

# No Compromise



Jan Versweyveld.

Jan Versweyveld is responsible for the scenography of the stage adaptation of *The Fountainhead*. He feels an affinity with protagonist Howard Roark.

**I**f someone were to compile a survey of the ten cult books most likely to be found on the shelves of architects, *The Fountainhead* would surely top the list. Published in 1943, Ayn Rand's first bestseller tells the story of self-willed architect Howard Roark, whose uncompromising character often stands between him and potential commissions. His convictions run so deep that he blows up a public housing project because it isn't built precisely to his specifications. Roark's friend Peter Keating, a man at the opposite end of the spectrum, gains success by making concessions and giving his clients what they want. And then there's newspaper magnate Gail Wynand, architecture critic Ellsworth Toohey, and Dominique Francon, daughter of architect Guy Francon. Dominique marries first Keating and then Wynand before finally choosing Roark.

As I write, Amsterdam Theatre Company is performing a stage adaptation of the book, with impressive scenography by Jan Versweyveld. Although the play goes on for four hours, it's never boring. Its ability to hold your attention is due not only to director Ivo van Hove and his cast, but also to the stage design, which undergoes a continual yet inconspicuous metamorphosis. Before the intermission, the spacious stage of the new auditorium at the Amsterdam Municipal Theatre accommodates a number of drawing boards, each of which represents an architecture firm. Enlarged images of the work being done at these desks appear on a mobile digital display. After the intermission, the stage has become a largely empty space – Gail Wynand's penthouse – with a splendid view of New York City projected on an enormous backdrop.

At the time of our interview, Versweyveld was in New York putting the finishing touches on *Scenes from a Marriage*, a play performed in Dutch in 2005 and now appearing in a version by New York Theatre Workshop. We talked via Skype.

**Most architects regard *The Fountainhead* as a classic. How did you feel about designing the scenography for a play that gives architecture such an important role? Did it influence your work?**

JAN VERSWEYVELD: Yes, of course it did. It was an amazing challenge. I really love the book; architecture is close to my field of operation and a subject that feels familiar to me. Even so, working with the stage adaptation of a book was not without its problems. As a scenographer, when I sit down for my first reading of a play, I often get lost in the surprising number of scenes and locations. They hit me like a tsunami, and it takes a while before I can make any sense of it all, before a few ideas finally float to the surface and gain the upper hand. At that point, I begin developing the scenography. In this case, the set had to be a space with a dual personality – the ability to stimulate a huge rush of energy and yet possess a kind of a calming effect. It had to represent not only the chaos of the creative process but also the newspaper titan's spacious loft. The combination of tranquillity and

dynamism is present here in New York, in a house on Spring Street where Donald Judd lived for many years. It's a cast-iron building where he also had his studio. I had that fusion of house and studio at the back of my mind, and Donald Judd is someone I regularly fall back on when I'm designing anyway.

**Had you already read the book before getting involved in the stage design?**

I started reading it when I knew I'd be doing the scenography. The conceptualization took more than a year, right up to the moment that rehearsals began. During the final months I worked intensively with director Ivo van Hove and video artist Tal Yarden, studying the possibilities scene by scene to figure out how we could make it all happen. The story takes place in all sorts of locations, and I've never been a part of the Anglo-Saxon scenography culture, where a different décor is wheeled onto the stage for every scene. I always try to design a single space that makes everything possible. Another challenge was the matter of how to portray creative processes to an audience. Actors can't draw, and they have no idea how a design process evolves. →

Howard Roark (Ramsey Nasr) works on an architectural drawing. Seated at the table is Mrs Keating (Frieda Pittors).





← Ramsey Nasr, who plays Howard Roark, does a pretty good job though. Is he really drawing on stage, or is his work prepared digitally?

No, it's his work, but it took a lot of drawing sessions. Ramsey Nasr is an actor who's willing to extend himself. He took the drawing very seriously and practised hard to get it right.

**The spatial design is actually quite simple: before the intermission, you see Guy Francon's desk at the left of the stage, Peter Keating's in the middle, and Howard Roark's at the right. Other locations are indicated by various objects: a kitchen table symbolizing Peter Keating's childhood home, a bed belonging to Howard Roark, a couch denoting Ellsworth Toohey. How can you be sure the audience will instantly recognize and accept scene changes without altering the backdrop?**

There are theatrical techniques for doing that. It can be done in different ways – with a sound, for example, or a video message or a change in the lighting. We try to keep it varied and engaging. If you stick to the same method, it gets boring. It's like saying, okay, does everyone get it? Then let's move to the next scene. We want to avoid that. Besides, at a certain point in the play it becomes less important to make such distinctions. It becomes more about the content, more

about *what's* happening than *where* it's happening. Your transitions ought to follow a sort of logic, of course; otherwise it gets confusing. But we try to keep those techniques to a minimum.

