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Chapter 12
Ivo van Hove: Celebrity and Reader

Denis Flannery

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To write about the work of Ivo van Hove (b. 1958) is, in part, to write about the output of a celebrity. This is due in no small part to the super-visible recognition his achievements have received – two Obie awards in 1999, the French government making him *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2004, a Best Director Laurence Olivier Award in 2015, among many others. This celebrity status is also in part due to the name, number and extent of the very famous artists and performers with whom, especially in recent years, he has worked. These include: Gillian Anderson, Juliette Binoche, David Bowie, Bryan Cranston, P. J. Harvey, Jude Law, and Saoirse Ronan.

When, on 11 January 2016, David Bowie's death was announced, van Hove had, for the previous eighteen months, been collaborating with the singer on the musical *Lazarus*. Co-written by Bowie and Enda Walsh, it had premiered at the New York Theatre Workshop the previous month.¹ On that day, in TV interview after TV interview, van Hove was asked about the last months, works and final illness of his collaborator and friend, becoming a kind of

conduit to the public about the hitherto unknown 'truth' of the circumstances in which Bowie left the world.

In one of those interviews, on Sky News, van Hove joined celebrity, the initial focus of this essay, with a display of his seriousness and sensitivity as a reader, my second, and major, focus. Asked about the reasons Bowie had for keeping his final illness and his approaching death secret, van Hove engaged in the following reading of the final song on *Blackstar*, Bowie's then-new album:

The last line of *Blackstar*, it's the last line of the last song, it's something (I am very bad at quoting) but something like 'I couldn't give it all'. That means like I gave everything possible but I had to keep something to myself. And I must say, as human being, I totally respect that somebody keeps his suffering and his death to himself, to a secret for him and his family. I totally can understand that and respect that. (van Hove 2016)

Van Hove does, it's true, misquote (the song in question is called 'I Can't Give Everything Away'; these words constitute the last line he sets out to read in recollection). But he goes on to confidently assert that the line has a meaning: 'That means ... I gave everything possible but I had to keep something to myself'. Misquoted or not, van Hove's reading takes a very emotionally-focused approach to a specific situation. No matter how focused the approach or how specific the situation, though, this reading has a very broad, near-universal emotional resonance. In this interview van Hove repeatedly emphasizes that 'I must say, as human being, I totally respect that somebody

keeps his suffering and his death to himself, to a secret for him and his family’.

In the process of recollection (and translation from English to Dutch and then to English again), senses of the phrase ‘I Can’t Give Everything Away’ may get slightly lost. To ‘give everything away’ can colloquially mean to give away a secret that one is holding or a game that, unbeknownst to others, one is playing. Giving ‘everything away’ also entails renunciation and/or abandonment.

But the song is read with an intense thoughtful attention to its emotional specifics. Even if ‘I Can’t Give Everything Away’ is read in terms of a meaning, message or code, the intensity, the thought and the affect are all in play; the song is not read reductively. For all the assertive force of purpose in this reading, van Hove manages to broaden out the song’s terms of reference along with those of Bowie’s death and of the interview itself: ‘as a human being, I totally respect that somebody keeps his suffering and his death to himself.’ Yet this broadening out leaves a certain mystery intact – the mystery, the privacy of Bowie’s final months in this case – and the mystery of ‘I Can’t Give Everything Away’. The reading is also set in the context of *Lazarus*, the musical. Van Hove claims that both the play and *Blackstar* were ‘like two testaments’ by Bowie, adding that they were ‘full of signals’ (van Hove 2016).

Reading the song in this way, van Hove quietly insists on a certain decency in collective life. This insistence echoes comments he made about Sophocles’s

Antigone in 2015 when ITA (International Theatre Amsterdam, of which he is General Director, formerly Toneelgroep Amsterdam,) made a co-production of that play with London's Barbican and Luxembourg's Théâtre de la Ville:

The dilemma of dealing with Polyneike's body became a terrifying reality recently when Malaysia airlines Flight 17 was shot down over a Ukrainian war zone. The dead were left in an open field, rotting in the burning sun for over a week. The whole world saw this as an act of barbarity. Once the bodies were recovered and brought to the Netherlands for identification, the Dutch government arranged a convoy of hearses in a 100km burial procession. This was a civilized and humane response, a mark of respect to the victims. (Van Hove 2015: 4-6)

If his reading of the final line in Bowie's song is premised on a confident assertion ('That means', he says of the line) then, with equal confidence, van Hove takes the cultural dynamics of Sophocles's play from 442 BC into a very brutally-conceived 'now'. And, again, his reading broadens out the text's terms of reference, this time moving from one unburied body in the ancient world to nearly three hundred (the bodies of the airline passengers and crew) in the very recent past. And if van Hove uses the verb 'to respect' as he speaks of somebody (in this case David Bowie) keeping their suffering and death a 'secret for him and his family', then he also draws on 'respect' as a noun when he describes the 'civilized and humane' response of the Dutch government when they arranged for the recovery and processional return of the victims' bodies as a 'mark of respect'. This word cuts across both readings and indicates the extent to which van Hove's practice as a reader is ethically driven and intensely related to urgent senses of reality. His use of the word 'respect' in these two contexts is also indicative of the centrality, for him, of theatre as a means for members of his audiences to encounter and

contemplate some of the most raw and difficult issues in their lives. I want theatre to touch on reality,' he once said, going to claim that:

