

A Natural Cassavetes Woman, Theatricalized, Magnified and Multiplied

NY Times, 4 dec 08, Ben Brantley

The walls come tumbling down in ‘Opening Night,’ Ivo van Hove’s wild and woolly stage version of the 1977 John Cassavetes movie about a Broadway-bound play in crisis. It’s not just the fabled, much-chipped-away fourth wall – the invisible barrier between actors and audience – that collapses at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where this exhilaratingly acted, Dutch-speaking production from Toneelgroep Amsterdam and NTGent runs through Saturday as part of the Next Wave Festival.

True, the Belgian-born Mr. van Hove applies his demolition devices to not one but two fourth walls in the course of this rambunctious evening, since he has not one but two separate audiences to consider. (More on that later.) But that’s the least of the barrier busting that goes on in this extended exploration of an aging prima donna’s wrestling match with her elusive existential essence.

Divisions between players and parts, public and private, life and death, madness and sanity, love and hate and – oh, yes – the person you see in the flesh and the one you see on a screen (make that several screens) at the same time: Mr. van Hove works his way through these distinctions like a prankish child with a magic eraser.

This isn’t just an instance of a bad-boy director kicking over the traces of tradition because he can. On the contrary, I have never seen Mr. van Hove – who has taken stylized wrecking balls to a host of classic plays – make more purposeful or appropriate use of his anarchic skills. His subject, you see, is the porousness of the identities of those who act in and live by the theater. When it comes to not grasping the idea of boundaries, it seems, there’s no people like show people.

Throughout his career Mr. van Hove has made it his business to find the scared and hungry animals within seemingly civilized (and often titanic) characters in deconstructions of plays like Tennessee Williams’s ‘Streetcar Named Desire,’ Eugene O’Neill’s ‘More Stately Mansions’ and Molière’s ‘Misanthrope’ (all produced at the New York Theater Workshop). For me these shows often felt more like intense acting exercises than fully articulated productions. Yes, they located and enhanced not-too-hard-to-spot subtexts in familiar works. But there’s not much tension in primal subtext unless it has a more rarefied surface to chafe against. (It’s not Blanche DuBois’s id that’s interesting, but the ways she fights it.)

But in the works of Cassavetes, the prototypical indie filmmaker, Mr. van Hove has found both a natural soul mate and a perfect taking-off point for actorly excavation. In films like 'Faces,' 'Husbands' and 'A Woman Under the Influence,' Cassavetes, who died in 1989, urged his cast members to burrow deep into themselves and return with the soiled contents from the corners of their psychic closets. That might be said to be the *modus operandi* as well of Mr. van Hove (who has also done a stage version of 'Faces').

Though he strays further from naturalism than Cassavetes ever did, he shares the same exploratory instincts and sentimentality about the bravery and foolishness of actors. Like a typical Cassavetes film, Mr. van Hove's 'Opening Night' can be irritating, cloying and redundant. But it often is also (like a Cassavetes film) unexpectedly affecting and (far more than your average Cassavetes film) flat-out hilarious.

Mr. van Hove says he has never seen the movie 'Opening Night,' choosing instead to work directly from Cassavetes's screenplay. The plot is a sort of Jungian, ghost-story variation on the ultimate backstage movie, 'All About Eve.' (Less felicitously, the show also retains much of the home-truth dialogue, projected in English translation in supertitles.)

The play 'The Second Wife' is in previews, and the show's star, Myrtle (the splendid Elsie de Brauw, in a role originated by the splendid Gena Rowlands), is having difficulty connecting with her part, that of a woman coming to terms with age. And when Myrtle doesn't connect, she goes haywire, collapsing into comalike prostration or hysterical laughter, or simply walking offstage in midscene.

Her temperament has been further addled by the accidental death of a young fan, Nancy (Hadewych Minis), a toothsome teenager. Myrtle brings the ghost of Nancy, as an embodiment of the fearless sex kitten the actress once was, to rehearsal.

Though only Myrtle sees her, Nancy's presence sucks up the oxygen in an environment already crowded with Myrtle's complicated relationships with (take a deep breath, please) Maurice (Jacob Derwig), her ex-husband and leading man; Gus (Oscar van Rompay), her callow, other leading man; Manny (Fedja van Huêt), her anguished director; David (Johan van Assche), her doting and clueless producer; and Sarah (Chris Nietvelt), the entertainingly proprietary playwright.

Just who means what to whom in this circle of friends and co-workers – which also includes Manny's neglected wife, Dorothee (Karina Smulders) – keeps shifting. We are often left unsure whether what we're seeing is of the play or outside it, whether the actors are playing to the mini-audience that has been assembled onstage or the larger one beyond it.

Our disorientation is compounded by the plethora of simultaneous versions of the same scene: those that occur in the flesh on the stage; those reflected in the glass doors at the back of Jan Versweyveld's soundstage-like set; and those that are projected in video onto an assortment of screens large and small. (The video design is by Erik Lint.)