

**S**HAKESPEARE in Dutch is a guttural affair; if you like your bard straight, you might feel a tad discombobulated by Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *Roman Tragedies*. But, for those who don't mind their theatrical sacred cows messed with, there's something exhilarating about seeing *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* transformed into a 5½-hour back-to-back, pared-down hard-news story with a high body count and terse surtitles in English.

For one thing, it allows you to concentrate on a remarkable set of very physical performances from highly talented actors and, for another, even without the ravishing language the genius of Shakespeare's plotting and psychological insights are laid bare.

The muscular direction also gives a clue as to why Ivo van Hove, 55, TA's artistic director, is such a pin-up of the European theatre world.

Alongside gigs as a guest director in theatre and opera for major companies in Europe and the US, he steers The Netherlands' foremost theatre company.

TA's website states van Hove is fascinated by human behaviour and relationships in the context of great social upheaval: "In fact, you can say that he transforms every play into a laboratory of human behaviour. While choosing his repertoire, he looks for arenas chock-full of conflicts and strategies."

Later, when we talk, he expands on his belief that audiences need cathartic experiences that would be destructive in life. "In theatre we go to see the pain and suffering and torture of people, that's what the arts are for. We all have violent instincts in ourselves and the arts can liberate that. Theatre is a very important part of society and I always say that we go to see Macbeth kill children," he tells me. "In real life this is nauseating."

Hans Kesting, a long-time TA member who plays Mark Antony in the production, says van Hove's work has always been extreme — "He once put on a play with a real tiger on stage" — but never for the sake of it. "He always stays true to his ideas of what a good show should



PICTURES: JIAN VERSEVELF

Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *Roman Tragedies*, above; and Ivo van Hove, below

# BARD INTERRUPTED

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On a rainy night in Amsterdam, the Stadsschouwburg theatre on the Leidseplein is buzzing with lovers of unsafe theatre and the auditorium is packed.

The broad stage, designed by van Hove's long-time collaborator Jan Versweyveld, has the bland furnishings of a modern conference centre; banks of microphones and TV monitors, indestructible pot plants, beige sofas. At a long counter down one side, the actors do their make-up and dress in full view while on the other side of the stage a line of kitchen hands is busy wrapping sandwiches, heating soup and laying out wine glasses.

As the audience files in, some ignore the banks of seats and head for those sofas, some for the snack bar; we're encouraged to move about, check our emails, have a beer, zone out and then tune in, maybe by watching the live action on stage or maybe by watching it from another angle on a video screen. The global news cycle is alive and well, with current "real" news flashed up on screens alongside realistic headlines and news clips from the ancient Mediterranean's theatres of power.

The staging displays many of the company's traits: multiple views, fragmentation of experience, audience complicity, and with the nuts and bolts of the production on full show.

Not all TA's productions have such a hi-tech, multiscreen feel, something van Hove is at pains to point out: "While all my plays are contemporary, I use technology only when there's a dramatic reason. The actors are always at the core."

Alongside the sprawling production of *Roman Tragedies* for the Adelaide Festival — the company's largest — TA has also brought its smallest, Jean Cocteau's one-woman *La Voix Humaine*, which played recently at this year's Sydney Festival. This is the second time TA has been to Australia; in 2009 it brought

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*Opening Night*, an adaptation of the John Cassavetes film of the same name, to the Melbourne Festival.

*Roman Tragedies* is "a beautiful trilogy about politics and politicians", van Hove says. His production takes Shakespeare's three Roman plays and distils them to their essential relationships and struggles, with *Coriolanus*, though set in an earlier period, setting up the relationship between the elites and the people.

"In *Coriolanus* we see the birth of democracy, where he thinks he should be leader as he has won the war, but the plebeians outwit him; in *Julius Caesar* it's full-blown democracy with two parties fighting each other, and Caesar knows how to please the people and use them to stay in power," he says. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, he continues, we are in a globalised world with multiple locations and a clash of cultures between the austerity of Rome and the opulence of Egypt. "It's pragmatism against the emotionally driven political view of Cleopatra, and Shakespeare was looking at this 400 years ago, it's amazing," he says.

