

## Abolish the Stage: Reflecting on Race and Theatre with *Tambo & Bones*

*Tambo and Bones* by Dave Harris, directed by Matthew Xia for Actors Touring Company and the Theatre Royal Stratford East, played from 16 June – 15 July 2023. Tom Six is Reader in Politics and Performance at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. This review essay was originally published on his Substack blog on July 17, 2023 and is published here with minor amendments.

### Where are we?

*Tambo & Bones* places its audience in the middle of 800 years of history, and is set in what used to be the USA, 400 years in the future. We don't know this until the second half, though, and then at the end, a stage direction explodes the device:

*No, we aren't in the future.*

...

*The audience is full of whomever can afford to be there.*

*Nothing has ever changed.*

*We know this. We know where we are.*<sup>1</sup>

It's a credit to Matthew Xia's production that this is a very good description of the effect it achieved. There are lots of ways to read the 'where we are' of this stage direction, of course, but one of them is that we're in a theatre, the kind of theatre that I want to persuade you that we should abolish.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Harris, *Tambo & Bones* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2023), p. 73.

The first half of Harris's play covers the first 400 years of its history in two parts. The first of these is a minstrel show, in which Tambo (Rhashan Stone) and Bones (Daniel Ward) - two clowns - perform a variety of stunts to secure quarters from the audience. The second part is a gig by Tambo and Bones who are now world-famous hip-hop artists. In both of these set-ups the dynamic of the double act depends upon the contrast between intellectual dreams (Tambo) and worldly appetites (Bones). Tambo wants, initially, just to sleep under a tree, and is repeatedly disturbed by Bones's vigorous attempts to appeal to the audience for money. After a while, all these appeals for cash mean that Tambo can no longer think of sleep, but he rejects Bones's tactics, and instead delivers 'a brief treatise on: Race In America' to the audience, which garners applause, but no quarters.<sup>2</sup>

The clowns find their quarters, in the first of a series of frame-breaking devices in which they locate the playwright (a puppet seated in the front row). They bring him on stage to beat him up for placing them in their invidious position. In the process, the playwright is accidentally pulled apart, and the quarters he has made from this minstrel show are scattered all over the floor. Later, the pair will recite the mantra 'Quarters to dollars. [...] Dollars to dreams'.<sup>3</sup> The move from quarters to dollars is the subject of part two.

### **Pay me in equity**

The rap concert in part two reminded me of the Carters' video for the song 'Apushit', which is set in the Louvre and contains the following lines from Beyoncé, spoken in front of the Winged Victory of Samothrace:

Gimme my check

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<sup>2</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 32.

Put some respect on my check

Or pay me in equity, pay me in equity

Watch me reverse out of debt (skrrt)<sup>4</sup>

Equity can mean two things in this context. First, it is used instead of ‘equality’ in social justice, because the doctrine of equality (of opportunity) works to provide a cover for, and thus reinforce, existing inequalities. Equity, then, is a form of justice that recognizes and seeks to redress structural inequalities. Secondly, however, equity is a financial term, meaning the excess value of a property or investment over and above any claims (loans, mortgages, etc) that could be made against it (the Lamborghini that Beyoncé and Jay-Z reference in the song, for instance, or the art works they perform in front of).

Like the Carters, Tambo and Bones are caught in the ambiguity of equity. Bones is all about the money:

Gucci, Fendi / **Prada**

Candy-paint / **impala**

Money / **ensalada**

Buy my shit / you **gotta**<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Carters, ‘Apeshit’, released June 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbMqWXnpXcA> accessed on July 15, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 42.

He invents ‘a dance craze’ called ‘The Bones’ (‘Gimme money for them Bones. / Money for them Bones’).<sup>6</sup> Tambo, on the other hand, still ‘can’t sleep’ and ‘don’t want money’:<sup>7</sup>

All I wanted was a **nap**

Mind’s a prison / world’s a **trap**<sup>8</sup>

Tambo’s song is a declaration of war on America, but far from changing the world as he hopes it will, it garners ‘*the loudest applause they’ve ever heard*’.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the pair reunite in a rap over a sample of the spiritual ‘Wade in the Water’ called “**Dollas to Dreams**”:<sup>10</sup>

I be getting money / money make the **rules**

I took the master’s house / cuz I took the master’s **tools**<sup>11</sup>

And then the world changes. America is engulfed by civil war. The extent to which Tambo and Bones took the master’s tools in that war is the subject of part three.

