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## PREVIEW - PERHAPS ALL THE DRAGONS

Words by Daniel Shamaun. Photos by Marc Damage and Sigrid Spinnox.



*Perhaps All the Dragons*, an innovative amalgam of digital installation and theatre from Belgium, will be running at The Smock Alley Theatre from 7-11 October as part of The Dublin Theatre Festival. The show is produced by Belgian theatre company Berlin which has two artistic directors, Bart Baele and Yves Degryse. It received high praise after its run in Brighton, and allows only 30 audience members for each showing. You take a seat on the inside of a hollow round table, facing one of the 30 screens placed around the outside edge. Each screen is home to a different storyteller, and you switch seats five times during short musical intervals throughout the show in order to hear different stories from around the world. This makes it impossible to hear all of the stories and everyone walks away with a different, but shared, experience.



What seems as though it could be an impersonal experience, quickly becomes humanised and involving. Each of the story-tellers is either thought-provoking, charming, or both. It feels as though you're listening to someone tell a fascinating story in a busy restaurant, rather than watching a pre-recorded video because there are 30 videos playing at once in a number of different languages (with subtitles). It only takes a few seconds to focus on the voice of the person you're listening to, partly due to the number of languages, and partly because of flawless audio directing. After your mind has taken a few moments to habituate to the sound, it is like an optical illusion reaching clarity. The busy restaurant feeling goes away and it feels more as though you're talking to someone in a room with whispering walls.





One of the show's artistic directors, Bart Baele, described how *Perhaps All the Dragons* came together. The show is the culmination of ten years of touring for the Berlin theatre company. They "met a lot of people and heard a lot of stories" that were too short to make a full production on their own, but could be used to create something together. They then began a process of research to find new stories to incorporate, one of which happened to be a fake article which was published in several newspapers, and Berlin eventually collected 30 tales. With the false story, *Perhaps All the Dragons* blurs the line between fact and fiction, as it is nearly impossible to figure out which one it is. Some of the story-tellers that appear on the screens are also not the genuine owners of their tales (but are all non-actors). The fact that it is impossible to tell which, is another testament to Berlin's work.



Each story is captivating in its own way. Some feel like innovative ideas that could appear on TED Talks, while others feel like interviews from heart-wrenching documentaries. It's easy to find yourself leaning in to hear the story, creating an intimate feeling reminiscent more of conversation than spectating. One story was told by an English woman who'd been involved in a project that attempted to transplant monkey heads and raised some interesting philosophical questions. Another was a Professor from New York discussing 6 degrees of separation, and another was that of a hikikomori (a person who does not leave their room) from Japan.



As the show goes on, things begin to feel as though the videos are not as individual as they seem, and a somewhat surreal feeling develops. Events in the videos begin to feel more connected, and being sat on the inside of the table makes it feel as though the audience is being watched rather than the screens. At points, it is almost as if it is a live video conference, and you want to ask questions of the story-tellers. This all builds to create a feeling of distrust of the screens, the situation, and your own senses, but enough is revealed to keep things positive. Enough is also kept quiet to keep you thinking about the show for a long time to come.



*Perhaps All the Dragons* feeds every sense. On entering the room, the installation looks strange and intriguing and is accompanied by soothing music. The show sounds incredible; the multitude of languages are a monument to globalisation and the conversational feeling generated is authentic and warming. A few of the seats have toys or objects to play with and the intervals, where you switch seats, engage you physically. During these moments of transition, the smells of perfumes and colognes worn by the other audience members become more noticeable too as

your senses are on high alert. And after all the stories have been told, there is a relaxing opportunity to sit and discuss them with the other spectators over a glass of sweet lemonade. If *Perhaps All the Dragons* happens to blow your mind, then it's there to pick up the pieces and put you back together afterwards.

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