

IVO VAN HOVE, VIRTUOSO

“...even if philosophy leads us to conclude that drama as we have understood it may be moribund, it cannot be certain where the human energies drama gathers together will settle next.”

Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character*ⁱ

“We live under the ecstatic sign of the technico-luminous cinematic space of total spatio-dynamic theatre.”

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*ⁱⁱ

“The stage floor is a metaphor for all existence.”

Jan Versweyveldⁱⁱⁱ

INTRODUCTION

One may question why we choose this moment in particular to undertake a book-length study of this director, who, now in his early fifties, still has much of his career ahead of him. Over the course of thirty-four years Ivo van Hove has made a profound impact on the theatre life of several countries. Now at the height of his powers, he is churning out productions at breakneck speed, including plays, operas, and hybrid musical works. He has become a major point of reference for theatre-makers, scholars, and afficianado audiences alike, much in the same way that Peter Brook made an impact in the 1960s, erecting a creative framework for an entire generation.

It is no exaggeration to assert that van Hove has come to a critical juncture. Precisely because his youth is decisively behind him, he can no longer lay claim to the identity of *wunderkind* and *enfant terrible*, labels which both haunted and catapulted his earlier career. And it appears that he has now decisively “gone to the next level” of acceptance and “arrival,” to have “crossed over,” if you will, in the major metropolises on both sides of the Atlantic where he practices his craft. Critics have conferred on him such august titles as: “The most important director in the theatre right now,” “one of the very few masters of European theatre,” “the most provocatively illuminating theatre director,” a “visionary director” and a “revered director.” One web blog breathlessly proclaims: “Ivo van Hove is God!”^{iv} Formerly a star of the margins, an iconoclast who drew attention through controversial bold theatrical strokes that flew in the face of convention often at the risk of being shunned, he is now approaching a new equilibrium, a sort of enshrinement, where his ambiances, choices, and approaches would become a new institutional norm. “The strange, fascinating thing about van Hove—why we keep lapping his work up for more effrontery—is that he styles himself as [both] a rebel and an establishment figure,” at the same time.^v

At this writing, he has dominated the New York theatre scene with four major productions in one year, all brilliantly received, all hits. No other director, including Americans, has managed such a feat in the 2015-16 theatrical season; it would be rare in

any season. In a real sense, he appears to have fulfilled a plan he had laid out for himself: "...that's my mission as a theatre director," he once told an interviewer. "I want to make the most extreme work possible, without compromise, shown to as many people as possible." It is an ambition which resonates like Antoine Vitez's or Jean Vilar's formulae did in their own time: To create first-class theatre, not just for a privileged few, but for everyone. Nor was it so very different from Joseph Papp's in his when he inaugurated Shakespeare in the Park in New York. Van Hove has already been featured in the Festival of Avignon and been lauded in Paris. He has had a long-running hit in London's West End, and another in the works. His collaborations with mediatized stars like Juliette Binoche, Phillip Glass, and David Bowie, in his final artistic output on earth, have added further luster to the Flemish director's "brand."^{vi} One might say that a decisive leap from elitist highbrow for a select few cognoscenti to middlebrow for the vulgate, a move he has made no secret of desiring, is accomplished and ensured.

At this palpably new phase in van Hove's three and a half decades-long career, where a much wider audience is starting to know his name and works – a critical point because it is one so obviously littered with perils, possibilities, and temptations – it behooves us to look backwards to his somewhat obscure beginnings, take stock of his earliest aspirations and reception, and chart our way back to the crux at which van Hove now finds himself. Before he had emerged from the second tier cultural capitals of Belgium and Holland and onto the world scene, he had already done a great deal of some of his most interesting work. The present recognition of his talents will almost certainly elicit curiosity about his early work. The ephemeral nature of theatrical art, even with the newest means for recording and dissemination, puts nearly insuperable obstacles in the way of giving reasonably detailed impressions from that not so distant past, and it is one of this book's main purposes to fill in some of these critically important blanks. Then, having digested the large majority of his *mise-en-scènes*, we are faced with the difficult challenge of defining what inner and outer qualities epitomize the entire substance of this major director's artistry – one so multifarious as to nearly elude all boundaries.

Do we need to justify the notion that a theatre director is an artist in the same sense and of equal interest to, say, a playwright? It is true that far fewer books have been written about stage directors' productions than dramatists' scripts. But a sea change has been taking place in the art of theatre since the advent of the modern theatrical director in the 1870s when the Duke Saxe-Meiningen and his hired hand Cronegk introduced the profession. Some laying claim to this interpretative role can in certain cases emerge to become a creative figure of such *éclat* that they have a right to be considered what Gordon Craig posited as an "über-director." It seems to me indisputable that pioneering theatre directors, no less than pioneering film directors, about which there is perhaps less controversy, merit serious consideration as a discrete artistic category of creator. Elinor Fuchs describes the current new prestige and parity that theatre workers beyond the playwright have gained, the famous prescription that dramatic action is the most important of component elements: "In the theatre of difference, each signifying element – lights, visual design, music, etc., as well as plot and character elements – stands to some degree as an independent actor. It is as if all the Aristotelian elements of theater had survived, but had slipped the organizing structure of their former hierarchy."^{vii} With

such a reconfigured hierarchy of elements, the director/designer, who after all is master of the formerly subjugated “spectacle,” gains a concomitant new prestige over Aristotle’s previously privileged element of dramatic “action” which is historically the playwright’s domain.^{viii} I trust that the discussion which follows will be a self-justifying one, speaking to “respect for directing” when it comes to a groundbreaker such as Ivo van Hove.

In framing the discussion of van Hove, I will have recourse to certain influential, already canonical, modern performance theoreticians – Elinor Fuchs, David Savran, and Hans-Thies Lehmann – whose works all appear to me germane to the discussion and were written over the same time period through which van Hove’s efflorescence has taken place. Underpinning all I write are also the ideas and vocabulary of older, today seldom referenced theoreticians – Susanne Langer and Bernard Beckerman. That does not mean to imply, however, that van Hove himself has absorbed or has been responding to these particular writers’ commentaries in his productions. On the contrary, the truth is probably more as Fuchs suggests, that “...postmodern theater practice ... takes little interest in theoretical debate, just as the theoreticians are less aware of actual theater than of any other art.”^{ix}

The first section will go “vertically” through van Hove’s oeuvre, identifying salient qualities that recur regarding play choice and interpretation, design and space, actors and acting, etc. The second section will “horizontally” describe a selection of productions in depth. Most of these latter are forgotten or dimly remembered by the few who were privileged to see them. A director’s achievements are condemned to oblivion or at best a fragmentary, if legendary, recall once a show is over. It will be my effort, to however small a degree, to bring these productions back to life in the imagination of the reader, and to illustrate some milestones along van Hove’s most variegated career thus far. This work then, will be one of recapitulation, reconstruction, and appreciation in the largest sense of the word.

Progression and Patterns

“We shall not choose one vision over another, but as though in a laboratory setting, permit the social choreography of them all to be seen.”

Ivo van Hove^x

From early on it became apparent that Ivo was not going to be a theatre director in the mold of Richard Foreman, Elizabeth Lecompte, or Tadeusz Kantor, one who would mine a single signature vein of style and process throughout a long career. Nor is it as though he went through one stylistic or thematic period, left it behind forever, to start a new one, and so on ad infinitum. A look at his chronology confounds all attempts to structure his career into clearly defined chronological phases of literary interest, theme, or style. Rather his trajectory more resembles that of an Andre Serban or Wilford Leach, who play with a highly varied, but finite and definable set of interests and tendencies.

One critic has admirably written that, “it is one of van Hove’s greatest strengths that at one and the same time something of himself is always allowed to resonate along with the words, without violating the original text.” Ivo himself has said that his productions are like entries into a personal diary. “If you laid all my shows end to end, you’d get a masked autobiography of Ivo van Hove.”^{xi} In a funny way, all the characters that troop by on his stages, though generally written by others, have been transmogrified into emanations from his own mind.^{xii} From that we can conclude that each show is more of a personal statement than professional repertory choice and may reveal as much about his own psyche as the author’s work being mounted. Such subjectivity in an artist can be a difficult equation to square with all the responsibilities of an artistic director of a major institutional repertory company.^{xiii} In his first decade of directorial activity, Ivo established many of the threads he would follow in the time ahead, pursuing each not in independent, self-contained, identifiable periods, but rather, introducing disparate modes, and then leapfrogging over one to the other. He developed each of these idioms restlessly – yet has remained fitfully faithful to his several established paths. Like a juggler he keeps a handful of interests in the air, themes and styles, all of which keep getting tossed aloft in turn with unabated compulsion. In the beginning his work burst out with youthful impetuosity and, frequently, rage. Now he has mastery, but even those two energy batteries of impetuosity and maturity continue to function in alteration and often get fused together.

Ivo is an oscillator. He oscillates between fulfilling the role of standard director of European repertory theatre in a slightly daring way (*The Russians, South, Lulu*) and an *auteur* charting his own rigorous course (*Faces, Cries and Whispers, Roman Tragedies*). He oscillates between scandal and respectability, between competence and transcendence, between gay and straight tropes, between being a creator of sound, silence and image theatre and explicator of text theatre, between both empty and cluttered stages, between the role of avatar of high art and as unabashed purveyor of pop kitsch, between tech-centered theatre and organic theatre of the human body. He is mercurial and faithful, bull-headed and uncertain. He wants to borrow and adapt; to embark on the unknown; to nestle down into the safe zones too. But once having done so, he can’t stay there for very long, and takes extreme risks next time out. He displays full awareness of his pattern thusly: “I’m a bungee jumper of the theatre.”^{xiv} Elaborating on the multiple modalities of theatre that have never ceased to interest him eludes easy pigeonholing:

Classics can’t be rushed. But they are only one side of my personhood. I also have one foot in the world of young people. And, in contrast to more analytical kinds of plays, I also do many productions, such as the recent ‘Con Amore,’ based on Monteverdi or ‘India Song’ by Duras in which I strive to get an intuitive, direct audience reaction. My first plays were even entirely constructed based on a journey in quest of a new image language. This show has its place in that part of my voyage. It also tracks with a new sensibility in the world of performance: the boundary between theatre and other media is growing ever thinner. A new theatre language is everywhere developing, with a strong influx of video artists, new technology, musicians... All those folks too want to take a crack at theatre. [...] With Jan Versweyveld too (Ivo van Hove’s steady set designer) I sense an interest in the impure, the performance art aspect of theatrical production.^{xv}

He's long since signed on to be the stable leader of a prestigious state theatre, and yet reserves the right to play the subversive bad-boy as the occasion rises. These extremities and multiple aesthetic axes make it hard to pigeonhole him, to define his special contributions, and to settle on any narrow or fixed characterizations of his "oeuvre." Ivo is ever in flux, and not just over the course of decades, but even within a single theatre season.

Despite the polyvalence of his works, which allows for wild variation in scale, texture, scenic strategies, dramatic sources, and approaches to acting, we would argue that the stamp of a van Hove production in performance, for all that, is unmistakable. His shows couldn't have been produced by any other of his contemporaries, particularly his Flemish contemporaries, although at times he's seemed to be in conversation with and even imitation of them, and they of him.^{xvi} A visceral quality one can cut with a knife that glints off any van Hove production will be our chief endeavor to parse and denote through words.

When one turns to films by some of the auteur filmmakers whose scripts the theatre director admires to such an extent that he has adapted them for the stage – Bergman, Pasolini, Cassavetes, Antonioni, Visconti – their respective aesthetic surfaces are glaringly identifiable. One wouldn't need the credits at the start or end of a movie to know whose movie it was. Bergman is slow, lush, emotionally involuted to an excruciating degree, with bottomless psychological depth; Pasolini perverse, seamy, uncanny, and crude; Cassavetes stormily kitchen sink and improvisational with rough edges; Antonioni slack, and aimless-seeming with ominous storms brewing beneath the placidity of the everyday, etc. The same might be said for such *auteurs* of the theatre as Ariane Mnouchkine, Thomas Ostermeier, or Patrice Chéreau, each of whom exudes a discernable flavor. And the same can be said for van Hove. We will endeavor to tease out patterns and repetitions, trends and propensities as we find them: to identify as nearly as possible what makes van Hove van Hove.^{xvii}

Ivo's success is undeniable, and yet he has flaws and weaknesses. In some productions you can see him groping, and even floundering. Later reversions to similar material find him hitting the same stumbling blocks, but finding his way over them. One can then look back and understand how the earlier works were part of a longer process of experimentation, to see where he was headed and why he fell into a pitfall or went down a blind alley. That very same seeming blind alley may exert sufficient fascination for it to have merited a second try. And – we will assert – certain "alleys" he considered blind or negligible, some for which he got negative feedback, were in point of fact under-sung artistic triumphs that fell on deaf ears at the time. We will look not only at finished productions as such, but tease out how he builds ideas over the course of several productions. A European director is allowed his failures and given scope to grope for fulfillment over the course of many shows. He tries things out right under the public eye, then goes back to work on what interests him. So both temperamentally and thanks to the context which has nurtured him, van Hove is an exemplar of the great European director such as Giorgio Strehler, Antoine Vitez, or Peter Brook, who brings something new, but who continually reinvents himself.

When We Say Van Hove We Don't Mean It

To illuminate this artistic voyage, to know its many ports of call and the ways they interconnect one would have to have seen, if not all, the many, many shows in several countries on both sides of the Atlantic over the course of thirty-four years. No one, to the best of my knowledge has been privileged to do so, except for his most intimate associates. But even there, who of them among actors, designers, dramaturgs, critics, or assistants has been with him everywhere he has created? I would venture to say: only Jan Versweyveld, who provides the set and lighting design, is in that position. But then, Jan cannot claim objectivity, only intense and prolonged intimacy with the projects, since whenever one invokes Ivo, Jan is also implied. Their creative process has been so intermingled and mutually dependent that separate ownership cannot be teased out. Ivo has most eloquently expressed the nature of their symbiotic and productive partnership in this way:

We are really both responsible for the design together. It is our common child. We also ought to write that it's actually a show by Ivo van Hove and Jan Versweyveld. That's the way I feel it.^{xviii}

One should properly say, when referring their works that they are van Hove/Versweyveld shows, in the same way "Merchant/Ivory films" seems a natural and appropriate formulation. But somehow, there are too many syllables for it to sing, so for easy reference we call them van Hove or Ivo shows, knowing full well we are unwarrantedly, but wittingly reducing, even falsifying, the truth of the matter. For the truth, as Ivo says is: "Jan and I make Gesamtkunstwerkes*": You can barely say where design leaves off and the directing begins."^{xix}

Ivo and I

As fortune willed it, I was to be present at Ivo's very first theatre production, and it may even be said, it was I who "discovered" Ivo. He has several times corroborated this version of history, so I take pride in it as an established fact.^{xx} The story has been related elsewhere, but I'd like to fill in certain blanks here. In 1981, having immersed myself in the study of Michel De Ghelderode, a riveting playwright from Belgium's modernist past, I was in Brussels on a post-doctoral fellowship from the Belgian American Educational Foundation (BAEF) researching the contemporary Belgian theatre scene, familiarizing myself with its playwrights, directors, and actors, that tiny, bifurcated nation's productions and its playtexts. To this end I was there, reading as many published plays and seeing as much live theatre as I could. I had quickly made a number of good friends in the Belgian theatre worlds.^{xxi} My guide in the Flemish sector was Clara Haesaert, a poet and government official, who had often sat on ministerial theatre commissions that awarded subsidies and prizes. She was known to virtually everyone in the Flemish

* Total Theatre pieces, in Richard Wagner's formula.

cultural scene, never failed to be intrigued by new developments, and enjoyed a special delight in bringing people together, even though some of the introductions would be awkward for her to make.^{xxii}

The tale begins unpropitiously enough. Clara sometimes dragged me along to events whose utility was hard to see, as for example a certain party at her friend Marcel Boon's school of applied arts. It was there, however, that she introduced me to Nikki Bovenlaert who taught courses at De RITCS, the professional academy for theatre and film directors in Brussels. The latter invited me to come speak to her class about the current state of the American theatre. Going would divert me from my research. I was on my first sabbatical, and although I love teaching above all other endeavors, I was trying to make the most of the available time for research; every moment was precious. The idea was to delve into Belgian theatre and not turn backwards toward the one I'd left. But I consented to spend an afternoon with Nikki's students. As I delivered my little talk on my impressions of the New York City theatre scene of the time, mentioning some of its brightest avant-garde lights (this occurred around the same time as Richard Schechner published his oracular "The Death of the Avant-Garde" in *The Drama Review*), I could not fail but notice the desultory, almost resentful atmosphere in the room. When the talk was over and I'd answered a few questions, I asked the directing students what their educational experience was like. The answer that came back was alarming: This school is terrible; we get no opportunities; people just talk at us and we never get to try anything; there are no facilities for practical work here.^{xxiii}

So I wondered out loud if the students couldn't take their own initiative and create shows out of their own lives and interests. I myself was deeply immersed in the culture of what we at the time called "ensemble theatre." I was and am an acolyte of Joe Chaikin, tremendously admired his Open Theatre and Winter Project, as well as so many other great New York-centered group efforts of the time – Creation Company, Mabou Mines, Meredith Monk and the House, Squat Theatre – and so on. Why shouldn't the students I was addressing start as those groups had started, as I myself had with various plays I had developed with actors in the writing process? One young man raised his hand and answered: "Ivo over here is doing a show now." The Ivo in question was a striking looking though taciturn young man, not as young as most of his peers. The boy who had spoken up, who turned out to be Karel De Sloovere, Ivo's wingman, demanded to know if I would attend Ivo's show. Now I was in Belgium to see professional theatre, not student gropings, and I had been officially excused from class work. But since I'd just encouraged them to put on their own shows, I couldn't very well decline the invitation. So I begged Clara to drive me to the marginal neighborhood in Antwerp where this play – *Rumors* (*Geruchten*) – was to premiere at a disused launderette, and we did go.

Very early on as I was watching *Rumors* I realized I was in the presence of something special. Indeed, if I was to trust my instincts, it appeared to be so very exceptional that I cashed in all the chips I'd accumulated by then in the Flemish Community. I called Pol Arias, influential theatre critic for the radio, Bob Van Aalderen, who programmed theatre events at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Marianne Van Kerkhoven from Kaaaitheater and Jaak Van Schoor, head of the Theatre Department at the University of Ghent. They all

trooped off to that abandoned launderette to see *Rumors*, and were one and all as impressed as I had been.

Not only did I – with Karel De Sloovere – translate *Rumors* and the following play Ivo wrote and directed – *Disease Germs* (*Ziektekiemen*) – but I wrote separate articles on each of them that were accepted by *The Drama Review* (*TDR*). All these articles and translations are reprinted in this volume as appendices to evoke for the reader the performances that had made such an impression on me. The translations went into the first anthology of Belgian drama I published a few years later. And then Clara arranged for me to be interviewed by Jef De Roeck for the major Belgian newspaper, *De Standaard*. The surprise multi-page spread that came out of it featured a remark from me to the effect that Ivo van Hove's play was one of the three best things I'd seen in the theatre during my time in Belgium. Not one of the three was within the institutional theatre establishment.^{xxiv} I also made the shocking statement that I found most shows in the official state theatres, and most of the fringe theatres as well, to be moribund. Without exaggerating the importance of my observations in that interview, which included a litany of the faults of the current Flemish theatre, its appearance coincided with a sea-change in the years ahead.

Before long all the old systems and structures (and many individuals as well) were jettisoned, and new structures and theatre artists, like Ivo, given command. Ivo claims that the interview had a determining effect on his subsequent success, which was in turn part of what became known as "The Flemish Wave."^{xxv} The stamp of approval by a scholar from America, even as obscure a one as myself at the time, came at a propitious moment, and Ivo's career was launched. Pol Arias convinced Annie De Clerck, host of a celebrated cultural television show, to go see *Disease Germs*, and she brought a crew in and filmed segments that then aired on Belgian TV. Shortly after I'd seen *Rumors* and was figuring out how to bring Ivo to the world's attention, Bob Van Aalderen cautioned me, trying to tamp down my enthusiasm by letting me know that young debutantes had often leapt onto the theatre scene in Flanders, momentarily thrilling everyone, only to fade just as rapidly. This, he implied, would surely be the fate that Ivo would share. I have often had occasion to muse on that remark since. This article represents my coming full circle with Ivo and looking back to appreciate, in the full sense of the word, all that has transpired in the interim, particularly as he has so unexpectedly made such an explosive impact on my native land.

While I was privileged to glimpse Ivo's work at its absolutely dawning, I have not managed to see all or even a great many of his productions live on stage since then; my profession precludes it. On occasion I've stolen over during the season, and I've caught most of what he's brought to or produced in New York. To compensate for the lapses between these live viewings, I've sought out as many DVDs and videos as are extant and, since even DVDs can be deceptive regarding the actual theatre-going experience, read as many reviews as I could get my hands on and spoken to people who did see them live to correct any misimpressions. This monograph is written from that experience of immersion. I cannot pretend to objectivity, since I bear a certain proud godfathership of having "discovered" Ivo, and having followed his meteoric, if sometimes rocky, rise with

identified amazement. Seeing the very weight and breadth of his output, has enabled me to draw some conclusions, which along with detailed description and analysis, I will share here. Despite my quest to familiarize myself with the totality of the van Hove oeuvre, there remain some five or six productions for which no recording – frustratingly – exists, but I feel sufficiently confident in the conclusions I’ve drawn nonetheless. In this central monograph and in all the following contributions to this book, a composite portrait of van Hove’s artistry will start to form.

The Flemish and Dutch Historical Context

In Holland, the theatre community graduated from their traditional notion of theatre in the 1970s, with the advent of the historical movement called the Tomato Action (*Aktie Tomaat*). Young experimentalists of the time and their sympathizers stormed the auditoriums of the institutionalized state theatres and threw tomatoes at the stages until the artistic directors of the time simply abdicated in favor of those young tyros.^{xxvi} The audience, to all appearances, adapted their own tastes to the new kind of theatre presented by the artists who next came to power. The renovators of the Dutch theatre, now ensconced in seats of power, including Geraardjan Rijnders, brought their productions to Belgium when on tour, and van Hove recounts being inspired as a young man by their innovative shows, so alive and open in contrast to the ossified local Flemish official theatre.^{xxvii} By the 1990s when van Hove replaced Rijnders as artistic director at Toneelgroep Amsterdam (TGA), the Tomato Action generation had seen its time come and go in its turn.

In Belgium a similar sea change came somewhat later, with the onset of the “Flemish Wave” that was just starting to manifest itself when I arrived in 1981.^{xxviii} It was initiated from above in a bureaucratic shift, when the officials at the Flemish Ministry of Culture, such as a visionary Minister Bert Anciaux, seeing how moribund the official theatres were, how artistically stagnant and how poorly they were drawing audiences, reorganized the entire funding structure, rewarding and penalizing theatres according to their degree of bold creativity, and spreading the wealth much more widely than heretofore. The result of this transformation, through which theatre scholars, practitioners, and critics made impact on government officials who actually listened to them, was that young rising stars such as Luk Perceval, Guy Joosten, Jan Fabre, and Guy Cassiers either found themselves named as artistic directors of the big theatres (Perceval and Cassiers), or world class opera directors (Joosten), or general performance stars (Fabre). The old artistic directors and their stale stables of actors were summarily put out to pasture, and the best of them reintegrated into the new, looser arrangement as freelancers.

The creations Ivo and Jan Versweyveld made while still students at De RITCS, *Rumors* and *Disease Germs*, were done under the aegis of their own little production company, AKT (Antwerps Kollektief voor Theaterproducties). Shortly thereafter they fused with another extant company in Ghent to become Akt/Vertikaal. By the year 1990 van Hove performed the remarkable feat of being tapped for the artistic directorship of a substantial state-run regional theatre across the border in the Netherlands, Zuidelijk Toneel in

Eindhoven. This surprising development, as we have noted, was part and parcel of a global renovation of the Dutch and Flemish theatre systems.^{xxix} Within ten years after that, he achieved the double coup of being named artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the largest institutional theatre in the Netherlands, as well as that of the prestigious Holland Festival. It would be stunning for anyone; it was doubly stunning for a Fleming to be so recognized in Holland.^{xxx} His American, German, and English parallel careers took shape over time. In any case, van Hove's trajectory assumed the dynamics of a whirlwind. It remains to be seen whether he has stayed entirely true to his avant-garde roots, moved on to institutional respectability, or achieved something between the two.

THE DIRECTOR SEEN FROM MULTIPLE ANGLES

A Theatre of Extremes, Experimentation, and Excess

"Love becomes lust, celebration becomes chaos, theatre becomes a carnival of vanity."
Hein Janssen^{xxxi}

CHALLENGING NORMS

"I like to shock."

Ivo van Hove

In our quest to get at what is quintessential in Ivo van Hove's artistry, the mysterious element which singles him out as distinct from those of his contemporaries, one must drill down into the nature of his innovations. We need to glean what he has brought to the global theatre that is truly new, and where he piggybacks onto previous pioneers' innovations, but blended into a new synthesis or applied to untrammelled sorts of texts or subject matter. And of course, it should be remembered that what appears to be brand new and startling for an American audience might not carry the same iconoclastic shock for a European one. In some measure, when it comes to his productions at NYTW and BAM, these have been virgin voyages for the current generation of New York audiences into territory that is *vin ordinaire* for European ones. Thus it is no contradiction for the American critic Randy Gener to write, "The irony is that while he is blessed by controversy here, in Europe van Hove's unabashed *auteurism* is very much a mainstream staple. Some observers consider him conservative, even," but it is equally true, as he also says, that:

... van Hove's classical revivals in New York entice, challenge and astonish for the opposite reason—because his go-for-broke technique creates uncommon stage realities that allow far greater room for the physical, the incongruous, the animalistic and the poetic than U.S. audiences are accustomed to seeing. [...] Through his idea of naturalism in extremis, van Hove rattles our arthritic conventions....^{xxxii}

The notion of reducing the set of *Streetcar Named Desire* to a single bathtub center stage, as he did in his notorious NYTW production, would not have had the same charge in Belgium, France, or Germany as it did in New York. Continental audiences would be rather more surprised to see a normal completely detailed naturalistic rendition of the sort we in America are inured to, an approach European critics would deem too literal. They disparagingly call what we are used to, “theatre of the first degree” or “illustration of text.”^{xxxiii} More typically, Europeans would expect scenic life which takes the text to a “secondary degree” even in any mainstream theatre-going experience, an approach, by contrast, American audiences and critics reflexively think of as “avant-garde” or “way out,” or just plain weird. That’s exactly the standard kind of theatre that is now seen all the time in the large, established institutional theatres of Belgium and Holland.

The term avant-garde in and of itself is controversial and means various things to various critics. Of late it has come to refer to movements of the past, from turn-of-the-century Symbolism down through mid-twentieth century Theatre of the Absurd. With the inception of terms such as post-modernism, deconstructionism, and the post-dramatic some would assert that there is no application for it, and that it had perhaps been a specious notion all along. However, I would say of any available characterization it is the one that most aptly applies to the kind of styles van Hove experimented with initially.^{xxxiv}

He was working in the long, parallel, but often converging traditions of Artaud and Brecht and has, even down to his most recent work, continued to tap into them. Consciousness of this link is clearly evinced in the work itself, but also with such pronouncements he has made as: “The theatre has a vital twin function: it’s a feast of the irrational and a place to pose questions without trepidation or reservation. The theatre won’t let itself be taken prisoner.”^{xxxv} Also, once he started directing extant play texts, his inheritance with the Meyerhold tradition of radical interpretation becomes indisputable. Others may prefer not to call this avant-garde, but the twin excitement and *furor* which greeted so many of his productions and multiple integral aspects of the productions lead me to this conclusion. Ivo van Hove himself disagrees with me: “In America Jan and I are considered avant-gardists, deconstructors of texts – which is not the case.”^{xxxvi} But even in Avignon where *The Damned* played this year, Virginie Ghilhaume the official spokesperson outside the Palais des Papes, introducing the televised version of the production, breathlessly attached one qualifier to van Hove’s name for TV viewers: “avant-gardiste,” so this particular (mis)understanding is not limited to America after all.

That being said, the avant-garde is a big tent. It spans a wide continuum, with the most abstract work at one end and the most concrete at the other; its motive force could issue from outrage at social/political injustice. Or it may insist on extreme separation from any such context into a version of the non-objective or what Victor Schlovsky during the period of inspired artistic ferment in Leninist Russia named “formalism,” a label which under Stalin became a sledgehammer that was used to crush his enemies. In the Belgian context of the 1970s before Ivo came on the scene, the theatre collective, De Internationale Nieuwe Scene was the epitome of a political, agit-prop theatre. They were, in fact, Flanders’s answer to the Living Theatre. At the other end of the spectrum,

working with something approaching pure abstraction, were physical theatres, such as Dur-An-Ki. “An axiomatic precept of the avant-garde is the substitution of experience for ‘aboutness,’” claims Arnold Aronson, introducing a very useful and easily recognizable concept.^{xxxvii} Throughout van Hove’s creative life a fulcrum of his quest has been to grapple with this very binary pull between aboutness and experience, or indeed regarding that between aboutness and aestheticism, as we shall see.

It is hard to reckon with the difference between the theatre structures in nations such as Belgium and the Netherlands and those in America, and the kinds of theatre particular audience segments may be drawn to and accept within what each considers a normal framework of aesthetic expectations. It is for someone else to go into depth about the sociological forces that have gone into creating these disparities, but the fact that they exist is undeniable. The gulf is illustrated by a critic’s remark about a production of Molière’s *The Misanthrope* Ivo directed in Germany, saying that “... following actors around with a camera [on-stage] may pass for avant-garde in New York, but in Berlin it’s a different ball of wax.” In the same vein van Hove himself has said in a European interview: “In New York I’m an avant-gardist. Here, I’m official theater.”^{xxxviii} The same radical approach, for example, to *Streetcar Named Desire* or *The Little Foxes* that took critics aback in New York, when viewed at Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the largest institutional theatre in the Dutch nation, is simply considered *normal theatre*.^{xxxix}

On rare occasions on our side of the Atlantic an exceptional groundbreaker like *Hair*, *Chorus Line*, *Rent* or *Hamilton* will be catapulted from La Mama, NYTW, or the Public Theatre where it has been playing for a relatively local, relatively intellectual cross-section to Broadway, at which point all that is original and shocking about it gets funneled into the commercial market. Then overnight the show becomes fashionable and acceptable to an audience comprised essentially of the tourist trade. In Europe the theatre makers have retained their penchant for risk-taking, for wiping the slate clean, for tempting scandal, despite the fact that their reliable audience is middlebrow and largely composed of ordinary people, not just a negligibly sized elite. They are not expecting live theatre to ape television or films, but know it will take real risks that challenge their political, aesthetic, perceptual, and personal equilibrium. They don’t require that the hottest star of films, soaps, or mini-series appear in them, although they like it when they do. They simply demand that it work.^{xl}

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that van Hove has often shown himself willing to go against the grain of current theatrical practice. He wants it to be known, however, that he isn’t interested in shocking for shock value alone, but does it to wake people up.^{xli} He tries; he risks, and in doing so, falls on his face at times. A director or artistic director will not lose their – very substantial – subsidy or their administrative post due to a stumble or two. And for the past thirty-four years Belgium and the Netherlands have welcomed van Hove’s adventurousness and encouraged it, so long as it provided lively, even controversial fodder for conversation, and so long as his over-all trajectory was fruitful.^{xlii} Having by now won over the American public and theatrical establishment, van Hove can seemingly do no wrong. Although indulgence for the long haul is not a customary hallmark of the American scene, which is notorious for chewing up and

spitting out its most celebrated artists.^{xliii}

How often has a critic called him “a bad boy” or “enfant terrible” or some such? Even now that his youth is really behind him, this outlaw branding hangs over him like after-shave, and it extends from the broad outlines of his approach to a text, in violations of scenic and staging traditions, to choice of subject and source material, to casting norms, down to the granular level of line readings. On all these fronts van Hove challenges what we’ve come to expect – notably from classics, but really from the entire theatre experience – and offers up something new and off-kilter, repeatedly staging break-ins on our comfort zone.

In his earliest two productions, *Rumors* and *Disease Germs*, he shook up the audience by inviting them to disused and gutted industrial spaces, a laundry and a warehouse, that were uncomfortable, even dangerous-looking. Had they passed a recent building inspection for safety standards? The thought entered my head as I walked in that first night. This possibility of actual physical danger extended to the subject matter and the way he deployed the actors in space as well. As with so many other ways, having once introduced this use of site specificity, he dropped it and went on to other challenges. Thus he eludes any easy labeling – in this case branding as a director of the site specific. But lo and behold, thirty years later he exploits a disused cavernous warehouse on Governor’s Island in New York Harbor for his American production of *Teorema*! He is both faithful and unfaithful to his experiments, which don’t, as we have seen, organize themselves into recognizable “stages” in a career.

A NEW QUEER AESTHETIC

In *Disease Germs* he introduced a camp, kitschy aesthetic to Flemish theatre, with all the female parts played in the grand style by men. This approach, which had been rampant for years in America with Robert Ludlum’s Theatre of the Ridiculous, the San Francisco Angels of Light, and others, was virtually untried in Belgium. If he had done the same things in 1981 in New York or San Francisco, they would have had a been-there-done-that patina. But in fact, Queer Theatre as such arrived very late in a country known for its Catholic piety, in contrast with the more liberated Netherlands to the north that had roiled since the 60s with alternative cultural experiments in hippie culture, feminism, and various outgrowths of the protest movements. Van Hove dove into theatrical transvestism and gender-bending with all lights blazing in such productions as *Disease Germs*, Bernard Koltès’s *In the Loneliness of the Cottonfields*, and Marguerite Duras’s *Agatha*. In the latter the two men, playing brother and sister, are costumed in identical “dainty ready-made suits and stylish striped slips.”^{xliv} Still, gender dressing up is a kind of cover – a literal disguise, hiding behind Camp – and van Hove quickly divested himself and his actors of any mask at all. He repeated and enlarged on gay issues, imagery, and gay feelings in an unmasked way – a thoroughly vulnerable, undefended way – in certain scenes of *Wild Lords*.

For Belgium, to specifically explore gay intra and interpersonal feelings using the

performance vocabulary of the Living Theatre and Grotowski's Poor Theatre was unprecedented. Belgium, as a bi-cultural nation had seen on the French side the work of the PlanK in the 70s, which often produced Grotowski-influenced devised theatre pieces such as *Real Reel*. There two near-naked men disported onstage, using a poetic language that transcended its French specificity, and with abstract sound and movement, explored a gamut of interrelationships. While the audience may have found a homoerotic punch to this work, there was no explicit gay content whatsoever, so it remained in the realm of the subliminal or potential. But it seems that van Hove never saw or knew this work, partly because it was on the further side of the Belgian linguistic divide. Still, from a wider historical point of view, it was a stepping-stone toward *Wild Lords*. The core notion both Grotowski and Living Theatre founders Julian Beck and Judith Malina brought to the theatre was one of stripping down to the authentic and the essential, getting rid of bourgeois society's and bourgeois theatre's illusory trappings. Van Hove's iterations of gay identity in these early works were performed in forthrightly, headlongedly primal way. It was courageous of both him and the performers to so personally expose themselves. Much of the theatre in van Hove's early career bore a defiantly gay stamp – all of which were self or group-authored under his aegis (ie, *Disease Germs*, *Wonders of Humanity*, *Wild Lords*, *Imitations*) worked with attitudes and styles that ranged from camp to kitsch. Then, when he moved over to text theatre, resorting to the repertory of Koltès, Duras (in his gender-bender rendition of *Agatha*, which was about brother/sister incest, but where van Hove had men play both roles), Genet, and Tony Kushner again we find a tropism to the gay.

In interviews van Hove makes no bones about his identity and his extraordinarily durable liaison with Jan Versweyveld, but insists that straight tropes interest him equally and firmly refuses a label of “gay artist” or the notion that he is bound to direct “gay theatre,” insisting that he is simply interested in love in all its forms.^{xlv} In 2002, he pithily responded to a journalist who had implied that all he was interested in doing was gay theatre:

I don't try to hide my sexual preference under chairs or benches, but it isn't true that my productions are all about that. In the words of Fassbinder: I'm not a fulltime homosexual. There are also a number of other themes from life which grab me. I've been making theatre for twenty years now. In only two productions was homosexuality actually a theme: in Julien Green's *The South*, and in Jean Genet's *Splendid's*. The rest of my shows have absolutely nothing to do with it. In point of fact heterosexual love is always central to my productions.^{xlvi}

In asserting this artistic identity, he is comparable to the American playwright Edward Albee who, though gay, has been a dramatic bard of heterosexual marriages in a plethora of fascinating plays, and has been variously attacked for being unqualified to dramatize the lives of straight couples, to being guilty of cloaking portrayals of gays in the personae of straights. John Clum has effectively and systematically debunked Albee's detractors' arguments, including those from such prominent critics as Stanley Kauffmann, Richard Gilman, Harold Taubman, etc.,^{xlvii} interesting to read, since the same reasoning could apply perfectly well to van Hove. Once he had switched over and settled into being a “text director” for good, plays with gay subjects, sub-plots, or treatments proliferate, but

neither were they uncommon – *Agatha*, *Splendid's*, *South*, *In the Loneliness of the Cottonfields*, *Ludwig*, *Edward II*, *Angels in America*, *Perfect Wedding*, *Song From Far Away*, *The Damned*.

Over time, particularly once he assumed directorship of Zuidelijk Toneel, he wound up doing far more works that explore straight families and heterosexual relationships – albeit, naturally, dysfunctional ones. It is not that he went back into the closet, but that he may have felt impelled to address the interests and orientation of his primary, generally conventional, local audience in the provincial city of Eindhoven, Netherlands. It is also true that heterosexual subjects, characters, and interactions undeniably intrigue him. Queerness, says David Savran, “is less a fixed attribute of a given text or performance than a transient disturbance produced between and among text, actor, director, and spectator. It might be said to be an effect of knowledge or lack of it, in relation to dissident sexual desires and identities.”^{xlviii} Viewed from this extremely inclusive vantage point, we can detect queerness in works with the most ostensibly straight milieus, such as van Hove’s *Cassavetes* shows, where such “transient disturbances” proliferate.

While the great preponderance of works he has undertaken do concern straight relationships, it is true, he has brought to them a fascination and harsh analytical vision of heterosexual male identity as a construct and mask. The nature of gender identity is frequently at play, under a microscopic lens. To this end, he has often deliberately chosen aggressively heterosexual pieces – *Cassavetes* filmscripts, for example – or brought to the surface the macho underpinnings of unlikely scripts, such as *Othello*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Taming of the Shrew*. It is as though, having decided to explore male aggression within comradeship, the choice of any given text is incidental and arbitrary. He can use *Rocco and His Brothers*, a text about boxing, or equally well *make Othello into* a play about boxing, and with it explore the trope which fascinates him. Why, in order to be close to each other, do men have to be so rough?^{xlix} And how is it that affection can flip into homicidal hostility? So, in *Faces*, for example, the suburban husbands’ affectionate horseplay invariably morphs into wrestling, with bruised limbs and feelings dragging in the wake. It is the absence of free homosexual expression between these straight characters, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick might aver, the refusal of the camp-fire erotic closeness at the end of *Wild Lords* depicted as a universal yearning among boys for each other, that deprives men of harmony with each other, and renders their relations with women so distorted. Taken onto the realm of the political in *Coriolanus* or *Julius Caesar* (both constituent parts of the *Roman Tragedies*), this mutual male roughness, which goes hand in glove with a refusal of open mutually exchanged male eroticism, can lead to war and the rise or fall of whole dynasties.

A REPERTOIRE FROM LEFT FIELD

“Surges of instinctual power are going on beneath the surface of every human exchange.”
Camille Paglia¹

The Little Foxes, *South*, *Massacre at Paris*, *Strange Interlude*, *More Stately Mansions*, and *Children of the Sun* form a list that bespeaks an unlikely, even far-fetched repertory, cosmopolitan, gawky, and varied. Wildly different as they are, his choices are all plays about the tendency of human beings to slip down into an animal condition, as some few strive against the stream to move upwards. It is a rare mind that can find excitement both in proven classics such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Misanthrope*, and who can also repeatedly perform artistic archaeology to rescue what many would consider old chestnuts and lemons from obscurity. The weird, the forgotten, the unlikely from reject bins. One salient example is a dreary post-war family drama by François Mauriac, *The Unloved* (*Les Mal-aimés*; in Dutch, *De Onbeminden*). The life Ivo discerned in it led him and the actors to a quirky, upbeat though grotesque style, which both mocks and remains respectful to the play, and totally justifies the choice of this forgotten work. It is often some relational configuration between the characters that draws him to a work, and allows him to see past its out-dated patina.

In both *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *The Little Foxes* the mother of the family finds a way to free herself from her husband by murdering him. Coincidentally, both Christina and Regina precipitate a heart attack in their respective husbands, Ezra Mannon and Horace. Christina, though, then helps it along with poison in place of medicine, whereas Regina merely withholds the medicine. In both cases that husband has a strong, passionate link with his daughter. We discover this same father/daughter link again in Mauriac's *The Unloved*. In *More Stately Mansions* the mother has disposed of her husband before the action begins and is vying for mastery of her son's soul with his wife; in *Mourning Becomes Electra* that mother is in competition for her son's soul with his sister. And then there are all the boys who share a "sacred little world" with their mothers – Simon with Deborah, Orin with Christine, Edmund with Mary, Martin in *The Damned* with Sophie – an unabashedly "out" Oedipal relationship repeated over and over. Perhaps these recurrent psychological dyads and triads that form the essential web of these mid-twentieth century plays' dramatic life, written in the wake of the then novel Freudian craze, is just incidental to van Hove's love of them. The paradox is that he claims not to be interested in psychology, and yet favors O'Neill, that most psychologically oriented, Freudianly bedazzled of playwrights.^{li} He also favors the cultural critic, Camille Paglia, who makes an earnest case for restoring Freudian tropes of sexuality, notably that of the Oedipus Complex, to feminist discourse. For this cause, van Hove is her agent in the field.^{lii} For his rendition of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, that constitutes the second section of *Kings of War*, he boils the sprawling historical trilogy down into an hour-long heady essence of unapologetic Oedipal family drama.

Othello gets its motive force from a father attempting and failing to keep his daughter from marrying a suitor not of his choosing. *The Taming of the Shrew* (2005) and *The Miser* (2006), by contrast, contain fathers trying to marry their daughters off to undesirable suitors as the precipitating context for the action. In all three cases the mother is non-existent without explanation, and the daughter's fate is in varying degrees dependent on her father's good will or will, plain and simple. In *Othello*, Emilia is a

sometime stand-in for a mother, and in *The Miser*, the marriage broker, Frosine, is an older female whose only project is to make more money for herself, not to protect the young lady. But in all three cases, an incipient marriage is at stake, wished for or resisted by the eligible young lady in question.

Several of van Hove's obscure play choices are initially baffling. Then one looks further and one finds several recurring narrative leitmotifs to which he is drawn – that they contain characters, for example, who are eating themselves up with unrequited love. In Gorky's play *Children of the Sun* (*Kinderen van de zon* in Dutch), this trope of unreciprocated love is like a chain reaction that runs through the whole cast. Liza perversely rejects the man she loves, the veterinarian Chepurnoy, who tenaciously pursues her and commits suicide on her account. Chepurnoy's sister Meliana then futilely abases herself before the clueless protagonist, the scientist Protasov. Another such relationship exists between Protasov's neglected wife, the proud, resourceful Yelena who allows herself to be wooed under her husband's nose by the portrait artist Vaghin. This pattern of frustrated attraction holds for Lieutenant Wicziewsky and Regina of Julian Green's *South*, and for the monodrama, *La Voix Humaine*, where another suicide results from love deprived of a willing partner. We see it yet again in Marguerite Duras's *India Song*, in which the Vice Consul follows the frigid, withholding, but fascinating Anne-Marie Stretter all over South-East Asia, then runs through the streets bellowing her name and stalking her even to the remote island where she drowns herself. None of these plays, stylistically, is an obvious choice for van Hove to have undertaken, nor do they otherwise resemble each other. But they do all repeat this consistent pattern of characters desperately, vainly in love, battering their heads against a wall of desire for a partner who coolly or frantically turns them down, which may account in part for his interest in staging them.

OVERKILL

One hallmark of van Hove is that he wants there to be *a lot* of theatre in his shows. Sometimes he achieves this by simply doing a very long show with very little cutting, piling on stage-time. Of course he's not the first to sometimes demand that audiences sit for long stretches in the theatre. Peter Stein, one of his role models, favored epic theatrical ventures, which in his teutonic way, aimed at absolute thoroughness and exhaustive treatment of subjects, as for example a 22-hour long Goethe's *Faust* and a 10-hour long version of Schiller's *Wallenstein*. Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, many other *auteurs* have opted for "the long form," as did Patrice Chéreau, who van Hove claims as "his idol."^{liii} Ivo does the *whole Angels in America* trilogy in one evening. He throws *three* Shakespeare plays together, only mildly edited down into one evening, and melds *three* Antonioni movies, each of which on their own is generally considered to feel endless. *More* is one way of being outrageous, and it isn't asking too much of an audience to hunker down for the long haul of a generous theatre experience. But it must be asked if more is always more – in the sense of deeper, harboring more surprises and delights, greater insight – or simply if exhaustive won't simply lead to exhaustion, both of the audience's energy and of the dramatic excitement. Still, in an age of quick sound

bites and terse You-Tube fragments, an extended, continuous camping out in the theatre for a deep confrontation is refreshing, and is essentially a return to theatre's native, classic roots and expectations – a submersion in artistic experience that palliates the superficiality of brief shocks and bumps in the night.

Often, he will include two or more texts in one evening, either intertwining several together, or one after the other. The most successful case of blending several works into one, is the *Antonioni Project*, where three films that are seamlessly blent into each other under one ineffable atmosphere. The three seemingly interminable, actionless film scripts on which is show was based were intercut with each other to create a new theatre text, actually makes it all seem much more eventful than the films felt apart. The pattern of switching back and forth between three narrative threads, allowing us to continually refocus and remember where we left off, is thus an antidote to ennui.

In some of the other cases, the bulking up is just counterproductive. One long Chekhov play isn't long enough on its own, but he intertwines both *Platonov* and *Ivanov* into an evening he entitled *The Russians (De Russen)*; nor one Greek tragedy; it must be both *Antigone* and *Ajax* (1991). He piggybacked Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* onto his *After the Rehearsal*, although either on its own would have been a full evening of theatre. It isn't enough to do one Shakespeare history play, but he must concatenate three in one monumental evening in *Roman Tragedies*, and yet another three into *The Kings of War*. He isn't the first director to take such an approach. Van Hove's contemporary Luk Perceval preceded him with a series of Shakespeare history plays adapted by Tom Lanoye for the celebrated *Ten Oorlog (Waging War)*. While one feels one is being given one's money's worth, this overkill can get stultifying by the fourth or fifth hour.

Scenes From a Marriage, which in any case first came out as a television mini-series, was not intended to be watched in one sitting. But Ivo stuffs it into one evening. In a binge of forced feeding, the series of false endings of the married couple's relationship ultimately starts to make unreasonable demands on the audience's patience. The *NY Times* reviewer didn't seem to have this criticism,^{liv} but the audience I was sitting with that had seemed so engaged and galvanized up until halfway through Act II, started to visibly sag and lose interest. The plethora of inconclusive conclusions wound up dissipating the considerable dramatic impact of the show. It is also a question of tempo. He refuses to rush through a show via what is known universally and traditionally in the profession as "pacing."^{lv}

Having directed from his fringe-style platform for the better part of a decade, van Hove began to approach more conventional texts in productions that might be identified as "radical interpretations," but which in the European context fall well within the frame of conventionality. The first major classic he took on was *Macbeth*, a 1988 production of AKT/Vertikaal. In retrospect, it served as a kind of audition to become artistic director for a major regional theatre, and he has made no bones about saying that he dreamed of doing large-scale productions in a theatre with sufficient means.^{lvi} Up to that point he had established himself as an interesting, distinctive experimentalist, but any repertory company would need to see evidence of ability to take on classic texts in a potential

artistic director, to be able to negotiate the large casts and their well-known challenges of language and period style.

While his production of the Scottish play gets off to a rocky start in the interpretation of the Witches, and throughout remains a kind of bric-a-brac of multiple, contradictory radical interpretations, the production did finally accrete into a show with power and substance. This was a presciently densely packed, transitional work, where he tried out many, many ideas he would return to later. Indeed, the production was over-stuffed with them, as though, unconvinced that he had a long and blessed career as a director ahead of him, he only had only this one chance to say and do it all. It is worth examining, if only as a germinating tray for many of the ideas he later developed with great benefit, and yet others that were tried out in this production never to be used again.

Upstage there is a wall of enormous vertical Stonehenge-like stones encircling the space, a powerful statement. These great slabs ultimately are seen to revolve, and reveal themselves painted scarlet on the backside. At first only one of them is reversed, forming a scarlet alcove that is used for bloody scenes and deeds, but finally all the slabs present their red sides to the audience, as the play gets more and more incarnadine. Then down center there is a large transparent bowl that remains present throughout the spectacle. This set piece has multiple purposes: as a kind of wishing well – as a window onto the supernatural beyond where the noble thane's successful future is rendered visible – as a mirror reflecting the tragic hero back at himself, as a simple pond, and so on. When the Witches present Macbeth with a series of apparitions, it is in the pool that he sees them. And it is in this prominently placed pool that Macbeth ultimately meets his end as well.

The Witches are represented as large emerald blue lozenges that waver and quaver, with shrill voices emanating from their vicinity. While there is no corporal presence, the lines are hollered out in a harsh, grating way. It is a good idea, perhaps, but falls flat in the event. But van Hove revives the use of endowing abstract ovular forms with life in his later production of Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris* to much better effect. All the Scottish characters wear salmon-colored shirts, white pants stained with burgundy splotches, dangling belts, and tatters of plaid kilts hanging down, which create an impression of their being dabbed with former bloody murders. This costuming hovers between a post-modernist statement, and coming across as simply dirty and ragged.

When Duncan greets the victorious soldiers he stays stolidly behind his desk, introducing yet another pattern in the van Hove oeuvre – depicting Shakespearean royalty as executives of some modern-day capitalist enterprise. Following this, we see such depictions over and over when it comes to his classics. Powerful social figures are transformed from period-appropriate aristocrats and burghers to high-ranking members of the contemporary plutocracy. From Julius Caesar and all his Roman cohorts to Caligula's (by Camus) associates and Richard II, from Harpagon in Molière's *The Miser* to Alceste in *The Misanthrope*, the equation of classic royalty with modern corporate leader or European Commission bureaucrat, the two of which are interchangeable, is van Hove's fallback, and he started the trend here in *Macbeth*. This shorthand image of an authoritarian corporate ruler from the One-Percent instantly strips Duncan of the

sympathy he usually gains in most productions.

Lady Macbeth wears a severe gray suit. Duncan and his retinue imitate sound effects of nature – birdcalls, cricket and frog too, which recur at the very end of the play as the lights dim – a distancing or alienating effect. It surely alienates us from any catharsis, as we chuckle against our own better judgment, but to what end? This is an easy and even juvenile attempt at humor, and it is the kind of thing that van Hove never repeated. On the other hand, it is an irreverent brand of stand-up comedy theatricalism that plays to the peanut gallery, reminiscent of certain of Jan Fabre's trademarks.

A different pattern is established when Macbeth offers his "what will come hereafter" soliloquy, rationalizing the murder to come. He does so with a delivery that is unadorned, fluttering his hands, nervous and pensive. He goes about it in a quiet, unpretentious way that is agreeable and refreshing. Van Hove has stripped him of all that is pretentious, which contrasts with the many gimmicks that litter this production. This lead actor's delivery of his monologues is one of the strongest aspects. He is presented as a haunted, modest, un-actorly Macbeth, who occasionally accrues a comic tone. But the tone tilts wildly in the production. Matters almost descend into Punch and Judy (or into King and Queen Ubu) as Lady Macbeth boxes Macbeth's ears to get him moving to answer the hammering at the door.

The Porter who enters next is bent over double, concealed in a voluminous cape with hundreds of keys at his waist and hanging from his neck. He counts and goes through them all systematically as the "knocking without" multiplies and magnifies ever more insistently, seemingly endlessly. He mutters his famous soliloquy to himself in totally incomprehensible gibberish, a choice of delivery which a director in an Anglophone production would be hard put to opt for, as it obliterates the revered text. On his return cross, when he is fleeing into exile, The Porter, still bent double, creeps across the stage, stabilizing himself with two valises as he makes his escape, slow as molasses. This Porter is virtually a Beckett character.

Nor does the comic mood last for very long. Artaud is in the air when a distracted Macbeth's clasp of his hands finally escalates until it is uncontrollable. Macduff, when he discovers Duncan's death, places himself in the red enclave with his hands wavering above and to the sides of his head, and howls over the murder of the king as his hands again emblematically flutter like frightened birds. He bows forward and back cataclysmically. The fluttering of Macbeth's hands return at moments of guilt like a musical leitmotif. When it is Lady Macbeth's turn to be overcome with guilt, she goes into a kind of quiet delirium, with facial and physical tics, at the entrance of Banquo's ghost. So, the show is an odd mix of styles and ill-fitting business. But it was useful as a way station for later occasions when more coherent uses of many disparate ideas were made.

UNLIKELY CASTING

“Art follows its own nature and its own laws, like a wild animal that can’t possibly be tamed.”

Ivo van Hove^{lvii}

As we have seen, Ivo denies that he’s a deconstructivist, but perhaps the word itself promotes confusion. Elinor Fuchs’s finding is that deconstruction “entails not the destruction of a literary work [as many believe] but rather exposing in that work of contradictory possibilities of interpretation. [...] Theatre has ... become the wholly auto-referential place Antonin Artaud said it should be: the space produced from within itself, and the equal of life.” Whether seen either from European or American vantage points, the “production texts” Ivo produces qualify as deconstructions of the original. Van Hove is a specialist in exposing contradictory possibilities of interpretation, and challenging the canonical or conventional one.^{lviii} Over and over we see Ivo confronting us a fresh, unsuspected view of a character, line, or moment against a more canonical one that has long been taken for granted as inarguable. As one minor New York critic noted, as though he were pinpointing a drawback in van Hove’s directing abilities: “Almost all the elements in [his] interpretative approach appear opposite to our preconceived ideas.”^{lix}

In his casting choices, van Hove has often broken the mold. When he has undertaken texts that are familiar to us, and in many cases sacrosanct, he has departed from the traditional image of a given character, and offered to the audience an alternative icon to consider. This has been one of his principle strategies for shaking up the play’s meaning and breaking into some new interpretation. Consider *Hedda Gabler*, beginning with the title character’s husband, George Tesman. Normally cast as an unappealing and misshapen dork, a pedant who is wandering about the bibliographical archives to tease minutiae out regarding his specialized field, the handicrafts of Brabant in the Middle Ages,^{lx} he is characterized both in Ibsen’s text and legion productions as remarkably thick-headed and unsympathetic – a mild-mannered, unwittingly dangerous bumbler. But van Hove cast him in two iconoclastic ways, first in the American production, and then differently again in the Dutch production.

At the New York Theatre Workshop he was a glib, petulant Bunthorne figure – a young dandy. If he wasn’t gay, then he was certainly ambivalent. He was lithe, feline, and in both clothing and verbal drawl, fashionably trendy. Regardless of who directs this modern classic a nagging question must, in some way, be addressed: Why did the beautiful, stylish, caustic termagant Hedda marry Tesman? The explanation in the text is supposedly covered when she confides in Judge Brack that she had simply “danced herself out;” in other words, she’d tilted precariously close to the end of the marriageable age at the same time accruing a nasty reputation, making herself into an unacceptable candidate for marriage to most respectable men. Casting Tesman as a sexually ambivalent metrosexual answers the question. It certainly doesn’t look like this Tesman will give Hedda a child or molest her very much at all, which leaves her, in that sense, free within her marriage. If she can’t have Eilert Lovborg, at least she won’t be subject to any undesired overtures.

Then in the Dutch production he was cast as a charming, amiable puppy of a man, an

unremarkable heterosexual “guy,” truly affectionate and likeable to all. Again, we can see that he would be an “acceptable” choice for a husband who could have been talked around by his brothel buddies into hooking up with Hedda, oblivious to the scandalous social response it would engender. He projects such good-willed and expansive bonhomie that it is entirely plausible he could have overlooked Hedda’s wild past and chivalrously rescued her from infamous old-maidhood. And one can also plausibly see him in that bordello with his chums, sharing their pleasures in a way that would seem far-fetched for the cliché traditional version of Tesman.

Ivo transformed the miniscule character of the Maid in *Hedda Gabler* into a lead. By giving the extravagant Polish transplant Elzbieta Czyzewska the role in New York, and making room for all her diva tendencies, he wittingly put the maid on a par theatrically with her new mistress, the title character. She, in effect, competed with Hedda for dominance of the household, insofar as she was the maid, and insofar as she was a successful star back in Poland, but struggling as an émigrée performer to establish herself in a prominent position in New York theatre, she stole the show too.

Tesman’s Aunt Julie is another re-visioning of a traditional prototype. American directors invariably follow the obvious clues that Ibsen has embedded, portraying her as a dithering, loquacious busybody, socially clumsy, usually played by a small, bird-like actress. Van Hove changes gears entirely, making her into the epitome of the social-climbing bourgeois Antwerp matron – cold, imperious, and unforgiving. The new image doesn’t arise out of whole cloth, but is based on a clue in the text that the character is highly ambitious for her nephew, having invested every penny she owns for his advancement. He is the only progeny her family has spawned, so she is prepared to take any road, even the low road, to assist him to rise to the top of his profession and society. The van Hove rendition of Aunt Julie clearly spurs her nephew Tesman on in his ruthless vendetta against his competitor Eilert Lovborg, and pushes him to squelch the evident fondness in which Tesman also holds Lovborg. Van Hove shows how social Darwinism runs in the family through this bit of unexpected casting that overturns the preconception.

We see a fresh approach to casting with Stanley Kowalski in van Hove’s NYTW production of *Streetcar Named Desire* as well. The muscular macho bullying hulk for which Marlon Brando laid down the marker was replaced by a svelte, clean-limbed actor, Bruce McKenzie. He was more cat-like than brute. The slender, lithe central male figure with small, regular facial features, sometimes ramified by a slew of similarly slender, lithe male supporting actors with modest good looks, is the prototypical van Hove default position, regardless of national or stylistic habit. Even when the role is that of a mature man, such as Harpagon in Molière’s *The Miser*, where the commedia tradition would dictate using a very short or very lanky, angular figure with a pointy nose, in his place we find a fit, neutrally clothed man of early middle age, with the nondescript good looks that abound in the contemporary European board room or European sub-commission. The only exception is the burly Fred Goossens. Naturally, once he assumed command of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, which is structured along traditional European repertory company lines, van Hove has had to resort to the actors available from the company instead of jobbing them each in according to each given role’s unique requirements. But

it is van Hove himself who, over time, with some exceptions, has determined the composition of this company, and the men in it have come to share this rather homogenous physique.

When he directs for NYTW, he can put his ensemble together *ex nihilo*, and then it generally seems like he is going for exactly the same look. A case in point is his production of *The Little Foxes*. In the character description of Ben, the malign uncle and head of the family, which Lillian Hellman provided, he is pictured as having the light movements which heavy men so often have. The bulky George C. Scott for example, true to type, played the role in the 1967 Lincoln Center production. But van Hove is having none of that, and we were confronted with Marton Czokas, a feline, square-jawed, actor seemingly without love handles slithering about the stage. So van Hove has kept the light-footed part of Hellman's requirements, but dispensed with the paunch. Muscle and long sinew, but no concomitant bulk, are the male hallmarks. Yet another case in point occurs in his recent John Proctor in the Broadway production of Miller's *The Crucible*. Ben Whishaw has a markedly slighter build than the sturdy character described by the original text and than he is generally cast to look. When Proctor is described in the play as appearing like a "great bird" sitting offstage in his solitary confinement cell, one is hard-put to make the verbal image jibe with the unimposing actor we've been watching.^{lx} One is driven to conclude that van Hove, as a general rule of casting, prefers to stay in the center of the human spectrum, applying consciously or unconsciously, an unmistakable litmus test that excludes extremities of height, weight (especially obese), or very unusual in features in any particular direction.

As for what Ivo's male actors wear, from straight-legged pants to suit jackets without ties, whether they be tee shirts or button down, the costumes are a given generic version of clothing. Since the bodies must be covered it will be done with as minimal ambition as possible for expressing any particular thing beyond what dry necessity requires. In fact, the over-all impression from the point of view of style is not just that the costumes are unobtrusive, but that they are denatured. The same may be said for most of the actresses, with notable exceptions. Sophie Okonedo who played Mrs. Proctor in *The Crucible* confided that, "he wants the men and women to wear the same kind of stuff, so they're rather androgynous. That's the way he explained it."^{lxii}

SEX ACTS/ACTING SEX

"I make fierce theatre, but theatre is all about fantasies, and those are often violent or sexual."

Ivo van Hove^{lxiii}

"Sex is a dark, dangerous force of nature."

Camille Paglia^{lxiv}

One Dutch critic said of van Hove: "He hops from lap to lap, because violence and sex always go hand in hand for van Hove."^{lxv} An American critic, having seen a number of

his shows, was amazed to finally come across one where no one undressed or made love, they are that prevalent.^{lxvi} A reputation for sexual obsession and explicitness has followed Ivo throughout his career both in Europe and America, although it is dissipating recently with his most recent ventures, which sublimate or entirely avoid sexual tropes, at least on Broadway. Van Hove is not only interested in the feelings arising between a couple in love, but is also fascinated by the problem of putting carnality itself before his public. Carnality is a very appropriate word to express the quality his actors invest in such performance passages. For it is presented like the main course of the show with a kind of salivation accompanying the meatiness of the experience. The movements and gestures representing love-making themselves are used as a provocation, attempting to supersede the media's steady barrage of sexual arousal that has left everyone blasé. His ability to succeed can feel especially destabilizing in live performance.

Still, to radically paraphrase Tolstoy, all theatrical sexuality is not the same. Van Hove's is highly idiosyncratic. For one thing, no actual or even simulated penetration happens on van Hove's stages. The sex acts, such as they are, tend toward the gymnastic, the fetishistic, and sex is often used as a window into psychological power relations. The real way to grasp the flavor of it would be to cite a fair number of specific examples from some paradigmatic productions. *Macbeth*, the first Shakespeare play he ever undertook, was rife with pregnant ideas that have then recurred throughout the *oeuvre*. Done under the aegis of Akt/Vertikaal in 1987, Lady Macbeth's first speech, reading the letter from her absent husband, is straightforward and intense, and ends with bestial lasciviousness as she anticipates her absent husband's return, upon which he is suddenly there with her. On his arrival, she leaps into his arms and plays the whole scene right up against him, belly to belly, he trying to undress her. They run offstage to make love it seems – all amorous passion and eroticism. From the simple circumstantial fact that they have been parted and now are reunited van Hove draws this logical consequence: that absence for a sexually passionate couple would bring out their voracity. Later when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plan Duncan's death, they do so in the tones and accents of contemporary spouses, a married couple with a shared domestic problem to face. She grips him and squeezes his shoulders as she convinces him, and then spins off into a kind of mild orgasm or frenzy; the contemplation of murder has quite an erotic kick.

The frank sexuality of Macbeths' relationship, while not entirely original,^{lxvii} heralds a tendency we can see throughout the van Hove canon: to bring sexuality between intimate partners to the fore as explicitly as possible. Later in the play, when Macbeth confesses to his wife the miserable, guilty nights he undergoes, her response is exclusively to sensually massage his shoulders and back, and bring him back to her through tactile wiles. Thus far into their mire of guilt, the Thane shows he can still prove insouciant and sensual, leading his wife forward with confidence and erotic virility, both to political triumphs and intimate ones.

Lord and Lady Macbeth are not the only loving couple in *Macbeth* as depicted by van Hove. The brothers, Duncan's sons, hold each other round like lovers. Macbeth and Banquo embrace like lovers as well, united in grief (seeming grief in the former's case) at the death of the king. Macbeth hastens to close in on Macduff too in an embrace that is

close and almost sexual. In sum, he is played as a highly eroticized Macbeth throughout, one who uses proximity and sexual energy to elicit loyalty from his subalterns. Even Macbeth's death has an erotic kick to it, voluptuously sinking down onto the bench, losing vital energy after losing the battle. Following his triumph on the field of battle, Macduff arrives and touches his nemesis from behind. Then gently, tenderly, he leads him by the neck around to the back of the picnic bench and sticks his head into the water of the bowl in a shocking gesture that is both sadistically cruel and intimate. It is like Snuff sex.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, sex is a vital expression of whom in the father-son-stepmother triangle has power over whom. The stepmother is the stake that both men gamble for, but she refuses to be a pawn in their game, preferring to play her own of sexual dominance over both of them. It is a question of which she will choose, and in the event she chooses both in turn, leaving the other to skulk. When the sex act does finally occur it is a no-holds-barred affair, with all the emotions engaged and the voices unleashed to vomit out deeply repressed angst, as would certainly not have been the way in a traditional American production. O'Neill doesn't indicate anything of the kind in the stage directions, and American directors, leery of accusations of anachronism or inappropriateness, would respect the prudishness of the period. The van Hove approach would have gotten the show closed down in previews on the Broadway of 1924 when it premiered. In Ivo's production, which is both hyper-naturalist and replete with non-verbal ritualism, the sex act becomes a rite of passage as well abrogation of all restrictions.

In a play like O'Neill's *More Stately Mansions* (*Rijksmanshuis*, 1993), explicit sex, which again is certainly not indicated onstage in the original text, serves to cut the great author's extreme prolixity. But when we see these characters act out their most intense sexual desires without apparent hesitation or reserve, it is left ambiguous if what they are doing is occurring on the objective plane or as a fantasy wish that is not actually being realized at all. When Joe starts to make love to Sarah, prompted by the innocuous line from the script, "It's so long ago that you've kissed me that way," he devours her, kisses her all over, and flips her upside down, exposing her backside, underwear, etc. – which is a highly typical rendition of van Hove lovemaking – before going right back into one of those endless O'Neill monologues. The athleticism of these interchanges is reminiscent of Wim Vandekeybus choreography – a signature of the Flemish Wave.

Talking and lovemaking, which often occur simultaneously and incontinently can both be over the top in van Hove productions. Joe proposes that he and Sarah live together as unmarried lovers. Her response: "I'd like nothing more." He takes her response as a green light to indulge in an orgy of fetishism, first removing her bra and panties. Next he repeatedly gets her to open her legs so he can see her vagina, sitting back on his stool to get a better look.^{lxviii} All the while he goes on about their relationship and future, then gets up and repeats the compulsive voyeuristic ritual once more. There is a cool, distanced, clinical approach behind this repeated action. Again, it could be the stuff of the unconscious mind or an extremely unspontaneous wish fulfillment of some remembered child's obsession.

Without any warning, the tables are turned between the couple as Sarah's sexual hunger is aroused, and she starts pulling *his* clothes off, suddenly and swiftly. He sits back on the stool wearing only socks, as she runs over and sits on his lap, grabbing him in a bear hug. His hands are non-committal. She falls on the floor and pulls him down on top of her. But he, detaching himself, walks off automatically talking about his plans for the future, while she lies there on the floor, writhing with dissatisfaction. They keep talking, he cool, she in a frenzy of sexual need. She crawls around on the ground on all fours, over to him, and pushes his hands off his lap where they were protectively joined. She gets him to slide down to the floor once more as they proceed to "make love" athletically in all kinds of twisted kama sutra positions – to the accompaniment of somewhat satirical piano music.

While all this activity is decidedly uninhibited, it is less sensual than animalistic and athletic – with a lot of carrying and dragging of bodies, inverted postures, etc., ultimately forming one of those extended non-verbal segments which are emblematic of van Hove. They then both get themselves organized and dressed. Pushing the body to extremes is, historically, a grotowskian tendency, but in van Hove's case, since he denies having had any direct grotowskian influence, it may be derived rather from later performance artists of the 1970s, "who sought the transgression of socially repressive norms through the experience of pain and danger."^{ix}

Sex depicted as a power seesaw is nowhere stronger than in the production of Genet's *Splendid's*, where the characters with the greatest status are liable to voluntarily surrender all power and without warning drop to the floor to perform fellatio on the one who just before was at his mercy. No sooner is the Queen of the proceedings, the dead American woman who was kidnapped by the criminal gang, paraded through the space and seemingly worshipped, then "she" is summarily debased, forced to undergo rape and anal sex. It is then promptly revealed that "she" is actually the gang-leader Johnny in the flesh, but in drag – the most macho member of the group. The strong man who had the whole gang under his thumb volunteers for the most abject of all roles, the female victim to his underlings' libidinous lust.

Ultimately all the proceedings of brutal sex are revealed to actually be a game, a charade, an enactment. So the roles of subjugated wretch and omnipotent sex master are continually in flux and interchange, as they get passed around the ensemble. At a moment of deep, cathartic suffering, when the character Piero, for example, scrapes the rock bottom-most point of hysterical despair, he is apt next to start masturbating. The emotions of wretchedness and subjugation in *Splendid's* turn them all on. But the sex acts proper are not gratuitous, merely sensationalist, nor enacted for their own sake or simple erotic pleasure. They are rites of passage which all who pass through the circles of this gay gangster hell, a site of crime and a jail cell at one and the same time, must undergo. These pornographic ceremonies are played with all the bombastic, orgiastic allure of a Mardi Gras parade. This is the innocent sexual exploration around the campfire of van Hove's early work, *Wild Lords* minus the innocence. There the air is charged with eroticism, but the sexual act is limited to rubbing of crotches, here outright

rape. In the earlier work, though desire is rife, sometimes even mutual, its fulfillment is tortuous.

This circumscribed world of gay sex among shut-in criminals makes a comeback in van Hove's *Edward II*. He re-imagines the English court as an all-male prison block. The thrill of scapegoating, of bringing those in power down and degrading them, are again dominant motifs in this play ostensibly about English regal history. The punishment the nobles suffer has a decidedly sexual dimension. The courtiers, here depicted as fellow prison inmates, form a clique or gang of those rejected by Edward. Both the king and young Gaveston, aristocrats in the prisoner hierarchy, literally "get the shaft" from those jealous of their power and of the singular attention the king pays his insignificant favorite. The dehumanizing prison setting gives free reign to cruel, violent sexuality that gets enacted in furtive shower stalls and lodged between prison bars. Incipient tenderness is viciously trampled upon as soon as it manifests.

Incest, at the heart of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, where a brother and sister fall in love with each other, is a trope van Hove explored earlier in Marguerite Duras's *Agatha*, where the sister was played in drag, gets taken up yet again in *Desire Under the Elms* and Charles Mee's *True Love*, these times between boys and their stepmothers. In the latter, where the age differential between son and stepmother is much greater than in the former, sex acts are prominent, and sex itself the theme of the play. However, sexual expression is treated with a certain ambivalence, sometimes in-your-face for those representing society-at-large, but verging on prudery, for the mother/son couple. Following the pattern laid down in *Danton's Death*, when in the midst of one of the many extremely long monologues about sex that pepper this show, the stepmother in love with her young step-son, commences to masturbate and achieve orgasm she never stops talking. That scene glides into a tickling match with the kid, which, when intimate sex between them is on the verge of erupting, evolves instead into a large-group orgy-like scene involving the entire cast. He saves the eroticism for the supernumeraries, as the transgressive couple are concealed by the mass. To spare us seeing the mother and son actually making love, van Hove diverts the show into ever widening circles of distancing, covering it over with in-unison foot-stomping by the ensemble.

Where we do get a glimpse into frank sex play, it is in a sub-plot. The boy, a modern-day Hippolytus, now presumably traumatized from his initiatory sexual encounter with his stepmother, chases a young girl around the space. She, more than willing to be pursued, massages his body while lustily confessing her love. This scene starts with great tenderness and clearly gives every indication that the kid is capable of having a normal adolescent love life, the incestuous episode notwithstanding. That is, until he sets to rhythmically and repeatedly spanking her to wild percussion accompaniment. At first, she was willing to see where it would go, but ultimately screams in horror and dismay. So the incipient relationship aborts.

In one of van Hove's more recent productions to be staged in America – *Scenes From a Marriage* – frank lovemaking is once more front and center. Here, though, sexual longing and deprivation within a legally sanctioned heterosexual marriage provide the

fodder. The play's structural conceit of playing three scenes from the couple's life out of chronological order leaves the audience in a state of disorientation and uncertainty as to where the truth lies in the characters' contradictory narratives of mutual misunderstanding and injury. When the central character Marianne wants to prevent her husband Johan from fulfilling his announced project of leaving her and the children, she takes off his shirt and presses the flesh of his back, her fingers desperately recalling to him what her words fail to. It is her fingers that summon up the love he's losing and cling to the body she seemingly craves so dearly.

If one sees this scene a-chronologically as I did, one is left with the assumption that it was she whose demand for more sex than he was willing to supply was causing him to flee from an over-exigent partner, only to find out later in the theatre-going experience in another anachronistic segment that it she who has long since withheld sexual favors from him. It had been she who had emotionally abandoned her highly sexed spouse, leaving him randy and unsatisfied, thus propelling him into the arms of another woman. Then in Act II, when all three of the couples who represent one single couple at different points in their marriage find themselves onstage at the same time and are trying to walk out the door, they wander from one to the other in a virtual clump, kissing and caressing, unable to let go. Is all this tactility erotic for the audience? It couldn't possibly be everyone's cup of tea; but it is clear that it is the characters' cup of tea. The grasping and clinching that comprise the leave-taking develops into yet another sustained non-verbal van Hove composition segment, a choreographed set piece whose antecedents are in performance art or the dance-theatre of De Keersmaeker and Pina Bausch.

In the early 1986 student production of yet another verbose play, Büchner's *Danton's Death*, van Hove embedded the rhetoric of the revolution within a series of explicit sexual acts between the revolutionaries. As in so many other cases, he uses sex on stage to cut and dilute the potential tedium of excessive verbosity. The political upheaval is replete with an unleashing of orgiastic energies. A female character starts to sing "The Marseillaise," standing across from Danton. What starts off pleasantly, gradually changes into something raucous and obnoxious, with which the hero of the revolution joins in. They both try to make the paean to liberty as discordant and bestial as they can, winding up blurting "LAAAAA, LAAAA, LAAAAA" into each other's face, like verbal vomiting, after which she starts masturbating and undulating as she speaks. Her speechifying continues unabated as makes rhythmic love to her from behind. She then leads him around on his knees with her fingers jabbed into his mouth, followed by a kiss. She drops down invitingly, seeming to offer fellatio, lies back as though she is ready for it, and then reverts to a fetal position, talking, talking all the while. Next she stands over him while he lies splayed out on his back. She sits on Danton's stomach making love to him as he delivers one of his longer political tirades.^{lxx}

The exception to van Hove's proclivity for staging sexual exploits, one which proves the rule for its exceptional delicacy, is seen in *Angels in America*. In a famous scene depicting gay male seduction in a public setting van Hove had the obvious cue to explore it in his usual carnal way. But he instead set the action of that scene at the extreme upstage point of a deep stage space at BAM, with the participants entirely covered and

concealed in hoodies. Rather than exposing anything and drawing us in, he casts the spectators to a far remove of alienated passers-by. With low voices and whispered monosyllables, the men furtively hook up and slip behind large dark flats, suggesting the concealed chambers under a boardwalk on Coney Island or some far-flung nook in the subway system, where their activities go on well out of the audience's sight. Thus van Hove, rather than exulting in the sexual liberation which gripped the gay world in the 70s, socks it away on the periphery.

