

# How to be a theatre hotshot

Ivo van Hove and his ensemble, currently spending a year in London, have changed the face of theatre

**David Jays** - The Sunday Times, April 16 2017



Living film: Chukwudi Iwuji and Ruth Wilson in Hedda Gabler - JAN VERSWEYVELD

Who's afraid of Ivo van Hove? We all were at first, when he brought Roman Tragedies, his six-hour Shakespearean epic, to London in 2009. I entered wary. Would I make it through? Would the live film and peripatetic audience be more than a gimmick? I left a true believer. I've since followed the Belgian director's scorching versions of Ibsen, Arthur Miller and Bergman (and kept the faith through faltering Sophocles and Bowie).

With his peerless Dutch ensemble, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, van Hove is overseeing a year-long season of work at the Barbican in London, including a new production based on *Ossessione*, Visconti's sweaty film noir. British actors join the Amsterdam regulars, with Jude Law as a drifter fatally insinuating himself into a failing marriage.

Van love or van loathe him, few directors are as influential. He first visited Britain in 1998 with an O'Neill/Camus double bill at the Edinburgh International Festival, later making a splash at the Young Vic with *A View from the Bridge*. He also works at the National: following Ruth Wilson's triumphant *Hedda Gabler*, he directs *Network* later this year. The director plays audaciously with ideas, but with a compulsive theatrical juiciness.

"If Tennessee Williams or Miller lived today," he has said, "they would want something innovative. If you just reproduce what they envisioned long ago, it wouldn't have the same force. I want to push through the limits, make the ultimate production."

## **Punk city**

“Our work began with performances and happenings, not in theatre school,” the designer Jan Versweyveld told me. He and van Hove are partners on stage and off, and in 1980s Antwerp were part of an innovative Belgian performance scene that also threw up key choreographers such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Alain Platel. They staged uncompromising spectacles in tiny spaces. “Antwerp was a city full of punks,” van Hove recalls. “We said, ‘F\*\*\* you, we’re doing what we want to do. Leave if you don’t like it.’”

## **Arguing with classics**

Some directors make waves with new writing or devised work; van Hove pits his wits against the classics, typically updating them and putting them in panoramic sets. Alongside familiar titles by Shakespeare, Molière or Tennessee Williams, he also squares up to films by Ingmar Bergman and Pasolini, even to controversial novels such as *The Fountainhead* by the alt-right darling Ayn Rand. Perhaps an existing work makes his interventions more sharply apparent. Of *The Fountainhead* (2014), Versweyveld said: “People loved it, but also hated its ideas.”

## **Movie night**

Obsession follows several van Hove movie adaptations. *The Antonioni Project* (2011) wove three of his films of the early 1960s (*L’avventura*, *La notte* and *L’eclisse*) into a single narrative, viewing the lost-compass characters as versions of themselves at different ages. Bergman inspired *Scenes from a Marriage* and *After the Rehearsal/Persona* (at the Barbican in September). “You really have to think for the first time about how to put these pieces on the stage,” the director says, “because it is a totally different language to film.”

## **Epic Shakespeare**

*Roman Tragedies* (2009) is an unlikely sensation. Three plays (*Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*), unspooling over six hours without an interval, show power build and fracture. Yet audiences are happy to immerse themselves in its rolling-news immensity, as they were with *Kings of War* (2015), based on Shakespeare’s history plays and set in a bunker modelled on Churchill’s war rooms. “Shakespeare is unequalled in his portrayal of leadership and power,” van Hove says. “[He] is dealing with the type of events we see on the news every day.”

## **Unseat the audience**

Van Hove and Versweyveld relish keeping the audience on the move and tweaking their perspective. We’re invited on stage during much of the *Roman Tragedies*, encouraged to use the stage bar or cluster around the actors. Audience placement is even more radical in *Scenes from a Marriage* (2005). Divided into three, the audience move through tight spaces watching three scenes of a disintegrating relationship and catching glimpses of the others like time-warped visions of past or future.

## **Live film**

Live film of the actors projected onto on-stage screens is a Hovian trademark that has seeped into the British theatre landscape. The work of the wunderkind Robert Icke — most recently, in his *Hamlet* starring Andrew Scott — is unthinkable without the Belgian’s influence. The director insists the filming is a device that pulls us towards the characters, catching the panic behind a manipulative monarch. Occasionally, it shows us the impossible: a camera followed the brawling characters

of Kings of War off stage, and when Henry VI sighed he'd rather be a shepherd than a king, we saw him press through a flock of sheep crammed backstage.

### **Breathless**

Arthur Miller's ethical melodramas can seem creaky, but van Hove gave *A View from the Bridge* a landmark reinvention. Mark Strong and Nicola Walker led the Young Vic cast, moving to the West End and Broadway. On a starkly confined stage, the action proceeded, as van Hove said, unswervingly as a car crash: an Italian-American family torn apart, wrenched by betrayal and unspoken desire. Strong's towering patriarch appeared progressively diminished by guilt. The audience seemed too involved to breathe as the remorseless drama reached an operatic, blood-showered conclusion.

### **Man who fell to earth**

Van Hove isn't infallible. *Antigone* (2015) was an intelligent bore; *Lazarus* (2015), the rabidly awaited collaboration with David Bowie, an unintelligent mess. Bowie revisited the hero of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, but the narrative was senseless, the dialogue portentous and van Hove's staging a chic apartment prey to frictionless symbolism. Michael C Hall (*Dexter*) played the hero, finally lying on the floor in a bathetic puddle of spilt milk.

### **Star players**

Law is the latest serious, starry actor willing to take on a Hovian challenge. The fit isn't always perfect: Juliette Binoche's *Antigone* never found focus, but Wilson was a ferocious Hedda Gabler at the National recently: blazingly unfulfilled, trapped in a sterile environment, with no way out. In November, van Hove returns to the National to direct Bryan Cranston (*Breaking Bad*) in an adaptation of *Network*, which tears into TV news.

### **The A-team**

The heart of van Hove's work is his Toneelgroep in Amsterdam (he became artistic director in 2001). The 21-strong ensemble includes recent graduates and veteran virtuosos such as Chris Nietvelt (a vibrantly tragic Cleopatra) and Hans Kesting (her Mark Antony, who also lurched in and out of power as Richard III). Guest directors include Katie Mitchell, Simon Stone and Sam Gold, and productions remain in rep for years. Go on a Thursday and they provide English subtitles.