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MIAF: Opening Night

By [Sarah Adams](#) ArtsHub | Friday, October 08, 2010



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Opening Night: MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL

A theatre company in crisis is the focal point for Toneelgroep Amsterdam/NTGent's multifaceted theatre reworking of John Cassavetes' 1977 film, *Opening Night*. Audiences at the Melbourne International Arts Festival will be invited to take a peek behind the scenes in this large-scale production that will be directed by revolutionary director Ivo van Hove.

Elsie de Brauw, who plays the Gena Rowlands role from the original film, tells me that one of the biggest challenges with this play is, "To make theatre out of a film, that's really something that's not so easy." However, as an actress herself, she found the role to be easily relatable, "Because it's about an actress who is rehearsing, so I do that every day."

One of the difficulties of taking a script that was originally intended for film and bringing it to the stage is that, "It's always the language is so, sort of naturalistic. In film, you have sentences like 'can you give me that cup of tea' so it's so natural, it's not Shakespeare... it's just normal language, and that is for theatre, hard. That's not helping you. You can theatrical-ise then.... It's not the language making it theatre."

De Brauw's character is almost laughably a diva, only so because she says that this is a very American thing to be, and that, "We don't have those in Holland and Belgium." Asked if she feels as though she ever gets any Diva-like qualities after being absorbed in the character she is almost shocked, "No, definitely not." This is but further evidence that this is a play about contrasts and rethinking the different roles we play. The play will also be performed in Dutch, with English subtitles. Just another twist in what appears to be a performance about tweaking and reinventing.

The protagonist is forced to confront her own mortality after the death of a fan who then begins to haunt her. "She tries to take the spirit of this girl into her life, and she talks to her while she's not there and this helps her to get more energy in the scenes. After a while, the spirit of this girl is no longer her friend but becomes an enemy." A long hectic crescendo of tantrums, near misses and the palpable longing for the days when Myrtle was younger and prettier are to follow.

Lighting and stage designer Jan Versweyveld's thoughtful set features a theatre within a theatre, creating a play within the backdrop of, well, another play. This may seem a bit much to get your head around, but don't fret, they have it under control. Versweyveld's design has camera operators following the actors on stage, broadcasting their actions on screens positioned in and around the performance space. If this doesn't seem like enough to co-ordinate, the audience also doubles as fictional spectators, sitting on stage and effectively becoming part of the performance.

These porous layers of the different roles we have in the theatre, as actors, audience members and participants are exactly what van Hove has aimed to play with. The NY Times have said, "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." Cassavetes was known to have encouraged his cast members to forge among the darkest corners of their minds, which could also be the style that van Hove tends to operate under, although he strays a lot more into theatrical and further from naturalism than his cinematic counterpart.

De Brauw agrees that what makes the work special is that it allows for the immediacy of theatre, with the intimacy of film, "When you see the show there are two camera women on stage, and they are filming us all the time like they are making a documentary of it. So you see not only us playing the theatre but you also see, on a very big screen behind us, you see details like faces or hands, or you see the technicians working or you see people talking to each other in a corner. It's both, it's like theatre and movie. And that's what makes it special."

This is a co-production between Amsterdam's Toneelgroep and Belgium's NTGent, from which de Brauw is a part of. NTGent is an open ensemble of actors, authors, directors, dramaturges and designers. De Brauw says that the main aim of NTGent is, "We try to be very diverse, sometimes it's only music, sometimes we make plays out of movies, sometimes we make plays out of books, sometimes we just have an idea, sometimes we really do a play how it is written."

Opening Night is an excellent example of the diverse program that Artistic Director Brett Sheehy has presided over for the Melbourne International Arts Festival 2010. It is excellent news for punters that he will be sticking around until 2012. In a statement released by the Festival Director, Carrillo Ganther she states, "Brett's programming abilities are of a high order – he brings great intelligence, passion and impeccable taste to the job."

What plays such as *Opening Night* show us is that, not only has the Arts Festival maintained a diverse standard of programming, they also haven't let eccentricity be their sole modus operandi. These are works selected for their quality, not their niche. And with works such as this sitting next to arts events plonked firmly in the traditional mainstream, we can only hope to be challenged, provoked and have our artistic minds reprogrammed – and this is always a good thing.

Toneelgroep Amsterdam/NTGent

Opening Night

By John Cassavetes, Directed by Ivo van Hove

<http://www.melbournefestival.com.au/program/production?id=3700>

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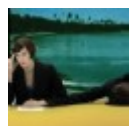
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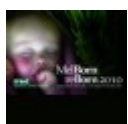
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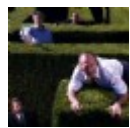
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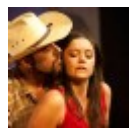
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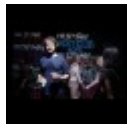
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