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Lockdown culture Ontroerend Goed

TM review - will you be approved to join an international cult?

★★★★☆

Available online

You are put through a cryptic interview in this ingenious show that tears up theatre's rulebook to make the spectator the star

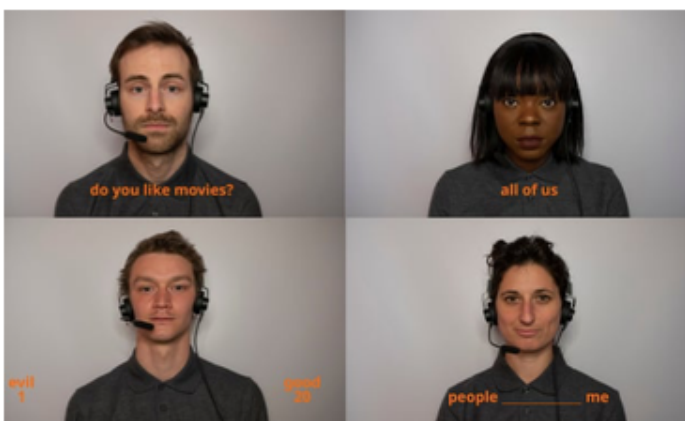


Mark Fisher

Thu 22 Apr 2021 12.03 BST



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▲ Answer carefully ... TM.

It's 2007, I've been lured into an Edinburgh basement and blindfolded. Unseen hands are guiding me out of a wheelchair and on to a bed. A voice whispers in my ear. "Are you worried about things?" she says. "Would you like to be in love?"

This was The Smile Off Your Face, my first encounter with Ontroerend Goed, an extraordinary Belgian company that has been messing with my head ever since. Its favourite trick is to turn spectators into participants. In Audience, for example, it caused consternation by testing the limits of what we deemed acceptable, while in £¥€\$ (Lies), it turned us into players in the international banking crisis.

Nowhere is this more true than in its series of one-to-one shows. After the sensory overload of The Smile Off Your Face came Internal, half speed-date, half group therapy, and A Game of You, in which you were unwittingly made the star of someone else's play. Now moving online, Ontroerend Goed has extended this strand to TM, a short and sweetly uplifting encounter that, like the company's best work, gives you the emotional pleasure you seek in the theatre but without the trappings of a conventional drama. (This is a company whose script anthology is called All Work and No Plays.)

The key to Alexander Devriendt's production are open questions that are universal but feel personal. After logging on and meeting your fellow audience members (mine were from Denmark, Belgium and Finland), you're shown a video full of bright-eyed people singing the praises of an international cult known as TM.

To assess whether you are worthy of membership, you are introduced to an operative (mine was Daniel from Germany) who takes you through a dianetics-style personality test. You answer yes or no, high or low, good or evil, to questions ranging from the benign to the unsettling. You're asked to interpret an abstract animated film and comment on what people think of you.

But rather than leave you exposed, as the company's shows have sometimes done in the past, this one pays you back with a humanitarian seal of approval. Reader, I passed the test. The majority surely will.

● Available online, Theatre Royal, Plymouth, until 25 April; virtual tour until 5 May.

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