

The Fountainhead review — a bewitching but overlong modernist melodrama



Aus Greidanus Jr and Janni Gosling in Ivo van Hove's production of *The Fountainhead* at the Lowry - TRISTRAM KENTON

★★★★☆

Ivo van Hove says that he always wants to offer “the most extreme production possible”. By the fourth hour of watching the superstar director (*A View from the Bridge*, *All About Eve*) and his Dutch company reinterpret Ayn Rand’s chunky 1943 novel about rival architects and ideologies in modernist Manhattan, you might think he’s just here to give us the longest production possible.

Oh, there are plenty of pleasures in Van Hove’s characteristically stylish, thoughtful show before then. And you can see how Rand’s divisive paean to individualism has inspired fans such as Donald Trump, who declared himself a fan of her hero, Howard Roark. This brilliant but bloody-minded architect is so devoted to the purity of his art that he won’t let little things such as human feelings deflect him.

Actually, though, you can see more of Trump in Roark’s media-magnate frenemy Gail Wynand, a man determined to prove that integrity is a commodity like everything else. Wynand marries Dominique, the woman Roark loves — and first takes by force in a scene Van Hove depicts as sadomasochistic, but ultimately consensual — but won’t commit to. Love being too corrupting for a man on a mission.

Van Hove's mission is to combine Rand's trashy, *Dallas*-with-blueprints plotlines with swathes of her big thinking about self-esteem, self-loathing, individualism and society. There is not quite enough of the former to sustain the latter, though.

Jan Versweyveld's huge set puts the characters around desks downstage while percussionists play upstage. The look is appealing, clinical yet cluttered. And the talk of aesthetic purity is alluring as Ramsey Nasr as Roark intimidates his ambitious yet earthbound rival Peter Keating (Aus Greidanus Jr) with his talent. Roark is your cool friend unencumbered by self-doubt.

For a while it motors along pretty nicely. You can't always fathom the motives of the influential Dominique, yet Halina Reijn looks comfortable as the conflicted femme fatale. While Rand and Trump may love Roark, Van Hove sees both sides of all these characters. That ambivalence is good while the plot keeps motoring; when Versweyveld brings in breathtaking wide-screen panoramas of New York; when Hans Kesting holds the stage as the suicidal yet casually all-commanding Wynand. The modernist melodrama of it all is bewitching. The acting, in Dutch with English surtitles, is arrestingly intimate throughout.

When the tale gets less rollicking, however, you are reminded that you can't really feel anything for any of this bunch. And in a final hour dogged by speechifying, you realise that three hours would have been plenty for this murky, much-debated, engagingly odd tale.