

# Burning City

city of fire

**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 Iddrisu, 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."

**"We want to show young people that they are not alone in their vulnerability"**

— Junior Mthombeni

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."

## 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."

practical info

**premiere on 20 February 2025**

**at hetpaleis until 28 February 2025**

**then on tour**

**info & tickets from [hetpaleis.be](https://hetpaleis.be)**