

The Land Beneath My Feet

When memories collide...

Philippe Chuyen

Translated by Edward Clay

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*Petanque is to Provence what the Delphi theatre
was to ancient Greece: a place of tragedy!*

Yvan Audouard

This play was performed by the company Artscénicum on 15 June 2012 at the Domaine de Fontlaure in Éguilles (*Bouches-du-Rhône*).

With Sofiane Belmouden in the role of Yaya, Philippe Chuyen in the role of Monsieur Blanc, Gérard Dubouche in the role of Zé and Thierry Paul in the role of Loule.

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CHARACTERS BY ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Loule

Yaya

Zé

Monsieur Blanc

A petanque¹ court. Dazzlingly bright midday sunshine. Along the side of the playing area are two public benches placed end to end.

Loule enters the playing area with a bucket of boules in one hand and a radio in the other. He places the bucket on the ground and the radio on one of the benches. He rubs his hands together then takes a seat. He picks up his boules and polishes them one by one. He turns on the radio. As he turns the dial through various stations, a newsreader announces that a bomb has just exploded at the Saint-Michel metro station in Paris. It is 25 July 1995 and President Chirac is expected imminently at the site of the tragedy. He listens to the news for a moment then switches to another station playing music. Cheerfully bobbing along to the music, he stands up and goes back to the playing area to practise his throw. Then, the song is interrupted by another newsflash about the attacks. Loule walks calmly to the radio and turns the dial again. Finally, he finds a lively tune. He returns to the playing area, humming. He gets himself back into position, but another announcement disturbs his concentration. Irritated, Loule moves swiftly back to the radio and turns it off. He returns to his throwing position and readies his arm when Yaya enters, boules in hand, followed by Z  , with his hands in his pockets.

Yaya - Hey Loule!

Z   – Better be on your game today my friend!

Loule - Better late than never!

Yaya (*pointing to Z  *) – Ha! It's his fault...

¹ The term 'petanque' comes from the Provenal Occitan *p  * (foot) and *tanca* (stake), meaning throwing a ball with your feet together, firmly rooted to the ground.

Zé – Couldn't find my boules. The wife put 'em somewhere. I turned the 'ouse upside-down looking for 'em...

Yaya - And there was me, down below, blasting the horn...

Zé – Even in the little cubbyhole where she puts her cleaning stuff...

Loule (*collecting his boules*) – Come on, shake a leg, we've got to see who's playing who.

Zé – No, I'm taking you both on today and giving you a good 'iding!

Yaya - Oh yeah? What happened the last time you took us on Zé?

Zé (*to Yaya*) - She must have 'idden 'em from me...

Loule (*getting some boules out the bottom of the bucket*) – Thirteen to diddly-squat!

Zé – She did it on purpose.

Loule (*to Zé*) – He's right, you've got a short memory.

A pause.

Zé – A short memory? No, no, not me.

Loule – Luckily, I brought a spare...on the off-chance we find a fourth...

Yaya (*practising his throw*) – It's that drubbing we gave him! It makes him forget things. He's got a selective memory.

Zé – I'd be quite 'appy to unselect you, believe me. (*Moving towards Loule*) Go on then, throw 'em down. Prepare to be disintegrated.

Yaya – Not me Zé. I'm integrated just fine!

Zé – Did you know my old man was champion of France?

Yaya – Yep, I did...

Zé – In Montpellier, my son...

Yaya – Place de la Comédie?

Zé – Bab-El-Oued Petanque Club: Jean Villanova, René Pérez, Jules Volto, AKA Vivi, my old man, in the 2nd division triples final...

Loule (*having collected a boule for each player and imitating Zé's accent*) – 15 to 10 against the Menpenti dream team: Henri Aidinian, René Manoukian...

Yaya – AKA “le Manouche” ...

Loule – And Joseph Saura!

Yaya – Brrrap!

Zé – June 1956, the only damn Algerian triple ever to win the French championships. The glory days!

A pause.

Yaya – The glory days?

Loule – You don't get to choose today... (*he throws the boules*) it's all down to chance!

Zé (*moving closer to the boules*) – Damn and blast! I'm stuck with 'im again.

Yaya – I'm gonna lose again.

They collect their boules. Zé takes a practice shot. He misses.

Yaya – Hey Zé, I'm shooting today, OK?

Zé – Sure you are...

Yaya tries to shoot but does even worse.

Yaya – Hey Zé, I'm pointing today, OK?

Zé – As per usual...

A smart gentleman, wearing a hat and dressed all in white, approaches from the other side of the playing area. The others have noticed him and watch him with slight derision. He watches them play for a moment.

The man - Hello chaps, excuse me...you aren't looking for a fourth by any chance?

Yaya (*aside to Loule*) – There you go Loule, there's your off-chance.

Loule (*sizing him up*) – Got two?

The man - I beg your pardon?

Loule – You got two? Hands? At the end of your arms?

They all look at him.

A pause.

Loule – Well come on then!

The man approaches, a little awkwardly.

Loule – Come on (sarcastically, with a mock formal accent) have no fear!

Loule reaches into his bucket to lend him some boules, but the man takes the bag that was strapped to his back and produces three brand new boules that glisten in the light.

Loule - Wow, now they're fresh off the shelf! Monsieur...?

The man – Blanc de la Martinière.

Zé (to himself) – Oh Christ...

The man – Monsieur Blanc.

Loule – Nice to meet you. I'm Loule... (offering to shake his hand). OK, Monsieur Blanc, you'll be on my team.

He puts the boules back in the bucket.

Yaya – You're new round here, aren't you?

Monsieur Blanc – Indeed. We've just had a place built...

Yaya (cutting him off) – You're right. Lovely part of the world.

Monsieur Blanc – Yes. But it's not cheap.

A pause. Loule hands Zé the jack.

Loule (*winking at Monsieur Blanc*) – Losers first!

