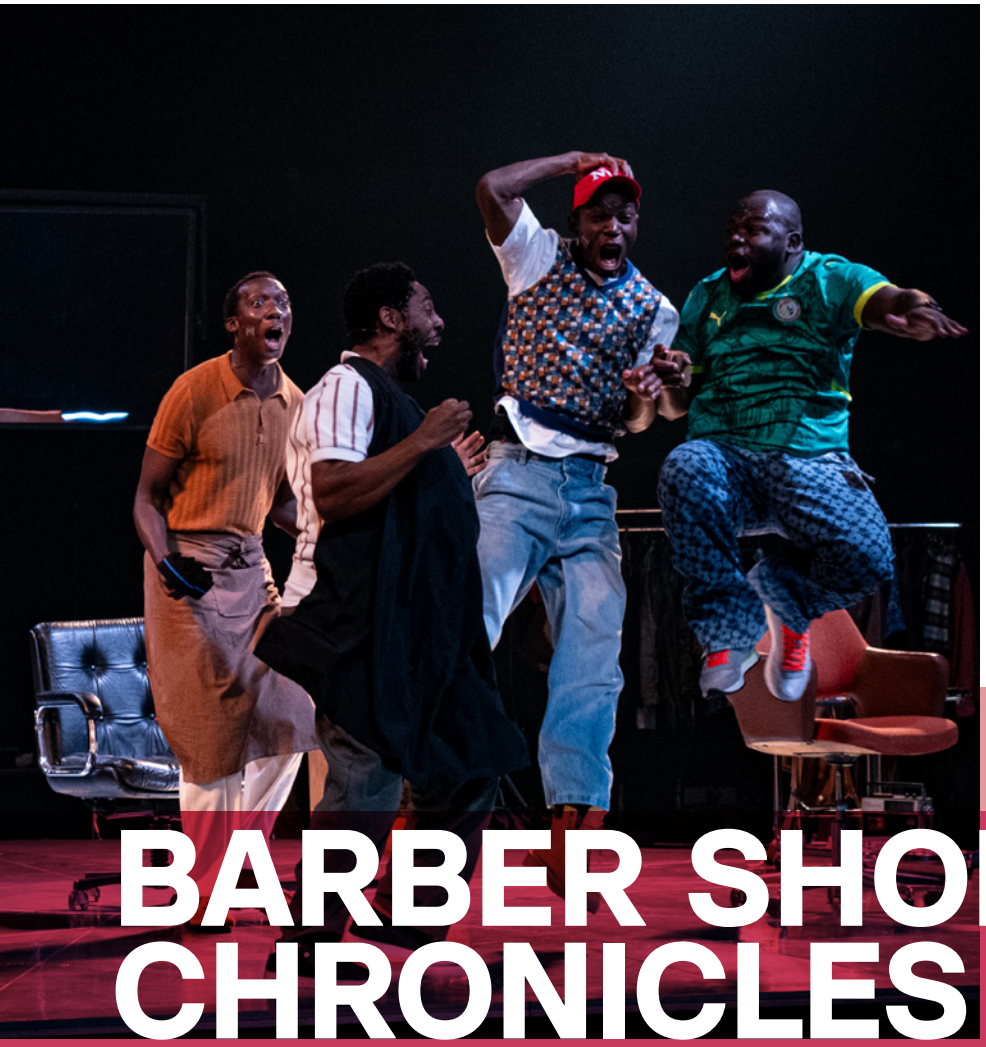

CREATION

BARBER SHOP CHRONICLES

INUA ELLAMS
JUNIOR MTHOMBENI AND MICHAEL DE COCK

Production Théâtre de Liège, DC&J Création

Co-production
KVS Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg,
MC93 Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis,
Théâtre de Namur,
Théâtre Jean Vilar Louvain-la-Neuve,
Théâtre National de Strasbourg,
Le Volcan Scène nationale du Havre,
Bonlieu Scène nationale Annecy,
La Comédie de Valence CDN Drôme-Ardèche
TNDM - Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II Lisbon,
TNC - Teatre Nacional de Catalunya Barcelona,
Lliure Barcelona,
Piccolo Teatro di Milano teatro d'Europa,
Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg

CREATION
THÉÂTRE DE LIÈGE
21 SEPTEMBER 2025

Tour schedule

Season 25/26

21 to 27 September 2025 Premiere in Liège (Belgium) followed by six performances.
8 to 10 October 2025 Théâtre de Namur (Belgium).
15 to 19 October 2025 MC93 Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis in Bobigny (France).
4 to 14 November 2025 Théâtre National de Strasbourg (France).
3 et 4 December 2025 Comédie de Valence, Centre dramatique national Drôme-Ardèche (France).

