

The Great Yes, The Great No

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE



NO FOREIGN SKY PROTECTED ME.
PROTECTED MY FACE.

Saturday 25 October 2025 • 3pm • 7.30pm

Sunday 26 October 2025 • 5pm

At the Grand Théâtre

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En français & anglais, siSwati, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana, Xitsonga, Sepedi avec surtitres en anglais & français

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Running time **1h30 (no intermission)**

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Introduction par Josée Hansen

½ heure avant chaque représentation (FR).

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Concept & Director **William Kentridge**

Associate Directors **Nhlanhla Mahlangu, Phala O. Phala,**

Luc de Wit

Choral Composer **Nhlanhla Mahlangu**

Costume design **Greta Goiris**

Set design **Sabine Theunissen**

Music Director **Tlale Makhene**

Dramaturge **Mwenya Kabwe**

Lighting design **Urs Schönebaum, Elena Gui**

Projection editing / compositing **Žana Marović,**

Janus Fouché, Joshua Trappler

Cinematography **Duško Marović SASC**

Video control **Kim Gunning**

Sound design **Gavan Eckhart**

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Performers **Xolisile Bongwana, Hamilton Dhlamini,**

William Harding, Luc De Wit, Tony Miyambo, Nancy Nkusi

Chorus **Anathi Conjwa, Asanda Hanabe, Zandile**

Hlatshwayo, Khokho Madlala, Nokuthula Magubane,

Mapule Moloi, Nomathamsanqa Ngoma

Dancers **Thulani Chauke, Teresa Phuti Mojela**

Musicians **Marika Hughes, Liam Robinson, Tlale Makhene,**

Dana Lyn

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Produced by **THE OFFICE performing arts + film**

A project of **The Centre for the Less Good Idea**

Lead commissioner **LUMA Foundation, Arles**

Co-production **Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg;**
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Foundational commissioning support for the development and creation of *The Great Yes, The Great No* is provided by Brown Arts Institute at Brown University, USA. *The Great Yes, The Great No* acknowledges the kind assistance of Goodman Gallery, Lia Rumma Gallery and Hauser & Wirth in this project, and generous support from The Roy Cockrum Foundation.

THE GREAT YES, THE GREAT NO

EN In March 1941, a cargo ship leaves Marseille for Martinique, carrying a remarkable group of passengers fleeing Vichy France, including surrealist André Breton, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and artist Wifredo Lam. In *The Great Yes, The Great No*, William Kentridge transforms this real historical voyage into an allegory of forced migrations, past and present. The mythological ferryman of the dead, Charon, now promoted to captain of the ship, summons additional influential figures: Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Frantz Fanon, the Nardal sisters, Léopold Senghor, and even Joséphine Baker and Trotsky.

Blending opera, theatre, dance, and Kentridge's signature visual artistry, this chamber opera is a tapestry of languages, music, and histories. The Chorus of Seven Women forms the spiritual heart, giving voice to displaced people across time. The production integrates projections, masks, and shadow play with Mahlangu's vibrant choral score. A unique theatrical experience, part play, part oratorio, evoking the weight of exile and migration while celebrating the transformative power of art and human connection.

FR En 1941, le cargo Capitaine-Paul-Lemerle quitte Marseille pour la Martinique, avec à bord André Breton, l'anthropologue Claude Lévi-Strauss, l'artiste cubain Wifredo Lam et bien d'autres artistes qui fuient la France de Vichy. Cette traversée authentique – qui devient une allégorie d'autres traversées maritimes du passé et du présent – est le point de départ de *The Great Yes, The Great No* de l'artiste polymorphe sud-africain William Kentridge. Chez Kentridge, le capitaine du bateau est Charon, le passeur des morts, qui fait monter à bord de cette arche d'autres figures célèbres, dont les représentant.e.s de l'anticolonialisme Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon et Paulette Nardal, mais aussi Joséphine Baker et même Léon Trotsky. Un théâtre musical fait de masques, collages et projections, qui explore de façon innovante le langage et l'image en invoquant les avant-gardes telles

que le surréalisme ou l'afro-cubisme. Sur scène, nous retrouvons, parmi les danseurs et danseuses, les choristes et musicien.ne.s, la comédienne Nancy Nkusi, vue dans *Léa et la théorie des systèmes complexes* (23•24).



PROGRAM NOTE

In March 1941, when the cargo ship *Capitaine Paul Lemerle* sailed from Marseille to Martinique, its passengers, escaping Vichy France, included the Surrealist André Breton, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, the communist novelist Victor Serge, and the author Anna Seghers.

