**An Evaluation of the Black Plays Archive Project (2009-2025)**

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# Executive Summary

This evaluation covers the Black Plays Archive (BPA), an ongoing digital archive project created by the National Theatre (NT) to remember and catalogue the works of Black British, African, and Caribbean playwrights produced in the UK.

This evaluation was created to establish a record of how the BPA was created, in addition to how it was managed and operated following its initial creation and in the subsequent redevelopment of the project in 2023 to celebrate the project's 10th anniversary. The findings of the evaluation conclude:

* The project was created as a one-off digital archive project in collaboration with the NT Archive and Digital departments. Its aim was to display and share the works of Black playwrights online, though no future planning or sustainability of project was built into its initial brief.
* An underestimation by the team initially working on the project assumed that a finite number of productions by Black playwrights existed historically and that any new productions wouldn’t likely need cataloguing after the launch of the BPA in 2013.
* Following the departure of the original project creators and a refocusing of the NT’s Digital Department, the BPA was absorbed by the team working in the NT Archive.
* A series of teaching resources and external events made the BPA an internationally recognised resource despite the lack of top-down oversight on the project.

Recommendations

* A dedicated top-down strategy should be created and implemented to ensure that the BPA fulfils its true potential, meeting the needs of its target user groups through the creation of events, resources, tours, talks and exhibitions (both aligned with productions staged at the Southbank and elsewhere)
* Continued resourcing is needed from the NT Archive to catalogue and update the productions within the BPA, in addition to updating and maintaining its digital infrastructure.

Concluding thoughts

The BPA project has a large remit and goal and acts as an expanding hub of information highlighting the theatrical works of Black playwrights who have been historically marginalised. The need to create resources and celebration around the plays within its catalogue will further aid users in engaging with the BPA, in the classroom, the rehearsal room, and beyond for years to come.

# Background

The Black Plays Archive (also known as BPA) is an online catalogue of the first professional productions of plays by playwrights of Black British, African, and Caribbean heritage produced in the UK. The archive exists largely as a collection of production information, listing cast and creative teams for first productions. Additionally, the BPA website signposts other archive collections, hosts a podcast, features a collection of audio recordings of plays from the archive, interviews with practitioners, essays and teaching resources.

The BPA has existed for over ten years, being first developed in 2009 and launching officially in 2013. Its ongoing aim is to remember the works of Black British playwrights, holding information about plays and playwrights in one place. This evaluation aims to cover the origins of the BPA as a digital archive project developed by the NT and concludes with some key suggestions for the project's ongoing success regarding its management and resourcing. A guidance document aimed at theatres, theatre companies, performance collectives and practitioners hoping to create similar archive projects was created in tandem with this evaluation[[1]](#footnote-2).

Like other digital archive projects hoping to centre the works of marginalised theatre-makers in the UK, such as the [Unfinished Histories Project](https://unfinishedhistories.com/), [Future Histories](https://www.futurehistories.org.uk/s/future-histories/page/welcome) and many others, the BPA was created to primarily remember and share the plays of Black playwrights, both historic and contemporary. With theatre and performance being inherently ephemeral by nature (as a play seemingly ends when its run closes), archiving and cataloguing performance allows it to achieve permanence in a public record, marking its existence when it otherwise may have been lost to time and memory. This is particularly important for the contributions made to theatre by Black playwrights, whose work has often and historically gone unrecognised by the wider theatre and performance sector.

The BPA project was spearheaded in 2009 by the playwright, director and then NT Associate Kwame Kwei-Armah, who hoped to create an archive that showcased the depth of Black British, African, and Caribbean playwriting from the UK. At the time, the NT had staged some of Kwame’s own work (plays like *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003), *Fix Up* (2004) and *Statement of Regret* (2007)) in addition to the works of other Black British, African, and Caribbean playwrights such as Roy Williams (S*ing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002) and *Baby Girl* (2008)), Winsome Pinnock (*Leave Taking* (1994) and *Can You Keep a Secret?* (1994)), Mustapha Matura (*The Coup* (1991)), John Kani, Winston Ntshona and Athol Fugard (*The Island* (2000) and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (2007)), Percy Mtwa (*Bopha!* (1987)) and Wole Soyinka (*The Bacchae* (1973) and *Death and the King’s Horseman* (2009)).

