

Leon van Nierop's review: Zero to Zero

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Documentary about what happens behind the scenes in hospitals during the Covid pandemic.

The timing of this brilliant documentary couldn't be any better.

The public may be inclined to think: Everything is over now, and the world will go back to normal after all the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Newspaper articles give cold hard facts and figures that people often skim over, people speculate. There are those who are for and those who are against vaccinations, and then there are those who have other theories to offer. But there are no random speculations here. Only facts, which are backed up by evidence on camera. But this earnest, matter-of-fact and level-headed documentary puts matters in astonishing, and sometimes brutal, perspective.

Yes, there are the usual facts given by the academics, but Christa Lategan (skilled editor and co-producer), Professor Leonie Scholtz and Shem Compion dare to go – with their cameras – where no one has dared to go before. Right into the belly of the beast. Into the wards where people either die or push through towards recovery.

They focus mainly on the Zuid-Afrikaans Hospital (Pretoria), where people risked their lives, and are still doing so, and where others who were looking in from the outside, underestimated the virus. Should you, the viewer, be confronted with the anxiety and suffering of healthy people who are suddenly flattened by the virus (many of whom died), you will too – along with the hospital staff – want to give a standing ovation to those patients who fought their way back. Not only with the incomparable selflessness with which the hospital workers cared for them, but also for the patients and the nursing staff's faith and prayers. And even for the tears they shed.

This isn't some boring pile of facts. We see conversations with the healthcare workers – especially the exceptional and professional Dr Yanila Nyasulu – who all fought daily on the frontline, and whose observations and stories about patients, which they experienced first-hand and even participated in through the eye of a lens, makes this a remarkable documentary.

But the strong point of this documentary not only lies in the interviews with the heroes and heroines – thus the healthcare workers – but especially with those who survived: like the man, CEO of a large company, who could only start to speak again after three weeks, let alone stand or walk. Without falling into sentimentality or melodramatic adoration, this documentary pays homage to the healthcare workers, who worked days and weeks on end practically without rest, to help and encourage patients to recover, especially those in isolation. Because the worst is (out of their own mouths) how scary it is to lie alone in a bed, next to oxygen tanks and with a mask on, and not even to be able to see the faces of the heroes and heroines who are caring for you, let alone be able to communicate with them.

And then the most priceless moment of all: that first touch of a hand on a sweat-drenched face after they've recovered. And the trauma the family goes through.

Even if you only watch one documentary in your life, make this one a priority. Because the film makers and the crew behind the scenes deserve as much praise – for bringing us the truth fearlessly and without sensation – as the healthcare workers do for saving so many lives. And their tears when they lose a patient.