Despite Amsterdam's reputation as a sex capital, van Hove may be fighting an uphill battle against a certain prudery concerning displays of gay sex, which may account for his own uncharacteristic modesty in this production. When interviewed by a gay magazine about his *Angels in America* production in Holland, his disappointment in the younger generation of Dutch peoples' attitudes was palpable:

'What's really taken me aback has been by the reactions to an educational project that we've been conducting around this play. It appears that it's difficult to bring up a theme such as homosexuality, so instead we use skits on topics like separation and mourning.' Toneelgroep Amsterdam often develops programs for getting middle school pupils to respond to themes from our successful productions. Even acting out scenes, for example. 'But this time we've encountered a lot of resistance; kids have no desire to play gay people, or even deny that they exist. I thought that we'd come further on the road to acceptance than that.'^{lxxi}

As far as nudity goes, van Hove has taken the measure of his disparate publics' tolerance levels for scabrousness. For his recent Broadway shows, there has been virtually no disrobing; only Ben Whishaw took off his shirt in *The Crucible*. For his French productions, on the other hand, a great deal of nudity is on display, for example in his recent production of *The Damned*. The S.A. Commandant Konstantin Essenbeck and his young lieutenant strip down and disport themselves, belly-flopping through a self-created pool of beer. They are backed up on the big screen by a virtual squadron of young S.A. officers who remove their clothes and engage in a drunken orgy before passing out and getting butchered by the S.S. The sibylline Martin, too, undresses, as does his regal mother, Sophie. In his recent staging of Simon Stephens's monodrama *Song From Far Away* in Amsterdam, the solo actor, Eelco Smits spends the lion's share of the evening naked, but in this case the unclothed body is more of a signifier for vulnerability before cosmic indifference, "unaccommodated man," than instance for prurience.^{lxxii}

Van Hove has been very insistent that he only agreed to work on Broadway provided there was no interference from his producer, Scott Rudin. And I'm sure it was accurate when he claims that Rudin assured Ivo he would not make any artistic stipulations whatever.^{lxxiii} But the environment itself has its own, perhaps irresistible, bewitching grip. For the Puritan-dominated *Crucible* in the self-censoring Walter Kerr Theatre the apostate Proctor jumps on his erstwhile mistress Abbie for a very few curtailed and chaste clinches. Thus it is a severely curtailed rendition of normal van Hoveist gymnastic sex. Not nothing, but nothing much to offend a tourist couple from Des Moines either. In Avignon, on the other hand, in *The Damned*, the border-pushing androgynous character Martin plays all manner of forbidden games. During a round of hide-and-seek

with his young female cousins he almost does *something* illicit while playing possum with one of them in a dark closet that causes her to scream for the help of her nanny. He later prompts her to touch his body all over. Just before her hand ventures to a really objectionable area the game is interrupted. Still later, after thoroughly showering his mother with the pent-up invective of years, she and he crawl toward each other on the floor and come this close to French-kissing. As for New York, when Ivo included rawer sexuality and more scantily clad bodies in his earliest NYTW productions he got a lot of pushback. Now, having won over the cutting edge crowd, and freshly arrived in the land of *Wicked* and *Mary Poppins*, the equation may have changed. The subversive advantage of administering shocks to the moral sensibility must be weighed against the possibilities of a drastic loss in popularity or being forever banned. In each locality what it means to push the envelope is different.

VIOLATING TRADITION

Van Hove favors classics, but that does not mean he is interested in presenting them “classically.” Rather he gives the text an empirical analysis which leads to unnervingly original stagings of scenes it was assumed could only be done one way. Throughout *Othello*, for example, van Hove violates many theatrical traditions. The usual interpretation of *Othello* has the general maintaining his cool through the first half of the play at least. But it is extremely early in this rendition when Othello suddenly strides downstage of the “cabin” to where Desdemona is standing, and slaps her violently, hurling insults and furiously tracking her to upstage of the glass barrier. As the downstage area is defined as a public space, this uncontrolled violence is a public embarrassment and reveals a chink in the armor of the political chief – in full view of society. Even when the couple takes the dispute “inside,” this family unit’s private business is equally on display, due to the total transparency of their walls.

Many characters play out their submerged desires and urges in all tactile frankness. Bianca is scantily dressed and seductively portrayed. She and Cassio have unabashed, highly sensual interplay, and make love everywhere, including the floor. Iago, when he comforts Desdemona, touches her sensually, intimately even, caressing her hair and face. Violating conventional wisdom which assumes Desdemona’s absolute purity and fidelity. She accepts all these overtures from her husband’s lieutenant as though it were natural. When he buries his face in her belly, she caresses his hair and accepts his advances seemingly without the least forethought. Emilia, who is standing by observing it all seems to think nothing of it either. Othello literally glimpses Desdemona’s supposed adultery with Cassio, thus blurring the line between paranoia and objectivity. As we witness these flagrant inversions of Shakespearean production tradition we are forced to ask whether these carnal liaisons, nothing like what we’d see in customary productions, are meant to be taken as imaginary wish fulfillments, as actual violations of the marriage contract, or as phantasms? As will be shown, these seeming absurdities and anomalies gain justification through hindsight, so that some inner truth displaces the purported nature of each relationship.

Visual Dramaturgy

Ezra Mannon: This house is not my house. This is not my room nor my bed. They are empty – waiting for someone to move in!

Mourning Becomes Electra, Homecoming, IV

As Hans-Thies Lehmann notes, the verbally centered dramatic aspect we are used to privileging very often takes a back seat to what he calls a “visual dramaturgy” in the contemporary theatrical experience, where image and stage picture demand primacy over *logos*. Arnold Aronson goes so far as to suggest that for most spectators, “it is the apprehension of space that may be the most profound and powerful experience of live theater although, admittedly, it is one that is most often felt subconsciously.”^{lxxiv} The first thing that greets an audience is the set and the specific performer-audience configuration. This is what subliminally proclaims and initially embodies the style for the duration of the evening. Hence its crucial importance.

This, the longest chapter of this monograph, will be concerned with giving detailed consideration to some recurring scenic arrangements van Hove and Versweyveld have developed over the years. Critics and audiences alike have frequently let it be known that these spatial innovations are usually the main draw and source of sensation in their productions. Ivo’s spatial solutions are in conversation with each other from production to production, like some lengthy back and forth debate or dialectic that spans more than three decades.

He and his longtime partner and designer Jan Versweyveld share the same voyeuristic point of departure as Emile Zola, the founder of naturalism: to reproduce a “slice of life,” with the distinction that van Hove rather approaches each play from some basis of inner life he discovers in the text, which in turn determines the outer scenic principle. This process leads most often to a very different result from the detailed box sets Zola and his followers favored. Rather it has resulted in a kaleidoscopic array of scenic variations for Ivo and Jan, although some – deceptively – at first glance do resemble conventional box sets.

Ivo’s partner and designer Jan Versweyveld describes what they take as their stylistic project as follows: “The challenge has really been to avoid degenerating into some ersatz realism, and rather to develop a new sort of theatrical reality.”^{lxxv} In steering clear of the ersatz, they have often contrived something both they and critics have called it “hyper-realism” or getting even closer, “spectacular realism.”^{lxxvi} If we can understand what the early naturalists were aiming for, we can see the ways in which van Hove and other post-modernists take those same ideas and both extend and subvert them.

Arnold Aronson, establishes a binary distinction between post-modern and naturalistic set design that “has asked the spectator either to suspend disbelief [as Zola so clearly does] or to accept the stage as an essentially neutral, though perhaps emblematic and special,

place [whereas] certain modern designs have tried to combine the two tendencies.” This latter synthetic approach exactly describes van Hove’s. Also, for Zola, a set would work on a “form-follows-function” premise, whereas for van Hove it would be “form-follows-essence.”^{lxxvii} Regardless of any incidental utility that components of their scenic space possess, which we might consequently and understandably interpret as a naturalistic function, whether they be furniture, apertures, concealed wall units, or surprise video screens, van Hove and Versweyveld employ a “stage-as-stage” principle. Even eating spaghetti in such a context is self-consciously “performative,” even if the character is also fictionally sating their hunger.

Direct presentation of poeticized spaces also derives from the earlier avant-garde theatricalist tradition of radical interpretation whose initiator was Vsevolod Meyerhold. In departing from the Moscow Art Theatre-Stanislavskian school, which, following Zola’s new theories, took the laws governing life as first principle, the renegade Meyerhold articulated the seemingly simple concept on which his entire magistral oeuvre rested as: “A dramatic performance depends on laws peculiar to the theatre,” which may be opposed to those which govern life.^{lxxviii} Van Hove fuses both the voyeuristic principle common to Zola-Antoine-Stanislavsky with an unabashedly theatrical space that declines to conceal its performative function, emblematic of Meyerhold.

The majority of flats, platforms, and other set pieces as well as furniture that generally turn up in van Hove productions share a tendency to be self-abnegating. Their style has also been simply characterized as “industrial.” While modern, stripped of molding and finicky decorative touches, neither are they especially contemporary in style as one might expect from spiffy Hi-Tech. Neither do they convey a personal touch. They are blandly without style, not just the style of the period in which the text is ostensibly set, but any style. Jan Versweyveld states that he became attached to this chilly aesthetic after seeing a production of *The Children of Herakles* by Peter Sellars.^{lxxix}

But for all the prevailing steel-grayness and flatness, there is no question but that these environmental shells harbor the potential for extreme spectacularity! The key word is potential. For what is *not* self-abnegating about their visual life is the arrangement and startling one might say, dramatic evolution of the scenic components in relation to the human bodies that inhabit the set. Quite often at turning points in the meta-narrative, those inexpressive dividers are subject to sudden collapse. Also, mediatic elements of video and projection often transform the environment, adding extra dimensions including time travel and emanations from the supernatural. To top it off, the audience, depending on the particular show, is likely to be startled by sudden incursions of such non-sequitur substances as scores of balloons or ping pong balls descending, solitary wolf-hounds prowling through, or pools of liquid white scum that might unobtrusively seep in and fill the stage surface.

A topic which would require a lot of specialized knowledge, which yet is crucial to the look of all van Hove productions, from first to last, is Jan Versweyveld’s preference for unusual lighting instruments instead of or in addition to the normal array of stage lighting. His use of unconventional lighting devices together with decisions for when in

the show to power them up combine to make a sophisticated semiotics of light itself. In his own words:

I've always been fascinated by light. Maybe that's why I have an aversion to traditional theatre lighting. The truth is that in the eighties theatre lighting was mostly quite dreary and got moved about in 'pools.' I was trying to find a refracted reality such as the yellowish light you can see in cities at night, the chilly light of a *frites* stand or the luminosity of a department store. And so I chose all sorts of alternative industrial light sources.^{lxxx}

As long ago as 1988, critics could discern in Versweyveld's sets certain rudimentary principles and alternating strategies. "In scenic arrangements, a number of them overlapping, in all their ambiguity, you may discern diverse artistic strategies for creating a meaningful context for a theatrical event."^{lxxxi}

Since that time, those strategies have come into clearer focus and been applied and reconfigured in multifarious ingenious ways that now form its own taxonomy. The broad categories of principles governing van Hove/Versweyveld's scenic configurations, may be expressed as: *Reduction*, as with *Streetcar Named Desire*, in which the entire Kowalski household was embodied in a single bathtub set center-stage; *Proliferation*, as with *Desire Under the Elms*, in which O'Neill's farm-home was rendered in a crush of painstaking detail, or Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*; *Isolation*, as with Gorky's *Children of the Sun*, Pasolini's *Teorema*, Bergman's *Persona*, and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, in which a home is encased in a hermetically sealed rectangle; or *Dispersion*, as with John Cassavetes' *Faces*, in which the audience is distributed throughout the various fictional homes and bars that are each suggested with the most minimal of objects, or Genet's *Splendid's* where each character does most of his acting on an isolated platform around which the audience circulates; or else a synthesis of several of the above, as in Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers* or Charles Mee's *True Love*.^{lxxxii}

TASTELESS CONTAINMENT CHAMBERS

We'll start with van Hove's most reduced rendition of domestic environments. This configuration is a morphing from what Henry James called "the tasteless parlors" of Ibsen and a plethora of late 19th and 20th century naturalists, which have been organized for maximum comfort and ostentation, into what appear to bear resemblance to sterile freezer cabinets, based on a spatial strategy we'll call *Isolation*. Here van Hove resorts to an atomization of life within a single part of a larger house, whose other spaces remain unseen and unknown to the audience. A great many van Hove productions (*South*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Children of the Sun*, *Teorema*, *After the Rehearsal/Persona*, *Ludwig*, *The Little Foxes*, *Husbands*, etc.) are designed as a series of encasing walls. They are usually white, although those in *Teorema* are black. They are, in essence, a re-visioning of the late 19th Century box set – the aforementioned tasteless parlor. The walls border the performance space featuring three sides of a simple box consisting of flattened walls,

with the audience on the fourth open side.

But with each successive production that uses this strategy, the seemingly simple box eventually becomes both a jack-in-the-box that pops open or even explodes, or a Pandora's box that contains all manner of surprises cached in odd nooks and crannies. Initially unsuspected elements lurk concealed in the walls, the way they are cunningly socked away in airplane or spaceship cabins to economize on space and render it maximally utilitarian: Scenery, props, doors, windows, and staircases, and especially television monitors, initially out of sight or unremarked, manifest throughout the action.

The earliest example I have found of this Isolation principle in van Hove's oeuvre is in his production of Julian Green's play *South*, set in the southern Confederacy before the American Civil War, which boasts a simple spare space. There is a door unit far extreme up left, with a unified wall of wood slats across the upstage that goes very, very high – five times' human scale – an adaptation of the box set, though extended into the upper reaches. The outsize scale and impermeability of the wall suggest that it shuts out other ways of living. They also suggest a ground of the cumulative weight of history and hide-bound tradition against which the domestic drama will be set in relief. A large majestic table with monumental organic legs and feet and tablecloth, an imagistic encapsulation of southern dignity, occupies the entire center-stage area.

Just downstage of the door unit, there is a plain bench. Stage right there is an equally simple, truncated step unit, for making entrances and exits. A hidden cabinet is set into the upstage plank wall. And, an element making the stripped down space strange is a big fishbowl on a tall narrow table. To top it all off, extending far out high up from the sidewall is the prow of a ship with a female figurehead applied to the underside, looming incongruously over the stage floor. In many ways, there has been a reduction to an absolute minimum. But this is not the realistic interior of a gallant southern plantation mansion; it's an intentional distortion of one, an ideation rather, with a very few peculiar additions, notably the fishbowl and ship's prow. The table is used, much the way tables are often used by van Hove, right down to his more recent *Scenes From a Marriage*: to have sex on. Its majesty, solidity, dominance of the space are established only to be deconsecrated by the sexually repressed, steamily libidinous characters.

The walls in the Isolation-based set represent the boundaries that contain modern life – or all life, whether they primarily be social constraints or the psychic constraints bolstering a frail sanity a character may, at some point in the action, lose. The walls' destiny is – before the end of the show – to collapse or in some other way to disintegrate partially or totally. Sometimes, toward the end of the play, all the walls of the three-way enclosed chamber become video screens, which transformation is a kind of disintegration of that which was formerly solid.

Halfway through van Hove's production of Bergman's filmscript for *Persona*, for example, the three walls that had bound the action silently drop away, revealing a vast watery expanse and a platform. All that is left of the room is now a wooden raft floating in the middle of the stage. Just as the life options the characters could imagine for

themselves were formerly cramped and circumscribed, they now open up into an infinite number, some of which get played out on a real or fantastical sphere. In van Hove's production of Cassavetes's *Opening Night*, as well, the walls literally fall away at the climax, opening up the formerly contained spatial and mental horizon to a vastness.^{lxxxiii}

Another example can be seen in the 2009 TGA theatricalization of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film classic, *Teorema*, which was restaged in a warehouse on Governor's Island in New York in the summer of 2010, a great paradigm for this mode of stage imagery. The box is a container for the status quo the nuclear family that peoples the drama has achieved before the play starts. The condition that the space expresses is sterile, stripped, and perfectly rectilinear.

The original film by Pasolini is a largely non-verbal exercise in style. Not bound by stage realities, the cinematic locations include the factory where the pater familias factory owner ultimately surrenders control to his workers, as a result of having been internally revolutionized upon contact with the intruder, Emilio. There is his family home, a grand manor house with a vast garden that fronts a dilapidated city street in an industrial landscape. We are also taken to the rustic farm the faithful family servant was born in and to which she returns, there to become a saint who eats only nettles. Glued to a bench from which she conducts true healings on the crowds who flock to see her, she finally levitates high in the air. We follow the lady of the house as she picks Emilio up in her car and takes him to a hotel room, and so on. Like so much post-War Italian cinema, the film has a deceptive neo-realistic style, but the earthy details of the recognizable, true-to-life physical settings give way before the uncanny string of events, which rather bespeak a magic realism and spiritual allegory. While sex is implied, as Emilio makes conquests over each successive member of the household, no sexual act is explicitly portrayed. While the film is redolent of erotic promise, it remains fastidiously chaste in what it shows, particularly in comparison to others of Pasolini's films such as *Salò*.

In the van Hove production, the audience is greeted by a large open space consisting of a black floor surrounded on three sides with black walls, a few stray pieces of black furniture here and there – table, benches, with clean aluminum features. The space is enclosed and spare as the family is an enclosed mental and moral system which provides no nutriment. Actors announce the stage directions from the screenplay aloud. However, they do not then enact or illustrate what the stage directions say, for example riding a motorcycle, but may simply sit or stand. The stage directions, since they're written by Pasolini, are poetic and in themselves worth hearing.

The mother sits on a streamlined chaise longue watching a television monitor set into the wall, which plays a stream of irrelevant images, notably shots of endearing exotic animals that nuzzle up against each other. There are in fact many hidden compartments set into the wall, mysteriously waiting to be used. There is also a turntable with a headset that one of the characters operates, from which apparently issues the incidental free-flow music, the first number being the American pop classic "Suddenly It Just Happened."

Once each of the family members is established, the intruder Emilio appears over the rear

wall, in a very real sense dropping into their lives out of the clear blue sky, and brandishing a white piece of paper. Up to that point, the purported box set had seemed impenetrable, but Emilio creates his own unlikely means of access, jumping down inside the enclosure, which is not just a protective house, but the mental defenses accreted by the family over time, and running around brandishing the page in their faces. They seem unmoved, uninterested, almost as if he wasn't there. He finally puts it into the aged maid's hand. She then brings it over to the father, who opens the envelope and reads it aloud: "I'm coming tomorrow," an anachronism that puts paid to any further sense of realism. In the film, the maid responded to a knock on the door and simply picked it up from the doorstep. The duration of the play consists of Emilio incrementally taking over the family's souls, and in consequence, the physical space.

When he has accomplished his ultimate project and, so to speak, gained possession of their souls, rather than integrating himself into the household for the long haul, he departs. Indeed, the father sends him away, whereupon bright light shoots out from openings under the flats and streams through the open door by which he vanishes. A sound of machinery and factory clangs out, destroying the preceding quiet (the silence of death) which had reigned in their lives. Stagehands come into view and change the entire environment amid the half light and dissonant racket. The cacophony comes to a sudden stop as lights come back up on total disorder. Even the formerly invisible orchestra has been repositioned front and center.

Jason Fitzgerald, in his review of the Governor's Island version, observes that, "the massive set—a gray, low-ceilinged space presented to the audience like an overblown diorama—is filled with overturned chairs, tables, desks, and floor panels, like an office after an earthquake."^{lxxxiv} The alteration is depicted as so disturbing that the large garage/warehouse space surrounding the hermetically sealed and contained walls of the home space appears to dwarf and disorganize that space.^{lxxxv} The characters in the family all lose their grounding and bearings. The acting up until this point had been cool and understated, but now they all act as though they'd been afflicted by rabies. So it's not just a matter of domestic orderliness, but of all inner psychological organization which is ultimately profoundly overturned.

CHAOS IN THE WALLS AND UNDER THE FLOORBOARDS

Emilio had upset their homeostasis by injecting himself into the family's midst. But his exit leaves a sense of loss and disharmony in his wake, represented by the chaos of the spatial arrangement. Pieces of the flooring have come undone exposing the wood beneath. Many parts of the walls are gone. Nothing is in its place any longer. Nothing is coherent anymore, as the characters each relate and enact the subsequent annihilations of their past selves. The last to go, the old servant lady walks along dragging a suitcase on a wheeled carrier, then leaves the house she'd been an integral part of since time immemorial. The great open and empty warehouse that encases the theatre space becomes gradually visible as light unprecedentedly filters in – high and empty and barren as the play ends. It is as though all space, the entire cosmos beyond the home, is revealed

to be a desert. It will be remembered that in his film Pasolini had realistically suggested this modern desert in his own way by surrounding the factory owner's luxurious mansion with manufacturing terrains and seedy vacant lots that the audience got to see whenever characters entered or left the house. During the film's denouement, the factory owner wanders aimlessly on the slopes of Mt. Ætna. Throughout the film, the camera pans to capture this barrenness. In the play, the meta-set always been there, but only appears as the play resolved, once the house is eliminated.

As can be seen, van Hove frequently problematizes the disorganized immensity lurking within or outside the domestic spaces, masquerading as the homes he and Versweyveld erect onstage. In fact the homes are flimsy and can easily collapse or be violated in a variety of ways, losing all protective function or ability to establish boundaries in a world of chaos that can impinge on them at the drop of a hat. Insofar as they are bulwarks of civilization, van Hove over and over demonstrates how they are prey to the chthonian, the dark forces that well up from below which can undo the whole social arrangement in a flash.^{lxxxvi}

There was a similar strategy employed for the American and Dutch productions of *Hedda Gabler*, the latter in 2006. Again, we find the proscenium configuration together with another bastardized naturalistic box set arrangement. As the lights come up, isolated piles of detritus are discovered, with an upright piano, a bunch of flowers in pots stage right, and a bland white sofa. A window is set into the wall stage right with simple vertical venetian blinds. In the American version the surface contained unrelieved walls; in the Dutch version the addition of blinds and window lend a specialness and opportunity for play of light and crucial stage business. They both suggest a world of lost freedom beyond, and when Hedda, as she periodically does, rapidly opens and closes and lifts and lowers them frenetically, they exteriorize her panicked state.

For the 2010 production of Maxim Gorky's forgotten play *Children of the Sun*, that van Hove unearthed, about the moral ambiguity of scientific advances, he uses Isolation as a scenic strategy, but adds several interesting twists over the course of the play's action. For this *echt* early twentieth century naturalistically play, written by one of Stanislavsky's house playwrights, the set at first resembles even more closely a naturalistic set to match the playwriting, only perhaps a strangely deprived home environment. Later on in the show the home environment reveals itself as a mere false seeming of one. The upstage area is arrayed with a white wall divided into cabinets, with a sink unit stage left. There is a table and TV on it upstage center. An old fashioned oven is located up right alongside a door. A little staircase set into the wall leads to an unseen upper story for one more exit option. There are doors everywhere recessed into the wall and a black and gray checked floor. So, in this case, van Hove opted for a compromise – an uneasy middle approach that shuttles between pure naturalism where objects look the way they're supposed to and his usual more radical stripping away of utilitarian objects. The blinding whiteness, where verisimilar walls would naturally have peeling wallpaper or distempered patches, suggests the sterility of a laboratory even though it's an ordinary communal apartment. Critics have suggested that it embodies the image of an ivory tower.^{lxxxvii}

Still, contrasted with *Hedda* or *Teorema*, it is a pretty filled up stage, and for once everyone has props that they use as people in life use small useful objects. Yet, the samovar we would expect to see has been changed out for an anachronistic glass teakettle, and there is the anomaly that all the furniture additions are stuck up against the rear wall.

The play starts with a girl, Liza (played by Halijna Reyn), doing repetitive aerobic exercises clumsily. She is working off an exercise show on the TV, placed on top of the refrigerator. The TV, also highly anachronistic for 1905, instantly takes us out of any sense of bygone “period,” and plays unobtrusively throughout the whole show, establishing the dull drone of the outer political context in the usual relationship it has with the modern home: omnipresent, but easy to tune out. Following the epileptic Liza’s explosive monologue at the end of Act I, which she performs almost like a seizure, there is an explosion of visual scenic technology issues to match, seemingly erupting from Liza’s cerebral short-circuit.

Here, as at a crucial point in several other shows, outsized video depicting globally relevant horrors bursts out within a local and specific home environment, swamping it with vaguely defined but universal social catastrophe that is already with us or on the way to engulfing us. Sometimes working with great power, this theatrical technique, jibes with the pioneering theoretical works of Debord and Derrida, realizing what they describe as “great historical trajectories that suppose a culture moving from stability – whether rooted in reality or in illusion universally accepted as actuality – toward and into a new instability of which theater becomes both model and agent,”^{lxxxviii} a description of the very disconcerting juggernaut van Hove repeatedly allows to flood across his sets. As never before, today’s theatre has the means to bring great social and universal upheavals into the middle class living room, and van Hove exploits those means to expand the scope of the dramatizable.

His use of it in *Children of the Sun* is a good example. Over the hyper-sentimental pop tune “What a Wonderful World,” which blasts out in buoyant joy various figures, ape-like and human-like, creep all over the white walls, which have now come into their actual use as a kind of screen. Van Hove sees an opportunity in Liza’s losing her mind to open up the enclosed space by splashing the screens with all kinds of footage of various 20th century disasters, as though they were spouting out of an unbalanced, but prescient sensibility, that of a seer or prophet, and spewing all over the walls, now no longer just static barriers, but deepened spaces brimming with ever-changing dimensions.^{lxxxix} The ape-like creatures are eventually replaced by Liza’s own face that takes over the entire space, as the act ends with the actress writhing in a dance, her body too is engulfed by the image of her own face.

In Act II as the tangle of the characters’ various love problems grows more intricate, the television screen starts showing masses of people hurrying about. Gorky resolves his play, where the ignorant townspeople gather to menace the scientist whose discoveries have disturbed the balance of their community, by evoking through stage directions the

sound of the clamoring masses outside the door howling for the scientist's head. Ivo replaces that sound tapestry, suggestive of a lynching in the making, in this way: the small TV image rapidly metastasizes into various Russian faces superimposed over the upstage wall, filling the set, as the sound of sirens and marching take over.

Huge masses of seething humanity are projected over the stage – a montage of scenes from various old Russian films, perhaps Eisenstein's. Then, as *The Internationale* plays and gets deformed, loud popping is heard and holes are shot through all the walls of the set. Then great gashes are punched in the walls. A series of dictators from all lands, not just Russia, and quick clips depicting many wars and various atrocities from barely discernible current events pass over in rapid succession. The wider world, which had formerly been contained in the unobtrusively droning TV box, has invaded the intellectuals' ivory tower and taken over. Now we know why the walls were all white in the first instance. As the video imagery recedes, many characters are discovered lying bloodied on the stage. Are we to understand that science-based technology unleashed a violence that led to the scientist's demise along with those of his friends and family? It is a Frankenstein's monster trope, whereby the modern-day scientist whose inventions bring evil along with progress ultimately falls victim to his creation.

With *Ludwig* (2011) van Hove translates Visconti's lush historical 1972 film epic of the same title into an austere proscenium arrangement with two large dark walls on either extreme end of the raised stage, with doors cut into them, and a large white screen spanning the upstage plane, with a small step unit placed in front of it. The lion's share of Visconti's movie about the mad king of Bavaria consists of a series of static conversations that take place in various ornate interiors of palaces, which are a delight to the eye. For a film, a surprising amount of screen time is taken up with characters in rooms merely talking to each other. Van Hove has preserved a great deal of this dialogue, but re-contextualized it within his stripped down unit set, once more finding an opportunity to apply a principle of Isolation. Upstage is the dark network of screens and floor that Ludwig writes on in chalk in impenetrable letters, symbols, and pictures that chart the degeneration of his disordered mind, until they literally swamp the stage in Act II.^{xc}

With these hermetic chalked scrawls, writing itself thus becomes dramatic activity and commanding image at one and the same time, that makes a comeback in the very recent production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* that played on Broadway in spring of 2016. In that production a blackboard is placed prominently up center. There is a poem inscribed on it, as well as the image of a tree and a house. The blackboard is employed in fits and starts by characters, notably Mercy Warren, who, in Act II, under pressure to name names of those who accompanied her to see the devil, repeats incontinently, "I cannot," and then proceeds to write the same phrase all over the board in bold letters. At a still later point, a flock of tiny projected white birds, recognizable at first only as moving chalk marks, flutter all over it, and then spread to the surrounding walls. The initially startling device of characterization through graphic means, first introduced in the 1970s in performance art performances, has become such a standard of the contemporary theatre by now that it has surely lost any of its initial avant-garde charge, a fact which

does not diminish its efficacy in these particular productions.

These multiple examples allow us a glimpse into all the ways seemingly normal domestic walls are turned into subjectively determined and societally swarming ones by van Hove. Through video, writing, and – as an oft-repeated last resort – demolition, van Hove challenges a series of assumptions of safety, complacency and equanimity with which we all invest a home's walls, the productions becoming crucibles for the home environment's abrogation and elimination. The mind of the individual and the unruly social forces swirling about the microcosmic home encasing a family unit ultimately sweep away any hint of reassurance.

PEOPLE IN GLASS HOUSES

"The middle-class nuclear family, where the parents are white-collar professionals who do brainwork, is seething with frustrations and tensions."

Camille Paglia^{xci}

Next we'll consider a scenic principle of *Ramification*, as applied to several productions scattered through a recent phase in van Hove's directing career. The word ramification has two divergent dictionary meanings: subdivision and upshot. Ramification as it works in these shows means that the audience's gaze into the ensemble of characters' issues and sub-plots is subdivided, made multiple. Where it's a matter of a family, as it often is, the audience can absorb within one theatrical frame the misery, frolics, and doom, of more than one isolated family member at a time, observing how they behave when they think themselves to be private and are separated from the others. The second dictionary meaning of ramification is also pertinent, as the characters' behavior and their conflicts are the upshot of the way they have been living, internally, with each other, as a result of the impact society has had on them.

Quite often, the lights of a van Hove/Versweyveld production will come up on a scenic interior consisting of an arrangement of soldered and bolted rectilinear metal scaffolding with receding planes of space separated by Plexiglas sheets. The configuration taken in its entirety embodies a domicile on a grid that is divided into separate chambers, some downstage, some upstage, some in the center, and some on the periphery of the action.^{xcii} It is no accident that van Hove and Versweyveld have most often reserved this metal and glass (the same materials we associate with skyscrapers) aesthetic for plays with life centered about the domestic sphere, notably in four of their more successful productions: *Cries and Whispers* (based on the film by Ingmar Bergman), Molière's *The Miser*, and Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*.

How is the metal and Plexiglas aesthetic of these home spaces distinct from Zola's turn-of-the-century idea of slice-of-life drama? In some sense, there is no difference. Zola wanted to peek inside at human lives and study the details of their behavior – how they

dress, the furniture and other objects that occupy their attention, the actual colloquial manner of their speaking, and their tiny habits and tics. To that end, architectural minutiae, a plethora of typical properties, verisimilitude in costuming according to profession, class, and character temperament, were all hallmarks of the characters' lives and social quagmire. The 1880s innovation of looking through the keyhole of a three-sided stage-set from which the front, fourth wall had been ripped off provided an opportunity to regard human relations as a Petrie dish under laboratory conditions. The principal operative in the field to put into practice and become identified with this concept was the director André Antoine at his Théâtre Libre, whose little stage was able to manifest one single, detailed, and delimited locale at a time, each of which was assembled and struck in linear fashion.

Between the time of Antoine/Zola and that of van Hove/Versweyveld several other precedents for the use of Ramification intervened. Later naturalists such as Lee Simonson and other American set designers of the 1930s created multi-roomed houses evoked by unit sets for the scripts of O'Neill, Paul Green, et al. They retained the slice-of-life notion of the 1880s and 90s, but established an image of simultaneity where the central scene depicted in the script would be shown, but so would the silent or muted, ongoing lives of the other characters in the other visible rooms of the house, and even an entire city street or community outside it. Sets consisting of thus exposed warrens of habitation graced such productions as *Porgy*, *Street Scene*, and *Desire Under the Elms*. They emphasized the regional, the organic, and the recognizably topical.

Later, the mid-Twentieth Century non-naturalistic avant-garde also had recourse to Ramification. The early Wooster Group under Liz Lecompte's direction, just after it had segued out of the Performance Group under Richard Schechner's aegis, notably with *Three Places in Rhode Island* (*Sakonnet Point* (1975), *Rumstick Road* (1977), and *Point Judith* (1979)), comes to mind as a precedent for Ivo. Using sets made with raw wooden armatures replete with apertures they enabled us to look through them and in on peoples' lives. Here too, the subject was the family – Spalding Gray and his actual family specifically – which was the subject of this voluntary voyeurism and exhibitionism. Gray and Lecompte's 1970s avant-gardism was a radical extension of Zola's slice-of-life Naturalistic concept eighty years earlier, but took it into the realm of abstraction. We see the same principle at work with a different Belgian director contemporary with Ivo, Arne Sierens who, parenthetically, worked for him on several shows for a time as his translator/adaptor. In 1997, together with Alain Platel, Sierens recreated a cluttered multi-chambered multi-storied dwelling on stage in their auteur creation *Indians All* (*Allemaal Indianen*).

In this type of representation of a home that van Hove and Versweyveld have erected on so many occasions, individual family members' simulacra of rooms can be discerned. But depending on the lighting and orientation of the actors, the function and ownership of a given part of the stage may change throughout the show. The key factors about this scenic aesthetic are that it allows for simultaneous, juxtaposed actions in several parts of the house/stage at once; that things may happen in one part of the house/stage of which other members of the family, *who are also in view*, are unaware; that some areas may be

brought into sharp focus as the recessive life goes on for the others who either remain in view or temporarily vanish from our consciousness; and that an impression is given of exposed intimacy.

So, generally plumbing the classic repertoire for his texts, Ivo resets them in a depersonalized and generalized “today” with an iconic array of electronic media – TV and computer monitors and a spate of cell phones littering and accoutering all the clean lines, the aggregate of stuff meant to improve the inhabitants’ lives. What happens to the people residing within the clean lines and behind the brittle Plexiglas surfaces, however, is anything but neat and clean. Despite their advanced design, these domiciles continue to be the same pain-factories as families’ houses have ever been depicted in drama. A metal and glass house is no less a crucible for seething, roiling passions – animosities and attractions, yearnings, and stiflings – to burble up and spill over than old fashioned slums or manor houses were. It is a holding pen and a wrestling ring. It is contemporary society’s channeling apparatus for intra-familial hostilities and battles over dominance and subjugation. The architects of the modern steel and glass abode intended to create a soulless but perfect structure, presumably to house ever self-perfecting family units. But no parallel interpersonal evolution has occurred to match the architectural one. Indeed, the vapidness and aridity of the house or apartment together with the isolation generated by the prevalence of electronic devices exacerbates the alienation within the family structure.

Zola and Antoine’s key-hole theatre was paired with a social/political agenda: to scrutinize the poor and deprived, to better understand the root social causes for human suffering. Van Hove’s, though, is not a theatre of social-political-economic protest against the plight of the under-classes, in the spirit of the early naturalists.^{xciii} For such family dramas as *The Miser*, *Othello* and *Taming of the Shrew*, the contemporary bourgeois world van Hove wants to depict, is stripped of national identity and specific locality, but finds its analogue in the aristocratic milieus of the French and English Renaissances from which the texts are drawn. He brushes aside all classical bric-a-brac and resets them in a nebulous present context, furnishes them with clean lines stripped of the clutter of fringes, and ruffles (but often replaced with new technological clutter) which gives a sense that society – or at least bourgeois society – is attempting to eliminate all organic life from its precincts and managing to flourish better than ever, on the same principle as hydroponic plants, without benefit of the psychological equivalents of oxygen, water, and soil. With Toneelgroep Amsterdam in 2003 Versweyveld provided his first such open thrust stage set, a multi-layered fretwork of architectural pillars, beams, openings, and corridors, for the great jealousy tragedy, *Othello*. Versweyveld himself dates the origins of this quest to depict the world of “the post-industrial bourgeoisie” back to the earlier 1989 Zuidelijk Toneel production of Wedekind’s *Lulu*, but the concept had evolved significantly since that time.^{xciv}

Othello is a good illustration of the way a relatively straightforward architecture on a van Hove stage, when combined with all the innovative lighting techniques Jan Versweyveld is endlessly experimenting with, transforms and morphs throughout the show. Multiple connotations are thus suggested, made surprising and intriguing through these refreshing

visual resonances, and are worthwhile going into in detail. The show begins not in the domestic world, but in one that Van Hove superimposes over Shakespeare's Act I, Scene I dialogue: a boxing gym that serves as a prologue to all that follows, one in which the males bond through violently acting out with each other, but from which the females are excluded by the palpable boundary consisting of imposing blue drapes hanging upstage. The lounge of a health club is replete with comfortable low-slung chairs distributed at random over the space with blue drapes hanging throughout the upstage plane. Stage right are benches and a clothes rack, with hooks etc. where the actors' clothing is hanging. A punching bag is suspended from the flies. The scenic arrangement encourages almost immediate unabashed physical exposure and an exclusively male communion through pugilistic physical release. Opening the play in this auxiliary public/private environment dominated by males who choose each other's company establishes the social ground of masculine domination and aggression for the family drama that ensues.

Later the blue drapes, in a majestic scenic gesture, are released and float solemnly to the ground, revealing an armature, painted battleship gray, which we could call a "cabin." An alert military figure stares into the middle distance, standing guard on the roof. It is in essence, composed of a platform with a roof over it containing a bed and very narrow horizontal windows, an aluminum and glass rendition of a lady's chamber, but more like the vestibule in a modern apartment building replete with the clean cold lines suggestive of a ship's cabin or a bank vault. A bank vault is an apt scenic image for Desdemona's chastity. The bed in the vestibule is a low-slung industrial, solid white rectangle, whose visual purity works both for the sanctity of the Othello couple's marriage and the coffin it will eventually become to contain Desdemona's unsullied remains. There is also a golden palm tree, an object that is both natural and ceremonial, but above all strangely kitsch. It is cousin to the fishbowl on the set in *South*, another disconcerting simulacrum of life plunked down in an inorganic ensemble. The vestibule is enclosed in glass both upstage and downstage of it, thereby leaving the marriage bed on view to the "public" from all angles.

In this production Othello is played by the imposing Hans Kesting who, in his uniform, bears a strong, and surely not accidental, resemblance to Colin Powell. Despite or because of the indisputable fact that he is a white actor playing a person of color his otherness is stressed by a string of pejorative pronouns applied to him in Hafid Bouazza's adaptation.^{xcv} Given Othello's role as modern man of state, his entire life must be on display; no corner of his undertakings – even his carnal relations with his wife – may be kept out of sight from his constituents in this modern day. The military figures that silently prowl in view beyond the upstage glass, casting brazen glances into Othello and Desdemona's domain as they pass, are on sentry duty, and after making their rounds one reappears on the roof above their heads. Like so many public figures, Othello and his wife live perpetually surrounded, and threatened even by those charged with protecting them.

The entire preparation for and carrying out of Desdemona's homicide is very carefully executed; indeed, it is a visual tour de force. The glass box allows for several lives to be

witnessed at once, although only one character or pair of characters engages in actual utterance. While Desdemona joins Emilia behind the glass partition to prepare for bed, spreading sheets and arranging pillows, Rodrigo enters downstage simultaneously and rails at the treatment he's received at Othello's hands through Iago's manipulation. Then, the bed made, as Desdemona confides to Emilia her foreboding anecdote about the servant Barbary, Othello adds to the tension by prowling in silence far upstage of the glass bedroom. Having completed her tasks, Emilia exits and leaves Desdemona alone. Othello closes the glass door. A relentless hard rock beat starts. Lights go up more intensely in the glass bedroom and dim down everywhere else. Othello is in silhouette, a still figure.

An extended silent hysterical and savage free-for-all ensues between Iago, Bianca, Emilia, Cassio, Rodrigo – violent fighting, assaulting, jumping on each other to hard rock accompaniment. This Dionysian unraveling, which is entirely van Hove's invention suggestive of a total suspension of social forms and a surrender to elemental impulses, prepares the way for the bloody resolution. Once the melee subsides, lights come up in the bedroom, which is now surrounded by darkness. Othello, who had been outside the house the last time he was visible, is now discovered standing over the bed totally naked, declaiming calmly. Desdemona invites him into bed. He pulls the sheet off of her, and the audience sees she is lying there totally naked. Othello then draws the curtains, shutting out the audience to create a truly intimate space, through which we now glean only their silhouette shadows – and kills her. As Othello prepares for the murder he isolates the entire room from the audience by closing the white voile drapes on tracks. Once they are closed, Othello's own shadow, superimposed on the drapes as the actual Othello moves about, follows him. The noble Othello is being tracked and doubled by his own lower, paranoid self. As he pursues Desdemona she attempts an escape by opening the sliding glass door, but gets caught by him in the drapes (which were identified with the male world in the prologue at the gym). Then he gets her back on the bed, and smothers her in pillows as her naked legs thrash about in silence for an extended time.

Commenté [J1]: Blotting or blocking out?

Emilia, also seen only as a black shadow, runs by, and then from offstage informs Othello of Cassio's injury. Reentering with his back to the glass in silhouette, grasping the curtain, Othello, is revealed to be totally naked as a bright light then hits him in time for him to relate and justify his murder of Desdemona. As Iago enters and Emilia berates them both, she flings the curtains open to reveal the truth of the murder. The actress playing Emilia improvises freely, shrieking uncontrollably, and repeating, "I will speak. I will speak!" Iago, with frightening decisiveness, but in total silence, forces her down onto the floor, strangling her methodically, just as Othello had strangled Desdemona. Othello then faces downstage, in full frontal nudity, while Iago sits downstage of him, but facing upstage. Both are reflected uncannily in the upstage glass wall, Othello from the back, Iago from the front, so that spectators see both their faces coming from either direction.

Not only does this image pair Othello and Iago, as though they were flipsides of the same entity, but it pictorializes both characters' dual personalities.^{xvii} Here is a salient example

of the Ramification principle, whereby shadow and mirror effects give an impression of a manipulator and his dupe revealing and reinforcing each other's crimes. They are no longer separate, but multiple and interpenetrating. When characters appear on different planes separated by glass partitions that can be seen through, or even on the same plane that is walled off, those partitions reinforce both their separateness and their aloneness. But, as here, the partitions also act as mirrors. This ulterior mirroring effect links the audience back to the earlier mystifying moments, as when Iago had caressed Desdemona, and completes them. The mirrors multiply the characters' individual separateness, reveal each character's inner multiplicity, announce a collective anomic, but also, as here, inexorably link discrete characters to each other.

With the 2005 Toneelgroep Amsterdam production of *Taming of the Shrew*, van Hove again went for a variation of the metal and Plexiglas motif. Upstage center, in an inner chamber totally open to view, was a grand piano, iconic of a creative spirit with which the two available sisters, Katherine and Bianca, are identified. The forestage is immediately established as a macho male domain, one where brute force dominates. Two characters, presumably Lucentio's servants, throw heavy metal boxes down on the forestage with a slam, that brute gesture thus opening the show.

On the furthest downstage plane are two guys in modern-day jackets and cardigans. Like the clean, modern lines of the set, the costumes are also innocuous, flavorless. Tranio and Lucentio plunk themselves down on their box downstage right watching the whole scene of thwarted courtship within the upstage chamber, staring deeply inside the home-space. Although van Hove has cut Shakespeare's extensive prologue, which frames the entire play meta-theatrically, he creates his own new one by putting Katherine, her family, and the suitors on display for Tranio and Lucentio, who are situated as their audience. Life goes on in the upstage house, which is totally open, wrapped in Plexiglas. There, inside, Katherine makes a show of mopping the floor and straightening up as Bianca plays the piano. Of course the crucial voyeuristic party who is being visually invited into the various chambers of the domestic refuge that is democratically exposed to their gaze is the audience.

Kate and Bianca's existence within the house seems free and easy and antic as Bianca sets a mattress on top of the piano and stretches out on it. Then Kate enters and spins around in a swivel chair and Bianca does a pole dance. Kate and Bianca have been tapped for arranged marriages, and until that point, are confined to a hot house where their range of action is curtailed. While they need not toil, they are left to spin in futile aimlessness. For example, though Katherine, the subversive sister, gives an impression that she is cleaning in her house, over time she actually creates greater disorder, throwing stuff around at random.

These are images of fun, but also of futility – spinning in place with no outlet – which ultimately pave the way for Kate to act with unwarranted cruelty to her more desired sister. They portend two carefree damsels whose childhoods are coming to an end, kept on ice as it were until now, who must now venture forth (i.e., downstage) into the alienating male-dominated world of the marriage market. It is worth quoting Hanna

Scolnicov extensively, as she lays out a feminist analysis of theatrical space, which has application to van Hove's scenic organizing principle at work here:

The structural division of space into the interior and the exterior of the house carries with it social and cultural implications. Gender roles are spatially defined in relation to the inside and the outside of the house. Traditionally, it is the woman who makes the house into a home, her home, while the world of commerce, war, travel, the world outside, is a man's world. As Simone de Beauvoir noted, 'man is but mildly interested in his immediate surroundings because he can find self-expression in projects;' whereas for woman, the house is the centre of the world, 'reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse.' From the spatial point of view, the world of man and the world of woman meet on the threshold. Thus, the very shape a play gives its theatrical space is indicative of its views on the nature of the relationship between the sexes and on the position of woman in society. 'Women,' wrote Virginia Woolf, 'have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.' [...] Traditionally, the house has been associated with woman's social place, but it can also be seen to stand for her body and her sexuality.^{xcvii}

Scolnicov is referring to spaces evoked in written scripts, but these spatial definitions are even more graphic when realized in a production such as this, which is virtually an illustration of the configuration she maps out.

When the men are all together in their downstage sphere "outside," they horse around, shouting macho fashion, piling up on each other, carrying each other around, and talking about available women with a lot of noise and false camaraderie. As they go on simulating a football game, mooning each other and the like, Kate dances a frenetic solo in her house, the transparencies in the set design allowing spectators to see these actions happening concurrently. The guys claim their space downstage of the house and pass by upstage of it, but the anticipated conquest occurs once Petruchio and his cohorts manage to penetrate into the middle ground between the two: Kate's home, which as we have implied, is an outer manifestation of her sentient self. "...the male space, lends itself naturally to a plot the goal of which is man's conquest of the house."^{xcviii} Kate is wild – a termagant – but are the men any more civilized? They are like a marauding party out of a cowboy movie who reappear through the transparent walls and have the stagecoach surrounded. But what kind of sympathy can there be between two such alien species as they are presented here? How can they ever pair off in harmony? What an alienated portrait of young, available men and women in contemporary society!

While there is not much hilarity either aimed at or achieved in this rendition of Shakespeare's supposed comedy, some does arise through the use of a small white cabinet. Before his famous scene of verbal jousting with Katherine, Petruchio sits on a bench downstage right and thus outside the house to deliver his soliloquy. Simultaneously, Katherine, in preparation for the unavoidable marriage proposal, wheels out a small white cabinet or freezer, opens it, slips inside it, and shuts the door on herself. Petruchio refuses to acknowledge that she is evading him, and treats the cabinet as though it were Katherine herself: he lays the cabinet on its side, kisses it, lies on it, keeps wooing her through its walls. After all, she has called him "a moveable," i.e., a piece of furniture, so his riposte is to treat the furniture in which she takes refuge as though it were

Commenté [J2]: I feel like you need to add an adjective here to communicate your point a bit more clearly. How would you describe this portrait and the meaning/feelings it conveys?

Commenté [J3]: I did some editing here to try to clarify the order of events, but I may have mangled it. Feel free to reject all of these suggestions.

she herself. The white box serves Katherine as a means of gaining some privacy within the Plexiglas home, where nothing may be concealed. But even there Petruchio pursues her.

Van Hove uses a variation on this “bit” elsewhere when Valère, the spoiled brother in *The Miser*, has a tantrum and goes to sit in the refrigerator. It’s a good sort of place to pout and one in which a vulnerable party – in both cases children of imposing fathers – may finally get some provisional respite from a situation in which they, the offspring, are suffering diminishing control over their own destinies. The ubiquity of this technique in van Hove’s productions, as for example when Hedda and Judge Brack duck down behind a sofa for a moment of who knows what? – even as their vagaries must be totally exposed to view from behind to anyone chancing to pass by – is yet another variant on the same trope. In contemporary homes the denizens require privacy, and, though the need for such a hiding place is seemingly universal, it is only to be had in the most awkward of ad hoc arrangements.

Jan Versweyveld calls the wide array of small private spaces he provides characters “*huisjes*,” (little houses), and he does it quite consciously on this regular basis. “What I really like doing is giving actors a spot that truly belongs to them, a spot which helps them regain their energy. If I were an actor I too would like to have a spot in the middle of the stage that is intimate nonetheless.”^{xix}

In *Taming of the Shrew*, as in *Othello*, van Hove takes advantage of the set’s transparencies that are virtual windows, to achieve a plethora of Ramification effects, such as when Petruchio and Kate, who are standing stock still, are turned into silhouettes. A bright fluorescent light bathes the rest of the stage while their bodies are seen, pressed together. Instead of having them pantomime the debacle of their wedding literally, van Hove uses this still image to accompany Biondello’s narration of how Petruchio has misbehaved outrageously in the church – where he acted out as the veritable male shrew.

In 2006 van Hove and Versweyveld undertook Molière’s *The Miser* (*Der Gelzige*) in Germany, a Dutch version of which followed five years later in 2011. It is another classical comedy, made essentially unfunny by the Flemish director, bent on exposing the essential vapidness and brutality of contemporary middle-class family life.^c The set for *The Miser* is similar to that for *Taming of the Shrew*. It features a wrought iron super-structure filled out with Plexiglas, divided into modules that can be curtained off and concealed or revealed as needed. Mid-way upstage is found an unobtrusive, low black metal railing running parallel to the proscenium line, which came in handy throughout the show in various cunning ways despite its deceptive simplicity, as well as a bed just beyond it that half conceals actors who are on it or behind it. The only sign of organic life is a tropical plant with big leaves, suggesting perhaps the Mediterranean – one of those strange-making touches we have seen elsewhere. Otherwise, everything is clean-lined, with unadorned, modern furnishings. The actors are costumed accordingly: ordinary t-shirts, hoodies, panties. The older men wear simple white button-down shirts and black pants, and Frosine a frowsy moo-moo.

As *The Miser* opens, muted rap music plays and an actress, who we later learn plays Elise, daughter of the family, sits up in bed naked and starts getting dressed. Her brother Cléante is revealed in a separate rectangular space adjacent to Elise's trying on black pants, a flashy silver-black blouse, and various mod jackets. His room, adjacent to hers, is simply comprised of racks full of hanging clothes. There is much emphasis on clothes in the text – Cléante later complains to his father that he has nothing to wear – but right here in his room, in plain sight, there is a wide clothing rack with bunches of suits to choose from which stand in contradiction and, of course, another TV monitor. The kids, in contrast to the circumstances indicated by Molière's text, are actually spoiled and super-endowed with "stuff." It is love and caring of which they are deprived. While they have a surfeit of clothes and video equipment – both the latest, no doubt – neither their father nor the world they inhabit nourish their hearts and souls, and, apart from making liars of them, it is that inner sterility which the set makes manifest.

Harpagon, the miser of the title and father of the house, and La Flèche, Cléante's manservant, both in black pants and white shirts, are then discovered, poised amidst this re-visioned construct of domesticity, surrounded by chairs, computer terminals, etc. downstage. So what in the text are a succession of two-character "French scenes," all of which traditionally are played in one self-contained and concentrated all-purpose locale typical of the neo-classical stage, are executed here by picking up on one area of the stage after another on what is, effectively, a complicated unit set representing the entire subdivided modern-day apartment. Thus, the linear temporal and spatial organization envisioned by Molière, dictated by the neo-classical unities, has become one of cinematic fluidity and simultaneity. As with *Taming of the Shrew*, wherever the principal focus is then developing, the Plexiglas and metal structure with its inherent transparencies between sub-units that allows for evolving simultaneous action on the set. Whenever a bloody argument has run its course, the contestants, like boxers at the end of a round, go back to their respective computer and TV monitors in their own private nook.

Harpagon natters on downstage on his cell phone, the living image of a businessman in a tough negotiation, or reads off a computer screen the list of moneys he has socked away, and – Eureka – we have post-modernized renditions of the classic soliloquy. At the very same time his daughter Elise undresses upstage, and wearing only underwear climbs into yet another of Jan Versweyveld's *huisjes*, a hiding place in the form of a giant plastic bag. There, Valère finds her and climbs in, to make out with her. On the same plane stage left, Cléante, again simultaneously, goes through his outfits and is *further* ramified in yet one more upstage plane, reflected back a mirror. At other points, the stage action physically expands so that these atomized existences within narrowly established boundaries are abrogated. Then the entire stage is taken over by one single unifying action. For example, Harpagon, upon learning that Cléante is pursuing the same woman he is, tears up a document and goes into a fit, chasing and kicking his crawling son all the way from extreme downstage right to up right. This physical fight ranges over the entire stage, until his young antagonist slinks out entirely.

At a certain point Harpagon says: "Your job is to clean up all around, and do be careful not to rub the furniture too hard." In the playscript he delivers these orders to his

servants, but here he gives them directly to his family members. As the song “Stayin’ Alive” from *Saturday Night Fever* is pumped in, the ensemble of wrangling family members and hangers-on form themselves into a merry procession and circulate single-file over the multi-chambered space, tossing all the garbage that’s laying around up in the air or kicking it along. Whatever order one character manages to create is undone and exacerbated by the one bringing up the rear, so we can’t tell if they’re cleaning up or creating more chaos. Throughout this segment the pater familias, Harpagon, expatiates without pause over the Bee Gees.

Following the ritualistic anti-clean-up in this motherless home, the ensemble of actors go grab items from the refrigerator, munch snacks and reassemble down left in what could be “the family room.” Van Hove depresses that comic potential in the “actual” scenes Molière and Shakespeare provided, but then gratuitously adds in these upbeat physical segments that the authors hadn’t provided for. The friendly, bouncy atmosphere of this post-dramatic segment ends abruptly as Harpagon screams that the music has to be turned off. There is a sharp, hard and immediate shift to sober business matters concerning marriage.

The low metal railing mentioned earlier that separates the single apartment into two, with upstage and downstage divides, gives us the hint that we’ve crossed over to a different character’s space, as needed. Most of the time, the bar is unobtrusive and unobserved, but periodically it comes into sharp focus as it serves some critical dramatic purpose. For instance, Monsieur Anselme, Harpagon’s handpicked suitor for Elise, takes his place immediately upstage of the fence as though it were the bar of the law that supports his otherwise weak case for matrimony. In another instance, all Harpagon has to do is lean on it with his face tilted down and the audience knows that he’s out on the balcony to his apartment, looking obsessively at his **cell phone**.

As we approach the climax Harpagon’s preparations for his own wedding to the same girl his son covets draw close to their sinister fulfillment. Things slow down markedly, just as they did three quarters of the way through *Taming of the Shrew*. It is almost as though the reality of the resolution – that both children will be deprived of their desired partners by their unloving father – is so terrible to contemplate that the characters go into an opium state of detachment and muzziness to avoid it. Electric metal music plays. It is a descent into Chaos. Then, with the sound of motorcars drifting up from below, Harpagon violently sweeps the contents of the coffee table onto the ground and stands on the black railing facing upstage as though he was going to jump and commit suicide. It is implicit that he does indeed plunge to his death, in a blatant violation of Molière’s original dénouement. It’s a definitive way out of the family quagmire, the one that he himself architected. He, a self-styled master of the universe and would-be destroyer of his children’s happiness, is the ultimate victim of the social establishment

As we observed earlier, the see-through Plexiglas sets described above and the Ramification principle they afford are among several strategies that Ivo van Hove and Jan Versweyveld have applied to designing domestic environments. Through van Hove and Versweyveld’s alchemy and ingenuity, space becomes a series of commanding images

Commenté [J4]: I’m wondering if you need this paragraph. Currently, I’m not seeing how it relates directly to your argumentative narrative.

Commenté [J5]: ??

for exploring a myriad of domestic dysfunctions. Each family member believes themselves to be misunderstood and bereft. Those are qualities of alienation that *could* elicit empathy, but when replicated in cordoned off spaces by many at once accrete to form an impression of generalized self-involvement and self-indulgence. When family members do meet in a common space, to plead their cause, to open their hearts, to give vent their discontent, it leads to instantaneous conflagration, as the other characters take this insistence as further proof of how they themselves are misunderstood and alone with their suffering. Each asserts the privileged nature of their own case. So rather than communing in empathic response, they bounce off each other and are relegated back to nurse their wounds in separation. All of this drama of aggravated disappointment is witnessed by an audience allowed into all private chambers at once, accreting to form in their minds an overarching image or dream of a society-at-large that is lost.^{ci}

HOARDERS ON-STAGE

As lights slowly gather through the early part of the Zuidelijk Toneel production of O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* we ultimately see that the scenic space works from a principle of Proliferation. The scenic space is literally packed with stuff – furniture and disparate junk over the various areas. In this spatial formulation there are no flats or walls to delimit the functions or proprietorship of the stage areas, only the way the characters utilize them over time.

The rustic furniture, exceptional for Ivo, is fitting enough, but the absence of walls betokens an image of a farm, rather than “the real thing,” however real each item within it appears. The proliferation of furniture, tools, milk cans, people, and cows in a small space democratizes the space, rendering milk can, cow, and human equal – all on the lowest level possible – and robs all of privacy. Everything is witnessed and rendered incestuous. Not even the most confidential act of sex or evacuation is concealed, but offered incontinently to the audience's gaze. The audience is party to all manner private goings-on, even though the characters are supposedly are shut out from them, though no physical impediment is in the way.

There are three areas on a gigantic stage. Since none of them is closed off from any other on this otherwise highly detailed stage farm, the characters strip and bathe in full view of each other. The father merely grows suspicious that his young wife is carrying on with his son, although it seems from the audience that the actor playing him has visual carte blanche to the entire affair and could know from the first sign of it. In *Othello*, the abused husband has full access as he stares through transparent Plexiglas barriers, thus seeing through supposed walls and plumbing the infidelity lurking in his wife's heart. Here, in contrast, a total absence of barriers creates a different paradox: characters are unable to see what is happening unimpeded literally right under their noses. By creating a total absence of walls, Ivo and Jan take Zola's style once more, and retool it radically into one that Jan has dubbed “hyper-realism,” Johan Thielemans “spectacular realism,” and Randy Gener “naturalism in extremis.”^{cii} Not even the real-as-real cows with which the farm-folk cohabit, are separated from each other by stalls that *mere* realism, or as Jan

Versweyveld pejoratively calls it, “ersatz realism,” would dictate being there.^{ciii}

With Christopher Marlowe’s *Massacre at Paris* van Hove works once again with this spatial principle of Proliferation. But whereas it was ultra-utilitarian milk cans and cows that congested the stage in the O’Neill work, here it is abstract forms of disks and piping. There is a principal spherical, horizontal platform front and center on a rake where most action transpires. A weird landscape surrounds it upstage in a semi-circular form, consisting of giant shiny spheres in red and black like ripe tomatoes, and a composition of vertical poles and tubes of different heights, which are in fact a functional system of tubular bells that are operated live. The costumes, especially those worn by the women, are bulbously shaped just like the spheres, and their presence further crowds the scene.

He uses this principle of filling up the stage yet again in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. The floor is white. The upstage area groans under the brooding presence of big, heavy, brown cabinets and wardrobes. Way upstage is a grandfather clock in characterless Formica modern. Just downstage of the grandfather clock is a metal ladder, the side of which functions as a simple boundary, and just upstage of which, next to the grandfather clock, is a little alcove nook for intimate tête-à-têtes. All of the metallic cabinets have clean, modern lines and slick varnish. A samovar, emblematic of Russian country life, gets placed on a short white step unit, a post-modern iteration of a shrine. And furthest upstage beyond the cabinets and wardrobes – are metal platform units – whose armatures are exposed. The stage we see has the allure of a rehearsal space – with substitute units in place of the period pieces we have come to expect of Chekhov productions. Regardless, the primary tone of this set is a crowding and accumulation, which allows very little room for movement. The actors are forever squeezing in between to get anywhere onstage.

WHERE THE AUDIENCE BECOMES THE CLUTTER

In Genet’s *Splendid’s* van Hove again resorted to a Peter Brook or Grotowskian kind of “empty space” with the scant definition of the Reduction principle, but a scenic configuration of *Dispersal*. By that I mean an environmental arrangement of the audience forced into the middle of the action for more direct immediacy and confrontation with the performers, even as the performers are scattered throughout the audience and in diffuse relationship to each other.

In his production of Cassavetes’s film *Faces (Koppen)* he and Versweyveld resorted to the kind of confrontational actor/audience relationship that Grotowski had earlier explored in such works as *Akropolis* and *The Constant Prince*, as had Richard Schechner’s Performance Group in experimental works such as *Dionysus in 69*, *Mother Courage* and *The Balcony*. Echoes of *The Connection* by The Living Theatre may also be felt, although van Hove would never have actually seen any of these iconic works. By the time van Hove worked with this technique in *Faces*, the echoes of 1960s avant-gardism had long passed from the scene, but an analogous 1990s trend toward “living room theatre” come into being. Indeed, with all the sofas and beds littered among the

café tables, *Faces* has a vibe of bringing the audience right into the intimacy of private homes.^{civ} The audience is made complicit with the disconcerting, invasive action and forced to be extremely involved with the actors in the most literal sense.

Van Hove had first tried out this dispersal principle, scattering the audience within the dramatic action, in a deeply flawed 1986 student production, six years earlier, of Büchner's *Danton's Death* at the Antwerps Conservatorium Toneel. The student actors proved unready for the ambitious playing style, and the lobby of the theatre with its glass walls, sterile pillars, and neutral lighting of over-all white wash resisted any evocation of the decadent atmosphere he was going for. A gelatinous formlessness prevailed in that experimental foray, but one can see within it the germs of ideas that recur in *Splendid's* with far greater consummation.

The environmental audience arrangement that we are calling Dispersal gains in piquancy and paradoxicality when van Hove employed this anti-materialist-derived aesthetic to depict a set of characters as deeply entrenched in the parallel middle class, materialist world of the 60s as those in Cassavetes's *Faces* (*Koppen*). The set and audience space, which are one and the same, littered with café tables and chairs, insists that it isn't a standard theatre space, but rather evokes a jazz club ambiance. It is specifically identified the "Losers' Club," one of many locales from the film version.

Van Hove lifts it and establishes it as a master or meta-setting – a place of unabashed, presentational performance – to contain the smaller "private spaces" in which the actors take refuge with each other. These supposed hideouts are manifestly on view, not to say blatantly invaded, by the audience. The actors insert themselves through the tight passages left between audience seating, and enter small areas for scenes plunked down right in the middle of the audience. Highly intimate scenes occur in very circumscribed spaces, largely taken up by double beds, restricting movement – in the audience's laps as it were – although a great deal of highly physicalized performance occurs even on the outer fringes of the space behind the audience, forcing them to twist around to see it. Parts of the thus fragmented audience are forced to keep their legs up and their heads resting against the headboards of the king-size beds throughout the performance. The band is embedded throughout the space as well. In these licit and illicit renditions of bedrooms, the suburban characters "perform" their circumscribed social roles, bursting at the seams to find escape from inner and outer inhibitions.

In his production of Charles Mee's *True Love* modular blocks are rearranged throughout the show and used in various ways like an erector set. When they are reorganized, the audience is forced to stand up and move. Van Hove also resorts to an analogous environmental approach to scenography sporadically in later productions with great effectiveness, notably the *Roman Tragedies*, in which the parts of the audience both sit in their conventional formal proscenium position and others join the actors distributed with them all over the stage. Those on stage are forced to face in all different directions and crane their heads as the live action shifts.^{cv} Although I am not directly addressing the question of audience response to van Hove's productions, it could be a fruitful subject for investigation, particularly in these aforementioned productions, considering how van

Hove plays with these paradoxical binaries of simultaneously eliminating separation and promoting independent psychic involvement by the members of his public.

THE EARLIEST SPATIAL STRATEGY COMES FULL CIRCLE

To a greater and greater degree, we see Ivo van Hove, in his most recent work, setting aside the strategies enumerated above and falling back on minimalism. This tendency was introduced by Peter Brook in the 1960s, and he theorized it in his book *The Empty Space*, influencing a whole generation of directors, if not several. There he advocated bringing the art of theatre back to its primal origins via a theatrical space that incorporates only what is an absolute minimum of physical definition and elements for a theatre event to occur.^{cv} This idea found its logical extension in a project which brought a troupe of actors into remote parts of Africa. There, traveling from town to town, they would clear a “dedicated space,” generally in the form of a sacred circle, beat a drum to draw the ad hoc audience toward them, and do performances for spectators whose language and cultural references would be totally different from those of the performers.^{cvi} In this way his performers were forced to discover a common denominator for human narrative codes, including gibberish and body language, and recover the essential elements necessary for the theatrical event to materialize. He pursued the idea further in his *Orghast at Persepolis*, where the performers incanted an invented language on the promontories high above a famous natural quarry that form a sacred spot in Iran.^{cvi}

While the idea of clearing the stage space of the false, accumulated detritus of the ages, which we will here identify as following a principle of *Reduction*, is not an absolutely new one, even for Brook – since we know that Harley Granville Barker and William Poel in turn-of-the-century England and Jacques Copeau in France of the 1920s and 30s had already done such radical experiments with similar aims. Yet Brook revived these ideas in a specific larger context when radical social and artistic iconoclasm was spreading throughout western society under the umbrella of “the counter-culture.”^{cix} He, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Chaikin formed a loose international consortium bent on applying a clean sweep to theatre, and all three explored radical ways of opening up the stage space.^{cx}

As we have seen, van Hove has been as apt to have a cluttered stage as an empty one. Or a transparent one; or a transformative one. He’s not identified with only one idea. But in much of his earliest work, the empty space principle was already somewhere in the mix. In the cavernous warehouse in which *Disease Germs* performed, the actors and limited scenery, consisting simply of a real automobile, were dwarfed by the ambient yawning containment shell. And while set on normal proscenium stages, *Wild Lords*, *Imitations*, and *Wonders of Humanity* all began with an assumption of a bare stage to which only the most minimal set pieces and furniture were added. They remained boldly theatricalist environments more redolent of possibility than definition. For van Hove and Versweyveld, clearing away the traditional bric-a-brac of theatre was an exciting revolution in and of itself:

It was a revelation when we figured out that the rear side of a set ought to be as much on display as the front side. On the rear side loiter the actors for hours on end, so why should that be less on view? That was a whole other approach to theatre. Also the use of materials: bogus materials were eliminated, wall painting and the stuff of illusion-manufacture swept away. What was left on stage was real. Same for minimalism: you have only to place a table on stage and you already in fact have a set. A table too, as Jan always says, is rising onto higher ground.^{exi}

Nonetheless, the Reduction principle, in and of itself, is neutral in more ways than one, and its impact depends heavily on context. When used abroad, in the Netherlands, for example, staging a not very well-known Italian classic in this way serves to actually reenforce conventional norms and reassurance for the middle-brow European theatre-goer. The same scenic strategy in *Summer Trilogy* by Goldoni for a Dutch audience stands out as a conservative production, whereas *Streetcar* by Williams for an American audience was received like an impertinent gauntlet tossed in the face of all that was held dear in theatre tradition.

This expedient of the Reduction principle was in evidence in his 2005 production of Charles Mee's *Perfect Wedding*, and he had recourse to almost exactly the same arrangement in his production of Goldoni's reassuring classical comedy, *Summer Trilogy* (2010). For the Goldoni, in the midst of an expanse of sparseness and openness, there was only a series of freestanding doors placed at various angles and even more simple wooden and metal chairs standing at odd angles. Huge white panels closed in the otherwise expansive space on three sides upstage. A lot of humor came from running through the doors and slamming them behind. To suggest a new location, all the actors had to do was to use a different part of the space, one enclosed by a different set of doors, or enter through the reverse sides of the doors that were just previously used.

His famous production of *Streetcar Named Desire* at New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) used the Reduction principle to outrage the audience and shock them out of their complacent expectations of how such an American classic has, must, and will be approached. The attention the visiting Flemish director grabbed, much of it negative at the time,^{exii} precipitated a heated debate on the New York fringe theatre scene and ensured that van Hove would thereafter be ensconced as a player in American theatre. The critical furor which arose laid the groundwork for anticipation for his next show and ensured him perennially full houses. The gamble of using nothing onstage, or almost nothing, when mounting a coveted American classic with all the accretions of habitually applied production values, the "bogus materials," taken away, proved a publicity coup. The empty space as applied to *Streetcar* in America proved subversive, however much the approach was meant to reenforce or bring out the essential dramatic qualities of the text.

More recently we have seen a spate of this reductive modality deployed by van Hove: in his German production of *Strange Interlude*; his English production of *A View From the Bridge*; his Dutch *Mary Stuart*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, his American *The Crucible*, his French *The Damned*. In both *Strange Interlude* and *View*

From the Bridge, a quadrilateral open pen contains all the action; the floor is filled with sawdust or sand, which is the only spectacular element in the frame throughout the show. The substance is physically malleable enough to be manipulated and sifted for its metaphorical possibilities. *Mary Stuart*, in a proscenium arrangement, works with wide open space, with an enclosing wall upstage, having in addition a mere two benches pressed up against it. This show's visual life consists almost exclusively of moving actors around in different harmonious stage groupings like chess pieces, hardly an innovative approach. This prevailing staging technique in *Mary Stuart* is relieved at two points, one at which Mary undergoes a spiritual transfiguration when her presence is enhanced with an uncanny lighting effect of opening, closing, and shifting gray irises. This technique is akin to a magic lantern used in symbolist plays from the 1890s, cast over Mary's hieratic figure, as she proffers some simple, but highly effective sculptural gestures. At the end of the show, the rigid, erect body of the Scottish monarch lifts off from the stage and vanishes into the flies above, akin to the way the old servant lady in van Hove's *Teorema* also levitated and self-beatified over an upstage wall. A levitation effect also came upon the young victim of Tituba's potions and magic spells, Betty Paris, in the recent New York hit, *The Crucible*, who defied our conviction that she wasn't bewitched by lifting unexpected off from her invalid's bed with her puritan garb fluttering surreally in the wake.

Van Hove will latterly have recourse to a few spectacular, technically based, effects in such otherwise highly verbal and sparsely, even conventionally, staged productions as *The Russians* and *The Fountainhead*. They function as *dei ex machinae* both in the classical sense – as a dramatic technique thrown in to inorganically resolve a situation – and also offer a theatrical treat to the audience that up to that point had been suffering from spectacle deprivation. Once the Reduction principle has put the focus unadornedly on acting, some pyrotechnics in the end in a sense, “give them their money's worth.” In *The Russians*, which is a mash-up of Chekhov's *Platonov* and *Ivanov*, an explosion of smoke and noise engulf the stage at the show's climax. Blood pours down at the end of *View From the Bridge*, which is all the more awe-inspiring an effect for arriving when we have become inured to a highly restricted set of impressions up to that point. Then in *The Fountainhead*, the central character, who is an architect, pursues an ideal conception for a housing development. His dream, however, become adulterated on account of utilitarian compromises by contractors, bureaucrats, et al., and he and his female counterpart blow up the entire project they'd labored so hard to design. The massive projected video image of the tops being blown off the projects is reinforced by an oppressive gust of wind that bears a wave of trash laterally across the actual stage space. That same wave of trash blowing across a stage is recycled in *The Crucible*, and then was imitated by Icke in his production of *The Oresteia*. Still, these surprise effects are sparingly distributed in these recent productions, the ambient key-tone of which is essentially of sobriety and minimalization of movement and spectacle.

Along with the stripping of the stage space, in this particular set of productions, comes a stripping of language and physical movement. The language is efficient, crisply enunciated and well projected, although van Hove's actors have invariably worn personal mikes for several decades now. The actors' bodies, whether standing, sitting, or walking,

tend to be relaxed, and gestures are saved for special moments. Stage crosses and business also remain at a minimum. The spoken text is king, and all other elements are relegated to support it, as in much traditional theatre.

MIX AND MATCH

In their recent theatrical rendering of Ingmar Bergman's film scenario, *Scenes From a Marriage*, van Hove/Versweyveld combine three of their established spatial strategies, to lay before us the inner workings of a single, paradigmatic heterosexual connubial unit. For Ingmar Bergman's made-for television mini-series the ramification of space as it worked in *Othello*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Miser*, through transparent surfaces and industrial materials, is merged with the isolation chambers we've seen used in *Hedda Gabler* and *Children of the Sun*. Van Hove/Versweyveld ruthlessly gutted, then reconfigured, the space of New York Theatre Workshop into three drab, beige claustrophobic, cordoned off spaces. They divided the audience into three sub-groups as well, and then poked just enough holes in the dividing walls so that the sub-groups led into the the triangular chambers could glean whiffs of action simultaneously being performed in the other two compartments, as well as to periodically sense the presence of the other two audience coteries. And who is in each of the three reduced stage areas? The same husband and wife, Marianne and Johan, repeated three times at different ages by three sets of actors. The audience gets to see in to Marianne and Johan's married life at its inception, its middle period, and its debacle, but not necessarily in that order. Each pair of actors, assisted by other characters, added as needed, will play the same scenes over thrice running for each successive part of the audience who are led from space to space. Those three scenes, in varying order, constitute Act I.

So while van Hove achieves the kind of compartmentalization and compression of relationships, as he does in *Hedda Gabler*, he simultaneously, by enabling slight glimpses through the windows and doors, he manages also to effectuate the voyeuristic audience/performer relationship he had introduced to *Othello*, *The Miser*, and *Taming of the Shrew*. But here it is not other characters that are glimpsed, but uncannily the *same* characters, only earlier or later in their marriage, played by other actors. Occasional shouted lines from other periods of the marriage manage to seep through the opaque but insubstantial dry-wall, so that all phases of time of the marriage, early, middle, and late, are consequently contained within each other. The causes and effects of a marriage's demise are all alive in the meta-space all the time. The beginning contains its own destruction, and the destruction was a certain consequence of the relationship's earliest days, given who the characters are. Johan and Marianne are surprised by what they do and what happens to them throughout their marriage, but the play's structure, both temporally and physically, suggests that what happens was innate, and meant to follow this course through its eventual mellowing and ultimate hollowing out.