From the outset, the BPA aimed to share and establish a record of plays from theatres across the UK, not just those staged by the NT. This would allow contemporary theatre-makers, playwrights, students, educators, academics, and members of the public insight and understanding into a seemingly forgotten and unacknowledged history. The project was initially funded by Arts Council England (ACE) and Sustained Theatre, with match funding coming from the NT. The project was created in partnership with the Black Cultural Archives.

# Breadth and execution of the project

The BPA exists on its own dedicated website ([www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk](https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/)) and hosts a variety of different elements for users to explore. Predominantly, the BPA is a union catalogue[[2]](#footnote-3), displaying information about plays through pages known as production records and displaying where additional relevant records associated with the plays are held, namely in other libraries and archive collections. The production records on the BPA include the play’s title, synopsis, the date of its first performance (the BPA does not catalogue revivals), the theatre it was staged in originally and the play’s cast size. A production record also includes the names and roles of the cast members and creative teams (for instance the names of the director, lighting designer, etc.). Production records are also connected to playwright biographies, with the website listing a playwright’s work and information about them. As of 2025, there are close to 900 plays with production records from over 300 playwrights on the BPA website, the earliest of which is from 1909.

Outside its central collection of production records, the BPA website also features a bespoke podcast hosted by a Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) student, created in collaboration with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (via the joint AHRC London Arts and Humanities Partnership). *That Black Theatre Podcast* features interviews with leading playwrights and academics and charts the works of playwrights and writers like Una Marson, Mojisola Adebayo, Winsome Pinnock and more, covering over eighty years' worth of Black British theatre history. The BPA website also features a series of teaching resources designed to assist educators in the classroom. These include a dedicated teaching guide for navigating the Black Plays Archive as a tool for teaching as well as individual resources for Inua Ellams’ 2019 adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, *Cuttin’ It* by Charlene James, and *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* by Jasmine Lee-Jones (with the resource being created by the Royal Court Theatre and hosted on the BPA website with permission). Four more teaching resources have also been commissioned in 2025.

The BPA website also includes a bibliography of plays and academic texts exploring Black British playwrights in the UK, a dedicated monologue resource for students auditioning for drama school, essays about plays in the archive (which come largely from NT programmes) and sixty-five specially made short audio recordings of plays from the BPA. These audio recordings include sixty-five individual recordings by playwrights Alfred Fagon, Roy Williams, Winsome Pinnock and more, available on the [play extracts](https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/play-extracts/) page on BPA website.

Additionally, the BPA also includes a series of unpublished playscripts (both digital and physical versions) written by Black British, African, and Caribbean playwrights and a collection of digital posters, programmes, and leaflets for staged productions donated by the Black Cultural Archives in 2009. Due to the copyright of these works belonging to the playwrights and graphic designers who created them, the NT Archive isn’t currently in a position to share these works outside the research room space in Waterloo.

# Initial aims

The BPA was created with the intention of not only remembering the works of Black playwrights in the UK, but to also share those works in their entirety. At the time of the project taking shape, the idea of sharing the works of playwrights online was tantamount to the BPA existing in the first place. This thinking stemmed from two ideas: making known the work of Black[[3]](#footnote-4) playwrights would allow for a greater and richer understanding of their work (to be more widely accessed) and the idea that archives were, and are to large portions of the general public, inaccessible spaces (due to barriers or restrictions to access).