### **Great replacement?**

In part three, the play breaks its frame again, with the actors walking into the auditorium to reveal that we are 400 years in the future, that this is a ‘celebration of our ancestry’, and that the audience is all black (the irony of this in the majority white audience I was in was skilfully held by the actors).<sup>12</sup> The actors then explain that to be ‘kind to our bodies’,<sup>13</sup> they are going to narrate what happened next, but when they realise this is a bit ‘bare-bones’, they decide to ‘have the

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<sup>6</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, pp. 41, 44.

<sup>8</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 56

robots do it'.<sup>14</sup> Enter X-BOT-1 (Jaron Lammens) and X-BOT-2 (Dru Cripps), two fascistic whiteface androids who re-enact with astonishing skill (Kloé Dean's movement direction was stunning) the story of 'white genocide'.<sup>15</sup>

Simply put, Tambo proposes to Bones that they end the civil war by using robots who look like white people to search and destroy their enemies, so that he can find some real grass, lie down and 'take a long, long nap'.<sup>16</sup> Bones, however, needs the war (in which they are supplying one side and arming the other) as the source of the 'Wealth. Power. Safety' that white people had but was always denied to him: **'I'm a real person. This war made me real'**.<sup>17</sup> In the end, the robots did their work, and all the white people were exterminated, but after that story is told, the on-stage robots start to glitch.

I'm a. Real. Person.

I'm a. Real. Person.

I'm a. Real. Person.

I'm a. Real. Person.

*(It continues...)*<sup>18</sup>

The actors try to stop the robots, and 'the descendants of a people who dreamt of determining their own humanity' thus demonstrate (with shocking effectiveness) that their 'humanity' is no less rooted in categorisation and violent domination than was the Western humanism (with its

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<sup>14</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, pp. 64, 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 70.

hierarchy of humans, part-humans, and non-humans) that underpinned colonialism.<sup>19</sup>

Replacement, in short, is revealed to be the problem of race disguised as its solution.

### **Another 400th anniversary**

Kim Provine wrote on her blog about *Tambo & Bones* that “I want every Black person in the land to see this show but I am hesitant about saying exactly why”.<sup>20</sup> I wish every theatre person in the land had seen it, and this is why: the racialized Blackness that was produced under the conditions of modernity isn’t the only thing that’s about 400 years old.

I used to work at Shakespeare’s Globe, running workshops and courses for students, and often this would involve giving them a tour of the theatre. We were encouraged to start outside the building where I would locate the theatre with an (appropriately caveated) telling of the urban myth that the timbers of the original Globe were carried across the frozen Thames by a group of actors who dismantled London’s first purpose-built Theatre (The Theatre in Shoreditch, built in 1576) in order to re-use them on Bankside. I would also take this opportunity to point to the financial centre across the river and emphasise that it began to grow in Shakespeare’s time from the buying and selling of other kinds of cargo carried by the river, produced by the labour of enslaved and colonized people all over the world. That connection may have been accidental, but it turned out to have huge historical significance. As Noémie Ndiaye argues in her excellent recent book, *Scripts of Blackness*, ‘early modern performance culture produced blackness as a conceptual resource available to all European spectators via techniques of racial impersonation and scripts of blackness that, in their multiplicity, could cater to various

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<sup>19</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Kim Provine, ‘REVIEW: “Tambo & Bones” at Theatre Royal, Stratford East’, June 27, 2023, <https://kimprovied.wordpress.com/2023/06/27/review-tambo-bones-at-theatre-royal-stratford-east/> accessed on July 16, 2023.

classes, factions, and sexes’.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the theatre of Shakespeare’s time (in which actors used techniques of blacking-up drawn, for example, from medieval practices of representing devils on stage) proved a crucial aesthetic resource for the colonial project of producing and naturalizing racial categories.

Race, in Alana Lentin’s definition, is ‘a technology for the management of human difference, the main goal of which is the production, reproduction and maintenance of white supremacy on both a local and a planetary scale’.<sup>22</sup> The reason theatre people should see *Tambo & Bones* is that it shows - more directly than any other play I can think of - that the technological form of western theatre developed interdependently with the technology of race. Theatre (as we in the west understand it, at least) may not be inevitably racist, but it is unavoidably racial.

