POSSESSION

by Sasha Hails

SAMUEL FRENCH

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POSSESSION was first produced on 15 June 2023 at the Arcola Theatre, London. Directed by Oscar Pearce, associate direction by Tramaine Reindorf, design by Sarah Beaton, lighting design by Joseph Ed Thomas, video design by Leo Flint, costume supervision Alexandra Kharibian, sound designer Esther Kehinde Ajayi (EKAS). The production manager was Josephine Tremmeling, production assistant Defne Ozdogan, with movement director by Tian Brown-Sampson. The stage manager was Alex Jaouen, Lingala coach Antho Lusambo Atangowena and the puppetry consultant Josie Daxter. The cast was as follows:

HOPE / MERCY . . . . . Diany Samba-Bandza
ALICE YOUNG / ALICE SEELEY HARRIS . . . . . Dorothea Myer-Bennett
KASAMBAYI . . . . . .Sarah Amankwah
JOHN DENT / JOHN HARRIS . . . . . Milo Twomey
DAVID / GEORGES / GEORGES' FATHER / NSALA . . Nedum Okonyia

Content Warning – Child birth, sexual content, discussions of sexual violence against women, discussions of generational trauma, historical photography of amputated body parts.
Age Suitability – 15+

CHARACTERS

Present Day

HOPE – 19, Black British Congolese girl. Kasambayi's daughter.

KASAMBAYI – 40ish, Black Congolese, first generation immigrant. Hope's Mother.

ALICE YOUNG – 41, White, foreign correspondent.

JOHN DENT – 49ish, White, foreign correspondent.

DAVID, GEORGES' FATHER – 16

DAVID – 22, Hope's lover

GEORGES – 22, Hope's son

BUS DRIVER, PARTY GIRL, YOUNG GYM BOY, MORGUE ASSISTANT, CHAIR, LECTURE HALL ASSISTANT

1900

ALICE SEELEY HARRIS – 30s, English missionary wife.

JOHN HARRIS – 49, English missionary.

NSALA – 22, Congolese man.

MERCY – 13, Congolese girl

AUTHOR'S NOTES

This play has had a long creative journey and I am incredibly grateful for all who have been part of helping it along the way.

It began from a very personal place. I wanted to explore all the challenges, emotional and financial, around being a working mother, and the ongoing frustrations and guilt I felt about being torn between work and home. I decided to make my character Alice a foreign correspondent, one of the toughest jobs for a Mother, that takes you far from home and into danger. As I began researching, interviewing the extraordinary Maggie O'Kane and Victoria Brittain, and reading about Lee Miller, Janine de Giovanni and Martha Gelhorn, I realised that this wasn't such a personal problem, it was common and it was political. This 'guilt' I felt at my ambition for a whole world beyond the family and raising children was not just born from my own emotional connection to my children, it was societal. It was Victoria Brittain who suggested that the Democratic Republic of Congo might be the place to set my play, in the heart of Africa, where the dual horrors of the colonisation and exploitation of women and of the colonisation and exploitation of the earth meet. Just at this time, in a strange coincidence, I signed up to house a refugee and Antho Lusambo Atangowena came to live with us, a Congolese asylum

seeker. She shared her compelling life story and her spirit inspired the character of Kasambayi and her daughter Hope. But the play was still missing something.

One day, researching King Leopold's Congo, Alice Seeley Harris appeared on my computer screen, rising up like a ghost with her photographs. The links between the mining of cobalt and coltan today and the rubber trade in King Leopold's Congo were immediately apparent. It is horrific and shocking to see how history continues to repeat itself.

NOTES ON STAGING

Alice Seeley Harris and John Harris are historical characters. The other characters are fictional but inspired by close research. Alice Young and Alice Seeley Harris should be played by the same actor. John Dent and John Harris should be played by the same actor. The actor playing David (Georges' Father) should also play David (Hope's lover in the Congo), Georges (Hope's son), and Nsala. The actor playing Hope should also play Mercy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks first to my three daughters, Siofra, Grainne and Cara who taught me so much about life and mothering, and who have been a seminal part of the creative conversations around *Possession* throughout its development. Thank you to Simon Reade for planting the seed of the play when he commissioned the monologue *My Front Line* and Alison Reid for her performance as Helen, an early version of Alice Young. Thank you to Maggie O'Kane and Victoria Brittain for sharing their stories. Thank you to Anne Edyvean who produced *My Front Line* on the radio and helped develop it further with Fiona Shaw. To Caitlin Mcleod who when I returned to the monologue some years later wanting to expand it into a longer play was brilliant at interrogating it with me. Thanks also to Madani Younis, Stewart Pringle, Deidre O'Halloran and Mark Rosenblatt who helped grow it further.

