

BELVOIR



Sydney
Festival
2022

BLACK BRASS



BLACK BRASS

6 – 23 JANUARY

CONTENT WARNING

Black Brass uses coarse language, loud sound (siren) and cigarette smoking.

RUNNING TIME

70 minutes (no interval)

CAST

Mahamudo Selimane as Trumpet

Mararo Wangai as Sleeper

TEAM

Creator, Writer & Performer **Mararo Wangai**

Director & Co-Creator **Matt Edgerton**

Assistant Directors – Sydney Season

Adriane Daff & Hannah Goodwin

Set & Costume Designer **Zoë Atkinson**

Dramaturg **Afeif Ismail**

Lighting Designer **Lucy Birkinshaw**

Lighting Realiser **Matt Cox**

Musician & Composer **Mahamudo Selimane**

Script Editor **Sisonke Msimang**

Sound Designer **Tim Collins**

Script Editor & Original Creative Producer

Zainab Syed

Community Engagement Coordinators

Niwa Mburuja & Wanyika Mshila

Community Ambassador **Anna Morris**

(**Black Owned Businesses Australia**)

Production Manager **Ben Nelson**

Stage Manager **Cecilia Nelson**

Black Brass is produced by

Performing Lines WA

In association with **Sydney Festival**.

Supported by the Western Australian Government through **the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Lotterywest** and **Fremantle Arts Centre**.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we share our stories. We also pay our respect to the Elders past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Mararo Wangai

Q&A WITH WRITER, PERFORMER AND CREATOR

MARARO WANGAI

How did the *Black Brass* project come about?

The project came about from a need that I felt for a performance that not only showcased the African experience, but celebrated these voices without being afraid to look critically at the issues concerning the experience of living in the diaspora. The script germinated from the 20 hours' worth of interviews that I conducted with individuals from a diverse range of African countries who have settled in Australia – permanently and otherwise. The interviews were conducted under the theme of resilience and this sharing of the complexities, depth and nuance in each of these voices, laid the foundation for what *Black Brass* has come to be. Looking back now, I am struck at how naively I went into these interviews, imagining that resilience would remain at the centre of our conversation, but each time without fail that I sat down with my notebook full of questions it would inevitably at some point close and remain on the table – I was not here to make demands of another's life experiences

- I was here to listen, to hold the space, and be present with the life that sat across from me.

Though this is a work of fiction, *Black Brass* has drawn from the deep well of each of these individuals' life experiences. It is a celebration of these voices and a statement to the creative industry - these voices are worthy of any stage and screen and we all deserve to see our stories told with nuance, delicacy and rigour. We must continue the work of opening pathways for those that exist on the fringes of society to speak their truths and tell their stories.

Can you explain your process in creating the show?

After conducting the interviews, I reached out to Afeif Ismail with his magical realist poetic style, and we came together to find a narrative that we could use as a vessel for these stories. During these conversations, it became clear how music could be an essential aspect of the narrative – I have always been amazed at the power that

music has to connect people beyond culture, beliefs and ideologies; it speaks to the heart. Matt Edgerton came on board and played such a crucial role in fine-tuning the narrative journey with a particular focus on coherency, narrative structure and a director's eye for the finest of details.

Later in the process we invited Mahamudo Selimane to join us and his incredible musical expertise, added one of the final layers to the work. In the final stages of the development we were lucky enough to have Sisonke Msimang look at the work afresh and question it. This process has been such a beautiful reminder of my love of the process of creating theatre; where every artist brings their own unique expertise to the story and in the end the work belongs to the whole ensemble. Each of the creative team from Zoë Atkinson's magical set, Lucy Birkinshaw heavenly lights, Tim Collins' angelic sound engineering, have been such essential elements of the work, we have all been looked after by an incredibly hard-working production team of Rose Liggins and Ben Nelson. Each and every one of us has invested deeply in the work and created a universality that is at the heart of *Black Brass*.

Why did you choose to both create the show and star in it?

Having worked with the amazing team at The Last Great Hunt I have learned that as an artist I have never been truly comfortable wearing a single hat. I will always be a writer and a performer and it just so happened that this is an opportunity for me to do both.

It was initially a very daunting experience but when you're supported by the powerhouse of a producer that is Zainab Syed and the dream team at Performing Lines WA, I felt secure enough to take on the role of breathing life into *Black Brass* and inhabiting the world that we have all worked incredibly hard to create together.

Was it your idea to incorporate music and if so why?

