

LET

# Burning City

by Junior Mthombeni & SACHA

at KVS  
theater  
arsenal

paaleis





# Burning City

*hetpaleis, KVS & Theater Arsenaal/Junior Mthombeni  
& SOCHA*

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# introduction

cops stop you

*fight flight freeze*

bomb in your street

*fight flight freeze*

parents pull each other's hair out

*fight flight freeze*

climate crisis at home

*fight flight freeze*

make America Racist Again

*fight flight freeze*

far right wins elections

*fight flight freeze*

Akosua, Kwabena, Li Wei, Olga, Ahmed move into your street

*fight flight freeze*

China becomes the new world leader

*fight flight freeze*

AI is in control

*fight flight freeze*

dark street, someone calls, someone whistles

*fight flight freeze*

For some people, life runs like clockwork.

But not for us. We fight a battle every day.

Our reptilian brain wants only one thing: to survive.

How do we find our way out of this turmoil?

Simple: put thirteen artists on a stage with different talents and profiles, ranging from adhd, autism and trauma to epilepsy and high sensitivity. Together, let them transcend all the shit and overcome the chaos. To then go out and change the world.

## info

- tags: music, dance, theatre
- 15 years and up
- performance subtitled in French and English
- [promo images](#)
- premiering February 20th 2025 + on tour until May 10th 2025
- also playing next season

## about Burning City

How do young people deal with feelings of disquiet, uncertainty and anxiety that today's world increasingly evokes? In recent years, we have seen young people claiming more of a voice in the public arena, from the climate marches and Black Lives Matter to reactions to policy during the pandemic.

What role does the theatre play in this? It's a question we often have to face as a youth theatre. Therefore hetpaleis has teamed up with the multidisciplinary collective SOCHA led by Junior Mthombeni. No other maker is as good at exorcising these social demons with a collective theatre ritual for a large audience.

Feelings of fear and insecurity are used as fuel to push back against a prevailing sense of hopelessness. It harks back to ancient festive rituals dominated by singing and dancing. Burning City, a revolution in concert, in which fear is cast aside. Theatre as a vehicle for hope.

Junior has brought a large group of people together for the play. SOCHA includes people from different generations, cultures and artistic disciplines. SOCHA describes itself as a group of residents of a new city, in all its rawness and inequality but also its glory. The group demands space for multiple voices – 'hear my voice'. SOCHA aims to be an authentic reflection of the world, complex as it is, a society in miniature. With this powerful group on stage, Burning City promises to be a celebration of representativity. Full of invisible talent.



## about Junior Mthombeni

Junior Mthombeni is director, actor, composer and musician. Since 2016, he has been one of the central artistic figures of KVS, the Royal Flemish Theatre, and as a dramatist he is an active member of the Jr.cE.sA.r collective.

Working with a multiethnic cast, Junior has grasped the big-city context in a contemporary musical theatre setting, carrying influences from the urban arts and musical traditions from all corners of the earth.

As a director, his work is a theatrical interpretation of the hot potatoes of the day, while also dissecting the contemporary significance of inspirational figures, movements and events in the recent and not-so-recent past in works such as Malcolm X, Dear Winnie and Who's Tupac. Aside from creating his own works, he is also on a valuable and dynamic journey together with SOCHA, a community of artistic performers of all generations, cultures and disciplines. Together they make up an ambitious and dynamic artistic mix in the On Fire shows. Burning City is to be a culmination point of these On Fires, in which the new city is expressed in all its glory, crudeness and inequality.

## credits

direction

by and with

musicians

artwork and installation

dramaturgy

director's assistant (intern)

stage design

light

sound

costume

musical advice

stage manager

production

coproduction

with the support of

Junior Mthombeni

Vianney Adriaens, Marios Bellas, Nina Plantefève-Castryck, Amina Iddrisu, Alix Konadu, Tonic Mendi Jacobs, Junior Mthombeni and Zach Swagga

Abel Baeck, Mirko Banovic, Jessica Boyeleba Balehen en Arne Demets

Elke Gijsemans

Gerardo Salinas

Anna Kestens

Stef Stessel

Jasper Vanhalle and Karen Verhaeghe

Bob Hermans and Sander Cools

Nushi Lambreva

Cesar Janssens

Steven Brys

hetpaleis, KVS and theater arsenaal

hetpaleis, KVS en theater arsenaal/Junior Mthombeni & SOCHA

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# Burning City

## city of fire

*we spoke with Amina Idrissu, Junior Mthombeni and Vianney Adriaens at the start of the rehearsals.*

*As much as we might wish otherwise, many young people experience our world as chaotic, overstimulating and unsafe. One of the reactions to this is fear. The director of Burning City, Junior Mthombeni, and his twelve performers investigate how fear influences our behaviour and how we can overcome that basic instinct. The result is an explosive, energetic production for everyone aged 15 and over.*

The 'reptile brain' is the starting point for director Junior Mthombeni's new work Burning City, a co-production by SOCHA, hetpaleis, KVS and theater arsenaal. What happens if you are confronted with stress or a dangerous situation? What do you do if you encounter violence, feel insecure or become totally overwhelmed by the triggers in social media? Your survival instincts take over: hide, fight, flight or freeze.

"I had a pretty difficult childhood, and I noticed that I was displaying the hide, fight, flight and freeze reactions myself. When you're doing that, you're not living your life. You're just surviving. You resort to a kind of primary instinct", Junior Mthombeni says. "I started to realise that many of us are functioning in a permanent state of survival. And these personal survival instincts have an influence on society as well. What happens at a micro level also happens at a macro level. You end up with a world where Trump has been elected twice, politics is becoming more and more polarised, and people are denying climate change. Right now, many people are reacting by turning inwards, not wanting to see these frightening situations. We are closing our borders: hide."

