

Ivo van Hove brings Bergman to the Barbican stage: *Persona*/*After the Rehearsal* ****

The Belgian director applies his stripped-down approach to two works by the Swedish master

Given the warmth with which London's cognoscenti have clasped director Ivo van Hove to their collective bosom, I was surprised to see a liberal sprinkling of empty seats at the opening of his Toneelgroep Amsterdam's latest four-night visit. Perhaps folk thought the material would be too heavy going: van Hove has adapted for the stage Ingmar Bergman's 1966 cinematic masterpiece *Persona*, preceded by his 1984 television drama *After the Rehearsal*.

Van Hove's approach of distilling a stage presentation down to the fundamentals of its characters and drama is keenly suited to Bergman's screen work: particularly in the early phases of each piece here, the onstage compositions look and feel like three-dimensional renderings of Sven Nykvist's haunting photography. The scripts remain faithful to Bergman's originals wherever possible, and even the pacing reproduces the running time of each film almost exactly.

In *After the Rehearsal*, a stage director discusses professional and personal matters with a young actress he has cast in Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and recalls a similar encounter with her mother, his former lover. In *Persona*, a nurse attempts to coax back to speech a famous actress who has inexplicably fallen mute some months previously, and in doing so reveals intimate matters about each of them.

Both pieces play on the familiar trope of reality vs illusion or presentation, but do so more profoundly than almost any other stage outing I've seen, raising knotty, troubling questions. Does the persona mean more than the actual person, or is it merely more persistent? And how much do one's "true" nature and experiences signify anyway? *Persona* is far the more masterly meditation, with hints of seduction and suggestions that actress Elisabeth and Nurse Alma may be aspects or figments of each other. There is little momentum as such, but it is nonetheless compelling.

Van Hove has cut the double bill down to a cast of four, among whom Gaité Jansen stands out as the younger actress in *After the Rehearsal* and Nurse Alma in *Persona*. His regular designer Jan Versweyfeld creates an expressionistic island and a very real rainstorm on the Barbican stage, and I came away both impressed and wondering whether he could be persuaded to tackle Nicolas Roeg's *Performance*.