In my plays, violence is ritual. People come to watch theatre to cry – not cry about the play or its characters, but about themselves. At the end of it, they walk out and continue as if nothing happened. Yet something did happen. One has to allow oneself to be emotional to learn how to love, that's what theatre is meant for. If you don't master that, life is horrible. (Veraart 2018: 79)¹

The quotation above comes from Karin Veraart's recent *Ivo van Hove*:

Regisseur, Director, Manager, a book which bears on its front a black and white headshot of its subject with his first name, IVO, printed in thick white type on a scale that dwarfs the smaller, darker printing of his surname and the thinner printing of the three key terms (director, mentor, manager) of Veraart's subtitle. For a director, even a well-known one, this is an intense level of public recognition. For a theatre director it's even more rare.

Veraart thinks of van Hove as a director (Regisseur), as a Mentor and as a business-man or manager whether as running the Café Illusie in Antwerp in the 1980s, directing Het Zuidelijk Toneel in Eindhoven in the 1990s or, finally, as General Director since 2001 of what is now ITA. What underlies all these three strands of activity is, a fourth – van Hove's readerly passion(s), his practice as a reader. This practice is emotionally-focused, highly responsive to the specifics of the situations and texts it encounters, ethically driven and motivated by an urgent wish to connect with the realities of its present moment.

¹ I am very grateful to Adriaan van Klinken for his helping me with the translation of this passage – and others – from Veraart's book.

CELEBRITY AND EXTREMITY

‘Celebrities,’ Sharon Marcus has recently noted, ‘are people known *during their lifetimes* to more people than could possibly know one another’ (Marcus 2019: 9). In this basic sense Ivo van Hove is emphatically a celebrity. But different aspects of the history of celebrity, as recounted by Marcus, have resonance for his work and career. Locating the origins of contemporary celebrity culture in a powerfully visible, and international, nineteenth-century theatrical world, Marcus points out that theatre has, since the 1800s, become a more minoritized, ‘niche form of entertainment, albeit one still able to generate blockbusters such a *Hamilton*’ (Marcus 2019: 12). Van Hove’s celebrity status and the mutual push and pull of his work with celebrity culture would begin to suggest, if not a return to the heady nineteenth-century days of an automatic equation between celebrity and theatre, then a certain removal of the theatrical from the ‘niche’.

Marcus claims that intellectuals ‘have been decrying the ills of celebrity culture’ since the early 1940s at least, adding that ‘media producers’ (among whom she includes photographers and gossip columnists as well as directors) ‘can become celebrities themselves’ (Marcus 2019: 14). Van Hove might well be considered an instance of this. But he has always taken into his work his own status as a fan, be that of music (David Bowie, Neil Young) of cinema

(his admiration and adaptations of Ingmar Bergman or Pier Paolo Pasolini), or other forms of cultural work.

Celebrity culture has, for Marcus, a 'triangular' structure with celebrities, media and publics each having 'partial, contested but real agency', with each using that agency 'to collaborate and tussle with the others' (Marcus 2019: 217). Van Hove is certainly not an intellectual decrying celebrity or solely a media producer who has become a celebrity. Rather he is a vivid instance of celebrity culture's uneven (and unpredictable) distribution of real agency. His 'fandom' in part motivates the making of work that re-imagines and re-energises celebrities. This process expands (if it doesn't consolidate) his celebrity status, frequently drawing celebrities into working with him. He is dedicated to a field (theatre) that Marcus reads as the original creator of celebrity culture. And at the heart of all this is his practice and passion as a reader.

Such, was the almost 'Woodstock' impact of *Romeinse Tragedies* (*Roman Tragedies*), van Hove's six-hour, multi-media take on William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* that, according to Toni Racklin, 'some people lie, to this day about being at the show (at London's Barbican Centre) in 2009 because Ivo's debut on the Barbican stage has acquired the aura of a cornerstone in British drama' (Racklin and Massai 2018: 57). Of that famous show van Hove claimed:

The idea emerged from the texts. I did not come up with something out of the blue and then search for texts to accompany it, that's not my way

of working. Obviously, out of the Shakespearian jungle I have to chop and make a forest, that's the way it is. But I am the kind of person who needs the original material to create something of importance today' (Veraart 2018: 108).

'When I do a play, van Hove once said, 'I like to do it in the most extreme way possible' (Dickson 2014: 1). And few would deny that to encounter one of his shows, either with his 'home' company ITA or with, say, the Comédie Française or the New York Theatre Workshop, is to have an experience of visceral, sometimes coarsely energising, extremity, and an experience with a massive, intense, complex affective reach.

