



Listen," says Ivo van Hove. "I'm not such a fan of Arthur Miller. He is a great playwright. But often his plays are *ethical*, you know? Good against evil." He fixes me with an aquiline gaze, all piercing eyes and Roman nose. "I am not so interested in good and evil."

Not many directors begin interviews by slagging off the playwright. But Van Hove likes to surprise. A few seconds later, he is telling me how much, actually, he admires Miller, especially the play he is currently rehearsing, *A View from the Bridge*. Loves Eugene O'Neill, too. Adores Visconti. Born in Belgium but now based in Amsterdam, Van Hove talks English at machine-gun pace, words and ideas rat-a-tat-tatting out in a fusillade of enthusiastic emphases. I shudder to think how fast he talks in Flemish.

"It is a harsh, straightforward tragedy," he says of *A View from the Bridge*. "It goes scene by scene. It's like witnessing a car accident that you see a hundred metres before it happens." He mimes a collision in mid-air: boom. "You just know they're going to smash." He coils back into his chair.

Van Hove first came to Britain in 1998, to direct a double bill of Eugene O'Neill and Albert Camus at the Edinburgh international festival. But it was the visits to London's Barbican made by his Toneelgroep Amsterdam

Anarchy in Antwerp

He did a naked *Streetcar Named Desire* and turned *Brokeback Mountain* into an opera. What will he do to *A View from the Bridge*? Belgian director Ivo van Hove tells **Andrew Dickson** why his punk origins still inspire his work

company that cemented his reputation in the UK. In 2009, their *Roman Tragedies* transformed Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* into an epic multimedia spectacle for the rolling-news era. In 2011, they brought Antonioni Project, re-enactments of three of the Italian director's films that used live cameras and blue-screen technology to project actors on to a variety of picturesque backdrops.

This new show marks quite a change. As well as being his first Miller, *A View from the Bridge* is the first time Van Hove has worked with British actors. "I feel a little displaced," he says. "It's a different culture here. I have to learn the rules." Let's hope he won't be too law-abiding: one of the best things about Van Hove is his ability to break open texts calcified by tradition. He set Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* on a stage stripped of scenery, placed an adaptation of Pasolini's *Teorama* on New York's Governors Island, and did *A Streetcar Named Desire* in which full-frontal nudity and a bathtub featured prominently.

"If Tennessee Williams or Miller lived today," Van Hove says, "they would want something innovative. If you just reproduce what they envisioned long ago, it wouldn't have the same force. I want to push through the limits, make the ultimate production." He shrugs. "That's an ambition,



of course. You never get there."

A View from the Bridge has its own challenges: originally written by Miller as a short story, its features as its protagonist Eddie Carbone, an Italian-American longshoreman from the Brooklyn slum of Red Hook ("a sinister waterfront world of gangster-ridden unions, assassinations, beatings, bodies thrown into the lovely bay at night", Miller wrote in his autobiography). Struggling with his feelings for his niece, Catherine, Eddie betrays her lover, a Sicilian illegal immigrant, with disastrous consequences.

Miller claimed the story had its roots in a real-life tale, but was distressed by its reception when he recast it as a one-act verse drama in 1955. His two-act prose version - more rounded and deliberate, less obviously indebted to Greek tragedy - is now the one usually performed, with its bludgeoning arias of love and lust and pain. Van Hove is fascinated by the text's contradictions, wrangled over by Miller during his first years with Marilyn Monroe. "One moment you sympathise with the person you hate, then in the next scene you hate somebody you love. It keeps going until the end. Even Eddie's lawyer says: 'I recognise Eddie in myself.' I love this ambiguity."

The play confronts two hot-button issues: immigration, most obviously, but also Eddie's relationship with his teenage niece, which see-saws between avuncular over-protectiveness and something more troubling. Van Hove pauses. "I think what happens is that they have this really intimate relationship that's been there for years and years. But when we look at it now, we think, well," - he lifts an eyebrow - "this is a real problem. You know, Philip Seymour Hoffman said something very interesting about Eddie, which is that his yearning is cloaked in virtue."

