

UK National Theatre's Black Plays Archive

Reviewed by Addison D. Faulk, University of South Carolina

The UK National Theatre's Black Plays Archive is an online database dedicated to documenting premier professional theatrical productions written by Black British, African, and Caribbean playwrights in the United Kingdom. "The Black Plays Archive aims to provide a more effective way of making archival material available and easy to access in order to address the forgotten histories of Black playwrights and practitioners in the [United Kingdom]." ¹ Former National Theatre Associate Kwame Kwei-Armah, a playwright, actor, director, singer, and broadcaster, initiated the project. The Black Plays Archive has a partnership with the Black Cultural Archives ² and is supported by Arts Council England ³ and Sustained Theatre. ⁴

The Black Plays Archive does not provide access to play scripts; however, users can access a plethora of information about these historical productions through the archives, including interviews with playwrights and practitioners, essays, production information, and excerpts of plays recorded specifically for the archives. The archives does not include many interviews, but featured ones consist of playwrights who discuss the development of specific works such as *The Coup* by Mustapha Matura and *Desert Boy* by Mojisola Adebayo. The earliest documented production in the Black Plays Archive is *The Lily of Bermuda* by Ernest A. Trimmingham in 1909. The most recent plays documented are from 2019. Production documentation includes detailed information on the production team, cast, location, opening night, and theatre company for each play.

Users can search materials based on the playwright, period, characters, cast members, venue, and much more. They can also browse the collection or review the Featured Content section. The essays are scholarly in nature and address themes such as Black America in 1970s British theatre and the renaissance of Black British drama in the 1990s. Such articles highlight the historical relevance of period dramas and encourage new critical thought and assessment when reviewing plays featured in the archives. While a play is fictional, the history behind it is real.

¹ "About BPA: Black Plays Archive," National Theatre Black Plays Archive, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/featured-content/about>.

² "Black Cultural Archives," Black Cultural Archives, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://blackculturalarchives.org>.

³ "Arts Council England," Arts Council England, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk>.

⁴ "Sustained Theatre: Promoting the Sustainable Growth of Theatre and Performers," Sustained Theatre, August 18, 2020, <http://sustainedtheatre.org.uk>.

