

A black and white portrait of Ivo van Hove, a middle-aged man with short, slightly messy hair, looking off to the right with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark, collared shirt. The background is dark and out of focus, with some light bokeh.

# Acts of war

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**Ivo van Hove**

# Theatre director Ivo van Hove is often drawn to adapting film screenplays for the stage, but his latest work, juxtaposing three warrior kings from Shakespeare's histories, shows he also finds contemporary relevance in the classics. By *Peter Craven*.



## PETER CRAVEN

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Ivo van Hove is one of those theatre directors who straddle worlds. The Belgian-born 59-year-old – whose four-and-a-half-hour adaptation of Shakespeare's history plays, *Kings of War*, will be performed at the Adelaide Festival next month in surtitled Dutch by his Toneelgroep Amsterdam company – is one of the great progressivists of the contemporary theatre. He is someone who shows what can be done to the theatre with every trick of distortion and iconoclasm, every live video feed of atrocity, every dislocation. He is a man in love with the classical and classic modern repertoire, who extends the stage to take in the scripts of modern movies.

Van Hove did a dazzling version of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* with Ruth Wilson – the young murderess and comrade-in-arms of Idris Elba in TV's *Luther* – and then Sophocles's *Antigone* in the translation of poet Anne Carson with Juliette Binoche in the title role at London's Barbican and the Châtelet in Paris. But he also, recently, did a version of Visconti's *Ossessione (Obsession)* – itself an adaptation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – seen here as a National Theatre Live broadcast with Jude Law. Sometime in the next year or so, London's West End will see Cate Blanchett in his adaptation of *All About Eve*, the Bette Davis movie of 1950 written and directed by Joseph Mankiewicz.

So, did van Hove – like so many stage directors – want to do film? He says his 2009 effort, *Amsterdam*, was not everything it might have been and he was established as a stage director long before film became a possibility.

I ask if his directorial talent – unlike that of Ingmar Bergman and Luchino Visconti, whom he has adapted – is primarily interpretative? He says he had been fiddling with his own work when Shakespeare came along.

"I happened to do a production of *Troilus and Cressida*," he says. "And I realised I needed that filter. That's when I started to develop."

Okay, but why the film scripts?

"Because I live 50 years later in a different era. I turn to movie scripts when I'm looking for something I cannot find in classic theatre scripts."

Van Hove talks about the new opportunities the script for John Cassavetes' *Opening Night*, performed at the Melbourne Festival in 2010, opened up and makes his case for what could be innovative about his production of Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*.

"In one crucial scene," he says, "there was no script, only a letter outlining the possibilities for a central character. Should she be surrounded by loving people helping her die or should she die cruelly, alone? The possibilities are wide open in Bergman's letter."

He talks about his adaptation of Visconti's *The Damned*. Remember Dirk Bogarde and Ingrid Thulin and the very young Charlotte Rampling in that epic indictment of the lurch towards Hitler? Van Hove did it with the Comédie-Française at the Avignon Festival. "It's like a modern adaptation of *The Oresteia* or *Macbeth*," he says.

For this Belgian tinkerer with the words of drama, the idea of literature looms large even when the medium seems opposite to a literary theatre.

He says he got on well with Binoche and had known her for a while when they tackled one of the most formidable and formidably dialectical of well-made plays. "We decided we should go for Greek tragedy," he says, "and we ended up with *Antigone*. It's about a woman whose story must be listened to, a very strong character, and Juliette saw it as a great opportunity."

He says they decided to approach the poet and classicist Anne Carson, whose previous version of the play, *Antigonick*, was "entirely" an adaptation. "The character of Creon was reduced to almost nothing but a brutal aggressor." Carson said she would do him a proper, faithful translation instead, and the upshot was electrifying in performance.

Wasn't Binoche a bit old to be playing a – fiery, admittedly – slip of a girl?

"I couldn't care less," he says. "It didn't matter. This character is ageless. The thing to remember is that *Antigone* is not a political person. She is not against Creon. She is simply someone who believes that someone in death should not be treated as rubbish, as a dirtbag. She cares about her brother. She cares about the things Creon has lost the ability to care about."

And then, of course, Sophocles turns around and makes it Creon's tragedy, too.

"Yes," van Hove says. "It's hard because she leaves the play. But *Antigone* is emotionally grounded because it's also the rise and fall of this man."

When you talk to van Hove you get the strongest sense of a man of the theatre who is not interested in any subtle verbal interpretation but who wants to show simple – sometimes overpowering – things with all the clarity and feeling he can muster.

If you ask him if he agrees with Peter Hall that a high fraction of directing is casting, he says it's different for him with his Toneelgroep than when he freelances.



In order to exemplify what he calls “the mixture”, he says that the main reason he did *Network* on stage – from the Paddy Chayefsky script for the Sidney Lumet film – was that he imagined Bryan Cranston of *Breaking Bad* in the leading role.