Season 26/27 (in progress)

KVS - Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (Belgium)
Théâtre Jean Vilar in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium)
TNDM - Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II in Lisbon (Portugal)
TNC - Teatre Nacional de Catalunya in Barcelona (Spain)
Le Volcan, Scène nationale du Havre (France)
Piccolo Teatro di Milano (Italy)
Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg (Luxembourg)
Bonlieu Scène nationale Annecy (France)

Barber Shop Chronicles

Inua Ellams
Junior Mthombeni et Michael De Cock

Ages 12 and up
Duration : 2 hours 20 minutes
Performance in French

Captation : https://vimeo.com/1127105202
Password : Barber2025

Download photos, press coverage and teaser

Cast

With Priscilla Adade, Junior Akwety, BATGAME, Hippolyte Bohouo, Martin Chishimba, Salif Cissé, Yoli Fuller, Aristote Luyindula, Mavà José, Jovial Mbenga, Souleymane Sylla, Clyde Yeguete
Text by Inua Ellams
Directed by Junior Mthombeni and Michael De Cock
Adaptation by Junior Akwety, Omar Ba, Caroline Gonce
Collective translation by Master's 1 students in Translation (ULiège) under the direction of Valérie Bada (Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches en Traduction et en Interprétation)
Set design and lighting Stef Stessel
Costumes Marie Lovenberg
Producer and musician BATGAME
Artistic collaboration Caroline Gonce
Dramaturgy Gerardo Salinas
Assistant director Mehdy Khachachi
Choreography consultant Serge Aimé Coulibaly
Stage manager Baptiste Wattier
Lighting technician Antoine Fiori
Sound technician Kevin Jaspar
Stage technician Aristide Schmit
Photos Stef Stessel
Set construction and costume design Ateliers du Théâtre de Liège

Production Théâtre de Liège and DC&J Création
Co-production KVS - Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg (BE), MC93 Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis in Bobigny (FR), Théâtre de Namur (BE), Théâtre Jean Vilar in Louvain-la-Neuve (BE), Théâtre National de Strasbourg (FR), Le Volcan Scène nationale du Havre (FR), Bonlieu Scène nationale Annecy (FR), La Comédie de Valence Centre dramatique national Drôme-Ardèche (FR) dans le cadre de SPIRITE Pole Internationale de Production et de Diffusion, TNDM - Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II in Lisbon (PT), TNC - Teatre Nacional de Catalunya in Barcelona (ES), Lliure – Barcelone (ES), Piccolo Teatro di Milano Teatro d'Europa (IT), Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg (LU)
With the support of the Belgian Federal Government Tax Shelter, Inver Tax Shelter
With the artistic participation of the Jeune Théâtre National
Support Club des Entreprises Partenaires du Théâtre de Liège

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The Barbershop Chronicles was first produced by Fuel Theatre and The National Theatre (30th May 2017).
The original play *Chroniques du Barber Shop* by Inua Ellams was published by L'Arche, in a collective translation directed by Valérie Bada.

Priscilla ADADE
Fiston

Junior AKWETY
Ibrahim / Rigobert / Plamedi / Pape

BATGAME

Hippolyte BOHOUO
Keeba

Martin CHISHIMBA
Malick / Tokunbo

Salif CISSÉ
Assane / Kweeni

Yoli FULLER
Nguessan / / Mamadou / Aladji / Thomas / Prospere

Aristote LUYINDULA
Samba / Brian / Zakaria

José MAVÀ
Yaya / Moussa

Jovial MBENGA
Abdoulaye / Adama / Yacouba

Souleymane SYLLA
Baptiste / Georges / Christian

Clyde YEGUETE
Arouna / Eding / Omar / Hazael

© Stef Stessel

Barber Shop Chronicles

One day, six cities, a few haircuts and thousands of stories

For many African men and men of African descent, the barber shop is much more than just a place to get a haircut. It is a gathering place, a space for confidences, where barbers take on the role of wise men and the shop is transformed into a confessional. In these timeless places, taboos disappear, and exile, education, girls, religion, football and politics become topics of casual conversation. In a play that spans continents, BARBER SHOP CHRONICLES invites audiences to discover six barbershops in six different cities (Kinshasa, Ouagadougou, Douala, Dakar, Abidjan and Brussels) on the day of the Champions League final, giving the audience the impression of eavesdropping on conversations – mixing French, Wolof, Bambara, Baoulé, Diaoula… –, to the rhythm of the humming clippers and the rustling towels.

