

National Theatre

A Teacher's Introduction to the Black Plays Archive

Archive Finding Aid

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Introduction

The Black Plays Archive (BPA) is hosted by the National Theatre Archive. It is an [online](#) catalogue which records the first professional production in the UK of plays written by Black British, African and Caribbean playwrights. Because the Archive is completely online, there is no need to arrange a physical visit to a specific building. Instead, teachers and students can explore it together, or independently, and use it to create a wide and secure understanding of work by Black playwrights. Access to the Black Plays Archive is free of charge, and available to all schools and colleges.

The Black Plays Archive hosts information about productions and signposts users to additional resources. It can be used in conjunction with visits to the National Theatre Archive, where visitors can find production-specific material for those productions staged at the National Theatre such as posters, programmes, photographs, set and costume designs and digital recordings of performances and other events related to the production. It can also be used to support visits to any other theatre or institution as part of academic study, careers programmes and extra-curricular activity.

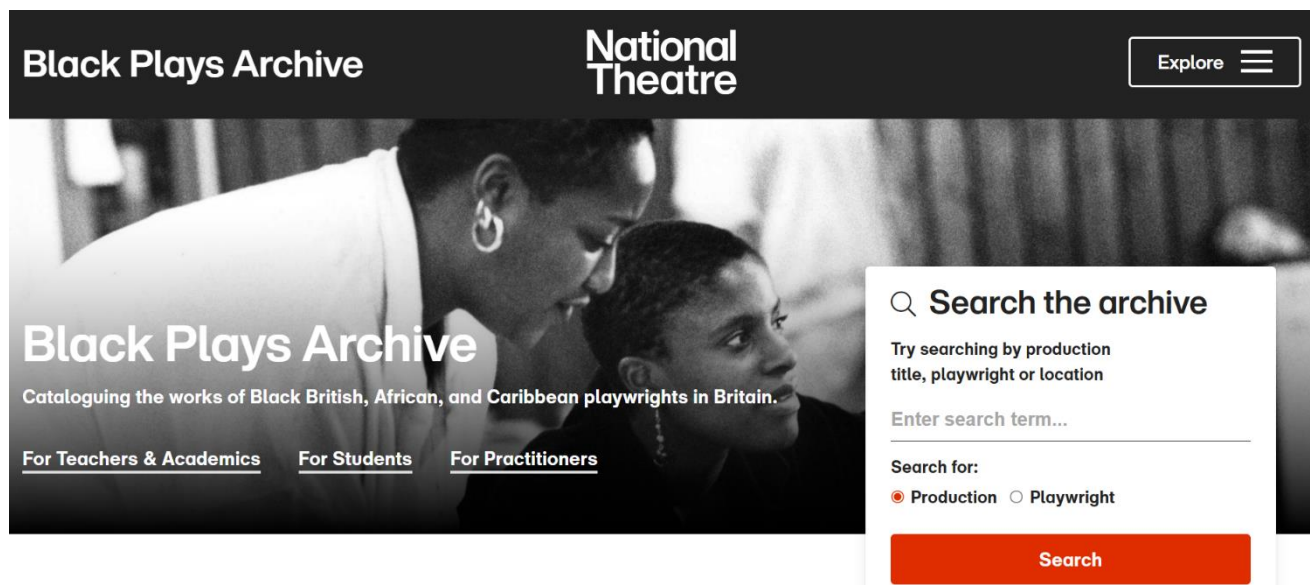
Inspiring Engagement

Introduce your students to the Black Plays Archive with this short [video](#). The spoken word nature of the presentation can inspire students' own responses to the work that they are doing in their own Drama and/or English studies, and could be a stimulus for devising in its own right.

Below are a series of further suggestions of how teachers might use the Black Plays Archive in their studios and classrooms.

Accessing the Black Plays Archive

The Archive can be accessed via specific links for [Teachers & Academics](#), [Students](#) and [Practitioners](#).



Screenshot of the Black Plays Archive website

Teaching a set text for English or Drama

The BPA's site provides curated pages which summarise the material held about a specific playwright, and signpost to other resources from either the National Theatre or elsewhere.

Winsome Pinnock, whose play *Leave Taking* is a GCSE set text, is one such playwright whose work is presented in this way. You can find a summary of the material held on her work [here](#). Students can then:

- Read summaries of each of Pinnock's plays, allowing them to observe common themes and narratives in the range of plays.
- Track the development of Pinnock's writing, through time and the theatre companies who have performed her work.
- Listen to [this recording](#) of an extract from *Leave Taking* and discuss the differences and similarities to the printed text that they have. Evaluate the differences.
- Watch the [video](#) in which Pinnock and dramaturg Ola Animashawun give advice to writers. This can be used to inspire students embarking on any creative writing task – from curriculum-based tasks in the classroom, entering writing competitions, devising and writing their own work, or exploring careers in the theatre industry. Pinnock also participates in this [video](#) about the work of Inua Ellams, allowing students to situate her work within a wider artistic and cultural context. You can find the full series of videos with Pinnock and Animashawun [here](#).
- Listen to the Winsome Pinnock episode of the [That Black Theatre](#) podcast which is held on the BPA pages. More information about the podcast can be found below. Winsome Pinnock's episode lasts for 55 minutes; teachers can pose a set of questions for students to answer whilst listening to the podcast. Alternatively, students might select five statements made by Pinnock which can inspire devised work, or written analysis of a play or performance. They might also do a presentation on Pinnock as a playwright, in order to develop their spoken language skills.
- Watch the recording of *Rockets and Blue Lights* which is held on the [National Theatre Collection](#) (via Bloomsbury's Drama Online), read the accompanying [Learning Guide](#) and debate some of the issues raised in that play, having researched the playwright and context beforehand.