Monsieur Blanc (*cheerfully*) – The cochonnet is all yours!

Zé – The jack. Down here, we say the jack.

Zé throws the jack.

Zé (*to himself*) – Pfff... the cochonnet.

Yaya throws a boule, then Monsieur Blanc throws one very badly.

Loule – So, you're new to the area?

Monsieur Blanc – As you can see...

Loule – Not bad round here, hey?

Monsieur Blanc – Indeed... but it's not cheap.

Zé (*irritated*) – Why d'you say that? Someone force you?

Monsieur Blanc – Force me?

Zé – To come 'ere?

Monsieur Blanc – No, why?

Yaya – Someone came to his house one day and told him to beat it. He ain't got over it since.

Monsieur Blanc smiles slightly, a little embarrassed. The others take no notice. He throws again and it lands too short.

Loule – Argh, what a duff shot!

Monsieur Blanc – I beg your pardon?

Loule – You're a little short, Monsieur Brun.

Yaya – Blanc!

Zé – A tad more generous next time.

Monsieur Blanc prepares to throw again.

Yaya - You're lucky, you are, Monsieur Blanc. You know, no-one ever asks me (*fawning*): “So, you're new to the area?”

Monsieur Blanc (*a little embarrassed*) – I see. It's not...

Loule (*growing impatient*) – Ignore him, Monsieur Brun. Carry on.

Zé – It's Monsieur Blanc... (*pointing to Monsieur Blanc's clothes*) White! Not brown! Come on, it's not 'ard!

Yaya – Because if you listen to some people, it's like I just rocked up yesterday and I'm off again tomorrow...

Zé – Makes sense though? With everything you lot get up to around 'ere.

Monsieur Blanc (*awkward and still yet to throw*) – I entirely understand how you feel... When you're not from around here, they tend to let you know about it...

Yaya (*annoyed*) – Hang on now, Monsieur Blanc, I *am* from round here! Can you believe this guy? (*Accentuating his accent*) Ain't it obvious from how I speak?

Zé – From 'ow you speak, yes. From 'ow you look, no.

Loule – And we hear a bit too much from you anyway, Yaya.
(*To Monsieur Blanc*) Throw!

Monsieur Blanc throws again and loses the point once more.

Monsieur Blanc – Fiddlesticks!

Loule (*dispirited*) – You, on the other hand, Monsieur Brun, certainly don't sound like you're from round here!

Yaya – Yes, your accent, Monsieur Blanc! Don't sound like it's from round here.

A pause.

Zé – For us, our accent is all we've got left.

Loule – Blimey, everyone's a victim today!

Zé – You wouldn't understand... Nobody 'ere could understand.

Monsieur Blanc – Well, I think I have understood you.

Zé – What?

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc (*embarrassed, referring to Zé's accent*) – Er... I... I have understood you...

Zé – Aha, he's 'aving a laugh!

Monsieur Blanc – Not at all.

Zé (*imitating General de Gaulle*) – “I have understood you!”
And three years later, we all 'ad to clear out.

Loule (*annoyed*) – No!

Monsieur Blanc – I'm terribly sorry, I'd forgotten about...

Yaya – The old man certainly screwed you over there.

Monsieur Blanc – You know, it was never really mentioned in our family...

Zé – So what did you understand then?

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc (*with some difficulty*) – Well... My father did his 28 months over there... And not a day more.

Yaya – Not a day more? That's a bad sign.

Monsieur Blanc – A bad sign?

Yaya – Spending three years over there and never speaking about it again, I reckon that's a pretty bad sign.

Loule rolls his eyes.

Monsieur Blanc – My father wasn't interested in politics. And he wouldn't have hurt a fly, so....

Yaya – A fly, maybe, but what about an Arab...

Loule (*cutting him off*) – Right, have you quite finished pissing off Monsieur Brun? What a pain in the backside!

Zé (*sarcastically*) – Yes. Can't you see you're making poor Monsieur Blanc lose? And Loule too.

Loule (*increasingly impatient*) – Right, whose turn is it to play?

Zé – Who's in the circle now?

Loule – “Who's in the circle now?” You really are hacking me off now!

They play for a while.

Zé (*after Yaya's throw*) – Well played my son! Good job we learned you something, isn't it²?

Yaya – But it was us what taught you numbers so you can count the points, innit?

Zé – “It was us what?” Ah, you're good you are! It certainly wasn't us who learned you how to speak.

Yaya – Ha, I learnt to play boules in Toulon. I ain't from Bab-El-Oued.

Zé – Algiers, yes, but not Bab-El-Oued. I'm from Belcourt, my friend. Belcourt, Algiers! (*then, to show off*) And just around the corner from Camus 'imself!

Loule (*to himself*) – Here we go again!

Yaya (*teasing*) – Oh, so you knew him?

Zé – My mother knew 'im.

Yaya – Oh, your mother.

Monsieur Blanc – Albert Camus?

Zé (*proudly*) – Yes sir.

Yaya (*pensive*) – Camus... The man who held his peace.

² The tone of this reply depends on whether the throw was good or bad

Zé – Huh?

Yaya – I said: Camus, the man who held his peace!

A pause.

Zé – The man who rests in peace, you mean? (*then to Monsieur Blanc*) Yep. Died in a car accident...(*sighs*)... 4 January 1960, in Sens, near Paris, damn tree smashed his car to pieces. Poor Albert, dead on the spot.

Yaya (*to Monsieur Blanc*) – No, I meant he held his peace about his country. Not because of a tree trunk.

Zé (*frowning*) – What's he on about, 'eh? Trying to confuse us, is he? Showing off in front of Monsieur Blanc because he's read a few books, 'eh? And what do you mean by (*imitating him*): "He held his peace". Camus never 'eld his peace: he spoke, he wrote...but people didn't listen to 'im. He only 'eld his tongue because he'd bitten the dust! If he'd lived...

Yaya (*interrupting*) – He'd have clawed his eyes out in disgust!

