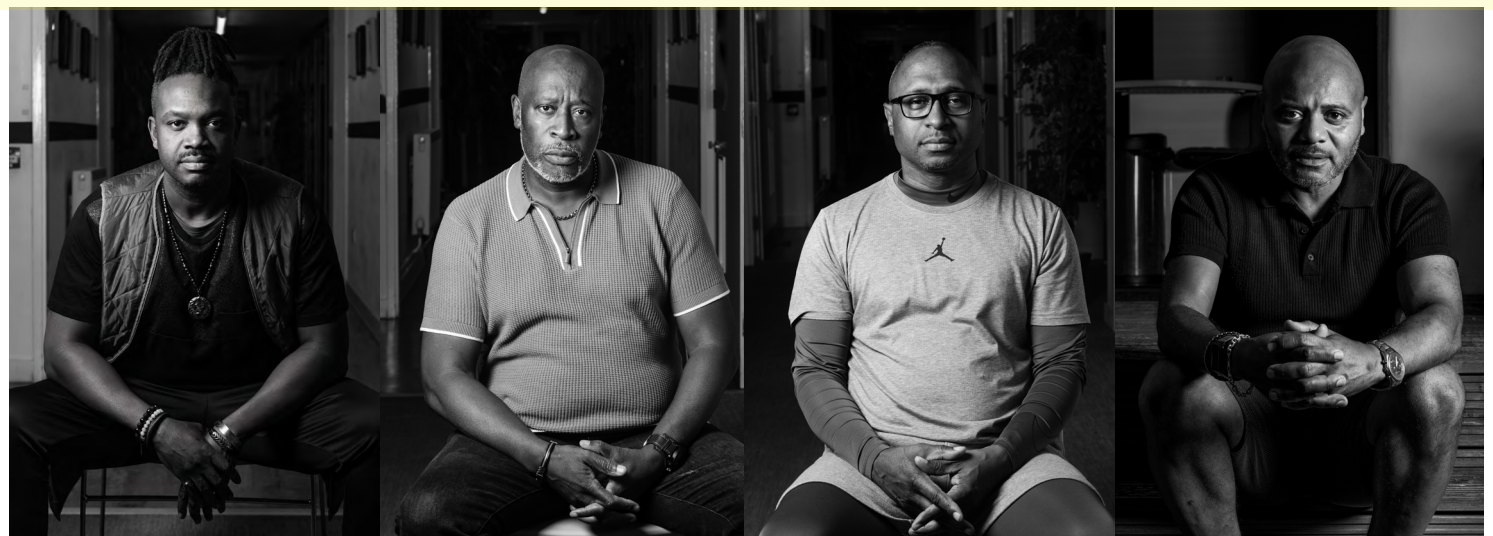




WITHOUT PLANNING PERMISSION: THE CLIMATE PLAY
A PRODUCTION BY THE BLACK MEN'S CONSORTIUM



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Lighting the flame

Esther Stanford-Xosei’s campaign to **Stop the Maangamizi** levels charges of genocide and ecocide resulting from actions committed by Western society. Each year, this lawyer-turned-activist leads a protest, an annual march, demanding reparations for historic and ongoing racial, gender and climate injustices.

A month earlier, Esther had been the BMC’s guest speaker. Many within the consortium who listened to her comments on climate change and its impacts on black people found her ideas pertinent. The talk sparked debates amongst us concerning the low level of engagement of black communities in the fight against the climate crisis. How relevant was this issue to black people, we wondered, and how safe was it to trust the popular narratives found in mainstream media and political discourse?

As with the wider population, not everyone in the BMC agreed that the problem was urgent. Yet, while there was a consensus that an issue such as pollution is a health crisis that negatively and disproportionately affects our communities, there were differing opinions as to how to tackle these problems.

A first step

As we geared up for an autumn production, BMC members considered what question our show should ask its audience. We wanted to present them with a powerful question that would make the viewer think deeply or differently, or that would lead to an emotional response.

We focused at first on the notion that black people are already disenfranchised in housing, often being forced to accept substandard or environmentally compromised accommodation.

What question should we ask?

To draw out further relevant questions, group members wrote down ideas that we believed our play should ask the audience. Each question we submitted evolved out of personal observations on the issue of climate catastrophe.

We pasted the questions onto a chart in the form of a tree designed to represent three categories:

- Consequences and Effects represented the tree’s leaves and branches
- Symptoms were its trunk
- Root Causes formed the roots.

Thus, our statements addressed the following queries: What are the outcomes of black communities’ limited engagement in climate crisis debates? What are the symptoms of not engaging, and what has caused our reduced level of engagement?

Members contributed the following ideas:

Root Causes

State-sanctioned removal of children from families • environmental racism • greed • political corruption• bitcoin • education and slavery

Symptoms

Slavery • colonialism • industrial revolution • capitalism and lack of regulation • unregulated waste disposal • cultism • ignorance • anxiety • scepticism • unsustainable living conditions – the result of low wages • job insecurity

Consequences and Effects

Food poverty • threat to and destruction of marine life • polluted air • water • veganism • genocide of bees • death by design • unspoken segregation • institutional racism • displacement of populations producing refugees and loss of land • mental health problems • chemtrails • food poverty • barbarism etc





The questions

“How can we replace the consumerist economy we’ve become addicted to?”
This was one of the early questions emerging from the ensuing debate. Many of us believed our society’s unchecked consumption of products to be a direct contributor in the looming crisis. The growth of manufacturing has increased carbon production and harmed the atmosphere. The transporting of products to the consumer impacts carbon levels, while the waste generated by production, discarded packaging, and our throwaway culture, has resulted in toxic materials leaching into the ground, polluting the oceans and inundating landfill sites. While excessive consumerism is not limited to black people, the perception was that black communities seemed to be less determined to reduce consumption or mindful of recycling.

“Is it too late? – Have we finally broken the climate?”
Recent climate events such as excessive

flooding in Tanzania and Australia, wildfires in North America, andhurricanes, extreme heat, unseasonal cold and premature springtimes all seemed to point to our climate’s compromised ability to regulate itself. The increase of extreme weather stories dominating the news, and reports of rising sea levels and higher migration linked to natural disasters prompted these questions.

“Why don’t more people vote for the Green Party?”
The Green Party had just one MP in parliament. Yet, with so many of us aware of the impending catastrophe, why did the Green Party not attract more support? Was it because they were considered a fringe group, or fanatical? Or because they were perceived to be a single-issue party? Or have people chosen to vote tactically, believing their voices will be heard at the ballot box only if they vote along mainstream lines? Or, are not enough people, including members of the black community, making their votes count through apathy or the distrust of politics?



Selecting the theme

Using a selection of themes raised from the tree exercise as a jumping-off point, the group performed improvisations. In the first of these, Shahab (Shabs), Michael, Ian and Fidel played characters demonstrating a range of views – from the representatives of ‘big oil’ to the radical campaigners – typically involved in the climate debate.

In another improvisation, the group created a scenario similar to the BBC show Question Time, in which four debaters (in our case: Errol, Shabs, Fidel and Ben) pitched conflicting opinions on climate change:

- Errol: Regarding the extension of ULEZ, how can you prove it improves air quality? And where does the money end up that’s collected from the fines imposed on motorists breaking the rules?
- Shabs: How can the black community trust the white establishment, who have lied to us for centuries?

