

emotions on the line

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In Jean Cocteau's play "La Voix Humaine" (the human voice), a lone actress talks on the phone to a lover with whom she's just broken up. She keeps getting interrupted by a bad connection – the piece was written in 1930, but anybody who has ever experienced a lost signal will empathize.

For about an hour, the unnamed woman goes through a roller coaster of emotions as she addresses the man who left, but also herself. It is uncommonly, uncomfortably voyeuristic, even for theater.

Dutch director Ivo van Hove drives the point home by placing his performer, Halina Reijn, in a small boxlike room and behind a big glass window, through which the audience scrutinizes her. It feels as if she's imprisoned in her own apartment, and at times she roams her limited space like a caged animal.

Van Hove – who offered amazing, radical versions of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Hedda Gabler" at New York Theater Workshop – keeps to a fairly minimalist approach for this Dutch-language (with translation) production, the showpiece of the New Island Festival.

The main mood-setting effect is the heavy use of pop music, particularly a lullaby-like song by the band Japan titled, appropriately enough, "Despair." (At least one of the other choices feels cheaply gimmicky, though.)

But really, van Hove's staging begins and ends with the inspired set, inside which Reijn (the feral, opportunistic Ronnie in Paul Verhoeven's movie "Black Book") unfurls a physical performance as unselfconscious as it is uncompromising.

This idea that environment dictates experience brilliantly extends to the venue itself: a warehouse deep within Governors Island. To reach it, you must hike along the waterfront, past deserted-looking buildings.

By the end, audience and character alike realize that as much as this woman talks, she can't connect. The only way out is suggested in a final image that simultaneously evokes defeat and liberation.

The best part: You have time to ponder it as you walk back in the semi-darkness, both inside and outside the city and its millions of impossible relationships.

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