

## **A Season in the Congo – Parallel Production – Young Vic, Summer 2013**

### **Gus Casely-Hayford**

**Justin Audibert** – Director, **David Gilbert** – Assistant Director, **Imogen Brodie** – Head of Taking Part, **Lily Arnold** – Designer, **Mike Ager** – Production Manager, **Lucy Cullingford** – Movement Director, **Emma Hayward** – Head of Workshop, **Axa Hynes** – Project Assistant.

**Summary** : Over the summer of 2013 the Young Vic staged a parallel production of A Season in the Congo. It was produced alongside the highly successful main-stage version of the same play. The aim over the five week fabrication, rehearsal and production period, was to work with young actors of varied ages and levels of experience to develop and stage a discrete and full production of the play.

In meeting the aims outlined in the Young Vic's and The Nomura Trust's reporting requirements, the parallel A Season in the Congo was ambitious and successful. It was one of the most effective and sensitively produced Arts programmes that I have observed over the course of my career. In direction, education, professional development, quality of production and addressing sectoral need the programme was extremely good. However, in achieving this success the Young Vic has exposed perhaps more important legacy concerns that it should consider addressing directly, or look to collaborate with others to find solutions.

**Context** : The, A Season in the Congo parallel production, was created as part of the Young Vic's Taking Part programme. The programme was conceived to be attractive to young people from local boroughs and offers an accessible interface into the Young Vic and its work. Taking Part engages local people by inviting them into the theatre as audiences, to participate in education activities, and to become involved as actors in the parallel productions.

Over the years the parallel productions have built a reputation for their quality and they have understandably found an important place in the theatre ecology. The programme is known for working with students of mixed experience - some with challenging backgrounds, some who want to work in theatre production, and the substantial majority who see it as a stepping-stone on their journey toward professional acting. It has built a reputation for being uncompromising in its pursuit of innovative and interesting work. The scheme has become important to performing arts-focussed students, (like those attending the BRIT School of Performing Arts and Technology) who are seeking to build experience as they

begin to make applications to drama school and university. In a highly competitive environment this kind of opportunity is frustratingly scarce. For a handful of students this programme has proved interesting and confidence enhancing as they find their way into other areas of tertiary education. And for the remaining few the parallel programmes have simply been a wonderful chance to be involved in a production of a play of the highest quality working with a team of professionals, and to be left with strong memories.

**The play:** Aimé Césaire (1913 -2008) was a Martinican poet, surrealist and founder of the Negritude movement in Francophone literature. He was a formidable critic of colonial racism and became fascinated in the brief leadership

of Congo by the first post-colonial Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba. *A Season in the Congo* captures the final few weeks of Lumumba's life as he briefly becomes head of state and then is deposed and killed. It has been described as a Brechtian epic that beautifully captures the descent of the Congo into a civil war and the eventual martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba. Hidden within the bigger narrative is a love triangle between Lumumba and his wife, and Lumumba and his other love - his duty to Congo and Africa. *A Season in the Congo* is an exquisitely fashioned story that could be read as a religious allegory and it is a rare, complex, play that offers a number of actors, rich roles, with characters that exhibit expansive emotional ranges. The play is driven by writing that is very reflective in quality, some of it taken directly from Césaire's poetry. However it is this very wordiness that makes the central role immensely demanding, and the epic narrative needs very thoughtful staging.

The most affecting passages of *A Season in the Congo* are undoubtedly the long Lumumba speeches. They are rich, sumptuous idealised descriptions of an *Africa* frozen in time, ravaged by colonial exploitation, whose salvation lies as much in its traditions as its future. There are passages of words that support the narrative of the play like over-sized cornerstones, they offer philosophical heft and emotional weight to the story. But anyone

**Sarah Seggari: Mpolo**

*'Anything to do with acting I jump at. I have at least two dreams a week of acting. Since I was little I have wanted to be a performer – and since I was six I have been working with the Young Vic.*

*Acting was not part of my early formal education, and then when I began attending Notre Dame I met Ms Parrott. She gave me a part in *A Mid-Summer Nights Dream* and it changed me.*

