

**WITHOUT
PLANNING
PERMISSION**

**A PLAY BY
THE BLACK MEN'S CONSORTIUM**

WHAT IS THE BMC?



The Black Men's Consortium is an intergenerational, user-led group that meets weekly to explore issues that matter to black men. Mental and physical health, relationships, parenthood, racial identity and social justice are a sampling of the subjects we address.

Regardless of income, age, sexuality or mental health status, the BMC caters to men impacted by life's experiences. In our coming together, we find ways to heal and be the better person.

One of the ways we examine the topics we care about is by participating in a wide range of methods that include creative drama activities. We also give public performances at venues in London and beyond.

Our medicine is the process we engage in, using playful, creative ways of allowing ourselves to be ourselves.




ABOUT THE PLAY



Devised by Tony Cealy and the Black Men's Consortium in November 2022, *Without Planning Permission* was revived for Mental Health Awareness Week in May 2023. Taking place on the fictional Mary Warner Estate in South London the play weaves multiple storylines around themes of community development, violence, grief and rehabilitation. In the play, the estate's residents lock horns with the Brotherhood, a seemingly benign group of men who seek to enhance the welfare of the estate through a series of philanthropic ventures.

But will the scars of past transgressions eclipse good intentions, or can the wounds begin to heal? The play is designed to give the audience the final say.

Without Planning Permission, a play in four parts, was performed on the 18th of May at Brixton Library and on the 20th at Streatham Library. Audiences from all over London attended the show, joining the cast in discussion and debate with great enthusiasm.



OPENING SCENES

Bumpy, the chair of the estate's residents' association, talks frankly about the grief he has suffered daily since his son was killed in a hit-and-run accident by a moped rider on the estate.

The Brotherhood, a group of male residents, showcase their contributions to life on the estate. They gave up waiting for the council to provide for them and took matters into their own hands.

Justice, the leader of the Brotherhood, has made a lot of money and wants to use it to fund projects for the community. But Justice wasn't always community-minded: he once dealt drugs on the estate. Now the residents are suspicious and remain divided on whether the Brotherhood should be allowed to stay.

Stephen is the father of Zeko, the young man who killed Bumpy's son and subsequently spent five years in jail. Stephen lives with acute anxiety stemming from years of abuse from his own father.

Grandad is Zeko's grandfather and Stephen's father. He's an unrepentant alcoholic and has an often abusive relationship with Stephen. Stephen is surprised when Zeko returns fresh out of jail. He didn't know Zeko was to be released. He hadn't visited the boy because of his anxiety.

Zeko has seemingly turned over a new leaf but quickly falls out with his dad and decides to live instead with Justice, who counselled him during his incarceration.

At the Mary Warner Estate youth club, Brotherhood member Righteous wants to invest in equipment. But Musa, the youth worker, is suspicious of the Brotherhood for the harm they caused in the past.

MEETING THE CHARACTERS

The characters take up positions around the auditorium, allowing the audience to wander around and hear their stories and intentions.

THE AUDIENCE DEBATES

The entire audience is recast as members of the Residents' Association as Tony leads a meeting that poses this central question: should the Brotherhood stay on the estate - or be made to leave?

In the first show, on Thursday the 18th, despite intimidation from members of the Brotherhood, most members of the audience voted in favour of the Brotherhood.

In the Saturday show, there was no vote, and the cast improvised an ending in which the Brotherhood tore itself apart.

CONCLUSION

Stephen angrily confronts his father about his drinking and his cruelty towards himself and Stephen's late mother. Grandad explains that the racism and disappointment he's suffered his whole life have made him the man he's become.

When Stephen learns that he's inherited land back in Jamaica, he offers to pay his father to move there and take over the land. Grandad wonders how much money he can coax out of his son, and the two fall out once more. Frustrated, Stephen orders his father to leave and never come back.

When Zeko saves Bumpy's life after the older man collapses, it marks a turning point for them both.

In Thursday's show, sickened by the audience vote, Bumpy appeared in the final scene lamenting the general lack of accountability for the crime and injustices on the estate.

In Saturday's show, where there was no audience vote, members of the Brotherhood fell out. Heartened by what he saw as an opportunity for healing, Bumpy leads the cast and the audience in songs that demonstrate unity.

THE FACILITATOR

TONY

Tony Cealy created the show and led the audience debates and residents' votes. In this, its second year, Tony handed the production over to the cast.



THE CAST

The casts differed over the two performances and consisted of BMC members, most of whom were non-professionals. Of the ten members of the cast, eight had performed the play in the previous year, reprising their roles from the earlier production.



KEITH

Keith portrays Stephen as a set of contradictions: first frustrated by his father's behaviour and disappointed by his own shortcomings.



