Susan Bennett and Sonia Massai (eds.)

Ivo van Hove: From Shakespeare to David Bowie

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Tom Cornford, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London

In the last decade, the name of Ivo van Hove has come to dominate the international theatre circuit, and become synonymous in the Anglophone Global North with the brand of chic and shocking European director’s theatre that the well-heeled middle-classes love or love to hate. He works across genres, media, and languages, he has built one of Europe’s most successful ensemble companies, and he travels regularly to direct one-off productions with celebrity actors. He and his designer-collaborator and life partner Jan Versweyveld have also created some of the most memorable theatrical images of my recent experience, some of which are captured in Versweyveld’s stunning photographs that illustrate this volume. Frequently, such *coups de théâtre* have involved the liberal use of fluids: blood, milk, urine, oil and water have all flooded van Hove’s stages, and soaked characters whose costumes invariably look dry-cleaned. Van Hove is as fascinated by leadership and responsibility as he is by theatricalised catastrophe. In his theatre, the professional class is engulfed by existential crisis.

Such observations are made possible by the richness of this collection of reflections on and thick descriptions of van Hove’s work from more than twenty expert observers, as well as from some of his close collaborators and the man himself. It will therefore doubtless prove an excellent resource for anyone teaching van Hove’s work or contemporary European or American theatre directing more widely. Researchers likewise will find a range of van Hove’s productions in both theatre and opera discussed that very few can have experienced in person.

This inclusive, wide-ranging collection offers, however, fewer opportunities for detailed critical engagement than some readers will seek. Some characterisations of the differences between ‘European’ and Anglo-American directing, for example, reproduce common simplifications, including the simply inaccurate view that Regisseur-directors are uninterested in text. In general, the volume adopts somewhat uncritically van Hove’s liberal assumptions about the timelessness of theatre and its autonomy in relation to society. His description, for example, of the aims of post-war theatre festivals is notably blind to their assertion of cultural power: ‘culture was needed to make sure that we were still human beings, that we were going to resist violence, that we were going to be inclusive rather than excluding people’ (86).

Contributors to this collection tend likewise to homogenise ‘the human condition’ (103), to consider stagings that are steeped in Western aesthetics as universal without considering the epistemic violence this entails, and (with the notable exception of P.A. Skantze) to overlook or seek to justify the hegemonic whiteness of van Hove’s work. Nonetheless, the editors have included interviews that expose such disavowed operations of power, including one with Hove’s co-director at the Toneelgroep Amsterdam (TGA), Wouter van Ransbeek, which describes their strategic project to make the TGA a global brand (91). Despite its commitment to that brand, this book therefore offers opportunities to see behind the marketing and consider the figure of the celebrity director in greater depth. Primarily, however, this is a collection for van Hove’s many fans, and they will be delighted by its insights into this leading artist of the contemporary theatre.