*I heard about the BRIT School, applied behind my parents' backs and got accepted. At the moment I am in the year 14 Drama Company and hope to go on to RADA.*

*I am addicted to acting. In ten years I will be making a living out of acting'.*

familiar with the work of the playwright, will know that they are not drawn directly from Lumumba's life or words; they are for the most part grafted from Césaire's own poetry into spellbinding Lumumba soliloquys. They offer perfect golden shafts of enlightened thinking. But as the play progresses they come to reveal an interesting internal tension between Césaire's romantic idea of Africa, and the often frustrating and complex reality of Congo in its post-colonial turmoil. There is a tonal contrast between the play as a sometimes highly technical study of greed and grubby human weakness, and the romantic poetry that has been drawn from Césaire's reflections on *Negritude*. It is vividly played out in the central character, whose struggles against the inexorable force of his country's collapse are only truly effective in beautiful passages of words – each of his actions only really seems to deliver the next downward jolt of his fate. In this play Prime Minister Lumumba's great legacy is not a set of tangible achievements, but the words given to him by Césaire. There is little doubt that Césaire considered this, and he tried to draw the man and metaphor together by making one an analogue of the other, giving Lumumba a messianic aura and making the story's core one of love. So, through the love of his wife, Lumumba simultaneously demonstrates his love for tradition while in his longing for the prostitute Helene Jewel, he shows his love of his people; Césaire wanted us to believe that the personal story was simultaneously the monumental myth.

For a director this plot-duality leaves an interesting set of choices: to favour an interpretation of a play as primarily about the personal themes of love and loyalty, or build the play principally around the meta-themes of nationhood, race and responsibility. The Young Vic's main stage production leaned on an interpretation of *A Season in the Congo* as a classic tragedy – Lumumba was Christ-like, he was an innocent child, a victim of unanswerable forces who was driven to fight the good fight to the bitter end. And like many Good characters in plays before him, Lumumba became someone we could only love remotely. We watch him bullied, manipulated and eventually inevitably, tragically pulled under, and we love him because he was the opposite of everything that Mobutu (Lumumba's protégé and ultimate betrayer) would become. But perhaps inevitably although we were beguiled by Lumumba's beauty, it was Mobutu who intrigued us, and lingered on in one's memory.

**Shanika Wright:** US Ambassador

*'Acting is all I wanted to do for as long as I remember. I have done workshops, but this is my first time on stage.'*

*I want to do theatre – I just need guidance, mentoring.*

The Parallel production chose a different course, giving the central role to a woman, setting the play in the present, by making its characters young urban Africans ... so we know from the very outset that this is an allegory. We can enjoy it as a fascinating fable, or we can burrow down through its layers, descend into the biographical and metaphorical narratives, mine the political discourse, to find Césaire's poetic parable beneath. It allows for the humour to float free as biting comment, and the deep moral undertow of the play keeps us correctly oriented. There is no need for a single messianic figure. Lumumba is the best within all of us. So Césaire's big beautiful

speeches can be shared between the whole company - couplets handed like batons from one actor to another, making everyone culpable, responsible; everyone equally able to dream. It relieves Lumumba of the burden of being Césaire's mouthpiece of Negritude, allowing our protagonist to become human and for us to feel his vulnerability. The play rather than being an epic epistle, becomes a sadder, smaller, more intimate story. The deaths and betrayals are not plot events - they each need mourning. And

Césaire's sumptuous poetry is a beautiful lamentation, not for a race, but for you and I. A Season in the Congo was a soulful memorial to Patrice, and less of a tableaux about the unimaginable loss of a young country's dream.

To deliver the tonally appropriate performances that would make this intimate portrait of an unravelling Congo truly work required a deeply thoughtful director. Justin Audibert worked doggedly to create a probing and sensitive production. He worked with the designer, Lily Arnold, to build a set that could completely surround the audience by placing the audience within an urban courtyard so that the play could unfold around, and within, the seated areas. It lent on the African tradition of masquerade and stories being told in town squares; of communities being drawn together by shared histories.

