

**Sword Presentation to William Kentridge**  
**par Astrid de La Forest (read by Catherine Meurisse)**  
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Three years! That's how long it took to welcome you to our company, dear William Kentridge! From that moment when we suggested your name, I spoke of my immense admiration for your work, so profound, so original and so committed.

It was at the IDEM studio that I was able to meet you, in this mythical lithography workshop where many artists from every continent meet, thanks to the vitality of its director, Patrice Forest, and his entire team, whom I salute here.

I would never have imagined that, after the joy of your election, I would have to speak before you all and, above all, to present you with the symbol you have chosen in place of the traditional sword. I sincerely thank you for this gesture of mutual friendship.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that, even for your installation, your choices are radical: there will be no sword committee, and there will be no sword either, but a staff!

What's this? Is it a "brigadier"? You began your career in the theater, so would you like to mark your entrance under the dome by striking the three curtain calls?

Is it a sceptre, a staff of authority, a marshal's baton? Is it a weapon? Certainly not.

If it were to represent a weapon - the only one you allow yourself to wield - it would be that of knowledge, in the image of the research laboratory you created in Johannesburg in 2016 with your friend, the artist Bronwyn Lace: "the center of the least good idea".

The reason I mention this center, which you mentioned in your speech, is that you chose to associate this sword-and-stick with a formula in English and French: "chercher une idée moins bonne" ("looking for a less good idea").

Dear William, as I searched desperately for inspiration to utter words that would live up to my admiration, I surrendered to your injunction. And I searched for the less good idea.

The words: "Find the less good idea" form a kind of motto according to which the most innovative and creative ideas are not the "good ideas" with which we start a project, but often what emerges along the way, by accident, without being planned.

As I was writing my speech, I realized that if you had chosen me, it wasn't for my "good ideas"! So I put aside all my questions, all my plans based on I don't know what in-depth study of your work, or a staging in your style where everyone would wear a mask, and I would be disguised as an elephant or a coffee-pot, or what have you? I can only imagine the disappointment of this assembly, for I condemn you to imagination!

In the end, I've chosen to use my heart, my emotions, my senses and my artistic intuition to evoke your approach and the pleasure I take in presenting you with your baton.

Yes! you've chosen a stick, a beautiful wooden stick, a ceremonial stick. It's carved from walnut wood, a dark, hard wood, but it's been stained and polished to make it even darker.

Burnt wood, charcoal, is the main medium you use in your workshop. This black wooden stick is also a reference to this.

Around the top of the stick is this ribbon of pearls with the woven legend I mentioned just now: FIND THE LESS GOOD IDEA / CHERCHE UNE IDEE MOINS BONNE.

In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, north of South Africa, there's a collective of women artisans called Marigold Beads. They've been weaving beads for around ten years. Your collaboration with them is based on a shared practice rooted in improvisation, experimentation and response to the unpredictable twists and turns inherent in all creative practices.

This piece was fashioned by Jacques van Staden, one of your studio's team members. It's not a fighting stick, but rather a stick that you hold in your hand as you walk - not a cane to lean on, but a stick that accompanies your journey. Traditionally carried by African leaders or people of social importance.

A symbol rich in history and meaning in many of your continent's cultures, this type of stick represents power, wisdom and connection to the land; a way to hear the voices of one's ancestors.

It's perhaps the old man's third foot, the one on which man holds on in old age; it's just as much a comfort to the pilgrim on his quest.

It's a symbol that also evokes the responsibility of the artist you are as a spokesperson for the struggles and aspirations of oppressed peoples.

This stick is an evocation of your work, and I can see it coming to life.

From here, I can hear it hitting the floor to the rhythm of the men running in place in one of your latest performances, *The Head & The Load*.

I see it carried by a woman like a banner or in the shape of a reed in *More Sweetly Play the Dance*: that brilliant form of dance macabre.

I see it used as a medical gallows or as a support for invalids in *Shadow Procession*.

I feel it's endowed with a magical power that gives hope and meaning to the lives of all those who see in your multifaceted work, from printmaking to opera, animation to poetry.

I see you carrying it at arm's length as a guide for all artists in search of justification and radicalism.

So I turn to the words of Aimé Césaire, whom you love and who has inspired you in your work, exhuming this prayer from *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, which evokes the edge of the sword:

“... Give me the wild faith of the sorcerer  
give my hands the power to shape  
give my soul the temper of the sword”.

And the poet continues in an exhilarating appeal, behind which we can see your work and your struggles:

*“[...] Make me rebellious to all vanity, but docile to its genius*

*like the fist to the elongated arm!*

*Make me commissary of his blood*

*make me the depositary of his resentment*

*make me a man of termination*

*make me a man of initiation*

*make me a man of recollection*

*but make me also a man of sowing*

*Make me the executor of these high works...”*

So, dear William, may this stick accompany and support you, and may it long remind you to offer the world and your contemporaries your essential and brilliant “not so good ideas”!

Thank you.