### **Theatre is racial / Race is theatrical**

At the start of *Tambo & Bones*, Tambo “*enters with a large watering can*”:

*He waters a fake-ass tree.*

*It don’t grow.*

*This irritates Tambo.*

*Why won’t the fake-ass tree grow if you give it some real-ass water?*<sup>23</sup>

What the stage directions don’t say is that we know all this because Rhashan Stone’s Tambo pauses between every action, turns to the audience and clocks us: ‘see what I did?’, ‘see what happened?’, ‘see how I feel?’ In the terms of the play, then, Tambo is a fake-ass person. His

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<sup>21</sup> Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022, pp. 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Alana Lentin, *Why Race Still Matters*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 5.

actions serve, like the ‘fake-ass tree’, merely to signify to an audience. But Tambo is also a real-ass person. Stuart Hall argued that ‘*race works like a language*’, ‘the body is a text’, and ‘we are all readers of it’.<sup>24</sup> Differences between bodies, in other words, are real enough, but that does not mean that race, as a means whereby ‘we organize those differences into systems of meaning’, is real in the same way.<sup>25</sup> It has real consequences, sure enough, deadly consequences in fact, but those consequences rest upon ‘fake-ass’ foundations, which is to say simply, as Hall does, that ‘race is cultural system’.<sup>26</sup>

*Tambo & Bones* suggests an important next step in this argument, which is to say that if race is like a language, *it is even more like a theatre*. Near the play’s end, Tambo describes the position of a racially minoritized actor in the western theatre today, ‘an old world where n\*\*\*\*s [the n-word basically just means ‘person’ in this play] would have to put on shows for people who looked nothing like them’:

And those n\*\*\*\*s would have to figure out what was real and what was fake, what was true pain and what was just a story, they’d have to do all of that in front of an audience full of white n\*\*\*\*s who had money and freedom and no idea.

How could anyone know freedom in a world where they were always being watched?<sup>27</sup>

Listening to this, I thought back to those initial moments of the play and their patterning as a series of actions, each interspersed with looks to the audience. The clown only exists when he is being watched. The black man cannot know freedom until he is no longer being watched. I also

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<sup>24</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Race, the Floating Signifier: What More is There to Say about “Race”?’ in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, London: Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 359-373, pp. 362, 369.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Race, the Floating Signifier’, p. 364.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Race, the Floating Signifier’, p. 370.

<sup>27</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 69.



thought of the opening of debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (a young man and his mother imagining him being stopped by the police):

SON: So if I put my hands up -

MOM: a threat, threatening.

SON: Slowly?

MOM: Provocative.

SON: Showed my palms

MOM: inflammatory. Could be.<sup>28</sup>

In the theatre, bodies are always being watched. They are held up to the view of an audience. Their appearances are scrutinized for signs of meaning of which the audience is the ultimate arbiter. Those meanings seal their fate. They can know no freedom. Theatre is unavoidably racial, that is, because the logic of race is theatrical.

In June 2107, police officer Jeronimo Yanez claimed he stopped Philando Castile because he “matched the description of a suspect in a robbery”, and then shot him because “I thought he had a gun in his hand”:

I, believe I continued to tell him don't do it or don't reach for it and he still continued to move. And, it appeared to me that he had no regard to what I was saying. He didn't care what I was saying. He still reached down. ... And, at that point I, was scared and I was,

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<sup>28</sup> debbie tucker green, *ear for eye* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2018), p. 4.

in fear for my life and my partner's life. ... I was scared because ... I didn't know what he was gonna do.<sup>29</sup>

This is how race works. Signs of difference are invested with significance thanks to behavioural scripts authored by dominant racialized groups. In other words, those differences are made to produce and make available for exploitation, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's famous definition, "group differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death".<sup>30</sup> Philando Castile was always being watched. Being watched killed him and it exonerated his killer.

### **Abolish the stage**

Exactly 400 years after London's first theatre was built, and theatre began to move from being an *event* that took place in streets, pubs, churches and marketplaces to becoming a *representational technology* subsumed to a capitalist social system, the journalist and activist Naseem Khan produced a report called *The Arts Britain Ignores*.<sup>31</sup> Khan found no shortage of 'performances that took place among ethnic minority communities': they 'would have kept a middle-sized theatre going for the entire [previous] year'.<sup>32</sup> She also found, however, numerous deep, structural divisions that kept 'ethnic minority arts' distinct from those made by and for what she refers to throughout (in an understandable euphemism) as 'the host-community'. I've likewise argued (in a forthcoming essay) that, as an institution, 'the British theatre [in the second half of the 20th century] was a white theatre not by default, but by design', and I think this is basically still the

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<sup>29</sup> Mark Berman, 'What the police officer who shot Philando Castile said about the shooting', *Washington Post*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/06/21/what-the-police-officer-who-shot-philando-castile-said-about-the-shooting/> accessed on July 15, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London: Verso, 2022), p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain* (London: Community Relations Commission, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976).

<sup>32</sup> *The Arts Britain Ignores*, p. 5.

case.<sup>33</sup> One of my reasons is that theatre in the west remains, technologically speaking, *western theatre*, which is to say white. That is a tautology, of course, but if we do not state it, we allow race to hide in plain sight.

