

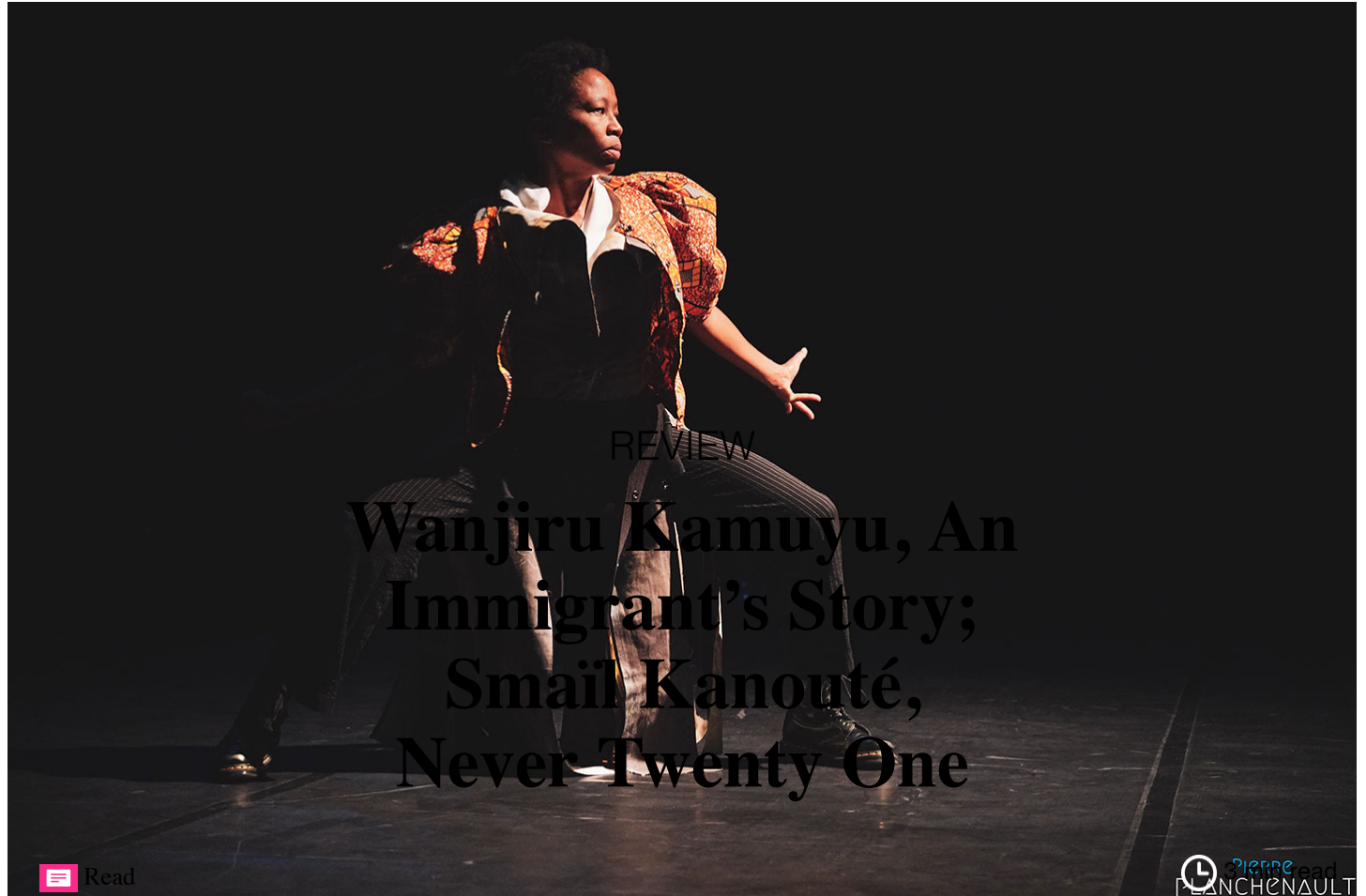
An Immigrant's Story

Wanjiru Kamuyu | WKcollective



Reviews

caminaktion.eu/en/immigrants



Wanjiru Kamuyu, An Immigrant's Story. Photo © Pierre Planchenault



[Charles A. Catherine \(https://springbackmagazine.com/author/charlescatherine/\)](https://springbackmagazine.com/author/charlescatherine/)

