

## Rufus Wainwright and Ivo van Hove Talk Politics, Coming Out and Boarding School

Two creative people in two different fields in one wide-ranging conversation. This time: the singer and the director.



Rufus Wainwright and Ivo van Hove, photographed in New York on Oct. 19, 2018. Credit Sean Donnola

What does the Belgian dramatist Ivo van Hove have in common with the American-Canadian singer Rufus Wainwright? For one, they're both artists whose gay identity is neither incidental to their work nor all-consuming. For another, they are both tireless artistic explorers, catholic in the extreme. Wainwright, son of the '70s singer-songwriters [Loudon Wainwright III](#) and [Kate McGarrigle](#), fused indie folk and soft glam into a series of highly personal albums, beginning with his eponymous debut in 1998 and continuing through his pair of dynamic 2003-4 "[Want](#)" albums. Then he decided to write operas — the second, "Hadrian," with a libretto by Daniel Maclvor, premiered in Toronto in October — and to compose music for the renowned American experimental theater director [Robert Wilson](#)'s 2009 staging of Shakespeare's sonnets in Berlin. These works brought him into the creative orbit of the Amsterdam-based van Hove, whose freewheeling multimedia adaptations pay equal homage to avant-garde performance pioneers like Wilson and august playwrights like Arthur Miller, whose "[The Crucible](#)" and "[A View From the Bridge](#)" he reimagined earlier this decade. (His theater company, [Internationaal Theater Amsterdam](#), recently premiered "[A Little Life](#)," adapted from the novel written by T's editor in chief, [Hanya Yanagihara](#).) Wainwright and van Hove met up one October night in a Japanese restaurant in downtown New York; van Hove, 60, had just finished a day of rehearsals for the Broadway adaptation of Sidney Lumet's prescient 1976 media satire, "[Network](#)" (opening Dec. 6), which he is directing and which stars Bryan Cranston. Wainwright, 45, had just flown in from his home in Los Angeles, the day after debuting his tense, beautiful and political new single, "[Sword of Damocles](#)," as he prepares to [go on tour](#). They were coming from disparate places, running on different clocks, but immediately opened up about that which matters most to them: politics, coming out, the multiplicity of the self — and the benefits of boarding school.

**RUFUS WAINWRIGHT:** One of my husband Jörn [Weisbrodt]’s great heroes is Ivo. I think the first thing that I saw of his was “[Angels in America](#)” at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) in 2014, which was incredible, and then “A View From the Bridge” and “The Crucible.” We’ve wanted to do something together for years. It could take many forms: certainly an opera or a musical. Today, when I came to the photo shoot, it was in the basement of a church. And I said, “What is this, an A.A. meeting?” Then it dawned on me that this is where you’re rehearsing “Network.” I had the same thing with my last opera: I think it was an old cigar factory — a very sacred aura, but also unglamorous and badly lit. So, when are you getting out of that room?

**IVO VAN HOVE:** In a week’s time. I’m happy. But making theater, when you’re the director, you have to constantly be the leader; a lot of people have to embrace your ideas. Rufus, you’re much more the god of your creation. Are you disciplined?

**RW:** My mother loved to drink and enjoy life, but when it came to music, she was incredibly exacting, and there was always a need for quality and trueness, and that really translated when I started making my early records. I worked with producers who tried to fight that a little bit, and I wound up usually winning. I’m just at the early stages of my theatrical career, though I’m probably only going to write three operas. Everybody’s been telling me incessantly, “Come on, Rufus, you have to write a musical.” I’m continuing my education.

**T:** Ivo mainly adapts the work of others. Rufus, you did a New York [show in 2006](#) that reproduced Judy Garland’s landmark 1961 concert, “[Judy at Carnegie Hall](#).” You both wear your influences on your sleeves.

**RW:** Well, I didn’t reproduce *every* moment. I did that show recently again because it was the 10th anniversary, and whereas the first time I very much related to her — I was newly sober and still tied to this bright-eyed romanticism — this time, I started singing and I realized, “Oh my God, I feel like Frank Sinatra.” Tougher, more experienced, more masculine swagger. I am an older man and more of a survivor, less of this victim character that Judy was.

**IVH:** I live from inspiration by other artists and authors. Shakespeare did not write one original story. I think you can only make something new if you know very well where you’re coming from. There are only a few geniuses in the world. Even Einstein, he found this fantastic thing, but not out of the blue. History builds up to that moment.

**RW:** I think there’s a terrible problem with young artists today who really aren’t concerned about educating themselves enough about culture and reading great books and knowing great films — and really just caring about success and what they’re going to look like on Instagram. People like Kanye West who think that they know everything and they know absolutely *nothing*. David Bowie was probably the best example of someone who did his homework. One of my jobs is to maintain respect for the bastions of culture.

**IVH:** I worked with Bowie on “[Lazarus](#)” [the van Hove-directed musical that opened in 2015, just before Bowie died]. But in my youth, he was defining because of the shows he did — like “Station to Station” (1976). It started with [[Luis Buñuel](#)’s 1929 Surrealist film] “Un Chien Andalou,” with the eye being cut. Bowie didn’t come on for many minutes; there was only white light. It was, for me, enormous: *If this is possible, that’s my world*. But Rufus, your songs, like “Dinner at Eight” (2003), are inspired directly from your life; I like the filter of somebody else’s text to talk about my life so I’m not visible. That, for me, is the difference. Your new song, “Sword of Damocles,” how did it start?