The set provided a platform to deliver subtle performances and the actors in the core roles delivered exactly that. Tammy Phipps who plays Lumumba is a vulnerable: a reluctant leader that we want to follow. We want to follow this Lumumba, in part because she shows the weight of his responsibility and sacrifice and yet tries to sublimate his fear and doubt. In

**Helen Spincemaille: Tshombe and Russian Ambassador**

*'Some people think drama is for drop-outs, but we are making a choice.'*

*You can learn so much from a script. Acting is my life. Ms Parrott, the head of drama, got me involved at Notre Dame School.*

*I am going to Warwick to study Drama and Political studies, I want to do teaching - my parents say become a doctor or lawyer. I want to make what I love my life, not for the fame and cars and money, I love it'.*

amongst the chaos and betrayal that surrounds Lumumba, the purity of that commitment is completely compelling – we share his weakness, and long to share his strength. The scale of the sacrifice is made real by the depth and importance of the personal relationships that surround Phipps' Lumumba. It is a sensitive and thoughtful portrayal but its intelligent incandescence might not stand as successfully as a central role if it was not countered by the quiet stealth exuded by Kayode Ewumi's, Mobuto. The character, Mobuto, provides a clever and subtle reading of manipulative evil. We watch the actor transform from a boy into a monster. And here we also see the shrewdness of setting the play in an African street, where this history is seen through the eyes of street-children which makes the emotional journeys of the key characters all the more chilling. Ewumi and Phipps use the setting thoughtfully, conveying the innocence of youth whilst telling the bigger story for the child-like innocence of Lumumba and the slow maturation and corruption of Mobuto, are all the more affecting when we see them portrayed by the young.

Around these two central pillars were a number of excellent performances, and those worth particular mention include Sarah Seggari's commendable Mpolo, Adrian Gardner's hilariously sinister Hammarskjold, Tas Munyaneza's sylph-like siren Helene Jewel, Helen Spincemaille's completely convincing Russian Ambassador and the terrifying psychopath Munongo played by Tia Blake. These were very thoughtful performances that sat within a body of highly convincing performances from the whole company.

This was a reflective and affecting production that very successfully made Lumumba a man that we could care for.

It relinquished some of the narrative heft to tell a story of someone who is like us, and who achieved greatness by remembering humility when it really mattered. Perhaps with more time, or more experience the some of the performances might have been further refined and confidence might have grown further.

**The quality of the instruction and direction:** The challenges of creating a complete play of high quality in a month with a young cast are manifold. The inexperience of the cast meant

#### **Adrian Gardner - Hammarskjold**

*'I have just finished at the BRIT school.*

*I wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer – simply because it is hard – then a girl I knew said she wanted to go to the BRIT.*

*It was everything I wanted and the people I met have become life-long friends. I discovered directing as much as acting.*

*I am going to study at Kent and eventually run education programmes in schools and make my own theatre company.*

*I know it is difficult, but I will take my time.*

*And this is important in helping me grow.*

that the creative and professional responsibility fell more squarely on the shoulders of the director and his supporting team than in conventional theatre production. From the very first day of auditions, it was apparent that the actors arrived with a wide and contrasting spectrum of skill and knowledge sets. Justin had to find a way not to patronise, but to galvanise the whole company - the naturally skilled, the experienced and the inexperienced alike.

In auditioning the actors for the company, Justin and David Gilbert, (the Assistant Director) sought, as far as possible, to look beyond prior drama experience, paper qualifications and age, and to make judgements purely on talent, enthusiasm and how actors complemented the group dynamic. Lucy Cullingford, the movement director, warmed the groups of auditioning actors, putting them through a range of initial exercises, before Justin stepped in to set improvisational tasks that the prospective company-members had to execute in teams. They exhibited not just a variety of levels of skill, but they also came with different kinds of energy, varied acting styles. Some were very self-conscious and nervous, others had obvious confidence, some displayed technical knowledge, while many showed a charisma and a fearlessness. Over three sessions, forty-eight young people were seen. They were without question, all talented. Each session generated its own distinctive creative atmosphere, allowing for lots of choice. But in the end the team were forced to make choices. Alongside obvious talent, Justin steered his team to think about need, experience, charisma and stage presence. Several times whilst making the selection, members of the team said that they could have cast the ensemble many times over. But eventually, sixteen young people: ten girls and six boys were chosen. Whilst all were talented, a small number were undoubtedly given a chance because of something exceptional or challenging in their personal stories that was not acting-related. In the context of the broader aims of the programme, that can only be considered the correct decision.

