

Robert Ssempijja

:

You judge

O
UT OF
THE BOX

MMpraxis & CAA Berlin

Robert Ssempijja

You judge starts with a story about the community in Kampala, Uganda, where Robert Ssempijja grew up and tells of the expectations of its members towards him. As the title suggests, the piece is about the act of judging – and that it might tell us more about ourselves, than the person we judge. The performance addresses how we are all constantly searching for our place in the world: we try to adapt, to understand our different roles and we struggle for acceptance.

You judge

Mentor:
GERT-JAN STAM

Dramaturgical advice:
MACIEJ SADO

Concept, Performance:
ROBERT SSEMPIJJA

Music:
ABDOUL MUJYAMBERE,
ÖZ KAVELLER

Costume:
KARMELITA SIWA

ROBERT SSEMPIJJA is a Ugandan contemporary artist and dance researcher whose practice is marked by the era of post-colonialism and decolonization. He is curious about the body as an archive of information that is activated by movement. Robert is searching for “a regenerative art practice” which moves away from exploitative relationships. Through dance, he bridges the distorted past and the digital present.

He works regularly with Christoph Winkler (Germany), Nora Chipaumire (New York/Zimbabwe), Qudus Onikeku (Nigeria) and Patrick Acogny (France/Senegal).

www.robertssempijja.com

You judge this polyphonic story about the work of Robert Ssempijja

[22 September 2022; Gert-Jan Stam]

Robert Ssempijja and I met through text.
He responded to an open call I had written.
Written words are still our main means of communication.
His first words were:
“please see the attached document as requested for the application”.

The open call was part of the TRERU¹ project that I initiated with my collective TAAT. TRERU is set in Kampala and brought together Ugandan artists and designers from a.o. visual arts, theater, dance and architecture for a 2-month collaborative learning experience.

When meeting Robert in person for the first time, I learned that in Uganda men don't hug and, a few hours later, I saw him dance naked.

Almost half a year later he asked me to write the text for this publication.

Rather than writing it, I decided to create a collage, a non-linear story, by assembling different texts related to Robert's work, that would resonate with each other. Not to tell a specific story but, maybe, to connect stories that are related because of Robert's work. Or, maybe, to show a web of stories that can no longer be untangled. Or, maybe, to deepen our encounter.

Apropos encounter. To me, to encounter is a skill. Like dance, it requires regular practice, as the quality of the encounter is measured by its intensity (both in intention and impact). The encounter could also be considered a dramaturgy of judgements. Both entities involved have to navigate their own as well as the assumed judgements of the other. They are confronted with their own classifications and prejudices and they are aware of the potential framings and opinions of the other.

In his work, which is strongly intertwined with his personal life, Robert plays with 'extended' translation, the way I encountered it in 'The mushroom at the end of the world' by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing². She refers to Shiho Satsuka's *“concept of ‘translation’, in which learning another culture both bridges and maintains differences.”*

The English language serves as Robert's fortunate but involuntary mediator between the many different domains of language (i.e. body, sound, memory, image, movement,...). With that he connects us with the stories that define him in relationship to us and proposes a dramaturgy of judgements that unite and divide those in attendance.

The use of language, of human language, is not a given. The fact that we share a common language is not and should not be taken for granted. That being said, the very meaning of using a specific language, say English, resonates differently for different people and different cultures. Not even the fact, that one has a mother-tongue can be taken for granted. Nor the fact that learning a language is a different process for different people. Just the language itself, triggers emotions, some small and some traumatic.

We consider this publication a messenger of the work entitled “You Judge”. It aims to let the use of a common language, the very act of writing and reading, the performance of communicating with human words, tell a polyphonic story about Robert's work.

You, the reader, are invited to read from beginning to end in the order in which the texts are presented. You will encounter different kinds of texts, taken from different contexts and written with different intentions. You are invited to follow this 'stream of consciousness' and to open yourself up to a possible undercurrent of its diverse nature.

