

that kept him going even in the bleakest of times.

"There was a time when I was feeling a bit suicidal, my brother was in hospital and these immigration issues were all happening at once.

"People who hear my story used to ask 'how are you still here?' Music kept me going."

Kema developed a passion for rap, singing and songwriting at a local youth project, the Chat Trust, in Arthur's Hill, Newcastle, where he spent most of his time as a teen.

His songwriting output today is prodigious.

Last year he set himself a target of writing 50 new songs and he ended up with 57. This year he's upped it to 100 and is already up to 42.

Kema sees writing as therapy, never more so than in writing Shine, which "reflects on where I was then and where I am now".

He added: "The journey has been both a blessing and a pain. If I hadn't gone through what I have, I wouldn't have written the show."

It will be premiered at the Live Theatre in May and from there it will be transferred to the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh.

"If it gets good reviews we will be looking at bigger theatres in Man-

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Kema Sikazwe

chester and London," said Kema. There's also a film version of Shine planned with funding in the offing.

Kema, selected as a Live Theatre Associate Artist in 2017, has worked on the play over the last year, in collaboration with Graeme Thompson, Live Theatre's creative producer who is directing it.

Graeme said: "Kema is a great musical talent and when he first came to Live Theatre to develop his writing and performance skills it was clear we had a real opportunity to make a unique show.

"What we have created is some-

thing that really speaks to this city and the things happening in our world today.

"To think that this is his debut theatre show is very exciting, it's a very ambitious piece of work.

"It's a very personal story to Kema but there is so much people can relate to.

"Also, it has an amazing original soundtrack and music."

Kema hopes that Shine will be, as he intended, an inspirational story for others.

"I've always wanted to inspire people to follow their heart through storytelling and personal experience," he said.

"Although we all have a different journey, we also have many similarities.

"I've wanted to tell this story for years and now I have the platform it's a dream come true."

■ Shine is being staged at Live Theatre, Newcastle, from May 2 to May 11. There is the opportunity to meet Kema in a free post-show talk after the 7.30pm performance on May 7.

To book tickets for the show at Live Theatre, priced between £10 and £14, with concessions from £6, call the box office on (0191) 232 1232 or see www.live.org.uk.

Populists will leave us all impoverished

Paul Benneworth



WITH all the uncertainties around Brexit, it's been calming to be in the Netherlands recently. Amid all the tensions, I have to admit welling up as I cast what may well be my last Dutch vote.

This time, we were voting for the water boards - a peculiarly Dutch invention. They are responsible for managing the flow and distribution of water in river catchment areas.

Their work ensures that our feet keep dry, the ground stays stable, that waterways remain picturesque and that farmers can irrigate their crops. That sounds dull and unimportant, but if half your population live below sea level, those tasks are of existential importance.

It's a hugely complicated task, and they have huge budgets. And those huge budgets are paid for by taxes that everyone pays.

They are not water supply businesses, so most citizens don't get anything visible back in return for your £300-odd per year. And, because living below sea level is woven into the Dutch culture, no one minds too much about having to pay these taxes.

They are also the oldest democratic bodies in continuous existence, with the first one being formed in 1255. They were democratic at a time when there was almost no democracy elsewhere in Europe and the absolute power of kings was becoming stronger.

But they had to be democratic because of two characteristics. Firstly, they made choices about life and death. If they don't build a dam near your house, or divert water from your farm, then that was a personal disaster for you.

Secondly, they worked on constructive solutions that could potentially benefit everyone.

Effective co-ordination meant that everyone can live in dry, safe and well-irrigated areas.

The water boards have become a source of controversy recently, because some urban taxpayers feel their money flows to benefit farmers. Our water board has responded by bringing water back into the cities, excavating formerly covered waterways to create

attractive urban parklands. But the point is that the biggest benefits that we get from effective water management is not a babbling city-centre burn. The water boards work with farmers to ensure that the increasingly frequent torrential downpours do not lead to more city-centre flooding.

It is hard to make that case to people if they don't believe it; it can seem unfair that you pay your taxes, and the farmers get better waterways. But because farmers get better waterways with meanders, storage pools and reed beds, the waterways protect the cities from climate change.

Everyone gets the general benefit of dry feet, even if it comes by benefiting a few privileged farmers. Of course, picturing farmers as privileged is as untrue in the Netherlands as it is in Northumberland.

Agriculture remains a marginal livelihood, made harder by demands for improved animal and ecological welfare in parallel with falling farmgate prices. Viewed in that light, the water system is fair and it works.

The sense of unfairness is stoked by populists who gain power by fomenting discontent without regard for what gets broken. And populist vandals here could really damage the Netherlands: the country could literally disappear under the waves.

Those vandals have stolen our power to see the wider benefits from everything from council housing to reliable rail services. One of the areas most under threat from Brexit's populist vandals is immigration.

We've collectively been tricked by them into believing that smashing freedom of movement is necessary to stop foreign freeloaders from ripping us off.

If we lose free movement after Brexit, we are simply empowering those populists who only keep winning by impoverishing us all economically, culturally and socially.

■ Prof Paul Benneworth is professor of innovation and regional development at HVL University, Norway.



► I, Daniel Blake director Ken Loach at the Tyneside Cinema

from real-world issues

when he mischievously woos her under that name.

The plot sounds a right old tangled thing and so it is, but it unravels beautifully on stage.

Rachel Scott imbues Gwendolen with comical hauteur while Kitty Parkins makes a bid to steal the show as pouting Cecily, more interested in flirting than the dull books dumped in front of her by Alison Carr's dotty governess, the aptly named Miss Prism.

The set prettily and effectively evokes both interior and exterior locations and the third of the three acts, arranged around two intervals, ends with a dance on stage and resounding

applause. The only sadness comes when you reflect on the playwright's own life which was riven with pretence and didn't end well. Disgraced and reviled for the crime of following his heart, he was dead at 46.

But what a legacy of laughter he left behind! If you want proof of that, get a ticket for tonight's final performance at www.peopletheatre.co.uk and enjoy.

DAVID WHETSTONE

■ Next up at the People's is People's Play Award winner Voltemand and Cornelius are Joyfully Returned by Paul Vates (May 7-11 in the Studio Theatre).



► The Importance of Being Earnest, at the People's Theatre