With his rhythmic, funny and powerful writing, Inua Ellams immerses us in the diversity of African cultures through countless everyday stories – from the most commonplace to the most incredible – and takes an enlightened look at contemporary black masculinities.

Lively, playful and carried by a communicative energy combining music and lyrical flights of fancy, Junior Mthombeni and Michael De Cock's adaptation celebrates the richness of cultures that are too often overlooked.

Biographies

Junior Mthombeni is a theatre director, actor and musician. His work is renowned for the explosive power with which he brings together social themes, musicality and the complexity of identity in vibrant contemporary theatre.

© Danny Willems

Since 2009, he has been the artistic director of SINcollectief, with whom he has caused a sensation with shows such as *Troost* (with the hip-hop collective NoMoBS), *Rumble in da Jungle* and *Reizen Jihad*. These productions have brought metropolitan stories to the stage, free of clichés, with a direct and complex style in which music, text and images merge into sensory theatre.

He then worked as a creator in the Jr.cE.sA.r collective, alongside Fikry El Azzouzi and Cesar Janssens. Together, they produced the successful shows *Malcolm X* and *Drarrie in de Nacht*.
He directed, with KVS artistic director Michael De Cock, Brel's adaptation of *Man of La Mancha*, based on Miguel de Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*.

In 2020, he made a lasting impression with *Dear Winnie*, an international production in which nine actresses and singers of African origin paid tribute to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. The show, which combined dance, song and personal testimonies, became a collective celebration of female strength, the will to survive and resistance. That same year, he delved into his musical roots with Sangoma Flighí, a melancholic swing ode to the blues. In *Who's Tupac?* (2021), he shook up the genre with a radical talent show in which young performers sought to define themselves in relation to an icon such as Tupac Shakur.

With *Vaderlandloos* (Stateless, 2021), Junior Mthombeni has created his most personal work to date. In this solo piece, he intertwines the story of his South African father, his mother from Mali, and his own experiences as the son of two worlds.

In 2023, he and Jr.cE.sA.r presented the show R.I.S.A. (*Reckless Idiots Seeking for Absolution*), a sharp and humorous ode to laughter as a survival strategy.

In 2024, he worked with Gerardo Salinas in Barcelona on the performance *WTF* at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya. WTF is a bold and committed reflection on identity, privilege and social blindness, presented as a raw collage of language, rhythm and confrontation. Also in 2024, he created *Burning City*, a production by SOCHA, the urban arts platform that Junior Mthombeni founded with musician and writer Tom Kestens.

Junior Mthombeni remains faithful to a fundamental belief in all his works: theatre is not a mirror, but a driver of change. His performances aim not only to move, but also to challenge, question and shake things up.

© Danny Willems

Michael De Cock is an author, director and actor. He has been artistic director of the KVS since 2017.

Michael De Cock's list of publications now includes some twenty titles that have been successful on the international book market. For the past ten years, he has also been writing screenplays. For example, he adapted the play *Achter de wolk-en (Beyond the Clouds)* into a screenplay for the feature film directed by Cecilia Verheyden. In 2018, the film version of the *Rosie en Moussa* book series by director Dorothée Van Den Berghe won the hearts of many film lovers. The The film also won an ENSOR (best film for young audiences) and was voted best film for children by Cinekid.

His books have been published in more than ten languages. For the past twenty years, he has been writing about migration and Europe. In the Flemish socio-cultural landscape, he can be considered one of the leading experts on the subject. Together with photographer Stephan Vanfleteren, De Cock travelled along Europe's borders for the book *Aller / Retour*, which Dorothée Van Den Berghe also adapted for the big screen in 2021.

Michael De Cock trained as a Romanist and specialised in adapting and reinterpreting the repertoire. The performance of *Bovary*, which he created with Carme Portaceli, was then filmed by Jaco Van Dormael and won the MIFF award in Milan. He then reworked the novel into a contemporary opera libretto, which premiered in spring 2025.