YOU
JUDGE

ROBERT SSEMPIJJA

[28 09 2021 - email; Robert Ssempijja]

please see the attached document as requested for the application.

I'm Robert Ssempijja, a Ugandan contemporary artist and dance researcher with a career in formal and informal dance settings as well as a person who works in the era of post colonialism and decolonization, and I travel between the worlds in order to find a way to build a sustainable scene for contemporary dance in Uganda. I practiced art on three different continents with different companies, projects and choreographers like Christoph Winkler (Germany), Nora Chipaumire (New York/Zimbabwe), Qudus Onikeku (Nigeria), Serge Aimé Coulibaly, (Belgian/Burkina Faso) Patrick Acogny (France/Senegal) and many more. My work takes a critical view of social, political, and cultural issues and my choreographic aesthetic is to create expression through the interplay of various elements. From inside to out and from outside to in, internally, and externally experiences that connect the physical body with the psychological world of the mind and on to the emotions of the human being and ultimately the soul.

I explore the unspeakable things in my world, in yours, in our community, in our countries and in the world as a whole. Things that the spoken language doesn't always have words to explain or where it is too difficult to talk about them out loud. I don't like to accept simple explanations, because I believe that there will always be more than one perspective that could be called true, depending on which side you are standing on. My work strives for sharing experiences with myself and others and to explore that connection that we can feel, see or hear. I believe that choreography is built on honesty, and dancing beyond the limits of one's physical body; this is what I strive to do in each of my works.

I am also curious about how the body creates and transfers information as well as se-crets into movement which build up the body's own vocabulary. I assume that our bod-ies are comprised of archives of information that are activated when it comes to move-ment. In my art works, I make a combination of Ugandan traditional dance, breakdance and contemporary dance.

**[2015 - *The mushroom at the end of the world;*
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing]**

2. Shiho Satsuka, *Nature in translation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). Satsuka draws on extended meanings of 'translation' in postcolonial theory and sci-ence studies.; for further discussion see chapter 16.

**[2009 - *Das Neue Afrika: Ernst May's 1947 Kampala Plan
as Cultural Program;* Kai K. Gutschow³]**

In December 1933, after being repeatedly thwarted in ambitious planning work in Silesia (1919-25), Frankfurt (1925-30) and the Soviet Union (1930-33), the German modernist planner Ernst May surprised even his closest friends when he announced that he would 'withdraw to the African bush in order to think about it [all] in peace.' [...] He took his family from Moscow, through Zurich, to Genoa, by boat to Mombassa, and up to a pastoral farm in the shadows of Kilimanjaro. For the next three years he concentrated all his efforts on growing coffee and fruit in the temperate highlands of British East Africa.

The transition from his grand European and Soviet projects to a colonial hierarchical mind-set came quickly. He regarded the African landscape as a tabula rasa, where 'there was no trace of visible human civilization.' He worked with great passion and en-ergy to develop a productive and self-sufficient farm-scape 'from nothing,' complete with a small village and infrastructure for his many 'primitive' farmhands. He wrote con-descendingly that both the Indian and the African workers, 'which are here at our ser-vice . . . often need to be taught even the most elemental tasks.' [...]

He saw little irony in the fact that after being forced to abandon his work in the Soviet Union because critics had attacked his planning methods as overly bourgeois and 'Western,' he was unable to return to his native Germany because Nazis had con-demned his architecture in Frankfurt as 'primitive,' 'un-German' and 'bolshevik,' and because Nazi racial purity laws already had attacked his Jewish family background.

May later retained fond memories of his first years in Africa as 'Architect-Farmer,' writ-ing in terms that suggested the traditional, rooted, völkisch inheritance he had tried

to install in all Germans through his garden colonies: "For the first time I was able not only to design a small region on paper, but could organically shape everything down to the smallest detail: an achievement that was physically demanding, but satisfied me im-mensely." The total landscape that May created on his Arusha farm was closely related to the 'self-help' settlements and the 'inner-colonization' projects that he had built in Silesia and that had been discussed widely as a method of reviving Germany after the devastation of World War I. Although not as vast as his European planning projects, he suggested a parallel to his earlier work when he wrote proudly that he had created 'my own third Reich,' an alternative to the ominous conditions in Germany. This desire for control and the ability to shape an entire environment, including its native inhabitants, lies at the center of both the colonial project and May's ambitions for modern planning.

