Alfred Fagon Selected Plays
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A Day in the Bristol Air Raid Shelter
Adventure Inside Thirteen
Four Hundred Pounds
No Soldiers in St Paul’s
Shakespeare Country
Small World
Weekend Lovers

ALFRED FAGON
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The first time I heard the name Alfred Fagon was back in 2000 when the winner of the Alfred Fagon Awards was announced. My ‘Who is Alfred Fagon?’ was met with a detailed description of the tragic circumstances surrounding Alfred’s untimely death of a heart attack aged only forty-nine, and the subsequent failure of the police to identify his body leading to an anonymous burial. There were fewer details about his writing or productions.

I attempted to find out more about Alfred Fagon and turned to the internet but Ask Jeeves (yes it was pre-Google) had nothing. Hardly surprising as there is an undocumented history of Black British theatre that is full to the brim with writers, actors, directors and other creatives all long forgotten.

Twenty years later I recalled that conversation when I was contacted by the artistic director of Hampstead Theatre, Roxana Silbert, asking me if I had ever read Fagon’s play *The Death of a Black Man*. I had. I read it in his published collection alongside two of his other plays, *11 Josephine House* and *Lonely Cowboy*. Hampstead Theatre was about to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary and had programmed only four plays from its extensive backlist that had received their debut productions at the theatre. I was surprised to learn that Fagon’s play *The Death of a Black Man* had its premiere at Hampstead Theatre in a production directed by Roland Rees and starring Mona Hammond, Gregory Munroe and Anton Phillips back in 1975. If I am honest, Hampstead was not a theatre I would have expected to feature in the early history of Black British Theatre. But all credit to the original Foco Novo production for getting a season on in that space. And now I was being asked if I would like to direct its first revival forty-five years later. Personally I had never seen a production of any of Fagon’s plays and I felt strongly that theatre needed to honour its pioneers. And I had no doubt that Alfred Fagon was a weighty pioneer whose work should be known widely. So it wasn’t hard to say yes. Here are some other reasons.

Up until the early 1970s ‘Black theatre’ in Britain was examining and chronicling the stories of ‘back home’ life in Jamaica (Alfred Fagon’s home), Trinidad and other Caribbean countries. Then there were the stories of those who had taken up the invitation and made the journey to the UK to help rebuild Britain in the post-war years whilst still yearning for ‘home’. Playwrights like Errol John, Barry Reckord, Michael Abbensetts and Mustapha Matura all had plays exploring those themes and settings. Even Fagon takes on the tension between maintaining Caribbean values and the temptations of life in the UK with his first play *11 Josephine House*. Arriving in England from Jamaica at the age of eighteen Fagon would have been all too aware of those tensions.

With *The Death of a Black Man* Fagon created one of the earliest plays to focus on the lives of the children of the ‘Windrush generation’ in Britain. All three of the characters are first-generation British born (or educated) with a Jamaican heritage. But there is no talk of ‘back home’. Jamaica is not on their minds. They are already home. They are all aspirational and they are all negotiating their way up the social ladder in England with full knowledge of the position of Black communities at the time.

Fagon sets *The Death of a Black Man* in 1973, so it sits in the middle of a decade which begins with Enoch Powell’s anti-immigration ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech (1968) and
the rise of Margaret Thatcher (1979) with her focus on individual social mobility and her denial of ‘society’. (I have no doubt that Fagon set out to write a deeply political play.)

1973 is also significant as it was a year that the West Indies cricket team beat England 2-0 in the Test series. The colonised beating the colonisers at their own game. 1973 is also the year the Notting Hill Carnival grew in size and featured its first sound system, after originally starting in 1966 – still one of the biggest celebrations of Blackness/Caribbean heritage in Europe. These two events indicate a growing sense of Black confidence and Fagon uses this metaphor to start the play.

The entire play is set in a swanky flat in Chelsea which the stage directions tell us is ‘furnished in Habitat style’.

There are three characters and the story plays out over four acts.

