

The Truth Commission Netherlands

chokri ben chikha

photography kurt van der elst





*Is it a performance, a theatre production
or a genuine Truth Commission?*

The Truth Commission Netherlands

With the first Truth Commission ever operating in the Netherlands, the Flemish theatre company Action Zoo Humain calls attention to the too often neglected, colonial legacy of the human zoo. Until well into the 20th century, the Netherlands too exhibited thousands of men, women and children and depicted them as “exotic,” “wild” and “primitive” in so-called “human zoos”. For instance the Surinamese and Indonesians people displayed at the World Exhibition in Amsterdam (1883), the Indian Exhibition in Arnhem (1928) and the Senegalese village at the Nenijs to in Rotterdam (1928).

Does the human zoo still affect contemporary social thinking? Are ethnic profiling, the Dutch childcare benefits scandal, but also “innocent” social sharing of ‘exotic’ holiday images, not examples of this?

Former Prime Minister Mark Rutte and King Willem-Alexander recently apologised for the Netherlands’ historical involvement in slavery. The Truth Commission presses ahead with that and focusses on what might follow after the ‘but’. Put yourself in the position of the visitors and their problematic curiosity, of the exhibited people and how they experience this and of the organizers and their colonial propaganda machine.

Following the example of South Africa’s “Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” witnesses speak out in word, image and movement. Former politician Kathleen Ferrier and Mpho Tutu van Furth, daughter of the late South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as chairpersons, preside the commission.









cast

Chokri Ben Chikha (*concept/director, master of ceremony*)
Sietske De Vries (*project manager/dramaturg, master of ceremony*)
Kathleen Ferrier (*chairwoman*)
Mpho Tutu van Furth (*chairwoman*)
Bert Sliggers (*historian of science*)
Chantal Loïal (*witness*)
Iris Tjoa (*commission member*)
Mareille Labohm (*commission member*)
Fouad Mourigh (*witness*)
Moussa Ndiaye (*witness*)
Izah Hankammer (*witness*)
Tamar Niamut (*witness*)
Anis de Jong (*commission member*)
Mavis Carrilho (*witness*)
Nienke Nasserian (*witness*)
Wensley Piqué (*witness*)
David Prins (*witness*)

locations

debatpodium Arminius, Rotterdam (*October 2023*)
Huis der Provincie, Arnhem (*October 2023*)
De Waalse Kerk, Amsterdam (*November 2023, September 2024*)
Eerste Kamer, Den Haag (*April 2024*)
Perscentrum Nieuwspoord, Den Haag (*April 2024*)



2.

Wat is de erfenis van de human zoo?





 LOVE and BEAUTY - JARTZEK the HOTTENTOT VENUS.

SHARP









“Welcome everyone to *the Truth Commission Netherlands*. My name is Chokri Ben Chikha.”

“I am Sietske de Vries. Together we have organized this truth commission and we will maintain order tonight.”













*Artistic research report The Truth Commission Netherlands
January 2024*

Chokri Ben Chikha

Critical zooism: a manifesto

*From the moment I started my research into human zoos, which I am conducting for fifteen years now, it has been clear to me that the effect of this historical phenomenon is still tangible up to the present. The artistic research for the series of performances of the Truth Commission in the Netherlands emphasised the need for a new artistic expression once again. An expression in which artists critically examine how the human zoo functions today, in other words: to question contemporary stereotyping and image distortion. I have named this artistic expression **critical zooism**.*

The human zoos basically revealed stereotypes about population groups. Stereotypes are unabatedly topical, as they are deeply rooted in our human nature after all. Human zoos have an twofold effect: on the one hand they make our world appear simpler and more controllable and on the other hand they reveal a lot about ourselves, our perception and our reality.

The current generation of politicians understands the central premise of the human zoo very well. Trump, Marine Le Pen, Victor Orbán, Geert Wilders (this list is not exhaustive) discard “foreigners” based on their stereotypical characteristics. Zooism is how I call pitting one population against another.

