Comedy, drama and black Britain – An interview with Paulette Randall

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British theatre director Paulette Randall once said about herself and her work, "I'm not a politician, and I never set out to be one. What I do believe is that if we are in the business of theatre, of art, of creating, then that has to be at the forefront. The product, the play, has to be paramount."[1] A look at her creative output, however, shows her political engagement in place – not so much in the sense of taking a proffered side, but certainly in the sense of insisting on participation in the public debate. To name just a few of her recent projects: Her 2003 production of *Urban Afro Saxons* at the Theatre Royal Stratford East was a timely intervention in the public debate about Britishness. The staging of James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr Charlie* (2004) at the Tricycle Theatre provided a thought-provoking viewing experience for a British audience in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. For the Trycicle and Talawa Theatre Company, Randall has staged four of August Wilson's plays. Her most recent theatre project was a production of Mustapha Matura's adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 2006.[2] However, Paulette Randall also has a professional life outside the theatre, where she makes her impact on the landscape of British sitcoms as a television producer. The following interview focuses not so much on specific productions, but more generally on her views on television, Britain's theatre culture, and the representations of Britain's diverse society. It was conducted over the telephone in March 2008.

EUP: What was your favourite sitcom as a child or young adult and today, and why?

PR: Well, there were quite a lot of American ones, there was a thing called *Run, Buddy, Run*, which nobody remembers, that was back in the sixties; I liked *Steptoe and Son* as a sitcom and *Dad's Army* was good as well.[3] And today - it's mainly American ones again - *Frasier*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Everybody Hates Chris*,[4] those kinds of programmes, and I like *Little Miss*

[1] Quoted in: Emma John, "'Sweat is fine. You don't have to have blood.'" [feature on Paulette Randall], *The Guardian*, 2 January 2006.

[2] For a short interview with Paulette Randall on the production, see http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/data/files/REP_INSIGHT_3_SISTERS.pdf, an educational resource provided by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

[3] *Run, Buddy, Run* (1966-1967) is a 16-episode series produced by jazz-musician Jack Sheldon who also stars in it as a bookkeeper on the run from gangsters. *Steptoe and Son*, a British comedy (1962-1974, written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, aired on BBC 1 in 57 episodes), revolves around the conflicts between a reactionary father and his open-minded, aspiring son. *Dad's Army* (1968-1977, 80 episodes created by Jimmy Perry and David Croft) is also a British sitcom set in World War II Britain and centring around the Home Guard, starring, among other "veterans", Arthur Lowe.

[4] *Frasier* (1993-2004, co-produced by David Angell, Peter Casey and David Lee for NBC), a highly successful sitcom, running for 264 episodes in eleven seasons, mock-portrays the private and professional life of the psychiatrist and radio talk host Dr. Frasier Crane (Kelsey Grammer). *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005, 210 episodes over nine seasons, produced and partly written by Philip Rosenthal for CBS) starred Ray Romano and Patricia Heaton as sports journalist Ray and his wife Debra. *Everybody Hates Chris* (an award-winning sitcom whose title is a parody on *Everybody Loves Raymond*; its first season was aired in 2005 and it continues to run in its third season currently) is set in 1980s Brooklyn. It stars Tyler James Williams as Chris, the eldest of three children in an African-American family.

Jocelyn and her sketch show.[5] They are funny, they've got great characters, and that's the main thing. Most of my work has been in comedy, I've only done one piece of drama, I did some short films for an independent company, Crucial Films,[6] for the BBC.

EUP: You have an extensive record of stage directing. Why would one want to become a producer and not a director, and why the turn to TV?