In the opening prologue we find the owner of the flat – eighteen-year-old Shakie – is London-born with a working-class background. He is dressed in army uniform and holding a cricket bat. He delivers a direct address that celebrates the West Indian cricket team, especially Garfield Sobers, and the Notting Hill Carnival in unabashed Black boy joy. Even today in theatre this is a rare and a provocative scene. It completely confounds the stereotype of a young Black man.

Furthermore Shakie is a superb businessman selling African arts and crafts (imported from Yorkshire) to the American ‘beatniks’ on the King’s Road and is making enough money for the flat, tailored suits and a fridge that is always full of champagne. He is fully assimilated in his Chelsea home and his goal is to get rich as fast as possible. He will use any attribute to get it.

Jackie is aged thirty; she is Shakie’s ex-girlfriend and mother of Shakie’s child. She is Jamaican-born but educated in an English private boarding school, suggesting that she has come from a rich family, but there is no evidence that Jackie has any means of her own. In the UK her social mobility comes from her education. Although there are plenty of clues there is a lot more mystery around this character and it could be said that Fagon was less successful with this characterisation.

Stumpie is aged nineteen and best friend to Shakie. The two young men grew up together in the same streets/estate in London but there is a hint that Stumpie may have arrived in the UK as a small child. He has been away travelling around Europe and Africa and has returned with the politics of Pan-Africanism and Black power that had started to influence Black communities in the 1960s. He wants his friend to fund his dream business of bringing African musicians to the UK.

I cannot imagine what it must have been like on opening night in that theatre. These characters completely confounded the popular stereotypes of young Black British people in the mid-1970s. Not having the living playwright or most of his contemporaries to refer to and finding little or no documentation, I leaned into Fagon’s text for clues to help with this new production.

Mustapha Matura was a friend and colleague of Fagon’s. There is a story that working actor Alfred Fagon was auditioning for a part in one of Matura’s plays and was amazed that the characters were written as they really spoke, including their authentic patois. It is said that he started writing plays after he discovered that this wasn’t forbidden on stage.

He found it easy to write. Like the very best playwrights Fagon had an ear for dialogue and was perfectly placed to put challenging Black voices onstage. The Death
of a Black Man has the messiness of real speech, full of repetition and circular arguments. This is exaggerated at points when alcohol or weed is involved. I spent a lot of time alone in a room reading The Death of a Black Man out loud so I could hear it. It was written to be spoken as all great plays are. I started to notice that characters had changes in their rhythm. This would even happen mid-sentence.

During the prologue we hear Shakie the Londoner with some patois thrown in. He is interrupted by Jackie walking into his flat and his language and rhythm instantly changes:

  Jackie  Not even glad to see me?

  Shakie   I am flabbergasted.

  Jackie  Don’t worry, I’m on holiday. Only passing through. Two years ago was the last time I saw you.

  Shakie   It was the same time I last saw you too.

  Shakie matches Jackie’s more clipped middle-class delivery and reveals himself to be an expert in ‘code switching’. Shakie’s language and rhythm shifts again when Stumpie arrives this time shifting from London to Jamaican patois.

  Stumpie   Hippies!

  Shakie   No. Rass clath beatniks!

It makes total sense that aspirational super-salesman Shakie would have code switching in his toolbox. He needs to move across race, class and age in order to do business successfully.

Stumpie uses his code switch to emphasise his politics and to alienate Jackie. Jackie doesn’t need a code switch.

The dynamics between the three characters – two men and one woman – has led many to suggest that Alfred Fagon was influenced by Harold Pinter. Indeed Pinter’s The Dumb Waiter was also programmed in the Hampstead Theatre anniversary season. I tried to find evidence of this by talking to those in theatre who knew him but no one could confirm that he had even seen a Pinter production. But Fagon’s four-act structure was remarkable in that each act had a marked shift in temperature.

Working with a longtime collaborator – the designer Simon Kenny – we spent a lot of time talking about this and reached for a theatrical shorthand. Act One plays like a Noël Coward two-hander. Act Two, with the introduction of Stumpie who is negative to Jackie, has the Pinter influence I have referenced. After the titular event happens offstage between Acts Two and Three there is another shift and Act Three turns into a dream play full of smoke and big ideas. The scale of Act Four suggests Fagon has moved into full operatic proportions. Even though we never leave the single location Kenny reflected this brilliantly in the design by progressively stripping away the walls until the characters are marooned on a menacing island.

