

## **‘Realism is always a bit fake’: Ivo van Hove and Jude Law in rehearsal**

A backstage glimpse of Toneelgroep Amsterdam as it reinvents Visconti’s ‘Obsession’

by: Sarah Hemming

In a rehearsal room in Amsterdam, actors Jude Law and Robert de Hoog are having a fight. A couple of terse words, and they are at it: eyeball to eyeball, backs braced, grabbing fistfuls of each other’s jackets. “You keep your hands off my things,” rasps Law.

Ivo van Hove steps forward and gently separates them. “Good,” the Belgian theatre director says. “This is a moment of real tension. They are both survivors: we should feel that.”

This is a scene from *Obsession*, a new adaptation of Luchino Visconti’s 1943 film, which the Dutch company Toneelgroep Amsterdam (TA) will give its world premiere at London’s Barbican in April. Law plays Gino, a handsome drifter who falls catastrophically in love with Hanna, a married woman. When I arrive in the rehearsal room, Law and de Hoog are working on a scene in which Gino, having broken with Hanna, is back on the road. He encounters Johnny, another traveller, who tries to coax him into forgetting the affair.

The film is a seminal piece of cinema history: a stark depiction of overwhelming passion, set against a backdrop of dusty landscapes and frayed poverty. For van Hove, however, bringing it to the stage means stripping away the neo-realism for which it is famous and distilling it to its essence.

“It’s a brutal analysis of passionate love,” the pioneering director tells me, during a break in rehearsals. “It’s about primal desires. It’s something that happened a thousand years ago, that happened 50 years ago, that is happening now. So it’s almost like this text becomes an ancient mystery — and that’s how I want to direct it.

“Here we strip down to the essentials because I think the whole production should be very elemental,” he adds. “There is no sense reproducing the film on stage. Realism on stage is always a little bit fake: I think you always have to search for theatrical solutions, not realistic solutions.”

We’re in TA’s rehearsal space: a huge, concrete-framed room behind the handsome Stadsschouwburg theatre, the company’s home in central Amsterdam. It is here that van Hove and his ensemble have created the work that has brought them international acclaim over the past decade, perfecting a combination of aesthetic rigour and visceral performance that can be thrilling to watch. Ambitious ensemble shows, such as *Kings of War*, which delivers three of Shakespeare’s History plays with the urgency of a news bulletin, and the exhilarating six-hour spectacle *Roman Tragedies*, forged from ancient Rome’s power games (which visited London’s Barbican last weekend), have cemented the company’s worldwide reputation.

Van Hove, meanwhile, has brought that intense, stripped-back style to other companies, working with English actors, for instance, on a searing *View from the Bridge* at London’s Young Vic and *Hedda Gabler* at the National Theatre; he can deliver familiar texts with astonishing emotional force. It’s not everyone’s cup of tea, however: playwright David Hare has complained that such conceptual work is beginning to “infect” British theatre.

*Obsession*, a co-production with the Barbican, is a new departure, the first time the company has combined Dutch and English actors and premiered a piece in English.

Outside the rehearsal room, trams clank past in the spring sunshine. Inside, the mood is calm, good-humoured, but focused. The two actors run through the sequence again and again, experimenting with shifts in tone. Van Hove, a trim figure in dark blue shirt and jeans, watches them as intently as a detective reviewing CCTV footage. His comments are largely to do with motivation and subtext. "It's more active, it's not reflective," he says to de Hoog about one line. "It's an active intervention: you feel Gino is like you, a soulmate, but he's got lost."

Designer Jan Versweyveld, van Hove's long-term partner and collaborator, modifies the lighting, while composer Eric Sleichim floods the room with a drowsy soundscape of crickets and buzzing flies. You can almost feel the sultry heat. Little by little, the scene emerges, like a sculpture from a piece of marble. By the end, a chance meeting between two men has become a highly charged encounter, channelling the frictions between freedom and commitment.

This is how van Hove, who has led TA since 2001, prefers to work: in a team, developing the whole piece — acting, music, setting — together as a unit. He is normally meticulously prepared, rehearsal periods are short and he wants actors to know their lines from the beginning.