PR: I had an horrible experience doing a show, it was *Five Guys Named Moe*.[7] I was the original director of that and I'd had a really horrible time because the vocal arranger and the choreographer had behind my back decided that I was the wrong person to be directing it, and they just made my life and the designer's life hell, and so I left. It was the first time I'd ever had a horrible experience working in theatre and I thought, maybe I just need to step away from it for a bit. I was very young and I'd never had a show that was going to go into the West End. And when these people suddenly got very excited by that, they got very mercenary about it as well. They decided that they wanted to take it and do it. Out of that, I was sitting at home and I got a phone call from someone saying, "Oh there's this job going", a trainee producer on a new sketch show, and it was *The Real McCoy*.[8] So I went to the interview and got the job. That's how I started out in television; I went into it straight as a trainee producer, not knowing anything about television really. But you can't sustain a career in television because there just isn't enough work. And it happens very sporadically.

EUP: Over the past ten, fifteen years, a lot has changed because of the arrival of satellite television and other developments. There seems to be a lot of pressure on producers.

PR: Yes, competition has got bigger.

EUP: In the *Guardian*, the playwright Roy Williams has been quoted saying about British television, "We only ever get a token one-off or serial black drama every two years or so. […] Six years ago it was *Babyfather*;[9] two years later we get *The Crouches*, which I worked on;[10] then

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[5] *Little Miss Jocelyn* (BBC Three and later BBC Two, started in 2006 and still running) is a one-woman-show and sketch comedy written and performed by Jocelyn Jee Esien, also known for her part in the hidden-camera show *3 Non Blondes*.

[6] Crucial Films, an independent production company founded by Lenny Henry in 1992, aimed at offering a platform for black talent. The company was taken over by Tiger Aspect in 1999.

[7] *Five Guys Named Moe*, a musical set in the 1950s, was first presented at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, but rapidly transferred to the West End (this move involved some change of cast and staff) where it ran successfully for five years, mainly at the Lyric Theatre. Having been sidestepped, Randall had her name taken off the credits.

[8] According to *Screenonline*, "*The Real McCoy* (BBC, 1991-96) was the first real showcase for young black comedy on primetime British television. The show also opened the door for multi-cultural comedy in general [...]. Playing with notions of race in Britain at a time when the only truly visible black British comedian was Lenny Henry, the show cleared a path for a new generation of black comedians to break into the mainstream." Ali Jaafar, "The Real McCoy (1991-1994)", BFI, *Screenonline*, http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/490742/.

[9] *Babyfather* (2001-2002, BBC 2) is a series based on a novel by Patrick Augustus, centring around four black men and their parenting issues. There have been two seasons, the first containing four, the second eight episodes. The series has been reaired in the US; in the UK, it has sparked great interest in the Babyfather Alliance, an initiative set up by Augustus that supports "responsible parenting". For more information see http://www.barnardos.org.uk/babyfather.

[10] The first season of *The Crouches* (BBC1, 2003, six episodes), an all-black sitcom set in Walworth, has been heavily criticised for its stereotypical and negative representation of a black family. For the second season, almost

two years later we get *Shoot the Messenger*.[11] That's not good enough. It's got to keep flowing all the time." Do you share his views? Can you comment on this?

PR: It depends on two things really: What do the broadcasters really want and what do the writers want? In a sense, it depends on what people want to write, but also the broadcasters wanting to fulfill their own briefs, perhaps saying "We need to have a black sitcom, because we haven't had one for twenty years", or whatever. At other times, they don't really want to talk about a black sitcom. It's very difficult.

EUP: Do you feel that there also needs to be more variety in sitcoms?

PR: Oh, absolutely, because we've had a series of people doing comedy, but again, it's only one-offs. And they'd never have two running at the same time. So there's an awful lot of pressure on the people who are making those programmes to satisfy everybody, which is impossible. No programme can do that.

EUP: What about variety in terms of all-black, all-Asian, all-white shows?

PR: Yes, you just need to have more variety in the progamming. When we did *The Real McCoy*, that was black and Asian, and in fact, it started out with white people in it as well. I think, certainly for the first three or so seasons, there was a regular white actor in *The Real McCoy*. In *Desmond's*,[12] there was always a white character, permanently. So there have been mixtures in the past. At the moment I've finished writing a treatment for a sitcom about a black family with siblings, and one of their friends is white. The thing is, it's always from black programming that you get that mixture. It doesn't happen necessarily everywhere, although it is beginning to change. When you start looking at some of the detective or hospital programmes, you do get a bit of a mixture of people in those, but that's all. And there are only a few of those.

