

Pupil notes on the interview with Philippe Chuyen, author of *The Land Beneath My Feet*.

FB	Why did you choose to write a play about the different ways that the Algerian War is remembered?	Why write about the Algerian War?
PC	I have no personal connection to that part of history, which is what I think has enabled me to treat each way of remembering it with impartiality, without favouring one perspective over another. I decided to take an interest in this subject in 2010 in anticipation of the 50th anniversary of Algeria's independence, which was approaching in 2012. So, at first it was an opportunity for me, because I thought that dealing with this subject at that time would be a good opportunity for touring a new show. And then when I started doing the research, I thought 'wow, this is huge'. I didn't know much about this part of our history (we don't teach it well in France). I quickly realised that I had to relate this part of France's history to the problems that the country faces today in terms of integration, communitarianism* and racism, while also paying tribute to those who have often been forgotten and caricatured, such as the people who were repatriated to France, or even the soldiers who were victim to the upheavals at the end of the colonial empire, to politics and to war.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Started work in 2010, 2 years before the 50th anniversary of Algerian independence - Chuyen has no personal link to these issues, argues he has impartiality - Homage to victims of all types (including even soldiers and settlers) - Topic not taught or understood well in France - Links to contemporary French issues such as racism, integration and 'communitarianism' - *'communitarianism' - when distinct groups with their own cultures and values exist within a larger community (sometimes referred to as 'multiculturalism'). This is less tolerated in France than here in the UK as the French state prefers integration and assimilation into French culture and values.

FB	You talk about what happens 'when memories collide...'. Is there something specific to theatre that allows you to explore these ideas that is not possible with other genres and media?	Is there something particular to theatre that allows it to explore these ideas?
PC	There is something direct about theatre, when it's done properly, that passes unfiltered from actor to spectator. A character in a play, through his or her emotions and experiences, can convey an idea, a collective subconscious, or a way of thinking. The theatre can express things that are universal without needing to employ great theoretical or scientific explanations. What's more, the interaction between characters produces relationships that are like little worlds that the playwright doesn't always have full control over once they are on the stage, and which increases the richness of the performing arts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct connection to characters and themes - Each character represents a way of thinking, a perspective - The relationships between them become like little worlds that, through the process of acting them on stage, eventually expand out of the author's control - Richness of theatre as an art form.

FB	Why did you choose a boules pitch as the setting? What does <i>pétanque</i> mean to you?	Why a pétanque court as the setting?
PC	<p>It's a very personal thing. I played boules when I was younger and I've always been fascinated by the types of people who are drawn onto or around the courts, whether as players or spectators. That's less the case now than when I was younger (because the times and the people have changed), but to me the game of pétanque has always been like its own kind of theatre with its codes, actors and tragedies. It's a game where you perform, which is why I had the idea of one day producing a play set during a game of <i>pétanque</i>. So, I already had the form, and then the Algerian War gave me the subject matter. The interesting thing was that the comedic nature of the situation (due to the Pagnol-esque undertones) and the tragic nature of a painful past collided in this play. What's more, the symbolism of the terrain (a square measuring 12m by 5m, which forms the playing pitch) proved to be a relevant way of talking about belonging to a place, uprooting, putting down roots, and living together; it became a sort of miniature French Republic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal connection to pétanque - Pétanque has its own codes, actors and tragedies, like theatre - The pétanque court as form, the Algerian War as content - Symbolism of the setting – rootedness, uprooting, belonging (think back to the title choice) - Space that allows for the tragic and the comic - Acts like a microcosm of France

FB	What was your process for designing and creating the characters? What did you want each character to represent?	How did you create the characters and what do they represent?
PC	<p>The process is random. The characters in my play took form little by little (there wasn't really a set plan) based on the books I was reading, the films I was watching and the people I knew or was encountering at the time... for example, in the organisations that I was visiting that exist to support people repatriated from Algeria to France, or from the stories that friends told me about their family histories.</p> <p>Dealing with the idea of Provençal identity was also important to me.</p> <p>It's complicated to explain and it would take a long time to dissect each character. A character is a bit like a jigsaw puzzle that you work out bit by bit, before the actors give life to and embody the words that are sometimes rather abstract in the author's head. However, it was vital that my characters were sufficiently representative of a social group, while also having their own personal experiences to make them believable. What's more, each character alternates between two perspectives: that of the memories passed down through their family history, and that of their personal experiences as men in 1995, the year in which the play is set.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Random, unplanned process - Sources of inspiration behind the characters: books, films and friends' family stories - A character is like a puzzle that you put together bit by bit - Then actors add their own embodiment of the character - His characters are meant to represent a social group but also be credible as individuals - They alternate between two axes, that of their own personal experience and that of their family history

