

# 'LUCKILY, I HAVE TWO HOMES'

Rising star Thierry Mabonga has learnt from Begbie and is drawing on life in the Congo for his new play. By *Paul English*

He could barely speak English, but the child from the Congo delivered the most Scottish of performances. Standing on a stage in a Glasgow primary school, thousands of miles from the African home he'd had to flee months before, Thierry Mabonga was about to have an experience that would deliver him to a future unimaginable on the streets of Kinshasa.

"I decided just to be bold, and to take that step," says the 23-year-old actor, recalling the first rush of public performance. "It was the talent show in St Paul's primary. I couldn't speak much English at that time, but I sang I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles) by the Proclaimers. I managed to get the audience singing along with me. I must have been eight or nine years old, but that was when I found out I liked being on stage."

Months before, Mabonga couldn't have pointed to Britain on a map, let alone Glasgow, the city that would become his home after his mother fled the DRC to safeguard her son's future.

"It was my mum's decision," he says. "I was born the year after the Rwandan genocide and there was a lot of tension in Congo. There still is."

"The people around the city made it unsafe. You just don't know if it would be safe for a little boy growing up. She wanted to give me a better life, a better education."

"I came with her, just the two of us. I can only imagine how difficult it was for her. I had no idea. I didn't even know other countries existed. When you're that young, you're just on your land, a normal boy, going to school with your friends. That was all that was important at the time."

"I remember very well being at the airport and waving goodbye to family members who had come with us, thinking, 'I'll be coming back.' Next thing you know, I'm in Scotland."

Growing up in Knightswood, in the west end of the city, Mabonga attended St Thomas Aquinas secondary, where he was a popular, sporty pupil. He was invited to audition for a part in a school production of the musical *Hairspray* by a

teacher he credits with convincing him he had the talent.

"I was fortunate to have a drama teacher called Geoff Nolan who really cared about nurturing talent. Drama is not for everyone but it gives you confidence, and once you get that you can clarify what you want to do. He was able to help me find that."

After high school, Mabonga won a scholarship to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

He won his first film role before he even graduated, as the hapless security guard responsible for springing Robert Carlyle's notorious Francis Begbie from hospital in 2017's *T2 Trainspotting*.

"I was really happy with it," he says. "Working with Danny Boyle and Robert Carlyle in my first screen job. They taught me a lot about professionalism."

Parts in BBC dramas *The Split*, *Trust Me* and *The Replacement*, as well as a standout turn in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* at Glasgow's Tron last year, have come his way since. He's also writing his own play, about the history of slavery in Scotland.

While still only 23, Mabonga is blessed with what he calls "an old soul". At 6ft, he's the gentlest giant, mannerly, with a modest Glaswegian accent, soft eyes and a smile to warm the coldest heart.

