

discover

ISSUE 8 | AUGUST 2014

BENELUX

IVO VAN HOVE'S
REFUSAL TO COMPROMISE

BRUSSELSITUDE
BELGIAN DESIGN
VERMEER AND VALUES
PLUS: DESIGN, CULTURE AND TOURISM

PROMOTING BELGIUM, THE NETHERLANDS AND LUXEMBOURG



I V O V A N H O V E R E F U S A L T O C O M P R O M I S E

For a man known best for staying behind the scenes, the inventive Belgian theatre director Ivo van Hove cuts a dashing figure. Smart, eloquent and quick-witted, this is a Belgian whose unique gift has led him to dominate theatres across the globe. As his latest venture 'The Fountainhead' takes to the stage in Amsterdam, I meet him to talk about mirroring reality on stage, placing classic plays in the 21st century and how he's grown up.

TEXT: EMMIE COLLINGE | PHOTOS: JAN VERSWEYVELD

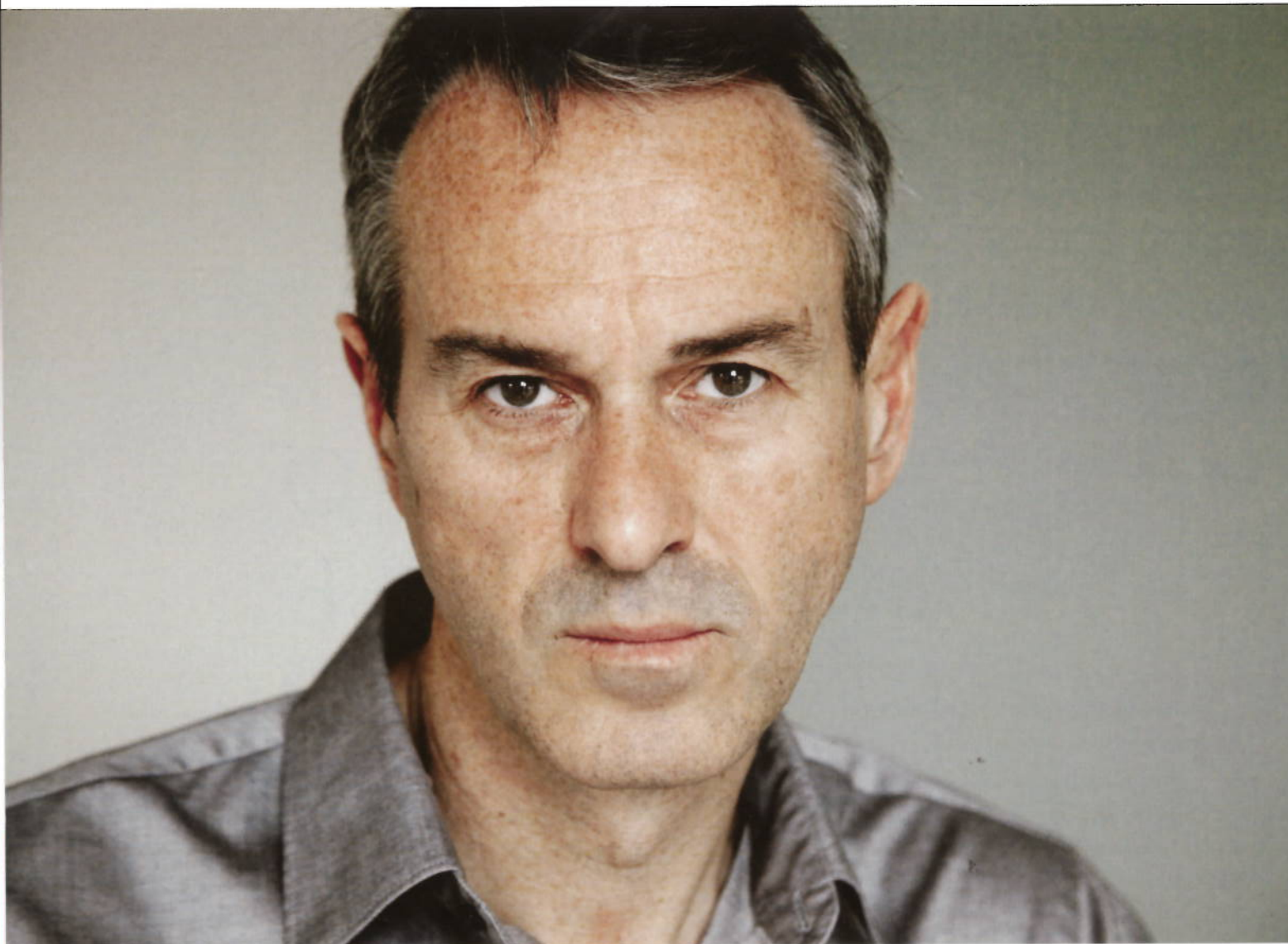
For those who don't know him, he's the Belgian theatre director; the Lars von Trier meets the Coen Brothers of the stage. Gaining prominence in the thriving city of Antwerp in the 1980s, with Jan Fabre and Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker as his contemporaries, Ivo van Hove has been central to Belgium's creative development. With its art as subversive as its politics, Belgium was a hotbed of performance art and alternative thinking in the past decades. Now 55 years old and living a more settled life in Amsterdam, Van Hove's origins in performance art are still visible as he pushes the boundaries of theatre and what we expect of it. Having just directed a hit opera version of 'Brokeback Mountain', which premiered in Madrid in early 2014, he is a man whose name sends shivers of

anticipation down the spines of theatre critics. He's the director who demands – and succeeds in – getting performers to act at the apex of their abilities.

