

# Candidate 2 evidence

Scottish Candidate Number:

Advanced Higher Drama  
Dissertation

**Is Ivo Van Hove successful in his revival of classical  
plays?**

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<https://www.theguardian.com/tage/2016/nov/06/ivo-van-hove-i-give-it-all-like-bowie-gave-it-all-in-a-masked-way-lazarus-interview>  
[Accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023]

"I don't know what "being faithful to a text" means. There's not one truth. As a director or actor, you have to give an interpretation of a line. I get 10 different people to say "I love you" – three words, an objective truth – and yet each time it is spoken it is different. I'm known for my preparation. For actors, this is not a threat, it is freedom. I like to create the world in which the text will blossom best."<sup>1</sup> This quote from the Artistic Director Ivo Van Hove gives us insight into the way in which he reimagines pieces of classical theatre, allowing them to extend out with their intended reading into a modern narrative. Ivo Van Hove is known for experimental avant-garde productions on and off Broadway, some of which include Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Hove has been awarded an Obie Awards for his off-Broadway productions of *Hedda Gabler* in 2005, as well as Tony awards for Best Revival of a Play, Best Direction of a Play and a Laurence Olivier Award for his production of *A View from the Bridge*. Hove's directing style has been described as maximalist minimalism which translates into the set design of his productions, demanding more from a stripped back version of the original play. In doing this Hove is able to highlight the emotions portrayed on stage without the need for excessive prop or set.

This is seen in his production of *A view from the bridge* which features only two props, a cigar and a chair which are used to symbolise a shift in power dynamics throughout the play. *A view from the bridge* follows the main characters of Eddie Carbone, his wife Betrice and their niece Catherine (Katy) who live in Brooklyn, New York in the 1950's. Their story is narrated by the lawyer Alfieri who is introduced in the opening scene of the play, we come to understand that the Carbone family are awaiting the arrival of Betrice's immigrant cousins, Marco and Rodolpho, who are coming from Italy to financially support family back home and build a better life. As the play progresses, we get insight into Eddie's complicated relationship with his niece, having raised her since her mother died, they have developed a close bond in which Eddie views her as a child in need of protecting, worsened by Catherine's desire to grow up and be seen as an adult but inability to step away from childish affections for her uncle. Determined not to hurt her uncle she remains trapped within this role, despite longing for independence and a life of her own. Eddie's infatuation with his Neice grows when she takes interest in Rodolpho, having disliked him since he arrived Eddie seeks the advice of

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1 Kellaway, K. (2016). Ivo van Hove: 'I give it all as Bowie gave it all – in a masked way'. *The Observer*. [online] 6 Nov. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/06/ivo-van-hove-i-give-it-all-like-bowie-gave-it-all-in-a-masked-way-lazarus-interview>

[Accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023]

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[Accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023]

the lawyer Alfieri, stating on multiple occasions that "The guy ain't right"<sup>2</sup> referring to the behaviour Eddie believes to be shameful and unmasculine, singing being an example of this. In act two Catherine breaks down seeking comfort in Rodolpho, the two begin to become intimate when Eddie arrives home early, enraged he demands that Rodolpho leaves, this escalates when Catherine tries to leave with him and Eddie refuses, forcing her into a kiss. Eddie's unspoken desire for his niece is exposed as Rodolpho demands respect for her. It is then that Eddie kisses him, asserting his power over him, maintaining his control and attempting to reveal to Katy what he believes him to be. "But for me, that's an act of war. Its rape."<sup>3</sup> Eddie later claims he didn't resist, insisting Rodolpho didn't give him the right kind of fight. This, therefore further concretises the idea in his mind that he is unfit for Katy and will have failed in his duty to protect her if he allows it to go on. In trying to prove his suspicions about Rodolpho he only pushes Catherine further away and puts more strain on their already deteriorating relationship. It is then that Eddie speaks to Alfieri one last time, in not receiving the answer he wanted from the lawyer he makes the decision that ultimately destroys his life, that decision being to turn the cousins into the authorities.

