

They Knew That Every Night They Went Out, They Were the First British Director Clint Dyer in Interview about the Windrush Musical *The Big Life* (2005)

Eva Ulrike Pirker

Clint Dyer joined the Youth Theatre after actors of the Theatre Royal Stratford East had visited his school in the early 1980s. Ever since then he has been hooked on the Theatre. In particular, he has been involved in productions that use music as a core element. In 2005, he directed *The Big Life*, a musical written by Paul Sirett (text) and Paul Joseph (music), a landmark production because it was the first black British musical performed in a West End theatre.

The Big Life is loosely based on Shakespeare's comedy *Love's Labour Lost*,¹ but its setting is the SS Empire Windrush and late 1940s London. On their way to England, the West Indians Dennis, Ferdy, Lennie and Bernie share their hopes of a golden future in the mother country, prepared to pursue careers in engineering and academia. They are serious about it and while still on the ship make a pact that they will stay clear from diversions, in particular from women. However, immediately by the time they arrive at a run-down boarding-house in East London, all of them have met the woman of their dreams, and what follows is the familiar Shakespearean plotting of intrigue and misunderstandings. But rather than being embedded in an unreal, picturesque scenery, the setting and situation of late 1940s London is bleak and full of disappointments: There is no decent work, housing, money is tight, prejudice is around and the weather does the rest. However, rather than succumbing to these extremely adverse conditions, the men are cast as witty survivors – the humour does not get lost and an overall lightness of approach dominates the production. This is not only supported by the lively ska numbers that accompany the production, but also by the device of a commentator who – in the manner of a chorus – throws in interjections from her place in the audience, which was the royal box in the Apollo Theatre: Mrs Aphrodite, an elderly Jamaican lady clad in a purple costume.

Before transferring to the Apollo Theatre, *The Big Life* had a successful season at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. The following interview was conducted via telephone in May 2008 and centres on Clint Dyer's experience as director of the musical.

EUP: Clint, let me start with some questions about your experience as a director of the musical *The Big Life*. How would you characterise the collaboration between those involved in the production – there was a big cast as well as a big crew. Were you in this case a director with a pretty firm idea of where it should all go or was it rather a creative process that involved everybody – actors, musical director etc.

CD: No, I had a pretty firm idea on where it would go and where it should go, you know, at the end of the day it has to stop somewhere. I mean, I undoubtedly was open to everybody's ideas, I allowed everybody to give their ideas, but it stopped at me.

¹ For more insights on the traces of Shakespeare's comedy in *The Big Life*, see Fiona Ritchie, "The Big Life, by Paul Sirett," *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 1.2 (Fall/Winter 2005), <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu>. Accessed July 2008.

EUP: There was one truly striking character in the performance: Ms Aphrodite, the woman who sat in the audience and offered impromptu comments. In the script, it says that her comments were not finalised when the script went into print, but was she, as a character, in the text from the start?

CD: No, that was an idea that I had about two weeks before we went into rehearsals. I wanted to reflect back at the audience the experience of what was happening on the stage. And the best way to do it was to try and create somebody who was them: them enjoying the show, them watching the show. And in a way what it also did is that it worked as a tool to make it present day as well as past, so that it wasn't just a pastiche musical about the sixties, fifties experience. It became a present day experience as well. So it was very modern while being very much based in the past.

EUP: Can you say a bit about the audience make-up in the two locations? The audience at Stratford East is reported as being truly multi-ethnic, drawing in people from the neighbourhood, whereas the West-End still has a reputation of largely catering for a mainly white, middle-aged, upper-middle-class audience.

CD: Yes, we had to really fight to try and get black audiences into the West End. We also had the issue of trying to get the white audiences to think that the show was for them as well. I think there's a prejudice – whether it be subconscious or conscious – that if you see a black cast you think it's for black people. You don't think it's a universal tale. And so that was an issue trying to overcome that barrier. So Philip [Hedley] made very big strides in doing it: He had a lot of people sponsoring the play who were famous, middle-aged white people, the same type of crowd that usually go and see plays. So you know, we had people like Maureen Lipman supporting the show. And people like that would immediately help to break down the barrier for that type of audience, the typical West End audience.

EUP: As for the actors or for the evolvment of the show on stage, how important is the actual location here? Did you think the actors enjoyed it more in one of the locations?

CD: That's a good question. See, the wonderful thing about doing it at Stratford East is the size and the intimacy, and that you have a very good idea of your audience. But obviously it was a huge buzz doing it in the West End even though it was bigger and not as intense for most of those involved. It was a huge buzz, because it's a big beautiful theatre in the West End. And when it was packed, it was groundbreaking. They knew that every night they went out they were the first. That nothing like that had happened before. So that was exciting.

EUP: As you were mentioning the audience's age, I have a question that links up to that: Philip Hedley writes in the introduction to the script that he was hoping that the music, and the particular genre of music used here – ska – would bring the story to a number of generations: The people who knew the music from the fifties as well as those who remember its the revival in

the eighties and, again, today.² Did you feel that this was important, that it worked?

CD: Well, we were definitely right in something in the sense that reggae and ska type music is very popular again with the likes of Lilly Allen and those types. That type of music. In a way, it's a shame that we aren't doing it now, because I think it would have struck another chord. I think it's very successful in bringing people of all types into the theatre who could appreciate the same music. That was one of the joys

EUP: Why did it not go on tour elsewhere? I thought a tour was originally planned?

