

REVIEWS

THE NOSE, THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, LONDON, NOVEMBER 2016

Shostakovich wrote very few works for the theatre. It isn't because he didn't like it. On the contrary, he happily collaborated with others and clearly enjoyed the joint nature of the enterprise. Rather, it was the reception of his most famous work for the theatre, the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* (1934) that dulled his enthusiasm. It wasn't that it was a failure (it was not, and continues to show up in enterprising repertoires to this day, sometimes in a revised version known as *Katerina Izmailova* that dates from 1962). More lethal to his production for the theatre was the belated publication of a deadly review of it, entitled *Muddle, Not Music*. This appeared in the pages of Pravda two years after the first performance. Popularly ascribed to Stalin, it was this that killed off this line of Shostakovich's creative outputs. Accused of that most accursed vice of Soviet modernism, 'formalism', this might have been proven more than just the death knell of a promising composer's career had he not behaved rather adroitly in relation to the regime afterwards. But as far as the theatre was concerned, that was that, with just a few early theatre pieces and a ballet score remaining behind.

One of these, the precocious adaptation of the Gogol short story 'The Nose', has been revived for the Royal Opera. Written in 1930, when Shostakovich was only 21 and entranced by the absurdity and satirical edge of Gogol's original, it is, frankly, a mess. The only justification for its appearances in the modern repertoire is Shostakovich's subsequent career, which in itself is configured by inconsistency. 'The Nose' is, however, an opportunity to glimpse the stylistic influences of the early Soviet theatre scene, before Socialist Realism shifted the productions of the 1930s back to the Stanislavsky-inspired traditions of the Moscow Art Theatre.

The first difficulty of the score is that this isn't really an opera. Devised with the brilliant but doomed Meyerhold's influence (Shostakovich was sharing his flat at the time), this is more a music theatre piece, experimental in structure, with large numbers of speaking parts as well as sung sections. But

a music theatre piece suggests something musically less adventurous, and is certainly less impressive in attracting the interest of a major opera house. This is important given the vast forces required to produce it, and certainly the Royal Opera production extemporises and adds to their demands in a number of ways. Indeed, there are times in Barrie Kosky's production where the director seems desperate to distract our attention from the shortcomings of the score by beguiling us with stage business that has little right to be there based on the score alone.

Essentially, this is the story of Kovalov, a low-level government official, whose nose turns up in the flat of his barber. Once he discovers his nose is missing, Kovalov embarks on a journey to reunite himself with it. This takes in encounters with the police, with the local newspaper and an escapade at a railway station, as the Nose, by now human size and possessing a higher rank than its former owner, seeks to escape St Petersburg for somewhere quieter. The return of his nose isn't quite the end of it, given that it simply won't reattach, until one morning Kovalov awakens with his nose happily intact. As one of the performers says to us directly towards the end, that this isn't much of a story is bad enough, but to base an opera around it is simply absurd.

This is, of course, the point. The danger of the libretto (contributed in part by the writer Evgeny Zamyatin of *We* fame) is in bringing into focus the absurdity of the situation, but especially of the official responses to it. These are themselves absurd and incompetent given how far the plot forces them outside their everyday experience and away from their rule books and conventions. Whilst not particularly dangerous as a set of ideas when first devised in the late 1920's, or even by the time of the first production in 1930 (though this wasn't universally applauded at the time by Soviet musicians seeking to argue for a proletarian style of music), this sort of theme and its presentation would be nothing short of perilous by the middle of the decade. Combined with an eclectic score that vacillates between traditional instruments like the balalaika and a full orchestra, and the ROH's production includes a brass section nestling in the stalls balcony to give punctuation to the sound, the energy of the work is impressive even when the music is not. It is worth noting that after its original short run, it would not be performed again in the Soviet Union for 40 years.

