

Double vision

After the Rehearsal & Pers

Ian Mundell

At first glance Ivo van Hove seems to be a great enthusiast for the cinema. Over more than a decade in charge of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the Flemish theatre director has staged adaptations of films by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Luchino Visconti and John Cassavetes. Yet he happily admits that he has never seen some of the films in question, while others remain distant memories. Instead of working with the film itself, he starts with the screenplay, treating it like any other theatrical text. The visual side of each film is of no interest. "It is important to me that our stage production is an autonomous production which doesn't refer to the film, even though we play every sentence as it is in the scenario," he says in an interview accompanying his latest production, a double bill based on Ingmar Bergman's *After the Rehearsal* and *Persona*. His reason for turning to the cinema for inspiration is that these films deal with themes he does not find in plays,

or at least not in the same way. In this case it is a reflection on the theatre itself.

After the Rehearsal is about an ageing director, Henrik, who embarks on a production of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* in order to be close to a young actress, Anna. His fascination with her becomes clear as they talk, but memories gradually intrude of his relationship with another actress, Anna's mother, Rakel.

Persona (pictured) also involves an actress, Elisabet, who forgets her lines on stage and then loses the ability to speak entirely. Initially taken into hospital, Elisabet is sent by the doctor to recuperate on an island, with only the garrulous nurse Alma for company. The films hold distinctly different places in Bergman's filmography. The director considered *Persona* (1966) one of his major works, a view shared by critics. Meanwhile, *After the Rehearsal* (1984) is a minor work, made for TV after Bergman had formally declared his cinema career



Ona

over. In his memoirs he wrote that it was meant to be “a pleasant little episode on my road toward death”, put together for the pleasure of working with the actors.

Bergman did not intend the two works to be paired, but van Hove sees them as complementary: One is about people who are willing to give everything for the theatre, the other about someone who suddenly finds it meaningless. “Both plays relate to each other like yin and yang; they are each other’s opposite. So when you bring them together, they give an even more complete picture.”

The connections are emphasised by Marieke Heebink and Karina Smulders appearing in both plays, as Rakel/Elisabet and Anna/Alma respectively. The evening begins with *After the Rehearsal*, which at 75 minutes is roughly the same length as Bergman’s original. *Persona* follows after an interval, reduced to an hour as might be expected if Bergman’s rich visual storytelling is set aside.