With The Death of a Black Man Fagon was not afraid to take on big themes: cultural appropriation, race, class, colonialism, religion, capitalism. While Fagon’s gender politics is difficult and really challenging for a twenty-first-century sensibility there is no denying the contemporary resonance of his work. And the play is very funny – until it’s not appropriate to be.

My revival was originally scheduled before the Covid pandemic but instead we all landed in lockdown. During the ‘great isolation’ the whole world witnessed the murder
Foreword

of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer. In the second half of *The Death of a Black Man*, when news of the death reaches Shakie’s Chelsea flat, the hard politics of the piece comes to the fore. The characters talk about the oppression and murder of Black people in Angola, Mozambique and South Africa, the actions of the male protagonists get more desperate and Jackie becomes more isolated.

Alfred Fagon, soldier, boxing champion, welder, father, actor, poet, playwright, chronicler and soothsayer. Wonderful to see his legacy shared this way.

Thanks to all who have kept his name and his work alive.

I wish I had met him.

Dawn Walton OBE

Director, *The Death of a Black Man* (Hampstead Theatre, 2021)
A Day in the Bristol Air Raid Shelter
Characters

Man
Woman
Man  So how long have you been coming to this amazing hole inside another hole?
Woman  Longer than I care to remember. I’m a sculptor.
Man  So you are an artist since the day you were born?
Woman  Yes always. Well, I used to play marbles then I took to chopping down trees. Why did you follow me this morning?
Man  I couldn’t help myself. I been trying to talk to you for a long time.
Woman  Okay so now’s your chance.
Man  It’s not easy is it?
Woman  What?
Man  Talking to you I mean.
Woman  Oh I see. Well, that’s your problem.
Man  My problem is your problem.
Woman  Since when?
Man  Since we start talking.
Woman  You move quickly.
Man  Life is quick.
Woman  Yes it is funny the way things happened, sometimes life is full of surprises.
Man  You telling me.
Woman  So how long have you been watching me?
Man  Years and years.
Woman  Was it frustrating?
Man  I enjoyed it.
Woman  Good for you.
Man  I don’t know about that.
Woman  Well, you should since you claim you’ve been watching me for years.
Man  What you think is going to happen in the year two thousand?
Woman  It’s only 1976.
Man  Some people take the year two thousand very, may I tell you very serious indeed.
Woman  Well, I don’t and you shouldn’t worry about other people. The year two thousand’s all in the future.
Man  Yes you look hard enough not to worry about the year two thousand. I can’t make up my mind about the year two thousand, maybe nothing is going to happen in
the year two thousand than what is happening in 1976 except doctors might find it easy to say to the enormously insane population two thousand guineas please fuck the please two thousand guineas are you is as good as dead and we will tie your two big toes together with a title on the label deceased gone underground burn the bastard, why are you so serious?

Woman  Looks can be deceiving.

Man  Who do you think you look like to me?

Woman  Are you serious?

Man  No.

Woman  I was up and about early hours this morning in the morning mist gathering energy for the rest of the day.

Man  Me too, my tank is full of mystery energy.

Woman  It’s telepathy.

Man  Could be a day to remember.

Woman  I hope so.

Man  What the hell is going on in Bristol?

Woman  You asking me?

Man  I don’t know what I want to say to you really.

Woman  Well, you don’t have to say if you don’t want to.

Man  It’s hard to keep your mouth shut isn’t it?

Woman  That shouldn’t be too hard, just shut it.

Man  True, true.

Woman  But it’s not as easy as that is it?

Man  Tell me about your underground work down here.

Woman  There’s nothing to tell, just look at them for pleasure.

Man  Why do you walk so fast?

Woman  I wasn’t aware that I did.

Man  Oh yes you do, you were even running the other morning.

Woman  Only because it was raining.

