

## THE DAMNED

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Invited by the Comédie-Française to direct its actors, Ivo van Hove chose to adapt *The Damned* for the stage. Using the screenplay rather than Visconti's film as a starting point, he tells the story of the Essenbecks as Nazism triumphs in Germany, in a show whose scenography borders on installation art. To protect their interests, the steel tycoons of the Essenbeck family see no other solution but to ally themselves with the new regime and murder the patriarch, old Baron Joachim, disgusted by the idea. Intrigue and machinations, betrayals and murders: the appointment of the new head of their steel empire will turn into a ritual in celebration of Evil, in which the corruption of the relationships between individuals echoes the cruelty and brutality of the political context. In this struggle for survival, against all odds, it is Martin – the incestuous and paedophilic progeny of powerful Baroness Sophie – who will manage to eliminate all his opponents and become a zealous servant of the regime, ready to reign on the empire he inherited. He will however have to pay a high price, living a cold life irremediably devoid of love, goodness, and beauty.

## IVO VAN HOVE

Artistic director since 2001 of the Toneelgroep in Amsterdam, one of Europe's most inventive theatre companies, Ivo van Hove has directed over a hundred shows, among which plays from the classic and contemporary repertoires, but also operas and book or film adaptations. In his personal repertoire, Shakespeare (whose Roman Tragedies he presented at the Festival d'Avignon in 2008), Molière, Goldoni, Schiller, Ibsen, O'Neill, Camus, Miller, Koltès, Duras, Müller, Jon Fosse, or Tony Kushner stand alongside Verdi, Wagner, Berg, Janacek, or Mozart, but also Visconti, Pasolini, Bergman, or Cassavetes. In 2014, he presented *The Fountainhead*, based on Ayn Rand's novel, in the schoolyard of the Lycée Saint-Joseph. Ivo van Hove considers the space of the stage to be of primordial importance in his shows, and he always asks of actors that they combine the intelligence of words with that of emotions. His theatre has always been more subversive than strictly political, far from any moralising posturing, and has never shied away from asking dangerous questions in order to allow us to "experience our deepest fears and dearest hopes."

## THE COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE

Gone is the time when the actors of the Comédie-Française were almost all recruited among graduates of the French National Academy of Dramatic Arts in Paris, or of the former Ecole de la rue Blanche, now known as Ensatt. The 39 sociétaires and 20 pensionnaires of the company now come from various backgrounds, sometimes even from abroad. *Simul et singulis* – together but unique – their careers evolve through their meetings with the various directors invited to work with them. Every one of those meetings is unique, shapes their acting style, and strengthens the personality of this troupe like no other in France.

## INTERVIEW WITH IVO VAN HOVE

**This isn't your first time at the Festival d'Avignon, but it's the first time you've ever worked with the Comédie-Française. How did you meet Éric Ruf? How did the idea of a show in Avignon, and then place Colette, come about? Do you have specific expectations when it comes to working with this company?**

**Ivo Van Hove:** I knew Éric Ruf as an actor – I'd seen him in *Phaedra*, directed by Patrice Chéreau, and admired and respected his talent. When he was appointed General Administrator of the Comédie-Française, he wrote me a letter – when I only ever receive emails! – which eventually led to our meeting, first in Amsterdam, then in Paris. I learned he was in talks with Olivier Py to have the Comédie-Française appear at the Festival d'Avignon in 2016. A happy coincidence did the rest; Olivier Py wanted an artist who had never worked in the Cour d'honneur to perform there this year, Éric Ruf invited me to direct a show with the company... This invitation from the Comédie-Française is very important to me, because few foreign directors get the chance to work with this ancient institution, with its mythical aura. When it started to become clear that I would get the opportunity to create a show for the Salle Richelieu and the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes, I was even happier. I've been working for years with the same troupe and actors, but I have also always worked in parallel with different groups of actors, be it in Germany, in the United States, or, not so long ago, in France. The key moment in my relationship with the actors, the moment when everything is decided, is that of the rehearsals. That's when we get to truly meet, beyond all speeches, all prior conjectures.

**You once said that you can only work on material you are "in love with." Is that why you picked *The Damned*?**

In my conversations with Éric Ruf, we quickly started talking about maybe working with something that wouldn't belong purely to the theatre. It just so happens that I have already directed adaptations of *Rocco and his Brothers* and *Ludwig*. To further explore Visconti's themes with *The Damned* is something I had been thinking about for a while. It seems to me that the reasons why one would want to tell this story are even clearer in the current social and political context than they were when the film was made. I see *The Damned* as telling two stories: on the one hand, that of the disintegration of a rich family – a family whose fate is intimately tied to that of the economy of their country, as they rule over an industrial empire – and on the other, a political story, that of the triumph of an ideology, Nazism, whose influence, in spite of the outcome of World War II, has only grown in recent decades, and now threatens many European countries. What we see in *The Damned* is a political alliance between a powerful family and a regime that they actually hate. The idea that financial prosperity and economic wellbeing would be more important than the happiness of mankind, the beauty of relationships between people, is a strange phenomenon that I find particularly interesting to observe and describe.