It takes a lot put me into a stunned silence, but it was in precisely such a state that I found myself by the end of *Angels in America* (the first van Hove show I ever saw in Eindhoven, May 2008). And it was in an equally stunned state that I drifted out of the Barbican's auditorium with the rest of the audience after six hours of watching/participating in *Roman Tragedies* in London in 2009. In his description of that performance Christopher Billings ranked it as 'one of the most intense vicarious experiences of my life' (Billings 2010: 439). I agree. *Kreten en Gefluister* (*Cries and Whispers*), after the film by Ingmar Bergman, in Amsterdam reduced me to a more tearful version of this state in 2011. Seeing *Na de repetitie /Persona* (*After the Rehearsal/Persona* – again after films by Bergman) in Paris in 2013, brought home to me the fact that there exist powerful emotions for which we have yet to find names. *Les Damnés* (*The Damned*, produced with the Comédie Française from the screenplay for the 1969 film by Luchino Visconti) took intensity to new levels,

laced, this time, with a more timely political terror when I saw it at London's Barbican in 2019.

'Van Hove' is also shorthand for the name of a team. The shift in name/brand from Toneelgroep Amsterdam to International Theatre Amsterdam downplays, inevitably, the word 'group' but that collaborative energy is powerfully, inevitably there in work under the new (ITA) name. When Van Hove has directed productions for other companies, this has inevitably meant that other members of the team work with him on those projects. Actors from Toneelgroep Amsterdam/ITA might not perform in shows like *Lazarus* or *All About Eve*, but such shows will feature set design and lighting by Jan Versweyveld, van Hove's artistic and life partner. Like the ITA actors, performers such as Michael C. Hall (in *Lazarus*) or Gillian Anderson (in *All About Eve*) will be costumed with sleek and searching intelligence by An D'Huys. The composer Erich Sleichim works with van Hove on many of his productions, both with ITA and with other international companies. And Tal Yarden's video work, combining the use of 'found' archive footage, pre-recorded footage of actors and action, live onstage filming (and sometimes combinations of all three) has been vital to Van Hove's impact worldwide.

Joseph V. Melillo has claimed of van Hove and Versweyveld that 'whenever a creative partnership is as long and fruitful as that of these two men, a kind of alchemy of assurance occurs'. For Melillo, this produces a 'confidence that the audience can sense', making us 'willing to follow these artists everywhere' (Melillo 2018: 49). That alchemy of assurance extends to the other members

of the creative team I have mentioned (as well as to a bigger network of creative, administrative, technical and managerial labour) and it is, as van Hove has acknowledged many, many times, central to the formation of his directorial approaches.

But at the heart of those approaches is reading. Interviewed in October 2014, when his production of *Angels in America* was about to open at BAM in New York, van Hove said: 'People talk about me as if I rip apart texts. I don't do that I always start with the text.' He then went on to emphasize the importance of textual fidelity and intimate reading to the approach(es) taken by Jan Versweyveld. 'He's a designer,' van Hove said, 'that really reads the text ... he knows the text better than me' (van Hove: 2014). This is one of van Hove's most vocal articulations of the centrality of texts and of 'really' reading, and knowing texts. He is also keen to emphasize that he is not alone in this – that his closest collaborator (and perhaps, by implication, everyone with whom he collaborates) share with him a belief in the centrality of (re) reading as a foundation of theatre-making.

SCALE AND READING

Speaking once about *Amour* (2012) by Michael Haneke, a film van Hove has not (at least not yet) adapted for the stage, he said 'There is nothing smaller or more intimate than that but at the same time nothing that is larger than life. Phenomenal' (Veraart 2018: 189). The terms of van Hove's fan-like praise reflect the intensity of his own admiration for artists and art-works that

alternate between intimate scales and vast scales. His praise for Haneke also reflects the importance of this alternation to his own artistic practice.

Movement between the intimate and the vast can happen between different productions: the intense, sparse intimacy of a one-man show like *Song from Far Away* (2015) by Simon Stephens as opposed to the vast, densely peopled technical amplitude of *The Antonioni Project* (2009). The latter, based on three films by Michaelangelo Antonioni, combined live performance with live filming of actors, their faces often displayed in intense close-up on large screens. This demonstrated a tendency to move between the intimate and the vast in one performance. Given, too, that in most instances, actors are close-miked, their enunciation can range from the whispered to the declamatory with no loss of verbal comprehension on the parts of the audience.

Scènes uit een Huwelijk (*Scenes from a Marriage*), based on the 1973 film/TV series by Ingmar Bergman, a show that has been in ITA's repertoire since 2005, provides a vivid instance of this aspiration. The *mise en scène* of Part One of *Scenes* consisted of a vast, almost-canvas like structure, divided into three parts, tent-like walls separating each. The audience sat inside this structure on tiny metal seats, one third of us (each with wristbands of one of three different colours) in each section. Three different pairs of actors played simultaneously in each section a scene of forty minutes or so, each pair portraying Johan and Marianne, Bergman's couple, at three different life-stages: youth (Alwin Pulincx and Suzanne Grotenhuis), early middle-age (Roeland Fernhout and Hadewych Minis), later life (Hugo Koolschijn and

Janni Goslinga – see Plate 12). The audience sat through the scene very close to the action with the actors, and the other audience members, visible in a sickly off-gold light. Throughout, sounds (laughter, beer bottles clinked in celebration, sudden movement, sharp questions, shouts of rage) could be heard coming from the other sections (and the other times of the marriage). In the middle of this structure there was what P. A. Skantze describes as ‘a small central room with plastic windows through which one could see the actors at rest’ (Skantze 2018: 183).