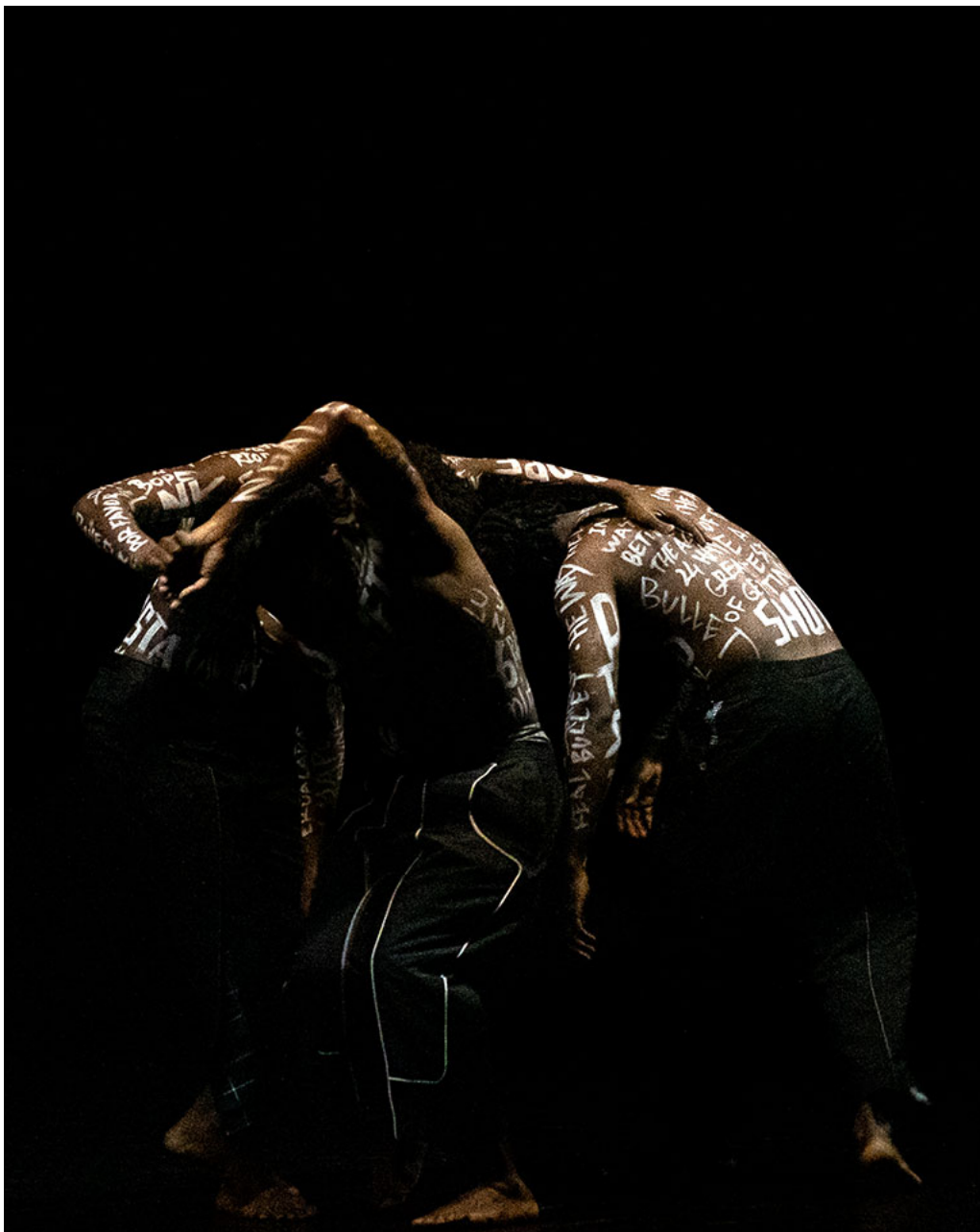
22 December 2020

Edgy performances at the edge of Paris that take us beyond our own horizons

'I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world.' In a globalised world, there are two ways to practise Socrates' idea of the sense of belonging: encountering many communities, or combining them. In a double programme for a Covid-compatible restricted audience, *L'Espace 1789* (<https://www.espace-1789.com/>), theatre of Saint-Ouen, a struggling suburb of Paris, has – unusually for French stages – successfully united these approaches.

First, Wanjiru Kamuyu (<https://wkcollective.com/company/sample-page>) presented *An Immigrant's Story* (<https://caminaktion.eu/en/immigrants/>), a colourful dance-and-text solo, true call for tolerance and fraternity based on the common discourses and attitudes she met while resident in Nairobi, New York and Paris, about migration, feeling home, racism, domination, difference or coexistence. Then Smaïl Kanouté (<http://www.smailkanoute.com/>) presented *Never Twenty One* (<https://caminaktion.eu/en/never21/>), a shadow-and-light male dance trio, true call for peace and responsibility through the denunciation of gun violence and its young victims in New York, Rio de Janeiro and Soweto. Both use recorded stories, narrative costumes, mixed dance, sophisticated lights. Here ends the comparison.

Kamuyu develops a very sensitive approach, alternating text bearing the political meaning spoken face to face with the audience, and inspired dance bearing the poetical load, going gradually from the feet in the ground to the head in the air. The autobiographical traces dissolve in the half-laughable, half-despicable wider experience of difference and racism that she presents in all its crudity. Alone on a stage bordered with a row of upside down chairs, she escapes from the ugliness of situations by always looking at the bright