



Play delves into what  
drives an individual to crime

## Description

# Teesri Duniya Theatre presents Montreal playwright/performer Oliver Koomsatira's *Psycho 6* from June 10 to 23

By Irwin Rapoport

June 8, 2022

***Psycho 6***, a play written and performed by **Oliver Koomsatira** and directed by **Liz Valdez**, is being performed **from June 10 to 23** at the **MAI** (Montréal, arts interculturels). The performances, produced by **Teesri Duniya Theatre**, mark the world premiere of this timely play that examines the making of a criminal. Here is a teaser of the play:

States the press release for the play:

“Based on playwright/performer Oliver Koomsatira's lived personal experience, *Psycho 6* tells the life-affecting story of millions of youth across cultures and social classes. This powerful piece weaves together theatre, physical movement, mask work, dance and rap, over a layered, integral soundtrack.”

I have dreams too. Like most of you. I still do. If I get to 25.

– K



*Psycho 6* flyer art

“In this nuanced, tour-de-force performance, spectators must consider – lion or gazelle; how does hunter become prey? The harrowing story follows the journey of K, a young man who’s been in and out of foster care and youth centres since the age of 9. His broken home, fiery temper and financial destitution have led him down a path of increasingly dangerous criminal activities and impacted his mental/emotional health. The play tackles youth gangs and pimping, subjects not often seen in the theatre. It takes a deep look into how specific socio-economic factors create a context where marginalized people of colour are vulnerable to delinquency out of sheer necessity.”

“The story of K has resonated with Koomsatira for a long time, ‘Growing up, I saw many friends get into a lot of trouble. Some were able to get out of the criminal underworld’s claws. Others weren’t. I wanted to grasp a deeper understanding of how good kids were being groomed to become criminals and what made them more susceptible to getting intertwined with these people. Some came back with scars, stitches, criminal records, sentences, drug addictions and firearms charges. And some just never came back,’ he said.”

“How does a music-loving teenager transform into a budding bandit and onto a fully-fledged criminal? *Psycho 6* is a reflection of the current climate, incorporating some harsh facts. Koomsatira’s goal isn’t to terrorize the audience, only to foster an understanding of what’s going on in local neighbourhoods without jumping to conclusions.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Koomsatira, in an interview with Westmount Magazine, gives our readers an insight into what drives him as a playwright and actor:



**WM:** *What inspired you to write this play, and how long did it take for you to write it?*

**Koomsatira:** From inception to full production, this play has been in the works for the last ten years. It began as a 10-minute piece through a solo creation workshop in 2012 and has expanded to a one-act play.

*'Psycho 6 is based on true events. Not one story specifically but derived from real events across the topic of youth crime.'*

Gun violence increased 81% in Canada between 2009 and 2019. In 2020, there were 8,344 victims of violent crimes involving guns. Montreal had 187 gun violence events in 2021, an increase of 44 events compared to 2020. Many of these incidents are related to criminal organizations, some involving youth gangs. In Montreal, 607 illegal guns were seized in 2021, compared to 593 in 2020 and 561 in 2019. Some of these unfortunate deadly shootings involve teenagers and innocent victims not affiliated with gangs. This play asks why? What are the socioeconomic factors involved in teenagers and young adults being groomed to participate in these types of behaviours?

*Psycho 6 is based on true events. Not one story specifically but derived from real events across the topic of youth crime. That being said, when I was growing up, a tragedy struck our neighbourhood and left an invisible scar in our hearts. A young man, whom I considered a positive role model, went missing and was later found dead in a cornfield. I believe it still remains an unsolved case to this day as all the information we received came through word-of-mouth. We were never able to receive any information from official sources so, as children, we just took bits of information from friends of the family to make sense of it. I sought to understand the world in which we grew up, our proximity to the criminal underworld, and how some of us made it out while others didn't.*

**WM:** *How would you describe your process for writing plays, and does it vary?*

**Koomsatira:** I definitely think it varies from playwright to playwright, but in my experience, I tend to go through similar phases, which loosely correlate with the science of the creative process as studied by psychiatrists: Phase 1 or Preparation, the assimilation of basic information to build on a topic or idea; Phase 2 or Incubation, a relaxed state when connections are made, often unconsciously; Phase 3 is that Eureka moment of huge inspiration or insight about what you're focused on; and lastly, Phase 4 being Production, the painstaking process of putting all the insights or concepts into a useful format that can be communicated to others, which for me, in this case, is a full-length play.

These stages take a lot of time to manifest, which is why I write about topics that I find deeply interesting. Once the project is green-lit by the funding bodies (Canada Council for the Arts for our design dramaturgy workshop) and a theatre company, we then work the play on its feet to continue developing it for the stage.

*'I'm an observer and I find people and circumstances very interesting, so I'm always absorbing what happens around me like a sponge, which inspires my writing later on in life.'*

**WM:** *What inspired you to write plays, and how would you describe the journey as a playwright?*

**Koomsatira:** I've always used writing in some form or another to make sense of my inner and outer worlds. As a child, I would write comic books. As a teen, I would write rap songs. After graduating from theatre school, I began writing in a more narrative style through short films and plays. I guess I could say that I'm an observer and I find people and circumstances very interesting, so I'm always absorbing what happens around me like a sponge, which inspires my writing later on in life.