Zé – He'd've sided with France! With the Pieds-Noirs! He was a Pied-Noir 'imself, after all. Algerian to his fingertips.

Yaya – Whatever!

Zé – Oh, so he would have sided with the Arabs, I suppose? With the FLN? He'd've supported your attacks, your crimes?

Loule (*getting annoyed*) – Whoa! Are we playing boules or fighting the war all over again?!

The game continues.

Monsieur Blanc – It wasn't a war.

Loule (exasperated) – Bloody hell!

Yaya – Eight years of fighting, 500,000 dead, thousands of disappeared, a million repatriated. What would you call it?

Zé (sarcastically) – Events?

Monsieur Blanc – We were all French.

Yaya – We still killed each other.

Monsieur Blanc – “Algeria is where I hurt, as others feel pain in their lungs”.

Zé – That's Camus, ain't it?

Monsieur Blanc – Indeed.

Zé (to Yaya) – See, I know it off by heart.

Monsieur Blanc – He suffered from tuberculosis, did Camus. He knew what he was talking about. His death saved him from making an impossible choice.

Loule – Oh no! Not you too, Monsieur Brun!

Monsieur Blanc (a little irritated) – Monsieur Blanc! Once and for all, my name is Monsieur Blanc!

Yaya – Excuse him, Monsieur Blanc, he sees brown everywhere.

Loule (with warmth) – Don't hold it against me, Monsieur Blanc, but Parisians playing boules...

Monsieur Blanc – I should remind you that Monsieur Brun was from Lyon³

Loule – Well, if it's north of Valence...

The game continues. Yaya steps forward to throw.

Zé – Right then, Mouloud, let's go!

Yaya – Mouloud! I'm chuffed you called me that!

He steps forward and throws.

Yaya – You've heard of Mouloud Feraoun?

Zé – Mouloud Feraoun... (*thinking*) Yeah... the boxer.

Yaya – The greatest Kabyle poet of all time! And he wrote in French!

Zé – Well there you go, we even learned you 'ow to write.

Monsieur Blanc (*picking up his boules*) – Right gentlemen, I'm terribly sorry but...

Yaya (*continuing*) – A fat lot of good that did, your mates in the OAS killed him in '62!

Zé – They were not my mates!

Monsieur Blanc leaves the court.

Loule – Monsieur Blanc, stay!... I know they're a pain!

Zé (*to Yaya*) – What's up with 'im?

³ Allusion to Marcel Pagnol's Marseille Trilogy

Yaya – We’re messing about Monsieur Blanc, don’t take it the wrong way! Ain’t that right, Zé, just messing about?

Zé (*grudgingly*) – Yeah...just messing about.

Monsieur Blanc (*leaving*) – You have a very strange way of going about it!

Loule (*in a final attempt*) – Come on... Monsieur Br...
Monsieur Blanc! (*Loule picks up the jack and hands it to him*) The cochonnet, Monsieur Blanc!

Monsieur Blanc turns round, looks at him for a moment, then changes his mind and comes back to the game.

A pause.

The game continues. Monsieur Blanc prepares to throw.

Loule (*to Monsieur Blanc*) – Come on now, focus, give it your all, let’s win it.

Monsieur Blanc produces a very poor throw.

Loule (*sarcastically*) – Wow, what a beauty!

They carry on playing.

Yaya (*to Monsieur Blanc*) – Can I ask why your dad never spoke to you about those three years he spent over there?

Loule (*dismayed*) – Flipping heck, Yaya!

Monsieur Blanc – He killed himself three months after returning to France.

Loule – Oh bollocks, we’ll never hear the end of this now.

Zé – You don't know how right you are...

Yaya – I'm sorry.

Monsieur Blanc – Don't be. I was only little. I don't remember it.

Yaya – And didn't you wanna understand when you grew up?

Monsieur Blanc – No.

Yaya (*interested*) – He didn't write about it?

Loule – He just told you he doesn't remember! Now Yaya, give it a rest and let him play.

Yaya – If we'd tried a bit harder to understand then we wouldn't be where we are today! But there was so much shame about how it all ended...

Zé – Shame? Hate, maybe. But I've never felt ashamed.

Yaya – Don't matter, it's still there! And now it's eating away inside...

Loule – But what can we do about it? What am I supposed to do about the Algerian war, decolonisation, and all the rest of it? You're going to drive us mad. It's the same old story every time, Algeria, Algeria, Algeria...it never ends!

Yaya (*pointing to the radio*) – All this stuff going on, it's breaking my heart...

Loule – Me too, you know, or should I say: it's breaking my balls!

Zé – It's the past, but it never passes.

Loule (*accommodating*) – What's important now, Zé, is our game! The here and now (*tapping his foot*).

Monsieur Blanc – It's true. What good does it do to rake over the past? He's right, let's play!

A pause.

Zé – No, I've had enough, I'm going 'ome.

Zé puts his boules down and leaves.

Loule – Ah, well done Zé. So you come here, stir up all this shit, and then you clear off, wash your hands of it and let everyone else sort it out!

Zé – I'm all out of sorts...

Loule (*irritated*) – I'm sorry but it doesn't work like that. So if you don't mind, you need to hang around because I've got one or two things to say on the matter too. Let's stir the shit a little bit more, but then afterwards, we're going to finish this damn game!

Yaya – I call it the truth, but if you wanna call it shit, then fine, let's jump on in.

Zé – The truth? Pfff... Whose truth? That's a bit strong.

Loule – Listen up, Yaya. You know, my poor father never set foot in Algeria. He was just a railway worker in La Ciotat. A driver and a crewman...and a communist to boot! No luck, hey? Know what he did during the Algerian war? He campaigned for the independence of your damn country!

Yaya – It's not my country.

Zé – It used to be mine.