side, reinventing herself through movement, music, stories and clothes. Tearing her colourful wax doublet, she reveals a long sleeveless split coat she later turns inside out, before covering her hair with her shirt. More than a patchwork identity, Wanjiru Kamuyu embodies fusions of cultures through metamorphosis, ending in a joyful ritual dance that carries the promise of better days to come.



Smaïl Kanouté: *Never Twenty One*. Photo © Mark Marlborough

Kanouté made a very contrasting journey. From his short experiences in the Bronx or in Rio, he found creative youths all dealing with wrath and hope, real and symbolic violence, finding freedom in music and dance. Never twenty one begins with a short movie showing the slums of New York, like a peaceful morning after a night of battle. Though Kanouté never brings the weapons to light, their menacing shadow covers the stage so that, the three dancers appear and disappear like powerful ghosts, as do the white inscriptions, in English and Portuguese, borne by the black skin of their chests. The energy never stops, Kanouté and his two dancers deliver a fluid and dazzling hip-hop mixed with african dance, war postures, capoeira, sweat being the only redemptive water they seem to want. Slowly, he drives us to remember the lost ones by looking at the dark yet beautiful consequences of violence on young and innocent bodies, never forgetting in his complaint that 'Smail' sounds like 'smile'.

Echoing in our minds the #BlackLivesMatter struggle, both shows broaden our horizons. Their strong and neat impact comes out of the clarity they were made with. The precision of construction, the richness of their staging, the truth of their messages and, in a way, the tragedy they choose to talk about: everything contributed to make the audience feel part of the story, and not only as a monster. Dance absolutely took its place as narrator of heritage, and of the present.