YUSUF

As Granddad, Yusuf demonstrates the frictions that exist in families, whether the causes are external or internal.



FOLA

Fola performs two monologues laced with bitterness and grief. He gets to the heart of Bumpy's loss, painting pictures with his words.



SHAHAB

Shahab takes two roles, one as the errant son, Zeko, and the other as Musa, a youth worker who distrusts the Brotherhood.



CHAKKA

Chakka plays a restrained Justice in the first performance, leading the audience to side with the Brotherhood during the debate.



MICHAEL

Michael is Stephen in Saturday's show, forceful in the stormiest moments with Grandad and ultimately scene.



ERROL

As Righteous, Errol is the menacing member of the Brotherhood, who pleads for understanding while he continues to intimidate.



JAY

Making his debut as Justice in Saturday's show, Jay exudes an air of complete investment in his mission to improve the estate.



FERNANDO

Fernando plays mild-mannered Obu. He runs the food bank on the estate and keeps clear of the group's internal politics.



LLOYD

Lloyd's Bumpy portrays the grief of a man mourning his young son. Bumpy's flip-side is one of love: a man fighting for his community.



ON MAKING THE SHOW - TONY CEALY

What unfolded over the weeks of rehearsals was a deep dive into the initial stock games, exercises and techniques.

The group experienced the activities from a place of playful enjoyment. Later, the members had the opportunity to make connections between their behaviours during play, and the impacts such behaviours could have in real life. Both the play and the analysis of the play helped the men to discover benefits for their mental health and well-being.

Individuals gradually transformed into a group, immersing themselves in the exercises. They shed old roles and identities, learning to leave external pressures and worries at the door and be present to the work of rehearsing.

Through feeling and experiencing the members' participation, it was vital for me, as the facilitator, to understand what I was asking of them. Layered on this were my own perceptions and insights, which were informed by taking the time to unpick, discuss, practise and reinforce what goes on behind the scenes, psychologically, in our bid to create braver spaces that support men as they explore processes of individual and societal change.



INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF THE CAST

After the closing of the show, the cast members reflected on the experience of taking part and performing. Here, they discuss their techniques for getting into a role and the broader context in which the play – and their characters – exist. What did they gain from their involvement in a BMC production?

YUSUF PLAYS GRANDDAD

Yusuf plays Granddad as an unrepentant alcoholic who lives with his son, Stephen and grandson, Zeko. Trapped in a problematic relationship with the former, he sees a ray of hope in his grandson, recently released from jail.

During the creation of *Without Planning Permission*, Tony Cealy had felt it necessary to include an intergenerational family that would represent the experiences of different age groups. To create the character, Yusuf recalled stories from his father-in-law, as well as memories of his own upbringing in Trinidad and Tobago. He strongly believes that the Windrush generation's experiences have a place in modern stories.

Observing his father-in-law, Yusuf noticed that older people found it harder to share difficult experiences with the same vulnerability that younger people tend to display. To Yusuf, it seemed as though all the older generation's experiences of prejudice and exclusion were kept secret within the family.

Granddad's character is notable for his reliance on alcohol as a way of coping with daily life. Yusuf, growing up, noted that many of that generation of black men always seemed to be drunk.

Today, he feels these men probably drank because they suffered from a lack of acceptance. That their behaviours may have been the result of trauma and racism. That their trauma seemed to stem from troubled childhoods. Yusuf believes the harshness they experienced from their own fathers may also have links back to slavery.

As such, using alcohol was often a man's way of handling serious issues and anxieties.

"I grew up in a town where there were loads of marriage disputes with alcohol - a lot of wife beatings," Yusuf says. "We were Muslims and didn't drink, and my father was the one who'd talk to the other husbands. He'd be in the gallery, on the front porch, cleaning up the blood of the wife, while she'd be crying and asking for help."



Yusuf is presently studying Family Therapy and believes there is less incidence now of violent behaviour and over-reliance on alcohol. “There’s still work to do,” he says, “but now it’s easier for a father to leave the household, which means that there are fewer situations where fathers turn to violence within the household.”

When the audience first meets Grandad, he is hopelessly drunk. And by the end of the show, he’s still drunk – and his relationship with his damaged son has not improved. It leads the audience to wonder what Grandad’s ultimate fate will be. For Yusuf, it’s appropriate to leave the remainder of Grandad’s story open to question.

Although Grandad’s future is not implied in the play, Yusuf sees little scope for his redemption because his son rejected him earlier. This dismissal, when he’s at last shown his vulnerability has, in Yusuf’s mind, led Grandad back to default behaviours of narcissism and violent drunkenness because that is what has kept him safe over the years.

