

hey, molière, hold onto your hat!

New York Times, 23 sep 07, Erik Piepenburg

There's deconstruction, and then there's Ivo van Hove. This Flemish director's radical reworkings of classic plays can leave theatergoers either abuzz or asleep, depending on their tolerance for fiercely anti-naturalist storytelling. His severely deconstructed revival of "Hedda Gabler" at New York Theater Workshop in 2004 not only divided and stumped audiences, but, in its most memorable scene, also left the actress Elizabeth Marvel, as the title character, drenched in V8 juice.

Mr. van Hove, the general director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, a Dutch theater company, has also taken his directorial sledgehammer to Eugene O'Neill's "More Stately Mansions," Tennessee Williams's "Streetcar Named Desire" and, in collaboration with the American Repertory Theater in Boston last year, Wim Wenders's film "Wings of Desire." Mr. van Hove returns to the New York Theater Workshop this season to rumble with Molière's subversive romantic comedy "The Misanthrope," in an adaptation by the British poet Tony Harrison.

In advance of Monday's opening Mr. van Hove spoke with Erik Piepenburg about Molière's funny side, what defines a "liquid society" and how he beat the boarding school blues. An extended audio slide show narrated by Mr. van Hove is at nytimes.com/theater.

Molière the Comedian

Last year I directed "The Miser," one of Molière's comedies, you could say, in Germany. I discovered something I didn't really know about Molière, namely that his plays are mostly misunderstood as comedies. I discovered in these plays social research about society, and that was for me kind of a new area. What interests me in "The Misanthrope" is this impossible love relationship between Alceste and Célimène. But at the same time Molière looks at society and how difficult it is for these people to live together in a new way.

What struck me when I first read the play was that there is no father, mother, brother or sister, there's no family in this play, which is strange. ... The play reminded me of a book by a sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish professor, who wrote books about what he calls "the liquid society," a society where people

are living together apart, or living apart together, you could say. The people who live together have separate bank accounts, and they always live in the illusion that they can do without each other, that they can live without each other. That made me think of this play.

There are no long-term relationships anymore, not till death does us part. That is the world Alceste is still believing in. He still believes in what you could say are old values of truth, sincerity, loyalty — forever. You have a job for your life. Well, in these times, in America and Europe, you don't have a job for life anymore. You may be happy if you have your job in two years' time. That's what this play deals with. Molière looks in a very objective way, not in a judgmental way, at how difficult it is to live in this liquid society.

Hedda Gabler

I had a pretty rough time when I started in New York 10 years ago. ... The New York Theater Workshop and the audiences were very loyal to my work. But the journalists were split over it. There were some people who really loved it, and some people who really hated it, which is always a good position. That's good, and it's normal. For me, everything was really new because these plays ["Streetcar" and "Mansions"] had been huge successes in Europe, but I understood very well that these plays were part of your culture here, and that I, this Flemish guy, was showing off about how to do it, which was not my intention. It was just my intention to show what I thought was in these plays. With "Hedda Gabler" it was the first time I felt there was a total consensus that this means something, that it's not superficial work, it's not Eurotrash, as they call it, that this is really somebody who tries to deal with a play in a sincere, deep way.

Drama Club

The moment I discovered that theater was important in my life was when I was 11 years old and I had to go to boarding school. I was so unhappy there. I cried for three months. I felt totally displaced and unhappy with everything. In this school there was a theater group, and every Wednesday afternoon you had a choice. You could go out of the school — but it was in a small town, so it wasn't interesting to go out — or you could join this theater group. I joined the theater group, not knowing why. I did it instinctively. I discovered immediately this warm nest. We had a little world in this world where I was totally unhappy. It was this little world where I felt totally at ease, relaxed and happy.

Likes and Dislikes

When somebody comes to me and says he really hated what he saw, or he really loved it, it's both the same. I act as if it's indifferent to me, but deep down of

course you always crave to be loved. And that's what I make theater for. Theater for me is my mission in life. It isn't my job. I can express something from myself which I think is very valuable. Missing it would be like missing my heart. When it means so much for you to make theater, you want everybody to love what you make. It's really terrible when somebody dislikes it.