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Exclusive interview with
the man Rupert Goold calls
the world's greatest director

IVO VAN HOVE

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TRUE SHOWMANCE

Phoebe Waller-Bridge
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cosying up to your co-star

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THE BIG INTERVIEW

IVO VAN HOVE

THE STAGE

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‘Once you close
the rehearsal
room door,
everything
is allowed’

The Belgian director is regarded as one of the most inspirational figures in world theatre. As his acclaimed staging of *A View From the Bridge* transfers to the West End, he tells **Matt Trueman** how his vision has been shaped by a sense of being an outsider

Ivo van Hove scouts the Jerwood Space for the right spot. It's the end of the working day and the cafe is almost empty. Every identical white table in the glass conservatory is free. Van Hove leans back slightly and assesses the situation, before making his choice and sitting himself down at the nearest table.

I've been warned this might happen. He has a habit, apparently, of telling people where to sit, as if even real life needs a bit of blocking. He's clearly quite particular: everything's just so. His outfit seems perfectly calibrated: light blue shirt, dark blue jeans, navy zip cardigan. His thin, grey hair falls into a tidy side-parting and his gestures are poised and delicate – something that lessens his passing resemblance to both Robert de Niro and Tommy Lee Jones. He's graceful in his masculinity.

Space is clearly important to the Belgian director. That's obvious from his productions, which are more sculptural or gestural than they are conceptual. His designer, Jan Versweyveld, has been with him from the get-go, a partner in both life and work, and when the pair took over Toneelgroep Amsterdam in 2001 ("God," he says flatly, "that's 14 years already.") they completely refurbished the company's offices. Apparently, aesthetics

can come before pragmatics: none of the doors has nameplates or numbers.

Van Hove's own office is particularly minimalist. No files. No computer. A long table – "almost empty" except for a mobile phone. "I call it my monastery. I love – and Jan knows this very well – emptiness." A serene smile appears. "It opens your mind."

Anyone who saw *A View From the Bridge* at the Young Vic last year will understand that. Van Hove's production, which transfers to the West End next month, seemed forged out of nothing but focus. Every element conspired towards concentration: the bare stage, light bouncing off its bright, white floor; the hollow, rhythmic drum beat that underscored key moments; two bars of Faure's *Requiem* on repeat. All you had to hone in on was the acting and the story. It felt like Arthur Miller's play distilled to its essence, with every impurity extracted.

That typifies Van Hove's approach. "What I have to do is to liberate the hidden forces of a play: telling the story, but also going beyond the story." Narrative, he explains, is the job of the playwright. The director must do more: unlock something above it; tap into something beneath.

That doesn't mean deconstruction though, and Van Hove insists he's not

an iconoclast. "I don't read a text, put it aside and start thinking about images. The images and interpretation come from old-fashioned research. I read a text over and over. I talk about it. I've given total fidelity to every text I ever did."

It depends what you mean by 'fidelity', of course; 'to the letter' being different from 'to the spirit'. Van Hove is all about the latter. "We try to discover how this play wants to be directed in the most extreme and unique way," he says. The play leads, but Van Hove and Versweyveld push it further.

“
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”

Space is key to that. In *Toneelgroep's* *Roman Tragedies* – a five-hour medley of Shakespeare's classical plays, seen at the Barbican in 2009 – the audience has free reign to move through the theatre, with sofas, computers and a bar onstage. We become Rome's citizens, ruled and fought over.

The Barbican's Louise Jeffreys and Toni Racklin saw it in Avignon in 2008, and resolved to programme it mid-show. For his part, Van Hove was anxious: his first London outing would be a Shakespeare in the playwright's homeland. "It was a really hard sell," remembers Jeffreys. "Five hours of Shakespeare in Dutch." The Barbican took the rare step of contacting artists directly, imploring them to come to one of the three performances.

The impact was huge. Playwright Simon Stephens, currently working with Van Hove on a solo musical, sums up its impact: "Roman Tragedies absolutely blew my mind. The combination of nuanced, detailed and humane acting, which evoked the best of British acting, coupled with an extraordinary ambition and imagination." It was, he says, like Shakespeare remade as a series of the television show *24*.