Van Hove says he is trying to emulate the freewheeling atmosphere of Shakespeare's

Globe Theatre, where audiences wandered about eating and drinking, meeting and chatting and then dipping back into what was happening on stage. "That's why there's so much repetition [in Shakespeare]," he says, "because people were not paying attention."

We the audience are also the Roman plebs, he explains, the clamouring populace; each play has been cut by a third and that includes all the scenes with the people, so we have to fill in for them "watching their politicians in both their good and their bad deeds". It's a silent role, although in a recent performance of the plays in New York sections of the audience shouted out Shakespeare's plebeian responses.

Since he took over the running of the company in 2001, Belgian-born van Hove has presented the best of the Western canon, giving a hefty torque to, among others, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, Georg Buchner and some less likely choices; British playwright Alan Ayckbourn's middle-of-the-road domestic comedy *The Norman Conquests* was given a very black treatment, with the playwright at one point threatening to pull the rights.

Future productions include a mash of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III* into a single play, and his season's new offerings include Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and Friedrich Schiller's *Maria Stuart*.

The end of 2014 will also see the debut, as a guest director, of playwright Simon Stone with a version of *Medea*. "Yes, he's throwing out the text," says van Hove of the 29-year-old Australian director, "something I'd never do as I'm really a text guy, but I loved his *Wild Duck* [by Ibsen]. And I love his totally new working method and that he really cares for his actors. I feel a connection there."

As a repertory company, TA has a permanent group of 20 players and a capacious stable of past productions, eight to 10 of which are revived each year (*Roman Tragedies* first saw the light of day in 2007) alongside a half-dozen new productions.

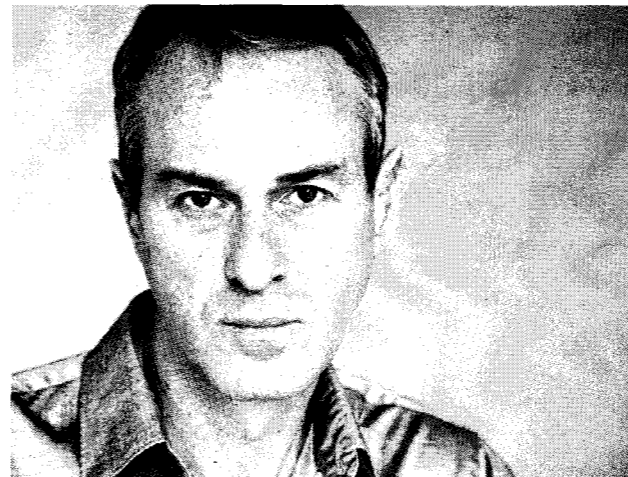
Kesting says the trust between the actors and van Hove is immense, which allows for a lot of risk-taking and healthy arguments. "Rehearsal space is not a place where we are meekly doing what we're told. We're constantly clashing ideas and egos," he says.

Alongside the well-known titles, where are the new plays? Van Hove shrugs. "It's a weakness of mine, I don't do a lot of new plays. I'm in love with contemporary classics and classical plays." He gets the buzz of the new, he adds, from adapting works of filmmakers.

Another buzz is opera; he guest-directs for a range of companies including a 2012 production of Tchaikovsky's *Mazepa* for Berlin's Komische Oper run by Australian Barrie Kosky and Wagner's Ring Cycle for the Flemish Opera.

As for what the long-term future holds, he's not sure. But it's clear his craft is all consuming. "Theatre is my life," he says. "It's my biography."

**Roman Tragedies** opens at Adelaide Festival on February 28.



**WE GO TO SEE  
MACBETH KILL  
CHILDREN. IN  
REAL LIFE  
THIS IS  
NAUSEATING**

IVO VAN HOVE

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