



Dutch author, scenographer and director Dries Verhoeven composes object-plays. Unrestrained by habit, he sets up his cinema installation in public squares, driving his caravan from Switzerland to Italy, always in search of the new.

# Dries Verhoeven the one-man band

Born in 1976 in the southern Netherlands to a pianist father and a mother working as a visual artist, Dries Verhoeven studied hotel management, reassuring his parents of the future prospects of their young son. But within a year he grew tired of his studies and turned to more artistic endeavours. He opted for scenography at the Toneelacademie, Maastricht's theatre academy, where he received a technical and classical education. *"We were learning a very conventional kind of scenography for the theatre and opera,"* he tells us. *"It quickly led me to realise that I wanted to do something completely different."* Dries Verhoeven finished his education in 1999 and

began his career as an assistant to Jan Versweyveld, scenographer for the choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and the director Ivo van Hove. In 2003, he began a collaborative project with Marcus Azzini, for whom he would design some very noteworthy scenographies that were close to installation work. He then experimented with disrupting the border separating actors and audience. *"I wanted to keep going further. I wanted spectators to feel like they had a role to play in what was happening, that we, audience and actors, were experiencing an exceptional moment together."*

For Dries Verhoeven, two working concepts would



*In the middle of the ford.*

**In a caravan.**

Two spectators face each other, separated by a pane of glass. Each one hears Dries Verhoeven's text on romantic relationships... and must follow instructions: choose a drink in the cooler, place hand on the glass. Little by little, a dialogue emerges. (2003)



*You are here.*

#### **An installation in a hangar.**

Each spectator is seated inside a box and receives little notes slid beneath the door. The ceiling is then raised and the others suddenly appear in a mirror. Stories cross paths... (2007)



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emerge: working with time and with the encounter, the “*here and now*”; and stepping away from the indoor performance space to reach a different audience – the passer-by. After “*Hartstocht*” (“*Passion*”), a trip in a minibus where spectators discover the city through mirrors placed on their laps, Verhoeven created “*Uw koninkrijk kome*” (“*In the middle of the ford*”) in 2003. In a caravan, two spectators – a man and a woman who do not know each other – come face to face, separated by a pane of glass. The man hears the woman’s voice and she his. The text, written by Dries Verhoeven, explores the twists and turns of romantic relationships. But it also gives instructions to the two spectators: place hand on window, plunge feet into a small sandbox hidden beneath trapdoor, etc. A strange, involuntary dialogue takes place, causing the duo to laugh, blush, or be moved, as they are both charmed and constrained into looking into each other’s eyes.

#### **Actors and audience in retreat**

Can one really call this a show? By shattering the very parameters of performance, “*In the middle of the ford*” reveals the uniqueness of Dries Verhoeven’s work and affirms his creative freedom. He pulls the actor and the audience from our very eyes – no one could see the two spectators. It’s a powerful experience and a memorable one, and a creation that places the artist in contact with experiential theatre. In the Netherlands, as in Flemish Belgium, many artists have been interested in the relationship that the stage and performance space have to the emotions experienced by audience members. We also find this concept and similar acts of disruption in the work of Ivo van Hove, Guy Cassiers or Lotte van der Berg – whose creation “*Braakland*” (2006) had a strong influence on Dries Verhoeven. Supported by the festival Huis en Festival aan de Werf in Utrecht, Battersea Arts Centre in London, Hebbel am Ufer Theater in

Berlin, and the network In Situ and La Villette in Paris, Dries Verhoeven is a decidedly European artist. “*In the middle of the ford*” has toured in Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. In 2005, his profile as a creator extended into the world of deserted railways with “*Sporenonderzoek*”, created in France under the title “*Mobile/Immobilie*”, in a shipyard in Ramonville, near Toulouse. The spectator begins a conversation on the phone with a performer – a term preferred to that of actor because the performer does not act, but navigates between reality and fiction, two entangled facets of the proposed theatrical situations. The spectator is pulled into the space between the two, between real and invented stories, and part of Verhoeven’s work as scenographer is also to construct specialised spaces meant to pull the spectator into a situation. The black box of “*De grote beweging*” (“*The Great Movement*”), created in 2006, is set up on public squares. In this small, comfortable cinema, about thirty people watch a live film of the square, listening to a text inspired by Chinese philosophy that traces the history of the universe right up to our current hurried, individualist society. Dries Verhoeven invites us to change our outlook on the world, clearly manifesting his own commitments and values.