FB	How was the play received? Does it appeal more to certain groups than others?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reception – unsure how it would be received as such a sensitive subject - Comedy as a way into difficult and sensitive issues - Rarely hostile or negative - Aiming for a neutral/impartial depiction of the issues – is this true in your opinion? - Trying to show each perspective without judgement or blaming - Also a play about forgiveness, tapping into the Judeo-Christian French culture - Your thoughts: everyone has their turn to speak and share their story - Those with personal experience may feel differently about this
PC	The play was immediately very well received. It was against all expectations because I struggled to imagine how the audience was going to react, I was apprehensive... But the laughter that was provoked by the performance helped people confront things that are difficult to talk about in France because some memories are still very fresh. We very rarely had any hostile or negative reactions. The play is impartial, I think, and people sense that... each way of remembering the past is evoked without contempt, without any desire to cause harm, without any attempt to assign guilt, at least I think so anyway... It's also a play about forgiveness, and for our Judeo-Christian culture I think that's important, and that also makes things easier to hear.	

FB	The end of the play laments the 'missed opportunity' for social harmony that might have existed in colonial Algeria, and hints at the possibility of such cross-community harmony in France today. Do you see this as a utopian vision, or do you see this as a possibility within the French social fabric?	<p>The end of the play suggests that French Algeria was a missed opportunity for different peoples to live together in harmony. Is this possible in today's France or is this too utopian?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was a degree of understanding between the different groups in French Algeria but for it to work properly, the colonial system would have had to be changed from top to bottom. - This was the dream of intellectuals like Camus - The ending of the play is perhaps a bit strong, but we mustn't forget that it is fiction - It is utopian, not necessarily realisable but we should aim for it nonetheless - Harder to imagine now than before, but brotherly relations should be the aim - Fraternity wins some battles and loses others - Theatre doesn't change the world but has a role to play
PC	Yes, there was a certain amount of understanding in Algeria between very different populations, but all that was effectively happening under a colonial administration. For things to evolve, the system would have had to change from top to bottom, the complete hierarchy of values. I think that's what many intellectuals of the time, like Camus for example, must have dreamt of, with the hope of bringing the two countries together on an equal footing. When I was writing the end of the play, I was thinking that I was pushing this idea a bit too much... but the play is fictional, we mustn't forget that, so we can go all out and dream, like Yaya, that Algeria could become part of the European Union... That idea is, of course, totally utopian, even more so today, I think. Reaching agreement on these questions of identity is a very complicated matter, but I believe that fraternity must remain both a prospect and a goal. We've not managed to achieve it, we all know that, nobody is oblivious... including in twenty-first century France and Europe, and I think that given you're from Britain that you'll understand that very well... However, fraternity wins some battles but loses others. Theatre doesn't change the world, but it does have a role to play in upholding human values.	

Planning an essay

Suggested essay question: 'To what extent does *The Land Beneath My Feet* conform to the model of competitive memory in its representation of the Algerian War of Independence and how is this demonstrated in the play?'

1. Define key terms – make clear what a model of competitive memory is and how it applies to the Algerian war

- Competitive memory: competing for victimhood. Different groups involved and each trying to put forward their take:
 - o FLN – Algerian independence fighters (thousands)
 - o Settlers / pieds noirs (around 1 million)
 - o Harkis – Algerians who fought with the French army (around 100,000)
 - o French army (2.5 million conscripts fought in the war in Algeria)
 - o OAS – French anti-independence fighters (only 1000 people in total)
 - o French citizens (millions, but with different views, some for and some against Algerian independence)
- Each group, or even sub-group, has their own story to tell, their own memories. Competing and conflicting memories and attitudes towards the Algerian war and colonialism
- The difficulty in creating a national memory – the different groups fight to have their perspective prioritised, often on the basis of their victimhood (how much they have suffered)
- Pétanque court as a microcosm of France (see interview)

