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## Minor miracles – the play: a co-ethnographic exploration of intimate encounters at work by diverse bodies and minds

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### ABSTRACT

Minor Miracles is a play that depicts a three-and-a-half-day experience in silence and darkness undertaken by a group of mere strangers whose diverse bodies and minds afford unexpected intimate encounters, surprising emotional intimacy, and reflections about intimacy and disability at work.

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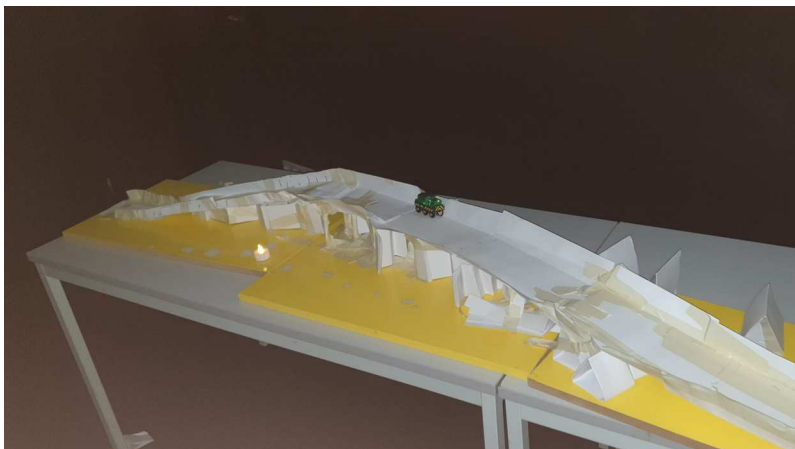
Diversity; intimacy; co-ethnography; disability

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You enter a theatre and see a stage obscured by a heavy, red curtain with the words “Minor Miracles” written on it in large black lettering. The audience is filing in, sitting down, picking up the programs placed on their seats. Everyone feels the excited buzz in the air and starts reading the programme.

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### Minor miracles – the play



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## The why of this play

'Minor Miracles' invites you to explore the intricate dance of intimacy within the confines of the workplace. Through a series of intimate encounters, the characters navigate the delicate balance between the extreme and the everyday. In an atmosphere where darkness and silence heighten every emotion, you are taken on a journey of self-discovery and mutual understanding. As strangers become acquaintances and acquaintances transform into confidants, the play reveals the complexities and unexpected facets of emotional intimacy. By the end, the characters – we – and perhaps you – learn profound truths about themselves and offer reflexive theories about the connection between disability, vulnerability and intimacy at work.

Why were we in the dark and silence? Why did we do this? What did it mean to us individually and as a group? How were we different? We challenge you to find out. The play has four acts, each taking you through a different phase of intimate encounters. All characters are real people, they are us – the authors. Nothing is fake, anonymized or amended. Discover the unseen and unheard through our diverse bodies and minds and learn how we came to perform our minor miracles. So, you could too.

Existing research often links intimacy to care relationships or sexual encounters. Our take on intimacy was broader. After all, Niklas Luhmann (n.d., 1982, 2000), a German sociologist, argues that intimacy is what keeps you anchored in today's fast-paced world. When he talks about intimacy, he does not mean just sexual or care relationships, but rather the full set of relationships that allow us to hold on to who we are while everything around us changes constantly and rapidly. For him, intimacy is like an anchor that helps us know ourselves through others in an ever-changing world. It is about knowing who you are. We adopt his term of emotional intimacy, a feeling of being close to someone (Gaia 2002; Lewis 1978; McAllister et al. 2012). Emotional intimacy has almost exclusively been researched in romantic relationships but also applies to friendship.

Some scholars like Reis (1990), Clark and Reis (1988), Buhrmester and Prager (1995), Mankekar and Gupta (2016), Rouse (2020), and Faier (2009) have explored different form of intimacy at work. While the term itself conjures up either sexual or romantic relationships between coworkers or couple relationships within the same workplace, the possibility of friends becoming emotionally intimate intrigued us. This is what this play explores.

We wondered how emotional intimacy emerges at work when it is not linked to romantic or sexual relationships or desires but rather grounded in a desire for mutual appreciation. Research highlights that trust, physical contact, activities, self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness are key factors in creating and enabling intimate encounters (Gaia 2002). It further suggests that intimacy either arises from the situation or the person (Gaia 2002). But we do not know how co-workers with different bodies and minds become emotionally intimate. Many workplaces bring together diverse bodies and minds, so we wondered: how could disabled and non-disabled people with different ethnicities, genders and sexualities become (work) friends? If we understood how emotional intimacy could emerge among strangers, this could help us learn how to create safe and brave spaces (Hunter 2008; The Rostone Collective 2014) that may foster better diversity management (Köllen 2021; Yadav and Lenka 2020), that caters to the often overlooked intersectionalities of people (Köllen 2021; Yadav and Lenka 2020), and that enables more 'real' conversations amongst colleagues (Jernsand and Goolaup 2020), and thus greater belonging. This also hinted that vulnerability, the willingness to acknowledge and share uncomfortable truths about oneself may play a role in this too.

How better to understand how intimacy emerges amongst diverse bodies and minds than by placing a group of strangers in very unusual but work-related situation. Join us on this rather unusual journey through an even more unusual research project.

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<sup>†</sup>Deceased, UK

## Cast list

We, the authors, decided to write our own character descriptions. Anica and Oana, the leaders of this project, casted the remaining cast members, deliberately focussing on diversity in bodies and minds.

Anica, Blind academic, woman, white, curly dark blonde hair that always looks fluffy, flown in from UK, guide dog handler and disgruntled long white cane user, lover of food, travel, and elephants, disability activist; finds it hard to filter sounds.

Andrew, Passionate librarian, white man getting close to retirement, living with dystonia (neurological condition) with shaking body, soft & timid voice, anxious about new situations, life-long learner, always wanted to be a published author.

Christopher, Business professional runs a social enterprise that supports people who are Deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing. Identifies as deaf and uses various technology to communicate and a sign language user, passionate about regulations/standards and advocacy for IDEA and loves to travel.

Christine, American business professor, white female with blonde hair, lover of animals and Taylor Swift fan, postponed her honeymoon to join this.

Emilio, PhD researcher. American by birth, Spanish and Brazilian ethnically, tall, curly hair, brown skin and full beard. Not shy but not too outgoing, prefers to wear sweatpants and hoodies in all life situations.

Erika, Neurodivergent professor and researcher of disability studies, registered occupational therapist, mostly retired attendant care worker. Nonbinary femme (she/they), white, culturally Jewish, late 30s, curvy body. A little shy at first, but confident once comfortable.

Hala, Diversity and Inclusion Consultant, based in London, Palestinian, curvy, tall, live and loud.

Kelly, Autistic queer woman, supporter of Scottish independence, politically very active, finalist in UK political reality TV, writes columns for newspapers, commentaries on TV, enjoys sitting on the floor, learning about own autism and masking, strong defender of women rights.

Oana, Hope healer, soul mender, and dream-maker. Professor by trade, wrangling strategies for making our world a better place; kind by choice, exploring nature with indigenous ways of being, knowing and seeing. Old fashioned middle aged plain vanilla white, tall and slim woman.

Wadebe, pronounce my name like way-to-be as this is my philosophy, Filmmaker and teacher, white, flown in from UK, but American/Portuguese by birth. Tall and confident (at least most of the time), but not always cool under pressure. Reader of energy, very passionate about aesthetics and artistic expression.

Us: Our collective reflective and analytical voice, disembodied, ethereal sounding, no gender connotation to it (it slightly shifts between higher and lower pitches), sounds a bit like a know-it-all because us always comes to know from within and between all our diverse bodies and minds in ways that are sometimes subtle and other times revelatory.

## Staff ensemble who works at the workshop provider

Birta, Blind woman, white cane user, works as coach.

