

A Little Life, Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam — a world of pain Ivo Van Hove's production is as gruelling yet compulsive as Hanya Yanagihara's source novel ★★★★★



Maarten Heijmans, left, and Ramsey Nasr in 'A Little Life' © Jan Versweyveld

Stage blood is stubborn. It soaks through clothing and stains the skin. After four hours onstage in *A Little Life*, Ramsey Nasr is covered in it. As Jude St Francis, a compulsive self-harmer grossly abused as a child, he endures a lifetime of suffering. As one close friend puts it, “He’s all scar tissue now.”

Hanya Yanagihara’s novel about four friends in New York became an international bestseller in 2015, when it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Awfully compelling, it’s a guilty page-turner. Every chapter heaps fresh pain on its traumatised protagonist. Jude’s closest friends repeatedly clean him up — an endless cycle of self-annihilation and care. This stage version, from Ivo Van Hove, is just as horribly transfixing. For all its agonies, you can’t look away.

Koen Tachelet’s spare adaptation muddles the chronology, swimming woozily between reality and memory. Nasr, slumped beneath a white sink on a red scab of stage, makes a ritual of cutting that brings his past back to life. His abusers blur into one. Hans Kesting, dressed in black, stalks the stage; smiling benignly as Brother Luke, the monk who abducts and pimps Jude as a boy; brutish as Caleb, bouncing his lover around like a basketball; chillingly inexpressive as Doctor Traylor, who restores Jude’s health just to torture him afresh. They toy with him like schoolboys scorching ants with a magnifying glass.

Such cycles run throughout: harm and healing, trauma and therapy. Van Hove looks at life in terms of process and, as Jude’s friends work around Jan Versweyveld’s compartmentalised stage — an artist painting, an actor running through his lines — there’s a suggestion that Jude’s self-harm is itself a practice. The phrase “getting better” pings ambiguously out of the text. It’s an unflinching, eviscerating watch that dissects abuse as a pattern, self-replicating pain.

Van Hove controls the mood like a precision engineer. Mark Thewessen’s videos crawl the kerbs of New York in ominous slow-mo: lights flicker, people stare. A string quartet scores the action onstage, sometimes scratchy as fingernails, sometimes a plaintive sigh. Like the book, it’s almost too much — misery porn — but the staging resists any cathartic release. It’s so suffocating you long to shrug it off as implausible, but you can’t: Nasr’s too committed for that. He plumbs the depths of self-pity and self-loathing, but always steels himself to survive, coping just to prove that he can. He’s scar tissue — and this is Van Hove at his best, theatre that leaves an ineradicable mark.