EUP: How would you describe the current dominant politics of staging and screening the black experience in Britain. What has changed in the past fifteen years for the worse or the better?

PR: It's different. The argument races on whether it's worse or better. Fifteen years ago, there were more small black theatre companies, providing work for actors as well as designers and directors. Now, quite a lot of those are gone. There are a few still around, but there are also more actors and more actors getting jobs, in the mainstream as well, not just in black theatre. But I think what has changed is this: There are no small theatre companies that can give people who

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the entire crew was replaced; scriptwriters Lisselle Kayla, Patricia Elcock and Paul McKenzie took the place of Ian Pattison, and Paulette Randall, who had not been involved in the first season, took over as a producer. Although the second season (BBC1, 2005, six episodes) got much better reviews, *The Crouches* was dropped afterwards.

[11] *Shoot the Messenger* (2006), a drama commissioned and screened by the BBC, evolves around a black teacher with a mission of teaching 'underachievers' who is disappointed and virtually destroyed by the black community surrounding him. As it foregrounds problematic aspects within the community (such as crime and blame-culture) the film has been controversially reviewed – David Oyelowo who plays the lead role has commented, "I don't think some of the things said in the film would be able to be said if it was by a white person." (Oyelowo in interview on the BBC website: http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shootthemessenger).

[12] *Desmond's* (Channel 4 1988-1994, six series, 70 episodes) presents the lives of South London barber shop owner Desmond Ambrose, his family, customers and other relations. The show was very successful and generated the spin-off *Porkpie*, also screened on Channel 4 (1995-1996).

don't want to act but want to do anything else in theatre, the opportunity. I think that's a fundamental change for me. So you know, there are no black designers at the moment that I know of. I mean there is a couple of Asian ones, and kind of any mixture in between, but no black ones, and certainly not any of any note.

EUP: In a recent report, a scriptwriter is quoted saying that "more historical drama" was needed in public broadcasting, as a means of "finding a way in which the past can speak to the present because, to me, that is the basis of the struggle we have here - and by "we" I mean 'we ex-colonial people'. The whole debate about us is around the notion of immigration and integration."[13] On the other hand, the adaptation of Caryl Phillips's novel *The Final Passage* was screened in 1996, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (which has a historical dimension) was adapted and screened, Andrea Levy's *Small Island* is currently being adapted for TV; the *Windrush* documentary was screened and rescreened several times, and there are other examples of the inclusion of black history in television.[14] Is this a growing trend or are these examples just one-offs?

PR: It sort of feels that they're one-offs. A lot of stuff came out last year and the year before because of the whole celebrations of 200 years since the slave trade was stopped. So there are quite a lot of programmes, particularly documentaries, that were made because of that. And that's also, I think, because of a certain climate, because of all the atrocities that had happened.[15] I think, that in a way, they'd started to kind of put more and more stuff on the television to appease people, which, at the end of the day, if we are still learning and discovering stuff, then it's worth it. But the reasons are slightly dubious, if you know what I mean.

EUP: Yes, it seems that there always has to be an anniversary of some kind – the Windrush anniversary, the Notting Hill Carnival anniversary, the anniversary of 1807. So do you feel that television features are produced to give people what they want, or is there also an incentive to give people something they might learn?

PR: Documentaries are fantastic, because they do that thing of informing in a very straightforward way. It would be nice if there was something that was a factual thing or a documentary thing, a comedy, a drama, the same as with the programming we've got, but just

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[13] Mukti Jain Campion, *Look Who's Talking, Cultural Diversity, Public Service Broadcasting and the National Conversation*, Nuffield College Oxford, 2005, http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/guardian/lookwhostalking.pdf, 39.

