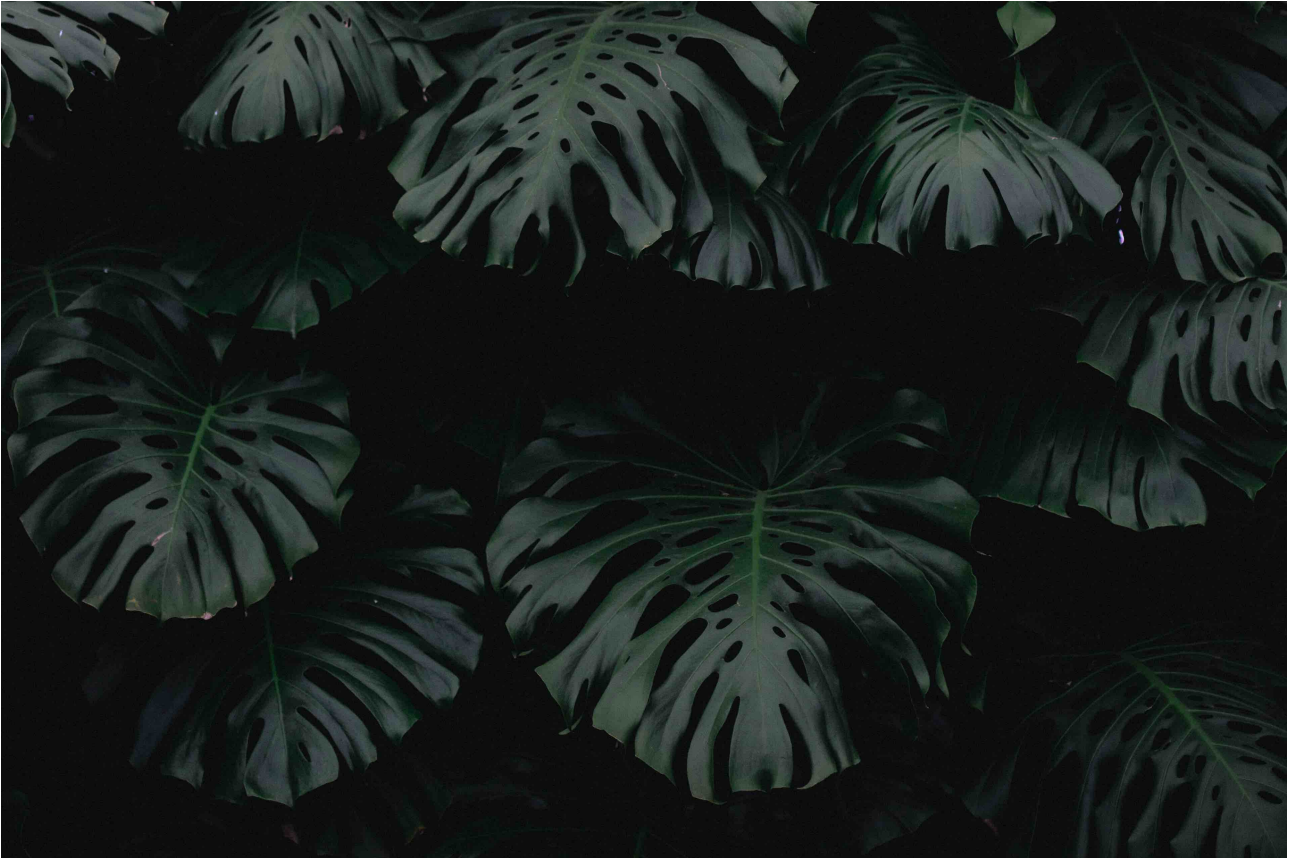


# **“The Chance to Find Yourself”**



**project-description**

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# “The Chance to Find Yourself”

## 1. The history of the project through the eyes of Benno Steinegger

In 2017 I, Benno Steinegger, was sitting in a small hut somewhere in the middle of a Peruvian rainforest. It was the third and last time I was there, looking for a way to deal with my past and future. With the help of shamanic rituals, childhood traumas resurfaced and I finally began to see how I could change the parts of my behaviour and habitual patterns that I had been suffering from for years. This process of getting to know yourself as a starting point for profound personal change was called "self-care" by Foucault. According to the ancient Greeks, this was not just a personal matter but also a service to the community. This phenomenon formed the theme of my most recent performance *i (to be defined)*.

Nevertheless, during one of the rituals, I got tired of staring at my own history and problems and I started thinking about my next performance. *i (to be defined)* seemed to have been an end point for myself and my collective Codice Ivan, after a long artistic trajectory that we had been building since 2008. It felt like the definitive end of a protracted adolescence and the closest I could get to my deeper self through art. A process had reached its end point. Suddenly a strange image loomed up in my head, like a vision: a black man and myself on a stage.