This boat and its journey are the starting point for *The Great Yes, The Great No*. The captain on the boat is of course Charon, the ferryman of the dead, crossing the water. Charon calls other characters up onto the boat. From Martinique, there are Aimé Césaire, who made the journey from Marseille to Martinique two years earlier with his wife Suzanne, and Jane and Paulette Nardal who together with the Césaires and Léopold Sédar Senghor had founded the anticolonialist Négritude movement in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Frantz Fanon, also from Martinique, jumps back in time and appears on the boat too. The other Martinican on board is Joséphine Bonaparte, twinned with another famous Parisian Josephine, Josephine Baker. Trotsky, killed in Mexico six months before the sailing of the boat, is there too. Even Stalin makes a brief appearance.

The journey is the 1941 crossing of the Atlantic, but earlier crossings from Africa to the Caribbean are also there, as well as contemporary forced sea crossings. The fertile grounds of Paris and Martinique, Surrealism and Négritude, are the background to the libretto. Aimé Césaire's seminal poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 1939) is its bedrock. New anti-rational ways of approaching language and image are in play. Charon's dyspeptic thoughts come from many sources, from Breton's Surrealism, the Afro-Cubism of Wifredo Lam, and the poetry of Léon-Gontran Damas, to writings from Senghor, Suzanne Césaire, and Paulette Nardal, and the 1930s poems of Bertolt Brecht.

William Kentridge

Artist, Director of *The Great Yes, The Great No*

A CHORUS OF SEVEN WOMEN

THE WORLD IS LEAKING – THE DEAD REPORT FOR DUTY – THE WOMEN ARE PICKING UP THE PIECES.

This poetic phrase by William Kentridge inspired the thinking behind the Chorus of Seven Women that is at the heart of *The Great Yes, The Great No*. Amongst a cast of historical figures who are called up from the dead, the Chorus represent the migrants who survive sea crossings and insist that we remember those who do not. Their seven voices allow for a balancing of harmonies in the choral composition, but also stand as a symbol of cyclical completion and connect us to myth and legend. It is a Chorus of Seven Women that comes after the journey, after the war, after the storm, after the party, after the decay, to pick up the pieces and to rebuild. An offering of possibility after the wreckage.

The role of the choral composer is to facilitate finding a kind of depth and honesty of sound that human voices are capable of. In the case of *The Great Yes, The Great No*, the choral composition, led by Nhlanhla Mahlangu, is enabled through the elements of dance, movement, and somatic memory to discover sound in a way that allows the chorus to work with physicality and cultural and historical depth. The libretto is made up of extracts of texts from a wide range of sources, which are then translated into the multiple languages spoken by the singers: isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana, SiSwati, and Xitsonga. During workshops, discussions amongst the chorus members about meanings are followed by locating a personal context from which to understand what is being communicated across time and geography, and from there, from a place that is felt in the body. This leads to a search for musical coherence in the form of melody, rhythm, song, and chant. The work of the Chorus is specifically located, yet creates a deeply felt sense that translates across distance.

Translation is a central feature of the work of the Chorus, as they work with and through the original languages that compose the libretto, including French, English, and Creole. The texts serve as gifts, prompts, and provocations for the work of translating, for carrying over experiences, ideas, understandings. This invokes the travel from one place to another, the journey by boat from Marseille to Martinique on which the Chorus of Seven Women is moved and inspired towards sonic (mis)translation. The Chorus captures the great asymmetries of the world and the marvellous potential of new understandings, and in this way, it completes the strange, magical, and unexpected surrealist experience of *The Great Yes*, *The Great No*, asserting the power of the unconscious, of chance, and of dreams.

Nhlanhla Mahlangu

Associate Director, Choral Composer for *The Great Yes*,
The Great No

& Mwenya Kabwe

Dramaturg for *The Great Yes*, *The Great No*

BIOGRAPHIES

William Kentridge

CONCEPT & DIRECTOR

William Kentridge (1955, Johannesburg) works across mediums of drawing, writing, film, performance, music, theatre and collaborative practices, to create works of art that are grounded in politics, science, literature and history, always maintaining a space for contradiction and uncertainty. His work has been seen in museums and galleries around the world since the 1990s, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Albertina Museum in Vienna, Musée du Louvre in Paris, Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen, the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, the Kunstmuseum in Basel and the Royal Academy of Arts in London. His work can be found in the collections of art museums and institutions across the globe. Kentridge has directed Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Shostakovich's *The Nose*, and Alban Berg's operas *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*, for opera houses including the Metropolitan Opera in New York, La Scala in Milan, English National Opera in London, Opéra de Lyon, Amsterdam Opera, the Sydney Opera House and the Salzburg Festival. His original works for stage combine performance, projections, shadow play, voice and music, and include the *Refusal of Time*, *The Head & the Load*, and *Waiting for the Sibyl*. In 2016 Kentridge founded the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg: a space for responsive thinking and making through experimental, collaborative and cross-disciplinary arts practices. The Centre hosts an ongoing programme of workshops, public performances and mentorship activities. He is the recipient of honorary doctorates from several universities including Yale, Columbia and the University of London. Prizes include the Kyoto Prize (2010), the Princesa de Asturias Award (2017), the Praemium Imperiale Prize (2019), and an Olivier award for Outstanding Achievement in Opera in 2023.

