On understanding who you are



Playwright Benedict Lombe discusses not seeking out all the answers, playing with time, and how to trust yourself.

September 11, 2026 -

As told to Yang Shi, 2070 words.

Tags: Theater, Process, Production, Success, Inspiration, Independence.

Your play, *Shifters*, moves between memory and reality, past and present. What drew you to telling Dre and Des' story through this shifting structure?

Well, I think it was probably just quite instinctive; it felt right to be weaving in and out of this relationship emotionally, visually, but also structurally.

What were some early images and themes for *Shifters*?

My initial ideas existed in this otherworldly space. I was really interested in something called the Kalûnga Line, which is the line between the natural world and the supernatural world, the soul and the body. There was something wonderful to me about not just two people who were at war with that, but a relationship that felt like it was the soul versus the body. I was interested in not having the answers, going on that journey with the characters. *Shifters* is not a show that necessarily gives you answers; it allows you to come in and have your own experience. Because we all have our own experiences of love. I think the show feels unique to every individual because you're coming in with your own experience, your own baggage, and your own interpretations.

When I read the synopsis and reviews, I saw a lot of resemblance to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Before Sunrise*, and *Past Lives*. I find your touch very cinematic, what other movies inspired you?

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind is just structurally one of the coolest things I've ever seen. I love the way it plays with the past and the present, and memory, and how it tells the story of this relationship. *In The Mood for Love* is just one of the finest films to have ever existed. That kind of restraint, and the seduction within the restraint, was really inspiring.

I love *Past Lives*, and it came out the year *Shifters* came out; that feeling of knowing that someone is your person, but also knowing that your time has come and gone, the devastation, and the pain, and the heartbreak, and how incredibly understated it is. That film just devastated me in all of the best ways.

[The Before Sunrise Trilogy] are my favorite films in the whole world. I actually watched *Before Sunset*, the second film, before I watched *Before Sunrise*. I watched it in the wrong order because I didn't know there was a first film. I met the characters in their 30s, and then I had the beautiful surprise of going back and watching their younger selves, which, in some ways, probably was a really cool influence. Because in *Shifters*, you meet their adult selves, and then you fill in the gaps of the first moment you meet them in the play, and the last moment they saw each other in the past, and what happens in those 16 years. For a film to sustain a two-hour runtime through little more than dialogue, while capturing some of the most intimate moments I've ever seen on screen, is remarkable. Its simplicity feels transcendent.

Richard Linklater [who co-wrote with Kim Krizan], Ethan Hawke, and Julie Delpy are some of the finest writers out there. I remember watching that film being very, very young, and it just blew my mind because I was like, how do you write in this way that makes me feel like I'm a fly on the wall? It's a masterclass in just everything.

Earlier, you were mentioning the feeling of knowing someone is your person. Do you believe in soulmates, or love at first sight?

The thing about knowing that somebody is your person is you also don't know, right? There is no certainty in that; it's a soul thing that you can't quite explain. I don't know if I believe in love at first sight. I believe that love is an active thing; we have to choose the people that we're with every day. That action is how love will stay alive.

I get what you mean. If you think about the *Before* trilogy, each film explores a different kind of love. The first is about love at first sight. In the second, they find each other again, and you start to feel like maybe they're soulmates. But by the third, you realize their love isn't just about fate, they choose each other, and they keep choosing each other every day, even when things get difficult. So I don't think love is one single thing, or that it has one fixed definition. It evolves, shifts, and takes on different forms over time.

I think that is what the play tries to explore: the way that love evolves, shifts, changes, and transforms, and the way these two people evolve, shift, change, and transform because of each other, despite each other, with each other, and without each other. The moments that they are in sync and the moments that they're not.

I remember watching *Before Sunset* in my very early 20s when it first came out, then in my 30s, and I remember thinking it was the most devastating film I had ever seen. I was like, "This is too sad, what do you mean? This is so devastating." Fast-forward 10 years later, revisiting that film in my 30s, and going, "Why was I so devastated? This is actually not sad." It's very real, it's very rooted, it's very grounded, it's actually very beautiful in many ways. It's really interesting how you look back on experiences and moments and relationships and what time does to your interpretation of things.

