PERTH FESTIVAL

15 February – 14 March

A PERTH FESTIVAL COMMISSION
WORLD PREMIERE

BLACK BRASS

BY MARARO WANGAI

PERFORMING LINES WA

Image: Christophe Canato

Founder

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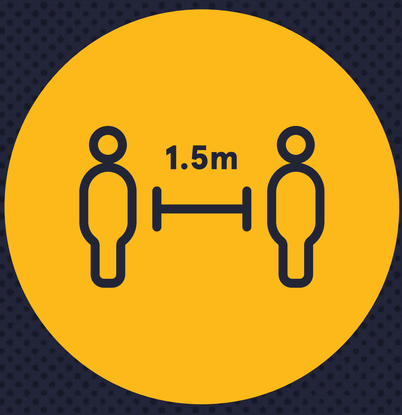
2021

Perth Festival acknowledges the Noongar people who continue to practise their values, language, beliefs and knowledge on their kwobidak boodjar.

They remain the spiritual and cultural birdiyangara of this place and we honour and respect their caretakers and custodians and the vital role Noongar people play for our community and our Festival to flourish.

PERTH FESTIVAL

Stay COVID-19 safe



Physical distancing

Wash your hands

Stay home if you are sick

Register your attendance

For latest health advice visit healthywa.wa.gov.au/coronavirus

BLACK BRASS

BY MARARO WANGAI

PERFORMING LINES WA

YANDILUP / NORTHBRIDGE

**STUDIO UNDERGROUND,
STATE THEATRE CENTRE OF WA**

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
MARCH		3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14

Thu & Fri 7.30pm
Sat & Sun 2.30 & 7.30pm
Duration 60mins

Post Show Q&A Fri 5 Mar

Contains coarse language, loud sounds and cigarette smoking

Auslan interpreted performance Sat 6 Mar 2.30pm

Audio described performance Sun 7 Mar 7.30pm with tactile tour available before the show

Performed in English with songs in Swahili, Lingala and French

PERFORMING LINES WA

Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries
GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

City of Fremantle | FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE

lotterywest

A Performing Lines WA production

Black Brass creative development was supported by the WA Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Lotterywest and Fremantle Arts Centre.

GET THE FULL EXPERIENCE

Celebrating African cultures

We want the experience of *Black Brass* to be more than just a theatre show. Come an hour before the performance and join us downstairs in the foyer to experience the sights and smells of African cultures with offerings of Ethiopian coffee, vibrant stalls, hair braiding, crafts and more!

After every show, enjoy an incredible line-up of live music in the courtyard celebrating the talented pan-African musicians based in Western Australia.

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Thank You

Perth Festival Partners

Perth Festival Donors

* Just tap the interactive tabs on the left to skip to a specific section

Image: Jess Wyld

Perth Festival 2021 is a love song to this place – its people, artists and stories. That includes the stories of our oldest inhabitants and more recent arrivals who have chosen to call this place home. What a joy to have an artist as multi-skilled and charismatic as Mararo Wangai in our midst to tell of the experiences of the African diaspora, and for him to be so beautifully musically supported by Mahamudo Selimane. This brilliant conversation between drama and music is another work brought to life through Performing Lines WA's extraordinary development program, and it's a privilege to feature it in Perth Festival 2021.

IAIN GRANDAGE

PERTH FESTIVAL ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Image: Jess Wyld

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING TO DO AFTER THE SHOW?

Stick around to enjoy an incredible line-up of live music in the courtyard celebrating the talented pan African musicians based in Western Australia. Or enjoy City of Lights at Perth Cultural Centre. Immerse yourself in the projections, catch some tunes at *STC Courtyard Sessions*, drop into a local bar for a post-show drink or treat yourself to a tasty bite at one of the many Northbridge eateries.

CREDITS

Writer & Performer Mararo Wangai

Director Matt Edgerton

Dramaturgs Afeif Ismail &
Matt Edgerton

Script Editors Matt Edgerton &
Sisonke Msimang

Musician & Composer
Mahamudo Selimane

Set & Costume Designer Zoë Atkinson

Lighting Designer Lucy Birkinshaw

Sound Designer Tim Collins

Production Manager Ben Nelson

Stage Manager Rose Liggins

Community Engagement Coordinator
Imara Mandred

Produced by Performing Lines WA

Concept by Mararo Wangai

Script developed with support from
Afeif Ismail, Matt Edgerton &
Sisonke Msimang

ARTIST STATEMENTS

Image: Fionn Mulholland

Q&A WITH MARAO 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 aspects of the African experience, but one that tried to celebrate these voices whilst not being afraid to look critically at the issues concerning Africans 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 come to call Australia home. The interviews were conducted under the

theme of resilience and I felt inspired by the complexities, depth and nuance in each of these voices who in many ways have laid the foundation for what *Black Brass* has come to be. Though this particular story is a work of fiction, it has drawn from the deep well of each of these individuals' life experiences.

