

September 7, 2015 5:48 pm

Song From Far Away, Young Vic Theatre, London — review

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Ivo van Hove's minimalist production gives Simon Stephens' play space to resonate



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Eelco Smits in 'Song from Far Away' at Young Vic. Photo: Jan Versweyveld

Playwright Simon Stephens is more widely known for work such as his stage adaptation of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time* or the controversially staged *Three Kingdoms*, but one of his most admired works is *Sea Wall*, an unadorned monologue from 2008 about familial grief pervading the everyday. *Song From Far Away* lasts, in Ivo van Hove's production for Toneelgroep Amsterdam, 80 minutes to *Sea Wall*'s 30, but is otherwise very much in the same territory.

Financial broker Willem is recalled from New York to the family home of Amsterdam by the sudden death of his younger brother Pauli. In a series of letters to the deceased written during his visit, Willem recounts the unexceptional events thereof, punctuated by outbursts of bereaved fury at

nothing in particular and by a handful of brief musical snatches (written by Mark Eitzel, formerly of American Music Club, with whom Stephens has also collaborated in the past).

As a director, van Hove tries to distil his staging to the heart of a work, be it the all-embracing, audience-inclusive sprawl of one of his Shakespearean multi-play assemblages or the Hellenic starkness of his version of *A View From The Bridge*. Here, too, he goes for minimalism. Jan Versweyveld's design is of a virtually unfurnished apartment, across which exterior and interior lights gradually sweep, leaving as the only constants the traffic lights at a crossroads outside the upstage window. As Willem, Eelco Smits pads around the two rooms, sometimes addressing Pauli in an empty wooden chair, sometimes taking refuge in headphones, and for around half the duration matching Willem's emotional nakedness with physical nudity. Nothing whatever is made of this; it seems, in context, entirely natural, certainly more so than reciting letters to a dead person.

As with a number of his other pieces (most recently *Carmen Disruption*, seen in April at London's Almeida), Stephens muses on the concept of home and belonging; in this case, not just a geographical location, but the sense that we never settle down in this life itself. Stephens is often at his best when less is allowed to be more rather than being gussied up, and van Hove here allows the material to resonate fully through the available space.



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