Van Hove and *Toneelgroep* Amsterdam returned to the Barbican the following year with *The Antonioni Project*, a mash-up of the Italian auteur's films, and again with *Scenes From a Marriage*. That split both stage and audience into three, playing scenes concurrently to imply that marriage is the sum total of two lives, not simply a relationship between two people; that all of us are different people at

CV Ivo van Hove

Born: Heist-op-den-Berg, Belgium, 1958

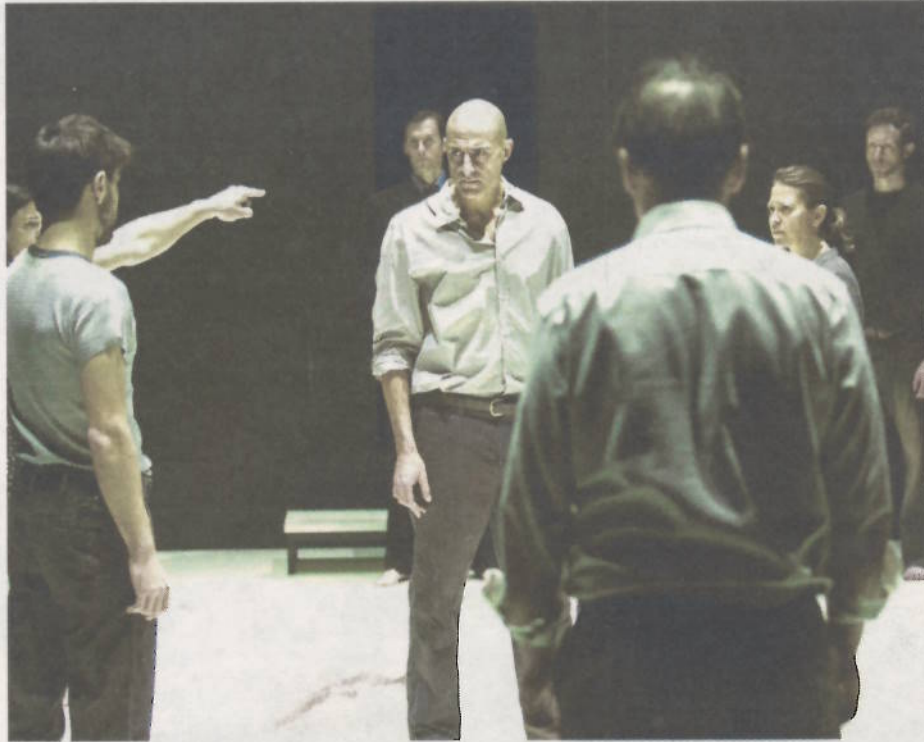
Trained: RITCS, Brussels

Awards:

- Oscar de Gruyter prize for best direction (*Macbeth*, 1987)
- Flanders Oeuvre prize (1995)
- Theatre Festival prize (1996)
- Off-Broadway Theater awards (*More Stately Mansions*, 1997; *Hedda Gabbler*, 2004)
- Herald Archangel, Edinburgh Festival (1999)
- Dutch Theatre Critics' prize (2007)

Landmark Productions:

- *Rumours*, 1981 (AKT)
Van Hove and Versweyveld's first show, staged in a warehouse in Antwerp
- *Desire Under the Elms*, 1992 (*Zuidelijk Toneel*, Eindhoven)
Eugene O'Neill's farm play staged with four live cows
- *More Stately Mansions*, 1997 (*New York Theatre Workshop*)
Van Hove's first production in English
- *India Song*, 1999 (*Edinburgh International Festival*)
Van Hove's first production to play the UK
- *Scenes From a Marriage*, 2005 (*Toneelgroep Amsterdam*)
Van Hove adapted Ingmar Bergman's film into a theatrical masterclass. He has since done the same for Antonioni and Pasolini's work.
- *Roman Tragedies*, 2007 (*Toneelgroep Amsterdam*)
Three Shakespeare plays squished together to become a five-hour epic about democracy.
- *A View From the Bridge*, 2014 (Young Vic)
Arthur Miller's family drama boiled down took London by storm, winning a West End transfer that's both surprising



Mark Strong with fellow cast members in Van Hove's production of *A View From the Bridge*, at the Young Vic last year. It transfers to the West End next month



Van Hove's top tips

Always be yourself. Don't cheat yourself.

