



**Speech by Ingrid van Engelshoven,  
Minister of Education, Culture and Science,  
at the presentation of the 2019 Johannes Vermeer Award to Ivo Van Hove,  
25 September 2019**

*Dear friends,  
guests from home and abroad,  
dear Ivo,*

It was about time.

How many international awards have to grace your mantelpiece before you finally receive the recognition you deserve in the Netherlands?

What would you have done if we'd waited any longer to present you with one of the biggest prizes in Dutch art and culture?

Would even this eloquent Fleming be tempted into, say... the destructive tendencies of, just to pick a name... Howard Roark?

Because let's be honest: after hearing the judges' report, it's almost surprising that we've never heard you scream for recognition, ... like Roark in *The Fountainhead*.

But you're not that kind of person.

A modest Belgian amongst the sober Dutch.

As a wider audience here came to realize this summer – fortunately, I say – thanks to your appearance on *Zomergasten*.

Just a few weeks ago, television viewers were given the pleasure of enjoying three hours of a true man of the theatre composing the most beautiful sentences with playful ease.

Tonight it's my turn. Although I won't even attempt to match you rhetorically. And rest assured, I won't take three hours over it either.

Even though a tribute that extensive wouldn't be out of place.

Last Sunday was impressive, once again. The newest 'Van Hove' transfers you into the tormented life of Freud. As a visitor, you're sent home with the need to examine yourself. Impressive.

After congratulating Iris van Herpen on winning this prize in my first week as a minister, and a year later Janine Jansen..., after fashion and classical music, it now falls to me to honour another powerful art:

theatre. But how do you surprise someone who's always in the director's chair? Inspired by John Cage, what about a shortened version of 4'33"? That didn't seem like such a crazy idea to me.

So take a look around the room. At all the familiar faces, all the long-time friends.

You will probably also see quite a few faces you don't know. Admirers who didn't want to miss this moment.

Now look up. At the sealing of the Ridderzaal.

Not just any old building to have opened its doors for this occasion.

But a set aspiring to a design worthy of Versweyveld...

Let's just pause a moment to take in what's happening here.

And I'll shut my mouth, too, for a moment.

[...]

*Dear friends,*

I am not going to present a spoken CV here. You're not going to hear a list of everything Ivo Van Hove has done for the theatre. You heard that in the judges' report. All I ask is another six minutes or so of your attention to explore what the future promises for our winner. That's what best suits the man who never stands still.

And I think it befits someone who, at the première of one production, starts talking about rehearsals for the next.

What lies ahead of him with this prize in hand?

What meaning will he continue to have – for himself, for other creative artists and for our nation?

But before we investigate these questions together, I first want to turn to someone else:

*Jan.*

No one wins a prize like this on their own.

You are the living proof of that, and Ivo would be the first to agree.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the love which has forged a creative marriage like yours.

The creative strength you have developed together is without precedent.

Since your late teens, you have conquered the world hand in hand.

What began with a few cautious visits to Paris to see how it's done has culminated in times when your productions can be seen simultaneously on three or four different continents, for weeks on end.

That will continue after tonight. And it is precisely that aspect I hope will be maintained in the coming years.

Ground-breaking art that looks beyond borders.

Because culture and art hold up a mirror to our society.

An artist who lets himself be confined by national borders – or by any boundary – always runs the risk of narrowing that mirror.

Culture, and certainly theatre, is one of the ways in which we engage in dialogue with the world around us.

A European who stages a play in New York also represents the Europe of today in dialogue with the United States of President Trump.

Whenever relations between countries and continents change, whenever noise and disruption loom, art, culture and science keep the dialogue open.

But we cannot leave that to individual artists like Ivo alone.

Any artist who is told that he or she spends too much time working abroad deserves our full support.

Because it is precisely there, in the midst of the strange or unknown, that you can find inspiration.

That should never be put at risk.

Ivo, I have absolutely no concern that you will ever limit yourself. You are now far too experienced for that. But one of the roles I envisage for you in the future is that of mentor and role model for young talent. I know that there are already many who look up to you and are learning from you. But let me also offer another option. One of your confidantes has raised a striking possibility. I quote, and you can guess at the reception afterwards who said this:

*“Ivo would also make an excellent lawyer. Because a lawyer starts where the law ends. Just like an artist, he sets standards. As a moral compass for society.”*

A quote like this, I imagine, is perhaps worth as much to you as a whole mantelpiece full of Dutch prizes.

And it describes a role I gladly entrust you with, with love. I hope that your future work will continue to display that same moral compass.

*Dear Ivo,*

We grew up in two villages less than seventeen kilometres apart. But we have walked very different paths. Last year I was given brief taste of the theatre with my role in *Sign of the Times*. In the run-up to tonight, I wondered what would have happened if you had walked my path. What would have happened if Ivo Van Hove were in my shoes. Or, perhaps a little easier constitutionally... those of my Flemish colleague, Sven Gatz?

I can think of three things.

*One:*

I think that the lawyer in you would advocate an amendment to the constitution. One stating that art and culture are non-negotiable. A need as basic as healthcare, towards which we should all contribute.



*Two:*

You would provide us with a guarantee that, under your rule, from birth every child would be picked up from home twice a week for a visit to the theatre.

*And three:*

You would consign anyone who questioned the importance of art to the deepest, darkest dungeon you could find.

Not for too long, though. Just for ten minutes, to let them experience the greyness of a world without culture.

And if I were living in Flanders, you would have had my vote.

*Dear Ivo,*

We now come to the moment you so deserve, and have had to wait so long for...

**Ivo Van Hove, I congratulate you wholeheartedly on receiving the 2019 Johannes Vermeer Award.**