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IVO VAN HOVE

— The brave Beneluxian director, 57, is constantly reshaping the world as a place both apocalyptic and electrifying.

Who's the most important theatre director working today? Many will point to IVO VAN HOVE. Despite or perhaps because of his uncompromising ethos, with audiences often nigh on abused as they sit agog and thrilled in their seats, VAN HOVE's name is guaranteed to trigger a ticket-buying panic whenever a new show is announced. The fantastically charming internationalist directs names from JUDE LAW to TAVI GEVINSON in cities from Amsterdam and New York to Seoul. As the writer of this piece attests, IVO's work is sure to provoke a profound emotional impact that will stay with the viewer forever. Unsurprising, perhaps, that DAVID BOWIE chose him to translate his parting thoughts about LAZARUS onto the stage.

Text by MARK SMITH
Photography by ANTON CORBIJN



2016 has been a fruitful year for IVO. Alongside two Tony Awards, he's been awarded the title of Commander in the Order of the Crown in Belgium, the Drama League Founders Award for Excellence in Directing and honorary citizenship of the town of Ham, Belgium.

If you were feeling generous, you might say that Leidseplein is Amsterdam's answer to London's Leicester Square or New York's Times Square, an unholy alliance of advertising hoardings, Irish theme pubs, amateurish street performance and semi-professional pickpocketry. On the western side of the melee, like a duchess at a disco, stands the stately Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam's original municipal theatre.

It's to the imposing balcony of this neo-Renaissance building that AFC Ajax, Amsterdam's football team, repairs for a triumphant photo opportunity whenever it has achieved something significant. And inside, a wirily handsome Belgian by the name of IVO VAN HOVE has been busy building a repertory theatre company with Champions League credentials.

Theatre writer MICHAEL COVENEY regards this company, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, with its cosmopolitan playbook, as "the centre of European theatre" *de nos jours*, an organisation equivalent to Milan's Giorgio Strehler company in the 1980s or the Odéon in Paris during the 1990s. Accordingly, the company routinely attracts big-name guest stars such as JULIETTE BINOCHE, who assumed the title role in last year's touring production of 'Antigone', and JUDE LAW, who will move to Amsterdam for two weeks next summer to play the grubby-glamorous lead in their stage adaptation of LUCHINO VISCONTI's 1943 film 'Obsession'. "I'd heard great things about IVO VAN HOVE," says JUDE of the decision.

Toneelgroep Amsterdam attracts huge audiences. As IVO will proudly attest, more than 177,000 members of the public came through the doors last season. Many are tourists and Amsterdam-dwelling expats who benefit from the English surtitles which, like so many profound thought bubbles, are projected above actors' heads during Thursday night performances. Dutch academic FLOOR RUSMAN compares the wild popularity of Toneelgroep Amsterdam's 'The Fountainhead' – a timely reboot of AYN RAND's controversial novel – to "a BEYONCÉ concert or a national soccer game." It has travelled to Paris, Antwerp, New York and Barcelona, and will soon go to Seoul.

'Kings of War', IVO's four-and-half-hour, Dutch-language mash-up of the SHAKESPEARE plays 'Henry V', 'Henry VI' and 'Richard III' took over the Barbican theatre in London last spring, and was widely held to be one of the theatrical acmes of 2016. Complete with a spectacular war-room-cum-newsroom set and contemporary political references (at one point, psychotic King

RICHARD, played by Toneelgroep Amsterdam stalwart HANS KESTING, telephones VLADIMIR PUTIN before declaring the Russian president a "faggot"), the production will be reprised at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November.

SUSANNAH CLAPP, theatre critic with the UK's 'Observer' newspaper, reckons IVO's dissection of the concept of political leadership is unmissable. "It's rare for a European director to have made such a profound impact across the English Channel," she tells me, "let alone across the Atlantic and beyond. But every time – whether he's doing SHAKESPEARE or for that matter ARTHUR MILLER – you get the impression that IVO has retreated to a very quiet room and identified the very core of the text. This is not someone who relies on an instantly recognisable technique that can be grafted onto any old thing. IVO appears to have a rare kind of clarity, and that clarity will travel."

