

Darryn King
MEETS **Ivo van Hove**

It's only theatre

During the Broadway production of *The Crucible* in 2016, as the audience settled back into their seats for the second act, a wolf appeared in the theatre. It moved purposefully downstage, stood at the edge of the proscenium, and stared menacingly out into the auditorium.

Actually, it was a purebred Tamaskan dog, a thoroughly trained lupine lookalike named Luchta. “He had to rehearse more than Ben Whishaw,” says director Ivo van Hove, referring to one of Luchta’s human co-stars.

Still, it gives you an idea of van Hove’s theatre, wherein an audience is made to feel that they’re in the presence of something real and unpredictable and dangerous, and perhaps at risk of being viciously ravaged by a wild animal.

Van Hove is the artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, a Dutch repertory theatre whose home is a neo-Renaissance building called the Stadsschouwburg. I paid a visit in December, on the day of the company Christmas party, but 59-year-old van Hove, projecting the neatness and efficiency of a switchblade, was not in a partying mood. Leading the way to a lab-white meeting room, his response to being asked how his day was going was an unjoking, “Don’t ask.”

To say that the man is maniacally busy would be an understatement; it’s getting so you can’t go anywhere without stumbling into a van Hove production. This month you can catch *Kings of War* at the Adelaide Festival, *Network* in London and *La voix humaine* in Antwerp; in April it’s *Persona* and *After the Rehearsal* (an Ingmar Bergman double bill) in Washington, D.C.; in May *Kings of War* goes to Montreal; in June *Roman Tragedies* and the opera *Boris Godounov* open in Paris; and in July Visconti’s *The Damned* will be staged in New York. (This list, though exhausting, is not exhaustive.) He’s also slated to direct Cate Blanchett in a new stage adaptation of the 1950 Bette Davis film *All About Eve*.

In London and New York, star actors have formed an orderly queue: Whishaw, Sophie Okonedo and Saoirse Ronan in *The Crucible*, Juliette Binoche in *Antigone*, Mark Strong in *A View from the Bridge*, Ruth Wilson in *Hedda Gabler*, Jude Law in *Obsession*, Bryan Cranston in *Network*. (Philip Seymour Hoffman auditioned for van Hove in the ’90s, for the role of Stanley Kowalski. Not casting him, van Hove says, was one of the biggest mistakes of his life. “I was afraid of him. Well, what to do with him?”)

There are other big names behind the scenes. Philip Glass composed an original score for *The Crucible*, while Patrick Marber personally petitioned van Hove for the job of adapting *Hedda Gabler* for the National Theatre. Van Hove collaborated with Enda Walsh and David Bowie on the musical *Lazarus* – one of Bowie’s final projects. (The ailing Bowie told van Hove he wanted to do a follow-up. “And he really meant it,” says van Hove tenderly. “He was full of plans.”)

There’s more to van Hove than access to celebrity wattage, though. Few if any living theatremakers possess such reliable, revelatory power to create theatrical moments, images and worlds that, literally, cause jaws to drop.

Van Hove’s *Angels in America* was staged in a black void with little more than the actors, a DJ turntable and an I.V. pole. (Playwright Tony Kushner called it the best production of the play he’d ever seen.) *A View from the Bridge* was similarly staged sans scenery and props, the performance space the size of a boxing ring, the actors barefoot. In *Scenes from a Marriage*, the couple was played, at different times in their lives, by three pairs of actors for three sets of audiences, at the same time, in adjacent thin-walled rooms. And in *The Crucible*, one of the Salemite girls was hoisted skywards by devilish magic – a freaky but intentional twist on Miller’s allegory, which crucially features no real witchery.

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Then there are the times when, with the use of live camerawork and giant screens, van Hove’s productions transcend the natural boundaries of the stage, spilling into the theatre’s corridors, dressing rooms and staircases or, as in the case of *Network*, into the street as passers-by gawk and stare.