Even those who celebrate multiculturalism are often unwittingly guilty of zooism. They may tolerate cultural differences, but their often-feigned tolerance, and sham equality can lead to indifference. Zooism, just like “pigeonholing,” is characterized by an urge for spectacle and voyeurism, an obsession with defining the own identity and a spectacularisation of difference.

As a means of opposition, I introduce critical zooism, in which artists take the initiative of questioning, reversing and fighting the legacy of the human zoo: unconscious and conscious zooism. Thus, both in a social and in an artistic way, steps are taken in the deconstruction of stereotypes, reducing individuals to one characteristic and dismissing people as animals.

In this sense critical zooism leads to reflection and catalyses subversiveness, diversity, empathy and transformation by not reducing the Other to a single characteristic. Critical zooism is a reaction to the frenetic multiculturalist and trans-culturalist representation of the Other in the performing arts as well as in other fields.

1. Critical zooism starts from stereotyping, with the zoo human as (research) tool, within the local, metropolitan super-diversity, the diversity within the diversity and wants to be a partner (in the discussion) in healing the broken trust caused by the social rupture and the (post)colonial past.
2. Critical zooism takes the liberty of making opposing diagnoses and defending indefensible positions. As a critical zooist, you play with your audience's (un)easiness by focusing on multiple identities. Is he one of us now? Do I belong to the group? Are we one group or two? Area of doubt. Radical doubt, intersubjectivity, rupture, not a permissive clash, but a resolute one.
3. Critical zooism doesn't tell us whether we create or criticise the human zoo ourselves. We make every effort to let the spectator take some of the responsibility.
4. Critical zooism recognizes the strength and weakness of stereotypes and does not flinch from that. They are the key to ourselves, our perspective and our reality. Stereotyping is flexible, hence stereotypes are in motion. They need to be questioned scrupulously, reset and adapted to an ever-changing reality through techniques such as decontextualization and/or association and as well as by using strategies such as searching the boundary between fiction and reality, irony, the audience as co-author, transparency of the creator and the strategy.
5. Critical zooism will have to feign authority, because the position of a creator and/or performer is by definition ironical. I am not a priest or politician, nor an exact scientist. Everyone will be free to ignore, ridicule or reject that authority.

6. Critical zooism feigns authority and that makes its position by definition ironic, but not non-committal. We are not social realists or naturalists, nor postmodernists or cynics. We are, however, searching for (performative) truth. To do so, we are inspired by factual, subjective, intersubjective and healing truth. We resist any form of caricaturing.

7. Critical zooism, diagnoses disease but does not cure it. The patient decides what to do with it. I believe that true authority does not give answers; true authority asks questions.

8. Critical zooism feigns authority in terms of good intentions. In telling an artistic-humanitarian story, we make our audience believe in our good intentions, in order to just deconstruct a similar commitment in the arts.

9. Critical zooism embraces *la pensée sauvage* and likes to work in a multi- and interdisciplinary way, based on the assumption that a variety of media can illuminate a common theme in a unique way, and one just penetrates deeper into the subject thanks to that multiplicity of perspectives.