Production photograph of Leave Taking (1994). Photographer: Richard H Smith

Inua Ellams' adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (2019) can be approached in the same way as suggested above. However, you can also:

- Access the National Theatre's [Schools' Resource](#) on the play. Written by mezze eade specifically for this production, the pack supports investigation on social, historical and cultural context of the updated play, as well as the main themes shared with Chekhov's original. The depth of the original also aids teachers in discussing challenging thematic and historical detail.
- The video recording is available on the [National Theatre Collection](#) alongside a teaching resource.



Production photograph of Three Sisters (2019). Photographer: The Other Richard

Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island*, adapted for the stage by Helen Edmundson in 2019, can also be explored in a similar way to above. Further resources available include:

- There are several interview recordings about the world of the play including 'Creating the Music in *Small Island*' (RNT/E/6/3/78) and 'A New Beacon: Caribbean Artists Movement' (RNT/E/6/3/80), as well as a discussion between the director Rufus Norris and adaptor Helen Edmundson (RNT/E/6/3/86).
- The video recording of the production is available on the [National Theatre Collection](#) alongside a teaching resource.
- The Teaching Practitioners using the National Theatre Archive guide is available on the [Learning Hub](#) and gives more information on how to use the Archive for teaching the work of Rufus Norris.

Encouraging wider contextual research

Many of the resources held by the BPA allow students to research plays and playwrights independently. As well as gaining knowledge on a specific text and/or writer, using the resources online also encourages the development of independent research study skills, which will be invaluable to students as they progress through their school careers and beyond. Because the material is a combination of aural, visual and written material, students of all abilities and interests will be able to access these resources.

Students will also find essays [and articles](#) within the BPA, for example , '[Cultural Diversity and Black British Playwriting 2000-2012](#)' by Professor Leni Goddard and '[Black British Plays Post World War II](#)' by Professor Colin Chambers.

Engaging with voices past and present: *That Black Theatre* podcast

There are 13 episodes of the [That Black Theatre podcast](#), which span topics such as Una Marson's work in the 1930s, the 1950s and the mass migration now associated with Windrush, the 1980s 'boom' in Black British theatre production, as well as episodes on specific playwrights such as Winsome Pinnock and Debbie Tucker Green. The podcast is hosted by PhD researcher Nadine Deller, and the breadth of episodes allows students to develop a much greater understanding of Black plays written and performed in Britain.

You can use these podcasts to:

- Develop a series of tasks about theatre history in Britain, particularly in the 20th and 21st century. Students can be allocated specific episodes which they can then summarise and present to their peers in presentation or curated display form.
- Identify the theatrical context in which writers (those represented by the BPA and those who aren't) are working, to inform an overview of theatre context and history.
- Create cross-curricular links with other departments in the school, identifying recurrent themes such as migration, discrimination, British politics and the artistic industries.
- As the movement towards more diverse representation within the curriculum continues, teachers can also use this podcast to support continuing professional development. This can inform choices of plays for performance and for the study of set texts.

That Black Theatre podcast is a joint project between the National Theatre, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and AHRC's London Arts and Humanities Partnership.

Identifying performance opportunities

Easily accessed via the 'Students' tab, you'll find a comprehensive list of sources for monologues including the list [here](#), and a full [production catalogue](#) which lists plays by name and cast requirements. These lists are invaluable for students seeking scripts for performance in exams, auditions or other performance events. Using the [recordings](#) of extracts from a wide range of plays is also another great way to help select material for performance.

Exploring diverse voices

At A Level, both Drama & Theatre and English Literature students are required to read widely in order to meet all the demands of the assessment criteria. Not only does this include the texts themselves, but critical analysis and discussion of the work. The Black Plays Archive hosts a number of interviews which discuss the work of Inua Ellams, Roy Williams, Mustapha Matura and Mojisola Adebayo. Although students may not be studying the plays by these playwrights, the interviews pose important questions that students will encounter in their study of Drama and English, such as writers' inspiration, language, culture and dramaturgy. You can use these interviews to prepare for discussions on thematic and contextual details of the work that you are doing with students within your own settings.

Diversifying the curriculum

The Black Plays Archive is proud to be involved with Penguin Random House's [Lit in Colour](#) campaign, which supports schools in making the teaching of English Literature more inclusive. Senior leaders, curriculum designers and classroom teachers alike can benefit from exploring the Black Plays Archive and the Lit in Colour resources to guide reviews of the curriculum within their own schools and academy trusts.

You can also access the [Black Cultural Archives](#), the [George Padmore Institute](#) and the [Future Histories](#) websites via the Black Plays Archive to further inform your teaching. These collections offer unique and inspiring resources to develop teachers' subject knowledge, and improve representation within your own subject area and the wider school environment.

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Thank you

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