

## ‘A Little Life’ Comes to the Stage. The Audience Can’t Look Away.



Ramsey Nasr, who plays Jude, in rehearsal for “A Little Life” in Amsterdam. The director Ivo Van Hove has adapted Hanya Yanagihara’s 2015 novel. © Jan Versweyveld

AMSTERDAM — How do you distill a 720-page novel that takes place over decades and vividly depicts child rape, self-mutilation and amputation into two hours of palatable theater?

The short answer, according to the director Ivo van Hove: You don’t.

Neither brevity nor palatability are concepts that particularly interest Mr. van Hove, who delivered an explosive, disconcerting adaptation of Luchino Visconti’s 1969 film “The Damned,” set in the early days of the Third Reich, at the Park Avenue Armory in New York in July.

On Sept. 23, his theater company, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, which recently rebranded as the International Theater Amsterdam, will premiere “A Little Life,” conceived by Mr. van Hove and adapted by Koen Tachelet from Hanya Yanagihara’s novel.

Published in 2015, the book became a worldwide best seller; it won the Kirkus Prize in Fiction and was shortlisted for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award. Readers and critics alike seem to either to love it or loathe “A Little Life”; it received lavish praise in the New Yorker review, and a scathing critique in the New York Review of Books.



Mr. Van Hove, one of today's most prolific and respected theater directors, is known for his marathon stage adaptations. © Jan Versweyveld

Mr. van Hove, one of today's most prolific and respected theater directors, is known for his marathon stage adaptations, such as his four-hour production of Ayn Rand's "The Fountainhead"; his nearly six-hour "Roman Tragedies," a modern melding of several classical dramas by Shakespeare; and his four-and-a-half-hour "Kings of War," which brings together five of Shakespeare's history plays.

Less than two weeks before the opening, "A Little Life" was running about three and a half hours. Mr. van Hove, who can make changes to a play up to the final rehearsals, admitted in an interview, "We don't know how long it will end up being, but I'm not afraid of length."

He's found a good match in Ms. Yanagihara's novel, which doesn't hold much back, in either page count or disturbing content. "A Little Life" features depictions of child abuse, self-harm, domestic violence and suicide. It initially looks like the story of four college friends — Jude, Malcolm, Willem and J.B. — who maintain a close bond as they come of age in New York and become successful in their chosen fields.

But it narrows to focus on Jude, who was discovered as a newborn in the trash and over the course of his life is continually subjected to horrendous abuse by a series of sadists.



Mr. Nasr, left, and Hans Kesting in rehearsal this month. © Jan Versweyveld

Mr. van Hove has followed Ms. Yanagihara's lead, keeping the novel's cruelty center stage rather than ushering it into the wings, where it might be easier for audiences to tolerate.

"I'm never concerned about it being too brutal," he said during a rehearsal break. "I'm not afraid of darkness, I'm not afraid of violence, I'm not afraid of extremities. Theater is there to

represent the actual reality outside. I think that's the function of art and theater — you look at things that you abhor, that you really are nauseated by, but that's important because it's a cleansing process."

Mr. van Hove said he first encountered "A Little Life" after two friends independently gave him copies of the book, saying the same thing: "This seems like something for you." After inquiring about the rights, he received a third copy with a personal note from Ms. Yanagihara, saying that she'd be "honored" if he'd bring it to the stage.

Ms. Yanagihara, who is the editor of T: The New York Times Style Magazine, said in a telephone interview that she saw Mr. van Hove's production of "The Crucible" on Broadway in 2016. "I just thought he was a genius, someone who did some very interesting, irreverent and disruptive things on stage," she said.

The two went back and forth on the concept for the script, and had some "spirited disagreements," Ms. Yanagihara said. But she said that she had ultimately left it mostly in Mr. van Hove's hands. "It was a leap of faith," Ms. Yanagihara said.



"A Little Life" follows a group of college friends, from left: JB, played by Majd Mardo; Willem, played by Maarten Heijmans; Mr. Nasr as Jude; and Malcolm, played by Mandela Wee Wee.

© Jan Versweyveld

The play will be performed in Dutch, with English supertitles for some performances, but Ms. Yanagihara said she hadn't read a final translation. "We have had a couple of conversations about it, but much of what is in the play is going to be a mystery to me," she added.

In rehearsal on a recent afternoon, Jude, played by Ramsey Nasr, was screaming on a hospital bed after burning his own arm and pouring salt into the wound. Then, with only a few physical gestures, Mr. Nasr convincingly transformed himself into a 12-year-old child, pleading with his captor, Brother Luke (Hans Kesting), to stop selling him to men for sex. Then the scene shifted to an encounter with another of Jude's tormentors, this one wielding a fire poker.

During rehearsal, a video screen hanging center stage amplified the suffering, by showing live footage that zoomed in on details: Brother Luke's hand groping Jude's crotch, or Jude's agonized face as he squirmed on the hospital bed.

Jan Versweyveld, the production's set, lighting and video designer and Mr. van Hove's longtime romantic partner and collaborator, said the live video element was still under discussion, noting that the choice was dramaturgical — "it enhances the voyeuristic aspect of it," he said — but also practical, to let the people in the back rows see.

The goal, he added, was to bring the audience closer to Jude's experience. "I think it's out of respect for the story and out of respect for the character Jude and his friends that we want to be as honest as we can possibly be in theater," Mr. Versweyveld said. "What do you do in the sex scenes? How far do you go?"

Ms. Yanagihara said she hoped the production would address the book's brutality in the most direct way possible.

"Some of the most thrilling moments on the stage are the ones where you can see that the director has really grappled with the idea of violence and has chosen not to fetishize it or to beautify it, but has presented it as something that the audience can't look away from — that the audience is made to look," she said. "I always imagined it as being visceral and that if it ever was presented cinematically or theatrically that it would be done unsparingly."

**The New York Times, Nina Siegal, 21 September 2018**