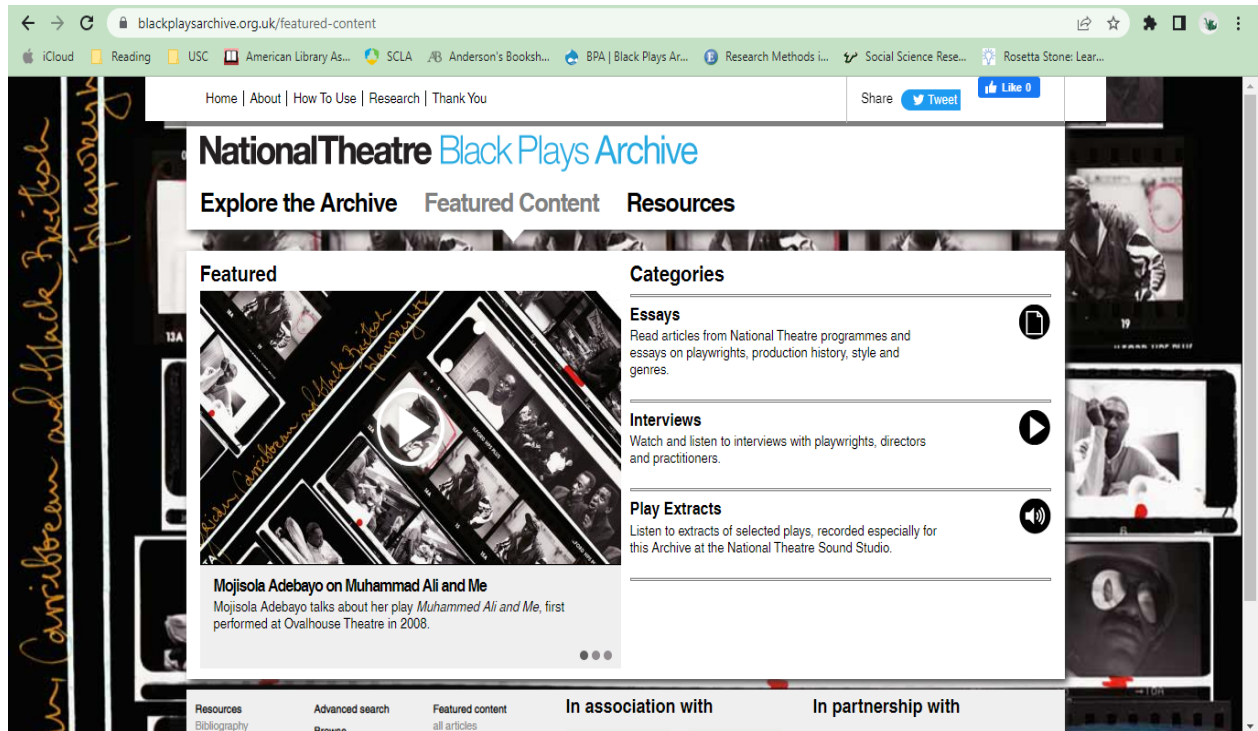


Figure 1: Screenshot of the Black Plays Archive's Featured Content section where users can discover play extracts, interviews with playwrights, and more.

The site also includes two educational packets for teachers. The provided materials, which focus on Charlene James's *Cuttin' It* and Inua Ellams's *Three Sisters*, are geared toward older teens and adults and discuss key themes and concepts of the plays, including female genital mutilation in *Cuttin' It* and ethnicity and power in *Three Sisters*.

*That Black Theatre Podcast*⁵ is a partnership between the Black Plays Archive, the National Theatre,⁶ the University of London's Royal Central School for Speech and Drama,⁷ and the AHRC London Arts and Humanities Partnership.⁸ PhD student Nadine Deller hosts the podcast, which dives into the Black Plays Archive and discusses Black British playwrights and the political and social events that influenced their works. The podcast's featured guests include playwrights Uma

⁵ "That Black Theatre Podcast," National Theatre Black Plays Archive, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/resources/that-black-theatre-podcast>.

⁶ "National Theatre," United Kingdom National Theatre, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk>.

⁷ "Royal Central," University of London: Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.cssd.ac.uk>.

⁸ "The London Arts & Humanities Partnership," The London Arts & Humanities Partnership, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.lahp.ac.uk>.

Marson, Mustapha Matura, Winsome Pinnock, Lynette Goddard, and more. Deller utilizes a mix of historical analysis, interviews, and discussions “to show that black theatre is for everyone.”⁹ There are thirteen episodes in the podcast’s first season, which can be streamed or downloaded through the archives and other major podcast platforms.

