



Ivo van Hove - Johannes Vermeer Award 2019 laureate

### Jury's report

The Johannes Vermeer Award is the Dutch state prize for the arts, to honour and encourage exceptional artistic talent. Since 2009, the prestigious prize has been awarded every year to an artist working in the Netherlands who is of exceptional significance to both the art world and to society as a whole. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science is assisted by an independent jury that not only carefully looks at the entire artistic field, but also ensures that all the various artistic disciplines are equally represented when deciding on their nomination. In its assessment the jury is also guided by the development phase of the artist. The Johannes Vermeer Prijs is intended for someone who has already built up a recognisable and enduring body of work and who, at the same time, still arouses expectations. His or her artistic career is in full development.

The award consists of the sum of 100,000 euros. The winner can spend this sum on a special project within his or her field of work. This year's jury consists of Els van der Plas (chair), Annabelle Birnie, Iris van Herpen, Jeroen Krabbé and Jamal Ouariachi. This jury unanimously decided to award the Johannes Vermeer Prize 2019 to theatre maker Ivo van Hove.

“Ivo van Hove has created an impressive oeuvre of theatre productions that is unique within the Dutch-speaking world, but also far beyond. Time and again he expands and deepens the theatrical representation of human existence. The past few decades he has taken the Internationaal Theater Amsterdam (formerly Toneelgroep Amsterdam) to the international top, an achievement as part of which the splendid theatre design by his partner Jan Versweyveld deserves a special mention.”

This is the most important reason for the jury to honour Ivo van Hove this year. In addition, the jury stressed Van Hove's importance through the way in which he manages to export the Dutch language and present it on the international stage. With his ground-breaking dramatic vision and his ability to bring language, drama, production and image together and giving them all equal space, he has introduced innovations in the world of theatre while holding on to its traditions. According to the jury, Ivo van Hove's leadership is characterised by a superb combination of artistic and managerial qualities.



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Ivo van Hove turned sixty last year, and several biographies were published about him on that occasion, both in the Netherlands and abroad. This in itself is special for a Flemish-Dutch theatre maker, but together these books also provide insight into how Van Hove's talent has matured over the past forty years, and how he has become one of the most important theatre makers of the moment. Concepts such as work ethic and passion apply to him: he has an unbridled energy that not only enables him to realise a number of high-profile productions every year, but also to manage a large group of people. The world he works in has become bigger and more varied in recent years. Not only when looking at his international successes, but also in the genres he works in: he is not only active in theatre, but also in opera, musical and music theatre. For him, interdisciplinary collaboration is a matter of course, as evidenced by his direction of domestic and international opera productions and his recent collaboration with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (KCO) for the production of *Death in Venice*.

### Substance

In terms of substance, all these productions are invariably characterised by a number of recurring elements. The jury would like to reflect briefly on these here. To start with, his most consistent theme is an impossible love and, as a result, the desire for security. In his controversial direction of Tennessee Williams' classic *A Streetcar Named Desire*, that feeling of detachment was impressively depicted. The main character, Blanche Dubois - destitute, deprived of all dignity - cannot thrive in the light, and prefers the dark. She desperately searches for the attention of strangers. His recent Couperus trilogy, *De stille kracht*, *Van oude mensen en Kleine Zielen* (*The Hidden Force*, *Old People and the Things that Pass*, and *The Book of Small Souls*), is also full of characters who are not very well rooted in normal life and who resort to drink, supernatural mysticism and desperate affairs. We recently saw the same desperation in his direction of *Een klein leven* (*A Little Life*) after Hanya Yanagihara's bestseller. In fact, most of Van Hove's performances are about this theme, often in combination with a crippled sense of lust, which in turn leads to all kinds of problems.



Van Hove himself once said the following in an interview about this fascination with people who are seeking shelter: “My performances are indeed often about suppressed desires, but that’s what a lot of theatre and literature is about anyway. And let’s not beat about the bush: Of course that has to do with who I am, with my homosexuality. It is about where I come from, from that small village in Belgian Limburg where I have always felt like an outsider. Not so much because I was gay, but because I didn’t feel welcome and didn’t belong anywhere.”

## Politics

The outsider dominates Van Hove’s theatre productions, whether they find their origin in classical plays or in his many adaptations of novels and film scripts. It is often claimed that Van Hove is a masterful dissector of the human soul and psyche in the theatre, but that he is not a politically engaged artist. This hypothesis is understandable in itself, were it not for the fact that in 2016, as a guest director at the famous Comédie Française, he made a politically charged performance: *Les Damnés*, based on the movie *The Damned* by Luchino Visconti. When it opened at the Festival d’Avignon, friend and foe were in agreement: Van Hove was breaking new ground.