Loule (*visibly moved*) – He campaigned against his own homeland... And for something that was way over his head. As soon as he heard about oppressed people, resistance, anti-colonial struggle, fighting imperialism, he couldn't get on-board quick enough, the old chap. So he started operating in the underground networks for the FLN! So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it! Yeah, he transported suitcases full of cash from Paris down to Marseille and shipped them off to Algeria. He risked his job, could've gone to prison, put his life on the line, you know. But the old communist did whatever Comrade Khrushchev said. He sent them dough so they could buy bombs to kill his countrymen. Lovely, right?

Moved by what he's just announced, he goes to sit down.

I'm sorry to have to tell you that, Zé.

A pause.

Zé (*showing his emotion*) – Forget it Loule, it's not your fault. You 'ad to let it out one of these days, didn't you?

Monsieur Blanc – Acting in the name of one's ideals, that seems quite incredible nowadays. You should be proud of him, that he had the courage to do what he did. And he was proved right in the end, wasn't he? Algeria got its independence. He was on the right side of history.

Zé – The right side of 'istory? That doesn't mean a thing! 'istory always gets written afterwards, Monsieur Blanc. If someone at the time 'ad the balls to say that Algeria should stay French, then it would have stayed French! And then that would've been the right side of 'istory, you see?

Yaya – Don't you reckon it took some balls to declare Algeria independent?

Zé – We should have shoved them down their throats like the FLN did! Little gang of murderers. Those so-called nationalists whose revolution meant terrorising the Muslims, their own brothers! They frightened 'em into supporting 'em by force.

Yaya – If only France had kept its promises, Zé! If it had stuck to its ideals of justice and progress. If they'd have even been given a hint of something other than misery, don't you think they'd have embraced France with every fibre of their being? With all their Arab fervour?! Do you really think they would have risen up as one behind the Fellagha, clinging on to their religion, their language, their traditions...

Zé – But Yaya, you know the Arabs and the Muslims didn't want to be French!

Yaya – Yes they did, Zé! But they were kept waiting...a century after being colonised. After being shot to pieces in Europe, during the wars. After asking for more rights, and time after time asking for acknowledgement of a “great universal homeland”... After all those efforts and all the pleading, they finally realised that they'd never be anything other than the natives, an under-class far beneath the French, and nothing would ever change that! After all that time, Zé, they didn't wanna be French any more.

A pause.

Zé – Except that we weren't colonisers. We were just poor folks that got chased from our 'ome.

Yaya – Except that it wasn't your home!

Zé (*he stands up and moves towards Yaya*) – It wasn't our 'ome? After five or six generations! It wasn't our 'ome? You want a punch in the mouth?

Monsieur Blanc (*stepping in*) – Goodness! Are you still just messing about?

Yaya (*harshly*) – They made you believe it and you swallowed it! For a hundred years, your leaders hammered it into you: Algeria is France! They lied to you, and you just clapped and cheered.

Zé – What else did we 'ave to believe in? We made that country! We built it with our own blood...

Yaya – And with theirs too.

Zé – We were Algerians! What were we guilty of? Of feeling at 'ome? We invented a whole country, a whole culture! French, Italians, Greeks, Maltese, Spaniards, Jews...all rubbing along together fine...by some miracle!

Yaya – And nine million Arabs you couldn't care less about!

Zé – What the 'ell do you know about 'ow we lived over there? My parents respected the Arabs, they rubbed shoulders with 'em every day...

Yaya – Yeah, the good little natives, simple, hard-working, don't mind scabbling around for peanuts. As long as they kept their mouths shut everyone liked them, but God forbid you mix with them...

Zé – Wrong! When I was a littlun, I 'ad a friend, an Arab boy, he was like a brother to me...

Yaya – They were told they were French, but they got no education, no right to vote, no representation...

Zé – And I never saw him again, you ‘ear me? Never!

Yaya – Ah, how far away that civilising mission ended up. So many abandoned promises. So many missed opportunities...

Zé – Shut up! Shut up, for the love of God, shut up!

Zé collapses back in his seat. A pause.

Loule (*to Yaya*) – So you're trying to put the last hundred years of French colonialism on his shoulders, are you? And what about the slave trade too while you're at it? And the extermination of the Indians, the Kanaks, the Māoris, the Malagasy...(*gradually getting worked up*) The annexing of the southern territories, the rainforests, the looting of the mines and all the bloody rest of it! The rape of the giraffe-necked women, Tintin in the Congo, Yabon Banania!

Yaya – Talk about going too far!

Loule – Yeah, well going too far is my thing, you know? As the representative of the white man, the spawn of Satan himself, the Westerner, Uncle Sam's cousin: the worst of the worst. Who should pay for these centuries of wickedness for all eternity? If you're expecting us to beg for forgiveness, to bow down before you, o worthy representative of the colonised peoples, as we await the day of reckoning, then you're sadly mistaken! And certainly don't expect me to be any different!

Yaya – I ain't no-one's representative! I gave that up long ago. Anyway, people have short memories, and it's a good job too. If you're washing your hands of it too, Loule, then what's the point talking about it? In fact, you're well within your rights not wanting to take any responsibility. It makes perfect sense.

A pause.

Zé – What is it that you want Yaya? You want me to say that Algeria ‘as turned into a model of eternal bliss and unbridled joy? ‘eaven on Earth with people killing each other left, right and centre?

Loule – Yeah, sod it! The opposite of what my old man fought for.

Zé – Do you want me to say that we were in the wrong? That we did the right thing leaving that country behind? That country with the most wonderful way of life you can imagine. Ah, blessed Algeria. You see, Yaya, all I ‘ave to do is close my eyes and I’m right back in that ‘ouse where we used to live...I was only little but...It’s the smells I remember the most. The fragrance of couscous floating up from the Arab stall in the street blending with the aromas of thyme from Madame Sintès’s stew. She was our neighbour on the first floor. All that mixed with the smell of my mother’s fried doughnuts. That was the land of my childhood, Yaya, and I shall cherish it forever. And now it’s gone to rack and ruin! And you want me to call that the right side of ‘istory?