Every forty minutes or so the ‘scene’ came to an end and an actor would lift the canvas wall and invite the audience to take their places for the next scene, and so on to a total of three times. By the end of Part One, each audience member had encountered the couple at all three stages of their relationship, though not necessarily in chronological order (the first time I saw the production at London’s Barbican in November 2013, I went from middle aged, to late middle-aged to young). This all sounds intense, claustrophobic, initially confusing, alarming on a very primal level – and it was. There was very little music, no video. The other members of the audience, visible in the sickly light, became almost like visual accompaniments to the action: a tear running down the face of a woman sitting nearby became an almost charged physical event. At one stage early in the ‘young’ section, two young men sitting in the row in front of me who had been holding hands from the minute they sat down suddenly, ceased to do so. Again, this shift in their physical relationship

resonated in a very theatrical way. I was reading other members of the audience and on some level aware that I too could be read.

But the show moved onto other elements of spatial grandeur that, if they compensated for some of the more distressing and almost gothic elements of the first part, lost none of their power to create powerful collective emotion. When you entered the late middle-aged (in a sense the 'final' scene of the show's first part), you fully realised that you were sitting on the Barbican's stage and that you were visible to what Skantze describes as 'the huge cavernous space of empty theatre seats' as the empty (and cold) auditorium opened up to you. The vacant rows described by Skantze constituted, for her, 'a perfect evocation of the afterlife waiting, of passing beyond relationship towards the swirling atoms of our next stage of being' (Skantze 2018: 184). I remember it differently, feeling that I could sense the presence of audiences from the past (and from the future) responding to performances from times past, passing and to come, watching us and being part of what felt, by now, like 'our' show.

That was Part One of *Scenes from a Marriage*. Part Two worked on a virtually empty stage with the seating in bleachers and with, at times, all six actors playing Johan and Marianne combining, sometimes speaking all at once as they took us through the next stages, and the next, of the relationship between Bergman's couple.

All this amounted clearly to a reading, to a 'smart' adaptation, especially given

that Bergman made his *Scenes from a Marriage* not just for the cinema but as a TV series. Seriality was both denied and given a more theatrically plausible form. This was extremity that provoked a form of attention in the audience that required occupying what Skantze calls the 'in-between of recognition and interpretation' (Skantze 2018: 185). Something, in short, that sounds a lot like reading.

Elsewhere I've written about how van Hove's work can demand from the audience, the activity of reading in more literal ways. His shows sometimes compel audiences to *read* onscreen and onstage text as an integral part of their experience (Flannery 2018: 191). His *Scenes from a Marriage* is a reading of Bergman's original and one, furthermore, that sounds a lot like the practice of close reading as described by Elizabeth Freeman who writes that 'to close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying' (Freeman 2010: xvi-xvii). Even if, in Part One, an audience member only sees the scene covering each period of the marriage once, the fact that at all times each section of the audience can hear the sounds of the other scenes (and can know thereby that the scene is being performed three times over a two-hour period) creates a sense of lingering.. Even though an audience member in Part One sees each scene only once, the other scenes can be heard playing in the next 'rooms', creating a lingering effect, where each scene is accompanied by a simultaneous re-reading of the others. It has also been noted that close reading pays attention to 'elements in the text which ought to be quietly subordinate to the main idea, but which textually call attention to themselves' (Gallop 2000: 8). There is rich thematic ore in *Scenes from a Marriage*; it's an exploration of what time can do to love, of ambiguity in love,

and of compromise. But in the intimacy, the closeness of this production that is not where the audience's attention is taken: small details – an overcoat dropped on the floor, a tiny photograph the elder Johann shows the elder Marianne of Paula, his new lover – are given calm, forceful prominence. Like the tears and the (non)handholding of one's fellow audience members, these details invite close reading.

IDEAS ONSTAGE

If many of van Hove's shows traffic in emotional, scenographic extremity that is driven by (and in turn invites) close reading, they also debate and probe *ideas*. And they often do so by, quite literally, asking questions: 'How far can one go in love of one's country?', 'Can politics change people's minds?', 'Is it always praiseworthy to fight to the death for a belief?' These are questions posed, in written form, onscreen, at the end of *Roman Tragedies*. Of his 2015 *Antigone* van Hove claimed that it was 'ambivalent and dark, modern and mythical ... [it] leaves one with more questions than answers' (van Hove 2015: 6).

His 2008 production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* cut, especially in the second of that play's two parts, large swathes of Kushner's text, taking its near-seven hours down to a more compact four while – perhaps unexpectedly – leaving the moments of theory and debate untouched. 'The Great Question before us is: Are we doomed? The Great Question before us is: Will the Past release us?'; 'Why has democracy succeeded in America?' – these are all questions posed very vocally by different characters in Kushner's plays and

van Hove was sure to give space and time to the articulation of these moments of anxiety, speculation and wonder (Kushner 2017: 137, 93). 'We gave our country a vile democracy', says one of the characters in *The Damned* says early in that play, evoking the collusion between democratic process and authoritarian government, a question that speaks sharply to European and North American politics at the time of writing (August 2019).

