



Press Release

Theatre-Rites and Gregory Maqoma present

Return to the Forest

A Theatre-Rites and Factory International co-production, co-commissioned by Sadler's Wells

A magical forest comes to life in an immersive production of dance and puppetry
Choreographed by Gregory Maqoma | Directed by Sue Buckmaster



7 – 10 May, Aviva Studios, Manchester | PRESS NIGHT: Thursday 7th May 6:30pm
28 – 30 May, Sadler's Wells East | PRESS NIGHT: Thursday 28th May 6:30pm

[Download press images here](#)

“A playful, uplifting, deceptively simple dance confection” ★★★★★ *The Stage* (on *The Global Playground*)

In a celebration of heritage and our connection to the natural world, *Return to the Forest* blends dance and puppetry to create an immersive production for families and children aged 8+. Audiences are invited into a museum where precious objects are kept to be seen but never touched. But as dusk falls, the precious objects stir, seeming to call to the last remaining visitors, yearning to be free. *Return to the Forest* explores how heritage is not something to be locked away, but a living, breathing force that requires respect and care. Marking their 30th anniversary, **Theatre-Rites** reunites with award-winning South African choreographer **Gregory Maqoma** (*The Global Playground*, Manchester International Festival 2021) to deliver their signature style of experimental theatre for children.

Return to the Forest is a high-energy performance that guides audiences in promenade moving them from the museum to an enchanted forest. Through powerful movement and mesmerising

puppetry, *Return to the Forest* follows five performers out of the museum and back into nature, magically transported by precious objects – including an Ishoba, an ancient map and a Gelede mask – which are yearning for their freedom. With a surveillance camera watching at all times, the daring questors stage a heist. But can it really be one when the objects are leading the way? In a tale of curiosity and transformation, this production offers children and families a playful, thought-provoking exploration of what we value, how we protect it and who our heritage belongs to.

Return to the Forest makes its World Premiere at Aviva Studios, home of Factory International who also run the biennial Manchester International Festival, before opening in London at Sadler's Wells East.

Director of *Return to the Forest* and Artistic Director of Theatre-Rites Sue Buckmaster said, "I feel honoured to have this opportunity to co-create once more with Gregory and a brilliant collaborating team. It feels very special to be able to make an original performance which is for children and adults to share and experience together. I am super excited to combine some contemporary masquerade and puppet figure concepts with exquisite dancers. I hope the experience will offer the artists involved and the audiences who attend, a precious moment to ponder on and celebrate the importance of the interdependence of nature and human nature.

Choreographer Gregory Maqoma said, "*Return to the Forest* with Sue Buckmaster and Theatre-Rites opens a space for audiences to engage not only with culture, but with heritage and the deeper question of what still matters in the world. It is a shared journey into the forest to discover, to renew, and to learn."

Artistic Director and Chief Executive of Factory International John McGrath said, "We're thrilled to be working once again with Theatre-Rites and world-renowned choreographer Gregory Maqoma - a creative collaboration born of Manchester International Festival in 2021. Five years on, *Return to the Forest* combines their expertise to create a visually stunning, energetic and thought-provoking arts experience for all ages"

Sue Buckmaster is the Artistic Director of Theatre-Rites, a puppetry expert and the fifth generation of theatre practitioners in her family. She is known for her unique puppet whispering technique and her work is celebrated for its use of Animism. She has directed over 30 theatre and site-specific productions for Theatre-Rites including *The Welcoming Party* and *The Global Playground* (MIF 2017/2021) and *Mischief* (Sadler's Wells and Dance Touring Consortium). She also works as a mentor, dramaturg and external director and has collaborated with other companies including directing *Chotto Desh* and *Chotto Xenos* for the Akram Khan Dance Company.

Gregory Maqoma, is an internationally acclaimed dancer and choreographer. Born in Soweto, Gregory Maqoma began dancing in the late 1980s to escape political tensions. After training at Moving into Dance from 1990, he became Associate Artistic Director in 2002. He founded Vuyani Dance Theatre in 1999 while studying at PARTS in Belgium. He's collaborated with renowned artists including Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. His accolades include three-time FNB Vita Choreographer of the Year, 2002 Standard Bank Young Artist Award, 2012 Tunkie Award for Leadership in Dance, and France's Chevalier de L'ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2017).

