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Style and swagger mark these anime characters.

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The rarely seen William Inge play 'Bus Stop' gets a revival.

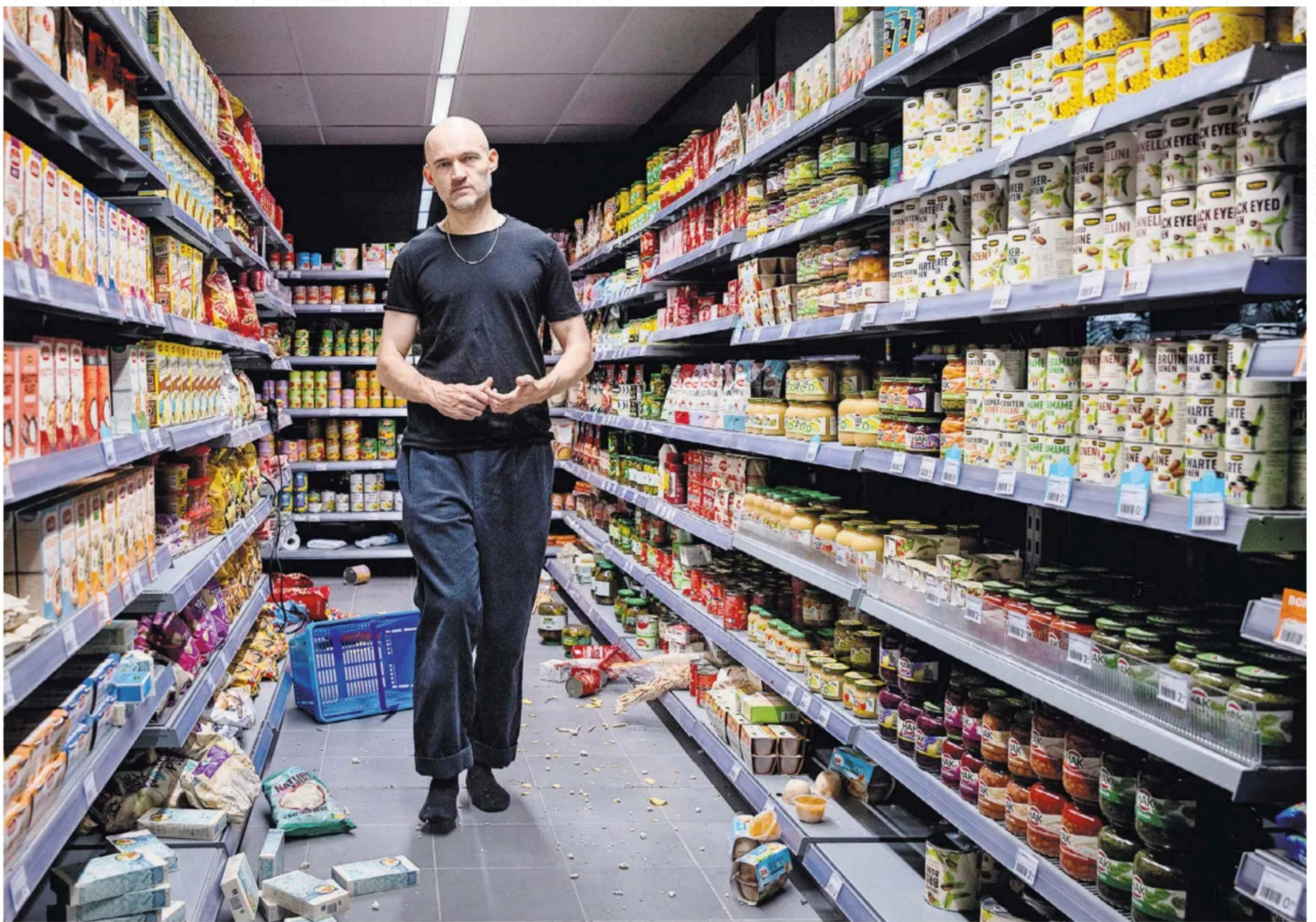


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An A.I.-generated voice of James Earl Jones leads to a dispute with actors.

Arts

The New York Times



ILVY NIJOSKIJEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In the Market For Your Reaction

Dries Verhoeven has constructed a replica grocery store for his latest provocative performance on shoplifting.

By NINA SIEGAL

AMSTERDAM — Between two aisles of a grocery store, a woman is having a destructive meltdown. She opens a jar of applesauce, spits in it and returns it to the shelf. She squirts a tube of mayonnaise onto the floor, then smears tomato sauce from a container on her chest.

Climbing the shelves, she recites a soliloquy on the joys of shoplifting. “Why call it stealing?” she says, with surprising calm. “I call it a love affair!”

All of this takes place within a giant glass box on the stage of the International Theater Amsterdam as part of the six-hour performance installation “Everything Must

Go,” by the Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven. Through Thursday, spectators can enter and exit the theater during the performance to peek into the box or can watch the performer unravel on TV monitors displaying CCTV footage.

