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**Reviews: Life & Fate, Life is a Dream, New Work/new Music
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Life and Fate, adapted for the stage and directed by Lev Dodin, Maly Drama Theatre Company, Theatre Royal, Haymarket, 12 May 2018

Reviewed by Gregory Sporton, University of Westminster

The tradition of the Russian novels stands in stark contrast with the English one. De Foe may well have invented it, in a practice that Dickens and George Eliot perfected. British novels focus on character and plot. They introduce the characters and then put them in a situation and have them respond consistently with what we know about them already. There are plenty of exceptions to this rule, but this roughly represents a tradition of classic novel writing in English. We can predict the approach of characters, and the author's main conceit is the inventive situations they find themselves in.

The Russian tradition does something quite different. Since Turgenev it has focused on how action and situation shapes character (Turgenev 1862). The context becomes the crucial determinant of behaviour, the pressure of the situation revealing what people are made of rather than extending their repertoire. Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov finds his essence changed by his actions, rather than responding in a manner consistent with what we already know about him (Dostoyevsky 1867). He has released a force into his world that he cannot control, and which in the end takes him over. *War and Peace* (Tolstoy 1869), the standard for all Russian novels, draws precisely on this approach, noting how the war against Napoleon provides the backdrop for character development as his cast pass through the trials set for them and are altered irrevocably by their experience.

This notion of a cast is another prerequisite for the Russian novel. The landscape the characters inhabit, huge as it already is, is peopled by an immense connectedness that places all participants into a context. This reflects the strength of kinship ties in Russian society, but it also reinforces the sense of vastness of a life lived in concert with others, fates interwoven through family ties, social ructions, money problems and the endless steppe that ties souls to the land. These features, having established themselves so powerfully in the nineteenth century, when the need for political and social reform found expression through Tolstoy or Gogol, remained into the Soviet period. Sholokhov (Sholokov 1932) found it necessary to construct an entire community to populate his work, and Gorky to use those basic relationships as the starting point for the socialist realist novel. Pasternak, for his part, drew on both Tolstoy and Chekov as inspirations for *Doctor Zhivago* (Pasternak 1957), the eponymous doctor even possessing a name that makes claim to the act of being alive. The context of the revolution as the determinant of behaviour that could be wildly inconsistent was found in Pasternak's life as well as in his novel.

It was entirely within this tradition that Vasily Grossman penned *Life and Fate* (Grossman 1960). The very title is intended to invoke the grand simplicity of *War and Peace* and mirrors its rhythm in the original Russian. It follows the fates of the extended family of Lydmilla Shaposhnikova, and the vicissitudes of life as served up to them and their connections, especially with regard to the Great Patriotic War and the Battle of Stalingrad. Grossman had been there himself, as a war correspondent for the Red Star army newspaper, and this gives his prose the weight of authenticity when dealing with the practical arrangements for conducting a battle. The episodic structure of the book produces a series of prose poems to the vagaries of fate, the split seconds or rapid judgements that appear innocuous, only to return with often devastating consequences. The war itself emerges as the real maker of

destinies, reducing will and desire to so much rubble along with the Russian cityscape, and Grossman's acute understanding of how this affects his large cast of characters is what makes this such an enthralling read. The forces unleashed by war expose the symmetry of the Bolsheviks with the Nazis, the disheartening actions that the instinct for self-preservation will drive us to, and the consequences of interpretations of ambiguous acts, large and small. This is distilled by examining how his range of characters fare in situations over which they have no control, and conversely ones where they are entirely conscious of their power to act. It is a masterpiece of Russian novel writing, unpublished in Grossman's lifetime given the Soviet Union's fear of the power of literature to undermine its legitimacy.