YOU
JUDGE

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ROBERT SSEMPIJJA

[January 2022 - audience text; Robert Ssempijja]

My mum who also happens to be my father inspires me a lot. However, there has been a struggle within me for the longest time and it manifests itself in my relationship with her. She is very much bound by the traditions, norms and unwritten laws of her society and community. She will do what is seemingly right in everyday life to make sure not to draw any ill wishes or social punishments over herself and her children. She extends that effort to the rest of her family. She makes sure that we go to school, cut our hair and iron our shirts. God forbid we have holes in our jeans even if it is the latest fashion. She does all this because of love and a will to protect us. But it tends to extend further on: How to think and act.

How to always leave our problems behind closed doors and meet the outer world with a smile. No matter the feeling inside. Being from a younger generation, I applaud my mother for all her doing. She has not had an easy life and with all the pressure from the surrounding society, it can't have made it easier to raise two children with no means. I want to please my mother in all this. Maybe I can give some of all her efforts back. I could become a lawyer or doctor as the norm tells me I should strive for. But I don't want that. I want to keep my hair, wear my t-shirt and dance my doctor's career away. Can't my actions speak for themselves?

[06 01 2022 - email; Robert Ssempijja]

Hi, GJ

hope this finds you safe & strong and a happy new year, just wanted to let know that am now in berlin if you happen to be around the city.

thanks robert

[19 01 2022 - web-text Tanztage Berlin 2022]

Robert Ssempijja starts his solo with a story about the community in Kampala, Uganda, where he grew up and tells of the expectations of its members towards him. Every society tends to be particularly judgmental and close-minded towards those who step out of line. We are all constantly searching for our place in the world: we try to adapt, to understand our different roles and we struggle for acceptance. In a catwalk setup, dancer and choreographer Robert Ssempijja demonstrates the body's ability to challenge social norms – and thus reveals the dance's inherent potential for emancipation. At the same time, the piece contributes to distorting, disrupting and expanding the limits imposed by the disciplining gaze of others.

You judge runs about 40 minutes. It uses English and Lugandan spoken language. Anyhow, it is comprehensible without any knowledge of Luganda. The audience area is dark and the audience will be seated. There are two wheelchair spaces and one beanbag seat that can be reserved by phone or booked via the online ticket shop or at the box office, if available. Admission begins 20-30 minutes prior to show time. We recommend arriving early to select a suitable seat.

**[10 09 2022 - conversation online;
Robert Ssempijja/Gert-Jan Stam]**

ROBERT

I think in 2017, that's when I really started writing.
And I first wrote, I think I showed it to you, the first thing I wrote was a letter to myself.

GJ

Do you remember what the letter was about?

ROBERT

I have it. I published it on Facebook.
Yeah.
I will share it with you.
I wrote a letter to myself and I published it in 2018.
But I already had it for about six, seven months before I published it.
Then my girlfriend was like: Yeah, I think you can start writing your own texts.
That's how I started gaining experience.
And then I wrote another text to Abramz Tekeya, the director of the Break Dance project Uganda.
Because he was the one who took me to school.
He paid for my school fees.
Because when I met him, I was not in school.

YOU
JUDGE

He took me back to school.
And in the letter that I wrote, I was talking about my conflict.
The conflict that I had with school, why I hated school.
Because he tried many times to take me back to school and I was resisting it.
I didn't want.

GJ

This makes me think about what you told me about how you went to school and they basically told you the language you speak at home is an inferior language and you have to learn English now because that is a real language.

ROBERT

I tell that story also in Alienation.
I talk about the first story.
It has four segments.
In the first segment I talk about being a kid growing up in Uganda and going to a colonial school and what I've been taught and what I've been told there.
Then I talk about my first experience going to Europe.
And then from Europe I travel to the United States.
Then I come back to Uganda to talk about Kampala as a city.