CD: Timing. I mean, energy ran out on it, I guess. I think we were very unlucky with the whole bomb situations. It was the major reason why it came off. The bombs, there were two bombs in the West End, which undoubtedly killed the show, because obviously there were no audiences. And so we lost a lot of money in three weeks. Most of the other West End shows have audiences that book way in advance. It's a well-known trend that black audiences don't book in advance. They just turn up on the night and come in. And so there wasn't enough money in the bank, so to speak. So when we lost the money, we went quickly into debt.

EUP: That's interesting, particularly because it was hailed as such an audience success in the media.

CD: Yes, it was. In terms of the reviews, I've never seen reviews like it. We didn't get one bad review. We were in the critics' choice for *Time Out* the whole time we ran, the whole time we were on at the West End. *The Independent*, I think, was near enough the same. *The Times* was the same. The response was always incredible. But, again, it's always about really *continuing* to get the audiences in. Thursday, Friday, Saturday could be packed, but, it's hard to get them in on a Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

EUP: I thought it was a great achievement. But it is also presents a tremendously upbeat version of the experience of post-war migration from the Caribbean. It fits in with what seems to be a new, more inclusive historical culture in Britain. It is something that has only recently started. It seems that ever since the Windrush anniversary in 1998, the story of black migrants to Britain has really made an entrance into the nation's collective memory.

CD: I hope so.

EUP: The Windrush is named and celebrated as one of the Icons of England on a website

² Cf. Philip Hedley in Paul Sirett, *The Big Life*, London: Oberon Books, 2004, 8. For a reading of the musical that focuses on the relevance of ska music, cf. Klaus Peter Müller, "Reaching for the Ska': The Hybrid Reconstruction of Black British History in the Musical *The Big Life*," in: Sigrid Rieuwertz (ed.), *History and Drama: Essays in Honour of Bernhard Reitz*, Trier: WVT, 2006, 210-228.

commissioned by the government.³ And you find many other examples. So there are all these upbeat stories of migration – but, I mean, it obviously hasn't been as smooth as that.

CD: Well, in some ways I probably disagree. I mean most of the times we see the story of West Indians coming here, it has been quite negative. It's always been a really difficult, strife-ridden journey. And they've been met with fierce racism. And, oh, what a terrible life, and how hard it is to be black in England. One of the things I was always determined to try to do with *The Big Life* was to try and be uplifting; to try and show that actually, there *are* success stories, there *are* families that worked really bloody hard – and were happy working really hard, and felt as though they'd been successful. There are many negative portrayals of immigration in this country, but the big difference that I'd like to point out, of course, with the West Indian migration here, is that it wasn't actually immigration as we know it now, because they were part of the United Kingdom. So they were only going to the motherland. They were all taught English in schools with English books, and their money had the Queen on it, you know, it felt like England just in Jamaica with black people. So when the West Indians came over, the biggest shock was that they weren't treated as though they were English when they were always told that they were part of the Empire. So I think in a way there's a huge confusion about that. So when you talk of the Windrush being such an English, iconic name and figure etc., that actually makes sense.

EUP: But it's new, isn't it? I mean it has only been for a couple of years that you have this kind of a Black British icon, on display for everybody. And since you mentioned 7/7 – the chances of seeing Asian British history represented in the same positive light are probably low at the moment. Certainly, the upsurge of Islamophobia has the capacity to prevent the development of a popular narrative about Asian British history.

CD: Yes, I completely agree. I think there is not enough thought and action directed at an understanding why England became Great Britain. In a real understanding that it's history, you know. It's constantly swept under the carpet, the acts of the British to gain so much power in the world. And their involvement with other countries, other places that they took over is massive. A lot of it is made to look like, or feels as though it was, just about the English and not about the Indians, or not about the Africans, etc. It's almost like it's just England's history. It's not the Indians' history, it's not the Africans' history. It's quite strange.

EUP: There was an influential documentary on the Windrush in 1998,⁴ and in 2007, there was the abolition anniversary. So you have all these documentaries and films. Are they one-offs just for the occasion?

³ The SS Empire Windrush has been one of the 'icons' of the government-supported Website *Icons of England* ever since the site was launched in 2005. Cf. "Icons. A Portrait of England," <http://www.icons.org.uk>. Accessed July 2008.

⁴ *Windrush* (BBC 1998, dir. David Upshal), was screened in commemoration of the fiftieth arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in 1998 and has been rescreened on several occasions.

CD: They certainly are just for the occasion. And they're often stuck on BBC 4, which is a great station, but it's got a very small viewership.

EUP: So *The Big Life* – do you see it as a one-off? Or are there other things that have come out of that, in terms of staging black history this big in the West End?

CD: Well, I hope it's not a one-off. I really do. I just don't know. I hope it isn't. It took a long time coming, so I presume it'll probably take a long time to come again.

EUP: A final question. Do you feel that you speak for the black community in the work you do?

CD: No, I speak for myself. I am black, so I think it would always end up having something to do with a black experience because it's my experience. I hope that people can take something from it just by osmosis, not necessarily because I see myself as having any answers. I think I have an opinion – like everybody else – but I wouldn't say that I was a spokesperson.

EUP: Thank you very much.