**Tia Blake - Munongo**

*'I love coming here.*

*I am studying at Lambeth College.*

*I love acting and dance, but I want to do stage management.*

*My mum always called me a 'drama queen'*

*I haven't looked into university.*

*I haven't got the confidence for the Munongo role – I need help with it.'*

Justin decided upon Tamoy Phipps, a female lead, to play Lumumba. It was a thoughtful choice; Tamoy has a clear and distinctive physical presence and obvious intelligence. She has

already taken lead roles in a number of productions and is set upon a performing career. In the Mabuto role Justin chose Kayode Ewumi. He was the most mature and self-directed of the company and would seem the perfect foil to Lumumba. It was daring casting that set out the director's stall very clearly. Across the whole cast, gender was disregarded - women finding roles as soldiers, henchmen and Kings. Casting with so little knowledge of their talent was not a problem, Justin seemed to discern small character traits in each of his company members that would make them appropriate for their roles, and as the play developed, his choices proved uncannily good. At the core of the production, Phipps and her foil Ewumi, are both actors with the skill to lead through example, who have the presence and knowledge to set the appropriate and professional tone for the production. Around Phipps and Ewumi, each actor seemed to find something of themselves to bring their particular role to life. It was apparent from the outset that this would not be a smaller diluted version of the main-stage production, the parallel play would tell its own story of the last days of Patrice Lumumba, and do so in its own way.

The first day of rehearsals began with the company engaged in a physically demanding game, passing a ball between members of the company, and trying to keep it from touching the ground without ever catching or holding it. Working in a small square space, the room fizzing with nervous enthusiasm and laughter, they quickly learned to cooperate, to keep the ball aloft for longer and longer. It proves a very useful process for building closeness, confidence and breaking down shyness. 'You have to be considerate of each other for the process to work' Justin shouted above the din. And that cooperative understanding seemed to be the most important message of the first session.

There was a very tight production time-line and so Justin was emphatic, setting very clear parameters and expectations for all involved. Justin drove the rehearsal process with a calm determined passion. He set out his stall early, demanding punctuality and complete application of the actors. They had all seen the main-stage production. The Director's first task was to ask the company to embrace the main-stage professionalism, and then to put

**Tas Munyaneza – Helene Jewel**

*'I am ambivalent toward everything except acting. I would take any opportunity to act – and being directed by a professional for a main-stage production is unbelievable.*

*I have wanted to act since primary school.*

*I did a Young Vic production of Hamlet, playing the main role and was so encouraged by it.*

*I want to study engineering at university as my back up plan, but I want to do drama.*

*My Dad is a physics teacher, he is beginning to accept it....*

that production aside. If his fear was that they might have been intimidated by the main-stage production, his worries must have been quickly allayed. As they settled after the first warm-up, it was hard not to be impressed by their sense of professionalism, commitment and belief in what they were involved in. Over the course of the first day they manifestly grew in confidence. Toward the end of the session one of the more initially introverted actors said; 'we felt awkward, but we were left feeling like we had a real connection at the end'.

