

The Fountainhead Play: Taking a Stand on Ideas

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(Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Academy of Music's website.)

In late 2017, globally esteemed Belgian director Ivo van Hove brought his staged adaptation of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* to New York City. I enjoyed this four-hour, Dutch-spoken, English-surtitled play enough to attend two of its five performances.¹

Van Hove and his company, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, previously performed versions of Shakespeare, Schiller, and Ibsen, demonstrating their respect for the classics. Adapting Rand's idea-driven novel is an ambitious feat for any director, and van Hove's effort is valiant.

Let's take a step back and see how *The New York Times* reviewer Lorine Pruette, seventy-five years ago, described *The*

¹ A two-minute trailer for the 2014 production of *The Fountainhead* in Amsterdam is available online at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeqgmAu2iO0>.

Fountainhead and its author: “[A] writer of great power. She has a subtle and ingenious mind and the capacity of writing brilliantly, beautifully, bitterly. . . . Good novels of ideas are rare at any time. This is the only novel of ideas written by an American woman that I can recall.”²

Van Hove understands this emphasis on ideas and names two of the four acts accordingly: Act I is called “The Idea Factory” and Act IV is called “The War of Ideas.” These two acts bookend the storyline’s clash between individualism and collectivism. In the play, as in the novel, innovative architect Howard Roark (Ramsey Nasr) is a first-handed individualist, a man of self-sufficient ego who does his work his way. His integrity is challenged by the collectivists all around him.

The stylized theatrical setting has a minimalist feel. It blends antiquated objects (typewriter, rotary phone, drafting table) with modern theatrical audio-visual devices, such as large projector screens (as in the photo above), which give the audience a more intimate view of the action. As the house lights go down, the play begins with Roark striding to his drafting table, strategically placed close to the audience. We see him pick up a paperback copy of *The Fountainhead* and read aloud: “He stood naked at the edge of a cliff.” Roark explains how the materials of the earth (stones, trees, lakes, etc.) are here for him to reshape into buildings according to his own vision.

A few scenes later, we visually experience how Roark reshapes these materials: a treat that the novel, with all its descriptive power, cannot provide. The projection system magnifies the structure on the side of the cliff where we see the building coming to life (see photo above). We also hear the scratching of pencil on paper; the calming sounds of the marimba modulate Roark’s intense focus, conveying his expert control of the creative process. As he sketches the Heller House, he states that a building’s form must follow its function.

Roark immediately faces adversity when his college-friend-turned-colleague Peter Keating (Aus Greidanus, Jr.) and their boss, prestigious architect Guy Francon (Hugo Koolschijn), “improve” this sketch by giving it a more conventional look. Rather than allow his building design to be stripped of its unity and symmetry, Roark angrily rips up the altered drawing and throws it on the floor while yelling at Keating. This was disappointing to watch, as Rand’s Roark would never have such an emotional outburst.

² Lorine Pruette, “Battle Against Ideas: Review of *The Fountainhead*,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1943.

Bart Slegers convincingly portrays Roark's main adversary: Ellsworth Toohey. The newspaper columnist and art critic uses his public prominence to attack the ideas that drive Roark. While promoting Keating's career, he preaches that the public good is superior to private ambition and the ego is evil. He also tells his niece, Catherine Halsey (Helene Devos)—who is engaged to Keating—that she should give up her selfish goal of attending college. The ultimate statement of Toohey's ideas is portrayed with the release of his book *Sermons in Stone*, of which we see an excerpt projected on a large screen. It concludes with the collectivist premise: "Vox Populi, Vox Dei" ("The voice of the people is the voice of God.") (Later, we'll see how this premise has deadly consequences for those in the play who accept it.)

Act II ("Labor and Love") opens with Roark hammering away at a quarry, since he cannot find architectural work at present. When the beautiful newspaperwoman and daughter of Guy Francon, Dominique (Halina Reijn), meets him, she does not know that he is capable of building beautiful skyscrapers, but their attraction is automatic. As in the novel, violent sex scenes dramatize the conflict between these strong individualist souls. We see Roark overpower Dominique, who initially resists and then submits, claiming to enjoy what she calls "rape." The glaring overhead projection of their nude bodies entwined on stage lacks intimacy and romance.

Despite various impediments placed before him, on stage we see Roark constantly working or thinking. He either sketches at his drafting table or, when nobody will give him a commission, reads publications about the building trade. Periodically, he will pick up a copy of *The Fountainhead* and leaf through it. We sometimes see him take a finished sketch and carefully, proudly place it on a side wall where the audience can gaze at it.