Lev Dodin, the Russian theatre director, has a history of what is often referred to as his 'theatre of prose' productions for the Maly Theatre in St. Petersburg. These are devised across long periods of time, and usually involve the students of his five-year-long acting school. The productions are created 'by the actors on their feet, and not around a table', as long-time Dodin observer, Maria Shevtsova observes (Shevtsova 2008:295), giving his young cast immense responsibility for complicated and difficult transitions of material from page to play. This work, as is the case with the Maly's adaptation of *Life and Fate* (Dodin 2007) for the theatre, is credited to Dodin as writer and director, consistent with a sense of his dominance of his actors and their fealty to his creative leadership. Many of them, including Dodin's wife, the actor Tatyana Shestakova, have worked at the Maly for a very long time, with most of the London cast in 2018 of *Life and Fate* the same players as at its Parisian premiere more than ten years ago.

The main stage begins covered in newspapers, presumably a reference to Grossman's work as a war correspondent. Once these are stripped away, a volleyball net dominates the stage

space, dissecting it across the middle. The actors knock some balls across from time to time, but the effect of the net is to invoke a cage providing a horizontal division for lining up people against the fence. The rest of the set and props are the spartan, dilapidated relics of pre-Soviet times, including a plumbed bath and a bedframe. Some of the scenes happen in tightly choreographed unison, making it possible for those in one scene to be linked to those in another by occupying the same space, or occasionally making eye contact. It has an uncanny effect, especially when the conditions of the POW camp contrast with the simultaneously experienced domestic life of the family of a Muscovite family, or the officers' mess at Stalingrad.

Dodin's production is just as sprawling as Grossman's source material, but very different in structure and emphasis. Shestakova links the three-hour plus experience together through her recitation of Anna Shtrum's letter to her physicist son, recounting the moments before she is killed and her reluctance to sign off, knowing this will be their final contact. Her grim observations of the behaviour of the invading Germans and her hypocritical neighbours leave her content to have been forced in the Jewish Ghetto where at least some humiliations can be avoided. This is tempered by the reality that she has only a short time before fate catches up with her. It is a performance of pathos and sensitivity, the understatement of the outrages she witnesses giving dignity to an appalling story.

The episodes of Dodin's *Life and Fate* make great efforts to replicate the structure of the novel without representing its content in its entirety. Grossman shifts the story around in time and place, picking up characters before they have done some of the things we know await them. Dodin's version focuses less on the dumb brutality of war and its often absurd moments, and more on issues about freedom. This includes a programme note declaring

that 'if even one Gulag exists, it's a fallacy to think that someone might be free'. True enough, this is drama rather than film, so far more emphasis is placed on the dialogue between Liss, the Gestapo officer and Mostovskoy, an old Bolshevik interned by the Germans, compromised by Trotsky's admiration for his work twenty years earlier. Liss' point is that there is no functional difference between the Bolsheviks and the Nazis, and he struggles to have Mostovskoy concede this point despite the evidence of the Russian's own situation. The physicist Shtrum, Anna's son, isolated and ignored by erstwhile friends as his theories are interpreted as politically inconsistent and his Jewish background suddenly identified, is elated when his fate turns after gaining Stalin's attention. There is a phone call from the Soviet leader who wishes him success. But having once been pushed right to the edge of existence, he cannot forego his life of privilege, quietly acquiescing when forced to condemn another whom he knows to be innocent. The tank commander Novikov manages to save his tanks and win a decisive battle, but he knows his tactics will attract attention, which they inevitably do, from those not entrusted with the lives of others. This, of necessity in a play, is overt rather than internalized, and it is obvious that it won't turn out well.

The interpolation of the localities and characters creates a satisfying structural link, even if there are plenty of scenes that are too ponderous and lack subtlety. The contrast between Shtrum's isolation and the subsequent scene celebrating his daughter's name-day in a room packed with others made its point long before it finished. The heavy didacticism of a recurrent theme of the forced march finishes with a brass band trouping off to be killed in the camps: it is not very ambiguous. In this it does not quite capture the spirit of Grossman's novel, where forces more powerful than the characters reduces their sense of autonomy to

a fiction. This is not to say it is not powerful theatre: it is, and occasionally deeply moving, but this is Dodin's *Life and Fate* rather than Grossman's.

