

Toneelgroep Amsterdam set to return to Adelaide Festival in 2018 with epic theatre production *Kings of War*

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IT WAS just over a decade ago, while developing *Roman Tragedies* — the sensational six-hour-long centrepiece of the 2014 Adelaide Festival — that Toneelgroep Amsterdam artistic director Ivo van Hove originally had the idea for another epic Shakespearean mashup.

“But I thought, ‘Let’s wait’ — because people will think all he wants to do is his hit number again,” van Hove says from the company’s headquarters in the Netherlands.

“So I waited and waited and waited until Jan Versweyveld, my scenographer, and I had a great, new idea which was totally different from the *Roman Tragedies*. It took us seven or eight years to really bring it together.”

That new idea became *Kings of War*, which brings together five of Shakespeare’s plays — *Henry V*, *Henry VI* parts 1, 2 and 3, and *Richard III* — in a single 4½ hour performance by 17 actors.

“It developed over the years, because first it started as bringing together *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. Then my dramaturge (Peter Van Kraaij) said ‘Read *Henry V* again, because I think it would be a great match to complete this whole cycle’,” van Hove says.

“The beautiful thing of having an ensemble of actors and a team of people is that you can develop projects over a longer term.”



While both *Roman Tragedies* and *Kings of War* draw on multiple works from the same classic repertoire and incorporate multimedia elements on a massive contemporary set, van Hove says the two productions have very different thematic agendas.

“What’s similar is that they bring together a few plays by Shakespeare around a theme. The theme in *Roman Tragedies* was politics, and political mechanisms. In this case (*Kings of War*) — and you could say it’s close, but it’s a different thing for me — it’s leadership.

“What makes a good leader and what makes a leader not-so-good, or actually bad? What I like in these plays by Shakespeare is that he confronts every one of them with the most extreme challenge a leader can have, and that’s whether to go to war or not.

“Going to war means that you can win a war, but you can also lose a war. When you lose a war, the people of your country will hate you, because there will be a lot of sacrifices. But even if you win a war, there is a lot of sacrifice. The war wounds are always there.”



The different monarchs’ approaches to war reflect their qualities as leaders, says van Hove, who began staging his own productions in 1981, won acclaim for his radical off-Broadway reinterpretations of classics like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Hedda Gabler* in the 1990s, and has been director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam since 2001.

“*Henry V* wins an international war, between France and England. *Henry VI* deals with an internal war; it’s more of a civil war. Then *Richard III* — who has no war at hand — creates a war, because he doesn’t know what else to do,” van Hove says.

The work even includes a short opening excerpt from another of Shakespeare’s historical plays, *Henry IV*, to set the scene.

“It begins when Henry IV has died, and his youngest son becomes the king. Then we see Henry V as a young student almost, a partygoer, not a serious young man at all.

“I wanted to start there because it established the character that becomes Henry V. You see the birth of a great leader, step by step by step, from somebody you meet in the first scene who you think could never be in charge of a country. He turns out to be the best leader out of all three of them.”

Stylistically and theatrically, van Hove says *Kings of War* is also “totally different” to *Roman Tragedies*.



“You (the audience) don’t get on stage — there’s no bars on stage, no food on stage, you just sit in the auditorium.”

The action is set primarily inside a bunker-like War Room, modelled on the one Churchill had in London during WWII, complete with a bed. Van Hove says war today is further complicated by a lack of clarity over when conflicts began and end, why they are being fought and, in some cases, even who the enemy is.

“Not one leader goes to the battlefield to fight with a sword anymore — they sit in rooms, most of the time thousands of kilometres away from the battlefield,” he says.

“What’s the battlefield? We don’t know anymore — we see it on the TV images, we see it from far above on a radar system, we see a cloud and then we hear that 30 people were killed.”

AROUND and behind the bunker set, out of view of the audience, are a series of interconnected hallways and rooms where cameras follow the protagonists, filming their performances and projecting them on a screen overhead.

The production’s use of video takes inspiration from the behind-the-scenes political dealings of TV shows like *House of Cards* and *The West Wing*.