Thank you to Antho Lusambo Atangowena, who lived with us for two years and who so generously shared her story, her culture and her community with me and who is the inspiration behind Kasambayi. She has waited ten years to be given asylum in England and is still waiting.

Thanks to the readers who gave their precious time and their very thoughtful and insightful advice and helped me interrogate and question the script: Jenny Mcleish, Isabella Tree, Suze Hails, Jackie Christie,

Chelsea Bondzanga, David Kimbangyi, Juliet Benis. Also Dominic Dromgoole, Michael Nest, Kevin Fitzmaurice, and Hugh Kinsala Cunningham.

Thanks to my agent, Jennie Miller for her endless support, and thanks to the Arcola, and Leyla and Mehmet for believing in the play and providing it with a home. Thanks also to Rebecca Seeley Harris; Rowena and Quentin Seddon; Charlie Burrell; Mick and Carole Pearce; Patty and Michael Hopkins, and Damian Lewis. And finally thank you to Oscar, my amazing director, for his patience, vision and passion – and the wonderful team of hugely talented cast and creatives he gathered to bring it to life.

King Leopold's Rule in Africa by E. D. Morel

It is not enough to denounce a wrong; it is necessary to show how that wrong originates, and to put forward a practical remedy.

"The Sick Rose" by William Blake

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy heart destroy.

King Leopold's Soliloquy by Mark Twain

The Kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy that has confronted us... The only witness I have encountered in my long career that I couldn't bribe.

ACT ONE

Scene One – London. Twenty-Two Years Ago –

(Silence. A wind. **HOPE** *[nineteen, fierce, whip smart, charismatic, funny] emerges centre stage. We aren't sure how she got there. She has a sense of purpose about her. Something of the ringmaster. Something of the MC. She might smile round at us all. She clicks her fingers – skin on skin –)*

*(***HOPE** *conjures up London street sounds – and a low, compelling, beckoning drum beat.* She sways to the music, letting it into her –)*

(And now she concentrates extra hard. Clicks again – and conjures:)

*(***KASAMBAYI** *[forty five-ish passionate, quietly intelligent, courageous], drags herself onto the stage. She's tired – and heavily pregnant. She lugs all her belongings with her in plastic bags and a broken wheelie suitcase. She wears a mix of Western clothes with African cloth wrapped over.)*

* A licence to produce *Possessions* does not include a performance licence for any third-party or copyrighted recordings. Licensees should create their own.

*(**HOPE** watches **KASAMBAYI** intently, critical but with great love. Seeking to understand.)*

*(**KASAMBAYI** drags her bags to a seat. She pulls them up around her.)*

HOPE. London. The 38 bus. Twenty years ago!

So now we know where we are.

*(**KASAMBAYI** takes her African cloth and WRAPS it around her head – like a bandage – round and round – blocking out the light – then she gathers her bags around her – and leans her head – wrapped like a chrysalis – and she's asleep –)*

(The bus pulls up – pings.)

*(Another couple of late night stragglers get on the bus. **PARTY GIRL** and a young bloke in gym stuff.)*

*(**KASAMBAYI** gives a huge moan. She still has the cloth wrapped around her head.)*

BUS DRIVER. Victoria Station. Victoria Station. This bus has terminated. Everyone off please.

*(**KASAMBAYI** leans on the seat in front of her in full labour. Moaning. In agony. The **DRIVER** comes to persuade her off –)*

I'm sorry Madam. Off the bus now please.

KASAMBAYI. Je ne peux pas. I can't move. Aaahhhhggghh.

BUS DRIVER. Everyone off. We're terminating here.

PARTY GIRL. For fuck's sake. She's having a baby.

BUS DRIVER. She can't have a baby on my bus.

(Suddenly with a huge moan **KASAMBAYI***'s waters break… her contractions hit hard. She is in full labour immediately –)*

Jesus. It's the fucking Niagara Falls.

PARTY GIRL. Call an ambulance – just call an ambulance – now!

