

OMOS

Andrea Baker

Rhys Hollis

Divine Tasinda

Kheanna Walker

Directed by Rhys Hollis

A moving image project that pays homage to Scotland's untold Black history, and celebrates Black and Black LGBTQ excellence and performance in Scotland.

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#OMOSproject

Exhibition on view:

3 September - 2 October 2022

Royal Scottish Academy

The Mound, Edinburgh

royal.scottishacademy.org

ABOUT OMOS

OMOS is a moving image project that pays homage to Scotland's untold Black history and celebrates Black and Black LGBTQ excellence and performance in Scotland.

The artwork is filmed in Puck's Glen and Stirling Castle and created collaboratively by a group of award-winning artists: cabaret performer Rhys Hollis (also known as Rhys's Pieces), mezzo soprano Andrea Baker, dancer Divine Tasinda and pole artist Kheanna Walker. The film is inspired partly by the format of LGBTQ cabaret and each artist has used their unique skills and perspective to create a solo performance for the film.

With performance styles ranging from the gritty alternative drag art scene to powerful mezzo soprano singing, OMOS is a proud and bold celebration of the Black experience. Rhys Hollis, Andrea Baker, Divine Tasinda and Kheanna Walker journey through the magical surroundings of Puck's Glen, performing amongst waterfalls and a stunning forest, until arriving at the Great Hall of Stirling Castle, in homage to untold Black history. Throughout the moving image artwork, they take up space and reclaim that history. They perform their own work in Puck's Glen and Stirling Castle, and instead of replicating the past, they make their own choices. Black British performers are celebrated, as they draw on the past, look to the future and shine a light upon Black performance today.

OMOS pays homage to a historical performance given to King James VI of Scotland with a little-known story, alongside connections between Puck's Glen and Stirling Castle and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the play, a group of performers rehearse in a forest, where they meet Puck, before they eventually perform for the royals at the palace. Puck's Glen, with its magical forest and waterfalls, is named after Puck from the play. In 1594, a performance was given to King James VI of Scotland and his family at Stirling Castle. The original plan was for a lion to pull a chariot through the Great Hall. However, organisers were concerned that the lion would frighten guests and it was removed. Just one year later, and possibly inspired by this event, William Shakespeare included a joke about royals being scared by a performance featuring a lion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However, there is an often untold Black history at the heart of this. When the lion was removed from Stirling Castle, an unnamed Black man pulled the chariot

instead - one of a number of Black people who featured in performances at the Scottish court.

The name OMOS was originally an acronym for the phrase 'O monstrous! O strange!', a quote from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As the project developed, this phrase has been morphed to stand for 'Our Movements, Our Stories'. The film has an ambiguous title of solely 'OMOS'.

BLACK PERFORMANCE TODAY

Drawing on the past and looking to the future, this project pays homage to the history of Black people featuring in performances at the Scottish royal courts, whilst focusing on the excellence in Black and Black LGBTQ performance today. Inspired by cabaret, where solo artists present their own work in a variety showcase, each artist presents a solo performance in Puck's Glen and Stirling Castle. Each performance is an artwork in its own right, as well as an integral part of OMOS as a whole.

Divine Tasinda presents a dance piece that is rooted in the natural environment, responding to the vibrations of the forest and showcasing an inner journey of both turbulence and tenaciousness. *'My method is to understand the stories of the people the project explores, and then use this inspiration to create an emotional movement style to tell a story with my body, and celebrate performance today.'*

Divine is a Glasgow-based dancer/choreographer trained in Hip hop, Afro, Dancehall, Commercial and Experimental. Recent projects including the solo dance video *We Dance Our History* commissioned by Project X 2020, dancer in *Grin* by V/DA at DancelInternational Glasgow, choreographer for *Kid X* at *Take Me Somewhere*, dancer for *Them*, National Theatre of Scotland (all Tramway 2019).