At first, I did not give much weight to that image, I did not know what to do with it. Themes like post-colonialism, racism and discrimination were certainly notions that had always fascinated me, but I did not feel the need to express myself artistically regarding these topics. When I was back in Europe, this image kept popping up. If my earlier experiences in Peru had demonstrably improved my well-being, perhaps I should pay attention to this image too and trust in its importance. So I decided, after I had lived in Belgium for already three years, to delve into the colonial history of Belgium and Congo. Many of the books I read referred to Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad, a book that I had read as a teenager but was now looking at with very different eyes. The main character Marlow, who stands partly as Conrad himself, undertakes a journey to the Congo. And unlike Marlow, Conrad's journey began in Brussels. I lived in the city where the journey began that had marked Conrad for life and led him to write Heart of Darkness! I began to wander through the streets behind the Royal Palace at night to find the site of the company that Conrad had sent to the Congo. Only a wall separated the royal residence from those who were responsible for violently exploiting the colony.

I had moved to Brussels because the Belgian art- and dance-world appealed to me. I had already the opportunity to show my performances and to develop a video work in Belgium. Moreover, the living conditions of artists in my homeland Italy were becoming more and more precarious. In short, I was an immigrant looking for a better framework for my artistic practice, and it was no coincidence that I ended up in the European capital. I moved from the periphery to the place that for me was the epicentre of power and production of contemporary theatre in Europe.

Marlow and Conrad followed a reverse trajectory but, like me, they were driven by curiosity and the hope of making a living from their profession. I began to think about migration and the reversal of directions. Would my new project be about Heart of Darkness? What could I say about these themes, what legitimised me to speak about colonialism and racism from my position?

At the time I was working in Sint-Jans-Molenbeek and was often the only white man among black people. I was ashamed of my exoticising interest in them: how was it possible that I was so concerned about discrimination but yet found deep inside me a feeling that I was better than 'them'? They' and 'I', what a terrible distinction. And yet it lived in me. What other dynamics, that I would not like to find in my thinking, are still lurk in me? How can I bring these to the surface to change something fundamental about my connection with dominant white power structures? Did I have to go back to the rainforest? The answer was no, I simply had to get to know 'these people' better. 'Getting to know the other person better is an opportunity to discover a part of myself that I have been denying, so that I can change it', I thought.

I remembered the performance Pichet Klunchun and myself by Jérôme Bel, in which Bel and Klunchun

try to get to know each other's artistic practice better through dance, despite the obvious cultural differences between them. What if I went a step further and made a performance with someone else in which we performance in which we become each other's alter egos and show this process on stage? Would it be possible to make a performance together? Would we get past the lack of common ground? Or would the performing arts be just the key to turn our differences into poetic, visionary, surrealist theatre? These questions stuck with me and I wanted to dive in them.

But who could this second person be? We had to be each other's alter egos. So another migrant, with a different background, origin and skin colour than me. I let myself be guided by my Peruvian vision and came into contact with theatre makers with a migrant background. Organisations such as KunstZ, Globe Aroma, Kaaitheater and workspacebrussels helped me in this quest. Eventually I got to know Jovial Mbenga. I was immediately impressed by his skills as an actor and felt connected to his way of making theatre. Jovial had already created a few performances and was now working on a new text. He grew up in Congo and came to Belgium to improve his working and living conditions. Everything fell into place: Jovial had gone the opposite way to Conrad. He was the alter ego I was looking for. We decided to work together. I was open with Jovial about my doubts concerning my position in this subject matter and we discussed how we would work, who would do what. At that time, the project was not yet supported. After a few difficult years I tried to find my way back to the theatre. Jovial showed enormous dedication and generosity towards me and the process. He brought our things with his car from residency to residency, we made art without resources, as I had done at the beginning of my career. A painful *déjà-vu*. But this time I was no longer alone: the 'I' had become a 'we'.

## **2. From unison to polyphony: history through the eyes of Jovial Mbenga**

When Benno told me about his idea for the project in 2018, I, Jovial Mbenga, was very enthusiastic about the idea of working together. We had a lot of conversations about ourselves, our artistic background, our differences... I had never read *Heart of Darkness* myself because I don't like novels that reopen the old wounds of colonialism, slavery and things like that. Reading the book was a difficult process for me because the words that are used express a violence and cruelty from another time - although unfortunately they still gnaw at society today. At the same time, I thought: who else can say something about the problems between black and white people than a black and a white person?

