COMMENTARY

The storms within

David Fallows

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
Peter Grimes
Opera North

However you look at it, *Peter Grimes* has a very important place in the history of English opera. First performed only a few weeks after the end of the Second World War, it had a success that was fuelled by the new-found confidence of the time and paved the way for a long series of English operas (variously received) over the next decades. Some twenty productions in different parts of the world within three years hint at its instant reputation. By any criterion it is one of Britten's finest scores as well as being his most extensively discussed and reinterpreted work.

Ronald Eyre's new production tackles *Peter Grimes* in terms of its two pervading characteristics – the wide, limitless power of the sea and the claustrophobic effect of the village community. The backdrop is mostly of ordinary sailcloth and much of the action is confined to a small central revolve that keeps coming back obsessively to the same position. This is covered in wavy lines, which can be read as symbolizing the sea, the beach, the boards of Grimes's cottage, those of his boat, or even the distracted workings of his mind. And Eyre presents the opening court scene as though it were a bizarre memory recollected in a nightmare.

Another aspect of the nightmare lies in the impersonal way he stages the pub scene: no sense of conviviality here, but merely a group of unpleasant and unsociable characters. Their behaviour (creating an uneasy tension with the music) makes it clear why Grimes should be an outsider. Nobody in their right mind would want to have anything to do with them: the grotesque costumes for Auntie and her nieces do much to emphasize this.

The pub scene has its problems, however, and these arise directly from Eyre's relatively abstract approach. Britten's music brilliantly contrasts the warmth inside with the raging storm which is briefly heard every time somebody opens the door to come in. Without the door, that contrast loses its impact and the music merely has the effect of being sporadically frenetic. That may fit well with the hard-driven conducting of David Lloyd-Jones, who does everything he can to sharpen the edges of the music. But it tends to fight against the musical and dramatic pacing that is such a wonderful feature of the score.

This anguished approach may have made it additionally difficult to sing the taxing roles of Grimes and Ellen Orford. John Treleaven and Marie Slorach both sounded somewhat rough and approximate on the opening night, though they acted powerfully; and Malcolm Donnelly never quite managed to infuse either personality or warmth into the character of Balstrode. The real successes are in some of the smaller parts. Mark Curtis and Peter Bodenham beautifully characterize the Rector and Bob Boles; while Alfreda Hodgson is as fine a Mrs Sedley as one could hope to hear, portraying her less as a scheming busybody than as an uncomfortable outsider with unfortunate powers of observation.

But in many ways the main character in *Peter Grimes* is the chorus. This is where an opera can make dramatic points that are denied to the spoken stage. Few other works are quite so powerful in their use of the chorus; and it would be easy enough to argue that Britten's music for them, growing in some ways directly out of the English choral tradition, is part of the real clue to the work's astonishing success. Opera North's chorus play their full part in the terrifying impact made by the production.

Wandering lives

Neil Taylor

FRANK McGUINNESS
Mary and Lizzie
The Pit, Barbican

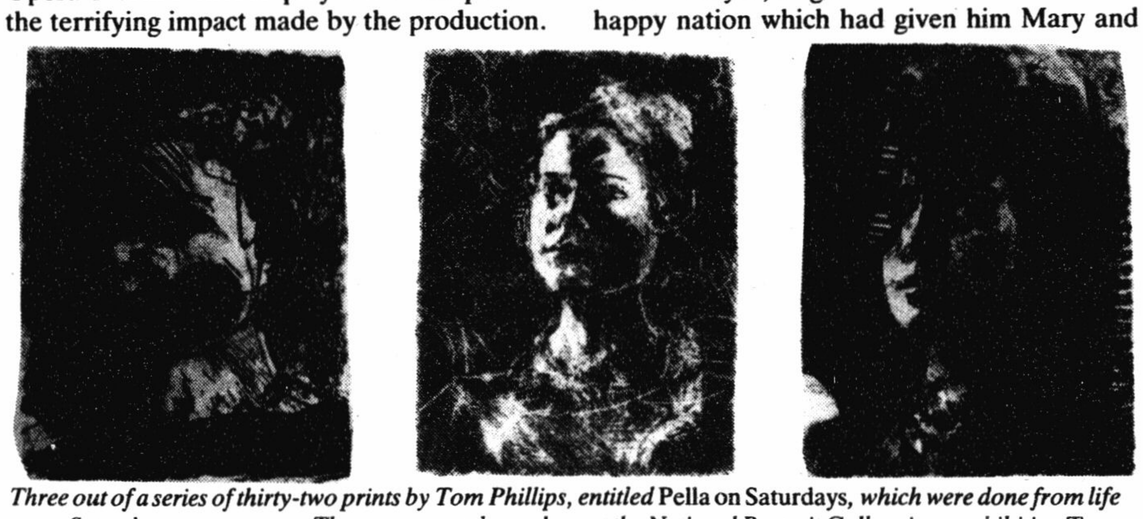
Frank McGuinness has tried, as many a romantic has before him, to write a play about love and death. His chosen lovers are two illiterate Irish sisters and Friedrich Engels, who met up with them in Manchester in 1842 and lived with them until they died. Of Lydia Burns (for whom he eventually broke his anti-marital vows in 1878) Engels wrote, "she came of real Irish proletarian stock, and the passionate feeling for her class, which was instinctive in her, was worth more to me than all the blue-stockinged elegance of 'educated' and 'sensitive' *bourgeois* girls". Of Mary Burns, who was his mistress for twenty years before her sister, Engels commented to Marx, "the poor girl loved me with her whole heart".