Sometimes his casting will ride roughshod over preconception, as when he did *The Crucible* with Ben Whishaw – Jane Campion’s Keats, Sebastian in the *Brideshead Revisited* remake, Julie Taymor’s Ariel in the Helen Mirren *Tempest* – as John Proctor.

“There’s the cliché we bring to these things,” he says. “Proctor is a farmer so we think he has to be big, like Daniel Day-Lewis. Well, I grew up with farmers and none of them were huge, and Ben turned out to be a countryside boy.”

He takes a step sideways to indicate the importance of getting away from preconception. There was his very successful production of Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*, with Mark Strong, set – very concentratedly and convincingly – in a boxing ring.

“I did it like a contemporary Greek tragedy,” he says. “And that turned out to be Miller’s original intention. It was only when Peter Brook did it in London that it became a huge display of Italian neo-realism.”

He says that his *Crucible* was all about “scapegoating”. It was performed in New York in the middle of the Trump/Clinton election, with all the shrieking about liars.

Again, there’s that characteristic note in van Hove of returning to basics.

“Ben’s Proctor was a man who had made one mistake in his life. He doesn’t want to. He accepts what he’s done. He doesn’t love Abigail and she doesn’t want to give him up.” His Abigail was played by the young American Irish star Saoirse Ronan, for whom the highest claims are being made at the moment with a Golden Globe win and Oscar nomination for *Lady Bird*.

Van Hove agrees that she’ll win every award in the world eventually. What dazzled him, though, was her instinctive grasp of the stage. “She’s great. She had never done theatre but her command of it was instinctive.”

Even her voice and projection?

“Yes, it was astonishing. It was as if it just came out of the dark. It was a total surprise and it was amazing.”

You can tell from the wonder in his voice that this man is that rarest of all things, an actor’s director. For all the grandeur of his conceptions, he clearly knows that actors are not puppets and this governs everything he says; it is as striking as his emphasis on primary emotion.

He’s rueful about his own attempt at film directing and about the state of Dutch film generally, but he glows when I ask him about Paul Verhoeven, the Dutch director who made *Starship Troopers* and *Showgirls* and

then made such an extraordinary splash with *Elle* last year, which had Isabelle Huppert playing a woman who becomes enthralled with a mystery assailant.

“I loved it,” he says, sounding rhapsodic. “I admired it so much. It was as if he was 25 again. And Huppert, an old friend, was perfect. There’s an actress who has a real connection to her darker side.”

Although he does not know Verhoeven, van Hove “wrote him a message” to tell him how much he loved the film.

Van Hove’s next passion is *All About Eve*. He tells the story about how he went to see Sonia Friedman, the London producer who did the Harry Potter play, and told her how much he would like to get the rights to the Hollywood classic. She looked at him and said, “I have them.”

“And then,” he says, “she shook my hand and said. ‘We have a deal.’”

Again van Hove emphasises that it’s the script, not the Bette Davis legend, he’s intent on.

“It’s almost written as a theatre play,” he says. “It stays as close as possible to the script and it should not resonate as a museum piece.”

It’s fascinating to talk to a man of the theatre whose dream factory is, in a nearly explicit way, partly made up of the films he’s seen that resemble great plays and which draw on the same kind of energies and feelings.

Shakespeare, it’s sometimes said, would have used every cinematic trick he could – on stage, on film, on anything. Van Hove exhibits in his quiet, intense way something of the zest you sense behind Shakespeare’s spectacularism and his tonal range.

What was his vision for Shakespeare’s history plays in *Kings of War*?

“We’re in a crisis of leadership,” he says. “When people voted for Obama they were full of hope. Then they were disappointed ... We excluded a lot. I’m not interested in the Wars of the Roses. I was interested in three kings – Henry V, Henry VI and Richard III – and their attitude to war.

“Wars are things you can win, but even if you win the war you will have a lot of problems. In Richard III you have a king who creates war in order to be king.”

He says that the preamble is the scene from *Henry IV*, where Henry V as Prince Hal puts on his father’s crown. “We present him as drunk, as just a college boy. But he’s someone who goes to war to create peace. He’s a king who can listen to people.”

Again with van Hove what’s pointed to is simple in one way, profound in another: the listening is a particularly striking point with its own subtlety. He also says that Henry V sacrifices himself and his personality in order to marry the French princess and that the effect should come across “like peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians”.

Whereas Henry VI, in his ineffectualness and impotent religiosity, couldn’t be more different. “Henry VI,” van Hove says, “thinks people are good but forgets to act. He becomes the victim of his advisers’ control and becomes marginalised.”

And then there’s Richard III – unlike Henry VI, an extraordinarily realised character. “Richard III just wants to be king, but once he’s got the crown, he’s totally bored. He can only reign, only live, only feel in order to have power.”

So what was it like opening *Kings of War* in New York the night before the presidential election, only to

have the packed season end a few days later with Trump firmly ensconced?

“It was perfect timing,” he says, almost wry. “We never intended the parallel. Trump was not even a candidate at the stage when we first planned the show. You do it on stage some time later, and suddenly it’s all about Trump.” ●

