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Photography: Jan Versweyveld

Opening Night at the Festival

A theatrical adaptation of a John Cassavetes film about the anxieties women face as they age, by Dutch director Ivo van Hove for the Melbourne Festival.

By Gemma Sharkey, 11th October 2010

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Opening Night is a theatrical tour de force that examines the fractured identity of the actor, the anxieties women face as they grow older and what happens when the line between performance and reality becomes blurred. Gemma Sharkey spoke to starring actress Hadewych Minis about her upcoming stint at the Melbourne Festival.

Opening Night is not your average bare bones theatre production, with actors carefully treading the boards while amply projecting a theatre-honed voice. It is much more. Adapted from the award winning 1977 John Cassavetes film of the same name by Dutch enfant terrible of the theatrical world Ivo van Hove, it recounts the story of a middle-aged actress, Myrtle, who is quietly dealing with her own personal anxieties about ageing. When a new director wants her to also embrace a role on stage, Myrtle refuses to the point of a very public and dramatic breakdown, and therein treading a well-worn path carved out by her cinematic predecessors Norma Desmond (*Sunset Boulevard*), Margot Channing (*All About Eve*) and Blanche Dubois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*). When a young fan and aspiring actress, Nancy [played by Minis], is suddenly killed while waiting for an autograph from Myrtle, and later returns as a ghost, she forces Myrtle to confront not only her own mortality, but the direction she must go in, both professionally and personally, if she is to survive.

“My character was a lot of fun to play as she becomes a ghost”, says Minis. “The beautiful thing about that is that she can do anything; logic doesn’t apply to the situation. At first my ghost is friendly and helpful, but she soon turns against Myrtle and in the end Myrtle has to strangle the ghost to death. I guess the girl represents a part in Myrtle she has to kill, to say goodbye to – her younger self and everything that goes along with shameless youth and happiness.”

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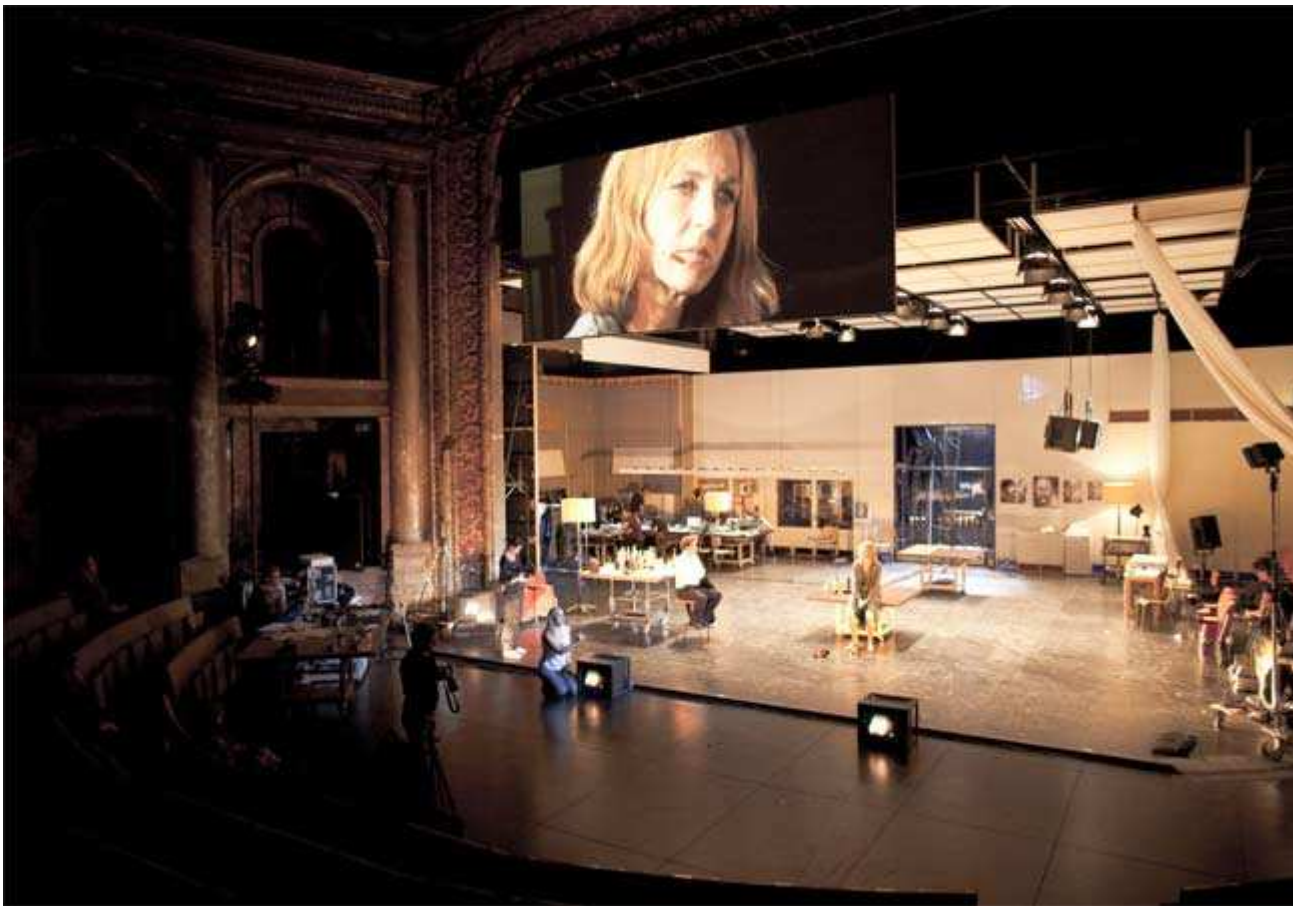