I've argued before that technologies have 'political valency': they have a tendency to bond with certain ideological constructions.<sup>34</sup> This idea doesn't explain, however, why that is not an accident. Ndiaye and many other scholars have taught us a great deal about the historical conditions that produced this situation, and one reading of *Tambo & Bones* might be that we can't escape it: Tambo and Bones are trapped in the frame of race as surely as the play is within the proscenium arch. But that need not be the case.

At the play's end, a stage direction tells us that Bones '*feels what it is to not need anything else from the audience or the stage*'.<sup>35</sup> For him, in that moment (although it is far from full of hope), the theatre's social relations have fundamentally changed. Scholar and abolitionist activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore says that prison abolitionists try to 'get people to understand the kinds of relationships that have normalized a sense that what prisons do is natural, normal, and inevitable', and I think there's an argument to be made for thinking in the same way about aesthetics.<sup>36</sup> How can we get people to understand the kinds of social relations that make certain aesthetic forms natural, normal and inevitable? And what would it take not to need them any more?

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<sup>33</sup> Tom Six, 'A Background of Slog: Work in the Theatre, 1950-1999' in *The Routledge Companion to British Theatre 1900-1999*, ed. Claire Cochrane, Lennox Goddard, Catherine Hindson, Trish Reid (forthcoming, 2024).

<sup>34</sup> Tom Cornford, 'Katie Mitchell and the Technologies of the Realist Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2020, pp. 168-192, p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> *Tambo & Bones*, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition', *The Intercepted Podcast*, June 10, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/> accessed on July 15, 2023.

In her 1976 report, Naseem Khan observed that ‘it is only in the West that music, dance, poetry and drama have become segregated into different disciplines’.<sup>37</sup> She goes on to describe the 1975 UK visit of Robert Serumaga’s Ugandan theatre company with *Renga Moi*, whose ‘achievement was firstly to explore a moral conflict through traditional elements of performance, and secondly to question tradition itself by their means’.<sup>38</sup> Ian Kiyangi Muddu finds ‘a careful negotiation between western avant-garde and African indigeneity’ in the new forms for unscripted plays that were created by Serumaga’s company of young actors to engage the volatile politics of post-colonial Uganda.<sup>39</sup> Khan’s report notes that although Serumaga’s company gave workshops on their approach while in Jamaica, no such programme was created in the UK, and it remains the case in the west that theatre finding new ways to use traditional elements of performance ‘to question tradition itself’ is very rare. Indeed, it is telling that the theatre company referenced by Khan that had by far the greatest longevity is Temba, which ‘is not experimental. It aims to provide actors with good, substantial roles, and audiences with well-made accessible plays’.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, one of Wilson Gilmore’s definitions of abolition is ‘life in rehearsal’,<sup>41</sup> by which she means that it is a space ‘to change what we do’: collectively to create new social relations rather than falling back into ‘a recitation of rules and wrongs’.<sup>42</sup> We must change what we do, she argues, because ‘the stage itself must tell a story’.<sup>43</sup> Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey and

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<sup>37</sup> *The Arts Britain Ignores*, p. 107.

<sup>38</sup> *The Arts Britain Ignores*, p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Ian Kiyangi Muddu, ‘Theatre and Politics: Robert Serumaga – The Pantheon of Uganda’s Theatre in the ‘70s’, *Theatre Times*, December 21, 2020, <https://thetheatretimes.com/theatre-and-politics-robert-serumaga-the-pantheon-of-ugandas-theatre-in-the-70s/> accessed July 16, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> *The Arts Britain Ignores*, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, ‘Where life is precious, life is precious’, *On Being* podcast with Krista Tippett, March 30, 2023, <https://onbeing.org/programs/ruth-wilson-gilmore-where-life-is-precious-life-is-precious/> accessed on July 15, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Key Note speech (event not identified), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a354481a9db0961249f52ec/t/60f454ff1ad9bf1c32bdce41/1626625279702/RGW+Keynote+transcript.pdf> accessed on July 15, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Ultz's design for *Tambo & Bones* offered a series of frames around the action (the Theatre Royal's proscenium, banks of speakers and a gantry, an illuminated stage truck for the X-BOTs), and Rhashan Stone and Daniel Ward's performances revealed the numerous ways in which their characters were trapped by those frames. The frames, in other words, produced and structured the play's violence. For me, then, this stage told a story about abolishing the stage, and it left me with a question: what would it take to make theatre part of 'life in rehearsal'?