Herbert, visually impaired man, white cane user, in his 50s, works as coach.

Sven, visually impaired man, works as guide.

Ali, visually impaired man with a soothing voice, aka 'the voice', voice actor, in his 20s, still at uni, works as guide.

Mark, Man, sign language user, middle-aged, works as coach and guide.

## Setting

The headquarter of Dialogue Social Enterprises in Hamburg, Germany: a seminar room, a hall, an exhibition, and a black box. The headquarters is in the warehouse (Speicherstadt) district of Hamburg. It's

right next to a canal with tourist boats beeping their horns and seagulls calling. The seminar room and foyer are quite echoey with high ceilings and wooden flooring. Dialogue Social Enterprises conducts leadership and communication trainings in complete darkness and silence. These trainings are respectively run by highly qualified coaches who are blind/visually impaired or D/deaf/hard of hearing, respectively. These are not run as blindness or deafness simulations due to the highly criticized nature of such experiences (Titchkosky, Healey, and Michalko 2019). Rather, the unique setting is used to sharpen non-verbal and verbal communication skills and to create extreme and often uncomfortable situations, as part of the learning environment.

It is Mid-July 2022, sunny and warm.

## Setting the scene – the how of our play

This play is in fact an unconventional presentation of a research project. So please excuse the more academic backstory. The project was designed as a collective co-ethnography (Clerke et al. 2014; Clerke and Hopwood 2014) between five academics and five practitioners. Co-ethnographies are a form of research in which multiple people collect data together on a shared event or experience. In our case, we conducted a multi-person autoethnography as we collected data on our own individual as well as collective experiences (Blalock and Akehi 2018; Davidson 2011; Ellis et al. 2018; Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017). The work took place in mid-July 2022 with an online extension into October 2022.

The research project was initiated and led by Anica and Oana. They picked the other eight co-ethnographers. Choices were based on experiences within the disability field as researchers, activists, and / or through lived experience. Gender (identity), racial and LGBTQ + diversity was considered alongside a diversity in disabilities including some who are non-disabled. This was to ensure that diverse ways of knowing (Hernández-Saca and Cannon 2019) and a diversity of experiences was present during the co-autoethnography (Averett and Soper 2011; Buckley 2016). Our recruitment was limited by the inaccessibility of the building. Co-ethnographers had to be able to 1) walk up two sets of stairs and 2) be available to be physically in Hamburg for the four days in July 2022. We appreciate that this has limited us in reaching an even greater of diversity in minds and bodies. We identified people through word-of-mouth, research we read, awareness of the disability community and recommendations.

Each of us consented to join and undertook research ethics training as everyone was researcher and participant simultaneously. Throughout the four days, we captured our experience in real-time as much as possible. During our sessions in the dark, some of us wore recording devices that captured the verbal interactions happening. During the sessions in silence, we videorecorded. After each ninety-minute to two-hour session in either darkness or silence, we individually reflected on our experiences through video or written diaries. We then spent half an hour to two hours discussing our experiences either in a group of ten or in two subgroups of five. Some of these reflection sessions were facilitated by Dialogue Social Enterprise staff. Many of us engaged in additional journaling in our hotel rooms and in discussions during meals and breaks. We did not film or record these.

After we returned from Hamburg, we took a six-week break before reconvening online. During online meeting 1, we wrote down our standout moments individually and then shared and discussed them (Blalock and Akehi 2018; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). We then met again twice more within two months to further discuss these insights homing in more and more on what we perceived as most insightful and to identify which moments captured these best. What struck us most was that what we experienced in terms of intimate encounters had not yet been described in current research (Broadbent 2016; Crary 1987; Gregg 2013; Rumens 2008; Broadbent 2016; Gregg 2013; Jamieson 2005). It was something different.

Through these multiple rounds of retelling how we experienced one another's experiences, the rawness of these encounters remained unadulterated. What made them so precious might have

been their unadulterated authenticity: we could not help but be ourselves, selves we may have not even acknowledged to ourselves, yet were plainly visible to the others – even in the dark. Many shared things they had never known, let alone shared with anyone else.

Perhaps in that perfect pitch darkness, we could better see ourselves through others’ interactions with us. Similarly, we learned to listen better in silence. We befriended one another.

Our group was repeatedly re-shaped, challenged to attempt tasks that loomed impossible to us at first. We all experienced wonderful punctuations of our joint journey to build intimacy through diverse person and unusual situations, which we interpreted as minor miracles. As we re-joined online to share reflections on our own experiences, we begun theorizing what happened. We are now ready to share what we have learned about emotional intimacy at work.

As we deliberated on how to present our findings, we recognized that conventional methods could not adequately convey our experiences. Consequently, we conceived the idea of a play. This innovative presentation method uniquely encapsulates and conveys our collective voices and experiences. The play is grounded in our research, featuring exact reproductions of our reflections and discussions, thereby maintaining the authenticity of our experiences. We did not shy away from highlighting moments of friction, confusion, and overwhelm, which were integral to our collective ethnographic insights gained in Hamburg. Writing this as a play gave us a better sense of our own and others’ experience, carving out key moments together, and representing them closer to how we experienced. For us, this felt more authentic than stand-alone quotes. It made us feel more connected to our paper and each other.

## Audience guidelines

Dear Audience,

Welcome to Minor Miracles. To help you fully immerse yourself in this unique and sensory-rich experience, we kindly ask you to take a moment to review the following guidance<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. Embracing the Experience

- **Be Present in Darkness and Silence:** Key scenes unfold in complete darkness or silence. Let your other senses heighten your connection to the story.
- **Respect the Journey:** This play explores deeply personal and intimate themes. Approach each scene with openness and empathy.

### 2. Accessibility and Support

- **Inclusive Features:** The performance is fully audio described. Captions will appear on side-stage screens, with sign language interpreters nearby. For blind or visually impaired guests, special headphones are provided.
- **Optional Enhancements:** To deepen your immersion during silent scenes, ear defenders are available under your seat.

### 3. Safety and Comfort

- **Stay Seated:** For your safety and to preserve the performance’s integrity, please remain seated throughout.
- **Support in Darkness:** If you feel uncomfortable during dark scenes, use the provided button device to alert a staff member. Please avoid using any light sources.

### 4. Preserving the Atmosphere

- **No Light or Recordings:** Please refrain from flash photography, video recording, or using light-emitting devices. Store them away or turn them off to maintain the immersive environment.

### 5. After the Curtain Falls

- **Reflect and Connect:** Join us post-show for a discussion with the cast – who are also the authors. We’d love to hear your thoughts on the journey you’ve just experienced

Thank you for being part of this extraordinary experience. Enjoy the show!

\*\*\*\*\*

We dedicate this play to Andrew who sadly passed away in July 2023. We all enjoyed going through this experience with Andrew. He was the one who coined our experience as a series of minor miracles. We appreciate the courage it took Andrew to join us in Hamburg given his neurological condition. Andrew was a great, helpful and kind man who was eager to learn new things till the day he passed away. We know how keen he was to see this published. We share our condolences with his wife and brother. RIP.

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You finished reading the programme, just in time for the play to start.

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## Prologue

Anica, Andrew, Christopher, Christine, Emilio, Erika, Hala, Kelly, Oana and Wadebe walk on stage with different devices, reading and typing. Some are heading to different types of chairs and sit down while still engaged with their devices. Others are walking around while texting. The curtain is still down. Everyone walks in front of it.

Anica and Oana sit down at opposite sides of the stage, both pull out laptops from their bags and start a zoom call to each other:

Anica: They all said yes!  
Oana (beaming widely): This is going to be so amazing!

Everyone keeps doing what they are doing. Anica and Oana start facing the audience and start speaking. The others join bit by bit until everyone talks together.

