

RAW SOLO SUCKS VIEWER INEXORABLY INTO ALS-DIAGNOSIS

By *Iris Spanbroek*
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Attempt on Dying is the most apt title creator Boris Nikitin (Switzerland) could have chosen for his autobiographical piece. In this sober monologue, he takes his audience through his father's ALS disease bed, and his wish to end his life through suicide. The result is a sober, raw play in which heart and head wrestle with each other.

Boris Nikitin is known for his radically minimal embellishment and illusion: the boundary between reality and theatricality is no stranger to him, as was also seen in his 2018 Hamlet adaptation. Attempt on Dying also remains austere. The design is minimal. The stage is empty, there is only a chair, apparently plucked from the café. Nikitin comes on, dressed in jeans and t-shirt, with script in his hand. He takes a seat and reads his text for fifty minutes. Gradually during the performance, the light changes slightly - from a total on stage and audience to a white spotlight on Nikitin himself - that's it.

The leitmotif of his text is his father's ALS diagnosis, how he gets increasingly ill, and eventually dies. Almost immediately after the diagnosis, his father indicates that he would rather die by euthanasia than by the disease. When he can no longer walk, he promises, it will be over. However, when the time comes for him to end up permanently in a wheelchair, he shifts his deadline. From walking to independent eating, from independent eating to total dependence, and then eventually the disease has done its work.

Nikitin himself balances between the academic intellectual, who applauds legal suicide, and the insecure son, who feels immense relief when his father changes his mind again and again. Telling is a monologue he delivers to a counsellor, early in the performance, in which he describes how beautiful euthanasia is. It is the right to be allowed to die, which changes the meaning of life itself. Living is no longer a must, not an obligation, but a choice. You MAY live, MAY end, MAY be. Nikitin even manages to wink meaningfully back to Hamlet in this: a fresh interpretation of to be or not to be.

The performance arcs towards the end of the agony. Then there are no more philosophical musings, but the focus is on the practical details. A phone call, a car ride, a reflection on final conversations, and finally the description of his father's death.

Nikitin also makes connections with other themes. Some are welcome additions, others feel redundant. For instance, Nikitin links his father's decision to his own coming out. Taking a stand on (your own) suicide is also an outing; both require vulnerability and courage. Although this connection between father and son is moving, within the performance it feels like too much. The focus on his father's illness provides enough food for thought. We don't need parallels to feel the gravity and precarity of the situation.

At first glance, Nikitin does not seem the best performer (recovery, reader). Sitting and reading is a form that requires some effort from your audience. It may be the language barrier, in an English-language performance by a German-speaking creator, but the reading aloud here and there is monotonous, flat, seemingly unfinished. The longer you watch, however, the more the opposite turns out to be true. All the movements Nikitin makes, from the shaking of his arm to the piercing glances he throws at us, are meticulously conceived and deployed as such.

When Nikitin drops a minute-long silence halfway through the performance but all these little movements persist, the focus of the performance also suddenly shifts. This is a dry text, true, but the physicality of this performance was painfully present all along. It is confirmed at the end. Nikitin stands up and goes off. A mock empty chair is left behind. The body is gone, and the form of this monologue meets the poignant content precisely and perfectly.

It is partly these small but brilliant theatrical interventions that make *Attempt on Dying* not only a dramaturgically clever, but also a moving and emotional solo. You are inexorably drawn into its narrative. Nikitin manages to strike the perfect balance between authenticity and theatricality.