

Candidate 3 evidence

Scotland's Theatre v. Racism?

Could Scottish theatre be racist? Race has been a topic on everyone's mind for a very long time. We've watched people from Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King become advocates for change just by addressing the societal issues that come down to the pigment in skin. On the 25th of May 2020, the murder of George Floyd caused mass political changes as movements such as Black Lives Matter filled every screen and street with protest. Society itself can't seem to be comfortable with race, but does this apply to theatre as well? Does Scotland's theatre do enough to address Scotland's history of slavery and issues of systemic racism?

People often assume that African people arrived in Scotland in the 18th century. In fact, Africans resided in Scotland much earlier, and in the early 16th century they were high-status members of the royal court.¹ Scotland played a large part in the transatlantic slave trade. By 1817, nearly a third of the slaves in Jamaica were owned by Scots.²

The presence of black people in Scotland is clearly recorded at the time of James IV (1473–1513). Sailors from Leith imported goods for the King, such as timber and cloth, for decorating Holyrood Palace. To further their work for the King they presented 2 black women known as the 'Moorish lasses' who then became part of the Queen's household. Both were then baptized as Margaret and Ellen (or Helen), their real names and country of origin lost to history.

Performed in the Edinburgh Festival Theatre in 2022 'James IV: Queen of the fight' by Rona Munro is from a set of plays she wrote about the interesting lives of some of the

¹ [Africans at the court of James IV | National Trust for Scotland \(nts.org.uk\)](https://www.nts.org.uk)

² [Slavery and Scotland | National Records of Scotland \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)

historical Scottish Kings. The play took inspiration from the two girls' experience and emphasizes the unknown power people of colour held at the court as well representing the racism they experienced within that.

Director Laurie Sansom says that he hopes the story "will move people and make them talk about it."³ He hoped that it would contribute to the national discussion about racism in Scotland. Sansom is hoping that "non-black theatre goers are willing to interrogate their own biases, and confront in greater detail Scotland's long history with racist violence. Rona Munro said "I don't think people know there were black people in Scotland that early in such a significant way".⁴ Danielle Jam who plays Ellen was asked in a Brig Newspaper interview how Queen of the fight differed to the other sets of Munro's play. She answered "Well, I never got to see the first three, so I'm going off what other people have told me, but for me I think the obvious part is that it centres around two people of colour, well, four people of colour in the court. It's from an outsider's perspective of what this country is, and it's addressing some truths about racism in Scotland."⁵

A real understanding of the cruel treatment the girls faced when being a part of the court was shown when the Queen gave birth to her son, the new heir. At this time Anne is working as a Lady's maid and a nurse but the Queen shows some disdain towards the girls that forms from a jealousy in a suspected affair between the King and Ellen. The Queen sits on a chair downstage right and swaddles the baby as she looks gradually

³ [The skinny Laurie sansom on Quenn of the fight](#)

⁴ [Queen of the Fight: the royally revelatory drama about James IV's court | Theatre | The Guardian](#)

⁵ <https://brignews.com/2022/11/06/james-iv-queen-of-the-fight-interview-with-danielle-jam/>

more uncomfortable and distressed. Anne rushes in from the opposite side of the stage and kneels before the Queen and the baby. Cradling it and rocking it, Anne takes the baby from the Queen as she pushes it into Anne's arms and cries for her to "take him". Anne stands still with her body turned from the audience and pauses in a sense of shock as the baby dies. Both with startled expressions the Queen leaps from her seat and angrily strides over to Anne saying "He died when you touched him, didn't he" in an accusatory tone of voice. Her finger directly pointed at Anne who is still holding the corpse, the Queen's words make it feel as if the interaction of different skin colours was poisonous and it had been Anne's touch that had killed him. The audience are made to feel uncomfortable as the tension in this scene derives from the Queen blaming a death on colour. We can see modern parallels in the idea of the media blaming murders on black people and the modern audience may also draw those parallels.

Munro incorporates William Dunbar's poem *Of Ane Blak-Moir* written in 1507.⁶ Blak-moir, or blackamoor, was at the time a general term for black people, and is now viewed as racist. The poem has a mocking and racist tone throughout the five stanzas, with recurring negative descriptions of her facial features. It is possibly the first poem of this type to be written about an African woman in the English language and serves as an understanding of the sad depictions people of colour faced in Scotland. In the play, the Queen commissions Dunbar to write the poem after discovering the King's affair. Motivated by his jealousy of Ellen's favour at court, Dunbar agrees to write it. The King's Court sit round a large banquet, dining and partying together with lively music and hysterical laughter. They are interrupted when Dunbar drunkenly stumbles his way to

⁶ https://dbpedia.org/page/Of_Ane_Blak-Moir

centre stage and proudly pulls out the crumpled poem he has written. He clears his throat and pats his chest as he begins to read the poem loudly, addressing the court with an arrogant tone of voice. Horrified and dismayed facial expressions appear on members of the audience as they watch Ellen and Anne being publicly shamed. The Queen hides her grins and tries to muffle her laughter as Ellen rises to take the poem off Dunbar in shame. Looking distraught Ellen pauses and looks at the poem, looks round the audience then proceeds to yell "is this enough for you?". Audible gasps are heard from the audience. Being predominantly white, there is an understanding that they themselves are part of the problem and bear responsibility. This scene creates a dramatic tension as the audience are addressed as part of the guilty party for Scotland's racist past. It calls into reflection the current injustices black people face.