Over the following days Justin built the play scene by scene, sequence by sequence, until by the end of the first week the company was able to perform a run-through. Justin seemed to command the company's respect with

endless patience, massive enthusiasm, a bottomless bank of general knowledge and ideas. And when they needed it, he could make them laugh, astound them with a fact and set them right. And occasionally all of Justin's management skills were needed; there were issues of concentration and focus that needed

**Tuwaine Barrett**

*'Loving it!*

*I am enjoying the process.*

*I want to do film and stage in year 12 at BRIT school. And then I want to go on to LAMDA, RADA or the Guildhall.*

*I am desperate for the experience.*

monitoring. Over the course of the second week Justin, David and Lucy, finesse and tighten scenes, layer in songs, dance sequences and support learning lines. It is an opportunity to begin to work with the less experienced, the less able and those with the most demanding roles. For Phipps the sheer volume of lines that needed to be learned meant that sometimes the mental mechanics of remembering was evident in her delivery. Finding time to address the particular needs of each actor takes time and energy. As the production begins to really take shape, the company draws closer together: lunchtimes becoming an opportunity to sing and dance together, evenings a chance to compare notes. But they did not rest on their laurels; Justin raised the bar, and in the final weeks, he seems even more dogged in his pursuit of his goals. As the process drew to an end, some of the actors started to get tired and the nervous energy began to build. The less experienced members of the company began to display some stress, and some of the more mature performers began to take more responsibility, helping to nuance and enhance sequences – Tas Munyaneza with the choreography, Helen Spincemaille with the singing – they helped to keep spirits up and maintain the momentum. By the end of the rehearsal period both the cast and the



production team look tired and it takes a great conscious redoubling of effort from everyone involved to maintain focus over the final stages.

**The nature of the learning environment:** This project was in part established to offer experience to young adults interested in drama. Many of those involved study at local specialist performing arts colleges or attend school. From the audition stage to the performance, they were treated like adult professionals. For one or two that was a lot to ask. At the initial rehearsal meeting, the director asked the actors to fully commit to the process, to be punctual, to show respect for their fellow company members, and work like Trojans. And that seemed to be a proposition that was substantially supported. During the early days of rehearsals it was very apparent who was used to working in a theatrical environment, and who by contrast might be finding it a challenge. By the second half of the production timetable as lines and choreography had begun to become familiar, the playing field levelled, and underlying ability, application and enthusiasm really became evident. Amongst the company were actors with challenging home lives, some 'in care', who worked alongside some relatively mature and experienced actors. The differences in age, experience and social background seemed to bear little significant relationship to the commitment they offered to the production. Over the arc of production, there seemed to be no strong disagreement and no disaffection. When given a chance to contribute to choreography or singing, they all worked very effectively as a team. For a small number there were minor issues in the final stages of the development. Some of the less experienced actors began to show the effects of pressure as the rehearsal process wound to a close and the first performance loomed. Some of that stress manifested itself in very minor periods of unproductive behaviour. Because the ambient momentum was so present, this did not have an impact on the broader production. There were a number of quiet conversations between the actors and individuals within the production team to refocus minds, to build confidence and very occasionally to nuance behaviour. This was an area where having Axa Hynes and David Gilbert available proved to be invaluable.

**The sensitivity of the educational contextualisation:** All the actors were of African descent. This was not engineered, but it offered benefits. It allowed for unbridled and un-defensive discussion about Africa and

**Divine Adelabu**

*'I saw a show at the Young Vic when I was younger and that inspired me to do my first work experience at the theatre.*

*My real area is music, but I like drama.*

colonialism. From the very first meeting, it was apparent that for some their involvement in the A Season in the Congo Parallel production was more than just a professional experience. Some were very knowledgeable about Africa. Two members of the company had family connections to Congo, while one was a Rwandan refugee whose family had lived in Congo. They have a great deal of knowledge about the culture and ethnic complexity of the country, but perhaps what they offer more profoundly is in helping to make the story real. Like the other company members they knew little of the Congo's history, but in giving a sense of it being a vibrant, real place, they helped in bringing the narrative to life. The play is enormously dense and rich, requiring preparation and thought, but the bigger challenge is in making the mental journey through time and geography. To give the company the necessary context, Esmé Peach, and her Congolese colleague, Terese, (both aid specialists from Oxfam) led a session. They spoke about their work in the Eastern area of Congo, where they provide water and empower communities to access facilities. Oxfam had worked with the main-stage production, sponsoring the Director and actors in their trip to Kinshasa and Eastern Congo to meet members of Lumumba's family.

