

Opening Night

Variety, 3 dec 08

Dutch director Ivo van Hove brings new meaning to the term “in your face” with his techno-centric treatment of John Cassavetes’ 1977 film, “Opening Night,” about the psychic meltdown of an aging actress after the accidental death of a young fan. Watching a large screen looming over the play-within-a-film-within-a-play, the audience becomes complicit in this twitch-by-twitch account of a woman’s nervous breakdown. Only a giant of a performance from a giant of a performer – just like the one given here by Elsie de Brauw in the Gena Rowlands role – could survive the cold, cruel scrutiny of a curious man with a camera.

It looks like a madhouse on Jan Versweyveld’s artfully cluttered backstage set, the scene of a preview performance of “The Second Wife,” a women’s weeper that is obviously going very badly. Sarah the playwright (the very watchable Chris Nietvelt) is a nervous wreck because her leading lady refuses to play the character she wrote – an aging stage actress who humiliates herself before the husband who dumped her for a younger model. Manny the director (the very competent Fedja van Huet) is deeply frustrated because he can’t make this diva behave.

Everyone else in the company has preview jitters. Small wonder, since two video-cameramen are tracking every unguarded move they make and projecting it onto a giant screen overhead. In line with Erik Lint’s uncompromising video design, that means face shots so up-close and personal you can count the eyelashes.

The theme of “The Second Wife” – the desperation of a woman trying to recapture the vitality of her lost youth – cuts too close to reality for leading lady Myrtle (de Brauw). And here’s where the source material of Cassavetes’ film (which had been percolating for at least a decade) shows its own age spots.

The menopausal meltdown Myrtle is going through is too vaguely attributed to “aging” – in the old-timey sense of a woman’s sexual appeal to men – with little reference to the waning of mental and creative powers that would certainly matter to a modern career woman and artist of her stature. If it weren’t for de Brauw’s bravura portrayal of her as a many-faceted person whose deeper thoughts and subtler feelings are constantly playing out across her expressive face, we might quickly tire of Myrtle’s histrionics.

De Brauw’s core understanding of the character is matched by the sensitivity shown by helmer van Hove (best known in Gotham for his 2004 “Hedda Gabler” at New York The-

ater Workshop) in putting her very public breakdown on display. Both on the stage and on the screen that hovers over it, de Brauw has the full support of her director.

While some of the male performers are surprisingly wishy-washy, van Hove gives his actresses a wide comfort zone to play in. Nietvelt is wonderfully neurotic as the nervy playwright. Lien de Graeve has a perfectly quiet moment in her small supporting role in “The Second Wife.” And Hadewych Minis, the exciting young actress playing the doomed fan who haunts Myrtle, is encouraged to be as bizarre as she pleases.

Although it’s hard to pull your eyes from that revealing video screen, it’s the women, in all their fleshed-out stage reality, who tell the real tale – woman to woman.