

# Funny, dark and pure: Hedda Gabler takes a grand leap into the 21st century



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**W**HEN Ivo Van Hove's production of Hedda Gabler first appeared at the Royal National Theatre in London towards the end of 2016, as with much of the Flemish director's work, audiences were left reeling by his reinvention of a familiar classic.

Henrik Ibsen's play about a woman trapped in a loveless marriage was already considered radical when it first appeared in 1891, both for its realism and its proto-feminist subject. Van Hove's production of a new version by Patrick Marber takes an even more daring leap into the 21st century, even as it remains faithful to Ibsen's original.

With Ruth Wilson taking the title role during the show's London run, for the UK tour that opens in Edinburgh tonight prior to dates in Aberdeen and Glasgow, Lizzie Watts steps into Hedda's shoes. The production also marks the third time Van Hove has directed the play, following productions in New York in 2004, and in Amsterdam in 2006 with his own Toneelgroep company.

"Some plays I like to revisit," says Van Hove. "Hedda Gabler is one of those. It's so enigmatic, but every moment is so clear at the same time. Every time you look at it, you find a new thing, and every time a new actress comes to the play, it changes. There is never a dull moment doing Hedda Gabler.

"This is the clearest version I've done. It's like a wine. Commissioning

Patrick to write a new version has really helped us. It has made the language so contemporary, and has really brought the play into our times.

"Before that, Christopher Hampton's version that we used was wonderful as well, but I think it was important after all these years to have a new version. We looked at the old-fashioned ways in which people used to talk to each other in terms of the play's exposition, and how people get things so much quicker today.

"As with when I did *A View From The Bridge*, I consider every play a contemporary play. That's why I didn't situate Hedda Gabler in the 19th century. It's a suicide play, for me, and the suicide is already happening within her – why can she not get out of this situation? – so the play is her inner landscape."

The last time Van Hove was in Scotland was with his production of *Antigone*, which he brought to Edinburgh International Festival with Juliet Binoche playing the title role. Since then, he has gone on to redefine Arthur Miller's play, *A View From the Bridge*, in a radical and acclaimed production.

He also directed the late David Bowie's play, *Lazarus*, written with Enda Walsh. Previous visits to Edinburgh have seen Van Hove direct Marguerite Duras's *India Song* among other works. As with both Duras's play and *Antigone*, Hedda Gabler marks what seems to be Van Hove's natural affinity with strong female characters with layers of fragility beneath the surface.

"I love to work with actresses, always," he says. "I am mesmerised by plays with female leads."

Watts saw Wilson in the London run of the show before she was cast as Hedda for the tour, and like Van Hove recognises both the play's

modernity and the complexity of Hedda herself.

"I saw the production before I knew I was going to be involved," says Watts, "and what struck me about it was that Patrick Marber hadn't messed around with the text or butchered it, and that Ibsen feels very modern without having to change things too much. Hedda feels like that as well. One minute she can be cruel and dark, but there's a vulnerability there as well that I want to tap into.

"There's something there as well about the social pressures on women of child bearing age to settle down. Maybe it's partly because I'm the same age as Hedda that I recognise that, and even though me and all my friends keep making excuses about how we don't want to grow up, there's still a tick box mentality about how we're all supposed to have done certain things by a certain age.

There's also this thing going on where from the outside Hedda appears to have it all, but inside is suffering from this deep depression.

"I'm hoping to bring out that vulnerability, although you have to remember that Hedda is really funny as well. This version of the play is really dark, but there's a lightness to it as well that comes from Hedda. She changes from minute to minute in everything she does, and that's why she's so amazing."

Marber and Van Hove came to Hedda Gabler with a mutual desire to make a play for now without losing a sense of the original.

"Ivo was very specific about what he wanted," says Marber, whose early plays, *Dealer's Choice* and *Closer*, were both performed at the Royal National Theatre. "He wanted it to be very easy for the actors to speak, but there was to be no swearing. He didn't

want it to feel old, but he didn't want it completely new either.

"As a play, I'm completely in awe of its construction, and I wanted to understand more about Ibsen, and his deep understanding of human predicaments in their extremity. I love it that Hedda is this dangerous, funny woman, who has these three very different men floating around her, all wanting her in different ways, and she's not really interested in any of them.

"This version of the play is very simple, and very pure, and working with Ivo is a completely different experience to any other director I've worked with. All the things I've learnt from his rehearsal room, I now take into my own."

Van Hove himself is currently working with the National Theatre on Network, an epic staging of the Sidney Lumet directed 1976 big screen satire on TV news, originally written by Paddy Chayevsky.

Van Hove will direct Breaking Bad star Bryan Cranston in the lead role of a version scripted by Lee Hall, writer of Billy Elliot and Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour. Van Hove's production of Network will also feature Scottish actor Douglas Henshall. None of which stops him from overseeing Hedda Gabler with a passion that looks to the play's core as it exposes some of the more troubling aspects of the human condition.

"There is something deep down that Hedda wants," he says. "That lack of something is unstoppable. It's not superficial.

"It's much deeper than that. My version of the play is quite stark. You see the destruction of Hedda by these men who abuse her physically and mentally, and you see her responses to how she lives her life, and tries to find out what's important to her beyond this lack.

"It's a very human play. It's not abstract. The story is very emotional. You're in love with someone else when you're married. So at that level you can see it as a play about relationships. But for me, there is this much greater

existential level.

"Hedda Gabler makes this most extreme decision, which I find incomprehensible and unimaginable, and that is what I love about the play. You have to try and find out all these things that are incomprehensible. It's a play about life and death."

*Hedda Gabler, Festival Theatre, Edinburgh, tomorrow until October 21; His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen, November 21-25; Theatre Royal, Glasgow, January 15-20, 2018.*  
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You see the destruction of Hedda by these men who abuse her physically and mentally



■ Lizzy Watts steps into Hedda's shoes in the familiar classic.