The sessions offer the actors the chance to build a sense of familiarity and confidence about Africa and Congo, and for them to begin to feel more comfortable about the subject. Exercises were deployed to elicit conversations about the UN's role in the Congo, and the moral and the pragmatic compromises that underpin the narrative, and what the seven graduates, would have meant to the country at independence. They are asked to imagine themselves as reporters presenting pieces from the Congo. They navigated the issues without any obvious stress for most are confident, inventive and full of ideas and use the exercises as a way of eliciting further answers about Congo from Terese. She talks very movingly about the difficulties of carving a dignified, productive life, of getting water, education and many things that Westerners might take for granted. They hear from Kaspe, a musician utilised by the main-stage production, who works at the Oseper Street Centre, that gives refuge to 200 Kinshasa street children. The world Kaspe describes might be the very world from which the parallel reading of A Season in The Congo emanates. In a long day of extraordinary stories and presentation, it is here that the company seemed most affected, coming face to face with people who live the lives that they were trying to make real. They seemed to enjoy the session and be moved and motivated by what they learnt. It opened them up to the idea that the process of acting is almost as much about research and knowledge as about dramatic skill. If there was anything lacking, it was to offer them any understanding of how Congo could have produced a man as eloquent and brilliant as

Lumumba, and could continue to produce people as talented as Kaspe and Terese.

Lumumba was a man determined for Africa not to be seen as a 'basket-case,' yet whilst very informative the Oxfam view did not help to counter that.

The process of keeping their minds active continued throughout the rehearsal process. On the first day of rehearsals Lucy led the company in a process designed to help them thinking about the physical character of the person they were to play, learning how to inhabit their character. They began by improvising, through exaggerated gestures, that gradually became more measured. Mid-way through these exercises, it was fascinating to watch Lumumba stand on a chair in the centre of the room – whilst around him other characters cowered and hid – and then as the exercises continued, Lumumba was joined by Mabuto. As they stood on their chairs, it became obvious to everyone in the room why the main two roles have been allocated. Phipps and Ewumi display leadership and intelligence both in their personalities and as actors. It helped the whole company orientate themselves in relation to these two powerful poles, and to understand the character-mechanics of the play. As the session continued, they were asked to think of cultural and psychological references that would bring their characters to life – to make them real. They were being asked to inhabit their character's world, to make the market-square where the place is set, real. It is an interesting process that very effectively gives the whole group an understanding of how they fit into the Congo cosmology, and it became the foundation of how all the roles and character relationships could evolve and orbit around the force of Lumumba and Mobutu.

**The accommodation of varied and discrete talent without compromise to excellence:** The company was made up of a core of BRIT School for Performing Arts students, and they took many of the key roles. Because of their numbers and experience they seemed to define the broader quality of the atmosphere. This was perhaps inadvertently a good thing. Their presence and knowledge of theatre production helped to galvanise processes and establish group cohesion. The BRIT school students have knowledge of drama production and they know the required skill-sets, understand demands of working in groups and to a tight timetable. Thankfully they were generous and sensitive enough to not allow a BRIT school clique to develop.

The play has a range of substantial and varied roles. There are a plethora of opportunities for the talented to shine, and Justin cast the roles to push many beyond their comfort zones. The youngest actor thrived in one of the most testing roles and made it truly his own. One of the actors about whom there was some debate over her inclusion (a young woman who

lives in care), was also given a very demanding role, and she came to completely inhabit the part. After initially finding it difficult to follow the play, it was her delivery at the denouement of the play that made this version of *A Season of the Congo* so poignant. And these journeys toward achieving performances beyond expectation were common across much of the production. It was a play that demanded varied kinds of dramatic talent and could utilise different levels of experience and skill with some who favoured dance while others singing but they all seemed to be stretched and tested. Perhaps the only possible losers were the tiny handful that had the most experience, who might have gained more from being pushed further.

**The fulfilment of sectoral need:** There are many ways in which this programme is important for the sector. High quality acting opportunities for the young are very rare while many drama schools desire acting experience in their prospective students. But what heightens the need is if one considers this programme through the lens of race.