Fidel: Can we as black people dismiss facts that we are being told about climate change?

Ben: What about our future? We need to look for alternatives for ourselves instead of just accepting what we’re being told.

From this, a further question emerged: How do you engage those in the community who do not have a good education, or do not access social media?

- The improvised scenes also served to reflect the diverse views of the BMC membership:
- Some of us were already engaged in measures to reduce the negative impact on the environment.
 - Some were actively consuming less, teaching our children the importance of caring for the environment, recycling at home and buying environmentally friendly products where possible, consuming less meat, no meat or any animal products at all.
 - Some members believed that the climate debate is a conspiracy maintained by

politicians and the media and designed as a means of social control.

- Some felt that the debate and stories in the news were hysterically out of proportion to reality: a means of terrifying a public that is not culpable.
- Some were oblivious - while aware of the various debates, their behaviour remained unchanged. They felt that there were more pressing, day-to-day concerns. Some of these emerged as the ongoing cost of living crisis, out-of-control migration, the ULEZ restriction imposed on London's drivers.

The improvisations generated powerful drama that led to a wider debate:

Errol: Would you vote for Sadiq Khan in London's next mayoral election?

Shabs: Climate scepticism: if you believe there is a catastrophe, what are you prepared to give up?

Seun: We need to replace consumerism.

Fidel: Can we accept living in a society where constant growth is not the goal?

Shabs: We would need some kind of new system.

Yusuf: As technology grows, it's affecting the climate. Inadequate housing requires more resources to make it habitable.

Jay: What happens to religious faith? What the Bible says contradicts the scientists.

Fidel: Are there no politicians we can trust?

Yusuf: My father always says, 'As Muslims, we know this. Look in the Koran.' Where is the voice of the impoverished person?

Seun: Why don't more black people vote for the Green Party?

Fidel: People who are not deprived tend to have climate anxiety.

The group decided to incorporate into the show the drama that emerged from our improvisations.

The format of a BMC show included space for audience debate. We were devising a climate change play that would invite the audience to share their thoughts on the climate crisis and then take a vote on steps to take for the future.

Fidel wondered how the group would feel should the audience vote that climate change is a hoax.

Lloyd suggested that the audience would need some form of aftercare, making available more information about the issues raised.

Jay wanted to include a scene where a character suffers a heart attack that has been directly caused by the climate catastrophe.

Research

Over this period, Tony Cealy, the BMC's facilitator and creative director, asked members to gather information relating to the climate crisis. Materials included news stories, opinion pieces, reports, policy and proposals and even cartoons – anything that had relevance to the crisis and implicated black communities however tenuously.

The period of research continued for six weeks until rehearsals for the climate change show began.

During this time, we pitched more suggestions, raising further questions as to the play's content.

We recorded vox pops asking black men in the community for their opinion on the climate crisis.

The large volume of research accumulated produced a degree of "research fatigue". It led us down rabbit holes of knowledge, opinion, conspiracy and ambiguity, threatening to eclipse rational debate. Was now even the right time to make a play about the climate?

Tony felt we had no alternative, highlighting our responsibility to include black people in the debate. 'If you're not around the table, you're on the menu', somebody said.

There was no denying that this is a topical issue – the mere mention of "ULEZ", the London Authority's initiative to ban carbon producing vehicles from the city, raised passionate feelings – both for and against – among some members of the BMC.

The case for reparations

We revisited the talk from Esther Stanford-Xosei that galvanised so many of us.

Her campaign centres on seeking reparations from the West for various injustices. As we considered Esther's dogma, more questions arose:

"Why do we have to seek reparations for actions that were carried out so long ago? Can't we just move forward?"

“But are we moving forward?”

“Why can’t we let bygones be bygones? It eats you up, otherwise.”

Studies have shown that trauma does not simply die out with the generation that experienced it. The phenomenon of inherited trauma occurs where the original suffering is passed down from one generation to the next, with each subsequent generation learning the pain of the previous one, even when the stories of injustice are not repeated.

A Guardian article reported on reparations being paid in San Francisco. Could the same thing happen in the UK? A chorus of opinions within the BMC debated the point:

“We’re not organised enough.”

“Well, we can’t move on until we’ve been paid. We need money to buy and build.”

“The Japanese have been paid for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Jews have been paid for the Holocaust. We have to get our own houses in order.”

What would happen if reparations were paid to black communities in the UK for enslavement, and for discrimination faced in more recent times? How would we spend the money received in reparations?

“We would need economic education. To encourage conscious spending.”

“Even though money was distributed in the US, the practice of neighbourhood redlining persists, denies black communities decent housing in certain areas.”

Is it realistic to expect monetary reparations? Another option might be payment in kind, in the form of better educational and work opportunities, improved housing, more powerful laws against discrimination.

Deciding on the focus of the play

At the end of the research period the group came together to sift through the material and ask the question: what should the focus of the play be?

At the Brixton Windmill rehearsal space, we participated in an ideation exercise where, in small groups, we proposed words, inspired by the research, that we felt should embody the theme of the play. Words that were considered but discarded included Education, Africanism, Future, Conspiracies, political lies. The words we embraced were “extreme pollution (uninhabitability)”, “environmental racism”, “mental health”, “black community”. These became the controlling ideas around which the play would be built.



Creating the play

Play-making: Structuring the story

In September, with just a month to go before the show opens at the Brixton House Theatre, Tony Cealy unveils a four-part structure for the play based on a formula that has proved successful in previous shows. It consists of opening scenes that introduce the characters, followed by a moment of chaos, a section in which the characters will deliver monologues, a space for audience interaction and finally, a conclusion. This format has most recently been used in the BMC revival of its play **Without Planning Permission**, which focused on a band of men known as The Brotherhood, who were loved and hated by residents of the fictional Mary Warner housing estate.

The new play, titled **Without Planning Permission: The Climate Play** is to be set on the same estate, but with a set of characters yet to be determined.

The narrative is as follows:

Introduction/Narration – 5 minutes

A short film opens the play, introducing the characters on the Mary Warner estate.

Gods/Chorus – 5 minutes

A deity, unseen by humankind, comments on the actions of humanity.

Opening scenes – 30 minutes

Scene 1

Sunday. A hot day. Residents of the estate are struggling to cope with the heat. We meet the characters including a youth worker and the chair of the Tenants' Association. An eccentric professor, building his machine, is at odds with everyone else on the estate.

Scene 2

The next day – Monday – brings torrential rain and cold, like Hurricane Katrina. A basement flat has flooded and sewage is pouring in. Lifts and electrics have broken down. Balconies are flooded. There is a mass evacuation to the community centre. Allotments are destroyed and crops washed away.

Transport is disrupted, communications are down and there is no mobile signal because of an electric storm. Mould growth in residents' flats is out of control, leading to bacterial infestation.

Insurance won't cover the damage – some don't have insurance. Characters who hate each other are forced together. Black people are not supporting each other.

A news bulletin shows how different communities deal with the crisis. Young people in hoodies take charge of helping the community. An anti-black black person makes an appearance.

