

BLACK^{EN}

THE SORROWS OF BELGIUM I: CONGO

Timing: 2 hours, no break.

Please switch off your mobile phone during the performance.

Multilingual performance with Dutch and English surtitles.

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We are working to improve our communication about our theatre and our activities.

If you spot text in or from NTGent which you believe overlooks, or misrepresents, an important perspective, or uses language which you suggest we should improve or change, please email us at info@ntgent.be.

We cannot reply to every mail, but we will read and consider each one.

CREDITS

With	Chris Thys, Peter Seynaeve, Tom Dewispelaere, Andie Dushime, Yolanda Mpelé, Aminata Demba, Nganji Mutiri, Frank Focketyn
Music	Sam Gysel
Direction	Luk Perceval
Text	William Sheppard, Steven Heene, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Luk Perceval, Nganji Mutiri, Aminata Demba, inspired by James Baldwin, Kate Tempest, Lucas Catherine, Gil Scott-Heron, Léonora Miano, Pagan Kennedy, Joseph Conrad, Jef Geeraerts, Giordano Bruno, William Shakespeare, Jean-Paul Sartre, Aimé Césaire and sister Adonia
Dramaturgy	Steven Heene
Dramaturgy internship	Lilly Busch
Set design	Annette Kurz
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Stage manager	Marc Swaenen
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Props	Flup Beys
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Creation costumes	An De Mol, Mieke Van der Cruyssen
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Coordination production and technical department	Patrick Martens
Thanks to	Steve Dugardin, Elke De Brouwer, Ted Stoffer
Production	NTGent

This performance was realised with support via the Belgian Tax Shelter.



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THAT UNIQUE BELGIAN FEELING OF SHAME – Luk Perceval

When, in the 1960s, I went as a little boy with my father to watch football in our highest division, I was struck by the humiliating jungle sounds that were produced against the first Congolese football players. My father called them 'black pearls' – with their daring and talent they gave colour and creativity to the often boring 'Raymond Goethals' football (*the name of a former Belgian trainer, red.*). At that time, there was also a Congolese salesman walking around in the stands – he probably stayed in Belgium after the World Fair in Brussels of 1958. He wore a white waiter's coat and a bowl on his head with packages of homemade *lakrids*, black candy. With his very distinctive voice he shouted: "Lakelakelakelakelak!" The people in the stadium enjoyed imitating him with monkey sounds. How humiliating must it be, both for those Congolese footballers and for the candy seller, to be addressed by Belgians as a baboon, I thought. In a country that has committed an unprecedented mass murder.

The same feeling of shame struck me last week, when I saw the images of the UN envoy urging Belgium to apologize for what happened in the Congo. The fact that someone has to come from abroad to remind us of our moral duty is, at the very least, very painful. How is it possible that these apologies were not made much earlier? How on earth is it possible that schoolchildren still have so little knowledge of what happened in the Congo? How is it possible that there are still statues in Belgium referring to the 'glorious leader' Leopold II? A king who, measured by the bloodshed he caused, comes close to Stalin, Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot? Yet there isn't any Belgian who thinks it would be more than appropriate, out of respect for the millions of victims, to remove his proud statue from the dike in Ostend.

Nie wieder

Currently, I work with a cast of Belgian and Afro-European actresses and actors on *Black*. This play is the first part of the trilogy *The Sorrows of Belgium* and focuses on the dark history about Belgian Congo and the Free State. Looking at the multitude of content and archive material we draw from, it's clear that we Belgians provided us with a good alibi. By blaming it all on Leopold II, we can close our eyes and ignore all those Belgians who carried out the orders from Brussels with ruthless violence. Assuming that the coloured man is not a human being, but a 'wild' person who could only be 'civilized' by force.

Over the past eighteen years, I have lived and worked in Germany, and I have experienced how the Germans almost daily ask themselves the question: *Warum?*. Questions that not only reflect on the system that Adolf Hitler installed, but also on the *rücksichtslosigkeit* with which the executors of that system started their murderous assignments. The most exemplary house fathers earned good money with these degrading jobs. This history is constantly being explained in schools, in order to make the young people aware of the lack of awareness. Unfortunately, racist choirs are also a phenomenon in the Bundesliga. Something that is happening everywhere today – in Italy, teams are punished for the racist choirs of their supporters and then have to play in front of an empty stadium.

