

# AVATAR ME, 2020.

## Co-produced with Teater Nordkraft

By Kathrine Winkelhorn

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### Mumbai from above

The mediatisation of theatre is not a new phenomenon and has a long history. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Radioteatret became one of the country's biggest stages, where lots of people sat with their ears glued to the radio to listen to the weekly presentation of new drama written or adapted for radio. Radioteatret was the invisible, but very much alive theatre. It has now been closed down and replaced by documentary podcasts that use a range of sound effects familiar from radio theatre, film and TV.



During the corona epidemic, mediation is on the rise. Theatres are closing down and looking for new channels and formats without a physically present audience. The most common has been filmed theatre that is streamed and perhaps adapted for film. The Royal Danish Theatre established the digital stage Kgl. Xtra, where you could watch previously recorded performances at home in your living room for free. Aalborg Teater established a digital stage to complement and expand the existing artistic activities in order to create a different interaction between spectator and performer and with a long-term goal of reaching a wider audience. In the winter of 2020, Teater Republique invited 14 writers to each write a monologue as virtual theatre. The texts were performed by actors who recorded themselves with a mobile camera. It was available free of charge on the web and was appreciated by a large audience with a total of 500,000 views.

AVATAR ME is one of three performances that were screened at the first-ever digital theatre festival RE:LOCATIONS, which took place 21 April-9 May 2021, just before the live opening

of the theatres on 6 May. The digital theatre festival is shown in cities all over the world, where people can open a computer and log in to have a theatre experience. In the press material, RE:LOCATIONS presents the digitally born performances as a new genre within performing arts that has an independent value.

AVATAR ME is a 1:1 live-streamed performance, where for 45 minutes you live another person's life, somewhere else in the world. It is an interesting concept at a time when people are becoming isolated and interaction with the rest of the world is limited. The participants are from South Africa, Brazil, Moldova, India and Malaysia.

I imagine it will be interesting to see what a digitally born performance can do as performing art. But how does it work? I book a ticket and receive a link, which, at an agreed time, gives me access to experience *AVATAR ME* on my computer. Fifteen minutes before the performance begins, I meet four other spectators on Zoom, where we are instructed in how to enter the show correctly and how to act as avatars. Then we are asked to switch off our cameras. After that, we are on our own, and each spectator 'travels' to their own performance. The performance takes place in my living room – and at the same time in another living room/in another room somewhere else in the world. To which city and country, you arrive, you do not know. The language is English.

### **Arrival in Mumbai**

All of a sudden, a voice says: Hello. I am asked to close my eyes and take a deep breath. *Press the button*, it says. Then an image appears of two hands dancing poetically with their fingers. Now you are me, and my name is Bertwin and I live in Mumbai, says a voice insistently. My eyes are fixed in the camera on his forehead, and I am eager and curious for contact. At no point during the performance do I see his face. The camera zooms down on his strong legs and he asks what job Bertwin has. My guess is that he is a dancer. Yes, Bertwin is a dancer and choreographer working in Bollywood and has performed several times in Lyon and Paris, which he happily points out. But Bertwin has been suffering from malaria and has been ill for two years, unable to dance. Now he is finally well. He shows me a beautiful picture of himself as a dancer, as well as pictures of him as a child, and family photos of his parents and three siblings. It is homely, intimate and safe.

But where am I? The camera pans around in a space that is impossible to decode. Is it a messy theatre wardrobe with a lot of objects scraped together, and what about the bed and the many teddy bears? We are in his former childhood bedroom, where he was born and grew up. I tell him I am hungry and want to eat dozas, the good Indian pancakes made with rice flour. We go into the kitchen, and here hot mazala prepared by his mother is being served. He eats elegantly with his fingers while a dog looks on and licks its mouth. It is an intimate and sensory interaction that you would not find in the physical theatre. But the house feels stuffy and I cannot quite breathe.

Mumbai represents something extraordinary to me. I know that about 22 million people live there, and that it is built on seven islands and is one of the largest harbour cities in the world! That in itself is fascinating. I get impatient and want to get out into the city and feel its pulse. I have been to India several times, but never to Mumbai. We walk out of the house and in the small garden before the front door, there is a high lattice gate with beautiful ornamentation that is carefully locked, which surprises me a little. He points to a four-storey pink apartment building where the family lives, located in one of Mumbai's many small 'village neighbourhoods'. "As a child, I used to jump around like a monkey on all the balconies. Look at that balcony, he says. Do you want to see me jumping from there now?" A little scared, I say yes and watch his long shadow from the balcony. It is nerve-wracking. I think he jumps, but it was hard to see.

