

Theatre

A Theatre Icon from the Lowlands

International Appreciation for Ivo Van Hove

If such a thing as a Nobel Prize for theatre direction existed, then anno 2017 Ivo Van Hove (b. 1958) would stand an excellent chance of winning. Not only has Van Hove gained world renown with his Toneelgroep Amsterdam, he has also achieved global recognition in his stints as guest director in Germany, France, England and the United States.

Van Hove's international reputation has risen spectacularly especially in the last year and a half, a provisional highpoint of which was his collaboration with global star David Bowie who passed away on January 10, 2016. In Manhattan's New York Theatre Workshop Van Hove directed *Lazarus*, a psychedelic rock musical based on Bowie's cult film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, with existing Bowie repertoire and new songs he wrote especially for the production.

A deluge of articles and reviews in the international press and a partnership with such a pop icon: so much recognition for a man in his fifties from a Flemish village in Limburg, is to say the least, quite remarkable.

When Van Hove took the reins as artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam on January 1, 2001,

such a glorious future still seemed very far-off indeed. In both artistic and business terms, there were initial problems to overcome, but within a few years Van Hove was able not only to turn things around for the company, but also with the press and his audiences. In the meantime, Toneelgroep Amsterdam has become an absolute top-notch national and international theatre company.

Formerly successful productions are regularly re-staged, co-productions are made with companies from both home and abroad and such laurelled theatre makers as Katie Mitchell, Simon Stone and Sam Gold are brought to Amsterdam as guest directors. Furthermore, in the meantime, foreign demand for Van Hove productions has risen more sharply than the company can accommodate in logistical and organisational terms: approximately sixty percent of requests from abroad have to be declined.

The majority of cultural subsidies come from Dutch government authorities, and that fact alone gives priority to productions for Dutch audiences. On the other hand: there is large-scale foreign investment in major productions, and without the collaboration of companies that include London's Barbican, the Wiener Festwochen and Parisian Théâtre national de Chaillot such a monster production as *Kings of War* (première June 2015) would not have seen the light of day. Playing outside the Netherlands is not only a privilege; it has also become an obligation.

Modern techniques, straightforward stage designs, costumes and attributes that refer to topical subjects, but also radical adaptations of texts, artful *mise-en-scènes* and physically stylized forms of performance are characteristic of a Van Hove production. The realization of the stage setting always involves his life partner Jan Versweyveld, who almost always opts for a functional and pragmatic approach.

Illustrative of this duo's innovative style is *Roman Tragedies*, a nearly six-hour-long production based on three Shakespeare tragedies that premiered in July 2007. A magisterial *tour de force*, an epic constellation, played without intermissions, in open surroundings in which the fourth wall between the playing area and hall was abandoned allowing the audience to move freely from the ground floor and balcony to the foyer and even the stage.



Kings of War © J. Versweyveld

Other great successes, in international circles as well, were *Angels in America* (première March 2008), a diptych by Tony Kushner about the aids epidemic of the 1980s, and *The Fountainhead* (première June 2014) based on the eponymous novel of ideas by the American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand.

The celebrated *Kings of War*, a Shakespeare marathon in which the historical plays *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III* were combined into a universal metaphor about power and lust for power premiered the year after *The Fountainhead*. Van Hove brought this production to London's Barbican in the spring of 2016, Shakespeare's quatercentenary year, and in November 2016, just prior to the American presidential elections, to the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York.

The headlines in *The Daily Beast* read, 'A Cautionary Tale for Election Day', which confirmed Van Hove's intentions. He takes extreme interest in the demons that besiege the human spirit, the unforeseen consequences of which determine the course of history. *Kings of War* is a gorgeous example of that fascination, but so are *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*, the Arthur Miller plays Van Hove staged on Broadway in 2015 and 2016.

One can scarcely keep pace with the speed of nominations and prizes that Van Hove has received of late. On May 20, 2016 he won the Founders

Award for Excellence in Directing in New York, an award that one can only receive once and that was awarded to a non-English-speaking director for the first time.

He had already received Tony Awards as Best Director of a Play (*The Crucible*) and Best Revival of a Play (*A View from the Bridge*). In his acceptance speech, Van Hove reminded his audience of the initial scepticism that had befallen him as the 'bad boy of Belgian avant-garde theatre' and the demanding route he had subsequently travelled in New York.

On the threshold of 2017, it was announced that Van Hove had been included in the prestigious American magazine *Foreign Policy* list of 100 Leading Global Thinkers of 2016: the director was praised 'for unmasking fear from the stage'.

In April 2017, Van Hove will be leaving for London with Toneelgroep Amsterdam to take part in a co-production with the Barbican of *Ossessione*, an adaptation for the stage of Luchino Visconti's 1943 debut film (based on James McCain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). Two actors from Toneelgroep Amsterdam will be sharing the lead roles, together with (film) actor Jude Law.

A striking aspect of the high status that Van Hove has achieved is his lack of divulging details regarding his private life. It wasn't until David Bowie's death, that the public was allowed a temporary view into the man Van Hove himself, and was able to see how moved he was at that moment. It generated a kind of intimacy that felt out of place for such an apparently inaccessible man who – like all great artists – is constantly searching for the great story behind the small, the universal behind the personal, and depth behind the superficial.

JOS NIJHOF

Translated by Scott Rollins



Michael S. Hall in *Lazarus*, 2016 © J. Versweyveld