But, also in Belgium, stadiums are marred by stupid racism. The proof of how little historical awareness there is, how little the average Belgian is aware of the atrocities in the Congo, a country that still suffers from the looting of the past.

Immigrant

In *Black*, we follow the trail of William Henry Sheppard, one of the first African-American missionaries to go to the Congo on a mission, witnessing the violence perpetrated by the *Force Publique*. On his return to America, he ended his lectures with the words: "As a man of God, ladies and gentlemen, sent to Africa to spread the word of Jesus, about the sacrifices he made for humanity, I returned with a sense of shame to our beloved country. How can we really believe in the Almighty? How can we face Him in our prayers, knowing what happened in His name?"

That is also what strikes me as a Belgian, when I hear that the UN say that it is high time that Belgium apologizes for what happened in the Congo: a feeling of shame. Even the fact that there is a discussion throughout the country as to whether or not we should apologize... It's downright shameful.

For the past twenty years, I have been abroad as a guest worker and an immigrant. Recently I came back to live in Belgium, I wanted to be with my family. Once again, I've experienced what it feels like to be Belgian. That unique feeling of shame, a feeling that is deeply rooted in this country. And if even the first citizen of the land, the king, doesn't want/can/may/may excuse himself, then I want to do so, and I hope many Belgians will do it together with me. My very personal and sincere apologies to the whole African continent. *Bow.*

Luk Perceval – an editorial in *De Standaard* on 20/02/19.

hell are not the others
hell is what other people go through
when the world decided to turn its back on them
turn its back on them and let them burn
to let them burn them and their babies
so, it shouldn't surprise you
that I preferred to be born in the middle of a lake
that I swam every night
to survive
that I kept swimming
to remove the whip marks
that I swam even harder to forget the trace of the insults
and condescension on all sides

how
by not teaching the African version of history
do you want the children not to lose their bearings?
how to explain to each child
that it is unthinkable to compensate victims for
multi-generational slavery?
how to tell them that it is impossible to do so
without destroying entire pillars
of western civilization?

but
I guess
that this is also survival
to maintain privileges by any means necessary
honest and dishonest
by any means necessary
keep the hand
and not just one
but all these hands cut off

to remind us
that the history of people meeting
is never very beautiful
when you look at it closely
there is at least one world
correction
at least two worlds
which separate
the great humanist theories
from their tiny daily applications

but let's not despair
it's not easy
but I believe in it
plural identity, I believe in it
in the singular universal
I believe in it very strongly
because I see it every day
in eyes of all colors
I swam to see just that
I swam to shore
I put down a foot in the name of my father
I put down a foot in the name of my mother

Nganji Mutiri, 2019.
www.nganji.be

BLURRED LINES – Steven Heene

You know the word '*caoutchouc*'? It's French for 'rubber'.

Yes, but the French learned it from the Spanish.

... who learned it from the natives in South America: *cahu chuc*.

It means: the weeping wood.

Le bois qui pleure.

The conversation above is one of the many scenes in *Black* that didn't make it to the final version. To give you an idea: the first version of the play was over 70 pages; today, a week before the opening night, the script only counts half that number. And there is a real chance that even more fragments will be deleted in the last straight line, if the dynamics of the performance require so. This principle of 'kill your darlings' is, of course, nothing new in the making of an artistic project, but in this case, it is more applicable than ever. The subject of *Black*, or should we say: the subjects, are extremely voluminous, broad and profound at the same time. In other words, the material is monumental, as can be expected from a rough chapter in world history, with a highly contemporary relevance and an almost tangible social sensitivity. It's like an ancient tree with countless branches, as far as the eye can see, with numerous characters who each deserve a portrait. In the positive sense but also in the negative sense.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

To give a few examples: those who dig themselves into the common story between Belgium and Congo, will soon come across the type of the 'explorer'. Men from Europe, such as the Scotsman David

Livingstone, or Henry Morton Stanley, the Welsh journalist. Or Marlow, the main character in the literary classic from 1899 by the Polish author Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Their journeys are engraved in our collective memory and still have something heroic about them, because they are exemplary of the courageous daredevil who, at the risk of his own life, explores new horizons. The word 'explorer' leaves no doubt whatsoever about the narrative perspective in question: these men 'discovered' something that previously didn't exist, meaning: was unknown in Europe. Fortunately, today, we are past that all too simplistic, one-sided view, thanks to critical biographies and reference works like *Congo. A prehistory* by Lucas Catherine.

