

National Theatre

*Moon on a Rainbow
Shawl: Teachers'*
**Educational Resource
Pack**

Archive Resource Pack

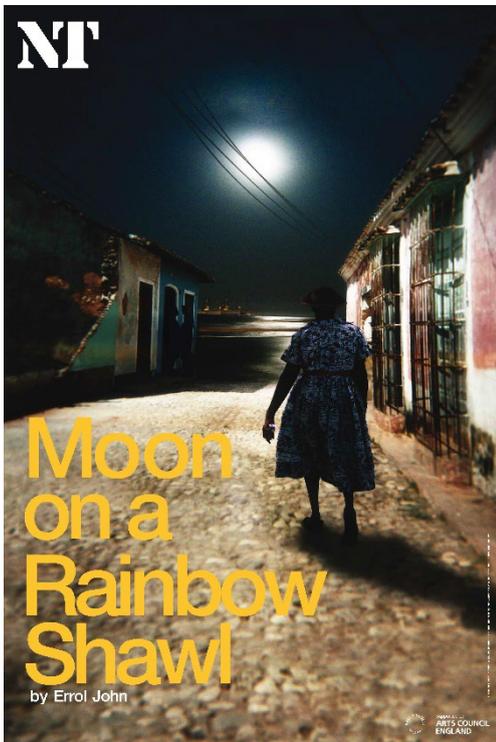
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This resource pack contain themes and details that might be challenging, emotionally activating or triggering. It is not our intention to cause distress or harm but to support your understanding of the play and its creative and historical contexts.

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Introduction



Poster for *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (2012), staged at the National Theatre.

Moon on a Rainbow Shawl is a powerful and poetic Caribbean drama set in post-war, pre-independence Trinidad. Written by Errol John, the play captures a moment in time for a community struggling with poverty, hope, dreams and disillusionment. The story centres around the residents of a run-down yard in Port of Spain, where each character dreams of a better future while battling the social and economic constraints that keep them tied to their circumstances.

With rich language, a vibrant setting, and deeply human characters, the play reflects on ambition, love, gender roles, and the legacy of colonialism. It offers its audience the opportunity to explore historical context, character development, and performance style through Caribbean dialect, ensemble work and social realism.

The playwright - Errol John

Errol John (1924–1988) was a Trinidadian actor, playwright, and screenwriter born in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Initially trained as a visual artist, he moved into acting and writing in the UK during the 1950s. His experience of the racial and class inequalities in Britain informed much of his work. *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* is his most famous play. It is hailed as one of the first successful Caribbean plays in Britain. John wrote with empathy, exploring working-class Black lives and the struggles of Caribbean people in a postcolonial world.

Original performance

Moon on a Rainbow Shawl was first performed at the Manchester Opera House in October 1958, directed by Frith Banbury. This was then followed by a regional tour and a production at the Royal Court Theatre in December 1958, directed by John Dexter, which ran for six weeks. The play was groundbreaking in bringing authentic Caribbean voices to a British stage. It was later revived in 2012 at the National Theatre, directed by Michael Buffong of Talawa Theatre Company.

The age recommendation is 13+ due to mature themes, including sexual exploitation.

Context of the play

Set in 1950s Port of Spain, Trinidad, after World War Two, the play captures a time of change, growing post-colonial identity and hope. Many Caribbean nations, including Trinidad and Tobago, were still under British rule or transitioning into independence. The residents of the yard face unemployment, colonial legacies, and limited prospects. The play offers insight into the Caribbean working-class during a time of global transformation, capturing a rich emotional and cultural landscape.

Trinidad and Tobago

Located in the southern Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island nation known for its cultural diversity, calypso music, and carnival. The islands were under British colonial rule until 1962. In the 1950s, Trinidad's economy was largely industrial and agricultural. Port of Spain, the capital, was a bustling hub for working-class citizens who lived in close-knit, overcrowded yards. These yards – shared houses with outdoor communal areas – become the symbolic heart of John's play.



"Trinidad and Tobago Regions map" by User:(WT-shared) Burmesedays, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection Trinidad and Tobago map is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Themes of the play

Dreams vs Reality: Characters long for escape and a better life, but reality often stifles those dreams.

Gender and Power: Women in the play navigate a world where their economic and social agency is restricted. In different ways, both Mavis and Sophia are reliant on the men in their lives for economic support.

