

**MEURSAULTS** When Meursault, the hero of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, published in 1942, commits a crime on a sunny beach in Algeria, it is an anonymous Arab he kills—his name will not be uttered even once. Using this meaningful and suffocating anonymity as his starting point, Kamel Daoud built, in 2013, *The Meursault Investigation*, a novel which gives this anonymous Algerian an identity, a face, and a personality, as well as a place in the history of his country. Through the story of Haroun therefore appears Moussa, this brother who disappeared one summer afternoon, and left behind the weight of his absence, a pain that never disappeared, and an ever-present anger. Philippe Berling has chosen to make us hear this monologue by an old man who cannot let go of his memories and throws them at the audience as if to free himself of them. While his mother, a surviving shadow who can't but sing her rage and misfortune, watches on, Haroun speaks of his years of mourning and of the history of Algeria, intimately intertwined with his personal drama. The cost of independence, the disillusionment that followed, the tragedy of civil war and terrorism... Everything that makes up a life stolen and broken, between reality and fantasy, sarcasm and biting humour.

The show will premiere on 21 July, 2015 at Théâtre Benoît-XII, Avignon.

**PHILIPPE BERLING** After graduating from the INSAS in Brussels, Philippe Berling founded the company Théâtre Obligatoire, began his career as a director, and continued to learn from many theatre and opera directors: André Engel, Jean-Pierre Vincent, Alain Françon, Bruno Bayen. From 1990 to 1994, he worked with Jean-Marie Villégier at the Théâtre national de Strasbourg, where he was director of programming. In 1995, he was appointed director of the Théâtre du Peuple de Bussang, before continuing his work as a director as a partner with several theatres (Belfort, Coulommiers, Auxerre, Noisy-le-Grand...). In 2010, he was appointed co-director of the Théâtre Liberté de Toulon along with Charles Berling, his brother. Philippe Berling has directed almost fifty plays, all evidence of his curiosity for classic and modern dramatic (Heinrich von Kleist, Henrik Ibsen, Georges Feydeau, Eduardo De Filippo, Serge Valletti...) and non-dramatic literature (Fernando Pessoa, Jean-Henri Fabre).

**KAMEL DAOUD** Former editor-in-chief of the *Quotidien d'Oran*, Kamel Daoud is today one of Algeria's most famous columnist with "Raïna Raïkoun" ("My opinion, your opinion"), an op.-ed. he writes almost daily in French, a language he learnt on his own during the Arabisation of Algerian schools in the 1970s. He published a collection of short stories in Algeria in 2008 under the title *La Préface du nègre*, which have been published in France in 2011 under the title *Le Minotaure 504*. He published his first novel in Algeria in 2013: *Meursault, contre-enquête* (*The Meursault Investigation*, Éditions Barzakh), available in France in 2014 (Actes Sud). Already translated into twenty-two languages, this book was awarded the Prix Goncourt du premier roman, the Prix François Mauriac and the Prix des 5 continents de la francophonie. Kamel Daoud is subject to a fatwa by an imam who asked the Algerian authorities to sentence him to death because of his engagement in favour of secularism in Algeria.

*Meursault, contre-enquête* by Kamel Daoud is published by éditions Actes Sud. *Meursaults* is subject to a *Pièce (dé)montée*, pedagogical file created by Canopé.

## INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE BERLING

### Why did you choose to adapt this novel for the stage?

Philippe Berling: I read the novel in its Algerian edition in November 2013 thanks to Georges Perpès, director of the Armand Gatti library in La Seyne-sur-Mer. I fell in love with it right away. It has often been described as a “sequel” to Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, but I see it more as a sort of reflection, an expanded look, at once admiring and critical, on this major work in the history of French literature. After reading *The Meursault Investigation*, many people want to re-read *The Stranger*. This is how young Algerians today are reading or re-reading Camus, thanks to Kamel Daoud.

### What key choices did you make when it came to adapting the novel?

I have chosen to keep the form of the novel, which was a monologue, but to add an extra physical and musical presence on the stage in the character of the protagonist’s mother. She will sing her pain and her anger. Ahmed Benaïssa, a 70-year-old Algerian actor, will play the part of Haroun, the brother of this nameless Arab murdered on a beach by Meursault. He’s a “rebel” actor, who hasn’t worked much in France, but has been a fixture in Algerian theatre, movies, and television. I have also decided to focus on the relationship between the son and his mother. It’s a bond that is at once terrible and indestructible, similar to the one that ties this Algerian to his country, so full of the hopes and disillusion of independence. I have also kept a few explicit references to *The Stranger*, as well as others to Kamel Daoud’s conflict with radical Islam with, of course, the extreme violence of the final monologue, which echoes the ending of Camus’s novel. Kamel Daoud has been the target of a sort of *fatwa* pronounced by an imam who asked the Algerian government to condemn him to death.