Hoffman and Van Hove knew each other and almost worked together. What happened? Van Hove presses his fingertips to his temples. "I was auditioning in New York for Eugene O'Neill's More Stately Mansions. Philip came to see me, this unknown actor. It was before Boogie Nights had been released. I thought he was wonderful, but I didn't have a role for him. Then, two years later, I was planning A Streetcar Named Desire. He was a star by then, and he auditioned for Stanley. He was brilliant. But then something happened which had never happened before, and which has never happened since." He exhales slowly. "I got afraid of him. I thought, what can I do with him? He's already brilliant. So



I said no." He looks wretched. "It was the mistake of my life."

Did he have any inkling of Hoffman's death? "No. We were talking about a new project. I was in Amsterdam when I heard. I was having a drink with somebody, telling this story, I don't know why. I came home and saw the news." He ducks his head. "Just vile."

Now 55 ("I know, I know, perhaps don't mention that"), Van Hove was part of a generation of bright young Belgians who came to prominence in the early 80s; among them choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and artist Jan Fabre. "Antwerp was full of punks," he says, "We said: 'Fuck you, we're doing what we want to do. If you want to scream, scream. If you want to play music loud, do that. Leave if you don't like it.'"

In January, Van Hove premiered an operatic version of Brokeback Mountain in Madrid and recently took Romans to the Adelaide festival. After View, he's back in Amsterdam for an adaptation of Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead, then Schiller's Mary Stuart. He drops enticing hints about a major new international co-production that will visit the UK. "I cannot say yet. But it will be important, I hope."

He may have a controversial reputation, but he insists he's not out to shock. "I'm not a provocateur. In New York, at first, they called me a bad boy, Eurotrash - the man you love to hate and hate to love, all that." He looks sly. "But when I do a play, I want to do it in the most extreme way possible. So, you know, I can live with that."

i A View from the Bridge is at the Young Vic, London SE1, Friday to 7 June (youngvic.org).

'Leave if you don't like it' ...
clockwise from
main, Ivo van
Hove, Antonioni
Project, and
Phoebe Fox
rehearsing A
View from the
Bridge



A month in Ambridge

Nancy Banks-Smith

*In the spring a young man's fancy
Lightly turns to thoughts of love ...*

PC Burns (motto "Calm down") has taken a fancy to Fallon from The Bull. PC Burns is a bobby dazzler (see what I did there?) and so is Fallon. It was said of Elsie Tanner that she was the sort of woman every commercial traveller hoped would open the door. Fallon is a girl like that. PC Burns got her attention by locking her up when a hen party got out of hand. His first name is Harrison, though that is not what Fallon called him at the time.

Ambridge's strenuous triathlon ended exhilaratingly with a punch-up between the leaders, Ian and Rob. How many sporting events, one feels, would be improved by a spirited bout of fisticuffs at the end. "My money's on the big fella," said Wiggo, the visiting celebrity, as they fell brawling at his feet. He said he was pleased to be in The Archers because he "grew up with it on the radio in the house". He means it was background noise. Obviously, he didn't listen but, just as obviously, his mother did. I suspect he turned up to please his Mum.

Meanwhile, Jennifer (who has bullied Brian into buying a designer kitchen) and Kirsty (who is marrying Tom) are kickstarting the economy single-handed. Jennifer has ordered Umbrian tiles, pentagons, boiling taps and An Intuitive Space (somewhere to intuit). Kirsty has ordered two wedding dresses, a honeymoon in a rainforest and a new house. Two tiny problems. Brian is facing a takeover and Tom's pigs may have TB.

It was the eve of Mother's Day. Catkins out on the pussy willow and bees sipping their syrup. Everything spring and golden. Everything up and buzzing. Then Ruth, who is in her 40s, miscarried a baby, an unexpected bonus baby. That was pretty brutal timing. They could at least have given the jaunty jig that Wiggo remembered so fondly a miss.

And I hope they remembered to tell the bees.

A Month in Ambridge returns on 28 April

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