In each space there is either a single table or bed, with indeed no room to spare for much more. The table may ultimately be used as a bed in one of the stages, and the bed used as a table. Standing in for the Ikea-infused spare, but authentic Scandinavian homes in

Bergman's movie, are bland and unadorned, reductions of domestic environments hyper-compressed (viz. *Streetcar*) into one iconic piece of unlovely unadorned furniture. Above each furniture piece is a single rectangular fluorescent light, only slightly amplified by some supporting ungelled lighting instruments. The homes are thus converted into surgical operating theatres with the offstage common space behind each and in the center of all, serving as fulcrum for the three, reminiscent of one of those administrative stations found on every floor of modern hospitals. We are placed in the position of witnesses to the surgical post-mortem of this marriage, horrified at the knife wounds the partners inflict on each other's spiritual flesh, but dispassionate before them as well. We are back in the psychically distanced, but physically intimate, Brechtian space of *Point Judith* and *Rumstick Road* with their contemporaneous claustrophobia, inevitability, and see-through voyeurism.

For Act II, which begins half an hour later, when the audience is called back from intermission, a major and perceptually disruptive alteration to the space has been accomplished. All the separating walls have been removed, leaving one single wide open space with the three audience segments now in an in-the-round formation and united for the ultimate playing out of the remaining phases of Johan and Marianne's marriage. These include: the signing of the divorce papers and Johan's departure for Australia, his return as a man remarried to a different woman, and his reuniting with Marianne, also remarried to a different man, in an illicit relationship with each other, as well as the termination of this adulterous phase of their knowing each other. So, a plethora of after-lives subsequent to their legal marriage flash by.

In one of the most original and refreshing scenes of the entire show, all three couples representing Johan and Marianne mix and match in the open space, sometimes speaking and acting simultaneously. Different Mariannes arbitrarily pair up with any of the three Johans for tender or hostile moments on parade. This makes for some piquant stage business. When one Marianne goes to fetch her diary to read it aloud, she grabs two extra versions of the diary from a cabinet and passes them out to her fellow Mariannes. They then read segments from the diaries one after the other. When Johan wants to kiss Marianne goodbye, all six congregate in one concentrated spot, and smooch, passing back and forth between all the female and male partners and giving the impression of an orgy, although it's really just one couple, subdivided. Here the space itself isn't ramified through window and mirror effects, nor do objects proliferate and crowd. Rather, all ramification is achieved through a joining and unification of the various selves, and it is the characters within the space who proliferate. When one Marianne calls out on the phone for a taxi, the other Mariannes add "two," then "three" taxis to the phone order. They are all after-images of each other, like a Muybridge serial photo, sometimes joining, sometimes breaking up into autonomous existence throughout the protracted scene.

The play ends with all the spatial openness reminiscent of the environmental set from van Hove's *Faces*, with the curious twist that instead of several married couples who are unfaithful to their husbands and wives, there is only one married couple, albeit a similarly unfaithful one it turns out, that is paradoxically divided *and* multiplied to be deployed within itself.

There have been other mixes and matches of two or more spatial strategies in a single production. Van Hove's theatrical version of Visconti's film *Rocco and His Brothers* is played in a large cavernous space with the audience in the round. In the center is a gigantic open platform that functions as the central metaphorical and situational image of a boxing ring. Rocco and at least one of his brothers are seeking their fame and fortune as boxers. The over-all environment proclaims itself as an "empty space," undefined and redolent of possibilities. But the initial impression of vacuity is contradicted by a series of areas abutting the platform on all sides that grow cluttered with a dense accretion of stuff, leading once more to a principle of Proliferation.^{cxiii} These areas, which resemble storage spaces where someone has indiscriminately shoved unwanted objects, will come to represent the various tight, claustrophobic rooms the straitened economics of Rocco's family force them into. The film on which the show is based is a prime example of Italian post-war Neo-Realism in the direct tradition of Zola's Naturalism, with all its typifying detritus. Van Hove's clutter isn't at all detailed or verisimilar in the same way as Visconti's, using his usual set of black, generic, clean-lined forms and a minimum of actual props, but parts of the area do fill up and force the actors up against each other, evoking the cramped incestuous spatial relations that recall the film.

Then, to compound the already complex and self-contradictory environment, Versweyveld has added rectangular towers at the four points of the rectangle alongside and slightly behind the audience bleachers. These monumental structures house several scaffolded stories, parts of which are curtained off, still others exposed to view through clear or translucent windows. They represent the family kitchen, offices of boxing ring impresarios, and other locales. The interior chambers in the tower, in effect, lead once more to a Ramification where the audience gets to peer through transparencies. With the audience split in four risers quadrilaterally arranged around the boxing ring, its attention is forever shifting throughout the show onto the central empty space, away to the cluttered peripheral spaces, or to the adjacent tower spaces, in unpredictable patterns. So the set taken as a whole promotes yet a third spatial principle, that of Dispersal. The variety of visual experience, that also produces a dynamically changing audience-actor relationship, keeps the energy alive and prone to unexpected ruptures. It reproduces, without any electronic means, the rhythm of a movie, with all its blend, flow, and jumps. The audience is treated to an ever-changing tempo of alternation between public and private, intimate and societal, micro and macrocosmic. Thus have van Hove and Versweyveld translated the verisimilar world of cinematic expression into a work that conforms to the visual languages and possibilities of live theatre.^{cxiv}

True Love, Charles Mee's original play about mother/son incest, also works with an in-the-round Empty Space principle. The audience is packed up against an abstract arrangement of platforms and cubes of varying heights and sizes without much other definition. The objects form a single, unified, compressed landscape of rectilinear components. Their visual unity at first disguises the fact that they are separable units; they initially appear joined for the duration. Through time, as the production proceeds, Proliferation takes over – not only the proliferation of set pieces or furniture, but of living beings. The large cast is stuffed onto the limited space and is omnipresent, even when

the chief interest is in intimate two-character scenes. The entire ensemble is all always there as a constant reminder that the intimist story of transgressive mother/son love plays out within a social mosaic and is subject to society's various judgments. So just as the audience is crowded into limited space, they are mirrored by a seemingly concomitant human mass that is made all the more crowded due to the presence of several live chickens.

Once illicit sex has been consummated in this theatrical universe, the component architectural parts of the initial construction get strewn everywhere and their unity destroyed. That universe, which could be read as the family unit or the Father's normative conception of how things should and do work, or even the totality of social mores, as physicalized in these blocks, has been thus palpably shattered. To the paradoxical mix of Reduced and Proliferating is yet again, added – for its shock value – Dispersed, giving the theatrical event a spontaneous and deliberately ragged feel.

Difficult Women and Metrosexual Men: Persistent Leitmotifs of Gender Identity

"It so happens that men in my shows are often rather passive. And the women strong-willed."

Ivo van Hove^{cxv}

THE DIFFICULT WOMAN

"Those who revere and live with great art recognize Clytemnestra, Medea, Lady Macbeth, and Hedda Gabler – conspirators and death-dealers of implacable will – as equally the forebears of modern woman."

Camille Paglia^{cxvi}

The van Hove brand (to use an all too-common word that puts great artists and laundry detergent on the same level) is not limited to spatial experimentation. Some tropes of character definition keep returning very strongly throughout the Flemish director's career despite its stylistic heterogeneity, notably: the prototype of the Difficult Woman. In the 2004-5 season alone, he picked plays from the standard repertoire that contain two of the most iconic troublesome women in dramatic history – Hedda Gabler from the play of the same name and Kate from *Taming of the Shrew*. Add in the unstable, charismatic women from Cassavetes that same year, and it comes into high relief that there is something definite Ivo is trying to explore or work out. Both Hedda and Kate are idle women who at the same time are ball-busters. They both have pianos that they don't know how to play. Their random diddling on the keys epitomizes the aimlessness of their lives and tips us off to the ominously unchanneled but aggressive energies roiling beneath the surface of their personalities. Once having kick-started into intentionality, those energies could be either constructive or destructive – toward others or themselves. Kate is a termagant who is being thrust into a marriage contract, presumably against her will. It is

made abundantly clear that Petruchio wants her both for the material benefits that are to be his, a very good reason why Kate mistrusts the match and resists it, as well as for the challenge of subduing the cantankerous female, another incitement for her to mount resistance.

But subdue her he does. Throughout Acts III and IV Petruchio subjects Katherine to the “taming” principal of the title, a spirit-chastening process portrayed in this production as a version of shock therapy, with very dynamic use of both set and lighting design to reenforce the horror of the process. Katherine is hemmed in downstage and kept from escaping. With the help of several assistants, her suitor causes the lights to go haywire. In sudden blinding flashes, she is picked up abject and half naked on her hands and knees, as the assistants raise the blinds on what’s going on concurrently within the brightly illuminated house upstage, which is a kind of vague orgy. It seems the frat boys are having a dress-up party cum hazing – now putting on travesty clothes, now stripping down to almost nothing. In contrast and simultaneous to their feverish amusements, Katherine is reduced to a pitiful, sobbing, and howling state, begging for affection on her hands and knees. The show is essentially a grim breaking down of an ill-conditioned, badly behaved woman through a “tough love” treatment reminiscent of lobotomizing, and that by a man more rudely behaved than she.

Hedda Gabler, by contrast, has voluntarily entered into her own undesired match and is attempting to have her cake and eat it too. Unsuccessfully playing the supportive, second-string housewife role, she simultaneously attempts to salvage her late wild tempestuous life by wresting Eilert Lovborg away from Thea Elvsted and dragging him back into his former alcoholism and debauchery. Through van Hove we recognize the prevalence in great Western drama of the trope of the marriageable girl/woman, that mainstay of drama from the Renaissance right through the early twentieth century. It is the same trope that comes back in *The Miser*, wherein Harpagon is both attempting to impress his daughter Elvire into an undesirable but profitable marriage, even as he himself is pursuing a young woman out of lust. His tyrannical reign corners his daughter into a hated destiny, and she responds by acting out as a petulant, whining, intractable harpy, yet another Difficult Woman.

It becomes obvious that van Hove is fascinated by twisted, domineering, manipulative female characters. He avows this, what he calls, “fascination,” with euphemistically designated, “strong women.”^{xcvii} Assembling them in one paragraph parts the curtain on a veritable pantheon. Not only Hedda, Blanche Dubois, and Shakespeare’s shrewish Kate, but Wedekind’s demonic Lulu, toxic Regina from Lillian Hellman’s *Little Foxes*, and fallen women, Carmen and Camille have all trod his stages. Even Desdemona, normally depicted as bland, blameless victim, in the van Hove version boldly flirts with Cassio and allows Iago to maul her, giving Othello’s jealousy palpable fodder to feed on itself. Various borderline, alcoholic and bi-polar, these ladies draw Ivo and us in only to abuse everyone around them, sometimes, like Hedda, luring their male adversaries to their demise. Or else they self-destruct, sometimes getting the tables turned on them, as happens in *Taming of the Shrew* and *Streetcar Named Desire*. Another of the same ilk is the solo role in Cocteau’s *The Human Voice*, who parades up and down in her isolated

apartment, pleading into the telephone receiver for her lover to come back to her, and ultimately jumping out the window in despair.

We see the director's fascination for powerful, charismatic, and perverse women as early as in his second production, the self-authored *Disease Germs*. The tone from the campy Fassbinder cult classic *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* crept into this remarkable *oeuvre de jeunesse*. Fassbinder, who remains one of Ivo's artistic heroes, was one of the hottest and most brazen of the 1970s European film directors, produced this claustrophobic work with a small cast consisting exclusively of women, which had echoes of the style of Robert Ludlam's Theatre of the Ridiculous.^{cxviii} The larger than life women of *Disease Germs* inhabited in a converted warehouse, increasing the scale and stridency of the performance to match, and threw their passions around in unembarrassed self-indulgence. The curious point about this production is that all the women were played by men in drag. Was the fascination for women concealed by this gender-bending theatrical strategy, or is his subsequent direct portrayal of women characters played by women really subterfuge gay dress-up? Resorting to drag opened the floodgates for over-the-top camp pastiche of a trope that in other van Hove shows more often assumes heartbreaking veracity. Indeed, the show managed to wring a good deal of poignancy and melodrama out of the event despite the prevailing camp mood.

Agnes, the heroine of Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* is a difficult woman whose fatal illness has pushed over the brink, making her an utterly impossible one. Karin's, condition from the start of the show is known to be terminal and unbearable, with no painkiller adequate to assuage it. Her symptoms are humiliating and swamp the lives of all who are close to her, notably her sisters and the family servant. We don't know that much about her character before her illness, but at this point she is demanding, emotionally overwrought, and irremediable. In contrast to Hedda or Kate, who have pianos they can't play too well, earlier in life Agnes is reported to have channeled her constructive energies into painting. Van Hove has taken that allusion and run with it, expanding and exploring the image of Agnes's painting into one of the most central and memorable of the production. Her former creativity has devolved into a medium to splash undiluted pain helter-skelter onto her immediate universe.

In the 2006 stage adaptation of John Cassavetes's film script *Opening Night*, the veteran actress, Myrtle, is another extremely irascible woman whose psychological meltdown commands both attention and affection. A celebrity in decline, she is uncomfortable in the role ("Virginia") that is assigned her in the play-within-the play, which she's accepted in an attempt at a comeback. The rehearsals start to go off the rails during what is supposed to be a run-through without stops. A dramatic moment arrives when it has been established that she receive a stage slap, but instead of going with the serious flow of the scene, breaks out laughing instead. Indeed, she falls on the ground, so uncontrollable is her hilarity.

Then, leaving the script behind, she commences a tirade attacking the character she's playing, "Virginia." She laces into her want of logic, her lack of humor, the unrealistic way she is drawn as a character, the insult precipitating a crying fit by the playwright

who is sitting right there in the first row. Her hurt feelings don't prevent Myrtle from launching into further, repeated and loudly proclaimed denunciations of the character she's been given to play. Dismay at getting older – which playing this character role makes her confront – is behind all her disruptive diva shenanigans. For if she turns out to be plausible in such an older role as Virginia, it confirms that her aging process must be visible to the whole world and so sets her off gumming up the works of the rehearsal at which she is a past master. Apart from throwing tantrums, Myrtle crosses the line of professionalism and starts having an affair with the – married – director even though her former husband is also in the cast. Her jealousy of the latter's young second wife is yet another irritant spurring her to drag her personal dramas into the “fictional” one.

A further complication derives from the repeated intrusions of a perky young fan of hers – Nancy. In the beginning of the play, Nancy pops up out of nowhere, confesses her undying admiration for the thespian, and runs out once more. Without further ado, she gets her brains spattered on the glass door to the theatre, supposedly having been hit by a car right outside the theatre. Although Nancy had at first seemed a totally plausible intruder, it gradually dawns that she had been a figment of Myrtle's disordered imagination all along. Despite her sudden, gory demise, Nancy insists on reappearing at her elbow, and keeps Myrtle on her toes, now bowing down before the veteran actress's great talent, now taunting her cruelly, none of which the other characters can see or hear. Myrtle drinks so much on camera and onstage, that there is an internal organic justification for Nancy's post mortem existence. But while we think of her as a symptom of Myrtle's D.T.s., there is also room for a more spiritualist interpretation. Myrtle later takes her to be a manifestation of her younger self that she is wrestling with, and ultimately stamping out, in her stormy quest for greater self-acceptance. So the phantom Nancy dovetails with and reinforces the central inner action of the drama.

More than Hedda, Blanche Dubois, Kate, or any of the other leading ladies in prior productions or some in later ones such as Mary Stuart, Abigail Williams, or Sophie Essenbeck, Myrtle in Elsie de Brauw's interpretation comes through as a multi-dimensional figure – not just difficult or charismatic in some emblematic way, but a person with a whole series of contradictory psychological pulls and preoccupations. It's not just that she evokes sympathy and irritation, but is ultimately one we wouldn't mind knowing and struggling along with. She and her alter ego, Nancy, monopolize the fascination quotient on stage, all the more so since the men who surround her – fellow actors, paramours, and director – are such ciphers by comparison.

TODAY'S MAN

“There's plenty of room for violent collisions, the shards of which get neatly coughed up before the following scene can start.”

Ivo van Hove^{cix}

And then there is manhood. The awkward, punk mental defective misfit, René, who provided the center for his first production *Rumors*, underwent a sea-change throughout

the 1980s. In his earliest goes at costuming his classics Van Hove experimented with hints of Elizabethan lines to the garments in *Macbeth*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* for many characters – yet he had the central male character of the latter, Giovanni, wear a simple suit and even a wristwatch in that post-modernized Jacobean universe. That approach was a sign of where he was headed.

By the time van Hove is appointed artistic director of Zuidelijk Toneel in 1990 and undertakes *Richard II*, he is costuming his male actors in the one-size-fits-all modern look. Picture, if you will, a slender, long-limbed young man with close-cropped hair and a square jaw and an almost delicate but sharply defined bone structure. He wears straight-legged, perfectly fitting pants and a tee shirt or simple button-down shirt, sometimes with a sports jacket, with a narrow belt and – crucial detail – shiny loafers. This is a description of the iconic van Hove hero. Spare and sleek, a subduedly stylish image of contemporary manhood, exemplified by Ivo's earliest leading man of choice, Bart Slegers, then a young juvenile,^{cxx} defines the look not only of the van Hove hero character, but virtually all the young men onstage with some notable exceptions. Analogous to Magritte's ubiquitous fetish-Man in a Bowler Hat, the young Slegers image is a prototype that persists in slightly modified forms down to van Hove's most recent shows. He is reborn in such current members of the TGA stable as Eelco Smits and Alwin Pullinckx.

Older characters invariably are distinguished by wearing jackets and button-down white shirts, but still most often no ties. Loafers on the feet constrain the wearer to a certain kind of walking – efficient, neither macho nor effeminate – but definitely anti-dramatic in enforced flat-footedness. And that was the exemplar of *Richard II* in the van Hove version. The usual brooding, mousy, hesitant portrayal was jettisoned for a matter-of-fact, young executive type, whose costume and bearing failed to set him apart from all the other similarly costumed and loafer-shod young executives running around on the scaffolded unit set. All the male characters wore more or less that costume, as though the Elizabethan period had been pressed through a style-sieve of Urban Outfitters. This default image of manhood recurred over and over through the Zuidelijk Toneel years well into his time at Toneelgroep Amsterdam, even into the quite recent *The Russians*, where the Platonovs and Ivanovs all look like that. Fedja Van Hûet, one of van Hove's current leading men in the TGA repertory plot, playing Platonov in *The Russians*, is of a similar body type and similarly costumed. Indeed Van Hûet seems to wear the same all-purpose costume regardless of whether he is acting Chekhov, Schiller, Visconti, or Cassavetes.

The prototype for this gender image might have origins in American film stars of the late 50s and early 60s such as Paul Newman in films like *Hud*, the descendant of the character Hal, in William Inge's *Come Back Little Sheba*, who was described by John Clum as, ...”just another 1950s rough trade fantasy, all body but not much in the way of brains, the male equivalent of the dumb blonde [...], the drifter stud [who] has not been domesticated.”^{cxxxi} Van Hove's iteration, while retaining much of the outer semblance of this image, is far from dumb; no, he is even glib. Transferring easily to Cassavetes or Pasolini pieces from the 1960s, his image is assimilatable into late nineteenth century characters like George Tesman and Eilert Lovborg in *Hedda Gabler*. We are then

reintroduced and made to see fresh formerly togaed figures such as Coriolanus, Brutus, Marc Antony, or even Alceste from Molière's *The Misanthrope*, all who get refitted in the van Hove changing room. Royal status in *Henry V* and *Henry VI* is indicated by the addition of sports jackets and ties. Concessions to the awkwardness of Henry VI and contortedness of Richard III are granted by having their jackets cut short and riding high on their haunches, and a bit too tight so they must be fastened with one button mid-stomach. As the catalogue expands to include figures from all parts of theatre and film history, it becomes clear that chronological fidelity will be no obstacle to the invasion of this ubiquitous statement and trademark.

This type of guy was so imbued in the van Hove sensibility that it carried over into his casting choice for Stanley Kowalski in his NYTW production of *Streetcar Named Desire*. The American actor he settled on, the late Bruce McKenzie, was a spitting image of the young Bart Slegers – you might say, a bourgeois Flemish aestheticized version of the New Orleans muscle-bound Polack. It was an image of a millennial Antwerper transplanted to the American heartland of the 1950s, thus a jarring violation of the Stanley Kowalski stereotype American audiences have grown to expect and which Williams describes in the stage directions. This is a streamlined, cool, even androgynous Stanley, a choice which accentuates his insinuating side over the affable rutting bull in the China shop qualities we've grown used to. When Kowalski was then packaged in tee shirt, khaki pants, and loafers it seemed as though the director was simply trying to replicate his Dutch fetish actor with one who had all the same endowments, only English-speaking.

Still, this innovative casting is in line with the scenic revolution represented by the solitary bathtub down center with which van Hove blasted away the naturalistic conventions and fifty years of received *Streetcar* traditions. Although unaware of the provenance of this iconography, Ben Brantley still called attention to the disparity between conventional expectations (including his own) and the actual incarnation at NYTW, reflexively rejecting such a re-visioning when he dismissed McKenzie as "... a scrawny, charisma-free Stanley."^{cxxii}

The costume and bearing of this prototype could apply equally well to a straight, gay or bi, and in the van Hove canon, it does. This man neither swaggers, nor minces; he is certainly no gaudy butterfly; nor is he crudely macho. He is simply modern man, who does not wear his sexual preference on his sleeve, but leaves it to be discovered according to the stage partners he chooses through the dramatic action, at hazard. It is almost as if van Hove is saying: "How should a straight or gay man supposed to look anyway?" Several of the gay, criminal hustlers in *Splendid's* (inhabiting a universe in which women don't exist) dress the same way as van Hove's relentlessly straight Stanley Kowalski or the Long Island husbands in the Cassavetes shows.^{cxxiii}

However, when a male character is blatantly effeminate, van Hove will give costuming cues to tip the audience off. The aging homosexual, Julian, in Charles Mee's *Perfect Wedding* (2006), as played by Joop Admiraal, is permitted a red scarf flung about his neck to stand out from his otherwise standard van Hove uniform. This accessory,

coupled with a sinuous, sibilant physicality, announce his gayness, and paves the way for his sizzingly subdued, unrequited love scene with the priest, Father Thane, played by Fedja van Huet wearing the trademark costume slightly altered by a clerical collar. Several of the women in the production are also gay or bisexual, their orientations emblemized by their straight-lined tailored suits. The male actor, Kay Bartholomäus Schulze, who plays the Queen in the German production of Marlowe's *Edward II*, is distinguished from the other prison denizens by the bright red lipstick he sports. Another effeminate character, from Mee's *True Love*, a middle-aged archly leering, old-fashioned "queen," played by Fred Goossens, is unmistakably attired in bright and pastel colors, including a loud Hawaiian blouse. He throws his gayness around with merry outness as though he were silently singing "I Am Who I Am" to himself all the while.

Beyond the fetish-image of maleness discussed above, van Hove frequently finds dramatic justification for staging groupings of heterosexual men. *Othello*, for example, opens with male aggression space – the lounge area in a modern-day gym or health club – foregrounding the corporality of the male body at sport. In the darkness, the sound of someone striking a punching bag primes us for the bustling world that is about to greet us. The stage is invaded by an abrupt flood of toned male flesh and virile voices. Rodrigo is at the punching bag – and all the guys are almost naked. Thus the keynote and atmosphere are established for this play about heterosexual love.

The men are dressed only in exercise shorts (somewhat adapted to culottes, hanging down to the knees and ever so slightly feminizing them, as van Hove did previously for the men's kilt-like costumes from his early approach to *Macbeth*) and boxing gloves – sans shirts, shoes or socks. As Iago and Rodrigo sit off to one side chatting about Othello and their own ambitions, Brabantio reposes on a chaise longue and then, as though he's the other men's coach, strips off their boxing gloves. In the darkness, we hear the sound of someone striking a punching bag. Before the scene is over all the men will have stripped entirely to buff and dressed again, covering up in business uniforms.

We see this hetero-male bonding in *Hedda* too, where the free and easy atmosphere which reigns at Madame Diana's off-limits parlor, a play only whispered about furtively and allusively in Ibsen's text, in this production is actually transferred to Hedda's own respectable parlor. At the point when all the male characters – Tesman, Eilert Lovborg, and Judge Brack – have assembled, they joyously clinch and mock-wrestle in a three-way scrimmage, a sublimation of male reciprocal attraction that has to be expressed through aggression.^{cxxiv}

In *Faces* the men spontaneously break out into a game of Cowboys and Indians, and in *Taming of the Shrew* the suitors descend into macho, rough, but affectionate tactile horseplay at the drop of a hat, with butt-patting, and "nuggies" of knuckles pressed into skulls, as though they were members of a basketball team.^{cxxv} In all these cases men are shown jockeying for the affections of the same circumscribed group of available women, but that proprietary combat does not preclude genuinely affectionate physicality between the men; in fact it's just the flipside of the same gender coin. It is as though van Hove wants to show that Hedda and Kate, just to cite a few, are ultimately run over not by one

empirical man, but by this bonded, communal male steamroller of tight networks and sub rosa understandings. These dynamics between the male characters that proliferate throughout the van Hove oeuvre are perhaps illustrative of the “homosexual panic” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick details so eloquently, a terror, she suggests, which is not based

... on an essential differentiation between ‘basically homosexual’ and ‘basically heterosexual’ men, aside from the historically small group of consciously and self-acceptingly homosexual men, who are no longer susceptible to homosexual panic as I define it here. If such compulsory relationships as male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination, and heterosexual rivalry all involve forms of investment that force men into the arbitrarily mapped, self-contradictory, and anathema-riddled quicksands of the middle distance of male homosexual desire, then it appears that men enter into adult masculine entitlement only through acceding to the permanent threat that the small space they have cleared for themselves on this terrain may always, just as arbitrarily and with just as much justification, be punitively and retroactively foreclosed.^{xxxvi}

The black-suited trio of friends in *Husbands* co-exists in that same “small space,” as do all the others. The first act is a male bonding fest following the funeral of a mutual friend, and they go through the same routines of horsing around and playing sports we see in other van Hove shows. Every so often they pop out with sexual come-ons toward each other, outbursts of homosexual feelings that get instantly reinterred. In *Faces*, two pairs of supposedly straight men, all of whom display a gratuitous homophobia, go to visit the call-girl Jeannie, yet seem to be especially eager to watch another man having sex with a woman, not merely to have it with her themselves. While clutching at a frail deniability in the context of a rugged straight ritual – going to a whore – they are trying to cop a little gay fun in the process. One could argue that such urges are behind all the straight posturing Cassavetes’s men specialize in. Van Hove senses it and has a chuckle at their expense. According to Savran, “...heterosexuality (like the bipolar system of gender it requires) is itself a performance that imitates ‘a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity.’ [...] Thus heterosexuality is always predicated on lost – and unmourned – homosexual catheses.” Furthermore, “... the male bond is always the site of intense anxiety, and the homoeroticism that perpetually threatens it is being constantly dislocated, abstracted, or (more ominously) translated into violence between men.”^{xxxvii}

Van Hove has the three women in *Husbands* – the widow of the friend whose death they are mourning, a prostitute, and a stray party woman – all played by one actress. The trio treat each woman in the same way – as an opportunity for a come-on. And come on they do – with clumsy brutality, but absolutely fail to make any connection with them – even a minimal amount of casual sex. They can connect with each other, however unsatisfactorily, but can’t find any way at all to do so with the Woman.

The physicalized comraderie between these clumps of male friends is an outgrowth of van Hove’s early fascination with boys in early adolescence sitting around a campfire in the final scene of *Wild Lords*, an *oeuvre de jeunesse* in more ways than one. In that show the exclusively male cast had explored a plethora of possibilities for male bonding and companionship. Those rites exposed the underpinnings of gay attraction behind a mask

of hearty, distanced conviviality. The experimental structure of the play allowed for the emergence and free play of concealed yearnings. In all later works where the guys disport with each other such as *Taming of the Shrew*, *Faces*, *Husbands*, *Rocco and His Brothers*, and *Othello*, same-sex attraction may be deduced or assumed, but the closest it gets to being expressed is in the fun-aggressive group pile-ups that occur in all these productions. The gay has gone underground; even in *Angels in America*, as we have shown earlier, a casual homosexual hook-up scene is played in deep shadow as far upstage on a very deep stage as it can get, the men wearing anonymous hoodies, muttering low monosyllables, pictured as denizens furtively skulking behind giant screens for a stolen contact.

Or sometimes the underground gayness may be unearthed as it was in *Rocco*. Here is a show about an aggressively male and macho environment, the world of boxing that van Hove had superimposed on *Othello*, but which is integral to this world as scribed by its author, the cineast Visconti. Ivo's version presumes a gayness woven into the woof of this circumscribed social milieu. He unearths same-sex impulses and even sex acts that Visconti, if he imagined them, left firmly in the subtext. In van Hove's show the five brothers all sleep together on one bed packed in like sardines. When Simone goes to the impresario, Morini, the impresario, the latter, even as he berates the former champion Simone for losing matches, kneels down in front of him and tempts him sexually, an unmistakable overture which the drunken Simone finally repulses. It's just a brief moment of stage time, but a very life-like one.

Apart from the tenderness and vulnerability displayed between the brothers, exceptional in the van Hove gallery of male buddy groupings, we are also presented with the character of the brothers' friend Guido. Here is an explicitly gay character who is both accepted and casually abused by the brothers, especially the dissolute Simone, for whom he performs many services, including tactile. This hanger-on and go-between, is here depicted as a gay admirer of the entire family, something more out of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* than Visconti's source film. The massages and salubrious rubdowns he administers are motivated more by sexual appreciation of the flesh than for their mere therapeutic value. Simone affects not to notice the sexual intent of Guido's touch even as he benefits from the contact, and so manages to have it both ways.

All this suggests that Simone's insecurities around women, and even his misogyny, may mask or go hand in hand with homosexual yearnings. Simone and his younger brother Rocco are forever grabbing and holding each other; that may or may not simply be part of their Italian brotherly tactile culture. They do it unembarrassedly with great passion. When Simone kills Nadia, the prostitute that both he and Rocco had loved, Rocco throws him onto the table, and then lies down on top of him. They stay that way, their bodies pressed together, in sadness, and intimacy over the woman they had shared, for some time. It is as though it was they all along who were the real lovers, and the struggle for her affections had been a mask for their own relationship. Van Hove here offers "gay" behavior from straight characters lurking just beneath the surface, and woven into the texture of their "normal" lives. The men in this play go after women aggressively, and a territorial battle over women is unquestionably at the heart of the drama. Even so, they

are heterosexual characters with more fluidity of preference and identity than the original text suggests.

Between 2008 and now van Hove has returned at times to stage texts with explicitly gay subjects – *Edward II*, *Ludwig II*, *Angels in America*, the world premiere of the opera version of *Brokeback Mountain* in Spain, etc. Most recently he has brought his stage adaptation of Visconti's perverse and homoerotic historical epic film *The Damned* to the TGA. *Edward II*, *Ludwig II*, and *The Damned* are among his most fulfilled and original works. But they are a few productions among many, van Hove maintaining his established pattern of fitful loyalty to his subjects and modalities. For as David Savran says, "Why must a queer theater remain fixated on the imaginary stability of that most unstable of identities? And why not acknowledge the fact that a writer's [or a director's for that matter] work will always exceed, and often belie, his or her avowed identity?"^{cxxviii}

The Technological Revolution

"The boundary between theatre and other media is growing ever thinner."

Ivo van Hove^{cxxix}

"Theatre is a sponge."

Ivo van Hove^{cxxx}

In the later phase of Ivo's work he is very liable to eschew technology altogether, reverting to a more traditional "linear-successive" mode of perceptual arrangements.^{cxxxi} *Perfect Wedding*, with its blank stage and minimal stagecraft, exemplifies this tendency. Other recent examples of shows with virtually no technology are *Streetcar*, *The Little Foxes*, *Mary Stuart*, *Persona*, *Scenes From a Marriage*, and *Antigone*. But as much as Ivo can be an acolyte of Peter Brook's Empty Space, on a parallel track, he has also evinced a bent for accoutering live theatre events with post-modernist landscapes, including with *The Antonioni Project*, *The Massacre at Paris*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He has grabbed onto this toolbox to advance the art of dramatic narrative into the twenty-first century, but no less importantly to give the audience spectacular treats to amaze them:

'Mephisto of theatre technology,' he has been recently called. 'The theatre of today brings all sorts of artists, including writers, together. I think that's an extremely positive development. People have started to return to the theatre to get their perceptual kicks. There are continual inventions being introduced in the theatre for new ways of telling old stories.' And that indeed is what he's doing.^{cxxxii}

Quite often the post-modernist landscape bristles with a plethora of monitors littering and hanging over the stage and brings about a "simultaneous and multi-perspectival approach" to audience reception, *Roman Tragedies*, *Cries and Whispers*, *The Damned*, and *The Miser* being prime examples. This particular aspect of Ivo's scenography leads

him also into the realm of what Elinor Fuchs calls the *meta-dramatic*. Regarding the Wooster Group's director, Liz Lecompte, she observed that, "... her contraries and abrasions are not among characters but among performance modes and cultural ideas." In that sense van Hove is less iconoclastic than Lecompte, since *his* "contraries and abrasions" crop up *not only* among characters as they often do, but *also* very heavily among performance modes and cultural ideas.^{cxxxiii} The intrusion of electronic media on his stages alongside newly minted renditions of well-known characters meta-dramatizes them in startling ways.

Ivo's use of monitors was first tried out in the early production, *Antigone* (1991), six years later with *Caligula*. In the modernized ambiance he grafted onto the Ancient Greek world, the actors playing social leaders held their press conferences with their faces projected on a series of monitors lined up along the horizontal line of the forestage. Using video monitors in narratives from antiquity is a shorthand medium for expressing that the same sorts of power struggles and political tropes are being repeated in our own times.

In Ivo's own words: "Video and microphones are the tools of today. Why not use them? In the times of the Greek tragedies, they used masks – which were like huge close-ups of an emotion. But I never use cinematic methods in a purely aesthetic way. I try to make it dramaturgically necessary."^{cxxxiv} And indeed, his most successful, sophisticated uses of technology where all the experimentation later converged with appropriate "dramatic necessity" were with the politically inflected *Roman Tragedies* and the socially inflected *The Antonioni Project*. His early gropings in this area were, of necessity, a far reduced number of witty perspectives than the multiplicity he ultimately came to command.

It began as a kind of imitation or homage. The configuration in the 1996 *Caligula* in which the monitors were hung over the stage in a line, and the live actors frequently placed beneath them in a parallel horizontal line behind a long set of tables is highly reminiscent of The Wooster Group's approach from such Liz Lecompte productions as *L.S.D.: Just the High Points*, their pastiche of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and *Routes 1 & 9*, their radical spin on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. During their heyday in the 1980s and 90s, this became their signature spatial arrangement. The Wooster Group became a point of reference for Ivo from the time he and Versweyveld saw *Point Judith* in New York in 1981. He even brought their *Hairy Ape* to the Holland Festival when he was its artistic director.^{cxxxv}

The Wooster Group has been feted and lionized internationally, but no place more than in Flanders where imitators have abounded, and especially Jan Lauwers's Needcompany. Guy Cassiers and many small young companies as well at times have rendered them homages.^{cxxxvi} While Needcompany has faithfully stuck to these and other Wooster Group scenic strategies over the years, including the extensive use of desk microphones, Ivo, you might say, merely flirted with them. That flirtation can especially be seen first in his *Antigone* (1991), the set for which was comprised of a spiraling configuration of rectilinear tables – conference tables in effect – with a rectangular overhanging canopy that had lines of rectangular neon lights recessed in it. The tyrant Creon's place is at the

far end of the conference table in an authoritarian position, with all the others arrayed as though they were members of a board of directors. This network of long tables is also reminiscent of Grotowski's set for *Faustus*, irrefutably one of the earliest influences on the Wooster Group aesthetic.

This idea was further refined, and came even closer to duplicating the Wooster Group's signature arrangement six years later, in *Caligula* (1996). Ivo also, for the first time, cribbed their use of electronically amplified sound, a technique he has never abandoned since. In that production there is a wide-open rectangular space with a series of tables way upstage arranged in a horizontal line. One can lie back on them, as Caligula's mother Drusilla does in a particularly lascivious moment, similar to the way the table we have seen a table used in *South*, for sitting on, standing on, for copulating on. Far upstage reposes the upright figure of Caligula, visually distinguished by his great height, in contrast to the dominant horizontality of the tables. Ivo here also introduced the use of a cameraman, giant camera slung over his shoulder in plain sight, filming a live feed, who would go right up into the face of the live actor playing Caligula. The far distant live figure that normal perspective is making slight instantly replicates as a giant on screen, addressing us seductively and intimately. The other characters are picked up on other small screens simultaneously, where we observed them stuffing their faces. Van Hove's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, especially, operates in a flattened out, metonymic and hyper-technologized space. The constricted, non-representational jigsaw edifice of raw wood in front of which the live actors operate, sitting at desk surfaces laden with laptops, makes for an abstracted physical and social context, where the mediation of cameras, cords, and monitors disrupts all direct connections they have with each other.^{cxxxvii}

This cold, flattened, static use of video did not retain van Hove and Versweyveld's attention for many other productions, but they continued to seek out further, innovative uses of video within live theatre. Ben Brantley, for example, describes the ubiquitous use of video in van Hove's rendition of John Cassavetes' *Opening Night*:

Our disorientation is compounded by the plethora of simultaneous versions of the same scene: those that occur in the flesh on the stage; those reflected in the glass doors at the back of Jan Versweyveld's soundstage-like set; and those that are projected in video onto an assortment of screens large and small. (The video design is by Erik Lint.) People have been conditioned in recent years — by sports events, concerts or even the lights of Times Square, not to mention their personal technological toys — to keep their eyes on the screen. Don't make that mistake here. Shift your gaze from screen to stage, and you'll see what a difference a frame makes and how the same performance registers differently in another medium. This use of technology suits well the portrayal of people whose sense of self is forever in flux. [...] For Mr. van Hove the camera is much more than a gimmick here. The tool may magnify and clarify performance, yes, but also distort. It seems telling that a show about a woman reclaiming her soul should end, as this one does, with two performers, Ms. [Elsie] de Brauw and Mr. [Jacob] Derwig, by themselves onstage, without their video doubles. At that moment they seem larger and more solid than ever before.^{cxxxviii}

By the time he did *Opening Night*, in 2008, Ivo had moved far beyond his initial Wooster Group emulations.

The radical explosion of audience/actor relationship in *Roman Tragedies*, in which *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Julius Caesar* were performed on one bill in succession, was only possible through its use of video. While set in a classic proscenium-style theatre, the entire stage space was organized to accommodate parts of the audience throughout it. On a rectilinear grid, easy chairs, sofas with their side tables and coffee tables, all facing in different directions, including toward the back wall of the theatre, could be occupied by audience members and actors alike without differentiation, creating a democratized leveling between the viewer/performer hierarchy. All through the stage space were distributed small monitors on the tables in addition to the extremely large screens available to the public remaining in their traditional seats. In between acts and plays, the audience was invited to move onstage or back into their former seats so that individuals could experience portions of the show from radically different perspectives.

There were several cameramen circulating all through the action, who approached dangerously close to the audience members to get the desired angle and distance for their shots, even as the actors themselves were disseminated in extremely close proximity to the loungers, often performing beats of high emotional intensity and getting into perilous physical altercations inches away from audience members' noses. At the same time, projecting out from the edge of the stage were podiums for the more rhetorical moments of public address all these plays contain, as well as a horizontal line of conference tables with table mikes planted on them, for the sorts of press conference scenes we will remember from the earlier work, *Caligula*.

The drama of the political and personal narratives is thus rendered multi-layered and multi-perspectival, as each audience member in a sense creates their own show simply through the choice of where they sit. Focus can wander from large screen to live actor or from large screen to smaller screen(s). And just as the near proximity of an actual actor lounging in the neighboring sofa can bring the action into a disconcertingly familiar intimacy, beckoning the show into a personal living room kind of space, so in a different way can the monumental images of close-ups revealing the actors' very nose pores, be intimate in their way, albeit preserving a formal actual distance. Taken altogether, this show problematizes the public and private lives of political figures in today's world. They are always on view, their lives invaded and exposed for consumption through television and all manner of social media, and in effect are living out multiple simultaneous existences, immediate and vicarious. They become members of our own family, live as we do in our living rooms, so close and yet so far.

The Antonioni Project breaks new media ground in other ways still. This show, comprised of three movies by the great Italian experimentalist, *La Notte*, *L'Avventura*, and *L'Eclisse*, rather weaves the three disparate casts and narratives together into one intricate whole. Contrasted with *Roman Tragedies*, it retains its psychological distance, keeping the actors separate from the audience on a proscenium stage, and features only

one large screen above that principal aperture and another somewhat smaller one upstage behind a raised platform. The two screens don't necessarily display the same images as each other, which makes for two perspectives at any given time at a minimum. In this production, beyond the content of the three scripts, van Hove wittily plays with the notion of filmmaking itself, and with the art of making narratives in general.

The stage is quite open and sparsely defined, but through the use of live video feeds, with cameramen roaming freely, through the use of towering booms, and a circular track and cart for dollying, a movie stage is suggested. Depending on the angle of the boom, the relative tightness of the frame image, and the position of the camera, various nooks and crannies over the stage space, even those hidden behind tall flats, may fill the screen, dwarfing the broad view of the live-action stage by magnifying minutiae with which it is juxtaposed. There is also a mix of pre-recorded footage along with the live feed. Live actors may act against that footage, which becomes background to them, or video images of the actors in live feed may be melded into the pre-recorded footage, yielding three layers of reality available for consumption. The use of video here is particularly appropriate, the specific intertwining narratives from the film scripts losing importance alongside the meta-narrative of actors being filmed and living actors acting. As the separate strands of the three filmscripts start to lose their integrity and blend together, interest gets further displaced on how the stories are being transmitted more than on their specific content.

In his most recent works, *Lazarus*, *Kings of War*, and *The Damned*, he has found new ways to amplify, stun, and tickle the spectator's perceptual aperture. In the former the central character multiplies, by his image separating out from his living figure and taking over the entire upstage space. In the latter, not only does a character's figure replicate behind him in multiple versions like the parts of a spring, but we are privy to life offstage even as we remain onstage. Then we are even brought into the world of the recently deceased to learn what life is like within coffins. Those poor souls, unremarked, remain with the oblivious living, and calling out to them for attention in vain. In the *Henry V* section of *Kings of War*, the life on the video screens together with daring lighting shifts make manifest liminal states on the evening before the Battle of Agincourt. First, large panels alternate sea-green and dull blue, as various small monitors flicker with short-circuiting imagery – more rhythm than content, to evoke a state between sleep and wake. Then the camera penetrates into a virtual corridor of drowsing soldiers, bathed in blood red. This soporific mood gradually gives way to a bacchanalia of swaying, drunken, often masked bodies. The recurring van Hove trope of chaos, internal and external, invades the stage. In both *The Damned* and *Henry V*, van Hove permits himself a dive into a surrealistic decadence that gets away from the sterile corporate ambiances of corporate contexts. The latter profane mood shifts subtly to sacred, as the King's voice praying in the gathering dawn overpowers the orgy. As the on-screen orgy subsides, so the live king on his knees before his army cot comes to the fore in simple supplication. Through these technical explorations, the very notion of reality opens further into unsuspected realms. Paradox and contradiction are more than ever the stuff of theatre.

Acting and Emotions: Not The Method

“Theatre is the art of the moment, existing of and in the moment.”

Dora van der Groen^{cxxxix}

Emotions are difficult for everyone to grapple with, either as a skill-set or technical challenge for European theatre directors and acting pedagogues. And they are difficult for critics such as myself to talk about with any precision. Still, many go to the theatre precisely because the emotional charge can be so immediate and stimulating. This issue of emotions, whatever the difficulties in articulating them, is an essential bedrock of the live theatre genre, so it behooves us to delve into the emotional life of van Hove’s productions, which clearly has always concerned him, to explore what he aspires to and the various strategies and results we’ve witnessed over the years.

Stanislavsky, who pursued a deep study of finding ways to access emotions, never made the same deep and long-lasting inroads on French, German, and Belgian theatre as he did on the American. Indeed, for France and Belgium The Actor’s Studio and the entire school of 1950s American “Method Acting” has the kind of legendary, exotic, and unattainable status as – say – French wines do in Podunk. John Strassberg, the famous Lee’s son, hung out a shingle in Paris, and French actors trooped to study with him. But that does not mean that the Stanislavsky system, in a broader sense, has been integrated into the pedagogy as the Lecoq system and the rhetorical Comédie Française tradition have.

In Post-War Flanders acting was taught at the Studio Herman Teirlinck and the Brussels Conservatorium using theories and techniques originating with Jacques Copeau, Lecoq, Laban, and Tairov, as culled and expounded by the great post-war cultural innovator, Teirlinck and his acolytes. Stanislavsky was not disregarded, but little practiced or understood. And certainly the off-shoot teachings of the American epigones of the Stanislavsky system, so lionized across the Atlantic – Strassberg, Adler, Hagen, Meisner – were not part of the mix at all.

Van Hove himself didn’t have an acting-based training, but at De RITCS, where he studied directing, there were no student actors on-site for the student director to direct. So he started by essentially following his instincts and inventing his own way of approaching the great questions of what stage emotions are and how to elicit them. He gleaned what he could about it as a sensitive viewer from his extensive film, performance art, and theatergoing, and worked out a not very systematic trial and error approach, though sometimes stumbling on felicitous results.

Having now worked in many nations, each with its own theatre traditions, he acknowledges certain broad differences between Flemish, German and American actors respectively, claiming that emotions are the special forte of the Americans.

As a director who works in several countries, does he think there is any longer such a thing as a national style of theatre? 'For me, not,' he says instantly. 'Well, yes,' he revises, equally instantly. 'American actors are much more emotional. And German actors tend to observe their own characters from the side, almost commenting on them while they are playing them. Belgian actors play from the belly. They are very earthy. [...] Yes, there are these little differences' he finally decides. 'What is important is that you create a sense of ensemble. And once you manage that, you have done 50 per cent of the work.'^{exl}

In a separate interview, when asked what distinguishes the Belgian spirit, he answered:

... we have our feet on the ground. That's our Flemish side. I love it when actors perform with the emotional intelligence of their bodies. Which isn't the Dutch way. They're more rational.^{exli}

It may be that their rationality has been cramping the director's style in his home base. From the beginning, van Hove was questing to find a personal approach. In his early works, it seems that van Hove simply hurled himself from one approach and style to the next with an impetuosity that, like some force-of-nature whirlpool, sucked his young, inexperienced collaborators into its vortex without too much analysis of how they got to the intended end. The compelling acting in his first play, *Rumors*, grew from the shared sense of mission among all who participated in it. That first ensemble he pulled together consisted largely of totally untrained actors, who were drawn by the young charismatic leader's implacable and lofty vision that galvanized their simmering and heretofore untapped longings. And they threw themselves into a creative endeavor they found imperative. For this first foray into guiding actors, the play's subject and the unconventional circumstances of its genesis seem to have been enough to forge a unified, and unusual, convincing performance style. He then tilted to extreme Mannerism and artificiality in *Disease Germs*.

While *Wild Lords* whose play text grew out of improvisations, was both in subject matter and the process by which the collaborators researched it, a quest for authenticity. It represents a coming to terms with gayness and all the concomitant emotional responses to male identity.^{exlii} The actors were led – more through a Grotowskian than Stanislavskian practices – to break through the accretions of defense and denial to a place of addressing their contempt for themselves and others, their mortification and shame inextricably linked to their deepest attractions and longings, and to ultimately arrive at a measure of acceptance. The way in which van Hove allowed each segment to take its course without pressure, a vital ingredient getting to authenticity, resulted in frequent slackness in the stage tempo. This made for much seemingly dead time onstage, much wandering and floundering, but also a sense of truthfulness in the emotional realm. As the actors were periodically called upon to present a version of their own lives without the intermediary of playing characters, without having had any particular training in psychology, Ivo was trawling on the borders between creative work and drama therapy.

Following these early gropings van Hove left behind this period of non-literary texts evolved between him and the actors, and undertook a wide variety of extant texts by

established authors. His quest for emotional truthfulness in acting was carried forward. But *truthfulness* is only one criterion he is looking for in emotions. For van Hove *suddenness* is equally valued. And *volubility*. And for preference, *sudden and voluble* at the same time.

From legion evidence, in contrast to the extreme indulgence he exercised in *Wild Lords*, he started demanding that actors' emotions explode out of seeming nowhere and hit a crescendo on a dime, an exigence that puts emotional truthfulness at risk. Actors caught in between both imperatives may sacrifice truth for volume, volume for truth, or achieve the rare blend of both. Though not absolutely reliable as objective records of a rehearsal process, a few examples of actors' accounts from a recent production might give some hints about how he works now. To all appearances, with Visconti's *The Damned* he succeeded in forging a unified style in record time with a company he'd never worked with before, the Comédie Française:

Like all the great masters, Ivo van Hove surrounds himself with an impressive staff and works in the most total calm. Which put us the actors into a state of natural availability, as if our logical faculties had been brought completely up-to-date, having effaced all the preceding layers. You arrive onstage with an awareness that a gigantic phase of preparation has been affected back upstream in the process, and the work ahead suddenly appears quite simple, allowing one in a very short time to rise to a high level of intensity of acting and expression. For the scene with the Night of the Long Knives [the mass assassination of the SA by Hitler and the SS, during the night of June 29, 1934], all Ivo van Hove had to do was pronounce this phrase: 'It's a bacchanalia.' That said it all. All that remained for us was to do was to push things to their ultimate formal and theatrical consequences....

And another:

For the majority of us this work with the onstage camera is totally new. And yet, its presence never stifles the acting: in the dialogue which he sets in motion with it, Ivo van Hove seems, on the contrary, to encourage our theatricality. I can act forcibly with all of this terrible woman's [the role of Sophie Von Essenbeck] colors of impotence and frustration: her perversion has to come from somewhere, even if that's no excuse for her acts and her thirst for power, which for me, remain an enigma. But in the film, Ingrid Thulin plays her in a very perfumed, cat-like way, her little silk negligees. I wanted to aim for something cruder, more monstrous, and Ivo encouraged me to do so. He wants to show the paroxystic interplay of forces onstage carried along by the kind of acting that burgeons to the absolute limit. I adore it.

And finally:

Ivo van Hove doesn't drag a huge amount of theoretical baggage along with him, but a structure for directing the show that's already shaped in its entirety. The blocking, the relationship to the video and the music, it's all worked out in advance to the max, the way it would be for an opera. And the characters are never approached in a psychological manner: Ivo rather exhorts her to follow what's in the script and elicits a great deal of mental inquiry. The other day I was kidding around with him, saying that he'd got me to stop being a psychological actor! I often ask for explanations about things when the

theatre itself amply suffices, but he gives me that confidence to permit me to get past it. It feels good, at 44 years old, to finally be able to leave all that behind!^{cxliii}

This may not be the same way he works with his company in Holland or with American actors at the NYTW. Suffice it to say that van Hove's strongest work has come about whenever a given ensemble of actors under his direction has happened on a quicksilver factitious partnership of believable and profound interaction, paired with an inspired vision for the mise-en-scène of staging, set, lighting, costuming, music, and at times electronic imagery. However much one would like to discern, replicatable and systematic causes at work, the force of kismet cannot be underestimated.

FROM NADIR TO ZENITH IN ONE SEASON

Two immediately successive productions from the years 1991-92 serve to illustrate the antipodal ends of Ivo's paradoxical and widely various handling of emotions onstage. In 1991 with Zuidelijk Toneel he undertook a production of John Ford's Jacobean classic about brother/sister incest, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Its theme of transgressive love ought to have been a perfect fit for Ivo who had already come to specialize in the marginal and taboo. But instead, through an over-cerebral post-modern interpretation, the project went sideways. The script is already subversive, and Ivo, rather than embracing that subversiveness and mining the deep potential for the forbidden love within the text, which he could easily have connected to his own early personal struggles,^{cxliv} came up with ways to undermine sympathy for the lovers. He deployed a battery of methods for distancing and finally deprecating Anabella and Giovanni's illicit passion.

The actors, seemingly uncomfortable with the effusiveness of their characters' sentiment, the full-throated adoration in their speeches gets leveled off and ridiculized. At moments at which the text calls for great passion, both Giovanni and the Anabella tend to reel off their lines in a double-time monotone as though they can't wait to get through these over-long verbal passages, which belies any impression of sincere longing. What they use is a special mode of utterance akin to the "zombie" speech, popular in certain performance art of the time, that gave the impression of reading or quotation." A monotonic rattling off of text was deliberately resorted to in many Wooster Group productions, and then resurfaced in the works of such Belgian theatre companies and directors as Needcompany, TG Stan, Jan Decorte, Luk Perceval and ... Ivo van Hove himself. We see it throughout his *Mourning Becomes Electra*, for example. Since that time it became one of a panoply of techniques available to use in a number of shows.

Elinor Fuchs defines and defends the unmodulated and logos-deprived flow of language manifested in the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.: Just the High Points*, that company's riff on Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, as

...precisely analogous to contemporary speed-reading, in which language streaks by so quickly that the reader 'sees' the text as a series of flashing images, space in effect exchanging for time. As audience to this radical distillation of 'just the high points' I recall thinking that realistic, psychological enactment of the familiar Miller text would

only have weighted the performance with a ponderous ballast.^{cxlv}

Van Hove was surely also trying to relieve John Ford's play of the "ponderous ballast" of clichéd emotions by using this technique. Only in doing so he threw the baby out with the bathwater.

Van Hove's Anabella is depicted as a drab wallflower, lacking in grace and verbal facility, so one must ask oneself, why are so many suitors pursuing her? Dressed in an unappealing white dressing gown, she has no more finesse or appeal than the actor playing her brother. They make up for inner need, passion, and natural attraction with frenetic forced energy. It's almost as though they're embarrassed, not only by the situation in which their characters risk rejection for the open avowal of love, but due to the task of having to play such an incestuous seduction scene before the Calvinists of Netherlands. Perhaps also, a certain native tendency to project complacency cannot jibe with the unabashed heat of southern European emotional life that jumps off the page. How can a Giovanni and Annabella who are fundamentally sanguine and have to work themselves into a froth to *show* how in love they are be convincing? But in this production, Ivo seemed not to aiming for conviction, but detachment.

The intricate wall of openings and perches upstage, which comprises the set and is reminiscent of troglodyte caves, incarnates the impervious social establishment, and as such it could have worked quite well. But this Giovanni and Anabella seem part and parcel of that edifice, fitting in as tarnished members of a corrupt society, rather than standing out in contrast to it. The point is that they have been visited by an attraction which is very much against their own interests and wills, so it ought to burst out without effort, as though the characters couldn't help themselves.

During the fight scene between Soranzo and Anabella, where her duped husband accuses her of infidelity, having discovered that she is pregnant, she brandishes porcelain plates above her head and lets them smash on the floor. All the while her would-be cuckolded husband stands there and lays one insult after the other on her in a cold, detached, drone that absolutely contradicts the Italian furor of the text. Then, finally, when provoked too far, he resorts to yelling. The volume is raised as though someone had turned the dial on a radio, without any visceral basis for it. Van Hove must have assumed that her pregnancy is now in its eighth month, rendering her as awkward and unappealing as possible. For she stands and shrieks back at him like a harridan. The go-for-broke swashbuckling flair with which most directors invest this scene, here is dragged into the bathos of sordid and squalid yammering.

Nor is the dearth of pathos restricted to the play's central love affair or love triangle. The clowns Bergetto and Poggio are also potentially quite appealing in their daffiness. Their relationship *could* be visualized as an intimate one, refracting with a comic spin Giovanni and Anabella's intense one. A radical interpretation might have discerned a transgressive attraction underlying their master/servant symbiosis, a choice van Hove could have made convincing, but which he didn't take. Even so, the bumbling Bergetto's inadvertent and unmerited death by assassination at the halfway point of the play could easily tug

strongly at the audience's heartstrings. But here it is performed as a commedia *lazzi* with masks and schematized stabbing, rigidly choreographed with intent to make it unbelievable, so any incipient sympathy or pathos is undercut.

When Bergetto's uncle Donato then seeks justice against Grimaldi, the malefactor who did Bergetto in, the local Cardinal arises to stymie him. This churchman in whom all social power clearly resides is depicted as a haughty queen, covered in jewelry, with a "thing" for the evildoer. He jollies Grimaldi back into his palace where he has sought asylum from prosecution, and pats his ass as though he's the Cardinal's boy-toy. It's a very strange and sinister approach, which betrays Ford's portrait of social corruption and turns institutional abuse of power in which the establishment is embodied homosexually. All of these unorthodox and questionable choices, along with the grab-bag costuming which goes directly counter to stylistic unity, could be justified if aiming at some sort of Brechtian alienation. Or else, it was a stab at a certain kind of post-modernism, akin to the work of Jan Decorte, which had recently been in vogue in Flanders.

If one accepts theoretician Charles Jencks's notion that "'double-coding', of highbrow and vernacular, classical and industrial" is the "essential definition of Post-Modernism,"^{cxlvi} there is no question that Ivo's productions fall into the post-modernist silo, his protestations to the contrary. In his selections of kitschy pop music, based on the industrialized environments in which he typically resets classics, by his way of interjecting a machine-gun repetition of gratuitous expletives into revered texts, and many more ways, double-coding is strewn throughout his work. In many cases it enriches the theatre-going experience. In *'Tis Pity*, though, van Hove was trying on a very particular aesthetic with which post-modernism fleetingly cloaked itself, one he largely abandoned afterwards. It is a style that makes the stage and actors' adornments look like a kind of random junk shop, where all period styles may coexist in a gawky neverland, and in which actors spout lines with derision as though they had been given the unpleasant task of enunciating sentiments which transgress against conceptual coolness.^{cxlvii} Sadly, the acting that is dragged in this direction just comes off as resistance to delving into deep emotional responses, the play's life then sputtering like a bad electrical connection.^{cxlviii} This production surely marked the nadir of van Hove's output.

In contrast, a case of his finding a serendipitous partnership with much happier results was in his Zuidelijk Toneel production of *Desire Under the Elms* the year immediately following his venture with John Ford. The sensation of bringing eight live cows on stage drew press attention. Indeed, Ivo's increasing notoriety at the time was achieved owing in large part to the various cows, chickens, and other fauna he put on stage through this period of his work.^{cxlix} The human actors too were able to approach it freshly because this old chestnut from the back drawer of the American repertoire is almost never done in Europe, and so, free from the baggage of associations from earlier productions or tradition. Perhaps also, once the actors found themselves in the presence of the cows, there was simply no choice but to match the unassuming truthfulness of their bovine collaborators or be wiped off the stage. It was as though the cows were the touchstone for the measure of emotional authenticity against which the human artists' mettle was to

be tested. The actors in *'Tis Pity* hit the false notes they did in an attempt to force the director's intellectual concept onto the stage with their own heads.

The cast of *Desire Under the Elm*, on the other hand, is waist-deep in the play's circumstances, thoroughly believable as the farmers they're impersonating who sink in the muck of their farmyard. Here too the actors have occasion to yell, but the contrast with *'Tis Pity* shows that yelling onstage, in and of itself, is neither right nor wrong. It's more a question of whether it's supported by inner conviction and not reeled off like an efficiently memorized spiel. Part of the authenticity in the acting may derive from the fact that van Hove and Versweyveld based their vision of farm life on all the peasants they had rubbed elbows with in the rural region to the east of Antwerp.^{cl} A false note in voice or behavior would be immediately recognizable to them.

Van Hove takes realism so far out here that it becomes poetic, unearthing the ritualized and imagistic life under the surface of dull, fetid farm routine, despite the fact that O'Neill's copious stage directions make no mention of them. The production, like the text's ambient mood is one of resentful taciturnity, but surges with daring physicalization when things get hot. To celebrate finding out that he has made his young wife pregnant, the old man parades around with a baby cradle held over his head and dances triumphantly around Hilda, the wife. His potency is celebrated in a stomping dance of triumph, with no holds barred, whereas O'Neill's script keeps these expressions on the verbal level. This is but one example out of many.

The externalized fulfillment of the script's latent suggestions is the magic ingredient when van Hove productions do work, and what is missing when they don't. He always impels actors to go to their limits to tap into their primal expressivity. *Desire Under the Elms*, in fact, epitomizes how far van Hove by this point advanced the Flemish theatre, and Dutch theatre for that matter, beyond the very things I had sensed were holding it back when I first arrived in 1981.^{cli} In many interviews van Hove suggests, intriguingly, that all his productions are in some sense autobiographical, but some are clearly more explicitly and directly connected with some traceable event.^{clii} A successful later production in a similar key was *Cries and Whispers* for it grew out of van Hove's experience with his father's recent protracted death agony.^{cliii} Perhaps it was van Hove's own extremely direct personal experience again that provided the needed trigger, and he chose the material concerning a woman dying of cancer expressly to work out his complicated feelings of mourning. What results comes out as a heady cross between the stuff of Actors' Studio naturalism, and a liberating shot of Grotowskianism – a freeing of impulses, loss of inhibitions, and strong visceral vocal work.

THE AMERICAN ALCHEMY

Between 1997 and 2016 Ivo van Hove has had some eleven productions done in New York City (find list below), a series of seven he has mounted with American actors at the New York Theatre Workshop in the East Village, six Toneelgroep Amsterdam productions in Dutch using English super-titles which have played mostly at BAM in

Downtown Brooklyn as well as one (*Teorema*) sponsored by Lincoln Center, that performed on Governor's Island in the East River.^{cliv} And now he's occupied Broadway twice, once in 2015 and once in 2016. He's planning to return to BAM next year with *Kings of War*.

In the fall 2015 season, three Van Hove shows were on the bill in New York – *Antigone* with Juliette Binoche at BAM following its European tour, *Lazarus* (in collaboration with David Bowie, who died in the middle of the run) with an American cast at NYTW, and the hit London production of *View From the Bridge* revived at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway; then in the spring of 2016 he followed up this impressive array with Miller's *The Crucible* at the Walter Kerr Theatre. To be the director with four major productions in this one season, despite or because of being a foreigner, in America is unprecedented. No previous European theatre director who doesn't live in the United States, except perhaps for Zeffirelli and certain other opera directors whose many productions premiered at the Metropolitan Opera, have done the like. The only comparable cases in memory in the theatre are that of Peter Brook, Liviu Ciulei for a short time, and Andre Serban; but then he actually settled in New York, only periodically returning to Romania.^{clv}

His many New York productions have given van Hove a very definite profile on this side of the Atlantic, and the arrival of any new production is instance to a large amount of interest and excitement; a veritable van Hove cult has taken shape over time. With the Tony Award for *View From the Bridge*, there is no longer a question of a small confidential following, but rather of his absorption into the general New York theatre scene. Initial hostility from the critics, which gradually gave way to grudging praise, now most often soars with superlatives. One might devote an entire study to the foremost tastemaker of the middle-brow, principal *Times* critic Ben Brantley's, conversion over time as a paradigm for this mounting acceptance.^{clvi} Along the way there were inevitably malicious pot-shots lobbed from a battalion of detractors who balked at anything but an orthodox approach to classics, and what they deemed ridiculous, blasphemous renderings of sacred cows they're convinced should continue being directed the way they always have been. Lately such critiques have been muted or absent.

The real influence van Hove has had on the American theatre scene would be impossible to calculate at this moment of great flux. What is tantalizing to wonder here is the way his experiences of working with American actors and of undergoing the initial trial by fire from New York theatre critics have left an imprint on his European work.

By and large, for his NYTW productions, van Hove moved ahead with the audacious project of staging American realistic classics in America with his foreigner's touch (O'Neill's *More Stately Mansions*; Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*; Hellman's *The Little Foxes*; Miller's *View From the Bridge* and *The Crucible*). And it was a very much a conscious, calculated project, as is clear in his answer to a Dutch interviewer just before he went off to America to stage his first American classic drama at New York Theatre Workshop with American actors:

And of course it's thrilling to direct right in O'Neill's own lion's den in a manner that

will hopefully be unusual for the Americans. We'll just have to put up a fight against a substantial O'Neill tradition. The plays by the great American writers such as Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill are still always put on with all the bells and whistles in their native productions. It is that realism that we need to show we can break through.

Whether he underestimated the depth of possessive chauvinism that attaches to the classics in the American context is unclear. But a certain amount of defiance and contempt for production tradition figured into the equation that formed his choices, along with the respect and even reverence for these quintessentially American plays themselves, as he asserts in interviews.^{clvii}

Additional works he has done here are the European classics already part of the "canon," Molière's *Misanthrope* and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, which he later mounted back in Amsterdam with Dutch actors, and the world premiere of Susan Sontag's monodrama recounting life with cancer, *Alice in Bed*. He further remounted a Dutch production of Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, but with a New York cast in English.

When van Hove started working with American actors at the New York Theatre Workshop he was confronted by collaborators, who although they came from disparate training academies, like most American actors, share a faith in and a vocabulary from some iteration of the Stanislavsky System. Such actors would be dubious before a director who demands that they shout without having summoned up a precipitating inner prompting to do so. There is some basis in the cliché of the Actor's Studio exponent refusing to do what they're told, but intransigently demanding to know, "What's my motivation?" And even then, they would tend to be loathe to pre-determine the way an emotion would be expressed, or be required to push out an emotion, which in actor's parlance is called "playing the emotion," rather than allowing something to "grow out of imaginary circumstances."

Van Hove has had to bring American actors along into his way of working and his, for them, radical vision for the theatre. And he has certainly had to modify his own methods to get the best work out of them. When Tom Sellar insinuated himself into the NYTW rehearsal hall for *The Misanthrope* in 2007, to investigate how the Flemish director's work process would interface with American theatre culture, he was astonished to report that Ivo van Hove "is a naturalist at heart. What looks like avant-garde revelry turns out to be his extensions of, well, scene work and Molière's text." Using the naturalism-based parlance of American acting studios, he notes that van Hove "invents circumstances but leaves it to each actor to thread them together. Conflict? Observed behavior? Building roles? This is practically Stanislavsky talk – and here in his American studio, van Hove appears wholly comfortable with it." He asks the actors to explore subtext, with the difference that he expects the subtext to turn into explicit, extreme stage business, prompting them to play those hidden drives and impulses out on the level of observable behavior. What a contrast with the French actors in *The Damned* who exulted that Ivo entirely relieved them of subtext and a psychological approach.

In contradiction to Sellar, who seems to find the European director's rehearsal technique not at all alien to American ways, Sophie Okonedo, who played Elizabeth Proctor from

The Crucible sounded put out that “he doesn’t really talk about character. He sets a world.”^{clviii} This information dovetails with van Hove’s fitful insistence that he’s not interested in psychology. An American Method-trained director who doesn’t talk about character first and foremost would be hard to find. Other American actors defend him as one whose approach is in close accord with their Stanislavsky-based training: When working on *The Misanthrope* at NYTW actor Thomas Jay Ryan praised him, saying, “Ivo is a true actors’ director. It’s not the angle I expected. Nothing comes that isn’t from a logical organic impulse.” Bill Camp, another actor in the same production, reports that, “Ivo has an amazing ability to find given circumstances I can’t ignore, using all the elements.”^{clix}

Having dealt with this issue in so many contradictory ways over time, Ivo has apparently evolved a malleable way of dealing with the disparate types of actors he deals with:

Never with me will we have the first ‘table reading’ where the director dissects the lines before they’re rehearsed. Talking about scenes is too intellectual. In life does anyone know why they act in such and such a way? Why would actors know any better? First and foremost situations must be brought to life, the play has to be discovered through acting it. And in its own order. Chronologically. Only the most banal way, you see.... I have no method, since each actor is different. Some need to understand the psychology of the character, and others not. I’m not a guru. On the contrary, I try to adapt needs of each one. If I like to provoke confrontations in rehearsal, I’m also allergic to conflicts. I need harmony when I work.^{clx}

This remark suggests that he’s come to bend to the contours of those he’s working with, wherever that may be, rather than insisting on a given method, which formerly put him in opposition to his performing partners. Still, he’s expressed frustration on occasion, saying “it’s hard for American actors to move from one emotional moment to another without demonstrating the psychological process!”^{clxi} This statement confirms that he prefers actors to jump into emotions on the dime and to push them to their highest intensity, which is in contradiction with the American practice of making space and trusting to emotions to come upon an actor unawares. Still others, notably of the Strasberg school, advocate accessing them through a step-by-step associative process of emotional recall, which may be that technique of “demonstrating the psychological process,” van Hove finds alien.

Still, Van Hove has formed close, highly creative and productive partnerships with such American actors as Elizabeth Marvel, Jenny Bacon, and Joan MacIntosh. In the cases of the former two, they will have had a training at Juillard, NYU, or some other reputable MFA Acting program, but at any rate a Stanislavsky-based one with heavy emphasis on voice and diction production. In the case of MacIntosh, this prominent veteran of Richard Schechner’s Performance Group productions, whose acting in the 1970 *Commune*, which garnered her an Obie, and whose 1975 *Mother Courage* brought her brief cult renown, found a natural artistic ally in van Hove.^{clxii} Her substantial talents, like those so many actors who incubated in the experimental theatre movement of the 60s and 70s, were trained in Grotowski styles, the seething ambiance of alternative theatre where alternatives to the Method were sought. Today many of that generation go sadly

neglected in the naturalistically oriented American establishment, which doesn't know what to do with them. But Ivo rediscovered and was happy to cast Joan MacIntosh in *Alice in Bed*, *More Stately Mansions*, and *The Misanthrope*. His experimental approaches were in total harmony with those she brings from years of Off-Off Broadway avant-garde experiences. In a sense, she is his ideal actor.

Sometimes, as in the NYTW production of *Hedda Gabler*, American actors have attempted to comply with the van Hoveism of empty yelling, detached from impulse, and the result is every bit as awful as it is when Dutch actors do it. We have seen his impatience with American actors' tendency to "show their emotional process," and he seems to have insisted that they simply come across with whatever emotion he deems appropriate. In a sense, the *Hedda Gabler* cast was *too* submissive and eager to please. But, in general, the collision of European director and American actors has ultimately enriched both. As critic Linda Winer remarked: "Say this for van Hove: He certainly inspires good actors to go to the brink for him."^{clxiii} Over time the director gained in adeptness at working organically, and the American actors managed better to fuse their own organic training with conceptual directing. In turn, it is highly likely that van Hove's interaction with most American actors he's dealt with taught him something about new ways to work with his Flemish, Dutch, and German interpretive partners. It may very well be that his American adventure was *determinant* on his maturation and synthesis of European strengths with American strengths. He imported something important and then exported something back, the alchemy of that interchange which brought him to maturity.

As for his London experience, apart from an obvious effort to get the English actors to speak an acceptable version of Brooklynese, he stripped the play of all American signifiers.

There are no props, but that was not my original intention. I had all the props ready next door – a roomful- and I said, 'Whenever we need something, we'll bring it out.' We ended up with two props: a cigar and a chair.^{clxiv}

Gone were the checked tablecloths and fire escapes visible through windows. Gone the faded wallpaper, brooms and sheets being folded. Devoid of the usual physical life of this naturalistic mainstay, what remained for the actors was the language and dramatic tensions to work with on a stage space analogous to the Globe. In rendering the play Shakespearean, Ivo played to the British actors' strongest suit. While it may have looked experimental, it had actually become classical in a way they've been trained to perform. This meeting of alien minds in a common comfort zone may partially account for this production's notable success.

The Aboutness/Abstraction Continuum

"I probably have a great hunger to mean something."

Ivo van Hove^{clxv}

Ivo, despite the primacy of the visual excitement in his theatre that so many point to and applaud, denies that he makes formal choices for their own sake. “Now I don’t think I’m an aesthete at all. To me it’s besides the point how beautiful something looks. An image only starts to be beautiful on account of the emotional charge underlying it.”^{clxvi} Tom Sellars, who saw Ivo in action in rehearsal finds ample justification for thinking he is a formalist. Then in the same article he flips to assert rather that, “he is a naturalist at heart,”^{clxvii} which in the context seems to mean that Ivo can adjust to the contours of a Stanislavskian rehearsal process if necessary. Sellars’ manifest contradiction is understandable, for the point remains unsettled. Just where on the continuum of greater or lesser “aboutness” Ivo sits remains an intriguing question. When bringing social or political issues to the fore, as he appears to be doing when he inserts cinema montages of various historical cataclysms into such live productions as *Teorema* and *Children of the Sun*, for example, the shift of medium and the vividness of the imagery of public turmoil, in and of itself, has impact. But what subject matter and notion of that can be construed from them is painted with the broadest of brushstrokes. Images of totalitarianism and disaster are presented without discrimination between types of dictatorship or even between natural and political cataclysms. They are essentially images of a world that is exploding, where people are on the move in patterns of irrational emergency, and of hordes at the mercy of leaders and events out of their own control. Closer identification of issues and hotspots is entirely eluded.

On the other hand, he resists the label of formalism.

We’re not trying to impose a style, like Bob Wilson, Peter Sellars, or Christoph Marthaler, who put on purely visual or purely conceptual shows, but rather to go to the extreme limit with a text, with all the means at our disposal, and without ever illustrating the text or situating it in a realistic world.^{clxviii}

On the other hand, he avowedly doesn’t want to create a theatre that takes certain kinds of political stands either, and has explicitly stated as much:

‘That’s ... my problem with the German theatre: they always want theatre productions to be political, whereas I find that the theatre ought to be subversive and not political.’ Subversiveness is that which injects disturbance into one’s thoughts, which triggers upsets and rejects horizons that are parachuted in ahead of time.^{clxix}

And even more categorically:

Theatre for me is not the stuff of dogma, but of imagination. Imagining – that for me is the essence of theatre. As when I dream and fantasize at night. It gets my juices flowing. Theatre as an art form may also bring changes in its wake to society, but not in a direct way. If it’s that you really want to pursue, then you’d do better to go into politics.^{clxx}

But in spite of himself, he has slipped slowly but surely into a theatre others, at least, do characterize as political. Political, though surely not polemical or propagandistic. The distinction is important to make. Indeed he uses and understands the concept of the “political” in a loose and idiosyncratic way. For example, referring to a series of plays he

designated under an umbrella term of a “marriage cycle,” he says,

This marriage cycle has a political character. And in that I am referring to politics in the Greek sense of the word, namely all that deals with society. We live in a time of great changes, there are great pressures, the world is practically consumed by fire. In such a period it behooves me to take a good hard look at people. Marriage is a special bond: it's the smallest unit in which treaties are signed, in which eternal faithfulness is sworn, and in which tiny wars take place.^{clxxi}

In this statement he starts by practically describing that macrocosm from his film montages: a world in turmoil and collapse, but a kind of collapse bereft of definition or causes or blame. From there he leaps to the smallest common denominator of society, the married couple, to find an observable conflict to help him understand the universal ones.