### **One big party**

Junior's observations were the starting point for artistic research. He and the musician Tom Kestens are pioneering members of the artistic community SOCHA, which met up every evening for a week in early 2023 to improvise on the theme of fear. The results were performed on stage at the end of the week. "The performance was extremely energetic and very emotional," recalls Amina Idrissu, one of the dancers. "That evening went down so well that Theater Aan Zee invited us to develop our material further. That reworked version ended up being one big party."



These performances laid the foundations of Burning City. “We concluded from our research that everyone has the same survival instincts inside them”, Amina explains. “You don’t get to choose which instinct takes over in a particular situation, but everyone is familiar with all of these reactions. Realising that can create an opportunity to connect.”

Although the production is based on experiences such as fear, trauma and chaos, Burning City focuses on perseverance, hope and resilience. “I used to create plays about people fighting racism and the repression of the Black population, figures such as Malcolm X or Winnie Mandela. Now I am more inclined to look for themes that can bring us together”, Junior remarks on his shift in focus. “That doesn’t mean I’ve abandoned my activist attitude, but I do think our society needs connection more than anything right now. I think that our production addresses both sides of that story: we explore the depths as well as strength, love and joy.”

**“We want to show young people that they are not alone in their vulnerability”  
—Junior Mthombeni**

### **Exchange**

Connection and transformation are at the heart of Burning City, both in terms of its content and the artistic vocabulary used to convey it. The thirteen performers have wildly diverging backgrounds, talents and vulnerabilities. “We have different ethnicities, ages, genders and artistic languages. The group is diverse in the broadest possible sense, without making a big thing of diversity. Everyone is just really talented”, says Vianney Adriaens, one of the performers in Burning City.

“We created Burning City horizontally; there is no hierarchy”, Junior adds. “That’s a way to create a unified whole, with a unified language. It’s wonderful to see how all the performers ultimately ended up acting and playing music and dancing. You can’t pigeon-hole us in a single discipline. We try to be limitless in that sense, to play on the strength of the community. The most important thing is that we all have something to say.” And improvisation and experimentation also have a crucial role. “It’s important to keep that freedom. That’s where our strength lies.”

## Coming together

Junior Mthombeni believes in the importance of connection and new encounters at a social level as well as an artistic one: “If we claim to want a better society, we have to try and make that happen right here, right now. If we can’t manage to find a shared language during six weeks of rehearsals, what do we expect from the outside world?”

That perspective is reflected in Junior’s choice of title. “The city is burning, more than ever before. It’s the ultimate place where diverse people come together: people who are more vulnerable, people facing racism or various forms of exclusion, you name it.”

At the same time, though, he wants to show a city ablaze with energy, passion and potential: “A fire is also something people sit around to talk to each other. The idea isn’t just that we’re burning out. So many nationalities and backgrounds converge in European cities. I think we need to see that as a strength.”

## Seeing and being seen

The performers in *Burning City* bring their disparate worlds together to unleash a force. “At the climax of the performance, the point is to be able to share that transformative energy with the audience and, through them, to send it out of the theatre”, Junior says. That’s why *Burning City* has thrown the traditional layout of the auditorium overboard: the audience take their seats around a catwalk. That erases the usual safe distance between the audience and performers, sucking the audience into the performance in a very tangible way.

“The show is right in your face”, Amina and Vianney confirm. “In that sense, maybe our research into primary instincts isn’t limited to the performers. The audience’s reactions are part of it as well: How do they react when they are sitting so close to us and see us being ourselves so frankly? Will it scare them? Will they want to join in?”

“At the same time, there’s the issue of how we deal with their reactions. The catwalk is all about being seen, putting yourself on display. In the context of *Burning City*, that mainly means daring to show yourself, as vulnerable as you are.”

## Vulnerability

Above all, *Burning City* hopes to spark something off in young people. “We live in a time when everyone seems to have to figure stuff out for themselves in the world. We might find that really strong and tough, but to be honest, it’s just so frightening. What if I fall? I think that has a huge impact on the decisions young people make, and their growth”, Junior says. “We want to show young people that they are not alone in their vulnerability. And that it’s possible to dance and celebrate on stage, in spite of everything.”

And Vianney adds: “I think the performance is really going to appeal to young people, because it’s so loud and in your face. I hope young people will recognise themselves in it, feeling that they are part of a hopeful community. A community on fire.”





scenography model

## about hetpaleis

hetpaleis is a large performing arts centre for children, adolescents and adults, situated in the heart of Antwerp in Belgium. It is home to future adults, as spectators, discussion partners, participants and artists. hetpaleis presents and produces various arts disciplines and makes high-quality productions accessible to a large, urban and diverse audience. hetpaleis is committed to regional and international cooperation and supports a variety of artists in their development.

## about KVS

KVS is the Flemish city theater of Brussels. KVS wants to reinterpret repertoire in relation to the city that is more than ever the world. KVS embraces the city in its plurality and wants to strengthen its artistic voice in the arts field. Interculturalism on and off stage is therefore not a task or a challenge for KVS, but a logical starting point. Just like a strong Flemish and international presence.

## about theater arsenaal

theater arsenaal is an open theater house that works for a strong connection between art and society. Openness it conveys in its artistic creations, its internal operations, its architecture, its contact with other cities and its commitment to the social and cultural partners and the inhabitants of the city of Mechelen.

### contact

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with the support of:



De Standaard



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