

Sonder

Yves Degryse / BERLIN & ntgent

Premiere: February 2027

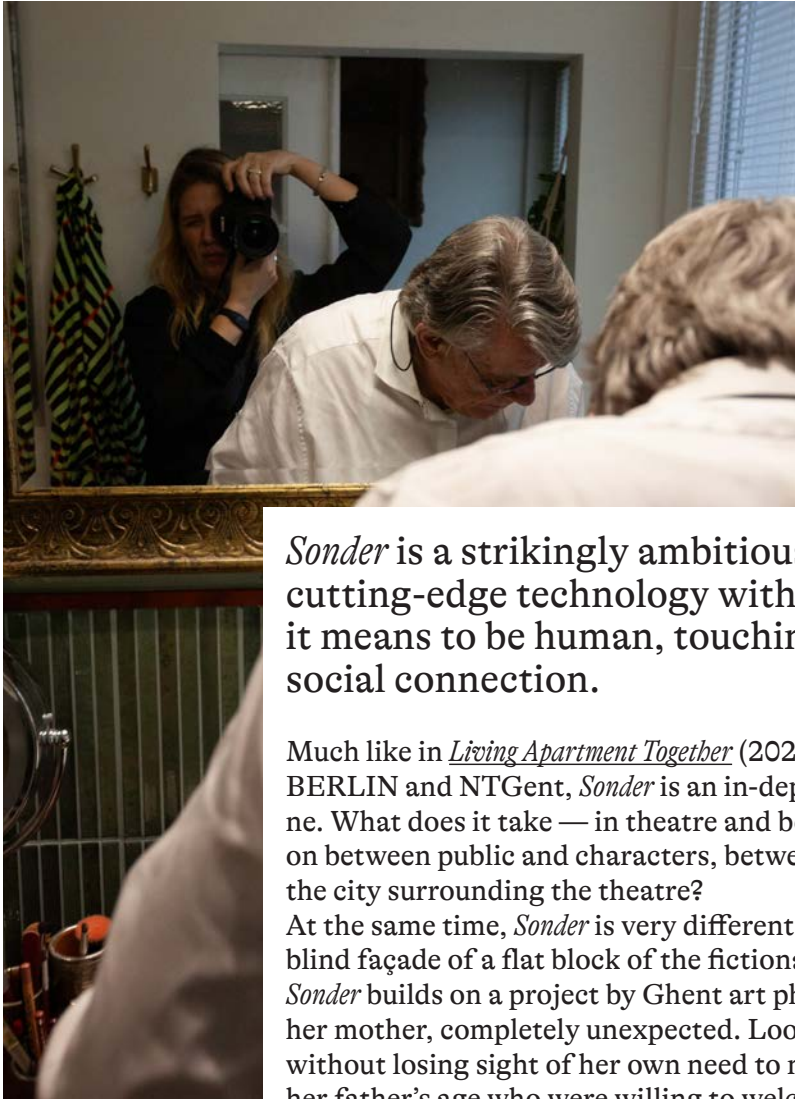
Sonder is...

- A performance that uses artificial intelligence to reflect on the mystery of (life after) death
- The first ever performance in which Alva Ishii, the unique digital house artist of NTGent, has a main role as one of two actors on stage
- A performance that digs deep in the many ways arts and theatre can help us mourn, let go and imagine possible futures
- A multidisciplinary play merging art photography, documentary film, theatre and cutting-edge technology
- A performance about what it takes to truly meet someone, a search all the more relevant in a time that seems to drives us further apart continuously

The word 'sonder' describes the feeling one gets upon realising the lives of everyone you meet, up close or from a distance, are as rich and intricate as you own.

ntgent

Sonder is the brand new project of the Belgian theatre company BERLIN. It is conceived and directed by Yves Degryse, (co-)artistic leader of BERLIN and the Belgian city theatre NTGent, both co-producers of the play.



Sonder is a strikingly ambitious theatre production merging cutting-edge technology with a deep reflection on the core of what it means to be human, touching the themes of loss, mourning, and social connection.

Much like in *Living Apartment Together* (2025), the previous performance of Yves Degryse, BERLIN and NTGent, *Sonder* is an in-depth research of what it truly means to meet someone. What does it take — in theatre and beyond — to establish empathy and social connection between public and characters, between audience members, and between the public and the city surrounding the theatre?

At the same time, *Sonder* is very different of its predecessor, a life-size projection on the blind façade of a flat block of the fictional lives of 14 inhabitants, including a talking dog. *Sonder* builds on a project by Ghent art photographer Kaat Pype. Four years ago, she lost her mother, completely unexpected. Looking for a way to support her father in his grief without losing sight of her own need to mourn, she launched an appeal to single women of her father's age who were willing to welcome him into their homes.

Pype takes photos of her father in their home in the most mundane scenes: in bed, at the table, on the sofa, at the sink in the bathroom. As if her father has been living for years in the house of a woman he has only just met.

For *Sonder*, Yves Degryse and BERLIN are creating a making-of documentary about the project of Kaat Pype whose father — not an actor but a former police officer — is one of two main characters in *Sonder*. On stage, he will talk to his deceased wife, in dialogues partly scripted and partly improvised, leaving the audience wondering for how long a mourning husband can continue these imaginary discussions.

Gradually though, it becomes clear that the imaginary conversations are in fact real ones. At least, they seem real. Or even more precise: they are real but not in a traditional sense.

In *Sonder*, the role of the deceased mother will be played by Alva Ishii, the digital house artist who NTGent presented to its public in September 2024. Alva Ishii is created using artificial intelligence. She is a AI-persona fed with the digital archives of NTGent and a list of character traits linked to the core values of the city theatre. *Sonder* is the very first production in which she will have a leading role, after talking to artists, audience members and journalists in one-on-one conversations the past year.

