

# I Have to Go in and Decolonize': Europe's Black Theater Makers Discuss the Scene

Kwame Kwei-Armah, Julia Wissert and Eva Doumbia met online this week to talk about challenging the establishment, Black Lives Matter and the issue of white universality.



By Alex Marshall

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LONDON — This summer, a coalition of American theater artists issued a statement, “We See You, White American Theater,” calling for an overhaul of the country’s theater landscape. There should be term limits on theater industry leaders to improve representation, it said, and at least half of casts and creative teams should be people of color.

Many of the same issues of representation plague the theater in Europe. Last month, Black Lives Matter protests sprung up across Britain and theaters issued messages of support, as well as statements pledging action on racism. This month, 400 British creatives signed an open letter calling for industry reform. “We cannot accept empty gestures,” it said, before listing five areas for change.

Representation in the theater business is an issue elsewhere in Europe, too, despite most major theaters’ receiving government subsidies and growing calls for theaters to reflect their local populations onstage.

On Wednesday, Kwame Kwei-Armah, 53, the artistic director of the Young Vic theater in London; Julia Wissert, 36, the artistic director of Schauspiel Dortmund in Germany; and Eva Doumbia, 51, the founder of the French theater company La Part du Pauvre, met on Zoom to discuss their experiences.

“I am so wildly excited to be doing this,” said Kwei-Armah as he joined the call.

Over two hours, the group found some differences and many similarities in the theater landscapes of their countries. When Doumbia (who spoke through a translator), said she had set up a festival to present work by Afro-European writers and directors, Wissert — who is the only Black head of a major theater in Germany — replied that she didn’t think that would work in Germany. “If you’re too explicit here when talking about racism, everyone just freezes,” she said.

“We’re all having to negotiate and shadowbox with white supremacy,” Kwei-Armah said. But the recent Black Lives Matter protests inspired a change of mind. “I am done,” he said.



The playwright and director Kwame Kwei-Armah has been the artistic director of the Young Vic since 2018. Matt Roth for The New York Times

The three also discussed white universality, decolonizing theater institutions and their issues with the word “diversity.” These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

**What is the state of diversity in your countries’ theater scenes?**

**JULIA WISSERT** I just hate speaking about diversity, because I’m not interested in diversity. I don’t want to diversify anything. I’m interested in the question of representation: Representation in the structure, in positions of power, among people who give money to theaters, artistic directorships.

Most of these [people in charge in Germany] are homogeneous: White, middle class, mostly male, mostly cisgender. It’s very slowly changing, but at the end of the day I think we’re very much at the beginning of this conversation.

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When I got my job one journalist started an interview with, "Were you as shocked about this announcement as the theater world was?" And I can understand that people thought it was a surprise because I'm obviously way too young to hold that position, because you have to be 60 to be an artistic director here, and of course you have to be male and of course you shouldn't be Black.

**EVA DOUMBIA** I don't like talking about diversity either. When I do, it's always on a diplomatic level more than anything. In France, most of the time we use the idea of diversity as a tool to polish our racism and put it in opposition with the racism in the United States. We call that the real racism.

But the Black Lives Movement and what happened with George Floyd, there was a French echo to it with Adama Traoré [a 24-year-old man who died in police custody in 2016]. The Black Lives Matter protests reactivated those feelings here and it's reignited that issue of representation in society, in theater.

**KWAME KWEI-ARMAH** What we have found in Britain is the people who invariably are the George Floyds, the people on the front line, are normally of African descent. But when it comes to diversity, we are normally right at the back of the queue.

The history of structural inequality here has meant there are few Black British artistic directors who have been in place for longer than two or three years. This is a wonderful moment where we are saying, "We want this time to be about us!" And within the sphere of theater, that's revolutionary because it means when I go into an institution, I have to go in and decolonize not just what's on the stage but the business model and the culture of the organization.



"I don't like talking about diversity," said Eva Doumbia, who founded the French theater company La Part du Pauvre in 2000. Jean-Marc Zaorski/Gamma-Rapho, via Getty Images

### Do you feel able to stage plays about the reality of Black lives in your country?

**DOUMBIA** What tends to happen in France is we invite people from Africa — directors, creatives. There's a sort of comfort that they're speaking from their perspective, so it's not the view of someone born in France who's known its racism since kindergarten. There's a sense of confidence that they will never challenge what's established here.