By his own admission van Hove is ‘isn’t a director who’s going to storm the barricades with a clenched fist.’ He is furthermore someone who, as in *The Roman Tragedies*, addresses political matters coolly. Still, with the first production as artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam six years ago he issued a stern warning against religious struggles and civil wars. It was perhaps too prettily gotten up so that attention got diverted, but Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris* in Hafid Bouazza’s adaptation wasn’t properly appreciated. Maybe it arrived too early. In 2001 a whole slew of civil wars, terrorist attacks and political assassinations with religious pretexts were still only on the horizon.^{clxxii}

Luk Van den Dries gets at van Hove’s method of integrating social issues while skirting the “political,” in his comparison of two van Hove’s middle-period productions, Edward Bond’s *Saved* and O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*:

It is also and above all in their theatrical approach that the two plays share common ground. In both cases the dramaturgy is not based on any historical-sociological foundation for the dramatic action (strict Protestantism in *Desire*, social decline in *Saved*). There is therefore no portrait of an historical period, but in the theatricalizing process, a search is pursued for emotional constants through which the conflicts retain a relevance for our own epoch. This is expressed as much in the use of language and costuming as the scenic design.^{clxxiii}

But as the world has since become more polarized, as Ivo has himself observed in public pronouncements, with those in the middle tending to gravitate towards more extreme partisan positions in pretty much every country where van Hove directs, the pressure is on him to take stands on public occasions, to identify himself as an artist thoroughly in touch with the important issues of his time, and to embed political “messages” in his shows. At the same time, he has no natural inclination to do so, and his position as director of the largest institutional theatre company in the Netherlands dictates that he maintain a non-committal attitude toward most topical issues, or else run the risk of alienating some faction of his potential audience. Indeed, following his admission that his shows are autobiographical documents, even a seemingly political production like *Roman Tragedies*, in a sense, is boiled down to a highly personal inner debate on what

makes an effective leader:

It's about people who grant that society is feasible, but who are compelled to arrive at a consensus with each other. Coriolanus is therefore much too gruff. He's totally inflexible. And that's why he founders. At the opposite extreme is Octavius (who later becomes Emperor Augustus), here acted by a woman, Hadewych Minis. She heads the empire as though it was a big company. She focuses on business plans and has no friends. She has only coworkers who carry out her decisions. She brings up the rear, but that's not because I chose that for her, I have a great deal of empathy for her. I head a company myself. I'm a manager myself. I know how decisions come to fruition.^{clxxiv}

When questioned about *The Damned* on this issue, he responded: "For me, Visconti hasn't made a film about Nazism, but the potential overturning of values in all society. He shows how the world can become barbarous in the name of simple economic and financial interests." He goes on to recount the hero's trajectory, summing up with:

He will have learned nothing from existence, one in which, capable of every excess under the sun, he winds up with only his violence on for all the world to see. A jihadist? A militant of the extreme right? *The Damned*, which occurs in the years 1933-1934, for me contains a troubling topicality here in Europe where everything might be overturned from one day to the next.^{clxxv}

In this telling analysis, which really expresses the major focus he intends for the show, van Hove undoes the particular time and place depicted (Nazi Germany) as well as the particular political movement (Nazism), to focus on universal values that are lost when material interests dominate. This essentially places all emphasis on the meta-historical pattern of societies in dislocation. These universal social issues and patterns are then available to the audience, if they wish, to connect the dots to their own time and context. Moslem terrorism or the Extreme Right are among the generic dangers the world faces. Guantanamo is dreadful. The War in Iraq was wrong. The European Community is in crisis. We live in a multi-cultural society, and immigration is a major concern. Chaos could come about. These are not terribly debatable or daring points to make. Sides aren't taken, and the sides that are available are blurrily depicted. But neither does his failure to take sides indict van Hove; it merely reveals where he wants his theatre to stand on the "aboutness" continuum.

Although van Hove has articulated the distinction he feels is key as that between the subversive over the political, in the precise sense by which he defines both, in recent years he has drifted toward – let us call it as he does – the sociological, or even more broadly – the ethical. As one journalist would have it, van Hove's on, "an embarkation into current events, a diffuse sociology of the everyday."^{clxxvi} Indeed, in many cases, sociological interests have to a certain extent replaced his earlier center of gravity.

I think that my work with Toneelgroep Amsterdam has become much more 'societal.' A lot more focus on confronting important themes of the day, such as migration: *Rocco and His Brothers* for example is about that. In the *Antonioni Project*, sure there's a lot about love stories, but they also have a very hard time standing their ground against a forward-moving, changing, urban world. At this point in time I'm going to find that side of things

a lot more compelling. Thus, as you take a look backwards you can easily see that there's been a vast array of themes. You don't live isolated from the world. When two airplanes fly into a tower then you can't just stay off in your own world, unless you withdraw way deep down inside your own world. I think that's totally fine too, but for me personally, I felt the need to develop an exact opposite way of relating to it.^{clxxvii}

To examine the various pronouncements Ivo has made on this subject is to reveal what seem to be a tissue of contradictions. While he refused the label of "aesthete," in 2009 he was contemporaneously complaining that audiences and critics were demanding and expecting too much "aboutness." That is also the year he claimed that his work with TGA had become much more "societally focused." In the press release for his recent production of *The Damned* in France, for which he is probably not directly responsible, the blaring squib proclaimed it as nothing more nor less than "political theatre."^{clxxviii}

In 2008 he also uncharacteristically came out with a detailed written polemic on the role of the artist in society, and the place of politics in theatrical art. It appears he was moved, on the occasion of a ceremony for bestowing an important theatrical prize, to mount the bully pulpit, as the Dutch government had started laying down conditions to artists for what the content of their work must be.

The Dutch political scene ought not to get mixed up with the artistic paths that artists take. There is 'a persistent tendency' in the Netherlands to think that political art will lead to a better society. [...] Politics has to concern itself with order, and artists have to concern themselves with chaos. Politicians nibble away at the dividing line between chaos and order. [...] Art gets its hide skinned and tanned, like a wild animal that's got to be tamed. But art follows its own nature and its own laws, like a wild beast that can't be tamed. Art that matters is wild like a tiger. When I go to a theatre I want to become immersed in chaos. The artist needs to break free from reality.^{clxxix}

Events which he then references, such as the assassination of Theo van Gogh, and the rise of the Extreme Right, which advocated cuts in arts funding, seemed to be exerting pressure on him to get more involved, *engagé*, to take a stand. Certain play choices, such as *Angels in America*, *Children of the Sun*, *Antigone*, *Mary Stuart*, *The Crucible*, and so forth, may be seen to indicate a movement in this direction. In this statement which borders on a condemnation of the Far Right, he referenced Harold Pinter, who in his last years became the quintessence of the pure artist speaking out when he, for example, put his prestige on the line for social issues such as the War in Iraq. Ivo, however, does not put his own name on the line with the same categoricalness as the British playwright.

Ivo's embrace of Shakespeare's history plays, first with the three-play cycle *Roman Tragedies*, and next with a second three-play cycle, *Kings of War* is the most revealing signal that he wants to delve politics. But there is a far cry from presenting images of political struggles, personalities, and patterns, which is what we see these shows doing, and propagandizing for one side or another, which they decidedly do not. As Randy Gener describes the electrifying experience of spectating *Roman Tragedies*,

The Dutch actors pulled no punches in their raucous portrayals of anchormen, senators, generals, cameramen, businessmen and so forth. The razor-sharp exchanges, petty

jealousies, backroom politics and blatant hypocrisies seemed not just incredibly real but were also hugely magnified by the cameras and TV screens scattered around me. In this simulacrum, there were no intermissions, but there was an explicit body count. Every so often I was slapped back to my senses when footage of American soldiers in Iraq was shown or a soldier was killed in the play; his body was laid on a slab and projected onto a large screen for all of us to contemplate. I wondered: Can a show such as this be produced or presented on American stages?

Indeed, it later was presented at BAM, and while the large, typically progressive audiences were electrified, they certainly manifested no sense of being offended by the presumably critical references to the War in Iraq. Few in America today uphold the wisdom of launching into that conflagration. Strangely the *NY Times* sent no critic. We thus have no particular journalistic record or response to answer Gener's question. But I would venture to say, having seen it at BAM, that had it gotten some press or gone on tour through the country, many would have found it galvanizing, few controversial for its political content.

Compellingly, *The Roman Tragedies* used 17 actors (48 participants in all, counting the crew) to stage declarations of war and public debates as global media events that unfolded in our living rooms. The dramatic-installation concept made so much sense that I, as a powerless spectator-citizen both in the world of theatre and in the world of the play, felt deeply implicated in the media's illusion of closeness and truthfulness, especially in relationship to the centers of so-called democratic government and corporate strength.^{clxxx}

Gener describes an event that makes world events feel immediate in such a way that he felt his citizenship of the world more keenly and his habitual sense of powerlessness challenged. Still, it is not clear that this confrontation could imply any equivalency with specific events of the day. A Dutch critic, however, does confide that, as watching, "Now and then I get a shock to be reminded of politicians such as Fortuyn, Melkert, Bos, Balkenende and Wilders," all controversial figures in the Dutch political landscape.^{clxxxi} But for international audiences, the overall, universal pattern is what gets driven home.

Van Hove opens a new production of *The Roman Tragedies* this month at the Barbican Center in London. This Shakespeare production crystallizes and harmonizes, more than any classic a-la-Hove I've seen in the U.S. or in Europe, the twin forces of visual excess and textual fidelity that animate his multidisciplinary theatre – whose capitalist/realist basis blows both hot and cold. On the stage in Vienna, a large red ticker flickered once again to scroll the latest news from the corrupt builders of the modern-day Roman Empire. This, the ticker proclaimed, was the amount of time left before the next murder starts: "One minute until the death of Julius Caesar."^{clxxxii}

In a show like *Con Amore* van Hove, at one end of the "aboutness continuum," may play use a narrative about a Roman dictator, in this case Nero, as with any other abstract, formal element, that has little or no reference to political events of our day. In *Othello* he may exploit the political leader as a Colin Powell figure, and emphasize the racist attacks to which he could be subject, thus giving a famous love tragedy a resonance of present-day issues. Watching *Julius Caesar*, Randy Gener reports feeling barraged under all the

bells and whistles of political life. But since there is no easy equivalency between the depiction of Shakespeare's characters and specific figures on the world stage today, apart from those clips from the Iraq War, one would be hard put to take away a "message," let alone a specifically polemical message. When van Hove himself asserts some connection between real life figures and events, even that must be taken with a grain of salt. As for example, when van Hove explains his most recent mash up of Shakespeare history plays, *Kings of War*, which:

... will be about leadership. These are themes we still have to deal with. You see it with Obama. He started so promisingly, but now even the most Democratic figures say they are disappointed. What happened? What kind of leaders do we want? Shakespeare wrote about all these things.^{clxxxiii}

'For the production of *Edward II* at the Schaubühne we were influenced by Giorgio Agamben and his reflections on the exceptional state. I thought of the camp at Guantánamo where extreme torture was considered normal by the American government, a form of barbarism that they'd never have accepted from any other nation in the world. So boom, our *Edward II* takes place in a prison.' [...] Yes, the omnipresence of finance in our lives and on our minds, cupidity vaunted as a universal value, led him to take on *The Miser*.^{clxxxiv}

Contemporary public figures and events may have served as inspiration, and an audience member might free-associate from the production to them, but ultimately that is not really what is being foregrounded in these shows after all.

Despite his allergy against being identified as an "aesthete," his and Jan's theatre works endlessly with images. He wouldn't want to think that they are created for their own sake rather than to illuminate some aspect of the text, and that is generally true. That these images have meaning, if not articulatable sound-bite messages, is undeniable; they are not beauty for beauty's sake. I would conclude that van Hove uses politics the way he uses love, as subjects for theatrical image-making. This doesn't make him into what he would term an aesthete, as these are not pictures devoid of content or relations of pure form, as certain shows by Robert Wilson or Richard Foreman have tended to be. Ivo shows us all the roles in the political process – the leaders, the toadies, media personnel, the masses, the leaders' spouses – their explosive interactions, and how all of society gets swept up in broad, roiling waves of historical events. His shows give instance to discussions and debates, but he himself, the *auteur* who has unleashed all this energy, is not taking sides either through the elements that comprise the show or when commenting on his work.

Language and its Double

"In van Hove's hands, the words of writers like Shakespeare and Ibsen sound like people who are alive today."

Marion Florusse^{clxxxv}

Certain aspects concerning the spoken diction in the shows van Hove directs in Dutch may be of only subliminal interest to English speakers who are focused on the super-title translations. And yet, these issues make a huge difference in the texture and emotional life of the theatre-going experience of his Dutch-language productions. Ivo was born in Flanders, where Dutch is an official language, but in many homes and small communities, multiple local Flemish dialects dating back to the Middle Ages and beyond are the vulgate. These dialects, while being part of the same general language, contain variants of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and especially radically different pronunciations. For general usage a sanitized and standardized form of Dutch called “*Algemeen Nederlands*” (A. N.) is resorted to, but even there Flemish-sounding official Dutch is different, especially in certain speech sounds, than the Dutch-sounding dialect to the north. These differences are accidents of history.

In a show like *Desire Under the Elms*, van Hove and his Flemish adaptor Arne Sierens played with the peasant characters speaking local Flemish-sounding variants, which added to the pleasure of the experience for some, myself included. Some Belgian critics claimed to be perplexed by or scornful of these attempts, particularly as some of the Dutch actors in the show apparently weren’t especially skilled at reproducing convincing Flemish dialect. *Splendid’s*, like *Desire Under the Elms*, is an adaptation done by Arne Sierens, and it is hard to resist the impression – from the point of view of diction, accents, and language – that it is among the most interesting work in Ivo’s career. The enormous commitment to interesting, localized speech gives these shows a special added dimension. It may be that “proper” diction occasionally suffers, but the earthy Flemish flavor contributes to liberate a primal voice issuing from an elemental core, not to mention abetting the verisimilar depiction of Flemish farmers. In both these productions, in consequence, the performers drew startlingly close to the Artaudian ideal of a performer who gets spiritually immolated during the performance, with which that the Flemish dialect sound is integrally linked.^{clxxxvi}

However, since assuming control over Toneelgroep Amsterdam in Holland’s cultural capital, even though an occasional Flemish actor is employed there, van Hove has perforce hewed to extremely Dutch-sounding official Dutch – the rough equivalent of the King’s English spoken at the RSC. The dialogue is generally well and clearly spoken, but can lack much character or spice in itself. Clarity triumphs over grit, except in an Artaud-influenced show like *Massacre at Paris*, his very first with TGA, where the actors did more vocal experimentation. In most recent productions, as van Hove has targeted an ever more general audience, the spoken language has become more homogenized.

As one who proclaims himself a “text director,” van Hove does not only mean that he interprets other writers’ texts, but that he loves language for its own sake and is interested in mining it for its inherent value. This may account in part for his tolerance or proclivity for playwrights who indulge in extremely long monologues, notably O’Neill, Charles Mee, Schiller, Büchner (at least the Büchner of *Danton’s Death*), Genet, Camus, Ayn Rand, and Molière. While modern audiences have less tolerance for long rhetorical passages and long evenings in the theatre, van Hove, again going against the grain, gravitates to both.

In countless cases though, van Hove, homing back to his roots in pure theatre, puts normal speech and dialogue on a far-back burner. Whether we see this strong tropism as Artaudian or post-dramatic, van Hove “production texts” typically veer away from the established script for lengthy spates of non-verbal action, which often have a ritualistic facet. Hans-Thies Lehmann expounds on the type of non-Aristotelian theatre which van Hove, in these many cases, foregrounds:

The aesthetic function in any kind of *ceremony*, the aesthetically ‘isolating’ moment inherent to all *festivity*. It is evident that there is always a dimension of the ceremonial in the practice of theatre. It is inherent to theatre as a social event – derived from its religious and cultic roots that mostly disappeared from consciousness. Postdramatic theatre, however, liberates the formal, ostentatious moment of ceremony from its sole function of enhancing attention and valorized it *for its own sake*, as an aesthetic quality detached from all religious and cultic reference. Post-dramatic theatre is the replacement of dramatic action with ceremony, with which dramatic-cultic action was once, in its beginnings inseparably united.^{chxxxvii}

Van Hove lays great emphasis on performance art as having had a determining influence on his work, especially Marina Abramovic’s. We see examples of entire shows that function ceremonially to the detriment of normal dramatic narrative, such as *Splendid’s*. Elsewhere in his preponderantly linear-sequential text-based shows, such as *The Miser* or *Taming of the Shrew*, the ceremonial element may also be reverted to during for extended segments. These could include choreographed or very aleatory dance; it could be long passages of sexual interaction without words; it could be a segment of physical violence; or it could simply be a charged silence. These segments are very seldom indicated by the authors in stage directions, and so represent taking a tremendous directorial liberty, one generally away from naturalism, but toward some inner truth and certainly in quest of immediate-feeling theatrical presence. In this sense, van Hove is an exponent of live theatre’s *many* available languages and codes.

When Does a Signature Become a Tic?

“Fixation is at the heart of art, fixation as stasis and fixation as obsession.”

Camille Paglia^{chxxxviii}

If one had attended enough Peter Brook productions over the course of decades, one would become inured to seeing gigantic Persian carpets hanging upstage by way of cycloramas. They were colorful, tasteful, and minimal. They exuded a suggestion of the East, and of the Gurdjieffian brand of spirituality that was secreted throughout all of Brook’s productions. In Richard Foreman’s productions, from the mid-70s onward, there have been the famous series of horizontal wires hanging across the proscenium, and many other artifacts such as the blinding lights shone in the audience’s eyes and the mellow voice of the omniscient narrator insinuating itself over the loudspeakers. These are just some examples of directorial signatures. In the above two cases, they are so ubiquitous and compulsive they might even be called directorial tics.

Through all the stylistic diversity that runs through van Hove's career, some curious items on the scenic plane repeatedly recur, including three fetish objects: pianos, TV monitors, and showers. In *Carmen*, *The Three Sisters*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Ludwig*, and most recently *The Hidden Force* (*De Stille Kracht*), where a grand piano emblemizes all Western culture in a colonial context. Grand pianos, uprights, and spinets keep turning up. Often, they are indicated in the stage directions of the original script. Other times, they are added by van Hove and make integral sense to the play's action, whereas in still others they are plunked down ... just because. In countless productions, also, including *Teorema*, *Children of the Sun*, *Kings of War*, *Cries and Whispers*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, apart from the video monitors that are used as mixed media, there are also functional monitors and laptops woven into the characters' stage lives. They tend to stay tuned on as background noise and image beneath the stage action, ignored or watched as the case may be. No one thinks to turn them off. They are as integral, as casually and universally accepted in the image of today's world van Hove is weaving, as a heartbeat. Indeed, they are often used to mark the changing tempo for the entire production. Perhaps in the modern world, this ubiquity suggests, where in the theatres of antiquity, a holy shrine would be placed front and center, the monitors and laptops on van Hove's stages are the sanctified repository for contemporary civilization's pulse.

Starkly bare-boned, open showers with real running water, too, pop up in a large number of van Hove productions: *Othello*, *Con Amore*, *Rocco and His Brothers*, and *Edward II*. If one were to add in other tropes of water, including water falls, pools, monsoons, real and imaginary, and so on, they would embrace *Ludwig*, *Persona*, *The Antonioni Project*, and the very recent Louis Couperus adaptation of the novel *The Hidden Force*. Of course, just having water or any other natural element, such as fire and sand (which he also has had at times) onstage is sensational in and of itself. The naturalistic habit teaches us that the water onstage will be imaginary. It is an aleatory, seemingly uncontrollable element that is also a technical challenge to introduce, and therefore a treat.

In a van Hove show, a shower or bath has an erotic dimension as well. In every case where it's used, there is a fantasy suggestion of possible illicit relations, more often the queer trope of sweaty gym-exercised bodies reveling in the sensual rush of water in the upturned face. But occasionally women find themselves under the spigots as well – or splashing in tubs (cf. *Streetcar*). Water also has an oneiric power, as used in *Ludwig* and *Persona*, where its presence is the keynote for magic realist and surreal ambiances. Water unleashes the imagination and the unconscious mind. If we then extend the imagery to include all liquid, the list expands appreciably: The paint that gets splattered in *Cries and Whispers*, the blood that comes showering down (a different kind of shower) in *View From the Bridge*, and the white ooze that engulfs the stage floor in *Lazarus*, each incarnates a different kind of invasion from deep within the psychic lives of the plays' characters.

In certain aspects of performing too, vocal and physical tendencies can morph into

personal tics. There is no question but that van Hove has always wanted his shows to work with extremities, including extremities of emotional expression. And without the language and methods of Stanislavsky-based acting in his tool-kit, he initially prompted the actors in his charge to push and push further, which has often led to a cul de sac of unremitting yelling. As remarked above, yelling, at times effective and at others arbitrary, has often become a tic of his productions.

Another sign for extreme emotions is the van Hove version of stage combat, generally taking the form of a shower of open-handed stage slaps incontinently raining down on a character's head as he shields himself from actual pain. This overused technique is another default stand-in for extreme passion to be used at a moment of crisis in conflictual scenes. The slap-fest too sometimes falls flat when it is unwarranted emotionally.^{elxxxix} In any case, it has become a theatre critic's mantra and cliché of Ivo's work that he indulges every opportunity for sex and violence. There is a kernel of truth in this supposition. A fascination with violence led him to direct David Storey's one act play *Saved* about a bunch of hoods who kill an infant in a baby carriage. In its time when it first opened in England and then America in 1965 it was initially censored and gained notoriety for crossing an unprecedented line into a brand of gratuitous violence, which had heretofore been off limits. The shock it gives was undiluted when Ivo revived it, as very few director have since its inception, in Holland in the 2000s.

A third piece of theatre business that is ultimately a tic or fallback is for one character to summon up a gob of saliva and let it drop onto another's face. As an expression or extrusion of consummate contempt it does not fail to get a rise out of the audience – a squirm of disgust and discomfort – that might qualify as Artaudian. Eilert Lovborg opens a can of beer, drinks some, and pours the rest over Hedda's head. Then forcing her to the ground, he spits the remainder it in her face. It is thus made unmistakably clear that the sex he invites her to share is debasing S&M, with him in the sado role. Next he dribbles sputum onto her face from above. This tactic of vileness has been seen in other van Hove shows. In *Desire Under the Elms*, in what passes for a courtship tactic back on the farm, the father spews food halfway across the stage at the woman he covets. At the climax of a fight with this new wife for dominance, the triumphant husband forms a giant clod of spit and lets gravity bring it humiliatingly to her face below him. For a spectator who only witnesses this business in one van Hove show, it might be startling. But when it has been seen in X number of productions, and is both predictable *and* disgusting, the novelty gives way to a certain malaise.

Imitation is the Highest Form of Flattery

One barometer of an artist's impact is the quantity and quality of their imitators. I had the pleasure of seeing a recent production of *The Oresteia* at the famed Almeida Theatre in Islington, northern London, by Robert Icke. This was not a translation, but a reworking of Aeschylus's trilogy with the plot of Euripedes' *Iphigenia in Aulis* added as prefix. This powerful production, its many virtues notwithstanding, bore a striking resemblance to a van Hove. A catalogue of many of its features, as we will see, could be

describing any number of van Hove shows: The physical space, minimal, but divided by several horizontal Plexiglas panels that are transparent and opaque by turns, with a ritual bath upstage; the occasional use of a live camera feed to magnify the actors' faces even as we watch the live versions simultaneously; the costumes, simple, spare business suits, jeans and tee shirts for the men, sober dark-colored, clean-lined pant-suits for the women; an acting style that is initially terse, understated and direct, at the height of the dramatic arc as though drilled out of the actors's guts and souls in howls, spasms, and grunts; a polished aesthetic surface initially, with a towering tempest, ultimately, unleashed; a radical reduction of props and set pieces into a small essential assortment with a single, unadorned table serving multiple purposes, both quotidian and ceremonial, the sole furniture in a domestic setting; a political motif of war and social power conjoined with a single family's most intimate dynamics, are hallmarks of Ivo van Hove. If one were to examine van Hove's production of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, another attempt to modernize Aeschylus's same classic work, one could easily draw a strong comparison between the abject, involuted performance of Eelco Smits who plays Orin, the modern counterpart for Orestes in van Hove's, and that of Luke Thompson who plays Orestes in Icke's.

This observation is in no sense an attempt to diminish Robert Icke's achievement. *The Oresteia* stands on its own as a remarkable and powerful artistic achievement. There are several scenes which imprinted themselves indelibly on my memory, so great was their dramatic power – notably that where Agamemnon administers poison to his young daughter, Iphigenia. The final image of Orestes sitting downstage, a voyeur staring into a tableau of his formerly united and stable family from the past, as the digital clock that marks the seconds until his death spews away above the stage, is unnerving and universal, reflecting the larger audience back to itself, forcing us all into Orestes's position. While it smacks of van Hove, and is an iteration of a technique we have seen in *The Roman Tragedies* for example, it is also all *echt* Icke. There will inevitably be more imitators of van Hove in the times to come, a sign of his prominence in our theatres.

More Stately Warhorses

“When the theater is limited to the socially possible, it is confined by the same forces which limit society.”

Joseph Chaikin^{exc}

Ivo van Hove belongs to the generation of young Flemish directors who came into their own through the dismantling of the calcified repertory system that had dominated Flanders's major urban theatres since before the Second World War. Discarding a civil-service minded troop doing a standard repertoire that had congealed somewhere in between Feydeau and Brecht, the state theatres of Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent then dove willy-nilly into radical experiments. Luk Perceval, Guy Cassiers, Johan Simons, and later Jan Goossens were among the avant-garde radicals who replaced the former artistic directors with their bold new models for institutional, large-scale theatre.

Then in 1990, van Hove was invited to Holland, which had undergone its own restructuring even earlier, and established himself as a radical *within* the context of a traditional repertory company in Eindhoven, Zuidelijk Toneel. Since then he has been practicing a balancing act between a traditional approach and pursuing his career as an iconoclast, but all within the context of firmly established state theatres. A certain number of van Hove's productions remind us that he is the director of a major European resident company which must keep pace with his counterparts in various English, French, and German capitals, where they are all checking out each others' repertoire choices. These realities have figured in to his work even before he assumed leadership of Zuidelijk Toneel, when, from his platform as an iconoclastic outsider, he was "auditioning" for such an administrative post with such large-scale plays from the western repertory as *Caligula* and *Macbeth*.

In a recent interview we find Ivo customarily asserting his autonomy of choice and personal volition for all he does artistically: "Nobody, come what may, can buy me or impose anything on me: I'm only capable of doing what I want to do." And in the same interview, he also confided: "I like to be included, not excluded."^{xcxi} Juxtaposing these two dissonant statements may reveal a great deal about where van Hove stands in his present career juncture, and it is perhaps through this Janus-lense that we should consider it.

Without suggesting that he has ever selected plays that disinterested him entirely, it feels at times that he has staged plays simply to show that he is up to the challenge of a full range of prominent plays from theatre history. So we see him two years ago undertaking a perfectly presentable *Mary Stuart* by Schiller, that showcase opportunity for two diva actresses to unleash their personal pyrotechnics. It did not, however, exceed in inspiration, innovation, or stirring performances the 2009 revival on Broadway with Harriet Walter and Janet McTeer. It wasn't his strongest suit, nor that of his actresses, all of whom put in workmanlike turns, but no more.

So, also, did he do *The Russians* several seasons back. Merely pairing and interweaving two massive plays, *Ivanov* and *Platonov*, setting them on the roof of a former factory-cum-loft building, and throwing in a few shots of flashy visual technology didn't disguise the sense that Chekhov was being undertaken more out of obligation than personal bent. We have noted that van Hove creates theatre by way of "writing in a personal diary." When he violates this principle of the personal, instead selecting a show from some professional imperative, the work tends to suffer.^{xcxii} The heart wasn't in it. The same holds for the Goldoni offering, based on the *Villegiatura Trilogy – Summer Trilogy* – where, despite the modern-seeming scenic space and costuming together with some post-modern casting, the traditional laws for playing farce comedy were laid on thick: the actors going for loud monotone line readings, closing in all pauses, topping each other's intensity, and starting higher than the one before. There is a lot of arbitrary throwing each other on the ground, but it didn't add up to great hilarity. Still, Goldoni is one of those standard playwrights a municipal theatre is obliged to put on the bill now and then.

Gorky's *Children of the Sun* also feels like an awkward fit. On the printed page it's an

unabashedly, early twentieth century naturalistic warm comedy/drama play of personalities with a serious social theme embedded, a surprising choice all the way around. Again, van Hove does certain things that prove that he's up to the entire play repertoire expected of, in Ivo's own words, "the official theatre." It also proves that his actors can handle playing eccentric and sharply defined characters, in the Stanislavski tradition, and secondarily a specifically Dutch naturalistic tradition that was represented by the playwright Herman Heijermans. Apart from denaturing and post-modernizing the set and, again, injecting certain technical pyrotechnics toward the end, this production added nothing new to Ivo's glory.

Even the much vaunted *Angels in America*, where Ivo's main innovation was to remove the instant classic's trademark gimmick, the oversize angel, missed the mark. Held in greater reverence than any American play written in the past twenty-five years, this one has made it into the canon of classics in the United States, esteemed on a par with *Death of a Salesman* and *The Glass Menagerie*. It is frequently anthologized and a staple of university theatre departments, its shocking aspects having accrued a patina of tameness, even honor, and been steadily digested into the ambient culture of political correctness. But despite the obvious opportunities for bravura acting it offers, Tony Kushner's script doesn't leave much room for directorial invention; most of that is pre-fabricated into the play's written structure. Any chance for Ivo to positively transform the play was taken off the director's plate by the imaginative playwright from the first.

Ivo's rendition was a large, portentous show, evoking an epic scale but weighting it with a bric-a-brac of discordant acting styles, the formerly daring gay content notwithstanding. Some actors were able to evoke the pathos of the dawn of the Era of AIDS, and others less so. Marieke Heebink, had the unfair burden of representing New York icons like a local Bronx rabbi and Ethel Rosenberg, characters New Yorkers of a certain generation harbor beneath their own epidermis like household gods. She was also assigned to play the uptight Mormon mother, which was the only character whose vibe corresponded to her own Calvinist Dutch flavor. As for the two Jewish characters, rather than making them recognizable or believable, she opted to portray each of them with a stripped down Brechtian *gestus*, an abstracted and distanced broad stroke of presentational panache. Thus for Ethel Rosenberg, she strode across the stage with one arm bent straight up in a rictus, legs stiffened, and staring out directly at the audience, announcing rather than saying her lines.^{exciii} How can a New York audience, which fully expects Ethel Rosenberg to resemble nothing other than a familiar *kneidel*, an ethnic babushka who could be your own grandmother, accept such a rendition? Even when playing the Mormon mother, Hanna Walter, for which she was best suited, her approach was to strike a single unchanging tone and stance and hew to it without variation. One wonders why van Hove laid all these roles on this one actress when he has a large stable of actresses to draw on. Perhaps some were retained back in Amsterdam to keep the repertoire going. But the great problem with this show was that, although there were powerful performances from Hans Kesting as Roy Cohn and Eelco Smits as Prior, the cast as a whole didn't cohere into a unified ensemble, which is self-contradictory for an established repertory company.

In the German version of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* none of the actors played much of a character at all, overlooking the magnificent histrionic opportunities to reveal complexities and quirks. They came off, then, as an unremarkable, generalized European family. So much of the potential delight of the play is contained in its fascinating character studies, juxtaposing extreme ends of the ludicrous with the noble. This includes the pompous pluming of the ego on display by the aging ham-actor Tyrone, to which O'Neill lends a comic dimension, that here was pretty much ignored or left out. Everyone just spoke to each other reasonably.

We see a similar approach also in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. The set is a spare, square of sand in the midst of which the actors strike a stance and declaim their monologues for the six or so hours of playing time. While this approach is unquestionably descended from Peter Brook's concept of the Empty Space, it should be remembered that Brook's purpose in clearing out the inessentials was to take theatre back to its primal roots. With epic shows like *The Mahabharata* a wide and deep space was defined only by a river running laterally across it, so that fresh, inspired acting and images might emerge from the clean sweep. This technique of late van Hove is more like neo-classicism in its austerity and thorough unity of character impersonation and tone, a form of what theoretician, Peter Szondi, has called "absolute drama." It is a reversion to a theatrical experience the critic:

...characterize[s] by the following: the dominance of dialogue and interpersonal communication; the exclusion of anything external to the dramatic world (including the dramatist and the spectators, who are condemned to silent observation); the unfolding of time as a linear sequence in the present; and the adherence to the three unities of time, place, and action.^{cxci}

Plenty of directors can do that. Ivo looks like he is treading water when he does, and it may ultimately come under the law of diminishing returns. Another issue is his artistic home. When directing in the Netherlands, van Hove has a traditional repertory company of actors contracted for the season to work with, and has had for many years.^{cxv} Most stay under the TGA roof for decades, although there is a continuous natural process of light attrition and new arrivals.^{cxvi} The obvious upsides of the traditional European repertory system where a consistent stable of actors is retained – that they cohere into a stylistic ensemble, that their steady salaries bespeak respect from society for the art-form and the artists, that they will be less tempted by glitzy outside work – are counterbalanced by some disheartening downsides.

While the acting and directing is often strong, so much depends on how well the casting needs of each play selected jibe with the abilities of the particular actors on staff. They may be cast in roles for which they may not be ideally suited. They are on staff and must perforce be given work. A perfunctory civil servant attitude toward performance may set in at times, and the temptation to fall into a kind of journeyman sufficiency is ever lurking. Actors develop tricks to conceal want of inspiration for or connection with a given work. Brio, earnestness, efficiency sometimes masquerade for emotional heights, wit, and vulnerability, though these tendencies vary from actor to actor. Also, because they are expected to keep up an intense schedule of playing diverse roles in a compressed

time-frame, they grab onto some essential characteristic of each role in their portfolio, and reduce it to a silhouette rather than developing fuller, more complex and layered renditions. Undoubtedly every repertory company suffers from these ills at times.

Then, the director also selects a play from the mandate to balance out the season or to keep in step with the other repertory companies of Europe. When he too brings this journeyman sufficiency to the work, he falls short of the expectations he has raised. In these instances the TGA tilts dangerously close to the quality on display in Flanders before the Flemish Wave swept away the municipal office-worker mentality that permeated the theatre establishment back then, a state of affairs which once upon a time Ivo van Hove called a “gussied up dinosaur.”^{cxvii} All these flaws may be seen affecting van Hove’s repertoire over time, if he remains artistic director.

As for the London and New York hit, Arthur Miller’s *A View From the Bridge*, the critics’ universal kudos notwithstanding, Ivo made the kitchen sink naturalistic drama into yet another neo-classical tragedy.^{cxviii} As the rave review in *Le Monde* expressed it:

Arthur Miller’s back again, but in a way we’ve never seen before, relieved of his Actors Studio straitjacket, of the trappings of the theatre of denunciation, to get back to the bare bones of his oeuvre: the role that this relationship with tragedy plays in American history.

And further on, it revealingly exults: “No need of any scenery to evoke the story of Eddy Carbone.”^{cxix} It is hardly surprising that the French would adore an approach which brings Arthur Miller in line with their own tradition for mounting their adored Racine and Corneille, nor one for the English that they’ve have come to equate with Shakespeare.

The postage stamp of sand ringed by a rectangle of benches is cribbed from the earlier German production of *Long Day’s Journey*. More than anything else, this conception of theatre follows the precepts David Mamet plugs in his acting textbooks: In essence, actors should just stand there and say the lines accurately and clearly. As David Savran truculently foresees though, Ben Brantley, the oracular main critic for the New York Times was certainly going to be swayed. This ultimate arbiter of “upper middle-brow taste” is in quest of a “serious” theatre that functions on “the imagined site of authenticity,” one that is “...at once politically effective, morally responsible, commercially successful, and culturally respectable.”^{cc} The current van Hove trend checks all these boxes, which wins the hearts and minds of the Broadway and West End audiences, as well as their critic-leaders.

This present central current of van Hove’s work stakes its claim at an intersection between two forms of respectability: that of the recent Shakespearean and Racinian traditions of the empty space and that of revered modern American classics. So he who had burst on the scene as “a bad boy” has been paving a path toward middlebrow acceptance, and this strategy has paid off. You might say, in David Savran’s caustic words, that our director is at present aiming for “an impossible ideal:” “working ‘through’ the ‘white’ heat’ of the commercial to reach ‘the artistic,’” “engaging in the “familiar task of balancing the ‘meaningful’ with the ‘profitable.’”^{cci}

From one point of view van Hove is simply persevering and expanding the project he announced in an interview twenty years earlier: to clear the naturalistic “bells and whistles” out of the habitual American stagecraft of its own modern classics. It is, as he repeatedly says, a straight “text” approach, although – in the present pattern – a few pyrotechnical visual features are injected at crucial moments, most often at the very end of a show as spectacular coda. The blood which rains down over actors and set alike in *View From the Bridge* is only one example out of several that could be named.^{ccii}

When placed on the Broadway bill, the audiences can congratulate themselves that they’re seeing the latest in cutting edge theatre (the *New York Times* critic told them it was), and it doesn’t make them feel too uncomfortable, even though the director has a reputation for being really far out! It’s certainly competent, well spoken, soberly staged, and yet it looks different from the other productions of the show they’ve seen, and makes the spectator ask questions about the play. At various points in his earlier career van Hove has often been burnt with bad or mixed reviews and sometimes with lukewarm audience responses when he’s stepped out of his or their comfort zone. Yet his most brilliant endeavors always involved artistic risks, especially the risk that the audience and critics wouldn’t like the result.^{cciii}

The current phenomenon of van Hove’s success in New York and London can be explained in part by Dwight MacDonald’s description of audience reception in American theatre back in the 1960s, as cited by David Savran:

‘We have,’ Macdonald wrote, ‘become skilled at consuming High Culture when it has been stamped PRIME QUALITY by proper authorities, but we lack the kind of sophisticated audience that supported the achievements of the classic avant-garde, an audience that can appreciate and discriminate on its own.’ So even highbrow plays fall as pearls before Midcultish swine. Moreover, the very structure of theater’s system of production, distribution, and consumption – as well as its heavy reliance on the ‘proper’ authority of the daily critics – would seem to guarantee its middlebrow status in perpetuity.

Savran, who neither approves of Macdonald’s contempt for the audience nor harbors the same exalted opinion of the avant-garde, goes on to say that “... middlebrow culture must evince an unstable, unpredictable, and anxious relationship between the commercial and the artistic...”^{cciv} His discussion of the anomaly of the avant-garde and its high-brow audience catches the van Hove phenomenon neatly in the net of his analysis, the pertinence of which merits its being quoted *in extenso* here:

But with the institutionalization of what used to be called the avant-garde by the early 1980s [exactly when van Hove was launched], there is very little theater left in the United States that amasses the kind of cultural cachet or enjoys the prestige of what passes for elite culture. Work by the likes of Richard Maxwell and the Wooster Group that continues to be performed in tiny venues perhaps qualifies, but certainly not the mammoth productions [cf., van Hove’s] that fill the Brooklyn Academy of Music during the ludicrously misnamed Next Wave Festival [precisely where his works are shown].

I would deny that the kind of work van Hove has long staged at New York Theatre Workshop, a smallish venue, is qualitatively different from that he has brought to the Next Wave Festival at BAM, where more people have seen it. Although the BAM venues, the Gilman Theatre and the Harvey, are substantial in seating capacity, the typical limited weeklong runs perforce rule out really massive audiences. A detailed demographic analysis might prove my hypothesis, but I would suppose that both theatres attract essentially the same audience. Savran continues:

Moreover, with the increasing dependence since the 1970s of the major non-profit theaters on profit-making ventures (beginning with *A Chorus Line* in 1976), the growing number of collaborations between nonprofit and commercial producers, the line between art and commerce has become all the more indistinct.^{ccv}

Is van Hove now part of what Savran sarcastically describes as, “the ... kind of elite culture [that is] supported by big money and prestigious foundations [that] caters to the champagne and caviar crowd which “imagine[s] high art as being either sacred and wrapped in mystique?”^{ccvi}

Is van Hove’s present audience middlebrow or highbrow? Whatever the answer, it is inarguable that the audience coterie has now expanded outward from that limited population to englobe a much larger, more heterogeneous public for *View From the Bridge* and *The Crucible* on Broadway, radically “commodifying” it.^{ccvii} Even the recent production of *Lazarus*, still staged within the relatively confidential margins of NYTW, drew exceptional notoriety first due to the renown of van Hove’s late collaborator, David Bowie. Analogously, Savran cites the destiny of the British playwright David Hare, who had three plays running on Broadway in one season, but for whom he regrets that he “has achieved commercial success only by forsaking his class-based critique of British society, his formal experimentation, and the corruscatingly edgy style of earlier works...”^{ccviii} Will the same sort of loss of pioneering spirit befall van Hove? Has it already?

While intermittently continuing to emit works in *his own* “corruscatingly edgy style,” van Hove recently has been evincing a tendency also to forsake real formal experimentation in favor of his current neo-classical approach, combined with associating his work with media stars and the imported British theatre, which tends to go over so well with the New York public. He is not one to disdain mass popularity if getting it wouldn’t force him to adulterate his work. In an interview Randy Gener asks: “So has the public caught up with him?” And Ivo responds, “... that’s my mission as a theatre director. I want to make the most extreme work possible, without compromise, shown to as many people as possible.” It remains to be seen whether those two aims can be realized in one and the same performance. Either the vulgate might reject unadulterated extremity and true novelty, or the artist wittingly or unwittingly may curtail it to render it palatable to this wider public.^{ccix}

In his international work, especially on Broadway, van Hove is subject to the American star system. No stage director’s name alone, except maybe Mike Nichols or Harold Prince, will bring in the crowds as it might in Europe. To fill the house he must cast from among big name actors, hoping that the crowd-pleasers, often drawn from the world of

film and television, will be competent onstage as well. This vital necessity, combined with the truncated rehearsal schedule Actors Equity and mediatized performers' heavy obligations impose on any creative process, are other kinds of debility, and run directly counter to van Hove's exploratory bent.^{ccx} In France he is now accustomed to a three-week rehearsal schedule, and claims to like it that way. He also claims to confine rehearsals to "a few hours in the afternoon." "How do you work?" "Fast."^{ccxi} Although he has balked at the notion that the creative process in film and theatre are alike,^{ccxii} he has de facto adapted a film-making calendar for theatre rehearsals: a protracted, detailed stage of contemplation and preparation with dramaturgs, designers, and composers, followed by a short, intense work period with the actors themselves. The early rehearsal phase of gaining actors' trust is obviated by the director's arrival on the scene in a glow of established prestige. He comes to town, they put themselves into his hands totally from the first, and they knock the show out. This formula worked very well for *The Damned* with the Comédie Française at the subscription-based Avignon Festival. But in America the financial pressures of the free market, where a producer wants to make back the investment, and where van Hove is in so much demand he's always off to direct the next show, introduce a brake on risk-taking. Can Ivo still claim, as he did shortly after taking over TGA in 2002 that "he still makes subversive theatre?" The answer appears to be yes *and* no.^{ccxiii}

Glimmers on the Horizon

Van Hove has been juggling many projects internationally at one time, but the alert faction of the New York audience were treated to the drum-beat of van Hove's interventions in the 2015-16 season, his *annus mirabilis*: he began at BAM with his imported production of *Antigone* with Juliette Binoche starring; then bowled in for his Broadway debut with the British transplant of *View From the Bridge*; third was the highly anticipated original staging of the David Bowie musical *Lazarus* at his old fringe haunt, New York Theatre Workshop; and finally he wrapped up with the original American staging, albeit with a much vaunted international cast, of *The Crucible*, back again on Broadway in March, 2016. As he said, without exaggeration, "The 2015-2016 allowed me to live ten years in one. I love that."^{ccxiv}

The almost universal approbation *A View From the Bridge* garnered illustrates what a safe choice it was for van Hove's Broadway debut, as detailed above; it comes in the wake of a series of other equally uncontroversial productions wrought in various countries – including *Maria Stuart*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *The Fountainhead*. *The Crucible* followed suit to a certain extent. While he again takes on a revered American classic, his interpretation doesn't slam up against it dialectically, as it had with *Streetcar Named Desire* or *More Stately Mansions*, or, to cite an antecedent, as the Wooster Group had done with *The Crucible* in their rendition, *L.S.D.: Only the High Points*, a deconstruction that incurred Arthur Miller's wrath. Rather he takes the approach, bordering now on a personal formula, of de-historicizing it through the stripped down sets and costumes; banishing long-held preconceptions of the characters and,

through both casting and interpretation, building them back up from zero; sweeping the cobwebs away from traditionally charged line readings, in certain cases, as with the star actress playing Abigail, replacing it with a Zombie Talk drone; and stripping entire scenes of generationally accreted melodramatic heightening; plus adding a few spectacular meta-dramatic touches, including restrained use of video and an animal presence. All of these innovations that refresh the play without rendering it unrecognizable it are subtle enough to pass muster with the complacent Broadway public, who would perhaps like to see themselves as open and liberal. Added to the recipe are the usual inducements of mediatized stars playing the principal roles, to insure the consistently sold out houses the absurd Broadway economy requires to make back the investment on those rare occasions when it allows serious drama to be done in its precincts.

SAFELY SUBVERSIVE

“Art is temenos, a sacred place. It is ritually clean, a swept floor, the threshing floor that was the first site of theater. Whoever enters this space is transformed.”

Camille Paglia^{ccxv}

The audience at the Walter Kerr Theatre is presented with a capacious, but enclosed space, evocative of some disused junior high school gymnasium or lunchroom, but clearly the kind of place where Americans in small towns go to cast their ballots in local and national elections. There is a large blackboard up center, and the floor has a gray and black chessboard design. The upstage wall, which one suspects is the actual theatre wall, is charcoal gray with a hanging piped heating unit projecting off of it, as well as a slops sink. The stage right of the stage contains three vast windows, and stage left a door, the only means of access. Whereas in a customary staging, as indicated in the script, the setting varies between Reverend Paris’s house, Proctor’s house, the local prison, a courtroom, etc., here all scenes appear in succession in this same unnamed space which effectively contains all those functions without much alteration. Locales are differentiated within the overarching master space in the most minimal way, largely by distributing, clumping, and overturning chairs in new configurations.

This box of a set, admittedly more massive than others, follows the established van Hove scenic pattern of Isolation in an enclosed rectangle that we have seen in *Hedda Gabler*, *Children of the Sun*, and others. Fire is used sporadically, as with a series of candles accompanying the watch over Betty Paris in Act I, and a live brazier that flares up later in the show. Certain anachronistic objects intrude and coexist, such as highly modern thermoses and paper cups.

The blackboard is put to plentiful use to crudely embody through pictograms the progressive unmaking of the community; to give visual, graphic life to howls heard from the gut; and finally transformed into a screen on which the daubings come to life and fly off as from an airport runway. Writing in chalk of the kind we’ve previously seen used in *Ludwig* graphically charts the growing hysteria engulfing the community. At first there is

only a big tree and small house scratched on it in a child-like manner, standing in for the sedate life of the town depicted. When John Proctor is made to repeat the Commandments, he writes the key words on the blackboard in addition to enunciating them. At the point when Mary Warren is clinging to her resolve not to inform on her master and mistress, she repeats the word “cannot,” and also writes it on the board over and over. In Act III, the accumulated chalk marks on the blackboard start moving and cohering into tiny bifurcated icons. Again, through video wizardry, this flock of winged squiggles start to detach from the circumscribed frame of the blackboard, grow larger and more numerous, and swarm over the entire back wall of the space. Since this is the only use of video in the production, it evinces both restraint and yet has theatrical power.

All the actors wear nondescript gray and black clothes, which while not period Puritan garb, retain like sobriety and modesty, at the same time as allowing for greater universality. The aged Rebecca Nurse and several other female characters, including Elizabeth Proctor and Tituba, wear pants suits, the anachronism of which doesn’t jar particularly. Once established, it may be assumed that the audience simply forgets we are meant to be in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts as opposed to any other place and time. As usual for van Hove, we are in no particular place or time.

The first segment is a brief and silent tableau of the girls working at their school desks facing away from the audience, a briefly glimpsed image on which the act curtain soon comes down. It reminded me of the *mise en scène* for German director Christof Marthaler’s production, *Maeterlinck*, at the NTG in Ghent some years back. The leitmotif of such non-verbal tableaux is used most sparingly. Another departure from the text that occurs early on is that Betty Paris briefly flies high above the stage floor at the end of Act I.

Later, a wolf or wolfhound stealthily prowls on, stares at the audience, and then runs off. This latter, startling, unexplained image must derive from a reference in Miller’s postface to the published play wherein he writes of farms abandoned by their condemned owners, left for the wolves to pillage. The animal, for those who haven’t read that text, will remain semiologically opaque, yet resonant and striking. Yet another gratuitous image much further along in the action is that a veritable storm of garbage rushes through the large side windows, leaving the stage floor littered in muck, accompanied by lightning flashes, and thunder, and causing an air vent (actually a giant overhanging batten) to shake loose and hang down from the flies. That disconcerting infrastructural fracturing is a bit of stage wizardry we’ve seen van Hove use before in previous productions as well, as recently as in *Antigone*. These visual statements of decomposition and soiling are more readily legible than the wolfhound, as implying that the community has been engulfed in the filth from the girls’ imaginations, and that that has led to its ruin.

In one of those Versweyveld masterly strokes of unconventional lighting, a large, rectangular fluorescent instrument that casts a ghastly, harsh glow is laid upon the floor stage right. All other light sources fade to zero. As circumstances begin to close in on John Proctor and force him to his ultimate moment of tragic choice, the four representatives of the local power structure debate in front of this lighting instrument,

casting shadows which project out as souls in hell. Later Proctor squats before it, squirming before the light of truth as it has clearly become, in the midst of grappling with his impossible decision. While there is no actual nudity, in a modification of van Hoveism and a concession to the Puritan society depicted, the audience is treated to Ben Whishaw removing his shirt only.

Another unusual feature is that Philip Glass has composed extensive incidental music for the occasion. His famous minimalist drones simply and pleasantly underline growing tension, but at times become more obtrusive as when a leitmotif of plucking strings accompanies Reverend Hale's rhetorical pursuit of devils intensifies. Suffice it to say that there is a much more abundant quantity of music here, especially under the dialogue, than for most van Hove shows, or all non-musical shows in general.

And so van Hove has tastefully brought the battery of his personal theatricality to this over-worn modern American classic, breathing new life into it, even as the individual performances were fairly underwhelming. The stars performed their function simply by having their names on the bills as audience draw. The real star of the show, whose name couldn't bring them in, was the director. Only Bill Camp gives a somewhat memorable portrayal as Reverend Hale and Ciarán Hinds as Judge Danforth. For all the innovative stagecraft added to the play, van Hove works with highly conventional stage groupings. When many characters are on stage at the same time, they stand bolt upright in fairly static geometric formations that are the hallmark of classical revivals as they are done everywhere.

The Crucible has long been considered a historicized indictment of the McCarthy era in American politics. What were commonly characterized as "witch-hunts" arising from the Post-War anti-Communist fever played out in House and Senate hearings that ruined the lives of so many. Arthur Miller himself was called to testify, and he faced the same moral dilemmas as his anti-hero from the times of the Salem witch trials in Puritan New England, John Proctor, although, unlike Proctor or the Rosenbergs, it was not for him a matter of actual life and death. *The Crucible* is thus a canonical text of American progressivism.^{ccxvi} This production puts that reading squarely on a back shelf. In a recent interview, he finds commonality between the two Arthur Miller shows and *Antigone*, all of which he did in New York in one season: I consider *View* a modern Greek tragedy, and Arthur Miller did, too. *The Crucible* also has that feeling of fate, of the thing that you think is not changeable." He then elaborates on Creon's role in Sophocles's play, which brings him full circle: "When I think about it, it's the same in *The Crucible*. There is this whole fight between the word of the law and the right human decisions to be made."^{ccxvii} His emphasis takes McCarthyism out of the mix entirely, although the same simply can't have been true for all the American baby boomers who make up the bulk of the Broadway audience.

Van Hove's rendering, while not absolutely subverting that generally accepted reading of the modern classic, cuts fissures by having Betty mysteriously levitate from the stage when unobserved. While the persecution of innocent victims by a juggernaut of hysteria and malevolent forces is unquestionably dramatized, the image implies that there do

appear to be real supernatural forces at work – witchcraft in the play’s imagistic canvass – for which the equivalence of Communist activity if consistently applied, renders this reading equivocal at most. If, on the other hand, no metaphorical meaning is intended and supernatural powers have literal equivalence only with supernatural powers themselves, and the play is stripped of its other customary political associations, then a totally different thematic balance is being struck. While the witch-hunters are evil and misguided, it seems there are grounds for their suspicions. Young girls – only when unobserved – appear to be levitating in this town. Van Hove has muddied the moral universe.

The fact is that he can as easily dignify this sacred cow of American progressivism by reviving it and see no contradiction in doing the same for Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, as he did recently at the TGA. That, along with her other monumental novel *Atlas Shrugged*, are taken by many as Bibles of neo-liberalism. Rand hobnobbed with Alan Greenspan, former President of the American Federal Reserve Bank. Their shared ideas, prestige, and purported intellectual heft were behind the perilous monetary policies and deregulation which led both to the Crash of 2008 and promoted the present economic gulf where we talk without exaggeration of the One Percent. While she has no particular profile in Europe, she’s had a resurgence of popularity with many here in America, and is regarded by others as the chief cheerleader for Social Darwinist supply-side economics. She is the hero of John Boehner, Paul Ryan, and Mitch McConnell.

When van Hove, though, describes his first amazed reading of *The Fountainhead*, he instantly recuperates it into the sphere of the highly personal:

Chief character is Howard Roark, a young architect who refuses to engage in compromise, and obstinately opts for modernism, who’s allergic to each and every reference to classical antecedents. His fellow student Peter Keating, however, promptly chooses to go to work for the top architect of his day and rapidly goes up the career ladder. The book is a tornado, and grabs hold of you. It situates the mental world of the artist in opposition to that of the opportunist. And so I thought, let me just for once be Howard Roark. Let it be today.^{ccxviii}

The fact that Ivo would select this politically loaded text for adaptation and presentation betrays either an indifference to or refusal to confront what such political ramifications might signify for “*nous autres*.” I would say that this is a case of intense self-identification with the main character (and perhaps unconsciously with others), such that the production text he wrought from Ayn Rand’s problematic novel became, in effect, an entry into his personal creative “diary,” thus obliterating its larger social statement and all the political ramifications it has in America. He brought the show to the Cour d’honneur in the Palais des Papes for the Festival at Avignon, and no political storm occurred in its wake. Still, it shows a certain discretion that he hasn’t tried to bring *The Fountainhead* to BAM, where it would surely be boycotted or booted.

Setting that issue aside, taking *The Crucible* and *View From the Bridge* together, it can be seen that Ivo and his producer Scott Rudin are positing a new model for how serious drama on Broadway could flourish economically without compromising artistic

standards. Both were resounding hits. Perhaps it takes a European experimenter, who admires but is not imbued with the dust of tradition, to show the way to American producers. This is van Hove at his most conservative, but Broadway at its most radical.

THE IMPURE

A collaboration with the celebrity rock star, David Bowie, the musical theatre piece *Lazarus* was at once highly publicized and confidential, the confidential aspect enhancing its cachet. Since it was performed at the relatively intimate NYTW venue for a limited engagement only a select few could see it, and those who were not quick on the draw, found themselves faced with a sold-out run very early on. Matters grew exponentially more dramatic in the midst of the run when Bowie shocked the world by dying, drawing that much more attention to the boutique event, and causing van Hove's stock to skyrocket. He, it turns out, was one of the tiny number of intimates who had been let in on the rock star's cancer, and the secrecy to which he was sworn and by which he abided extended even to his partner, Jan Versweyveld.^{ccxix} It was in this highly mediatized context that the production came and went, and has quickly become the stuff of legend, especially as so few people were actually able to see it.

The show is a theatrical and theatricalist sequel to the 1976 Nicholas Roeg film in which David Bowie starred, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which in turn was based on a novel of the same title by Walter Tevis. Critic David Rooney encapsulates the action, adding exposition not necessarily provided in the cryptic show by adaptor Enda Walsh, but filling out the whys and wherefores from the book and movie:

The extremely loose narrative ... centers on Thomas Jerome Newton (Hall), a humanoid alien who came to Earth from his drought-stricken planet many years earlier. After amassing a fortune in business while attempting to build a rocket ship to take him home, he was experimented on by the government [...] He's tormented by visions from his past and his imagination, which fuse in his memories of the blue-haired woman he loved, Mary Lou. As his assistant, Elly (Cristin Milioti), gets sucked deeper into Newton's world, she separates from her husband (Bobby Moreno) and remakes herself as Mary Lou, forgetting her own identity for a time [...] There's also an ethereal Girl (Sophia Anne Caruso), sent on a mission that she initially struggles to comprehend but eventually deduces is to help Newton return to his planet. (She builds a rocket onstage out of masking tape in one of the show's simplest but most evocative images.) But it emerges instead that it's Newton's task to help free the Girl from her limbo state, a revelation involving dark deeds related by Alan Cumming in a video insert. Finally, there are black-clad figures, led by the enigmatic Valentine (Michael Esper), who appear to be some kind of agents of death. Audiences will make more or less sense of the show depending on their willingness to invest in its unrelentingly opaque and choppy storytelling.^{ccxx}

This is further amplified in Chris Jones's telling:

Meanwhile, a blond, perchance angelic teenager, known as "Girl" (Sophia Anne Caruso) shows up, partly to help Newton get home, it seems, and partly to operate as an eroticized muse, a reminder of his daughter and an object of desire (this enters dangerous territory,

to my mind, when you're dealing with so young a performer). This "Girl," who may or may not be one of Newton's own booze-soaked delusions, has minders, who also function as a kind of chorus. And then, among other digressions, there is a character named Valentine (Michael Esper) whose sinister qualities immediately are evident, if not his connection to the main narrative.^{cxxxi}

The audience member who expects to get a fully explicated narrative, such as the one above, will be disappointed and frustrated by the show, as the characters who pop up more or less out of nowhere are not generally identified and do little to advance the action. Such apparitions recall those from Richard Foreman plays and Strindberg's *To Damascus* sooner than – say – *A View From the Bridge*. They are Jungian animae of interiority and subjectivity, which do more to bounce off the central character's obsessions and psychic torments than to enjoy independent existence. *Lazarus*'s loose narrative is an armature which strings various extant Bowie hit songs together with some specially composed ones.

The exposition gradually and elusively reveals that the central character is a personage from outer space who is in a kind of containment cell until the mystery of his identity can be ascertained. Indeed, as he is confronted by the various characters enumerated above, the basic narrative premises can only be deduced through the interstices, that is if one hadn't boned up on them by watching the film and reading the novel before coming to NYTW. The fragmentary and incomplete accretion of circumstantial information, which resists easy penetration and intellectual access, reinforces the avant-garde creds of the theatrical event.

For the occasion, van Hove yet again insisted on imposing an extreme renovation of the NYTW space, and as with the gutting and reinstallation he carried out for *Scenes From a Marriage*, artistic director Jim Nicola again indulged him, but raised the ticket prices to unaccustomedly high rates to account for it. The audience is greeted by a scenic arrangement on the proscenium stage with which van Hove afficianados would be familiar: a closed-off anonymous looking chamber in the form of an unadorned rectangle. There is a large screen occupying the center stage portion of the upstage wall, set against a larger rectangular recessed alcove that encompasses it. It at first simply looks like a rather unattractive patch, fronted by a ledge. Against the stage left wall is a refrigerator that provides strong, extra-terrestrial LED light when opened, and embedded in the stage right side, a door, and some very unobtrusive sittables. We are back in the scenic mode of Isolation, since the box the central character inhabits is cut off from any sense of an outside world. Suffice it to say that van Hove and Versweyveld had a Ready-Made handy, a pre-tested spatial strategy that matched up perfectly with the hermetic story line.

The central rectangular patch on the upstage wall is rapidly revealed and put to work as a screen, and the play starts with a barrage of video and audio montage. The main character, Newton, lying supine on his back centerstage on the stage floor, is circumscribed by a projection of himself on the screen. This establishes the show's leitmotif of combining live feeds of the actors together with recorded images of them. He is surrounded on the floor by a line drawing of a spaceship, and that is projected onto the

vertical screen, the image starting small, but coming in for a tighter close-up. His image is replaced on the screen by that of the Girl, who sings "Life on Mars." It is reported that he is a victim of amnesia who has thus come unhinged from his past and is surviving day by day on Lucky Charms cereal, gin, and Twinkies. Female presences, "Adolescent Girls" One, Two, and Three, dressed in black, but sometimes in blue with blue hair, function as a chorus. Newton sings David Bowie-like, slides across the floor, agilely hops up on the ledge, and slaps the glass which has covered over the rectangular screen space, leaving greasy marks on it.

Behind the glass of the larger rectangular plaque we can dimly make out the live band that accompanies the singing throughout. Beyond them is another plane of window through which we can perceive cityscapes and watery cascades between the gaps. A Kabuki-costumed woman emerges from behind the video screen on which she also remains paradoxically as a video image, to torment Newton and dance around him. The chorus of three female figures, now wearing facial masks, sings backup as a blonde virginal nymph also appears on-screen, and then emerges from it as a live entity singing about America. We also see the heartland whizzing by on the screen, as though seen from a racing car. Newton and the blonde waif, who may have emanated from his own brain, lounge in front of the careening cars of the thoroughfare and connect verbally.

The Little Girl fills us in on all the exposition in one fell swoop, which is hard to absorb. Videos of Potsdamerplatz in Berlin then fill the screen, show footage of wartime and post-war Berlin, including monuments being mauled and torn down, walled up windows, student uprisings, etc. This raised space upstage beyond the window is transformational. As the glass slides open, projected Berlin gives way to a three-dimensional café setting, along with a rear-projected video café environment.

Once the screen has once more been eclipsed this inner sanctum of surprising and ever-altering dimensions that lead into recesses of memory-space, we are again returned to the circumscribed realm of the containment chamber. Newton sings in front of the screen, in presentational, rock concert fashion, so the isolation chamber's fourth wall is frankly acknowledged to be absent. This blatant theatricalism, playing right out to the audience, renders Newton as not so isolated after all.

The Three Adolescent Girls assist Newton in killing the girl, Mary, who might be an impostor stand-in or doppelgänger of his daughter. The actor playing Newton sings in front of a perfectly in-sync, congruent image of himself on the screen, an interplay of live and recorded selves in perfect symbiosis. Once that melding is established it is then torn asunder as the video image of Newton separates, escapes the screen and runs all over the surfaces of the room, finally filling up the entire back wall. Virtual projected Newton yanks aside virtual velvet drapes, which open to reveal identical *actual* velvet drapes that the *actual* Newton also then pulls apart. So while the initial scenic arrangement had established an understated principle of Isolation, the electronic media layer on many witty, brilliantly executed stunts that lead to an expansion of the space in all dimensions, and synthesize Ramification both of the human presence and the space itself, the entire morphing environment having become an extension of Newton's being.

As the action winds down a milky white viscous paste, like condensed milk, seeps in from unknown provenance and covers the stage floor. The dead Girl wakes up, and chats with Newton. He recovers his past and family through her. The Girl unravels masking tape, creating a schematic outline of a rocket on the stage floor. Newton then lies down within the rocket, which fits snugly about his form. Both man and rocket are ramified on the screen as a live video feed shot from directly above the stage floor projects them to us. On screen the rocket outlining the central character's body ultimately lifts off and sets out into the stratosphere via computer video technology, propelling Newton back to the planet he came from.

Some of the harsh criticisms dished up by reviewer David Cote in his pan give hints as to the show's innovative structure. He starts off by lambasting it as "cryptic" and for being "too weird and disjointed" and redolent of "self-indulgent stasis." It is the playwright/adaptor Enda Walsh who comes in for his worst barbs. Cote accuses him of specializing in "the static, repetitive and faux-existential: Beckett Lite. His fragmentary, banal dialogue frustrates any emotional or intellectual connection with the characters or situation." Cote admits to admiration, however, for the Bowie songs as well as their delivery, together with van Hove's "typical visual flair."^{ccxxii} *Via negativa*, Cote, the epitome of the conventional literal-minded sensibility, gives away his expectations and standards or critical "horizon" (which, like so many critics, he is sure the reader shares) for what must go into making a theatre play: It must be dynamic and full of logical dramatic action; it must be clearly legible; it must be, in contemporary parlance, "relatable," and its parts must fit together in a tight causal relationship; its dialogue must flow and sparkle with originality. Indeed, if one only added likeable characters to that recipe it would be the play of his dreams. And it is also unsurprising that he thoroughly appreciates all the abstraction and ambiguity typical of David Bowie's rock songs that he will not tolerate in theatre. This list would express the exigencies and prejudices of the average American Middlebrow Theatre-Goer and a play created from it would be the exemplar of Brecht's Culinary Theatre and Peter Brook's Dead Theatre.

Lazarus manifestly violates every item on the checklist. But therein, for me, lies all its interest and the give-away that van Hove hasn't lost his willingness to subvert, offend, and fly in the face of convention. For Cote is right that the play has cryptic situations, is weird, disjointed, and static in structure, and has fragmentary, banal dialogue. All these features taken together give it avant-garde bona fides, and betray a seeming indifference to pleasing and reassuring the audience. The concessions to commercial exigencies are the Bowie name, the crowd-pleasing musical numbers, and the stunning visuals, all of which do render the show (why even call it a play?) more palatable. Thus a new van Hove synthesis is born. Dutch critic Herien Wensinck calls it "a total-artwork," "a chameleon-like" artwork.^{ccxxiii} Ben Brantley's highly laudatory review betrays a greater tolerance for the show's forays into the New than Cotes's, but finds some of the same issues to be troublesome:

These [production] elements often meld exactly as they should, which means that they create a haunting impression of dividedness, of life as a perplexing jumble of puzzle pieces that can never be fully assembled. Unfortunately, that sense of dislocation extends

more clumsily to the relation of the script to the songs. The spoken story line, when it's not opaque, brings to mind a young adult novel of the supernatural, featuring restless and winsome spirits longing to be put to rest.

He goes on to note that Enda Hall, who plays Newton, "has mastered a perfect semi-anaesthetized style of speech," thus heralding a return to or continuation of van Hove's *More Stately Mansions* experiments in Zombie Speech. Still, the director is absolved of any weakness: "Van Hove's signature style – skeletal, shimmering and ominous – is as distinctive as Mr. Bowie's, and in many ways, a perfect match for it."^{ccxxiv} It isn't necessarily that van Hove isn't onto a promising new direction for himself, only that he ought to be more careful which collaborators he chooses to take risks with.

The series of songs, many of which are hauntingly familiar from the various phases of David Bowie's long career, do not necessarily fit neatly into the narrative's ostensible episodes. They make commentary or simply are inserted without excuse or justification. This arbitrary connection of "numbers" is a throwback to van Hove's variety show, post-dramatic roots of *Wild Lords* and *Imitations*, as well as his later forays into musical theatre, including *Carmen* and *True Love*, all examples of what he is proud to call "impure theatre."^{ccxxv} The outsider, alienated central character together with all the doppelgangers and negative anima who manifest as outgrowths of or worthy opponents to the central character's ego take us back to the subjective, neo-expressionist world of *Rumors*. There he had another three-character chorus of specialists to provide pseudo-expert commentary on the aberrant central character René's motives. And Newton – the quintessential outsider, the guinea pig, the cool hipster – is akin to that far off character in more ways than one.

However, this *mix* of the two genres – the musical variety show and the expressionist – is something new for van Hove, resists easy commercial digestion, and perhaps represents a new and tantalizing road beckoning for the future. It seemed overly contained in the NYTW theatre, and could easily have a future life in much larger auditoriums or even stadiums, especially considering the David Bowie allure. This show has the potential to expand into the proper scale for its rock concert dimensions, yet retain its introspective, ontological focus. *Lazarus* is a paradigm for van Hove to follow up on that would augur a return to his avant-garde, riskier roots, while managing to retain his newfound larger audience. As he himself said, once upon a time: "I even think that classical theater will remain in existence, and the backbone of theatre forms will also remain, but the future will be in the 'impure' arts."^{ccxxvi}

A third foray into a promising direction is embodied in van Hove's guest production of Visconti's 1969 filmscript, *The Damned*, the movie made with an international company of actors, who spoke or were dubbed in German, but acted live by the famed Comédie Française in French at the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des Papes for the 2016 Festival at Avignon. For van Hove, this was exponentially more of an honor as, strangely, the Comédie Française has only been invited to pride of place in the annual summertime festival six times in its 69-year history, the last time thirteen years ago.

At the center of this production, and what seems to interest Ivo most are: the question of the nature of leadership of a big business through turbulent times and under a regime that demands moral compromise; the pattern of a great historical sweep of history encapsulated in a family struggle to the death that has overtones of Greek tragedy as in *The Oresteia*; and the topos of decadence, as epitomized both in the character of Martin and the major sub-plot concerning the SA Brown Shirts. All these are familiar from other van Hove shows. The first item is reflected in the memorable remark he made in explaining his interest in Shakespeare's *Roman Tragedies*: "I'm head of a company myself. I'm a manager myself. I know how decisions are brought to fruition."^{ccxxvii} While the company he's referencing isn't a steel turned armaments manufacturer, but rather a highly visible, state-supported theatre company, the nature of compromise and political pressure on both may be analogous.

The series of men who lead the Essenbeck Arms Manufacturing Company, a fictionalization of the Krupp empire which provided Hitler with bombs, is a downward spiral of C.E.O.s. It starts with the aged patrician, Joachim, who saw his nation through the First World War, the disarmament forced by the Treaty of Versailles, and the rearmament, as Germany ventured to violate the terms of the treaty. He abdicates in favor of his son, Herbert, not because he cannot tolerate serving the National Socialist cause, but because he has the aristocrat's contempt for the low-life Hitler, and never wants to be in a position where he'll have to shake his hand. Herbert, sensitive and rational, virulent anti-Nazi married to a Jewess, is quickly forced into exile, so he never has a chance to lead the company. He is replaced by SA Commandant Konstantin, an out-and-out thug. But Martin, the pervert, controls over fifty percent of the company's shares, and in a capricious fit, replaces Konstantin with Friedrich, his mother's lover, who is an unaffiliated technocrat. Ultimately Martin himself, by then a willing tool of the regime having donned the SS uniform, takes over the active running of the firm. Thus Visconti provides at least five models of business executives, one more craven than the next. One can see them as individuals or as a five-headed hydra.

It may be remembered that even the best Krupp C.E.O. is supervising an industry whose purpose is to wreak death and destruction on mankind. But the moral dubiousness of engaging in the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction barely enters into either Visconti or van Hove's productions. The closest we get to the reality of bomb manufacturing is a backdrop video of clean, efficient factory machines, gears and pistons pumping and grinding away to get us over the hump of a long transition between scenes.

The show plays before the magnificent medieval backdrop of the inner Cour d'honneur of the Palais des Papes, a vast stone wall inset with periodic doors and windows placed in it high in the air, rising above and behind the spectacle. Recorded hard metal music stands in place of Maurice Jarre's memorable, relentless movie score. German lyrics are sometimes heard. There is also live instrumental ensemble playing an original score of somewhat discordant modern music. The space is wide open. To stage right is a straight line of make-up tables with large round globes circling each mirror. In a parallel line going straight from down to upstage are square, industrial black sittings. In a third layer of offstage reality, in fact furthest offstage, are risers on which sit black-clad SS men,

their faces glued to the action. From a semiotic point of view, they are stationed behind everything, and prepared to burst on to the scene, the scene of history, whenever the moment is ripe. Symmetrically across the open expanse from these two lines is a raised platform, with another straight line, this time of coffins, parallel to the make-up tables across from them. They are, like everything else, black and characterless. They too are waiting their chance to participate in the historical event, and indeed they get their chance.

This show has one of the most sophisticated uses of video we have seen from Ivo, particular for its monumentality on the vast screen expanded to the giant scale of the Cour d'honneur, and its multi-focus. Although there seems to be only one live cameraman moving about, an extraordinary variety of clashing realities are dizzyingly picked up as he circles the space. The effects go by so fast we have no time to analyze them, but can only, stunned, try to absorb them on the run. The offstage area by the make-up tables is frequently in the frame, reminding us of the half made-up actors waiting in the wings, dispassionately watching themselves in the mirrors or the action onstage. Beyond them are other actors in costume, mostly SS men sitting in rows, patiently awaiting their turn on the stage of history. So the offstage spaces, which perpetually come into view either through the roving of the naked eye, or borne to it by the insistent camera and screen, force the audience to confront potentialities. The audience may not ignore what stands in wait, and is made complicit, and by extension sharing in responsibility.

Once again with the vast open central space, Ivo is working with the Reduction principle. However, the acting and staging style is no longer neo-classical, but something at once less recognizable and more compelling. The family riches are embodied in an array of stainless steel goblets, plates, and bowls that litter a large side-table. Following Herbert's exile, the deviant scion of the family who controls the majority of stock, Martin, sweeps this landscape/still life of conspicuous consumption off the table in one fell clattering swoop, and it is clear that all dignity and tradition has come to an end for the Essenbecks.

According to the van Hove formula, the precise, authentic history being related has less primacy or verisimilitude than the pattern of which it is a paradigm. From the display we are meant to make our own connections with present-day life. Some lines jump out at us, mostly put in the mouth of Herbert, the well-intentioned, altruistic son. As it becomes clear that Hitler will inexorably assume power following the crucial burning of the Reichstag, Herbert tells his family: "It's too late, too late for us to soothe our conscience." His family, like so many German industrialists, abetted the dictator's rise to power, and now they will only have themselves to blame. Without retailing all the ways they have been complicit, it is understood. Such a line shoots out at the audience, to all of us who have and continue to be complicit in historical events which return to bite us. And, if there were any room for doubt, the camera periodically shoots directly out into the audience, capturing that mass on the big screen for their own contemplation.

Then, once he recognizes that he must leave Germany to save his life, and his family's life (although they are already doomed), he says: "Every day thousands of people are

forced to emigrate from our land. We aren't the least fortunate among them." And instantly the entire current immigrant crisis is invoked, and hits home. And so obvious as to be ridiculous, the rise of Nazism mirrors the present precarious state of Europe where the Extreme Right is presently clamoring for a bigger place at the table once more.

In the midst of all these political upsets, laced with staid tableaux of Herbert's classic two-child family, the presence of the young brother Martin insinuates itself as a subversive element, not of political stability, for of that he is oblivious, but of the standard idealized image of the heterosexual family unit. During the initial family gathering, he grabs the mike and does a musical number reminiscent of the MC in *Cabaret*. Whereas in the movie Martin appeared on a little raised stage in full regalia, doing a Marlene Dietrich imitation, here he is scantily dressed, resembling an Egon Schiele drawing, assaulting them all with the affront of his own exposed body. Following this shocking introduction, we assume he is gay, but even his queerness is stomach-churningly subversive, as he goes rather for his pre-adolescent niece, and subsequently his own mother.

Among the multiple, ingenious uses of Ramification, thanks to all the domains established on this spare set, is an extended game of Hide and Seek Martin plays with his young female cousins. The counting down before "Ready or not, here I come," do double duty for the countdown to the Reichstag fire. There is a hush as Martin hides out in some dark closet with the older of the two girls, their silent, close confinement splayed out on the big screen. It comes to an abrupt crisis as the girl first casts her eyes around while her uncle kisses her hands. What follows cannot be determined as she then suddenly and inexplicably screams for help. The whole family dashes about the stage in all directions, and there is a seamless morphing of one emergency to another, with the girl's father and mother forced to hustle their branch of the family out of Germany.