Man  I like the rain, do you?

Woman  Yes I do.

Man  You going to give us a cup of tea then?

Woman  I haven’t got any tea.
Man  Surprise, surprise.
Woman  You see that piece over there.
Man  Yeah.
Woman  Four years went into that – hard labour.
Man  That’s a long prison sentence.
Woman  Yes I know, I like it though there’s a lot of me in that.
Man  You make me feel guilty.
Woman  Oh is that so, why?
Man  I don’t know. So here we are then.
Woman  Yes, we are here.
Man  I have never done this before.
Woman  Well, do you like my studio?
Man  Yes but everything look like hard work to me.
Woman  Everything is hard work. This is the pieces I am working on at the moment.
Man  They all look the same to me.
Woman  Well, they are not all the same.
Man  How comes?
Woman  How comes what?
Man  You look funny when you are in your studio.
Woman  Well, for your information I don’t feel funny.
Man  Can’t say I agree with you, there’s a lot more light in your face since you came into your studio.
Woman  You don’t have to patronise me, I don’t particularly like that type of attitude.
Man  Why is artist so frustrated?
Woman  Right, how to do this morning, I can’t think straight with you around.
Man  Chop up more wood I suppose.
Woman  Right, stand over there.
Man  What’s that, stand where?
Woman  Are you any good at pulling funny faces?
Man  Maybe.
Woman  Well, get some practice in, I’m gonna take some photos.
Man  That’s interesting.
Woman  Yes it is.
Man  What are you gonna do with the photos?
Woman  Look at them, what else.
Man  I know that.
Woman  So why did you ask?
Man  Sorry I’m a little bit shaken with your sudden burst of athletic energy.
Woman  Never apologise to anyone, child. Let’s get started, first your face.
Man  Sure why not if my face interest you.
Woman  Okay. I don’t particularly like the jacket, I don’t think it would go well with this shot, take it off.
Man  What else don’t you like about my garments?
Woman  I will let you know that in a minute.
Man  I can’t wait, I wonder if you would marry me?
Woman  You are wondering about it are you?
Man  Yes.
Woman  Okay, mister, back up against the wall.
Man  If this is a stick-up, I haven’t got any money.
Woman  Spread your arms as if you was Jesus on the cross.
Man  Jesus Christ. It’s not Good Friday is it, or is it gonna be another lynching?
Woman  You’re not that unlucky. Okay, kid, drop your left arm.
Man  Now I know what my right arm’s for.
Woman  Stretch your arms in front of you.
Man  What am I now, Moses crossing the Red Sea?
Woman  That’s a good one. Right, right, take off your shirt.
Man  Sure thing, what about my trousers?
Woman  You can keep them on for the time being.
Man  Thank you. It’s a pleasure to work for you.
Woman  Right, get hold of this with both hands.
Man  Mighty Jehovah Witness, have you any feathers or paint?
Woman  No, you look better without make-up.
Man I didn’t know you were gonna shoot a movie.

Woman Right, right now I want some good shots, steady with the eyeballs. Where did you say you come from?

Man I will tell you for the last time.

Woman No don’t. Jamaica, okay, okay. You look like an African to me.

Man What type, Black or white?

Woman Oh definitely Black. Good, just imagine you’re in the jungle, somewhere in Jamaica or Africa, it doesn’t matter which jungle. Good, good. I’ve always wanted to do this. You must act funny, okay, okay, kid?

Man Are you enjoying yourself, madam?

Woman Oh immensely, marvellous.

Man Good for you.

Woman Right. Okay, ready?

Man I’ve been waiting for the last five minutes, this must be a war movie you’ve got in mind.

Woman Now you’re in the jungle and you are chopping up white people, start chopping.

Man Wait, fuck, what do you mean?

Woman What do I mean? You have never been to the movies on a Saturday morning? Come on, kid, I want at least a dozen different shots. Now look vicious and start chopping up white people in the jungle.

Man This hole is not a jungle.

Woman Who’s the one that is acting all the time, now’s your chance to prove yourself on camera, act as if you’re in the jungle.