Music has always been an essential part of the work. We forget that theatre is sometimes still seen as elitist – as though it belongs to a single culture or class of people – whereas music is celebrated universally and allows us to shed our cultural armour, feel and connect with issues beyond ourselves, and just simply let go of ourselves for moment.

I wanted *Black Brass* to be a work that allows an audience to not only connect with it cerebrally but perhaps even spiritually.

Just like Hugh Masekela's song 'Stimela', the music that Mahamudo has created takes us on a journey through the African continent; in languages ranging from Shangana to Swahili, Kikuyu to Portuguese, Lingala to Xhosa. Each song carries a history within it that speaks for itself.

What messages are there in the show for the audience?

I don't believe it is my place as an artist to give messages to an audience. I am more interested in examining historical accounts, cultural ideologies, and philosophies and unpacking the complexities between and within all of this through vigorous examination and sitting all of this beside first person accounts.

In creating *Black Brass* some of the questions that have recurred in the process of examining the African experience in the diaspora come to mind; What does it mean to belong? What cultural baggage and heritage do we carry with us when we migrate? What do we choose to keep or let go off?

These are issues that are at the heart of *Black Brass*, and whatever messages an audience takes away from this narrative is out of my control as each will experience it from their own unique vantage point and make of it what they will. My job is to celebrate these stories, proclaim that they are deserving of an audience's attention and, together with the rest of the team, craft a journey that is challenging, thought-provoking and unafraid of truths as uncomfortable as they may be.

We are living in uncertain times, and headed towards an uncertain future, writing for me will always be a hopeful experience; I write as a grandchild of the colonial experience, I write as a child with one foot in the world and the other on the continent of my birth, and I write as a father looking out into an unknown future hoping that there is a place for all of us to live with dignity out there.



Mararo Wangai and Mahamudo Selimane

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

MATT EDGERTON

Developing this play with this team of artists has been a joy. Our main guide in discovering this show has been Mararo's unerring artistic compass. He wanted to tell the story of a man who many would walk past without looking twice; to find the extraordinary in the ordinary; to celebrate the resilience of the African diaspora; and to inspire us to be curious about the vast histories we all carry.

I have relished the time we have been afforded in creating this work, exploring the literary, philosophical and musical inspirations that, along with the interviews themselves, are its ongoing sources. Theatrical giants such as August Wilson and Lorraine Hansberry have given us formal models as we moulded a series of verbatim interviews into a dramatic work. The philosophy of Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was an ongoing provocation to keep the critical and social edge of the work keen. And the music of Hugh Masekela, Sathima Bea Benjamin and many others reminded us of the limitless emotional and political potential of music.

The other great inspirations have been the wellsprings of talent in the creative team. There is a particular alchemy that can sometimes happen when prodigious talents like Mahamudo and Mararo share a space. Music and poetry invented and invested with soul and body, songs composed spontaneously giving sound and form to something ephemeral but profound. The script itself has been sustained by rich springs: Mararo, Afeif, Sisonke, Zainab and myself have pored over every word and I can feel each of their influences in each syllable. Our whole creative team has approached the project with this sense of careful attention, paired with a playfulness and willingness to yield to the flow and changing course of the work. Zoë has given us a space that feels simultaneously prosaic and poetic – a real-world visual metaphor. Tim's sound design has taken shape gradually, with an ear to the heartbeat of the performers, so that at times it has felt like an organic extension of their thoughts and impulses. And Lucy's effortlessly expressive lighting of this space feels as much a part of the work's meaning as Mararo's poetry.

I am sad not to have been able to travel to Belvoir for this season with Ben, Tim and the performers. This is a theatre I grew up going to and it is a very special place. I want to pay particular thanks to all the creatives that have joined us for this season to continue the work of those of us who have remained in Perth. To Adriane – thank you for your artistry and for being my eyes on the ground and to Hannah for your invaluable insights about staging in the Belvoir space; Matt – thanks for your accomplished hand with Lucy's lights; Cecila – thanks for stepping into the flow of the show and managing our stage Sydney-side. A huge thank you to Jen and the team at Performing Lines for unwavering support in getting this show out of fortress-WA. Thank you to Rose for all your expert stage management in the original season and getting the remount tour-ready. And to Eamon, Zainab and all the team at Belvoir – thank you so much for having us.

Our creative team spoke a lot about the pleasure of ambiguity. I hope each person in the audience goes on their own journey and has a unique experience of *Black Brass*. Our wish is that what you encounter speaks to you in these many voices: through the pan-African languages within the songs, the many languages of music itself, the shifting whisper of light, the sharp inflections of theatrical design and the conversation between these two bodies orbiting one another for an hour.

Mahamudo Selimane and Mararo Wangai

