

# THIRD SPACE / LOTTE VAN DEN BERG

## Dying Together

SAT 16/03 19:00 + SUN 17/03 15:00

PERFORMANCE

3H | IN ENGLISH

LOCATION: KAAITHEATER

P E R  
F O R M 1 9  
A T I K

### 'THE CRASH FORCED BODIES TOGETHER', THEY SAID.

A conversation with Lotte van den Berg,  
by Eva Decaesstecker (Kaaitheater).

**According to Lotte van den Berg, art is about creating space: space to explore how we relate to one another. In *Building Conversation* (ongoing since 2013), that relationship emerges through conversations. Now, van den Berg is presenting *Dying Together*, which examines human relationships in the midst of terrible catastrophe. The performance is part of Performatik19 and connects to the festival's thematic strand on death, loss and performativity.**

**The objective of *Dying Together* is not to focus on the fear of death, but on the moment of death itself. How do you convey the experience of dying together?**

I do not literally make people have that experience. That would be impossible. I am convinced that death should not be feared, but that it does deserve our attention. I do not want to look away from it.

In *Dying Together*, we watch moments in which large groups of people die at the same time, and we see how the existing relationships between people change, immediately before and after the moment of death. The situations in question are often unforeseen. The people who die in catastrophes often do not know each other, and then they suddenly share an experience of something essential, namely death. I seek to explore how this forges connections between people. There is a reason why we call it 'collective death'. The bereaved suddenly also constitute a new group in which relationships shift and change as time goes on.

**Are the relationships you mention the social relationships and power balances that no longer exist?**

You might indeed think that death is in a certain sense a great equalizer. I fear, however, that our mortality alone cannot remove the inequalities that exist between us. Just look at the ways in which we die, and the ways that bodies are treated after death. If anything, this only increases the inequality between us, or at least confirms it. The value with which we as Western Europeans imbue our own life and thus our own death is very different from the value we attach to people further away. Whether that is in a little boat on the Mediterranean Sea or in Syria. If we die in an attack, we focus a disproportionate amount of attention on it. The relationships that become clear in the context of such a catastrophe had a profound effect on me while I was creating this production. Per situation, we explore what the relationships between the people involved are and how they change, both immediately preceding the moment of death and immediately following it, as well as a long time afterwards.

**The performance deals with very specific catastrophes. Could you tell us which ones?**

We focus on the first major so-called refugee boat disaster in 2013 during which a ship capsized just off the coast of Lampedusa. We also deal with the Paris attack in November 2015 on the Bataclan concert hall. The event that inspired me to create this performance was the crash of the Germanwings plane in 2015, and that is also part of the performance. The co-pilot committed suicide by crashing the plane into a mountain in the French Alps, taking all 149 passengers with him. Immediately after the crash, there was a lot of speculation about the co-pilot's motives. He was a young man. I started wondering if this suicide might also be interpreted as a hopeless attempt to make a connection. A connection with the people who experience it together. The passengers and crew members came from seventeen different countries across the world and formed a global community of people who did not know each other. Due to the co-pilot's act, they are now all

bound to that one moment and thus also to one another.

Because of the crash, the plane and its passengers were almost completely destroyed and scattered across a large area. During the attempts to clear the area and recover the bodies, it became evident that many of the remains could not be identified. The DNA that they found could not be linked to any one of the individuals. 'The crash forced bodies together', they said. This created new DNA, a common DNA that belonged to all the individuals collectively. Strangely enough, my assumption was confirmed, though in a very different way than I had expected. Many of the bereaved only received small parts of the bodies of their loved ones to bury. Many of the remains stayed on the mountain and were buried in a 'communal grave'. Many people criticized this decision because they did not want their loved ones to share a grave with the co-pilot, the murderer, as he was called. This makes the changing relationships between people very clear: immediately before the crash, the passengers were strangers to one another; immediately after, they were connected forever; four months later, at the funeral, a very new relationship had developed. There are so many different stories linked to this one event. What we try to do is to look at the situation with all the people who were involved – either closely or more distantly – and to pay them equal attention.

### **How do you do that concretely during the performance?**

We ask those present to represent somebody who was involved in the situation. If you say yes, then we give you a place in the space. You are completely free to change your place or attitude according to what you think is most appropriate. You do not have to say or do anything on behalf of the person you represent, but you try to imagine how that person would position themselves with respect to others. We call this physical thinking. You are asked not only to relate mentally but also physically to that other and to the people around you. Simple movements like standing, sitting and lying down. You might approach the other person or do exactly the opposite and create more distance. As a result, your perspective of the situation constantly changes.

**This is reminiscent of constellation therapy, in which a therapist guides somebody as they designate objects or people as representatives in order to analyse specific relationships, such as within a family. Creating a constellation gives the client insight into the dynamics in his or her system. Is your performance based on this method?**

Partially, yes. The thing I find interesting about constellation therapy is that you materialize certain thoughts or feelings and situate them in a space. You make them visible, both for yourself and others. You choose an object or ask a person to represent something or someone so that you can place it in the space and walk around it; you can relate to it physically. I read and learned a lot about constellation therapy because I have the sense that as a theatre maker, I do something very similar: I place people and thoughts in the space, I materialize ideas and I give them a place on the stage. They then produce new and unexpected thoughts and perspectives. The relationships between the different elements become visible and turn out to be different than I had expected. You also sense the impact of minimal changes in those relationships. That is actually something that all art forms do. You manifest a thought in the space and this elicits new thoughts when you look at it. I have come to love the simplicity of this principle.