The difference in the ethnic make-up of the passengers on a London Tube train and the audiences of typical London theatres can be stark. The Young Vic has made an important contribution in challenging this demographic disparity. Over years we have seen them profoundly change the ambience of a theatre experience and diversify their audiences and productions – but the Young Vic is one of an exceptional handful. More needs to be done. Sadly for many BME actors and directors there remain tiny numbers of opportunities to make a substantial mainstream contribution to the funded sector. The profound international success of particular BME British actors in the commercial acting arena has awoken the sector to the demand from audiences. But there is a lag in the sector in addressing the lack of supply of good and appropriate programming, providing good roles, getting BME actors into companies and productions, finding them agents, places at drama colleges and at auditions.

It is unacceptable to make racial prejudgments about people in most professional areas, but in acting making decisions and judgements based on appearance are part of the way the industry operates. Challenging deep-rooted patterns of behaviour will be difficult. The sector has tried to address the issue at drama school level with minimal effect. It is an ecological issue that must begin with nurturing talent at the earliest stages whilst simultaneously encouraging the mainstream to embrace the opportunity that greater diversification will bring. The Young Vic parallel productions fulfil a vital role in giving young actors a first chance in a professionally produced play. For many BME actors, who experience the

conventional path to professional success blocked by their lack of early stage experience, involvement in the parallel production could prove essential.

It was a positive outcome that four actors involved in the A Season in the Congo production found roles in a Peter Hall production immediately after the play was concluded. Without the platform of the parallel production the benefit to the sector and the actors would not have been felt. Whilst these programmes are beginning to address a sectoral need there remains a great deal to be done.

**The professionalism and complete commitment to the highest standards in every area of delivery and support:** Watching the production come together, it was immediately evident that there was a shared drive for excellence and care. The quality of the costumes, the sensitivity of the set, the sophistication of the lighting and sound all added to the feeling that this was important and helped the actors in delivering equally committed performances. And over weeks of production meetings, Mike Ager gently drove the team to find ways to stretch the limited budget, and to remain flexible and inventive. Around the technical teams, Axa Hynes, Alix Harvey Thompson, Imogen Brodie and David Gilbert were unstinting in their pastoral support and individual encouragement of the actors.

**The quality of the production:** In what was a very fine production of A Season in the Congo, Lilly Arnold's set was magnificent. It was through the set and the costumes that we understood Justin's vision of the play erupting from the mouths of street kids. The costumes helped to carry some of the humour and allegory of the story and they were researched with unrelenting and forensic care. Lilly revised, rethought and researched every detail right up to and through the first performance. Amongst the plethora of tiny visual delights were beer branded sunglasses, a crown made from glow sticks, keys made from cutlery – but with each embellishment we were reminded that at heart this was being taken very seriously.

The set worked beautifully but posed a large number of planning complexities. All the costumes and props had to be kept within the set. This had to be managed with painstaking planning by Alix Harvey Thompson and added an additional layer of pressure on the actors. At the end of each scene things had to be placed ready for re-use in the place they would be needed next. With actors playing multiple roles, there was a lot of stage direction to plan and remember. In the rehearsals and the first performance, this complexity was something of an encumbrance, but by the time the company had found their feet, the set and costumes became a vivid narrative support.

**Some thoughts for the future:** As I hope I have effectively outlined above, A Season in the Congo, Parallel Production, was successful in a variety of ways. Parallel Productions produce unquestionable excellence and benefit young people from some of the most traditionally excluded demographic groups in subsidised theatre. Not only are the productions of the highest quality, but by being involved, the actors place themselves in a better position to take advantage of future professional opportunities. This was a magnificent production, which seemed to delight audiences and undoubtedly gave enduring benefits to the careers of the participants. For the majority of the actors the benefits of being involved will be in building confidence and gaining experience, but for a handful A Season in the Congo may well be the first step of a path that will lead to an acting career. Indeed as a direct result of being involved in the parallel programme, four of the key participants were immediately offered roles in a Peter Hall production. For a small company of young actors, it is a significant legacy in itself, and I feel sure over coming months there will be others.