For sure. Time and your personal journey teach you wisdom. I have a bit of a challenging question, since we're talking about love and the many great films, shows, and books that have explored it: What makes *Shifters* unique?

First of all, *Shifters* is a Black British love story; it's not a Black love story, it's Black British. That in itself barely exists on stage. And certainly not in New York. This Black British love story is unapologetically romantic and culturally specific, even in its New York setting. Yet it refuses to be defined solely by its identity and remains completely universal, and that is a massive win.

People will try to categorize *Shifters* in the context of, here are all of these different white love stories, or here are these African-American stories, and I think they will miss the fact that it is Black British, and the fight that we have gone through to retain that.

I love the intersectionality that defines *Shifters*. Can you elaborate on how growing up in a small town in the UK shaped the characters' identity and sense of belonging?

It's a really interesting thing to explore because we talk a lot about how Blackness is not a monolith, and obviously Black British culture and Black British identity are still being introduced globally. There's something really fascinating to showcase Black British characters in locations that you don't expect them to be in. What happens when they're two Black Brits in the North of England? What happens to their sense of self, their sense of each other, their sense of identity in spaces that historically they might not be expected to be in, or they haven't been in? How does that also color, enrich, subvert our expectations of what a Black British character looks like, and sounds like? I was really interested in the nuances of that, and in how these two characters bond through the experience of living in a small town so far removed from everything they know. I was interested in the specificity of these characters being Black British, but also Congolese and Nigerian. As a Congolese British person, I've seen so many narratives about Congolese people that are rooted in struggle, systemic oppression, and resistance to a white supremacist world.

I wanted to write characters who come from these cultures but are also allowed to be fully human, to live their lives and fall in love in the way characters from other backgrounds often do without question. People from these cultures and histories rarely get that freedom in storytelling, which is absurd, because of course we live and love in the same way. We're human too.

What's your favorite scene and why?

There's a moment where one of the characters says, "There's no reality where something made from you could be a bad thing." Night after night, whether the audience is loud or listening intently, you can hear everyone feeling it differently, and it always draws a wonderful response.

It's an incredibly powerful line. What is your creative process like as a writer, as a screenwriter?

It's very unhealthy, very masochistic. I just lock myself in a room for endless amounts of hours, and I don't allow anybody to talk to me, look at me, breathe near me, come give me any kind of hydration until I've driven myself insane. Then I'm like, maybe I should walk outside the door and touch grass, and remember what it feels like to be a human. I'm always trying to work out how to find balance in my creative process. I get very obsessive when I feel like I'm onto something. Because I'm very nocturnal, so much of my writing happens at 10:00 PM when my brain is like, all right, cool, we can get started. I will write from 10:00 PM until 10:00 AM the next day.

What's your next project?

I'm working on a play for the National Theatre in London, which I am in the writing process. I'm probably not going to go into too much until it's been birthed. People always have these birthing analogies when it comes to writing something, but I am very much in labor at the moment with this play. I'm working on the *Shifters* TV adaptation with Seesaw Films, which is super exciting to continue to spend time with these characters in a different medium. I am working on two films, one is a movie musical, which is my first musical. I don't know if I can write a musical, but I'm doing it.

Have you ever thought of acting?

I did… When I was at school, we were essentially told that the only way to be a storyteller was to be an actor. I did drama and whatever, and it was only after I started to do drama that I realized I had so much more interest in writing the things that people were saying rather than saying those words. I went as far as auditioning for top drama schools and getting into the drama schools, and then realizing I want nothing to do with acting; all I want is to control the narrative. I feel a lot more at ease being a writer and storyteller.