In *Dying Together*, we create the constellations in our own way. We explain that the word constellation is derived from con-stellare. This concept was first used to describe the stars and the ways in which stars form patterns with one another. These patterns are not permanently fixed but can change. People also form patterns with one another, and they change constantly. The collective moment of dying makes all the relationships very acute. It changes and questions them, but it also makes them visible. Nevertheless, this performance is not therapeutic. At the end of the performance, nobody comes and explains what happened or what should have happened. Our work is not psychological but political. We create a space in which you can look at existing political relationships between people in a new way.

**The concept of 'space' is a fixture in your work. In *Dying Together*, you create a space to explore relationships. In your ongoing project, *Building Conversation*, you created spaces for conversations. Your own organization is also called Third Space. How do you conceive of the role of 'space' as a concept and how do you think that is manifested in *Dying Together*?**

It is true that the concept of space is very important to me. That is also what I do as a theatre maker: creating spaces. Spaces in which the participating audience members themselves play a major role in the experiences that they have. While I was creating *Dying Together*, I realized that it is important for me to give myself mental space with respect to the poignant moments of collective death. Take the example of the boat that capsized in the Mediterranean on its way to Europe. That is a situation of which I am very much ashamed; it makes me want to

at it anyway and give it a different kind of attention? Creating an environment in which you can pay attention to the things that you would rather not see, creates a space in your head. It enables you to see things differently, to imbue them with different feelings and thoughts. I hope that this performance has that effect.

Furthermore, I feel as though art itself is a space. I like to think of it as an exercise space. It is a place where we can try things and exercise ourselves with respect to others, outside our everyday realities. I think that this exercise space is currently the most valuable thing that art can offer us.

**What do you think is so important about this exercise? The fact that it leaves room for speculation and uncertainty?**

Yes, I think it is important to realize time and time again that I will never really know and that everything I do is an exercise. I want to ensure that thinking itself stays active and does not become stale and rusty. Relationships between people are also dynamic and changeable. If we continue to ascribe the same marginal position to certain people, we as a community will become confined. I hope to contribute to a dynamic society that has the courage to practice life communally.

To me, *Dying Together* and *Building Conversation* are practices more than anything else. And these practices of communal exercise are more important than the specific situations or conversations. In *Building Conversation*, we research how we speak to one another. In *Dying Together*, we look at relationships, the value with which we imbue our own lives as opposed to the lives of others. How do we think about our own death and the death of the other? And this exposes the socio-political relationships in which we live.

**To conclude, *Dying Together* has been programmed as part of Performatik, which explores the boundaries between the visual arts**

**and the performing arts. Is there a visual aspect to *Dying Together*?**

Absolutely. *Dying Together* is very 'performative'. The visual arts and theatre encounter one another in a performance. I do not make theatre, or at least not of the type with characters and roleplaying. My work is concerned with the materializing of certain ideas in a space here and now, and I ask people to do that with their bodies. We make clear agreements about what we will do and then we do it. Many performances have a certain premise or point of departure: 'what if'.... What if we stand like this for an hour or what if we repeatedly fall down or what if we run towards each other along the Great Wall of China. Certain parameters have been decided, but what will happen exactly and the effect that it will have on you are unknown. And that is precisely what we do in *Dying Together*. The ultimate result is different every night.

**CREDITS**

**CONCEPT & DIRECTION** Lotte van den Berg (performer) **IN COLLABORATION WITH** Floor van Leeuwen (performer), Gerindo Kamid Kartadinata (performer), Justyna Wielgus (performer), Lukas von der Lühe (performer), Matteo Bifulco (performer), Salomé Mooij (performer), Josefine Rahn (performer), Polly Lapkovskaya (composer), Vinny Jones & Breg Horemans (light and set design), Tobias Staab (dramaturg), Jakob Proyer (head of production), Vincent Beune (head of technique), Kate McIntosh (artistic advice), Alexander Nieuwenhuis, Julien McHardy & Kinan Mohammad (research) | **PRODUCED BY** Third Space | **IN COPRODUCTION WITH** Theater Rotterdam (NL), Schauspielhaus Bochum (DE), Theaterfestival Boulevard (NL), Vooruit (BE), SoAP (NL), C-TAKT. BUDA (BE), BIT Teatergarasjen (NO), and Nanterre-Amandiers (FR) | **IN THE CONTEXT OF** APAP - Performing Europe 2020 | **SUPPORTED BY** the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. **SUPPORTED BY** Performing Arts Fund, Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst, VSBfonds, Ammodo, Fonds21  
[www.thirdspace.be](http://www.thirdspace.be)



## **SALON: DEATH, MOURNING, RITUALS & PERFORMATIVITY**

A discussion on death, mourning, rituals and performativity, with Lotte van den Berg, Barbara Raes, Pieter van Bogaert, Michel Yang (Oracle).

**17/03** 18:30 | Kaaitheater | in English