“We have used a very particular way of filming — filming in the corridors of power, you could say,” van Hove explains. “They are things that you could not see with your bare eye on stage ... people who make deals in the corridors. We have some very surprising images that we create there — I cannot talk too much about it, because it’s one of the surprises. I developed my own way of using video, so it’s always a mixture of things that are live and a little bit faked. It’s like a magic thing happening behind the stage.”

Roman Tragedies composer Eric Sleichim has once again created the score but this time *Kings of War* features live brass musicians — and a countertenor singing — instead of percussionists.



Belgian-born van Hove says he couldn't have imagined the world's current political climate, the rise of right-wing hate groups, the possibility of a Trump presidency or the threat of nuclear destruction from despots like North Korea's Kim Jong-un, when the company set out to make *Kings of War*. "That's the amazing power of the theatre. We created the production in May 2015, in Vienna, and then it came to Amsterdam. Trump was not there — he was just a businessman. When we went to New York, a year ago, it was the weekend of election day. *The New York* press wrote a wonderful review about it, that this was the first production of the Trump era. References to Trump and Richard III were enclosed in every review.

"That's the huge, masterful power of Shakespeare. It reflects whatever time you live in. It reflects the worries and the anxieties and the desires of people at the time."

Van Hove is also no stranger to tackling the big themes on stage — perhaps most personally when, immediately after *Kings of War*, he collaborated with David Bowie on the musical *Lazarus*.

"It was a huge challenge," he says. "I'd done only one musical event, in a very new version and, of course, I'd done a lot of opera. So I knew how to bring a song, or an aria, on stage. The scary thing was, of course, that David Bowie had this whole context around him ... his music you almost cannot separate from the images that you see with them. When you hear his songs, you see the videos."

Even Bowie's elaborate suits and costumes were extensions of what he was trying to express in song, van Hove says.

"He never was like himself on stage, he always played the character. But that made me think ... if he could only express himself as an actor, then he could give his most personal statements in his songs. By hiding, he could be himself. That grew stronger when I really got to know him.

"That's what an actor does all the time. When Hans Kesting plays Richard III (in *Kings of War*) ... he also expresses himself. He is not playing Richard III, he *is* Richard III."

Van Hove said he decided to make no reference to Bowie's previous guises or visuals in *Lazarus*, inspired by Walter Tevis's novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the 1976 film adaptation of which starred the singer as an alien called Thomas Jerome Newton.

"It allowed us to find our own way — he didn't expect it to be a David Bowie show — it was a David Bowie, (playwright) Enda Walsh and Ivo van Hove show, and that's what he respectfully allowed us to do."



Van Hove was among the first and few that Bowie told when he was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, and the singer's attendance at the New York opening of *Lazarus* in December 2015 was to be his last public appearance.

"It turned out to be — we didn't know that at the time, although he was really very fragile. He didn't look like it, when he was on stage for the applause, but backstage it was a different story," the director recalls.

Knowing of Bowie's illness only increased van Hove's drive for the project. "It gave me a lot of energy. The project, immediately, was about life and death — that's what I said.

"I had this scary moment, because I never got the script before I met him and Enda Walsh. They said 'We are going to read it for you, and then we're going to ask you what you think of it'.

"Immediately I could connect to the core of it. I said to David, 'It feels as if in this production you have to be in Newton's mind'. David said 'Yes, that's really spot-on'.

"A lot of things changed, but I could connect to this existential thing about life and death, and a person who knows that he has to die but cannot."

Six months into the project, when Bowie told Walsh and van Hove of his illness, he was "so calm about it, realistic about it" but for the director, "the urgency became doubled".

"It was already an urgent production. I remember, because I had a full calendar, I said to David 'Can you not do it in 2017?' He said: 'No, Ivo — I will be f***ing 70 by that time!' So he really wanted it to be as urgent as possible.

"Then, of course, I moved productions to make it happen. I'm happy that I did it, because otherwise perhaps it would never have happened."

Despite the often dark themes of his works, Van Hove describes himself as an optimist and *Kings of War* does conclude with a hopeful look to the future.

"*Richard III* ends with Richmond becoming Henry VII ... we don't see him a lot in the play, but we see he's a man with a more free spirit, open to the future. He's not making scapegoats of other people, not judging other people all the time, but listening to them.

"Henry VII gives us a glimpse of hope, a glimpse of possible change." ●