

the dark secrets of the belgian avant-garde

Or, How Director Ivo van Hove Rehearses Molière's The Misanthrope

Village Voice, 18 sep 07, Tom Sellar

Anyone who thinks Ivo van Hove is a formalist or “auteur” director can find plenty of incriminating evidence in his rehearsal room. On a recent muggy afternoon, the Belgian-born director was preparing Molière's The Misanthrope in a studio at New York Theatre Workshop (where it opens September 24). Three principal actors—Thomas Jay Ryan, Bill Camp, and Alfredo Narciso—lounged barefoot on a platform, attired in rehearsal uniforms: identical black suits with untucked white shirts. Some sort of early-'60s lounge music oozes out of the sound system. A team of European designers and dramaturgs confers in Flemish about how a door should open on designer Jan Versweyveld's set—a clinical gray box walled with semi-transparent glass panels and vertical video screens. “It's waterproof,” a blasé design assistant says. “For the hosing-down and food fight.”

Very suspicious activity. And first impressions like these often lead American audiences to think of Van Hove, the 49-year-old artistic director of the Netherlands' Toneelgroep Amsterdam, as an experimental theater-maker—a provocateur bent on re-authoring classics. But don't be fooled by the video cameras or perfume-ad visual sophistication. In Europe, Van Hove is considered conservative, even conventional. And watching him in rehearsal, you can see why: He is a naturalist at heart. What looks like avant-garde revelry turns out to be his extensions of, well, scene work and Molière's text.

Van Hove freely admits this dark secret on his lunch break. “My theater is based on psychology,” he says, “but not only on psychology. I try to make an X-ray of a character, to bring the subtext out where it can be seen. American actors learn to keep it hidden.” This forbidding institutional set with fluorescent lighting? “It's a laboratory of human behavior.” The video cameras flanking the stage perimeter? “They let us look much more closely at an arena of conflict. Like masks in Greek drama, they give huge expression to small things onstage.” Characters, he notes, are created out of “184,000 different moments”—in other words, he invents circumstances but leaves it to each actor to thread them together.

Conflict? Observed behavior? Building roles? This is practically Stanislavsky talk—and here in his American studio, Van Hove appears wholly comfortable with it.

Van Hove's New York successes—*More Stately Mansions* (1997), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1999), *Alice in Bed* (2000), and *Hedda Gabler* (2004)—have always been linked with powerful performances from America's finest stage actors: Bill Camp, Elizabeth Marvel, Joan MacIntosh. He asks his company not only to discover the emotional "subtext" of O'Neill and Ibsen, but to express and embody it to an unusual degree, and in untraditional ways. Van Hove says he doesn't know precisely how he helps psychology-oriented American performers do this. "I have strategies, I think, but I don't know exactly what they are. I don't talk that much. We just build it scene by scene, moment by moment."

For *The Misanthrope*—Molière's bitter black comedy about a man who insists on sincerity, only to suffer for it—this means not just breaking down a 17th-century play word by word, but also letting the company explore space and scale. For a conversation between the title character, Alceste (Camp), and his admiring acquaintance, Oronte (Narciso), Van Hove guides the pair into a small lounge just offstage. A cameraman follows, beaming their cloistered confidences onto a center-stage screen, where Philinte (Ryan) watches. The effect is striking: The camera magnifies their intimate exchange, making us so privy that we can see Camp's brow rise. Under bright lights, the close-ups might look superficially like a soap opera, but it's just Van Hove's zoom lens on Molière's domestic interior. When the duo returns center stage, Van Hove puts them into a huddle, their backs to the audience and heads leaning against an upstage wall, an inch apart, as they whisper pledges of mutual friendship. A technician trails them holding a mic overhead, and suddenly their murmured vows broadcast and reverberate across the entire studio. Versweyveld trots onstage to suggest a slight spatial adjustment, which Van Hove accepts absently: "Whatever. If the atmosphere is right, they can do anything."

A few tries later, the company gets to the end of the scene, when the honesty-obsessed Alceste critiques his new pal's bad poetry and the friendship quickly sours. Eventually, Van Hove asks Camp and Narciso to act out the subtext, to physicalize the swelling animosity beneath the characters' literary debate. "This time, go at it like two crazy mad dogs," he proposes. It's not a metaphor: Camp and Narciso lunge for each other's throats, then roll across the stage in headlocks, growling and grunting. Van Hove lets them wrestle in silence for nearly 10 minutes, with cameras trained. No one can remember who has the next line, and the roughhousing nearly careens out of control. Camp breaks away, breathless, and abruptly exits. No one is quite sure what just happened, but a few minutes later it's clear that everything is fine. Whether or not Van Hove decides to incorporate it, his experiment has exposed an aggressive underpinning in Molière's taut neoclassical verse. Everyone in the room shakes their heads, surprised and a little weirded out.

A week later, although these explorations have been methodical, progress has been slow. Ryan appears a little nervous about this, but has no doubts. “Ivo is a true actors’ director,” he says. “It’s not the angle I expected. Nothing comes that isn’t from a logical, organic impulse.” Joan Macintosh, who plays Alceste’s rival Acaste, agrees: “He has gotten to the heart of what Molière wrote.” The company is now working on the NYTW main stage, which is buried under garbage: food, papers, and bottles are strewn everywhere. But Van Hove assures me that there is no food fight. So why are the video screens splattered with egg? “There is some food which we enjoy ourselves with,” he says, grinning boyishly. But he’s quick to emphasize that it comes from the text, not criminal mischief. “It’s about consumption, a society caught in the illusion that they can consume each other. Food is an element in that.” The actors still don’t know how all the set dressing will be used.

Undaunted, Van Hove plows ahead with a late scene they haven’t touched yet: Alceste and Oronte finally demand that Céliméne (Jeanine Serralles), their love interest, choose between them. The director begins by slowly, tentatively dispersing the performers. Some sit in dressing rooms visible from the auditorium (and on camera); others are downstage. As accusations fly, the actors, like their characters, have to bridge these unwieldy distances and sort out their relationships. As they delve into the scene, it becomes clear that this spatial choice—which at first looks weirdly de-centered and self-consciously arty—actually serves the text. The chaotic configuration underscores the romantic confusion and opens the way for the cast’s discoveries: Who’s in? Who’s out? Who’s speaking and watching? Who’s onstage? Who’s not acting? The video complicates the composition further, and it’s not easy to see a final shape. But, as Camp says a few minutes later, reflecting on the day’s work: “Ivo has an amazing ability to find given circumstances I can’t ignore, using all the elements. And with him, you can always go further.” That’s a true actor’s endorsement of a director’s process. Van Hove, the secret naturalist, would be pleased.