

The Demolition Artist: 3 Critics Debate Ivo van Hove



Live video onstage is a hallmark of Ivo van Hove productions, including “Network,” with Bryan Cranston, now on Broadway. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Who is Ivo van Hove and why are theatergoers saying such (thrilling) (furious) (mystified) things about him? How did the unassuming Belgian director, who since 2001 has made the theater company Toneelgroep Amsterdam his base of operations, turn into the most important auteur on the international stage circuit — and now a three-time Broadway director?

With Mr. van Hove’s divisive production of “Network” earning more than \$1 million a week on Broadway — having Bryan Cranston as your star doesn’t hurt — The New York Times gathered three writers who have followed his path for nearly two decades.

In this edited conversation, Ben Brantley, co-chief theater critic for The Times, and the critics Elisabeth Vincentelli and Jason Zinoman aim to make sense of Mr. van Hove’s ascent, from Off Broadway to a Tony Award, David Bowie to “All About Eve.” With a Broadway revival of “West Side Story” looming on the 60-year-old director’s docket, the theater editor, Scott Heller, kept them from rumbling.

SCOTT HELLER How rare it is to be meeting for a three-way debate about ... a theater director?

JASON ZINOMAN A pleasure, really. And a testament to the success of Ivo van Hove.

BEN BRANTLEY And who would have thought, when he first started his explosive demolitions of hallowed classics at New York Theater Workshop in the late 1990s, that he would become a mainstream force.

ZINOMAN I was trying to think (and maybe you can help me) of another artist who has transitioned from experimental theater to the red-hot center of Broadway with as much success. Richard Foreman was on Broadway, I believe, twice. Peter Brook has a longer résumé but hasn't been on Broadway since 1984.

HELLER Julie Taymor?

ELISABETH VINCENTELLI The only artists with this kind of crossover success are musicians or visual artists. Someone like Philip Glass, for instance. But American theater is different: the entry gate to the mainstream is guarded ferociously.

BRANTLEY And when you think of how many American avant-gardists (Peter Sellars, Robert Wilson) have had to go to Europe to experience popular acclaim, it's all the more astonishing. His 2015 "View From the Bridge," which turned Arthur Miller's kitchen-sink drama into majestic tragedy, was the turning point, I suppose.



Mark Strong, center, as Eddie in the Tony-winning revival of Arthur Miller's "A View From the Bridge." Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

HELLER Let's talk about the mainstream. Has van Hove tailored his aesthetic for mass consumption, or are theater audiences more primed than ever for what he has to offer? And, even before that, try to capture for us why, at his best, he excites each of you — and I promise, we'll get to why he frustrates, too!

VINCENNELLI I've seen almost all his New York shows since "A Streetcar Named Desire" in 1999, and I don't feel his aesthetic has changed much, if at all. What has changed is the American audience's willingness to enter his world. He's a brilliant director of visuals, which puts him in sync with our incredibly visual culture.

BRANTLEY Agreed, Elisabeth. And the fact that he introduced video cameras into his mise en scène so early as a means of seeing, literally, different faces (and facets) of his characters certainly jibes with a screen-dominated moment in culture.

ZINOMAN He creates a kind of chaos onstage, with all the points of view. You often never know where to look.

VINCENNELLI Plenty of Broadway shows are actually very high-tech, but their use of technology tends to be kept behind the scenes. Van Hove brings the artifice to the forefront.

BRANTLEY And he does that with acting itself, making us aware of the various tricks and tropes performers use and how they manipulate that ultimate tool of acting, the human body.

HELLER You've all written about video as a stage tool going back decades — the Wooster Group and beyond. The same with stylized acting styles. What happens when van Hove applies these techniques to familiar texts — Shakespeare? A novel like "The Fountainhead"? And movies — so many, many movies, re-enacted onstage?

BRANTLEY I'm glad you mentioned the Wooster Group, because they really pioneered the multicamera, multi-mic art of disorientation. Van Hove uses these things specifically to illuminate the text, I think, sometimes in rather literal-minded ways. But he also — in two of his epic examinations of corrupting tyranny, "Kings of War" and "The Damned" — allows us to see behind the scenes of the corridors of power, so we're always aware of several levels of action happening at once.