Anica & Oana: Welcome to our play, well it isn't really a play, it's our real life.  
Everyone: This is us, our conversations, our experiences and thoughts as they happened. During our encounters of strangers, we recorded everything, like they do on Reality TV. What you'll witness is what we really said, thought and did. We are diverse, we are disabled and non-disabled, straight and LGBTQ+, white and black and global majority, academics, practitioners and activists, immigrants, and non-immigrants, young and not so young. We are humans. And when it all started in Hamburg, we were strangers. We didn't know what to expect or what we'll find. What we found was a new understanding and appreciation of what intimacy and intimate encounters can mean at work.

Everyone exists the stage. The curtain rises for Act 1.

## ACT 1 – a day in silence

### Scene 1 – moving into silence

11 people stand in a rectangular room. Everyone keeps a bit of a distance from each other, watching one another, obviously still quite unfamiliar. All except Christopher seem somewhat apprehensive. Christopher looks very confident. Mark, the coach for this session in silence, points to ear defenders on a table next to him and to the group. Slowly the group walks over. Kelly first. All put on big ear defenders. They go back and stand in a semi-circle facing Mark.

[Silence]

[Silence]

[Silence]

Christopher (quite cocky to himself): This is going to be so easy. I know how to communicate without sound. Being d/Deaf and a sign language user is really going to make this easy.  
 Kelly (happy, to herself): Wow. They have ear defenders. I love it! Never had that before. I wish all places had ear defenders.

[Silence]

[Silence]

The group silently follows Mark through a door and out of sight. Anica looks weary. Hala looks nervous. Anica swipes her white cane back and forth.

## Scene 2 – animals and more

In a small room with rough, thick beige carpet on the walls, ceiling, and floor. The wall carpet looks like short waves. Fabric-covered stools set out in two groups. The group divides. Kelly, Oana, Hala, Anica and Emilio head to the left and everyone else to the right. Mark, the coach, walks up to a large wall with multiple squares on it and starts signing. Everyone is watching him carefully and intensely.

[Silence]

[Silence]

Anica looks lost and keeps turning her head in all directions, trying to make out any sound.

[Silence]

[Silence]

Mark gestures to the group on the left to start. They all mime playing different musical instruments.

[Silence]

Anica turns towards the movement, looks more confused and just randomly move her arms around, clearly not having any clue what is happening.

[Silence]

The right group watches, Erika with increasing concern on her face. Christopher's facial expression slowly changes from confident to confusion the longer he watches Mark, the coach, sign.

[Silence]

Next task: Mark explains through signing and gesturing that the group needs to identify the animal meant by a sign on a large wooden board.

Christopher (while Mark signs, to himself): What is he saying? I thought I'd have an advantage. I'm fluent in sign language but have no idea what he's saying. I didn't know that German sign language would be so different.

The two groups huddle to coordinate their answers. They are all gesturing widely and mouthing words in a very exaggerated way.

Erika (glancing over to Anica in the other group, to herself):

This must be so hard for Anica. I wouldn't know how I would feel if I were blind and now nobody talked. I think she doesn't know what's happening. She looks so lost.

Hala (pauses her engagement with the task, sighs deeply, to herself):

I can feel my body calming down. This is nice. What was everyone's name again?

Emilio touches Anica's hand and lifts them up, halting in that position. She nods. He tries to move them into specific signs. Anica lets him move her hands and arms around. She still looks confused. Emilio looks frustrated and helpless.

Emilio (to himself): I don't know how else to help her.

[Silence]

The group on the right shows their interpretation of the sign by miming the animal. The right group indicates a cat. The left group a bird. Mark points to the right group and they grin widely and clap in sign language (holding their hands up and moving them left and right just above the wrist). Throughout this, Emilio still tries to move Anica's hands and fingers around to help her understand what is happening.

Us: We experience Anica's struggle and vulnerability as a blind woman in a room without sound. We all feel that not being able to hear is Anica's greatest fear. It is not just her fear; it's our fear now. We still can't recall most names, but we are already getting to know Us. Without words, she self-discloses. Staying with the rest of us takes courage and trust. We become more intimate.

### Scene 3 – toy structures

In a seminar room. Emilio, Wadebe and Anica sit on one side of a table. Christopher and Erika on the other. There is a dividing wall in between the two sides of the table so that they cannot see what is in front of the others. The rest of the group is set up similarly at the second table at the other side of the room. Everyone still wears their big ear defenders. On both sides of each table, people are gesturing and mouthing in response to what others communicate to them across the dividing wall. They repeat similar signs to each other. One shows it, someone from across the divide repeats it with a questioning look. The other side either nods or shakes their head and signing and mouthing continues. In between these exchanges, those on one side sign to each other before getting up to sign to those on the other side of the wall. This process keeps repeating. One group at each table has coloured children's building blocks in different shapes in front of them, the other side has a piece of paper with a drawing of a structure. The group with the building blocks puts different blocks down, asking each other with gestures and mouthing if that is what needs to happen within their subgroup.

[Silence]

A woman walks over and sits next to Anica. Anica removes ear defenders from one ear so the woman can whisper sign language translations to her. Anica looks less lost and starts engaging in the signing to Erika and Christopher opposite her. This group smiles widely and laughs in between. The group at the second table is more tense and seems more frustrated.

Erika and Christopher have a half-finished structure in front of them. The structure on the second table in front of Oana and Kelly collapses. The first table doesn't react as they can't hear it.

[Silence]

Emilio and Wadebe are trying to explain a difficult section to Christopher and Erika by using basic sign language for colours and mouthing the words. It becomes obvious by the signed and mouthed questions back that Erika and Christopher don't understand how they need to place the three identified toy building blocks.

The woman whispers to Anica again whose face shows that she understands which shape they are trying to explain. Anica tries to get Emilio's and Wadebe's attention who first keep trying to explain the same thing again to Erika and Christopher. She nudges Wadebe. He turns to her. She takes his hands and gives him a questioning look. He nods. The woman whispers behind Anica. She then takes both of Wadebe's hands and forms them into a position, then takes Emilio's, positions them too, and finally uses her own hands to form the final shape. They all slowly stand up so that Erika and Christopher can see. Wadebe's hands represent two upright standing rectangles. Emilio's hands represent a triangle lying on one of its shorter sides between Wadebe's hands while Anica's showcase a triangle balancing on top of Wadebe's hands. Emilio then uses one of his hands to sign three different colours, after each colour pointing at Wadebe, Anica and himself, respectively. From then on, they use each other's hands much more to show the final positions and shapes. Everyone laughs. Giggles fill the room.

The two groups continue their exercise in building the toy block structures. The woman whispers less and less to Anica.

- Us: What did we learn while not speaking to each other? A lot. We grew closer. The minor miracles started. Sometimes it was as simple as being 'in touch' with other people, sometimes as subtle as changes in who took the lead or who responded how to whom. Seamlessly yet unmistakably we learn how to use one another's bodies and minds. Relying on almost perfect strangers' bodies and minds became more important than the task. Anica was vulnerable, we were vulnerable. As Emilio and Wadebe found new strengths in their non-verbal communication, we all became more confident. The physical contact brought us closer as did the challenge we faced.
- Kelly, Oana and Hala relaxed due to the silence, we could all feel their calm, even Anica who wasn't calm herself. The whirl of emotions we experienced are ours. We all felt it, at once. Then again. And again. Each shared moment was, well, an intimate encounter.

## ACT 2 – a day in darkness

### SCENE 1 – moving into darkness

In a foyer. The Foyer has high ceilings and wooden floors. Everyone is milling around near a door frame in the middle of the backwall. The wall is otherwise red with huge Braille writing on it spelling Dialogue Social Enterprises. It is impossible to see what lies beyond the entrance as it is shrouded in very dark shadows. The view also shows a reception counter with computer screens on the right and an open cloakroom with one jacket on the left. Sounds of people chattering, typing on a keyboard and a door opening to the outside letting in sounds of boats and seagulls; sounds of footsteps on wooden floors.

Our group chats intermittently and shuffles around. Waiting.

