

Je suis un voleur

I Am a Thief · Fabrice Murgia and Loutfi Chama

NEW THEATRE PRODUCTION

ARTARA



Loutfi as a child

Je suis un voleur

Je suis un voleur (*I Am a Thief*) starts from the life of Loutfi Chama: a childhood spent in institutions, years in detention, then life outside the walls. Present on stage, he works with Fabrice Murgia on a theatrical form built from his memories and his own words.

The project questions how institutions and the gaze of others shape an identity. It also explores how hard it is to find one's place in a society one has long been kept apart from.

"I am a thief."

The words on the sign that Loutfi, aged five, was made to wear around his neck in front of the other children.



Loutfi's journey

Born in 1981 in Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, Loutfi first grew up in Anderlecht. After his father's death, he was placed in the Préventorium de Biez at the age of two and a half, together with his sister and brother. Both of them later returned to their mother; he remained in care. Until he came of age, he went through several institutions, including spells in IPPJ youth detention centres.

In his account, those years are marked by power struggles, humiliation and violence, but also by a few kind figures. At five, after taking a banana from the boarding school kitchen, he recalls being forced to kneel in front of the other children with a sign around his neck reading "I am a thief". That sentence gives the show its title. It defines a child by his act and assigns him an identity.

As an adult, thefts, armed robberies and prison terms followed one another. Life outside prison then meant learning other ways of relating to people, and facing paperwork and the codes of the working world. Along the way he trained in gardening and youth work, and held several jobs. Freedom does not immediately end the habits and fears acquired in confinement.

How the project began

Loutfi met Julie Daliers through a theatre project in prison. She went on to support him through his administrative steps and introduced him to theatre. Over the years, the wish to tell his story on stage took shape. He then came to Fabrice Murgia for help in building this project.

The first meetings made it possible to revisit this material with Loutfi, at his own pace, leaving room for silences and for the gaps in memory.





The questions the show raises

Je suis un voleur offers an in-depth reflection on the path of Loutfi Chama, placed in care from the age of two and a half before experiencing prison as an adult. Four main threads run through it in very concrete terms.

1 How violence is made, and the weight of a label

The very title of the piece comes from a founding trauma: at five or six, accused of stealing a banana in an institution, Loutfi was punished by having to wear a cardboard sign around his neck reading "I am a thief".

- **The self-fulfilling prophecy.** The piece shows how an institution meant to protect ends up assigning a criminal identity to a child. Treated as guilty and deprived of affection, the child internalises the role.
- **The institutional spiral.** From care homes to closed institutions for minors, the violence endured (humiliation, isolation, abuse) breeds violence in return. As the review in the Belgian daily *Le Soir* points out, the story shows how the failures of the State and prison overcrowding (notably at Forest prison in Belgium) produce reoffending instead of preventing it.

2 Integration rather than "reintegration"

The word "reintegration" is deliberately questioned throughout the project, because it assumes there was a successful integration in the first place.

- **No initial bearings.** Having grown up behind walls since early childhood, Loutfi Chama never knew ordinary life or the social codes of the free world.
- **Alone in the face of norms.** In the book, he describes the feeling of being "like a wolf strayed from its pack, like a terribly lonely tightrope walker". The piece questions the absurdity of asking someone to "readjust" to a society they have always been kept apart from.

3 The vertigo of freedom and life “outside”

Leaving prison does not mean being free straight away. The show explores the abrupt and anxious transition from the total control of prison to autonomy.

— **Fear of the ordinary world.** After years shaped by imposed schedules, locked doors and the back-and-forth between the street and the cell, everyday life “outside” becomes a source of anxiety.

4 Testimony as an act of emancipation

The very genesis of the show answers an essential question: how do you take back power over your own story?

— **Speaking out on stage.** This is neither a trial nor a plea, but a crossing. Going on stage allows Loutfi Chama to step out of invisibility, to turn his flaws into artistic material and, at last, to play his own role rather than the one society had imposed on him.





BUILDING A FORM WITH LOUTFI

The piece develops through dialogue between Loutfi and Fabrice Murgia. Loutfi brings his experience and takes part in the choices that shape how he is represented. The directing work consists in making his words shareable, without reducing them to a reintegration story or a string of biographical events.

Memory comes in fragments. The work on stage starts from this discontinuity to explore the different ages of Loutfi's life and the roles he took on to survive. Humour, offbeat moments and moments of sharing have their place alongside the episodes of violence. They belong to his way of telling and to his wish to pass things on.

A SPACE SHARED WITH THE AUDIENCE

The staging research explores a bare space, the use of image and sound, and the motifs of confinement: doors, walls, corridors and windows. These elements are seen as ways of bringing memories to the surface and of working on the relationship between reality and representation.

The director's working note of May 2026 proposes bringing audience members close to Loutfi, seated around tables in a shared space. This approach shifts the usual face-to-face relationship between stage and auditorium. Physical proximity, listening and the circulation of speech become part of the research.

EVERYONE'S PLACE IN THE CREATION

Staging this story carries a responsibility: choosing what will be shown, what will be shifted or left in silence. Fabrice Murgia questions how to exercise this role without reproducing the relations of domination Loutfi has known. The process must allow Loutfi to discuss proposals, to refuse certain forms and to keep parts of his experience to himself.

The aim is to create the conditions for an encounter with the audience, in which Loutfi can be heard beyond the categories that have marked his life. The theatre becomes a place where his words are worked on and where audience members can question the way they look at others.

Credits

DIRECTION AND WRITING
Fabrice Murgia

BASED ON THE TESTIMONY OF
Loutfi Chama

WITH
Loutfi Chama
Naïm Bakhtiar
Emilienne Tempels

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
Vladimir Steyaert

SOUND DESIGN
Maxime Glaude

LIGHTING AND VIDEO DESIGN
Giacinto Caponio

VISUAL DESIGN, COSTUMES AND PROPS
Marie Hélène Balau

SCREEN PRINTING
Catherine Tilmant and Sophie Lestrate

SOUND TECHNICIAN
Célia Naver

LIGHTING TECHNICIAN
Marc Defrise

STAGE MANAGER
Margot Ruelle

RESEARCH AND EXPERTISE
Juliette Béghin
Cedric Tolley
Socio-political research unit of Bruxelles Laïque

GUARDIAN ANGEL
Julie Daliers

ARTISTIC ADVICE
Jean-Louis Colinet

PRODUCTION
Asbl Artara / Hélène Dubois

CO-PRODUCTION
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