One of the features of this production at the ROH is the amount of expansion the production team have allowed themselves from Shostakovich's original plans. The 90-minute score expands to 120 in the hands of Kosky, in particular lengthened by his insertion of a troupe of tap-dancing noses. This is fine, and in some ways fits the conception of the original: there are certainly scenes in the libretto that don't appear in the Gogol's story. But for this to truly work without an interval, surely some cuts ought to have been made to some of the more decorative scenes that do nothing to push on the narrative. This means the production often has a mission to distract us from its shortcomings, using colour and movement to overcome the lack of depth in the scenario. The most popular components of this production seem to be exactly these interpolations, which rather defeats the purpose of seeing this as a Soviet-era curio.

Martin Winkler's Kovalov is the great central performance in this. With a face that shifts easily between outrage, arrogance and self-pity, the production is always the lesser when he is not on the stage. The scene where he seeks to untangle himself from the marriage demands of the ugly daughter of a bombastic local widow, and is entirely misunderstood in the process, is a highlight.

The demand of a director that their production take precedence over the score is not exactly uncommon in operatic history. That the purists insist that the music be allowed to take pride of place is another commonplace. *The Nose* presents a conundrum that, like the dilemma of the characters, isn't easily solved: the score isn't up to a direct listening (even Shostakovich didn't think so), but the production is so distracting that the essence of our interest is lost in the blur.

**THE RED SHOES, MATTHEW BOURNE, SADLERS WELLS THEATRE,
LONDON, NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016**

Powell & Pressberger's film *The Red Shoes* (1948) has stuck out, indeed rather mocked, the dance world since it was released in 1948. Much like the life of Diaghilev, the apparent model for the impressively instinctive artistic acumen of Boris Lermantov, it has chided the ballet world for generations in its inability to be both artistic and popular at the same time as telling a savage story about ambition and love. It remains the best dance film ever made, and its elements have been repeated, without similar success, in any number of subsequent films (See *White Nights* (1985), or *The Turning Point* (1977) as other less successful examples). Essentially a reworking of the story of the Ballets Russes, the brilliant Russian impresario Boris Lermantov corrals around him figures from music, design and ballet to create sensational experiences for audiences. Lermantov's judgement, like Diaghilev's, is only questionable when it comes to one person. In Diaghilev's case, it was his lover, Nijinsky, whom he summarily sacked when he discovered he had swiftly married in South America. In *The Red Shoes*, Lermantov has a similar fit of rage when he sees his star ballerina, Victoria Page, take up with the composer he discovered and brought to prominence, Julian Kraster. Vicky Page, played in the original film by the impossibly beautiful Moira Shearer, has contravened the great law of existence in the Lermantov circle: nothing is more important than dance, not even love unless it is the love of dance. By falling in love with Julian and leaving Lermantov for him, she has violated a strictly enforced taboo. She must go.

The charm of the film, and the temptation it holds for any further treatment of it, is the interweaving into the narrative of the dance world itself. The highlight of this is the full performance of a new one-act ballet, *The Red Shoes*, composed by Julian with choreography apparently by Grisha Ljubov, though the real creators were Brian Easdale and Robert Helpmann, respectively. Helpmann, for his part, plays Shearer's onstage partner, Ivan Boleslawsky, exploiting his intense eyes to mitigate a limited technique. Ludmillia Borisonova makes a tremendous theatrical turn as the company's prima ballerina (and one, apparently, not prone to fits of jealousy), and their troupe is fleshed out by a crew of flamboyant and extravagant dancers, who pitch up for class and rehearsals in all sorts of garish stuff, brimming with *joi de vivre*. It defined, and probably explained, life in the theatre for non-theatricals, overflowing as it is with caricatures. Whilst it remains the best

dance film ever made, and probably the best British film made between the war and the 1960s, both the physical limitations of much of the dancing and the characteristic slowness of Powell and Pressburger's storytelling, make this a difficult assignment for watching these days. Shearer's performance remains astounding for its time, but its time was, after all, nearly 70 years ago.