 <http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=https://springbackmagazine.com/read/wanjiru-kamuyu-smail-kanoute-espace-1789/&t=Wanjiru%20Kamuyu,%20An%20Immigrant%E2%80%99s%20Story:%20Sma%C3%AFI%20Kanout%C3%A9,%20Never%20Twenty%20One%20https://springbackmagazine.com/read/wanjiru-kamuyu-smail-kanoute-espace-1789/>

 <http://twitter.com/home/?status=Wanjiru%20Kamuyu,%20An%20Immigrant%E2%80%99s%20Story:%20Sma%C3%AFI%20Kanout%C3%A9,%20Never%20Twenty%20One%20https://springbackmagazine.com/read/wanjiru-kamuyu-smail-kanoute-espace-1789/>

 http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=https://springbackmagazine.com/read/wanjiru-kamuyu-smail-kanoute-espace-1789/&media=https://springbackmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/fab_%C2%A9_Pierre_PLANCHENAU-04615_web.jpg

 <http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&title=Wanjiru%20Kamuyu,%20An%20Immigrant%E2%80%99s%20Story:%20Sma%C3%AFI%20Kanout%C3%A9,%20Never%20Twenty%20Kamuyu-smail-kanoute-espace-1789/>

The bottom line: two stories cross the global and the local to broaden our own horizons



27 November 2020, Espace 1789, St-Ouen, Paris

An Immigrant's Story

Choreographer & performer: Wanjiru Kamuyu / Dramaturge & producer: Dirk Korell / Writer: Laetitia Ajanohun / Original music composition: LACRYMOBOY / Costume: Birgit Neppi / Lighting: Cyril Mulon / Executive production: camin aktion / Co-production: Espace 1789 de Saint-Ouen, scène conventionnée de Saint-Ouen, La Manufacture CDCN Nouvelle-Aquitaine Bordeaux • La Rochelle, L'échangeur – CDCN Hauts-de-France, Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, Théâtre de la Ville – Paris

Never Twenty-One

Choreography: Smail Kanouté / Performers: Aston Bonaparte, Jérôme Fidelin aka Goku, Smail Kanouté / Outside eye: Moustapha Ziane / Sound and light design: Paul Lajus / Set design: Olivier Brichet / Body painting: Lorella Disez / Costume design: Rachel Boa, Ornella Maris / Production: Company Vivons ! / Co-production: Les Ateliers Médicis – Clichy sous Bois, Espace 1789 – Saint-Ouen, CENTQUATRE – PARIS, Les Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine Saint Denis, Théâtre de la Ville – Danse Élargie 2020

To the pointe

FOR IMMIGRANTS, IT'S COMPLICATED

9/17/2023

0 Comments



Wanjiru Kamuyu performed the powerful "An Immigrant's Story" on Saturday at PS/21 in Chatham.

The immigrant story is complicated. Each immigrant has a unique one that few in the new home country want to hear; so they walk among their new country folks in fear. They are “the other” and they remain as such until they can blend. And before they do, they must be wary.

That’s the message behind Wanjiru Kamuyu’s “An Immigrant’s Story,” a powerful solo performed by Wanjiru Kamuyu on Saturday at PS/21 in Chatham. In an evening-length work, this dancer, singer and storyteller from Kenya and France explores the careful tight-rope immigrants tread – one where they inhabit land that many don’t want them to live.

It’s an important, timely topic that Kamuyu breaches. And I’m glad she is doing it as Kamuyu is an engaging artist who, in this work, grabs her audience’s attention immediately with her voice that shot through the darkness with a longing for a home that is lost. When the lights on the stage rise to just a thin line in which she stands, one sees a person who struggles. She tears at her heart, looking strangled. She holds out her hands, begging for acceptance. She is trapped with little room to maneuver.

As she runs, her colorful, African-pattern top, becomes tattered. So too do her pants. And when her costumes, designed by Brigit Neppl, transforms into a ripped robe of faded material, one sees the pain of being stripped of more than a home. Familiar landscapes, friendships, language, acceptance are lost.

The stage design is stark. It is rimmed with overturned chairs – basically signaling that one is not welcome. You cannot sit and stay in an upside-down chair.