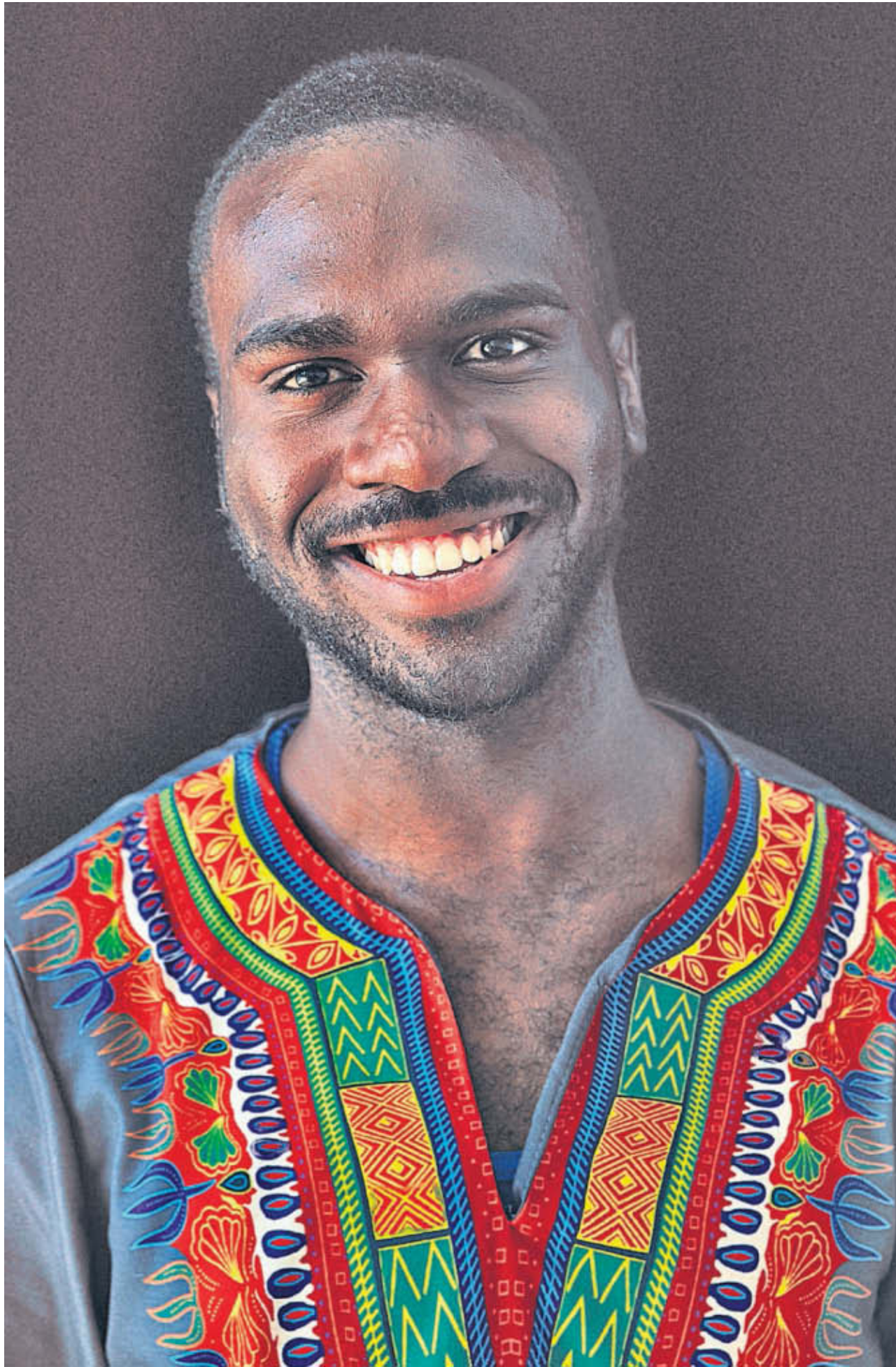
We meet at Theatre de Quat'Sous, in Montreal's trendy Plateau Mont-Royal district, where he's rehearsing *First Snow/Premiere Neige*, a trans-Atlantic collaboration between the National Theatre of Scotland and Quebec's Theatre PAP, which opens at Edinburgh's Kings' Hall next week as part of the Fringe.

The bilingual production features a Scottish and Quebecois cast, exploring issues around sovereignty and the similarities between both lands, where referendums on independence have been held – twice in Quebec – with voters opting for the status quo each time.

Each cast member brings an autobiographical component to the play, directed by Quebec director Patrice Dubois, and penned by Scots writers Davey Anderson, Linda McLean and Philippe Ducros, from Montreal.

In one scene, Thierry's character talks of falling for a Quebecois girl at the now-defunct Arches club on the night of the

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Mabonga won his first film role before he graduated from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, in 2017's *T2 Trainspotting*

2014 count. Yet there are other moments drawn from personal experience.

One monologue in particular, in which his character speaks of children being enslaved to dig for minerals used in the production of digital devices back home, starkly sketches life for the thousands of young boys back in Congo.

As we sit backstage what he describes is a scene from another universe. But he knows it might have been his.

"I grew up in Kinshasa, the capital," he says. "Further east, where it's more rural, there's a lot of slave labour, a lot of young people forced to dig for minerals. There's no safety at all. Most of us don't realise where the things inside our phone come from. It makes you appreciate the things we have in developed countries. People are working to give us things they might never have, and that's not fair."

It's something he was reminded of when he returned home in 2016. The city

was experiencing one of many frequent power cuts. Arriving to find his cousins and extended family surrounded by darkness, he turned on the torch function on his iPhone.

People laughed. "I guess they'd never seen anyone do that before," he says.

Mabonga's return to Africa emboldened a desire to share the benefit of his experience – or luck, as he calls it – around those who didn't get out. He talks of returning to work with kids, engaging them in sport or drama.

