

Theatre review: After the Rehearsal/Persona at the Barbican

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This isn't a play at all, really, but two playlets that adapt Bergman films made decades apart and, on stage, end up longer. I'm not saying that you need to prepare but, frankly, it helps. Yes, I'm talking about homework.

Top of the list, see the films. And, no, edited highlights won't do. *After the Rehearsal* is a late Bergman work, a television film made in 1984, about an ageing director smitten with a young actress, although he is haunted by his long affair with her mother. *Persona* is Bergman's 1966 masterpiece, a psycho horror (though so beautiful that you ache) about an actress who has stopped speaking and her nurse, who never shuts up.

But be warned. It is possible to love the films but to find this adaptation of both works, directed by the exhaustively productive Ivo van Hove, more than a little tedious. Van Hove is a modern theatrical phenomenon, a director with the golden touch, although in this case all that glisters is not exactly that. This British premiere of a 2012 production will at times baffle those who haven't swotted up and, at three hours and 15 minutes, is too long.

This is homage theatre with many indulgent flourishes and it is performed in Dutch by Van Hove's Toneelgroep company, with English surtitles. Van Hove has a thing for women wearing slips and there is plenty of female nudity and slip-wearing here. He adores blasting out samples of music with psychologically linked themes, such as Kenny Rogers's *Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Is In)*.

The sets, by Jan Versweyveld, are phenomenally good, particularly the waterscape in *Persona*, a shimmering pool surrounding an island stage. This allows for much water frolicking (in slips) by the young nurse Alma (Gaite Jansen) and the silent actress Elisabeth (Marieke Heebink). At times it is stunningly beautiful.

Technically, Van Hove has ticked all the boxes. He has all but drawn a diagram of the themes the two works share (identity, madness, theatrical references galore), but the stage versions do not have the atmosphere or the tension of the films. Our emotions remain unengaged. But when your mind starts to wander (and it will), you can always just admire the set. I wasn't surprised when many did not return after the ludicrously long interval. Assume the brace position.

★★☆☆☆

The Times, **Ann Treneman**