



More than a million listeners have already heard May Sumbwanyambe's work on BBC Radio 4 with his latest play, *Back Home*, highlighting the elephant ivory debate.

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## Creative writing lecturer's new play highlights elephant ivory debate

A Northumbria University lecturer, who is also an award-winning playwright and radio dramatist, is preparing for his latest play to be aired on BBC Radio 4.

[May Sumbwanyambe](#), who specialises in practice research with a focus on bringing the lesser heard voices of African communities to the fore, wrote *Back Home* after being commissioned by the BBC and collaborating with

fellow PhD student Molly Brown.

Molly's investigations into consumer demand for ivory, and research into the diverse perspectives around ivory and elephant conservation, form part of her work at the University of York's Leverhulme Centre for Anthropocene Biodiversity. The research has been included in the play by May, who is also a PhD student at York's School of Arts and Creative Technologies.

It is estimated that there are around 350,000 elephants left in Africa, but thousands are killed each year due to poaching, which reached a peak in 2011. The future of elephant conservation efforts and resulting ivory stockpiles from natural elephant mortality, along with the complex issues of ivory demand and poverty are explored in *Back Home* through the eyes of a Zambian woman who has lived in the UK for many years, only to return as part of a charity tackling animal conservation. On her return she finds that her family have very different views and experiences of elephant conservation efforts.

May, who teaches on the [Creative Writing MA](#) and [English Literature and Creative Writing BA \(Hons\)](#) courses at Northumbria, said: "These are very challenging issues and often creative interventions, such as fictional storytelling, can provide a safe and more accessible way to access and understand very difficult or uncomfortable topics.

"By creating these fictional characters, with different lived experiences of animal conservation, we hope to show that having a variety of different voices around the table in discussions going forward, could be crucial to the survival of this magnificent and much-loved creature.

"Most of my work is about really trying to put African and Caribbean voices at the centre of their own stories. On the surface, the play is about the ivory trade and elephant conservation, but at the heart it's trying to frame the conversation between the west and Africa."

Molly explained: "We often talk about the elephant ivory trade through a western perspective heavily laden with animal welfare priorities over biological conservation ones. To truly tackle the issues of why numbers of elephants are still under threat, it is important to remember that the conservation success that results in growing elephant populations comes with the very real increased threat to people's lives and livelihoods.

“In this play we wanted to highlight these perspectives and explore how seeing conservation efforts through different lenses - a western perspective as well as an African perspective - can be a very valuable way of moving things forward in a positive direction.”

More than a million listeners have already heard May’s work on BBC Radio 4 following the success of [The Trial of Joseph Knight](#), which tells the story of African slave Joseph Knight in 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland and was adapted for stage performance as [Enough of Him](#). And [After Independence](#), inspired by real events in the late 1990s, when many farms in Zimbabwe owned by white landowners were seized by thousands of war veterans.

In 2016, May’s debut play was the winner of the [Alfred Fagon Audience Award](#) – the leading awards for black British playwrights. Since then, he has worked extensively with theatres across the UK, including the National Theatre of Scotland and is currently writing a new television series for the BBC.

May added: “While some students will choose to specialise in scriptwriting, I believe *all* students benefit from exploring the ideas and techniques of scriptwriting. My professional experience of writing and my international standing as a playwright mean I can offer research-informed teaching at the highest standard in scriptwriting across stage, film, television, radio, opera and musical.”

*Back Home* will be aired on Tuesday 24 January, at [2:15pm on BBC Radio 4](#) and available for a limited time on BBC iPlayer.

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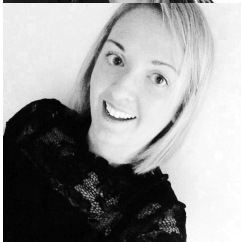


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