The scene begins with half the group picking up canes then putting them back, eventually choosing the right one, and then slowly shuffling into the darkness following one of the guides.

Ali (VI coach): Your turn now. Please get your cane.

Andrew, Hala, Kelly, Oana, and Emilio follow. They soon fade into the pitch darkness. There is quiet, anxious chatter building up. Click-clanking of canes with other canes, against a muffled wall and other muffled sounds of bumping and shuffling.

- Us: All aboard Anica's world. Well, not fully. She can still see a tiny bit. Yet, she is more familiar with no sight than the rest of us. Up for an adventure? Perhaps. Each of us swirled in all manner of feelings, not all of them comfortable. Brief bursts of nervous chatter pierced the quiet every few seconds kept us well apprised that most of us were on the verge of what, we weren't sure. What a task! But wait: was it 'a' task? Within each group, each of us was given the chance to lead the others. Would we be able to do it? Could we even remember what we had to do amongst all of our collective emotions?

**SCENE 2 – crossing a bridge**

Inside the exhibition. Everything is pitch black, no light. Sounds of breathing and shuffling. Every time someone thinks to themselves, they have a light highlighting them from above. Nobody else becomes visible.

Erika (thinking to herself): Wow, I love this. This is great. This makes me feel really comfortable. It's like I'm invisible here in the dark. Yeah. I really like this. I can be me!

A door opens. The room is filled with sounds of birds and occasional winnowing of a horse. Plants rustle. It smells like plants and soil.

Wadebe (quite loudly & astonished): Oh wow!  
 Herbert (blind coach): What can you hear?  
 Wadebe (amazed): Is this some kind of jungle?  
 Herbert (chuckles a bit confused): No, just a park with two bridges. Does this ring a bell for anyone?  
 Erika (nervous): Oh yeah. Me. It's my job to get us across a bridge with an obstacle.

Footsteps on gravel as the group starts moving forward.

Erika: Is gravel ok? I'm going to follow the gravel. I think gravel is good.  
 Wadebe: Gravel terrain. Some wooden stuff here [cane bangs into something]. Feels like we're advancing.

Erika and Wadebe are walking one way. Others are moving at slightly different angles. Their footsteps are audible moving in different directions, like a big arch. After a while they bump into each other in the middle of the room. The park's sound is mixed in with footsteps on different surfaces (soil, grass and gravel) and canes sliding on gravel and bumping into wooden objects.

Christine (thinking to herself): I don't like the darkness. Should I say something? Everyone else seems fine. Maybe I'm not going to say something. This is uncomfortable. Where are we going?

[Falls silent]

So many voices. Oh, there is Erika's voice again. Erika makes me feel very secure though when she speaks ... Erika is leading me, I'll be ok.  
 Erika (surprised): Hi, Chris? Is that you? Where are you?  
 Wadebe: How did we loop here?  
 Christopher: I feel like there are a lot of people around me.  
 Wadebe: Are we single file? I feel like we are a blob. Are we a blob?  
 Erika: Chris, where are you?  
 Christopher: I'm on gravel.

Erika moves further away from Christopher.  
 Meanwhile at the other end of the room. Erika, Wadebe, and Cristine wander around moving off the gravel and have muffled conversations about where the bridge is, what the surface is and where they are.

Christopher: Who is this?  
 Anica: It's Anica.  
 Christopher: Where are we?  
 Anica: We are very close to a wall and on the other end from anyone else. Let's stay here till they found the bridge.

Christopher (thinking to himself; struggling to hear with his cochlear implants and freshly without sight for lip reading): I'm really confused. Voices are everywhere. Where is everyone?

At the same time, back at the other side of the room:

Erika: I can hear the water running maybe it's leading us somewhere. Where is the wall.  
 Wadebe: On my right.  
 Erika: I think we need to step over this rock. There's like a rope.  
 Wadebe (louder): There's a rope.  
 Erika: There's a tree.  
 Britta (blind coach): Don't go into someone's garden!

Erika laughs but continues further into the garden unaware of it.

Christine: Are we in someone's garden?  
 Erika: Still have the wall to my right.  
 Herbert (blind coach): Erika, what can you hear?  
 Erika: Water to my left.  
 Herbert (shouts somewhat annoyed): No! You are in my garden!  
 Wadebe: Anica, did you find your way out of the garden?  
 Christine: I don't think she was in the garden.

Anica (from far away): No, we weren't I'm with Chris.

Erika does a roll call.

Herbert (blind coach): Chris, where are you?  
 Christopher: Not sure, there is like a wall.  
 Herbert (Blind coach): Can you hear the water?  
 Erika: Just want to make sure we have Chris?  
 Anica: Yes, we have.  
 Herbert (blind coach): Have you located the bridge?  
 Erika (relieved and excited): I think I have. YES. Here it is. (sounds of flowing water)  
 Anica: Chris, just hold on to my shoulder and follow me.  
 Christopher (thinking to himself): Where is she? How tall was she again? Is she facing me? What if I touch her somewhere inappropriate? I don't know where her body is. I don't want to be inappropriate.

Team 1's sounds disappear and sounds of team 2 begin.

The group enters the darkness. On one side of the stage, there is still some light shining through. Kelly's silhouette is visible. Andrew, Oana, Hala and Emilio are audible in the darkness, slowly moving forward checking in with each other.

Kelly (distressed): I can't do this. I need a moment.  
 Oana (thinking to herself): Oh wow. Kelly sounds scared. What can I do? She doesn't like touch or eye contact. She said so very clearly this morning. I don't know what to do.  
 Andrew (thinking to himself): Oh. This is tricky. I don't know what I am doing. Did they say go right or left?

Hala walks back towards Kelly. Her silhouette becomes visible near Kelly's.

Hala: Are you ok? Do you want to leave? I'll leave with you if you want. Or do you want to take my hand?  
 Kelly: Yes, please. Your hand.  
 Al (blind coach) i: Who has the first job? The one with the bridge?  
 Kelly (still anxious): Me.

Emilio (aloud): I can go in front. Kelly, you're still the leader but I'm happy to walk in the front and you can lead from the back.

Hala: I'll stay in the back with you, Kelly. We can leave if you need. Do you still want to hold my hand?

Kelly: Yes, thank you. Ok.

The group moves closely together through the space. Sounds of gravel, footsteps on grass and the wood of the footbridge

Us: Did you get lost? Well, we did. Everything felt challenging, but in a different way to the previous silence. We weren't just in different groups. Having to complete tasks in darkness challenged us. We could, however, build on intimate encounters from before. The task surfaced new vulnerabilities, new self-disclosures. We all knew it would be tough for Christopher, as a deaf person without the ability to lip read or to locate the direction of sounds. None of us know before that Kelly was afraid of the dark. But everyone in Kelly's group had learned how to feel her fear as their own. To Kelly's and everyone's swift relief and surprise, she accepted Hala's hand despite usually avoiding physical contact. Without realizing it at the time, we were not solving for someone's fear. Instead, we were intuitively leaning into the shared feeling of vulnerability. Our common experience of fear was resolved through touch: Kelly holding hands with Hala in the second group; Anica and Wadebe offering their shoulders to Christopher. The resolution brought much more than relief, however. Andrew coined this experience for Us as a minor miracle. He explained that when Kelly took Hala's hand, he felt included like never before, even if he had not been the one giving or holding a hand. Our collective intimacy deepened

### SCENE 3 – finding the sound

Still in pitch darkness. Traffic sounds. The faint clicking of a traffic light is audible in one corner of the stage.

Ali (blind coach): Who has the street task? The one with the traffic light?

Oana: I think that's me. How do I find the road?

Ali (blind coach): Listen to the sounds.

Oana (to herself): Woah. So many sounds. This is really overwhelming. Where is that traffic light? Too many sounds. It all sounds like it comes from everywhere. No traffic light sound. No, I can't filter it.