“When a family member is open enough to allow us in,” Yusuf reflects, “that’s when we should take the opportunity to connect. To allow them to express themselves.”



LLOYD PLAYS BUMPY

He's called Bumpy, but he's sometimes known as Mr Richards. During the initial planning of the show, Lloyd felt his character should have an Afrocentric name. But then he noted a facial similarity between himself and Forrest Whittaker. In the television series *Godfather of Harlem*, Whittaker plays a character called Bumpy, and Lloyd adopted that name.

Bumpy, the chair of the tenants' association, has lost a son through a mindless act. Building the character of Bumpy, Lloyd found a rich supply of acting talent amongst the members of the cast. He singles out Jezia, as an early mentor: "I'm old enough to be his dad twice over." Lloyd remembers being asked to find a way to tug on the audience's heartstrings in empathy with Bumpy. "It was Jezia (who played Zeko in the original production) who advised me to think about a time when I'd lost somebody. I lost a sister when she was eighteen. She was pregnant and suffered domestic abuse. Because we were only a year apart I really felt it."

So Lloyd went on a personal journey back to the time of his sister's death, recalling the feelings of loss and grief he'd experienced. "I'd read about the signs of grief and how to deal with it and I used my own experiences of therapeutic engagement and interaction to help me."

Reliving those emotions to deliver the same performance for the second year of the show couldn't have been a pleasant experience. But while the process took its emotional toll, Lloyd found it surprisingly easy to cope. "I was drained and tired and had to take a couple of days to debrief," he says. Not only did Lloyd resurrect the character from last year's production, but he also advised Fola on interpreting the role, as Fola would play Bumpy in another performance. "I told him he didn't have to follow me exactly but make it his own. He did a really good job," is Lloyd's verdict.

As well as acting in the show, Lloyd was instrumental in bringing the production together. His tips? "Plan, plan, plan and organise. And delegate." Lloyd is thankful for the help he received from other cast members – Keith, Shahab and Wayne – who all pitched in with the directing and planning duties.

Lloyd's talent as a co-ordinator makes him a natural choice to play the part of Bumpy – the chair of his local tenants' association. What does Lloyd make of his fictional alter ego's plans to kick the Brotherhood off the Mary Warner Estate during the residents' meeting? "Up to the second show, the audience had always voted to keep the Brotherhood. As Bumpy, I gave every possible reason I could think of why they should leave. So, when it looked like Bumpy and Musa would win the audience vote, and Tony didn't announce the winner, I was quite disappointed. But that's showbiz!



FOLA PLAYS BUMPY

"I'm very comfortable when it comes to improv, especially in drama," says Fola. "I'm learning that there are different ways you can layer your performance."

Bumpy, the character Fola plays, is at the heart of the show. His backstory - the loss of a son to a hit-and-run accident - is a key part of the **structure** around which the play revolves. In Fola's hands, the **monologues** delivered by Bumpy are a painful poetry of loss, bitterness and grief.

Fola's **performance** was not the only version of Bumpy in this summer's presentation. He stepped into the role following in the footsteps of Lloyd, who originated the part in the previous season. Fola's primary aim was to make sure he was in line with Lloyd's depiction. However, it was inevitable that he would bring out other facets of the character.

What comparisons can be **made** between this year's and last year's shows? "It's becoming a far richer tapestry where people can bounce off characters they've played before, experience new characters and give advice," Fola says, adding that the actors recognised that a character played one way last year could be played

differently but just as successfully by another actor this year. Such acceptance, he feels, created a supportive atmosphere amongst the performers.

Gaining the other actors' seal of approval in the part of Bumpy gave Fola the assurance he needed to perform it before an audience.

And Fola takes it in a markedly different direction, using the coping mechanisms of a man who has lost a child, to demonstrate how that loss has attacked his faith. "I enjoyed the differences as much as I was trying to reach for the similarities," he says. He goes on to explain how, during rehearsals, everyone had an association with Lloyd's original interpretation. It was important for Fola to

channel the atrocities that go on in real life: "Parents being separated from their children is infinitely horrific."



Taking part in the show has been an animating experience for Fola. "I've been through zones of feeling distrusting of self, incompetent and unworthy. I've seen how we melanated men feel the need to suffer in silence. Coming down

to the BMC we have a chance to iron our collective spirits out and go back home refreshed."

For Fola, the most valuable aspects of the BMC come from being able to share each other's experiences, "In the wider world, there's not much room to do that. When people share, they get the benefits usually associated with receiving counselling."

The BMC is valued as a resource because it emphasises good mental health. How is that achieved by making unscripted plays? For Fola, improvised theatre leaves more room for play than if everybody's working from a script: "Some of the best things you'll see are caused by natural human error – people forgetting a line. What they do in the way of improv oftentimes creates random magic."