Black Brass is a celebration of these voices and also a statement to the artistic industry that these voices are worthy and thee people deserve to see their stories on stage.

Can you explain your process in creating the show?

After conducting the interviews, Afeif Ismail and I came together to find a narrative that we could use as a vessel for these stories. During these conversations, it became clear to me that music would be an essential aspect of the narrative – it continues to amaze me the power that music has to connect people beyond culture, beliefs and political ideology; it speaks straight to the heart.

Once the structure of the story was in place, Matt Edgerton came on board and played a crucial part in finetuning the narrative journey of the work and we invited Mahamudo Selimane to join us with his amazing musical expertise.

In the final stages of the development we were lucky enough to have Sisonke Msimang who helped find the finishing touches to the work.

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. The rest of the creative team – Zoë Atkinson, Lucy Birkinshaw and Tim Collins, have been such essential elements of the work.

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

Through having worked with the amazing team at The Last Great Hunt I have learned that an artist cannot afford to stick to wearing one hat. I have always been a writer and a performer, and I am learning more and more that when one door closes, I must knock on the other – it just so happened that this is an opportunity for me to do both supported by the amazing team that Performing Lines WA's producer, Zainab Syed, has brought together. I feel secure enough to create material that is equal parts ambitious and challenging and also to be able to take on the role of breathing life to it and inhabiting the world that we have created together.

Image: Fionn Mulholland

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

Music has always been an essential part of the work. Theatre sometimes is seen as elitist, as though it belongs to a single culture, whereas music is celebrated universally and often allows us to shed our cultural armour, to feel and connect with issues beyond ourselves or realities. Combining the two I believe makes for a rewarding experience where an audience can not only connect with a work cerebrally but also through the heart. The music that Mahamudo has created spans the African continent in languages from Shangana to Swahili, Kikuyu to Portuguese, Lingala to Xhosa. It holds these voices high and draws from each of these languages and their immense depths.

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 ideologies and philosophies and unpacking the nuance and complexities within them. Through the perspective of the African experience in the diaspora; What does it mean to belong? What cultural baggage and heritage do we carry with us when we migrate? And 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.