Kelly (to herself): This is very loud. Too much noise. Glad I have Hala.

Britta (blind coach): Can you please move on? We need to get through this, other groups are waiting

Oana: Just give me a moment. I need to listen and locate the traffic light. I need to filter the sound to place it.

Nothing happens.

Britta (blind coach) (harshly annoyed): I think you're unable to lead. Andrew, can you please take over?

Oana (defiant): I just need a moment.

Britta (annoyed): Andrew, please can you lead?

Oana: I just need a quiet moment.

Andrew (to himself): I don't want to do this. This is not fair to Oana. I also can't hear where the traffic light is. Is it to the right? Where was right again? The darkness makes it so much harder for me to orientate myself. I really don't like taking over. She'll be able to do it. Why aren't they giving her the time? (impatient): Andrew will do it now.

Britta: Ok.

Andrew (reluctantly): I think it's this way. I'm not sure. Follow me.

Andrew (uncertain): What did they say? It's so loud. What is happening?

Kelly to Hala: Andrew leads now. They said Oana can't do it. She couldn't hear the traffic light.

Hala:

Kelly (to herself):

I feel for Oana. I can't hear it either. There are too many different noises, and they are coming from everywhere. I wish I had those ear defenders from yesterday. They were great and made me so much more comfortable.

The group shuffles reluctantly and begins to advance slowly in the direction of the traffic light sound. The sound becomes louder.

Al (blind coach):

Come to me, come to me, come to me.

Emilio (to himself):

Woah. That voice. I immediately trust it. I will follow the voice everywhere.

Andrew, Hala, Kelly and Oana together (reverently):

That voice. I feel calmer. I will follow it.

The group starts walking in a different direction: They move faster and with more confidence and much less reluctantly.

Us: The whole group felt Oana's difficulty to separate the sounds, growing into a sense of overwhelm, frustration with the unhelpful addition of noise, peaking into utter annoyance for having the task taken away from her. Stalled as we might have temporarily found ourselves, we were nonetheless following Oana's inward journey to a level of vulnerability she had never acknowledged even to herself. Just like before, the moment of shared vulnerability was undeniable ours, not Oana's. As was the intimacy we all shared. As we followed Andrew's reluctant leadership, then Ali's voice, we acknowledged out loud what we could no longer deny. We had grown so close that we literally moved in synch, as a single body and mind, towards Ali's reassuring voice. All of us retold the experience, including to Ali, who agreed to our request to record his saying "come to me, come to me". Intimate encounters kept popping up when and where we least expected.

## SCENE 4 – building bridges

A large hall-like room with wayfinding markers on the floor going off into different directions. Everyone wearing different clothes is standing in a rough circle and chatting. Snippets make it clear that some of them had a somewhat crazy night out. The atmosphere is happy and relaxed. Everyone is smiling and engaging in the uncoordinated conversation. two blind coaches join them.

Britta: Great, everyone. We're now going into our Black Box. We will divide you into three teams. Each team chooses a leader. Your job is to build a bridge on a platform. Each platform is 72 cm long. Team 1 will build the up-ramp, team 2 the middle, and team 3 the down ramp. The entire bridge needs to be at least 10 cm wide and 10 cm high. In the end, your client's car needs to be able to safely drive across it. Team leaders can talk to each other. There is no other communication across teams.

Looking apprehensively, the group divides into three groups. Each group forms a line. Each line is led by one of the coaches guiding them into the Black Box. Oana, Wadebe and Christopher are one group. Anica, Erika, Emilio and Andrew are another group. Kelly, Hala and Christine are the final group. All three teams, in turn, disappear through a door.

The room is pitch black. No sense of its size. Lots of voices talking at the same time are audible. Time passes and chatter beckons more urgent intermingled with odd laughter in the middle of the room (Kelly and Hala). Sounds of paper being cut, people asking for paper, scissors, measurements, instructions. Things falling on the floor people trying to retrieve it, chairs being moved, people asking "did you hear where it fell?" "I can't find it" 'oh, found it'. This randomly occurs at the different tables. Similar questions being asked about how to make the pillars, how to make the road covering it, how to build the ramp. 'Maybe if we fold it?'. 'If we roll it?'. 'We don't have that!' becomes a motif. 'That's very wobbly'. 'There is stronger paper here'. People asking for re-assurance, checking in with each other. In between the verbal exchanges, very monotone computer voices speaking measurements in centimetres are audible. Most of the chatter is indistinguishable and it becomes harder and harder to hear as the scene progresses. It is chaotic and gets louder; many voices overlapping. Spotlights travel to illuminate cast members who talk to themselves.

Britta (loudly): First coordination meeting, please! Leaders: Wadebe, Erika and Christine, come to me please.

Christine (thinking): They didn't give us canes. How am I supposed to get there? I still have no clue how to do build our part! Hopefully the others do.

Wadebe, Christine and Erika (leaders) meet. They speak to each other, but it is almost not comprehensible. The rest of the room is too noisy and continues the chaotic situation from before. Parts of sentences like 'we Should ...', 'paper pillar', 'we can' are audible from the three leaders but nothing that makes full sense.

Britta: Team meeting done. Please return to your teams.

Chatter increases. Andrew isn't heard from for a little while. Kelly and Hala are still laughing every now and then (middle table). Oana's and Wadebe's voices sound frustrated. The pace of activities quickens.

Oana: Why are we building the road for the up-ramp team? We already have to build ours plus the underlying structure for our offramp. We don't have enough time.

Wadebe (taken aback): I wanted to help, and we have a good idea for how to build the road so we should be fine. They said, they will build the pillars, I think.

Oana: So, will they?

Wadebe (annoyed but unsure): I think so.

The atmosphere feels very different across the room. Some conversations are relaxed, others tense. The table on the left (Andrew, Erika, Anica and Emilio) is working hectically, but sounds cheerful. Hala and Kelly are punctuating whatever they are doing with a good measure of laughter. Wadebe and Oana grow quiet.

Christopher (to himself): This is like 50 people talking at the same time. What are we doing? What are they saying?

Hala & Kelly (together): I need a break. What are we doing?

There are a couple more team meetings and people moving more frantically. The group on the right is getting very tense. Their voices become more aggravated. Christopher's voice disappears from the general chatter. At the middle table, Ali (blind coach with 'the voice') joins Christine, Hala and Kelly.

Hala: Christine, what do you do?

Christine: I'm an assistant professor.

Kelly (intrigued): How old are you?

Christine responds but her answer is muffled by all the other chatter.

Kelly: Wow. Cool.

Hala & Kelly turn their attention to Ali and flirt with him asking him lots of deep personal questions. Their chatter mixes in with the rest of the chatter.

Christine (to herself): We really need to get that bridge built. I have to keep my perfectionism in check, I think. The others have checked out, I think.

Christine's table erupts in gentle chuckles. Anica laughs more and more frequently.

Herbert (blind coach): Please set up the bridge now.  
 Wadebe: What? We're not done yet!  
 Erika: Come on, we got to be faster, we still have to secure it all with tape.

People moving around, announcing and asking others to get out of the way.

Erika: We're coming through. Please watch out. We are on the left. Please watch. Emilio, have you got it?  
 Emilio: Yes. Andrew, can you turn a bit more towards me, please.  
 Andrew: It's on the table. Oh, something just wobbled. I think we need to stabilize it more. Our pillars are wobbling.

Two groups converge at the far left of the room. The right group is still at their worktable.  
 Sound of lots of sticky tape being ripped.  
 Anica is giggling and laughing loudly. Erika chimes in. The laughter fills the room. Emilio makes bemused comments next to them.

Emilio: What are you doing?  
 Anica (struggles to speak overcome with the giggles): Erika couldn't find the ripped off sticky tape, so I keep sticking it on her arm, all over. This is so weird!

The final group moves. Lots of final discussions and sticky tape being placed on paper.  
 Some are working on the bridge intensely; others are seemingly standing back. Christopher, Hala and Kelly fall motionless.