KEITH PLAYS STEPHEN

“I’m surrounded by such talent and support from the actors,” says Keith, who originated the part of Stephen in last year’s production of the show, “Tony Cealy facilitates and gives us the skills.” Keith revived the character this year for one performance before handing it over to Michael, who also played Stephen.

Stephen’s son Zeko hit and killed a child while out on his moped. When we meet Stephen, he is depressed and unaware that Zeko has just been released from prison. Stephen’s father, Grandad, has been hiding the boy since he returned to the family home. And when Stephen learns of the deception, it causes further friction in an already troubled household.

Grandad has been physically and psychologically abusive towards Stephen for years, and the wounds have never healed. Although on medication, Stephen feels unable to discuss his situation with anyone. For his part, Grandad is perpetually drunk, destroying any possibility of honest communication with his son.

“I never had an abusive father,” Keith reflects, “I never lived with him. But my half-siblings did.” Listening to his half-brothers’ stories of being beaten by their father gave Keith insights into how a 54-year-old man like Stephen can still be in terror of someone who has been beating him from an early age – and how that lasting trauma has resolved into crippling anxiety.

Talking to friends of a similar age while preparing for the role, Keith discovered they had all been subject to abuse from their fathers. “We concluded it was because of where they came from - Jamaica or wherever. That’s how they were raised.

“Thankfully, as generations have gone by, we’ve learned not to do that. My sons and their generation don’t beat their children.” Keith is convinced that the prevalence of social services and safeguarding measures has made all the difference in the UK: “There’s other ways to discipline a child - it’s about loving as opposed to hating a child. But we’ve still got a way to go.”

A former social services professional, he advises parents to talk to their children respectfully, adding that parents need to admit when they need support when faced with challenging situations. “Social services don’t blindly remove children – it’s in everyone’s interests to keep families together. You won’t be criticised.”

In Keith’s eyes, what gives Stephen strength are his faith and his affection for his son: “His community has forgiven him for his son’s misdemeanours, and these combined factors give him the will to get back on track.”

The opportunity to act in roles that extend his range is an important motivator for Keith who, in an earlier career, portrayed Michael Jackson on many occasions. “I play it powerfully and use dialogue that I feel makes the audience believe the character is real.” He values BMC productions for weaving serious messages around entertaining stories: “There’s still a taboo about black men and mental health - far too many black men are dying from suicide in this country. I want to break down that taboo.”



MICHAEL PLAYS STEPHEN

When discussing the influences he used to help him characterise his playing of Stephen, the put-upon father to Zeko and begrudging son to Grandad, Michael refers to performances on the big screen. “I was thinking about the film *Fences*,” he says, “where Denzil Washington plays a harsh father.” It’s not surprising to hear this from Michael who acts in films for a living. He’s clocked up a dizzying number of appearances in several well-known productions.

Having drawn inspiration from Hollywood, Michael, born in the Caribbean, also looked to his personal experience to provide the emotional punch vital in the scenes he plays with the abusive Grandad.

Conscious of just how demanding and intense his scenes with Yusuf would be, Michael, a newcomer to the BMC, naturally looked to Keith for direction. Keith originated the part of Stephen and had made recordings of the rehearsals and performances. These videos helped Michael with his own interpretation.

“You’re talking about issues that you’ve got to connect to within yourself, and that the audience has to connect to,” Michael says, revealing the qualms he had about not being able to meet the challenge. “I was glad we got a little rehearsal - it wasn’t enough, but I thought, ‘I’m going to do it anyway!’”

The feedback on his performance assured Michael he needn’t have worried. Putting his own spin on the part and understanding that he did not need to replicate Keith’s version ensured he delivered a convincing Stephen.

So how does he compare the BMC’s process of devising theatre with his day job? “It’s more real, he says. “The film industry is about the script. It’s about rehearse, rehearse. Whether I’m doing a specific part or I’m in the background, there’s no room for improv in a big production with massive investments.”



Aside from the economic differences, Michael finds the BMC way of doing things more challenging and more personal – which is understandable. When a big, glossy American film crew rolls into town with enormous sets and a gigantic budget, you're just one of a multitude of actors shooting a single scene.

“On a big, crowded set, you can get lost in a group of 200 people,” Michael says, recalling an expensive studio production he was recently booked for. “With improv, you're standing there, and you can't really hide. People get to see the real you. It's scary but in a good way.”

Michael is looking forward to being in the next BMC show: “I hope I get to play a part that takes me way out of my comfort zone, that makes me anxious in a good way. I want that ‘just do it’ Nike attitude. I've grown from doing those two shows. You learn more about yourself, and I'm grateful for the opportunity.”