It's in his very quiet office near the top of the Stadsschouwburg that I first meet IVO, whose Christian name rhymes with E-Bow (the last bit of his surname rhymes with NOVA). He describes the room as his cloister. "It's deliberately very bare, because this is where I come to balance the artistic ambitions that I have for Toneelgroep Amsterdam with the financial potential of the institution. You're not going to find pictures of my family in here."

If I'd had to guess IVO's profession from his body language alone, I'd have said high-end shadow puppeteer or conductor (orchestra, not bus). His long arms shoot all over the place when he has a point to make – which is often – and his hands are in a state of perpetual demonstrative flux. One moment they're being an exploding bomb, the next, they're a bird. "I am a very physical director and I touch actors all the time," he tells me. "I encourage the actors to touch each other. People tend to think in theatre that it's only the mouth that's talking. Not true. For me the language of the body is every bit as important as the language of the text."

As the increasingly famous figurehead of an arts organisation that last year alone received €6.2 million in public subsidy, IVO – dressed today in a crisp black slim-fit shirt and smart indigo jeans – is quick to distance himself from fancy furniture. When I settle admirably into one of a swarm of black ARNE JACOBSEN Series 7 chairs, he points out that these were inherited from his predecessor. "And I've been here nearly 16 years, so that's good value," he adds. My glance at the white leather sofa behind me provokes an

equally spirited justification: "That sofa is a very famous design, too, but it was used in a production of ours, the 'Summer Trilogy' by CARLO GOLDONI that we first did in 2010, so you see that we always try to make good use of what remains from our past projects."

It's partly IVO's understanding of the practicalities, as well as the possibilities, of contemporary theatre that make him such a welcome guest in institutions around the world. "IVO is no prima donna," says TONI RACKLIN, head of theatre at the Barbican Centre in London. "He knows both sides of the coin and he understands what we want for our audiences on a pragmatic level. Consequently, we work together in a very straightforward way. The emails we exchange are rarely more than a line long."

IVO assumed the helm at Toneelgroep Amsterdam in 2001 after a ten-year stint at Het Zuidelijk Toneel in Eindhoven. The year marked a creative step-change for IVO, whose oeuvre – after early days spent staging self-written work in the Belgian creative capital, Antwerp – had come to centre on family dramas such as EUGENE O'NEILL's 'Desire Under the Elms'. He describes the 9-11 terrorist attacks – which he watched unfolding on TV from his former home in Antwerp – as a powerful awakening: "My work immediately became much more political." His abiding impression of that day, he tells me, is of the dignity with which ordinary New Yorkers conducted themselves. "They were crossing bridges on foot in total silence. You might have expected it to be chaotic, for people to be running and pushing each other out of the way, but no, they were a community. That's something I really admire in America."

The admiration is mutual. This year, IVO won two Tony awards. He directed two different Broadway productions of classics by America's favourite playwright, ARTHUR MILLER. 'A View from the Bridge', a transfer from Wyndham's Theatre in London (where I witnessed an actual fight in the queue for returns), used British actor MARK STRONG's pulsating temple to masterful effect, and will now cast its menacing shadow over Los Angeles. 'The Crucible', starring BEN WHISHAW, SOPHIE OKONEDO, SAOIRSE RONAN and TAVI GEVINSON, features an original score by PHILIP GLASS and has been transfixing unusually youthful crowds at the Walter Kerr Theater in Manhattan. "It's three hours of a lot of people on stage discussing religion and politics and scapegoating each other mercilessly," says IVO. "When I attended the first preview, I was really afraid there would be empty seats after the intermission. But everyone stayed

and there was an immediate standing ovation at the curtain call."