Rhys Hollis presents a drag spoken word act that interrogates the oppressive conditions that Black people continue to endure, and defiantly shines a light on the magic that can flourish despite this. *'I see this project as a form of taking back power by highlighting the Black excellence of performers in Scotland. The performers take up space on their own terms, celebrating the lineage of Black people in the UK, and our brilliance and creativity.'*

Rhys (also known as Rhys's Pieces) is a cabaret performer and lead artist directing the project, as well as being one of the performers in the film. Rhys Hollis is described as a one-person cabaret troupe; they are a performance artist dancer, rapper, lip-syncer, cabaret host, genderbending drag artist and burlesque act. They were crowned 2018's LipSync 1000 Champion beating over 100 other cabaret drag artists to take the prize. In 2019 they were awarded the title of best Variety Act by QX magazine. They are a member of the legendary LipSinkers group, and host cabaret nights across the UK, including their own creation, Queefy Cabaret.

Kheanna Walker presents a pole performance with a magical fairy-like quality echoing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, inspired by how pole dance has helped Kheanna become more confident in her own skin. Her piece is a celebration of Blackness, femininity and being 'unapologetic for who we are.' 'I think it's important to see Black artists occupying spaces that were once used to dehumanise them. It's important to acknowledge the history but it's also important to show our strength and resilience because that is what we are. Representation of Black artists in spaces is essential, because we have been misrepresented and silenced far too much in history, so it's important that our artistry and talents are seen.'

Kheanna is an international pole dancer, choreographer and trainer based in Glasgow. Alongside working as a trainer, she is also the Creative Lead at a global polewear brand, Pole Junkie, and hosts her own podcast 'Queens of Hustle'. Kheanna started her pole dancing journey in 2015 in her hometown of Montreal, Canada. Since then, she has competed and won multiple awards in Australia and has taught classes and workshops in multiple countries. She has also had the pleasure of judging several competitions in the UK.

Andrea Baker presents an acapella performance of a song about Black joy. Performed in the Great Hall of Stirling Castle, where the historical performance that *OMOS* pays homage to took place, the song reclaims the site and occupies it with the power of Black expression. Following the song, all the performers join together to mark this reclamation. These moments of joy are powerful, but throughout there is a sense of pain beneath the surface. 'I hope to bring a new view of the history of Black people in Scotland. I will also be bringing my experience as a queer woman to the project. A lot of the

Black female singers in history identified as bisexual. These are women who lived their truths, I want to be part of this continued artistic discourse.'

Andrea is a mezzo soprano internationally renowned for her 'enchantingly powerful' performances (Das Orchester) and hailed as having 'stupendous and heartrending' talent (Bild Zeitung). In addition to her celebrated work on the opera stage, she is the creator and producer of the award-winning, one-woman show *Sing Sistah Sing!* - a joyous, soulful celebration of the African American female voice. Self-written and self-produced, this ground-breaking show has toured to sold-out audiences around the world, and was included in the digital 2020 Edinburgh International Festival. As a broadcaster and documentary maker she can be heard across the BBC, including on Radio Scotland, Radio 4, and on Radio 3's Sounds Connected.

The project was made possible with a team of Black creatives:

Ambroise of Paradax Period filmed *OMOS*. Ambroise is a Glasgow-based cinematographer, editor, colourist and director experienced in working with performers. 2021 and 2022 projects include artistic collaborations seen at Dance International Glasgow, Glasgow International, Take Me Somewhere Festival... Ambroise worked closely with Rhys since 2020 to develop the cinematography for the film.

Xana created music for Divine and Kheanna's performances, as well as sound design for the film. Xana is a freestyle live loop musician, sound artist, vibrational sound designer, archival audio producer, audio researcher, spatial installation artist and theatremaker, who deconstructs words to make improvisational performances and composes scores for spaces through Xana's genres orchestral noise and thicc bass.

Washington Gwande was photographer for the project and produced portraits of each artist. Washington is an Edinburgh-based portrait and event photographer with a degree in professional photography acquired at Edinburgh College Washington has worked closely with Grayling Capital, Black & Barn, Celsius Plumbing and Crafty Connoisseur.