FERNANDO PLAYS OBU

“Do you trust Justice?” That's the question someone puts to Obu, during the second part of *Without Planning Permission*. It's the section where the audience freely roams around, engaging directly with the characters, hearing their stories and motivations. Fernando plays Obu, a member of the Brotherhood, a band of men who have come together with the common goal of improving the lives of residents on the fictional Mary Warner Estate.

Obu is a diplomat, as Fernando describes him. He's a gentle character with a strong moral sense. Fernando found inspiration for the role in part from the American Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers, founded in the 1960s, sought to improve their neighbourhood by organising programmes like free breakfasts for children who were being failed by the system. Obu is doing something similar: “I joined the Brotherhood to help the community.” Fernando plays the character with great empathy.

When Fernando created the character, director Tony Cealy asked him to write stories about Obu. That was when Fernando came up with the idea that Obu runs a food bank on the estate. An important part of Obu's backstory is that somebody helped him once. Now Obu wants to do his duty and pay that kindness forward.

Performance is in Fernando's blood and he has a busy career acting in films and on television. He enjoyed his time working on this BMC-devised show, finding the process invigorating. "Our group," he reflects, "is different from other theatre groups. Other groups are all about the play, but ours is first about taking care of people's mental health and second about building the background of the play. It's not just about the work but about the people who do the work."

The focus on mental health is a main theme in the show and referenced by the other performers. It's hard to ignore the various mental states – grief, fear, anger, fulfilment – evident in the characters they play. For Obu's part, he is reserved and compassionate, wanting to do the best for his community the best way he can. He gets on with the job, sidestepping the politics of the estate. It's easy to imagine that, were elements of the Brotherhood to be expelled, Obu would be permitted to remain because of the tangibly beneficial service he provides.

So what does he really think about the leader of the Brotherhood – the controversial Justice – under whose patronage Obu operates? "I know Justice had some issues with some of the community," says Obu, with customary discretion, adding that in his opinion Justice "has got to come to terms with the community".

How this will be achieved remains an open question throughout the show.



CHAKKA PLAYS JUSTICE

There's a degree of ambiguity that Chakka brings to his playing of the role of Justice. It's intentional. Is he a wise advisor taking young Zeko under his wing after the boy leaves prison? Is he an evil-minded influence on the housing estate where the play is set, manipulating those around him into carrying out more of the same shady practices for which he is better known? Chakka means to keep the audience guessing. "I wanted to tackle the stereotype of the black man in a nice suit," he admits, referring to common perceptions of black men who, though well-dressed, appear to lack moral depth.

For Chakka, there is a definite problem in the way that black people view black people. "We are often judgemental of our own kind," he says, referring to a form of mental slavery that persists within black communities and which has engendered a lack of trust among us. Is he right in his evaluation of Justice? After all, this is a character who got rich dealing drugs on his own estate while causing misery and upsetting the lives of untold numbers of fellow residents. His current ambition is to capitalise on Bitcoin to provide the money required to improve the well-being of the Mary Warner Estate. Is it any surprise that the locals are suspicious?



Nevertheless, at previous performances of *Without Planning Permission*, when the audience gathered to debate the motion of permitting the Brotherhood to remain on the estate, they always voted in the Brotherhood's favour.

So, does Chakka have a point when he raises the issue of public distrust of the sharp-dressed black man? What are his own feelings towards the character he plays? "If I met Justice, I'd want to know what he was bringing to the table," he says, echoing many of the voices in the audience who heatedly discussed the Brotherhood's fate during the Thursday performance in which Chakka played Justice. But, as previous audiences had done before them, this one also voted

overwhelmingly to give the Brotherhood another chance. Why, when there was much initial distaste for Justice and his cohort?

It may be because of the enigmatic styling in Chakka's portrayal. His calculatedly elegant bearing and portrayal of Justice as a man of few words leaves the audience little to go on when evaluating the man's morality. As a result, we are forced to fall back on what others say about him – and the chorus of voices for and against can be loud and perplexing. In Thursday's show, members of the Brotherhood were extremely vocal. And whether or not their assurances held substance, the audience was persuaded.

Pressed further, Chakka says, "I would not judge Justice solely on his skin colour." The audience appears to share this sentiment, seeming to accept that the man has paid for his past antisocial actions with a stint in prison, emerging new and improved and wanting only the best for his community.

Interestingly, other members of the cast, when questioned, were less accepting of this narrative, which is a testament to how this one character remains a divisive figure within the play.



JAY PLAYS JUSTICE

"Although they didn't tell me what to say, it was as though I was with friends." Jay is explaining how he stepped into the role of Justice for the Saturday performance of the show at Streatham Library. A natural spoken-word performer, Jay had been building a brand new character that he planned to introduce into the existing story of the Mary Warner Estate. But at the last minute, he was asked to play the leader of the Brotherhood.