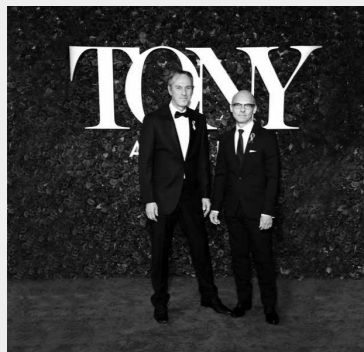
His stateside success wasn't always on such a towering scale. IVO has a longstanding and loyal association with the off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop, and it was to this tiny black-box venue between Second Avenue and Bowery that IVO instinctively returned when DAVID BOWIE, on the recommendation of producer ROBERT FOX, entrusted him with directing 'Lazarus', BOWIE's self-penned musical. IVO didn't know at the time that BOWIE had terminal cancer. BOWIE was unaware that IVO was something of a super fan – as a teenager he had scrimped to journey to New York to see BOWIE in his legendary turn as the Elephant Man at the Booth Theatre in 1980. They soon traded their confidences and, between breaks in rehearsals for 'Lazarus', BOWIE would entertain VAN HOVE with verbatim monologues from 'The Elephant Man'. "The voice was exactly as I remembered it," recalls IVO. "He was a true English gentleman." BOWIE's public appearance for the opening night 'Lazarus', on 7 December 2015, would be his last.

Today is the day of the EU referendum in the UK, so the first thing IVO did after getting up at 7.30 was tune in to BBC breakfast news. "It's important for a theatre-maker to be aware of what's going on in the world because it's not *l'art pour l'art* anymore," he says, gesturing to the window. "I need to be accountable for what I do in the same way that a factory owner is accountable. Except that theatre is made by people, not machines, and as such I have a responsibility – an obligation, actually – to know what's going on in society."

Fighting for space with the spectre of Brexit on Dutch newspapers' front pages today is the news that the man sitting opposite me is the most important artistic force at work in the Netherlands. IVO, you see, has just been ranked number one in the annual NRC Cultuur Top 100, the who's who (and what's what) of Dutch cultural clout. Were he the kind for Lenonesque braggadocio (he's not), IVO could now legitimately claim to be four times bigger than the Rijksmuseum, three times bigger than blockbuster painter MARLENE DUMAS and 17 times bigger than the HARRY POTTER of electronic dance music, MARTIN GARRIX. IVO allows himself a moment of quiet stupefaction at having toppled architect REM KOOLHAAS from the coveted top spot. "He's an icon, of course. It's a bit awkward to have been given this award because I'm Belgian, and yet all of a sudden I'm considered to be



IVO and DAVID BOWIE working on 'Lazarus', the musical sequel to the 1976 film 'The Man Who Fell to Earth' in which BOWIE originally starred.



The director and his partner JAN VERSWEYVELD at the 2016 Tony Awards, mere hours before emerging with two gongs.

Dutch.” He says he’s very happy to be considered Dutch, and in any case “everybody has a complex identity and we need to get away from this idea that purity exists. If you looked into my genealogy you might very well find out that I’m Hungarian, too.” He hasn’t looked into his genealogy for the same reason he doesn’t often contemplate his early work. “I go forwards, not back. I’m sure the plays I’ve staged are a kind of diary, but if you want to get anything done you don’t sit around reading your old diaries all day, do you?”

Certain mementos are allowed. Dominating one of the walls in IVO’s office is a massive, radiant photographic print from ‘Children of the Sun,’ Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s critically adored 2010 take on MAXIM GORKY’s Russian Revolution drama. Like most of the promotional shots for VAN HOVE productions, this light-saturated image of an agitated cast was taken by JAN VERSWEYVELD, IVO’s partner in both life and theatre-making since they met at a dance workshop in Antwerp in 1980. With three other friends, IVO and JAN set up one of the city’s first grand cafés, Café Illusie, across the street from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and made enough money to fund two productions. I say that it sounds terribly romantic and bohemian. “The clue is in the name then,” says IVO. “It was an act of survival dressed up as a restaurant.”