(It's all chaos – young gym bloke gets on his phone, **PARTY GIRL**, **HOPE** *and the* **BUS DRIVER** *gather round* **KASAMBAYI** *trying to help.* **HOPE** *unwraps* **KASAMBAYI***'s head –* **KASAMBAYI** *emerges from the Chrysalis.)*

Where are you from love? – Do you have anyone we can call? –

KASAMBAYI. Nobody. No one. This baby coming that's all I've got. *(She keeps repeating this and similar…)*

(She gives another huge moan –)

It's coming. I feel it – it's coming – oh Mon Dieu – Notre Père, qui es aux cieux, que ton nom soit sanctifié, que ton règne vienne, que ta volonté soit faite sur la terre comme au ciel… etc…

BUS DRIVER. Jesus –

*(***PARTY GIRL** *dives in to help. She pulls a wet swimming towel out of her bag – and a roll of toilet paper. Gym boy calls an ambulance. Over the following* **KASAMBAYI** *gives birth – assisted by the* **BUS DRIVER** *the* **PARTY GIRL** *and* **HOPE**. *They deliver the baby using a bottle of Evian – lots of wet wipes – anything they can find.)*

KASAMBAYI. Donne-nous aujourd'hui notre pain de ce jour. Pardonne-nous nos offenses. Comme nous pardonnons aussi à ceux qui nous ont offensés. Et ne

nous soumets pas à la tentation, mais délivre-nous du mal. Car c'est à toi qu'appartiennent. Le règne, la puissance et la gloire. Pour les siècles des siècles.

(With a huge push the baby is delivered by **HOPE**, *the* **PARTY GIRL** *and the* **BUS DRIVER** *on the bus seat –* **KASAMBAYI** *holds out her arms with the African cloth –* **HOPE** *places the baby into it – and* **KASAMBAYI** *wraps her and sits exhausted – the cord is still attached – a siren – the paramedics are arriving...)*

*(***PARTY GIRL** *and the* **BUS DRIVER** *give each other a hug –* **HOPE** *just stares at* **KASAMBAYI** *and the baby –)*

PARTY GIRL. She's so beautiful – well done – there you go – you're OK now –

KASAMBAYI. Hope.

PARTY GIRL. What's that?

KASAMBAYI. *(Staring into the eyes of new baby.)* Hope.

*(***HOPE** *takes the baby from* **KASAMBAYI**.*)*

HOPE. Hope Victoria Kasambayi Mabele. This is me!

*(***HOPE** *rocks her baby self.)*

My name is my story – in four words. It's exactly who I am. I'll show you. We'll start at the end – which is actually my beginning. And roots me.

Mabele is my Congolese family name. I was conceived in Congo, DCR and my Dad was called Fimi Mabele. He came from a small village out in East Congo near Goma.

He had a farm near the mines. I never met him. He was killed by soldiers. Who wanted our crops to feed themselves. Mum said he died saving her life.

Kasambayi is my Mum's name. It was my Granny's name too. All us women in the family share it. It means 'consolation'. Which daughters are – even though they're a disappointment at first because they're not sons. If I'd had a girl I would have called her Kasambayi too.

Victoria is my middle name. Because I was born at Victoria. What my Mum didn't know then was that Victoria wasn't just a station – She was a Queen – of England. Queen of the Industrial Revolution – Queen of colonisation – and her cousin was the devil, King Leopold of Belgium – who claimed the Congo for his own! But hey – it's a powerful British name to put alongside my Congolese names – and I'm a British – Congolese girl.

Hope is my first name. Because that's what I brought into the world with me and that's what my Mum wanted for me. And what I am.

> *(***HOPE** *passes her baby self back to* **KASAMBAYI**, *her mother.* **KASAMBAYI** *is helped off the bus and the stage by the* **BUS DRIVER** *and* **PARTY GIRL**.*)*

I lived up to my name for a long time. For sixteen years I was basically a good girl. But round about GCSEs this wind whipped up inside my body and it wouldn't let me be. Like a fire. Like a dance I needed to dance.

At the same time I was going through a really bad patch with Mum. It was like I was allergic to her. I couldn't do her pain anymore. I didn't want to wear her sadness.

Scene Two – London. Hackney. Council Flat. 27th Floor –

*(**KASAMBAYI** sits on the sofa and indicates the seat next to her –)*

KASAMBAYI. Yaka nazalaki kozela yo [Come. I'm waiting for you.] Sit! I've got popcorn. What do you want to watch. Rosie leant me some of her daughter's DVDs. *The Lion King*, *Matilda*, *Anastasia*?

HOPE. Rosie's daughter is six mum. I'm sixteen!

KASAMBAYI. These are classic movies. For everyone.