GJ

What does this piece You Judge mean to you now?

ROBERT

I think a lot of things have changed.
I created that piece a long time ago.

GJ

This is why I'm asking.

ROBERT

A lot of things have changed.
I think if I look back in time at when I created that work....
...if I would create it now, it would be totally different.
It would be totally different.
I think I would have a very different approach to it.
But the reason why I'm keeping it the way it is, is because
I want to keep the original source of it.
And that was my mom.
I don't want to change that actually.
Mm.
Because uh,....
I told you the story, I think,

GJ

Please tell me again.

ROBERT SSEMPIJJA

ROBERT

So I went to visit my mom.

And when I was at her place, I did not bring a lot of clothes.

So I asked her if I could put on one of her dresses and she said:

“If you put on my dress you stay inside the house, you don’t go outside.”

Because people are going to, you know,...

She was scared that people would judge me. Because I have this hair. And in Uganda,

someone with hair like mine,...they think you either smoke marihuana or you are gay or,

you know, you do something that is illegal.

I told my mom, I don’t care if people judge me based on the way they see me.

I don’t care about that.

I only care about what I think inside of me, that is the most important thing to me.

I don’t like to look at people and just judge them by the way they look.

I think that experience influenced me a lot.

I decided that I won’t put on shoes anymore. Unless I’m in winter.

I decided that I would only wear what I feel like and I will not wear something

just because the public wants me to.

To put on a suit and stuff like that.

You know, I’m going to live life the way I feel like.

I don’t want to live life just following other people’s rules, you know?

But actually, for what I’m going to do now, I mean, performing in the gallery,

for that I am going to put on a suit.

And it’s that suit that I’m going to take off.

So.

Yeah.

So last week I was in Uganda and I went to a police station.

There was an issue with one of the neighbours.

So when I went to the police station, everyone was wondering what I do for a living.

I went to the police station and I was standing outside and all of the officers got out,

all of them, and they were looking at me.

And when I entered the police station, all of them entered as well.

They were waiting to see, what am I going to say?

And then I told them, I’m a farmer.

And they’re like: “No.”

They took me for one of those big celebrities.

And then they were very disappointed when I told them I cannot sing.

But we had a good conversation.

It was good for me to have a conversation with them and to see what they think

about people with my kind of hair and stuff like that.

GJ

So what would you do about the piece differently than this time?

ROBERT

I think one of the things that would be different is that I would take it more in

the direction of homophobia. If I am to do it now.

YOU
JUDGE

Because it is something that is a very big topic back home.

And I was talking to someone last week and I told them that in Uganda there are a lot of things we need to explain to our community. But we have to do it in the local language.

Which is very hard.

Because we have a lot of words that we cannot translate to the local language.

And that will make it hard to explain it to a local person.

To a minor.

To someone who has never gone to school.

So I think I would take it in that direction if I were to do it now.

[...]

ROBERT SSEMPIIJA

[2021 - In the End, It Was All About Love; Musa Okwonga⁴]

Many people will call it that, even those who should know better. It is not a bubble. A bubble is a carefully-sealed world whose occupants are oblivious to everything that happens beyond it. Berlin is something different. It is a refuge, an enclave, a safe haven. If Berlin were your bubble then that would mean you were incurious about whatever happened in other parts of the world. But you are acutely aware of those happenings, and that is why you are here. There is a very good chance that you are here because you fled the true bubbles of our societies—the small suburbs and villages where you were raised. Where your difference was at best tolerated. There is a very good chance that those places, those bubbles, will resent how you see them now. that they will interpret your distance as elitism and snobbery as opposed to an essential act of self-protection. Those places, those bubbles, will not stop to think about what they did to you, that you were so traumatised that you had to flee at the earliest opportunity.