The lighting, by Cyril Mulon, is also telling. It switches to boxes – as if an immigrant is boxed into a persona. She stands in one to tell the story of an African teen coming to America – and the racism she met. That marginalization did not emanate from White people but Blacks who called her names like Jungle Bunny and taunted her by saying she lived like Tarzan, topless with her bottom hanging out. They even, shockingly, said the transatlantic slave trade kept them from that – a shocking notion for any person of color to contemplate.

At one point, Kamuyu walks off the stage and glides slowly through an aisle of patrons, making discomfort part of the experience. Members of the audience she slips by stand, lean back, shift in the closeness to this stranger. Her pass through in the house, with her head held high and eyes searching, is overlaid with her voice that speaks of the privilege of sitting up front with others of your same race, perhaps same ethnic background. She spoke about how those in the back are not even worthy of consideration. Those in the front row are who matter. It was a strong indictment on all of us there, mainly because it’s true.

When she returned to the stage, she spoke of immigrant stories – those of all people – as created by Laetitia Ajanohun. The last was of a Russian living in Sweden. Though that person made a life in Sweden, they balk at talking about their roots, but whimsically admit they yearn to sit by a river near their old home. It was heartbreaking.

What those who vilify immigrants miss is the immigrants might not want to be here or another country either. And at a time when immigrants are unfairly targeted, Kamuyu wants people to know that. I hope more people listen.

Kroppens längtan efter tillhörighet

DANS

An Immigrant's Story

Av och med: Wanjiru Kamuyu
Black box, Norrlandsoperan

SCEN. Omgiven av 35 omkullvälta svarta stolar står Wanjiru Kamuyu när ljuset går upp i Black box – den enda scenografin i hennes solo, men som sådan mättad av betydelser. Har någonting briserat och skapat en tryckvåg mot periferin? Är det den eviga vandrarens verklighet vi presenteras, rader av potentiella viloplatsar, men omöjliggjorda som sådana? Tillvaron som halvt tillhörig?

Ja, allt detta kan läsas in i en föreställning som på knappa timmen hinna ladda rummet med påminnelser och nya insikter om en historia och samtid av rasism, kolonialism, sexism, migration och hemlängtan – allt gestaltat och förkroppsligat genom Wanjiru Kamuyus självbiografiska dans.

Ett ljudlandskap dånande av flykt och stora fartyg omger inledningen; Wanjiru dansar en människa tvingad framåt, bort, i elektrifierade rörelser, kastad mot väggar, innan hon når en ny plats och ömsar skinn. En färgstarkt mönstrad blus skalas av till en klänning från slavhandelsn tid, senare till den samtida urbana människans svarta byxor och vit skjorta.

I en senare sektion möter vi en 16-årig Wanjiru i nya hemlandet USA, navigerandes i upplysta kvadrater av ljus, konfronterad av en hel kontinentens föreställningar om den kontinent hon lämnat. Här glider de tidigare hetsiga diagonalerna och piruetterna sömlöst över till stand-upens kroppskomik och skarp svart humor. De svarta belackarna som drivs av sin underliggande skräck – om inte den transatlantiska slavhandeln varit, kunde du ha varit vi?

Så fortsätter Wanjiru Kamuyu växelspelet mellan tysta danspartier, monologer och interven-



Wanjiru Kamuyus *An Immigrant's Story* framfördes på Norrlandsoperan på onsdagen. FOTO: PIERRE PLANCHENAU

tioner med publiken – en skur av frågor om hemhörighet och exkludering, eller när hon likt en vålnad rör sig genom publikraderna med sitt protestmanifest mot den vite mannens privilegier. Det är rappt, drabbande,

vackert och underhållande.