SCOTLAND'S CONNECTION TO SHAKESPEARE

The two locations that *OMOS* was filmed in - Puck's Glen and Stirling Castle - both have a connection to William Shakespeare's famous play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the play, a group of performers called the Mechanicals are rehearsing a play in a forest. A mischievous fairy called Puck casts a spell on one of the group and turns his head into a donkey's head. As you walk through the forest and past waterfalls in Puck's Glen you can see how the magical atmosphere inspired it to be named after Puck - it feels like a place where fantastical things happen.

The play that the Mechanicals are preparing is due to be performed at the royal palace. Snout, a member of the group, is cast as a lion but says 'Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?' He expresses worry that the royals would be scared of a lion (whilst also stereotyping women). It is thought that this joke - about royals being scared of a lion - could reference an event that took place at Stirling Castle in the 16th century.

To celebrate the baptism of Prince Henry in 1594 a masque was produced at Stirling Castle - a type of play popular with royals at the time. William Fowler, who wrote the masque, produced a written account of the event. As part of the masque a lion was going to pull a chariot through the castle's Great Hall but it was cancelled as it may have 'brought some fear' to the royal guests. Fowler's account was published in London, a year before Shakespeare began writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This could be what Shakespeare was referencing when Snout worries about performing as a lion to the royals in the play.¹

1. <https://blog.historicenvironment.scot/2019/04/Shakespeare-in-Scotland/>

BLACK PEOPLE IN PERFORMANCE IN SCOTLAND

That is only part of the story. It is less commonly known that instead of having a lion pull the chariot through the Great Hall, an unnamed Black man was charged with pulling the chariot into the hall. Below, Fowler describes the scene, naming the man as a 'Black-Moore' as Black people were described at the time.

The chariot was very heavy and had a number of costumed women on it, and so would not have been able to be pulled by one person. Fowler described how it had been visually altered so it looked like the Black man was taking the full weight of it, whilst wearing an outfit covered in gold chains:

there came into the sight of them all, a Black-Moore, drawing (as it seemed to the beholders) a triumphal Charlot (and before it, the melodious noise of trumpets and Howboyes [oboes]) which Chariot entered the Hall, the motion of the whole frame (which was twelve foot long, and seven foot broad) was so artificial within it selfe, that it appeared to be drawn in, only by the strength of a Moore, which was very richly attired, his traices (decorative clothing or accessories) were great chaines of pure gold.²

There is no further record of the man who pulled the chariot. There was a tradition of Black people paid to perform in Scottish courts, and he may have been similarly employed.

He may have also appeared in an event that same year called the Convoy of Moors³, another example of the treatment of Black people as an 'exotic' entertainment. This was part of a ceremony in Edinburgh in 1590 to mark Anne of Denmark being crowned queen consort of Scotland. The convoy involved an African man leading a group of white people whose faces were painted black - they were in blackface. They walked in front of Anne of Denmark's coach, who was also present at the masque at Stirling Castle.

2. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A01101.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

3. Silenced voices/speaking bodies: female performance and cultural agency in the court of Anne of Denmark by Clare McManus. Page 56 (PDF Page 66) http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4220/1/WRAP_THESIS_McManus_1997.pdf

Academic Mairi Cowan has researched Black people at the Scottish royal courts in the 1500s, about one hundred years before the events at Stirling Castle⁴. She describes that there were a number of Africans in Scottish courts: 'these people were actually slaves brought to Scotland' to 'be kept around the court as entertainers, and as unusual people.' They were often 'identified as Moors - including Peter the Moor; the Moor Taubroner; the Moor Lasses; the Black Ladies; Helen Moor and Margaret Moor.' They were paid and 'their wages were more than a typical Scot who worked at the court would make'.