[08 05 2022 - Twitter, Stella Nyanzi⁵]

NOT MY MAMA JANET: A POEM

For Mother’s Day 2022,

My poem calls out Uganda’s wicked witch:

They call you Mama Janet,

Yet you gulp all the food of Uganda’s children.

You hike the cost of school fees for the rich

And neglect your low quality UPE schools.

You shit in the brains of Uganda's little ones,
Leaving them bereft with your stupid education.
You plunder the public purse to build sky scrapers,
Instead of buying books or paying teachers well.
You heavily pad foreign banks with stolen wealth
Siphoned fast and shrewdly from public funds,
Yet lack of menstrual pads promised by Museveni
Keeps girls out of schools on menstruation days.
You insist on being called Mama Janet,
Yet poor mothers still die in birth under your watch,
And fathers slave away, failing to make ends meet.
Youths sell themselves for pittances to Arabs.
You murder all women and men in your way.
Mothers are raped by your son's gunmen.
Young men are brutalized on your son's orders.
Their balls electrocuted and limbs wounded.
Writers are tortured in prison to silence them
Journalists are shot at, beaten or locked up.
Protesters are maimed and ailed for months.
Legislators are bought or incarcerated.
You will never be my Mama Janet!
You are the cursed witch cursing Uganda.
As Uganda's mothers enjoy this Mother's Day,
May you die in misery you gluttonous witch!
May you rot in misery you murderous bitch!

[22 02 2018 - Facebook; Robert Ssempijja]

I think that our bodies are like archives, so I am sure and know that the body has got a lot of information or secrets especially when it comes to movement. Vocally they are always hidden within our bodies so we have to get deeper so that we access that information or those secrets in our bodies and I am sure by the use of time, space and body too we can access this information.
One of the reasons why I always wake up everything morning and dance is to get deeper in what I am doing than I was yesterday.

[18 09 2022 - letter; Robert Ssempijja]

Dear mama,

It has been long since we had the chance to talk. I'm sure you are doing great. I get to hear news about you from my brother. He tells me that you are doing well. I've been thinking about you a lot lately and I wanted to write down my thoughts in a letter to you. There is a reason for the silence inbetween us and I'm wondering if the time has come to break the silence and talk about that reason. I thought this might be easier in writing than to do it over a phone call. It's easier to choose what I want to tell you like this. I wish I would have been able to write this to you in Luganda, but I can't because I've never learned my own language. The language that you speak and read, I can only speak in a very limited way. My English on the other hand has improved, but you don't speak more than a couple of sentences of the language which I use in daily life. It saddens me that you and I don't have a common language that we share.

What I want you to know is that despite everything I appreciate all you have done for me and my brother. It can't have been an easy task to raise two boys on your own as you have done. Now both of us have left you and moved away for different reasons. I can't imagine what that makes you feel.

You've formed me into the person I am today. You've been both a mother and a father to me and I carry those traits within. The masculine side and the feminine go hand in hand to colour my view of the world.

I have a lot of questions for you. I think you might get surprised to hear them. I have a strong sense of not belonging in the world I was brought up in and in which I'm expected to take part and uphold as an adult. What I mean is that I feel estranged from most of our traditions and the society's values and norms you've tried to teach me. I know you did what you had to do to protect us from the societies view upon our family. I'm grateful for that. But now I don't know what's expected of me when I choose to take part in our family life. Even when I do know what's expected I don't understand the point of it. There is so much I believe is unnecessary and just upholding a way of thinking which isn't applicable in the time we are living anymore. Maybe it is safe to say that we have our disagreements. Although you don't know about them because I'm not supposed to question you or any other older relative.

We've been brought up in different times and with different chances. Who would have thought that I would get the chances in life I have. I'm sure no one could have foreseen that when you were struggling to make ends meet with two small boys hanging in your skirts that those two boys would have the opportunity to get exposed to different people from all over the world. I've been traveling to different countries and continents, and I've had the chance to question my own truth over and over again. I've been fortunate to be able to do that and I've worked hard. You have also worked hard, your whole life. Despite that, you have never held your own passport in your hand and the dream of traveling to a different continent has only come as far as a distant dream of yours and the exposure to people of different backgrounds has been limited to people who come in the form of missionaries and charity workers.