Man What does these close-up shots have to do with the action?

Woman Nothing, kid. All I want you to do is to pretend you’re chopping up white people in some African jungle.

Man I am not an African.

Woman Alright, any bloody nationality.

Man I am not taking any more photographs with any bloodclath chopper in my hand.

Woman Why not for God’s sake?

Man Let bloodclath white people chop up bloodclath white people themselves.

Woman What the hell are you talking about?
Man  I am talking about the effect of this kind of photo will have on Black people.
Woman  I don’t understand.
Man  How can you, nobody does, and I don’t think any fucker would care either except the innocent Blacks.
Woman  All I want is so photographs of you chopping up white people.
Man  Alright, bloodclath, bring the white man, bring him bloodclath here, let’s do it for real rassclath, let’s chop up the white man bloodclath.
Woman  Okay, kid, that is the spirit, keep it up.
Man  What are you talking about, I think I better put on my shirt.
Woman  What bloody for?
Man  Because I don’t wanna take any more naked African photographs with any chopper in my hand.
Woman  Alright make it a naked Jamaican.
Man  I am not a savage.
Woman  Who said you were a savage?
Man  Well, that’s what Black people would think if they see that kind of photograph of me.
Woman  So you’re worried about people?
Man  If anyone from St Paul’s see me like this they would think I have gone totally mad to rassclath.
Woman  What are you worried about? The only thing about St Paul’s people is they’re all poor.
Man  I don’t care a bloodclath about St Paul’s, I care about Black people.
Woman  Okay, okay. Let’s cool down a bit. If you weren’t so sensitive we could have had some good shots. It’s silly really, really silly, stupid.
Man  And the first policeman from central police station who see the photograph would arrest me instantly.
Woman  Oh my God, are you frightened of the police too?
Man  Don’t ask me foolishness.
Woman  Well, I think you are.
Man  You can think what you like. *(Picks up coffee-table book and looks at it.)* Is it true you have written a book?
Woman  No.
Man  But your name is on it.
Woman: I took the photographs.

Man: Did you make plenty of money?

Woman: No.

Man: White people never want to talk about money.

Woman: Oh I made thousands.

Man: That’s a lot of money. What is the book about?

Woman: You can read it if you like.

Man: No.

Woman: You can have that copy.

Man: I expect someone write a book like this they make half a million. Are you gonna do any more books?

Woman: Yes I hope so.

Man: Are you gonna do one about Black people?

Woman: I might.

Man: Do one with lots of gambling and pretty chicks with plenty of money. It should do well amongst the Blacks when they make a movie of it.

Woman: Money and chicks.

Man: Are you gonna put me in it?

Woman: I might. Now tell me what makes you think you are a savage?

Man: I don’t think I am a savage, did I say I was?

Woman: So why can’t I take photographs of you holding the axe?

Man: Look, I want to better myself, I am a poet you know.

Woman: So you are not alone, there are lots of other poets.

Man: I am not stupid.

Woman: I didn’t say you were but nevertheless you’re acting as if you are.

Man: You know what I think?

Woman: Tell me what you think.

Man: Okay, okay. I will tell you.

Woman: Remember, all I wanted to do was to take some photos of you.

Man: I think somebody should have disturbed my mind when I was a child. How the bloodclath did I end up writing poetry?

Woman: You’re still acting as if you’re a child.
Man  You’re sculptor right?
Woman  That is correct.
Man  So why do you want to take photos of me?
Woman  So I can look at them.
Man  That I don’t understand.
Woman  Why?
Man  Just forget about the photographs. Just make a statue of me and forget about the photos.
Woman  Look, I think all this fuss you are making is over nothing.
Man  Maybe.
Woman  I suppose you are right in some ways, complex.
Man  Complex, what’s that?
Woman  Inferior complex.
Man  I am not inferior.
Woman  Are you really a poet?
Man  And a bloodclath gravedigger, the same way you are a photographer and a sculptor. I think you are going to sell those photographs.
Woman  So.
Man  So, I want some of the money.
Woman  Money eh, so that’s what you want, well, you’re not getting any.
Man  Why not?
Woman  It takes a long time to sell something.
Man  How long?
Woman  How long? Have you ever sold any of your poems?
Man  Nope.
Woman  So how do you expect me to sell a common everyday object like a photograph, just like that?
Man  Madam, the language in St Paul’s is money.
Woman  Good for St Paul’s.
Man  I think artists and artists should work together but white people and Black people is something else.
Woman  Black and white.
Man  That’s politics.
Woman  Your politics is not my politics.

