

BARD FOR TODAY

'Mr Shakespeare' is an ideal commentator on current affairs, theatre director Ivo van Hove tells **Jane Albert**

A curious thing happened during Toneelgroep Amsterdam's New York debut of *Kings of War*. An amalgamation of five of Shakespeare's history plays — *Henry V*, the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* — *Kings of War* is Ivo van Hove's unflinching examination of leadership, greed, egomania and the disastrous consequences that can flow from power falling into the wrong hands. Just four days into the season, Americans went to the polls, electing Donald Trump the 45th President of the United States.

The local theatre press went into a frenzy, with *The New Yorker* hailing the play as "the first great theatrical work of the Trump era". *The New York Times'* reviewer Ben Brantley would later write: "That this group portrait of image-manipulating politicians and their pawns was presented only days before the latest American presidential election gave Mr van Hove's production a searing timeliness ... audiences left *Kings of War* highly stimulated and equally scared."

Serendipitous timing? A genius adaptor? Or yet more proof — if any were needed — of the astonishing timelessness of the Bard?

Little more than a year later Shakespeare and his works once again hit the headlines, this time in Australia and in relation not to politics but education, after Canterbury Boys High in Sydney introduced Shakespearean slam poetry in a response to worries over underperformance and sliding interest in English among male students. Whether this was merely a case of back to

the future or a return to common sense, the local news item was the jumping off point for Review's Skype chat with van Hove at Toneelgroep's Amsterdam headquarters.

It would prove a scintillating ride in which van Hove barely drew breath, speaking concisely and insightfully about global politics, the human condition and the specific moment he fell in love with "Mr Shakespeare", the master storyteller whose prophetic words continue to inspire him more than 400 years after they were written.

"Whenever I want to say something in the

theatre about power structures of our time, well, there's only one who says it all. And that's Mr Shakespeare. His work is accessible but also direct, poetic, vulnerable, powerful, rich in ideas. It's amazing that one man wrote all these plays, so full of real issues that we are dealing with still, after 400 years. I'm not surprised [to hear of the Canterbury Boys project] — and it's a good idea, a good idea," he says.

Well he may wax lyrical about Mr Shakespeare, given it was an epiphany brought on by the selfsame playwright that led to van Hove discovering his theatrical voice.

He has since earned acclaim for his radical interpretations of not only Shakespeare but Arthur Miller, Henrik Ibsen and Ingmar Bergman, expanding beyond theatre into opera, musicals, film and television.

For the Belgian director, it all began with *Troilus and Cressida*. Van Hove was in his early 20s, a young theatre director producing improvisational theatre based on avant-garde European

authors, when he was invited to work with a group of acting students at a local school in Antwerp. The 15-strong group was too unwieldy for improvisation, leaving van Hove at a loss about what to do.

"And then I thought, why not choose a text that nobody ever does? I thought of *Troilus and Cressida* and I did it, and it was a revelation. My work became much more personal than when I was writing my own texts or doing very contemporary texts based on improvisation. To have this fantastic, fabulous, chunky text full of ideas, full of characters I loved or hated, that created tension — I thought: this is my home, this is what I was searching for," he says.

From the beginning van Hove has juggled adapting and directing with running various theatre organisations and festivals. In 2001 he took over Toneelgroep, today considered the leading theatre company in The Netherlands; he ran the Holland Festival for seven years from 1998; and he is one of the artistic leaders in the dramatic arts department of the University College Antwerp, a role he has held since 1984.

But it is the vital, pared-back contemporary interpretations of classical texts and modern

classics for which he is internationally respected and which led *The New York Times* to recently describe him, in its review of *Kings of War*, as “perhaps the most influential director of his generation in international theatre”.

“Since *Troilus and Cressida* I never do improvisations any more,” van Hove says.

“I brought all these elements into my interpretations of mostly classical texts and modern

classics. I never expected myself to do this, and now in all those 36 years I think I almost did all the Shakespearean tragedies. It was an unexpected love affair.”

Toneelgroep’s 2007 production *Roman Tragedies* was one of the highlights of the 2014 Adelaide Festival and is often used as a point of comparison when discussing successful contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare globally.

A marathon six-hour production, van Hove’s multimedia adaptation invited audience members to stroll around and on the set, making use of the lounges and bars available within the theatre, occasionally bringing them into contact with the actor.

It was universally hailed as a triumph for its contemporary relevance and intelligence, and it continues to be performed.

Van Hove seems capable of applying a contemporary filter to any text, be it Shakespeare or Miller, leaving the audience feeling as if they have been punched in the gut, so closely does the story reflect the present day. Highlights from his diverse body of work include the West End and Broadway productions of Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*, earning him two Olivier and two Tony awards in 2015 and 2016 respectively; and *Hedda Gabler*, first staged in New York 2004 and then for the National Theatre in London in 2016. His stripped-back *Angels in America* made playwright Tony Kushner weep. But his 2016 production of *The Crucible* on Broadway, starring Saoirse Ronan and Ben Whishaw divided the critics; one hailed it as “unsettlingly vivid ... the freshest, scariest play in town”, but some were less convinced.