Theatre-Rites is an award-winning leader in experimental theatre for children, recognised nationally and internationally for its imaginative touring and site responsive productions. The company has created over 30 theatre-based and immersive productions for children and families in the UK and internationally. Committed to intercultural collaboration and working across disciplines, Theatre-Rites presents children with striking, contemporary imagery while placing audiences at the heart of each experience to foster a sense of agency. Notable productions include *Mischief* (TMA Award, Achievement in Dance), *Houseworks*, *The Lost and Moated Land*, *Journey of a Refugee* (ETTIE Award; OFFIE Award), *Zoe's Peculiar Journey Through Time*, and *Paradise*. *Theatre-Rites Puppets, Objects & Sites* (published 2021) was written by Dr Sue Buckmaster and Dr Liam Jarvis.

Factory International is the organisation behind Manchester International Festival and the city's landmark cultural space, Aviva Studios. Building on the legacy of Manchester International Festival, Factory International commissions, produces and presents a year-round programme of original creative work and special events at Aviva Studios, online, and internationally through its network of

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Aviva Studios
Water Street, Manchester M3 4JQ
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co-commissioners and partners. Ultra-flexible in design, Aviva Studios is based around large, open, adaptable spaces that can be constantly reconfigured, creating a unique canvas to make, explore and experiment and offering audiences the broadest range of art forms - from major exhibitions and concerts to intimate performances and immersive experiences. Running every other year, the city-wide Manchester International Festival is one of the world's leading arts festivals, and the first to be entirely focused on the commissioning and producing of ambitious new work.

ENDS

Running Time: 1 hour 30 mins (no interval) | Suitable for ages 8+

[Download press images here](#)

Listings information

7 – 10 May

Factory International

Press Night Thursday 7 May, 6.30pm

Aviva Studios, Water St, Manchester M3 4JQ

11am | 8 (schools), 10 (relaxed)

2:30pm | 9, 10 (audio described)

6:30pm | 7, 8, 9

£25 (Band A) - £12.50 (Children)

School Groups: £10 per student (1 free teacher per 10 students)

Limited Affordable Tickets Available

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28 – 30 May

Sadler's Wells East

101 Carpenters Rd, Stratford Cross, London E20 2AR

2pm | 28, 29, 30

6.30pm | 28, 29, 30

£18 (Adults) - £12 (Under 16s)

Discounts Available: Groups, Access, Members, Barclays Dance Pass, Get into Dance

sadlerswells.com/your-visit/sadlers-wells-east/

Company information

Director Sue Buckmaster

Choreographer Gregory Maqoma

Co-composers and sound designers: Frank Moon and Domenico Angarano

Set designer Jean Chan

Lighting designer Guy Hoare

Costume designer Kinnetia Isidore

Assistant choreographer Miguel Altunaga

Production manager Gareth Howells

Puppetry designers Alison Duddle, Naomi Oppenheim and Sue Buckmaster with Gelede mask made in collaboration with Bunmi Augsto

Cast

Xolisile Bongwana

Natnael Dawit

Mayowa Ogunnaiké

Simon Palmer

Teele Uustani

Information about the precious objects in the Museum

An Ishoba: a ceremonial stick, commonly carried and used by traditional healers or Sangomas in

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South Africa. A theatrical version has been created for the production by Gregory Maqoma's brother Langa Maqoma who is a Healer, based on the Ishobas he uses.

An Ancient Map of a green forest: inspired by a 14th Century Mappa Mundi, created by Naomi Oppenheim and Sue Buckmaster for the production.

Gelede Mask: traditionally a wooden headdress from the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Benin. A theatrical version has been created by visual artist Bumni Agosto, designer and maker Alison Duddle with Sue Buckmaster inspired by a traditional Gelede mask.

Calabash: often found in tropical Africa, South America and some parts of Asia. The calabashes in the production are being reused from a previous Theatre-Rites' collaboration with a South American musician.

A Knotted Heart: a joint creative impulse between designer Jean Chan and Sue Buckmaster. Made by Jean and influenced and inspired by her Chinese heritage and their joint research into sacred knots and silk thread weaving in China and Japan.

Notes to Editors

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About Theatre-Rites

Theatre-Rites is an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation and field leader in the creation of beautiful and thought-provoking theatre for children which often explores complex issues such as the refugee situation, the climate crisis, the financial crisis and neuroscience.

Celebrated for their use of puppetry under the leadership of puppetry expert Dr. Sue Buckmaster they are acclaimed nationally and internationally. They create small and mid-scale touring productions and immersive, site-responsive productions that stir the imagination and stimulate thought and have attracted high-profile commissioners including Schauspielhaus Bochum, Manchester International Festival, Sadler's Wells, The Barbican, the Salzburg Festival and the Ruhrtriennale Festival.

The company also offer a training and development programme and promote and celebrate the artform of puppetry and object animation.