***The Damned* is first and foremost a film...**

No, it's first and foremost a screenplay. I saw the film as a young man, but I haven't seen it in a while, and I don't want to. I'm not trying to adapt Visconti's film. What I plan to do is to go back to the screenplay and direct it for the theatre. We'll see what we'll do with the changing locations based on the venue. Their diversity and number aren't necessarily a problem. Think about Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance: the action takes place in more than forty different locations, in Rome, in Egypt, in the Orient! It's impossible to show that onstage, and yet...

For *The Damned*, things are very similar. It's actually easier, because most of the story takes place in the Essenbeck family mansion. With Jan Versweyveld, we'll try to come up with a theatrical space that will allow us to figure the house at the same time we do other locations. It doesn't have to be realistic. The two venues where the show will be performed, the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes and the Salle Richelieu, have very different dimensions; we've decided to play with horizontality, to use something akin to installation art, to create a universe of molten steel, iron, and raw timber. Its role will also be to reveal, in its own way, the dance of death that is at the heart of the story. We should then be able to recreate it on a smaller scale, so in the end, people will get to see the same show in both venues.

**In *The Damned*, we follow the psychological evolution of various characters faced with ever more oppressive and dangerous events, influenced by History as well as by their personal lives. Do you find this aspect of the work particularly interesting?**

In my work, I always try to bring together an important sense of theatricality with the exploration of complex psychological areas and sophisticated emotions. Of course, a lot of things will depend on what happens with the actors, on the way they'll react to my propositions. What's interesting in *The Damned* is that the behaviours it exposes aren't "raw" but "corrupted." To highlight the violence of those characters, we'll paradoxically use the sensuality of bodies; flesh will be at the forefront. There's a lot about relationships between men and women in this "twilight of the Gods" (*Götterdämmerung*), but none of those – with the exception of that of Herbert Thalmann and his wife, who'll die in Dachau – is authentic – there's always something to cloud, even annihilate, romantic feelings; and sometimes, that relationship is based on deviant impulses – paedophilia, incest. Everyone's always trying to manipulate everyone else. Nothing *real* can happen in such a context.

**Is there one character you see as standing out in this screenplay?**

At the heart of the story – and at the heart of the show – stands the character of Martin. To me, he's an extremely symbolic character, in that the son of Sophie von Essenbeck is a real chameleon, able to adapt to any situation, even the most stressful and oppressive ones. He's an unambitious nihilist, who thinks only of his own survival. And he ends up all alone. Everyone else is either gone or dead. He is like Musil's "Man without qualities," living in a brutal and cruel era.

**If you had to describe *The Damned*, would you say it is a historical nightmare, a social nightmare, an individual nightmare?**

I see it as a celebration of Evil. Like a death ritual. Love and art have no meaning in that world. The story of *The Damned* is the negative reflection of everything that is beautiful and good in the world. It's the "other side." In our troubled era, I think it is important to show the audience a world in which they would *really* not want to live. But I am no moralist: I can understand if you think that, in the end, Martin was right, he survived when all the others died. And I know there's always something fascinating about Evil, which is also why works full of violence and cruelty are popular. In *The Damned*, there's a sort of downward spiral: after a while, you can't stop what's coming, things pick up speed and quickly deteriorate. If Evil triumphs so quickly, it's because time is always of the essence. The Essenbecks make a deal with the devil not for ideological reasons, but for financial ones. They don't have a choice. The cruelty and violence that result of it can be fascinating for the audience, but it's better to experience those feelings at the theatre than in the real world.

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Interview conducted by Laurent Muhleisen

## AND...

SHOW broadcast on France 2 on July 10 at 22:40 and available during six months on Culturebox.

MAISON JEAN VILAR

*A Share of the Orient* / Read by the Comédiens-Français / 11, 12, 13 July at 11:30

*Stage metamorphosis - 70 years of stage design at the Comédie-Française*, everyday from 11:00 to 19:00

CYCLE OF SACRED MUSIC

*The Music lesson* by Pascal Quignard / Reader Didier Sandre from the Comédie-Française / July 14 at 11:30

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with the artistic team of Les Damnés, July 12 at 17:30, Louis Pasteur campus of the University

RESEARCH AND CREATION IN AVIGNON

With the National Research Agency *Passions, violence, and power – Norms and transgressions*, with in particular Didier Sandre from the Comédie-Française, July 8 at 14:30, cloître Saint-Louis

THE NAVE OF IMAGES

*La Chute des dieux (Les Damnés)*, director Johan Simons and Paul Koek, *The Fountainhead* based on Ayn Rand (excerpt), director Ivo van Hove and *Les Damnés*, director Ivo van Hove, July 11 from 14:00, église des Célestins

FAITH AND CULTURE ENCOUNTERS

With Didier Sandre from the Comédie-Française, July 9 at 11:00, Chapelle de l'Oratoire

The script *Les Damnés* is published in n°634 of *Avant-Scène Cinéma*, available at the Festival bookshop at the église des Célestins and at the Chartreuse bookshop in Villeneuve lez Avignon

*Les Damnés* is subject to a *Pièce (dé)montée*, pedagogical file created by Canopé.

## TOUR DATES OF THE DAMNED AFTER THE FESTIVAL

From September 24, 2016 to January 13, 2017 at the Comédie-Française (Paris).

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