



Review: Holy Fool

Park Theatre, Finsbury Park

By Jessica Holt

Writers Rosalind Adler and Lea Sellers have written a complex, thought-provoking and entertaining play about the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich who had an uneasy and fragile existence under the dictator Joseph Stalin.

After displeasing Stalin at a concert, Shostakovich was arrested and was about to be tortured when the torturer himself was arrested. This grim humour throughout the first half is enhanced by the off-stage commentary delivered by male and female voices who change roles throughout as do the actors, apart from Benjamin O'Mahoney as Shostakovich.

Jenna Augen plays Nina, the composer's wife and his most trusted advisor and critic. Their scenes together are delightful and portray a loving and truthful relationship. By contrast the scenes with Katya, a young admirer played by Phoebe Pryce, are less powerful and are too often focussed on her personal development rather than Shostakovich's moral dilemma: how much should an artist compromise with an oppressive regime?

This is more successfully explored in a scene where Shostakovich is questioned by an agent of the state. The scene is tense and the composer struggles to give appropriate answers. According to his interrogator he is "treading on thin ice."

Director Kate Fahy draws our attention to history repeating itself with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She writes about contemporary artists: "They walk the same tightrope that Shostakovich walked, trying to get their message out subversively without losing their life or the lives of their loved

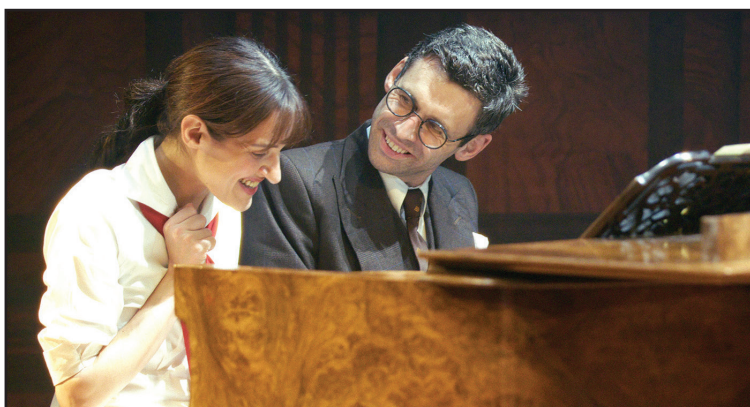
ones".

Designer William Fricker has created a set which at first successfully steeps us in the time and place of Russia in the 1930s. But there are many scenes and many time frames, and the transitions are sometimes awkward.

The change of the backdrop in the second half provided a dramatic contrast as the action moved to the United States and though visually pleasing it became rather overwhelming through the long highly charged scene between Katya and Shostakovich. Possibly a non-naturalistic set would serve the play better enabling the audience to focus more on the themes and dialogue.

The soundtrack was beautifully blended with the composer playing the piano. This was one of the many highlights of the production as it reinforced the genius of the man as well as reminding us of his precarious position in Stalin's Russia. His decision to hide the score of his Fourth Symphony under the floorboards symbolises the composer's opposition to the state and his passion for experimentation.

Interesting questions were being raised throughout such as "Who is Art for?" "On a more pragmatic level: "Why doesn't Shostakovich defect to the United States?" This production has a great future with the impressive quality of its ensemble playing and its important messages for today.



Piano genius: Jenna Augen and Benjamin O'Mahoney in Holy Fool

Shakespeare like you've never seen before

For their latest production, Garden Suburb Theatre have taken Shakespeare's sunniest comedy Love's Labour's Lost, given it a good trim, and set it loose in the garden of a grand hotel. Think riotous colour, larger-than-life characters, quick-witted, quick-fire delivery, and all served with a proper great-British nudge-nudge-wink-wink.

The group is telling its audience to think of it as the rom-com the



Successful production duo Hat Townley and Stephen Graham. Photo Mike Coles

Meet the producers

By Lynn Winton

Among those behind the premiere of new play Holy Fool (see our review left) are actor and coach Hat Townley and retired GP Stephen Graham, who met at the school gates "decades ago" and have been working together ever since.

Most recently, they formed the production company Graham and Townley Productions, which has been finding plays to take to the Edinburgh Festival, to the Upstairs at the Gatehouse Theatre in Highgate and to other venues since 2017.

Their mutual passion for theatre is also shared by Hat's husband, Shakespearian actor Christopher Hunter, and Stephen's wife Teresa, also a retired GP. The two couples live round the corner from each other in the heart of East Finchley, which is very handy for frequent meetings, with Campbell and Syme cafe being their favoured 'boardroom'.

Stephen's theatre CV goes way back to the 1980s when he was a medical student at Middlesex Hospital and took part in putting on student plays and Christmas concerts. He experienced early commercial success when he discovered and produced the first work of then unknown writer John Logan, who went on to achieve huge

playwright and as a screenwriter recognition as a prolific for many hit films, including Gladiator and the James Bond movies Skyfall and Spectre.

That first collaboration with John Logan went to the Edinburgh Festival in 1987 and won a Fringe First. A second Logan/Graham collaboration went to the Playhouse Theatre in the West End. After qualifying as a GP and having a young family there came a long break until retirement, but the interest never waned, and the whole family decamped to Edinburgh every year to enjoy the Festival. Meanwhile, actor Hat was performing all over the country with the Royal Shakespeare

Company and other theatre groups, as well as teaching drama and vocal skills and running voice workshops at Goldsmith's University. If her face looks familiar, it might be because she spent many years helping at the East Finchley Festival. As well as being constantly on the lookout for new talent, they have also made a decision to start investing in high profile shows, such as James Graham's The Standard of Living about the life of John Maynard Keynes, which runs at the Theatre Royal Haymarket until December starring Rory Kinnear and directed by Nick Hytner. It really doesn't get any more high profile than that.

genre was born from; all the fumbling, the pining and the grand romantic gestures you'd expect from a Hugh Grant, Julia Roberts or Colin Firth flick just with 400 years' head start.

Director Daryl Hurst says: "This production is exactly what Shakespeare should be; fun, silly, and relevant. We've pulled together some amazing comedic actors from across north London for what will be a really brilliant production."

Love's Labour's Lost runs at Upstairs at the Gatehouse in Highgate Village from Thursday 8 to Sunday 11 October. Tickets prices £13/£15, also supporting North London Hospice, are available from <https://www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com>.

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