It sounds hair-raising – to go on stage without being sufficiently practised in the part. A newcomer to the BMC, the most exposure Jay had had to Justice up to that point was watching Chakka rehearse, and perform in the Thursday show.



But Jay took it in his stride. “Everything was improv,” he recalls. “I got feedback from the other actors during the performance.”

You read that right: Jay’s interpretation of Justice was directed on the hop by the actors who were on stage with him, as the audience watched, totally unaware of this late change.

“I knew my character was the boss, so all I had to do was be the boss.” It was a daring move, and if the dynamic amongst the members of the Brotherhood was different, the audience was none the wiser. The consensus was that Jay pulled it off.

His spoken-word skills came to the fore in the second part of the show, where the characters freely improvise monologues. As audience members promenaded, they listen to the stories of the characters’ lives, pitching them questions in a bid to better understand their motives. In this setting, Jay’s Justice explained how he had been forced to give up his young son, then tried to reconnect with the boy years later. When someone asked how Justice was qualified to help the estate, Justice responded by adapting a monologue he’d prepared in a different context. It describes lifting up those in need of assistance: “...Now what I’m trying to do is provide a rope or a ladder to help them elevate.”

The Saturday show omitted an official vote from the audience as to whether the Brotherhood should be allowed to stay on the estate. How did Jay, in the persona of Justice, cope with that level of uncertainty? “There was a lot of opposition, with some people saying maybe the Brotherhood should go and others saying maybe they should stay,” Jay says. “I asked Tony Cealy for a decision and he said, ‘Just do what you do.’ So we came up with an unrehearsed scene where Righteous flipped the script. It became a conflict between Justice and Righteous where Righteous is unhappy about being in my shadow and wants to take the spotlight. I said my piece, and it worked.”

After such a rollercoaster experience on his debut BMC performance, would Jay do it again? “I would have loved to have had more rehearsal,” he says, “but in the end, it worked out. I didn’t have time to be nervous. I was able to exercise my creativity, and it showed me that anything is possible.”



ERROL PLAYS RIGHTEOUS

Righteous is mischievous. He's looking for a purpose - something to be involved in. This is how Errol describes the loud, brash character he plays in *Without Planning Permission*. Righteous, an outcast in many ways, looks to Justice, the leader of the group, as the father, brother and uncle he never had.

In Righteous's backstory, he comes from a big family. But his parents split up, and his siblings were taken into care. Years later, Justice takes him under his wing, tracks down his siblings and re-integrates Righteous into the family home on the Mary Warner Estate. From that moment, there is a deep bond between Righteous and Justice.

On the stage, Righteous's anger at the world is evident. He's angry about the system, about how social services ripped a family apart, about his parents not being there to support him, about being treated differently because of his disability. His anger gives him a reason to be his own person, Errol says – to be as angry as he wants.

Justice uses that anger to his own advantage, channelling it to shatter the barriers that stop him from getting what he wants on the estate and using Righteous as a tool of intimidation.

Righteous has totally absorbed Justice's dream. Errol took the character's name from Righteous's primary urge to right the wrongs in his past. As far as Righteous is concerned, Justice is doing everything for the greater good.

But soon, Righteous feels that Justice is shifting away from his philanthropic ideals.

When the show debuted last year, Tony Harrison played Justice, working closely with Errol over several weeks. This time around, Righteous was pitted against two very different versions of Justice on different days. Jay's more vocal interpretation of Justice relied on improvisation and was more reactive. Chakka's portrayal said little but held great command over the Brotherhood. Chakka encouraged Errol to play a stroppier Righteous.

For the second performance of the play, the cast improvised their own ending, exploring what life on the estate could be like without the threatening influence of the Brotherhood.

Errol found himself juggling an undefined conclusion to the story with a change to Righteous that causes him to fall out with Justice. This version of the play broke down into a war of wills between Righteous and the Brotherhood leader.

"I wasn't prepared for that!" Errol remembers. I hadn't rehearsed that kind of curveball." And it was all happening live before the audience, who loved it and joined the cast onstage at the very end, singing in a demonstration of unity.

"It was challenging and nerve-racking, but it was a productive experience," Errol recalls. "If that's what drama looks like, then that's what drama looks like."



SHAHAB PLAYS MUSA

Without Planning Permission features a section where the audience, temporarily cast as members of the Mary Warner Estate's residents' association, quiz members of the Brotherhood and other characters in the show. The character of Musa, a youth worker on the estate, is highly vocal in his opposition to elements in the Brotherhood, who he feels have corrupted the youth on the estate and offer nothing of substance despite their claims to the contrary.