In July 2019, as part of the Manchester International Festival, the entire cast of ITA's adaptation of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, along with British actors such as Adjoa Andoh, Juliette Stevenson and Lemn Sissay, performed *Re:Creating Europe*, a staged reading, but with lighting and video projection, of an assembly of texts that comprised poems (John Donne's Meditation XVII, 'No Man is an Island'), extracts from political speeches (by Helmut Schmidt, Margaret Thatcher and Ann Widdecombe and others), essays (e.g. Susan Sontag's 'The Idea of Europe'), songs (e.g. 'Stop the Cavalry' by Jona Lewie) and plays (extracts from Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Henry V*) read in English, Dutch, French and German. For van Hove, this was 'a mix of visions for Europe that are often diametrically opposed' (van Hove 2019a: 3). For the cultural-media organisation Balie (who collaborated with ITA on the project), the show explored 'the ambivalent idea of Europe through many different voices' Albrecht and Geurts 2019: 5).

Although *Re:Creating Europe* was not a play in any conventional sense, the experience of sitting through it was not far removed from some of the van Hove shows I've mentioned so far. The need to present questions even (or

especially) if they are untimely, awkward (or even unanswerable) was, indeed is, of paramount importance. If *Scenes from a Marriage*, free as it was of any necessity for the audience to read onstage or onscreen text, invited a response that worked and felt like reading, then *Re:Creating Europe* made a visual, theatrical virtue of the spectacle of its actors and performers reading aloud from copies of scripts they held in their hands.

And even when questions are not explicitly posed, or projected in written form, onstage, van Hove's sense of the texts on which he bases his plays remains sharply focused on the specific questions they pose. With ITA, van Hove made a 2018 stage adaptation of *A Little Life*, based on the 2015 novel by Hanya Yanagihara. 'Reading *A Little Life*,' he claimed, 'is much more than just reading a book. It's a destructive descent into areas of pure pain, pure loneliness, pure friendship' (van Hove 2018: 1). The experience of encountering Yanagihara's novel was intensely affective for him and so too were the questions it posed. These are 'questions about good and evil, about how to deal with losing whom [sic.] you really love. But also about the contemporary tyranny of being happy, about the connection we automatically make between love and sexuality' (van Hove 2018: 1). Unlike the civic, political questions posed in and through *Roman Tragedies* and *Re:Creating*

Europe, these are broader questions about ethics and affect – which are, in turn, two driving forces in his practices of reading.

READING ‘THE DIRECTOR AND HIS LIBRARY’

Veraart’s book has a twelve-page chapter entitled ‘De Regisseur & Zijn Bibliotheek’ (the director and his library). This begins with an account of van Hove’s fascination, from the age of 20, with plays by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. And it very promptly links van Hove’s responsiveness to those figures with the artistic and intellectual debts he has to his teachers and exemplars: Alex van Rojen, Robert Wilson, Peter Stein, Patrice Chéreau. A link exists, therefore, between reading and a heritage of theatrical inspiration and pedagogy. The chapter also broadens out one’s expectations of what might be in a ‘bilbiotheek’ and the sometimes surprising routes by which a director can choose texts he wishes to adapt. The library contains Miller and Williams but also the French writer (and film maker) Marguerite Duras and a number of auteur-directors/writers: John Cassavetes, Michaelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Luchino Visconti. Over the years, van Hove’s name has become powerfully linked to these figures and that linkage has been driven by his often-avowed fan-relationship to them.

There is an intensely reciprocal and unboundaried relationship between reading, cinema and the making of theatre in this account of the director’s library. Repeatedly, for van Hove, what he was reading or seeing when he was twenty years old is a frequent point of return – ‘When I was about 20 years old, I saw all the films by Visconti,’ van Hove claims in a programme

note for *The Damned*. 'These films,' he goes on 'stir up emotion and broach controversial topics' (van Hove: 2019: 8). He then goes on to emphasize that he re-read the screenplay as part of the process of developing the show. Such re-reading is integral to van Hove's directorial approaches. 'I re-read the plays and I thought they could be stronger now', he said when I asked him why, in 2008, he had decided to stage both parts of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Flannery 2014: 172).

'Those who fail to reread, 'Roland Barthes once noted, 'are obliged to read the same thing everywhere' (Barthes 1974: 16). Van Hove's commitment to re-reading chimes with his practice of reading texts with openness and alertness. It is perhaps a certain failure to take into account the importance and impact of this commitment to rereading that makes van Hove's work easy to mimic and, perhaps, easy to parody. At the very same time, the visceral impact of that work is very difficult to reproduce. This may be because at the heart of van Hove's work is not just reading, but *rereading*. Barthes goes on to claim that if rereading has a goal it is to 'obtain, as though under the influence of a drug not the *real* text, but a plural text: the same and new' (Barthes 1974: 16). Rereading, for Barthes (and, I suspect, for van Hove) constitutes an affective, potentially mind-altering process aimed in part at accessing the sameness of a text. Hence van Hove's (often overlooked) scrupulous fidelity – to Shakespeare, to Kushner, to Visconti and others. But rereading also drives a will to access a newness in the texts he chooses,

often one that is historically resonant for the audience in very immediate ways— something that is, as he puts it, ‘of importance for today’.