"There's massive unemployment, and it forces young people to work in things like unlicensed motorbike taxis. It's dangerous. There's nothing else."

"Many of them are educated. I know many who are smart but aren't working. The high level of unemployment leads to alcohol, which is a big problem."

"When I went back I could see myself there. I'm just lucky, blessed by the grace

of God. It could have happened to anyone else and I could still be back there. For some reason my life was turned around."

Self-effacing though he is, he knows he's exactly where he should be.

"Being a drama student, you can get very excited when you get offered jobs," he says. "You almost start to ask for approval. Then you learn you're here because you're good, because you have the right to be here."

He's talking, of course, about work. But Thierry Mabonga could just as easily be speaking of home, however he chooses to define it.

"Scotland is my home, I've been there since I was eight," he says. "But Congo is home as well. It's a difficult question. If I could have Congo and Scotland in one word, then I would."

*First Snow/Premiere Neige* is at King's Hall as part of the Edinburgh Fringe from Wednesday until August 26

## SPARKLING LIGHTS AND SACRED SOUNDS

Chris Levine's new art installation in a champagne bar off the Royal Mile is 'om' message for our modern times, says *Julia Horton*

Afeted teetotal artist whose work promotes meditative clarity and calm is holding his first solo show in Scotland – in a champagne bar in the midst of the world's biggest arts festival.

Chris Levine, best known for his portrait of the Queen with her eyes closed, will launch his new exhibition at the Pommery bar just off the Royal Mile this Wednesday as the Edinburgh festival gets under way. It is a sound and light installation entitled *Stillness at 136.1 Hz*, in reference to the frequency of "om", a sacred chant believed to be in harmony with the energy of the natural world.

Levine aims to give festival revellers a chance to tune into that calm, and enjoy a moment's peace among the hectic whirl of entertainment and the day-to-day "chaos" of modern life. He also hopes to reawaken the spirit of the Scottish Enlightenment in the bar, after learning that the restored space in the historic Signet Library once housed a renowned collection of books where people seeking self-improvement sought inspiration.

Levine, who lives near Winchester in Hampshire, says: "My work is increasingly about drawing people into the present moment, the now. There's a lot of noise and chaos out there [in the world] but if you can tune into these natural frequencies, you can tune into the natural order of things. *Stillness* is a beautiful thing. If my art can tickle people to explore meditation, I almost feel that is what I'm supposed to do."

The installation combines an "almost imperceptible" background soundscape inspired by a musical scale



Levine: enlightenment

called *solfeggio*, based on numbers deemed sacred – including "om" – and thought to be in sync with the energy nodes in the body, or chakras.

Bright lights will be beamed over people's heads through lasers which emit single wavelengths of pure colour, so they appear more vibrant, to help people connect with natural energy and go with the natural flow of life. "It will be different for everyone. Some might sit and marvel at it. Some might want to crank it up and rave, but energetically you are all becoming one with the artwork because you are all energy [made of masses of atoms]," Levine says.

The work builds on a previous installation in Australia which Levine says provoked mainly positive and sometimes highly emotional reactions, with several people moved to tears. It includes a distinctive plus sign to help people "zone out" from the chatter, representing time on the vertical axis and space on the horizontal plane, he adds.

The experimental light artist, whose mother is Scottish, lost his Canadian father to alcoholism when Levine was just 18. He himself stopped drinking alcohol nearly 30 years ago and took up meditation, seeking out sensory "highs" rather than chemical ones.

*Chris Levine's Stillness at 136.1 Hz* is at the Pommery bar in the Signet Library's Upper Library, West Parliament Square, Edinburgh, in association with the Saatchi Gallery and *The Sunday Times* Scotland, on August 1-27

## 'COURAGE WAS DEFINED BY YOUR WILLINGNESS TO DESTROY YOURSELF'

A hard-core upbringing inspired Rachel Kushner's acclaimed new novel, finds *Stephen McGinty*

Rachel Kushner knows how to sniff out a good character, such as Doc, a killer cop with a penchant for expensive cologne. In the pages of her new novel, *The Mars Room*, Doc is serving life without possibility of parole for acting as a hitman.