*Les Damnés* is about how sophisticated fascism spread in the Third Reich and how the violence also crept into the bourgeoisie. Van Hove clearly made a link to present time, where right-wing populist movements are becoming commonplace. The fact that he also seduced the actors of the Comédie Française, who excel in the classical repertoire, to play a modern, physical and intense play, underlines his qualities as an actors’ director.

It’s easy to argue that productions like *Angels in America* and *The Fountainhead* are just as political, despite the fact that they deal with very personal matters. Because, *Angels in America* is about the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in New York and how the social standards of that time pushed the victims even more into a corner. *The Fountainhead* has often been described as a neo-liberal and neo-capitalist manifesto, but is also about the freedom versus limitation of the artist, and in line with this, fantasy.

After the success of *Angels in America* in his own country, Toneelgroep Amsterdam made the crossing to New York, bringing Tony Kushner’s play back to his home town: New York, where the AIDS epidemic once began. It was the culmination of the international success of both the theatre group and its director.



## Stage design

Van Hove's expressiveness is emphasised by the visual power of the stage design, usually by his partner, Jan Versweyveld. The jet-black decor in Richards Strauss' *Salomé* affirms the austerity of the play and the loneliness of the title role. *The Fountainhead*'s architectural decor reflects the main character's profession. Video images often add an extra dimension, such as in Schrekers' *Schatzgreber* or in Weils' *Mahagonny*. In short: for Van Hove, the image is equal to the word, the drama and the music. The jury considers this to be very specific to his work.

## Language

The jury also embraces the international dissemination of the Dutch language and theatre tradition, which is very special for such a small language area. A language that characterises Van Hove for the most part because of his Flemish roots and his Dutch living and working environment. Ivo van Hove was born in 1958 in Heist-op-den-Berg, and started his theatre career in Flanders, where he became the artistic director of Het Zuidelijk Toneel in 1990. Between 1998 and 2004, he was in charge of the Holland Festival. In 2001, he became director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, which, after merging with the Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam, is now called Internationaal Theater Amsterdam (ITA). He also directed a large number of plays abroad, for instance in Paris, Berlin, London, Hamburg, and New York. This brought him into contact with theatrical cultures other than those in the Netherlands and Flanders, and it was remarkably easy for him to feel at home in the vibrant theatre world of West End in London and Broadway in New York, where he collaborated with renowned actors such as Bryan Cranston and Ben Whishaw. In 2015, he produced the musical *Lazarus* in New York, which would eventually become David Bowie's testament. From mid-October 2019, this special Dutch production will be in the theatres.

Ivo van Hove has been honoured for his achievements with the Grote Theaterfestivalprijs (1996), the Vlaamse Cultuurprijs Algemene Culturele Verdienste 2015 and - together with Jan Versweyveld - the Amsterdamprijs voor de Kunst (2015). He has won two Laurence Olivier Awards and two Tony Awards. In addition to plays, he has directed numerous operas at De Nationale Opera, de Vlaamse Opera, the Opéra de Paris and recently Kurt Weill's *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* for the Festival Aix-en-Provence.



This season, he will produce the play *Freud* and a theatrical adaptation of the novel *Wie heeft mijn vader vermoord?* (*Who killed my father?*) by the young French author Edouard Louis. His version of *West Side Story* will open in New York in 2020. Next, he will direct Isabelle Huppert in Tennessee Williams's *La menagerie de verre* (*The Glass Menagerie*).

### **Inspiration**

Ivo van Hove's sources of inspiration include the French film, opera and theatre maker Patrice Chereau and the work of the German film maker and playwright Rainer Werner Fassbinder. His great teacher was Dora van der Groen, the Flemish actress, director and then managing director of the theatre training programme at the Antwerp Academy of Music, where Van Hove received his training. When he was at the academy, Van der Groen said to him: "Ivo, you and the theatre are a happy marriage." "I've always remembered that: getting married is for better or for worse," says Van Hove.

He certainly has experienced worse times, especially in the early years of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, when the troupe and the new artistic director had to get used to each other. But gradually, he developed Toneelgroep Amsterdam as a top theatre company. He is clearly proud of what he has achieved with his group. Or as he once said himself: "With my team, I want to create the most adventurous, innovative, exclusive and personal theatre experience for as broad an audience as possible. Theatre on the cutting edge, theatre that doesn't aim to please, but wants to seduce. I'm proud to be able to do that now, in all those cities and countries." And the jury of the Johannes Vermeer Prize 2019 is that as well: proud of what he has achieved. And very excited about what is yet to come.