

The Fountainhead, Manchester International Festival, review: half captivating, half stupefying, this stage version is Ayn Rand to a tee



The Fountainhead, originally a novel by Ayn Rand, has been adapted for the stage by Ivo van Hove CREDIT: TRISTRAM KENTON



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“It does not matter that only a few in each generation will grasp and achieve the full reality of man’s proper stature – and that the rest will betray it.” Thus spake Ayn Rand,

in a foreword to a 1968 edition of her 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*.

For the Russian-born Rand (1905-1982), who wept in wonder at the sight of the Manhattan skyline in 1926, thereafter embracing America like a lover, the fate of humanity lay in the few, not the many. The darling of libertarians, and proponent of the virtue of laissez-faire capitalism as a system that demands and rewards the best in every individual, she regarded as supreme that single-minded “noble soul” who cleaves unyieldingly to their vision, come what may.

She made that type flesh in her 700-page opus. Howard Roark is a modernist architect who'd rather starve than swallow any compromise, which corrosive element is seen as the very cornerstone of a stable career in the client-chasing world in which he moves.

Though Roark's steely progress might seem an off-road subject-choice for the Belgian theatre-maker Ivo van Hove, so adored by fashionable theatre-followers – the majority of whom (one suspects) would recoil from Rand's philosophy – his adaptation at the Lowry Centre in Salford fits his pattern of preoccupation.

Whether it's another Howard, Howard Beale, in *Network*, railing against the corporate system, that civic-refusenik Roman warrior Coriolanus, or those who choose, and those who refuse, to yield to the Nazis in Visconti's *The Damned* (recently seen at the Barbican), he's fascinated with defiant contrarians. And it hardly seems fanciful to detect a symmetry between the integrity for which Roark is striving in his quest to rethink the built environment and the rigour of van Hove's aesthetic – which is all about dispensing with inherited ideas and clutter.

His approach here is business as usual, which means an emphasis on business itself: the mechanics of the show's delivery are exposed, with technical crew discreetly sitting to one side of a vast working space arrayed with design-tables and desk-lamps. As per usual, we get a fair bit of projected video, some of it (pre-recorded) conveying the shimmering magnificence of New York's thrusting towers, some of it going in close on the rough (and quasi-rapist) sex in which Ramsey Nasr's impassive Roark engages with Halina Reijn's Dominique Francon.

She's an architect's daughter who desires this outsider but also denounces him. Some will find their encounters – first staged in 2014, pre #MeToo – unpalatable, but they have a theatrical artifice about them, and come sheathed in paradox: he treats her like his property, she claims she owns him.

Running to a bum-numbing four hours (with English surtitles for the Dutch text in this MIF UK premiere), the production is a monument to directorial hubris as much as it is a testament to actors' ability to learn reams of script. I was half-captivated, half-stupefied, but its refusal to be easily admired or dismissed is its *raison d'être*.

The Fountainhead, by the way, is one of Donald Trump's favourite books. They should have put that on the poster; one in the eye for the group-thinkers.