



### Theatre blog

## Shameless and subversive: the feminist revolution hits the Edinburgh fringe

**From a burlesque that belittles the patriarchy to an unholy reworking of the Bible, righteous anger bubbles over into artistic brilliance at the 2016 festival**

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Smashing the patriarchy has never seemed quite so much fun as it does in [Hot Brown Honey](#) (Assembly Roxy), an all-female cabaret-style show from Australia that takes on gender, sexism, colonialism and race with a raucous glee, while giving a feminist makeover to circus, hip-hop and burlesque. There is an extraordinary straps sequence that conjures the twisted moves of a woman trying to escape domestic violence; even hula hoops are called into service to explore western tourists' culture of entitlement.

The women in [Hot Brown Honey](#) are all queen bees out to sting male assumptions and privilege, question outmoded attitudes and make links between different kinds of oppression. The struggles of Indigenous Australians are entwined with those of

women, in a show that may not win any awards for the subtlety of its politics, but which raises the rafters with its sly, subversive use of entertainment as a means of consciousness-raising.

The show is not alone in its interest in gender issues on the fringe in 2016. As [Joyce Macmillan](#) observed at the [first round of this year's Fringe First awards](#): "Gender is always a theme, but the mood this year is very much one of anger from women writers and performers in a time when some people are arguing the feminist revolution is over, but in some ways things are getting worse."



📷 Intelligent and heartfelt ... The Interference. Photograph: Brittney Rivera

That's certainly apparent in Lynda Radley's [The Interference](#), an intelligent, heartfelt show written for Pepperdine University in Malibu, which is playing at C Venues Chamber Street until 16 August. The culture of campus misogyny combines with a toxic world of online comment when Karen is raped by a football star, Smith, and

refuses to back down despite the obstructions of the police, the timid university authorities and a swell of public opinion arguing that his budding football career is of primary importance. There's much here to remind us about the [Stanford University case](#) that made the headlines recently.

The *Interference* is cleverly staged, like a football game on which people are constantly commentating - a device that highlights how, in an ultra-connected world, privacy is at a premium, with everybody's actions seen as public property. All the more so if you are a woman, because it's still very much a man's world. After all, even some women posit the opinion that Karen should have been grateful the good-looking jock Smith paid her any attention, and say refusing to keep silent is just more evidence that she's a [slut](#).

For Karen, it's almost impossible to secure real justice in a world where trial by social media rules, and so too it proves for Leah in the sparkily written and brilliantly performed [Fabric](#) at Underbelly. In Charlotte Josephine's [Blush](#) (also at Underbelly), an 18-year-old girl's ex-boyfriend has sent naked images of her to his friends, one of whom has published them on the internet. There have been 30,000 clicks and rising, and although the public sharing of private images is now against the law, officialdom offers little redress in these circumstances.



📷 Brilliantly performed ... *Fabric*. Photograph: Pamela Raith



Blush, composed of intelligent, sharply observed monologues from five characters, is scrupulously even-handed in the way it treats men and women, but also makes clear that it's women who are judged more harshly and slut-shamed - shame that will need to be addressed if change is going to happen.

Fortunately, there are an awful lot of shameless hussies around on the fringe, repossessing the naked female body and making us think again about how we gaze at it. As this year's fringe began, Moira Knox - the woman known as the Mary Whitehouse of the fringe during the 1980s and 90s, when she campaigned against shows that featured bad language, nudity and blasphemy - died aged 85. She would have been apoplectic in the face of Lucy McCormick's Triple Threat at Underbelly, an unholy, low-down, skilled up, hilarious reworking of the story of Jesus Christ from a female perspective.

Like RashDash's Two Man Show at Summerhall, Triple Threat doesn't just remind that the history of patriarchy is long and embedded, it also shows us we have to remake these stories and tell them differently if we are going to change our own culture and its attitudes towards women. Two Man Show does it by pointing up the fact that naturalistic theatre might be a tool of the patriarchy, while Triple Threat suggests that it is in live art and singing and dancing that liberation might lie.

In that, it has much in common with Hot Brown Honey, and it's the joyousness of all these shows that make them so engaging, even to the final crowdsurfing moment in Triple Threat, where it is a woman riding the crest of the wave. It's also the way that they reclaim the naked female body as something to be proud of rather than an object of shame or a sex object to be possessed by men. In Two Man Show, the women's nakedness has a matter-of-fact ease, as if nudity is the most natural thing in the world and being happy in your own body is a right.



📷 Skilful and hilarious ... Lucy McCormick in Triple Threat. Photograph: Tamsin Drury

Good stuff, but I do wonder about the fact that all these naked female bodies on display are ones of young perfection - not an ounce of excess flesh, and all clipped and trimmed to conform to what quite honestly is a male idea of female beauty - but as Nicole Henriksen observes in her account of working as a stripper, Nicole Henriksen is Makin It Rain (Underbelly), there are many daily assumptions made about the female body, and also about women who use their bodies as part of their work. Henriksen's show highlights the fact that we make distinctions between the female body exposed in a strip club and the same female body doing exactly the same movements on a stage in Underbelly. Why is it OK in the latter context if it's a feminist statement, but deemed suspect in the former?

It's these very double-standards, and the idea that the sex worker who gets raped is less deserving of sympathy and justice than "good girls" who dress demurely, that are under scrutiny in these shows, which speak up loudly about the corrosive effects of shame. They prove that women are angry about the everyday sexism they encounter. And if getting that message across involves flaunting the naked female body then so be it, because - as the seminal 70s feminist handbook of women's health proclaimed - these are "Our Bodies, Ourselves".