Bearing all this in mind, it is unsurprising that a choreographer like Matthew Bourne wouldn't one day make an attempt at it, noting a few others in the distant past have tried to bring it to a new audience, including a disastrous musical version that had a handful of performances. The reservations about his handling of the material would surely not be a lack of affection for the subject matter, but a weakness for camp, rendering the ballerina's existential crisis into a study of mid-twentieth century affectation, and drowning the substance in overblown, nostalgic character studies. This must have been tempting given the point that might be made about this: homosexuality was still illegal when *The Red Shoes* was first made, and the lifestyles of the participants were certainly a long way from the conventional, much further away than their counterparts in the modern era might be. Noting Bourne as a limited maker of movement and a stronger creator of character, this is was not out of the question. There are problems with this production, but at no point does the campy eclipse the drama, and that is saying something noting the volume of it.

Bourne's *Red Shoes* retains the elements and styling of the original: we are dealing with a post-war community of conspicuous flamboyance that must have been a welcome contrast to the still-rationed, still-warfooted Europe of 1948. A flame-haired aspirant to a place in the Ballet Lermantov is shown off by her aunt in a reception after a performance, but not before running into the charming, if difficult, Lermantov. Her reward is ultimately a place in the company, and eventually a ballet is commissioned as a vehicle for her gifts. Composed by the young assistant conductor, it leads to love between them, and finishes with the impossible choice Vicky cannot make: to love the dance or to love a man, but not both. Nicole Kabera provides the diva-esque laughs as Irina Boronskaya early on, and manages a few bars of *Les Sylphides* into the bargain, but the real star of the storytelling is the proscenium arch that rotates and angles to give us glimpses into the audience and into the backstage dramas playing out amongst the cast. This device, cleverly exploited all through the performance, does a similar job to the camera in framing our attention on what it needs us to see. It shows us the company performing from behind, and then what the audience is actually seeing. The ballet within the ballet, *The Red Shoes*, includes more than a slight homage to Helpmann's original choreography, but surprisingly (given the Oscar-winning score of the original), not the music. What it does do is give full reign to the central performance by Cordelia Braithwaite, whose desperation to get the red shoes off finishes only with her death. But this is just the performance, as it were. So, at the end of the first act, once Lermantov knows he has created a great ballet and a great star, he sees from the wings the backstage kiss that will seal Vicky's fate, the moment of forbidden love wrought from long rehearsals and a shared creative experience. In a masterful (and surprisingly rare) moment of theatricality in this production, he turns with the proscenium to suggest they are the same sides of a coin, rather than a binary divide.

In a second act that shows as much adoration of the original material as the first, we are treated to the gradual breaking down of Lermantov's plans and the incipient unhappiness of the young couple once deprived of their glamorous environs. The contrast between the bohemian theatricals and the dullness

of domestic life again pits the ballet world against the rest of it, and the price to be paid for personal decisions. Once Vicky rejoins the troupe, and her husband interrupts the preparations for the performance with his own unwanted appearance, Victoria can no longer reconcile the two worlds, coming to grief, as in the original, under the wheels of a train steaming through Monte Carlo station. It is a grandly theatrical finale to a restrained work that does very well in getting to the heart of a problem about being different, and the gulf of ignorance that exists between our ambitions and their costs. Vicky could surely not know the destination when twirling for the amusement of company, nor what might be drawn from her in the process. To this end, Bourne tells the story of every dancer: none of them ever knew what it would cost or demand, and this alone makes it more than simply derivative of the original. Bourne has something to say about this, and whilst sometimes this is buried in tiny, detailed references to the original (leaving those who do know it well out in the cold), or the quality of some of the choreography (in typical Bourne style, more Fosse than anything else), he is a storyteller above all. In selecting *The Red Shoes*, he understands that this is the dance story beyond all others, and he has done it proud.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jan/22/philip-glass-80-interview-observer-new-review>.