What makes Hove's version of this play as powerful as it is, is the nature of the set and prop used on stage, a lack of this is commonly found in Van Hove's productions and can be seen all throughout his adaptation of Miller's play. The lack of set allows for the audience to focus solely on the characters on stage, the stark and empty stage emphasises the characters' emotions and ways in which they interact with one another. Hove's version is intentionally left up for interpretation, he described it as that of a palace or ruins, emphasizing that Miller intended this to be a modern Greek tragedy. The stage is designed to reveal the lives of those living there, exposing the story and granting access to private emotions like those of Eddie. This gives us a better understanding of character relations and how their lives unravel. The set features a black wall with a single doorway in which the actors enter and exit, a short glass wall encloses the room in which the family sit, giving a sense of the shared space. In voiding the stage of set it allows the audience to focus on the meaning of the play and who the characters are rather than what they are doing which can often distract from the overall message and impact. Instead, Hove gives power to the actors to understand their character in a way they may not have if prop and set had been more present in the

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<sup>2</sup> [www.dramaonlinelibrary.com](https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com). (n.d.). *A View from the Bridge*. [online] Available at: [https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350932883&tocid=do-9781350932883\\_6263820697001&st=a+view+from+the+bridge](https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350932883&tocid=do-9781350932883_6263820697001&st=a+view+from+the+bridge).

[Accessed February 2023]

<sup>3</sup> [www.bing.com](https://www.bing.com). (n.d.). *Mark Strong and Ivo van Hove %7c Interview %7c TimesTalks - Bing video*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Mark+Strong+and+Ivo+van+Hove+%7c+Interview+%7c+TimesTalks&view=detail&mid=6D55E2A97CBEA334A1126D55E2A97CBEA334A112&FORM=VIRE>

[Accessed 8 May 2023].

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[Accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023]

performance. "All you've got to concentrate on are the words, what those words mean, why you're saying those words, why the words are being said to you, and what they mean, the characters and therefore the narrative. It makes the whole process incredibly clean. The play becomes clear in this incarnation, and that's what a lot of people have said to me; it's the clearest version they've ever seen because it's uncluttered with the usual traffic of the stage."<sup>4</sup> The limited prop used in the play emphasises the meaning behind the ones that are used, an example of this being the use of the chair in the second act of the play. Marco challenges Eddie to lift the chair using one leg, in doing this he doesn't only challenge his strength but his manhood which makes his failure extremely impactful. Eddie is no longer the one in power. Marco not only hypothetically looks down on Eddie but literally when he picks up the chair and holds it above his head, staring down at Eddie asserting his status in the household. This also ties into the meaning behind the prop in act one, the cigar which Catherine lights for Eddie symbolises his power as the man of the house unthreatened by anyone. These props hold significant meaning in the play which would have been lost in among other set and props if they were to be used. Hove commented in an interview that this scene wouldn't have been possible without the use of the chair and wouldn't have made the same impact if done without unlike other aspects of the play that are emphasised by the lack of prop.

In my opinion Hove's revival of Miller's play is successful as he doesn't step away from the original story of the characters but instead creates an environment in which the play can flourish and find an audience in a modern narrative, he is able to capture the timelessness of the issues that the Carbone family face and speak to the audience on a personal level, whilst stepping away from the traditional naturalism in which the play was intended to be performed. This allows us as an audience to understand the tragedy that takes place and relate this to their own personal experience. This creates a play that is not only impactful but that anyone can see themselves in. "This is not just somebody else's family tragedy. It speaks directly to us and suggests that there is an Eddie Carbone lurking in all of us, just as there is a vengeful Electra and a blind Oedipus."<sup>5</sup> I think Hove was successful in his decision to strip back the set and props as this made space for the characters' emotions on stage, the lack of physical objects meant that there could be no distraction from the intensity of play

<sup>4</sup>[www.bing.com](https://www.bing.com). (n.d.). *Mark Strong and Ivo van Hove %7c Interview %7c TimesTalks - Bing video*. [online]

Available at:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Mark+Strong+and+Ivo+van+Hove+%7c+Interview+%7c+TimesTalks&view=detail&mid=6D55E2A97CBEA334A1126D55E2A97CBEA334A112&FORM=VIRE>

[Accessed 8 May 2023].

<sup>5</sup> the Guardian. (2015). *A View from the Bridge five-star review – Ivo van Hove reinvents Arthur Miller*. [online]

Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/feb/17/view-from-the-bridge-review-ivo-van-hove-arthur-miller>.