Van Hove’s approach to reading is distinguished by great emotional precision, and by a very alert ear for the resonances across time and cultures of the texts he considers and adapts. His reading as preparation for the making of theatre is marked by a combination of fidelity, respect and motivation to use fresh encounters with texts to make work that is, in his words, ‘important for today’. Veraart’s account of van Hove’s library sheds light on what we might call the archive of van Hove’s practice: the importance of ‘classic’ texts, especially (though not exclusively) American ones, his engagement with writers who made films in the 1960s and 1970s as well as directors many of whom (such as Visconti) felt a close connection to a literary, often canonical, tradition. This is accompanied by van Hove’s readiness to allow theory (especially sociological theory) to influence his work. Veraart quotes his claim that he is greatly influenced by the sociologists Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman (Veraart 2018: 193). All of this indicates high levels of engagement and action, affective response, courage and critical acumen. Yet very recently, van Hove’s work has been read as either potentially or excessively distanced from texts or else open to a naïve susceptibility to those texts’ more wily ways – and it is to this kind of response that I will now turn.

READING VAN HOVE IN 2019

A recent, rather lukewarm, response to van Hove’s *The Damned* (Comédie Française, 2016; also performed at London’s Barbican in 2019) provides an

instance of this. 'Roll up,' Dominic Cavendish writes 'for male and female nudity, a man being tactile with a girl in a way that signals paedophile intent, the simulated sexual assault of a barmaid – and Hitler salutes' (Cavendish 2019). Cavendish goes on to claim that 'the immediate explanation for what's on stage and its ready acceptance can be laid at the door of the venerated Visconti' (Cavendish 2019). As he trivializes the play, Cavendish rhetorically attributes trivializing motivation (and rhetoric) to van Hove and the company (hence the use of the phrase 'Roll up'). The onstage presence of nudity and representations of intergenerational sexual intent and sexual assault is attributed by Cavendish, in a confusedly causal way, to the power and status that appear to emanate from the 'venerated Visconti'; that is either from Visconti himself or from some – implicitly unworthy – veneration of Visconti on van Hove's part.

What is not entertained (or acknowledged) is that these things are there in the screenplay that, van Hove emphasizes, he re-read. Their onstage presence is part of an almost doggedly literal process of adaptation. It also emerges from, again, a re-reading process, this time of Visconti's screenplay: 'I did not watch the film again,' van Hove claimed, 'since it is vital to me that the stage performance not be an adaptation of the film.' 'Staging a film script is a huge theatrical job,' he has also said, 'you have to invent a new world' (Veraart 2018: 89). Cavendish particularly takes issue with a moment at the show's end when the character of Martin von Essenbeck (Christophe Montenez) 'strips off, covering himself in an urn-full of family ashes' (Cavendish 2019). Those ashes with which Montenez covers his naked body are ceremonial

objects and their presence is consistent with van Hove's claim 'in my plays, violence is ritual' (Veraart 2018: 79). Each time, in this production, a character dies or is killed, that character is ceremonially led to one of six coffins placed on a slightly raised platform, stage left and guided by blackshirted attendants therein. After each of these deaths and entombments, an attendant takes a small urn of ashes from behind each coffin and ceremonially empties its contents into a larger, wider urn, centre stage front. By the play's end, when the Essenbeck family's collusion with the Nazis and the SS is total and young Martin has eliminated all of his enemies (and all of his loved ones), he does indeed strip naked, removing his black SS uniform, and then covers himself in ashes as Cavendish describes. More than this, he takes a machine gun and mounts a table at the back of the stage in front of a large video screen which, at this final climactic moment, goes blindingly white. This change in colour and lighting is swiftly followed by the amplified rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire. The show's searing final image is Montenenez's now-silhouetted Martin firing into the audience in his naked, raging ash-covered triumph.

Cavendish describes some of these aspects of the performance as 'van Hove's own striking choices', and in some ways Cavendish is right, especially about the coffins, the repeated recourse to which is utterly consistent with the director's emphasis on violence as ritual. But the coffins, and many other aspects of the show to which Cavendish takes exception, are van Hove taking Visconti's screenplay absolutely to the letter.

Various characters in the film – the Baron Joachim von Essenbeck (Didier Sandre in this production), Elizabeth Thallman (Adeline d'Hermy) and, by the

end, Martin's mother Baroness Sophie von Essenbeck (Elsa Lepoivre) and her lover Friedrich Bruckmann (Guillaume Gallienne) encounter off-screen deaths or there are, in the film, significant gaps and silences around their killings. The ritual with the coffins 'literalizes' these deaths and makes them physical in a vividly theatrical way. This ritual, ceremonial aspect also echoes what David Willinger has claimed is the influence of Antonin Artaud on van Hove's work (Willinger 2018: 13-17). Experientially, this repeated ritual, wherein the audience is filmed by onstage cameras and our image projected onto the large screen at the back of the stage, makes each death part of one narrative chain and, it feels, an inexorable politico-cultural force (or nightmare) in which it is all too easy to feel agonisingly involved.

