and testing.

Stories are constantly re-found, re-fined, and re-discovered. A kind of theatrical archaeology could become physical manifestation of this, and an archaeological dig around what we know to the 'true' would be instrumental. Lauters assertion that '[...] we have come to realize not only the need to construct new versions of history – social as well as literary – but the need to reconstruct our standards of excellence, our understanding of form, indeed our ideas about the functions of literature' (Lauter 1985, 95) speaks loudly. In order to re-imagine *the canon, a canon*, the very notion of canonacism, there are several points to bear in mind: the point of the compilation of the canon; who it's for; what is remembered, by whom and for what reason. To 'reread canonical texts as much for what they do not say as for what they make explicit' (Lauter 1991, 159) could become a specific area of study.

What next?

The etymological roots of revise are to ‘look again’ – to *re vise* – but in order to revise the canon that ‘looking again’ should be through different lenses. If the ‘greatest’ is an epithet given to those works which exhibit ‘qualities such as aesthetic beauty, profound ideas, themes, notable characters and language, and impressive artistic skill’ (Green 2017, 283) then it is time to re-vise and re-visit what is meant by those subjective qualities. The aim is not to replace the canon, but to expand it, to modify its very reason for being. If what has not been accepted into the canon is as great as that which has (and in many cases is its precursor) why can both not co-exist in a dialogue with each other? Committing to not accepting in the mono is a tangible starting point in the pursuit of pluralisation. If the genesis is known, its potential pluripotency could beget new ideas and other ways of seeing and understanding, enriching us all.

If we are to change the canon via additive augmentation and/or gradual replacement, we are simply remaking the canon in a different image; simultaneously destroying the canon and building a new one. Speaking to the film canon – analogous to the literary and dramatic canon as discussed – Cousins suggests that the ‘canon is a kind of Trojan horse. It’s a battering ram, a bold, blunt way of getting cinema into people’s heads, getting them talking, searching, caring. Once it’s done this work, it should self-destruct’ (Cousins 2021, 51). Whilst that is eminently applicable here, it raises the question of what it is that replaces it and whether or not we are creating a canonical Theseus’ Ship. How can we guard against this in our work? How much should we follow Cousins in ensuring that the canon self-destructs? Indeed, how will we know?

Conclusions

To ensure that the storytellers of the future are liberated to tell their stories in a way that serves the chosen subject matter, the nourishing soil for those plants to take root needs to

be adequately prepared in order for abundant bloom – or not. It is churlish to assume that the canon is immovable, especially in the pursuit of truth. Truth is, by necessity, a moving target – but a target that can, and must, be aimed for. That which seems immutable now may well be surpassed by evidence of mutability and modes and manifestations of critical engagement must be open to that. In order to be in the conceptual position to accept and work with that ideal, the canonical structure and the ascription of canonical status must be looked at afresh. Ironically, Bloom – for all evidence to the contrary – does have a point; work that changes the way in which subsequent work comes to be, comes to exist, should be seen as important, but in order to do that the foundational base is to be broadened, with a view to lineage and succession. To disregard social change and research, alongside diverse thinking and experience, narrows the canon and controls culture, a culture which – in a post-colonial world – belongs to, and is shaped by, us all. By 2030 Arts Council England – a non-departmental government body with a remit to promote, fund and advocate for the arts in England – wishes England ‘to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish, and where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences’ (Arts Council England 2021) - this cannot be sustained, or even fully achieved, if the foundation is narrow and stale and not truly representative of ‘every one of us’ – if there is no say in the laying of the foundations there can be no real rooted voice in the final product.

To uphold the status of the dramatic and actor training canon in the training of the next generation of artists is to starve that generation of access to experience and thought and creativity, which will eventually lead to the snake eating itself, and culture becoming something akin to a black hole, where all that we see is the Event Horizon; a force so strong that the knowledge and wisdom that it has consumed is lost forever. The changes that will come will be informed by ‘changes in society and politics’ but will only be fully enacted

‘through human agency’ (Lauter 1991, 258) and in that, critical and active engagement in challenging the hegemonic functioning of the canon and its dissemination as it currently exists. Indeed ‘the absence of a curriculum that is reflective of an ever-increasingly diverse and multi-cultural society continues to contradict and compromise the lofty egalitarian ideals often espoused by universities’ (Arday, Belluigi and Thomas 2020, 299). If the canon is not looked at with any real sense of critical discourse and, more importantly, a will and want for change, but instead as something to augment and beautify, then this becomes an existential and tautological conversation.

But a final word of warning: ‘[w]hoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you.’ (Nietzsche, Horstmann, and Norman 2001, 69). This engagement with the canon and its function is not a once only event – it must be continuous, responsive and aware.

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