*(**HOPE** is circling the room. Like a caged animal. She can't sit.)*

We could watch a service with the new pastor on my phone?

*(**HOPE** goes to the little window and puts her face to it, breathes in deeply – sucking in the air –)*

What are you doing over by that window?

HOPE. Oxygenating. I can't breathe. It's summer. Why have you got the heating on?

KASAMBAYI. What's got into you today. Come and sit…

HOPE. Maya's asked me round to her house Mum. To do our homework.

KASAMBAYI. You've been at school all day. Come sit with me. Take a break.

HOPE. I need to revise. I've got exams soon.

KASAMBAYI. Why don't you call her.

*(**HOPE** hesitates, shakes her head.)*

You see your friends all week. This is time for us!

HOPE. We have SO much time for us. I want to go out.

KASAMBAYI. We can go out. We can go to church.

HOPE. Work, church. Work, church. I know it's enough for you Mum. But it's not enough for me.

KASAMBAYI. When you have had the life/ I've had.

HOPE. I know! I know you've had a really hard life. I know about your 'Hard Times'. But It's your hard times Mum, not mine.

KASAMBAYI. You don't know anything.

HOPE. And who's fault is that. You won't ever tell me –

KASAMBAYI. What kind of Mother would I be to force such stories on you.

HOPE. But you ARE forcing them on me. Without even telling them. You're so angry.

KASAMBAYI. No I'm not.

HOPE. I feel your pain. Everyone can. I'd rather you talked about it. I want you to.

KASAMBAYI. You don't know what you are asking for.

HOPE. Exactly! That's the problem isn't it! But I want to know! I'm asking…

*(***KASAMBAYI** *is about to rage, but instead with a huge strength of will, turns it inwards – turns away from* **HOPE**.*)*

You're angry now. I can feel it. I wish you'd shout at me! Shout if you want. Tell me off.

(But **KASAMBAYI** *has shut off. Gone into her carapace.)*

*(***HOPE** *stares at her frustrated.)*

HOPE. I'm going out then.

KASAMBAYI. Take the popcorn. I won't eat it. Nazwi yango mpo na yo. [I got it for you.]

*(**HOPE** turns back to us, giving up on her mother.)*

HOPE. I wish she had trusted me with the truth – cos then I wouldn't have needed to go hunting for it myself.

*(But **HOPE** is irrepressible. Nothing can hold her down for long…)*

HOPE. I needed life. The sky. The green trees. Nature.

*(She conjures and the stage floods with green light – it becomes a park. Birdsong. A young black boy, **DAVID** [sixteen], saunters/dances into the middle of it – every fibre of him alive and strong and singing –)*

That was the best summer. The summer of being sixteen.

Scene Three – A Cemetery Park, Hackney – A Few Years Before –

HOPE. Out in the park it was all velvet sky and hot recycled city breath. Our Savannah –

DAVID. There was a paddling pool and we would wade in.

HOPE. Mothers and toddlers would leave as we arrived.

DAVID. Scatter.

HOPE. We scattered them.

DAVID. Our pack.

HOPE. We were powerful and strong and this was our moment and our watering hole.

DAVID. We rolled kisses between us like dragons roll fire. That summer was ours.

(Sound effects. Sunday church bells peel out post service...and continue peeling into the next scene as –)

*(***HOPE** *looks across the stage, to see...)*

Scene Four – The Same Cemetery Park, Hackney 1900's –

*(***ALICE SEELEY HARRIS** *[Thirties, missionaries wife, dutiful, intrepid, capable, compassionate, loyal] pushes a huge old-fashioned Silver Cross Edwardian pram through an English park and takes a seat on a bench. She is heavily pregnant.)*

(Across the park comes hurrying towards her a vicar – **JOHN HARRIS** *[Forties, missionary. Old school British Colonial Patriarch. Ambitious, religious, zealous.] He is carrying a box.)*

(They beam at each other – clearly in love –)

*(***JOHN** *holds out an unwieldy box, beautifully wrapped.)*

JOHN. For you!

ALICE. John! Thank you.

(She takes it and weighs it in her hands. It's heavy –)

(Playful.) Something for baby?

*(***JOHN** *puts his hand on the gift, stopping her –)*

JOHN. Wait. Perhaps I have done this the wrong way round – I have news first –

*(***JOHN** *takes* **ALICE***'s hands. Sits her down gently, serious.)*

HOPE. I found these two in my cemetery park – still hanging out – or maybe they found me – unfinished