In 2024, he wrote the book *Alleen verbeelding kan ons redden (Only imagination can save us)*, a passionate plea for culture in our democracy. He adapted it into a solo show that toured France and Belgium. He also created *Hannibal* (based on a historical novel he wrote) with Junior Mthombeni, an eclectic show where techno, opera, ancient history and stories of new migrations come together to create a unique show that is part of a European project and which, in addition to Spain, France and the Netherlands, has been performed in Senegal and Ghana. He had already collaborated with Junior Mthombeni on *L'homme de la Mancha*, which was performed in Montevideo, Madrid, Paris and many other cities.

With Carme Portaceli, for whom he has already written *Bovary* and *Mrs Dalloway*, he will create a play next year about Mary Magdalene, the «forgotten» and «erased» woman. De Cock is writing the script for the play, which will premiere in Barcelona in 2026.

Interview with Inua Ellams

© Andy Lo Pó

How did you come up with the idea for this project, which is so unique in the European theatre landscape?

I had a friend who was studying public health sciences here in the UK, and one day she showed me a flyer about a project in which barbers and hairdressers were being trained as mental health support workers. This enabled them to identify potential health problems in their customers and offer them advice directly in their salon. I was quite surprised that barbers could do this job, and I wanted to know why there weren't any suitable people from the health sector to look after black men.

That's where the project really began; I wanted to stay in a barber shop to sketch portraits of men having their hair cut. However, I was struggling to raise funds to write the play, and when the National Theatre asked me if I had any ideas for a new play, I mentioned my interest in barber shops and they gave me a grant to allow me to devote time to the project. I then wanted to go further, to do something bigger, so I travelled across Africa to meet men in barbershops, recording their conversations, and I came back to London with nearly 60 hours of recordings, which I turned into a 1 hour 45 minute play.

I worked hard on this play. I think I had fourteen drafts before I had the original, including one that lasted over four hours. I created characters, I took characters I met during my trip, I had them meet each other, I invented dialogues, and sometimes I used lines I had recorded. There is a real mix of fiction and non-fiction in the play.

Why was it important for you to mix elements of fiction and non-fiction? Was it precisely to liberate this voice that had been hidden for too long?

I don't know... In the West, we often think of artists and writers as solitary geniuses, sitting in the dark, surrounded by their own knowledge, exploring the depths of human memory and wisdom to create a work that they then share with us vertically.

In Africa, it's a completely different concept, it's a much more common process. Poets, writers and storytellers are public servants. They serve the people by writing down their stories and later returning them in writing. There is a famous joke about a storyteller performing in a village. He is not very good, so the village takes the story back and tells it to each other. They already knew the story; they were just waiting for the storyteller to make something different, bigger and more exciting out of it. So, when he failed, they took the story back from him…

Or there's the story of a Chinese-American cellist. He was travelling in Botswana and one day stopped in front of a group of elders, promising to give them a concert. When he told them he would be back at 7 p.m. for the concert, they asked him, «You're here in front of us with your instrument. Why should we come back later to see you play? Why can't you play now?» The man, who did not understand, looked around and noticed all the farmers singing and working simultaneously in the fields. In reality, in this community, there was no distinction between art and artist, between performance and performer. The concept of a concert did not even exist, at least not in the way we understand it in the West.

The arts and artists in Africa are the people. I didn't want to sit down and invent things when I didn't need to. Everything was already there. I could go out and find stories with these men, rework them slightly, and then give them back to them through a performance. And that's exactly what I did. Most of the names in the play are the real names of the men I met. They didn't want me to change their names because they enjoyed the conversations they had with me, so I did that to honour them, but also to honour the tradition of how art and artists work in continental Africa.

In your play, we feel the characters' attachment to barber shops. Why are these places so important to communities of African origin in London, in the United Kingdom?

I don't think this is a question that is limited to the United Kingdom; it's a global issue. It's important because Europe is racist. Black men are perceived as vicious and frightening. We are constantly under surveillance, we are stopped and intimidated by the police. And the list goes on. You always have to put your best foot forward as soon as you leave places where you feel safe, where you can just be yourself and relax. Barber shops are those places. No one there will judge you for the colour of your skin.

