

# In a Musical ‘Death in Venice,’ the Author Is Present



Ramsey Nasr, standing, as Aschenbach and Achraf Koutet as Tadzio in a rehearsal for “Death in Venice” in Amsterdam. Mr. Nasr also adapted Thomas Mann’s novella for the production. Credit Jan Versweyveld

AMSTERDAM — At an Amsterdam rehearsal studio one recent afternoon, Thomas Mann, the German author who died in 1955, was speaking with the main character of his novella, “Death in Venice.”

“I have to get out of here,” said Gustav von Aschenbach, collapsing into a chair with his head in his hands.

“That’s a good idea,” said Mann, hovering nearby.

But Mann did not let him leave. Instead, he forced his character to stay in Venice, tormented by his obsession with a 14-year-old Polish boy, and to die there.

In this new musical production of “Death in Venice,” created by the internationally renowned Belgian director Ivo van Hove, the author is present. Mann doesn’t only converse with his protagonist, but also with his own wife, Katia, who watches from the sidelines as her husband also becomes increasingly distracted by the sight of the beautiful boy.

It is what you might call a meta-rendering of “Death in Venice”: A story from Thomas Mann’s real life — how he created a fictional alter ego with submerged homoerotic urges — is the framing device that sets the stage adaptation into dramatic motion.



The conductor David Robertson rehearsing for "Death in Venice" with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. Nico Muhly has written a new score for the production and his music will be interspersed between works by Richard Strauss, Anton Webern and Arnold Schoenberg. Credit Herman Wouters for The New York Times

Premiering April 4, the production is a collaboration between the Internationaal Theater Amsterdam (formerly known as the Toneelgroep Amsterdam), which Mr. van Hove leads, and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. They have commissioned music by the American composer Nico Muhly, which will be interspersed between works by Richard Strauss, Anton Webern and Arnold Schoenberg, and conducted by David Robertson. The production will tour Europe from next year, with performances in London, Paris and Zagreb.

"We see Mann at home writing this novel, creating von Aschenbach, sending him to Venice, and having him meet a boy," explained Mr. van Hove, in a rehearsal break. "It's to make clear that this wasn't just a story to Thomas Mann: It was something that he lived through."

Ramsey Nasr, who adapted the novella for the stage and plays Aschenbach, said in an email exchange that the idea of incorporating the real-life story of Thomas and Katia Mann into the drama was a way to explore how artists create fictions from their own lives. Katia described in her 1974 memoir, "Unwritten Memories," how "Death in Venice" was based on a trip the two took to the city in 1911, when they stayed at the Grand Hôtel des Bains on the Lido, and encountered many figures whom Mann used as models for his characters.

The boy who became Mann's muse was later identified as Wladyslaw Moes, the 10-year-old son of an aristocratic Polish family, in the 2001 book "The Real Tadzio," by the Scottish journalist Gilbert Adair.

When Mr. Nasr learned about this background to the novel, he said, "It made me wonder: How was it for her to be there and witness it all?" This gave him "all the ingredients for a drama encapsulating the story," he added.



Ivo van Hove in Amsterdam in 2018, rehearsing "A Little Life." Credit Jan Versweyveld

Katia, who outlived her husband by 25 years, [was almost 90](#) when she finally revealed publicly how she had dealt with that chapter of their life together.

"She didn't talk about it for her whole life, really," said Mr. van Hove. "She accepted that he had this in him but he turned it into novels and he turned it into poetry and into art."

"Death in Venice" is one of the most celebrated works of German literature, and it has been adapted as an acclaimed film by Luchino Visconti, in 1971, and as Benjamin Britten's final



opera, which premiered in 1973. Mr. Muhly, a composer who has worked with Philip Glass and Björk, has written new music for the production. In an interview, he said this “Death in Venice” was neither an opera nor a music theater piece, but rather “a play with a lot of room for music.”

The difficulty of adapting the novella for the stage is that the drama of the story largely takes place in Aschenbach’s mind. Visconti reimagined Aschenbach as a composer and conductor (played by Dirk Bogarde) and used music by Mahler on the soundtrack to reflect Aschenbach’s anguish.

In Britten’s opera, Aschenbach retains his identity as a writer, who sings his interior monologue, while Tadzio has a nonspeaking role, typically performed by a dancer.



Thomas Mann’s wife Katia said in a 1974 memoir that “Death in Venice” was based on a real visit the couple took to the Grand Hôtel des Bains in the city. Credit Jan Versweyveld

Mr. Muhly said he knew Britten’s opera “incredibly well,” and that it was a key reference point for his own opera “[Two Boys](#),” which was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 2013. But, he said, he had to “not think about that at all. Instead, I was thinking about the text, I was thinking about the adaptation, and what Ivo’s team has done to frame this text and to tell the story in different way.”

Mr. van Hove has created three productions this season that concern what he called “abusive forbidden relationships”: a stage adaptation of Hanya Yanagihara’s novel “[A Little Life](#),” which tells a story of a victim of pedophilia, and “[The Wood](#),” a play adapted from a [novel by Jeroen Brouwers](#), which portrays physical and sexual abuse in a Roman Catholic monastery and boarding school.

“It’s very current, with what’s coming out about the Catholic church and, coincidentally, this whole Michael Jackson thing,” he said, referring to the new documentary “[Leaving Neverland](#),” about child-abuse allegations against the pop musician. “It’s really something that people are talking about more and more. Thomas Mann wrote about the subject of desire. You cannot call it abuse; it’s in someone’s mind, but it’s really a fantasy desire.”

Mr. Robertson, who will lead the Concertgebouw for the production's Amsterdam run, cautioned against thinking of "Death in Venice" as primarily about homoerotic or pedophilic urges.

The production was asking bigger questions, he added: "Where does creativity come from? Where does love stem from, and what happens when love and creativity are blended together?"

Mr. Robertson said he thought the project was a wholly new take on Mann's story. "This doesn't replace the novella, the film or the opera," he said. "It augments this fantastic creation that Thomas Mann has made."

Death in Venice

April 4 through 13 at the Carré Theater, Amsterdam;

[carre.nl](http://carre.nl)

The New York Times, Nina Siegal, April 2, 2019