**However there are some reasons for concern and areas that might require future attention:**

1) It should be made clearer from the start that being involved should be judged as an end in itself. The many integral benefits of being part of a parallel production should be emphasized at the beginning and celebrated at the end. Non-professional engagement in acting should be promoted wherever possible, the normalising of amateur involvement is important for the health of the industry. There should be a production photograph or something around which, completion and a sense of achievement and closure, can be focussed.

2) The parallel productions are very successful but they leave little record. Could one scene be staged and filmed each year and kept as an archive of these productions? There is the very real possibility that you might capture the first significant performance of actors who will go on to make a significant contribution.

3) For those that do wish to continue working in the theatre, there are a number of ways in which the Young Vic might better support them.

3.1) Whilst being ambitious is laudable, expectations and aspirations could be better managed and channelled as part of this programme. Every participant that I interviewed wanted to work professionally in theatre, most seeing acting as his or her preferred professional option. Yet, most of the students did not know, and some had never met, a

professional actor. Perhaps as part of future programmes the Young Vic could invite one or two professional actors to speak to the students about acting, the pleasure and the challenges, to answer questions – but also to talk about how performing can offer a range of transferable skills that could also be useful in other areas of life.

3.2) There should be sessions where the non-acting professional experts involved in the parallel production, like the lighting specialists, the set and costume designers etc. are given a chance to talk about their contribution to a production so that other opportunities of working in the theatre are opened up as possible career routes.

3.3) To take this further perhaps students interested in theatre design and production might benefit from an internship over the course of the production.

4) For the most successful acting is worth all the hardship, but even they would have to acknowledge it as a challenging profession. Idris Elba recently acknowledged that he might have ended up on benefits if not for some help at the right time. Most young actors seem to suffer in silence, and gradually let go of their dreams. That might well be inevitable, but could the Young Vic begin to build a self-supporting network?

4.1) Could the Parallel productions become self-supporting groups - could the Young Vic facilitate the participants staying in touch digitally, maybe via a social media page? Could the participants be encouraged to update each other on their progress through this network, and help the Young Vic monitor how the programme has impacted their lives?

4.2) Perhaps in the future the alumni of Parallel productions might be encouraged to return to speak to the actors in the current production, and where bonds are made, perhaps they could act as mentors?

5) From what I have observed for those that wish to act professionally, the difference between success and failure will not just be hard work and talent – it will in part be luck and opportunity. The obvious area in which the Young Vic can have an impact is opportunity. The Young Vic should be augmenting their efforts to encourage the mainstream drama schools to widen their ideas of what a future student might look like, and the backgrounds that they might spring from. One way of making this possible would be to select the five most promising Parallel Production actors, and offer small grants (of perhaps £200) designed to pay for a year of auditions to drama school and costs. This could be supplemented with audition support to teach them the language of interviews and some sort of career advice to talk through next steps. For an investment of about £1000 a year and some management,

the Young Vic could make a significant contribution to specific careers, and over time to the sector. It would not just have long-term benefits, it would help to further motivate and focus the Parallel production actors over the course of the development of the play – knowing that a handful of these awards would be made each year.

6) The sector is changing. It is fascinating to look at the photographic portraits of the students of the major drama schools over recent years to see how their intakes have grown more diverse. But even those changes have not kept pace with demographics or audience taste – London is now an ethnic majority city, but none of the truly mainstream drama schools have made anything like that level of commitment to changing the profile of their student intakes. Whilst there is significant diversity amongst the most successful British actors, many ethnically diverse actors have had to find unconventional routes to success. Perhaps the Young Vic should be inviting the drama establishment to its parallel productions, whilst quietly and loudly petitioning them to take advantage of this larger pool of talent?

7) To make a significant in-road into diversifying the student demographic at drama school it may require commissioning a discrete project to look again at diversity and the sector, and the impact of past initiatives to address this issue; this might be something that the Arts Council England or the Kings Cultural Institute might invest some funding in.