

## **ibsen's 'hedda,' undergoing renovation**

Newsday, September 22, 2004

By Linda Winer

Once more into New York's kitchen-sink theater rides Ivo van Hove, the wild and often wondrous Flemish explorer (some say plunderer) of the hallowed and the classic. Once again, he is the guest of the New York Theatre Workshop, where van Hove, artistic director of Amsterdam's leading repertory company, has found a home-away for his love-hate adventure with audiences.

In 1997, he provoked furious accusations of vandalism and an appreciative Obie Award with a demented but enthralling rethinking of Eugene O'Neill's problematic "More Stately Mansions." Two years ago, he was less persuasive at stripping the illusion off "A Streetcar Named Desire" - mostly remembered for a Stanley who held a naked Blanche's head underwater in a bathtub for a very long time.

His prey this time is "Hedda Gabler," which opened last night in a production that just might bring swing voters to his side. In many ways, this is the least outlandish and most satisfying of the visions he has shared at the Workshop. He plays the text fairly straight, using Christopher Hampton's translation of Ibsen's study of the disturbed female of 1890. Characters don't talk much in gibberish or breathless overlapping speeches.

The setting has been updated to a chic contemporary comfort zone, with fashion footwear and a surprisingly congenial modern attitude adjustment. Elizabeth Marvel, who proved she would go to the brink for van Hove as Blanche, has a complex combination of playful eroticism and hysteria as Hedda, the perilously bored new bride of Jason Butler Harner's handsome but geeky George Tesman.

She spends most of nearly three hours in a pink silk slip and a deeply erratic funk.

Forget Victorian parlors and women in corsets. As designed by van Hove's longtime collaborator Jan Versweyveld, the newlyweds have moved into a huge apartment in a fancy old building. The living room is in an uneasy state of renovation, a raw open space with unfinished walls, flowerpots waiting to be planted on the terrace, Hedda's upright piano, and a few pieces of furniture

waiting to be replaced. The only conspicuous decoration is the wall case with Hedda's two pistols, poised behind what could be a "break glass in emergency" warning.

Characters throw themselves violently onto the tired white sofa. Judge Brack – played with dangerous affability by John Douglas Thompson – smashes Hedda against the wall until we hurt for her. Anna Reeder plays the lovesick Mrs. Elvsted with a plucky sensuality and an exposed belly button above her long black skirt (just one of costume designer Kevin Guyer's unsettling brainstorms). Elzbieta Czyzewska plays the long-suffering maid as if she were a delightful extra in a vampire movie.

Of course, this all sounds like too much. Naturally, it is. Yet, the world of van Hove's Hedda has a humor, intelligence and ferocity that never seem out to betray Ibsen. I can't get it out of my head.

HEDDA GABLER. By Henrik Ibsen, directed by Ivo van Hove. New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. Fourth St., Manhattan. Seen at Sunday afternoon's preview.