Places where men gather are often places of aggression, whether it's a stadium, a gym, a motor racing circuit or a bar... And when black men are in these kinds of places, they can be subject to racist attacks, like footballers who are still pelted with bananas today... But if you're a black man in a barber shop for black people, these things don't happen; you're accepted because you look like everyone else, you look like your father, your uncle, your brother... They don't judge you. That's why these are safe places, because you can be yourself.

So barber shops are safe havens where you can talk freely about your problems without fear of being judged by a hostile society?

Sometimes I talk about racism, sometimes I talk about how my father disciplined me when I was a child, sometimes I talk about poverty in the Nigerian community, about how these people survive... But I often talk about survivor's guilt, because I live here now, in the United Kingdom, I am no longer with them there, and I am doing better here.

If I tell someone who hasn't had this experience about all these things, they may not even know how to understand what I'm saying. They won't be able to give me advice, they won't even know how to listen to me, but if I talk to someone who comes from my world, then everything is simpler, talking and listening... Of course, you don't necessarily have to come from my world to understand me, you just have to spend time studying and reading. This is especially true in healthcare, if you're a doctor, psychiatrist... I notice that many healthcare professionals never even talk about us, about our culture... And so they don't know how to give us advice, they don't know what to say that's right. It's beyond their comfort zone, but also and above all beyond their experience. So I don't go to them, because I know they wouldn't understand me, and I have to look for people who can understand me, until the system changes.

I will always be nervous about finding myself in one of these scenarios, so I avoid them. During lockdown, we learned that doctors in the United States – today! – are taught in textbooks that black people have a higher pain tolerance than white people! So when black people go to the doctor, they are often told, «Yes, you are sick, but it's not that serious because you are black. ' That's what doctors are still being taught today... What they learn about our bodies, when our bodies are practically identical... How could I trust them with my feelings? That's why you end up looking for environments where people are like you and listen to you without judging you based on the colour of your skin.

Your play, which originally takes place in an English-speaking world (Lagos, Accra, London, etc.), has been adapted to a French-speaking setting, with other cities. London and Paris have often been best enemies, but what are the main differences between countries like France and England on these issues?

I may be wrong, but I think things are more advanced in the United Kingdom than in France. We have more non-white politicians. We had a Prime Minister of Indian origin, we had a language that allowed us to articulate our differences and then reach out to invite as many people as possible to join us.

I learned, for example, that in France, the word for ghostwriter is le nègre. In England, we have nothing similar, nothing where we assume that the term for someone who is not credited for their work is a black person. The word is not used as much as it used to be, and that has changed with the arrival of new words to replace it, but in some places, this language is still used... This shows how far behind France is on these issues. I can't remember which French politician once said that colonised countries should thank France. That may have been 10 years ago, but saying that, even 10 years ago, was unthinkable in the United Kingdom. So, yes, there is still a lot to be done here, there are still a lot of bridges to build, but I think the United Kingdom is more politically aware of these issues and more socially aware of the country's diversity. And we are integrating this new language into our politics, we talk about it much more than in France. That is exactly why people like Marine Le Pen could win the next elections, whereas here in the UK they only won a few seats and could disappear in a few years.

This is a crucial moment for France[1]. Perhaps the results will galvanise citizens, even if Le Pen wins this election. Perhaps it will create a shockwave and change the country for the better? I don't know. But I definitely think the United Kingdom is ahead of the game, which is why I believe a play like *Barber Shop Chronicles* can have a much greater impact than it did in London. With the rise of the far right in continental Europe, I feel that this play is a good starting point for building new things together.

Interview by Simon Vandenbulke, Dramaturg at Théâtre de Liège

1 The interview was conducted on Friday, 5 July 2024, just a few days before the second round of the French parliamentary elections.

Interview with Junior Mthombeni

After numerous collaborations with author Fikry El Azzouzi (Dear Winnie, Malcolm X), you are now tackling *Barber Shop Chronicles*, **a play by British writer Inua Ellams, who is of Nigerian origin. What convinced you to stage this play?**

When I staged an all-female cast to tell the story of the extraordinary character that was Winnie Mandela, I found a very strong energy on set that I thought was beautiful. So after working with an all-female cast, I was very curious to see what the opposite would be like. I am curious to tell mainly the stories of black men. I wanted to know more about these characters, to delve into their psychologies, into the psychology of what we call «black men».