Nhlanhla Mahlangu

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR & CHORAL COMPOSER

Exceptional vocalist, choreographer, composer, theater maker, dancer and educator Nhlanhla Mahlangu is a graduate of Dance Teaching at Moving into Dance, Mophatong. Born in Pholapark Squatter Camp in Apartheid South Africa in the late 1970s, Mahlangu started school during the national state of emergency in the 1980s and witnessed first hand the conflicts between the African National Congress, Inkatha Freedom Party and The 'Third Force' of the 1990s. Mahlangu can only be described as a generous interdisciplinary collaborator who excels at conjuring original, complex and contemporary work rooted in traditional forms. Mahlangu is celebrated for his embodiment of Isicathamiya, a cappella-type musical form combining vocals and movement. Mahlangu uses this practice as a way to process the history of South Africa, particularly the plight of migrant workers. Nhlanhla Mahlangu's prolific practice is one of interrogation, articulation, development and research. He has gained exceptional ground through his pivotal collaborations with luminaries the caliber of William Kentridge (*The Head & the Load*, *Sibyl*, *Ursonate*, *The Centre for the Less Good Idea*), Robyn Orlin, Richard Cock, Gregory Vuyani Maqoma, Sylvia Glasser, as well as his choral music and music making approaches with his Hlabelela Ensemble and Song and Dance Works. Mahlangu is celebrated with the Naledi award winner for Best Choreographer, Promax Africa Award 2021 for Best Title Sequence in *The Estate*, New York Theatre and Dance Awards – The Bessies 2020 Best Composition and Sound Design, recognition by the The Danish Arts Foundation's Committee for Performing Arts Project Funding in 2019 for choreography, casting and co-directing, Special Price Winner of the Reumert Award 2020 in Denmark, among others. His latest achievements includes being one of the directors – Body Orchestrator of *Shaka Ilembe*, an award winning and most prominent 12-part TV series premiered in South Africa in 2023.

Phala Ookeditse Phala

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Phala is a multi-award-winning 'storyer' in the form of a theatre-maker and director whose work has won awards in South Africa, USA, Czech Republic and Australia. He is the Co-Director of Noma Yini; a South African arts collective in the business of 'storying' – the multiple ways of coming into, portraying, forming, building, making, and performing stories. From 2019 to 2023, he was the Animateur at The Centre for the Less Good Idea, an interdisciplinary incubator space for the arts, based in Maboneng, Johannesburg. He holds a Masters in Dramatic Arts from Wits University. His works champion emotional and psychologically-stimulating storying as a uniquely African aesthetic. His focus and interest are on methodologies of making and creating work in ways that collapse and disrupt conventional norms.

Luc De Wit

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Luc is an actor, director and drama teacher. He began his career as an actor but later worked increasingly as a stage director and since 1995 he has focused mainly on directing operas. He also teaches regularly at theatre and music theatre colleges, and has given workshops for actors, singers, directors. Luc De Wit has worked as a co-director with William Kentridge since 2005, and often revives Kentridge's productions in international opera houses and theatres. Among these productions have been *Die Zauberflöte* (Opera La Monnaie / De Munt, Brussels and revived in many opera houses), *Il Ritornno di Ulissee*, *The Nose*, *Lulu* and Buchner's *Woyzeck*. He was associate director of Kentridge's production of *The Nose*, originally seen at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in 2010 and revived there in 2013. This production was also seen at the Festival d'Aix en Provence and at the Opera de Lyon in 2011. In 2012 he worked with William Kentridge and composer Philip Miller on the chamber opera *Refuse the Hour*. The following year he

worked as movement director on Guy Cassier's production of *Götterdämmerung* at the Berlin State Opera and La Scala, Milan. That same year he co-directed *Die Zauberflöte* with Pierrick Sorin in Lyon. In 2015 Luc De Wit and William Kentridge once again worked together, this time on *Lulu*, a co-production between the Met, The Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam, the Rome Opera and the English National Opera. In 2017 Luc De Wit was co-director with William Kentridge for *Wozzeck* at the Salzburger Festspiele in co-production with Sydney Opera and The Met. He recently worked with William Kentridge as associate director and actor on *The Head & The Load*, which performed at the Tate Modern London, The Ruhrtriennale Festival, the Park Avenue Armory in New York City, the Arsht Center in Miami and Joburg Theatre in Johannesburg. In 2022 he directed the revival of *Wozzeck* in the Opera de Paris (La Bastille) and in Liceu, the Opera of Barcelona. Luc De Wit recently directed *Orphée et Euridice* at Gluck in the School of Arts in Gent in March 2024. In April 2025, Luc De Wit will direct the revival of *Wozzeck* for The Opera House in Toronto.

