



Cassavetes's drama of backstage breakdown steers clear of the heart

THEATRE

Opening Night
 By John Cassavetes.
 Playhouse, Victorian Arts
 Centre, Toneelgroep
 Amsterdam/NTGent.
 Melbourne International
 Arts Festival. October 20.

I SUSPECT I might have enjoyed Ivo van Hove's intriguing production a lot more if I hadn't seen the film on which it was based, John Cassavetes's *Opening Night*. Van Hove himself claims not to have seen the film. And the film itself — a brilliant backstage study of the process of creation — is often given surprisingly short shrift in the Cassavetes canon. In recent interviews, van Hove has even suggested that the audience for his play already outnumbers that for the film, which suggests a certain complacency in approaching his material.

Opening Night showcases one of Gena Rowlands's great roles. She plays the leading actress Myr-

tle, a woman "of a certain age" struggling with a role that is, in part, about ageing. During an out-of-town season before its premiere in New York, the cast, crew and writer are struggling to perfect the performance, when a young fan — the unstable 17-year-old Nancy — is killed in a car accident.

Myrtle begins to be haunted by Nancy's presence, in an increasingly spooky and beautifully ambiguous portrayal of possession. Yet, as she says, she herself has summoned Nancy, because that is what actresses do.

As Myrtle approaches the edges of insanity, it becomes clear that Nancy represents not only her younger self, but the daughter she never had in her single-minded pursuit of her career.

In the film Gena Rowlands's compelling and fascinatingly complex performance of Myrtle's destructive act of creation sails so close to the wind it's painful to watch. Elsie De Brauw, who plays Myrtle in this production, is clearly an accomplished actress, but she doesn't get close to Rowlands's fragile, razor-sharp edges.

But van Hove's adaptation isn't about exploring the traumatic heart of Cassavetes's film. He offers a surprisingly crude, pop-psychology adaptation of the story, with De Brauw's Myrtle reduced to a vain actress refusing to face her age.

Van Hove's adaptation is theatrically spectacular and beautifully performed. It gives the auditorium a side-on look to a huge backstage area, with a number of spectators actually on stage, performing as the audience. Two camera operators film live footage, which is projected, along with surtitles (the text is in Dutch) on to screens around the stage, permitting huge close-ups of the actors' faces.

Where this show works brilliantly is in its comic ironies. When van Hove approaches the serious questions in Cassavetes's script, he takes refuge in jokey melodrama. He is clearly no mean theatre-maker; but in this show his virtuosity has a hollow core.

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Tickets: \$75. Bookings: 1300 182 183. Until Saturday.