When Act III ("Valhalla") begins, we see newspaper magnate Gail Wynand (Hans Kesting) holding a gun to his head, wondering whether he should pull the trigger. In a soliloquy, he describes how he rose from the slums of Hell's Kitchen, deciding that his newspaper, *The Banner*, was the way to amass money, influence, and power. Appealing to the lowest common denominator, he states that the public wanted crime, scandal, and sentiment, so he provided it. We learn that he channeled his enormous energy and drive to the purpose of ruling others, so that he would no longer be pushed around in a "dog-eat-dog" world. Wynand lowers the gun, concluding that today will not be the day he dies.

We see that when Toohey arranges for Wynand to meet Dominique (who chose to leave Roark because she feared the culture would destroy him), the tycoon immediately falls in love with her. Van Hove captures the affinity between Wynand and Dominique through their natural comfort on stage. Their words speak of a reverence for the best in man, although neither thinks that integrity and joy are possible. When Dominique tells him of her love for skyscrapers, Wynand replies, "I would trade the best sunset for one glimpse of the skyline of New York. What other religion do we need?" The entire back wall (40-by-15-foot screen projection) of the stage shows us the view of that skyline as seen from Wynand's fifty-seventh floor penthouse. Van Hove gives perceptive audience members the chance to grasp that it is the soul of first-handers like Howard Roark who are capable of building those skyscrapers they admire so much.

Similar to the novel, in Act IV Keating asks Roark to design a government housing project called Cortlandt Homes. We had seen Roark do Keating's designs for him earlier, but this time Roark agrees only on the condition that it be built exactly as he designs it. Keating agrees.

Here, van Hove's staging reaches its apex as he seamlessly compresses several scenes. For example, at one point, Roark sits at his drafting table and designs the Cortlandt Homes housing project. He spends fifteen minutes focused on drawing, the symmetrical buildings taking shape on the overhead screen. While Roark is lost in his creative process, Toohey stands behind him and voices words from his column, stating that man must live for others and that freedom and compulsion are compatible.

We then see the effects of Toohey's philosophy play out as we witness the complete demise of Keating and Catherine. After years of counseling by Toohey, Keating looks beaten, bloated, and spiritually empty. His career has plummeted since Toohey stopped promoting him. Catherine has replaced her youthful aspirations with a cynical demeanor as a social worker. In a final scene between the formerly engaged couple, she tells the heartbroken failure, Keating, that love is immature and selfish. We actually feel sorry for Keating here, as he has lost the only thing he ever truly wanted.

By the time Wynand meets Roark, we anticipate how the tycoon will try to break the man of integrity. Once again, van Hove uses the projector screen to great effect, as Wynand asks Roark to redesign his original drawing of Wynand's home in a Rococo style. When we see Roark willingly oblige, Wynand laughs at how

preposterous it looks. On stage the two characters bond well; it is the only time we see Roark smile.

That smile quickly vanishes when Roark returns from a trip with Wynand. He sees that the early-stage construction of Cortlandt Homes has been stripped of its principled unity of form. It has been turned into a hodgepodge of styles by the collective souls of the Toohey-influenced architects.

The war of ideas blasts off when Roark dynamites Cortlandt Homes. He first asks Dominique to help him by serving as a decoy so that nobody on site is injured. They both know that those disfigured buildings are an insult to Roark's integrity; he cannot allow them to be built as such, so he must take action. As Dominique lies flat we see the full backdrop screen of the unfinished Cortlandt structure (see photo below). The loud explosion is timed with her screaming Roark's name. The seats shake as the building implodes before our eyes. The winds from the blast scatter papers all over the stage.



(Photo courtesy of Brooklyn Academy of Music's website.)

In the wake of the destruction, we learn that Wynand thinks that he can once again shape public opinion, this time for a cause he believes in. Since a man like Roark exists, Wynand now thinks that individualism can win in the culture. He attempts to make this happen through the force of his printing press. Van Hove's mechanical representation of Wynand is effectively achieved by means of a huge

printing press, which is slowly and loudly marched out onto the stage. Its rumble gives the rhythmic pulse of the heartbeat of ideas. But for too long it has been used only for supporting conventional views. When Wynand's policy was reversed to plug Roark as a great architect of integrity, the machine churned out thousands of papers that came back unread.

