

What makes me proud

SuAndi

It was while I was performing at the Walker Theatre, Indianapolis that I met with a clairvoyant who had been recommended to me by Kirk Washington Junior of The Hittite Empire performance group. I was cynical of her prophecies that included her seeing me living in a house surrounded by roses (English stereotyping, I thought) and that I would do more directing rather than performing – producing one show with hundreds of participants. (Really?)

Well, I did move to a house with a large garden, and I did produce *In My Father's House* at the Contact Theatre Manchester in 2001, which included nearly 150 teenage and older men of colour, many of whom had never performed before, exploring what it meant to be a Black man. *IMFH2*, with 64 participants, came two years later at Zion Arts, Manchester.

Black Arts Alliance (BAA) was established in 1985, utilising the term 'Black' as a political umbrella term embracing African, Caribbean and South Asian cultural heritage. As a producing, commissioning and advocacy organisation with a national and international membership, it eventually became the National Black Arts Alliance (NBAA). To produce *In My Father's House*, I worked first with a team of BAA creatives: script writers, live artists, drummers, etc. They would eventually work with the cast and, given the show's themes, I needed them to address their own vulnerability before they could empower the participants to do the same, and to speak in their

own voices. I was the only woman in the crew, which of course enabled me to nudge topics into the room. It was an amazing two-day session that included laughter, food and some tears.

As part of *Acts of Achievement*, a Black History Month programme coordinated across Greater Manchester and Lancashire by NBAA, the performance formed part of a weekend colloquium at the Palace Hotel, Manchester from 2 – 4 November 2001 that explored current issues around Black art practice and production. Keynote speakers included Yvonne Brewster OBE, co-founder and Artistic Director of Talawa Theatre between 1985 and 2003, while roundtable discussions included Denise Wong the founder and artistic director of Black Mime Theatre, Felix Cross, Artistic Director of Nitro Beats (formerly the Black Theatre Co-op), and Jan Ryan, founder member of UK Arts International. It culminated with stunning performances from the San Francisco-based artist Idris Ackamoor, and my friend and fellow poet Ntozake Shange, who flew to Manchester for a 48-hour stay because she wanted to support me.

I had been lucky to perform on the same bill as Ntozake in Leicester while I was a member of BlackScribe, possibly the first Black women's performance poetry group. I worked with her again in Atlanta, when I was hosted by the celebrated African American playwright August Wilson for the Black Theatre Network at the annual National Black Arts Festival. As sister Librans we clicked. Funnily enough, when I introduced myself to Wilson, he had no idea who I was!

What is pride? Is it always self-congratulatory, or is it also about being proud of the accomplishments of someone or some people you know? In the case of *In My Father's House*, it was the latter. Seeing the cast on stage has to be one of my favourite memories, followed closely by watching the *Mary Seacole* opera featuring my libretto at the Royal Opera House, Covent

Garden on its opening night, 3 October 2000. But whereas the Seacole company were all accomplished professionals, these were local guys who had put their trust in the lead artists to guide them in this amazing showcase. The audience went wild. The orchestra of African drummers was mainly made up of members from Twelve Tribes, Manchester. That didn't unnerve the visual artist, Kevin Dalton Johnson, standing stage front to share his experience as a gay man. Nor did it stop the backstage hug we shared after the curtain went down. As one of the cast reflected, *In My Father's House...*

...gave me the inspiration to not undersell my capabilities, and also helped me to learn more and appreciate my culture and heritage. It changed my perspective of other people and other cultures, basically I am grateful to have had the opportunity...

John McGrath, Contact Theatre's Artistic Director, commented how pleased he was to see how many of the cast returned to watch other shows. A couple of the guys were recruited from an agency working with the homeless and with people suffering from mental health issues. For a while they would ring asking if there was another project they could join. Shopping at the Moss Side branch of Asda could prove to be time consuming as I was often drawn into long conversations by a guy wanting to tell me more about his life before and since the show. Nothing hurts the ego more than being publicly, loudly hailed as 'Hello, Miss!' by an attractive youth when you suffer from age denial.

After Atlanta, the African American playwright and scholar, Paul Carter Harrison asked me to contribute a chapter to his co-edited volume, *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (2004). I co-wrote an article with Michael McMillan, 'Rebaptizing the World in Our Own Terms:

Black Theatre and Live Art in Britain', which enabled its account of *In My Father's House* to be archived internationally.

Whatever the genre, art should just reflect society. It should also challenge the norm, particularly if that misrepresents. It should bring into the public arena those deemed invisible. I think both productions of *IMFH* did that. Black Arts Alliance has never believed in volunteers and, coming from a community still exploited in the afterlife of enslavement, I was determined to secure adequate funding, which we did, and everyone was paid as professionals. Yep, I am proud of that.

SuAndi

SuAndi is a multi-awardwinning poet, performance artist, dramatist, librettist and writer, known across the UK and abroad. Her three published collections are *Style*, *Nearly Forty* and *There Will Be No Tears*; her one woman show *The Story of M* is on the curriculum for A level English Literature and the MA in Black British Literature at Goldsmiths.

In her role as the freelance Cultural Director of the National Black Arts Alliance, SuAndi has led members in training weekends, exhibitions and performances as well as producing three pieces of ground-breaking historical research: *Afro Solo UK*, *Voices for Freedom* <https://tinyurl.com/5n84raxe>, and *Strength of Our Mothers* www.ourmothers.org.

SuAndi has received numerous awards including the O.B.E. and two honorary degrees and is a Writing Fellow at Leicester University.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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