

'Oh God, I'm black': The perspective I come from is finding a character who tells a good story. I think every one's really out for themselves. I have no qualms in saying that I am.

Pinnock is more ambivalent: "I want to write about the multi-cultural society but specifically I want to write for black actors. I guess there's a kind of political agenda, although in my life there are contradictions to do with having beliefs and not always being able to be completely true to them, either as a black person or as a woman."

To Bonnie Greer, an American playwright and critic in her mid-fifties who has lived in England for the last six years, the issue of identity is absolutely relevant. "As a black woman you've got the double cross of being a woman and being black. Very few people understand where that work is coming from and how to look at it."

"So many are shot down in flames with their first plays. It's very difficult to write a play when you're on your own. My own concern as a playwright is making the invisible visible and the most invisible person in this society is the black woman."

Two things are agreed: there are not many black women playwrights around and those that are do not have all-important female role models. Black women have suffered much the same hardships as other new writers over the last decade, except that they only really began to emerge at about the time that the theatre began to lose its confidence and its cohesion.

The clampdown on local authority funding in the early 1980s took a heavy toll on specialised companies such as feminist collectives and specialist black groups. By the late 1980s, the country's new writing flagship, the Royal Court, was forced to close its studio to save money—just one sign of how an embattled theatre establishment was shutting down its entry routes.

In the resulting climate of caution and conservatism the revival of *Leave Taking* is an important event. The reluctance of today's theatre to mount plays is one of the biggest problems facing any new writer. It means that, in all but the rare cases where a work is picked up for a commercial transfer, plays have an active life of just four or five weeks in front of total audiences that seldom rise above the hundreds. For the black woman writer, it contributes to a sense that there has been little, if any, headway over the last 10 years.

And indeed, the theatre has not mirrored the advances made by black women in the novel over the same period. "In the novel," says Pinnock, "people are writing really interestingly about the way cultures are changing and interviewing and how that affects the individual. But in the theatre that doesn't seem to exist: it's not reflected in the way plays are cast or in what people are writing about. People aren't exploring the multi-cultural society. There is a real racism."

Greer points to the absence of a critical establishment capable of doing anything more than building individual black writers up and knocking them down. For Yvonne Brewster, director of the theatre company Talawa and editor of *Mezzanin's Black Plays* series, part of the problem is political and stylistic timidity. "What people expect from black writers is either hokey-cokey like *Five Guys Named Moe* or inverted, autobiographical stuff."

"There was a time, about five years ago, when they all seemed to be dealing with problems in bodice. Then there was a mystical phase. There's also an obsession with the well-made play. But do you have to learn to write like the restoration writers before you can react to the times we live in? I think we need to throw plays off the wall a bit more and off the page and into the sea and see if they will survive."



Jenny McLeod: I wake up in the morning and I think I've got to eat and pay the rent. I don't think 'Oh God, I'm black'

Bold words, but what is being done to help such brave leaps of faith? Pinnock, who runs writing workshops with the experiential company *Clean Break*, maintains that "all the talent today is in places where people wouldn't normally try."

Talawa, in contrast, is involved in a scheme to team playwrights up with directors and dramaturgs. "Workshops don't work," says Brewster. "What's needed is one-to-one attention." Among the promising writers to emerge from that process is the actress and TV scriptwriter *Joni Hooley*, a contributor to the sitcom *Desmonds*, who has produced a comedy which breaks the mould in an entirely unexpected way. "It is," says Brewster, "really commercial. None of this subsidised nonsense, but written with such aptitude and such a strong sense of women of a certain age, that it really might be going somewhere." If so, it would be a useful reminder that new writers don't always have to be young.

Leave Taking is at the *Guibank Theatre, Colchester* from Dec 8-10 and at the *Collesiole* from Dec 13. *Raising Fires* is at the *Bush* until Dec 23.



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Claire Armistead on Winsome Pinnock Part two

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