

Tricycle Theatre, London

Review by **Graham Kirby**



Bola Agbaje's exceptional new play about asylum is the final instalment in the Tricycle's excellent Not Black and White season and is by far the most compelling.

In the hands of a lesser writer the story, characters and incidents would be trite or even indifferent. Justice, a young man from Zimbabwe, is incarcerated as an illegal immigrant. His family struggle to help him and his case is taken up by the hard-bitten but brilliant lawyer, Mark Cole. Already the traps are set for cliché and tracks that have been trampled by other dramatists and writers but Abaje writes with the lightness of a ballet dancer and easily pirouettes over any booby traps with a great injection of spiky humour and wit. Her writing is also a wonderful marriage of precision and realism lacking in cloying sentimentality, mixing her overriding themes with familial tensions that exist between Justice and his sister Grace.

Justice and the nature of the justice he receives are obviously central to the play's themes. For while Justice himself has been unsuccessful in his application for asylum and imprisoned for entering the country on a false passport, his sister Grace was successful in her application. Justice is merely one of many immigrants – some illegal – who support our economy. A chorus of workers, all on false papers, highlights the propping up of a country whose media and mores are rabidly hostile. Against these odds they find no unity except in God. The black Home Office jobsworth (Jimmy Akingbola) who rants against sponging immigrants is a counter-intuitive and contentious addition. It is a brilliant scene that shows prejudice goes beyond stereotypes and

forces us to confront our own inner bigot.

Detaining Justice is a considerable and worthy piece of dramatic writing. The sense that the system and the decks are somehow stacked heavily against Justice is a verbal pun that is never quite stated but never leaves us. To the audience it seems so obvious that Justice should neither be detained nor deported that it is almost too preposterous. That is the point – we are all human. As the story continues Grace has sex with an official to help her brother, only to be resigned that he ought to return to Zimbabwe.

This is not only Justice's story. In the background – away from Justice's gloomy, inhuman cell – is the recession, now an ever-dramatic presence, spiking unemployment and increasing tensions between races as the new economic reality sours the public mood. We often think about immigration and asylum in terms of numbers rather than humans with their own stories. Agbaje's play weaves Justice's story with his sister's and other workers who are the butts of our hypocrisy and corruption. As one cleaner puts it, colonial Britain took and therefore colonial Britain should give.

Detaining Justice is superbly acted – near faultlessly - and subtly directed by Indhu Rubasingham. Aml Ameen as Justice is seething with inner tensions and frustrations that come to the forefront but he never overplays or overstates these. His is a fine and individual performance. Sharon Duncan Brewster as Grace is equally affecting.

This is not a play that answers questions and, although it is very clear what Agbaje thinks – and yes, she can be didactic - she does not present us with a neatly wrapped play that can send us home with a clean conscience, an alibi and a solution; there are plenty of questions here beyond race and immigration that touch upon our humanity and pretence. Although sometimes the conflict within the play can seem petty, that is what disturbs and lifts it from the banal.