Go for maximum urgency. There's always something more to discover. Never take things for granted. Dig deeper in your library. Look at as much as possible – not just theatre, but movies, museums, people on the streets. Be curious and never think that you know everything there is to know.

It's very important, as a director, to tell a story from the text but also to tell a visual story.

"I have the feeling that I lived my life already once," Van Hove explains. "Everything that happens in life, I experienced there for the first time."

He spent the first two weeks in tears, homesick. "Then I didn't cry anymore." His best friend – "I was in love with him, of course" – died in a bicycle accident one weekend and, the following Monday, a teacher told Van Hove, then left him "totally alone with that feeling". He learned how to stand up to bullies, specifically by learning to lead.

On one occasion, for example, the young Van Hove compiled and printed "an undercover newspaper" with three of his peers. "We were like terrorists. We had helmets on. We'd prepared it with a teacher, actually, and distributed it around the school, all this sex and religion, all very in-your-face for a Catholic school. Nobody knew it was us."

Theatre provided a similar thrill. On Wednesday afternoons, pupils had a choice between the sports field, the local town ("to walk around and see the girls") or the school theatre. Out of 800 students, only 15 picked the theatre. They became

• **Scenes From a Marriage, 2005**

(Toneelgroep Amsterdam)

Van Hove adapted Ingmar Bergman's film into a theatrical masterclass. He has since done the same for Antonioni and Pasolini's work.

• **Roman Tragedies, 2007**

(Toneelgroep Amsterdam)

Three Shakespeare plays squished together to become a five-hour epic about democracy.

• **A View From the Bridge, 2014 (Young Vic)**

Arthur Miller's family drama boiled down took London by storm, winning a West End transfer that's both surprising and perfectly sensible.

different points. It ends with all three couples coming together, swapping partners; echoes of each other.

The aim, says Van Hove, is to "create a world that this play will live in; a space that these actors will inhabit. That space can be an empty space, sometimes a video or a virtual space, and sometimes a house or an architectural space. That depends on the play."

His combination of fidelity and boldness, close textual analysis and grand spatial gestures, is what makes Van Hove such a strong proposition internationally – as revered in mainland Europe, where German Regietheater dominates, as in Anglo-saxon, literary and naturalistic traditions. Rupert Goold believes him to be the greatest director on the planet. For his part, Van Hove seeks to span it: "I hope my productions are universal."

Van Hove grew up in a small Belgian town 30 miles east of Antwerp, Kwaadmechelen; population 2,000, with a large Italian immigrant population (like the Carbones from *A View From the Bridge*? "I never thought of that.") His father was a pharmacist, and his mother ("just") a housewife. Wary of small-town life, they sent him to boarding school at 11 – "not as a punishment," he stresses.

Adolescence is always formative, but at boarding school it can seem doubly so.



Toneelgroep's *Roman Tragedies*, directed by Van Hove, at the Barbican in 2009. The audience was free to move throughout the theatre



Cast of *Scenes From a Marriage*, Van Hove's adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's film, which premiered in 2005

young Van Hove compiled and printed "an undercover newspaper" with three of his peers. "We were like terrorists. We had helmets on. We'd prepared it with a teacher, actually, and distributed it around the school, all this sex and religion, all very in-your-face for a Catholic school. Nobody knew it was us."

Theatre provided a similar thrill. On Wednesday afternoons, pupils had a choice between the sports field, the local town ("to walk around and see the girls") or the school theatre. Out of 800 students, only 15 picked the theatre. They became a tight-knit club, working together once a week, putting together a production at the end of each term.

"It was there I felt the warmth and secrecy of working in theatre," he remembers. "We were working on something nobody else knew about, then suddenly, it became public and we'd get applause. The applause was one thing, but it was the secrecy. I still have the same feeling. Once you're in the rehearsal room and you close the door, everything is allowed."

At his parents' insistence, Van Hove went to law school, though he didn't complete the course. "In the third year, suddenly, I looked up and saw only a library with a ton of books. I thought, 'I'm sitting here now, every day, only looking at books: article 34.2, paragraph 3. I don't think I want to spend my life like this.' I made an immediate decision, stopping that same day."