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Life is a Dream, by Kim Brandstrup, Rambert Dance Company, Sadler's Wells Theatre,
London, 26 May 2018

Reviewed by Gregory Sporton, University of Westminster

The obscurantism of Kim Brandstrup's *Life is a Dream*, presented at Sadler's Wells in London in May, prompts a serious question. What is now the point of Rambert Dance Company? This is, surely, an existential moment in its history. Mark Baldwin, its long-standing director stood down abruptly in early 2018, with little more from the company than bland statements and mutual exchanges of thanks for his fifteen-year service. A world-wide search for a new director began, but why? Surely there are some serious questions about Rambert and its continued drift into obscurity that needs answering in advance of someone else committing themselves to Rambert for a long period? Defining what that commitment should be ought not to be reduced to a search for a personality, but for an identity, for Rambert has become a dance company rapidly made irrelevant as others steal their clothes. Ballet companies like ENB and the Scottish Ballet now use Sadler's Wells as a place to showcase their ability to perform the contemporary works that Rambert used to specialize in, and the training of modern ballet dancers is such that they can turn their hand at such stuff without looking like fish out of water. Even the Royal Ballet is comfortable commissioning Hofesh Shechter. Rambert never seems to have seen this threat on the horizon. Their dancers have the same sort of pedigree as found in the companies that have replaced them, and they seem interchangeable in style and repertoire with their new rivals. This has been going on for the past few years, and Rambert's preparedness to commission a

repertoire from others does not seem to challenge the dancers they have to be much different (though to be fair, Ben Duke's *Goat* earlier in the year did something like that). That, and the pressure to present a touring programme that appeals to A-level students within some tight resources, leaves it looking professional without being interesting. Not for the first time in the company's history, its identity is proving a drag on its development. The country's leading contemporary dance repertoire company no longer looks very distinctive or in the lead.

Their journey into anonymity took some further steps with Kim Brandstrup's incoherent and dated full-length work *Life is a Dream*. As Balanchine famously pointed out, there is no way in dance to show that 'this character is that character's mother-in-law'. Kim Brandstrup has ignored this advice for much of his career and produced a surfeit of failed narrative dances as proof that Balanchine was right. Based on a sixteenth-century play, the overly symbolic transmogrification from theatrical text to dance simply does not give the audience enough clues about how the narrative is progressing, and indeed if there are not two different dances competing with one another. There ought to be some concern about the physical language Brandstrup uses, a hackneyed set of predictable moves that require tipping a shoulder here to create torque for a turn, or tucking a leg at a 45° angle to get some impetus going. This supports no claims for innovation: the vocabulary is strictly 1990s, and as such the dancers get stuck in a time warp of their choreographer's making. As they demonstrate throughout the 90 minutes of the work, they are fully committed and are creating more meaning from the steps than designed for in the choreography. This has the curious effect of being beguiling beyond the claims the narrative makes on us. But Brandstrup's storytelling does not work; it seems too full of its own importance and comes across as an impediment to what we really find ourselves wanting to see.

Partly this is because the narrative is making far more claims on us than it evidences. The script of the original play has given rise to some serious contemplation by the production team about how to present an updated version of a 1950s production of a 400-year-old play. Whilst this no doubt gives those A-level students plenty to discuss, it is too slight to be of much interest beyond its own private speculations. It is perfectly useful to set out some artistic challenges about the impact of source material, but the result is incomprehensible as a narrative save the most obvious features. What makes it work is that perennially underrated resource, the dancers, who time and again show the possibilities wrought from their own artistry. The standard mad-woman scene in the first half becomes something quite transcendent in the hands of Edit Domoszlai who translates something that starts like an Ek-inspired cliché into a powerful portrayal of the convictions of madness and the injustice of its cause. The duet between Liam Francis and Stephen Quilden at the beginning of the second half, as they both mirror and contrast one another, as aspects of the same being, is another transcendent highlight created by the commitment of the dancers to the work