YOU
JUDGE

ROBERT SSEMPIJJA

When I speak of decolonisation of the mind, it is you and others in the same situation I think about. You don't always know your worth and yet you were a very controversial woman, and still are, when I grew up. You were a single mum, an entrepreneur and someone who left everything in the village to find a new life in the country's capital. You were brave and loud. You had to be. You had to claim your place and space. But when we speak we don't speak about the same things and we don't understand each other.

I would want to share my world with you and for you to have the possibility to understand what I'm sharing. We have had deep conversations about politics, democracy, environmental issues and the state of society. But it seems like we are living in two different worlds and I'm not sure of where I belong or where I want to belong either. You are a huge inspiration in my life, but I seem to have a hard time to understand your way of viewing things. Even to start to explain what it is that I actually work and support myself with (my art) is a foreign concept to you. One day maybe our relationship is ready for you to come with me on one of my trips and you might start a similar mind-opening process I'm going through. I would be grateful to be with you on that journey. Despite our differences I love you very much and I'm convinced I will always continue to do that.

Love, Robert

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XB-9GQDYgIjM>

² Mushroom at the end of the world; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Princeton University Press 2015.

³ Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa: Intertwined and Contested Histories, edited by Fassil Demissie, Phd. London: Ashgate, 2009.

⁴ In the End, It Was All About Love; Musa Okwonga. Rough Trade Books 2021.

⁵ NOT MY MAMA JANET: A POEM; Stella Nyanzi. Twitter 2022.

GERT-JAN STAM (Zaandam, 1972) is one of the cofounders of TAAT, a transdisciplinary arts collective that develops environmentally engaged installations for embodied encounters between humans and more-than-humans. TAAT's practice shifts and slides between artistic research, social practice and collaborative learning. TAAT is currently growing "Encounter Portals" in Athens, Eindhoven, Ghent, Kampala and Vilnius. Gert-Jan also works as Stammpunkt, creating 'Begegnungsarchitektur' for a.o. Stadtmuseum Berlin, Stiftung Berliner Mauer and KW Institute for Contemporary Art.

www.taat-projects.com

www.stammpunkt.de

YOU
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ROBERT SSEMPIJJA

The experimental performance series Out of the Box, organized by MMpraxis and CAA Berlin in collaboration with Zönotéka, provides a platform for Berlin-based emerging choreographers to adapt existing stage works to a gallery space. Each edition offers a short residency and a mentoring program in which the artists receive support from a mentor of their choice.

The MMpraxis curatorial platform organizes exhibitions and events at the intersection of performing and visual arts with a focus on choreography, time-based media, and performance art.

www.mmpraxis.com

The Contemporary Arts Alliance Berlin (CAA Berlin) is a private platform for the promotion of contemporary culture in Berlin. It supports young artists from the fields of visual arts, theater, music and dance both financially and in practical matters.

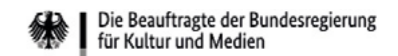
www.caa-berlin.org

Zönotéka is a symbiotic exhibition and production site for innovative encounters. Focusing on an interdisciplinary understanding of art, its collaborative programs endeavor to creatively address scientific issues as well as to foster an inventive micro-community by offering individual working places.

www.zoenoteka.com

Organized by MMpraxis and CAA Berlin in collaboration with Zönotéka. Supported by the NATIONAL PERFORMANCE NETWORK - STEPPING OUT, funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media within the framework of the initiative NEUSTART KULTUR.

You judge is production of Ssempijja Robert in co-production with SOPHIENSÆLE. With the kind support of Company Christoph Winkler. The performance was part of the 31st edition of Tanztage Berlin. Funded by the Senate Department for Culture and Europe. With the friendly support of Tanzfabrik Berlin e. V. and Theaterhaus Berlin Mitte.



02/03 OCT
6 PM- 8PM

ZÖNOTÉKA

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