The show proceeds via a series of set piece confrontations between family members as outside events, which force the company to make constant adjustments, run their downward-spiraling course. Standouts among them include: The search for Martin by his mother Sophie. She receives notice, presumably from him, the chief but *fainéant* shareholder, of a special board meeting. But he has disappeared. She leaves the stage to hunt him down through all the stairs, corridors, and horse stalls of the off-limits precincts of the Palais des Papes. We follow her elaborate movements throughout the actual building on live video feed, only to find Martin cowering and crawling on his belly back on stage where she began.

In the play, as in the film the historical Night of the Long Knives, by which the SS led by Goebbels wiped out its rival militia, the SA, led by Erich Roehm, is the showiest and most extended segment. It occurred as the entire corps of the SA indulged in a holiday orgy on an island in the Wannsee. Again, van Hove creates a special theatre language to substitute for Visconti's unforgettable cinematic rendition. Konstantin, the Essenbeck cousin with SA affiliations, enters with young Aryan giant of lieutenant. They are the only live-stage participants. They are, however, accompanied by a gathering of multitudes of virtual SA members on screen, who sing a Heimat song. The lieutenant

then goes into a little jig, with Konstantin circling him. On screen, shot from far above the SA multitudes strip and launch into an orgy. Downstage, meanwhile, Konstantin and his lover drink big steins of beer. They then strip, dump a keg of beer on the stage, and literally breast-stroke through the lake of beer they have made. The onscreen orgy of sex and noise intensifies. Konstantin and the lieutenant attack a bargirl and strip her of apron and garters with which they adorn themselves. All, onscreen and off, circle and do the cancan, ultimately dissolving in drunkenness. The two awake from the debauch onstage. On screen the men are seen, suddenly, lying, littering the ground, still shot from above. SS men silently enter, stand over them and shoot them one by one. With each shot a red stain instantly appears around the body. Finally, two others, including Friedrich, president of the company, come out and toss a bucket of red blood on Konstantin and the boy. The two dead victims then stand and are led off into their inevitable coffins. Following this segment of the Night of the Long Knives, which ends Act I, the brown dance floor is rolled up. Everything on stage is now uniformly black. Black, the color of the SS

Four parties, who at present constitute the mistrusting leadership of the Essenbeck manufacturing company, sit at an industrial-style dinner table while it is being set by SS men, with an array of clean stainless steel plates and settings. This silent segment is focused entirely on a choreography of eyes as the four directors exchange and conceal visual messages. Later in the scene, the four rise, and stare offstage. A full minute of silent stage time goes by before it is revealed that they are looking incredulously at Herbert Essenbeck, returned from exile.

These are intercut with a parallel series of ceremonial segments. Thus, the balance between the addressing of “questions” and the penetration into the irrational, the twin elements that van Hove has identified to be at the heart of the theatrical experience, are both mined.

There is the ceremony of assassination. Many characters die throughout. Most of their deaths occur without preamble or explanation. They are voluntarily escorted by a squadron of Black Shirts up onto the platform where the coffins are lined up. A gun is pointed at the head and silently explodes. The victim, often relieved and smiling to surrender a difficult life, is formally led into the coffin and there lies down. The lid once closed, the “corpse” is shot by camera from within the coffin. Invariably the victim appears on the great screen in sepia close-up, suddenly horrified at their situation, silently protesting being left in that coffin. This protest continues at length on the great screen while the life of the onstage actors continues apace in front of the grimacing, pleading face.

A variation on this ceremony occurs when Martin, during the recurring game of Hide and Seek, secretes himself in one of the coffins. There his young female cousin comes upon him. He tricks her into taking his place in the coffin and shuts the lid on her. She, like all victims, appears fighting against the reality of death on screen. Her nanny arrives to rescue her from the coffin. Unfortunately for her, her Jewish mother, is later reported to have been intercepted in their attempted escape from Germany and to have perished in a

concentration camp. Her father has to trade his own life for his daughters so they may survive.

Yet another variation occurs when the dignified and sensual family doyenne Sophie ultimately gets tarred and feathered by her own son Martin, which is in itself a ceremony of defilement linked to her belated marriage with Friedrich, the technocrat. She is dressed as a bride and escorted by her paramour Friedrich who'd run the company, into twin coffins, where – in sign of suicide – they lay down, and voluntarily resign themselves to their fate.

There is the ceremony of going into exile, which Herbert effects by simply stepping down off the stage. His pronouncements from that exceptionally used part of the space nearer the audience, and outside the rectangle of the Essenbecks' comfort zone, have a Brechtian flavor of greater consciousness of historical significances.

And finally there is the ceremonial of preparation for mass annihilation that constitutes the coda to the performance. Martin stoops before great steel bowl, gathers up and covers himself with white powder, crosses to the platform up center, picks up a machine gun, and guns down the audience. This show was created in the wake of terrorist outrages in Paris and Brussels. As the actors convened for the first day of rehearsal, they learned of yet another such attack in the airport of Istanbul. The perhaps too facile and specious connection between Martin's conversion to Nazism and that of present-day terrorism grows out of that context.

Still, all in all, *The Damned* represents an extremely positive new direction for van Hove. The images of this epic show are stunning, the stage life layered, dense, and continually surprising. He has found the convincing "stage language," he always seeks when adapting film scenarios. The French actors, despite their various lapses into maudlin tropes, are well-suited for the brittle aesthetic surface of this unsentimental, decadent rendition of the Nazi period.

And a fourth promising departure is represented by the TGA production of *The Hidden Force*, an adaptation of a turn-of-the century novel by revered Dutch author Louis Couperus. This is a tale of the Netherlands' colonial past in Indonesia, and van Hove retains its highly narrative quality, taking great advantage of the cultural atmospheres and artifacts of the Javanese environment. The deftly managed clash and intermingling of the two cultures' performance modes, which echoes the key dramatic confrontation in the subject matter, injects a great richness into the production.

It is set on a radically stripped stage space, with loose floorboards. Almost all physical objects – costume racks and racks holding indigenous musical instruments – are pressed up against the three solid encasing stage walls. The sparsest of furniture elements are added and subtracted as needed. This is a ceremonial space and a story-telling space, with a strong bow to Peter Brook, which nonetheless advances Brooks' imagery further into the twenty-first century. There are periodic washes over all three walls of video imagery of water, air, and the ambient natural elements which engulf the lives of the

Indonesian and European characters alike. These are filled out by occasional infusions of dense fog that rushes up through the floorboards, that define the space like misty, ever shifting panels, and dense, tropical rain that drenches the stage space from the flies in a convincing version of a typhoon in the rainy season.

The stage imagery generally fortifies two-character scenes of dialogue with additional characters that move in counterpoint, sometimes dance-like, at others, in still tableaux, giving a shorthand complexity to the picture. The cast has likewise been enriched with a more multi-cultural variety than usual, as the stage is infused with ethnic dance and ethnic music. The costumes, which include some typical van Hove business suits for the Resident, nonetheless, are expanded in range to include skirts and other looser, more colorful body drapings and wrappings again issuing from Indonesian styles. So, while as precise as ever, the whole staging takes on a looser, more free-form, novelistic feeling, with sends blending into each other, than van Hove has generally permitted himself of late. Despite the empty stage, the infusion of natural elements provides the actors with more of a sense of altered environment that is more than a mere stage affords their performances a greater sense of visceral support and hence authenticity than has been seen in such other recent productions as *View From the Bridge* and *The Crucible*. In such simple actions as standing and sitting, but also in the release of intense passions, they are manifestly more at ease in their bodies due to the embrace of the surroundings, the introduction of so many guest performers from other cultures, and the granular familiarity with the unobtrusively crafted Dutch of Couperus's.

KEY PRODUCTIONS

In this next section, we will present detailed descriptions of salient productions which either changed van Hove's course over time or were a strong paradigm for a given kind of approach. Each exemplifies some extreme point along van Hove's range. Taken together, they reveal an amazing virtuosity. Many will be productions that today's theatre-goers, discovering van Hove only recently, will have barely or never have heard of.

When I first submitted my articles about his two first shows, *Rumors* and *Disease Germs*, to *The Drama Review*, the then editor Michael Kirby enforced a strict policy: reviews were to consist of pure detailed descriptions of the theatre events with a minimum of critical judgment or exegesis. Anyone who has tried to write this way will see how hard it is not to stray from recounting the outer life onstage into interpretations of its meanings and ramifications or be tempted into declaring how good or bad it is.

I will certainly lapse both into interpretation and judgment, as well as showing how the particular show in question relates to the entire van Hove oeuvre. But my main aim here is to bring these shows back to life with words, so that the reader may vicariously re-experience the long-dead theatrical event in some small measure. My model is to do for Ivo what Edward Braun did so lucidly for Meyerhold's famous production of Gogol's

The Inspector General, which makes the reader feel as if they were there watching.

Wild Lords, One of Three Defining Oeuvres de Jeunesse
(AKT-Vertikal, 1984)

Following van Hove's bursting on to the scene with the self-authored *Rumors* and *Disease Germs*, he moved for a time into a different, collaborative way of creating shows. Rather than writing a text himself and putting it on, he assembled a group of actors, started with a governing idea, and, using some inspiring texts or themes only as jumping off points. Then he would embark on improvisational explorations that eventually were given some modest shaping, finally to be opened up to an audience. While in numerous interviews he has insisted on the point that he is, "a text director,"^{ccxxviii} it was not always thus, nor is it entirely thus even today. In the most recent theatre season in New York, van Hove was lionized for three shows deeply rooted in text that can be counted as either radical interpretations or merely interpretations (*Antigone*, *View from the Bridge*, and *The Crucible*), but no less so for the post-dramatic-leaning *Lazarus*. The latter work is exemplary of what Peter Boenisch describes as a "dramaturgical strategy of putting relations in play" that marry, "rather effortlessly, forms and strategies of contemporary theatre-making attributed to 'performance theatre' with the staging of a literary text."^{ccxxix} In his first two oeuvres de jeunesse, *Rumors* and *Disease Germs*, van Hove functioned as a true *auteur* – writing and directing everything. Subsequently departing from that methodology, he launched into staging sober intimist, extant *plays* by Harold Pinter, Bernard Koltès, and Marguerite Duras. But he also forged a separate track by fashioning non-text based *shows* with rudimentary and incidental verbal texts, productions that were sprawling, undisciplined, and even self-indulgent. With them he was to introduce much of the stock of imagery, theatrical ideas and thematic material that he would later resort to time and time again, layered onto extant texts written by others.

In *Wild Lords*, *Imitations*, and *Miracles of Humanity* he applied a method of ensemble creation, today known as "devised theatre." This is more of a process of creation than a performance style, developed in the 60s by the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, the Performance Group and a slew of other American experimental companies. It was later pursued in Flanders by collectives such as the Internationale Nieuwe Scene, De Trojaanse Paard, Maatschappij Discordia and others. They all produced what in retrospect came to be called "post-dramatic" works in the sense that they embraced, "the unfolding and blossoming of a potential of disintegration, dismantling and deconstruction within drama itself." Such works conform closely to the following requisite for post-dramatic forms, that, "...staged text (*if* text is staged) is merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition."^{ccxxx}

Van Hove has spoken of the inspiration he had derived as a young audience member from seeing a spate of international productions in the context of the annual Europalia Festival and Théâtre 140, the Brussels equivalent of LaMama. The PlanK and so many

other groups provided a gamut of views into avant-garde options in the late 70s for a young Belgian theatre maker, and most were nourished on the same avant-garde precedents, although each company idiosyncratically shaped and molded them in a different way. In coopting the group, developmental method, van Hove was perforce dipping into the same sources which had inspired the immediately earlier artists whose work had so moved him – Artaud, Grotowski, Viola Spolin/ Paul Sills Theatre Games, Laban, Happenings, clowning etc., although he only had access to some of these primarily American influences second and third-hand.^{ccxxxi}

A certain set of transitional Belgian collectives that flourished in the 1970s, and with whose work van Hove was certainly familiar, such as Theater Antigone, 't Barre Land, and Dood Paard, also made an impact. The German theoretician, Lehmann who has studied these particular Flemish groups, relates that their performances were:

... characterized by a peculiar mixture of school theatre atmosphere, party mood and folk theatre. The players saunter in leisurely fashion onto the stage, chatting, glancing at the audience, muttering things to each other, seemingly agreeing on something. Then it may gradually become clear that they are in the middle of allocating roles. Jokes, within the play or outside of it, private conversations and a mode of acting that does not want to cover up the lack of professionalism: all this converges into scenes that can in turn be interrupted again.^{ccxxxii}

While shows from van Hove's mature period don't work principally or even a great deal with this aleatory aesthetic in the way that the Belgian company TG Stan, for example, continues to, one does pick up on flashes of it here and there, an arrow to be plucked at will from his stylistic quiver. But his three early ensemble pieces manifestly leaned heavily in this direction.

The first of the three, *Wild Lords*, presented under the rubric of AKT-Vertikaal in 1984, is a meditation on manhood, and an explicitly gay, even homoerotic, piece – his most explicit coming out statement. It can certainly be characterized as post-dramatic, since in contrast with van Hove's later productions, dialogue takes a back seat and the original source material disperses almost to the point of being unrecognizable.

While he claims to have used William Burroughs's daring and outlandish 1971 novel *The Wild Boys* as a jumping off point, it is no more than that, for *Wild Lords* can't really be regarded as an adaptation at all. It would be a stretch to claim to detect any use of Burroughs' narratives or atmosphere. At most, *Wild Boys* is, similarly, an epic exploration of homoerotic longing, but there the similarity with Ivo's show ends. None of the narrative segments from the van Hove piece match up with any from Burroughs's novel, which imagines international herds of feral boys going up against nation states' heavily armed battalions, and obliterating them using various forms of fantastical weapons of mass destruction in a quest to wipe out the institution of the nuclear family, and by extension, civilization as we know it.

The book also indulges in endless ritualistic episodes of surrealistically sensational sexual encounters, but they bear little resemblance to relationships found in van Hove's play.

While Burroughs's book obsessively repeats certain scenes of seduction, suggesting an international network of pulsating, squalid, but mythopoeically grandiose homosexual encounters set variously in Mexico, North Africa, Alaska, and Saint Louis, van Hove's show contain no required sexual acts at all. Burroughs resorts to multiple scenes of anal sex, manifestations of a purported global web of social subversion, and revisits this leitmotif over and over in various dream permutations. We are fetishistically and repetitively dragged through the same phrases of come-on and unimpeded communion between the willing, unhesitating participants. Chance meetings slide unimpeded into a formulaic series of mutually, even telepathically, understood sensory steps that create arousal, that quickly and surely leads to anal penetration and immediate jouissance. While Burroughs' emotional tone is seamy, daring, straightforward, and always fulfilled, van Hove's is coy, embarrassed, and unconsummated.

Burroughs recedes entirely from view in what the audience ultimately saw on Ivo's stage. Rather, the show derives from delving into guided improvisation springing from his actors' experiences, points of reference, and imaginations. *Wild Lords* ought to be taken on its own terms as an original work, a piece of devised theatre. In many more senses, it represents a case of van Hove wading into the post-dramatic.^{ccxxxiii}

The cast consists of three attractive, slender young men. The performance has a variety show structure without a traditional unifying plotline. It allows for the willy-nilly addition or subtraction of any idea that popped up along the way.^{ccxxxiv} This free-form armature is laden with influences from performance traditions out of gay culture – ie, lip-synching and transvestism – and multiple others, such as Commedia, mime, gesture, cabaret singing, etc.^{ccxxxv} Even in performance it remains heavily improvisational, in some sections only using words when absolutely necessary, relying more on non-verbal modes.

In other sections, words are derivative of pop-cultural sources. One such segment is based on some British TV show where “ordinary people” tell of their lives, a trope of ridiculizing conventional heterosexual existence. While later in his career, van Hove has come to lean on actual electronic multi-media onstage, here he introduces a different, non-technical, form of mediatization that Lehmann defines as...

...its very opposite: theatre on a bare stage with minimalist, pared down aesthetics, which nevertheless can only be understood by being related to life in a 'mediatized' society. Whether or not media technology is actually being used on stage, as Etchells says, 'technology will move in and speak through you, like it or not.' [...] When contemporary experimental live performance now uses or reference media, it is partially 'remediating' film and television but not in order insidiously to 'replicate' them to maintain its legitimacy ... but in order to probe their status and impact on us in a self-conscious manner) – including their history of remediating theatre.^{ccxxxvi}

Both content of segments and the space between them are determined by a principle of randomness, extreme spontaneity, and refusal to produce formed moments or even much of anything for long periods of stage time. There is a bare stage with mikes, which allows for a presentational style, and long uneventful transitions between segments, as the

performers change in and out of costumes right in front of the audience.^{ccxxxvii} “Rebel Soul” is the first song. A few other melodic and uninhibited rock songs follow, but then the singers look at each other as though embarrassed. Next they take off all outer garments and come back to the mikes. They feel around in their elastic waists, pockets, look at each other uneasily in silent sexual tension, and, potentially, attraction. The initial unease evolves into a silent power game, in fact a Mirror Game, one of Viola Spolin’s exercises. Shuffling shoes develops into a dance evolving with varying degrees of speed and force into a Rockettes number before it breaks down entirely. Phrases of abstract sound and movement get repeated picked up and explored, yet another Spolin or Open Theatre game. One steals another’s shoes, which morphs into a lengthy exchange of shoes and socks to see what difference it makes. Attraction leads to emulation.

Following these preliminaries, the large center of the play consists of the three male actors departing from their own interrelationships and incarnating various harshly satirical renditions of straight people, all very unflattering. They start by lip-syncing Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin, father and daughter French celebrities are impersonated, and sing at each other lasciviously. This marks van Hove’s first exploration of several into incest.

The song once over, the third actor, wearing a long orange wrap-around skirt and white towel over his head, takes the focus, and turns the skirt into a commedia curtain. The other two run behind the skirt, which is now held aloft. Then all three clown around behind it like Punch and Judy, donning pointy gold hats, telling coarse jokes. One plays a raucous out of tune sax over the top of curtain. They dissolve in raucous laughter as they ever so gradually transition out of this segment. The long transitions between segments bespeak an intentional defiance of professional discipline, but introduce a lax rhythm familiar from Happenings and Performance Art, one that refuses to bow to the audience demand for constant sensation.

Next, there is a long segment taken from British TV, where ordinary people turn out to parade their lives. The first “volunteers from the audience,” plants who are a married couple and their friend Amanda, “the other woman.” They are none other than the same three cast members, two of whom thus appear in drag. They play out heterosexual roles of mutual degradation riven with alcoholism, and domestic brutality. In this work without concession to editing out of weak dialogue or rank vulgarity, there are many repetitions. Rape, anal attacks, frottage by way of flirting are among the gross acts these “TV show” participants unreservedly dive into. They engage into numerous exchanges from dominant to abject role-playing, but the women generally find themselves in the degrading, victim position. The ultimate recourse of all connubial discord is that the husband invariably and often slaps his wife viciously in the face when she won’t come across with what he wants.

The many scenes of domestic violence, here played in the distanced style of brutal clown shows, forecast such of the later van Hove’s curiously disparate script choices as *Othello*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Faces*, and *Rocco and His Brothers*. We will see in all of them that he imposed or seized on potential for abrupt, intense, and early physical violence to

break out between heterosexual domestic partners. Authorship over time gives way to auteurship, but the *stuff* of the text often is or is made to be identical, deriving from the stuff of a singular obsessive vision.

Discarding those tropes, the three performers parade around to a James Brown tune. This section is almost entirely physical and non-verbal. No longer playing assumed roles, the three actors are left simply with each other and themselves. They face their longing for contact, their embarrassment that they have these longings, and an uncertainty about how far they could go before they'll be answered by rejection and ridicule from their peers. Their movements are governed by a leitmotif of contradictory impulses: abandoning themselves to their attractions for each other, arising self-consciousness at having gone too far, and each projecting their own self-censure on the others. The Grotowskian/Artaudian tenet they're all clearly working from mandates that they are to go to extremes of physical exertion in order to break through to some psychic self-confrontation and exposure.

This show demands a lot of patience from audience. There are long extended dancing segments, interspersed with mere milling about. It periodically coheres into high points of come interest. But much of this segment is dross, where the actors wander around the edges of the space and search for an impulse to follow. The dancing finally rises to sweat-bath of dionysiac frenzy that resolves into a one-man dance in a trope of self-exposure as the other two watch him lose himself. As the two "spectators" wander off, the exposed one finally stops, conscious of the self-spectacle he's been making that lost him an audience. All three are embarrassed. They then wipe the sweat off each other in silence, poke each other in the navel, forage in there with their fingers, but then look around as though they were worried they'd be overseen doing something illicit. They then once more segue into lip-syncing and dancing around like the Supremes, to the Motown song "Dirty Old Man." We see this pattern of coming close to physical intimacy that gets diverted into song and dance again in the later van Hove show, *True Love*.

The entire trio, having worked itself into a state of liberation and self-abandonment, two of three once more drop out of the revels, leaving only one to forge on to the end, singing and dancing by himself. Meanwhile the two others light a real campfire upstage, thus once more repeating a trope of belonging and abandonment. The third leaves off dancing and joins them. One sings "House of the Rising Sun" accompanying himself with a soulful acoustic guitar, in sharp contrast to the showy Motown number. This segment is very relaxed, formless, and unpretentious in contrast with the glitzy, campy one just preceding it. A half moon is flown in above their heads as the stage lights fade out entirely on them. They sing on into the gathering darkness. All of a sudden many stars are hanging over the stage, and the three stand staring at them in wonder, grabbing each other's pants – in a half-sexual, half innocent spirit. That's how the show ends: with innocent images of boys together.

It's all very outré, and tedious too, if judged by the criteria of traditional theatre. But, if seen through a post-modern or post-dramatic lense, the same criteria do not apply. Later in his career, many of the same propensities resurface, but within the more disciplined

frame of radical interpretation of established texts. What he came out with in *Wild Lords* and the two pieces that succeeded it were totally unexpurgated and unformed pieces, baby and the bathwater all-together affairs, grab-bags of whatever came up in rehearsal to which neither a strong editor's scissors nor a sensitive organizing phase had been applied. And yet it is clear that this is all material van Hove urgently needed to get out of his system and set rudely before the public. It's the kind of stuff that takes courage to put out in a homophobic culture with strong, strict Catholic traditions such as Belgium, and it has the kind of devil-take-the-hindmost, take-it-or-leave-it insolence throughout. In the long view, one might consider it a theatre of incubation, one of the artist's way stations on the path to finding his voice.

The next piece during the same early period van Hove took a stab at was Calderon's *The Constant Prince* from the Spanish Golden Age, calling it instead *Wonders of Mankind* (*Wonderen der mensheid*). This was a play that Grotowski did a famous production of as well. Apart from that, we never seem to hear of it, and it is seldom anthologized. It is certainly not the Calderon text that is normally revived, that being his famous *Life is a Dream*. But here, Calderon was again purely incidental. It was rather an attempt to do another post-dramatic show in which music, movement, and image supersede text and leave it behind. This was a creative path heartily embraced by Jan Fabre, but ultimately not taken as wholeheartedly by Ivo van Hove. The freedom from text that Ivo achieved in this production, however, forever after accounts for the insouciant departures and liberties he later takes when text presumably becomes king. One example that recently jumped out at the audience occurs when Hans Kesting as Richard III in the midst of *Kings of War* suddenly drops the Shakespeare text, picks up the receiver to a red telephone on his desk, and says, "Hello Barack." Next he picks up a white telephone receiver and chats in German with Angela Merkel. And finally, via a green receiver he speaks with Vladimir Putin in Russian, then goes back to Shakespeare, but not without editorializing that Putin is, "a fag."

It is a series of non-verbal études between the four men and one doll-like woman. One may be reminded of Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* or, even farther back here and elsewhere in this show, to Happenings from the 1950s and 60s or Marinetti's Futurist *Serate* from the 1910s for antecedents. Van Hove credits the performance art tradition he witnessed when young, particularly the work of Marina Abramovic, as a personal, direct influence,^{ccxxxviii} but a whole slew of other performance movements about which he may be less informed are crowding behind it.

Body movement sometimes galvanizes into traditional dance modes such as tarantella, flamenco, Fred Astaire dancing from 1930s movie musicals, at so forth. At the same time there is a wild mix of music, including from opera (*Trovatore*) and other classical music selections including "The Blue Danube" and "Thus Spake Zarathustra," all too well known, all easy to make fun of; pop songs from the 70s like "Angie," "Happiness is a Warm Gun," and "Yellow Submarine;" and period dance music like "Put on Your Dancing Shoes," Bossa Nova and other latin music; plus some German Heimat song round the campfire – in short, an unrelated smorgasbord of familiar music that make for easy, often kitschy, commentaries on the action. Here is established the precedent for

van Hove's idiosyncratic use of the music of bad taste – the content any extant musical piece forming literal, thematic echoes of a given dramatic moment. Sometimes it brings a smile, often evokes a nostalgic wave. The intellect seeks to resist such a knee-jerk emotional response, since it's too easy; so a conflict arises in the spectator whether to resist or succumb to the over-obvious manipulation – another hallmark of the post-dramatic.^{ccxxxix}

The most recent use of this approach by van Hove is in the 2014 NYTW production of *Scenes From a Marriage*. There we hear the easily recognizable introductory chords from Paul Simon's "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover" just as the main character, Johan, has announced he's leaving his wife of twenty years, Marianne. Then Marianne puts on an LP of Leonard Cohen singing "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye," a tune sure to bring tears to the eyes of superannuated hippies, in a ploy to keep him from leaving. Then, even kitschier, at the end of the show "Windmills of My Mind" plays. The apogee of this intentionally over-obvious use of saccharine golden oldies is when he inserted a particularly cloying rendition of "Some of My Favorite Things," from *The Sound of Music* for Jon Fosse's portentous, pinteresque *A Summer Day*, in which a husband goes out on a boat and doesn't return. It's like putting a garish statue of a leprechaun in the middle of a Japanese rock garden. And on and on. These baby-boomer favorites perhaps assist in reenforcing an Aristotelian catharsis in the public. It is well understood that music can often touch an emotional chord that would support the dramatic action. Or, in contrast, they may perform an anti-Aristotelian function, a sly, Brechtian one of first evoking the easy sentiment, and then next causing us to examine why we allow our emotions to be so easily manipulated, which, I confess, is what happens to me every time it occurs. Or perhaps it's because Ivo just thinks the tunes, which after all come from a culture alien from his own and may not seem kitschy at all to him, fit the moment in a naive sense of literally echoing the dramatic action. Suffice it to say, using such recognizable tunes are pervasive in van Hove shows.

***Desire Under the Elms*, Zuidelijk Toneel, 1992**

Julian Green's 1957 play *South* started van Hove on his practice of unearthing American twentieth century playtexts that, however revered, would be tricky to revive in an American context and seldom have been. O'Neill became an especial favorite of his,^{ccxli} but Lillian Hellman, Green, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller all eventually come in for van Hove revivals. *South* is a most peculiar play by a peculiar writer. Its sole British production was put on shortly after it was written, but was banned by the Lord Chamberlain due to its supposed gay content, which today we would find extremely subdued. Julian Green was born and educated in the American South, ancestral home to his mother's family, and then spent his entire adult life in France, where, apart from this play and few other works, he wrote primarily in French. He was accepted into the Pantheon of great French writers and even brought into the Académie Française, even as he remains little known in Anglophone countries.

The play is set on a plantation in South Carolina, during the last three days prior to the bombing of Fort Sumter, only a few miles distant from the plantation. The gay plot thread concerns an extremely bottled up but charismatic Polish transplant to South Carolina, Lieutenant Wicziewsky, who falls in love with the scion from a neighboring plantation, Eric McClure. After trying and finding himself incapable of confessing his love (although it is divined by several other characters), he fabricates a conflict with his beloved. This move boxes McClure into corner where honor requires that he challenge the Pole to a duel. The latter dies in the contest. Throughout, other characters, notably Regina, a stiff-necked cousin from the North, but McClure as well, are seething with unexpressed libidinous longings. This is all set against the backdrop of a beneficent plantation where the landowner Edward Broderick prohibits his family from laying a hand against the Black slaves.

While the gay theme may have come to be acceptable, even extremely tamely handled as it is here, some of the sentiments from the Black slave would be extremely difficult for a contemporary American audience to swallow. Green, who exiled himself from Virginia to Paris, called himself a “*sudist*,” and maintained the family loyalty to the Confederate cause, even from the remove of France. When he writes a play about antebellum South Carolina, these sympathies seep through. Many of the slave characters have run away from the plantation, but returned because the life there agreed with them. The old blind black seer Uncle John says:

You’ve been very good to me. You freed me twenty years ago, or more. You gave me a little house and a cornpatch by the roadside. We stayed on the plantation because we love you, and it’s because I love you that I got up this morning when I heard the children, and came to see you.

Also, the female house slave Eliza has a long soliloquy in which she fantasizes about being white as she looks in a mirror. This type of regressive longing for a change of racial identity may pass muster in an Adrienne Kennedy play, but treads on thin ice in a play written by a white male. The affectionate and loyal attitude of the slaves toward their masters in the South Carolina of *South* just at the onset of the Civil War may partially account for how seldom this fascinating play gets revived here.^{ccxli}

It seems that what attracted van Hove to this play is the gay theme, as well as the generalized undercurrent of intense sexuality that the director once again, drags out of the subtext and physicalizes with stark brutality. Apart from these points of interest, the dialogue is very beautifully crafted, and the play, while partaking of old-fashioned dramaturgy reminiscent of Hellman or O’Neill, also has intimations of abstraction, as for example in stage directions which describe the characters as silhouettes in the dark. Van Hove plumbs these stylistic opportunities and works on bringing secondary codes to life. It is certainly a play worth recovering.

But it was with Ivo’s production of O’Neill’s neglected American classic, *Desire Under the Elms* that he was firmly established as a director to contend with on the Flemish/Dutch landscape. The showman in him came to the fore as he captured headlines by employing eight cows. It is certainly noteworthy that *Desire Under the*

Elms is also a play about incest, albeit incest between non-blood relations. O'Neill has written a play about the intersection between material property and potency – both of which are related. Whose farm is it? Whose woman? O'Neill has the two dramatically intersect, and it is from this capitalist-materialist starting point that van Hove jumps in.

His production is a foray into hyper-realism that outdoes Zola and the early naturalistic theatre of André Antoine in respect to authentic detail. It places insistent emphasis on low, appetitive, repellant daily behavior, appropriate to the farm milieu being depicted. In the more immediate past it surely grows out of the New German Realism of Francis Xavier Kroetz of the 1970s, the resurgence in uncovering the maggots under the rotting flesh of daily life. In New York this style was unveiled in the important 1984 production of *Through the Leaves* directed by Joanne Akalaitis, featuring the late Ruth Malaczech. It is also on display in such Fassbinder films – which van Hove confesses he doted obsessively on – as *Merchant of Four Seasons* and *Fox and His Friends*.^{ccxlii} Missing from O'Neill's world as brought to life by van Hove is any cause for moral outrage at intolerable economic conditions, which formed the bedrock of Zola's theories on naturalism. Rather van Hove offers a close look at a love triangle in squalid surroundings, in a production that pushes the bestial. There are real animals onstage, and the humans act like animals. Although such American productions were not available to van Hove, it bears resemblances to such recent predecessors as Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and more especially the taciturn and debased world of Irene Fornes's *Mud*.

O'Neill's resuscitated modern classic gains force by having its antiquarian, ponderous New England dialect – transcribed so thickly as to make it difficult to enjoy reading in English these days – translated and adapted by a master of local Flemish dialect, Arne Sierens. Van Hove, who is free from the reverence for or annoyance with O'Neill's language since he staged it in this free Dutch translation as he is is unaligned regarding American Civil War politics. Presenting Green and O'Neill's plays in provincial Dutch Eindhoven, he was exempt from implicit obligations to present them according to any American time-honored tradition. This left him free to envision them fresh and unaccustomed and breathe new life into them, as he has done so often since. Sierens replaces the muddy American palaver with a lightly archaicized Dutch, which according to some is impenetrable and others wonderful. Though it might be reminiscent of rustic Flemish peasant jargon, it appears to be a construct of it rather. We take it for granted that O'Neill's language is an authentic record of a New England dialect, but how do we really know? This artificial lingo in Dutch, then, has a directness of expression and simplicity that is more analogous to the stripped-down visceral English of Shepard or Fornes than to O'Neill's sometimes wooden cadences.

O'Neill set it in 1850 New England and gave it a jagged dialect in order to tap into the same sort of feelings. For Zuidelijk Toneel Arne Sierens translated that blunt instrument into an unfathomable sort of Flemish that has much in common with the set designer, Jan Versweyveld's, cows. It is a language cobbled together out of scraps, out of dissonances, developed only to express the most urgent of feelings. Reflection and thought are made redundant through an unwavering tradition. The which gets deflected into action, but scarcely into language.^{ccxliii}

I just wouldn't overestimate the original English dialect's intelligibility either; it's likely a fair equivalent of the original. Shepard, Fornes, and Van Hove (or Sierens's O'Neill) all stand in the same relationship to naturalism: referring to it, but actually betraying it, and creating a poetic space in which the concrete accrues metaphorical life through overkill. Eight cows onstage particularly create a sense of clutter and false verisimilitude. For while they are pure aleatory agents, standing, sitting, peeing, and defecating in defiance of dramaturgical requirements, and are bearers of unimpeachable semiological authenticity, they make it impossible to forget you're watching a play. The animals provided enormous sensation for the show, and they were headlined in all the press reponses.^{ccxliv}

The play begins with murky lighting with a reddish glow, suggesting a pre-dawn hour, which picks up here and there on some details and only gradually brightens to reveal the entire stage, with isolated pinpoints coming up on significant figures. Stage right a real cow is being milked, the rest calmly masticating. They are animate space-fillers, but there is a great deal more in inanimate farm implements and furniture cluttering up the space in seemingly chaotic fashion. This farm culture, deeply imbued with primitivism, is devoid of privacy or the niceties of civilization. But it is also simply a violation of naturalistic imperatives that the kitchen and the bathroom be divided or that there be walls between them.

There are four cows in all stage right and another four are later revealed stage left. All the four men of the family are dressed in drab farmers' outfits – that are clearly the standard European and not the American farmer garb – gray-blue jumpsuits. Once their costumes and dialect establish them as very Flemish farmers, the fact is further driven home, for they chug Genievre and not the whiskey (or “likker”) indicated in the play – the drink of choice in such homespun American plays. The older sons, Simeon and Peter are slobs, their shirts partly hanging out of their pants and their hair slicked down unappealingly.

A special grim humor of human and animal fluids, functions, and excreta is firmly established and explored in this show. Milk spurts into a can before our very eyes in the old fashioned way, procured without any machines, but by hand. Peter, one of the brothers crosses centerstage, kneels and washes his face in a giant metal bucket. Stage left, another, the younger brother and hero of the play, Eben, is cooking something over a real open fire beneath a bucket right on the stage floor. Peter who washed is now eating something. The third brother, Simeon, holding a coffee cup, forages deep and long in his nose.

Prominently situated between the now well-lit cows is a long table. Simeon takes a long, long pee, which gives every indication of being as real as the fire, into the cow pen. Halfway through he spits in the same direction as the pee for good measure. Meanwhile Eben, the leading man son role, played by the talented Peter Van den Begin is sitting back as numerous pots and pans simmer away. An older man playing his father, Cabot, a noted Dutch actor Gerard Thoolen, in what was to be one of his last major roles before

dying, stands rubbing his crotch. In short, we are treated to a lot of vulgar, low activities, getting us into the groove of what purports to be real farm life in rural New England-cum-rural Flanders.

Eben finishes cooking and unceremoniously drops thick round pieces of ham onto plates. The entirely male family prays perfunctorily, and eats in silence like pigs in a trough. The two elder brothers, argue with the father about Eben's dead mother whose farm it was until her husband Cabot worked her to death. They address each other in a nasty pissed-off mode of speech, which then soars into lyricism when evoking a dreamed-of future far away in California. Of the cows that are immediately upstage of the breakfast feast, two lie down during the scene. Eventually the lyrical mood arising from the dream of California and far away places sets in, and they go to sleep, followed by darkness and a long pause to delineate the end of this segment or act.

As Simeon and Peter do go off to prospect for gold in the west, they sing "California, Here I Come" as a rock and roll-like riff – which is anachronistic in every sense. Cabot, when he sees his sons are leaving the farm for good, has a conniption on the floor, screaming about a knife he'll use on them, which is nowhere to be found in the playtext, and beating the floor. The excellent acting is here and there mixed with such arbitrary incursions from other "codes," and it must be wondered why van Hove found this necessary. Brechtian distantiation? In order to make it more familiar, or simply to break the spell of the story and universalize it? In his earliest work, all was improvised. In all his mature work improvisation may always be resorted to to violate or amplify the main text, as it does here, although with greater or lesser justifications in each case.

Abbie (played by Hilde van Mieghem), the woman Old Man Cabot has just married, arrives in blue polka dot skirt, unbecoming high-heeled shoes, and a gray jacket. Her low white bobby socks, suggesting some indeterminate period of the past: the 1940s? 50s? She is unfashionable, but somehow magnetic, plain, but possessed of a dominant personality. Her arrival is instance to a lot of fooling around, splashing water out of a large tub, throwing hay around, all intended to impress her. She indulges in shrill, determinedly jolly singing of John Phillip Sousa tunes, although they do strongly resemble the oompah tunes one might find at a Flemish fair or "*kermis*." But American tropes in the Flemish environment tend to muddy the water, and that must be the idea. She speaks mollifyingly to Eben, and he responds by spitting a mouthful of food across the stage at her, accusing her of trying to take over the farm, which belonged to his dead mother, and thus by rights, to him. While in the text, O'Neill has her responding to him with calm forbearance, in this production, they, typically for Ivo, have a violent, loud argument, with both fighting hard. She seems to dominate, and he takes refuge under the table. He's obviously smitten with her. Still, she is a plausible young wife to the old man, who has now put on a bright red shirt and is vigorous for his age.

The extremity and animalism of the theatrical business continues next, in the extended non-verbal segment which follows. Abbie changes into sneakers and dons an apron, ready for work, in an almost a ritual transformation. Eben, in his turn, strips down to his skin upstage, and sits down into the water in the big tub to wash himself, presaging the

famous van Hove bathtub in *Streetcar Named Desire* in future years. His bathing himself is a long affair charged with sexual arousal. As he washes himself, she washes the floor around him on her hands and knees. Both Eben and Abbie maintain silence in their shared space. She even dips a pitcher into his dirty bathwater to get more floor-washing water for herself. He dries off naked in full view of the audience, as she cleans and sets the table and starts peeling potatoes. He pats his hair down using the soiled water out of her tub. He then gets dressed in a way meant to show himself off to better advantage than previously, replete with a white handkerchief awkwardly sticking out of his jacket pocket, and clodhoppers on his feet. Again, a ritual is at work – a courtship ritual. While he is very awkward and self-conscious in front of her, yet she seems to appreciate the new look.

Whereas in the O'Neill play Abbie drops subtle, cautious hints as to her attraction for the son, here she promptly lays down on the stage floor her arms splayed out, in sensual surrender, inviting him. He lies down in a similar pose, across from her. They are thus in sync. She gets up and lies down in the crook of his arm. He seems to be physically revolted, and vamooses as the father arrives. Father Cabot drinks milk from the milk can, eyeing the girl with proprietary lust and appetite. He approaches her grossly, brutally sticking his hand in her breast, taking possession; she rejects him. He is vexed and starts ordering her around in a bestial dictatorial way, and then makes another attempt on her body. When she tells him she wants to make a son with her husband, he buries his head in her crotch. But immediately after a short scene break, Eben is in bed, and Abbie is undressing him. The father, Cabot, is lying on a bed stage left, naked, as his son, Eben is doing the same stage right, and to reiterate, there are no walls or screens between them. Abbie, wearing her slip, lies on the floor center stage weighing their respective virtues.

The turbulent lovemaking is depicted as a series of sudden shifts in power, as well as alternations between violence and tenderness. As the father goes off to sleep in the cow stables the boy and girl throw themselves at the other, and make passionate love on the table. Here, as in other productions, *Scenes from a Marriage* for example, a table may be used as a bed or vice versa. The lovemaking dissolves into shouted and violent abuse, both parties sneering at each other. She dominates with words, so he resorts to throwing her back on the table. Then she takes charge pressing his mouth against her breast, and just as suddenly becomes tender. When she exercises the ultimate power of abandonment by finally walking out on him, he is left there howling in uncertainty and pain.

What starts as an argument between the old and young man transforms into a physical battle. This is the first of what turns out to be a series of physical confrontations, during which the verbose dialogue is mostly suspended. The stronger father, goaded on by the boy, at great lengths is pulled into the fray and predictably defeats the younger, weaker one. The “fist-fight” is here depicted as a series of open-handed slaps showering the head and body, which is in fact the typical van Hove physical fight, whether between man and woman or two men. Abbie tries to break it up, and the father responds by going off. The boy in turn berates the woman, channeling his resentment at losing the fight on her. Following the pattern, the anger resolves into love and affection, and then morphs into

yet another slap-fest. Once she is lying on the ground, trounced, as a coup de grace he spits a big clod of spit into her face.

Van Hove permits and encourages these lengthy non-verbal, physicalized segments in violation of the American tradition for continuous, uninterrupted dialogue in such canonical plays, in fact deliberately ignoring and reinventing as he pleases. But once a character has a long monologue, especially with a playwright such as O'Neill who is known for his prolixity, it too can go on for as long a chunk of stage time as the non-verbal fight sequences.

When the lights next come up, she laughs heartily, rolling on the floor, her body exposed, the laughing segueing to a heart-wrenching howl of "Noooooooooooo!" at the thought of Eben's leaving and going to America. He, all the while, eats like an animal at the table – the mush, drooling into a bowl, seemingly indifferent to her suffering. The boy and girl wind up wrapped up in each other lying on stage floor, asleep. Cabot walks around upstage clapping, slowly, then faster. He is applauding them, then rages at sight of them together, sits at table, and talks incontinently. The young man eventually overturns his bowl, splattering his face with mush. He goes into a violent, rageful sea ditty, as he tromps around the stage. All of a sudden an upstage area that had never been used or noticed earlier, appears, revealing a male figure with wide-brimmed hat silhouetted in a door opening. And the play is over.

In this production van Hove succeeds in integrating all his earlier groping – dialogue, movement, image, full, committed acting, and post-dramatic innovation, all dovetail at the unlikely point at which Zola intersects with Artaud. Both the slice-of-life, which wallows in the material, and the breakthrough beyond the material level to extremes of the spiritual sphere, now coexist and reinforce each other. In this play about potency, van Hove unearthed his own directorial potency, where his earlier forays come together into a united whole of theatrical dazzlement. The unprecedentedly strong, realistic acting he elicited from the actors in this show paves the way for a similar coup years later in *Cries and Whispers*.

***Splendid's* Zuidelijk Toneel, 1994: Consummation of the Theatre of Cruelty**

Following on the heels of two shows which focus on illicit heterosexual relations, the earlier English classic, John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and the second an American modern classic *Desire Under the Elms*, van Hove turns to an obscure example of French Theatre of the Absurd, which is also an explicitly gay play by a frankly gay playwright. A reading of *Splendid's* written version reveals a sketchy, even half-baked text in which character development is meager and the narrative blurred. Genet wrote it in 1948, but requested that it be published only posthumously. It finally was in 1993, one year before van Hove staged it in Dutch, following its world premiere at the Berlin Schaubühne, and apparently before it had ever been staged in the original French.^{ccxlv}

It is not, by any measure, on a par with Genet's best-known works – *The Maids*, *The*

Blacks, or *The Balcony*. It is, though, his most blatantly gay play, and the only one that van Hove has been moved to put on thus far. Van Hove saw in it an opportunity for theatrical fireworks and a machine or pretext for working out directorial experiments that ultimately justify belief in the work's potential value, and provide a trampoline for one of his most compelling shows. He invests it with much of the baroque imagery and extravagant life of sexual assault coupled with ecstatic devotionism that characterize Genet's novels – *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *The Miracle of the Rose*, *Querelle of Brest*, etc. – which, in encapsulated form, it strongly resembles.

It depicts a world unto itself, that of homophilic French street toughs. The production marries the outpourings of a petty thief – Genet – writing a text for the theatre with the realization of Artaud's theories for ideal theatre production practices. The text opens the door to a bath of bathos, sexuality, and exaltation through crime and voluntary humiliation, and van Hove elicits extreme wallowing in all of them from his collaborators. An Artaudian approach to voice and gesture is a theatrical vocabulary he has periodically explored since the very beginning, with *Rumors*, *Disease Germs*, and *Wild Lords*, in what van Hove has dubbed his “primitive manner.”^{ccxlvii}

In the extremely terse stage directions which introduce the script, along with the three or four other scraps of information Genet provides beyond dialogue, we are informed that “they [the criminals] never touch each other.” However, this prescription is not strictly adhered to in this production.

This show approximates the site-specific warehouse used in *Disease Germs*, and when it played in Ghent it was done not in a theatre space, but a real site-specific cellar. But when it was done at De Singel, a major cultural center, in Antwerp, it had to reproduce that same ambiance in what really is only a theatre space.^{ccxlviii} Metal grills surround the stage, and enclose a series of individual, separated platforms that comprise the set proper, behind which is the corrugated metal wall of the warehouse. It is a raw, makeshift environment. The play opens with cacophony as the audience assembles, and there is a lengthy piece of time for the atmosphere to be established before the dialogue begins.

A middle-aged bald figure, Scott, who resembles Genet a bit, presides in a swivel chair, enjoying all the noise and pluming himself up. A policeman character, wearing a tight-fitting uniform and no jacket, reminiscent more of a member of The Village People than an actual cop, bops to the raucous music. He surveys the scene, patrols through it, brandishes his gun. Another guy wearing tails compulsively beats and brushes the wire metal enclosures with a big shovel. Another runs around in a frenzy. The audience is greeted with lots of screaming and incomprehensible babble, priming them for something menacing to follow. The want of seats forces them to stand or else try to overcome their discomfort by milling. A bell announces the start of the play proper, and the spectators are then stuck where they happen to find themselves at that moment.

Each of the gang members is on his own elevated platform separated from the others, the audience at their feet distributed around them. From the spotty exposition of the play we learn that they have committed a crime and are now holed up in a hotel awaiting a siege

by the police, which, they expect, will leave them all dead. Throughout the play they remain in their harshly delimited spaces on islands separated from each other by the audience members below, only joining another actor on a different platform at crucial moments of redrawing of alliances.

This static arrangement forces the actors into circumscribed, fascinating movement choices on their own islands, as it were. Genet's text is highly encrusted with imagery in a practically incomprehensible private language. The actors play with it as though it were issuing right from their guts and souls, with a sense that they are going for broke emotionally, physically, and vocally for the highest of stakes. The total conviction with which they perform casts an illusion that we are understanding what is being said, even though it is vertiginous and hermetic.

All the gang members, through casting and costuming are made to appear beautiful and grotesque at the same time. Their acting is simple, direct, and saturated in this imaginary world of 1930s French street thugs. They dredge up unworldly voices and a convincing gestural language that is hieratic, resonant of secret forbidden ceremonies of sacrifice and self-immolation, and transcend the bounds of the everyday.

All of a sudden the music and sound comes to a stop with a flourish. A radio announcer reports a crime and a get-away. The Voice of a radio announcer rattles off a series of expository facts: that seven young criminals are occupying the seventh floor of the luxury Hotel Splendid's, where they are holding a policeman and American millionaire's daughter for ransom. Armored vehicles surround the hotel. Attempts are being made to clear the area of the crowd that is growing ever denser. Several in the crowd have fainted and were taken away by the Red Cross. The public is informed that in a moment of distraction the girl has been "accidentally" murdered and that the "cop" has chosen to take up sides with the criminals. This radio announcer's incursions, as he purports to keep the audience up-to-date with the developing police drama outside the Hotel Splendid's, demarcate the parts of the ritual.

One of the thugs, the gang leader, Jean, often called Johnny, holds a large dangerous looking gun – an Uzi. He is crude, in a jacket and stiff looking white shirt with open celluloid collar, open down to the navel. He has a primitive, impassive facial mask – in the Grotowsian sense of mask – that is mask-like face – and a gruff, surly way of speaking. He barely moves when he speaks, and so exercises convincing authority over the others.

He is in dialogue with a blonde kid of Adonis-like beauty, Bravo, who wears a leather jacket, stiff and starched hanging down behind him, and a white vest. Both are dressed in the awkward lines of French street toughs from the 30s, the clothes that would have been worn in the street culture Genet grew up in. Bravo is ecstatic, but shifts very quickly to hysteria, weeping in self-pity. He whips himself up into a dionysiac frenzy that brings him to his knees. With great wide hieratic gestures, his arms spread open wide, he bemoans his fate and his unfulfilled yearnings. Following his lengthy tantrum, they all lapse into silence. The silences in this play can be excruciatingly long, every bit as long

Then follows another eruption of music, the policeman dancing with abandon, and an update about the gangsters' complicity with the cop. On another table, there is a small plastic elevation consisting of an empty industrial wire spool. A fourth gang-member stands up from his recumbent position on the table and mounts the elevation. This is Riton. He is shirtless and wears a blank mask-like face and a mop of Rastafarian coiled hair standing on end. He has a washboard chest and highly developed muscles that also give an impression of being almost molded out of plastic. His head hangs down and he drools saliva liberally onto the ground. He is treated as a god-like sexual idol, the unattainable object of adoration, for the rest of the gang. When he ultimately looks up he seems to be sightless.

All of a sudden, on one of the platforms appears a miraculous female, alias, the Holy Virgin, alias “The American Woman,” alias the hostage who was reportedly killed, wearing a dress. The policeman below orders them not to the proceeding, but miraculous religious music plays as gangmembers wheel the “mansion” platform through the house like an icon. After the solemn procession Riton unmasks the female figure to reveal that the “American kidnap victim” is actually the gangleader, Jean, who had dressed up in

drag. Next he jumps on him, throwing him to the ground, and beats him up unmercifully, in what almost seems like a rape. Back on his platform Bravo dances a hopping, pounding rhythmic dance in accompaniment to the violence.

The others, including Scott on his table and the others, call “Long live the Queen” as Jean, dressed once more in travesty is wheeled about in glory. They then recite in unison a doggerel verse and each on his own platform dances jerkily around, the choreography “conducted” by both Scott and the Policeman. The grotesque, but exalted segment comes to an abrupt stop as a shot rings out, and then Bravo falls. He writhes and moans pathetically on his platform. Then Jean in his dress staunches his wounds in horror.

The Policeman, now up on one of the platforms, lectures them about what it has cost him to leave the police force and join in with the criminals, and does a narcissistic dance of “discipline,” very sexually charged like a leather queen. He brandishes his gun and strikes flattering poses to show his body off to greatest advantage. Scott in his swivel chair and he then join in a lengthy philosophical disputation, somewhat in the spirit of the dramatized debates between the title characters in Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*. The Policeman grabs a flower, eats part, and tosses it away, then drops it on the body of the devastated transvestite. Spreading her legs in the air and spewing a lot of triumphalist verbiage all the while, he pulls his pants down and prepares to bugger her, the dead American woman, who is really Jean, the gangleader. The transvestite protests as the Policeman prepares for this, his ultimate triumph. Just before it happens, the Queen of the Ball sits up and, with great, lofty emotion, lambasts all the others. The Policeman lays his head affectionately on her bare breast in a Pietà tableau. Then he proceeds to “electrocute” her with a few brusque gestures and a sound effect. A shiver that goes through her body. She is dead.

But then all the actors gather on the center platform, the first time in the show that they congregate together, and strip off their clothes, replacing them with simpler clothes. They intend to just walk out of the former reality and escape unharmed from what had been established as a hotel surrounded by law enforcement. In this ritual way, they divest themselves of the entire bloody episode that has just transpired, and show it up as a mere charade or enactment – an invented ceremony in fact. The tenor of the acting changes from here on, as though it’s all been one big joke, and they can no longer take anything seriously. One of them sprays the space with water as though shooting. But then, the Policeman reveals that he has been working undercover all along and has them cornered with his prop gun. But the more he has them cornered, the more helpless he becomes, until he finally grabs a bag and playfully throws feathers into the air. After this anti-dance with its explosion of silliness the show ends in darkness and silence.

The press was less than enthusiastic, but blamed the shortcomings on Genet’s slack dramaturgy. Still, they acknowledged van Hove’s enterprise and sexual daring, strong directing which they claimed was still incapable of overcoming the weakness of the text.^{cxxlix}

Faces (Koppen), Zuidelijk Toneel, 1998

John Cassavetes's 1968 *cinéma vérité* movie is the basis for this show, which could be considered van Hove's heterosexual answer to his own production of *Splendid's*. It was the first time that van Hove used a film script as a basis for a live theatre production, a vein he has often tapped into since, with remarkably fruitful results. He presumably doesn't consult the finished movie, only the script, and evolves a scenic world from that source. He is one of the first stage directors to go this route, and it is one that has proved most fertile for him.^{cel} Van Hove, since he left off writing and developing his own scripts many years ago, has been looking for extant texts which say what he wants to say himself, or can be made to say them. In contrast to Shakespeare, which he maintains are too self-sufficient, the film scripts are susceptible to being subsumed within the overarching meta-dramatic narrative within which he wants to embed them.^{celi}

The original film of *Faces* has a grainy, homemade look, full of unscripted scenes that came about through improvisation. There is a jazz soundtrack, and a lot of singing and pseudo-performances put on by the characters for each other in a purely amateur way. Indeed, in the film, there was a fair amount of singing, particularly by Gena Rowlands whose character clearly enjoyed being in the spotlight. Van Hove has taken his cue from that exhibitionist tendency and expanded the musical dimensions. When these live Dutch and Flemish performers sing, they have a more professional veneer than those in the film do. Many of the elements of exposition are incomplete or unexplicated, leaving the audience to speculate and fill in blanks. Many character motivations, as in Chekhov plays, are subtextual.

The film, in a version of the Zola aesthetic, puts the audience in the position of voyeurs peeking in on something unsavory, but extremely human and detailed – almost a sociological cross-section of a certain type of suburban middle class society. Thus we enter into scenes that are already in progress without knowing how these particular characters came to be together or what their specific agendas happen to be. We may glean or guess, but the full conscious and unconscious truth is hidden from us. There is an overwhelming sense that the characters are themselves semi-conscious, careening through their lives based on unbridled impulses that hit them from who knows where at unexpected moments, wreaking havoc for themselves and their intimate friends and family members. They seem to be textbook illustrations of the pioneering gay theorist Edward Carpenter's analysis of married couple, as elucidated by John Clum:

'Men are crippled by their education, which teaches them to dominate but does not teach them self-consciousness or spiritual development: They really have never come of age in any adequate sense.' Men create society in their image: 'In consequence of which we naturally have a society made after his pattern – a society advanced in mechanical and intellectual invention, with huge passion and emotional elements, but all involved in whirling confusion and strife – a society ungrown, which on its material side may approve itself a great success, but on its human and affectional side seems at times an utter failure.' Part of the male-created capitalist order, built on his 'craze for property and individual ownership,' is the enslavement of women. As a result, there are only three

roles for women: The upper-middle-class lady who is basically an ornament the lower-middle-class household drudge, who is free domestic labor, and the prostitute.^{cclii}

At the same time, these are respectable, supposedly heterosexual married people, who bring less respectable individuals into their orbit in order to experience a measure of thrill and sense of freedom from the enforced conformity and high financial and social pressures of their lives. We are not supplied with enough exposition to know whether these forays into infidelity are regular rituals or one-offs. But what starts as controlled experiments in having a little illicit fun, wittingly or unwittingly (we cannot know which) wind up creating gigantic fissures in their official relationships and causes major disruption to their personality constructs.

Connecting the dots from the set of loosely strung together scenes we spy in on, the plot of the narrative is as follows: after his late afternoon tryst with Jeannie, a self-employed prostitute, to which he is accompanied by his buddy Fred, Richard Furst goes straight home. The encounter with Jeannie ended on a sour note, but within minutes of arriving home he tells his wife Maria that he wants a divorce. He then recontacts Jeannie, and eventually gets her away from another pair of johns. He spends the night, during which escapade they make love. After the abrupt and unexpected scene with her husband, Maria, Richard's wife, goes out on the town with three girlfriends to a nightclub, during which they hook up with a certain Chet, a guy out on the prowl. After luring him back to Maria's home, their hostess finally manages to get the other three women out the door, and Maria gets to have sex with Chet. When Richard comes back in the morning, Chet escapes out the window, leaving the unhappily married couple to themselves. At that point, with their marriage demystified, Maria tells Richard she doesn't love him.

The movie fluidly transports us into various rooms in the affluent home of Richard and Maria Forst, a successful CEO and his wife; the home of Jeannie Rapp, an upscale callgirl; a bar significantly called "The Losers' Club;" outside onto streets and in cars and so on. The movie moves chronologically, although disjointedly, through the course of a single late afternoon through to the morning of the following day. In van Hove's production, the spaces lack the identifiability of the movie's realistically depicted locales, therefore registering as more abstract and emblematic. It also makes the individual characters' arcs harder to follow. Instead it foregrounds states of being, underlined by the meandering jazz ambiance, over action. In contrast with Cassavetes's film, we can hardly follow the plot here; indeed plot fizzles away like an Alka Seltzer in water. In short, the Cassavetes trademark kitchen sink naturalism has been given a strong infusion of the post-dramatic.^{ccliii}

While Cassavetes never uses the cinematic "split screen," van Hove does just that in a live theatre equivalent, keeping simultaneous life going in several areas at the same time – once more applying his oft-used principles of Ramification and Dispersal. Individual actors, couples, and groups go about their lives all at the same time, creating multiple focii for the audience to keep following, putting them in competition with each other. In these several instances van Hove out-cinematizes Cassavetes. Indeed, van Hove transforms a linear, if disjointed, film into an epic picaresque both through his spatial and dramaturgical strategies. Most often one principal scene, replete with dialogue lifted

from the film, goes on while others proceed in relative silence. This contrapuntal approach reinforces the dominance of jazz, as though the actors were various instruments and voices riffing with each other through successive waves of dissonance and harmony. It is my distinct impression that numerous lines have been added to the Cassavetes script, lines which often clarify a layer of motivation which the film rather keeps hidden or ambiguous. One example is when an actress, evidently making it up, distinctly declares, “I want a baby,” a bit of exposition the movie never included.

Cassavetes’s movie is unmistakably centered in its own time – the late 60s – while evoking a world that feels more like what we think of as the repressed 1950s. This is the milieu of businessmen husbands and stay-at-home wives with two cars in the garage... the sort of people Malvina Reynolds satirized in her song “Little Boxes.” But van Hove eliminates that specificity through costuming. The men wear nondescript jackets, pants, white shirts and narrow ties, and the women unobtrusive though flattering dresses, skirts and blouses classically achronic, but which could plausibly be worn today. We are therefore, then, now, and in no particular time all at once.

As the audience assembles, the actors move about serving drinks, dancing randomly, shedding inhibitions, all of this setting the stage for some sort of Dionysian revels. 1950s and 60s-style live jazz plays throughout. The show too falls in and out of “organization,” like a piece of jazz music. At the start languorous jazz is playing as the audience comes in. They are greeted by a deliquescent, maudlin atmosphere. Three characters, Richard Furst, his old school buddy Freddie, and the callgirl Jeannie, are widely distributed throughout the space, all acting within the boozy keynote that establishes the acting style and atmosphere. They crouch and stand and swaying to music, singing drunkenly, acting the fool. They’ve obviously already had a few loosening drinks, and all the characters keep up this incontinent swilling right until the end. Liquor is the absolutely essential lubricant for loosening social restraint. The singing builds to shouting into hand-held mikes, as they crow out their songs raucously.

This prologue segues into the first scene – clearly a little party, a gathering among friends. Freddie tears his shirt open, and starts coming on disgustingly and aggressively to Jeannie, who freely accepts his hands all over her. She then walks away and settles into a double bed in the center of the café space, leaving the audience uncertain as to whether she has gone to another part of the room, another room in the house, or a different time/space zone entirely. The free-flowing peripatetics of the Dispersal principle frequently engender narrative discontinuities and ambiguities of which this moment is a paradigm. Meanwhile, Richard is sitting at a far remove in his suit, observing and drinking. In the film Jeannie ultimately accuses Freddie of being vulgar, but here his vulgarity bursts upon us in a far grosser manner than the minor verbal faux pas he commits in the movie.

Both on stage and in the movie, the basis for this scene, that two friends have hired a callgirl and come home with her for some fun, is only made apparent over time. But in both, since the nature of the sex they supposedly got together to enjoy is never consummated, we are left wondering what exactly they had in mind – that one man

would have Jeannie while the other watched, that they would have her both together in some way, or one after the other. We never know, but can assume that the presence of both is necessary for the fulfillment of the fantasy scenario they have imagined. Here Richard, located at a far remove from the others, is very much a voyeur in on Freddie and Jeannie's dance of approach and avoidance.

Freddie and Jeannie sing "White Christmas" discordantly and obnoxiously. She makes up and performs a pseudo Russian folkloric song and dance, and they serenade her with "I Dream of Jeannie," with which she joins in. In all these cases, they turn the film's feeble, almost poignant attempts at performance into full-blown cabaret numbers, backed up by the live jazz ensemble under the baton of the gifted musician, Harry De Wit. They also do the rousing "Limbo Rock," a number from the same period that wasn't in the movie, in a line weaving all through the audience, infecting it with their sense of fun, missing no opportunity to interject a ludic spirit to overcome the desultory base-line mood.

They add other impersonations, as when they play at Cowboys and Indians, mock-shooting each other, and then do feats of prowess from the circus, backed up by drum rolls. These attempts at hilarity dissolve in failure, with Freddie and Richard getting into a shoving match. All the frolicsome and comical pieces of business invariably grow aggressive and hostile, as though the men's competitiveness were just below the surface of their amiability, champing to burst out, a pattern that is repeated throughout the show. "I Dream of Jeannie," segues into close dancing that melts into an embrace between Richard and Jeannie. But every time the actual anticipated sex is on the point of being realized, one of the three veers away from it, as when Jeannie does kama sutra calisthenics to invite Freddie into sex which doesn't lead anywhere.

Just as the Dispersal technique creates dramatic disjunctions, it also allows for simultaneity of action. The next scene starts long before the previous one has run its course, as women, notably Richard's wife Maria, makes phone calls to her mother and her friend Louise in a different part of the space in one of those "split-screens." Eventually the first scene tapers off, and is replaced by a four-way phone conversation between various women at extreme ends of the playing space, and at a variety of levels, from high to low, speaking simultaneously and overlapping. They don't hear each other or barely, as they gab about available men, marriage, and so on. Most of this dialogue is invented and wouldn't have been in the film script. It turns into a very long segment of aimless chitchat that works with a rhythm of formlessness and randomness, mirroring the jazz ensemble that meanders along without any discernable organizing principle. It is hard to pick out the whole train of thought of any of their conversation streams. Rather, each part of the audience that is closest will get more of one than the others. It should be assumed that any information that is imparted wouldn't be essential to understanding what happens subsequently.

In the movie there are two – The Loser's Club – where Richard goes looking for Jeannie (and where she is not), and the unnamed one where Maria and her girlfriends pick up Chet. Here, there is only one undifferentiated club that contains all the scenes.

All the men enter the space insinuatingly snapping fingers, circulating freely, interjecting a new sense of forward motion and intentionality, the intention of having a good time that would ideally include transgressive sex, and the women abandon their phone conversations. This segues into a simultaneous dance by the rest of the cast, loosely distributed throughout the space. Disco lights, mostly blue, create visual motion. There is no rush, as the dramatic narrative is thus suspended. After the crucial moment when the central character Richard tells his wife Maria he wants a divorce, the action bifurcates, as did the movie, with both husband and wife pursuing an illicit liaison outside the marriage. He pursues Jeannie. At the same time she goes after Chet, a club denizen on the prowl, who now gets introduced in the dance club where Maria suddenly also appears with her three girlfriends, all married ladies.

Throughout the dance club scenes which ensue, the violence, hostility, and sexual assaults on van Hove's stage are much more explicit and extended than those in the movie, where conflagrations are generally muffled and quickly stifled. Chet starts to casually come on to one after the other of the women, now poking his hand into décolletage, deep-kissing another – that is Florence – who responds by feeling him up, humping him, and trying to distract him. One of her lady friends, trying to lure him away, engages him in dance whose steps require the partners to kiss. The women friends' vying for Chet's attention resolves into a three-way dance that is just as much a clinch as a dance. When Chubby Checkers start singing "Come on, Baby Let's Twist Again!" the triad collapses onto a bed, as other actors Twist elsewhere. Then he breaks out, chasing all the women around the space in incoherent pursuit, as the women scatter screaming.

Jeannie elsewhere has gotten involved in intimate exchange with a third man in a red tie, both of them perched on stools in one corner. This is Jim McCarthy. He fills here ear with the story of his marriage. Van Hove's use of simultaneity is again put to use by starting this conversation unobtrusively almost incidentally. But once the previous scene that had engrossed the audience disperses, our eyes then settle on whatever is left in the cleared out field of vision, the new one between Jeannie and Jim then gathering prominence and dramatic import.

Whereas this scene was set back in Jeannie's apartment in the movie, here everything during this central section appears to take place in the dance clubs. But we can never be really sure, as the locales are never identified in any decisive way. So, we accept that whatever fictional place it may be, it is also in a club, the overarching meta-environment in which the audience and the performers abide from beginning to end. Joe Jackson, Jim McCarthy's sidekick in Jeannie's apartment in the film, appears out of nowhere and attacks Jeannie and attempts to rape her, as Jim tries to prevent it to discordant jazz music.

This violent outburst finally gets sorted out, and the general party atmosphere is reestablished. The latter at this point is feverish, chaotic, disorganized, with lots of simultaneous speaking as follow spots sweep over space, further dispersing our attention. The unpredictably violent Joe Jackson camps it up, pretending to be gay and then, on a

whim, breaks a lot of glasses. Low-level disputes break out everywhere. The guys start taking off their jackets and preparing to fight. This leads to clumsy jumping on, rolling about, and pummeling each other drunkenly, right in the laps of the audience. Everyone is screaming and hurling accusations indiscriminately. Each time Joe Jackson is subdued briefly, he then erupts again, with periodic spates of glasses shattering, as the women stand off to the side commenting with Chet. This long segment is an elaboration of certain extremely minor moments in the film that Ivo allows to expand and explode.

This intentionally random comes to an abrupt stop when McCarthy proclaims contempt for his son's affinity for the game of tennis, which he implies is effeminate. Richard in response falls out, laughing uncontrollably. Richard and Jeannie are now left alone, the atmosphere turning intimate and even tender. As she quietly smokes, their badinage eventually leads to a deep embrace and kiss, while a lazy jazz piano riffs behind them. They then transfer over to one of the double beds and she starts undressing him slowly as they talk low. She kisses his toes and moves up his body, singing "Dry Bones" – "You're shoulder bone's connected to your neck bone," etc. – and playfully feels him up all over, just as in the movie. He's entertained. Their conversation gets deeper, as he confesses that he hates his life.

No actual sex has come to fruition between them by the time a conga line starts up, the café and the "community" once more ritualistically invading and taking possession of the space, ultimately snuffing out their intimacy. Joe Jackson is now jumping on a woman in a red dress, who is Stella, another call-girl friend of Jeannie's. They go into a series of clinches, flirtations, and escapes, embraces and rebuffs, a pattern which goes on simultaneous to Richard and Jeannie resuming their own tête-à-tête. Richard and Jeannie now get more violent and explicitly sexual, grunting the whole time, not actually making love, but engaged in a protracted struggle that stands in the place of copulation.

At this point in the film, Cassavetes uses a jump cut, so we never actually see the two leads in the sex act. Neither do we here, where Jeannie finally stumbles away from the bed. Clearly it's the wee hours and everyone has more or less subsided. Soft, subliminal music with random phrases in English plays and "dawn" lighting comes up. Jeannie starts to restore some order to the space. Chet meanwhile hauls Maria off the floor and into bed, does some vague C.P.R. maneuvers and stumbles to a phone to call E.M.S. He tries to get her, who now gives every impression of being a corpse, to stand and walk, trundling her lifeless body around. In fact she isn't lifeless, as after an agonizingly long time, she starts to gag and come back to herself. When he slaps her hard she comes to, to his delight. She tells him she's cold and he wraps her in a blanket, pulling a sheet out from under some surprised audience members, discomfiting them in the process. Then he tops it all off by sticking a pillow on her head as she sits there looking like Humpty-Dumpty. Once he gets a drink into her hand, they come back to normal and chat aimlessly.

General lights come up throughout the space, this in contradistinction to film, which narrowed in on only one couple, the married Richard and Maria, who have to face each other after their separate revels of infidelity. In van Hove's theatre version the focus is

hereafter dispersed among various couples having conversations and doing random things in all the beds. Jeannie does a backward somersault over her guy, winding up with her butt in his face. This surge in the energy once more breaks down into yet another desultory, aimless scene. Chet is smooching with Maria as Jeannie roves about the entire café, smashing bottles in garbage cans, cleaning up. This provides a harsh counterpoint to the moody jazz. Now all the cast members are pulling themselves together, the men putting on their jackets and roaming around the space. The final scene of recrimination between Maria and Richard in which she tells him she feels nothing for him, that she hates her life with him, is extremely low-keyed and anti-climactic, even as it resolves the principal dramatic action. It is played very softly and intimately, almost not acted at all. She leaves the space and he follows her out. Both the film and the play end on a dying fall, each using its respective means, cinematic and theatrical. Reminiscing about it, van Hove dubbed his show “a great impressionistic fresco.” And so it was.^{cciv}

A Massacre at Paris, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, 2001

This production is yet another convincing example of the prominent place Artaud holds in the van Hove aesthetic, and of the many permutations which may grow out of it. There is a very heavy emphasis on ritual and atmosphere. The sound tapestry, visual life, and daring approach to voice and movement all dovetail to radically alter the very stage air, making it thick, heavy, and redolent of a perverse hallucination that simultaneously manages to be sacred and profane.^{cciv} This is van Hove’s one and only venture into extreme Mannerism, with a whiff of Peter Greenaway in the air, and so represents a road not ultimately taken. In this way, it leap-frogs from the rough wildness of the atmosphere established in *Splendid’s*, and burrowing with it into the uncharted territory of elaborate design.

Christopher Marlowe’s Senecan drama is drenched in resigned foreboding, as though the characters have no choice but to be dragged and to drag others into a foreordained bloodbath of cruelty and crisscrossing revenge plots. This 1579 play is rarely performed, and with good reason. Its weak points are manifest and legion. Seemingly his last work, it is about the Counter-Reformation that depends for its narrative on an event from then recent history. The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew’s Eve ripped through France in 1572, only seven years before Marlowe wrote the play. This was a scourge in which the Catholic Duke of Guise orchestrated the slaughter of many of the prominent Protestants in Paris, a move that then incited similar popular massacres to spread like wildfire through more than seven other French cities. The massacre was precipitated by the marriage of King Charles IX’s sister Margaret to the Protestant Henry of Navarre, the culmination of a series of attempts by Protestants to dominate political and religious life in France in the time of the religious wars of the sixteenth century. This bloodbath, in which from 10 to 20,000 died, led to the Day of the Barricades, and thence to the reactive assassination of the Duke of Guise and coronation of Henri Navarre, all events dramatized in the play.

Marlowe's play seems to be an unbroken series of murders, with only the merest peremptory lead-up to them and reflection on them either before or after. The relentless *fougue* of butchery is evoked with a minimum of linguistic elaboration or interest, depriving the work of one of the virtues of a *Richard III*, for example, where political assassination is also rife and relentless. The chain of decimation is accompanied by the slenderest of character development and is packaged in a truly clunky, almost apathetic, dramaturgy. As Marlowe scholar, J.B. Steane, puts it, where some might see "terrific pace" in the flow of short scenes, "other people may find a sort of scrappiness, or a sense of over-compression...."^{cclvi} The episodes are indeed so ragged and mechanical as to remind one of *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry, rendering the bloodshed distanced if not downright ludicrous. It reads more like an illustrated, rudimentary children's history or chronicle than a fully fleshed out Elizabethan play.

Van Hove's production endeavors to efface this impression, and succeeds. Whereas the actual history of the events depicted reeled over the entire map of France in convulsive throes implicating the lives of many thousands, Marlowe delimits the drama to a virtual royal closet within which the royal presences float through like so many balloons that get pricked and pop. It is this quality, at once claustrophobic and foredoomed, that van Hove captured in his production. One gets a powerful sense of what Jan Kott called "the Grand Mechanism" of history,^{cclvii} and by grabbing a hold of this quality and intensifying it to the nth degree, van Hove turns all the play's weaknesses to performative strengths.

The Marlowe text that has come down to us is significantly shorter than most of his other great works such as *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, or the *The Jew of Malta*. The truncated quality to the text is alien to the structural expansiveness of most Elizabethan plays, with something almost schematic about it that makes it seem that it can't possibly be the finished version or that no finished version was ever written. Indeed it is rarely produced, and was a perverse choice with which to begin van Hove's stewardship of the TGA.^{cclviii}

Scholars think parts may be missing. The taciturnity leaves much murky, and van Hove's adaptor, Bouazza, was at pains to make the complicated historical dynamics much clearer than Marlowe appears to have done. It is evident, on close study of the original text, that his Dutch translation is really an adaptation where so many liberties have been taken that it might be deemed an entirely separate work, one actually superior to Marlowe's.^{cclix}

Bouazza makes the conflict between Catholics and Protestants much more explicit in all the places where Marlowe's text makes so much of the exposition implicit, if not downright cryptic, and harder to grasp. Lines are added, others suppressed, still others assigned to different characters than Marlowe indicates – especially to beef up the womens' roles, to take advantage of the marvelous actresses who are playing them – or are simply interpolated freely. Yet the jumps from Marlowe's lines to Bouazza's are seamless and imperceptible in performance, since the translations of syntax, complexity, and imagery in moving individual English lines to Dutch is so loose and arbitrary. The over-all impression, so different from reading the original, is that the language, whether it be Marlowe's or Bouazza's, is gutsy and powerful.

The actors' humanity is reduced and disguised by strangely shaped, cumbersome costumes and hairstyles. Once they enter, they take their places as elements in the extant landscape – the humans transforming into virtual set pieces. There is something clownish about the costumes, outlandish and unflattering, with odd angles and exaggerated ruffs for the old queens, sexy and sinuous clinging outfits for the men. As the female characters place themselves immediately behind the big shiny spheres that litter the stage, their busts and faces are revealed, but the rest concealed and visually joined. It is as though the human parts were extensions of the spherical set pieces. You might call the spheres "full-body masks" that leave the faces uncovered. They are lit as though from within, and shimmer numinously. To exit, the actresses simply face upstage as the lights around them dim. So as they step away from the spheres, they for all intents and purposes simply vanish. In contrast with the stately immobility of the females, many of the male subalterns in their slinky body suits that make them look reptilianly scaly but virtually undressed. They are in constant, grotesque, acrobatic motion in a kind of movement that perhaps recalls early expressionist dance by Mary Wigman. The Cardinal is depicted as a serpentine and sensuous figure in white leotards, with flowing blonde hair and a bared chest. All the male characters, each in their own way, wear eccentric costumes such as this.

