



## Theatre

### Lost in translation with this on stage blow-up

*Antonioni Project*  
 Barbican Theatre, London

In this postmodern, digital age, the great masterpieces of modernism – whether in drama, in the novel or in film – seem like very distant shadows that beckon weakly to us from a long way away. Ah yes, the old days, that time when people took art seriously, when what artists said actually mattered. You can still watch modernist director Michelangelo Antonioni's films and marvel at their existential spirit. But can this be translated onto the stage?

*Antonioni Project* by Amsterdam's Toneelgroep attempts to squeeze three of the Italian master's 1960s' monochrome films – *L'Avventura*, *La Notte* and *L'Eclisse* – into a mere two hours and 20 minutes. So here again is a fragment of the tale of Anna, who in *L'Avventura* mysteriously disappears and whose lover, Sandro, pursues Claudia, her best friend; Lidia and Giovanni from *La Notte* each seem to suffer a midlife crisis; and in *L'Eclisse*, an affair between a young, money-obsessed stockbroker Piero and Vittoria slowly moves into view.

There's also Vittoria's mother, who also trades on the stock exchange, and Giovanni is finally drawn to Valentina, an industrialist's daughter. As you can see, this is a milieu of well-heeled high achievers who can enjoy neither the riches they accumulate, nor the sexual relations that they drift into. As the programme note explains, these are couples for whom sex is easy, but emotional intimacy impossible. An air of exhaustion hangs over their dealings with one another.

In the early 1960s, huge strides in economic growth occurred in a society still dominated by old ideas and values. To break taboos, to transgress, was an adventure with no certain ending; too late for Victorian morality, too early for the feminist movement, the characters seem adrift, confused, vulnerable and –

with only a couple of exceptions – unstable. But the existential crises of the '60s don't survive completely unscathed in this contemporary staging.

Toneelgroep's production shows a film set on the stage level, with a huge screen above, on which the actors are projected, often with added backgrounds, with the result that we see every detail of their faces hugely amplified, as well as their microphones. The screen images have not been aestheticised and come across as crude video pictures. So the magic of Antonioni's films is lost in this transition, although the sense of emotional bafflement is well conveyed. But there is no sense of ennui, or really of political radicalism.

Instead, the staging is immensely well worked out and occasionally very clever. However, compared to similar experiments by Katie Mitchell at the National Theatre, it is less aesthetically pleasing, and less well acted. Mitchell remains the master of this kind of work. Here, the video images of the sea are much more successful than the banal *Gotterdammerung* sequence in which Richard Wagner's *Twilight of the Gods* operatic music plays over familiar scenes of ecological disaster. Certainly, the show is also saying something about artists and creativity, but it is mumbling rather than articulating.

Toneelgroep's director Ivo van Hove, video techie Tal Yarden and designer Jan Versweyveld have created a watchable stage piece, but also a tedious one. After the novelty of the split between the live acting and its projection as film wears off, you are left with little but the usual questions about representation in art. What's missing is the sense of Antonioni's moral questing, political radicalism and aesthetic perfection. But maybe this crudity is itself indicative of where our culture is today. ●

**Aleks Sierz**