

PROSCENIUM

Master Class

By David Pownall

Master Class

Wednesday 4th to Saturday 7th November 2015
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Master Class

David Pownall

Cast:

Stalin.....Anton Jungreuthmayer
ZhdanovMike Williams
ShostakovichBen Morris
ProkofievDuncan Sykes

Director.....Vincent Eavis
Assistant Director.....Shirley Wootten
Director SupportMark Sutherland

Musical Director.....Lewis Lev

Stage Manager.....Hannah Lester
Assistant Stage Manager.....Linda Hampson
Sound & LightingArnold Glickman
Set DesignVincent Eavis & Mark Brookes
Set Construction.....Mark Brookes
CostumesAnne Gerrard, with assistance from cast & crew

The action of the play takes place in a reception room
in the Old Kremlin early in 1948.

There will be an interval between Acts 1 and 2.

The Writer

David Pownall was born in Liverpool in 1938 and educated at Lord Wandsworth College and Keele University. He graduated from Keele in 1960 and the University awarded him an Honorary Doctorate of Letters in 2000.

He worked initially in Personnel Management, first for Ford Motor Company, 1960-63, and then went to Zambia to work for Anglo-American PLC, a copper mining company. While in Zambia he wrote several plays for an amateur drama group and in 1969 returned to England determined to make a career as a writer.

He began as resident writer for Century Theatre, a touring company, where his first professional production was *How to Grow a Gorilla* in 1971. He moved on to become resident writer for the Duke's Playhouse, Lancaster from 1972 to 1975 and then helped to found Paines Theatre. Two of his plays with this group, *Music to Murder By* (1976) and *Richard III, Part 2* (1977), were successful productions at the Edinburgh Fringe.

At this time he began work on *Master Class*, which was to prove his major success in the theatre when it opened at the Old Vic in 1983: some time later he published *Writing Master Class*, a biography of the play from inception to coming of age. Influenced by his interest in music, English National Ballet commissioned a 'dance play' *Nijinski: Death of a Faun* in 1991 and another musical-centred play, *Elgar's Rondo*, resulted from a commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1993.

As well as writing thirteen novels and two volumes of poetry, David Pownall is one of the most prolific writers of Radio Drama and has to date had more than eighty plays broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and 4. He has won two Giles Cooper Awards, for *Beef* (1981) and *Ploughboys' Monday* (1986), and three Sony Awards including a Golden Award for *Elgar's Third* (1981).

In May 2013, to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday, Radio 4 dedicated a whole season to his work. His latest work is a series of plays called *Assassins* for Radio 4 Extra beginning in May of this year with *The Virgin Knife* : why did Charlotte Corday travel to Paris in July 1793 with the sole aim of murdering Jean-Paul Marat?

From The Director

The playwright David Pownall advised me that this is only the second time that *Master Class* has been performed by an amateur group in its 32 year history. Such are the technical demands in terms of the live performances required of actors who should also be performance standard musicians. As a musician with a love of the theatre I took a different approach to these challenges. We had a very accomplished Musical Director who could fulfil the musical challenges. No need to guess who is playing the piano and where - you would be able to see him in front of the stage. The cast would mime as part of a 'transparent' set including the onstage skeleton piano which you would be able to see right through. You can see through

the walls of this room in the Kremlin, the cupboards and their contents and the rooms, just like I imagine those in control of such a totalitarian society would want to see through everything, including the souls of individuals. When it comes to the crux of the play however, how you can see through and try to control music, then that's where the attempts at transparency bump into a wall. Music, like all art forms, is unique. How do you define what a piece of music means to everyone and what it is supposed to convey? How can you therefore attempt and be successful in controlling it? This was what Stalin and Zhdanov set out to do, like they had all other art forms, to relegate the status of the artist but utilise the power of the arts to mobilise their agenda and motivate the people in support of it by distraction.

You will find yourself, I hope, within a compelling two hour meeting, observing what people might do in the presence of structured 'State' power and force but also the responses to the creative process and the politics of personal power, all influenced by the effects of alcohol.

It has been my enormous pleasure to rehearse this play. We had some long rehearsals near the beginning of the rehearsal period where we spent most of our time exploring the characters, their motivations, their status and their intentions. We played out imaginary interviews of the cast by each other or in front of a TV interviewer, and worked hard early on to try to get to the heart of the characters by testing out the evidence. All ideas have been welcome. We have tried to select those that we think work best. We have set out to achieve things together by debate and consensus. It's been a democratic process. I've learned a lot and am deeply appreciative of everyone who has

contributed to this play. My special thanks to Shirley Wootten who has been a wonderful Assistant Director to work with, looking out for things I've missed and filling in for me regularly when I have been on my travels abroad.

As for what the play 'means', I will leave that with you. I look forward to your thoughts and views and hope the evening is intriguing, funny, difficult, enjoyable, painful and springs an occasional surprise...

Vincent Eavis, Director

veavis@icloud.com

(Views and comments welcome!)

Shostakovich and Stalin

From an article by Hannah Ellis-Petersen in The Guardian, 16 May 2015.

Shostakovich had a complex and troubled relationship with the Soviet regime. Although he wrote many pieces praising the greatness of Stalin and the Soviet regime, it is widely acknowledged that these compositions were merely a means to ensure his survival when the risk of non-compliance was a prison sentence or worse.

Since the end of the cold war, most performances of his pro-Soviet compositions and cantatas use modified texts, removing

the Stalinist references out of sensitivity to the brutality of the past and the millions who died.

But Paavo Jarvi, internationally renowned conductor, has recorded two pro-Soviet cantatas, *The Sun Shines Over Our Motherland* and *The Songs of the Forest*, both written in the 1940s in overt praise of Stalin, and also included an anti-regime piece, *The Execution of Stepan Razin*, written after the death of Stalin. This has been much criticised in the Russian press, but Mr Jarvi defends his decision:

“My original thinking was that it would be a very interesting project to show the two sides of this great composer and the reality of this great person under the dictatorship. Through these pieces, Shostakovich’s music tells the terrifying story of that time, and I think that story is only truly effective if it is honest and not modified according to the fashions and political waves of the time. People should confront this uncomfortable part of history.

What I didn’t realise when I first began the project is that we would now be dealing with the same situation with Russia as we were when communism collapsed. Right now we are witnessing something that nobody expected, which is the rise of a totalitarian regime again. Changing Shostakovich’s texts does not change or erase what happened. If we ignore it, history will repeat itself.”

Waiting in the Wings, by Noel Coward

Set in "The Wings" charity home for retired actresses, Noel Coward's seemingly inconsequential piece is a wise and compassionate address of the problems of confronting old age.

"It's the most lovely modern play I've played....cruel, but awfully funny"
Sybil Thorndike

Directed by Janet Harrison

13th to 16th April 2016

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 673 200

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk

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