

Theater Director With a Filmmaker's Eye

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The Belgian theater director Ivo van Hove swears he has never seen “Opening Night,” the classic 1977 backstage film by John Cassavetes, but that didn’t stop him from adapting the film for the stage. His innocence helped rather than hindered him, he said, in imagining his stage version based on Cassavetes’s original screenplay.

Mr. van Hove’s “Opening Night” makes its American premiere on Tuesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where it will play for five performances, in Dutch with English subtitles.

As general director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, Mr. van Hove is known here for his bold, actor-centered stagings of classic dramas, including plays by Tennessee Williams, Ibsen and Molière. But “Opening Night” will show a different dimension of the director, whose recent European projects include Wagner and Shakespeare cycles. Created with his Amsterdam ensemble in 2006, this production reflects Mr. van Hove’s interest in cinema and growing résumé of screen-to-stage adaptations.

In 2005 Mr. van Hove adapted “Faces” (1968), another film by Cassavetes, who died in 1989, for major theaters in Germany. This fall he tackled “Rocco and His Brothers,” a 1960 film by Luchino Visconti, for the Ruhr Triennale festival.

Later this season he is scheduled to adapt Ingmar Bergman’s 1972 “Cries and Whispers,” which will play at the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm, Bergman’s longtime artistic base. And for the 2009 Holland Festival he is devising a single evening based on three films by Michelangelo Antonioni: “L’Avventura,” “La Notte” and “L’Eclisse.”

Mr. van Hove, who turned 50 in October, says he fell in love with these films as “a movie freak” in his early 20s. “I was living around the corner from a very good movie theater in Antwerp, which was always empty. I was sitting there alone, with maybe two other people, and there were all the movies of Visconti, Pasolini, Fassbinder.”

The long development time required for filmmaking, he said during a recent break from meetings in New York, makes him impatient. Although he recently made a feature film, “Amsterdam,” he finds staging screenplays a more viable alternative. Cassavetes’s “Opening Night” – one of the great films about the theater – proved irresistible.

In long unbroken sequences Cassavetes follows Myrtle, a star actress (in a celebrated portrayal by Cassavetes’s wife, Gena Rowlands) who breaks down during out-of-town

previews for a new play. Myrtle finds herself haunted by thoughts of mortality after a fan's accidental death near her limousine. Her anxious colleagues pin their hopes on her first performance, uncertain what will transpire.

“For me it was more than just a movie about theater people,” Mr. van Hove said. “These theater people together constitute a family ó a society, you could say. It’s about how this breaks down, or is on the verge of breaking down, because one of the people, Myrtle, revolts against it.”

For the adapters the film’s multiple locations – corresponding to personalities and inner states – posed the largest problem. Mr. van Hove’s solution, reached with the set and lighting designer Jan Versweyveld, was to build a small theater on the actual stage, creating a play within the play.

At the Brooklyn Academy’s Harvey Theater some audience members will sit onstage, doubling as fictional spectators within the narrative. The rest of the spectators will watch the action from their traditional seats outside the proscenium. Scenes play either to the front or to the side, to indicate whether characters in the story are on- or offstage. Plexiglass screens reveal additional playing areas.

Mr. van Hove has not entirely abstained from filmmaking. He deploys a camera crew to move around the action, training lenses on individual performers. “I film it like a soap,” he said. “Two cameras, view and close-up.” The live images beam to large video screens, a magnifying effect that he likens to the masks used in ancient Greek amphitheaters.

Ray Carney, a Cassavetes scholar and film professor at Boston University, saw the theater version in Amsterdam. “Every time a play is adapted from a film or any other source text,” he noted, “there is an act of interpretation going on – an act of reunderstanding, reshaping and highlighting.” In this case, he said, Mr. van Hove “is very interested in these overlaps and mergings of different personal, public and private spaces.”

That means the stage director “has clearly decided to break down the walls, or to make them all transparent with this plexiglass world he has created,” Mr. Carney added. “We have a very strong sense that the person out in front of the audience is the same person we saw just a minute ago in the dressing room, or in the street at the back of the theater.”

Despite the various additional layers in the live version, Mr. van Hove doesn’t relish innovation for its own sake. “I don’t like irony that much,” he said, emphasizing that he ultimately just wants to tell Cassavetes’s original story, an artist’s crisis of self-discovery. “It’s about theater, but it’s actually about living,” he said.