

# *The Big Life*, by Paul Sirett

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## Abstract

*The Big Life* is a musical, created in East London by a black British team of artists, which has now transferred to the West End. Based on *Love's Labor's Lost*, the show follows Shakespeare's play closely but adds a twist, transposing the main conflict from that of gender to the issue of race. The play provides a fascinating example of the endurance of the English national poet, here used to explore an important period of recent English history.

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Apollo Theatre, London, September 14, 2005. Written by Paul Sirett. *Music*, Paul Joseph. *Director*, Clint Dyer. *Designer*, Jenny Tiramani. *Lighting*, Gerry Jenkinson. *Sound*, Gareth Owen. *Musical Supervisor*, Robert Hyman. *Choreographer*, Jason Pennycooke. *Associate Producer*, Philip Hedley.

Much has been made of the fact that Paul Sirett's *The Big Life* is the first black British musical to be performed in the West End. The show, before transferring to the Apollo, was developed at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, a venue in East London that runs pioneering musical theater workshops, encouraging increased participation, in all aspects of theater, from its ethnically diverse community.<sup>1</sup> Although reviews acknowledge a Shakespeare connection, less attention has been given to the fact that the piece is clearly an adaptation of *Love's Labor's Lost*. At first it might seem improbable that an exuberant ska musical dramatizing the arrival of Caribbean immigrants in England on the ship the Empire Windrush in the late 1950s could be based on one of the Bard's more obscure plays, but *The Big Life* is more closely tied to *Love's Labor's Lost* than has been acknowledged by theater critics.

Indeed, it is difficult to miss the overt parallels in plot and characters between the musical and Shakespeare's play. In *The Big Life*, four young men who meet on the Windrush vow to forswear women and to devote themselves to self-improvement as they begin new lives in England. Biron, Longueville, and Dumaine are transformed into Bernie (played by Neil Reidman), Lennie (Chris Tummings), and Dennis (Marcus Powell), with Ferdy (capably played in this performance by Geoff Aymer, who usually plays the part of the Reverend) as their ringleader. The female characters are renamed Mary (Yvette Rochester-Duncan), Kathy (Claudia Cadette), Sybil (the vocally talented Yaa), and Zulieka (Antonia Kemi-Coker). Ferdy and Zulieka, who correspond to Shakespeare's Ferdinand and the Princess, are singled out from the rest of the group, just as they are in *Love's Labor's Lost*, with Ferdy the initiator of the ascetic vow and Zulieka set apart from the other women by her African, rather than West Indian, heritage (apparent both from her dress and speech). The men's pledge is parodied by Eros, the smooth ladies' man (Jason Pennycooke) and Jacqueline, the English good time girl (Amanda Horlock), at one extreme and the evangelical Reverend at the other (in this performance played by an understudy, Dennis Victory).

The show's opening number is the buoyant "In Ingran": "We comin big time we comin, kyan wait to get to Ingran, wi mek it big in a Ingran, mek it rich and be a hot boy, mek it all de way in a Ingran." Although the men have yet to make their vow, this first song echoes the assurance and enthusiasm of Ferdinand's opening speech in *Love's Labor's Lost*. Ferdinand claims that his court "shall be the wonder of the world" (1.1.13), and the men and women on the Windrush are equally confident that their arrival in England will herald the start of an exciting and successful new life. In Shakespeare, the King calls his fellow courtiers "brave conquerors" (8), rashly assuming that the task the men are about to undertake has already been accomplished and setting them up for failure.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the optimism of the Windrush immigrants is immediately deflated, on their arrival, when they are confronted with the inclement English weather, a signal that things will only get worse. Even before they make their pact in "The Contract Song," the men are presented as faintly ridiculous: Ferdy has academic pretensions, with his Ph.D. and the address of an English professor he intends to contact for work; Lennie is overly confident; Bernie has a silly walk; and Dennis is the dopey one in an oversized suit and porkpie hat. Sybil is also mocked; she is portrayed as prim, proper, and naïve.

The male and female characters all end up living under one roof, that of Zulieka's boarding house. The women naturally side with Sybil, who has broken off her engagement with Bernie on the boat after an argument, and they have nothing but contempt for the vow the men have taken and for their abilities and efforts to find employment. The resulting atmosphere is therefore one

of tension between the sexes and of frustration, as the men find it increasingly difficult to stick to their pact, and the women slowly begin to relent and to tempt the men with increasingly sultry song and dance routines — such as "W.O.M.A.N," a song that shows not only that the women have the upper hand, but also that each of them is keen to seduce her man. The first half of the play ends with a wonderful sequence in which the statue of Eros in London's Piccadilly Circus — a frequent meeting point for the men as they search for work — comes to life, floats to the floor, and begins tap dancing. As the men sing the song "Gettin' Hot," Eros shoots each of them, and they all turn around to reveal arrows in their backs, indicating that they have finally succumbed to love. Throughout the play, Jason Pennycooke's energetic choreography perfectly unites the songs with the action on stage.