Shahab, who plays Musa, has real-life experience in youth work and sympathises with the complaints of his fictional alter ego. "I can relate to Musa, although not in terms of the drugs problem that Justice is responsible for – I'm not a gangster!" he says, laughing. "I thought the Brotherhood were ripe for puncturing. They had a lot of hot air, saying, 'We're here to do this and that', when, in fact, they were quite hollow. They were just ripe to be parodied and lampooned."

In this season's shows, Shahab played two characters in two different storylines. One, the youth worker, struggles against the negative forces on the estate and forms an alliance with Bumpy, who has lost family members due to the actions of the Brotherhood. Shahab's other character is Zeko, the son of Stephen, and, pivotally, the person responsible for the death of Bumpy's own son.

Playing both parts demanded a great deal of rehearsal time from Shahab, who was

also a key figure on the production side. That the shows came together at all is in no small part because of Shahab's organisation, together with contributions from Lloyd and Keith. Actors in amateur dramatics must often juggle full-time jobs, and gathering everybody together for rehearsals can be hit and miss.

Shahab acknowledges this: "The planning and rehearsal space is always a bit higgledy-piggledy. It feels a bit makeshift simply because we're non-professionals and because people have other pressures and mental health issues."

But the freedom that sporadic rehearsals offer is something that Shahab enjoys. Where some AmDram societies can be serious affairs, Shahab feels such an approach dampens creativity. Too many rules and strict demands and the whole process begins to feel like a job. "That defeats the point of trying to have some fun, to take a load off, relax and do something creative. I enjoy the slapdash nature of the process."

In particular, Shahab loved being part of the group, going through a process and bonding with the other members of the company. "You really get to know a person when they're under the pressure of an impending performance." As the group worked together over several weeks, an intimacy developed that's not usually possible in everyday life: "Even if you're working with people, you don't truly know them. In everyday life, you only scratch the surface with people, but when you go through a process together, you become brothers in arms. That's a big part of the enjoyment of it for me."

Having performed stand-up comedy, Shahab felt he had put performance on a pedestal, with the need to script an entire set, memorise every word and rehearse it repeatedly. But "being with the BMC has taught me you just do it, and in doing that, you get to a place where you're more organic. It's showed me a way of being more natural on stage."





A DEBRIEF OF THE MAY 2023 PERFORMANCES

Following the successful performances of *Without Planning Permission* on Thursday, 18th and Saturday, 20th of May, the Black Men's Consortium held a debriefing session to evaluate the shows and the process and learn lessons for the future.

BMC members participating in the debrief included Chakka, Errol M, Errol T, Fernando, Fola, Jay, Keith, Lloyd, Michael, Peter, Robert, Shahab, Seun, Tony C, Tony H and Yusuf.

Tony C, absent for much of the time leading up to the production, was astounded after seeing the show in late-stage rehearsal. He sensed good rapport between those who took part and believed nothing went wrong during the performances. Robert agreed that it all came together in the end, despite the omission of some scenes from the Thursday show.



PLANNING

There was a feeling that production planning had been chaotic and haphazard. Robert felt individual members should have been more committed. Errol T, who played Righteous in both shows, also said the shows should have been better organised.



Shahab believed a leader is vital to impose structure. In the event, Lloyd, Keith, Shahab himself and Wayne picked up the slack. Michael agreed, noting that Keith posted multiple videos of the rehearsals on YouTube, showing the characters in different versions.

This tactic partly met Robert's suggestion that character information should have been written down and shared as a crib sheet.

Lloyd said there was a lot of communication through WhatsApp. He reminded the group that he did a lot of phoning round to ensure commitment from the performers. Errol T liked the idea of conference calls and felt the prep was helpful.

Regarding preparation for the show, Peter felt that the games and activities that typically feature at the BMC contributed to the planning process.



REHEARSALS

During the rehearsal period, Lloyd determined the scenes to be covered at each session. He was glad to see the scenes improve from one rehearsal to the next.

Michael was one of the newcomers to the BMC, and the two shows marked his first performances amongst a company of actors, most of whom had performed the same show last year. Michael, who played Stephen in the Saturday performance, didn't get enough rehearsal time for the second scene where the confrontation with Grandad reaches its climax.

Jay was the other newbie to the show. He played Justice and said he would also have benefitted from more rehearsal time and some constructive criticism.

Chakka played the role of Justice for the Thursday show and believed they got the job done. He said Jay was in a controlled environment. Thus, even though there hadn't been enough rehearsal time, it didn't matter: performers would be fine with their characters so long as they knew what those characters were based on.



Overall, Jay found the process very positive and felt Lloyd and Keith did a great job as directors.