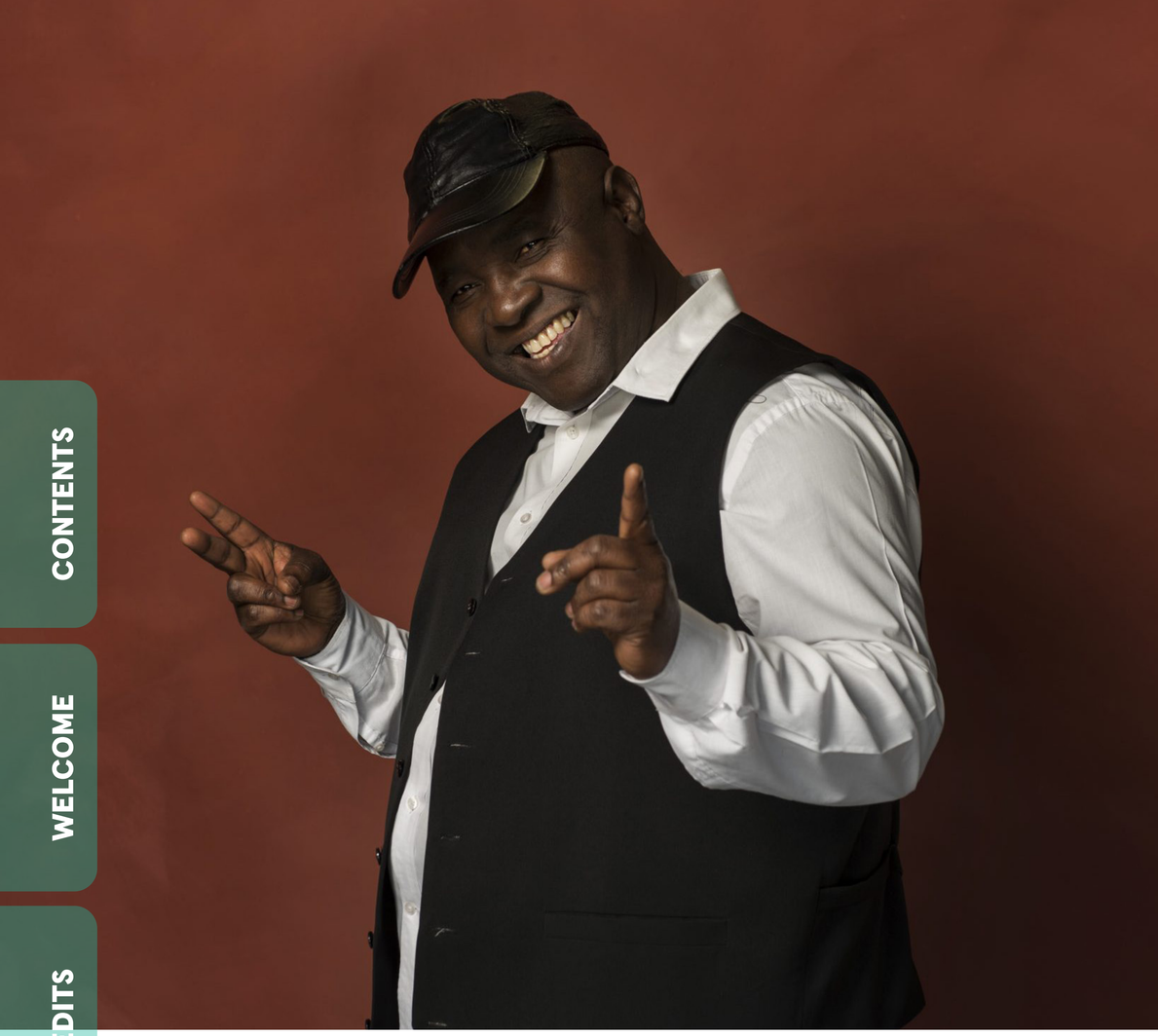


Image: Christophe Canato

Q&A WITH MAHAMUDO SELIMANE

How did you come to be involved in *Black Brass*?

I wasn't expecting to get involved because Mararo first came to interview me about my career as a musician. He was going to write something about my story for another production [and in fact he did actually end up doing a performance reading my story for this other project]. As he was doing the interview with me, I was playing some old songs from back home and he got more interested in this. When he started

to work on *Black Brass* he came back to talk to me again and asked me to be involved.

My first reaction was 'what's that? What's this about?'. He said 'well I'm an actor and you're going to be playing some music'. I told him I was the wrong person for the project and that he should find someone else. I didn't really see how I could be involved. For me it was something so new and I didn't really know anything about this way of making. I didn't know what kind of music he was talking about. He was going to be performing as an actor and I was going to be doing music – I just didn't see how this was going to work. That's why my first answer was 'No'. But he kept at me and said he'd already mentioned it to the others involved in the project, so I agreed to come along and see what it was about. On my first day I felt like I was faking. I didn't feel like it was any good. I was thinking, 'what am I doing here? This is the wrong place for me'. But then I started to play some music – because I had to make up some songs on the spot – and as I started writing the first song the feedback from the people there was good. They said, that song works well with this. The music worked well with what they were creating. From this I got encouraged to keeping working on it, that maybe it was the right thing for me.

Can you describe your process in creating the music for the show?

Some of it was made up on the spot as Mararo was reading and sometimes I'd try something and think 'this is not the best way to present this song'. So I'd take it away and work on it later. There was a lot of me writing and playing and sending music back and forth. The thing was it's not just about writing what the instruments are playing, it's more about getting a connection between the music and what Mararo is saying, what he's trying to transmit to people. So you need to make something which matches what he's saying at any moment and this is a big challenge.

For a start the script is in English. And I had to ask – what language do you want me to write in? And they said to write in whatever language felt right for the moment. I'm a speaker of different languages so I would try one of these to see if it worked. It was hard trying to write the lyrics to match the song. Sometimes you write something that people don't understand but you have to make sure the way you're going to sing they're going to get the feeling. If the song is about sadness, the audience needs to feel the sadness even if they don't get the meaning of the words. It's just the way you sing. And this is difficult because it was such a different process to writing songs for a gig.

