

angels who came to earth now come to the stage

By Donna Kornhaber and David Kornhaber

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When the German film director Wim Wenders heard from his publishing agent that an international group of theater artists wanted to adapt his 1987 classic, “Wings of Desire,” for the stage, he didn’t object but he didn’t participate. “I know the worst thing you can do as the original author is to get involved,” he said.

And so the challenge was left to the American Repertory Theater, based here, and Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the largest repertory company in the Netherlands.

“There are many films that you can adapt to the stage,” said André Joosten, the set and lighting designer for the production, “and there is one film that you cannot adapt. And that film is ‘Wings of Desire.’ ”

Known for its sweeping aerial shots of Berlin and innovative camera work, the film has achieved wide acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. It tells the story of an angel in war-ravaged Berlin who renounces eternal life to pursue a relationship with a lonely trapeze artist with whom he has fallen in love. It won Mr. Wenders the best director award at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival and was named one of the 100 best films of all time by Time magazine in 2005. (It was remade in 1998 as “City of Angels,” a much less memorable version with Nicolas Cage and Meg Ryan that takes place in Los Angeles.)

The idea for the new production came from Ola Mafaalani, who is among the leading young directors of the Dutch theatrical avant-garde. For years Ms. Mafaalani, who was born in Syria and studied in Germany before settling in the Netherlands, had been adding angels to her revisionist productions of Shakespeare. (A 2001 production of “Macbeth” featured an angel who escorted victims off the stage, and in a 2002 production of “Romeo and Juliet” Ms. Mafaalani added to the cast a mute angel who inadvertently assists in the deaths of the lovers.)

When Robert Woodruff, the artistic director of the American Repertory Theater, approached Ms. Mafaalani about developing her first American production, she suggested an adaptation of “Wings of Desire.” She had seen the film as a student

and regarded it as the origin of her fascination with angels. “It had a very profound effect on her,” said Gideon Lester, the associate artistic director of the American Repertory Theater. “If she was ever going to stop using angels, she had to exorcise them by going back to the source.”

Ms. Mafaalani was adamant that the piece be developed in association with Toneelgroep Amsterdam, widely considered the foremost theater company in the Netherlands, where she has been a permanent guest director since 2001. “I felt that it was very important to have two realities on the stage,” she explained by telephone. “Two languages, two different histories. This is what the play is about.”

Ivo van Hove, the artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, knew the co-production would present logistic difficulties, from housing actors to transporting sets. But he had faith in this up-and-coming director. “I knew her work back when she was making mainly small productions,” he said in a telephone interview from Amsterdam. “It was always clear to me that her theatrical vision would fit perfectly in the bigger theaters.”

Mr. Wenders, who co-wrote the script of the film, had faith too. “Looking at the credits of the people behind that theater production, I saw no reason to deny their demand,” he said about giving his permission.

After a year and a half of work the play had its premiere at Toneelgroep Amsterdam on Oct. 8; it will transfer to the American Repertory Theater for a three-week run beginning Saturday.

The formidable task of adapting the script went to Mr. Lester and the Dutch playwright Ko van den Bosch, who is also Ms. Mafaalani’s husband. “We had one version where we translated every single camera shot,” Mr. Lester recalled. “So we ended up with this enormous bilingual bible of a text that was about 400 pages long.”

It soon became clear that the key to the adaptation would be to “wrestle it away from the source,” Mr. Woodruff said.

Mr. Lester added: “If Wenders’s film is about film, then this production is about theater And that’s the biggest adaptation that’s taken place.”

From a design standpoint, that meant simplicity. “The theater is very bare,” Mr. Joosten said. “You can see the whole stage house as it is.” A canteen where the characters get refreshments and giant pillars of sand that resemble hourglasses

would be the only set pieces. To capture the look of Mr. Wenders's black-and-white film stock Mr. Joosten decided on powerful halogen lamps that "eliminate all colors," he said.

There still remained the question of how to translate the action of the film onto the stage. On screen the angels coexist with humans who cannot see them: they "observe us and they write details — for example, a passer-by who in the rain folded her umbrella and let herself be drenched," Ms. Mafaalani said. To make these interactions believable, she said, she relied on an intense regimen of improvisation to find the right balance of the human and divine.

"We didn't really know until three days before opening night how it was going to live on the stage," Mr. Lester said. "Ola doesn't really rehearse. She has the actors move through a series of structured and unstructured investigations. And she throws enormous changes at them every day."

The American actress Mam Smith, an experienced aerialist who plays Marion, the trapeze artist, said: "I've never done improvisation on such a massive scale. It was a deconstruction as well as an adaptation."

Ms. Smith is one of four Americans in the nine-member cast performing in Amsterdam. The Cambridge cast will be slightly different. Bernard White, who played the angel Cassiel in the Amsterdam production, is replacing the Dutch actor Fedja van Huet as the lead angel, Daniel. The thinking is that an American actor in the lead role will better connect with American audiences.

"One of the early things Ola said was that the angels should be more human than humans," Mr. White said. Ms. Mafaalani expanded on that: "They want to be downstairs. They want to feel. They want to know what love is. They want to have baby teeth."

The heart of the theatrical transformation involved demystifying the angels. "Wenders uses cinematography to show us the world from an angel's perspective," Mr. Lester said. "It's very different to have a 6-foot-2, 200-pound actor on the stage and have another cast member say, 'I can't see you, but I know you're there.' You're asking the audience to buy into an impossible fiction. When you can get that right, it's really satisfying."

Ms. Mafaalani's angels do not have wings. To find a visual vocabulary for this secular notion, Regine Standfuss, the costume designer, turned to the men's collection of the designer Gianni Versace. "What do angels look like?" she said. "They

look like people in black suits.”

Ms. Mafaalani said: “There is no God in this play. It’s not religious, but it is very spiritual.”

So far audiences have been receptive. “We received eight curtain calls last night,” Mr. Woodruff said about a performance in Amsterdam at the end of October.

And the reviews have been favorable. A critic for De Groene Amsterdammer, a newsmagazine, wrote that the play “is a poetic and sentimental gift,” while the reviewer for the news service Geassocieerde Pers Diensten wrote that “ ‘Wings of Desire’ proves its legitimacy as a unique theater production.”

Ms. Mafaalani, whose work has yet to appear in the United States, is confident Americans will be receptive: “In these times all over the world people are happy to see angels.”