Two gods place a wager to find one good person.

A second film shows a series of pre-recorded vox pops take a poll of Brixton's black male population's views on climate change.

Scene 3

On the third day, tenants attend an emergency meeting to address recent events. Residents reveal the problems they were facing before the weather calamities. These include the cost of living, ULEZ regulations and more.

The Professor suddenly storms in and announces that he's seen a bleak future where black people disappear, general dystopia prevails and London is flooded. He shows these scenes through footage he has recorded from the future on his mobile phone.

The terrified residents debate the professor's claims. Half the room brands it a conspiracy while the remainder are spooked by what they've seen. The scene ends in chaos.

Scenes 4 & 5

To be determined.

Meet the characters – 30 mins

Meet the characters is an opportunity for the audience to leave their seats and step onto the stage to enter into a personal encounter with any character they choose. An improvisation is triggered when a viewer steps on an X next to a character. At that point, the character performs a monologue that contains a dilemma.

The viewer is then prompted to say something to help the character, that contributes to the improvisation. The character shares the viewer's comments with the next audience member. The process is repeated by all characters.

Meeting – 30 mins

The audience and the play's characters assemble to discuss the issues raised (focusing on one single question). The audience vote on what should happen next: to prepare or not prepare for a dystopian future.

Interval – 20 mins

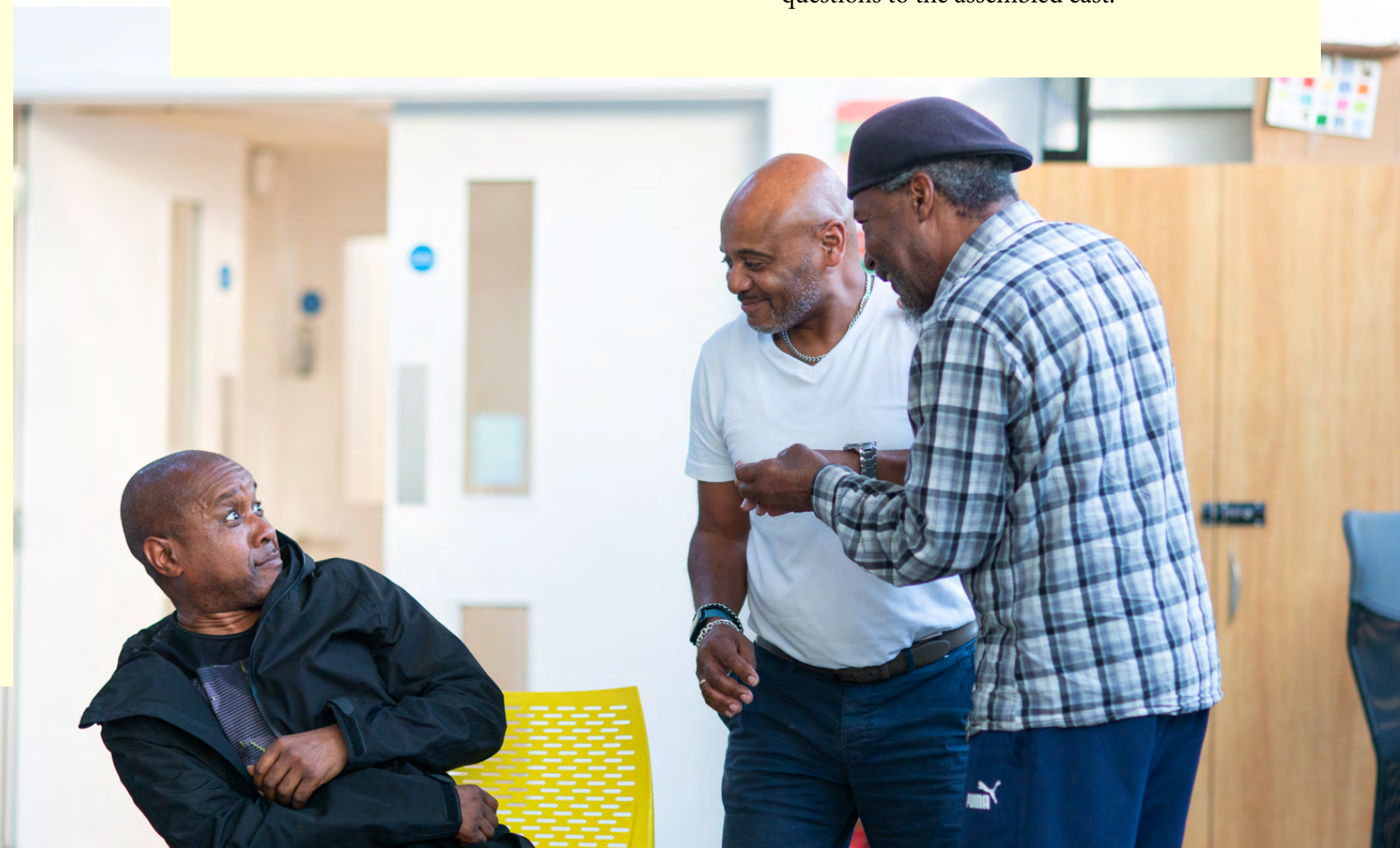
Concluding scenes

3-5 concluding scenes.

Depending on the outcome of the audience discussion, one of two possible endings depicting the future is performed. Either ending leads the audience to realise they have made the wrong decision.

Question and answer session

The show ends with the audience pitching questions to the assembled cast.





Play-making: Characterisation

In a workshop setting, the BMC actors generate frameworks of the characters they have created. By the end, each will know his character's stance, gestures, his way of sitting and leaning, and his sound signatures. They will learn how their character interacts with others, demonstrating strong positive or negative connections.

Exercise: Finding and building the characters

The exercise begins with the performers initially working alone with the following guidelines from Tony:

"Do not talk. Do not look at anyone else. Only remember the bits of instruction that resonate with you. Take as much or as little from the process as you want. Leave if you want. Don't do it if you're not enjoying it."

The intention is to conceive a character that the actor feels comfortable with.

The performers start to walk around the space: "Find a part of your body that is

feeling tension, then let it go and find another part of your body with tension. Experiment. What do you like? Who am I like this? Who could I be when I'm like this?"

The performers develop limping gaits. They hold their backs, their necks. They tap their temples and wince.

"Then let it go and walk normally," Tony continues, "so you know: this is what my character is like when the tension is on, and what it's like when the tension is off."

They walk in imaginary landscapes of thick mud, of water. Nothing is fixed.

There are Gestapo marches, people sliding around on the floor, and others walking on tightropes.

The actors explore the shape of their characters: how this character shape might sit down. How they might rise from sitting. "Now make it larger," Tony tells them, "slightly more exaggerated. What works or doesn't work for you?"

"Make the character slightly bigger. What does the character feel like when exaggerated? Only you know how big it should be."

As Tony claps his hands, he asks everyone to flip into the opposite of what they have been doing. "Who is this character? Do they have tension in their body? Which part? How do they see the world?"

He claps his hands again – a signal to create different characters: "Who's this person? What are they like?... Exaggerate the character slightly."