The preference van Hove exhibits for the act of re-reading, the vitality of the re-reading of a text (as opposed to watching a film again) is yet another indication of how engagement with a text, on a verbal, material level is at the heart of his work, especially when it comes to the onstage invention of 'a new world'.

When it comes to nudity and ashes, the name 'Essenbeck' is a near-homophone of the name Von Aschenbach. This evokes Gustave von Aschenbach, the central character of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912), famously adapted for screen by Visconti two years after *The Damned*, and also adapted by van Hove's ITA in 2018. More fundamentally still, this surname evokes, indeed is, the German word for 'ashtray'. Cavendish, wrongly, believes (or needs to be seen to believe) that some of the most

doggedly faithful and textually attentive aspects of van Hove's Visconti adaptation are exercises in perversity, caprice or European directorial *droit du seigneur*. And there is a vocally anti-European thread in Cavendish's comments. For him *The Damned* is 'hard to follow' because it is in French (hardly surprising since it is a production for the Comédie Française). Not to react to it with 'uproar' is, for him, to 'bow low before shock European "regietheater"' – another unsupported assertion (Cavendish 2019).

Cavendish's response to this production of *The Damned* finds a perhaps surprising partner-in-approach in the work of queer theorist Lisa Duggan as she responds to another production. 'Prominent Belgian director and self-identified gay social democrat Ivo van Hove,' Duggan writes in *Mean Girl*, her recent book on Ayn Rand, 'fell in love with *The Fountainhead* when he received it as a gift in 2007' (Duggan 2019: 11). That falling-in-love culminated in one of van Hove's and ITA's most visually stunning, technically complex, vast and politically controversial plays – a four-hour adaptation of Rand's 1943 novel that was first performed in 2014 and has toured internationally ever since. This production is four parts, each with a different title and each title displayed in on a video screen. Part Four is, for example, entitled 'War of Ideas'. Duggan claims that the particular focus of ITA's and van Hove's adaption of *The Fountainhead* is an emphasis 'on the struggle of a creative artist, Howard Roark, against the forces of conventionality and mediocrity' (Duggan, 2019: 11). Cavendish casts van Hove's inherent sense of theatre as ritual event and his textual fidelities as manipulations of his material, partly motivated by a suspect veneration of Visconti. Duggan,

though, sees van Hove as all-too-susceptible to Rand's mean-girl manipulations. Duggan claims that 'this kind of focused, selective emphasis', is something that Rand's novels all too commonly and insidiously invite. 'Even the readers most loyal to Rand's overall political vision, Duggan goes on to write, 'often fiercely advocate some of her views while ignoring others – especially her atheism' (Duggan 2019: 12).

But, again, there is more involved in van Hove's adaptation of Rand than either political naivety or susceptibility to the novelist's wily ways. The first is fidelity, a certain respect. Elsewhere, I've argued that two different aspects of the novel get very faithfully treated in van Hove's production. The first is the characters' huge erotic and personal investments in each other or, for want of a better term, love. This is not something dominant rhetoric about (and produced by) Rand might encourage us to see but it is nonetheless there within the pages of *The Fountainhead* and very visibly in readers' responses to it. Second, the novel's poetic emphasis on light – the light of the sun, light on waterfalls, cityscapes – is paid massive tribute by Versweyveld's sometimes searing, often hazy and subtle lighting (Flannery 2018: 192-94). Of course, *The Fountainhead* is also about the world of architecture, something that provides abundant visual opportunities at which Versweyveld's design gracefully leaps.

There are also tensions within the production that indicate a relation between van Hove and Rand's novel that goes beyond the susceptibility of which Duggan accuses him. 'Man's first duty is to himself, Howard Roark (Ramsey

Nasr) says in the course of his final speech in the show, 'No man can live for another.' As he says this (and much more) in *The Fountainhead's* final moments, the other members of the cast stand behind him in silhouette and make haunting beautiful sounds on theremins. Peter van Kraaj, who worked as a dramaturg on the show, said the following about this moment:

While, in the foreground, Ramsey is talking about self-centeredness and the need to start from yourself, you see a collective of actors who together make the soundtrack to Ramsey - the direct proof of what a group knows about beauty ... Those are two theatrical signals and a fundamental statement. (Veraart 2018: 154-55)

In van Kraaj's reading – and this was certainly my experience when I saw the show – Rand's right-wing individualism is being implicitly critiqued by a vision of theatrical and social collectivity. Just as the audience of *Scenes from a Marriage* is invited to engage with an in-between state of recognition and interpretation, so the audience of *The Fountainhead* is invited to ask the kinds of questions which are so important to van Hove's sense of theatre, and never more so than in these last minutes. These questions are not only responses to Roark's/Nasr's discourse on individual agency but they are also questions about what is in front of them. If Roark the character eschews collaboration and radical dependence then how can that be squared with the fact that not only the specific theatrical event of *The Fountainhead's* conclusion but theatre itself is utterly driven by both collaboration and radical dependence? The audience might wonder if Erich Sleichim's stunning music played on those theremins is music that emphasizes or celebrates what Roark proclaims? Does this music excavate the weakness of his argument or reinstate the disavowed affect of belonging and attachment that drives those arguments

into being in the first place? Central to the audience's attachment to the performance is a process of recognition, questioning, interpretation – reading.