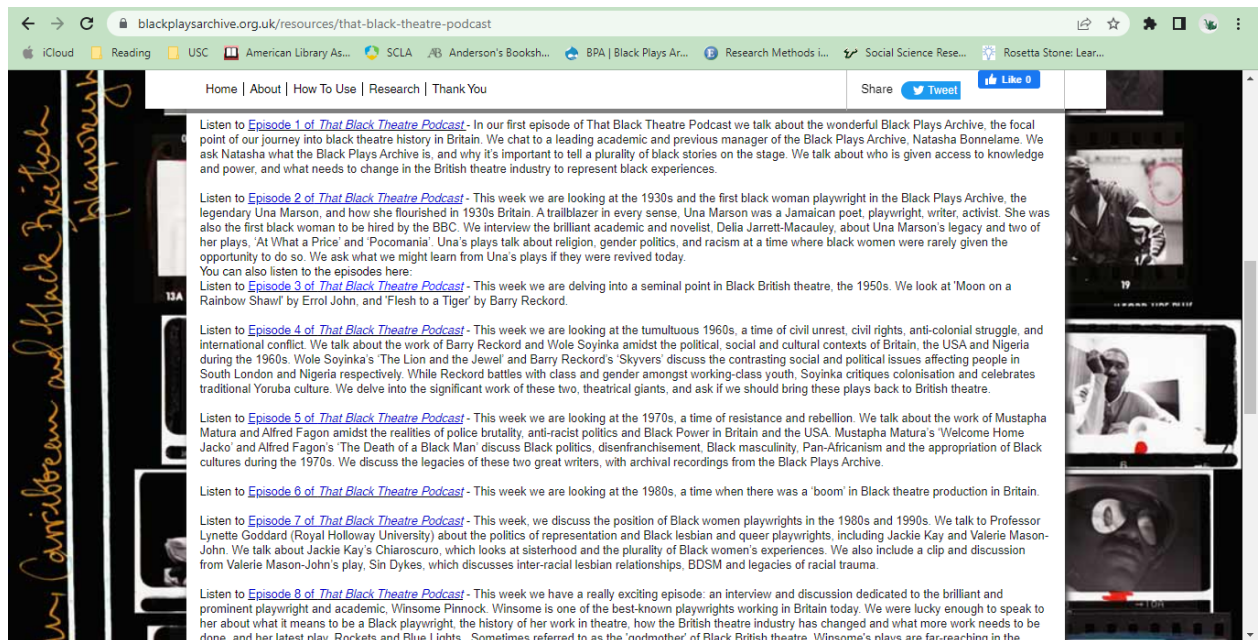


Figure 2: Screenshot of That Black Theatre Podcast page, including descriptions of podcast episode contents.

Overall, the Black Plays Archive is well-organized and provides valuable resources for the skilled researcher and the casual browser. I love how easy the site is to navigate. The archives has a fluid layout, providing clear navigation paths and placing the featured elements front and center, although the black-and-white background image of a photo reel is rather distracting and tends to blend in with the text boxes; the image also does not scale when on a mobile device, which is a potential accessibility issue. The site developers might consider inserting a neutral gray buffer around it to add dimension and ensure the reader’s attention remains on the content. The image might also work well as a header.

The introductory video by Kwame Kwei-Armah on the home page is highly engaging and informative. Kwei-Armah introduces the viewer to the archives and the “wealth of forgotten material” that the Black Plays Archive provides access to through audio and visual content. All content is open access, which is one of the archives’s greatest strengths. Resources that are only accessed through paywall subscriptions block access to information, especially for members of the public who cannot afford an

⁹ Nadine Deller, “That Black Theatre Podcast,” accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/resources/that-black-theatre-podcast>.

individual subscription. During my many years studying theatre, I have often found that the academic library is the only place I can find the information I need due to these restrictions. An open-access resource of this nature provides improved access for everyone, more recognition for the archives, and collective awareness of the historical importance of these resources.

My favorite thing about this resource is the audio excerpts of the plays, which were recorded specifically for the Black Plays Archive and are an absolute thrill to listen to. I listened to *Death of a Black Man*¹⁰ and *Black Crows*.¹¹ The site features detailed information about each clip, including the playwright, recorded year, location, and cast. The ability to listen to clips of these plays provides a unique experience, allowing the listener insight into what the original production may have sounded like when it was performed.

This resource is significant in the realm of archival work because it is a detailed, continuously growing resource for Black plays and playwrights of the United Kingdom. Whether users are researching Black playwrights or generally browsing the resources, this archives allows people of different backgrounds to explore the information. This site would be especially valuable to those interested in theatre history and historical manuscripts. Resources like the Black Plays Archive can also assist scholars in producing groundbreaking research. Students like Nadine Deller can develop new and innovative ideas for archives. In addition to hosting *That Black Theatre Podcast*, Deller researches Black women playwrights in the United Kingdom and uses the Black Plays Archive in proposing new methods for archiving and analyzing their works.¹² Overall, the Black Plays Archive is a beneficial resource that is not only informative but also simple to use.

¹⁰ *Death of a Black Man*, Black Plays Archive, December 14, 2009, <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/featured-content/play-extracts/death-of-a-black-man>.

¹¹ *Black Crows*, Black Plays Archive, January 5, 2010, <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/featured-content/play-extracts/black-crows>.

¹² "Research: Nadine Deller Biography," Black Plays Archive, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/research>.