



Wayward actress threatens the show

A new play distils the theatricality of an edgy 1970s film

FIONA GRUBER

AN ageing actress falls apart when faced with playing the role of an ageing actress. The death of a fan destabilises her further and the presence of her ex-husband as the leading man aggravates an already rocky situation. As the play's premiere draws closer the theatre company fears that its leading lady will derail the entire production.

This is the premise of *Opening Night*, originally a film created by the American director, writer and actor John Cassavetes in 1977.

In 2006, Dutch theatre director Ivo van Hove adapted it for the stage and, after acclaimed runs in The Netherlands and the US, he is bringing it to the Melbourne International Arts Festival this month.

Van Hove is speaking on the phone from New York. He works there frequently, alongside his main job as artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, The Netherlands' foremost theatre company. *Opening Night* was a hit in the American theatre capital in 2008 and van Hove has a reputation there for his confrontational style of directing. He says the media comments in New York are always the same: he's back in town, the bad boy, the man you love to hate.

Why do they hate him? He chuckles as he mentions a controversial production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* in which the characters spend a great deal of the time in the bath. He likes to get to the core of a play, he says, to make an X-ray of the text.

"Some critics say that when you make an X-ray you only see bones, but it's a good place to be and lots of actors want to act with me."

Adapting *Opening Night* for the stage was not hard, he says, partly because the drama is about a theatre company and partly because Cassavetes (who died in 1989) was, at heart, a theatre director. *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Faces* and *Husbands* were all films that brought Cassavetes critical acclaim as a screenwriter and director. But, says van Hove, he only did movies to make money and ploughed the profits from these and from his acting career into live performance, putting on small-scale plays in Los Angeles with Gena Rowlands, his actress wife. His connection with the theatre world made Cassavetes a compelling storyteller.

"In every line he writes, you feel he knows what a director and actor need," van Hove says. "It's simple yet it has great depth." And his themes are universal: "He talks about very human things, he moves people and connects with them, even when the characters are beating each other up."

Opening Night, both the film and the play, looks at the fractured identity of an actor as an individual, as part of a group and as the object of an audience's attention.

Van Hove's long-time collaborator Elsie de Brauw plays Myrtle, an actress discontented with her role within the theatre company and unwilling to play Virginia, the leading character in the play *The Second Wife*, in the depressive manner that the author intends. She's also anxious about her waning energy and attractiveness.

When Cassavetes cast Rowlands in that role they were both approaching 50, about the age that de Brauw is now (as is van Hove).

A criticism is that the play deals

with midlife crisis in a dated fashion, more in keeping with the 1970s than with contemporary womanhood.

Van Hove rejects the need for a feminist interpretation. "It's a very emotional text, about the longing for togetherness and a lost paradise," he says.

"Myrtle's problem is existential, she's struggling with ageing, with acting, with people thinking she's an old woman. She resists being part of the [theatre] family but they are dependent on her. It's not about emancipation."

In van Hove's production, which has Dutch dialogue and English surtitles, video monitors on stage display close-ups of the action. These are intended to accentuate particular moments and echo the masks used in classical Greek theatre.

This is not just trendy use of multimedia, van Hove asserts: the close-ups are used to serve the drama, to reveal a grimace or shrug. The music of Neil Young, which flows through the production, is another necessity, he says, matching the emotion in the music and the drama.

On Jan Versweyveld's set, the behind-the-scenes action morphs into onstage drama. It is a *mise en abyme* of theatrical spaces within larger stages, accentuated by the fact that a portion of the audience sits on the stage.

Van Hove told his actors to be ruthlessly truthful, both in their roles and about the fact that they are "in love with theatre".

It's led to an interesting dynamic: he directs an actor playing a director very like himself, "pretending to be sincere but manipulating".

Van Hove's international career includes opera, film and theatre, ranging from Moliere, Ibsen and Eugene O'Neill to a



marathon six-hour version of Shakespeare's Roman plays called *Roman Tragedies*, combining *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

He also has a penchant for film-to-play adaptations. Alongside *Opening Night* he has directed theatrical versions of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage* and *Cries and Whispers*, and stagings of films by Visconti, Pasolini and Antonioni. This is his second Cassavetes project, following a version of *Faces* in 1997. Van Hove's first choice for a follow-up was the film *Husbands*, but at the time the Cassavetes estate wouldn't give him the rights.

Surprisingly, he still hasn't seen

the original film of *Opening Night*. And, although Rowlands is supportive (and has since given permission for an adaptation of *Husbands*, which he plans to stage in 2012), she has yet to see his stage version of *Opening Night*.

It's ironic, van Hove says, that his production, which did well in The Netherlands and in New York, has probably outstripped the original film's takings at the box office. "It showed for one week in New York, and so did we," he says.

Opening Night is at the Arts Centre Playhouse, Melbourne, October 20-23.



Gena Rowlands in the film



Elsie de Brauw, in blue, plays the unwilling actress Myrtle in the Dutch production *Opening Night*, which is a stage adaptation of the 1977 John Cassavetes film of the same name

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