



# THE FOUNTAINHEAD

## INTERVIEW WITH IVO VAN HOVE

### **Is this the first time you've adapted a novel for the theatre?**

Ivo van Hove: Yes, because I love cinema and read very few novels. Apart from actual plays, I've mostly adapted films; those of Ingmar Bergman, John Cassavetes, Marguerite Duras. I may actually have been somewhat of a trailblazer in that regard.

### **Weren't your first works in the 1980s made up of texts edited together, though?**

Yes and no. They were more improvisations, sometimes around a theme. I would give actors a text, and they would do something with it. Sometimes all I would give them was an idea. I was editing things produced by actors, in a way similar to some choreographic works. Movements put together until they form a story.

### **Why choose *The Fountainhead*, a novel written by Ayn Rand in 1943 and set in 1920? What adaptation choices did you make?**

It's all thanks to the Festival d'Avignon. The book was a gift from my assistant after the 2008 edition of the Festival, where we played *Roman Tragedies*. I read it almost in one sitting. It took some time to acquire the rights to adapt it and start working on it. Now I can finally start thinking about the direction. I liked this book because it asks the question of the essence of creation. It's a novel of ideas, similar to how I want my theatre to be a theatre of ideas, but one that would think about what things mean today. We wanted to remain faithful to the novel, and chose to follow its four-part structure. But the novel is 687 pages long, our text only 150. On the whole, we remained faithful to it by focusing mostly on the theme of artistic creation and didn't add any external text. The book is on my desk now, and every day I read a few pages. Even though we've been working on it for a long time now, that we've had time to let it mature, it's still an ongoing process, one that will continue for me until the day before the first representation. I'm not afraid of cutting things until the last minute.

### **It's an intimidating novel. There are several different stories—a rivalry between two architects, love stories, a very critical look at journalism and criticism... There are six characters: four men and two women. Who are they?**

The characters are like those of Camus's *Caligula*: they are both social archetypes and individual characters. For instance, there's Howard Roark, a modernist architect—who dreams of practical and unique buildings, meant to be lived in, built with respect for the materials used. He believes that creation is a lonely process, something you do on your own. He believes one should never give up and only listen to oneself. Then you have Peter Keating, also an architect, who's a symbol for social architecture. He's got a large entourage and believes that one needs to listen to one's clients, to one's public. A good example of the difference between them would be this passage where Peter Keating wants to remove a rock to build something in its place, while Howard Roark wants to build on top of the rock. Ayn Rand looks down on Peter Keating's position, despises the tendency he represents. I would like to see if that's really warranted. What I want to do is put both perspectives on an equal footing and wrestle with the dilemma this creates: should art accept to take part in everyday life? Should the artist remain isolated? Should he listen to no one else? Can he go against the zeitgeist? Van Gogh didn't enjoy success until after he died, alone and destitute. His paintings are now among the most expensive things in the world. The novel asks this crucial question of the relationship between art and money. How can one survive by producing art within the system? I have sponsors, but I had to put my own money on the line a year and a half ago. And even if none of my sponsors has ever tried to influence any of my creations, it remains a fragile equilibrium.

### **This book can be read as an economic, political, and social manifesto, to the glory of capitalism and individualism. How did you deal with that aspect of the text?**

Capitalism isn't really at the heart of *The Fountainhead*. It's something that plays a much larger part in another of Ayn Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. Of course, I'm well aware that the novel is set within a capitalist system and that Ayn Rand's philosophy has become the object of political discussion. When I was in the United States and talked about my project to adapt this novel, people looked at me with circumspection. It's a little different in Europe, the book isn't as well-known. Except among architects, for whom it's a sort of Bible. Without trying to draw too strong a comparison, it's a little like refusing to adapt Wagner because of Hitler's admiration for him. What I wanted to do was adapt the novel without having to deal with its political context.

**Ayn Rand's books weren't translated into French until very late, whereas she was considered an authority in the United States and in England. In the 1950s she created Objectivism, along with people like Alan Greenspan, who would later become Chairman of the Federal Reserve. How do you explain the fact that her work didn't really make it to Europe?**

I'd never heard of Ayn Rand until 2007, yet you can find her books everywhere! But I think this hymn to an extremely liberal form of capitalism couldn't really be heard in Europe until the recent crisis. The world of today looks a lot like the world of the 1920s. It seems like we live in a dangerous and terrible time, that the world is about to enter a new system. What system, I don't know. But when faced with those very affecting dilemmas, we have to pick a side. That's why Vargas Llosa, Clinton, or Putin can sometimes refer to Ayn Rand, even though she's now seen as a hard-right thinker, in part because of the appropriation of her philosophy by the Tea Party. Those are themes theatre can deal with and, as a director, I'm not afraid to take that risk. And if Ayn Rand considers Howard Roark to be good and Peter Keating to be bad, I'd rather show that Macbeth kills children, that it's awful but we should know it happens. Look at Macbeth, look at Medea! Those are stories we're used to today. But if we go back to the original meaning of the play, a woman who kills because she doesn't feel loved anymore, it's a topic that has deep moral and ethical ramifications. Ayn Rand explores this kind of extreme questions, that's why I find her interesting. *The Fountainhead* forces you to think about contradictory positions and its beauty is that, if it is indeed a political novel, it also speaks of love, with an extreme passion that is almost sadomasochistic.

**Your work on scenography is always very rich and meaningful. For this show, will it have something to do with architecture, which plays such a central role in the novel?**

Of course. We considered architects think first in terms of shapes, not in terms of what their technical skills allow them to do. We began with simple ideas, drawings, sketches. The relationship to the public will be the usual one: the audience will be sitting in front of the stage, on which the actors will play. But I've been working for a long time with the same scenographer, Jan Versweyveld, and his stage design will be anything but standard. Technicians and engineers will appear on the stage, so that the audience can see everything that is going on, see how the show is created. This idea of creation is crucial. We'll create the novel on the stage. Architecture, music, video, performance: all those artistic forms will play a part in this creation. There will be references to contemporary architecture. It's very important to me. So is the music, written by Eric Sleichim. We'll use some music from the 1920s, but also some Steve Reich, some American minimalism, etc. Percussion instruments, mostly. We'll use instruments that aren't really orchestra instruments. Instruments made of glass or stone, very rough. It's got to do with the work of the architect as Howard Roark sees it: he works directly with materials, touches them, thinks about their significance. That's not something Peter Keating does; Keating draws, he projects.




**There was a movie adaptation, directed by King Vidor. Have you seen it?**

I don't want to see it. I've been told they made the love story the heart of the movie. But to me, this story about creation is just as important, if not more so, than the love story between the heroine and the three men who court her.

**The novel ends with a very long monologue by Howard Roark, which Ayn Rand forced King Vidor not to cut. It is, I believe, the longest monologue in the history of cinema: seven minutes! It's an artistic manifesto. Did you keep it?**

Yes, it is in the show. I would actually want to create something based on this monologue alone, later on. What's interesting is that Howard Roark doesn't speak much in the novel. And this sudden monologue is like the eruption of a volcano. He becomes a sort of Prometheus.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier.

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