

BERNARDINE EVARISTO

Britain: A Continuum

Circles of rouge on his white-powdered cheeks,
the Master of Ceremonies strides on stage
in a goat's hair periwig and a ship in full sail
as hat. He is all afro-foppery.

“Welcome. *Willkommen. Bienvenue*
to the Britannia Retrospective,” he gushes at rows
of style-journos, pens hovering over faux-zebra notepads.
“First off down the runway, amid flashing strobe

and 70s funk is couture from the salons of Rome.
We have pink lurex togas, psychedelic gowns,
mink breastplates and bubble-wrap g-strings,
evoking four centuries, ladies an' genl' men

when Latin was the lingua franca
on these old Celtic lands. Next we re-emerge
out of dry ice, clad in grey sacking, bi-furcated
for the boys, belted for the girls—the rustic look,

ideal for digging ditches and milking cows,
in this 'ere Lundenwic, this Engla-lond,
conquered by Danes and Germans, creating
the Anglo-Saxon vibe. Watch out for the Vikings though!

Rubber horns, PVC tunics and bloody
perspex swords. Check the long beaded handbags
shaped like longships. Have boat will pillage, a hint,
methinks, of the mournful plucking of African kora

with Elizabethan harp, and a display

of iron bracelets, necklaces, tattered culottes (tie-dyed),
and tattooed backs. Slave-wear, ma'am, easy
to maintain and retrieve if stolen. Whooah!

It's getting kind of tropical under this wig. Our cue
for Victoriana. A sitar and damp pianola
accompany a ballet of tweed saris, tartan turbans,
whalebone bodices over shalwar kameez, and pyjamas,

leading us into a trance-dance finale
of 90s jungle inspired by old bi-pedal exports
and jewels returning to the crown. A melange
of plumed cloth caps, grass stockings, big-batty

leopard skin bustles, pinstripe agbadas
and fur-lined yashmaks for all those johnny-just-comes
who have sailed to these shores since time
immemorial.... And so...

under a solitary spot, with a twirl and a flourish, I bow.
You've been a fabulous audience, I take off my hat to you.
It is the ship we all came on, after all.
Here, catch it. It is yours."