Van Hove’s forays into opera have included staging *The Makropulos Affair* and *Iolanta* for the Dutch National Opera; and the entire *Ring des Nibelungen* for the Vlaamse Opera. He moved on to the musical stage to direct *Rent* for Endemol co-founder Joop van den Ende. His collaboration with David Bowie and playwright Enda Walsh on the “play with music” *Lazarus* was the final work in which the singer appeared — and, in fact, the last time Bowie was seen in public. He died in January 2016.

When it comes to staging Shakespeare, it is the translation that serves as van Hove’s starting point. It is also, he believes, key to giving

non-English-speaking theatre-makers a distinct advantage.

“We have a bit freer attitudes towards Shakespeare, we’re not so imprisoned by [tradition],” van Hove explains. “In England the biggest thing with a production is, ‘Oh this actor said this line in a different way to Mr Gielgud 30 years ago.’ It’s a fantastic position — but I don’t think the young people are waiting for a little accent that’s different in one line.

“You have to bring Shakespeare alive. Because Shakespeare is very, very relevant today and it’s all there, it’s all there, you don’t have to change the text. But you have to bring them into today. And for us it’s not only about how you pronounce the line in the most beautiful way — that’s not of so much interest to me. What’s in the line, how to bring that out, the brutality of that line, the poetry, the sentimentality — whatever.

“So our theatre has a little bit more of a visceral attitude towards Shakespeare’s text, I think.”

Kings of War took about eight years to coalesce, a collaboration between dramaturge Peter van Kraaij and scenographer (and van Hove’s life partner) Jan Versweyveld. The ability to develop projects over time is just one of the benefits of Toneelgroep’s ensemble of actors and creatives, van Hove says. Where *Roman Tragedies* explored politics and political mechanisms in a condensed staging of *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Kings of War* examines leadership.

“For me there was a very clear theme in the five plays — *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, which is three plays, and *Richard III* — a central focus for the adaptation: I wanted to make a production about leadership today. Because I’m absolutely sure the most important issue at this time — and from what I know of Australia you see it in Australia, you see it in America and you see it in Europe and South America, everywhere — [is] a search for new leadership.

“Sometimes we think the new leadership is the old leadership as they think now in America, trying to go back in time ... so there’s this search going on. What type of leader do we want to deal with the issues of our time?”

In addition to Trump, van Hove cites Brexit, the escalating tensions over North Korea’s nuclear tests, the refugee crisis and the rise of religious and nationalist fundamentalism — all issues crying out for strong leadership. “We are in this very complicated age and I wanted to reflect in a big, chunky theatre production on what leaders are there around? We see [these

complications] in the production, then, reflected in these leaders: Henry V, Henry VI and the most strange leader of all, Richard III.”

Just as they are today, Shakespeare’s leaders are challenged with the most difficult decision a leader has to make: whether to go to war. “Going to war means you win or lose. If you lose, it’s a catastrophe for the country, people will hate you. If you win, there’s a lot of loss, because there’s always casualties, always mourning, distress and trauma afterwards. Even if you win a war, it’s never only a victory.”

A little more than four hours long, *Kings of War* is a large multimedia production, the stage representing Churchill’s war room, a deceptively domestic design considering the cold and calculated decisions made there that inevitably affect soldiers on battlefields thousands of kilometres away. Much of the action takes place off-stage in the real “corridors of power” that would otherwise go unseen — conspiracies launched, bodies buried, mothers weeping over their infants, all captured on camera and revealed to the audience on screens.

The 20-strong cast wears contemporary attire: stylish suits for the men dealing with the business of war, softer outfits for the women mopping up the inevitable emotional fallout. Eric Sleichim’s interactive score features a live brass section and countertenor; and the performance is in Dutch with English subtitles.

Van Hove could not have predicted the Trump presidency or the path chosen by Kim Jong-un, when preparing for *Kings of War*’s debut in Vienna in May 2015. Excited critiques in the press and comparisons of various leaders with Richard III were welcome publicity (“Shakespeare with shock and awe” was how *The Guardian*’s 2015 headlined a review from Holland Festival), for van Hove this was simply further proof, if any were needed, of the enduring significance of Shakespeare and his texts.

“Shakespeare wrote more than 400 years ago, and all his stories were already 200 years before him, using the period to talk about this time. I do the same,” van Hove says. “I use his material to talk about our time, it’s about the age we’re living in. That’s the greatness of theatre, and of Shakespeare.”

YOU HAVE TO BRING SHAKESPEARE ALIVE. BECAUSE SHAKESPEARE IS VERY, VERY RELEVANT TODAY AND IT’S ALL THERE ... YOU DON’T HAVE TO CHANGE THE TEXT

IVO VAN HOVE

Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s production of ***Kings of War*** opens today at the Festival Theatre in Adelaide, as part of the Adelaide Festival, and runs until Tuesday.



**Toneelgroep
Amsterdam's
artistic director
Ivo van Hove,
above; facing
page, from left,
scenes from his
*Kings of War
and Roman
Tragedies***