Another recurring character type is of a political nature. Like the Irish diplomat Roger Casement. He was initially a close associate of Stanley in Congo, working for the African International Association, one of the vehicles that King Leopold II had created to go about his business in Congo. But Casement became increasingly critical of the Free State regime, and when he was commissioned by the British government in 1903 to investigate the state of Congolese human rights, his report was revealing and devastating: "slavery, mutilations, torture of the local population on the rubber plantations". The so-called *Casement Report* on Congo was a turning point in the international perception of the Congo Free State. Later, Casement would conduct a similar investigation in Peru; he was knighted as a champion of human rights in 1911.

And, of course, there is the figure of Leopold II himself, in many ways the spider in the web, as far as the exploitation of Congo is concerned. His megalomania and greed have seldom been matched in history, as has the number of victims his regime has caused in Congo. Estimates speak of 10 million deaths or more. It places our former monarch – who himself has never been in Congo – in the line of dictators such as Mao, Stalin and Hitler.

THE CURSE OF THE CONGO

The above names are, as said, only a few examples of the fascinating personalities who present themselves quite quickly in the reading about Congo as a former colony. This being said: none of them is actually present in the text of *Black*, unless via an indirect reference. Even the evil genius Leopold II gradually disappeared into the background during rehearsals. (Later in this program booklet there is a scene with the Belgian king in Brussels which was cut in the edit, for your information.) His absence may be surprising – after all, he was the initiator in several ways, as described excellently by the American historian Adam Hochschild in *King Leopold's Ghost*. But from the beginning, during the preparations for *Black*, as the first part in a trilogy called *The Sorrows of Belgium*, it was clear that we wanted to expose 'longer lines' through these productions. In other words: lines that do not stop at a land border or between generations, but that illustrate how much certain mechanisms have – and still have – an influence. In concrete terms, as far as the Congo story is concerned, it would be too short-sighted to attribute the tangle of greed, hubris and racism to one particular individual, even if the initiator in question bears a crushing historical responsibility. "The curse of Congo is its natural wealth", as BBC journalist Dan Snow wrote in 2013. It's this wealth – diamond, gold, copper, tin, cobalt, coltan – that explains why boats for centuries now sail on and off to the mouth of the Congo River. To trade, but also to plunder the land.

A reference from *Black* that did reach the final version: already in 1608 Pieter van den Broecke from Antwerp sailed to Congo. The big profit was then in the ivory trade. Van den Broeck bought no less than 31,000 kilograms of ivory, worth 4.5 cents per pound. He traded that mountain of elephant teeth for iron bars, beads and brandy and sold the ivory in Amsterdam at 45 to 60 cents per pound, so for ten to fifteen times more. And even today, Congo is considered one of the largest treasuries

on earth, with coltan as a raw material for mobile phones. The era of rubber harvesting only really started after the invention of rubber tires: both the American inventor Charles Goodyear and his Scottish colleague John Dunlop had discovered a process by which rubber could be used to make bicycle and car tires. It led to a race between the Western powers to harvest as much rubber as possible in their colonies in Africa and South America, for the new automotive industry. It gives a wry undertone to the word 'caoutchouc', which in its origin refers to trees that are 'crying'.

OH LORD

Enter William Henry Sheppard, the African-American missionary who left for Congo in 1890, via New York and Liverpool. Together with a white colleague named Samuel Lapsley. As the main character in *Black*, Sheppard incorporates two story elements that are essential for looking at this piece of history: ethnicity and religion. To begin with the latter, the Catholic urge to convert non-believers, as a natural part of a civilization process, is a dominant factor in the Western expansion drive of the nineteenth century. As a smokescreen for economic and political motives, but also from a sincere belief that the word of God had to be known and sung in every corner of the world. Even today, there are examples of such a desire for conversion. A few weeks ago, an article appeared in *The Guardian* about the recent death of the young American missionary John Allen Chau, a 26-year-old blogger and adventurer who was determined to convert the local population on the remote North Sentinel Island in the Indian Ocean. According to Chau, these hunter-gatherers, who voluntarily choose isolation, are part of "the last stronghold of Satan". Chau, born in Alabama – the city where William Sheppard studied – and a follower of the evangelical organization All Nations, wanted to make contact with the Sentinelese at all costs. He found that they "have the right to know that God the Creator exists and that He loves them and has paid for their sins". He

died in November 2018, killed by the local people, and has since been praised as a martyr by his church brothers.

