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INUA ELLAMS

BARBER SHOP CHRONICLES

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BARBER SHOP CHRONICLES

United Kingdom
Theatre

About the performance

A Fuel, National Theatre and West Yorkshire Playhouse co-production

Newsroom, local hot spot, confessional and football stadium. For generations African men have gathered at the barber to talk shop, family, race, music and sport. Now you can take a fly-on-the-wall look at the goings on, in Inua Ellams' latest production direct from a sell-out season at London's National Theatre.

Take a fast-paced journey from London across Africa and be transported inside six barber shops over the course of a single day. Meet the crew and share in their stories. Whether it's London, Jo'burg, Harare, Kampala, Lagos or Accra, the banter is barbed and the truth is right in front of the mirror.

Heart warming and hilarious, Barber Shop Chronicles explores the stuff of life with sharp insight, upbeat music and laugh-out-loud humour. You'll be entertained. You'll be enlightened. And you'll feel like you've made some new friends.

Credits and Acknowledgements

Co-commissioned by Fuel and the National Theatre. Development funded by Arts Council England with the support of Fuel, National Theatre, West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Binks Trust, British Council ZA, Òran Mór and A Play, a Pie and a Pint.

Cast and crew

Writer Inua Ellams

Director Bijan Sheibani

Designer Rae Smith

Lighting Designer Jack Knowles

Movement Director Aline David

Sound Designer Gareth Fry

Music Director Michael Henry

Staff Director Stella Odunlami

Dramaturgs Sebastian Born, Tom Lyons

Performers

David Ajao, Peter Bankolé, Tuwaine Barrett, Maynard Eziashi, Bayo Gbadamosi, Martins Imhangbe, Patrice Naiambana, Cyril Nri, Kwami Odoom, Sule Rimi, Abdul Salis, David Webber

Inua Ellams: Writer

Born in Nigeria, Inua Ellams is a cross-art-form practitioner: a poet, playwright, performer, graphic artist, designer and founder of the Midnight Run, a nocturnal urban excursion. He's a Complete Works poet alumni and a designer at White Space Creative Agency. Inua Ellams' previous plays at the National Theatre include The 14th Tale (Fringe First award) and Black T-Shirt Collection. Other plays include The Riddler at Theatre503; Knight Watch at Greenwich + Docklands Festival; Mostly Like Blue for Islington Community Theatre; Cape at the Unicorn; The Long Song Goodbye at Battersea Arts Centre; Fastcuts and Snapshot at West Yorkshire Playhouse; Marsh Orchids & Concrete for China Plate; Reset Everything and An Evening with an Immigrant at the Soho and on tour, which was awarded the Liberty Human Rights Award in 2017; and Turned at Trafalgar Studios. His poetry is published by Flipped Eye, Akashic, Nine Arches, and several plays by Oberon Books. His new book #Afterhours is published by Nine Arches Press.

Bijan Sheibani: Director

Bijan Sheibani is a theatre and opera director whose work includes numerous productions at the National, the Almeida, Battersea Arts House and Soho Theatre, amongst others. His production of *Gone Too Far!* won an Olivier Award for outstanding achievement in an affiliate theatre. His work in opera includes *Nothing at Glyndebourne* and *Danish National Opera* and *The Virtues of Things* at the Royal Opera House and his short films *Groove is in the Heart* and *Samira's Party* were both selected for the BFI London Film Festival. Artistic director of ATC 2007 – 2010 and an Associate Director of the National Theatre 2010 – 2015, in 2018 Sheibani will remount his production of *The Brothers Size* for the Young Vic and direct a new opera for *Streetwise Opera* at the Sage Gateshead.

Fuel: Co-producer

Fuel produces an adventurous, playful and significant program of work – live, digital and across art forms – for a large and representative audience across the UK and beyond. The company collaborates with outstanding artists with fresh perspectives and approaches who seek to explore our place in the world, expose our fears, understand our hopes for the future, create experiences which change us and in turn empower us to make change in the world around us.

Themes

Identity: How do our experiences shape who we are? How do we construct our world-view at an individual and community level?

Masculinity: How does culture impact the way men's experience of the world is shaped?