It is the latest disquieting offering from Verhoeven, 49, who combines elements of theater and visual art to create performances that are engineered to leave the audience trembling.

“I’m quite a nervous person, and I like this feeling of nervousness, because it means there’s something at stake,” he said, while the glass box was being assembled at

The Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven inside “Everything Must Go,” in Amsterdam. The installation sits onstage in a glass box, with performances also relayed by CCTV.

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Dutch Artist Is in the Market for Your Reaction

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the theater this week. "When we're nervous, we are activated."

This approach has won him supporters in the Dutch art world, and last month, Verhoeven was announced as the Netherlands' representative for next year's Venice Biennale. Eelco van der Lingen, the chairman of the advisory board that selected him, said Verhoeven was the "kind of alternative voice" that he hoped would "help us confront sensitive issues by provoking or disrupting."

For "Everything Must Go," Verhoeven interviewed 24 shoplifters, including someone who "forgot" to swipe a piece of ginger at a self-checkout stand and a man serving a prison sentence for stealing 56 sacks of coffee. Verhoeven said that many of the shoplifters saw their behavior not as a shameful transgression but as an act of political sabotage or civil disobedience.

He combined the interviews into a single monologue, which his performer recites

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DRIES VERHOEVEN

live during her grocery-store meltdown. "What I do is an adventurous and naïve way of restoring balance," she says at one point, "like some Robin Hood micro-justice."

Verhoeven said he wasn't sure how he felt about such a justification, but that was the point. If he had a strong opinion about something, he wouldn't explore it through art, he said. He prefers to work from a feeling of ambiguity or doubt.

The great thing about ambiguity, he added, is that "it is never over."

Born in Oosterhout, a small town in the south of the Netherlands, Verhoeven was the third child of a painter and a piano teacher. He was raised a Roman Catholic and served as an altar boy, but because he knew he was gay, he said, he didn't feel he could express himself fully.

"It was a small village, about 2,000 people were living there, and lots of cows and pigs," Verhoeven said. "As long as you're drinking a beer with everyone else, you're fine — but the moment you stand out, you're not."

After attending art school in Maastricht, Verhoeven moved to Amsterdam at 21, and finally felt he could be himself. "I didn't just come out of the queer closet, I came out of quite a few closets," he said. "I became more and more critical of society. I started seeing the fun of disrupting the norm, and that's what I've been doing ever since."

Although his degree was in set design for theater, Verhoeven said he didn't want to just "put a few ornaments" on someone else's play. He wanted to construct the entire spectacle. The sets are still integral to his work, but his performers are often ordinary people or actors playing nameless characters with generic identities. Frequently, he places them in glass boxes.

In "Ceci n'est pas..." ("This Is Not..."), a 2013 piece he presented in 17 European cities over six years, Verhoeven installed performers in clear soundproof glass booths in public places. One booth, called "This Is Not Love," featured a girl sitting on a man's lap as he read her a book; both were wearing only underwear. Another, "This Is Not History," featured a Black performer, half-naked and shackled while performing acrobatics.

The piece incited varying levels of controversy in the countries where it was performed. In Finland, a passer-by objected to the tableau "This Is Not My Body," featur-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ILVY NJOKKICZHEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



The installation (top and above) by Dries Verhoeven (above right) combines elements of theater and visual art to create performances that are engineered to leave the audience trembling.

ing a nude 84-year-old woman wearing a mask. The police intervened and threatened to shut down the performance unless the performer wore a bra, and Verhoeven became caught up in a three-year legal battle over public obscenity that went all the way to Finland's Supreme Court.

For his 2014 work, "Wanna Play?" he put himself in a glass box in Berlin and used the gay dating app Grindr to contact locals, asking them to join him in the box and take part in nonsexual activities, like washing each other's hair or holding hands. That work was shut down five days into its run, after complaints that it violated Grindr users' pri-



vacancy by projecting their responses on a screen in a public square, although he had distorted their profile pictures.

Another work, Phobiaroma, which premiered in Athens in 2017, invited visitors into a house of horrors populated with sinister clowns, men wearing bear costumes and figures that looked like cartoon terrorists. The haunted house gave visitors "a new way of looking at their fears," said Maaik Bleeker, a performance studies professor at Utrecht University, including "fears that are very much played into now by politicians, like fear of the other."

A more recent work, "Brothers, Exalt

Thee to Freedom," placed 10 migrant workers from Bulgaria in a glass box onstage, where they spent eight hours a day singing a revolutionary socialist song. This work schedule mirrored their hours as assembly-line workers at Amazon, but Verhoeven paid them better. Yet the repetitive nature of the work still left visitors unmoved.

For Verhoeven, that's a good sign. "Activating is the goal," he said, whether his work engenders anger, disgust or tears. But he wasn't interested in telling his audience what to think about their reactions, he said. "I'd like to bring you into a position of not-knowing — that I share."