### **On a Scooter in a Village**

Outside the gate is a scooter and I suggest that we go for a ride. I ask for a helmet, to no avail, and slowly we drive off into the night. I have a nice feeling of sitting on the back of a scooter. We pass a hospital, where there are a couple of stretchers and an ambulance. The city is completely quiet and closed due to the sky-high corona infection. There is not a single person in the streets and it feels strange. Like Bertwin, I sense a tense atmosphere in the city. Shutters have been put up in front of most shops and the city seems to be under siege. At a large, round lattice cover, probably 8-10 metres in diameter, we stop. "Can you guess what's under the cover? It's a well, and when we were boys, we loved to swim and bathe there". But it was strictly forbidden as the water was not clean and was severely sanctioned by mum. There had been suicides in the well and some people believed that the well was inhabited by evil spirits.

On the way home we pass a large Christ figure at a Catholic church. Bertwin asks me about my religion, and it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the illusion that I am him. His girlfriend Chasma is a Hindu, and it is a serious dilemma that his parents can in no way approve of him marrying a Hindu. "Would you go against your parents' wishes? Because that is quite difficult for us". I get the feeling that it may be difficult to be a Christian in Mumbai with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India. It is a delicate question, but I ask why he was so careful to lock the lattice gate. "Well, it can be challenging not being a Hindu here", Bertwin replies diplomatically. Slowly we pass the hospital and the show is over. I take a deep breath and switch on the camera so I can see who I have been with. I see a handsome man of about 30 years of age.

### **AVATAR ME as Performing Arts?**

Already 10 minutes into the performance I am fascinated and confused. For what does it mean to be an avatar. Normally, it is a small figure that you use for example in the online game *World of Warcraft* as your gaming piece that can communicate with the other players. In the ancient Indian language, Sanskrit, avatara means descent. So maybe you could say that during the performance I 'descend into' Bertwin's body, but not into his soul. This is difficult to grasp. For who is the other when I am Bertwin? Where is the line between 'I' as spectator and participant, and the living Bertwin on my screen in Mumbai? But it is precisely at this intersection that tension arises in an ongoing inner monologue between myself and my avatar Bertwin, but also in the real and ongoing dialogue we have. In AVATAR ME I am both a spectator and an active participant. It is unusual and exciting.

In the encounter with Mumbai, I feel a creeping disappointment because I have an inner image of what it will be like to ride a scooter in Mumbai. A kind of preconception of what I can or could experience. The people, cows, bikes, chickens, carts, pigs, etc. with lots of colours that you see in other Indian cities.

It is strange but fascinating to see a performance that is faceless and without a visible body. Is this even performing arts? Here there is no narrative, no beautiful costumes or sets, no stage. here you do not encounter beauty, but unadorned everyday life in a 1:1 interaction with a stranger from another continent. It is both challenging and fun. In Tue Bering's construction, the dramaturgical effect lies in confronting the idyllic home in the apartment with the 'dangerous' outside, but also in the fact that the 'stage' reacts to its audience, just as in physical theatre. I am left with a completely new sensory experience of a performance that I remember in detail. Would my experience have been very different if I had arrived in Moldova or Brazil, where I have not been before? I do not think so. It will be exciting to see how a digital format can evolve, and there is little doubt that online performances have the potential to reach a larger audience with lots of innovative international

perspectives and collaborators. Yes, maybe in time you can also have an income. It is great that FIX&FOXY dares to explore completely new paths with their performing art.

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**Kathrine Winkelhorn** has for a number of years been responsible for the Master's Programme in Culture and Media Production at Malmö University and is chairman of Copenhagen International Theatre.

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The festival is produced by Wildtopia and presented in collaboration with theatre partners, Teater Nordkraft in Aalborg and Teater Viirus in Helsinki.

**Cast:** Marcela Nistor, Robin Khor Yong Kuan, Bertwin Ravi D'souza, Lalisa Costa and Lillian Tshabalala.

**Director:** Tue Biering.

**Producer:** Annette Max Hansen.

**Dramaturg and co-director:** Linn Haldrup Lorenzen.

**Coordinator and co-director:** Camilla Gürtler.