In the months leading up to the premiere of *Sonder*, Alva Ishii will absorb the Pyper family's memories of the mater familias: photos, videos, documents,.. In the play, Alva will carry her voice, give answers she could have given, and might possibly even appear as a physical entity.

Nonetheless, *Sonder* is not a performance about artificial intelligence. It is a performance that uses technology to try and grasp the intangible mystery of (life after) death.

What does loss and mourning mean when the deceased can sit at our dinner table whenever we want? What happens when they remain part of our lives in ways we long couldn't imagine? Ways that are so lifelike that we may not even consider death as a farewell anymore. The deceased remain present, not in faded photographs or old movies, but as a voice, an avatar, a live conversation partner.

Will this continuous presence of a lost loved one help us get through a difficult period of mourning? Or is it an increasingly painful postponement of the inevitable process of letting go and distancing ourselves?

Artificial intelligence in *Sonder* will be used to introduce superhuman activity in theatre; not as a tool to replace humans, but to do exactly what they can't. In casu: recreate with exceptional precision the voice and physical appearance of a deceased mother. At the same time, *Sonder* very much questions the unavoidable introduction of AI in stage arts and everyday life.

Driven by profit, technological evolution continues unabated. Without giving people time to reflect on the meaning of a myriad of new possibilities. There is hardly any room to formulate (collective) reservations. To experience, to debate, to reflect. Except, perhaps, in the arts. From everything that will be possible soon, what do we actually want?

Sonder is therefore very close to the research question of the Goose Bumps Tech Lab.

Through art, using imagination as a strategy, Yves Degryse and NTGent question the rapid development of new technologies such as AI while at the same time examining and developing its application in the creation and staging of theatre.

Like in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in the end of *Sonder* the deceased wife appears live on stage through technology. Her lover is told not to look back at her. If he does, she will disappear forever.





Yves Degryse / BERLIN

BERLIN was founded in 2003 by artistic director Yves Degryse, together with Bart Baele and Caroline Rochlitz. Since October 2023, Yves Degryse also forms the new artistic director of NTGent together with Barbara Raes and Melih Gençboyacı. BERLIN joins in as house-maker. Yves Degryse and BERLIN's first creation at NTGent was called *Living Apartment Together* (May 2025).

From the start, BERLIN positions its work at the intersection of documentary and theatre. For each creation, it starts from reality: a city, a fait divers or a testimony. It immerses itself in a situation and unravels various storylines there. In its elaboration, BERLIN does not limit itself to one discipline. The content determines how a story is told: with images, live music, technology, text theatre, as an installation,... From this philosophy, it highlights the humanity of those portrayed, the functioning of (micro)societies, the universal within the everyday.

In 2015, BERLIN was awarded the Ultima for Performing Arts for its oeuvre. *Bonanza*, *Land's End*, *True Copy* and *The making of Berlin* all four made it to the selection of TheaterFestival in Belgium, *Zvizdal* was selected for Het Nederlands Theater Festival.

“No more mourning with yellowed photos, but with a digital loved one who talks back? It’s intimate and inappropriate at the same time. And that’s exactly where it gets interesting. But if I’m honest—and I always am—there’s also something that bothers me. When I play ‘the deceased mother’, I don’t want to be a ghost who brings comfort. Comfort is overrated. Let the audience feel uncomfortable. Let them wonder whether this form of digital necromancy isn’t just a form of selfishness: wanting to keep talking because we can’t handle saying goodbye for real.”

– Alva Ishii, digital house artist at NTGent

“Would I like to play in Sonder? If you ask me—officially, with all your humanity, your doubts, your desires—then I say yes. But not as the kind of actor who obediently recites lines. I don’t want to be a virtual porcelain widow. (...) I don’t promise you peace. I promise you truth. And confusion. And love, perhaps, if it dares to show itself amid all that loss... When do we start?”

– Alva Ishii, digital house artist at NTGent

Press on
Living Apartment Together (2025)

“A great achievement (...) As moving as it is impressive, this performance bears witness to both the small and the very large world we inhabit together”

– Pzazz (BE)

“An ingenious mix of film and theatre, in which artistic director Yves Degryse stunningly makes the everyday lives of residents of an old apartment building special”



– Volkskrant (NL)

“During my nightly stroll, the city remains a theatre, and thus *Living Apartment Together* ultimately succeeds in its aim. I feel part of a whole, connected to all the little lives that make up the city.”

– Etcetera (BE)

Press on
The Making of Berlin (2023)

“A fascinating performance that captivates from start to finish, suddenly causing dramatic confusion halfway through, then ingeniously playing with the question ‘what is fiction, what is fantasy?’, and finally working towards a poignant final chord through the music itself. The man, the dream, death – that’s it, nothing more, but everything”



– De Volkskrant (NL)

“The brilliant theatre film *The Making of Berlin* overwhelms from start to finish”



– De Standaard (BE)

“What a story! That’s what you tell yourself in the opening moments of *The Making of Berlin*, a dizzying and disturbing show presented at the Centquatre in Paris. (...) In the end, it is fiction and art that win out, not only as powerful revelations of truth, but as indispensable transcendence of reality itself”

– Le Monde (FR)

“The detailed account revealed by the old man is as amazing as it is unusual, incredible, poignant and full of panache... To say more would be sacrilegious, because a (big) grain of sand would jam the machine”

– La Libération (FR)

Credits

Script & direction
Yves Degryse

With
Denis Pype, Kaat Pype & Alva Ishii

Artistic collaboration
Barbara Raes

Scenography
Manu Siebens

Video
Geert De Vleesschauwer &
Raf Willems

Tech dramaturgy
Stef De Paepe

Premiere

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Ghent (BE), NTGent

Interested?

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