



# The Transformative Experience of Sharing

*A play about survival and redemption*

Review by Alexandra Cordukes

PHOTO: Heidrun Lohr

**T**he Baulkham Hill African Ladies Troupe reinforces how important the arts are to society. Writer and Director, Ros Horin, should receive an Order of Australia for this production for creating a work that addresses so many key issues into-day's society: women's rights with regards to domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape, tolerance, acceptance, diversity and integration.

With a successful 30 years of theatre behind her it is not just Ros's incredible writing and directing skills that make this play so special. It is her compassion, understanding, commitment and closeness with the cast that has enabled such an intimate and powerful piece of theatre to come to life. From the moment I took my seat in the cosy downstairs theatre at Belvoir St I felt part of something bigger.

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is based around a form of theatre known as 'verbatim theatre'. This is where the playwright researches, workshops and records interviews with her real life characters. In this case it is four African refugee women who have built new lives for themselves in Sydney.

The women are Yarrie Bangura and Aminata Conteh-Biger from Sierra Leone, Rosemary Kariuki-Fyfe from Kenya and Yordanos (Yordy) Haile-Michael from Eritrea. Yordy, a past client of STARTTS, was orphaned at an early age and grew up as a child soldier. Many years later she escaped on foot leaving her daughter behind.

Each of these four women has experienced horrific and prolonged human-rights abuses and was bound by a culture of silence. As they have never been able to discuss the horrors they had experienced with their families or communities, they had become trapped – prisoners in their own bodies.

"It took a long time to build up trust and confidence," recalls Ros Horin who met regularly with the women over several years. "We drummed and we talked, and danced and laughed and sang. Gradually the form and text began to take shape. There were times however, that were extremely painful for the women and I stopped and asked them most seriously if they would prefer not to go on – to just go home and get on with their lives. Not one ever did."

Once she had collated all of the material, Ros then brought in four professional actors, dancers and singers of African descent, to work with the women and help tell their stories. This insightful approach creates a rich

and fascinating tapestry of storytelling.

In the play we are taken on a journey to Africa and each individual story has been creatively woven into the script and brought to life through live dialogue, video recordings, photomontage, dance, poetry and song.

The bonds between the women on stage are strong and genuine and the women cherish each other throughout the tough scenes of recollection. These scenes are so powerful and harrowing that at times, as an audience member, I just wanted to reach out and comfort the women.

There are however some playful and amusing scenes reminiscent of some of the women's fonder memories of Africa that Ros has cleverly integrated throughout the play – sharing food, boisterous markets and local gossip. Giving pause to the more confronting stories, these scenes also show the women in good spirits celebrating life – their on-stage confidence a sign of just how far they have come.

The question is, what drives these four women to keep reliving their past on stage each evening?

The metaphor for this play is freedom - breaking free from the shame and horror of the past. The women hope that by sharing their stories they might be able to help free other women who have been subject to or are currently suffering from sexual, psychological or domestic abuse.

STARTTS has been a major sponsor of this production and provided a professional counselor to support the cast during the development and performance of the play. This project is core to the STARTTS mission to help facilitate the healing process of survivors of torture and trauma.

When I asked Ros how she felt that the play has helped the women with their healing process she replied, "whilst you will have to ask them individually, from my point of view these are not the same women I met three years ago. The process seems to have been incredibly therapeutic and has helped them switch on a light inside themselves that they had forgotten or never even knew existed."

When the play comes to an end we are left with a lot to contemplate. As I wiped the sad and happy tears from my eyes I felt totally in awe of all of these great women with their fighting spirit, resilience and gratitude for life.

Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is a powerful and engaging play with the potential to create individual and social change on a local, national and international scale. R