

THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Created and Performed by

Tobi King Bakare
Nisha Dassyne
Hannah Douglas
David Furlong
Tony Guilfoyle

also created by Rosanna Lowe and Ery Nzaramba

Conceived and directed by Michael Walling

Designed by
Lighting by
Movement by
Production & Stage Manager
Assistant Director
Marketing by
PR by
Photography by
Associate Director
(Community Engagement)
Community Outreach by

Shiraz Bayjoo
Catherine Webb
Maria da Luz Ghoumrassi
Harvey Shepherdson
Carlota Arencibia
Bonnie Smith
Chlo   Nelkin Consulting
John Cobb
Lucy Dunkerley

Historical Consultancy by

Phil Hindmarsh,
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coolitude.shca.ed.ac.uk

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bordercrossings.org.uk

#TheGreatExperiment

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David Furlong (left) and Hannah Douglas (right)



David Furlong (left) and Tobi King Bakare (right)

COMPANY BIOGRAPHIES

Carlota Arencibia is a performer, writer & director originally from Gran Canaria. She has recently written & performed a one woman show, Rosa. Carlota's directing credits include The Second Sex (Camden Fringe) & For Harry (Southend Fringe).

Tobi King Bakare is most know for his role as Jamie in the Sky drama, Temple & will be seen next in the Netflix series, Cursed and HBO series soon to be announced. He's also appeared in numerous theatre productions with Camden People's Theatre & RAaW Theatre.

Shiraz Bayjoo is a Mauritian artist based between London & Mauritius. His practice explores the social, political & historical conditions integral to Mauritian cultural identity & the wider Indian Ocean region. He has exhibited internationally at galleries & biennales including Tate Britain, Institute of International Visual Arts, 14th Biennale of Sharjah; 13th Biennale of Dakar & 21st Biennale of Sydney.

Nisha Dassyne was born in Mauritius & studied Fine Arts at Santiniketan, India. She was part of the core devising & performing team for Border Crossings' Mappa Mundi which toured to the UK and Mexico, & has also worked for Soho Theatre, Northampton Theatre Royal, English National Opera & Proteus.

Hannah Douglas trained at ALRA. Her film & TV credits include Going Country (BFI Network/Inceptive films); Lapwing (Urban Apache Films/World Serpent Productions) & Little Dorrit (BBC). Theatre credits include Pride & Prejudice (The Courtyard); Hopeless Romantics (UK tour), Orpheus and Eurydice (Insane Root Theatre Co) & A Christmas Carol (UK Tour).

David Furlong was born in Mauritius & trained at the Paris National Theatre of Chaillot. He is Artistic Director of Exchange Theatre where he produces, performs, writes & directs. In 2017, David was nominated for Best Director at the Offies. Other theatre credits include The Flies (The Bunker); Macbeth (Cockpit), Misanthrope (CPT) & Red Oleander (CPT).

Maria da Luz Ghoumrassi is a movement director, dancer, choreographer & educator working through multidisciplinary techniques to develop intercultural awareness performance. Previous movement direction includes The Mighty Boosh (BBC), The Garden (Spare Tyre) & The Revolutioners (Yeong Eldarin Studio).

Tony Guilfoyle has collaborated on several Border Crossings productions and has a long association with Robert Lepage's company Ex Machina. Other theatre credits include The Iceman Cometh & The LA Plays (Almeida); Shopping & Fucking (Geilgud & Queens Theatres) Outskirts (RSC), Woyzeck (Gate Theatre/St Ann's Warehouse) & The Queen & I (Out Of Joint).

Michael Walling is Artistic Director of Border Crossings & Visiting Professor at Rose Bruford College. He has directed numerous productions across four continents, winning awards for Two Gentlemen of Verona in the US & Paul & Virginie in Mauritius. Opera includes The Ring (ENO).

Catherine Webb is a venue Lighting Director at the Islington Assembly Rooms & Union Chapel & also a novelist writing most recently as Claire North. Theatre credits include The Secret Lives of Humans (NDT); The Dog Beneath the Skin (Jermyn St Theatre); Reflections in Swan Lake (Lillian Baylis); Beauty & the Beast (Lighthouse Theatre) & Down & Out in London & Paris (Pleasance 2/NDT).

Border Crossings creates new intercultural, multi-media theatre in response to the contemporary globalised world. The company works across the borders between cultures & art forms, & between nations and peoples. Since 1995, Border Crossings has collaborated with artists & companies from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Croatia, France, Germany, Ghana, Hungary, India, Ireland, Lebanon, Mauritius, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Palestine, Sweden, the USA & Zimbabwe, as well as the diverse communities of the UK.

BORDER CROSSINGS THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

A new play by Border Crossings in association with
Dugdale Centre and Exchange Theatre



Image: Shiraz Bayjoo

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WELCOME TO THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Ghosts and plays have much in common.

The energies and crises generated in the wake of buried trauma give an urgent and necessary birth to both of them. Prophetic and bickering, ancestral voices demand their rightful space in our cultural self-fashionings.

