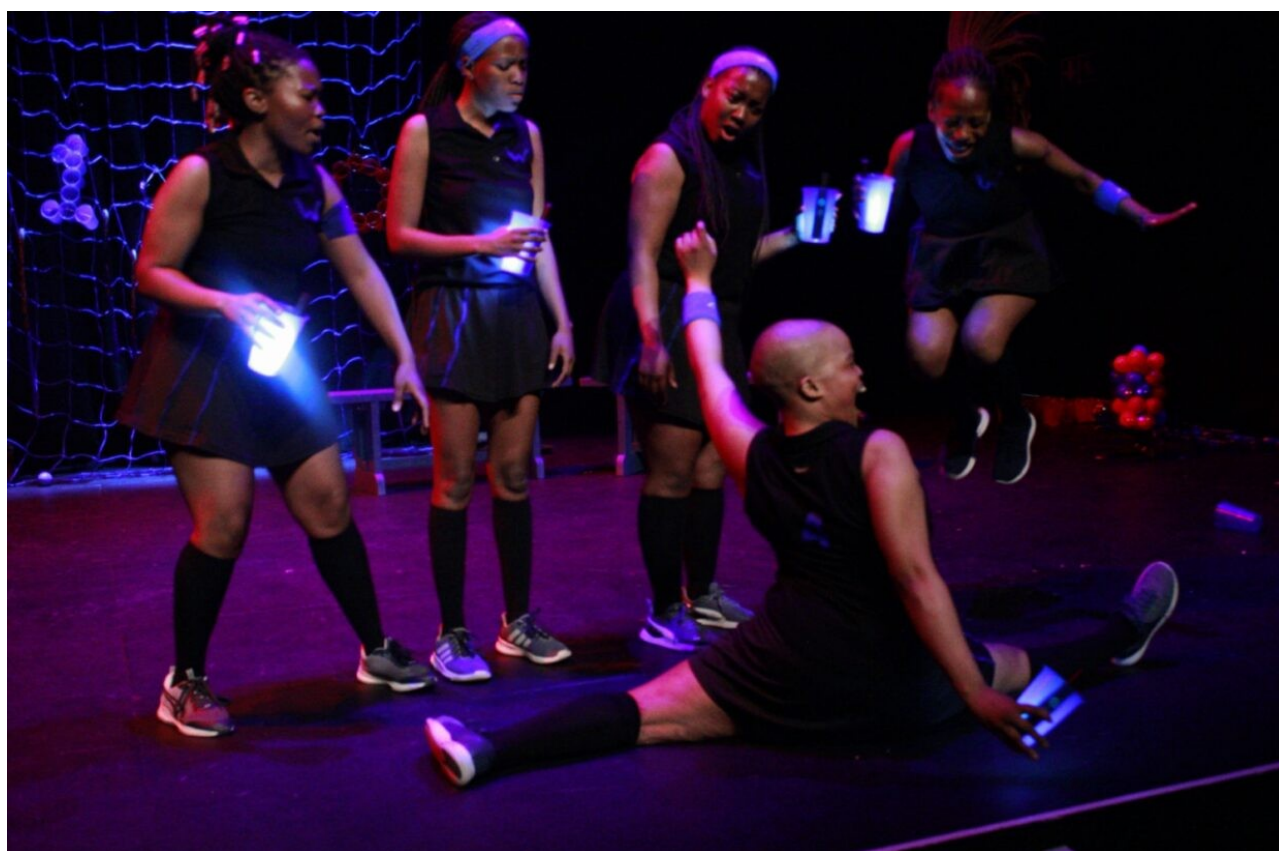


# THEATERKRANT

## Verity Productions

*Whistleblowers*

# RARELY HAS THE HEALING POWER OF THEATER BEEN SO PALPABLE



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**AWARDED: Critic's choice**



For *Whistleblowers*, directors Quintijn Relouw and Rob Murray collaborated with five young black women from the art and creative industry education AFDA Academy in Johannesburg. In the creative process they came together on the theme of gender-based violence: (sexual) violence against women. (A trigger warning for this review is therefore in order).

According to Interpol, South Africa is the 'rape capital of the world'. There are between 72 and 92 reports of rape per 100,000 inhabitants each year – but according to researchers, only 10% of rapes are reported to the police at all. It is estimated that in South Africa someone is victim of sexual assault every 25 seconds.

With this knowledge, which is mentioned in the program booklet of the performance, and with Nina Simone's *Sinnerman* over the speakers, you immediately look at the opening image of *Whistleblowers* with a strong emotional look. On the stage there are two water coolers, a net with hockey sticks and a scoreboard formed by plastic cups, and there are five places on the floor with hockey balls, each illuminated with a spotlight. Then the spots go out one by one, making the balls disappear. Even before Reabetswe Gaentswe, Boitshepo Maile, Kgaogelo Makgoba, Modipadi Mokgohloa and Phindiwe Qakoshe take the stage, the impact of femicide is already being felt.

The performance itself takes the form of a hockey game, in which the rules and structure of the sport are used as a metaphor for all facets of rape culture. After an impressive performance, one of the players has to sit on the lap of all her uncles and family friends, while they give themselves a good squeeze (the male roles are always played by the actresses themselves). The players receive yellow and red cards if, according to the male referee (Relouw himself), they behave too defiantly or brutally towards the patriarchal authority. And the match itself is presented as a confrontation between the female *Whistleblowers* on one side and male Red Caps on the other, with the physical fragility of 'our' team becoming increasingly palpable.

As the performance progresses, the atmosphere becomes increasingly grim. In cut scenes we suddenly find ourselves at a party where the women throw themselves on the dance floor, but are always chased by pushy men. The way the fun and life energy of the women is sucked away by the creeps of the men makes tangible how all-encompassing the problem of toxic masculinity can be for women; if you always have to be on your guard against danger, it will be impossible for you to enjoy your life.

In the end, the referee sends all women off the field with a red card, except one, who alone has to withstand the penalty shots of the entire male team. The link to gang rape is clear and heartbreaking, as is the implication of how men help each other break down female solidarity and isolate the group's most vulnerable individual. In the end, the women mount one last counterattack, furious at being pushed on the defensive all the time.

The outcome is uncertain: the performance comes to an abrupt end. But the climax is yet to come. The players, very emotional, first seek support from each other during the applause before one of them takes the floor and recounts the statistics. She says that the names on their hockey sticks are victims of sexual violence in South Africa and the Netherlands. She says that a month ago they lost one of their crew members 'in brutal fashion'. She says 'It's getting harder to perform this piece each time, it's getting harder to be a woman in South Africa every day'. And then she invites all 'survivors of sexual violence' to sign the hockey sticks on stage.

First one woman stands up, then more and more. In the end, half of the women (and a handful of men) in the room are on stage, comforting and supporting each other. The entire public - including those left behind - weeps for the violence that has been inflicted on these and hundreds of millions of other women, and continues to be inflicted every day. Rarely has the healing power of theater become so clear to me, especially because of the international character of this moment of collective solidarity.

The collaboration pleased the players so much that after the success of *Whistleblowers* they founded their own company, called Verity Productions. In November of last year, again with Relouw as director, they made their second performance *Fronted*, which takes the funeral of a black lesbian woman who committed suicide as a starting point. It is to be hoped that the group's incredibly brave and vital work will continue to be seen in the Netherlands and Europe.

Photo: Feziwe Nyoni