Anyone who reads William Sheppard's diaries online, or the 2002 book *Black Livingstone* by the American writer Pagan Kennedy, who sketches the life story of the African-American missionary, will soon feel that he was far from fanatic. Unlike Chau, or unlike his white companion Samuel Lapsley, Sheppard was clearly much more pragmatic in nature. To characterize him with a sentence from the performance: "If I can save them from starvation, it will be easier to talk about Jesus." And effectively *Mundele Ndom*, the 'Black white man', turned out to be – thanks to his Martini-Henry rifle – a great friend of many Congolese, after he had shot yet another hippo on the banks of the Congo River. The few photos taken during his stay in Congo reinforce that image: smiling broadly between the Congolese is a tall and athletic man in a white linen shirt, wearing a large white tropical helmet, not exactly the type you would expect from a missionary on a journey to convert souls.

THE N-WORD

The second element of the story Sheppard introduces as the protagonist in *Black*, ethnicity, is an example of an extremely long – and shameful – line in world history. It is the line of age-old racism, of slavery, of degrading practices that very often start with a feeling of white supremacy, varying from very visible and explicit racism to a much more subtle variant. Both extremes are still present in society today, although – slowly but surely – a global shift is noticeable, for example in the growing awareness about the numerous 'white privileges', thanks to authors such as Gloria Wekker, a professor who caused quite a stir in the Netherlands with her book *White Innocence*. So yes, it seems that decolonization is going on, at least in the mindset of a younger generation that grew up in a mix of ethnic identities. But everything

indicates that this process, just like other forms of collective 'progressive insight', will take a lot of time.

The evil legacy of racial hatred is, of course, gigantic, and some references to it have also been included in the performance. For example, there is a sarcastic scene set in a classroom, in which actress Andie Dushime gives a lecture, at the direction of *Father* Lapsley, played by Peter Seynaeve. At the beginning of this lecture, she lists a number of figures from the *Atlas of The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Between 1501 and 1867, an estimated 12.5 million Africans were imprisoned and put on the boat to almost every country with an Atlantic coastline: the United States, Portugal, Brazil, France, Great Britain... This painful trafficking in human beings was, in fact, partly the result of lucrative cooperation with part of the African population itself. An example of this is also mentioned in *Black*: one of the regular partners in the deals with Europeans, including Belgians, were the Zappo-Zap from the Kasai region. They collaborated with the slave traders from the West, as well as with the Arabs, and made countless victims.

Ironically, racism also played a decisive role in William Sheppard's departure for Congo in 1890 as a missionary for the Southern Presbyterian Church. His own church hesitated to send a *Black* man on a mission – it took two years of insistence and, especially, as soon as a white missionary was willing to go along. The decision was also politically supported: the very conservative American senator John Tyler Morgan gave Sheppard's candidacy a push in the right direction, hoping that many Afro-Americans soon would leave the United States too, "back to Africa". So, Sheppard's great Congolese missionary adventure, a highly unlikely journey for a person in his early twenties, started and ended with racism back home. Because even after his successful return a few years later, with international congratulations and numerous encounters with American and European dignitaries, including a gold medal from the hands of British Queen Victoria,

Sheppard ended up with insults and highly racist comments. An American newspaper, for example, reacted with astonishment after he had returned to the States, wondering how “this little nigger” was able to bring such a challenging adventure to a successful conclusion. For the *Black Livingstone*, as he was called by then, there was no place in the history books, as it turned out.

BLACK VENUS

It's at times astonishing to read the reports and diaries about Congo when it was still a Belgian colony. For even after 1908, when the autocratic rule of the 'robber knight' Leopold II was officially over, the exploitation continued, albeit in a more 'democratically' institutionalized way. The image of the Congolese as ignorant primitive, who desperately needed civilization and conversion, remained there for decades, also in the media and in education. Characteristic of this racist and paternalistic view are the so-called World Exhibitions in Brussels in 1935 and 1958, for which Congolese huts were reconstructed. The white public gazed at his black fellow man, who was presented like an animal in a cage. There were also similar 'spectacles' in other cities around the world, including New York, Paris and Amsterdam. In retrospect, the 1958 exhibition was a turning point in the mutual perception between the Belgians and the Congolese. Our country had invited 500 so-called *évolués* to Brussels for the occasion: Congolese people who had an education and who were becoming increasingly critical of the relationship with the colonizer. One of them was Patrice Lumumba, the left-liberal nationalist leader, then still in the role of press photographer.

