

THE WORD

The Word Magazine is Belgium's leading English-speaking free media platform, documenting and championing the best in neighborhood living, music and art. Published every two months, the magazine is distributed in over 500 distribution points across the country.



Gökhan Girginol

You're a man of many talents – from music and slam poetry to the visual arts – yet you've attracted the most attention for your acting skills. Do you have a preference in terms of mediums?

It's difficult to say, but maybe theatre is in my blood. According to my mother I was born very theatrically: blue, alien-like, rather painfully. I've always enjoyed triggering people, in creating and

exchanging energies, which then becomes theatre. It can be a grueling job, boxing yourself up in a dark room for hours on end, repeating the same lines. On the other hand, it is just as rewarding and insightful an experience. Theatre is all about discovering yourself, other dimensions, worlds, people, energies, colors. It's about constant learning, communicating a message, and being completely present in the moment. My appreciation with cinema came a bit later – with *Problemski Hotel*, my first proper feature role– when I realized that I could channel some of my thoughts and sentiments on everyday realities through my character, where I could really work on character-building, creating a persona that the audience really believed in. The world of cinema is larger and more transcendental than theatre – it's reach is much more global – so I feel that acting here should be about transmitting my understanding on the “meaning” of acting, and communicating my truths to as many people as possible. I'm careful not to lose myself in my art, by trying to stay as grounded as possible, being aware of what I know and still need to learn. It's all about being aware of timing, focus and discipline.

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What are your thoughts and impressions on the Belgian cinema scene?

I don't know if I'm fully part of the scene, but my impression is that Belgium – and specifically Flanders – is currently establishing itself in the global film industry, with its own style and aesthetic. Flemish actors are increasingly being sought out by Hollywood for instance. There's also more opportunities for actors of color to find work now. So the once rather static and inaccessible Belgian scene is thankfully shifting into something more representative of its society, with attention being paid on portraying all characters authentically and with credibility. Unfortunately, there's still an industry for shoddy stereotyping and clichés. Personally, this can range from being reduced to a simplistic “face” of the immigrant youth from the ghetto, to not being selected because my blue eyes and blonde hair don't fit the Turkish stereotype. Belgian cinema still has a long way to go in that regard, especially in comparison to Holland or Germany. Then again, the key is not letting institutional structures or barriers stop you. It's too easy to blame your misgivings on your identity or background – sure these shape your opportunities, but they don't determine them either.

You're very active in community work, especially with youths – such as your workshops in Limburg, or your project Robin Hassan Hood. Why do you feel it's so important to give back, and more importantly to bring art into their lives?

Genk has a beautifully rich yet untold story: a strong working class, a mining legacy, all made up of various origins living together. There have been some changes since the industries closed down, yet the town's still unique in itself. Perhaps I'm somewhat romanticizing Genk, but I feel that there's peace and unity between its heterogeneous population. One clear development is that youths in Genk are increasingly demanding recognition of their place in this world. This is largely thanks to our current digital age opening up access to information, like social media, which I didn't have growing up. What I did have was a local youth center, with an authoritative role model, who we all respected and turned to for guidance. This sense of brotherhood is something that I always carry with me. So when I was faced with youths seeking guidance, a role model, I embraced it. But it's a learning process, finding a balance between giving and self-care. For example, Robin Hassan Hood was a personal project where I gathered and directed a thirty-strong performance troupe made up primarily of inexperienced yet enthusiastic youths from Genk, and some professionals. It was such a rewarding experience which I don't regret at all, but at the same time a pretty draining one. There's a huge responsibility involved in teaching or guiding. I had to drop off the radar

afterwards and work on myself for a while. But, at the end of the day, we give because we want to give, not because we want to receive – and we can also only give if we're completely in balance and aware of our limits.

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What is it then exactly that you're trying to give back to the community?

I want to embolden people in their hopes, and open their eyes to new possibilities. Theatre and the arts belong to everyone – a point that doesn't get made enough. My intention is not to be the voice of the working class for instance, but rather to be the "voice of the voice" – instead of pretending to be a representative for my community, to provide them with the resources and tools of empowerment. I want to encourage fearlessness, in the sense of embracing your weaknesses and inner shikari, and not standing still due to fear. We're all rebels, in one way or another, rebelling against ourselves and our pre-assigned labels and limitations. If you're able to look into yourself as well as out of yourself and achieve self-awareness, everything then becomes slightly easier to deal with.

Gökhan is a Belgo-Turkish actor with a strong inclination for the arts. Born and raised in Genk, he pursued formal training at the Ritcs in Brussels going on to climb his way up the Belgian movie scene with highly acclaimed films such as Hotel Problemski. He is currently involved in two TV series, a national tour of the play Nachtelijk Symposium as well as a string of community-based projects.