ZINOMAN I no longer think van Hove adjusts his techniques to fit or illuminate the text so much as he shoehorns the material into his particular aesthetic. He's become a rigid if often stunning stylist, whose longtime collaboration with the designer Jan Versweyveld is his most important partnership. One hallmark is shooting a scene on the street that is then projected in the theater. It invariably gets a laugh when the audience sees New York pedestrians acting baffled by actors performing near hot dog carts. It's the kind of cheap laugh David Letterman would get when he took cameras on the street. But the backdrop is Nazi Germany in "The Damned" and a media hellscape in "Network." His use of media here is jarringly at odds with the content in a way I am not sure he is in control of.



"The Damned," with Jennifer Decker, left, and Christophe Montenez, is one of many van Hove productions based on films. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

BRANTLEY I do think one of his concerns is to erase borders and tear down walls, not just to rattle us with avant-garde self-consciousness, but to suggest our own kinship with the people onstage. He did this more effectively in "The Damned," I thought, by beginning with the cast in civvies and letting the characters' preparation for the big party that begins the show become our entry point into the story.

ZINOMAN While I think of him as more interested in form than content, he seems right now very focused on politics.

VINCENTELLI The "one size fits all" accusation isn't entirely off-base. (It reminds me of accusations lobbed at Robert Wilson, also not off-base.) What concerns me a bit is the reliance on multimedia these days, which wasn't always the case in van Hove's earlier shows. I wonder if it has something to do with an overuse of films as source material. I wish he'd go back to the classics!

BRANTLEY But he's less a one-trick pony than his reputation would have it. Remember his viscerally immediate, relatively technology-free adaptation of Bergman's "Scenes From a Marriage" a few years ago? He cast three different sets of performers as the same couple at different ages, and it universalized our (or at least my) identification with them. I think, oddly enough for a modernist, he's a universalist.

VINCENTELLI All the talk about multimedia obscures his amazing work with actors. The performances he gets from them can be stunning. I remember them more than the video gewgaws.

HELLER Give me an example.



Elizabeth Marvel as Blanche DuBois in Mr. van Hove's "A Streetcar Named Desire" at New York Theater Workshop. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

VINCENTELLI Toneelgroep's Hans Kesting, strikingly physical as Richard III ("Kings of War") and Mark Antony ("Roman Tragedies").

BRANTLEY How about Saoirse Ronan's malevolent serving girl in "The Crucible"? Or Elizabeth Marvel's flayed, viscera-exposing performances in "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "The Little Foxes"?

ZINOMAN I'm not much of a believer that van Hove is great for actors. But Ben reminds me of another admirable trait: his gutsy conceptual flourishes. In "The Crucible" he dared to suggest that the witches might in fact be real. I had never seen this before. I didn't find the execution of this idea to have enough conviction to completely work, but respect the attempt.

VINCENTELLI It's hard to overestimate the impact his European upbringing has on his work on American and British classics, like "The Crucible." He doesn't come to them with the same baggage. This does not always entirely pan out, but when it does, the results are illuminating — "View From the Bridge" is a perfect example.

HELLER Let's circle back to Jason's points about van Hove's politics. "Network" ends with a controversial flourish, in which we watch footage of presidents being inaugurated since the 1970s, culminating with Trump. The audience howls. Is this merely playing to the crowd?

BRANTLEY Absolutely. It's pandering and unnecessary. Many of my problems with "Network" have to do with the source material. What wowed me about the production, though, was Bryan Cranston's stunning performance as a man made by media — and the way that guy interacted with the onstage cameras, and his own reflected images!

VINCENTELLI I agree with Ben, that was a cheap shot.

HELLER So capture for me how or when van Hove makes richer, more bracing political arguments.

ZINOMAN He doesn't. "Network" is not an anomaly. The only person who hammers television as much and broadly as the artists behind "Network" is Trump himself. In other hands, some of this would be played as satire, as in the original movie. But van Hove, as far as I can tell, is incapable of a sense of humor. His one mode is epic, grim, relentless tragedy.

BRANTLEY He is a tragedian, first and foremost, though I think we can make room for tragedians in a time when they're a rare breed among directors. No, he lacks a sense of satire and even of irony, except in a cosmic sense. What I think fascinates him and what often works for me, is the idea of monolithic personalities, damned to suffocate under their own passions (or egos). That was true of Mark Strong's amazing Eddie Carbone in "View From the Bridge" and the monarchs from "Kings of War."

VINCENTELLI I don't think of him as a political director at all. Sometimes I feel he stumbles into it, but that's not his primary or even secondary mode. What he does best is excavate new readings from plays you thought you knew — subtext from text. For instance, he had Bruce McKenzie play Stanley in "Streetcar," an actor who's not the beefy, hypermasculine guy people commonly associate with that character. That was revelatory to me — the shapes masculinity can take.



