

The Hounding of David Oluwale play brings injustices of deaths in custody to the stage

By
Matilda MacAttram

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Shattering the silence around black
deaths in custody

The Eclipse Theatre Company 's compelling production addresses one of the most critical, but least talked about issues facing black Britons living in the UK today.

Playing at
London's Hackney Empire this month , this new show is based on Kester Aspden's award winning book, entitled 'Nationality Wog '. It tells the unsettling story of one of the earliest recorded deaths of a black service user in police custody.

The
offensive title of the book, takes its name from Oluwale's police charge sheets,

where an officer at Leeds police station wrote 'wog' over the original entry of 'British', and another where 'wog' was typed in as the original record.

Playwrite,
Oladipo Agboluaje first came across Oluwale's story at Charing Cross station when he saw a stand at Waterstone's selling the critically acclaimed book.

'What caught my attention then was the misspelling of David's surname, given the cavalier attitude with which my named is spelled, I made a mental note of the book, but decided to buy it when it came out in paperback because of this.' Agboluaje said.

Defenseless service user feels the full force
of police racism

A
month later Agboluaje received a call from the West Yorkshire playhouse saying that they would like him to consider writing a script for the stage adaptation of David's story.

'I read the book and learned that Kester had interviewed Nigerians who had informed him of the unlikelihood of David's name being 'Oluwale'. The official records had named him so, and there were other more egregious version that David went by', Agboluaje said

This play
brings together the work of Agboluaje and artistic director Dawn Walton who skillfully recount this true story of racism and social injustice that shook the city of Leeds in the early 1970s.

The Play brings David back to tell his story face to face with the Scotland Yard Detective charged with investigating his case. It is a poignant tale of one man's search for a home in city that treats its most vulnerable with brutal contempt and another man's investigation to get to the truth behind a vagrant's death.

'Since I took on this project, it's been interesting how many people have sought Eclipse out because they want to talk to us about their stories. What is really scary is that I've been made aware in researching this play that there are any number of cases since 1971 that have never made it to court and barely been reported. Waston said. Campaigners say that since Oluwale there have been more than 1,000 deaths of black people in police custody but no further prosecutions.

Burst of the benevolent British colonial bubble

Arriving

in England from Lagos in 1949 with the status of British citizenship afforded to all people within the Sovereign's empire, Oluwale was an ebullient young man with aims of studying to become an engineer once he got settled in Britain.

A

stow away on the Temple Star Ship from Nigeria, he was discovered during the voyage and spent 28 days in prison on his arrival to the shores of the 'Mother country'. His 'sojourn at His Majesty's Pleasure' was to set the tone for Oluwale next 21 years in Britain.

A

young man who loved life, American films and to dress well, he became part of Leeds tiny black population who lived and crammed into the few houses prepared to give them bed and board. He is remembered even now as a well loved, gentle easy going man.

Rather than fulfilling his

ambition of studying engineering, Oluwale held a series of menial jobs in tailoring, at the West Yorkshire Foundries and local brickworks where he is noted for reading 'educated' newspapers, and slaughterhouse labourer.

In March

1953 Oluwale became involved in a fight with the police. It was reported that he was bludgeoned about the head by a truncheon and ended up with a second three month prison sentence. Rather than being released after three months he was admitted to the psychiatric unit of the local hospital, reportedly complaining of hallucinations. Friends are confused as to what happened to David in prison to drive him insane.

At 22, Oluwale was sectioned and sent to the notorious Menston asylum outside Leeds diagnosed with schizophrenia. The only black patient, held on the stinking, overcrowded secure ward, he did not receive a single visitor. Electric shock treatment and heavy antipsychotic tranquilisers left him a traumatised oddity. When he was released eight years later he shuffled and twitched, and laughed for no apparent reason.

Brutalised to death by those who are paid to protect

Forced to live rough on the streets of Leeds Oluwale was hounded by Leeds city police officers, Inspector Geoff Ellerker and Sergeant Ken Kitching. The two police officers terrorised him over several years. They beat him, urinated on him, smashed his head against the floor and took him to woods miles outside Leeds and left him there.

His

torment at the hands of these officers ended when his body was discovered face-down in the river Aire, close to Leeds' main sewage works on May 4 1969.

The

brutal killing of this ostracised and vulnerable man became the centre of a criminal investigation that shamed a city, and marks the only time that police

have broken ranks over a death in custody.

Oluwale's

body was exhumed following accusations that two Leeds city police officers had hounded him to his death. At the trial a protracted campaign of abuse by police officers came to light. The investigation showed just how many officers knew what was going on or colluded in the persecution.

Two

officers were eventually prosecuted for their involvement in Oluwale's death and as the play unfolds horrific details, of consistent brutality meted out to a man living on the margins of society emerge.

The Hounding of David Oluwale. Directed by Eclipse Theatre's Artistic Director Dawn Walton, is at the Hackney Empire in London from Tues 24 - Sat 28 March.

The Hounding of David Oluwale is touring across the UK at:

31 January-21 February 2009,
West Yorkshire Playhouse, Playhouse Square, Quarry Hill, Leeds LS2 7UP
25-28 February 2009, Birmingham
Repertory Theatre, Broad Street, Birmingham B1 2EP
3-7 March 2009, Liverpool Playhouse,
13 Hope Street, Liverpool L1 9BH
11-14 March 2009, New Wolsey
Theatre, New Wolsey Theatre, Civic Drive, Ipswich IP1 2AS
16-21 March 2009, Exeter
Northcott Theatre, Stocker Road, Exeter EX4 4QB
24-28 March 2009, Hackney
Empire, 291 Mare Street, London E8 1EJ
31 March-4 April 2009,
Nottingham Playhouse, Wellington Circus, Nottingham NG1 5AF

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