

State of the Playwright 2024

Rebekka de Wit

SHAKESPEARE IS DEAD

FESTIVAL FOR CONTEMPORARY PLAYWRITING

Good evening, everyone. I'm Rebekka de Wit.

I'm standing here - I think - because I created a performance about the climate crisis.

The play is called "The Shell Case." It gained a lot of attention, partly because it was one of the few premieres that year.

And, as it goes as these things go, reviews came in for the play. Do we all now have to make plays like The Shell Case?" wrote a critic indignantly.

"Yes!" I shouted loudly from my living room at the time. The critic read her analysis on a podcast. "That is EXACTLY what I want. For everyone to create plays like The Shell Case. I wish everyone would call me first to ask, REBEKKA, what should we make a play about now? And I would say: You on nitrogen, you on biodiversity, you on methane. And that everyone then comes to see those performances, and that we are then all very conscious, and then systemic change happens." (sardonic laughter)

I understand the critic's fear. If you create something about the climate crisis, it seems like you're claiming a monopoly on relevance, as though you're implicitly saying it's no longer legitimate to create something about love, about the way the light enters certain buildings, to wander off on a tangent.

Writing in times of the climate crisis. Those were the words I was given to think about what I could say to you today. I don't think that in times of the climate crisis, you should necessarily write about the climate crisis. Preferably not, perhaps even. We are in it, the climate is destabilizing, and you can respond to it in different ways.

In 2019, an article appeared in the NRC, by Thomas van Huut. It was titled: "No artwork is a match for the climate crisis."

He mentions some artworks that address the climate crisis, such as the Ice Watch by Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson collected floating icebergs from Greenland and exhibited them at climate conferences. A very polluting artwork because it was so grand and logistically complex, and those icebergs had to remain frozen.

Timothy Morton wrote an essay about that artwork, and in it, he stated:

Climate change is a 'hyperobject': a phenomenon "that is so extensive in both time and space that we can only catch glimpses of it at one moment in time." It is so vast, and our individual contribution so small, that we can hardly grasp it.

And then Thomas van Huut writes the following: Art excels in making the unimaginable imaginable. But when artists do that with large-scale climate art, it often feels like the art falls short. The art has a paralysing effect, often because it is itself polluting, or because it depicts the problem but offers no alternative. As a result, the artwork seems powerless. You are made complicit and have no prospect of taking action.

The conditions under which the artwork is produced are part of the artwork. So, making theater in times of the climate crisis doesn't necessarily mean you have to talk about the climate crisis, but the conditions of the work we create should be in line with Paris.

Besides government and business, the cultural sector should also operate in line with Paris. The intellectual power, creativity, and agility that artists and writers have at their disposal could be used to develop new production methods, new economies. And that is gratifying. Very gratifying, I know from experience.

And perhaps it sounds obvious, for productions to be in line with Paris, but it's not. Try getting the catering for a tour or a festival to be vegetarian.

Fortunately, they have tried it here, and they not only tried, they managed it, as I understand. So, Paris Alignment starts here.

An opera is currently being made from The Shell Case, Premiering in four weeks. We sold the rights on the condition that all catering would be plant-based, the sets recycled, and there would be as few airmiles as possible. They agreed to that. At that time, we didn't know that 'as little flying as possible' could, apparently, still be a lot of flying. A sustainability manager had been appointed to tally the CO2 emitted for this production, and while the artistic team was dedicating meeting after meeting to how to replace fire on stage, the office was booking plane ticket after plane ticket to fly in international singers.

When asked about the reason for these flyovers, one of the big smurfs said: 'Well they are an International Opera House.' I wasn't exactly sure what she meant because anywhere in the world you are international in some sense anyway, but it does get to the heart of the problem.

We all want to do something, as long as we don't have to fundamentally change the way we produce things.

If I could choose, I would rather have an opera about how the light enters a building that is completely carbon neutral than have The Shell Case featuring various international singers.

After all, it isn't about making us all aware of the climate crisis. Our grandchildren won't differentiate between us and climate change deniers or people who were not so aware of the crisis. We all deny that crisis, in the way we live, produce. And it would have been a victory had there been no flying, I think. Not because it saves molecules in the air, but because with those new ways of production and a new vision of internationalization, we install new habits that will become the norm and, eventually, values that other sectors can draw inspiration from.

If we produce in line with Paris, we don't need to talk about the climate crisis at all. Then we can finally make performances again that no one is waiting for. Performances about how the light enters a building.

And this is perhaps the point where I have to admit that I came to the realization, very late in the writing process of this tekst, that the task was to write about the state of the *playwright*.

I read the email with the original question again and suddenly saw, oh - wait a minute - this should be about the *playwright*. When I told someone that, they looked surprised and said: but we don't use the word *play* anymore. That's not inclusive enough. That's white repertoire.