Tlale Makhene

MUSIC DIRECTOR

Soweto-born Tlale Makhene is a sought-after percussionist, composer and collaborator who draws from traditional, world, and jazz music. Tlale has performed locally and internationally, collaborating and working with artists ranging from Miriam Makeba to Corinne Bailey Rae and Johnny Clegg to Pharaoh Sanders. His collaboration with William Kentridge began seven years ago with *Refuse The Hour* and continues through his work with Kentridge's Centre for the Less Good Idea. Tlale has released two original albums: *Ascension of the Enlightened* (2004), which won the highest accolade in South African music awards for Best Contemporary Jazz Album, and *Swazi Gold* (2017). In 2020, Makhene was awarded the BVSM Award for best percussionist. He also wrote music for Dada Masilo's *Sacrifice*. Other albums under his name are *SG2.0* (2020 SAMA Awards Nominee for Best Adult Contemporary Jazz) and *Busuku Nemini*.

Mwenya Kabwe

DRAMATURGE

Mwenya B. Kabwe is a Zambian-born maker of theatre and performance, facilitator of creative processes, a performer, writer, arts educator, and scholar. She holds a PhD from The Centre for Theatre Dance & Performance Studies (CTDPS) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) where she is currently Senior Lecturer and Head of the Theatre Section. Her creative practice and research is focused on contemporary African theatre and performance, migration, immersive and site-specific performance work, live art, collaborative and interdisciplinary art making and re-imagining African futures. She has lectured at the UCT Drama Department, Wits School of Arts division of Theatre & Performance, and the Market Theatre Laboratory. She is a co-curator of the Unrehearsed Futures conversation series and a curatorial partner in the OpenScape Network. Her current projects include working with William Kentridge as the Dramaturg for his latest theatrical production, *The Great Yes, The Great No*, and incubating several collaborative interdisciplinary experiments through The Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg.

ADDITIONAL PRODUCTION CREDITS

Technical Direction **Boyd Design**

Production Manager **Brendon Boyd**

Technical Director **Mike Edelman**

Stage Manager **Meghan Williams**

Libretto Composition **Jessica Jones**

Choreography **Thulani Chauke | Teresa Phuti Mojela**

Ukulele Compositions **Hamilton Dhlamini**

Wardrobe Supervisor **Mathilde Baillarger**

Props Master **Lissy Barnes-Flint**

Still Photography **Stella Olivier**

Studio Prop Fabrication **Chris Waldo de Wet | Jacques van Staden**

Costume Fabricators **Emmanuelle Erhart | David Engler**

Costume Fabrication Supervisor **Lasha Lashvili**

Sound Engineer **Michele Greco**

Lighting Operator **Alexandre Schreiber | Parker Battle**

Studio Assistant **Jessica Jones | Carla Walsh**

The Great Yes, the Great No was developed in residence at the Centre for the Less Good Idea and the LUMA Foundation Arles. Premiered in partnership with the Aix-en-Provence festival at LUMA Arles, July 2024.

THE CENTRE FOR THE LESS GOOD IDEA

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY INCUBATOR SPACE FOR THE ARTS

BASED IN MABONENG, JOHANNESBURG.

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QUATERNAIRE

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KENTRIDGE STUDIOS

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Special thanks to publishers **Gwenaëlle Aupetit (Editions La Découverte)**, **Mireille Fanon Mendès-France**, **Gloria Castillo (University of Texas Press)**, **Myrna Rochester**, **Suzanna Tamminen (Wesleyan University Press)**, **Alexandra Jeann Lillehei**, **Constance Krebs (Association Atelier André Breton)**, **Aube Elléouët**, **Présence Africaine**, and **Editions du Seuil**.

WORKS INCLUDED:

André Breton *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non*: © Association Atelier André Breton

Aimé Césaire *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*: © Présence Africaine – English version *Return to My Native Land* translated by J. Berger and A. Bostock: © Présence Africaine

Leon-Gontran Damas *Pigments*: © Presence Africaine – English translation by Alexandra Jeann Lillehei

Suzanne Césaire “Le grand camouflage” and “1943: le surréalisme et nous” in D. Maximin (ed.) *Le grand camouflage: Écrits de dissidence (1941-1945)*: © Editions du Seuil – English version “1943: Surrealism and Us” and “The Great Camouflage” in D. Maximin (ed.) *The Great Camouflage: Writings of dissent (1941-1945)* translated by K.L. Walker: © Wesleyan University Press

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YOU SHALL KNOW IT
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Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759)

Direction musicale **Christophe Rousset**

Mise en scène **Jeanne Desoubaux**

Orchestre **Les Talens Lyriques**



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Impression **Atelier reprographique Ville de Luxembourg**

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