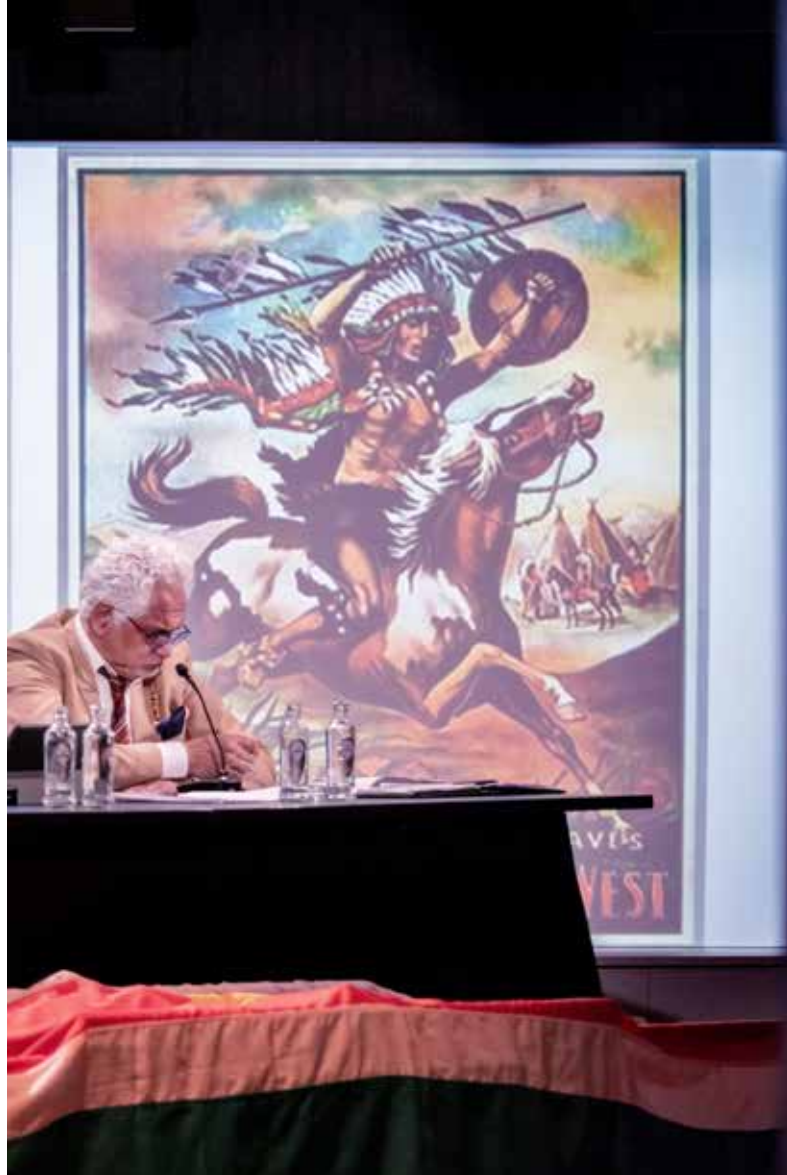
“What is the legacy of the human zoo? How does the former perspective affect today’s society? Are there contemporary forms in which the cultural heritage of the human zoo is somehow still palpable?”



CHANT





















GEZANGEN

“Victimization is not considered scientific resource material.”

















“Why are you applauding? For yourselves? To be honest, I particularly feel discomfort. I thank Mrs. Loïal for her efforts. Is it necessary that we continue to reenact this vulnerable past in this way?”















“You clearly didn’t understand, that is not the point right now. Does it bother me? I just want to know more about the circumstances of our ancestors.”

























“Don’t act like we’re all sitting here watching porn.”

Commission member **Mareille Labohm**







NOS

NIEUWS
POORT









“While the policy in the Netherlands was to disperse people with an immigrant background as much as possible, the Moluccans were always segregated from others. And that’s also how we were looked at by the Dutch who cycled past our neighbourhood and tried to catch a glimpse of us. We were called Ambonese... Monkeynese...”













GEZANGEN

276 v. 1-2 . .

791 v. 1-2-4 .

801 v. 1-2-5-7

416 . . .

978 v. 4 . .

. . .



Antwoord

Een Nederland communicatiecentrum
voor de samenleving en hun coalitie.









“Why is pain not welcome?
No one escapes suffering
not even the powerful
the rich
the insensitive”





CALL TO ACTION?