Theatre being theatre, haters gonna hate. In the ’90s and early ’00s, van Hove’s work was derided as gimmicky “Eurotrash”. *The Wall Street Journal*’s drama critic Terry Teachout regards van Hove as “the most pretentious stage director of our time”. Playwright David Hare recently described van Hove as the source of a contagious disease infecting the theatre tradition.

Van Hove is emboldened, not deterred, by his detractors. “I see that never as a threat. I see it as an opportunity.” And, for the most part, he is considered a blast of fresh air for an art form in need of oxygenation. *A View from the Bridge*, in particular, has been held up as a watershed production, bringing an edgy intensity – the show culminated in an apocalyptic rain of blood – to London’s conservative West End.

“My mission in life has always been to make the most personal, the most urgent and, you could say,

unique productions,” he says. “But for as large an audience as possible. And without making any compromises. Without *pleasing* them. I don’t like theatre that tries to please me.”

In 2014, van Hove’s *La voix humaine* and *Roman Tragedies* were presented at the Sydney and Adelaide festivals, respectively. The productions could scarcely have been more different: in the former, the audience spied voyeuristically on one woman speaking into a phone behind glass; the latter was a sprawling six-hour marathon of *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, in which the audience entered and explored the performance space at will.

This year, van Hove returns to the Adelaide Festival in epic mode. *Kings of War* is van Hove’s four-and-a-half-hour distillation of *Henry V*, *Henry VI* parts I, II and III and *Richard III*, with a smattering of *Henry IV* Part II. It’s an examination of different styles of leadership: the dashing diplomacy of Henry V, the prayerful pitifulness of Henry VI, and the reign of terror of Richard III – Dutch actor Hans Kesting at his slimiest – as he wreaks havoc out of, among other things, sheer boredom.

Like *Roman Tragedies*, it’s theatre as binge-watch, a mini-festival in itself, making full and riveting use of a roving camera operator and a giant screen, seamlessly integrated live and prerecorded footage, an animated segment on the Battle of Agincourt, a fog machine, a brass quartet, a cooing countertenor, and a flock of sheep.

Kings of War played Brooklyn, New York, in November 2016, in the days leading up to the US presidential election. For those audiences, the image of a monstrous, howling Richard III was fresh in the mind when the poll results crept in. *The New Yorker* called the production the “first great theatrical work of the Trump era”.

“That was so strange,” says van Hove. “Richard III was like a mirror for them. Somebody who uses power not really for the benefit of the country.”

“That was also a great thing to feel, that, with our theatre, we could make the Americans think about their own situation, even when we made it in a totally different context. Everybody sees something else in it. That’s the beauty of art.”

Ivo van Hove grew up in a small village of farmers and coalminers in rural Belgium, and one of his earliest searing experiences of art was the death of Bambi’s mother in *Bambi*.

“Very obvious, perhaps,” he says. “But for me it changed my world. Driving on the bus back home for an hour with my mother, I cried the whole time. It moved me tremendously. Total fiction that could move you to the bone. That stayed in my mind, and in my heart always.”

At boarding school, van Hove became involved in drama, performing for fellow students and parents in plays written by the teachers. While studying at art school in Antwerp, he met Jan Versweyveld, a production

and lighting designer, at a modern dance class. They’ve been partners in life and art ever since; Versweyveld has designed for other directors and choreographers, including Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, but van Hove refuses to even imagine working without Versweyveld’s involvement. “I’m loyal, he’s disloyal,” he says.

“Yeah, but that always happens,” he says, in a tone suggesting it was just your average weekend knighthood ceremony.

Together they opened Café Illusie, across from Antwerp’s Royal Academy of Fine Arts. There was live entertainment: shows in the cellar, opera stars performing arias as people dined. Less conventionally, van Hove personally persuaded a local zookeeper to bring penguins to the bar for a “penguin party”. “We had a lot of ideas,” he says.