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[Accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023]

and therefore made a bigger impact on the audience, leaving them shocked by the events that take place.

Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* focuses on a young couple, Hedda and Tesman played by Ruth Wilson and Kyle Soller, who have recently returned from their honeymoon and are moving into their first apartment together, despite the seemingly happy time in the couple's life their marriage is already becoming strained due to the lack of love in their relationship. "Wilson is especially good at conveying the desolation of a Hedda confined in a meaningless marriage."<sup>6</sup> Hove's version of this classical play opens in a sparsely furnished apartment with bare walls and buckets filled with bouquets of flowers situated near a large window, the main piece of set being a large piano in the middle of the room on which Hedda sleeps. This set already contrasts with that of *A view from the bridge* but is still stripped back of furnishing fit for the vast space, having not been able to afford the apartment the couple struggle to get out of debt, straining their relationship. In the opening scene of the play, we are introduced to Tesman's aunt Juliana and Berte who once was Tesman's nanny and who is now the couple's maid. Within the first scene we come to understand that Juliana is caring for her sister Rina who is sick and who later dies further on in the play, this only adds more pressure to the couple's relationship as Hedda refuses to involve herself with his dying Aunt, stating "You know I can't deal with illness and death. I have to be free of all ugliness."<sup>7</sup> when Tesman receives news of her quickly declining health. This lack of compassion is also evident in the way in which she treats Juliana throughout the play. It is obvious that Hedda feels a discomfort towards Juliana and the idea of being part of their family, highlighted by the way in which she refuses to refer to her as auntie and her marriage being purely that of convenience. Hedda's inability to be satisfied in her own life contributes to her need for control and power over others, which leads to reckless outbursts. An example of this being when Hedda smashes a bouquet of flowers on the floor before throwing all of the bouquets all over the apartment and stapling the flowers to the bare walls as the song *Blue* by Joni Mitchell plays, the use of the song further illustrates the Hedda's anger and frustration paired with blue lighting flooding the stage.

Hedda's inability to make change in her life and escape the boredom and emptiness she is trapped in is emphasised by the character of Mrs Thea Elvsted who comes back into

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<sup>6</sup> Billington, M. (2016). *Hedda Gabler* review – Ruth Wilson lets loose Ibsen's demons. *The Guardian*. [online] 13 Dec. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/dec/13/hedda-gabler-review-ruth-wilson-ibsen-ivo-van-hove-national-theatre>.

<sup>7</sup> [www.dramaonlinelibrary.com](http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com). (n.d.). *Hedda Gabler*. [online] Available at: [https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350934634&tocid=do-9781350934634\\_6256940628001&st=hedda+gabler](https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350934634&tocid=do-9781350934634_6256940628001&st=hedda+gabler)

[Accessed 9 Feb. 2023].

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[Accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2023]

Hedda's life having gone to school with her, it is not long before she finds that her past lover, Eilert Lovborg, is now in a relationship with her having got sober from past addictions. Thea describes to her the manner in which she met Lovborg and left her loveless marriage to be with him, ultimately doing the thing that Hedda can't, make change for herself. "Thea is like Nora [in *A Doll's House*]; she *does* something, she makes a change. She leaves her husband because she doesn't love him. Hedda doesn't. Hedda doesn't love Tesman. Tesman doesn't love Hedda. But they never make a decision to cut it off, to really make a change."<sup>8</sup> It is when Hedda meets Lovborg again that she seeks to gain power over the life of him and Thea and it is her who ultimately destroys their relationship and his life. It is Hedda who convinces Lovborg to drink again "Because there are people, suspicious people who don't believe you've truly forsaken your old habits. You must prove to them you are so cured, you can enjoy a tiny indulgence on special occasions. Boldness."<sup>9</sup> and who leads him to join Brack's party, it is from there that Lovborg's life begins to unravel when his precious manuscript goes missing unaware of the fact it is in the possession of Hedda. It is due to this that his relationship with Thea ends and is found having been shot by a gun given to him by Hedda, suspected to have taken his own life. In this scene we see Hedda dancing after Lovborg leaves with the gun, spinning and raising her arms in the air as golden light fills the stage through the window, it is then that she takes the manuscript and places it into the fire, burning it as the song Hallelujah plays overtop. The choice Hove made to use this song in this scene could suggest that Hedda is feeling a type of euphoria from finally gaining back her power and having an influence over the life of her past lover. The lyrics also suggest the way in which she has impacted Lovborg, leaving him broken and unable to carry on much like Hedda feels at points in the play, often feeling like she lacks purpose or meaning.

