

THEATER



Photographs by JORIS VAN BENNEKOM

DUTCH STUDENTS (on a virtual beach) witness the carpet-bombing of Rotterdam in “Soldier of Orange,” or “Soldaat van Oranje” as it’s known in the Netherlands.



A SPEEDBOAT of friends capsizes as it attempts to escape from Nazi-occupied Holland on a set that features 80,000 gallons of water, all in a converted hangar.

An immersive experience

‘Soldier of Orange,’ in its sixth straight year of sellouts, is the ‘Hamilton’ of the Netherlands.

BY LIESL BRADNER

In a converted hangar at the former Valkenburg Naval Air Base in Katwijk, about 40 minutes southwest of Amsterdam, 1,100 theatergoers sit on a circular platform about 100 feet in diameter.

As the show begins, the entire seat platform starts to rotate, stopping in front of one of 10 stationary stages along a 180-degree panorama. A large, synchronized panel slides open to reveal a handsome Dutch college student being chased by Nazis across a 196-foot-wide beach with real sand and pouring rain. Music is pounding. Planes fly over in an animated sky as machine guns blast away at our hero. He dives into the 80,000 gallons of water on set and escapes into the North Sea.

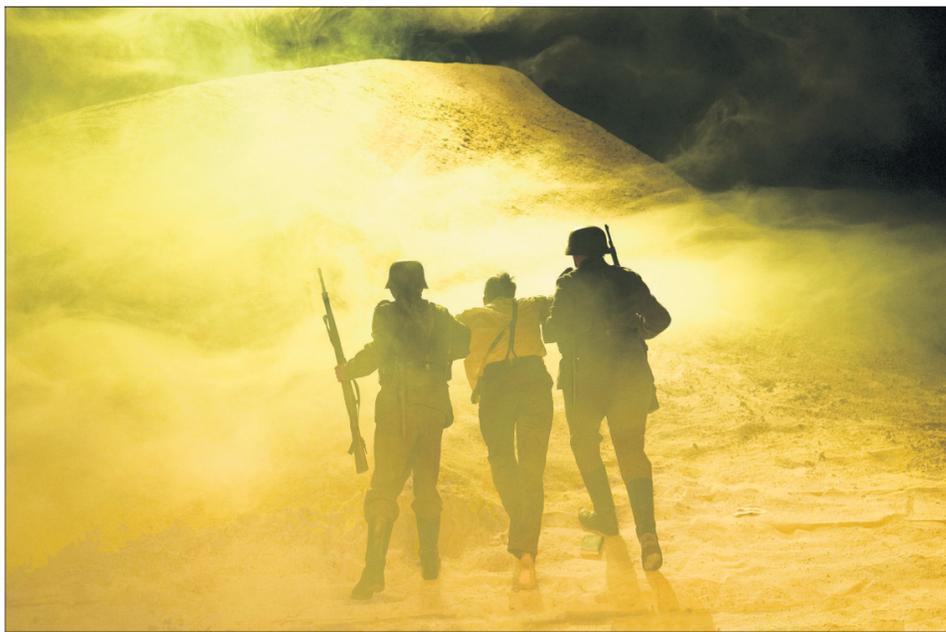
This is “Soldaat van Oranje” (“Soldier of Orange”), which is celebrating its sixth straight year of sellout shows. The production marked its 2,000th performance on Nov. 19 and has proved to be such an effective immersive-theater experience, its creators said, some patrons have returned a dozen times.

One of the surprises with this, the most successful show in Dutch history, is that key members of the creative team are not from the Netherlands but rather Los Angeles. Lyricist Pamela Phillips-Oland and composer Tom Harriman, both Angelenos, were recruited to write the music based on the true-life story of Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema.

A member of the Dutch resistance and air force fighter during World War II, Hazelhoff, as he was known, and friends are forced to make life-and-death decisions during the German occupation of their country in “Soldier of Orange.” The story is told through Oland and Harriman’s music and choreography by Los Angeles native Sarah Miles de Levita.

“The idea was to make it an international show,” said Harriman, who had collaborated with Oland on another Dutch project, that one about Vincent Van Gogh. Together they mined Hazelhoff’s memoirs for inspiration.

“We wanted it to be timeless,”



A JEWISH STUDENT is dragged to a firing squad in a scene from the mega-scale Dutch musical.



THE HERO and one of his fraternity brothers speed across the country to sign up soldiers.

said Oland, who previously worked with Frank Sinatra as his lyricist on the songs “Monday Morning Quarterback” and “Barbara.” Dutch actors recorded several songs in Harriman’s Studio City studio.

The immersive staging—something of the inverse of “Les Misérables,” in which a stationary au-

dience watches action on a rotating stage—includes hanger doors that dramatically open to reveal an authentic DC3 Dakota aircraft taxiing inside. The exiled Queen Wilhelmina steps out to a cheering, liberated Netherlands.

The audience is rotated toward stages with other scenes: a ballroom, the Queen’s palace, colossal

sand dunes, a German interrogation cell. Six projectors display vintage newsreel footage and dogfight sequences on four large cinema screens that move simultaneously with the audience.

“It was the most exciting musical in my life,” said American theater producer Pat Addiss, who attended the six-year anniversary in

October.

This new, purpose-built theater system, called SceneAround, was created by Tony Award-winning Dutch producer Robin de Levita, choreographer Sarah’s husband.

“We had been looking around for a theater space that was connected to the war and found this empty antique airplane hanger,” producer Fred Boot said. It was Robin de Levita who then said, “Why don’t we put the audience in the middle and build the scenery around it?”

Boot had been dreaming of staging a musical based on the Dutch war hero since 1993. Years later, he finally met Hazelhoff, who had immigrated to America in 1952 and was living in Hawaii. Although a film adaptation had been made of his wartime experience—the 1977 Oscar-nominated “Soldier of Orange,” directed by Paul Verhoeven and starring Rutger Hauer—Hazelhoff gave Boot his blessing.

“Soldier of Orange” has received the Dutch equivalent of the Tony for best musical, and the cast album reached No. 7 on the Dutch pop charts.

“Every major Dutch actress of a certain age has played the Queen,” Oland said of the coveted role.

While producers search for a location near London to stage the musical, the question remains: Would the British—or Americans—embrace “Soldier of Orange” with the same enthusiasm as the Dutch? And is this cutting-edge theater experience the way of the future?

“It’s not affordable here,” Addiss said. “Not all shows are meant to be spectacular or over the top.”

Amerborgh International, the company that financed the “Soldier of Orange” project in 2007, recouped its initial \$10-million-plus production costs in less than a year. “It has proven to be a good economic model by being cheaper than building a whole new conventional theater, which can cost anywhere from \$42 to \$84 million” Boot said. “By using an existing building and adjusting it to the concept of SceneAround, we were able to produce the show relatively cheaply.”

Boot is already working on his next project, which may be closer to the heart and history of Americans: a musical based on author Russell Shorto’s 2005 book, “The Island at the Center of the World,” about the early Dutch settlement of Manhattan in 1625.

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