

## Grand Opening

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**Cassavetes: Misogynist, genius, alcoholic, playwright**

**THE SHOW MUST go on” finds new meaning as Opening Night’s leading lady stumbles, falling-down drunk, into the auditorium. Stagehands scurry to remove her messy street clothes, pump her full of caffeine and slap away at her face with greasepaint-covered powder puffs, attempting to revive her in time for the show within a show’s opening night.**

While they prepare her for her close-up, the lucky aisle-seat dweller is already being treated to another type of close-up as the actor’s panty-clad rear wriggles just inches from your nose. Everyone loves a substance-addled, once-beloved actress fallen from grace. We all sheepishly remember finding titillating schadenfreude in embarrassing wardrobe malfunctions, unruly public displays and impulse head shaves. While she’s far from analogous to today’s pop-culture twits, Myrtle Gordon, the aging heroine of John Cassavetes’ 1977 film *Opening Night*, struggles to tell the difference between stage and sidewalk, and is forced to take a hard look at what it means to be an actor when the accidental death of a fan throws her into psychological crisis. The story follows Myrtle’s operatic collapses and histrionic tantrums as she rehearses a play for Broadway debut.

On the heels of *The Misanthrope* (2007) and *Hedda Gabler* (2004), avant-garde Flemish director Ivo van Hove brings this journey to the stage in a theatrical adaptation of *Opening Night*. His company, Toneel Groep Amsterdam, will premiere the work for U.S. audiences Dec. 2-6 as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave festival. Van Hove is no stranger to Cassavetes, his adolescent idol, since he also adapted *Faces* for the stage in 1997. It makes sense for oft-controversial van Hove to find resonance with similarly controversial Cassavetes, whose films he admires for being “really down to earth, rough and direct” using “almost no aesthetics.” Van Hove is drawn to Cassavetes’ characters because they are “totally unpredictable; they are not linear, they are whimsical.”

Actor-director van Hove also sees *Opening Night* as an opportunity to talk about his job. The play about a play crystallizes Cassavetes’ definitive theme: The dissonance between private and public personae. But for van Hove, *Opening Night* is not just about self-reflection, it is also “a love story, an existential text and a family tragedy. It is about this theater family, dependent upon a star who gives them necessity, a family that totally falls apart when Myrtle is not able to play her character.”

Elsie de Brauw, as fame-weary, chainsmoking Myrtle, guzzles her way through the bottles and men that litter her stage. There is her manipulative (and married) director Manny (Fedja van Huet), the show's elderly producer David (Johann van Assche), and her former flame and co-star Maurice (Jacob Derwig), who rebuffs her advances, cruelly saying "You're not a woman to me anymore, you're a professional."

Opening Night is part cinema, part live theater and part documentary, and while using video in theater is nothing new, van Hove has found a formal *raison d'être*. Live footage avoids the fakeness that plagues most meta-theater, using camera as "microscope" to coax sincere, anti-theatrical performances.

"We never use [video] in a purely aesthetical way," he says. "We only use it when it is necessary." Camera people follow the actors onstage and simulcast to a large screen that hangs above the proscenium, as well as to several strategically placed television monitors.

One hundred audience members sit stage right, inserted into the production as the audience of Opening Night (when the actors are "acting" onstage, they play to this stage audience and the house sees them frontally only via screen). This allows van Hove to harness the cinematic close-up for theater, crucial for broadcasting the subtle wincing, manic shudders and world-weary brow furrows that make a Cassavetes character. Opening Night's biggest challenge lies in recreating the disparate spaces of Cassavetes' film. Characters sprawl in hotel rooms, green rooms, dressing rooms and, finally, the stage.

Van Hove's designer, Jan Versweyveld, creates an intriguing visual *mise en abyme* with many partitioned stage spaces, screen spaces, auditorium spaces and backstage spaces. Forget the fourth wall — van Hove's production is the spatial equivalent of a Russian nesting doll. The relatively bare set takes shape through movable tables abundantly stocked with spirits, resembling the floating workstations of a mad scientist, and well-chosen props punctuate as visual metonyms for the spaces they define. Additionally, a host of theatrical guts — trailing sound and camera wires, costume racks, spike tape directions and a cavalcade of techies — emphasize the backstage central to the Cassavetes narrative's original vision.

Van Hove fancies himself a Cassavetes purist, saying, "I was not inspired by things outside of the Cassavetes world." Yet, several elements of Opening Night differ from the screenplay. His ballet-like physical passages — sexual, violent and at times both — are a welcome divergence from Cassavetes' own style.

The score's fade in and out of Neil Young songs creates a lush, nostalgic atmosphere that recalls a movie soundtrack, appropriate for a work that hopes to blend the languages of screen and stage. Van Hove's innovative direction crafts a virtual reality that does its best to efface what Myrtle warns against: "We must never forget, this is only a play."