The political, real-life dimension of this project was examined in depth in the Call to Action. The Call to Action consisted of the five recommendations the audience could vote on during the performance. Those recommendations were:

- 1. A documentation centre must be established in the Netherlands in which all information regarding native peoples shows and human zoos is made available.**
- 2. Implementation of a national regulation for the grave rights of Moluccan KNIL veterans and the designation of the Moluccan districts as cultural heritage.**
- 3. Providing reparations to the descendants of those exhibited.**
- 4. The abolition of the visa policy for residents of former colonies and overseas territories of the Netherlands.**
- 5. Recognition of the historical “human zoo” as intangible Dutch cultural, allowing it to be included in the curriculum of both primary and secondary education.**











JASON

SMALLHD

FLUOR









Aankondiging
Bewerking van een belangrijke regeling over de
gradatie van Politie 1210, eveneens in
het samenhang met de Politie wetten en
subsidie en fond.

“Écoutez les échos de sa lutte. Ma danse n'est qu'une goutte dans l'océan, qui cherche à susciter le changement vers un monde de compréhension, où la justice trouve sa place. Et dans le silence du mouvement, une voix qui crie. Je suis femme, je suis noir, je suis moi-même.”













Were some scenes in *The Truth Commission* a form of trauma porn?

Were we as creators showing the pain of black people for the entertainment of a predominantly white audience? Were we repeating with certain scenes, whether commented on or not, whatever has occurred at the time of the human zoos?

Or did the structure of the performance, the continuous shift of perspective and testimony actually create confusion that encouraged the audience to reflect critically on what they had just seen?

*Artistic research report The Truth Commission Netherlands
January 2024*













“I, Wensley Piqué, I do it in my way. Nobody can take away my honour as a human being. I am responsible for that myself and I will not burden anyone else with that responsibility. Not only my colour is a source of pride, but also my history and everything I am.”



WAAR WIJ
WILLEN WONEN



GEZANGEN
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413
LITURGIE



GEZANGEN
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LITURGIE















“Do you see me going to a hotline?
Dutch hypocrisy.
I’d rather tell it like it is.
That’s what I’m cast for, again.
Here tonight in this so-called theatre.
This fake court filled with lies.”



GEZANGEN
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GEZANGEN
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By: Kathleen Ferrier | November 5, 2020

Heal the wounds of the colonial past with truth and reconciliation

Government, establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is what Kathleen Ferrier, Joost Röselaers and Jaap Scholten advocate.

The Netherlands is struggling with its slavery past and its impact today. In Rotterdam, the results of research into the city's colonial and slavery past were presented recently. Last month, Slavery in East and West. The Amsterdam Study was published. At the presentation, the importance of finding the truth about the past was emphasized. In the Netherlands, there has not yet been given an unequivocal answer to this, let alone constructive solutions.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In South Africa, after the downfall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the question of how to deal with the atrocities committed during apartheid arose. Rather than a legal approach, a very different solution was chosen.

Under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established. The commission wanted to do justice to the past so that a better future for all would become possible. Healing was a key word. And healing begins with listening to each other. To tell narratives and to seek understanding of the other's story, pain and fears.

Tutu distinguishes four steps towards reconciliation: the first two are telling narratives and naming the pain. Only then is there room for the third step, which is reconciliation. Remarkably, for Tutu, there is no need to show remorse or apologise. Reconciliation follows after openly telling what happened. The fourth and final step is "renew or let go". In renewal, mutual relationships are freed from the ghosts of the past, and a truly shared future can be worked on.

Connection wanted

So, it starts with truly listening to each other's stories, to all the stories. The Netherlands also faces this question: "how do you deal with each other and how do you carry on, as citizens of a country, that has a past in which the ancestors of one person deprived the ancestors of another of their humanity?" In the Netherlands, this was the case much earlier than in South Africa, but it still plays a sensitive role in the lives of many.

On 1 July 2019, Minister Ollongren wrote to the House of Representatives that she wanted to conduct a broad social dialogue aimed at connection. It is imperative for a shared future for our Dutch society that we engage in dialogue with each other. We therefore call for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the Netherlands, to face our past and provide the healing that is necessary for reconciliation.