Then, of course, there is the quality of Inua's writing. I have always promised myself that when I direct a play that has already been written, I will stay as close as possible to the story and the way it is told. As soon as I read it, I immediately identified with the story. I felt close to it in a way.

You mention the writing; did you collaborate with Inua Ellams to adapt his play?

The idea was to transpose the play, to move it from an English-speaking context to a French-speaking one, and this transposition could not be done without his help.

In the original text, the play takes place in several barbershops: in London, but also in Lagos, Accra, Johannesburg and other cities on the African continent, and we wanted to translate it into the French-speaking world. Replacing London with Brussels, Lagos with Kinshasa, and so on. To see what the differences are between French-speaking and English-speaking communities; how language changes these communities, how it permeates them? What are the characteristics of each? We worked with many playwrights to try to stay as close to the original as possible.

On the other hand, when we did the first readings with French-speaking actors (without the adaptations), we all noticed that there were also many similarities: the way of speaking, the sense of humour, relationships with parents, etc.

Alongside this change, there are some minor adjustments. For example, in the original text, they discuss Mandela. Who could Mandela be in a French-speaking context? Could it be Patrice Lumumba? Do we necessarily have to translate these little things? How do we strike a balance between what needs to change and what needs to stay the same? These questions were discussed with Inua.

When reading the play, the importance of language immediately stands out. You always pay particular attention to the body in your shows. How do you reconcile these two elements? What is the relationship between them?

There is something I really like about Inua's play, and that is the transitions. When I read it, I really found a certain rhythm, a certain melody running through the whole play, even though, yes, it is a play where they talk a lot.

You immediately feel a cadence, which is present throughout. So I feel that it's just as easy to incorporate these issues; dance and rhythms are linked to language anyway, dance can be found in language, without necessarily passing through the body. In reality, *Barber Shop Chronicles* is a bit like slam poetry; there is a kind of regular, rhythmic pulse that accompanies the piece from beginning to end. It is with these elements that I have to play in order to bring a particular energy to the stage.

So music plays an important role?

Yes, of course. Even though it's difficult with this particular piece, I dreamed of having live music; it's always important for me to have musicians on stage. Music allows us to bring a radically different energy to the stage. It's not like a cassette tape that you can listen to over and over again, where the sound will always be the same, the voice always identical; live music brings theatricality, it can change from one day to the next, the rhythm can vary, the intention can be modified.

Music and dance permeate the body, transporting us to other levels. It is not simply a cognitive experience; when we discuss language and the body, language primarily involves the mind, while music involves the body. Music is therefore also a way of connecting these two components.

And then, quite simply, I really like to imagine the play as a musical score. I find it beautiful. Whatever happens, music is part of my identity. It's a way for me to communicate. It provokes different emotions and conjures up memories in different ways.

As you mentioned, this play features an exclusively male cast. Yet you wanted to include a woman among all these men. Why did you want to do that?

It is obvious that introducing an outsider into a community will change the energy of the room. Without being able to explain it properly, I like the idea of introducing something new and seeing what happens next. It shifts perspectives. Depending on the context and the people involved, words and phrases can sometimes take on very different meanings. Seeing how another perspective, an outside perspective, can change the meaning of things is what I want to do.

In *Barber Shop Chronicles*, barber shops take on a role similar to that of bars in Europe, where men come to chat.

That reminds me of a story Inua told me. In African societies, there are very few places where people can go to talk about their personal problems. So there was a whole project to train hairdressers, to give them the basics so that they could advise and listen to their customers, because these are the places where men go to talk. They provided first aid, so to speak. This is also the starting point for his play; it was after hearing about this project that he began writing *Barber Shop Chronicles*.

Bars serve the same purpose; it is sometimes said that bar staff are the new psychologists (he laughs). When we had our café Jambo, there was a whole community of the African diaspora who came there to chat. It's like a home, a place to talk, a place to meet people – and also a place for friction! – so I can see the analogy with cafés.

Will the design be a mix between a café and a barber shop?

I really like the original idea of the salon; I've always imagined the set like that. I feel that we shouldn't mix things up too much here. The room is quite bright; it's a barber's shop. I know that I sometimes go off in all directions, trying to combine disparate elements, but in this case I'd like to stick to tradition.

