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The hottest Belgian in town

Ivo van Hove is directing up a storm on the London stage, says **Jasper Rees**

The hottest ticket in the West End right now is Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*. Yes, it contains immense performances, above all from the panther-like Mark Strong as Eddie Carbone, the Italo-American longshoreman racked by an immoderate fondness for his niece. But what sets off the splendour of British acting at its best is the bare-knuckle staging, austere stripped of props and even shoes. The visionary director responsible is, perhaps uniquely in West End history, from Belgium.

The name Ivo van Hove means the world to cognoscenti of the Euro-programming at the Barbican, where his acclaimed Toneelgroep Amsterdam have created dizzying spectacles, from an epic mulch of Shakespeare's Roman plays to a chopped-up promenade version of Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*. *A View from the Bridge* started out at the Young Vic, a rare exception to British theatre's fear of European directors. "You must think hard to find non-English-speaking directors here," van Hove says. So nobody has been as stunned as he has by the production's success.

"I didn't know the impact was going to be so emotional. Also, I discovered — my naive attitude, perhaps — that London, in the Anglo-Saxon world, really is the centre of theatre. Everybody saw the production." The result is a flood of — unannounced — job offers. "I will be around," is all he can say.

First he goes back to the Barbican, where he will direct Juliette Binoche in *Antigone*. She had told the venue, after her appearance there in *Mademoiselle Julie*, that she'd like to come back in three years to work with a great director. "The Barbican immediately said, 'Ivo van Hove'," he reports.

Even now, his voice registers boyish surprise. He's an angular figure with floppy grey hair, who speaks idiomatic English and, despite his preference for doom-laden drama, has a fluffy way with irony. The director assumed they were sounding each other out. "I said to her, 'Give it a thought.' And she said, 'No, we're going to do it.'"

The new English translation, by the Canadian poet Anne Carson, will, van Hove advises, be a modern drama, but not a domestic one. "I looked at the play as if it was written yesterday. What's really happening? We tend to tame Greek tragedy, this rare, barbaric world. 'It's just about my neighbour.' It's not. I have to give

those clandestine conditions: "Once the door is closed, everything is allowed. I can utter whatever perverse fantasy I want, and nobody should blame me for it." The son of a pharmacist, he veered dutifully towards a profession. He recalls the day when, as a third-year student, he looked up from his law books. "I thought, 'This is not my life, I don't want this.' I stopped that day." He had studied directing in Antwerp before, in the early 1980s, taking on his own plays, then moving on to the translated canon.

Yet Belgium started to feel constricting: "We are such a small country, we need to break out of this cage." His international career really kicked off when he staged the O'Neill rarity *More Stately Mansions* with New York Theatre Workshop. Van Hove became a regular off-Broadway, then in 2001 set up permanently abroad as general director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam.

He argues that the company's experimental aesthetic derives from its nationality. "The Dutch don't have a Shakespeare. The French have a huge culture based on Racine, Molière. We treat plays in a different way. We consider the author the engine of a production." Whatever he does next in the UK, it won't be the Bard. "Not yet. I think that will take some time."

At 56, he has no children — he is in a long-term relationship with his designer, Jan Versweyvel — and, despite ever more frequent absences, considers Toneelgroep Amsterdam his

"dysfunctional family". "I'm totally connected to this group. A lot of your colleagues said already that it's perhaps the best ensemble in the world. I feel the same. It would be stupid to leave that behind. I want the illusion that everything will be for ever."

That illusion tends to find expression in his productions. He thinks nothing of asking audiences to sit for four, even six, hours. He's no fan of intervals. "It breaks the tension you have with each other. I would rather go on." Even a rare foray into comedy — Ayckbourn's *The Norman Conquests* — was a five-hour soirée.

The masterstroke with *A View from the Bridge* came a week into rehearsals, when van Hove asked the cast to dispense with shoes. "There was a minute of silence, because actors don't like to be in bare feet. Me neither. You feel really naked. The body becomes much more important." A full fortnight before the production opened, Versweyvel told van Hove it was the best thing they had ever done.

"I said, 'Leave me alone.' But he was right. It's so hard to say why something is a success. If you tried to do this again, it would be a failure. It seemed to be a rude decision to take all realism out of it, but that opened the box of Pandora."

A View from the Bridge, Wyndham's, London WC2, until Apr 11; *Antigone*, Barbican, London EC2, from Wed until Mar 28



Fluffy with irony: Ivo van Hove, left. Below, Phoebe Fox, Mark Strong and Nicola Walker in *A View from the Bridge*