



Open to festival acclaim

THEATRE **OPENING NIGHT ★★★★★**

Toneelgroep Amsterdam/NT Ghent Playhouse, Arts Centre, October 20, Ends tomorrow

Martin Ball Reviewer

A THEATRICAL tour-de-force, *Opening Night* is a densely layered exploration of the full-scale mechanics of theatre-making, from writing and acting, to directing and designing.

Originally a 1977 film by John Cassavetes about the rehearsal process for a play, the film has been re-imagined as a remarkable stage show by leading Dutch theatre company Toneelgroep Amsterdam and Belgium's NT Ghent.

Many great films have been made about the process of film-making, just as there's many a Broadway production about putting on a show. *Opening Night* borrows much from these traditions but achieves its stunning effects by using Brechtian processes of "baring the device" while also taking inspiration from contemporary ideas of meta-theatricality.

The story is simple. While rehearsing for a play called *The Second Wife*, the leading actress Myrtle worries that playing the role of an ageing woman will risk defining her as an older woman.

This anxiety undermines her confidence, sending the rehearsals into chaos.

Myrtle is further distracted by the accidental death of a young fan, whose ghost comes to embody Myrtle's image of her younger, more sensual self. From here she goes on a journey of rediscovering her identity through inter-relationships with the writer, leading man, producer and director. The conceptual brilliance of this production begins with director Ivo van Hove's decision to open up and re-orient the stage. Part of the audience sits in the wings as if the front of house, while the main auditorium becomes one of the stage's wings.

This sense of visual re-orientation is emphasised by the use of hand-held cameras, which project the action from multiple angles onto a series of screens.

We are thus privy to the action from multiple perspectives: the front, side, and even from the backstage dressing rooms. Such ideas are not new, of course, but the intelligence and detail in the design, direction and performance of *Opening Night* make this production particularly engaging.

Language remains something of a barrier,

however. The Dutch text is projected as surtitles throughout the theatre; but, in a production that is already so visually dense, such a crucial extra component is inevitably a distraction.

It is perhaps because of this that it can take time to fully engage with the show and appreciate the entire scope and nuance of the visual details and spatial relationships.

Beyond this minor annoyance, however, *Opening Night* is a celebration of theatre's potential to illustrate life.

And it is terrifically funny, providing hilarious scenes as Myrtle ad-libs her lines — reminiscent of Dustin Hoffman's character in *Tootsie*.

Elsie de Brauw is excellent as Myrtle, a woman desperately trying to reconcile the contradictions in her self-identity. Other stand-outs among the 11-strong cast include Chris Nietvelt as the haughty playwright, Hans Kesting as the director, and Hadewych Minis as Myrtle's spirited and lissom alter-ego, Nancy.

Opening Night is very much festival fare, offering a great opportunity for local audiences to see a production with international scale and scope.



A scene from Toneelgroep Amsterdam/NT Ghent's tour de force, *Opening Night*