Race: What does race have to do with identity? How do concepts of race change / effect the migrant experience?

Ideas to explore with students

Racism: Ellams was confronted with racism on arrival in the UK including, as he says, the idea 'you have to work twice as hard for half as much'. How does racism impact the experience of Australians? Has racism impacted your experiences? Research the 1967 referendum and discuss the idea of how citizenship impacts identity.

Migration: Ellams has said '[The history of the world is nothing but the history of emigration](#)'. Do you agree? How has this impacted your personal history? Your family? Your community? Explore the different catalysts for migration and the factors that impact the reception of migrants in a place. How does the experience of movement, and the factors that prompt it, impact the migrant's identity?

Interconnections between people: What are the outcomes when diverse perspectives are blended? How are interconnections between people, places and environments articulated in diverse contexts?

Identity: Our experiences shape our identity as individuals and communities. Explore this concept on a personal level: what experiences have particularly impacted your idea of self? How does this impact your interactions with others? Extend this thinking out to consider your community. How is community similarly shaped by experience?

Q&A with Inua Ellams

What inspired you to write this show?

Back in 2010 someone gave me a flyer which was about a pilot project to teach barbers the very basics in counselling. I was surprised that conversations in barber shops were so intimate, that someone thought that barbers should be trained in counselling and also that they actually wanted the counselling project sessions to happen in the barber shop. This meant that on some level the person who was organising this thought there was something sacred about barber shops. Initially I wanted to create a sort of poetry and graphic art project where I would create illustrations or portraits of the men whilst they were getting their haircuts and write poems based on the conversations I'd overhear. I failed to get that project off the ground, but the idea just stayed with me for a couple of years, until I got talking to Kate McGrath from Fuel who liked the idea. Together we approached The National Theatre. That's where the show came from and how it was inspired.

You describe your plays as ‘failed poems’ – why was this idea better suited to a play?

The voices in my head just began to grow bigger, louder and in numbers. When this happens, the poems become multi-voiced and turn into dialogue. Eventually this dialogue breaks away from the poetic form altogether. The idea of Barber Shop Chronicles was suited to a play because there were several voices feeding into the conversations within the sacred spaces that barbershops seemed to be as I began to research. What was the process for creating the show?

I began with a month residency at The National Theatre in London, then a week-long residency in Leeds at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. I then had six weeks of research travelling through the African continent. I was in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana. I returned with about 60 hours of recordings, which I whittled down to a four-hour play, which was then eventually whittled down to an hour and 45-minute show. I got rid of lots of things that I intend to use at some point. There were 14 different drafts of the play written in that time, with lots of R and D processes.

How different is it to write for other people to perform rather than a show you perform?

It’s not that different. I guess I just know from the get-go that I’m not going to be the performer of the text. So it isn’t different as such, the difference is when it comes to the rehearsal period. Up until then when I’m writing it’s just various shades of my voice speaking to each other in my head, or various shades of me coming out in various voices in my head. Then when I get in to the rehearsal space and I see other actors take on the lines it becomes something else. But initially there is just a story that I’m trying to find the best voices to articulate. That process isn’t too different from creating work that I will perform myself. Also, I guess whenever I write poetry I don’t always imagine I’m the one performing it because I imagine most people will first interrogate the poems with a two-dimensional surface; by that I mean in book form. Therefore, they will read it with their own voices in their head. So, even when I write poetry I don’t imagine that I’m the first performer of the text.

How does it feel to write the play and hand it over to others to bring to life?

It’s all about trust and that is mediated by the director. It can be very nerve-racking. It can also be very exposing for other people to take your words and do what they will with them. They can find that moments in the play are not as subtle as you imagined they were and critique and ask questions. But this is all conducive to creating better art. This has definitely been a positive experience with this play.

Resources

<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/barber-shop-chronicles>

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/sydney-festival-2018-barber-shop-chronicles-shares-insight-into-what-men-really-talk-about-20180116-h0j0nt.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/11/barber-shop-chronicles-dorfman-london-review-cut-above-the-rest>

<https://www.timeout.com/sydney/theatre/barber-shop-chronicles>