

THEATRE COPRODUCTION

LE VOYAGE DE LA VÉNUS NOIRE

*THE VOYAGE OF THE
SABLE VENUS*

ALICE DIOP

Text by Robin Coste Lewis



FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

18 – 21 May
Schauspielhaus Wien

Sable Venus – have we seen these two words together before? French film director Alice Diop’s very first feature film, *Saint Omer*, was already rewarded with the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival. She now presents her first work for theatre, which is based on a revolutionary text. It is an essay by American poet Robin Coste Lewis that turns the entire Western history of art upside down, reading it from the utterly new perspective of the black female figure. Inspired by Lewis’ approach, Diop takes the audience on a fascinating journey. In a radically simple theatrical set up that comprises only a table, her own body and the text, what emerges is a pictorial stream that goes beyond all imagination. It is a mind-changing theatre experience, or as the text says: ‘*The Voyage of the Sable Venus* is an epic written in one line.’

Language
French

Surtitles
German, English

Duration
70 mins


barrier-free access

Q&A
19 May, following
the performance

Filmscreening

Fragments for Venus (2025) by Alice Diop following all performances, admission free!

The Voyage of the Sable Venus is an epic written in one line.

Concept, performance Alice Diop **Text** Robin Coste Lewis **Translation, Artistic collaboration** Nicholas Elliott **Outside Eye** Thierry Thieû Niang **Light design** Marie-Christine Soma **Costumes** LEMAIRE **Rehearsal direction** Léa Boulblil **Props design, Stage management** Lucie Basolet **Translation review** Jean-Philippe Tessé **Stage design, Technics, Production** the team of MC93 **Lighting control** Pascal Alidra Biron **Audio direction** Emmanuelle Loève **Translation surtitles** German: Odile Kennel, English: Original contribution by Robin Coste Lewis **Surtitles** Nicholas Elliott

Production MC93 – Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis, Festival d'Automne à Paris
Coproduction Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna, Comédie de Genève, La Comédie de Valence – CDN Drôme-Ardèche, Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels), Le Rideau de Bruxelles, Centre Dramatique National Orléans – Centre-Val de Loire, MansA – Maison des Mondes Africains (Paris)

executed by the team of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

World Premiere November 2025, Festival d'Automne à Paris (MC93 – Maison de la Culture)

Performance rights The text by Robin Coste Lewis, in its French translation, was published by Éditions Gallimard in November 2025.

PIERCED AND TRANSFORMED

ALICE DIOP ON *THE VOYAGE OF THE SABLE VENUS*

Robin Costes Lewis has spoken of a 'love at first sight' with regard to the character of the Sable Venus. You yourself have said you were stunned by this text. Why do you think that is?

A friend of mine read it to me some three years ago, on a bench in Brooklyn. I was instantly blown away. The stunning aspect is hard to put into words. It's the text I was looking for, the one that brings everything together – all my individual 'selves'. It articulates things that had previously been unsayable. Its poetic – not to say epic – form distils years and years of painstaking academic research: on the representation, objectification and fetishisation of Black women's bodies in art. It's precisely because it comes at you with so much poetic inspiration that you have no choice but to surrender to it. To let yourself be pierced and transformed. It is a text of impressive intellectual maturity, and it catches me at a particular turning point in my journey; it catches me through its language. That's the big novelty: its power of expression. The Sable Venus pieces the fragments back together; she gathers up the debris. She's a complete figure, standing firm, in her own right. These are our mothers, our sisters, all the women who went before us, who went unseen because our gaze

was tainted by violence; and now we are seeing them from a fresh perspective.

There is a very political dimension to this journey, this look at the very heart of the history of representations; yet the more the text progresses, the more it reveals a tender and intimate dimension. You get the sense of a rebirth, of an almost loving call to 'start the world anew'.