**In creating the scenography, did you have to make concessions with respect to the story as it's told in the book?**

A novel and a play are two different things. In adapting the novel to a stage play, Koen Tachelet had to make countless choices. He eliminated quite a few subplots. Guy Francon and Henry Cameron, the two father figures, have much smaller roles in the play, for example, than in the book. All the receptions bit the dust. But I wouldn't say we made concessions. I was able to do what I wanted to do. Scenography, dramaturgy, video art and music are a single entity. The actors felt at home on the set from day one, and that's crucial to me as a scenographer, because it's a place where they have to spend a lot of time and to dredge every last drop from their souls.

**And how do you do that – make the actors feel at home on the set?**

They need a blank canvas. I try to create a kind of mental openness – a space that both actors and audience can fill on their own. I try to give silence a physical presence.

**How do you do that?**

One example is the use of old pitch-pine boards for part of the floor. There's something rustic about old wood, something earthy. It expresses

↑ Newspaper magnate Gail Wynand (Hans Kesting) discusses the design of his new house with Howard Roark.

↗ Social worker Catherine Halsey (Tamar van den Dop) talks to Peter Keating (Aus Greidanus jr.). Seated at the desk is editor in chief Alvah Scarret (Robert de Hoog).



a feeling of time passing, of all the years it took to become what it is. We also used a lot of glass and filled the stage with light. There really should be no difference between a rehearsal room and a stage set. Both should allow actors to transform. Together with architects from Ten Bras Westinga, I was involved in developing the new auditorium. I think it's a pleasant environment for actors. You can do things there that are really close to the audience. Stage and auditorium are one. We also paid careful attention to the rehearsal rooms. They get plenty of natural light – the atmosphere is very Zen. They're the exact opposite of German rehearsal rooms: furniture-filled spaces with black curtains, a true reflection of the German stage. The rehearsal rooms at the Amsterdam Municipal Theatre are dynamic work spaces that bear a striking resemblance to the play. *The Fountainhead* itself could be a rehearsal room.

**Ayn Rand is a controversial figure, whose convictions and background have made her a mascot of conservative and libertarian movements in the United States. Within those political circles, her most important book, *Atlas Shrugged*, is almost like a bible. What's your opinion of the message conveyed by *The Fountainhead*? Does it speak to you?**

I can find myself in the book to a certain degree. The play poses the question of how a crea-

tive person positions himself within his profession. Roark goes to extremes in expressing his opinions, and I recognize that in myself. The beginning of the play is literally down to earth. He's in a quarry, and he imagines making walls out of granite and steel beams out of iron ore. The properties of those materials determine what he's going to do with them. I'm in total agreement on that score. For me, a board isn't a piece of veneered MDF. The social context in which he places his ideas is harder for me to accept. But what's so fantastic about *The Fountainhead* is that it makes you think. It turns your beliefs upside down. I think that's why people are so gripped by what they've seen. You leave the theatre with questions. It confronts you with ideas that you might be unwilling to say out loud but that you do feel now and then. Even though agreeing with Roark's standpoint is not politically correct, I still feel an affinity with him.

**I hope you're not going to blow up any sets that aren't built to your specifications.**

I don't think I'd go that far, but that doesn't mean I don't understand to the fullest the suffering endured by Howard Roark. ←

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In 2014 *The Fountainhead* has appeared at theatres in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Avignon, Vilnius, Antwerp and Rotterdam. The schedule for 2015 includes performances in Amsterdam from 30 October through 6 November. Tickets are on sale at [toneelgroepamsterdam.nl](http://toneelgroepamsterdam.nl). The language spoken will be Dutch, with surtitles in English.

**'The Fountainhead confronts you with ideas that you might be unwilling to say out loud but that you do feel now and then'**

Howard Roark on the point of blowing up Cortlandt Homes with the assistance of Dominique Francon (Halina Reijn). Seated at the desk is Ellsworth Toohey (Bart Slegers).

'Actors need to feel at home on the set in order to dredge every last drop from their souls'