Since being dubbed 'Eurotrash' in the 80s and 90s for his unconventional stage productions, Van Hove is adamant that he takes his theatrics seriously now. As 'A View From The Bridge', his first ever London play, comes to the end of its run at the distinguished Young Vic theatre, Van Hove expresses his unconcealed delight at the countless 5-star reviews it has received. "I guess I just did a good job," he laughs modestly. "For my first British play I'm so pleased to have made a difference. The play means such a lot today, perhaps even more so than before, and it must really

resonate with the audience." While British broadsheets struggle to find enough hyperbolic words to do it justice, Van Hove is more interested in the audiences' reaction: "I never expected people to stand up. 'Is this normal?' I thought." He pauses: "In Holland my style of theatre is the norm, but in England it's a wholly different environment, so rich in tradition but less willing to explore."

Given his rather unconventional stage productions ("I'm loyal and truthful to the text," he explains coyly, "just not the stage directions"), it's surprising to hear that the 55-year-old began a law degree when leaving school. After several tenuous years, he quit, deciding to pursue his real passion. "My route into theatre is the 'usual story',"



he explains – apart from the law degree lapse. “We used to regularly visit my grandparents in the countryside and I’d insist on staging little productions for them. Dressing my younger brother up to play characters, I even made curtains for the stage.” Attending a strict Catholic boarding school as a youngster, his Wednesday afternoons were dedicated to enrichment activities: “With the choice between sports and a trip into the town to meet girls, I went for the third option: the theatre group. Each year would end in a production and I loved the idea that we worked secretly in our rehearsals all year and nobody really knew what we were doing,” he sighs wistfully. “That’s definitely where the love comes from.”

After our conversation, Van Hove has to dash off to rehearsals so I wonder whether they’re closed and kept secret until the show’s opening night. “Not at all!” he says impassioned. “My rehearsals are full of people – at least further into the process they are, I like the first few weeks to be quiet. Today I’ve got three young Brazilian architects coming to observe as ‘The Fountainhead’ is relevant for them.”

Under Van Hove’s guiding hand, the celebrated Dutch theatre group, Toneelgroep Amsterdam are staging Ayn Rand’s mid-century novel ‘The Fountainhead’. Opening in mid-June, the play is set in New York in the 1920s, a decade of conflict between modernism and classicism, retaining in-

tegrity versus commercial success. Revolving around the young, driven architect Howard Roark, Van Hove explains that the character uses “the world of architecture as a metaphor to discuss art, engagement, individuality and autonomy... while simultaneously being a love story. It is a book that was screaming to be put on stage.”

For Van Hove, his principles remain steadfast; he’d never take on a commission, and he only accepts productions for which he’s prepared to give 200%. “I have to know that I can do it in my extreme way,” he says. Citing his stark scenery-less adaptation of Tony Kushner’s illustrious *Angels in America*, “one of the best plays of the last century,” it appealed to Van Hove as it

RIGHT: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, an iconic novel, film and play directed by Van Hove, will once again be performed this September.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Ayn Rand's mid-century novel *The Fountainhead* has just begun a run of shows at Amsterdam's Stadsschouwburg and certain performances have English subtitles.



is essentially "American culture in writing." Combining very private stories with meaningful events while reflecting tension in society, the play confronts the emergence of AIDS and society's acceptance of homosexuality. Not one to rest on his laurels, Van Hove, who has garnered international acclaim for his tackling of societal issues, has set theatre critics' hearts racing with his up-coming production of the Greek classic *Antigone*, due to start rehearsals later this year with France's darling Juliette Binoche taking centre stage. Again, given Europe's current political climate, Van Hove explains, such a play draws parallels with today's scenario. "I'm very bad at telling stories," he replies bashfully when I ask him for a synopsis. "But I'll try: It's the classic story, a civil war over power between two brothers. It's the age-old argument of whether to follow intuition or reason. You see it happening a lot today in politics with the rise of populist parties and the electors making emotional choices."

Alongside directing two plays a year for Toneelgroep Amsterdam, which has had Van Hove at the helm since 2001, he takes on any number of other projects a year. Since the *Brokeback Mountain* opera and *A View From The Bridge* have both been so successful already in 2014, Van Hove and his long-term set designer Jan Versweyveld believe they can declare 2014 "a pretty good season!"

While his own personal season might be going well, Van Hove's worldview is perhaps not as optimistic as it could be. Choosing to confront current affairs in his productions, he expresses his dissatisfaction with politics and society at large while keeping the theatrics as appealing as ever. Bringing classics and modern classics to our attention, his skills as a director have taken him across the globe and his voice will not be dimmed.

Toneelgroep Amsterdam presents contemporary theatre at an international standard, produced from its home base, the Amsterdam Stadsschouwburg. As the Netherlands' largest repertory company it holds a prominent place in the Dutch capital's international cultural scene. With an annual average of 20 plays and performing a total of over 350 performances, the company plays to audiences of 110,000 each year. Next season, Toneelgroep Amsterdam will subtitle 11 plays in English in the Amsterdam Stadsschouwburg. In August and September:

the entertainer

by john osborne | directed by eric de vroedt
WED 13.08.14 | THU 14.08.14 | FRI

15.08.14 | SAT 16.08.14 | TUE 19.08.14 |
WED 20.08.14 | THU 21.08.14 | FRI
22.08.14 | SAT 23.08.14 | 20:00

the fountainhead

by ayn rand | directed by ivo van hove
TUE 26.08.14 | WED 27.08.14 | THU
28.08.14 | FRI 29.08.14 | SAT 30.08.14 |
THU 04.09.14 | THU 18.09.14 | 19:30

angels in america

by tony kushner | directed by ivo van hove
THU 11.09.14 | 18:00

Information & tickets:

www.tga.nl/en