With the internet bringing more people together and with opportunities being created for work to be shared more easily via digital spaces in 2009, a digital archive project seemed to solve the problem of an archive’s inaccessibility. The internet, of course, can be accessed at any time or anywhere, with access available beyond external institutions. With this, the creation of the BPA coincided with the creation of the NT’s then newly formed Digital Department. The NT Digital Department, hoping to bring the productions of the NT to a larger international audience (via a more digitally and technologically literate workforce), was tasked with sharing the work created by the theatre via new technological means. The creation of the Digital Department led to the creation of NT Live (with productions being broadcast live into cinemas from 2009), NT Collection (which shares recordings of productions with schools and education centres from 2019) and NT at Home (the NT’s streaming service from 2020).

Upon the project’s creation in 2009, the BPA sat between the management of the NT Digital Department and the NT Archive. Both departments, in addition to Kwame Kwei-Armah, a dedicated project researcher and volunteers aimed to create the BPA as a resource that would positively affect contemporary Black playwrights in their knowledge and understanding of previous work as well as solidify or create a ‘canon’ of work borne of Black British, African, and Caribbean theatre traditions. This would be in addition to sharing these works with students, young people, theatre-makers, and actors as well as the general public.

A dedicated committee was also created to steer and oversee the BPA project, consisting of theatre-makers, directors and writers, many of whose own work would make up the productions in archive.

The BPA as a digital archive project would seek to establish ways to share the plays written by Black playwrights – be that through sharing the plays themselves online or information about them via production records or records of performance (a play’s cast, creative team, when were the play was staged, etc).

# Scale and scope

It was assumed that, like many things on the internet, the BPA would provide complete and open access to plays in their entirety, either through video recordings of play readings or audio recordings. Just as a library allows users free access to texts, it was believed in the early stages of the BPA project that similar access would be possible to recreate online. What this assumption didn’t necessarily account for however, was the sheer number of plays that would fall under the umbrella of the project’s realm, including how the ongoing creation of new work and discoveries of previous works would impact the scale of the project. Additionally, the continual development of online infrastructures would require the BPA’s website to gradually degrade over time if it wasn’t continually updated.

In researching works to be included in the BPA, those working on the project found that they were rediscovering plays as the project progressed from 2009 to its launch in 2013 and then again from the years 2014 to 2020 and then 2021 to today. The rediscovery of these plays is framed this way as, of course, the plays the team were coming across were not new at all – in many cases they were many decades old and written by a variety of emerging and established playwrights. The plays were, however, largely unfamiliar to the team researching the work. It is worth reiterating that the intention to rediscover plays was an aim of the BPA project. The project hoped to first identify plays that had been staged previously, then document them through production records and recordings before aiming to share these works with a larger audience (as per the aims of the Digital Department and the NT Archive at large). This resulted in 65 audio recordings of plays being created at the NT Studio and elsewhere around the country (after permissions were sought and later granted by the playwrights to share their work online). These recordings were created in addition to the numerous production records of performances on Calm (the Archive's cataloguing system) which later went on to the BPA website.

In essence, it seems that the initial project didn’t necessarily plan to continually include more of the work it was seeking to share. Instead, the project was launched despite a lack of formal or structural plans to sustain it. With this, it seemed that there was an unspoken assumption that, at some point, new and rediscovered plays would stop being catalogued, funding would cease or the team working on the project would move onto other things. By framing the project in this way, as a one off, it assumed that the scale of the project would be relatively small and stay relatively small, as opposed to maintaining pace with the stagings and rediscoveries of work by Black playwrights.

There was a suggestion in 2014 that the BPA could have been updated and maintained by a partnered organisation, such as the Black Cultural Archives (as was suggested at the time). What this assumed was that, if the scale of the project wouldn’t grow to include new production records of new or rediscovered plays, additional elements on the website could have been created to further engage users, continuing the project in parallel to the work on the website created by the NT. However, the BPA is not a resource capable of updating itself, someone needs to continually create production records and maintain its digital infrastructure. This means that that the scale of the project should continue to increase as previously staged plays become rediscovered and new work becomes staged. The aim of the project makes this clear: to remember and catalogue the works of Black playwrights – who continue to write plays and who had written plays previously. In this way, the project, by design, must continually expand and grow the numbers of plays in its catalogue, as the works of Black playwrights expand and grow in theatres across the UK (Black Plays Archive Report, 2014).

