

Yves Degryse & Alva Ishii / BERLIN & NTGent

Sonder

premiere 18 February 2027



credit: Kaat Pype

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.

For *Sonder*, Yves Degryse and BERLIN are creating a making-of documentary about the project of Kaat Pype and her father. Pype's father, not an actor but a former police officer, is also one of the 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 of NTGent created with artificial intelligence. In the months leading up to the premiere of *Sonder*, Alva Ishii will absorb the Pype 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 at the end 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, thanks to technology? What happens when they remain part of our lives in ways we long couldn't imagine? Will this continuous presence help us get through a difficult period of mourning? Or is it an increasingly painful postponement of the inevitable process?

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.

CREDITS (prelimary)

Concept Yves Degryse & Kaat Pype

Script & direction Yves Degryse

With Denis Pype (Vake), Lieve Fonteyne (Moeke), Kaat Pype, Yves Degryse

Live music Berlinde Deman

Dramaturgy Matthias Velle

Artistic collaboration Beyond The Spoken / Barbara Raes

Video design Geert De Vleeschauwer

Light design Dennis Diels

Set design Manu Siebens

Styling Marij de Brabandere

Composition music & soundscape Peter Van Laerhoven

Digital imaging Joni De Borger & Stijn Jansen