The final scene of James the IV has all the characters reappear on stage exactly as they were in the opening of the show but in contrast they are in the period clothing of the Court. Both Anne and Ellen stood downstage centre brightly lit with everyone else around looking content. Ellen takes a long pause and gazes over both the audience and the rest of the characters, this time in recognition of what she is about to say. "The poem was real, just as the maker made it. Remember that most of all." She stands smiling as Anne reaches for her hand and they stand side by side as the lights fade out on the stage. This moment, in contrast to the beginning, showed a true understanding of where Scotland has come today in terms of its treatment towards race. "When our stories are over and done, our names might be forgotten but we were real". It pushes a reflection about how this part of Scottish history is overlooked and forgotten when it vitally shows us the impact of race through time.

Set in the present day also exploring themes of racism in Scotland is *The Lament for Sheku Bayoh*. It was first performed in the Edinburgh Lyceum in 2021 as part of the Edinburgh International Festival.

The horrific tragedy of Sheku Bayoh still haunts Scotland. Sheku Bayoh died on 3 May 2015 after an incident in the street in Kirkcaldy involving officers of Police Scotland.⁷ Police were called to Bayoh's house after friends had reported him for taking drugs and had been spotted walking around his hometown erratically with a knife. Police say that when they found him, he did not cooperate when being asked to get down on the ground. This resulted in alleged police brutality and resulted in Sheku's death. In 2018, the Crown Office in Scotland decided neither of the officers should be prosecuted. Further inquiries were made into the story in 2019 when witnesses came forward and police were accused of giving false statements of what happened. Similar police brutality to this has been seen before in the tragic case of George Floyd.

'The Lament for Sheku Bayoh' is a documentary drama written by Hannah Lavery. In her play, Hannah Lavery delves into the personal and societal implications of Bayoh's death. It explores themes of race, identity, grief, and institutional racism. Through a combination of poetry, storytelling, and performance, Lavery invites audiences to reflect on the impact of systemic injustices and to confront uncomfortable truths about race relations and police violence in Scotland. The themes related to justice and accountability then help to emphasise the need for systemic change and the importance of holding those in power responsible for their actions. Her writing conveys a sense of

⁷ <https://www.shekubayohinquiry.scot/>

urgency and frustration regarding the lack of accountability for police violence and racial injustice.

What is important to note is that Lavery tell us about the story of Sheku Bayoh whilst also expressing her own experience of racism. Lavery's own father, a black Scottish man, absent for the majority of her childhood led her to "broader questions of legacy, identity and shame, bringing to light Scotland's history of colonialism and slavery, and the continuing racism inflicted on people of colour in the country today." Her aims for the play were expressed as "I felt like I wanted people to say his name, to create a lament in which we remembered this deeply loved man." Not many people she spoke to had heard of the killing of Sheku Bayoh – "no-one seemed to know about it" – which only pushed Lavery to see the project through with more urgency. She began finding out what she could about him online. "We were looking at the questions that have been unanswered for the family," she says. "[The play] is not an investigation – it's an exploration of what was out there in the media.⁸

At the very beginning of the play three women stand in front of chairs lined up across the stage with a rigid stance and making direct eye contact with the audience. One woman steps forward. Her movement is slow and looks strained representing the grief. She takes a long pause and lifts her head up with a dismayed facial expression before she uses an accusatory tone of voice representing the need for accountability for his death. "What would it cost us to lift him, broken, from a Kirkcaldy street, to cradle him as our own, can we still say we love this place if we don't?". This becomes a true indication

⁸ [Hannah Lavery on Lament for Sheku Bayoh: The Skinny](#)

of their support felt for Sheku and how they understand that Scotland isn't dealing with racism correctly and is not holding accountability.

In another scene showing delusional attitudes about not admitting Scotland's racist institutions, they create a conversation between people in Scotland talking about his trial. One woman sits slouched casually on a chair looking tired and slightly defeated. She lets out a large sigh as she says "what if they are the danger?" The other woman sits upright in her chair looking startled and confused. The pitch of her voice rose as she tried to contemplate and dispute the comment. "The police? C'mon", "why'd you say that", "because if that were true I would hear about it, we would hear about it. It's not Black Lives Matter, this is Scotland!" Representing the ordinary conversations taking place raises awareness and makes a more humanized version of the lack of understanding people in Scotland have around the media's portrayal of race-led movements in aid of his death.