The pain is still palpable

We envision a national commission, established by the government, composed of people with diverse backgrounds, who are not involved in the political and polarized discourse and who are knowledgeable about/experts in the subject. The commission has two missions. Firstly, it is charting history by bringing together all investigations to date and commissioning further research where necessary. Secondly, the commission has to listen to all the stories that need to be heard on how the past affects the present. These testimonies will be recorded and made accessible to the public. Together, the research and stories form a “memory of slavery”. A representative selection of the material obtained may be broadcasted on television.

The context is entirely different from that in South Africa. In the Netherlands, the stories go back to past centuries. There are no direct, still living culprits, maybe at best representatives of them.

However, we carry the stories with us; the pain is still palpable, largely because many, black and white alike, do not feel heard. Only after listening there will be room for reconciliation. Reconciliation is emphasized and strengthened through meaningful and secular ritual, which can be shaped and expressed by poets, artists, historians, philosophers and theologians of all persuasions.

In the Ridderzaal

The meeting of reconciliation would preferably take place at the National Commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the heart of our democracy, the Ridderzaal at the Binnenhof. In the presence of the King, the Cabinet and representatives of all the groups involved, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would report all its findings and identify the main pain points. Then the pain points are acknowledged, and reconciliation is articulated. The meeting may conclude with symbols of national unity and singing.

It takes courage and the right framework to emerge from the polarised discourse. It is about learning to look at that shared but painful past from different perspectives. It is important that those in privileged positions learn to see that they are not the only standard. It is equally important that the unprivileged dispose of the victim role.

These are deeply spiritual issues, about being seen and recognized or not. Healing should be the central point. That is what our society needs.

This article was co-authored by Joost Röselaers (remonstrant pastor) and Jaap Scholten (author) and previously appeared in NRC Handelsblad on 30 October 2020.











“Because the Holocaust can only be a moral benchmark if that benchmark carries universal value. Not if it is used to look away, away from war crimes or crimes against humanity. Why does the Netherlands abstain from agreeing to UN ceasefire resolutions? Is that necessary for Mark Rutte’s job application with NATO?”











Wilde Weiber - Amazonen-Corps - Dahomey



Eine Nacht
in
Dahomey



Wilde Weiber - Amazonen-Corps - Dahomey



Eine Nacht
in
Dahomey







“Yes, the n-word is a problem. If Mohammed Ali says it, it’s okay. And if Aimé Césaire says it, it’s okay. All the rest need to shut up.

Je suis nègre et nègre je resterai car ma couleur est une source de fierté. Elle représente la richesse de mes ancêtres, leur lutte et leur héritage.

Je suis fier de qui je suis, c’est là, que je trouve ma force.”

Witness **Moussa Ndiaye**













full Artistic Research Report 2024
The Truth Commission Netherlands
Action Zoo Humain

C R E D I T S

concept/director, master of ceremony

Chokri Ben Chikha

cast

Kathleen Ferrier, Mpho Tutu van Furth, Bert Sliggers,
Chantal Loïal, Iris Tjoa, Mareille Labohm, Anis de Jong,
Fouad Mourigh, Moussa Ndiaye, Izah Hankammer,
Tamar Niamut, Zouzou Ben Chikha, Nienke Nasserian,
Wensley Piqué, David Prins

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research committee 2

Djuwa Mroivilli, Jolanda Spoel, Florian Hellwig, Sruti
Bala, Laura Cull, Arkadi Zaides, Wensley Piqué, Rutger
Esajas

research committee 3

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Bala en Mpho Tutu Van Furth

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Mirachor, Nora Mohammed, Evelien Jonckheere en
Karel Arnaut

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project manager/dramaturg, master of ceremony

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production management

Lique van Gerven

music

Seppe Salomé

video

Sven Peetoom

live video crew

Korrel Film

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technische productie: Stefan Mandersloot

schakeltechniek: Sid Zeno Duit, Stefan Mandersloot

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Widlak, Caylee Nielen, Iris Klein, Duncan de Koning

website/socials

Robin Laurens, Kirsten Lipman, Oya Latifa

press

Ronald de Groot

coproducers

ACTION ZOO HUMAIN, Perpodium, DEGASTEN, Theater Rotterdam, deBuren, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, Musis & Stadstheater Arnhem, de Brakke Grond

with the support of

Bijlmer Parktheater, IMPACT, Theater Zuidplein, NTGent, Provinciehuis Arnhem, Waalse Kerk, Debatcentrum Arminius, de Vlaamse Overheid, Fonds 21, Fonds voor Cultuurparticipatie, Fonds Podiumkunsten, Vriendenloterijfonds, Fonds ZOZ

