

(Scary) Comfort

by Pieter T'jonck, pzazz.theater, May 2019

In 2017, 'Voicing Pieces' by Turkish-Belgian artist Begüm Erciyas was one of the highlights of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts. The installation swept up your own voice in an inimitable way. The opposite happens in 'Pillow Talk': Erciyas gets inside your head and stirs your innermost thoughts.

How Erciyas does this precisely, I can't disclose here without ruining the fun for someone who still wants to visit the performance. So they'll just have to wait a little while to read the rest of this piece.

There. Did you have fun? Were you surprised as well by the landscape, created out of fabric, which spreads out on the floor as far as the eye can see, far across the 'globe' of the KVS? Did you think that there were people underneath the bumps that rose up underneath the fabric everywhere in the room too? Did you still recognise the space with those low hanging light bulbs that dissolved the contours of the theatre hall? Was it easy to get comfortable on one of those pillows? Which thoughts did you share with the pillow you curled up against?

Did it come to mind that you were talking to a machine? Because that's what it actually is: underneath every pillow, there's a microphone and a speaker hidden. You're addressed by a machine that talks to you from inside the pillow and welcomes you. It can't be anything else. When I stayed a little too long, I noticed that the voice I had heard began again in the exact same way it had started talking to me.

But the machine's reactions to your specific answers do improve. Almost automatically, you assume that 'she' is listening to your description of the room, and just as easy you believe that 'she' really looks at the space through your eyes to see what's visible around you. That 'she' even starts to get dizzy when your eyes shoot across the room too fast.

But it all becomes really scary when you can ask the machine questions. 'She' answers them with yes or no. Afterwards 'she' invites you to share what's on your mind. What follows, could not possibly come from a standard script. The machine has to have picked up on emotional signals from what you said or asked, and must've found 'corresponding' replies to them.

'PILLOW TALK' GIVES YOU PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

That way, 'Pillow Talk' offers you a lot to think about. It seduces you into sharing a moment of contemplation during busy festival days throughout which you run from one place to the other, and rarely have the time to think things over. After all, the installation imitates a moment that everyone knows: the moment you're alone in bed and share your worries or happiness with a comforting pillow.

But it's still a machine. For example, the installation casually makes you aware of the fact that machines and algorithms have grown closer and closer to the skin as a second nature that has been laid down on top of the physical reality, and can seem even more real. It's like cursing at your computer when it doesn't want to cooperate once again, but takes things a step further in the superlative degree. You realise that your computer doesn't have its own will or power of thought. But Erciyas' pillows make you forget about that. They're like the real pillow from your childhood, but better, more real.

That's a little scary too.