Britta: Are you done now? We need to finish. You've taken a long time.  
 Wadebe: Yes. I think we're done.  
 Andrew: It is connected over here.  
 Christine: And over here.  
 Erika (giggling): Just two more sticky tapes. Erika (to herself while more sticky tape is ripped and stuck on surfaces, and she gives into a fit of seemingly unstoppable laughter). I really can't stop laughing like I was crying. It's like a reflex. And I think there is probably some kind of sense of safety with the group already. That I am with because you know, to lose control like that, and not feel like a social pressure to. I want to get back to our task, but I just I just can't, and it is, I think it is partly overwhelming like there is just a lot going on. Yet, I also feel strangely confident even though I have no idea what I am doing.

Anica bursts out laughing, again.  
 The coaches get the car and turn its light on. It is a little toy car. It's tiny light illuminate's parts of the bridge.

Wadebe: This is never going to work.  
 Oana: This doesn't look stable enough.

One coach sets the toy car on the bottom of the onramp. He lets go and the car starts moving. The car keeps moving and makes it across the bridge.

Everyone: Cheering.  
 Andrew (to himself): This is a minor miracle! Everything felt equalizing; we bonded so well together. This time the darkness felt like a safety blanket.  
 Emilio (to himself): Wow, I never thought this would work.

Nobody moves but people take pictures of the car and the bridge and film it. Everyone exchanges how they felt and their utter amazement that the bridge actually fits together and held. Emilio, Erika, Anica, Andrew, and Christine are quite giddy with excitement, while Christopher, Hala, Kelly and Oana are relieved. There is a shared sense of pride. Except for Wadebe, who seems deflated.

Wadebe (wiping off sweat, to himself, standing a bit to the side): This is a bit basic, not very aesthetically pleasing.  
 Us: Ah, the sound of laughter! Of course, laughter served different functions. Anica's giggles rippled waves of happiness around the group. Some chimed right in like Christine and Erika. Others felt the cleavage of the contrast: they had already been at a loss like Christopher, and this pushed them to withdraw further. Laughter itself was not contagious. But the glimmers of hope and joy spread. Whose experiences were whose became hard to tell. Even in retrospect, we reflected on a felt inseparability of experiences. True, a bridge had been built. And, against all odds, it held! But it was not the three-part paper one that barely held together. It was an invisible one, glued as our individual vulnerabilities became available to Us and Us found a way to meet them. Cotinus intimate encounters. These encounters could not have been planned. Nor measured. Much like the paper one, these intimacies challenged Us to make disparate experiences fit. And hold. And strangely, they did.

### ACT 3 – reflection on light and sound

Everyone is back in the room where they built the toy structures earlier. Everyone except Kelly sits in a loose circle. Kelly sits on the floor in front of her chair as she finds this more comfortable with her autism. Oana takes her laptop and opens it.

Oana: Ok. Recording started for the last time. Could everyone please share their main reflections now that we are done? Anyone wants to go first?  
 Andrew: I'll go.  
 Andrew: What an experience! I was so scared going into the dark. I only got through it with empathy from everyone. It's ok to be vulnerable. It was this amazing combination of vulnerability and strength that made the teamwork. It was really effective and no more so than when the bridge was built, which I saw as a minor miracle. I ever thought it could be done. I thought the darkness was like a security blanket.  
 Christopher: It was an overwhelming sense of fear and insecurity going into a dark room for the first time. We had canes for the first time. Really didn't know where we were going or anything. I was really overwhelmed and Anica came and touched me and let me use her shoulder. And it was amazing how one sense could allow you to provide all your other feelings and emotions that you're going through and provide such calmness.  
 Christine: I think the most vivid one for me was probably how uncomfortable I felt in the dark. Maybe if I had been in the group of Kelly, I wouldn't have felt that, you know, that was the most salient, because if I saw her nervous, I'd be like this is normal to be nervous. A lot of people in my group really embraced the dark, and I feel like it really enjoyed it, and had a really nice time. The vulnerability was so important. We spent so little time together, but I feel we got really close as if I've known everyone for years.  
 Christopher: I also think going into the unknown was really odd. We didn't know who each other were; our backgrounds; what was our expected role in the week, and how we just became to trust the process. Yet I am leaving with new friends from people all over the world with different experiences, and inside that allowed me to be vulnerable and show a side of myself that most people don't encounter. What a week!

- Wadebe: Never before in my life have I've been placed in a situation where you have such a diverse group of people from different walks of life, and then, all of a sudden, it's like well, we're going to take away one of the senses too, and now you're going to give you this challenging thing to accomplish which I know everybody was very seriously motivated to accomplish ... Building the bridge in the dark was one of the hardest and most stressful things I've done. It was a choice of myself to accept a role as one of the leaders. When you're in the dark, things seem very much like life and death. There was this desire to succeed. I became the conduit of communication. That became stressful. I enjoyed the darkness without wearing my mask of everything is alright. I had some exasperated reactions and was quite glad these weren't visible. The whole thing was putting everyone under pressure.
- Erika: I think I'm quite different but also similar to you, Wadebe. I'm feeling incredibly excited following that experience. I loved it. It was incredibly enjoyable. I felt in my element. We were standing around, I noticed I was swaying my body and I noticed nobody can see and it felt incredible. It made me aware that there was an incredible sense of relief. I'm always aware and uncomfortable of people seeing me in the world.
- Kelly: When I was ready to run out of the door. When Hala came and took my hand. This intimacy was immediately created. I have a grim fear of the dark. The whole way through they were with me holding my hand. I was ready to leave. It was tough. I was ok when we were moving around but found it much harder when sitting still in the dark, it was really claustrophobic. Well, I loved being able to sit like I wanted to without anybody noticing. Great not to have to mask for once. I was also astonished that my social batteries were so drained after the day in silence.
- Hala: It really took us a while to get across that bridge in that park area. I was a bit scared when we entered the dark but got quite comfortable within five minutes or so. When I felt Kelly struggling, I went back to her and offered my hand. I kept asking her throughout if she still wants my hand, wanted to make sure she is ok but also comfortable with the touch. The close spatial proximity really made me feel safe. I liked how we all huddled together.
- Emilio: I think what was so interesting. For me. It was, of course, the kind of first glimpse of like the power of vulnerability, and how that can kind of be contagious, because when we first went in, it actually took us a while to get into the you know, into the dark, and that was because, of course, you know, Kelly was afraid of the dark. But she was very, very straightforward; very, very openly vulnerable. Our group was very patient. We have a lot of respect for one another. We are really very willing to listen to what one another had to say. Emilio (looks to Kelly). Thank you. I learned a lot from you.
- Oana: Exercises highlighted embodied anxiety. The sensory deprivation made me struggle to let other senses compensate without creating overload. The most significant overload was sound. It was the interference from outside the group. I experienced that as a very abrupt overload. I didn't want to have to deal with their interference. I was very mindful of touching and constantly checked in to see what was appropriate or not. At some point, Emilio was noticing how anxious I was to take a step and he moved my foot up the step. Almost taking over control of someone else's body. For me, the most important one was the bridge where Emilio had to take over, as every time I tried to lift my foot, I became more and more uncertain about what to do with the different obstacles. The other example was Hala going back to the entrance and taking Kelly's hand. I had considered offering, but my intuition was to create space and leave her alone to deal with her uncertainty on her own terms. Hala took a very different approach. She wanted to make sure Kelly was not alone. I was quite surprised of how welcome, and well received, Hala's offer of touch was by Kelly. We almost worked as a multi part body. At one point, so many different hands were exchanging objects, and it was all very fluid and somehow very, very gratifying at the same time. I experienced moments of joy border lining elation after that. We had a sense of control over what other bodies and voices in the room could do and would do. For me it felt like gaining control by having the consensual collaborating of so many different bodies in the room to multiply our own efforts on the task.
- Anica: I think the moment I will remember most is probably the weirdest one. Sticking tape on someone else's body, well two people in the end as I also ended up using Emilio's arm as storage place for sticky tape: it's probably right up there with some of weirder things I've done in my life. I had to giggle and laugh so much, couldn't stop. It didn't feel awkward. It just felt like the thing to do in that moment. Erika and Emilio had no issue with me doing that; it also had become a normal thing for them. I loved the sense of achievement that everyone shared once that car crossed the bridge. Felt like winning a world championship. I really found joy in vulnerability, I thought it was cathartic to hear others vulnerability and it even kind of made me feel better to experience others struggling. I really like the co-existence between

joy and struggle in the same situation. We were in between the two opposite states, going back and forth between struggle and joy. With every move I felt that we felt more connected.