There are also shadow characters in tightfitting space-agey outfits in blue, red, yellow, sculpting their svelte figures. These control the movements of certain others, slowly moulding them into strange and exaggerated postures, as in an echo of Japanese theatre. They then carry their charges off like puppets or lifeless dolls after they have been slain, and there is almost continuous slaying in this play. A continuous and unobtrusive flow of characters on and offstage is thus patterned through gentle dancing, a sound tapestry, and a visual tapestry.

As the Duke of Guise, the central male character speaks upstage various electronic apparatuses go on and off, lighting up and flickering off – like a twinkling, glimmering technological firmament, or suggestive of the neural pathways in his scheming mind. It is a gentle and grotesque approach, unrushed, unforced, that is very inward and outward at the same time. Principal characters who speak simply stand and let the voice and words do the work. This stately river of sound/image-scape flowing by, where humans and set pieces blend into each other even as voices and instruments also meld, makes for a unified aesthetic, different from those found in virtually all of van Hove's other shows.

Van Hove and Bouazza add a prologue that doesn't exist in the play. Catherine, Queen Mother of France, played by veteran actress Ina Van Faasen, enters in black Elizabethan dress and is asked about her son by a secondary character, and we hear really beautiful vocal work from her through her monologues. When she is done, the composer and conductor, Harry De Wit, comes downstage and conducts, his ensemble producing a strong percussive sound that leads into mysterious and premonitory music. His presence blends seamlessly with those of the actors. Hard tones combine with lengthy bell-like chords, as various characters move about and get in place. The female characters poise themselves behind the giant shiny globes, from which only their heads and arms protrude.

Character social standing is denoted by the size of the globe the characters inhabit; some are massive, and others puny. The hierarchy is also reinforced by the length and formality of ritual entrances, as when King Charles of France's primacy is established on his first appearance. He is first seen wrapped in a banner by two lithe, reptilian subalterns, as though from *Mummenschanz*, who are dressed in clinging white. The King steps forward, and exposes the interior side of the rectangular banner by extending his arms. On it is stitched a giant target, and he is at its center, revealed as principal candidate for sacrifice. The unwrapping of various characters and display of their banners just behind them, like sets of rectangular wings, become a ceremonial leitmotif throughout the production.

Charles speaks with hope about the marriage of Prince of Navarre to his sister Margaret, which we learn has just been celebrated. Bells ring out behind him as he speaks and Navarre abases himself before the king. Then the Queen Mother gives her assent, but warns that Navarre's affiliation with Protestantism may prove a source of discord. Notwithstanding the warning, they all go off to celebrate Mass in honor of the union, which the Queen Mother, in a loud aside, vows to "dissolve in blood." Navarre, who remains onstage, frolics like a five year-old, hop-scotching all around the large shiny circular disk which fills the downstage area, and sits and spins on a smaller disk at its center.

Following Navarre's devout wish that the French people protect the Protestant minority, loud clanking music rings out, accompanied by a sharp light change and reconfiguration. The massive bells that sit upstage are operated before our eyes by musicians that strenuously pull a series of hanging cords, as they rock and resonate to introduce a scene between the Duke of Guise and his wife, the Duchess, that is nowhere to be found in Marlowe's play. In Act I, Scene 2 comes one of those extremely long Elizabethan tirades assigned to the Duke of Guise, full of rich poetry and passion, which is the only lengthy soliloquy in Marlowe's play.^{cclx} In the van Hove production however, the actor, going against the grain of the text, aims more for lucidity and limpidity than whipping himself into a rhetorical frenzy. It is at one with the rest of the production in its – not detachment. This is not exactly a kind of Brechtian alienation, but rather a melancholy irony that permeates the proceedings. As characters die, the head lowers, and the bodies are dragged off, most often as they simply say "I die." This was a narrative technique with which van Hove experimented in *'Tis Pity*, but here it does not seem cold or off-putting as it did there, only an extension of the melancholy almost-foreordained wheel of history's turning.

The Duke of Guise, the anti-hero, has sent a poisoned glove to the Old Queen of Navarre, mother of the Prince of Navarre who just got married. She dons it, and afflicted through the skin of her hand, dies talking. A huge amount of text is added to the dying queen's monologue for this wonderful actress to play with. She stands behind one of the large black spheres until the end of both the monologue and her life.

The Queen Mother Catherine who witnesses, and had indeed instigated the murder,

comes out from behind her own giant tomato. The chief villainess' dress is ridiculous, with side bustles, but with her calves exposed. At her instigation, the Duke of Guise directs the massacre of Protestants which forms the nub of the play. He yells in repeated refrain "Push, push, push, die, die, die!" which, as with so much other text in this performance, cannot be found in Marlowe's laconic script. It is because of additions like this that this unprecedentedly brief Elizabethan play here stretches out to a full two and a half hours.

The meandering flow is then broken as *Phantom of the Opera*-like organ music pumps out. The stage also darkens, creating a segment devoid of dialogue, a storm of grotesque *son et lumiere* pervading the stage with no human presence as part of it. The lights flash in a repeated loop of flashing winking over the entire stage – white, blue, orange – conducted by Harry De Wit from the upstage pit in which the semiotic chaos produced is spectacular. Finally, the harsh disruptive segment gives way to an intimate monologue delivered by the lost, melancholy King Charles, he who wears the giant target over his torso, to his two intimates. His speech is punctuated by clanking. One of the two of his entourage appears to be his lover. Charles, while seated on the throne, places that intimate on his lap, who in his turn, caresses the king's hair. The speech becomes a paroxysmic Senecan tirade about the rot in his body, which resolves into a grotesque groan of liver or kidney pain. Has he been poisoned? As with so many things in this production, the historically precise fact of the matter is sidelined in favor of a theatricalist effect. The categorical fact is that he has been eliminated from the political stage and life.

Navarre hovers behind an upright tomato shape, in effect wearing what has been established as a female form as a costume, as a young woman tempts him to love her and exhorts him to conduct himself as a man. He takes the bait, leaping to the exhortation. Although he does start making love to her that intention suddenly shifts when he flings her against the stage right low tomato shape, berating her, and ultimately doing her in.

The play's direction now changes drastically once more. A child's face appears and fills one of the tomatoes, which now functions as a hologramic screen. Imagistically the tomato has morphed into a womb that contains this otherworldly presence. So, into this organically designed environment is added an element of video, albeit one unobtrusively integrated into the organic whole. In that same womb appears a woman garbed in white who chants Dionysically and a male bacchante. These virtual figures dance within the womb shape, suggestive of a happier potential future for France. The play thus ends on a note of restored innocence, a celebratory and optimistic coda to the convulsive disaster which gripped this corrupt, imploding world that is now dead.

Both the audience and critical reception was tepid, making Van Hove's debut at Toneelgroep Amsterdam an initial deflation and his tenure appear precarious.^{cclxi} This partially accounts for why Ivo, who survived the critical debacle, never followed up on this baroque-mannerist style. Looking back, van Hove says that it failed through being "over-designed," with too many visual and aural artists larding the show with their contributions.^{cclxii} Indeed, the reviews tended toward that point of view, with a further

accusation that all the design is a waste of the government's money, putting the new artistic director trying to prove himself both artistically and administratively into an awkward spot. The bad reception caused several of the veteran TGA actors to lose faith in their new artistic director and left the company. It is a very sad development, as this show contains some of the most impressive acting performances of his entire tenure in Amsterdam.

Van Hove too probably took such criticisms too much to heart at the vulnerable moment when he had just assumed artistic directorship of TGA and was staking his new career in Amsterdam on the show's good reception. To me it was quite unified and controlled, with an atmosphere so encrusted one could cut it with a knife, in a manner most satisfying and hypnotic.^{cclxiii}

American and Dutch *Hedda Gabler* (2004, New York Theatre Workshop and 2006, Toneelgroep Amsterdam)

Elinor Fuchs identifies *Hedda Gabler* as the modern play whose "mythic structures of imagery and action" offer the director a post-modern opportunity par excellence, opening up vistas of multiple re-interpretation. It is perhaps not coincidental that van Hove's approach is among his most explicitly post-modern among his productions, where all his clashing and illuminating departures seem welcome. It is also a fascinating case study of the cross-pollination that has transpired as a result of van Hove's trans-Atlantic forays is that of *Hedda Gabler*, which he first directed at New York Theatre Workshop with American actors in English in 2004. He then revived it in Dutch for Toneelgroep Amsterdam in 2006 with some of the same choices intact. At the same time, there were so many crucial alterations that the disparities between the two performances are worth studying in detail. Fuchs's call to "de-classicize the works of 'classical modernism'" is both answered and fulfilled onstage by van Hove's two *Heddas*.^{cclxiv}

In his New York *Hedda Gabler*, Ivo dragged American actors into "European acting" with very questionable results. In later American productions he allowed himself to be pulled in the performers' direction, finding a synthesis between European directing and American acting with better results. From the outside it appears as though he had a very willing cast of American actors at New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW), a group that was looking to try a new approach and strove to give him what he was asking for. But the European approach, this time around, failed to gel, the rave review in the *NY Times* by Christopher Isherwood notwithstanding. Isherwood, the second-string critic on the *New York Times*, had resisted van Hove up to that point, giving him pans. But *Hedda* won him over. He called it "strange and strangely enthralling," "a refreshingly daring revival" which "instantly slips the fall theater season into a higher gear," and "remarkable." Van Hove, he tells us, "is an artist seeking, as Ibsen once did, to illuminate the world around him."^{cclxv}

Isherwood also pays compliments to Christopher Hampton's translation/adaptation, but to my ears it's as stiff and inorganic as most English translations of Ibsen tend to be. The

actors didn't get it to sound any more natural. Van Hove, whose spoken English is quite good, is perhaps still not the best judge of translations of foreign plays into English. And there is no question that the highly accomplished Christopher Hampton ought to be just the right person for the job. Sadly he wasn't, and it had unfortunate consequences for the acting.

Van Hove has revisioned a new sort of scenic world for the Victorian-Age period piece as one more open, modernized, or rather simply stripped of character, in something of the same style as he employed for *South* and *Children of the Sun*. The set is a tasteless, and characterless white box with a sterile Ikea sort of look. Contradicting the text, in which Judge Brack is thanked for taking responsibility for thoroughly furnishing the house while the newlyweds were away for their extended grand tour, the place actually appears quite unready for the return of the honeymooning couple or any habitation. Clearing out the physical clutter is just one way van Hove has tried to start with a clean slate. As he cleared away the Victorian clutter on the scenic plane, the actors seem to approach the text with the same matter-of-fact simplicity, stripping it of traditional delivery. Unfortunately they are impeded by traces of Victorianism in the translation.

He has also worked hard to sweep aside the usual "typed" casting and acting we expect from a revival of this well-known work. "The familiar personae of Ibsen's drama are turned into nasty but undeniably interesting new creatures."^{ccxvi} It's as though he's telling us: "You're used to this part being done this way, but nothing in the text necessarily warrants it, so we're going to go against the grain." There's also a lot of playing against the tone suggested by the text and definitely against the usual way of acting it, which Ivo has often tried before (cf: *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*). In this case, as there, much of it feels arbitrary. The performances from the start are loud, shrill, pushing comic interpretations, with a lot of going for laughs in a play where dry irony is usually the closest it gets to humor.

The play starts with Hedda sitting at an upright piano upstage with her back turned to us while the audience enters. She diddles with the keys, as she doesn't have the skills to actually play, and this is expressive of her aimlessness within her newly wedded and bottled up state. The piano is a wreck, with its guts of wires and wood exposed. The melancholy song "Blue" by Joni Mitchell plays, redundantly reflecting Hedda's mood. One of the first characters we meet is Berthe, the Maid, normally an unobtrusive character – the most minor in the entire cast, in terms of definition, impact on the action, strength of interactions and relationships, in every way in fact. In both this and the TGA production, van Hove set to building up the marginal role of Berthe. He keeps her onstage throughout the production and attempts to make of her a kind of envoy between the audience's world and the other characters'. In most productions she is a functional and marginal figure who enters rarely, has no character to speak of, and contributes little to the stage action except as sounding board for Aunt Julie. Here we watch her sitting on the sidelines throughout, spying on the spectacle of her employers' lives and forming silent and sometimes highly vociferous judgments. The late Elzbieta Czyzewska played it at the top of her voice, pushing for volume and emotion, and bursting into forced crying and giddy laughter at arbitrary moments. The effect was just plain silly. She pushed

every single line without any nuance to the line or sense that some lines might be more important than the others. One suspects that this was just plain ham acting, as she simply appeared to be drawing attention to herself at every opportunity for the sake of the attention. In short, this production brought out all the worst tendencies of a very talented actress.

Aunt Julie shows up in a leopard skin dress, and takes an arrogant and cold approach. Whereas Tesman's aunt is usually portrayed as a timorous, mouse-like presence, needy for any sign of acknowledgment from George and Hedda and quivering before her imposing niece-in-law, in this case she presents an image that is assertive, outspoken, and sure of herself. She is dressed to seem dressed to the nines, if in bad taste. Hedda in a further flip of custom, by contrast appears looking quite dowdy in her first appearance, in faded pink housedress with a brown coat thrown over it and barefooted. So the usual visual balance between the two characters is turned on its head, with Hedda placed at a power disadvantage, styleless before this paragon of fashion.

Whereas Hedda's new husband Tesman, is generally depicted as an introverted, socially uncomfortable and pedantic man without physical attractions, when he enters here he turns out to be a hip and self-assured young metrosexual with a strong gay affect, or as Isherwood euphemistically says in his review – "slacker brat."^{eeclxvii} Thea Elvsted has a mod vibe, with backpack and shirt that lets her soft fleshy belly show, and koulats – contrary to the usual introverted, repressed portrayal. She is here presented more like the archetype of the mischievous, outgoing, and venturesome Hilda Wangel from Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. During the famous tête-à-tête scene with Hedda, in which most productions plunk her primly down in the middle of an overstuffed sofa, in this one she lies on her back on the floor to recall her wonderful days with Eilert. It's a bold move that sweeps away all vestiges of Victorian convention and American and English performance tradition, which in itself could be a good thing. But in the event it was unfortunately not well acted.

In Scene 2 what is normally played as a quiet domestic conversation with unexpressed tension turns into an arbitrary shouting match between Tesman and a frumpishly dressed Hedda. The sniping shows that that they're getting on each other's nerves to such an extent that the young marriage is already tottering. Here we have van Hove resorting to his default tic, and in this case it winds up every bit as unjustified and exhausting as in his worst Flemish and Dutch productions. In other normally conversational scenes as well the actors take advantage of every opportunity to raise their voices. For example, the minute Hedda and Eilert are alone onstage they start unmodulatedly shouting. Then when they wind up on the sofa together it veers immediately into explicit sex play. All that is traditionally understated and implied is here brought extrovertedly out into the open.

We learn that all the men in the play convene in a whorehouse on the edge of town, where they drink immoderately and engage in all manner of scandalous behavior that must not be referred to in polite parlors. The same characters, when they actually come before the audience in a group in traditional productions, generally stand or sit in

uncomfortable clusters acting like they barely know each other. Van Hove sweeps this stiff formality away, which is logical, in that the exposition reveals that both Tesman and Eilert have been familiars from childhood and that they and Judge Brack have often “let their hair down” together at Mlle. Diana’s establishment. So van Hove here takes a totally novel way of handling maleness and male-to-male relationships. When Eilert comes on stage he and Tesman exchange a long tight clinch, which can either be interpreted as homoerotic or as heterosexual male bonding. Then later in that scene Eilert, Tesman, and the Judge play ringaleavio with Eilert’s famous manuscript, and scrimmage on the floor, holding each other in a clinch like football players.

The Dutch version of the show two years later was far superior, so that one must assume either that van Hove didn’t believe he could get the same types of performances from his TGA actors as those he managed in New York, or that in the interim he had rethought the New York production and now strove to leverage very different qualities out of the play.^{celxviii} While superficially it was the same show, he in fact only retained certain aspects and made many subtle, but important alterations. The chief distinction is that he grows to trust the play to reveal its treasures in its own good time rather than forcing them out early and pushing them relentlessly. In consequence, the Dutch production took a more gradual time getting off the ground to insidiously get under our skin, and paid off more when time came for the climax than the New York one.

We find essentially the same proscenium box set arrangement as the NYTW production, three imposing unadorned white walls faced with commercially stamped insulation material, although the horizontal aperture of the stage is much wider on the TGA stage than the more intimate Off-Broadway NYTW one, rendering the production that much more monumental and less intimist. There is a delimited pile of sundry, undifferentiated stuff center stage, with yet again an upright piano, a perfunctory bunch of flowers in pots stage right, and another pile stage left, plus a white sofa. Instead of the plethora of flowers suggested in Ibsen’s stage directions, which lend the box set parlor he describes the aspect of a coffin or a funeral chapel, a very few austere bouquets are token signs for all flowers well-wishers have brought to congratulate the returning honeymooners. Hedda has voluntarily surrendered her authentic, wild lifestyle in exchange for a house and husband she reviles and bourgeois respectability, which she is talking herself into accepting. The flowers, then, are typically Ibsensian signifiers – ostensible gifts honoring the honeymoon couple, but deeper down, funereal blooms. Her marriage is the penultimate nail in the coffin of Hedda’s spirit.

A deceptively simple window with vertical venetian blinds has been added, intimating an outer world, that the American production did not. Here the blinds and window hint at an alternative for Hedda beyond the finite box she lives in, and an opportunity for the play of light which Versweyveld is so good at. In fact a lot of atmospheric and dramatic mileage is achieved with the window, blinds, and light working in tandem over the course of the play.

The text is preserved and has the ring of more or less normal spoken Dutch. The transfer from Norwegian to Dutch is much more gentle, as the two languages are more closely

related, than are Norwegian and English. Van Hove is on firmer ground with a neutral-sounding, spare Dutch. We still have unconventional casting and impersonations of the characters, but they sit more appropriately here. For example, Judge Brack is a young vigorous and perfectly attractive guy in a suit without tie, not the usual old decaying roué of tradition. Thea, as in the New York production, is again a sort of hippie in tanktop with a knapsack. Then Tesman is just a grown up boy – not sexless and unappealing or very dorky, as usually played. Nor is he the metrosexual of the New York version. This Tesman is a lively, naturally affectionate guy. He kisses the Maid. Might he be having an affair with her? And as the play moves toward its conclusion he seats himself in front of Hedda who kneels before him. It has been the norm in college English classes to allege that she only has sex with him under duress, and then only once on their wedding night or during the honeymoon. But in front of our eyes, in the most matter-of-fact way, Tesman seems to be happily claiming his marital rights, and she automatically complying. This, and so many other new ideas jump out at us and make us see the play afresh.

Hedda enters, plays the piano desultorily, then hides behind it as Aunt Julie, appearing in a tacky modern housewife dress, enters and bumbles on with the Maid, who is dressed entirely in black. This character is handled significantly differently from the NYTW rendition. She is once again made crucial to the action, which is in itself a radical departure from what Ibsen wrote and what tradition dictates, but deployed here with measure and coherence. Tesman enters, throws himself onto the couch, and chats with his Aunt as the dark presence of the maid remains poised at the extreme other end of the stage in alert silence. Her silence and stillness carry equal weight with their chitchat, her mere silent gaze rendering all they say to each other suspect.

Julie and Tesman call for Hedda, and she pops out from behind the piano where she was all along, rather than making a customary entrance through a door. The improbability of such a choice thus reinforces a style that resists any naturalistic expectations. The surprising mode of entrance also establishes this area behind the piano, again, both as an emblem of Hedda's stifled creative life, and as a private refuge. Her present survival strategy is to to conduct a furtive, secret parallel existence of relative freedom, in the circumscribed space behind the piano, but *within* her new restrained realm of the larger box/house.^{ccix} Eilert later makes a bold move, pulling the sofa away from the wall, where he and Hedda sit, both their backs to the audience. This places them facing upstage, presumably unobserved, reliving their past in her father's house, and carving out one more private area within the larger exposed one, in addition to the space behind the piano.

While concealed, Hedda has taken the opportunity to change clothes. She emerges in a revealing teal dress covered with some black over-wrap, an outfit that immediately proclaims her as a scandalous presence. Once alone again onstage, Hedda goes over to the window, and Joni Mitchell's "Blue" plays. She keeps fiddling nervously with the blinds so the light changes and shifts wildly all over the stage – shadows and glaring light in alternation, restlessly building to a climax when husband runs back on, and she desists. The lighting and these physical actions, in signature van Hove fashion, exteriorize

Hedda's state and relieves the actor of having to express it affectively. The Maid stays in her chair off to the side the whole time eye, witness to her wild, alarming fidgeting with the window, and to the marital squabble as well.

The doorbell buzzes periodically with an inordinately loud and unrealistic electric sound that has the dramatic function of announcing visitors, separating segments, and introducing ominous elements. Hedda, in shocking violation of Victorian manners, howls, "Come in!" Thea enters from back of the theatre and comes down the aisle. As she exults in telling Hedda of her former intimacy with Eilert Lovborg, again lies down center on the floor to do so. Then Hedda leaves Tesman alone with Thea, but remaining in the room, goes upstage center to peer at a monitor. The TV remains on throughout the show broadcasting silently. So long as Hedda faces the TV screen in profile, she is presumed to be unaware of what is happening between her husband and Thea, despite the absence of walls between them. It is clear, as Thea gets on her knees in front of Tesman that she and he had been intimate in the past, normally a muted subtextual detail easily overlooked entirely, now one blatantly, even grossly illustrated.

This production takes a very long time to heat up. The whole first act is uneventful and unrewarding, but the groundwork for the pyrotechnics in Act II is patiently being laid. The actors in general speak in believable, unforced conversational tones. Unlike their American counterparts, they don't push emotions they don't feel. In other words, Ivo brought contemporary American acting technique back with him to Holland! The acting is thus generally quite conventional, although when violations come they are all the more unexpected and destabilizing.

But that doesn't mean the production is without a large number of striking, even startling choices, bordering on vulgarity, as when Tesman describes how Hedda's "filled out so," and looks so flourishing. He holds his hands wide out, bends his knees and emits a Bronx cheer. When the Judge leaves after a tete-à-tete with Hedda she literally flings all the plants – vases and all – all the way across the stage – hitting the hated walls that hem her in, littering the floors. At the beginning of Act II she fires her gun over the audience's heads at the Judge who's in the back of the theatre. Eilert picks up a glass and downs the liquor, then sends the glass flying up against the walls to shatter. He follows this up by flying into a rage and slapping Thea.^{cclxx} It is in gestures like this that it becomes apparent what a monster is lurking inside him that alcohol would unleash if he goes back to his old ways. The text alludes to his alcoholism so indirectly and with such Victorian propriety that on reading the script or seeing a more conventional production, his drinking and whoring are enveloped in unnecessary mystery, typical of the Ibsenian (and perhaps all Victorian) drama. It is refreshing to have his alcoholic unreliability enacted before our eyes.

The Judge is more forwardly sexual than usual, and Hedda bends over in front of him, sticking her rear end directly in his crotch. At the end of their scene together they are about to run off behind the upright piano, the only private refuge on stage. Just then Tesman enters, catching them back there, but he is oblivious. This overt sexual playing around between Hedda and the Judge, while lively, contradicts the implications at the end

of the play, that she would be horrified were she forced to allow him free sexual access as a result of his blackmailing her. That pressure, along with the implied imminence of unwanted motherhood, are two main factors in the playtext that directly contribute to her suicide. But if, as here, she enjoys sex with the Judge and even lures him into it, the impulse to end her life loses force and logic.

Announcing Eilert's entrance, there is an especially long obnoxious buzz – signally a radical shift in the play. Everyone freezes and looks out. Then he bustles in, passing Hedda without a glance and grasps Tesman's hand warmly. In this Dutch rendition the friendship between the two academic competitors is not at all feigned, but truly warm-hearted, indicating that their longterm friendship has a real affective basis. This is yet another innovative interpretation, and one that is supported by the text.

The curtain goes up on Act II, and the minimal enclosed space has gone through a major transformation, through altering a few simple elements. A big red table lamp has been placed directly on the ground down center. The blinds have been closed and it is dark. The piano has been shoved out of the way upstage and is facing sideways. The ladies have been waiting for the men to come back from their revels. Hedda is on the ground. Thea has been sleeping on the sofa against up left wall. The Maid starts clearing up, turning off the lamp, opening the blinds, etc. Then she lights a real fire in a pit we hadn't noticed directly in the ground down center. This choice is a primeval stand-in for the highly civilized Victorian ceramic or cast iron stove we would expect to see in a naturalistic, conventional production. The pit's rawness reinforces the play's savage and allegorical underpinnings. The home has lost its domesticity and taken on the allure of a shaman's or gypsy's cave.

Once Tesman arrives he sits down center facing the audience, while Hedda sits on the floor directly in front of him, with her back to audience. Is she performing fellatio on him? He, seemingly oblivious, continues to recount all that had happened at Mlle. Diana's. The only way we know anything untoward is going on is that his speech gets more and more broken up and desultory, which confirms our suspicions.

The Judge reappears from behind the audience, chats with Hedda from the back of theatre over the audience's heads, as she sits on the stool warming herself over the firepit down center. The fact that he can pin her down with his voice from the back of the theatre reinforces the sense of her being trapped. She never ventures off the stage the way the other characters do. As he starts blackmailing her and proposing his contemplated arrangement for getting her under his sexual power, the dynamics between them become highly physicalized. Hedda flees from one side of the stage to the other, trying to elude him, but the Judge succeeds in cornering her at each sidewall. He finally closes in on her and savagely throws her back at the wall repeatedly, till she sinks. So the blackmail, ever so gently implied in the text, is made explicitly and brutally forced on her. He takes off, giving her a temporary reprieve, as Eilert enters shouting savagely. The red lighting shifts suddenly to white. Through all those scenes Thea had been sleeping unobtrusively out of sight on the white sofa, facing the up left wall, invisible and virtually offstage, but "reappears" once Eilert arrives.

The moment comes for Hedda to burn manuscript over the fire, and she does so in a very subdued way, the Maid in this case becoming her accomplice. Indeed, it now appears that Berthe has been biding her time from the very opening of the play expressly to perform this singular act. She helps Hedda wheel the piano in front of fire to disguise the evidence of the burnt manuscript. Hedda leans her head against the side of the piano, as others move furniture around into an entirely new configuration and the beautiful Leonard Cohen song “Hallelujah” plays. This interlude replaces an intermission between Acts II and III, and allows for pragmatic business to be taken care of.

In Hedda’s final big scene with Tesman, she unexpectedly becomes vulnerable and approaches, extending her arms to offer him wholehearted affection, again in a total break with tradition, which has her cold and distant to him right to the end. He repulses her overtures three times, pushing her away, symmetrical to the earlier scene in which she had thrice repelled the judge’s overtures. Then, however, he realizes his wife is pregnant and reverses himself, aversion turning to cozy intimacy.

Once again Thea had been onstage, but concealed behind a clump of furniture before she “makes an entrance,” simply by standing up, now dressed in black. Tesman and Thea go off to work on the manuscript by the window. There they transform into a pair of mobile shadows, engaged in something the lighting and their position renders ambiguous, but suggestive. Whereas in traditional productions the possibility of their romantic and sexual future remains very much sub-textual and rather a meeting of intellectual minds, here it is blatantly physicalized for its romantic potential. Hedda stays in her chair down center by the piano. Alongside her is the Maid, her back to the audience, who continues as the mute observer/witness to all that happens, so she is ramified into Hedda’s shadow or doppelganger.

Judge Brack has been lounging in the sofa upstage left from the top of the scene, and from that static vantage point, banters with Hedda, casually revealing the sordid truth of Eilert Lovborg’s suicide. Then he starts to approach her as he intends to again advance his own agenda for his place in the household, to be accepted as the “cock of the walk.” As he closes in on Hedda to stake his claim with finality, he throws his jacket down on the ground and stands over her. He opens a can of beer, chugs some, pours the rest over Hedda’s head, and forces her to the ground. It is clear that the sex he has in mind for her is debasing sado-masochism with him in the domineering role. He dribbles sputum onto her face from above. Then the Judge kicks at a light down left which suddenly plunges the stage in darkness, preparatory, presumably, to taking his sexual plot to its consummation. The only illumination left comes from a thin line of fluorescents lit all along the upstage line as well as the red-shaded practical table lamp stage right, that leave Hedda and the maid in silhouette.

At the same time, Thea and Tesman have gone to the back of the theatre to join in reconstructing Eilert’s manuscript, thus discovering yet another private area, and speak to her from there. Hedda goes into the light of the practical lamp, is seen picking up the gun, bangs out some random music on the piano, aims the gun every which way in a

reckless and dangerous fit, and finally winds up shooting herself. The other characters come and stand in profile as silent witnesses to her death. Then lights up and applause.

***True Love*, 2002, Toneelgroep Amsterdam**

This performance, prominent American playwright Charles Mee's debut in Europe, is a reworking of material both from the ancient Greek tragedy *Hippolytus*, but equally the French Neo-Classical tragedy by Racine, *Phaedra*. Both tell of incestuous and adulterous love between the same mythological stepmother and her younger stepson. Van Hove commissioned the American dramatist to write the play for the TGA, which then had its premiere in Dutch translation.^{cclxxi}

This play invades the audience, intrudes on them, and takes them places they may or may not want to go, with various sorts of controversial assertions and jagged energies. The play is at first bent on being excruciating in many ways as it lurches to life. The entire first third is a tendentious session, often embarrassing, often simply formless, aimless, and tedious, that pushes against the limits of the audience's tolerance, but then resolves into a highly tender, revealing passage into the human soul that brings the audience along after all. Like many of van Hove's best shows, it is Stanislavskian and Grotowskian at the same time. Once it settles in, the actors take all their time, unaffectedly, though having to slog through Mee's interminable monologues, to arrive at places of intense, deep emotionality.^{cclxxii}

Mee re-sets the ancient tale in a modern-day lumpen proletariat suburban family of the most ordinary kind. But he keeps the lengthy rhetorical monologues from the earlier texts in which the main characters, but especially Phaedra, examines her passions from all sides. Elinor Fuchs described another of Mee's reworkings of another classic, *Orestes*, which follows a similar pattern to *True Love*, in this way:

... plot and character are rhetorical surfaces in precisely the way that ethics and personhood function as emptied-out simulacra in the world of his play. They are quoted, but are not objects of exploration; even less are Mee's characters subjects in whose suffering, inner conflicts, recognition, growth, or resignation we are invited to take interest. Mee presents an entire society as a hospital ward in varying stages of breakdown, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and sanctimonious and self-forgiving 'recovery.' These vertiginous moral prospects are presented as objects of contemplation in a series of stand-up production numbers – monologues, occasional dialogues, and song and dance routines^{cclxxiii}

For van Hove, this new opening also represents a reversion to or continuation of tendencies laid down in such liberating earlier shows as *Wild Lords* and *Wonders of Humanity*. Having a definite story to tell, it isn't as loosely strung together a series of acts as they are, but still retains that music hall or vaudeville open structure. The text of *True Love* works with discontinuous time, and we are never quite sure where we are on the past/future continuum. Scenes don't complete; they just morph. Whenever the

protagonists arrive at a crucial moment of catharsis they are interrupted by group numbers, such as line dances, kitsch songs, and even a circus or amusement park-ambiance segment. In any event, it is a pastiche, with the narrative lurching forward in fits and starts – the balance between plot and spectacle, dramatic and post-dramatic, equally shared. This play gets right in the audience’s face with the characters’ neuroses, and blatant attempts to go beyond the internalized social boundaries which presumably hem in their behavior.

Perhaps in *True Love*, Mee’s iteration of *Phaedra*, the central characters are subjects in whose “suffering, inner conflicts, recognition, growth,” we do take interest. But the surrounding choric figures have interest also, as paradigmatic types projecting more or less fascinating personae. They tend to refract the central *Phaedra* characters back to themselves, even as we assume we know these prototypes’ identities intimately without being quite sure why this particular cross-section of the human menagerie has been selected out to participate in this drama. Although each member of the ensemble is given a name and has a palpable, definable character silhouette, they are never particularly identified or given any narrative link to the main narrative. They do each have impact, the equivalent of their fifteen minutes of fame, but are ultimately just random people in society who comment, observe, and participate vicariously in the central story. In aggregate, they are a loose descendent of a Greek chorus consisting of types that comment, support, engender atmosphere to form a roisterous social tapestry. Character is not dead, only flattened and recycled.

True Love is an environmental show, as is true of *Faces*, *Splendid’s*, and *Roman Tragedies*, acting in the audience’s lap as it were, with sections of audience sitting or standing facing each other. It is a theatrical arrangement that epitomizes a “refusal of separation.”^{ccclxxiv} At the beginning there is a sense of dispersal and simultaneous, enigmatic presences. One actress is sitting in the center with a headset on, the rest widely distributed. Then there is a dialogue broadcast, auditory only, not visual. Another carries in a long piece of wood with holes in it. All of a sudden many actors are there in the center distributed along these porous long rectangular elevations. There’s one outrageous middle-aged transvestite sucking on a popsicle who stands out. At least one live chicken is wandering around. In fact, there is a variety of arbitrary types – a female teenager, a scholar, a sporty young man, a young Arab, etc. engaging in simultaneous difficult to make out conversations. We have no idea if or how their lives connect, and finally figure out that they don’t particularly. Three guys get into a fight, shouting, and various other examples of violence erupt. But none of these conflagrations are explained or lead anywhere dramatically. What we are watching is a portrait of a social background. All of a sudden a pre-teen boy wheels in on a scooter wildly. Behind and in front of the audience, breakneck, he takes off his shirt and falls on the floor crazily, then takes off again zooming around on the scooter.

The central female character, the *Phaedra* figure, goes into an exceedingly long philosophical monologue about sex that had the audience’s eyes glazing over until, she starts, in their very midst, to masturbate and climax as she keeps talking. The scene evolves into a tickling match with the young kid, who is evidently her stepson, a

Hippolytus who is really *very* young (twelve?). That dyad evolves into an ensemble orgy-like scene, then transitions into a series of dance steps in unison, and finally breaks up into everyone on their own. Again, the Phaedra character, with the costume and demeanor of a suburban young mother rather than a pagan queen, delivers a monologue.

Once it is over, a prominent male character in the chorus (who has no lines, but stands out through Roeland Fernhout's charismatic performance) unwraps a big cream cake, pulls down his pants, and hands the cake to the transvestite who smears the cake on the guy's naked butt and penis. This, we may speculate, is the young boy many years later, who is now engaging in such kinky practices as these, although it is never explicitly explained in so many words. An alternative possibility may be that mere contemplation of sex occurring between a boy and his mother unleashes a universe of ambient perversity in their heads or projected out into the external world, hard to say which. Yet a third reading would have it that the society against which the blameless incestuous love gets played out is saturated with perversity.

In this American script, the acting takes on an American tenor as well, and the Dutch audience appears to be intensely affected by it. Starting here, in the middle of the show once it has found its ground, all most of the acting becomes very genuine, vulnerable, spontaneous, and unaffected in the same way. A violent debate representing various views on the subject of incest takes place in which everyone is intensely, quietly involved, accompanied by accordion music. One angry man's tirade is a trigger for a series of the men on platforms spread out through the space to do simultaneous abandoned and angry dance movements to hard rock music in blue ambient light with blinding spots hitting them. Ultimately the music stops and men do a final few steps in silence, then fall down prone.

The mother, after confessing to her infatuation for her young stepson, imitates a chicken who ultimately gets slaughtered. Then the entire cast builds a tall tower out of the modular blocks, simultaneously singing the syrupy pop song "I Will Always Love You," as they climb it and hang off this construction. The mother, holding a big white balloon close to her, recites the spoken, syrupy "break" in the song. The boy wanders through the space, and she follows him with her eyes. He is now in her memory, one might assume. He chases a young girl who then massages his body, lustily confessing her love. It is all very tender up until he rhythmically and repeatedly spans her to wild percussion accompaniment and her screams. The young man goes a tirade polemicizing against sex, backed up by abstract movements by the one I take to be his older self and a woman singing gently in the background.

Finally the stepmother (Phaedra) and the kid meet and give free reign to their love. She utters effusions about the all-encompassing dimensions of a relationship that is at once maternal and erotic. He carries her toward a safe haven as the saccharine music of "Saturday Night Fever" bursts out, while the company builds an architectural cocoon of modular blocks around the lovers, hiding them from the world.

This is the moment, at the very point of the fulfillment of the flirtation between

stepmother and stepson that had been simmering since the play's beginning, that van Hove chooses to hide the sexual consummation from the audience and divert them from it. The play has encouraged voyeurism into the mother/son relationship, and raised the suspense surrounding it to a fever pitch. Yet Ivo will throw all manner of spectacular bread and circuses in the audience's path to make them overlook the fact that they have been gypped out of witnessing the consummation of that relationship. Still, despite his discomfort with pedophilia as evinced by all these theatricalist diversionary tactics, *True Love* is an infinitely more sympathetic, nonjudgmental portrait of incestuous love than we saw in his *'Tis Pity*, and in that sense, a chance van Hove grasped at to redeem himself.

At this point, shattering the romantic mood, the ensemble members run around the space. They grab their benches, which are made in the same design as the platforms, and grab their benches out from under them, which forces them to stand. This is the set-up for a wild Dionysian rite, as the ensemble's energies turn from sentimental to savage, with dancing and dousing both the floor and each other with water. Then, recovering from this anarchic mood, the cast forms into a line dance, with its characteristic simultaneous regimented movements, which leaves the audience spatially and psychically displaced. It must be a circus, as the audience is now placed in the role of fairgoer, standing, milling around, observing. The observing morphs into peeping as the Arab jock soaps up his body, and the transvestite rubs him down, only one such activity amid the general pansexual disporting that goes on. Then there's a line dance of simultaneous movements as a rain of confetti comes down as the transvestite does a fire-eating act!

This segment ends when a silent firecracker is placed burning in the kid's ass. Enter a new character: the woman's absent husband, based on Euripides's and Racine's Theseus, who surveys the scene of debauchery, douses the flame, and then starts to lace into the two other family members. Then the boy, totally naked, reciprocally berates the man, his father. As the wife and her husband have it out in their *scene à faire* in which nothing is held back, they inhabit a devastated landscape of randomly strewn platform units. The space exteriorizes the chaotic of this stage in their marriage, the jangling of family and moral relations must be post-incest. The floor is covered with white foam that had been shot out during the intermission, like sexual juices spread all over the playing space. Little by little the standing audience members find new places on the benches from which they take in the rest of the show. They are forced to grapple with finding a new seat even as the family members struggle to see where they stand in their radically altered the situation.

When the father ultimately shoots his wife, son, and himself it is done as a ballet. This climax is followed up by strobe lights flashing on an ensemble dance, as the broadcast voice we'd heard in the beginning babbles on in ironic accompaniment.

The audience, finally – by now having been thoroughly integrated into the play's action – showed themselves to be pretty enthusiastic, but exhausted. They'd been dragged through the mud of the tawdry but very human story and a rollercoaster of theatrical events. Not only did they have to physically move around as the action dictated and virtually take part in it, but were forced to make moral judgments. And that in addition to

doing the work of mentally reconstructing a disjointed narrative as it moved in all directions through time. They applaud wearily as the pop songs “I Cast a Spell on You,” and “No Messing Around” drone on in obvious commentary about what has gone before. But the truth is that through all the theatrical hocus-pocus and endless rhetoric, which pushed everyone out of their comfort zones, *Ivo van Hove* put a spell on *them*!

The song and dance segments that are inserted here and there represent a strong tendency in van Hove to rise above and away from the merely dramatic. He is constantly drawn to various musical theatre forms, from the many actual operas he’s directed throughout Europe; to one out-and-out Broadway musical revival, *Rent*; to bastard music/drama forms, that have included such shows as *Carmen*, which jettisoned Bizet’s opera for a post-modern pop experience on an open stage without traditional set – a de-operatized, concert version using musical idioms from James Brown to John Cage. Then there was a show that broke new ground in the musical theatre field, *Con Amore*.

The latter is a show based on the libretto to Monteverdi’s Baroque opera, *L’incoronazione di Poppea*. While music is foregrounded in van Hove’s *Carmen*, here it is mostly subtracted, and relegated, along with the dramatic narrative, to somewhere far in the background of this theatrical event. Elinor Fuchs’s in describing Des McAnuff’s post-modern *Leave it to Beaver is Dead*, might just as easily be referring to *Con Amore*, in that it “represents a rupture in traditional form, coupling play and rock concert in uneasy harness,” replete with “... an aesthetic of breaks and gaps, surfaces and masks,” that tends to being “objectless in its irony, without closure, speaking a strange synthetic language packed with sly quotations and a myriad of references to pop culture.”^{cclxxv} Like *Leave it to Beaver is Dead*, *Con Amore* is not just post-modern; it qualifies as post-dramatic. For it is, first and foremost, a cooking show. A chef in an elaborate hi-tech kitchen is the most prominently disposed figure on-stage. Throughout the show he is fabricating a gourmet meal, and the fascinating cooking process destabilizes the Aristotelian hierarchy and steals the show from the performers reenacting Nero’s drama with his several wives.

The cooking process, which is placed front and center, at a seeming mountain peak on the stage, is like a performance art inset within the dramatic narrative that sidelines the narrative. Retrospectively, one may conclude that cooking and eating wherever it is inserted in van Hove’s various productions – *Rocco and His Brothers*, *The Misanthrope*, and *Desire Under the Elms* – has the opposite function from the same activity in a naturalistic production. There it would be to reenforce the fictional, representational stage life, to get us to suspend disbelief over the nature of the imaginary space. But in these cases, it rather breaks out of that life, given as a *presentation* or *performance* of eating, with all its carnality being thrust at the public.

In addition, characters gratuitously do long sessions of yoga; a series of ingredients – sauces, eggs, shredded cheese, etc. – get poured by one character over another’s body and into mouths; stripping, shaving, and showering all happen before our very eyes; and then comes the show’s consummation, which is the consumption of the banquet that has been in preparation throughout. While there is some actual singing and dancing to draw us

back into the operatic source material, it tends to be almost aggressively amateurish, too far below the opera standard to bear or aspire to comparison. This show hearkens back to van Hove's beginnings with *Wild Lords*. But while it plays with some original ideas, it lacks the same spark.^{cclxxvi}

***Rocco And His Brothers* 2009, Toneelgroep Amsterdam**

The van Hove scenic version and the Visconti film version of *Rocco and His Brothers* are related, but totally incommensurate, which is not to say that one is better or worse than the other. In fact, both are major and successful autonomous works of art, though a comparison between the two is a very instructive primer as to how the mediums differ.

The Visconti film, a masterpiece of 1950s Italian cinematic Neo-Realism, starred the French actor, Alain Delon, whose part was dubbed in Italian. The gritty, evocative settings, the rambling, but compelling script, the masterful camerawork, and bold editing all militate to make this one of the most important films in history. The plot is extremely intricate, with many reversals and complications. The acting sways back and forth between believable brio or understatement. At times it falls into a maudlin melodramatic style that now feels quite dated, even ludicrous. Those transitory weaknesses, however, are ultimately transcended, leaving a final impression of an exceedingly convincing and moving film classic.

The common narrative of both movie and play adaptation centers on a large, working class Italian family, the Parondis, who move to the big city, Milan, as the five sons of the fatherless clan lack economic opportunity back in the countryside. They succumb to the various temptations and pressures of city life, even as they repeatedly exhibit nostalgia for the rural land of their birth and formative years back in the south. Several are talented boxers, and the scenario charts their rises and falls, competitions and betrayals, both professional and romantic. The character Nadia the prostitute, who one of the brothers introduces into the interpersonal spider net, plays a corrosive role in the family and is ultimately instrumental in its undoing, although she is also the show's principal sacrificial lamb.

The family members and those they bring into the family circle interact with tactile, uninhibited passion, equally so between men and men as between women and men. The males assert their machismo in ways that suggest their ambivalence toward both sexes. The boxing, which forms the heart of the image-life of the movie, is treated as though men work out their love-hate for each other in this ritualized arena, demolishing or submitting to annihilation by the loved object. What they can't love, they pound to oblivion. In moments of extreme angst, as when Simone, the ne'er-do-well, breaks up a merry family gathering with the news that he has killed the prostitute that three of the brothers had shared, Rocco and Simone wind up in bed together sobbing and holding each other like two bereaved lovers. After quite a long time, their mother, who is also ostentatiously sobbing, caresses them both. We see her claw-like hand enter the frame

and hover over their writhing bodies, a haunting image full of metaphorical resonances. It is as though death, incarnated in the mother's hand, were hanging over the two male lovers, formerly both lovers vying for Nadia's affections, now in effect both widowers who can be reunited only in death.

It is easy to see why van Hove, who so often problematizes heterosexual male identity, was drawn to this movie. However, he eschews simply duplicating Visconti's imagery, even some of the movie's most compelling shots, but reworks the whole from ground up. He restricted his borrowing to the script itself, and entirely reimagined the physical life. In this sense, as for all his theatrical adaptations of screenplays, the memory of the movie, remote but indelible, hovers like a ghost over the stage, regularly demanding comparison for better or worse.^{cclxxvii}

Van Hove's *Rocco* retains a byzantine dramatic structure, but he has necessarily simplified the action of the movie to a degree, eliminating, for example, a major subplot surrounding a broach that Simone steals which Rocco recovers and returns. The numerous secondary characters and crowd scene extras, including the multitudinous neighbors in the building, who congregate on balconies around a central courtyard sticking their noses into the private business of the Parondi clan, form a representative social background in the movie. So do the crowds of spectators at the boxing matches. All those supernumeraries are gone. For the purposes of theatre, the actual audience functions as stand-ins to these crowd-witness groupings, the function of moral arbiter to the dramatic chain of events thus falling in their laps. The kitchen sink realism of the movie, with the detailed multiple locations through urban and exurban Italy, some of which have enormous poetic power, are also sacrificed and re-set in a generalized unit meta-theatrical space. Physical, detailed verisimilitude gives way to evocative suggestion through simplified objects and playing areas.

The acting aspires to roughness and naïve exuberance, as in van Hove's *True Love* for example, not to the sleek, cool approach that typifies van Hove works that came later. In fact, there is a rugged, artisanal feeling, bordering on conscious sloppiness, about the whole show that has a welcome warmth and humanity. Veteran actors like Fred Goessens as the boxing coach and Celia Nufaar as the family matriarch are set loose to sink their teeth into savory characters and play their scenes for broke, in performances that aspire to an Actor's Studio flavor. Others betray an incapacity to act with the depth and multi-dimensionality Visconti's film actors achieve. Instead, they strike a keynote for themselves, come up with a character mask, and allow those to stand in for character portrayal from beginning to end. As much as one wants to avoid such clichés, it may be that the challenge of Dutch actors to portray hot-blooded Italians can only be achieved through reducing characterization to one facet, one which they then cling to for dear life. These latter aren't bad performances, just a little thin and overly efficient.

The show was made the occasion for the launching of the new Rabozaal of the Amsterdam Schouwburg, a massive in-the-round space, newly acquired as a secondary auditorium for Toneelgroep Amsterdam. There is a feeling of voluminousness, lending an epic scale to this production. Van Hove deploys a wide gamut of directorial and

narrational tools, including having disparate scenes play simultaneously in different parts of the space, overlapping beginnings and ends of scenes, or surprising us by starting a scene suddenly in a forgotten or never-used-before area. Chairs about it on the floor, plates, fruit, a pot are strewn on the horizontal surface – even as the primogeniture is lying right in the middle of the platform surface. The others then take their places at the “table.” In fact they’re waiting for Simone to arrive in order for the family to be complete before starting their Easter feast, while he’s lying in their midst (physically there, virtually elsewhere), since their table is his bed in another part of Naples.

Van Hove and Versweyveld once more lean on the semiotics of lights in relation to carefully selected materials, using an economical shorthand of hue and type, to convince us that this is Italy. By changing up the dominant colored wash, they instantly also alter the perception of time of day and mood. That, in and of itself, is anything but revolutionary. But, for example, when Nadia is stationed up above on one of the towers – it is suggested as a private chamber by the simple means of illuminating it with a light green light – a certain green that somehow reminds us of Italy. The office scene where that manager Morini has it out with Simone over his debts and bad boxing takes place behind sliding smoked glass panels on the ground floor of one of the towers. In a different scene Mama and Rocco lounge in easy chairs, watching as others change their clothes behind translucent smoked glass that reminds us of the sort of modernist design aesthetic prevalent in Italy of the 1950s. That area behind the smoked glass is recycled for a police interrogation scene, the opacity allowing the audience only to glean but not witness the proceedings directly. When the boys arrive with news that Vincenzo has eloped with Gineta, they awaken Mama who is on the second story of one of the towers, which is entirely open to the audience. The spare device of having a small old-fashioned TV on, flashing silently inside the otherwise unencumbered chamber, is all it takes to suggest rather than illustrate a lowerclass, cramped apartment.

The wandering narrative pulls us in from the first moment. The Parondi family is introduced at the very start with cast members arriving carrying bunches of trunks and suitcases, boxes, and potted plants to one end of the space adjacent to the central raised platform. Rocco’s family is initially congregated around this cumulation of detritus, encapsulating an eternal image of displaced persons huddling in alien surroundings. The mother sits there on a suitcase and waits. Her sons sit on the edge of the center platform. The family has come to the Milan from the country, and plunks themselves down on the doorstep of brother Vincenzo, played by Leon Voorberg, and his fiancée. These pieces of baggage wind up being continually redistributed and repurposed throughout the show, as do various pieces of furniture. Vincenzo hops up on the platform, where a punching bag is hanging, and starts right in training with his coach. His wife Ginetta comes to see him in a downstairs chamber in one of the towers, where they talk about their imperiled domestic situation. They’ve got a place to live, but she’s angry with him because she fears that they’ll lose their independence with his family newly arrived. They make up, kiss, and she leaves.

As Ginetta leaves, Vincenzo makes a beeline for a different tower where he comes upon his mistress, Nadia, who makes a first appearance in her emblematic revealing

streetwalker's gold lamé dress and spiked heels. He means to leave his wife for this "other woman," when his mother who appears at the "window" above sees him kissing her and instantly sizes her up as a common hooker. The rest of the family members – indeed all the brothers – look down on her from the height of another scaffold at the other end of the space. Distributing elements of the family domicile to extreme ends of the playing space, as he does here, is indicative of the free way van Hove pictorializes functional locales, without respect to literal space relations.

All it takes to suggest the windowsill of an Italian tenement is for a crudely horizontal wooden beam to be fastened to the naked metal scaffolding. All the brothers poke their heads out over it, and the trick is achieved. The brothers throw down a raincoat for their brother's erstwhile mistress, flock down below on a camp bed, and chat up the new woman. Nadia, now introduced into their midst, takes up unofficial residence and, according to the Mother, brings down disgrace on them all. They all sit on one camp bed so that an instantaneous image of cramped family life in reduced circumstances – tight, incestuous, intimate – is suggested. The youngest brother Luca is a not a real 9-year-old, as he was in the movie, with all the knee-jerk sympathy a real child's presence would elicit, but still a real adolescent, perhaps 16 years-old, the same boy actor who played the lead in Charles Mee's *True Love*.

As with the windowsill device, van Hove often substitutes an appeal to the imagination for naturalistic concreteness. Whenever a big boxing match is in progress – lights, roaring crowd sounds, a clanging bell, and an amplified announcer's voice stand in for Viscontian film reality of an actual boxing rink. The contestant boxes against an unseen opponent, and endows being struck himself. Each blow is crisply accompanied by a hard recorded sound like a gunshot. Each time one of the boxers strikes a boxing bag, there's a sound effect to accompany the impact. When Simone or Rocco connect with an imaginary foe's chin and knock him out, as they do, it's accompanied by a loud electronically produced thud. The family appears on top of one of the towers to cheer for their favorite son. Simone lies down on a massage table, and there is no masseur, but he acts as though he's being worked on. The actors in all these cases rely heavily on what Stanislavsky called "sense memory," convincingly undergoing these experiences as though all the real elements were in place and there to be used.

But in other cases, literal realism is used after all, so one can't look for absolute consistency in Van Hove's post-modern palette. When the impresario Morini talks to Simone (played by Hans Kesting), the troublesome older brother, as he showers behind semi-transparent blinds on the bottom floor of one of the towers, there is an actual stream of water coming down and a showerhead. Spaghetti and tomato sauce, when served, are as real as real can be. So is the salad nobody seems to eat. But one can't help get the feeling that the unappetizing looking pasta, sauce, and salad are all more Dutch emblems of Italian cuisine churned out by the Toneelgroep Amsterdam commissary than an actual succulent Italian meal cooked by Mama.

This show is an occasion for van Hove to deploy his masterful skills at deploying the elements at his disposal for maximum variety. The performance is gripping not only for

the compelling human situation, but for the kaleidoscopic parade of extremes – between deafening and quiet, cluttered and spare, isolated and dispersed. Van Hove interjects one of those extended silent, physicalized segments, which are one his trademarks and with which he embellishes the original screenplay throughout. Once it is clear that Rocco has laid claim to Nadia sexually, and she has taken refuge from her abusive lover Simone with him, the younger brother, lights suddenly come up on Rocco and Simone locked in immobile combat. Then the tableau comes to life, and they continue fighting off the platform, breathing hard, quietly circling each other. They clinch again as lights go blue. Finally, Rocco throws Simone onto the camp bed, which collapses on top of him, and Rocco stalks off. They then go right back into a clinch which is halfway between combat and lovemaking. Simone throws Rocco against a scaffold, Rocco rises up, throws Simone onto the platform, and there they both lie prone. The whole non-verbal segment is very protracted.

It is followed up by several scenes where physicality and image supersede dialogue. Accordion music plays as Nadia drags her coat off painfully, gets up, and drunkenly tiptoes over to the side and onto her knees, perched on the cafe table where Simone is sitting alongside the platform. The stage is bathed in red light. She winds up on the ground, turns all the furniture over, hysterically laughing, and crawling all over the place. She and Simone wind up in bed. She takes off her dress, stands back up, and dances around, twirling it in the air. A quiet scene between the oldest and youngest brothers, Simone and Luca follows. Sitting in the armchair, Luca cradles Simone's head in his arm, with convincing great tenderness. In yet another all the brothers are lying in bed wrapped in each other's arms when Rocco storms in to wake and throw his brother Ciro out so he can talk to Simone privately. Simone listens silently and then gets back into bed with his three other brothers who are lying in one single bed like sardines, front to back, and falls back asleep.

Suddenly shots ring out; the lights change; and Nadia, Rocco, and Simone are lying on the ground in a facsimile of a jump-cut. Simone gropes his way to Nadia who leaves him lying there and crawls on her knees over to Rocco who hasn't moved, saying that it's him she loves. Bang! Another shot triggers a sudden change of atmosphere. We deduce— as no prop gun is in evidence – that Simone has shot his girlfriend. Then we're suddenly in the middle of a fight with Rocco in the ring: another jump cut. Simone though, continues the previous action simultaneously, and carts the prone Nadia away, to the sound of recorded cheering at Rocco's successes. After a brief fight Rocco wins as usual. And in a simultaneous third setting within the multi-focus segment, the family sets the other half of the platform like a table with a checked oilcloth tablecloth. Once the fight's really over, colorful balloons get distributed, and spaghetti served. Rocco, now with his family, announces that with this latest victory he has become the biggest champion in Italy. They pour wine and toast. Rocco makes a speech about the future, and says they will have make sacrifices for the new house they're hoping to move into. He doesn't realize when he says it that Simone has already made a human sacrifice of Nadia. Simone who then lopes into the party drunk as a skunk, is warmly welcomed by Mama nonetheless. Sarcastic, caustic, he accidentally steps on a balloon, which bursts, and orders Rocco to turn over all the money he has. They then notice that he has blood on his

hands, but in his drunken state he can't put together a convincing alibi for it. He finally admits to himself and his family that he has murdered Nadia. Mama starts sobbing, and he orders her to be quiet.

Rocco, out of his mind with grief and rage, topples Simone onto the platform/birthday party table. But then they lay there, Rocco inert on top of Simone, like lovers. Rocco sobs, saying the murder is his own fault, caressing Simone and kissing him. Simone, numb, pats Rocco's back. Then he goes to sit and eat spaghetti voraciously like a pig, upon which Simone too starts to sob uncontrollably and Mama leads him lovingly away. The rest of the family breaks down into opposing camps. Ciro and others scream at each other from off to the side, in the towers. Ciro announces that he's going to get the police to turn in Simone, and the others warn him not to. Luca sits at the table in silence for a long time. Then he sets to stuffing his mouth with spaghetti.

The lights very gradually fade on the table with Luca sitting by himself. Then Ciro starts his own low-key monologue. Separated now from the situation, he narrates how he did in fact turn Simone in to the police. Rocco stands crying at the other end of the table facing away, and demands to know why, then, screaming, denounces him. Ciro explains himself. That he loved Simone. That he intends to move ahead in life. He talks to Luca who has drifted far off in the dark to the far reaches of one of the aisles in between audience sections. He explains that Rocco is a saint, but that there's no role for saints in this world, and that his saintliness brings down disasters on everyone. Luca, barely listening, clears the table. They stand right up against each other. Ciro yells in his face, and Luca drops all the plates and food, making a huge mess. Putting aside their acrimony, they hug, he tells Luca to give Mama a kiss for him, and leaves. The youngest son, Luca, is left alone on stage, practicing boxing, an image that bespeaks the indominability of the Parondi spirit. Curtain. This, on balance, is a very strong, powerful show.

Cries and Whispers

Although it was later brought to BAM in Brooklyn I originally caught Toneelgroep Amsterdam's adaptation of the Ingmar Bergman film *Cries and Whispers* (*Kreten en Gefluister* in Dutch) at the performing arts center De Singel in Antwerp, and it's that earlier version which I describe here.^{ecclxxviii}

The original movie opens with the delicate tinkling of various gold-gilded clocks. We are treated to a series of opulent red-wallpapered interiors of the Victorian era in Sweden, which bespeak prosperity, complacency, and good taste. The central character, Anna, writes in her diary, and it is through the medium of this highly private and hushed conveyance that the exposition regarding her illness emerges, just as tinklingly as the clocks which count down her remaining time on earth. While using the tropes of naturalism, the quietist film is structured by alternating scenes of outer reality with confessional monologues. Bergman makes abundant use of close shots of individual characters isolated from their world, set against a monochromatic background. Further,

there are fantasy scenes that start as though they were objective reality, but then tip over into grotesque fantasy, bespeaking a kind of Magic Realism. Even these tend to occur in a hush.

Van Hove made extremely fundamental changes in the prevailing mood. Whereas the lighting in the film is softly filtered, as though emanating from the bulbous oil lamps which adorn the lush interiors, onstage the light is harshly white, generalized, and clinical. Also, from a dramaturgical point of view, van Hove readjusts Bergman's multi-focus plot to an essentially uni-directional one so that the play's action heavily centered on Anna's life and mortal illness, whereas in the film it's evenly divided between her other sisters and she, as well as the loyal family servant Anna. The theatre version removes the narrative complexity from early on and displaces the other characters' plot lines in such a way that we perceive them as vestigial, not equal to Anna's calvary.^{ccclxxix}

De Rode Zaal in De Singel is a very large house with a gaping proscenium arch. It's a space that renders privacy moot. Yet as this show comes over the footlights it penetrates one's very marrow. Hanging over and encompassing the entire depth and width of the stage is a high rectangular canopy. The stage space below it is divided into a series of rectilinear compartments formed by industrial metal and glass dividers, by now familiar signifiers of the Ramification principle. The clean lines of this sterile world evoke the Calvinist sternness that dominates the family's life. We can see through and past most of them, thus reducing the possibility for privacy, but allowing for much simultaneous action. Video monitors are scattered throughout the space, although van Hove resorts to them mostly only early in the action. The further into the narrative we penetrate, the more the event depends on live action.

When the lights come up, the first things we take in are that downstage are a hospital bed to one side and another chamber to the other side where Anna, the servant, prays. Following this moment of illusory calm, equivalent to the filigree tinkling of glass-faced clocks with which Bergman lures the audience in at the start of his film, frenetic cartoons of Tweety Bird, flashing by faces, and speeded up abstract patterns dominate the videos. This feverish montage accompanied by hectic recorded sounds represents the last moments of troubled sleep for Karin, the main character, as she whips into waking consciousness. She is an artist now mortally ill, seemingly in the terminal stages of ovarian or cervical cancer.

Once she wakes up, we are dragged through a series of excruciating scenes which do anything but sugar-coat the real ordeal of the patient. From when she sits on her toilet and removes her soiled underwear, to where she pounds her haunted, traitorous midriff to drive home to the impotent doctor how unrelenting her pain is the seamiest sides of horrifying illness get thrust at us. It is hard to imagine how Chris Nietvelt in the role of Karin could volunteer to go through this agony performance after performance, but there are no holds barred in her expansive portrayal of a woman losing control over her bodily functions and faced head-on with implacable death. In the first act, Anna and the sisters are compelled to change the sheets on the hospital bed not once but three times.

As is typical of van Hove so much that is expressive happens in between the dialogue, as he elaborates action that Bergman only implied or hinted at in his quietist film classic. It was mentioned in the film that Karin is an artist. A small, framed oil painting by her bedside is briefly flashed on, and we see that she did indeed dabble in painting. Here, Karin streaks the very glass of the stage dividers with bright blue tempera. As her pain peaks, she unrolls a huge strip of paper, throws a bucket of the blue paint on it, pitches her chamber pot full of slops after, and rolls about in the mess, shrieking. While pain is crippling her, she crawls over to her paint pots and makes drawings all over the stage floor. At the height of her agony, the paint gets splashed and spattered all over the walls – a Rohrschach of suffering. Her art thus detonates, or following the imagery of the play, metastasizes throughout the entire theatrical space. Where Bergman whispered, van Hove howls.

A master of the suddenly shifting ambience, van Hove periodically lowers the vast rectangular canopy in front of the set to conceal the stage action. What promises to offer relief from the relentless catharsis proves to simply be a shift of medium, not of misery. For the canopy once lowered is actually a screen on which is projected imagery where reality gets distorted, ramified, and transmogrified. The actors become shadow puppets projected onto the canopy-now-screen, as Karin's face, hit by a video camera upstage is projected large over those shadows. It is a vast canvas that gets filled with Bunraku shadows superimposed on her giant face, reeling from side to side, thus enlisting a vast arsenal of ingredients to evoke the disordered inner world of the dying patient. This is the theatre of Gordon Craig consummated, the one he dreamed of but had not the means to realize. Whereas Craig posited puppets, since he thought the actors of his time incapable of realizing the enormity of his concepts, here the tight-knit Twenty First Century company of actors can strive to and do match their uber-director's wildest, most exalted visions.

Once Karin dies, it is not the end of Chris Nietvelt's performance. We see flashbacks into the lives of the other sisters, with each other and their husbands, all fascinating, all harsh. These many scenes which made up the main action of the movie have been displaced from the central action and back-ended to this aftermath, where their impact is mitigated. Nietvelt appears, as though incidentally, upstage through the dividers, tromping around casually, now either a ghost or simply an actress going about her offstage business.

The performance of her excoriating death, which dragged the audience through an emotional blizzard leaving them drained, yet contains its own antidote. We rediscover Karin following her own death casually seated downstage, and watching as her family members abandon the house of their childhood. They coldly leave behind the servant Anna, who had devoted years of her life to their now dead sister, evicted and left to wander the high road.

Out of the blue, Karin breaks the fourth wall and starts chatting casually directly with the audience, reminiscing about her young years and early years living with her sisters and mother. She speaks, sitting behind a window cut into the canopy, which is lowered once

more, reverting to its function as giant screen. She says that she would dearly love to be reunited with those she had loved, those who had meant something to her. She then comes out of a door that was also unobtrusively cut into the canopy, and watches the images pass by on the screen. So the canopy, through a simple but clever sleight of hand, turned into the outside of her house.

Then, it becomes clear that all the images before us on the screen are an artful video of all those people she just alluded to, those very loved ones with whom she had wished to be reunited. One by one, they playfully congregate and lie down, forming an amoeba shape. As the camera pulls back, they grow little as we lose a sense of their integrity as individuals and now perceive that the large shape their squiggly little bodies forming is now one of a single human body. Thus a second sleight of hand performed through this virtual imagery transforms what was a house into the house of all human existence – this great all-containing human body – everlasting. Karin goes back inside the canopy and assumes her position over the video image of her loved ones, merging with them. Their little bodies fill her large one and fit within its contours. Van Hove gives us a plausible and dearly hoped-for image of harmony in life-after-death and even immortality, which we eagerly gulp down, children once more, hopeful and credulous. There is no denying that this play ranks among van Hove's masterpieces.

***Antonioni Project*, 2010, Toneelgroep Amsterdam**

The three Antonioni movies, *La Notte*, *L'Avventura*, and *L'Eclisse*, when they first came out in hard succession between 1960 and 1962, were considered to be a self-contained series. While they shared no characters or incidents in common, they were similar in atmosphere, rhythm, and theme. They all contain couples whose partners are drawn to each other, but whose integrity as a couple is threatened both by circumstances and large existential traps. The members of the couple misbehave, stray, act on caprice, muse about the strength of their attraction or ability to rise to the occasion, and about whether it's immoral to join their lot with this or any other person in a relationship that could endure. The films were made under the sign of the existentialist philosophy that was then in vogue, represented by Camus's novels, *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, as well as his landmark essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," and Sartre's *Nausea*, *No Exit*, and multiple other works of fiction, theatre, and philosophy. The Antonioni characters are all related to Meursault, anti-hero of *The Stranger*, who one day happens to kill an unknown man on a beach because... well, there is no real because. He might have done that or something else in the moment. Indeed, any choice would have been equally valid, just as total inaction would have. At the same time, the anti-heroes and heroines of these films are also riven with doubts and moral outrage at their own responses to events, and those of their circle as well. All human action is subject to doubt as to its significance or validity. In existential cinema and theatre, as much may be deduced from silent glances and visual compositions as from explicit verbal expression. Doubt filters up in the interstices.

The reigning atmosphere is one of malaise. It's the world of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* gone sour, stripped of madcap joyousness. The characters are bourgeois or wealthy, insouciant

as to getting their daily needs met. They have come loose from the moorings of whatever compelling purpose or mission they may ever have sought to fulfill in life. They bump up against each other socially without penetrating each other's lives in satisfying ways. The physical landscape is desolate. Time and again we are treated to solid, beautiful ancient structures of the Italian cities and countrysides, but surrounded by wastelands where lackluster building projects are standing half-finished or by industrial parks of numbing anomic. Certain characters may gain momentary thrills by betting on the stock market, going for a sexual quickie, or taking a luxurious boat ride. But even caught up in the swing of these distractions, they remain blasé, and some ruin themselves in consequence of the impulsive leap of a moment's duration.

The slack, meandering sense of time in Antonioni is what most characterizes these films. In a daring departure from the standard Hollywood pattern, Antonioni's characters are notable for drifting in and out of their relationships, through spaces, in and out of their precipitating motives, producing a rhythm that is ambling to the point of stultification. Conversations have an aimless feeling about them. Decisions drift up out of the blue like flotsam, and just as arbitrarily fritter away. Characters suddenly appear in a new environment without preparation or explanation. Entropy is the determining energy at work in Antonioni's modern classics, and many thought he had captured the zeitgeist of mid-century. Others found it pretentious, self-indulgent claptrap.^{ccclxxx}

Van Hove's production is much more about states than political or social issues. I would say its avant-garde credentials are greatly enhanced by its disjointedness, its foregrounding of mood over dramatic eventfulness, and denial of "aboutness."^{ccclxxxi} It's quite a trick to throw all these independent casts from three separate movies into one theatrical fishbowl, and retain clarity. When the three narratives are put in confrontation with each other as van Hove forced them, a new, more complex narrative is engendered with its own scaffolding of background and foreground. Certain elements from each film come to surprising prominence and seem to have impact on threads with which they had had no relation whatever back when they were part of one autonomous screenplay only.

This production is dependent on as well as about electronic media. The live characters' proceedings are always under the scrutiny of a camera, and their lives are performed as though on a sound stage. Indeed, the stage is fitted out to resemble one. Technical paraphernalia and cinema lighting stuff – instruments, reflectors, and filters – litter the environment. One technique we've seen used skillfully elsewhere in the Benelux by Guy Cassiers, for example,^{ccclxxxii} employs a green screen with actors being filmed live from offstage. It also has the ability to accommodate pre-shot footage along with the live feed, placing the very actors we see on stage, as they are there, but set against some specific environment that is not the stage at all. Thus the audience can be both right here in the theatre with live actors and transported elsewhere to a more complete fictional environment that looks real as real can be on the screen. The green screen background can contain both animate and inanimate landscapes.

In this case, the cameras are placed directly downstage, just off the proscenium arch. The stage at first appears to be totally empty with a blue floor and rectangular screen placed

upstage, although it becomes evident that a separate area also exists stage left, set off by a divider. A giant screen is also hanging just over the stage, so we see both at once – whole bodies of live actors in a void – little –and big and in the context from a hospital interior above, only partially seen in the many screen close-ups – face and upper torsos.^{ccclxxxiii} There is lots of free-form movie music, largely piano, playing aimlessly underneath.

The first three scenes establish the three narratives before they intertwine:

1) Tomaso, a patient in a hospital (Hugo Koolschijn) is wheeled onstage in a wheelchair, accompanied by his two dear friends and acolytes Giovanni and Lydia. He's a well-known author, and is obviously mortally ill. The three are standing onstage, but, through use of a green screen, they appear to be standing in one of those all too familiar corridors of a major urban hospital that hang in space, connecting two pavilions with the rest of the hospital visible through the glass walls. This is a character grouping from *La Notte*. The live actors are puny in relation to the space and to the monumental film images of themselves on the screen above.

2) Two other actors simultaneously enter, but are picked up by a different camera and are standing in front of a different background showing an urban landscape of office buildings with buses passing on the street outside. This couple, whose story forms the core action from *L'Eclisse*, Piero and Vittoria, had formerly been lovers, and are in the midst of ending their relationship. He wants it to continue, but she's had enough.

3) Then another pair, two chic blonde women, Anna and Claudia, enters. Claudia's image is then displaced in the screen by the leading man, Sandro. This is the love triangle from *L'Avventura*. As they embrace, they are followed by a camera on a circular track, and then by another camera tracking straight along the entire downstage end of the stage. Quite a dynamic image above on the screen is thus created out of this live feed.

By starting off with the triangle from *La Notte*, and in particular the scene in the hospital room, van Hove places the entire enterprise in the context of impending death. Not just the *Notte* plotline, but the entire show has the death of the esteemed professor at its center, thus, in effect, de-centering the other two plots.

The tracking camera picks up on Lidia, who had crossed center stage, just as the background jumpcuts to a strange beach or golf range, with sun setting behind her, plus other human figures who are visible in the far distance, and only on screen. She is joined by Giovanni from that first scene, and they embrace. In the movie (*La Notte*) she was silently overwhelmed by the decrepitude of their friend Tomasso in the hospital room, and silently fled to be alone in a setting of urban blight, which is where Giovanni catches up with her.

Next, the illusion of the famous master scene in a boat from *L'Avventura* is evoked. To create this sense of being at sea a whole group of actors wearing swimsuits are downstage lolling on a blanket backed up by a couple of low screens. Through the magic of

greenscreen, the background on the screen above the stage is all sky and sea, rising and falling. A cameraman kneels center stage facing stage right, thus capturing them all. The combination of the live actors in real time merged with the pre-prepared moving background makes for a convincing film image, very similar to the actual Antonioni movie, although the live actors are totally unadorned and devoid of physical environment. This allows us to see the mechanism behind the illusion as well as the created illusion at all times. Of course the audience's focus goes back and forth between the live and screen version at will, which makes for perceptual complexity and paradox throughout. Van Hove and his dramaturg have rearranged the chronology of scenes from *L'Aventura*, with scenes from early on between Anna, Sandro, and Claudia, intercut with the scene from the boat and on the island later.

This bucolic, unpressured scene on the boat is suddenly disrupted as a live jazz band just offstage blasts out, and the huge technical crew dashes about with thousands of monitors, and battens drop into view from the flies. A jazz trumpet blares out in the midst of all this chaos, and we are meant to understand that we are now at the stock exchange. The stock exchange, where Vittoria's mother spends her days, was unforgettably established in the Antonioni movie as a masterpiece of impossibly intricate choreography in which the brokers careen pointlessly about in a pattern of shoving and near collisions.

Here, the effect is achieved with the introduction of the technicians of the show itself, revealed in the midst of all their multiple tasks. Throughout the van Hove show the technical crew are virtually cast members whose comings and goings we follow with equal interest to the actors. A great deal of simultaneous dialogue, with many actors on cell phones, and hands going in all directions is meant to evoke the roiling stock exchange from *L'Eclisse* where Vittoria repeatedly goes to see her betting-on-stocks-addicted mother, as the jazz trumpet once more blares out, enhancing the cacophany. The camera on a wagon running along the straight downstage track shuttles back and forth, its footage intercut with another camera's, as a series of quick cuts back and forth reenforce and capture the chaos going on on stage.

An actor with his back to us, but whose face is captured on screen suddenly announces the heart attack of a fellow stockbroker. The announcement, breaking the hubbub of the frenzied stock deals that forces the driven stockbrokers into a taciturn moment of silence, is yet another sharp reminder of mortality early on in the show. One of the actors is picked out studying his cellphone, a sharply deflating image that instantly causes a sharp dropoff in the significance of that man's life. Once silent moment passes, a dizzying montage of the various actors and technicians shouting into cellphones flashes by, as the camera pulls in and out suddenly, from close to far shots, in sharp jerks.

Just as suddenly as the chaotic scene had burst out, it gives way completely to an intimist scene between Vittoria, who we'd seen splitting up with her lover, now together with one of the stock market agents who becomes her new lover. He's standing across the boundary from the downstage end of the stage looking upstage at her, even as she is facing downstage looking at him. They're talking to each other live, but picked up by different cameras, which cut back and forth between the two.

In the film of *L'Avventura*, the two friends, Claudia and Anna, had a scene of trying on dresses, where Anna hands Claudia one of her own. Later Claudia, who is a blonde, appears in a brunette wig, the color of Anna's hair, which thus introduces the doppelganger leitmotif which carries through the duration of the movie. During the dressing scene in the movie, there is the gentlest suggestion of lesbian attraction between them, but later, when Anna has disappeared and Claudia replaces her as Sandro's mistress, it is more that they mirrored and duplicated each other, that they are somehow existentially symbiotic, then interchangeable. This segment on stage is set in front of catty-corner white screens. The sexual tension between them is suggested even more strongly than in the movie, although who they are to each other is left hanging. Are they sisters? Lovers? Friends? Again, Claudia leaves Anna and is replaced by Nico. He: "I love you, isn't that enough?" She: "No." There is an extended scene with one camera on both of them in a two-shot.

