Ivo van Hove brings ‘Antigone’ to London

Peter Aspden

The Belgian director talks about visceral stuff, on stage

©Anna Hix

Belgian director Ivo van Hove at the Barbican, London

Here’s a tip for anyone planning a night out at the theatre when Belgian director Ivo van Hove is at the creative helm. Take a deep breath before you enter the auditorium. Stiffen your sinews. You may even need a hip flask. The director of last year’s highly acclaimed *A View from the Bridge* at London’s Young Vic, soon to transfer to the West End, notes approvingly that his version of Arthur Miller’s play left audiences “crying and shocked” as they left the building. It is, he says, what theatre is for. “You can have entertainment at home. But people go to the theatre for something far deeper than that.”

Van Hove has been building steadily on his reputation as one of the most affecting, and clearest-sighted, directors working in world theatre. His intense and solemn work, which regularly tours in Europe and the US, is designed, he says, to shake us to the core. His base remains in the Netherlands, as artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, but he is back in London in March, bringing Sophocles’s masterpiece *Antigone* to the stage at the Barbican. It is an event that has already captured the public’s imagination for its casting of Juliette Binoche as the drama’s doomed protagonist.

The theme of the play, the conflict between private conscience and public welfare, keeps it ever-resonant. Antigone is dismayed when her uncle Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, decides that the body of one of her brothers who fought in the civil war,

Polyneices, should remain unburied while the other, Eteocles, is properly honoured. Antigone objects to the ruling, fighting for justice against an implacable figure of authority. She pays, ultimately, with her life. These are not issues that will ever go away, I say to van Hove.

“No, that’s true,” he replies. “But that also makes it a very difficult piece to put on. If you want it to be interesting, gripping and rather disturbing, because that is what I think it should be, then it’s not so easy. There have not been so many great productions, and in the movies it has never been successful.”

The key, he says, is in portraying the “rough” side of the story. “We must never forget that in the preceding days, there has been a violent, bloody civil war going on between these two brothers. And that should be part of the production, this feeling of a state of emergency. There is this urgency that things should change.

“And then, on the other hand, what happens in the play is also a process of a woman in deep mourning. She has lost her mother, her father and now her two brothers. In *Oedipus at Colonus* [Sophocles’s preceding Theban play] she tries to persuade both of her brothers not to go to war. But she mourns them even when she thinks they have done wrong. It reminds me of a mother whose son is in jail for some reason, but she still visits him. She does not abandon him.”

An even grimmer contemporary comparison arose while van Hove was reflecting on the drama: “By a horrific coincidence there was the Malaysia Airlines crash [the aircraft was shot down near the Ukrainian-Russian border in July] in which about 200 Dutch people died. At first their bodies were laid out in a field, in the hot sun, and there was this feeling that this was so cruel, that they needed to be treated respectfully.

“When the bodies came back to Holland, there was a coffin for each of them and then there was this ride back from the airport, along the highway, and people stopped and stood totally silent. It was a huge act of honouring.” It is an echo, he says, of Antigone’s sense of outrage, and her personal courage. “I don’t see her at all as this stubborn little girl who just says ‘no’.”

The play, in van Hove’s hands, becomes an entwining of the personal and political. “And it is a reminder that politics should become more human. I feel deeply that the 20th century is over. It was the century of ideologies — communism, socialism, capitalism — but that has collapsed. We tend not to recognise that capitalism has collapsed, but it is in such trouble. It is like a beast in a cage.”

I ask him if the success of *A View from the Bridge* last year had surprised him. “Yes, I never thought that would happen. But I must say, in rehearsal, I connected with Mark Strong, and all the cast, so strongly. There was never any problem, not one incident, not one obstacle. Everyone understood what this production should be.” The play’s transfer to Wyndham’s Theatre elicits a wry remark: “Until yesterday I was considered an avant-garde director. But I am really happy that the West End is open to receive this kind of work.”

So has the public caught up with him? “Well that’s my mission as a theatre director. I want to make the most extreme work possible, without compromise, shown to as

many people as possible." Theatre, he says, is one of the most important art forms in the digitally obsessed 21st century. "Because it is live. And that creates enormous tension."

Van Hove was full of praise, during last year's run, for British actors who had surprised him with their versatility. "Of course I knew they were very text-based, but they were also very aware of the physical space. Mark was very eloquent in his delivery, but also had this great animal-like presence."

As a director who works in several countries, does he think there is any longer such a thing as a national style of theatre? "For me, not," he says instantly. "Well, yes," he revises, equally instantly. "American actors are much more emotional. And German actors tend to observe their own characters from the side, almost commenting on them while they are playing them. Belgian actors play from the belly. They are very earthy.

"Yes, there are these little differences'" he finally decides. "What is important is that you create a sense of ensemble. And once you manage that, you have done 50 per cent of the work."

Apart from directing the classics of world theatre (he confesses to a "weakness" in engaging with new work), van Hove is best known for his theatrical adaptations of movie screenplays: Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers*, Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* and *Scenes From a Marriage*, and works by John Cassavetes and Michelangelo Antonioni.

Bergman, he says, "wrote some of the most meaningful things about relationships and marriage ever. I don't think anyone can say anything more about those things than he did in *Scenes From a Marriage*. His work is not so political. He talks about human beings, but in such a big way, so that it is universally understood. It is a theatrical challenge — trying to find how the text wants to be produced for the 21st century."

Future projects include a trilogy from Shakespeare's history plays, *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, which will, once again, be co-produced across different countries. "They will be about leadership," he says boldly. "These are themes we still have to deal with. You see it with Obama. He started so promisingly, but now even the most Democratic of figures say they are disappointed. What happened? What kind of leaders do we want? Shakespeare wrote about all these things."

In the visceral theatre of Ivo van Hove, the sharpest political commentary of our times comes from hundreds of years ago. Have a stiff drink, and learn.

'Antigone', Barbican Theatre, from March 4, barbican.org.uk; 'A View From a Bridge', Wyndham's Theatre, from February 11, delfontmackintosh.co.uk