[14] Caryl Phillips published his first novel, *The Final Passage* in 1985 and also wrote the script for the television adaptation (1996, Channel Four, dir. Peter Hall); Zadie Smith's blockbusting novel *White Teeth* (2000), hailed as showcase literary piece for the multicultural New Britain, was adapted for the mini-series by Simon Burke (2002, Channel Four, dir. Julian Jarrold); Andrea Levy's prize-winning novel *Small Island* (2004), which depicts Britain's "finest hour", the war and post-war experience from black and white perspectives, has been adapted for television by Sarah Williams and is currently produced by Ruby Films for BBC. *Windrush*, a four-part documentary on the black British experience written by Mike and Trevor Phillips (1998, BBC, dir. David Upsal), has been rescreened on several occasions and is regarded as breakthrough-piece for 'serious' black themes.

[15] An infamous "atrocities" in the 1990s was the murder of Stephen Lawrence by a gang of racist youth (1993), the ensuing acquittal of prime suspects and the official diagnose of institutional racism on all levels of British policing. See The Sir William Macpherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, (1998), http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/4262.htm. Institutional racism and police malpractice caused a number of scandals throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and racism (both latent and overt) continues to be a problem in many areas of British society.

more varied. Asian-Chinese, you know, they don't have a voice and there's so many different, desparate groups and I think it would make it more interesting to watch. But I think television is more about entertaining in a way, whether it's in a drama or a comedy. Ultimately, it's a pleasure-thing.

EUP: To come back to black history: On the stage, there have been some plays that include, for instance, the Windrush experience, Kwame Kwei-Armah comes to mind, Roy Williams, and there has even been a sell-out musical, *The Big Life*.[16] I find that quite striking, it even went to the West End, and that's unheard of.

PR: It was great when that happened. It was a great show, and it was an important one because it was about a British history, black *and* white, although it was mainly told from a black perspective. But it is, you know, our history that should be shared, that should be out there. It's everybody's history. You're talking about a British experience, and it's generations on now, so that's why I think these stories are being told more and more. But it's a universal history, it's not just a black one.

EUP: If you were to produce or direct a piece on black history, what medium and genre would you chose?

PR: On black history... I think if I was going to do something, it would probably be... maybe a musical, maybe a play. That's the kind of thing I'd like to do. I'd also like to do maybe something that is a bit more satirical, which could work on television. I love doing drama, but I also love doing comedy and I think that sometimes, comedy can get to places where the drama doesn't necessarily reach, because it's just more appealing, and people like to laugh.

EUP: And it certainly has the potential to include subversive elements. Could you imagine there being a sitcom that includes historical themes, or is that inconceivable?

PR: Oh I don't know. It depends on how far back in history you want to go. For the last fifty years, you can easily have stuff. *Desmond's* did that in a way, because you had the parents who came from Guyana, and their children were born here. So you had that generational aspect and different cultural experiences in one programme. So yes, it's possible. But even if you're thinking about a kind of historical comedy piece, there must be room for that.

EUP: I've never seen one.

PR: And I haven't.

EUP: In an ideal world, what would be different in British television with respect to issues of race and representation?

PR: That it's not just done under a kind of "season-umbrella", that it should come as an integral

[16] *The Big Life* came out of a musical project at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. It was co-written by Paul Sirett (lyrics) and Paul Joseph (music) and directed by Clint Dyer. The show opened in February 2005 at Stratford East and was transferred to the Apollo Theatre in May 2005.

part of what you see on the screen.

EUP: Is there anything that you would want to add?

PR: The only thing that I would like to add is that I think that it's important that artists are allowed to be artists in whatever shape or form they want to do that. I think a lot of the time, because the executives sit there and decide what they want, and then they go out and look for it rather than allowing people to just write what they want to write and create what they want to create. And we all fall into that trap, because you think, if I don't do something that they want, then it won't get made.

EUP: Thank you very much.