I felt we were a good pair to look the demons of the past in the eye. That's what it's about: confronting them. But we also talked about the human being, regardless of skin colour, and about the meeting between Benno and myself and the fact that we both came to Belgium to pursue our profession of performance artists.

## **3. The creation of the dramaturgy**

Our first short residency in workspacebrussels served as a preparation for a 10-minute presentation for WIPCOOP (Mestizo Arts Festival). We re-read *Heart of Darkness*, we discussed the language Conrad uses to describe the indigenous population of Congo, we talked about Chinualumogo Achebes critique of the novel and what the 'horror' Conrad describes means for us today. Suddenly, a white woman entered the room. We both looked in her direction, she looked at us, then turned to Benno and asked her question. When she left, Jovial said: 'You see? White people always speak to white people.' This observation hit Benno hard.

At the same time, we knew then that we had found a way to work together: a shared research with always an outside view, which observes also the process itself. We had to work with double vision: one in the middle of the scenes, texts, improvisations and conversations, and one that stood outside and watched us do all those things.

We watched the film *The Passenger* by Michelangelo Antonioni. One particular scene caught our attention: the reporter David Locke (Jack Nicholson) interviews an African shaman (James Campbell). The shaman grabs the camera and turns it towards an extremely embarrassed Locke who has no choice but to turn the camera off. It was at that moment that we saw a method that could also work

for us: we had to (metaphorically) turn the camera around during the process and the performance itself, in order to show that our questions are perhaps even more important than our answers. Those questions reveal the hidden implications of the existing power structures. This led to a sharpening of our working methods and an increasingly interwoven dramaturgy in which we also made this method visible on stage.

Throughout the various work-in-progresses we saw that this mechanism also came across to the audience: by being transparent about our questions on how to make theatre we show how our thinking on this has been shaped and this transparency ensures that a spectator can empathise with our doubts, frustrations and desires. It was crucial for the further development of the performance to understand that seeing the creation of the performance works better than to explicitly name the questions we have. The question of how we can do this as well as possible from our very different backgrounds is therefore both the motivation and the subject of the research.

#### **4. Credits, team & partners**

By and with: Jovial Mbenga & Benno Steinegger

Concept: Benno Steinegger

Co-director: Gaia Saitta

Dramaturge: Lara Staal

Outside eye: Joëlle Sambu Nzeba

Technical Direction&Lights: Valeria Foti

Collaboration for research: Costanza Lanzara (University of Florence-cultural anthropology)

Other outside eyes: Pol Heyvaert (artistic collaborator at CAMPO), Simon Baetens (dramaturge at workspacebrussels) and Mats Van Herreweghe (dramaturge, theatre maker and curator of Theater Aan Zee)

Artistic coordinator: Elke Decoker (Workspacebrussels)

Financial coordination: Valérie Wolters (Workspacebrussels)

Co-produced by: workspacebrussels, KAAP and Garage 29,

With the support of: CAMPO, A.C. Codice Ivan, Klm / Kinkaleri, WIPCOOP/Mestizo Arts Platform, wpZimmer

#### **5. Creation :**

- 4-22 January 2021: technical residency at KAAP (Bruges)
- 16-28 February 2021: residency in Workspacebrussels (Brussels)
- 22 March - 3 April 2021: residency in Garage29 (Brussels)
- 26 April-9 May 2021: technical residency in wpZimmer (Antwerp)
- 11-18 June and 29 June – 11 July: technical residency in CAMPO (Ghent)
- Premiere: Summer-Autumn 2021 (tbd)

## 6. Public outreach

We sincerely hope to reach as many people as possible with our work. In the performance we want to speak in a light-hearted way and exchange thoughts on themes that were already very loaded before the reemergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Through humour, poetic images and discussions between the two of us, the fourth wall between us as performers and the audience is broken down.

This makes the performance quite accessible, despite its subject matter, so that young people (10+) and people who do not go to theatre very often can also feel appealed to. We clearly noticed this inclusive character in the moments of the preliminary research.

Our search for self-questioning also led to the idea of devising a programme that facilitate encounters with the public, such as post-performance-talks, debates and/or workshops in which we can share our methodology.

We hope to contribute in a modest but honourable way to making the 'white innocence' visible (as formulated by Gloria Wekker) and to contribute to the conversation about colonial past and present, to the building of bridges between the DRC and Europe/Belgium, but also between various population groups in general.

We are also in the process of developing contacts with various schools, as the performance could also be showed in such institutions as we see it as a good opportunity to address and discuss themes such as racism, colonialism and inequality.

Given the current situation regarding the coronavirus, many extracurricular activities have been cancelled, so it is very important that we continue to follow the safety safety measures to see what is feasible. KAAP and CC Bruges show interest in setting up a route for the performance to be performed at the schools themselves.