How different is it creating for theatre (and performing in a play) compared to a music gig?

When I write songs for gigs I have to think about the bassline, the keyboard line and all of this. I have to write to see what's going to be the core part – then add all the harmonies. But for *Black Brass* there weren't all those instruments – there is only one guitar and you have to make the one guitar sound powerful enough without all the other instruments. In the end it's mostly just me singing, with Mararo joining me a couple of times. For a lot of the creation time I felt like it needed more instruments, not just me. But the feedback was good, that this was the sound they wanted.

I have never been scared of the audience before because I have played in front of many people at big festivals, but now even in a rehearsal, playing for the crew, I'm nervous. It's not just playing. I have to try and get involved in the performance, in what Mararo is saying. It's not just playing guitar I have to be one of the actors. I have to be part of the show.

I'm enjoying it but it's also so different to what I normally do. I'm not a theatre goer at all, so the whole process has been very different for me.

What do you think music adds to the story?

I'm not sure what the music is adding to this story – the story has from the beginning been about the music. It's more about the feedback you get from the music. It's adding to the main language of Mararo's character. But it also seems to affect Mararo the actor. When the music comes on it makes him react – you can see it. I'm not sure if it makes him feel more relaxed to keep performing or it gives him more energy. It helps him with is emotions when he's listening to the music or sings along with me. When he sings with me or when he listens to the music I can see he gets more energy to keep performing.

Music definitely adds something.

The way I'm playing sometimes I can see the way he's feeling the music and it makes me sing in different ways. It's a conversation you're hearing. Sometimes I cry when I sing. Maybe it's about something sad – so I act sad. I can't cry for real of course because I won't be able to finish the songs.

This show is my new challenge. There is still a long way to go. But if the creators and the audience appreciate what I'm doing I'm going to feel so proud of this.

Image: Fionn Mulholland

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Our lead-artist Mararo has always been determined to let this show speak for itself. So instead of attempting to explain what the work means, I'm going to write a few notes here about process.

My own ambition in this process has been to avoid pretending I know things I don't and instead, to listen and to find those areas where I can make meaningful contributions. This has meant stepping into this imaginative river and exploring its many tributaries

– the literary, philosophical and musical inspirations that are ongoing sources for this work. And there are many! The river has been fed by theatrical guiding lights such as August Wilson and Lorraine Hansberry, the philosophy of Frantz Fannon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the music of Hugh Masekela, Sathima Bea Benjamin and many others.

Developing this show with these artists has been pure play – joyful, and inspiring. 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. In fact, 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. This has allowed each to offer substantive contributions to *Black Brass* in ways that have swelled its banks.

As an audience experiencing this work, I hope 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.

MATT EDGERTON

Image: Fionn Mulholland

A NOTE FROM THE DRAMATURG

While Perth Festival brings together artists from around the world, this year they have discovered a rare gem hidden in Western Australia, the talented writer and performer Mararo Wangai.

Mararo Wangai's *Black Brass* is a triumphant work, showcasing a nuanced African narrative on stage. Blending songs and stories into an immersive and authentic theatrical experience, *Black Brass* brings traditional African storytelling techniques onto an Australian stage in a work that is both daring and important.

It was a pleasure and privilege to work with the talented multicultural and multilingual creative team in a fruitful cross-cultural collaboration and see this work realised.

In the current socio-political climate where voices of colour, and particularly Black voices, are relegated to the margins, works such as *Black Brass* speak to communities that are often unwelcome in traditional mainstage theatres, and engage us in a candid conversation about displacement and healing.

This story is a challenge to the mainstream expectations of refugee narratives. It is like throwing stones into a quiet lake, creating multiple ripples, with each ring telling us a beautiful story about the past and the future, love and betrayal, lies and trust, success and loss, happiness and sadness.

In the midst of the long isolation enforced upon us by the pandemic, *Black Brass* offers us a glimpse into a story filled with tears and laughter, celebrating the tangled knot that is life and living.