Then, just catty-corner to the preceding one is a screen occupied by the couple from *L'Eclisse*, Piero and Vittoria, forcing us to juxtapose the two romantically involved couples. She is getting dressed and doing her make-up. He's changing his clothes too in another two-shot scene. She goes off screen, but we never lose track of her below – on stage. She is trying to seduce him, or simply to keep him there with her, but he's distracted, by what we don't yet know.

Then, now freely weaving the three plots together, we're back to the *L'Avventura* boat. We only see the sea rising and falling on the screen, whereas below the actors walk around and speak, very much as though they're on dry land. It is clear, as one calls "Anna!" that the crucial event of the film – Anna's mysterious disappearance – has just occurred. There is a moment of chaos and black and white on screen, and then we're back in a bedroom, in a quiet scene with ethereal music, this time with Claudia, another woman, and Sandro together.

Anna's Father (confusingly played by Hugo Koolschijn, who also plays the hospital patient Tomasso) appears in the middle of the curving track, as the camera circles him on it, backed up by a mechanical sound. This is meant to give the impression of him landing in a helicopter, whereas in the film he equally impressively arrives on the island on a catamaran. He talks of his daughter, who has disappeared. Sandro crosses in to address him and the camera circles them on the track. At the end of the conversation Sandro strides with purpose all the way across the very wide stage, and is tracked by the camera on the horizontal track, so our eyes are glued to him all the way across the stage when he arrives at the far left end to kiss Claudia, who has now replaced Anna in his affections, now that the latter has disappeared. The long cross on stage and screen simultaneously, in effect, takes us the psychic distance between his love for Anna, as represented now by her father, and his rebound mistress. He and that new mistress then have several long, dynamic love scenes together. But van Hove now amplifies their plot-thread by interweaving those of all three discrete couples, who thus become interchangeable.

We follow Claudia and Sandro into a scene in a train station, which is not where it was

not set there in the movie. She sits on a suitcase. The screen above is a dizzying, blurry image of a train station corridor in black and white that serves more for mood than specific background, and the characters are not captured by the cameras. This scene from *L'Avventura* alternates between those from *La Notte*, between Vittoria and Piero with whom she begins an affair, followed by one with the married couple from *L'Eclisse*, Giovanni and Lidia. As one scene is winding down and the other is beginning the characters from the two independent film narratives stare at each other and take each other in across the stage space (across the gap between the two dramatic plots as though the films were laid over each other like two transparencies) before pursuing their own stories once more. These discrete groups of characters from different movies cross each other's paths without the two stories yet combining into one. The act ends with an outburst of jazz music that lasts through the intermission.

At the start of Act 2, the entire set-up is different. The screen has replicated into many screens, and they all display a racetrack with different fragments of the same locale – horses being led lazily around by jockeys, their ambling rhythm establishing the tempo for the entire scene.

Onstage there is an L-shaped white platform dominating the central area, surrounded by the ambient blue kidney shape on the floor, representing a pool. Throughout the blue areas are placed low-slung modernist easy chairs. Actors are sitting languorously here and there. Some wander about willy-nilly on the screen and on stage as well. There is a small window-shaped screen just upstage of the pool on which horses are led past. When an actor stands in front of it, both she and the horsetrack background are projected large on the screen above. But the perspective is totally different – suggestive of a sybaritic party. It is in fact the party at Patrizia's sumptuous home centered around a pool which bookends the long earlier scene on the boat in *L'Avventura*. Patrizia and Claudia remain in the foreground of the screen image, even though the characters onstage take focus away from them.

There is a camera on a pivoting boom center stage, which can turn around and pick up subjects on the opposite sides of the stage and peer into corners. Thus does it leave the main party and find its way into a private scene between a woman and a photographer, Raimondo in the bedroom nook off to the side. As Raimondo shows her naked shots of women he has seduced, the camera picks them up from above, over the bed, all the images of naked women circling on the large screen. Then all of a sudden, behind the white catty-corner flats with the beds, a whole new area is discovered that is hidden from the onstage by an opaque divider – a hotel bar extreme stage left, with huge overhanging decorative lamps – all in the same hyper-modern style, picked up by the camera on the boom peering down over the divider. In fact, van Hove is still creating a voyeuristic audience/actor relationship we have seen in other shows. But instead of transparent walls or tight boxes, he uses the camera to invade spaces that are so private, they aren't even available to the audience's gaze any other way.

Then back center stage, Patrizia, Claudia and Sandro have a general party discussion, though his is the only face – close up – on the screen above. In a neat segue, the old lady

takes off on her own, while the lovers walk the few steps stage left, a move that places them in the private setting of the bedroom. They are followed by the pivoting camera that renders their attempt to gain privacy public in spite of them; the equivalent of a film “cut” from pool to bedroom has thus been achieved.

Their intimacy is briefly interrupted by a sickening loud blaring sound as the camera pivots careeningly and stomach-droppingly back to Patrizia sitting and Vittoria from *L'Eclisse* sitting downstage of her at the pool. Then, just as suddenly, it goes back to the cool music and the love scene in bed. Vittoria is next joined in an adjacent chair by Piero, her new lover, who had in fact been her mother's sleek young stockbroker. They come into the foreground as the love-scene in the bed carries on upstage, but not on the screen.

The jazz band is depicted on one small screen and the racetrack background on another. As the couple from *L'Eclisse* start making impetuous love, the music heats up with a punk song. Things go abstract as a transition, due to the pivot camera swirling dizzily around, and then settles back into cool jazz, as the couple in bed, Sandro and Claudia are picked up there following the love making. We see them from various angles, straight ahead and via aerial shots as well, as the boom circles and bends. Sandro proposes marriage to Claudia, which takes her aback.

As he throws her down onto the bed once more, the music briefly gets energetic, and the camera peeks over the wall behind the bed to peer into the stage area we can't see live. There is a fight going on. The guy in the fight, Giovanni from *La Notte*, emerges and talks to the old lady – Patrizia. This marks the beginning of a major shift in which characters from two different movies interact with each other. In fact, two party scenes from two different movies – *L'Aventura* and *La Notte* – have actually now been reduced to one.

As Claudia nestles into bed and Sandro, dressed, prepares to wander through the hotel, she asks him if he loves her. He offhandedly says he does. She asks him to say it again, but he demurs, only tossing off that he does as he walks out, and turns the corner of the dividing flat. In a slick transition, the camera follows him to where the audience can't see behind the flat. There, just on the other side of the wall from the bedroom area, the camera discovers another vamping female character – Vittoria from a totally different movie – to whom he offers a light. So he has literally left his new love interest on the rebound from the disappeared Anna, and left her in bed only to come on to yet a third love interest. And Vittoria who had left her husband and taken on Piero, is now flirting with yet a third man! The camera, supreme voyeur, has captured the entire pattern of symmetrical infidelities.

The style now shifts to a long grotesque and alienating sequence depicting society as a James Ensor mosaic of mocking mask-like faces, and then to a totally different quiet, reflective one, as quite striking images on screen pass by in juxtaposition to the stage actions. Many secondary members of the cast are scanned in a line, passing slowly before our eyes upside-down on the screen, most of them masked. Once we start to

wonder where the live masked actors are on stage and cast about, we find that they are actually standing against a wall far stage left, in an out-of-the way spot, looking into a mirror. It is the mirror image that the peering camera captures onscreen, making them preeminent. It is certain that the director has calculated perceptual puzzle in the audience and spaced out the images accordingly.

The line of masked actors then form themselves into a procession and stride out centerstage, arraying themselves around the pool, as though they were now statuary. The lights go down on this oneiric tableau, and the screen also immediately flies up and out, as a series of large red cylindrical lights have come down from the flies and hang over the stage. This is a sample of Jan Versweyveld's semiotics of lighting instruments. It is as though certain human dramas are announced by the appearance of selected lighting fixtures of prescribed shapes and colors. As we hear Lidia's voice inquiring after the condition of Tomaso (the dying man from the first scene whom we had all clearly forgotten along with Lidia), and hear that he had died ten minutes earlier, the red lamps slowly move up and out of sight. They were there only briefly in acknowledgment, as it were, of his passing. A new reflective mood prevails, with just two characters onstage, the couple from first scene, the Pontanos, Giovanni and Lidia, who we haven't seen for some time, sitting with the reality of Tomaso's death. A mirror ball effect is spinning very slowly over the stage, dappling it with reds and blues in uncanny silence. For once, no music is playing.

In this way, by providing constant, unpredictable shifts in mood, alternating plots, and startling use of video and lights, van Hove is able to keep seemingly subdued and subtle, almost undramatic, scenes gripping, full of originality and compelling interest. It isn't so much dramatic interest, since no character or set of characters detain our attention for any unbroken period, but aesthetic interest in the strategically shifting shifts in music, lights, spatial shape, in other words, the theatrical means themselves.

Following the silence, Patrizia, the patrician hostess joins the band and sings "My Funny Valentine," seen both on stage and on screen, a bit which isn't in the film. Her performance starts off rather poignantly. Then after a while many join in singing harshly and discordantly as the band starts shrilling out. The cast starts running around frantically, and hundreds of blue balloons drop down onto the stage. This signals a total and sudden switch in tone and modality, as the giant screen comes down from its high perch and for the first time entirely occludes the downstage playing area. There is no more live theatre, only film image filling the giant proscenium frame.

We see a montage of scenes of modern disasters – war, emergencies, mass killings, crowds of people in motion, police actions with grand, magistral orchestral music playing in the background, all of which goes on for an extended period. It is cataclysmic and grand at the same time. None of this foregoing business comes from any of the three films. It is almost cliché to note that Existentialism was born out of the cataclysms of the Second World War – the mass slaughters of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Holocaust. Van Hove, by juxtaposing these horrific montage images to the arbitrary and blasé actions of the Antonioni characters, leaves it to us to connect the dots and construct our

own picture of causal relations between the two.

As the pandemonium winds down we switch to the couple from *L'Eclisse*, Piero and Vittoria, on screen in a car, kissing, who then separate without exchanging a word. There is then a sudden cut to different couple, Claudia and Sandro from *L'Aventura*. The live actors have been entirely eliminated and are now displaced by huge movie actors, although they are probably simply the same actors being filmed backstage. The live action which had shared the stage with video via a Ramifying principle, is now entirely edged out by it. Today the reality has become mediatic and magnified – put under a microscope. They are even talking partially about a certain film they had seen in a movie theatre or on television.

After lengthy two character dialogue-dominated on-screen scenes with little physical movement, Claudia and Patrizia's faces emerge from the dark. Claudia has lost track of Sandro's whereabouts and is frantically searching for him. After getting reassurances from the older women, she keeps walking surrounded by darkness and comes upon Sandro making love to another woman, she also emerging from the darkness. In the movie, *L'Aventura*, this desperate search for her lover whom she feared had come to some dreadful accident, takes place in brightly lit realistic spaces of a luxury hotel. Here it is visualized as faces abstracted in the dark.

Lidia and Piero, then, on the very edge of the stage, tiny, have a long scene right in front of their simultaneous gigantic images. Imagery in this section moves in and out of realism and into a kind of expressionism: imagery with fluid, blurred contours, a penetration into extreme uneventfulness, a stream of dreary, going-nowhere images and action. Entropy dominates more and more, as the images deliberately lose intention and direction. This segment has hijacked us into the extreme post-dramatic. And then almost imperceptibly we slip back into the drama that had gone into suspension. Lidia and Giovanni are lying together among the balloons amid the detritus left over from party. She says she just called the hospital and heard that Tomaso has died. It is all handled very quietly and devoid of energy, but... the event itself implies impact.

At that point the screen goes up to reveal the live actors and the rest of the set once more, returning to their initial scale and medium. There is a composition of scattered empty chairs that had previously been occupied – the poetry of loss and death encapsulated in the image of idle furniture. Lidia leaves the balloons behind, crossing the stage. Only Giovanni remains in close-up on screen above as Lidia reads a letter she had received from someone long ago – including expressive and eloquent insights into the fleeting nature of life. At end of the long letter, Giovanni asks who wrote that letter. She says, "You." She screams that they don't love each other, as he tries to comfort her.

The screen comes back in and we see the jaded, matrician hostess Patrizia having breakfast in bed with her industrialist husband Ettore. He kisses her. They talk about sucking the juice out of a particular kind of egg. He asks: "What do you feel?" She: "Not much." That gets repeated twice. The screen is raised as a rock song plays for the curtain call. All the characters and technicians and musicians deploy along the front of

stage in a long line backs to audience. They then turn and face audience and bow.

Although we see many of these characters over and over, the intertwining of the three stories dilutes the importance and specificity of each. The characters literally float in a medium of blue without much focus on the concreteness of their lives. Even more than the characters in the movies, the philosophical issues of connection and existence are foregrounded to the detriment of particular stories. They have become prototypes of people far more than individuals. It is hard to take in or absorb much more than a few facts about each character, but that they are in and out of love, betray each other, and wonder what's worth bothering about. This is a show of atmosphere, aesthetic surface, and ideas floating about. The low-key acting that is called for in this essentially cool, understated piece suits the Dutch actors' temperaments quite well, however Italian the piece's roots. Again this is a show where scenic dynamics are foregrounded over dramatic incident, charting a sea-changing of subtle *states*.^{cclxxxiv}

Recently Ivo made this regretful assessment of the tour de force: "...the film scenarios were too weak, and the production I made was technically too complicated for the actors, too difficult to master onstage. An error."^{cclxxxv} I beg strongly to differ.

***Persona*, 2012, Toneelgroep Amsterdam**

This was one half of a double-bill of Bergman film scripts van Hove adapted to the stage. It is of a spareness, understatement, and mystery that match the Swedish film classic. The dramatic text follows the film scenario lockstep, but using extremely different means. It deviates from Ivo's big, rollicking spectacles, with a canvass restricted to only four actors. Only two occupy the lion's share of performance time. Its theatrical interest is subtle and understated, its meaning a deliberate puzzle.

The show starts in a simple gray box set. There is almost nothing on stage, except a hospital bed center stage in light, with a naked woman's body on it – Elizabeth Vogler (played by TGA stalwart, Marieke Heebink) – whereas all around it the stage space is dim. Frida Pittoors as the Doctor is downstage in the dim light talking to the other protagonist, the nurse Sister Alma. She reveals all the exposition in one go, revealing that a famous actress, their patient in the bed, had stopped talking right in the middle of a performance. Once she finishes the long, involved story, she abruptly walks out. Two such narrative passages frame the play symmetrically, although throughout the main protagonists have lengthy, subdued monologues.

All movements are kept to a minimum, and the acting is restrained, but charged. Sister Alma goes up to the naked lady, now her mute patient, and tells her the basic outlines of her own life. She has gotten no response, when the Doctor returns suddenly. Sister Alma posits to her a theory that the illness is psychic or spiritual rather than organic in origin. The Doctor, accepting the hypothesis, they shake on Sister Alma's assignment as the one who will lead la Vogler back to health, and the Doctor leaves once more. The Sister, with even more confidence than before, marches up to the bed to care for her patient, and

gives her a shot. This entire section of the play has a very clinical tone, and all actions are performed with a clinical correctness. The music that plays, a monotone single electronic note, supports this sterility.

Sister Alma turns on the radio, and the recording that plays is of a radio drama – could it be Vogler’s own voice acting in a show? The patient starts laughing wildly at hearing the show. Then the nurse sits down left and wonders out loud what’s wrong with Mrs. Vogler. Spooky voices close in from everywhere as in a horror movie. The patient starts stretching and moving, and assumes a hieratic statuesque pose, holding a letter high in the air. The nurse opens the letter and reads it aloud to “Mrs. Elizabeth Vogler.” As the letter verges on the scabrous and scandalous, the nurse stops reading. She shows a photo of a nice little boy to Vogler, who rips it up. Then, for the first time, a brief video scene of Vogler’s silent, but animated, blown up face, plays.

Back to the live stage, the Head Nurse comes back to propose that they take a trip to the seaside together. The nurse starts to explain what in the role of Electra must have been problematic for her, and Vogler runs up and tries to silence her with her hand, but the Sister won’t be silenced. As she continues to offer her theory on what traumatized the actress, Vogler holds onto the downright proscenium wall, and Sister starts dressing her in silence. This preliminary scene ends as she finally hands Vogler her handbag.

Then music starts. The Nurse rearranges the room as the three walls, that had so solidly manifested a hospital room, silently and suddenly fall. As though by magic, the Nurse, Head Nurse, and Elizabeth Vogler are now on a platform – in effect a rectangular wooden float – adrift in a great rectangle of real water, the greatest expanse of it in the deep upstage area, and a narrow channel of the water downstage, which is where Vogler and Nurse dip their feet.

The nurse reads a passage from her patient’s diary, in effect violating her trust, about each person being a closed book with its own series of hidden secrets. At that moment, a machine starts up and water is spewed through the air at them sitting on the raft, an effect representing a great storm. They run about in it, throw off their clothes, luxuriate in the storm, embrace each other passionately. The whole extended segment without words is sensual and intimate. As the water lets up, in a moment of growing intimacy, they dry off and don white virginal dressing gowns to pretty, reassuring music. As the evening progresses the nurse confides many extremely private matters to her patient, who takes everything in in silence, but attentively. The nurse jokes that she’s not used to being listened to, and it is clear that her patient has become a kind of spiritual doctor to her. Fog is pumped out from a fog machine that is within the audience’s line of vision. Vogler stands staring at it, then back to us.

All of a sudden the lights that were amber turn totally blue, and in a dream-like voice Vogler suggests that the Nurse had better go to sleep. Both are now in silhouette in the blue light. Vogler keeps talking now as Alma sleeps. A recorded voice speaks, as Vogler strokes her back with a shawl, which produces a very lovely visual and auditory image. The recorded speech ends. Lights come back up as though dawn had broken; so

a series of days are telescoped into what seems like one continuous segment. This is certainly a vision, dream, or inner fantasy, since Vogler has not yet officially recovered her power of speech.

With the new “day,” Alma makes more direct attempts to get Elizabeth to speak. Alma now wears dark glasses. Elizabeth tries and fails to speak. She works herself into a state and rips the dark glasses Alma is wearing off her face. All of a sudden the sweet nurse becomes extremely cruel to her, threatens to strike her with a thermos, drags her around by her jaw, and holds her by it on the ground. Then Elizabeth wades out into the water, terrifying Alma, who follows her out into it, chasing her around. Elizabeth lies prone in shallow water down left. Alma sits in deeper water up center. The lights fade downstage as a male voice calls out imperiously “Elizabeth, Elizabeth!” Reflections of ripples in the water play all over the upstage cyclorama as Alma creeps downstage to make sure that Elizabeth is alright. But she’s drowned. Alma describes her – swollen lips, empty, sleeping, blurting out that she’ll be “nothing more than a piece of meat.”

And then out of nowhere from the remote upstage, breaking through the fog a man in a suit appears: it is Alma’s husband, wading his way, knee-deep, through the water, trying to make contact and reawaken the broken relationship with her. The couple kneels in the water holding each other. Elizabeth stands up, circles them, then stands over them. Alma leaves him. He stands, walks onto a little dock/step unit upstage center, opens the cyclorama and vanishes. He had been a dream. Alma and Elizabeth are now back on the main float in a bluish dawn light.

Elizabeth sits on the downstage end of the float on a chair while Alma sits on “shore” at the far downstage end of the stage, on the ground, her back to us. Alma tells the story of what she’d heard about Elizabeth before she’d ever met her. “Elizabeth Vogler has everything she could possibly wish for as an actress and a woman, but she’s not motherly.” She tells the story of how Elizabeth Vogler looked at her newborn baby and said, “Why don’t you die?” She tried to kill it, but the baby survived. In this remarkable speech, it appears very much as though Alma has assumed Elizabeth’s identity and was speaking in place of her.

Then the nurse finally takes one of the chairs, sits alongside Elizabeth, and explains that the two of them are different people, not the same. A heavy pause ensues. Finally, Elizabeth answers – “Nothing,” which, if interpreted as “real life,” would mean that this was the first actual word out of her mouth since her trauma. She is cured. Alma encourages her. Elizabeth puts her hand on her arm. The Doctor comes back onstage and narrates Elizabeth’s return to normal life as an actress, thus framing the action and ending the show.

This show works with both a small number of actors and a small number of simple, but astonishing production elements – falling walls, water occupying the space creating an oneiric island, some minimal video, and fog. It is an environment which is extraordinarily visually open, but is in fact yet another isolation chamber. The initial isolation chamber of the hospital room obliterated once its walls fell down to give way to

a floating raft cordoned off from the outer world in its way by the water that surrounded it. There the healing of both women can transpire through dream, fantasy, role-exchange, exorcism, talk therapy, and so on. Both the therapy and the show are remarkably effective.

Ludwig, 2011, Münchner Kammerspiele

This production in Munich is based on Luchino Visconti's 1972 movie about the "mad" nineteenth century king of Bavaria, who, living at the time in which Bismarck was constructing a united Germany that put Prussia at the summit, spent his own time building a slew of fairy-tale castles that no one lived in. Almost bankrupting the state in the process, his other great project was to become chief patron to Richard Wagner, thus enabling him to write his great opera cycle, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. He ultimately shut himself away in a remote castle deep in the forest with a large band of young male assistants, avoiding all royal responsibilities. As his state was in danger of crumbling from neglect, he was forced to abdicate and was interned in an insane asylum. Shortly afterward he drowned in mysterious circumstances.

Both film and stage production are significantly marked by claustrophobia, but the respective mise en scènes create this closed in feeling in radically different ways. One of the film's delights is that it takes us to the grounds of a plethora of palaces available to the Teutonic royalty and between which they flit in their hothouse existence. The characters then vanish inside, and most of Visconti's prolix scenes take place inside rooms within the diverse palaces. This live show establishes a strict, clear stage geography to distinguish between public domains, private domains, and domains of a disordered, insane mind. The stark, unadorned walls in the downstage area hem Ludwig in. He is trapped in the unwished for kingly role, at the unfortunate juncture when the historical Ludwig II inherited the Kingdom of Bavaria, the very moment at which a militarized, dominant Prussia assumed suzerainty over his realm. Bismarck rendered him a relatively powerless, figurehead potentate, which jibed with his aversion to the business of governing.

The van Hove set separates him from his people. The latter masses are entirely absent from both the film and stage play. As the play proceeds, social isolation gives way increasingly to a psychic one, and he sinks ever deeper into insanity, shut off from his few familiars and alienated even from his former self. The subjectivity of the stage space is ever reinforced when Ludwig compulsively scratches chalk symbols on the black walls that ultimately become entirely taken over with these incoherent doodles. Thus, as he writes, his inner throes are given a hermetic expression no one in his life or in the world can interpret: a scenic expression of his overwhelmingly painful estrangement and abjection. At times the jottings indicate actual places the action is set – the underground cavern, a palace, the hunter's lodge. The camera can pick them up and represent them large on the overhead screen. All Ludwig can see on his horizon are his own jottings. All else is crowded out by the writing, as black background gives way to white esoteric symbols.

The video screen covering much of the stage, by contrast, generally allows the audience confidential views of the inner room of official life whose white walls are thickly encrusted with gold curlicue molding that epitomizes pomp-ridden German court life. The actual space seen live from the audience with their bare eyes is thin sliver hardly glimpsed through the open door cut out in the middle of the upstage screen. The inner chamber in the van Hove production is a representation of a single inner ceremonial space or receiving room that emblematically encapsulates what were in the film many spaces within many palaces, as they actually were historically. While the citizens of Bavaria are absent from the stage, the audience to a degree assumes their function. The Isolation principle here at work makes that space remote from the audience, putting the royals at a remove from the plebs. We, as citizens, are forced into a position of voyeurs peeking through a slightly parted door on the one hand, but then, as the theatre audience, allowed total, but illicit access via the screen. So we in fact do see and know all that happens in that inner sanctum despite the fact that the door is meant to keep us out.

Then there is the bureaucratic domain that is in front of the stage at audience level. The Wagner unit's space down from it is also on the audience level. In between scenes a narrator's voice over a loudspeaker describes the next place and whatever has transpired in the interim. This is accompanied by a ticker tape, moving written caption version of the same text travelling across the base of the upstage screen, together with a buzzing electric sound. One of the film's conceits is that it periodically interrupts the action to isolate a given character giving answers to unheard questions from an unseen committee of inquiry. Though not explained, it is understood that these witnesses have been called to clarify aspects Ludwig's life and death and the role they played in it. Plainly this inquest occurs following Ludwig's abdication and demise to get to the bottom of how he died, but the testimonies are inserted a-chronologically from the very start. Van Hove only retains one final one, that of a court official at the very end of the drama; the rest are eliminated.

While this is a German production, van Hove as guest director, imported Jeroen Willems, an extraordinary Dutch actor who isn't a member of the TGA repertory, who acts the role of Ludwig in German. The entire cast's acting is intense with the stamp of authenticity, particularly Willems who convincingly clings to his own highly focused involuted mental world.

The show starts as two figures, Ludwig in white suit and Pater Hoffmann, an old man in knee-length black caftan, enter and formally take their places. Willems, the actor playing Ludwig, has a twisted affect. There is clearly a lot going on inside, combining furtive prudish delicacy and perverse audacity. He is not at ease in his body, which is the outer site for the two forces that are at war inside him. The old king has died, and the priest has come to prepare Prince Ludwig to assume the throne, a position for which the latter protests his inadequacy. At the end of the interview the minister blesses Ludwig as church bells peel out. Loud, royal bombastic music announces the entry of various other characters for the coronation. The magnitude of the music betokens formality and multitudes, beside which one feels the inadequacy of the meager human presence of the

three intimidated officials who hesitantly creep onstage. Finally a queenly figure enters in white ermine with crown and gown. In fact she is the real Queen Mother, Ludwig's mother. Ludwig can't look her in the face, and crosses to the other side of the stage.

The ritual of coronation proceeds nonetheless. Champagne is brought, and drunk by the new King. Then the Queen crosses to him, kneels, and kisses his hand. Ludwig goes right up to his brother, Prince Otto, cast as an appealing young man in white turtleneck and gray running pants, and looks him square in the face, uncharacteristic for one whose glances at others are generally fleeting and oblique. Then Ludwig faces upstage, whereupon Otto places an ermine shawl over his shoulders and a fantastic gold jewel-encrusted crown on his head. The whole proceedings are broadcast large against a background of stenciled wallpaper on the screen. There is then a great coming and going of young men through the door cut into the screen. Since Ludwig's image is splayed out on the screen, the young men seem to be going through the seam of his jacket. Thereafter, while no one is visible in the large stage area, the gold encrusted inner chamber is established as the ceremonial space, only fully visible onscreen, from which Ludwig gives his first official, though inadequate, speech in his new role. He then has a subdued audience with a court official who is clearly hard pressed to maintain a pose of discretion in the face of such an eccentric sovereign. Ludwig confides that his entire governmental policy will be to lure Richard Wagner into the realm and supply his monumental creative needs so he may write and produce opera according to his extremely exacting principles.

As the conversation on the screen ends, we hear the sounds of horses' hooves, and a young beautiful woman, Duchess Elisabeth of Bavaria, with whom the historical Ludwig (and Visconti's film *Ludwig*) maintained an intimate, but principally platonic friendship, spins onstage, dances a bit, and sits on the floor.^{ccclxxxvi} The live Ludwig enters downstage once more through the cut-out-of-the-screen door. She spins over to him brazenly and grabs his arms, but he is at a loss for how to respond to her. He opens his jacket and confronts her in a sexual way, almost like a flasher, an awkward overture she amusedly brushes off. He takes up a position, standing up against her, his front against her side. Seemingly oblivious to the gauchery, she simply keeps talking and walks away.

The sub-plot involving the Wagner love triangle is next introduced and is woven in and out of the scenes concerning Leopold's peripeties. Wagner appears in modified romantic garb: white shirt, white vest, and beige pants. The man and a woman who accompany him are Cosima Von Bülow and her husband Hans Von Bülow. Just downstage of the stage is a grand piano, and these characters are confined with it on that plane, she at the piano. It is only at the end of the scene, when Cosima and Wagner are on their way out that Wagner suddenly grabs her in a clinch. Passionately intertwined, they sink down to the base of the one of the walls, pull themselves together, and exit.

Ludwig is again with Elisabeth, the eligible pretty Viennese girl from earlier, discoursing to her on his most passionate subject, Wagner, as music from *Lohengrin* plays. He again goes over to her and makes a vague attempt at physical contact, and she again eludes him. As the music crests and he and she are almost at the point of a sexual consummation,

another girl dances in shrieking. This is Elisabeth's youngest sister Sophie, to whom Ludwig ultimately becomes engaged. The two girls gambol about and exit through the upstage door. Now they are large on the screen conversing in the offstage room as Ludwig lies face down on the stage. Once they vacate the inner chamber, Ludwig sits facing upstage, and his face fills the screen as he listens to Wagner's music. These images read as the possibility of heterosexual connection, or else his unease with the idea of it, is being edged out by his obsession with Wagner's music.

Ludwig starts crawling around the stage on hands and knees. A camera catches him uncannily from above, so he can be seen moving about drawing on the stage floor with chalk in the form of a circle and a tree in its midst. Most of the rest of Act I consists of various scenes depicting Leopold's obsession for building an opera house for Wagner and the dreadful realization that his beloved younger brother, Prince Otto, is sinking into the long wasting illness that eventually kills him. The loss of Otto chisels out a yawning gulf of further desperation and separation that leaves him alone on stage, and howling. In between and throughout, Ludwig reappears on the floor drawing with chalk again, seen from overhead on the screen.

As Otto, Leopold's male confidant of his younger years, is removed from the action, a new figure is introduced to play that role. It is Joseph Kainz, a young courtier, who sneaks through a side door in his underwear, chuckling and scuttling away, his clothes in hand, as though he and Ludwig were picked up in the middle of some forbidden game. Ludwig closes in on him, while Kainz cowers up against the wall. Ludwig pins him there by attacking the wall with chalk and draws watery images around him with the chalk. This leads to a strange erotic scene where Ludwig too strips down to his underpants as the sounds of water burble. In the film, Visconti brings the viewer into a fanciful underground grotto the historical Ludwig had constructed beneath the cellars of one of his palaces, replete with both swans and a swan boat, and curving stone ceilings – the theatre for sexual scenes that are never quite consummated. Here onstage, the far more restricted means of the sound of water together with the motion of swimming evokes this setting theatrically and abstractly. It refers to it without exactly localizing it or explicating it. While there is no actual water in evidence, they physicalize walking through a watery realm together, and almost drown. Ludwig puts his clothes back on as Kainz keeps swimming both onstage and on screen against the chalky waves he'd schematically drawn on the walls. One way to read this suggestive scene is that Ludwig entertains consummating a sexual relationship with this alluring companion, and then succeeds in resisting it, leaving the other to swim on in the watery element alone.

The next segment in the show again involves Ludwig, now only on screen within the gilded inner chamber. We see him close up, back to us, beating the floor with his shoes, as Kainz, in his underwear, screams. It is an image of vicarious sado-masochism, since no one is actually being hurt. Kainz turns onto his side and the image fades. Is it merely an unfulfilled fantasy in his head or a sexual episode he actually lives out with Kainz? All these scenes are stylized in such a way that their ontology as reality, dream, or fantasy remains indeterminate.

Then many men pour through the door, filling the screen at the same time, and the second girl from earlier, Sophie, enters with Elisabeth. Ludwig is there too. We also see some of the same characters, depicted on a miniature scale, live, as they stand in or pass by the little door cut into the larger image. This juxtaposition of characters with themselves, the stage self small and the screen self large in relation to the double-existence door, is the most uncanny design aspect of the production. This second ceremonial scene is accompanied by piano playing by Frau Von Bülow. After most of the characters leave, Sophie, the dark-haired sister, is standing downstage by the piano, as Ludwig comes back onstage. Sophie and Ludwig do what amounts to a dance of approach alternating with avoidance. She sings to the piano accompaniment, while Ludwig remains just upstage watching her and waiting for her. She finishes singing and he goes out the upstage door, immediately to reappear large on the screen, sitting in a chair. We only see the lower half of his body, but at his knees sitting on the ground, is the Queen Mother. Sophie chatters and walks about him, her skirt grazing his knee. She keeps chattering as she unbuttons his shirt, whereupon he leaps to his feet in aversion. But then he pulls her body to his. We don't see their faces. He has her on the ground and is standing over her.

Some other man is standing there silent too, watching. Throughout this scene we see no faces, only the lower parts of bodies. He talks throughout, but then walks away, and it seems that nothing has happened. Then he bends over and lifts her skirt, strokes her legs, and opens the door to let her out. She, the onstage version in a small scale, escapes, as he stands in the doorway rebuttoning his shirt. He then runs out to fetch Sophie back into the room, so that they are now both large on the screen once more. Finally he sits and lets her start to perform fellatio on him. But before it's consummated he stands her back up, plays with her hair, turns her around, then pulls her back through the door and, both of them little, come back downstage. He sits on the edge of the stage, his legs dangling off, as she stands upstage of him, now utterly distraught as he chatters to cover up their embarrassment. She takes her leave just as Wagner enters for a talk with Ludwig. The pattern of frustrated sexuality that characterizes this abstract segment reveals Ludwig's interest in women and ultimate inability to function with them. The historical Ludwig and Sophie's lengthy engagement in which he kept putting off the wedding day, much to his mother and the court hierarchy's consternation, ultimately proved abortive, and he remained a bachelor.

Ludwig sketches a little hut on the sidewall. This stands in place of an actual hunting lodge, which in the film, based on historical fact, is where the king brings his young subalterns. Kainz builds a "fire"- in point of fact, a red-orange light comes on – down right, before which he stretches out, and Ludwig lies down next to him. They embrace on the floor, but the sex goes no further. The fire is also burning large on the screen as the two girls, Sophie and Elisabeth, have a simultaneous passionate scene, tender and spiteful by turns, culminating in Elisabeth slapping Sophie.

A series of discordant chords announce the sudden entrance of various boys who pour on stage tracking another boy around the stage, as in a hunt or lynching. This is pictured on the screen as well, the camera positioned to show it from above, which renders the cruelty of the pursuit more harrowing. Ludwig succeeds in chasing the malevolent boys

away and cradles the victim on the ground, framed by a rectangle of white light in space made by the screen having been flown halfway out. Act I ends with Ludwig going back to drawing with his chalk on the upstage wall as the young boy lies there.

When the audience comes back from intermission, Ludwig is still drawing with chalk on the wall on his knees on the floor, the screen having been flown two thirds of the way out. Several other alterations have also been made to the set. We now see that there are many flats facing in various directions upstage and that Ludwig has filled most of them with his scrawlings, compulsively, obsessively. Four desks have been placed downstage of the stage. They have gooseneck lamps and papers. Every detail is industrial in style, in contrast with that white and gold gilded world of the screen and inner chamber, which has been eliminated from the stage. The new arrangement is a scenic representation of the degree to which court life has receded from Leopold's psyche to be entirely displaced by his inner obsessions. The courtiers, Count Durkheim and Count Von Holstein from earlier, sit at two centrally placed chairs back-to-back, converse about Ludwig's degeneration, and contemplate what course of action to follow. The one wears a white Nehru jacket; the other is in a black suit without tie.

The first male companion from Act I, Richard Hornig, now enters and speaks to Ludwig. Ludwig responds not in words, but in jerky, spasmodic hand gestures. When he does finally speak, he stammers more than he had in Act I. The lover berates him, backs him against the sidewall, grabs his penis, as though pushing him to the fulfillment of a sexual act. Ludwig speaks low and compulsively, in short outbursts, and not on the subject at hand, whereupon Hornig, exasperated, lies down on the ground. The screen periodically flashes white, but then goes dark again. Every so often there is a flicker of the projection of the gold room. The disjointed screen imagery seems to visualize the short-circuiting that is starting to undermine Ludwig's brain just as the graffitied stage flats exteriorize his descent into madness. As Ludwig exits, dark, murky, ominous music with grinding and weird effects plays. On the screen up above we see from on high overhead shots of all the drawings –black ground and white marks, matching what's on stage.

Elisabeth enters and surveys the decimation, moving through the graphological wreck of Ludwig's present world. Hornig talks over her movements, narrating them. As she leaves, Hornig too runs offstage, and light flashes out onstage, but keeps sputtering out. In the film Visconti takes us to a remote hunting lodge that Ludwig has staffed with a bevy of young men who live in perpetual orgy, all of which the king observes but does not actively join in with. Van Hove handles this segment differently. With every flash of light comes video imagery, large but fragmented, of many guys, who we assume are on live feed backstage, but pictured large on screen, in an orgy. Mostly we see only their midriff sections, but sometimes faces too. As throughout, it is unclear whether this orgy is happening in some objective reality or represents Ludwig's fantasy world unleashed and running amok.

Ludwig comes out on the darkened stage. A spinet is now upstage in the white rectangle, the only white part of the stage floor. He bangs on the keyboard, then removes the top, and shakes up the piano's innards, then shoves it about so that its legs collapse. As soon

as the spinet is lying wounded on its side, the horrid music stops. Ludwig freezes there over the victimized instrument, and Richard Hornig comes to lay down right next to him on the floor with his back to us. This tableau prolongs, as cold light now comes up to illuminate it. One of the courtiers, his glasses on his nose, still sitting at one of the tables downstage, reads from the document sent from the court which requires Ludwig's abdication. He is conversing with a new court official, Professor Gùdden, an alienist, who is seated at another table.

Ludwig and Hornig finally break the tableau and warily move downstage toward the court officials. Now one of the officials steps up onstage. Hornig holds him at arm's length, attempting to keep him from invading Ludwig's space. This simple stage action stands in for the film version of events, in which an official committee arrives at Ludwig's castle hideway deep in the forest to abduct him, but comes under siege by the entourage of young boys.

There is an altercation between the officials, as Durckheim argues for kindness and indulgence for the king, whereas Von Holstein advocates taking decisive, ruthless action. The kind-hearted Durckheim, winds up yelling and strips himself of his official Nehru jacket, throwing it on the ground and storming off, thus relinquishing his function, and abandoning Ludwig to his enemies. Ludwig remains onstage, agreeing to abdicate. He speaks in a halting, extremely painful and pained way. By way of leave-taking, he puts something, probably imaginary, undoubtedly the crown, into Hornig's hands. The latter, having successfully weeded it from him, shields it. It is clearly a childlike game between them, to the accompaniment of the sound of dripping. Then Hornig plays at pretending to battle their way through a storm, crossing the stage, and exits. Professor Gùdden then changes the tone abruptly, addressing Ludwig in an official manner from downstage, informing him of the details of his imminent internment. Ludwig climbs onto the tabletop and stands over the doctor, and the severe Von Holstein who is also sitting at that table. The doctor, in a black frock coat, now joins Ludwig onstage and cajoles him to leave with him. Ludwig now joins the doctor in exiting the stage. They keep chatting after they have stepped down to the audience level, and head to the back of the theatre.

The sound of dripping persists. Then silence. We now see Ludwig and the doctor large on screen at the coat check of the actual theatre, where they are handed their coats, and then the move through the theatre lobby and out the front door to the theatre. We follow them walking down the real street outside the theatre, presumably on live feed. Live, back inside the theatre now, the court official, Count Durckheim, talks in an inwardly tormented thoughtful way about what had been done to the King, as though he were being interviewed. When he finishes, we hear the sound of loud rain. Ludwig and the doctor can be seen on the screen, as though it were a continuation of the earlier video, approaching and penetrating a closed white castle or asylum. Black.

Van Hove has referenced the twelve-week rehearsal schedules that are the norm in German state theatres. This remarkable production was the fruit of such a lengthy and deep process, as were his productions of *The Miser* and *Edward II*, the next play up for discussion. From these three shows I would have to deduce that the longer rehearsal

schedule and his chemistry with the German actors have born the sweetest fruit. These three productions are among his most structurally complex and satisfying, and the acting is certainly uniformly compelling. There is nothing like them for strong, integrated ensemble acting and originality of style.

Edward II (2012, Berlin Schaubühne)

Johan Callens, in his review of *Edward II*, reminds us that van Hove had previously undertaken yet another Marlowe play with *A Massacre at Paris*, the Elizabethan playwright's other most cruel and perverse play.^{celxxxvii} Stylistically, the production of *Massacre at Paris* was unique in the Van Hove canon, developing an extreme form of mannerism. One also sensed Artaud's etheric body permeating every stage moment. Ivo again joins a Marlowe play with Artaudian sensibility, which charges the theatrical air. This production is even more reminiscent of Genet's *Spendid's*. This is another homoerotic world of criminals inexorably thrown together, who long for each other and nose around each other too with instinctive hostility. By the time he undertook *Edward II*, van Hove had settled into his signature clean scenic lines and honed the use of video, a long voyage away from the rawness and empty space aesthetic of *Splendid's*. Still, the heady homoerotic atmosphere, the wrenching of guts, primal voice and image, and the trope of human sacrifice is common to both productions. Genet is a creative descendant of Marlowe, and it is the Artaudian potential in both that van Hove perceives and fulfills.

This production resets Marlowe's historical drama of a gay English king in a jail cellblock. Without altering references to kings and earls and the English throne or realm, although cutting the text to ribbons, it is now about the power and the sexual peripeties and struggles between a select group of prisoners who inhabit a line of cells.

Scenically, *Edward II* is a return to the Ramification Principle. As with van Hove's *Miser*, there is a series of isolated chambers, six this time. In this case they aren't separated by clear Plexiglas, but bars, front and back of each cell as well as on top, and thick, opaque walls in between them. Like van Hove's *Othello* and his *Taming of the Shrew*, there is one horizontal corridor running downstage of the cells and one upstage. The downstage area has unimpeded sightlines, its spartan definition deriving from a single bench down center. As for the extreme upstage plane, the audience's visual access is obstructed, a handicap that proves directorially useful. Along half of the upstage corridor is a series of showers. The audience can see the overhanging showerheads, but not the stalls, which are blocked from sight by the cells. The opposite end is occupied by the gym equipment one might also find in a prison – barbells, bench presses, and the like. The line of cells is split in half by a tall rectangular tower, at the top of which sits an omnipotent technician who operates the video, sound, and lights. He frequently gains focus as a detached observer, providing a cool, objective perceptual filter, particularly in highly passionate or eventful scenes, but also periodically takes part in the action when he performs as a guard and is assigned several of Marlowe's minor characters' lines.

There is also, importantly, a large horizontal video projection screen hanging over the stage, which is divided into some twelve compartments separated by black lines. The screen is equivalent to the multiply divided screens department stores, grocery stores, and office buildings are provided with that allow eavesdropping on many locales at once, so that any malefactor can be captured wherever they may be on the premises. So the ramification of prisoners in the six cells, each a mirror of the neighboring one, is repeating on the flat screen, where surveillance cameras track each of the prisoners, and yet *again* visually isolate them in boxes. What appears on the screen may be just so many different, simultaneous images, projecting various parts of the stage in live feed – mostly seeing into discrete cell units to reveal intimate moments within them from angles the audience can't access from the front. Just as often they present one large, unified image that swamps all the little boxes, generally close-ups of a few characters, including the face of the technician up high.

[The] omnipresent camera surveillance, deployed in screen montages (by Tal Yarden), linked inmates separated by the wide stage but also exposed their intrigues, secret thoughts, and yearnings. Occasionally, the perspective of the prison interiors was distorted or the otherwise black-and-white images morphed into colors, thereby measuring the subjectivity of certain speeches and the drama's emotional intensity. Van Hove's staging techniques of control, as evidenced in images of murdered characters' death-masks, blackouts, electrostatic noise, and smooth traveling shots from a nearby surveillance camera....^{celxxxviii}

Or, as in the battle scenes, the live feed principal is left behind, and the locale depicted takes us beyond the theatre environment with pre-recorded material.

The prison block setting is a perfect analogue for a divided family, albeit a highly unconventional and digressive one. Each prisoner suffers in isolation, brought together during recreation periods, but otherwise forcibly separated. In the highly charged homoerotic space of this van Hove rendition of an already passionately abject text, the characters' longing for tactile contact is greatly exacerbated. They make love to the wall, on the other side of which is the personification of their love, visible to the audience, but not to the lover. Sometimes two men unwittingly make love to either sides of the same wall, creating a mirror image. A hand reaches through bars, groping a bit to the left or right, and sometimes even succeeds in landing on human flesh on the other side of the wall. When the denizens get to meet in one cell together or the downstage area, and full body contact is ultimately achieved, the resultant passionate release is that much more intense following the enforced separation. In this play, the barred doors to the prison cells stay open and allow for free congress for much longer and with more frequency than would be true in an actual prison. The action is yet relentlessly punctuated by shrill whistles that force the men back into their cells, the gates clanging shut on them, and their arms held high in the air in a posture of enforced capitulation to the higher power of the prison system which reigns. It overrules even Marlowe's kings, princes, queens, and barons, in a way analogous to the power attributed to God in the Elizabethan Age. Here all are uniformly reduced to being prisoners, imbued with the high or low status a prison's hierarchical structure breeds – based not on hereditary advantages, but on such criteria as charisma, brute strength, persuasive abilities, etc.

There are nine actors – all male – with some doubling of roles. In keeping with his usual method, van Hove cuts a fair amount of text – whatever is superfluous to the central story he wants the play to tell. He often only retains a few carefully chosen lines from very long scenes. Abrogations of the narrative complexity native to Elizabethan drama in favor of streamlining cause secondary characters to be cut as well. But even major threads, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, who in Marlowe's text gets humiliated and stripped of lands, is cut. That injustice serves as a strong justification for the conspirators' revenge motives against Edward, but still it is left out. It can easily be seen how the question of church lands and power didn't serve van Hove's prison setting meta-text, so he jettisoned it. What remains of Marlowe's action is powerful, compelling, and is impregnated with enormous dramatic and theatrical intricacy of its own. Van Hove divides the play into suddenly arising and ending segments that are introduced by large letters popping up on the screen, such as "Homosexuality," "Underlayer," "Conspiracy," "Love." These words, reminiscent of Brechtian placards that frame each segment conceptually, suddenly interrupting whatever's going on, signal a shift in tempo and mood which the lighting, acting energy, and stage picture work in concert to evoke.

The play starts with Gaveston's long monologue, reading the letter in which Edward tells him his father, the king, is dead, that he is now king, and summoning him back from exile in France to be by his side. At first Gaveston is concealed, taking a shower upstage behind the cells, as he contemplates the panacea awaiting him on returning to his lover. We are privy to his facial responses which are projected large on the video screen, as water pours down drenching him. Still speaking, he emerges from behind the cells, naked and dripping. He addresses the half-naked Edward, who is lying supine in his cell, unaware that his lover is standing right outside his cell. Thus Gaveston and he are at a far remove from each other, together only in imagination. Gaveston scales the outer bars of Edward's cell, and speaks to him, that "him" perforce being the Edward in his mind. The Edward the audience sees in his cell is oblivious to his lover sitting perched atop it, and reaching down between the ceiling bars. Edward now, undoubtedly fantasizing Gaveston's presence above him – in effect creating a double, mutual fantasy – stretches his own arm up to him, as Gaveston invokes the frolics they'll have at court once they're reunited.

Sometime a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
 With hair that gilds the water as it glides
 Crownets of pearl about his naked arms...
 [...] peeping through the grove shall be transform'd,
 And running in the likeness of a hart,
 By yelping hounds pull'd down and seem to die;
 Such things as these best please his majesty.

The anonymous fictive boy in question who Gaveston describes disporting in a pastoral masque at first whirls about in a carefree existence, but then is tracked to the ground and sacrificed in a bloody end that prefigures both his and Edward's demises.

Edward, both inside his cell alone and with his underlings when in the common space,

indeed, throughout the play, wears only a white breechcloth. In Edward and Gaveston's first love scene, after knocking on the cell wall to signal their presence, they first embrace the metal wall that separates them, then grope each other from their separate cells through the bars and across the wall. It is a scene that is both explicit and frankly erotic.

In the next scene where the various nobles plot Gaveston's demise and then argue their plan to the king, Edward warns: "Lay hands on that traitor Mortimer!" to which Elder Mortimer responds "Lay hands on that traitor Gaveston." At that very moment in van Hove's production the lot of them turn on and set upon Gaveston, who is sitting in a hoodie on a downstage stool. They beat him up, just as a cabal in a prison might. As the savage fighting is going on, the video camera picks up on the technician in the tower, whose large image, viewed in an aerial shot, adjusts his dials and eats a big salad with consummate detachment.

Van Hove translates the figure of the spurned Queen Isabel, Edward's historical wife, into another male prisoner – a flaming queen in a different sense, with high status in the prison population – who burns for love of Edward and sees Gaveston as competition that must be eliminated. This role is played by a very fine German actor. Edward sees a chance for getting the Queen to support Gaveston return from exile by evoking their former intimacy. As the king and his ex edge toward each other against the bars, rekindling a former intimacy, all the "nobles" swear fealty to the king they were recently so keen on undermining. Edward promises "...a second marriage 'twixt yourself and me," to which the Queen assents, "And may it prove more happy than the first." The king then urges "revels" upon them, at which point all the prisoners frolic about, kiss and embrace each other. They spin and bounce about the stage as buoyant soft reggae music plays. The camera slowly pans the entire stage, the actors only seen from the waist down (a technique we've seen used recently before in *Ludwig*), capturing the entire row of cells and the men's legs in action. Their hilarity is suddenly cut off by the high decibel prison siren going off, the prisoners' sudden return to their cells, and the gates all decisively slamming shut.

In Marlowe's text, the chastisement of Gaveston is described verbally and allusively. But not so here. As Elder and Younger Mortimer casually pass the time of day, all the others strip down entirely and take showers upstage. Their naked bodies can be half-seen between the upstage bars. Gaveston is now returned "from Ireland," and the conspirators waste no time in teaching him a lesson. As the showers liberally douse the actors with hot water, Gaveston who is also naked, is suddenly seized upon by the lot of them and – seen from above on the screen only – skewered up his fundament with a long wooden rod. He is subsequently carried out on stage shockingly bloodied and bloodying he who bears him, and unceremoniously dumped in his cell, then covered with a blanket. This scene is truly bloodcurdling. The men who perpetrated the outrage scurry back to their individual cells and quickly and furtively get dressed, disassociating themselves from the crime.

Before the crime is discovered, the King lies back down on a bench press upstage right of the cells, and proceeds to slowly lift heavy barbells while Mortimer and Lancaster, the

chief ringleaders in the lynching of Gaveston, lean in on him, giving him urgent advice about how to salvage his reign. When it later comes time for the conspirators to complete their plan and decisively put an end to Gaveston's life, they pinion his spreadeagled hands and feet to the rear of Edward's cell where he hangs with a bloody horrified mask-like look on his face. In fact his face is enshrouded in a red plastic bag that suffocates him, which image is broadcast and frozen on the great screen above. Presumably using SFX, the onscreen face goes ever so slowly from horrific red and livid to white, washed-out, and flattens into two-dimensionality. Edward mourns his love's death without ever actually looking at him. The fading redness of Gaveston's face is akin to the operation of Edward's dwindling fidelity, for no sooner has Gaveston's face gone white and schematic, like a mask, than Edward falls in love with his successor, Young Spencer.

Van Hove goes for a violent, ruthless, and horrifying approach, which dovetails with the prison setting. Revenge, lynchings, and prevailing violence are the stuff of prison culture. When Edward and his adversaries "go to war" against each other, then van Hove is in a bind. Does he express war as an historically accurate Elizabethan armed struggle or in the visual language of modern prison riot? He charts a middle course, half-way between civil war and prison break, but finally neither. Elements are used that emblematically suggest the energy of mass struggle without the usual lance and broadsword battle stagings from Shakespeare productions. Fog sweeps the stage. Horses gallop across the screen. The technician dumps white pillow feathers from his tower. Various characters clamber up and over the jail cells. "Tell that Midnight Rider" plays over general pandemonium of shouting. The overhead screen depicts close-up rushing tufts of white fog in live feed. Finally the technician, now functioning as a guard, climbs down from the tower, intercepts Edward, and shoves him back into his cell, thus putting the genie of war back in the bottle. Then his brother Kent is in his cell with him, lamenting the rift that has separated them in tender tones, as Edward kneels before him. Kent's forlorn face is projected large on the screen.

After the Queen has a temper tantrum over her son Edmund's rights, the word "Underlayer" appears, and a blue light envelops the stage. Then two figures are seen moving about Edward's cell in near darkness. But on the screen they are large and fairly well lit. It is Edward and Young Spencer, making love, in the midst of which idyll, an assassin reaches through the bars and slips Spencer's head into a red plastic bag. On the screen then, large and grotesque, Spencer's face now deep red, freezes in a death mask, just as Gaveston had, just as all death is represented here.

In the play as written Edward imprudently spares the traitor Mortimer's life, imprisoning him instead. He then escapes from captivity and sails to France to make common cause with the Queen. On van Hove's set, Mortimer swears his affections to the male prisoner queen, who stands with his belly pressed against the bars of his cell while Mortimer mechanically and rhythmically pounds away at him, midriff to midriff. It is uncanny and seemingly inexplicable how, as the stage remains extremely dimly lit and bathed in deep blue light, the same characters that can barely be made out on stage, are seen via live feed on the giant screen above picked out in glaring white light. The paradoxical effect is evidently not made possible through stage lighting, but special camera lenses or

computerization.

By the end of the play the technician descends from the tower and plays a more and more central role in the drama. Ivo continues to get mileage out of the Ramification strategy: Mortimer and the Queen have sex in “France.” Van Hove’s audience has no notion they are in a different country, as they are not, in stage reality, in a space designated as France at all, merely in an adjoining cell. At the same time the technician, who without differentiation assumes the lines of various small roles rolled into one, sits talking to Edward in his own cell. The King reclines, head on his confidant’s lap, just as Edward in the text asks if he may lay his head on the lap of a Welsh friar who takes him in once he had lost the battle and fled. At this stage, Edward acts his role of beleaguered king more and more as a crybaby. The technician asks him to give up his crown. The crown in question is a thick plain black sphere – what a diadem of a modern prisoner might plausibly look like if such a thing existed.

During Edward’s lengthy monologue in which he entertains giving up the crown and is in fact spiritually detaching from the exigencies of the material world of status and struggle, his face appears large on the screen. It is shot from below against a sky-blue and white background that, while unseen by our eyes when looking at the stage figure, is prominent on the simultaneously visible screen. This depiction, his face set angelically against an infinite azure, restores to him an suddenly exalted stature, an almost angelic quality that he had lacked through many previous scenes. When he was king, the images say, he was insufficient. As he surrenders his crown and detaches from the things of the material world, he comes into his own with new inner power.

When the time comes for Mortimer, long Edward’s principal opponent, to pay the price for his treachery, the actor is taken behind the technician’s tower, so as not to be seen onstage. The well-built, sturdy actor is dragged on screen, shot from overhead through a fish-eye lense, that distorts his body, so he is turned into a dwarfish gnome with giant head and tiny, spastic limbs. In this guise, his underlying self is unmasked, as it were, and shown to be paltry, grotesque, subhuman. He pleads his case, to which a subaltern answers by slicing his neck from end to end.

Shortly after Edward is discovered in his cell entirely naked, in pain, and smeared with excrement, as the technician soothes him, offers him water to wash with, and drink. This is an image of the extreme wretchedness to which Edward has, through circumstances and his own defects, sunk, but one that also evokes all victims of war and political dislocations. As the bathetic end draws near, the various Ramification effects are dispensed with, leaving simplicity and unity in their wake. The stage is littered with white feathers, giving a sense of devastation to the realm. Edward, who is still totally naked but bearing traces of excrement on his skin, shares lengthy, quiet, and measured, unhurried colloquies with the technician, simply sitting and talking together on the down center bench. The stillness of this segment – which holds dramatically despite the simple conversational tone – makes us realize how violent and turbulent the power struggles and brutal eroticism we have witnessed have been. The contrast with all the foregoing noisiness evokes a welcome inner peace Edward only achieves through extreme

humiliation and loss. The King's death is very quiet and sensual. The technician squats on his lap, turning his back to the audience, embraces him long and intimately, and this embrace is the execution. Edward rolls off the bench and is dead.

When young Edward, the prince who has inherited the throne from his father against his own will, appears to eulogize his father, he deposits a large bag containing smaller red plastic bags by his head. He voluntarily walks into his father's former cell, closes the door on himself, and raises his hand in the gesture they've all been using as a sign of acquiescence to prison authority. This image succinctly captures the essence of kingship: it is equivalent to voluntary prisonership. The Ramification effect used throughout leaves us with a strong sense that the prison has much more metaphorical than actual significance, and that Edward's journey is one of Everyman, with additional resonances of course for those who enter the political sphere. Extremely enthusiastic applause greeted this production.

Now and Into the Future

While the Reduction approach Ivo has been falling back on lately in multiple productions has, in its stripping away of inessentials, an innate authenticity, it starts to be concerning, as it can begin to look merely non-committal. When Peter Brook laid out the theory and showed the world the practice of the Empty Space it revolutionized the theatre, at least for a time. But then, the avant-garde by definition always has within it timed obsolescence. At this point, some sixty years later, van Hove is reaching out to open audiences up with a similar approach. Thus far, in London, Paris, and New York it has garnered him lavish praise. A fundamentally empty space, he has shown, has multiple uses and can go in many different directions. But can it go on very long on this particular path without it too getting tired?

For Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Joseph Chaikin the empty space implied more than a set design idea. It posited responsibilities of all sorts. Their actors underwent, each in their own way, a highly demanding physical and vocal regime, explorations that posited no known starting points or predictable destinations, but were founded on sincere, ruthless searches. And those experiments of the 60s and 70s implied experimentation conducted in coherent ensemble groupings forged in furnaces of pitiless rigor. For van Hove's repertory actors, whether at home in Amsterdam or in guest stints abroad, and certainly as concerns Broadway actors, such is not the case. These are perhaps not times where there is the luxury of longterm experimentation and ensemble creation in that unconceding tradition. Ivo repeatedly makes the distinction between "little theatre" (*klein zaal*) and "large-scale theatre" (*grote zaal*), associating the "little" with sincere early gropings toward a given vision. He left that sort of experimentation behind a long time ago, opting for the showier venues that liberate and match the scope of his vision, but imply constraints of other sorts. Perhaps twentieth century theatre has to turn on a dime, and the audience may have to content itself with a simulacrum of "the real thing." The participants may be individually disciplined, and all are competently trained. But

when they stand still on stage and “simply speak” it sometimes starts to reveal an insufficiency. Neutral only goes so far.

On the other hand, it is not an offensive style and it *is* one that manages, as we have seen, to attract audiences. It has proven once more that serious theatre can be a draw on Broadway, provided that there are some big names attached to the show. “Not to be adulterous,” he recently said, “but you can do different things in different circumstances, as long as there is an audience to see it.”^{ccclxxxix} In a very real sense, it is the ultimate fulfillment of the project the Flemish director set out to accomplish when he first came to America: to shake up the literal way American classics tended to be produced here. With such productions as *Antigone* and *The Damned* he has also, it seems, been given his lead and shaken up the theatre in France in a different way. He has been so very successful, that his initially defiant quest has lost its controversial tension.

Van Hove, thus far, has moved on parallel tracks, bi- and trifurcating his efforts. He is both Broadway and Off when in New York. He is official repertory theatre back in the Netherlands. Who knows how he might reinvent himself over time? If van Hove doesn’t restrict himself, but finds venues and opportunities to keep experimenting and growing on a parallel track in *klein zalen* – with *Lazarus* standing as exemplar of this possibility – then there is great hope for a continued, highly fruitful career and numerous fascinating productions ahead. To give him the last word:

Also, our first productions, *Rumors* and *Disease Germs*, signified a rupture: with the theatre tradition in Flanders. There were vehement proponents and adversaries. Our work has virtually always provoked controversy. In New York they call me a bad boy and an iconoclast, for the way I direct Molière and Ibsen. It’s never been any different. And I feel just fine with that. It means something. If you rub everybody the wrong way then you’ve got something worth talking about, I say.^{ccxc}

And one more:

I see life as one continuous failure, so that afterwards you might rise from the ashes like a phoenix. For the time being I’m still flying upwards.^{ccxci}

ⁱ Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 95.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Fuchs, *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Wouter Hillaert, “De Toneelvloer is een Metafoor voor het Hele Bestaan,” *De Morgen*, March 25, 2006, p. 4, an interview with van Hove’s long-term partner and designer, Jan Versweyveld.

^{iv} Quoted respectively from: Charles McNulty, “Meet Ivo van Hove: The most provocatively illuminating theatre director,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2016; Fabienne Darge, “‘Vu du

pont,' la piège tragique d'Arthur Miller," *Le Monde*, Oct. 16, 2015; Andrzej Lukowski, Review of *View from the Bridge*, *Time Out, London*, February 17, 2015 and Andrzej Lukowski, "Revered Belgian director Ivo van Hove," Review of The Young Vic Production of *A View From the Bridge* at the Wyndham Theatre, *Time Out, London*, Nov. 14, 2014. Oracular kudos bespeak his new-found critical beatification, such as: "Mr. van Hove brings us so close to a work's emotional white-hot center that it burns as never before." Ben Brantley, "A Universal Heart, Pounding With Hope," *NY Times*, October 24, 2014. On the Continent, as far back as 2001, he was locally being touted as the "most powerful man in the Netherlands." (Trudy Van der Wees, "Machtigste man van Nederland," *Haagsche Courant*, Jan. 27, 2001), and "the director who dares it all," (Margriet Marbus, "Dus dit is de regisseur die alles durft," *TheaterMaker*, June, 2002). Now his stellar status has gone global. In a recent French press release he has been referred to as a "super-star." http://www.telerama.fr/scenes/kings-of-war-d-apres-shakespeare-au-theatre-national-de-chailloot-ivo-van-hove-superstar,136991.php#xtor=EPR-126-newsletter_tra-20160125. Even in the mid-90s he was being called such things as "wonder-boy" in the Benelux press. "Ivo van Hove geldt als de wonderboy van het Vlaamse theater." [...] Van Hove, een van de vele piepjonge Nederlandse groepjes." Max Arian, "Het van Hove Festival," *Het Groene Amsterdammer*, June 17, 1998. But now he is "Broadway's man of the moment!" Peter Marks, "Broadway's Man of the Moment," *Washington Post*, March 12, 2016.

^v Quoted in Randy Gener, "Ivo van Hove Has a Passion for Extremes," *American Theatre*, November 6, 2009.

^{vi} "The play's [*View From the Bridge*] transfer to Wyndham's Theatre elicits a wry remark: 'Until yesterday I was considered an avant-garde director. But I am really happy that the West End is open to receive this kind of work.'" Sarah Hemming, "Ivo van Hove brings 'Antigone' to London," *Financial Times*, March 6, 2015. In London in 2015 he was given an Olivier Award for directing and, as of June, 2016, he was awarded a coveted Tony Award for Best Director, and his production of *View From the Bridge* was named Best Play of the season as well, the highest honors bestowed in New York, and by consequence, American theatre.

^{vii} Fuchs, op cit., p. 7.

^{viii} The progressive diversion of interest from the playwright to the director as "the dominant creative force" in the theatre, while certainly not shared by all and actively opposed by many, was initiated by Gordon Craig in theory and Meyerhold in theory and practice, then taken up in a radical way by Artaud, and pursued by a plethora of practitioners and theoreticians from the 1940s until today. Richard Schechner made undoing the traditional Aristotelian hierarchy into a personal cause in his platform as editor of *The Drama Review*, during the 1980s and 90s based on "the conviction that the text/narrative/character-based theatre of the mainstream Western tradition is moribund." See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999), pp. 4, 213-214. Semioticians have long advocated this shift in emphasis, but were dissatisfied by merely leveling of text to be commensurate with spectacle. They went beyond to include and dignify for study such elements as the program, theatre lobby, and thought process of the spectators. See, for example, Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 56. As an alternative to a dramatic text (the script), which promotes linear action, they posit the possibility for a "discourse of staging," that relates to a "performance text" which can be "read" on its own terms based on a "metatext" that is woven together by the director, designers, composer, and – especially – the audience. Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. 20, 30, 78-80. Of course, it would be foolhardy and inaccurate to assert that these polemics have been universally or even largely accepted by a theatre community and audience, particularly in the English-speaking world, which still tends to grant primacy to the playwright's contribution.

^{ix} Fuchs, op cit., p. 95.

^x Max Arian, "Ik ben een onvermoeibare optimist: Interview met Ivo van Hove," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, August 24, 2007.

^{xi} Quoted in Jean-Louis Perrier, "Au bout du texte," *Mouvement*, January, 2012.

^{xii} In an otherwise unfavorable and unsympathetic review, I believe one critic stumbled on a truth: "Van Hove's characters (it would be hard to call them Ibsen's)...." Julius Novick, "*Hedda Gabler*," *Backstage*, October 8, 2004. That insight might hold for all the authors the director undertakes. While a director like Andre Serban creates the definitive Chekhov, Molière, Strindberg, and so on, van Hove reinvents all his authors' texts as van Hoves and their characters as the phantoms in his mind projected onto the physical plane.

^{xiii} "Theatre-making for me is like keeping a diary. There too you often grasp things better when you read them again later on. My shows are my life's diary. I make something not in order to have a success. It's got to mean something to me. Quoted in Angela van der Elst, "*Angels in America*: AIDS als metafoor," *Winq Magazine*, May 31, 2008.

^{xiv} Maxie Szalwiska, "The Camera is Ruthless: Ivo van Hove's *Antonioni Project*," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2011.

^{xv} Quoted in Pieter T'Jonck, "Onpure kunst over pure driften," *Financieel-Economische Tijd, Tijd Cultuur Bijlage*, September 11, 2002.

^{xvi} It is neither a libel nor a surmise to make such a statement, since he frankly avows that he and his Flemish contemporaries in the Flemish Wave have been doing just that – imitating each other – all along. Interview with David Willinger (Upper West Side, New York City, September 17, 2014), hereafter referred to as DW Interview. In the pages that follow I will cite several cases where a given van Hove production puts one in mind of Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, or Luk Perceval. Ivo and Guy Cassiers literally started together (with Ivo as writer/director and Guy as actor in *Rumors*), and their work, different as each's is, have sometimes shared resemblances.

^{xvii} Using the term "*auteur*" for a film director has long been accepted since Andrew Sarris brought the term into cinema studies. Applying it to theatre directors is less common, but there is ample evidence for it, and it certainly makes sense when explicating van Hove. For a sometimes specious and skeptical, but sweeping attempt to account for what was at the time a media-worthy phenomenon in New York, see: Frank Rich, "Auteur Directors Bring New Life to Theater," *NY Times*, November 24, 1985.

^{xviii} Pieter Bots, "Ivo van Hove: Ik vindt dat ik nog steeds subversief theater maak," Interview, *TheaterMaker*, October, 2005.

^{xix} Quoted in: Herien Wensinck, "Geen tijd voor grapjes," *NRC Handelsblad*, December 20, 2015.

^{xx} Alluded to in: Rebecca Mead, "Theatre Laid Bare: A Radical Director's Raw Productions," *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2015, pp. 56-57. Also, with more elaboration, Ivo has told interviewers:

There was a man who was doing a study about theatre in Belgium, a professor, David Willinger. I'll never forget his name. In *De Standaard* an article by this man appeared, a few weeks after we we'd been performing, and the production of the year that he'd seen was *Rumors*. Then naturally it all started, and Pol Arias came straight to us. He was one of the very few journalists who saw that show. Kaaithheater also came immediately, because they thought: this is something we'd better not miss. But it's a production about which not one single review appeared, except in New York in *The Drama Review*, in other words, one of the biggest theatre periodicals in the world. And so it came to have a kind of cult success.

Interview with Wouter Hillaert at the Monty, *Belgium is Happening* (University of Antwerp, February 12, 2009), p. 6.

^{xxi} I deliberately say “worlds” because, in this tiny nation, there are at least two theatre communities, which these days rarely overlap – the Flemish and the Francophone. My investigations quickly embraced both.

^{xxii} Thus she even braved the somewhat inaccessible writer Hugo Claus, daring to present me to him, while nobody else cared to risk it. The felicitous step she took led to an extremely fruitful creative relationship, whereby I ultimately translated some ten of his plays into English.

^{xxiii} While Ivo evidently shared this view, still he has saluted his directing teacher at the time, Alex van Royen, a veteran actor/director, whose curmudgeonly dished out expertise Ivo found useful in laying down some basic concepts, particularly concerning rigorous analysis of text. Elisabeth van de Grift, “Op de divan – Ivo van Hove,” Interview, *Red*, April, 2008; Hillaert, op cit; Ivo van Hove, “Het misverstand van die éne tekst,” *Trouw*, July 2, 2005.

^{xxiv} The other two were *Thomas Sits Dreaming in the Class* (*Thomas zit te dromen in de klas*) by the marionette theatre Taptoe and *Ba Anansi* by Tone Brulin’s TieDrie. Jef De Roeck, “Toneel in Vlaanderen ’80-’81: Niet slechter en niet beter dan elders,” Interview with David Willinger, *De Standaard*, July 25-26, 1981.

^{xxv} For definitions of The Flemish Wave and discussions of certain of its members, See: “Editorial: Border Collisions – Contemporary Flemish Theatre,” Peter M. Boenisch and Lourdes Orozco, Special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, eds., Peter M. Boenisch and Lourdes Orozco, 20: 4 (November, 2010), pp. 397-400, and Thomas Crombez, “Canonisation in Contemporary Theatre Criticism: A Frequency Analysis of ‘Flemish Wave’ Directors in the Pages of *Etcetera*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* (24: 2, April, 2014), pp. 252-261. Ivo himself recounts his personal experience of living through the Flemish Wave as follows:

At the start of the 1980s Jan Versweyveld and I began to make theatre, but in the same year Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker for example also began creating theatre. A little later Luk Perceval tore himself away from the KNS [major state theatre in Antwerp] as it was then called. There was Sam Bogaerts and the Witte Kraai company, a fringe group, but with extremely good actors like Warre Borgmans, Johan Van Assche en Lucas Vandervorst. Jan Lauwers was also there of course. Jan Fabre, who came out of the visual arts, same as Jan Versweyveld. That was the sort of the generation of people who all actually wanted to make their mark, and we all did just that, not so much in institutes or in large institutions. We each went our own way and didn’t ask for any subsidies. We didn’t even give it a moment’s thought. Thus there arose that certain generation but with a great many stresses, because there was, naturally, a lot of competition. And when you start off without any money you naturally want the attention to go to you, and whoever gets more attention that you get jealous of, and at the same time not necessarily because you have their best interests at heart. [...] After my first triumph came a sort of ‘waste land’: there were only old, moldering, outdated theatre in groups that were static, which rubbed no one either the wrong way or the right way, which had an obsolete hierarchical structure, and which hadn’t the slightest interest regarding what was going on beyond the theatre. Who wouldn’t look past their own side of the border, you see? Something had to give. It was a kind of in-between time: it’s very quiet and then the birdies start to wake up, and those little birdies were us. I think that really says it. It was a new time with members of a new generation who by that time had very tight connections with each other.

Hillaert, Interview at the Monty, op cit.

^{xxvi} See: Steven Drukman, “Tomatoes and Their Consequences: In Dutch Theatre, the Fringe and the Mainstream are One,” *American Theatre*, November, 1997, and Max van Engen, “Begin van de Aktie Tomaat: De crisis in het theater leidt tot openlijk protest en acties van het publiek,” R. L. Erenstein, *Een Theater Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 1996), pp. 752-759.

^{xxvii} See Hillaert, The Monty Interview, op cit.

^{xxviii} Luk van den Dries, "Première van *Mistero Buffo* in De Munt," Ibid., Boenisch and Orozco, op cit., p. 397.

^{xxx} As producing director of Zuidelijk Toneel, as per the new planning rules for the arts, he managed an annual budget of around 83 million Belgian francs [this was before the Euro], that would go toward putting on a minimum of four productions that would be performed throughout the southern end of the nation [Netherlands]. And Zuidelijk Toneel exceeded that mandate: The production of *Desire Under the Elms* managed to put on 57 performances for 30,000 spectators, and Thyestes racked up admissions with 53 performances for around 20,000 people. It was arranged that a large share of the public as a matter of course came through performance programs in Flanders at a number of arts centers and theatres: in this way *Saved* pulled in a third of its audience members from Flanders. All of which goes to show that to a greater and greater extent Flanders and Netherlands are evolving into one single performance region with free interchange of artistic products and people. Finally also the authorities are starting to acknowledge that and to remunerate Flemish productions in the percentage of their disbursements.

Luk Van den Dries, "Moord op onschuldige kinderen," *Etcetera*, 1993-02, jaargang 11, nummer 40, p. 44-46.

^{xxx} Toneelgroep Amsterdam (TGA) is the largest theatre company in Holland, with one hundred permanent employees, including a stable company of approximately twenty-five actors on salary. It has intricate design, education, literary, and publicity offices. Visiting it, one feels very much that it is a considerable national and municipal institution provided with an abundance of amenities. Apart from the pride of place in the gothic style Amsterdam Schouwberg in the heart of the city, productions also show at the more open and spacious Joop Admiraalzaal. It receives sizable subsidies from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sciences and the city of Amsterdam. Like most theatre companies in Europe, they regularly take selected productions on tour throughout the Netherlands and Flanders, to the presenting auditoriums and cultural centers that proliferate, even in some of the tiniest, most far-flung towns.

^{xxx} Hein Jansen, "Een Hamlet met twee hoofden: Reportage Perceval en van Hove in Duitsland," *Volkskrant*, September 24, 2010.

^{xxxii} Gener, *ibid.*

^{xxxiii} Hans-Thies Lehmann cites Jean-Pierre Sarrazac's theory of theatre of "the second degree." *Post-Dramatic Theatre* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2006), p. 116. In a "logocentric philosophy of theatrical art," such as that which prevails on the vast majority of America's naturalistically inclined stages, "the mise en scene seems to do nothing other than confirm what the text has already suggested or replace what the didascalia communicated to the reader." Patrice Pavis says more or less the same thing using different terms. Pavis, op cit., p. 145.

^{xxxiv} I'm far from the only critic to think of van Hove in this light. Steven Drukman, for example, writing in 1997 calls him an "avant-gardian." Drukman, op cit.

^{xxxv} Ivo van Hove, "Het misverstand," op cit.

^{xxxvi} Perrier, op cit.

^{xxxvii} *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 4-5, 7.

^{xxxviii} From: Janssen, "Een Hamlet," op cit. Van Hove quoted in: Julie Phillips, "Ivo, Chekhov, No Nudes: Van Hove Tackles 'Three Sisters' at the Holland Festival," *Village Voice*, June 24, 2003. The term avant-garde is problematic, is often used loosely, and can be variously defined. According to this way of thinking, van Hove's kind of theatre represents "the research and development arm of the culture industry," when the avant-garde is analyzed from a hyper-sociological point of view. There is truth and application to such a finding, particularly as elements from his fringe explorations, in some cases, have later resurfaced in his own commercial productions to critical kudos. Referring to the American avant-garde of the 1950s, Arnold Aronson asserts, that it "created neither an abstraction nor a distillation of the concrete world; in a sense it did not create a world at all. [...] It created an art in which the reference points were other

forms of art, the creative process of the artist, and the theatrical experience itself – not the external or so-called ‘real world.’” Aronson, op cit., pp. 4-5. I would say, rather – in America and Britain, at any rate – that van Hove’s work *does* tend to abstract from the real world, even as it sometimes refers back to art, and yet *is* avant-garde – that is it was until it recently has been absorbed and accepted in such high middle-brow contexts as Broadway and the West End. On reflection, I would characterize most of his shows from his early and middle periods as avant-garde, rather than either post-modern or post-dramatic, with salient exceptions that I will note.