Everyone gets up to leave.

Us (reflexively): That was how intimacy revealed itself; how we knew it was built—not as a fragile construct of words, but as something lived and felt. Not merely a paper bridge, but a structure forged from the raw materials of vulnerability and difference. We observed it take shape when Kelly stood before the dark and did not turn away, and when Oana met the sound with trembling honesty. In those moments, they did not shield us from their fears; they invited us in. And later, through their reflections, they allowed us to walk those paths again—this time with them, and within ourselves.

Their openness stirred something within the collective of us. It softened our edges. It made space for our own truths to surface, our own vulnerabilities. And in that shared space, emotional intimacy was not just possible—it became inevitable.

We were not the same. Our differences were not incidental; they were essential. They did not make the journey easier, but they made it real. Through contrast, we saw more clearly the universality of our experience. The way fear echoes differently in each of us, and yet how familiar its rhythm becomes when heard together.

It was through this mosaic of selves—diverse, vulnerable, and willing—that we became something more. Not just individuals in proximity, but a collective in emotional intimacy. That is how we came to know:

intimacy is not found. It is built. Together.

## ACT 4 – your turn ...

The ten authors sit in a semi-circle. The person who speaks steps forward towards the edge of the stage looking directly at the audience. The spotlight highlights the person talking. Everyone else sits in a shadow.

Kelly: We hoped you enjoyed ... .  
 Andrew: ..our minor miracles!  
 Anica: We shared our minor miracles with you. It's your turn now! Join us!  
 Oana: Ours were moments of extremes. But intimate encounters happen everywhere and every day.  
 Wadebe: Take a moment to recall an ordinary experience, a moment of your own vulnerability or that of others that became yours or theirs. A situation that sparked joy, forged connection or bond, or that just made you breathe an instant sense of relief in the midst of a challenging circumstance.  
 [Silent pause to foster recollection, then Emilio draws in closer and prompts further: which is the first encounter that springs to mind? \_\_\_\_\_]  
 Hala: Capture it!  
 Hala: Now utter this reclaimed memory out loud or sign it to the crowd, if you're comfortable with that  
 Erika: Now tell us more: how has this minor miracle touched you in a lasting way?  
 Christopher signs: Putting the spotlight on you as you get ready to honour your minor miracle on stage. Think about it and if you're comfortable speak or sign it to everyone.  
 Christine: Thanks for sharing your minor miracle with us!  
 Anica: And such intimate encounters keep growing, one minor miracle at a time ...  
 Curtain falls

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30 minutes later the Q&A session begins.

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**Question and Answer session**

- Wadebe: Thank you so much for joining us this evening. We're grateful to those of you who have stayed for this Q&A session with us. We're all here on stage.
- Audience Member: What comes next?
- Wadebe: Great question (chuckles). As a filmmaker, I'm exploring how to translate this experience to the screen. I filmed our entire encounter in Hamburg, but a film adaptation needs to be more than just those videos. So, to answer your question: a video version is a possibility once we figure out how to convey the sense of darkness on screen, to make it truly immersive. But also how to get the creation of emotional intimacy across.
- Audience Member: I know that some of you are academics.
- Wadebe: Yes, half of us.
- Audience Member: So why did you do this? It sounds like an amazing experience, but there must be more to it than that. You already wrote some of it in the programme but could you tell us a bit more?
- Wadebe: I'll let Anica and Oana, the masterminds behind this project, answer that.
- Oana: Anica had mentioned these leadership workshops to me for years, and they really intrigued me. When we saw a call for research funding, we decided to propose this idea. Our original goal was quite open-ended. We wanted to see what happens when people with diverse backgrounds, bodies, minds and perspectives experience this together, especially if they don't know each other beforehand.
- Anica: Exactly. It was a fascinating idea, and everyone here agreed to participate. Just to clarify, we contacted them about two months, some only five or six weeks, before the event and asked if they'd come to Hamburg to spend hours in darkness and silence. We were amazed that no one declined. So, to your question—yeah, we really took a step back and asked ourselves: What can we actually learn from this kind of unusual situation? And honestly, these kinds of extraordinary moments can teach us a lot about the everyday stuff we usually take for granted. There's some great research out there—like the work by Jernsand and Goolaup in 2020—that shows how learning happens when three things come together: First, engagement—and let me tell you, this experience was deeply immersive for all of us. Second, critical moments—and we captured a bunch of those in *Minor Miracles*. And third, reflection—which we did a lot of, both during and after. Now, we were especially curious about emotional intimacy—those quiet, powerful moments of connection. And that's a bit of a tricky area in the literature. A lot of the existing work tends to focus on intimacy in the context of sexual relationships, harassment, or power dynamics—think Broadbent, Gregg, Jamieson, and others. Or it looks at sex work and care work, like in the studies by Paerregaard or Warr and Pyett. When it comes to disability, it's a similar story. Researchers like Dokumaci and Liddiard have explored the challenges disabled people face in forming intimate (often sexual) relationships. And Black and Kammes did a meta-synthesis in 2019 that really highlights the barriers for people with intellectual disabilities. Fritsch, for example, looked at the unique dynamics between disabled people and their personal assistants. But again, most of this work is framed around sexuality or care—not the broader, everyday forms of intimacy we were seeing. That said, there are some interesting exceptions. Reis, Clark, and Buhrmester, for instance, talk about intimacy as something that happens when one person opens up and the other person accepts that vulnerability. Simple, but powerful. And then there are studies like Mankekar and Gupta's work on call centres, or Rouse's research on creative co-production, or Faier's study on migrant workers—all of which show how everyday conversations can spark real moments of connection.

Still, even those didn't quite capture what we were seeing—especially when it comes to the diversity of bodies, minds, and experiences. So we wanted to dig deeper.

One idea that really intrigued us came from Zeyen's 2024 paper, which talks about how emotional intimacy can actually create a kind of positive contagion. And Kaplan and Kupper, in their 2017 study on reality TV—yes, *Big Brother*—showed how intimacy and solidarity can form not just between contestants, but also between them and the audience. That really supported our hunch that intimacy can happen even among strangers.

But the big question remained: How do you create that kind of connection among people from totally different backgrounds and with different interests?

Some research, like Gaia's 2002 review, suggests that unusual situations can speed up these kinds of connections. So ... we decided to test that. We invited people in—and then we put them through days of silence and darkness. Just to see what might happen. (chuckles). So here we are ... Sorry I rambled a bit there.

Audience member: I'm an academic myself, so I'm really interested in what you learned. Was there a specific theory you had in mind?

Erika: So, here's the thing—Christine, Emilio, and I, the other academics on the team, weren't actually part of the original planning. We kind of parachuted in once things were already rolling in Hamburg. But since then, the three of us—and the rest of the group, which was ten of us, then sadly nine after Andrew passed—have been doing a lot of reflecting together.

Now, I wish I could say there's a neat, tidy theory out there that explains what we experienced with *Minor Miracles*. But—surprise!—there isn't. And if you've ever asked an academic a simple question and gotten a 20-minute answer, you'll know we're not great at keeping things brief anyway. So naturally, we started building our own theory.