Deze voorstelling kwam tot stand met de steun van de Taxshelter van de Belgische Federale Overheid via uFund

playlist

4 > 7 October 2023, Rotterdam - Debatpodium Arminius

26 > 29 October 2023, Arnhem - Huis der Provincie

1 > 4 November 2023, Amsterdam - De Waalse Kerk

4 April 2024, Den Haag - Eerste Kamer

5 April 2024, Den Haag - Perscentrum Nieuwspoort

14/15 September 2024, Amsterdam - De Waalse Kerk (shortlisted for the Dutch Theatre Festival)

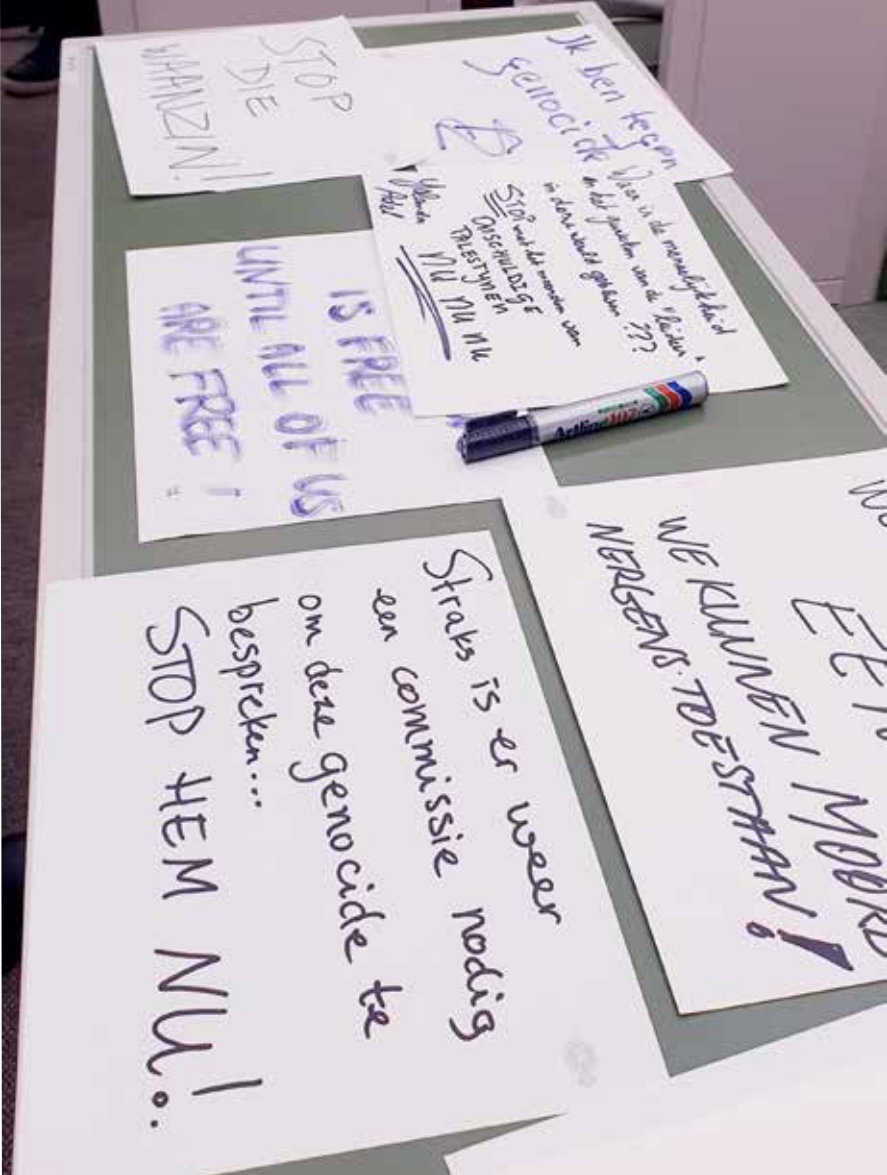


“The Gent-based theatre collective Action Zoo Humain performed *The Truth Commission* at the Dutch Senate in The Hague on Thursday night. The performance is about the history and impact of human zoos. It came to a brief occupation of the conference room to demand a cease-fire in Gaza.”

“The confusion thus created by *The Truth Commission* is particularly productive: where does art end and activism begin? By ultimately asking the audience to engage in actual resistance to the dehumanization of ‘the other,’ the performance emphasizes everyone’s personal responsibility toward the toxic legacy of the human zoos.”

Article The Truth Commission, de Standaard, 5/4/2024, by Marijn Lems







Eerste Kamer
der
Staten-Generaal





Review Theaterkrant:

They were brought to the Netherlands in groups and exhibited in the open in recreated huts, wearing their own traditional clothing and using their own tools. They received no or too little money and often suffered hunger. In these circumstances, these non-white people were put on exhibit for the Dutch bourgeoisie.

The performances represent court cases with a chairman, a jury, witnesses and experts. In Rotterdam, the Arminius Church was chosen as the setting. The stately, wood-panelled interior and wooden benches create an atmosphere of authority. Witnesses successively tell their stories, using photographs and dance. They all testify about this history, often completely unknown to the Dutch public. The information you hear and see as a spectator is alternately harrowing, staggering, painful, anger and shame provoking. Fortunately, humour is also used to make it all more digestible.