# Growth, support, and resourcing

After the initial launch of the BPA website in 2013, the BPA became managed and maintained by the small team working within the NT Archive department, which now included a freelance project officer updating and maintaining the project. Additionally, the committee formed at the start of the project informally dissolved, leaving the NT Archive wholly responsible for the BPA.

Following its initial launch, the BPA flourished, particularly in the years following 2014. This was due to the work of NT Archive department, the role of the freelance project officer and the creation of exhibitions and events showcasing and displaying the work within the project. Despite the digital infrastructure of the BPA website not changing since its launch (which, in a time of rapid technological advancement quickly began to age and deteriorate), the BPA was able to grow and develop into an increasingly engaging resource among playwrights, educators, students, actors, and members of the public.

Prominent exhibitions and events from the BPA included its inaugural series of play readings in 2010, a symposium on the works of Black women playwrights in 2012 (honouring the legacy of the late playwright Dona Daley), a highly subscribed to series of adult education seminars, first in 2014 and again in 2015 (featuring talks from prominent theatre-makers whose work is in the BPA), the Bright Young Tings Exhibition in 2017 (which featured images from the photographer Michael Mayhew of Black actors and theatre companies in performance and rehearsal in the early 1980s), the creation of two digital Google Arts and Culture exhibitions (chronicling [Bright Young Tings](mailto:https://artsandculture.google.com/story/bright-young-tings-national-theatre/qwVxRsrVGQ0A8A?hl=en-GB) and the history of plays written by [Black playwrights at the National Theatre](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/black-plays-at-the-national-theatre-national-theatre/UAVxRuJrcxgA8A?hl=en-GB)), sessions in schools for students and young people, Martina Laird’s 2018 ‘Palimpsest’ talk (featuring discussion from prominent Black actresses on their careers and their experiences in the wider theatre industry), and more, including Q&A discussions (called platform talks) to accompany the productions on stage at the National’s theatres. In addition to these events, *That Black Theatre Podcas*t was launched in 2020 to acclaim, exploring the many playwrights, themes and movements that exist within the BPA. Not only did these events and *That Black Theatre Podcast* bring increased visibility to the BPA, they also successfully engaged users and participants by exploring the plays and playwrights themselves, resulting in often deeper learning and discussions about plays and playwrights who historically had flown under the radar.

In 2020 the NT partnered with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama on a Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership (LAHP). This student created the *That Black Theatre Podcast* as part of the public engagement element of their funded research. The NT also began two further CDAs in 2021 and 2023. One of these ended up stopping the CDA in favour of a more traditional PhD solely attached to Central and the other did not complete their upgrade to full PhD status after first year. Both students had a variety of reasons for their decisions. We have noted that there is difficulty finding suitable supervisors both within the NT and at Central, who have the appropriate research interests and lived experience to be of benefit to students. We are exploring with Central how we might be able to improve this moving forward. Separately, the NT Archive has hosted student placements from 2020 from a variety of universities, who support with data entry, synopsis writing and background research, which have provided valuable support for the BPA and experience for the students.

In addition to these events, the freelance project officer also continually documented the staging of new plays across the UK as well as cataloguing rediscovered plays by creating further production records for the BPA website. This role became a permanent post in 2024.

By the dual approaches of making the BPA visible through public events centring the project and the continual updating of its catalogue, the BPA became recognised as a resource dedicated to showcasing the works of Black playwrights. In this way, the BPA achieved a kind of permanence within both the minds of those who used the website and participated in its events as well as within the NT Archive and the NT at large.