A pause.

Yaya (*who is now sitting down*) – I’m sorry, Zé. I shouldn’t have said all that. I got carried away. My father fought, you know. I never knew him, but sometimes it’s like he speaks through me.

A pause.

Loule – Holy shit, imagine that. Spending your whole life dreaming of ideas that end up crumbling to nothing in the

space of a few weeks. After the Wall came down in '89, he never spoke again, my old man. He stopped talking completely. Even to his wife, poor thing. You think my mother deserved that? After putting up with him all her life. The only thing he said after that was: "I'm going to die!" The quacks all said he was fine, but he'd given up.

Monsieur Blanc – The world had ceased to make sense to him, that's all.

Yaya – And you'd rather've had what? A nice little stationmaster with no convictions? Just a bloke watching the trains go by?

Loule – Bloody hell, yes! Because please tell me what good all that lot ever did? The Trotskyists, the Maoists, the Third-Worldists! Endlessly proclaiming that the revolution would free Algeria and the rest of the world too! What did they teach us? That we're the guilty ones! We're the bastards, the colonisers, the slave masters. They deceived us, made us buy into their damn pipe dreams...liberty and justice, my arse! And where are they now? I can't hear them any more! That's all I used to hear about when I was a kid. It drove my mother to despair. We'd had it up to here with Algeria...and now the Islamists are coming to plant their bombs over here...And you won't stop harping on about it!

Zé – Do you think it's easy for us? Do you think we enjoy 'earing about all this?

Monsieur Blanc (*to Loule*) – You're accusing people who sometimes paid with their lives for what they believed. Many people suffered. Many were lost. It isn't fair.

Yaya – So what's the right side of history for you then? The side that'll let you play boules in peace? The side that vindicates what your dad did?

Loule (*emphatically*) – Can't you leave him be!?

Zé – Whoa, Loule, what's the matter with you?

Loule – You know what, Zé, we've never left this land right here. Not me, not my family. That's just how it is, I can't help that. But little by little we've seen all and sundry turn up around here, you see? I won't go through them one by one, it'll take far too long. Bit by bit, we've seen Provence...

Zé – Who's this “all and sundry” then?

Loule – I'm not talking about you...

Zé – Well let me tell you a bit about me because your insinuations are starting to get on my wick...Us Pieds-Noirs didn't feel very welcome 'ere when we arrived with nothing but the clothes on our backs. All this about Provence's legendary hospitality...there certainly wasn't much o' that about when we arrived in Marseille!

Loule – Come on, Zé, you must be fed up with always playing the victim.

Yaya – So who is your “all and sundry” then?

Loule (*letting loose*) – They wanted their independence, right? Well they can bloody well keep it! They need to sort their own shit out, not come over here and start stirring things up. They should stay over there... But they seem to think this is a place of refuge for them, that it owes them something, that it's guilty of subjugating them, of betraying them! They bit the hand that fed them and still want to come back for more, don't they? And make us pay for it too...

Monsieur Blanc – Loule, you are angry. You don't really mean what you're saying!

Loule – And then there’s the Johnny-come-latelies! The ones who think this land belongs to them just because they bought a piece of it, and all they see here are fields they can endlessly concrete over... One huge theme park where I’m the performing monkey!

Monsieur Blanc – Am I a Johnny-come-lately then?

Loule – Not you, no. You’re just a duffer!

Yaya – Oh, that's harsh...

Monsieur Blanc – A what?

Zé – A duffer!... I’ll tell you later.

Yaya (*sarcastically*) – ‘Fraid so, Loule, we all end up being colonised by someone at some point. What goes around comes around.

A pause.

Loule (*frowning*) – What goes around comes around?

Yaya – Adapt or die. Or fight. The Arabs fought.

Loule (*becoming more and more outraged*) – What goes around comes around? You trying to say we deserved it? You think this is all some kind of poetic justice? You want us to say, “oh deary me, we need to pay for the horrors of the past. We owe our wealth to centuries of colonisation!” You want us to roll over and get swamped by the world and his wife? It's that, isn't it?!

Loule leaves the court, exasperated.

A pause.

Zé (*sitting, staring into the distance*) – My mother's cousin 'ad a vineyard just outside Bône, though they call it Annaba nowadays... Blimey, I'll shan't forget that story! In 1960, when the order to evacuate was given, the 'arvests were over, the grapes 'ad already been picked. When her cousin 'eard the news, he didn't say a thing. He went straight to the vats, opened the taps and let the wine run out onto the floor. Then he fitted a ripper to his tractor and spent three days from dawn till dusk pulling out every last vine from every last inch of his land. He didn't stop even for a second. Didn't even glance up at the mountains he'd grown up around, or the Arab workers looking on from afar. When a policeman who'd 'eard about what was going on came to ask him to explain 'imself, do you know what he said? "Sir, since what we've done here is a crime, it needs to be erased. And so you see, that is what I am doing".

A pause.

Yaya – What a story. Beautiful. Tragic.

Zé – So beautiful that Camus wrote about it in one of his books.

Yaya - Don't matter whether Camus wrote about it, that's scorched earth, what that bloke did.

Zé – Can't you put yourself in his shoes for just a second? Try to understand why he did what he did. Understand those who wanted to destroy the country when they were 'ounded out!

Yaya – I can understand it, sure, but I can't excuse it. 'Cos by destroying everything when you leave, you're destroying those who come after you too. It's like saying to them that they're worth nothing, that they shouldn't even exist. That they may as well just die.

Zé – It's called despair, Yaya! Despair, plain and simple. I know some people who fled their 'omes with the stew still cooking on the stove...

Yaya – And they left with their honour intact.

Zé – Honour? Honour also means fighting back too!

Yaya – The crimes of the OAS? You call that honour? Persecution of civilians? Raids? Summary executions? Wiping out whole villages? Is that honourable?