Prior to the 2016 Tony Awards ceremony at New York’s Beacon Theatre in June nominees were repeatedly briefed that, in the event of a win, there would be no time for kissing loved ones before ascending to the JAMES CORDEN-manned podium for their strictly timed 90-second acceptance speeches. As it happened, the ban proved academic for IVO. JAN had roamed out to the foyer bar in search of water for a parched IVO when he learned, via a monitor, that IVO had won Best Direction of a Play for his tense take on MILLER’s ‘A View from the Bridge’ at the Lyceum. JAN rushed back to the doors of the auditorium only to find them closed. “I told an anecdote that got a laugh,” recalls IVO of his speech, “but the rest was a sort of trip. So nerve-wracking! One thing I do know,” he says, “is that once you’re sitting down in that hall, you want to hear your name called out. You want to win. It’s as simple as that.” New York likes a winner, of course, and IVO recalls the warmth with which everyone he encountered that night – “drivers, waiters, passers-by. You name it” – offered their congratulations on spying his Tony. “We don’t have the same culture in Holland,” he says of his adopted nation’s Calvinist aversion to tall poppies.

“There’s this idea that you have to keep your feet on the ground. I respect that, and it has its benefits. But at the same time, I’ve always known where my feet are.”

JAN is the compact, sinewy man with a bald head and designer glasses with whom I’ve just, coincidentally, shared an elevator. Pushing an enormous trolley of props, JAN looked too absorbed in scenography – his official metier – for me to attempt conversation. Of their enduring creative and personal union (IVO and JAN married at City Hall in 2004) IVO says simply, “Being together has saved us both. We have an exceptionally good balance.” When they convene after work to return to their canalside home together, there’s little shoptalk. Sometimes one will ask what the other had for lunch, but that’s it. “He has his *trajet* and I have mine,” says IVO.

Tonight IVO and JAN will attend a drinks party for the departure of actor ALWIN PULINCKX, who joined Toneelgroep Amsterdam as an intern in 2001 and has participated in most of its major productions. “Rehearsing and working on a new play can be a very delicate process,” ALWIN will tell me once the hangover has subsided. “IVO’s great strength as a director is to treat each actor both as his equal and as an individual.”

Pretty much everyone I talk to about life at Toneelgroep Amsterdam describes the troupe as a family, with IVO and JAN as its friendly patresfamilias. IVO is a demanding father – and often, he admits, an absent one on account of his travel schedule – but he’s always available for a pep talk, even when it has to be on Skype. “I tell my actors that we are in the theatre to break records, like Olympians. Sometimes you manage it, sometimes you don’t. But failure should never be a source of shame if you’re striving to be the best. When you try for mediocrity, I think that’s a shame.”

IVO sheepishly confirms a rumour I’ve heard around Amsterdam – namely that he was once so keen to have a producer colleague submit to his directorial vision that he signed an email “HOWARD ROARK”, after the intransigent architect protagonist of ‘The Fountainhead’. That’s not to say that IVO is a huge fan of libertarian pin-up ROARK who, with his mania for skyscrapers and hatred of the establishment, is arguably the DONALD TRUMP of literature. “I like paying my taxes and I like social security,” says IVO. “If I’m earning and someone else can be cured as a result, I’m fully supportive. But at the same time I think everyone should try to create their own opportunities. I’ve a strange mix of European and American attitudes.”

IVO spent his early childhood in the tiny village of Kwaadmechelen in Flemish-speaking Belgium. His father was the village pharmacist (“an old-fashioned one, the kind who made the medicines himself”) and IVO’s mother worked – illegally, IVO reckons – long hours as his assistant. The family was well-to-do by the standards of the village and IVO felt socially “other” until he was sent to boarding school at the age of 11. He enjoyed it so much that, on weekends, he’d “escape” back to school. “I’d drive 60 kilometres on a scooter just to have one drink with my friends.”