This history is a reminder that Black people have been part of British life for hundreds of years. Whilst researchers emphasise that Black people in the royal courts were valued and paid handsomely, this is not a friendly story nor a positive circumstance. The conditions in which they and their ancestors were brought to the country - and the inhumane ways in which they were named and made to perform as 'exotic' and 'unusual' entertainment - must not be forgotten. In 1603, Shakespeare published *Othello*, a play whose central character is a Black man. Whilst Black people were employed as entertainers in the royal courts, Shakespeare's *Othello* was played by a white actor painting his face black - performing in blackface. This practice - which turns Black people into something to be imitated, rather than celebrating a Black actor - has a long history.

The events in this text may have happened in the past, including hundreds of years ago, but they are not irrelevant today - they inform us of the history of Scotland, and are part of a long and ongoing struggle for the rights and liberation of Black people and people of colour in Scotland, the UK and around the world.

Bringing us back to 2022 - *OMOS* showcases Black performers living and working in Scotland and UK today and celebrates their agency, talent and excellence.

4. Moors at the Court of James IV, King of Scots, a lecture by Mairi Cowan
<https://www.medievalists.net/2013/03/moors-at-the-court-of-james-iv-king-of-scots/>

FILM CREDITS

Director
Rhys Hollis

Featuring
in order of appearance
Divine Tasinda
Rhys Hollis
Kheanna Walker
Andrea Baker

Director of Photography
Editor
Ambroise Leclerc

Performance music
Sound design
Xana

Score
Asher Fynn

Costume
Lada Sotirova
Jivomir Domoustchiev
Truffle Pig Wigs

Make-up
Cast
Jay Park

Camera Assistants
Daniel Franklin
Daniel Cook

Sound Recordist
Foley Artist
Audio Mastering
David McKeitch

Runner
Akiko Kobayashi

Photographer
Runner
Washington Gwande

Colour grade
Dangerous Studio

Sound design
Composition by Xana. With
performance by Andrea Baker.
Music
Divine's performance music
Composition by, lyrics by,
performed by and courtesy of
Xana.

Kheanna's performance music
Composition by Xana; Lyrics
by and performed by Kheanna
Walker;
Courtesy of Xana, Kheanna
Walker.

'Lion's Roar'
Lyrics by Rhys Hollis with
adaptations by Xana;
Composition by Aidan Teplitzky;
Performed by Andrea Baker;
Courtesy of Rhys Hollis, Aidan
Teplitzky.

Produced by

POLLYANNA

Producer
Adam Castle

Producing Consultant
Rhys Hollis

Production Coordinators
Annlouise Butt
Gabriel Bagnaschi

POLLYANNA

OMOS is produced by Pollyanna. Pollyanna has produced queer art and culture in Scotland since 2015. The annual cabaret shows at Edinburgh Festival Fringe have hosted over 250 performance and been described as 'a bona fide asset to the Fringe' **** by the Scotsman and 'the only queer collective you want to see this Fringe' ***** Edinburgh Festivals Magazine. Pollyanna is produced by Icky Arts CIC, also producers of Edinburgh Artists' Moving Image Festival, celebrating video art and experimental film. Pollyanna is working with Creative Informatics, The University of Edinburgh for a new project in 2022 and 2023.

WORKSHOPS

The Origins of Storytelling (Movement Workshop)

Led by Briana Pegado
3 September, 10am-12pm | St Cecilia's Hall, Edinburgh

Lipsyncing 101

Led by Rhys Hollis
3 September, 12:15-2.15pm | St Cecilia's Hall, Edinburgh

Sing Sister Sing Workshop on the History of Gospel and Jazz Music

Led by Andrea Baker
3 September, 2:30-3:30pm | St Cecilia's Hall, Edinburgh

The Origins of Storytelling (Creative Writing Workshop)

Led by Briana Pegado
24 September, 2-4pm | Fruitmarket, Edinburgh

All workshops are free but ticketed.

To book visit royal.scottishacademy/events or scan QR code below.



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Produced by



Funded by



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