

Obsession, Barbican, London — the drama of inner geography

Jude Law broods compellingly in Ivo van Hove's production ****



Luchino Visconti's 1943 film adaptation of James M. Cain's noir novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* not only stole a march on Hollywood but also constituted the first great flowering of Italian Neorealismo cinema. Now it in turn provides the material for the fourth stage adaptation of a Visconti film by, in some ways, one of the most formalistic current theatre directors, Ivo van Hove.

For all that van Hove talks about distilling a drama, his productions do tend to adopt similar strategies to each other. Jan Versweyveld's sets are, as here, stark and empty but modern. Of the dust and grime of the story's setting there is barely a sign, other than the conspicuously contrived emptying of a few dustbins and the discharge from an engine overhead of a torrent of sump oil as the two protagonists are making love beneath — working on several levels there, I think.

It is true, though, that van Hove is deeply concerned with mapping characters' inner geography, and that he is tremendously successful in doing so. As Gino, the drifter who fetches up in Joseph and Hanna's diner, falls for her and kills Joseph with her, Jude Law blows away all the reservations I have previously had about his onstage work. Torn between the twin hungers for Hanna and for the road, Law's Gino broods compellingly for virtually the entire 100-minute duration.

Halina Reijn as Hanna alternates acting as a foil for him with providing a stillness against which he can resound. (This is the first production by van Hove's company Toneelgroep Amsterdam to use both British and Dutch actors in an English-language staging.) Robert de Hoog as the mysterious Johnny (corresponding to Visconti's additional character "the Spaniard") provides homoerotic tension, tempting Gino by offering him a detailed reflection of one aspect of himself. Eric Sleichim's sound design is best when discreet, which it usually is, although he scores a raucous point by following one of Hanna's portrayals of herself as a "little puppy" with a snatch of *The Stooges'* "I Wanna Be Your Dog". I'm still something of a van Hove agnostic, but I'm being won round.

Financial Times, Ian Shuttleworth, 26 April 2017