But old prejudices are hard to overcome, as history shows. On the website of NTGent, you will find a long poem by Désiré Bossaerts, a Flemish civil servant who was stationed in the city of Boma between 1904 and 1907. His *Dreams in Congo* are often unintentionally

hilarious, in the way in which the Flemish *heimat* is idealized, as a stronghold of civilization, and Congo is portrayed as a dark pool of “barbarity, ferocity and wildness”. As for the white sense of superiority and the racist stereotyping, there is little difference with *Black Venus* by the Flemish writer Jef Geeraerts, a novel published in 1968. In the novel, the reader is treated to a series of conquests of black women by the male protagonist – explicit sexism by the white male colonizer in his comfortable and self-indulgent power position. Geeraerts had lived and worked in Congo in the 1950s, as a regional administrator, and in 2010 he talked about this “intense” experience in the program *Phara* at the VRT. Among other things about his nickname ‘Mbomo Fimbo’, where the word ‘fimbo’ refers to a ‘whip’. Geeraerts explains how he had that whip used “in a good way”. Because “without a whip you couldn’t achieve anything at that time”. After all, according to Geeraerts, “blacks are very friendly and open and they laugh and they seem carefree, but to work you really have to force them to do it.” The interview, which can still be found online, provoked surprised chuckling and embarrassed laughter in the television studio.

HELL, IT IS NOT THE OTHERS

The creation of *Black*, the performance, is an attempt to let various voices be heard. About their experience of the past, which is – as always – resonating in the present. Besides the exploration of various text and archive sources, texts written by the actors themselves have been added. You can find an example of this in this booklet, a poem by Brussels based actor Nganji Mutiri. He grew up in the Congo and travelled a long way professionally before he devoted himself fully to the arts: as an actor, poet and filmmaker. William Sheppard’s diaries also inspired the Congolese writer Fiston Mwanza Mujila, who, at the request of director Luk Perceval, wrote a series of scenes from his home and workplace in Graz, Austria. The performance ends with impressions that actress Aminata Demba noted about her own experience: how it feels to

grow up as a young girl with African roots in Belgium. These are real impressions of yesterday and today that are confronted with other – and older – quotations, including some racist statements. In this confrontation, the performance *Black* seeks a form of catharsis: if we, as a society, want to come to terms with our colonial past, we need to investigate how it all started, and how it still might be present today, as part of the 'normal' daily life at home.

This delicate balance is supported and helped by the live music of Sam Gysel. He also has roots in Congo and knows a lot of the rhythms and musical traditions of the country, as a drummer and percussionist. At the same time, it's through his knowledge of music that *Black* can refer to other cultural contexts. It explains why the performance begins with the groove of an old American blues traditional: 'You Gotta Move'. With the whole cast as a choir on stage, as the players of a travelling sideshow that stops at a square in the middle of the city: "Ladies and gentlemen...". In its form, it's a reference to the lectures Sheppard gave when he returned from Congo. He toured in schools, churches and theatres and, night after night, the audience was in awe by his testimony, curious as the (African-)Americans were about life on the distant continent called 'Africa', a continent which nobody knew really well at the time, but which nevertheless appealed enormously to the imagination of the young and the old.

Regarding the unknown as something exotic: this tendency is characteristic of human kind and, in that respect, of all times. But a more important insight is the conclusion as Aminata puts it at the end of the performance: we cannot change our history, but we can choose how we tell it. As the first part of the trilogy *The Sorrows of Belgium*, *Black* chooses the most logical approach: openly, self-critically and with one eye on the future.

Because to know where we are going, we need to know where we come from. Even if the past is painful and embarrassing. In fact, that is precisely why.

Steven Heene, Ghent, 10 March 2019.



© Annette Kurz

DELETED SCENE FROM 'BLACK'

3. MEETING KING LEOPOLD II

(Frank whistles the Brabançonne on a paper)

LAPSLEY

During our stop in London, I am invited to Brussels by none other than Leopold II, king of the Belgians. Sheppard is not invited...