Seun questioned the need for open rehearsals. Several members of the BMC attended rehearsals even though they were not directly involved in the shows. They offered direction, which must have been confusing for the actors and possibly off-putting for the directors. Errol M and Lloyd also felt there was too much input during rehearsals.

As it turned out, Michael found it helpful to watch videos of Keith's portrayal of Stephen, while Lloyd advised Michael to make the role his own.

By putting recordings of the rehearsals on the internet, Keith intended that actors watch the rehearsals they missed. He lamented Tony C's absence in the pre-production period, believing there would have been more leadership had Tony been present. But Lloyd, Wayne and Keith jumped in and provided leadership.

For Michael, the shows were a team effort with a core group, including Shahab, who was always there.

Robert noted a discrepancy between rehearsals and the shows: since there had been no props on hand at rehearsals, the actors were not sufficiently familiar with the props in performance. Or with blocking, he observed. "It's about commitment", Errol T said, adding that what you put in determines what you get out.





PERFORMANCE

Keith observed how the two shows were very different. The Thursday venue at Brixton Library had a stage to perform on, which, sadly, wasn't the case at Streatham Library's show on Saturday.

Errol T agreed there were differences between the two venues in terms of lighting and sound.

Lloyd did not think the audience noticed when mistakes were made.

The show's third section includes a forum for the audience to debate the pros and cons of having the Brotherhood running programmes on the estate. This part is led by Tony C, with cast members contributing to the discussion while in character. At the end of the debate, a vote decides whether the Brotherhood should be allowed to remain or made to leave the estate. The vote also determines what the final act of the show will be.

The majority of Thursday's audience voted to keep the Brotherhood. The Saturday show ended without Tony calling for a definitive vote. This omission led to the Brotherhood actors deciding on the hoof how to end the show. The outcome was an anarchic falling out between the members. But it gave other factions on the estate a chance to come together to heal old wounds and work for the common good.

Lloyd felt Tony C had "stitched up" the actors. Tony admitted he did it on purpose, to make the show more urgent and less complacent.

For Chakka, the beauty of the work was that it put you on the edge. It made you resilient. He learned to switch roles quickly and found it an opportunity to be versatile, particularly because he knows the actors.

Errol T felt Chakka had thrown him a curve ball during the Thursday show by asking him to make his character, Righteous, belligerent. But because they were both committed to what they were doing, Errol felt it worked.

Tony H added that it's not the performance that was important but the getting to know one another, and that contributed to one's versatility. He didn't think anything went wrong, even though the performers may not have been entirely happy with the shows. The main thing, Tony H felt, was for them to be comfortable with each other.

Robert did not think it realistic to expect brilliance when people are thrown in at the deep end. He also advised that health and safety become an issue when performers are not adequately prepared.

Keith considered Yusuf's depiction of Grandad "worthy of an Oscar".



FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Thinking of improvements to the process, Jay would like more rehearsals. Michael would like to be able to rehearse at home, view more videos and receive more feedback. He found it helpful to have received direction in a scene he rehearsed with Grandad.

Fola suggested that newcomers needed acclimatising to the show's improvisational style. Although improv is not in his background, he believed it was the only effective way for people of different backgrounds to operate.



Lloyd found directing and organising the shows painful: “people don’t listen”. He had wondered what would have happened had the show been forced to go ahead without Tony C. Lloyd accepted that the show would have had to carry on regardless. Despite that, he would do it all again - supported by Keith and Shahab.

For Yusuf, it was hard the first time around to form a character, but this was essential for newbies to the show. He said it was just as important to learn to be comfortable in the uncomfortable environment of putting a show together with limited time and few resources.

Chakka planned to attend more rehearsals to better support the team.

Tony C explained that he does not provide a script for the actors to perform, preferring instead to work with an improvised play that gets to the heart of the group. His interest is in social justice theatre. He designed fifty per cent of the show to be audience participation and he encourages that level of engagement.

On the subject of audience participation, Shahab echoed sociologist Paul Gilroy's observation on the differences between black and European art: white audiences are passive whereas black audiences have an ongoing dialogue with the artform.



TECHNICAL MATTERS

Keith raised the issue of poor sound quality. Both venues had poor sound quality, resulting in an echo, in which the lower tones of the actors' voices were often lost. To combat this problem, Keith felt BMC should invest in a PA system that includes clip-on microphones.

Seun questioned whether amplification would produce a clearer sound, but Tony H felt that a high-quality system would work.



Interviews and text by Seun Okewole (unless otherwise indicated)

Design by Tendai Matare

Photography by Sergei Bagot-Sealey, with additional images by Keith Sharmone Preddie

(c) Black Men's Consortium 2023