Zé – It was a war, Yaya. Groups of people behave like bodies... like living organisms... they adapt and they protect themselves. It's natural for them to react and fight back.

Yaya – Yeah, but nature never invented hangings, drownings, rapes; antibodies don't have electrodes, or bombs or hooks; animals don't have prongs or razors. A plant could never strangle someone as good as barbed wire.

Zé – Us Pieds-Noirs 'ave got nothing to do with all that...

Yaya – But you knew what the soldiers were doing?

Zé – We didn't know a thing.

Yaya – It was all happening right under your noses.

Zé – I told you! We 'ad nothing to do with it!

Yaya – You knew what they were doing! Aided and abetted by the French government.

Zé – The government? They couldn't've cared less about us. The government ordered us to be shot at!

Yaya – But you know now?

A pause.

They look at each other.

Zé – They did it to ferret out the Fellaghas, the bombers, the ones killing innocent people...

Yaya – The Arabs stopped being the nice little natives and became the ones who needed ripping to shreds. In the name of French grandeur! Can you tell me what Camus said about all that bloodshed?

Monsieur Blanc – My father was one of those...

Zé (to Yaya) – “My mother before justice” ...

Yaya (to Monsieur Blanc) – What?

Zé (to Yaya) – With all the FLN attacks going on, he said: “I will defend my mother before justice”. That's what Camus said...

Monsieur Blanc – Camus was worried about his mother. She didn't want to leave Algiers... He was just a man after all.

Yaya (to Monsieur Blanc, *vigorously*) – What did you say?

Monsieur Blanc – My father was just a man too.

Yaya – I thought you didn't know anything about him?

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc – It's hard for me to talk about it.

A pause.

Zé – Don't be shy, Monsieur Blanc, it's confession time!

A pause.

Yaya – Come on! We've come this far, after all.

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc – My father was in charge of a villa.

Loule (*who has returned to the court*) – A villa?

Monsieur Blanc – An interrogation centre in the hills above Algiers. He wasn't just a conscript like I said. I lied. He was a serving officer. Captain of the paratroopers. He did that godawful job because he didn't have a choice. And above all because he was in Algeria to defend France.

Zé – France? Pfff...

Monsieur Blanc – Yes, France. His suicide proves it.

Zé – That's why he committed suicide? For France?

Monsieur Blanc – Yes.

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc continues. He addresses each character one by one, and occasionally the audience.

My father joined the Resistance when he was just 17 years old, in 1943, during the Nazi Occupation. He was captured and tortured by the Gestapo, and sent to Auschwitz...and

by some miracle, he survived. After the Liberation, only one option seemed to make sense to him: joining the army as a paratrooper! Quick as a flash they whisked him off to Indochina, where another rotten war was just beginning. That's where he cut his teeth, learned about courage and sacrifice, earned his officer's stripes and met my mother, in Saigon. He was never off the front line. He was still there in that Asian quagmire during the catastrophe at Diên Biên Phu...As always, on the losers' side. He was taken prisoner and spent months in the Việt-Minh's re-education camps. There were a thousand men in his company, and when he was freed in 1954, there were only 23 left. Twenty-three soldiers returning from a colonial empire in ruins. The heaviest one scarcely weighed 7 stone. Then in '57, that really took the biscuit! They posted him to Algeria to maintain law and order and organise peace-keeping missions. How absurd! Apart from some short periods of leave in France, he stayed on right until the end.

A pause.

For over half of his short life, my father fought for France, to protect its sovereignty, its territory, its ideals...He was quite unaware that he was a pawn in his century's tragic game, our colonial death throes. Nobody could ever say he failed in his mission! He was crushed by the chain of events. It overwhelmed him. The practising Catholic within him waged a merciless moral war against the dishonourable soldier he'd become: that's why he took his life...Like Camus, you see: he held his peace.

A pause.

Loule – Why didn't he quit?

Monsieur Blanc – He killed himself. Is that not enough for you? If he'd resigned, someone else would have done the

job in his place. With his Christian conscience, he carried out his mission with humanity...

Yaya – Humanity in torturing people?

Monsieur Blanc – My father demanded that nobody systematically resorted to physical torture. I've read the letters he wrote to my mother. He'd been a prisoner of the Communists in Vietnam, and the Gestapo before that. He knew all the flaws...

Yaya – So he humiliated people, then?

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc – In Algeria, torture became a weapon, a mass undertaking. You had to torture dozens, hundreds of people just to get one name. And then there were some who couldn't control their violence and others who even got a wicked thrill out of it. I know that my father fought against such methods! But of course, he still bore witness to all the crimes, the rapes, the executions... People being pushed out of helicopters far out at sea.

A pause.

Zé – You see, Yaya. There was us, the Pieds-Noirs, stuck in the middle of all of them 'orrors.

Monsieur Blanc – Horrors that didn't even help us win. Horrors which killed thousands and dishonoured countless soldiers.

Loule – Damn stupidity! Only to end up clearing out with their tails between their legs.

Yaya – Yeah, and hanging their heads in shame.

Loule – Who are you speaking for now, then? Whose side are you on?

Yaya – Whose side? What's up with you? Wanna see my papers?

Loule – It takes more than that! You need to love France.

Yaya – Love it? Are you the one dishing out permits?

Monsieur Blanc (*to Loule*) – We know what happens if you love it too much.

Loule - You say you love it, but who's to say that deep down you don't absolutely despise it?

Yaya – Think whatever you want. I ain't ever stopped loving it.

Loule – Can you prove it?

A pause.

Monsieur Blanc – Loule, what a ridiculous question.

Zé – He's right, that's a stupid question.

Loule – Well it just came out...Dammit!

Yaya – My dad was in the FLN. The paras arrested him and we never saw him again. My uncle was a harki and he was killed when they stopped him boarding one of the boats...

Zé – A harki?