**LES ENFANTS TERRIBLES, A DANCE/OPERA BY PHILIP GLASS,
DIRECTION AND CHOREOGRAPHY BY JAVIER DE FRUTOS, THE
BARBICAN, LONDON, JANUARY 2017**

These days, and quite rightly, Philip Glass objects to being called a 'minimalist'. It is, as he points out 'music we wrote in the seventies. It is over thirty years out of date'.¹ His vast *oeuvre* since that time has a complexity and diversity that makes such simplifications more than superficial: they are also misleading. Now 80, and the subject of a festival of his work at the Barbican, his work still retains the sense of discipline, focus and structure that made it leap out from the exploration of tone and texture that had preceded it. The repetition may not be as drilled as it once was, and the variation far more inventive, but the music does not lose its sense of purpose or suddenly change its shape without substantial reason. This score, from 1996, retains all those transparent Glass-like features, as a chamber opera for three pianos.

Given the score, it is difficult to understand the choice of choreographer/director Javier De Frutos to realize this project. His work to date has revolved around the shock of nudity, but has rarely aspired to anything structured or disciplined. On the contrary, as with this production, his work is littered with distraction and often bereft of a focus, like a book made up of digressions or footnotes. The challenge of accommodating the singers with the dancers is met by the ever-clichéd doppelgänger dressed in the same costume. This implies a link by design rather than through the performance, and the blunt literality produced becomes impossible to reconcile once this extends to numbers of dancers rather than single individuals. In a work like, say, Matthew Bourne's *Play without Words* (Bourne 2004), this is an evident theatrical risk, but Bourne's treatment of the variations that are produced is infinitely better controlled and expertly exploited. The multiplicity is tolerated because it produces a range of

potential outcomes, and the dance is about dealing with their consequences. De Frutos isn't so skilled at controlling such forces, with the result that the work looks disorganized from the beginning, and never settles sufficiently to allow the music, the singers or the dancers to tell their story. Rather, he has encouraged the set design (and some garish and random projections onto it) to become a further intrusion on this already jumbled process. We end up with a classic of distracting colour and movement that seeks to mask the vacuity of concept. In this production of *Les Enfants Terribles*, De Frutos is not short of forces, but he lacks the concentration demanded by the music to stick to a task. As a consequence, the dissonance created by the onstage confusions with the austere and ascetic score encourages viewers to close their eyes to the visual noise in order to appreciate the music as the real star of the show. Dragging the viewers between over-complex set manipulation, intrusive projections, the four singers and the eight dancers is too much hard work, especially when there are surtitles into the bargain, for such a slight reward.

That this isn't thought through is a genuine shame, noting this is quite an experiment for the Royal Opera House. It has taken some singers and a couple of their dancers into the Barbican for a challenging work. That the dancers are augmented by some more regular De Frutos collaborators is disappointing if only for the squandered opportunity of spreading the experience of such work around a bit more. This is not to say the dancers aren't able: they clearly are, but they have been failed by the material given them in this treatment. Cocteau's source material, like *Glass'*, is not littered with extravagance, but the director has been unable to restrain himself given the riches at his disposal. This leaves the performers working overtime, but achieving very little in a difficult evening to appreciate.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Gregory Sporton joined the University of Greenwich as Professor of Digital Creativity in 2013 where he is also Head of the Department of Creative Professions and Digital Arts. He originally trained as a dancer at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, Australia.

After a performing career that included companies in Australia, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, he entered academia at the University of Wolverhampton before joining Laban as Head of Research in 1999. He moved to the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design in 2003 where he founded the Visualisation Research Unit and served as its director before joining the University of Greenwich in 2013. At Birmingham, he was also director of Space for Technology and Art Through Experimentation (STATE), whose main contribution was the establishment of the Eastside Projects artist-led space in Birmingham. He is the author of *Digital Creativity: Something from Nothing*, published in 2015 by Palgrave Macmillan.

Since 2006, Gregory has worked on the application of technologies in the visual and performing arts, producing a combination of practical projects and publications, including MotivePro, a motion data device developed with the composer Jonathan Green. As well as his work on digital technology and the arts, he has published extensively on dance, especially on ballet in Soviet times, and he is a regular visitor to Moscow and the Bolshoi. He has an MA in arts education from the University of Warwick, and a Ph.D. in cultural studies from the University of Sheffield, where he studied with Professor Fred Inglis. He was made a Professor at Birmingham City University in 2010.