**WM:** As a playwright, what are the themes for plays that jump out to you?

**Koomsatira:** I'd say I'm intensely interested in the human psyche and its endless complexity. Trying to understand odd behaviours, personality disorders and extremely challenging life circumstances that pressure real people to make very difficult decisions. I'm often inspired by true events that seem so over the top that an audience member would say, "No way, that's not real," if they saw it onstage.

**WM:** We are witnessing another surge in mass shootings in the United States, with the tragic results they bring. In *Medea*, Euripides dealt with infanticide. Are recent events and incidents giving you ideas for future plays?

**Koomsatira:** Yes, as a matter of fact, Canada and Montreal also face some important challenges in terms of firearms and gun violence, as mentioned above. Of course, we're not in the same situation as the U.S., which seems to be caught in an impossible deadlock of legislation.

However, since we're sharing a border, a lot of the guns we find in the hands of teenagers here come from the U.S., so their gun problem also seems to become somewhat our problem when they get smuggled across the border. *Psycho 6* tackles this tricky situation head-on by trying to understand which factors contribute to this surge of violence in our major cities.

'... a lot of the guns we find in the hands of teenagers here come from the U.S., so their gun problem also seems to become somewhat our problem when they get smuggled across the border.'

**WM:** Some playwrights are more comfortable writing dialogue for actors. To what extent do you write plays with you being one of the performers?

**Koomsatira:** So far, I'm comfortable with writing dialogue by layering the writing process. I'll start with a general idea of the scene to figure out the characters' urgent needs, what they want from each other and which tactics they might use to convince each other.

I also always write my plays out loud to see how it comes out sonically. Reading something in your head is quite different than hearing the sound frequencies and how the syllables roll off your tongue. This influences a lot of the structures of my sentences, the flow, the pauses, the breaths, the tension in the vocal apparatus and its subsequent emotional intensification. This style of "out loud writing" comes from writing rap, which is about mumbling bits of words together to come up with interesting rhyme schemes and varying rhythmic patterns.



Image: Liz Valdez





*WM: When did you first start acting, and do you enjoy performing your own plays?*

**Koomsatira:** I began stage performances in high school for talent shows, mostly in the form of stage combat, martial arts, break-dance and rap. During different drama classes, I was introduced to creation through movement. Then, I really began diving into conventional and classical theatre at 17 years old when I joined the Professional Theatre program at Dawson College, a 3-year full-time program.

I do enjoy performing in my own plays because I get to speak about topics that are important to me as an artist but also as a person of colour. Certain topics that affect BIPOC demographics (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) don't always get addressed by conventional plays so it's an opportunity to flesh out uncomfortable topics on mainstream stages. A similar impact occurred with the two multidisciplinary shows I created in the last ten years, discussing difficult topics through rap, contemporary dance and video projections.

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*WM: Which plays have greatly impacted you, and who are some of the playwrights you admire?*

**Koomsatira:** That's a great question. I'd say I've had the opportunity to work on so many plays throughout the years that I can't really pin down a top three. They've all informed me what I enjoy and dislike about theatre. Each play impacts me differently when I perform in them, but they all leave a mark on my consciousness. I strive to stay as open-minded as possible when I approach a play I have the privilege to give a voice to. However, I tend to prefer contemporary works that try to reinvent the wheel, shake things up, and aren't afraid to discuss hard topics while finding ways to make them interesting and compelling. I also get inspired by documentaries, the lives of unsung heroes, or films portraying spectacular true events.

*WM: Who are the actors who have made a mark on you in terms of performing?*

**Koomsatira:** Again, I've worked with thousands of very creative and hardworking actors throughout the years, and they've all had something valuable to teach me directly or indirectly, both as artists and human beings. I can't really pin down a handful of them but I tend to be inspired by actors who are humble, generous, kind, authentic, good listeners, and open-minded, which makes the high-pressure context of acting a lot more bearable. Basically, all the qualities that you tend not to find in highly narcissistic individuals.

On stage, I appreciate actors who make bold choices, take risks, aren't afraid to step out of their comfort zones and strive to create colourful characters as opposed to just playing themselves over and over in different productions. It's challenging because we often get cast for our energy, age-range and personality, but within those boundaries, actors who try to do something they've never tried before, as opposed to working from a predictable recipe, are the ones that affect me most, while still being in service of the story being shared of course.

*WM: Is there anyone you would like to mention in terms of putting this together?*

**Koomsatira:** Very special thanks to Liz Valdez, our director, who dived head first into the project with all of her being. To **Rahul Varma** and his company Teesri Duniya Theatre who put faith and resources into making this production a reality (people don't always realize how complicated and expensive it is to present a play).

To **Deborah Forde** who guided the dramaturgy workshop during **Teesri Duniya Theatre's Fireworks Playwrights' program**. To our designers **Zoe Roux, Christine Lee** and **Nalo Soyini**, who created the set, props, lighting, sound, music and costume designs to captivate our senses. To **Elyse Quesnel** and **Alessandra Tom**, our stage manager and assistant director, who are holding the ship together and making the project work.



And to all the staff at Teesri Duniya Theatre's office and the people at the theatre space (MAI, Montréal, arts interculturels) working out all the technical and logistical challenges leading up to the opening night, June 10.

**Psycho 6 runs from June 10 to 23 at the MAI**

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Images: Adam Matheson

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