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# Classical & Opera

## A whole new ballgame...

The ways in which jazz and baseball were used as tools of protest and identity for black Americans is explored in a new work performed by Hackney schoolchildren.

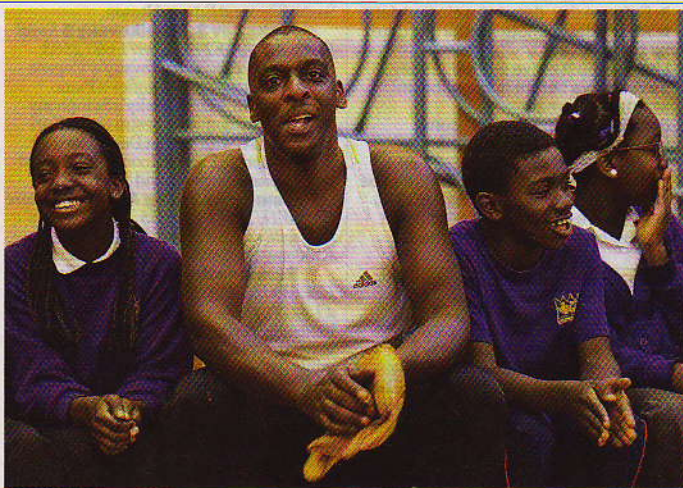
**Jonathan Lennie** previews jazz opera 'Shadowball'

In the foyer of Kingsmead Primary School, a display board proudly announces that its pupils, in this leafy corner of Hackney, speak 24 African, 13 European and three Caribbean languages in addition to English. Next door in a gymnasium marked out like a baseball diamond, 30 of these young people are rehearsing a new jazz opera called 'Shadowball'.

'When do we get to see our costumes?' demands one young man, which instigates a brief halt in proceedings and some concerned discussion among the cast. On being reassured by director Jonathan Moore that it will be in two days' time, the nine and ten year olds return to the business of rehearsing a chorus entitled 'This Game Is Life'.

Also singing is professional jazz singer Cleveland Watkiss, the only adult in this production, who towers over the youngsters in his gym vest, and next to me, on the sidelines of the diamond, another voice can be heard. It is that of Julian Joseph, the British jazz pianist and composer, who is clearly enjoying seeing his opera brought to life, sitting with a copy of the score, occasionally laughing and singing along.

The kids, meanwhile, have turned their attention to pitching imaginary balls into the catching mitts of their partners. It is an activity known as 'shadowball', which black players in America's Negro Leagues would enact so convincingly while warming up that the crowd couldn't tell that there wasn't a ball. Joseph and his librettist Mike Phillips have taken the practice as a metaphor for the segregation in baseball and elsewhere in the USA. Set in Kansas in the early 1940s, Joseph's opera tells the tale of a young baseball fan who goes in search of his heroes, including Jackie Robinson, who, in 1947, was the first black player to break the 'colour barrier' and play in a major league and who also became a civil rights activist.



**Shadow play** Cleveland Watkiss and cast rehearse Julian Joseph's 'Shadowball'

The idea came from the award-winning charity and producer of 'Shadowball', Hackney Music Development Trust (HMDT) – specifically its director, Adam Eisenberg. 'He had the idea and I just ran with it,' explains Joseph. And it was something of a revelation to the composer, who has previously written another opera, 'Bridgetown'. 'I had no idea how many of the great jazz musicians – Duke Ellington, Bill Robinson (Bojangles), Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong – all owned

Negro League teams. They also used to meet up on the road in a great intertwining of sport and music.' Back in rehearsal, the kids are now engaged in a scene in which the black players are made to stand in one long line to be served food, while a single white person occupies the other queue. The director explains the concept of segregation and the

story of Rosa Parks, who in 1955 famously refused to give up her seat in the front section of a bus in Alabama. That the predominantly black kids raise their eyebrows and look at each other sceptically, makes one wonder if this history has any relevance to them. Joseph believes it does and that the black experience is a universal one, 'because you are either on one side of it or the other'.

Much as we like to think that racial prejudice is behind us now, the composer is not so sure. 'It is unrealistic to think that it has all gone,' he asserts. 'Even in this country, black people playing football was a problem in my lifetime. So we have to remember these things and how, in the case of Jackie Robinson, it meant that the limitations that were put on people because of racial prejudice were removed. The good thing about a production like this is that it prepares the kids for things that have happened in history, it makes them question things and gives them the courage to stand up for themselves.'

Now in his early forties, Joseph was born in London to parents from St Vincent and Grenada. Their love of jazz inspired him to investigate the music. 'As a black person growing up in Britain, it gave me some great people to identify with, such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane and Charlie Parker.'

What is it about jazz that makes it the sound of black America? 'It is just a direct expression of an experience of a people and it brings everything together in a sound,' he responds

**'This production makes the kids question things and gives them the courage to stand up for themselves'**

without hesitation. 'So you get the freedom – the necessity for freedom in improvisation – the melodic calls and shouts, you get the scream of pain, the ecstatic joy. People say other music has this, but not in the same way that the Africans who came to America have it.'

It is certainly, therefore, the right sort of music to accompany this story of how one man's talent could not be ignored – and he wasn't even the best black player. 'The Brooklyn Dodgers wanted to win and he helped them because he was way better than all of their players, explains Joseph. 'And compared to Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, he was average. But where he wasn't average was his temperament and intelligence. He could withstand the taunts, he was emotionally very secure and knew how to deal with these problems and also go out and play a great game and shine.'

The opera will be performed on stage by a total of 120 pupils from Kingsmead and Jubilee Primary Schools, before being taken up by another 18 schools over the next two years. The HMDT charity even hopes to extend the baseball theme by creating borough baseball leagues – which, let's face it, Hackney ought to win, given its head start. 'Shadowball' is at the Mermaid Theatre, Tue June 29 & Wed June 30.

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