# The future of the BPA: structure, vision, and impact

In 2023, the BPA website was redeveloped, making its once deteriorating and dated digital Infrastructure more user friendly and modern, seeing the project expand into its second decade of life. This mammoth redevelopment was undertaken following an external consultation with playwrights, theatre-makers, staff working on the project and participants from its target user groups, investigating how the project was meeting its core users and how it could potentially expand to further achieve its aims.

To date, the BPA still sits under the guidance of the NT Archive, with a dedicated project coordinator updating the BPA’s catalogue of production records, its website, as well as liaising with other departments internally at the NT and external organisations to keep the resource running, up to date, and engaging among its target groups. However, the committee that once oversaw the project has yet to be replaced after almost ten years and there remains missing a formal umbrella structure that could further aid in the continual development, success, and steering of the project.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the numerous and immensely popular events that were once a staple of the project have reduced following the restructuring of the exhibitions department within the NT. Currently, the NT Archive lacks the resource to independently run such a high number of thoughtful, nuanced and successful events due to the small team working on a variety of projects (such as cataloguing work from the National’s theatres as well as embarking on a highly skilled digital preservation and infrastructure project). From this, the BPA website has largely been maintained by the role of the project coordinator alongside the NT IT and Marketing departments, in addition to the site's third-party website developer. As has been the case since at least 2014, the NT Archive has been solely responsible for the content of the project, commissioning teaching resources and creating collaborations with other institutions and organisations, in addition to running events around the project. Externally, the BPA provides, tours, handling sessions, and played a role in the 2025 staging of Michael Abbensetts' 1978 play *Alterations* in the Lyttelton theatre.

First staged at the New End Theatre in North London, *Alterations* first came to the attention of the NT through being catalogued in the BPA. When looking for works specifically written by Black British, African, and Caribbean playwrights, the BPA was the perfect resource to give information about a given play’s plot and cast size in addition to information about the playwright and provide contextual information such as when and where the play was first staged and who produced it. This information allowed the NT to consider a large number of forgotten works and highlighted plays that had been written by marginalised voices. The BPA also was able to signpost where the script for a number of plays could be accessed, easing the process of contacting rights holders and estates to seek performing rights.

Following the staging of *Alterations* at the NT, the BPA:

* Contextualised and gave a history of the play
* Supported the Development and Learning departments in hosting events,
* Sourced photographs and contextual information for Marketing
* Provided public and internal tours, handling sessions and talks about the BPA and Michael Abbensetts
* Advocated for the restaging of the plays within the BPA
* Highlighted the importance of archives relating to theatre and live performance, particularly from racially marginalised playwrights

To fulfil its full potential, the BPA would require continued support and resourcing to remain in step with the ever-increasing number of productions being written and professionally staged by Black playwrights in the UK, in addition to a specific vision for how the BPA is marketed, understood, and used by its target demographics of users. Combined with a dedicated strategy to bring the BPA back into the public realm with events surrounding the materials in its collections (both connected to and separate to the productions staged at the NT), the BPA will able to meet more of its target users as well as bring information from the archive to the general public, allowing them to become more informed and knowledgeable about the works of Black British, African, and Caribbean playwrights and theatre makers.

# Thank You

The NT Archive would like to thank the following people for their time in discussing the BPA and for their awareness, perspectives, and involvement in the project over a number of years: Kwame Kwei-Armah OBE, Martina Laird, Lynette Goddard (Royal Holloway, University of London), Dr. Michael Pearce (University of Exeter), Deirdre Osborne FRSL (Goldsmiths, University of London), Sula Douglas-Folkes, Dawn Walton OBE and NT staff members.

**Thank you**

Evaluation of the Black Plays Archive Project (2009-Present) written by Head of Archive Erin Lee and BPA Coordinator Rianna Simons, 2025.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A catalogue is a description of the material within an archival collection, providing information about the collection. Often also called an archival description or a finding aid (from Archives Hub) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Here, Black refers to the diasporas of African and Caribbean nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)