

In 2007, I attended Dries Verhoeven's *You Are Here*. At what looked like the front desk of a hotel, I received the key to a small room furnished with a bed and a lamp. No windows. I knew there were others in more or less similar rooms around me, but I could not see them. Performers communicated with me via pieces of paper slid under the door. Music and voices entered the room via a speaker integrated in the wall. Reflected in a mirror covering the entire ceiling I could see myself, laying on my bed, alone in my room.

In a text about this creation, Verhoeven explains how he used to live in a very small street in Amsterdam and how sometimes he would be able to see glimpses of the life of his neighbor reflected in the windows at the opposite side of the street. How this made him realize that every night, on the other side of the wall, only 80 centimeters away from him, someone else was sleeping too, someone he did not know. And also on the other side, and above, and below: all around him people living their lives very close to him, yet he had no idea who they were and what their lives were about. What would it be like to zoom out and see all these lives simultaneously?

This is what happens in *You Are Here* when at one point in the performance the mirror ceiling slowly rises and instead of only the room in which we find ourselves, we get to see the other rooms around us as well. Forty small rooms housing forty isolated individuals.



Photo: Anna van Kooij

Back then in 2007, *You Are Here* invited reflection on how people that live close by can be complete strangers to one another while at the same time we are intimately connected to

others who are far away from where we find ourselves. About how media technology supports the distribution of intimacy and belonging across distance. Zooming out, *You Are Here* performed the gesture of the map indicating where we find ourselves and helping us to orient ourselves with regard to what is actually around us. Looking back in 2020, I cannot help noticing the resemblance of the spatial construction of the performance to the improvised emergency hospitals erected in conference halls and sport stadiums. I cannot help thinking about closing the door of our rooms behind us and keeping the world around us at a distance as a way to protect ourselves and others. I cannot avoid being reminded of people quarantined in hotel rooms, receiving instructions on pieces of paper slid under their doors by invisible messengers. Or how caring for loved ones became leaving food in front of their closed doors, to be opened by them only after I had left. Things that had not happened yet at the time this work was created, yet that now are becoming part of my ways of looking at the documentation of the performance and begin to interfere with my way of understanding what this performance does, how it makes me think.

*You Are Here* may very well be the first theatre performance that I will attend after the lockdown. Planning its recreation started before COVID-19 hit the world. Due to the pandemic, the date of its revival had to be postponed. Now that we can begin to think about making and showing theatre again, the unusual spatial construction of this work unexpectedly turns into an advantage in ways not foreseen at the time of its original creation, nor at the moment that the decision to revive it was made. Verhoeven's work presents an example of how innovative approaches to creation that have been considered 'in the margin' (without actually being marginal phenomena) now may hold the key to making theatre in a post-lockdown condition. His work is exemplary for a rich history of expertise and experience embodied in the work of makers who have explored various ways of negotiating closeness and distance within the theatrical experience, like the possibilities of performance to take audience along in individual experiences or experiences shared with only a small group; performances that place audiences distant from one another in landscapes, cities, buildings or installations; performance that take individual audiences along by means of headphones, smartphones, tablets or written instructions; or that play with the logic of drive-in movie theatre, the peepshow (placing the audience in separate cabins), or moving the audience around in small, (semi) individual carriages.

If indeed *You Are Here* is going to be revived, this will turn the spatial marker that is the performance's title into a temporal marker as well. You are here, now. Things have happened that have changed where we find ourselves and that require us to rethink not only the position of the audience in the theatre but also where we are in the world: our relationships to others, what might be the future, and how we understand the past. In our current situation, questions of closeness and distance, of how to be together and where we find ourselves in relation to others around us, have become even more urgent matters of concern than they already were before. What this requires from the theatre is not only a matter of determining the maximum number of audience permitted in the big room or whether we should better shift to online performance, but of what could be the role of theatre in living through, reflecting on and questioning where we find ourselves here and now.

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