If The Netherlands is serious about dealing with its slavery and colonial past, The Truth Commission deserves to be seen all across The Netherlands. This coping process will take generations, but this testimony of a disgrace of the Netherlands, provides everyone with a reason to examine themselves and investigate the many concealed or hidden facts of Dutch slavery and colonial history that have not yet seen the light of day. Knowledge of these is crucial to cope with this past in a serious way.

Power to mister Chokri Ben Chikha and his company for Action human zoo!

Review Theaterkrant, 6/10/2023, by Andre Reeder

press quotes:

“It’s about letting different truths and perspectives collide.”

Interview with director Chokri Ben Chikha, NRC, 27/09/2023, by Marijn Lems

“Between the squabbling of the commission members and the emotional dance solos of the performers, perhaps the most powerful scene comes toward the end of the performance.”

Review De Lage Landen, 24/11/2023, by Laurens de Vos

“Humans as exotic attraction exhibited in a zoo; it’s not that long ago at all.”

Interview with Chokri Ben Chikha and Kathleen Ferrier, de Gelderlander, 19/10/2023, by Sandra van Maanen

“I thought it was freaking confusing. It’s just about dehumanizing peoples and still I could laugh about it. I’m totally blown away. I give the performance a 10.”

Denzel von Deira, host KULT / Omroep Zwart, TV episode on 19/10/2023



The Truth Commission Netherlands was selected for the Dutch Theatre Festival

The Dutch Theatre Festival shows the best performances of last season every year. The performances are selected by a professional jury. The festival aims to be the showcase of the Dutch theatre. The Dutch Theatre Festival also shows successful new developments in the field of theatre, takes the lead in the conversation about the role of theatre in society and blurs the boundaries between different art disciplines.

ACTION HUMAN ZONOMA IN

partners



DEGASTEN

met steun van



Vlaanderen
verbeelding werkt

**BULMER
PARKTHEATER**



FONDS
PODIUM
KUNSTEN
PERFORMING
ARTS FUND NL



FONDS VOOR
CULTUR
PARTICIPATIE

Acknowledgments by Action Zoo Humain

When we started the conversations for The Truth Commission Netherlands in 2019, we could not have imagined that the time would only come in 2023. Partly due to the corona pandemic, we had no choice but to develop the project at a very slow pace. Thanks to this 'extra time', the project grew from a focus on one city, Rotterdam, to overarching artistic research into human zoos in the Netherlands.