It is easy to see why McGuinness fell for the Burns girls. Their domestic arrangements with Engels provide him with an interesting complication in the well-documented entanglement of Engels with the Marx household. Not only did they show Engels the slums of Manchester, thereby finding a place in the causal chain that led to the composition of *Das Kapital*, but, in the opinion of his biographer Gustav Mayer, Engels fell in love with "the unhappy nation which had given him Mary and Lizzie". McGuinness seizes on all this and writes a tragi-comic scene at the Marxes' dinner-table in which Jenny, deranged by poverty and embarrassed by the presence of such loose low-class women, attempts to humiliate Engels by reading out a description of the Irish in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* that is little more than racial abuse.

But this scene belongs to no naturalistic study of historical characters. It is part of a dramatic fantasy which aspires to universal statements and attempts continuously to collapse all conventional boundaries between individuals, places and times. For Sarah Pia Anderson's production, Ultz has made the stage-floor entirely of the lids of coffins, so when the actors tread the boards we think typologically of the dead. McGuinness's *Carthaginians* was set in a graveyard in modern Derry but spoke of ancient Carthage, while *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* had its soldiers re-enacting the Battle of the Boyne. Here, he seeks a still freer narrative form and an even more expressionist dramatic style: scenes are little more than images, partly narrated, partly staged, partly sung.

History has so little to say of Mary and Lizzie that the playwright can have his way with them. He asks them to "tell . . . the way they wandered through lives together", consorting with fairies, pigs and Queen Victoria. They travel from life to death and from Ireland to England to Russia. Unfortunately, the weakness of "wandering" as a dramatic structure coincides with a more general failure of McGuinness's dramatic imagination. Maureen Beattie and Lesley Sharp give passionate performances but Mary and Lizzie are ciphers, as are the crude satirical portraits of Marx (Simon Dormandy) and Engels (Simon Russell Beale).

Mary and Lizzie would like to be a play of ideas. The first is that Ireland is self-destructive because it has been abused by England, just as the proletariat was by Marx and Engels, and women are by men. The second is that Engels will be forgiven because he really loved two Irish proletarian women. This latter, like the closing lines of the play ("Love is the lord of all"), is a nice idea but, because McGuinness eschews both poetic language and dramatic interaction, it remains theatrically unproven.



Three out of a series of thirty-two prints by Tom Phillips, entitled Pella on Saturdays, *which were done from life every Saturday over one year. They are currently on show at the National Portrait Gallery in an exhibition* Tom Phillips: The Portrait Works *(until January 21, 1990).*

Reforming Russia

Lesley Chamberlain

CAROL RUMENS
Nearly Siberia
Soho Poly Theatre

Watching the progress of *perestroika* if you are British and in love with a Soviet émigré can be as harrowing as watching his seduction by another woman; and whether there is true *glasnost* between you becomes a test of faith akin to the West's desire to believe in Soviet reform. To accept that the other side is committed and unequivocal is impossible, so disappointments, bluffs and counter-bluffs follow and those with the strongest need to believe are the most hurt. Carol Rumens's play recreates this situation in contemporary London, setting out a subtle analysis of the impact the Gorbachev era has had on the Russia-loving West.

The presentation of attitudes rather than character, however, remains difficult material for the stage, if it is not to seem propagandistic. For qualified admirers of Brecht it means character still has to slip through if a play is to be made. But what *Nearly Siberia* gives us instead of character is sex and female anxiety. Moreover, no one would blame any Slava wanting to go home to Sonya, whatever the political weather outside, if Katherine, aged thirty-seven, and a busy journalist on *New Woman*, represents Britain.

