

Theatre

Antonioni Project

Barbican

★★★★☆

Ponderous pretension or existential masterwork: critical opinion is divided on Michelangelo Antonioni's early Sixties trilogy, *L'Avventura*, *La Notte* and *L'Eclisse*. Most agree, though, that the films are starkly beautiful. So it seems perverse that Ivo van Hove, directing a theatrical interpretation for the Dutch company Toneelgroep Amsterdam, offers a production largely about as lovely and enthralling as a multistorey car park.

A bank of computers separates the audience from the stage, which is cluttered with cables, cameras and screens. Video imagery of bland, commercial cityscapes supplies backdrops to actors whose English-surtitled performances we watch simultaneously on stage and screen. Their tales of unhappy affairs, emotional isolation and ennui unravel and intersect. It all looks as banal as a badly made TV soap.

Presumably the aesthetic is inspired by the closing sequence in *L'Eclisse*, a protracted evocation of sterile anonymity in a modern Roman suburb.

The battery of high-tech equipment ramps up the sense of alienation that is among Antonioni's central motifs. But the language of the films is at least as much visual as verbal, and van Hove and his adapter/dramaturge Bart van den Eynde fail to find a theatrical equivalent. There's scarcely a suggestion of the jagged Sicilian rocks or restless seascape, the crumbling cathedral or ominous distant Mount Etna of *L'Avventura*. And even when, after an interminable scene change, an aperture opens in a wall revealing a live jazz band and a blue platform is constructed to suggest a moonlit swimming pool, there's little of the brittle glamour of the cinematic source.

The kaleidoscope of episodic scenes means the characters are ill-defined, and the acting, magnified mercilessly onscreen, frequently rings false. To hammer home the political resonances — disconnected lives, half-lived in a world of violence and rampant consumerism — van Hove bludgeons us, towards the end, with images of slums and oil spills, tanks, bombs and floods: a lazily emotive barrage of emblems of modern evils. It's horribly clumsy. And over all, it's hard to see how this production, by merely rendering Antonioni's vision more ordinary, lends it any meaningful new dimension.

Sam Marlowe

Box office: 0845 1207550, to Feb 5

