

Interview with Philippe Chuyen, author of *The Land Beneath My Feet*, conducted by Fiona Barclay (University of Stirling), August 2022.

FB	Why did you choose to write a play about the different ways that the Algerian War is remembered?
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.

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?
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.

FB	Why did you choose a boules pitch as the setting? What does <i>pétanque</i> mean to you?
PC	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 pétanque. 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.

FB	What was your process for designing and creating the characters? What did you want each character to 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.</p> <p>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>

FB	How was the play received? Does it appeal more to certain groups than others?
PC	<p>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.</p>

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?
PC	<p>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.</p> <p>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...</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>