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## INTERVIEW: Elsie de Brauw on Opening Night at the MIAF

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Actress Elsie de Brauw is in Melbourne town this week for the International Arts Festival. She's starring in *Opening Night*, renowned Belgian director Ivo van Hove's adaptation, with Amsterdam's [Toneelgroep](#), of the 1977 film of the same name, by John Cassavetes.

In that film, Cassavetes, performing opposite Gena Rowlands and Ben Gazzara, depicts the progress of a new Broadway play, *The Second Wife*, through rehearsals up to its opening night. Myrtle, a middle-aged star playing the lead role of a woman struggling to admit that she is aging, is having serious problems with the play's material. When an adoring teenage fan is knocked down by a car and killed, Myrtle suddenly rebels, throwing the whole production into glorious chaos.

"Yes. Of course, I've seen the film. What did you think...?"

I've just asked Elsie de Brauw, who has the leading role of Myrtle, if she's ever actually seen *Opening Night*. I explain that I only asked her this because Ivo van Hove [swears](#) he has never seen it. I thought maybe that was a part of the [Toneelgroep](#) creative process, or something ...

“Yah, yah, yah. No. I know he says that, but I doubt that it’s true, you know. When we do an adaptation of a film, I like to watch it because you always get something out of it, an inspiration.”

And what did she think of the film?

“How can you ever make a play out of this? What is it? A movie about a play. How do you turn that into a play, a play about a movie about a play?”

But this groundbreaking treatment of a landmark film is precisely typical of European enthusiasm for Cassavetes’s work. Even in 1978, when *Opening Night* was being released into empty cinemas across Los Angeles and New York, before disappearing completely from American screens for more than twenty years, Europeans were hailing it as a masterpiece. Clearly, Ivo van Hove is a fan.

“Ivo’s idea was, was, he’s a big Cassavetes fan, he had already adapted *Faces*, another Cassavetes’ movie, his idea was first to do *Husbands* [1970], but we didn’t get the rights, or something. So then he found *Opening Night*, and we decided to do that.”

The standout feature of van Hove’s work with Toneelgroep, in this production in particular, is the use of filmic and other technologies to heighten theatricality. Live-streaming cameras are used to effect Cassavetes’ extreme close-ups and lingering portraits, importing formal and compositional tropes from film to heighten the liveness of the theatre experience.



“While we are playing in the play there are two camerawomen who follow us, and, as you watch the play, projected on a huge screen behind you see our faces, or the hand gesture, or something that happens way at the back.”

But it’s not a formal kind of experiment, such in the technology-laden works of Richard Foreman or the Wooster Group. Despite his innovations, van Hove describes himself as an old-fashioned theatremaker, a man only interested in making stories for the stage. This is a professional modesty shared by de Brauw, who claims she does not like to think about whether she is in a film or a play, or even about the presence of cameras at all. It’s all about the character.

“We, as the actor, don’t have to think about that. I don’t even want to know when the camera is on me, actually. I don’t want to see my face. My focus is on the character. I’m thinking about the audience, and that interaction, not how I look up close. If I think about the movie, it’s because it’s the language of a movie. It’s not the language of, of, a Shakespeare.”

So, she says, she has embraced this woman, Myrtle.

“Myrtle is a woman who has been acting for twenty five years or so and now she has agreed to play a part, Virginia, in this new show. But she really thinks that the play isn’t very good, that there is no *humour* in it.”

Part of the great struggle in Cassavetes very serious film is in trying to find an escape through humour. But an escape from what?

“The woman is someone she doesn’t want to play. She has to be hit; she has to be the victim, and she doesn’t like that. So she makes up her own texts and screws up rehearsals. People keep telling her it’s because she has to play a woman who’s getting older and that she has a problem with that. She says no, no, that’s not the problem, I just want to do what I like, not what I don’t like.”

Cassevetes envisioned his film as the titanic clash between a fierce writer and a driven actress, with the director caught in the middle, all of them fighting—to the death—for the integrity of their art.

“That’s really real,” says de Brauw. “It’s like we do that all the time. Not so bad, perhaps. In America you have more women who are *actresses*—you know, divas—but the fight, the desire to, I, I really want to play this *good*, and why can’t you really *look* at me when you’re playing, or I don’t want to do that, why do I have to do that? I recognise that.”

**The details:** *Opening Night* opens on Wednesday, October 20. Tickets through [The Arts Centre](#) and [Ticketmaster](#).