2. Apply this to the play – how does the play suggest competitive memories?

- M Blanc saying it wasn't a war – seen as naïve by the others, influenced by French national state rhetoric (p. 16)
- Zé – For us, our accent is all we've got left. Loule's reply – Blimey, everyone's a victim today! (p. 12) points to competitive victimhood (or what Benjamin Stora called victim oneupmanship).
- M Blanc and Zé argue about the 'right side' of History (p. 21) – does History have a 'right side'?
- Yaya + Zé – assertion of identity, including national identities. Where is home, and who is home? (p. 22-23)
- Loule's feeling of being white means being responsible for all wrongs in the world – guilt, who is guilty? All positioning as victims. M Blanc (lost his father as a baby); M Blanc's father (initially presented as an ordinary conscript who committed suicide after the war); Zé who lost his homeland; Yaya, whose father and uncle were both killed; Loule, feeling that his homeland is being changed by successive waves of incomers and wondering where he fits in – all of them position themselves as victims at different points and to different degrees.
- The play does suggest that competitive memory is more complicated than each group holding just one memory. Yaya and Loule's family stories contain more than one memory. Yaya's father was a member of the FLN and was killed by the French army; Yaya's uncle was a harki and was killed when the French refused to let him board a ship to leave Algeria. Similarly, Loule speaks often about the need to love France, but his Communist father supported Algerian independence and collected money for the FLN who would buy bombs that would kill French citizens. Division and difference in memories, even within these family histories. Playwright suggests that it is more complex than one group all having one experience

3. Apply this to the play – in what ways does the play not reflect competitive memories? Is there a different dominant message?

- The ending: hopeful about the potential for a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and yet harmonious society in Provence. They still have different memories of the past but they are aware and respectful of each other's histories.
- Harmony brought in, the characters taking on each other's line from the beginning. Borrowing lines from each other, adapting them at points. These at the beginning set up their divisions, but how these lines are reprised and adapted suggests a more hopeful future:

e.g.

- o Zé – You've got a short memory!
- o Yaya (to Monsieur Blanc, who is preparing to throw) – So, you're new to the area?
- o Monsieur Blanc – Yes, a lovely part of the world...
- o Zé – Not cheap, though, 'eh?
- o Monsieur Blanc – Well, one has to do what one has to do...
- o Loule – Now watch it, Monsieur Blanc, from now on, let's keep it zipped!
- o Monsieur Blanc – Monsieur Brun! I'm Monsieur Brun.
- o Loule – Ah, good! You're learning fast.
- o Zé – So, Monsieur Brun, we've settled in pretty well round 'ere now, 'aven't we?
- o Yaya (pointing to Loule) – You reckon we might still disintegrate him, Zé?

The ending is not competitive but more about harmony.

You can't repeat each other's lines without listening. Signs that people/perspectives are being heard

- What about the role of pétanque?
- The different characters are brought together by a shared love for the culture of pétanque. Zé, Loule and Yaya are friends who play together: even although Zé and Yaya come from different sides in the war, they are united by a shared culture and love for the game. M Blanc is a stranger who becomes a friend because of the game.
- Forgiveness – moment of forgiveness between M Blanc and Yaya (p. 38): Monsieur Blanc – 'For what it's worth, Yaya, on behalf of my father, for your uncle and your father (he removes his hat and offers him his hand): I ask for your forgiveness.' M Blanc is asking forgiveness for the events that led to the deaths of three people in the older generation. How effective do you think this is? How is this received? Does it bring closure and understanding? How does it relate to the idea of 'memory by implication' (the idea that we live with the consequences and legacies of the past and have a responsibility, not for the events, but for how we deal with these consequences).
- You could also refer to the Interview with Philippe Chuyen, where he is asked about how the play has been received. He says that the play has been well received and has rarely had a hostile reaction [this is unusual in debates around the Algerian War!]. He attributes this to the comic nature of the dialogues and interactions between characters: 'the laughter provoked by the performance helped people confront things that are difficult to talk about in France'.

4. Conclusion

What do you think? Is the play more about competitive memory or is it more about a shared harmonious future? Are there signs of memory by implication at work?