Afeif Ismail

BIOGRAPHIES

MEET THE TEAM

MARARO WANGAI

Writer & Performer

Mararo is a Kenyan-born writer, performer and media graduate, with a passionate interest in diverse forms of storytelling. His work strives to avoid simplistic narratives, assess society critically and tries to remain adaptive, organic and alive through its development, until the eventual encounter with an audience. He is attracted to stories that deal with the struggles of humanity, and creating work that not only tests his craft both in writing and performance but work that pushes him and his audience away from comfort zones, expectations and the mundane,

into the unforgiving unknown where we might both learn deeper lessons for the next chapter. His recent works include *The Advisors* and *Improvement Club* (The Last Great Hunt) and *Unsung Heroes* (Black Swan State Theatre Company). Mararo has twice been nominated for Best Supporting Male Actor – for *The Advisors* at 2017 Performing Arts WA Awards and Improvement Club at 2018 performing Arts WA Awards.

MATT EDGERTON

Director, Script Editor & Dramaturg

Matt is an Australian theatre director with a diverse body of work including contemporary and classical shows across a range of forms, styles and scales, cross-cultural collaborations, work for audiences of all ages and theatre projects promoting social development. For Perth Festival Matt was the director and dramaturg of the AWGIE award-winning *A Ghost In My Suitcase* and co-director of the Helpmann Award-nominated *Lé Nør [the rain]*. Matt's work has toured widely and won some stuff including Glug, Helpmann and AWGIE awards. Most recently, Matt won Best Direction

of a Mainstage Production at the 2019 PAWA Awards for *Fully Sikh*. Matt has previously held positions as Artistic Director of Barking Gecko Theatre and Resident Artist at Bell Shakespeare. He is a Churchill Fellow and proud member of Actors Equity.

AFEIF ISMAIL

Dramaturg

Afeif is an internationally published poet and playwright from Sudan whose works have been translated into German, Spanish and Swedish. He has published eight books of poetry and short stories in Arabic, and seven books in English. His work has been recognised nationally through winning awards and nominations including winning the Naji Naaman's Literary Prize 2015, 3 Seeds (3 short plays) presented by Always Working Artists at The Blue Room Theatre and *The African Magician* nominated for the Australian Writer's Guild Award for Best

Children's Play in 2011. In 2014 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington selected Afeif to be one of six International Playwriting Observers at New Visions/New Voices Festival of Works in Progress for Young Audiences. In 2018 Afeif was invited as a guest speaker to the ASSITJE/ATINA 5th International Theatre for Young Audiences Critics and Researchers Forum in Buenos Aires. Afeif's play for children *Son of the Nile* was shortlisted for The ASSITEJ African Playwriting Competition in 2019.

SISONKE MSIMANG

Script Editor

Sisonke Msimang is the author of *Always Another Country*: *A memoir of exile and home*. She is a South African writer whose work is focused on race, gender and democracy. She has written for a range of international publications including *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, Newsweek* and *Al Jazeera*.

MAHAMUDO SELIMANE

Musician & Composer

Mahamudo is a musician, singer, songwriter and composer from Mozambique who migrated to Australia in 2004. A member of many bands within and beyond Perth, Mahamudo has performed and toured in festivals around Europe, Africa and Australia, including Perth International Arts Festival in 2002 with his band Eyuphuro, his first visit Down Under. *Black Brass* is Mahamudo's first theatre production as a performer.

ZOË ATKINSON

Set & Costume Designer

Zoë studied Scenography at Prague Academy of The Performing Arts, The International Institute of Figurative Theatre (Czech Republic) and at the Institute International de la Marionette in France, under Josef Svoboda. Since returning to Australia in 1997 she has designed for theatre, dance, puppetry, opera and museums. Her most recent works include *Cloudstreet* and *The Return* (Malthouse Theatre), Perth Festival's *The Museum of Water* with English Artist Amy Sharrocks, *Ghost in My Suitcase* (Barking Gecko Theatre), *Xenides: the Musical*, *The Cherry Orchard and York* (Black Swan State Theatre Company), Hecate (Yirra Yaakin Theatre).
Zoë was Artistic Associate and Designer for Peth Festival 2017's opening event *Booma Waanginy* which was presented again in 2019.