Colonial Legacy: The play reflects the tension between colonial control and the growing desire for independence and identity. Ephriam longs to be independent but the economic disparity on working-class Black Trinidadians causes him to leave.

Hope and Resilience: Despite poverty, injustice and heartbreak, the play's characters show resilience and dignity, each wanting the yard to be a respectable place to live, despite its shabbiness.

Community and Conflict: The tight-knit yard fosters relationships and tension. Personal ambitions often clash with communal living.

Play Structure

Moon on a Rainbow Shawl is structured across three acts with two scenes in each act, totalling six scenes overall. The structure of the play follows the course of three days (beginning with moonrise), as the inhabitants of the yard go about their day-to-day lives.

As the play progresses, the stage directions suggest that the weather in the area changes from a full, clear moon in act one to overcast skies in act two, followed by rain and thunder in act three. This reflects the journeys of the play's characters being impacted by the changes happening around them. The play employs:

Linear Narrative: The play is told in chronological order (from day one to day three), with a beginning, middle and end structure to tell the story. The action unfolds over a short time period, mostly within one location – the communal yard.

Single Setting: The entire play takes place in the rundown yard surrounding Old Mack's property, symbolising entrapment and close relationships.

Character-Focused: The plot is driven by the individual aspirations, relationships and emotional journeys of the characters, which may be referred to as a 'character drama'.

Naturalism and Naturalistic Dialogue: The play attempts to accurately depict lives of working-class Trinidadian citizens, showing the characters as they would be in reality. Authentic Trinidadian dialect and speech patterns bring realism and cultural specificity to the text as well, creating a sense of realism to the characters.

Black Caribbean identity

Moon on a Rainbow Shawl explores Caribbean identity in a post-colonial era. Characters navigate inherited European values and local traditions, often expressing frustration with societal expectations and limited futures. John's play reflects the aspirations of a generation growing restless under colonial systems while still rooted in their cultural heritage.

Use of dialect and language

In *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, language and dialect are used as powerful tools to create authentic characters and highlight the cultural setting of the play. The play features a vibrant use of Trinidadian Creole (also known as Trinidadian English Creole), which gives a distinct rhythm, texture, and identity to the characters' speech. John's use of dialect reflects the local speech of working-class Trinidadians. Rather than standard British English, characters speak in an expressive Creole that combines African, English, and Caribbean influences.

Examples:

- 'I wish yer did ketch him!' (I wish you did catch him!) [Sophia – act one, scene two]
- 'A bucket of water would soon cool she!' (A bucket of water would cool her down) [Sophia -- act two, scene two]

This language creates a sense of realism and draws the audience into the everyday struggles, humour and poetry of Caribbean life.

Class and education

While most characters speak in dialect, some code-switch (when a speaker alternates between two languages or dialects depending on the social situation. The primary motivations for codeswitching include expressing solidarity, clarifying a point, fitting into a social group, or conveying a specific attitude) when discussing their education or aspirations. Characters like Ephraim, who dreams of a better life and contemplates emigration to England, occasionally shift into more standard English to suggest ambition, internal conflict, or a desire to be seen as upwardly mobile.

Example: Ephraim may slip into standard English when expressing dreams or frustrations, showing he is conscious of class mobility and how language shapes perception ('He's got a house. Yet he starts putting that up. Three stories high. To live in! - Himself alone. Now is months since a workman was here.') [act one, scene two]

Character and emotion

John uses dialect to convey deep emotions, such as love, anger, and frustration. The rhythm and musicality of the Creole allow for heightened expression, and the use of repetition, idioms, and culturally specific expressions add emotional texture.

Example: Mavis's biting humour and sarcasm are sharper in dialect ('Call yer damn mother – call she! Tell she come and see ger herself!'). Sophia's strength and maternal pride are evident in her commanding tone and rich vernacular ('Nothin' to do with you! Allyer men! What the hell allyer care. The kind of thing that woman does carry on with here are night I shame to mention – far less fer Esther to see').

Postcolonial voice

The use of Creole can be seen as a political choice. Errol John resists the pressure to write in standard English, instead celebrating the linguistic heritage of Trinidad. It reflects a postcolonial identity and asserts the value of Caribbean voices, cultures, and experiences on stage.

In using dialect, John allows characters to speak in their authentic voices, challenging colonial hierarchies of language that often-dismissed Creole as 'inferior'. This aligns the play with broader Caribbean literary movements that sought to decolonise language and storytelling.