Again, different, completely new characters are born: "Who's this?" Tony continues, "How do they see the world?"

The actors continue to move around the space, switching characters on Tony's signal and, ultimately, deciding for themselves when to change and create a new character. The formations dance, they skip, they demonstrate menacing, internalised violence or heart-warming vulnerability.

"Find a character shape you're happy with. For now." The shapes take a shower or a bath.

How would they wash?

Romantically? Smoothly? Or are they industrial and harsh? Will they use hot water or cold? Will they use soap? What parts of the body do they focus on, and what do they leave out? Are they singing as they wash?

The characters dry and dress themselves. What clothes do they wear? Different clothes from yesterday or the same as before?

The shapes observe their faces in imaginary mirrors. What adjustments do they make? Is this the face they'll wear for the day, or is another, totally different face required? Indoor face... or outdoor face? Confident? Rugged? Should the eyes point towards the floor, or will their heads be raised?

"What facial expressions does your character make every so often?"

The characters adopt a different face, one that sees the world differently. Are they high or low status? After several switches of faces and expressions, characters become set, ready to leave the house, to face the world.



The next task is to mime a character taking a walk down the street, still without noticing other characters around them. Some actors walk more slowly than others, some dodge puddles. What is their destination? In time, the characters begin to determine where they are going – where they need to be: the gym, work, a helicopter.

*Is there somebody behind me? No!
Keep walking.*

Am I being followed!?

Pick up the pace a little.

Dodge in and out to get away.

Where are they, this stalker?

Start to jog... Now you're running away. Phew, they're gone, and you carry on walking normally.

Your character arrives at a location where they want to be, where they are in their element. What happens there? You start to do the thing you do in this place. It's a place you love: the sauna, work, a shopping centre, mum's house. It's the place you were hoping to be. The part you're enjoying the most.

But now time's running out: *I need to pack up and get ready to leave - regrettably.*

As you leave, you're getting farther away. You're back on the road, walking. In the distance, do you recognise someone you know? You try to approach but they're walking farther away. You call out their name but they can't hear you. You call louder. But they've gone. You missed them, so you keep on walking. You weren't fast enough. Maybe there's another opportunity.

You know where you're going but you don't like it. You don't want to be there but you have to go there.

You've nearly arrived.

You do something to make it feel good. But it doesn't really help.

How do you enter this place?

What do you do in this place you don't like?

Prepare yourself, because you've got to do it.

Now get into it.

You may be in a rush to do it.

Add words if you need them...

Grab some paper and write fast. Write 'Dear' and leave the rest blank. At the sound of the bells, write as fast as you can: a stream of consciousness.

Write faster.

Now you know who you're writing to, who the letter is for. You know what to say in the letter.

At the sound of the bells, you'll write down the name of the recipient.

The exercise ends with three gestures that the character gets to keep.



Exercise: Character interactions

Two characters meet and size up one another.

What happens in this interaction? Only a character can determine when there is a strong reaction to another character.

“All you have to do is know if you remember this person,” Tony instructs, “Remember the two strongest reactions. Who do they remind you of? Who are they like?”

At the sound of the bells, the interactions begin.

- ♦ What is my reaction?
- ♦ What kind of person is this?
- ♦ Who are they to me? An old friend/ admirer/someone you can’t shake off?

It’s not a scene, it’s a meeting.

The actors report back on their interactions.

Errol: Chakka reminded me of my old self. There was a sense of rejection, and expression in that rejection. Jasz scared me! I enjoyed his expressions and the words he used. He reminded me of a brother.

Ian: Jasz was loose, crazy, spot on! I wanted him to go away; I couldn’t be around him. I didn’t feel that Shabs was fully there. But it was a more positive experience.

Keith: I had the most reaction to Fernando. He reminded me of someone who’s inconsiderate towards the blind. He was shouting in my ear.

Fernando: Shabs had the same energy as me – I had the strongest reaction to him, a positive reaction. Jasz had more energy. I couldn’t match it, but it was also a positive reaction. Both of them could be my younger brother.

Yusuf: Ben had positive vibes. But I had the strongest reaction to Chakka. He was so negative, I wanted to stay five miles away from him. He was a danger to my whole essence. It was like water and oil mixing. I feared that he would steal my identity. Lock him up!

Shabs: I had a negative response to Yusuf. I tried to steal his weed. He was like an elder brother who didn’t approve of me. He’d decided I was scum. I wanted to fight him; to judge him for judging me. Wayne made me laugh when our characters first encountered one another. That was a positive: my character is an outsider and we felt like kindred spirits.

Qualam: Keith reminded me of my grandmother and that was good. I had a negative reaction to Yusuf. He reminded me of my brothers who shirked responsibility.

Chakka: Yusuf was like one of those toxic men who’ve never grown up. Jasz gave me a negative vibe.

Michael: Chakka was scary. He gave off a dark energy. Jasz’s high-pitched vocalisation gave a sense of a psychotic persona. There was madness, darkness.

Jasz: I had a positive reaction to Fernando. When I forced on Chakka, he pushed back.

Ben: Yusuf was positive, a kindred spirit. We could relate to each other in a laid-back way. It felt like a level playing field. Ian’s character was negative; I felt challenged and I walked away. I didn’t want to be near him.

Robert: Jasz was playing the game. He reminded me of my aunts and uncles. Chakka reminded me of sisters being malicious.