This gives me more space and time to explore everything else: the links between dance and language; interactions, etc. And then, I really like the idea that the play takes place in a barber's shop.

We talk about meeting places, cafés and barbershops; could the theatre also take on this function as a meeting place?

In any case, that is the ideal I am pursuing. But theatre as an institution must engage in introspection to achieve this. I know many black people who do not consider the theatre to be a place for them, like a barber's shop, like a safe place.

It is our obligation. We must ensure that it becomes one. That is what I am trying to do, even though I know how difficult it is. To be completely honest, even I, who frequent theatres, sometimes feel like I am the only black person in the room. It's not the barber shop where I can go and tell my stories. That's why Inua's play is so important, so that theatres can become that place.

When I look at these salons in Brussels, I see North Africans, Black people and white people coming in and starting to talk to each other. From there, things emerge, everyone learns from each other, and a new society is formed. So, yes, if that is the goal of theatre, please, let's make it happen!

What is missing in theatres for them to become the places you are talking about?

In the way we welcome the diversity of the world, and not just the elite who are familiar with theatre. In *Barber Shop Chronicles*, everyone is welcome, everyone feels at home. Different people can say to themselves, «But! This is my play!» It's so important to make theatre a home for everyone. Towelcome. To say, «You are one of us.» To repeat, «Come join us!» Let's exchange, let's exchange together. But not vertically, from top to bottom, let's exchange horizontally, on an equal footing. It's not easy, but it's essential to continue in this direction. And this work is not about programming a play to attract Black people. I don't think it can work that simply. It's something we have to build, and build together. We need to tell different stories. Our stories are still too often homogeneous; even if things are starting to change, we must continue!

Inua's text allows us to open our eyes wider, in a way. To move forward. To learn history from new perspectives. That's why it's so important. To open up new worlds, new visions. I know it may sound like a cliché, but let's remember that a person is first and foremost a person. It's so obvious, but sometimes it's good to be reminded of the obvious.

This play – so well written – I will bring it to the stage with great pride!

Interview by Simon Vandenbulke, Dramaturg at Théâtre de Liège

A Conversation with Text Editors Junior Akwety & Omar Ba

Barber Shop Chronicles adapted for the European Continent

The premiere of the French version of *Barber Shop Chronicles* was met with a standing ovation on September 21 at Théâtre de Liège. The original play by Inua Ellams had already enjoyed great success in the United Kingdom before embarking on an international tour across the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Serge Rangoni, artistic director of Théâtre de Liège, recognized the tremendous potential of the work and initiated a collaboration with KVS, under the direction of Junior Mthombeni and Michael De Cock. One of the central questions quickly arose: since the play is set mainly in England, South Africa, and Ghana, should the team stay faithful to those original narratives? Or should the work be adapted for the European continent and for French-speaking African communities, grounding it more deeply in the Liège and Brussels contexts?

Together with author Inua Ellams, the creators chose the latter path. Following an initial translation by master's students in translation at the University of Liège under the supervision of Valérie Bada, *Barber Shop Chronicles* was "tailored" into French. The "tailors" in question: Caroline Gonce, project manager and coordinator of the actors' repertoire at Théâtre de Liège; Senegalese historian and multidisciplinary thinker Omar Ba; and actor, musician, and creator Junior Akwety, all working closely with the directors. Dramaturg Gerardo Salinas spoke with Omar Ba and Junior Akwety about their creative process.

How did you choose which countries to include?

Junior : The selection of countries stemmed from Inua's original text. We tried to capture the subtleties he wanted to highlight and to identify francophone countries where similar stories or themes could be found. Some countries quickly stood out more clearly than others.

Current events also played a role: when Inua wrote the play, he drew heavily from what was happening in the world at that moment. We focused on what was making headlines in francophone African media, in our own countries, and integrated those elements into the rhythm of the text.

What helps is that, across Africa, despite national and cultural differences, there's a remarkably similar social dynamic. Many themes resonate equally in anglophone and francophone countries. That made the project feasible from the start: we could create a francophone version by adapting the contexts, countries, characters, references, and ethnic backgrounds. It opened up so many possibilities.