Tutors tried to persuade him back, as did his parents, but Van Hove transferred to a cultural college in Brussels, RITCS, where students choose from several pathways, including theatre, film and journalism. "Within the first year, it became clear," he says.

While there, Van Hove met Versweyveld, his designer and partner. Both men were 21. After attending shows together, they made one of their own, a self-penned piece called *Rumours* ▶ 14



IAN VERSWEVELD

Van Hove's adaptation of Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*, above, staged at last year's Avignon Festival

with a cast of 30. They didn't invite any programmers or press. "We were not interested in that. It was a 'fuck you' time. It was the beginning of the 1980s. Everyone was into punk. Attitude. Leather jackets. 'Fuck them all!'"

Accordingly, hardly anyone saw *Rumours*, but it later got a rave write-up in New York's influential *Drama Review*. "We became famous with a cult success that nobody had seen but everybody still talks about," says Van Hove. It led the pair to form a company, AKT (Antwerp

Theatre Collective), devising shows and adapting texts they staged in empty buildings around the city.

At Toneelgroep, Van Hove works only with classic texts. He's wary of writers, he says, nervous about commissioning something then hating the play that lands on his desk. Classics offer fixity and, with it, certainty. Their universality is proven. "I make my decisions up to two years before I do a production. It means I really have to think, 'Do I desperately want to direct this text?'" In programming Toneelgroep's rep – a model he believes

Van Hove and Versweyvelde have a flat in New York, and it's a culture that fascinates him. "Sometimes you think a culture is very near to you, but it's very far away," he says.

When he first went to New York, as a guest director in 1997, it took him by surprise. He woke up crying. "I didn't know what had happened to me. Later I thought, I had this feeling once before: boarding school, at 11. I thought I knew it, because we see American culture on TV, in movies, Starbucks, McDonalds, but I felt totally displaced, totally not at home."

reserve flew straight out the window. It was, she says, a deeply collaborative process. "He allows everyone to say their piece: dramaturg, designer, anyone who's in the room. There's no hierarchy." For his part, Van Hove enjoyed the British actors' ability with words: "They dealt with the text in a very elaborate way, even when it was quite straightforward." Americans, he finds, are emotionally at ease; Germans, detached and dry; Flemish, gutsy.

If one goes looking for Van Hove in *A View From the Bridge*, one thing jumps out: the identity of the outsider. The Carbonees are immigrants. They "live according to the laws of their community, the laws of revenge", he says. One thinks of his home town and his homesickness, of the lot of a Belgian in Holland and a European in New York. Looking wider, one thinks of community tensions and nationalism, of sharia law and Charlie Hebdo. This is something Van Hove does brilliantly: he lets the political and the personal sit side by side, not necessarily reconciling them, but acknowledging both.

But the Greek thing is interesting too, especially as Van Hove has just begun work on *Antigone* – his first Greek tragedy in almost 30 years – with Juliette Binoche. Why that play?

He answers with an example: Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, shot down over Ukraine. With the war on the ground, the 280-odd bodies lay there for more than a week. "The whole world felt that having them there in an open field was barbaric; that was the word the papers used." Holland repatriated the bodies and processed them through the country. "There were 75 hearses containing 75 bodies. The streets were totally empty. Everybody stopped, totally silent. It was an act of anti-barbarism." This, he says, is what *Antigone* does.

"That's what the play talks about: no matter who your enemy is, whatever has happened, you should be human. Politics

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Van Hove on...

... the European rep model:

“An ensemble of actors is the best condition to present high-quality work all the time. When you know each other well, you become much more critical – in a positive way. You search for something else. It allows risk, too, because we have the basis of shows we know are successful artistically and with audiences.”

... the director as outsider:

“My least favourite thing is attending performances of my own work. You’ve already made it and, as a director, whatever actors say to welcome you, you feel like a little bit of an outsider. The show becomes theirs, which is great.”

... design:

“You have to create a world that this play will live in; a space that these actors will inhabit. That space can be an empty space, sometimes a video or virtual space, and sometimes a house or an architectural space. That depends on the play.”

... Working with writers:

“What I’m really afraid of is that I commission a play and when that play arrives, I don’t love it. What then? Then I have to do it.”

... Choosing plays:

“I want 200% commitment from myself to a project, because if I’m not 200% committed, how can I convince all these people – actors, technicians, the whole team – that they should be?”