There is much love of Russia in this play, in the observation of Russian habits (jam in the morning tea) and the retelling of anti-Brezhnev jokes, but none of it is moving. A good 5 per cent of the dialogue is in Russian, but will only convince those who don't know the language. Perhaps too there is love on Katherine's part for Slava, if that is what a desperate keenness to have a baby means, but she is a cardboard person. If she were more real, the audience might well feel sorry for her in bed, and in love, and in love with Russia. For Katherine, a poor, sad successful girl, who sees her editor as Stalin when he spikes her piece on ante-natal care because it is too full of "farting and squelching", has no anchor in love of herself. In passing – like characters in many recent British plays – she entertains some obligatory thoughts about the government and the NHS; also, of course, even her own misery is copy. The familiar comparison arises in this play between thin spiritual lives in London and a projected paradise of the realized spirit in Russia, but here I suspect it isn't intended.

The best scenes concern Katherine's imaginings of the hallucinatory pull Russia has for Slava, embodied in the beautiful, streetwise Sonya, offensive and irresistible, a dancer in spirit who will sleep anywhere for a coat. There is truth in Katherine's realization that she would denounce Sonya to the State in order to secure her own future with Slava. Complex, mysterious, never-to-be-grasped Russia inspires dreams and nightmares in Katherine of a colour and complexity undiscovered elsewhere. The emotion lurking in the play comes closest to the surface in the music of Moscow: recordings of haunting Russian love songs and some borrowed rock and roll. But the feckless, sly, phony romantic Slava, who finally unveils his secret plan to bring Sonya to the West, does not embody that Russia. He represents emotional betrayal and political deceit. *Nearly Siberia* offers a suitably bleak prognosis on the outcome of Soviet reform: no fruitful union between Katherine and Slava, but Slava imposing his old devious life on Britain, to the destruction of Russia-worshippers like Katherine.

Homespun philosophies

David Papineau

RONALD HARWOOD
Another Time
Wyndham's Theatre

Ronald Harwood's latest play has a pleasing formal symmetry. The first Act is set in South Africa, and the central issue is whether Leonard Lands, a gifted young pianist, should leave home to study overseas. The second Act is set in London, thirty-five years later, and the issue is whether the now-celebrated Lands should return home to perform in South Africa. In the first Act Christien Anholt plays the young pianist and Albert Finney plays his father. In the second Finney plays the middle-aged pianist and Anholt plays his son. Each Act has four scenes, of which the first two portray contemporaneous events in adjoining rooms, in the style of Ayckbourn or Frayn.

Unfortunately, the play's substance is less impressive than its structure. Both Acts lack narrative development. The first centres on the unhappy marriage of Lands's ineffectual father and embittered mother (Janet Suzman), and introduces us to her brother, a Professor of Moral Philosophy (David de Keyser) and sister, a spinster librarian (Sara Kestelman). In the second Lands is visited by his mother, aunt and uncle during the lunch break in his recording studio in Maida Vale.

In place of incident Harwood gives us philosophy. His characters reflect on such themes as the relationship between parents and children, our ability to transcend our circumstances, the springs of artistic creation and the significance and responsibilities of art. However, one doesn't have to go to the theatre to hear the kinds of things they say. The Professor of Moral Philosophy is fond of observing that "there's no justice in this world". Yet we have "an obligation to life itself", and must "play the hand we're dealt".

Even the currently topical issue of whether artists should perform in South Africa is treated scantily. Lands is resolved not to go, but his only rationale seems to be that he feels guilty about his childhood. His otherwise pleasant son counters that Lands has already played the piano in Russia and Turkey. The aunt thinks that it would be worthwhile if just one person were changed by hearing Lands play.

The philosophizing is leavened with jokes. When the characters order coffee, the uncle is able to observe "Four black, one white – just like back home". A gratuitous reference to Pavlov allows the aunt to remind us not to forget his dog. The penultimate scene closes with the characters convulsed by a comparison between Lands's father's bowel movements and the volcanic eruptions of Pompeii.

The distinguished cast take up the challenge, but their classical talents are not well suited to this material. Finney's strategy is to ignore the badinage, and he has some success in defining the continuities and contrasts between failed father and famous son. The other actors have more difficulty finding an appropriate register, but get some help from their elderly personae in the second half. Suzman and Kestelman relax into a kind of Jewish old lady double-act, and de Keyser, who has to shoulder most of the jokes, has some fun playing a geriatric wag.

Three plays by the South African playwright Pieter-Dirk Uys, *God's Forgotten* (1975), *Paradise is Closing Down* (1977) and *Panorama* (1987) have recently been published in a single volume in the Penguin Plays series (186pp. Penguin. £4.99. 0 14 048228 8).

Papineau, Daivd. "Homespun philosophies." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4515, 13 Oct. 1989, p. 1124. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902-2014, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200458779/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=TLSH&xid=2a74fde2. Accessed 21 Aug. 2020.