Man   Listen, I don’t care if you take photos of me naked with two thousand spears in my hand.

Woman  You mean real African spears?

Man   Look, all my life I’ve been a guinea pig for white people and updated middle-class Blacks.

Woman  Oh I see, you’re a lost soul.

Man   Can we talk artist to artist?

Woman  That’s a mistake for start.

Man   Everybody makes mistakes, let’s make a few ourselves.

Woman  You problem’s money.

Man   Once again, yes.

Woman  Then you are not a bloody artist.

Man   Maybe I should have learnt my lesson at school.

Woman  Yes you should have and leave the problem of money to economists.

Man   I am living in St Paul’s.

Woman  Who the fuck cares where you live. Jesus Christ, do you understand the suffering of the public at large?

Man   As far as I’m concerned the world starts and ends in St Paul’s.

Woman  What the hell are you talking about?

Man   Lord God Almighty, when you’re a Black artist and find yourself in the middle of St Paul’s that is the end of life.

Woman  Stop taking the place so seriously.

Man   You have to. The place is always full of visitors from right-wing political group and left-wing Sunday churchgoers. St Paul’s is one of the biggest excuses Bristol get for sending people to prison sensationally. Unfortunately for every reasonable person sensational prison sentence create further hate and so in turn you have everybody in St Paul’s hating Bristol and the rest of society.

Woman  Listen, St Paul’s is a first guinea pig for every crank and genius in the city.

Man   Bristol, eh, what a bloodclath place.

Woman  It’s got a lot of England in it. Then the immigrants arrive in Bristol the petty crime rate shoots up. The truth is life in South Mead and Knowle can be just as painful.

Man   You talking to a Black man. He never leave St Paul’s. It’s Brixton, Chinatown, Moss Side.
Woman You’re on the wrong track. There’s always a St Paul’s in people’s heads.

Man What, St Paul’s finally cracked me up as an artist?

Woman You’re not cracking up, there’s a lot of artists worse off than you. It doesn’t matter where you live. There’s a problem everywhere for artists, except in the little square boxes they hold themselves.

Man St Paul’s is a box for me like a coffin.

Woman Oh forget it – don’t mention St Paul’s – I’m tired of St Paul’s – it’s not the only place in England. Money and St Paul’s and politics – it’s stupid, stupid. You can’t get stuck with all that.

Man No fear, I left that place.

Woman Well, okay then. You’re alright. I know. You’re a poet.

Man The whole idea of life is to do something useful. I mean help people. Some of them are dying of starvation and diseases, how can a Black man be a poet in England while they are living in St Paul’s?

Woman The same way a woman has to be a sculptor in a hole like this.

Man As far as I am concerned women are twice as wicked as men, if you was a man you wouldn’t want to take naked pictures of me.

Woman Ah, listen to his rubbish.

Man Nobody understand what it’s like for a Black poet who lives among white people and starving Black people.

Woman Forget about white people or you’ll never make any money from your writing. It is quite possible if you ever make any money from your poems you will lose your soul in the process.

Man Sometimes I wonder what is the difference between a white rat and a black rat.

Woman I suppose they help each other in their daily lives.

Man All money have done for people so far is give them enough power to fool each other.

Woman Pigs and rats have a lot in common.

Man Do you believe in God?

Woman Come on, kid, talk straight money, God’s what’s eating you.

Man I wanna work.

Woman Well, who’s stopping you, the rats or the pigs?

Man Oh my God. I feel so stupid, stupid. I might as well shoot myself, nobody don’t bloody understand the fucking pain in my head. Why did I pick up a pen in the