About Factory International

Factory International is the organisation behind Manchester International Festival and the city's landmark cultural space, Aviva Studios. Factory International commissions, produces and presents a year-round programme of original creative work and special events at Aviva Studios, online, and internationally through its network of co-commissioners and partners. It also stages the city-wide Manchester International Festival (MIF) every other year.

Factory International builds on the legacy of Manchester International Festival, one of the world's leading arts festivals, and the first to be entirely focused on the commissioning and producing of ambitious new work. Staged every two years in Manchester since 2007, world-renowned artists from different art forms and backgrounds create dynamic, innovative and forward-thinking new work in venues and spaces across Greater Manchester.

Aviva Studios was designed by the world-leading practice Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), with Ellen van Loon as lead architect – their first major public building in the UK. Its development was led by Manchester City Council, with backing from HM Government and National Lottery funding from Arts Council England.

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Ultra-flexible in design, the building is based around large, open, adaptable spaces that can be constantly reconfigured, enabling artists to develop and create large-scale work of invention and ambition of a kind not seen anywhere else in the world. A unique canvas to make, explore and experiment, audiences can enjoy the broadest range of art forms - from major exhibitions and concerts to intimate performances and immersive experiences.

Factory International plays an important role in the lives of Greater Manchester residents, bringing jobs, skills, training and creative opportunities. Through the Factory Academy, Factory International is training the creative workforce of the future, while its pioneering creative engagement and artist development programmes create year-round opportunities for local people to get involved, from participating in flagship commissions to shaping the organisation through involvement in its public forums.

Factory International is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.

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About Sadler's Wells

Sadler's Wells is a world-leading dance organisation. We create and share dance that inspires us all. Our acclaimed year-round programme spans dance of every kind, from contemporary to flamenco, Bollywood to ballet, salsa to street dance and tango to tap.

Each year, over half a million people visit our four theatres - Sadler's Wells Theatre, Sadler's Wells East, Lilian Baylis Studio and Peacock Theatre. Millions more attend our touring productions nationally and internationally or explore our digital platforms, including Sadler's Wells Digital Stage. Sadler's Wells East - In 2025 we opened a fourth London venue in Stratford's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Sadler's Wells East is home to a 550-seat mid-scale theatre, as well as facilities for the Rose Choreographic School and Academy Breakin' Convention, which provides Hip Hop education to talented young people aged between 16-19.

Supporting artists - Supporting artists is at the heart of our work. We have Associate Artists and companies, which nurture some of the most exciting talent working in dance today. We host the National Youth Dance Company, which draws together some of the brightest young dancers from across the country. Sadler's Wells Breakin' Convention runs professional development programmes to champion and develop the world's best hip hop artists, as well as producing, programming and touring groundbreaking hip hop performances. Within Sadler's Wells East are six world-class dance studios, vital facilities which offer dancemakers time and space to train, create and rehearse productions in house.

Furthering the art form - We commission, produce and present more dance than any other organisation in the world. Over the last 20 years, we have helped to bring more than 200 new dance works to the stage, embracing both the popular and the unknown. Our acclaimed productions tour the world and have reached audiences of more than two million in over 50 countries. We also host the Rose International Dance Prize, a biannual award that celebrates the best new choreographers on the global stage.

Transforming lives through dance - Around 30,000 people take part in our learning and engagement programmes every year. We support schools local to our theatres in Islington and Stratford, designing experiences with children and young people to watch, explore and critically engage with the arts. We also run Company of Elders, a resident performance company of dancers aged over 60 who rehearse with renowned artists to make new work for public performances locally, nationally and internationally. Community engagement is essential to what we do. At Sadler's Wells East, which is open throughout the day, participatory spaces like The Dance Floor are situated at the heart of the building, offering lunchtime classes and other free activities for the local community.

We believe in the transformative power of dance, for artists, audiences, and communities. As the national platform for dance, we make space for artists from around the world to create new work and offer audiences the opportunity to see the best productions being made today.

Sadler's Wells is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.

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About Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. Our vision, set out in our strategy *Let's Create*, is that by 2030, we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish, and where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. Between 2023 and 2026 we will have invested over £467 million of public money from Government, alongside an estimated £250 million each year from The National Lottery, to help ensure that people in every part of the country have access to culture and creativity in the places where they live. Until Autumn 2025, the National Lottery is celebrating its 30th anniversary of supporting good causes in the United Kingdom: since the first draw was held in 1994, it has raised £49 billion and awarded more than 690,000 individual grants. Visit [our website](#) to learn more about our work.

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