In my opinion Hove's revival of Hedda Gabler is successful in its ability to strike the audience and leave a long lasting impact, the build-up and sudden execution at the end of Hedda's character is much like that of Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge* and leaves the audience feeling saddened and stunned despite the characters being difficult to like a sympathise for at times. Hove's use of costume in Hedda Gabler allows us to step further away from the past and into the present in which the performance finds a contemporary audience. "Well, what we wanted to do is to get out of the nineteenth century, so we situated the play in a loft, in a big city."<sup>10</sup> In doing this Hove is able to connect more directly with his

<sup>8</sup>Staff, E. (2017, November 16). *INTERVIEW: Ivo Van Hove on Hedda Gabler*. British Theatre. <https://britishtheatre.com/interview-ivo-van-hove-hedda-gabler/>

<sup>9</sup>[www.dramaonlinelibrary.com](https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com). (n.d.). *Hedda Gabler*. [online] Available at: [https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350934634&tocid=do-9781350934634\\_6256940628001&st=hedda+gabler](https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350934634&tocid=do-9781350934634_6256940628001&st=hedda+gabler).

<sup>10</sup> Staff, E. (2017). *INTERVIEW: Ivo Van Hove on Hedda Gabler*. [online] British Theatre. Available at: <https://britishtheatre.com/interview-ivo-van-hove-hedda-gabler/>.

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audience much like he did in *A View from the Bridge*, taking away elements of the past and replacing them with something more modern or leaving them up for the audiences' interpretation. I believe this revival of *Hedda Gabler* is successful in the way in which lighting was used to depict feelings at certain points during the play, the blues and yellows expressing what was unsaid by the characters on stage, carrying across this message subtly. A moment where the use of lighting is prominent is in the final scenes where the stage is shrouded in darkness when Hedda takes her life, the importance of this moment is emphasised by the fact it was the people in her life who created this darkness, the wood panelling being drilled onto the windows by the other actors and then finally Brack kicking closed the only remaining light source when he finally gains control over Hedda. Representing Hedda finally losing control of herself, her life beginning to fall apart and unravel in front of her as she loses all hope for the future. This can also be seen at the end of *A view from the bridge* when the door of the house is barricaded by metal shutters, trapping the family in this harrowing end without any way of escape from the inevitable.

*Angels in America* is a play set in the mid 1980's during the struggles of the early AIDS crisis and the Reagan era in which six New Yorkers try to navigate ever shifting grounds while they grapple with the reality of their interconnecting lives. Kushner's play tackles topics of homosexuality and the AID's crisis, Religion, politics, heaven and hell, death, life and love. The story more closely follows the character of Prior Walter (Eelco Smits) after he first reveals that he has AID's, this leads to his partner Louis (Fedja van Huêt) abandoning him in his time of need, unable to face how the illness will impact Prior and their life together. Their relationship isn't the only one that we see deteriorate, Joe Pitt (Marwan Kenzari), a Mormon lawyer in denial about his sexuality is married to his wife Harper (Hélène Devos) who struggles with drug use and vivid hallucinations. Amongst these relationships we also explore the life of the famous Republican Lawyer Roy Cohn (Hans Kesting) who works with Joe and despite his extremist right wing homophobic views, is dying from AIDs, taunted by visions of Ethel Rosenberg. Finally, Belize (Roeland Fernhout) who works as the night nurse at a hospital who cares Cohn on his deathbed. Ivo Van Hove's version of this play bends the format in which it was originally intended to be performed, instead of the two part play that it was originally written as Hove compacts his version down into a single five hour performance that encompasses both part one, *Millennium Approaches* and part two, *perestroika*. Not only did Hove cut down the performance time of the play but changed the language that the play is performed in, his adaptation of *Angels in America* was performed in Dutch in Amsterdam by the theatre company *Toneelgroep Amsterdam* of which he is the artistic director. In doing this he stepped away from Kushner's love of the English language and instead adapted the script to fit the language in which he wanted his version to be performed. Despite making this change the meaning was not lost in translation, in an interview with Hove and Kushner, Kushner commented on the change in language didn't take away the impact or the meaning of the play, despite not speaking Dutch he was still able to understand what was happening on stage and understand the emotions felt by the characters without knowing exactly what they were saying.