Yaya – Yeah, my uncle. Just as they were casting off its moorings, the ship's captain got the order to offload all the harkis on-board. He was killed as the real French soldiers

looked on over the guardrails.

Zé – Crikey, Yaya, I knew your father was in the FLN, but a harki uncle too...you really are in up to your neck!

Yaya – Damn right. And when people question my right to love this country where I was born, I feel like I'm in up to my eyeballs! So, Loule, after all that, you might think I'd despise this country. You might think I'd hate it and I'd end up wanting to blow the whole thing up! And you'd be right to think that. But you'd also be right to think "you know what, honestly, we've gone too far with this guy, we've only got ourselves to blame. All that bitterness, we've been bloody asking for it! Why do we keep on hounding the poor bloke? Why don't we recognise him as one of our own, at the end of the day? Why not add him to the melting pot with everyone else? In the name of that tragic war, our shared history, the tears shed and the blood spilt, all that suffering, why shouldn't he be welcomed as one of us?!" Hey, Loule? Why do you mistrust the Arabs so much? Can you tell me?

A pause.

Zé – 'Ow come you've never told me about your uncle?

Yaya – I have told you about him. Lakdhar!

Zé – You never told me he was a harki.

Yaya – It's my mum... She didn't want us to say.

Zé – What a shame!

Yaya – You know, Zé, to some people, harkis are traitors. But a month before they bumped him off, he was the one who smuggled her out, along with a French officer he knew...One who didn't follow orders. She was about to give

birth, she was alone... Ever since she told me that story, it's funny, you know, I've always had a soft spot for people who don't follow orders.

Zé – Jesus, Yaya, widow of an FLN fighter, saved by her harki brother... Bloody 'ell, you could write a novel with all that! You could be the next Camus.

Yaya (*as if confiding a secret*) – Don't joke about that, I know someone who turned it into a play.

A pause.

Yaya – Don't tell me I've gone up in your estimation, Zé, now you know about my harki uncle?

Zé – Nope.

Yaya – Phew, I was worried for a second! 'Cos there's no such thing as a good Arab or a bad one, innit?

Zé – I know Yaya, they're all terrorists!

Monsieur Blanc – France owes a huge debt to your uncle.

Yaya – And to my dad?

Monsieur Blanc doesn't answer.

Yaya – You know, my uncle's been dead for years. He ain't gonna claim his dues now.

Loule – Why not campaign for him to be recognised? So that justice can be done for him?

Yaya – If justice was gonna have anything to do with it, the French government would've been condemned 40 years ago. Wouldn't recognising the sacrifice of the harkis mean

admitting to France's cowardliness?

Loule – We acknowledged our responsibility towards the Jews...

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.

A pause.

Yaya (*stepping forward and shaking his hand*) – Thank you, Monsieur Blanc, but leave him be, your old man, he's given enough.

Loule (*insisting*) – So why are you banging on about Algeria if you claim France is your country?

Yaya – What d'you see when you look at me, Loule? D'you think I can disown my roots? Three weeks ago, right, I lost my papers. So I rocked up to the town hall to get new ones. The woman sat there at reception asked to see my ID. I told her, that's exactly why I'm here, 'cos I've lost it! So I showed her my birth certificate and when she saw my parents were born in Algeria, she gravely informed me that times had changed and that it ain't enough to be born in France to prove you're French, you also need to prove your parents were French too. Very well, I said, look, they were born when Algeria was still part of France! They were born in France, so they're French. The way she looked at me... I said, lady, my parents were born before Algeria became Algeria. It was still France. They were born in Algeria but it was still part of France. (*to Loule*) Can you prove it? That's what she said to me! Algeria used to be part of France, everyone knows that. I know, sir, but can you prove that they were born in France? Yeah but I can't, I told her, 'cos they never had any papers! So there you go. So now, Loule, I'm in a right mess. And that's something I can prove! And

when the day comes that they ask to see my papers, who knows, maybe they'll send me over there? What a muppet I'd look.

Zé – What about me then? Jewish on my mother's side, Spanish roots, born in Algeria. I'm pretty sure to be screwed over too, right?

Yaya – Shit, Zé, you're in up to your neck an' all! You better have your papers in order or you'll be on the next flight out of here back to the homestead.

Zé – God forbid, Yaya, I'd look an idiot in Algeria too...

Loule – So you're Jewish?

Monsieur Blanc – Loule!

Loule – What? Don't 'Loule' me! I feel like muggins here is the only poor sod not lucky enough to be an immigrant, a repatriate or the child of a war martyr. I'm right, aren't I? Don't forget that muggins here is the poor sod who's welcomed you all to his home! (*tapping his foot*).

Yaya and Zé – His home?

Loule – Yes, his home. The poor sod doesn't recognise it any more, d'you hear me? He tries to put on a brave face, make himself stand out a little, show that he exists...show that this is still Provence dammit! So he clowns around on café terraces. He speaks too loud. Instead of taking his game of boules seriously, he messes around, gestures wildly. He drinks more Pastis than he probably should! But really, he doesn't know what he's made of anymore, his culture, his language, his accent, they're all things off the telly or stuff he's got from his ancestors. So he ends up turning into a Marcel Pagnol character! Or worse still, Tartarin of Tarascon, a buffoon...

Monsieur Blanc – But Loule, nobody is forcing you to.

Loule – Thank God for that, Monsieur Brun! But, you see, when he's had enough of playing the fool, when he's fed up of making people laugh, he doesn't know what to do with himself. So he falls silent, feels strange, out of place. He wonders what it's all about in the end, all this messing around and playing the fool. He doesn't know if he should be welcoming or downright hostile to the invaders. They start looking at him funny. If he kicks against the system, they call him racist, closed-minded. So he stays in the shadows, closes himself off, shuts himself away...and bit by bit, he disappears...he's slowly snuffed out! He turns into a figurine, trapped in the past.