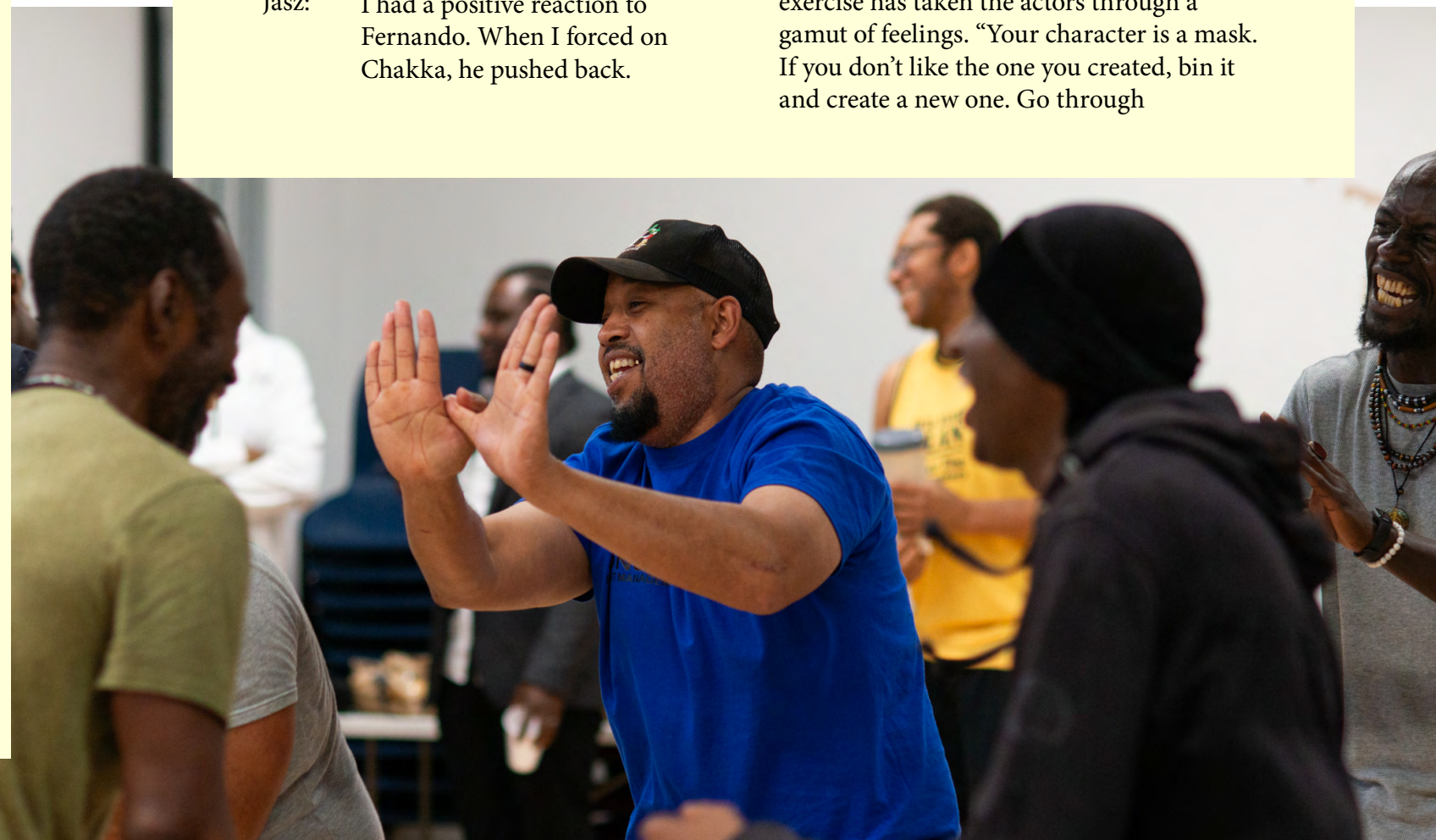
Subsequent improvisations explore the characters further.

Reflections on the exercise

Fernando sees the hallmarks of physical theatre in the previous exercise. Qualam reports how comfortable he had felt going off on a tangent.

“Some instructions felt uncomfortable,” Michael says, but I went for it.”

“There are lots of ways to build a character,” Tony announces, explaining how the exercise has taken the actors through a gamut of feelings. “Your character is a mask. If you don’t like the one you created, bin it and create a new one. Go through



different exercises to find elements that resonate with you.” He goes on to demonstrate how tensions in different parts of the body bring out different aspects of a character.

“Start big,” adds Roger, “it’s easier to rein it in than it is to build it up.”

Ben considers the exercise the most authentic way of developing a character: “The process helped me create someone with emotions,” he says, pledging to use the process again in the future.

The exercise causes the performers to delineate between themselves and the character they have created. “It made me realise that the character and me are two separate identities,” claims Yusuf, “I wish I’d de-rolled because I found I was travelling home with it.”

How does an actor ‘de-role’ from the theatrical character they’ve created?

The answer: to be physical in your body, to shake things off. “Do a dance,” Tony advises, “Some people look at the character from a distance.”

Qualam’s method of switching into a different persona is to step onto a prayer mat.

The next task is to flesh out the characters. “Recall the gestures you created yesterday as you move around the space,” is Tony’s instruction, “Think about a physical stance of gesture or phrase or sound your character might have. Where is the tension in the body of that character? Think about how the face expresses itself.”

The actors pair up according to the characters that Tony deems work best together: Michael and Jasz, Yusuf and Ben, Yusuf and Shabs, and so on.

The partnerships should work on three levels:

1st Level

Begin by walking around separately in your own space.
When the bell rings, recognise each other as the characters you created earlier.
Revisit what you said yesterday.
What happened when you first met the other person?

2nd Level

What is the relationship between the two characters?
Now physicalise that relationship in an improvisation.
It’s an extremely hot day. Create the physical setting: when and where are you?

Shabs and Yusuf improvise a scene between older and younger brothers sharing a spliff. The older brother is chilled, while the younger one is stressed. The older brother wants to guide his brother, but they fall out when the younger man pushes too much. It’s not the first time they have clashed.

The duo replay the scene, adding elements of a set and a setting. They agree on a number of additional facets of their relationship, adding a backstory.

Next, Ben plays an innocent man, protective, angry and vulnerable. Yusuf remains the same worldly, chilled-out guy we saw earlier. The setting is Yusuf’s

character’s house. Why is Ben visiting Yusuf? He thinks he has things under control, but it emerges that this is not a safe place for him to be.

3rd Level

The scenes are repeated this time with stage management.

Now we learn that Ben’s character is not as innocent as he originally seemed: he works secretly as a gigolo. As an actor, Ben must fill in the gaps in his knowledge about his character’s side business.

The more details the actor can provide about his character, the more awareness the character has, and the more convincing that character becomes.





Play-making: Putting the pieces together

“Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their participation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building.”

As time moves on, the creation of the play progresses.

Settings have been established:

- A garden
- A play area
- An allotment

A theme has emerged: bringing people together to overcome social injustices.

In the world of the play, the community has built something, but the council orders them to dismantle it.

One faction wants to build a car park on unused land on the estate. Another faction wants to build a garden or a play area. The two opposing desires highlight a conflict between practical need and beautifying the environment.

Conflict:

A conflict with the council.

Motivating factors

It comes down to money, local builders and planning permission.

“The greatest lesson of the civil rights movement is that the moment you let others speak for you, you lose.”

Other ideas to consider

The professor character > radioactive waste > gigantic vegetables, enormous children – in Japan?

People working together to improve well-being, to strengthen democracy.

“To bring about change, you must take the first step.”

A celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the Mary Warner Estate? Or the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush?

“We fail when we fail to try” – Rosa Parks.

The actors explore the tension in their bodies; they make their gestures bigger.

“You’re going to deliver a monologue,” Tony says, “You have to make an address to the nation about what it is like to live on an estate, how to make things happen and how to get organised.”

Now, in character, the actors stand on chairs and make speeches.

Fernando: Somebody is walking towards the tube and sees a fire.

Qualam: I’m on my prayer mat – a magic carpet. A meteorite over a minaret.

Yusuf: I am a transport police officer supporting the Muslim community in Lambeth.

They form into groups, working up sketches that offer previews of life during a national disaster:

Lloyd: We are a high-ranking service personage, a local police commander and a fire service chief. The three of us are standing in Windrush Square in Brixton, making a public service announcement, explaining where to find services and food during an ongoing public health emergency.

The seven levels of tension

Tony next introduces the group to the seven levels of tension. These levels, he explains, are used to inform the energy that’s required in a given scene – for example, lethargy on a very hot day, or wakefulness on a very cold day.

Level One: Complete exhaustion
You have no energy – you feel like a jellyfish, dead to the world. Whatever tensions there are in your body, let them go.

Level Two: Relaxed, laid back
You’re on a beach. Or at home. You have things under control. You feel natural, comfortable.