LUCY BIRKINSHAW

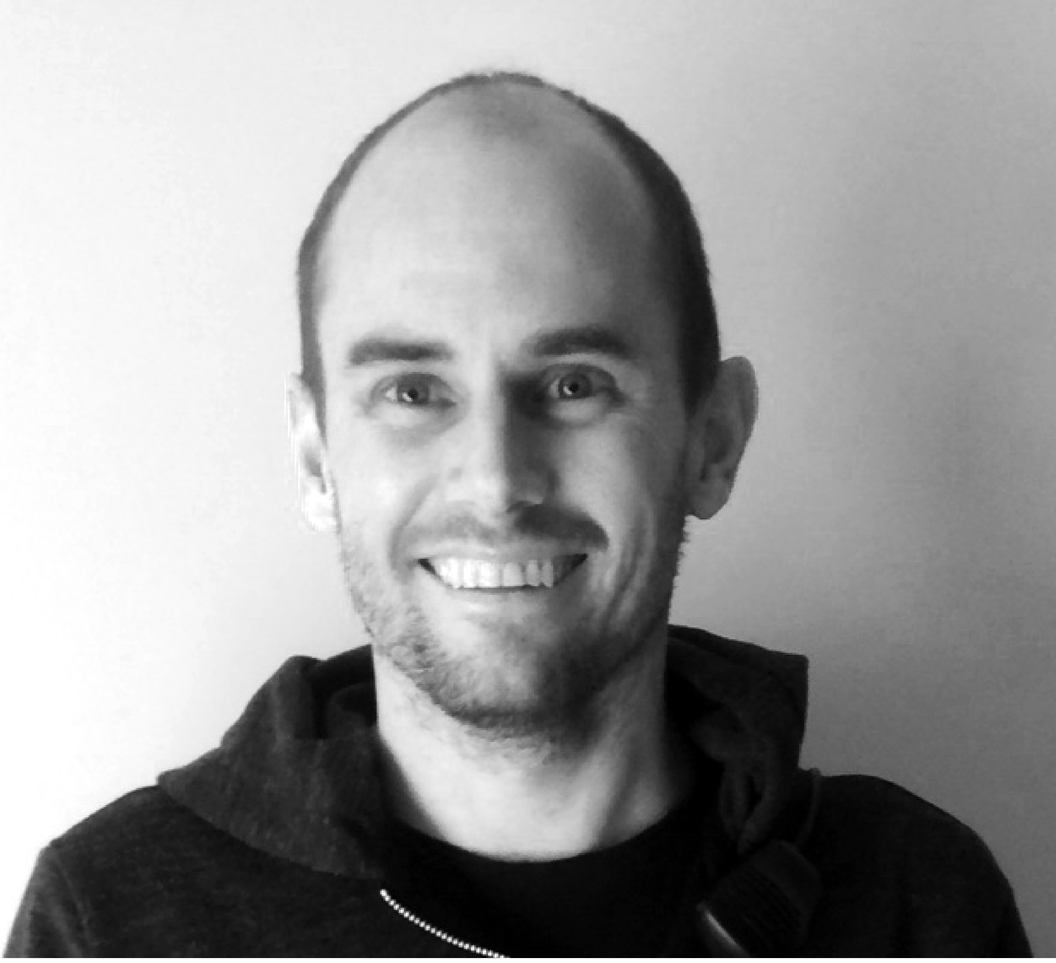
Lighting Designer

Lucy is a lighting designer and artist whose work spans theatre, musical theatre, concerts, opera, dance, film and television. She graduated from the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts with an Advanced Diploma of Lighting Design for Production and Performance and Curtin University with a Bachelor of Art, Fine Arts. Lucy has designed lighting for Black Swan State Theatre Company, Perth Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Malthouse, Griffin Theatre, Barking Gecko Theatr, WAYTCo, Melbourne Opera, Lyric Opera Melbourne, St Martin's Youth Theatre, Side Pony Productions, Hayloft Project, Perth Festival, Opera in the Park, Australian Opera Studio and many others.

TIM COLLINS

Sound Designer

Tim is a sound designer, composer, musician, technician and tour manager. He has worked in the entertainment industry since 2001 involved in performance and logistics for theatre, festivals, concert and studio production, musical theatre and live broadcast. Tim has been a mentor at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts since 2006. His show credits include *Fearless, Xenides, Fully Sikh* (Sound Design/Composer & Technician), *Boundary Street, Next To Normal, Clinton The Musical, Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, Let The Right One In, Our Town, The Torrents, Cloudstreet, The Rabbits, A Ghost In My Suitcase* and *My Robot*.



BEN NELSON

Production Manager

Ben Nelson is a professional production manager and audio operator with eight years' experience in the theatre industry. He began his career mixing bands in Albany (WA) before joining the Albany Entertainment Centre as acting Head of Audio (2014 – 18). In 2018 he relocated to Perth and has since worked in diverse roles for various companies including Perth Theatre Trust, WA Ballet, Crown Theatre, Tura New Music, Perth Festival, Sensorium Theatre, Maybe ( ) Together and Performing Lines WA. Since March 2019, Ben has been production managing Performing Lines WA's works including *Whoosh!*, *Layla Majnun*, PLWA Creative Hub and ongoing creative developments.

