

Shakespeare gets grand opera treatment

Ivo van Hove returns to the Adelaide Festival with another thrilling, epic production

[PREVIEW] Ivo van Hove excited audiences at the Adelaide Festival with *Roman Tragedies* – his award-winning conflation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Performed in Dutch with surtitles, the production ran an unbroken six hours and yet it kept audiences gripped.

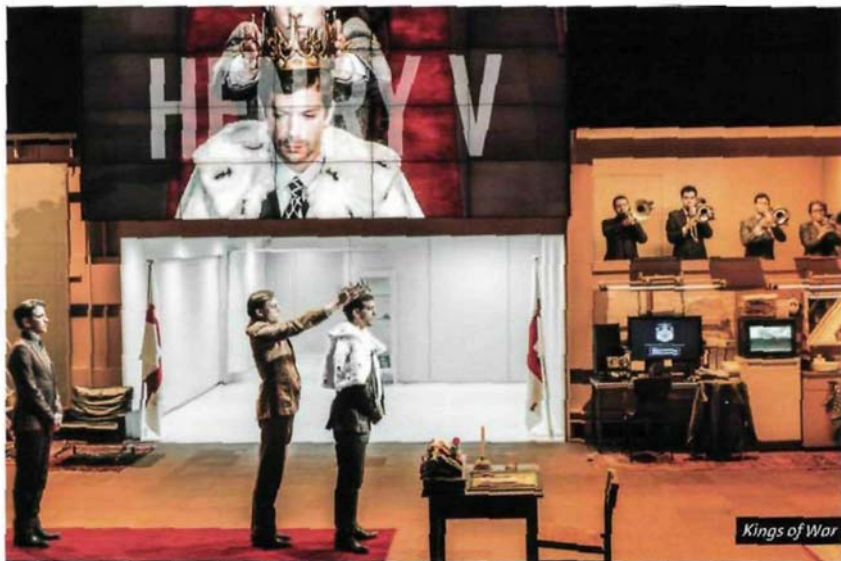
Now, Toneelgroep Amsterdam is returning to Adelaide for the 2018 Festival with Van Hove's latest Shakespearean epic, *Kings of War*. Running a mere four hours this time, the production – which is set in a modern war room – joins and distils five Shakespeare plays, *Henry V*, the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*, to create a study of power and media manipulation that has resonated strongly with audiences in Amsterdam, Paris, London and New York.

Describing it as a “thrilling... cold-eyed, hot-blooded work”, *The New York Times* said: “*Kings of War* takes the home-viewing pleasures associated with serial television portraits of cutthroat schemers, like those in *House of Cards* and *The Sopranos*, and magnifies them to the proportion of grand opera.”

Though a play about leadership would seem more pertinent than ever in the Trump era, Van Hove began thinking about *Kings of War* in 2007 while on tour with *Roman Tragedies*, before Trump had even thrown his hat in as a presidential candidate. “That’s the greatness of Shakespeare – it gives us a perspective on the times that you live in,” says the Belgian director, widely considered one of the most influential theatre directors of his generation.

“In four hours of theatre, we cut away a lot of stuff, of course, because we want to deal with a theme, leadership and leadership today; that was the focus. If I would do *Henry V* it would be a different production, not the production of *Henry V* you see now. But by bringing this together within four hours, it’s a pressure cooker where you see three totally different attitudes towards the most difficult decisions a leader has to take – and that’s glory, that’s war, or love. In this play, every leader has to make a decision.”

Van Hove starts *Kings of War* with a scene from the end of *Henry IV* Part II when Hal,



who is still a young rabble-rouser, is given the crown by his dying father. “He suddenly has this crown on his head, and then you see this young man developing scene by scene into a great leader... So, this is an amazing journey. For me Henry V develops into the perfect, most balanced leader of the three,” says Van Hove.

“Then we go to Henry VI, a very different man. He is really religious, an extreme Christian, and that is his drive, it has nothing to do with the real issues at stake for his people. You see there the opposite of Henry V, you see his advisors, scene after scene, take over power, so Henry V becomes totally isolated in his belief in his God and that his belief will save the country.”

“Then of course Richard III, you see him becoming king. Because of his handicap, his frustrations about not living the life that his brothers can, he was never the one intended to be king, and he fights his whole life, like a street fighter almost to get this crown. He will do anything for it, kill whoever he needs to, even his own brother. Then when he has the crown, a wonderful scene pops up, namely he sits in this [throne], he has the crown on his

head, and he is totally bored because he doesn’t know what to do with this power. He has no vision, no plan for the country, nothing.”

Van Hove sets his production in a modern war room behind which is a series of interconnected corridors where much of the action takes place. A roving camera man captures what is going on there, and projects it onto large high-definition screens. The interplay between live action and video (both live and pre-recorded) emphasises the way that the 24-hour news cycle underpins the exercise of political power today.

Live music always plays an important role in Van Hove’s productions. “[In *Kings of War*] it’s made by the same man who did the composing of *Roman Tragedies*, Eric Sleichim,” he says. “We had a quartet of percussionists in *Roman Tragedies* and now it’s a quartet of trumpets. There is music the whole time, it’s almost like music theatre, and we have also a countertenor singing the whole time live so it’s a big, big interdisciplinary production.” **Jo Litson**

***Kings of War* plays at Adelaide Festival Centre, March 10 – 13 as part of the Adelaide Festival**