Monsieur Blanc – But Loule, it's normal for one's destiny to be influenced by the plight of others! Provence has always been a melting pot, a place of refuge...

Loule – You see, that's what the newcomers always say.

Yaya – So what would you do with the Arabs, the Pieds-Noirs... the Parisians?

Loule – Well maybe it's just me, but I want to go on believing in this land beneath my feet, it never leaves my thoughts, just like Zé and his Algeria. I want to go on seeing it like I did as a child, seeing my rolling hills that have had to make way for apartment blocks... seeing my father when he used to take me hunting...seeing the thrushes he killed: “Only four, laddie, no more than that. We need to leave some for everyone else!” A Communist, every inch of him. Seeing those humble folk talking to and fro in the cool of the evening on their front steps, calling out to each other in their language, all living there together since the year dot...

Zé – But who would you play boules with if we weren't 'ere?

Loule – I'm not talking about you...I've got nothing against you!

Yaya – But you are, Loule, we are the others you're talking about!

Loule – No!

Monsieur Blanc – The Empire has shrunk, Loule. It's nothing but a little pebble, a fragile leaf, a delicate shell. It's time to lay down its arms!

Loule – No!

Zé – But Loule, if you look 'ard enough, you can still find your 'omeland, can't you? You think I can say the same? My 'omeland has become a sanctuary for the dead we left behind. And if truth be told, your accent is like the accent of the Pieds-Noirs, it's gradually fading away...dying out.

Loule – No!

Yaya – Yeah, Loule, you're right! You should resign yourself to never-ending bitterness with all this lot coming over here, these uprooted masses, these hordes at odds with their identity...these filthy rich Europeans looking for a sun-drenched paradise - the ones who want to turn your home into a big lavender-scented museum, a tanning salon, a giant barbecue!

Loule – No!

Zé – Yes, you should cry about your lot for years on end, grow bitter and spiteful, closeted away in your tower, feeling repulsed by the whole world and everything in it! Push yourself right to the edge, drowning in your own gloom, poisoned by hate...

Loule – No!

Yaya – Yes, Loule! Until one day, you finally snap! And like a bolt of lightning, you realise. You think of your ancestors, the ones who made you, the ones who haunt your memories...and you stand up, roll up your sleeves and finally declare:

Loule puts his fingers in his ears and looks to the ground.

Yaya (*imitating Loule*) – Look at me! Take a good look: I am Provence! I am Occitania! The Mediterranean flows through my veins, the blood of my forefathers...My land has a noble history, long and glorious, a history of resistance against tyranny, and has survived through it all!

A pause.

Yaya looks at Loule, who hasn't moved.

(Becoming more persuasive). Survived through thick and thin! Because all these migrants and the conquerors too, whether it's the northern barons or today's concrete-obsessed developers from the world over...They've all become locals too, without even meaning to: inhabitants of a peaceful land, a land of brotherhood, where gentleness, elegance and love always win out over garishness, vulgarity and violence.

Everyone looks at Loule.

A pause.

Loule (*raising his head and gradually taking his fingers from his ears*) - Is that it? Are you done?

Loule stands up, collects his boules and prepares to continue the game.

Monsieur Blanc (*to Yaya*) – He doesn't seem convinced.

Yaya – He didn't listen to a thing.

Zé (*collecting his boules*) – Yes, but you spoke the truth, Yaya. Thankfully we learned you a thing or two as well...

Yaya (*collecting his boules*) – Well maybe if you'd shown a bit more willingness for us to learn then perhaps you could have stayed over there...what d'you reckon to that? Algeria: a subtle mix of Muslims, Christians and Jews living together in peace, side by side, as equals. The most glorious and largest region of France...of the European Union! Wouldn't that be nice?

Zé (*moved*) – Oh yeah...what a thought!

Monsieur Blanc – And what if this region you speak of already existed? Doesn't that same Algerian experience, that started way back in 1830, have every chance of succeeding here, in Provence, in the 21st century? Like it's been transplanted to this side of the Mediterranean? What do you think? (*They all stare at him, dumbfounded*) Loule? What do you think about that?

Loule – Y'what? Me? What do I think about what?

A pause.

Zé – I think it's you to throw, isn't it? Because with all 'is chatter (*pointing to Monsieur Blanc*), we still haven't finished.

Loule – It's me to throw? You're both pissing me off! What's the score?

Zé – You've got a short memory!

Loule throws the jack and invites Monsieur Blanc to play. The game continues and leads to some improvised movement and lines.

Yaya (to Monsieur Blanc, who is preparing to throw) – So, you're new to the area?

Monsieur Blanc – Yes, a lovely part of the world...

Zé – Not cheap, though, 'eh?

Monsieur Blanc – Well, one has to do what one has to do...

Loule – Now watch it, Monsieur Blanc, from now on, let's keep it zipped!

Monsieur Blanc – Monsieur Brun! I'm Monsieur Brun.

Loule – Ah, good! You're learning fast.

Monsieur Blanc throws a very bad shot.

Loule – Well, kind of...

Zé – So, Monsieur Brun, we've settled in pretty well round 'ere now, 'aven't we?

Yaya (*pointing to Loule*) – You reckon we might still disintegrate him, Zé?

Zé – Disintegrate him? We'd need to be on the ball. It all depends on the other one, the duffer...our only 'ope.

Monsieur Blanc – Duffer?

Yaya (emphasising his accent) – Duffer!

Monsieur Blanc (*throwing yet another bad shot*) – Are you going to explain what that means or not?

Zé – There's no point Monsieur Blanc. When it comes to duffing, you're the champ!

Monsieur Blanc still doesn't understand.

Loule – Well I'll be bugged! Would you believe it? Out of all these immigrants, I end up with the most useless one...

They play until the end of the round.

Yaya – Don't worry, Monsieur Blanc, it'll come, you'll see! With a bit of practice...innit, Loule? With time. Everything comes with time. After all, why shouldn't it?!

Curtain