Level Three: Neutral, no character
You’re standing, arms by your side. There’s nothing going on with you. You’re straight aligned, legs together, eyes straight ahead. Disinterested.

The actors begin to walk at a neutral pace. They are relaxed, paying no attention to anyone else. Their eye-levels are horizontal.

At this energy level, you could go in any direction. You’re passive. What does your breathing feel like – what are you carrying unconsciously? All body parts are equal. There is no character, no story, no future, no past. Straight lines only.

Level Four: Alert

You're moving at a faster pace, aware of things. Your eyes are looking, you're curious. It's hard to stay in one place; there is always something distracting you. Use shorter breaths. Don't say where you are. Go and check things out.

Level Five: Suspense

A much faster pace. All the tension is in the body – everywhere. You have tunnel vision.

Is there a bomb in the room!?

You're searching, holding your breath, on the balls of your feet, reacting.

I'm holding it, but I need to go to the toilet

Level Six: Passionate

Maximum tension.

There IS a bomb!

Shouting. Chaos.

Keep at it, but with no actual words.

Level Seven: Terrified

You can also be petrified – rigid with fear (depending on the character).

Tony encourages the actors to encounter one another as they run around the space: "When there are two or more of you, match each other's level of tension. You don't have to be on the same level at the same time, but at least some of the time."

As the actors run, they switch between levels – from 5 to 4 to 3 to 2 to 1 and back up to 5.

Groups of characters at different levels of tension produce good dramatic contrast as they switch between non-contiguous levels and cause abrupt shifts in energy.

Exercise: Levels of tension

Experimentation with the different levels of tension transforms into an exercise.

It begins with Level 3 neutrality. Then, on a signal, actors individually decide what level to switch to. Pairs of characters at different levels together are discordant; uncertainty clouds these pairings. Separately, the transitions work well, but together, the transitions of different individuals lack harmony. They do not gel.

The actors return to level 3.

A further instruction: "Watching other people around you will tell you what level you should act at: Level 5 – *is there a bomb?* Level 6 – *there IS a bomb!* Level 4 – go back to watchful. Now, stay together in a clump at Level 3."

Two weeks earlier, the actors performed an exercise where they grouped in diamond-shaped foursomes, standing and moving together, all facing in the same direction. Whoever happened to be in front would lead the group forwards, with the others copying his movements. Should the leader turn left, right or all the way around, the leadership would switch to whomever next happened to be at the head of the diamond. The result was an eye-catching choreography of balletic formations that generated its own mini-narratives.

Now, at the end of the current exercise, the group, en masse, organises itself in a manner similar to that before, experiencing different levels of tension as a single organism. This time, the result is less balletic: it's hilariously chaotic – but it achieves its end of giving every individual a sense of himself within a unit.

Fleshing out the scenes

Opening scene – a community garden on a hot day. Yusuf, Michael, Fernando, Ben, and Errol T are all outside, planting the garden.

Fola, Chakka, Shabs, Graham, Jay and Robert will enter the scene at different intervals and engage with the gardeners in different ways.

Roger provides questions for each of the actors in the community garden to ask about their characters:

- What is your name?
- What do you do?
- What were you doing right before you came into the garden? Bring that into the conversation.
- What is your level of tension?

Graham enters as a community policeman – known to some, distrusted by others. Chakka's character shows signs of a mental health crisis. He has been sectioned in the past.

A local politician, played by Fola, is deeply unpopular amongst the group.

Jay is an entrepreneur who tries to sell the group on his idea for a CBD oil business.

Off-stage, the professor is making banging noises. The actors must reference this at least twice in the opening scene.

In the third scene, new information is introduced at the residents' meeting. Wayne appears in the character of the professor, with forecasts of climate devastation in the community. This changes the status quo: should the residents prepare for the oncoming disaster or ignore it and focus on their immediate problems?

Here, we make comparisons with Macbeth. In Shakespeare's play, the protagonist gains

new information when he meets the three witches, then he spends the remainder of the play reacting to his new knowledge.

In our scenario, one person signals their concern about the professor's revelations and, one by one, other residents come around to his way of thinking.

Tony advises that if we can draw the audience into the day-to-day drama, we will then need to invent something that makes them change their minds.

At this stage, the closing scene is yet to be determined.

In reference to the seven levels of tension, we learn that just as individual characters experience levels of tension, so too does the play as a whole, from one moment to the next.

Thus, the opening scene – the day of extreme heat – has Level 2 tension. The next scene of torrential rain is at Level 6 (*is there a bomb?*). The third scene – the residents' meeting – will be Level 7 (*there IS a bomb!*). These changes in level will convey the emotion of the play.

The group continues adding ideas to the mix, developing a rich setting against which the drama will take place.

Qualam feels that the play should contain levels of humour as well as ones of tension. Ben suggests the audience and the characters should be split over the central issue.

Should there be a character who dies forgotten in their flat? What about including a resident who breeds dogs illegally?

Keith is building his character into that of a trickster, a wheeler-dealer always on the make. His character must suffer a fall from grace.

The characters

Each character will focus on a specific issue during the meeting. These include the cost of living, community violence, police relations, and traffic restrictions. All the characters will have an opinion about the climate crisis that they must balance with more immediate concerns.



Shabs's character is addicted to illegal drugs. Deluded and ostracised, he resides in a shed. A self-styled philosopher and anarchist, he considers the climate crisis just another sham designed to limit our freedom. Why do people believe the hype, he wonders.

Yusuf plays Shabs's character's older brother, a Rastafarian of the Windrush generation. He believes Jah is inflicting the climate crisis on mankind as a punishment. He wants his door fixed.



Lloyd reprises his role as Bumpy, the chair of the Residents' Association. Bumpy calls the meeting of the residents to discuss a range of everyday problems faced by the tenants of the estate.



Keith plays an East Ender seeming to do his bit for the community. But he secretly runs a house of multiple occupancy for illegal immigrants. This secret is affecting his mental health. He wants practical alternatives to government initiatives, and accountability for the current economic situation.

Qualam portrays the owner of the local bodega. Forced to raise prices in the current cost of living crisis, he faces a stream of customers who are furious at the increases and prepared to steal from him.



Fola plays a local politician who says the right things, but does little to address the concerns of his constituents. He is roundly despised by most residents.

Michael portrays a dad encouraging his family to help the environment by recycling, composting, saving energy, saving food and reducing their carbon footprint.



Chakka portrays a man with learning disabilities who is largely ignored by the other residents. His father's respiratory health suffers due to poor-quality housing.

Fitzroy understudies Fola, playing a character that is hated by the local community that he in turn looks down upon.



Fernando plays an ex-con, a gangster-turned-preacher, struggling with the cost of living. His house wants repairing, but he has yet to see any upgrades. He believes the climate crisis has become a problem only now that it affects white people.

Wayne plays Jason, The Professor. He has invented a machine that predicts a catastrophic future: the result of humanity ignoring the climate emergency.

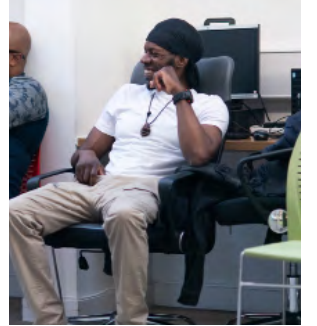


Graham portrays the local police officer whose beat covers the estate. Many of the residents distrust him because they feel he represents an unjust system.