A crucial link to the thought surrounding racism in Scotland and Sheku Bayoh's murder is made in the performance as the 3 actors who tell his story appear in silhouette in front of a large projected photo of him dressed smiling and in a kilt and finery for a Scottish wedding. A long pause is held to take in the true beauty of the picture as one of the voices echoes "did you know, did you, that one day this photo would be used to say that you once belonged here, and that your blackness would be striking, and challenge something in us?" in a reassuring tone of voice. This becomes not only a happy and empowering commemoration but a reflection into the way his murder has changed thoughts and feelings in Scotland about race.

In my opinion, a strong element of the storytelling came from the fact that all 3 girls telling the story were black. This felt like a deliberate casting and brought a relevant element of personal understanding and experience to life. I felt that this created a very moving reflection about how even though Scotland is trying to adapt and become more aware of the systemic racism and past slavery it had there's still unconscious experiences of racism people feel on the daily. It shouldn't have to take major deaths or violent experiences for people to realize that.

Whilst Lament for Sheku Bayoh was created from a political perspective, Medea produced by the National Theatre of Scotland directed by Michael Boyd took one of theatre's great works and created his casting in a way that would twist the story into a racial issue.

Michael Boyd directed Liz Lochhead's adaptation of Medea, which was performed as part of the International Festival in August 2022. In this adaptation Medea is cast as a black woman with the rest of the cast being predominantly white. The reason for this is to represent her as an outcast due to her colour. "It kinda walks that fine line of being both modern and rooted in the original" explained Stephen McCole who plays King Creon.⁹ In an interview with Boyd, he specifically talks about his casting choice of Adura Onashile as Medea.¹⁰ "What brought was the fact she's a Nigerian artist based in Glasgow and therefore vividly dramatized the aspect of Medea being an outsider."

The staging is set in a thrust shape as the actors walk up and down the catwalk with an entrance carved out of a rusted wall in complete darkness. Medea emerges from the

⁹ <https://theqr.co.uk/2022/08/03/interview-stephen-mccole-medea-eif2022/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/education/education-portal-home/medea>

darkness as the chorus of all-white Scottish women that have been watching her part to allow her to stride through the middle. Medea uses a loud volume to be heard over everyone else using Scottish dialect but in a refined British RP accent. Her movement is slow as she paces and glides between the chorus, the floaty black jumpsuit she is wearing aids this graceful image as the cuffs flow behind her. The dynamic between the chorus and Medea is set immediately as she differs heavily in appearance to them and stands out due to her colour creating a separation between them. This emphasizes how she becomes alone and an outcast in society and gives the impression it is down to her race.

Although Medea differs appearance-wise from the chorus they show they follow her story throughout and almost work as a feminist support as they can't share a connection through their colour but try to show her the support through womanhood. After arguing with Jason, Medea lies curled up in a fetal position looking defeated and destroyed, her body being lit in a high intensity spotlight that creates a halo around her. White hands reach out to her from the chorus and speak in unison saying, "who will take you in, contaminated as you are?" This along with the circled light effect around Medea creates a barrier between them and contamination suggests that there is something wrong with her due to her colour.

This adaptation serves as not only a way to challenge the diversity in cast but to alter storylines to fit with the present issues of race.

The National Theatre of Scotland has created a new Anti Racism plan¹¹. The plan shows targets and deadlines for:

- Create anti-racism induction for freelance staff,
- Ensure hiring practices are anti-racism focused,
- Create a remuneration policy incorporating anti-racism practices, and
- Increase the cultural diversity of the staff base.

They will do this by giving Induction packs including resources and documents to be read out on first day of rehearsals and have Anti-racism training for freelancers prior to working on shows.

In my opinion, I feel that it is positive to see work and research being done into how Scotland's theatre can represent race in both historical and political ways. I feel it makes theatre gradually more diverse but also interesting and informative. By actively creating goals within the industry helps to make sure every person regardless of colour feels safe and included and most importantly respected. As an identifying Scottish white person it is eye-opening to discover parts of Scotland's origins and be able to connect with that through theatre but also be challenged to thinking about any prejudices I carry. If Scotland's theatre continues to uphold its diversity and meet its goals to tackle and educate about further racist issues then it is at least doing something to address Scotland's past of systemic racism.

Word Count – 2,997

¹¹ [Anti-Racism action plan | National Theatre of Scotland \(nationaltheatrescotland.com\)](https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/anti-racism-action-plan)

Bibliography

[Africans at the court of James IV | National Trust for Scotland \(nts.org.uk\)](https://www.nts.org.uk)

[Slavery and Scotland | National Records of Scotland \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)

[The skinny Laurie Sansom on Quenn of the Fight](#)

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/sep/13/queen-of-the-fight-james-iv-scottish-history-rona-munro>

<https://brignews.com/2022/11/06/james-iv-queen-of-the-fight-interview-with-danielle-jam/>

https://dbpedia.org/page/Of_Ane_Blak-Moir

<https://www.sheku-bayohinquiry.scot/>

<https://www.theskinny.co.uk/theatre/interviews/lament-for-sheku-bayoh-hannah-lavery>

<https://theqr.co.uk/2022/08/03/interview-stephen-mccole-medea-eif2022/>

<https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/education/education-portal-home/medea>

<https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/about/reports-and-documents/ar-action-plan>