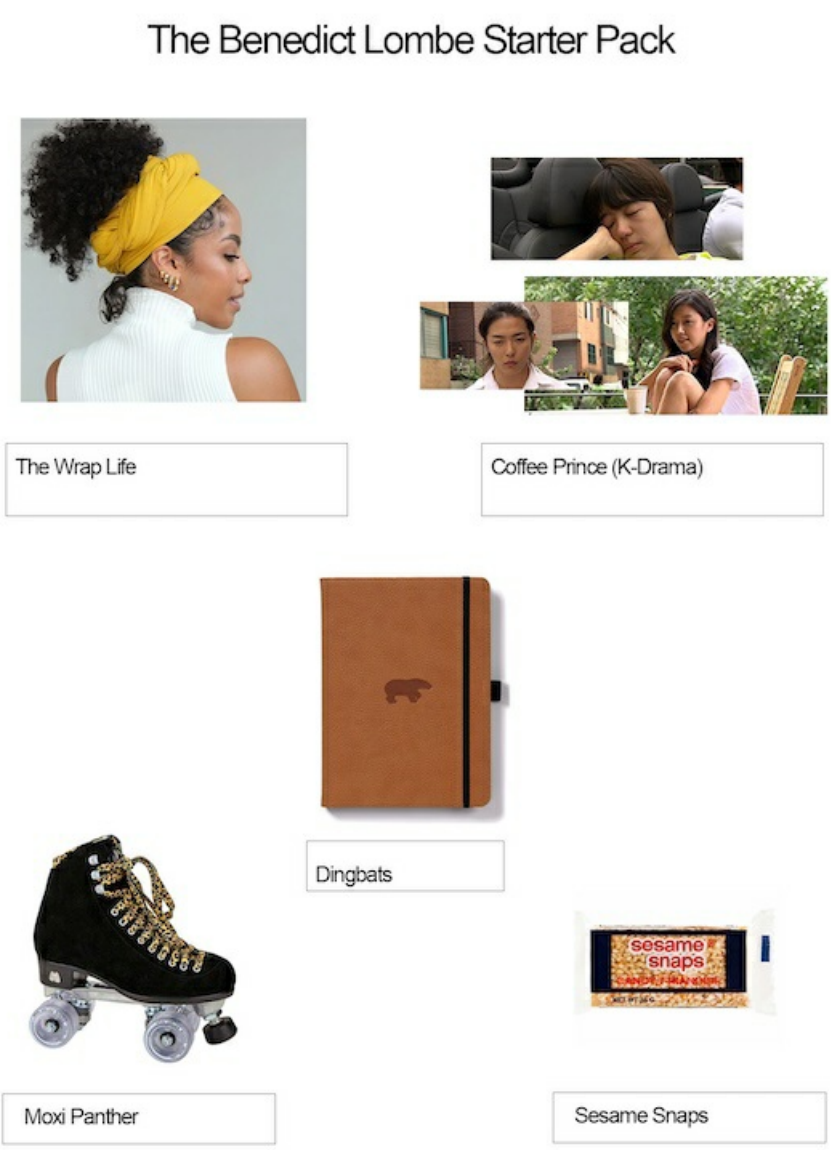
One last question: What advice would you give to young writers?

I would say a couple of things. People will always try and tell you who you are, and it's very easy to believe the bad stuff once you believe the good stuff. Understanding who you are, what you want to say, and why you write will really help you connect with people.

There will be so many voices that will come in and try and define you before you've defined yourself.

Also ask questions. When you enter this industry, you're often made to feel grateful simply to be in the room. And while gratitude is important, we sometimes forget that people are also lucky to experience our art and collaborate with us. I think the anxiety sometimes is just to go along with it because you don't want to be perceived as anything other than wonderful and easy to work with. You can be wonderful and easy to work with, but you can always question things along the way. If you don't understand something, if something doesn't quite feel right, if you don't quite know why things are happening the way they're happening, just ask. You will always be your biggest advocate.

Benedict Lombe starter pack:



The Wrap Life Head Wraps

Dingbats Wild Life Notebooks

Coffee Prince (Classic 2007 K-drama starring a young Gong Yoo)

Moxi Panther Quad Roller Skates

Sesame Snaps (a writer's dream snack)

Name
Benedict Lombe

Vocation
playwright

Diana Patient