Wynand bitterly realizes that he cannot force people to think his way. When a collectivist publication (which Toohey had manipulated for years) cannot effectively be used to defend a man like Roark, Wynand gives up on his late-blooming bid for integrity. Grasping that his life's work and his quest for power by controlling public opinion has been in vain, he then pulls the trigger of the gun which he held to his head one act earlier.

This scene differs from the novel, in which Wynand commits metaphorical suicide by closing the *Banner* and cutting off all ties of friendship with Roark, even though he hires him to build his greatest skyscraper, the Wynand Building. This is a reasonable adaptation change to make. It is visually difficult to depict a metaphorical suicide, especially when the audience has already seen the character hold a gun to his own head.³

Toohey's lust for power then reaches its height. We have seen him destroy Keating, Catherine, and Wynand. His final test is Roark. Van Hove chose to dramatize the final showdown between these antagonists in two closing speeches, rather than in a courtroom trial as the novel does. The play, unlike the novel, thus leaves it up to the audience to decide who is right.

Toohey stands center stage, the gun still smoking from Wynand's suicide at the back of the stage. In soliloquy form, he tells the audience that Roark is a builder who became a destroyer and an arrogant egoist who wished to have his own way at any price. He concludes that society has the right to rid itself of him. Toohey implies that "we" should condemn—perhaps, to death—anyone who refuses to live for others.

It is then Roark's turn to address the audience. He slowly walks from one side of the stage to the other in utter silence, the sound of his shoes ringing out. When he begins to speak, it is with conviction about men like him, innovators who dared to do what others did not.

³ Wynand also kills himself in the movie version of *The Fountainhead*, directed by King Vidor (Warner Bros. 1949). Although Rand wrote the film's screenplay adaptation and initially approved of its production, I enjoyed van Hove's play much more than Vidor's film, which I could hardly watch.

Every set of eyes in the theater is on him. He explains how egoistic and individualistic ideas led to the birth of America: “This country was based on a man’s right to the pursuit of happiness. His own happiness. . . . I came here to say that I do not recognize anyone’s right to one minute of my life.” Showing van Hove’s insufficient understanding of Roark, at one point in this speech he has the protagonist jarringly mention how unfair certain taxes are. Upon finishing his speech, he exits through a back door of the stage. The audience is challenged to ponder the fundamental alternative of egoism/individualism versus altruism/collectivism.

The biggest flaw in the play is that Roark lacks the joy and benevolence portrayed in the novel. He has fits of anger and tells Keating to shut up. This could never happen in the novel not only because it in fact doesn’t, but because such an outburst doesn’t fit with the calm, collected Howard Roark who Rand created.⁴ If the director didn’t blatantly ignore Rand’s vision for Roark, he also did not fully achieve it. It is easier to portray a villain (Toohey), a giant with mixed premises (Wynand), and a conformist (Keating), than it is to embody an ideal man.

However, it is important that Ayn Rand’s masterpiece has been brought to the stage by an acclaimed director, even if the heroism and value-driven romanticism of her art are not completely realized there. A sharp contrast exists between this kind of play and most of today’s theater. The latter is too often farcical, cynical, absurd, naturalist, or even nihilistic.

Though less than ideal, the play is still quite enjoyable, and it serves a wider and important goal. When an esteemed theater group travels the world performing a stage adaptation of a novel, they can’t help but act as a billboard for that novel. In this case, it’s a novel full of life-changing, potentially earthshaking ideas, and it’s on sale in the lobbies of impressive theaters around the world. This is more than

⁴ For further (and somewhat different) analysis of the play, especially on this flaw, see Carrie-Ann Biondi, “*The Fountainhead* Takes the Stage: Helping or Hindering Heroism?” *The Savvy Street*, December 13, 2017, accessed online at: <http://www.thesavvystreet.com/the-fountainhead-takes-the-stage-helping-or-hindering-heroism/>. See also insightful commentaries on the play by Shoshana Milgram and Gregory Salmieri, accessed online at: <https://ari.aynrand.org/blog/2017/12/05/watch-now-ayn-rand-experts-discuss-ivo-van-hove-staging-of-the-fountainhead> (scroll down the page for an embedded link to the archived Facebook recording of this panel discussion, moderated by Ann Ciccolella).

could be said prior to van Hove's efforts. I hope that the play returns soon to the United States, so that the ideas of this American classic can reach an even wider audience. That would be a great way to celebrate *The Fountainhead's* seventy-fifth anniversary.