Van Hove’s concept of theatre drew on his fascination with performance art, particularly such extreme, death-toying stunts as Marina Abramović’s *Rest Energy* (bowstring drawn, arrow aimed at her heart) and the Chris Burden piece that left the artist with a bullet in the arm. At the age of 20, in his earliest work as a director, van Hove was already experimenting with the divide between reality and fiction, actor and audience, to confronting effect. His autobiographically driven first work, *Rumours*, was an immersive theatre piece decades before immersive theatre became de rigueur, staged in an abandoned laundry building. He recruited (he uses the word “seduced”) 30 non-actors to perform for 30 audience members at a time. A teacher of van Hove’s who saw the show described it as “a primal scream”.

“I thought, *That’s the best description you could give*. A primal scream. ‘I am here. Listen to me. Look at me.’”

“I discovered very early in my life, luckily, that in theatre – and opera later on – I found the perfect way of expressing who I am, and what I think about people, and about life, and about society.”

Beyond directing Sophocles and Shakespeare, van Hove became a pioneer in staging adaptations of films (Antonioni, Bergman, Cassavetes) as well as other unconventional non-theatre texts (Susan Sontag, Ayn Rand). His use of live cameras and jumbotron-style screens – starting with Albert Camus’ *Caligula* in 1995 – also proved to be hugely influential. In 2001, van Hove became artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, and after September 11 his work grew more political, outward-looking, monumental, reaching a creative apotheosis in his Shakespeare sagas, *Roman Tragedies* and *Kings of War*.

With Toneelgroep, van Hove has also skilfully managed to defy the typically ephemeral nature of theatre, building a repertoire of productions that have been staged

around the world, in some cases, for a decade or more.

“I used to make productions that after two weeks or two months were gone. There’s only a document, a program, fading photos. But sometimes you want to live with something. It’s very good for the actors, for audiences in Amsterdam, but also for me. You can learn from yourself, you can reflect on yourself. I see it as my life.

“And my work brings me further. Thinking about the things that the Greeks wrote about, or Shakespeare wrote about, or Molière wrote about, or Tony Kushner writes about, makes me a better person. And it’s a badge of honour that the work we make seems to inspire a new generation. That they feel more liberated from the constraints that used to be there.”

Lately, flying between appointments is the only downtime van Hove gets in which to read and consider scripts. “A lot of directors underestimate the time before they start rehearsal. To know exactly why you want to do this text.” It’s become typical for him to, for example, spend a day in rehearsals in London, travel to Tokyo in the evening for a one-night-only performance, and travel back to London for rehearsals the next day. Or travel to Belgium for the weekend to be knighted.

“Yeah, but that always happens,” he says, in a tone suggesting it was just your average weekend knighthood ceremony. “It freaks out the producers.”

And he married Versweyveld during a rehearsal break. “We were rehearsing – you will not believe this – *The Norman Conquests* by Alan Ayckbourn. Five hours of comedy about marriage. Marriages falling apart, people not happy together but staying together. So, yeah, that was not a very romantic thing to do.”

Versweyveld has pointed out that, over the years, van Hove has been using warmer onstage lighting rather than the cold fluorescence he preferred in the old days.

“That’s an artistic quarrel we have all the time,” says van Hove. “He likes the harsh light. I’m mellowing in the light. But I think it’s because I need to, more and more, bring the audiences nearer to us, to look at things much more carefully. So I can then show the darker things a little more extremely.”

And yet van Hove also knows when to pull back, ease up. While rehearsing the final, harrowing, scene of *Hedda Gabler* in London, actress Ruth Wilson broke down, caught up in the moment and her character, and unable to continue. Van Hove sent everyone home for the day.

“That sometimes happens with me,” he says, almost shamefaced. “I can describe something so well that somebody gets – But then I stopped. I don’t push. I said, ‘Go home, take a bath, relax. If you feel tomorrow like coming, come; if not, let me know. It’s only theatre.’” **M**