John's writing is not just about what is said, but how it is said – the rhythm and pace of the language is just as important as the message.



Sophia (Martina Laird) in Moon on a Rainbow Shawl at the National Theatre, 2012. Photo by Jonathan Keenan.

Characters

ESTHER ADAMS

A teenage girl full of hope and ambition. She dreams of becoming a teacher and escaping poverty. She represents youthful optimism in contrast to the resigned adults around her.

SOPHIA ADAMS, ESTHER'S MOTHER

Sophia Adams is the moral centre of the play. She is a protective and principled woman, having suffered betrayal in her own life. She seeks to improve the lives of her family.

ROSA

An attractive young woman who uses her looks to survive. Her individual choices spark conflict between personal gain and social judgement.

CHARLIE ADAMS, ESTHER'S FATHER

A former fast bowler turned porter, Charlie is trapped by poverty and alcoholism. His bitterness reflects crushed potential. He is Esther's father.



Sophia (Martina Laird) and Rosa (Jade Anouka) in Moon on a Rainbow Shawl at the National Theatre, 2012.

Photo by Jonathan Keenan.

EPHRIAM

A young man who dreams of a better life and plans to leave for Liverpool. He has a brief relationship with Rosa but chooses to leave rather than commit to her.

MAVIS

A prostitute who sees the world for what it is. Wise and pragmatic, she offers an alternative view of survival and morality.

PRINCE

A hustler who manipulates others for personal gain. His arrival disrupts the yard's fragile balance.

OLD MACK

The owner of the rooms in the yard and the café, Old Mack is wealthier than the other characters but is deeply lonely. Rosa is the object of his unreciprocated affection.

Additional notable characters in the play include Ketch (a Calypsonian, whose music opens the play), Solider and Sailor (two clients of Mavis), the Policeman (investigating the robbery of the café), and Janette (one of the neighbourhood children). Minor speaking roles include Boy and Taxi Driver.



Esther (Tahirah Sharif) and Charlie (Jude Akuwudike) in Moon on a Rainbow Shawl at the National Theatre, 2012.

Photo by Jonathan Keenan.

KS3 Drama activities

The following exercises are designed for Key Stage 3 students.

Hot-Seating – Sophia and Rosa

Ask for volunteers to hot-seat as Sophia or Rosa. The class asks questions about their life goals, moral choices, and relationships.

Extension: explore how both characters respond differently to the pressures of poverty and gender expectations.

Role Play – Conflict in the Yard

Improvise a scene where the residents confront Charlie after a drunken episode. Students must explore vocal tension, gesture, and power dynamics. (Please note: students need to respond maturely to the situation, motivations and character dialogue rather than simply play a drunken character). This may be more suitable for older students at Key Stage 4 or 5.

Forum Theatre – Sophia's decision

Stage the moment where Sophia must decide whether to stay or leave. Encourage the class to step in with alternative lines or choices.

Dialect and Voice Workshop

Practise Caribbean dialects with focus, musicality, rhythm and tone. Compare how each character's voice reflects their status and emotions. This work must be approached with maturity and sensitivity, being respectful of anyone with a different accent or dialect.

Below are video suggestions to support language and dialect activities.

[How to speak like a Trini \(Tutorial\) - YouTube](#)

Thought-Tracking – Charlie

Use a scene where Charlie lashes out. One student voices his lines, another his internal thoughts

Example exchange:

Charlie: I used to be somebody

Inner Voice: Why did it all go wrong?

Design task – The Yard

Students should sketch a set or create a design for the yard using found materials and textures. Discuss symbolism: corrugated iron, broken fences, dusty roads. Link these ideas to context and why John wrote the play to reflect the struggle and dreams of working-class people in post-colonial Trinidad.

Extended KS4 Drama Exploration

The following exercises are designed for students exploring devised drama.

Duologue rehearsal – Sophia and Rosa

Excerpt:

Rosa: Men don't love girls like us. They use us and go.

Sophia: I don't want to believe that. I still believe in something better

Practical task: Rehearse with contrast in tone – Rosa is disillusioned, Sophia is hopeful. Focus on blocking and staging to express emotional distance.

Monologue work – Charlie

Excerpt:

Charlie: All I wanted was a piece of respect...one chance to shine.

Practical task: Deliver with variations in tone – resigned, angry reflective. Discuss how physicality (slumped posture, dragging feet) can add to the characterisation.