At home, IVO’s status as the eldest of three boys afforded him first dibs on the bathwater. Adored brother JEF, IVO’s partner in teenage crime (“We smoked cigarettes together and did all the things we were forbidden from doing”) was diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1980s, around the same time that IVO came out to his parents. “It was very hard for me to see my brother when he became ill because at the same time I had to distance myself from my parents because they had such a hard time with my being a homosexual. In those days he was often

(or are they bats?) are circling overhead, and the 2,000-seat bleachers are vibrating with an ominous growl that may or may not be the Mistral. When a man three rows back from me in the stadium-style seating rig stands up and hollers to get his friend SAM’s attention, the entire audience goes silent and turns to gawp expectantly. Four rows before me, IVO is a picture of serenity in pale blue.

‘Les Damnés’ is based on LUCHINO VISCONTI’s screenplay for the 1969 film ‘The Damned’, and concerns the power struggles and machinations among members of the steel-making VON ESSENBECK family as National Socialism sweeps Germany. What begins as an elegant tableau of bourgeois self-regard soon reeks of moral putrefaction. Six coffins line the right hand side of the stage, and – with chilling inevitability – they are filled throughout course of the evening. All of the victims (one of them a small child) are buried alive, their death throes projected mercilessly over the cinema-sized screen at the back of the stage.

The notorious ‘Night of the Long Knives’ scene from the film is here in the form of a 15-minute orgy of naked wrestling on a

“I am a very physical director and I touch actors all the time. I encourage them to touch each other too.”

sedated, which I hated of course, but I don’t want to be critical because I didn’t have an alternative solution.” Eventually (and appropriately for a scenographer) it was JAN who built the bridge between IVO and his father, who died in 2007. “JAN was sitting at his deathbed when I wasn’t there,” says IVO, “and they became best friends.” Nowadays, IVO’s brother lives in sheltered accommodation in Belgium and is doing much better in general. “There is a crisis now and then,” says IVO. “Social things are hard for him.”

It is July in Avignon, France, the country that made IVO a Knight of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2004 in recognition of his contribution to the arts. In the gothic, open-air atrium of the extraordinary 14th-century Palais des Papes, it’s *placement libre* for the dress rehearsal of IVO’s show with the actors of the Comédie-Française. Audience members are communicating the number of spare seats in their vicinity with hand gestures as if they’re traders on the stock-market floor. The atmosphere before the performance – which is headlining the prestigious Festival d’Avignon – is properly febrile, as if we’re waiting for a controlled explosion. Swallows

slip-and-slide and a frenzy of video-game violence to a soundtrack of death metal. At the most traumatic moments of the evening (and there are plenty) the house lights go up and the cameras which have been tracking the actors are turned on the audience so that we are forced to confront our silent complicity. There’s no giggling or waving. It’s like some nightmare version of the kisscam you might see at an American football match.

If IVO’s version of ‘A View from the Bridge’ recalled the stealthy ensnarement of a boa constrictor, ‘Les Damnés’ is a roiling nest of vipers. After a weird, hypnotised ovation, we file into the streets of Avignon drained and speechless. When I wake the next morning, the production’s concluding image – a silhouetted man firing machine gun rounds into the audience – is the first thing in my head.

When my taxi pulls up at the Hotel d’Europe, and I enter the sun-dappled courtyard, I can scarcely believe that this tumble-fringed man, sitting there in an immaculately crisp, sky-blue short-sleeved shirt, is the architect of last night’s horrors. IVO, it seems, takes a tan quickly, and there are tiny, precise freckles on his skin – perhaps because he

doesn't like rehearsals to go on for more than five hours per day and has been staying at a villa outside of town. "When I said to the Comédie-Française that we had five weeks to do this, they didn't think it was enough," he says. "In the end, they told me they felt like they had a hell of a lot of time. It's because they feel free and focused at the same time; I trusted them and they learnt to trust me."

