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performance

## 'Surveiller et punir' in modern times

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**Four former prisoners take the stage of NTGent in Lara Staal's theatre performance *De Gevangenis*, critically questioning the Belgian criminal justice institution. What does punishment mean? How does society see it? And how can we do better? We spoke with Adam Rambouk, the youngest of the group, and Aisha Adepoju, a documentary maker, about their joint mission to shed light on a failing system.**

### **Hi both. Can you introduce yourselves?**

Adam: Hi. I'm Adam, 20 years old. A while ago I spent two months in prison because of a fight. Now I'm playing in the theatre performance *De Gevangenis* by Lara Staal, premiering here at NTGent.

Aisha: My name is Aisha, I'm a documentary filmmaker and collaborated on the video design. Together with Lara, I interviewed ex-prisoners, judges, street workers, prison guards, and criminologists,... We used those interviews as a research tool and integrated them into the play to offer viewers a multifaced view of the Belgian prison system.



### **How did you get involved?**

Aisha: Lara had seen my graduation film, *El camino frente a mi*, about a girl who runs up against the limitations of the regular school system. She had previously made *DISSIDENT*, in which students questioned the educational system. As she continued her documentary approach in *De Gevangenis*, and as I love theatre, I was excited to collaborate.

Adam: I got involved through Aisha, whom I met during my first theatre experience with *de nieuwe spelers*. When she told me about this project, I was eager to participate. In the beginning, it was a big question mark. I didn't know what to expect. But it has been great so far!



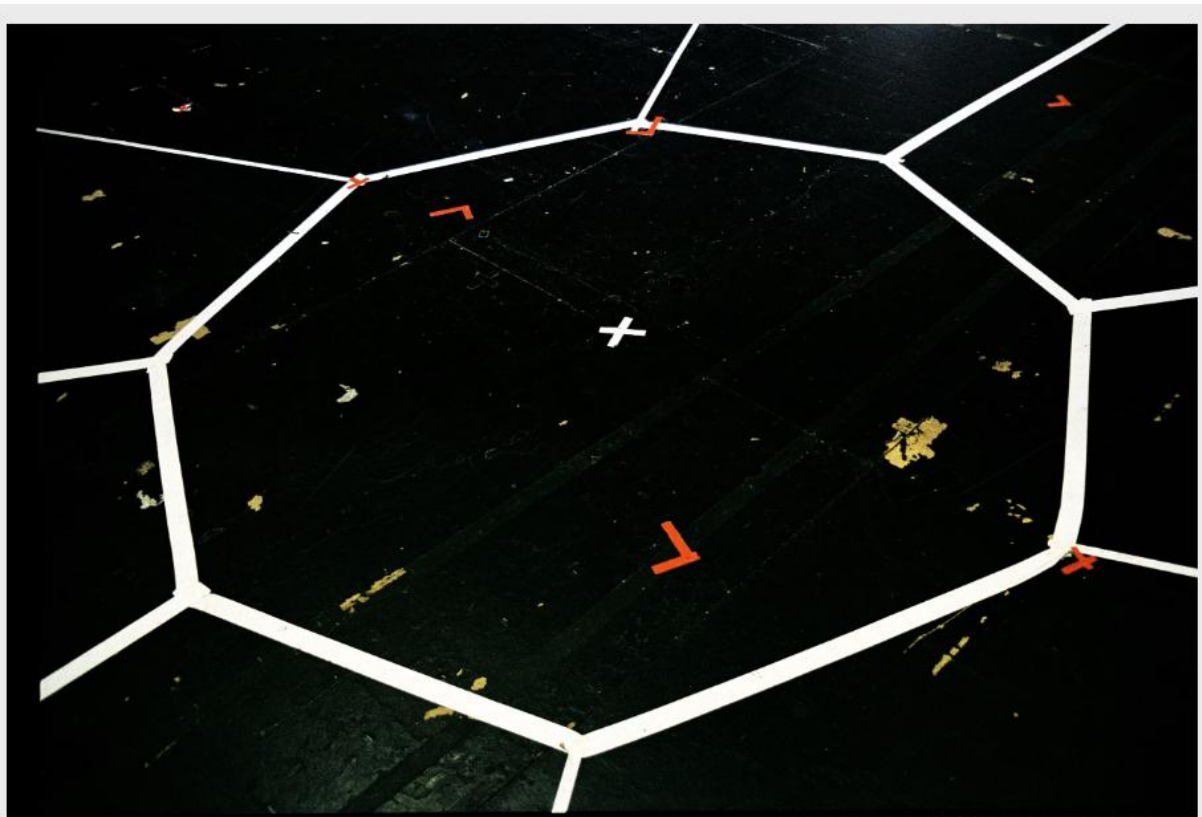
### **What takes place on stage?**

Adam: Together with three other ex-convicts, I share my story. The performance is based on our experiences in prison, but it also includes role-play. For example, I play a lawyer and a judge. In a way, judges are 'against us' — they are on the other side. Now, through acting, I get to experience that side.

Aisha: The performance is a collage of theatre, found footage, and live video play. It features spoken word and music by rapper Freddy Konings, one of the four actors. The pre-recorded interviews provide a polyphonic perspective on the prison system.

Adam: Most of us had no stage experience, except for Freddy and Kevin, a vlogger. For Bahadir, for example, it was his first time. He is our 53-year-old co-star.

***A world, not as separate as we think, as those physical walls symbolising prison are already invisibly present in our society (Aisha)***



**Aisha, what was it like to delve into the prison system?**

Aisha: I knew little about the topic, so it was a privilege to learn more about it by capturing the testimonials. A world, not as separate as we think, as those physical walls symbolising prison are already invisibly present in our society.

**Is that the main message?**

Aisha: There's no straight message, but rather a call for reflection and humanity. It's a search for answers to questions like: 'Who belongs in prison?' 'How do they get there?' 'What does punishment mean and what's society's view on it?' From multiple voices, we hear that the prison system does not work and yet we keep it intact. Belgium has been convicted several times for its detention conditions.

Adam: I was 18, had a clean record, went to school, and worked. Then, I went to jail for a fight. A fight? People don't know what we experience inside. I hope this performance gives them a better understanding of what life in prison really is like.





**Adam, when did you discover that theatre was something for you?**

Adam: I signed up with *de nieuwe spelers* together with two friends. We were mostly into film. In the beginning, it took some getting used to, but after a year of workshops and rehearsals, we were able to present a beautiful show.

Aisha: *de nieuwe spelers* was a free theatre program for those who do not get as many performing opportunities, with the aim to increase diversity on stage, film and television. During this time, the castings for *De Gevangenis* were already running. Lara had several people in mind, but we were missing a young voice. So I approached Adam.

Adam: I had spoken very little about my time in prison. With the people of *de nieuwe spelers*, I felt safe to talk about my past. Now I'm bringing it to the world with *De Gevangenis*. It's a great way to share my story :-).

***I had spoken very little about my time in prison. Now I'm bringing it to the world with De Gevangenis (Adam)***



### **Who should come to see the show?**

Aisha: The aim is to reach a diverse audience. It is as important to reach citizens as it is to reach policymakers. Policymakers act on the societal gaze and vice versa. The play wants to raise awareness about prison, a place that is often forgotten.

Adam: I especially hope that prison directors and guards will come to see it. They go home at 5 p.m., while we remain inside 24/7, often for years. The experience never truly leaves you, it stays with you for life. The outside world knows little about what happens behind prison walls, only we know it. So, we bring that reality to them.