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Sensitive Guys, a comedy about no laughing matter

By Peter Crimmins

A Philadelphia theater company is premiering a new play this week, dealing with sexual assault on a college campus. It's unusual because the entire cast made up of only women and gender non-conforming actors. It's also unusual because it's a comedy.

"I didn't set out to write a comedy," said MJ Kaufman, the author of "Sensitive Guys" opening Thursday at the Drake Theater. "When you invest in the truth of character and story, it turns out to be funny." Kaufman finds comedy in places where people don't have the language to accurately describe what they are going through, and says right now there is a paucity of words for unwanted sexual behavior. "A lot of our culture right now is trying to redefine language — that's funny," said Kaufman. "When people don't have the words to talk about sexual assault, they say things like, 'Rapist. I mean, 'perpetrator.' I mean, 'person who perpetrated.'" That's real. It's a complicated reality, and we laugh at it."

The play is set in a fictional New England college where two groups of students — a men's group and a women's group — are each trying to end all sexual violence on campus, 100 percent of it, in five years. It takes shots at the impossible idealism of student groups, the messiness of immature sexuality, while keeping its powder dry to criticize the institutional shortcomings of a college administration doing little to stem sexual violence on campus.

In one scene, members of the women's group argue about how much levity to put into a presentation they have to make for prospective students. If they don't appeal to new recruits, the college may rescind their group status. "You know how many students the Environmental Action Group has? Or the Women's History Month Coalition?" one student said with rapid excitement. "The Students Resisting and Transforming Corporations has gotten so big, they are meeting in Southview."

"What we do isn't glamorous," countered another, more somber student. "It's not for everyone. We're not just a resume booster for wannabe nonprofit executives."

"Well, we want people to actually show up."

There are no men performing in this play. All the actors are either female or actors who don't identify as either gender. Kaufman explicitly wrote that casting decision into the script. Kaufman, too, is not gender-conforming, preferring to be referred to as "they." As in: they wrote this play two years ago, before the #MeToo movement consistently put sexual assault in daily news headlines. "We kept coming back to the text and kept feeling differently because of the world," they said. "We felt different levels of hopeful, or not hopeful, or raw, or devastated, and needed it to end on a different note."

That "we" includes director Evren Odcikin, who says he is drawn to scripts that make audiences cry when they should be laughing, and laugh when they should be crying. To him, "Sensitive

"Guys" offers a group of characters wading through a murky sexual minefield, inside an educational institution providing no clear assistance.

"I think we are used to the kind of survivor stories fed to us through mainstream media that can be dehumanizing," said Odcikin. "What MJ has done — it's beautiful. These people are not one-dimensional. They are funny, they hurt, they laugh, they cry, they support each other, but they don't baby each other."

While sexual harassment and assault has always been a problem, recent news coverage about scores of prominent political, business, and cultural figures toppling from sexual harassment accusations has given "Sensitive Guys" an urgency it may not have had a year ago. It was workshopped in the summer of 2016, at [InterAct's](#) New Play Development and Philadelphia's [PlayPenn](#).

Since then, Kaufman and Odcikin tweaked the script to better reflect the current moment.

"It was challenging, because we don't want the play to be so timely now that it doesn't speak to a truth later," said Odcikin. "It's making a proposal, asking questions that feel relevant right now with an eye toward how — we hope — this problem will be better dealt with, soon."