^{xxxix} “American audiences often [...] think of van Hove [...] as an experimental theatermaker – a provocateur bent on re-authoring classics. But don’t be fooled by the video cameras or perfume-ad visual sophistication. In Europe, van Hove is considered conservative, even conventional.” Tom Sellar, “The Dark Secrets of the Belgian Avant-Garde,” *Village Voice*, September 18, 2007. While the author may have a point, relatively speaking, it is a hyperbolic way of making a point, since this director’s identity varies from production to production, some of which may be characterized as “conservative,” and some of which really are “conventional,” but just as many have been ground-breaking, challenging, and even subversive.

^{xl} I don’t want to oversimplify. I am referring to the subsidized theatres of Europe. In

Amsterdam, Paris, and London there exists a parallel “private” theatre as well, “boulevard,” West End, and simply “private” theatre, where big names and mediatized figures are the big draw and making a profit is the prime value, just as in the United States. But the general audience tends to frequent the heavily subsidized theatres to a much greater extent than on the other side of the Atlantic, and is a much less marginalized and rarified experience.

^{xli}

Provocation in some crude sense has never thrilled me. Last summer I put on a performance of a Molière in New York. The papers were crammed with news of my provocation. That’s all to the good: when people are given something to see that they weren’t expecting. It shocks you, but it wakes you up too. In that sense I’m all for provocation.

Quoted in: Van de Grift, op cit.

^{xlii} Of course, one must be wary of making generalizations. Many of his experiments in Europe have come in for criticism from all sides. A favorable review of his *Othello*, for example, makes reference to several earlier productions which the critic had found wanting. Betraying her own predilections, she complains: “His latest productions were devoid of anything particularly exciting. Only that the form took precedence somewhat over the content, and more than anything we sometimes saw concept.” Merijn Henfling, “Othello woont in een glazen huis,” *Het Parool*, February 3, 2003. He has been subject to several unbridled polemics in the press against him filled with vitriol. As can happen in such exercises, a germ of truth may lurk, or at the very least, a starting point for further discussion. Or it can just be gratuitous meanness. One notorious one crossed the line with the shocking, homophobic statement: “If the Holland Festival were to really get rid of him in the near future, and Toneelgroep Amsterdam also started casting about for another artistic leader yet again, he could always open a bordello for boys.” Hans Oranje, theatre critic from *Trouw*, quoted in Stuivenberg, op cit. Van Hove, incensed, responded that he was still waiting for an apology.

^{xliii} Consider, for example, the career of Tennessee Williams, who couldn’t get commercial productions for any of his many late plays, but who ultimately was celebrated when he received the National Medal for the Arts in Washington on which occasion the cultural establishment belatedly relented, and whose plays have achieved full beatification following his death. Among directors the cases of rejection and neglect of great talent are just as legion. Consider some of the Joe Papp’s brilliant directing stable at the New York Theatre Festival and the Delacorte Theatre in the 70s and early 80s – A.J. Antoon, Edmund Berkeley, or John Pasquin; what became of them despite their delivery of stunning productions? And this tendency toward fickleness and cruel

neglect becomes legion when it comes to actors, so many of whom have had moments of glory only to be cast into a purgatory or limbo of obscurity thereafter.

^{xliiv} Marijke Caris, "AKT: *Agatha*," *Etcetera*, July, 1984, jaargang 2, nummer 7.

^{xlv} In interviews he makes no bones about his gay identity and his extraordinarily durable liaison with Jan Versweyveld, makes very clear that straight tropes interest him too, and stoutly refuses a label of "gay artist."

That man [with whom he has lived and worked for many years] was Jan Versweyveld, van Hove's life partner and his secret weapon. [...] Randy Gener: 'Why have you stayed with one designer throughout your directing career?' ^{xli} Ivo van Hove: 'Because I live with him.'

Gener, op cit.

And:

'Why does he stay with you?' Van Hove: 'I'm very loyal. He stays with me for the same reason. He knows I love him tremendously.' 'And for what reason might he leave you?' Van Hove: 'I'd rather not even think about it.'

In the same interview and several others he avows that, "I'm Catholic, and so loaded with feelings of guilt and shame." Van de Grift, op cit., and DW Interview.

^{xlivi} DW Interview, op cit. Quoted in: Richard Stuivenberg, "Er zit aan mijn botten om aan te rukken," *TheaterMaker*, April, 2002.

^{xliivii} It "reduces Albee's play (*Virginia Woolf*) to only one subject and reduces Albee to his homosexuality. [...] Albee's plays seem less about sexuality either mono- or hetero-, than do the more naturalistic plays of Williams and Inge, in which sexual desire is the overt focus. As Foster Hirsch observes: 'Typically, sexual drives in Albee become transfigured into mock-religious acts of sacrifice, penitence, immolation; sex is incorporated into a lofty symbolic framework....'" John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Between Men – Between Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 182-183. Many of the same points can be applied to van Hove, whose work so often seems to dwell primarily on sex at first glance, but ultimately transcends it.

^{xliiii} David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2003), p. 59.

^{xlix} If one is inclined toward biographical interpretations of theatrical choices, then anecdotes from van Hove's youth can explain this association. Certainly, van Hove's own avowals to interviewers in the sense that his production texts may be read this way encourage us to make these connections.

^l "No Law in the Arena," *Vamps and Tramps* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 27. Van Hove states that he was deeply impressed by Paglia's writings, which is why I've laced this essay with powerful citations from the incendiary cultural critic that dovetail most neatly with his thinking and works. Hers is just the sort of scholarly writing that can have direct impact on an artist seeking inspiration and corroboration for his impulses. Her pithy, daring, image-laden assertions can easily find equivalents in dramatic relationships and theatrical settings.

^{li} Van Hove: "I have a very specific take on O'Neill, and it is not psychological." Gener, op cit. We shouldn't be too hard on van Hove when he contradicts himself in a different interview: "My theatre is based on psychology," he confides to Tom Sellar," but not only on psychology. I try to make an X-ray of a character, to bring the subtext out where it can be seen. American actors learn to keep it hidden." Sellar, op cit. Perhaps it's just an inevitable booby-trap that words like "psychology" can mean such different things in various contexts, so that they cease to mean anything finally.

^{lii} “No Law in the Arena,” op cit., pp. xiii, 12, 12, 19, 22, 23, 26, 34, 41, 46, 81. She argues that, “our dream life itself, as Freud has shown, is both power play and passion play.” P. 23. How applicable is that statement to so many segments in van Hove shows!

^{liii} Bots, op cit.

^{liv} Ben Brantley, “A Marriage in Trouble in Triplicate,” *NY Times*, September 22, 2014.

^{lv} Which simply means, in the conventional theatre, that a director will pressure his or her cast to speak fast without any pauses between lines; so pacing means to apply a single kind of fast unbroken rhythm.

^{lvi} As, for example:

Bots: ‘As one of the foremost directors you rediscovered large theatre spaces in the mid-eighties. Why did you opt, after all the rented and small venue performances that you did with Akt/Vertikaal, to work in large theatre spaces?’

Van Hove: ‘It was a logical next step for me. Patrice Chéreau is my greatest idol, and his staging in large theatre spaces has had a profound influence on me. The way he devises his mise-en-scènes! For example, I’ll never forget the rise of Laertes in his *Hamlet*. I admired his large-scale productions, and I too wanted to create such wild shows. That goes just as much for the directing of Peter Stein, such as his *Oresteia*, that I saw on television back in those days.’

Bots, op cit. At each new juncture of his spectacular career van Hove appears to have been honest with himself as to his ambitions and done what it took to fulfill them.

^{lvii} Ivo van Hove, “Politiek moet handen van kunst afhouden,” excerpts of a speech delivered while participating in the Machiavelliprijs ceremony in The Hague, Belga (news service bulletin), January 29, 2008.

^{lviii} For this definition of deconstruction of theatre texts, see Fuchs, op cit., p. 174.

^{lix} Isa Goldberg, Review of *Hedda Gabler*, *New York Press*, October 6, 2004.

^{lx} A reference to Brabant in the Middle Ages would have a different charge to it in a Flemish or Dutch production, since Brabant is a neighboring province in the Lowlands, the one indeed which houses Brussels.

^{lxi} Ben Brantley picked up on this novelty: “But that willowy sensitive plant Ben Whishaw as the strapping, rough-hewed farmer, John Proctor? Really? [...] John Proctor has often been portrayed (by the likes of Liam Neeson and Daniel Day-Lewis) as a stalwart Gary Cooper type [in large part because Miller expressly describes him that way both in stage directions and other characters’ dialogue.], and part of the tragedy in that context is seeing a big man brought to his knees. The slighter-framed Mr. Whishaw looks more vulnerable, and we fear for his safety from the beginning...” “In Arthur Miller’s ‘Crucible’ First They Came for the Witches,” *NY Times*, March 31, 2016.

^{lxii} Quoted from Radio Interview with three starring actors from *The Crucible* on *The Leonard Lopate Show*, WNYC, April 15, 2016.

^{lxiii} Quoted in: Colet van der Van, “Elk mens is een xenofob,” *Trouw*, August 17, 2005.

^{lxiv} “No Law in the Arena,” op cit., p. 42.

^{lxv} Hein Jansen, “In *Massacre* gaat vorm boven spel,” *De Volkskrant*, March 10, 2001.

^{lxvi} See Phillips, “Ivo, Chekhov,” op cit.

^{lxvii} Note for example Polanski’s 1971 film version.

^{lxviii} Paglia writes:

The female body’s unbearable hiddenness applies to all aspects of men’s dealings with women. What does it look like in there? Did she have an orgasm? Is it really my child? Who was my real father? Mystery shrouds woman’s sexuality.

“Sex and Violence,” op cit. p. 22. Orin’s fixations seem perfectly illustrative of her point.

^{lxxix} Lehmann cites Marina Abramowicz as a salient exemplar of this practice, but many others as well; Ivo, it will be remembered, lays particular emphasis on being in lineage with her. Op cit., p. 140, and DW Interview, op cit.

^{lxxx} Van Hove belongs to a lineage dating from theatricalism of the Meyerholdian school of directing. But he is also theatrical in the different sense of Peter Brooks's formulation, engaging in the "mode of excess," or in other words melodrama. Quoted in Davis, Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality: An Introduction," *Theatricality*, Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, eds., *Theatricality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 21. In so many ways, van Hove goes for sheer extremes of emotion (organically or forced), both for their shock value and salubrious cathartic value. At other times, as have been cited, he goes for underplaying or numbing out the affective value of the spoken text – in a reverse form of excess, at the extreme end of inexpressiveness or flatness of affect.

^{lxxxi} Van der Elst, op cit.

^{lxxxii} Guido Lauwaert, "Theatre: 'Song from Far Away' is puur naakt en blot," *Knack*, August 21, 2015.

^{lxxxiii} DW Interview, op cit.

^{lxxxiv} Lehmann, op cit., p. 93, and Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 1.

^{lxxxv} Quoted in Hillaert, "De toneelvloer," op cit. So radical interpretation is for him obligatory.

^{lxxxvi} See, for example, Johan Thielemans, "De totaal ontwerper," *TheaterMaker*, 9/10, December, 2007/January, 2008.

^{lxxxvii} Aronson, *Abyss*, *ibid.*, p. 21. For a précis of Zola's Naturalism see: Martin Esslin, "Naturalism in Context," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 13, no. 2, Winter, 1968, pp. 67-76. Johan Thielemans has actually dubbed Ivo's productions, "the essential theatre." Thielemans, *ibid.*

^{lxxxviii} Aronson, *ibid.*, p. 17, and Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), p. 253. Tracy C. Davis does an exuberant survey of the many ways, from vaguest to most specific, of the denotations attached to the loaded word "theatrical" over time, but provides us with the pertinent version that applies to van Hove when she quotes Mordecai Gorelik specifying the historical movement of theatricalism as: "'a modern neo-conventional stage form based on the principle that 'theatre is theatre, not life,'" whose members included Tairov, Vakhtangov, and Copeau (which is debatable) along with Meyerhold as exponents of this style. Davis, op cit., p. 13. Johan Thielemans has remarked on the provenance of van Hove and Versweyveld from Meyerhold, the Russian director of a celebrated production of Verhaeren's *The Dawns*, in that current events, such as news of victories of the Red Army, invaded the stage and audience and that the space between the two was abrogated. Thielemans, *ibid.* What he says is true but limited, for how many other of Meyerhold's early twentieth century innovations find a new life in van Hove productions, including radical interpretations, the *auteur* primacy of the director, the use of placards and film, iconoclastic uses of music and singing, anti-naturalistic, highly physical acting and innovation in vocal production, etc.? For before there was Grotowski or Brecht, there was Meyerhold, and Ivo is unquestionably one of his distant heirs. Repeating a fundamental lesson he took from Alex van Royen, he sums up his philosophy about directors' attitudes toward extant playtexts: "A text isn't objective, a text is the fuel for a theatre production. The director puts his own spin on it." And, "... you can only put on an analysis of a text, never the text itself."

^{lxxxix} Van Hove, "Misverstand," op cit.

^{lxxxix} Performed at the A.R.T. in 2003, and also in the Netherlands. Versweyveld describes his impressions:

It was done extremely clinically, without any frills, with just a pail of red liquid. There was no illusion of forcing, and it wasn't acted. The scene was horrifying and had an enormous impact on

me. It taught me that theatre and set design too gets played out in the head of the spectator. When you bring text, actors and space together in your head, that's where tension arises. And the more transparency you procure for the public in whatever you do, the better the work. That's why in recent days Ivo and I are letting more and more be seen of what goes into the production, as much onstage as off. Nothing is left secret.

Quoted in: Hana Bobkova, "De ontdekking van de schouwburg als locatie," *TheaterMaker*, December 2007/January, 2008.

^{lxxx} Quoted in: Bobkova, *ibid*.

^{lxxxi} Pieter T'Jonck, "Toneelbeeld van Jan Verweyveld: Scenografie als autonome kunstdiscipline," *De Standaard*, September 15, 1988.

^{lxxxii} I'm not alone to remark on certain of these spatial strategies. For instance, Luk Van Den Dries describes two, contrasting Ivo's uses of space in *Desire Under the Elms* with that in his production of Edward Bond's *Saved*, the latter of which is an early version of the type of scenery he has brought back quite often recently in such productions as *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *View From the Bridge*.

...in *Desire* when the towering passion between son and stepmother finally explodes, it takes place on a wall-to-wall carpet, the borders of the framework of which were literally violated. And *Saved* wound up in a desolate still tableau whereby the floorboards slam shut around the family cell. For the duration of the show we've had access into their world full of frustrations and suffering, and now we see the façade of the family life once more, adorned with some red curtain fabric. A narrow cut-out in an endless series.

Luk Van den Dries, "Moord," *op cit*.

^{lxxxiii} "... the Belgian-born Mr. van Hove applies his demolition devices to not one but two fourth walls in the course of this rambunctious evening, since he has not one but two separate audiences to consider." The critic here is not referring to literally demolishing the walls, as Ivo is wont to do, only metaphorically doing so. Ben Brantley, "A Natural Cassavetes Woman, Theatricalized, Magnified and Multiplied," *NY Times*, December 4, 2008.

^{lxxxiv} Jason Fitzgerald, Review of *Teorema*, *Backstage*, July 16, 2010.

^{lxxxv} Tom Sellar, reviewing the New York version, felt that the vast sight specific warehouse subverted any sense of claustrophobia and rather swamped the production.

Lincoln Center Festival put the production in a large warehouse on Governors Island in part to accommodate Jan Versweyveld's wide-open set. With modular platforms sliding out of granite wall crevices and a sofa-size flat-screen TV showing desert footage throughout, the space keeps things firmly rooted in the here and now—not 1968 on the verge of upheaval. But this sleek post-industrial sterility holds little allure—it lacks definition, and its emptiness dwarfs the actors and engulfs the sound. When the interior gets destroyed and an inevitable deconstructive mess is strewn across the floor, there's little drama generated.

"Ivo Van Hove Stages Pasolini on Governors Island" *Village Voice*, July 20, 2010.

^{lxxxvi} This is a term from Camille Paglia as she advocates an embrace of the pagan: "What the west represses in its view of nature is the chthonian, which means "of the earth" – but the earth's bowels, not its surface. "Sex and Violence," *Sexual Personae*, New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 5.

^{lxxxvii}

They talk about lifting up the masses, but it's a commitment at arm's length: they've entrenched themselves in their sparkling white house, their ivory tower, and don't enter into actual contact with the people outside the door – right up until the latter literally force their way inside.

Wensink, *op cit*.

^{lxxxviii} Fuchs, op cit., p. 143. Arnold Aronson suggests that Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle has become "the metaphor of choice" for the current age, "replacing Einstein's relativity principle." *Abyss*, op cit., p. 112. Perhaps it is precisely the rhythm behind such existential uncertainty that van Hove is expressing through these abrupt, destabilizing, mixed-media interventions.
^{lxxxix} While the topicality of the play about the balance between science and art (or humanity) seemed to hit home, the effectiveness of the technologically driven climax was called into question by at least one critic:

When the hordes finally then appear before their doors to tear down the ivory towers, it actually seems to come right out of the blue. Van Hove dives right into it with a heavy display of hammer blows, but the depiction of the revenge of the masses is now too disengaged, and as a result the scene comes across as somewhat absurd. For art to stand up to chaos and survive becomes a far too simplistic conceit: The artist keeps drawing on the walls even as the house is caving in on him.

Herien Wensink, "Van Hove halt Gorki naar de politiek van nu," *NRC Handelsblad*, Nov. 30, 2010.

^{xc} Elinor Fuchs charts the evolution of a tendency of using writing itself as a post-modern scenic activity in a way pertinent to this production: "...numerous plays and performance pieces beginning in the 1970s project writing back on the stage performance in a 'literalization' that any previous generation of theater-makers would have rejected as untheatrical. [...] This has important implications for dramatic character, which begins to re-assume its cursive pre-psychological meaning – character as impression or inscription." Fuchs, *ibid.*, p. 74.

^{xci} Paglia, "No Law in the Arena," op cit., p. 27.

^{xcii} Jan Versweyveld confides on the origin of this concept:

I've always thought that it must be possible to conceptualize spaces where an independent life could be led, outside the limits of time and the circumstances of a production. Now I reject that idea. A space only makes sense insofar as the audience is there, if it's performed, and if a unity is brought about.

Quoted in: Bobkova, op cit. Geert Sels was the first journalist to call this approach "glass houses." Sels, "Omspringen met beperken," *TheatreMaker*, December 2007.

^{xciii} Even when his characters come from the lower echelons of society in other productions he was done, as with the farmers in *Desire Under the Elms*, the street toughs and cop in Genet's *Splendid's*, the boxers from Pasolini's *Rocco and His Brothers*, and the marginals from Charles Mee's *Perfect Love*, who all hail from the lumpen proletariat, the economic and political facets of their plights are not problematized by van Hove.

^{xciv} Quoted in: Bobkova, *ibid.*

^{xcv}

Roasted Tartar, crazy nicker, shiny stovepipe, Maghreber, sandnigger, Fattah, camel, desert rat, Saracen. In the terrific translation that the writer Hafid Bouazza has created from the tragedy *Othello*, he gives series of loaded synonyms for Shakespeare's neutral indication, 'Moor.' Bouazza's *Othello* is more than ever a discriminated against Arab. He's an alien who's never secure in his position.

Wilfred Takken, "Arabische Othello als kippige Colin Powell," *NRC Handelsblad*, February 2, 2003.

^{xcvi} One reviewer elaborates on how this doppelganger effect was brought about:

Iago (Roeland Fernhout) in this version becomes seen as the evil side of Othello, his phony Western lean-to, his false friend. He stands for eternal envy and feelings of being wronged. To underline this mirror effect he wears the same uniform, and both of them have shaved heads.

Ibid.

^{xvii} Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 6-7.

^{xviii} Ibid., p. 8.

^{xix} Quoted in: Hana Bobkova, op cit. Geert Sels states that the first example of “*huisjes*” on a Versweyveld set could be found “in rudimentary fashion,” in the production of *Ajax/Antigone*. Sels, op cit.

^c Van Hove:

Molière, unfortunately is very rarely performed in the Netherlands. When I read his plays, I find them extremely relevant, even though that's a horrible word. [...] Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish-English sociologist, has written a series of pertinent books: *Liquid Society*, *Liquid Love*, etc. He says that our society has become fluid and all relationships of short duration. We no longer get into long-standing relationships anymore, not in work, and not in love. [...] The French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who entertains the question of the consumer society, also comes to mind.

Quoted in: Arian, “Ik ben,” op cit.

^{ci} The image of a society in the grip of anomie, embodied here and elsewhere in various productions, seems either to be based on van Hove's reading of Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish English sociologist, and the writings of French philosopher Jacques Rancière, or possibly that he draws reinforcement from them of his own perceptions. He suggests that their visions of contemporary society as absolutely fluid, riddled only with short-lived relationships, as a hyper-consumerist orgy, conform to what he calls the “social choreography” he has concatenated to represent it as such. Arian, *ibid*.

^{cii} “Through his idea of naturalism in extremis, van Hove rattles our arthritic conventions and disconcerts even some hipsters who argue against slavish reproductions of classical works.” Gener, op cit.

^{ciii} Since words like Realism can mean so many different things, it is critical that we attempt to get at the nature of van Hove's iteration of Realism:

Versweyveld here succeeds in finding a way of encapsulating the dramaturgy into a simple, lucid image. The set design here offers itself up as an interpretive framework, a meaningful filtering screen. It then gets finished off through nuanced lighting and fulfilled by the actors' presence. No fuss with scene changes anymore, no flashy transformations as were used in his impressive *Lulu*, for example. They are unit sets in both cases.

Van den Dries, “Moord,” op cit.

^{civ} Lehmann describes this craze as a phenomenon that grew out of “club culture.” Op cit., p. 118.

^{cv} In so many of these productions he seems to be desiring to awaken a “multi-conscious” response in the audience, that is – according to Daphna Ben Chaim – spontaneously and unconsciously on more than one plane at a time. Ben Chaim references Stephen Heath and Walter Benjamin as rejecting the normal understanding of Brecht's Epic Theatre as distancing the audience from the dramatic conflict, and rather *refusing* separation. “It is this fixed position of separation-representation-speculation ... that Brecht's distantiating seeks to undermine.” Daphna Ben Chaim, *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), pp. 88-89.

^{cv}ⁱ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Avon Books, 1968), passim.

^{cv}ⁱⁱ Michael Gibson, "Brook's Africa," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (September, 1973), pp. 37-51.

^{cv}ⁱⁱⁱ See Anthony Charles Smith, "Orghast at Persepolis," *Peter Brook: A Theatrical Casebook* (London: Methuen, 1988.), pp. 172-190.

^{ci}^x Oscar Brockett and Robert Findlay, *A Century of Innovation* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), pp. 109, 110, 128, 140.

^{cx} See, for example, Aronson, *American Avant-Garde*, op cit., p. 38.

^{cx}ⁱ Quoted in Hillaert, Interview at the Monty, op cit.

^{cx}ⁱⁱ The multiple mirthful plays on words of the reviewers' responses bespeak their manifest contempt for van Hove's interpretation. Ben Brantley in the decisive *New York Times* review wrote:

If this production, which I will always think of as 'A Bathtub Named Desire,' sounds like an antic outlandish hoot, it really isn't. Mr. van Hove, who played similar (and marginally more illuminating) tricks with Eugene O'Neill's 'More Stately Mansions' two seasons ago, has the severe logic of the steely literature teacher who parses works of art into diagrams.

"A Brimming Bathtub as the Focus of Desire," *NY Times*, September 14, 1999. Still and all, the critics were divided, even within themselves. James Hannaham in the *Village Voice* comes down somewhere in the middle. "It's remarkable how bizarre the director's choices can get, but 'Streetcar' still rings out and soars above his vision of it. If you read the script afterward, many of van Hove's conceits appear completely logical, if overstated." Donald Lyons in the *NY Post*, under the off-putting banner "Clean 'Streetcar' leaves Something to be Desired," admits, "This spring cleaning of an over-familiar play may have been too ruthless, too thorough, but it's never boring. On balance, I like this 'Streetcar' for its audacity, impudence and theatrical excitement." But Brantley and the vulgate's negative view found support from the *Daily News* with a blistering review entitled "An Undesirable 'Streetcar': Bizarre Staging will make Tennessee Williams Fans Blanch." Other chuckles include: Donald Lyons, "Clean 'Streetcar' Leaves Something to Be Desired," *NY Post*, September 14, 1999; David Kaufman, "An Undesirable 'Streetcar': Bizarre Staging will make Tennessee Williams Fans Blanch," *Daily News*, September 14, 1999. Still a minority, such as Debra Jo Immergut in the *Wall Street Journal* (!), and especially the erudite, venerable (and more prescient, it seems) Robert Brustein in the *New Republic* appreciated the effort to the extent that he wrote an extensive thought piece about it in which he asserted van Hove's right to take the approach he did. Brustein frames his response by establishing that, "the challenge of Williams revivals, then, is how to make them surprising to people already familiar with their content while delivering the material anew to younger audiences." And he follows up with a measured analysis of why it worked (and what didn't work for him), summed up with the remark, "I found it deeply absorbing for most of its three-hour length." But, as anybody who knows American theatre can tell you, nobody reads the *New Republic* and everyone takes the *New York Times* as gospel. See: James Hannaham, "A Formalist Affair," *Village Voice*, September 21, 1999; Debra Jo Immergut, "Deconstructing 'Streetcar': A Bold Look at Williams's Timeless Southern Drama," *Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 1999; Robert Brustein, "Revisioning Tennessee Williams," *New Republic*, October 25, 1999.

^{cx}ⁱⁱⁱ In his chapter, "Density of Signs," Lehmann references an aesthetic of "*plethora*," which probably equates with my term "proliferation," as well as one of "*deprivation*," which correlates with my "reduction" principle. Lehmann, op cit., p. 89.

^{cx}^{iv} Judith Malina, co-founder of the Living Theatre, jotted down a quotation from André Gide in a diary entry dated 1948: "Dramatic art must no more seek to create the illusion of reality than does painting; it should work through its own special means and aim towards effects that belong

to it alone. Just as a painting is a space to set in motion, a play is a space of time to animate.”

Cited in Aronson, *American Avant-Garde*, op cit., p. 50.

^{cxv} Quoted in: Maartje den Breejen, “Carmen plooit zich niet, nooit, *never*,” *Het Parool*, August 23, 2002

^{cxvi} “No Law in the Arena,” p. 25. Van Hove’s attitude toward singular, savage women from the classical canon may very well have been reinforced by Camille Paglia’s writings on pagan women.

^{cxvii} See *ibid.*, and T’Jonck, “Onpure,” op cit.

^{cxviii} Although van Hove could never have seen those New York productions, perhaps the Ka Theater of Amsterdam, a gay theatre he did have a chance to see in his younger years provided the aesthetic and social basis for his own introduction of gay theatre to Belgium. Fassbinder was always a strong point of reference for him, as he as often attested in interviews, as for example, Bots, op cit. And: “And so we were in a way the Fassbinder generation: with leather jackets, and we could give a shit about everything, but thought that we were all that, period.” Quoted in Hillaert, Interview at the Monty, op cit.

^{cxix} Quoted in: Arian, “Ik ben,” op cit.

^{cxx} Who now still frequently works for Ivo, now mature roles, and has evolved into being a most impressive performer.

^{cxxi} John Clum, *The Drama of Marriage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 167.

^{cxxii} Brantley, “A Brimming Bathtub,” op cit.

^{cxxiii} Flemish critic Eric De Kuyper closely analyzes the male body as fetish in Hollywood films from the Thirties through the Fifties. While he never exactly lands on the precise image van Hove fetishizes, he does home in on many of the same traits of dress, physical type, and stance which ultimately approximate the van Hove male prototype. Clark Gable, Tyrone Power and James Dean may circle around it, for me, the early Paul Newman comes closest. *De Verbeelding van het Mannelijk Lichaam* (Nijmegen: Sun Uitgever, 1993), pp. 14, 15, 17, 39, 75, 97, 104, 110, 112, 125.

^{cxxiv}

In the Catholic boarding school he discovered friendship with other boys and homosexuality. In Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (and later in *Don Carlos*) he foregrounded a boy’s world full of rollicking, sparring young men.

Arian, “Het van Hove Festival, op cit.

^{cxv} The interviewer Pieter Bots sees, in the aggressive knot of male buddies in van Hove’s *Taming of the Shrew* as a commentary on specifically Dutch sports party culture, with its own atmosphere, sloganeering, and local sense of comradeship, claiming that the recognizably boisterous “Orange Feeling” (The Dutch House of Orange) is depicted due to van Hove’s detached distance as a Flemish outsider; the latter admits that this may very well be the source of the imagery in this show. Bots, op cit.

^{cxvi} Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic,” In *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, Rachel Adams and David Savran, eds. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 159.

^{cxvii} In the latter instance, Savran is writing about Sam Shepard’s plays, and while van Hove has never been drawn sufficiently to Shepard to mount his plays, this treatment of gender is something the two share. Savran, *A Queer Sort*, op cit., pp. 74, 146.

^{cxviii} Savran, *ibid.*, p. 81.

^{cxix} T’Jonck, op cit.

^{cxx} Wilfried Takken, “Filmscripts zijn ideaal,” *NRC Handelsblad*, Cultureel Supplement, June 5, 2009.

^{xxxi} Lehmann, op cit., p. 16.

^{cxviii} Pieter van Vierken, "Het geluk bestaat niet," *Eindhovens Dagblad*, November 23, 2000.

^{cxviii} Fuchs, op cit., p. 102.

^{cxviii} Szalwiska Interview, op cit.

^{cxviii} Mead, op cit. And:

The Wooster Group from New York appeared with Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, an unadulterated actors' theatre, with Willem Dafoe as the boiler stoker who finds out that in the eyes of a classy lady he's no better than a wild beast. The show was performed without missing a beat – in the history of the avant-gardist Wooster Group, yet one more new direction for them.

Arian, "Het van Hove Festival," op cit.

^{cxviii} Who played the lead, René, in Ivo's very first production, *Rumors*, and then went on to become a pioneer in the use of video in theatre, perennially coming up with astonishing new ways to integrate stage and recorded performance throughout his celebrated career. He is currently the highly accomplished Artistic Director of the most significant municipal theatre in Antwerp, Het Toneelhuis, whose works have been featured at the Theatre Festival at Avignon to acclaim and whose *Sunken Red* came to BAM.

^{cxviii} All that Lehmann does to describe Needcompany productions elaborations of metonymic as opposed to metaphorical space applies to this production. Lehmann, op cit., p. 151. Van Hove tries out this strategy in various productions, culminating in this one, but then ultimately discards it or waters it down so it no longer registers as such.

^{cxviii} Brantley, "A Natural Cassavetes Woman," op cit.

^{cxviii} Quoted by van Hove in: Hillaert, Interview at the Monty, op cit. Van der Groen was a prominent, highly charismatic Flemish actress and director of the Conservatorium in Brussels, an acting school, where she invited van Hove to teach, and who served as one of his very greatest inspirations, as he has often asserted.

^{cxli} Hemming, op cit.

^{cxli} Perrier, op cit.

^{cxlii} Although there may be disagreement on this point.

Whoever labels this as gay theatre is mistaken. It's about relationships, plain and simple, between people and about the prejudices which take hold of us. Sometimes with gentle, and sometimes tough self-mockery, one's own emotions, one's own longings, are translated into awkward movements and fleeting glances. The excellent, carefully selected music acts as a reference framework within which the play is constructed. The exaggerated style in which confrontations and rivalries between individuals within diverse relationships (straights come in for their share too) are presented makes *Wild Lords* a light-hearted, but gripping play.

Ronny Deschepper, "Een kijk op de wereld van literatuur, wielrennen, muziek, film en zoveel meer Ivo van Hove," <http://ronnydeschepper.com>, April 26, 2012.

^{cxliii} The actors whose observations are cited are Denis Podalydès, Elsa Lepoivre, Guillaume Gallienne, who play Konstantin Essenbeck, Sophie Essenbeck, and Friedrich Bruckmann respectively. Fabienne Darge, "Au Festival d'Avignon, la Comédie-Française dans la cour d'honneur," *Le Monde*, Scènes, July 6, 2016.

^{cxliii} In interview after interview the director reverts to his difficult days at boarding school, a turbulent and decisive time in his life, where he faced many questions about gender and identity. There he had his earliest experiences with love and sex that in that context must surely have counted as transgressive, including an affair with a teacher, whom he refused to condemn when questioned about it, saying rather that it was voluntary and that it had enriched his life. In the relationship between the boy king, Henry VI in *Kings of War* and his regent, Duke of Gloucester,

van Hove injected a strong sense of an affectionate relationship of this sort, presented perfectly matter-of-factly and sympathetically. See, for example: Sue Somers, "Ik heb zelf voor die relatie gekozen," *De Morgen*, November 29, 2010, and Ivo van Hove, "Ik heb nooit iets tegen mijn zin gedaan." *De Standaard*, December 5, 2010. See also: Marbus, op cit., Arian, "Ik ben," op cit., Rudy Kagie, "Ik kan alleen maar wenen," *Vrij Nederland*, December 13, 2003, Van der Van, op cit., and Marion Florusse, "Complimenten maken me verlegen," *Elegance*, January 31, 2005. In the latter interview he reveals that it was at the boarding school also that he discovered the works of Jean Genet.

^{exlv} Fuchs, op cit., pp. 58, 86. Fuchs traces the roots of zombie speech to its source in the post-dramatic works of early performance artists Daryl Chin and Larry Qualls.

^{exlvi} Quoted in Fuchs, *ibid.*, p.6. Arnold Aronson elaborates on the same idea:

It is this intentionally radical disruption of pleasing aesthetic synergy that is a cornerstone of postmodern design. One definition of postmodern design, then, is the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous elements within the unifying structure of the stage frame, the purpose of which is to create a referential network within the mind of the viewer that extends beyond the immediately apparent world of the play.

Aronson, *Abyss*, op cit., p. 18. Fuchs doesn't stop there, but describes in detail this aesthetically resistant aesthetic, one for which she betrays a preference I cannot share: "...dissociation (or eclecticism) and sensationalism in the strict sense of the word. A broken pediment here, a Roman arch there, a bit of Art Deco here, etc." Fuchs, *ibid.*, p. 166. She discerns in these arbitrary mixes a "frank theatricality," but such forays can equally easily slip over into intellectual incoherence. It is a style that Jan Decorte, a transitional figure on the Flemish theatre scene favored in his productions, notably Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena*, done at the Beurschouwburg in Brussels in 1981. Van Hove admired Decorte, and it is not surprising that he sought to emulate him at times. Interview DW.

^{exlviii} It may or may not be coincidental that one year later Joanne Akalaitis, founder of the remarkable American ensemble group the Mabou Mines, directed an American production of *'Tis Pity* at the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre, and succumbed to many of the same traps. In her production, too, the costumes became an incoherent bric-a-brac of post-modernity, the set a random mix of styles from the past, with a Di Chirico look seeping through, and in general a seditious approach robbing the play of all its power. The Giovanni/Anabella relationship – albeit with more attractive leads in the role, including Val Kilmer – were no more in tune with their roles than those in van Hove's production. Admittedly, I disagree with the *NY Times* critic at the time, who found the evening, "...a fresh, contemporary encounter with a startling play," an experience to which "you leave the theater convinced that the director must have rewritten the text," since it sounds so contemporary." Of course, this is an ultimate compliment to Ford, but he truly liked Akalaitis's take as well, including the scenic bric-a-brac. Frank Rich, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore'; Jacobean Tale of Lust and Revenge Updated to the Fascist 1930s," *NY Times*, April 6, 1992.

^{exlix} The presence of animals on Ivo's stages hit an apogee with *Kings of War* where King Henry VI is seen wading through a flock of sheep that throng in a long, white Kafkaesque hallway. The flock is exclusively present on the video screen, which lessens the impression to a degree. Still, they admirably suggest an oneiric world, similar to the flock in Buñuel's classic film, *Exterminating Angel*. It turns out that animals are the one thing, in real life, that have the power to scare Ivo. He would, he avows, cross the street to avoid a cat. See: Van de Grift Interview, op cit.

^{cl} "The cows came from a farm in Nuenen, just an ordinary Brabant cattle farm with hard-working farmers. The same sort of men as the five million Dutch people these days sit around glued to the

tube watching every Sunday evening.” Van den Dries, “Moord,” op cit., p. 44-46. But perhaps the fidelity to agricultural life in the show came more from Jan Versweyveld’s first-hand familiarity with it than Ivo’s. As he reported:

When I was a child I often stayed with my aunt in the Campine [backward rural region to the east of Antwerp]. She was housekeeper for the priest, and I regularly accompanied him on house calls to the parishioners, poor cottage farmers whose cattle was their most important possession. The door between the stall and the living room always stayed open out of concern for the cows. They truly lived right alongside their capital. That same social arrangement is what we were aiming to express in *Desire Under the Elms*. Not the romantic side of farm life, but the hardcore business side of it. It goes as far as the physical presence of the animals onstage. Their sound and smell contrasted with the characters’ homicidal passions. The entire ambient innocence was viewed through the eyes of the cows.

Quoted in: Bobkova, op cit.

^{cli} De Roeck, op cit.

^{clii} Van Hove: “Moldering within various characters I allow something of myself to seep through.” Quoted in: Florusse, op cit. See also: Kagie, op cit.

^{cliii} John Del Signore, “Ivo van Hove Talks About ‘Cries and Whispers’ at BAM,” *The Gothamist*, October 25, 2011.

^{cliv} Lincoln Center Festival put the production in a large warehouse on Governors Island in part to accommodate Jan Versweyveld’s wide-open set. With modular platforms sliding out of granite wall crevices and a sofa-size flat-screen TV showing desert footage throughout, the space keeps things firmly rooted in the here and now—not 1968 on the verge of upheaval. But this sleek post-industrial sterility holds little allure—it lacks definition, and its emptiness dwarfs the actors and engulfs the sound. When the interior gets destroyed and an inevitable deconstructive mess is strewn across the floor, there’s little drama generated.

Tom Sellar, “Ivo Van Hove Stages,” op cit. Sellar’s critique reflected the tone of most New York critics at the time.

^{clv} See Frank Rich, op cit. for a survey of which foreign auteur directors, throughout the 1980s, had made an impact on New York theatre and American theatre in general.

^{clvi} Brantley’s initiation to van Hove was the 1997 production of *More Stately Mansions* at NYTW, and his response was irritable and caustic, a stance he maintained through several more shows. He called the rendition of the O’Neill classic “a comic-strip version.”

Mr. van Hove brings a lot of sensational flash and deconstructionist tools [...] but the overall effect is to accentuate the obvious, in the manner of a student highlighting a study text in bright Magic Marker. [...] Much of this feels like acting-class exercises that were never developed into integrated performances. [...] But as far as achieving the sense of a haunting concert of voices, this production falls way short. (It makes you realize how accomplished the Wooster Group’s [It took him some time to be so converted to Elizabeth Lecompte as well.] interpretations of O’Neill are.).

“Talk, Talk, Talk: O’Neill in the Raw,” *NY Times*, October 8, 1997. It pales beside the out-and-out pan from *The Westsider’s* uncredited theatre reviewer: “It’s only early October, and we already have a front runner for Bomb of the Year. [...] His directorial choices make Anne Bogart’s look like the picture of clarity and restraint.” “If O’Neill Were Alive,” October 16, 1997. And then there’s the review by the venomous John Simon whose title says it all: “Unmansionable,” *New York Magazine*, October 20, 1997. Still, many reviewers at the time were impressed by van Hove’s American debut, including those from the *NY Post*, *Newsday*, and the *Wall Street Journal* at a time when there was still a variety of newspapers that reviewed theatre.

Consider how far Brantley has come to virtually pure infatuation. Consider how far he has come to virtually pure infatuation. Regarding last season's *A View From the Bridge*: "This must be what Greek tragedy once felt like, when people went to the theater in search of catharsis. Ivo van Hove's magnificent reconception of Arthur Miller's 'A View From the Bridge' [...] takes you into extreme emotional territory that you seldom dare visit in daily life. [...] You also feel ridiculously blessed to have been a witness to the terrible events you just saw." "'A View From the Bridge' Bears Witness to the Pain of Fate," *NY Times*, November 12, 2015. For the recent *Crucible*, his rave review celebrates it as flawless: "The director Ivo van Hove and a dazzling international cast [...] have plumbed the raw terror in Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible.' [...] And an endlessly revived historical drama from 1953 suddenly feels like the freshest, scariest play in town." "In Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible,'" op cit. What can account for this evolution? Is it merely that van Hove grew on Brantley? Is it that van Hove naturally evolved in a direction that became pleasing to the omnipotent critic? Or has the temperament and openness of the Broadway audience changed in the intervening eighteen years so that Brantley cannot stand to be left behind? It cannot be that van Hove calculated what would please Brantley and is giving it to him.

^{clvii} Quoted in: Hein Janssen, "New-Yorks theater vraagt Van Hove voor regie *Rijkemanshuis*," *De Volkskrant*, December 5, 1996. See also Bots, op cit, where Ivo declares himself a "missionary" who carries his enlightened form of theatre directing to foreign lands, which has a distinct flavor of condescension.

^{clviii} Sellar, "Dark Secrets," op cit., and Interview, *Leonard Lopate Show*, op cit.

^{clix} Sellar, *ibid*.

^{clx} Fabienne Pascaud, "Ivo van Hove," *Télérama*, June 29, 2016.

^{clxi} Simi Horwitz, "Ivo van Hove: A Dutch Director Does O'Neill," *Backstage.com*, Feb. 21, 2001.

^{clxii} Van Hove recounts his harmonious working relationship with Joan MacIntosh:

It was difficult at first to bring that off with American actors. I make a much more theatrical show out of his text. Also I treat O'Neill with humor—some critics couldn't accept that. Joan MacIntosh was the catalytic agent who made *More Stately Mansions* possible for me. She really understood me. Because she was a member of Richard Schechner's avant-garde collective, she could connect with my extremity.

Gener, op cit.

^{clxiii} Linda Winer, "A 'Streetcar' Laid Bare," *Newsday*, September 13, 1999.

^{clxiv} Quoted in: Pamela Newton, "Ivo van Hove is Having a Moment," *American Theatre*, November 11, 2015.

^{clxv} Arian, "Ik ben," op cit.

^{clxvi} Quoted in: Liv Laveyne, "De tijd is rijp om Tsjechov weer te spelen," *Knack*, September 29, 2010.

^{clxvii} Sellar, "Dark Secrets," op cit.

^{clxviii} Perrier, op cit.

^{clxix} Quoted in: Perrier, *ibid*.

^{clxx} Quoted in: Max Smith, "Theatermakers: Verbeelden is het wezen van theater," *Leidsche Dagblad*, June 21, 2002.

^{clxxi} Quoted in Loes Gompes, "Eeuwige trouw volgens Ivo van Hove," *Uitkrant*, February, 2005.

^{clxxii} Arian, "Ik ben," op cit.

^{clxxiii} Van den Dries "Moord," op cit., p. 44-46.

^{clxxiv} Arian, "Ik ben," op cit.

^{clxxv} Pascaud op cit.

^{clxxvi} Perrier, op cit.

clxxvii Hillaert, Interview at the Monty, op cit.

clxxviii Fabienne Pascaud, "Festival d'Avignon 2016: 'Les damnés,' la pièce monstre d'Ivo van Hove," *Arts et Scènes*, July 8, 2016.

clxxix Van Hove, "Politiek moet handen," op cit. Other sections of the speech were reprinted as: Ivo van Hove, "Kunst help tons angst te bedwingen," *De Volkskrant*, January 30, 2008.

clxxx Gener, op cit.

clxxxi Arian, "Ik ben," op cit.

clxxxii Gener, op cit.

clxxxiii Quoted in ibid.

clxxxiv Quoted in Perrier, op cit.

clxxxv Florusse, op cit.

clxxxvi Van Hove is in essence acknowledging Artaud when he asserts that, "The theatre has a vital twin function: it's a feast of the irrational and a place to pose questions without trepidation or reservation." Van Hove, "Het misverstand," op cit. He also often associates theatre performance with dreams, which accounts for the oneiric quality that seeps in to so many of his productions, another connection with Artaud, who was for a time director of the Paris Surrealist Group's Bureau of Dream Research and never stopped being a surrealist, despite being expelled from surrealist officialdom by Breton. Just one example of his statements on the subject: "Art insures that we can experience our deepest anguishes, frustrations and longings in museums, concert halls, theatres and cinemas. It bears a resemblance to dreams...." Ivo van Hove, "Kunst helpt ons angst te bedwingen," *De Volkskrant*, January 30, 2008.

clxxxvii Lehmann, op cit. p. 69.

clxxxviii "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art," *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 29.

clxxxix One such prolonged slapping match occurs between Edward and Gaveston in *Edward II*, when Edward urges Gaveston to leave him and seek refuge in Ireland. Gaveston realizes he must give up his place even as Edward urges him to seek safety. In desperation at a potential separation, Gaveston picks a fight with him and beats up on his love, a typically hyper-physicalized rendition of emotional abandonment.

cx The *Presence of the Actor* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991).

cxci Quoted in: Pascaud, "Ivo van Hove," op cit.

cxcii It wasn't so much earlier that, when asked if he cared to direct any more Chekhov, he had responded: "No. I wonder if Chekhov still has a whole lot of meaning for us. Whatever he has to say about people we've come to know little by little ourselves." Bots, op cit. The statement, made in 2005, by 2010 had morphed into: "The time is ripe to stage Chekhov again. But I find that those plays today, over a century later, once again are really significant." Laveyne, op cit. He justifies the play choice due to analogies with present-day Dutch and Belgian politics, but these reasons, however true, don't indicate a personal impetus. His lack of enthusiasm and affinity seemed to me to affect both is productions of *The Three Sisters* and *The Russians* (*Platonov* and *Ivanov*). Julie Phillips is an American critic who expresses what a number of Dutch critics have also said: "The morose quality in Chekhov doesn't seem to be in van Hove's register." Phillips, "Ivo, Chekhov," op cit. In contrast, for example, his contemporary, Luk Perceval, has long had an extraordinary knack for finding new resonances in his Chekhov productions.

cxci Patrice Pavis posits a very different reading of the Brechtian *gestus* than I adduce, asserting that it is "never like the ideograms of Grotowskian gestures... a living form possessing its own logic," nor a "reified image of a social relationship." Pavis, op cit., p. 48. But since that is exactly what I *do* discern in this performance, let's instead say that Heebinck was using a Grotowskian ideogram to portray Ethel Rosenberg.

cxciiv Elaborated in Lehmann, op cit., p. 3.

^{cxv} He is clearly ambivalent about the pitfall of becoming too institutionalized:

I've become known here [in Holland] for my interpretations of large-scale repertory shows, and I'm expected to stick to them. Just as some newspapers also charge that within Toneelgroep Amsterdam, [with their pop version of *Carmen*], that to a certain extent we're going down on our hands and knees before the youth audience. As if this production was intended as a provocation against the established Amsterdam public. That construction of facts is often leveled as if the theatre building was their private bailiwick and that they're experts on how theatre ought to be made. When you arrive with that attitude to see 'the latest van Hove,' then you will and won't leave it disappointed. In any case, it's not as though I'm suddenly abandoning the theatre.

Quoted in: T'Jonck, "Onpure," op cit. As always, it rankles with him every time he feels he is being pigeonholed into one kind of theatre identity.

^{cxvi} See, for example, Florusse, op cit. and Bots, op cit. for anecdotes about how certain new actors have entered the company, and Kegie, op cit. for some about how some have taken their leave.

^{cxvii} "The Flemish Theatre had become a moldering dinosaur when in 1981 I made my debut as a theatre director with my self-written play *Rumors*." Quoted in Els Den Butter, "Ivo van Hove: 'Mijn eerste voorstelling was in een wasserette,'" *Rails Magazine*, 2001.

^{cxviii} Cf. Newton, op cit. Marvin Carlson identifies the imperative for the depiction of specificity of locale with the Romantic Movement, especially with Victor Hugo. In contrast, stripping away of particularity and presenting a neutral theatrical space goes back to the Neo-Classicists. I feel this Neo-Classical flavor permeates this latter spate of van Hove productions very strongly.

Carlson, op cit., pp. 82-84. Van Hove speaks quite openly about his intentions to do just that.

^{cxix} Darge, "Vu du Pont," op cit.

^{cc} Savran, *A Queer Sort*, op cit. pp. 47, 17.

^{cci} Savran, *ibid.*, pp. 24, 36.

^{ccii} Arnold Aronson writes of how, historically, text-based theatre was reserved for the high-brow experiences, while performance that foregrounded the visual was denigrated. "The cultural divide between high and low art that emerged in the nineteenth century also relegated the world of spectacle and visuality to the popular theater, while valorizing the literary theater of high culture. Scenic spectacle and technological effects became the realm of melodrama, Grand Guignol, music hall, circus, and in its own way, naturalism." Aronson, *Abyss*, op cit., p. 3. In the 1970s theatre artists like Robert Wilson, Ariane Mnouchkine, Meredith Monk, and Richard Foreman with the Theatre of Images restored a theatre with visual primacy to the high-brow realm. Van Hove, for his part, manages to interject visuality that is often suggestive of popular imagery with impactful rhythms borrowed from Grand Guignol into high art text theatre, one of the hallmarks of his method.

^{cciii} "I think, deep down, it is a hope to be loved by audiences all over the world." Quoted in: Szalwinska, op cit.

^{cciv} Savran, *A Queer Sort*, op cit., pp. 17-18.

^{ccv} *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

^{ccvi} *Ibid.*

^{ccvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

^{ccviii} *Ibid.*, p. 51.

^{ccix} *Ibid.* Also, Gener, op cit.

^{ccx} As van Hove said when he'd been invited and was interviewed right before heading off to work at NYTW:

It's thrilling that plays are produced totally differently over there. I've now got to fight for a rehearsal period of five weeks, and they find that terribly long. In Germany it's the exact opposite.

There you've got to rehearse at least for twelve weeks if you want to be taken seriously.

Quoted in: Janssen, "New-Yorks theater," op cit. See also Bots, op cit.

^{ccxi} See Pascaud, op cit. He enlarges on the point, saying that he now plans all the details so far in advance that this time compression doesn't hurt the show. For the French production of *The Damned*, the actors arrived at the first rehearsal with all their lines pre-memorized. But recall that he first fought against the American system, where he was expected to have it all done within four weeks, insisting on an extra one.

^{ccxii} Takken, "Filmscripts," op cit.

^{ccxiii} Constant Meijers, "Verschil Maken," *TheaterMaker*, October 7, 2005.

^{ccxiv} Quoted in: Pascaud, op cit.

^{ccxv} "Sex and Violence," op cit., p. 29.

^{ccxvi} In his review, Ben Brantley finds topical political signification in the production, and its being done now, finessing the play's McCarthy-era provenance thus:

That its arrival also feels perfectly timed in this presidential election year, when politicians traffic in fears of outsiders and otherness, is less surprising. Miller's portrait of murderous mass hysteria during the 17th-century Salem witch trials was written to echo the "Red menace" hearings in Washington in the 1950s. [...] Nazi Germany comes to mind. Certain pundits might even think of the United States today [Brantley already did].

I feel it is a stretch to connect this production so facilely to the impending elections or to intuit any remnant in the production of analogy to the Red Scare of the 1950s. It is all extrinsic baggage the audience may bring, but are those associations not belied by van Hove's approach? Elsewhere in his review Brantley has it both ways by agreeing with me: "Parallels between Miller's then and latter-day news have never been hard to reach for. What makes Mr. van Hove's interpretation so unsettlingly vivid has little to do with literal-minded topicality." Brantley, "In Arthur Miller's 'Crucible,' op cit.

^{ccxvii} Quoted in: Newton, op cit.

^{ccxviii} Ivo van Hove, "9 punten voor een theater van de 21ste eeuw," excerpted from a speech given on the occasion of the opening of TF-1 Theater Festival, August 31, 2006, disseminated as a press release by TGA.

^{ccxix} Joe Coscarelli and Michael Paulson, "David Bowie Allowed His Art to Deliver a Final Message," *NY Times*, January 11, 2016.

^{ccxx} Unattributed Review of *Lazarus*, *Hollywood Reporter*, December 7, 2015.

^{ccxxi} "Space Oddity: 'Lazarus' is Bowie at New York Theatre Workshop," *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 2015.

^{ccxxii} Review of *Lazarus*, *Time Out New York* (December 16-22, Issue 1032), p. 45.

^{ccxxiii} Herien Wensink, "Van Hove laat Bowies universum zinderen," *NRC Handelsblad*, December 8, 2015.

^{ccxxiv} Ben Brantley, "David Bowie Songs and a Familiar Alien in 'Lazarus,'" *NY Times*, December 7, 2015.

^{ccxxv} T'Jonck, "Onpure," op cit.

^{ccxxvi} Quoted in: T'Jonck, *ibid*.

^{ccxxvii} Quoted in Arian, "Ik ben," op cit.

^{ccxxviii} I am not the kind of director who puts the text aside and starts fantasizing images. I am really a text director. The only reference is the text. I do drive everyone crazy, because I question every line and, in an opera, every note. Why is that line there? Why this crescendo there? I want to know the why behind the text. Every text needs an interpretation. It needs to be taken care of. To be looked at. There is not one truth about the text—not one truth. You have to find your own truth.

Quoted in Gener, op cit.

Even if we take Ivo at his word, there is a lingering sense that he is not a text director in the same sense as most literal-minded American naturalistic directors are; otherwise his current renovation of the American scene would lose all importance. Rather he conforms to Patrice Pavis's nuanced corrective portrait of the modern director, who: "...half semiologist and half 'sorcerer's apprentice,' makes up his own performance text." Pavis, op cit., p. 159. So we take issue with Ivo in his own self-definition as a "text director," which implies fidelity to some orthodox reading, by pointing out that he uses his close analysis of the traditional text to refashion a performance text that often borders on subverting the original, or at the very least, the spectators' preconception of it.

^{ccxxxix} "...the often dismissively used term 'text theatre' will [sometimes] turn out to mean a genuine and authentic variant of postdramatic theatre, rather than referring to something that has supposedly been overcome." Lehmann, op cit., p. 17. But in the first three cases, it means just that. The audiences have, however, embraced both the text and post-dramatic approaches without evincing much discrimination between the two. Also, Peter M. Boenisch, "Acts of Spectating: The Dramaturgy of the Audience's Experience in Contemporary Theatre," In Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane, eds, *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 2014), p. 231.

^{ccxxx} Ibid., pp. 44, 46.

^{ccxxxi} For example, he told me that he was heavily influenced by his reading of Artaud, but that by the time he'd come on the scene, the Grotowski wave "was finished" and couldn't possibly have had an influence on him. DW Interview, op cit. How is it, then that I see a Grotowski flavor in so much of his work? Perhaps due to all the influence that Grotowski had had on the generation of theatre-makers van Hove was nourished on.

I once worked with an actress in New York, who in an interview, said about me: 'Ivo tells you: Do a somersault, will you? And then after you do it, he says: Great, can you also do a double somersault? And once you do that, he coolly asks: Do you maybe have it in you to also do a triple somersault?' That is my way of working; I have boundaries, but that's exactly where I like to fiddle around. Especially in the physical realm.

Quoted in: Florusse, op cit. The process and attitude being described is essentially grotowskian in its drive for the absolute and pushing actors past their boundaries of what they consider possible. For all intents and purposes, the Artaud and Grotowski threads are indistinguishable and very clearly digested, resuscitated, and ubiquitous in the van Hove oeuvre.

^{ccxxxii} Lehmann, op cit., p. 121.

^{ccxxxiii} Ivo confided that two out of three of the actors were straight; the one gay one, who all pundits predicted would have a brilliant career ahead of him, tragically committed suicide at a very young age. DW Interview, op cit.

^{ccxxxiv} And thus fulfills a stipulation for post-dramatic theatre that unified plot and action take a back seat to other theatrical factors. "In post-dramatic forms of *theatre*, staged text (*if* text is staged) is merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc. total composition." And: "Ostentatious kitsch, solidarity with the taste of the masses and a thirst for fun are combined..." It has, "a tendency toward parody." Lehmann, op cit., pp. 46, 119, 120.

^{ccxxxv} The conspicuous variety of postdramatic theatre often finds its inspiration in the patterns of television and film entertainment and makes reference (irrespective of quality) to splatter movies, quiz shows, commercials, and disco music. [...] [It] registers the state of mind of its mostly young spectators – their feelings of resignation, rebellion and sadness, and their desire for happiness and to live life intensely. [...] Their fundamental 'infinite lack of future prospects which cannot be

covered up even by the most forcible assertion of “fun” in the now’ is a statement which captures the relationship between the blatantly performative elements and the anomy they cover up.

What Lehmann discerns as disjunctive principles at the base of a Needcompany event – that “...bodies, gestures, voices and movements ar torn from their spatio-temporal continuum, newly connected, isolated, and assembled into a tableau-like montage” in a metonymic space – could be describing this show as well. Ibid., pp. 118-119, 151.

^{ccxxxvi} Ibid., pp. 10, 13.

^{ccxxxvii} Again Lehmann observes that the “real” tends to intrude on and is not connected within the fictional frame, creating “an unsettling blurring of boundaries,” a further condition for post-dramatic theatre. Ibid., p. 104.

^{ccxxxviii} DW Interview, Ibid. For an overview of how performance art came to Belgium in the early 1980s see Crombez, “Happening in Belgium,” op cit.

^{ccxxxix} Lehmann, op cit., pp. 117-118.

^{ccxl} “Do you have a favorite playwright?’ ‘Eugene O’Neill is my all-time favorite. I’m doing *Mourning Becomes Electra* next season, for the second time. I just did *More Stately Mansions*. My production of *Desire Under the Elms* was on CNN because I had live cows in it. I love O’Neill because he is thinking about the catastrophe that life is.” Julie Phillips, “Ivo, Chekhov, No Nudes,” op cit. Also:

That necessity resides on the basis of the passion Ivo van Hove, director of Zuidelijk Toneel, harbors for Eugene O’Neill. His direction of *More Stately Mansions* received first prize in the 1995 summer Theatre Festival. That production isn’t Ivo van Hove’s first confrontation with the American theatre author. In 1989 he directed *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in 1992 followed *Desire Under the Elms*. Last year New York Theatre Workshop invited him to put on an American version of *More Stately Mansions*.

Bart Van den Eynde, Production Notes from Show Program at De Singel, Antwerp, for *More Stately Mansions*, August 25, 1998.

^{ccxli} This 1957 play was presented for the first time in the United States at Target Margin Theatre in NYC, directed by David Herskovits, only in 1997. In the event, none of the critics raised the same objections I do.

^{ccxlii} Van de Grift Interview, op cit. Hans-Thies Lehmann argues for the term *hypernaturalism* as applied to the 1970s and 80s works of Kroetz and Fassbinder that seem applicable to certain of van Hove’s productions. Lehmann, op cit., pp. 117-118.

^{ccxliii} Pieter Kottman, “Dat onuitgesproken lijdzaam zijn,” *NRC Handelsblad*, March 9, 1992.

And: “Arne Sierens’s translation was very effective (up to and including the word ‘*totteke*’ for a kiss) but in the mouths of the Dutch actors, it didn’t always sound right.” Ronny De Schepper, *Dagelijks iets Dagelijks*, April 28, 2012. It seems that *totteke* is close to the word for “kiss” from the Antwerp dialect. The usual ways to say, “kiss” in Dutch are either *kus* or *zoen*.

^{ccxliv}

Eight real live, red-hewed cows on stage, who throughout the performance do nothing more than eat, drink, shit and piss, and from time to time, blissful on account of their feed bags, sack out in the hay and take a snooze. They were the real eye-catchers of the show. [...] During the first ten minutes of the show you can’t take your eyes off of them, but after that the people get more interesting. [...] The eight cows from Nuenen, apart from that, had a wonderful life throughout the tour. Normally they get milked by a machine, as do all the cows and goats in [the British TV series] *Farmer Seeks Woman*, but during this show they actually get men’s hands on their udders.

Hein Janssen, *Het begeren onder de olmen* door het Zuidelijk Toneel, *Het Volkskrant*, March 9, 1992. And in *NRC Handelsblad*:

Desire Under the Elms (1924) was, as presented by Zuidelijk Toneel, defined by cows, real cows. Their roles consist of their presence, the manure on the stage floor, their lying down and standing back up again. They symbolize the connections with the earth, which is otherwise missing from the set design.

Kottman, *ibid.*

^{ccxlv} “*Splendid’s* (1948) can be read as a meditation, as an internal dialogue over the meaning of crime for the criminals and for ‘the public.’ The play was first produced early in 1994 in Berlin at the Schaubühne.” Ilse Vandesande, “Engelen van het kwaad die schreeuwen om genegenheid: *Splendid’s* van Jean Genet door Het Zuidelijk Toneel,” *Etcetera*, 1995-02, jaargang 13, nummer 48, p. 29-31.

^{ccxlv} Laveyne, *op cit.* And:

The specific site seemed also to have had a tremendous impact on the audience. In Ghent the performance took place in the underground concert hall of the Vooruit. The audience literally had to descend into the underworld. In the Singel the entire production fit onto the stage of the Red Hall (de Rode Zaal). The actors made energetic use of the metal constructions that lined both sides of the stage, which were reminiscent of a scene out of Elvis Presley’s *Jailhouse Rock* (1957).

Vandesande, *op cit.*

^{ccxlviii} Hans Horsten, “Zuidelijk Toneel voelt zich slachtoffer van bende van Nijvel,” *De Volkskrant*, December, 15, 1994.

^{ccxlix}

It’s unfortunate, but the play isn’t strong enough to keep the spectator engaged through to the end. Together with the slow and awkward unfolding of the story, the menace and consequently the tension trail off entirely. Yet *Splendid’s* is a production that can’t possibly leave you unshaken, inasmuch as it goes as far as it does. So far that it seldom keeps Genet from slipping into the realm of the taboo.

Vandesande, *op cit.*

^{cc} He says it himself very directly: “I create theatre from film scripts, not from films.” And:

Theatre is a sponge that sucks up all the various influences from other art-forms: video, visual art, performance, music. Theatre seeks out the other genres in order to ultimately produce a new language. Film came into the mix because my generation was brought up on film, with the great auteur films of the sixties and seventies. Before that the genres had been more separate, and theatre was an extension of literature. There are so many films that have changed my life, that have given me insight into myself, such as *Last Tango in Paris*. And with that baggage, I want to make something happen.

For a thorough consideration of how and why van Hove uses film scripts as source material for theatre productions see: Wilfred Takken, “Filmscripts,” *op cit.*

^{ccli} Van Hove: “De thema’s die ik wilde aansnijden, vond ik niet in toneelstukken, en wel in filmscripts.” *Ibid.*

^{cclii} Clum, *The Drama of Marriage*, *op cit.*, p. 20. Also:

Effectively, the category appropriate to the new theatre is not action but *states*. Theatre here deliberately negates, or at least relegates to the background, the possibility of developing a narrative – a possibility that is after all peculiar to it as a time-based art. This does not preclude a particular dynamic within the ‘frame’ of the state – one could call it a *scenic dynamic*, as opposed to the dramatic dynamic.

Lehmann, op cit., p. 68. And indeed, the audience to van Hove's *Faces* is confronted more with *states* – states in the acting, states in the ambiance, and the ebbing and flowing of a *scenic dynamic* that is alien to the purposefulness of Ibsenian “absolute” drama.

^{ccliv} Quoted in: Stuivenberg, op cit.

^{cclv} Hein Janssen, “De schouwburg als kathedraal, het podium als altaar waarop van Hove als De Schepper een hoogmis opvoert,” *De Volkskrant*, March 15, 2001.

^{cclvi} Introduction to *The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 28.

^{cclvii} Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday (Anchor), 1966), pp. 3-56.

^{cclviii} There were productions of *The Massacre at Paris* in 1981 featuring Gary Oldman and one by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1985 that was also done at Stratford-Upon-Avon in October of that year. In fact, it has been done in recent years in New York in 1999, Sydney in 2001, and Dublin in 2002 with many cutting and adding freely to the script. 2014 saw the 450th anniversary of Marlowe's birth and a number of revivals as well. Thus van Hove's production, however improbable, was part of an international renaissance for this obscure play. See:

<http://www.marlowe-society.org/marlowe/work/massacre/intro.html>.

^{cclix}

Marlowe wrote a fragmentary play for the theatre; Haffid Bouazza created a free adaptation from it. How mankind allows itself to play out their cruel power game in the name of religion – that's the story both Marlowe and Bouazza tell in flowery, bloody language. Bouazza's text matches the entire composition for excess. With Hugo Claus and Shakespeare as sources of inspiration, he's made up his own language throwing in both obsolete words and contemporary Dutch. His play throbs and thumps along, and is chock full of sexual references.

Janssen, In ““Massacre,”” op cit.

^{cclx} It is a full 90 lines of free verse, of which this is a sample:

Oft have I levell'd, and at last have learn'd
That peril is the chiefest way to happiness,
And resolution honour's fairest aim.
What glory is there in a common good,
That hangs for every peasant to achieve?
That like I best that flies beyond my reach.
Set me to scale the high Pyramides,
And theron set the diadem of France;
I'll either rend it with my nails to naught,
Or mount the top with my aspiring wings,
Although my downfall be the deepest hell.
For this I wake, when others think I sleep;
For this I wait, that scorn attendance else.
For this, my quenchless thirst, whereon I build,
Hath often pleaded kindred to the king;
For this, this head, this heart, this hand, and sword,
Contrives, imagines, and fully executes,
Matters of import aimed at by many,
Yet understood by none.

^{cclxi} Wilfried Takken claimed that, after taking over as artistic director in the middle of the season, van Hove hoped to take the theatre by storm with a gigantic, startling production. Many of his collaborators dragged their feet in passive resistance. “The theatre critics tore the play apart, the audience was bored to death, and many actors of the actors felt miserable.” In an interview with

him van Hove later admitted he ought to have started with a more modest production and waited until the beginning of the following season to assume leadership of the company, but went ahead with it because, “this had been a dream of mine for twenty years, the staging for which I’d run over in my head a hundred times.” “Een koud bed,” *NRC Handelsblad*, December, 19, 2003.

^{ceclxii} DW Interview, op cit.

^{ceclxiii}

The question addressed to State Secretary Van der Ploeg, who had obviously been in attendance at the opening night, was a follow-up as to whether his department also subsidized fashion shows. Then further, Jansen sardonically points out: “One could almost overlook the fact, but in between all these imposing sounds and images a group of actors were also running around, in puffy ball gowns or sexily suggestive recreation suits designed by Van Beirendonck. It cost them the better share the how and the why of this story (who is who, which Catholic murders which Protestant, which queen mother is associated with which king) to make it all clear.

Janssen, In “‘Massacre,’” op cit. The narrative confusion which the reviewer Janssen blames on the production was actually a weakness in the Marlowe text that the adaptor Bouazza worked hard to eliminate and clarify, in outright violation of the original. Clearly it wasn’t enough for the critics, nor perhaps for the audience.

^{ceclxiv} Fuchs, op cit., pp. 62-63.

^{ceclxv} “A Hedda for Self-Absorbed Modern Times,” *NY Times*, September 22, 2004. In this review Isherwood charts his own initial aversion to van Hove to this ultimate conversion. He shared with Ben Brantley the same trajectory of shock morphing into admiration, ever standing up, as is their official role, for the Upper Middle Brow theatre-going public’s point of view and taste:

Mr. van Hove will be known to the city’s theater fans as the ornery Flemish director who had the temerity to stage a beloved American classic, ‘A Streetcar Named Desire,’ in and around a bathtub a few years back. The meager rewards didn’t justify the liberties taken. But that is assuredly not the case here. Mr. van Hove’s remarkable ‘Hedda Gabler,’ which also includes such peculiarities as a can of tomato juice used as a weapon of mass humiliation, and a finale staged almost entirely in darkness, does not necessarily illuminate the play as a dramatic text. That can be left to traditionalists. Mr. van Hove’s sights are set considerably higher: he is an artist seeking, as Ibsen once did, to illuminate the world around him.

As he and Brantley went, given the *Times*’s outsized influence, so went their reading and theatre-going public.

^{ceclxvi} Isherwood, *ibid*.

^{ceclxvii} Isherwood, *ibid*.

^{ceclxviii} Acknowledging, without necessarily accepting my critique of the NYTW production, which after all, garnered much praise from the press, he told me that he often gestates a text in between productions and welcomes the process of revision based on lessons learned. DW Interview, op cit.

^{ceclxix} Van Hove actually says that this piano gained a “fetishistic function.” Bots Interview, op cit.

^{ceclxx} A van Hovian trope of slapping as first and last resort of frustration initiated in the parodies of middle class married men from Jerry Springer-like TV shows the post-dramatic vaudeville, *Wild Lords*.

^{ceclxxi} From an interview with van Hove from around that time:

For the past three years, Belgian director Ivo van Hove has been program director and presiding personality at the Holland Festival, Amsterdam’s annual avant-garde arts institution. [...] As with *Alice in Bed* last year, van Hove programmed his own directorial work as the festival’s opener: a production of *True Love* by New York playwright Charles Mee. (van Hove had planned to direct a stage adaptation of Scorsese’s *Mean Streets*, but the rights fell through.) Van Hove and Mee

originally discussed doing *True Love* together at New York Theatre Workshop; instead, this last-minute substitution became Mee's European premiere. [...] Are there writers you like in America right now? Charles Mee, and also Suzan-Lori Parks. Mee is writing a play for me now. I've been directing for 22 years and it's the first time I've commissioned a play. I was very afraid of that. He's in America, I'm in Europe, it's not an obvious combination. But we'll give it a try.

Julie Phillips, "The Theater of Live Chickens: Van Hove, Mee, and Donnellan at the Holland Festival," *Village Voice*, July 10, 2001.

cclxxii

My productions are often characterized by extremity. They can be very hard and aggressive. But also super tender and very romantic. I always try to allow feelings of compassion to come through. That's the way I directed *True Love*. To the consternation of many. Gang rape, incest, and adultery all found their way into the show.

Van Hove quoted in: Max Smith, op cit.

cclxxiii Fuchs, op cit., p. 105.

cclxxiv Ben Chaim, op cit., p. 89.

cclxxv Fuchs, op cit., pp. 6-7.

cclxxvi The admiring *The Village Voice* critic disagreed with me there.

Last year in Amsterdam, director Ivo van Hove staged the most sensuous, delicious play I've seen in a long time. The text of *Con Amore* was adapted from Monteverdi's 1622 opera *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. For the set, van Hove's regular designer, Jan Versweyveld, took the staid Stadsschouwburg theater and built into it a complete, top-of-the-line, working kitchen and bathroom, with a couple of mattresses to make a *Real World* home complete. Staged in the round, the play was a cynical tale of love and power: The emperor Nero dumps his wife Ottavia for the courtesan Poppea, who dumps her own longtime lover for Nero's crown. Yet the actors also went on with daily life: they cooked, ate, peed, got food smeared on their bodies, and took long showers. While the text was saying that love was a sham, all the amazing sensuality and nakedness—Halina Reijn, who played Poppea, has the most beautiful body—was telling us to get laid, get fed, and embrace life.

Julie Phillips, "Ivo, Chekhov, No Nudes," op cit. However, my own critique is similar to that of most of the local Dutch reviewers at the time. A remark typical of those reviews sums up that more skeptical response to:

Eleven or so young actors are just hanging out and have no idea how to get the story off the ground. [...] Van Hove probably wanted to communicate something about something that is eternal in love, and what is typical for our times and our generation. [...] But in this stir-fry form all that remains is an aftertaste of dullness and monotony.

Wilfred Takken, Review of *Con Amore*, *NRC Handelsblad*, February 4, 2002.

cclxxvii As Marvin Carlson reminds us, these kinds of ghosts of past performances which hover over our theatre-going experiences can be absolutely determinant. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2003), passim.

cclxxviii This passage is a reworking of part of an article. David Willinger, "The Current Belgian Renascence," *Western European Stages* (Vol. 21, No. 2, Spring, 2009), pp. 70-72.

cclxxix Van Hove undertook this project shortly after the harrowing death of his father in 2007, and he has made no secret that, in doing so, he was working out his feelings of mourning and rage. No wonder that it counts among his most deeply felt and profound works. Del Signore, op cit.

For many Antonioni's films are an affliction: slow, empty, and enigmatic. 'Too little paint and too much canvass,' remarked an exhibit visitor to his film *L'Avventura*. Enemies re-christened Antonioni as Antonion-Ennui. Fellow film director Alfred Hitchcock characterized his films as hot air: 'It's easy to make a pretentious film. Pop in quite unnecessary images to baffle people. Like that Italian chap, Antonioni.'

Coen Van Zwol, "Het geweer gaat niet af," *NRC Handelsblad*, June 5, 2009.

^{celxxx} "An axiomatic precept of the avant-garde is the substitution of experience for 'aboutness.' 'The world doesn't fear a new idea,' D.H. Lawrence observed. 'It can pigeonhole any idea. But it can't pigeonhole a new experience.'" And the world may very well fear a new experience, I might add. Still referring to the American context of the 1950s, Aronson states that "...what the public perceived as abstraction the artists saw as a liberation of truth and a rejection of 'the lie, the cliché, the standardized.'" Although they help provide a vocabulary for our discussion, I'm not sure if such blanket statements can be trusted. But in van Hove's case, it would be true that he knew he was abstracting *and* that he was – at least through much of his career – bent on freeing theatrical art from lies and clichés. Aronson, *American Avant-Garde*, op cit., pp. 7, 49.

^{celxxxii} David Willinger, "Three Plays and an Opera," *Western European Stages*, 2009.

^{celxxxiii} The way this production uses video tends to support Philip Auslander's contention that, contrary to our customary association of live theatre with the virtue of immediate *presence*, television's "essential properties as a medium are *immediacy* and *intimacy*." While the live actors moving about on the stage seem distanced in this production, the same actors depicted in close-ups, often simultaneous with the larger, diffuse framed picture we're watching onstage, seem alive and close to us. "...live actors are only pale reflections of the mediatized representations that dominate the cultural landscape." In this show especially, but elsewhere too, as for example *Roman Tragedies* and *Lazarus*, the lights come up exactly on such a "cultural landscape" as Auslander describes, either littered with the detritus from a "...a trial run, a mock-up for work in television, commercial movies, or advertising." Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 14, 32, 43.

^{celxxxiv} Lehmann, op cit., p. 68.

^{celxxxv} Pascaud, op cit.

^{celxxxvi} She latterly became the eccentric empress to the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph.

^{celxxxvii} Johan Callens, *Edward II* Review, *Theatre Journal* (Volume 64, Number 4, December, 2012), pp. 601-603.

^{celxxxviii} Callens, *ibid*.

^{celxxxix} Newton, op cit.

^{cexc} Quoted in: Steven Heene, "Ze noemen me een bad boy en daar voel ik me goed bij," *De Morgen*, November 3, 2007.

^{cecxci} Van de Griff Interview, op cit.