



**ARTS FESTIVAL** Backstage dramas play out on stage and on screen in this play based on a film about a play, writes **Susan Shineberg**.

# Behind the scenes

**D**IRECTOR Ivo van Hove gleefully kicks aside the barriers of stage convention in *Opening Night*, a play based on a film about a Broadway stage play in profound crisis. Taking the screenplay of John Cassavetes' 1977 film classic as his starting point, the Belgian-born director demolishes a lot more than the invisible "fourth wall" between audience and actors. In his wryly observed backstage drama, coming to the Melbourne Festival next month, he deliberately blurs borders between backstage and onstage, reality and imagination, sanity and psychosis.

This Dutch-speaking production, performed by Toneelgroep Amsterdam, deftly combines cinema techniques with the immediacy of live theatre. A large, peeled-back set shows us the chaos behind the scenes as a theatre company prepares for a preview three days before opening night. Stagehands and technical crew scurry to and fro, placing props and adjusting cables. Technicians and sound and lighting crew are at their desks below the stage. Actors practise their lines, and the frazzled director paces nervously.

All of this is closely observed by several camera operators, whose live video feed is projected throughout the work on various screens around the stage. These intimate close-ups allow us to peer, for example, into the

leading lady's dressing room, where her dresser is tugging her into costume, the actors' microphones capturing every muttered comment. Even the faces of audience members pop up on the screens — in particular the mini audience seated onstage — adding yet another layer to the play-within-a-play effect and drawing us in to the action.

Van Hove, director of the internationally acclaimed Toneelgroep Amsterdam since 2001, is a long-time devotee of Cassavetes, the trail-blazing New York filmmaker and actor who died in 1989. *Opening Night*, arguably his most personal film, tells the story of Myrtle Gordon, an actress struggling to come to grips

with getting older (played by Cassavetes' wife Gena Rowlands, with the director himself as her leading man), in a kitchen-sink melodrama called *The Second Woman*.

Van Hove says he's never seen the film. "Though I really should now," he smiles, sipping a coffee in the stylish cafe in Amsterdam's graceful Stadsschouwburg (Municipal Theatre), where the company is based.

"I knew *Faces*, (which van Hove has also made into a stage play) and *Husbands* (and *Minnie and Moscowitz*, but I didn't know this one very well. It was one of Cassavetes' movies that wasn't so successful, it only ran for one week in New York,"

he says. "Nobody went to see it. We've been playing it for five years now and, in fact, I think I have now much more audience than the film ever had."

Van Hove, whose career spans more than three decades, is one of the most exciting and innovative directors working. His numerous awards include Obies for best director of an off-Broadway show (*More Stately Mansions* and *Hedda Gabler*), and an Archangel Award at the 1999 Edinburgh Festival. His opera productions include Wagner's *Ring* for Flemish Opera Antwerp, and Janacek's *The Makropulos Affair* for the Dutch National Opera.

When his dramaturg suggested using the Cassavetes script of *Opening Night*, van Hove rejected the idea.

"I said, 'Oh, come on, an ageing actress? Please!'," he says. "Then I read it and saw that it was absolutely full of life and energy." Not to mention the cracking dialogue. "That's always the way with John Cassavetes."

Myrtle fears her role will typecast her forever as the older woman. Her already fragile psychological state goes haywire after she witnesses the death of a young fan, whose ghost becomes a disruptive alter ego. Her increasingly bizarre behaviour threatens to derail both her theatre "family" and the opening night of *The Second Woman*.

"It's very dangerous using movie elements to recreate this opening night on the stage," van Hove says of



**Age**  
**Saturday 25/9/2010**  
**Page: 14**  
**Section: A2**  
**Region: Melbourne Circulation: 291,000**  
**Type: Capital City Daily**  
**Size: 593.42 sq.cms.**  
**Frequency: MTWTFS-**

**Brief: MIAF**  
**Page 2 of 3**



the live video feeds. "But I think it was necessary, to get those huge close-ups Cassavetes used. It creates an acting style that is very rich. I actually use video in a way they do in soaps, a device to come closer to the actor, to the skin, the expression, the emotion of the actor."

In one riveting sequence that takes the drama right into the auditorium, the camera shows a drunken Myrtle (the incandescent Elsie de Brauw) lurching up the backstage stairs of the theatre, beaming the shot onto the large screen that hovers over the stage.

"It was a challenge to bring on stage, because *Opening Night* is

**It's very dangerous using movie elements to recreate this opening night on the stage.** IVO VAN HOVE, director

dealing with the director, the live actors and can easily become something which is too secretive or is like a parody," says van Hove. "In fact it was a challenge, really, of how to bring our own lives on stage, to show people rehearsing, look at them backstage, then at the same time to look at them in their private lives.

"As a film director, you are almost a god of your creation," says van Hove, who has made one film, *Amsterdam* (2009), and a Dutch television movie. "You can edit the

movie the way you really want to, and make or break the performance of an actor. In theatre there's much more autonomy for everybody, a live event. It's one of the art forms of the 21st century, because art has been becoming more and more a virtual experience. In a few years people will increasingly crave live performances."

The music of Neil Young, whose *Tonight's the Night* kicks off the action, underpins the work like a film soundtrack. "When I read the script, the first words I wrote down were Neil Young," says van Hove. "The themes of becoming older, of loneliness, all these things. His songs are full of them. The warmth, the humanity, heart of gold, being in love, it all really resonated for me. It fits the play, the atmosphere like a glove, I think."

While essentially a serious look at human fears and frailties, the play bubbles over with acerbic wit and some laugh-out-loud moments.

"It's very warm and human, and people all over the world connect with it," says van Hove. "Cassavetes wrote a kind of universal drama . . . We've been doing this piece for five years now, and people are in love with his characters, even when they misbehave or are drunk or being aggressive. It's full of emotion without being sentimental, and my actors really went for it."

*Opening Night* runs October 20-23 as part of the Melbourne Festival. [melbournefestival.com.au](http://melbournefestival.com.au)



**Age**  
Saturday 25/9/2010  
Page: 14  
Section: A2  
Region: Melbourne Circulation: 291,000  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 593.42 sq.cms.  
Frequency: MTWTFS-

Brief: MIAF  
Page 3 of 3



Jacob Derwig and  
Elsie de Brauw in  
*Opening Night*.

PICTURE:  
JAN VERSWEYELD