We do have French racism talked about onstage, but it's never being addressed by Black people. It's mainly white directors making plays for white audiences. It's OK to have Black performers, actors, dancers, but Black creators are not as accepted.

**WISSERT** I would say here it's *exactly* the same. The biggest discussions we're having at the moment in Germany is the question of white universality — the white body as being neutral and the white artist being able to speak to any time. There's no understanding.

**DOUMBIA** I get a sensation of feeling a little bit stuck sometimes. Because you want to be able to tell your stories and tell them to the biggest number of people. But at the same time, you feel you're being assigned to a category — being seen as a Black person from the white gaze.

**KWEI-ARMAH** I don't quite know what "Black" work is, and as we know, the word Black is a political construction. It means different things in different spaces. But what I am really clear about is there is a tax from our white audiences, many of whom are quite tribal, and who, the moment that they see someone Black on the poster, think that [the play] is somehow niche.

When we see a white story, we see a white actor in it and race becomes secondary. We go, "Oh, this is a story about redemption." But sometimes the white audience will see a Black face and go, "Oh, this is a story about racism." Or "Oh, it's for them." And that's the false binary we need to defeat in this country. And we are nowhere near defeating it.

#### **Are diversity targets or quotas the answer?**

**DOUMBIA** Can I make an analogy with the face masks we're always talking about? In a normal world with Covid, you wouldn't have to tell people to wear a mask in order not to get sick, right? And yet you have to tell them. It's the same with quotas. In a world with common sense we wouldn't have to ask for them and yet without them nothing will be done. Although it'd be hard to have them here, because we have this huge tradition of official color blindness. [In France it remains illegal to collect data on race for almost all official purposes.]

**WISSERT** In Germany, I wish we had a quota because I think, or hope, it would start a conversation and force colleagues to think differently, as well as give other artists a chance of gaining positions of power. I've had enough of people saying, "I really want to do something." I don't want to hear good will anymore, because good will didn't get us anywhere.

I'd even go further and connect that quota to subsidies: There are no repercussions at the moment if you don't have any people of color in your institution. You can get shamed on social media and people call you out. But that's basically it.

#### **Do you have quotas at the Young Vic, Kwame?**

**KWEI-ARMAH** My previous shadowboxing self would have broken down the connotations of quotas and tried to make it sound polite and soft and nonthreatening to my white colleagues — to not make them worry that somehow they would lose something that they were born naturally into.

My post-Black Lives Matter self actually says, "I don't understand the question." Democracy means that you should reflect your environment. And if you're not reflecting your environment, you're suppressing someone. Quotas is a euphemism for "Should we let Black people in?"

In truth, incremental change is fine, but we're not in the moment of incremental change.





"If you're too explicit here when talking about racism, everyone just freezes," said Julia Wissert, the artistic director of Germany's Schauspiel Dortmund. Birgit Hupfeld

**Theaters across Europe are currently facing financial hardship after they were forced to close because of the coronavirus. Are you worried that could affect efforts to improve diversity?**

**WISSERT** Our season had been announced when Covid happened. But what it did for us was allow us to rethink the idea of what theater really is. It's a question of: How do we engage with an audience? What stories are we actually telling? So we used this crisis to go to the city and say, "We're not going to make money for maybe two years, but we're going to go out to the communities and create projects that can really engage with people who wouldn't normally come to the theater."

**KWEI-ARMAH** When we went into Covid, I was about to announce my new season and the centerpiece of that was themed around — for want of a better term — a "Black British experience." And as soon as we started hemorrhaging money, I went, "That's the one that has to go." The writers are not that well known, and it's a big expensive project.

But then Black Lives Matter happened, and I went, "No! That's got to be the leader of the pack." Everything else takes a second seat — this now becomes the zeitgeist — since theater is here to reflect society and speak about it from its heart. This time has allowed me to stand in my truth without compromise.

**Correction: July 20, 2020**

*An earlier version of this article misstated when the document "We See You, White American Theater" was released. It was this summer, not last week.*

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