ROSE LIGGINS

Stage Manager

Born in the UK, Rose graduated from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David in 2014 with a First Class Honours degree in Theatre Design and Production, specialising in Stage Management. Since graduating, Rose has worked in numerous theatres around the UK, most notably for two summer repertory seasons at Theatre By The Lake, Keswick in 2015 and 2016. After taking some time out to travel, Rose and her partner moved to Perth in 2018. Since then, she has worked with West Australian Ballet on several of their productions and as a stage manager with The Last Great Hunt.

IMARA MANDRED

Community Engagement Consultant

Imara is a passionate and dedicated cultural advocate, change maker, mentor, community shaker and storyteller. She is a young first/ninth generation mixed raced African-Australian with ancestral roots and connections in Zanzibar, France and England. She has joined Performing Lines WA as the Community Engagement Coordinator for the 2021 premiere of *Black Brass* to highlight and celebrate the richness of this inspiring production, as well as the many sub-Saharan African cultures, countries and creative entrepreneurs present within different Perth communities.

PERFORMING LINES WA

Performing Lines WA produces transformative contemporary performance by Western Australia's most audacious independent artists. As the West Australian office of national organisation, Performing Lines, they curate a portfolio of works that are propelled by pressing questions and new ways of seeing the world.

The company's purpose is to champion risk and to ensure the breadth and plurality of Western Australia's identity, culture and creative potential is represented, celebrated and enjoyed. They support independent artists to create, present and tour innovative & relevant contemporary Australian performance locally, nationally and internationally.

PERFORMING LINES WA

performinglines.org.au

THANK YOU

Special thanks to Delen (France and Republic of Congo), Hamed (Sudan), Hardy (Mauritius), Irene (Democratic Republic of Congo), Jamal (Sudan), Kuda (Zimbabwe), Mulwa (Kenya), Daudi (Kenya), Rana (Sudan), Richard (Nigeria), Shingie (Zimbabwe), Shola (South Africa), Shoshi (South Africa), Shubert (France and West Indies), Kizito (Kenya) and Mahamudo (Mozambique) whose stories provided the inspiration for *Black Brass*.

Special thanks also to Performing Lines WA for nurturing and caring for the idea from its infancy through to its presentation. A very trusting and ambitious team to work with which is the perfect nest for a creative. This would definitely not have been possible without them.

Thank you to the Centre for Stories for advising, not only on how to source interviewees but on how to create a respectful and comfortable environment to allow them to share.

Thank you to Fremantle Arts Centre for hosting the creative team in the idyllic surrounds of Fremantle and providing a space to test the material on the floor in its crucial early stages.

Thank you to Subiaco Arts Centre for hosting the creative team and providing facilities to put on a moved showing that led to the festival.

Thank you to Perth Festival Lab for connecting me with artists in such proximity that one is reminded that they are flesh and bone as I am, which planted the seed to create a work that is ambitious and pushing towards new territory.

Thank you to the Office of Multicultural Interests for the advice and for pointing me in the right direction.

Thank you to The Blue Room Theatre for the advice and for providing space for talents established and upcoming to inspire each other.

Thank you to the Department of Local Government, Sports and Cultural Industries for trusting the project and team enough to allow us to put it up.

Thank you to Sisonke Mismang for her input and valuable feedback.

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Our Chair's Circle is a committed network of Donors who, along with our Chair, support the Festival's long-term strategy of growing the WA arts sector for a minimum of three years with a donation of $20,000 per annum.

FESTIVAL CIRCLE
The Festival Circle giving program provides ongoing support to artistic excellence across all we do. Donations to this fund are a direct investment in enabling us to bring excellence to our community and provide local artists with the opportunity to work alongside the world's greatest thinkers, performers and creatives.

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Our Medici Donors make an annual donation towards enabling a specific, ambitious Festival performance each year.

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Our Commissioning Fund supports the development of new Festival works over the four-year tenure of our Artistic Director. Donations to this fund enable us to develop and present Festival works that give voice to the people, artists and stories of this place.

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Our Creative Learning & Engagement Fund brings meaningful artistic experiences to young people and our local community to assist their wellbeing, whilst ensuring artistic experiences are accessible for everyone.

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