**RW:** It started when I was hanging out with [Carrie Fisher](#) not long before her death. We'd had a very interesting few nights together in Hollywood, and there was this moment where she was on the phone with her attorney, screaming, "It's like this sword of Damocles is over my head!" And I thought, "Oh, that's strong." It was also before the [2016 American presidential] election, so I think everybody had this foreboding, sickening fear. Something was going to fall. [The lyrics from "Sword of Damocles" include "Raise kindness / Above all else / Avoid the books of / Hatred behind the shelves."]

**IVH:** It became a metaphor for you personally?

**RW:** Personally and for everything. And then the election happened. I also had some stuff I had to deal with — especially moving back to Los Angeles and becoming a father. [In 2011, Wainwright had a girl with Lorca Cohen, Leonard Cohen's daughter; the child is co-raised by her biological parents and Weisbrodt.] And also, Carrie died. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm going to write this song about Donald Trump." It was just: *We all are in trouble*. I was very adamant to release it before the midterms. I know it's a cliché to say that in these dark times that's when the theater flourishes, but I do hope it does. I'm looking at the story of [Harvey Milk](#) as a possible idea for a musical.



Both Wainwright and van Hove wear their influences on their sleeves. Credit Sean Donnola

**IVH:** I consider what I'm doing now, "Network," very political. With "[The Damned](#)" [based on [Luchino Visconti](#)'s 1969 film about Nazi-era German aristocrats] in 2016, I avoided doing something [overt] about Hitler. It becomes a terrible cliché on stage, which is totally not dangerous anymore. There was a "Heil Hitler" in it, and I said to my sound designer that I wanted it to be the "Heil Hitler" you *really* are afraid of, where you get goose bumps. "The Crucible" (2016) was very political in that way. It was in the middle of the Republican debates, when Trump at the beginning was on the sidelines and came closer to the middle, and every candidate, even the most polite and civilized ones, started to scapegoat the other. "The Crucible" is full of people scapegoating each other.

**RW:** I feel that Trump is like nothing the world has ever known. He's a new sort of beast that we have to contend with as artists.

**IVH:** Going back, Rufus, to how you were raised to become a musician. My father was a pharmacist. I was the oldest son, so I was also raised to take that over. I was trying to escape every second of my life in that world, that Belgian village. But he did these things that nobody does anymore: the powders. He had scales weighing out milligrams. I respected that a lot, that he could make something that was so delicate.

**RW:** And you are a kind of pharmacist! There's probably a lot you learned. My father and I have definitely been through the wars together. We're in a good place right now. I'm not saying my father's like Trump — there's not an inkling of that — but I do feel like with that generation, they had everything. He suffered from depression, and I think in a lot of ways all of that expectation and opportunity was a curse. Whereas what happened to me was, when I hit puberty, AIDS was everywhere. It was certainly traumatic and difficult, but it gave me a sense of perspective: Life is short, enjoy things while you can. Ultimately, I was enriched by that catastrophe.

**IVH:** I knew when I was 11 that I was gay. My luck was that I was in a boarding school. I lived one whole life in those six years. Jan [Versweyveld, van Hove's partner and scenographer], whom I met when we were 20 — we were not welcome at my home together. What I did then, and I'm very proud of myself now, was hold my horses. I left my parents alone and I lived my life. Slowly, we grew nearer to each other; Jan was sitting at my father's deathbed before I was there. You know, I'm not a full-time homosexual. I have a lot of other interests. But now that I'm older, I feel more and more responsibility.

**RW:** I was about 11 or 12 and I started to have these dalliances. I'd sneak out of the house, and my mother found a magazine and was horrified and kicked me out. And what my father did at that point, and I'm very much indebted to him, is he then insisted that I go to boarding school.

**IVH:** It's a paradise!

**RW:** It was the best move I ever made. I needed to get away from my parents, I needed to be in a safe environment, I needed to have other people really invest in me for who I was and not for who I was supposed to be. So I think that kids should be taken away from their parents!

**T:** Rufus, you're about to go on tour for the 20th anniversary of your first two albums (1998's "Rufus Wainwright" and 2001's "[Poses](#)"). Ivo's also had a varied yet stable career. How have you both changed as artists?

**RW:** I have adopted a Hindu kind of belief system in the sense that I don't believe in the linear anymore. For me, it's more like a tree, where *that's* a branch and *that's* a branch and they still exist. I've always believed that those two albums are two other Rufuses that are still there, that still haunt me, that I have to temper and also embrace.

**IVH:** I totally connect to that. When we were making "The Damned," Jan was saying, "Ivo, it feels as if we're making 'Rumors' again" — our first production in 1981 [in Antwerp, about a young, increasingly schizophrenic man]. That roughness, and also that audacity. As I said, I'm not a full-time homosexual. I have much more to say. I am also the son of a pharmacist, and I am also the general manager of my company. I have much *more*, and everyone has much more than one identity. You don't have to be Hindu to know that deeply. Perhaps artists are more aware of it.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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