Var kommer jag att bli gammal, frågar sig Kamuyu – för den som tillhör alla och ingen plats är svaret ovisst. Men hon fortsätter på kosmopolitens överlevnadsvis att räkna kriterier:

na för lycka på varje ny plats. I ett ljus slutparti med mjukt rytmisk dans över hela scenen vill jag läsa det som att hon säger; att förlora ett land behöver inte vara att förlora sig själv.

SARA MEIDELL

The body's longing for belonging

Published April 13th

Written by Sara Meidell

<https://www.vk.se/2022-04-13/kroppens-langtan-efter-tillhorighet>

Surrounded by 35 overturned black chairs, Wanjiru Kamuyu stands there as the lights go up in the Black box – the only scenography in her solo is saturated with meaning. Has something exploded and created a pressure wave against the periphery? Is this the reality of the eternal wanderer we are presented with, rows of potential resting places, but impossible as such? Life as half-belonging?

Yes, all this can be read into a performance that in just under an hour manages to load the room with reminders and new insights into a history and contemporary of racism, colonialism, sexism, migration and homesickness – all embodied through Wanjiru Kamuyu's autobiographical dance.

A soundscape thundering with flight and large ships surrounds the beginning; Wanjiru dances a woman forced forward, away, in electrified movements, thrown against walls, before reaching a new place and shedding skin. A colorful patterned blouse is peeled off to a dress from the time of the slave trade, later to black urban trousers and white shirt of the contemporary urban wo/man.

In a later section, we meet a 16-year-old Wanjiru in her new home country, the United States, navigating in illuminated squares of light, confronted by an entire continent's notions of the continent she has left. Here, the previously hectic diagonals and pirouettes slide seamlessly over to the stand-up's body filled with comedy and sharp black humor. The black scoundrels driven by their underlying terror – if it were not for the transatlantic slave trade, could you have been us?

So Wanjiru Kamuyu continues the interplay between silent dance parts, monologues and interactions with the audience – a burst of questions about belonging and exclusion, or when she, like a ghost, moves through the audience with her protest manifesto against the white man's privileges. It's fast, catchy, beautiful and entertaining.

Where will I grow old, Kamuyu asks herself – for the one who belongs to everyone and no place, the answer is uncertain. But she continues on the survival of the cosmopolitan to count the criteria for happiness in each new place. In a bright finale with soft rhythmic dance all over the stage, I want to say it as she says; to lose a country does not have to be to lose one's self.

Scen

Wanjiru Kamuyus hänförande dans är ett politiskt brandtal

1 april 2022 10:23

I "An immigrant's story" används fördomarna som arbetsunderlag. Sara Berg ser ett starkt soloverk på Dansstationen i Malmö.

- [Sara Berg](#)Text

Det här är en recension. Analys och värderingar är skribentens egna.



Wanjiru Kamuyus solo är en självbiografisk satir om migranskapet. Foto: Pierre Planchenault

Fakta

An immigrant's story

Koreograf och artist: Wanjiru Kamuyu. Dramaturg och producent: Dirk Korell. Text: Laetitia Ajanohun. Musik: Lacrymoboy. Kostym: Birgit Neppl.

Dansstationen, Palladium i Malmö, 31/3-1/4.

Sara Berg är scenkonstkritiker och skribent på kultursidan.

Wanjiru Kamuyus "An immigrant's story" är som ett cv. Hon föddes i Kenya, flyttade till USA som sextonåring och bor nu i Frankrike. Hon har dansat klassisk och samtida dans. Hon har utsatts för fördomar och rasism men också hyllats internationellt.

Allt detta gestaltas i hennes starka, satiriska solodansverk, där det självbiografiska och identitetspolitiska utgör fundamentet. Det intressanta är vad hon gör med det. I dansen blir erfarenheterna inte bara hennes; de tillhör svarta kvinnor i generationer.

Palladiums scen kantas av ett trettiotal stolar med benen i vädret. Trettio platser där man inte får sitta. Så Kamuyu dansar. Hennes historia växer fram till tonerna av

den franska producenten Lacrymoboy's bastunga åskmuller. Plagg efter plagg skalar hon av sig sina olika identiteter: den afrikanska orangemönstrade blusen, den amerikanska nybyggarklänningen, den propra kontorsklädseln och den frisinnade franska klubb-outfiten.