I first encountered the ghosts of Indian indentured labourers some five years ago, when Nisha Dassyne and I visited the Aapravasi Ghat in Port Louis, Mauritius. This severe stone complex testifies to the 453,063 people who passed through it on arrival in the island, transported by ships from Calcutta and Madras to work in the sugar cane fields; and, by extension, the 1.3 million whom British shipping dispersed across the world in the period following the abolition of slavery, when the Empire was hungry for sweet food and cheap labour.

The ghosts arrived in our house just as Britain was slamming its doors in the faces of their contemporary avatars. The “migration crisis” of 2015, the “hostile environment”, the Windrush scandal and the Brexit vote all revealed a country ill at ease with the globalised world it had itself created, spinning a mythology of English exceptionalism and imperial isolation. This retreat from the world, coupled with a politics of exclusion and “othering”, is at once delusional and dangerous. We have to set the record straight on our complex and dark imperial history. We have to open ourselves to the hauntings of slavery, of famine, of indenture. As Avery Gordon says, “haunting... is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known.” And so we decided to put the ghosts of indenture on the stage, inviting them to haunt our own, personal present.

In THE GREAT EXPERIMENT they wrestle and dance along their uneasy pathway towards the heart of Empire.

Michael Walling
Artistic Director, Border Crossings
January 2020



Michael Walling (foreground) with the company

“Sugar makes us happy, giddy, fat. It is the central ingredient in cheap, processed food, contributing to obesity, diabetes and other health problems. Introduced into the daily life of Britons as a result of high yields on British sugar plantations in the ‘West Indies’, sugar’s proliferation during the slave trade, and the reliance on cheap labour to produce it, are symbolic of current inequalities. The plantation was a model for a modern factory: a workplace of unequals, a site open which near magical technology would turn cane to crystals, in an export enterprise that would yield its owners millions of pounds or francs or guilders. The plantation’s wealth relied on its structure being by necessity racist. Like a predator and its victim, richness and poverty remain in a state of perpetual chase. While slavery was abolished, the structure that produced it still flourishes.”

(Tessa McWatt: Shame on Me - An Anatomy of Race and Belonging. 2019. p.52-3)



Tony Guilfoyle

A note from Historian Marina Carter

In 1835, the year slavery was officially abolished and replaced with a limited term of ‘apprenticeship’, Mauritius was a small, isolated and recently acquired territory of the British Empire in the southwest Indian Ocean. It was notable largely for its fierce opposition to imperial slave reforms and flagrant breaches of the abolition enactments. Taken from the French in 1810, principally to prevent their corsairs from wreaking havoc on the British-India trade, the island had been encouraged to turn to large scale sugar production after 1825, when taxes were reduced, and the French settler class teamed up with British merchant capital to finance large scale forest clearance and cane planting. The ex-slaves were due to be liberated from their apprenticeships in 1839 and foreseeing the difficulties of negotiating their continuation in plantation labour, the estate-owners used their mercantile contacts to privately import several thousand mostly adult male workers from Asia. This new ‘trade in men’ was denounced by humanitarians in Britain and India and was temporarily halted in 1838. Committees of Enquiry were set up, and the sugar colonies and anti-abolitionists waited on the outcome. The issue had become one of momentous significance both to commercial interests and to humanitarian groups, reflecting not only on the colonialists’ treatment of Indians and freed slaves but also on the needs and future of tropical plantation agriculture.

By 1842, the matter was settled. On 22nd January, Edward Smith-Stanley, the fourteenth Earl Derby, then serving as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, sat down to write a despatch. The missive, which officially conveyed the sanction of the British Government to the re-opening of Indian labour migration to Mauritius, explained why the colony had been chosen to be the site of a great experiment which would demonstrate that sugar could be produced as effectually by free as by slave labour. Stanley believed that without immigrants the colony would retrograde in ‘wealth and civilisation’ and had accepted the notion put forward by the planters and their British merchant allies, that the ex-slaves had refused to work on the estates, considering therefore that this denied them the right to protection from the competition of immigrant labour. He agreed with the contention that the poor and crisis-prone Indian nation would benefit from migration and that since an Indian community was already settled in Mauritius, the colony would not suffer from the immigration of a non-Christian community. Finally, the proximity of Mauritius to India made it an ideal choice as the site from which to begin this great experiment.

So began the era of government regulated indentured migration, which would rapidly transform Mauritius into Britain’s premier sugar producer. The experiment lasted until the early 20th century, was extended to British and French Caribbean colonies, to Fiji and South Africa. It transformed the demographic make-up of those territories and continues to have global ramifications.

Was this an act of breath-taking hypocrisy, or a stroke of genius? Was indenture merely slavery under another name or more akin to the contemporaneous migrations of Irish and other impoverished white working-class groups? Historians have long wrestled with these questions, some of which seem peculiarly relevant to modern debates about ‘free movement’ and ‘immigration controls’ in the Brexit era.

A team of researchers from the Universities of Edinburgh and Leeds has been working with Border Crossings to discuss how these momentous decisions two centuries ago played out and continue to impact on us. Now it is the turn of actors to grapple with and articulate the issues raised by THE GREAT EXPERIMENT, and for you, the audience, to witness and to share in the dilemmas it raises.



Nisha Dassyne