

Ivo van Hove takes on Ayn Rand: The Fountainhead in New York

The Belgian director's staging at BAM is faithful to the spirit — and length — of the novel

Ivo van Hove is perhaps the world's leading interpreter of the theatrical canon. Blending stripped-down design with arresting visuals and an intense focus on language, the Belgian director's productions of Shakespeare, Schiller, Ibsen and Miller, among others, have created a much-imitated style that reinvigorates classical drama while preserving its timeless power.

Of course, it helps when you start out with bona fide masterpieces. Why then should such a talented director want to adapt a 700-page baggy monster that mixes pulp romance with epic doses of sub-Nietzschean philosophical pretension? Ayn Rand's 1943 novel about a relentlessly egotistical New York architect certainly has countless devotees (including Donald Trump and several members of his cabinet). But how many of them are going to flock to a four-hour play in Dutch, with English surtitles (which originated at Toneelgroep Amsterdam in 2014)?

One explanation would be that van Hove wants to subject the book to withering pastiche. But the reverent programme notes describing his *Fountainhead* as "a play about passion, about driven people, a performance about a divided sense of idealism" suggest otherwise. And from the opening scene it becomes clear there are real affinities between van Hove and Rand's protagonist Howard Roark, whose uncompromising commitment to modernist architecture (he even disdains the Parthenon) mirrors the director's own austere minimalist style. When Roark proclaims that "the form of a building must follow function", he could be describing Jan Versweyveld's utilitarian set, resembling a contemporary co-working space, where even the rigging cables and sound desk are visible. Given van Hove's transatlantic success, you might even call it "international style".

And just as Rand's architectural superman refuses to design any building where he lacks absolute control (clients' wishes be damned!), it seems unlikely that van Hove himself would listen to anyone suggesting he might shave an hour or two off the running time and trim some of Roark's turgid monologues about the primacy of artistic genius and the need to struggle against "second-handers" (ie the poor, the fat, the ugly and all those who indulge their weakness). Their cause is defended by Ellsworth Toohey (Bart Slegers), a socialist journalist who wages a successful campaign against Roark's "Temple of the Human Spirit". But the focus here is on Roark's heroic vision of achieving strength through art (and his designs do have a spare monumental grandeur about them).

Not that there is anything particularly sympathetic about Ramsey Nasr's Roark (who would glower at such a snivelling display of emotion). For much of the play, this veteran of van Hove's theatre smoulders at his desk, occasionally drawing impressively clean sketches, which are projected on to a large screen. Such moments do capture the fleeting magic of artistic inspiration. We see nothing of actual building work, however, and, in contrast to van Hove's usual lively directorial approach, the only sustained bursts of physicality here consist of naked encounters between Roark and architecture critic Dominique Francon (Halina Reijn), beginning with a brutal rape.

In keeping with the novel, that scene suggests Francon got what she wanted. The poised and enigmatic Reijn certainly livens up this production whenever she appears. But many will find the misogyny attached to her character hard to stomach.

So why resurrect such a noxious piece of work? The *Fountainhead*'s principal merit is that it gives explicit intellectual form to the dominant ideology of our times. Far from being beleaguered colossi, men like Roark hold immense power in politics, business, and entertainment. When justifying their egotism, they usually resort to flannel or bombastic provocation. Rand, on the other hand, tells it like it is.