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Hove used very little set in his production much like Hedda Gabler and A View from the Bridge, the stage offered very information as to what is going on and where the characters are during the play apart from images projected onto the wall of the stage, these images showed pictures of New York in the 80's with things such as the twin towers still being intact in order to give a sense of time and where the play is set despite not being performed in America. "What we did in this production is – because there is no set, but there is a little bit of a set, we use in a very minimalistic way video, and in video we create New York in the beginning of the eighties."<sup>11</sup> This was paired with music from David Bowie which featured as the only sound used in Hove's production of Angels in America. "When you listen to [David Bowie] songs, you'll hear the beginning of the 80s," says van Hove. "And so many of his songs talk about decay, death, change, transformation. That's his music and that's why we used it. I think all art should be subversive. Why go to the theatre? To be shocked, to be blown away, to be emotionally touched, to come out of the theatre having experienced something. Perhaps you don't even know what it is yet, and why. But your imagination has been stimulated. That's what we try to do onstage."<sup>12</sup> Through the use of Bowies songs Hove is able to get across themes of the play to the audience and allow them to gain a better understanding of what is going on at this time in America and the inequality and underrepresentation people with the illness are getting, the misinformation about the illness and little support from Reagan at this time made it increasingly difficult to get the treatment needed.

In my opinion Ivo Van Hove's adaptation of Angels in America is successful however, it doesn't reach the same level of success as A View from the Bridge and Hedda Gabler. This is due to the script being cut down into a shorter version of the original play, despite Hove's version still being impactful it loses some of the depth and humour found in the original and other adaptations of the play such as Marianne Elliott's version which in keeps with the original format of the play. "The earthbound realism and humour of Millennium Approaches is lost in the depths of this time-warped universe, where actors stroll onto a bare stage with no walls and spit out their lines rapid-fire with little emotion."<sup>13</sup> Despite this the play is still

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<sup>11</sup>[www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stvpFanEU30). (n.d.). *Artist Talk: Ivo Van Hove and Tony Kushner*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stvpFanEU30>

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<sup>12</sup> Nast, C. (2014). *Tony Kushner Gives Rave Review of Stripped-Down, David Bowie-ized Production of Angels in America*. [online] Vanity Fair. Available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2014/10/angels-in-america-bam-ivo-van-hove>

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<sup>13</sup> Anon, (2014). *Angels in America*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/news/angels-in->

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regarded as successful adaptation of Kushner's original masterpiece, evoking emotion and leaving a long-lasting impact on the audience. I believe *A View from the Bridge* and *Hedda Gabler* overall better revivals as they didn't move as much away from the original text and were instead brought into an environment in which they could thrive and develop as pieces. However, I do believe that Hove was successful in his stripped back set as this allowed for the emotions to take up more of the space on stage without distraction which brought about a new meaning and dimension to the play. "But Ivo's production was very much about the frailty and fragility of the human body. I found it overwhelmingly moving."<sup>14</sup>

In his revivals of the classic plays investigated in this dissertation Hove has been successful in adapting them to fit modern theatre and resonate with a contemporary audience. Each play is different and successful in its own right. *A View from the Bridge* is successful in its simplistic set and is effective in conveying Miller's version of a Greek tragedy, the emotions are not lost in the stripped back staging and are given the space to dominate the performance and create a long-lasting impact on the audience. Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* is successful in stepping away from the past and into the present, in moving forward and putting the play into a modern narrative Hove is able to highlight the timelessness of the play and make it fit seamlessly into present times. His version of *Angels in America* is successful in bringing new meaning to the modern classic and putting emphasis on aspects of the play which are often overlooked in other adaptations; however, it can be argued that some of meaning, and impact was lost in decision to cut time the time of the play. Despite this Hove's *Angels in America* still effortlessly pulls you into the world of these characters, allowing you to understand their emotions and the relevance of this era in a modern world.

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