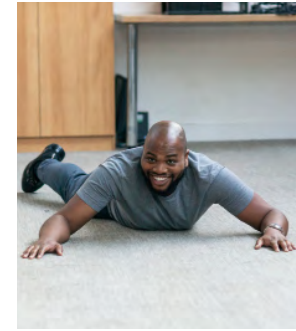
Jamal plays one of the few characters who is genuinely concerned about climate change, but believes events are following a prophecy. He is nomadic and spiritual. He rents a bed from Keith and has lived on the estate for six months.



Jay's character believes that the climate crisis has been fabricated by elites including politicians, CEOs and the military and that it's being used to manipulate us. He doesn't believe in green policies.



Ben plays an escort pretending to be on the dole. His dwelling is blighted by mould and contaminated water. He wants to see practical actions taken to reduce the risk of climate change. He has yet to see any of his problems fixed.



Seun, in the show's second and third performances, performs a musical interlude that comically comments on the climate crisis.



Fidel, the cellist, provides live musical accompaniment throughout the show.



Rehearsals

The company stages an early run-through of scenes 1 to 3, which reveals several things, some good, others less so. The actors are working well together, everyone knows what they're doing, and the humour of the characters is coming through.

But some elements need straightening out: too many characters are crowding the stage. Different pairings of characters are vying for stage time in the short scenes, and the resultant overlapping speeches make the narrative difficult to follow.

Roger asks the cast: "What do you feel

you could or should do differently? What do you feel others could do differently?"

We identify a need to increase tension from one scene to the next. The scenes require better structuring to clarify the beginning, middle and end.

There must be a greater sense of loss displayed when the garden is ruined in the downpour of the second scene.

When asked how he feels rehearsals are progressing, Roger suggests that what is more important is how everyone on stage feels. "The cast is becoming more focused and self-organised figuring out what they need to do," he adds.

Two weeks before opening night

With just two weeks left of rehearsals, the cast voices concerns that they are not as advanced in rehearsals at this stage as they had been at the same time last year. The final scenes have not been planned. And the earlier scenes still feel messy.

Tony addresses these worries: "I'll give you the skills to cook up a scene that can be adapted to the situation."

He launches the cast into a series of exercises designed to endow them with the tools necessary to improvise scenes within the play.

1st Exercise: I see, I notice, I wonder, I feel

In the exercise, you say how you feel about a thing and you act the emotion.

I see (something).

I notice (a response to a detail).

I wonder (an as yet unimagined possibility).

I feel (my emotional response to it).

Each statement should arise from the last.

There are moments in improvised plays when an actor may run out of things to say. Employing this technique helps the actor produce an appropriate response based on the emotion evident in the situation.

2nd Exercise: Yes, and...

One person starts the conversation with a statement. A second person builds on it, without blocking his partner, by saying "Yes, and..."

This improvisation works best when the conversation develops from a mundane opening proposition. The "yes" is acceptance. The "and" is the progression of the idea.

Start with the proposition. Don't ask a question, and don't say "no".

Try not to censor yourself.

Keep building the action.

Don't go back on what you've already said.

Don't blame and don't talk about the other person.

Accept the offer, whether or not it is based on what was said before.

Don't plan the conversation, and don't try to control it.

Once it reaches a climax, it's done.

3rd Exercise: One-word story-building

Here, the participants tell a story, with each person in turn adding a single word at a time. The temptation is to add more than one word especially if the obvious next word is one like "and" or "a" or "the".

It requires concentration and investment in the process.

No one person can control the direction of the story or its outcome. The improvisation ends when the participants sense the story has reached a climax or natural conclusion.

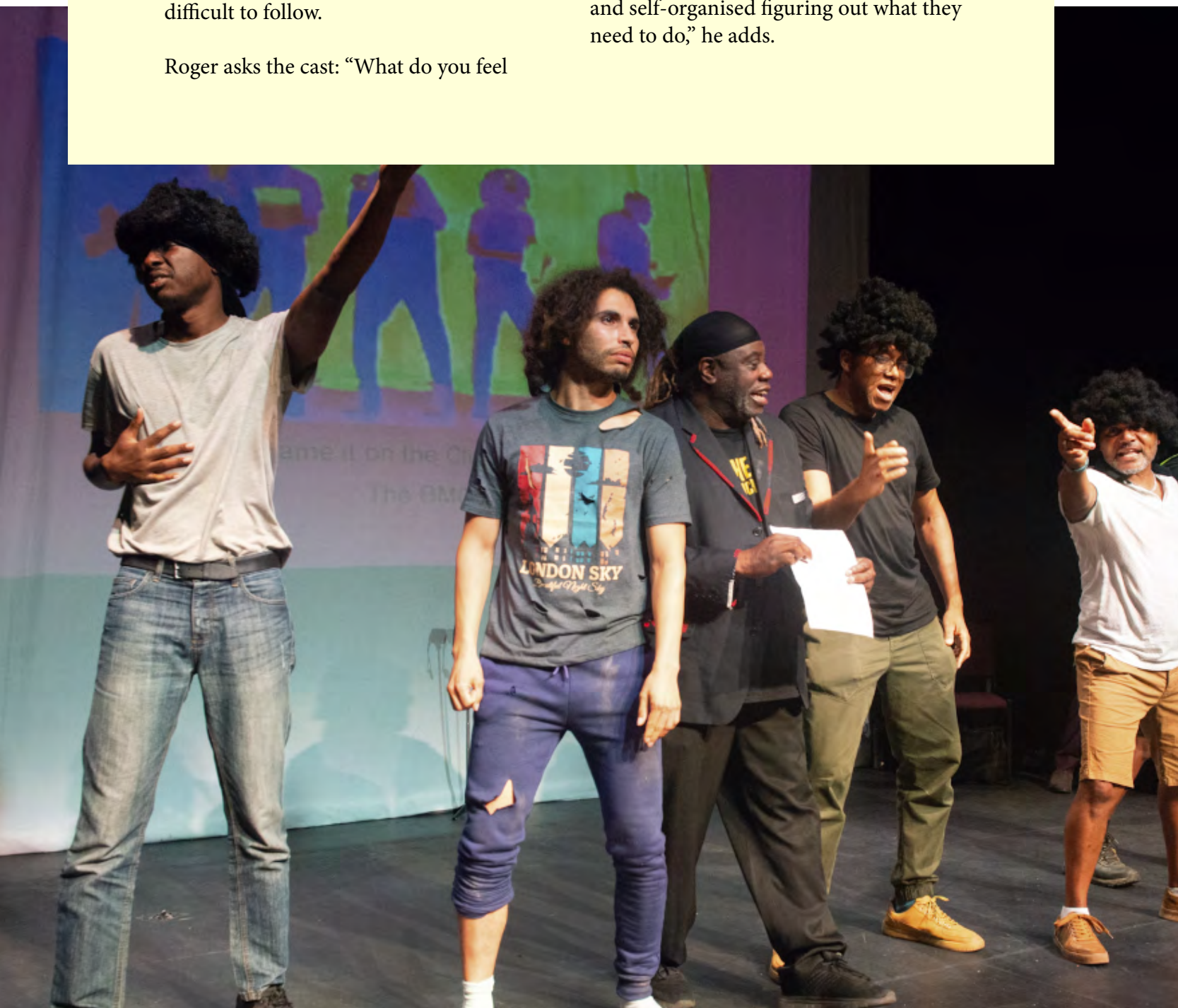
One week before opening night

In the run-through the opening scene of the hot day in the community garden, the general feeling is that the exchange between Keith and Jay takes too long.