Cavendish and Duggan are both keen to emphasize the extent to which aspects of both shows emerge from a political stance that is either naïve or just undesirable (for Cavendish *The Damned* is a liberal parable; for Duggan, van Hove's decision not to stage *The Fountainhead* in a way that chimes with her own total hostility to Rand emerges in part from his status as a 'self-identified gay social democrat' (Duggan 2019). For both commentators, van Hove is suckered in by entities cast in paranoid terms: 'the venerated Visconti' for Cavendish; the 'insidious' invitations Rand's fiction issues, in Duggan's view, to 'focused, selective emphasis', as if adaptation were even possible without focused, selective emphasis.

CONCLUSION

Van Hove's fame and personal celebrity status, his spectacularly intense directorial practice and the readiness of his work to ask and explore (sometimes with a slowness that can appear to risk verging on the foolhardy) theoretical and philosophical questions can, wrongly, create an impression of remove, rootlessness, a distance from the 'ordinary'. It is sometimes assumed that this can entail a distance from texts and near-delegation of the process of reading. In this essay, I have set out to question these assumptions.

The overlap of celebrity and reading with which I began is far from common in the early twenty-first century. Barthes, in his reflections on re-reading,

describes it as 'an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society' and goes on to claim that it is 'tolerated in certain marginal categories of people (children, old people and professors)' (Barthes 1974: 16). Neither 'celebrities' nor 'directors' make it onto Barthes's list of tolerated 'marginal' (re)readers. The case of van Hove would suggest that perhaps one or both of these categories should, or at least could, have been included. 'As a theatre maker you have to have cultural baggage, and you have to be able to pick from that or the moment that you have to,' he once remarked. 'I want to (evolve) evolutions, processes' (Veraart 2018: 188). What happens when van Hove selects from his 'cultural baggage' appears to be an activation of his habits and skills as a reader – his emotional focus, his alertness to the specifics of the text/situation he reads. There is also, of course, the ethical drive of his reading habits and his insistence that the theatre he makes from them speaks to some of the most raw and difficult areas of present realities. This is accompanied by a rich and necessary history of collaboration and a recognition of the necessity to reread, not only to avoid the trap of reading 'the same thing everywhere' but also to be open to the opportunities that occur

when theatre occupies, as it always needs to, a space between the same and the new.

Five Key Productions

Scenes from a Marriage. By Ingmar Bergman. Set design and costumes by Jan Versweyveld. Perf. Roeland Fernhout, Bart Slegers, Celia Nufaar, Hugo Koolschijn, Janni Goslinga, Alwin Pulinckx, Benjamin de Wit, Camilla Siegertsz, Charlie-Chan Dagelet, Claire Bender, Eva Heijnen Maartje van de Wetering. Stadschowburg, Amsterdam. 1 Feb 2005.

Roman Tragedies. By William Shakespeare. Set Design by Jan Versweyveld. Costume Design by Lies van Assche. Perf. Bart Slegers, Chris Nietvelt, Fred Goessens, Frieda Pittoors, Gijs Scholten van Aschat, Hans Kesting, H el ene Devos, Hugo Koolschijn, Janni Goslinga, Maria Kraakman, Marieke Heebink. Alwin Pulinckx, Eelco Smits, Harm Duco Schut. Stadschowburg Amsterdam. 17 June 2007.

The Fountainhead. By Ayn Rand. Set design by Jan Versweyveld. Costume design by An D'Huys. Perf. Aus Greidanus jr., Bart Slegers, Frieda Pittoors, Halina Reijn, Hans Kesting, H el ene Devos, Hugo

Koolschijn, Janni Goslinga, Maarten Heijmans, Ramsey Nasr.

Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam. 15 June 2014.

Lazarus. By David Bowie and Enda Walsh. Set design by Jan Versweyveld.

Costume design by An D'Huys. Perf. Krystina Alabado, Sophia Anne Caruso,

Nicholas Christopher, Lynn Craig, Michael Esper, Michael C. Hall, Cristin

Milioti, Bobby Moreno, Krista Pioppi, Charlie Pollack, Brynn Williams. New

York Theatre Workshop, New York. 7 December 2015.

The Damned. By Luchino Visconti, Nicola Baddaluco, Enrico Medioli. Set

design by Jan Versweyveld. Costume design by An D'Huys. Perf. Sylvia

Bergé, Éric Génovèse, Denis Podalydès, Guillaume Gallienne, Elsa Lepoivre,

Loïc Corbery, Pierre Louis-Calixte, Adeline d'Hermy, Clément Hervieu-Leger,

Jennifer Decker, Didier Sandre, Christophe Montenez, Sebastien Baulain.
Cour d'Honneur, Avignon for the Avignon Festival. 7 July 2016.

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Notes

1. Such is Van Hove's celebrity status that not only would his name appear on the credits for the *Lazarus* original cast recording a few months later as the play's director, but he would also appear in no fewer than five photographs (mostly shots taken in rehearsal) included in the booklet that accompanied the recording's CD and vinyl release. Bowie himself, who wrote all of the songs in the show but did not appear in it, has two photographs on the recording's sleeve and in its booklet.