At Toneelgroep, Van Hove works only with classic texts. He’s wary of writers, he says, nervous about commissioning something then hating the play that lands on his desk. Classics offer fixity and, with it, certainty. Their universality is proven. “I make my decisions up to two years before I do a production. It means I really have to think, ‘Do I desperately want to direct this text?’” In programming Toneelgroep’s rep – a model he believes to be the best way of ensuring quality and ambition, because it allows successful old shows to mitigate against new ones that fail – he looks for the same “200% commitment” in other directors.

With his own work, it means that his career becomes a reflection of himself. He calls his plays a “masked autobiography”. He explains: “If you look at my plays, you know who I am at a certain time and what I think at a certain moment, about human beings and about the world.” Theatre, he says categorically, “is my life”.

He adds: “My work changed a lot after 9/11. That was a real change for me. It woke me up. In the 1990s, I did a lot of family tragedies. Suddenly, the family tragedies disappeared and I did things like Roman Tragedies.”

His next large-scale project – there are at least three on the boil – is another Shakespearean compilation: *Kings of War*, a squished history cycle looking at leadership in crisis.

He’s become fascinated, too, by great American texts. It’s not entirely new: in 1995, he staged *Desire Under the Elms* with four live cows, as well as a bathtub-centric *Streetcar Named Desire*. In recent years, though, that’s gone further: he’s done US plays *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and *Angels in America*, plus stage adaptations of the Ayn Rand novel *The Fountainhead* and the Annie Proulx short story *Brokeback Mountain* (also adapted into a film). Then there’s *A View From the Bridge*, of course.

far away,” he says.

When he first went to New York, as a guest director in 1997, it took him by surprise. He woke up crying. “I didn’t know what had happened to me. Later I thought, I had this feeling once before: boarding school, at 11. I thought I knew it, because we see American culture on TV, in movies, Starbucks, McDonalds, but I felt totally displaced, totally not at home.”

“

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”

A View From the Bridge was Young Vic artistic director David Lan’s suggestion. Van Hove initially resisted it – “It was just a play,” he says – though Versweyveld, who had seen and loved the Young Vic’s auditorium, persuaded him otherwise. Research (“my favourite part”) provided a route in.

Van Hove discovered that Miller had, initially, written a one-act play, compact as a Greek tragedy, before Peter Brook asked him to expand it towards naturalism. Eddie Carbone and his family had been fleshed out, but there were forces to liberate. “I said to my actors, I want to bring the two worlds together: the starkness and power of the one-act play with the emotional and psychological refinement of the two-act play,” says Van Hove.

Phoebe Fox, who plays Eddie’s niece Catherine, describes the rehearsal process: “The first day we did a read-through and then we just got up and started, which was terrifying.” British

having them there in an open hall was barbaric; that was the word the papers used.” Holland repatriated the bodies and processed them through the country. “There were 75 hearses containing 75 bodies. The streets were totally empty. Everybody stopped, totally silent. It was an act of anti-barbarism.” This, he says, is what *Antigone* does.

“That’s what the play talks about: no matter who your enemy is, whatever has happened, you should be human. Politics tends to become extremely inhuman.” He points to Putin, but also to America, to Guantanamo Bay and CIA torture. “They call it a ‘state of exception’.” Creon, king of Thebes, does the same.

Van Hove’s task now is to reconcile the politics with the human – and that’s why he’s avoided Greek tragedy for so long. “It’s so difficult.” He unfurls a long, deliberate sigh. “We have two tendencies as directors. Either we make them into domestic dramas, so that we can understand them – ‘Medea is just a woman’ – or we make them abstract and larger than life. Both, I don’t like. It’s very hard to bring these two worlds together.”

That’s when Van Hove brings up the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. “She writes that, in the 21st century, politics should incorporate humanity, emotion and religion,” he says. “We have to find the right balance again. It’s really important.”

Further reading

- **Toneelgroep Amsterdam**
www.tga.nl/en
- **Ivo Van Hove biography**
www.tga.nl/en/employees/ivo-van-hove
- **Interview in The Guardian:**
bit.ly/Guardian-van-hove
- **Theatre Communications Group profile**
bit.ly/TCG-van-hove