Wanjiru Kamuyu i "An immigrant's story". Foto: Pierre Planchenault

I sin dans driver Kamuyu med stereotyper, men hon upphöjer också det bespottade till något vackert. För att sedan bita ifrån igen. Publiken kan aldrig känna sig trygg i sina reaktioner.

Ett exempel: den nästan voodoo-likadansen i inledningen, med knappt märkbara inslag av klassisk balett och streetdance. Som följs av en arg monolog om de rasistiska fördomar hon mötte när hon flyttade till USA. "Du sysslar med voodoo. Du har ätit en död människa. Du har aids."

Eller när musiken övergår i något slags höghastighetsjazz och Kamuyu blir en 1920-talets nattklubbssångerska och showartist. Hon rör sig med yviga gester över scengolvet, i ljuset från spotlighten. Hundra år senare underhåller hon igen, fast på andra villkor. Föreställningen har lika många lager som hennes scenkostym.

Detta är inte bara djupt personlig och hänförande dans, det är också politik. Det är upplevelsen av att vara självvald och påtvingad (im)migrant och kosmopolit, att aldrig riktigt höra hemma och ibland inte tillåtas ta plats.

Är då de frustrerade brandtalen nödvändiga? Ska inte dansen kunna stå för sig själv? Tja, ibland är frågor för viktiga för att lämnas öppna för tolkning.

Ett av de starkaste partierna är då Kamuyu täcker munnen med en ansiktsmask och långsamt rör sig mellan bänkraderna. Hon är den svarta kvinnan, vi är den vite mannen. Men den här gången är rollerna ombytta: vi måste resa oss för henne.

The mesmerizing dance of Wanjiru Kamuyu is a political pamphlet

Prejudice is used as background in “An Immigrant’s Story”. Sara Berg sees a strong solo work at Dansstationen

An autobiographic satire about migranhood.

“An immigrant’s story” by Wanjiru Kanuyu is like a cv. She was born in Kenya, moved to USA at sixteen and now lives in France. She has danced ballet and contemporary, she has endured prejudice and racism, but has also been internationally celebrated.

All this is portrayed in this strong satirical solo, with autobiography and identity politics as the fundamentals. The interesting thing is what she makes out of this. The experience is not just hers; they belong to generations of black women.

The stage at Palladium is framed by thirty chairs legs up. Thirty places where you cannot sit. So Kamuyu dances. Her story appears to the tones of the base thunder of French Lacrymoboy. She strips off clothes and peels off identities: the orange patterned African blouse, the American immigrant dress, the proper office outfit and the free spirited French club look.

She makes fun of stereotypes, and also elevates what is spat upon to something beautiful. And then bites again. The audience is never safe in their reactions.

One example: the almost voodoo dance at first, with elements of ballet and street dance. Followed by an angry monologue about racial prejudice she met in the US. “You do voodoo. You ate a dead person. You have Aids.”

Or when music changes to high velocity jazz and Kamuyu becomes a night club singer show artiste from the 1920s. Moving with big gestures across the floor in the spotlight. On other terms one hundred years later. The show has as many layers as her stage outfit.

This is not only deeply personal and mesmerizing dance, it is also politics. The experience of the chosen and forced (im)migrant and cosmopolitan, never really belonging and sometimes not allowed a place.

Are these frustrated pamphlets necessary? Does not dance stand on it’s own? Well, sometimes questions are too important to be left open for interpretation.

One of the strongest parts is when Kamuyu covers her mouth with a face mask and moves slowly among the audience seats. She the black woman, we the white man. But with roles changed: we must stand up for her.

Sydsvenskan, Malmö daily paper 2022-04-01 – review by Sara Berg (Sweden)