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who contributed one way or another to the creation of *The Truth Commission Netherlands* over the past five years. In the first place, many thanks to our partners Theater Rotterdam, Musis & Stadstheater Arnhem, DEGASTEN, de Brakke Grond, International Theater Amsterdam, Flemish-Dutch House for Culture and Debate deBuren, Bijlmer Parktheater, IMPACT and Theater Zuidplein, for your commitment, support and openness to participate in this project. Particular, Dave Schwab, Sènamì Awunou, Stefanie Vermeiren, Milou Brockhus, Richard Kofi, Lisa Wiegel, Ingrid Scheper, Moeps Stellingwerf, Nataša Cvjetković, Bettina Lorscheijd, Willem Bongers-Dek, it was a pleasure to be able to turn to you for a critical reflection, a sparring moment and extra motivation during the research and creation process.

We are also very grateful to Robin Laurens and Kirsten Lipman for their efforts in taking care of project communications and continuing to improve the communications strategy.

In addition to the commitment of our partners, we have also been able to rely to a great extent on the flexibility, understanding and knowledge of everyone who has been part of our Action Zoo Humain company the past few years. Thank you Ann, Veerle and Oya for always being there for us. We look forward to being in Ghent more often.

Also many thanks to everyone who shared their insights with us during the research process: Bert Sliggers, Iris Tjoa, Arend van Dam, Djuwa Mriovilli, Jolanda Spoel, Florian Hellwig, Sruti Bala, Laura Cull, Arkadi Zaides, Wensley Piqué, Rutger Esajas, Carina Fernandes, Ashley Chin, Shirin Mirachor, Sruti Bala, Mpho Tutu Van Furth, Evelien Jonckheere, Karel Arnaut, Marieke Bloembergen, Parveen Kanhai and Quinsy Gario. Moderators of our research committees, States Generals and follow-up discussions: Mahutin Awunou, Richard Kofi, Jamie Huisman and Caterine Baeten, thank you! Anne Helsen, Tanja Elstgeest and Nora Mohammed, thank you for your commitment during the start of the project.

Furthermore, a sincere shout out to all the young people who attended the youth committees: Wouter, Amine, Marit, Alex, Imani, Oumaima, Soumaya, Ernanda, Indy, Nelgina, Yanna, Pauline, Szymon, Merel, Linde. Your contributions have inspired and touched us enormously. Also the supervisors of the youth committees, Senna Pauli and Jasmine van Putten (TR), Roos Hauwert and Karlijn van Kruchten (Muis & Stadstheater), and coordinators Jamie Huisman and Dorothy Blokland of DEGASTEN, thank you for shaping the youth trajectory and surprising us with your insights.

We are also very grateful for the collaboration with the cast and crew of the performances. Thanks to your willingness to step into our story, the performance got the wings it deserved. You were a fantastic team: Kathleen Ferrier, Mpho Tutu van Furth, Bert Sliggers, Chantal Loial, Iris Tjoa, Mareille Labohm, Anis de Jong, Fouad Mourigh, Moussa Ndiaye, Izah Hankammer, Tamar Niamut, Nienke Nasserian, Wensley Piqué, Lique van Gerven, Jan Berckmans, Sid Duit (Korrel), Stefan Mandersloot (Korrel), Nynke Bonnema (Korrel), Zouzou Ben Chikha.

Finally, without The Truth Commission in Belgium and South Africa, we would never have been where we are today. Our thanks go to everyone who was involved in previous editions.

COLOPHON

photography / Kurt Van der Elst

composition & lay-out / atelierkvde

translation / Katia Brys

with thanks to / Chokri Ben Chikha, Sietske de Vries, ACTION ZOO HUMAIN

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