Omar : Exactly. In the original text, the choice of countries was based on the opportunities they offered. Inua also considered demographic representation and relevance for a British audience. For the francophone version, we carefully selected comparable countries: Burkina Faso – with its current political turbulence, its charismatic military leader, and its debates on neocolonialism and the legacy of Thomas Sankara; the Democratic Republic of Congo, because of its ties to Belgium, its colonial past, and its well-established diaspora; and Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, both with strong symbolic capital, large diasporas in France, and historical parallels with the anglophone countries in the original text.

How did you approach linguistic nuances and humor?

Junior : Linguistic nuances and humor are central to African societies. Laughter, teasing, and banter are part of everyday life – it's a living, ever-present energy. So, it wasn't difficult to bring that into the French version.

As for linguistic nuances, we wanted to understand the particular dynamics of each country. In Cameroon, for example, there's 'Frenglish'– a blend of French and English that's naturally evolved from bilingualism. It was important to preserve that.

We also placed a lot of trust in the actors to develop this dimension. They know their cultures better than anyone, and they bring a broad understanding of context. We relied on them to question and refine the language, simplifying certain elements for fluidity. That helped us strike a beautiful balance – onstage and in the text.

We even slipped in a little gem from Haiti. We built a solid foundation for the actors to build upon, since they ultimately carry the piece. For each character, the language had to flow naturally.

Omar : Despite the diversity, there's no real distance between the countries. Each has its humor and linguistic quirks, but the underlying tone is often the same. The African diaspora shares many cultural codes through music and the internet. French is a rich language that adapts beautifully to cultural contexts, allowing nuances to shine through word choice, tone, and accent.

At the same time, the differences from the original text are clear: history, colonial experience, and local contexts add distinctive inflections, yet there's also a sense of shared cultural affinity.

What about local accents and political context?

Junior : Inua's original text already referenced political and historical events to illuminate certain themes and reflect social processes. Politics is part of daily life for Africans – it's tied to the pursuit of a better present and future. We therefore had to address it – with humor, seriousness, and respect.

At the same time, we were able to retain elements of the original while adapting to local contexts, which differ greatly from one another. Africa consists of thousands of peoples, numerous languages, and immense cultural wealth. When it came to accents, we let the text shape the character, and then the character became the foundation for a voice, an accent, and a story. From that, we built what felt most natural in each country – while preserving the subtle poetry of Inua's writing, its musicality and precision.

The goal was to create natural, conversational dynamics that evoke cities like Yaoundé, Kinshasa, Abidjan, or Dakar, but also the African diaspora in Brussels. It was about finding common ground and developing a meaningful, continent-wide theme. The process unfolded through compromise and dialogue with Inua – which was deeply enriching.

Omar : Politics and social context aren't just the backdrop – they're integral to the stories and the play's energy. They shape living conditions and determine how people fight to survive every day. For many, that's also what drives migration.

How does the play reflect the diversity of diasporas and countries?

Junior : The diversity of the African diaspora is fully visible in the barbershops of Matonge in Brussels, where Senegalese, Ivorians, Cameroonians, Congolese, and Burkinabé meet. That diversity is clearly reflected through the cast itself, each actor bringing a different background.
Even within the represented countries, the characters are portrayed in diverse ways. There's a range of techniques and performance styles that express each country's unique dynamic. As in any society, people differ – but together, they create a shared urban culture.

Omar : That's true – the barbershops are like miniature islands of the African continent. People of different nationalities meet or work together there, making the continent's cultural and national diversity visible.

How were the actors selected and involved?

Junior : The artistic team – directors Junior Mthombeni and Michael De Cock – handled the casting. I had the chance to meet all the actors; most had gone through auditions, and their desire to be part of this story really moved me.
They were involved from the very beginning of the creative process. During the first reading, we asked them about the credibility of the characters and their stories. The actors did in-depth research on accents and language use, and they actively helped shape their characters. It was a highly collaborative process, marked by constant dialogue between dramaturgy, stage design, and direction.

How did you establish the tone and energy of the play?

Junior : The tone and energy were strongly influenced by the generosity of the ensemble. There was a genuine desire to share emotions and build brotherhood. The play carries that essence – taking care of the story so that it resonates and has impact.

Omar : The tone and energy emerged during the writing process itself. Each character was given a voice, a color, and a depth that made the dramaturgical and directorial work flow naturally. The final result remains true to the energy of the original while embracing a new context with its own unique signature: explosive, profound, and light all at once – a mosaic of feelings.

Interview by Gerardo Salinas, Dramaturg at KVS

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