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Director van Hove has often been accused of sensationalism and shock tactics in order to draw in the crowds, and is reputed to have a confrontational style of directing – he has said that he likes to “to push [the actors] to their limits to provoke an extreme but meaningful performance”. In the case of Minis’ part in the play, in addition to portraying the gamut of human emotion, there is full-frontal nudity.

“I had never done it before and at first I was really afraid,” says Minis. “But the scene was short and they turned the lights low so it was okay. My character is an exhibitionist and she wants to be desired by everyone, so taking off all her clothes is definitely something she would do. And Ivo is an amazing director; he’s like a fish in water. Usually directors are very specific about a performance, but he gave me more freedom than ever before. He let me find out for myself how I would react in different situations. He gave me a lot of trust.”

What is also interesting about van Hove is that he seems to really understand not only women’s anxieties about ageing and mortality, but also the plight of the actor and the difficulty that comes from having an identity that is fractured during and after performance. Using technology as well as a powerful script, the play effectively explores the question of where the line between the actor and the character lies?

“When he would direct us it would be amazing how much he knew, how much he understood,” says Minis. “He really gets inside your head. He’d say things like ‘Now you’re with this girl and you’re thinking: Oh, you’re prettier than me...’ They were typical women’s thoughts and I thought ‘How do you know we think like that?’ He sees people so clearly and understands what’s going on in inside them – that’s what makes him so amazing”.

In addition to his skills as a director, van Hove uses technology, a powerful set design and a moody soundtrack by Neil Young in order to give the play’s narrative more impact. By using film screens to provide close-ups of the actors’ faces – much like the Greeks used masks – and the dramatic ploy of a play-within-a-play, the audience is left unsure as to where each scene begins and ends. In this way he destabilises and disorientates the viewer, giving us a window into the actors’ own difficulties in distinguishing what is performance and what is real.

Minis is effusive on this aspect. “It was a dream for the designer and Ivo to build a theatre-within-a-theatre, to show the inside world of actors, the private scenes that go on between shooting and on-stage parts. Those intimate moments, the before and after, all the interesting parts of the acting world which seem improvised in the play are actually real and scripted. And the screens give the audience the chance to see close-ups of the actors’ faces and choose whether to watch the acting on stage, or on the screen. You can look right into the actors’ eyes, and given that this is such an emotional production that’s really something special.”

Opening Night runs from October 20-23 at the Melbourne Festival.

www.melbournefestival.com.au



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