VANDENBROUCKE

That's normal, you know.

LEOPOLD II

It is not out of selfish considerations that we are getting involved in international politics. We are neutral and, as ever, content with our fate.

LAPSLEY

The night before, I can't sleep. What will I wear? How do you address a king? I write a letter to my mother asking her to light a candle for me, knowing that my letter will only reach her weeks after the audience...

LEOPOLD II

But as the ruler of this small, thriving country, we see it as our historical duty to help establish a modern Congolese state, and at last to open up to civilization the only region on earth which it has not yet penetrated!

LAPSLEY

That morning I put on the gloves that she once gave me, my Sunday jacket and a silk top hat I had bought in London. It's the only luxury that I can afford, going without a hat is not an option.

LEOPOLD II

So as to drive out the melancholy that has overshadowed entire races for centuries already.

LAPSLEY

A lackey leads me to the reception hall, as vast as a gallery in a museum. His

uniform is ornamented with gold, like the gallery: gilded leaves and small cupids atop the pillars and crystal chandeliers everywhere.

LEOPOLD II

To achieve this, we must acquire as many land concessions from the Congolese population as possible with an eye on new roads and constructions. And, indeed, we must set up mission posts and other settlements!

LAPSLEY

The king is very kind. He wears a green military jacket, with large epaulettes and a sword, without much decoration. His hair is parted, and his beard is long and thin and slightly grey already.

LEOPOLD II

Peace can be achieved from these posts. A lasting peace that will put an end to the age-old disputes among the native tribes. But also, that will put an end to that terrible slave trade conducted by the Arabs. In brief, it is a crusade that is worthy of our time. A time of Enlightenment. And it makes me happy to see how much international public opinion approves this noble objective.

My dear young man, the tide is with us both.

Between you and me, as regards your destination, we are happy to make you a proposal. Our suggestion is to move into the region of Kasai.

VANDENBROUCKE

Kasai, Kasai... He's never been to the Congo, our king, has he.

LEOPOLD II

It's quite far inland, but it's worth it. The more you can bring civilization to it, the better for all of us.

(Frank whistles the Brabançonne again)

SHAKING THE GRAND NARRATIVES – Lilly Busch

Ropes hang down from the ceiling, there are too many to be counted. On a stage that is empty, except for a large pool table, they define the landscape for the story being told this evening. As one of the technical tools, making the changes of the lights and the scenography possible – and thus, the ‘action’ on stage –, something becomes visible which usually stays backstage. Brought into sight, it reminds us during the show that the place where we are gathering is a theatre. A place where bodies meet, on stage as well as in the auditorium.

In *Black*, the ropes can be seen as a metaphor for the strands of history, for the entanglement and the plurality of perspectives. Collaging different materials – historical accounts, songs, poetry – as well as languages, separate stories are linked and individual voices brought into a polyphonic assemblage, which allows a glimpse into a complex and wide historical context. The continuous interruption of the narrative, leaving and showing gaps, points to the fact that the picture can never be complete: the decision to tell something inevitably excludes something else which remains unsaid. But finding an all-encompassing picture is indeed not the aim – rather, the big narrative is cut into individual threads, the story sways into different directions in the course of the evening.

As the performers interact with the cords, they set them in motion, they shake them and cause vibrations, which at best could even find their way through the ceiling, going outside of the theatre and into the night. In their movement, they are reminiscent of the record of a heartbeat, of the torrential Congo River and, at the same time, they become visible as

an instrument that can be used in a violent way, to hurt someone. The actors hit the floor with the ropes, they run through them, hang on to them, lift themselves up from the ground, bring themselves to a height of fall on stage. There is a certain height of fall that anyone faces who addresses Belgium's weighty history of colonialism, too. *Black* is a project that, with its diverse cast, aims to revisit this past by telling a different version of it, a version that overcomes the repeating of prevailing male and euro-centric tales.

The African-American missionary and self-made anthropologist William Henry Sheppard was in fact a quite uncommon 19th century adventurer in the Congo. Just like he himself sticks out in the gallery of foreign travellers to the Congo at the time, he had the ambition to tell a different story about Africa, by reporting on local cultures he met and studied, as well as on the colonial cruelty he witnessed. Upon his return to the USA, he had the opportunity to share his findings in public spaces like churches and universities, a surprising occurrence, bearing in mind that he lived in the midst of racial segregation in the United States. His speeches and publications turned out to be a significant contribution to the launch of international protest against the colonial rule in the Congo. And yet, Sheppard died in poverty and the recognition for his work remained sparse – in the history books he was hardly given a place.