Robert de Hoog, Alwin Pulinx (onscreen and in far background) Bart Slegers and Leon Voorberg in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's "Kings of War" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Credit Emon Hassan for The New York Times

ZINOMAN I want to go back to the idea that his characters, as Ben puts it, are damned. I agree. And doomed. This unifies much of his work: Everything is inexorable. But there are

drawbacks to this, particularly as he works with an increasing diversity of material (next up: “West Side Story”). He seems uninterested in creating suspense or generating surprise, except through visual flourishes.

BRANTLEY For me, one of his most remarkable gifts is his ability to sustain a feeling of suspense (that *Götterdämmerung* doom) even though you know where you’re headed. And it works with dark, monumental classics like “View” and “The Crucible.” Curiously, his one attempt at Greek tragedy that I’ve seen, an “Antigone” starring Juliette Binoche, was utterly uninvolved.

VINCENNELLI I’m fine with him always working in the same register. Are we complaining that Jerry Zaks always does comedy? He’s brilliant at it. As for gimmickiness — that criticism isn’t aimed at, say, Richard Nelson, whose Apple Family plays are just as gimmicky. But because they are in a familiar naturalistic mode, nobody notices or cares. What van Hove is doing is loosening up, if only a bit, the naturalistic grip on mainstream American stages. That’s a big deal in our world.

ZINOMAN Now that he’s getting to work on the most prominent stages of the commercial theater, I do think his range matters. We agree “View From the Bridge” was wonderful. But is he the right director for “West Side Story”? This question is no longer academic.

HELLER Part of what has gotten him these opportunities is the embrace of critics like the three of you. He has become a name, a brand of sorts, that theater fans follow. Or not. As one commenter to a Times review wrote: “Ivan Van Hooey. Enough. Please. Make him go away.”

VINCENNELLI When you go to “The Damned” and you hear people having animated discussions — pro and con — on the street afterward, there’s something happening that I think is very exciting. People arguing over directorial choices! That is just incredible to me. I’ll forgive “Lazarus,” the Bowie show, just for that.

ZINOMAN I agree with Elisabeth that inspiring heated argument about theater directing is wonderful. But I also think we have a bias for ambition that can make us go easy on van Hove. For instance, let’s take the most provocative decision I have seen him make, the molestation scene in “The Damned.” That was a very young actor, and he lingered in that scene in a way that was meant to make us uncomfortable. To be fair to him, the scene was in the film. But theater is a different medium. And when I watched it live, I didn’t think about the decadence of Nazi Germany or the corruption of that family or any contemporary parallels. The only thing on my mind was that actor: How did they explain this scene to her? Van Hove had already shown us executions, orgies, adult bodies smeared in blood and feathers. Did we need this too? Was it worth it?

BRANTLEY All of your concerns were certainly on my mind when I watched. I think it would require more space than we have to justify that particular choice. But you’re right, it jerked us out of the moment. I, too, found myself wondering how the young actress had been prepared for that moment.

HELLER Is sex in van Hove-world simply part and parcel of the grimness that Jason talked about?

VINCENNELLI I've seen women take issue on social media with the way his productions can be physically taxing for actors. But from everything I've read, actors love working with him and the process is thorough and methodical. As for what's onstage, I don't find his depiction of sexuality grim. It can be brutal, manipulative, yes, but it's also matter-of-fact in the way it looks at power relationships and how they are expressed through sex.

BRANTLEY I'm also often aware of the loneliness of the characters in his productions, even when they're locked in carnal embrace. That was part of what was so beautiful to me about his interpretation of "Angels in America" — the hopeful futility of reaching out and touching someone. And I think he just might do well by Eve in the upcoming "All About Eve," given his stage version of John Cassavetes's "Opening Night."

HELLER The productions do keep coming. Beyond his own work, I wonder: Has he influenced other directors, or what we're all seeing onstage?

VINCENNELLI What he does can be expensive, and American directors with ambitions and ideas are usually short of cash. There is not the same institutional support system as in Europe or Britain.

BRANTLEY But I do think he's opened doors for directors who take less traditionally naturalistic approaches to theater. After all, the Daniel Fish "Oklahoma!" is Broadway bound. And perhaps there's a touch of van Hove in its use of merciless simulcast video and the witty contradiction between text and action.

ZINOMAN Success doesn't just lead to imitation. It expands the realm of the possible for producers.

© New York Times, 9 January 2019
Ben Brantley, Elisabeth Vincentelli, Jason Zinoman