"I like to start immediately in the situation that we will have on stage," he says. "The set and the music are like an extra character for me. It's not like we rehearse something and then you make it more beautiful by bringing a set and sound. No, it has to be a total togetherness of all these elements."

For *Law*, rehearsing this way for the first time has been a revelation: "The detail that has already gone into the design and the attempt to create the mood that you're going to experience on stage makes a huge difference," he says. "It gives you a sense of the world you're going to be performing in. It gives you a tonal feel. With that in place, you can really start to mine into the details. And if you find something, you have the composer there. Within two minutes, there's a new sound cue."

Gijs Scholten van Aschat, who plays Hanna's husband, adds: "There's no waste of time — it's 'let's create an atmosphere and work'."

Yet that intensity co-exists with a surprising degree of freedom. After months spent analysing a text, in rehearsal van Hove encourages the cast to try things out, go for broke: "When you try to do 'less is more', you need the 'more!'" he says, with a smile. "The 'more' is the actors."

I head off to talk to two of the "more": leading actors Hans Kesting and Marieke Heebink. Long-term members of the ensemble, they describe rehearsals as demanding, physically tough even, but liberating. "It asks a lot of your skills, but the space is given to you to develop them," says Heebink.

"I think Ivo's great quality is that he knows how to wait until an actor finds something," says Kesting. "He sometimes says, 'Now — something has to happen.' And then he walks away. The sentence 'Now something has to happen' means 'Now you have to come up with something extraordinary'. Then he totally leaves it to you."

Kesting plays Mark Antony in *Roman Tragedies*. At the heart of the show he gives an electrifying rendition of the famous funeral oration, beginning, almost inaudibly, in a slumped heap. He recalls how he and van Hove crafted it.

"I started shuffling papers and saying the lines and Ivo suddenly said, 'Throw the papers away, sit in front of the desk, be still, be quiet, don't know what you are going to say . . . Now, grab the microphone, be quiet, be quiet, start to whisper . . .' We basically rehearsed the whole monologue in 10 minutes and we never did it again."

Roman Tragedies, a marathon reworking of three Shakespeare plays exemplifies the radical treatment of cherished texts that can ruffle feathers in the UK. Van Hove says his intent is to release the urgency in a play: “If I end up with something that I’ve seen 10 times already, it makes no sense for me.”

Simon van den Berg, editor-in-chief of Theatermaker magazine, observes that such work is not unusual in the Netherlands: “Here culture is either progressive, or it isn’t there at all.” Indeed, he explains, Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s success can be seen in the context of recent Dutch theatre history. The cultural landscape underwent a transformation in the late 1960s, sparked by the pleasingly named “Aktie Tomaat” (“Tomato Action”): a revolt by theatre students, who began throwing tomatoes during a conventional performance of *The Tempest*. That ultimately led to a revolution in theatre practice, one that shifted the focus from big ensembles to small-scale, progressive and site-specific collectives. Van Hove’s skill has been in transforming the practices learned in that arena for a bigger stage and for a wide national and international audience.

“Ivo comes from that landscape,” says van den Berg. “What he has done is a sort of restorative action to make theatre companies great again. He’s effectively made TA like the Concertgebouw orchestra or the Rijksmuseum — icons of Dutch culture. People are proud of that. I don’t think we see the repercussions for Dutch theatre — yet.”

I put that to Wouter van Ransbeek, associate director of TA, who has been instrumental in extending the company’s international reach. Van Ransbeek agrees that with success come responsibilities: TA already runs a development programme for directors, he says, and will soon be adding a writers’ programme — a significant move in a country that lacks a playwriting tradition. He adds that working in an environment that prizes innovation keeps you focused: “It increases the pressure on you to be good.”

Back in the rehearsal room, the cast has been joined by Halina Reijn, who plays Hanna. They’re running through the couple’s break-up. After one attempt, Reijn sinks to the floor and remains there during the next scene: a physical reminder of the hold that Hanna has on Gino. “I like it,” responds van Hove, quietly.

“For me theatre is a subversive world,” he says. “Everything you’re not allowed to think and dream of and do in real life, you can do in a secure space. I think that’s what theatre is there for.”