There is also the matter of the subject itself: what sort of update does not challenge the notion of a troubled young man whose soul is rescued by the love of a woman? The makers cite this in their programme notes as representing an unchanging human desire, which they are simply acknowledging and updating for our time. But the power-dreams of a male director manipulating the actors and the action are surely something the #MeToo generation just will not relate to. This was evident in the half-empty house at Sadler's Wells the night I saw it. Universal it may be, but its audience has departed. What kind of cutting-edge contemporary dance company regurgitates convention and misrepresents it as innovation?

This is the conundrum for Rambert. Just what tradition do they now want to be part of? Marie Rambert showed tremendous appetite for risk in the 1970s when she diverted the company away from the ballet repertoire that had established its name into a modern, contemporary dance ensemble. Richard Alston gave it a recognisable style and aesthetic during his tenure. Christopher Bruce and Mark Baldwin both positioned it successfully as the nation's contemporary dance repertoire company. But in the face of competition to its repertoire from modern ballet companies, it is time for Rambert to have a serious think about its future. A turn for the radical might be the best move, putting clear water between itself and the others. It may just kick-start the careers of some more daring choreographers as well, giving the dancers of Rambert more to chew on than this particular collection of clichés.

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New Work/New Music, The Royal Ballet, Royal Opera House, Linbury Theatre, 8 February
2019

Reviewed by Gregory Sporton, University of Westminster

The newly refurbished theatre space in the basement of the Royal Opera House required the commissioning new work for the Royal Ballet, and the result, a collaboration with the London Sinfonietta, is something of a marvel. The space itself is an attractive, small-scale venue inside a grand opera house, though you would hardly know you were inside it from the décor or the audience arrangements. The architecture provides a broad and handsome stage for a modest-sized audience, with enough room for the selected choreographers to give full rein to the abilities of the dancers and provide the public with a close-up view of some excellent performances.

This was a mixed programme, three duets and three works for small groups, with some choreographers (Calvin Richardson and Kristen McNally) recruited from the company. Other works were duets from Brazilian choreographer Juliano Nunes and Goyo Montero, the artistic director of the Nuremburg Ballet, and an excellent group work for five men by Alexander Whitley. Beyond them all in ambition and realisation was Aletta Collins' *'Blue Moon'*, set to music by composer David Sawer, that properly actualised the potential of the dancers and the space alike. The seven female dancers demonstrate power and poise, commitment to the work and a sense of being in comfortable control that sometimes eludes the ballet-trained. In many ways, this work exemplified what has changed in dancers and their training across the past decade: not for this group any sense of vulnerability, nor the awkward effects that used to arise when ballet dancers are given challenging work to do by

contemporary dance choreographers. The repertoire and the opportunity to explore their potential movement as artists has clearly been capitalized on here by all parties. It is instructive to watch the interplay of dancer and choreography in such a context. For all the choreographic limitations of some of the offerings on the programme, the engagement by the dancers in this project makes much of it work.

The duets were certainly harder to watch, presented in darkly serious tones, and far more conventional in terms of presentation and movement range, but it is the sort of work that might have previously been beyond the reach of the Royal Ballet. These are more of a modern affair than might have to be seen at the ROH, so some plaudits for creating the opportunity to extend the reach of the dancers. Whitely's *'Uncanny Valley'* is hindered mostly by some awful costumes and redeemed by committed performances from the men involved. Richardson's *Something Borrowed* is certainly fun, and an antidote to the heavyweight seriousness of the rest of the programme, Collins excepted. Perhaps the career-defining opportunity of making work for the Royal Ballet gets too unwieldy for some choreographers to relax enough to let the dancers do their magic. But magic they are, and with a new space to support some experiments, this could be a very interesting era for a company that has shown itself open to some new opportunities.

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