What we came up with is an emerging framework around intimate encounters and disability. It's made up of three interconnected, looping steps. The first one? Creating spaces. Sounds simple, right? But it's actually about intentionally making room for these kinds of encounters to happen—especially in ways that embrace diversity.

And here's the thing: there's not a lot of research on how to do that with what we call "diverse mindbodies." Williams and Hagood put it really well back in 2019 when they said disability is the "silent D in diversity." These encounters—we believe—happen all the time, but they often slip by unnoticed. What made Hamburg different was that the environment helped us notice them. Anica and Oana were already creating those spaces before the workshops even started. Like, on the very first day, Anica booked us a table by the water. We sat there, soaking up the sun, laughing, chatting—it was beautiful. And it wasn't just a nice dinner. It was part of the process. That moment helped lay the groundwork for the intimacy we'd later experience.

Another big part of creating space was the built-in reflection. We were constantly checking in—with ourselves and with each other. Everyone kept some kind of record—I'm a diary person myself—and we had group discussions at least twice a day, sometimes three. And during those, we really leaned into our different ways of knowing and being.

That's when the magic started to happen. We began to open up, to share things, and—just as importantly—to accept what others shared. That's what researchers like Clark and Reis, and Gaia, and Lewis talk about when they describe how intimacy forms. It's not just about disclosure—it's about acceptance. We allowed ourselves and others to be vulnerable, which increased the sense of emotional intimacy and in turn allowed for more vulnerability. This made me – all of us – feel safer and more like the real us than in many other spaces we've been in.

And in disability studies, there's this powerful concept called *cripistemology*—from folks like Chen, Johnson, and McRuer. It's about how disabled people generate knowledge in ways that challenge traditional norms. That idea really helped us understand what was happening.

Now, one of the most fascinating parts? The darkness. Literally. We spent time in complete darkness, and it changed things. It made the space more inclusive in ways we didn't expect. Many of us started to unmask—and I don't mean metaphorically. Masking is something a lot of disabled people do to appear more "normal," to meet ableist expectations. Like Kelly, who usually prefers sitting on the floor but felt pressure to use a chair—Radulski talks about this in their 2022 work.

But in Hamburg, we all started letting go of those masks. And that made our encounters not just more intimate with each other—but also with ourselves. Again, we were closer to ourselves and thus able to be emotionally intimate with others.

Christine:

Okay, I promise this one about the second aspect is going to be short—well, short-er. Let's say ... the academic version of a quick story.

One of the really unique things about our experience was that it wasn't just about dyadic intimacy—you know, those one-on-one connections that most of the literature focuses on. A lot of studies, like Rouse's 2020 paper (which, by the way, has the beautifully poetic title "Where You End and I Begin"), explore how identities blur and merge in those close, two-person dynamics—especially in creative co-production.

But what we experienced was something different. It was collective. Intimate encounters didn't just happen between pairs—they happened across the whole group. And that changed everything.

Even if you weren't directly involved in a moment, you still felt it. It rippled through the group, deepening emotional intimacy for everyone. Without the usual one-on-one structure, things got more complex—but also more interesting. We saw new configurations of intimacy emerge, ones that don't really show up in the existing literature.

So, in short (yes, really this time!), the collective nature of what we did pushed us beyond the usual frameworks. It opened up new ways of thinking about how intimacy works—not just between two people, but within a whole community.

Emilio:

Alright, last one—I swear. And yes, I know they said the last one would be short, but I really mean it. Let's call this the "academic cooldown lap."

So, the final piece of our emerging theory ties everything together: the link between the collective and the self. Because while we had these powerful group experiences, there was also something deeply personal happening for each of us.

We all had moments—breakthroughs, little revelations—where we connected dots we hadn't before, or shared things we'd never said out loud. And sometimes, we didn't even share them out loud—we just realized them. It wasn't just about disclosing things to each other, but also to ourselves. That's something Clark and Reis talked about way back in the late '80s and early '90s—how intimacy can grow through self-disclosure, even when it's internal.

And these moments didn't always happen through direct conversation. Sometimes they came from just being there—observing, co-experiencing. Like when Kelly shared her fear of the dark in real time. Or when Andrew didn't say anything, but somehow, we all just knew. Even in silence, even in darkness, those moments connected us.

What we found is that these personal reflections looped right back into the collective. The more we processed individually, the more connected we became as a group. It wasn't just the encounters themselves—it was the immediate reflection on them that made the difference.

And in the spirit of Jernsand and Goolaup's work from 2020, we really did learn through this. We learned about emotional intimacy—not in theory, but by living it. And somehow, in just a few days, strangers became fast friends.

See? Told you I'd keep it short-ish. That's my academic mic drop moment (smiles smugly).

Oana:

These three points—diverse bodies and minds, no duality, and the individual-to-collective cycle—inform our emerging theory.

- Audience member: You keep saying this was an unusual situation, but what does it tell us about everyday life?
- Oana: It tells us that our understanding of intimate encounters has been too limited. We can learn to tune in, become more aware as they happen, and more reflective about how they shape our everyday interactions at work.
- Audience member: What does it tell us about intimacy at work?
- Anica: Just a couple of things to wrap up. First, and this is important: what we experienced shows that intimacy can happen at work—and it doesn't have to be romantic or sexual. That's something the literature often overlooks, as Erika just pointed out. But we saw it clearly. Second, we think this has real implications for diversity management. Our experience was deeply intersectional, and yet, intersectionality—especially when it includes disability—is still often missing from diversity conversations. Köllen (2021) and Yadav and Lenka (2020) both highlight that in their reviews. But here's the exciting part: the kinds of intimate encounters we had? They're not limited to our project. They could actually be replicated in other work settings. That sense of belonging we felt—of strangers becoming connected—could be fostered elsewhere too. Now, how do you do that in a workplace? That's the big question, right? Hunter (2008) and The Rostone Collective (2014) suggest that creating safe workplaces means people need to be willing to take risks, to fail together, and to stay open and authentic. But how do you actually make that happen? Well, our time in Hamburg gave us a few clues. No, I'm not saying every office should plunge into darkness or go silent for days (though ... imagine the team-building potential!). But the real trick is enabling safe self-disclosure through being vulnerable —giving people the space and time to be real with each other while doing something together, whether they succeed or not. It's about breaking usual work routine, or even leaders being open about their own vulnerabilities. It's about creating the conditions where emotional intimacy can grow—even among strangers, even across different bodies and minds. I tried to keep it short. I really did. But apparently, I'm still not winning the "most concise" award today.(chuckles)
- Audience member: I'm not an academic. What can I take away from this?
- Christopher: The trip to Hamburg taught me a lot about myself and my work as a disability advocate and manager. Understanding different ways of knowing and experiencing the same situation and learning to see it from my own and others' perspectives, made me realize that many practices in my organization and those we work with need to change. Reflection and celebrating these minor miracles are important to create a sense of belonging.
- Kelly: I'm very active in gender and disability activism. We need to consider how to create spaces for these intimate encounters without having to fly people to another country and put them in dark rooms (she laughs). It's possible to create such spaces. If we do, we can better tackle diversity challenges. For instance, why don't we mingle with people very different from ourselves? How can organizations ensure different voices are heard and common ground is found?
- Hala: I fully agree. Open, respectful conversations or other forms of communication are important. Showing vulnerability was another lesson; we were all willing to step into that space. Safe and brave spaces play a part in this.
- Wadebe: As a teaching fellow at a university, I believe we can bring the emerging theory of intimate encounters and disability to the classroom. We can teach students to consider the diversity of bodies and minds and reflect on daily interactions to appreciate their minor miracles. Asking students to keep mini-diaries and share some experiences with others will help them value their everyday lived miracles.

Wadebe: That's it. We are out of time. Thank you, everyone, for joining us in reliving our minor miracles.

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Ethics Approval by Western University Research Ethics Board 121181.

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