#### **Immigrant, foreigner, other**

With its converted space, Verhoeven’s 2007 work “*U bevindt zich hier*” (“*You are here*”) deftly reconciles the author, director and scenographer. The spectator first believes that he is alone in a room, then discovers, when a mirror-ceiling is lifted, that he is in the middle of a much larger picture and that an entire audience is, like him, lying down on a bed. “*You are here*”, and “*Niemand’sland*” (“*No Man’s Land*”, 2008) were the result of one central concern: “*I live in Amsterdam in a neighbourhood where 70% of the population is made up of immigrants, yet I realised one day that I* →

#### **Experiential theatre**

awakens all of the spectator’s senses, offering an adventure that often blends theatre and multidisciplinary installations: going on stage and taking one’s place on set among the performers (Ivo van Hove); walking alone in the sand dunes (Bob Wilson); watching a street performance through a window pane, unseen by anyone else (Lotte van der Berg)...





## Empty hands.

### On stage.

Five children and five seniors share the stage. Each performer has a corresponding lighted screen that flashes their lines. Eggs are scattered across the floor. Movement is tricky. (2010)

→ *hardly have any contact info from immigrants in my mobile phone. I wanted to work on this question: what do I know about them? Do I want to know them?* In “No Man’s Land” the participating audience member or spectator follows a foreigner who walks them through his neighbourhood and the places that mark his life. Through headphones the participant hears the possible stories of this person. *“In my creations, I leave a lot of space for the spectator’s mental projection. With “No Man’s Land”, I examine this projection and the prejudices that we have about immigrants.”* In a Europe where the extreme right wing is spreading its message, Dries Verhoeven defends the political dimension of “No Man’s Land”, which constitutes an

important step for him. He would like to see this creation tour in different European countries, where it could be adapted to different national languages and situations.

## The rebel mascot

The theatre as a communicative tool, as a test of the distance and prejudices often imposed on our perception of the foreigner, are again at the heart of “Life Streaming” (2010). Via webcam, twenty spectators communicate with twenty Sri Lankans seated in an Internet café on a beach devastated by the tsunami of 2004. The same year, the “fear of dogma” overtook Dries Verhoeven, who said that he was worried about becoming the mascot for Dutch experiential theatre. To protect himself from routine and the danger of always taking the easy route, he shook things up by taking on – or taking over – the stage to further examine the relationship between artists and audience based on what he had learned outdoors.

“Empty hands”, created in November 2012 in Amsterdam, brought together five performers under the age of ten and five others over the age of seventy. Fragile and weak, they evolved through a remarkable multidisciplinary scenography, which included a floor covered in eggs. Each performer was allotted a lighted screen that flashed pieces of text from their script. Dries Verhoeven calls out to other generations’ sense of responsibility regarding the young and the old. Above all, he continues to exercise his freedom as an artist. *“These last few years, I have felt completely free in the exploration of my curiosity and the sharing of this curiosity with the audience. I hope I can keep going like this.”* ● ANNE GONON

[www.driesverhoeven.com](http://www.driesverhoeven.com)

## “You have me in your hands...”

**W**hen he received the support of the Performing Arts Fund in 2009, Dries Verhoeven created his company and published “80 cm away from you”, a small book with a white cover on which the title is handwritten. Five texts, in Dutch and in English, by the scenographer himself, a theatre critic, a dramaturg, an author, and a project manager from La Villette, explore Verhoeven’s creations and the central questions of distance and the relationship to the spectator. Hannah van Wieringen, an author involved in “You are there” and “No man’s land”, describes “the paradox of the invisible actor”, that unique position that Dries Verhoeven puts performers in. The artist’s text, entitled “You”, begins by stating: “You have me in your hands. Your thumb is on this page. Your face is about 40 cm away. You are looking at these words. Other than that, I know nothing about you.” Through this mise-en-abyme of the act of reading and the link that connects us to the author, Verhoeven experiments again with distance and plays with our relationship to art. ● A.G.

“80 cm away from you”, Dries Verhoeven, 2009, € 11,25 available at International Theatre and Films Books, Amsterdam ([info@theatreandfilmbooks.com](mailto:info@theatreandfilmbooks.com)).