IVO has been up until 3am resolving an (imperceptible) "lighting issue" with the show and giving feedback to his actors – one of whom, GUILLAUME GALLIENNE, 44, is merrily knocking back rosé at a table across the way. IVO is less ebullient. His posture is different from what I glimpsed of him during the rehearsal last night. The shoulders are lower. He admits to feeling all at sea: "For a director, it's a strange mixture of feelings when your work is done and the show opens. You're up and down at the same time. Up because you've realised the dream that you had with your team. Down because it's going to be hard to move on, to leave it behind. But I know I have to." Next Friday he'll board a plane to New York to reconnect with 'The Crucible'.

This morning, on returning to the villa, IVO and JAN had a heart-to-heart about 'Les Damnés'. "JAN said something very interesting," IVO confides. "He thinks that this work is a return to the work we did together as young guys, when we were 20 years old and full of testosterone – the roughness of it, the scale and the meaningfulness of the images, the crazy music and then these very delicate moments."

IVO thinks that the death, at age 69, of his hero BOWIE has been instrumental in the intensification of his output. "I feel that urgency now. Look, I'm 57. I'm getting a little bit older and I'm aware that there is an end to things. JAN and I have both come to the conclusion that we want to spend the time we have left making theatre that's meaningful."

A seminal text for IVO, recommended to me during our previous meeting, is 'Les Identités Meurtrières', a slim but concentrated essay published by Lebanese-born French writer AMIN MAALOUF in 1998. In it, MAALOUF considers the problematic allure of patriotism and cannily predicts tumult in the European Union. Pondering the question of why so many nowadays commit crimes in the name of religious, ethnic or national identity, MAALOUF has the following to say: "There is a Mr. HYDE inside each of us. What we have to do is prevent the conditions occurring that will bring the monster forth." "I'm glad you read it," says IVO. "I wish DONALD TRUMP would do the same."

Last night, on stage at the Palais des Papes, the monster ran amok. It's quite clear that recent events in Paris, Brussels, Orlando and Istanbul have informed the staging of 'Les Damnés'. This is a production which dares to ask how much we've really evolved since Europe's most murderous age. "The whole time I was working on this, I was thinking of PICASSO's painting 'Guernica,'" says IVO. "A tableau full of cruelty. Not a sparkle of hope."

I ask whether, given all the dreadfulness at work in the world, IVO thinks it's morally defensible to have children. "Of course it is!" he says without hesitation. "Look at what happened with BREXIT. Seventy-five per cent of the young people in Britain voted against it, but the older generation decided to destroy their opportunities and degrade their future. That's grotesque cruelty, yes, but you have to believe that the younger generation can create a new world, one step at a time." He refers to HERBERT, the character in 'Les Damnés' who is defiant even when his wife is sent to Dachau by his own family, and ABIGAIL WILLIAMS in 'The Crucible' who continues to demand her liberty. "Look," says IVO, "we've had the Ice Age and the Stone Age, all these vast periods of time. We are just a particle in the history of the world. We are nothing – just nothing at all. But we should enjoy what we have."

The head of press for the festival comes to whisk IVO away for a live TV interview in French. "Oh god, I'm so tired," he confides, before being mic'd up with seconds to spare.

As I pack up my things and wave goodbye, I notice the tiny pastry heart that accompanied IVO's bottle of water. I leave the hotel's courtyard and go round the corner to a cobble public square. On a placard leaning against a small tree in the middle of the square, someone has spray-painted LOVE IS OUR RESISTANCE in capital letters. Under normal circumstances, I can't say this kind of thing would provoke much of a reaction in me. Maybe I'd snap it for Instagram and go about my business. Today, I sit down on the ground and weep. I'm quite sure I know why.

IVO VAN HOVE



Clearly a firm believer in the old adage that good things come in threes, IVO is perched on a stack of chairs in his Amsterdam living room in front of a painting by the Dutch artist MARTIJN HENDRIKS.