### Did the monologue strike you as a dramatic form right away?

Even as I was reading the novel for the first time, it seemed clear to me. There is a very clear address to the audience, since Haroun speaks to the customers of a café near Hadjout—formerly known as Marengo—where it is still possible to drink alcohol. In the play, however, the story will take place in the courtyard of the house where Haroun lives with his mother. I thought it would work better that way. In the novel, this house, where his mother used to work as a servant, becomes the family’s in 1962, when independence is declared and the French are made to leave the country. The son draws a parallel between the colonisation of Algeria by the French starting in 1830 and the act of taking the house back from them. He will therefore talk from this courtyard, near the grave of the French pied-noir he killed, as asked by his mother.

### There is also a parallel between those two murders, that of the anonymous Arab in *The Stranger*, and that of the Frenchman in *The Meursault Investigation*...

The difference is that the murdered Frenchman has a name: Joseph Larquais. It’s a key distinction. Algerians, before 1962, could very well be nameless. For some of the settlers, they were nothing but anonymous Arabs. Collectively, they were seen as second-class citizens, politically and officially.

### **How would you explain the massive success of the novel?**

It is a worldwide success, since this Algerian novel, written in French, has now been translated into twenty-two languages... I think the success of the book has something to do with the theme of post-colonialism. It is about this interim, between colonialism and independence. What you have here is an Algerian proudly taking advantage of what he sees as the best part of colonialism. He devours Camus and produces *The Meursault Investigation*. He's absorbed not only Camus's language, but also his themes. But the work he produces is undeniably his. Kamel Daoud has managed to create a distinct identity, a mix between the two cultures that make him. He sees it as a source of cultural wealth. He firmly believes there are "thirty-eight millions Meursaults in Algeria" who are stuck in an in-between, waiting for a brighter future. The novel is an "open" one, it allows for many different interpretations.

### **Isn't the novel also an exploration of the history of Algeria since independence?**

The history of his country is carved into the flesh of the novel's protagonist. It is a vision of history on a human scale, seen through individual destinies and stories. The relationship between Haroun and his mother, for instance, echoes his relationship with Algeria, a relationship that has much to do with colonisation, a relationship of domination and submission, with a perpetrator and a victim. Those vicious circles are very common, universal even, but they are here presented by an old man on a theatre stage rather than analysed by intellectuals and political scientists. This ability to remain as close as possible to the human is what makes the theatre and literature so powerful.

### **Doesn't this power also come from the fact that what we have here is a piece of literary fiction?**

Certainly. The first fiction begins with a dead man who doesn't exist, since he has no name. The second one is built around his brother, who is looking for him but never finds him. Finally, the third one would come from Moussa, this legendary brother, inspired by the famous Ali La Pointe, who could have been a character from one of Jean Genet's novels: a pimp and a thief, a very handsome man, a hero of the struggle for independence, of the battle of Algiers... But Moussa is murdered in the 1940s in Camus's novel, and Ali was born in 1930 and died in 1957...

### **Albert Camus has been described as an "awakener of consciences." Isn't that also what Kamel Daoud is doing today?**

Probably, which would explain the success of his book, which can be read as a sort of journey through our entwined consciences, those of the French settlers and of the colonised, then formerly-colonised, Algerians. A journey that doesn't try to avoid the rough edges of French-Algerian history, or those of the national history of Algeria. Of course, not all wounds heal...

## AND...

### THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Site Pasteur de l'Université, free admittance

- 23 July at 11:00 am, *The Mediterranean as a "single soul"*, with, among others, Philippe Berling and Kamel Daoud, organised in partnership with the Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur

- 23 July at 03:00 pm, *France / Algeria: Different views on secularism and politics*, with, among others, Kamel Daoud, organised in partnership with *Mediapart*

- 23 July at 05:30 pm, *Dialogue artists-audience* with Philippe Berling and the team of *Meursaults*, encounter hosted by the Ceméa

## TOUR DATES FOR MEURSAULTS AFTER THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

- 29 September 2015: La Garance, Scène nationale, Cavaillon

- from 1<sup>st</sup> to 17 October: Théâtre Liberté Toulon

- from 3 to 7 November: Théâtre national, Toulouse

- 12 and 13 November: Romans Scènes, Romans-sur-Isère

- 19 November: Théâtres en Dracénie, Draguignan

- 21 November: La Croisée des Arts, Saint-Maximin

- 25 and 26 November: Maison de la Culture, Nevers

- 21 and 22 January 2016:

Site-Mémorial du Camp des Milles, Aix-en-Provence

- 28 January: Espace Diamant, Ajaccio

- from 2 to 6 February: Théâtre des Bernardines, Marseille

- from 9 to 18 February: within the network of the Institut français d'Algérie

- 15 and 16 March: Espace des Arts, Chalon-sur-Saône

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EDITION

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