Kushner met the police officer who inspired her character in the "sensitive needs" block of a Californian maximum-security prison. The prison officer guarding him had momentarily walked away and Kushner was left alone in the cell as the prisoner confessed to a series of murders other than those for which he had been convicted. The crimes had been committed while he

was working for Los Angeles Police Department.

As Kushner, whose novel was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize this week, explains: "I was already working on the novel when I encountered him. I had embarked on a project to try to learn as much as I could about the Californian prison system."

"The potent short interaction with him in the confined space of his cell, during which he started to recount how it was he got away with the killings while he was on duty in the LAPD, just stuck with me. It was easy for me to write in his voice. It just rolled out."

Doc may have muscled his way into the novel, but it is a tribute to Kushner's literary

skill that he plays a support role to a string of female felons, such as his nemesis and former lover Betty LaFrance, a former leg model who is now on Death Row.

The *Mars Room* is centred on a female prison, loosely based on the Central California Women's Facility, the world's largest women's prison. Next month, Kushner will speak at HMP Edinburgh, home to Scotland's largest number of female prisoners, as part of her appearance at Edinburgh International Book Festival. "I'm going to do a reading," she says. "The festival arranged it and I'm so excited that they asked me to do it. They have a foundation that has funded books for all those who attend."

Kushner, 49, a Californian, was raised by beatnik parents who lived in a converted school bus before moving to a tough San Francisco neighbourhood when she was 10. On her first day at school, a new friend took Kushner to see her sister, who worked as a prostitute in the red-light district.

Kushner's parents were studying at the University of California, but their daughter's world was edgy and, at times, electrifyingly exciting. In the novel, elements of her youth are bequeathed to Romy Hall, the central character, a former dancer at the Mars Club, a San Francisco strip club, who is serving a life sentence for



Kushner spent her teenage years on the mean streets of San Francisco

the murder of her stalker. Kushner is married with a 10-year-old son, but in the novel Romy loses her son to the care system.

"It's hard to explain the environment in which I was an adolescent," says Kushner. "I was hanging out with older kids. It's not that I fell in with tough kids, or that I was drawn to them. It was more like you just swim in the water of your environment and that was the water."

"In writing this book, it became quite clear to me that I was never going to go to prison. Maybe I knew that, but I had been forced to survive in an environment where the people I admired most were courageous and, in the world where I existed,

courage was defined by how willing you were to destroy yourself.

"I understand intimately what life is like for people who are destined to travel down that road because those people were the figures who were the brightest."

For the past four years Kushner has worked for a charity that supports female prisoners and she has visited almost every penitentiary in the state. She is a tough woman, a former biker who went over the handlebars of a Kawasaki Ninja 600 at 130mph and lived to tell the tale in her previous novel, *The Flamethrowers*, but has she ever been frightened during her prison visits?

She insists not. Disturbed,

yes, and moved by the plight of the prisoners, certainly, but not frightened. "No, not even remotely," she says.

"They are hurt and injured and on drugs and vulnerable and I feel bad for humanity. I didn't feel scared for myself."

That's not to say she hasn't been disturbed by what she has seen. "One of the prisons I went to, Salinas Valley, is a maximum-security prison. Many of the prisoners there are in secure housing units," she says.

"They have stabbings on the yard daily. The guards are betting on prison riots and which gang is going to win, and they make you watch their home-made, edited together, closed-circuit footage of stabbings and

killings on that yard. That was maybe the hardest thing, watching those videos, but I made myself do it, because it seemed like I would find an answer to the question of how much of my innocence would remain after I had been through this trial by fire."

"But, given all of that, when I walked out on C yard in Salinas Valley, which is an active yard where there are stabbings, I was not afraid of the men."

Since its publication in America earlier this year, *The Mars Room* has been highly praised, but, for Kushner, no literary critic's words have meant as much as the letter she received from a "good friend in prison", who has a brief cameo in the novel. The friend is serving life without possibility of parole and is now a talented gardener.

"I memorised it because I was so touched by what she wrote."

"She said: 'I hope people in the free world know how insanely realistic this book is – I have a feeling that it is too difficult for some people to ever understand or imagine what our lives are actually like. In a way, I don't know how you pulled it off, but you did it.'"

*Rachel Kushner* appears at Edinburgh International Book Festival on Tuesday, August 14, at 12.15 pm. Tickets are £12. *The Mars Room* is published by Jonathan Cape (£16.99)