Towards the beginning of the second half, there is a feisty competitive duet between the sexes, "Better Than You." This is followed by the men singing "The Price We Pay," a song about their despair at being unable to obtain work; despite the fact that they are highly qualified, the racist approach of the English makes it impossible for them to find anything but the most menial of jobs, and they are continually turned away and fobbed off with lame excuses. Ferdy's aspirations to work in the English academic world move from comic to tragic as he is turned away from the university and ends up working in an asbestos-filled factory. Similarly, Lennie, a master mechanic who can fix anything, can only find employment as a bus conductor. The clash between the men and the women is given added resonance from the fact that the female characters do seem to be better off than the men; Kathy and Mary's nursing skills are in demand, so it is easy for them to find work, and Zulieka runs her own bed and breakfast. It is later made clear, however, that things are not rosy for the women, either; Zulieka's house is still owned by her ex-husband, and she remains dependent on him.

*Love's Labor's Lost* 4.3, in which the men, in turn, eavesdrop on each other reading sonnets addressed to the objects of their affection and thereby discover they are all in love, is deftly replicated in *The Big Life*. Each of the men, in turn, asks Eros (the Costard figure) for help in wooing his lady, and each is given the same song to sing to her; thus, the comedy of the repeated clichéd sentiments in the poems that Shakespeare's lovers read aloud is paralleled by the banal love song ("Is It Love") that Bernie, Ferdy, Lennie, and Dennis are in turn given to sing. The most significant of the oppositions that structure *Love's Labor's Lost* is the battle between the sexes. This is also vividly and engagingly played out in *The Big Life*, but the characters ultimately come to realize that only by pulling together can they live happily in such a foreign and hostile situation. Of course, the women revel in tricking the men by swapping identities, just as they do in 5.2 of Shakespeare's

play, but the hostility between the men and women is finally sublimated by an emerging sense of solidarity based on the characters' common ethnicity.

The musical remains true to the Shakespearean text with its clouded ending; an announcement is made that Zulieka's father has died (as happens with the Princess's father), and the emotional tone changes instantly from gaiety to seriousness. Needing to return to her home in Africa, Zulieka makes Ferdy promise that he will wait for her, and the other women also make their men agree to wait a year before marriage to prove their seriousness. Biron says, at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost*,

Our wooing doth not end like an old play:  
Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy  
Might well have made our sport a comedy. (5.2.851-53)

He thus claims that it is the women who have marred the play's happy ending. The final scene of *The Big Life* departs somewhat from *Love's Labor's Lost* in being more upbeat, with the story's resolution deferred, but not destroyed, and a stronger sense of community amongst the male and female characters emerging to replace the emphasis on their difference.

Paul Sirett's musical uses the gender antipathy of Shakespeare's play, but resolves it in order to concentrate on racial antagonism, making the point that although both types of hostility were rife in the 1950s England in which the play is set, racism was a more pressing problem for the Windrush immigrants. The fact that his play shows the battle between the sexes coming much closer to resolution than they do in Shakespeare's *Love's Labor's Lost* suggests that ways do exist in which such antipathy can be overcome. *The Big Life* is uplifting because the individuals manage to overcome their attitudes and prejudices about gender in order to focus on uniting to tackle the issue of racism which, as immigrants to England, affects all of them. The musical is therefore ultimately less troubling than Shakespeare's play, as the characters are all victims of external prejudice, rather than, as with the men in *Love's Labor's Lost*, their own misconceptions about love.

In addition to the plot, there are other surprising links between *The Big Life* and traditionally staged Shakespeare. The show's designer, Jenny Tiramani, has worked on a host of Shakespeare productions, notably at Shakespeare's Globe, where she has designed costumes for original-practices productions such as *Twelfth Night*, *Richard II*, and *Measure for Measure*. Members of the six-piece band that provides accompaniment in a variety of West Indian musical styles are dressed as angels and housed directly above the stage, just as at the Globe. This decision to make the band a visible presence on the stage emphasizes the importance of music to the production and nods back to the early modern theater.

The show is stolen, however, by a character who has no counterpart in *Love's Labor's Lost*, but who again harks back to earlier dramatic practices. Mrs. Aphrodite, a Jamaican woman in her sixties (played by the much younger actress/comedian Tameka Empson), sits in one of the boxes and offers intermittent commentary on the action on the stage, functioning as a chorus figure. Her improvised dialogue, one of the highlights of the production, ties the show in neatly with the contemporary black British stand-up comedy that is currently so popular. The audience reveled in this type of humor, which typically involves self-mockery, playing on conventional stereotypes of the British Caribbean population and offering plenty of in-jokes.

Indeed, the audience responded to much of the play as they might do to a comedy set, frequently interacting with the performers, repeating the jokes, and talking amongst themselves. For me, this highlighted Shakespeare's continuing and contemporary relevance. *The Big Life* shows England's national poet being appropriated to dramatize an important period in the country's history and, through its appeal to a largely black British audience, making Shakespeare's work relevant to an expanding sector of theatergoers.

### Notes

1. I am grateful to Lucy Munro for her comments on this piece.
2. All references to *Love's Labors Lost* come from *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).

### Online Resources

*The Big Life: The Ska Musical*. Theatre Royal Stratford East [cited 28 January, 2006]. <http://www.stratfordeast.com/big%20life.htm>.

## References

Shakespeare, William. 1997. *Love's Labor's Lost*. In *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton. 783-802.