We run scene again but without dialogue.

We run it once more, layered with dialogue. The peaks and troughs in the action will advance the narrative and allow the audience to make an emotional connection.

Jay and Keith's scene will now happen downstage towards the front. Shabs's character will have purpose from his first appearance.



Some actors are blocking one another from the audience's view. Although it is natural, when engaging in two-way dialogue, for people to face one another, there is the likelihood onstage that one actor will turn his back to the audience. The actors learn to be vigilant to avoid this happening.

Roger advises the actors not to try to hold on to things that worked in a scene in the past as it will cause problems when they try to replicate them: "Improvisations don't stay the same, so avoid the temptation to lock down the action now, because things will inevitably change on the next run-through of the scene."

Two days before opening night

With just two days left before the first performance, the cast have become comfortable with the space at Brixton House Theatre, where they have been rehearsing on Mondays in September.

Fitzroy is understudying Fola's role as the upwardly mobile black politician that draws the ire of most of the other characters.

Tony tells the cast to keep pushing themselves: "Let's explore other stuff you might want to do. Get creative," he urges.

There is still a problem with characters talking over each other in the crowded first scene. How will the audience know what to focus on?

Scene two plays without a hitch, although the technical effects – the ambient sound – tend to draw attention away from the stage business.

In scene three, the large cast sits in a semicircle, emulating a Residents' Association meeting. With minimal physical action, the scene seems static. The issues raised by individual characters sound jumbled. Are the characters being played true to type?

As Tony gives his notes to the cast, there is the sense of a 16-string guitar being tuned, with the resulting chords starting to play in harmony.





Opening night

The show opens on the first Wednesday in October.

The consensus after the first performance is that the audience was very engaged, reacting to the comedic scenes and participating keenly in the second part, where they got walk on stage to meet the characters face-to-face. In part three, the audience and cast discussion was animated, kept moving by Tony, who acts as facilitator.

Yet, for a play purporting to be about the climate crisis, the topic of discussion was quickly diverted and dwelt on other concerns, such as the cost of living, the black experience in Britain and others besides. These same topics were discussed by the cast during the residents' meeting. In hindsight, the characters who presented their complaints most forcefully seemed to have determined the direction of discourse that the audience later followed.

During the interval following the audience discussion, the auditorium was cleared and

Tony and the cast assembled to determine the end of the play. There have been no rehearsals of the last section before this because the ending will be dictated by the mood of the audience.

But some in the cast devised narratives that rounded off their characters' stories. Yusuf's weed-smoking, man-of-the-world alter ego went blind from living so long in a toxic environment. Fola's "buppie" politician was ultimately protected by his privilege, while Shab's drug user cleaned himself up.

The show ended with the cast and audience singing a tongue-in-cheek song lampooning London's mayor, Sadiq Khan, for the restriction on motor transport in the capital. The song, "Blame it on the ULEZ", was sung to the tune of the Jacksons' "Blame It on the Boogie". This turn gave the show a welcome adrenalin boost on which to end.

At a debrief of the opening night, the feeling is that scene three, the residents' meeting, ended in a scrum. The message of imminent climate catastrophe was lost when the professor was ejected by the other characters. The residents' reactions to the



predictions should have been more considered. Characters did not take his message on board, and the audience appeared not to notice the emotion behind the various reactions to the news. And those reactions should have been sufficient to make a lasting impact on the audience.

Too many issues were raised in scene three that dealt with matters other than climate change. The actors rehearse it again before the second performance, aiming to build to a crescendo when the professor's deafening time machine heralds his entrance. The actors will stand up, one after another, when Bumpy overrules the vote – instead of standing up all at once. This will give characters the chance to raise objections more coherently.

Reflections from the second night

The opening scenes of the second night's performance were more orderly. The cast talked over one another less than had been the case on opening night.

Chakka reports that he has received calls from people who saw the performance, thanking him for his portrayal of a disabled person.

The issues raised during the residents' meeting were addressed with more consideration, with each participant able to air their concerns in a clearer, more controlled fashion. At the urging of an audience member during the group discussion, each person taking part was encouraged to declare what skill they could contribute to improve the well-being of the estate. Accountants, coaches, therapists, IT specialists, administrators and more, all offered their skills.

The audience voted to set up, amongst other things, a breakfast club for the children on the Mary Warner estate. This conclusive decision seemed to satisfy members of the audience.

However, the vote created some frustration among the performers, who felt that the audience had missed the point of the play and switched the debate away from the subject of climate change.

The final show

It is 6.01 pm on the third night, and once again, the cast debates how to keep the audience on track with the message of climate change.

The show begins at 7.00 pm.

It would be great if it were 5 o' clock now," Tony says wistfully, as the cast strives to find the perfect balance between the characters' everyday gripes and the need to tackle the oncoming climate disaster.

But the show begins on time and the opening scenes work out even better than before. The cast are more assured in their roles and the dynamics amongst them have strengthened considerably.

Seun milks his ironic turn singing the opening bars of "Singin' in the Rain" to the audience's bemusement.



“We’re all contributing to some degree. It’s a fact. It’s not fiction.”

“We need to come together and be an example for the rest of the world.”

“We’ve all been colonised to believe this is how we should live. We have the power to deal with poorer families. From early age to older people.”

“Climate activism has a very white face. We can do both at the same time – climate and social activism. White people have the luxury of time. We are struggling with day-to-day problems.”

And the discussion returns to more immediate concerns.

One view points out the problem of social media: “It teaches us to hate ourselves. We need to solve it.”

And what solutions, Tony wonders, do audience members have for the problems they’ve seen played out before them in the earlier scenes?

“Tear down the estate!”

“Rebuild the garden.”

“Protest!”

The audience debates

Then comes the pivotal audience debate, which takes cues from the preceding residents’ association meeting.

Some in the audience demur at the prospect of joining the discussion on stage and remain planted in their seats, despite being advised that their voices will not be heard if they do not physically move to the stage.

Issues raised include police treatment of people in the community who are different.

One participant mentions the role of mass media: “The media is setting the agenda: people are being murdered in Croydon. But rather than blame the ‘other’ we should look at ourselves.”

“Watch what you hear on the news. What you hear doesn’t mean it’s true!”

Another blames local violence on bad parenting: “It’s been going on for generations.”

A third person disagrees, describing how young people are being influenced by their toxic peers.

Tony wrests the debate back to the issue of the climate:

“Climate change will impact the global south first,” someone pipes up.

“It is time for people to start reconnecting with the land,” another says, “I think it’s local and global. I don’t have my own land.