That's right. It's even a sensual text. Why? Because once you've made the journey with her, once you've seen, felt, and observed this fragmentation of Black women's bodies in history and the history of art – the visual unconscious on which all of this is predicated – you can no longer un-see it. Once that revelation has occurred, you have to reboot your life. And it's a deep reboot, in terms of both gaze and language; as a driving force it's really powerful. It has the ability to speak to each and every one of us, regardless of our place in the world. The text is so rich it can be heard in a thousand different ways. The horizon of love it has in mind lies beyond anger, beyond confrontation. Its force is unstoppable because it is a force of calm. It draws us in and, in the end, simply says that it is afraid to love, to be

touched, to be approached. Because the violence of racism, of dehumanisation, is so deep-seated and so ancient that it touches the very essence of who we are. Of how we relate to ourselves and to others. We are traumatised by what this visual unconscious has created. It creates insecurity, violence and neurosis. That violence has infected me; it infects us all, but I had never looked at it that way, never confronted it so deeply, to be able to rid myself of it. When she writes, at the end of this long theoretical and artistic odyssey, 'your hand on my hand is too much', I'm overwhelmed because I feel so deeply what she means. I wish I could channel that phrase to every ear listening to me and be heard. Because it heals. It heals us – us women, men, White people, Black people. It heals all of us.

The text ends with these lines: 'Please, sit here and read to me.' In this production, you're also the performer, which is a first. What does this mean for you?

I never thought that, one day, I'd be on a stage. In my films, I'm never the focal point; I'm never in the spotlight. And yet, with this text, it was impossible to consider any other option. There was no other way I could have worked this material. I couldn't adapt it for the screen, superimpose images over all the images it evokes; it would have nullified it. Diminished it. It had to be addressed, directly. The words had to pass through my body as a Black woman. It was me that had to be exposed. And I'm all the

more willing to do so as the text protects me; it allows me to emerge, to come forward, naked as it were. I see it like an old photo camera that might give access to something extremely intimate yet never indecent; after all, the text is magnificent. I'm protected by its powerful language. Full of images, full of thought, full of sensitivity. The text is a vehicle, a vessel. It can transport you and go through you. But that ending, that 'read to me', I want to say it also to those listening to me: play your part, take it from here, do it for me, for yourselves, for us now. For all of us, this long poem is a form of care. For me, it heals me of the obsession of being heard and understood by minds that cannot do so – or do not wish to. It opens up a new horizon, one beyond the ideological discourse. I feel it will allow me to write new female characters, women who exist for themselves, who will no longer be the object of predation, nor will they be obsessed with confrontation. I think that reciting this text is also about bringing closure to a certain cycle of stories, allowing me to begin another. It invites you on a journey within yourself that's so free and so deep that it's exhilarating, and generous. It's extremely liberating. I believe we must not underestimate the potential for political action and emancipation it can bring.

BIOGRAPHY

Alice Diop (*1979) is a French film director and screenwriter. She studied history and visual sociology.

With a deliberately calm but uncompromising visual language, she addresses topics such as identity, migration and colonialism. Her films tell the stories of people whose voices are rarely heard in public. Her work is characterised by Diop's desire to bring unique life stories from the margins to the centre. In doing so, she transforms personal stories into political images. Diop, who grew up as the daughter of a Senegalese family in the 'Cité des 3000' in Aulnay-sous-Bois, a Parisian suburb, is a prominent figure in a new, politically engaged French cinema.

With *Le Voyage de la Vénus Noire*, her stage debut, she is coming to Austria for the first time to the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna.

Diop received the award for best documentary film at the 2021 Berlinale, the Silver Lion in Venice in 2022, and was part of the jury for the Academy Award (Oscar) in 2024. Her best-known films include *Saint Omer* (2022), *Nous (We)* (2021) and *Vers la tendresse* (2016).

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Owner, Editor and Publisher Wiener Festwochen GesmbH, Lehárgasse 11/1/6, 1060 Wien, T + 43 1 589 22 0, festwochen@festwochen.at | www.festwochen.at **General Management** Milo Rau, Artemis Vakianis **Artistic Direction** (responsible for the content) Milo Rau, Artistic Direction **Translation** Stephen Grynwasser **Picture Credits Cover** © Marie Rouge **Produced by** Print Alliance HAV Produktions GmbH (Bad Vöslau) **Design** SIRENE Studio **Layout** Valerie Eccli

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