I hadn't received that memo yet, but here it is for you now. The state of the theatre writer, then.

I don't know exactly what a theatre writer is. I do know that the theater is the best place to publish things. I thought that writing a book would mean that you had actually written something, but it's much more real when an actor has made a text their own and expresses it in front of an audience. More corporeal, more alive, more mortal.

Not very long ago, I was standing in the wings of the City Theatre in Amsterdam for the anniversary of De Groene Amsterdammer. I was whispering to a member of the editorial team, a writer, like me. He said he had written for the stage once himself, which he had found fantastic. In the rehearsal room, he discovered that the writers he usually surrounded himself with always kept everything to themselves, but here, all the cards were on the table. Trying to get to the bottom of something *together* was something he had not experienced in that way before.

After the election results, I felt very much like creating a show. Not because I had something to say or express, but because I wanted to be in a rehearsal room.

And that I had written something, or perhaps not me, but someone else had. That they would then read it aloud for the first time, something that I know was written in the dark, like something they were ashamed of, and yet they continued writing, thinking of those people in the rehearsal room on a Monday morning.

That by now they had written for theatre often enough to know that where the shame is, there it is, because shame is the shadow of a failed standard. Everyone holds their breath, because everyone knows that we will soon all have to bear this together, and that I - someone - then very softly, while reading, (and try to read as fast as possible, because of that shame), hears a kind of chuckle, right where the shame was, and by hearing that chuckle the writer knows, yes, so do you. We all do. So precise, so attentive, so quiet. That's what I wanted. And I couldn't think of any other place than this where that could happen. And still.

Roger Cox, the lawyer who won the climate case against the State, and also against Shell, I have heard him say that the courtroom is one of the few places in society where the complexity of the climate crisis can be addressed and listened to. I think the theater is also such a place. In The Shell Case, we let 'the voice of Shell' be heard, composed from numerous speeches by CEOs from the eighties onwards. It was by putting that text into the light, night after night, where you could hear a pin drop and finally heard what someone was actually saying, that I started to wonder where those metaphors and comparisons actually came from.

I knew the speeches we used them from, sometimes distorted, but there seemed to be something in front of them. And after reading the work of Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, it turned out to be true. Much of the language we now use in public debate to address climate found its inception in the nineties, early 2000s. As a creator, writer, playwright, we will also have to scrutinize the language with which we write the stories we write. As a writer, you don't just describe reality, you reproduce it while prescribing it.

Sometimes I think that the climate crisis is actually a relationship crisis. That the large-scale disruption of the climate is only a consequence of something much larger, namely a consequence of the fact that we don't feel at home on this planet. That we have laid asphalt between us and the earth, a roof over our heads, walls between us and a screen between us and the world. Is the comfort in which we have enclosed ourselves, though once intended as a refuge, just an escalation of the broken relationship between us and the earth that brought us forth?

Perhaps not. The climate crisis is so many things at once. What I do know is this: the theater is an uncomfortable place, where it becomes very difficult not to be there. That is, you can't put up a screen, put on headphones, change channels. An appeal is made to your presence, and so the act of creating a performance, the act of sitting through it as an audience, has almost become a kind of training that I sometimes find heavier than meditating, but still one that takes a shot at that relationship crisis a bit. For an hour and a half.

Every performance, whether it's about a ticking clock, love, or the climate crisis, does something to our ability to listen, endure, and ultimately bear.

And while I thought about what consequences I could connect to the previous sentence, that is, what that sentence actually means and how I could end this speech with it, I was called by one of the directors of the opera. That there will be actions by the NGO Milieudéfense at the premiere because the ballet, which also resides in the opera building, is sponsored by ING. The bank that Milieudéfense says finances the climate crisis. I was told that there is currently a meeting discussing whether the ballet should sever its ties with ING. That meeting is still ongoing four days later, I know.

All in all, I believe I disagree with my previous statement. I still think we all need to create performances like *The Shell Case*, play them in large institutions so that the entire arts and culture sector becomes fossil-free and other sectors can draw inspiration from it. (During the delivery of the lecture, I heard someone in the front row react indignantly, which prompted me to say that it

was a joke, which it is, but in the context of our relationship crisis, I'll explicitly mention that. It's a joke, a stylistic device to give this text an air of conclusion).

The only place where that can happen, claiming one thing and then declaring the exact opposite, where those two don't cancel each other out, but somehow maintain a precarious balance, where many things can be true at the same time, this can only happen here.

It was also the reason I wanted to be here. So that I don't have to sit at home, scrolling through the news feeds, mainly being afraid that all of this will disappear. By being here, you being here, and this being here, I can also think: We are still here. We are still here. (Motherfuckers.)

Spoken by Rebekka de Wit on February 13, 2024, at OPEK Leuven during the opening of Shakespeare is Dead 2024 www.shakespeareisdead.com