Thus, looking closely at it, his story brings about the questions: who has a voice? And in which space? Who makes the decision about who is allowed to speak? Who earns a profit by the commitment of someone else? While the play, on the one hand, addresses this historically, as the story of William Henry Sheppard is situated in the American context more than a hundred years ago, it is on a different and important level

also about the fundamental question of representation in the here and now. It's an invitation to become aware of the simultaneity of multiple stories, but as well an occasion to reflect on theatre as a place, about the prerequisites for a performance on stage, but also beyond the stage.

'CAN YOU REALLY SEE ME?'

How do you use the given framework, set in a theatre dispositive? Which associations do you evoke? Which ones are you aware of and which ones do you produce involuntarily? In some ways, the landscape with the ropes in *Black* also brings up stereotypical images of lianas in the jungle and of African wilderness. To say it with a quote from the play: "Africa – a place of beautiful landscapes! Africa – a place of beautiful animals!" Some of the dialogues and images that are shown this evening certainly have the potential to cause unease. To initiate a broader reflection by inciting ambiguity and controversy is not only one of the great capacities of theatre, it's also the specific concern of this play. *Black* attempts to work with and on imagery, walking on a tightrope between exposing and reproducing clichés, between deconstructing and affirming body-based distinctions of people and an undifferentiated image of the "black continent". While insisting on the potential of art to playfully shift discourse lines, it seems to be the responsibility of theatre makers and theatre goers alike to critically explore the desire for recognizable, stereotypical images.

On a broader level, the question of representation is closely linked to a debate about ever-present discriminatory structures in the arts sector today, for example when it comes down to employment opportunities. The casting of roles in the performing arts adheres in many cases to the

underlying logic that white actors are more suited to represent the norm or the universal, while actors of colour often receive racialized job offers. The actuality of racism on and off the stage, which ultimately can be traced back to the colonialist idea of cultural superiority, makes choosing which bodies are used for which images all the more a delicate matter. The actuality of racism on and off the stage, which ultimately can be traced back to the colonialist idea of cultural superiority, makes choosing which bodies are used for which images, all the more a delicate matter. As a theatre production, *Black* stands and engages within the wider and urgent debate of diversification in the cultural scene, which should be the case not only in individual plays, but in the structures and at all levels of any (arts) institution.

King Leopold II, who was the ruler of the first Congo Free State and the mastermind behind the exploitation and atrocities committed, never set foot in the Congo himself – an area of more than 1.5 million square kilometres, 75 times the size of Belgium. It is hard to believe that he basically had no first-hand knowledge about the place and the people he was ruling over from a distance, wilfully disregarding an enormous gap of comprehension. What can be translated from this absurd fact: thinking about the colonial history in the Congo today, we, too, are talking about experiences we can only try to imagine. All the more, it seems crucial to be clear about the position one chooses, and not to pretend that it is possible to embody the “real” or the “whole” story. Parts of history are in the end not tangible, they remain a secret.

In light of this, *Black* seeks the spaces ‘in between’, the common ones, but also the confrontation. The play is an attempt to get into a conversation about history, and as communication has it, there is always

something lost in translation, or impossible to grasp. In the play, there are no clearly fixed roles, but rather a group body from which individual figures differentiate momentarily. Dynamic scenes alternate with pictorial moments of stillness. Oscillating between poetry and horror, beautiful atmospheres interweave with violent information. Some of the silent moments convey shock and speechlessness about certain topics, like the practices of systematic violence, such as rape or the chopping off of hands. They cannot be described or depicted on stage, but become imaginable between the lines and in the pauses. Ultimately, this points to the fact that empty spaces created by the history of hegemony and violence are something to be endured and exposed.

Coming to terms with the repercussions of colonial history, a history not past but in fact very present, one that Europe's prosperity builds on, is a necessary and ongoing process. And yet, we can only tie in with the story here and now, where we stand, where writing continues. What *Black* promotes is: it can only be a multitude of people – different in age, skin colour, gender, experience and expertise – who reach for this task today. Step one: to examine closely where we actually stand. Step two: to dissect what has been, and tell it anew.

Lilly Busch

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