Design task – Costume for Prince

Design a costume for Prince that blends colonial influence with streetwise charm. Consider silk shirts, polished shoes, and bright colours. Justify your choices in a short paragraph.

Soundscape – Port of Spain Yard

Create a soundscape using diegetic sound and ambient noise:

- Tropical birds
- Distant steelpan
- Street vendors calling out
- Distant music

Layer these sounds to establish the atmosphere of the yard before act one begins.

Music and Identity

Students should select three calypso or early reggae songs that reflect the tone of the play. Justify their choices in terms of rhythm, message and connection to the characters' struggles.

Performance Styles

Introduce Frantic Assembly-style lifts or Artaud's stylised chaos to explore moments of frustration and entrapment. Suitable for Key Stage 4 or 5 students due to the link to practitioner work and deep exploration of more mature themes and ways of working.

Use moment motifs to represent Sophia's dreams (arms reaching upward), Charlie's regret (back turned, fists clenched) and Rosa's defiance (slow, steady eye contact with the audience).

Moments to explore in devised drama

Key moment	Source of conflict	Theme explored	Act/Scene
1) Sophia vs Ephraim	Personal ambition vs responsibility	Family, escape, identity	Act three, scene two
2) Old Mack and Rosa	Power, coercion, limited choices	Gender, class, survival	Act one, scene one
3) Mavis and Prince	Prince strikes Mavis	Guilt, shame, violence	Act two, scene two

1) Sophia confronts Ephraim about leaving for England (act three, scene two)

Tension source: Conflict between ambition and responsibility

Why it is important: This moment exposes the emotional and ideological clash between Ephraim's desire for personal freedom and Sophia's commitment to family and home.

<p>Sophia: Rosa pregnant! Fer you! Yer know that – Don't yer? [...] Now she tell yer she makin' baby – yer goin' off on a boat! Yer don't want to know!</p> <p>Ephraim: [...] Lady, yer know what yer sayin'? Yer know what yer tellin' me to do?</p>

Explanation: Sophia confronts Ephraim when she discovered he's planning to abandon his child to pursue a new life in England. The exchange is filled with emotional intensity as Sophie challenges his cowardice and selfishness, while Ephraim defends his dreams. The ideals of escape and reality collide, creating a powerful scene of personal and societal tension.

2) Old Mack offers Rosa a 'way out' (act one, scene one)

Tension source: Power imbalance and moral pressure

Why it is important: This moment highlights the predatory behaviour of Old Mack and the limited choices available to women like Rosa.

Old Mack: I see yer, Rosa, I want yer. Most nights in the car I bring yer home yer sit so close –
Rosa: Mr. MACK – LET ME GO!

Explanation: Old Mack uses his financial power to manipulate Rosa into a transactional relationship, offering her comfort in exchange for control. Rosa's rejection of his offer is brave but risky, showing her resistance to exploitation. The subtext of sexual coercion and economic desperation makes this scene deeply unsettling and tense.

3) Prince proposes to Mavis (act two, scene two)

Tension source: Conformity, acceptance, and validation

Why it is important: Mavis' acceptance of Prince's proposal reveals the mental and emotional toll of living in poverty and being judged by others. Giving up her profession for marriage is almost her giving up her identity and conforming to the societal pressures of womanhood. This move could be said to move her closer to being accepted and possibly respected by Mrs Adams.

Mavis: Ay allyer! Look! Look! Look! Mey man put a ring on mey finger. He say he go make a respectable woman out of mey...
Prince: Hush yer mouth, nah girl. Hush nah

Explanation: Mavis is often seen as the comic or 'loose' character, on the peripheral of society. She is thrust into acceptability by Prince proposing to her. This shows her desire to be accepted and respected by the other characters (in particular Mrs Adams), though it comes at a cost as she has 'a Johnson's band-aid under one eye'. Her bold declaration and celebration of her engagement contrasts with Prince's response as he finds her loud outburst embarrassing.

Useful Links

BBC Bitesize – Caribbean Voices in Drama

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zqtgq6f/revision/2>

Interview with Director Michael Buffong – YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFqSiNgUdHo>

Windrush and the Legacy of Caribbean Theatre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mY8e5k45z6k&t=107s>

Thank you

This Teachers' Educational Resource Pack was written by Maylene Catchpole, 2025.